PERFORMING FEMINISM: AMERICAN PERFORMANCE ART AS A FEMINIST DECONSTRUCTIVE STRATEGY

by

Angelique M Szymanek

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Abstract

This thesis is an examination of feminist performance art, primarily of the nineteen sixties and seventies, celebrating its revolutionary use of the body as medium, as well as the unprecedented political and social agency it asserted for women both in and outside of the art world. In their work, the artists discussed in the first chapter of this thesis often employed deconstructive strategies as a means to challenge the dominant power structure in Western society which continues to situate women as inferior Others in relation to men, a binary which is reinforced by psychoanalytic theory and its signifying systems. Within this context, the second section of this thesis aims to reveal the falsehood of a universal feminist agenda by highlighting the work of several women artists who, through a focus on race or sexuality, work to reveal the pluralities of identity often muted in early nineteen-sixties feminism. The third and final section addresses performance artists' engagement with one of the most fraught and frequently private manifestations of oppressive patriarchal systems: rape. The material in this portion of the thesis is particularly troubling, but it is the most frighteningly powerful example of how the construction of gender can and does manifest itself in violent and horrifying ways. The performances and theories presented in this thesis support the concept that feminist performance art that utilizes the body as medium does so in an effort to begin the process of revealing the falsities of Western gender constructs.

Introduction

This thesis explores American feminist performance art of the nineteen sixties and seventies, particularly those works which confront the dominant cultural construction of the female body as object and/or Other.[1] Many scholars have traced the very roots of the American feminist movement to a series of events that occurred in the nineteen sixties which fueled unprecedented efforts to expose social injustices toward women, many of which were manifest in the art world. These events included the formation of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966 as well as the addition of the category sex to the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.[2] Arguably, however, the most important of these events was the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, a text which revealed what Friedan famously coined, "the problem that has no name." *The Feminine Mystique* dared to take up the previously unspeakable realities of women who felt unfulfilled playing out the roles designated by Western society. Although the book specifically addresses the suburban middle-class women who were the subjects of Freidan's surveys and studies, the ramifications of revealing the uncomfortable truth that, for many women, being mother and wife just was not enough was ground breaking.

As Friedan's book called much needed attention to the failure of nineteen fifties propagandistic social order in the home, several very politically fueled feminist

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[1] The term "Other" is used in philosophy to explain the way the self, in its own subconscious and in society, defines itself through its differences from another. Hegel was one of the first to write of the "Other" and it is Simon De Beauvoir who applies it to gender studies to set up the relationship of women as "Others" in relation to men.

[2] Mary D. Garrard, "Feminist Politics: Networks and Organizations," in *The Power of Feminist Art,* eds., Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 90-91.

organizations where forming as well. Many of these groups were deemed radical for their unconventional consciousness-raising tactics such as the public demonstrations of the Redstockings, whose manifesto was published in 1969.[3] What ultimately resulted was a feminist battle which took place in both the public and private spheres of women's lives. The tumultuous atmosphere of these two decades strengthened what may now be considered the cornerstone of feminism, which is the continued exploration of what gender is and how its definition has and continues to shape Western culture. Women performance artists of the sixties and seventies took up this investigation in their work while encouraging an awareness of the importance of individual experience and social activism. The artists and theory discussed in this thesis are born out of this very particular historical moment, one in which the women artists discussed here decided that their own bodies where the ideal medium through which to express their feminist agendas.

The critical response to performance art by women is often examined through a postmodernist lens that implicates the inherently political nature of this work. Responding specifically to performance art of the sixties and seventies, author Jeanie Forte writes in "Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism," that "all women's performances are derived from the relationship of women to the dominant system of representation, situating them within a feminist critique."[4] This critique relies largely on the disruptive nature of performance within a patriarchal system, a disruption which aims to deconstruct that system. Forte argues further that women's performance of

[3] Ibid., 93.
[4] Jeanie Forte, "Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre,* ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 251.

the nineteen sixties and seventies had a specific strategy to align postmodernism with feminism in order to reveal the objectification that modernism perpetuated through its highly masculine and phalocentric systems. Consequently, the drive that binds these performances is the attempt to disassemble the construct which situates all women as objectified Others. Feminist performance arose in the nineteen sixties as a particularly effective approach because it has an actual woman as its subject, a strategy understood best in relation to Lacanian psychoanalysis which defined the female body through its "lack," as Other, existing only to reflect the male subject and its desires. These female performance artists are then placing themselves outside of this position, refusing the symbolic order dictated by Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud. Teresa de Lauretis comments on this social order when she states, "Whoever defines the code or the context, has control…and all answers which accept that context abdicate the possibility of redefining it."[5] I argue that it is this "possibility of redefining" that women performance artists are exploiting in their often jarring and powerful art, challenging the codified systems of Western culture.

The "possibility of redefining" is arguably at the very core of the body of performance that this thesis aims to address. With the intention of aggressively and often violently confronting the construct that is "woman," performance artists of the nineteen sixties and seventies lay a crucial groundwork for expanding the argument to incorporate issues of gender, race and class. In my thesis, I approach the performance artists of these two decades in relation to their successors who maintain the efforts to destroy the constructs that have so limited the social positions of women. In the first section I

[5] Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 3.

address performances that employ the strategy of deconstruction through expression of the female body and sexuality. Using their own bodies, these women are challenging the long-standing artistic tradition of the female nude as art's subject, such as the muse or an embodiment of nature without identity or personal agency. By presenting their nude bodies as speaking, self-aware women they are proposing a new tradition, one grounded in real women's experiences and sexuality.

In her seminal text, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Amelia Jones creates a distinction between performance artists and those artists who specifically use their bodies as a site for deconstruction, using the term "body art" to identify their work.[6] Among these body artists, Carolee Schneemann rises as a particularly active performance artist during the nineteen sixties, often performing nude and unapologetically confronting the viewer with a "speaking subject." In her 1975 piece *Interior Scroll*, Schneemann quite literally gives her nude body language as she pulls a ten-foot long scroll of paper from her vagina while reading the text aloud to a largely female audience.[7]

As it is the intention of this thesis to position women's performance art of this period as a reaction against Western patriarchy and its signifying systems, I must address the language and theory which constitute it. The Lacanian symbolic order is dependent on "a linguistically-encoded network of meaning and signification that is internalized with the acquisition of language."[8] This language formulates the power-relationship that articulates the position of male as dominant subject in relation to the female object, or the

[6] The term "body art" or "body works" emerged during the 1960s and 1970s when it was used by a number of writers who wished to differentiate it from a conception of "performance art" which was broader and also assumed a large audience in a theatre setting as opposed to work of artists, such as Carolee Schneemann, which could take place in private spaces.
[7] Kathy O'Dell, "Feminus Fluxus." in *TDR (1988-),* Vol. 41, no. 1 (Spring, 1997), 46.
[8] Forte, "Women's Performance Art," 255.

Other. What many feminist theorists and artists attempted to do, then, is find ways to shift this paradigm and, as Forte writes, "expose breaks in the language structure."[9] In an effort to expose such a break, Kaja Silverman focuses on Lacan's reliance on the close interdependence of the terms "subject" and "signification," because "the discourse within which the subject finds its identity is always the discourse of the Other—of a symbolic order which transcends the subject and which orchestrates its entire history."[10] Consequently, the question of how a woman is to speak as a subject, as well as discover, affirm or claim an identity, is left unanswered. Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* gives her female body a voice that is manually pulled from within, read aloud and put on display as a creator of meaning. The agenda of locating a voice and denying the psychoanalytic exclusion of women as speaking subjects becomes the project of many of the artists discussed in the first section of this thesis.

The use of the nude body in performance as taken up by many artists of these two decades has come under heavy criticism from many directions, including feminists. The inherently sexual nature of the female nude and its display elicit criticism as work that re-inscribes the body as object. Author and critic Jill Dolan takes up this issue in a number of texts, condemning nudity in performance as a source of voyeuristic pleasure.[11] Dolan's contempt for the display of the female nude is misplaced since it misunderstands how performance serves as a means by which the artist may destroy the voyeuristic control of anonymity, subvert the male gaze and refuse the position of fetishized object.[12]

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[9] Ibid., 261.
[10] Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 197.
[11] See Jill Dolan, "The Dynamics of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Pornography and Performance," *Theatre Journal* 39:2 (1987).
[12] This counter to Dolan's stance is addressed in detail in Jeanie Forte's previously cited article "Women's Performance Art."

The issue then, for critics of the nude body in performance, is not necessarily the performance itself but the documentation of the performance, which, as the images accompanying this thesis demonstrate, often leave behind a mere snapshot of the piece. In the archives of performance art what the viewer is often presented with, in the cases where film is not available, is a frozen, silent female nude. The documentary traces of a performance, however, cannot be treated with the same implications of a posed, still painted nude, for example. As Jones argues, "it is precisely the relationship of these bodies/subjects to documentation (or, more specifically, to re-presentation) that most profoundly points to the dislocation of the fantasy of the fixed, normative, centered modernist subject and thus most dramatically provides a radical challenge to the masculinism, racism, colonialism, classicism, and heterosexism built into this fantasy."[13] Simply put, what Jones is proposing, and I would agree, is that the performance event needs the photograph to confirm its historical mark just as the photograph needs the performance as the "ontological anchor of its indexicality".[14] This co-dependent relationship is entirely unique to performance and must be considered when viewing documentation of an event.[15]

The field of film theory has produced a number of feminist scholars who have written on the subject of the fetishized female body, namely Laura Mulvey, E. Ann Kaplan and Teresa de Lauretis – primarily responding to the Freudian conception of

[13] Amelia Jones, "Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56:4 (1997): 11-18.
[14] Ibid., 17.
[15] For more on the documentation of performance art see Amelia Jones' "Presence in Absentia," as well as Kathy O'Dell's article entitled "Displacing the Haptic: Performance Art, the Photographic Document, and the 1970s," in *Performing Research* 2, 1 (1997): 73-73.

fetishism.[16] In her essay entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey writes of the establishment of a phalocentric system in Western culture and its manifestations in traditional narrative film. She argues that film has created a relationship in which "the image of woman is (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man."[17] Film provides a clear paradigm for the functioning of fetishism in a patriarchal culture, but the distance of the viewer allows a sense of control and secrecy not as easily acquired when the performer and spectator share the same space. By bridging this gap the woman is asserting a control of the gaze and the framing of her body as object, forcing the viewer to confront a living, speaking body in place of a sexually codified image.

The second section of this thesis focuses on the pluralities of female identity. In this section, I discuss a variety of performance artists whose projects aim to reveal the presence of difference among women. The construction of the female according to patriarchal and psychoanalytic systems does little to account for differences in race and/or sexual orientation. These artists, largely through expressions of personal experience, reject essentialist critiques often applied to feminist art works by exposing a perspective of female experience that is dependent on difference. Adrian Piper is an artist who deals with race and more specifically what she calls the "colored woman artist" and her exclusion from the "Euro-ethnic," patriarchal, art historical canon.[18]

In 1970 Piper launched a series of performative pieces entitled *Catalysis,* in which she would drastically alter her appearance (stuffing a towel in her mouth, covering herself

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[16] In Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the History of Sexuality,* trans. James Strachey, (New York: Basic Books Publishers, 1962), Freud defines fetishism as "the replacement of the normal sexual object by another which bears some relation to it, but is entirely unsuited to serve the normal sexual aim."
[17] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and narrative Cinema," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism,* ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 28-40.
[18] See Adrian Piper, "The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader,* ed. Amelia Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 239-247.

with wet paint, etc.) then carry out mundane, daily tasks such as riding the bus or shopping. These performances confronted viewers with obvious difference and examined intolerance on personal and social levels, erasing the artist's separation from the work of art by actually becoming the object and, thereby, "situating the making and the viewing experience in the same time and space continuum."[19] After the *Catalysis* series, Piper embarked on an even more ambitious project, *The Mythic Being* (1973-76), which she created as a means to liberate herself from the limitations of her position in the art world and society at large as both gendered and racial Other. The work is highly personal, relying on excerpts from her own journal entries to formulate an identity for the character she called *The Mythic Being*, who was a young black man with an afro. It is simultaneously dependent on public response to measure the assumptions made by others as well as herself, an aspect that privileges the method of performance. Piper uses her own life and experiences as both a non-white female subject and creator/artist to expose what she terms as "the triple negation of colored women artists."[20]

The plurality of sex is an equally important part of this dialogue with artists such as Rachel Rosenthal who, in *Leave Her in Naxos* (1981), presents slides of a number of her lovers, both male and female, highlighting the presumptions of heterosexuality and its position as a normative condition in society and the arts. I also discuss a number of artists who handle lesbian sexuality through performance, by again using personal experience to displace the construction of female sexuality and its seemingly inextricable relationship to male desire. The lesbian body in performance has a particularly contentious position to the myth of "woman" as a submissive object for male

[19] Lisa Gabrielle Mark, ed., *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 260-261.
[20] Piper, "The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists", 239-247.

consumption. Images of lesbians were infrequent in visual culture (more specifically those created *by* women) until about the nineteen seventies when a number of theatre and performance groups began to work to dispel stereotypes and formulate a positive, voiced identity.[21]

Judith Butler has argued that lesbians have often been labeled as derivative because the way they act, dress and/or speak is always referential as there is no established way "to be" lesbian.[22] Likewise, author Julia Brosnan writes "Thus butches are accused of aping men; femmes are accused of aping straight women; to present anything other than fully clothed is to reinforce the dominant cultural images; to present as sexual is to encourage male voyeurism."[23] With the aim of dispelling such accusations, many performance artists seek to create a position for the lesbian outside of cultural ideologies. In response to this lack of recognition, de Lauretis has suggested a "feminist subject," as opposed to a female one which is perceived as unchanging and locked into the phalocentric social structure. Understanding women as feminist subjects, as opposed to female objects, could allow women a position outside of heterosexuality, which is constructed in terms of men.[24]

De Lauretis' approach also allows for political agency as well as a dialogue by and among women; these are the very elements that aided in the creation of the Lesbian

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[21] Earlier artists such as Claude Cahun and Alice Austin were in fact producing images of women in intimate, non-normative relationships, but such artists were exceptional and certainly did not receive, in their time, the same critical response as their male colleagues. The creators and audiences for images of women together was by and large male until the nineteen seventies when artists like Cahun and Austin, as well as Germaine Krull, were beginning to be rescued from obscurity and their subjects taken up by then contemporary female artists, such as thus discussed in the second chapter of this thesis.
[22] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Subordination," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 78.
[23] Julia Brosnan, "Performing the Lesbian Body-The New Wave," in *Acts of Passion,* eds. Nina Rapi and Maya Chowdhry (New York: The Haworth Press, Inc., 1998), 82.
[24] Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," in Sue-Ellen Case, ed. *Performing Feminism*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 22-28.

Art Project (LAP), which was formed in Los Angeles in 1977. The project was short-lived, dissolving after less than three years, but its mission penetrated the art world in immeasurable ways. The Lesbian Art Project was primarily concerned with creating new representations of lesbians while promoting a public awareness of lesbian cultural production.[25] Among the many projects that sprung from LAP was *An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism* (1979), which was a collaborative performance executed by thirteen lesbians. The piece involved a series of workshops which aimed at raising consciousness through role-playing and a variety of other theatre games.[26] Addressing otherwise highly taboo material, *An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism* confronted a multitude of issues faced by lesbians from same-sex desire to incest in the name of vocalizing and re-inscribing the language and imagery surrounding homosexuality.

In focusing on non-white and lesbian artists, the second section of the thesis assumes a specific and unique approach and set of circumstances for these artists versus those in the previous section. Both groups are working to break down the construction of the woman in patriarchal society, but the later must inherently deal with a more complicated paradigm as the signifiers for women have been formulated around a white heterosexual icon of "femininity."

One element uniting all of the artists mentioned in the previous sections is the physical and sexual threat of violence that has always been an inherent part of womanhood. Performance artists often utilize their own bodies as agents of expression, amplifying the implicitly physical and often painful nature of conforming to expectations of the feminine. The third and final section of this paper highlights performances which

[25] Ester Adler, et al., "Artists Biographies," in Mark, ed., *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, 260-261.
[26] Ibid., 260.

deal with the subject of sexual violence, particularly rape. The collaborative efforts of the women artists in the performance *Ablutions* (1972), for example, parallel the growing number of women's rights organizations that developed in the nineteen sixties and continued to expand in the seventies with the primary issue of sexual violence.

