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FEMINIST ISSUES

Introduction

Silvia Kolbowski

Mignon Nixon

The "special" issue is a genre that generates mixed reactions. In particular, it has become a suspect format, faulted for ghettoizing the politics of race, nationality, or sexuality, not to say feminism—concerns that could arguably contribute to the makeup of every issue of a given journal. Without underestimating the validity of such a critique, the special issue also has its positive dimensions. It can function as a lens through which to focus with unusual intensity on a particular historical moment, and on those discourses and phenomena that contribute to understanding such periods, whether of the past or the present. This special issue was organized in such a spirit.

It is an apt time to analyze the current status of feminist practices, given some recent shifts and permutations. The V-Girls do this, in "Daughters of the ReVolution," by looking from a generational perspective at what is now the historical feminism of the 1960s and '70s. Mark Cousins and Parveen Adams, in "The Truth on Assault," indirectly address the legacies of radical feminist precepts in an analysis of Catherine MacKinnon's controversial new book, *Only Words*. And in "Bad Enough Mother," Mignon Nixon reads uses of the body in some contemporary feminist art practices through a Kleinian framework.

"Questions of Feminism: 25 Responses" and the round-table discussion were formulated so as to tie together the many threads that feminist practices—of art, theory, criticism, and activism—have tried to interconnect in the past few decades. The questions were written to address some current tendencies and leanings recognizable within the extended social contexts in which these practices exist. Brief sketches by necessity, the questions suffer from the inevitable shorthand that plagues the initiation of inquiries, in that such initiations require, at least in part, a nominal stance. Nevertheless, the language of the questions is descriptive of some recent directions. One of these directions—a rejection or simplification of psychoanalytic theory or theoretical "work" in general, can be perceived in art magazines, galleries, museums, and art books. The mainstream media is also a register, as in the explicit and repeated theory-bashing in the *New York Times* in favor of "plain talk" criticism or metaphysical precepts, or the celebration of a "return to body art" at the expense of the last few years' taste for

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theoretical art in fashion magazines. And the dismissal of so-called academic feminism in favor of the "truth" of grass-roots feminism can be read in the "underground" popular context of a West Coast fanzine. These are some examples of a complex situation in which the polarizations of terms that are outlined in the questions—the polarizations that so many of the respondents want to resist—persist. At the same time, popular or activist discourses and phenomena have often been a blind spot—or fetish—of theoretical discourses, including feminist ones. The two questions in this project attempt to address such disturbing hierarchic dichotomies, recognizing that they cannot be willed away, but only eroded through relentless scrutiny of all kinds. Gauging by some of the responses and the texts in this issue, such practices are already underway.

While the questions went out to a large and diverse group of artists and writers, the responses represent, of course, a partial return. Nevertheless, they offer a range of readings and positions that sometimes focus on the implications of certain conditions and legacies for continuing feminist art and critical practices, and sometimes suggest provocative and conflicting ways of reading the past, and of reading current references to past practices. Feminist art and criticism/theory of the past few decades has most certainly been heterogeneous. Yet it should not be relegated to the realm of an eclecticism that defies close analysis. It is important to begin to identify approaches and tendencies—from a particular and self-conscious historical distance—in order to engage in dialogues that will broaden the social potential of such work. To see this as a restrictive impulse is to erect unnecessarily defensive barriers.

The response of one critic in Germany makes it clear that the conditions and practices of art and criticism are not parallel in Europe and the United States, so that asking questions located within the framework of American culture elicited a description of significant national disjunctions among feminisms. It is safe to say that even more dramatic disjunctions exist across broader geographic and cultural distances, distances that can perhaps be bridged in the future. Such disjunctions are further elucidated in the introduction written by Sabeth Buchmann to the documentation of the "Information Service" project, which was initiated in Germany and has since traveled, like a displaced sign of feminine/feminist absence in large group exhibitions, to many other venues.

The presence of the texts and projects brought together in this issue will, it is hoped, challenge the formulation of feminism(s) as a thing of the "post."

SILVIA KOLBOWSKI

Questions of Feminism: 25 Responses*

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, 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 the 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?

* These questions were sent to a group of artists and writers in the summer of 1994. The responses follow.

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AYISHA ABRAHAM

(Question 2)

I wonder if it is possible to demarcate the 1960s and '80s in terms of clearly distinguishable categories of "grass roots" and "theory." Would our understanding be where it is without the pathbreaking *grass roots–theoretical work* done by activists/artists/theorists who have traditionally belonged to marginalized communities?

The issue of formations and expressions of subjectivity in and through art is crucial here. In the United States, with the help of the popular press and media, politics tends to be reduced to essentialized and deterministic notions of race, ethnicity, femininity, otherness, etc. This conveniently cloaks all the other categories that have not been legitimized within the classic self/other binary debates.

In a recent article entitled "Interior Colonies: Franz Fanon and the Politics of Identification," Diana Fuss locates psychoanalytic discourse and the politics of identification within colonial history and other historical genealogies:

> It therefore becomes necessary for the colonizer to subject the colonial other to a double command: be like me, don't be like me; be mimetically identical, be totally other. The colonial other is situated somewhere between difference and similitude, at the vanishing point of subjectivity.[1]

While it is still hard for artists from marginalized communities to negotiate their identities within the context of the art world, there are many who have used strategies such as autobiography to explore a history that has never been interrogated before. The problem only arises when terms such as "the body," "autobiography," etc., are taken out of their historical contexts and thrown around like disembodied and rarefied concepts.

I find myself becoming more conscious of the extent to which my work has to be informed both by theoretical analyses and direct practical engagement with complex issues of subjectivity, identity, etc. I feel the need to look at the specifics of these issues. It is the politics of process that interests me. In my present project, which has engaged me for three years, I am attempting to construct a narrative around a group of nineteenth-century photographs that documented Christian conversion in South India. The intersections of faith and identity (through the consumption of new commodities and the use of the camera) during this colonial period are some of the issues that have interested me. The project has transformed dramatically from my first attempt to read these images visually.

1. Diana Fuss, "Interior Colonies: Franz Fanon and the Politics of Identification," *Diacritics* (Summer–Fall 1994), p. 23.

In contemporary Indian art, the mythological Indian woman of precolonial India became the archetypal icon of representation. Indian artists during the nationalist movement imbued "her" image with the purity and idealism of a lost era. Responding to contemporary events and the reactionary appropriation of these images, I felt I needed to find another method to explore these issues historically. I wrote to my grandmother asking specifically about her memories of Christian conversion/technological change (the advent of the camera, etc., in rural India) at the turn of the century. She wrote me a series of letters, and then later I interviewed her extensively. This "grass roots" involvement became an important anchor for me to ground my work.

The issue of mediation is an important one. The assumption of an "authentic" that can be uncovered without interpretation is naive and apolitical. Unmediated work tends only to *compensate* for historical absence. It attempts to celebrate rather than interrogate critically. A one-liner simplifies issues and is then considered more *authentic*, more *accessible*, more *popular* than works that attempt a politics of process to explore complex ideas. Any engagement with a problem is labeled "elitist" by the mainstream partly because it might have the potential to disrupt existing systems. Theory that is reified is acceptable because it is more easily commodifiable and made into just another formal project.

However, what makes one skeptical of antitheoretical work is a return to fairly old-fashioned formalism and a narcissistic flaunting of the self. Ambling through the recent exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art ironically titled "Sense and Sensibility," a title reflecting a nineteenth-century vision of femininity, one was struck by the vocabulary of seduction utilized in both the materials and the concepts. The artists are women, young, and from international backgrounds. The projects, however, seem purely formal and fail to reveal any critical engagement or disruptive iconoclasm.

There is a tendency in contemporary group shows to rely on a series of naughty one-liners. Despite all the visual appeal and wit, work that relies only on the accoutrements of femininity—the pink plastic, the corset, the eye shadow (as in the "Bad Girls" show at the New Museum of Contemporary Art)—are disturbingly essentialist expressions, even though that work parades in the garb of the "impure."

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EMILY APTER

Essentialism's Period

Nineties feminism seems to be worried about periodizing essentialism, worried, that is, about essentialism's periods (its shameless emissions of bodily fluids, menses, and tears), as well as its own historical periodicity from the 1960s and '70s through the '80s.

Seventies essentialism has impinged on the 1990s in the form of a fashion revival—the ideational equivalent of platform shoes, oversized collars, small T-shirts. Seventies essentialism, like these "period" items retrieved from the recesses of the closet, was already "back" in the '80s, but instead of going away in the '90s, it just continued to assert itself more and more.

Mary Kelly tells me that her work from the 1970s (*Post-Partum Document*) is increasingly requested in the '90s for shows dedicated to reexamining women's art of the '70s. *Post-Partum Document* deployed a Lacanian psychoanalytical framework mediated by feminism to invent new strategies for representing maternal desire. The work was anything but essentialist (the '70s was, after all, the heyday of theory), but the reasons for interest in it now seem to smack of essentialism nonetheless. The 1990s view appears focused less on *Post-Partum Document*'s exposure of the social constructedness of maternity and more on its formal and thematic references to "dirty nappies," infant scrawl, feminine leakages of love and feeling, and the social/psychic seams and lesions connecting female bodies to the workforce—see, for example, the lexical progression from labia to labor to lubricant in entry L7. Index L, Homo sapiens (F), which reads:

> LABIA MAJORA, LABIA MINORA, LABOUR-false labour, length of labour, normal labour (first stage, second stage, third stage), LABOUR PAINS, PROLONGED LABOUR, RAPID LABOUR, LACERATION, LACTATION, LEVATORS, LIFTING, LIGHTENING, LIE OF BABY, LINEA MIGRA, LITHOTOMY, LOOP, LUBRICANT.

It is perhaps no accident that during the 1980s—a decade of nostalgia, power feminism, and race/class division—Mary Kelly made "Historia," part three of the four-part project *Interim* documenting the utopian collectivism and fervent egalitarianism of the 1960s and '70s. It is, however, paradoxical that this move seemed to parallel a mode of historicizing feminism that has become increasingly pronounced in the "backlash," "grunge," "postfeminist" era of the 1990s. Adjacent, on one side, to academic seminars on "Future Deconstructions" and, on the other, to Woodstock '94, a minor boom in commemorative books, special issues, and exhibitions has erupted, each in different veins concerned to measure and evaluate "where we are" *vis à vis* 1970s essentialism and 1980s theoretical feminism.

A heightened awareness of such periodicity is echoed in Chantal Mouffe's introduction to the republication in 1990 of selected essays from *m/f*, a preeminent British feminist theory journal that ran from 1978 to 1986. Mouffe discerns the "common challenge to essentialism" as "the central theme of the otherwise diverse interventions made in the journal during its nine years of existence." Mouffe then makes the case that it is precisely *m/f*'s antiessentialism that renders its arguments relevant to the "postmodern feminism" of the 1990s. This may be a fair and useful assessment, but not surprisingly "postmodern feminism" already sounds dated in the mid-1990s insofar as postmodernity has been severely discredited for lending itself to antimodernist, politically enervated aesthetic ideologies.

