



GIRLS' NIGHT OUT

ORANGE COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART



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Rineke Dijkstra

Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, USA, June 24, 1992, 1992

C-print

24 1/2 x 20 1/2 in. (62 x 52 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

I'm a captive of my own image and my attempts to escape are my works of art.

Salla Tykkä¹

Each generation reformulates its story. In organizing *Girls' Night Out*, we were inspired by what we observed as a generational shift in contemporary visual art—one that reflects a more open and complex approach to identity in recent photography and video. The exhibition encompasses work produced during the past decade by an international and intergenerational group of women: Eija-Liisa Ahtila (b. 1959, lives in Helsinki), Elina Brotherus (b. 1972, lives in Paris), Dorit Cypis (b. 1951, lives in Los Angeles), Rineke Dijkstra (b. 1959, lives in Amsterdam), Katy Grannan (b. 1969, lives in New York City), Sarah Jones (b. 1959, lives in London), Kelly Nipper (b. 1971, lives in Los Angeles), Daniela Rossell (b. 1973, lives in Mexico City), Shirana Shahbazi (b. 1974, lives in Zurich), and Salla Tykkä (b. 1973, lives in Helsinki). Bringing a divergent range of expression to their exploration of identity, these artists share an interest in classical genres such as portraiture, architectural space, and landscape, as well as a respect for a rigorously formalistic approach to technique and subject.

Some of the most influential art made in recent decades has focused on issues of identity, and women artists of previous generations, from Hannah Wilke (1940–1993) to Cindy Sherman (b. 1954), are well known for their critiques of the stereotypes of femininity. Although the historical context for *Girls' Night Out* is informed by the pioneering conceptual and aesthetic stance of these artistic forerunners, the work in the exhibition nevertheless reflects a new sensibility that has grown out of the influence of feminism and the corresponding progress women have been able to achieve. As Simon Taylor has written with respect to the experience of women artists:

Despite persistent bias and discrimination, there *has been* a qualitative change for women artists in the past thirty years. Being a woman artist is no longer viewed as a handicap, and female art students can reasonably expect to exhibit in museums and galleries once they graduate. . . . While the women artist's movement may have suffered setbacks, notably in the backlash decade of the 1980s, many improvements in the situation of the woman artist have been secured. . . . Women now occupy positions of power, not merely as patrons, benefactors and philanthropists, but in the actual work of directing museums, curating exhibitions, publishing books, editing magazines, teaching university courses, etc., so the patriarchal control of artworld institutions has changed—and women artists are the beneficiaries of this democratization.²

I would argue that women today are able to explore complex and contradictory notions of femininity without having to defend or valorize past feminist gender issues, and they are consequently more likely to define identity in more ambiguous terms, drawing on their own subjectivities and multiple potentialities.

Central to *Girls' Night Out* is the idea of the *girl*—a term that has regained currency when applied to women in an affirmative manner, especially by women—and the exhibition's title reflects a generational shift that has brought the use of this word back into play. Although youth culture has dominated fashion and the popular media since the 1960s, with an emphasis on girlish styles and bodies, the early feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, also known as the women's movement, was focused on asserting the independence and power of women. The use of the term *girl*, when applied to grown women, was considered patronizing and demeaning. In recent years, the word *girl* has been reclaimed by a wide range of young women,

from political activists to those working in the mass media. Legions of young feminists organizing in the late 1980s and 1990s called themselves Riot Grrrls, and girls and women writing for zines such as *Bust* and *Bitch* took on the name Girlies. In the 1990s magazines like *Sassy* in the United States and *Dolly* in Australia documented young women claiming the formerly male domain of rock and roll, as well as reclaiming “girly” things, from nail polish to the color pink (but assiduously avoided the dieting articles and dating tips that are the standard fare of conventional young women’s magazines).

In the fall 1997 “Girl” issue of *Spin*, rock critic Ann Powers wrote: “Girl Culture girls have transformed what it means to be female in the nineties. Unlike conventional feminism, which focused on women’s socially imposed weaknesses, Girl Culture assumes that women are free agents in the world, that they start out strong and the odds are in their favor.”³ The signs of girl culture are ubiquitous. While thinking about this exhibition, I was struck by the accessories worn by my preteen daughters: T-shirts, hats, and necklaces bearing slogans such as “You Go Girl,” “No Boys Allowed,” and “Girls Rule.” But the ascendancy of girl-ness and its groundswell in contemporary culture have actually been in evidence since the 1980s. Pop singer Cyndi Lauper, who released the hit song “Girls Just Want to Have Fun” in 1983, might be seen as a proto-girl. A movie of the same title, starring a then unknown Sarah Jessica Parker, was released to wide popular success in 1985. In 1984 Madonna came out with her landmark album *Like a Virgin*, which included the cut “Material Girl.” British TV sitcoms such as Jennifer Saunders’s self-critical *Girls on Top* (1985–86), and later her hilarious *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992–96, 2001), were refreshing signs of change on the small screen. And in 1988 a new feminist-based magazine for teenage girls called *Sassy* hit the newsstands.

In the 1990s television was enlivened by a plethora of female stars who, however “girly” and “ditzy” they might appear, had

Hannah Wilke

What Does This Represent?