Rape is an issue that is often addressed in the performance art of the sixties and seventies. Despite the epidemic numbers by which this crime occurs and has occurred throughout all of recorded human history, it was, until this time, a very taboo subject. Victims of rape are often filled with a shame that keeps them from ever speaking about the incident, possibly feeling as if they have been irreversibly dirtied or marked by the violation. The artists discussed in this chapter were part of a national effort that began to take shape in the late sixties in which women were being encouraged to speak out about their experiences and expose the debilitating effects rape has on women in their personal lives as well as for women in society on the whole. The prominence of the issue contributed to the publication of author Susan Brownmiller's book entitled *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975) in which she famously labels Western society as a "rape-supportive culture."[27] The artists and performance pieces discussed in this section not only work at creating a greater social awareness, but also aim to confront the sexualization and simultaneous objectification of the female body. The positioning of the woman's body as sexual object has, if not only subconsciously, allowed male dominance, ownership and abuse of it.

Rape Scene (1973), by artist Ana Mendieta, re-creates the scene of the rape and murder of a student at the University of Iowa, where Mendieta was herself studying, in

[27] Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: men, Women and Rape,* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1975).

the year that it occurred. Mendieta invited her unsuspecting classmates to visit her apartment where she had staged the disturbing aftermath of a crime scene in which she lay half-naked, smeared in blood and tied to a table. The piece mercilessly forces the viewer to grapple with the horror of sexual violence as well as the victimized female body itself. This performance/installation is one of many works of art that began exposing the highly taboo subjects of female sexual trauma. In 1971 the New York Radical Feminists organized the first public speak-out on rape. Feminist scholars and artists alike were beginning to pull these issues out into the public consciousness, linking the objectification and passivity assigned to the women to these horrifying acts of dehumanization while challenging society to deal with the issue.

A three-week long performance created by artists Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, called *Three Weeks in May* (1977), also deals with sexual violence against women. One performance from this project entailed a dimly-lit gallery space which housed a large, winged lamb carcass that was suspended from the ceiling. Above the carcass, four nude women, painted red, were crouched on a ledge. Below, on the floor, a graphic illustration of sexual assault was drawn in chalk on the asphalt and tape-recorded voices told their stories of rape and sexual violence. Beyond this space, the event included a number of subsidiary projects, including the creation of a giant map that pinpointed the locations of rapes throughout the city of Los Angeles, emphasizing the epidemic proportions of sexual violence against women. This project, like many performances at the time, demonstrates how the construction of woman as object, or sign, gravely endangers the lives and emotional well being of actual women. The pieces discussed in the final portion of this thesis do not just critique and try to re-design

modern/phalocentric societal systems of representation, they also create a kind of illustrated cause and effect, demonstrating the aftermath of a society which positions the female body as lesser, lacking and Other. These women and their work also embody a type of art which is highly political and activist, grappling with issues, images and a medium (their performing bodies) that the art world had not seen before. By exposing the horrific realities of female sexual victimization, these artists were not only attempting to alter the broader cultural treatment of rape, but they were also beginning to challenge long established traditions and expectations of what "art" is and what it could do.

It is the goal of this thesis to position performance artists of the nineteen sixties and seventies at the frontlines of a war engaged with the art world as well as society at large. The women discussed in this paper began, in some of the most public and organized ways in history, to create a voice and image for the female artist in the male dominated, Eurocentric art world. These women's art, and much of the theory that responds to it, has strongly criticized the psychoanalytic systems of the symbolic order which are deeply engrained in societal subconscious as well as rejected modernist means of representation which support those systems. The challenges and innovations produced throughout these two decades provided a platform from which current feminist theorists and art makers can continue to deconstruct the ideological debasing of women and further the debate with deeper considerations of difference and gender construction as well.

I. Performing in the Flesh: Body Art and Gender Politics of the American Nineteen Sixties and Seventies

The American feminist movement of the nineteen sixties and seventies was both a public battle for equality as well as an investigation into the private experiences of women. Performance art, in its myriad of visual tactics and political aims, targeted the public and private spheres alike, in many cases utilizing common experiences among women to strengthen communication with the audience. Later critics, largely those associated with Third Wave Feminism of the nineteen nineties, often discredit the essentialist nature of art which sought to speak to all women through "cunt imagery,"[28] or the innate "essence" of women. Such approaches are scorned for being highly reductive or neglecting to address socio-economic and racial differences. Despite such limitations, the art projects that came out of this era in American history made some of the largest strides towards creating an awareness of the limited, if not all together excluded, position of women throughout Western art histories.

A major point of contention for many of the artists discussed in this chapter and indeed those whose work I examine throughout the thesis is the dominant cultural construction of gender, which places them in a position of inferiority to their male counterparts. This construction has been articulated largely through systems of behavior and language that identify an individual as male or female, masculine or feminine. For

[28] I first encountered the term "cunt imagery" in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 78. I have since seen it used in a wide variety of feminist and art historical texts typically in reference to the images produced during the nineteen-sixties in Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro's Fresno Art Project, but in general to most of the vaginal imagery created during this time in an effort to unite women with a common, "feminine" image.

an explanation of what these systems are and how they are formed, I turn to the theories of psychoanalysis. Simply put, the elements of psychoanalytic theory utilized in this thesis address what we make of bodily difference and identifies the sources as biological, psychological and/or social. Freudian theory would dictate that the development of gender is psychological and occurs "in a largely pre-determined manner by means of a series of stages: oral, anal, phallic, latent and genital."[29] According to Freud, gender identity and sexual identification are inextricable developments. As author Michael Kimmel points out in his text, *The Gendered Society*, "Freud dislocates gender and sexuality from the realm of biology," as they are both psychological achievements and accomplished within the family.[30] As I will discuss more thoroughly in the second chapter of this thesis, Freud also links gender identity to sexual orientation, describing homosexuality as a pathological condition derived from gender development as opposed to mental deficiency or moral deviance. Since the development of gender is dependent on the maternal relationship, for Freud homosexual males are individuals who failed to stop identifying with their mother and her feminine qualities, just as lesbianism is the result of a female who identified with her masculine father. Kimmel highlights the dangerous nature of Freudian parent-child relationship theory as it reinforces countless stereotypes. These are the very stereotypes that have long formed societal expectations of male and female behavior and the relationship of sexual orientation to so-called masculine and feminine behavior. Therefore, what is most useful in Freud's theories are their illumination of cultural stereotypes about sex and gender.

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[29] Agnes N. O'Connell, "The Social Origins of Gender," in *Female and Male: Psychological Perspectives,* ed. Rhoda K. Unger (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 146.
[30] Michael S. Kimmel, *The Gendered Society,* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 68-69.

If it can be said that these theories have formed basic Western understanding of gender construction, then it is to be assumed that artists working within this system of ideologies are forced to either reinforce or to attempt to negate this system. It is my position that, since the nineteen sixties, performance art has had the deconstruction of gender as its primary intent. Women's performance art in particular has been understood as highly political and female performance artists have taken a stance against the dominant system of representation and the power relationships formed as a result. As Jean Forte postulates in her article "Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism," women's performance art often reveals the signifiers associated with the constructed concept of woman in order to expose their falsehood and create new systems of representation.[31] "In the late nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies, coincident with the women's movement, women used performance as a deconstructive strategy to demonstrate the objectification of women and its results."[32] Women artists wanted to shift the power relationship by making themselves subjects and refusing their place within a male dominated social system that classified them as Other.

One common strategy for women striving to deconstruct the traditional gender binary and its associated femininities was to utilize their own bodies as agents of expression. Feminist performance artists of the seventies publicly asserted control over their bodies, removing the body from the objectification of a misogynist society while attempting to break down the constructs of femininity that shaped the lives of American women. One of the major components of that construct was, and still is, socially mandated standards of beauty. How American culture has come to recognize the symbol

[31] Forte's essay takes a distinctively postmodernist stance, positioning feminist performance art as a reaction against modernist systems of representation.
[32] Forte, "Women's Performance Art," 251.

of "woman" was through a system of signifiers associated with the paradigm of femininity. The feminine was—and many would say that it remains—defined by the possession of physical attributes deemed befitting to a woman according to patriarchal authority, as well as by the participation in a particular set of social roles, particularly those of mother and wife on the one hand, and sexual object on the other.

One artist who tries to confront and destroy the "visual pleasure associated with female beauty"[33] is Lynda Benglis whose infamous *Artforum* advertisement in November of 1974 has come to serve as a kind of icon to anti-femininity (Figure 1). The conventions of femininity are concerned with passiveness, modesty and submission, all of which are disregarded in Benglis' starkly transgressive portrait. In the ad, Benglis appears nude, holding a giant latex dildo to her crotch, confronting the viewer behind a fashionable pair of white sunglasses. The impact is direct and unsettling; in fact, it was criticized by the editors of the magazine themselves who said her ad was "an object of extreme vulgarity."[34]

The image came after a series of promotional photos that Benglis created the previous year in which she posed in various provocative ways, including one in which she stands nude, except for a pair of jeans which have fallen to her ankles (Figure 2). Author Lucy Lippard writes that the photographs are a response to the "macho" tradition of the exhibition announcement wherein the artists would include a photograph of themselves "usually featuring a cigar, cowboy boots, a truck, or a dog – rather than their

[33] Joanna Frueh, "The Body Through Women's Eyes," in *The Power of Feminist Art,* ed. Norma Broude and Mary C. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 194.
[34] Quoted in Rebecca Schneider's, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 35.

work."[35] More specifically the scandalous 1974 photo of Benglis is a direct respond to a concurrently published image by artist Robert Morris, who knew Benglis and had collaborated with in 1972 on a video project.[36] Morris, known primarily at the time for his sculptural work, produced a poster for his Castelli-Sonnabend exhibition in which he appears bound in chains, nude from the waist up, wearing only a studded collar, sunglasses, wrist restraints and a military helmet (Figure 3). The poster presents Morris in an overtly masculine yet highly sexual manner; his bondage and slick, oiled skin have been described as homoerotic.[37] As in Benglis' photo, sexuality and their relative gendered stereotypes are presented in such an extreme manner as to appear mocking. Both artists had an interest in parodying male/female stereotypes and sexuality, but Morris' image never received the harsh criticism that Benglis' had because, as most historians now concur, a woman presenting herself in a non-normative sexual manner was far more threatening to Western ideologies than a male doing so.

As Lucy Lippard later wrote shortly after this image was made "the discomfort with Benglis' photograph was not the nudity or sexual display but the agency assigned to her displayed body."[38] Similar to Benglis' still image and the ideas she projects in it by using her own body, at the core of much feminist performance art in the nineteen sixties and seventies was a basic drive to assert control over one's own body and to remove it from the constructions of femininity and objecthood by making it a surface for artistic expression, an active subject instead of a passive object. Lippard addresses the dismissal

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[35] Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art,* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 104.
[36] Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America,* (New York: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 103.
[37] Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 114.
[38] Lippard, *From the Center*, 104.

of this type of performance art stating, "Men can use beautiful, sexy women as neutral objects or surfaces, but when women use their own faces and bodies, they are immediately accused of narcissism."[39]

Often accused of such narcissism, artist Carolee Schneemann employed her own nude body in many of her performances. Highly active in the New York art scene beginning in the early nineteen sixties, Schneemann became involved in the Fluxus movement as well as Happenings. The Fluxus movement was one of many avant-garde manifestations of the desire for an art integrated with life. Fluxus engaged in mixed-media events and publication activities but was dominated by performance, spanning from about 1961-1970.[40] Happenings, with roots dating back to the nineteen fifties, were equally invested in the closer integration of art and life and were meant to be spontaneous theatrical events. Fueled by what she expressed as a resistance and repression of her career and work because of her gender, Schneemann soon began to feel uncomfortable with her place within the New York City arts scene, feeling as if she functioned as a "cunt mascot"[41] in largely male circles of Fluxus and Happenings.[42] The source of this displacement for Schneemann was her own body; she therefore used it as the very site to address the constructs of female identity which had constricted the intellectual weight of her work. Since the concept of the powerless, emotionally-driven female is framed within concepts of femininity and beauty, Schneemann's work, much like Benglis' *Artforum* ad, aims to pull women free from that construct by owning, reworking and

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[39] Ibid., 125.
[40] For more on the Fluxus movement see Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
[41] The term "cunt mascot" is used by Schneider in *Explicit Bodies*, 34 in reference to Schneemann's affiliation with Fluxus and Happenings. It is a term that the artist had used herself in a number of interviews and in some of the personal notes found in Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy,* (New York: McPherson & Company, 1979).
[42] Schneider, *The Explicit Body,* 34-35.

grafting meaning onto the sight of her body outside of patriarchal ideals and/or expectations. According to Frueh, Schneemann's *Interior Scroll,* first performed in 1975 and again in 1977, "overhauls the myth of the stupid, weak or powerless beauty."[43] Standing on a platform, the artist slowly disrobes revealing her naked body (Figure 4). She then outlined the contours of her body with paint and proceeded to pull a ten-foot-long scroll of paper from her vagina. Slowly, some have claimed ritualistically, she unraveled the stream of intricately folded paper and read its contents aloud to the audience. The text was written by Schneemann and she positioned her body in a variety of poses while orating lines such as: "I met a happy man, / a Structuralist filmmaker…he said we are fond of you / you are charming / but don't ask us / to look at your films / …we cannot look at / *the personal clutter / the persistence of feelings / the hand-touch sensibility.*"[44] Schneemann's scroll is a clear expression of her frustrating experiences as a woman artist who is often denied equal status as a creator because of the "personal clutter" designated to art works produced by women at this time.

In this piece, Schneemann's body and specifically her genitalia become a source of information, a body with a voice that defies the silent objecthood of femininity. Schneemann's work, like many feminist performance artists of this time, was partly informed by the ideas developed by Simone de Beauvoir's famous 1957 *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir postulates that men have created an ideal for women, one that petrifies their bodies into passive objects of men's possession.[45] *Interior Scroll* enacts the body, refusing misogynist control and forced compliance, as de Beauvoir's suggests, by male ideals. Amelia Jones concludes in *Body Art, Performing the Subject* that Schneemann

[43] Frueh, "The Body Through Women's Eyes," 192.
[44] Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy,* (New York: McPherson & Company, 1979), 59.
[45] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Bantam, 1961), 127-128, 148.

presents herself as a fully embodied subject and, in the process, established a "passionate and convulsive" relationship with the audience.[46] The experience of being both artist and object is, of course, tempered by the presence of a live audience. The temporal nature of performance dictates a body of work whose meaning needs to be explored within the context of time, place and the reception of the viewers. Each witness to the performance carries with them their own preconceived notions of art production, womanhood and the woman artist, which are then projected onto the work as it is being created, participating in its process and the result.

When considering any artwork that utilizes the female nude, one cannot ignore the issues of sexuality and sexual desire that are intrinsic to it. In an earlier work by Schneemann, *Eye/Body* (1963), these issues are confronted in a very direct and intentional way (Figure 5). The work was performed in the artist's own loft apartment in New York City, forcing the viewer to enter her personal space and to travel into the work itself. Schneemann had transformed her apartment into a "kinetic environment" consisting of 4' x 9' floor panels, broken glass and shards of mirrors, photographs, lights and motorized umbrellas. Schneemann stepped into her work and then incorporated herself into her construction by painting, greasing, and chalking her naked body in what she called a "kind of shamanistic ritual." In *Eye/Body* Schneemann was not only image but image-maker, a concept which is reinforced by the use of pun in the title. The implied exchange of the looking eye and "I," or self, being one suggests the complete fusion of art maker and art object; she who is to be looked at and she who looks are the same person allowing Schneemann to create her own self-image. Schneemann describes the performance in her book *More Than Meat Joy*:

[46] Jones, *Body Art,* 3.

> In 1963 to use my body as an extension of my painting-constructions was to challenge and to threaten the psychic territorial power lines by which women were admitted to the Art Stud Club, so long as they behaved enough like the men, did work clearly in the traditions and pathways hacked out by the men.
>
> The nude was being used in early Happenings as an object (often an "active" object). I was using the nude as myself—the artist—and as a primal, archaic force which could unify energies I discovered as visual information.[47]

As in the later performance *Interior Scroll, Eye/Body* refused to adhere to the "traditions and pathways" of Western art which denied women creative agency by producing art as well as personal agency as subjects of art.

Part of Schneemann's impulse to use her body so explicitly in her work came from the frustration she experienced as an artist who, because of her gender, was not taken seriously in the male-dominated art world. Using her body in her work was a way for the artist to directly confront the limitations of her sex by making her artist's body "visual territory" and forcing the viewer to grapple with the agency and creative power that she as both artist and art-image produced. The personal weight of works such as *Eye/Body* and the discomfort her work elicited garnered much criticism from what Schneemann herself refers to as the Art Stud Club. The basis of their dismissal was that her work was too personal, too "messy" to be taken as a serious contribution to the art world.[48]

Nudity, however, was not the problem since it was used often in Happenings as an "active" object. For Schneemann, the implications were different because she was using

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[47] Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy,* 52.

