Roles Recast: Eleanor Antin and the 1970s

Emily Liebert

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2013
“Roles Recast: Eleanor Antin and the 1970s” provides the first book-length study devoted to Eleanor Antin (b. 1935), and positions her practice as a pivotal point between late modernism and postmodernism in American art. The project focuses on Antin’s work from 1971 to 1977, made while the artist was living in San Diego. During the period under consideration Antin integrated key facets from dominant art paradigms of the 1960s, especially Conceptualism and Minimalism, with a politics of desire and sexuality, creating art that instantiates a critique of vision. As such, Antin anticipated strategies that would become canonical by the late 1970s in art informed by postmodernist feminism, notably by artists associated with the “Pictures” generation. By arguing that San Diego was a key site from which art informed by postmodernist feminism emerged, I challenge the geographic binary that associates essentialist feminism with southern California and locates a more theoretically-inclined feminism in New York.

Through what I call an “aesthetics of precarity,” I contend that Antin reveals the vulnerability and potential for mutability that lie at the core of such fields as subjectivity, spectatorship, and community. Related, she challenges the stability of visual representation and identity, and reveals the ways that fissures in one compromise the plenitude of the other. I argue that these features of Antin’s work, integral to the particular feminism she advanced, served as a protest against the military triumphalist
rhetoric—and its celebration of the heroic, stable soldier—that was prevalent during the Vietnam War era in which her artistic practice emerged.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations  
ii

Acknowledgements  
xi

Introduction  
1

Chapter One: Conceptualist Subjects  
15

Chapter Two: Feminist Differences  
54

Chapter Three: Aesthetics of Precarity  
92

Chapter Four: Multiple Occupancy  
124

Epilogue  
154

Illustrations  
162

Bibliography  
163
Chapter One: Conceptualist Subjects

Figure 1.1  Eleanor Antin, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (detail), 1972. 148 black and white photographs, text panel; each 7 x 5 in.

Figure 1.2  Eleanor Antin, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (detail), 1972. 148 black and white photographs, text panel; each 7 x 5 in.

Figure 1.3  Lawrence Weiner, *A 36" x 36" Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard From a Wall*, 1968. Language and the materials referred to; dimensions variable.

Figure 1.4  Carl Andre, *144 Lead Square*, 1969. 144 units of lead; 12 ft. x 12 ft. x 3/8 in.

Figure 1.5  Eleanor Antin, *Blood of A Poet Box*, 1965–68. Wood box containing one hundred glass slides of poets’ blood specimens, specimen list; 11 1/2 x 7 1/4 x 1 1/2 in.

Figure 1.6  Eleanor Antin, *Blood of A Poet Box* (detail), 1965–68. Wood box containing one hundred glass slides of poets’ blood specimens, specimen list; 11 1/2 x 7 1/4 x 1 1/2 in.

Figure 1.7  George Maciunas, *Fluxkit*, 1964. Suitcase with representative choice of multiples produced by George Maciunas; 11 x 17 5/16 x 14 15/16 in.

Figure 1.8  Bruce Nauman, *Failing to Levitate in the Studio*, 1966. Black and white photograph; 20 x 24 in.

Figure 1.9  Eleanor Antin, *Representational Painting*, 1971. Black and white video still, silent; 38 min.

Figure 1.10  Eleanor Antin, *Domestic Peace* (detail), 1971–72. Seventeen pages of handwritten text on graph paper and typewritten text and ink on paper; each 8 1/2 x 11 and 11 x 8 1/2 in.

Figure 1.11  Eadweard Muybridge, *Woman Descending an Incline with a 20-lb. Basket on Head, Hands Raised*, 1884–86. Collotype; 9 1/16 x 12 3/8 in.

Figure 1.12  Yvonne Rainer, *We Shall Run*, 1963. Pictured: Yvonne Rainer, Deborah
Hay, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Morris, Sally Gross, Joseph Schlichter, Tony Holder, Alex Hay. Photograph by Peter Moore.

Figure 1.13 Andy Warhol, *Before and After*, 1961. Casein on canvas; 54 x 68 in.

Figure 1.14 Sol LeWitt, *Serial Project No. 1 (ABCD)*, 1966. Baked enamel on steel units over baked enamel on aluminum; 20 in. x 13 7/12 ft. x 13 7/12 ft.

Figure 1.15 Robert Morris, *Untitled (ring with light)*, 1965–66. Two units of painted wood and fiberglass and fluorescent light; each 24 x 14 in., overall diameter 97 in.

Figure 1.16 Sol LeWitt, *Muybridge I* (exterior view and interior), 1964. Painted wood, photographs, flashing lights; 9 1/2 x 96 x 10 1/2 in.

Figure 1.17 Sir Francis Galton, *The Jewish Type*, 1883. Eight black and white photographs; dimensions unknown.

Figure 1.18 Martha Rosler, *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, 1977. Color video still, with sound; 39:20 min.

**Chapter Two: Feminist Differences**

Figure 2.1 Eleanor Antin, *Domestic Peace* (detail), 1971–72. Seventeen pages of handwritten text on graph paper and typewritten text and ink on paper; each 8 1/2 x 11 and 11 x 8 1/2 in.

Figure 2.2 Eleanor Antin, *Domestic Peace* (detail), 1971–72. Seventeen pages of handwritten text on graph paper and typewritten text and ink on paper; each 8 1/2 x 11 and 11 x 8 1/2 in.

Figure 2.3 Eleanor Antin, *Domestic Peace* (detail), 1971–72. Seventeen pages of handwritten text on graph paper and typewritten text and ink on paper; each 8 1/2 x 11 and 11 x 8 1/2 in.

Figure 2.4 Eleanor Antin, *Domestic Peace* (detail), 1971–72. Seventeen pages of handwritten text on graph paper and typewritten text and ink on paper; each 8 1/2 x 11 and 11 x 8 1/2 in.

Figure 2.5 Eleanor Antin, *Domestic Peace* (detail), 1971–72. Seventeen pages of handwritten text on graph paper and typewritten text and ink on paper; each 8 1/2 x 11 and 11 x 8 1/2 in.
Figure 2.6  Eleanor Antin, *Domestic Peace* (detail), 1971–72. Seventeen pages of handwritten text on graph paper and typewritten text and ink on paper; each 8 1/2 x 11 and 11 x 8 1/2 in.

Figure 2.7  Warner Bros., *The Jazz Singer*, 1927. Black and white film still, with sound; 88 min.

Figure 2.8  Hans Haacke, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (detail), 1971. Two maps (photo-enlargements), 142 black and white photographs, 142 typewritten sheets, six charts, explanatory panel; dimensions variable.

Figure 2.9  Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document: Introduction* (detail), 1973. Four Perspex units with white card, wool vests, pencil, ink; each 10 1/16 x 7 7/8 in.

Figure 2.10  Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document: Documentation I, Analysed Fecal Stains and Feeding Charts* (detail), 1974. Twenty-eight mixed media parts; each 11 x 14 in.

Figure 2.11  Eleanor Antin, *Guerilla Warfare from Library Science*, 1971. Black and white photograph, Library of Congress catalogue card; Photograph: 12 1/8 x 8 1/8 in.; catalogue card: 3 x 5 in.

Figure 2.12  Eleanor Antin, *Four Transactions* (detail), 1972. Four pages of typewritten text and ink on paper; each 11 x 8 1/2 in.

Figure 2.13  Eleanor Antin, *Four Transactions* (detail), 1972. Four pages of typewritten text and ink on paper; each 11 x 8 1/2 in.

Figure 2.14  Lee Lozano, *No Title*, 1967. Ink on paper; 11 x 8 1/2 in.

**Chapter Three: Aesthetics of Precarity**

Figure 3.1  Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots Facing the Sea*, Del Mar, CA., February 9, 1971, mailed March 15, 1971, from *100 Boots*, 1971–73. Postcard; 4 1/2 x 7 in.

Figure 3.2  Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots*, 1971–73. Fifty-one black and white postcards; each 4 1/2 x 7 in.

Figure 3.3  Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots in the Market*, Solana Beach, CA., May 17, 1971, 9:30 am, mailed June 7, 1971, from *100 Boots*, 1971–73. Postcard; 4 1/2 x 7 in.
Figure 3.4  Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots at the Pond*, Mission Gorge, CA., July 12, 1971, 2:00 pm, mailed March 6, 1972, from *100 Boots*, 1971–73. Postcard; 4 1/2 x 7 in.

Figure 3.5  Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots Turn the Corner*, Solana Beach, CA., May 17, 1971, 2:00 pm, mailed August 9, 1971, from *100 Boots*, 1971–73. Postcard; 4 1/2 x 7 in.

Figure 3.6  Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots on the Job*, Signal Hill, CA., February 15, 1972, 12:15 pm, mailed September 11, 1972, from *100 Boots*, 1971–73. Postcard; 4 1/2 x 7 in.

Figure 3.7  Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots in a Field*, Route 101, CA., February 9, 1971, 3:30 pm, mailed January 21, 1973, from *100 Boots*, 1971–73. Postcard; 4 1/2 x 7 in.

Figure 3.8  Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots Trespass*, Highway 101, CA., May 17, 1971, 2:30 pm, mailed August 30, 1971, from *100 Boots*, 1971–73. Postcard; 4 1/2 x 7 in.


Figure 3.10  Ed Ruscha, *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas*, 1962, from *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1963. Gelatin silver print; 4 15/16 × 5 1/16 in.


Figure 3.12  Caspar David Friedrich, *The Wanderer Above the Mists*, 1817–18. Oil on canvas; 37 7/16 x 29 1/2 in.

Figure 3.13  Mark di Suvero and others, *Artists’ Tower of Protest*, 1966. Mixed media; height: six stories.

Figure 3.14  Nancy Spero, *Search and Destroy*, 1967. Gouache and ink on paper; 24 x 36 in.

Figure 3.15  Ed Kienholz, *The Portable War Memorial*, 1968. Plaster casts, tombstone, blackboard, flag, poster, restaurant furniture, photographs, working Coca-Cola machine, stuffed dog, wood, metal, fiberglass; 9 1/2 x 32 x 8 ft.

Figure 3.16  Eleanor Antin, *Fragments from Roissy* (detail), 1966–67. Collage; dimensions unknown (work nonextant).
Figure 3.17  Eleanor Antin, *And from Movie Boxes*, 1969. Photomontage and text in aluminum and glass case; 37 1/2 x 25 1/2 x 3 in.

Figure 3.18  Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots at the Bank*, Solana Beach, CA., February 9, 1971, 10:00 am, mailed April 26, 1971, from *100 Boots*, 1971–73. Postcard; 4 1/2 x 7 in.

Figure 3.19  Eleanor Antin, *Tim from California Lives*, 1969. Duffel bag, magazine, dried fruit tray; dimensions variable.

Figure 3.20  Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, 1974–75. Forty-five gelatin silver prints of text and images on twenty-four backing boards; each 11 4/5 x 29 3/5 in.

Figure 3.21  Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (detail), 1974–75. Forty-five gelatin silver prints of text and images on twenty-four backing boards; each 11 4/5 x 29 3/5 in.

Figure 3.22  Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (detail), 1974–75. Forty-five gelatin silver prints of text and images on twenty-four backing boards; each 11 4/5 x 29 3/5 in.

Figure 3.23  Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (detail), 1974–75. Forty-five gelatin silver prints of text and images on twenty-four backing boards; each 11 4/5 x 29 3/5 in.

Figure 3.24  Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (detail), 1974–75. Forty-five gelatin silver prints of text and images on twenty-four backing boards; each 11 4/5 x 29 3/5 in.

Figure 3.25  Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots Taking the Hill (1)*, Lomas Santa Fe, CA., June 13, 1972, 2:00 pm, mailed April 16, 1973, from *100 Boots*, 1971-73. Postcard; 4 1/2 x 7 in.

Figure 3.26  Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots Taking the Hill (2)*, Lomas Santa Fe, CA., June 13, 1972, 2:20 pm, mailed April 19, 1973, from *100 Boots*, 1971-73. Postcard; 4 1/2 x 7 in.

Figure 3.27  Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots Taking the Hill (3)*, Lomas Santa Fe, CA., June 13, 1972, 2:45 pm, mailed April 23, 1973, from *100 Boots*, 1971–73. Postcard; 4 1/2 x 7 in.

Figure 3.28  Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots Taking the Hill (4)*, Lomas Santa Fe, CA., June
Chapter Four: Multiple Occupancy

Figure 4.1  Eleanor Antin, *The Two Eleanors*, 1973. Black and white photograph mounted on board; 11 x 14 in.

Figure 4.2  Eleanor Antin, *Choreography VII—Battement Développé (Short Tutu)* from *Caught in the Act*, 1973. Six black and white photographs mounted on board; each 6 3/4 x 4 3/4 in.

Figure 4.3  Eleanor Antin, *Caught in the Act*, 1973. Black and white video still, with sound; 36 min.

Figure 4.5 Yvonne Rainer, *Corridor Solo and Crawling Through* from *Parts of Some Sextets*, 1965. Wadsworth Athenaeum. Pictured: Yvonne Rainer and others.

Figure 4.6 Eleanor Antin, *Little Nurse Eleanor*, 1976–77. Paper doll; approx. 14 x 4 in.

Figure 4.7 Eleanor Antin, *The Adventures of a Nurse*, 1976. Color video still, with sound; 64 min.

