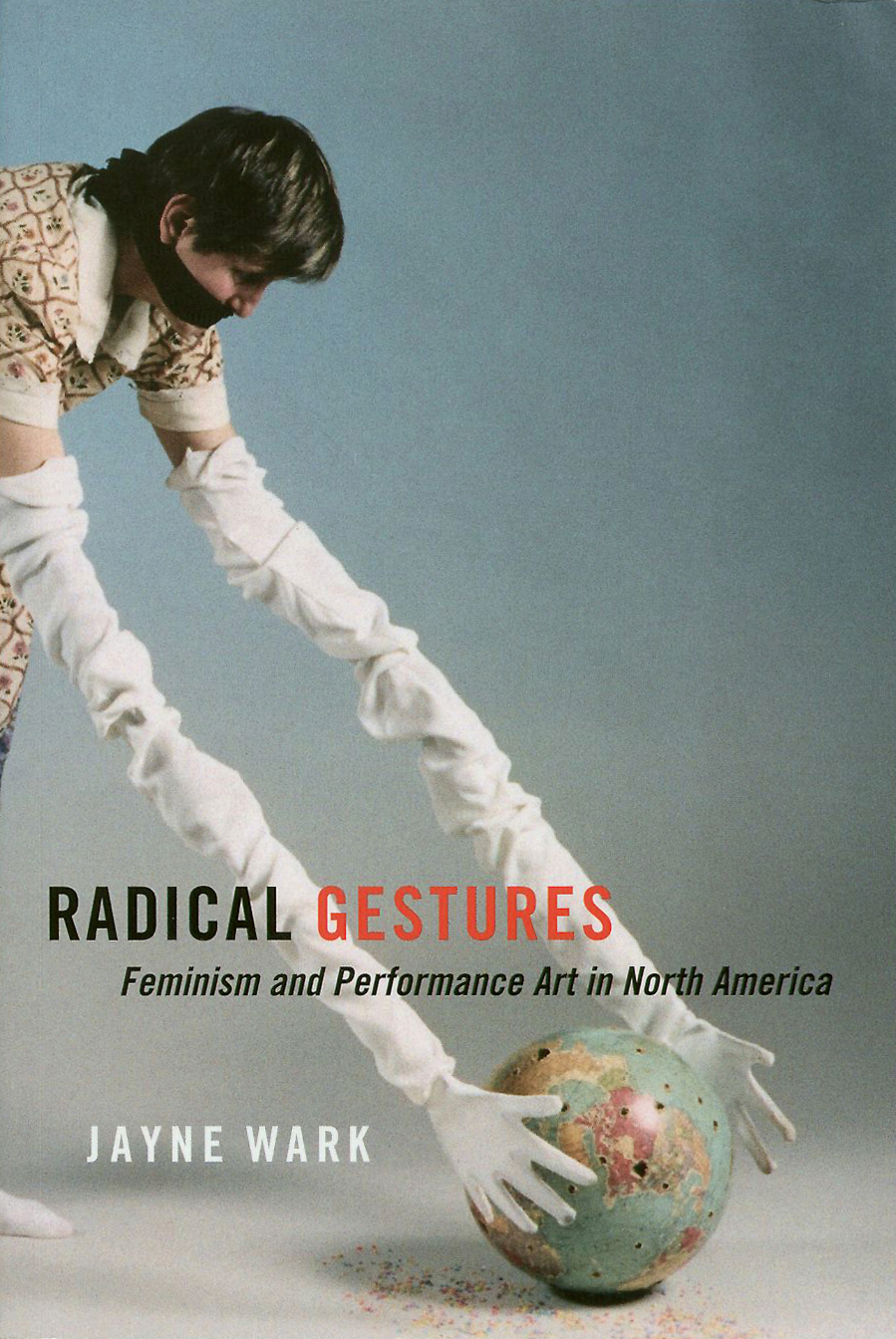

RADICAL GESTURES
Feminism and Performance Art in North America
JAYNE WARK

6

Embodiment and Representation

BODIES OF DIFFERENCE

The history of feminist performance has often been viewed as primarily occupied with the female body and its representation. For example, in her 1997 book *The Explicit Body in Performance*, Rebecca Schneider explains that she has coined the phrase "explicit body" as a way to explore "the explosive literality at the heart of much feminist performance art and performative actions."[1] Amelia Jones's 1998 book *Body Art: Performing the Subject* does not exclusively concentrate on female artists, but she argues that work by feminist and "otherwise nonnormative artists who particularize their bodies/selves" is central to her thesis that the significance of body art is its ability "to expose and challenge the masculinism embedded in the assumption of 'disinterestedness' behind conventional art history and criticism."[2] While I have argued that the history of feminist performance cannot be encompassed solely within the parameters of a focus on "the body," it is undeniable that the body has been an imperative and pervasive concern in feminist performance from early days to the present. Over this period of time, a wealth of theoretical and critical writing on the body and its politics has developed, which can be brought to bear profitably on the historical investigation of feminist performance art undertaken in this study. This chapter will begin by addressing why the body is important to feminist discourse and by summarizing the key theoretical positions regarding its potential as a site of critical resistance before moving into a detailed analysis of how and what the body and its representations have

come to signify within the histories of feminist performance and the writing about it.

The anthropologist Mary Douglas has shown that the body operates symbolically within the social rules and rituals of all cultures for the primary purpose of "the ordering of a social hierarchy."[3] Taking this as the departure point for her succinct overview of writing on the history of the body in Western culture, Janet Wolff cites a range of studies that have examined efforts to bring the body under social control by suppressing bodily appetites and desires in order to serve the ideologies of bourgeois capitalism and its need for a "reliable, docile, regular workforce, [and] its dependence on the self-regulation of its subjects."[4] But if all bodies in all cultures come under forms of social control, feminism asks what role the regulation of bodies has had in positioning women as subordinate to men within a hierarchy of sexual difference. This question was first addressed by Simone de Beauvoir, who, we recall, concluded that man has named himself the self and woman the other, thus promising himself the transcendence of the mind, while consigning woman to the immanence of the body. Man imagines himself free of such immanence because "he thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively." De Beauvoir conceded that the "facts" of biology might make it more difficult for a woman to become a self but noted that these "facts" did not preclude this self-becoming since "there is no true living reality except as manifested by the conscious individual through activities and in the bosom of society."[5]

De Beauvoir's prescient declaration that woman is made, not born, has been foundational to feminist thought, yet her notions of sexual difference and political strategy have not gone unchallenged. For post-structural feminists, de Beauvoir's faith in dialectical resolution as an emancipatory strategy is troubling. De Beauvoir believed that since the difference women embody was as yet *unrepresented* – except as defective other – the task of feminism was to bring this entity into representation through ideology critique and thus lay claim to a subjectivity on par with that of men.[6] By contrast, Luce Irigaray has argued that women's "otherness" is not just as-yet-unrepresented, but also *unrepresentable* within the existing framework. Because woman is defined in a negative relation to patriarchy as waste or excess, no simple reversal of the order of things is possible. Thus the goal of equality is illusory because it can be achieved only by assimilating women into the mascu-

line regimes of thought and practice. In the long run, history would repeat itself, she writes, and "revert to sameness: to phallocratism. It would leave room neither for women's sexuality, nor for women's imaginary, nor for women's language to take (their) place."[7] Irigaray urges women not to erase or disembody sexual difference but to assert its specificity and to redefine it as a positive entity.