[48] Though she was involved with Fluxus since its inception in New York, the founder of the movement, George Maciunus, officially excommunicated Schneemann for her "messy, expressionist tendencies." Schneemann has written that Maciunus found her to be a "terrifying female" and printed a note to be published in Fluxus papers that clearly stated his exclusion of Schneemann and her work from the movement.

the live nude as more than an active object. As author Rebecca Schneider states, "whether she ultimately wished it, the object of her body was unavoidably also *herself* – the nude *as* the artist, not just the artist's (active) object."[49] In that both the creator and the art are both explicitly female, Schneemann's work posed a threat to excepted cultural associations of the active with masculinity and passive with femininity. The female body as subject is a contradiction to patriarchal text,[50] challenging the way Western culture has come to understand and interpret representation and proposing a new text rooted in the experiences and sexuality of real women.

One may better understand this strategy of patriarchal contradiction by referencing psychoanalytic theory, specifically to the writing of Jacques Lacan which clearly reads the female body as Lack, or Other. Also central to Lacanian theory is the belief that the female body exists solely for the purpose of reflecting the male subject and its desires. "Derived from Freudian conceptions of the psyche, Lacan's model articulates the subject in terms of processes (drives, desires, symbolization) which depend on the crucial instance of castration, and are thus predicted exclusively on a male or masculine subject."[51] For Lacan the term "phallus" refers to the privileged signifier, a signifier of power. Simultaneously, Lacan also insists that the phallus is not the same as the biological penis and, therefore, is not exclusively male. Many performance artists have addressed this distinct deviation from Freudian theory regarding the phallus by highlighting the fact that it ignores the strongly political nature of the term. In Vicki Hall's performance *Ominous Operation* (1971), for example, the artist is led behind a

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[49] Schneider, *The Explicit Body,* 35-36.
[50] For a discussion on the potential conflict of a speaking subject and its representation see Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics,* 197.
[51] Josette Feral, "Powers and Difference," in *The Future of Difference,* ed. Eisenstein and Jardine (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), 90-93.

curtain only to emerge shortly after with a giant phallus attached to her body, behaving in a more aggressive and confrontational manner. Here, the artist has made clear the connection between sexual politics and the privileged sexual signifier as well as the relationship between dominance and the biological member.[52]

The symbolic order, as articulated in Lacanian psychoanalysis, determines power relationships while recognizing the inherently patriarchal nature of language, which Lacan refers to as the Name-of-the-Father.[53] Developed in his seminar *The Psychoses* (1955-1965), the Name-of-the-Father is the fundamental signifier which allows signification to proceed normally. "It both confers identity to the subject, naming and positioning the subject within the symbolic order and signifies the Oedipical prohibition (the "no" of the incest taboo)."[54] As Forte has pointed out, theorist Julia Kristeva provides a useful and vital counterpoint to Lacan's stance on language, one that has been crucial to many feminist thinkers. According to Kristeva, the woman is "semiotic" and the symbolic order is dependent on her, completely negating Lacanian theory. "In describing the semiotic as the 'underside' of symbolic language, [Kristeva] allies it with the maternal, the feminine, although it is not necessarily delineated by sexual difference."[55] This concept allows fractures in meaning within the structure of language, creating the possibility for authentic difference posed as an alternative to Lacan's authoritative "lingually-constructed society," which is implied in Name-of-the-Father.[56]

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[52] For more on this performance see Moira Roth, "Autobiography, Theatre, Mysticism, and Politics: Women's Performance Art in Southern California," in *Performance Anthology,* ed. Carl Loeffler (San Francisco: Last Gasp/Contemporary Arts Press, 1989), 461-463.
[53] Ibid., 102-103.
[54] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan: The Psychoses, Book III*, trans. Jaques-Alain Miller, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1990), 41.
[55] Forte, "Women's Performance Art," 254.
[56] Carolyn Burke, "Irigaray Through the Looking Glass," in *Feminist Studies* 7:2 (1981): 112.

By creating spaces for difference or breaks in language, Kristeva has also fueled a further exploration into Lacanian psychoanalysis to uncover other issues that subjugate or negate women. One such issue is that of the female speaker. According to Lacan, woman as the culturally constructed Other exists to reflect male subjectivity and, in doing so, is defined by what she is not or by her lack. Without a singular or owned identity, woman is denied the possibility of being her own subject. As we saw in Schneemann's work, it becomes the project of many performance artists to demand and create an identity wherein woman is subject. Returning to *Interior Scroll,* for example, it is evident that, through performance, women artists of the nineteen sixties and seventies are exploiting and creating breaks in the psychoanalytic systems which have made maleness the authoritative and defining structures through which women are to identify themselves. In forcing the world to see them as self-defining, speaking subjects, these artists are revealing the falsehood of such constructions and thereby threatening the way Western society has come to know gender representation and the female body.

Like Schneemann, artist Hannah Wilke utilized her own body to explore, among other things, the paradox of being both artist and object in Western culture. Steeped in expressions of her personal experiences, Wilke's work makes distinct references to how images of women have sculpted our understanding of femininity and, consequently, how they have created a space of discomfort and pain in which the female body is assumed to exist. Through her work, Wilke exposes what I would call the "masquerade of the feminine"[57] as articulated through popular culture and media images. Often but not

[57] The term "masquerade of the feminine" is taken from Irigaray's critique of Lacanian theory regarding the phallus and its creation of a masquerade of the feminine in Western culture. Irigaray believes that the phallus, contrary to Lacanian thought, is part of a closed signifying system that positions female as Other.

exclusively through photographs, the artist references what Abigail Solomon-Godeau has called "the repertoire of poses derived – variously – from advertising, fashion photography, erotica and pornography, pinups, and movies."[58] The often glamorous appearance of the images she produces coupled with her own beauty makes Wilke's work particularly susceptible to the critique of narcissism commonly foisted on women artists who use their own image in their artwork.

In *So Help Me Hannah* (1978), Wilke appears nude in a series of photographs taken in New York's alternative exhibition space, P.S. 1. In the photos, Wilke assumes various poses wearing nothing more than a pair of high heels, holding a variety of props from Mickey Mouse dolls to guns (Figure 6). The images are overlaid with quotations from writings by primarily male artists and philosophers, which were incorporated into Wilke's performances. During the piece Wilke moved slowly, freezing occasionally to strike a pose, and was accompanied by a soundtrack of her own voice reading some of the texts in her photographs. The visual effect of both the photos and performances (most of which were videotaped) is that of a series of satiric advertisements. Utilizing a notion developed by author Craig Owens in reference to artist Barbara Kruger, Amelia Jones argues that Wilke's work engages with the "rhetoric of the pose."[59] In *So Help Me Hannah,* the artist is commenting on Western codes of femininity by enacting them through a variety of poses. Wilke is clearly not just recreating stereotypical female imagery by posing as a poster-girl of sexuality. Her images and performances exaggerate

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For more on the subject of the feminine as masquerade see Margaret Whitford's, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, (London: Routledge, 1991).

[58] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Woman Who Never Was: Self-Representation, Photography, and First-Wave Feminist Art," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution.* ed. Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007) 340-341.

[59] Craig Owens, "The Medusa Effect," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture,* ed. Scott Bryson et al. (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 192. Quoted in Amelia Jones, *Body Art,* 152.

and parody representations of the "feminine" found throughout Western society. Through performance Wilke is asserting a power that is not present in the traditionally petrified images of women that she critiques. The strategy, again, is to make the object become subject and the element of control is integral to the work, something which is highlighted by Wilke's reference to the phrase "so help me god" in the title. Placing her name in the phrase where "god" would be implies either the possibility of artist as the ultimate creator or at least having god-like qualities. It could also suggest that Wilke does not call on god for help, but on herself in the likelihood that god doesn't exist. The exact meaning is uncertain but the assertion of self-control and expression are equally strong in either case.

Through their participation in "the rhetoric of the pose," performance artists begin to subvert and complicate the binaries of gender difference through which women are understood as passive objects of a male gaze. The relationship of women to the gaze is discussed in Mulvey's, previously mentioned essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which, although its theories are applied specifically to the Hollywood film genre, provides a useful comparison to performance and its documentation, which often relies on film recordings. In the essay Mulvey postulates that women's bodies are positioned as mere objects of fetishistic, voyeuristic male pleasure. Furthermore, she argues that the female body in Western culture connotes "to-be-looked-at-ness,"[60] which, when considered in relationship to Wilke's work, is refused by the female body that doesn't conform to conventions of femininity. By taking a closer look at a particular photograph from the *So Help Me Hannah* series, one may better see how Wilke's images complicate the posed female body. In the performative photograph entitled *What Does*

[60] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 14-26.

This Represent/What Do You Represent? (Reinhart) (1978-1984), we are confronted with an image of the artist described by Jones as follows:

> Wilke sits dejectedly, legs spread, in the corner of a desolate, seemingly empty room, the gun in her hand echoed by the array of toy guns before her on the floor. The words of the title—those of male modernist painter Ad Reinhart—are printed on the image in an abrupt, polemical fashion to disrupt any comfortable objectification of Wilke as image; they also point to the way in which the rhetoric of aesthetics has been deployed at the expense of women, whose bodies are usually unspoken objects of representation.[61]

In the image, Wilke is presenting/performing her body as object, "she constructs herself as literally cornered by the gaze."[62] The woman we see here, however, is not an idealized, sexual fetish object; the presence of pubic hair, for example, does not conform to the art historical traditions of representing the female nude. Wilke's introspective expression and body positioning do nothing to suggest sexual desire, yet she is naked, a condition with intrinsically sexual connotations. The artist has desexualized the female nude and, in turn, de-objectified the object she presents (herself). In her slumped state and introspective gaze, she is denying the viewer the traditional female nude which invites looking and implies the subject's submission. Her use of male text, which she can be heard reciting during her performances, along with the subjecthood she has granted her nude female body, is a mixing of patriarchal visual codes of "woman/body/object" and "man/mind/subject."[63] This mixing of codes allows for artists to conflate and openly challenge socially mandated gender roles while attempting to avert the male gaze and activating its frozen object of desire.

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[61] Jones, *Body Art*, 157.
[62] Ibid., 158.
[63] Ibid., 159.

Akin to the goals of *So Help Me Hannah,* Wilke's later work entitled *Starification Object Series (S.O.S)* (1975) was another instance where the artist used her body as an agent of expression, both mirroring and critiquing images of the female nude. In *S.O.S,* Wilke again struck a variety of poses reminiscent of high fashion media and was mostly nude aside from some minor props and pieces of chewing gum which she had fixed to her body (Figure 7). The gum is twisted into forms that have been described as womb-like, vulvular, and tiny wounds. With it Wilke has scarred her face, back, chest, breasts and fingernails with shapes that, in their multiple meanings, can evoke feelings of both pleasure and pain. Wilke's scars symbolically reference the keloided designs on the bodies of some African women, whose flesh is opened with hundreds of small cuts made to the skin, without anesthesia. Wilke states:

> I decorate my body relating to African Scarification Wounds, of the Caste System (on my head), or, macho male photographs, with cowboy hats and guns, or little uniforms…maid outfits, and hair curlers; so, they were psychological poses that related to me, as emotional wounds…the internal wounds that we carry within us, that really hurt us. You know, having to "be pretty," or, being pretty, and being thought of as stupid.[64]

Wilke used chewing gum because, for her, it was the appropriate medium for representing the scars of femininity, "I chose gum because it is the perfect metaphor for the American woman—chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece."[65] The soft, pink scars externalize the psychological and emotional wounds suffered by Western women in their efforts to fit into the impossible mold of beauty carved out by patriarchal society. The title of the work itself, *S.O.S*, an abbreviation globally recognized as a call for help, implies a direct sense of urgency and despair while the word *Starification,* where one might expect scarification, tells us that

[64] Mark, ed., *WACK!,* 260-261.
[65] Ibid.

the battle scars of beautification are the necessary ornament of a woman who has achieved stardom. The reference to African Scarification Wounds may be read as an amplification of the artist's portrayal of herself as Other, by creating a visual connection to the identification of a racialized Other, an issue that will be further addressed in the third chapter.

As is the case with much of Wilke's work, the meanings in *S.O.S* and its imagery are layered. Despite the common interpretation of Wilke's gum scars as vaginal forms, the artist herself does not read them as singularly female. The marks reference both male and female genitalia, in Wilke's words, "they can be seen as female and male, just as the head of a cock looks very much like a vagina. So they are really male-female gestural sculptures."[66] The androgyny of the forms disallows a gender identity, suggesting that visual associations or assumptions made in respect to sexual difference are often misguided and false. This reading lends a universal sensuality to the scars that complicate the viewer's understanding of the work. Again, Wilke is intentionally disrupting our preconceived notions of gender and making her body subject.

At about the same time that Wilke was covering her body in wads of chewing gum shaped into "gestural sculptures," artist Eleanor Antin was embarking on a thirty-six-day-long performance piece that would speak a bit more directly to the oppressive nature of patriarchal femininity. For *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1973), Antin committed herself to a strict diet regimen during which she lost ten pounds. Antin documented the weight loss in a series of photographs taken each day of the performance (Figure 8). The photos were systematically taken: four shots taken from front, back, left and right views. The images are presented in a grid so that the progress being made on

[66] Jill O'Bryan, *Carnal Art: Orlan's Refacing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 74.

her body can be seen in a clear and simple manner, reminiscent of a film strip. The piece is a response to traditional methods of Greek sculpture in which marble is chipped away until the ideal form is revealed.[67] The result of Antin's intense dieting was the waning of her physical frame into a shape that better matched the ideal female form as dictated by society.

A slightly earlier work by Antin, *Representational Painting* (1972), can be read as an ideological precursor to *Carving* as it also comments on the manipulative nature of Western beauty practices (Figure 9). *Representational Painting* is a video recording in which Antin appears to the viewer as if standing in front of a mirror. Throughout the thirty-eight minute recording, Antin applies make-up, a metaphor for creating art by painting the canvas of her face. By positioning the viewer in the place of her own reflection, Antin seems to assuming a female audience who would recognize the actions of the woman in front of them as not unlike their own daily beauty rituals. Like her weight-loss, this manipulation of appearance is part of the "masquerade of femininity" for which women often subject their bodies to painful and often absurd changes. Additionally, in both *Representational Painting* and *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture,* Antin is clearly making reference to the traditions of art history as participatory in creating and supporting the beauty standards she is critiquing. Employing a very direct relationship with the audience through performance is Serbian born, New York-based artist, Marina Abramović. Abramović's deconstructive strategy exposes human vulnerability and fear can, and does, affect one's world views and relationships with others. Describing her work, Abramović states:

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[67] Arlene Raven and Deborah Marrow, "Eleanor Antin: What's Your Story?" in *Chrysalis*, no. 8 (Summer 1979): 43-51.

> Through performance I found the possibility of establishing a dialogue with the audience through an exchange of energy, which tended to transform the energy itself. I could not produce a single work without the presence of the audience, because the audience gave me the energy to be able, through a specific action, to assimilate it and return it, to create a genuine field of energy.[68]

The energy exchange between artist and audience plays an integral part in Abramović's performances as a type of non-verbal communication that inextricably links her to those viewing her. The energy expelled from both artist and audience in Abramović's work is amplified by the sense of urgency present in her performances.

For the piece *Rhythm 10* (1973), first performed in the Richard Demarco Gallery in Edinburgh, Abramović turned on a tape recorder, laid one hand on the floor with fingers spread, and repeatedly stabbed the empty spaces between her fingers as fast as possible (Figure 10). Utilizing an assortment of ten knives, the artist replaced one each time she cut herself. Minutes later Abramović would play back the recording, concentrating on the rhythm so that she could repeat her movements, following the exact pattern of marks and cuts that had originally occurred. Describing the performance, Abramović states:

> After each cut, I change to a different knife. Once all the knives (all the rhythms) have been used, I rewind the tape. I listen to the recording of the first performance. I concentrate. I repeat the first part of the performance. I pick up the knives in the same sequence, adhere to the same rhythm and cut myself in the same places. In this performance, the mistakes of the past and those of the present are synchronous. I rewind the same tape and listen to the dual rhythm of the knives. I leave.[69]

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[68] Marina Abramović, in Dobrila Denegri, "Conversation with Marina Abramović," in *Marina Abramović: Performing Body* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1998), 18.
[69] Ibid., 19.

Through her repetition of these self-damaging performances, Abramović is trying to merge the past with the present while exploring the physical and mental limitations of the body.