Figure 4.8 Eleanor Antin, *Portraits of Eight New York Women*, 1970. Eight sculptures of mixed media; dimensions variable. Photograph by Peter Moore.

Figure 4.9 Eleanor Antin, *Yvonne Rainer* from *Portraits of Eight New York Women*, 1970. Stationary bicycle with basket and horn, fabric flowers, sweatshirt, text panel; dimensions variable.

Figure 4.10 Eleanor Antin, *Carolee Schneemann* from *Portraits of Eight New York Women*, 1970. Wood easel, mirror, jar of honey with honeycomb, crushed crimson velvet, text panel; dimensions variable.

Figure 4.11 Eleanor Antin, *Naomi Dash* from *Portraits of Eight New York Women*, 1970. Chrome Towel rack, bath towel, nylon stockings, shower cap, litter box with litter, text panel; dimensions variable.

Figure 4.12 Eleanor Antin, *The Nurse and the Hijackers*, 1977. Color video still, with sound; 85 min.

Figure 4.13 Eleanor Antin, Airplane set with paper doll passengers from *The Nurse and the Hijackers*, 1977. Paper, cardboard, shag carpet over wood on sawhorses; approx. 5 x 17 x 4 ft.


Figure 4.15 Eleanor Antin, *The Gentleman’s Game is the Lady’s Gain* from *The Angel of Mercy: The Nightingale Family Album*, 1977. Toned gelatin silver print, mounted on paper; 18 x 13 in.
Figure 4.16 Eleanor Antin, ‘They Also Serve...’ from The Angel of Mercy: The Nightingale Family Album, 1977. Toned gelatin silver print, mounted on paper; 18 x 13 in.

Figure 4.17 Eleanor Antin, Operation in A Field Hospital from The Angel of Mercy: My Tour of Duty in The Crimea, 1977. Toned gelatin silver print, mounted on paper; 30 3/8 x 22 in.

Figure 4.18 Eleanor Antin, War Games from The Angel of Mercy: My Tour of Duty in The Crimea, 1977. Toned gelatin silver print, mounted on paper; 30 3/8 x 22 in.

Figure 4.19 Eleanor Antin, In the Trenches Before Sebastopol from The Angel of Mercy: My Tour of Duty in The Crimea, 1977. Toned gelatin silver print, mounted on paper; 9 15/16 x 12 in.

Figure 4.20 Eleanor Antin, The Angel of Mercy from The Angel of Mercy: My Tour of Duty in The Crimea, 1977. Toned gelatin silver print, mounted on paper; 30 3/8 x 22 in.

Figure 4.21 Eleanor Antin, The Angel of Mercy, 1977/81. Color video still from videotaped play, with sound; 64 min.

Figure 4.22 Martha Rosler posing for The Angel of Mercy Masonite puppet, c. 1976. Color photograph; 6 x 4 in.

Figure 4.23 John Perreault posing for The Angel of Mercy Masonite puppet, c. 1976. Color photograph; 6 x 4 in.

Figure 4.24 Roger Fenton, Cookhouse of the 8th Hussars, 1855. Salted paper print; 6 1/4 x 8 in.

Figure 4.25 Roger Fenton, Valley of the Shadow of Death, 1855. Salted paper print; 10 7/8 x 13 3/4 in.

Figure 4.26 Martha Rosler, Cleaning the Drapes from House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, 1967–72. Photomontage.

Figure 4.27 Martha Rosler, Balloons from House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, 1967–72. Photomontage.

Figure 4.28 Eleanor Antin, The King, 1972. Black and white video still, silent; 52 min.

Figure 4.29 Eleanor Antin, Portrait of the King, 1972. Black and white photograph mounted on board; 13 3/4 x 9 3/4 in.
Epilogue

Figure E.1  Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)*, 1981. Photograph; 55 × 41 in.

Figure E.2  Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still*, 1977. Gelatin silver print; 8 × 10 in.

Figure E.3  Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still*, 1977. Gelatin silver print; 10 × 8 in.

Figure E.4  Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still*, 1977. Gelatin silver print; 10 × 8 in.

Figure E.5  Eleanor Antin, *Before the Revolution*, 1979. Black and white photograph; 9 1/8 x 6 1/8 in. Photograph by Denise Simon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In writing “Roles Recast: Eleanor Antin and the 1970s” I was supported and inspired by generous mentors and colleagues, family and friends. I extend to them my warmest gratitude. At Columbia, I have been privileged to be part of an intellectual community that has continually enlivened my work. Above all, I thank my dissertation advisors, Alexander Alberro and Rosalyn Deutsche. My first encounters with them were through their own outstanding scholarship, which has shaped my commitments as an art historian and continues to inform my thinking. As advisors, Alex and Rosalyn have been endlessly generous, striking a graceful balance between trust and guidance: they have given me the room to grow into this project myself, while making themselves fully available with thoughtful direction when I have needed it. I thank Kellie Jones and Branden Joseph for sitting on my dissertation committee and for offering their steadfast support of this project as it has evolved. In classrooms and conversations, they have helped me to reflect anew on my work. Carrie Lambert-Beatty’s scholarship has long inspired me, so I was honored to have her on my dissertation committee, visiting from the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at Harvard. Kaira Cabañas has given me invaluable feedback on this dissertation, offering her keen insight, perspective, and experience at every stage along the way. I am grateful to Susan Vogel for introducing me to African art, which was my Ph.D. minor field of study, and remains a great interest. The influence of these scholars is reflected not only in the pages that follow, but also in my goals as a teacher and mentor. For their gracious and cheerful assistance with details large and small, I thank Columbia’s Department of Art History and Archaeology staff,
past and present, especially Jorgen Cleemann and Luke Barclay. The prologue to my
graduate work was my undergraduate major in art history at Yale, where Christy
Anderson, Christine Mehring, and Jonathan Weinberg introduced me to the pleasures of
scholarship.

My dissertation received generous support from a Henry Luce
Foundation/American Council in Learned Societies Dissertation Fellowship in American
Art, a Smithsonian Institution Predoctoral Fellowship at the Archives of American Art,
and a Pierre and Marie-Gaetana Matisse Fellowship in Modern Art History from
Columbia. At the Smithsonian I am especially grateful to my fellowship advisors Anne
Collins Goodyear and Liza Kirwin whose mentorship made my year in residence
especially stimulating and productive.

I relied on gracious curators, conservators, registrars, librarians, and archivists for
access to the research materials on which my dissertation draws. I spent many fruitful
hours studying papers, objects, and ephemera thanks to the assistance of: Elizabeth
Botten, Marisa Bourgoin, Wendy Hurlock Baker, Mary Savig, and Margaret Zoller at the
Archives of American Art; Charles Campbell at the Art Institute of Chicago; Jessica
Gambling at the Balch Art Research Library, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Nick
Lesley at Electronic Arts Intermix; Michael Ahn, Elaine Angelopoulos, Ronald and
Frayda Feldman, Eleanore Hopper, Varvara Mishkushkina, and Marco Nocella at Ronald
Feldman Fine Arts; Virginia Mokslaveskas, Glenn Phillips, and Ted Walbye at the Getty
Research Institute; Jennifer Tobias at the Museum of Modern Art Library and Archives;
Karin Hignett at Tate Britain; and Catherine Wood Tate Modern. In addition, Tracy and
Gary Mezzatesta and Jamie Wolf welcomed me into their homes to examine work in their personal art collections.

My development as an art historian has been crucially informed and animated by my work in museums alongside brilliant curators and educators. At the Chinati Foundation, Marianne Stockebrand and Rob Weiner inspired me with their unwavering commitment to a wholly unique art institution and their penchant for the unconventional; I continue to admire their disregard for the notion of the impossible in all of their pursuits. At the Whitney Museum, where I was a Joan Tisch Teaching Fellow, Kathryn Potts, Ellen Tepfer, and Margie Weinstein gave me the opportunity to teach through objects, which was and is a constant source of intellectual renewal; they furthermore modeled for me the ways that museum education can benefit and serve a range of audiences. Finally they gave shape to a community of Teaching Fellows, in which I relished participating. As I completed my dissertation I had the opportunity to curate an exhibition related to it at Columbia’s Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery. There I had the great fortune of working with Deborah Cullen and Jeanette Silverthorne who supported my ambitions for the exhibition, while expanding and deepening the project through their own ideas and experience.

At the Whitney Independent Study Program (ISP), which offers a special space for rigorous critical discourse, I met many of the colleagues who remain treasured interlocutors. I thank Ron Clark and Johanna Burton for their leadership at the ISP, and Emily Apter for serving as my tutor that year in the Critical Studies Program.

I am lucky to share this field with smart and generous colleagues who read earlier drafts of my dissertation and provided exceptionally constructive feedback; I look
forward to continued exchanges with Claire de Dobay Rifelj, Suzanne Hudson, Anna Katz, Bibiana Obler, Joshua Shirkey, Virginia Solomon, Jeannine Tang, Alex Taylor, Kay Wells, and Carolyn Yerkes. David Tompkins has helped me sharpen many projects over the years; the current one is no exception.

One of the great draws of studying art of the recent past and present is the chance to have relationships with the artists who make the work that motivates my own. I offer my greatest thanks to Eleanor Antin. The ways she integrates humor, narrative, and biography in crafting her innovative feminist art practice is a constant source of inspiration for me. It has been a particular honor to experience Eleanor’s ingenuity, wit, and sensitivity personally as I have gotten to know her through my work on this project. And through their practices and friendship, the studio visits and conversations we have shared, artists Arlen Austin, Cara Benedetto, Brennan Gerard, Ryan Kelly, and Silvia Kolbowski have contributed to this dissertation.

Finally, I thank my cherished friends and family, especially my mother Katherine Dalsimer and my stepfather Peter Pouncey, whose love and humor have guided me through the most challenging moments of this project. My father, Robert Liebert, introduced me to art before I could walk, and he modeled a true passion for art history that got under my skin during the brief years we shared. His presence remains a part of me, growing and changing as I do.
DEDICATION

For my parents
INTRODUCTION

“The early Conceptualists were primitives,” wrote Eleanor Antin in 1974. She continued, “contrary to their belief, documentation is not a neutral list of facts. It is a conceptual creation of events after they are over. All ‘description’ is a form of creation. There is nothing more biased than scientific documentation. It presents a non-psychological image of the ‘natural order’ with no more claim to ‘objective’ truth than William Blake’s symbolic universe.”¹ When Antin wrote this she had been making Conceptual art for nearly a decade, starting with Blood of a Poet Box (1965–68), her green wood box that contains neatly catalogued blood samples drawn from 100 artists and writers. Antin’s criticism of early Conceptualism’s claims for neutrality stemmed from her commitment to a feminism informed by postmodernist critiques of vision and representation. This feminist framework differed from a more widespread practice of feminism in American art of the early 1970s, which opted to use, rather than question, the mainstream fields of visual representation in an effort to elevate images of women. Also counter to the practices of some of her friends and feminist artist peers, despite her frustrations with its earliest incarnations, Antin did not discard Conceptualism; instead, she appropriated aspects of its politics and aesthetics, repurposing both to serve feminist ends.

This dissertation argues that Antin’s art practice of the 1970s expands the terms of Conceptualism and feminism as they have solidified in the histories of this period in

American art. In the work I examine, Antin integrated key facets of the advanced art paradigms of the 1960s, especially Conceptualism’s challenge to modernist traditions of visual representation, and also Minimalism’s investment in the position of the spectator, with a politics of desire and sexuality. As such, she made visible subjectivity, which was a blind spot in many of the Conceptualist and Minimalist practices with which her own art was in dialogue. Through pioneering work that insisted on the inseparability of representation, spectatorship, desire, and sexuality, Antin anticipated strategies that would become well established by the late 1970s in art informed by postmodernist feminism, most notably by artists associated with the “Pictures” generation. The latter made visible the imbrication of vision and desire in order to critique and reorient systems of representation. Drawing on the work of Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, and Yvonne Rainer, and opening possibilities for artists such as Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, and Carrie Mae Weems, Antin’s art is, as I will show, a pivotal point between late modernism and postmodernism in American art.

In her work of the 1970s Antin instantiates what I call an “aesthetics of precarity”: through diverse strategies she reveals the vulnerability and mutability at the core of subjectivity, spectatorship, and community. Related, she challenges the stability of visual representation and identity, and reveals the ways that fissures in one compromise the plenitude of the other. I argue that this feature of Antin’s work, integral to the particular feminism she advanced, served as a protest against the military triumphalist rhetoric—and its celebration of the heroic, stable soldier—that was prevalent during the Vietnam War era. My contention here is informed by Judith Butler’s arguments for the ethical
value of precarity in times of war.\(^2\) It is also shaped by and contributes to a field of feminist literature and theory that locates in psychoanalysis potential to acknowledge and thus potentially reroute war’s motivations.\(^3\) This work advocates for self-reflection, considers subjectivity a mutable entity, imagines community as a site of productive contestation, and interprets the self as constituted in relation to the other. In a conversation about the current state of feminism and the arts published in *Grey Room* in 2008, the relationship between feminism and militarism arose. Mignon Nixon recalled that in November 2001, at the conference “Women Artists at the Millennium,” Linda Nochlin rightly worried that following the September 11 attacks there would be “a revival of heroic masculinity.”\(^4\) Nochlin implored the audience to counter this trend with a commitment to feminism. It is my hope that in some measure the current project answers Nochlin’s call.

