

HER CHARMING HAND:
ESSENTIALISM, ARTISTIC TOUCH AND FEMINIST ART FROM THE 1960S AND 70S

By

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I give myself permission to reinvent this history.

–Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics*

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This dissertation offers a critical analysis of how feminist art historians, critics and curators in the 1990s established new ground for reengaging with 1960s and 70s feminist art by challenging the “theory versus essentialism” polemic, a series of debates in the 1980s that excluded earlier feminist work from historical discussion and record by denigrating it as “essentialist.” It goes on to recontextualize the problem of essentialism within a broader history of artistic touch that has, since at least the Renaissance, relied on gender to figure artistic skill, identity and value, re-examining the work of several early feminist artists whose work explored, exposed and often critiqued assumptions about relations between touch (artistic, physical and affective), the body, gender, and acts of making as well as viewing. By focusing on touch at a time when dominant aesthetic practices and critical interests were retreating from the hand as a signifier of artistic identity, early feminist work, this study contends, anticipated the deconstructive practices of the 1980s and, more importantly, remains highly relevant to contemporary social and aesthetic projects dedicated to furthering the development of an ethics of difference.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Is feminism a useful descriptive term for art that employs radically different modes of address, aspiration and genre? The difficulty of answering these questions helpfully reminds us of the sharp difference between the conceptual possibilities and limitations of art discourse and the often anarchic specificity of art. Or to put it slightly differently, these persistent questions remind us that rationality gives us ways to make categories while art gives us ways to resist them.¹ – Peggy Phelan

In most art historical narratives, the turn from modern to postmodern practices, like the earlier shift into modernity, is figured through a change in artistic touch. Citing Marcel Duchamp's readymades, the Pop sensibility of Andy Warhol's mechanically reproduced silkscreens, minimalist Donald Judd's reliance on prefabricated industrial materials, conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner's turn away from the object toward language, and the development of an aesthetics of administration, these narratives credit the replacement of the hand, the traditional signifier of an artist's presence in the work through mark or style, by a readymade, machinistic or conceptual process, not only with questioning the relationship between artist and artwork, but also with precipitating a radical shift in the parameters defining both.

As the decade of the 1960s unfolded in a context of burgeoning capital, consumerism, and anti-war, civil rights and women's liberation movements, identity politics were born, a condition which pressed the discourses of art, philosophy and theory to find languages capable of thinking and speaking about new experiences of subjectivity.² At the same time, poststructuralist theories, primarily imported from Europe, were gaining an increasing audience in the United States. In general, these theories involved or could be motivated toward critiques of Cartesian subjectivity, the idea of a "full" or coherent and self-present individual distinct from his objects of contemplation or study. Within the art world, these critiques of subjective "presence" and objectivity paralleled artistic challenges to the tenets of Modernism, particularly critic Clement Greenberg's version which, in part, defined the modernist artwork as autonomous (self-

referential and separate from life), yet maintained a notion of the artist as genius, a coherent subject whose self-expression and access to transcendence guaranteed the value of his work.

The figure most associated with Greenbergian Modernism is Abstract Expressionist painter Jackson Pollock. Although it may be argued that Pollock participated in the 20th century trend away from the artist's hand by relinquishing the brush for methods of production that no longer touched the canvas directly, neither he nor his critics abandoned the notion of the artist's subjective presence as transmitted through his gesture into the work. In fact, the substitution of Pollock's active gesturing body for the traditional artist's brush attempted to reinforce an essentialist notion of artistic genius as a direct transmission of transcendence (or the realm of the divine) into the artwork without mediation (here, the potential mediation of the brush, including its various historical connotations).

This conflation of Pollock's body, gesture and work in his famous "drip" paintings of the late 1940s and early 1950s, figured by critics as the apotheosis of high Modernism and heroic male artistic genius, was challenged in the following decades by artists seeking to distance themselves from expressionist psychology and "subjective" intentionality. For example, Warhol's distance from the objects he produced (his assistants at The Factory made "his" silkscreens) and his cultivation of a flat, affectless persona, coupled with declarations that he saw himself as a machine, could easily be read by later scholars as exemplifying certain key aspects of nascent poststructuralist theories such as the death of the author and the exteriorization of subjectivity. In most art historical narratives the decline of the modernist artistic subject is linked to a negation of artistic touch, a move that is then retroactively figured as presaging the transition into poststructuralist appropriation art and the "deconstructive" practices of the 1980s.

Beginning with this premise, that the undoing of the universalized subject of Modernism coincides with a demise of interest in artistic touch, my research offers an alternative to that narrative by reframing the question of artistic touch through an investigation of proto- and early feminist artwork from the 1960s and 1970s, a body of work that actively engaged with touch as a concept, an artistic tradition and an embodied, thus historicized, source of personal, aesthetic and political epistemology and invention. This project explores how early feminist artists such as Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneemann, Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Judy Chicago used various forms of touch to critique modernist notions of autonomy, critical objectivity and artistic genius, concepts and practices that promoted and maintained ideas, beliefs and systems of valuation that were, and continue to be, deeply gendered.³ In the process of working through connections between personal experience (emphasized in the consciousness-raising techniques developed at this time by the women's liberation movement), representation (aesthetic and popular theories and forms), and gender politics, it is my argument that these artists researched and developed new forms of artistic practice, theory and history-making which bridged and thus defied the Cartesian separation of subjects and objects of knowledge that had informed and supported Clement Greenberg's version of modernist art. From this perspective, early feminist artists anticipate one of the most important developments in poststructuralist theory, the deconstruction of subjectivity.

However, as *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter has observed, feminist art, "the formative art of the last four decades ... has been perversely hard to see."⁴ This is in part due to the vested interests of a patriarchal art world that had neither the desire nor the lens through which to engage with such work. But it is also the result of feminist critical discourses in the 1980s which retroactively labeled and denounced the work of earlier feminist artists as

“essentialist,” a term with meanings that have shifted over time but is generally defined as: the belief that gender is biologically based rather than socially constructed; an ignorance of the fact that female bodies are articulated through complex codes of representation, primarily language; and the attempt to universalize female experience by generalizing personal experience into larger, theoretical claims, or by trying to fix embodied experience as an absolute or unmediated referent.

Accusations of essentialism were often most often directed at 1960s and 70s art that involved the imaging or performative display of the female body, typically the body of the artist. For 1980s feminist artists and critics influenced by poststructuralist critiques of Cartesian subjectivity, earlier feminist work demonstrated a naïve belief in “the actual experience of the body,” an essential self-possession that Mary Kelly equated with Cartesian subjectivity and “presence.”⁵ For Kelly, artistic investments in “direct experience” were ultimately masculinist and regressive because they sought to use the body and artistic touch as forms of unmediated representation, thereby fulfilling the modernist “prophecy of the painted mark.”⁶ She conflated artistic touch with the body, à la Jackson Pollock, and so read into early feminist art an essentialist belief in unmediated presence. This dissertation argues, in part, that anti-essentialist critiques such as Kelly’s have overlooked the highly significant ways in which artists like Schneemann, Ono, Ukeles and Chicago used and developed various forms of artistic touch precisely to explore their experiences of embodiment as mediated, as deeply figured through forms of representation which, as artists, they were well prepared to intervene in and redefine. In fact, much of their work was made explicitly to counter the notion of embodiment and subjectivity as fixed and unmediated, ideas that would later be called “essentialist.”⁷

The art historical record, however, has largely echoed the anti-essentialist arguments of Kelly, Griselda Pollock and other critics, establishing what Peggy Phelan calls “false polarities” pitting the ostensibly “essentialist” feminist practices of the 1960s and 1970s against the theory-based feminist art of the 1980s, work such as Mary Kelly’s which, like Warhol’s, lent itself more easily to the increasingly popular academic discourses of poststructuralist theories and thus appeared more sophisticated.⁸ By retroactively applying the label “essentialist” to early feminist art and denouncing it as theoretically naïve, the position of anti-essentialist artists and critics like Kelly and Pollock aligned, paradoxically, with the sensibilities of the masculinist art world, effectively dismissing an entire corpus of early feminist work as irrelevant to contemporary art practices and discourses. With a few exceptions, for example the work of Louise Bourgeois, art made by women in the 1960s and 70s virtually disappeared from the art world and critical discussion, popping up occasionally in an independent gallery or small museum but existing primarily as a kind of dim and disowned mythical past.

The year 2007 witnessed a reversal of fortune, a revival of academic and museological interest in early feminist art culminating in the inauguration of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. This augurs well for the future of feminist art history and would not have been possible without the confluence of a number of factors and a great deal of effort, stretching for well over a decade, on the part of several feminist art historians and curators with whom this dissertation will be in dialogue, most notably Peggy Phelan, Helen Molesworth, Catherine de Zegher, Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, who in the 1990s attempted, with varying degrees of success, to refute, loosen or deconstruct the “theory versus essentialism” debate. Any contemporary reading of 1960s and 70s feminist art must take into account the terms of both its dismissal and re-emergence. Chapters Two, Three and Four track

these developments, offering a critical and historical analysis of challenges to the “theory versus essentialism” debate by feminist critics and historians from the 1990s to the present, outlining what is at stake as I begin to develop a new understanding of early feminist work through the lens of touch, specifically discourses of artistic touch that have, since the Renaissance, resorted to various definitions of essentialism (biological, semiotic, poststructuralist, etc.) to constrain, devalue and/or dismiss women artists.

Chapter Four focuses on the 1996 exhibition *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s ‘Dinner Party’ in Feminist Art History*, curated by Amelia Jones, as a pivotal moment in the revitalization of interest in early feminist art. Extending the scholarship of Broude and Garrard, among others, I will show that Jones’ particular deconstruction of the “theory versus essentialism” debate (in the context of historicizing and re-interpreting *The Dinner Party*) proved controversial in the eyes of many artists and critics, but persuasive for a small yet pivotal group of art historians, curators and patrons such as David Joselit, Connie Butler, Maura Reilly and Elizabeth A. Sackler, who would go on to further the work. For it was after seeing *The Dinner Party* for the first time in Jones’ show that Sackler became interested not only in its ambitious aesthetic and historical program but the historical significance of the work itself, which included problems of conservation and public access.⁹ This eventually resulted in Sackler’s purchase of *The Dinner Party* in 2001 and the creation of the first major institution in the United States devoted to collecting and exhibiting feminist art. The 2007 opening of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum featured *Global Feminisms*, an exhibition of contemporary feminist art curated by Reilly and Linda Nochlin, while on the west coast Butler organized *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*, the first international historical survey to track the emergence of feminist art in the 1960s as a world-wide phenomenon.

Given the history of the “theory versus essentialism” debate, it is no gentle irony that the focal point of the Sackler Center is *The Dinner Party*, which Peggy Phelan credits with single-handedly triggering the “essentialist backlash” when it first appeared in 1979.¹⁰ In terms of my own project, it is important to note that this collaboratively produced monumental mixed media installation (which had the audacity to rewrite history by documenting the lives of real women and goddesses from pre-history to the 20th century) turns on re-motivating various forms of touch as they have traditionally been gendered, valued and sited. In a series of clever crossings, *The Dinner Party* dared to challenge and redefine artistic touch by utilizing techniques and materials historically associated with women’s domestic handwork or “craft” labor (i.e. embroidery, weaving and china painting) to create a work of “high” art designed for a museum setting.

Chicago pressed the traditions of artistic touch further by culling processes from the Los Angeles “finish fetish” art scene, a macho, individualistic and blatantly male-identified high-tech yet labor-intensive aesthetic characterized by critics as erotic and lazy (the synthetic materials, abstract forms and machine aesthetic belied the painstakingly hand-sprayed lacquer surfaces), to produce *The Dinner Party*’s overtly handmade, low-tech ceramic dinner plates.¹¹ The result was a surprising, powerful and humorous juxtaposition of form, content and process, as the delicately wrought folds of the large and increasingly three-dimensional vulva-form plates, bathed in glowing, translucent colors and thick, glossy surfaces, attempted to publicly affirm, eroticize and redefine female genitalia as beautiful, delectable and “in your face” while also suggesting that it is through such collective labor that one produces and performs both “femaleness” and history.

As the product of intensive historical research as well as Chicago’s “central core” theory (a feminist theory she and Miriam Schapiro developed to interrogate and test relations between personal and social experience, embodiment, gender and aesthetic representation), it is my

contention that *The Dinner Party* is an argument for the power of artistic touch to function, in its various forms, as a rich interface for surfacing intersubjective desire while combining art, theory, history and gender. Like the work of such other early feminist artists as Ukeles, Ono, and Schneemann, Chicago's playful remotivation of touch through its conceptual, affective and historical connotations as material, aesthetic, social and gendered, suggests new forms for integrating subjects and objects of knowledge as well as artistic and traditional (language-based) forms of history-making. Such inventive combinations may prove to be just as efficacious, if not more so, than compartmentalized forms when it comes to producing knowledge, interrogating social problems, and spurring creative responses that re-imagine and reconfigure the world.

Although refutations of the "theory versus essentialism" debate cleared the ground for new interpretations of 1960s and 70s feminist art, Chapter Four ends by confirming that despite its recent institutionalization, critical and historical investment in this body of work is by no means secure.¹² As commentary in the 2006 anthology *Women Artists at the Millennium* reveals, there remain a few influential critics who refuse to relinquish the terms of the old polemic.¹³ Thus continued analysis of both the debate and the artists who were dismissed by it is crucial to expanding the art historical record. This dissertation is a contribution to that trajectory.

My project, as indicated earlier, also investigates early feminist art from the perspective of a modern history of artistic touch, the shifting and complex relationships between touch, the mark, identity and presence, particularly as they are figured through gender and thus form a critical substrate of the essentialism debate. While the artist's hand may have, in earlier periods, indicated her or his presence in the work, there was never a simple conflation of touch and presence; their interplay constantly opened on to other social and political factors such as gender, class and capital, as well as questions about artistic autonomy, agency, and intention, more often

than not complicating presence rather than simply confirming it. I look to Carol Armstrong, Philp Sohm, Mary Sheriff and others who have addressed the gendering of “the artist’s hand” during earlier periods, thereby contextualizing and extending the art historical conventions that 1960s and 70s feminists such as Carolee Schneemann, Chicago, Ono and others invoked, consciously or not, with their emphasis on artistic touch.

Chapter Five opens with Shigeeko Kubota’s 1965 performance *Vagina Painting*. Her specific emphasis on artistic touch through a parody of the “heroic male” artists Jackson Pollock and Yves Klein sets the context for tracing historical relationships between artistic touch, gender and genius. The problem of essentialism and the question of desire (historically linked to the senses and the feminine) implied in Kubota’s erotic performance and addressed in Amelia Jones’ 1996 exhibition have been plaguing women artists, as mentioned above, at least since the Renaissance. Constrained by patriarchal assumptions about their biological “nature,” women artists, far more frequently than their male counterparts, have had to contend with art critical discourses that often essentialize their touch along with their bodies and intellect (or supposed lack thereof). There are moments, for example in the 18th century, when a female artist might be said to exhibit a “virile brush” but her “natural” lack of reason excluded her from participating in genres coded as male, such as history painting.¹⁴ Whenever the work of a woman artist challenged or defied gendered categories and assumptions it was ignored, devalued or dismissed by critics who ultimately used essentialism as their rationale for so doing.

Historically speaking, “feminine” touch has been a mobile category, not necessarily linked to an artist’s gender yet typically a derogatory classification, either devalued for its lack of masculine qualities or, when linked to “artifice” (and the technical skill of painting as “cosmetic”), suspected of propagating an illusionism that could at various moments support or

undermine vested social and class interests.¹⁵ From the Renaissance on, “feminine” artistic touch and the figure of the woman artist have served primarily to signify difference, typically as the devalued terms in oppositions that constructed male artistic identity as coherent, rational and naturally superior. Just as feminine “matter” required masculine “form,” the female artist’s “immanence” assured the male artist’s “transcendence” which, in turn, guaranteed his genius.¹⁶

The 20th century turn away from artistic touch is an interesting shift, given the fact that “self-effacing” brushwork or touch that did not “betray the hand” was assigned to the “feminine” as a slur in the Renaissance, but by the 19th century was simultaneously valued for its ability to create a transparent illusion of “realism” (Ingres and the French Academy) and rejected (Courbet and avant-garde painters) for erasing the signs of actual labor (artistic and working class) that produced such “realism.” During the late 19th century, polished or “licked” surfaces functioned as a sign of artistic quality and social responsibility to the state, but the effort required to produce such surfaces was considered “shameful work” due to its association with feminine domestic labor.¹⁷ The effacement of the hand thus comes full circle, with the polished surface seen as indicating “a lack of resistance” that both erases (female and artistic) labor and produces good (servile) citizens.¹⁸

From this perspective, the production of Jackson Pollock (with his declarative, self-referential facture and spontaneous gestures) as the apotheosis of heroic male individualism makes sense as a sign of (male) artistic liberation from a world of mounting conformity linked to the expansion of industrialization, military and information technologies, mass marketing and public consumption. But with the undoing of the universal male subject during the 20th century, artists took up increasingly distanced approaches to art making. Technology, chance methods, and the hands of others (industrial laborers, assistants, or the audience) came to stand in for the

hand of artistic skill and intention, though the gendered implications of such a development has rarely been noted by critics. Feminist artists emerged in this milieu and many of them, including Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Judy Chicago, Carolee Schneemann and Yoko Ono, re-embraced various forms and practices of touch as a means to make the intellectual, sensual and physical labor of art, theory and identity-making tangible again, to intervene in and reinvent them all.

Chapter Six is a preliminary investigation of the ways in which these proto- and early feminist artists in the 1960s and 70s foreground touch as a concept, metaphor and practice at once aesthetic, social and political. Though definitions of immanence, like those of transcendence and essentialism, shift according to context, I argue that many if not all of the artists accused by critics and historians of naïvely “celebrating” and essentializing the female body were also, even if the theoretical terminology was not yet set in place, beginning the work of deconstructing the gendered oppositions between transcendence and immanence, and between subjects and objects of knowledge, as well as the systems of organizing and valuing experience that were based on such oppositions.¹⁹

For example, I will discuss how Ono, Valie Export and Marina Abramović produce themselves as “objects” by giving their touch over to the hand of the audience. Functioning simultaneously as both artist and “artwork,” they highlight the intersubjective desire that informs the production of art and knowledge (including concepts such as gender and identity). In the process, artistic touch becomes a larger representational field with ethical implications. Interrogating and elaborating on the very “loaded” concept of touch, many of these early feminist artists question the “purity” of its modernist conception as self-referential and transcendent. In a sense, they return to earlier historical moments when the artist and the gender of her touch did not necessarily coincide, when the artifice of touch was understood as offering a

powerful form through which “reality” might be expressed and exposed as an effect of skillful representation and, as a result, made available to re-imaging and re-imagining.

Chapter Six also focuses on how Carolee Schneemann plays with and exaggerates the artist’s hand as corporeal, gendered and erotic. Her film *Fuses* depicts Schneemann and her partner, James Tenney, making love, but her foregrounding of artistic touch and vibrant color short-circuits any essentializing literalism. Instead of giving its subject, the two lovers, over to the “consuming gaze” of standard pornography or the high art nude, the film offers us the erotic corporeality of touch as facture, as art-making inseparable from but not identical to the bodies of making and viewing.²⁰ This is an important distinction. Like Jackson Pollock’s, the touch of Schneemann, Ukeles and Ono may be located in both the materiality of the art and the act or gesture, which may then become the work. But where Pollock’s touch (at least as it was produced) collapsed simultaneously into his body, the canvas and god to secure authorship, genius, value and male privilege, Schneemann, Ukeles and Ono stage touch as both a learned skill (aesthetic and social) and an often unconscious behavior or affect that has a specifically gendered material and aesthetic history. In the process, “touch” exposes art, corporeality and lived experience as dependent on intersubjective (and intrasubjective) relations, not as a guarantee of knowledge, divine genius, or subjective/objective autonomy but rather as a means to unsettle them all.²¹

Highlighting various forms of touch, the work of each of these early feminist artists enacts a feminist and aesthetic, visual and corporeal, politics of subjective interdependence, vulnerability and agency decades before Judith Butler used the metaphor of touch to argue for this possibility.²² And yet, while the artist’s touch both produces and is produced through the touch of another (object and/or subject), mingling with objects and audiences far beyond any

original location through memory, images, film and written documentation, the particularity of “her” body remains resolutely in the work. Far from universalizing, this local-global connection is predicated on the contingency and finitude of each subject, each object, each look, each touch, and the constant negotiations of those boundaries, which are by no means secured by any source other than our collective efforts, intentions, intuitions and judgments, the production of which we might interrogate and expose, with empathy.

Given the “essentialist” debates of the 1980s in which artistic touch associated with an artist’s use of her body ran the risk of being equated with essentialism (with the modernist promise of the artist’s presence in the work), few historians or critics of feminist art in the 20th century art have addressed the topic of artistic touch and gender, although there is strong scholarship for earlier periods (Mary Sheriff 1996, Philip Sohm 1995, Melissa Hyde 2000, Ewa Lajer-Burcharth 2001, Mathes 2003) and important contributions being made by contemporary feminist theorists working in other areas (Laura Marks 2000, Elizabeth Harvey 2003, Butler 2004).

The dearth of research on artistic touch in relation to 1960s and 70s feminist art is actually quite surprising, given that the “rediscovery” of tactile or “haptic” epistemologies in poststructuralist and intercultural theories of the late 20th and early 21st centuries cite early feminist theories and practices as their models or precedents (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari 1987, Marks 2000, Butler 2004, Jones 2006). In fact, recent attempts by anti-essentialist feminist art critics and historians (Pollock 1996, De Zegher 1996, Bracha Ettinger 1996) to produce a new theory of feminism have turned to metaphors and concepts originally formulated in the 1970s by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, the very theorists whose work on “writing the body” (often through metaphors of tactility) was dismissed decades earlier as essentialist.²³ In fact, with the

exception of critical essays by Tamar Garb (2006), Anne Wagner (2006) and Laura Meyer (1996), few critics or historians working on 20th century feminist artists have specifically addressed the historical gendering of artistic touch—and none have discussed 1960s and 70s artists from this vantage point.²⁴

Touch, artistic and social, carries different semiotic valences at various historical moments. Artistic touch (in its several forms as facture, gesture, surface, etc.) may expose the porous and often contradictory relations of desire between artist, work, sitter (in the case of portraits), and viewer/critic/historian. It may be simultaneously reflective (a product of its historical and social context) and generative (learned, ironic and creative), and its various relationships to the identity, truth or transparency of its subjects and objects may produce a great deal of insight, anxiety, contradiction and delight.

Feminist artists inherited a long history of aesthetic criticism and practices based on the archaic and asymmetrical Aristotelian opposition between form and matter, gendered as male and female.²⁵ Like a number of artists in earlier periods, feminist artists emerging in the 1960s and 70s took up artistic touch in its various guises as *both* form and matter, as matter capable of producing form as well as undoing it.²⁶ In the process, they began, or perhaps continued, to deconstruct a number of old polemics that constrain and devalue the feminine, particularly transcendence versus immanence and theory versus essentialism. In terms of the latter, they were perhaps prophetic. At the very least, they anticipated some of the most important developments in poststructuralist theory, including the deconstruction of Cartesian subjectivity. Rethinking and rearticulating connections between representation, subjectivity and social relations by focusing on their own embodied experiences of gender, they challenged the Enlightenment separation of subjects and objects of knowledge, instantiating new possibilities for the making of art, history,

identity and ethics. The art of early feminists is indeed, to quote Holland Cotter, the “formative art of the last decades.”²⁷

¹ Peggy Phelan, “Survey,” in *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Reckitt, (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 18.

² Against the background of an emerging feminist movement in the late 1960s and 70s, proto- and early feminist artists were grappling with the sexist practices of the art world’s museums, galleries, critical journals and educational programs. Under the leadership of Betty Friedan, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was born in 1966 as a response to the government’s failure to enforce the prohibition against gender discrimination guaranteed in Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Realizing that the rights they were fighting for in student liberation and civil rights movements weren’t being extended to them, Shulamith Firestone and Pam Allen founded New York Radical Women in 1967 to fight for women’s liberation. Early members included Carol Hanisch, author of the famous slogan “the personal is political,” and Kathie Sarachild, who outlined the original program for “radical feminist consciousness-raising” in 1968. By the end of the 1960s women’s liberation groups were emerging all over the country and feminist literature was becoming widely circulated.

In the art world, Women Artists in Revolution (WAR) split off from the Art Worker’s Coalition in 1969 to draw up a set of feminist demands to present to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Primary among them was a call for more solo shows by women artists, continuous non-juried shows of work by women, and a 50 percent inclusion of women in all shows.² In 1970, Lucy Lippard, Faith Ringgold and others created the Ad Hoc Committee of Women Artists to protest the fact that only 5 percent of the artists represented in the 1969 *Whitney Annual* were women; by 1971 that number increased to 21 percent.² A second protest against the *Whitney* in 1972 by Women in the Arts led to the *Women Choose Women* show at the New York Cultural Center, the first major mainstream exhibition of women’s art.²

On the west coast, the Los Angeles Council of Women Artists (LACWA) formed in 1970 to protest the total exclusion of women in the important *Art and Technology* show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Like their New York counterparts, LACWA lobbied for significant increases in the museum representation of women artists, but it also fielded demands for the inclusion of equal numbers of women and men at all levels of museum management and suggestions for an “Educational Program for the Study of Women’s Art.”² This emphasis on the education of women artists as a key part of social reform is perhaps one of the most important differences between the east and west coasts, generating a number of woman-run alternative spaces and institutions dedicated to producing, showing and critiquing women’s art, including Womanspace and the Los Angeles Women’s Building. The latter housed the Feminist Studio workshop, an independent feminist art school founded in 1973 by art historian Arlene Raven, designer Sheila de Bretteville and Judy Chicago, who had already pioneered the first feminist art program in the country at Fresno State in 1970 and, with Miriam Schapiro, transferred it to CalArts in 1971.

³ The term “early feminist” artist is somewhat misleading insofar as there are certainly artists in earlier periods who could be considered “feminist” in various ways, from the extremely witty Italian Renaissance painter Sofonisba Anguissola (1532-1625) (who left her home to study in Rome and later became the court painter for Philip II and Queen Elisabeth of Valois) to Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), whose work (for example *Fillette* (1968) and *Cumul I* (1969)) often played with and questioned gendered stereotypes and assumptions. I’m using the term loosely, to designate artists who were working with ideas that could be considered feminist in the period when second wave activism was just beginning to coalesce in the 1960s to its full blown emergence into mainstream culture in the late 60s and 70s.

⁴ From Holland Cotter, review of *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*, *New York Times*, Mar. 9, 2007, Weekend Arts; Fine Arts.

⁵ Mary Kelly, “Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism,” in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), 96.

⁶ Mary Kelly, “Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism,” in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), 96.

⁷ In the context of gender politics from the 1980s on there is a heightened sense that the conflation of the mark and the body of the artist, traditionally invoked – and sometimes veiled – through touch, is particularly seductive and dangerous. It is precisely this condition of the seduction and danger involved in invoking and veiling presence, whether “naïvely” essentialist or as a limit-condition of experience, that I examine, focusing on how early feminist artists researched, staged and even theorized this condition, primarily through their explorations of touch.

⁸ Peggy Phelan, “Survey,” in *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Reckitt (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 23.

⁹ Personal discussion with Judy Chicago during a press tour at the opening of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum on Thursday, March 22nd, 2007; confirmed later in the day during Sackler’s and museum director Arnold Lehman’s question and answer session.

¹⁰ Peggy Phelan, “Survey,” in *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Reckitt (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 37.

¹¹ See Laura Meyer, “From Finish Fetish to Feminism: Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* in California Art History,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s ‘Dinner Party’ in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 46-74.

¹² See Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Joanna Frueh, *Erotic Faculties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Helena Reckitt, ed., *Art and Feminism*, (London: Phaidon Press, 2001); Hilary Robinson, ed., *Feminism-Art-Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni, eds., *Art/Women/California 1950-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹³ Emily Apter, “A Referendum on Theory and Feminism,” in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 327-328.

¹⁴ Mary D. Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 187.

¹⁵ For scholarship on the figuring of touch in relation to gender and cosmetics see Melissa Hyde, “The ‘Makeup’ of the Marquise: Boucher’s Portrait of Pompadour at Her Toilette,” in *The Art Bulletin* (September 2000): 453-475; Jean Clay, “Ointments, Makeup, Pollen,” in *October 27* (Winter 1983): 3-44; Tamar Garb, “Powder and Paint: Framing the Feminine in Georges Seurat’s Young Woman Powdering Herself,” in *Bodies of Modernity. Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-Siècle France* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998); Jacqueline Lichtenstein, “Making up Representation: The Risks of Femininity,” in *Representations 20* (Fall 1987): 77-97; Patricia Phillippy, *Painting Women: Cosmetics, Canvases and Early Modern Culture* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

¹⁶ For an excellent discussion of the gendering of form and matter in Italian Renaissance art criticism (which refers to Platonic and Aristotelian distinctions), see Philip Sohm, “Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 759-808.

¹⁷ Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, “The Ideology of the Licked Surface: Official Art,” in *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1984), 205-232.

¹⁸ Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, “The Ideology of the Licked Surface: Official Art,” *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1984), 223.

¹⁹ It is important to note that this emphasis on immanence and corporeality would be picked up later by poststructuralist theorists, from the highly influential French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand*

Plateaus (1987) to film theorist Laura Marks (2000, 2002) and Lacanian analyst-turned-artist Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, whose theory of the matrix has been touted by feminist art critics and historians like Griselda Pollock and Catherine de Zegher as the cutting-edge theory of feminist art practices and discourses.

²⁰ I am indebted to Carol Armstrong's reading of Manet's facture for this observation. See Carol Armstrong, "Facturing Femininity: Manet's 'Before the Mirror,'" *October* 74 (Autumn 1995): 86. I am also thinking about the differences between finished and unfinished surfaces in the 19th century. Nineteenth-century Realism was the heir of post-Renaissance pictorial tradition, but the emphasis on the act of painting, on painting as artifice, and on the intervention of the artist through his labor, ends up increasing (rather than decreasing) the impression of reality. "By emphasizing the painting as representation, the artist confirms the existence of what is behind the representation. In *fini* painting, on the other hand, the transparency of the painting—its lack of resistance—emphasizes the fictive character of what is represented. Thus, treatment and subject, the *fini* and the exclusion of everyday life, serve the same purpose in the strategy of official art." Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, "The Ideology of the Licked Surface: Official Art," in *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1984), 224.

²¹ These artists explore the structure of touch as it declares difference, but this is a concept and practice of difference understood to function as metonymic contiguity, association and condensation rather than metaphoric separation, substitution and displacement, a concept of difference as fluid, as separating as it unites and uniting even as it separates, refusing the oppositional either/or structure of assimilation or rejection. For an excellent discussion of Irigaray's "two lips" from the perspective of contiguity, contextualized in her critique of Lacan's vision-based theories (which are, in turn, founded on the Aristotelean notion of woman as the ground through which man achieves his own essence/subjecthood, while woman, as essence, has no access to "having" it or achieving her own subjectivity), see Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 55-72.

²² See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

²³ For a concise review of this dismissal, see Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

²⁴ Those who have written on 60s and 70s artists, for example Phelan (2007), do not mention the history of artistic touch at all; Meyer (1996) only talks about Chicago in terms of the 1950-60s finish fetish movement in Los Angeles.

²⁵ See Philip Sohm, "Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 759-808.

²⁶ See Carol Armstrong, "Facturing Femininity: Manet's 'Before the Mirror,'" *October* 74 (Autumn 1995): 74-104.

²⁷ From Holland Cotter, review of *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*, *New York Times*, Mar. 9, 2007, Weekend Arts; Fine Arts. The exhibition *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution* opened in Los Angeles at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA and ran from March 4 - July 16, 2007.

CHAPTER 2
A CRITICAL HISTORY OF THE THEORY VERSUS ESSENTIALISM DEBATE, PART 1

One thing is certain: Feminist art, which emerged in the 1960s with the women's movement, is the formative art of the last four decades. Scan the most innovative work, by both men and women, done during that time, and you'll find feminism's activist, expansionist, pluralistic trace. Without it identity-based art, crafts-derived art, performance art and much political art would not exist in the form it does, if it existed at all. Much of what we call postmodernist art has feminist art at its source. Yet that source has been perversely hard to see.¹ –Holland Cotter, *The New York Times*, 2007

2007: A Resurgence of Early Feminist Art

The year 2007 marked an unprecedented focus on feminist art in the United States, an attention that circulated, like many of the early feminist artists, critics and activists in the 1960s and 1970s, between the two coasts.² In New York, the permanent installation of Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* and the exhibition *Global Feminisms* marked the inauguration of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, the first major institution in the United States devoted to collecting and exhibiting feminist art. In a bid to keep pace, the Museum of Modern Art hosted its first symposium ever to focus entirely on feminist art, "Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts." The event attracted an overflow audience; tickets sold out far in advance and faster than any other such symposium in the museum's history.³ On the west coast, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles organized *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*, the first international historical survey to emphasize the global scale of the dynamic interaction between art and feminism that began in the late 1960s.⁴

Meanwhile, throughout the year, the Feminist Art Project, an ongoing national initiative administered by Rutgers University, promoted a number of publications and events across the country, including a full day of panel presentations held at the 2007 College Art Association meeting in New York with discussions led by feminist luminaries such as Martha Rosler, Suzanne Lacy and Mary Kelly.⁵ Given the fact that prior to 2007 there had been few major

exhibitions and institutions that included, much less spotlighted, feminist art, particularly works from the 1960s and 70s, these events signal a current and highly significant renewal of interest in its complex histories, its factional and often frictional genealogies. As we will see, this renewed focus has proven to be as complex and factional as the history itself, repeating the atmosphere of controversy and contention that emerged in the 1970s and 1990s.

The “Problem of Essentialism”

Although 2007 was banner year, much of the groundwork for this revival of early feminist art was laid earlier, in the 1990s and early 2000s, by a number of important publications and a few smaller-scale exhibitions that specifically focused on or included feminist art from the 1960s and 70s.⁶ During this period, many artists, curators and historians were turning their attention toward emerging theoretical developments that were drawn from or could be related directly to the work of early feminist artists and theorists: theories of visibility that proposed forms and relations of viewing more haptic than optical; experiments in academic writing that explored relationships between subjectivity, representation and epistemology, challenging the traditional separation of personal and theoretical domains; and Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, which articulated new possibilities for thinking about subjectivity in relation to gender and embodiment.

These theories not only created a vital field for new interpretations of feminist work, they also reengaged with the body, reintroducing questions about somatic and gendered experience that offered more complex perspectives on the concept of essentialism. This was a crucial advance for feminism and art history. For it was the “essentialism issue” or what later came to be known as the “theory versus essentialism” debate, a polemic generated by feminist artists and critics in the 1980s, that had consigned the larger body of and context for early feminist work to a persistent near-invisibility, despite the fact that a handful of early feminist artists, including Judy

Chicago, Rebecca Horn, Carolee Schneemann, Eleanor Antin and Hannah Wilke

(posthumously), did have retrospective shows in the 1990s and early 2000s.⁷

Although the definitions subtending accusations of “essentialism” shifted somewhat over the course of the ‘80s, they included claims that feminist artists of the late 1960s and 70s assumed that gender was biologically based rather than socially constructed; that these artists were ignorant of the fact that female bodies are articulated through complex codes of representation; that these artists universalized the feminine by generalizing personal experience into larger theoretical claims; and that they tried to fix identity and the body, often conflated, as absolute or unmediated referents of “the real.”⁸ Several feminist art historians, including Mira Schor and Amelia Jones, have noted that an overwhelming sense of discomfort with women’s experiences of embodiment pervades the anti-essentialist arguments made by Griselda Pollock, Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, Mary Kelly and others. These arguments fed into a general perception that art and criticism generated in the 1980s, informed by or read through the increasingly influential academic discourses of semiotics, Marxism, psychoanalysis and deconstruction, offered feminism more sophisticated critiques of gender and subjectivity and rendered the work of early feminists theoretically naïve and irrelevant by comparison. The effect of the essentialism polemic combined with the theoretical emphases of the 1980s to set up a dynamic whereby a large, diverse and formative corpus of early feminist work was devalued, dismissed and subsequently lost to both feminist and wider art historical discussions.⁹

By the 1990s, however, there was a marked sense among a significant number of feminist artists, critics and historians that the “theory versus essentialism” debate was inaccurate, unproductive or exhausted. While those who chose to reengage with this polemic did so in ways that differed a good deal in terms of position, critique, theorization and innovation, their

responses were and continue to be arguably the most critical factor in paving the way for the current revitalization of institutional and academic interest in 1960s and 70s feminist art. The following account will consider several key events and publications, all work that in some way attempted, with varying degrees of success, to revisit early feminist art through addressing, loosening or deconstructing the “theory versus essentialism” debate. Among these are Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard’s *The Power of Feminist Art* (1994); *October*’s 1995 questionnaire on the status of feminist art and discourse; and Helen Molesworth’s article “House Work and Art Work,” also published in *October* (2000). They also include a 2001 conference organized by Carol Armstrong that produced *Women Artists at the Millennium* (2006), and two groundbreaking exhibitions, Catherine de Zegher’s *Inside the Visible: an elliptical traverse of 20th century art in, of and from the feminine* (1994) and Amelia Jones’ *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (1996).

Any investigation into some of the various forms and explorations in feminist art from the early period, including the role(s) of touch, must take into account the precarious status of the body in contemporary feminist theories of representation. These theories have for the most part traded on or attempted to deconstruct the concept of essentialism, so it is useful to trace the contours of the sustained and serious reengagement with this concept.

1990s Theory Reexamines “Essentialist” Concepts: Touch, Embodiment and Experience

To establish the context for my exploration of how proto- and feminist artists in the late 1960s and 70s engaged with the concept and practices of artistic touch, it is important to show how art critical and historical attempts to rearticulate the concept of essentialism in the 1990s were fundamental to creating an expanded arena for academic and curatorial reevaluations of early feminist work. The following is an outline of the theories and trends that paved the way,

either directly or obliquely, for feminist artists and thinkers, including myself, to reengage with and challenge the “essentialism issue.”

First, feminist critical interest in the 1990s shifted from theorizations of the “male gaze” (which cast the woman in a passive or narcissistic role) to the richer possibilities of haptic visuality, a theory emphasizing tactility and embodied forms of knowing less instrumentalizing than predominant notions of opticality based on distance and knowledge as mastery. It is significant that film theorist Laura Marks, who has written extensively on this topic, cites among her sources Walter Benjamin’s theories of representation, Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of haptic nomadism in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Svetlana Alpers and Naomi Schor’s descriptions of 17th century Dutch still life paintings and, most important for my research here, Luce Irigaray’s theories of female eroticism from the 1970s and “the perceived essentialism of feminists who describe a form of representation grounded in the body.”¹⁰ As a theory of “sensuous knowing” that offers, in part, new possibilities for thinking about the production of knowledge and subjectivity through a mutuality of relations between viewers, artists and works of art, the concept of haptic visuality reopened questions central to earlier feminist concerns, reintroducing the body, female sexuality and issues of epistemology into older debates about the relationships between art, gender, subjectivity and politics.

Second, influenced by the work of feminists in other disciplines, including H el ene Cixous and Irigaray (who went beyond a mere critique of Cartesian subjectivity to actively experiment with its implications), some feminist art historians (such as Moira Roth, Joanna Frueh, Eunice Lipton, Jane Blocker, Peggy Phelan and Amelia Jones) began to produce writing that challenged and further eroded distinctions between “personal” and “theoretical” knowing. Acknowledging their desires, projections and investments in or identification with their objects of study, these

feminist scholars staged themselves and their objects, to varying degrees, in the process of the making; in other words, as both product and producer of histories and theories at once personal and cultural. Taking their cues from “essentialist feminists” and in some cases from Judith Butler (see below), they investigated and began to perform the mutual constitution of subjects and objects of knowledge, extending the possibilities for art historical writing while posing radical questions to the discipline itself, challenging the modernist critic’s stance of critical objectivity and its relation to the value systems supporting much art historical and critical interpretation.

Third, Judith Butler’s (1990, 1993) theory of performativity, developed specifically to address issues of gender and embodiment, followed on the heels of work by Diana Fuss (1989), Naomi Schor (1989) and Trinh T. Minh-ha (1990) to initiate one of the most powerful critiques of essentialism and the “theory versus essentialism” debate to date.¹¹ Deemphasizing the psychoanalytic theories upon which much feminist work in the 1980s had relied, Butler’s theory aligns with a Derridean critique of presence and deconstruction of subjectivity, yet foregrounds the experience of gender by insisting on embodiment. “Performativity” is not performance *per se*; it is not an intentional or singular act but the reiteration of a set of norms, a citational practice through which the subject is produced as an effect. Reconceptualizing all categories, including gender, subjectivity and identity, as active conditions rather than descriptive terms, the theory of performativity argues that the concepts we assume as essential do in fact precede, constrain and exceed us, yet function, through our repeated citations of them, as dynamic conditions we continually negotiate.

The result, as Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, is paradoxical:

the reconceptualization of identity as an effect, that is as produced or generated, opens up possibilities of ‘agency’ that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that

take identity categories as foundational and fixed. For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither totally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary [...] Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible.¹²

In offering possibilities for a subjective agency that is not predicated on either essentialist notions nor social constructivism, an agency that does not foreclose a deconstruction of identity and vice versa, Butler creates a political, social and embodied concept of subjectivity that even historians Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, outspoken in their criticisms of the effect of poststructuralist theories on subjective agency, find useful and inspiring.¹³ Most importantly, Butler's concept of subjectivity deconstructs the theory versus essentialism polemic that has structured much of the critical and historical conversation about feminist art since the 1980s.

The implications of Butler's theory of performativity are numerous, many of them congruent with the work of "anti-essentialist" or "constructivist" feminist artists and critics in the late 1970s and 80s such as Mary Kelly and Griselda Pollock, who argued for representational strategies based on distance, demystification and dis-identification as a means to effect political change by "laying bare" tacit forms of gender interpellation.¹⁴ But what Kelly and Pollock overlooked was the fact that, given the performative subject's iterative potential for mistakes, exaggerations, and misfirings of identificatory repetitions, even strategies of identification that became conflated with "essentialism" might create productive misses that expose or exploit the instability inhabiting every concept, making it available to critique and reinvention.¹⁵ Thus art historian Amelia Jones draws, in part, from Butler's theory in *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (1998) in order to refute charges of essentialism and narcissism levied against several 1970s feminist artists whose use of the female body had been dismissed by anti-essentialist artists and critics as reinforcing a naïve, biologically based identification with the feminine.

The power of Butler's theory of performativity for reinterpreting feminist art from the 1960s and 70s lies in her emphasis on embodiment, which challenges theories of biological essence or ontological presence as well as cultural constructivism, the founding opposition of the "theory versus essentialism" debate.¹⁶ Here her theory differs from Derrida's, at least from her perspective, insofar as she highlights the fact that citational repetition is embodied, encrusted with the imbricated histories of relations between bodies and the social.¹⁷ Drawing from Merleau-Ponty's theories of phenomenology, Butler situates the body as incessantly enacting and reproducing a historical situation for which it, in turn, continually produces possibilities. In this way, the body introduces particularity and contingency into the subject's ongoing process of tacit habituation, which is critical to undermining the universalizing potential of essentialism and cultural interpellation alike.

Yet it is also through the body that "despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel."¹⁸ As a body, one cannot remain intact, even though, as Butler argues, it is imperative for us to continue claiming legal rights to bodily autonomy. The irrevocably public dimension of the body means that one is given over to others even as a body is "one's own." The body dispossesses the subject at the same time it puts it in a condition of relationality: "If I am struggling for autonomy, do I not need to be struggling for something else as well, a conception of myself as invariably in community, impressed upon by others, impressing them as well, and in ways that are not clearly delineable, in forms that are not fully predictable?"¹⁹ Embodiment is, for Butler, the "primary tie" by which we live a condition of connection as bodies for one another.²⁰ Here we could place Butler's work in the lineage of theorists Irigaray and Cixous as

well as proto- and early feminist artists (Yoko Ono, Valie Export and Carolee Schneemann among others), as the primary metaphor Butler draws on is tactile.

In terms of the “theory versus essentialism debate,” Butler’s key point is that the body is neither passive nor inert material onto which concepts such as gender are inscribed; concepts are not determined solely by nature, language or culture. For all their chiasmatic exchanges in the subject’s interpellation, language and culture exceed the body and the body exceeds language and culture; there is always a gap, an incongruity between them that risks unintelligibility.²¹ This excess is both a threat and a chance, as unintelligibility risks not only that the subject will not be recognized as a subject *per se*, which may provoke social exclusion and violence, but also that the subject will not be recognizable at all, will not be addressed by the Other upon whom the subject’s viability is dependent. Yet this unintelligibility, spawned through the incongruity of the speaking body, also opens the potential for resignifying terms that constrain and construct the tacit performativity of habit. The power to “expand the cultural field bodily” through “subversive performances of various kinds,” may even be found in hate speech, as formerly pejorative terms such as “woman,” “black,” and “queer” may be both enacted by and productive of bodies in startling ways, generating unanticipated situations, movements and political futures.²²

Butler’s deconstruction of essentialism rethinks the notion of “experience,” cautioning us about our use of language and theory. She reminds us that all language is theoretical, implicating any speaker or writer in a scene of social responsibility: “There is, in my view, nothing about femaleness that is waiting to be expressed; there is, on the other hand, a good deal about the diverse experiences of women that is being expressed and still needs to be expressed, but caution is needed with respect to that theoretical language, for it does not simply report a pre-linguistic

experience, but constructs that experience as well as the limits of its analysis.”²³ The power of the relationship between bodies, language and experience may also be claimed for any form of representation in relation to bodies, including images and even touch, the sense most readily associated with embodiment as presence and essence. But for now, I wish to begin to map the essentialism issue as it was addressed in the 1990s and early into this millennium, as what continues to subtend much of the discussion involves a rearticulation of these relationships accompanied by an increasing discomfort with the oscillating uncertainties circulating between prescription and description, expression and impression, and female eroticism.

Art History Reengages with the “Theory versus Essentialism Debate”

Broude and Garrard Historicize the Debate “Theory vs. Essentialism,” *The Dinner Party* and Central Core Theory

If Judith Butler, writing in the early 1990s, could make the claim that pejorative terms like “queer,” “black” and “woman” had been, to some degree, positively reappropriated by the very subjects formerly oppressed by them, the same could not be said for “cunt,” at least not in the context of feminist art historical discussions broaching the subject of essentialism. It is no subtle irony, given the central place it now occupies at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, that Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*, with its thirty-nine ceramic vulvaform plates commemorating historical women and goddesses, was credited in Peggy Phelan’s 2001 survey essay for *Art and Feminism* with having single-handedly provoked the 1980s “backlash” against “essentialist” 1970s feminist art.²⁴

But in 1994, Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard responded aggressively to the charges of “essentialism” in their introductory essay for *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*. Deliberately eschewing the 1980s emphasis on poststructuralist theory as the interpretive frame for American feminist art from the 1970s,

Broude and Garrard chose to focus on the political and historical context of its making, particularly work that had in part informed *The Dinner Party*, including Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's theory of "central core imagery" or "cunt art" which postulated, in part, that women artists made "central core" forms that resonated with their experience of embodiment.

Despite what appears to be a wholesale dismissal of poststructuralist theory, an over-reaction that in some ways left the "theory versus essentialism" polemic intact, Broude and Garrard did succeed in making a number of extremely cogent and persuasive arguments that refute charges of biological essentialism against feminist art from this period by historicizing the concept, observations since elaborated on by even the most theoretically astute feminist art critics and historians such as Amelia Jones.²⁵ Their attempt to counter charges of a universalizing essentialism, particularly in the case of Chicago and Schapiro's central core or cunt theory, are less successful, though in the process they do make what I consider to be a key distinction between the invention and application of a theory. In fact, this sometimes subtle but crucial difference subtended the theory versus essentialism debate in the 1980s, yet it has not, to my knowledge, been addressed in any direct or systematic fashion.

Broude and Garrard's historicization of the essentialism problem is important for understanding two of its variants, biological reductionism and universalization, as is their equally crucial rebuttal of these charges against early feminist art. While their historical outline credits British film theorists Pam Cook, Laura Mulvey and Claire Johnston with picking up on French feminist critiques of Freud's notion of "biology as destiny" to found their rejection of a naturalized "female essence," they also point to American Patricia Mainardi's earlier arguments against the notion of a "female sensibility" in art as developing the first criticisms of ideas and assumptions that would later come to be called "essentialist." A member of New York

Redstockings, Mainardi, according to Broude and Garrard, was implicitly referring to Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's theory of "central core imagery" when in 1972 she stated that a "right wing of the women artists' movement" was "codifying a so-called female aesthetic."²⁶ A year later, art critic Cindy Nemser more overtly rejected Chicago and Schapiro's cunt theory, which postulated, in part, that women artists made "central core" forms that resonated with their experience of embodiment. In particular, Nemser objected to what she perceived would be the effect of such a theory, that it would confine women artists to making specific "intrinsically female" forms, thereby denying the diversity of expression that is one of the trademarks of feminist art from this period.

Thus, as Broude and Garrard illustrate, Chicago and Schapiro's attempt to invent a theory from what they perceived to be their particular and embodied experiences as women, like similar projects undertaken by feminist artists including Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke and others, was viewed by critics as essentialist and problematic from the start. The idea that women could make work that might express their sense of a vulvic interiority was too narrow, since it could be read as confining women to their biology or particular forms of expression, but it was also too universal, insofar as the theory was perceived as making claims for all women. While these critiques may be valid from certain theoretical perspectives, Broude and Garrard's analysis responds by arguing that despite its drawbacks "cunt art" was a radical attempt to theorize connections between physical feeling (specifically, an experience of embodiment that did not disavow sexuality and other life processes), gendered identity and aesthetics, as a powerfully creative and political act.²⁷ It is from this perspective they refute the critical dismissal of cunt art as both universalizing and biologically essentialist.

Conceived in reaction to the negative and oppressive attitudes toward women in the 1950s and 60s and the “centuries of indoctrination” that restricted female sexuality to biological destiny, Chicago and Schapiro’s use of “cunt” imagery was never meant, in Broude and Garrard’s account, to confine women to their biology but rather to “reverse the loathing and devaluation of female anatomy in patriarchal culture.”²⁸ They cite a passage from Chicago and Schapiro’s 1972 essay “Female Imagery” that, in retrospect, is very much in the spirit of the point made by Judith Butler almost twenty years later about the appropriation of derogatory terms like “queer”: “The woman artist could take ‘that very mark of her otherness and by asserting it as the hallmark of her iconography, establish a vehicle by which to state the truth and beauty of her identity.’”²⁹ Here, female sexuality functions as “a resource, rather than a destiny”, as cunt imagery created by women artists signals women’s power to define, assert and enact their sexuality and eroticism on their own terms.³⁰

A second and related point is that the female identity Chicago and Schapiro sought to redefine was not as fixed or dependent on biological essentialism as critics have liked to assert. To give one example, Broude and Garrard refer to Chicago’s Cock and Cunt play, performed in 1972, as a clear demonstration that Chicago and other feminist artists at Womanhouse were entirely cognizant of the cultural construction of gender. Costumed in giant cloth vulvas and penises, female performers labeled “SHE” and “HE” mocked the naturalization of gender roles with witty dialogue such as “‘A cunt means you wash dishes.’”³¹

Although Broude and Garrard counter accusations of biological essentialism against Chicago and other early American feminists with relative ease, their refutation of the universalizing aspects of central core theory relies on their downplaying its status *as a theory* (perhaps due to their own prejudice against theory) and is less straightforward. However, in the

process, they make a very subtle but important distinction between methods of theorization mentioned above, one that points to perhaps the most problematic as well as innovative aspect of the practices of feminist work from the 1970s: the making of theory from embodied experience as both an individual and collective pursuit, a point to which I will return in the final chapter.

Broude and Garrard acknowledge that some of the most strident accusations of essentialism against early feminist artists were provoked by central core theory and its attempt to posit a universal formal iconography for women artists. As Nemser had pointed out, such codification risked a level of generalization that would fix or narrow forms of women's aesthetics and experience. Broude and Garrard's response is to shift the frame, explaining, through comments made by Lucy Lippard, that Chicago and Schapiro's "theory" was more a working hypothesis taken up in an exploratory fashion. Attempting to elude the idea of theory-making, they situate cunt theory historically, arguing that questions about the use of female-identified forms in the mid-70s were embroiled in a larger debate about whether or not "women's art" could be defined at all, with feminist artists divided between those who used these forms self-consciously to political ends, and those who argued such forms should not be used because they were too imbued with stereotypical connotations.

Reiterating that central core forms are not inherently gendered, Broude and Garrard shift the question away from whether these forms "should" be used to "how" they are used, asking what it means or how the work might signify differently when a formal language is taken up by women instead of men. While I agree with their final claim that the intention of the 1970s feminist agenda was to make women visible as an embodied body politic, their response to the charge that cunt theory is too universalizing seems a circuitous avoidance of the initial problem of over-generalization. Their use of history effectively refutes charges of biological essentialism,

but it doesn't work as well as a frame for addressing the accusations of universalizing essentialism.

