

NEVER ENOUGH IS *SOMETHING ELSE*: FEMINIST PERFORMANCE ART, AVANT-GARDES, AND PROBITY¹

I. Introduction: Censorship and *Something Else*

“To write,” Gilles Deleuze has claimed, “is certainly not to impose a form (of expression) on the matter of lived experience. Literature rather moves in the direction of the ill-formed or the incomplete.”² He also noticed that a writer “is not a patient but rather a physician, the physician of himself [*sic*] and of the world.”³ Deleuze supports this metaphor by quoting French writer Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: “One day, we will perhaps know that there wasn’t any art, but only *medicine*.”⁴ And then Deleuze added: “Literature appears as an enterprise of health.” But it is a strange kind of health, a health wracked with “delirium,” a delirium played out between what he identified as the poles of “disease” and “resist[ance].”⁵ Deleuze left his assertions intentionally ill formed, namely unresolved, a strategy that he secured by locating them in the incomplete condition of always becoming. “Writing is inseparable from becoming,” Deleuze insisted.⁶

However sympathetic one may be to Deleuze’s application of an organic, philosophical model of becoming to writing and being, or to his alliance with what resembles Victor Turner’s anthropological interest in the relation between the liminal function of art and social healing, one still needs to ask: How would the “inseparable” relation he proposes between writing and becoming be different if one did impose “a form (of expression) on the matter of lived experience”? And how could one not if writing (and art, following Le Clézio) is a kind of physician, an enterprise of health? More importantly, what criteria would be constructed to administer this medicine? How may those who write (or produce art) be held responsible for their practices if writing (as physician) is to have a social function in an actual political space? Does this mean that something akin to the code of medical ethics embodied

¹ This essay was published in James M. Harding’s edited edition, *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality* (Madison: University of Madison/Wisconsin, 2000): 239-289.

² Gilles Deleuze, “Literature and Life,” (1993) for *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Winter 1997): 225. This article was first published in Deleuze’s final book *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans., Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

³ Ibid: 228.

⁴ Ibid: See J-M. G. Le Clézio, *Hai* (Paris: Flammarion, 1971): 7.

⁵ Ibid: 229.

⁶ Ibid: 225.

in the Hippocratic Oath would be solemnly sworn to by writers (and artists)? How and who would administer that code of ethics? Of what might it consist?

These questions are particularly compelling to me because of the unpredictable ways in which the present state of this essay came into being. Indeed, “essaying” is a more accurate term for this text, which was written over a period of four years, on divergent subjects, for distinct reasons, in response to multiple requests from various people for diverse contexts, in different countries, and on different continents.⁷ Under such conditions, writing itself never ceases becoming, as I shall explain.

The article with which the present essay began was called “Never Enough.” (It appears below as the second section below.) “Never Enough” was commissioned by Danish performance artist Kirsten Justesen for *Body as Membrane*, an exhibition of women’s performance art photographs that Justesen organized with Austrian performance artist Valie Export.⁸ To my surprise, Justesen herself cut my essay from the catalogue in December 1995. She refused to publish it because I had raised questions about the ways in which the photographs in the show demonstrated attitudes that I described as self-denigrating and self-destructive, a criticism that implicitly challenged Justesen’s exhibition itself. Justesen justified her censorship by stating that my views represented “American Puritanism with a thin candy coating.”⁹

Ten months later, when I attempted to include an excerpt from the still unpublished “Never Enough” in a different catalogue essay (this time on Carolee Schneemann), to my utter astonishment Marcia Tucker, then Director of the New Museum, censored the very same section (“Apples and Stems”), which addressed how Schneemann’s theory and practice have been usurped for years by artists and critics who often neither credited nor supported her

⁷ My interest in the process of “essaying,” and its relation to the actual unfolding of a person’s life, began with the discovery in 1976 of the book *Essaying Essays: Alternative Forms of Exposition*. New York: Out of London Press, 1975.

⁸ Artists in the show, at the Kunsthallen Brandts Klaedefabrik, included: Elke Krystofek and Valie Export, Austria; Jayne Parker, England; Heili Rekula, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, and Kirsten Justesen, Denmark; Orlan, France; Renéé Cox, Joan Jonas, Mary Kelly, Alison Knowles, Carolee Schneemann, and Annie Sprinkle from the USA. In addition, the show included deceased artists Gina Pane (France) and Ana Mendieta and Hannah Wilke (USA).

⁹ Justesen’s justifications were transparently defensive. She knew quite well that for over twenty years my scholarship has been devoted to some of the most controversial Performance Art in the post-1945 period. My work on destruction, violence, and trauma in art and society is the reason she invited me to write for the catalogue. Moreover, she also knew that as an artist I collaborated in performances with African American artist Sherman Fleming on the subject of sex and race, actions that included interracial nudity.

work. When I learned of the Tucker's cut, I requested that an asterisk be added to the heading of my catalogue essay in order to alert readers to the fact that an important part of the text was missing, and that it had been deemed "not appropriate" for publication.¹⁰ In response to my request, Tucker responded that I had been "edited"- not censored.¹¹ She further asserted that everyone who had read my text, including Schneemann, was "troubled" by the "angry and defensive tone" of the "Apples & Stems" section.¹² I responded to Tucker this way:

Have I - without the slightest intention to do so - breached a museum code of decorum much in the manner [that] Schneemann herself [does in her art]? ...Why was a section of the "Apples and Stems" part of my essay deemed "inappropriate" as I was told? Why have the quotation marks I had placed around the word appropriate been struck from my [requested] note? Is it because I wrote what needed to be said and named names where The New Museum would prefer to be more polite? Is it because I accurately honed in on, and breached, institutional standards of decorum? If so - and obviously I did - then I, like Schneemann, must be on the right track. Moreover, ...why does taking a position against self-destruction, self-derogation, and the appropriation of Schneemann's theoretical language - that is, taking a position against art that is opposed to everything for which her life's work stands - have to be interpreted as "angry and defensive"? ...What is inappropriate about anger? What is wrong with defending an artist's work after so many years of misunderstanding, neglect, and abuse? Why, even as we embrace the visionary work of a revolutionary artist, must we politely whisper about (and thus protect) the forces, which systematically have conspired against her? Indeed, I find it distressingly paradoxical, if not hypocritical, that in our profession all forms of the most extreme sexuality, violence, masochism, sadism,

¹⁰ While traveling in September, I was initially contacted by Dan Camerson, curator for Schneemann's exhibition, who faxed me an urgent notice in my Amsterdam hotel that Tucker "strongly felt" that the "Apples & Stems" part of my essay was "not appropriate" for the publication and "should be cut" from my essay.

¹¹ Marcia Tucker letter to the author, October 10, 1996.

¹² Early in the editing process sometime in August, I had been advised that the "Apples & Stems" section appeared to "pit Orlan against Schneemann." I had immediately revised the text since my intention was never to pit the artists against each another, but rather to delineate the structure of competition endemic to the cultural situation itself. After the revision, Schneemann herself told me in a phone conversation that she was "thrilled" with my essay, and later wrote to me that she was "humbled...and grateful" for my "insight...and loving comprehension." Carolee Schneemann letter to the author, 24 August 1996.

“abjection,” and so on, may be shown, written about, and even celebrated as “transgressive,” but a critique of these very behaviors is described as “angry and defensive.” It is more than ironic that my text should be censored when, for so many years, I wrote about destruction and violence in art when no one else would. What a strange world we make!¹³

Tucker never answered by letter. When I saw her at Schneemann’s opening, she remained her congenial and warm self.

I let the whole matter of both censorship experiences pass until January 1997 when I was again contacted by Justesen, who invited me to “respond” to an article by English art historian Katy Deepwell on the exhibition *Body as Membrane* in the now defunct Finnish art journal *Siksi*.¹⁴ The insult of being solicited to retort to a debate sparked by my own work, by the very person who had censored it, was unmistakable. In the intervening months, Justesen had realized that my essay potentially motivated an extended discussion of her show. So she distributed my text to numerous individuals, among them Tania Ørum (a critic for *Kritik*), Deepwell, and others. In order to further the discussion of the whole affair, Justesen herself (not Deepwell) had shifted the focus from the problems I had raised (about the ways feminist performance artists represent themselves) to a spurious competition about the differences between “American and European feminists.” (Divide and conquer has always been the best smoke screen to avoid grappling constructively with real conflict.) I agreed to respond to this contrived “debate” only when John Peter Nilsson, then Editor-in-Chief of *Siksi*, resolved to publish the full text of my censored catalogue essay - “Never Enough.”¹⁵

In the summer of 1997 an article by Ørum was published by *Siksi* as part of the chain of responses to the “debate” my essay prompted. In her article, Ørum, Justesen’s friend – charged that it was I who was the one to be held accountable for lamenting the self-representations of the artists exhibited in *Body as Membrane*. “If anybody is guilty of perpetuating the image of woman as victim and part of a chain of interchangeable bodies which may be replaced by each other at any moment irrespective of individual

¹³ Kristine Stiles letter to Marcia Tucker, 16 October 1996.

¹⁴ See Katy Deepwell, “Debate: Sassy or Not?” *Siksi* [Helsinki] 11: 4 (Winter 1996): 88-90.

¹⁵ When my essay “Never Enough” finally came out, Nilsson changed the title to, “Debate: The Empty Slogan of Self-Representation.”

characteristics,” she wrote, “it must be feminists like Kristine Stiles.”¹⁶ Ørum also repeatedly described me as an “old” feminist and associated me with Jill Johnston, a lesbian activist and 1970s essentialist feminist. However inaccurate a personal description of me this was, I did not find it insulting to be called either old and essentialist or lesbian, as she intended. On the contrary, Ørum’s polarizing strategy simply recalls Justesen’s attempt to the contrary, Ørum’s polarizing strategy simply recalls Justesen’s attempt to pit American against European feminists in an effort to shift the questions I raised in “Never Enough” from substantive cultural issues to personal attacks. Justesen’s and Ørum’s behavior, as well as the censorship of my essay, are object lessons in feminist discourses and politics. Feminists do, can, and must disagree. This is the only objective I hold “essential” to the health of feminism. That my work was censored in a feminist context, by feminists, and that I continue to be misrepresented and maligned by feminists in avant-garde contexts, only proves how important such disagreements are to us all.

Now, Justesen and Tucker are intelligent, responsible, and creative women, highly informed about contemporary art. Tucker is an articulate, longtime champion of contemporary aesthetics and cultural theory. Justesen is a feminist artist herself, practicing performance art, one of the most controversial forms of artmaking. Who could predict that of all people they would censor? Certainly not I, who never set out to write anything worthy of censorship, even though I realized that my essays did not conform to the celebratory tone of conventional catalogue entries. But I felt that “my textual contribution [was] in keeping with the fierce quality of the works themselves.”¹⁷ Moreover, neither Tucker nor Justesen could conceive that they could censor. Rather, Tucker held that she had “edited,” and Justesen stated that she “refused to publish” a text that was “inappropriate” for her exhibition catalogue.

¹⁶ See Tania Ørum’s “Fishy Bodies and Closed Minds,” *Siski* 12:2 (1997): 88.

¹⁷ This comment is excerpted from my letter of 31 December 1995, to artist-curator Kirsten Justesen and Lene Burkard, Assistant Director of the Kunsthallen Brandts Klædefabrik. I wrote that my text was “ruthlessly honest, passionate, and empathic to the women in the exhibition as well as to my own feminist position,” and I pointed out that, “I was *not* commissioned to write something sympathetic to the exhibition, nor was I required to be uncritical.” I tried to impress them that what I wrote needed to be written, and was done so “in the spirit of open dialogue.” Furthermore, I explained that I believed my essay was “is in keeping with the fierce quality of the works themselves.” And I lamented the fact that they did not seem to grasp “the inter-relatedness between theory and action, between text and image.” Finally, I observed that, “In the end, I feel that you betray not only your aims but all of our purposes as feminists by not fairly admitting into the arena of visual and textual discourse an open discussion of the issues.” Nevertheless, I stated that, “I remain committed to the show and to the artists in it.”

The professional positions alone of these two women must compel further consideration of the issues I raised in “Never Enough,” if only because it would appear that Justesen and Tucker possess a certain kind of power, authority, experience, and knowledge. That these attributes are real or recoverable in any larger context is, of course, at question. For there is a critical difference between the appearance of power and the actual ability to exert power in culture at large. If Tucker and Justesen had any real authority, it is doubtful that they would have found the need to censor within the confines of art history and criticism. And is it not a lack of essential confidence and authority that drives the censor in the first place?¹⁸

According to William Gass, censors perform their tasks for a higher value, one known best to them, and which they alone determine for the others:

The censor cuts; the censor veils; the censor confines; the censor denies.

All this is done for the sake of something higher: the stability, the good, of society....There is always a position of power and privilege at risk when the censor snips, for what stone tree would fear the woodcutter’s tiny saw?¹⁹

Regardless of their defenses, Tucker and Justesen did censor. The difference between “editing” and “censoring” depends on *who* has the power (at any given juncture) of representation.²⁰ My authority as an author was usurped without my agreement and without consultation with me. I had the feeling of one whose mouth was “stopped” as Gass so powerfully pointed out about the affects of censorship when he remarked: “You wish to stop her mouth from voicing her thoughts, thoughts that you would see silenced, frightened into formlessness.”²¹

Why do censors uphold what they themselves believe to be unthinkable? Because *something else* has been spoken that they sense must be suppressed in order to protect someone or something else from exposure. This repressed virtual content then requires endless exposure, in the manner Gass described, “To expose, to lay bare...how many layers of

¹⁸ A year after I wrote this present essaying essay, Marcia Tucker was dismissed from her position as the Director of the New Museum, a firing that provided more evidence for her actual lack of substantive power even in the institution she was instrumental in founding.

¹⁹ Ibid: 61.

²⁰ For a superb discussion of censorship see, Sue Curry Jansen’s, *Censorship: The Knot That Binds Power and Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

²¹ William Gass, “Shears of the Censor: Notes on excision, imprisonment, and silence,” *Harper’s Magazine* 294:1763 (April 1997): 60.

concealment had to be removed? Seven veils? And each one symbolic, through and through of political, sexual, [institutional], and educational entanglement.”²² Whether faced with censorship or not, the writer’s responsibility - especially if s/he is to let writing perform the physician’s ministrations - is to reveal and accuse. My essay was censored *not* because of its actual content, but because of that *something else*, that virtual content at work within it. The voice that both Justesen and Tucker deemed necessary to stifle (in order to secure the illusion of uncontested exhibitions) was the voice within the text that changed my discourse into what Deleuze described as “a kind of foreign language within language.” In other words, although I said one thing, I was also saying *something else*, that virtual content Deleuze associated with what Virginia Woolf might have considered to be the very rightful concern of the writer: “The writer does not speak about it, but is concerned with *something else*.”²³

So I have been required to interrogate myself, asking: What is this *something else*, this foreign language, lodged within my discussions of art that caused censorship by those who could not imagine themselves to censor? My answer is this: I brought value judgments culled from my personal expectations about the ethical behavior of avant-gardes (and of those associated with them) to my experience of writing about them. My *something else*, in the first instance, was my temerity to describe as negative the performances and self-representations of women performance artists in *Body as Membrane*, and, in the second instance, my critique of the unethical behavior of those associated with representing avant-garde art. Moreover, in addition to exercising value-judgments that clashed with doctrine, rules, and rites regarding the behavior of, and institutional practices associated with, avant-gardes, the *something else* within my text was in search of a something I shall describe below as *probity* within avant-garde practices. The evocation of that *something else* raised the censors’ dread and panic, and it was *that* fearsome *something else* that the censors tried to hide, transgressing even their own creeds in order to silence words from being voiced.