*\


When Antin made the work that this dissertation considers, she was based in San Diego where she, her husband the poet and art critic David Antin, and their young son Blaise had moved (from New York) in 1968 after David was hired as a professor in the Visual Arts Department at the University of California San Diego (UCSD) and appointed director of the university’s Mandeville Art Gallery. The center of feminist art in southern California in the 1970s was the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles. Founded in 1973 by graphic designer Sheila de Bretteville, artist Judy Chicago, and art historian Arlene Raven, the Woman’s Building was conceived as a “public center for women’s culture” complete with galleries, classrooms, performance spaces, workshops, a bookstore and a café, where “women of every age, race, economic group, lifestyle and sexuality are welcome.” Although Antin participated in a range of events at the Woman’s Building, and was friends with some of its members, her commitment to an art informed by feminism differed considerably from the priorities of this group. She was neither interested in separatist feminism nor compelled to combat “negative” images of women with “positive” ones. Rather, Antin understood “woman” as an unstable term—as a signifier in an ideological discourse that needed to be interrogated as a whole if new meanings and identities were to emerge.6

---


6 For more on alternatives to the “positive images” approach in art informed by feminism, see Griselda Pollock, “What’s Wrong with ‘Images of Women’?” in Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s Movement, 1970–85, ed. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock.
Just as Antin’s work occupied interstitial spaces between movements and mediums, her art and feminism elude tidy geographic categorizations. During the 1970s her work operated within advanced art paradigms being practiced in both New York and southern California, clearly reflecting not only her immediate environment, but also her roots and earlier background. Antin was born Eleanor Fineman in 1935 to Jewish parents who had emigrated from Poland to New York a few years earlier. She grew up in the West Bronx, immersed in a community of families like her own that were working to acculturate and determined to succeed within mainstream American society. She attended the City College of New York (CCNY) and, after taking a break to work as a professional actress, she received her Bachelors degree in writing in 1958. In the late 1950s and early 1960s Antin’s main artistic endeavor was poetry, while she supported herself by modeling for artists. At CCNY she met David Antin; the couple married in 1961.


Antin’s brief acting career included a tour with a traveling theater company’s production of William Inge’s Bus Stop, and a part in a play directed by Ossie Davis at the first NAACP convention. She attended the Tamara Daykarhanova School for the Stage, where she studied the Stanislavsky method, and she was a member of the Actor’s Equity (which would ultimately pose a conflict that prevented her from going on tour with the Living Theatre when she was invited to do so by Judith Malina and Julian Beck).
the major art movements of the time, including Pop’s investment in consumer culture, Fluxus’s intermedia aesthetic, Minimalism’s interest in phenomenology, and most importantly, the methods through which Conceptualism recast the terms that defined art.

The art of Martha Rosler was shaped by similar engagements, and in the chapters that follow, I invoke key works by Rosler from the late 1960s and 1970s in order to support and elucidate my analysis of Antin. Rosler left New York for San Diego in 1969 to begin a Masters Degree in Fine Arts at UCSD, inspired in a large part by the Antins’ move there the year before. As good friends working in close proximity, first in New York and then in San Diego, Antin and Rosler developed artistic practices that intersected in the artists’ shared understanding of feminism as a politics grounded in challenging a patriarchal system that was responsible not only for sexism, but also class inequities, racism, homophobia, and other antagonisms toward non-normative subjects. In her 1977 article “The Private and the Public: Feminist Art in California,” Rosler critiqued what she designated the “gender determinism” operative at the Woman’s Building, a determination that, she contended, facilitated a disregard for economic and class factors. By arguing, through Antin and to some extent Rosler, that San Diego was a key site from which art informed by postmodernist feminism emerged, this dissertation challenges the geographic

---

8 For more on the relationship between the art of Antin and Rosler during the 1970s see Catherine Caesar, “Personae: The Feminist Conceptual Work of Eleanor Antin and Martha Rosler, 1968–1980” (PhD Dissertation, Emory University, 2005). While Caesar brings attention to the general resonances between the work of Antin and Rosler, I extend this consideration through close analysis of the historical and theoretical ramifications of the related concerns embedded in particular works by each artist.

binary that associates essentialist feminism with southern California and locates a more theoretically-inclined feminism in New York.¹⁰

It is no surprise, that working in San Diego in the late 1960s and 1970s, Antin and Rosler developed a mode of feminist politics and aesthetics that was distinct from the one taking shape among artists in Los Angeles. Amidst San Diego’s defense factories, marine, air force, and navy bases, there was a small close-knit community of leftist artists and intellectuals primarily affiliated with UCSD and other local colleges.¹¹ By the mid-1970s the faculty included, in addition to the Antins, artists Manny Farber, Helen and Newton Harrison, Allan Kaprow, and Pauline Oliveros, filmmaker Jean-Pierre Gorin, poet Jerome Rothenberg, and Marxist philosophers Fredric Jameson and Herbert Marcuse. This impressive roster drew students including not only Rosler but also Kathy Acker, Angela Davis, Fred Lonidier, and Allan Sekula. San Diego became the site of a great efflorescence of radical avant-garde intermedia activity.

For Antin the most useful dimension of Conceptual art was, as stated, its interventions into modernist traditions of visual representation, interventions she


¹¹ Even at UCSD, San Diego’s wider military context was inescapable: the campus was a former military base and art classes were often held in the old Quonset huts that were relics of the site’s earlier incarnation.
expanded to show that vision and spectatorship are imbricated with sexual politics.

Antin’s work thus demonstrates that Conceptual art and art informed by feminism come together in a critique of vision, a relationship that has been largely neglected in art historical discourse. The most rigorous analyses of Conceptualism’s critique of vision, by Alexander Alberro and Benjamin Buchloh respectively, do not address feminism, focusing instead on the stakes of Conceptual art for political economy. Although Lucy Lippard is often associated with a feminist approach to Conceptualism, her interest has in fact historically been and remains grounded in the ways that women—not necessarily feminist—artists have engaged Conceptual art. As she wrote in the press release for c. 7,500, her 1973 exhibition of Conceptual art by women, “some of the participating artists are feminists, some are not. This was not an issue in choosing their work. The show itself, however, was organized partly in reply to the remark ‘There are no women conceptual artists.’” More recently, re-emphasizing the connection between women and Conceptual art, Lippard recalled that “the inexpensive, ephemeral, unintimidating character of Conceptual mediums themselves (video, performance, photography,


narrative, text, actions) encouraged women to participate, to move through this crack in art’s walls."

It is crucial to distinguish between feminist artists and women artists; eliding these terms misrecognizes feminism as a biologically determined position, when in fact it is an intellectual and political position. This dissertation proceeds from an understanding of art informed by feminism as an art that exposes fantasies of mastery, purity, and idealization, and interrogates the foundations of those myths; it locates the experience of spectatorship within the body, and acknowledges that the embodied spectator is shaped by her or his desires and other psychic drives.

My project interprets Conceptual art and feminism through each other. How did Conceptualism and feminism inform each other in art of the 1970s? How was the body used in a way that both extended and challenged a theoretically rigorous Conceptualist feminism? What did Conceptualism offer for a feminism that accommodated difference and dissent? These are the questions that drive the first two chapters of this dissertation. Chapter One focuses on Carving: A Traditional Sculpture (1972), a work that tracks the artist’s weight loss over a period of time. Through Carving I establish Antin’s feminist strategies of detourning key tenets of Conceptualism and Minimalism as they were established by the movements’ earliest practitioners. I furthermore argue that in Carving Antin offers an innovative model for what might constitute body-based art informed by feminism in the early 1970s: unlike many artists at

---

the time who used the female body as a material in their work, Antin does not present that body as an aesthetically political end in itself; rather she renders it a precarious site, through which she offers a sophisticated critique of visual representation and spectatorship, finally arriving at a model of embodied vision that is structured by desire.

Chapter Two continues to examine Antin’s treatment of a gendered subject within a Conceptualist paradigm, but in works in which the body is absent. In *Domestic Peace* (1971–72) and *Four Transactions* (1972), Antin explores the nature of female-female relationships both across and within generations. By contrast with the idealization of bonds between women by many of Antin’s colleagues in the Women’s Art Movement in southern California, Antin’s art highlights the conflict embedded in these relationships. Thus, if in Chapter One, the individual subject is rendered unstable, here in Chapter Two, a group of subjects becomes precarious. I frame this dimension of Antin’s work through Chantal Mouffe’s notion of agonistic pluralism—the conviction that in order for democratic political movements to survive, they must accommodate difference and contestation—and point to the ways that Antin’s “agonistic feminism” has been left out of dominant feminist art narratives. Rectifying this omission productively reorients our understanding of the legacies of 1970s feminist artistic practice.

Chapter Three places Antin’s Conceptualist feminism within another political context: contemporary protest against the Vietnam War. It therefore adds to the growing body of literature that explores the importance of feminism for antiwar politics. I focus on Antin’s use of an aesthetics of precarity in *100 Boots* (1971–73), a work that consists of fifty-one photographic postcards, which the artist distributed internationally during a two-and-a-half-year period. I concentrate on *100 Boots*’s iconography of absence, the
fragmentation that is built into its narrative structure, and its material fragility, arguing that these dimensions of the project challenged the military triumphalism that helped propel the Vietnam War. This argument opens onto a wider consideration of the ways that strategies of protest in art changed between the early and later phases of the Vietnam War.

Chapter Four introduces the question of subjectivity in vision. While there had always been performative aspects embedded in Antin’s Conceptual art, starting in 1973 the artist turned her attention almost exclusively to modes of performance. I examine Antin’s use of performance in a series of personae she invented between 1972 and 1977, characters she calls her “selves.” Antin inhabited these selves—a king, a ballerina, and two nurses—interchangeably, depicting their adventures through drawing, writing, photography, videotape, film, and live performance. I argue that in this body of work Antin put spectatorship on view, thereby continuing to address many of the concerns that were operative in her Conceptualist practice and further contributing to the evolution of art informed by postmodernist feminism. I emphasize the ways in which the selves were structured around different kinds of vulnerability, which I relate to the sense of political disillusionment that marked the post Vietnam War era in America. In an epilogue I turn to the self who Antin occupied from 1979–1987, Eleanora Antinova, the African American ballerina in Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. Antinova serves as the final lens through which I examine the central issues of this dissertation, extending its field of vision into the 1980s.

*
“Roles Recast: Eleanor Antin and the 1970s” is the first book-length study on Antin. My aim in this project is not to offer a comprehensive view of the artist’s practice from the last fifty years, but rather to use her work to complicate the art historical narratives that have arisen around the 1970s, which also functions to shed new light on more recent and contemporary art. Despite the historical importance of Antin’s work and the influence it has had on several generations of successful artists, her practice has not received the scholarly attention it deserves: the literature consists primarily of exhibition catalogue essays, reviews, and interviews. The two substantive critical texts on Antin are both chapters in multi-artist books. In “Rewriting the Script: Eleanor Antin’s Artwork,” in *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity*, Lisa Bloom traces Antin’s references to her Jewish ethnicity in her work from the 1970s through the 1990s. In “The Other ‘Other’: Eleanor Antin and the Performance of Blackness,” in *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith*, Cherise Smith also addresses the influence of Antin’s Jewish identity in her work. Smith examines Antin’s multiple performances as Eleanora Antinova, and makes the provocative claim that for Antin the performance of blackness

---


was a way to “distinguish herself from whiteness and to reclaim her ethnic Jewish identity.” While I agree with Bloom and Smith that Antin’s ethnicity informs her work in key ways—indeed throughout the project I draw on their work—neither Antin’s ethnicity nor her engagements with race are the focus of my analysis.

As much as my dissertation relies on certain theoretical models, it is grounded in rigorous object study and extensive archival research. Using an integrated methodology has enabled me to situate Antin’s work within its historical and art historical contexts, while arguing for its broader political implications. The Eleanor Antin papers, 1953–2010 became publicly accessible at the Getty Research Institute in July 2012 and I am the first scholar to consult them. This opportunity has considerably deepened my understanding of Antin’s art. Her correspondence shows with which artists and curators Antin engaged and how; these materials illuminate Antin’s political investments and reveal the ways her early frustrations with art institutions shaped her exhibition and distribution strategies. The unpublished writings, interviews, and notebooks I encountered in Antin’s archive helped me understand the evolution of the particular works that give shape to my dissertation.

---


19 The Woman’s Building records, 1970–1992, and The Henri Gallery records, circa early 1900s, 1940–1996, both housed at the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Art, were also crucial to my understanding of the context in which Antin’s art emerged.
To understand why Antin’s critical reception has been limited we might turn to an essay written by David Antin on Robert Morris. In “Have Mind Will Travel” the author disparages what he calls “biographical recuperative criticism,” criticism strained by the pressure to make sense of the apparent discontinuities and paradoxes that unfold over the course of an artist’s career.20 He surmises that critics who capitulate to this pressure tend to prefer “persistence” in an artist’s practice, for it is persistence that both yields a “trademark, proclaiming the artist’s property rights” and “operates as an assurance of authenticity.”21 David Antin notes that a “relation of ownership that is established through persistence of use eventually becomes self-defining. So that an artist will come to be defined by the idea he or she owns, and the idea by its artist owner. In this sense having an idea is a little like having a dog. A Doberman owner is clearly a quite different person from someone who owns a Jack Russell terrier.”22 Eleanor Antin has many dogs in her yard. Her lack of “persistence,” in the sense that David Antin uses the term, makes it difficult if not impossible to place her in the existing categories and roles that typically guide our understanding of art history. It is largely for this reason that Antin has been, if not overlooked, then not fully seen. Accordingly, I have found that a study of Antin’s work of the 1970s demands, as my title announces, that roles be recast.