Nineties feminism endorses antiessentialism by jettisoning gender stereotypes, theorizing the body, queering sexual difference, and plugging the ears to the maternal recidivism of friends ("But now that you have a boy . . . "). But 1990s feminism, lesbian and straight, white and postcolonial, also suspects that its theories and self-conscious periodizations mask a kind of gynophobia—an aversion to the specters of femaleness and femininity that will not go away. Perhaps this explains the present attraction of 1970s essentialist feminism, which, embarrassing as it may be, desublimated the female body's unconscious. In retrospect, despite its sororal idealism, biologism, and blinkered experiential credo, 1970s essentialism worked rather fearlessly with the apparition of womanliness. In retrospect, what Kristeva called "women's time" and what might otherwise be referred to as "essentialism's period," appears to have been a rather good time for women. But personally I hope that by the end of the 1990s essentialism as a discursive framework will have permanently gone out of fashion.

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MAURICE BERGER

My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over "proceedings too terrible to relate." The exercise is critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic. Moving that veil aside requires, therefore, certain things. First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. Thus memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin, and in what I find to be significant.

—Toni Morrison,
"The Site of Memory," 1987

There is an unfortunate tendency, evident in the very question posed by *October,* to see theory in opposition to autobiography, popular culture, and contemporary politics. The idea that theory is by nature elitist only serves to limit the possibilities of feminist and other critical practices as it feeds the anti-intellectualism of our time. This is not to say, of course, that feminist theory is not sometimes inscrutable; but neither is it automatically irrelevant to practical politics. There is no question, for example, that Judith Butler's dense arguments on the construction of gender and lesbian identity, and most particularly her brilliant ideas about drag as a model for self-construction, have inflected popular discussions about essentialism and the need to transcend narrow and divisive self-identifications.

Since feminist critical practices are increasingly crossing paths with other identity-based disciplines such as race and gay and lesbian studies, the question of theory's usefulness must be broadly considered. Over the past decade, in response to urgent social and cultural realities, leftist theoretical methodologies have been in a state of flux and reassessment. Homi Bhabha, for example, has recently asked whether the "commitment to theory" inherently undermines activism and social change. Is theoretical jargon, he wonders, merely another "power ploy" of the Western cultural elite? Bhabha concludes that theory can contribute to social understanding: the very elusiveness of certain theoretical constructions, he argues, permits them to better examine the difficult and often convoluted relationship between power, language, and identity—"the discursive ambivalence that makes the 'political' possible." In other words, by refusing to submit to an oppressive lucidity and logic, such discourses can more effectively communicate the contradictions and anxieties that constitute the social subject. There is, of course, a major

political advantage to seeing ourselves this way: by residing in the interstices between categories of class, gender, race, sexuality, nation, and generation, such a conception of selfhood refuses to fuel the stereotypes that underwrite bigotry.

While theory can serve as a powerful intellectual foundation for social practice, we cannot ignore the question of whether its inscrutability can sometimes be disempowering. It is incorrect, for example, to assume that autobiographical or paraliterary forms, idioms associated with an earlier feminist ethos, are incommensurate with psychoanalytic or semiotic theory. Thus in race, gay and lesbian, and gender studies, the personal often works to make the theoretical more concrete, accessible, and, ultimately, politically effective: Simon Watney, for example, lends passion to his deconstruction of public representations of AIDS by recalling the funeral of a friend who died much too young; Michele Wallace supports her argument about the racist and sexist imperatives of art history by examining the ways in which the exemplary work of her own mother, the artist Faith Ringgold, has sometimes been ignored; and Patricia J. Williams illustrates the brutality of white institutional power by recounting how a white salesperson refused her entry into a SoHo boutique.

These resonant and lucid texts, all grounded in various psychoanalytic or semiotic models, reveal much about the nature of oppression: the extent to which social circumstances are mediated by representation; the complicity of Western institutions, including the mass media, in the formation of sexist, racist, and homophobic conditions and depictions; the potential of theories of representation to empower by exposing patterns of bigotry; and the means by which such theories, even if they begin as obtuse academic exercises, can inform public discourse. There is no question that poststructuralist, psychoanalytical, and neo-Marxist feminist practices—from Gayatri Spivak's dismantling of the fictive, even literary constructions of the historical narratives of colonialism to the artist Mary Kelly's adoption of Lacanian principles to interrogate the hierarchies of masculinity—have replaced unmediated reality with representational sophistication. But the increasing adeptness of the radical right at political debate and manipulation has called into question the elusiveness of theory and the insularity of the academy. It may very well be counterproductive, at this point, to disregard the reality that some of the most effective political methods in the ongoing struggle for equality and freedom are often won through the very strategies of coherence and consensus that earlier intellectuals, with all good intentions, strove to subvert.

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VICTOR BURGIN

Question 1, about the rejection of feminist theory, seems subordinate to Question 2, about the rejection of "theory" in general as "elitist." As an insult, "Elitist!" functions as a performative utterance (in the strictly Austinian sense), its meaning varying widely according to context. Etymologically, however, the meaning of the word is more limited. The feminine noun *élite* is derived from the past participle, *élit*, of the verb *élire:* "to choose"—which in turn derives from the Latin *eligere:* "elect." Literally, then, in the Western-style democracies largely coextensive with global capitalism,[1] the word "elite" applies to any minority selected to govern a majority. In this literal sense, the members of a national government constitute an elite, as does the officer class of the military or the executive class of a corporation. Literally, "elitism," when used pejoratively, names any practice that serves to support the narrowly patrician interests of a select ruling class at the expense of the majority of those they purport to "represent." Much of the production of the so-called "popular" or "mass" media must therefore be considered "elitist," to the extent that it perpetuates and disseminates hegemonic corporate values and beliefs. The charge of "elitism," therefore, is applicable to much of the "popular culture" that cultural populists find most "accessible."

When populists redefine the word "elitism" by *opposing* it to the term "accessible," the word slips its etymological moorings and drifts across the political spectrum. For example, an article in the literally "elitist" newspaper *Le Figaro* proclaims: "It is necessary to overturn the spirit of our teaching which suffers from the illness of elitism."[2] This "illness" (for which Fascist, Stalinist, and Maoist populisms offered their various cures) afflicts *language*, both in the literal and in the more broadly semiotic sense. Much like the cornea, language is considered to be naturally transparent when healthy; if it is not transparent then it must be diseased. Here, a clear-eyed democratic appeal on behalf of intelligibility and common sense implicitly pathologizes, stigmatizes, and discredits those who do not speak in a popular ideolect. It is significant that the *Le Figaro* article indicted *teaching*. Many factors inhibit the development of critical theory within the "art world." For example: the particularly close dependency of art institutions on the patronage of wealthy individuals and major corporations; the inequitable and unmediated feudal system of power relations between "artists," "critics," "dealers," and "curators"; the timeless appeal to narcissism of ideologies and spontaneous and autonomous expression; the arbitrarily volatile and capricious nature of the mediatic "sound bite" culture to which the "art world" is now being

1. See Bertrand Badie, *L'Etat Importé* (Paris: Fayard, 1992).
2. *Le Figaro*, October 13, 1967, cited in the *Le Petit Robert* (Paris: SNL, 1978), p. 619.

assimilated, and so on.[3] However, although critical theory is marginal to the art world, it remains central to a certain idea of the university. Within the academy, also, there has been a resurgence of cultural populism—closely aligned with "identity politics," and associated mainly with the growth of "cultural studies." Here, we do well to note a distinction respected in the study of popular culture inaugurated by the Birmingham Center. As Stuart Hall recalled, "the Center did not say: 'All you have to do is be a good activist and we will give you a degree for it.'"[4] This is not to promote political quietism among academics. On the contrary, it is to urge a close attention to the specificity of differing forms of political praxis, to the disparate registers in which they operate, and to the mutable and indeterminate relations between them. (In terms of art production this calls for, in Paul Gilroy's words, "negotiating the relationship between vernacular and nonvernacular forms."[5] In this perspective, it is strictly irrelevant to criticize "essentialist" identity politics because it rests on theoretically untenable assumptions about the subject. Certainly, the "essential" identity in question (black, female, gay, or whatever) can only ever be a fiction, *but it is a fiction with real political effects.* The only pertinent *political* question in relation to an "identity" is not "Is it really coherent?" but "What does it actually achieve?" Politics is as much an art of the Imaginary as of the real, and appeals to an "essential" identity have been manifestly successful in creating and mobilizing politically effective constituencies—for good or for ill. It is no less beside the point to reject semiotic and psychoanalytic theories because what they have to say about mediation and identity may be ideologically inconvenient, and cannot be reduced to a slogan. Certainly, populists throughout modern history, and across the political spectrum, have found such theories offensive, but the only substantial offense of such elitism today is against the paternalistic common sense of the corporate-political establishment that constitutes the *literal* elite—and the only one worth contesting.

3. The fashion for theory in the art world of the 1980s was largely decorative. Commenting on the phenomenon in the mid-1980s, I noted: "The [theoretical] texts are looted of their *terminology*, which is then used to vacuously ornament the pages of conservative writings.... Pages are now peppered with such terms as 'signifier,' 'desire,' 'drive,' 'deconstruction,' and so on—a roll call of the arrested, terminological prisoners given meaningless labour in intellectual deserts." (*The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* [Macmillan, 1986], p. 163).

4. Stuart Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities," *October* 53 (Summer 1990), pp. 17–18.

5. Paul Gilroy, "Cruciality and the Frog's Perspective: An Agenda of Difficulties for the Black Arts Movement in Britain," *Art & Text* 32 (Autumn 1989), p. 108.

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JULI CARSON

The bar between oppositions of "psychoanalytic and semiotic/language-based theories" and "grass roots feminist politics" has recently served to naturalize that bar between the textual and visual and, concomitantly, "high" and "low" art. Question 2 thus accurately, while problematically, reflects the jousting between theoreticians and artists alike over the return of identity politics—versus the deconstruction thereof—within a post-AIDS episteme. But what if one were to redirect the question to address the *manner* in which such configurations position psychoanalytical theory in the realm of the "elite," or more specifically, maintain that such a theory is indeed "inaccessible" and more "deconstructive"? What happens, in other words, when psychoanalytical theory finds itself methodologically co-opted or *marketed* in the service of essentialist "accessible" identity politics? Certainly the fact that *Flash Art*'s March 1994 issue, which freely drops the (now "accessible") Lacanian mirror stage as a trope to explain the "decentered subject" in at least three articles on painting and installation art, is testimony to the uncritical employment of marketable psychoanalytical methodologies.

