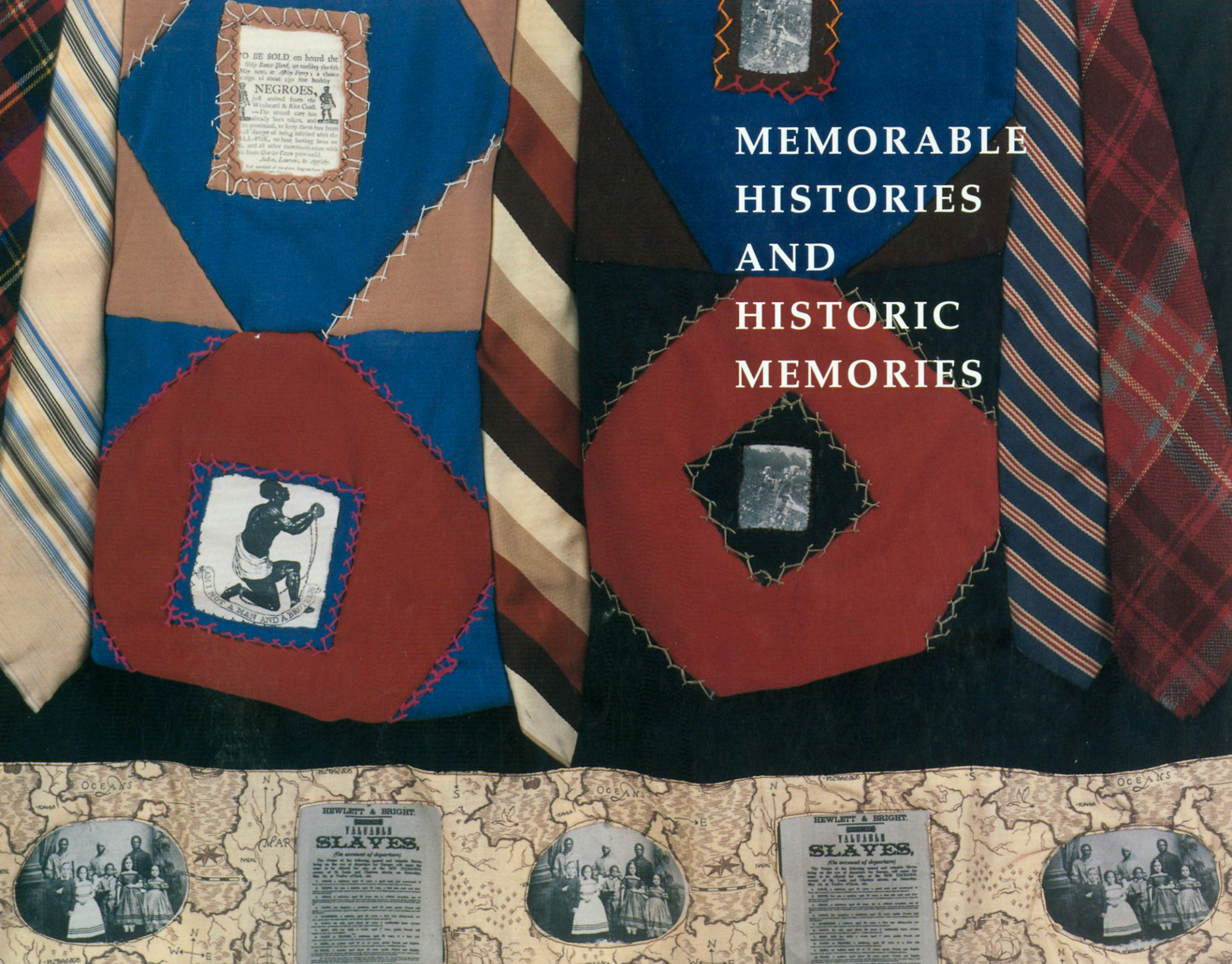
TO BE SOLD on board the
NEGROES,
MEMORABLE
HISTORIES
AND
HISTORIC
MEMORIES
HEWLETT & BRIGHT.
VALUABLE
SLAVES,
(On account of departure)
HEWLETT & BRIGHT.
VALUABLE
SLAVES,
(On account of departure)