22 Ibid., 100.
CONCEPTUALIST SUBJECTS

A grid of 148 five-by-seven-inch black and white photographs extends across twenty-three feet of a gallery wall. The grid is made up of thirty-seven vertical rows each comprised of four photographs that show a nude woman from the front, back, and left and right sides, respectively. The background for each image is a door against which the woman stands. The door repeats the rectangular frame of the image, making that frame central to the image’s contents. Because the woman stands with her feet firmly planted on the floor in front of the door, an architectural space is introduced. Given the point of view from which each image is shot, this space is shared by the woman and her spectator, and, obstructing the door, the woman blocks the spectator’s hypothetical exit. Altogether, the 148 images map the woman’s eleven-pound weight loss, which was the result of a diet she undertook for a period of thirty-eight days. Each day of the diet (except one when the woman was traveling) is represented by one of the vertical rows; time advances in a left-to-right progression.\(^\text{1}\) This is Eleanor Antin’s *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) (figs. 1.1 & 1.2). *Carving*’s text panel informs the viewer that the images document the progress of the woman, played by the artist, as she “carves” away her fat to reveal the “ideal form” within her. I write “played by the artist” because this work is not about Antin’s personal struggle with weight; rather she is a stand-in, or surrogate for, a female subject more generally. As she progresses toward this ideal, accumulating days and

---

\(^{1}\) The missing day is August 7, 1972. Martina Batan to Madeleine Grynsztejn, February 28, 1996, The Art Institute of Chicago, Department of Contemporary Art curatorial files.
expanding the work as she does so, the woman gets physically smaller: the flesh that had at first made her stomach bulge in profile disappears; the curvy outline of her silhouette straightens out. This progressive reduction unfolds as the spectator traverses the work’s extensive progression of images.

Antin incorporates into *Carving* a range of art historical references that spans two millennia—from ancient Greek and Italian Renaissance sculpture to early photography and film, to Minimalist and Conceptualist artistic conventions. This palimpsest of references figures a weighty history that rests on the shrinking woman’s shoulders, as well as her breasts, hips, thighs, and other body parts. At stake in the work are the ways that visually administered cultural and aesthetic standards, including systems of measurement and evaluation, frame and diminish the embodied female subject.²

*Carving* was first exhibited in a solo show that Antin organized and named (with her tongue in her cheek) *Traditional Art: ‘Painting,’ ‘Sculpture,’ ‘Drawing.’* What was misunderstood in *Carving*’s original reception—in part because of Antin’s rhetoric surrounding the work—is that the primary target of *Carving*’s intervention was not classical or even modernist art paradigms, but rather paradigms more recently

² It is worth noting that a similar work was produced across the country in New York, in 1971 by Adrian Piper. In Piper’s *Food for the Spirit* the artist documents herself over the course of a summer during which she was purportedly “doing nothing else but studying and writing a paper [on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*], doing yoga, and fasting.” Piper explains: “to anchor myself in the physical world, I ritualized my frequent contacts with the physical appearance of myself in the mirror.” The final work consists of a series of fourteen Polaroid photographs (later editioned as larger prints) that shows Piper, nude and expressionless, staring straight ahead with a camera in her hand—clearly the author of the images. Like *Carving, Food for the Spirit* holds a western patriarchal aesthetic, symbolized by Kant, accountable for the literal diminution over time of an embodied female subject. Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 1:55.
established: those of Conceptual art and Minimalism. Carving was a feminist intervention into Conceptualism and Minimalism as its terms were established by the movements’ earliest practitioners.

The Conceptualist paradigm, which emerged in the early 1960s in the work of such artists as Dan Graham, Sol LeWitt, and Lawrence Weiner, was founded on challenges to some fundamental aesthetic assumptions, namely that visuality had to be the primary sphere in which art operated, that the work of art was unique and irreproducible and could only be experienced in the privileged space of a gallery or museum, and that the artist’s hand endowed the work of art with special meaning. In order to subvert these conventions, early Conceptual artists developed several key strategies: they used language as a primary medium (so that the “viewer” became a “reader”); they eschewed traditional artistic materials such as oil paint, canvas, bronze, and marble; they rendered the process of production transparent; and they often circulated their work in reproducible media such as photographs, books, and magazines. Some of these tactics are evident in Lawrence Weiner’s A 36” x 36” Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard From a Wall (1968) in which the artistic gesture is supplanted by a basic act of labor, which is described in the title so as to remove any mystery from the creative process (fig. 1.3). Antin draws on Conceptualism’s basic

---

3 This argument challenges Amelia Jones’s contention that body art in the 1970s was a response to Jackson Pollock’s “drip-painting persona.” While I agree with Jones that the “position of Pollock” was “an integral moment in the articulation of a postmodernist mode performative subjectivity,” I would argue that much of the body-based art informed by feminism produced in the 1970s was responding to more recent art than that of Pollock. Jones, Body Art/Performing the Subject (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 84, 67.
tenets. However, whereas in many cases first generation Conceptualists disregarded the body, *Carving* foregrounds the body in ways that I will soon unpack.\(^4\)

Alongside Conceptual art, Minimalism was emerging in the work of Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, and Donald Judd. These artists were also proponents of the idea that their work did not have to come from their own hands, but could be made according to instructions by a fabricator. Minimalism privileged standard geometric forms—as opposed to more subjectively conjured forms that might suggest a narrative—and serial repetition, so that a work materialized according to the logic of, in Judd’s words, “one thing after another.”\(^5\) As opposed to many first generation Conceptual artists, for the most part Minimalist artists took the body into account, and their work was structured around a relationship between the artwork, its surrounding space, and the viewer’s presence. Still, even though Minimalist art was often concerned with the fact of a spectator’s body in space, it tended not to consider the characteristics that determined that body’s subjectivity; it tended, that is, to ignore the ways that gender, race, sexual orientation, class, psychology, and ideology affect how viewing subjects navigate and perceive the world they physically occupy, imagining instead a universal, abstract spectator.\(^6\) An

\(^4\) Dan Graham’s Conceptualist practice, some of which was grounded in performance and phenomenology, is an important exception to this assertion.


\(^6\) In his critique of Rosalind Krauss’s *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Craig Owens argues that in order for modernist myths to be “unmasked” those myths must be analyzed on “ideological grounds.” Owens, “Analysis Logical and Ideological,” in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Stewart Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 268–283.
example of Minimalism’s preoccupations and oversights is found in Andre’s *144 Lead Square* (1969) in which 144 lead squares of industrial standard size lie next to each other on the floor, creating the larger square form (fig. 1.4). This work, like all of Andre’s floor pieces, is meant to be walked on, which produces both sound and haptic feedback for its spectators, who at once not only see, but also hear and feel the art with which they engage. Furthermore, there is a reciprocal relationship between Andre’s art and its spectators, for the spectators leave traces of their physical presence—footprints, scratches, and scuffs—on the lead (or zinc, or copper) that they traverse, marking the art with evidence of time and use. The spectator, then, is integral to the meaning of *144 Lead Square*, but just as a body. *Carving*, by contrast, examines not only the physical, but also the psychic experience of spectatorship, investigating in particular the ways in which vision is mediated by desire.

Central to the subjectivity on view in *Carving* are the dynamics of spectatorship that the work as a whole instantiates. *Carving* must be interpreted in light of the relationship it establishes with its spectators—spectators who are understood not merely as bodies in space, but rather as subjects with desires that are activated by what they *look at*. The desiring spectator is vulnerable. She occupies a precarious position because she is constituted by needs that, in her state of desire, have not been met. Furthermore, the position of the desiring spectator has implications for the images at which she looks: since desire is motivated by lack, desiring spectatorship implies that images are not complete in and of themselves; as opposed to being self-sufficient—or *autonomous* in Modernist parlance—images are contingent both on the wider social and political sphere to which they belong and on the viewer who consumes them. Images, then, like the
spectators who consume them, are precarious objects. By centering on desiring spectatorship, Carving offers an expanded conception of vision.

My emphasis on Carving’s critique of vision challenges the essentialism/social constructionism binary that has historically been used to distinguish art informed by feminism of the 1970s from that of the 1980s. Typically, this binary is predicated on a distinction between the material presence or absence of the body in a work of art, and it is often argued that there is an inverse relation between the presence of the body and theoretical rigor. In 1982 Mary Kelly stated that “most women artists who have presented themselves in some way, visibly, in the work have been unable to find the distancing devices which would cut across the predominant representations of woman as object of the look or question the notion of femininity as a pre-given entity.” The body/theory dichotomy was prominently featured in October’s “Feminist Issues” special issue of 1995. The journal began with a questionnaire that put forward a distinction between “recent feminist art and critical practices” that “develop ideas, arguments, and forms related to 1980s feminist theories focusing on psychoanalysis, a critique of Marxist and related political theories, and poststructuralist theories of cultural identity” and those that “return to 1960s and ‘70s feminist practices centering on a less mediated iconographic and performative use of the female body.” While there are many examples of works,

7 “No Essential Femininity: A Conversation between Mary Kelly and Paul Smith,” Parachute 37, no. 26 (Spring 1982); reprinted in Mary Kelly, Imaging Desire (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 67. For a critique of Kelly’s opposition to the use of the female body in art, see Amelia Jones, Body Art: Performing the Subject, 22–29.

both within and outside of the 1970s, that use the body without reflecting on the issues its material presence raises, Carving shows that such oversight is not inherent in the body as medium; rather, it reveals that the body, as one in a constellation of terms, can catalyze the very distancing devices and questions for which Kelly calls. Carving, then, supports Judith Butler’s argument that “the options for theory are not exhausted by presuming materiality, on the one hand, and negating materiality, on the other.”

In her 2006 essay “House Work and Art Work” Helen Molesworth offers an astute challenge to the essentialism/social constructionism binary, pointing to the ways it has stymied a diversity of feminist art historical narratives and maintained fantasies of teleological progress that feminist politics have worked to undermine. As an alternative to this framework, Molesworth suggests designating new terms through which previously segregated artworks can be considered in tandem: she uses the politics of labor to put in conversation work by Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly, Mierle Laderman-Ukeles, and Martha Rosler. Yet Molesworth facilitates a disregard for the distinctions between works associated with each side of the binary she rightly critiques, a disregard that can lead to a misunderstanding that art informed by feminism is a unitary field. In other words, the

Rosalyn Deutsche, Joanna Drucker, Liz Kotz, Adrian Piper, Yvonne Rainer, and Arlene Raven, challenged the survey’s chronological framework.


challenge to a stifling binary in art informed by feminism cannot be at the cost of
disavowing feminist differences. For (art informed by) feminism to remain politically
vital it must accommodate difference, conflict, and contestation. Instead of minimizing
the differences between the two sides of the essentialism/social constructionism binary, I
prefer to locate works that evade an either/or logic, figuring instead a both/and hybrid
along the lines of Elizabeth Grosz’s demand that “in the face of social constructionism,
the body’s tangibility, its matter, its (quasi) nature may be invoked; but in opposition to
essentialism, biologism, and naturalism, it is the body as cultural product that must be
stressed.” Rather than displaying the body as undisputed matter, Carving presents a
body whose materiality is mediated and literally contoured by a kaleidoscope of high art
and vernacular image regimes. The body depicted in Carving—like the images that
depict it—is vulnerable to, constructed by the world it inhabits. Carving does not
rehearse but criticizes those constructions, primarily through the mode of spectatorship it
calls forth.

---

11 This argument is informed by radical democracy theory and especially the notion of
agonistic pluralism put forward by Chantal Mouffé. I address this theoretical framework
in depth in Chapter Two.

12 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Australia: Allen &
Bodies were the source of Antin’s first mature work, *Blood of A Poet Box* (1965–68) (figs. 1.5 & 1.6). Antin pricked the fingers and drew the blood of one hundred poets and artists with whom she was friendly. She deposited the samples on three-by-one-inch microscopic glass slides, which she labeled with the name of the donor and the date, and filed in a commercially manufactured slender green wood box. One side of the box holds the slides, each fitted into a numbered slot, a centimeter apart. Seen all together, the slides present a serialized array of abstract spots, smudges, and stains, which formally are visual puns on the painterly mark. The other side of the box contains a list of names, written in laboriously tidy penmanship that indicates the identities of the blood donors; the names are numbered to match their corresponding blood samples.