What Do You Represent? 1978–84

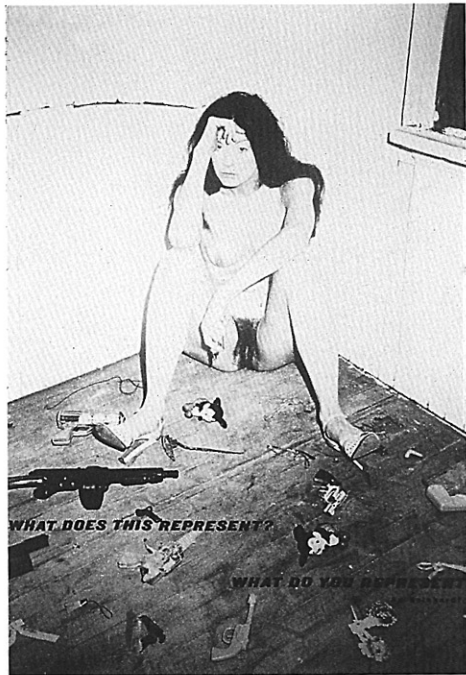
Gelatin silver print

Variable dimensions

Hannah Wilke Collection and Archive,

Los Angeles, California

Courtesy SolwayJones, Los Angeles



prominent roles and witty dialogue that were empowering in their own way—sexy and smart. Actors such as Sarah Jessica Parker of *Sex and the City*, Calista Flockhart of *Ally McBeal*, and Sarah Michelle Gellar of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* nevertheless represent idealized Hollywood types. More individuated are some of the younger female musicians who have dominated the pop music scene over the past decade, including Aaliyah, Mary J. Blige, Bjork, Macy Gray, Alicia Keyes, Avril Lavigne, Alanis Morissette, Liz Phair, and Portishead. Also closer in spirit to the work in *Girls' Night Out* is a spate of recent films written and directed by young women—such as Nicole Holofcener's *Lovely and Amazing* (2002), Rebecca Miller's *Personal Velocity* (2002), Samira Makhmalbaf's *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003), and Lisa Cholodenko's *Laurel Canyon* (2003)—which have greatly increased the number of complex female characters portrayed on the wide screen.

The evolution of a new girl culture—and the increasingly central and empowered role that girls and women have played in politics, the mass media, and other professions—finds its parallel in the art world. Feminist artists of the late 1960s and 1970s drastically changed the content of traditional media such as painting and sculpture and at the same time pushed photography, performance, video, and installation art to the fore. Using their own bodies, artists such as Valie Export, Carolee Schneemann, and Hannah Wilke brought a performative mode to their art that challenged the way that women had been portrayed—and objectified—in art and in the mass media. In her lifelong series of self-portraits, Wilke inserted her naked body into her art, and by becoming simultaneously subject and object, she both exaggerated and deflated the eroticization of the “male gaze” conventionally brought to the image of the female nude (fig. 2). Flaunting her sexuality, she aggressively confronted her audience and used the seductive potential of her femininity in performances that were gestures of sexual autonomy and empowerment.

Cindy Sherman

Untitled Film Still #6, 1977

Gelatin silver print

8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures,
New York

Wilke also made videos in the 1970s that documented and expanded on her performances, as did Eleanor Antin, Lynda Benglis, Adrian Piper, Martha Rosler, and Martha Wilson, to name a few feminists working in new media. Rosler's video *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) features a robotic housewife who wields kitchen utensils as if they were instruments of violence. Rosler's simultaneously funny and scary portrayal of this antithesis of the perfect housewife calls into question the prescribed sphere of domesticity for women while, as other commentators have noted, also alluding to "women's undeveloped power and suppressed rage."⁴ In his essay for this catalogue, Bill Horrigan references the critical contributions of the first generation of women video artists, who—in addition to challenging representations of sexuality, race, and gender—asserted female subjectivity as a legitimate subject for art.

In the late 1970s a new wave of women artists—including Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Sherrie Levine—engaged in their own brand of sexual politics, focusing on gendered representation in art, art history, the media, and popular culture. One of the most important artists of this generation was Cindy Sherman, who continued Wilke's critique of images of women that reflect a male perspective but employed new strategies for doing so. Like Wilke, Sherman works in a performative mode, serving as her own model, but unlike Wilke, she veils and disguises her own identity. In her now-famous series *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80), Sherman represented various female character types from old B movies and film noir (fig. 3). Through her reenactments of the stereotypical ways in which women and the female body have traditionally been depicted, she drew attention to the power of media images to shape ideas of female identity. Sherman's images, combining parody with social critique, often portray women as victims and flaunt their femininity, holding it at a distance.