These two streams of thought have produced a polemical clash between those who, like de Beauvoir, struggle for equality by identifying and eradicating the ways that sexual difference has been used as a pejorative sign of the "feminine" and those who, like Irigaray, uphold sexual difference as a political strategy for envisioning new modes of language, knowledge, and embodied experience. Although these two traditions have sometimes been regarded as mutually exclusive, Rosi Braidotti has argued that we should see them "as complementary and part of a continuous historical evolution."[8] She advocates that feminists should struggle both to change the historical asymmetry of the sexes *and* to question the categories that this asymmetry has produced and that feminism proposes to deconstruct. Braidotti shares the skepticism of theorists like Teresa de Lauretis, Monique Wittig, Judith Butler, and Donna Haraway that the category of gender is itself a regulatory fiction that both normalizes sexual difference and obscures other kinds of differences among women.[9] But, like Denise Riley, Braidotti proposes that feminists should think and act from the proposition of "as if." As Riley put it, "it is compatible to suggest that 'women' don't exist – while maintaining a politics of 'as if they existed' – since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did."[10] In Braidotti's view, we can acknowledge that the primary site of subjective location is the body – not as a natural entity but as the site of intersection between the biological, the social, the material, and the symbolic. The parodic, paradoxical, and conditional mode of "as if" allows women to reject the presumed universalism of the subject while still accepting the signifier *woman* as the subject of discourse without having either to define what that is or to exclude the differences among women.[11]

These insights are useful for considerations of how women artists have used their bodies in performance and representation as well as for considerations of the debates that have arisen regarding such practices. At the core of these debates is the question of whether women's bodies, so heavily marked by preexisting meanings of sexual hierarchy and objectification, can be the site of feminist political intervention without being

reappropriated into these dominant meanings.[12] These debates, which will be discussed in more detail below, have now come to be framed within a generational model in which 1970s feminists' supposedly naive and "essentialist" ideas about the body and sexuality were displaced by the "anti-essentialist" discourse analysis of 1980s feminists, who in turn have been criticized by "third-generation" feminists for failing to address the primacy of the "real" physical body and for thus causing the denigration and subsequent neglect of early feminist art.[13] Although this process of feminist self-critique is necessary and valuable, the use of generational periodizing as the basis for polemical dispute is problematic. For one thing, while it is certainly appropriate and timely for feminists today to redress the inaccurate characterization of early feminist art as reductively essentialist, this should not come at the cost of belittling the important contributions made to feminist discourse during the 1980s as now "calcified into an orthodoxy," as Susan Kandel puts it.[14] For another thing, we should we be skeptical of historical readings that diminish the legitimacy of earlier critical perspectives by privileging our own as more correct or accurate. As Griselda Pollock urges, we need to allow feminism to exist as a "space for momentary conjunctions and creative conflict" that neither flattens out its historical process nor obscures our own positions within it.[15]

BODY WARS

"Your Body Is a Battleground" declaimed Barbara Kruger in one of her art-advertisements of the 1980s. Since the early 1970s, feminists had waged a struggle for control over their own bodies in legal, political, medical, and cultural domains. As Lisa Tickner has noted, women had only to look around in the realms of both art and popular culture to see that they were everywhere but nowhere, except as the mediating sign for the male.[16] For all their ubiquitous presence, the endless parade of women's bodies signified nothing but the fantasies of representation, fantasies that, in de Lauretis's words, rendered women "unrepresentable except as representation."[17] Pushing their own bodies and selves into this terrain of absence and "lack," feminist performance artists produced an unexpected – and sometimes threatening – clash between literal bodies and the symbolic meanings that they convey.

This was no easy task. From the late 1960s into the early 1970s, body art, a development from both Minimalism and Conceptualism,

was thoroughly dominated by male artists.[18] As discussed in chapter 2, this contradicts the frequently expressed view that performance appealed to women in this period because it was a new and open field that had not already been staked and claimed by male artists. In fact, Lucy Lippard's groundbreaking essay "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art" makes it clear that women had good reason at the time to perceive the field of body art as hostile terrain. She wrote that "from 1967 to 1971 when Bruce Nauman was 'Thighing,' Vito Acconci was masturbating, Dennis Oppenheim was sunbathing and burning, and Barry Le Va was slamming into walls," it seemed highly unlikely that body art would "appeal to vulnerable women artists just emerging from isolation," especially since they faced the danger that their intentions would be misunderstood: "A woman using her own face and body has a right to do what she will with them, but it is a subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of women to expose that insult." Lippard also noted that although there is an element of exhibitionism in all body art, a woman who used her body was in a situation of double jeopardy, particularly if she was physically attractive. She risked not only having her image reappropriated as an object of male sexual desire, but also eliciting accusations of narcissism and self-indulgence. Lippard wryly stated that "Because women are considered sex objects, it is taken for granted that any woman who presents her nude body in public is doing so because she thinks she is beautiful. She is a narcissist, and Acconci, with his less romantic image and pimply back, is an artist."[19]

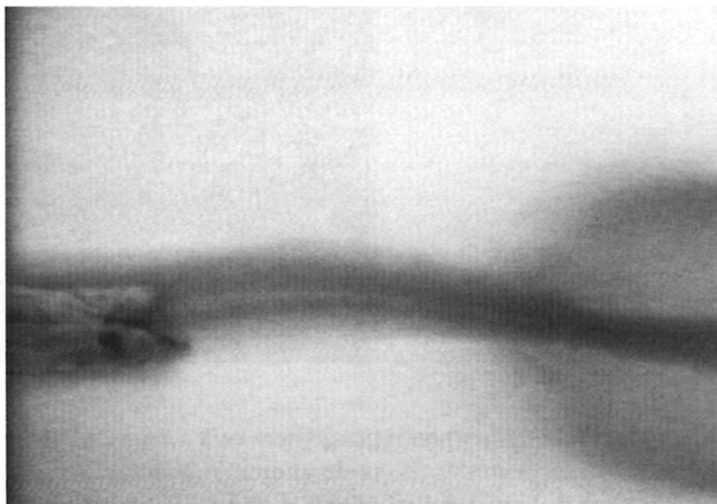
Lippard alluded to the danger that women might inadvertently collude in their own objectification and to the particular conundrum arising from the fact that a woman's sexuality was seen not only as inseparable from her activities as an artist, but also as the basis for regarding these activities as incompatible with the achievement of "great" or "serious" art. For feminist artists in the early 1970s, then, the challenge was both to undermine long-standing prohibitions, prejudices, and exploitative attitudes toward female sexuality and to confront their implications for women *as artists*. Their struggle was both artistic and political. Consequently, feminist artists played a crucial role in formulating a new kind of art practice that was able to achieve a degree of social resonance to which most artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s could make only rhetorical claims.

TRANSGRESSIONS AND TABOOS

One way that feminist artists formulated their resistance to how female bodies and sexualities had been determined and disciplined within patriarchal culture was to transgress taboos and defiantly flaunt the connotations of the corporeal body as "abject." As Julia Kristeva defined it, the abject is what the subject must expel in order to be an "I." It is the alien within us, but it is also associated with those borders of the body where the inside meets the outside, with the fluids discharged from orifices, and with matter out of place. It also has two meanings. *To abject* is to undergo the operation of expelling the alien within, while *to be abject* is to be a nonsubject, to be enslaved, in de Beauvoir's terms, by the immanence of the body.[20] For feminist performance artists, the task was to reveal and resist the operations of cultural repression by which the female body and the feminine had been aligned with the abject.

Given that menstruation has been one of the most rigidly enforced taboos around female sexuality, it is perhaps inevitable that, as Lisa Tickner said, it *invited* feminist artists to violate the taboo.[21] One such example was the video *What a Woman Made* (1973), by Mako Idemitsu, a Japanese artist living in the US at the time.[22] The tape begins with a fuzzy image gradually coming into focus, revealing a tampon gracefully leaching a trail of menstrual blood into a pristine toilet bowl (fig. 6.1). Just as we realize what this image represents, an authoritative male voice interjects, reading excerpts from the Japanese bestseller *How to Raise Girl Children*, written by the former babysitter to the royal family. This misogynistic text barely conceals a revulsion that conflates physiology and personality in an utterly degrading assessment of the innate nature of Japanese women. They are described as pieces of property to be safeguarded until marriage, as lacking talent, and as indecisive and unable to solve problems by themselves. They are expected to be passive, obedient, and, above all, pleasant at all times. By thus layering this aesthetic image with a text that codifies the litany of defects and negative characteristics imputed to female "nature," Idemitsu reveals the impossibility of simply detaching and reclaiming a "positive" female biological imperative from the cultural prescriptions that determine and constrain its meanings.

In other works from this period, the transgression of social codes was enacted through parodic refusals that recall Irigaray's theory of mimicry as a strategy to "un-read" the texts of phallogocentric discourse by



6.1 Mako Idemitsu. *What a Woman Made*, 1973.
Black-and-white video, 11:00 min.

reading back into them to reveal what they do to and say about the "feminine."[23] In her video *Take Off* (1974), California artist Susan Mogul wittily enacts an "un-reading" of Vito Acconci's *Undertone* (1972).[24] *Undertone* exemplified Acconci's work from this period, which used structural premises to traverse public and private boundaries by means of bodily manipulations, inappropriate disclosures, and predatory aggressions. Acconci enters the frame and sits at the far end of a table, like a victim of an interrogation. With head lowered and arms concealed, he tells us that there is a girl under the table rubbing his groin and so on. At intervals he looks up to address the viewer directly, saying things like, "I need to know you are there listening to me, tense and on edge, forcing me to keep talking to you, screening out my lies, pushing me against the wall to keep me from deceiving you." In *Undertone* Acconci eroticizes the relationship between performer and viewer, forcing the viewer to complete the scene and become inseparable from the fantasy itself. Mogul's *Take Off* repeats the set-up of *Undertone*, but she tells us that there is nobody under the table rubbing her legs and groin; instead, she has a vibrator under the table, which she then pulls out to show the viewer (fig. 6.2). Jettisoning Acconci's intensely confrontational demands upon the viewer as witness to his fantasy, Mogul matter-of-factly describes the vibrator, where she got it, what kind it is, and how many

6.2 Susan Mogul. *Take Off*, 1974. Black-and-white video, 10:00 min.

batteries it takes. She then repeats these two actions, pleasuring herself with the vibrator under the table and making banal comments to the viewer, such as her observation that the cost of batteries is a small price to pay for sexual satisfaction.