The sense of exigency in *Rhythm 10* is magnified in a work by Abramović of the following year in which she situated herself near a table which held over seventy different objects—including a scalpel, a rose and a gun loaded with a single bullet. In *Rhythm O* (1974), Abramović stood before the crowd on a pedestal and left the assortment of objects on display and allowed the audience to use them on her any way that they wanted (Figure 11). At first, the audience was slow to approach and began with playful actions such as applying makeup and perfume. As time progressed, however, things began to turn and the results were sometimes horrifying: her stomach was pierced with rose-thorns, her clothing was cut, as was her throat and one audience member licked blood from her skin. Most frightening, one man from the crowd held the gun to Abramović's head for several minutes, curling the artist's own finger around the trigger until someone else intervened. Describing her experience, Abramović states:

> On the table there is even a loaded gun. I could have been killed. The idea was: to what extent can we be vulnerable? How far the audience can go and what it can do with your body? It was a terrible experience. I was just a thing, elegantly dressed and facing the audience. In the beginning, nothing happened, but then the audience became more and more aggressive, projecting on me three images: the Madonna, the mother and the whore. The weirdest thing is that the women almost didn't act, but they were telling the men what to do.[70]

The humiliation and physical abuse brought on the artist by the piece provoked strong visceral reactions from viewers which became an integral element of her work. At the end of the grueling six-hour performance, the artist broke her silent, motionless and,

[70] Marina Abramović quoted by Janet Kaplan in "Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramović," *Art Journal* 58:2 (1999): 6-19.

therefore, passive relationship with the audience by beginning to walk toward them. Despite the aggressive and violent acts many of them had inflicted on her, upon becoming active the viewers quickly retreated, running from the performance space. At this moment in the work, the audience displays its inabilities to confront their own actions and maintain the roles they decided to play in Abramović's performance. Unlike other performance artists, such as Orlan to whom we will turn next, the physical violence and manipulation displayed on the body of the artist in *Rhythm O* is not entirely within the woman's control.

The performances by Antin and Abramović discussed above are, comparatively, an incredibly mild version of what French artist Orlan would subsequently go on to do twenty years later in her controversial artworks. The women artists mentioned thus far have provided a platform in the art world for others to critique the patriarchal construction of gender that has, among many other things, dictated beauty standards. Working significantly later than the artists previously mentioned in this chapter, Orlan's performance is not only developed during a different political and social climate in terms of feminism but in a different cultural environment as well. French feminism of the mid- to late twentieth century was largely expressed through philosophical and literary texts, such as those written by De Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, whose theories have help frame the discussion thus far. Moreover, Orlan's work came to maturity during a broad shift from second to third wave feminism; this later form of feminism considers differences in race, age, class and sexuality among women—aspects of identity that many consider to be gravely underrepresented in the second wave—to be essential. Although the historical and cultural context for Orlan's work is distinctly different from that of the

American artists discussed thus far, her work has irrefutable ties both theoretically and visually to their work. Like them, she uses her body as medium and has continued the broader Western feminist agenda to reveal the oppressive nature of a patriarchal society.

In the mid nineteen sixties Orlan began her career as a painter, but quickly decided that using her own body as medium would best suit her goals as both a woman and an artist. At the very onset of her artistic career, Orlan was consumed by explorations into her own identity (as is evident in her decision to change her given name, Mireille Suzanne Francette Porte, and assume the name Orlan). Crucial to her work is her striving to reappropriate her body from the dominant cultural ideology which she feels has limited her professional and personal life.[71] In the process of demanding ownership of her body, Orlan makes a spectacle of it. In particular, it was in a series of plastic surgeries performed throughout the nineteen nineties that Orlan has transformed her face into a living collage of beauty ideals from a variety of art historical sources.[72]

The *Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* began in 1990 and consisted of nine different plastic surgery performance pieces performed over the course of five years. In these pieces she uses medical cosmetic manipulation as a means to express, in a most unforgiving way, the extreme social pressures put on women to conform to narrowly defined standards of beauty. As critic Alyda Faber writes, "her work exposes the violence of these beauty standards insofar as her 'reincarnation' project embodies these

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[71] Alyda Farber, "Saint Orlan: Ritual as Violent Spectacle and Cultural Criticism," in TDR (1998-), vol.46, no. 1 (Spring, 2002), 85.

[72] In 1990, Orlan drafted plans for a series of surgical performance pieces in which she would appropriate facial features from five historically significant paintings. It depicted Orlan's face incorporating the chin of Venus from Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1480), the nose of Francois Pascal Simon Gérard's Psyche in *Le premier baisser de l'amour a Psyche* (1820), the eyes of the anonymous sculpture *Diana chasseresse,* the lips of Europa in Gustave Moreau's *l'enlèvement d'Europe* (1876), and the brow of Leonard's *Mona Lisa* (1503-5).

practices to excess."[73] Directed by Orlan, the performances are not merely recordings of cosmetic surgeries but theatrical productions complete with props and costumes. The first surgery, for example, took place in Paris and featured a Black male striptease dancer and surgical gowns designed by Paco Rabanne. Operation seven, entitled *Omnipresence* (1993), was executed in New York City and viewed via satellite in Montreal, Paris, Tokyo and Latvia. For this event Orlan's hair was dyed a brilliant blue on one half of her head and blonde on the other. The room was green and she lay on an orange operating table while reading faxes sent to her from across the globe, answering the questions while surgeons opened, closed, pulled and prodded her face (Figures 12 and 13). Through the use of a spinal block, Orlan was able to remain conscious throughout the surgeries with minimized pain. The use of the block, however, complicated the procedures and created a far greater danger to the artist.[74] The videos, although tempered with the theatricalities of costume and, in another case, the reciting of French psychoanalytic theory, are difficult to stomach and the mixture of horror and absurdity are meant to mirror the impossible and painful definitions of beauty articulated by Western society.[75]

A common critique of Orlan's transformative performance art is that, in the process, she has conformed to the very beauty standards which continue to make women feel inadequate. In November of 1993, however, Orlan responded to this critique, embarking on the creation of a "mutant body" which included having chin implants placed on her temples (Figure 14).[76] The result has been described as "symmetrical horns" and the protrusions are a testament to the Orlan's mission which is not to improve

[73] Farber, "Saint Orlan," 86.
[74] Jill O'Bryan, Carnal Art: Orlan's Refacing, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 56.
[75] For an extensive exploration of Orlan's work and its relationship to concepts of beauty and the grotesque, art history, medicine, identity and feminist strategies see Jill O'Bryan's text, *Carnal Art,* cited above.
[76] Faber, "Saint Orlan," 86.

or enhance her own beauty.[77] In these performances, Orlan uses her flesh as a "medium of transformation."[78] Beautiful or not, Orlan has taken control of the images that describe Western beauty and manipulated them at her own will. She is a work of art ever in progress, who has utilized the very place of feminist contention, her own female body, to create her masterpiece.[79]

Additionally, in her surgical performances, Orlan has "placed her body into the center of beauty technology in order to expose and question those techniques of gender that simultaneously construct and discipline 'beauty-conscious' female identity."[80] Orlan's surgeries, although also difficult for the audience to watch and physically painful for the artist, are highly orchestrated under the direction of the artist. No cut is made into her flesh that was not intended as part of her process of transformation. For Abramović, by contrast, the fate of the body is in the hands of the audience. In many ways, this type of performance technique is more revealing of actual social constructions and attitudes at large. When faced with the female body as object, as Abramović herself states, the audience projects the roles of Madonna, mother and whore onto the body and, in those projections, the direct relationship between objectification and violence is clearly evinced.

Using their own bodies, the artists addressed in this chapter asserted control over their identity and sexuality, challenging and refusing to be represented by the Western

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[77] Kate Ince describes Orlan's brow implants as "symmetrical horns" in "Operations of Redress: Orlan, the Body and its Limits," in *Fashion Theory: The Journal of dress, Body and Culture,* vol. 2, no. 2, (May 1998), 112.
[78] Barbara Rose, "Is It Art? Orlan and the Transgressive Act," *Art in America,* 81, no. 2 (February 1993): 85.
[79] Although I have only discussed the facial alterations, Orlan has also incorporated bodily transformations into her performance series as well including liposuction and breast implants. For more refer to Kate Ince's, *Orlan: Millennial Female (Dress, Body, Culture),* (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 2000).
[80] Tanya Augsburg, "Orlan's Performative Transformations of Subjectivity," in *The Ends of Performance,* ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 295.

construction of woman. They used performance as a tool in demanding that they play the role of both image and image-maker, leaving little to no space for art historical conventions that would deem this position unattainable for a woman. Through their performances, these women began exposing the gendering process which is laden with traditional signifiers and stereotypes.

The perspective I have presented through the artists discussed in this chapter, however, is limited, since issues of race, sexuality and class are not the direct objectives of these artists. While they challenged gender norms, we might, in retrospect critique them for their tendencies to position themselves as female universals by leaving these aspects of identity unquestioned. The performance art pieces that I will discuss in the next chapter expand the discourse into multiple issues of double-negation in which the artist is not just Other according to her sex, but as articulated through skin color and/or sexual orientation. The commonalities between the performance artists discussed in chapters one and two is the particularly political form of self-portraiture that they were practicing through the conscious decision to make their bodies the site on which to negotiate and expose their position in society, and often more specifically, their place in the art world.

II. Acting Out: Racial and Sexual Difference in Performance

In the following chapter I will highlight performance artists or groups that expand notions of gender difference into other aspects of identity. In that social, cultural, sexual and biographical variances among women are countless, I do not intend to encompass all difference but merely to utilize the works of a number of artists who have articulated their particular position within the patriarchy beyond mere sexual difference as examples of the pluralities of feminist discourse expressed through performance in this historical period.

Any attempt to reconstruct a female identity outside Western psychoanalytic ideologies of sexual difference is subject to criticisms of a false universalism and ahistoricity. Biological essentialism is often the root of such critiques, and from it springs the concept of a unifying femininity experienced by all women. Luce Irigaray states that "a long history has put all women in the same sexual, social and cultural condition. Whatever inequalities may exist among women, they all undergo, even without realizing it, the same oppression, the same exploitation of their body, the same denial of their desire."[81] As Butler and other critics have reacted, this stance is equally oppressive in its lack of accounting for difference among women. The globalizing effect of such an essentialist approach eradicates class, race and sexual difference, among many other things, and it presumes a white, heterosexual and middle class female norm. Butler claims that "the failure to acknowledge the specific cultural operations of gender oppression is itself a kind of epistemological imperialism…colonizing under the sign of the same those differences that might otherwise call that totalizing concept into

[81] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One,* trans. C. Porter with C. Burke, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 164.

question."[82] Each of the artists highlighted here approach differences of race and sexuality in varying ways, some highly personal while others aiming to effect political and/or social awareness. What this chapter aims to do then is separate these women from the previous chapter, not to emphasize or alienate them as 'Other" to the primarily white, Euro-American artists presented in chapter one, but to additionally address the specific sensitivities to race and sex issues that are present in their work.

In regard to racial difference, poet Audre Lorde once wrote that, "ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women's joint power."[83] She then continues to address what she describes as the tendency of white women to both ignore their "built-in privileges of whiteness" and to describe *woman* in terms of their own experience. The absence of non-white women in many of the mainstream feminist critiques of the nineteen sixties and seventies creates deep divisions in which those not included are a double-negation, an Other within the construct of the female Other. Yet other authors of the time did address these differences. An important article written in 1977 by Beverly Fisher entitled, "Race and Class: Beyond Personal Politics," calls feminists to confront the latent racism in the feminist movement and its theories by reevaluating and considering the absent histories and experiences of minority women.[84]

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir utilizes a complex series of comparisons between racism and slavery to analyze women's oppression. As Margaret Simons has pointed out, de Beauvoir's work rests on scholarship that was seminal to the nineteenth

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[82] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 13.
[83] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outside,* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1984), 67.
[84] Beverly Fisher, "Race and Class: Beyond Personal Politics,"

century; "in fact, the central question that defines Beauvoir's project in the book is posed in terms of the master/slave relationship described by Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*."[85] In his text Hegel describes a dialectic in which a slave, conscious of his dependence and oppression, comes to a state of self-consciousness when granted freedom and independence. During the course of this same dialectic, the master, no longer owning the slave, recognizes his dependency on him or her, establishing a reciprocal relationship.[86] Beauvoir believes women's history reveals a parallel with this slave/master relationship, but "in woman's relationship to man the dialectic in which reciprocity is established has failed to operate."[87] Beauvoir then questions why women have not contested their subordinate relationship to men and answers it with a description of the many differences that exist between racism, sexism and class oppression. These differences, according to Beauvoir, create a disunity which, coupled with a critical dependency on men, makes autonomy nearly impossible.

The trouble with *The Second Sex*, however, is that the author herself has not acknowledged the various economic, social and political situations of women from different societies. Simons has criticized Beauvoir's adaptation of the Hegelian slave/master dialect for its conflation of racist and sexist ideologies and for ignoring the ethnocentrism in her, and Hegel's, analysis of oppression. Simons states that "the ethnocentrism of Beauvoir's perspective, with its tendency to generalize from her own cultural viewpoint, shows an insensitivity to the experiences of women in other cultures,

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[85] Margaret A. Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex* (New York and Oxford: Rowman & Litlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 25.
[86] See Georg W.F. Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, Trans. J. Hoffmeister. (London and New York: Oxford University Press,1977), 67.
[87] Simons, *Beauvoir and the Second Sex*, 25.

which has continued to be a problem in feminist theory."[88] As articulated in the quote by Lorde above, written feminist critiques by white women have a strong and dangerous tendency to de-emphasize the differences in women's lives in an effort to illuminate a shared oppressive social positioning. The danger is a Eurocentric feminist discourse which only further alienates and silences minority women, forging a divide that weakens the collective and assumes a white privilege.

The assumption of whiteness is dominant in much of feminist theory, the psychoanalytic theory discussed throughout this thesis and the histories of art. An article by John P. Bowles entitled, "Blinded by the White: Art and History at the Limits of Whiteness," argues that whiteness is the very model by which all Western culture is judged, sustaining its position of privilege.[89] "As the norm, whiteness passes unremarked, perpetuating the canonical conventions and traditions that sustain its privilege; whiteness is assumed, while only otherness is pronounced."[90] Art history's tradition of positioning of the white body as a universal by which all others are measured and marked as different is the crucial ground upon which women artists of color created a shift in meaning by using their bodies in performance. The tendency to overlook difference for the sake of an essentialist, unifying, female voice denies the pluralities of experience, cultural difference and sexuality that allow individual women a sense of autonomy.

In *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (2005), Martin Berger analyses the tendency for Western culture to associate racial difference with being non-

[88] Ibid. 27.
[89] John P. Bowles, "Blinded by the White: Art and History at the Limits of Whiteness," *Art Journal* 60, No. 4 (Winter, 2001), 39.
[90] Ibid., 39.

white, as if whiteness itself is not a racial category, but the gage by which all others are identified. His exploration of Western visual culture does not rely on artistic production and imagery to explain or evince how race is constructed; instead he focuses on what is "unseen," the discourses and ideologies which inform the image.[91] What I would like to avoid in this thesis is the assumption that difference is an issue that is, or should only be, dealt with by or when discussing non-white artists. The study of whiteness as a specific identity helps to expose whiteness as a false normative and reveal the ways in which, in Western culture, race has been constructed in relationship to white experience.

Artist and philosopher Adrian Piper is a woman working to expose the experiences of women of color and their place in discourses of race, feminism and philosophy. By the early nineteen seventies, Piper had established a reputation for herself as a Conceptual artist in the New York scene with a number of works including *Here and Now* and *Concrete Infinity 6" Square* (1969) in which the emphasis of her art was not on the object itself but to the idea of art as a "declarative proposition that generates its own self-reflexive system."[92] In her autobiographical study, *Talking to Myself*, written in the early nineteen seventies, Piper recounts that things changed dramatically for her in the spring of 1970 following a series of events including the resurgence of the women's movement, the invasion of Cambodia, the attacks against anti-war protesters at Kent State and Jackson State universities and the student rebellion at City College where she had just begun studying philosophy as an undergraduate.

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[91] For more an in depth consideration of whiteness as a racial category and its relationship to visual culture, see Martin Berger, *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture,* (Los Angeles: University of Los Angeles Press, 2005).

[92] Adrian Piper, "The Logic of Modernism," *Flash Art* (Jan.-Feb., 1993), 58. For Piper's thoughts on Conceptual art earlier in her career, see "My Art Education" (1968), in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, I* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), 3-7.

Subsequently, Piper began reflecting on her role in regard to what was happening around her and "on her position as an artist, a woman and a black."[93] Feeling the need to respond directly to what was occurring, Piper rejected art which referred back to what she calls "conditions of separateness, order, exclusivity, and the stability of easily accepted functional identities which no longer exist."[94] She further dispelled the idea that art functioned as a mediator between the artist's creative process and the viewer's passive reception of it. Like many of the women artists discussed in this thesis, Piper's work serves as a declaration of her own creative agency and as an established academic who publishers her own work, she maintains this agency well beyond the performances themselves.