Nan Goldin

Greer and Robert on the Bed, 1982,
from *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*

Cibachrome color print

30 x 40 in. (76.2 x 101.6 cm)

Courtesy Nan Goldin and Matthew Marks Gallery,
New York



The role of representation in defining identity was a central topic of art in the 1980s, and photography lent itself ably to this critique. The art press of the decade was dominated by discussion of the “Pictures” generation—including such artists as Kruger, Levine, Sherman, Jack Goldstein, and Richard Prince—whose work was largely characterized by the appropriation and reconstruction of pictures made by others. One notable artist of this generation who used photography but followed a distinctly different path was Nan Goldin (b. 1953). Drawing on the tradition of documentary and fashion photography, Goldin has created a highly personal and disturbing commentary by opening up her own private life and the lives of her friends and lovers to the unflinching eye of the camera (fig. 4). Her provocative images have captured the most intimate details of lives enmeshed in love, sex, drugs, violence, and addiction. Rich in saturated colors and art historical references (her images have often been compared with paintings by artists such as Caravaggio and Jan Vermeer), Goldin’s images have a low-life edginess and seductive glamour. Her glaringly brutal portraits of herself and her “tribe,” culminating in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1981–96), brought a new subjectivity and journalistic approach to the art photography of this period.

Much of the art in *Girls’ Night Out* falls somewhere between Sherman’s performative work, focused on a fictive staging of self, and Goldin’s documentary reportage, in which her subjects represent themselves. Employing what might be called a staged or performative realism, many of the artists in *Girls’ Night Out* take an almost ethnographic approach to their subjects, and it is sometimes difficult to assess the degree to which their sitters are complicit. Indeed, some of the subjects have only just met the artists and agreed to pose for them, others serve as more neutral formal elements, and still others are friends or actors playing their parts in staged tableaux.

Rineke Dijkstra

Self-Portrait, Marnixbad, Amsterdam, Netherlands, June 19, 1991, 1991

C-print

60 1/4 x 50 3/4 in. (153 x 129 cm)

Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

The Dutch artist Rineke Dijkstra began her career in the 1980s working on commission for newspapers, magazines, and annual reports. Struck by the practiced poses of the businessmen and other professionals she usually photographed, who knew exactly how they wanted to present themselves, Dijkstra gravitated in her personal work to portraits that would have, in her words, a “naked immediacy.” Her early work has been described as being situated somewhere between the photographs of August Sander (1876–1964) and Diane Arbus (1923–1971), two major influences acknowledged by the artist. Dijkstra shares Sander’s systematic, taxonomic approach to portraiture in combination with tremendous sensitivity to the individual’s expression, gesture, posture, and costume. Like Arbus, she reveals the unusual lurking beneath the everyday, and she shares Arbus’s often-quoted goal of working in “the gap between intention and effect.”

In the early 1990s Dijkstra began a series of bathers that epitomized what would become her trademark blending of a formal classicism with psychological intensity. The series started in the Netherlands with her own self-portrait, taken after a long and exhausting swim (fig. 5), then moved to beaches in the United States and, after that, Eastern Europe. In the United States she was struck by what seemed to her a particularly American sensibility among teenagers, “who take their examples from photos in glamour magazines they want to imitate.”⁵ In *Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, USA, June 24, 1992* (1992; fig. 1), the subject, a teenage beauty queen who seems to be pulling in her stomach as she tries to strike a natural pose, evinces an underlying anxiety. For Dijkstra, the self-consciousness of posing reveals something essential about her subjects. Her camera manages to portray, in her words, “what we don’t want to show anymore but still feel.”⁶

Dijkstra’s video installation *The Buzz Club, Liverpool, England / Mystery World, Zaandam, Netherlands* (1996–97; fig. 27)



Sarah Jones

The Dining Room Table (III), 1998

C-print on aluminum

60 x 60 in. (150 x 150 cm)

Courtesy Maureen Paley Interim Art, London

features young clubbers at a Liverpool disco and a Dutch techno club. Delving more deeply into the phenomenon of adolescence, she invited teenagers at the nightclubs to dance for the camera. The twenty-six-minute video is a mesmerizing look at kids responding to the thumping disco-techno music blasting in the clubs, just off camera. Dijkstra's technique is part cinema vérité, part ethnographic document (of youth fashion, facial expressions, and body language). At first, viewers—feeling like voyeurs—are as uncomfortable as the subjects being portrayed, but they are ultimately swept into the spirit of the video as the young dancers waver between awkward self-consciousness and ecstatic loss of self, transported by their sensual immersion in the music and dance. Says Dijkstra: “In the process of photographing it becomes clear to me what I am looking for. Usually it's closely related to my own experience. In the disco girls, I recognise my own desire for rapture.”⁷

British artist Sarah Jones also focuses primarily on portraiture, but she broadens the frame to include details of architectural interiors and landscapes. The privileged homes of bourgeois British families serve as one of the central settings for her carefully composed domestic environments. Appearing placid and serene, subdued teenage girls sit in suspended animation, as if their lives were on hold (fig. 6). An almost claustrophobic impression of confinement makes it seem all the more crucial that the girls move on. Their outward indifference belies a subconscious struggle for self-discovery, further suggested by the occasional subject crouching beneath a table or by Jones's complementary series of photographs of recently vacated couches in psychoanalysts' offices (fig. 59). The contradictions and tensions at the heart of this work, in which the staid settings stand in stark contrast to the emotional turmoil commonly associated with adolescence, energize the works and create a dramatic subtext.