Nonetheless, we who position ourselves on the other side of the "essentialist" bar in the practice of Lacanian psychoanalytical criticism often "essentialize" the "inessential." Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, in their article "Semiotics and Art History," warn against such unexamined uses of "psycho-criticism," arguing that a classic state of countertransference between the critic (assumed to be the analyst) and the art work (posited as the analysand) is enacted. They state:

> Psychoanalysis is a "talking cure" in which the patient does the talking, the interpreting; in psycho-criticism the work cannot talk, so who is the patient? If psychoanalysis tends to take on the status of a master code that can be "applied" to art, one can also argue that the critic is the patient who does the talking (s/he is the only one who talks), while the work of art is the analyst who orients the analytic work (the analyst is typically silent, but strongly structuring of analytic work).[1]

I cite the above passage not as a warning against the inevitable "failure" of psycho-criticism, whereby the critic needs to work him/herself out of the "trap" of transference/countertransference in relation to the art work, but rather to offer a model in which the "drag" of psychoanalytical theory can be enacted to deconstruct the hierarchy between the binarisms of text/image, critic/artist, and theory/practice. The real failure of many grass roots feminist and semiotic/language-based theoreticians alike is that they position themselves firmly

1. Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin* (June 1991), p. 196.

on either side of the bar between accessibility/inaccessibility and thus essentialism/inessentialism, denying the space of slippage that exists between these signifiers. For it is *precisely* within this site of slippage (in which the loss of mastery is produced by the shifting positions of analyst and analysand) that the most interesting and aggressive feminist theoretical art practices have taken place. The simultaneous importation and deconstruction of Freudian psychoanalysis within the realms of feminist and queer theory that actively engage in this game of transference has demonstrated this, beginning with the Lacanian film theoreticians of the 1970s and more recently continued by the "Freud on Freud" strategies employed within the field of queer literary criticism. While the phallocentric blind spots of Lacanian discourse that informed this approach continue to be deconstructed, it is poststructuralist psychoanalytical theory that has enabled us to "ride" and pervert the binaristic bar rather than to stabilize identity and practice around it. Unlike the identity politics of grass roots feminists or the essentialized psycho-tropes of many semiotic/language-based theoreticians, the above examples don't rest within the stabilized site of countertransference that Bal and Bryson warn against; rather, it is the *perpetual* state of shifting transference within signification that is encouraged in the hopes of destabilizing identity itself.

How, then, can one maintain this bar of accessible/inaccessible, high/low, textual/visual within a discourse of Lacanian/feminist psychoanalysis? And is it not the *revenge* of psychoanalysis always to flip us to the opposite side of the bar should we engage in this act of "essential inessentialism"? However, if we *were* to enact the performative of perpetual transference/countertransference between critic and artist, text and image, high and low art, the hierarchic bar then would begin to be blurred. Should *this* not be the site of investigation both of, and for, psychoanalytical feminist practices?

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[redacted]

SARAH CHARLESWORTH

To reiterate a framework of oppositions between "elitist" theory and "grass roots" politics, theory and practice, mind and body, analytical and autobiographical, contingent and essentialist self-conceptions of feminist politics is to reinvest in an exclusionary model of a collective historical struggle. To oppose the conceptions of practice that have evolved in various decades, "the 1970s," "the 1980s," is to ignore the specific historical situatedness of these endeavors. There can be no "return." We have learned through the feminist project of the last decade. The questions that confront us now are different. Whether we choose to frame alternate approaches appropriate to diverse speakers and contexts as dialectical oppositions within a larger common project or as shifting and extending arenas and modes of discourse, we cannot sacrifice theoretical rigor and precision for comprehensibility, i.e., "accessibility" *or* clarity of communication for elegance of articulation.

Art and critical writing becomes "elitist" at the point at which language is used as an instrument of control and exclusion rather than elucidation and emancipation. Neither of these criteria reflects directly on the quality or validity of the thought. There is a suggestion that "autobiographical" strategies and conceptions of identity are "insufficiently mediated." One wonders, of course, mediated by whom? Is it incumbent on those versant in critical theory to mediate the practice of "grass roots" feminist politics? Certainly not. To maintain a rigorous ongoing project of analysis that involves the acknowledgment of *actual* differences in perspective of generation, nationality, class, race, and sexual orientation and that seeks consistently to question the import of inherited languages and conceptions of practice is perhaps more valid.

One wonders why "popular culture" is consistently conceived of as located elsewhere, while "theory" marginalizes itself, or is marginalized by, its aloofness from the mainstream capitalist agenda. The critique of patriarchal language falls short at the point at which the manipulation and exchange of signs remains essentially rooted in economic considerations that remain stubbornly resistant to criticism in the abstract. It is at this juncture—as cyber-culture and the vast array of electronic technologies are rapidly reconfiguring notions of community and sociality, not to mention exchange and consumption—that we approach analysis within the interfaces of literary, artistic, and electronic culture with continuing awareness of their profound situatedness within a capitalist system of exchange. In this light, the material conditions that define and shape women's lives are not seen as separate from the cultural contexts in which we articulate and negotiate the conditions of meaning.

SARAH CHARLESWORTH is an artist who lives and works in New York City. She also teaches in the Graduate School of Photography at the School of Visual Arts in New York.

Your questions raise serious feminist issues, although, as I will suggest later, I think it would be useful to inflect the questions in a somewhat different direction.

I have long supported art associated with feminist, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist ideas about subjectivity in visual representation—what you call "1980s theoretical work"—against charges of "elitism" leveled by a number of different groups. These groups include, of course, neoconservative cultural critics who routinely rise to the defense of "the people," champion "accessibility," and ridicule the complexities of new cultural theories as part of their campaign to censor critical art and safeguard a masculinist, purportedly universal, high culture.

But traditional left commentators, those attached to political projects grounded in the idea of a social totality, also frequently imply that feminist work on representation is elitist. Hostile to a cultural politics based on partial, rather than totalizing critiques and aims, and rejecting the formulation of such new objects of political analysis as vision and subjectivity, these critics denigrate feminist theories that interrogate traditional foundations of politics. Such theories, it is asserted, abandon social "reality"; they are "particularist," hence elitist, in relation to the preconstituted unity of "real" political struggle. Sometimes, even left critics who have challenged this orthodoxy repeat it inadvertently when evaluating contemporary art. They may, for instance, reduce the meaning of visual images to the circumstances of their production and then reproach artists who "deconstruct" images of women—Cindy Sherman is often cited as an example—with producing work that "accommodates" itself to art institutions and so withdraws from the exigencies of "practical" political struggle. Such accounts disregard the strong challenge that feminist work on the politics of vision has raised to both mainstream and critical aesthetic frameworks that render images *per se* politically neutral by assuming a polarity between the formal operations of images, on the one hand, and a politics exerted from the outside, on the other.

In addition, concerns about elitism or inaccessibility have been expressed from certain feminist positions: those assuming that feminist politics requires an ontologically grounded feminist subject; those seeking to recover a life of the body outside the contingencies of cultural construction; those who feel that struggles against empirically identifiable forms of violence and oppression are endangered by explorations of the body as phantasmatic and of gender as an unstable cultural fiction.

Generally, I have supported art involved with psychoanalytic and/or poststructuralist critiques of representation when confronted by critics who fear that to interrogate the foundations and stability of such categories as "woman," "women," "the body," or "experience" is to repudiate reality. I do so not because I think there is no world external to thought but because the presumption of

substantive foundations for the meaning and specificity of these categories disavows the discursive relations—the exclusions, repressions, subordinations, erasures—that constitute and naturalize such foundations. Far from an intrinsically elitist endeavor, then, 1980s feminist critiques that take account of the relations that structure visual representations and explore, among other investigations, the fantasies producing apparently coherent images, have helped extend democratic discourse. For, as many critics have recently argued, it is the disappearance of references to absolute, extradiscursive grounds of meaning—and, with this disappearance, the interruption of the certainties promulgated by "outside" voices of authority, including those claiming authority to account for the political condition of the world—that legitimates debate about social questions, about the meaning of the social itself, and thus forms the starting point, if not the sufficient condition, of a democratic political life.

Still, I hesitate to come to the defense of "1980s theoretical work" in precisely the terms set out by your questions. As with all questions, it is difficult to escape what Glenn Gould, in a contentious self-interview, once called "the interlocutor as controller of conversations." Question 1 opens by referring to "various different directions" in which feminist practices are moving but then presents only two, antagonistic, directions (though, to be sure, you internally differentiate the 1980s theoretical work). How, then, to reply without reducing the complexity of "feminist art" by either polarizing the field of feminist practices or trying to counter such a polarization with the fantasy of a unitary feminist project? While the questions themselves do not idealize the 1980s work, their either/or construction leads a respondent who, like myself, cares a great deal about 1980s critiques of visual representation, to endorse this work as an "exemplary" feminist practice. But the notion of exemplariness is so historically tied in art discourse to beliefs in the existence of superior political-aesthetic visions and so tinged by vanguardism that it indeed raises the specter of elitism.

Exactly which "recent artistic, critical, and curatorial practices" does the 1980s work need defense from? Perhaps it would be constructive to suppose that the "less mediated . . . use of the female body" in recent art does not necessarily indicate a simple return to some feminist art of the 1960s and '70s but, in certain cases, represents a recurrence of such iconography in light of—and in response to problems presented by—1980s models of feminist practice. From this perspective, we might, as I said earlier, open questions with a somewhat different emphasis. For example: Instead of stressing the need to defend 1980s practices against the charge that psychoanalytic and semiotic theories cannot easily "cross distinctions of race, class, and sexual orientation," why not ask (and perhaps this is what your final question intends), what is the value and what are the limits of 1980s critiques for the theorization of differences of race, class, and sexual orientation?

ROSALYN DEUTSCHE is an art historian and critic who lives in New York. Her book on art and spatial politics is forthcoming from MIT Press.

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JOHANNA DRUCKER

New/Nude Difference

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. In the heterogenous/polymorphous realm of contemporary art some women are committed to taking the history of women's art and feminism into account and others seem as determined to ignore that history as the rest of the art world.

What was that history, anyway? The one in which feminism was both advocate and impetus for production of women's work? In the earliest contemporary phase, the mid- to late 1960s, women acknowledged and asserted their identity in biological terms out of necessity—in order to break down the basic patriarchal line that women because they were women couldn't be artists. We also know that such a strategy is characteristic of the first stages of activism: naming, claiming, repossessing identity within the dominated, subordinate group. Then theory (read, French, critical, psychoanalytic, and feminist theory) posed a critique of gender. No longer a given, it was to be understood as a symbolic construction. No matter what its base in the biological distinction of bodies, gender was significant within the realm of cultural practices. This added tools to the arsenal of activism—asserting feminine identity and making use of feminist theory allowed—demanded, even—rigorous rethinking of assumptions, cultural categories, internalized constraints. It seemed possible to let go of every cliché one had ever been forced to swallow about what it meant to be a woman—since, as a construction, "woman" was open for investigation. But let's not forget the way theory displaced women in the name of that symbolic construction of gender. Theory-based feminism suppressed physicality, denied the body except as a metaphor. Gender based in symbolic constructions rendered actual identity (gendered or otherwise) moot. 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." Feminism as a power base for women had been eroded—and a lot of so-called feminists were complicit in that process.

The reassertion of identity of women in terms of gender, biological gender, seems like a necessary countermove. OK, sure a lot of the body-based art is dopey and clichéd in its assertions, but some of it is smart, and attempts to synthesize a theoretical interrogation of the cultural construction/constraints and the biological fact that is the determinant—whether we like it or not—of those cultural constructions. This is *not* necessarily essentialism. Why? Because essentialism

presupposes a notion of the "natural" identity of women as determinative. No matter how much theory asserted that one could deny gender through symbolic practices, the history of even the last thirty years (since the advent of the organized Women's Art Movement) proves otherwise. The culture positions us according to our gender. 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, or that being a bad girl gives you a place in the power structure, or that claiming the vernacular gives you an unmediated control over the narrative of your own life. These are all witless approaches to a complex problem. They foster certain current myths that dominate the trendy art scene, keeping feminist agendas neatly repressed. Why isn't there a sexy category of the smart woman? Why are adult women still struggling to compete with adolescent females for social and art-world visibility? Why do the exceptions applied to male artists (oh, he's a painter, but he's a *theoretical* painter) not get applied to women? Why? Because women still don't have the power base—individually and collectively—to make major changes in the structure of the art world or media world. Denial won't change that.