These events of censorship further caused me to confront the fact that this *something else* hovering in my texts is akin to what Deleuze described as a kind of “delirium,” the “disease” of the process of writing that underpins the “physician” who, through writing, acts on herself:

²² Ibid.

²³ Deleuze: 229-230.

Literature is delirium, and as such its destiny is played out between the two poles of delirium. Delirium is a disease, the disease par excellence, whenever it erects a race it claims is pure and dominant. But it is the measure of health when it invokes this oppressed bastard race that ceaselessly stirs beneath dominations, resisting everything that crushes and imprisons, a race that is outlined in relief in literature as process.²⁴

Indeed, in this essaying – this never enough - writing *became* the physician through which I encountered how thought may invoke what it also wishes to resist, the delirious process that releases the cure – namely that *something else* which resists oppressive domination. When the physician that is my writing required me to examine why my work had been censored, I realized that the *something else* haunting my text was my insistence on the enactment of personal codes of *probity*. By this term, I mean to draw attention to personal accountability and responsibility: the integrity, rectitude, candor, fair play, justice, scruples, and accountability with which those engaged with avant-gardes must operate. My concern with probity must have been the subtext, the *something else* that summoned the censor’s scissors. Is, then, the censure of my work simultaneously the register of its delirious conjuring, a resistance to the “bastard?” Does the *something else* of that delirium also have to do with writing and art themselves, with their dual possibility to minister health, with their instrumental ability to interrogate with probity, and with their recuperative role as a means to operate in the dissociative breach between delirium and resistance? Finally, is it not probity that requires us to search, to delve beneath the surface, to dig into the substance not only of events but of the measure of those events in the institutions erected around them?

“PROBITY!” a surprised Laura Cottingham, wrote to me: “What an unheard of suggestion for the 20th century, [insofar as] this is a shared or at least understandable assumption...of accountability, integrity, probity.”²⁵ On further reflection, the feminist writer and lesbian activist added:

I BELIEVE in probity. I believe in it politically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. My concern with your essayistic assertion is still that the weight of your assertion does not, for me, weigh in against the strength of understanding

²⁴ Ibid: 229.

²⁵ Laura Cottingham email to the author 28 July 1997.

currently operating against it. That's all -- in other words, I see you doing a David and Goliath here. And yes I know who won that battle, but that was a myth!²⁶

When I call for avant-garde art to operate with probity, as I shall at the end of this essay, it is *not* a call for ethical or moral fundamentalism, nor for a simplistic grand principle, but for a pluralistic accountability that may be virtuous *or* monstrous. Cordelia's answer to King Lear's question to his three daughters is exemplary of virtuous probity. Lear asks: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most?" Cordelia testifies, in contrast to her obsequious sisters: "I love your majesty according to my bond; no more nor less." If Cordelia's scruples impress some as too righteous, Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *Salo* is an excellent model of the heinous. In *Salo*, Pasolini takes up the Marquis de Sade's theme of perversion with a fierce probity and horrible aesthetic in order to investigate with uncompromising and brutal integrity the violent clash between the limits of individual desire and the boundaries of human freedom demanded by the social contract.²⁷

Several sections follow. "Never Enough," as I have said, is the original censored essay from *Body as Membrane* and published in *Siski*, to which I have made minor emendations here. The next section, "Feminist Performance Art," widens the discussion of the feminist avant-garde begun in "Never Enough" with special attention to the problem of drawing parallels between the work of Schneemann and such artists as French performance artist Orlan. In the section, "Probity, Avant-Gardes, and Radical Originality," I first consider feminist performance in the context of widely discussed theories of the historical avant-garde. Next I reflect on the relationship between *radicalism* and radical, and the difference between a specious "ism" and an authentic originality, before ending with a discussion of the value of

²⁶ Laura Cottingham email to the author 30 July 1997.

²⁷ I have been preoccupied with the responsibilities of interpersonal exchange – the social contract – since 1980 when, as an artist, I used this term in two works of art. The first, entitled "International Social Contract," was a collaboration between myself and the San Francisco artist Richard Irwin (now deceased) for an exhibition entitled *Tourism*. It took place in the summer of 1980 at the Heller Gallery on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley. Our intention was "to extend the meaning through examining the function of *social contract* [our emphasis at the time]." In a second work I realized in 1980, entitled "Lettres/Livres," I wrote letters in little books (which I collaged with images) to twenty-five people in Nice, France. I had found their names in the Nice telephone book. I left a place in the books for the recipient to respond, hoping, thereby, to create a space for responsive exchange and mutual trust. In other words, I tried to engage them in a friendly exchange and a social contract. I hoped that as strangers we would get to know each other by exchanging the books through the international mail. In this way, together we would produce a work of art. No one responded. See my, *Questions: 1977-1982* (San Francisco: KronOscope Press, 1982): 68-73, 78-85.

probity in the identity and behavior of avant-gardes. Finally, “Women Taking Action” concludes – for the time being – with a call for more intensified practices of probity, the *something else* driving this essaying essay.²⁸ Taking probity as an ethical premise, these sections weave together interdependent critiques of feminist performance and avant-garde practices, providing not only a reevaluation of each but a theorization of their relationship to each other.

II. Never Enough

“Is this where it all ends?” *Time* Magazine asked of Ivana Trump, Czech-born wife of US billionaire Donald Trump, in its December 24th, 1990, coverage of the “scrumptious scandal.” Ivana had been granted \$25 million and a divorce after thirteen years of marriage and three children. The judge handed down the decision in only ten minutes “based on Mr. Trump’s cruel and inhuman treatment.” Ivana, forty-one at the time, had been discarded for a twenty-six year-old actress, Marla Maples who not only remarkably resembled the first Mrs. Trump but also produced a child for Mr. Trump four years later. Exchanged for a newer, fresher, and better-functioning machine, Ivana “disappeared from high society for a few weeks...only to turn up on the May cover of *Vogue* Magazine as a blonde bombshell with a very fresh face [lift]...newly single, secure and oh-so-stylish,” *Health* Magazine reported in July 1991. As if money and body-altering technology could reverse the cultural consciousness and values to which she, regardless of being tall, slender, blond, glamorous, rich, smart, or accomplished (in short the paradigms of desire in western culture), had been forced to surrender.

Grief and futility overwhelmed me while reflecting upon Ivana’s circumstance, not because of her divorce or plastic surgery. No one but Ivana was responsible for turning herself into the caricature of her own youth. I was desolate because no matter who a woman is, what she does, or what she has, she is never enough. I am never enough. And the temporary shift in Ivana’s self-representation would not ultimately prevent her from her fate.

²⁸ As if this essaying is never enough, I have been invited to extend these remarks and publish this text as a book. For now that project will have to wait. But it would appear that “Never Enough” named a phenomena of female struggle, but a personal event of writing that, indeed, has imposed a form of expression on the lived matter of my personal experience, proving, just the opposite of what Deleuze wrote but arriving, nonetheless at the same conclusion where: “literature rather moves in the direction of the ill-formed or the incomplete.”

For, despite momentary triumphs none of us are exempt from defeat - even women like Marla, who capitalize on the fall of another.²⁹ Trump's exchange of women represents a phenomena against which even the youngest, most beautiful, accomplished, and fertile or, on the contrary, the most enraged, hostile, and man-hating woman is powerless. In this particular case, Trump's ability to attract and acquire younger women feeds the illusion of the deferment of mortality and the insufficiency that absolute power always knows. And so, one representation is constantly traded for another.

Religious, social, and cultural formations that arbitrarily limit women's potential and use-value to age, beauty, and fertility provide the psychological conditioning that convinces women that we are never enough. Even more depressing, the incessant exchange of women in patriarchy remains fundamentally unaltered despite feminism, consciousness training, gay and lesbian separatism, radical changes in gender and sexual roles and practices, and the theoretical critiques of poststructuralism. What is more, it is exacerbated by the economy and circulation of representations of women as objects of desire. Women have learned that representations that abuse and degrade us - images that also promised to capture male attention - now hold the gaze of many males and females. But this attention is fleeting at best, as the desire for female sexual subservience is transformed into disgust at our pathetic self-abnegation, at the same time as it is fueled for more. We women continue to produce ourselves as victims, feeding this voracious appetite.

My ruminations about never being enough, and about Ivana Trump's dilemma, were prompted by the photocopies sent to me of works that were to be included in the exhibition *Body as Membrane* (for which I had been commissioned to write this essay). While examining them, I found myself asking: "Is this where it all ends?" The cheap photocopies of photographs - still images of live performance events - were pictures that broke my heart and incapacitated my will. They confirmed the desperation of the struggle and the extent to which we women continue to degrade ourselves in a misguided attempt to wrest power over the cultural implications of our representations. For despite pictorial rhetoric, these images were not empowering, but hopeless and sad. I longed for them to be simply fictions. But even as

²⁹ Since the writing of this essay, Trump and Marla divorced amicably. I paraphrase his reason, as given in a CNN nightly news program: "Marla prefers things like home and walking on the beach. I would rather be in the office making phone calls for eight hours a day. Ivana was more like me in that way." In a double irony, Marla, too, was not enough - and not enough like Ivana.

fictions, they would have bespoken self-hatred. And they are not fictions, but residual documents of real actions taken by actual women. Indeed the photographs of French performance artist Orlan, one of the most extreme examples of suffering in the exhibition, demonstrates just how much the contest over representation is one of life and death, as she repeatedly undergoes dangerous spinal blocks in order to retain consciousness during her body-altering performances.

Curiously, however, it was not the black-and-white photocopy of the horrific suicidal mania of Orlan's serial body - reconstructions that reminded me of the dislocated wretchedness of Ivana Trump, posing as a forty-one year-old ingénue on the cover of *Vogue*. (I had, until this moment, become anesthetized to their gore.) It was the color photocopy, thrice-removed from the actual performance, of "Dog Bites" (1992) - an action by the Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila - that prompted my ruminations.³⁰ The visual remove of the photocopy enabled me to distance myself from the usual aesthetic function of the slide transparency and photograph. Their spotless, glamorous surfaces (made ready for consumption) technologically enhance viewing. But to see "Dog Bites" at the distance of the poorly reproduced black-and-white photocopy was to not only the commercial function of the slide and glossy photograph, but also to visualize the dejection of Ahtila's act. There she is: cropped, dyed red hair. Harsh black lines traced carefully on her eyebrows and around her eyes. Lips thick with color. The artist glowers expectant, penetrating, distrustful, but analytical. Her partially revealed breasts are squeezed together and contorted. She raises her hand in the gesture of a dog, paw/palm up. Her title insists that she is ready to attack. But what I see is not a biting dog. I see an untouched woman who might rather roll over to be petted and licked (by man or woman) than to bite. She is pure emotional pathos. The body here is a membrane of pain.

³⁰ The catalogue from *Body as Membrane* was published after my essay was rejected. It contains a statement by Ahtila about "Dog Bites" which states that she is not the figure in the picture. As I was given only the photocopy of Ahtila's action, not her text, and told that these images represented the artist's performances, I could not have known when I wrote my essay (unless I had asked, which I did not), that Ahtila was not the woman in the pictures. The photograph's ability to fool the observer into believing that the image is of the artist depicted (especially when the work is one of performance art) is characteristic of the assumptions that are brought to performance art where the medium of the artist is the body. I have criticized other writers - among them Henry Sayre and Robert Hughes - for not being attentive to the problematic relationship between the photograph and performance art, and of being duped. Having fallen victim to the very same error, I would like to acknowledge my own culpability.

Some terrible gnawing psychophysical self-doubt, self-hate, self-revulsion, and annulment pervade these images. In “Hyperventilation,” 1993, Heli Rekuli wears a gas mask with the phallic oxygen hose inserted in her vagina. [Figure. 151] While Rekuli makes a connection between the life-sustaining function of the oxygen hose and the life-giving capacity of the birth canal, her red-greased body, animalistic pose, stained fingers, and menacing eyes suggest rather a sado-masochistic fantasy of some variety of vicious bondage. Rather than controlling her own body and restricting the elements that sustain it to a female origin, Rekuli's image insists upon the constriction of the female body within the repressive and humiliating sexual technology of a male domination fantasy.

Similarly Joan Jonas's disembodied bodily image “Mirror Piece “(1970) resembles Hans Bellmer's disemboweled dolls, anticipating the violently dismembered mannequins in Cindy Sherman's photographs of the early 1990s. [Figure. 152] In “Satisfaction,” 1994, Elke Krystofek masturbates before a public with objects inserted into every genital orifice - anus and vagina stuffed with what (in the photocopies I was sent to study) resemble a dildo and a knife. Krystofek's action seems to be an aggressive, if not ironic, reply to the Rolling Stones' whine, “Can't get no satisfaction.” [Figure. 153] But her satisfaction is one of lonely exhibitionism in an environment that she suggests (because of the objects with which she surrounds and impales herself) offers only brief respite from duties of ironing, vacuuming, and other domestic tasks conventionally associated with women's subordination. Is Krystofek free merely because she can abandon her chores and masturbate in public to a primarily male crowd? Isn't this scenario simply a staged version of any number of stock male fantasies - to see a woman as beautiful as Krystofek masturbate for them? Is Krystofek in possession of her self-representation, or is she a woman completely out of touch with the dignity of her own body? As an Austrian, has Krystofek been conditioned by *Wiener Aktionismus*, a consummately male genre of performance art, to abase herself in public?

Krystofek is the antithesis of Mary Kelly, whose body has disappeared, hidden in a black monolithic costume and replaced by texts, narrative histories, and heraldic shields. Kelly's cosmetic make-up equally camouflages her and suggests that her self-confident pose, her apparent invulnerability, derives from a conditioned disembodiment, rationalized by the patriarchal logic of language handed down from Plato and protected by the polished wooden floors of exhibition spaces. Rather than debase her body, Kelly abandons it, like the,

bourgeois subject [who] substitutes for its corporal body the rarefied body of the text...The carnality of the body has been dissolved and dissipated until it can be reconstituted in writing at a distance from itself. As the flesh is derealized, representation, which becomes at last representational, is separated from it and puts in train a mode of signification for which, to borrow a word from Derrida, the body has become supplementary.³¹

The body is anything but supplementary for Annie Sprinkle who claims to be “sexually excited” by the production of her own image. But what is presented superficially as a parody in “Prostitute/Porn Star Turned Sex Guru/Performance Artist” and in “Anatomy of a Pinup Photo” (1991) is, I think, a thin pretense for asserting and protecting the “real,” and that which may not be substituted.³² [Figure. 154] “Anatomy of a Pinup Photo” is simultaneously natural and artificial, an image of fecund desire and barren repulsion. In this work of art, Sprinkle verbally emphasizes the “realness” of her pendulous breasts by describing them as “sagging,” while also attempting to overcome their inevitable insufficiency (insufficient because they will always be replaced – as Marla replaced Ivana) by encrusting them with pearls.³³ Sprinkle’s emphasis on her “real” breasts divulges a craving to be associated with anything she might consider “real.” For the one element of her image that the self-appointed “sex guru/performance artist” insists is real - except in which the pain she endures from wearing shoes that are too small and a corset in which she can not “breathe” [sic]) - is her enormous breasts. It is her one irreplaceable special aspect that few other women share. No wonder Sprinkle seeks to assert the “reality” of her breasts by apologetically noting their vulnerability to gravity (“sagging”) or describes her corset as hiding the actual girth of her “very big belly.”