Jones's rich and elegant compositions have been compared with those of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish masters, who were keenly aware of the significance of rooms as well as the gestures of the people in them. Other works sometimes suggest art historical references to painters such as Piero della Francesca, Diego Velázquez, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Edouard Manet. In her series entitled *Actor*, she worked with professional actors, who were directed to assume a static pose and mimic the gaze of one of the figures from Piero's *Brera Altarpiece* (1472–74). Writing about the Renaissance painter, the art historian Bernard Berenson noted that Piero's figures “exude a strange inverse reaction between expression and expressiveness: they show no emotion, yet arouse a strong response in us.”⁸ In the same way that Jones denied the actors their method and their identity, the girls in her domestic interiors and landscapes tend to mask their personalities before the camera. Recalling Ingres's society portraits of the mid-nineteenth century, in which his poised female sitters gaze out blankly but enigmatically, Jones's portraits take on a hypnotic aura of mysterious reverie.

In contrast to Jones's carefully staged photographs, the work of New York artist Katy Grannan is more candid in nature (fig. 7). Grannan—who, like Jones, often references European painting—makes portraits of anonymous, middle-class Americans. Grannan's technique is straightforward: she places ads in small-town newspapers, soliciting subjects to pose for photographs in their own houses and milieus and making it clear that the photographer is a female artist. It has been argued that photography depends on the art of seduction and accommodation—skills at which women are often particularly adept. The number of responses Grannan receives to her ads, and the openness of her sitters, may well be a result of her gender. As the photojournalist Mary Ellen Mark observed: “I can walk down any street in the world and knock on the door, and they'll let me in.

Women are less threatening and have an easier time getting access to strangers.”⁹ Grannan’s remarkably intimate portraits of relative strangers are striking evidence of this.

Grannan shares with Rineke Dijkstra, whose work she admired as a student in the graduate photography department at Yale University, an interest in “transformative” moments. Grannan tries to find the moment when her subjects have let go of their own pose but have not yet assumed a new one. Their choices of clothing, gestures, and settings for the photographs, although sometimes amended by the artist, are highly revealing. Many of the young women who answer her ads are posing without their parents’ knowledge, and an unspoken sense of secrecy and complicity bonds artist and sitter. The awkward familiarity of her subjects’ unremarkable domestic surroundings (often their childhood homes), which Grannan manages to transform into theatrical settings, elicits a voyeuristic interest and empathy.

More successful as poseurs are Daniela Rossell’s subjects, who are often members of the Mexican upper class. Rossell’s young female sitters seem closer to the female stereotypes of Cindy Sherman’s photographs than to the real people featured in Grannan or Dijkstra’s portraits. Although most of Rossell’s images are not staged by the artist, it is almost impossible to distinguish between the sitters’ images of themselves and their “authentic” selves. Taking an ethnographic approach to society portraiture, Rossell suggests the intricate merging of her sitters’ subjective and social identities, in the same way that their personal aesthetics have become indistinguishable from designer fantasies. The quasi-baroque interiors captured by Rossell are even more claustrophobic than those in Jones’s photographs, and the sitters’ gestures and expressions are even more closely guarded.

In her series *Ricas y famosas*, Rossell’s subjects are family members, friends, and acquaintances, and this creates an unusual sense of intimacy between artist and sitter. Aware that the artist would be

publishing these photographs, the subjects nonetheless seem unconscious of how the images might be interpreted by the public. The pretentious surroundings, designer clothes, and other signs of excessive consumption reveal lavishly lived fantasies that would be right at home on the TV show *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Rossell's portraits convey a dizzyingly surreal effect. One image, reminiscent of Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (after 1482), shows a woman, scantily draped in diaphanous blue tulle, standing in precarious rapture at the edge of an infinity pool elevated high above a sweeping view of the wealthy suburbs of Monterrey, Mexico (fig. 8). This large-format print—with its striking panoramic composition and radiant palette of blues, aquas, and greens—exemplifies the strength and power of Rossell's visual vocabulary. Equally surreal is the formidable success of the illusion created by her sitters, whose sheer theatricality ironically highlights their vulnerability.

A world away from the opulence and illusion of Rossell's photographs, Iranian-born Shirana Shahbazi focuses on the mundane aspects of life in Iran. Although her images are documentary in style and some are shot spontaneously on the street, most are staged. In her ongoing series *Goftare Nik (Good Words)* (2000–2003; fig. 9), she juxtaposes her reportage-like photographs with paintings made in collaboration with billboard painters (figs. 72, 73). The latter images, which show women in veils and austere ayatollahs, correspond to Western stereotypes. Her own images—of women and men, mothers and children, working women, landscapes, and cityscapes—are widely diverse and not immediately identifiable as portrayals of Iran and its people.

The artist, who grew up and was educated in Germany, was born in Tehran and makes regular trips there to create new work. Her own bicultural experience allows for a transcultural approach. In her site-specific, floor-to-ceiling montage arrangements, she juxtaposes



paintings with photographs, the familiar with the foreign: an image of a young veiled woman smoking a cigarette, next to a picture of an old-fashioned Iranian billboard, next to a photograph of an urban freeway. Celebrating and finding beauty in banality and offering an alternative to cultural clichés, she does not pass judgment as she examines the often contradictory identity of Iran, and especially Iranian women, today—poised between Islamic tradition and contemporary Western life.