For Antin, the word “poet” designates not simply a writer associated with a particular literary genre, but rather an art producer whose work she admires. Therefore she included visual artists and performers in her green slide box alongside the writers. With blood donors that included Allen Ginsberg, Allan Kaprow, Allison Knowles, Jackson MacLow, Yvonne Rainer, Jerome Rothenberg, and Carolee Schneemann, *Blood*

---


*of a Poet Box* presents a group portrait of a particular New York cultural milieu of which Antin was a part.\(^{15}\) Periodically, throughout the work, blood samples cluster around a particular date. This creates a social diary of sorts, suggesting who was spending time with whom, and when.\(^ {16}\) Indeed, Antin has related some of the artists in *Blood of a Poet Box* to her artistic formation in New York in the 1960s: “we used to go to everything at Judson [Dance Theater]—everyone was there, from Yvonne Rainer to Carolee Schneemann. All these artists! And critics, too.”\(^ {17}\) She recalls meeting “the new generation of artists and critics, Vito [Acconci], John Perreault, Joanie Jonas, the early conceptualists, different Fluxus people, like George Maciunas, Jeff and Bici Hendricks…And Alison Knowles and Dick Higgins.”\(^ {18}\)

*Blood of a Poet Box* is clearly related to the form of the Fluxkit, initiated by George Maciunas in 1964 (fig. 1.7). The first Fluxkit was a box that stored objects, visual art, and texts by thirty-nine artists, some of whom were characterized as Fluxus artists

\(^{15}\) For details related to the process by which Antin collected the blood samples that comprise *Blood of a Poet Box*, see “Oral history interview with Eleanor Antin,” May 8–9, 2009, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

\(^{16}\) The aleatory nature of the work’s premise—the artist will sample the blood of 100 poets as she encounters them—recalls such projects as Ed Ruscha’s *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963) and Andy Warhol’s *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* (1964). For more on the legacy of aleatory sampling in work by Ruscha and Warhol, see Benjamin Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 121.

\(^{17}\) Howard N. Fox, “A Dialogue with Eleanor Antin,” in *Eleanor Antin*, ed. Howard N. Fox (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999), 197.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 199–200.
(and a handful of whom relinquished their blood for Antin’s work). Many artists quickly took up this form, filling boxes with materials that included not only performance instructions, event scores, and puzzles, but also materials more oriented toward the body, such as food, plugs for bodily orifices and, in the case of Maciunas’s later Fluxkits, animal feces. Antin, then, was not alone in incorporating the indexical trace into the Fluxkit. In 1965 Robert Watts made *Fingerprint*, a small plastic box, which holds a single fingerprint on a smooth plaster surface, and Robert Filliou’s *Hand show* (1967) is a wood box that stores the handprints of twenty-five artists. Several artists who offered the impressions of their hands to Filliou gave blood to Antin.

As mentioned, *Blood of a Poet Box*’s individual blood samples evoke the painterly mark. Significantly, the blood displacing the paint stroke belonged specifically to artists who, in the wake of John Cage, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol, were positioning themselves and their practices in direct opposition to the values at the core of Abstract Expressionism: the fantasy that the artist possesses a genius that can be unlocked through time spent in a secluded studio; the fetishization of the gestures produced in that studio by using materials detached from everyday life; the celebration of autonomous artistic objects; and the belief that art engages a universal subject.

---

19 Marcel Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Green Box)* (1934) and his *Boîte-en-Valise* (1935–41) are clear precedents for the Fluxkit. Indeed, Antin too had Duchamp in mind when she purchased her green box for *Blood of a Poet Box*.

20 Hannah Higgins has argued that one of Fluxus’s artistic innovations was to frame vision within a wider range of corporeal experience. Specifically, writes Higgins, “the Fluxkit produces sensate forms of knowledge.” Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 37.
When Antin made *Blood of a Poet Box* she had recently abandoned what she would later describe as her “fifth or sixth generation” Abstract Expressionist painting.\(^{21}\)

As if to finalize this departure, in *Blood of a Poet Box* Antin skewers Abstract Expressionist ideology. If the artist as icon was central to Abstract Expressionist mythology, in Antin’s hands, mythic flesh becomes anonymous blood, which is to say that immediately recognizable icons are converted into abstract indices linked to the bodies from which they came only through labels. The blood of the best-known poet in the box, Allen Ginsberg, is rendered indistinguishable from that of the lesser-known poets. Greatness, it seems, does not reside in—or at least is not entirely determined by—DNA.\(^{22}\) In treating skeptically the fantasy that the artist is naturally endowed with awesome powers, Antin pays homage to *Blood of A Poet Box*’s namesake, Jean Cocteau’s surrealist film *Le Sang d’un Poète* (Blood of a Poet) (1930). Cocteau’s film parodies the idealized artist through exaggeration, most notably in the famous scene when the artist-protagonist discovers that he has magical powers, which enable him to animate a canvas with his line and awaken a centuries-old sculpture with his touch.

In the middle to late 1960s in the United States Antin was not alone in foregrounding the corporeally unremarkable condition of the artist. Bruce Nauman’s

\(^{21}\) “Oral history interview with Eleanor Antin.”

\(^{22}\) In 1971 Linda Nochlin argued that artistic greatness is a social construction in her essay “Why Have Their Been No Great Women Artists?” *ARTnews* 69, no. 9 (January 1971); reprinted in *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 145–178. Antin was one of eight women artists invited to respond to Nochlin’s essay in the issue of *ARTnews* where it was first published. Antin, “Women Without Pathos,” *ARTnews* 69, no. 9 (January 1971): 45.
photograph *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966) is a double-negative print that overlaps two images of the artist’s body in alternate states: suspended between two folding chairs in what we deduce is the artist’s best effort at levitation and on the ground (fig. 1.8). As opposed to the idealist myth of artistic transcendence Nauman shows that even at the site of his creative production the artist is subject to the laws of gravity. A similar lesson is demonstrated in Vito Acconci’s photographic series *Fall* (1969), which documents the result of the artist following his own instructions: “Holding a camera, aimed away from me and ready to shoot, while falling forward. Lose my balance: Snap photo 1. Fall down and hit the ground: Snap photo 2.” Both works show an artist’s body that is contingent on—at the mercy of—the physical world it inhabits, which stands for a conviction central to the practices of Nauman and Acconci: that the artwork is dependent on the social world it inhabits.

Each work by Antin, Nauman, and Acconci employs a ludic sensibility that bears traces of Duchampian wit and the physical humor of Samuel Beckett (informed as it was by that of Buster Keaton) crossed with Yvonne Rainer’s deadpan task-based choreography and Fluxus’s sense of play. If the projects by Nauman and Acconci veer toward slapstick, *Blood of a Poet Box* is shaped by an aesthetics of absurdist pseudo-science, which Antin would continue to explore as she built and honed her Conceptualist practice. Why, at this moment in history, were some of the most advanced and influential artists working in an American context driven to develop these ludic embodied practices? What was at stake in making the body a site of play?

Play can be a tool to evade official rules. This dimension of play is the focus of Mikhail Bakhtin’s analysis of the Carnival period—the weeks preceding Lent in the
Christian calendar—in Renaissance Europe, which opens onto his wider theory of the social and political implications of laughter. For Bakhtin, Carnival was marked by the “temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank,” which freed its participants “from norms of etiquette and decency imposed in other times.” Bakhtin’s conception of Carnival laughter, grounded in the elusion of rules, has been foundational to a number of interesting theories and projects related to radical humor. To my thinking, however, the mode of subversion that Bakhtin identifies is of limited political value because it arises in a temporally and spatially bounded sphere, indeed, it was arguably provided as a steam-valve to keep the rest of the year in order.

More important for my purposes is the sort of impact Michel Foucault attributes to play in the first paragraph of *The Order of the Things*. The book’s preface starts with Foucault’s response to Jorge Luis Borges’ parody of epistemology in his account of “a certain Chinese Encyclopedia,” which divides animals into fourteen absurd categories. Foucault explains, “this book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with


24 The project that is most relevant in this context is Joanna Isaak’s 1985 exhibition *The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter* at the Queens Museum of Art in New York. For retrospective reflections on this show, see Isaak ed., *Laughter Ten Years After* (New York: Hobart and William Smith Colleges Press, 1995).
collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and Other.” As opposed to the circumscribed potency of Carnival’s “temporary suspension…of hierarchical rank,” play in Foucault’s assessment has the capacity to dismantle categories of thought. This incites a laughter that is endowed with nothing short of physical force—it shatters, breaks, disturbs, and threatens official culture.

Presenting the artist’s body in play, Antin, Nauman, and Acconci challenge the aesthetic ideology that there is an official artistic body that is the home of creative greatness. More broadly, in other works, they disrupt the fiction of a coherent, authoritative subject by presenting the self as inherently fractured and in a perpetual state of precarity. This activity is related to Conceptual art’s objective of radically decentering the artist, a project in which Nauman and Acconci were deeply invested. As we shall see, for Antin, deflating the coherent self and rendering it precarious led to an exploration of a vast range of subjects and subjectivities in the multiple personae—or “selves”—she invented and inhabited starting in 1972, the same year she made Carving.

---

...it is obvious that the logic of the space of postmodernist practice is no longer organized around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material, or, for that matter, the perception of material. It is organized instead through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation.

-Rosalind Krauss

Following *Blood of a Poet Box*, Antin continued to engage the body of the artist; soon after she finished extracting the blood of poets, she began whittling her own flesh.

She had originally intended *Carving* to be displayed at the Whitney Museum as part of its Annual Exhibition of American Sculpture, a showcase that alternated each year with the museum’s Annual Exhibition of American Painting. In a draft of a letter to Marcia Tucker from the period when Tucker was a curator at the Whitney, Antin wrote:

> There is one work especially I thought you might be interested in for the Whitney Annual. It’s a large sculpture I call CARVING. It consists of photographic documentation...of my unclothed body in the process of ‘carving’ down during a strict regimen of dieting and exercise....The piece is actually carried out technically in the manner of archaic and classical Greek sculpture which proceeded to peel small layers off an overall body image until the image was gradually refined to the point of aesthetic satisfaction. While I may have a different aesthetic for the female body than Greek sculpture exhibited for the Korai I think the work articulates the aesthetics of carving as a sculptural mode.

In an interview with Cindy Nemser from 1975 Antin explained that *Carving’s* evocation of traditional sculpture was a response to what she considered the fundamentally “traditional” nature of an exhibition organized around medium

---


categories. The staff at the Whitney was also coming to this conclusion, and in 1973 the museum ceased its alternating annual exhibitions of painting and sculpture and initiated instead a model of biennial mixed media exhibitions, which remains in place to this day. The Whitney was not interested in exhibiting Carving in its 1972 Annual because, according to Antin, the curators did not consider the work sculpture. Nearly three decades later, however, in 2000, Carving would hang on the Whitney’s walls as part of the survey exhibition The American Century: Art and Culture 1900-2000.

In the meantime, as already mentioned, Carving had its debut in 1972 in an exhibition that Antin organized, Traditional Art: ‘Painting,’ ‘Sculpture,’ ‘Drawing,’ which traveled from the Orlando Gallery in Encino, California to the Henri Gallery in Washington, D.C. Carving was exhibited alongside Representational Painting (1971) and Domestic Peace (1971–72). Representational Painting, which marked the artist’s first use of videotape, consists of a thirty-eight minute silent, black-and-white, single, continuous, close-range shot that shows Antin, clad in jeans and a bra, putting on make-

---


29 Although I do not doubt Antin’s recollection, in the correspondence I located between Antin and Tucker I did not find evidence that this was the Whitney’s stated reason for rejecting the work.

30 An expanded version of Traditional Art: ‘Painting,’ ‘Sculpture,’ ‘Drawing,’ titled More Traditional Art, was exhibited at the Northwood Experimental Art Institute in Dallas, Texas in 1973.

31 It is unclear whether any additional works were included in this show. One review suggests that a videotape now known as The King (1972) may have been featured under a different name, while other reviews do not mention this work. I have not been able to locate a checklist or press release for the show and the artist has no documentation that would resolve this uncertainty.
up (fig. 1.9). In the context of *Traditional Art* the make-up is Antin’s paint, her face the canvas. The video opens with Antin priming her canvas, applying moisturizer to her face. After ten minutes the painting begins and continues for nearly half an hour, interrupted only when the artist takes drags from a cigarette or pauses to assess her work-in-progress, which is reflected back to her on the video monitor. These pauses are notably long and it seems pointed that Antin is in no rush to satisfy the viewer with the finished product. Antin appears tense and even awkward as she applies her make-up. While the unnaturalness to her gestures fits the work’s meaning, it was actually the result of a technical miscalculation: when she planned to use her video monitor as a mirror Antin had not realized she would be looking at her own image in reverse, this being the first time she had used the medium of video. Thus the artist’s experience of being estranged from herself sets the mood for *Representational Painting*. Antin’s physical awkwardness continues up until the final moments of the video. After she is apparently satisfied with her painting, Antin stands up, takes off her bra, puts on a white button down shirt and uncomfortably attempts to strike a pose—she keeps tucking and untucking her shirt, she slouches, finally performing a physical discomfort that diminishes the viewer’s pleasure in consuming the painted image. While *Carving* played on sculpture, and *Representational Painting* joked with painting, *Domestic Peace* teased drawing; this work, which I address at length in the next chapter, is comprised of fifteen pages of hand-rendered graphs made by the artist to record the daily tensions between herself and her mother while she, her husband and their young son, Blaise, stayed at her mother’s home for an extended period of time (fig. 1.10).
Collectively, *Carving, Representational Painting, and Domestic Peace* formed a project that the artist described at the time as “a re-investigation of art history and methodology by redefining the old terms so precisely as to throw new and relevant light and, in fact, make them useful again.”\(^{32}\) As Antin wrote to Henrietta Ehrsam, one of the gallerists hosting *Traditional Art*, the works “are part of my on-going series of explorations into the real nature of the standard traditional genres.”\(^{33}\) The exhibition received moderate attention in the art press, garnering assessments that were at best descriptive and at worst dismissive.\(^{34}\)

It is true that in 1972, as Peter Plagens noted in his review of *Traditional Art*, it was not novel to challenge the classical terms of painting, sculpture, and drawing, either through individual works or a curatorial premise.\(^{35}\) Two years earlier Kynaston McShine had organized the important exhibition *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art (in which Antin was not included), explaining in his catalogue essay that one of the primary aims of the artists in his show was “to extend the idea of art, to renew the definition, and to think beyond the traditional categories—painting, sculpture, drawing, printmaking, photography, film, theater, music, dance, and poetry.”\(^{36}\) McShine’s curatorial premise


\(^{35}\) Plagens, “Reviews,” 89.

should be considered in tandem with Dick Higgins’s 1966 text “Intermedia,” in which the Fluxus artist averred, “the concept of the separation between media arose in the Renaissance…. However, the social problems that characterize our time…no longer allow a compartmentalized approach…each work determines its own form and medium according to its needs.”