As I mentioned previously, when Broude and Garrard engage with the question of essentialism they make an important distinction between two of Chicago and Schapiro's approaches: the "theory in formation" that they developed to guide themselves and their students into art-making (i.e. the Cock and Cunt play) and their parallel attempt to theorize a formal iconography for a female aesthetic. As described by Broude and Garrard, art-making at CalArts was preceded by a rigorous process of consciousness-raising and self-examination where "individual solutions were grounded in experience rather than theory."³² Unlike the theory of "central core imagery," art produced at this level "could not be essentialist because it did not claim that level of generalization."³³

Broude and Garrard's argument is entirely valid insofar as "central core theory" functioned differently as a process of invention versus application, where it succumbed to the potentially universalizing structure typical of most theory-making (theories are made to be tested and authorized through reproduction, which is how they gain their explanatory or generalizing power). Yet what they pointed to and missed, possibly because they continued to assert a separation between theory and experience (with experience conceptualized as embodied and therefore potentially biologically "essentialist"), was the possibility that this method of "theory-in-formation" developed at CalArts and by other feminist artists working in the 1970s challenged "theory" in general, inspiring art that was, I want to insist, simultaneously grounded in experience, in the historical particularity of the subject-in-making, *and* theoretical. In other words, through their emphasis on embodied subjectivity and desire (artists' and viewers' investments), the work of a number of early feminist artists, including Ono, Schneemann and

Ukeles, suggested that there could be a form of theory that was both futural (hoping to influence the future) and particular (individualized and historicized) without insisting on a method of application/replication that would fall prey to overgeneralization (as a repetition of the same).³⁴

A Brief Digression on Theory: Mierle Laderman Ukeles' Maintenance Art

A clarification of what I mean by “theory” may be useful at this juncture. Often what is referred to as “theory” includes propositions or ideas that may have been generated as a response to art and/or critical practices and yet, in their systematic application, elaboration and power of generalization, often end up defining them (i.e. Kant’s aesthetics or Greenberg’s theory of modernism). “Theory” may also be a shorthand term for the primarily academic discourses of psychoanalysis, semiotics, Marxism, feminism, deconstruction and so on; theories that rose to prominence in the 1970s and 80s, particularly in the disciplines of film, literature, feminism and contemporary art, challenging history as a primary explanatory discourse.³⁵

Although Broude and Garrard’s argument appears to maintain this opposition between theory and history, their distinction between applied and invented theories points, however unintentionally or obliquely, to a potentially new possibility for thinking about the historical relationship of early feminist art to theory. Despite accusations of essentialism, it is my argument that many of the early feminist artists who were labeled theoretically naïve were in fact producing their own theories for thinking about and making work that would create change in their own lives and the state of the world they found so ineluctably shaping them. What we call “theory” in an academic context does not often recognize the perhaps less broad-based but no less influential theorizing each one of us does on a daily basis, as well as the theories that are constantly invented by communities and groups. This level of theory-making was highly developed during the 1960s and 70s by many second wave radical feminist activist groups, particularly New York Redstockings and Gainesville Women’s Liberation, as a revolutionary

strategy for building concrete actions and a collective political movement that was connected to and continually tested by individual women's experiences.

I believe it needs to be emphasized that the radical feminist strategy of conscious-raising, where women gathered to articulate their personal problems in order to see a pattern of connection to larger social and political issues, became the foundation for an embodied or *immanent mode of theory-making* that was considered a necessary prerequisite for successful political action and radical social change.³⁶ Although Judy Chicago denies having any knowledge of consciousness-raising until she invented it as part of the program at Cal Arts, this method of immanent theory-making was also highly successful for art-making, as Chicago's and her students' work (i.e. the Womanhouse projects) attest.³⁷

My point is that regardless of actual contact with specific feminist groups, women artists were inventing a kind of embodied theory-making where the research, development, invention and testing/performance phases were equal to if not more important than replicable applications. In other words, the work of a number of feminist artists, such as Carolee Schenmann, Yoko Ono, Valie Export, Mierle Laderman Ukeles and others showed the process of their art as immanent theory-making and vice versa. This embodied notion of theory challenges the subject-object split of Cartesian rationality and actually comes closer to the most archaic sense of "theoria," a concept which, for the Greeks, combined body and mind, intuition and a honed sense of perception that drew equally from all of the senses. A theorist was someone who traveled to a "foreign" place, experienced it through feeling, memory and imagination (listening to local stories and myths, recording sights, sounds and smells, touching artifacts, etc.) and then returned home to make this knowledge available to the larger community.³⁸

To cite one relevant example, when feminist performance artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles declared, “my working will be the work” in her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969! Proposal for an Exhibition: ‘Care,’* she was pointing to the fact that her art-work would enact her theory performatively in a way that was embodied, personal, public, aesthetic and political.³⁹ After becoming pregnant and being told by a professor that she could not be a mother and an artist, Ukeles traveled to an uncharted territory, reframing her experiences of maternal labor (cooking, cleaning, etc.) as aesthetic labor. She extensively theorized “maintenance art” as strategies and practices aligned with a “life instinct” invested in the care of the species, which she opposed to the “death instinct” of avant-garde art based on separation and the solipsism of “do your own thing.”⁴⁰ When Ukeles performed *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside, July 22, 1973*, washing the floors of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, for eight hours straight (the equivalence of a work day), she made a profound connection between the crucial but low-paid and often invisible labor of public service workers and unpaid domestic female labor.

In *Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object* (1973), Ukeles continued to research and develop her theory of maintenance art in a museum context by charting the shifts in labor and responsibility that result when hands with different semiotic designations touch the same object. When a maintenance worker cleans a glass case, the result is a clean case. But when Ukeles (in the role of artist) cleans the case and labels her effort a piece of “maintenance art,” the case can no longer be touched by a museum worker; instead, it may only be handled by a curator who is then responsible for keeping the art object properly maintained. In a funny, circular logic where the higher-paid curator ends up performing the same manual labor as the artist and the lower-paid service worker, Ukeles exposes the art/object as having no inherent worth, its value an effect of how it is framed (en-cased) through a series of tactile encounters which are in turn

assigned value arbitrarily though the labor of individuals who have no “inherent” value either; all acquire significance and worth only through their function of signifying difference in the endless circulation of signs and capital. It is through emphasizing and repeating her embodied domestic labor, her “feminine touch” (artistic and domestic), across several contexts simultaneously that Ukeles performs art, critique and theory in one brilliant art-work that exposes, quite literally, the conditions of its own production as an argument for the future, for maintaining an attentiveness to care in systems that rely, first and foremost, on interdependency.

Ukeles continued to develop her theory of “care” and maintenance art through large-scale public artworks such as *Touch Sanitation* (1977-1980), where she personally shook hands with every “untouchable” garbage worker in the New York Department of Sanitation and subsequently became the department’s only artist in residence. Her current project crosses environmental issues with public rituals of grieving as she designs a public memorial for 9/11 at Fresh Kills, the ecologically disastrous landfill that was temporarily reopened in September 2001 to admit the unidentifiable remains of the 9/11 victims.⁴¹ Ukeles’ orientation and process, which began with a question she posed in her manifesto: “After the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?”: is similar to that which was being developed in feminist activist groups like Redstockings, where a theory attained authority through action, by continually circulating through personal, embodied experiences, understood collectively as socially and politically shaped and shaping. While radical feminist groups articulated their theories through manifestos, essays and public actions, early feminist artists were also inventing new theories as well as forms for inventing, testing, and representing/performing their often explicitly embodied ideas.

This does not mean that many of the 1960s and 70s feminist artists, like the second-wave radical feminist activists, weren't reading or extrapolating from "high" theory (by this I mean highly systematized, previously accepted or academically authorized theories), for they certainly were (i.e. Simone de Beauvoir, Marxism, etc.), but they did so in order to *invent new theories* that would more accurately reflect, guide and potentially influence their lives as well as the world that gave them meaning. As a result, their primary source and testing ground for knowledge, theory and action was not so much the proper citation of a high theory or theorist but rather their own dynamically lived experiences, which circulated through their nascent epistemologies and vice versa. I understand the accusation of essentialism in the 1980s as, in part, a misreading of this emphasis on personal experience and the bodily as a ground for the testing and making of theory and knowledge. Accustomed to the application of "high" theory, critics and artists of the 1980s did not recognize the value of the "low" or immanent theory invented by proto and feminist artists in the 1960s and 70s.⁴² While it led Broude and Garrard to engage with accusations of a universalizing essentialism against Chicago and Schapiro's central core theory (its suggestion that certain aesthetic forms may emerge from a women's sense of vulvic space) by making an astute distinction between the usefulness of this theory as an invention for art-making versus the problems it raised when it was applied to the work of other women, Broude and Garrard's prejudice against "high" theory prevented them from exploring their own insight further, from raising the possibility that early feminist artists were in the process of inventing a different kind of "theory."

Broude and Garrard's attempt to respond to accusations of a universalizing essentialism against Chicago and Schapiro's theory of "cunt art" by retheorizing essentialism may not be as convincing as their refutation of the charges of biological essentialism, but their engagement

with the question does point to the issue of generalization as a problem inherent in the making of theory, a problem that theory shares with language as well as certain definitions of both feminism and essentialism, claims to which I will return. However, in the process of refuting certain claims of essentialism while also redefining it, Broude and Garrard recuperate the concept of essentialism as an “enabling myth,” highlighting one of the most problematic and compelling practices of early feminist artists, the making of art and theory from personal experience. It seems ironic, given their antipathy to poststructuralist theory, that the making of art and theory from personal experience is not only one of the key components of 1970s feminist practice, but informs some of the richest poststructuralist and feminist-inspired theories of the 1990s, including Butler’s theory of performativity.

Broude and Garrard’s Take On Essentialism

Broude and Garrard carried the “theory versus essentialism” polemic further by developing their own theory of essentialism. In a spirit somewhat akin to Gayatri Spivak’s call for a “strategic essentialism” (in some cases a temporarily consolidated political identity such as “subaltern” could be a useful strategy), they argue for an analytical strategy of “cultural essentialism” that acknowledges the social construction of gender and its availability to remodeling through shifts in artistic imagery. As a step in the formation of political identity, this kind of essentialism asserts the political value in celebrating what they deem culturally essentialist forms (i.e. stereotypically feminine shapes or historical female ancestry, from the Great Goddess to the full spectrum of foremothers) as a means to “redress,” in the words of Miriam Schapiro, “the trivialization of women’s experience.”⁴³ At first glance such a notion of essentialism may seem inherently reformist and conservative, but that perspective is undermined by Broude and Garrard’s point that revivals of historically subordinated forms and content have the capacity to challenge the value systems that created them and, in the process, may engender

new forms and new values. Thus Broude and Garrard engage with the “theory versus essentialism” debate from a position that embraces certain aspects of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity. While they do not acknowledge Butler’s writings in their early publications, this suggests that the poststructuralist theory of performativity has strong affinities, if not precedents, in the work of American feminist artists from the 1970s, the very work that was dismissed for over a decade as “essentialist.”

The issue of generalization, as it intersects with embodied experience in relation to essentialism or theory, is in part the problematic of feminism in general. The “essentialism” polemic foregrounds feminism’s most persistent area of difficulty and vulnerability, the contradiction at the heart of its activist foundation: its need to name and to posit a category of “female,” an identity and a set of experiences that becomes the basis for a politics, pedagogy or epistemology, while simultaneously having to acknowledge, in order to maintain its broad-based commitment to social justice, the exclusions or at least limitations of such naming. From a poststructuralist perspective, this means continually having to contend with the condition that neither “female” nor “experience” may be assumed; like all concepts, neither is a stable, uniform, universal or unproblematically generalizable term—or even a fully knowable one—which is also feminism’s “chance” to create other and unforeseen futures.⁴⁴ While Broude and Garrard articulate their discomfort with the effects of poststructuralist theory, with the difficulties that “difference,” as an always inherent unintelligibility and instability that inhabits and undoes every concept, poses for feminism as a category and a politics, their take on this problem is to argue for the value of a kind of strategically “essentialist” feminism.

Broude and Garrard conclude that the 1970s generalizing or “essentialist” notion of feminism functioned most powerfully as an “enabling myth”:

While the idea of a categoric women's art may be philosophically dubious, it was a valuable creative principle for the historic Feminist Art movement—a belief in the unitary reality of the category female—as its source of artistic inspiration. The significance of the category female for early feminists was not biological (that was merely its sign) but political, for feminism's power, it was then believed, was the power of women as a group. In this sense, the accuracy of the essentialism belief is beside the point, since right or wrong, it was an enabling myth.⁴⁵

Thus Broude and Garrard recuperate one of the “essentialist” aspects of feminism, its imaginative and cultural power as a political sign and spur to artistic and cultural innovation (rather than a guarantee of truth in biology or a universal feminine aesthetic), an idea Amelia Jones will repeat in her 1996 exhibition catalogue for Sexual Politics.⁴⁶

This revision, if we extend its implications, not only rewrites essentialism as a political strategy of historical as well as contemporary significance for feminist art and art historical narratives, but also points to why and how, as a concept, it continues to lure and exasperate scholars, artists and activists, marking our continuing anxieties around invoking or representing “experience” *per se*. As Amelia Jones has pointed out, even the arch-anti-essentialist Griselda Pollock makes essentialist claims in her essay “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity” when she argues that discernable differences between the work of male and female painters in late 19th c. France are the result of a particularly female experience of modernity.⁴⁷ Considered from this perspective, not only is Pollock making claims for a generalized feminine experience (for women from a certain class), but one could extrapolate from this example and say that the act of “interpretation,” like theory or even language itself, is essentialist insofar as it must at some level generalize as it attempts to stake out a ground from which to speak or write.⁴⁸ Although Broude and Garrard do not extend their argument this far, they begin to point to the possibility that “essentialism” could be read as an attempt to grapple with, by trying to represent (render perceptible and repeatable), the ground for any claims to meaning-making, personal or political, even *experience itself*, as it functions as or perhaps stages the highly contingent and thus

contestable limit-ground of subjectivity as a necessary yet increasingly particularized and difficult political claim.

Yet in their provocative formulation of essentialist feminism as an enabling myth, Broude and Garrard also imply that certain kinds of theory, particularly the interpretations of postmodern theory deployed by anti-essentialist critics, operate as a *disabling myth* for feminism. By throwing into question “what is real,” such theory works to deny women “their history by dismissing as beneath consideration practically everything that flesh-and-blood women have historically accomplished in the real world.”⁴⁹ Although they do not explicitly discuss the poststructuralist deconstruction of certain notions of history that, along with the undoing of subjectivity and teleology, complicate theories of activism, they do underscore the point that feminist art from the 1970s was politically efficacious in a way that the art of the 1980s was not.

From Broude and Garrard’s perspective, much of 1970s feminist art was highly successful insofar as it exposed or dissolved many of the traditional distinctions between public-political and private-aesthetic realms. Based, implicitly or explicitly, on the radical feminist slogan “the personal is political,” a phrase coined by Carol Hanisch in Gainesville, Florida in 1969, 1970s feminist practices did insist “that the reality of women’s lives was larger than their traditional circumscription . . . and that, indeed, the very categories of private and public were in themselves political fictions.”⁵⁰ In the context of the modernist art world, this challenge to artistic autonomy (by suggesting the imbrication of art and life) was indeed a radical innovation with great potential for political, institutional and social change, although it would not often be heralded as such by contemporary art critics and historians.

Attempts to Reframe (Re-enflame?) the Debate: *October*’s “Questions of Feminism”

In the winter of 1995, the journal *October*, considered a bastion of “high” theory, published twenty-five responses to “Questions of Feminism,” a two-paragraph query sent out to

a number of artists and writers the previous year.⁵¹ *October*'s first question posed as an attempt to understand recent (early 1990s) feminist practices that had "bypassed, not to say actively rejected, 1980s theoretical work, for a return to a so-called 'real' of the feminine," a return predicated on "1960s and '70s feminist practices centering on a less mediated iconographic and performative use of the female body."⁵² By associating work from the 1960s and 70s with "less mediated" and "performative" uses of the female body that assumed a "so-called real of the feminine," and then setting it up in opposition to the "theoretical work" (understood by the editors of *October* as poststructuralist or "high" theory) of the 1980s, *October* explicitly adopted as a given the "theory versus essentialism" polemic that had been instigated and widely promoted by 1980s artists and critics.⁵³

The second question, trading upon the first, asked what the implications of such practices might be for feminist art and criticism by setting up an analogous opposition between art practices based on theory versus those grounded in activism, linking the former to charges of "elitism" and the latter to calls for "accessibility" and a return to "grass roots politics." In describing the then current work of the 1990s as utilizing concepts of autobiography and identity that "have been criticized for being insufficiently mediated," one of the primary accusations that signified "essentialism," the second question aligned feminist activist art with the essentialist and non-theoretical pole of the opposition.⁵⁴

Although not explicitly cited in *October*, several essays from *The Power of Feminist Art*, particularly Broude and Garrard's convictions regarding the deleterious effects of poststructuralist theory on feminist activism, appear to have provoked some of the concerns and perhaps the elaborate framing of *October*'s questions. Not only do Broude and Garrard credit theory-inflected anti-essentialist critiques of 70s feminist art with misreading and thereby

blocking its historical recognition, they also emphasize the deconstruction of “reality” as “essence” as a move that inhibits feminist politics by delegitimizing “real” experiences, historical actions and effects. This is a point later underscored by African American feminist artist Lorraine O’Grady: “It is cruelly ironic, of course, that just as the need to establish our subjectivity in preface to theorizing our view of the world becomes most dire, the idea of subjectivity itself has become ‘problematized.’”⁵⁵

It should be noted that the emphasis in *October*’s questionnaire on a “so-called ‘real’ of the feminine” framed as a “return” to 1970s feminism not only reinscribes the polarization of the “theory versus essentialism” debate, but also foreshadows the title of *October* editor Hal Foster’s 1996 publication *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century*. In reworking theories of the avant-garde, Foster credits feminist art as “the most productive critique of minimalism to date,” yet only feminist artists considered to be theoretically informed (from the perspective of “high” theory), such as Mary Kelly, Silvia Kolbowski, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler and Martha Rosler, are noted, and feminism as an art historical category or historical movement is mentioned no further.⁵⁶ Still more significant, however, is what’s missing from Foster’s persistent call for a rethinking of “critical distance”: although this question is central to his text, the entire corpus of “essentialist” feminist art, work (i.e. Schneemann, Chicago, Wilke, etc.) that had not only exposed but also directly challenged modernist autonomy by performing unrelenting critiques of and innovative responses to issues of critical neutrality, remains conspicuously absent.

If, as Judith Butler has so persuasively argued, the language of theory creates as much as reflects “the world,” then feminist criticisms of theory’s “exclusionary” discourse and calls for more “accessible” language, language which offers a greater potential to reach a broader

spectrum of the populace, make sense for feminists even from a deconstructive perspective. Yet the *October* questionnaire aligned accessible language with the “grass roots” activist and non-theoretical pole of the “theory versus essentialism” debate, demonstrating a certain level of defensiveness about their investment in the 1980s version of the “theory” side of the opposition. While it is true that the language of 1980s theory had been critiqued by some feminists, for example Mira Schor, as “elitist,” such writers were certainly not apologists for practices they did deem essentialist, so *October*’s questions composed a polemic that didn’t quite line up.

To elaborate on this point: as a contributor to Broude and Garrard’s *The Power of Feminist Art* and an outspoken yet careful critic of the 1980s “theory versus essentialism” debate, Schor critiqued its proponents not for their attack on essentialist art practices, with which she agreed (finding Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* “offensive” in its “simplistic representations of women as cunts”), but rather for their “elitist” language, which she found divisive in terms of a feminist politics.⁵⁷ In “Backlash and Appropriation,” Schor specifically targets the theory-based art and criticism of Mary Kelly and Griselda Pollock as “exclusionary” in this way: “to understand the work one often felt an advanced degree in philosophy and psychoanalytic theory was required.”⁵⁸ In a similar vein, Suzanne Lacy explained, “the subversiveness of the attack by ‘theory’ on 70s feminist art was that while it indeed developed important aspects of feminism, it seemed to disconnect us from activist issues, rarifying the debate by the obscurity of its language.”⁵⁹ Like Broude and Garrard, Lacy also connected theoretical discourse, with its accusations of identity as essentialist and universalizing, as fueling the 1980s cultural backlash against political organizing: “the trivialization of 70s feminist art history coincides with a rise in art and art theory positioned within a stance of individual—rather than collective—identity, in a field where action seems naïve and futile.”⁶⁰

Unlike Schor, Lacy read Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, with its bold and unapologetically frank acknowledgement of women, women's bodies, and the long and culturally diverse history of goddess-worship, "as a conceptual foray into reconstructing history, reframing popular culture, and addressing a mass audience."⁶¹ But despite her own dislike of *The Dinner Party*, Schor did position "The Great Goddess Debate—Spirituality vs. Social Practice in Recent Feminist Art," a panel held at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in December 1987, as emblematic of the divisive effects of an elitist theory-based feminist discourse on feminism as a broad-based political movement. Noting that the panel members who opposed the idea of "a Great Goddess" as essentialist "could scarcely conceal their contempt" for feminist artist Nancy Spero's "depictions of women, including ancient goddesses, for the relatively handmade look of her work, and for her identification with 70s activist feminist art", Schor points to the fact that they disregarded the more theory-inspired aspects of Spero's work, such as her strategic textual appropriations.⁶² Yet more disturbing to Schor was the gulf in discourse between the theory-identified critics and the many women in the audience who "did not seem to understand the language of critical theory being used against their beliefs or its consequences to their own practice."⁶³

In the context of the art world, "The Great Goddess Debate" "epitomized," for Schor, "the intellectually exciting but often hierarchic and repressive polarization which transformed the terms of feminist art in the 1980s."⁶⁴ Despite the fact that, in Schor's view, the polarity was a false one, and that most feminist artists operated in a realm between "essence" and "culture," she continued to be no apologist for what she viewed as essentialist art, arguing that some of the backlash against essentialism was justified by "weaknesses in the movement," specifically artists' increasing careerism, "intellectual laziness," and representationally "simplistic"

“offensive” work like Chicago’s.⁶⁵ She bemoaned the fact that 1980s theory’s “exclusionary aspect, the dearth of visual pleasure, and the distance that was sought from the materiality of the body” had in her view instigated “the most disturbing backlash against 70s feminist art, namely its amnesiac return in the 1990s.”⁶⁶ This last reference was to 1990s work such as Kiki Smith’s; Schor lamented its popularity and read it as trading on an uncritical solicitation of spectatorial pleasure by naturalizing the image of women as victims.

Schor’s essay offered an astute and condensed version of the “theory versus essentialism” debate, summarizing most of the discourses that comprised or fueled it, from the “gender as socially constructed” position, which sought to undo patriarchal naturalizations of women’s inferior status, to Derrida’s philosophical critiques of essentialism as presence and universality, and “academic feminism’s” reliance on text-based theorists such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Laura Mulvey and others to produce the campaign, led by anti-essentialist artists and critics like Mary Kelly and Griselda Pollock, against spectatorial identification and visual pleasure. Schor also outlines the blurring of boundaries between art history, literary theory, philosophy, linguistics and social theory as contributing to theory’s eventual ascendancy over visual analysis and history as the dominant interpretive mode in disciplines involved in the visual arts.

Her most intriguing statement in reference to the “theory versus essentialism” debate, however, is one that Amelia Jones would take up in her 1996 exhibition *Sexual Politics*: “The combination of all these discourses,” Schor writes, “constituted a rejection of 70s feminism’s search for what female eroticism *might look like in visual art*. It condemned the sexual politics and ideals of the 70s feminists and the materiality of their efforts while at the same time writing out of the history of late twentieth-century art much of the work of the 70s.”⁶⁷ In a striking

conclusion, Schor reads the campaign against essentialism as resulting in the exclusion of 1970s feminist art from historical canons; more importantly, it does so through a discomfort with female eroticism.⁶⁸ This was an idea *October's* questionnaire did not address.

¹ From Holland Cotter, review of *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*, *New York Times*, Mar. 9, 2007, Weekend Arts; Fine Arts. The exhibition *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution* opened in Los Angeles at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA and ran from March 4 - July 16, 2007.

² To give just one concrete example of the bi-coastal exchanges during the early phases of feminist art, here's a list of the women artists and critics who visited The Women's Building in Los Angeles, founded in 1973: Martha Wilson, Lucy Lippard, Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, Bonnie Sherck, Linda Montano, Pauline Oliveras, Mary Beth Edelson, Holly Near, Joan Jonas, Yvonne Rainer, Judy Baca, Kate Millett, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Ulrike Rosenbach, Eleanor Antin, Helen Harrison, Adrienne Rich and Martha Rosler. From Moira Roth and Suzanne Lacy, "Exchanges," in *Art/Women/California 1950-2000*, ed. Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni (Berkeley: University of California Press), 295-309; 300

³ Holland Cotter, "Feminist Art Finally Takes Center Stage," *The New York Times*, January 29, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/29/arts/design/29femi.html>. See also Connie Butler interviewed by Amelia Jones in "History Makers" on frieze.com (accessed 04/28/2007).

⁴ The *WACK!* show at the MOCA Geffen in Los Angeles included 119 artists from twenty-one different countries.

⁵ The Feminist Art Project was founded in 2006 by Arlene Raven, Judy Chicago, Dena Muller, Judy Brodsky, Ferris Olin, Susan Fisher Sterling and Maura Reilly with the purpose of inspiring a new grassroots promotion of feminist art education, exhibitions, events, and publications. According to Reilly, the initiative sought to build on the momentum of the public announcement that Elizabeth A. Sackler, a collector of Chicago's work who had purchased and gifted *The Dinner Party* to the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2001, was going to establish not only a permanent installation for Chicago's iconic work but also an exhibition space devoted entirely to feminist art. The decision by Sackler (who sits on the board of the Brooklyn Museum) and Arnold Lehman (the museum's director) was motivated, in part, by the enormous success of the 2002 exhibition of *The Dinner Party*, which in the course of four months drew more than 80,000 people to the museum. See "Feminist Curating and the 'Return' of Feminist Art," *Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones (new edition, forthcoming).

⁶ While this chapter focuses on texts that address the essentialism debate more specifically, the larger context for this renewal of interest in early feminist work was the publication of a number of books, articles and anthologies addressing a broad range of feminist work from this period, including: Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," *Art Bulletin* 69 (September 1987); Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990); Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Abrams, 1994); Lucy Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995); "Feminist Issue(s)," ed. Silvia Kolbowski, *October* 71 (Winter 1995); Amelia Jones, ed., *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996); Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999); Helena Reckitt, ed., *Art and Feminism*, (London: Phaidon Press, 2001); Hilary Robinson, ed., *Feminism-Art-Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni, eds., *Art/Women/California 1950-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

⁷ In the 1990s, German artist Rebecca Horn had a twenty-year retrospective, *Inferno-Paradiso Switch*, at the Guggenheim in New York; Carolee Schneemann's *Up To And Including Her Limits* was held at the New Museum in New York; Eleanor Antin's 1999 retrospective was at the Los Angeles County Museum; and both of Hannah Wilke's posthumous shows, *Intra-Venus* (1994) and *Performatist Self-Portraits and Video Film Performances 1976-85* (1996), were held at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York.

In 2002, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., held a retrospective of Judy Chicago's work, while two smaller shows, *Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art of the 1970s* and *Personal and Political: The Women's Art Movement, 1969-1975*, opened at the White Columns gallery in New York and in Easthampton, N.Y., respectively.

⁸ For a representative group of the most influential anti-essentialist authors from the 1980s, see Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, "God's Little Artists" and "Critical Stereotypes: the Essential Feminine or How Essential is Femininity," in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); Griselda Pollock, "Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation" in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Mary Kelly, "No Essential Femininity: a Conversation between Mary Kelly and Paul Smith," *Parachute* 37, no. 26 (Spring 1982): 31-35; Mary Kelly, "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism" in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art), 87-103; and Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art-Making," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 53-59 [originally published in *Screen* 21 n. 2 (Summer 1980)]. The observation that these authors felt discomfort with women's experiences of embodiment is a general statement made by Peggy Phelan but it has also been mentioned by other feminist art historians, such as Amelia Jones and Mira Schor. See Peggy Phelan, "Survey," in *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Reckitt (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 23.

⁹ This overview is indebted to the observations of Peggy Phelan, "Survey," in *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Reckitt (London: Phaidon Press, 2001); Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," *Art Bulletin* 69 (September 1987); Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Abrams, 1994); Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996); Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); and Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 169, 138.

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), followed on the heels of Diana Fuss' *Essentially Speaking* (1989), Naomi Schor's "This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray," *Differences* 2 (1989) and Trihn T. Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other: Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1990).

¹² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 147.

¹³ See Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2.

¹⁴ Interpellation in the sense that the subject is a product of the social relations that precede it; this notion was developed through the work of Lacan, Foucault and Althusser.

¹⁵ Although the subject is always already inscribed through the iterative practice of performativity, typically in the service of maintaining social normativity, the nature of this iterative structure is that it repeats, but with a difference, opening both the act and the subject onto the potential for something else or other to emerge. In other words, while categories and concepts such as gender, identity, nation, and so on are reinforced through repeated acts, citational repetition, as Derrida has often noted with respect to the mark or trace in writing, is an effect of *différance*, an effect

that makes subjectivity possible and, as Butler demonstrates, opens possibilities for an agency that is not simply the result of an individual subject's decision or will. In fact, as both Butler and Jon McKenzie have emphasized, it is the failure of performativity, its mistakes or misfirings of identificatory repetition, that opens onto futural possibilities.

¹⁶ Artists and critics who were placed on the side of "cultural construction" during the 1970s and 80s would include Mary Kelly, Griselda Pollock, Sandy Flitterman Lewis and Judith Barry, to name a few.

¹⁷ For a detailed analysis of the differences between Butler's and Derrida's theorization of the performative from Butler's perspective, see the last chapter of Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁸ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004a), 19.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004a), 21-22.

²⁰ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004a), 22.

²¹ Citing the work of Shoshanna Felman, Butler points to "the abiding incongruity of the speaking body, the way in which it exceeds its interpellation, and remains uncontained by any of its acts of speech" (Butler 1997, 155).

²² Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial, (New York: Routledge, 2004b), 164.

²³ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial. (New York: Routledge, 2004b), 164.

²⁴ Peggy Phelan, "Survey," in *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Reckitt (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 37.

²⁵ For example, see Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1998); Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996); and Peggy Phelan, "Survey," in *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Reckitt (London: Phaidon Press, 2001).

²⁶ 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, 1994), 23.

²⁷ In their 1972 article "Female Imagery," Chicago and Schapiro ask: "What does it feel like to be a woman? To be formed around a central core and have a secret place which can be entered and which is also a passageway from which life emerges? What kind of imagery does this state of feeling engender?" (quoted in Broude and Garrard 1994, 23).

²⁸ 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, 1994), 23-24.

²⁹ 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, 1994), 24.

³⁰ Of course the notion of a subject defining itself in its own terms was challenged by poststructuralist deconstructions of subjectivity and psychoanalytic theories. The question of whether or not there could be a "female imaginary" and the relationship to gender and unconscious processes was a concern among some Lacanian feminist theorists. 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, 1994), 24.

³¹ 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, 1994), 24.

³² 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, 1994), 24.

³³ 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, 1994), 24.

³⁴ Amelia Jones' theory of "parafeminism" is based on such strategies. Using her object of study, artist Pipilotti Rist, as an "avatar" (rather than a model) for making a theory for feminism, Jones culls strategies from Rist's practices and the ways in which they engage with Jones' desire as a way to think about subjectivity and feminism differently. Parafeminism isn't a replicable theory (like psychoanalysis) insofar as it suggests guidelines for following one's own desire and inventing one's own personal and historically contingent theories for feminism. See the final chapter in Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

³⁵ Peggy Phelan, "Survey," in *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Reckitt (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 37.

³⁶ For an excellent explanation of consciousness-raising as it was being practiced in the early women's liberation movement on the east coast, see Kathie Sarachild, "Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon," in *Feminist Revolution*, ed. Redstockings (New York: Random House, 1979), 144-150.

³⁷ Kathie Sarachild, "Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon," in *Feminist Revolution*, ed. Redstockings (New York: Random House, 1979), 144-150. Judy Chicago's claim that she had never heard of consciousness-raising but rather invented it as part of the pedagogical method for training artists (in the Feminist Art Program at Fresno and then the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia) was relayed during a press conference and then repeated in a personal conversation with me at the opening of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art in the Brooklyn Museum on March 23, 2007. For examples of Chicago's students' work, see Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, *Womanhouse*, (Valencia, California: California Institute of the Arts Feminist Art Program, 1972). It is important to realize that many of Chicago's students made some of the most innovative and important work of the the 1970s, from Faith Wilding's performance *Waiting to Suzanne Lacy* and Leslie Labowitz's public media performance *In Mourning and Rage*. Wilding, Lacy, Mira Schor and many other students from the Feminist Art Program have gone on to become first-class professional artists and teachers.

³⁸ I have culled this definition of "theoria" from E.V. Walter. He also makes links between theory, experience, Plato's chora and haptic perception/reasoning (a tactile and sensuous reasoning), an extremely useful as a frame for interpreting early feminist artists' use of touch as a means to theory-making. E. V. Walter, *Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 18-22; 120-145.

³⁹ Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969. Proposal for an Exhibition: 'Care,'" reprinted in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), 220-221. For an online version, see the website for *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*: <http://www.moca.org/wack/?p=301>.

⁴⁰ Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969. Proposal for an Exhibition: 'Care,'" reprinted in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), 220-221.

⁴¹ In terms of artistic touch, Ukeles' emphasis on the hand in maintenance art may be compared with Gustave Courbet's "The Stonebreakers" (1849). Relinquishing the traditional artist's brush for the hardier trowel and palette knife, Courbet chose implements analogous to those wielded by his unusual (for its time) subject matter, stonecutters. While he rendered the typically invisible labor of the working class visible in terms of content, the roughly textured surface drew attention to the hands of the workers and the painter, producing a powerful set of correspondences between them. A difference, perhaps, is that Courbet's labor is often cited as paradigm-shifting, heralding the turn to the modern period with its embrace of quotidian subjects and self-conscious reflexivity, while Ukeles' insistence on the laboring hand has not generated much discussion in the broader art world.

⁴² “High” theories often originate in an “outside” discipline such as the political or social sciences (i.e. Freudian psychoanalysis) but are then imported into another area, such as art, film or literary criticism, in order to expand or revitalize it. “High” theory, through repeated citation (especially if cited across multiple discourses) has attained a high level of authority and academic legitimacy (even if initially obscure to the popular reader or even other academics). Its powers of application and generalization may increase (as a metaphor to think or act with) until it is reabsorbed into the general populace as a kind of received wisdom (for example, almost everyone knows what someone’s psyche or unconscious “is”), although the nuances and even precepts of the theory may become lost, redefined or maintained as arcane knowledge. A “high” theory may or may not have begun as a “low” theory, but has become highly systematized with rules and parameters that are accepted and replicated, though perhaps modified, by a group of cohorts. A “low” theory would include the production of unauthorized or small “t” theories that typically emerge from personal experience as it enacts ideas previously conceptualized and verified. A “low” theory could be aligned with the initial research and development phase of an idea that might extend into a “high” theory, but it is often designed by an individual for her or his own personal use, even or especially if the idea or image (an image can be a theoretical proposition) is unauthorized or unrecognized by the larger culture. “Low” theories are often highly innovative, but can be reactionary as well. I am arguing that Chicago and Schapiro’s “central core theory” is an example of a “low” theory that was highly innovative in terms of provoking individual artistic production (i.e. for Chicago and her students at Cal Arts), but the attempt to generalize it at the level of a “high” theory (applied to the work of other artists) succeeded primarily in exposing the difficulties inherent in all generalizing maneuvers, from the creation of categories like “woman” and “feminist” to the gendered (and raced, classed and so on) investments that inform and subtend any act of concept-formation.

⁴³ 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, 1994), 25.

⁴⁴ For a good, straightforward definition of feminism, see Phelan 2001: “The ideological stakes in the question ‘what is feminism?’ have often led to increasingly sophisticated but, it must be admitted also, increasingly evasive responses. I prefer a bold, if broad, definition: feminism is the conviction that gender has been, and continues to be, a fundamental category for the organization of culture. Moreover, the pattern of that organization usually favors men over women.” (Phelan 2001, 18).

⁴⁵ 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, 1994), 28.

⁴⁶ Citing the work of Diana Fuss, Jones asserts that “a certain essentialism,” as the “claiming of identifiably similar experiences among particular groups of people – is a crucial condition of any ‘coalition politics’” in order to argue that some forms of essentialism “must be accommodated within any politics of representation.”

⁴⁶ Jones argues persuasively that the “essentialism” of Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Arlene Raven, Lucy Lippard and others was productive and powerful in terms of its effects, functioning both as an “enabling myth” and as “a crucial component of 1970s identity politics: it enabled the development of a feminist politics of art and art history” by insisting that the production of culture is informed by gender and, by extension and intention (if not sufficiently), “differences” of all kinds (racial, ethnic, class, and so on). Defined in this way, the “essentialist” feminist art of the 1970s is credited as producing one of the most significant paradigm shifts in the history of art (Jones 1996, 99). Defined in these terms, essentialism as a strategy shares qualities with one of the earliest and more convincing definitions of feminist art, Lucy Lippard’s statement that feminist art is “neither a style nor a movement” but rather “a value system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life” (Lippard 1995, 172). Lucy R. Lippard, “Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s,” in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (New York: The New York Press, 1995). For Peggy Phelan, feminism is a “conviction,” a way of interpreting “the world and the work” that acknowledges “that gender has been, and continues to be, a fundamental category for the organization of culture. Moreover, the pattern of that organization usually favors men over women.” (Phelan 2001, 20; 18). I also wish to clarify that feminism has a conflicted history in terms of opening the art world to “difference” as it was heavily critiqued for its exclusions, particularly by women of color and lesbians. It might be more precise to say that, in general, feminism’s insistence on a recognition of gender inspired, provoked, or added momentum to the push by other identity-based groups to gain access to or rewrite art historical canons.

⁴⁷ Jones 1996, 98-99.

⁴⁸ This is why Jones will insist on foregrounding her own intersubjective relations with the art she interprets or engages with; it is one way to try to avoid occupying the position of a subject/critic as outside of and prior to an object of knowledge (the subject as prior to the writing). In other words, she will try to show herself being written, being exposed into subjectivity through engagement with the artwork and the writing.

⁴⁹ 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, 1994), 28.

⁵⁰ Carol Hanisch's paper "The Personal Is Political," which began as a memo written in Gainesville, Florida in 1969, was originally published in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*, a magazine edited and self-published by Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt in 1970, and was widely reprinted and passed around in the Movement and beyond in the next several years.

⁵¹ See "Questions of Feminism," *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 5-47. The questionnaire, disseminated in 1994, read as follows: Question 1: Recent feminist art and critical practices appear to be moving in various different directions: while some artists and writers continue to develop ideas, arguments and forms related to 1980s feminist theories focusing on psychoanalysis, a critique of Marxist and related political theories, and poststructuralist theories of cultural identity, others have forged a return to 1960s and '70s feminist practices centering on a less mediated iconographic and performative use of the female body. Although significant for feminist practices, the work of the 1960s and '70s did generate theoretical critiques of its overt or underlying thematic of biological or physical essentialism. In light of this, how can we understand recent feminist practices that seem to have bypassed, if not to say actively rejected, 1980s theoretical work, for a return to a so-called "real" of the feminine? And what roles do the continuation/elaboration of the 1980s feminist concerns and practices play in the current arena? Question 2: Recent art, critical, and curatorial practices have renewed the use of the term "accessibility," which is routinely opposed to "elitism" in characterizing some feminist art and critical-theoretical practices. "Elitist" feminist art and critical writing are typically associated with theory, and in particular with psychoanalytic and semiotic/language-based theories, and are defined as distanced from popular culture and contemporary politics. In this sense popular culture is broadened to incorporate "grass roots" feminist politics as well, which is thought to be more capable of crossing distinctions of race, class, and sexual orientation. "Accessible" art and critical writing, and "grass roots" feminist politics, often employ autobiographical strategies and conceptions of identity—strategies and conceptions that have been criticized for being insufficiently mediated. What are the implications of the renewal of these oppositions of accessibility and elitism, of low and high art, of the real and semiotic, for feminist art and critical practices in the 1990s? What questions do these alignments and practices pose about the legacies of 1980s feminist theories?

⁵² "Questions of Feminism," *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 5.

⁵³ This journal is known for its preference for work that subscribes to or is easily read through certain "high" theories, notably some poststructuralist theories, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and the Frankfurt School.

⁵⁴ "Questions of Feminism," *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 5.

⁵⁵ Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 177.

⁵⁶ Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism", in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996), 59.

⁵⁷ Mira Schor, "Backlash and Appropriation," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 259.

⁵⁸ Mira Schor, "Backlash and Appropriation," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 257.

⁵⁹ Suzanne Lacy, "Affinities: Thoughts on an Incomplete History," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 271.

⁶⁰ Suzanne Lacy, "Affinities: Thoughts on an Incomplete History," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 270.

⁶¹ Suzanne Lacy, "Affinities: Thoughts on an Incomplete History," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 271.

⁶² Mira Schor, "Backlash and Appropriation," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 254.

⁶³ Mira Schor, "Backlash and Appropriation," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 254.

⁶⁴ Mira Schor, "Backlash and Appropriation," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 254.

⁶⁵ Mira Schor, "Backlash and Appropriation," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 259.

⁶⁶ Mira Schor, "Backlash and Appropriation," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 259.

⁶⁷ Mira Schor, "Backlash and Appropriation," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 258, italics in original.

⁶⁸ Schor mentions the theoretical work of Luce Irigaray as branded with the essentialism slur. For an excellent discussion of Irigaray in the context of the essentialism question, see Naomi Schor, "This Essentialism Which is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray," in *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought*, ed. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor and Margaret Whitford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 57-78.

CHAPTER 3
A CRITICAL HISTORY OF THE THEORY VERSUS ESSENTIALISM DEBATE, PART 2

Responses to *October*'s "Questions": Refusing the Polemic

October's "Questions of Feminism" survey did not even touch upon the territory entered by Mira Schor, the idea that the suppression of early feminist art might hinge on discomfort with female eroticism. But the questionnaire's wording, as related in the previous chapter, had a particular slant that invoked the "theory versus essentialism" opposition, and subtly privileged the theory pole. Few respondents missed that slant, and by 1994 quite a few of them found the old opposition too simplistic, erroneous or no longer relevant to feminist discourses, for a number of reasons.

Rosalyn Deutsche, though a strong supporter of poststructuralist critiques of representation, felt compelled to comment on the oversimplified and antagonistic either/or structure of the *October* questionnaire. She wrote, "I hesitate to come to the defense of '1980s theoretical work' in precisely the terms set out by your questions," astutely pointing out that the subtle positioning of theoretically-informed work as "exemplary" of feminist practices "indeed raises the specter of elitism."¹ While Deutsche suggests an interrogation of the value of 1980s critiques for understanding a broader range of differences that include race, class and sexual orientation as a more productive alternative to *October*'s defensive stance, Yvonne Rainer directly confronts an impression of "hidden agendas" and "this odd equation between 'essentialism' and 'accessibility,' between 'mediated' work and 'elitism,'" declaring: "I just can't buy into these tired old dichotomies anymore."²

Many respondents stated a similar exasperation with such terms. For Arlene Raven, "the complexity of 1970s feminism is entirely obscured when called 'essentialism.'"³ She underscores the fact that much of that work was informed by the writings of highly theoretical

thinkers such as Firestone, Daly and Millett, suggesting that any “return to the ‘real’ of the feminine” in the 1990s was less a simple rejection of 1980s theorizing than a desire for an increasingly richer and more generative approach.⁴

A number of artists and writers point to the fact that “essentialism” used as a term to describe early feminist art is simply wrong. Noting that her own work in the 1970s, including the *Mythic Being* and *Catalysis* series, clearly disproves any generalizing labeling of early feminist art as biologically essentialist, Adrian Piper chose to respond by explaining that she rejected 1980s style feminist theory for the same conceptual laxity and intellectual self-indulgence demonstrated, in part, by the conceptual moves of the October questions themselves. Ewa Lajer-Burcharth was another who found the essentialism-theory dichotomy inaccurate, elaborating on the performance art of Jane Antoni as engaging with Hélène Cixous’s concept of “writing the body” from a perspective that is “neither pure essence nor pure cultural construct.”⁵

In a playfully punning mood, Emily Apter claims that 1990s feminism is “worried about periodizing essentialism ... about essentialism’s periods (its shameless emissions of bodily fluids, menses, and tears), as well as its own historical periodicity.”⁶ While she credits 1990s work with deploying a number of antiessentialist strategies such as queering sexual difference, refusing gender stereotypes, and continuing to theorize the body, she also reads the 1990s revival of interest in essentialism as an attraction to its desublimation of the female body’s unconscious. “In retrospect,” writes Apter, “despite its sororal idealism, biologism, and blinkered experiential credo, 1970s essentialism worked rather fearlessly with the apparition of womanliness.”⁷ Although she concedes that this way of working “appears to have been a rather good time for women,” Apter concludes her response with what seems to be a call for menopause, for putting a period to the use of essentialism as a discursive framework.⁸

Perhaps the respondent who speaks most directly and comprehensively to the essentialism versus theory polemic informing *October's* 1995 questionnaire is Johanna Drucker, who begins by stating, "I feel pretty sick of the 'good theory people,' 'bad essentialists' presumption underlying your question and see the current field of art produced by women in more complex terms."⁹ She looks briefly to the historical context of the debate, noting that early feminists of the mid- to late 1960s organized around biological identity as a necessary first step toward activism, toward breaking down patriarchal barriers based on sex and the naturalized assumption that a woman couldn't even be an artist. Rather than defend a notion of essentialism based on biology, however, Drucker cogently points out that the appearance of theory in the 1970s, particularly poststructuralist theories, offered feminists powerful additional tools, opportunities to enrich and rethink their own assumptions. Yet she makes the important point that the critique of gender as a construction, even as it offered women the possibility of agency, the potential to redefine what "woman" means, also displaced them by ultimately undoing identity as well, a move that undermines feminism as a political and social power base for those who are identified by the law as women.

Drucker underscores the appropriative potential in theories of construction, the fact that "the 'feminine' became the hip place from which to speak, with which to be identified, and then it became the province of male theorists and writers—claims were made for Jacques Derrida, James Joyce, and all sorts of other male figures as inventors of, or paradigmatic practitioners of, 'the feminine.'"¹⁰ For Drucker, a revived interest in female identity in terms of biology may be an important way to counter much of the 1980s theory-based feminism which denied or suppressed the female body, stating "any single encounter with the Law, the State, the Media, the Church or any other institutionalized power structure will show you how idiotic it is to pretend

that disguise, masquerade, symbolic or other ‘construction’ of our gender changes the fact that we are subject to the law according to our biological identity.”¹¹

Drucker calls for work that engages the biological as both ground and effect, as socially interpreted, contrived and not without social, psychic and physical consequences. This move is not essentialist because, in her definition, essentialism connotes a belief in biology as determinative. While Drucker does not engage with the more expanded definitions of essentialism (for example Mary Kelly’s, which links it to poststructuralist notions of presence), her response to *October*’s questionnaire articulates criticisms of the “theory versus essentialism” debate posited by a number of feminist artists and scholars in the 1990s, among whom Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard were the most vocal.¹² These critiques would be developed further and become more commonplace in later feminist art history and criticism, particularly in the work of Amelia Jones, Peggy Phelan, Abigail Solomon-Godeau and others.

None of the respondents in 1995 suggested a more thorough interrogation of the term “essentialism,” and most, if not all, seemed to indicate a preference for leaving it behind; but this would not be the case.

Further Attempts to Reframe the Debate: Molesworth, de Zegher, Pollock and Kwon

Noting that “a certain reduction has taken place in the current reception of 1970s feminist work, an intellectual faultline broadly described in generational terms,” Helen Molesworth’s article “House Work and Art Work,” published in the spring 2000 issue of *October*, tried to loosen the “bitter binary opposition” of the theory versus essentialism debate by reframing the two artworks often viewed as paradigmatic of the polemic, Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* and Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document*, in terms of a political economy of labor.¹³ Although both works were completed in 1979, they have often been made to exemplify antithetical poles and a generational split between the “essentialist” feminist practices of the 1970s, characterized by

Chicago, and the theory-based practices of the 1980s which Kelly has come to represent.¹⁴

Molesworth (along with Peggy Phelan, Amelia Jones, Abigail Solomon-Godeau and other prominent feminist art historians and curators) criticizes the “crudely oppositional and hierarchized” terms of the debate which, from her perspective, serve mainly to constrain interpretations of feminist art and art history or render invisible work that does not fit into these narrow though often vague prescriptions. By placing Chicago’s and Kelly’s works in a relation that highlights similarities more than contrasts, Molesworth also challenged the assumption made by anti-essentialist critics such as Lisa Tickner and Griselda Pollock that feminist art unfolded in a narrative of progression from essentialism to theory, a claim that in her eyes only reinforces the antagonistic polemic.

Molesworth’s strategy is neither to embrace nor to disavow either poststructuralist theories or essentialism. Instead, she attempts to undo the “stale binarism” by recontextualizing its premier examples, Chicago and Kelly, through a reconsideration of two other feminist artists from the 1970s, Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Martha Rosler. She attributes the near-invisibility of the second pair in part to the restrictions of polemical categories. Analyzing the ways in which Ukeles’ *Maintenance Art Performances* (1973-74) (see above) and Rosler’s videos *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) and *Domination and the Everyday* (1978) link gender, the creation of proper social subjects, and the invisibility or naturalization of unpaid or underpaid labor, Molesworth expands the interpretive field for a richer comparison of *The Dinner Party* and *Post-Partum Document*. Without denying the “stark contrasts” between these two works of art, for example Kelly’s diagrammatic refusal to show the female body versus Chicago’s lush use of cunt imagery, Molesworth points to the ways in which all four artists address the “private” aspects of women’s experiences through the “public” venue of art. For Molesworth, part of the

legacy of feminism is the recognition that the public can be rearticulated through the private and not simply the reverse. This allows her to open and extend the discourse around these feminist artists in order to show how, by making visible the mutually interdependent relations that in fact obtain between spheres traditionally held separate, their work functioned not only as social but also institutional critique, directly engaging with and challenging performance art, Conceptual art and Minimalism—the most cutting-edge art practices of the day.

Instead of asking how the work of early feminist artists might be positioned within feminist discourses of art and art history, which is the focus of much of the analysis that draws on the theory versus essentialism debate, Molesworth usefully endeavored to shift the question by showing how work created by artists with an interest in feminism or feminist issues, in this instance the “private” hidden sphere of maintenance labor, used the public dimension of art to press “advanced” art practices toward increasing social specificity. In so doing, Molesworth effectively expanded the interpretive field for these early feminist artists beyond the theory versus essentialism polemic while demonstrating the importance of their work to the larger discourses of art and art history, thereby increasing what she calls the “what if” potential of both art and feminism.¹⁵ For example, Molesworth reads Chicago’s interest in texture and surface, her repetition of triangular and glossy vulvar forms, and her questioning of what belongs in institutional space as situating *The Dinner Party* in dialogue with the concerns of Minimalism. Furthermore, the specifically sexed imagery in *The Dinner Party* challenged Minimalism’s assumption of a universal body, while its inclusion of craft practices and invocation of the repetitive cycles of domestic cooking, eating and cleaning played off Minimalism’s fascination with the logic of repetition and industrial production.

Likewise, Molesworth reads Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* as a strong critique of Conceptual art and its radical "de-skilling" of the art object, which sought to "democratize" art yet in many cases remained in compliance with Modernism's abstraction of content. According to Molesworth, Kelly's refusal to image the mother, substituting instead a plethora of social science-style charts and Lacanian graphs to track the labor and psychological investments of day-to-day motherhood, encouraged a denaturalization of those relations. The inclusion of her son's dirty nappies also crossed a private-public line, poking fun at the "art for art's sake" orientation of much Conceptual art, Modernist painting and the institutions that supported them. By suggesting equivalences between these forms of labor, the domestic and artistic, Kelly revealed the social construction of both. Exposing the porous boundary between the realms of public and private, the values and investments, psychic as well as social, embedded along those faultlines, all these 1970s art works invoke both the strategies of identification typically associated with essentialist feminism as well as the distancing commonly attributed to the 1980s theory version, defying, yet again, the "theory versus essentialism" divide.

While Molesworth's argument did succeed in unlocking the stultifying opposition between *The Dinner Party* and *Post-Partum Document* by shifting the interpretive frame, it did little to dislodge the terms of the "theory versus essentialism" debate itself, which continued to frame or haunt much feminist analysis and discussion. Yet, by pointing to the limitations of the polemic, changing the questions asked of work made by artists influenced by feminism, and offering an expanded field for its interpretation and its relationship to history, the social and art, Molesworth offered artists, critics and historians a more complex alternative. Reading the art work of 1970s feminists first through the lens of a political economy of labor and, second, for its engagement with and influence on the art practices of its day, she is able to leave the difficult question of

defining feminism and feminist art, an attempt which may easily become prescriptive and over-theorized, open to continued interpretation and negotiation.