On one level, Mogul's *Take Off* is a straightforward mockery in which Acconci's overburdened claims to psychosexual power are deflated by her insouciant mimicry of masturbating with a battery-operated sex-aid. On another level, her playful nonchalance perhaps alluded to the fact that despite the explicitly sexual undertones of so much of Acconci's work, the art world seemed thoroughly oblivious to the way that it reiterated hierarchies of sexual difference. The sexualized engagement of Acconci's work has recently been addressed by Amelia Jones, who argues that in fluctuating between obsessive assertions of his "normative masculinity" and attempts to "feminize" his body (hiding his penis, plucking out chest hair, pulling on his nipples in works like *Conversions* and *Openings*), Acconci not only unveils what is normally hidden – that the body of the artist/genius is male – but also "*performs* himself as open-ended and contingent on spectatorial desire, pointing up the incoherence of masculinity itself."[25] Jones is careful to admit that Acconci's work enables, but does not ensure, such a reading. Certainly, critics at the time recognized that Acconci investigated relations of power and domination in often explicitly sexual ways, but they seemed insensible to why this might be problematic for women.[26] Acconci himself has acknowledged – in retrospect – that even though he "hate[s] maleness ... and male domination," his work was "really sexist," a point that he then rationalizes by saying that assumptions of the sex/gender basis of power relations are so "culturally imbedded" that he readily fell into them.[27]

6.3 Lynda Benglis. *Female Sensibility*, 1974. Colour video, 14:00 min.

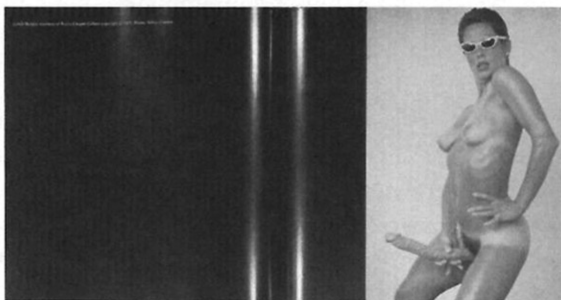
The asymmetrical way that sexually explicit art by male and female artists was perceived at this time is also made evident in the work of Lynda Benglis. Benglis's video *Female Sensibility* (1974) functioned, as did her other videos from this period, to tease out the tensions between technical process and content (fig. 6.3). This tape opens with a close-up of two women's heavily made-up faces. Slowly and deliberately, they nuzzle their faces together and then begin to kiss and caress one another. The audio consists of a montage of radio programming, including a talk-show host razzing callers about male-female relationships, country-and-western music, a discussion about parapsychology, and advertisements for keeping America beautiful. The contrast between the barrage of random samplings of commercial media culture and this charged display of female (homo)eroticism creates a disconcerting disjunction between public and private that forces the viewer into an unequivocal confrontation with the role of voyeur. Although the desire and discomfort elicited in the viewer is reminiscent of Acconci's work, what distinguishes Benglis's tape is how it explicitly frames the dynamics of viewing within the politics of sex and gender so as to refute the ostensible neutrality of both the production and reception of art.

At one point in the video, Benglis's voice cuts in, talking on the phone about an upcoming exhibition of her work for which she is planning an announcement featuring a photograph of herself. At the time, Benglis was living in California, where, as Lucy Lippard has noted, "an honored macho tradition is the exhibition announcement showing a photograph of the artist – usually featuring a cigar, cowboy boots, a truck, or a dog – rather than his work."[28] In a parody of this macho tradition, Benglis produced a series of four publicity photographs, the most scandalous of which appeared as a full-page colour advertisement

in the November 1974 issue of *Artforum*. Naked and slicked up like a bodybuilder, Benglis assumes an aggressive, hand-on-hip pose, sporting nothing but sunglasses and a gigantic latex dildo (fig. 6.4). Benglis's photograph sparked a wild controversy in the art media, which accused her of narcissism, pornography, and penis envy. A group of irate *Artforum* editors condemned her ad as "an object of extreme vulgarity … brutalizing ourselves and … our readers."[29] Although the critic Robert Pincus-Witten wrote favourably about Benglis's work in general, he felt that the photographs were trite, especially in comparison to what he saw as Acconci's more meaningful engagement with sexuality (like other male critics, he ignores Acconci's *sexism*): "Benglis' sexual photographs are not to be confused with Vito Acconci's performances on erotic themes … Superficially, Benglis' work reveals the tasteful, the glossy, and the narcissistic, while Acconci's secret sexual systems are more populist, and tend toward the squalid, the exorcistic, and the puritanical."[30]

Benglis said that she wanted to create a "media statement … to end all statements, the ultimate mockery of the pinup and the macho."[31] The macho exemplar that Benglis is widely assumed to have had in mind was Robert Morris's exhibition announcement that had appeared in the April 1974 issue of *Artforum*.[32] Naked from the waist up, wearing a German Second World War helmet, aviator sunglasses, wrist cuffs, and studded dog collar, Morris flexes his bulky biceps while grasping a massive chain draped around his neck. Whether or not his image, with its violent and militaristic overtones, was itself a parody of machismo, as Amelia Jones suggests, it caused not a ripple in the art press, unlike the excoriation that Benglis received. Feminists at the time, however, recognized her work as a defiantly transgressive gesture and the reaction to it as clear evidence of the art world's gender bias and blindness.[33] It thus revealed a growing awareness among feminists of how the Modernist myths of aesthetic neutrality, autonomy, and disinterested judgment of "quality," which Jones investigates so thoroughly, were used as convenient devices to downgrade the work of women artists and to justify their exclusion from professional recognition.[34]

In ways that are similar to Benglis's assertion of embodied sexual difference within the discourse of body/object relations that preoccupied artists like Morris in the 1970s, the work of Janine Antoni in the 1990s has blurred the lines between sculpture and performance by producing objects and installations that are not so much representations of the body as enactments of it.[35] In works like *Chocolate Gnaw* and *Lard Gnaw* (1992), Antoni emulated the monolithic geometries of Minimalist



6.4 Lynda Benglis. Two-page artist's "centrefold" in *Artforum* 13, no. 3 (November 1974): 4–5 (original in colour).

sculpture by casting huge cubes of chocolate and lard and then eroding their Platonic wholeness by gnawing away the edges of the cubes. In *Lick and Lather* (1993) Antoni again used her body to produce sculpture, this time by having casts of herself made in chocolate and soap in the form of classical busts, which she then resculpted by licking away at the surfaces. For Antoni, such works provoked questions about the relationship between portraiture and self-representation in art, about the permanence of the monument versus the ephemeralness of her materials, and about the tension between the publicness of honorific sculpture and the private rituals of eating and bathing.[36]

In *Loving Care* (1993) Antoni again took up a dialogue with the history of art in a performance that alluded to a well-known work by the Fluxus artist Nam June Paik called *Zen for Head* (1962), in which Paik in turn had made reference to Jackson Pollock's drip paintings by dipping his tie into a bucket of paint and dragging it along a roll of paper laid out on the floor. For her part, Antoni dipped her hair into Loving Care hair dye and "painted" or "mopped" the floor of the Anthony D'Offay Gallery in London with broad, sweeping strokes (fig. 6.5). Antoni's work engages with the history of sculpture, however broadly defined, not so much to parody its conventions and traditions as to rethink the relation of the body to the object in ways that foreground the gendered associations of embodiment. Inasmuch as her work entails both a ruining of heroic traditions and a simultaneous evocation of pleasurable and abject sensations, it can be seen as an enactment of the canny kind of mimicry that Irigaray espoused, where mimesis, as Naomi Schor has written, "comes to signify difference as positivity, a joyful reappropriation of the attributes of the other."[37]