The work of Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila finds its own unique balance between the documentary and the staged, between fact and fiction. Her filmic and still works combine the skills of a visual artist and filmmaker who cuts through complex narratives to touch on psychological revelations. (Ahtila attended art school and UCLA's Film, TV, Theater, and Multimedia Studio program.) While employing documentary techniques, she interweaves special and surrealistic effects to dramatize her ideas. Ahtila's *If 6 Was 9* (1995–96; fig. 31) is a video installation and film about teenage girls and sexuality. The piece, based on research and real events, includes recollections from the artist and others of their own experiences of sexual awakening, but she places these stories in the mouths of five teenage girls, ages thirteen to fifteen. Through the conflation of the women's words and the girls' voices, Ahtila alludes to the complexity of identity, suggesting that each individual is a composite of past and present selves that is continually being reconstituted.

In *If 6 Was 9*, Ahtila presented a girl's-eye view of life that is raw in its honesty. She has continued to borrow from documentary research and personal experiences while moving her narratives into the quicksand terrain of psychotic behavior, including hallucinations, obsessions, and phobias. Footage from some of these longer dramatizations was edited to make *Lahja—The Present* (2001; figs. 32–35), a group of five one-to-two-minute DVDs presented on five

monitors (it also includes thirty-second TV spots made at the same time as the installation itself). In this work Ahtila displays her remarkable capacity to plunge the viewer into the narrative's most urgent moments. "The Bridge," for instance, follows the painful progress of a woman who knows that she is acting crazy but can cross a bridge in her neighborhood only by crawling across it on her hands and knees (fig. 30). In another segment, Ahtila focuses on an adolescent girl on her way home from school. As the girl walks into her barren yard, she carefully bypasses a mud puddle, hesitates, looks up at the house (is someone watching her?) and back down again; then she promptly returns to lie down on her back in the middle of the puddle (fig. 26). After lying there for a minute, she gets up, covered with wet mud, and walks into the house. At the close of each segment, there is a text that reads: "Give yourself a present, forgive yourself." Combining tough scrutiny with immense empathy, Ahtila creates powerful works that address desire and loss, catharsis and survival.

Ahtila has exerted a critical influence on a younger generation of Finnish artists, including Salla Tykkä, whose more autobiographical works explore her personal struggle with the social and cultural constructs of femininity. In her earliest work, which documents her own coming of age, she presents the female body as a battleground, riven by external pressures and internal demons. In an early video, *Bitch—Portrait of the Happy One* (1997), Tykkä presents herself as a glamour girl, stepping out of a limousine, walking down a red carpet, surrounded by adoring fans. In a series of three photographs entitled *Sick*, *More Sick*, and *The Sickest One* (1997; figs. 14–16), she found a way to deal with anorexia, staging her recurring fears as a way to combat them.¹⁰

Tykkä sometimes employs Ahtila's quasi-surreal, cinematic approach to the moving image. The artist's recent video *Thriller* (2001;



fig. 79) explores the feelings of a girl confronted by her own sexual awakening. With a highly charged resonance (and deep, vaginal reds) that evokes the films of Ingmar Bergman and David Lynch, in which the lines between dream and reality are often blurred, Tykkä creates a scenario stretched taut by the sexual tension between a man and a young girl (father and daughter?). Rather than portraying the young girl as a passive victim, she presents a role reversal. When the protagonist is unable to act on her desire, she turns to violence. Tykkä further intensifies the piece's psychological punch by leaving the narrative open-ended, raising unanswered questions about the girl's consciousness of her own motivation and the man's role in awakening her desire.

Tykkä's uninhibited exploration of female sexuality comes after years of discourse about the representation of women in art and the mass media. As an artist and a teacher, Dorit Cypis has played an important role in this discourse, which is reflected in the evolution of her own body of work. Cypis—who was born in Israel, grew up in Canada, and lives in Los Angeles—has consistently prodded cultural assumptions about female identity, and her subjective exploration of identity anticipated the sensibility found in *Girls' Night Out*. Her interactive portraits of the 1980s gave her performers control over their own representation as she allowed them to pose in response to projected images, often from the subject's personal archive. This work was inspired by the same drive that directs Cypis's activities outside conventional art making. For instance, she founded an interactive arts program, called Kulture Klub, that brings together artists and inner-city homeless and at-risk youth, and she is currently enrolled in a graduate program in mediation.

In her pivotal work *Yield (the Body)* (1989; fig. 10), Cypis called attention to the difference between “the gaze of the woman” and “the gaze by the woman.” Characteristically open and unfettered by

Dorit Cypis

Yield (the Body), 1989

Installation details

C-prints

Variable dimensions

Photographers (from top to bottom):

Nan Goldin, Ann Marsden, and

Linda Brooks

Collection of the Walker Art Center,
Minneapolis; T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund,

1993

inhibition, the piece includes a large nude self-portrait, along with twenty-eight small nude photographs of the artist that she commissioned from four other female photographers (including Nan Goldin), in an attempt to see how women looked at other women, as opposed to the familiar “male gaze” of art and pornography. Cypis’s gentle sensuality affirms female sexuality and its centrality in women’s lives (as well as in the domain of feminist ideology).