A perhaps more ambitious attempt to shift feminist art history away from the “theory versus essentialism” polemic, Catherine de Zegher’s *Inside the Visible: an elliptical traverse of 20th century art in, of, and from the feminine*” is a collection of forty-two essays based on a 1994-1997 internationally touring exhibition of thirty-seven multicultural and intergenerational women artists. The initial concept for the show was grounded in an historical event culled from de Zegher’s local history, the Beguine movement, which originated at the end of the twelfth century in her home country of Belgium (Flanders). Rebelling against prevailing social constraints and recurring exclusions, [Beguine] women took up itinerant spiritual lives, eventually gathering into communities that created “a perfect amalgam of their doctrine with their spiritual experience” by focusing on spiritual, scholarly and worldly endeavors that eschewed monastic traditions bound to intellect, dogma and perpetual vows.¹⁶ Informed by this independent, nomadic, contingently collective and organically invented model of feminism, *Inside the Visible* sought to “break down polarities” of inclusion and exclusion by creating a space capable of maintaining the singularity of each artist, event and viewer while articulating problems in representation across historical time and global cultures.¹⁷

In a series of deft theoretical moves that mirror and multiply the hinged separate-but-connected structure of Derridean *différance*, De Zegher linked the metaphors of her local history with global politics and poststructuralist theories. Her intention was to allow “the perturbing, the dissenting, the dangerous, the repressed to reemerge and to ask if it is possible to think ‘difference’ without naming it and subsuming it under reductive and totalizing systems of thought (naming the Other: that is, identifying, classifying, separating, and fixing alterity).”¹⁸

She cites artist and theorist Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger to press her query further: “Is it possible to deracialize and degender difference and think it in positive, nonreifying terms? To seek work in which ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ are in a perpetual state of mutual negotiation where one neither swallows nor ejects the other?”¹⁹

This problem of creating, acknowledging and/or making a relation to “otherness” without falling into assimilation or rejection has a long feminist and poststructuralist lineage, at least in literary theory circles, most notably in the work of H el ene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Susan Griffin and Jacques Derrida, with Cixous and Irigaray the most successful in realizing its promise by writing theory poetically as an art of the body and the body as a poetic act of theory.²⁰ In art historical circles, however, where much of the feminist theorizing was less conscious of the larger *oeuvre* of these authors, the work of Cixous and Irigaray, which exhorted women to “write the body” as a feminist strategy at once political, theoretical and poetic, became tainted with the slur of “essentialism.”²¹ Thus the most challenging and compelling aspect of de Zegher’s show was her desire to structure it according to “poetics rather than polemics,” walking a delicate line that attempts to avoid binary oppositions and charges of essentialism while invoking theories that continue to dialogue with something categorized as “female.” In other words, her intention was to select work and organize an exhibition around poststructuralist theories of “feminism” that refuse any fixed definition of terms, categorizations, or stories of origin, yet maintain a uncertain fidelity to something called “the feminine.”²²

One of de Zegher’s fundamental goals in working with theories of “difference,” which include feminism, deconstruction and poststructuralism, is to avoid the “artificiality of ‘oppositional thinking’” and to make visible “operations that tend to marginalize certain kinds of artistic production while centralizing others.”²³ For de Zegher, “difference” lies not in things but

in the space between them, it is “a form of transaction” or relational encounter that fixed categories or characteristics such as “feminine” and “masculine” limit or cut too short.²⁴ Thus de Zegher takes up a theoretical position akin to that of Griselda Pollock, who “defines” “the feminine” not as an essence but rather a point of resistance or strategy of undoing or unmaking. The effect, however, is not to undo the theory-essentialism opposition; it merely deflects it, as “essentialism” remains the negative ground or pole of the discussion. As de Zegher herself concludes in a 1996 interview in *N.Paradoxa*, “whenever we try to define the feminine the difficulty is that we always appear to bend towards essentialist notions.”²⁵

The problematic of essentialism, particularly in its universalizing aspect, is evident elsewhere in the same interview. When de Zegher agrees with interviewer Katy Deepwell that her show emphasizes a multiplicity of subject positions, she does so with a caveat that “forms of sharing, collective experience ... could be seen as essentialist.”²⁶ Yet as de Zegher acknowledges, a sense of collectivity as “interdependency” or “co-emergence” is central to any concept of difference, as is a refusal of linear history with its assumptions of origins. Citing Derrida’s notion of the trace, de Zegher attempts to select works and [build] a show that resists origins and fixed positions through “perpetual reinscription.”²⁷ She repeatedly refers to “beginning again” as a model for a nonlinear approach to history that implies repetition without positing an origin. Thus the show is structured neither thematically nor as a survey but as a series of repetitive cycles moving globally across three periods marked by recurring social, economic and political events: the rise of fascism and the Holocaust in the 1930s-40s, concurrent dictatorships in the 1960s-70s, and the political conservatism and increased racism of the 1990s. As a result, de Zegher was able to bring together a diverse group of artists and practices without offering a history of women artists *per se*. The clear advantage of such a strategy is that it

offered opportunities to see the work of women less well-known in Europe and the United States, created interesting juxtapositions and unexpected associations between artists working in divergent times and places, and proposed a much richer field of possibilities for feminist history than the overly reductive and constraining “theory versus essentialism” debate.

However, in a curious twist given the near-invisibility of many female and, more specifically, feminist artists from the 1970s, de Zegher further justifies the structure and goals of her exhibition by claiming, in a later interview, that the feminists who emphasize the 1970s as a new historical moment “murder their mothers” by positioning themselves “at an origin.”²⁸ The accusation of “murdering mothers” also appears in Griselda Pollock’s essay in the exhibition catalogue where she declares: “Feminism must begin to consider its own histories without murdering its mothers.”²⁹ It is significant that Pollock’s exhortation appears just prior to her rehearsal of the 1980s version of the “theory versus essentialism” divide, narrated once again through an opposition between artist-theorist Mary Kelly, whose work, according to Pollock, encourages viewers to “analyze art by interpreting symptoms at the level of psychic structures in a journey of discovery,” and the practices of feminist artists whom Pollock does not deign to name yet feels confident in characterizing as reading into artwork the “known habits of women” such as “central cores, typical colors, favored themes.”³⁰ The reference to “central cores” is, however, a clear indication that she is referring to Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro and other artists retroactively labeled and dismissed by 1980s critics as “essentialist.”

Yet the stinging declaration about “murdering mothers” is an odd one, given that many of the major feminist projects from the 1970s, particularly *The Dinner Party*, explicitly sought, however imperfectly, to uncover and discover their foremothers through a concerted effort to research women’s history. Perhaps this is why the title of de Zegher’s exhibition deploys the

term “feminine” instead of feminist, which might engender a different set of parameters and problematics. In fact, de Zegher states quite explicitly that her show was “not linked specifically to a notion of women’s history” or sexual politics but rather to “the history of different ethnic/minority groups.”³¹ Although she concedes that the increase in retrospectives featuring older women artists is a result of feminist demands, she is more interested in transhistorical contrasts and local women artists’ responses to more general historical events or issues in the 20th century. (For example, how work made in relation to the war in Vietnam might speak to work responding to dictatorships in Latin America at the same time.)

While her call for “poetics rather than polemics” is theoretically sound and offers rich possibilities for interpretation and multiple histories, de Zegher sums up her exhibition as “an unpredictable assemblage of positions permitting multiple convergences and divergences while asking for an open play and transformation of meaning.”³² This is a statement one could make about the potential immanent in any interaction between artworks, artists and viewers, pointing to the potential for a loss of specificity and relevance when feminism or the feminine is defined in generalized poststructuralist terms. When the feminine becomes synonymous with the concept of difference it also risks repeating the old trope of “woman” as the signifier of difference, the marked “other” to “man,” which then reinscribes the problem of conceptual assimilation or rejection discussed earlier.

Though the problem of essentialism appears at first glance to be more of a theoretical than a specifically historical issue for de Zegher, her claim that 1970s feminists murdered their mothers suggests otherwise, as does her discussion, following Pollock, of Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger’s theory of the “matrixial gaze.” Heralded by Pollock and de Zegher as a “new” and corrective feminist response to earlier theories of the phallic gaze, the matrixial gaze does not

escape the specter of essentialism: “She [Lichtenberg-Ettinger] draws on the image—even at this time of paranoia about essentialism—of the intrauterine meeting in the late stages of pregnancy as a model for human situations.”³³ Here “essentialism” sounds less problematic as a theoretical concept and more historically situated as an affective response to a specific idea in time.

Moreover, de Zegher’s concern seems warranted on several levels as she goes on to quote Lichtenberg-Ettinger at length in a citation that trades on Derridean concepts and uses terms generated by “essentialist” feminist writer H  l  ne Cixous but not directly credited to her.³⁴

This signals an anxiety not only about essentialism but also, by implication, about the positioning of artists and writers who were excluded from feminist canons for being “essentialist,” such as Irigaray, Cixous, Chicago, Schneemann, Wilke and others who actually created and worked with many of the ideas and practices that are here being recycled and claimed as new. While “origins” are always questionable and theoretically problematic (especially when used as a ground to fix signification), and may often be beside the point despite patriarchy’s obsession with guaranteeing paternity, it appears as if by engaging with the problematic relations between feminism and essentialism, the feminist theorists of the 1990s are catching on to the fuller implications of earlier feminist work but at the same time using the deconstruction of origin to mask a kind of nervousness about those earlier feminist practices. And, despite attempts to deconstruct origins and linear notions of history, both de Zegher’s and Pollock’s approaches to the problem of essentialism continue to theorize feminism as moving away from essentialist assumptions, thereby implying a narrative of progress.

Old Wine in New Bottles? Anti-essentialism: A Critique

Griselda Pollock and Miwon Kwon both contributed essays to *Inside the Visible* which exemplify the kinds of twists and turns some feminist theorists felt compelled to make in the 1990s in order to reopen, rethink and/or refute the “theory versus essentialism” debate. Pollock,

one of the most enduring and vociferous critics of “essentialist” feminist artists, enacts her own repetition of the debate but this time in a gesture, albeit a circuitous one, of recuperation. In her essay, “Inscriptions in the Feminine,” Pollock credits the feminist discourses of the 1970s with challenging modernism’s notion of a genderless artistic autonomy through their insistence on addressing questions of art through the lens of sexual politics. Yet her earlier denigration of essentialist feminism reappears in a new/old guise, substituting the term “oppositional feminism.” Characterizing the feminist artists and thinkers of this period as “*oppositional*, celebrating the signs of women’s identities” in a “simple reversal” of modernism’s phallocentrism, Pollock positions them as the ground for a correction, for “a historically new set of theorizations of sexual difference” that “work beyond the opposition.”³⁵ This is the set-up for a “new” definition of feminism as structural process, a complex strategy of “resistance” based on a conceptualization of the feminine *as difference*: “the difference of the feminine might function not merely as alternative but as the dialectical spring to release us from the binary trap represented by sex/gender.”³⁶

According to Pollock, this new feminism is a “space between” (concepts, terms, etc.) and a process whereby any gathering, term or positivity may be undone through its own internal alterities or contradictions.³⁷ In language referencing the Derridean notion of the supplement, she describes the feminine as that which is both in excess of patriarchal culture and what that culture must repress, as it harbors “other, heterogeneous meanings” which will “radically alter the system by emerging into signification.”³⁸ In other words, Pollock’s hope is that as the feminine undoes itself in a kind of perpetual deconstruction, it will unleash representational forms that will also undo the patriarchy that both creates and represses it. More significantly, Pollock’s assumption of a progression from “oppositional” to “difference” feminism reinforces

the old 1980s story that the work of early feminist artists was simplistic and theoretically naïve, when in fact, I would argue, Pollock’s “new” theories draw heavily from ideas and theories formulated by feminist artists and theorists often dismissed as “essentialist.” Instead of deconstructing the theory versus essentialism opposition, Pollock installs a new one that looks uncannily like the old, while simultaneously recuperating the denigrated term without appearing to embrace it.

Pollock is eager to claim that “feminism,” like the terms “feminine” and “masculine,” no longer functions as a positivistic or prescriptive category. However, faced with the difficulty of acting on this claim, which is to write in the name of feminism, she attempts to define feminism as a series of prescriptive strategies such as “pivoting the center, reading against the grain, taking the view from elsewhere that is in fact here, and seeing with a *matrixial* gaze.”³⁹ Yet nowhere does Pollock mention Gayatri Spivak’s work, particularly her theory that embraces the deconstruction of identity and positivistic categories yet allows for the use of identity as a context-specific strategy and temporary ground for social resistance and action; perhaps because this theory is called “strategic essentialism.”

The anxiety and odd deflections around the concept of essentialism are most explicit in Pollock’s discussion of Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger’s concept of the matrix, which Pollock describes as being “linked to ‘the feminine’ but by this concept neither a biological nor an anatomical description is intended.”⁴⁰ In a long quotation that is worth citing here, Lichtenberg-Ettinger defines the matrix as:

An unconscious space of simultaneous emergence and fading of the *I* and the unknown *non-I* which is neither fused, nor rejected. Matrix is based on feminine/pre-natal interrelations and exhibits shared borderspace in which I call *differentiation-in-co-emergence* and *distance-in-proximity* are continuously rehonored and reorganized by metamorphosis created by—and further creating—

relations without relating on the borders of absence and presence, object and subject, me and the stranger.⁴¹

Pollock reads the matrix as a symbolic logic operating not in opposition to but rather alongside the phallic logic of opposition and inclusion/exclusion, which she credits with rendering much of the work made by women “invisible.” According to Pollock’s reading of Lichtenberg-Ettinger, the matrix offers a system that will allow the repressed a route into the symbolic order, language and visibility, and yet, in its continual emergence and fading of the I and non-I, denies the fixity of the phallic gaze.⁴² For the purposes of mapping the “theory versus essentialism” polemic, it is important to note that this logic Lichtenberg-Ettinger calls “matrix” is by no means original to her; although she is a Lacanian theorist, her work often draws on the logic and metaphors both theorized and demonstrated in the writings of Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva and Derrida since at least the 1970s.

What links this logic of deconstruction or difference to the feminine? As poststructuralist feminists, that is precisely the ground Cixous and Irigaray have theorized and worked since Cixous first coined the term *écriture féminine* in 1975, exhorting women to “write the body” in potent explorations of female experience, sexuality and pleasure.⁴³ In fact, not only are the fundamental ideas Lichtenberg-Ettinger assembles for her theory of the matrix culled directly from these writers, but even some terms, such as “distance-in-proximity” and “the I and non-I,” may be traced directly to Cixous’s work from the 1970s on.⁴⁴ Thus Pollock, the preeminent anti-essentialism anti-pleasure critic who argued so strongly against feminist artists who used their bodies in representation, finds herself compelled to cite both Cixous and Irigaray, the very feminists who inspired women to “write the body” as a social, symbolic and political act, for her “new” theory of feminism. It is no wonder that this 1990s brand of “difference feminism,” theorized against a background of “essentialist feminism,” is uneasy about origins.

Pollock's attempt to reappropriate the work of "essentialist" feminists is also evident in the beginning of a particular sentence where she elides any specific reference to those who originally hurled the epithet: "While both writers [Cixous and Irigaray] *have been assumed* to be positing a feminine essence in the body of women from which these metaphors would stem..."⁴⁵ Then, in a complete reversal of her earlier position, she continues the sentence in a move entirely appropriate: "... *I hear them calling for* new semiotic relations between the corporeality of the subject and the filters or signs through which meanings that might articulate otherwise what feminine subjects are now forced to experience hysterically or psychotically because there are no metaphors to accommodate their own psychic, fantastic and sexual lives."⁴⁶ By the end of the paragraph, Pollock credits Lichtenberg-Ettinger with mapping this problematic, though in fact, as I have delineated above, Cixous, Irigaray and others previously labeled "essentialist feminists" have been calling for the invention of such semiotic resources since the 1970s.

While Pollock is clearly uncomfortable with and critical of any generalized prescriptions about what is or is not feminist or even female, she finds herself in an awkward position lauding Lichtenberg-Ettinger's "new" theory of the matrix, which attempts to rehearse the insights of early feminist theorists like Cixous yet employs a biology-based psychoanalytic approach. Cixous has written between the traces and trances of H as I-I, as I and not-I, for at least thirty years, using the logic of the unconscious and the structure of difference as sepra-united to acknowledge the body as material, fantasmatic, and created through yet continually undoing the language that shapes it and its processes. She has worked to deconstruct universalizing notions of gender and subjectivity without denying the specificity and materiality of bodies, particularly as, of and in political experience.⁴⁷ Lichtenberg-Ettinger, however, by layering psychoanalytic theories over a structure of difference, attempts to link or ground her theory of the matrix in "the

feminine” by making claims that sound eerily biologically essentialist, positing the intrauterine relationship between mother and fetus as the foundational model for this “new” relationship of partnership-in-difference. Not only is this gesture universalizing in its pretensions to figure and comprehend the psychological, physical and spiritual process of gestation for all mothers and fetuses, but by assuming an equivalence between adult women and fetuses, it harbors implications that are extremely regressive for women in a political context, opening the door to a host of backlash ideologies of which anti-abortion arguments are just one component.

After linking the matrix, with its “shared borderspace” of intrauterine relations, unproblematically to female desire, Pollock attempts to address the question of essentialism. At this point it is instructive to attend particularly carefully to her language and tone:

Even raising it [the matrix] here makes me anticipate accusations of essentialism, regression, fundamentalism. *Yet what can be more obvious* than the possible impact of the curious, indeed uncanny moment of the mature infant [late stage pregnancy] both storing up sensory impressions of the other with which it cohabitated and registering the impact of that other’s fantasies as she carried and fantasized about an unknown other within the most interior spaces of her body and the most intimate places of her own psychic life, reviving in turn her own archaic memories?⁴⁸

It is precisely that “obviousness,” particularly in connection to the female body, that Pollock herself used to denigrate artists she deemed essentialist. Pollock is right to anticipate the very charges she and other anti-essentialist feminists leveled in the past, accusations she now hopes to deflect in the name of a new theory.

Miwon Kwon Grapples with the Theory versus Essentialism Debate

In her *Inside the Visible* essay, “Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta,” Miwon Kwon acknowledges that most feminist practitioners would prefer to drop the “theory versus essentialism” opposition, with some going “so far as to embrace all forms of women’s art as manifestations of a healthy pluralistic diversity *within* a very broadly conceived feminist art

practice and history.” She nonetheless insists, and I agree, that these two poles continue to frame current feminist debates.⁴⁹ In order to “complicate the terms” of the “theory versus essentialism” polemic, Kwon reads the “essentialist” work of 1970s feminist artist Ana Mendieta through both positions, refusing either to favor one or to resolve the opposition.⁵⁰ Rather than perform a full deconstruction, she allows the terms to remain suspended in a dialectical tension, which implies that holding the opposition as a contradiction rather than a mutually exclusive binarism might be useful. Yet Kwon’s essay raises the extremely important point that “theory” is a non-homogenous category and, likewise, feminism may be thought as either a subject (a topic) or a structural problematic. Thus she astutely suggests that the “theory versus essentialism” debate is fundamentally linked to particular notions of subjectivity. This claim opens onto the larger possibility that essentialism might be reconceptualized as non-oppositional to a Derridean or deconstructive approach to feminism.

Kwon sets up her discussion by making a subtle but crucial distinction, noting that exhibitions and discussions of feminism in the late 1990s and early 2000s focused primarily on feminism *as a subject* rather than *a structural problematic*. Though she does not explain this distinction directly, she is conceptualizing the “structural problematic” option through a poststructuralist deconstruction of subjectivity in at least two senses: first, that of the Cartesian notion of human identity as self-present and, second, that of the idea of a rhetorical topic, topos or subject as self-identical. In other words, Kwon plays across two notions of subject, as human and as topic, applying the poststructuralist logic that reads the subject as structural rather than real, an effect of Derridean *différance* rather than a positivistic essence (with origins and causality), to the topic or subject of feminism. Thus Kwon, more clearly than Pollock, points to

the possibilities available in shifting the subject and topic of feminism from a subject to an effect of the process, play, or ongoing dynamic of *différance*.

Feminism isn't the only topic open to deconstruction, however, as any topic is available, including history. Yet the theory or strategy of deconstruction does not intend to disappear "feminism" or "history" as a negative, which would simply mean the inverse of a positive, keeping the concepts locked in a system of oppositions. Rather it seeks to open whatever it is we gather under each term to a broader range of possibilities, to make each one into a site, but a site, like a human subject, redefined as non-identical, partial, contingent and ultimately undecidable. The promise here is structural, offering a process rather than an entity, and ethical, proposing a feminism and a subjectivity that aren't simply pluralistic as in "feminisms" or "subjects" but rather non-exclusive, open to specificity more than totalizing impulses, and inclusion without overgeneralization or assimilation. The effect, instead of rendering a subject, would result in the mapping of a field of continually shifting relations, zones of friction and contiguity rather than a decisive gathering of inclusions and exclusions. At least this is the promise, and it is one that de Zegher took up as the goal of her curatorial strategy for *Inside the Visible*.

Kwon, however, does not discuss structural feminism, perhaps because it is a process more amenable to showing than telling. Instead, she introduces the "theory versus essentialism" debate under the rubric of what she sees as the "complicated, double imperative" of feminism conceptualized as a subject. On one hand, feminism aligns with the project of writing history in the sense of periodization, of history conceived as a topic or subject, while on the other, it seeks to employ that history to think prescriptively about present and future feminist work. While I may not agree with her linking of terms or her reading of Mendieta's work, I will explore her argument further as it conveys something of the complicated position the "theory versus

essentialism” debate has come to occupy, at least in certain circles, in discussions of feminism within American and European contexts.

In making a distinction between feminism conceived as a subject versus feminism as a structural problematic, Kwon, without saying so overtly, points to a long-standing argument between Derrida’s and Lacan’s theories of subjectivity, one waged primarily in literary theory circles and often ignored or conflated in art historical debates. Regardless of the fact that they both may be credited as participating in the historical unraveling of Cartesian subjectivity, Derridean deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis are founded on different assumptions and offer very different strategies for interpretation and speculation. In other words, in order to set up her critique of the theory-essentialism polemic, Kwon points to a fundamental distinction *between theories*, between the Derridean deconstruction of the subject as an effect of *différance* and the Lacanian insistence on a subject, despite the fact that it is split, lacking and produced through the effects of language. To put it far too simplistically, Lacan’s theory still posits a subject, while Derrida’s undoes any name, term or gathering, including that of *any* subject.

By slightly shifting the terms of the essentialism polemic, by returning to “constructivism,” one of the earliest terms, instead of “theory,” a later and broader term, as the opposite of essentialism, Kwon makes the extremely important point that the “theory” side of the debate is a non-homogenous category. For Kwon, the idea that gender is a social construction is a positivistic approach dependent on the notion of a “subject”; it functioned as a critique, perhaps, but not a deconstruction of subjectivity. The opposition between “essentialism” and “constructivism” holds only if feminism is defined as subjectivity feminism. In other words, the opposition only works between essentialism and *particular theories*, such as the psychoanalytic, Marxist, or poststructuralist theories that posit a subject of feminism in both senses, as subjects

and topics. If, instead, the “theory” pole is deconstruction, then there is no opposition, only a process whereby essentialism may become a theory and a theory may become essentialist, a point that has been argued by Diana Fuss and others. When a “subject” is conceived as a structural problematic, oppositions like “constructivism” and “essentialism,” or “nature” and “culture,” are moot. All concepts are merely an effect of *différance*; they are representations, ideas that refer, ultimately, to “no thing.”

And yet, as feminist theorists such as Judith Butler (1990, 1993, 2004), Amelia Jones (1998) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994) have pointed out, it is the body, as the site where “nature” and “culture” map each other, that enacts subjectivity as particular and contingent. Thus the “theory versus essentialism debate,” the binary opposition so many feminist practitioners would like to abolish, is fundamentally linked to particular notions of subjectivity and embodiment. The larger possibility, then, is that the term essentialism, structurally necessary as the term against which some theories of subjectivity oppose themselves in order to take place or appear, might be reconceptualized. This may seem counter-intuitive, but the insight of Kwon’s essay is that it demonstrates, while not explicitly arguing, that essentialism is not locked in opposition to a Derridean approach to feminism, a point consistent with Butler’s theory of performativity. When Kwon shows, on one level, that Mendieta’s work can be read both ways, as available to both essentialist and constructivist readings, she demonstrates the limits of those readings and, by extension, subjectivity feminism. This is important, as the exhaustion of one term (essentialism) in a binary relation implicates the other, as well.

Rehearsing the terms outlined by earlier feminist scholars, including Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews in their important 1987 essay, “The Feminist Critique of Art History,” Kwon restates the vital point that the “crux” of the essentialism debate waged within

subjectivity feminism (feminism as a subject or topic) appears centered on arguments about the body.⁵¹ The body of essentialism is “*in* representation” while the constructivist body functions “*as* representation ... the body as a transparent signifier of identity and self versus the body as a nexus of arbitrary conventions of meaning ... as signature or sign.”⁵² These purposefully restricted definitions of both theory and essentialism are accurate as far as they were understood in early 1980s debates. Hereby Kwon traces the generally accepted history, as I noted earlier, whereby the feminist artists labeled “essentialist,” including Chicago, Schneemann, Wilke, Schapiro and many others from the late 1960s through the 1970s, were accused by their critics of coming from a position of believing that the body and female sexuality are biological givens, innate qualities that exist outside or prior to representation. The charges that this work was ahistorical and/or intended to universalize “the feminine” were understood, as Kwon notes, as accusing this art of reinforcing rather than challenging patriarchal structures of sexual difference; in other words, as repeating the patriarchal strategy of naturalizing the qualities assigned to gender that are in fact products of ideological and social conventions.⁵³

Like Broude and Garrard, Mira Schor, and other feminist art historians, Kwon admits that this branding of many early feminist artists as “essentialist” may not have been fair, especially as the term was applied across “problematically” diverse practices and produced in a specific historical moment when the ability of women to represent the female body and sexuality was considered a strategy of liberation from male-defined concepts and images. Yet Kwon’s purpose is not to defend early feminist artists from accusations of essentialism, nor to re-examine the concept explicitly. Instead, her reading of Mendieta underscores, among other things, the fact that any work by a woman artist that emphasizes and/or celebrates the physicality of the female body, particularly in relation to “nature” or biological functions like menstruation, birth and sex;

that valorizes “women’s work,” from domestic to craft; or that sees “the female body as a direct source of meaning and imagery” is often linked to this earlier corpus of feminist work and is immediately considered suspect.⁵⁴

In Kwon’s analysis, Ana Mendieta’s earlier projects from the 1970s, which include the powerful and often reproduced series of photographs, *Silueta*, are most often read as essentialist in terms of both intention and reception. Citing Mendieta’s own comments about her work, Kwon moves back and forth between these quotes and the ways in which critics have interpreted Mendieta’s work through the lens of essentialism, concluding with her own assessment:

Recruiting the imagery, ritual and symbolism of various goddess-worshipping religions and traditions, Mendieta, like many other women artists of the period, claimed power through a process of self-othering—a self-primitivizing that located the ‘feminine’ and ‘woman’ anterior to historical time (moving to *prehistory*) and outside ‘civilized’ cultural spaces (citing the work in the ‘other’ space of nature or treating the body as a natural site). Mendieta, of course did both. And the allure of her identity as a Third World woman artist surely added to the exoticism of her works in light of the entrenched primitivist tendencies of 1970s feminist discourse and in the general discourse on Western modernism.⁵⁵

From Kwon’s perspective, Mendieta’s choice of natural settings for her performance photographs and her use of goddess imagery, particularly forms that predate written history, signals her recourse to a place and time that is somehow outside both civilization and history. Situated this way, Mendieta’s work, as interpreted by Kwon, is naturalizing and universalizing in its gestures, which means it is essentialist. Although this circular form of interpretation may seem suspect, the charge of operating outside history does create an odd alliance between essentialism and some poststructuralist theories, notably psychoanalysis *and* deconstruction, which have also been accused of being ahistorical. I notice that without its being named, deconstruction, as one of the poststructuralist theories, is able to slip, unnoticed, back and forth between the categories of feminism thought as structural problematic and feminism thought as subject. This may account, in part, for Kwon’s creation of the initial distinction and her

placement of the essentialism debate under subjectivity feminism, where history is still a positivist category of gathering and exclusion.

But for now I would simply like to note that Kwon's reading of Mendieta does include many of the terms typically aligned with a charge of essentialism: female body, nature, prehistory, ahistorical, outside culture, universalizing, a belief in a direct transmission of meaning, celebratory, goddess-worshipping, sexual, ritual, exotic and primitive. The use of any form that is overtly or covertly vulvar is problematic, too, as responses to Chicago's *The Dinner Party* attest, though critiques typically remain on the level of content and the artist's intention.

Kwon's transition into the theory "pole" of her reading begins with this sentence: "Yet something enigmatic remains ...a peculiarity that spills over and exceeds this feminist framing."⁵⁶ Here the issue of the body is raised again, hard on the heels of quintessentially poststructuralist language, but it is a negated body, absent yet resurrected, made visible through the traces of its departure. Kwon immediately contrasts Mendieta's "consistently disappeared" body with that of "most feminist artists during the 1970s" who "vied for visibility and self-affirming expression through figurative, literal, sometimes 'in-your-face' presence."⁵⁷ She goes on to claim that even when considered in the larger context of earth and body art made by both women and men, Mendieta's use of negative imprints instead of positive figures is unique and "cannot be attributed simply to her sex."⁵⁸ While I doubt anyone, even Chicago and Schapiro at the height of their interest in "central core imagery," would attribute an artistic choice to sex alone, I find that Kwon's reading of Mendieta through theories of representation (primarily psychoanalytic and poststructuralist) in an effort to align her work with poststructuralist theories offers useful critiques of earlier interpretations of her work. Ultimately, however, Kwon's

interpretation seems to end up repeating the general tenets of theory more than offering particular insights into Mendieta's *oeuvre*. This is instructive.

What Kwon interprets as the “double void” in Mendieta's work, her representation of both the “original” event and the body as absent or negated (implied only through their traces) is argued by Kwon's use of Susan Stewart's work on longing to rethink the medium of photography as souvenir rather than documentation.⁵⁹ This in turn allows Kwon to read Mendieta's intention, through her use of photography, as a self-reflexive recognition of both the body and “authentic experience” as always already lost, a concept fundamental to the Derridean critique of origin. And Kwon's conclusion, that the photograph as souvenir provokes the production of critical narratives as compensation for this loss of origin, an origin that is itself impossible to retrieve, and that these narratives are an effect rather than a cause of Mendieta's work (thus brilliantly critiquing biographical interpretations of her art), is consistent with poststructuralist thinking. This, in turn, “legitimizes” both Mendieta and her work as theoretically savvy—which means not essentialist.

It also raises the specter of interpretive desire.

Essentialism, Theory and Interpretive Desire

Leaving the relative importance of the artist's intention in critical interpretations aside for the moment, one might wonder at the impulse to interpret Mendieta's work as doubly showing and staging loss when Mendieta herself emphasizes connection: “My art is the way I establish the bonds that unite me with the universe.”⁶⁰ Yet Kwon's goal in her essay was to complicate the terms of the theory-essentialism debate, which she accomplished, on one level, by reading Mendieta's work through both positions while not favoring either one or resolving the opposition, thus allowing the terms to remain suspended in a dialectical tension. However, what interests me in Kwon's take on the “theory versus essentialism” debate is that her conclusion

regarding Mendieta's work could, if we follow the general tenets of deconstruction, hold for *any* representation: "As viewers, we always arrive too late on the scene. The immediacy of her [Mendieta's] experience of marking the landscape, guaranteed by the image that registers its distance in space and time, has already been transformed from origin to trace, transformed from event to memory to desire."⁶¹ The only specificity or what sets Mendieta apart from other artists, primarily the "in your face presence" of other early feminists, is what Kwon interprets as *Mendieta's intention*, her intention to stage an understanding of the relations between subjectivity, the body, the event and the medium (here, photography) in such a way that it that appears consistent with the tenets of poststructuralist theories of representation. We might wonder, however, about the question of desire that Kwon herself has raised, regarding those critics who project *their* intentions onto Mendieta's absent body. We might also wonder about the relationship between Mendieta's intention and Kwon's.

In Kwon's reading, it is Mendieta's intention to be self-reflexive in a way that reaffirms particular theories of subjectivity and representation, theories that posit subjectivity as an effect of representation, that counter the charges of essentialism against her and her work. In a magical turn, these theories through which her work is read then appear inherent to it. In effect, as a form of language, of representation itself, it is indeed theory that makes Mendieta (through Kwon) speak this way. Theory, then, repeats and reaffirms itself through this staging. It only *appears as if* it were engaging the work, for to do so would be to assume that the work existed before and outside of the theory, which would open it to charges of essentialism as a belief in presence and origin. Moreover, in another twist, because Kwon must impute an intention of self-reflexivity to read Mendieta's work as not-essentialist and because intention needs a subject, Mendieta the artist becomes conflated with her work, just as Kwon the critic and historian becomes conflated

with her essay, which also stages her as an effect of both the theories she invokes and Mendieta's work. This is, in part, why subjects are so difficult to give up, as is the "pole" of essentialism that allows them to be staged, to appear, even as they are being disappeared.⁶² Theory, as an ideational and linguistic form of representation, would have no object without them.

What does remain, however, in the endless repetition of steps that seek to defy any ground of origin is, as Kwon so perceptively states, the supplement of desire, particularly the desire of the critic, historian or viewer which may be projected onto the work and then ascribed to the desire or intention of the artist. Without explicitly stating this, Kwon's essay demonstrates, through her desire, the limits of "subject" feminism as it stages subjectivity as its structural problematic.

This attention to the play of intersubjective desire returns us to the work of those 1970s feminist artists and theorists whose explorations of gender led them to defy and debunk modernism's emphasis on autonomy and critical neutrality. Displaying her characteristic sensitivity to the gender biases in language, Schneemann dropped the "h" from "history" as she issued this challenge:

[C]an an artist be an art historian? Can an art historian be a naked woman? Does a woman have intellectual authority? Can she have public authority while naked and speaking? Was the content of the lecture less appreciable when she was naked? What multiple levels of uneasiness, pleasure, curiosity, erotic fascination, acceptance or rejection were activated in the audience?⁶³

Staging their own desire and/or that of the audience, artists such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Yoko Ono, Schneemann and others invented innovative forms for art and knowledge-making that offered new possibilities for theory and history writing as well—a potential currently explored and furthered in the work of contemporary feminist poststructuralist art historians such as Peggy Phelan, Rebecca Schneider, Jane Blocker and Amelia Jones, who foreground their own desiring voices and investments in their art critical and historical analyses.

⁶⁴ This kind of “self-consciousness” is not the autonomous or insular self-referentiality of a Modernist artwork, but rather seeks to foster an awareness of the non-coherence (or non-identity) of subjectivity and the interdependence of subjects (and of subjects and objects) through staging the desire that circuits between them, making them vulnerable to each other.

The emphasis on the solicitation and/or performance of intersubjective desire is central to art historian Amelia Jones’ reinterpretation of “essentialist” feminist art in her 1996 exhibition *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, which marks a crucial turning point in the history of the “theory versus essentialism” debate. Drawing on Broude and Garrard’s earlier arguments, *Sexual Politics* historicized the polemic but also, citing the theoretical work of Diana Fuss and the lack of “neutrality” in critical responses to *The Dinner Party*, deconstructed it. Perhaps even more instructive is the fact that as Jones deconstructed accusations of essentialism against Chicago and other early feminist artists in part by showing how “desire” informs the bridge between subjects and objects of knowledge (how critics’ responses to the work were driven primarily by their own often sexist sensibilities and/or discomfort with the female body), Jones and her exhibition became targets for the same kinds of hostility projected at Chicago and her work since its debut in 1979, which points to the importance of and need for continued feminist work on feminist art.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how a consideration of desire and intersubjective (and objective) imbrication works to unsettle any pretense to essentialism as an attempt to anchor meaning, to guarantee Truth or Cartesian subjectivity (the subject as separate from the object of knowledge). I will be rehearsing Jones’ deconstruction of essentialism and foregrounding of desire to set the stage for understanding the historical and theoretical importance of studying early feminist artists’ use of touch as a practice, metaphor and concept with a long aesthetic

history. While Jones' exhibition marks the most rigorous refutation and deconstruction of the "theory versus essentialism" debate, it also serves as the contemporary example of the problem. Historically speaking, the concept of essentialism has been linked to issues of artistic touch figured through gender for at least several centuries, typically to the detriment of female artists. Already constrained by patriarchal assumptions about their biological "nature," women artists, far more often than their male counterparts, had to contend with art critical discourses that essentialized their touch as well. "Feminine" touch was either devalued for its lack of masculine qualities or, when linked to "artifice" (and the technical skill of painting as "cosmetic"), suspected of propagating a dangerous illusionism that at various moments supported or undermined various vested social and class interests. In general, however, "feminine" touch and the figure of the woman artist served to signify difference, typically as the denigrated term in an opposition that constructed the male artistic identity as coherent, rational and naturally superior due to having access to the realm of transcendence, which in turn guaranteed his genius.

With the deconstruction of essentialism in Jones' argument, we can begin to see, from a contemporary perspective, that the foregrounding of desire that Jones' reads in the work of early feminists has been percolating all along in historical discussions of artistic touch as gendered. In other words, touch, while carrying different semiotic connotations and relationships to identity and gender at various moments, harbors the potential to foreground the porous relations of desire between artist, work, sitter (in the case of portraits), and viewer/critic/historian. Artistic touch may be simultaneously reflective (a product of its historical and social context) as well as generative, and its relation to the identity, truth or transparency of its subjects and objects can produce a great deal of insight, delight and/or anxiety.

¹ "Questions of Feminism," *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 18.

² “Questions of Feminism,” *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 37.

³ “Questions of Feminism,” *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 38.

⁴ “Questions of Feminism,” *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 38.

⁵ “Questions of Feminism,” *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 29.

⁶ “Questions of Feminism,” *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 8.

⁷ “Questions of Feminism,” *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 9.

⁸ “Questions of Feminism,” *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 9.

⁹ “Questions of Feminism,” *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 19.

¹⁰ “Questions of Feminism,” *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 19.

¹¹ “Questions of Feminism,” *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 20.

¹² See essays in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).

¹³ Helen Molesworth, “House Work and Art Work,” *October* 92 (Spring 2000): 73.

¹⁴ Helen Molesworth, “House Work and Art Work,” *October* 92 (Spring 2000): 73.

¹⁵ Helen Molesworth, “House Work and Art Work,” *October* 92 (Spring 2000): 95.

¹⁶ Helen Molesworth, “House Work and Art Work,” *October* 92 (Spring 2000): 38.

¹⁷ Catherine M. de Zegher, ed., *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996b), 38.

¹⁸ Catherine M. de Zegher, ed., *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996b), 21.

¹⁹ Catherine M. de Zegher, ed., *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996b), 21. In various metaphors and forms since the 1970s, Cixous has written about the need to neither subsume nor reject the other. See her essay “The Author in Truth,” where she discusses the work of Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, specifically a story where the main character eats a cockroach and then vomits it up. Cixous writes: “The text teaches us that the most difficult thing to do is to arrive at the most extreme proximity while guarding against the trap of projection, of identification. The other must remain absolutely strange within the greatest possible proximity” (170-171). Hélène Cixous, “The Author in Truth,” in *‘Coming to Writing’ and Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jenson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 136-181.

²⁰ For Cixous’ most methodological version of theory that is also poetic, see *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia Press, 1993); for the most “accessible,” see the collection of essays in Hélène Cixous, *‘Coming to Writing’ and Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jenson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991); Hélène Cixous, *The Book of Prometheus* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991) and Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981; first published in France 1975). For Irigaray’s forays into theory that are poetic, see: Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover* (New York: Columbia, 1991); Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions* (New York: Routledge, 1992, first published in France 1982); Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, New

York: Cornell University Press, 1985; first published in France in 1977); and Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985; first published in France 1974).

²¹ For an excellent discussion of Irigaray in relation to the essentialism question, see Naomi Schor, "This Essentialism Which is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray," in *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought*, ed. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor and Margaret Whitford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 57-78. The slandering of Irigaray in an art historical context is mentioned in Mira Schor, "Backlash and Appropriation," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 248-263.

²² Catherine M. de Zegher, ed., *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996b), 39.

²³ Catherine M. de Zegher, ed., *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996b), 20.

²⁴ Catherine M. de Zegher, ed., *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996b), 20.

²⁵ Catherine M. de Zegher, "Interview with Catherine de Zegher," *N.Paradoxa* no 1 (December 1996a): 8.

²⁶ Catherine M. de Zegher, "Interview with Catherine de Zegher," *N.Paradoxa* no 1 (December 1996a): 3.

²⁷ Catherine M. de Zegher, ed., *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996b): 21.

²⁸ Catherine M. de Zegher, "Interview with Catherine de Zegher," *N.Paradoxa* no 1 (December 1996a): 5.

²⁹ Griselda Pollock, "Inscriptions of the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996a), 72.

³⁰ Griselda Pollock, "Inscriptions of the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996a), 73.

³¹ Catherine M. de Zegher, ed., *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996b), 5.

³² Catherine M. de Zegher, ed., *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996b), 39.

³³ Catherine M. de Zegher, ed., *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996b), 22.

³⁴ Catherine M. de Zegher, ed., *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996b), 22.

³⁵ Griselda Pollock, "Inscriptions of the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996a), 70, italics in original.

³⁶ Griselda Pollock, "Inscriptions of the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996a), 70, italics in original.

³⁷ Griselda Pollock, "Inscriptions of the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996a), 71.

³⁸ Griselda Pollock, "Inscriptions of the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996a), 74.

³⁹ Griselda Pollock, "Inscriptions of the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996a), 71, italics in original.

⁴⁰ Griselda Pollock, "Inscriptions of the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996a), 71.

⁴¹ Griselda Pollock, "Inscriptions of the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996a), 77, italics in original.

⁴² Griselda Pollock, "Inscriptions of the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996a), 78.

⁴³ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981; first published in France, 1975).

⁴⁴ In various metaphors and forms since the 1970s, Cixous has written about the need to neither subsume nor reject the other. For example, see her essay "The Author in Truth," where she discusses the work of Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, specifically a story where the main character eats a cockroach and then vomits it up. Cixous writes: "The text teaches us that the most difficult thing to do is to arrive at the most extreme proximity while guarding against the trap of projection, of identification. The other must remain absolutely strange within the greatest possible proximity" (170-171). Hélène Cixous, "The Author in Truth," in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, Deborah Jenson, ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 136-181. For texts addressing the issue of proximity or finding "the right distance" linked to issues of gender and epistemology, see her essay "Extreme Fidelity," in *Writing Differences: Readings from the Seminars of Hélène Cixous*, ed. Susan Sellers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988). For Cixous' outright statement refusing what would later come to be called biological "essentialism" yet embracing transformations of sexuality and the body as political acts, see "Sorties," in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981; first published in France, 1975). Cixous writes: "There is no such thing as "destiny," "nature," or essence, but living structures, caught up, sometimes frozen within historiocultural limits which intermingle with the historical scene to such a degree that it has long been impossible and is still difficult to think or even to imagine something else. But there should be no misunderstanding: men and women are caught up in a network of millennial cultural determinations of a complexity that is practically unanalyzable: we can no more talk about 'woman' than about 'man' without getting caught up in an ideological theater where the multiplication of representations, images, reflections, myths, identifications, constantly transforms, deforms, alters each person's imaginary order and in advance renders all conceptualizations null and void. There is no reason to exclude all possibilities of radical transformations of behavior, mentalities, roles, and political economy. ... Let us imagine simultaneously a general change in all of the structures of formation, education, framework, hence of reproduction, of ideological effects, and let us imagine a real liberation of sexuality, that is, a transformation of our relationship to our body (--and to another body), and approximation of the immense material organic sensual universe that we are, this not being possible of course, without equally radical political transformations (imagine!). Then 'femininity,' 'masculinity,' would inscribe their effects of difference, their economy, their relationships to expenditure, to deficit, to giving, quite differently. That which appears as 'feminine' or 'masculine' today would no longer amount to the same thing. The general logic of difference would be a crowning display of new differences" (96-97).

⁴⁵ Griselda Pollock, "Inscriptions of the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996a), 75, italics mine.

⁴⁶ Griselda Pollock, "Inscriptions of the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996a), 75, italics mine.

⁴⁷ Griselda Pollock, "Inscriptions of the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996a), 75.

⁴⁸ Griselda Pollock, "Inscriptions of the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996a), 80, italics mine.

⁴⁹ Miwon Kwon, "Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 167.

⁵⁰ Miwon Kwon, "Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 167.

⁵¹ Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," in *The Art Bulletin*, Sept. 1987, Vol. LXIX, No. 3.

⁵² Miwon Kwon, "Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 166.

⁵³ In setting up her version of the opposition, Kwon mentions that the anti-essentialist or what she carefully limits to the "constructivist" camp associated with the "theoretically driven" work of the 1980s, work which looked to Marxist, psychoanalytic and poststructuralist (in a broad sense) theories, has been accused of "intellectual elitism" and criticized for a "perceived" inability to deal with the physical body (Kwon 1996, 168). However, she does not mention that the discourses of psychoanalysis and deconstruction have also been charged with ignoring or being incapable of addressing history. This is a charge which contributes, I would suggest, to some of the invisible and displaced frictions operating in both the theory-essentialism and theory-theory polemics, in part because bodies, however parsed or porously unbound, remain the object of politics as well as the reason, if not always the means, for distributing subjects across space and time.

⁵⁴ Miwon Kwon, "Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 166.

⁵⁵ Miwon Kwon, "Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 168. For a perceptive discussion of "the primitive" in relation to modernism and feminist performance art, see Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁵⁶ Miwon Kwon, "Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 168.

⁵⁷ Miwon Kwon, "Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 168.

⁵⁸ Miwon Kwon, "Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta," in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 168.

⁵⁹ For an excellent discussion of the status of the photograph as documentation from a deconstructive point of view, see Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 11-18.

⁶⁰ Mendieta quoted in Miwon Kwon, “Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta,” in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 168.

⁶¹ Miwon Kwon, “Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta,” in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 171.

⁶² I am indebted to Jane Blocker’s *Where is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) for offering an excellent and successful example of the play of intersubjective desire between artist, work and historian as performative history writing. She sums it up here: “Inasmuch as this book is a history it is also a performance. It is empowered by the repetition of the question, “Where is Ana Mendieta?” But, as with Mendieta’s branding of Eliade’s book, the boundaries between history and performance are unstable. While I write my history of Ana Mendieta, she is always writing me” (Blocker 1999, 135).

⁶³ This quote is from Schneemann’s performance “Naked Action Lecture” at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1968. For a full description of the performance, see Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy* (New Paltz, N.Y.: Documentext, 1979), 180.

⁶⁴ See Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Amelia Jones, *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004); Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Eunice Lipton, *Alias Olympia: A Woman’s Search for Manet’s Notorious Model and Her Own Desire* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1992); Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Joanna Frueh, *Erotic Faculties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

CHAPTER 4 ESSENTIALISM AND DESIRE

In the early days of the women's movement, the question was often posed: What would happen if women told the truth about their feelings and experiences?

The answer ... that the world would split open, seems confirmed by the level of fury that *The Dinner Party* has provoked.

–Judy Chicago¹

Quite possibly the strongest resurfacing of the problematic of essentialism in the 1990s was triggered by feminist art historian Amelia Jones' 1996 exhibition *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*. Intended as an opportunity to reevaluate *The Dinner Party* after an eight-year hiatus from public view, Jones' exhibition was plagued by a resurgence of the very mood of contention it sought to analyze, the highly charged atmosphere of controversy that has surrounded Chicago's monumental work and early feminist art in general since their inception. Five prominent feminist artists refused to lend their work and *Los Angeles Times* reviewer Christopher Knight called the show a "fiasco."² However, a number of others, including art historian David Joselit, curator Connie Butler, and patron Elizabeth A. Sackler, recognized the value of *Sexual Politics*, as its targeted deconstruction of the "theory versus essentialism" polemic cleared the way for a concentrated re-valuation of 1970s feminist art and its role in post-war American art historical narratives.³

Articulating a number of the insights previously discussed in the work of Mira Schor, Broude, Garrard, Molesworth and others, *Sexual Politics* provides a useful platform for contextualizing several of the historical, political and theoretical issues that have informed and continue to emerge as a result of the essentialism debate. This chapter will outline the points raised by Jones which I consider most crucial: refutations of charges of essentialism against proto- and early feminist artists; a critique of the anti-essentialist position as elaborated by its foremost proponents, Griselda Pollock and Mary Kelly; a discussion of how early feminist art's

engagement with embodiment and desire exposed the “interestedness” of modernist theories of art (an exposure repeated in the critical responses to *Sexual Politics*) and, following the work of Broude and Garrard, an elaboration of the distinction between Chicago’s development of “central core theory” for her own innovative art practices and its more problematic application as a generalized frame for interpreting the work of others.

This last point is important to a continued deconstruction of the “theory versus essentialism” polemic of the kind I am engaged in here. Though Chicago and her peers have been accused of essentialism (variously defined as literalism, biological reductionism, universalization and theoretical naiveté), I want to argue that the infamous “vulva” plates in *The Dinner Party*, like many of Chicago’s pieces from this period, were in fact the product of a theory. Aside from the virulent critiques leveled at “central core theory” in particular, the fact that many feminist artists of the late 1960s and 1970s were inventing specific theories, not just applying or reinterpreting “theory” (as I discussed earlier), has been generally overlooked, at least by critics.

Perhaps one of the more enduring elements of the early feminist legacy and one that continues to inform much contemporary feminist work is an insistence, following the lead of “essentialist” feminist artists and poststructuralist theorists alike, on foregrounding intersubjective circuits of desire as informing not just the making and reception of art, but the evaluative, critical and theoretical discourses that subtend its historical forms and narratives as well.⁴ I believe that this foregrounding of desire through playing with conventions of artistic touch is not original with 1960s and 70s feminist artists (it is in fact already present in the work of such artists as Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun), but the social conditions of the 1960s (the various rights and identity movements) pressed upon the conceptual links between desire and

essentialism once again, and “touch,” in its various cultural and aesthetic forms, provided an excellent vehicle. In fact, I would say that one of the most important contributions of early feminist work, especially to theories of subjectivity, has been its insistence on breaching and collapsing traditional boundaries between art, theory and embodiment, with “touch” providing one of the most powerful exploratory, if not explanatory, mediums and sources.

Sexual Politics: *Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*: Essentialism, Desire and the “Problem” of Female Experience

Like many of the feminist critics and historians previously discussed, Jones situates the question of essentialism as central to the debates that framed most interpretations of early feminist art, agreeing that it provided the conceptual platform for the condemnation and dismissal of an entire group of diverse women artists from the late 1960s and 70s, particularly those who used the female body in their work. Challenging the reductive historicization and general invisibility of early feminist art, Jones reexamined it, as did Broude and Garrard, as a set of responses operating within a specific political and historical context. However, unlike Broude and Garrard, who for the most part have eschewed poststructuralist discourses, Jones expands their investigation by drawing on the insights of contemporary poststructuralist theorists such as Judith Butler, Diana Fuss, Joan Copjec, Jacques Derrida and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in order to analyze not only early feminist work in the context of its making and critical reception, but also its impact on the role of the art critic and historian. More specifically, Jones takes up Mira Schor’s contention, cited in the last chapter, that much of the anti-essentialist backlash against 1960s and 70s feminist art indicated a discomfort with female sexuality and eroticism. Thus the term “sexual politics” in the title of Jones’ 1996 exhibition refers not only to early feminist artists’ introduction of gender and sexuality into art and art historical discourses and practices, framed by Jones as a political act, but also the effects, particularly on the role of the art critic and

historian, of women artists articulating the personal as political in terms of embodiment, as subjects caught up in, as well as constituted through, circuits of desire.⁵

Early feminist artists' investigations into the connections between subjectivity, corporeality and politics were explorations that were grounded, for the most part, in personal experiences of sexual difference. They were often articulated through attempts to posit, represent and theorize relationships between art-making and female desire, frequently producing work that involved overtly sexed bodily imagery, from Carolee Schneemann's *Naked Action Lecture* (1968) to Adrian Piper's *Food For the Spirit* (1971), Hannah Wilke's *S.O.S.—Starification Object Series* (1974) and Judy Chicago's "cunt plates" in *The Dinner Party* (1979). Following Lucy Lippard's frequently quoted insight that "Feminism's greatest contribution to the future of art has probably been precisely its lack of contribution to modernism," Jones persuasively argues that early feminists' emphasis on content, specifically issues of gender and female desire, exposed, challenged and undermined a set of assumptions fundamental to modernist interpretations of art and aesthetic valuation, particularly Clement Greenberg's reliance on Kantian notions of critical neutrality or disinterest. Yet some feminist artists' insistence on content, particularly when they translated one of the fundamental tenets of the American women's liberation movement, "the personal is political," into artistic investigations of female experience, also opened their work, as we have seen, to accusations of essentialism.⁶

The solicitation and exposure of the structure of intersubjective desire between viewer, artist and work unraveled modernist assumptions of critical disinterest, yet simultaneously incited strong critiques from modernist and feminist critics alike.⁷ These responses exposed the politics not only of art criticism but also of feminism, providing an entry into the complexity of the feminist project itself and the difficulties inherent in any attempt to construct a politics of

identity that also seeks to challenge the kinds of exclusions that make such a categorical gathering necessary in the first place. The scope of such claims, which are based in large part on linking the problem of essentialism to issues of subjectivity and desire, warrants a brief overview of Jones's own discussion of the theory versus essentialism debate as it developed through interpretations of early feminist art.

In *Sexual Politics*, Jones recontextualizes the highly controversial icon of 1970s feminist art, Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, within the aesthetic and political history of its making and reception. Her initial motivation, like Helen Molesworth's (discussed in the previous chapter), was the fact that feminist art from the late 1960s and 70s, when not entirely disappeared from broader art historical narratives, was often cast as the denigrated term in a reductive history structured as an opposition between essentialism and theory, with Chicago's "celebratory" and "essentialist" *The Dinner Party* (1979) representing all feminist art produced in the 1970s and Mary Kelly's Lacanian-inspired *Post-Partum Document* (1979) standing in for the theoretically savvy and critique-oriented work of the 1980s. Offered the position of guest curator of a show that focused solely on *The Dinner Party*, Jones accepted only on the condition that the exhibition be considerably expanded to include the work of other feminist artists contemporary with Chicago as well as more recent artists whose work addressed similar questions, issues and themes.⁸

Jones' goal for the exhibition was neither to laud or defend *The Dinner Party* as the product of a feminist utopia, nor to scorn it as the preeminent emblem of a theoretically naïve, misguided or embarrassing moment in the history of feminist art, the two most common critical responses to the work. Instead, Jones took a much broader approach, focusing on *The Dinner Party* as a product of its time, situated within a network of influences and effects that supported

Jones' own desire to scrutinize the complex and often contradictory stakes of feminist art discourses. By reexamining the debates surrounding *The Dinner Party*, debates most often framed in terms of the problem of essentialism, Jones sought not only to correct "an art historical misinterpretation of the feminist art movement" but in so doing to expand the historical narrative of post-war American art in general.⁹

Despite Jones' desire to broaden what she considered to be reductive historical narratives of feminist art, some of the harshest criticisms of the exhibition came from early feminist artists themselves. Before the show even opened, five prominent artists who were Chicago's contemporaries: Nancy Spero, Mary Beth Edelson, Joyce Kozloff, Joan Snyder and Miriam Schapiro: refused to lend their work and a sixth, June Wayne, dropped out at the last moment. Given *The Dinner Party*'s history of controversy, a history that had already made it the focus of both popular and art world attention (albeit overwhelmingly negative in the art world), these artists feared that a show organized around the piece would serve to promote Chicago's career, "heroize" her legacy by endorsing its strategy of feminist essentialism, reinforce a view of the work as pornographic, and/or strengthen the historical misperception that *The Dinner Party* represented the origin of the feminist art movement in the United States.¹⁰

In comments offered after the show had closed, Jones noted that she endured "very vicious and very personal criticism in the media," yet had not anticipated the level of vehement hostility and bitter divisiveness among the feminist artists and critics.¹¹ As feminist art began to be historicized in the 1990s, the acrimony over how that narrative was to be related is notable in light of the fact that a lot of the debate about essentialism centers on anxieties about origins and the fixing of meaning. It is also worth mentioning that this anxiety over the narratives of feminist art history is not limited to artists and critics associated with 1970s feminism; up to the

present, it continues to permeate discussions by some of the most influential critics and artists of the 1980s as well.¹²

My treatment of *Sexual Politics* does not focus on the show in its entirety but rather on the ways in which it sought to contextualize, complicate and deconstruct the theory versus essentialism debate. Much of the discussion will center on Jones' analysis of the accusations of essentialism against *The Dinner Party* and, by extension, the whole of early feminist art. In her introductory essay, Jones directly counters the art historical tendency, exemplified by textbooks like Gardner's *History of Art*, to position Chicago's monumental work as the sole representative of 1970s feminist art, an over-generalization that made it easy for those who labeled *The Dinner Party* "essentialist" to collapse all work from the 1970s into the same category. Not only did this conflation deny the diversity of feminist art from the period, it also missed the crucial point that much 1970s work could be read as explicitly not-essentialist, an observation made in the previous chapter by Adrian Piper, who in her response to the 1995 *October* questionnaire emphasized the fact that her own projects clearly focused on race and gender as social constructions.