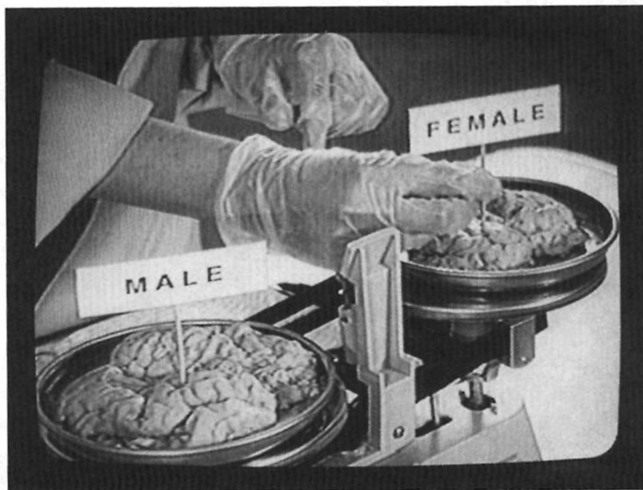
Antoni's use of chocolate alludes to the relationship between women and food that many feminist artists have explored. As Rosemary Betterton has argued, this relationship is one that evokes the powerful tensions between desire and repression that are inscribed upon the bodies of women.[38] It encompasses the symbolic taboos that we associate with food, the transgression of which risks abjection, as well as anxieties about uncontrollable appetites, the release of which elicits the threat of what film theorist Barbara Creed has called the "monstrous-feminine."[39] As Susan Bordo has shown in her study of bodily ideals in twentieth-century society, these anxieties are both symptomatic and productive of the ways that female bodies are brought under control, such that food and dieting have become central signifiers of the conflicting needs for control and release in consumer capitalism.[40] This intersection between female anxieties, cultural ideals, social control, and commodity capitalism was explicitly addressed in a video by Tanya Mars called *Mz. Frankenstein* (1993), which was presented in the form of an infomercial for a machine called the Relax-a-cizor, marketed by a US manufacturer to thousands of women for home use in the 1950s. Demonstrated by Mars as Dr Frances Stein, the Relax-a-cizor promises an effort-free way to achieve beauty by getting rid of ugly fat, but in truth, the complex efforts to attach the various straps and pads to Mars's ample body, and the resulting overtones of sadomasochistic bondage, appeared neither relaxing nor effortless. Mars's video takes satirical aim both at our social obsession with physical perfection and at the spurious claims of those profiteers who seek simultaneously to inculcate and exploit the bodily anxieties aroused by such normative ideals.

In *Brains on Toast: The Inexact Science of Gender* (1992; fig. 6.6), Canadian artist Joyan Saunders similarly explored pseudo-scientific and mechanistic claims to the ability to regulate female sexuality and desirability. Saunders's video, however, examines more precisely how such normative ideals cannot contain the particularities of lesbian sexuality. Using vignettes structured around the categories of "brains, hormones, reproduction, and private parts," Saunders's video features a humorous lesson by a butch dyke on how to walk, sit, and stand so as to take up more space and appear more imposing (i.e., more masculine) as well as an encounter between two lesbians whose erotic play, which includes bondage and deep body-piercing, is graphically and unflinchingly portrayed.

As Lynda Hart has pointed out, such portrayals confront not only the pulp-novel traditions of the 1950s and 1960s that characterized

6.5 Janine Antoni. *Loving Care,* 1993. Photodocumentation of performance at Anthony D'Offay Gallery, London. Photograph: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd, London.

lesbians as pathological and deviant, but also the more immediate schism caused within the feminist movement by the inability of straight feminists to recognize and accept any forms of lesbian sexuality that did not replicate normative heterosexuality; in other words, the inability to accept that lesbian women might seek from one another something different from what heterosexual women sought from their partners.[41] As Jill Dolan has summarized it, the feminist movement could accept someone saying "I am a lesbian" as an indication of an identity position, but because sex acts are what mark gay and lesbian bodies as different, saying "I practice lesbian sex" would "initiate a discourse that might displace the emphasis on life-styles and relationships and break open the sanctimonious strictures of politically correct lesbian identifications."[42] By transgressing heterosexist taboos in her video, Saunders broke open these strictures to reveal what cannot be contained within a monolithic concept of feminine sexuality.



6.6 Joyan Saunders. *Brains on Toast: The Inexact Science of Gender,* 1992. Colour video, 26:30 min.

RE-VISIONING

The rift within feminism over its difficulty in reconciling difference and sameness has been particularly divisive, but feminists have also found themselves in conflict over the question of pleasure and its relation to criticality within feminist art. To return momentarily to Benglis's video *Female Sensibility* as an example of pleasurable female eroticism, it should be noted that both Susan Krane and Amelia Jones have read it as an expression of a "distinctly erotic narcissism."[43] As we have seen, feminist performance artists who displayed their bodies were often accused of narcissism. But while it is undeniable that charges of narcissism against women's art carried a special invective, Christopher Lasch's 1978 book *The Culture of Narcissism* shows that it was a critical term used loosely and widely in the 1970s to "cover all forms of 'vanity,' 'self-admiration,' 'self-satisfaction,' and 'self-glorification.'"[44] It was, then, a convenient term of disparagement imputing to an artist's work a lack of engagement with social and political discourse. When levelled at women's art, narcissism was therefore a multipurpose put-down implying that it was shallow, undeveloped, vain, and/or self-absorbed. The real point was a refusal to recognize that the subject of women *as* subjects could have any significance whatsoever to the "public importance" of art.

Over the years, many feminists have "re-read" narcissism in positive terms as a potential site of political resistance. Freud actually emerges here as an ally, for he did not see female narcissism as necessarily negative since narcissistic women acquire "a certain self-contentment which compensates them for the social restrictions that are imposed upon them in their choice of [the male as love] object."[45] For feminists who examined the relation of the feminine to the realm of visual representation, this self-sufficiency of the narcissist was important because, as Mary Jacobus wrote, "for once Freud defines *woman* not in terms of lack but in terms of something she has: primary narcissism replaces the missing phallus."[46] For Jo Anna Isaak, the real potential comes from the connection Freud later made between narcissism and humour.[47] Freud explained this connection by writing that "humour has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation ... The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure."[48]

For Amelia Jones, what is most significant about female narcissism is its ability to evoke pleasure and desire. As Jones reads the work of Benglis, Hannah Wilke, and other feminist artists, they stage their bodies not to deny the objectification of female subjects but to solicit the viewer's desire to possess the female body as object. By "literalizing this desire" within a narcissistic scenario, the distance between self and other, artist and viewer, is collapsed, thus threatening "Western phallocentric subjectivity, which insists upon the oppositional staging of an other (who lacks) to legitimate the self (who ostensibly has)." Jones argues further that this also undermines the traditional mode of artistic interpretation whereby the viewer assumes a position of authoritative mastery from a point of critical distance.[49] But this reading of the relationship between viewers and female artists' bodies on display as intersubjectively engaged is very different from – and, indeed, in explicit opposition to – theories of representation and spectatorship that were initiated in the writings of John Berger and Laura Mulvey in the early 1970s and later elaborated by numerous writers on art and cinema.[50] As Janet Wolff summarized it, "The devastating implication of this work in general appears to be that women's bodies (particularly the nude, though not just that) cannot be portrayed other than through the

regimes of representation which produce them as objects for the male gaze, and as the projection of male desires."[51]

From Jones's perspective, this body of discourse, which dominated in the 1980s, has had negative consequences for our understanding of how feminist artists in the 1970s used their bodies because it portrays them as naively believing that they could escape such objectification. But as I have argued, such generational critiques are often oversimplified and exaggerated. For example, Jones writes that because of their "Marxian distrust of art forms that elicit pleasure, that seduce rather than repel viewers," British feminist proponents of this discourse, including Mulvey, Lisa Tickner, Griselda Pollock, and Mary Kelly, "turned definitively away from the body." Kelly is described as "unbending" and "prescriptive" in her insistence "that *any* artwork including the artist's body is *necessarily* reactionary," while Pollock is said to presume arrogantly that the strategy of "Brechtian distanciation" that she advocates is the only one that is "effectively (or properly?) feminist." Jones views their position as rigid because they assume "that spectators will necessarily react or participate in a predictable way" and thus reiterate "one of the most damaging impulses of modernist criticism: the definitive evaluation of works of art in terms of an externally conceived, hierarchical system of value (in this case, replacing Greenberg's aesthetic categories with Brechtian ones)." Jones acknowledges the value of their critiques at the time but says that their "wholesale dismissal" of "the strategic force of body art projects in the late 1960s and 1970s" has blinded them to "the contingency of all meanings and values of cultural products on the social and political contexts of reception as well as on the particular desires of the interpreter in question (here, Pollock and Kelly themselves)."[52]

Jones is correct that the anti-essentialist discourse associated with these feminists has had negative ramifications for the critical fortunes of early feminist art. And certainly we should be suspicious about why feminist art began to receive mainstream recognition only in the 1980s when artists like Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger, whose media-based work focused in coolly distant ways on how women are positioned within the regimes of representation, began to be written about by male critics like Hal Foster and Craig Owens, who applauded such work as evidence of 1980s feminism as "an instance of postmodernism."[53] At the same time, Jones's totalizing condemnation of 1980s feminist discourse in fact repeats the same "wholesale dismissal" of

which the latter is supposedly guilty, thus greatly diminishing the relevance of her own critique.