Looking back at this moment, Branden Joseph has argued that for artists taking up John Cage’s legacy, such as Dick Higgins and his fellow Fluxus artists, “the very idea of producing an ‘advanced’ work seemed to imply precisely that the question of a work’s status—the disciplinary, institutional place of the work of art or music—almost necessarily had to come into play.”

Antin was hardly ignorant of this wider field of advanced art practice. In Carving, however, although she refers most explicitly to Renaissance ideals that others had already laid to rest, it was more recent—almost contemporary—artistic “traditions” that she challenged: the philosophy and politics of Conceptual art and Minimalism. The feminist dimension of Antin’s Traditional Art also distinguishes it from contemporaneous works that challenged classical artistic conventions. Plagens, however, does not take this aspect of the project into account except for his hostile observation that Representational Painting “has some poignancy because of the Women’s Movement (i.e., ‘Omigod, look what we’ve put the

---


poor creatures through,’ etc.) and because of Antin’s beautiful, sorrowful face on the screen.”

*Carving*’s text panel facetiously likens Antin’s method of carving to that of ancient Greek sculptors by means of a quote from art historian Carl Bluemel: “the Greek sculptor worked at his block from all four sides and carved away one thin layer after another….He never worked just at a leg, an arm or a head, but kept the whole in view, and at every stage of the work the figure itself was a whole.” And in the same statement, invoking Michelangelo’s conception of sculptural carving, Antin notes that “two considerations determine the conclusion of a work: (1) the ideal image toward which the artist aspires, and (2) the limitations of the material. As our great predecessor [Michelangelo] once said…‘not even the greatest sculptor can make anything that isn’t already inside the marble.’” Given their farfetched nature, these analogies add levity to the work; at the same time, by their association of sculptural carving with dieting, the cornerstones of western aesthetic history—and in particular their celebration of plenitude and essential beauty—are implicated in the production and maintenance of contemporary body ideals.

Unlike the myth of Pygmalion, in which sculpting ultimately animates a woman’s body, in Antin’s hands sculpting objectifies the animate subject. We can think of *Carving*’s subject-turned-object through the lens of another myth in the annals of Greek

---

39 Plagens, “Reviews,” 89.

40 In “Pygmalion,” Ovid’s ninth century tale of metamorphosis, the eponymous Greek sculptor is granted his wish when the statue he has made of ivory turns to a woman of flesh.
history, that of Medusa. Some of the gravest scopic exchanges in ancient Greece apparently occurred between Medusa and her onlookers. As the story goes, anyone who came into Medusa’s purview was turned to stone—she was herself a dangerous sculptress of sorts—until Medusa’s powers were turned against her by Perseus. In his essay “The Medusa Effect, or, The Specular Ruse,” Craig Owens argues that the myth of Medusa evokes not only sculptural production but also photography. Recounting the climax of the myth when Perseus slays Medusa, Owens writes:

> using his shield as a mirror, he [Perseus] reflected the deadly gaze back upon itself, whereupon Medusa was *immediately*—or so the narrative proposes—petrified. The myth’s central episode is almost proto-photographic; it seems to describe that split-second in which vision bends back upon itself to produce its own imprint. Perseus inserts Medusa into a closed system, a relation of identity between seer and seen….Thus Medusa is transformed into an image, inserted into the order of designation.  

The double entendre of mediums that Owens draws out from the myth of Medusa is central to *Carving*, for the work displays a body that is twice frozen: the first freeze is implied through Antin’s analogy between a body starved and a sculpture carved; the second freeze is literal—it happens when her camera’s shutter clicks and a picture is made. Furthermore the violent vision that marks the myth of Medusa makes the myth a useful touchstone for analyzing *Carving*’s critique of vision.

*Carving*’s morphology evokes Eadweard Muybridge’s late nineteenth century experiments with stop-motion photography to show otherwise invisible processes embedded in physical acts such as walking, running, jumping, and descending stairs (fig. 1.11). While Antin was referring to this groundbreaking moment in the history of

---

photography, she was also incorporating Muybridge as he was mediated by an artistic model much closer to her own time: Judson Dance Theater. In her discussion of the importance of Muybridge’s photography to art of the 1960s, Carrie Lambert-Beatty notes “a quality of suspension” in Muybridge’s images that was useful to the dancers and choreographers associated with Judson—Yvonne Rainer in particular—whose work aimed “to make unstylized physical activity more than usually visible” (fig. 1.12). Also linking time and visibility in the work of the Judson Dance Theater, Annette Michelson wrote in 1969 that the Judson performers “distended the arena of organized movement, installing within the dance situation a real or operational time, redefining it as a situation within which an action may take the time it takes to perform that action.” The importance of the Judson precedent to Antin’s practice was indicated in no uncertain terms in 2004 when Antin selected “various performances, 1965–1967” by the Judson Dance Theater as her contribution to the exhibition Artists’ Favourites, curated by Jens Hoffmann at the ICA in London. Of her choice Antin explains, “at Judson Dance Theater, the new works were as exciting as the newest Antonioni film or the most recent Fluxus concert or the latest Dylan album. Yvonne Rainer, Robert Morris, Lucinda Childs, Carolee Schneemann, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, their work had a glamorous colloquialism that enchanted us. The Judson Dancers were transforming the dance language, extending the vocabulary to include running, walking, freezing, breathing, 

---


talking and shouting.” In its conception and demonstration of embodied work and its use of “operational time,” Carving draws on Judson’s choreographic paradigm and crosses it with overt feminist politics. That is, Carving deploys visual dissection and transparency not to reveal the mechanics of a physical activity, but rather to expose the work that lies behind the attainment of a culturally-determined gendered physical ideal.

For Antin, the Muybridge “quality of suspension” offered an alternative to the phantasmatic before-after diptych pervasive in popular magazines, which uses only two photographs to show a body before and after it has been altered in some manner. The latter is the convention Andy Warhol cites in his painting Before and After (1961), which is based on a nose job advertisement that promises to make its would-be-consumer’s physiognomy appear less Jewish (fig. 1.13). Counter to this convention, Carving’s 148 photographs ask the spectator to consider the labor of the subject’s diet one painstaking pound at a time. In both Carving and Representational Painting the tedium imposed on

---


the spectator mimics the tedium experienced by the object of spectatorship.\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Carving}, then, reveals a concern with the nature and stakes of artistic labor, which as recent scholarship has demonstrated, was a crucial site of transformation for American art in the 1960s and 1970s.\textsuperscript{47} On the heels of Judson’s task-based dance, artists working within a Conceptual art paradigm began producing task-based work in which they would document themselves, usually with film, photography, or videotape, carrying out a self-assigned exercise. For example, in Nauman’s film \textit{Bouncing Two Balls Between the Floor and the Ceiling with Changing Rhythms} (1967–68) the artist bounces two balls in his studio attempting (and failing) to sustain a particular pattern for ten minutes. Soon after Nauman made this work, Acconci, in \textit{Step Piece} (1970), stepped on and off a stool every morning at a rate of thirty steps per minute for as long as possible during a designated period of time. Chris Burden enacted more extreme tests of physical endurance in such works as \textit{Through the Night Softly} (1973) when he skidded on his stomach—nearly naked, with his hands tied behind his back—across fifty feet of broken glass in a parking lot and recorded the action on videotape.

In \textit{Carving} and \textit{Representational Painting}, Antin introduces the question of sexual difference into task-based art. In 1975 David Antin wrote of task-based video from

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[46] When \textit{Representational Painting} debuted, Benjamin Forgey described the work’s duration as “a long 40 minutes, even for so interesting a face.” Forgey, “Conceptual Shows Blossom Here.”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
the late 1960s and early 1970s, “the work ends whenever its intention is accomplished.”

Helen Molesworth offers a feminist counterpoint to this observation when she notes that in task-based work grounded in domestic labor, such as mothering and home maintenance, as depicted by artists Martha Rosler and Mary Kelly, since these tasks are never done, a sense of endlessness shapes the works’ affective register. Molesworth also contrasts *Carving* to the task-based works that David Antin addresses, arguing that as opposed to the “putatively nonideological manner” in which these male Conceptual artists carried out their tests of physical endurance, in *Carving* “the managerial impulse to document and survey is shown to permeate women’s lives differently, bound as it is to the production of women’s bodies as a consumable commodity.”

In 1966 Sol LeWitt, one of the founders of Conceptual Art, wrote “Serial Project #1, 1966” and “Paragraphs on Conceptual art” (both published in 1967) in which he outlined ideas about permutational seriality that were central to his practice. In the first text he explained that “the serial artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions merely as a clerk cataloguing the results of his


49 Helen Molesworth, “Work Ethic,” 44.

50 Ibid., 132–133.

premise.” In the second text he shifts from a manual to a technological metaphor: “the idea becomes the machine that makes the art.” These ideas are physically manifested in such works as LeWitt’s sculpture *Serial Project No. 1 (ABCD)* (1966), whose form is the result of the premise of laying on a grid all the possible combinations of solid and open white enameled aluminum cubes and rectangular prisms of particular dimensions, and *Incomplete Open Cubes* (1974), an installation of sculpture and drawings, which answers the question: if you take an open cube and systematically subtract between one and nine of its twelve edges how many variations do you get and what do the variations look like altogether in both two- and three-dimensions? (fig. 1.14) In *Carving*, with LeWittian logic, Antin takes a premise with preset limits and reveals the form that follows. However, she translates into embodied subject-specific terms the question that instigates *Incomplete Open Cubes*, asking: if you take the body of a thirty-seven year old woman of a particular genetic make-up and systematically withhold food for a set amount of time what does the object you’re left with look like?

*Carving*’s embodied recasting of the LeWittian premise draws on the sculptural work of the more phenomenologically oriented Minimalists. Antin has referred to Minimalist exhibitions in New York in the 1960s as her “art education.” In particular, she recalls the experience of going to a Robert Morris show and seeing one of the artist’s

---


54 Ibid., 12, 13.

untitled works of 1965: “you get off an elevator and enter a gallery and he’s got one gray object in the middle of the room. There’s nothing else but that object. It steals the whole room. It’s not doing it by crowding you, you can still move; it’s just filling the space with its nothingness. It’s pure theater. There’s an energy oscillating from this object that’s literally taking over the room. It’s very aggressive. I mean, that’s the kind of thing that really trained me.”

The impact of this memory is clear from Antin’s use of the present tense, although more than three decades had passed since the moment she describes. It is not surprising that Morris’s version of Minimalism was especially useful to Antin, given that Morris’s sculptural practice came out of his work with the Judson Dance Theater. Between 1962 and 1965 Morris choreographed six dance pieces: War (1962-63), Arizona (1963), 21.3 (1964), Site (1964), Check (1964), and Waterman Switch (1965). Michelson argues that it is due to his work with the Judson Dance Theater that Morris’s early sculpture “elicits the acknowledgement of temporality as the condition or medium of human cognition and aesthetic experience.”

Although Antin did make large-scale sculptural objects from 1969-1970, Carving, a work grounded in the mediums of performance and photography, and reliant on time, most precisely integrates the logic of Minimalism as outlined and practiced by Morris.

56 Ibid., 201.

In his 1966 text, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” Morris articulates the new terms of sculpture as a set of contingent relationships between an object, its surrounding space and light, and “the physical viewpoint of the spectator.” These relationships led Morris to observe that “the object has not become less important. It has merely become less self-important.” Michelson characterized this decreased self-importance of the object in Morris’s work as a “sense of co-presence,” that is, “the spectator’s sensed relationship of the self as a perceiving, corporeal presence, to the object in question.” Michelson furthermore argued that Morris links seeing “to our sense of ourselves as being bodies in space, knowing space through the body.” However, if Minimalism, principally as practiced by Morris, ushered in a phenomenological conception of the spectator, its subject remained universal. By virtue of the subject matter it pictures and the spectatorial scenario it establishes, Carving intervened in Morris’s universalizing Minimalism.

The “pure theater” that made Morris’s work inspiring to Antin made it “the negation of art” for Michael Fried. For Fried, Minimalism was “disquieting” like “the

---

58 *California Lives* (1969) and *Portraits of Eight New York Women* (1970) consist of sculptures made from American consumer goods, arranged to evoke particular people. I address these works in Chapters Three and Four respectively.