Obviously, smart new work has to acknowledge both the way the biological is interpreted symbolically as well as the cultural construction of consequences of that biology. Either one alone is inadequate. Pretending you don't have a biology, or that it isn't used to position you, is just plain stupid.

New/nude difference: accept the biology, change the consequences, recognize the symbolic, but don't repress its imaginary relation to the real.

JOHANNA DRUCKER's recent publications include *Theorizing Modernism: Visual Art and the Critical Tradition* (Columbia University Press, 1994), *The Visible Word* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), and *Narratology* (Druckwerk, 1994). She is Associate Professor of Contemporary Art and Theory at Yale University.

RAINER GANAHL

The two questions are related and should not be confined to feminist concerns, feminist theories, and feminist art alone. The phenomenon of a projected immediate "real" that lays claim to supposedly nonmediated "accessibility" can be found at this time in many areas.

Phenomenology, the philosophical analogue of unmediated, undialectical thinking—openly hostile to any historically construed abstraction and complexity—is a discourse as much on the rise as political formations that use simplistic language to "reclaim" the "authentically national" at the expense of rejected others. This is occurring in the U.S. in terms of a renewed academic interest in phenomenology, as well as in attitudes toward immigration, and in much of Europe where national boundaries and civil rights are being circumscribed by such reduced arguments.

Historically speaking, it should be remembered that it was phenomenology that capitulated to fascism in the Europe of the 1930s. A history of German academic philosophy and institutional directives of the time, and the well known particular case of Heidegger, show this to be the case.

It might also be appropriate to remember the Adorno of *Negative Dialektik* (1966), in which he analyzed the particular relationship of phenomenology to essentialism, to ahistorical thinking, to the fetishistic idealizations of "real ideas" (Heidegger), as well as to fascism. Interestingly enough, this important critique has not played a crucial role in the nonacademic reception of Adorno in the U.S.

And wasn't phenomenological thinking revitalized in France at the time of the Algerian independence movement and the French-Algerian war? Influenced by French phenomenology, and opposed to Algerian independence, Camus, as pointed out by Edward Said, inscribed Algerian Arabs in the proper existentialist act: the out-of-context, senseless shootings of anonymous Arabs. This can be read as one of the heroic messages of a literary movement that stands as a paradigm for a phenomenological methodology of the 1960s and early '70s that situates narcissistic, hypostatic mediations in place of a more conscientious analysis or understanding of different cultures.

The fact that my answer addresses the politics of phenomenology should not be misunderstood as a dismissal of feminist concerns. Just the opposite: only when feminist practices are seen within the context of today's larger cultural and intellectual climate can we understand some of the issues raised in the question.

RAINER GANAHL is an artist who was born in Austria and has lived and worked in New York since 1990. He has exhibited internationally and is currently working on a series of projects that deal with education and nationality.

ISABELLE GRAW

I was surprised that you referred to "recent feminist art and critical practices" in such general terms, as if these practices were obvious, universal, and clearly defined. Do we all agree upon what makes art feminist and how "recent tendencies" can be described? In Germany, I don't see a return to what you call the "real" of the feminine. In fact, very few women artists here claim to be feminists at all. Instead, most of the women who work in the public sphere tend to declare emphatically at some point in their careers that they are not feminists.

If one could conceive of something like an international feminist community, it would be characterized by its familiarity with certain notions and analyses—shared readings and an easy dialogue. You would therefore be correct to assume that everybody you addressed would know what you were talking about. But would this mean that your interpretation of certain events in the New York art world would have the status of an internationally relevant debate?

I also asked myself why you criticize unnamed contemporary artists for having actively rejected or bypassed the theoretical work of the 1980s. Without even questioning the accuracy of this analysis, I would like to state that it is sometimes very necessary to reject or bypass a commonly agreed upon critical formula. I don't think you can ask all artists to engage actively with the most advanced theoretical negation of what they are doing.

In my opinion it would be more productive to criticize artists like Kiki Smith or Janine Antoni *not* for having overlooked gender studies but rather for the fact that their work assumes a social climate of polarized gender relations, which ignores contemporary, more subtle forms of sexism. When these artists represent the female body as victimized, subjected to standards of beauty or reproductive functions, the image emerges of a totally repressive society where discrimination against women is naturalized. This is not to say that discrimination or uneven power relations have ceased to exist, but rather that they have become more complicated.

While you see "recent feminist practices that seem to have bypassed if not actively rejected 1980s theoretical work," I observe that "gender studies" or feminist readings of psychoanalysis are not actively rejected but assimilated in curatorial projects, art criticism, and art works. Two recent exhibitions demonstrate my point: "Suture" (in Salzburg) and "Oh Boy It's a Girl" (in Munich).[1]

For "Suture," Lacan's model of the mirror stage was taken literally and not as an abstract model. Every time a mirror appeared in an art work it was read as the demonstration of a split identity or a fragmented body. "Oh Boy It's a Girl" used a popularized version of "gender studies" as its starting point—gender as a social

1. I have not seen either exhibition. My criticism is based on their press releases and catalogues. I am therefore focusing more on the curatorial claims than on the art works.

construction. American gender studies has recently been imported by German feminists, publishers, and intellectuals under this very name,[2] and this importation has rarely taken into account the fact that Judith Butler herself argues against any voluntaristic understanding of "constructivism," insisting that one can't change gender identity as easily as one changes clothes and that an examination of social constraints is necessary.[3] Nevertheless, it remains tempting to treat art works as proof of the artificiality of gender identity (and I have done this myself). The problem with this type of interpretation, however, is that it totally neglects other ways of thinking about the art work and overlooks the social conditions that shape or contradict any theoretical description.

Art works are expected to fulfill theoretical claims even retrospectively. But it would not make sense to reproach the sixties artists from today's point of view that they were essentialist. Their work must be looked at *historically*, done at a time when it was necessary to make claims for "female creativity" and "equal rights." Only after these claims had entered a common vocabulary or changed the legal status of women could their underlying assumptions be problematized.

But the same is true for a German state program that offers support for women artists "over forty." While one has to welcome such initiatives, their underlying assumptions turn out to be very revealing. A grant for women artists over forty presupposes and encourages traditional female histories in which being a mother comes first. Similarly, public arrangements for "flexible work" cannot only be seen as a triumph of feminism, because this form of noncontractual labor corresponds well with the needs of a decentralized society.

When the acknowledgment of women's difference leads to a fixed otherness for women, one can speak in terms of a neosexism analogous to neoracism. As far as the German art world, or certain factions of it, are concerned, still another picture emerges: traditional sexisms that propagate a natural inferiority of women continue to be expressed by some of its members. It would have seemed logical to me for some bad girl/women artists to have appeared in Germany, and one could have rightly criticized them for their direct use of the body and for all the notions (women, men, sexism) they take as a natural given. But I think that there are more reasons for a traditional militant stance for women artists in this country than for someone like Sue Williams. In fact, the German art world can be described as a place where the absence of women artists is rarely mentioned and never reflected upon; quota systems are generally seen as evil, and an analysis of the contemporary forms of sexism doesn't belong to the agenda of those members of the art world that I know.

2. This has to do with the heavy connotations of the German word *Geschlecht*, which also means genre, stock, race, and family in German. For this reason, Suhrkamp publishing house calls its series "Gender Studies" and not "Studien zum Geschlecht."
3. In her book *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

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RENÉE GREEN

Last April I organized a symposium in New York entitled "Negotiations in the 'Contact Zone'" during which many of the questions you've asked regarding 1980s theoretical work and feminist practices, as well as postcolonial hermeneutics, were discussed in terms of how they can be regarded today. The participants included international and local cultural producers and cultural critics who were asked to address these issues in terms of their own work. A discussion followed in which issues referring to autobiography, among other things, were discussed. A publication of that discussion and the papers delivered is forthcoming. What follows in part results from my thinking about that discussion and is an excerpt from my forthcoming book, *After the Ten Thousand Things.*

"Experience" and the Trickiness of Knowledge Acquisition, or Seers, Writers, Readers, Walkers, and Related Fictions

She's a shade of brown, so am I, can we talk? Or is it presumptuous of me to rely on a superficial signifier as an indication of possible rapport? Yes, of course it is, I decide, but I'm still curious.

When the evidence offered is the evidence of "experience," the claim for referentiality is further buttressed—what could be truer, after all, than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through? It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation—as a foundation upon which analysis is based—that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference. By remaining within the epistemological frame of orthodox history, these studies lose the possibility of examining those assumptions and practices that excluded considerations of difference in the first place. They take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference.

—Joan W. Scott, "Experience,"
Feminists Theorize the Political

"Experience," like "consciousness," is an intentional construction, an artifact of the first importance. Experience may also be re-constructed, re-membered, re-articulated. One powerful means to do so is the reading and re-reading of fiction in such a way as to create the effect of having access to another's life and consciousness, whether that other is an individual or a collective person with the lifetime called history.

—Donna Haraway, "Reading Buchi Emecheta," *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*

More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.

and

For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power.

—Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *Illuminations*

RENÉE GREEN is a visual artist.

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LIZ KOTZ

In a recent essay on feminist art,[1] I argued that one of the most interesting undercurrents in the art world of late has been a reexploration by women artists of art of the 1960s and '70s, especially work done in performance, video, experimental film, body art, and other nonobject forms. It's strange to see those explorations, often focused on the female body, framed here as a return to "essentialism." After all, we know from Bruce Nauman that not all representations of the body verge on the pictorial, and that language itself often has a kind of body consciousness.

If we look at photographs by Zoe Leonard or Jack Pierson, there is an apparent return to a "naive" relation to the image, and a return to pathos, sentiment, and even nostalgia. Leonard and Pierson reintroduce a range of unacceptable subjects, and do so as if we've never seen these images before. Drawing from the undersides of photo history—Weegee, Diane Arbus, Robert Frank, Larry Clark—both Leonard and Pierson virtually reinvent this tradition before our eyes. Yet must we see this move as a *repression* of postmodernism? Perhaps it is a *disavowal*, and a necessary one at this point in time: a return to a sentimental and auratic relation to the image, not unlike that of Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. However problematic in its embrace of extremely mannered forms of "authenticity," that impulse should not be totally denigrated. Like a perpetual return of the repressed, the projective content of the image will always exceed existing codes.