In Jones' account, many early feminist artists like Chicago sought to challenge misogynist depictions of women by offering powerful, alternative, and often "celebratory" images.¹³ Yet others, for example Laurie Anderson and Lynn Hershman, offered critique as a form of feminist empowerment, a trend that would become popular and privileged in the 1980s. Citing work like Anderson's *Object, Objection, Objectivity* (1974) (a project where Anderson reversed the male gaze by stopping to question and photograph men on the street when they accosted her with sexual language) and Hershman's exposition of "femininity" as a fictive social construction in Roberta Breitmore's Construction Chart (1973) (an illustrated guide to the "make-up" required

to transform the artist into a “female”), Jones points out some of the numerous examples of 1970s feminist work that could have been located firmly on the theory (social construction) and critique, rather than essentialist, pole of the opposition.

Throughout the essentialism debate, however, artists like Anderson, Hershman, and Piper, who took what was considered a more distanced perspective, were grouped together with Chicago and other supposedly essentialist artists such as Ana Mendieta, Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann, who were categorized as offering more “personal” and sometimes “celebratory” views of the female body and experience. Jones found that in the 1980s, with the “general move toward the promotion of feminist art that ‘deconstructed’ the pleasure that men in patriarchal culture take in representations of the female body,” the differences of approach among early feminist artists were missed or lost.¹⁴ Critics like Griselda Pollock, who sought to negate viewing pleasure with critical distance or *critique defined as distance*, considered artists’ use of what Pollock called positive or “realist” images of the female body naïve, a misguided attempt to produce political efficacy by assuming that simply making something visible could render “essential meaning” and knowledge.¹⁵ Here, the ever-shifting concept of essentialism was broadened to include the assumption that an object or image could harbor meaning that was immediately accessible or transparent, an interpretation that may be traced to both a Derridean critique of the notion of “presence” (meaning as full, given, inherent in the subject or object itself) and the Aristotelian definition of the essential as “irreducible” or “unchanging.”¹⁶

While critiques of both presence and the presumption of a one-to-one correspondence between vision and knowledge continue to be crucial to feminist deconstructive strategies, Jones emphasizes the point that anti-essentialist critics like Pollock and Kelly perceived the problem of essentialism as compounded when images included the artist’s body. For Pollock and Kelly, the

body could too easily be assumed as standing in for or as the origin of personal experience, a “proximity” which threatened to elicit viewer empathy or identification, or risked pandering to male pleasure while appearing to offer knowledge or truth (through the illusion of unmediated presence). Thus essentialism, defined variously as a belief in the truth of corporeality (biological gender), proximity (the illusion of presence), transparent meaning, and personal experience (unmediated knowledge as a definitive anchor for signification), became a catch-all term for a group of shifting qualities retroactively assigned to early feminist art.

Early feminist art, particularly work that depicted the female body, was then positioned by its critics as uncritical, even antithetical to critique (defined as a mode of expression requiring distance), which came to be favored in the 1980s as a prerequisite for art considered both feminist and politically efficacious.¹⁷ For anti-essentialist feminists in the 1980s, particularly in Britain but also in America, political efficacy became firmly linked to critique, specifically critique informed by psychoanalytic, Marxist and/or poststructuralist “theory.” As a result, the notion of what constituted “good” or acceptable feminist art retained its link to the political, but became defined through what were perceived to be theoretical rather than experiential parameters, theory-based forms of criticism (psychoanalytic, deconstructive, etc.) that sought specifically to undo or dissect the very notion of “experience” that early feminists had worked so vigorously to explore, articulate, define and challenge as the basis for their art, politics *and theories*; a point to which I will return in the final chapter.¹⁸

The core of Jones’ argument about accusations of essentialism against early feminist art emerges from her investigation into the controversy surrounding *The Dinner Party*, emblemized by its highly polarized reception which swung from adoration to virulent critique, even invective, while also provoking “unexpected intersections among critical models thought to

be opposed.”¹⁹ The primary targets of modernist and feminist critics alike were the notorious vulva-form dinner plates, which modernist critics labeled “vulgar,” “kitsch” and “pornographic,” while some feminists declared them “essentialist,” primarily in the sense of biological reduction and universalizing tendencies.²⁰

The thirty-nine plates, initially inspired by Chicago’s theory of “central core imagery,” are arranged in individual place settings, each dedicated to one of the thirty-nine historical women and goddesses honored with a seat at a large, 3-sided (triangular) table, with 13 place settings on each side. On the floor, the names of 999 more women are inscribed on white porcelain tiles, resulting in a total of 1,038 women symbolized in an ambitious work of monumental proportion (46’ x 46’) that sought not only to revise the history of Western culture but raised serious questions about how history is, quite literally, made. The plates depict vulvas in various degrees of abstraction, increasingly three-dimensional as they advance through historical time. Each plate is rendered in lustrous, high gloss hand-painted ceramic, the centerpiece of a hand-embroidered runner elaborately made using techniques appropriate to the woman’s historical period. Many of these techniques were rediscovered and learned by needlework volunteers through hundreds of hours of painstaking research and labor. The installation included wall panels documenting the execution of the piece, thereby acknowledging the skills and labor of the more than 400 people, women and men, who donated their time and knowledge to the completion of the project.²¹

As Jones argues, Chicago’s foregrounding of content, namely the blatantly sexed imagery of the plates and the symbolic as well as literal embroidered depictions of individual women’s lives on the plates’ runners (i.e. Mary Wollstonecraft advocating for women’s education on the front side of hers, and dying in childbirth on its back) was an audacious move at the time,

directly challenging historical and religious narratives which had by and large forgotten, dismissed or erased women and goddesses from the historical record. Just as provocative, at least for the art world, was Chicago's decision to utilize skills and forms traditionally associated with women's "domestic" and often collaborative craftwork and labor (ceramics, china painting and needlework) to create a large-scale museum installation. By foregrounding the techniques and products of the "female hand," the effect, entirely intended on Chicago's part, was to provoke a contentious clash between "high" and "low" art genres. The result, as Jones chronicles, was that conservative modernist art critics like Hilton Kramer condemned *The Dinner Party* for "displaying a vulgarity 'more appropriate to an advertising campaign ... than to a work of art.'" *Time* magazine's Robert Hughes, who derided its "relentless concentration on the pudenda," declared it "mass devotional art," while for Suzanne Muchnic of the *Los Angeles Times* it was "the ultimate in 1970s kitsch."²²

One of Jones' significant strategies is to read this set of responses to Chicago's work as drawing primarily from the theories of modernist art's preeminent critic and champion, Clement Greenberg. His formalist principles, developed from 1939 on, required modern art to maintain "medium purity" (no mixing of media) and "autonomy" by refusing to reference anything outside itself, or any other orders of experience. It was also Greenberg who, in his early work, set up an opposition between "pure" or high modernist avant-garde art and low art "kitsch." Popular with the masses, kitsch is associated primarily with the domestic sphere, specifically women's tastes and crafts. As the critical responses testify, not only does *The Dinner Party*'s "flamboyant activation of kitsch—the prohibited desire of modernism" incorporate all that Greenbergian formalism excoriates, but the fact that Chicago designed the work to be exhibited in the high art domain of the museum directly challenged the boundaries of modernist aesthetic

value. In the process, *The Dinner Party* exposed the modernist critic's "disinterested" judgment as clearly informed by gender-based biases.²³

Despite a preponderance of hostile reactions from art critics, when it was first shown *The Dinner Party* was an enormous popular success, drawing record-breaking crowds at all fourteen of its venues. Ten thousand people saw the work when it opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979, 20,000 copies of the accompanying book were sold in the first two weeks, reviews from non-art critics tended to praise the piece, and attendees filled the guestbook with accolades and appreciation. However, while some art critics like Lucy Lippard saw the work's popular appeal as a feminist achievement, many others vilified not only the art but the audience as well. Hilton Kramer declared *The Dinner Party*'s "ideological" (feminist) content to be the source of its popular appeal, which for him confirmed its lack of aesthetic merit, while others, like Maureen Mullarky, characterized "the women who file worshipfully past this cunnilingus-as-communion table" as gullible, needy and insensitive to aesthetic nuance.²⁴ Perhaps the snidest example of this disconcerting congruence between aesthetic elitism and contempt for the female audience was feminist critic Clara Weyergraf's dismissal of *The Dinner Party*'s "brash vulgarity" as pandering to "the taste of the middle class housewife."²⁵

In one of her most incisive insights, Jones sees a correlation between modernist critiques of *The Dinner Party* and the theories condemning visual pleasure promoted by anti-essentialist poststructuralist feminist critics who, like Chicago, sought to create a new audience for art but, unlike her, focused more precisely on the role of art in producing a specific kind of feminist spectator. While Jones pointedly credits the work of poststructuralist feminist theorists with "radically rethinking the ideological effects of representations of female bodies and ... making feminism respectable within mainstream (that is, male-dominated) academic discourse," she also

establishes a very important correspondence between the notion of audience gullibility or insensitivity cited above and the motivation informing the theories of leading anti-essentialist feminist critics like Griselda Pollock, Lisa Tickner and Mary Kelly. Generally speaking, their efforts to create a new type of feminist viewer promoted the idea that feminist art should utilize strategies that would produce distance between the viewer and the work. They developed their “anti-visual pleasure” position specifically as a corrective counter to “essentialist” feminist work that they perceived as encouraging viewer identification by being too literal (accessible or readable), “celebrating” the female body, pandering to visual pleasure (the male gaze), or all of the above. From the perspective of Jones, Mira Schor, Peggy Phelan and a number of other feminist historians, the development of 1980s feminist theory took place, to a large degree, at the expense of 1970s work.²⁶

Like Broude and Garrard, Jones locates the anti-pleasure critique as emerging out of the late 1970s and 1980s British version of poststructuralist feminist discourses which relied heavily on visual and film studies-based theories, particularly Laura Mulvey’s notion of the “male gaze.” Yet Jones’ analysis critiques that position from a different perspective. Formulated in visual, Marxist and castration-oriented psychoanalytic terms, anti-pleasure theories were primarily concerned with the psychic and hence political effects of an artwork’s formal structure and particular mode of production on the viewing subject. From the Marxist perspective that Kelly, Pollock and many other theorists of representation embraced at the time, the viewing subject is especially vulnerable to capitalist commodity culture’s manipulation of her or his desire through representational strategies designed to suture the viewer into the work. An image or work that appears to invite the viewer’s identification, particularly through the solicitation of pleasure, could be read as encouraging the viewer to accept, uncritically, the particular ideologies or

beliefs subtending it. Interpreted as encouraging viewers to become passive consumers of capitalist culture, work that appeared to elicit responses of pleasure and/or identification came to be positioned as politically suspect or regressive, the antithesis of work designed to provoke intellectual reflection and social action.

Grounded in Marxism and a Lacanian psychoanalytic model which theorized sexual difference as fundamentally registered through the visual absence or presence of the phallus, Mulvey's critique of the "male gaze" argued that Hollywood cinema constructs the female body as a passive object "to be looked at" in order to elicit the pleasure of a male viewer who, positioned as the active agent of the look, is thereby confirmed in his subjectivity and access to power through "having" a phallus. Positioned in this way, the female body, as representative of the "lack" needed to guarantee sexual difference and the plenitude of the male phallus, becomes a fetish object that wards off the male fear of castration or insufficient subjectivity. Kelly and Pollock, in an effort to expose and challenge the social and political stakes for women as both subjects and objects of representation, embraced their interpretation of avant-garde artist and Marxist theorist Bertolt Brecht's theory of distancing, which offered specific strategies for making work that would provoke passive consumers of art into becoming self-conscious viewers, critics and cultural actors. Brecht's call to break the spectator's uncritical immersion in the illusory space and ideology of a work of art through subverting conventional viewing expectations was taken up by Kelly and Pollock as a feminist strategy for art-making. Following Mulvey, they argued that a refusal of visual pleasure would undo the spectatorial tropes that positioned the female body as the fetishized object of the male gaze. In the process, they hoped to expose femininity as a cultural concept rather than a biological given (in contrast to any

“essentialist” belief in the biological origin of gender), thus rendering it available to re-imagining through visual re-imagining and strategies of production.

In her reading, Jones emphasizes the fact that by adopting a Marxist and Brechtian orientation, Kelly, Pollock and most other “anti-essentialist” feminist critics focused heavily on political efficacy, defined as the artwork’s ability to produce (or avoid) specific spectatorial effects. In their desire to transform passive consumers of patriarchal ideology into active feminist cultural agents, they dismissed any work that could be construed as eliciting pleasure and spectatorial immersion, specifically through forms involving the female body that, for them, risked fetishism, the illusion of presence (essentialism) and the foreclosure of the critical distance required for intellectual reflection and social participation. Jones’ reading is confirmed by a 1982 interview in which interviewer Paul Smith asks Kelly why she omitted the representation of her own body in *Post-Partum Document*. Kelly replied:

I feel that when the image of the woman is used in a work of art, that is, when her body or person is given as a signifier, it becomes extremely problematic. Most women artists who have presented themselves in some way, visibly, in the work have been unable to find the kind of distancing devices which would cut across the predominant representations of woman as object of the look, or question the notion of femininity as a pre-given identity.²⁷

For the most part, then, work as diverse as Judy Chicago’s, Carolee Schneemann’s and Hannah Wilke’s, all labeled “essentialist” for their overt display of the female body, was seen by anti-essentialist feminist critics as naively and/or narcissistically pandering to the male gaze while lacking criticality by promoting the illusion that the meaning of the work is guaranteed in the presence of the body, a presence capable of transmitting meaning without mediation. The implication was that viewers of such work would be seduced into ignorance, missing the theoretical insight that the body in the artwork is an image or representation which is culturally manipulated (and manipulating) and that even the physical body, like gender, is a culturally

mediated concept. Preoccupied with fetishizing, identifying with and/or celebrating the female body, viewers of such work, ignorant of more sophisticated theories of representation, would not be able to gain the critical distance necessary to become efficacious feminist cultural actors.

Echoing some of the points about 1980s “elitism” raised earlier by Schor and Lacy, among others, Jones critiques the anti-essentialist, anti-visual pleasure position as blind to and even foreclosing the political and social potential of art considered to be more “accessible” to viewers. Pollock’s dismissal of feminist art that she deemed literal or “realist in an uncritical way” aligns not only with Kramer’s dismissal of *The Dinner Party*’s “vulgar” accessibility, but also assumes that spectatorial effects are uniform across viewers and can be known or determined in advance. In addition, the negation of female pleasure denies the possibility that female artists and viewers may also be desiring subjects, thus aligning the anti-pleasure position with both Modernism’s and patriarchy’s general oppression and disavowal of female desire.

Despite Kelly’s disclaimer that “there’s no single theoretical discourse which is going to offer us an explanation for all forms of social relations or for every mode of political practice,” Jones argues that the anti-visual pleasure, social construction stance of the anti-essentialist feminist artists and critics of the 1980s generated a theory of feminist art that became highly prescriptive and ultimately limiting.²⁸ Reiterating one of Diana Fuss’ strongest points in *Essentially Speaking* (Fuss’ influential deconstruction of essentialism), Jones emphasizes that the “social construction” position, in its pretensions to truth, knowledge, and the social as a determinative origin, may be just as “essentializing” as a belief in the biological origin of gender or personal experience as the unquestionable ground of knowledge.²⁹

Using this perspective, Jones makes her surprising move of arguing that the parameters of judgment subtending Kelly and Pollock’s prescription for feminist art were complicitous with

Greenbergian Modernism. By substituting a particular, pre-determined concept of feminist social efficacy (achieved through critical distance, i.e. a critique of the male gaze) for Modernism's notion of aesthetic quality, the anti-essentialist position, in Jones' interpretation, attempted to institute a modernist hierarchy of value for feminist art. Although Jones does not take her argument to this level of generality in Sexual Politics, the concept of essentialism (defined as an attempt to anchor signification) deeply questions any relationship between art and epistemology, a point to which I will return. For now, however, the more specific trajectory in Jones' argument is her statement, made in agreement with Lucy Lippard, that what critics found most offensive about *The Dinner Party* wasn't simply Chicago's inclusion of essentialist "content" but rather the "wholly interpretable imagery" of the female sex.³⁰

Along with Broude and Garrard, Jones interprets the "essentialism" of Chicago's dinner plates, like her foregrounding of domestic crafts, as a political act specific to its temporal context. By rendering the vulva available to vision, Jones argues, the plates violate and thereby expose a long history of Western aesthetic conventions that fetishize the female body, yet disallow the direct and public representation of female genitals by relegating such imagery to the "obscene." Challenging the line that separates art from pornography, Chicago's three-dimensional, over-sized, "in your face" vulva plates expose the "interestedness" not only of the culture that finds them "offensive," but also of aesthetic evaluations of art that claim interpretive "disinterest." For despite the fact that most of the plates are rendered in a style more metaphorical than realist, the "unconcealing" of female genitalia as content, or what Hughes decried as "the relentless concentration on the pudenda," was so unusual at the time, so arresting and powerful in terms of identification and desire (attractive and/or repulsive), that modernist art critics' reactions to *The Dinner Party* end up aligning with the later pronouncements of

conservative politicians, who called the piece “ceramic 3-D pornography” and “weird sexual art” during Congressional hearings in 1990.³¹

For Judy Chicago, this odd convergence between the worlds of art and conservative politics, and the fact that both focused exclusively on the plates (thereby decontextualizing them from the larger scope of the installation), signaled “something very real about our culture’s view of women and women’s sexuality: that it is, at its base, detestable or at the very least shameful and not to be publicly revealed.”³² Observing the ubiquity of images of female sexuality in our culture, she made a strong distinction between images that teach “female sexuality is something to be manipulated, controlled, or dominated; that it is basically passive, or, if active, something to be subdued, often by violence” and those that suggest “female sexuality can be assertive, powerful and transformative.”³³ Chicago understood the plates to exist “entirely independent of men, bravely struggling to assert their own identities in their own context, their own history, and their own long effort toward liberation.”³⁴

Yet these vulva plates, emerging from Chicago’s project to explore “central core imagery” and a potentially female sensibility in art, were highly vulnerable to charges of essentialism, conceptualized variously as a belief in biology as defining gender, an attempt to fix identity, and/or a universalizing gesture. Chicago and Miriam Schapiro had formulated “central core” or “cunt theory” as a metaphor for a woman’s body, identity and source of creativity; as an invention for their own work; as a pedagogy for training women artists; and as a theory and/or interpretive guide for exploring how an artist’s embodiment affects perception and might offer material for producing a language of form capable of exposing and intervening in the “human dilemma.”³⁵ This “dilemma” was, in part, the frustration generated in Chicago and Schapiro (and their students in the Feminist Art Program) by living in a culture that had no semiotic for their

experiences, for the “double identity” of “male” and “female” that they understood all humans as living but with the “female” operating across much of history as the negative, repressed or denied term.³⁶

More broadly, the dilemma was the contradiction they felt between their embodied and personal experiences (i.e. “to be formed around a central core and have a secret place which can be entered and which is also a passageway from which life emerges”); the cultural identities, roles and connotations assigned to them (i.e. “woman” as “passive,” “artist” as “active” and “masculine”); and the cultural and aesthetic representations (or lack thereof) that reflected, shaped, defined and gave value to those identities and experiences.³⁷ By using their own bodies (as physical, sexual and social research data; embodiment as feeling, form and semiotic) as source material for their art, Chicago and her students sought to invent an aesthetic language that would reflect the contradictions that shaped their existence as women and offer possibilities for redefining “woman,” the female body and, as a result, their own lives and culture. As Jones argues (see below), this was a productive strategy for art-making, but problematic (universalizing) as an interpretive method for “discovering” central core or cunt imagery in the work of other women artists, notably Georgia O’Keefe, who consistently and vigorously protested this interpretation of her work.

Chicago and Schapiro’s central core theory was, in turn, inspired in part by archaeological and art historical images of ancient female figurines, many of which were interpreted as primordial fertility goddesses by archaeologists and a newly emerging cross-disciplinary group of researchers interested in ancient matrifocal cultures.³⁸ While Jones briefly mentions this “goddess culture” as provoking Chicago and many other early feminist artists (including Mary Beth Edelson, Nancy Spero and Carolee Schneemann) to rethink history, she misreads, I think,

the deeper influences. Jones labels the early feminist interest in goddess cultures “an enabling idea” flawed by what she interprets as an attempt on the part of feminist artists to appropriate masculine transcendence.³⁹ I disagree since, for the most part, researchers working with goddess imagery were theorizing not only new re-interpretations of patriarchal historical narratives but also new forms of embodied reasoning, much more in line with a poststructuralist deconstruction of the Cartesian separation of subjects and objects of knowledge and of Judeo-Christian-Islamic notions of truth as anchored in a transcendent male god.⁴⁰ In the words of Mary Beth Edelson, a feminist spirituality “provided resistance to the mind/body split by acknowledging sexuality in spirituality, thus reconciling the experience of a united spirit, body and mind,” a logic which she understood as deconstructing the nature/culture opposition.⁴¹

What is relevant to my interest in essentialism is the fact that although Jones does not discuss the drive for transcendence as an essentialist strategy *per se*, the urge toward transcendence in Christianity and other monomaletheistic religions is precisely the desire to fix signification (to anchor truth as the word of god, the paternal logos that transcends matter and the maternal body). This may be why anti-essentialist critics have generally been reflexively allergic to feminist artists’ references to “the goddess,” which are cited as essentialist for a variety of mainly implied reasons, primary among them the desire to guarantee the meaning of the female in a notion of *immanence*, in nature conceived as a biological truth of the body. It would be worthwhile to return to this at some point in order to untangle how, in general, feminist artists’ use of “goddess” imagery has been perceived by critics as an attempt at transcendence as well as immanence, which illustrates beautifully one of the paradoxes of essentialism. As Diana Fuss has argued, essentialism has been constructed to be “essentialist”; there is nothing “essential” in essentialism (it is an idea, not a reality).

That said, in many cases “goddess” images, which carry a potent historical as well as aesthetic load, provided tangible and conceptual support for artists interrogating, re-imagining and re-theorizing not only the rendering of the female form but also its material and aesthetic history, and, by extension, the aesthetics and materiality of history making as it might be theorized and imaged through the female body, particularly in narratives of creativity. Furthermore, the concept linking “goddess logic” and touch in a general sense is desire. Just as desire bridges the gap between subjects and objects of knowledge, and allows for processes of identification and immersion while also retaining a sense of distance (there must be some return movement through separation in order to maintain desire), thereby challenging the modernist (Kantian) notion of autonomy and critical distance or “objectivity,” the logic of “goddess thinking” as it was articulated in the 1970s (and beyond) sought to reintegrate the mind/body split supported by Judeo-Christian-Islamic beliefs and Cartesian theories in order to challenge epistemologies and belief systems that promote a hierarchical notion of transcendence that aligns spirit with mind and the male gender over a body denigrated as matter, immanent and female. The sense of touch also bridges the separation of subjects and objects, may dissolve boundaries or produce them while retaining a sense of contiguity, and implies a distance in proximity and proximity in distance that undoes the conceptual opposition of immanence and transcendence and suggests, instead, possibilities for their mutual imbrication.

As previously indicated, Jones (in line with Broude and Garrard) makes a crucial distinction between Chicago’s development of central core theory as a guide for her and her students’ art making and Chicago’s and Miriam Schapiro’s later, more problematic attempt to locate evidence for the theory in the work of other artists. Jones acknowledges that central core theory, when used as an interpretive model, could easily be misread as implying that women

make art that reproduces their biological anatomy or that there is a formal and unchanging “female sensibility,” ideas that appeared reductive, universalizing, and therefore essentialist to 1980s critics. Yet Jones’ research, like Broude and Garrard’s, confirms that Chicago’s and Shapiro’s intention was never to secure central core imagery as a form or meaning; rather, it was an attempt to remake a denigrated symbol of female identity and otherness (the vulva) into a sign of cultural value and empowerment. While it is true that Chicago and Shapiro had universalizing intentions insofar as they sought to research the commonalities of female experience as a precondition to collective, political action, they were not biological essentialists, nor did they intend to “fix” female identity.

In “Female Imagery,” their original paper on central core theory, Chicago and Schapiro make clear statements to the effect that women’s oppression results not from biology but rather the “way in which women are seen by the culture.”⁴² Jones also cites their contemporary, feminist historian and critic Arlene Raven, who stated as early as 1975 that “female experience” is “socially defined and cultural rather than biological, innate or personal.”⁴³ For Raven, definitions of “the feminine” are fluid and “change according to the political, economic and social needs of a world which demands a woman display them.”⁴⁴ Keenly aware that the feminist insistence on personal experience as content functioned, in part, as “an attack on modernist formalism and the capitalist structure it serves,” Raven explicitly stated that central core imagery was neither “stationary in art” nor based on “biological determinism—an idea to which feminism is opposed.”⁴⁵

Jones reads Chicago’s vulva plates as emerging from a political intention, her desire to create an “active vaginal form,” “a positive mode of representing the female body in order to reclaim it from its patriarchal construction as passive object, fetishized through structures of

male desire.”⁴⁶ As previously noted, Chicago’s “cunt art” could be read today as an example of feminist poststructuralist theorist Judith Butler’s much later concept of performative subjectivity and agency. Even in the 1970s, artists like Faith Wilding were clear about the connection between cunt art, politics, and identity, as is apparent in her statement to Jones that central core imagery should be understood along the same lines as “Black is Beautiful.”⁴⁷ Thus cunt imagery, at least for some 1970s “essentialist” feminist artists, functioned much in the same way as Butler describes the appropriation of hate speech by those it targets (for example the word “queer”) as a means toward progressive political ends—without necessarily resorting to a concept of identity as fixed or original, although the risk is always present.

That said, perhaps the most problematically essentialist element of central core theory, one that it shares with both *The Dinner Party*’s plates and the feminist project in general, is the charge of universalization. Attempts by 1970s feminist artists to articulate a concept of “female experience” as a political imperative and aesthetic question produced innovative work but also rendered the concept vulnerable to overgeneralization. The political goal of finding a common female experience or female sensibility in art was, and still is, a potentially overgeneralizing gesture, and charges of essentialism against *The Dinner Party* and its plates from this perspective were, if not entirely accurate, appropriate and productive. Despite the fact that Chicago and her volunteers spent hundreds of hours researching and selecting the group of women represented, which did include at least one woman of color, Sojourner Truth, and lesbian Natalie Barney, many women of color and lesbians criticized the project for a lack of diversity. While Chicago never intended the piece to be comprehensive (nor could it be), these critiques were valid insofar as they were motivated by assumptions the work itself suggested through the ambitious scope of its historical revision, its monumental size, and its ironic though predominantly serious tone.⁴⁸

The problem of universalization was also evident in the contradictory nature of many of the responses to the plates. For example, some feminists, like Mira Schor, criticized them for reducing all women to their vulvas (biological essentialism), while others, like Lorraine O'Grady and Alice Walker, found it disturbing that Sojourner Truth's plate did *not* depict a vulva, thereby denying "blackness and feminism in the same body."⁴⁹ Although Truth's plate does suggest an abstract vulva in its arrangement of three faces, Jones reads Walker's critique as astutely exposing "the hesitancy white feminists tend to exhibit in relation to black female sexuality," an observation that opens yet again onto the general critique of early feminism as not taking other identities, such as race, ethnicity and queer orientations, into account.⁵⁰ While the representational restraint of the Truth plate was meant by Chicago as a respectful gesture, given the historically racist sexualization of the black female body, it does point to the rupture of an already tenuous congruence between women when race and other identities are factored into gender based experiences, highlighting the very different stakes women have in historical narratives, especially those involving issues of sexuality and embodiment.⁵¹ Chicago acknowledged the problem of universalization in an interview with Lucy Lippard published in the catalogue for her 2002 retrospective: "In the seventies we were guilty of a certain universalization. The notion that there was a single woman's perspective has come in for some healthy criticism. But I think it opened the way for a more sophisticated understanding of the ways in which diverse women's experience was filtered through race, culture, geography, sexual preference, personal experience, family structure."⁵²

In Jones' account, the lack of consensus in feminist readings of the vulva plates and The Dinner Party in general is emblematic of the difficulty of creating agreement about what constitutes a feminist work of art in the first place, a tension inherent in the overgeneralizations

and exclusions that any coalitional politics always risks. Chicago's failure to secure readings of the plates that were always empowering rather than objectifying for viewers and critics exemplifies one level of the problem of essentialism, which is also a problem of language and representation in general. If we accept the particularity and contingency of postmodern subjectivity and meaning-making (the gap between signifier and signified), there is simply no way, at least from a poststructuralist viewpoint, for an artist or artwork to fully anchor meaning or control viewer response. This is why, as Jones asserts, prescriptions for feminist art, such as the refusal of visual pleasure, may initially offer productive hypotheses or experiments but will eventually limit the possibilities for both art production and spectatorship.

Ironically, the "essentialist" Chicago's intent was never to create a particular kind of viewer but rather to expand the entire field: "The whole notion of feminist art, as I was trying to articulate it, is that the form-code of contemporary art has to be broken in order to broaden the audience base What I have been after from the beginning is a redefinition of the role of the artist, a reexamination of the relation of art and community, and a broadening of the definitions of who controls art and, in fact, an enlarged dialogue about art, with new and more diverse participants."⁵³ Thus, as Chicago implies, the more productive approach to art criticism may not be to determine whether or not a work of art is essentialist, but rather, as Diana Fuss has suggested, to map responses within an expanded interpretive and/or historical field. The value of Amelia Jones' reinterpretation of early feminist art lies, in large part, in the fact that she begins to trace the various and imbricated kinds of essentialisms operative at particular moments in art historical discourse and practices. I would expand her observations to define essentialism as the deep assumptions that inform our interpretations, the points at which we are compelled to fix meaning, however temporarily, in order to speak, represent or signify at all as we negotiate the

circuits of interpretation and desire that subtend all interactions between artists, viewers, and works of art.

Drawing on Diana Fuss, Jones concludes that Chicago's "doomed but valiant" effort to represent and expand "female experience" in *The Dinner Party* is a problem characteristic not only of a particular period of feminist thought that privileged gender as the primary constituent of identity, but also of the larger project of feminism when it attempts to articulate female experience as a general category.⁵⁴ Accusations against essentialism as a universalization of experience *should* be taken seriously and in many cases have been, as feminist discourses and practices continue to inform, struggle with, and open up to other discourses, including race, postcolonial and queer theories. But as Jones points out, again through the work of Fuss, "a certain 'essentialism'—that is, the claiming of identifiably similar experiences among particular groups of people—is a crucial component of any 'coalition politics,' and must be accommodated within any politics of representation."⁵⁵

As that which makes the politicizing of experience possible by gathering individuals into larger, group identities, essentialism as Jones, following Fuss, defines it, may function as a political strategy that should be evaluated according to when, where and by whom it is practiced, as well as "how they practice it and on what terms the foundational identity is defined."⁵⁶ In consequence, *Sexual Politics* ends up framing early feminist artists' attempts to articulate female experience, "to mark gender as informative of cultural practice, to refuse the masculinist notion of 'universality' that guaranteed the privileging of male-invented forms and themes as neutrally aesthetic (as beyond race, gender, sexuality and class)," not as a naïve blunder but rather as a vital strategy and necessary step in the articulation and development of feminist practices and discourses.⁵⁷

In her final analysis, Jones assigns the perceived essentialism of Chicago and her contemporaries a place of fundamental importance in post-war art historical narratives, arguing persuasively that it was productive and powerful in terms of its effects. As “a crucial component of identity politics,” essentialism “enabled the development of a feminist politics of art and art history” by insisting that the production of culture is informed by gender and, by extension and intention (if not sufficiently), “differences” of all kinds (racial, ethnic, class, and so on).⁵⁸ Defined in this way, the “essentialist” feminist artists of the 1970s may be credited as producing one of the most significant paradigm shifts in the history of art. In terms of the theory versus essentialism debate, *Sexual Politics* offered a decisive reconceptualization of accusations of essentialism against early feminist artists and, in the process, opened up new possibilities for the inclusion of “essentialist” feminist artists in post-war art historical narratives.

Critical Reception of Sexual Politics

To repeat, Jones’ revision of the history of early feminist art was not, for the most part, well received, at least not initially. Yet it should be noted that, with the exception of Ruth Wallen’s essay in *Women’s Studies* and David Joselit’s review for *Art in America*, most criticism of *Sexual Politics*, careening from gratitude to outright opprobrium, missed Jones’ crucial recontextualization of the essentialism debate.⁵⁹ In fact, in a repetition that could only qualify as uncanny (and very revealing), *Sexual Politics* elicited many of the same hostile and contentious responses that had plagued *The Dinner Party* since its debut in 1979. In a sense this reaction confirmed some of the concerns of the six prominent early feminist artists (mentioned earlier) who, fearing that the emphasis on *The Dinner Party* would support Chicago’s career at the expense of their own, refused to have their work included.

For the most part, initial reviews of the show did tend to focus primarily on *The Dinner Party*, often with scant or no mention of the fifty-three other works that had been included.

Some reviewers were positive, for example *Art Scene*'s Betty Brown who, acknowledging a moment of nostalgia, expressed delight that a younger generation would finally be able to see early feminist work that had not been accessible. Other reviewers, for example *Art Issue*'s Libby Lumpkin, repeated old criticisms that conformed to Hilton Kramer's, Robert Hughes's and Suzanne Muchnic's earlier dismissals of *The Dinner Party* as "ardent kitsch."⁶⁰ Perhaps this was not so surprising given the fact that Lumpkin, one of four panelists selected by L.A. Times art critic Muchnic to discuss the history of feminist art in a roundtable organized in conjunction with the show, did not appear conversant with contemporary feminist discourses. When asked to comment on the current status of feminism in art, Lumpkin responded with the statement that the problem is that all feminist theories share a "basic kind of assumption about women—that they're virtuous."⁶¹

Other reviewers rehearsed Pollockian concerns about critical distance. Writing for *Woman's Art Journal*, self-described "virgin viewer" Julie Springer "admitted" that seeing *The Dinner Party* was "thrilling" and that "it looked fabulous!"⁶² "On reflection," however, she backed away from her initial response, which she described as an "uncritical acceptance of the status quo," and faulted the exhibition for presenting the work as it was originally installed.⁶³ Citing the dramatically lit table, tapestry banners, and informational wall panels (which introduced the women and goddesses represented as well as the people who worked on the project), Springer criticized the combination of "Chicago's didactic envelope" and the "ecclesiastical aura" of the installation for eliciting the kind of affective reaction that, from a Pollockian perspective, signals a lack of critical distance. She ended her analysis by identifying her initially positive response to *The Dinner Party* as a problem inherent to the work as well as

the exhibition's framing of it, an inadequacy that translated, in Springer's estimation, as the show's failure to keep its promise to offer fresh interpretations.⁶⁴

At the other end of the spectrum, David Joselit's review for *Art in America* praised the exhibition. He specifically cited the theory versus essentialism debate as the primary source for the "often bitter disagreements that have divided feminist artists and theorists in recent decades," and acknowledged the importance of its deconstruction, which he then credited with spurring him to rethink early feminist work, including *The Dinner Party*.⁶⁵ Referencing the political intention and enormous amount of historical research that went into its making, Joselit compares *The Dinner Party* with Hans Haacke's activist installation, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*. Commissioned by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum to create a one-man show, Haacke, like Chicago, relied on extensive archival research to create photographs and text-based wall panels that detailed some of the questionable business practices of Harry Shapolsky, one of the Guggenheim's trustees. Despite the fact that Haacke's exhibition was cancelled by the museum's director six weeks before it was due to open, this installation is considered an important early example of Institutional critique. Thus Joselit's reinterpretation of *The Dinner Party* as drawing on strategies associated with Conceptual art and Institutional critique implicitly argued for its inclusion within an "accepted" avant-garde historical lineage, a position taken up and expanded by Helen Molesworth in her 2000 essay "House Work and Art Work," discussed in the previous chapter.

Furthermore, Joselit, reading "against the dominant critical grain," found that Chicago's controversial dinner plates, "produced in an abstracted language saturated with cultural references," were "impossible to see ... as a simple form of biologism."⁶⁶ After viewing *Sexual Politics*, Joselit not only agreed with Jones' contention that accusations of biological essentialism

against 1970s feminist work were, for the most part, insupportable, but also concluded that “even the most biologically explicit art of 1970s feminism sought to link the body to cultural norms and constructions.”⁶⁷ It is important to note, however, that Joselit continued to underscore key differences between art labeled “essentialist” and “constructionist,” the former seeking to “produce a visual wage from female biology” versus the latter’s emphasis on the body as an effect, rather than a source, of social norms and discourses.⁶⁸ Yet this review, published by a respected contemporary art historian and critic writing for one of the most widely read art journals, signaled an early acceptance of Jones’ deconstruction of the theory versus essentialism polemic as well as of her fundamental proposition that 1970s “essentialist” feminist art was, at the very least, worthy of serious reconsideration within broader post-war art historical narratives.

I indicated earlier that the most malign review of *Sexual Politics* surfaced in the popular press, where *Los Angeles Times* art critic Christopher Knight dismissed the entire show not only as “a fiasco,” but as “the worst exhibition I’ve seen in a Los Angeles museum in many a moon.”⁶⁹ Although Knight acknowledged the “significance of the show’s subject,” stating “feminism has been the most influential and momentous social movement for American art since the 1960s,” his review replicated the type of strident invective slung at *The Dinner Party* twenty years earlier, precisely the sort of reaction Jones’s essay for the catalogue had chronicled in detail. He chided the UCLA/Armand Hammer Museum of Art for having “foolishly trotted out” a work he then erroneously described as eliciting “nearly universal Bronx cheers from art critics and feminists alike.”⁷⁰ Acknowledging the political intention informing *The Dinner Party*, he excoriated its pretension to posterity, simultaneously contradicting his earlier assertion about a unanimous response to it: “Chicago’s ‘agit-prop monument’ is a crass and self-important oxymoron, which partly explains the horrible divisiveness of its reception.” Here Knight

repeated a long-established criticism of Chicago, the perceived contradiction between her desire to critique the institutions of art yet also be accepted into them. While Jones did, in fact, acknowledge this problem in her essay for the catalogue, noting that many feminist artists continue to struggle with precisely this dilemma, Knight failed to see the investigatory potential such a contradiction offers and used it, instead, to dismiss *The Dinner Party* as a “failed work of art.”⁷¹

Although Knight’s excoriation of *Sexual Politics* appeared to be based on the fact that it centered around a “flawed” artwork (*The Dinner Party*), what he seemed to find most offensive about the exhibition was Jones’s feminist framework: “‘Sexual Politics’ isn’t really about art at all” but rather “an illustrated lecture on feminist theory,” with “preachy didactic panels [that] direct the audience in proper theoretical viewing of the art.” This is a criticism similar to that put forward by Springer, who was suspicious of Chicago’s “didactic envelope” and the identificatory responses the installation elicited, but Knight’s was more personal and emotional, lambasting both the show and its curator. Ignoring Jones’s extensive historical research, he resorted to labeling her “an ideologist” who privileged theory over practice, a conclusion he then expanded into a declaration about theory’s “misuse” and abuse of art. Sidestepping any specific discussion of theory, Knight concluded his professional review by attempting to veil this omission, substituting instead a rather vivid yet clichéd anthropomorphization that would be hysterically funny if it were not, in fact, hysterical and malicious. “You want to run screaming from the room,” Knight ranted, as “mere works of art,” like “Julie Bamber’s exquisite little vulval painting on a phallic block of wood,” get “crushed beneath the boot.”⁷²

The commandant is, of course, Jones herself, and the threatening footgear Knight didn’t dare name directly is feminism, more specifically Jones’ feminist poststructuralist deconstruction

of essentialism and modernist critical neutrality. While my imagination might enjoy outfitting Jones with any number of exotic accoutrements, what Knight invoked was far less delightful, the feminist-baiting hate term “Feminazi” popularized by right-wing pundit Rush Limbaugh. Reproducing exactly the kind of critical reaction Jones credits much early feminist art as provoking in order to expose it as invested, Knight reconfigured his personal dislike of *The Dinner Party* and discomfort with certain forms of feminist discourse as an aesthetic judgment, a deflection he then attempted to veil by launching into a vociferous personal attack on the curator as “ideologist.”

Knight’s response, in its effort to classify art as autonomous or separate from theoretical discourses, resurrects not only the specter of Clement Greenberg’s version of Modernism but also larger questions about relationships between art and language, a point to which I will return in a moment. Knight’s column did in fact provoke a number of letters to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, the majority of which were supportive of the exhibition in various ways. Though not unanimously fond of *The Dinner Party*, many authors were clearly astute regarding gender issues, Knight’s metaphorization, and the exhibition’s effort to challenge and expand the art historical record. “The barbed-wire fence of labels that Knight constructed around ‘Dinner Party,’” Carolyn Wolf noted, “seems no match for its powerful emotional and intellectual communication. Since we all view art through a filter of our gender, upbringing, education, political beliefs, etc., I believe many people will find viewing this work to be a moving experience.”⁷³ Crediting Knight’s “harsh dismissal” with provoking his curiosity, James Griffith found the exhibition, which “bore little resemblance to Mr. Knight’s description,” both “viscerally and emotionally moving.”⁷⁴ Griffith also pinpointed one of the fundamental contradictions in Knight’s discourse: “Knight says Chicago’s work has ‘long been denounced as

politically retrogressive' for making a monument to the lost/ignored history of important women. In doing so, Knight participates in the tradition of belittling and suppressing this history."⁷⁵

Another important counter to Knight's diatribe was a letter from art historian Donald Preziosi, which, despite having been solicited by the *Los Angeles Times*' Counterpunch editor, had to be reprinted with corrections as a result of misleading editorial revisions.⁷⁶ Preziosi not only exposed Knight's inaccuracies, including his statement that the exclusion of video art "grossly deforms the show" (in fact Knight had missed the screenings), but also underscored the way in which Knight (and critics like him) censor feminist perspectives; in this case, through the "bashing of a female curator who mounted an exhibition with critical and theoretical challenges to phallogocentric historicisms."⁷⁷ Preziosi also challenged Knight's dichotomizing of art and theory in his attempt to paint Jones as an "ideologist," pointing to the fact that "artistic practices of the past 200 years have never been separate from critical and theoretical discourse and debate."⁷⁸

Preziosi is referring to the development of the disciplines of art history and criticism, where theory has always been an active component in the interchange between aesthetic evaluations and practices. What he did not address directly in his letter may be a tension, exemplified by Knight's reaction and the theory versus essentialism debates, that remains as a result of a shift in interpretive paradigms that began in the 1960s and 1970s, when theories began to move swiftly between academic disciplines, particularly linguistics, philosophy, psychoanalysis and literary criticism. It was during this period that the influence of theory-driven methods of interpretation, which could include Marxism, feminism, and various forms of poststructuralism, increased dramatically, eventually migrating from philosophy and literary criticism to film studies and art critical and historical discourses. Drawing primarily from the

study of linguistics (i.e. Ferdinand de Saussure) and the metaphor of language, “poststructuralist theory” (such as Derridean *différance* and Lacanian psychoanalysis) garnered a great deal of explanatory authority in the humanities, peaking perhaps in the 1980s yet continuing to inform much work in the arts.

While most artists and critics would agree that “language” includes visual, mythic (i.e. dreamwork) and somatic practices as well as verbal, we tend however to think of art historical and critical practices as verbal discourses written in a somewhat secondary or derivative relation to the artwork/s they ostensibly describe, analyze and contextualize. We forget that the language we use may, in fact, constitute our object/s of study, which is why, as I mentioned earlier, Judith Butler cautions us to be very careful, especially with the language of theory. Ostensibly “describing” or critiquing early feminist art, the concept of “essentialism” was, in fact, a theoretical idea that created, in turn, a history and body of work.⁷⁹ Critical frames are very powerful technologies, not only for analysis but also for invention.

Thus Knight’s opprobrium, despite its numerous factual and rhetorical errors, was provocative on another level that renders it instructive. It is yet another ironic twist in the history of the theory versus essentialism debate. In Knight’s article, Jones’s use of feminist and poststructuralist theories to investigate and deconstruct that debate, an opposition instituted in intra-feminist arguments by feminists drawing on poststructuralist theories to correct and/or denounce earlier feminist work (rendering it irrelevant to the historical record), is found guilty (once again) of annihilating the very art it now seeks to restore to a history it is credited, simultaneously, with both producing and erasing. Confirming Judith Butler’s observation about the power of theoretical discourses, Knight’s response raises questions about “appropriate” boundaries between art, texts and theory.

It is quite possible that what critic Knight found so offensive was not simply the ideology (feminist content) or (what he perceived to be) the overdetermining wall panels and essays informing *Sexual Politics*, but the fact that Jones overtly appropriated the power of the critical frame. Her recontextualization and reinterpretation of the artworks through a framework of critical texts performed, in a sense, what she argued for early feminist art, exposing the practices of art criticism and history as “interested” while demonstrating the relation of mutuality, albeit incongruent, between texts and images and bodies. Exposing one of the naturalized assumptions about the role of art critical and historical writings (that they function as secondary to the art they describe), Jones’s texts stimulated anxiety about the proper role of critics, curators and historians.

Knight’s reaction to *Sexual Politics* underscored one of Jones’s key points, one that could be applied to all systems of signification and undercuts the possibility of any “real” essentialism: the gap between language and referents (i.e. the artwork, the body, etc.), like that between subjects and objects, solicits and exposes desire. I would agree with Knight that Jones is to some extent an ideologue, but no more or less so than Knight or any of the rest of us. On the other hand, part of the trajectory of her critical work is to expose the ideology and identifications that make her a subject, to acknowledge her investments and desire (to the degree one can), sometimes blurring the boundaries between art, history, theory and autobiography in her work.⁸⁰ Traversing traditionally disparate disciplines, Jones as critic and historian, takes her cue from the practices of many early feminist artists (Carolee Schneemann, Judy Chicago and Valie Export, among others), who crossed numerous boundaries and inhabited any number of forbidden territories in order to make their own work and invent their own theories about feminism and aesthetics. Emphasizing invention, sometimes more so than or in lieu of critique, their work and

theories, unlike much 1980s art recognizably based in academic poststructuralist theory, lacked a familiar or ready-to-hand interpretive frame, rendering it more difficult, perhaps, for some critics to recognize, relate to and acknowledge.

Sexual Politics: Some Conclusions

While *Sexual Politics* was not without its problems, Amelia Jones did accomplish a significant reframing of the essentialism debate in terms both theoretical and historical, thus achieving her goal of challenging and opening up art historical narratives that had consigned most early feminist art to irrelevance and relative invisibility. Although it has not been possible to trace a direct connection between Jones's 1996 exhibition and concerns voiced in 2007 by Mira Schor and Mary Kelly about what they perceived as a current of "essentialist revisionism" in art historical discourses (a surprising reversal of the old polemic, threatening to exclude or overshadow the contributions of 1980s theory-based art) it is true that *Sexual Politics* contributed directly to the creation of the first institution in the United States committed specifically to the research, collection and exhibition of feminist art.⁸¹ For it was after actually seeing *The Dinner Party* for the first time in Jones' show that patron Elizabeth Sackler became interested not only in its ambitious aesthetic and historical program but the historical significance of the work itself, a narrative that included problems of conservation and public access.⁸² This eventually resulted in Sackler's 2001 purchase of *The Dinner Party* and, by 2007, its permanent installation at the Brooklyn Museum in the Center for Feminist Art that bears Sackler's name.⁸³

Given *The Dinner Party*'s pre-eminent place within the narrative and physical space of the Sackler Center, it can indeed be argued that the concerns of those feminist artists who felt that the *Sexual Politics* show would serve primarily to further Chicago's career and reinforce the misperception that the feminist art movement started with her have to some extent been validated. And Jones has conceded that for many viewers of *Sexual Politics*, its pre-curated

focus on *The Dinner Party* tended to overshadow the larger history she wished to present, despite her attempts to broaden the context.⁸⁴ But one may hope that the Sackler's larger emphasis on showing, collecting and educating the public about feminist art (global and contemporary as well as historical) continues to spur further research on its historical narratives rather than to confirm the old, reductive ones, such as the essentialism versus theory divide.

From a curatorial perspective, *Sexual Politics* has been credited with laying a foundation for the American feminist survey and for continuing to inspire shows of feminist work, including the two vast 2007 exhibitions, Connie Butler's *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* and Maura Reilly's *Global Feminisms*.⁸⁵ Continued evidence of a strong curatorial desire to acknowledge and extend many of the tropes and strategies of 1970s feminist art is perhaps best reflected in contemporary artist and curator Emily Roysdon's essay for the 2009 group exhibition *Ecstatic Resistance*, held at X Initiative in New York.⁸⁶ In her project to "re-imagine what political protest looks like. And what it *feels* like," Roysdon, undaunted by potential accusations of "essentialism," does not hesitate to claim working from her "lived experience" as a feminist, queer and political activist while "celebrating" embodiment. At the same time, she wryly complicates any subjectivity based on identity by claiming "the impossible" as a site of lived experience, an experience of identity which may also function as the place from which "we make our best art" and politics.⁸⁷

Taking a trans-generational approach (as Jones did in *Sexual Politics*), *Ecstatic Resistance* included contemporary work by feminist icons from the late 1960s and 1970s, such as Adrian Piper and Ulrike Ottinger, alongside that of younger political, feminist and queer artists such as Sharon Hayes and Juan Davila. Roysdon's frank acknowledgment of her debt to "great feminist thinkers" and artists, including Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, and the unselfconscious ease

with which she embraces strategies of pleasure, desire and the body as well as deconstructive theories of subjectivity, epitomize a perspective that doesn't so much seek to reconcile the tropes of 1970s and 1980s feminism as rather, in an improvisational approach that culls from both, to confirm the reductive nature of the polemic.⁸⁸ As part of a younger generation of artists, Roysdon (born 1977), like the group of feminist, queer and activist artists she co-founded, LTTR, draws from strategies that include both 1970s "essentialism" (making claims from embodiment and lived experience) and 1980s identity critique freely, intelligently and without apology. She exhibits a certain confidence that many older feminist art critics and historians do not seem quite able to muster.

The Polemic Persists: Emily Apter

No matter how often the longing for an end to the theory versus essentialism opposition is expressed, it appears to be futile. Despite Amelia Jones' persuasive deconstruction of it, post-millennium references to the problem persist in some spheres, and it is important to note that they often remain linked to anxieties about the current role of theory in relation to feminist art discourses and practices, concerns about an "essentialist revisionism" at the expense of a critical and artistic interest in "theory" and 1980s theory-based art. These anxieties remains acute for some critics, particularly those who tend to define and sometimes conflate feminist theory in general with psycho-analytically driven subjectivity theories.⁸⁹ For them, the polemic persists, particularly in discussions involving the body, gender and touch, three concepts enduringly vulnerable to accusations of essentialism, rendering them available to further analysis and interpretation. One of these critics is Emily Apter (previously mentioned in the context of *October's* "Questions of Feminism").

I would like to conclude this chapter by outlining Apter's response to an essay on Palestinian-born British artist Mona Hatoum written by Tamar Garb (a current example of an

examination of the problem of essentialism as linked to artistic touch); then delving further into touch, proximity and distance in Garb's take on Hatoum's art; and, finally, by preparing the ground for my last chapter by departing from a particular quote by Mary Kelly upon an examination of the work of certain early feminist artists, seen in part through the lens of the history of artistic touch.⁹⁰

Even though she claims to eschew “binary thinking”, Emily Apter, expressing a strong concern (almost identical to that articulated by Schor and Kelly in 2007), dedicates her response essay to the “Subjectivities” section of the most recent feminist art anthology, *Women Artists at the Millennium* (2006), to a call for “a referendum on theory and feminism,” stating that “in order to survive, feminist theory—especially the psychoanalytically inflected theory—has had to fight for its life.”⁹¹ Mapping a brief history wherein psychoanalytic theory, having lost some of its authority in the disciplines of its origins, reestablished itself in feminist art discourses and practices, Apter then goes on to suggest that despite the prominence of feminist artists and critics who continue to draw from it (i.e. Griselda Pollock, Mary Kelly, Catherine de Zegher, Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, Mignon Nixon), the dominant position of psychoanalytic feminism no longer appears secure.