60 Ibid., 234.


62 Ibid., 45.
silent presence of another person.” Indeed, a work by Morris of the sort that Antin praises in the passage quoted above is problematic to Fried for just this reason: “it is…as though the work in question has an inner, even secret, life—an effect that is perhaps made most explicit in Morris’s *Untitled* (1965–66), a large ringlike form in two halves, with fluorescent light glowing from within at the narrow gap between the two” (fig. 1.15). In Fried’s analysis one of Minimalism’s main offenses was its introduction of “endlessness” and “duration” into the work of art, which signaled to him the end of art that suspended time—art that was “at every moment…wholly manifest.” If we read “Art and Objecthood” in relation to *Carving*, Fried’s anxiety about Minimalism’s persistence in time seems borne out, for *Carving* encompasses temporality not only by picturing a process that unfolds in time, but also because to assimilate the work’s 148 views the spectator must walk back and forth along *Carving*’s vast expanse.

*Carving* also introduces differences into Judd’s famous prescription for Minimalist order, “one thing after another.” Rosalind Krauss has compared this to “days simply following each other without anything having given them a form or a direction, without their being inhabited, or lived, or meant.” While Antin integrates a Minimalist

---


64 Ibid., 128.

65 Ibid., 129.

66 Ibid., 144, 145.

order into Carving, she avoids the evacuation of content to which Krauss points. Indeed, ten years after Judd’s “Specific Objects” was published Antin explained, “my idea of structure or sequence is that I have some place I have to go. I can take any direction I want, but there is somewhere I want to get to. And it’s not an abstract concern. I don’t want to get to a cube.”

Most disruptive of a smooth serial progression are the emotional variations that spread across Carving’s top row of frontal views: alternately the pictured woman appears tired, annoyed, querulous, bemused, and on some days her expression is simply blank. This feature of the work modulates the rhythm of the serial register by indicating the pictured subject’s experience as she goes through the daily photographic regimen that produces the work. The facial register of affect offers a site for spectatorial identification and projection, forcing Minimalist form to accommodate the psychic state of a gendered subject. Although Antin draws on what she learned from Judd, LeWitt, and Morris, then, their “traditional sculpture” is also the focus of Carving’s critique.

Carving refers specifically to two works by LeWitt: Muybridge I and Muybridge II (both 1964) (fig. 1.16). Each consists of a black painted box, eight-feet long, with ten evenly-spaced peepholes through which the viewer sees a serial progression of images of a nude woman’s body that gets progressively closer in each frame. Because the spectator’s visual parameters are so tightly circumscribed, the effect of the woman’s


69 My observation here is related to Anna C. Chave’s suggestion that recourse to the artist’s biography is a way to counter the critical tendency to depersonalize Minimalism. However, I maintain that Carving does not offer a transparent view into the life of Eleanor Antin, but rather that it depicts Antin’s performance of a particular subject position. Chave, “Minimalism and Biography,” Art Bulletin 82, no. 1 (March 2000): 149–163.
body’s increased proximity is decreased legibility: as she comes closer her genitals move toward the very edges of and eventually beyond the spectator’s visual frame, yielding a final image that shows the body in such extreme close-up that it is nearly abstract.

Beyond the formal parallels between LeWitt’s “Muybridge works” and Carving—they all show a sequence of images of a nude woman, who, when examined from left to right, appears to disappear—these works share a critique of spectatorship: they put the activity of spectatorship on display and neither work can be assimilated by the spectator in a totalizing view. Antin’s denial of the totalizing view is grounded in Carving’s size.

Carving unfolds in a panoramic display of flesh. The work’s large size symbolizes the extent and magnitude of the histories of imaging the female body that the work evokes. It is because of Carving’s size that the process it figures cannot be grasped in a single view. If the spectator wants to follow the work’s narrative and witness the pictured body’s transformation from the first day of the diet to the last, she must walk back and forth along the twenty-three-foot span, assimilating the multiple views it offers into a totality. The perceptual experience that Carving instantiates for its mobile spectator is one of fragmentation; Fried’s instantaneous perception is denied. Perceptual fragmentation corresponds to the process of carving, chipping away that is performed by

70 This feature of LeWitt’s work was notoriously misunderstood in 1991 by Elizabeth Broun, the director of The National Museum of American Art (NMAA), who demanded that Muybridge I be removed from the exhibition Eadweard Muybridge and Contemporary American Photography at the NMAA because she found the work’s “peep show” degrading to women. Broun’s decree produced such an uproar within the art world that she quickly withdrew the ban and LeWitt’s work was included in the exhibition as planned. For a contemporary critique of Broun’s attempted censorship, see Rosalind E. Krauss, “The LeWitt Matrix,” Sol LeWitt – Structures 1962-1993 (Oxford: The Museum of Modern Art, 1993), 32.
the pictured woman. With each passing day Antin loses a little more weight, a fact that becomes perceptible only cumulatively.\textsuperscript{71} In other words, as the view expands Antin’s body fades, producing a structural connection between the act of looking and the diminution of the object under surveillance—the act of looking is thus endowed with violent potential.

Each vertical register of Carving, representing one day of the diet and showing the subject from the front, back, and left and right sides, invokes the historical use of photography in disciplines like phrenology (the nineteenth-century pseudo-science that claimed head shape as a justification for racial hierarchies) and anthropometry (the system used between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries to connect physical measurement with a proclivity toward criminal activity) (fig. 1.17). The female object pictured in Carving becomes a specimen, even a guilty object. As spectators we become her hypothetical examiners or wardens. Because of the discomfort potentially produced by this relationship between the one who looks and the one who is looked at, Carving invites its spectator to become aware of her or his position—first physically and then ideologically—with respect to the work’s pictured object.

Hal Foster has argued that postmodernist art informed by feminism develops Minimalism’s critique of the subject while correcting the latter’s treatment of perception “as somehow before or outside history, language, sexuality, and power.”\textsuperscript{72} For their work

\textsuperscript{71} Just as there is a relationship in Carving between labor and scale, Julia Bryan-Wilson has noted that in Morris’s artwork scale is “not only a function of perception but also a measure of bodily effort….The larger the art object, the more work was needed…..” Bryan-Wilson, \textit{Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam Era}, 96, 98.
in this area, Foster singles out artists “from the middle 1970s through the middle 1980s”: Mary Kelly, Silvia Kolbowski, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, and Martha Rosler. Antin, however, is a missing conduit between Judd and Morris on the one hand, and Foster’s later feminist roster, on the other, for Carving, like the work of the latter, presents a model of embodied vision that is structured by desire.

The object of critique in art informed by postmodernist feminism was desire—and especially unconscious desire—in visual representation. One of postmodernist feminism’s foundational texts was Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (presented as a lecture in 1973 and published in 1975). Mulvey uses psychoanalytic theory to reveal the ways that the unconscious has structured the pleasures of looking—what Freud called scopophilia—in mainstream Hollywood cinema, thereby shifting vision from the sphere of disinterested looking into a realm of desire, fantasy, and sexuality. Freud explains that the scopophilic drive is satisfied in two ways: through voyeurism (which entails secret looking at a detached, unaware object) and narcissism (which relies on identification with the object under surveillance). Mulvey argues that in

---


73 Ibid., 59.

74 This feature distinguished art informed by postmodernist feminism from art informed by other feminisms such as liberal feminism (which argued that women should be treated the same as men) and radical feminism (which often proposed separatism as a way to eradicate social structures tainted by patriarchy).

Hollywood cinema both forms of scopophilia are masculinized—that is, in its narrative structures the man (in the role of active subject) looks while the woman (as the passive object) is looked at. “In their traditional exhibitionist role,” writes Mulvey, “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.”

While postmodernist feminist artists, like Mary Kelly, worried about using the actual female body because doing so might rehearse the very terms being critiqued, Carving avoids this pitfall: through the conventions the work cites and its sheer size, Carving invokes a vast history of imagery of the female body and holds it up to critique. More importantly, however, by putting spectatorship on display—by foregrounding the precarious relationship between image and viewer—Carving implicates vision itself in the maintenance of patriarchal ideals.

Far from being an inert, passive, noncultural and ahistorical term, the body may be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual and intellectual struggles.

-Elizabeth Grosz

While Antin was making Carving, the stakes of embodied politics were particularly high because of an important national event: the historic Supreme Court case Roe versus Wade. On December 13, 1971 a pregnant single woman, Norma L. McCorvey, under the alias Jane Roe, brought a class action suit to the United States

76 Ibid., 366.

77 Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism, 19.
Supreme Court, challenging the constitutionality of Texas criminal abortion laws that declared abortion illegal unless advised by a doctor in order to save the mother’s life. The case was reargued on October 11, 1972, and on January 22, 1973 the Supreme Court ruled with a 7-to-2 majority that “a state criminal abortion statute of the current Texas type, that excepts from criminality only a life-saving procedure on behalf of the mother, without regard to pregnancy stage and without recognition of the other interests involved, is violative of the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.”

Roe v. Wade was pending during the period of Carving’s production. Against this political backdrop, its depiction of a subject literally diminished by regulating regimes reads as a protest against state control of women’s bodies.

Roe v. Wade overlapped with ongoing government-directed trauma to bodies in the Vietnam War. The imbrication of patriarchal and militaristic control of the body were powerfully figured by Antin’s close friend and fellow San Diego-based artist Martha Rosler in Rosler’s iconic work *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1973; 1977) (fig. 1.18). Although she had been exploring the relationship between patriarchy and war since her early photomontage series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967–72), *Vital Statistics* marks the first time that Rosler used performance to animate this concern—in 1973, in front of a live audience, and in 1977, on videotape. During a

---


continuous take that fills twenty-five of the video’s nearly forty minutes, two male examiners in white laboratory smocks methodically measure and record the dimensions of the body parts of a nude female subject (played by Rosler), as three women in lab coats sound a whistle, bell, and kazoo respectively, depending on whether a given measurement is above, below, or on par with the standard. Just as Carving refers to Greek cultural history, Vital Statistics intentionally evokes a Greek drama by using the women as a chorus that has a presence and function but no agency in the scene. The videotape concludes with a slide show of government photographs of women and children being measured while a voiceover recites an inventory of “crimes against women” and speaks of the government’s use of statistics and calculation to justify domination and social control. If an image regime controls the subject in Carving, in Vital Statistics the subject is regulated by systems of data. In both works it is a fantasy of an ideal, an abstract standard, against which the embodied subject is evaluated, in some cases by her failure to conform to the ideal.

It is not just law, then, but also vision that subjugates the body and potentially legislates the embodied subject. And, given that vision is located in the body, Antin and Rosler reveal that the spectator’s phenomenological position is inseparable from her or his psychic and subjective position. These works can be read in dialogue with Judith Butler’s argument that “a gendered matrix is at work in the constitution of materiality”

80 Rosler discusses this aspect of the work in Jane Weinstock, “Interview with Martha Rosler,” October 17 (Summer 1981): 95.
and therefore “feminists ought to be interested, not in taking materiality as an irreducible, but in conducting a critical genealogy of its formulation.”

Feminist theorists have long been critical of the Cartesian split between body and mind. The problem with the body/mind bifurcation is that the corporeal, which has historically been aligned with female bodies and bodies of color, tends to be positioned as inferior to the mind, which has traditionally been aligned with the white male body. For Butler, as well as for Elizabeth Grosz and Moira Gatens, even a feminist social constructionist approach to bodies is insufficient, for in arguing that ideologies determine the body, it upholds the body/mind distinction. Grosz and Gatens call instead for a mobius-like understanding of mind and body, nature and culture, and other binaries. For Grosz, “the question of the cultural construction of subjectivity” is less important than “the materials out of which such a construct is forged,” while the important question for Gatens is “‘how does culture construct the body so that it is understood as a biological given?’”

Antin and Rosler treat the body as an unfixed material (it is literally reshaped in Carving), a site that acquires meaning precisely in the process of subjection to visual and ideological constructions. In feminist critiques of embodied vision, the treatment of the body as a field of inquiry—and, as such, inherently and productively precarious—would

81 Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex” (New York: Routledge, 1993), 32.

lead to challenges to a stable subject, one of the central concerns of the postmodernist art practice. These concerns would soon animate Antin’s artistic work.
FEMINIST DIFFERENCES

In 1971 the Antins and their four-year-old son, Blaise, stayed with Antin’s mother in her mother’s small New York apartment for a period of seventeen days. As the artist explains, her family chose these accommodations because of their “economic and domestic convenience (i.e. babysitting, meals, other services)” and because “it was also an opportunity…to discharge family obligations.”

To facilitate a peaceful visit Antin arrived at her mother’s home armed with a repertoire of what she called “conversation openers”—statements and anecdotes drawn from a circumscribed range of topics, including her life with her husband, son, and friends, as well as politics, and ethnic and race relations. Antin would start each day with one of the openers; since some were more provocative than others, she would carefully decide which one to use based on her and her mother’s respective moods and the length of time that they were going to remain house-bound together. Practically speaking, this exercise was a success, for Antin and her mother got along well enough to make the visit tolerable. The exercise also provided material for Antin’s Conceptualist artwork Domestic Peace (1971–72), an eighteen-page document that depicts her tactics and their outcomes through charts, statistics, and deadpan texts (fig. 2.1).

Following an introductory text, which explains the premise of Domestic Peace, Antin provides a “map code,” which translates seven graphic notations that stand for the

---

1 Introductory text in Domestic Peace (1971–72).
modes of interaction and affective registers she anticipates will arise between her and her mother: bored, calm, civilized conversational, agitated, argumentative, hysterical, and provocative (fig. 2.2). In each of the work’s following pages, these graphic notations indicate the moods that follow from a given conversation starter (figs. 2.3–2.6). In the artist’s words, the notations are “precise and comical graphic representations depicting the difficulties of 2 generations trying to live together and not making it too well.”