Perhaps what is going on right now is not so much a return to unmediated subjectivity as a return to that *longing:* for genuine sentiment, true originality, a coherent self albeit an "alienated" one. This is not an insincere desire; it's something that needs to be examined. If we look at the use of photography in Cady Noland's or Lutz Bacher's work, for example, both artists turn the appropriated image toward strangely personal fascinations and a more abject positioning. Even marred by photocopy dirt and barely legible, the residue of the human face continues to be invested with messy affect. This register of the "subjective" doesn't suppress the copy, it reterritorializes it—like that image of Patty Hearst that Noland returns to, again and again. And when artists like Nicole Eisenman and Karen Kilimnik explore obsession and marginal subjectivity, they do so having completely integrated a media-saturated notion of the copy.

I don't think it's useful, at this point in time, to reassert highly normative typographies of feminist art, as was done at the end of the 1970s.[2] To continue to

1. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *Lusitania* 6 (1994).

2. At that time, semiotic and psychoanalytic theorists routinely denigrated body art or performance in favor of media-based work offering explicit critiques of ideology and representation. For example, Judith Barry and Sandra Flitterman-Lewis's "Textual Strategies: the Politics of Art-Making," *Screen* (Summer 1980) relegated Gine Pane to the bottom of their four-tiered typology of feminist art; yet

polarize "iconographic"/"performative" and "semiotic" approaches seems equally misguided; such a rubric is inadequate to theorize much canonical feminist postmodernist art, much less that of the current moment. Part of the problem with 1980s "picture theory" and its emphasis on representational critique was a paradoxical tendency to repress the body and the iconographic—for instance, in all those appropriationist readings of Sherrie Levine's work which never addressed the erotics of the surrogate image, of what's inside the frame. Likewise, Cindy Sherman offers an interface between the performative and the mediation of the photograph; the continuing fascination her work elicits derives from the tension between these two modes.

Rather than inscribing current artistic production within increasingly academicized versions of feminism, we need to continually problematize received categories of "feminist art," since these so often operate by exclusion. Much of the most interesting work by women artists in the past ten years or so never fit dominant 1980s paradigms of feminist postmodernism or clearly articulated political oppositionality. That's why a lot of this work is only detonating into the present now. While some projects may look like work from the 1960s or '70s, it seems crucial to acknowledge moments of rupture, and to avoid creating false genealogies for work in the present. When a feminist artist today chooses to "risk essentialism" in her return to the female body, she may do so in full awareness of the perversity of the gesture. For instance, Lutz Bacher's video sculpture *Huge Uterus* (1989) features a grueling six-hour videotape of an operation the artist endured. While exploring the intense penetration and passivity of the female insides, this is not a return to a "real" of the feminine or to some naive autobiographical approach. As Simon Leung once quipped, Bacher "performs an autopsy on the strategies of feminist art-making."

There may well be a turning away from certain feminist readings of psychoanalysis, but this is hardly a rejection of it *in toto*. Rather than focusing on rather codified narratives of sexual difference, many current projects explore concepts of the death drives, aggression, the compulsion to repeat. These murkier areas of psychoanalysis are not unlinked to questions of gender and sexuality, or to "real world" politics. Around lesbian and gay practices in particular, there's been a real convergence of art, activism, and theoretical work, with nothing like a consensus of opinion. There's no reason that psychoanalytic and semiotic-based projects should be distant from popular culture or contemporary politics—both Bacher and Noland, after all, seem to bridge that divide quite easily.

Pane's work is intimately susceptible to more nuanced psychoanalytic accounts, as performance historian Kathy O'Dell's "The Performance Artist as Masochistic Woman" (*Arts*, June 1988) suggests.

LIZ KOTZ is a New York–based writer and critic, and a doctoral candidate in Comparative Literature at Columbia. She teaches art history and theory at Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers, and is editing, with the poet and performer Eileen Myles, an anthology of lesbian writing titled *The New Fuck You: Lesbian Adventures in Reading*, due out in the spring from Semiotext(e).

[redacted]

SOWON KWON

Of course feminist art inflected by "1980s theoretical work" was some of the most important work being done then, as now. It was salutary and enabling in its explorations of the complexities in the formation of subjectivity, sexual difference, and the politics of representation, and its critique of biological essentialism. I would have thought that by now SoHo feminists could no longer feel comfortably unified in the name of Mother Earth, Tibetan goddesses, or, for that matter, Anita Hill. Or to extol the virtues of menstrual blood as a pigment and vice versa—you definitely wouldn't do that without a serious wink. But I am constantly surprised. Still, I think it would be a mistake to say that the work of the 1980s was being totally eclipsed (I couldn't help but sense an anxiety in your questions . . .).

Having said that, though, I think I am not alone in also feeling resistant to what I can only now name as a kind of "asceticism" (with all its associations to rigidity and dogmatism) that permeates much of this and other critical work in the 1980s. I think the postmodern "style"—the slickness and opacity of surface, a prescriptiveness in message, the privileging of text and photo-based media, etc.—was read (perhaps too quickly) as another formalism. Maybe there is a clue, too, in the way I feel pressured to structure my answer, i.e., to "take a side." It is at such junctures that both sides of any opposition (1960s and '70s feminism versus '80s feminism, in this case) loom heavy as orthodoxies, and I need to find another way.

But then again, maybe it's not so complicated. When I first read these questions, I thought of Audrey Flack's new public art commission in Queens. The maquettes are apparently already complete for a monumental, full-body bronze sculpture of the Portuguese Queen Catherine of Bragança (for whom Queens was named) to be erected in Hunter's Point. Catherine was the wife of Charles II (her dowry included India!), and Queens County was established in 1683 as a resolution of the territorial dispute between England and Holland (never mind the Rockaway Indians). Perhaps it would be premature to characterize the queen-to-be as a monstrosity on the landscape just yet, but I definitely cannot join in on this celebration of "powerful womanhood." To me, this is an "insufficiently mediated" gesture that reminds me again and again that some feminisms are much more readily embraced (and more marketable) than others. Maybe the "so-called 'real' of the feminine" is not "returning"—it never *really* went away. For those who think this is bad news, for those heeding "the legacies of 1980s feminism," it's probably time to pump up the volume way loud.

SOWON KWON is an artist based in New York.

EWA LAJER-BURCHARTH

Any return to unmediated, essentialist, or biologically determined approaches—be it in quest of the putative "real" of the feminine or in the name of "accessibility"—seems to me regressive and lamentable. Yet I think that we need some criteria for distinguishing between regressive impulses and those that aim at a critical expansion of the earlier feminist agenda. Rather than dismissing recently renewed aesthetic interest in the body as a sign of retreat into biologism, we may recognize its emancipatory potential.

For example, while the performative use of the artist's own body in the recent work of Janine Antoni may be recognized as a departure from the constructivist, media-targeting stance developed in the feminist practices of the last decade, it does not necessarily constitute an essentialist strategy. Rather, it may be seen as an effort to relocate the problematic of sexual difference *beyond* the dichotomy of construction versus essence that shaped the earlier debates on feminine identity. Neither pure essence nor pure cultural construct, the artist's body emerges as an individualized and materially specific instrument of signification. With it, Antoni and other artists pursue questions currently also raised by such feminist thinkers as Judith Butler: How does my body *matter*, that is, how exactly does it mean, and how does its materiality allow signification? These issues do not foreclose but expand the avenues opened up by the 1980s psychoanalytically informed inquiries into femininity.

Nor is this individualized and materially specific use of the body *per se* dehistoricized and apolitical. It seems, on the contrary, to constitute a specific response to the way in which the politics of identity evolved in the 1990s. Personalized morphologies are territory for investigating new meanings that corporeality and desire acquired in the era of AIDS.[1] Women artists also revisit the body in search of new possibilities for theorizing feminine desire and authorship. While Antoni's use of the body critically reengages the 1970s notion of *écriture féminine*,[2] other women artists attempt to dephallicize signification by exploring different kinds of relations to the maternal body and the corporeal specificity of their own. Without abandoning psychoanalytic theory, these artists seek to reterri-

1. For example, Robert Gober, Simon Leung.

2. Critically, that is, attempting to avoid its potentially essentializing implications. Thus, if Antoni chooses to mop the floor of a gallery with her hair dipped in Loving Care, she might be seen as responding to Hélène Cixous's notorious injunction "Write yourself! Your body must be heard." Yet, she is not "writing" with some mythic "white ink of the mother" but with a specific substance by which consumer culture seeks to define femininity: the hair dye the artist's mother uses. While deploying her own body in such authorial mode, she is thus also operating with its historically and culturally specific inscription as feminine.

torialize and reimagine that loss at the origins of all subjects, male and female, that Lacan articulated in exclusively phallic terms.[3]

Lastly, should we identify the current autobiographical impulse with an unmediated or unpolitical stance? Traversing many different kinds of visual reflection and writing, this impulse responds to a broader need to individualize and pluralize the meanings of sexual and racial difference, thus increasing our sense of its heterogeneity and its historical contingency. It participates in making us more aware of the complex and ambiguous ways in which stereotype operates in society.[4] Through autobiographical accounts, we get a better sense of how the subject *negotiates* rather than acquires his/her identity.

Thus, far from being forgotten or disavowed, the legacy of the 1980s is being critically revised in order to confront new kinds of needs, demands, and desires. It is perhaps more productive to develop the terms for better understanding the nature of this revision than to mourn the loss of the imaginary plenitude of the past decade.

3. See Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, who seeks to displace the primacy of the phallus as the originary signifier through a notion of the matrix that she has developed both in her theoretical work and in her aesthetic practice. Or Nancy Davenport, who deploys fetishism as an intrafeminine libidinal and signifying strategy in an attempt to chart a new lesbian imaginary.

4. Lorna Simpson's work, for example, explores the ambiguous effects of racial stereotypes. While retaining the notion of race as a signifying or discursive category—the legacy of the late 1970s and the 1980s—Simpson's practice, like the writing of Patricia J. Williams, examines its workings on the level of an individual body in specific, often banal, everyday situations.

EWA LAJER-BURCHARTH teaches modern and contemporary art and critical theory at Harvard University. Her book on J. L. David and French visual culture after the Terror is forthcoming from Yale University Press. She is currently working on a project concerning three contemporary women artists.

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ERNEST LARSEN

It would seem that all artistic practice in this country betrays serious and perpetual anxieties about the sources and possibilities of its legitimacy or the process of legitimation. Given how absurd and precarious this process remains, the terms "accessibility" and "elitism" appear to reveal not so much an opposition as a circuit. Users (call them *j'accusers*) of these sedimented terms tend to hurl them at their presumed opposite numbers, but what these terms quite obviously have in common is a refusal to ask an obvious if implicit question: Accessible to whom? Elitist to whom? Both terms simultaneously address and repress the question of the nature and makeup of the audience(s) or public(s) susceptible to feminist artistic practice, and attempt to legislate how that audience should be constituted.

To some degree the very diversity of feminist art practice hides the continued resistance of institutional gatekeepers to any substantive shift in the patriarchal paradigm. At the same time, economic realities and understandable anxieties about legitimation have reduced para-institutional and anti-institutional initiatives—which by foregrounding the issue of *new* audiences sometimes overcame the false opposition between accessibility and elitism—to the status of nostalgia. For feminism, legitimation has proven to be less a stepping-stone than a stumbling block.