Her efforts to change this artist/viewer relationship resulted in a series of performance pieces in which Piper forces the viewer to confront her actual presence and behavior in hopes of inciting a reaction to it, thereby changing the dynamics and potential meaning of the work. These performances are different from those discussed so far, in that Piper does not use herself as the female nude in her work. Moreover, as in her *Mythic Being* performances discussed later in the chapter, she does not always represent herself as a woman. One of her first ventures into this very direct form of art production was an unannounced performance in April 1970. The piece took place at Max's Kansas City, a New York City social hot-spot for those in the art scene where the artist walked around the crowded bar for an hour wearing a blindfold, earplugs, nose plug and gloves

[93] Adrian Piper, *Talking to Myself: the Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object,* (Bari, Italy: Marilena Bonomo, 1975), 38-39.
[94] Ibid., 41.

(Figure 15).[95] As Piper describes "Max's was an Art Environment…to even walk into it was to be absorbed into the collective Art Self-Conscience Consciousness, either as object or collaborator."[96] The blindfold, gloves ear and nose plugs, then, were a form of sensory deprivation, an effort to protect the artist from "absorbing" the environment. Piper was making her relationship to the art community quite clear, her artistic consciousness was to remain unaffected by the greater collective and in doing so she has presented herself as a "silent, secret, passive object…ready to be absorbed as an object."[97] Piper's first performance sums up many of those to follow; through her objecthood she has made herself an artistic subject.

Author Jane Wark writes that "[Piper's] dual role as artist *and* art work allowed the entire art making process to be internalized in her rather than in a separate and discrete object."[98] For Piper, the agency she is granted as both artist and art object through performance transforms and condenses the artistic experience into a moment of confrontation in which "the work has no meaning or independent existence outside of its function as a medium of change. It exists only as a catalytic agent between myself and the viewer."[99] This statement makes the study of Piper's work retrospectively problematic, if the work only exists in its moment of impact in the viewer then does it cease to exist after that exchange? In Piper's text, *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, she offers clarification on this point when she writes about the documentation of her work as a "mental recreation" of the original that still has impact on the viewer. She states, "the

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[95] Piper's *Untitled Performance* at Max's Kansas City, NYC was documented by her friend, Rosemary Mayer, in six black-and-white photographs.
[96] Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I: Selected Writing in Meta-Art 1968-1992* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 26.
[97] Ibid., 26.
[98] Jayne Wark, "Conceptual Art and Feminism: Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, and Martha Wilson," *Woman's Art Journal,* Vol. 22, No. 1 (Spring-Summer, 2001), 45.
[99] Piper, *Talking to Myself*, 53.

psychic impact is there but on a removed level rather than an immediate and personal one."[100] She believes the measure of her work to be the level of change it provokes in the viewer, rather than whether the change was positive or negative, direct or through a secondary source (such as film or photo).

Piper continued to develop her ideas through performance in a series of works entitled *Catalysis* (1970). Each performance occurred in a public setting so that the artist could be sure that the audience would not have been prepared for her confrontation with them. These settings also removed the works from any kind of traditional art context, like a museum or gallery, so that the viewer would not have any predetermined response associated with those types of environments. Performing everyday tasks, such as riding the bus, Piper would alter her appearance in a wide variety of ways ranging from quirky oddity to the grotesque. In *Catalysis I*, for example, "she rode the subway at rush hour and went browsing in a bookstore wearing clothes that had soaked for a week in a putrid mixture of vinegar, eggs, milk and cod-liver oil."[101] In *Catalysis III,* she painted her clothes, attached a "WET PAINT" sign, and then went shopping at a major department store (Figure 16). Through the *Catalysis* series, Piper's aim was to create an art work that provoked an undetermined and active response by allowing art to "lurk in the midst of things."[102] The responses Piper's performance elicited were as varied as her techniques and sometimes hostile.[103] However, when the artist responded to people in a non-confrontational, normal way, such as asking for the time, she found that they reacted

[100] Piper, *Out of Order,* 33.
[101] Wark, "Conceptual Art and Feminism," 46.
[102] Piper, *Talking to Myself*, 54.
[103] The documentation of this performance was done by Rosemary Mayer, the same woman who documented the Max's Kansas City performance.

normally. "This was enlightening to her because it showed she could transcend 'the differences I was presenting to them by making that kind of contact.'"[104]

By the late nineteen seventies and continuing throughout the succeeding two decades, Piper's art began to focus more directly on her experiences with race. The same desire to confront viewers with her body, herself as artistic subject, can be found in her later works and throughout her extensive publications. At the core of much of Piper's work is the drive to explore social identity and xenophobia. Her *Mythic Being* character, for example, is a performance which is often described as symbolic of the "threatening" black male for which Piper dons an Afro wig and fake mustache, acting out stereotypically masculine behavior (Figure 17). Describing herself as the Mythic Being, Piper writes "my behavior changes, I swagger, stride, loop, lower my eyebrows, raise my shoulders, sit with my legs wide apart on the subway, so as to accommodate my protruding genitalia."[105] She continues, "To become the Mythic Being was to elicit, through contacts with others and recollections of my own personal past, a masculine version of myself, the masculine part of myself."[106] The performances, along with the images published in the *Village Voice* to accompany them (Figures 18 & 19), are part autobiographical and part fictional, again conflating the art with the artist herself. The stereotypical appearance and behavior of Piper's *Mythic Being,* coupled with the publics' often disdainful response, embodies the fear and social discomfort associated with difference. A number of art works and writings following these performances, as she

[104] Wark, "Conceptual Art and Feminism," 47. Quote is taken from Adrian Piper's, *Talking to Myself*, 34.
[105] Adrian Piper, *Out of Order*,117.
[106] Ibid., 117.

states, "reflected my ongoing initiation into interpersonal confrontation, political alienation, failures of communication, rejection, ostracism, and mutual manipulation."[107]

As a biracial American, Piper's work expresses a particular feeling of alienation, and it explores how other tend to see her as never quite fitting into either of the rigid social and historical categories of white or black. In an essay written in 1992 entitled, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," Piper recounts a number of personal and professional experiences in which her racial identity was challenged, criticized, and/or stereotyped, often by people she had held in high-esteem. The performances of Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke and Marina Abramović evoke a feeling of discomfort in the viewer often by the works' inherent sexuality and, in Abramović's case, for the violent nature of the performance. For Piper, however, the discomfort is in recognizing the possibility of our own racism. Through a wide variety of media, Piper's work reminds the feminist critic that the body is not only encoded by gender but by race and that difference can never be shared by all women but recognition may hold the possibility of transcending that difference. In the words of Piper:

> I am the racist's nightmare, the obscenity of miscegenation. I am a reminder that segregation is impotent; a living embodiment of sexual desire that penetrates racial barriers and reproduces itself. I am the alien interloper, the invisible spy in the perfect disguise who slipped past the barricades in an unguarded moment. I am the reality of successful infiltration that ridicules the ideal of assimilation.
>
> I represent the loathsome possibility that everyone is "tainted" by black ancestry: If someone can look and sound like me and still be black, who is unimpeachably white?
>
> Some of those, both black and white, who later became my friends, upon first meeting, peer closely at my face and figure, listen carefully to my idiolect and habits of speech, searching for the telltale stereotypical feature to reassure them. Finding none, they make some up…. Or they find out my identity later, after we have become friends, and go through a

[107] Ibid, 228.

> period of cognitive dissonance, a bout of mild perceptual disorientation, before our friendship dissolves these preconceptions.[108]

In Piper's writings and performances she grapples with some of the latent fear and mistrust in Western race relations. With *Mythic Being*, she proved that not only race but gender are culturally encoded conditions, as her performance enacted stereotypes of black masculinity. As a 2002 article in *Artforum* noted, "Piper presents herself, masked with grotesquely enhanced symbols of gender and culturally inscribed images, making it clear that recourse to any universalist model of the body is fruitless, since bodies are always already culturally interpreted."[109] Piper's performances are created and enacted in effort to make an impact on her audience that will begin to dispel a variety of racial and gender myths engrained in Western social subconscious.

Another artist whose work highlights her specific racial position within Western identity politics is Yayoi Kusama. Working in New York throughout the nineteen sixties, Kusama created a number of performance-based images in which she played on what she calls her "doubled otherness"[110] through American culture which situates her as both racially and sexually at odds with normative conceptions of an artist's identity. As Amelia Jones points out in *Body Art,* Kusama amplifies her difference, rather than concealing it, through self-display in a series of images such as *Sex Obsession Food Obsession Macaroni Infinity Nets and Kusama* (1962) (Figure 20). In this photo, collaged with another photograph of macaroni, Kusama appears lying across a couch, wearing little more than a pair of high heels and heavily applied make-up. Looking like a

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[108] Ibid., 229-230.
[109] Georg Schollhammer, "Adrian Piper," in *Artforum* (October, 2002), 34.
[110] Quoted in Jones's *Body Art,* 7 from Kris Kuramitsu, "Yayoi Kusama: Exotic Bodies in the Avant-Garde," unpublished paper submitted for Amelia Jones and Donald Preziosi's " Essentialism and representation graduate seminar, University , UCLA, Spring, 1996.

nineteen-sixties pin-up, Kusama juxtaposes this feminine image with a strip of macaroni and one of her *Infinity Net* paintings covering the space behind her. Kusama's art is often described as "obsessive" for its repetitive and often consuming effect, which can be seen in the photo collage via the polka-dots that decorate Kusama's body as well as in the uniform shapes of the macaroni that fill the space in front of the couch. The space around the artist's nude body is filled with repetitious shapes and lines which appear to almost engulf her, the cotton-projections of the couch, undeniably phallic in shape, were made by Kusama and frame her displayed body. Kusama has amplified the suggestion of existing in a space which is enveloping her through the placement of the polka-dots on her skin, hair and shoes. The artist is at once subject and decorative object. "Am I an object? Am I a subject? Her pose and garb remove her from us, camouflage shifting her into the realm of potential invisibility ('self-obliteration'). She still can't decide whether she wants to proclaim herself as celebrity or pin-up or artist."[111]

The uncertainty of her representation and its relationship to the space around it holds specific resonance for a non-white artist, whose goal may be to find identity and artistic agency in a Euro-ethnic climate. Kusama's work occupies the so called third-space where non-white women artists struggle to claim an identity which is otherwise obscured, if not blatantly removed, from Western art culture.[112] In a portrait of artists taken of those who participated in the 1965 *Nul* exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Kusama makes her relationship to the art world quite clear.[113] Among the

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[111] Jones, *Body Art*, 8-9.
[112] The term "third space" was first articulated by post-colonialist theorist Homi Bhabha. The term refers to space in which two cultures intersect (in his studies the colonizers and the colonized) and the possibilities that this space holds for negotiation and re-consideration of meaning and representation. For more on his third space theory, see Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture,* (New York: Routledge Press, 2004).
[113] See photograph in *Nul negentienhonderd viif en zestig, deel 2 fotos* [Nul 1965, part 2, photographs] (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Musuem, 1965).

gathering of predominately white, male European-Americans dressed in suits, Kusama is situated front and center wearing a white silk kimono. Her glaring non-Western garb, like her nude polka-dotted body, is an intentionally exaggerated display of her identity in an almost caricatured fashion, making her difference among the group unavoidable. The nearly mocking tone of such images forces the viewer to understand, in this context, the unique identity of the non-white woman artist working within Western culture.

As steeped in the Euro-ethnic white privilege that art history and feminist theory may have been by the nineteen sixties and seventies, these discourses were equally exclusive in regard to difference in sexuality. In Western culture, heterosexuality has been as much a social normative as whiteness, and the ongoing efforts to destroy the hetero-normative construct are evident in the work of many of the lesbian artists of the late sixties through the nineties. The more recent writings of Judith Butler have dedicated much consideration to the construction of gender and its relationship to what she has called the "heterosexual matrix."[114] Specifically, Butler's *Gender Trouble* explores the relationship of gender to sexuality and the multitude of definitions that have been given to these two terms often under the construct of heterosexual normativity. Especially relevant to this discussion is Butler's conception of what she terms gender performativity which describes gender as the enactment of a particular set of repeated behaviors that society has codified as either male or female.[115] In the preface to her second edition to *Gender Trouble* published in 1999 Butler states: "The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is

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[114] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

[115] Butler derives the idea of repetition as key to gender performance from Derrida's theory of iterability. See *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973).

manufactured through a sustained set of acts, positioned through the gendered stylization of the body." She continues, "in this way, it showed that what we take to be an 'internal' feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, a hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures."[116] Moreover, Butler makes clear throughout the text that gender performance cannot and does not identify an individual's sexuality or sexual practices, meaning that one who acts out or performs the behaviors associated with a particular gendered category is not revealing their hetero- or homosexual orientation, even if those acts are subversive or ambiguous in relationship to the binary construct. Ultimately, according to Butler, heterosexuality is a fiction which is constructed as an identity through the repeated acts of an imagined original, and therefore non-heterosexuals, who are often criticized for copying heterosexuals, only copy a copy and never an original because an original doesn't exist.[117]

Within this theoretical context performance art becomes a highly complex matter in that the actions of the artist become obscured, especially that of the lesbian artist whose sexuality is already outside of the cultural norm. In the nineteen seventies, a number of lesbian/feminist theatre companies organized around a common desire to challenge pervasive stereotypes, namely that of the lesbian as the antithesis of "real" women.[118] The few images that were circulating in the public eye were largely based on butch, man-hating characters like those seen in the 1968 film *The Killing of Sister George*. The two lesbian characters in the film are an accurate representation of public anxieties about homosexual women, portraying them as crass, masculine aberrations of

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[116] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 15.
[117] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 5.
[118] Julia Brosnan, "Performing the Lesbian Body: The New Wave," in *Acts of Passion: Sexuality, Gender and Performance,* eds. Nina Rapi and Maya Chowdhry (New York and London: The Haworth Press, 1998.) 80.

Western femininity.[119] As Barbara Egervary points out in her article *Another Con-Text* (1998), the stage offers a space of representation in which a woman might re-contextualize societal assumptions of her identity. Egervary writes, "The theatrical frame is a forum where every sign, be it visual, spatial, temporal or linguistic, is assumed by the spectator to bear meaning."[120] The space of the stage, then, offers something that impromptu performance art does not have available. For example, the performance by Piper in Max's Kansas City in New York does not have the same context and meaning as the work of lesbian theatre groups addressing their difference on a stage. For Piper, the unprepared condition of the spectators reveals a truth that a space already marked with meaning, such as a stage or art gallery, cannot offer. The tactics and intentions of these two types of performance are markedly different but ultimately aim at a similar end point, recognition of the constructed negation of non-normative women functioning in a patriarchal, Eurocentric culture.

The women who choose the context of the theatre and specifically the space of the stage do so to inherit the weight of meaning associated with occupying that space. "By placing the female body as metonym center-stage, occupying the signifying space of the stage, women working in theatre challenge the notion of female absence and confound the processes of objectification by the spectator by extreme self-objectification."[121] The WOW (Women's One World) Café in New York's East Village became a center for such performances, founded in the late nineteen seventies by two women who had been inspired while on a theatrical tour through Europe. Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw were

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[119] Ibid., 81-82.
[120] Barbra Egervary, "Another Con-Text," in Rapi and Chowdry, eds., *Acts of Passion.*
[121] Ibid., 24. Metonym refers to the woman's body as the part which represents the whole; the entirety of her own experience as a woman and the significance of the woman's body on stage as representational of the spaces women occupy.

producing and performing with the feminist theatre group Spiderwoman Theatre throughout Europe where they met several like-minded companies that wished to perform in the United States. The level of freedom and availability of performance space was far greater in Europe than the United States, so WOW was established as a place where women's theatrical work could be showcased in an environment based on the European film and theatre festivals that Weaver and Shaw had attended in their travels.[122] WOW Café quickly became a kind of socio-political headquarters for feminist/lesbian performers and it cultivated a community of artists and audience members that helped raise consciousness about issues of sexual difference and gender.

In a 1988 issue of *The Village Voice*, WOW founder Weaver talks about the crucial role that sexuality plays in lesbian and other forms of performance.[123] Lesbian performances staged at WOW as well as other venues were revealing a number of aspects about lesbian life that were not included in mainstream visual culture, highlighting the repression of homosexuality and alternative lifestyles in society. A regular presence at WOW Café since its inception is lesbian performance artist and playwright Holly Hughes. Hughes' controversial performances satire heteronormativity with the use of devices such as humor, camp and shock. Her work has been criticized for being "pornographic," a familiar response to women who speak out about sexuality.[124] Described as a "film-noir soap opera," Hughes' play entitled *Well of Horniness* (1984),[125] for example, is filled with humor, fantasy and wit as it tells the story of an imagined radio

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[122] Alisa Solomon, "The WOW Café," *The Drama Review: TDR,* Vol. 29, No. 1, (Spring, 1985), 92-101.
[123] Ibid., 93.
[124] Holly Hughes describes some of the critical response to her work in the Introduction to Holly Hughes, *Clit Notes: A Sapphic Sampler,* (New York: Grove Press, 1996).
[125] The title of the play, *Well of Horniness*, is a play on the title of a famous lesbian novel published in 1928 entitled, the *Well of Loneliness,* which suggests a connection to this novel which was one of the very first publications to deal with sexuality and gender in a non-condemning, although controversial, way. l

broadcast describing a lesbian fantasy (Figure 21).[126] The performances executed at WOW Café range from the deeply serious and political to the comedic, all with the intention of expanding the discourse on lesbianism as to create an awareness and identity of and for the lesbian community.