The problem with this kind of critique is not just that its argumentation is tendentious or that its allegiances are partisan (e.g., American versus British) but rather that it gives the impression that feminist artists and intellectuals were capable of pursuing only certain kinds of questions or strategies at certain times. On the contrary, just as feminist artists in the 1970s were concerned as much with the "regimes of representation" as they were with their literal bodies, neither was there a turning away from the body and/or its representations in the 1980s. In lieu of fixing this history within the framework of a generational teleology, I would argue instead for a consideration of feminist artists' strategies and techniques, which emanate, as does most feminist discourse, from the two traditions outlined earlier, namely de Beauvoir's "ideology critique" of social and material conditions and Irigaray's "mimetic repetition" of the semiotic and symbolic bases of power and knowledge. And while these strategies and techniques have shifted from time to time, place to place, and artist to artist, I concur with Rosi Braidotti that they should be viewed not as oppositional but "as complementary and part of a continuous historical evolution."[54]

MAKEUP, MIRRORS, AND MASQUERADE

When Teresa de Lauretis wrote that "woman is unrepresentable except as representation," she meant that women are forcibly confronted with their double alienation from subjectivity in representation because they can appear in the "phallic order of patriarchal culture" only as already signified. She insisted, however, that women *can* represent themselves from within the chinks, cracks, blind spots, and marginal spaces of hegemonic discourses – that is, from within what she called the "space-off" of film theory, the space that is "erased, or, better, recontained and sealed into the image," which includes both the camera (the point of perspective) and the spectator (the point of reception and interpretation).[55] In Lucy Lippard's terms, for women in the early 1970s, these "space-offs" included the camera and video monitor, which "have indeed become the mirrors into which for centuries women have peered anxiously before going out to confront the world."[56]

The scrutiny of these reflective spaces, and of women's self-surveillance within them, was often conveyed in works using cosmetics. One

of the earliest was *Leah's Room* at Womanhouse (1972). And in a video from the same year called *Representational Painting*, Eleanor Antin underwent a transformation involving a facial, makeup job, and fashion change meant to show how "a woman paints herself to represent herself to the world."[57] If, as Lippard observed, "to make yourself up is literally to create, or re-create, yourself," then the act of making up is indeed a form of representation, a fictional construction.[58] Yet the purpose of makeup, at least in Western culture, is to use artifice to create the illusion of its absence so that beauty appears as "natural." Especially in the early days of the feminist movement, women's anxiety was palpable about whether they ought to reject this artifice outright. Even though Martha Wilson had been using cosmetics in performances in which she took on the guise of both a hyperbolic femininity and its drag counterpart, when she first met New York artist Jacki Apple, with whom she collaborated in 1973 in a performance called *Transformance (Claudia)*, she was shocked by Apple's "real-life" appearance: "She looked professional all over, eye makeup to high heels. I thought artists weren't supposed to look like that. A sexist belief, something inherited from Gertrude Stein, a woman has to be un-pretty to be taken as seriously as a man."[59]

Realizing that prettiness, as a signifier of sexual difference, was an impediment to being perceived as a subject (that is, to being taken "as seriously as a man"), Wilson produced a series of works from 1973 to 1974 that explored the conundrums of female desire and desirability. In *Images of My Perfection/Images of My Deformity* (1973), Wilson catalogued parts of her body according to what she regarded as their degree of attractiveness or unattractiveness. Presented with all the formal rigour of Conceptual art, the lists and photographs document the basis upon which value or its lack is inscribed on women's bodies. In *Makeover* (1974) she shifted her attention to the face, that most public locus of both identity and the prescriptive ideals of feminine beauty, although in this case the outcome was a lurid, clownish mask. The makeover process was elaborated further in a set of paired photographs entitled *I Make Up the Image of My Perfection/I Make Up the Image of My Deformity* (1974). In these photographs, and in her video of the same title, makeup – the quintessential tool of feminine perfectibility – is used to mimic femininity itself and to re-present it as a façade of tenuous and conflicted fragments (fig. 6.7).

Wilson's play with representation enacted what some feminists have theorized as the potential of mimicry and masquerade to problematize

6.7 Martha Wilson. *I Make Up the Image of My Perfection/I Make Up the Image of My Deformity*, 1974. Photodocumentation of performance in the artist's studio, Halifax.

the relation of femininity to itself in representation. As Laura Mulvey argued in her analysis of conventional, Hollywood-type cinema, the rigid structures of spectatorship present women as the given-to-be-seen, as passively locked within the active and objectifying gaze of the male protagonist. This, said Mulvey, presents a dilemma for the female spectator. Identification with the hero entails a certain "masculinization" or psychological transvestism, while identification with the female character requires her to adopt a passive position characterized by a closeness or proximity between herself and the feminine object on display.[60]

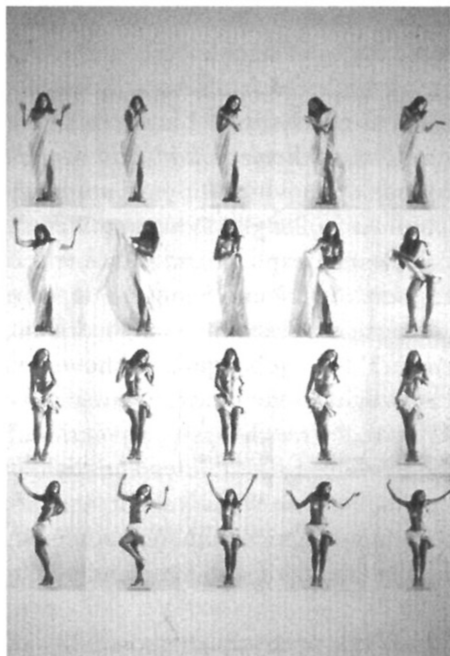
In her article on "Film and the Masquerade," Mary Ann Doane argued that women could resist this closeness through the strategy of female masquerade. Doing so would allow a woman to "produce herself as an excess of femininity," to don a hyperbolic mask that flaunts femininity by holding it at a distance, thus resisting the patriarchal positioning of femininity "as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as precisely, imagistic."[61] Irigaray holds a different view, however, arguing that the female masquerade actually exacerbates a woman's double alienation

because, in positioning her as an "object of consumption or of desire by masculine 'subjects,'" it reifies her as a nonsubject alienated from language.[62] For Irigaray, mimicry is a more subversive strategy because it allows women to pass from "imposed mimesis" – in which the female is positioned as mirror to the male, reflecting and confirming the truth of his centrality – into a female miming that has no recognizable referent.[63] Building upon her earlier study of the critical possibilities made available through an intertextual reading of Brechtian and feminist theory, Elin Diamond has made a perceptive connection between Brecht's repudiation of imitative or naturalist theatre and Irigaray's concept of mimicry.[64] Just as Brecht's alienation effects work to make ideology visible, Irigaray's mimicry shatters the illusions of the equivalence between mimesis and truth by "showing the show" through which such truth-claims are staged, thus revealing the "divisive effects of the patriarchal Self in a body that is not the Same."[65]

SHOWING THE SHOW

This "showing the show" enabled feminist performance artists to mimic their cultural positioning as mirror to the sameness, or "hommo-sexuality," of the patriarchal subject and, by shattering the truth-claims of this subject, to treat what Braidotti calls "the myth of Woman" as a now "empty stage where feminist women can experiment with their own subjective becoming."[66] In other words, feminist performance artists could strategically traverse subject and object positions, an insight made, as we recall, by Lippard in 1976: "When women use their own bodies in their art work, they are using their *selves*; a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject."[67] Yet as Jacques Lacan pointed out, to (mis)represent or mimic representations of femininity in the patriarchal order is a treacherous game because "images and symbols *for* the woman cannot be isolated from images and symbols *of* the woman. It is representation ... the representation of feminine sexuality ... which conditions how it comes into play."[68]

The pitfalls that Lacan warns about are exemplified in the work of Hannah Wilke and in its controversial reception. Wilke's diverse body of work encompasses sculpture, performance, video, film, photography, posters, and book works, and it is characterized by autobiographical references and a complex layering of imagistic and linguistic metaphors. Wilke's own female sexuality is always central: "Since 1960, I have been