Perhaps the return to relatively unmediated representations of the body and to autobiography counts as a last-ditch effort to fix on what could be the only remaining source of authenticity for artists for whom theory is a brier patch. But to jettison history and theory is also to discard even the most rudimentary critique of commodification, a move that enables such artists to leap right over the brier patch and into the marketplace *sans* the weight of bad faith that used to make the search for authenticity such an exacting trial. The temptation of autobiography is to shrink the complex social and historical determinants of personal history into a singular and singularly unproblematized wrapper of identity. This impoverished site is vulnerable to the imputation that a politics whose only sure referent is the self is hardly a politics at all and is in only a diminished—though often marketable—sense a viable aesthetic. If representation implies reception, then work centered exclusively on the validity of selfhood is often too ungenerous to acknowledge the other. Thus the practical effective striking power of the partisans of immediacy may assure access not for new publics or audiences but for itself. In this situation theory-conscious feminist artistic practice could beat the bushes for new sources of legitimation—or could perhaps by deepening its gender-based critique of commodification reencounter less predictable publics in venues less predictably synonymous with the market.

ERNEST LARSEN is a novelist who also writes cultural criticism and makes videotapes collaboratively with Sherry Millner.

LEONE & MACDONALD

The question has always been, is, and will remain our best political weapon.

—Edmond Jabes, in *From the Desert to the Book*

If one believes that the feminist movement is a response to the legal oppression of women, then it would follow that a primary goal of feminism is equality for women under the law. The law, as we know it, is a reflection of and agency for the maintenance of a power hierarchy that is (arguably) patriarchal in both substance and assumptions. Within this frame, it would follow that the goal of any feminist practice, critical or artistic, would involve either an actual or conceptual restructuring not just of the substance of the law (passing the ERA, for instance) but of its foundations,[1] which are rooted in categories of opposition. The renewal of a dialogue about oppositions such as "accessible versus elitist" within so-called feminist art and critical-theoretical practices marks, for us, a disappointing return to a reductive way of thinking.

When we came into deconstruction theory, for example, we felt liberated by its rejection of simple binarisms. Far from distancing us from popular culture and politics, this theory freed us to pursue a more accessible crossover practice in which we actively resist lining up on one side or the other of the divide. *Instead, we play the crack.* In framing its question in binary terms—accessible versus elitist, low art versus high art, the real versus the semiotic—*October* risks collusion with the very system of oppression that it is attempting to interrogate. We ask *October:* Can we move forward *within* these terms of opposition, or do the terms themselves limit any real opportunity for reworking foundations?

In surveying contemporary "feminist" practices, we see neither a nostalgic return to the 1960s and '70s nor a disavowal of '80s theoretical work because the groundbreaking work of the previous three decades has become part of the collective unconscious. Contemporary practices are emerging from, reacting to, and unconsciously subsuming the strategies of the past. So while some works clearly refer back to specific historical movements such as body art, they do so in the context of the present moment, which enables them to mean something different. It follows, then, that in the context of the present moment, we need to unmoor

1. Here we adopt Judith Butler's designation of the foundation as that which functions "as the unquestioned and unquestionable in any theory." For Butler, foundations claim some implied universal basis yet are themselves "constituted through exclusions which . . . expose the foundational premise as . . . conditional and contestable." See Butler, "Contingent Foundations," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 7.

our investigation of contemporary feminist practices from the constraints of oppositional tactics. If the question is, indeed, our best political weapon, we need to establish new lines of inquiry. How, for instance, does work that no longer appears to have a self-conscious strategy strategize itself? What exactly constitutes a "feminist" practice in the 1990s? Is *October*'s question fundamentally about class? What is it that we need to know in order to know something new? And will the knowing be assured by the active unknowing of the questions we have asked ourselves before?

HILLARY LEONE AND JENNIFER MACDONALD are multimedia installation artists collaborating under the name of Leone & Macdonald. They have exhibited in gallery and museum venues in the United States, South America, and Asia and are represented by the Fawbush Gallery in New York.

KATE LINKER

First, I would like to take issue with the statement that "*recent* feminist art and critical practices appear to be moving in various different directions," inasmuch as, over the past few decades, different essentialist perspectives based in a preexistintg feminine "reality" and social constructionist views have always coexisted as fluctuating opposites, whose interaction structured the discursive site of *feminisms*.

This much said, I would like to address a particular political phenomenon, namely, the collapse or retreat into specific local struggles of a number of organized feminist groups, encompassing artists and critics among other individuals, in the period following the 1992 presidential election. This widely remarked fact is often attributed to inability to mobilize the ranks of women after the election of a pro-choice president and Democrat-dominated Congress; it is more specifically related to the sentiment harbored by many women that the female body could finally be secured, defended, guaranteed. However, the weakening of this feeling in the ensuing months is due to more than the organized efficacy of the religious right. For if what is described in legal terms as a woman's "right to bodily integrity and autonomy" has not admitted of such easy security, it is because that body is not legally "possessible," nor are its rights to self-control *de facto* enforcible. It would appear, instead, that the female body, in its most basic, essential, and inalienable sense, does not exist. Even given the elaborate reticulation of legislative argument, the indirection by which the right to abortion has been approached, conspicuously "skirting" the core issue of a defining reproductive control, is striking. Consider, for example, the right to privacy argued in *Roe v. Wade*; the invocation of a state's legitimate interest in an unborn child, as it informed *Webster* and other decisions; or the preclusion of access to information concerning abortion as a means of impeding abortion in *Rust v. Sullivan*. The legal discussion surrounding abortion constructs a network of interwoven discourses, of impinging but circumstantial codes, from which the issue of bodily autonomy is curiously absent, the body, as it were, evacuated by the ideology of the body that comes to supplant it. The illusion of "having" the body—of its integrity and control—fades before a construction that may be the only real we know, and its experience, the truest form of feminine experience.

KATE LINKER, a free-lance critic, was Guest Curator of the exhibition "Difference: On Representation and Sexuality," organized by the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, in 1985. She is also the author of *Love for Sale: The Words and Pictures of Barbara Kruger* (Harry N. Abrams, 1990) and *Vito Acconci* (Rizzoli, 1994).

Both questions make a conceptual move that partly explains *my* rejection of feminist poststructuralist theoretical work of the 1980s. Question 1 associates, without argument, 1960s and '70s feminist iconographic and performative deployments of the female body with an "overt or underlying thematic" of biological or physical essentialism. This certainly is news to me! From 1970 to 1976 I used my body in performances that were resolutely and obviously antiessentialist (see anything in the *Catalysis* or *Mythic Being* series).

Question 2 associates conceptually accessible art criticism with "autobiographical strategies and conceptions of identity." Again this is news to me! Although I have written autobiographically about my work under the rubric of *meta art*, the straight art criticism I have written—for such publications as *Artforum*, *Artpapers*, and *Flash Art*—has been resolutely and obviously impersonal in voice and detached in content from issues of identity. And I try very hard to make my ideas as clear and accessible as possible.

Both cases illustrate some of the problems I find with 1980s feminist theorizing, and *it has nothing to do with content.* Although I have many objections to psychoanalysis, I have been impressed by the writings of such European psychoanalytic feminists as Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. So I know the ideas can be expressed clearly and powerfully. The problem with much of this work is that it is just too conceptually lax and intellectually self-indulgent for me to spend the little reading time I have trying to fight my way through its turgid prose in order to figure out what the writers are trying to say—only to discover, if and when I do, that their views are often vulnerable to quite elementary objections.

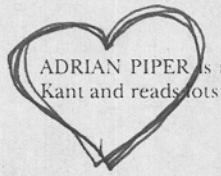
First, about conceptual laxity: The theorizing I reject trades clear and careful analysis of particular ideas, theories, dynamics, and works for easy generalizations that are too vague and ill-defined to do any real work. The consequence is theorizing that mostly floats in an abstract space of its own, making only the most occasional reference to those real events and entities strong connection to which makes a theory both subtle and comprehensive in scope, rather than merely difficult to pin down. The issues that feminism addresses are too urgent, and too much in need of as much support as we can get, from as many quarters as possible, to countenance mere abstraction for abstraction's sake.

Second, about intellectual self-indulgence: I am a serious and committed reader, trained to read difficult texts. When I read, first I skim, then I reread carefully, then I go back and underline, and finally add my own notes. Sometimes these notes help me to unscramble difficult ideas or sentences; sometimes I must force myself to find particular implications or examples of what the writer is saying

in order to be sure I understand how her or his theories apply. These are elementary pedagogical tools that anyone with a college degree must master. But they don't help with much 1980s feminist theorizing. Since the arguments don't progress from point to point as you move down the page, it doesn't help to skim. Since passages are frequently ungrammatical ("poetic"?) and full of neologisms and nonstandard, undefined usage of terms, rereading carefully doesn't help either. Since it's almost impossible to figure out the point being made on a first careful reading, there's nothing to underline. The only thing that helps is to unscramble each sentence step by painful step, and get pundits to explain their meaning to you, until you develop an intuitive sense of how the words are being used—i.e., *until you learn the language*.

The problem is that I don't read feminist theory in order to learn a language. And since I have no professional stake in speaking this particular language—e.g., getting tenure or accumulating publications in the relevant journals—I have no incentive to spend my time on this exercise. Moreover, I react with suspicion when a purportedly serious theorist veils her ideas with so many layers of verbiage that I feel I've achieved something quite important just by figuring out what she's trying to say, whether it's any good or not. I begin to suspect that if they need that much protection, her ideas probably aren't very good at all. I begin to wonder whether *she* must think they're any good, if she's not willing even to try to state them plainly.

I also develop strong feelings of self-pity, neglect, and abandonment by a writer who appears to care so little whether I understand her or not that she is unwilling or unable to exert herself to observe even the most elementary, Strunk-and-White-type guidelines of clear writing. I get irritated, and start to suspect that this phlegmatic stance toward the act of communication is a sign that this piece of prose is not really intended to communicate at all, but rather to perform some other function—mutual celebration of the reading community of "native" speakers, perhaps, or exclusion of the uninitiated from it (in the way we used to do as little girls, when we formed clubs in which only the members knew how to speak Pig Latin and could make an idea important by expressing it in a secret code; wonderful days, but they're over now).



ADRIAN PIPER is a conceptual artist and Professor of Philosophy at Wellesley College. She teaches Kant and reads lots of big, fat books.

YVONNE RAINER

Dear *October*,

Thanks for including me in your survey, but I must confess I'm having trouble with the questions, not knowing whose work, whose writing, whose art is going unnamed. The generalness, combined with an underlying tone of injury in your text, creates a tautological have-you-stopped-beating-your-wife effect. And then there's this odd equation between "essentialism" and "accessibility," between "mediated" work and "elitism." My—and your—heavy use of quotes already indicates a problem of definition. And because you refer so vaguely to the positions of "others," an impression is conveyed of hidden agendas and a needless ellipticality.

As far as I'm concerned, it's up for grabs whether a photograph of a high-heeled shoe (in a gallery or museum) is essentialist, accessible, critical of patriarchy, and/or elitist, or any combination thereof. I just can't buy into these tired old dichotomies anymore. In the plastic arts the interesting issue has always been not that a given work celebrates or critiques the "so-called 'real' of the feminine" (is it reinforcing the status quo, or is it didactic/critical?), but *whether* it does either of these. In most instances it's just damned hard to tell. Depending on your angle of vision along any given aesthetic/political axis, you can always make a case for the work you like.