Foucault suggests that the repression of sexuality actually increases the number of ways in which it enters discourse, some of which resist the hetero-normative construct.[127] This suggestion supports the idea that performance may be experienced as an avenue into non-normative sexuality. Teresa de Lauretis warns, however, that it is exceptionally difficult to alter the "standard of vision, the frame of reference of visibility, of *what can be seen,* since the conventions of seeing, and the relations of desire and meaning in spectatorship, [remain] partially anchored or contained by a frame of visibility that is still heterosexual."[128] The problematic element of representation that Lauretis proposes, that the viewer's point of reference when viewing lesbian sexuality will likely be that of a heterosexual relationship, is a primary cause for the butch/femme pairing of lesbians that attempts to assimilate homosexuality into mainstream understanding. These stereotypes are often performed in an effort to reveal their falsehood, such as in Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw's *Anniversary Waltz* (1990), a theatrical performance in which the couple had dressed in the costumes traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity. Throughout the piece, the two women strip away layers to reveal the signs of the opposite gender underneath, exchanging the representations of each gender between them. "Their manipulation of butch-femme solely as clothing moves it away from the transgressive of

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[126] Alisa Solomon, "The WOW Café," in *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance,* Martin Carl, ed. (New York: Routledge Press, 1996), 145.
[127] See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 102.
[128] De Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," 33-34.

its historical signification."[129] The presentation of gender as a mere layer of clothing that can be peeled away emphasizes the arbitrary nature of gender and focuses on its constructedness.

One of the earliest efforts within the art world to openly address lesbianism with the intention of giving it a voice was spearheaded by Arlene Raven in the Woman's Building in Los Angeles. *The Lesbian Art Project* (1977-1979) actively explored and exposed lesbian iconography, one of the most successful projects of which was *The Oral Herstory of Lesbianism* (1979). This work was directed by Terry Wolverton and it is comprised of a series of stories that were generated by a group of thirteen performers.[130] The intention of the project is described by Wolverton in an interview: "Most of the history and traditions of lesbians have been lost, erased, or misinterpreted. Lesbians today need to record and make public our experiences."[131] *The Oral Herstory of Lesbianism* was advertised as "Storytelling, Theatre and Magic for Women Only" and was presented at the Woman's Building in a space specially constructed for the performance. The audience was seated before a wall of pink gauze in front of which each of the thirteen artists would appear to perform their scripted vignettes with titles including "Butch/Femme Conga Lines," "Stalking the Great Orgasm," "Yellow Queer" and "Bar Scene" (Figure 22). The stories being told revealed both the similarities and intrinsic differences between women's experiences as lesbian as opposed to heterosexual, while celebrating the validity and power of sex without men. Unlike *Anniversary Waltz* which would be performed at the WOW Café eleven years later, the element of

[129] Rapi and Chowdhry, *Acts of Passion.* 193.
[130] Yolanda Lopez and Moira Roth, "Social Protest: Racism and Sexism," in *The Power of Feminist Art,* 151-153.
[131] Wolverton, quoted in Bia Lowe, "Theatre as Community Ritual: An Interview with Terry Wolverton," *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* 5, no. 1, Issue 17 (1984), 48.

homosexual sex was central to *Herstories.* This approach presents a much more direct dialogue with lesbianism than performances which only address the behavioral and/or physical stereotypes of lesbians but fail to tap into the very source of those stereotypes, which may make the piece less effective, as is often the critique of *Anniversary Waltz.* As author and critique bell hooks once wrote, it is more appropriate to state "I practice lesbian sex," rather than "I am a lesbian," because it would perpetuate a discourse which might shift the focus away from lifestyles and relationships and "break open the sanctimonious structures of politically correct lesbian identifications."[132]

The acknowledgement, both artistically and theoretically, of a plurality of sexual difference and female identity begins to reveal the naivety and falsehood of a universal feminist stance. Writing about difference, Jones states that this acknowledgement also "marks the breakdown of the 1960s and 1970s notion of coalitional identity politics, wherein the importance in claiming one's allegiance to a particular (and usually singular) identity category, of making oneself 'visible' to the dominant culture, was deemed to be unassailable."[133] The work of artists discussed in the first section of this chapter employed a feminist stance that, although powerful and productive, did not focus on identity outside of white hetero-normativity in their work. The performances presented in the second half work to expose that exclusion and create a female identity that has the potential to look, act and feel, in a variety of ways, contingent on their own biographies, specifically their individual sexual and ethnic specificities, and not on their biological

[132] Jill Dolan, *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 192-195.
[133] *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader,* Amelia Jones, ed. "Introduction to Part Three: Difference," (New York: Routledge, 2003) 116.

sex. The third and final chapter of this thesis addresses a subject which, in an incredibly tragic way, touches women from every sexual, ethnic and socio-economic particularity, that of sexual violence.

III. The Violence of Patriarchy: Performance Art as Socio-Political Activism

The prevailing social condition of women as victims to violent crimes, domestic abuse and incest, predominantly at the hands of men, can be largely attributed to the cultural construct that has allowed sexual difference to dictate power structures. The American feminist movement of the sixties and seventies brought issues of domestic, criminal and sexual violence into the public consciousness. The issue of sexual crimes, particularly, gained increased attention in the late seventies and into the nineteen eighties as a major road block to gender equality. Theoretically, writers were responding to the gendering of violence and the power relationships reinforced through sexually violent acts, such as the work of Teresa de Lauretis discussed below. This chapter will explore some of this reactive theory as well as some of the major artistic projects responding to violence as a focal feminist issue.

Poststructuralist feminist theory has often, in its exploration of violence, focused on the representation of violence itself. The center of these theorists' discussion can be articulated as a two-fold agenda: first, an analysis of the production and dissemination of institutional discourses and techniques of power and knowledge, and, second, an investigation of the relationship between the female subject and symbolic meaning.[134] In Teresa de Lauretis' article, "The Rhetoric of Violence" (1983), the author formulates a discussion which pivots upon a critique of Michel Foucault's position on gender, arguing that his discourse analysis of the technologies of sexuality needs to be countered with an

[134] Annette Burfoot and Susan Lord, *Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence*. (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 16.

analysis of the technologies of gender.[135] She believes this exclusion to be a fundamental flaw in the very foundation of Foucault's theories and calls for a more instrumental turn in the theory, which would allow for the analysis of "the techniques and discursive strategies by which gender is constructed and hence…violence is en-gendered."[136]

Foucault's technologies of sexuality are, as de Lauretis states, a "set of techniques for maximizing life," which had been first developed by the bourgeoisie near the close of the eighteenth century to ensure class survival and continual hegemony. De Lauretis describes Foucault's "techniques" as the "elaboration of discourses (classification, measurements, evaluation, etc.) about four privileged 'figures' or objects of knowledge: the sexualization of children and the female body, the control of procreation, and the psychiatrization of anomalous sexual behavior of as perversion."[137] These discourses, according to de Lauretis, were supported by the state that focused particularly on family and instilled and reinforced these four privileged objects of knowledge into each individual, family and institution, thereby making sex a social matter. Consequently, sexuality cannot be understood as a property of the body or an inherent state, but the result of said technologies as instituted and articulated by the phalocentric power structure in place. Essentially, what de Lauretis argues is that, if gender and sexuality are constructed through the semiotic and prevalent discourses of power and meaning, then so is violence, which becomes gendered through representation.

When artists first began to respond to the issue of violence against women in their art, the incredibly personal and traditionally secreted shame of it had to be addressed.

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[135] Teresa de Lauretis, "The Violence of Rhetoric: Considerations on Representation." In *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 35.
[136] Ibid.,132.
[137] De Lauretis, "The Violence of Rhetoric," 86.

The social and cultural stigmas of revealing women's victimization, particularly in the home, makes a clear parallel with de Lauretis' theories on the ways violence is articulated through social discourses and how it also functions to reinforce and stabilize power relationships. The Feminist Art Program, instituted in 1971 by Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago at the California Institute for the Arts, produced some of the first artists and art projects to address and expose the muted reality of violence, or threat thereof, in the lives of women. *Womanhouse*, created in February, 1972, was a collaborative project organized under the leadership of Shapiro and Chicago and executed with the fundamental involvement of twenty-one students of the Feminist Arts Program. The project was a site installation in a condemned mansion at 553 Mariposa Avenue in Hollywood, California in which every room of the house was transformed into spaces in which particular aspects of women's lives were revealed, in direct dialogue with the rising feminist movements in the nineteen seventies.[138] Each of the seventeen rooms was a veritable blank canvas on which an individual artist or small collaborative group could visually express an element of women's lives and/or experiences they felt most appropriate for the space. Of the three bathrooms in the house, for example, one was created as a homage to menstruation complete with a wastebasket overflowing with soiled tampons (Figure 23). As the house was being renovated, a long and arduous part of the project taken on by the same women who would later fill the spaces with statements both personal and private, they decided to incorporate performance and special events. Arlene Raven writes of the project as having an "overwhelming despair" and continues:

[138] Arlene Raven, "Womanhouse," in *The Power of Feminist Art,* 48-49.

> The hundreds of lipsticks and shoes, sheets, plates of food, yards of material, rooms of color and stories and messages do not really offer much of a life. Even though we are told that our life is what we make of it, in fact for mid-century women, the same human existence seems excessively predetermined and prescribed. The *Womanhouse* protagonist is tortured from birth to death with these diametrically opposed states of being thrust in her face.[139]

Raven asserts that for all women in this particular moment in American history, the expectations of Western culture dictate the same "tortured" existence; in bringing this to light, *Womanhouse* gave power and lent a sense of collectivity to women's private experience.

Faith Wilding's *Waiting* was performed in *Womanhouse* and was a powerfully simple example of a woman breaking the silence of her troubled and often suffocating existence. For the piece, Wilding appeared as a waiting woman, rocking slowly in her chair while, in a low monotone voice, she recited a poem which compresses a woman's entire life into a monotonous, repetitive cycle of subservience and passivity (Figure 24). Raven characterizes the poem as "a litany that rhythmically describes women's lives as reactive to the actions of others and as characterized by waiting."[140] A portion of the poem reads:

> Waiting…waiting…waiting…
> Waiting for someone to come in
> Waiting for someone to hold me
> Waiting for someone to feed me
> Waiting for someone to change my diaper…
>
> Waiting to be somebody
> Waiting to wear makeup
> Waiting for my pimples to go away
> Waiting to wear high heels and stockings
> Waiting to get dressed up, to shave my legs
> Waiting to be pretty...

[139] Ibid., 58.
[140] Ibid., 58.

Waiting for him to notice me, to call me
Waiting for him to ask me out
Waiting for him to pay attention
Waiting for him to fall in love with me…

By turning the home inside-out, exposing the often desperate and lonely conditions for women, *Womanhouse* was one of the first projects to begin breaking the taboo associated with speaking and/or displaying these conditions.

Many performances were created out of the collective conscious of the Feminist Art Program, one of the most elaborate being *Ablutions* (1972) (Figure 25). *Ablutions* was created at a time of transition, when the *Womanhouse* was being dismantled and before the opening of the Woman's Building, an artist's space in Los Angeles dedicated to the promotion and support of female artists, which opened in 1973. Performed in a large studio in Venice, California, the piece addressed the difficult subject of rape, revealing an even more painful experience for many women. Artists Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Sandra Orgel and Aviva Rahmani (the latter two both students of Chicago's) collaborated to create *Ablutions* as a testament to the wide range of physical, psychological and emotional distress caused by the frighteningly common occurrences of sexual violence. *Ablutions* (meaning "washing away"), used a number of testimonials from female rape victims recorded by the artists which played throughout the performance. The title makes reference to bathing and cleansing as well at to prayer adding an element of ritual to the work which is amplified in a number of ways throughout the piece. The space was covered with "skeins of web-like ropes on a floor strewn with broken eggshells, amid three large aluminum washtubs."[141] Jan Oxenberg

[141] Gail Levin, *Becoming Judy Chicago: A Biography of the Artist* (New York: Harmony Books, 2007), 212-212

was one of the three women who participated in the performance by immersing their nude bodies into a vat of cow's blood, then eggs and finally clay. She described her experience in an interview stating "we were breaded with blood, which was crusted to our eyelids, then wrapped in a sheet from head to toe and tied with a rope. It was claustrophobic… it was a powerful artistic experience for the audience."[142] Each of these three women, covered in the blood, egg and clay mixture, were wrapped like mummies in white bandages then had ropes tied to them which were connected to a vast network of ropes which linked each of the performers to one another as well as to other objects throughout the space, including the aluminum tubs of egg, blood and clay. As Suzanne Lacy describes, "a woman was tied into a chair then tied to everything else in the vast room…The sound was a tape recording of women telling about their rapes. At the end of the piece the last voice repeated over and over, 'I felt so helpless, all I could do was lie there and cry.'"[143]

The performance resonated with artists and viewers alike serving, in many ways, as a kind of catharsis for women who have felt silenced, shamed or ignored by Western culture through acts of sexual violence. The performers, in their bound, silent and soiled state, amplified the horrific experiences of the women whose voices filled the space. At a time when information about rape was scarce, the powerful images and wrenching stories of victims were a major contribution to the early formation of the anti-violence movement that developed over the course of the nineteen seventies.

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[142] Jan Oxenberg in an interview conducted by Gail Levin, February 2006 and published in *Becoming Judy Chicago*, 213.
[143] Suzanne Lacy, as quoted by Arlene Raven in "Feminist Performance Art: Performing, Discovering, Transforming Ourselves," in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 168.

Taking a more aggressive and angry approach to the subject of rape, the performance *Three Weeks in May* (1977) was one of the first to establish what came to be known as New Genre Public Art.[144] Working with Barbara Cohen, Melissa Hoffman, Leslie Labowitz and Jill Soderholm, Lacy expanded on her involvement in *Ablutions* with a series of performances and public events intended to heighten public awareness. The concept for *Three Weeks in May* also grew from the performance *One Woman Show* (1973), during which a community of women assembled in the Women's Building anonymously through a chain-letter process. Upon arrival, the women were seated in front of Lacy who "named herself as a woman who had been raped, a woman who is a whore, and a woman who loves women."[145] After asserting her identity as "a woman who has been raped," dressed in paint soaked clothing, Lucy read aloud the statistics from the daily Los Angeles police report regarding rape. Finally, after announcing the startling numbers provided by the report, the artist stood-up and threw herself against the wall, leaving a black imprint from her paint-soaked clothing.[146] The performance fueled a series of works that incorporated a range of elements including criminal statistics, media data and programming, personal testimony and art installations, among others.

Three Weeks in May utilized a range of traditional and non-traditional media which were displayed in public places, creating spaces in which education, activism and theory could interact. Lacy's "activist-aesthetic tools,"[147] which emerged from her strong

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[144] Vivien Green Fryd, "Suzanne Lacy's Three Weeks in May: Feminist Activist Performance Art as 'Expanded Public Pedagogy." *NWSA Journal* 19.1 (2007), 23-38. The term New Genre Public art was first coined by Suzanne Lacy to describe art which uses both traditional and non-traditional media and methods to communicate with a wide, diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives. For more see Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art,* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).
[145] Ibid., 28.
[146] Ibid., 28-29.
[147] Ibid., 29.

commitment to feminism and political activism, have become a lexicon for artists seeking to engage in a discourse with, or create awareness within a diverse, public audience. *Three Weeks* was orchestrated with the collaboration of a large number of artists, activist, politicians and audience members in the Los Angeles area, a city which had been recently designated "Rape Capitol of the Nation." Lacy felt strongly about including elected city officials and media reporters to expand the social impact well beyond traditionally designated art spaces, such as studios or galleries, to include press conferences and day time talk shows for example. "Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, co-coordinator, spoke on a radio program about art and politics; City Attorney Burt Pines called a press conference prior to the opening ceremonies; and an officer from the Los Angeles Police Department Rape Detail appeared on an early morning television talk show with a member of the Rape Hotline Alliance."[148]

Three Weeks in May also included an installation entitled *Maps* (Figure 26), which was created from police statistics documenting incidents of rape in the city. On a wall in City Mall Plaza, directly downstairs from City Hall, Lacy posted two municipal maps of the city, each about 25-foot-wide, and marked the occurrences of rape throughout the city. Describing the work, author Vivien Green Fryd writes:

> On the first map she stamped the word 'rape' in four-inch red stenciled letters over every location where a woman had been raped over a three-week period. She updated the map daily using data from the Los Angeles Police Department central office. Around each red RAPE stamp, she inscribed fainter red markings that alluded to the estimate that there are nine unreported rapes for every one reported.[149]

The second map was linked to the function of the first as a site of revelation of the issue of sexual violence by countering it with the marking of locations of assistance and

[148] Ibid., 30-31.
[149] Fryd, "Suzanne Lacy's *Three Weeks in May,*" 7.

awareness such as prevention centers, hospital emergency rooms, rape hotlines, and counseling centers. These maps were displayed in the City Mall located in downtown Los Angeles so that it could reach a larger audience and, as Lacy herself states, "create a union between art, its content, and its context."[150] As with the performances of Adrian Piper, the element of the unexpected and the displacement of an art project outside of a gallery space allows for a wider audience without any of the preconceived notions that may accompany traditional exhibitions in an art space. The accessibility of these maps in relationship to its environment juxtaposes the everyday activity of shopping to the epidemic incidences of rape. Since Lacy added a new stamp to the map for every new assault so that the piece would be ever changing, the work was increasingly covered by the chaotic overlapping of the red RAPE stamps that incorporated a sense of the growing and eminent danger of sexual assault.