Throughout the 1990s Cypis has further shifted her focus from the gendered body to the ineffable body (memory, time, location). Her willingness to delve deeper into subjective exploration has resulted in a powerful new group of images. As in her earlier installations and environments, the large scale of the photographs and their disorienting layers of imagery place the viewer both inside (the interior experience) and outside (the direct experience) what becomes a private and public space. The multiple planes and refractions of *Prisoner’s Dilemma 1* (2002; fig. 44) create a double reality. As we determine whether or not we are looking at the artist herself or at her reflection, her physicality becomes secondary. Do we know only what we see, or do we see what we somehow already know? For Cypis, the mirror, which allows one to see and be seen, functions as an indefinable interval between perception and phenomenon, between the observable body and intuitive essence. In *The Rest in Motion 2* (2002; fig. 12), human presence is suggested through its absence, replaced by the swelling forms of a curtain blowing in the wind. Its sensual allure suggests the strangeness of an out-of-body experience and our daily navigation of the dimensions of consciousness. The seductive shape—of curtain or human—is ultimately a temporal experience, a destabilized subjectivity.

Sharing with Cypis an interest in the metaphysical, California-based Kelly Nipper explores the relationship between motion, time, the body, and space. In an early performance piece,



11
Kelly Nipper
Movement with Chalk, 1998
Framed chromogenic process color print
49 x 63 in. (124.5 x 160 cm)
Courtesy galleria francesca kaufmann, Milan

12
Dorit Cypis
The Rest in Motion 2, 2002
Cat. no. 26

BLOND (1995), a person, almost completely wrapped in white terry cloth, with only an opening for the mouth, hovered in a subzero room, chewing gum and silently blowing bubbles. The eerie, enigmatic quality of this performance and the minimal aesthetic of its white-on-white environment prefigure Nipper's later installations, photographs, and videos in which actions appear to happen outside of time. In her large-scale photographs, such as *Movement with Chalk* (1998; fig. 11), in which a young woman conjures a magical cloud of chalk dust, the figures seem to be performing silent meditations. Her exquisitely staged and balanced tableaux, whether they feature figures or still-life objects, are marked by a poetic quietude.

Nipper's recent video entitled *Bending Water into a Heart Shape* (2003; fig. 66) bridges stillness with continuous motion. Setting herself and her subject an impossible task, Nipper worked with a young dancer and a martial arts instructor for months to perform the sustained movement of an ice skater's triple-lutz jump, extended over a period of one hour. Instead of filming the lutz and slowing down its split-second movement, Nipper filmed in real time, working with the dancer to create a highly controlled, excruciatingly slow-moving Butoh-like performance. Influenced by the American choreographer Merce Cunningham, her multiscreen video captures the intensity of the challenge that the dancer and the artist set for themselves, allowing us to observe their humanity when they fail to achieve perfection.

Finnish-born Elina Brotherus also takes a poignant approach to failure in an entirely different setting: the student and her teacher in the dance studio. In her single-channel video *Lesson* (1998; fig. 28), the artist is the beleaguered student, attempting to perform a short and simple ballet but unable to follow the directions of her teacher. Berated by the teacher for her missteps, Brotherus captures the humiliating experience of youthful failure with the humor and



retrospect of an adult. She is not afraid to confront her own weaknesses and imperfections. For instance, *Revenue* (1999; fig. 41) portrays the artist's arrival in France for a period of residency. Standing in her new, minimally furnished room, in a country where she does not yet grasp the language, she looks utterly bereft, like a lost little girl. Brotherus's autobiographical works follow one young woman's attempts to find her place in the world; her formal asceticism and critical distance are countered by the intimacy of her self-scrutiny.

Brotherus presents herself in a simple, unaffected way that is disarming in its directness and breathtaking in its beauty. During the period when she made works such as *Love Bites II* (1999; fig. 13) and *Femme à sa toilette* (2001; fig. 40), she kept her camera on a tripod in a corner of her room in order to grow accustomed to its presence. That way, she could more readily photograph herself in an emotionally unguarded state before pulling herself together. Brotherus's work is compelled not so much by the perspective of a seasoned feminist as by the seemingly limitless possibilities that she faces in defining her own identity. In her art, as in so much of the imagery in *Girls' Night Out*, one is struck by the loneliness of the pursuit and the sense of displacement that accompanies meaningful self-exploration.

The artists in *Girls' Night Out*, each in her own very distinct way, seek to strip away or unveil the outward trappings of womanhood. In contrast to Cindy Sherman's remarkable review of the myriad masks imposed on and worn by women, the work in *Girls' Night Out* reflects an interest in what's beneath the surface. In getting inside the bodies and minds of her subjects, Ahtila exposes the impact on women's psyches of constructing and wearing the mask. Dijkstra waits patiently behind her camera for the moment when the mask drops. Grannan works with her youthful models to find a place outside the pose. Tykkä struggles to free herself from imposed social models by sharing some of the most painful and intimate moments of



growing up. The formal beauty of Nipper's work coexists with the chance occurrences and self-revelations beneath the surface. Shahbazi's girls and women navigate the contradictory divide between Islamic tradition and modern Western society, literally between veiling and unveiling. The masked faces of Jones's adolescent subjects cast a pall over her scenes, their composed expressions locked into prescribed roles and premature atrophy. Rossell reminds us of the entrapment of the mask, of its ability to subsume or subvert the self. In her innumerable self-portraits and landscapes, Brotherus shares the lonely pursuit of self-determination outside social imperatives. Cypis suggests the ongoing desire for self-discovery and an openness to the unknown—she reminds us of the possibilities in letting the mask slip away.