Unlike Miwon Kwon, whose distinction between deconstructive and psychoanalytically inflected feminist theories was discussed in the previous chapter, Apter conflates feminist theory with psychoanalytic theory at several points in her essay. This slippage is important, given that her concern is primarily the “embattled” situation of psychoanalytic “subjectivity feminism” in current feminist discourses.⁹² While she locates this problem as part of a larger “backlash” against theory in general, it is worth noting an irony: several of the “accusations” she registers as threatening the survival of psychoanalytic subjectivity feminism (theory) since the mid-1990s,

such as “too straight, too white, too smug about assumptions of consensus” and “insufficiently engaged with issues of race,” are identical to those levied against “essentialist” feminist art of the 1970s (for example some of the aforementioned responses to *The Dinner Party*).⁹³

Although Apter names a number of psychoanalytic and literary theorists, including Jane Gallop and Julia Kristeva, who attempted to answer or rectify these and other charges against psychoanalytic feminism (such as “too generationally rivalrous,” “deferential to phallogocentric theoretical constructs,” “insufficiently engaged with issues of race, postcolonialism and public policy; too academic and overly abstract”), it is the domain of “visual feminism” that has, from her perspective, “played a key role in ensuring the afterlife of feminist theory.”⁹⁴ Yet given Apter’s emphasis on the survival of psychoanalytic feminist theory within feminist visual discourses, I think it is significant that only one of the three essays in the “Subjectivities” section draws specifically on such theory: Mignon Nixon’s explanation of negative transference as informing Louise Bourgeois’s *The She-Fox*. Neither Tamar Garb’s discussion of Mona Hatoum nor Anne Wagner’s work on Rosemary Trockel refers directly to psychoanalysis. More importantly, both Garb and Wagner emphasize their artists’ references to the body and use of *techne* (drawing and line) as gendered, a position that, for Apter, skates uncomfortably close to essentialism, perhaps motivating her call for a referendum on theory and, finally, “an anti-essentialist approach to the analysis of gender in visual media.”⁹⁵

Apter’s discomfort is significant for my interests because her primary concern, that feminism develop “an anti-essentialist approach,” is consistent with the history of feminist criticism relying heavily on psychoanalytic subjectivity theories (see Pollock and Kelly, discussed earlier).⁹⁶ What seems most problematic for Apter is that both Garb’s and Wagner’s essays rely on gender stereotypes (i.e. the “feminization of line”) that appear to her to be

essentialist and/or to leave the reader with conclusions that are, from Apter's viewpoint, unsatisfying in their deconstructive ambivalence.⁹⁷ On one level, Apter's discomfort with assignments of gender is understandable from a theoretical position that seeks to open the concept of gender up beyond the reductive binarism of "female" and "male" (as well as to include many others factors that contribute to identity formation, such as race, class, age, location, and so on). While I would agree with this goal, I think Apter misses the value for both critics and artists of working (for several reasons) with stereotypes and potentially essentialist concepts.⁹⁸

My first response to Apter is that Garb and Wagner, following the lead of the artists they discuss, are citing both cultural tropes and important historical precedents, earlier art critical and historical traditions that discussed line and touch in terms of bifurcated gender. More importantly, gender, over time, has not always been assumed to be inherent, fixed, or essentialist in the art discourses that have utilized it as a primary organizational and/or conceptual metaphor. I will continue this discussion in my next chapter, but for now I would like to emphasize that gender stereotypes, particularly in relation to aesthetic practices and discourses of touch, are unstable, both dependent on and also influencing much wider cultural contexts (such as issues of class, race, age and so on), which is precisely what Hatoum's work (shortly to be discussed through Garb's reading) suggests.

Second, while it is certainly true (particularly from a performative perspective, as mentioned earlier) that the recitation of stereotypes may serve to reinforce them, it is also true that, in a series of gestures that are often not recognizable as traditional "critique," stereotypes, like any concept, may be re-performed incorrectly, opening them up to new definitions and semiotic relations with other concepts or images. Part of the power of both Hatoum's and

Trockel's work, as read by Garb and Wagner, is that it sets up an ambivalent tension between terms which moves the locus of critique away from the intention of the artist and more toward the experience of the viewer. By both exposing and holding the contradictions that arise through oppositions that cannot, at various moments and under particular pressures, be maintained (i.e. feminine versus masculine; human versus non-human), their work invites the viewer to explore, through a range of possible responses, how her or his own subjectivity and/or semiotic processes are informed by intersubjective desires, often contradictory and incongruous.⁹⁹

The third point I would like to make, not only in relation to Apter's concerns but also the larger question of essentialism, is that at some level there is no getting "outside" or "beyond" the "stereotype" insofar as it is, in a sense, an integral part of the semiotic process. Given that we constantly negotiate relations between the particular and the general, the stereotype is a matter of scale, functioning as a requisite shorthand in the process of making and connecting, or disconnecting, images, words and ideas. To push this concept further, even the use of a single word or term is a stereotype insofar as it is an arbitrary gathering of meanings into an agreed upon convention which, through the process of repetition, gains "credibility" and becomes an accepted word or even "received idea." However, due to the fact that a representation (word, image, idea) cannot give us the thing to which it refers in its entirety (there are always exclusions, excesses and over-generalizations due to the gap between a word or thing and its referent), it may be repeated unconventionally (though accident or intention) in an ongoing process of shifting semiotics over time and place.

Words, images and ideas gain and change meaning and semiotic authority through repetition and moving back and forth from the particular to the general. If we drop to the level of the most particular or unique the result is typically non-sense, in the sense of non-

comprehension. While nonsense may be incredibly useful, poetic and is the foundation of much successful art, it also risks a level of incomprehension or misunderstanding that may lead to a subject's death, insanity or simple irrelevance.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, generalization leads to problems with exclusions, as lesbians and women of color were quick to point out during the early feminist movement.

In a sense, the process of making meaning is at some level inherently essentialist insofar as repetition, as an effect of the play of difference and the desire to create or maintain meaning, produces a gathering or ground, a point of reference, however temporary, flawed and tenuous. Without that ground, albeit highly unstable and negotiable, there would be no "significant" communication. On the other hand, essentialism, defined as the fixing of meaning or an attempt to give the thing in itself (full presence), is also rendered impossible by the play of difference and intersubjective desire. Again, this is the paradox of essentialism: there is nothing "essential" to essentialism, which is why "touch," perhaps the most received signifier of presence and essence in Modernism, is such a powerful trope, especially in the work of 1970s feminists. As Diana Fuss has observed, "essentialism may at once be more intractable and more irrecoverable than we thought; it may be essential to our thinking while at the same time there is nothing 'quintessential' about it."¹⁰¹ Hence essentialism, "when held most under suspicion ... is often doing its work elsewhere, under other guises ... sometimes laying the ground of its own critique."¹⁰²

It is my perception that in 21st-century art discourses, which follow upon the undoing of the theory-essentialism opposition by deconstructive feminists like Judith Butler, Jones and Fuss, the old, over-generalized polemic is of more immediate concern to feminist critics invested primarily in the explanatory power of psychoanalytic subjectivity theory than to those who use a

deconstructive, postcolonial, race theory and/or activist approach.¹⁰³ And yet the anti-essentialist critics, particularly Pollock, De Zegher and Lichtenberg Ettinger, have turned, as mentioned in the last chapter, to using concepts and metaphors developed by 1970s “essentialist” feminists as a way to resuscitate their psychoanalytic feminist theorizing. Admittedly, mine is a deconstructive reading of the situation, but I think it is valid to say that while psychoanalytic feminism continues to use “essentialism” as the negative pole against which it seeks to define an “anti-essentialist” program, method or approach, essentialism, as the outside term that makes the inside term possible, will continue to haunt, even appear to revitalize, the very system that would exclude it. While I am not arguing for maintaining binary thinking, the beauty of oppositions is that they always fail at some point, undone by their terms’ own beveled edges or internal porosities.¹⁰⁴

It is my sense that Apter places too strong an emphasis on the possibility of escaping or getting “beyond” gender stereotypes through theory and critique and not enough on the value of acknowledging, mapping and/or playing with the broader historical and cultural implications, contradictions, absurdities and excesses generated by embodied concepts (i.e. feminine, masculine, transgendered, and so on) as they are performed across time and place. This is not to suggest that history is somehow opposed to theory and critique, but rather to suggest that what we commonly call history may be referenced, traced and represented through various strategies and forms, including embodied practices that render it aesthetic and theoretical as well. There is not space here in the context of my argument to discuss Wagner’s brilliant reading of Trockel, but I would like to end with a brief look at the work of Mona Hatoum through Garb’s essay, which opens on to my own interest in essentialism and early feminist artist’s use of touch.

Touch and the Proper Distance: Mona Hatoum

In Tamar Garb's astute and lively analysis, Palestinian-born artist Hatoum plays with the histories of line, material and touch as gendered, making them available to reinscription through "registering the experience and bodily specificity of women," a strategy that subverts the formal properties of line by making it "signify as markers of the feminine."¹⁰⁵ It is this assignment of "feminine" or "masculine" that Apter finds so troubling and potentially essentializing in Garb's analysis, which also discusses Hatoum's use of the body, often her own, to invoke powerfully gendered dichotomies. As Apter finds Garb's references to gender (which are, more accurately, reflective of Hatoum's) potentially "essentialist," I would also like to emphasize the ways in which Hatoum performs a destabilization of gender, class and art historical traditions through a use of materials and gestures which specifically invoke or reference touch, particularly as she plays with notions of "proximity" and "distance."

The concepts of proximity and distance have a long feminist history and are fundamental to the work of French feminists Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous as they each developed, from the 1970s on, feminist strategies that came to be known as "writing the body."¹⁰⁶ Their work was responding, in part, to philosophical and religious traditions in which proximity and distance were often gendered and could refer, respectively, to the oppositions of immersion (identification) and reflection (critical distance), immanence and transcendence, body/matter and mind (or spirit), and/or female and male. As Garb argues, several of Hatoum's pieces directly reference the "readymade" template of the modernist grid, but her use of material (i.e. human hair) and context (i.e. domestic) confounds any supposed neutrality by invoking culturally gendered connotations. In addition I would suggest that Hatoum, like many feminist artists of the 1970s, also uses gender as a kind of grid, a "readymade" or "found object" (a modernist strategy that was often used to eschew signs of the artist's hand or subjective investment), but

her invocations of touch both stage and trouble gender roles and rules, as well as subject/object relations, by implying relationships between things or people that do not typically inhabit the same space or tolerate proximity comfortably.

In *Keffieh* (1993-99), Hatoum re-weaves the readymade grid of the traditional Arabic head scarf, reproducing the conventional black and white version worn by men but substituting the black threads with a new material, the long silky tresses of dark female hair. As Garb argues, this small shift in material explodes the semiotics of this quotidian object, at once making visible the typically invisible hands of women, their unacknowledged labor and creativity (traditionally women are the weavers and embroiderers in Palestinian culture), while creating a situation of taboo proximity between genders, heightened by the fact that in Arabic culture a woman's hair, which directly references her sexuality and fertility, is supposed to remain covered.

Hatoum also leaves an excessively lengthy, wavy fringe of dark hair at the edges of the scarf, thereby reinforcing the connotations of female sexuality and further disrupting the codes of both proper "reproduction" and correct distance by suggesting forbidden touch, sexualized contact between the male body of the wearer and the body of a strange (non-familial) woman. Although Apter might be uncomfortable with these references to binary genders, the power of *Keffieh* is that it solicits and plays with these tensions (gendered, sexual, creative) that exist and are heightened through such an opposition, invoking transgressions that are simultaneously cheeky, assertive, seductive and critical when performed by a female artist born into an Arabic culture.

Hatoum plays further with the theme of touch, line and gender by weaving small hair grids on ready-made toy looms in *Untitled (Black Hair Grid with Knots)* and *Untitled (Grey Hair Grid with Knots)* (2001). Directly referencing the weaver's loom as the original grid, these pieces

challenge the modernist grid's claim to neutrality by placing it within the historical domain of women, their labor as well as art. Again, Hatoum's use of hair, sometimes her own grey hair carefully saved and prepared through a painstaking process, speaks, for Garb, "of that which exceeds the grid: the temporal, the corporeal, the feminine."¹⁰⁷ In this way, Hatoum stages the gap between the body and systems of signification, the "failure of the grid to control the somatic excess of the subject."¹⁰⁸

As *Keffieh* demonstrated, Hatoum often stages this incommensurability through invocations of touch that are visual, tactile, cultural and/or historical. In *Van Gogh's Back*, a photograph from 1995, Hatoum has soaped the hair on the back of a hirsute man into a spray of circular and curvilinear lines reminiscent of Van Gogh's brushstrokes. Garb reads the resonances between brush, hair and stroke through the trope of drawing as a caress "conventionally associated with male artists and female models," an aesthetic history invoked and reversed by Hatoum as the female artist. In *Recollections*, a 1995 installation, Hatoum placed a loom on a table, scattered hairballs around the room, and strung a series of practically invisible strands of hair from the ceiling. Brushing against the faces and bodies of the viewers, the hair effectively collapsed the distance between viewer and artwork, its texture and cultural connotations (linked to the subjectivity and sexuality of the body that produced the hair) eliciting the viewer's subjective desire through a range of possible responses (i.e. surprise, disgust and/or pleasure, and so on).

For Garb, the "hair line ... refuses to signify as one or the other, as body or line, mind or matter," highlighting the fact that meaning is made in the relation of difference.¹⁰⁹ This migratory semiotic, its reversibility and irreconcilability, resonates through all the oppositions Hatoum invokes in this work, from feminine and masculine to subject and object, simultaneously

linking and undoing both, exposing their tangled imbrication. What interests me most is that it is primarily through a multi-channeled invocation of touch, from the physical handwork of women (including her own as artist), through the potential and/or realization of forbidden touch (between female and male bodies, female and female bodies, the artwork and the viewer, or the artist and the viewer), to the history of gendered artistic touch (drawing as a caress), that Hatoum “exposes” the gendered codes of her cultures (Arabic and aesthetic) through eliciting intersubjective desire.

Hatoum plays with touch as one of the most intelligent mediums and metaphors for staging and exploring the structure, contradictions and negotiations of identity and desire. As that which makes a body a body, creates it “properly” and yet also undoes it as “mine,” touch may both produce and unravel boundaries in one stroke, which may be why it is a key element in the work of many 1970s feminists, too.¹¹⁰ I would suggest that on one level, Hatoum, like a number of early feminist artists, uses touch as a form of performative theory-making, as a “proposition” (pun intended) that invites the viewer to think about or experience how the world might work differently. And yet, given the perspective of a modernist history of aesthetic touch, where the artist’s hand was a signifier of creative genius (i.e. Jackson Pollock), of the artist’s full presence as the originator of the work, early feminist artists’ explorations of touch in the context of gender were highly vulnerable to charges of essentialism.

Departing From Kelly: A Reexamination of Early Feminist Art

The next two chapters continue to be shaped by my interest in the persistence of that term, in the obsessive and vehement returns to the essentialism debate in art historical and critical literature, which as Peggy Phelan notes have a “quality of Freudian afterwardness” suggesting the repression of something traumatic or threatening at their source, indicating at the very least that “something still-to-be-interpreted remains.”¹¹¹ Curious about the relationship between

“essentialism,” repetition and touch, I choose as my point of departure a quote from one of the most insistent anti-essentialist critics, artist Mary Kelly: “The discourse of the body in art is more than a repetition of the eschatological voices of abstract expressionism; the actual experience of the body fulfills the prophecy of the painted mark.”¹¹²

By criticizing body artists as enacting an essential self-possession because they, as well as their supporting critics, equated “actual experience” with “the body” and “the prophecy of the painted mark,” Kelly is drawing on both the history of the artist’s hand in art historical narratives and one of the fundamental insights of post-structuralism, the deconstruction of presence, theorized in part by Jacques Derrida’s work on writing and difference.¹¹³ As I discussed earlier, from the viewpoint of the anti-essentialist critics like Kelly, the meaning of “essentialism” shifted from a naïve assumption of biology as the origin of gender (biological essentialism) and came to stand in for a belief, also naïve, in the ontology of presence. This point was at the heart of both Kelly’s critique of Greenbergian formalism and, more specifically, her wholesale denunciation of feminist body art.¹¹⁴ Kelly’s dismissal provoked Amelia Jones to reinterpret the work of a number of 1970s artists in *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (1998), which concluded that many early feminist body artists enacted the very critiques of ontological presence that Kelly and the anti-essentialists had invoked to dismiss them.

My investigation will focus on the part of Kelly’s critique Jones did not take up, examining early feminist art from the perspective of a modern history of artistic touch, the shifting and complex relationships between touch, the mark, identity and presence, particularly as they are figured through gender and thus form a critical substrate of the essentialism debate. While the artist’s hand may have, in earlier periods, indicated her or his presence in the work, there was never a simple conflation of touch and presence; their interplay constantly opened on to other

social and political factors such as gender, class and capital, as well as questions about artistic autonomy, agency, and intention, more often than not complicating presence rather than simply confirming it.

Arguing that “the subject” is not the origin of writing, is not “present” before writing but is rather an effect of it (and is infinitely deferred through the spacing of difference), Derrida’s speculation, when translated into the art world, upends traditional assumptions about artistic authorship, agency and genius while also undoing Modernism’s belief in art’s (as well as the critic’s) autonomy and neutrality. Deeply questioning the Cartesian subject-object split opened up new possibilities for rethinking epistemology through the intersubjective relations between artist, viewer and work. It was the destabilizing effects of intersubjective desire that Kelly’s critique, which is astute in the context of Modernism, missed in her complete dismissal of feminist artists’ use of the body, due to her concern that the body was somehow too historically bound to ontological presence and art historical conventions around the mark (the artist’s presence invoked through touch) to be useful for feminist art practices and theory. In the context of gender politics, there is a heightened sense that the art historical conflation of the mark and the body of the artist, traditionally invoked – and sometimes veiled – through touch, is particularly seductive and dangerous.

It is precisely this condition of the seduction and danger involved in invoking and veiling presence, whether “naïvely” essentialist or as a limit-condition of experience, that I would like to look into more thoroughly, focusing on how early feminist artists researched, staged and even theorized this condition, in part through their explorations of touch. Yet this condition has a longer lineage in art historical narratives, one that dates back to at least the Renaissance and is thoroughly gendered.

¹ Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 223.

² Christopher Knight, "More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed 'Dinner Party' Undermines 'Sexual Politics,'" *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1996, http://articles.latimes.com/1996-05-02/entertainment/ca-65092_1_dinner-party (accessed 6/27/2010).

³ See David Joselit, "Exhibiting Gender," *Art in America*, Jan 1997, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_nl_v85/ai_19013625 (accessed 2/8/2007).

⁴ Thus part of this chapter will seed the potential for an investigation, through the trajectory of Jones' work, of the hypothesis that the problem of essentialism (as provoked by reactions to the work of early feminist artists) opens on to issues fundamental not only to feminist debates about connections between art practices, concepts of subjectivity and coalition (identity) politics, but also feminism's relationship to epistemology. It may be that the theory versus essentialism debate ultimately questions the boundaries between theory, criticism, history and art, offering possibilities for expanding the discipline of art history, its historical methods and practices. This may be part of the impetus behind the current reinvigoration of interest in late 1960s and 1970s feminist work, and why the problematic of essentialism, despite years of theorizing, dismissal, revision and deconstruction, survives.

⁵ As Jones, Copjec and others have suggested, desire is what undoes, or at least complicates and questions, every attempt to maintain strict divisions between inside and out, between subjects and objects on any level (intellectual, psychic, physical, and so on). One of the great insights of much early feminist art-making that was labeled "essentialist" is, as Jones argues in *Body Art / Performing the Subject*, that it performs, elicits, and exposes desire. As a quality that is often assumed to be personal, essential and interior, desire is what takes one out of one's self; it is biological, cultural and political at once, maintaining subjects and objects in relation.

⁶ Lucy R. Lippard, "Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s," *Art Journal* 40, no. 1 / 2 (Autumn – Winter, 1980): 362-365, 362.

⁷ Jones chronicles this in her essay for the *Sexual Politics* catalogue and develops it further in *Performing the Subject*. Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996.); and Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

⁸ The exhibition that was to become *Sexual Politics* was initiated by the director of UCLA at the Armand Museum of Art and Cultural Center in L.A., Henry T. Hopkins. Languishing in storage in Melbourne, Australia since 1988, "The Dinner Party" had recently stormed into public view once again when a number of politicians in Washington, D.C., who had never seen the piece, blocked its donation to the University of the District of Columbia, calling it "weird sexual art" and "obscene" (*Sexual Politics*, 10). Hopkins, who had been the director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art when "The Dinner Party" opened there to unprecedented attendance in 1979, was eager to put it before the public eye once again in order to initiate a dialogue about the relationship of government to the arts. Elizabeth Shepherd, senior curator, suggested showing the actual piece and Amelia Jones, fascinated by the history of controversy and by the extreme range of responses, both positive and negative, that "The Dinner Party" had provoked, agreed to guest curate, expanding the exhibition considerably to include feminist work both contemporaneous with Chicago's as well as contemporary pieces that addressed similar questions, themes and issues.

⁹ Amelia Jones, "Art's Sexual Politics," *N.Paradoxa* online no. 19 (May 2006): 56.

¹⁰ Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 25, footnote 7; also Amelia Jones, "Art's Sexual Politics," *N.Paradoxa* online no. 19 (May 2006): 54-65.

¹¹ Jones writes, "The hostility I experienced as I attempted to mount this critical and historical account of the place of The Dinner Party and its related arguments in feminist art history was intense. It wiped out my idealistic view of

feminism as a collective, supportive environment in which women could negotiate and exchange ideas. It was made clear to me that certain kinds of revisionist thinking were not welcome and that, as someone who did not actively participate in earlier periods of the feminist art movement, my attempts at intervening in what I perceived to be rather reified narratives of feminist art history were viewed antagonistically by at least some of the women who had been active in the 1970s. While I still strongly identify as a feminist, because of this disillusionment I have distanced myself somewhat from the more institutionalized aspects of feminist art history and theory, discourses that I perceive as being somewhat hypocritical in their simultaneous desire to regulate discourses while self-proclaiming their own marginality and alignment with the oppressed and excluded. This probably says a lot more about my own development from an idealistic to a more realistic position relative to feminism (which, after all, can't save academia or the art world from themselves) than it does about feminism per se." Amelia Jones, "UCLA/Armand Hammer Museum of Art—Brief Article," *Art Journal* (Winter 1999) http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0425/is_4_58/ai_59552678 (accessed 2/8/2007). See also a discussion between Amelia Jones and Connie Butler in "History Makers," (accessed 04/28/2007 at frieze.com).

¹² As mentioned earlier, my interest in the essentialism issue was spurred by comments made during a panel discussion I attended (sponsored by the Feminist Art Project in 2007), "'Life of the Mind, Life of the Market': A Reevaluation of the Contribution of Theory to Feminist Art from 1980 to 2006," chaired by Mira Schor with panelists Mary Kelly and Johanna Burton. Schor stated that her motivation for convening the panel was an attempt to "recoup the intellectual rigor of the 1980s" that was being lost or threatened by an "essentialist revisionism." The implication was that the concept of essentialism was being reinterpreted at the expense of theory and an interest in the theory-based work of the 1980s. The panel was held on Saturday, February 17, 2007, in conjunction with the meeting of The College Art Association, February 14-17, 2007. For further confirmation of this anxiety about the role of theory in contemporary feminist art discourses, see Emily Apter, "A Referendum on Theory and Feminism," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 327-334.

¹³ I would take issue with this distinction insofar as even "celebratory" images of women may offer the potential to inspire critical thinking. My first response to "The Dinner Party" led me to research the history of goddess imagery in relation to continental philosophy, notably Jacques Derrida's term "chora" which, culled from Plato's *Timeaus*, marks an early attempt to think the concept of primordial creativity as an abstraction separate from the female body. It is impossible to predict or control the outcome of a viewer's response to an art work. I would suggest that the term "critique" in relation to feminist art describes a style or approach to criticism and art-making more than an effect.

¹⁴ Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 97.

¹⁵ Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 98. Griselda Pollock, "Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice: A Brechtian Perspective," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 163, 165, 181.

¹⁶ For a more precise history of Aristotle's definition of essentialism, see Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1-21; 71-72.

¹⁷ The essay most representative of the feminist call for Brechtian distanciation is Griselda Pollock's "Screening the 1970s: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice—a Brechtian Perspective," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988).

¹⁸ Although this appears to be a kind of “chicken or egg” argument (does theory emerge from experience or experience from theory? Later, theorists like Judith Butler will say they are entangled in a ceaselessly performative and incongruent process of mutual re-definition), it is this splitting of theory away from experience in order to deconstruct experience in the 1980s that ends up re-installing theory as articulating the truth of experience. For me, psychoanalysis is the premier example of this. As Diana Fuss explains, the anti-essentialists missed the crucial point that the privileging of theory (theories of gender as socially constructed) merely displaced essentialism (as a belief in truth, origin, or presence) from a belief in the body/experience/nature as the anchor of signification to the ground of the social/the theoretical/language. Arguably the most incisive quote from Fuss is: “Perhaps the most dangerous problem for anti-essentialists is to see the category of essence as ‘always already’ knowable, as immediately apparent and naturally transparent. Similarly we need to be aware of the tendency to ‘naturalize’ the category of the natural, to see this category, too, as obvious and immediately perceptible *as such*. Essentialism may at once be more intractable and more irrecoverable than we thought; it may be essential to our thinking while at the same time there is nothing ‘quintessential’ about it. To insist that essentialism is everywhere reactionary is, for the constructionist, to buy into essentialism in the very act of making the charge; *it is to act as if essentialism has an essence*” (Fuss 1989, 21; italics in original). See Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

¹⁹ Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 85.

²⁰ Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 25.

²¹ Jones is careful to include criticisms of Chicago and “The Dinner Party,” from what some feminists found to be a contradiction between Chicago’s desire to critique institutions of high art while at the same time to be accepted into them, to the way she ran her studio from a position of mastery (based on a Renaissance studio model, which some critics read as reinforcing old patriarchal concepts and structures of hierarchy). While the people who worked on the project are acknowledged, Chicago never claimed that she was creating a collaborative work in the sense of equal power-sharing or decision-making. Since my interest is in the essentialism debates, I do not discuss perceptions, critiques and corrections of Chicago’s feminism that do not relate more or less directly to accusations of essentialism.

²² Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 87-88.

²³ It is important to note that Jones makes it clear that Chicago herself was invested in the concept of “high” art even as she sought to challenge it and expand its definitions. And yet, she points out that Chicago is not the only feminist artist who desires to have her work shown and discussed in high art settings, a contradiction that has plagued feminist art practices from early on (Jones 1996, 88). In fact, the issue of “greatness” has been reintroduced into feminist discourse once again, but this time as a positive goal for contemporary women artists. See Emily Apter, “A Referendum on Theory and Feminism,” in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 333.

²⁴ Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 90.

²⁵ Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 90.

²⁶ In response to Pollock’s insistence that feminists avoid the effects of the “male gaze” and Lisa Tickner’s contention that “The Dinner Party” was emblematic of a problematic “reverse discourse” whereby “essentialist”

feminist artists of the 1970s attempted to anchor the signification of the feminine (much as patriarchal discourses had done), Jones comments: “the development of a poststructuralist feminist art theory in the 1980s in some sense took place at the expense of the kind of feminist art from the 1970s that attempted to represent the female body in order to reclaim it from patriarchy and furthermore, this vast range of body-oriented, utopian, transformative work was often collapsed into “The Dinner Party,” which was then cited as exemplary of its problems” (Jones, 1996, 98). See Griselda Pollock, “Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice: A Brechtian Perspective,” reprinted in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 76-93; Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,” reprinted in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), 361-374; Lisa Tickner, “Sexuality and/in Representation: Five British Artists,” reprinted in *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968-2000*, ed. Hilary Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 459-473.

Peggy Phelan argues a similar point: “The accusation of essentialism was mounted in the 1980s, when theory displaced history as the dominant discourse of feminist writing. Having duly observed this lag time, however, historians then ignore it, and go on to talk about the logic of representation, a logic that makes a statement like Chicago’s ‘a vagina, that which makes me who I am,’ seem naïve, even embarrassing. But the lag time is crucial to the accusation, both in its content and its desire to be distant from and superior to ‘feminist essentialists’” (Phelan 2001, 37). For Phelan, the vehement and repetitious accusations of essentialism have “a quality of Freudian afterwordness” that suggests “a symptomatic repression of something threatening” which remains to be interpreted. See also Mira Schor’s “Backlash and Appropriation,” in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 248-263, discussed in the previous chapter.

²⁷ I would like to note, however, that in her discussion of female experience, specifically, “an essentially feminine experience of the body,” Kelly reads Hannah Wilke’s work as a confirmation of Freud’s postulation of the bisexuality of the drives. By acting out the feminine position of object (of the look) while also taking up the masculine role as the producer of the look (as the art and artist she is both subject and object of the look, of desire), Wilke produces a contradiction. For Kelly, through this contradiction, “a fundamental negation of the notion of an essential femininity nonetheless appears” (374). Yet Wilke is still classified, by Kelly, as promoting an essentially feminine experience of the body as prior to representation, as dominated by representations (rather than self-consciously producing femininity as a representation of difference within a specific discourse) (372). Curiously, Kelly also finds confirmation of the bisexuality of the drives “even in work which is overtly derived from the female body,” where “you can find a kind of super-imposition of phallogentric and concentric imagery—Louise Bourgeois is an interesting example” (74). This recourse to form as a marker of gender appears, surprisingly, to reproduce a basic assumption of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro’s much reviled “central core theory.” Yet for Kelly, that both forms exist in one work is a sign of the fact that masculine and feminine positions are never fixed.

Kelly didn’t eschew identification or pleasure entirely, just particular forms of identification and pleasure that were deemed to have uncritical effects. In “Post-Partum Document,” she substituted a first-person diary narrative for the absent representational image, claiming that “this kind of pleasure in the text, in the objects themselves, should engage the viewer, because there’s no point at which it can become a deconstructed critical engagement if the viewer is not first—immediately and affectively—drawn into the work” (Kelly and Smith 1982, 373). Narrative text was considered an acceptable visual form for soliciting the viewer, but the female body was not. The pleasure that was to be avoided was of a very specific kind, one defined quite generally by the affective response it was presumed to provoke in an audience of heterosexual men. This response was then assumed to be antithetical to producing, in viewers of all sexes, the critical distance necessary for political critique. See Mary Kelly and Paul Smith, “No Essential Femininity,” in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (New York: Oxford, 1998), 372. (Originally published in *Parachute* 37, no. 26 (Spring 1982): 31-35.

²⁸ Mary Kelly and Paul Smith. “No Essential Femininity,” in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (New York: Oxford, 1998), 375. Originally published in *Parachute* 37, no. 26 (Spring 1982): 31-35. Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 92.

²⁹ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, (New York: Routledge, 1989). Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley, UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 99.

³⁰ Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. by Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 92.

³¹ Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 92-93. These hearings resulted from Chicago's attempt to donate "The Dinner Party" to the University of the District of Columbia in 1990 in order to secure it a permanent home and exhibition space. Her offer was accepted by the UDC trustees, but then a negative media campaign, mounted by more conservative members of the faculty senate, resulted in student protests against the work and Chicago withdrew her offer. Since the US Congress controls the UDC budget, the Congressional hearings were, in part, motivated by the negative press, headlines such as "UDC's \$1.6 Million 'Dinner'; Feminist Artwork Causes Indigestion" in the right-wing *Washington Times*, which also referred to the piece as "vaginas on plates" (Chicago 1996, 220). As a result, a conservative Virginia representative, finding *The Dinner Party* offensive to the "'sensitivities and moral values of our various related communities,'" introduced an amendment to cut \$1.6 million dollars from UDC's operating budget (Chicago 1996, 220). See Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 219-224.

³² Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 223.

³³ Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 223.

³⁴ Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 223.

³⁵ Chicago and Schapiro outlined their position in an article titled "Female Imagery." See Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, "Female Imagery," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 40-43. (Originally printed in *Womanspace Journal* 1:3 (Summer 1973). For more information on the pedagogical aspect of central core theory, see Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, *Womanhouse*, (Valencia, California: California Institute of the Arts: Feminist Art Program, 1972); and Jennie Klein, "The Ritual Body as Pedagogical Tool: The Performance Art of the Women's Building," in *From Site to Vision: the Women's Building in Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton, <http://womansbuilding.org/fromsitetovision> (accessed 8 March 2009).

³⁶ Chicago and Schapiro outlined their position in an article titled "Female Imagery." See Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, "Female Imagery," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 40-43. (Originally printed in *Womanspace Journal*, 1:3 (Summer 1973).)

³⁷ Chicago and Schapiro outlined their position in an article titled "Female Imagery." See Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, "Female Imagery," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 40-43. (Originally printed in *Womanspace Journal*, 1:3 (Summer 1973).)

³⁸ The researchers working at this time (1970s and 1980s) on matrifocal and goddess cultures included archaeologists Marija Gimbutas and James Mellaart, sculptor and art historian Merlin Stone, psychologist Starhawk (Miriam Simos), art historian Buffie Johnson, and theologians Carol Christ and Charlene Spretnak, among many others.

³⁹ I am paraphrasing Jones here. She writes: "the *idea* of the mythical goddess was clearly powerfully enabling for these artists, serving as a site of projection that allowed them to actualize their own attempts to attain the kind of transcendence conventionally reserved for men." See Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los

Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 95.

⁴⁰See note 40 above.

⁴¹ Edelson saw the integration of mind, body and spirit as a platform for changing consciousness and creating “a dynamic, non-hierarchical network of cooperative relationships that include nature and human liberation.” See Mary Beth Edelson, “Male Grazing: An Open Letter to Thomas McEviley,” in *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968-2000*, ed. Hilary Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 596-597.

⁴² Chicago quoted in Jones. See Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 96.

⁴³ Arlene Raven quoted in Jones. See Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 96.

⁴⁴ See Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 97.

⁴⁵ Raven quoted in Jones. See Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 96-97.

⁴⁶ See Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 97.

⁴⁷ See Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 97.

⁴⁸ While *The Dinner Party* was the result of a collaborative effort, Chicago never claimed it was a democratically shared creative project. She has always taken full credit as the author of the work. As the one who had the vision for the project, she understood her workshop as operating primarily on the model of a Renaissance art studio. This perspective and her clear belief in the notion of artistic genius have elicited much criticism from some feminists who see her position as reinforcing older patriarchal models based on exclusionary hierarchies of value that are male-defined, particularly Modernism’s investment in artistic genius.

⁴⁹ Walker quoted in Jones. See Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 101.

⁵⁰ Jones is careful to point out, however, that while this critique of early feminism did lead to corrections and more inclusive considerations of race, ethnicity and sexual orientation, early feminists did not ignore race or sexual orientation. This is a point Martha Rosler emphasizes in her essay for *Women Artists at the Millennium* (ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006)). Both note that black and lesbian women were central to the feminist movement from the beginning. Betye Saar and Faith Ringgold were definitely key organizers in the art world, a fact recently highlighted in the 2007 exhibition *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*. See Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual*

Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 101.

⁵¹ A number of women of color have addressed and continue to address the issue of sexuality as it intersects with race, including Carrie Mae Weems, Lorraine O'Grady, Kara Walker, and Renee Cox, among others.

⁵² Elizabeth A. Sackler, ed., "Entering the Culture: Judy Chicago Talking with Lucy Lippard," in *Judy Chicago* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2002), 11.

⁵³ Chicago quoted in Jones 1996, 90. See Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 90.

⁵⁴ Jones 1996, 99. See Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 101.

⁵⁵ Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 99.

⁵⁶ Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 99.

⁵⁷ Jones 1996, 99. See Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 100.

⁵⁸ Jones 1996, 99. See Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of California Press, 1996), 99. Defined in these terms, essentialism as a strategy shares qualities with one of the earliest and more convincing definitions of feminist art, Lucy Lippard's statement that feminist art is "neither a style nor a movement" but rather "a value system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life" (Lippard 1995, 172). Lucy R. Lippard, "Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s" in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (New York: The New York Press, 1995), 19. For Peggy Phelan, feminism is a "conviction," a way of interpreting "the world and the work" by acknowledging "that gender has been, and continues to be, a fundamental category for the organization of culture. Moreover, the pattern of that organization usually favors men over women" (Phelan 2001, 20; 18). I also wish to clarify that feminism has a conflicted history in terms of opening the art world to "difference" as it was heavily critiqued for its exclusions, particularly by women of color and lesbians. It might be more precise to say that, in general, feminism's insistence on a recognition of gender inspired, provoked, or added momentum to the push by other identity-based and/or activist groups to gain access to or rewrite art historical canons.

⁵⁹ David Joselit, "Exhibiting Gender," *Art in America* (Jan 1997), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_nl_v85/ai_19013625 (accessed 2/8/2007); Ruth Wallen, review of *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones, in *Women's Studies* 28 (1999): 339-344.

⁶⁰ Lumpkin's comment came during a roundtable discussion organized around the *Sexual Politics* show, the transcripts of which were published in the *Los Angeles Times*. Participants included Judy Fiskin, Amelia Jones,

Rachel Rosenthal, and Libby Lumpkin. Lumpkin's lack of knowledge of and reductive attitude toward feminist theory and discourse is evident in her statement: "I don't even know an artist in this generation who isn't a feminist. My problem is that the discourse tends to look at certain art that has feminist themes and calls that feminist art. I'm much more interested in art that has feminist effects rather than feminist themes. I understand that there are a lot of diverse theories because I spend a lot of my time reading about them, but they're all tied together by this basic kind of assumption about women—that they're virtuous." In addition to making this reductive and incorrect statement about the basis of feminist theory, Lumpkin never does specify what "feminist effects" might be. See Suzanne Muchnic, "Push-Pull of Feminist Art; Four respected figures in feminist art share their opinions about what has happened to the movement in the years since Judy Chicago's controversial 'Dinner Party' was first assembled in 1979," *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 1996, Entertainment section, home edition.

⁶¹ *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 1996, Entertainment section, home edition.

⁶² Julie Springer, untitled review of the exhibition *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, in *Women's Art Journal* 20, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1999): 52-54.

⁶³ Julie Springer, untitled review of the exhibition *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, in *Women's Art Journal*, 20, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1999): 52-54.

⁶⁴ Julie Springer, untitled review of the exhibition *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, in *Women's Art Journal* 20, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1999): 52-54.

⁶⁵ David Joselit, "Exhibiting Gender," in *Art in America* (Jan 1997), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_nl_v85/ai_19013625 (accessed 2/8/2007).

⁶⁶ See David Joselit, "Exhibiting Gender," in *Art in America* (Jan 1997), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_nl_v85/ai_19013625 (accessed 2/8/2007).

⁶⁷ See David Joselit, "Exhibiting Gender," in *Art in America* (Jan 1997), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_nl_v85/ai_19013625 (accessed 2/8/2007).

⁶⁸ See David Joselit, "Exhibiting Gender," in *Art in America* (Jan 1997), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_nl_v85/ai_19013625 (accessed 2/8/2007).

⁶⁹ Christopher Knight, "More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed 'Dinner Party' Undermines 'Sexual Politics,'" *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1996, http://articles.latimes.com/1996-05-02/entertainment/ca-65092_1_dinner-party (accessed 6/27/2010); Ruth Wallen, "The Legacy of 1970s Feminist Artistic Practices on Contemporary Activist Art," in *N.Paradoxa* 14 (Feb 2001), <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/n.paradoxa/2001panel3.htm> (accessed 2/8/2006).

⁷⁰ Christopher Knight, "More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed 'Dinner Party' Undermines 'Sexual Politics,'" *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1996, http://articles.latimes.com/1996-05-02/entertainment/ca-65092_1_dinner-party (accessed 6/27/2010).

⁷¹ I would add that this accusation is replete with gender bias, as many artists who perform institutional critique are, in fact, regularly shown in museums and vigorously collected, including Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers, and Fred Wilson. It is also true, however, that women and feminist artists have less success in this area. Some may enjoy a degree of visibility and support, for example Andrea Fraser, but feminist artists like Carolee Schneemann have not much benefitted from it.

⁷² Christopher Knight, "More Famine Than Feast; Focusing on the Flawed 'Dinner Party' Undermines 'Sexual Politics,'" *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1996, http://articles.latimes.com/1996-05-02/entertainment/ca-65092_1_dinner-party (accessed 6/27/2010).

⁷³ Carolyn Wolf, letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1996, Entertainment section, home edition.

⁷⁴ James Griffith, letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1996, Entertainment section, home edition.

⁷⁵ James Griffith, letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1996, Entertainment section, home edition.

⁷⁶ Donald Preziosi, "Art Under the Boot," *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 1996, Entertainment section, home edition.

⁷⁷ Preziosi was Jones' graduate advisor at UCLA.

⁷⁸ Donald Preziosi, "Art Under the Boot," *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 1996, Entertainment section, home edition.

⁷⁹ Within feminist discourses, the problem of essentialism, as Peggy Phelan has argued, was fundamentally "a series of investigations into the relationship between female bodies and subjectivity, a relationship that is framed by language" (Phelan 2001, 37). See Peggy Phelan, "Survey," in *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Reckitt (London: Phaidon Press, 2001).

⁸⁰ See Amelia Jones, particularly her "irrational" history of New York Dada, told through an identification with the neurasthenic artist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven based, in part, on Jones' own tendency to the same symptomology. Playing against regimes of critical distance and rationality (Taylorism, Fordism, certain flows of capital and academic discourse), Jones immerses herself in her object of study, which includes taking her cues from the artist's strategies (i.e. self-display, autobiographical writing, immersion into Dada, etc.) (Jones 2004, 238). At certain points in the text Jones mimics the Baroness's rhythms, tone and obsessions in her own writing, as well as writing from the Baroness's perspective and in her voice. Jones' goal is to "promote a kind of neurasthenic art history—one that acknowledges rather than suppresses the confusing projections and identifications through which we art historians give meanings to works of art, movements, and the artists who make and sustain them both" (Jones 2004, 172). Art history, for Jones, is "a reciprocal system of action, reaction, and remembering. A giving flesh that involves bodies/minds on both ends" (Jones 2004, 223). Amelia Jones, *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004). See also Jones' invention of "parafeminism," a new "method" (under erasure) for feminist critical work. Rather than simply applying pre-given theories or methodologies to an artist's work, Jones invents a method, in part, through her identification with a particular artist, in this case Pippilotti Rist. Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁸¹ A panel discussion which I attended, sponsored by the Feminist Art Project at the 2007 meeting of the College Art Association, "'Life of the Mind, Life of the Market': A Reevaluation of the Contribution of Theory to Feminist Art from 1980 to 2006," chaired by Mira Schor with panelists Mary Kelly and Johanna Burton; held Saturday, February 17, 2007, in conjunction with the meeting of The College Art Association, February 14-17, 2007.

⁸² Personal discussion with Judy Chicago during a press tour at the opening of The Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum on Thursday, March 22nd, 2007; confirmed later in the day during Sackler's and museum director Arnold Lehman's question and answer session.

⁸³ There was considerable discussion about the naming of the center, debates over whether it would be more appropriate to call it a Center for Women's Art (following the example of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC) or a Center for Feminist Art. In the end, the Brooklyn Museum decided on "Feminist," citing feminism's impact, since the late 1960s, on artistic and cultural production. See Maura Reilly, "Notes from the Inside: Building a Center for Feminist Art," in *La Mirada Iracunda (The Furious Gaze)*, ed. Xabier Arakistan and Maura Reilly (Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain: Centro Cultural Montehermoso de Vitoria-Gasteiz, forthcoming).

⁸⁴ Amelia Jones, "Feminist Curating and the 'Return' of Feminist Art," a discussion between Connie Butler, Maura Reilly and Jones, ed. Amelia Jones, 2009, forthcoming.

⁸⁵ For Connie Butler, the *Sexual Politics* exhibition laid the foundation for surveys of American feminist art, which inspired her to broaden the context for the *WACK!* exhibition by exploring more transnational practices. Other exhibitions since 2002 credited with influencing Reilly and a renewed interest in feminism are: *Personal and Political: The Women's Art Movement, 1969-1975* (Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, NY, 2002); *Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art in the 1970s*, including a follow-up show *Regarding Gloria* (White Columns Gallery, New York, 2002-3); and the 2002 exhibition of "The Dinner Party" at the Brooklyn Museum. Jones cites *Division of Labor: 'Women's Work' in Contemporary Art*, curated by Lydia Yee (Brooklyn Museum, 1995) and Catherine de Zegher's *Inside the Visible: an elliptical traverse of 20th century art in, of and from the feminine* (Kanaal Art Fondation, Beguinage, Kortrijk, Belgium, 1994; The Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, 1994-5). Butler mentions Lynn Zelevansky's show looking at contemporary gendered minimalism, *Sense and Sensibility* (Museum of Modern Art, New York), where Feminist Art was the "elephant in the room," and three independent *Bad Girls* shows in 1994, one in the UK and two in the US, the first curated by Marcia Tucker (New Museum, New York) and a "West" version curated by Marcia Tanner (Los Angeles, UCLA Wight Art Gallery). See "Feminist Curating and the 'Return' of Feminist Art" (a discussion that took place between Butler, Jones and Reilly in 2009; ed. Amelia Jones, forthcoming).

⁸⁶ <http://www.emilyroysdon.com/index.php?/projects/ecstatic-resistance> (accessed 15 January 2010).

⁸⁷ <http://www.emilyroysdon.com/index.php?/projects/ecstatic-resistance> (accessed 15 January 2010).

⁸⁸ Roysdon is a co-founder of the feminist and queer activist artist group LTTR along with Ginger Takemoto of the band Le Tigre. The band's eponymous album features a song called "Hot Topic" that explicitly acknowledges their debt to early feminist artists and writers including Carolee Schneemann, Mary Kelly, Judy Chicago, Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray and many others.

⁸⁹ Emily Apter, "A Referendum on Theory and Feminism," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 327-334.

⁹⁰ This part of this chapter will seed the potential for an investigation, through the trajectory of Jones's work, of the hypothesis that the problem of essentialism (as provoked by reactions to the work of early feminist artists) opens on to issues fundamental not only to feminist debates about connections between art practices, concepts of subjectivity and coalition (identity) politics, but also feminism's relationship to epistemology. It may be that the theory versus essentialism debate ultimately questions the boundaries between theory, criticism, history and art, offering possibilities for expanding the discipline of art history, its historical methods and practices. This may be part of the impetus behind the current reinvigoration of interest in late 1960s and 1970s feminist work, and why the problematic of essentialism, despite years of theorizing, dismissal, revision and deconstruction, continues to haunt contemporary feminist art historical discourses.

⁹¹ Emily Apter, "A Referendum on Theory and Feminism," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 327-328.

⁹² Emily Apter, "A Referendum on Theory and Feminism," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 327-328.

⁹³ Emily Apter, "A Referendum on Theory and Feminism," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 329. While Apter does not provide more specific information about this backlash in terms of the differences between psychoanalytic and deconstructive theories of feminism, it is worth noting that Judith Butler's reevaluation of gender and essentialism through a theory of performativity appeared in her 1993 publication, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*; that a collection of essays that challenged the erasure of 1970s feminist art, *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, was published in 1994; that Amelia Jones' exhibition and catalog of essays, *Sexual Politics*, opened in 1996 and that her book *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, which re-interpreted the work of many "essentialist" feminist body artists from a deconstructive theoretical position, appeared in 1998. Thus the "backlash" against feminist theory may have more to do with a kind of internecine struggle between psychoanalytic theories and deconstructive theories, the latter able to offer a more complex thinking about essentialism. I would also like to note that neither "essentialist" feminist

discourses nor psychoanalytically driven ones seem to be adequate to the questions that postcolonial and race studies are looking to address. Artists and theorists like Lorraine O'Grady and Trinh T. Minh-ha draw from deconstruction but are creating theories based on movement, rhythm, flow, myth, narrative and community—while progressively questioning and eroding the boundaries between art, narrative, theory and history. For a discussion of alternative ideas for theorizing from an African American perspective, see Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 174-187.

⁹⁴ Emily Apter, "A Referendum on Theory and Feminism," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 329.

⁹⁵ That with which Apter most seems to take issue, delivered in a kind of back-handed compliment, is Garb's interpretation of Hatoum's use of line, medium and touch as playing with stereotypes of gender. Apter does not directly accuse Garb of subscribing to essentialist assumptions but rather does so obliquely, by linking Garb's reading of Hatoum's use of line to Catherine Ingraham's research on the history of line in architecture. For Apter, Ingraham's arguments, despite her insistence on gender as an effect of representation, "inevitably succumb to a certain literalness of gender stereotype." In the next sentence she refers to Garb's essay: "It is certainly to Garb's credit that she assumes the burden of the binary [feminine and masculine] without apology or hand-writing qualification." Finally, she ends her discussion of Garb with "How does one devise an anti-essentialist approach to the analysis of gender in visual media, and what would it look like?" Clearly she thinks Garb's essay does not qualify. See Emily Apter, "A Referendum on Theory and Feminism," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 330.

⁹⁶ Emily Apter, "A Referendum on Theory and Feminism," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 330.

⁹⁷ While Apter credits Garb's conclusion, the possibility that Hatoum's hair grids stage "the irreconcilability of masculine abstraction and feminine materialism," as a "figure of strange beauty," she is compelled to query: "Where does this leave us theoretically?" For Apter, the choices are oddly binary, either a "model that celebrates the ambivalence of unresolved difference" [Garb's deconstructive approach here] or one that challenges "the conventions that reduce gender in visual interpretation to subjectivist assignations of masculine and feminine". She ends her commentary on Garb's essay with a strangely rhetorical question, given the years, now decades, of feminist theorizing, primarily psychoanalytic, about the essentialism issue: "Can we develop a methodology that accepts sexual difference while refusing the claustrophobic stereotypes of gender difference? How does one devise an anti-essentialist approach to the analysis of gender in visual media, and what would it look like?" See Emily Apter, "A Referendum on Theory and Feminism," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 330.

⁹⁸ I would like to note that the concept of "gender" is under debate. Judith Butler looks to Luce Irigaray who, in her reading, is foundational for feminism because she poses gender as a question (not an answer) for feminist inquiry and permanent interrogation. Butler also cautions that to put a concept under question does not mean we must exclude or never use it. We can, at the same time, both use and continue to interrogate concepts, such as universality, gender and sexual difference. See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 178-179.

⁹⁹ An excellent example is Jones' interpretation of the work of Hannah Wilke. Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 151-195.

¹⁰⁰ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁰¹ Regarding the essentialist versus constructionist debate, Fuss writes: "To insist that essentialism is everywhere reactionary is, for the constructionist, to buy into essentialism in the very act of making the charge; *it is to act as if essentialism has an essence.*" Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 21; italics in original.

¹⁰² Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1. For an excellent discussion see chapters one and two.

¹⁰³ I would emphasize that most of the feminist critics who often turn to deconstructive theories and strategies (such as Jones and Butler) may also draw from psychoanalytic concepts from time to time, but they are far less invested in it as an explanatory paradigm than, for example, Pollock, Kelly and Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. Another point I would like to underscore is that essentialism, as Jones observed in her essay for *Sexual Politics*, has traditionally not been an issue for women of color. For an incisive discussion of essentialism from the perspective of an African American female artist and critic, see Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 174-187; for the perspectives of a woman of color, deconstruction and postcolonial theory, see Trihn T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

¹⁰⁴ It is the mapping of these remainders, traces and the ways in which we attempt to negotiate and/or hold apparent contradictions that interests me, which is why Garb's essay, like Hatoum's work, may refer to binary and "essentialist" terms like "feminine" and "masculine" but does so in order to expose, play with and subvert them. Of course, the act of repetition always risks reinforcing the terms, yet also, as Judith Butler has argued, contains the possibility of repeating them "incorrectly" or in unpredictable ways that offer new semiotic possibilities and relationships.

¹⁰⁵ Tamar Garb, "Hairlines," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006), 256.

¹⁰⁶ Discussing the work of Clarice Lispector, Cixous writes: "the most difficult thing to do is to arrive at the most extreme proximity while guarding against the trap of projection, of identification. The other must remain absolutely strange within the greatest possible proximity" (Cixous 1991, 171). In terms of touch and proximity: "How far it is from a star to a self, O what inconceivable proximity between one species and another, between an adult and a child, between an author and a character what secret proximity. Everything is far away, not everything resides only in distance, everything is less distant than we think, in the end everything touches. Touches us. Just as Macabea got into Clarice's eye, like a speck of dust, just as she made her weep tears of believing, I am touched by Clarice's voice. The step of her slow, heavy phrases weighs on my heart, she treads with short, heavy phrases, thoughtfully. Sometimes one has to go very far. Sometimes the right distance is extreme remoteness. Sometimes it is in extreme proximity that she breathes" (Cixous, 1991, 181). Hélène Cixous, "The Author in Truth," in *'Coming to Writing' and Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jenson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 136-181. Luce Irigaray also works with metaphors of proximity, distance and touch. See Luce Irigaray, "When Our Lips Speak Together," in *This Sex Which is Not One*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 205-218.

¹⁰⁷ Tamar Garb, "Hairlines," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006), 256.

¹⁰⁸ Tamar Garb, "Hairlines," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006), 266.

¹⁰⁹ Tamar Garb, "Hairlines," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006), 273.

¹¹⁰ "Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. It may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel. And so when we speak about my sexuality or my gender, as we do (and as we must), we mean something complicated by it. Neither of these is precisely a possession, but both are to be understood as modes of being dispossessed, ways of being for another, or, indeed, by virtue of another." Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 19.