A number of public performance pieces were also incorporated in this project including *She Who Would Fly* (1977), which was set in a gallery space and open to the public. Only a handful of visitors were admitted into the space at once where, upon entering, they were confronted by a winged lamb carcass suspended from the ceiling, as if in flight. The walls of the space were covered with maps on which women's rape testimonials marked the locations of the crime. Moving around the space, viewers would soon become aware of the four nude women hovering in the rafters above them. The women were painted blood red and crouched "like vultures" above the lamb carcass, watching the visitors from their perched positions (Figures 27 & 28). Lacy described these women as "avenging angels, metaphors for a woman's consciousness that often splits from her body as it is raped" as well as "bird-women [who] reminded visitors they

[150] Ibid., 8.

were voyeurs to the pain of very real experiences."[151] Below, on the floor, a graphic illustration of sexual assault was drawn in chalk on the asphalt; tape-recorded voices told their stories of rape and sexual violence, putting a voice to the written accounts that hung on the walls. The piece was a sensory attack on the visitor, a shock to one's eyes and ears in an attempt to evoke the pain and horror of the victims whose words filled the space. The "avenging angels" surveyed the scene and projected a gaze onto the largely female visitors that seemed to both warn and protect from the potentiality for sexual assault as well as from the "patriarchal relations of looking."[152] The point of the performance was clearly to create a shock that would resonate with the viewer in profound and disturbing ways while expanding public awareness of the often hidden existence of sexual crimes against women.

An equally shocking performance was executed in 1973 by Cuban born artist, Ana Mendieta entitled *Rape Scene.* For the performance, Mendieta carefully re-created the scene of the 1973 rape and murder of a University of Iowa student. Staging the scene in her own apartment, Mendieta, also a student at the University of Iowa, had invited classmates to visit her where, upon entering, they would find her half-naked, bloody body tied to a table with the apartment in a state of disaster from the implied struggle (Figure 29). This merciless confrontation with the subject of rape, like *She Who Would Fly*, shocks the viewer into recognition of the severity of not only the crime, but of the objectified state of the body after the crime. The body of the artist is presented here in a state unlike the performances discussed thus far. Here it is immobilized, silent, powerless and seemingly lifeless. This performance reveals the woman's body in a state of utter

[151] Jeff Kelley, "The Body Politics of Suzanne Lacy." In *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism,* ed. Nina Felshin, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995,) 221-49.
[152] Ibid., 223.

objecthood and, in this desecrated state, rape and murder become very real and tangible subjects. The artist herself is not the focus of this piece, but instead the viewer is encouraged to consider the social circumstances under which such a horrific act could occur. For *Rape Scene*, Mendieta chose performance as her means to confront the issue of sexual violence for its direct, physical relationship to the viewer and herself. By placing herself in the position of victim, the possibility of personal victimization must become frighteningly real, as it becomes for those who attended the performance, unprepared for the disturbing display they would be forced to grapple with. Here the use of the artist's body is absolutely integral to the meaning of the work, denying the viewer the distance that painting or photography grants and locating the body as both medium and subject of the work.

The works of the artists examined here utilize performance as not only an expressive, artistic medium, but as a tool for creating socio-political awareness. The strategies employed by Lacy and Mendieta, for example, combine each artist's personal struggles as a woman with a greater consciousness for the positioning of women in Western culture as inferior Other. Combining theory with practice, these women pushed art far beyond the confines of traditional medium and exhibition practice to create performances that would resonate on the deepest personal levels as well as stir-up public awareness of the feminist agenda at large and the epidemic numbers at which women were being subjected to violent acts of oppression. Additionally, these women were beginning to change what art is, what it is supposed to do and challenging the art world to take up new issues and present them in equally innovative and powerful ways.

Conclusion

The deconstructive tendencies of women's performance art created during the nineteen sixties and seventies has an undeniably critical relationship to psychoanalytic theory and the ways in which it has manifested in Western culture. The work of artists such as Carolee Schneemann and Adrian Piper, for example, developed directly from their personal experiences in the male-dominated art world. By recognizing and exposing the secondary positioning of female artists and their work in Western culture, these artists chose to defy gender expectations in both their respective artistic careers as well as in society at large. The display of the nude female body was not new to the art world; however the display of a speaking nude woman with a sexuality that is her own was. Performance from this moment in American art history is often disturbing, rebellious and deeply moving all at once, a condition born from the use of artists' use of their own flesh as expressive agent. Using their own bodies not only establishes an ownership of them but it undermines the objectification prescribed in patriarchal culture and re-inscribed in the art world through the prominence of the female nude presented by male artists as fetishized object.

Performance art of the nineteen sixties in seventies plays a crucial role in the history of art not only for its development of a new art form (performance) but also for its furthering the modernist agenda of questioning what art is and what it can and/or should do. The women discussed here made unprecedented progress in giving feminism a voice in Western culture. The deconstructive and radical agendas of their performances have been continued through the work of later artists, such as Orlan discussed in chapter two, as well as porn start turned performance artist Annie Sprinkle whose work takes the

exploration of female sexuality to extreme. In 1990, for example Sprinkle performed *Public Cervix Announcement*, in which she invited audience members to look at her cervix, which she had made visible by placing an open speculum into her vagina (Figure 30). Without the foundation of feminist sensitivities laid by the artists discussed here, as well as many others who are not, women artists working today would be suffering the same lack of personal and private agency as well as erasure from histories as were occurring fifty years ago.

The writings of Judith Butler are immeasurably important to both this thesis and as a legacy of the agenda set out by the performances discussed here. In her work, Butler has challenged not only psychoanalytic theory, which articulates woman as Other, but also the very notions of gender which further inform the work of Michel Foucault and other influential theorists of sexuality. I believe her work to be the bridge between the artists I have discussed and more recent performance which often challenges the construction of gender, which according to Butler is the byproduct of heteronormativity. As exemplified in the work of The Lesbian Art Project discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, the process of deconstructing or at least examining the conditions under which we understand gender began with the radical and progressive performance of the nineteen sixties and seventies. As the artists explored in this thesis show, the medium of performance was utilized not only for its visceral, defiant nature but for its ability to expand beyond the traditional spaces of art exhibition and touch a far broader audience. As if animating an iconic painted nude, these women refused to allow their images to be determined and/or manipulated by the phalocentrism that has so long invalidated them as subjects and used their own bodies as the surface on which the very debate takes place.

Figures

Figure 1. Lynda Benglis in advertisement published in the 1974, November issue of *Art Forum.*

Figure 2. Lynda Benglis, photograph published in ArtForum, 1973.

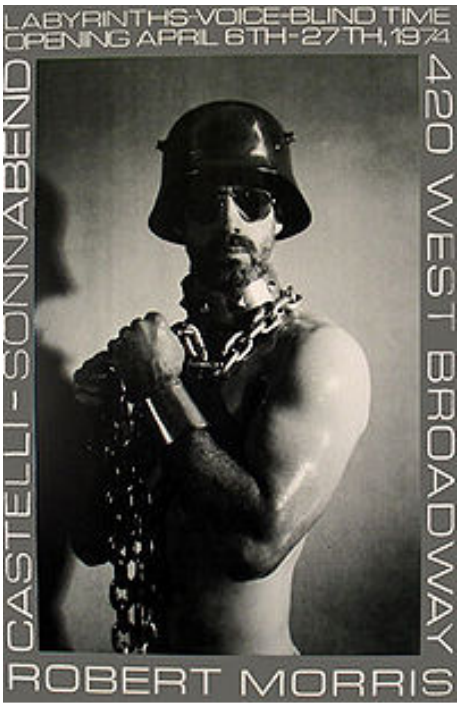

Figure 3. Robert Morris, Castelli-Sonnabend exhibition poster, April 1974.

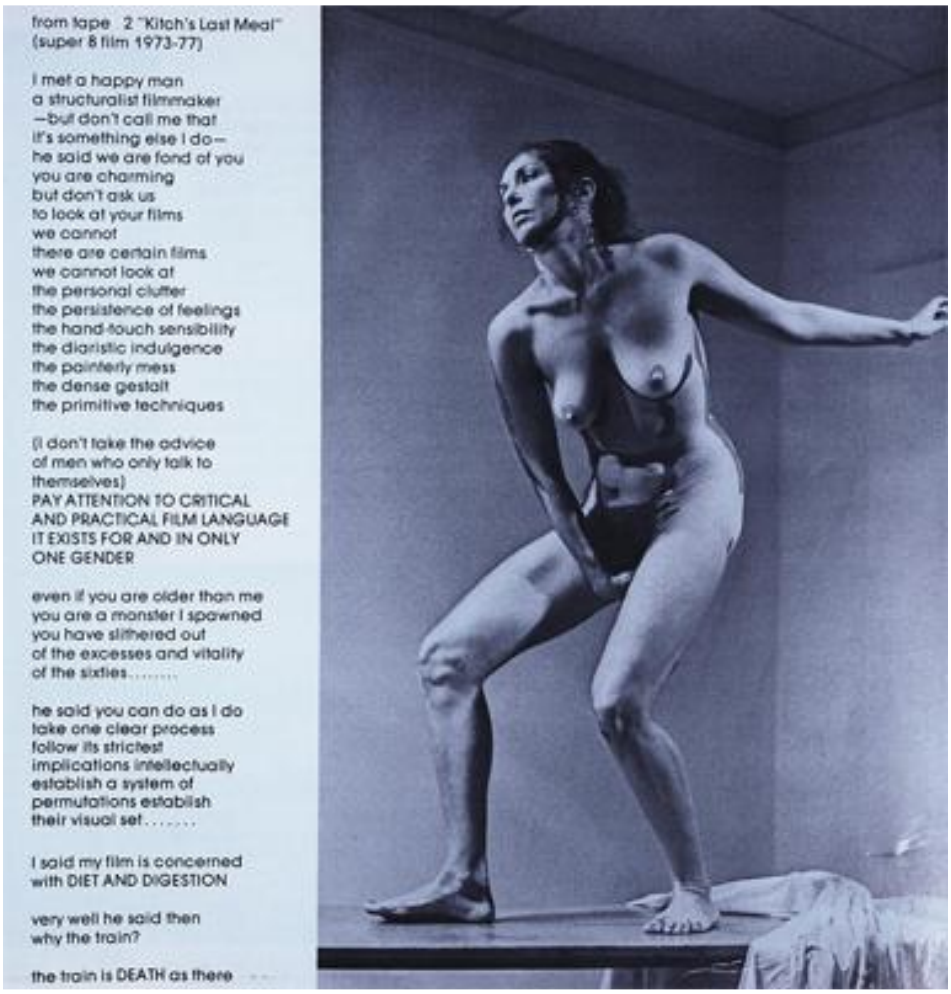

Figure 4. Carolee Schneeman, *Interior Scroll*, 1975.

Figure 5. Carolee Schneemann, *Eye/Body*, 1963.

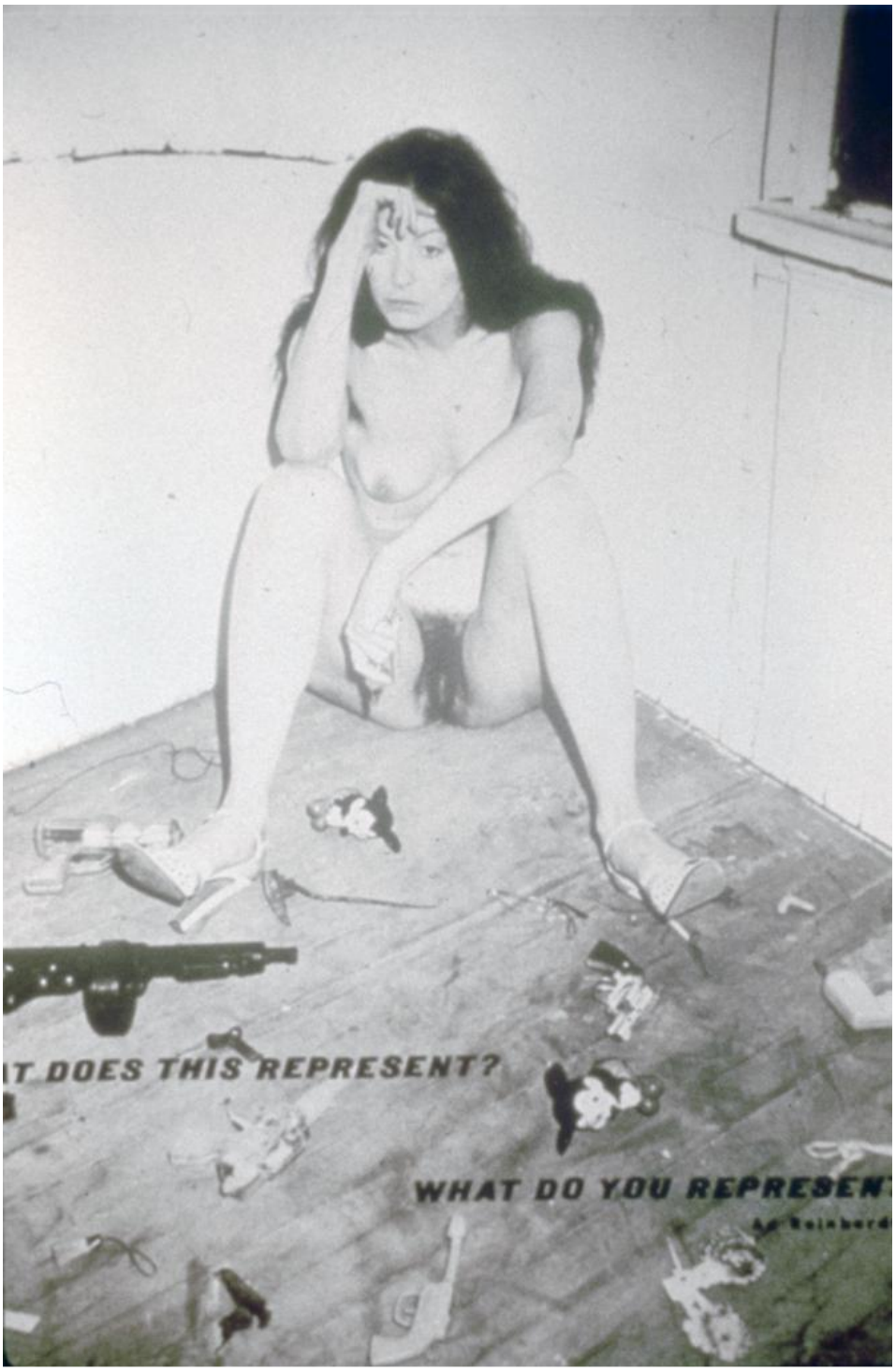

Figure 6. Hannah Wilke, *So Help Me Hannah: What Does This Represent / What Do You Represent (Reinhart)***,** 1978–1984.

Figure7. Hannah Wilke, *Starification Object Series (S.O.S),* 1975.