As a mother with two girls on the brink of adolescence, I am particularly aware of the ironic gap between our positions. While they are working to create their own mature identities, I am struggling to retain aspects of their childhood selves—not so much their innocence, but their openness to new experiences and feelings. My recognition of my desire to transcend this divide brings me to an exploration of uncertainty and multiple possibilities. In her essay in this volume, Taru Elfving, drawing on postmodernist feminist psychoanalytic theory, argues that the fluid and evolving nature of the adolescent girl's identity—her inability, as child-woman, to fit neatly into categories of age and gender—makes her a particularly compelling subject. As Elfving points out, “there is radical potential in this impossible position.”

Through their exploration of this potential, the artists in *Girls' Night Out* offer a multiplicity of glimpses into the personal and social space that we inhabit today. They confidently portray girls and women, as well as boys and men, in relation to private and public contexts, without the need to challenge or critique stereotypes and, perhaps more significantly, with a critical honesty that transcends

satire and irony, putting their faith in the power of the unconscious and the unseen. In their works, identity is less about socially assigned roles and more about an investigation of subjective experience. The images they present are at once poetic and disturbing, haunting and beautiful, groundbreaking and classic. Here the “girl” does not represent the feminine per se but instead embodies a vulnerability and at the same time a sense of unbounded potentiality that are essentially human.

NOTES

1. Artist's statement, 2001.
2. Simon Taylor, “The Women Artists' Movement: From Radical to Cultural Feminism, 1969–1975,” in *Personal and Political: The Women's Art Movement, 1969–1975*, exh. cat. (East Hampton, N.Y.: Guild Hall Museum, 2002), 29.
3. Ann Powers, quoted in Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 134.
4. Yolanda M. López and Moira Roth, “Social Protest: Racism and Sexism,” in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 152.
5. Rineke Dijkstra, in “The Naked Immediacy of Photography” (interview with Claire Bishop), *Flash Art*, no. 203 (November–December 1998): 88.
6. Rineke Dijkstra, interview with Jessica Morgan, in *Portraits: Rineke Dijkstra*, exh. cat. (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, in collaboration with Hatje Cantz, 2001), 79.
7. *Ibid.*, 12.
8. See John Slyce, “On Time, Narration, and Performative Realism: The Photographs of Sarah Jones,” in *Sarah Jones*, exh. cat. (Essen: Museum Folkwang, 2000), 108.
9. Deborah Solomon, “The Women behind Photography's New Golden Age,” *New York Times*, 9 September 2001.
10. I'm indebted here to Taru Elfving's insightful writings about Tykkä.



42
Dorit Cypis
Reversibility, 2001
Cat. no. 19

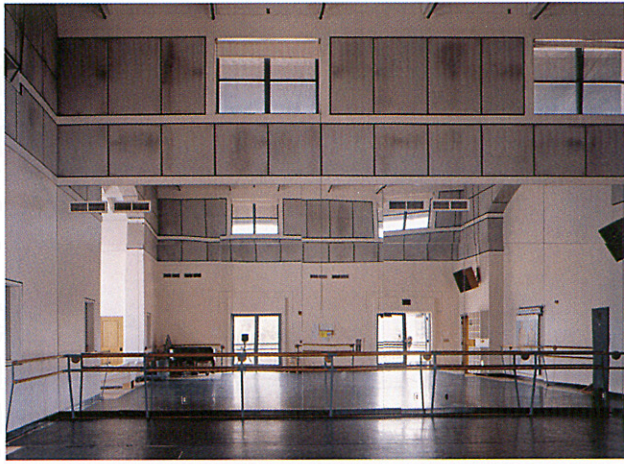
Working in photography, video, performance, installation, and social actions since the late 1970s, Dorit Cypis has pursued an ongoing investigation of the politics of representation and formal explorations of the complexities of looking, seeing, and being seen. From early performative video works and immersive slide-projection installations that confronted viewers with their complicity within the image, including projects in the late 1980s and early 1990s involving her naked body or direct gaze, to more recent large-scale photographs featuring visually disorienting and almost indecipherable spaces, Cypis has created works that engage viewers on visual, social, psychological, and phenomenological levels.

Mirrors, reflective surfaces, and images of the camera itself are some of the recurring elements in Cypis's most recent works exploring perception and the body in relation to social and interior space, as both physical and metaphysical. In the diptych entitled *Reversibility* (2001; fig. 42), she stands in a spare dance studio between a large mirror and a row of windows. With her camera next to her in the center of the room, she twists her head and torso as if attempting to see her back—a view of her body that she can obtain only with the help of a mirror's reflection. With the shutter release cable under her foot, Cypis shot *Reversibility's* images with the camera's lens aimed toward the mirror. Not only does the mirror function here as a site of reflection on the artist's body, it serves as a disorienting device calling into question the viewer's position in relation to this image and collapses the space between the viewer and the subject.

Cypis returned to the highly reflective space of a dance studio in *Dancer's Dilemma 1* and *Dancer's Dilemma 2* (2002; fig. 43). In these images the camera's lens once again points toward and is reflected in the studio's mirrored wall. Seams between large sections of mirror have the effect of fracturing and disrupting the image of this space. While the artist's body was prominent in *Reversibility*, in these images it is all but absent.