6.8 Hannah Wilke. *Hannah Wilke Super-T-Art*, 1974. 20 black-and-white photographs, 1.02 x 81 cm overall; 25 x 18 cm each. Photograph: D. James Dee.

concerned with the creation of a formal imagery that is specifically female ... Its content has always been related to my own body and feelings, reflecting pleasure as well as pain, the ambiguity and complexity of emotions."[69] In her work, Wilke's decidedly beautiful face and body were often "scarred" by small labial motifs (made from chewing gum) intended to convey metaphorically the psychic and physical wounds suffered by women under patriarchy. In one performance, *Hannah Wilke Super-T-Art* (1974), Wilke posed as both Christ and Venus, suggesting that she was both victim and giver of pleasure; indeed, her self-designation was "Sugargiver" (fig. 6.8).[70]

Although it seems clear that Wilke was not merely a gratuitous exhibitionist, many feminists have been troubled by the question of whether viewers were able to make the distinction in her work between, in Lacan's terms, images and symbols *for* the woman and images and symbols *of* the woman. As Lippard noted, "her own confusion of her roles as beautiful woman and artist, as flirt and feminist, has resulted at times in politically ambiguous manifestations that have exposed her to criticism on a personal as well as on an artistic level."[71]

Acknowledging that Wilke's work was ambiguous about whether it was resisting or acquiescing to the codes of female objectification, Amelia Jones suggests that what most bothered feminists was its perpetuation of the stereotype of women as narcissists.[72] But, in fact, it is not true that feminists could not appreciate the value of "defiant narcissism," for this is exactly the grounds upon which Lippard applauded Benglis's *Artforum* image. In contrast to Benglis, however, Wilke's art did not seem to make a feminist stance explicit and thus left too much open to interpretation.[73] As Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman put it, "she does not make her own position clear; is her art work enticing critique or titillating enticement?"[74] As Jones reads it, however, this ambiguity and confusion was precisely the point. Strategically posing as a narcissist enabled Wilke to "wrench open conventional alignments of the female body with a debased and quintessentially objectified self-love." Moreover, she says, because Wilke's seductive narcissism drew viewers into a relationship of desire with Wilke herself, it worked to undermine the Modernist fallacy of distanced and objective interpretation.[75]

Jones's reinterpretation of Wilke's work opens up the possibility of reading it in multiple ways. Nonetheless, it must be noted that since attitudes toward narcissism in general and female narcissism in particular were so negative at this time, it is hard to imagine that if Wilke's work really was a positive, feminist recuperation of narcissism, it would have been recognized as such. This negative view of narcissism was especially evident in writing on video. In his 1976 article "Video Art, the Imaginary and the Parole Vide," Stuart Marshall argued that the tendency of video artists to use the camera/monitor as a mirror indicated a preoccupation with what Lacan had identified as the "mirror stage" of development.[76] In the mirror stage, the child first recognizes itself as an independent and cohesive being (ego), but this is only a misrecognition of unity, for the child really becomes two: the self who sees and the self who is seen in the mirror image. This oscillation between self and self-as-other is only resolved as the child proceeds through the Oedipal crisis and enters, through language, the social matrix of the "Symbolic Order."[77]

As Marshall saw it, video that was preoccupied by self-reflection was trapped, like the child in the mirror phase, in the regressive, pre-Oedipal, and therefore presocial stage of development. Of the four artists that Marshall focused on, three were women: Joan Jonas, Lynda

Benglis, and Hermine Freed. Significantly, he did not note that Lacan specifically associated the mirror stage with female identity because the female's incomplete resolution of the Oedipal crisis positions her perpetually outside the Symbolic Order as the objectified other.[78] Ignoring the possibility that these artists' work might be read as initiating an engagement with these problems of sexual difference and subjectivity from a feminist perspective, he commends Vito Acconci as the only one of the four who addresses the subject/object positions in voyeurism in a positive, self-critical way. By contrast, the three women are dismissed as embodying a regressive narcissism manifest in their indulgent, uncritical exhibitionist display.[79]

In the same year, Rosalind Krauss published the article "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," in which she made the point that video is distinctive because unlike most art forms that must be seen in terms of their physical conditions, video must be seen in terms of psychological conditions, specifically narcissism. Krauss argued that the very nature of the video medium, with its mirror reflection and feedback, locked artists into a preoccupation with self-regard that is narcissistic because it signifies "the unchanging condition of perpetual frustration." She disparaged video's tendency to collapse subject and object, which made it difficult to maintain critical distance, and she related narcissism in video art to "the problem of narcissism within the wider context of our culture" and to the way that the art world had been "deeply and disastrously affected by its relation to mass media." In the end, she concluded that video can escape its narcissism only by assaulting the medium or exploiting it in order to criticize it from within.[80] As an important critical voice of the period, Krauss clearly demonstrates in this article the general opprobrium in which narcissism was held at this time, both in art and in society.

Although Krauss referred to two women artists, Lynda Benglis and Joan Jonas, she, like Marshall, remained oblivious to how they were positioned differently, as women, in relation to subjectivity, and she certainly did not acknowledge the possibility that they might be using narcissistic self-reflection as a specifically feminist kind of critical strategy. Like Benglis, Jonas explored the formal and technical properties of the video medium in an effort both to materialize her own body and psyche and to engage viewers in a consciousness of their own ways of looking. In *Mirror Check* (1970), for example, Jonas stands naked before an audience and examines parts of her body with a hand mirror.

6.9 Joan Jonas. *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, 1972. Black-and-white video, 17:24 min

6.10 Joan Jonas. *Vertical Roll*, 1972. Black-and-white video, 19:38 min.

Jonas wrote that "From the beginning the mirror provided me with a metaphor for my investigations as well as a device to alter space, to fragment it, and to reflect the audience, bringing them into the space of the performance. These events were rituals for an audience that was included by this reflexion."[81] This suggests that although *Mirror Check* might seem to epitomize Krauss's critique of video as narcissistic, Jonas's self-display was derived less from a "condition of perpetual frustration" than from a concern to investigate structures of spectatorship. This concern was given a more explicitly feminist inflection in Jonas's work over the next few years.

In *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972), Jonas turned the video camera as spectatorial device on herself and four other female performers. Wearing elaborate costumes and masks covered with feathers and jewels, the performers manipulated mirrors, cameras, and monitors to create a disjunctive collage of "real" and reflected images (fig. 6.9). Although these women might initially appear to be participating in the kind of unwitting self-objectification that Lippard warned against and that seemed epitomized in Wilke's work, the spatial and temporal fragmentation of the imagery and actions disrupted any possibility of their being recuperated into what Mulvey called "fetishistic scopophilia."[82] Fetishism is certainly alluded to by the costuming, but it is then circumvented by the mobile agency of the performers and by their constant disruption of the spectacle by holding mirrors and cameras up to one another. Moreover, by repeatedly putting on and removing their masks, they enacted that distance between the self and the image that is paradigmatic of the feminine masquerade.

Images from *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* were later incorporated into a video called *Vertical Roll* (1972), which disturbed the pleasures of viewing much more aggressively (fig. 6.10). Jonas played with the image by adjusting the frequency of the monitor so that a roll bar interrupts the image at regular intervals. She then rescanned the monitor, incorporating this "flaw" into the final tape to make it appear at different points as though the images are either being pulled down off the screen or jumping over the roll bar. This repetitious rupture of the image is intensified by the ear-shattering soundtrack of a spoon being banged on a mirror or by pieces of wood being clapped together to mark the moment when the roll bar strikes the bottom of the monitor. By confronting the viewer with these severe distortions, Jonas makes watching her roam the screen and negotiate its rolling barrier a disconcerting and

6.11 Dorit Cypis. *Exploring Comfort*, 1974.
Black-and-white video, 10:30 min

confusing experience. The insistent artifice of the technical manipulations echoes and reinforces the artifice of the images, which forces us, through our extreme discomfort, into a conscious awareness of our role as viewer.