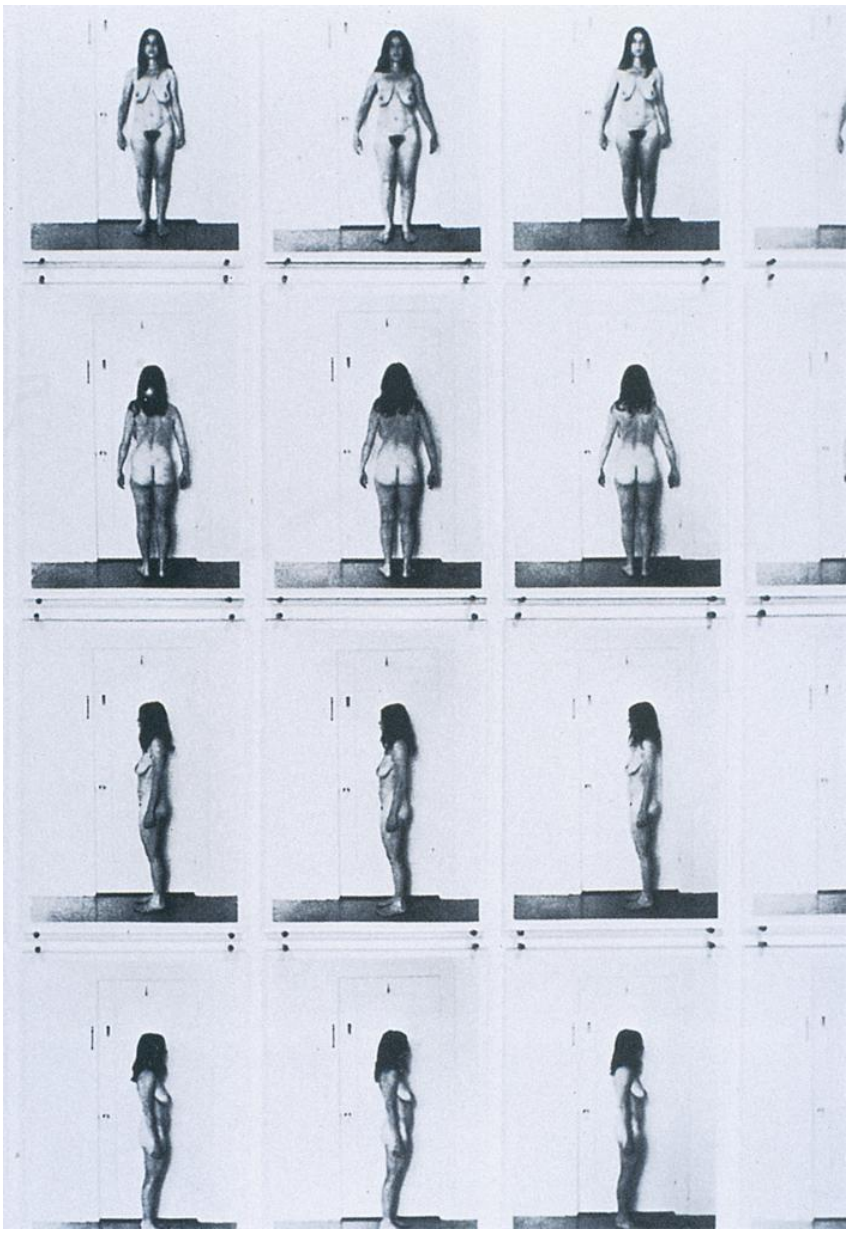

Figure 8. Eleanor Antin, detail from *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, 1973.

Figure 9. Eleanor Antin**,** *Representational Painting,* 1972.

Figure 10. Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 10*, 1973.

Figure 11. Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 0*, 1974.

Figure 12. Orlan, *Omnipresence*, 1993.

Figure 13. Orlan, *Omnipresence*, 1993.

Figure 14. Orlan, *Omnipresence*, 1991.

Figure 15. Adrian Piper, Max's Kansas City Performance, 1970.

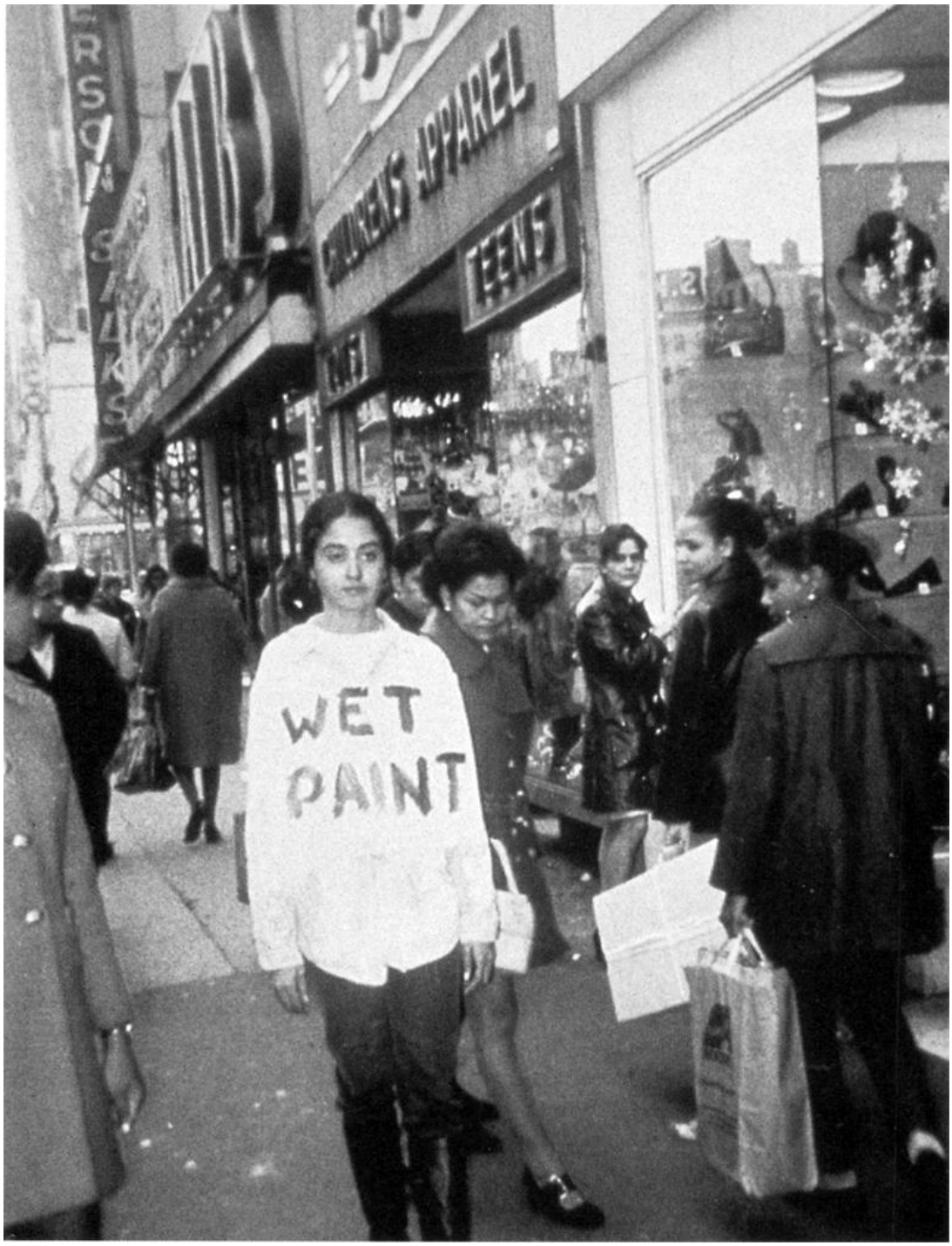

Figure 16. Adrian Piper, *Catalysis III*, 1970.

Figure 17. Adrian Piper, *Mythic Being,* 1975.

Figure 18. Adrian Piper, *Mythic Being*, image published in Village Voice, 1975.

Figure 19. Adrian Piper, *Mythic Being*, image published in Village Voice, 1975.

Figure 20. Yayoi Kusama, *Sex Obsession Food Obsession Macaroni Infinity Nets and Kusama,* 1962.

Figure 21. Photo from the play *The Well of Horniness,* written by Holly Hughes, 1984.

Figure 22. The cast of *The Oral History of Lesbianism*, 1979.

Figure 23. *Menstruation Bathroom* in *Womanhouse,* 1972.

Figure 24. Faith Wilding, *Waiting* performed in Womanhouse, 1972.

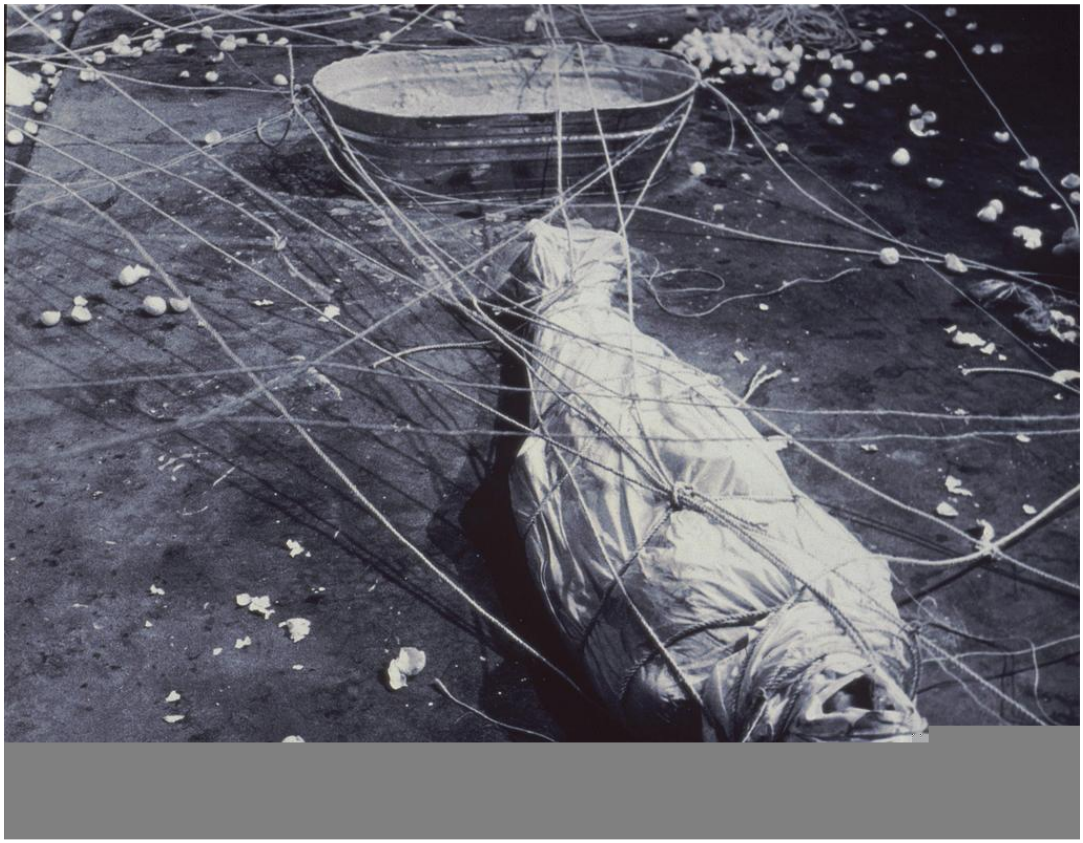

Figure 25. Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Sandra Orgel and Aviva Rahmani, *Ablutions,* 1972.

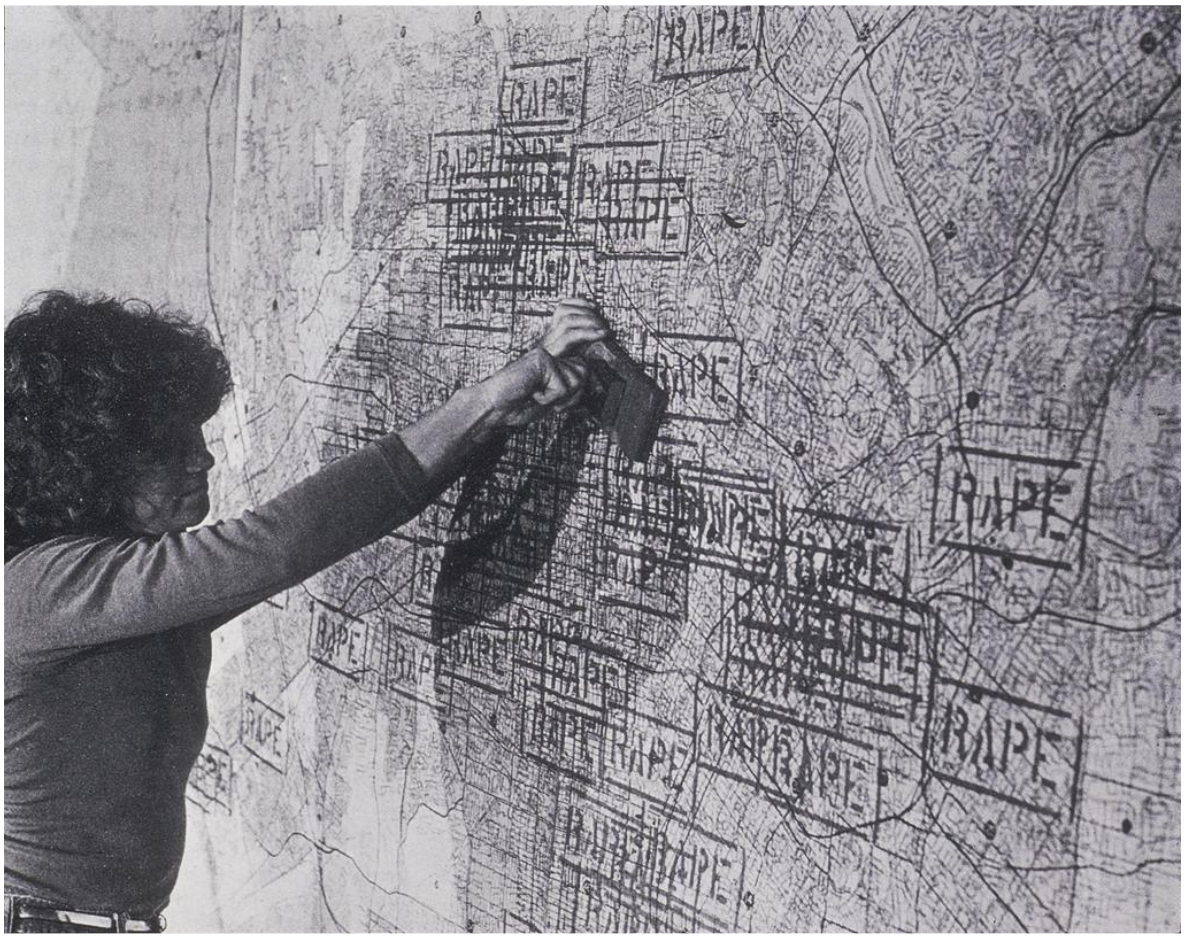

Figure 26. Suzanne Lacy, *Maps*, installation for *Three Weeks in May*, 1977.

Figure 27. Suzanne Lacy, *She Who Would Fly,* 1977

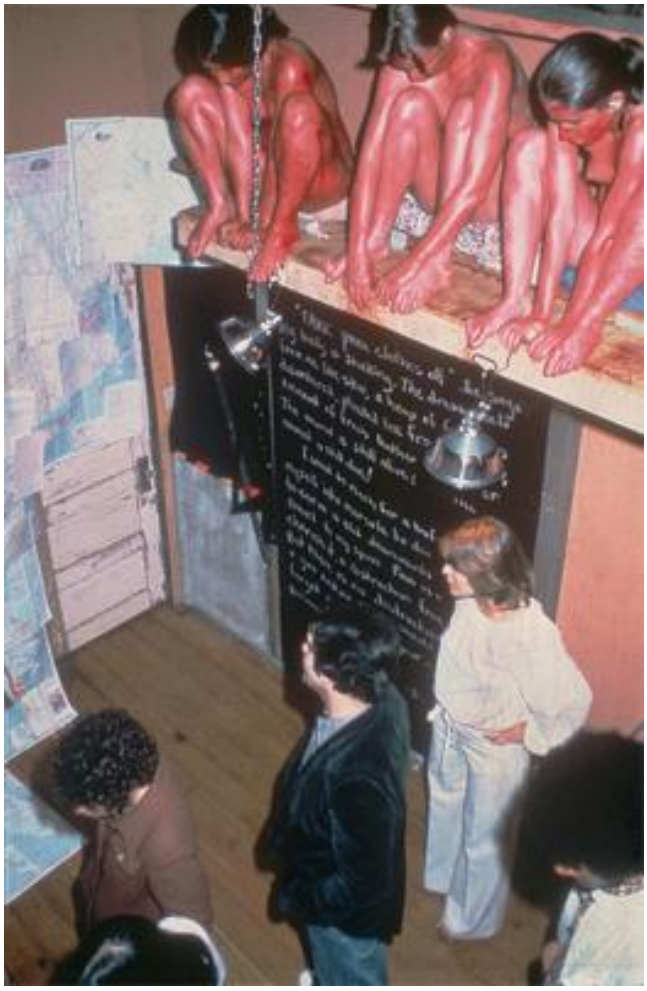

Figure 28. Suzanne Lacy, *She Who Would Fly,* 1977.

Figure 29. Ana Mendieta, *Rape Scene*, 1973.

Figure 30. Annie Sprinkle, *Public Cervix Announcement*, 1990.

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