¹¹¹ See Peggy Phelan, "Survey," in *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 37. She is also troubled by the fact that art historians often pointed to the shift from history to theory as the dominant feminist discourse in the 1980s and yet continued to use later theories of representation to denounce work from the 1970s, a move that situates the historian in a relation of distance from and superiority to the early work (Phelan 2001, 23). Moreover, when scholars like Jones and Phelan point out that it was the anti-essentialists, the theory folks of the 1980s, who

created “essentialism” and then retroactively applied it to the feminist art of the 1970s, they are accurate not only in terms of the history of the debate, but are pointing to how the debate itself is a particular series of enactments, or reiterative performances, of the relationship between its very own terms, presence (essentialism) and representation (theory or anti-essentialism). The desire for presence, for unmediated experience, to *know* the thing in itself, to be able to claim a ground of truth and/or agency for a subject who is origin and author of the work, is an effect of difference, of representation, and of the theoretical language we use to describe it. In other words, we lack full presence, knowledge, and agency but end up having to make claims for experience anyway; no matter how careful or circumscribed our repetitions, we are forced, or perhaps extruded, to constitute as subjects. However, as Peggy Phelan, Judith Butler, Jon McKenzie and others have remarked, it's *the failures* in reiteration that produce new contexts and invoke situations for entrenchment or change. Thus, each time the essentialism versus theory debate is rehearsed, there's a chance for a productive miss. But I also wonder: could the curious retroactive labeling of the early feminist artists as “essentialist” be a kind of nostalgia, or a disavowed and projected desire, born through theory itself (as a form of representation), for what theory imagines it lost, and images as loss (or plenitude; they constantly change places), in order to lay claim (however tenuous) to the ground of its own experience? It is curious to me that the early feminists of the late 1960s and 1970s seem to become, for later generations, a kind of substitute for the Great and Terrible Mother, a site of plenitude and death that had to be abjected, à la the “chora” in Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

¹¹² Mary Kelly, “Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism,” originally published in *Screen* (1981); reprinted in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York and Boston: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Godine, 1988), 87-103 (quote on page 96).

¹¹³As Derrida outlines in *Of Grammatology* (1974), thinkers from Aristotle to the present have privileged the phoneme, as the non-exterior voice closest to the thought of the signified, over writing, which, as signifier, exterior sense, and thing, has only a secondary and instrumental function of translating the interiorized “full speech.” It is through this full speech, present to itself, its signified, and the other, that the subject, at least according to Hegel, is related to itself in the element of ideality. Thus the meaning of being as self-presence, “speaking” to itself and perhaps divinity, is produced. Consequently logocentrism, assuming this “pure intelligibility” or presence of the signified, debases writing as non-self-presence and exterior to meaning; writing is perceived as merely a tool in the service of language.

For Derrida, however, the concept of writing no longer indicates a secondary form of language as communication, signification, constitution of meaning or thought. No longer an exterior surface, writing goes beyond its role as the extension of language, exceeding and comprehending language (Derrida 1974, 7). In one attempt to demonstrate this, Derrida rethinks the problem of origins through Saussure who, in trying to theorize the independence of language, complained that the spoken word becomes so bound up with the written image that writing begins to usurp the role of speech. In other words, representation mingles so intimately with what it represents that the origin becomes ungraspable. Derrida writes: “There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin. For what is reflected is split in itself and not only as an addition to itself of its image. The reflection, the image, the double, splits what it doubles. The origin of speculation becomes a difference. What can look at itself is not one” (Derrida 1974, 36). Without the violence of writing, what Derrida also calls trace or *différance*, logos would remain within itself. So, as Plato declared, writing does entail a kind of forgetfulness, a departure of the logos from itself. Yet writing, as Derrida demonstrates, constitutes rather than translates speech, language, and subjectivity.

According to Derrida, writing must now be thought as both more exterior to speech (not its image or symbol), and more interior, since speech is already a writing. But before it can be linked to incision, drawing, letter, or signifier, the concept of *graphie* implies, as the possibility common to all systems of signification, the framework of an instituted trace. This trace is the irreducible absence within presence, an absolute past which can't be awakened to the present, thought before the entity, the structure of the relation with the other, the movement of temporalization; it is the absolute origin of all sense in general which opens appearance and signification, repetition and ideality. The trace, as arche-phenomenon of memory and the very movement of signification, is the opening of the first exteriority in general, the relation of inside to outside, and the relation of the living to its other. As arche-writing or spacing, it marks the dead time within the presence of a living moment; as unperceived, nonpresent,

nonconscious, nonintentional, the reserve of what does not appear, it can never be merged with a phenomenology of writing (Derrida 1974, 68). Yet the familiar "spatial" and "objective" exteriority we think we know is not possible without this spacing, "would not appear without the gramme, without *différance* as temporalization, without the presence of the other inscribed within the sense of the present, without the relationship with death as the concrete structure of the living present. Metaphor would be forbidden" (Derrida 1974, 71). Moreover, "as the subject's relation with its own death, this spacing as writing is the constitution of subjectivity" (Derrida 1974, 69). Writing is also the becoming-absent and becoming-unconscious of the subject; the discontinuity, discreteness, and diversion from the identity of the self-same which, in turn, it has engendered. Thus Derrida states: "Constituting and dislocating it at the same time, writing is other than the subject" (68). In addition, this "original absence of the subject of writing is also the absence of the thing or the referent" (69). Writing in a general sense, then, is the absence of both the signatory and the referent, exceeding the question *What is?* and contingently making it possible. (Derrida 1974; 41, 75). Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1974).

¹¹⁴ Mary Kelly, "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism," originally published in *Screen* (1981); reprinted in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York and Boston: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Godine, 1988), 87-103.

CHAPTER 5
ARTISTIC TOUCH, GENDER AND GENIUS: THE “PROBLEM OF ESSENTIALISM,”
AGAIN

In 1965, one year after moving to New York, Japanese artist Shigeko Kubota created a public performance for the Perpetual Fluxfest art festival. A paintbrush attached to the crotch of her underwear, Kubota walked to the center of the room, lifted the hem of her dress and squatted over a large piece of paper placed on the floor. Balancing adroitly on her toes, she proceeded to apply red paint to the paper’s surface in fluid, undulating strokes. She called the piece *Vagina Painting*, a title which, oscillating between verb and noun, placed equal emphasis on the act, the product and the actor, foregrounding artistic touch as a process simultaneously engendering and en-gendered.

Kubota recalls that fellow members of the avant-garde art group Fluxus didn’t approve of *Vagina Painting*.¹ Although she doesn’t offer any explanation, it is possible to read *Vagina Painting* as a simplistic literalization of gender and artistic practice, an “obviousness” that may have provoked its dismissal. The brush hairs suggest pubic hair (bush/brush), the red paint blood, and her movements mime the creative acts of birth and sex, effectively insisting on the presence of the feminine and its fertile processes (biological and artistic) in the history and even pre-history of art-making. In the later parlance of 1980s feminist art discourses, the literal performance of female creativity through an explicit reference to female genitalia would be categorized as “essentialist,” as naïvely presenting the body as a locus of inherent meaning (“presence”) and gender as an effect of natural or biological rather than cultural processes.

Yet by those of her audience initiated into the discourses of modernist and avant-garde art, Kubota’s performance could also easily be recognized as parodying two of its foremost figures, American Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock in the act of making one of his “drip” paintings (1947-1950) and Minimalist Yves Klein’s continental response to Pollock, his

Anthropometries events held in Paris between 1958 and 1960. Pollock was famous for relinquishing the traditional artist's brush in favor of his spontaneously convulsing body, while Klein, perhaps more infamously, substituted live female models. Standard art historical narratives locate Pollock's genius in his unique process of working, documented in photographs taken by Hans Namuth in 1950. Using sticks, knives and trowels, Pollock moved around a large canvas laid flat on the floor as he threw, splattered and dripped paint on to the surface, breaking with the traditional notion of painterly touch as an anatomical connection between hand, brush and canvas.²

Literalizing and ironizing Pollock's disconnection from the brush as well as art critic Clement Greenberg's insistence on modernist art's formal "purity," Klein created a series of live performances where, dressed in a tuxedo and accompanied by musicians, he commanded nude female models to cover themselves with his signature blue paint and impress their bodies onto sheets of paper that covered the floor. Referring to the women as his "living brushes," Klein congratulated himself on his pristine distance, his ability to create without having to soil himself.³ The art historical importance assigned to Pollock and Klein is predicated on their innovations in artistic touch. For both, anatomical touch was increasingly distanced yet heavily figured (or literally produced) through references to sexuality; references that were made explicit at some moments and veiled or naturalized at others.

We may never know exactly why Kubota's peers disparaged *Vagina Painting*, but we do know that they also responded negatively to the work of two other female members of the group, Yoko Ono and Carolee Schneemann. Ono's performance *Cut Piece* (1964), during which she sat impassively on a stage while members of the audience cut pieces of her clothing with a pair of tailor's shears, was denigrated as "animalistic."⁴ Schneemann, whose "painting environments"

(*Eye Body* 1963), kinetic theater (*Meat Joy* 1964), performances (*Interior Scroll* 1975-77) and films (*Fuses* 1964-67) also emphasized touch and her body (often through highly active and/or ritualized gestures of self-painting using organic materials such as meat, feathers and blood) was “excommunicated” from Fluxus by George Maciunas, its self-appointed leader.⁵

However, in the critical discourses of the period—and even now, almost fifty years later—Klein’s writhing models and Pollock’s thickly splattered canvases (bearing the traces of his cigarette butts and other “spontaneous” debris) are not described in terms of domestic dirt, disorder or primitive chaos but rather as gestures of virility and paradigm-shifting innovation. These descriptions are drawing, consciously or not, on gendered clichés about touch that have a long and often contradictory history, but remain consistent in their conceptualization of “the feminine” as the denigrated other that naturalizes often unmarked and universal “masculine” value.

In terms of brushwork, artistic touch from at least the Renaissance on was often divided along gender lines. Supposedly feminine attributes (such as loving, docile, delicate, sweet, clean, pure, tender and caressing) were typically assigned to self-effacing brushwork that was, in turn, linked to artifice and cosmetics.⁶ In contrast, “masculine” brushwork, where the action of the brush was visible in its application, was characterized as bold, vigorous, thrusting, frank and vehement. This “epistemology of brushwork,” as Philip Sohm has pointed out, was based on Platonic and Aristotelian distinctions between form and matter that assigned man the role of active form and woman the quality of passive matter in need of form’s definition.

The critical deployment of such polemical figuring was often circular and asymmetrical, ultimately used to define, contain and control actual women’s bodies and lives. By the 16th century, the imagined attributes of matter were naturalized as women’s unstable and vacillating

psychology, evidence of a weak and disordered mind. These qualities were then used to disparage art that was considered to be without design or proportion as “feminine,” a classification which, in turn, was used at various moments to rationalize the exclusion of women artists from certain styles or genres. Aretino played on this notion in his *Ragionamento della Nanna e della Antonia* (Venice 1534), when, as a figure for copulation, he aligned woman (a prostitute) with pigment and man with the manipulating brush, with the man positioned as the primary generator in the act of creation.⁷

In the 20th century, the performances of Yves Klein (referred to above) literalized and extended this cliché, as the tuxedo-clad Klein verbally commanded his “living brushes” (naked female models) to paint themselves with a hue he branded as his own (“Yves Klein International Blue”) and imprint their bodies on paper while he, remaining immaculately “clean,” strutted and preened. Manipulating archaic tropes of gendered touch, Klein claimed for the mid-20th century avant-garde male artist the position of the grandest creator, He who generates from the spoken word alone, who (re)produces and dominates His materials from a distance without the “dirty work” of touch as domestic (female) labor or sexual intercourse with a woman. Klein is considered an artistic genius, but as Carolee Schneemann discovered in the 1960s, her bold and aggressive work was praised as “masculine” (“as if I were inhabited by a stray male principle”) until she stepped outside the “pathways hacked out by the men” to foreground her body and gender; then her work was dismissed as narcissistic, pornographic and essentialist.⁸

Thus what incited the disapproval of Kubota’s peers when she performed *Vagina Painting* in 1965 may not have been its “explicit” content *per se* but rather its refusal to “self-efface,” its wry humor and “literal” exposure of the art world’s gender-based double standard. This was a radical statement in the 1960s, when terms like “male privilege” and “feminism” were just

beginning to enter public discourse. Kubota's concrete emphasis on artistic touch, on the production of art through a touch that appeared gendered or, conversely, brought gender into appearance, referenced a specific set of art practices and debates that opened on to larger issues, contradictions at the heart of the modernist project that would eventually instantiate the uneven and incremental shifts into theories, practices and movements we call, far too reductively, feminism and postmodernism. And yet those practices and discourses emerged from a long and complex history where touch, facture and artistic genius were figured through tropes of gender; concepts that, at least when applied to the work of women artists, were often constrained by essentialist notions, especially in moments of social anxiety and unrest such as the late 18th century or the 1960s.

This chapter takes up *Vagina Painting* as a lesson and a provocation. While feminist critics in the 1980s could not have missed Kubota's playful gesture of mimicry and mimicking of gesture, they did overlook, perhaps due to their focus on the problem of essentialism in relation to the "male gaze," the deeper propositions available in *Vagina Painting*'s embodied critique. Kubota specifically referenced the trope of artistic touch, which has a long historical relationship with the figuring of genius through gender and, at least for women artists, with the problem of essentialism. Historically speaking, the concept of essentialism has been linked to issues of artistic touch figured through gender for centuries, typically to the detriment of female artists. Constrained by patriarchal ideas and beliefs about their biological "nature," women artists, far more often than their male counterparts, had to contend with art critical discourses that essentialized their gender and then used those concepts to figure aesthetic discourses which, in turn, were used to contain, exclude or disdain women artists' abilities and production. "Feminine" touch was either devalued for its lack of masculine qualities or, when linked to

“artifice” (and the technical skill of painting as “cosmetic”), suspected of propagating a dangerous illusionism that at various moments supported or undermined various vested social and class interests. In general, however, “feminine” touch and the figure of the woman artist served to signify difference, typically as the denigrated term in an opposition that constructed male artistic identity as coherent, rational and naturally superior due to having access to the realm of transcendence, which, in turn, guaranteed his genius. Women artists were often judged by standards of interpretation and valuation quite different from those applied to their male peers, and conventions of “touch,” artistic and otherwise, played a central role in defining and enforcing that asymmetry. This chapter threads through some of this history as it pertains to the figuring of artistic touch, gender and essentialism.

As *Vagina Painting* implies, artistic touch and its connection to gender, gesture and genius have functioned as one of the central explanatory narratives of art critical and historical discourses, a relationship that dates at the least to the Renaissance period.⁹ In aesthetic discourses, touch or *touche* most often refers to the sensual mark-making process that constitutes the art object, a tangible visual and tactile record of the artist’s gesture recorded in the facture or handling of the paint. Artistic touch may draw attention to itself through brushwork, facture and gesture, or illustrate touch through narrative convention (as in Cabanel’s *Birth of Venus* (1865) where the hand of the furthest putto stretches toward the nude’s arm, offering the spectator vicarious contact with the flesh) or as metaphor, for example in the rhyming or juxtaposition of female flesh with sensual fabrics, textures, or exotic objects in Ingres’ *Grande Odalisque* (1814).

Artistic touch in various forms may be an indication of personal style and/or historical period, such as the Rococo or Neoclassicism, or point to transitions between them. The self-conscious facture of Courbet’s *The Stonebreakers* (1849) is often cited as one of the key

indicators of the shift into the modern period, while “hands-off” work like Klein’s (discussed above) or Warhol’s strategy of having his assistants produce “his” silkscreens (already a mechanical process) marks the transition into postmodernism. But the figuring of artistic touch, aesthetic valuation and evaluation, artistic identity and history has a long (and shifting) historical dependence on tropes of gender. These conventions *are gendered*, unevenly and to the detriment of women; which was precisely Kubota’s point.

Touch, Gender and Essentialism

What feminist art discourses of the 1980s labeled the “problem of essentialism” has a long historical connection to the figuring of touch through conceptualizations of gender, and yet touch is not always dependent on the gender of the body of the artist. For example, in the 19th century, the touch of women artists was more restricted by essentializing gender roles and social mores than that of their male colleagues, but in the 18th century, Mary Sheriff claims, “the sex of an artist and the gender of her painting need not coincide,” which means that even for women there are moments of non-coincidence between touch and person.¹⁰ This unhinging of touch and artist at various historical moments seems to me curiously “postmodern,” yet the gender asymmetry is instructive given the accusations of essentialism against 1960s and 70s feminist artists. It is my hope that tracing these shifts may offer some insight into the accusation of an essential self-possession leveled at early feminist artists as they worked to develop and theorize their own forms of touch.¹¹ Given the fact that Mary Kelly criticized proto- and early feminist artists’ use of their bodies as essentialist, as “fulfilling the promise of the brush,” it is useful to trace how the historical relationship of women artists to the brush, their bodies and their work has been figured in the past.¹²

For the period from the Renaissance to the 17th century, gender (in relation to art, but not in general) was located less in the social realities or representations of men’s and women’s bodies

than in the categories of value that subtended the literature of art criticism and the elements of painting, such as medium, brushwork and color. While “masculine” and “feminine” qualities remained fairly consistent, the critical deployment of these qualities was various and irregular. In general, “femininity” was “frequently disembodied” and “wielded as a rhetorical weapon,” usually against objectionable and/or “foreign” art (i.e. Michelangelo’s diatribes against Flemish painting or Florentine criticism of the Venetian colorists).¹³ A mobile yet consistently derogatory term, the “feminine” could shift from being associated with the material, such as oil (Michelangelo called oil painting “womanly”), to color (Vasari’s use of the term “soft” to describe Correggio’s use of color implied femininity) and to brushwork (criticism of Titian’s polished style).¹⁴

While the gendered figuring of touch in art critical discourses is a complex and non-linear history, I will briefly mention a few of the most persistently gendered concepts, ideas which critics culled (as mentioned above) from the Platonic and Aristotelian dichotomizing of form and matter as, respectively, masculine and feminine. Form has a rational order of proportion while matter has none. To be placed on the side of matter was the equivalent of being said to have no access to reason. This was one of the invectives Florentine critics hurled against Flemish painting by characterizing it and its viewers (female fans) as possessing the same qualities, “sensual vision” and a lack of proportion (physical and cognitive) like those of “irrational animals.”¹⁵ (This is an accusation that resonates with the 20th century critical dismissal of Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* as “animalistic,” which I will discuss further in my last chapter.) Moreover, “because reasonless woman acted more by sense than intellect, she was often called a slave of jewelry, cosmetics and other superficial ornaments.”¹⁶ This trope, implying a wily woman and a viewer who mistakes appearances for reality, was then used to position Flemish painting as

disingenuous ornament and its feminine viewers as duped by their own propensity for false appeal.

This gendered bifurcation of active and passive, rational and chaotic, and solid versus amorphous was deployed by art critics in various periods to figure and assign value to techniques (i.e. brushstroke), materials and processes (i.e. fresco versus oil), and in aesthetic debates such as drawing (line) versus color and rough (unfinished) versus smooth (finished) surfaces, with the masculine term consistently privileged. In the Renaissance, reason and proportion were aligned with *disegno* or drawing, which required the study of anatomy, ancient sculpture and “an ability to create divine images just as God the Father did.”¹⁷ Identified with the masculine, drawing was defined in opposition to feminine *colorito*, which adhered to the surface of things and attracted the senses. While drawing was a learned and practiced skill, color was held to be instinctual, a natural talent. In the great Cinquecento debate over the values and properties of drawing (Florentine) relative to color (Venetian), Michelangelo lamented the fact that Titian’s abundant natural abilities suffered from a lack of *disegno* (order and proportion). “Because Titian copied nature indiscriminately, and copied women in particular,” Sohm notes, “it may be concluded that he painted women the way women viewed paintings.”¹⁸

Gendered terms were applied to other materials and processes as well. Not surprisingly, given the preference for oil in Venice and fresco in Florence, the latter is claimed to be an active process that requires mastery, while the former contains its qualities within, allowing a more passive role for the painter who becomes lazily compliant with the material. For Vasari, coloring with oil “kindles the pigments so nothing else is needed except diligence and love because the oil itself renders the coloring softer, sweeter, and more delicate.”¹⁹ Thus oil was appropriate for certain subjects deemed feminine, such as depictions of the Virgin Mary.

Highly finished or lacquered surfaces were analogized to the use of cosmetics. They were figured as feminine in part because the application of make-up and that of the highly polished paint surface both required patience, a “feminine” virtue. For Sohm, “disguising the artistic act of brushing behind a smooth surface rendered it passive and silent, like women were supposed to be.”²⁰ Yet the artistic techniques that produced such surfaces could also be described as appealing to viewers susceptible to flattery or those with a vulgar taste for the apparent (rather than the substantive). In the 17th century, the detailed and transparent surfaces of Flemish paintings, long dispraised by Florentine critics as “feminine,” were described as “licked.” Critics imagined foreign painters licking their paintings clean, a salacious image that points to a high level of anxiety about the seductive qualities of painting, cosmetics and the female art of artifice.²¹

Aesthetic debates over the “licked surface” reappear repeatedly, like the problem of essentialism, and inform different views of “realism” in the 19th century. Aligned with the French Academy, bourgeois taste and state propaganda, academic “fini” comes to be figured as a guarantee of artistic quality and social responsibility through its erasure of the labor of its own making, a labor associated with manual labor and/or the domestic work of women.²² Paradoxically, the erasure of marks of labor guaranteed the artwork’s value by indicating how much time the artist had spent on its making (unlike avant-garde art, where the speed of its rendering made it vulnerable to accusations that it was slapdash). No wonder the slick, glossy “cunt plates” in Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (1979) provoked such excitement (celebration and censure) with their contradictory “perversion” of aesthetic conventions. Drawing from “cosmetic” artfulness, they offered a seductive high *fini* surface while at the same time aggressively “unconcealing” gender through content (vulvic forms) and by *emphasizing* labor—

not only the “domestic feminine ” labor of their making (the handwork involved in rendering the intricate, labial folds of the vulvas and technical skills of china painting) but of creativity in general—as sexual, collaborative and feminine art/artifice. In fact, the glossy surfaces mimic the viscous lubrication of female sexual arousal which, in turn, mirrors the excitement of the feminist project to rewrite history from perspectives that include rather than disavow desire on every level.

For the Florentine critics, however, feminine style, like the Flemish and Venetian work that term condemned, was considered foreign and remained a consistently negative critical value. A male painter like Titian could paint in both finished and rough styles.²³ But as an “individuating quality that reflects the artist’s character,” style was rarely assigned to women painters in the Renaissance and Baroque periods. At best they could reproduce a style inherited from a father, as was assumed to be the case with Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614), Marietta Tintoretto (1560?-1590), Chiara Varotari (1584-c.1663) and Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1656). When a style *was* attributed to a woman, it was always one associated with self-effacing brushwork. The masculine brush was bold, vigorous and thrusting; it produced sketchy, confident strokes that recorded their action visibly on the surface of the canvas. Aretino likened it to a procreative sword; to paint with a masculine brush was to literally paint with the penis.²⁴ On the other hand, feminine brushwork rendered a “loving finish,” a “cosmetic skin” that concealed the action of the brush.²⁵ Men might take up styles that were feminine, masculine, or a combination of the two, but women, in the rare moments when a style was attributed to them, were limited in the critical literature of the 16th and 17th centuries to “feminine” styles only, whether they adopted them as a strategy or, more frequently, were assigned them by critics. Thus touch was linked to an artist’s “nature” more narrowly for women artists who, aligned with

“matter,” were not thought to have access to reason and were dependent on the masculine to give them shape and meaning.

As previously mentioned, in the 18th century “the sex of an artist and the gender of her painting need not coincide,” and 18th century critics freely opposed Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun’s soft touch and skill at artifice, coded as feminine, to Adelaïde Labille-Guiard’s firm touch and masculine truthfulness.²⁶ As Mary Sheriff’s reading of female artists negotiating the turn from the 18th to the 19th centuries reveals, an essentializing notion of artistic touch, which links touch to the “natural” qualities or characteristics of the artist, gains currency in periods in which social roles are also being “naturalized” in order to shore up certain failing tenets of patriarchal culture and politics. This “naturalization” is performed by both artists and critics as they renegotiate their relationships to gender and touch in, or through, art-making—as artifice, or not, or somewhere uncomfortably (or cleverly) in between.

Sheriff grounds the different concepts of artistic touch as an effect of two competing 18th-century theories of art. The expressive theory, which would triumph (especially in Romanticism), argues that the “essential” self of the artist is visible and readable in the work, sees an essential connection between the artist’s touch (the marks she or he makes on the canvas) and the artist’s intentionality or state of mind when s/he made those marks, which produces a certain sense of “coherence” between the subject and object in a painting. In this way, the expressive school of the 18th century seems founded on assumptions similar to certain tenets of Modernism, which read the artistic mark as a trace and indication of the expression of the artist (although the work, once born, stood independently of its maker). In contrast to the expressive theory, the rhetorical theory of art, learned at and promoted by the French Academy, assumed the artifice of representation. Painters schooled according to this theory were taught a set of artistic

moves (styles, handling of paint, etc.) that were tied to specific subject matter and could be adopted or abandoned at will. Theoretically, from this perspective, artistic touch was not only a learned strategy but could be imitated, regardless of the gender of the artist. Yet the implications of this skill in artifice (already “natural” to woman) were unsettling to critics at a time of social upheaval.

The later 18th century was also an era when the hermaphrodite, the Tribade, and the femme-homme threatened the patriarchal order by imitating men, often passing *as* men while usurping both their “natural” sexual rights to women and their intellectual superiority. The expressive theory of art was far more ideologically suited than the rhetorical (with its emphasis on artifice) to a political mentality that demanded a return to essentialized notions of social roles and sexed bodies. In particular, the return to history painting was seen as a “reform,” an attempt to rescue this noble (male) genre from its corruption by the (feminine) Rococo. This aesthetic shift was occurring simultaneously with changing definitions of women that were becoming more restrictive.

While the gendered attributes of brushwork remained fairly consistent with that of earlier periods, touch (“la main”), since the founding of the French Academy, had been linked to the skill of execution or craftsmanship. The hand was aligned with the body and reasoning (“le raisonnement”) was placed on the side of the mind. Therefore it was permissible for a woman artist like Adelaïde Labille-Guiard to have a masculine touch *if* she painted in particular genres, such as portraiture, which required only the manual skill of copying and not the cogito demanded by history painting. Craft and the body, aligned with the feminine, were less valued than the masculine mind and reason. As a result, many critics of the period claimed that women were unable to take on the masculine genre of history painting. Requiring reason and its higher

powers of imagination and judgment, history painting demanded mental faculties women “naturally” lacked.

Thus, when Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, a female artist, took up history painting in the last quarter of the 18th century, she was working from assumptions based on the older, academic, rhetorical theory of painting as artifice. Her timing was unfortunate. Although she was considered to have a soft, “feminine touch” appropriate to her gender, Vigée-Lebrun was slandered when she presented herself as a history painter, not so much for her lack of a masculine touch but, ironically, for overstepping the limits of her “natural” female propensity for imitation. Given the period’s anxieties about gender transgressions, it was considered “unnatural” for women to mimic men, especially their powers of intellect, those powers supposedly required for successful history painting. As a result, Vigée-Lebrun was caught in a curious contradiction between her “nature” as an artist trained in the arts of mimicry and her social role as a woman who was not supposed to mimic men.

Vigée-Lebrun “performs” this complex dilemma in her *Self-Portrait* of 1783. Reading this painting from a “performative” perspective, Sheriff convincingly argues that Vigée-Lebrun *performed her nature as a woman and a painter*, pressing her command of touch as artifice, her multiple identifications and imitations, to such a degree that critics of her day were led to recognize the beauty of the work and concede her mastery *through* the self-portrait’s lack of resemblance to the artist. In Sheriff’s reading, Vigée-Lebrun points to her gendering but constantly eludes essentialism by producing a painting that is a parody of truth, the truth of essence, while being truthful in its mastery of imitation. The artist paints what is true about her as well as what is fantasized; she occupies her proper social roles but also positions reserved for men; she cites other work, notably Rubens’s *Chapeau de Paille*, becoming a desired wife and, at

the same time, the artist of that desire; she mimics Rubens's masterful use of light and color; and she is simultaneously one of the Tribades of Trianon.²⁷

In other words, Vigée-Lebrun's self-portrait performs its own artifice, a staging of artistic genius as the skill of artifice. This is an interpretation feminist art critics Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker missed in their focus on this portrait as an objectifying display of beauty. Accusing Vigée-Lebrun of being complicit with or simplistically repeating the codes of the essence of Woman, they labeled her work essentialist. Yet, as Sheriff explains, Vigée-Lebrun appeared beautiful because she made a beautiful and sensuous work of art. This beauty is thus inseparable, not from her person, but from her work, despite the fact that the work did not resemble her.

In the 19th century and into the 20th the expressive theory of art claimed the dominant position, culminating, perhaps, in the critical fashioning of Abstract Expressionist artist Jackson Pollock. In the case of women artists of the 19th century, it was expected that their touch would align with the naturalized qualities of their gender, although men were not held to such conventions. As Carol Armstrong has argued, Berthe Morisot was considered the perfect woman painter since her light, spontaneous and fleeting brushstrokes matched both the qualities of Impressionist painting and the ideal French woman.²⁸ Other highly skilled women painters, such as Rosa Bonheur and Mary Cassatt, who used various types of facture that did not match their gender, were not accorded the same praise (Cassatt was called a "masculine American" while Bonheur's sex and choice of subject matter did not match her gender visually or aesthetically). Although Morisot's brushwork is certainly modern (as opposed to the polished *fini* of academic painters of her time), her art was evaluated according to her gender, which was not the case when Manet copied her brushwork for his rendering of flesh in *Before the Mirror*.²⁹ Critics called

Morisot's touch "'pretty,' 'delicate,' 'subtle,' 'charming and seductive,' 'refined,' 'vague and amorphous,' implying its womanliness at every turn, and tying her 'palette and brush' to the eighteenth century and to Fragonard."³⁰ Manet was assigned no such lineage; he was just mastering a different kind of touch.

Pollock's Genius: Transcendent Touch

In the later 20th century, most feminist artists and critics were in dialogue with the patriarchal tenets of Modernism and the remnants of Abstract Expressionism, in which the artist's touch was an indication of his presence in the work, guaranteeing its genius and value. Male essentialism secured value, yet female essentialism, typically, had a reverse effect. In the case of Jackson Pollock, the gendering of his touch was primarily an effect of the dominant critical discourses of the period which produced Pollock as a symbolic figure, in fact the artistic figure *par excellence*, of modernist art. While the crafting of Pollock as the apotheosis of high modernism by a group of art critics and historians (including Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Meyer Schapiro and Michael Fried, among others) has come to dominate if not define the narrative of modernist art history, this narrative was not inviolate, entirely unified, or without its own contradictions. What is relevant to my research, however, is that the production of Pollock as the premier artist of his time depended, in large part, on the promotion of a long-standing notion of touch as belonging to the artist, a sign of his self-expression, but also his link to the transcendental, the source and expression of his artistic genius. Through a circular sort of reasoning, Pollock's genius, his ability to access the realms of universal truth, beauty and value, rendered his touch transcendent.

Despite the critical emphasis on the physical "action" of his painting, Pollock's refusal of the mediatory brush and disconnection of his hand from the canvas, its assimilation into the gesturing body and the simultaneous union with god and the painting, meant that Pollock's touch

became, in a sense, disembodied, taken out of time and contingency. This logic was due, in part, to Clement Greenberg's strategic use of Immanuel Kant's theory of aesthetics to craft his theories of modernist art, which I will say more about shortly. But for now I would like to note that Pollock's touch makes a strange circuit between embodiment and transcendence, a looping, not unlike his gestures, deeply inflected with gender through references that are quite flagrant at some moments and at others very subtle, veiling his gender through naturalization, spiritualization or recourse to universal human values.

Pollock's valorization as the quintessential "action painter" was a trope produced and disseminated primarily through critical texts such as Harold Rosenberg's essay "The American Action Painters" and Allen Kaprow's "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" as well as Namuth's photographs and film of the artist at work.³¹ Widely circulated in the mass media, these photographs both supported and in turn spawned various texts describing Pollock, the western cowboy hero/loner gone native, "dancing" around the canvas, his gestures "spontaneous," "ritualized," and "diaristic."³² Relieved of the painterly (bourgeois, academic) brush, Pollock was free to penetrate the canvas on the floor ("I need the resistance of a hard surface") with his "paint-saturated wand"; could unite with it in an ejaculatory spewing of pigment from a stick or a direct pour onto the canvas ("I am in the painting") and confirm his genius in this direct emission/transmission of divine inspiration, described by Greenberg as "uncastrated" yet retaining "stylistic control."³³

The sexualized interpretations of Pollock's touch did not go unrecognized by either the mass media or a younger generation of artists. "The Wild Ones," a 1956 article in Time magazine, dubbed Pollock "Jack the Dripper" and a number of younger artists, including Klein and Kubota, picked up and elaborated on this trope.³⁴ One of the more overt references is Robert

Rauschenberg's 1955 "combine painting" titled *Bed*, in which a traditionally horizontal set of linens (including a pillow, sheet and quilt supposedly used by Rauschenberg) is splashed with paint and hung vertically on the wall.³⁵ The shift from horizontal to vertical mimics Pollock's drip canvases (painted on the floor then hung on a wall), the dripping streaks of paint refer to his gesture, and the interface between bed and drips suggests that Pollock's supposed virility (highly unlikely given his alcoholism and psychological anguish) was a mere "wet dream." It was this level of obvious sexual reference that Shigeko Kubota's *Vagina Painting* quoted and critiqued, recognizing Pollock as inheriting and drawing on long history of male artists who from at least the Renaissance on "painted with the penis."³⁶

While analogies between male sexuality and creative genius go back at least as far as the Renaissance, they increased, as Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker have noted, in the 19th century, leading to the "conviction that greatness in art was the natural privilege of man."³⁷ In the face of increasing challenges to the male subject's coherence, authenticity and autonomy in the 20th century, the reassertion of this connection appears to have become more urgent, pronounced and, on occasion, ironized, which did not necessarily diminish the assumption.³⁸

Namuth's images reinforce the fact that Pollock's method of working broke with traditional notions of painterly touch, a move that, when interpreted as foregrounding bodily action, has been credited by some critics (i.e. Allan Kaprow) as contributing to the development of event-based and body art. While the idea of the spontaneous gesture as an expression of the artist's self and presence (the gestalt of the moment or time) is an inheritance from the 19th century, for critic Harold Rosenberg, "the action," as both "a thing" ("in that it touches other things and affects them") and "a sign" (both psychic and material) "became its own

representation.”³⁹ Pollock’s gesture continues to make its mark as “Pollock,” but it is his performance, unhooked from the traditional artist’s brush, that is emphasized.

On the one hand, Kaprow understands the “action” aspect of Pollock’s touch, inherent in his gestural marks, as challenging rather than conforming to Greenberg’s notion of the autonomy of the work. He reads Pollock’s gestures as inviting spectatorial identification yet refusing a single focal point, taking the picture “so far out that the canvas is no longer a reference point.”⁴⁰ Pollock’s choices regarding touch, form and scale transform painting into a kind of “environment” for audience involvement, becoming the inspiration for Kaprow’s “Happenings,” time and space-based events that would contribute to the rise of performance art. Kaprow concluded:

I am convinced that to grasp a Pollock’s impact properly, we must be acrobats, constantly shuttling between an identification with the hands and body that flung the paint and stood ‘in’ the canvas and submission to the objective markings, allowing them to entangle and assault us. This instability is indeed far from the idea of a ‘complete’ painting. The artist, the spectator, and the outer world are much too interchangeably involved here.⁴¹

A number of early feminist artists, such as Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann, would explore the potential of such a performative interchange further in order to articulate the role of desire in the creation and interpretation of works of art, as well as the potential of the body (as both subject and object of art) in their own self-conscious enactments of identity (as itself an act).⁴²

On the other hand, Pollock’s performance, when read as conflating artist, gesture and work, was most often produced by modernist critics as guaranteeing the identity or authenticity of all three. Playing on René Descartes’ famous phrase “I think therefore I am,” Alfred Barr, art historian and the first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, confirmed this orientation in 1959: “Many [Abstract Expressionist artists] feel that their painting is a stubborn,

difficult, even desperate effort to discover the ‘self’ or ‘reality’, an effort to which the whole personality should be recklessly committed: I paint, therefore I am.”⁴³ This assertion of a coherent, self-affirming Cartesian identity achieved through a notion of touch figured as embodied performance (conflating artist, work and nature/god, which I shall discuss in a moment) is what critics like Mary Kelly and Hal Foster would later read as Modernism’s emphasis on “presence” and desire for “the essential in art,” setting up the problem of essentialism that would be applied by some critics, with Kelly prominent among them, to early feminist art as the critical yardstick.⁴⁴

Despite the apparent contradiction in the fact that Pollock was produced both as the poster boy for Greenberg’s formalist version of modernist art and as the provocation for its opposition (the rise to prominence of “theatrical” or phenomenological and time-based art, such as Happenings and performance art), critical commentary, often supported by Pollock’s own statements, tended to emphasize Pollock’s touch as the expression of his “creative nature.” In an interview with Lee Krasner in 1967 Pollock stated “I am nature,” and art critic Meyer Schapiro lauded the artist’s drips and markings as “the artist’s active presence.”⁴⁵

As noted above, this was a concept of nature and presence figured in masculine terms, universalized as divine creativity (Kant) or eternal human values such as individual freedom. Exposing this strategy would be key for many women artists whose creativity was culturally figured as a sign of immanence, of bloody bodily fertility and messy physical, rather than transcendent, presence, a trope of touch painter and performance artist Carolee Schneemann would interrogate and push to its limits. This exposure required a complex analysis by artists working in the late 1960s and 1970s, since the terms of masculine creativity, as naturalized, went

unremarked, and it is worth unpacking a bit here, at least those terms that would influence feminist artists' explorations of touch.

For example, in Meyer Schapiro's version of Pollock, interpreted by Richard Shiff as responding to a post-war crisis in male identity triggered, in part, by the loss of originality implied in photographic technologies of mechanical reproduction, Pollock's touch was a mark of his deep psychology and creative freedom, a heroic act of liberation from an increasingly conformist culture based on industrialization, mass production and alienated labor; an act that called for a return to an ethos of American [male] individualism.⁴⁶ Yet that individualism, as an "act of genius," went beyond national or human values. Declaring that the act of painting "is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence," Harold Rosenberg, who coined the term "action painting," challenged Greenberg's notion of the autonomy of art (by conflating art and life, a move that Allan Kaprow would take up later and make into a career) yet agreed with Greenberg's insistence on the artist's (and artwork's) transcendence, insofar as "the work, the act, translates the psychologically given into the intentional, into a 'world' — and thus transcends it."⁴⁷ Without recourse to a transcendental valuation, the act of painting is simply about the act; it is merely aesthetics or psychology but not "the psychology of creation."⁴⁸ In other words, without the move from personal psychology to transcendental creativity, the work of art "cannot be justified *as an act of genius*."⁴⁹

This notion of touch as the mark and transmission of transcendental genius was figured, in large part, through tropes of masculinity that were simultaneously emphasized and veiled, through various strategies and assumptions that made it appear natural.⁵⁰ From an existentialist perspective, Pollock's act of painting is transcendental insofar as he projects himself, his

intention, into the world through his work, thus overcoming the immanence of materiality and submissiveness to biological destiny through an active, willful agency.

And yet, as Simone de Beauvoir pointed out, transcendence in a patriarchal world is gendered as the cultural purview of men:

the situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures, nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilize her as an object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego ... which is essential and sovereign.⁵¹

In other words, women (as signifiers for difference) function like canvases, as the objects onto which men project their immanence, their corporeality and vulnerability, in order to achieve transcendence, to make their mark in the world and, thereby, secure their sense of autonomy and coherency, which is “essential and sovereign.” By factoring in the question of sexual difference, de Beauvoir exposes the vulnerability of existentialism’s concept of transcendence, based on intention and (male) creativity, to issues of power and essence. Men make art, women make (men’s) babies.

The concept of transcendence was fundamental to the modernist project as articulated by its main proponents. To formulate his theory of modernist art Clement Greenberg relied on Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment, which stipulates that judgment, as purposiveness without purpose, is informed neither by cognitive reasoning nor subjective “liking”; it must be free of emotion and subjective interest. From the perspective of the Cartesian opposition between mind and body (subject and object, reason and sense, a polemic that goes back to Plato and the Greek philosophers), “interest” or desire is on the side of the body, the sensuous and the subjective. In Platonic terms, sensuous knowledge is a “bastard logic,” which means unreliable because unsecured by the guarantee of the paternal logos (the word whose meaning is guaranteed through the dialogue of patriarchal philosophers anchoring meaning). Later, within Judeo-Christian-

Islamic patriarchal religion, the paternal logos is the spoken Word of God (as absolute knowledge or universal truth). Here, the paternal word has gone a significant step beyond its philosophical roots, functioning as both creator and guarantor or, in semiotic terms, anchoring meaning as an unmediated one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified; it is creator, representation and the thing itself. It is this “phallogocentrism” and its logic of the “self-same” (upon which a logic of opposition and metaphoric substitution is based) that Luce Irigaray, beginning in the 1970s, subjected to vigorous critique, linking it to regimes of vision while proposing, as a feminist alternative, tactile relations (i.e. “two lips”) capable of embracing a logic of simultaneous difference and (associative, metonymic) contiguity.⁵²

In order to bridge the gap between the subjective (what is known about the object through the senses) and the objective (for Greenberg the “autonomous” and self-referential art object), Kant relied, as Derrida has argued, on metaphysics, on an appeal to nature/god as a transcendental source of creativity, meaning, truth and knowledge in order to guarantee the meaning and value of the object as essential or inherent to it (and separate from the subject).⁵³ In turn, it is this access to, or in Derrida’s terms the miming of, the self-generating and self-guaranteeing transcendental creativity of nature/god (in monomaletheistic religious terms, god as the universal Creator) that both defines and secures artistic genius.⁵⁴ Through his ability to mime *the action* of god (not imitate a thing), to make a direct connection to and transmission of self-originating enactments of creativity (nature/god), the artist embeds the divine source of artistic genius and value directly into the “pure form” of the painting. This “value” is then extracted by the critic, who, through his faculty of aesthetic judgment, has the ability to recognize and interpret this genius for the masses.⁵⁵

Through recourse to the transcendental, the artist is a genius and the critic secures his own judgment as a universal truth, which, according to Kant, invests him with the authority to speak for others; through this circular logic, both artist and critic are aligned with god.⁵⁶ In other words, transcendence is a concept that may be used to secure and regulate meaning and value through recourse to a claim of originary creativity (self-generating and self-guaranteeing) and absolute knowledge (1 to 1 correspondence between sign and referent); it's about who gets to control the semiotic, who gets the last word, who gets to draw the bottom line; in this way, transcendence is the apotheosis of essentialism. But like all ideas and signs considered from a poststructuralist perspective, its "truth" is secured, essentially, in nothing (hence the urgency of fundamentalists of whatever stripe to disavow this).⁵⁷

Given the social, religious and/or political attempts to naturalize certain persons' access or claims to transcendence as absolute knowledge or intrinsic value, part of the work of feminism has been to expose transcendence as a concept with a long gendered history, either blatantly through critiquing the figure of a god imaged and imagined as male, as auto-generative and an absolute source of meaning, or more subtly through interrogations of metaphoric displacements and attributes that are coded as male or female. In particular, many early feminist artists were sensitive to Modernism's reliance on transcendence to sever artistic creativity from the body (namely, the immanence projected onto the female body), spiritualizing it in order to guarantee the value of male creativity as neutral, universal and true.⁵⁸

This denial of the body in modernist aesthetic theory was perhaps nowhere more blatant than in Greenberg's formulation of opticality as the goal of modernist art, a strategy that continued to rely on transcendence in order to shore up the framing of his concepts, particularly autonomy and genius.⁵⁹ Yet Kant's recourse to transcendence, in Derrida's reading, encounters

the problem of the frame; in order to posit an inside there must be an outside, which, in turn, defines it.⁶⁰ By maintaining a boundary between the subject and the object (which it then must overcome), Kant's turn to the transcendence of metaphysics appears to anchor value and signification but only resorts to another frame. In Greenbergian terms, the artwork is supposedly autonomous, separate from the subject or viewer, yet it is the subject who defines the object as art. Frames, like the concepts they are invoked to secure (such as autonomy), are never inviolate; to invoke a frame is also to insinuate its demise.

Perhaps this is in part why Greenberg's defense of self-referential art eventually compelled him to posit the picturing of opticality as the goal of modernist visual arts. In Pollock's drip paintings Greenberg saw matter becoming weightless, dispersing both the object and the viewer's traditional focal point as Pollock's looping lines, no longer bound to the work of contour, created instead a kind of luminosity (formerly the purview of color). For Greenberg as well as his follower Michael Fried, Pollock's drip paintings "transcended ... the conditions of reality in order to enter the dialectical terms of abstraction," referring to nothing other than a pure opticality figured as freed from the body.⁶¹ In this way, Pollock's paintings realized the work of Modernism that for Greenberg had begun with Manet and the Impressionists, satisfying his desire for a "purely optical experience as against optical experience modified or revised by tactile associations."⁶²

This desire to elude mediation, to separate the viewer's "divine" eye from tactility and the body, or the artist's hand from the brush and canvas (an equivalence both Klein and Schneemann would explore, but to very different ends), is paralleled, through a strange and sometimes paradoxical logic, in the way that transcendence in modernist discourses is linked to concepts of presence figured through distance and proximity, space and time. As Hal Foster has argued in

“The Crux of Minimalism,” Greenberg’s ally, the critic Michael Fried, posits two kind of presence. The first, which is the goal of modernist art, is timeless and epiphanic, experienced by the viewer who stands before a great work of art and enters into a moment of instantaneous transcendental communion with it. This mystical union with the work is predicated, however, on the viewer’s distance, on the ability to stand before the work and take it all in. In a strange sort of circuitry, the viewer’s experience of mastery/communion/timelessness relies, at least in the case of Pollock, on the separation of the artist’s hand/brush/mediation from the canvas in order to collapse his gesture with his body. This is an action that mimes and thereby unites the artist with god, the body/gesture becoming a pure or unmediated action/transmission of/from god back into the “pure” form of the work, which is then available to the viewer who may experience this transcendence or act of transubstantiation as instantaneous “conviction.”⁶³ This is the experience of transcendence Fried so passionately desires in his call for “presentness as grace.”⁶⁴

The second kind of presence, a tactility defined in corporeal or immanent terms as palpable immediacy (proximity) and concreteness, is aligned with duration, exemplified for Fried in the comment of Minimalist artist Tony Smith who, considering his experience of a nighttime road trip as a way to think about or make art, said, “there is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.”⁶⁵ Foster agrees with Fried’s suspicion of Smith insofar as he seems to be invoking an essentialist notion of presence as unmediated experience, though the Minimalists weren’t chastised and dismissed as naïve essentialists; this accusation was reserved for the early feminists. Yet the problem for Fried was not essentialism per se, but rather the fact that this “literalist” or “theatrical” theory and practice of art is both “wholly accessible” (something everyone can understand, questioning the need for the critic) and situates the viewer in the “mundane time” of the body rather than the timeless present, the transcendental time that fosters

a sense of “conviction” or belief in the instantaneous and absolute knowledge available in and through a great work of art.⁶⁶

Although Minimalism took Greenberg’s notion of the “objective” (the autonomy and purity of form) far beyond what he and his cohorts had intended, embracing, instead, a subjective and phenomenological approach, they “continued to position the viewer and the artist as outside history and sexually neutral.”⁶⁷ To some extent, this move away from the hand toward an industrial or machine production of the work of art appears to insert more distance between artist and work.⁶⁸ But that gap, as we have seen, does not prevent an identification of the artist with transcendent genius while, at the same time, it foregrounds the potential for the artist’s identity to become dematerialized as signature, as a sign that accrues value on its own, so to speak, regardless of its material connection to the work. That value, no longer having to reside in the object, is free to be created and determined by social forces, which in the Western art world means primarily white male critics, historians and patrons.

This condition simultaneously courted, exposed and amplified connections between art, artist and the forces of the market, a strategy Pop artist Andy Warhol exploited to maximum effect. Not only did Warhol not touch most of “his” work, leaving it to the mechanical process of silkscreen printing performed by studio assistants, but he also relinquished typical notions of subjectivity by claiming that he wanted to be “a machine.”⁶⁹ While this statement lent itself to interpretations of post-Cartesian and postmodernist identity, Warhol was, once again, collapsing the artist with the work, now machine-made. In fact, in one of his many comments combining critique, celebrity and humor, Warhol suggested that one should, in lieu of an artwork, tie up and hang \$200,000 on a wall; printed currency, of course.⁷⁰ The idea was “pure genius,”

acknowledging the fact that the machine, industrial and institutional (the “machine” of art criticism, history and the market), had become god.

While Foster claims that the blindness of both Modernism and Minimalism to gender and history was redressed by feminist artists of the 1980s, I would argue that Kubota’s performance, and the work of a large number of other feminist and proto-feminist artists and theorists from the 1960s and 70s (from Yoko Ono and Luce Irigaray to Carolee Schneemann and many others), contradicts his claim and assigns that feminist redress a considerably longer heritage.⁷¹

Grappling with the modernist and postmodernist problem of transcendence may account, in part, for the fact that many early feminist artists and theorists invented theories and practices of immanence. Their work integrates and interrogates corporeality as a form not only for political activism and/or critique but also research, sometimes through historical references to the images and histories of archaic goddesses but mostly with an eye to imaging and imagining a future to come. Some, most notably Judy Chicago, Carolee Schneemann, Valie Export and Marina Abramović, did seek transcendence in the sense of a projective female will. But many of these artists, including Schneemann, Chicago and Yoko Ono, recognized, from various perspectives, that one of the most crucial problems of gender was the patriarchal strategy of invoking transcendence, which, as the attempt to secure meaning beyond time and space, outside the body and history, went far beyond the question of aesthetic judgment and value to subtend much larger social and political issues.

¹ Shigeko Kubota, “Shigeko Kubota with Phong Bui,” *The Brooklyn Rail* (September 2007): <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2007/09/art/kubota>.

² I am discussing Pollock’s touch in the context of painting, but I would like to point out that Duchamp’s brilliant and wry institutional critique, his 1917 “Fountain” (a mass-produced urinal turned upside-down), was signed with a brush in the artist’s hand. Anticipating the turn of subjects and objects (signifieds) into circulating signs (signifiers), it was the signature of his alter ego, “R. Mutt,” rendered in dripping paint that mocked the spontaneous “truth” of the romantic, the child, or the insane. I have often wondered if Pollock’s “genius” could be linked to a desire to riff on this particular signature of Duchamp’s. I would also like to note that the framing of Pollock’s touch as an act is read

by Amelia Jones as a move toward (but not the origin of) the performance of artistic subjectivity (which doesn't become a dominant form until the 1960s). See Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 53-102.

³ Describing these performances Klein wrote: “[My models] became living brushes! I had rejected the brush long before. It was too psychological. I painted with the more anonymous roller, trying to create a ‘distance’—at the very least an intellectual, unvarying distance—between the canvas and me during the execution. Now, like a miracle, the brush returned, but this time alive. Under my direction, the flesh itself applied the color to the surface, and with perfect precision. I was able to remain constantly at the exact distance ‘X’ from my canvas and thus I could dominate my creation continuously throughout the entire execution. In this way I stayed clean. I no longer dirtied myself with color, not even the tips of my fingers. The work finished itself there in front of me, under my direction, in absolute collaboration with the model. And I could salute its birth into the tangible world in a dignified manner, dressed in a tuxedo.” From Yves Klein, “Le Vrai Devient Réalité” (Truth Becomes Reality), quoted in Paul Schimmel, “Leap Into the Void: Performance and the Object,” in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949-1979* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 33. [Klein’s essay written in March 1960 and originally published in *Zero 3* (July 1961).]

⁴ Kristine Stiles, “Between Water and Stone—Fluxus Performance: A Metaphysics of Acts,” reprinted in *The Artist’s Body*, ed. Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones (London: Phaidon, 2000), 211. [Originally published in *The Spirit of Fluxus* (Minnesota: The Walker Art Center, 1993), 64-99.] For a discussion of the superiority of vision over touch in the work of Goethe and Schiller at the end of the 18th century (with vision aligned with the intellect and touch with “the primitive ‘animal senses’”) see Margaret Olin, “Validation by Touch in Kandinsky’s Early Abstract Art,” *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 1 (Autumn 1989): 161.

⁵ See Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy* (New Paltz, N.Y.: Documentext, 1975), 52. “Kinetic theater” is a performative amalgam of bodily gestures and movements in space that could include objects as well as film and video projections.

⁶ Philip Sohm, “Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 794.

⁷ Philip Sohm, “Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 799.

⁸ Carolee Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 55.

⁹ Pollock and Parker cite Maurice Schroder’s research on “the growth of the analogy between artistic creativity and male sexuality” which has its roots in the Renaissance when artists were cautioned to be chaste in order to preserve their ‘virility’ for their art. Schroder also cites Flaubert (the artist who ‘feels his sperm rising for an emission’) and Van Gogh (“don’t fuck too much ... your paintings will be all the more spermatic”). This led to “the nineteenth-century conviction that greatness in art was the natural privilege of man.” Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, “‘God’s Little Artist,’” in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981b), 82-83.

¹⁰ Mary D. Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 187.

¹¹ Mary Kelly, “Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism,” in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited by Brian Wallis, (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), 87-103.

¹² Mary Kelly, “Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism,” in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), 87-103.

¹³ Philip Sohm, “Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 760.