MEMORABLE HISTORIES AND HISTORIC MEMORIES

History is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells; and only a metaphysician would seek its soul in the distant ideality of the origin.[1]

Michel Foucault

Before we begin, an old story bears telling again. It is the tale about Arachne and Athena. Arachne, a "low-born" Lydian woman, made her name by producing exquisite textile work. Her accomplishments were so great that those who came to see her work assumed that Athena herself, the goddess of craft, had taught Arachne. But Arachne refused this implicit hierarchy of talents and challenged Athena to a contest. Athena, disguised as an old woman, tried to warn Arachne against defying the gods. But Arachne was determined, and so the competition was held.

Athena's tapestry depicted the hills of Mars and the council of the gods discussing an old dispute over naming the land. Each individual god was depicted sitting on his throne—the work celebrated order, reasoned exchange, and rational discourse. In each corner of the tapestry, mortals were being transformed from their human identities as punishment for challenging the gods. The border of the work, which served as the goddess's signature, consisted of an olive wreath, signaling peace, poise, and control.

Arachne's tapestry, on the other hand, demystified the lives of the gods, representing scenes of women such as Europa and Leda as they were abducted and violated by the gods. In direct contrast to Athena's orderly and rational border, Arachne's border/signature consisted of an intricate tangle of ivy and flowers. Athena inspected the completed work and found it flawless, as exquisite as her own. However, Athena destroyed the tapestry and beat Arachne over the head with a shuttle, not only because Arachne challenged the authority of the gods by engaging Athena in a contest, but because of the way Arachne represented the history of the gods in her tapestry. Arachne, in despair, tried to hang herself. The story ends with Athena taking pity on Arachne and saving her from death by turning her into a spider, condemning her to creating meaningless weavings for eternity.[2]

Last summer, Dorit Cypis, one of the eight artists participating in *Memorable Histories and Historic Memories*, observed in a conversation with me that she and the seven other artists in the exhibition are "weaving their own relationships to history." This seemingly simple statement suggests many different ways of understanding the relationship these artists have to history as well as how they represent and make use of history. The artists in *Memorable Histories and Historic Memories* indicate through their works that they have investigated ways of understanding and representing histories using new rhetorical and representational modes.

Intrinsic to the work made by these eight artists is a critique of the traditional notion of history which, as historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese observes, "has been written primarily from the perspective of the authoritative male subject—the single, triumphant consciousness."[3] The structure of mainstream history has generally been presented as a linear chronology that implies progress or a completed development, and the voice of history has been one of authority and objectivity seeking to erase any hint of the time and place in which it has been written. Women are significantly absent from this historical structure. In the 1970s, feminist scholarship tried to "correct" various disciplines by inserting women into histories or by trying to establish women's histories as autonomous. Historian Joan Scott criticizes both these methods in *Gender and the Politics of History* where she explains that, "the former (approach) permits the woman's voice to be heard, but within a context that views it as inherently inferior. The latter leads to a segregation that marginalizes the project while leaving dominant traditions of historical writing unchallenged."[4] The goal of women's history, then, writes Fox-Genovese, is "not to substitute the chronicle of the female subject for that of the male, but rather to restore conflict, ambiguity and tragedy to the center of historical process: to explore the varied and unequal terms upon which genders, classes and races participate in the forging of a common destiny."[5]

The artists included in *Memorable Histories and Historic Memories* have a certain stake in defining their relationship to history. Each of these women has been actively working and exhibiting since the 1970s, and each is firmly ensconced in various contemporary art worlds. Yet, because their art does not fall neatly into established artistic "movements," philosophies, or generations, their works are marginalized in larger art histories or overviews, if included at all.[6] Like Arachne, these artists set out to create, through representation, their own relationship to history while at the same time suggesting that all history is a matter of perception and is used or misused according to larger political or ideological agendas. Theirs are histories of resistance, not repetition. Art historian Sarat Maharaj, writing about Arachne and Athena in relation to issues of colonialism and textiles, observes that Athena's tapestry can be read as "sheer production, as prescribed representation, as saying the same thing again, as 'naked repetition.'" Arachne's tapestry, on the other hand, can be read as an "expressive, self reflexive practice, saying it again with a difference no matter how apparently small, as 'clothed repetition.'"[7]