³¹ Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (New York: Methuen, 1984): 62-3.

³² I need to remind the reader at this point, that this section of my text was written in the fall of 1995, long before Sprinkle ceased doing these kinds of performances, and before the terrible fire at her boathouse in Sausalito, California, a fire that destroyed the artist’s entire belongings. Even before her tragedy, Sprinkle had begun to change her direction.

³³ A similar preoccupation with authenticity haunts Madonna despite much postmodern theorization to the contrary. In the last scene of *Truth or Dare*, Madonna appears snuggled in her bed with her dance troupe. In the midst of a playful scene in which they are teasing her, she recoils when someone suggests that a string of pearls she is wearing is fake. Without thinking, Madonna instinctively retorts: “No! They are the real thing!” Hearing her own longing to be associated with something fine and “real,” “something unable to be exchanged, the woman who has made a career of being celebrated as the paradigm of an empowered woman able to invent herself, Madonna resumes her charade. But Madonna’s denial of simulation exposed her craving to be *anything but* that decentered, fragmented postmodern construction she has been made out to be.

Similarly, the Hottentot Venus that Renée Cox summonses in “Hott-En-Tot” (1994) has strap-on prosthetic breasts and buttocks that reinforce the stereotype of African “primitive” sexual appetite. But these prosthetic appendages equally visualize the extended temperament of the colonialist mind Sander L. Gilman has carefully theorized.³⁴ Much like the commodity that the black Hottentot became for nineteenth century society, a commodity whose genitalia remain on display at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris, Kirsten Justesen presents herself as a commodity. In “Lunch” (1975), Justesen is stuffed naked into a grocery cart situated on a country road in a pretty landscape. [Figure. 155] She appears to glory in the bucolic environment (of both her own body and the lovely terrain), becoming a fetish of the supermarket of images asking to be consumed and devoured. In another image, she appears as a mermaid, but her fishy tail has replaced her head (creating the male fantasy of the woman who won’t talk back) and leaving her ravishingly voluptuous body mindlessly intact for consumption.

One after another, these photocopies overwhelm me with their thinly veiled anxiety, anguish, and futility. Even Alison Knowles, ordinarily the picture of serenity and self-acceptance, appears catatonic in her self-portrait, “The Identical Lunch.” Regardless of the fact that this is one of the most benign images in the exhibition, Knowles looks sphinx-like. This naked woman on a New York rooftop seated by her lunch might just be resting, meditating, or enjoying the sun. But her pose is stiff and strained in the chair where she sits object-like, rectilinear, an automaton shackled to the rotations of the wrist-watch she wears, a technological reminder of the incessant march of time that regulates the social usefulness of her female body and its decline so poignantly present (but denied) in Sprinkle’s work.

“By what ‘system of power’ are certain representations authorized while others are blocked, prohibited, invalidated, or ignored?” Margaret R. Miles has asked.³⁵ Her question is rhetorical since it already identifies a system of power as the means by which certain kinds of acts are validated. This observation offers a key to how we might understand that the images exhibited in *Body as Membrane* belong to the very system of oppression against which they ostensibly contend. The images in *Body as Membrane* surface in a culture of female abuse

³⁴ Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985): 85.

³⁵ Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989): 5.

precisely because the culture is conditioned to representing women in this manner. Despite much theorizing to the contrary, and regardless of who has the power over representation, the semiotics of female degradation has been so deeply and systematically established and entrenched that it will be read as misogynistic whether produced by a feminist or a misogynist. Consciously departing from Judith Butler's highly influential theory of the 1990s that one may reformulate prohibition as power, I want to clearly state that *women do not empower themselves by perpetrating signifiers of domination and degradation under the signs of feminism or self-representation*.³⁶ A feminist re-theorization of bondage, for example, is not sufficient to change the signification of S-M images in a society acculturated to viewing female bondage through male desire.

The photographs that comprise *Body as Membrane* overwhelmingly testify to the failure of feminist art and theory - my own included - to resist the continued and even accelerating degradation of women. These images reinscribe it and suggest that the cultural conditioning of women is so complete, and the situation so extreme, that we will - in the name of self-empowerment - re-represent ourselves within the same vulgar exploitative system of signification. Valie Export's "Genitalpanik" (1969) and "Eros/Ion" (1971) succinctly summarized this state over twenty-five years ago. [Figure. 156] Perhaps, that is why her photographs are among the most compelling in this exhibition. Her work addressed the fact that women's bodies are tortured and carefully taught to reiterate the wounds in self-inflicted acts of pain and subjugation ("Eros/ion"); and that we remain in a profound condition of genital panic ("Aktionshose: Genitalpanik") attempting, it would appear in vain, to defend that space while simultaneously aiding and abetting our exposure. [Figure. 157]

I recognize how conservative this position may appear, and that such a perception would break with the history of my own scholarship. But when faced with the photocopies of representations in *Body as Membrane*, I honestly could not recognize the values I have previously stood for, even when I defended some of these images in the past. Why? The context of looking at these pictures - as a whole representation of women's Performance Art - has the overwhelming impact of showing me something I have never been able to see before:

³⁶ While a systematic engagement with Butler's highly influential tenant is in order, this is not the place for that encounter. See Butler's, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. For a more detailed discussion of my thesis that the reformulation of negative signs does not function as a means for self-empowerment, see "Shaved Heads and Marked Bodies: Representations from Cultures of Trauma," in this volume.

how, under the empty slogan of self-representation, women have become the handmaids of the system of our own abuse against which we must struggle and never capitulate.

For example, in an article on Orlan published in 1993, US critic Barbara Rose defended Orlan's "theater of operations" as a reworking of the ancient Greek artist Zeuxis's art. "Zeuxis," she wrote, "made a practice of choosing the best parts from different models and combining them to produce the ideal woman."³⁷ What Rose forgot is that Zeuxis' male construction of an impossible female ideal is the originating source of Orlan's wounds. Such deep damage cannot be recuperated through irony, or healed by mere imitation of the same process. Rather, by drawing on Zeuxis, as Rose claims, Orlan reiterates the system she seeks to expose. In this act, Orlan is assisted by the increasingly brutal efficiency of contemporary patriarchal technology, the very technology that fostered Ivana's disappearance and "fresh" new look, and the reproductive technology that threatens to make women's bodies obsolete altogether.

Decades have passed since Carolee Schneemann offered the justification for a female artistic practice upon which Rose attempts to account for Orlan's motivation and accomplishment. Schneemann wrote, "Not only am I an image maker, but I explore the image values of flesh as material I choose to work with."³⁸ Schneemann also claimed in her essay "Istory of a Girl Pornographer" that: "I WAS PERMITTED TO BE AN IMAGE/BUT NOT AN IMAGE-MAKER CREATING HER OWN SELF-IMAGE."³⁹ Reworking Schneemann, Rose wrote: "Orlan remains in control of her own destiny [as] the artist and the woman [who] will never play the victim.... [She] is both subject and object, actress and director, passive patient and active organizer." Does Rose's defense of Orlan mean that after thirty years of ignoring Schneemann, the critic has finally learned something from her? Does this mean that Rose's consciousness has been raised after decades of contributing to mainstream culture and supporting male artists associated with Greenbergian formalism, the very art world patriarchy that has suppressed Schneemann's work for so long? I think not. It means that Schneemann's discourse has been co-opted.

³⁷ Barbara Rose, "Is It Art? Orlan and the Transgressive Art," *Art in America* 81:2 (February 1993): 82-7, 125. All quotes by Rose are from this article.

³⁸ Carolee Schneemann on "Eye Body" (1963) in *More Than Meat Joy*: 52.

³⁹ Schneemann, "Istory of a Girl Pornographer," (1974) in *More Than Meat Joy*: 194.

Rose is able to defend Orlan because, like Donald Trump, she represents and reifies systems of power validated by patriarchy. The very culture that replaces Schneemann with Orlan (Marla for Ivana) is the culture that never empowered Schneemann in the first place. Another vivid example of this brand of sexism is a letter I received from the chief curator of a well-known museum in the United States. In refusing my proposal for a retrospective on Schneemann's work, he wrote that his audience would be better “served by the apple.”⁴⁰ In other words, this curator would prefer to exhibit an artist *in the style of* Schneemann rather than the artist herself.

What is at stake in the dynamics of desire and representation? Why serve the public the apple and not the stem? The apple (Marla/Orlan) is sweet, juicy, fecund, and new before it drops off the gnarled life-supporting stem (Ivana/Schneemann). The obvious irony of the fresh/stale, new/old paradigm is its profound instability. Orlan is not new and fresh. Aging, indeed, is what motivates her current work (and Barbara Rose's interest in it). Like Carolee, Marla, and Ivana, someone already substitutes for Orlan. Is it you, Elke Krystofek? Or you, Heli Rekuli? Someone still in gymnasium? Who will she be?

My point is that the appropriation of once revolutionary actions into the cultural mainstream merely provides another spectacle of victimization. One should not be surprised to learn in this regard that as Rose uncritically and proudly points out, “Pierre Restany, Achille Bonito Oliva and Hans Haacke get prominent billing [in Orlan's work] because they have supported [her] work in the past.” Indeed! Support by such powerful male critics and artists merely validates Rose's discourse.)

Orlan's work and many other works in *Body as Membrane* make me ache with misery for us all: men and women alike. For it appears that much of what we see has been disciplined and managed back into the system of marketable and profitable “apples.” And after one shiny red apple loses its luster or is consumed, there is a bushel of more women each waiting her turn. The biting tone of this essay is not directed at the artists, curators, or even critic Barbara Rose. Nor do I mean to pit Schneemann against Orlan. All of us, like Marla and Ivana, take our positions as victims of the patriarchal system that abuses and uses us as replacements for each other at some point or another. My anger is directed at our culpability,

⁴⁰ Some may wonder why, in this essay that name names, I have left this curator anonymous. The answer is that ours was a private exchange regarding the possibility of exhibiting Schneemann's work. All the names that are named in this essay are already part of a public record.

at all of us who sacrifice our bodies as membranes to capital and patriarchy in the name of fame, sex, love, and theory. *Body as Membrane* marks a critical turning point for me in my recognition of the insurmountable gap between feminist intentions and theories, and their actual effect in visual and discursive practices vis-à-vis avant-gardes (to which I shall return in a later section).⁴¹ Despite many significant theories, many women artists remain confused and misdirected with regard to how to bridge this abyss in the visual domain. The enormous value of an exhibition like *Body as Membrane* is to instruct us visually in how far discourse is from rectifying the abusive conditions of women's representation and carnal knowing.

If we are to learn anything from *Body as Membrane*, it is that we fail to exempt ourselves from patriarchal economies and end up supporting them unwittingly if prevailing discourses or visual practices approve of women's images of self-denigration. Let me close this section with a parable that might be instructive for the ways in which power, despite one's best efforts at self-empowerment and self-representation, quite frequently gains its own ends:

There were two starving artists living in the kingdom. The king offered them both a stipend to become his court artists. The one said to the other, "I can not accept this offer as it would jeopardize the integrity of my work." The other said, "Then you should not. But I will accept so that I can live and work." The one artist died of hunger. The other became a successful court poet. The king fulfilled his will both ways.⁴²

III. Feminist Performance Art

My last pronouncement would seem to have ended the discussion. But not so fast. Returning to the questions I raised earlier, let me move closer to that *something else* that motivated the initial essay "Never Enough." That *something else* had to do, in large measure, with the vehicle that hauls the cart of apples and stems, namely the avant-garde, in which the delirium Deleuze identified as the poles of "disease" and "resist[ance]" is played out in the domain of visual art. For what the avant-garde might be, and how it might operate, is the *something else* that was the intuitive underpinning of my initial response in "Never Enough."

⁴¹ The defeat an artist experiences from co-option is vividly documented both in Guy Debord's suicide of 1995, and in his biting self-irony in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Trans., Malcolm Imrie. New York and London: Verso Books, 1990. Originally published as *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle*. Paris: Editions Gérard Lebovici, 1988.

⁴² Quoted from the back jacket-cover of my *Questions: 1977-1982*.

Justesen and Export positioned their exhibition *Body as Membrane* within the history of the feminist avant-garde. As a result, the exhibition itself must answer to that context. They wrote, for example, that *Body as Membrane* belonged to the tradition of “the feminist exhibitions [that] have emerged in Europe and the USA,” and within the events they believed “rapidly changed” the ways in which “women, environment and art” were represented and treated in the international economy of art practices, institutions, and markets.⁴³ They located the origins of their show in the famous feminist exhibition Export organized in 1975, *MAGNA FEMINISTA: KUNST UND KREATIVITÄT*.⁴⁴ In short, they positioned *Body as Membrane* as a contemporary incarnation of feminist avant-garde practice/performance in order to establish an illustrious lineage for younger artists and Justesen herself. They achieved this goal by juxtaposing the work of relatively unknown artists with images of such now-canonical performances as Export’s “Tapp und Tast Kino” (1968), Joan Jonas’s “Twilight” (1975), Mary Kelly’s “Post-Partim Document” (1973-78), Gina Pane’s “Azione Sentimentale” (1974), Carolee Schneemann’s “Interior Scroll” (1975), and Hannah Wilke’s “Intra-Venus” (1992-93). [Figure. 158] The very presence in *Body as Membrane* of feminist pioneers lent unquestionable avant-garde authority and *caché* to the rest of the exhibition, and any question about the exhibition was perceived as a challenge to the history of feminist avant-garde art.

Avant-garde practices are conventionally marked by revolutionary fervor, radicalism that attempts to effect change and innovation in aesthetics as well as in the culture and politics of everyday life. The kinds of photographs exhibited in *Body as Membrane*, conformed to these common and inherited expectations and representations associated with avant-garde art. Many of them, for example, belonged to the visual conventions of surrealism whose established symbolic discourse historically has canonized art as both radical and avant-garde. Jayne Parke’s “Film Still: The Pool” (1991) is a good example. Parke presented a photograph of a naked woman holding a gigantic eel just under her breasts. Her head was cropped out of the image just below the shoulders and her legs are edited (amputated ?) from the frame, just below her pubis. This image draws on not only the visual vocabulary of surrealist painting and film, but on ancient representations of fertility goddesses in biblical

⁴³ See, Valie Export and Kirsten Justesen, “Introduction,” to *Body As Membrane*: 142.