The term common to both of your questions is this old red herring masquerading as "mediation." It is suggested that "essentialist" work is "less mediated." Also, "accessible" work—autobiographical strategies *et al.*—is, or has been, "criticized for being insufficiently mediated." Again, those "other" voices—not yours—are being set up to make very dubious polarities. (Why don't you put your own gripes on the line?) Not that *your* "others" are the only ones riding on such binarisms. A potential producer to whom I recently sent a script said to me, "It's very intelligent. Are you going to go experimental?" Ha! Here's an opportunity to make a case for intelligent/experimental/mediated/elitist versus dumb/essentialist/unmediated/accessible. Have you watched any MTV lately? I would say that that stuff is mostly essentialist *and* mediated, sometimes smart, and invariably accessible to just about everybody. Then of course there's hip-hop, which is totally inaccessible to me because I can never understand what they're saying.

She won't apologize for being so cranky. After all, she's closing in on age sixty and is minus a tit. From the p.o.v. of someone relentlessly accused of elitism throughout her career, I can only remonstrate that cultural waters find their own level, sometimes in the most unexpected places.

Yours, Yvonne

YVONNE RAINER is currently fund-raising for production of a seventh feature film titled *MURDER and murder*. Send checks to her c/o this magazine.

ARLENE RAVEN

The "dichotomy of the decades" in feminist theory and practice has been overstated and misunderstood. The complexity of 1970s feminism is entirely obscured when called "essentialism." In fact, this earlier feminism spawned artists' images never before seen—original (not "unmediated") forms in every medium that fused the facts of female physicality with the social constructions of femininity.

The activist imperative of this period charged that personal principles be put into mass public—thus cultural—artifacts and actions. The feminist movement in art was inspired by the highly theoretical texts of thinkers like Daly, Firestone, and Millet (to name only a few) and was itself critically grounded in indigenous philosophical, ethical, and political theses.

The new theoretical perspectives applied to feminist issues in the 1980s have added an intellectual richness and additional bases for understanding sexism, patriarchy and the condition of women and men within these. The specialized academic language often used made these insights less accessible to a general feminist readership. However, plainspoken, journalistic treatments of French, English, and American texts have become ever more available today.

I see the "return to the 'real' of the feminine" in the 1990s as an underscoring of the activist nature of feminist thought and of an artistic need for a more generative and direct approach to self- and female imagery rather than a rejection of the theories of the preceding decade. In fact, feminist critical practice now draws on artistic and intellectual resources of unprecedented scope and depth.

ARLENE RAVEN is an art historian and has published six books on contemporary art. She writes criticism for the *Village Voice* and a variety of art magazines and academic journals and is the East Coast editor of *High Performance*.

(Question 2)

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SUSAN RUBIN S
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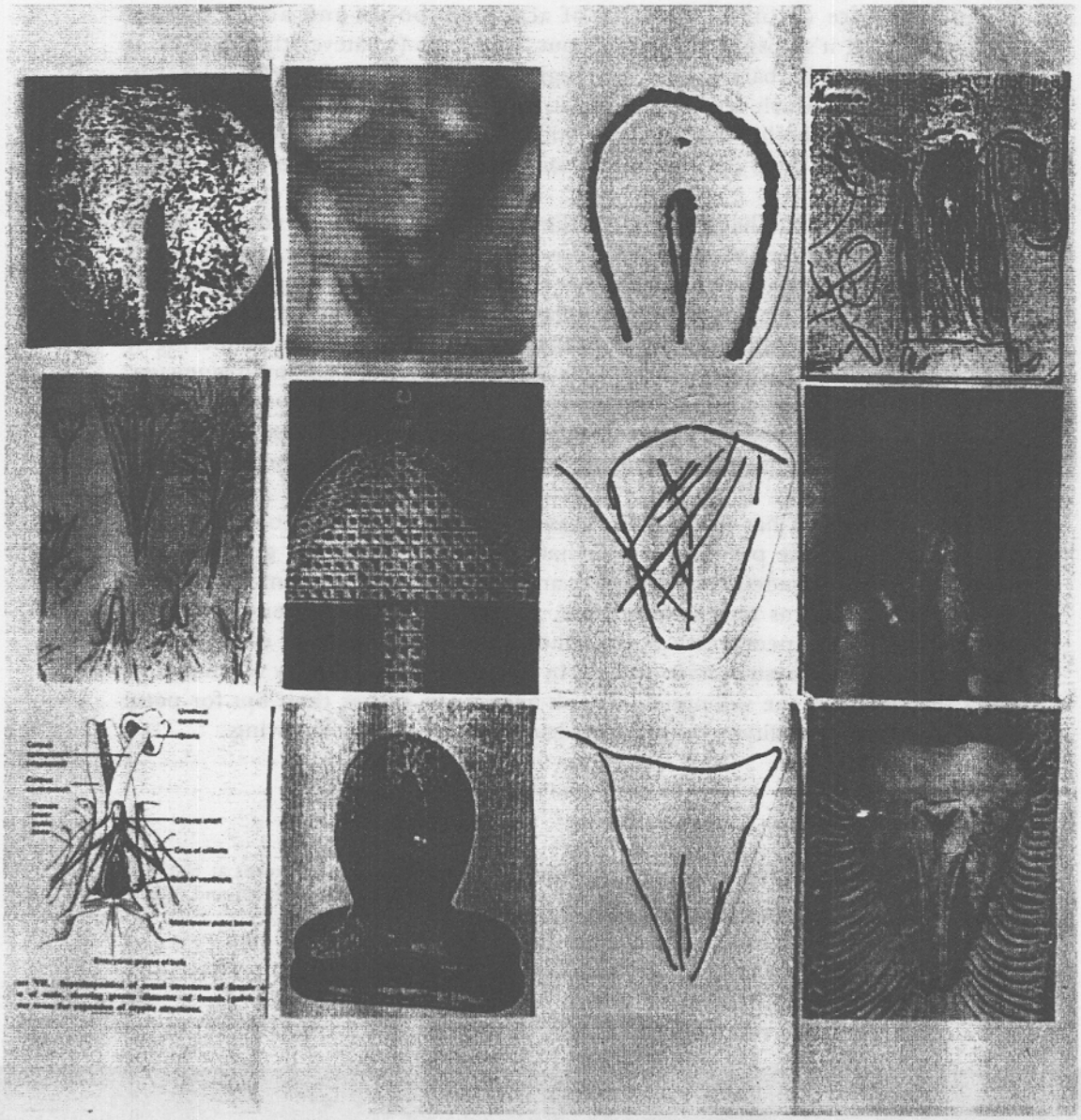
(Question 2)

Your formulation of the question is slippery, and would require a lengthy critique. The desire to write "accessibly" is not necessarily linked to a conscious refusal of elitism, and even less of theory; one can write accessibly about very complicated theoretical questions. Conversely, one can criticize elitism in highly theoretical or jargon-laden language. Similarly for the opposition between "low and high art," which you seem to align with the "accessible versus elitist" pair. As you know, it is possible to write in extremely "elitist" theoretical language about popular culture (witness the spate of academic books and articles about Madonna); and it's possible to write about "high" art (whatever that may be: if Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger are "high," how about the Guerrilla Girls?) in accessible terms—which does not, I repeat, mean theoretically naive or hostile to theory. I wonder whether there is not a hidden, perhaps unconscious bias in the way you formulate these oppositions: a bias against what you see as an attack on theory.

Personally (since that's one of the dimensions your question addresses), my critical trajectory since the early 1980s has been toward greater accessibility. But this has less to do with thoughts—whether friendly or hostile—about theory than with thoughts about language and about audience. I have felt an increasing need, or desire, or longing, to be read by more than a few people. Without pandering: it is not a matter of "talking down," but a matter of speaking in a common language. So yes, there has been a refusal in my work: I would call it a refusal of, even a revulsion against, the excesses of metalanguage. If left to itself, metalanguage has a way of proliferating, substituting itself for thought: that's the time to prune it, radically.

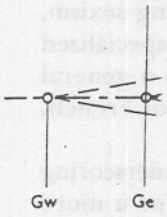
As to what this has to do with "grass roots politics," with conceptions of identity and with the practice of art, that's up to individuals to grapple with. There are narrow-minded and dogmatic, and just plain silly or uninformed views among "politicos" as among theorists, among autobiographers as among semioticians (some people are both), among those who paint in oil as among those who practice postmodern collage. In the end, it's the quality of mind and spirit that matters: the willingness to risk generosity, rather than opt for petty bickering. And the ability to cut through dead matter, to reach the living.

SUSAN RUBIN SULEIMAN is Professor of Romance and Comparative Literatures at Harvard University. Her books include *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde* (1990) and *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature* (1994).



CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN is an artist.

Fig. 1 HOV



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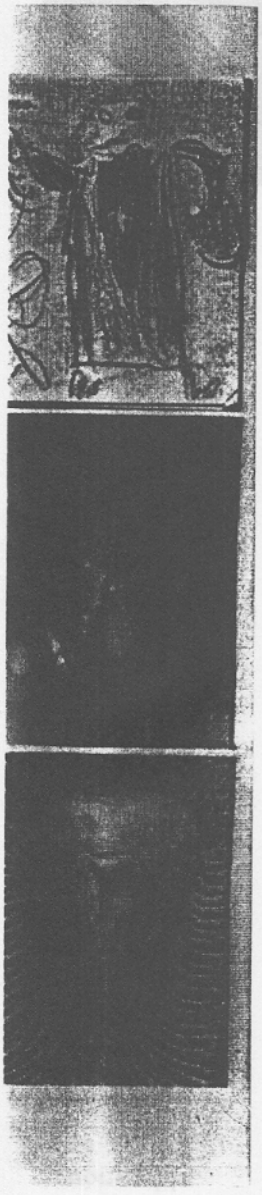
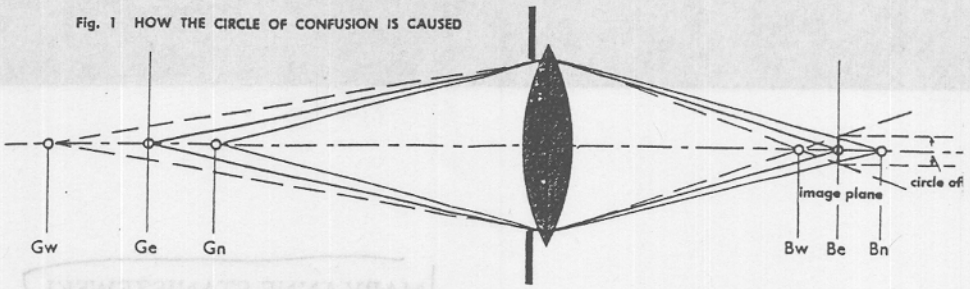


CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

Fig. 1 HOW THE CIRCLE OF CONFUSION IS CAUSED



VULVA'S SCHOOL

Vulva goes to school and discovers she doesn't exist . . .

Vulva goes to church and discovers she is obscene . . .
(quote St. Augustine)

Vulva deciphers Lacan and Baudrillard and discovers she is only a sign, a signification of the void, of absence, of what is not male . . . (she is given a pen for taking notes . . .)