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- ¹⁴ Philip Sohm, "Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 796-98.
- ¹⁵ Philip Sohm, "Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 778-79.
- ¹⁶ Philip Sohm, "Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 781.
- ¹⁷ Philip Sohm, "Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 783.
- ¹⁸ Philip Sohm, "Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 764.
- ¹⁹ Philip Sohm, "Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 787.
- ²⁰ Philip Sohm, "Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 793-94.
- ²¹ Philip Sohm, "Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 795.
- ²² Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, "The Ideology of the Licked Surface: Official Art," *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1984), 223.
- ²³ I thank Melissa Hyde for pointing out that from the perspective of the Venetians, Titian's style was not considered feminine.
- ²⁴ Philip Sohm, "Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 799. I thank Melissa Hyde for pointing out Renoir's (1841-1919) famous statement: "I paint with my prick."
- ²⁵ Philip Sohm, "Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 798.
- ²⁶ Mary D. Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 187.
- ²⁷ I cannot reproduce Sheriff's brilliant and inspired reading here, but see Mary D. Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 80-220.
- ²⁸ See Carol Armstrong, "Facturing Femininity: Manet's 'Before the Mirror,'" *October* 74 (Autumn 1995): 74-104.
- ²⁹ See Carol Armstrong, "Facturing Femininity: Manet's 'Before the Mirror,'" *October* 74 (Autumn 1995): 74-104.
- ³⁰ See Carol Armstrong, "Facturing Femininity: Manet's 'Before the Mirror,'" *October* 74 (Autumn 1995): 90.
- ³¹ For an excellent and almost prophetic reading of the impact of Namuth's photographs on Pollock, his career and a younger generation of artists, see two articles by Barbara Rose: "Jackson Pollock: The Artist as Cultural Hero" and "Namuth's Photographs and the Pollock Myth." Rose discusses the dissemination of these photographs as creating a "mythic" Pollock and ushering in a new celebrity culture of artists producing themselves for mass media consumption (i.e. Warhol). Both articles are in *Pollock Painting: The Photographs of Hans Namuth*, ed. Barbara Rose (New York: Agrinde Publications 1978). Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Artnews* 51 (December 1952): 22-23, 48-50. Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. J. Kelly (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

³² Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. J. Kelly (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3-4.

³³ Despite the fact that Pollock, in an interview with Lee Krasner, declared "I am nature," a statement that could be read as aligning him with immanence rather than transcendence, this aspect of Pollock was recuperated by critics like Harold Rosenberg through a discourse of normative heroic masculine individualism framed as a transcendental mastery of nature. For Pollock quotes see "Jackson Pollock: An Interview with Lee Krasner," *Arts* (April 1967), 38; cited by Andrew Perchuk in "Pollock and Postwar Masculinity," in *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*, ed. Andrew Perchuk and Helaine Posner (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 38; and *Possibilities I* (Winter 1947-48), reprinted in *Abstract Expressionism*, ed. Cecile Shapiro and David Shapiro (London: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 356. For the "wand" quote, see Harold Rosenberg, "The Myth of Jackson Pollock," reprinted in *Abstract Expressionism*, ed. Cecile Shapiro and David Shapiro (London: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 377. Meyer Schapiro reads Pollock's touch in the context of industrial mass production and increasingly alienated labor, where "paintings and sculptures ... are the last hand-made, personal objects within our culture. The painting symbolizes an individual who realizes freedom and realizes freedom and deep engagement of the self within his work. ... Hence the great importance of the mark, the stroke, the brush, the drip, the quality of the substance of the paint itself, and the surface of the canvas as a texture and field of operation—all signs of the artist's active presence." See Meyer Schapiro, "The Liberating Quality of the Avant-garde," *Artnews* 56 (Summer 1957): 38, 40. I am indebted to Amelia Jones for the insight about Pollock's relation to performance art. See Amelia Jones, *Performing the Body/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998), Chapter Two. For a more direct discussion of Pollock's influence on Happenings, see Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. J. Kelly (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

³⁴ See "The Wild Ones," *Time Magazine*, February 20th, 1956, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,808194-1,00.html>

(accessed April 8, 2010).

³⁵ A "combine" painting attaches cast-off materials (such as tires and old clothes) to a traditional support.

³⁶ See my earlier comments on Aretino's figuring of the paintbrush as a sword and a penis in the Renaissance, Fragonard's depiction of the artist who "paints with his ass" (penis) in the 18th century, and Renoir's famous 19th century statement "I paint with my prick."

³⁷ Pollock and Parker cite Maurice Schroder's research on "the growth of the analogy between artistic creativity and male sexuality" which has its roots in the Renaissance when artists were cautioned to be chaste in order to preserve their 'virility' for their art. Schroder also cites Flaubert (the artist who 'feels his sperm rising for an emission') and Van Gogh ("don't fuck too much ... your paintings will be all the more spermatic"). This led to "the nineteenth-century conviction that greatness in art was the natural privilege of man." Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, "'God's Little Artist,'" *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981b), 82-83.

³⁸ I note the wide range of artists who have jokingly ridiculed or ironized male sexuality, particularly white male heterosexuality, such as Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol, among others. But irony does not ensure a critique, just as critique does not insure a change in concepts or consciousness. As the careers of these artists have demonstrated, the market assimilates artists, particularly male artists, despite their critiques and in fact often lauds them for such.

³⁹ Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Artnews* 51 (December 1952): 22-23, 48-50.

⁴⁰ Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. J. Kelly (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 6.

⁴¹ Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. J. Kelly (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 5.

⁴² For an excellent analysis of feminist body artists, see Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), particularly her reading of the work of Hannah Wilke.

⁴³ Alfred Barr, *The New American Painting* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 5.

⁴⁴ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996), 58. Mary Kelly, "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), 87-103.

⁴⁵ This emphasis on the artist's creative nature benefits from reading it through Derrida's critique of Greenberg's reliance on Kantian aesthetics. See Derrida's essay "Economimesis," where he shows the link between artistic genius and nature/god. For me, the key to how Pollock is being produced by Greenberg is Kant's idea that artistic genius mimes nature/god, which "produces what produces," an original act of creative power that is not based on mimesis as imitation but re-creating the act of god/nature's power to create and represent itself simultaneously; recreating god's act of creating. See Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis," translated by R. Klein, *Diacritics* 11: 2 (Summer 1975): 8-11. For the artist described as an "active presence," see Meyer Schapiro, "The Liberating Quality of the Avant-garde," *Artnews* 56 (Summer 1957): 38, 40. For Pollock's statement "I am nature," see "Jackson Pollock: An Interview with Lee Krasner," *Arts* (April 1967): 38; cited by Andrew Perchuk in "Pollock and Postwar Masculinity," in *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*, ed. Andrew Perchuk and Helaine Posner (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 38.

⁴⁶ Heralding painting and sculpture as the "last handmade, personal objects" in a culture of increasing industrialization, mass production, and alienated labor, Meyer Schapiro writes: "The painting symbolizes an individual who realizes freedom and deep engagement of the self within his work. ... Hence the great importance of the mark, the stroke, the brush, the drip, the quality of the substance of the paint itself, and the surface of the canvas as a texture and field of operation—all signs of the artist's active presence." See Meyer Schapiro, "The Liberating Quality of the Avant-garde," *Artnews* 56 (Summer 1957): 38, 40. See Richard Shiff, "Breath of Modernism (Metonymic Drift)," in *In Visible Touch: Modernism and Masculinity*, ed. Terry Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 185-213.

⁴⁷ Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Artnews* 51 (December 1952): 22.

⁴⁸ Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Artnews* 51 (December 1952): 22.

⁴⁹ Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Artnews* 51 (December 1952):22.

⁵⁰ For an extended discussion of the need to see and the simultaneous need to veil Pollock's gender/penis/phallus (in Lacanian terms) in order to secure his genius and the critic's "disinterest," see Chapter Two in Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

⁵¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated and edited by H. M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1952), 28.

⁵² Irigaray's critique of the "self-same" is embedded in her critique of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, particularly the primacy of vision in the gendering of subjects. See Luce Irigaray, "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry," in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 13-132.

⁵³ Derrida argues that the artist/genius and critic in Kant are analogous to God though an "anthropo-theological *mimesis*, a divine teleology" (Derrida 1975, 9). This mimesis is not based on the resemblance or identification of one thing with another but rather a "pure and free productivity" that resembles that of nature. The mimetic art of an author-subject or artist-god, then, is "the identification of human action with divine action—of one freedom with another," a statement that fits well with the critical production of Pollock as the action painter. "The communicability of pure judgments of taste, the (universal, infinite, limitless) exchange between subjects who have free hands in the exercise or appreciation of fine art, all that presupposes a commerce between the divine artist and the human one. And indeed this commerce is a *mimesis*, in the strict sense of a play, a mask, an identification with the other on stage, and not the imitation of an object by its copy. "True" mimesis is between two producing subjects

and not between two producing things. Implied by the whole third *Critique*, even though the word itself never appears, this kind of *mimesis* invariably entails the condemnation of imitation, which is always characterized as being servile” (Derrida 1975, 9). The artist’s genius, as “freedom,” resembles God’s freedom (which “resembles itself and reassembles itself”) “precisely by not imitating it, the only way one freedom can resemble another” (Derrida 1975, 10). This *mimesis* cannot proceed through concepts because it is a “quasi-natural production.”

“The original agency here is the figure of the genius. ... [genius] is a natural talent, a gift of Nature ... genius is itself produced and given by nature,” without which there would be no fine art. “Nature produces what produces, it produces freedom [for] itself and gives it to itself. In giving non-conceptual rules to art (rules ‘abstracted from the act, that is from the product’), in producing ‘exemplars,’ genius does nothing more than reflect nature, represent it: both as its legacy or its delegate and as its faithful image” (Derrida 1975, 10). Genius is not learned, which for Kant is simple imitation: “‘Genius is the innate disposition of the spirit, by which nature gives rules to art.’” Derrida continues: “The poet or genius receives from nature what he gives, of course, but first he receives from nature (from God), besides the given, the giving, the power to produce and to give more than he promises to men. The poetic gift, content and power, wealth and action, is an add-on [*un en-plus*] given as a [power] to give [*un donner*] by God to the poet, who transmits it in order to permit this supplementary surplus value to make its return to the infinite source—this source which can never be lost (by definition, if one can say that of the infinite)” (Derrida 1975, 11). Jacques Derrida, “Economimesis,” translated by R. Klein, *Diacritics* 11: 2 (Summer 1975): 8-11.

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Economimesis,” translated by R. Klein, *Diacritics* 11: 2 (Summer 1975): 8-11.

⁵⁵ I am indebted to Amelia Jones and Donald Preziosi for translating the conflation of author, god and critic in literary theory discourses into art historical terms. See Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 31. See Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

⁵⁶ As “subjects who know” not through reason or emotion but a *mimesis* of auto-generative action, a self-referential creativity which, through a mystical surplus, both transmits and reflects nature/god, both artist and critic are aligned with god. See Jacques Derrida, “Economimesis,” translated by R. Klein, *Diacritics* 11: 2 (Summer 1975): 8-11.

⁵⁷ It would be interesting to consider this idea in the context of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried’s theory of opticality, particularly Fried’s reading of Pollock’s use of line as referring to nothing other than eyesight itself. The last attempt to guarantee significance is a resort to the disembodied eye—which is the sign for god in many cultures. See Fried quoted in Hal Foster, *Art Since 1900* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 357.

⁵⁸ In philosophical terms this strategy was exposed by Luce Irigaray in her critique of phallogocentrism as the replication of the “self-same,” a concept of creativity that, in its move to abstraction, denies the body, particularly the female body. See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), translated by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 13-132.

⁵⁹ Richard Shiff will argue otherwise. See Richard Shiff, “Breath of Modernism (Metonymic Drift),” in *In Visible Touch: Modernism and Masculinity*, ed. Terry Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 185-213.

⁶⁰ I am offering a very simplistic reading of Derrida, but this is how I understand his general argument. See Jacques Derrida, “The Parergon,” in *Truth in Painting* (1978), trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), 37-82.

⁶¹ Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 357. For an in-depth analysis of this aspect of modernism, see Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994). Thus Pollock’s paintings realized the work of Modernism that for Greenberg had begun with Manet and the Impressionists, satisfying his desire for a “purely optical experience as against optical experience modified or revised by tactile associations. It was in the name of the purely and literally optical, not in that of color, that the Impressionists set themselves to undermining shading and modeling and everything else that seemed to connote the sculptural.” Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. C. Harrison and P. Woods (London: Blackwell, 2003), 776.

⁶² Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. C. Harrison and P. Woods (London: Blackwell, 2003), 776.

⁶³ See Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 146. Regarding "conviction" Hal Foster comments: "Here the doctrine of autonomy returns in its late guise, and it suggests that rather than separate from religion, (as Enlightenment aesthetics sometimes proposed to be), autonomous art is, in part, a secret substitute for religion—that is, a secret substitute for the moral disciplining of the subject that religion once provided." Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 53.

⁶⁴ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 147.

⁶⁵ Tony Smith quoted in Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 131. Cited in Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 51.

⁶⁶ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 146.

⁶⁷ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 43.

⁶⁸ Avant-garde art histories often cite Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" (1917) as a seminal moment and progenitor.

⁶⁹ See G. R. Swenson, "What is Pop Art? Answers from Painters Part 1," *Art News* 62, no. 7 (November 1963): 26.

⁷⁰ Warhol's quote was: "I like money on the wall. Say you were going to buy a \$200,000 painting. I think you should take that money, tie it up, and hang it on the wall. Then when someone visited you, the first thing they would see is the money on the wall." Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: from A to Z and Back Again* (New York: Mariner Books, 1975): 133-134.

⁷¹ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 59.

CHAPTER 6
EARLY FEMINIST ARTISTS: ARTISTIC TOUCH, TRANSCENDENCE AND
IMMANENCE

Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. It may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel. And so when we speak about my sexuality or my gender, as we do (and as we must), we mean something complicated by it. Neither of these is precisely a possession, but both are to be understood as modes of being dispossessed, ways of being for another, or, indeed, by virtue of another.¹ –Judith Butler

But this treatment of *Before the Mirror* distinguishes itself from the discourse of formalism in a number of ways as well. And one of those ways concerns its address to facture, and to facture's capacity as a form of *un-form*: facture's dissolution of form and its readability, its disruption of the singleness and unified *gestalt* of the image, and its attachment to the amorphous regime of color as against the rationality of design.² – Carol Armstrong

Though definitions of immanence, like transcendence and essentialism, shift according to context, I want to suggest that many, if not all, of the feminist artists accused by critics and historians of naïvely “celebrating” and essentializing the female body were also, even if the theoretical terminology was not yet set in place, beginning the work of deconstructing the opposition between transcendence and immanence, subjects and objects of knowledge, and the systems of organizing and valuing experience (aesthetic, social and political) that were based on such oppositions.³ Some feminist artists achieved this through interrogations and elaborations on the very “loaded” concept of touch, questioning the “purity” of its modernist conception as self-referential and transcendental, all in one stroke. Although feminist artists explored many types of touch, I would like to begin by addressing two of the most prominent forms, touch given over to the viewer, explored in the work of Yoko Ono, Valie Export and Marina Abramović, and touch that exaggerates and plays with the artist's hand as corporeal and gendered, of which Carolee Schneemann's work is an early and compelling example.

Yoko Ono

As an exploration of giving the artist's touch over to the hand of the audience, Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964) is a rich resource. It has been performed multiple times in different locations, including Kyoto, Tokyo, London, New York and most recently Paris. As a result, there is a history of critical reception, as well as David and Albert Maysles's documentary footage of the July 1965 performance at Carnegie Hall in New York, which was shown again in its entirety in 2007 during the exhibition *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Along with Carolee Schneemann (*Eye/Body: 36 Transformative Actions*, 1963), Valie Export (*Touch Cinema*, 1968), and Shigeko Kubota, Ono is one of the first female artists to use her body in her work, and I believe it is worth noting that all four, in various ways, emphasize the hand of the artist.

At each venue where *Cut Piece* is performed, Ono, dressed in one of her best suits, kneels or sits impassively on the stage, a large pair of tailor's shears placed on the floor in front of her. The audience is invited to come up, one at a time, and cut off a small piece of her clothing which, at least in the original performance notes, they may keep if they wish.⁴ The quiet, static composure of Ono's body and facial expression throughout the piece, presumably the result of her subjective will, effectively produces her body as an object, creating an unremitting tension between subjectivity and objectivity that questions the boundaries between artist and work; the invitation to touch extends that exploration to foreground the audience.

In discussing the original performance of *Cut Piece*, produced for the 1964 "Contemporary American Avant-Garde Music Concert: Insound and Instructure" in Kyoto, Japan, Ono underscores its aural dimension.⁵ Given her previous collaborations with the American avant-garde composer and theoretician John Cage, whose work, in contrast to Clement Greenberg's version of modernism, was designed to challenge the autonomy of art (often including the

audience as co-creators), this initial emphasis on sound is not surprising, nor is the fact that the piece changes with each new context. Ono notes the reluctance of the Kyoto audience to appear on stage, their reticence creating a series of long, soft silences that pervade the echoing hall, a hush which serves to amplify, when the scissors finally do arise, the sound of cloth shearing at the touch of resolute metal. The overall impression Ono gives is one of quiet contemplative movement, the sound of hard line meeting soft surface, irregular yet rhythmic, creates a fabric of its own, weaving bodies and space together through time rendered tensile, tangible.⁶

In the 1965 performance at New York's Carnegie Hall, however, the actions of the audience seem to dominate the performance and *Cut Piece* appears more visual than auditory. This may be due in part to the fact that I have access to it through the medium of film and to the Maysles brothers' editing choices, but I think not entirely; critical discussions have also tended to focus on the visual aspects. The film routinely offers close-ups of Ono's face, predominantly static and impassive, which contrasts starkly with the growing momentum of the audience, their eagerness pressing them forward, the rhythm of their bodies and the cutting increasingly determined, at times almost reckless in execution. One person walks very quickly onto the stage and sharply tugs at the cloth before cutting; a man circles Ono while brandishing the scissors, a trope of predation applauded by the audience. As the performance advances so does an emphasis on the visual, evident in how the attention of the audience-participants seems to shift from the action of cutting to an increased awareness of being on stage coupled with the desire to expose Ono's body. One man, on his second trip up to the stage, looks out of the frame as if confirming support from comrades and says: "This might take some time." Someone in the audience asks, "How long?" "Not too long," he replies, scissors in hand. Reassured, he performs an extended

slicing of her slip. Another voice in the audience yells “Playboy.” He then shears through her bra, leaving her to cover her bared breasts with her hands.

Part of the brilliance of *Cut Piece* is that audience members who attempt to “reveal” Ono are, in turn, themselves revealed through their own touch/actions, though this, too, remains open to degrees of speculation. That Japanese audiences’ responses to Ono seem quite different from New Yorkers’ (admittedly the venues were framed differently as “music” and “art,” but there was a considerable degree of categorical overlap at that moment) suggests that the performance exposes cultural differences and social *doxa*. This may be true, but perhaps less in terms of confirming stereotypes about the respective cultures (i.e. Japanese are quiet, New Yorkers are aggressive) and more so in terms of cultural regimes of vision and touch (which open onto issues of gender and race), since *Cut Piece* vigorously challenges assumptions about the relationship of “seeing” to “knowing.” Although the New York audience partially exposed her and the London audiences stripped her entirely, this revealed very little or nothing about her and a great deal more about the viewer’s drive to see, which, in the history of western culture, is linked to a desire to “know” and thereby “grasp” or possess the object.⁷ This equation is not unfamiliar to theorists and historians of western regimes of vision (i.e. the “mastery” implied in Renaissance perspective), feminist artists and critics (i.e. from Freud’s famous question “What do women want?” to Hollywood cinema’s pandering to a “male gaze”) and post-colonial theorists (i.e. the history of ethnographic imaging).

It is significant, I think, that most art historical responses to *Cut Piece*, as historian and critic Peggy Phelan has noted, have focused primarily on its scopic register.⁸ This often overlaps with feminist interpretations produced post-1980, with their critical emphasis on the “male gaze.” Thomas Crow reads the performance as foregrounding “the political question of women’s

physical vulnerability as mediated by regimes of vision.”⁹ Kathy O’Dell makes the claim (not substantiated in the filmed performance) that “throughout most of the piece she [Ono] sat completely still, training an icy stare on the audience, past those who took her up on her offer. By ironically replicating stereotypically male practices of voyeurism, as well as stereotypically female states of passivity, she competed with traditions of voyeurism and demonstrated another form of mastery over visual space.”¹⁰ And while Kristine Stiles reads *Cut Piece* as a “discourse on passivity and aggression” that encompasses a range of possibilities (from “the reciprocity between abuse and self-denigration,” “the relinquishment of power required in the sadomasochistic exchange,” and “the potential for objectification of the ‘other’ in the militarization of feeling that dislocates compassion from acts of brutality”), her general conclusion is that it offers a commentary on the condition of art as an interactive relation between beholder and object; an exchange revealed in “the relationship between exhibitionism and scopic desires.”¹¹

The conclusions that Crow and Stiles reach, particularly the latter’s suggestion that *Cut Piece* “visualizes and enacts the responsibility that viewers must take in aesthetic experience,” are certainly valid, but their emphasis on the visual seems to take for granted the key element of the work, which is Ono’s deliberate emphasis on touch.¹² That said, Fluxus artists (including Ono) in general were interested in the framing of daily behaviors, so the act of filming should be considered as a possible influence on the behavior and touch of the New York audience-performers. As we know in our quotidian lives, the presence of the camera and the possibility of being imaged may create a kind of “self-consciousness” different from that elicited either by a “live” performance or an event framed as “art.” And as many feminist critics, most notably Laura Mulvey, have argued, internalized tropes of imaging affect not only how we “act” (“act

natural!”) but how we “see” and feel about ourselves as well as others, particularly in terms of gender.¹³ Yet I would posit that Ono’s foregrounding of touch is no less vital for being filmed; the genius of the piece is, in part, that it sets up and interrogates the constantly shifting and mutually-constituting relations between touch, vision and other technologies of boundary-making and crossing, self-consciousness and social consciousness.

While *Cut Piece* challenges the assumption that seeing is knowing, the range of exposure and knowledge is variable and continually under question, a flickering in the framing made possible, I would argue, by Ono’s foregrounding of touch. The members of the audience who get up on stage may be “revealing” themselves through their touch/actions, perhaps consciously (i.e. exhibitionist, sexist and/or racist desires), unconsciously (i.e. implicit social *doxa*, such as internalized habits of vision, tactility, sexism and/or racism) or not at all (I project my beliefs and experiences onto their gestures). Where does “touch” begin and end, and what is the relationship of touch to vision and of both to knowledge? *Cut Piece* stages this as a primary question, one that was taken up by the French feminists Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous in the 1970s and again almost thirty years later by film historian Laura Marks in her theorization of “haptic visuality” (as mentioned earlier).¹⁴

Enacting these relations, *Cut Piece* opens onto a series of complex inquiries about the frames or boundaries between self and other, subjectivity and objectivity, self and social consciousness, and art, artist and audience. Ono’s work slices back and forth through a number of pressing questions that imply ontological uncertainties as well as disparities in power and privilege, foremost among them: Who is exposing whom? Who or what, then, is being revealed? And who (or what) is being created in this exchange of subjects and objects? Part of the insight *Cut Piece* offers is its punning on “revelation,” its challenge to an empirical notion of vision as

knowledge which, at the same time, is countered with a hint that vision might be futureal or visionary (as in the 2003 Paris performance, staged to call for world peace). But this is a notion of vision and epistemology that is neither autonomous nor disembodied, suggesting that immanence offers its own possibilities for transcendence.

The questions Ono's performance raises are complex and compelling, and I am keenly aware that I arrive at them through responses that are simultaneously emotional, physical and contradictory. I see the increasing rhythms of the audience-performers and feel them in my pulse; I wince as Ono's slip is cut, my stomach tightening, twisting as my flesh-fabric jumps. I look away, then glance back, afraid, curious, wanting to see more, frustrated when the camera cuts, too. Concepts begin to swirl and pop, locking into viscera, memory, emotion. Fear, anger, threat, violation, racism, sexism, it's all very fast. Furious, protective, aggressive, fascinated, helpless, outraged; it happens in an instant and my adrenaline is pumping.

I focus on Ono, living, breathing, yet silent and impassive, an "X" of arms across her chest, hands cupping nipples, and my own breath slows. There is something arresting in the way she raises her arms to cover her breasts and remains, quietly touching herself. In a simple gesture (of what? modesty? protection? self-possession? defiance? art?) she has transmuted a formal object into a sign. And yet the body remains, remembers itself, mute, insistent, at once terribly singular and inescapably social; an effect of a gesture: "she" is touching "herself."

"X" is a scissor, a target and a crossing.

Entraining to Ono's quiet stance, I slow down long enough to insinuate some critical distance into my tangled and contradictory responses. As in a dream, I have just inhabited several positions in this scene (audience, participant, artist, even cloth, scissors, floor), granted, from the distance of voyeur. Part of me "knows" I'm safe but my body doesn't feel that way. At

the same time, I “know” the man who cut her bra is aggressive, possibly violent, but it seems that the more I try to interpret his actions the more I am brought up short, face to face with my own assumptions, desires, memories and unconscious processes. I saw the cutting and I felt it through a flurry of embodied memories, from the dreariness of pattern-making in a middle school home economics class to the fear and rage of a rape not long after and, most recently, a minor surgery. The skin had been anesthetized so there wasn’t any “pain” but I heard and felt the pressure of the scissors, the snapping of the metal and the shearing of flesh from “outside” as well as “inside” my body. Uncanny and loud, it felt enormous, threatening, impossibly close. Close to what? I wondered. I could not tell exactly, even as I felt the threat.

Cut Piece poses the same question: Where is “me” located? In relation to “you,” but such a linguistic distinction quickly shifts and changes shape. In the odd trick of a synesthesia that bounces back and forth between senses, bodies, objects and time, traversing the supposed inside and outside of what I tentatively call my body/self, I feel the performer’s/Ono’s “gestures” “in” my body, unraveling and reweaving me, like Penelope’s cloth, into something very old, possibly new, mythical yet evanescent. There is a very complicated exchange here between bodies, objects, ideas and selves, personal and social memory and history, that defies Cartesian coherence, autonomy and reason. I am supposedly in my body, in my senses, but it is clear to me that they are not entirely rational nor definitively mine.

As far as I have been able to ascertain, Peggy Phelan is the only art critic and historian who has focused on the element of touch in *Cut Piece*, but she frames it in the context of the “live” interaction between artist and audience, who enact what she eloquently calls “the dense drama of touching and being touched.”¹⁵ Phelan highlights the risk and vulnerability of both positions. For the viewer, walking on stage means relinquishing the voyeur’s position of safety by

subjecting oneself to the gaze of the audience.¹⁶ The artist is vulnerable as well, and when the audience member-turned-performer comes close and cuts off her bra, the disparity of vulnerabilities, here gendered and raced, surfaces. In this moment Phelan sees Ono “flinch,” her mask of impassivity slipping for a second before she resumes her position of “passive sacrifice.”¹⁷ For Phelan, it is this “flicker,” the unconscious, “unscripted and momentary” response to the touch of another, that exposes, in Phelan’s account, “the aggression that marks sexual difference and the laborious efforts women make to not be undone by it.”¹⁸

I agree with Phelan’s phenomenological interpretation, but would emphasize the possibility that a viewer, even of the film, may experience these “flickers” as well. Touch is no less mediated for being “live” and it is this mediation that is a crucial element of the work, part of what it is asking us to consider as the artist gives her hand over to the touch of others, which, I would argue, includes the film’s audience. While Ono appears to make of herself the perfect modernist artwork, self-referential and contained, an object purely visual, it is her invitation to touch that bridges subject and object, creates a chiasmatic relation between them that opens the work up to the mediation of desire, its seductions and uncertainties, exhilarations and dangers. In the process, I have to wonder at the extent of the artist’s touch, which has co-mingled with that of the audience and with objects, space and time in a dizzying exchange, the origin of which remains uncertain and dependent on how one frames it. Even then it remains elusive; the more it appears interior the more this interiority points to an outside.

As a Buddhist-inflected “offering” of her body to the audience, art and the world, Ono’s “gesture” could be said to be both in and beyond the work.¹⁹ When Ono hands her touch over to the audience-performers this does not necessarily mean that she has relinquished it, since it has a hand in the making of the work and her body-made-object. At the same time, Ono’s touch is

externalized as the larger work, and could even be said to be returning to her through the touch of the other, even though it is not quite clear if the participants ever physically make contact with her (though they come very, very close). It is this play of proximity and distance, of distance in proximity and a sense of proximity even at a distance, that defines touch in general and permeates *Cut Piece*, problematizing concepts of artistic autonomy and the traditional framing of subject versus object while resonating as a metaphor and a practice for a potential feminist, social, aesthetic and epistemological ethics.

Ono's gesture does go "beyond" her body, but it is not a collapse into the transcendence of a father god guaranteeing truth, genius or subjective-objective autonomy and coherency, the cornerstone of western male privilege. Foregrounding the fact that a gift requires a receiver, Ono's touch is "given" yet also dependent on an "other" (i.e. audience, object, space), which extends her touch beyond "her" body/self. In the process, this is a touch that is barely, if in fact at all, "hers," flinchingly, to give. She gives what she doesn't have, at least not in its entirety, and it is through this gesture that I understand my responsibility in producing her, in touching her as she touches me. This is a very slender yet profound notion of "will," an agency that foregrounds its own fragility as its greatest strength, an interdependency that opens on to Ono's desire, as well as my own, for peace and social justice, be it gender-, race-, and/or world-directed.

I am keenly aware that I am "producing" my reading of Ono and *Cut Piece*, snipping here and there, coming as close as I possibly can yet careful to look with my touch, my eye/body/self, and to question the equation between seeing and knowing. Exposing me as a particular, contingent and desiring subject, *Cut Piece* asks me to "expose" others with a touch of compassion, respectful in the knowledge that I can never fully "know" myself, Ono, the audience

or the work. In these odd crossings, the imbrications and disparities between seeing, feeling and knowing, a grace may be insinuated into the interpretative act, shifting the frames, asking me to witness my own acts of cutting, of drawing lines and conclusions. This does not mean, however, that one cannot judge, respond to or censure the actions of others or interpret an artwork. But rather than “kill the other into knowledge,” as Laura Marks, following the lead of Irigaray and Cixous, has argued, Ono asks me, through her emphasis on touch, to read and evaluate with a humility and wisdom grounded in an awareness of the complex mechanisms of my own judgment as subjective, embodied and contingent, immanent rather than absolute.²⁰

Like Pollock, Ono’s touch is in the act, the gesture of the process, which then becomes the work. But where Pollock’s body (at least as it was produced) collapsed simultaneously into the canvas and god to secure authorship, genius, value and male privilege, Cut Piece stages the immanence of touch, its desiring corporeality dependent on intersubjective (and intrasubjective) relations, not as a guarantee of knowledge or subjective/objective autonomy but rather as a means to unsettle both. Ono’s “gesture” (as I am producing it) foregrounds the artist’s touch as enacting a feminist and aesthetic, visual and corporeal, politics of interdependence and vulnerability forty years before Judith Butler used the metaphor of touch to argue for this possibility.²¹ And yet, while “her” touch both produces and is produced through the touch of another (object and/or subject), mingling with objects and audiences far beyond the performance hall, the particularity of “her” body remains resolutely in the work. Its worldly reach is predicated on the contingency and particularity of each subject, each object, each look, each touch, and the constant negotiations of those boundaries, which are by no means secured by any source other than our collective efforts, intentions, intuitions and judgments, the production of which *Cut Piece* offers the potential to interrogate and expose, with empathy.

This is the potential that many early feminist investigations of artistic touch offer to the development of a concept of transcendence that retains its definition as “beyond” the self and the “known” without resorting to universal truths, father-gods, or claims to absolute knowledge that secure privilege in its various forms, including assumptions about gender, race, class and so on. In the same stroke, “immanence” is not confined to one body; it may create a larger “work” or social body that, nonetheless, continues to acknowledge the physical finitude of the singular one.

A couple of points are worth noting here. Ono recalls that her Fluxus peers did not like her work; they referred to it disparagingly as “animalistic.”²² Although I have not found any further explanation for this comment, I would link it to Carolee Schneemann’s observation, cited later in this chapter, that the “feminine hand-touch sensibility” was too “messy” for the art world at this time.²³ While Schneemann’s highly visceral (i.e. painterly and tactile, sometimes involving animal flesh and her own blood) approach to her body and touch seems in many ways the opposite of Ono’s cool, clean, impassive stance in *Cut Piece*, the “mess” Schneemann refers to is both her own “hands-on” aesthetic and the solicitation of desire, the entanglement of intersubjectivity and objectivity between audience, artist, work and world that Ono’s performance does indeed provoke: the entwining of eyes/bodies/concepts in acts of coming-to-knowledge, exposed through the act and metaphor of touching.

In fact, art historian Kevin Concannon has noted a proportionally inverse relationship between the decrease of general art historical interest in situating Ono within the accepted avant-garde lineage of Conceptual art and the increase in feminist interpretations of her work (particularly *Cut Piece*), despite the fact that Ono was one of the founding members of Fluxus and has a prolific conceptual *oeuvre*.²⁴ Concannon’s response is to downplay the feminist readings of *Cut Piece* in order to lobby for Ono’s acceptance into the Conceptual canon based on

her lifelong focus on global peace. However, despite the fact that Ono has stated she was not aware of the feminist movement at the time she performed *Cut Piece* and did not develop her feminist consciousness until a few years later, I would reiterate my earlier argument that the ethical possibilities Ono's performance poses obtain for relational structures of knowledge-making in general, including feminism, racism and world peace; in other words, they are all of a piece.²⁵ That said, I believe the homophonic slide in English from "piece" as cloth, partition and slang for both a gun and a woman's cunt/ass (as sexual object) to "peace" is not too much of a stretch. Ono performed *Cut Piece* in 2003 to call for world peace in the wake of 9/11, yet in 2008 she included the original 1965 Maysles brothers' film documentation of *Cut Piece* in her exhibition *Touch Me* at Galerie Lelong in New York. Predicated once again on the participation of viewers-turned-touchers, *Touch Me* "urges the audience to revitalize and rethink a personal connection to the most current situation women are facing."²⁶ Ono's goal, despite the long history of the "essentialism problem" in feminist art and art critical debates, is to "comment on different facets of the female experience."²⁷

As *Cut Piece* demonstrates, the risks for artists who shared touch or gave it over to the audience included threats that could be physical. Ono was stripped to the waist when she performed *Cut Piece* in New York (1964), Carolee Schneemann was attacked by a man who tried to strangle her during a performance of *Meat Joy* (1964) in Paris, and ten years later Marina Abramović endured, through the six hour long performance of *Rhythm O* (1974) in Naples, Italy, a frightening range of inappropriate and abusive behavior at the hands of a primarily male audience. Schneemann was "saved" by three middle-aged women, members of the audience who recognized that she was in danger and piled on top of her assailant to subdue him.²⁸ In general, however, the stakes for women artists whose work explored or tapped into "female

experience” have been high, not only in terms of the art historical record where debates over the issue of essentialism relegated careers to obscurity, but also in terms of an artist’s bodily integrity, her physical and emotional (as well as financial) well-being, which is where assumptions about gender relations often surfaced.²⁹ For women who challenged the notion of autonomy (the Cartesian separation of subject and object) by foregrounding touch and intersubjective desire, this seems strongly the case. It also applies for some artists, like Ono or Abramović, who did not initially set out to interrogate issues of gender.

Valie Export

Although Austrian artist Valie Export was not physically attacked by viewers-touchers in her 1968 performance piece, *Touch Cinema*, it further exposed the gender stakes, the power disparities involved in looking and touching, some seven years before Laura Mulvey published her landmark work on the “male gaze.”³⁰ Like Ono’s *Cut Piece*, *Touch Cinema* interrogated relationships between aesthetics and epistemology, but following Carolee Schneemann’s foregrounding of the female body and sexual pleasure (*Eye Body* (1963) and *Fuses* (1964-67)), Export explicitly sought to challenge the codes of patriarchal state morality that confined images of female sexuality to the private realm of pornography.³¹ Export theorized in broad strokes, arguing that women’s bodies are used to reinforce the equation of seeing as knowing and knowing as possessing, which she understood as a primary metaphor and support for the functioning of the capitalist state.³² As a result, *Touch Cinema* was simultaneously research, performance and activist intervention. Claiming that the connection between vision, voyeurism and the sexual objectification of women’s bodies operates in the service of a capitalist morality that uses it to reinforce notions of private property (women conceived as the private property of men serves as its baseline), Export used the model of cinema to theorize and explore what might happen if visual communication were to be replaced with tactile means.

Aligned for a time with the Viennese Actionists, Export tuned their emphasis on the body and creativity toward feminist ends to theorize “Feminist Actionism.”³³ Conceptualized as material enacting a “drama of meaning,” the human body and its gestures could be creatively refigured to produce new semiotic combinations; in turn, this creative process was considered both self-affirming and self-generative.³⁴ Export saw herself as responding, in part, to Pollock’s transfer of his body into the canvas, which Feminist Actionists took further: “the artists of Feminist Actionism have taken *écriture corporelle* beyond the canvas, written it onto their own bodies, and posited their own individuality against the culture around them.”³⁵ She drew from the automatic techniques of Surrealism and Tachism (to articulate repressed or unconscious material), Happenings, the behavioral framing of Fluxus and various dance groups and, most importantly, “the history of female experience.”³⁶ The goal for Export was to excavate and work through the “historical scars, traces of ideas inscribed onto the body, stigmata to be exposed by actions with the body.”³⁷ She understood Feminist Actionism as unifying “perception and action, subject and object” as it “seeks to transform the object of male natural history, the material ‘woman,’ subjugated and enslaved by the male creator, into an independent actor and creator, subject of her own history.”³⁸

For the first performance of *Touch Cinema* at the “Junger Film [Young Film] 68” festival in Vienna, Export designed a miniature “theater” made of styrofoam, which she wore strapped to her naked chest. For subsequent actions, due to problems with durability, she crafted the box out of foam-lined aluminum. The theater extended about six inches in front of her breasts, its opening covered by a small cloth curtain. At each venue, Export walked out onto the street and invited people to “visit the cinema.” Documentary photographs show Export standing in a crowd of people while a man reaches through the curtain to discover and touch what would

typically be shown in a darkened theater, that is, Export's naked breasts. Their gazes meet, viewer-turned-toucher and subject-turned-object. The original title of the performance in German is *Tapp-und Tastkino*, which invokes the idea of a repeated touching or groping in the dark for something that can't quite be revealed. Understood from this perspective, it is clear that Export is not suggesting that touching her breasts equates to knowing them or her but, like Ono, is attempting to reframe the acts of seeing and touching as mediated by the viewer, her or his desire.

What Export had hoped for, in part, was that the female artist-subject-turned-object would make another turn back into subjectivity through the proximity created by touching, a tactile communication that would obviate the voyeuristic distance of objectification and replace it with the viewer's self-consciousness and empathic recognition of Export's subjectivity.³⁹ The element of tactility drew viewers close enough to make eye contact with Export, thereby subjecting them to the scrutiny of both artist-object and the surrounding audience. Since women were welcome to touch her as well, Export understood the political aspects of the work to include support for homosexual rights, as it offered an opportunity to publicly acknowledge the reality of homosexual contact. By freely offering her body as a sign of her own power, as a subject, to do so (rather than being "offered" as an object through the tropes of cinematic voyeurism), *Touch Cinema* also invited the possibility of a pleasurable "sexual" exchange between subjects that defied state regulations that attempt to restrict such tactile acts as private or taboo. In this way, Export understood her performance as enacting possibilities for new forms of social behavior, interaction and organization.

In Mulveyan terms, the fact that the artist actively returned the viewer's look should have subverted her patriarchal construction as a passive female object, but that did not turn out to be

the case. Most touchers did not acknowledge Export as contiguous with her breasts or make the conceptual connection to the idea of subjective intimacy and mutuality as an alternative to voyeuristic compartmentalization and distance.⁴⁰ As Export was well aware, touching does not guarantee knowledge through feeling any more than looking guarantees knowledge through seeing; she had hoped, however, that integrating vision and tactility might create a new form of self-conscious communication that would reorganize human behavior and, ultimately, society.

If Export's experiment failed to achieve its goal within the context of her performance, it was more successful as a form of feminist research and almost prescient in its anticipation of feminist theorists' later preoccupation with the power of the "male gaze." It could also be argued that *Touch Cinema* and Carolee Schneemann's work were early explorations of the possibilities for what would become known thirty years later in film studies as "haptic visuality," the insistence on vision as embodied. Too, Export's performance is a crucial step marking how difficult it has been for women artists to redress the gender and power imbalances that subtend and maintain negotiations of boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity, looking and touching, as Yugoslavian body and performance artist Marina Abramović discovered again six years later.

Marina Abramović

Abramović's instructions for her six-hour-long performance of *Rhythm O* (1974) are straightforward and simple. To the gallery audience, she writes: "There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired"; to herself she notes: "I am the object. I take full responsibility."⁴¹ A partial list of the items Abramović made available to the audience includes: feather, cake, bone of lamb, kitchen knife, flute, whip, Polaroid camera, band-aid, bell, red paint, hammer, gun and bullet. Like Ono and Export, Abramović explored the possibilities that arise in giving touch over to the audience, but unlike Ono and Export, Abramović has repeatedly stated

that she is neither political nor feminist.⁴² This does not mean, however, that her work does not raise or address questions central to feminism, as her presence in feminist exhibitions and conferences attests.⁴³

Documentary photographs of the performance show Abramović in a range of positions and levels of undress. We see her limp body suspended horizontally between several people (at least one is a woman) and they appear to be lifting or swinging her, invoking a child's game or perhaps a rescue. In another photograph Abramović is standing upright, her expression a constant mask of neutrality as an elaborately coiffed and made-up woman wipes the artist's eye, though we cannot ascertain to what purpose: applying something or wiping it away? At another moment Abramović is lying on a table with a man's coat draped over her body, a sign of care? Death? Later, an erect candle has been inserted between her thighs, suggesting clitoris, phallus, votive. Sometimes she stands with cruciform arms, loops of paper sweeping the ground like a paraded religious icon.

In one series of images a man removes Abramović's shirt to kiss or suck on her nipple and then kiss her on the cheek. Several more photographs show her naked from the waist up. In one of these her head is entirely concealed, wrapped in cloth like a victim of torture; in another she is seated on a chair with chains binding her ankles. In a third a bearded man pours liquid over her head from a coffee cup; a fourth shows a man with a cigarette dangling from his mouth scoring graffiti into her neck with a razor. Another shows Abramović holding three Polaroid photographs of herself from the performance, a fourth tucked in to a chain around her neck, which also holds a foil-wrapped rose. There are tears in her eyes; the men in the background seem oblivious to her condition. Toward the end of the performance, we see her bared chest emblazoned with lipstick and razor marks, draped in chains and adorned with a placard made by

the audience that reads “VILE.” *Rhythm O* ended shortly after a man placed a gun in Abramović’s hand, held it to her head and loaded a bullet.⁴⁴

A few members of the otherwise unsympathetic, heckling and aggressive audience intervened, wresting the gun from the man and throwing the bullet out the window. But when the performance ended at its appointed time and Abramović returned to her “normal” state, the audience quickly fled the gallery. According to Abramović, they “could not stand me as a person, after all that they had done to me.”⁴⁵ While Abramović appears to be conflating her identity with the work of art, the frame of “art” does not guarantee that the behavior of the audience during the performance is commensurate with all of their various identities, conscious or unconscious. I agree that the audience’s behavior was overwhelmingly aggressive and violent. At the same time, the act of touching may not ensure absolute knowledge about the toucher or that which is touched, but it does throw into relief the stakes involved in how we frame and negotiate experience, craft it in, out of and back into belief, knowledge, judgment and action, activities in which gender (cultural, biological, imagined) functions as a key component.

Rhythm O was the last time Abramović would physically interact with an audience, shifting her approach to investigations of touch performed in front of viewers or the camera. More recently, she has returned to direct engagement with the audience, but now it is the energetic nature of the tactile exchange that is foregrounded.⁴⁶ For Abramović, there is a truth of the body and experience that might be known through touch and tactile exchanges, but which is spiritual and not easily accessible; in fact, it is a desire for transcendence that is impossible to grasp except through experience, matter and duration. Undaunted by potential accusations of essentialism, she titled her 2010 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*.

Carolee Schneemann

Each of the artists I have mentioned thus far, Ono, Kubota, Export and Abramović, was influenced, to varying degrees, by the work of painter, filmmaker and performance artist Carolee Schneemann.⁴⁷ As the first woman artist to use her own body as form and material for her painting, Schneemann should be considered a crucial figure in histories of art and feminism.⁴⁸ While historian Kristine Stiles does credit her with inventing a “new method of sight” that both “fuses bodies and things” and maintains their particularity, neither Stiles nor other art historians address Schneemann’s overt emphasis on tactility, which I see as her primary strategy for articulating the mutual influence and interconnection of body, vision and representation, making Schneemann one of the most innovative and feminist artist-theorists of the 20th century.⁴⁹ Foregrounding gesture and mark as a means to research, negotiate and intervene in the gap between subjects and objects situated in time, space and history, Schneemann’s work exposes, articulates and provokes the dynamic and shifting exchanges between perception and desire, the personal assumptions (conscious and unconscious) and cultural ideologies (particularly beliefs about sex and gender) that inform and subtend the processes of aesthetic and social judgment.

Arriving in New York in 1961 as a young painter fresh out of graduate school, Schneemann was immediately engaged with or active in a number of avant-garde music, literary and visual art circles, which facilitated contact and/or collaboration with future art luminaries such as Claes Oldenburg, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Morris and Andy Warhol. She choreographed for the Judson Church dance group, where she invented “kinetic theater”; performed and collaborated in many different kinds of experimental art events, including Allan Kaprow’s Happenings; and considered herself a member of Fluxus until she received a letter of excommunication from its self-appointed leader, George Maciunas, who found her “expressionist tendencies” too messy for his taste.⁵⁰

Astonishingly, censorship of her work has proven to be a persistent problem throughout her career, from the man who tried to strangle her during *Meat Joy* (1964) through law enforcement officials intervening in her anti-Vietnam war performance *Illinois Central* (1968) to the numerous protests and cancellations, as well as critical neglect, of her extraordinary film *Fuses* (1964-67).⁵¹ As the first film to depict oral and genital heterosexual lovemaking from a pleasure-positive, gender-equality perspective (where neither partner/gender dominates or is more or less active than the other), *Fuses* is still an anomaly in the history of cinema.⁵² Given the fact that Schneemann has been labeled a “pornographer” and *Fuses* continues to be censored, it was not entirely shocking to discover that the only lab that would agree to print the film in 1964 did so solely on the condition that the artist submit each reel with a letter from a psychiatrist, further verification of the subtle and less-subtle forms of cultural repression she, and we, continue to endure.⁵³

Despite the fact that she works in a wide range of media, from film and video to dance, performance and installation, Schneemann conceives of herself primarily as a painter who has engaged deeply with the painterly issues of her time.⁵⁴ Pollock (at least as he was produced in the critical literature) relinquished the brush in his search to discover a transcendent identity, attempting to elude, in part, its 19th century connotations as bourgeois and academic; Schneemann too experimented with giving up the brush as her primary tool. However, by the time Schneemann, a generation younger than the Abstract Expressionists and acutely aware of her gender, arrived in New York, the brush had taken on new connotations.

In a letter documenting a discussion with art critic Leo Steinberg in 1957, Schneemann explicitly rejects the male-dominated school of action painting modeled on Pollock, which she perceives as replacing vision with psychology and “the self-generating act.”⁵⁵ In an interview

with Carl Heyward in 1995, Schneemann explained that the brush had been recuperated to “phallic” ends, tinged with the “heroic implications” of the “Abstract Expressionist male endeavor.”⁵⁶ Although she does not frame her statement in these terms, her work suggests that these “implications” refer, in part, to a drive toward a notion of transcendence (and genius) that requires yet disavows immanence. For Schneemann, the Abstract Expressionists, “longing for [a] sensuous abandon” they “despised in themselves,” projected that conflict and hatred outward onto women and blacks.⁵⁷ As a result, she has devoted most of her career to integrating vision and the body with a painterly attention to various forms of tactility that explore and theorize “lived experience, the female erotic, and the sacredness of sexuality,” often using extensive historical research into images of women and goddesses that affirm female creativity.⁵⁸ Through a series of wry and witty twists, Schneemann has reconfigured the brush without relinquishing the tactility of the hand, replacing and/or integrating it with her historical and immanent, or materially historicized and historicized as material, female body.

Schneemann’s pivotal work, *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions* (1963), foregrounds tactility to interrogate multiple problems simultaneously: the interactions between painting, vision, and the body, and female artistic agency. Having worked as an artist’s model in order to support herself while she was researching the inverse relationship in the art historical record between the shockingly sparse number of documented female artists and the copious images of primarily nude female bodies, Schneemann was eager to “get that nude off the canvas” and to foreground her agency as a female artist.⁵⁹

In 1962, she began to build an environment in her loft that incorporated human-scale painted panels of rhythmic colors, motorized parts, broken glass and mirrors. By this time she

had already made a connection between painterly facture, movement and space, recorded in her notebooks from 1962-63:

The tactile activity of paint itself prepares us for the increased dimensionality of collage and construction: the literal dimensionality of paint seen close-up as raised surface—as a geology of lumps, ridges, lines, and seams. Ambiguous by-plays of dimension-in-action open our eyes to the metaphorical life of materials themselves.⁶⁰

Working with her whole body, she realized that her own corporeality was, literally and figuratively, a crucial element in the space, duration and form of the construction. Part of her goal was to experiment with relinquishing her “self” to the materials and to ritualize the process, like Pollock, in a kind of trancelike state. But unlike Pollock, she chose to research and document the mutual transformation of her body and the work (her body within and as part of the “work” in the dual sense of art and labor), which a friend agreed to photograph.⁶¹ With this decision, Schneemann inaugurated an entirely new, proto-feminist paradigm for art making:

Covered in paint, grease, chalk, ropes, plastic, I establish my body as visual territory. Not only am I an image-maker, but I explore the image values of flesh as material I choose to work with. The body may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring, and yet still be votive—marked and written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will.⁶²

From a formal, painterly perspective, Schneemann locates her practice as heavily influenced by Cezanne, who sought to draw the eye into the painting and back out into the space of the viewer.⁶³ Expanding on this idea, she theorized and tuned her work to researching the possibilities for returning the eye to the body, a body that is simultaneously in the eye and a body that sees. As Stiles has explained, Schneemann posited a relational space between an inner eye and an outer eye, a gap between the body’s physical connection to what is seen (outer eye) and its role (inner eye) in determining or imagining what is perceived.⁶⁴ It is the space between the eyes, between made, perceived and imagined worlds, which Schneemann understood as

permeated with ideology (i.e. issues of gender, race and politics) and sought to expose, articulate and redefine.

And yet the key to this space is Schneemann's activity of marking. The photographic images of Eye Body show Schneemann's naked body streaked and painted, layers of texture and mark integrating the artist's body with the heavily painted panels, animated objects and studio space. The artist has painted everything around her, including herself. In a gesture that anticipated Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964), Schneemann has extended her touch, specifically her acts of painterly touch as a form of mediated self-touching and vice versa, to make her body/self/work into a sophisticated argument for the inextricably mutual relations between artist and object, agent and receptacle, subject and object, viewer and viewed. Touch is the medium through which Schneemann defines herself as artist and object, seer and seen, but I wish to underline the fact that these are definitions that are invented through the activity and craft of painting. Schneemann offers no "essential" self. Her identity, like her body and her art, is produced as an effect of acts of artistry. This is why asserting "my creative female will" is so important to Schneemann.⁶⁵ Here agency, identity, body and art are simultaneously produced and productive, always mediated by representation and the materiality and historicity of sensate information. Moreover, she understood quite clearly that the "conventionalizing history" from which she had to wrench her body included art historical narratives:

I wrote 'my creative female will' because for years my most audacious works were viewed [by critics] as if someone else inhabiting me had created them. They were considered 'masculine,' owing to their aggression and boldness, as if I were inhabited by a stray male principle. An interesting possibility, except that in the early sixties this notion was used to blot out, denigrate, and deflect the coherence, necessity, and personal integrity of what I made and how it was made.⁶⁶

Schneemann also realized from early on that "using my body as an extension of my painting-constructions challenged and threatened the psychic territorial lines by which women, in

1963, were admitted to the Art Stud Club, so long as they behaved enough like men, and did work clearly in the traditions and pathways hacked out by the men.”⁶⁷ It is important to note that Schneemann was making this work, which is painterly, sculptural and photographic, at a moment when Minimalist artists such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris were producing three-dimensional objects that have been heralded by art historians such as Hal Foster as introducing a radically new awareness of the body.⁶⁸ The body they foreground, however, is that of the viewer, who becomes aware of her or his corporeality by walking around the sculpture in the gallery space (Robert Morris, *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)*, 1965) or by producing content for a set of industrially produced and serially repeated objects that provide, in and of themselves, little or none (Donald Judd, *Untitled Stacks*, 1968-69). Although the Minimalists have garnered art critical and historical credit for foregrounding corporeality, the body of the Minimalist artist had disappeared, not through the gesture into god, like Pollock, but rather into the signature. Like that of Pop artist Andy Warhol, mentioned earlier, the Minimalist artist’s touch, for the most part (there are exceptions), is no longer tactile or even contiguous with the object.

On one hand, this Minimalist strategy may be read through a Duchampian lineage; it enacts a potential refusal of the notion of artistic genius by undoing the link between artist, hand and god. On the other, as the Minimalist and Pop artist’s body disappeared, his or her labor increasingly more conceptual than actual, touch too, in a sense, became detachable from the artwork. It migrated out of the body into a signature that could be literal, as the signature on a contract of sale, or stylistic, as an artist’s lifestyle or celebrity value, which essentially collapsed the signature into the artist without the mediation of the work. Instead of belonging to an object or a style of gesture or facture that could be discerned in the work, the artist’s signature itself became an object-like sign, that to which the work was returned or anchored in terms of

authority, cultural value and profit. While one could argue that this exposed artistic genius as blatantly produced through the circulation of signs and discourses (rather than a quality inherent in the work), this critique did not prevent certain artists, almost exclusively male and now even more “distant” from the object, from being produced by critics, historians and agents yet again as transcendent creators.