Extreme discomfort is also experienced watching Dorit Cypis's video *Exploring Comfort* (1974). Cypis was a student at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design at the time and would have known of Martha Wilson's pioneering feminist example. *Exploring Comfort* was one of Cypis's first performance videos, and as Jan Peacock noted, like the fledgling explorations of many young women artists, it presented "a vulnerable female subject who sets the task of seeing herself under conditions of being seen" (fig. 6.11). Seated on a stool before the camera, Cypis announces "I need some comfort" and then, after a pause, "I *need* some comfort." She stares expectantly into the camera for what may be the longest forty seconds in video history. As Peacock says, to sit locked in Cypis's gaze (and for how long we do not know) "is to live without comfort – or rather live with discomfort: hers, our own, or both."[83] Suddenly Cypis breaks the tension and begins to caress her face and body. She then moves her face in close to the camera to practice facial expressions and laughter styles while checking her image against an off-

screen monitor. Watching her on-screen affectations, we quail with embarrassment both for her and for ourselves because she seems to watch *us* as we look. Scrutiny becomes a form of torture, and we find ourselves most decidedly in the realm of visual un-pleasure. As Anne Wagner has proposed, this kind of video aimed "to summon you into the present moment, as an audience, and sometimes, under selected circumstances, to make you all-too-conscious of that fact."[84]

The presence of the camera/monitor was such a highly charged signifier of spectatorial structures that these devices were often incorporated into live performance. For example, in *Some Reflective Surfaces* (1976), Adrian Piper used film and video images to make the audience self-conscious of its position (fig. 6.12). She explained:

I am a neutral object in black clothes, white face, moustache, dark glasses. I tell you, the audience, a story of myself as a disco dancer as I mimic and repeat the dancer's movements. Sometimes I stop to rest, practice, and refuel myself with whiskey. A film, of me, dancing with friends and watching you, is projected on and behind me as I dance to the song *Respect*. A man's voice criticizes my dancing in sharp commands. As I move into the spotlight my image appears on a video monitor. The film and music stop; I acknowledge you; the light goes out.[85]

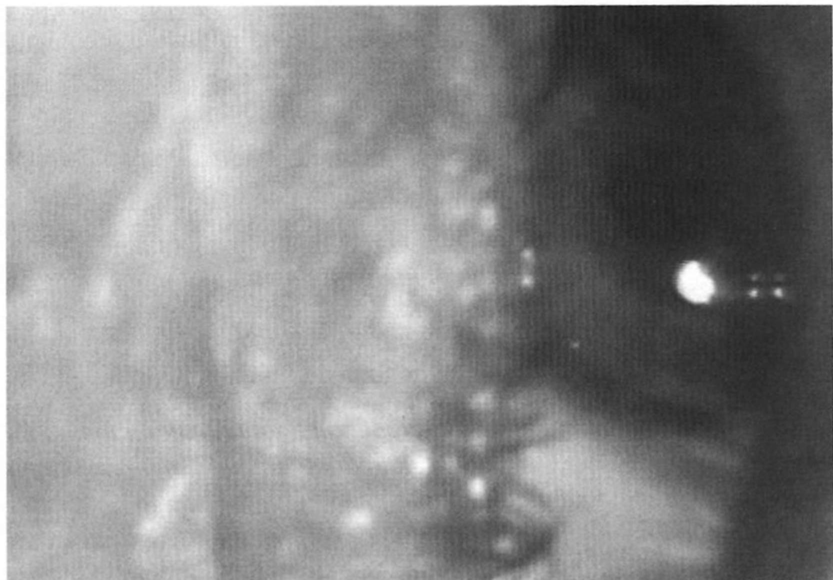
6.12 Adrian Piper. *Some Reflective Surfaces,* 1976. Photodocumentation of performance at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

As Piper obeyed these commands, the theme of Aretha Franklin's song (i.e., self-esteem and confidence, especially for young blacks) and the notion of popular dance as spontaneous and free self-expression were brutally undermined by this scrutinizing male presence watching her and exercising his authoritative ability to coerce her into compliance. This male voice seeks to assert its disembodied (transcendent) mastery, but in the end, it is Piper who acknowledges the audience and who asserts her own particularized subjectivity as a black woman.

For women, the devices of camera and monitor carry the burden of their own material and philosophical relation to the history of technology, wherein the "bachelor machine" has been imbued with a masculine auto-eroticism and the feminine has been instrumentalized. In tracing this history and attempting to address how women can enter the technological order, critic Nell Tenhaaf reiterates Luce Irigaray's question: "If machines, even machines of theory, can be aroused all by themselves, may women not do likewise?"[86] In response, Tenhaaf proposes that many early feminists did exactly this by merging their bodies with the video apparatus itself. In *Delicate Issue* (1979), for example, Kate Craig turns the machine on herself in the most intimate scrutiny of the elusive boundary between private and public, closeness and distance, flesh and machine (fig. 6.13). The camera, while operated by her partner, is fully under her control as it scans her body inch by visceral inch. The embodied sounds of amplified breath and heartbeat rise and fall. As the camera probes the scarcely identifiable landscape of Craig's body, her voice addresses us with equally probing questions: "At what distance does the subject read? How close can a camera be? How close do I want to be? How close do you want to be?" In the end, as the camera closes in on her glistening clitoris, Craig again asserts her control over our desire to look, to take in her body: "This is as close as you get," she says, "I can't get you any closer." We are, says Tenhaaf, on a threshold, literally and metaphorically, where the feminine merges with the technological without being subsumed by it.[87]

BODIES OF DISCOURSE

As Craig's embodied encounter with the machine implies, bodies always exist within the complex signifying practices of social meaning. From the late 1970s through the 1980s, especially in the work of artists like Victor Burgin, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall, and others, who explored photography's relation to commerce and popular culture,



6.13 Kate Craig. *Delicate Issue*, 1979. Colour video, 12:36 min.

art's dominant discourse shifted to a focus on the role of representation as a potent form of mediation within ideological and cultural discourse. The goal of such work was not to escape or provide alternatives to the representational myths and ideologies produced within culture but to interrupt their flow, to diagnose and reveal their mechanisms, and thus to play a role in liberating people from the institutions that control their lives.[88]

Yet much of the critical groundwork for these investigations came from the ideas and issues first articulated within feminist art practice of the 1970s. Not only had early feminists been committed to a critique of representation, but they had also expanded our understanding of politics beyond the traditional class-oriented language of the Left by exposing its lingering humanism as a gendered construct blind to sexual difference. Moreover, because feminist artists saw themselves as part of a large social movement, they were especially concerned with the need for their work to be meaningful both within and beyond the art world; that is, they saw it as explicitly political. Unlike the dominant art practices of the period, such as Minimalism and Conceptualism, which, for all their claims to having "political implications," remained confined to

6.14 Martha Rosler. *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, 1977. Black-and-white video, 38:00 min.

self-reflexive critiques of the art world and its systems, early feminist art aimed to reach new audiences by means of an aesthetic discourse that was clearly and broadly legible. This predilection for a culturally shared language through which women could refer to and critique the contingencies of experience in the contemporary world enabled feminists to articulate a new form of avant-garde engagement.

The feminist concern with questions of how identity, the body, and its representations are embedded within social relations and historical contingencies was always explicit in the work of Martha Rosler. Rosler's preoccupation has been to show the inadequacy of all systems of representation not just as art world constructs, but also as social discourse. In her view, these systems constitute the "mythologies of everyday life."[89] In her *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, originally performed live (1973) and reenacted as a video (1977), Rosler presents a dark parody of positivist science in which a male researcher and assistant verbally interrogate a woman (Rosler) in a clinical setting (fig. 6.14).[90] As the examination proceeds to physical information, Rosler gradually undresses, and every inch of her body is scrupulously measured by the two men, while three female assistants register with bells, whistles, or kazoos how her measurements compare to the "standard." The video is accompanied by Rosler's voiceover reciting a litany of "crimes against women." *Vital Statistics* is a searing indictment of how society circumscribes and controls female behaviour and roles through both mythical ideals and the "objective" categories of science.

Her voiceover also reflects upon how one learns to "manufacture" one-self as a being in a state of culture by simulating an idealized version of the self as "natural," thus proposing, as Henry Sayre suggests, that the external appearance of the self does not *conceal* the true or natural self but is a *representation* of the self as natural.[91]

Although we have seen that a number of early feminist artists like Rosler, Piper, Mendieta, Michishita, and Idemitsu addressed gender in relation to economies of production and to the particularities of racial or cultural identity, the focus of most feminist performance art in the 1970s was primarily on gender alone. This tendency within early feminism in general has subsequently resulted in harsh critiques of it as exclusionary, especially of women of colour.[92] These critiques were also made in the art world. Although feminism always claimed to uphold inclusiveness and collectivism, feminist artists were seen by some to have betrayed this egalitarian vision as soon as they had themselves attained a degree of recognition within the art world's mainstream institutions. American artist Lorraine O'Grady made precisely this point when she staged a kind of guerrilla attack at the opening of the "Personae" show in 1981 at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. In a defiant gesture reminiscent of the intrusion of Robin Morgan and her feminist cohort at the 1968 Miss America pageant, O'Grady appeared as *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, wearing a tiara and a gown made of 180 pairs of white gloves, and proceeded to disrupt the opening by shouting angry poems against the racial politics of the art world that had sponsored the "Nine-White-Personae" show (fig. 6.15).[93] O'Grady's Mlle Bourgeois Noire character had in fact already debuted in 1980 in a similar invasion of the Just Above Midtown Gallery, which was conceived by its founder/director, Linda Goode-Bryannt, to serve as the only black avant-garde art gallery in New York at the time. Although the boldness of Goode-Bryannt's vision was indicated by her choice to locate the gallery in the heart of the mainstream New York art scene, O'Grady felt that the work of too many of the gallery artists was simply not living up to the gallery's radical potential. While the punch line of her poem at the New Museum was "Now is the time for an invasion!" her poem at Just Above Midtown was an exhortation to its artists that "Black art must take more risks!" All in all, Mlle Bourgeois Noire was an equal-opportunity critic, shouting out in tough terms against the conventions and hypocrisies of both the black and white art world milieus.[94]

6.15 Lorraine O'Grady. *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Goes to the New Museum*, 1981. photodocumentation of performance at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. Photograph: Coreen Simpson.