Each of these artists has found that, unlike Arachne, they can best challenge history, including art history, from within history's interstitial spaces rather than confronting it head on. This leads us back to Dorit Cypis's observation. What first comes to mind when I think of "weaving one's own relationship to history" is physical contact, touching—that through their work these artists are looking for ways to feel, caress, wrap themselves up in their own history. Like blankets, such histories may offer protection, warmth, and comfort to them and, by extension, to us. But then you look at their work. The histories we find here do not allow anyone to rest easy. They are scratchy and a bit uncomfortable—like a wool blanket on bare skin in warm weather. They might at first suggest warmth and protection, but then you realize that they can't, at least right now, because it is the wrong place and the wrong time. Something is amiss.

In his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault writes about traditional history and what he terms "effective history." Traditional history, he explains "is given to a contemplation of distances and heights: the noblest periods, the highest forms, the most abstract ideas, the purest individualities."[8] Effective history, on the other hand, "shortens its vision to those things nearest to it—the body, the nervous system, nutrition, digestion, and energies; it unearths the periods of decadence and if it chances upon lofty epochs, it is with suspicion—not vindictive but joyous—of finding barbarous and shameful confusion."[9] One way that the histories found in *Memorable Histories and Historic Memories* can be understood is as "effective histories." By incorporating in their work subjects such as food, social dancing, the body, beauty, autobiographies, and ancient myths, and including and in some cases altering familiar artifacts such as photographs, antique domestic linens, quilts, moss, mirrors, thick paint, and flowers, these artists, to borrow Foucault's words again, "confirm their existence among countless lost events."[10] They find in the lofty institutionalizations of fine art, language, and traditional histories, "barbarous and shameful confusion" and reveal this confusion through poetic, sensual, joyful, and beautiful means—by representing the equivalent of Arachne's intricate tangle of ivy and flowers as opposed to Athena's olive wreath.

These artists are not looking for comfort in their histories. Nor are they merely seeking to make contact with history; that is, they do not simply want to be included in a context that inherently finds women's voices inferior. Instead they want to touch, even caress the fabric of histories. Sartre writes, "The caress does not want simple contact; it seems that man alone can reduce the caress to a contact, and then he loses its unique meaning. This is because the caress is not a simple stroking; it is a shaping."[11] And to take it one step further following Foucault's argument: "The issue is not just who has the power to speak but who shapes the structure of the discourse."[12]

Texture and tactility are qualities these artists employ in order to create a situation in which history can be reconsidered. The physical nature of their work, both the creation and experience of it, underscored by the use or representation of familiar, everyday objects, suggests touch: Mira

Schor's luscious use of paint; Rose Marasco's photographs of silverware, eggs, oatmeal, pine needles, and diaries; Maureen Connor's incorporation of old film clips and music; Dorit Cypis's feathers and mirrors; Deborah Willis's quilts; Anne Wilson's thread and hair; Amalia Mesa-Bains's moss, flowers, and sea shells; and Adrian Piper's grids, pencil drawings, and typewritten text. As Katy Kline points out in her catalogue essay for the exhibition *Subversive Crafts*, the implications of actual physical engagement in the making of a work of art cannot be underestimated. "Information is processed differently," she observes, "when incorporated (even by projection) through the body."[13]

An object that references or invites physical handling or touch constitutes a particular way of knowing that has intrinsic to it, according to Australian critic Sue Rowley, an "articulation of a deeper, underlying critique of Enlightenment assumptions about knowledge, truth and rationality."[14] In other words, touch, or even the invitation to touch, is iconoclastic because it is the symbolic act that can breach the carefully constructed gap between the object (the physical) and the mind. Without this gap, constructed by Enlightenment philosophers to maintain a proper distance from the object (the body, the mundane), the contemplation of pure aesthetics is corrupted. This tactility, observes Ewa Kuryluk "provides the sensual bridge," the very bridge that Enlightenment philosophers intended to obliterate, "to elemental desires, primitive instincts, and archaic beliefs—to the primordial abyss hidden under our thin civilized skins."[15]