⁴⁴ See Export’s exhibition *MAGNA FEMINISTA: KUNST UND KREATIVITÄT - Ein Überlick über die weibliche Sensibilität, Imagination, Projektion und Problematik, suggeriert durch ein Tableau von Bildern, Objekten, Fotos, Vorträgen, Diskussionen, Lesungen, Filmen, Videobändern und Aktionen*. Vienna: Galerie Nächst St. Stephen, 1975.

and mythic lore. But most of the works in *Body as Membrane* utilized extra-artistic contexts also conventionally associated with avant-garde strategies to infiltrate everyday life. Indeed, the photographs exhibited in *Body as Membrane*, if encountered in another context, might very well have been perceived as belonging to life, not art. Where else, for example, might Alison Knowles's very beautiful and poignant "Double Production" (1964) - an x-ray image of her belly pregnant with twins - be found, except perhaps in a medical archive? That she presented her pregnancy as performative conforms precisely to the genre and conventions mandated by avant-gardism.

And, what of Annie Sprinkle's photograph, "Anya, A Goddess" (1990)? This work recalls 19th century pornographic daguerreotypes - too obviously composed to be erotic, too corny to be provocative - pornographic only because her Rubenesque body is solicitously displayed for the gaze as a visual stimulation for other pleasures. Heli Rekuli's "Untitled" (1995) is a color photograph of a naked woman sitting propped up on the floor, slouched against a wall like a limp doll, head covered entirely in a black rubber hood with Mickey Mouse ears, and into whose mouth a large, black phallic object (perhaps a dildo) is shoved. This image could be found only in the context of sadomasochistic literature, since in everyday life few venues (except an avant-garde exhibition space) would support, much less permit, the representation of such a helpless, debased, and humiliated woman.

Orlan's work also fits neatly into the avant-garde practice of bridging public and private life. In her photographic poster, "I Have Given My Body to Art" (1993), the artist represents herself with black and blue, heavily bruised eyes, distorted nose, swollen lips, and ragged, greasy multicolored hair. [Figure. 159] It is a picture of pure abjection, pain, and suffering that would make an excellent warning poster for the prevention of family violence. Such an image reinforces the fact that the only artists who have systematically achieved canonical status in art history are those who have belonged to, or been associated with an avant-garde in one way or another. It is fitting, then, to place Orlan's self-inflicted violence in the context of a kind of domestic violence, the abusive family histories of a pseudo-avant-garde, whose achievement is neither visionary nor revisionary, changing nothing at the root (as anything associated with the original meaning of the word "radical" must do).

As the apologist for Orlan, critic August Ruhs defined Orlan's aesthetic aim to, "irreversibly alter her physical and social identity - in order to blaspheme as well as to rebel." He continued that:

[S]ince to Orlan it is not enough merely to read the body - and in particular her own body - she literally sacrifices it to art to perform a Demiurgic and parthenogenetic act through plastic surgery, so that she transcends the limits of traditional body art in an unprecedented way - hardly any other artist achieves this aim as radically as she does.⁴⁵

Such a statement makes it clear that the production of (art) history as a game of high stakes (since the nineteenth century) has now reached life-threatening proportions. Writing with utter sincerity and surprising naiveté, Ruhs continues to applaud Orlan's "efforts" as "ethical, especially since their intention is to do good."⁴⁶ Oh, that intent had the power to cause reality to become so!

Furthermore, Ruhs understands Orlan's work to be "basically a community project [because] art's essence is an integral part of the political opposition against categorization, which turns similar to [it] in the end." Ruhs also claims that Orlan's "fight" is on "two fronts: Where trespassing is done against the actual state of nature - and against the naturalness of culture."⁴⁷ To suggest that plastic surgery that endangers a woman's body represents a "community project" flies in the face of sociological facts. "Starting in 1983," Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Susan Faludi pointed out that, "the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons launched a 'practice enhancement' campaign, issuing a flood of press releases, 'pre- and post-op photos,' and patient 'education' brochures and videotapes... bill[ing] 'body sculpturing' as safe, effective, affordable - and even essential to women's mental health."⁴⁸ Faludi explains that by the mid-'80s they were filling magazines and newspapers with "low monthly payment plans" for such surgery, and that the campaign worked. "By 1988, the cosmetic surgeons' caseloads had more than doubled, to 750,000 annually...counting only the doctors certified in plastic surgery; the total annual figure was

⁴⁵ August Ruhs, "Orlan's Metamorphoses," *Body as Membrane*: 154.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1981): 217.

estimated in excess of 1.5 million.”⁴⁹ Despite this booming business, plastic surgery “was as dangerous as ever [and] in fact, the operations [especially silicon implants] would become even riskier as the big profits lured droves of untrained practitioners from other specialties.”⁵⁰

These operations, furthermore, lead to,

widespread charlatanry, ill-equipped facilities, major injuries, and even deaths from botched operations. Other studies found that at least 15 percent of cosmetic surgery caused hemorrhages, facial nerve damage, bad scars, or complications from anesthesia. Follow-up operations to correct mistakes filled a two-volume, 1,134-page reference manual *The Unfortunate Result in Plastic Surgery*. Plastic surgeons were devoting as much as a quarter of their practices to correcting their colleagues’ errors.⁵¹

Faludi closed her chilling account of cosmetic surgery - a section of her book entitled “The Breast Man of San Francisco” - by quoting Kurt Wagner, a plastic surgeon who operated on his wife’s body nine times: “To me surgery is like being in the arena where decisions are made and no one can tell me what to do.”⁵²

Orlan’s self-punishment – exhibited in the negative ways in which she represents herself, reconstructs her identity in multiples, sexualizes her environment, and engages in self-mutilation (through instigating her own disfigurement at the hands of reconstructive surgery) - resembles the transference of psychopathological dissociate behaviors from the personal to the avant-garde. In this regard, the artist’s work suggests exposure at some early point to identity-shattering psychological experiences, the dissociative effects of which now appear in her art in a manner that indicates posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In such instances, a “traumatic event” resides somewhere in the history of the individual, an event defined as “outside the range of usual human experience that would be markedly distressing to almost anyone,” in which “the victim becomes ‘stuck’ ...when response to trauma cannot be worked through, for whatever reason.”⁵³ PTSD is the dissociative, unconscious, maladaptive,

⁴⁹ *Ibid*: 218. Faludi points out further that, “More than two million women, or one in sixty, were sporting the \$2,000 to \$4,000 breast implants - making breast enlargement the most common cosmetic operation. More than a hundred thousand had undergone the \$4,000- plus liposuction surgery, a procedure that was unknown a decade ago.”

⁵⁰ *Ibid*: 218-19.

⁵¹ *Ibid*: 219.

⁵² *Ibid*: 222.

⁵³ Bennett G. Braun, Center on Psychiatric Trauma and Dissociation, Rush Institute of Mental Well-Being in Chicago, in “Multiple Personality Disorder and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Similarities and

repetitive attempt to work through the traumatic event lost (dissociated) from memory but stuck in the unconscious.⁵⁴ Orlan's symptoms of such a pathology include repeated constructions of alternative identities (the name "Orlan" itself is a fictive identity which, apparently, the artist assumed as a teenager); fixation on breaking social taboos; obsession with sexual display, media attention, and spectacle; self-aggrandizement in the form of associations with God and saints ("Saint Orlan" is one of her identities); and self-abuse in the form of repeated life-threatening operations. Furthermore, Carey Lovelace reported that Orlan planned to adopt a new name, one chosen for her by "a public-relations agency."⁵⁵ Lovelace also has pointed out that, among other efforts, Orlan "has displayed her magnified vagina painted red, blue, and yellow; applied pubic hair on Louvre paintings of [pubic] hair-free females; walked down the street in a dress on which was printed an image of her own naked body."⁵⁶ In a "mesurage" of 1965, Orlan used her body as a standard unit of measure to compare "the length of streets named after famous men against streets named after other famous men," asking, "why would a 'Chateaubriand' measure 550 *orlans*, for example, and a 'Victor Hugo' only 25?"⁵⁷ In such an action Orlan fabricated a link (through the device of measurement) between the names of famous French men, the number of times their names appeared on French street signs, and the representation of the size of their phalluses. This metonymy also functions as a metaphor displaced into a representation of herself - "measure[d]" in "550 *orlans*."

The artist's apparent chronic dysfunction implies some form of long-term, particularly sexual, abuse in which the pain of experience has been sublimated and transformed into guilt, a self-loathing typical of traumatic subjectivity that equates the self with being despoiled and dirty.⁵⁸ "She would wash her white clothes in public and capture her gray sweat in a small bottle," Lovelace reports.⁵⁹ One of the more definitive symbolic actions indicative of sexual

Differences," in John P. Wilson and Beverley Raphael, eds., *International handbook of Traumatic Stress Syndromes* (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1993): 35-36.

⁵⁴ See also, Mardi J. Horowitz's, *Stress Response Syndromes*. Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1976; and "Post-traumatic stress disorders," *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 1:3 (1983): 9-23.

⁵⁵ Carey Lovelace, "Orlan: Offensive Acts," *Performing Arts Journal* 49:17:1 (January 1995): 15.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*: 18.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ See Section V of *International Handbook of Traumatic Stress Syndromes*, on "The Impact of Trauma on Children and Adolescents, with articles on childhood incest particularly by Arthur Green, Judith Lewis Herman, and others: 527-658. These articles also contain extensive bibliography on the subject.

⁵⁹ Lovelace: 18.

trauma is that Orlan displayed the sheets “with semen stains documenting her sexual encounters” that her mother had saved for her bridal trousseau.⁶⁰ This symbolic “display” provides, perhaps, the most direct evidence of the “traumatic event,” the primal act of sexuality for which Orlan seems to require and repetitively demand witnesses. Her dialogue of showing and telling, of producing representations, and displaying sexual acts, suggests that Orlan desperately needs viewers who can confirm and testify to otherwise dissociated illicit sexual experience(s).

Most telling in this regard is a point that Lovelace notes: “To watch the procedure of Orlan’s skin being opened up and flesh removed *feels like witnessing an obscene act* (emphasis added).”⁶¹ Orlan’s pathology, I think, involves not only the symbolic reenactment of original obscene acts, but the requirement that their display be witnessed by viewers. This witnessing approximates the testimony necessary for the acknowledgment of her painful experiences, and for her recovery from them. Psychologist Susan Roth and psychiatrist Ronald Batson, health professionals who specialize in adult survivors of incest, point out an aspect of trauma that I think is especially helpful in thinking about Orlan’s work. Trauma is always visible, they write, “showing itself to be alive and well, as if one were still living in the past, in a state of terror or terror transformation. The memory is before us, frozen in time, defying attempts at exposure and forcing us to look in unconventional ways for what is right in front of our eyes.”⁶²

Such acts transfer and displace onto art the artist’s own dissociative relation to the source of her pain. But transference is not uncommon in art, especially in performance art, where corporeal experience is the primary material of the artist. Art then serves as both perpetrator and savior. For what could be more of a nightmare than “giving” one’s body to art except representing that gift *as if* it were involved in an abusive and victimized relation, not only *with* art, but *in the name of* art. But not just *any* art, avant-garde art. For the only art worth such a price - the price of one’s own body - is an art through which, and in which one

⁶⁰ Ibid: 19.

⁶¹ Ibid: 18.

⁶² Susan Roth and Ronald Batson, *Naming the Shadows*: 25. For a general introduction to the symptoms of sexual trauma see, P.M. Cole and F.W. Putnam, “Effect of incest on self and social functioning: A developmental psychopathology perspective, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 60 (1992): 174-184; M.A. Polusny and V.M. Follette, “Long-term correlates of child sexual abuse: Theory and review of the empirical literature,” *Applied and Preventive Psychology* 4 (1995): 143-166.

can, and more importantly *may*, establish one's fame for radicalism in the history of art. From there one may transcend the body as nature and find cultural immortality. In a sense, however, for a woman artist this achievement gives only the fleeting and false impressing of breaking the cycle of replacement (metaphorically represented by Ivana and Marla), since the voracious appetite of the public constantly demands the "new" of its avant-gardes. The lengths to which Orlan has gone to give her body to the context of avant-gardism, then, proves only that she is willing, finally, "to die to be reborn as a tradition."⁶³ Moreover, repetitively performing the traumatic dissociative conditions of a cultural context that itself requires replacement through repetition, insures that the artist will always have an environment and audience for her traumatic reenactments. More than living life, Orlan lives for (art) history in a wretched, self-destructive cycle of operations and disruptions to her personal life: "Orlan has been marginalized, fired from jobs, arrested, ridiculed, and showered with media attention (emphasis added)."⁶⁴ Such are the pitiable histrionics of a scarred body, the visual corollary to a disfigured self-esteem. Her repeated acts of self-abuse and mutilation deserve empathy and a sense of tragedy, not celebration.⁶⁵

At this critical juncture, it is important to distinguish my method from Hal Foster's psychoanalytic notions of the relation between trauma and the avant-garde. For a discussion of the presence of *real* pathology in avant-garde art is precisely what is missing in theories of

⁶³ I borrowed this phrase from W.J.T. Mitchell who used it in quite another context. Nevertheless, I think it is still valuable here. Writing on the subject of abstract painting and language, Mitchell queried: "If we ask when abstraction stopped being an avant-garde movement, dying to be reborn as a tradition that must treat these forbidden subjects as heresies to be repressed, an obvious answer is: at least as early as [Alfred] Barr, who noted in 1935 that 'ten years ago one heard on all sides that abstract art was dead' and who sees his own work as 'in no sense a pioneering effort'." See Mitchell's "*Ut Pictura Theoria: Abstract Painting and Language*," in his *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994): 236; reprinted from *Critical Inquiry* 15:2 (Winter 1989).

⁶⁴ Lovelace: 14.

⁶⁵ Indeed, after this essay was completed, I met Orlan for the first time at the opening of *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*, the celebrated exhibition curated by Paul Schimmel on thirty years of international Performance Art, which opened at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in February 1998. I approached the artist and introduced myself. Orlan responded to my self-introduction by commenting that she had heard that I was such a "warm" person, that she did not understand why I wrote so harshly about her work. In the course of a brief conversation under an umbrella outside LAMOCA in the rain, I explained that I was concerned for her life and that I did not want her to kill herself for art. She responded, "life is much harder than art." I replied that I realized she was personally in psychological pain, but that acting it out as physical pain was not the solution, and I urged her to stop punishing herself because I would not stop writing about her work in this manner until she stopped hurting herself. Her response was to throw her arms around me and burst into tears. There is no way to tell this poignant story – witnessed by my family and two of my graduate students – without sounding melodramatic and self-aggrandizing. Nevertheless, it happened and that matters. Orlan is an artist for whom I have deep respect and boundless empathy.

the avant-garde. Foster's *Return of the Real* depends heavily upon the psychoanalytic notion of "deferred action," an event that "is registered as traumatic only through a later event that recodes it retroactively, in deferred action."⁶⁶ Quoting Jean Laplanche on Freud, Foster takes as a truism the following: "It always takes two traumas to make a trauma."⁶⁷ But to propose, as Foster does, that the avant-garde (as a grammatical subject) conforms internationally, trans-generationally, and transhistorically to a set of dissociative symptoms identified with traumatic subjectivity - such as *deferred action* - requires a tremendous leap of theory and imagination. Moreover, the claim that artists associated with Foster's "neo-avant-garde" (a concept to which I shall return) have some universalized relationship to trauma is equally untenable even, and especially if, Foster is merely using the discourse of trauma as a descriptive device.⁶⁸

Regardless of the over-determination of his thesis, there is an even more serious shortcoming in Foster's theory of the theories of trauma. Freudian and Lacanian theories seldom function in the *real* (Foster's *leitmotif*) world of psychotherapy where *real* psychologists and psychiatrists actually work to heal *real* traumatic subjectivity, since they do not seem to be therapeutically effective theories.⁶⁹ Foster's theorizing equally ignores the differences between cultural constructions (theories) and actual trauma victims - *real* people who may not have the ability to recuperate "the real." Those who really live as survivors, dissociated from their own actual experiences, quite frequently are unable to lead constructive lives, lives that would permit them to devote themselves to such things as the *real* production of art. And when they do, their trauma shows; as it does so blatantly in the art of Orlan.