During the 1980s and 1990s, American artists like O'Grady, Coco Fusco, and Lorna Simpson and Canadians like Jin-Me Moon, Lori Blondeau, and Shelley Niro addressed more directly the questions of how race, identity, power, and politics intersect with feminism. For Martha Rosler, however, it was just as problematic to focus on race at the expense of class as it was to focus exclusively on gender. In particular, she argued that demands for inclusion missed a crucial point because they do not sufficiently address the question of art audiences and their investments in the economics and prestige of class hierarchy and, moreover, that such demands are all too easily co-opted into the desires of the art world's controlling institutions to appear progressively liberal: "Looked at from the perspective of a fashion-driven industry, the advent of art world identity politics, or multiculturalism, represents the incorporation of marginal producers, who bring fresh new 'looks' to revivify public interest ... Powerful cultural institutions like the Rockefeller Foundation and many universities, which didn't care for the older [Marxist] version of political art, have been quick to sponsor multiculturalism, which is, after all, a demand for inclusion rather than for economic restructuring."[95]

No doubt Rosler's comments will be seen as highly contentious in some circles, but her point is that feminism should not merely expand its discourse to include the politics of race, ethnicity, and sexuality, but also maintain a focus on the historically specific context of capitalism and the bourgeois ideology that sustains it. As a result of Rosler's presence, as well as that of British feminists like Mary Kelly and Sandy Flitterman as visiting artists or teachers at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the question of gender *and* class became an important reference point for students there at this time. In 1982, for example, Wendy Geller produced the video *48-Hour Beauty Blitz*, the premise of which was taken directly from a *Glamour* magazine article designed to instruct the reader in carrying out a weekend-long regimen for self-renewal centred on a beauty makeover.[96] Feminists had long seen such representations of women as responsible for inculcating prescriptive ideals of femininity. Yet Geller's intention was not simply to expose such representations as oppressive, but also to understand her own fascination with them.

As Geller works through her weekend beauty regimen, we see that there is more going on here than an interrogation of the allure of women's popular culture. It has something to do with the discrepancy

6.16 Wendy Geller. *48-Hour Beauty Blitz*, 1982. Colour video, 38:00 min.

6.17 Wendy Geller. *48-Hour Beauty Blitz*, 1982. Colour video, 38:00 min.

between the makeover's intended results and the results that Geller actually experienced, which came not only from the fact that beauty work turns out to be isolating, tedious, and exhausting, but also from the stark contrast between Geller's efforts to inhabit the feminine fantasy and the persistent hindrances of her impoverished reality. Geller tells us, for example, with a dour and deadpan expression, that she is supposed to use her best china and crystal so as to make the beauty blitz as pleasant as possible, but what she holds up for view are a few chipped dishes from a thrift store (fig. 6.16). Later we see her cooking the prescribed "low-cal" dinner – an egg-white omelette – in a pie pan on a hot plate. With devastating satire emulating Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Geller repeatedly uses the magazine as a cover for the broken blender in which she buzzes raw vegetable "soups." Later, realizing that her rooming-house bathroom is occupied at a critical moment, she is forced to improvise a facial at her kitchen table with a bowl of water and a ragged scrap of towel (fig. 6.17). This discrepancy between the fantasy and the reality is not just a matter of Geller's inability to live up to the impossible ideals of feminine beauty. Rather, the most debilitating obstructions to the presumed pleasures of the *Beauty Blitz* result from the hardships of her economic reality. In revealing how her beauty tasks are thwarted by her poverty, Geller's "disclosure of class relations" casts a glaring light on how her ideological purchase on femininity is determined by the limitations of her economic purchase on consumption.[97]

As much as Geller satirizes the fantasies of women's popular culture, she does not disavow their allure and significance. We have seen how other feminist artists have deftly appropriated the discourses of popular culture while intervening in their prescriptive ideologies. This often takes the form of a self-mocking defiance that reminds us of Freud's observation that "Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious." And because it is the sign of "the ego's victorious assertion of its own invulnerability," it is empowering.[98] Such rebelliousness is clearly evident in the work of Lori Blondeau, who uses parody to define a positive identity in the midst of a hostile social environment. One response to her experience of the clash between her Aboriginal identity and the dominant ideals of white femininity was her creation of the character CosmoSquaw, in whose guise she appeared in 1996 as the bosomy cover girl of her mock magazine, *CosmoSquaw* (fig. 6.18). Recuperating the term "squaw," which means "woman" in the Cree language, was an act of defiance both against the teenaged boys who had called her "a fucking

6.18 Lori Blondeau. *CosmoSquaw*, 1996. Cover of mock magazine. Collaboration and photograph: Bradlee LaRocque.

6.19 Lori Blondeau. *Lonely Surfer Squaw*, 1997. Digital image for the Internet exhibition "Virtual Postcards from the Feminist Utopia," sponsored by Mentoring Artists for Women Artists, Winnipeg, Manitoba. Photograph: Bradlee LaRocque.

ugly squaw" and against the way that *Cosmopolitan* magazine targets single white women looking for tips to find a man – tips that were of no help to a single and Aboriginal woman.[99] Blondeau's magazine satirizes the exclusionary presumptions and bombastic prose of *Cosmopolitan* with cover lines such as "Learn How to Spoon Feed *Your* Man!" and "10 Easy Tips for a Killer Bingo-Face!" In *Lonely Surfer Squaw* (1997), which was designed for the web-based exhibition "Virtual Postcards from the Feminist Utopia," Blondeau posed with a pink surfboard, like a displaced *Baywatch* babe, on the bank of a frozen Saskatchewan river wearing nothing but a fur bikini and mukluks (fig. 6.19).[100] Blondeau shows that humour can indeed repudiate reality and thus enable the humorist to resist her own subjection. It is, finally, as Judith Butler would say, a way to "make trouble" for the status quo of hegemonic power structures.

Winnipeg-based performance artists Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan have been making similar trouble for over a decade now. As emphatically "out" lesbians, their work addresses sexism, homophobia, and the social negotiations of identity. They use costume and dress as metaphor, symbol, or dramatic prop for narrative skits and vaudevillian gags that

6.20 Lorri Millan and Shawna Dempsey. *Arborite Housewife*, 1994. Studio photograph of performance costume. Photograph: Sheila Spence.

are wickedly parodic inversions of what is "normal," legitimate, and officially sanctioned. Nothing is sacrosanct in their comedic repertoire. As the *Arborite Housewife* (1994), Dempsey wears a pink dress made from one of the new "wonder" materials that furnished the postwar suburban boom (fig. 6.20).[101] Reciting a parable about marriage being like driving the family car, she warns of the dangers that ensue if family members deviate from their prescribed roles. Yet there is little danger of us taking her morality tale seriously, for it is as rigid and artificial as her dress. In *Growing Up* (1996), however, Dempsey confides that such rigid and artificial constructions could also be the object of queer desire (fig. 6.21). As an adolescent in the late sixties, she didn't know what erotica or porn were, but she did know what turned her on: the ladies in the lingerie pages of Eaton's catalogue wearing "industrial-strength underwear concealing unimaginable body parts so powerful they needed architecture to keep them in place."[102] Humour cuts like a knife here, as always for Dempsey and Millan, serving both as a means to expose the cultural contradictions and confinements that oppress them and as a force for liberatory release, theirs and ours.[103] From that "empty stage where feminist women can experiment with their own subjective becoming," their gift of laughter rises defiantly.[104]

6.21 Lorri Millan and Shawna Dempsey. *Growing Up Suite*, 1996. Photodocumentation of performance. Photograph: Don Lee, Banff Centre, Banff.