Memory, which was once too slippery and elusive to be considered in relation to history, is now deemed a partial yet legitimate clue to the past. Each of these artists draws on memory in her work. Memory is fluid, active, and dynamic, whereas traditional history, secured by the text, remains static, bows to details, and arrests time. Memory is far more "porous," to borrow artist Amalia Mesa-Bains's description; she continues that, "it is deeper (than history) and can be amplified in more forms."[16] A character in another old story, Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess of memory and the imagination, is described as a figure who consists of nothing but layers and layers of drapery. Susan Stewart writes, "Memory, at once impoverished and enriched, presents itself as a device for measurement, the 'ruler' of narrative."[17] Different histories, unlike those most frequently presented, exist within the deep folds of memory. By drawing out and representing unimagined histories, these artists employ memory to measure traditional history. For all the artists, memory, both personal and collective, provides the core from which meaning is created.

Each artist offers a representational language that is close to the body and emotions as well as to what Julia Kristeva terms "the unnameable," which is "repressed by the social contract."[18] The space that is created as a result of this language is a "corporeal and desiring mental space."[19] In this space, history is not linear or progressive—there is no suggestion of a developmental flow of time. Instead, their histories are unstable and in flux, fractures are apparent, and difference is emphasized. The fabric of their histories is not brand new nor is there a sense of closure. More questions are raised than answered; ambiguities abound, suggesting a history suspended in a time of perpetual fabrication. However, interspersed with the new, clean, crisp, freshly-pressed fabric are frayed edges, loose feathers, smeared paint, holes, and mends—nothing has been deliberately damaged, ripped, or torn out of pure anger or for the sake of being fashionable. With persistence, the histories have been pieced together, the older fabric carefully incorporated with the new. Their histories are indeed quilt-like in their construction, with poetry, found-images-turned-art-again, and memories. Still, you must look out for the left-over pins—they missed a few, on purpose.

To summarize the strategies employed by these artists, we can return to Foucault and his definition of a critical subject, "one capable of critical historical reflection, refusal, and invention."[20] These artists, as critical subjects, do not seek to control the overall direction of history, but instead selectively and creatively employ the discourses of history. They "suspend adherence to certain principles and assumptions, or to specific interpretations of them, in efforts to invent new ones." And finally, as critical subjects, they are "neither entirely autonomous nor enslaved, neither

the originator of the discourses and practices that constitute their experiences nor determined by them."[21]

The past—history—viewed as tradition has long been employed to bolster the status quo. However, as Ewa Kuryluk states, "we cannot transform tradition by obliterating the past."[22] Jana Sawicki explains that, "According to Foucault, our freedom consists of our ability to transform our relationship to tradition and not in being able to control the direction that the future will take."[23] Arachne did not reject history or tradition, she instead expressed "its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells."[24] Likewise, the artists in this exhibition reveal that history and tradition can erupt and overflow the confines of the traditional constructions created for it. Surging beyond the borders, as I imagine the ivy in Arachne's tapestry did, the spaces created for the histories in these artists' work allow for difference. Their art suggests not only the need for a much more inclusive and expansive notion of history—histories of gender, race, class, art, and language—but a way to begin its creation.

Alison Ferris

1. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 145.

2. My own interpretation of the story of Arachne and Athena is based on Book 6 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as well as Sarat Maharaj's and Nancy Miller's retelling of the story in their articles. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by A.D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Sarat Maharaj, "Arachne's Genre: Towards Intercultural Studies in Textiles," *Journal of Design History* (4, no. 5 1991), 75–96; Nancy K. Miller, "Arachnologies: The Woman, the Text, and the Critic," in *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

3. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Placing Women's History in History," *New Left Review* 133 (June 1982), 29.