⁶⁶ Hal Foster, *Return of the Real*: xii.

⁶⁷ Ibid: 29. See also Jean Laplanche, *New Foundations of Psychoanalysis*, Trans. David Macey (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989): 88.

⁶⁸ I have pointed out that the increase in trauma globally, for example, has produced what I theorized as "cultures of trauma" in some specific nation such as Romania, Rwanda, Bosnia, Yugoslavia, Vietnam, Cambodia, etc. But in suggesting such a term, my research was grounded in specific examples of actually (not theoretically) traumatized peoples and environments such as I have encountered in work in Romania. Having said this, I want to thank Charles Altieri for his incisive discussions with me regarding my use of the term "trauma." He helped me to understand how the term "does not allow enough for the...positioning [of my subjects] in relation to [the] suffering" about which I write. Those discussions nudged me nearer to thinking about the concept and value of probity.

⁶⁹ Neither the term *deferred action*, nor Jacques Lacan's name, for example, appear amongst the literally thousands of terms indexed in the *International handbook of Traumatic Stress Syndromes*.

Moreover, to link super-realist painting (like that of Richard Estes) with trauma, as Foster does, is absurd, threatening the urgent needs of *real* traumatized subjects. Foster writes:

Superrealism is also involved with this real that lies below, but as a *superrealism* it is concerned to stay on top of it, to keep it down. Unlike surrealism, then, it wants to conceal more than to reveal this real: thus it lays down its layers of signs and surfaces drawn from the commodity world not only against representational depth but also against the traumatic real. Yet this anxious move to smooth over this real points to it nonetheless; superrealism remains an art of “the eye as made desperate by the gaze,” and the desperation shows. As a result its illusion fails not only as a tricking of the eye but as a taming of the gaze, a protecting against the traumatic real. That is, it fails *not* to remind us of the real, and in this way it is traumatic too: a *traumatic illusionism*.⁷⁰

Such thinking is - as political scientist James M. Glass has argued about the celebration of schizophrenia as a metaphor for poststructuralist theory - not only “naive but dangerous” for the ways in which it trivializes the *real* pain of *real* trauma.⁷¹ *Real* suffering creates *real* alterity, not pseudo-liminality, the affected show of being an “other.”

Under a spurious *radicalism* proscribed for the avant-garde and then theorized (by Foster) as trauma, Orlan employs extra-artistic means to present her torment. But to the extent that she performs her distressing misery before the collective gaze, should not extra-aesthetic means be employed to enable her to help herself? If she walked into a psychotherapist’s office, would that mental health professional celebrate the purposeful self-mutilation of her body, or draw her attention to her delirium and her need to resist it? Why should the art-world revel in its own delirium with pseudo-avant-garde celebrity in the name of an artist’s suffering? Can we not assist the suffering in our midst? Can we not demonstrate support among our own ranks on behalf of ourselves? If not, how may we presume to be effective in the social spaces of everyday life?

⁷⁰ Hal Foster, *Return of the Real*:

⁷¹ James M. Glass, *Shattered Selves*: 158.

Liljana Sedlar, a cultural critic from Belgrade, asks similar questions. Writing on the reception and impact of Annie Sprinkle's work (as a self-appointed sex guru of "spiritual orgasms" who displays her cervix), Sedlar observed:

Although her method of demystification makes visible that which has hitherto been hidden from view on the stage, it fails to transcend itself and culminate in a vision of woman's body, or woman's more complex nature, which differs from the purely instrumental and pornographic. This has to be stressed because spiritual understanding of woman and sex, and expert guidance in these matters, is what Annie Sprinkle sells...Without Annie...intending it, the show gave the viewer a chance to have a good, long look at appalling, desperately fought off but ultimately unbreached human loneliness, packaged in the unconvincing high spirits of a seeming sexually and spiritually liberated and fulfilled woman.⁷²

Sedlar pointed out that feminism is not exempt from spurious claims to avant-garde status, or from the demands of the market, and noticed the desperate lengths to which a woman might go to garner attention in a society that devalues women:

In a sense, in her specific field [Sprinkle] strove for the kind of performance that, connecting nothing with nothing, superficially gets things done and keeps things going. She shows the detached, pragmatic concept of knowledge promoted by the establishment: internalized and applied - not to politics or the media, but to our most internal affairs, our understanding and enactment of our primary creativity.⁷³

Sedlar closed her remarks on Sprinkle by stating that in her display of the private and interior spaces of a woman's body, Sprinkle "did not really know what to do" with her body and merely used it to convey some sort of conception, "but the conceptions themselves were the problem."⁷⁴ Here it is important to reiterate: It is *not* Orlan or Sprinkle or any of the other artists in *Body as Membrane* that I wished to excoriate, but *the conceptualization and representation of women within the codes of patriarchy and the corrupt conditions inherited for avant-garde practice.*

Theater historian Rebecca Schneider summarized another dilemma related to these questions when she discussed the fashion for "transgression" in avant-garde contexts:

⁷² Liljana Sedlar, "A Letter from Belgrade," *Performance Research* 2:1 (Spring 1997): 101, 100.

⁷³ Ibid: 101.

⁷⁴ Ibid: 102.

One of the complexities that riddle contemporary performance art is the status of transgression in art practice today. Inasmuch as postmodernity necessitates a distinction from modernity, cultural critics and postmodern theorists have made the claim that the avant-garde, and its “bad boy” hope in the political promise of transgression, died sometime in the 1960s. As the argument goes, late capitalism appropriates, incorporates, and consumes transgression into fashionable chic at such a rapid pace that the subversive impact of transgression has become impossible....I find it telling (as have many before me) that the avant-garde and the option of “shock” that it championed should die just as women, artists of color, and gay and lesbian artists began to make critically incisive political art under their own gender-, race-, and preference-marked banners....Abandoning transgression might not be the issue so much as critically confronting the historical licensing of transgression in art practice.⁷⁵

Schneider perceptively distinguished between permission given to white male artists, and withheld from “women, artists of color, and gay and lesbian artists,” although it is still much easier for gay men and men of color to achieve avant-garde status than it is for women. Furthermore, she questioned whether or not the situation in which women make art (that may be called “avant-garde”) has changed at all:

When women as active agents picked up the avant-garde tradition of transgressive shock, as they began to do with a certain *en masse* fervor in the 1960s, the term of transgression necessarily shifted. Female transgression presented a structural impossibility -- almost a double shock. After all, men transgress, women resist. Does the structural taboo of ‘transgressive femininity’ relate in any way to the proclamation that transgression is necessarily failed, impossible, defunct - to the point of shutting down the avant-garde among generally male postmodern theorists who strive to re-mark their own present tactics as “resistant?”⁷⁶

The terms of avant-gardism *did* shift in the 1960s. But the fact that women were suddenly more visible in the arts cannot solely explain the rhetoric of a declining interest in

⁷⁵ Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997): 3-4.

⁷⁶ Ibid. See Leslie Jones, “Transgressive Femininity,” in Jack Ben-Levi, Craig Houser, Leslie C. Jones, and Simon Taylo, eds., *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*. New York: Whitney Museum, 192-3.

“transgression” as a socially held value. For the multiplicity and synchronicity of invention in all areas of artistic production in the 1960s required a reenvisioning of what might constitute avant-garde activity, a rethinking of the avant-garde itself. Reconsideration of the qualities and values that attain to the avant-garde led, in part, to the widely held view that it was dead, but also to new theorizations of the avant-garde. For while some called for “resistance” to replace “transgression” - Schneider cites Hal Foster as an example - the literature on art and the avant-garde over the past two decades reveals that it became *de rigueur* (particularly in critical theory) to call for avant-garde models of both resistance and transgression. Indeed, artists might achieve instant avant-garde status merely by having such terms assigned to their work. In no small measure, this accounts for why some artists, especially women associated with performance art (witnessed in *Body as Membrane*), have gone to extremes to present their work in a context of “transgression.” This includes the culture’s current fascination with abjection, and especially with bad girls.

In this regard, Laura Cottingham offered a powerful and uncompromising critique of the “bad girls” shows - four exhibitions organized between 1993 and 1994 by museums in London, Glasgow, New York, and Los Angeles. Cottingham charged the curators (Marcia Tucker being primary amongst them) with refusing “to acknowledge ‘70s Feminist Art [and] activism and theory of the Women’s Liberation Movement.”⁷⁷ Though in her mid-thirties herself, Cottingham accused “most women under age forty [of acquiring] their knowledge of feminism from Newsweek magazine or some other corrupt site -- such as women’s studies professors who mistakenly offer fag-haggling, the theories of Jacques Lacan, and inane interpretations of the First Amendment as contributions to feminist theory and activism.”⁷⁸ Cottingham described the “historicized usage of the term ‘Bad Girl’ [as] distinctly derogatory, [and functioning] to regulate the behavior of women toward self-sacrifice, sexual repression, and assimilation into the heterosexual contract of marriage and family, toward the very ‘Good Girl’ model” against which the shows were a reaction. She also added that, “an appropriation

⁷⁷ Laura Cottingham, “Introduction” to *How many ‘bad’ feminists does it take to change a Light Bulb?* (New York: Afterwords, 1994): 3. Cottingham was hired to write about the show *Bad Girls* in London at the Institute for Contemporary Arts. But when she discussed the implications of the title of the show, the curators “immediately attempted to edit/censor” her work. “Their reasons for justifying the title, or rather their assumed right to eliminate my criticism,” Cottingham wrote, “were based in such specious rationalizations as how many women and artists of color the sponsoring institution...exhibits; and how my critique personally insulted their work.” (p. 2)

⁷⁸ Ibid.

of the good/bad model, from any woman's perspective, even if consciously attempted as subversive, is still nothing more than a parroting of a male supremacist construct.⁷⁹ Such rhetoric, she concluded, "relies on a false, pseudo-Hegelian premise that thesis ('good girl') and anti-thesis ('bad girl') will provide synthesis (emancipation) -- ignoring how obviously this dialectic willingly writes the terms of women's emancipation according to patriarchy itself."⁸⁰ She also pointed out the shallowness of Marcia Tucker's definition of the "bad girl," as "honest, outrageous, contentious, wanton, self-indulgent, and even vulgar." It should be clear from my discussion above (regarding Tucker's "cutting" of my text) that bad-girl contentions are permitted only in the circumstances she herself sanctions. As Cottingham puts it:

That Tucker puts the "Bad Girl" in the same pejorative terms commonly used against women who do what we want -- 'wanton, self-indulgent and vulgar' -- is another instance where her voice and her judgment don't subvert, but directly mimic, the patriarchal voice of woman hating. Much of the rhetoric associated with these exhibitions reeks of such unexamined self-hatred and self-contempt.⁸¹

Finally, the *Bad Girls* title, Cottingham insisted, was one "the museums chose...because of its potential as a marketing device, because it commodifies art, and women, as insubstantial and sexualized objects, [and because] these are sex(y) exhibitions and girl/woman is a synonym for sex."⁸²

All of the above is relevant to the parallels many critics and art historians made between Orlan and Carolee Schneemann. Schneemann's performances, too, have been cast as the stereotypical "bad girl," pseudo-transgressive works, especially since she (along with such artists as Valie Export and Linda Montano) were interviewed in the famous special issue of *RE/Search* magazine on "Angry Women."⁸³ In this regard, Schneemann is, herself, partially responsible for encouraging such associations, connections that subsume her otherwise authentically challenging and original performances into a digestible cultural context. Schneemann understandably points out that the situation is paradoxical: if she refuses to

⁷⁹ Ibid: 8.

⁸⁰ Ibid: 9.

⁸¹ Ibid. Marcia Tucker is quoted from Mary Haus's, "Funny, Really Funny," *Art News* 93:4 (April 1994): 27.

⁸² Ibid: 13.

⁸³ See *RE/Search Magazine* 13 (1991).

participate in such contexts, her work would never be seen; if she acquiesces, her work is subject to distortions. However, in confronting this dilemma, *if feminist theory and practice are to perform their social imperative, then to become “transgressive” or “resistant” now, in works that mime and mine patriarchal models, is to defeat the very aims of feminism altogether.* So when Schneemann turns up, or places herself in, the “bad girl” context of the 1990s, it threatens to undermine the very values she has so courageously fought to achieve. As a result, many critics (in their enthusiasm to claim Schneemann as a transgressive model for a feminist avant-garde) have missed the centrality of her aesthetic strategy. For Schneemann’s brilliant contribution to the shift from painting to performance was her understanding of the importance of combining the body, in her words, “with the work as an integral material.”⁸⁴ Schneemann has never been celebrated for this key contribution to the histories of art, for realizing that the fractured planes of Cezanne’s proto-Cubist painting suggested corporeal extension into the live body in action. Deprived of this recognition, Schneemann was also dismissed as a “dancer” (rather than the filmmaker, painter, performance artist, etc. that she is) by Annette Michelson. It was this comment that so frustrated and enraged the artist that she performed the infamous “Interior Scroll,” 1975, in which she pulled a scroll that she read from her vagina during her performance, the text of which ended with the statement that “we think of you as a dancer.”⁸⁵ Until the 1990s, she has been marginalized and scorned as someone who merely wanted to “take her clothes off.” While Hannah Wilke found an influential male

⁸⁴ Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy*: 52.