All this recalls Yves Klein’s *Anthropometries* performances, mentioned above, and his desire to elude the psychology and intentionality of the brush. As Klein declared in his 1960 essay “Truth Becomes Reality,” a certain “distance,” created by using the bodies of “his models” as “living brushes,” allowed him to “dominate the work” without having to touch it. “Under my direction,” crowed Klein, “the flesh itself applied the color to the surface, and with perfect precision. I was able to remain constantly at the exact distance ‘X’ from my canvas and thus I could dominate my creation continuously throughout the entire execution. In this way I stayed clean. I no longer dirtied myself.”⁶⁹ Remaining “clean” while birthing his art through the laboring, immanent bodies of female flesh, Klein became an artist-god by producing “immediate experience. The mark of the immediate, that was my need” while at the same time reaching the “state of disembodiment” that “made me realize that I really was a proper Christian, believing with reason in the resurrection of the body.”⁷⁰

Despite his ironic tone, Klein was a Rosicrucian who was spiritually invested in the concept of transcendence.⁷¹ More importantly, this identification with god-like genius has been repeated yet again in 2010, invoked without hesitation in the critical essays for the Hirshhorn Museum’s current exhibition, *Yves Klein: With the Void, Full Powers*. In her review of the show, *New York Times* critic Rebecca Smith quipped, “A grip needs to be gotten here,” as she cites the Hirshhorn’s deputy director and chief curator Kerry Brougher’s description of Klein as

“an involuntary painter” and “some strange object who came, only for a short time, from the heavens to open our eyes and minds.”⁷² Nor is Dia Art Foundation director Philippe Vergne’s contribution to the catalogue immune to hyperbole and the unfathomable religious metaphor. Noting that Klein was the same age as Jesus when he died, Vergne claims, “Klein’s gaze was cosmic and spiritual ... his imprint on the creative landscape of the second half of the last century is as deep as that of a stigmata.”⁷³

Despite their ostensible desire for corporeality (as “immediate experience” or, in the case of Klein, as a medium for his own spiritual transcendence), the work of the Minimalists could not, as Foster admitted, account for the particularity and historicity (gender, race, class and so on) of the bodies it intended to provoke either; nor, I would add, of the bodies that created or labored in its name.⁷⁴ The work of Schneemann and many other early feminist artists (particularly Mierle Laderman Ukeles, introduced in chapter 2) is a radical intervention in and departure from this lineage, achieved in part by foregrounding the labor of making as it intersects historically with various productions of “feminine touch,” from artistic creativity and lovemaking to the feminine invented as domestic, immanent, sexual and so on.

The formal questions Schneemann posed in *Eye Body* and many of her other works overlapped with her profeminist concerns, ideas that continue to animate feminist discourses and practices more than forty years later. *Eye Body*’s primary question, “Could a nude woman artist be both image and image maker?” dovetailed with her observation that “I had to wrest my body out of a conventionalizing history,” demonstrating Schneemann’s analytical savvy about the relationship of images to the ways in which we conceptualize, inhabit and actively create the world through our bodies; bodies which, in turn, are produced through sensate acts that include seeing and touching.⁷⁵ As the repeated censorship of her work, from overtly political anti-war

statements through sex-positive visions of gender relations to explorations of female erotics, demonstrates, Schneemann has managed to articulate the situation of her labor as an artist, a woman and a particular subject in history. This is the place where the conflicts and contradictions of the proper and the taboo, the conscious and unconscious, the seen and unseen, and the touchable and untouchable are negotiated in all of their conflicted and desiring (repugnant, raging, blissful and so on) contingency.

Schneemann's film *Fuses* (1964-67, 29 minutes, 16 mm, color), like *Eye Body* and much of her *oeuvre*, emerged, in part, from her fundamental commitment to the aesthetic and intellectual research and articulation of female creativity in its various forms, from art-making to love-, baby-, and world-making. Schneemann initially conceived *Fuses* as a response to her friend Stan Brakhage's film of his wife's pregnancy and birthing, *Window Water Baby Moving* (Brakhage, 1959). From Schneemann's perspective, Brakhage's use of filmic technology served mainly to appropriate the bodies it filmed, rendering its subject as solely the creative product of the artist's omniscient eye. This "male eye," as Schneemann saw it (possibly presaging Mulvey), "was absorbing and repossessing an essential, unique female process, until the film became, in a way, the birth giver."⁷⁶ Her sensitivity to both the representational power of the apparatus and the gendering of creativity, labor and production informed what she read as Brakhage's shifting of the imagery away from the "primacy of the [shared] erotic relation" which produced conception, in favor of its end result, which made "the baby part of the male's realm of self-extension through the encapsulating authority and power of the camera eye."⁷⁷ Brakhage's film challenged Schneemann in terms simultaneously formal and conceptual. At the same time, mining her corporeal experience as a potential source of insight, she realized: "I had never seen anything in my culture that corresponded to what sexuality felt like. I wondered what it would

look like, if it would be different if I filmed it.”⁷⁸ As it turned out, *Fuses*, was, in fact, quite different.

On the level of content, one might be tempted to say that *Fuses* is a film composed primarily of explicit images that show Schneemann and her partner, James Tenney, making love. But that would be highly inaccurate, as if the film somehow stood outside of or apart from that which it appears to depict. There is no all-knowing or instrumentalizing eye here (although Kitsch, Schneemann’s cat, does stand in for both the witnessing eye and Schneemann’s “pussy” as she observes from her post on the window “frame,” one of the many visual-verbal puns throughout the film). Instead, *Fuses* is a lush integration of content and form, subject and painterly method, vision and facture.

Schneemann shot the film over three years, borrowing a wind-up Bolex camera that she positioned to loosely frame the bed. As there was never an eye behind the camera, so to speak, she never knew exactly what her footage would capture. Clearly she filmed other images at times (the view from the bed out of the window, shots of her walking into the ocean, etc.) and occasionally made adjustments to the camera in the room, since some of the images are close-ups and others are shot from wider angles, but in general she was eager to work with whatever entered the frame. However, the unique and powerful effect of *Fuses* is a product of how Schneemann merges content, form, research and theory through her post-production methods, which rely on the facture and rhythms of painterly gesture as well as literal and musical “scorings” of the film. These elements reflect and reenact a number of erotic couplings, primary among them the dynamic separations and reassemblings of “subject” (content/idea/love-making), “matter” (materials and bodies touching) and form (a tactile, painterly and heavily altered filmic surface, often built up by dense layers of collage), where the content (the tactile relations of

lovers touching) is mirrored in the form (a heavily textured film surface/skin) which also implicates the viewer.

This attention to film surface as skin simultaneously invites the viewer to draw closer (to touch), at times blocks or enhances what is seen (the scratchings on the surface block full view of a body part or the application of color makes it look more object-like but strangely erotic), while foregrounding the materiality of the film *as film*, as a manipulated surface, a thin, tensile layer of contact through which light is projected. Here, light could be the energy of bodies (Schneemann wanted to infuse the film with it) exchanged through skin as a sheer and tender valence that makes contact with the world rather than arraying it before us. Schneemann's film is not the Renaissance window onto the world, centering us in knowledge and mastery, though the camera periodically shifts from the lovers to a shot of the open window in their bedroom. Sometimes her cat is perched there, a shadowed sentinel, at other moments a transparent curtain drifts slightly with the breeze and floods the image with light. The frame may delineate a separation between bed and world, here and there, viewer and film, but there is always something stretched across it. Thick or diaphanous, dense or translucent, the film skin, like the eye-body, offers no clear view onto "reality"; rather, like Schneemann's lovers or Irigaray's "two lips," both are in constant contiguous contact with that which they supposedly objectify as "other."

Through this heavily layered and polyvalent dialogue, *Fuses* enacts Schneemann's research questions about the relationship between representation and lived experience (would she be able to film what she felt? And, conversely, would what she saw on film have any correspondence to what she felt? What would be the effect?), theory (articulations of female pleasure have the potential to change sexual, aesthetic and social relations and valuation, the way people inhabit their bodies and source them for knowledge production), and an ethics of gender,

vision and touch. This is what makes Fuses such an astonishing departure from other “sex” films.⁷⁹

Although the format of *Fuses* to which I have access is a somewhat grainy video copy of the film, Schneemann’s touch is readily evident in both the activities of lovemaking and artistry, especially in the dense layering of highly textured and treated images, achieved through the painterly application of rich, saturated colors (reds, greens, blues, yellows) and physical manipulation of the film stock with scratching, scoring, burning; exposure to acid, cat hair and weather; and even baking in an oven (again, the film is replete with playful metaphor; here “bun in the oven,” a domestic female metaphor of pregnancy, is extended to suggest female sexual and artistic creativity). As in *Eye Body*, Schneemann understood this activity as submitting her intentionality to chance, to the natural processes of the materials, but that does not mean she has relinquished her painterly hand. For the artist her hand, as part of her eye-body, is contiguous with her materials, with nature, art, the body, the psyche, lived experience and personal as well as social identity, but is not to be conflated with them; in fact, as the hand of an artist, it has been trained, and entrained, to create, extend or alter any of these elements which in turn create, extend and alter it—and each other.

Composed with a logic of association (rather than cause and effect, exposition or storytelling) and non-sequential, non-narrative actions, *Fuses* is not a film that submits easily to a frame-by-frame or narrative analysis. In contrast to pornographic films there is no build-up to a climax, and unlike in traditional narratives no subsequent resolution is offered. Everything hums, sings, grimaces, grins, folds, unfolds, enfolds in a succession of rhythmic waves; textures of light, colors, shapes and forms reel, turn, slip, reverse, shimmer and shimmy across the screen. At moments an image is offered as a close-up (which “should” reveal more “information”), but

the vibrating flesh-form is not discernable as male or female, only varying beats of hue, contrast, movement and texture shifting with/as form. We might glimpse the rocking of buttocks but then a series of triangular shapes, highly textured and colored, take up the dance. A hand caresses a chin. Then in quick succession a belly, a field, flowers bending in the breeze. They dissolve as a navel (“innie” and “outie”?) emerges from the background and a finger pulls cloth across a soft roll of body.

Images of the lovers are shot from various ranges of proximity and distance. Although they are often fragmented they never feel disjointed, due, in part, to the fact that they are frequently overlaid and “fused” with other rhythms created by colors and textures applied to the film stock, a strategy not dissimilar to that of *Eye Body*. Thus the lovers are foregrounded as both material for the film and an effect of it, and Schneemann, as the maker, is also the material made, the “seen” and scene that also sees. This argument gathers strength as we view the lovers from multiple angles in various positions, which they frequently switch and exchange (i.e. she is on the bottom, then on top, clearly enjoying the tides of orgasm), movements and metaphors that are mirrored as the filmic frames themselves are also reversed and flipped, top to bottom, side to side. Gender is materialized and “equalized” further as a red-stained image of a slick, erect penis dissolves into a vulva, the vulva into a penis, then penis into lips, mouths kissing, clitoris, penis-slit as mouth, and so on. Neither partner appears more active or passive than the other, and all actions, as well as rest, are shared or exchanged. Stereotypes are undermined as we ripple through a cascade of associative logics and humor: penis, silo, nipple, breast, testicles (an affectionate squeeze makes them look like a heart), cars on a “freeway,” “reflective” Christmas lights, ornaments (balls) and a pair of eyes, wide-open.

There are several cuts to Schneemann entering the ocean and views of Kitsch the cat, silent witness framed by the window, standing in for Schneemann and the anatomy that categorizes her as “female.” Repeatedly lush strokes of color, stain or smear pass through images that move in and out of the frame, draw closer, recede, draw closer again, pulling me, the viewer, into the surface of the screen while producing another layer of rhythm as they flicker over bodies copulating and caressing in their own various rhythms. At moments the film careens wildly then slows to a gentle rock, back and forth, between painterly abstractions and images that can feel almost “too real.” There is a very long take, in real time, of Schneemann enjoying cunnilingus and short, choppy “shots” of her taking Tenney’s penis into her bobbing mouth. I am by turns fascinated, slightly embarrassed (I know this in my body, but watching makes me self-conscious. Should I be looking? Feeling?), lost (*what* is going on here?), laughing, curious, flushed, breathless, bored, turned on, or almost in tears with the sheer beauty of the thing, visually, conceptually, emotionally—and flooded with an uncanny longing.

It is true that *Fuses* “fucks fiercely” and “touches tenderly,” yet I am surprised, admittedly shocked at moments, not only by its courage, intimacy, social vision and explicit *pleasure*, but also by the fact that I feel it, its colors, textures, shapes and rhythms, so strongly in my body.⁸⁰ Schneemann has rendered sex as rhythms of facture and rhythms of facture as sexual; it is this dialogue between form and content, between sex, art, idea and experience that makes this film so powerful and rich. In her own lyrical voice, Schneemann offers the best description of *Fuses*:

I wanted the bodies to be turning into tactile sensations of flickers ... you get lost in the frame—to move the body in and out of its own frame, to move the eye in and out of the body so it could see everything it wanted to, but would also be in a state of dissolution, optically, resembling some aspect of the erotic sensation in the body which is not a literal translation. It is a painterly, tactile translation edited as a music of frames.⁸¹

Touching me deeply, *Fuses* is a lush exploration of surfaces, of myriad surfaces touching. Through her “painterly mess,” “hand-touch sensibility,” and “diaristic indulgence,” Schneemann has transformed the film itself into a kind of flesh, announcing itself as a touched and touchable, though not entirely graspable, skin; a surface through which we might make contact, as lovers, as viewer and film, as bodies of love and making.⁸²

At the same time, what creates this “skin” and allows for this contact, for contact figured as contiguity and difference, is Schneemann’s foregrounding of touch on multiple and equivalent levels, which she accomplishes through her painterly use of facture. The gestures of the lovers touching and Schneemann’s passionate labor in making these images (and art) become analogies, each one for the other, separate yet at moments indistinguishable. Here the structure of touch *is* the structure of desire, the need for difference so as to make contact, the dissolution of difference as immersion or disappearance, and the need to separate in order to come together again. As Carol Armstrong has argued, facture may be considered a formal quality, but it is also “a form of *un*-form ... [a] dissolution of form and its readability, ... [a] disruption of the singleness and unified gestalt of the image.”⁸³ In *Fuses*, the viewer is never given the lovers as “present” or as a fully coherent image (if that were even possible, which is the promise of documentary images) as Schneemann’s facture, “at once effacing and announcing itself,” both forms and “un-forms” the lovers.⁸⁴ The sensual strokes of color and shape, their rhythmic dance across the screen arising and dissolving into visual poems and puns, reminds us, ineluctably, of Schneemann’s hand in all of this.⁸⁵ The most erotic aspect of *Fuses* is, in fact, Schneemann’s love affair with facture, which, in turn, refuses to give the lovers over to the “consuming gaze” of standard pornography (the illusory “realism” of documentary) or the high art nude (the illusory “realism”

of *fini* painting).⁸⁶ Instead, we are given the erotic corporeality of touch as facture, as art-making inseparable from but not identical to the bodies of making and viewing.

I am suggesting that it is this level of eroticism, in combination with Schneemann's frank investment in heterosexual gender equality and in one woman's erotic pleasure, which has provoked the repeated and ongoing censorship of *Fuses*. (It has been repeatedly censored for its "explicit" content or, amusingly and appropriately, for its lack thereof.) While this topic would require a book of its own, I would like to mention a few of the numerous, primarily hostile, responses to the film. At the Cannes Film Festival in 1968, a group of about forty men rioted, ripping up the theater seats and throwing the padding around because, according to Schneemann, *Fuses* did not offer the predictable phallogentric sequencing of images (they thought they were coming to see a porn film).⁸⁷ In 1985 police impounded both film and projector at a screening in El Paso, Texas, and after the work was screened once at the 1989 Moscow Film Festival, it was banned by a female official who called Schneemann "a pornographer and a dangerous woman."⁸⁸

Art historian David Levi Strauss attributes the rage against *Fuses* to its political, rather than sexual, explicitness; its censorship exposes the fact that depictions of a woman's pleasure from her point of view are still culturally unacceptable.⁸⁹ This is a reading with which I agree, and it throws into relief the strange and complex conditions that subtend the fact that until quite recently, leading feminist critics also rejected or ignored the film.⁹⁰ Although *Fuses* refuses a narrative structure and optical gaze of mastery, two of the strategies most important to feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her attempt (with Peter Wollen) to make a feminist film (see *Riddles of the Sphinx*, 1977), Mulvey has never written about or even mentioned any of Schneemann's films in her essays.⁹¹ This is understandable insofar as much of Mulvey's major

work was focused on vision, specifically her desire to eschew visual pleasure (the “male gaze” as it was constructed in Hollywood cinema), and there was no language (that I am aware of) in British film theory at the time that addressed tactility in relation to vision and spectatorship. Also, Schneemann’s insistence on touch, the erotic, and the female body as a crucial source of knowledge and resistance to patriarchal culture dovetails with the writing and theorizing of Irigaray and Cixous, so often misread as essentialists.⁹²

Schneemann was aware that it was her emphasis on tactility, variously coded as too feminine (messy), essentialist (bodily), or a mere repetition of the Abstract Expressionist confirmation of the heroic male artist’s psychology and presence, that contributed to her rejection by feminist theorists.⁹³ The text for her second performance of *Interior Scroll* (1975-77) at the Telluride Film Festival in Colorado underlines this recognition, but also reveals the difficulties of negotiating feminist politics:

I met a happy man / a structuralist filmmaker —but don’t call me that / it’s something else I do— / he said we are fond of you / you are charming / but don’t ask us / to look at your films / we cannot / there are certain films/ we cannot look at / the personal clutter /the persistence of feelings / the hand-touch sensibility / the diaristic indulgence / the painterly mess / the dense gestalt / the primitive techniques / (I don’t take the advice / of men who only talk to / themselves) / PAY ATTENTION TO CRITICAL / AND PRACTICAL FILM LANGUAGE / IT EXISTS FOR AND IN ONLY / ONE GENDER⁹⁴

Although this text implies that her films have been rejected by male critics and filmmakers, Schneemann revealed in a 1988 interview that she was referring to feminist film critic and *October* editor Annette Michelson who, like Laura Mulvey, “couldn’t look at my films.”⁹⁵ According to David Levi Strauss, the exclusionary excuses Schneemann cited in her text from 1975 were repeated again in a 1994 roundtable, “The Reception of the Sixties,” when the editors of *October* (Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, Silvia Kolbowski, Denis Hollier, Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloh, with Martha Buskirk) gathered to respond to the press’s

negative reception of the Robert Morris retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum. While discussing various “challenges to the pictorial,” the work of Schneemann, Valie Export and Hannah Wilke was mentioned and the importance of body art by women artists in the 1960s became a central topic. Admitting that art history has not done its work in this area, Michelson’s response, however, was to suggest that visual culture studies “may remedy that situation, although we’ve yet to see abundant and significant results.”⁹⁶ Clearly, Michelson still did not consider such an endeavor worthy of her own or her discipline’s efforts.

Despite the fact that *Fuses* has been repeatedly censored, vilified and critically ignored (especially, as previously mentioned, by feminist theorists until fairly recently), I would argue that Schneemann’s emphasis on tactility as research, theory, practice and politics anticipates Laura Marks’ highly influential theory of haptic cinema by almost thirty years. For Marks, a “haptic visuality” moves “eroticism from the site of what is represented to the surface of the image.”⁹⁷ An image that produces a tactile surface, one that encourages the viewer to come close, to be implicated in the image itself without the distance of mastery, transforms relations of looking: “I come to the surface of myself (like Riegel hunched over his Persian carpets), losing myself in the intensified relation with an other that cannot be possessed.”⁹⁸ In this way, “haptic visuality does not imply a critique of mastery, the mastery implicit in optical visuality, but it is through a desiring and often pleasurable relationship to the image that this critique is bodied forth. Voyeurism relies on maintaining the distance between viewer and viewed. Eroticism closes that distance and implicates the viewer in the viewed.”⁹⁹ Although Marks is articulating a theory where both a film’s tactile surface and the acts of looking it elicits may be erotic in themselves, regardless of content, the fact that *Fuses* is also erotic in content speaks to Schneemann’s brilliant “fusing” of theory, method and practice.

In her response to accusations of pornography and essentialism, Schneemann has clearly stated that *Fuses* does not depict anything “real”; the tactile surfaces and reassembled images foreground the fact that the film is the product of her manipulation of material, from the shooting and editing choices to the thick, painterly surface (so thick, in fact, that the first reel could not be run through the printer) and the physical interventions on the film stock.¹⁰⁰ I agree with Schneemann and yet I have to say that *Fuses feels* “real” in my body, more real, in fact, than if it had been shot as a documentary. Such is the power of artistic touch, its seductive dance with reality and desire. This may be what some viewers found so threatening, others delightful or even educational.¹⁰¹

Schneemann’s conceptualization and practice of artistic touch was, as I have noted, in dialogue with Jackson Pollock’s interest in mark-making and the gesturing body, specifically when it comes to her desire to both retain creative authority and short-circuit a self-perpetuating psychology. For Schneemann more so than Pollock, however, engaging with the tactile and vital processes of materials offered not only a strategy for eluding intention by giving it over to their properties (tactile and visual) but also a way to explore and render her body material and visual, as contiguous with but not collapsed into the work. This is an important distinction; it suggests that Pollock’s conflation with the work and god was much closer to an essentialist search for absolute truth, meaning or value than Schneemann’s, which despite the film title “Fuses” and her explicit references to the historical images and narratives of goddesses in many of her other works, *refuses* transcendence, often through eroticism and laughter.¹⁰²

¹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 19.

² Armstrong is referring to a painting by Manet, but her point is a general one, I think. For her astute reading of Manet's use of Morisot's feminine facture to undo femininity, see Carol Armstrong, "Facturing Femininity: Manet's 'Before the Mirror,'" *October* 74 (Autumn 1995): 74-104.

³ It is important to note, as I did in an earlier chapter, that this emphasis on immanence and corporeality would be picked up later by poststructuralist theorists, from the highly influential French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) to film theorist Laura Marks (2000, 2002) and Lacanian analyst-turned-artist Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, whose theory of the matrix has been touted by feminist art critics and historians like Griselda Pollock and Catherine de Zegher as the cutting-edge theory of feminist art practices and discourses.

⁴ The original instructions are given in Kevin Concannon, "Yoko Ono's Cut Piece: Critical Reception," a talk given at the Third Annual Performance Studies Conference, Atlanta, 11 April 1997, available online at <http://webcast.gatech.edu/papers/arch/Concannon.html>

⁵ *Yoko Ono: Arias and Objects*, edited by Barbara Haskell and John J. Hanhardt (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1991), 91. However, Jieun Rhee notes that there was a moment of violence in that first performance in Kyoto, Japan, that Ono since has played down: "One person came on the stage. . . . He took the pair of scissors and made a motion to stab me. He raised his hand, with the scissors in it, and I thought he was going to stab me. But the hand was just raised there and was totally still. He was standing still . . . with the scissors . . . threatening" (Rhee 2005, 103). See Jieun Rhee's "Performing the Other: Yoko Ono's Cut Piece," *Art History* 28, no. 1 (February 2005): 96-118.

⁶ *Yoko Ono: Arias and Objects*, edited by Barbara Haskell and John J. Hanhardt (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1991), 91.

⁷ A number of critics such as Laura Mulvey have written on this issue but I believe the most interesting take is the argument developed by Laura Marks. See Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 190-192. For a description of the London performance where Ono was produced as "an oriental lady," see Jieun Rhee's "Performing the Other: Yoko Ono's Cut Piece," *Art History* 28, no. 1 (February 2005): 110-111.

⁸ Peggy Phelan, "The Return of Touch: Feminist Performances, 1960-80," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Connie Butler (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007), 352.

⁹ Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 133.

¹⁰ Quoted in Kevin Concannon, "Yoko Ono's Cut Piece: Critical Reception," a talk given at the Third Annual Performance Studies Conference, Atlanta, 11 April 1997, available online at <http://webcast.gatech.edu/papers/arch/Concannon.html>

¹¹ Kristine Stiles, "Between Water and Stone—Fluxus Performance: A Metaphysics of Acts," reprinted in *The Artist's Body*, ed. Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones (London: Phaidon, 2000), 211. [Originally published in *The Spirit of Fluxus* (Minnesota: The Walker Art Center, 1993), 64-99.]

¹² Kristine Stiles, "Between Water and Stone—Fluxus Performance: A Metaphysics of Acts," reprinted in *The Artist's Body*, ed. Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones (London: Phaidon, 2000), 211. [Originally published in *The Spirit of Fluxus* (Minnesota: The Walker Art Center, 1993), 64-99.]

¹³ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema" (1975), reprinted in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), 361-74.

¹⁴ See Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); and Laura U. Marks, "The Memory of Touch," *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 127-193.

¹⁵ Peggy Phelan, "The Return of Touch: Feminist Performances, 1960-80," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Connie Butler (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007), 352.

¹⁶ Peggy Phelan, "The Return of Touch: Feminist Performances, 1960-80," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Connie Butler (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007), 352.

¹⁷ Peggy Phelan, "The Return of Touch: Feminist Performances, 1960-80," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Connie Butler (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007), 353.

¹⁸ Peggy Phelan, "The Return of Touch: Feminist Performances, 1960-80," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Connie Butler (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007), 353.

¹⁹ The idea of the piece as an offering is articulated by Ono in *Yoko Ono: Arias and Objects*, edited by Barbara Haskell and John J. Hanhardt (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1991), and elaborated further in Marcia Tucker's catalogue essay for the 1994 *Bad Girls* exhibition, where she explains: "Ono's inspiration for Cut Piece was the legend of the Buddha, who had renounced his life of privilege to wander the world, giving whatever was asked of him. His soul achieved supreme enlightenment when he allowed a tiger to devour his body, and Ono saw parallels between the Buddha's selfless giving and the artist's. When addressing serious issues, in this case voyeurism, sexual aggression, gender subordination, violation of a woman's personal space, violence against women, Ono invariably found means to combine dangerous confrontation with poetry, spirituality, personal vulnerability, and edgy laughter." Marcia Tucker, ed., *Bad Girls* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994). This idea of offering is also given a more complex cultural reading by Jieun Rhee, who speculates on the reception of "Cut Piece" in Japan. Noting that on that occasion Ono chose to title the work "Yoko Ono Farewell Concert: Strip-Tease Show," she suggests that Japanese audiences would have understood the relation between the sensational aspect of striptease and the notion of a ritual gift through the Buddhist concept of self-sacrifice, the Shinto origin story of the goddess Amaterasu, and the late Muromachi and Edo tradition (16th-18th centuries) of *Kumano bikuni*, the nuns who engaged in prostitution as a sacred offering. Amaterasu the sun goddess is lured out of the dark cave into which she has retreated when Ame-no-Uzume, the goddess of heaven, performs a bawdy dance that exposes her genitals. The ensuing laughter draws the sun goddess back out to fertilize the earth. See Jieun Rhee's "Performing the Other: Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*," *Art History* 28, no. 1 (February 2005): 106.

²⁰ Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 192.

²¹ See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

²² Kristine Stiles, "Between Water and Stone—Fluxus Performance: A Metaphysics of Acts," reprinted in *The Artist's Body*, ed. Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones (London: Phaidon, 2000), 211. [Originally published in *The Spirit of Fluxus* (Minnesota: The Walker Art Center, 1993), 64-99.]

²³ This quote comes from the text of "Kitsch's Last Meal" (1975) a Super-8mm film, which was used as the second of two scrolls that Schneemann used for her two performances of "Interior Scroll" (1975-1977). It was first performed at "Women Here and Now," in East Hampton, N.Y. August 29, 1975, and again at the Telluride Film Festival, Telluride, Colorado, September 4, 1977. Carolee Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 159.

²⁴ See Kevin Concannon, "Yoko Ono's Cut Piece: Critical Reception," a talk given at the Third Annual Performance Studies Conference, Atlanta, April 11, 1997, available online at <http://webcast.gatech.edu/papers/arch/Concannon.html>. I would like to note, however, that as of 15 May 2010, the room dedicated to the Fluxus movement at the Museum of Modern Art in New York does have a case that contains a number of documents relating to Ono's work, although they address collaborations with her husband, John Lennon (an imbalance which doesn't alert casual viewers to the much larger corpus of Ono's solo *oeuvre*).

²⁵ See Kevin Concannon, "Yoko Ono's Cut Piece: Critical Reception," a talk given at the Third Annual Performance Studies Conference, Atlanta, April 11, 1997, available online at <http://webcast.gatech.edu/papers/arch/Concannon.html>.

²⁶ One could develop this trajectory further in the body of the chapter, but I will just give the longer quote from the exhibition description of “Touch Me,” held at the Galerie Lelong in New York from 18 April to 18 May, 2008. From the exhibition press release: “In “Touch Me,” Yoko Ono will present an interactive painting, film, conceptual photography and sculptures that comment on different facets of the female experience, calling upon the viewers to make direct and deeply personal connections. ... A participatory element is central in “Touch Me,” in which Ono urges the audience to revitalize and rethink a personal connection to the most current situation women are facing. ... The centerpiece of the exhibition will be a large canvas covering the entire width of the gallery. Openings will be cut into the canvas, and viewers are invited to insert body parts through. Encompassed in this simple act are opposing elements of isolation, exposure, vulnerability, and defiance. The viewers will have the option to photograph themselves with supplied cameras; these photos will be displayed together on another canvas with the participant's own comments and thoughts written underneath the photos, furthering the inclusive nature of this new work. A 4-screen installation version of Yoko Ono's 1964 performance of *Cut Piece* filmed at Carnegie Recital Hall in 1965, will act as a counterpart for the metaphoric 2008 work.” Description from Yoko Ono's “Touch Me” exhibition website: http://www.a-i-u.net/touch_me.html.

²⁷ “Cut Piece” was performed in Tokyo and Kyoto in July 1964, New York in March 1965, and London in 1966; Ono performed it again on 15 September 2003 at Théâtre le Ranelagh in Paris. Description from Yoko Ono's “Touch Me” exhibition website: http://www.a-i-u.net/touch_me.html.

²⁸ Carolee Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 138.

²⁹ Schneemann often mentions the fact that her culture has not supported her work, that she has not been able to fund future projects. See Carolee Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002). Valie Export had her child taken from her by the Austrian government, which, considering her unemployable, labeled her as an unfit mother. See “Valie,” in Carolee Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 97.

³⁰ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema” (1975), reprinted in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), 361-74.

³¹ Note that Valie Export often capitalized her entire name, conceptualizing it as a logo. She appropriated it from the cigarette brand Smart Export, wishing to assimilate the slogans brandished on the package, which included “made in Austria,” “always and everywhere,” and “smart.” For Export, giving up the father's name and replacing it with an artistically generated name was a crucial form of self-identity. See the artist's biographical entry in the exhibition catalogue *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Connie Butler (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007). In this dissertation I am choosing to follow more conventional academic formats that do not capitalize each letter. Export did not. “Touch Cinema” is also referred to also as “Tap and Touch Cinema,” which is closer to its title in German: “Tapp-und Tast Kino,” which contains the sense of repeatedly trying to grasp something in the dark that cannot be fully known. See Michael Sicinski, “VALIE EXPORT and Paranoid Counter-Surveillance,” *Discourse* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 71-91.

³² For Export's full description, see Valie Export, “Tap and Touch Cinema,” accessed online 10/22/2007 at The Galleries at Moore: <http://thegalleriesatmoore.org/publications/valie/valietour3.shtml>.

³³ Valie Export, “Aspects of Feminist Actionism,” *New German Critique* 47 (Spring-Summer, 1989): 69-92.

³⁴ Valie Export, “Aspects of Feminist Actionism,” *New German Critique* 47 (Spring-Summer, 1989): 70.

³⁵ Note, too, that Export traced corporeal writing not to the French feminists but rather to Mallarmé. Valie Export, “Aspects of Feminist Actionism,” *New German Critique* 47 (Spring-Summer, 1989): 81.

³⁶ Valie Export, “Aspects of Feminist Actionism,” *New German Critique* 47 (Spring-Summer, 1989): 71.

³⁷ Valie Export, “Aspects of Feminist Actionism,” *New German Critique* 47 (Spring-Summer, 1989): 73.

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- ³⁸ Valie Export, "Aspects of Feminist Actionism," *New German Critique* 47 (Spring-Summer, 1989): 71.
- ³⁹ Valie Export, "Aspects of Feminist Actionism," *New German Critique* 47 (Spring-Summer, 1989): 90.
- ⁴⁰ Valie Export, "Aspects of Feminist Actionism," *New German Critique* 47 (Spring-Summer, 1989): 90.
- ⁴¹ Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 74. Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 14—May 31, 2010, organized by Klaus Biesenbach, Chief Curator, Department of Media and Performance Art.
- ⁴² See Klaus Biesenbach, "Klaus Biesenbach in Conversation with Marina Abramović," in *Marina Abramović*, ed. Kristine Stiles, Klaus Biesenbach and Chrissie Iles (London: Phaidon Press, 2008), 20. This position was reiterated again by Abramović in her presentation for the conference *The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in Visual Art*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, January 26-27, 2007.
- ⁴³ Abramović was a presenter at the conference *The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts*, held at the Museum of Modern Art, January 26–27, 2007. Her work was also included in the largest feminist exhibition to date, *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, held at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, March 4 – July 16 2007, and the anthology *Art and Feminism*, edited by Helena Reckitt (London: Phaidon Press, 2001).
- ⁴⁴ Kristine Stiles, "Cloud with its Shadow," in *Marina Abramović*, ed. Kristine Stiles, Klaus Biesenbach and Chrissie Iles (London: Phaidon Press, 2008), 60.
- ⁴⁵ Kristine Stiles, "Cloud with its Shadow," *Marina Abramović*, edited by Kristine Stiles, Klaus Biesenbach and Chrissie Iles (London: Phaidon Press, 2008), 60.
- ⁴⁶ See her performances "The House with the Ocean View" (2002) and "The Artist is Present" (2010). For an excellent reading of the first, see Peggy Phelan, "On Seeing the Invisible: Marina Abramović's *The House with the Ocean View*," in *Live: Art and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 16-28. See also Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010).
- ⁴⁷ Kubota performed in Schneemann's anti-war (Vietnam) kinetic theater piece "Snows" (1967). Stiles notes that "Kubota and Ono were familiar with the radical way in which Schneemann used her body, and these actions, as well as her legendary *Meat Joy* (performed in Paris, London and New York in 1964), charted a new direction that anticipated not only the so-called sexual revolution, but feminism and certainly Kubota and Ono's feminist performance directions." Kristine Stiles, "Between Water and Stone—Fluxus Performance: A Metaphysics of Acts," reprinted in *The Artist's Body*, ed. Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones (London: Phaidon, 2000), 213. [Originally published in *The Spirit of Fluxus* (Minnesota: The Walker Art Center, 1993). 64-99.]
- ⁴⁸ See "Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions" (1963). Schneemann recalls that Yoko Ono was the only other artist making body art before this time, but I would add Japanese Gutai artist Atsuko Tanaka, whose "Electric Dress" of 1956 occluded her body with light, but did require the frame of her body. See Carolee Schneemann, "Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions," in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 55.
- ⁴⁹ For an excellent discussion of Schneemann as a painter first and foremost, see Kristine Stiles, "The Painter as an Instrument of Real Time," *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 16.
- ⁵⁰ See Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy* (New Paltz, N.Y.: Documentext, 1975), 52. "Kinetic theater" is a performative amalgam of bodily gestures and movements in space that could include objects as well as film and video projections.
- ⁵¹ Schneemann was saved during the Paris performance by three middle-aged women who recognized she was in trouble. She recalls: "They threw themselves as one onto the man and dragged him off of me." See Carolee

Schneemann, "Istory of a Girl Pornographer," in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 136.

⁵² Carolee Schneemann, "On Censorship: Interview with Aviva Rahmani," *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 210-215; and Carolee Schneemann, "Notes From the Underground: A Feminist Pornographer in Moscow," *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), .

⁵³ The letter was written by a friend's husband, a psychiatrist who thought the request was ridiculous. He wrote: "Carolee Schneemann's current film work is an examination of the archetypal evolution of the cross," a very funny response given the material of the film. Schneemann laughingly comments that it is written like a note that excuses one from a gym class. In this interview she appears to make light of the infantilizing of women, but her work is often a blend of this sense of humor with cutting critique. See "Vulva's Morphia" (1992-97) from which Eve Ensler's wildly popular "Vagina Monologues" seems to draw, though Ensler's take is far more male-bashing and less sex-positive than Schneemann's, which may account for its popularity. See Carolee Schneemann, "Interview with ND," *ND*, no. 14 (Austin, Texas, 1991): 5-10. Reprinted in Carolee Schneemann, "Interview with ND," *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 123.

⁵⁴ Quotes taken from Carolee Schneemann, "Interview with Carl Heyward," *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 1996. [Originally published in *Art Papers* 17, no. 1 (January-February, 1995): 9-16.]

⁵⁵ Schneemann was familiar with writings by Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Artaud, and Wilhelm Reich in the early sixties, before they became standard academic reading. Later she read Freud, Jung, and feminist research in art history, psychology, linguistics, concepts of a sacred erotic, and ecology. Carolee Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 22; 213. Schneemann's work anticipates connections that were also being forged across the Atlantic by French feminists such as Luce Irigaray, who would promote a female erotics based on touch as a form for a new feminist "logic" that goes beyond but also deconstructs patriarchal culture, particularly psychoanalysis, philosophy and linguistics. See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 23-33, 205-13; 79, 157-159; for female pleasure see the same text, "Cosi Fan Tutti," 86-105 and "Two Lips," 205-218. For Irigaray on the haptic feminine, see Luce Irigaray, "The Fecundity of the Caress," in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 185-217. For a section on intrauterine touching, see the same text, 162; for touch and the female divine, see the same text, p. 71 and Luce Irigaray, "Divine Women," in *Sexes and Genealogies* (1987), trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 57-72. For touch in relation to female bodies as commodities of exchange, see her work on the myth of Demeter and Persephone/Kore, in Luce Irigaray, *Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution* (1989), trans. Karin Montin (New York: Routledge, 1994), 91-112; also Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, translated by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 112-119. Irigaray also argues that the male drive toward transcendence is linked to a desire to achieve a purity and coherence of identity and truth as "identical" and "indifferent"; a male desire to give birth to himself, immaculate and godlike, as the "self-same," while disavowing the obscene, irruptive and powerful necessity of otherness in copulation, real birth and creative female bodies. This idea courses throughout her texts. For one thread, see Luce Irigaray, "How to Conceive (of) a Girl," in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 160-167. Schneemann's letter of 1957 quoted in Kristine Stiles, "The Painter as an Instrument of Real Time," in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 3.

⁵⁶ Quotes taken from Carolee Schneemann, "Interview with Carl Heyward," in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 207.

⁵⁷ Quotes taken from Carolee Schneemann, "Interview with Carl Heyward," in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 207.

⁵⁸Quotes taken from Carolee Schneemann, “On Censorship: Interview with Aviva Rahmani,” in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 215; and Carolee Schneemann, “Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions,” in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 55.

⁵⁹ Carolee Schneemann, “Interview with Kate Haug,” in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 28. [Originally published in *Wide Angle* 20, no. 1 (1977): 20-49.]

⁶⁰ Carolee Schneemann, “From the Notebooks (1962-63),” in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 47.

⁶¹ Carolee Schneemann, “Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions,” in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 55-59.

⁶² Carolee Schneemann, “Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions,” in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 55.

⁶³ For an excellent discussion of Schneemann’s painting practice, which often gets overlooked due to the critical emphasis on her performances, see Kristine Stiles, “The Painter as an Instrument of Real Time,” in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 4.

⁶⁴ See Kristine Stiles, “The Painter as an Instrument of Real Time,” in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 11.

⁶⁵ Carolee Schneemann, “Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions,” in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 55.

⁶⁶ Carolee Schneemann, “Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions,” in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 55.

⁶⁷ Carolee Schneemann, “Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions,” in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 55.

⁶⁸ See Hal Foster, “The Crux of Minimalism,” in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 35-70.

⁶⁹ Klein’s text is worth quoting more fully: “[My models] became living brushes! I had rejected the brush long before. It was too psychological. I painted with the more anonymous roller, trying to create a ‘distance’—at the very least an intellectual, unvarying distance—between the canvas and me during the execution. Now, like a miracle, the brush returned, but this time alive. Under my direction, the flesh itself applied the color to the surface, and with perfect precision. I was able to remain constantly at the exact distance ‘X’ from my canvas and thus I could dominate my creation continuously throughout the entire execution. In this way I stayed clean. I no longer dirtied myself with color, not even the tips of my fingers. The work finished itself there in front of me, under my direction, in absolute collaboration with the model. And I could salute its birth into the tangible world in a dignified manner, dressed in a tuxedo.” See Yves Klein, “Le Vrai Devient Réalité” (Truth Becomes Reality), an essay written in March 1960 and published in *Zero 3* (July 1961). Quoted in Paul Schimmel, “Leap Into the Void: Performance and the Object,” in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949-1979* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 33.

⁷⁰ See Yves Klein, “Le Vrai Devient Réalité” (Truth Becomes Reality); reprinted in *The Artist’s Body*, ed. Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones (London: Phaidon, 2000), 195-196. [Originally written in March 1960 and published in *Zero 3* (July 1961).]

⁷¹ I am indebted to Amelia Jones for confirming Klein’s commitment to Rosicrucian beliefs. She reads his work as critiquing the phallus of modernism while also possessing it. See Amelia Jones, “Dis/playing the Phallus: Male

Artists Perform Their Masculinities,” *Art History* (December 1994): 546-84. I have found his text to be rife with Christian and sexual innuendo: “These marks, pagans in my religion of the absolute monochrome, hypnotized me at once, and I worked on them secretly, always with the complete collaboration of the models, in order to share the responsibility in the event of spiritual weakness.” See Yves Klein, “Le Vrai Devient Réalité” (Truth Becomes Reality), reprinted in *The Artist’s Body*, ed. Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones (London: Phaidon, 2000), 195-196. [Originally written in March 1960 and published in *Zero 3* (July 1961).]

⁷² Rebecca Smith, “Painting Thin Air, Sometimes in Bright Blue,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2010, Arts section, Florida edition.

⁷³ Citing Klein’s Anthropometries paintings, Smith quite rightly asks, “Why is all this not excessive or psychological—or simply par for the course in the age of Brigitte Bardot?” See Rebecca Smith, “Painting Thin Air, Sometimes in Bright Blue,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2010, Arts section, Florida edition.

⁷⁴ See Hal Foster, “The Crux of Minimalism,” *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 35-70.

⁷⁵ Carolee Schneemann, “Interview with Kate Haug,” *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 28. [Originally published in *Wide Angle 20*, no. 1 (1977): 20-49.]

⁷⁶ See Carolee Schneemann, “Interview with ND,” reprinted in Carolee Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 123. [Originally published in *ND 14* (Austin, Texas, 1991): 5-10.]

⁷⁷ See Carolee Schneemann, “Interview with ND,” reprinted in Carolee Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 123. [Originally published in *ND 14* (Austin, Texas, 1991): 5-10.]

⁷⁸ See Carolee Schneemann, “Interview with ND,” reprinted in Carolee Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 123. [Originally published in *ND 14* (Austin, Texas, 1991): 5-10.]

⁷⁹ David Levi Strauss, “Love Rides Aristotle Through the Audience: Body, Image and Idea in the Work of Carolee Schneemann,” in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 323. [Originally published in Carolee Schneemann, *Up To and Including Her Limits* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 26-34.] Also see Carolee Schneemann, “Interview with ND,” reprinted in Carolee Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 123. [Originally published in *ND*, no. 14 (Austin, Texas, 1991): 5-10.]

⁸⁰ I am breathless, pulsing, dropping into a sexual and fully sensate experience, yet it is far different from the one-dimensional arousal I may feel in seeing and/or hearing a typical depiction of sexual encounter.

⁸¹ Carolee Schneemann, “Interview with Kate Haug,” *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 43. [Originally published in *Wide Angle 20*, no. 1 (1977): 20-49.]

⁸² The quotes are from the text of her film “Kitsch’s Last Meal,” which Schneemann also used as the text for the scroll she pulled out of her vulva in the second performance of “Interior Scroll” at the Telluride (Colorado) Film Festival on September 4th, 1977. The male “structuralist film critic” she refers to has since been revealed to be a female feminist film critic, *October* editor Annette Michelson, “who couldn’t look at my films” (319). The projected quotes are from Michelson’s students (319). Schneemann did not fare well with feminist critics, including Laura Mulvey, who praised her work in private but refused to write about it (27). See Carolee Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 159; 319. I am partly indebted to Laura Marks’s theory of haptic visuality for my understanding of tactile surfaces from a

filmic perspective. See chapter 1, “Video Haptics and Erotics,” pp. 1-22, in Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). See also Laura U. Marks, “The Memory of Touch,” in *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 127-193. For thinking about Schneemann’s work from a tactile and painterly perspective, I am indebted to Melissa Hyde and Carol Armstrong. See Melissa Hyde, “The ‘Makeup’ of the Marquise: Boucher’s Portrait of Pompadour at Her Toilette,” *The Art Bulletin* (September 2000): 453-475. See also Carol Armstrong, “Facturing Femininity: Manet’s ‘Before the Mirror,’” *October* 74 (Autumn 1995): 74-104.

⁸³ Carol Armstrong, “Facturing Femininity: Manet’s ‘Before the Mirror,’” *October* 74 (Autumn 1995): 78, f.n. 5.

⁸⁴ Carol Armstrong, “Facturing Femininity: Manet’s ‘Before the Mirror,’” *October* 74 (Autumn 1995): 92.

⁸⁵ Carol Armstrong also notes that facture has historically been connected to “the amorphous regime of color as against the rationality of design.” See Carol Armstrong, “Facturing Femininity: Manet’s ‘Before the Mirror,’” *October* 74 (Autumn 1995): 92. As I mentioned earlier, in the great debate of drawing versus color, color’s lack of form was linked to the feminine. Clearly this metaphor a telling sexual analogy for color comes from art theorist Charles Blanc in 1867: “The union of drawing and colour is necessary to engender painting, just as is the union of man and woman to engender humanity; but drawing must conserve its preponderance over colour. If it is otherwise, painting will run to ruin; it will be lost through colour as humanity was lost through Eve.” Blanc quoted in Anthea Callen, “Degas’ Bathers: Hygiene and Dirt, Gaze and Touch,” in *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision*, edited by Griselda Pollock and Richard Kendall (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 170. Color, desire and the sense were all attributed to the feminine at various moments. In 17th century art criticism, “the weapon of color is that attributed to all women: the ability to delight the senses.” See Philip Sohm, “Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 791.

⁸⁶ I am indebted to Carol Armstrong’s reading of Manet’s facture for this observation. See Carol Armstrong, “Facturing Femininity: Manet’s ‘Before the Mirror,’” *October* 74 (Autumn 1995): 86. I am also thinking about the differences between finished and unfinished surfaces in the 19th century. 19th century Realism was the heir of post-Renaissance pictorial tradition, but the emphasis on the act of painting, on painting as artifice, and on the intervention of the artist through his labor, ends up increasing (rather than decreasing) the impression of reality. “By emphasizing the painting as representation, the artist confirms the existence of what is behind the representation. In *fini* painting, on the other hand, the transparency of the painting—its lack of resistance—emphasizes the fictive character of what is represented. Thus, treatment and subject, the *fini* and the exclusion of everyday life, serve the same purpose in the strategy of official art.” Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, “The Ideology of the Licked Surface: Official Art.” In *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art*. (New York: Viking Press, 1984), 224.

⁸⁷ Carolee Schneemann, “On Censorship: Interview with Aviva Rahmani,” in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 211.

⁸⁸ Carolee Schneemann, “On Censorship: Interview with Aviva Rahmani,” in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 211.

⁸⁹ David Levi Strauss, “Love Rides Aristotle Through the Audience: Body, Image and Idea in the Work of Carolee Schneemann,” in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 322.

⁹⁰ I am referring to *October* editor Annette Michelson and Laura Mulvey, who praised Schneemann’s work in private but refused to write about it. See Carolee Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 27; 319. Recent feminist theorists who have engaged with Schneemann in interesting ways include Amelia Jones, Anette Kubitzka, Kristine Stiles, Katy Deepwell and Rebecca Schneider.

⁹¹ Apparently, according to Schneemann, Mulvey spoke with her about the importance of “Fuses” as a rupture with pornography and how it would “change the whole argument and discussion of filmic representation of sexuality and . . . then she couldn’t touch it!” Carolee Schneemann, “Interview with Kate Haug,” in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging*

Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 27. [Originally published in *Wide Angle* 20, no. 1 (1977): 20-49.]

⁹² See note 56.

⁹³ See Mary Kelly, "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988) 87-103.

⁹⁴ Carolee Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 159.

⁹⁵ The projected quotes are from Michelson's students. See David Levi Strauss, "Love Rides Aristotle Through the Audience: Body, Image and Idea in the Work of Carolee Schneemann," in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 319.

⁹⁶ See David Levi Strauss, "Love Rides Aristotle Through the Audience: Body, Image and Idea in the Work of Carolee Schneemann," in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 320.

⁹⁷ Laura U. Marks, "The Memory of Touch," in *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 185.

⁹⁸ Laura U. Marks, "The Memory of Touch," in *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 184.

⁹⁹ Laura U. Marks, "The Memory of Touch," in *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 184.

¹⁰⁰ Andrea Juno, "Interview with Carolee Schneemann," *Angry Women: RE/Search* 13 (1991): 70.

¹⁰¹ Schneemann reports that women approached her and thanked her for making "Fuses." One woman said she had never seen her own genitals, or another woman's, crediting "Fuses" with allowing her to see her own sexual curiosity as natural and to "experience her own physical integrity." Carolee Schneemann, "Notes on Fuses (1971)," in *Carolee Schneemann Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 45.

¹⁰² Works by Schneemann that are premised on or refer to goddess cultures, images and artifacts include: "Eye Body" (1963) (Schneemann later discovered the connection between snakes and the Cretan snake goddesses); "Homerunmuse" (1977), "Venus Vectors" (1987), "Cycladic Imprints" (1988-92), "Unexpectedly Research" (1992), "Vulva's Morphia" (1992-97), and "Ask the Goddess" (1991). "Vulva's Morphia" is the much wittier inspiration for Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues*. Many of Schneemann's works are tinged with irony and fun. In this way, she is a kind of feminist Aretino, who likened the penis to a sword and then a paintbrush. See Philip Sohm, "Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 799. Instead, Schneemann paints with the cunt, which has very different implications and of course is generally received badly by critics. The image from *Eye Body* which supposedly exposes her clitoris (my eyesight is not that keen anymore) reminds me of the 18th fears about women who transgress sex roles—they have big clitorises and usurp male power.

According to Sheriff, the Tribade (a Greek term) was a term for ribald French women or "false hermaphrodite," defined by some men as girls who had clitorises much longer and larger than normal and who "abuse it" with other girls; the ignorant person mistook her enlarged clitoris for a penis. "Long defined as a woman who 'undertakes the virile functions in the service of her own sex,' the tribade disguised herself as a man by usurping his sexual rights over women" (182). These definitions turned on "imitation" rather than essence. The Tribade was threatening and disrupting not because her sex was indeterminable, but because her miming of the man's sexuality threatened the coherence of a social and sexual order regulated by reproduction. The Tribade's sexuality, focused on the clitoris rather than the vagina, invoked an economy of pleasure. "The tribade raised the possibility that sexual performance

was not linked to essential sex, but based in mimicry (of an organ she did not have, of a role that was not hers). The condemnation of the tribade was all the more pressing because moralists recognized that even a woman with a normally sized clitoris could overvalue that organ” (Sheriff 183). The *femme-homme*, often accused of sexual commerce with other women, mimicked the virile position by performing the man’s intellectual or political functions. Social transgression (a woman acting like a man) was often figured as sexual transgression (183). See Mary Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 182-183.

Comfortable with considering herself an intellectual painter, Schneemann was offended in the 1960s when her best works were described as “masculine.” For Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun in the 18th century, to have a “virile brush” meant she was an intellectual (also a transgression) and thus capable of painting in any genre. In a sense, both Schneemann and Vigée-Lebrun are Tribades; both play with representation and gendered identity as artifice across form and content, their personal lives and social roles, each in her own way and according to her historical moment. In many ways, I see Schneemann in dialogue with Vigée-Lebrun. Whereas Vigée-Lebrun’s history paintings were called imperfect because she failed to properly idealize the goddesses (as a woman she couldn’t be expected to understand the ancients), Schneemann takes up the iconography and rituals of the goddesses (often with humor) to produce feminist art. Schneemann shows that not only can she step into “the mindset of the ancients,” but she mimics and embodies them in order to make history! For an excellent discussion of Vigée-Lebrun and history painting (195-196), as well as her brilliantly ironic *Self Portrait* of 1783, see See Mary Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 180-220.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lesley Gamble was born in the north and has been heading south ever since. A professional coach on the “A” horse show circuit for almost two decades, she trained many national champions, developed her own business, and became a licensed horse show judge, a skill she continues to enjoy and maintain in addition to her academic career.

For almost a quarter century Lesley has designed and taught college courses across several disciplines, from art history and general humanities to literature, film and women’s studies. Working from a feminist and poststructuralist perspective, her research interests have focused primarily on the histories and theories of women’s aesthetic and spiritual practices. Stoking her passion for travel, these pursuits have led her to destinations as diverse as St. Petersburg, Russia; Singapore; Bali; Malta; various points in western and eastern Europe; Turkey; and several countries in Central Asia, including Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Lesley travels in other ways as well. As a licensed massage therapist she explores “touch” as a modality of intimacy, healing and embodied wisdom. Currently she is bringing that knowledge to bear on questions of difference (gender, race, class, ethnicity, etc.), augmenting her academic research by investigating “touch” as a concept, an artistic practice, and a tangible, as well as affective and imaginative, experience and source of epistemology. As the work of many early feminist artists demonstrates, “touch” opens on to some of the most pressing social and political issues of our time, foremost among them the question of how to negotiate and live a politics of the commons through an ethics of difference.

She is also passionate about land and environmental art, projects that draw on the fertile nexus of aesthetics and science, as well as visionary and improvisational art, film, texts and music. Happily identifying as both tree-hugger and aquasapien, her love of nature, particularly the aquasphere, has her thinking about how local artists are drawing attention to and offering

new perspectives on the increasingly dire problems of Florida's waters, from the estuaries, rivers, springs and aquifer to the Gulf of Mexico.