4. Patrick H. Hutton summarizes Joan Scott's *Gender and the Politics of History* in: *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 121.

5. Fox-Genovese, 29.

6. This includes recent overviews of feminist art history written in the 1990s. See for instance: Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds. *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact.* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994); Amelia Jones, ed. *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's* Dinner Party *in Feminist Art History.* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

7. Sarat Maharaj, 76-77.

8. Foucault, 155.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Pocket Books, 1956), 506.

12. Hutton, 122.

13. Katy Kline, *Subversive Crafts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Visual Arts Center, 1993), 8.

14. Sue Rowley, "Warping the Loom: Theoretical Frameworks for Craft Writing," *Craft in Society: An Anthology of Perspectives,* edited by Noris Ioannou (South Fremantle, Australia: Fremantle Arts Center Press, 1992), 182.

15. Ewa Kuryluk, *Veronica and Her Cloth: History, Symbolism, and Structure of a "True" Image* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 220. I first explored issues of touch and tactility in the exhibition *Conceptual Textiles: Material Meanings* (September 22, 1995—January 7, 1996), curated for the John Michael Kohler Arts Center. I have borrowed, with permission, this paragraph from the essay in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition.

16. Amalia Mesa-Bains, interview by Curator Alison Ferris, telephone conversation, May 1998.

17. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 24.

18. Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," *The Kristeva Reader,* Toril Moi, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 200.

19. Kristeva, 209.

20. My understanding of Foucault's critical subject was augmented by Jana Sawicki's discussion in *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body* (London: Routledge, 1991), 103-104.

21. Ibid.

22. Kuryluk, 224.

23. Sawicki, 99.

24. Foucault, 145.

AYA DORIT CYPIS

An artist who pushes the boundaries of what art is, Dorit Cypis creates performances, multi-media installations, and photographic and video imagery that explore themes of memory, identity and representation. Her work has been exhibited and/or performed at the Whitney Museum of American Art; the International Center for Photography, New York; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; the Museé d'Art Contemporaire, Montreal, and many other museums and galleries nationally and internationally. Other projects, which she terms "social design," combine performance, the production of works of art, and art education. Cypis is the director of *Kulture Klub*, a project she created in 1992, that provides a network between artists and homeless teens to bridge survival and creative expression.

Cypis is the creator of *The Body in the Picture*, an interactive process exploring identity, the body, memory, and representation that she offers through private practice, art schools, and artist centers. Among her numerous awards are fellowships from the NEA, the Jerome Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, the Minnesota Arts Board, the Bush Foundation, and Sumitomo Bank, Japan. She is a graduate of the B.F.A. program of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and holds an M.F.A. from the California Institute of the Arts. She has been on the faculty of the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College as well as an artist-in-residence at numerous schools, art centers, and museums both in the United States and abroad.

HUNGRY GHOST (AND THE 7 MUSES)

About *Hungry Ghost (and the 7 Muses)*, Dorit Cypis writes:

I wanted to destabilize the reading of both the 'women' and the 'father' as fixed ideas. I wanted to lift them through the physical, out of the physical—suspend them in a place just above recognition. Are the women appearing or disappearing, present or phantom? Maybe they are spirits coaxing the viewer into phantasy. The 'father' hovering, not flying but wishing to. Father, light as a feather, heaviness released like spirit leaving the dying body. A hovering between heaven and earth, matter and ether. Is the political relationship between them still active in this space of hovering? Are the women guides, gateways, sentinels, witnesses, looking back from the other side (of the mirror)? Is the father holding court or being held fast just this side of evaporating?[1]

Hungry Ghost (and the 7 Muses) consists of seven altered photographs from Garry Winogrand's series *Women Are Beautiful* from the 1970s. This installation critiques the fundamental theoretical models of the male gaze that stem from Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," while simultaneously opening up new ways of understanding and making use of these theoretical constructs. The photographs were reproduced in the form of durotrans, adhered to mirrors, placed in gilded frames and lit from the back with old-fashioned painting lights. The photographs are installed in a blue room. At the end of the room, attached to the wall, is the word F ATHER spelled in feathers with a fallen, feathered "E" lying below on the floor. Cypis realizes in *Hungry Ghost (and the 7 Muses)* what she describes as "the poetization of meaning through strategies of evocation." She continues: "The word F ATHER made of feathers, colored lighting, and the dislocation of the gaze through the use of mirrors, are all intended to play with the historically fixed readings of Winogrand's 'women,' photography, gender, and appropriation."