⁸⁵ A discussion of the history of “Interior Scroll” is complicated and beyond the scope of this essay. However, it is important to mention, here, that the text Schneemann pulled from her vagina and read during “Interior Scroll,” was adapted from tape 2 of “Kitch’s Last Meal,” a super-8 film she made between 1973 and 1977. In “tape 2 of “Kitch’s Last Meal,” she discussed a conversation she had with “a happy man, a structuralist filmmaker,” who criticized her films for “the personal clutter, the persistence of feelings, the hand-touch sensibility, the diaristic indulgence, the painterly mess, the dense gestalt, and the primitive techniques.” (See *More Than Meat Joy*, p. 238) In an unpublished letter to Carol Wikarska of 4 March 1975, Schneemann identified this filmmaker to be none other than Annette Michelson: “Did I note that ‘I met a happy man’ from “Kitch’s Last Meal” tape 2 is a derelict ‘communication’ between myself and Annette [Michelson]?” Fictionalized as a male protagonist for her film, “Kitch’s Last Meal,” Schneemann transformed the internalized memory of this insult into the external discourse of “Interior Scroll.” She performed this action twice, first for the exhibition “Women Her & Now,” August 29, 1975, in East Hampton, and second at the Telluride Film Festival. She made the decision to enact “Interior Scroll” again when she found – to her “dismay” – that her work has been relegated to the category of “The Erotic Woman,” in the program of the Telluride Film Festival. Yet another classification – like “dancer” – that (in the context of the film festival) withheld recognition for her work as a filmmaker, must have reminded the artist of being described as a “dancer” in the earlier discussion of her films with Michelson. “Interior Scroll” and “Kitch’s Last Meal” tell much about both the artist’s working methods, her fierce fight for recognition, and failure of many powerful cultural theorists to acknowledge Schneemann’s many significant achievements and contributions.

dealer in Ronald Feldman, and Orlan's work has been supported in part by powerful male figures in the art world, Schneemann still has little institutional support despite the fact that she is the precedent for such practices as those of Wilke and Orlan. Apples and stems, apples and stems... Schneemann herself admits that the ways in which she has retrospectively presented her work does "accommodate such interpretations" as those that link her work with that of Annie Sprinkle and Orlan (both of whom she considers friends).⁸⁶ Moreover, although she agrees that her work is different in intent and representation than theirs, she observes:

The social force field in which male artists come together and bond, even with dissension and competition, constitutes a power base even though they may fight with each other. But there is no instance where women associate together with a shared area of concern, and its implicit contention to build a shared base of aesthetic power. The image of this historic situation is Saint Orlan blowing herself up in order to displace an iconic power. As a Saint, she is slightly ridiculous because she has her breast bared and eroticised, and she is wearing the robes of the old patriarchy. But if your attempt to subvert the hagiography fails and your image turns back on yourself so that you are still dressed up as a whore in a saint's costume, then that might be the moment when you take up the ritual knife to mutilate yourself to become an offering in a culture where there can be no sainthood.⁸⁷

Schneemann's deep understanding of Orlan's predicament only must increase our empathy for the grave situation in which Orlan, tries (and indeed all women try) to make art, and tries to be enough: tries to stave off her inevitable transformation from being a shiny apple to becoming a disposable stem.

If Schneemann's options for public attention have been reduced to a feminist context alone, a context that, while significant, also threatens a fuller reception and understanding of her work, is she to blame even though she pays the price? Given this situation, the scope of her extraordinary aesthetic production is circumscribed by cultural criticism, art history, and gender issues. Despite this fact, her work includes drawing, painting, assemblage, environments, happenings, Fluxus, body art and performance, film, photography, and video,

⁸⁶ Schneemann in a telephone conversation with the author, 27 July 1997.

⁸⁷ Schneemann in conversation with the author 3 August 1997.

as well as a prodigious body of writing that includes diaries, letters, poems, essays, and aesthetic theory. While she may have permitted a reductive view of the breadth and depth of her *oeuvre* - in her urgency to have her work enter into the discourses of art and its histories - it was feminism that gave her the important historical place she has achieved. Nevertheless, the art historian's task, as I understand it, is to draw out the richness of such an artist's work and to defend it. For there is much at stake in making it possible for the work of a woman artist to be understood outside of the restricted context of feminism, so it may gain recognition for the kind of sweeping cultural contributions to art, literature, and aesthetics that Schneemann has made.

Schneemann created acts of primary observation. She reconstructed the ways in which we see and interpret the world. *Observation that reconstructs interpretation is radical and original.* And it is the radical quality of her vision, her originality that is worth defending. Schneemann's art has been full of the joy and celebration of female (and male) bodies in and for themselves. Her work is not *essentially* about women only and our bodies, even though both she and her apologists have taken advantage of the extraordinary power of her female imagery to further the cause of feminism, feminist art, feminist performance, and theories of gender. Her art is also about the role of art, of vision, of seeing and its relation to the body, and of how spaces for the body are conceptualized. For example, anyone who has viewed *Fuses* (1965-68) - the exquisite and erotic film she made of intercourse with her then-husband composer James Tenney - will realize that much of Schneemann's work is about heterosexual love, relationships, and the joy of bodies in general. Most of all, she has validated all bodies, proclaiming: YOU ARE ENOUGH.

IV. Probity, Avant-Gardes, and Radical Originality

Probity - the real *something else* with which I have been concerned throughout this essay - *is crucial to the foundation of successive avant-gardes if their acts of observation are expected to remake the world.* But before leaping to the conclusion that avant-gardes may contribute to remaking experience, I must ask: What is avant-garde activity and how is this cultural formation conventionally defined?

Art history has long fantasized that one avant-garde leads to another in a long, but broken, line of transformations, discontinuities, ruptures, and displacements from *the*

idealized, authentic, *historical*, avant-garde down to successive authentic or spurious *neo-*avant-gardes. Yet even a casual study of the histories of *the* avant-garde suggests a different historical formation than the diachronic, developmental model to which we have become accustomed. I want to describe avant-gardes as plural, existing simultaneously, working in different media synchronistically in local, national, and international settings (each dependent on the context of their practices and politics), and functioning in different social configurations, at different times and for different purposes. Finally, I want to state categorically that the institution of avant-gardes has not, and can never die, as long as revisioning the world in myriad ways continues. Avant-gardes develop through adaptation and alteration amongst diverse artistic and cultural practices simultaneously. As every artist knows, art comes from art, so that concepts left undeveloped in one avant-garde, medium, and cultural context reappear expanded in an adjacent or subsequent one. I have noted that this process can transpire in subtle and profound ways. For example, the failure of academic figurative painters to sustain ethical humanist content at the end of the nineteenth century, coupled later with the co-option of figuration by National Socialism in Germany and social realism in both Russia and the United States, made it nearly impossible for artists like Oskar Schlemmer to address what he called the “timeless themes” of figuration. Only the dramatic reemergence of the figure in a presentational form (namely in the artist’s actual body, not only in Schlemmer’s and Duchamp’s work, but in happenings, Fluxus, actions, events, and performance art) vigorously renewed the ethical content of figurative work in cultural discourse. What is more, avant-gardes may be celebrated or not, have commercial success or not, and be institutionalized or not. None of these categories is sufficient to identify what is, or is not, avant-garde.

When the impact of avant-garde practices is considered, the stakes become higher than may be reached by theories of *radicalism*, the dismissal of originality, and accounts of how one avant-garde may displace another. While these arguments have served important ends in the past, extreme situations require reconsideration of the very purpose of the social institution identified with *the* avant-garde, and the expectations that accrue to it. For *avant-gardes provide space for communicating determined acts of primary observation*. What I mean by a determined act of primary observation (more commonly thought of as originality) is “to observe” in the fullest psycho-physical sense of that possibility: not only to look with one’s

inner vision and outer gaze, but to bring one's full attention to something, to consider, inspect, become mindful of, and absorbed in, something. As such, the visions and thoughts of multiple avant-gardes (in every discipline and walk of life) provide a framework for rediscovery that challenges ordinary notions of form, meaning, function, and context. Such observation - one that reconstructs received interpretations and predetermined results - is always already radical and original, and connects private subjectivity to transmutation in social reality. The function and purpose of avant-gardes, then, may be described as follows: *Avant-gardes perform acts of envisioning and observing able to reconstruct the ways in which events, objects, and the relationships between them may be interpreted and lived. Such singular acts provide a framework for discovery or rediscoveries of the world that challenges epistemological, ontological, and teleological concepts.* As a result, while mandated from within society for its necessary growth and change, avant-gardes are simultaneously, and paradoxically, always in conflict with the given order.

Some twenty years ago, Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock rightly pointed out that the term "avant-garde" had become a "catch-all label to celebrate most twentieth-century art and artists, [and] the pervasive, dominant ideology of artistic production and scholarship."⁸⁸ Accordingly, avant-gardes are expected to conform to the rules established for their codes of representation and conduct. Susan Suleiman succinctly summarized this framework of expectations, "The hallmark of an avant-garde practice or project -- or dream -- [is] the attempt to effect radical change and innovation both in the symbolic field (including what has been called the aesthetic realm) and in the social and political field of everyday life."⁸⁹ This widely accepted view of *the* avant-garde keeps faith with normative descriptions of it and automatically consigns avant-gardes' practices to a "dream" in which they are figured as a special vehicle for successive utopian visions. Such a view deprives multiple and simultaneous avant-gardes of their real contributions to and in real cultural, social, and political contexts, and fails to acknowledge their effective alterations of conventional ways of seeing and re-envisioning life. Moreover, such a concept of avant-gardes and their practices supposes that *radicalism* is the same thing as being radical (namely changing things at the

⁸⁸ Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, "Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed," *Art History* 4:3 (September 1981): 305, reprinted in Francis Francina, ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985): 167.

⁸⁹ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990): xv.

root), a difference to which I shall soon return. Idealist and materialist views of *the* avant-garde, moreover, deprive avant-gardes of the capacity for “spiritual renovation and artistic innovation.” This oversight accounts for some of the reasons that it has been so easy, so often, to proclaim the death of both *an* avant-garde and *the* avant-garde.⁹⁰ Both views equally consign multiple avant-gardes to failure, either by constructing a fantasy of transformation within a utopian discourse of reform, or - as in the case of Orton’s and Pollock’s argument - by limiting radical observation and practice to narrowly defined “new discursive frameworks.”⁹¹

When Suleiman states that the avant-garde is recognized for its “attempt to effect radical change and innovation both in the symbolic field (including what has been called the aesthetic realm), and in the social and political field of everyday life,” she refers to Peter Bürger’s and Renato Poggioli’s classic theories of the avant-garde.⁹² Bürger’s arguments have preoccupied theorists of *the* avant-garde for the ways in which he identifies an “historic avant-garde,” based on “genuine intentions,” and to which he juxtaposed a “neo-avant-garde” that “institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions.”⁹³ An invention of cultural criticism, according to Bürger, the neo-avant-garde represents the demands of the market (and those critics who do the marketing) for new aesthetic products.

In *The Return of the Real*, Hal Foster attempted to retheorize Bürger’s concept of a commercial “neo-avant-garde.” Chiding Bürger for dismissing the postwar avant-garde as merely a commercial neo version of *the* historical avant-garde, Foster constructed an

⁹⁰ In “Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed,” Orton and Pollock argue that the avant-garde “is not a process inherent in the evolution of art in modern time; it is not the motor of spiritual renovation and artistic innovation; and it is more than an ideological concept, one part of a complex pattern of imagery and belief.” (p. 167)

⁹¹ *Ibid*: 168. Here Orton and Pollock argue that an historical avant-garde emerged in the “second half of the nineteenth century [that entailed] a range of social postures and strategies for artists by which they could differentiate themselves from current social and cultural structures while also intervening in them.” Moreover, they state that, “In this century there has been only one other, successful avant-garde moment when the avant-garde and the definition of appropriate avant-garde practices had to be, and was, revived and re-articulated.” That moment was “in New York in the late 1930s and early 1940s when a new discursive framework was established that enabled some of the artist and intellectuals who gathered there to construct an identity for themselves which was simultaneously an opposition to, and an extension of available American and European traditions.”

⁹² See, Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of The Avant-Garde*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968; and Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Trans., Michael Shaw, Foreword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

⁹³ Bürger: 58.

argument for the continued vitality of successive first, second, and presumably subsequent neo-avant-gardes.⁹⁴ In an attempt to rescue his renewed concept of successive “neo-avant-gardes” from being dismissed as merely commercial, Foster required the function of his neo-avant-garde to recuperate and review moments, themes, questions, and so on, of *the* historical avant-garde. But by reinvesting his version of a neo-avant-garde with the putative value of *the* historical avant-garde, there seems little reason to distinguish between avant-gardes unless there is a residual value (which Foster leaves untheorized) in the valence of originality (Bürger’s “historical avant-garde”). Which, of course, there is. Foster further argued that the authenticity of neo-avant-gardes might be achieved by what he described as “protension” and “retension.” By these terms, he indicated the means by which his neo-avant-garde is able to recuperate, repeat, reconstruct, and displace the institution of the historical avant-garde: first, protensively by recovering the historical avant-garde and, second, retensively by offering “a critique of the process of acculturation and/or accommodation,” of “becoming-institutional.”⁹⁵ (In most theories of *the* avant-garde, an original avant-garde is privileged, and neo-avant-gardes are described as merely commercial and competitive with the original avant-garde, displacing and revising, as in Foster, or responding to “new discursive frameworks.) Finally, Foster’s theorization of the operations of his neo-avant-garde relies on two concepts: “parallax,” which he defined as “the apparent displacement of an object caused by the actual movement of its observer,” and “deferred action,” which he interpreted according to Freud.⁹⁶ “In Freud,” Foster explained, “an event is registered as traumatic only through a later event that recodes it retroactively, in deferred action.”⁹⁷

Foster introduces the concept of “parallax” to create a model in which the observer “caused....the apparent displacement of an object.” The more common context and use of the term *parallax* is in astronomy. There the term signifies the central role that the observer plays in the identification and constitution of the object, and is a term associated with relativity theory, second order cybernetics, Heisenbergian uncertainty, and reception theory. (Foster contradicts himself in his use of a quasi-scientific metaphor - since he also claims, much later and, significantly, in a footnote that “artistic innovation and scientific revolution are hardly

⁹⁴ Foster: 8.

⁹⁵ Ibid: 21-24.

⁹⁶ Ibid:: xii.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

analogous.”)⁹⁸ Namely, to account for the central role the spectator and critic play in the identification of the avant-garde. The term parallax permits Foster to build a theoretical model capable of accommodating his own critical pronouncements about what constitutes neo-avant-garde.⁹⁹ In short, Foster’s labored theory accounts for the continued institutional function and appearance of successive avant-gardes enabling him simultaneously to construct and confess to his own reflexive role as a self-proclaimed champion of a postmodernist “second” neo-avant-garde. (One of the neo-avant-gardes he champions is feminist, but he only accords avant-garde status only to those artists, naming Mary Kelly, Silvia Kolbowski, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, and Martha Rosler) interested in producing and theorizing “the sexual-linguistic constitution of the subject... from the middle 1970s through the middle 1980s.”)¹⁰⁰

Moreover, while Foster admits to having portrayed only a “partial” history of the neo-avant-garde, and acknowledges that he remained “silent about many events,” the subjects about which he remained silent and partial - and his reasons for enduring so - are suspicious. For example, feminism itself, to say nothing of the contributions of feminist theory in general to questioning theories of *the* avant-garde, is generally absent from the book, even while feminism is ostensibly one of his theoretical models. Foster borrows the phrase feminist art in his text, but when women artists are mentioned they are drawn exclusively from a postmodernist, poststructuralist, Lacanian-influenced panoply sanctioned by *October*. Indeed, the only women mentioned in Foster’s book are: Kiki Smith, Maureen Connor, Rona Pondick, Mona Hayt, Kate Ericson, Cindy Sherman, Barbara Ess, Andrea Fraser, Katarina Fritsch, Nan Goldin, Eva Hesse, Barbara Kruger, Silvia Kolbowski, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, Adrian Piper, Anne (and Patrick) Poirier, Yvonne Rainer, Martha Rosler, and Sue Williams. Moreover, Audrey Flack is singled out with James Rosenquist and Don Eddy “among others” merely for “derealiz[ing] the real with simulacral effects.”¹⁰¹ Equally egregious in a book purportedly on the neo-avant-garde and so thoroughly engaged in the

⁹⁸ Ibid: 228, fn 6.