Vulva reads biology and understands she is an amalgam of proteins and oxytocin hormones which govern all her desires . . .

Vulva studies Freud and realizes she will have to transfer clitoral orgasm to her vagina . . .

Vulva reads Masters and Johnson and understands her vaginal orgasms have not been measured by any instrumentality and that she should only experience clitoral orgasms . . .

Vulva decodes Feminist Constructivist Semiotics and realizes she has no authentic feelings at all; even her erotic sensations are constructed by patriarchal projections, impositions, and conditioning . . .

Vulva reads *Off Our Backs* and explores tribadism; then she longs for the other gender's scratching two-day beard, his large hands and insistent cock . . .

Vulva interprets essentialist Feminist texts and paints her face with her menstrual blood, howling when the moon is full . . .

Vulva strips naked, fills her mouth and cunt with paint brushes, and runs into the Cedar Bar at midnight to frighten the ghosts of de Kooning, Pollock, Kline . . .

Vulva reads Gramsci and Marx to examine the privileges of her cultural conditions . . .

Vulva recognizes her symbols and names on graffitti under the railroad trestle: slit, snatch, enchilada, beaver, muff, coozie, fish and finger pie . . .

Vulva learns to analyze politics by asking "Is this good for Vulva?"

MARY ANNE STANISZEWSKI

The challenge for feminists is not to succumb to traditional oppositions. Setting theory against practice, high culture against low, the theoretical against the populist, the arcane against the accessible, the so-called unmediated against the mediated, and art against activism, *is* patriarchal. For it is precisely a static, binary, oppositional order of things that sustains the authority of patriarchy.

If we have learned anything from theory during the past twenty years, it is that language, meaning, and any sense of ourselves and our world cannot be strictly binary. We cannot absolutely separate form from content, ourselves from our cultures, our self from others, the mind from the body, the signifier from the signified. There is always that third term, always that slippage in meaning, always something that mucks up everything and prevents it from being completely black or white. And this gray area of uncertainty, complexity, vitality, and infinite change is the terrain that will nurture women and feminism.

I am not saying that there are not important differences in methodology and realization among objects created for the art market, the discourses of critical practices, the mass media, popular culture, and political activism. And distinctions are, of course, what create meaning. But we diminish ourselves by treating these categories in terms of exclusive subjects, meanings, methods, strategies, and audiences. We should not presume, for example, that a theoretical project, a Conceptual art installation, for instance, created for the informed audiences of the art world, can be sufficiently mediated—and feminist—whereas a project created for the mass media, such as a music video, cannot. Nor should we predetermine that particular kinds of work and subjects, like a performance by an artist probing her personal and emotional anatomy, be a regressive return to essentialism. We need to experiment with the discourses and institutional boundaries within which we set out to work. Central to any "successful" feminist endeavor is "site-specific" awareness of our received institutional limits and of who it is we are trying to reach.

I see such feminism not only in Linda Nochlin's essays, the photographs of Cindy Sherman, the installations of Adrian Piper, and the films of Trinh T. Minh-ha, but in innumerable practices, projects, and products of which the following are a representative few. Madonna's work during the past decade is something more than erratic "mastery" of the spectacle. Her presentations of herself not only as a sex object, but as a sex subject who directs myriad feminine masquerades, have been received as feminist by millions of young women. Queen Latifa has led the way in successfully introducing the ideas and language of feminism into rap. Designers like Vivienne Westwood, Rei Kawakubo, and Jean-Paul Gaultier have plundered the conventions of fashion, turned its language inside out, and been instrumental in transforming the runway show into performance which, among

other things, reveals the cultural contingency of clothes. Students of mine have questioned the norms of the graduate seminar—like Carolyn Cooley, who for a class report played a tape recording of her analysis of medieval and contemporary ideologies of motherhood while she used her stomach as the screen on which to project her slides. Or others, like Louise Thompson, utilize teaching as one component of their work as artists and the classroom as terrain to be critically and creatively explored. ReproVision, originally a committee spawned within the New York activist group Women's Health Action Mobilization, is characteristic of grass roots feminist organizations that not only accomplish things like keeping women's health clinics open but operate on a variety of cultural fronts. One of myriad activist video collectives that have developed since the 1980s, ReproVision produces inexpensive, agitprop tapes that provide information and analysis of women's issues that rarely reach mainstream TV. The Manhattan Cable show "Dyke TV" is a much needed vehicle for lesbian issues and exemplifies the potential for public access and alternative television programming. These endeavors, like everything, have their flaws and are confined by their frameworks. But they all, with varying degrees of creativity and criticality, effectively take on important feminist issues and reach a spectrum of audiences that spans from the relatively intimate to the exponentially vast.

Let us learn from the past: The problem with essentialist feminism was that its essentialism was patriarchal. Not unrelatedly, so are oppositions that restrict the way we would think and live and work. Such stereotypes, nonetheless, do persist, and this is perhaps why they are all the more visible today, and why these questions were posed. But this is also the reason it is so important to confront and explore such limits in any of their variations. To investigate and dismantle these oppositions holds not only our challenge, but feminism's promise, and women's rewards.

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LISA TICKNER

(Question 1)

The question opens in a tone of neutral description and ends in one of mounting anxiety. Perhaps *this* is the interesting question. What are we afraid of? There's more than a hint that feminist practices have taken a wrong turn, gone off the rails, turned delinquent; or, reversing the generational thrust, that the adolescent vitality of 1970s feminism matured successfully into a body of rigorous 1980s art and criticism that threatens now to go all to pieces. The body haunts the text, just as the text haunts the body.

This is the first significant generation of artist-daughters of artist-mothers. Perhaps only in the last twenty years have women as artists grown up with both parents (and artist-siblings, and a feminist audience). This is the landscape that is itself productive of new work (and *new artists*, since practice produces agents as well as objects or "symbolic goods"). If it's not yet clear how the Oedipal triangle figures, this may be what worries us. Perhaps delinquency hurts because it frames older feminisms as authoritarian and out-of-date. Perhaps the cutting truth is not that feminist art escapes feminism (whatever that's construed to be) but that it hasn't escaped art (or what the art world is under modern conditions). "Feminist art" insists on its *awkwardness* as any kind of category but can't altogether escape the nets of fashion—commercial, curatorial, or critical—or the deadly formaldehyde of period style. For a moment, the return to the body in some expressive, performative, or "unmediated" form looks like a fresh option but, ironically, it spawns theoretical justification anyway (as the essays for both the U.S. and British "Bad Girls" exhibitions testify). I don't say this cynically. It's in the nature of the game that art in our culture comes out of discourse and returns to it: each "unique" and "unprecedented" move is accorded a catalogue's framing pedigree.

But you never go back to the *same* place. The 1990s are different because of the 1980s and as a result of something more dialectical than a pendulum swing. At certain moments particular media, concepts, forms, referents, metaphors, or procedures seem to offer an especially pertinent or expressive resource. There's no point in ranking these but only in using them. Then we can see what they're good for: what, in talented hands, their "yield" is. Different art practices at different moments have been linked to an assertion of (biological or social) "essentialism," "antiessentialism," "strategic essentialism," or the claim that what women have in common is simply a collective stake in femininity as a masquerade. Yet even this isn't disembodied. The body is *there*—in speech, in fragments, in dreams, in fantasies, in traces and stand-ins—in much of the 1980s work that seemed to reject it (but rejected only its status as fetish).

The body figures—how could it not?—but the question is how, what, when, and for whom? The body is Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real. The ego is a bodily

ego, and the body has a phantasmatic dimension. Gender is something we embrace but from whose embrace we flee. What would a feminist utopia be like, in gendered terms? (There are some science-fiction answers to this question, not all of them consoling.) The impact of a French feminist insistence on the imaginative centrality of the body has been interestingly—provocatively—paralleled by a cyborg-feminist flight from gender (and perhaps maternity). These issues are for me more pressing than the question of whether a new generation has properly rehearsed its feminist litany. Women artists have acquired for the first time in the last twenty years a sense of critical mass and the opportunity to communicate with an intelligent, educated, impassioned, committed, and argumentative audience. We ought to be able to trust ourselves to raise the issues and argue the points. In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, the cultural field is a set of "positions" that offers the artist a set of "possibles." The avant-garde game is to change the field of possibles. The feminist game is to make that changed field *count*. But then, of course, if humanity turns out to be an evolutionary blip in cosmic time, a fragile link between animal life and a disembodied cyborg intelligence, then gender as we've struggled to understand and to live it will go the way of all other conditions the flesh is heir to. It's hard to imagine a world of virtual eroticism, unparented reproduction, and desexualized intelligence. I'm not sure I want to. Is that what women want?

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MICHELE WALLACE

As a black feminist cultural critic, in my most recent work I have focused on visual culture: film, TV, the visual arts, design, fashion, and advertising. Two reasons: first, there is still a grave paucity of black and/or feminist critical discourse on black participation in most areas of visual culture; and second, issues arising from visible intersections of "race," sexuality, and gender in visual culture are particularly compelling in our present moment. These include: in TV and video, the O. J. Simpson "chase" and trial, the Thomas/Hill hearings, Madonna's or Michael Jackson's or Prince's use of "race" in music videos, or the underground video "The Salt Mines," which examines a homeless community of Latina transvestites; in film, *Crooklyn*, *Daughters of the Dust*, *Just Another Girl on the IRT*, *The Crying Game*, *Sankofa*, or even the recently released *Shawshank Redemption*, just to name a few; in visual art and photography, the "Black Male" exhibition at the Whitney, the photographic work of Robert Mapplethorpe, Lyle Ashton Harris, Carrie Mae Weems, and Lorna Simpson, the installations of Renée Green, Fred Wilson, and David Hammons, as well as the painting of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Emma Amos, and Faith Ringgold, also just to name a few. Analysis of advertising, fashion, race, and design around issues of "race," sexuality, and gender are particularly neglected, although some recent inroads have been made.

In my own work, I attempt to assimilate and critique the theoretical accomplishments of so-called "elitist" feminism, at the same time that I have no wish to alienate "grass roots" feminism. Although I am black, I don't think of my work as more "accessible," not because of anything inherent to my critical practice—not, for instance, because of my use of "autobiographical strategies" or "conceptions of identity"—but because most people are not yet interested in what I have to give: specifically, new knowledges of the black woman's role in American culture, in feminist thought, and in visual culture (and tangentially connected to this, as well, explorations of the larger categories of women of color, queer women, poor women, etc.).

In the formulation of my own critical practice, I find it all but useless to contrast "psychoanalytic and semiotic/language-based theories" with approaches concerned with "popular culture and contemporary theories." Obviously, as the Black Popular Culture Conference (which I organized at DIA in New York in 1990) would suggest, I am very interested in popular culture, but not in contrast, or in opposition, to more theoretical or "elitist" approaches. For one thing, I wouldn't automatically place discourses on "popular culture" in the inclusive column. And for another, I am beginning to feel excluded, myself, by adherents of either camp who fail to delineate what is emotionally at stake in their own work as part of their critical practice. All biographical reflection doesn't necessarily serve to reveal such core issues any more than all theoretical speculation serves to