Garry Winogrand's book *Women Are Beautiful* consists of eighty-two photographs of women taken on the street. Employing the "snapshot aesthetic," Winogrand photographs these young women, all strangers to Winogrand, waiting for the bus, talking on the telephone in a phone booth, walking their dogs, shopping. Winogrand, as promoted by John Szarkowski, curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, epitomized the advent of a new, distinctly American school of photography. Szarkowski held up Winogrand's snapshot aesthetic as celebrating the "real" while at the same time he emptied Winogrand's work of its social and political content in the manner that he contextualized the work. The elision of "woman" into this context, as evident in *Women Are Beautiful*, illustrates the mechanisms used to retain the power of the male gaze, one that, to use Mulvey's theoretical model, objectifies women through fetishism. Fetishism in terms of

PAGE 36
Hungry Ghost (and the 7 Muses), 1996 (detail), cat. no. 3

PAGE 37
Hungry Ghost (and the 7 Muses), 1996, installation with variable dimensions cat. no. 3

PAGE 38
Hungry Ghost (and the 7 Muses), 1996 (detail), cat. no. 3

PAGE 39
Hungry Ghost (and the 7 Muses), 1996 (detail), cat. no. 3

representation is the need to distance oneself from the sight and knowledge of difference by displacing the anxiety created by the sight of difference onto another object. Winogrand disavows the difference of women. He photographs them furtively, in the guise of the "snapshot aesthetic," blocking the women's gaze (many of the women's eyes are closed) or he shows them holding a displaced object such as an ice cream cone, a pretzel, or a camera. He thereby creates for the viewer the ability to contemplate "woman" in the safety of the "mirror of art."

Cypis complicates this reading of Winogrand's work even as she challenges his position in the history of photography as "father" of a new American photography. Rather than simply appropriating images and giving them back to the viewer with the assumption that a critique is inherent in the re-presentation, a common strategy of 1980s artists, Cypis places Winogrand's photographs on mirrors. She therefore offers these images for reexamination but does so providing a radically new context for them, one in which the one-way, male-dominated gaze is opened up and made more complex. The viewer must look at him/herself looking at the women, and it is no longer clear who is the subject and who is the object of the gaze. However, the women remain the focal point in Cypis's work, their importance emphasized by the deletion of much of each photograph's background. Cypis was struck by the strength and self-possession exhibited by the women in Winogrand's photographs and she observes that these are not simply furtive photographs but carefully, if subconsciously, made works that filled a deep lack on the part of Winogrand.

Simultaneously, Cypis doubles, even triples references to fetishism in her work through her use of materials. In addition to being the physical materials of everyday life,

photographs, feathers, mirrors, gold, and the shine on the frames are all traditional fetishes, that is, they have all been identified at one time or another as substitute objects. Rather than producing shame, a phenomenon inherent to fetishism, these fetish objects contribute to an environment that invites the viewer to experience pleasure, albeit a self-conscious pleasure, in the act of looking.

With cock feathers and the once-whole word "feather" transformed into the word "father," Cypis fetishizes the authority of the Father represented by Winogrand (or the patriarch, or the Holy Father, or Cypis's own father). In other words, she transforms the kind of power Winogrand and his work hold in the history of photography from one of authority into the kind of power contained by a fetish, one that produces intrigue and metaphor. Therefore, rather than completely dismissing Winogrand and his work as simply blatantly sexist, she invites us to look at it again outside of the constructs that have been created for it in standard histories of photography.

1. Dorit Cypis, correspondence with Curator Alison Ferris, June 29, 1998.