In one image her crouched and barely detectable form appears peeking into the room from a reflected glass doorway, while in the second image the glass door is closed, and only a suggestion of her body is visible outside. Is the subject's body outside the physical photograph, outside the photographed space, outside the social space of the viewer, or deflected onto the viewer's body? A large poster against a side wall illustrating the musculature of the human body now appears in the dance studio—a subtle stand-in for the now "absent" physical body.

Cypis's photographic spaces become further complicated and disorienting in *Prisoner's Dilemma 1* and *Prisoner's Dilemma 2* (2002; figs. 44, 45), which were produced in conjunction with a project Cypis initiated with the Harbor Justice Center Superior Court House in Orange County. After teaching a class at the University of California, Irvine, that explored the visual codes of the courts (which involved studying the procedures of the justice system and interviewing many of the employees of the Justice Center), Cypis was granted access to the facility's temporary jail cells for a photo shoot. Of particular visual and conceptual importance to her was the fact that this jail was designed as a panopticon, a structure created to provide complete observation of every prisoner.¹ From within a small room of one-way mirrored glass built in the center of a larger room surrounded by and facing jail cells that hug its periphery, guards of this facility are able to watch the prisoners. Since one-way mirrored glass is reflective on one side, when prisoners look in the direction of their guards, all they see is themselves, never quite sure if they are being watched and by whom. It is within this disorienting architecture that Cypis positioned herself and her camera, creating two images that feature both her body and the camera's form trapped in a virtually unknowable space where reflective surfaces and reflected images create a sense of dislocation and displacement.



43
Dorit Cypis
Dancer's Dilemma 1, 2002
Cat. no. 20

44
Dorit Cypis
Prisoner's Dilemma 1, 2002
Cat. no. 23

45
Dorit Cypis
Prisoner's Dilemma 2, 2002
Cat. no. 24

The disorienting images of *Prisoner's Dilemma 1* and *Prisoner's Dilemma 2* evoke the French philosopher and social critic Michel Foucault's fascination with the panopticon and how such a structure of domination based on complete observation is the essence of power, having far more oppressive potential than physical control over a body.² Not only do Cypis's images suggest the power dilemma faced by prisoners, never sure if and when they are being watched, but it also creates a dilemma for viewers, since their position relative to the structure of the panopticon is also confused and destabilized. Questions of who and where is the "prisoner" lead to questions about where power lies. Cypis borrowed the title *Prisoner's Dilemma* from negotiation theory. It describes a hypothetical situation in which two criminals are accused of the same crime and jailed in separate cells. They cannot communicate with each other while each separately attempts to negotiate his or her freedom with the authorities. What neither prisoner knows is that one's negotiation depends on the other's. In Cypis's photographs this allegory becomes an instructive morality play on the relationship between the viewer and the viewed.

From an oppressive structure of confinement, Cypis moves to an exhilarating expression of release in two images titled *The Rest in Motion* (2002; p.5, fig. 12). In these images she captures views of a large curtain as it billows from an open window, set in motion by the force of turbulent winds. Shot from inside a hotel room in Tel Aviv, Israel, during a storm, these two images capture the curtain as it becomes wildly animated. As the curtain expands and collapses, attempting to break free of the visual and physical confines of the window frame and any fixed orientation of either inside or outside, it almost appears to breathe. Although the physical body is absent in these images, this curtain becomes a surrogate body, restless, determined, and euphoric.

The seductive restlessness of Cypis's curtains escalates to fury in another related work, *Mixed Motives* (2002; fig. 47), a large image of the Pacific Ocean during a dramatic storm. *Mixed Motives*, whose title is derived from a negotiation term implying the use of more than one strategy, is marked by a violent ocean with waves crashing on the beach that send foam and spray into the air. This agitated shoreline contrasts sharply with an opening of calm blue sky above—an unexpected respite in an otherwise tumultuous scene. A further and perhaps ultimate release comes in *Inside-Out* (2002; fig. 46), a series of utterly still images made in a peaceful, exotic interior space. Situated inside a thatch-roofed room structure in Tulum, Mexico, Cypis's camera now points toward the room's open windows, framing palm fronds angling down from the roof and overlooking a lush, green landscape. The bright sun outside contrasts with the vast, dark interior of this room, creating a meditative and reassuring space that becomes calming both visually and mentally. Once again, the body is absent in *Inside-Out* and yet, as with *The Rest in Motion* and *Mixed Motives*, images Cypis deliberately installs in relation to *Prisoner's Dilemma* and *Dancer's Dilemma*, they speak to the interior world of the body/mind. With traces of each image adding meaning to the others, these works embody various psychic states, often impacting the viewer on a visceral level.

NOTES

1. English philosopher and theorist of British legal reform Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) proposed the architectural innovation of the panopticon as a design for safer prisons. The "all-seeing" panopticon called for a prison space constructed as a circular arrangement of inward-facing jail cells, at the center of which is an observation station with special shutters or windows to prevent the prisoners from seeing the guards. The central goal of the panopticon was control through both isolation and the possibility of constant surveillance.
2. See Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195–228.