⁹⁹ Ibid: “[A]vant-gardist transgression [shifts] toward a model of deconstructive (dis)placement [based on] the reflexivity of the viewer to refashion the cliché not only of the neo-avant-garde as merely redundant of the historical avant-garde, but also of the postmodern as only belated in relation to the modern.” (pp. xii-xiii).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid: 59.

¹⁰¹ Ibid: 142.

post-structuralist, post-modern problems posed by conceptual art, is the fact that Foster never mentions Joseph Kosuth, certainly one of the founders of conceptual art, if not arguably its most precocious theorist. Is this not a strategy for attempting to write Kosuth out of the postmodernist avant-garde or art history in general: murder by omission? Such an absence certainly reflects the well-known and documented struggle between Kosuth and the editors of *October* with whom Foster is closely associated.¹⁰²

Despite Foster's apparent openness about aesthetic and ideological preferences, the role of the critic and art historian in the formulation of the concept of the avant-garde is one of the more invisible aspects of the theories of avant-gardes. By contrast, Orton and Pollock carefully explored how critics themselves can "manifest all the symptoms of 'avant-gardism' in [their] inability to account for the avant-garde."¹⁰³ Few have been more circumspect (and sardonic) about the role of the critic in the construction of the avant-garde than Thomas Crow, who states that the avant-garde functions, after all, as merely "a kind of research and development arm of the culture industry."¹⁰⁴ Antoine Compagnon is equally as explicit: "At the start, avant-gardism belongs to both the critic and his subject, for it is the critical viewpoint integrated into artistic practice that gives the term avant-garde its meaning."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² This is not the place to rehearse the battle between Kosuth and the editors of *October*, but for those who wish to follow it, see Joseph Kosuth, "Intention(s)," *The Art Bulletin* 77:3 (September 1996): 407-412.

¹⁰³ In this respect Orton and Pollock point out the "intentionalist and formalist" history of style Irving Sandler constructed in his account of the evolution of Abstract Expressionism in New York, while at the same time "conceal[ing] the fact that a section of the New York intelligentsia was intensely preoccupied with the avant-garde in the late 1930s and 1940s." They also note that Sandler made "no mention of the intervention which one member of that group, Clement Greenberg, made at that time in avant-garde theory and American intellectual...artistic strategies." (p. 169)

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut, and David Solkin, eds., *Modernism and Modernity* (Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983): 257. For a useful study of some of the institutional origins of the avant-garde, see Robert Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994.

¹⁰⁵ Antoine Compagnon, *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 35. An good example of how critics construct avant-gardes, and how those constructions are canonized is exemplified in the way in which Benjamin Buchloh's views have been repeated by Alice Jardine in the particularly influential context of the exhibition catalogue *Utopia Post Utopia*, a show that established the identity and pedigree of many critics, art historians, and artists associated with what became accepted as the postmodernist avant-garde. She cited "Benjamin Buchloh's list of radical deconstructionist artists of the late seventies: Dara Birnbaum, Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, Martha Rosler, Jenny Holzer." Her repetition of Buchloh's "list," in a context saturated with power, is typical of how avant-gardes are constructed, cultivated, promoted, deemed "radical" (or "deconstructionist" which, for a time, was the same), preserved, and how a specific critic's taste and ideology may be institutionalized. See, Alice Jardine, "Alice in Wonderland Looking/For the Body," *Utopia Post Utopia: Configurations of Nature and Culture in Recent Sculpture and Photography* (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, 1988): 116. See also,

No real theory of avant-gardes, then, may be written until the tastes and ambitions of critics themselves have been explored. For, as Paul Mann stated in *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*: “The death of the avant-garde is its theory and the theory of the avant-garde is its death.”¹⁰⁶ Moreover, in capitalist economic systems, avant-gardes routinely must be pronounced dead in order to resurrect them for a new market. In this respect, Mann has also noted that:

Death is necessary so that everything can be repeated and the obituary is a way to deny that death ever occurred. Under the cover of the obituary artists and critics continue exactly as before, endlessly recuperating differential forms, endlessly manufacturing shabbier and shabbier critical goods. Long after theory proclaims their demise, we still see the same drives to originality, to novelty, to autonomy, to the anti, all exposed, framed, and evacuated in a continuous cycle of discursive commitments....The death of the avant-garde is an event-horizon, a limit of visibility, and thus a discursive phenomenon in the strictest sense: its death from discourse. The theory-death of discourse itself. In every obituary of the avant-garde criticism writes its own epitaph.¹⁰⁷

William Gass has further observed,

Sophists support the status quo until it changes. Then they support the new status quo. They are the friend of every place of power and are beloved by every regime, large and small, because they can offer no reasons for change. Except they aren't fast friends. They wiggle with the wind. And every tribal law is right -- but only inside the tribe.¹⁰⁸

The purported “death” of *the* avant-garde is relevant here, especially to the ways in which women are permitted access to becoming identified as avant-garde.¹⁰⁹ For either there *are* avant-gardes or there are not. The jargon of *neo* does little other than confuse the

Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” *Artforum* 21:9 (September 1982): 43-56.

¹⁰⁶ Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991): 3. Such “deaths,” Mann maintains, are a “more or less explicit...kind of cultural feedback or backlash, the revenge of the mainstream after a hundred years of reading its own obituaries in manifesto after manifesto.” (p. 36)

¹⁰⁷ Ibid: 141, 145.

¹⁰⁸ Gass: 64.

¹⁰⁹ Even the linguistic representation of this process is tortuous; for permission is required for access in order to be positioned for becoming identified as avant-garde – all this before recognition as such!

anthropology of what it *means* to be avant-garde and in what cultural, national, and historical context one becomes so. Feminism – as a real, political, social movement - demonstrated that formal style had nothing whatsoever to do with the cultural conditions of the avant-garde, as Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock pointed out two decades ago: “The heterogeneous activities of women in the twentieth century convincingly dismiss any notion of a homogeneous woman’s art.”¹¹⁰ Thus, style must not be the determining feature of avant-gardes. The cultural function of avant-gardes (one that becomes political by virtue of being social) *is to provide information about determined acts of observation, and to communicate that knowledge as a means to reconstruct the ways in which events, objects, and the relationships between them may be interpreted and lived.* All the rest is pseudo avant-gardism, propped up by the cultural institutions of art and criticism from which the value of probity has disappeared.

Now let me turn more directly to the question of probity, through a consideration of the concept of originality. Continuity occurs between and among avant-gardes, in large measure, because they represent social ideals worked out through time. Indeed, the co-existence and pluralism among avant-gardes occurred from the moment when it became evident that there was a contention over the production of cultural value associated with the historical avant-garde. In the 1970s, when feminist theory made it impossible to avoid the facticity of this avant-garde pluralism, those who understood *the* avant-garde to represent a diachronic phenomenon began to identify it as dead.¹¹¹ In other words, *the* historic avant-garde died when a pluralistic feminist avant-garde was born. It is predictable then that someone like Foster - interested in defending only a particular *kind* of feminist practice - should miss the essential point of avant-garde plurality and attempt to popularize only one kind of feminist practice. Inherent plurality, too, is key to understanding the fierce competition over avant-garde production of values. An awareness of that plurality also accounts for the highly competitive language in the numerous avant-garde manifestos

¹¹⁰ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981): 137.

¹¹¹ While the conventional date for the beginning of the historical avant-garde is somewhere around 1850 in the work of Gustav Courbet, as the date of modernism itself continues to be pushed back to the Renaissance and earlier - to periods in which the production of culture is self-consciously analyzed in its own period - the notion of avant-gardes’ originality (of vision that revisions the world outside of prescribed institutionalized values) will be discussed in earlier periods.

produced during the first two decades of the Twentieth Century. We have only to think, for example, of the relative simultaneity of Futurism and Cubism (with its many branches such as Orphism, Purism, etc.), the various Russian avant-gardes that drew on Cubism and Futurism, and the theoretical debates within deStijl, and so on, to confirm this point. It was, and remains, the accomplishment of radical change in the reorganization of meaning in the symbolic, social, and political fields – namely to be original - over which avant-gardes (and their champions) have always clashed in the construction of value.

Originality is the primary element in any reconstruction of meaning. In this regard, it is important to recall the auspicious success of Rosalind Krauss' 1981 article "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," in which the critic posited just the opposite premise. There she attempted to dismantle what she dubbed as "the myth," or "the cult," of originality. This well-known essay does not require rehearsal here. I need only to point out that Krauss opposes originality with "repetition and recurrence" as central to the function of art-making itself, locating her argument in the problem of copyright over the multiple castings of Rodin's sculptures. I wish only to focus on a pair of telling sentences that have been, heretofore, disregarded. In them, Krauss most directly and simply undermines her own argument:

Now why would one begin a discussion of avant-garde art with this story about Rodin and casts and copyrights? Particularly since Rodin strikes one as the very last artist to introduce to the subject, so popular was he during his lifetime, so celebrated, and so quickly induced to participate in the transformation of his own work into kitsch.¹¹²

One must immediately ask the following questions. If Rodin's work was not original - not avant-garde (by dint of being "so popular...during his lifetime") - then how could that art have been transformed into kitsch in the first place? How must the work be described, then, *before* the mechanism of capital changed it (and "induced [him] to participate in the transformation of his own work") into something that could be described as kitsch? *In other words, how could there be kitsch without a counter referent?* What is the status of that counter referent? The answer is, of course, there could not be kitsch without originality.

¹¹² See Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1985): 157; reprinted from *October* 18 (Fall 1981).

Rodin could not have been “so quickly induced to participate in the transformation of his own work into kitsch” if it was not avant-garde and/or original *before* becoming kitsch.

But once this crucial failure in her logic is pointed out – like pointing to the queen who is wearing no clothes - Krauss’s theory of the avant-garde is revealed as simply her bold bid for power and authority over the erection or destruction of an avant-garde. Moreover, the particular principles of formalist aesthetics she wished to construct as value (in her celebrated article) were those associated with the avant-garde of Minimalism with which she herself was associated: repetition and recurrence. Repetition and recurrence were the values of originality that she would have *appear* to belie originality itself, but are championed nevertheless by Krauss as avant-garde. What Krauss confused is that to place the value of originality *in the value of* repetition and recurrence is different from claiming that repetition and recurrence, in themselves, are phenomena of originality. In this way, the facticity of originality plays around the notion of transformation, and is the unacknowledged subtext for Krauss’ theories.¹¹³ Her theory becomes original, even as she debunks the value of originality in art. Her theory – like that of Foster’s “parallax” - transforms the conventionalized secondary position of the critic vis-a-vis the primary work of art, into the primary position once held by the artist. Words take precedence over aesthetic objects. Theory, itself, becomes an aesthetic object. Krauss, as creator, theorizes the world rather than merely comments on it.

Krauss’s concept of the “myth of originality” reflects the continued hegemony of formalism - bound up as it was, ironically, with Greenbergian aesthetics of originality. At the same time, it also followed feminist deconstructions of the concept of genius that Linda Nochlin first discussed a decade earlier in her brilliant essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” 1971.¹¹⁴ Such examinations of the social practices related to the concept of originality and patriarchy were necessary. But is it possible that, in unhinging

¹¹³ W.J.T. Mitchell has compared Krauss’s aesthetics to those of Clement Greenberg. “Whatever criticism we might make of Krauss’s rhetoric,” Mitchell wrote, “we certainly could not charge her with presenting an eccentric or unprecedented account of the history of abstract art.” He continued: “One might even call this an entirely orthodox version of the story, one that has been retold in many ways over the last ninety years, usually under the rubric of abstractions like ‘opticality’ and ‘purity.’” He concluded: “The abstract artist, as Clement Greenberg put it, is a ‘purist’ who insists upon excluding ‘literature’ and subject matter from plastic art.” See “*Ut Pictura Theoria*,” in Mitchell’s *Picture Theory*: 215-16.

¹¹⁴ Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1971), in Thomas Hess and Elizabeth Baker, eds., *Art and Sexual Politics* (New York: Collier Books, 1973), reprinted in Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988): 145-78.

patriarchy, the critique of originality has been seriously misplaced? Indeed, faith in, and a need for, originality is an ideal shared by all cultures and located in the value societies place on any form of concentrated attentiveness to the conditions of being and making that affirm diverse models of invention. In this regard, originality is a value worth defending. For an ideal is not a myth any more than the social value accorded originality (in any field) is mythic or insignificant. On the contrary. Ideals are important ways in which societies embody needs, desires, and possibilities; and the social institution of originality that express such human constructs must be taken seriously if a culture is to maintain a constructive vision of itself and its future. Theory needs to be more than an exegesis on taste, or - as in the case of Krauss - a predilection to admire recurrence in the visual form of modular repetition.

Every discipline has its own concept of originality, its avant-gardes, and its relationship to originality. Imagine how innocent it would appear in the context of physics, for example, for someone to pronounce its scientific avant-gardes dead, or to describe its inventions as myths of originality. Is the effect of the original atom bomb a myth? Similarly, while any particular manifestation of avant-gardism may appear exhausted, certain cultural formations, ideological beliefs, and social practices that produced its particular responses - and that earned the appellation "avant-garde" in the first place - may be displayed in new formations elsewhere. My question is: Why is artistic originality and vision treated with such fear in a cultural context? What is there to be gained, and for whom? The answer seems self-evident to me: discursive power over originality. The last two decades of the twentieth century, in which textual theories declared power over originality, will be understood to have been a kind of *fin-de-siècle* and *fin-de-millennium* sophistry representative of a period in massive technological and social transition and generally without substantive leadership or shared social values. In this way the historicity of the theory of the death of the avant-garde is tied to concepts of the myth of originality. Both theoretical positions fall short of an account of the reoccurring and concurrently shifting historical, political, social, and cultural phenomena that give rise to the responses I have identified as avant-gardes. The putative notion of the death of the avant-garde is based on the critique of originality, itself an attack on the concept of authenticity - a value attached to what is esteemed, in part, in the concept of "radical." But this chain of meanings that moves from the uniqueness of something radical (something that changes things at the root), to something authentic and, therefore, original, is

seldom considered. *An attack on originality, therefore, is an assault on the very foundations of the notion of the authentic and the radical.*

Moreover, the term radical itself has been misused, and its meaning has been depleted and over-determined in contemporary jargon. Therefore, it must be asked: What constitutes “radical” as opposed to “radicalism,” and what is the relationship of radical and radicalism to the avant-gardes? Radicalism can be understood to embody an attitude about conventions, suspicions, and perhaps even fears of conformity. Radicalism always speaks *as if* from a position of alterity, of being outside. And it is as often a self-appointed position of marginality as it is a socially ascribed one. Radicalism seldom assumes actual political positions, nor is it usually aligned with any ideology either of the right, left, or center. For radicalism is relational, relative with regard to centers, and may represent any theoretical or ideological position. In this way radicalism is as shifting and ambiguous as any unanchored sign, like the sophist identified by William Gass above who supports the status quo until it changes. These are the very reasons why radicalism is - and should be - considered dangerous. Radicalism is wholly unpredictable. Ted Kaczynski, the man convicted of being the Unabomber, is a prime representation of radicalism. He is someone whose native intelligence, race, class, education, and sexuality (for all that is currently known about him) could offer few clues to his disaffection, his radicalism, or, more importantly, his violent expression of it. Moreover, radicalism almost always - and I can think of few exceptions - means an attraction to violence, and the ability to entertain violence as a method to achieve its end. The more dangerous the radicalism, the more interesting, exotic, and sometimes erotic the person who exhibits its traits becomes in the public imagination.¹¹⁵ But the Unabomber reforms nothing. His radicalism is always reduced to a mere curiosity, a social anomaly, but not a social force.

The behavioral manifestations of radicalism (unpredictability, involvement in violent change, attraction to violence, and enticement of those magnetized by violence) are very close to the symptomology identified with traumatic response. This suggests to me that radicalism itself may be a traumatic response. I don't want to overstate this point, but I do want to link this possible dimension of radicalism with another one of its features: radicalism is always a

¹¹⁵ For example, see, David Aberbach, *Charisma in Politics, Religion and the Media: Private Trauma, Public Ideals*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.

struggle with power. *Radicalism* is not - and never can be, by definition - *of* authority even when it may be *in* authority - as was the case with despots like Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, the Khmer Rouge, and so forth. *Radicalism* is always, somehow, disenfranchised. Of course this disenfranchisement presents the greatest problem: how is a culture to discern actual or imagined disenfranchisement in those who wield enormous power? In this sense, theories of *the avant-garde* have suffered especially from the academic project of western Marxism, which, having associated itself with the avant-garde, appropriated *radicalism* to itself especially after the failures of the 1968 revolutions and the increasing institutionalization of the leftist throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Ironically, the result has been that most theories of *the avant-garde* prove to be fundamentally conservative and deeply attached to academic dogma.

Radicals are different. *To be radical means to envision and produce in a way that alters observation, changing perception at the root.* Indeed, is this not the very task of the radical? Whether on the left or right, radical deeds are, paradoxically, often accomplished unintentionally. One may become radical by simply going about one's business as usual - if that business is investigating the world, *closely and with a difference.* As a result, one of the most interesting conditions of the cultural position of the radical is that s/he often - although not always - remains nearly invisible. That is, someone fundamentally radical is often imperceptible in, and to, her/his own time, especially during the period of his/her innovations. But how could it be other? For how could knowledge and experience be reshaped if new epistemologies were already known, ontologies lived, and teleologies recorded? This must be one of the most cherished conditions of avant-gardes: the paradox of the general inability to identify what is original in our own time. Does it not stand to reason, thus, that to be authentically radical or avant-garde one must - more or less - be invisible? Radical signifies a phenomenon that mitigates against encounters with that which *is surprising in itself.* For once something is known, it sheds its original condition and surprise becomes the familiar.

To be radical requires responsibility, a quality that may be impossible to transmit from generation to generation, as Jacques Derrida has observed, "Such is the secret truth of faith as absolute responsibility and as absolute passion that, sworn to secrecy, cannot be transmitted

from generation to generation. In this sense it has no history.”¹¹⁶ While Derrida is correct that faith has no history, he exaggerates when he speaks of “sworn secrecy.” Faith as absolute responsibility has no need for secrecy. For faith as absolute responsibility *cannot* be inherited, imitated, recuperated, repeated, reconstructed, or displaced. Faith cannot be transmitted from generation to generation. Faith is never neo; it cannot be learned. Faith - as absolute responsibility - becomes, knows itself becoming, understands its absolute responsibility and passion, and is quiet in that knowledge, quietude and becoming that remains a mystery to all that behold it. For faith represents personal will, unlike trust, which designates interpersonal responsibility. The secret truth *of* avant-gardes is a culture’s passion-filled faith *in* insight and vision as absolute responsibility.

In order to credibly uphold such a truth, avant-gardes are culturally constructed and charged with the responsibility to represent *how* such behavior - behavior that is also understood as an aesthetic - is to be accomplished. In conventional discussions of the avant-garde, this passion has been circumscribed to a reductive notion of utopianism, rather than an expanded discussion of probity: namely the degree to which avant-gardes demonstrate integrity, candor, fair play and justice, scruples; and, most of all, how accountable they are to the social and cultural implications of what they create, represent, and originate. Without probity how can value have meaning? How might there be a “dream” without probity, namely integrity and principle?

Probity contributes *invisibly* to the health of the social order in constructive, non-ideal, material ways because it contributes to an ethical order. As Emmanuel Levinas observed: “It is there, in the ethical, that there is an appeal to the uniqueness of the subject, and sense is given to life in defiance of death.”¹¹⁷ Commenting further, Derrida writes:

Duty or responsibility binds me to the other, to the other as other, and ties me in my absolute singularity to the other as other. God is the name of the absolute other as other and as unique (the God of Abraham defined as the one and unique). As soon as I enter into a relation with the absolute other, my absolute singularity enters into relation with his on the level of

¹¹⁶ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*: 80.

¹¹⁷ Levinas, *Noms propres* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1976): 113, as quoted in Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*: 78.

obligation and duty. I am responsible to the other as other, I answer to him and I answer for what I do before him.¹¹⁸

Derrida's discussion is exemplary (even when the philosopher conforms to his faith in the Judaic tradition that God is male). For Derrida's discussion locates the structure of social duty and obligation as metaphorically represented in a notion of God as a construct. If one takes a similar position vis-a-vis avant-gardes, they are cultural constructs established to embody the promise and ideal of an ethical order where the potential for change (namely originality) is played out in observing and making based on radical acts of probity. The radical act represented in the cultural construct of the avant-garde is *the concentrated attentiveness to the conditions of being and making wherein personal subjectivity and social reality themselves converge toward acts of probity.*

V. Women Taking Action

Let me close by returning to the beginning of what Deleuze described as delirium, my essaying essay, my medical act of self-ministration, my obsession with probity. In *Body as Membrane*, Justesen and Export focused on the theme of the membrane, which they defined as “a border coating between the cell and its surroundings,” a “sensitive and soft, porous material (skin) that functions as a transformer [which] transports and transmits any conceivable information,” and as “one of the body's vital components, [that] functions as a filter as well as a canvas screen for reception, projection and reproduction.”¹¹⁹ Comparing the photo-emulsion of the photographic medium (the medium through which the performances of the artists selected for the show were exhibited) to the surface of the body, the curators explained that, “the physical body is an instrument to test theory practically on a spatial surface.”

But the body's somatic spatial surface is also connected to a complex system of social values and practices and psychophysical responses that forever distinguish it from other surfaces immune to such emotive fates. The body is, indeed, an interface between external and internal experience, an object among other objects with values of use, exchange, and many others like ability. That the body has been deployed as a discursive surface in the visual

¹¹⁸ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*: 68.

¹¹⁹ Export and Justesen, “Introduction,” *Body As Membrane*: 142.

arts testifies to the extremity of the ontological insecurity of the body, identity, and existence itself in the late twentieth century. That women's bodies are displayed for consumption in all walks of life is a truism that reinforces the traumatized states of dissociation in which so many women live. As a result, when the body, any body, but particularly a woman's body, is presented, there is much at stake. That art might contribute to the remedy of our vulnerability is without a doubt true, but only if we are willing to be vigilant with respect to our own probity especially if we are feminists. It is the duty of avant-garde art and the institutions and practices attached to it - if they are worth the social values invested in them - to be so. Unless, of course, we fail in our effort to maintain society's trust. So, let me repeat myself:

Why does taking a position against self-destruction and self-derogation...that is, taking a position against art that is opposed to everything for which...[life] stands - have to be interpreted as "angry and defensive"; and what is wrong, or inappropriate about anger?... It is distressingly paradoxical, if not hypocritical, that in our profession all forms of the most extreme sexuality, violence, masochism, sadism, "abjection," and so on, may be shown, written about, and even celebrated as "transgressive," but a critique of these very behaviors is described as "angry and defensive" [or American Puritanism with a thin candy coating.] What a strange world we make!¹²⁰

The many themes and subjects that I have addressed in the process of essaying this essay constitute the unnamed *something else* present in the work that earned double censorship. My work was expurgated for breaching the standards of decorum for institutions and their publications; feminists are expected to celebrate each other's productions, especially in the context of the feminist avant-garde. I was invited into the presentational context of the avant-garde, provisionally accepted because of those privileged invitations, and expected to behave according to the unwritten rule that whatever is exhibited under that sacred umbrella is exempt from the critique of those within its ranks. I was expected to construct a discursive picture of a feminist avant-garde beyond reproach, to close ranks, to perform my ekphrastic duty of explanation and apology. But I bungled my job. I now understand that I earned the censors' mark because of the following infractions: I failed to conform; I had the temerity to

¹²⁰ Kristine Stiles letter to Marcia Tucker.

disagree; I violated a taboo of *the* avant-garde exhibition catalogue by describing in unflattering terms, and questioning, the work of the artists I was hired to praise and celebrate; I explicitly rebuked Justesen both as the curator for the content of her exhibition and as an artist exhibiting in her show.¹²¹ Furthermore, I named names and criticized both an artist (Orlan) and a critic (Barbara Rose).¹²² In her position as director, I made Tucker vulnerable to the implication that she was an accomplice to my views if she permitted my words to be published under the aegis of the New Museum.

Finally, just before sending this manuscript off to the editor of this volume, I learned that an essay by Rosalind Krauss had suffered the same censorial fate as mine. A section of Krauss's work critical of artist Jeff Wall was "edited out" of her essay on artist James Coleman by Yves Gavaert, Belgian publisher of Coleman's exhibition catalogue for the Vienna Secession Museum.¹²³ Krauss was led to believe that she had been "unethical" in launching an "attack [on] one artist in a catalogue about the work of another artist." Stunned by the censorship of her work, the first in "thirty years of critical writing," Krauss acquiesced, just as I had. Why? She did not want to hold up the catalogue for the artist who was depending upon her essay:

Given the shortness of time between now and the opening of Coleman's exhibition, however, withdrawing the text will mean that Coleman will not have a catalogue: this is not, then, just my problem alone. So I decided on a second course, I will cut the text for the catalogue but publish the unexpurgated, uncensored version in *October*.¹²⁴

Krauss was clever. She made certain that she should could publish her own views by building a powerful and highly visible international context for them in *October* Magazine. Most work

¹²¹ It may occur to some readers that Valie Export, the co-curator of the exhibition *Body as Membrane*, is curiously absent from my critique. The reason for this is that never at any time did Export have anything to do with the censorship of my essay. Indeed, it was she who was instrumental in recommending me to write for the catalogue. Moreover, as it should be evident from my comments on the photograph "Genitalpanik" (1969), the entire import of the exhibition itself could have been and was - already in 1969 - conveyed in her one work. I admire her act, the image of it, one that is unsurpassed in its elegance, brutality, and depth of content.

¹²² Barbara Rose, it turns out, "lives in the same building as Marcia Tucker."

¹²³ Rosalind Krauss, "...And Then Turn Away: An Essay on James Coleman," *October* 81 (Summer 1997): 32.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

that is censored, especially when it is by or about women (or both), finds no publisher. Or, as William Gass has pointed out: “It is not that we suppress serious [material] entirely; but in capitalist countries, only on the margins can excellence be located.”¹²⁵ I am not suggesting that all work at the margins necessarily belongs to the category of excellence. In fact, had “Never Enough” been published, it most likely would have found its place in the dustbin with other so many feminist writings: ignored, and then forgotten.

What the censors proved is that whoever they censor is not within their ranks, nor trying to be. Maybe that lack of desire to belong is my most unforgivable breach (and most powerful weapon). As Fredric Jameson once observed: “The reversal of our habits of idealism... is a dialectical shock.”¹²⁶ Fear is what prompted the censors who, in their acts took it upon themselves to guard the art, guard the public, guard themselves (and their friends), guard the pseudo-avant-garde context. Guard against what? My passion (delirium) about probity. Even though taken on their own merits in different contexts, I could not sanction the works in *Body as Membrane*, because their collective presence - the experience of these works *en masse* - was not consonant with the probity to which feminist avant-gardes must hold.

“What’s really bad for the system,” Laura Cottingham has written, “is women refusing to believe in all the myths of history, and taking action to change our present and our future.”¹²⁷ Taking action as avant-garde feminists, endowed with the absolute passion for responsibility and accountability, means making the act of primary observation and representation itself an act that reconstructs the ways in which women are seen, and refusing to participate in contexts that do violence to those reconstructions. Observation that reconstructs, deconstructs, alters, and reforms the ways in which women are interpreted, empowered, and represented *could be* radical, original, and might connect private subjectivity to social reality to challenge patriarchal epistemologies and change human ontologies.

Much like the *Bad Girls* series of exhibitions, *Body as Membrane* has made it clear that this show was about marketing artists through the vehicle of sex. Images presented in an avant-garde context - *by* women, representing the degradation *of* women - belong to the traffic *in* women and constitute little more than pseudo-avant-garde acts. For unless the lesson is

¹²⁵ Gass: 63.

¹²⁶ Fredric Jameson, “Architecture and the Critique of Ideology,” Joan Ockman, ed., *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985): 60.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*: 17.

learned that *never enough is never again*, the traffic in women that depicts her/us as degraded and subjugated will remain *radicalism*, not radical. As Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co have written in another context, we will become pure alienation: “Like the last notes sounded by the Doctor Faustus of Thomas Mann, alienation, having become absolute, testifies uniquely to its own presence, separating itself from the world to declare the world’s incurable *malady*.”¹²⁸

I contend that *avant-garde art operates constructively in the cultural, social, and political spheres and must do so with probity that contributes something substantial to the social order within which it is involved*. The provisional term here is probity - defined by the ethics of virtue and justice associated with accountability and responsibility to oneself and to one’s society. These are all putative values underpinning any concept of authenticity that is not spurious (though to complicate matters, one can also be spurious, and be so genuinely!). Avant-garde art – the cultural institution of originality at the radical margins of vision - is, was, and always will be powerful, alive, and a cultural threat operating in the social domain of the political. As Edward Shanken astutely observed:

Le Clézio got it backwards. The point is not that, as he put it - ‘One day, we will perhaps know that there wasn’t any art, but only *medicine*.’ - but rather: One day we will perhaps know that there wasn’t any medicine, but only *art!*”¹²⁹

Knowing this truth of the persistence and necessity of art, one cannot help but insist upon and search for its value as it undergirds social institutions that are called upon to improve life. And this conclusion leads to the next: If not probity, what would, or could, the charge of avant-gardes be?

¹²⁸ Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co in *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology*. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985.

¹²⁹ Edward A. Shanken in conversation with the author Spring 2000.