On each page of Domestic Peace there are two parallel lines, one that represents Antin and one that represents her mother. On Antin’s line a neatly printed “S,” which stands for “story onset,” indicates the moment that Antin launched into her “conversation opener.” Each entry includes both the date and the duration of the encounter that followed from the opener. The opener itself is transcribed at the bottom of each account. For example, on December second, Antin and her mother began the day with no agitation—according to the charts they were emotionally flatlined. This prompted Antin to select one of her “alternate” openers, which she describes in the work’s text panel as a story that “contained slightly abrasive elements which might be expected to mitigate peace” and thus should be saved for “‘good’ days.” In this case, using the alternate opener—in which Antin reflects on her son’s troubles at school—caused spikes in the graphs: at once Antin showed signs of being provocative and argumentative, while her mother was somewhere between argumentative and hysterical. It is noted that this encounter lasted thirty-five minutes.

---

When one views the isolated days that make up *Domestic Peace* it is hard to see beyond the basic elements, which can be easily unpacked: the content of the conversation opener, the moods that it precipitates, and so forth. Cumulatively, however—over the course of the work’s two-plus weeks—*Domestic Peace* reveals the dynamics of power that unfold at home between a mother and daughter. It is one of several works by Antin that explore the power relations among women who share communal ties of one sort or another. Whether she focuses on the non-elective and permanent bonds of family or the periodic temporary formations of an artists’ group, Antin exposes the conflict and contestation that exist among women both across and within generations. However, even as she renders these connections precarious, Antin insists that precarity need not destroy community alliances.³

Antin’s position in these works resonates with a set of ideas that the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe has been developing since the early 1990s under the designation agonistic pluralism. Agonistic pluralism accepts “ongoing confrontation” as vital to democracy’s existence. As Mouffe warns, in democratic struggles of all kinds when consensus is enforced at the cost of natural discord “dissent tends to take violent forms….The danger arises that the democratic confrontation will therefore be replaced by a confrontation between essentialist forms of identification or non-negotiable moral values.”⁴ Antin modeled a form of agonistic feminism in her art. Building on the foundation of anti-essentialist feminism, which contends that a subject’s identity is

---


determined by a range of factors, including not only gender, but also race, class, and sexual orientation, agonistic feminism, as I am using the term, supports the argument that for feminism to remain democratic it must accommodate differences as well as the inevitable conflicts that emerge between differentiated subjects. It is notable that in the works under consideration Antin used the aesthetic conventions of Conceptual art to posit her model of agonistic feminism. At stake then, here as in the previous chapter, are the ways Conceptualism served a feminist project.

Mouffe’s conception of agonistic pluralism is predicated on the thinking that informed her book with Ernesto Laclau from 1985, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics.* Against the idea that there is a “single underlying principle fixing—and hence constituting—the whole field of differences,” Laclau and Mouffe propose the notion of “chains of equivalence” among a range of democratic struggles, which has the potential to make room for the demands of multiple oppressed subject positions. In the context of 1980s leftist politics, this argument was vectored against a strict Marxist conception of politics, which subordinated all democratic struggles to class struggle. “Equivalence,” in the way that Laclau and Mouffe use the word, does not signify the erasure of difference; rather it assigns parity of importance among respective struggles. Laclau and Mouffe envisage shifting and precarious links among these chains of equivalence, and sometimes even tension between them. Indeed, they argue that power and antagonism are not only *inradicable* from, but

---


6 Ibid., 111.
also constitutive of the social world and therefore must be accounted for in any conception of democracy. This theory and its underlying politics were central to the contemporaneous art of postmodernist feminism, for which Antin’s work laid important foundations.

Mothers

In Domestic Peace, the dynamics of power between Antin and her mother revolve around Antin’s identity as an artist. What is conspicuously absent from the conversation openers that comprise Domestic Peace is any account of, or even reference to, Antin’s artwork or career, which by 1971 was well underway. As Antin explains in the work’s introductory text:

though my mother insists upon her claim to the familial she is not at all interested in my actual life but rather in what she considers an appropriate life….By madly ransacking my life for all the details that suited my mother’s theory of appropriateness and by carefully suppressing almost all others, I was able to offer her an image of myself that produced in her a ‘feeling of closeness,’ [which would] ensure the domestic peace necessary to free me for my own affairs.  

Antin has noted that Domestic Peace, like Carving: A Traditional Sculpture, entailed an act of self-transformation. She later described the image of herself that ensured domestic peace as “an alien image, ‘the good daughter, the good wife, and mother.’” The very construction—the scripting and performance—of this image is itself an artistic act, to


which Antin would later give physical form and display in art exhibition venues. In other words, while the need for domestic peace may have temporarily silenced Antin’s identity as an artist, it is ultimately through that identity that Antin silences her mother.10

The pun of the work’s title signals the artist-daughter’s double life. As it is spelled, “peace” refers to the harmony that Antin, as daughter, attempts to maintain with her mother. To the ear, however, the word might be “piece,” as in a work of art about the domestic, which is what Antin is producing. The chameleonic nature of language—what Freud, in his treatise on jokes, describes as the “plastic” quality of words—reiterates the way that distinct subject positions are fused in Domestic Peace: Antin plays the daughter, and uses that performance to serve her work as an artist, forcing a home to double as a studio.11

Given Antin’s concealment of her career in Domestic Peace, it is surprising to read the artist’s statement that “my mother had taught me that being an artist was the greatest thing in the world.”12 Antin recalls that her mother took her to museums, ballets, and concerts as a child and made significant financial sacrifices so that she could take acting lessons as a young adult.13 Asked about this contradiction, Antin explains that

10 My point here challenges Lisa E. Bloom’s assertion that in Domestic Peace “harmony and calm between mother and daughter come only at the price of the artist’s own ‘silence.’” Bloom, “Rewriting the Script: Eleanor Antin’s Artwork,” 67.


12 Howard N. Fox, “A Dialogue with Eleanor Antin,” in Eleanor Antin (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999), 222.

although her mother had supported her interest in the arts as a child, this changed when she was an adult.\textsuperscript{14}

In the 1960s and 1970s questions about the assumption of domestic positions by women produced tension among feminists both across generations, between mothers and daughters, and within generations, among feminist sisters. One event that precipitated these questions was the publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s foundational feminist text, \textit{The Second Sex}. First published in French in 1949, \textit{The Second Sex} was translated into English in 1953, and widely read in America throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Placing her own observations and experience within a philosophical framework, de Beauvoir made the argument, groundbreaking for its time, that femininity is a social construction, and not a function of biology or other innate conditions. “One is not born, but rather becomes woman,” as de Beauvoir famously put in print.\textsuperscript{15} Following from this and related positions articulated in the pages of \textit{The Second Sex}, many women began contesting the “becomings” that their mothers had taken as fixed conditions. Such contestations laid the groundwork for second-wave feminism.

Following from de Beauvoir’s contention that femininity was a construction, in her 1963 book \textit{The Feminine Mystique}, Betty Friedan challenged the prevailing cultural and media construction of women as anatomically destined to be housewives and mothers. She urged women coming of age in the 1960s to question the paths their own

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{14} Eleanor Antin, interview with author, February 17, 2012.
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}
mothers had followed and to honor the full spectrum of their desires, which might include professional ambition. The questions that *The Feminine Mystique* exposed catalyzed a divide between mothers and daughters that was more than an age gap. The rift deepened throughout the decade in the context of the sexual revolution and countercultural movements, as young women pursued opportunities, activities, and alliances that were unavailable—and in many cases alien—to their mothers. While *The Feminine Mystique* did not explicitly propose an overhaul of traditional family structures, its thesis that women were entitled to fulfilling careers certainly implied the possibility that such change was in sight. Slightly later texts would argue more ardently for the reconfiguration of family structures.\(^\text{16}\)

As the relationship between traditional family roles and new feminist objectives came under scrutiny, the question of how to position oneself as a mother and a feminist grew increasingly fraught. Jane Lazarre noted the challenge of integrating these two

---

positions in her popular memoir of 1976, *The Mother Knot*. Lazarre describes joining a women’s liberation consciousness-raising group and recalls her discomfort in this setting as she grew increasingly pregnant, for pregnancy brought with it a “discomforting sense of dependency” on her husband, whose role would soon be elevated to the father of her child. “But this feeling of dependency,” writes Lazarre, “was incomprehensible to women who had never been pregnant. As they spoke confidently of politics and their work, fear gathered in my throat and muffled my words.”

The conflict that Lazarre describes was at play within the art world at the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles. Fulfilling its stated mission to serve as a “public center for women’s culture,” throughout the 1970s the Woman’s Building served as a gathering place for women to address motherhood collectively: in 1975 *By Mothers*, an exhibit “by mothers on the theme of motherhood,” was mounted; from 1976 onwards the Woman’s Building Extension Program offered a number of workshops related to mothering such as “For Mothers: Towards Role-Free Mothering” and a “Mother Daughter Workshop;” and in 1979 the Woman’s Building published an informational brochure for Woman’s Building Extension Program (January 19–March 14, 1979), Woman’s Building records, 1970–1992, box 13, folder 17. The description of “Mother Daughter Workshop,” led by Aurelia Morris in 1977, read: “The most crucial relationship in any woman’s life extending its influence into all other relationships is her attitude towards her own mother. Yet these relationships have been left largely unexamined, except in therapies where all the blame for one’s unhappiness was heaped upon the


19 “For Mothers: Towards Role-Free Mothering,” led by Paula Tobin and Carole Raye in 1976, promised to “explore the contradictions, conflicts, and limitations in our attempts to be ‘good mothers’ and still have creative intellectual and social lives of our own.” Brochure for Woman’s Building Extension Program (January 19–March 14, 1979), Woman’s Building records, 1970–1992, box 13, folder 17. The description of “Mother Daughter Workshop,” led by Aurelia Morris in 1977, read: “The most crucial relationship in any woman’s life extending its influence into all other relationships is her attitude towards her own mother. Yet these relationships have been left largely unexamined, except in therapies where all the blame for one’s unhappiness was heaped upon the
pamphlet, “Single Mothers: Some Questions and Resources for Young Women.”20 Despite these mother-positive exhibitions, workshops, and printed materials, many Woman’s Building participants felt that on a day-to-day basis the realities that shaped their lives as mothers, were not readily accommodated. At one point a group of women drafted a proposal for child-care and early education at the Woman’s Building because “many women with children are unable to attend or enroll in Woman’s Building programs because they cannot afford child care.”21 Recently, the founding members of the Mother Art Collective, a group that from 1973 to 1986 created performances and installations devoted to the integration of motherhood into artistic practice, recalled their reason for coming together: “as artists, feminists and mothers of young children, we were horrified at a group decision to allow dogs in the workshop studios [at the Woman’s Building] but not children. We wanted an environment that was supportive, and we created that community. Our first act was to create space for children at the Woman’s Building by building a playground in the parking lot.”22


22 Former Mother Art Collective members (Deborah Krall, Suzanne Siegel, and Laura Silagi), email message to Cheri Gaulke, August 13, 2010; cited in Gaulke, “1 + 1 = 3 Art and Collaboration at the Woman’s Building,” in Doin’ It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman’s Building, ed. Meg Linton and Sue Mayberry (Los Angeles: Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, 2011), 32.
Outside the Woman’s Building a number of artists addressed the challenges of negotiating art and domestic responsibility by refusing to separate the two spheres. For her 1968 project Mon Fils, Léa Lublin brought the typically private domestic activity of mothering into the public space of the museum, tending to her seven-month-old son Nicholas over the course of an exhibition at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. The next year in the United States Mierle Laderman Ukeles wrote “Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!” which articulated the ideas she soon put into practice in her “Maintenance Art.” In this series of works Ukeles performed versions of her daily chores as a new mother, including “cleaning, sweeping, washing, changing diapers, cooking, and bed-changing” within art’s institutional spaces. In 1973 Tony Conrad made a series of “Cooked Films” in which he literally cooked his artistic medium to produce a range of aesthetic effects; he describes this process as a mode of integrating his roles at the time as primary caregiver to his child and professor of film at Antioch College. In Mary Kelly’s Post-Partum Document (1973–79) the artist presented an extensive archive of the first six years of her son’s life, tracking not only her son’s development, but also her own experience of his increasing independence. Martha Rosler’s videotape Domination and the Everyday (1978) is a montage of sound, photographs, mass-media advertising, and

---


that interweave the discourses of mothering, art, and politics into what Rosler describes as “an artist-mother’s ‘This is Your Life.’” These works are the coordinates through which *Domestic Peace* must be interpreted, but also from which it must be differentiated: although Antin shares with Lublin, Ukeles, Conrad, Kelly, and Rosler a concern with how to live at home and in the studio, in *Domestic Peace* she explores this conundrum not through the position of the parent, but through that of the child.

The familial orientation of *Domestic Peace* is related to Antin’s roots in the tradition of Jewish comedic performance, a crucial strain of which privileges the child’s perspective. Historian Joyce Antler shows that the stereotype of the Jewish mother as loving and nurturing if also overbearing, cajoling, and critical of all but a very few life choices for her children has roots in environments like the one in which Antin was raised—first-generation European Jewish families determined to acculturate and succeed in mainstream American society. The mother featured in *Domestic Peace* fits the aforementioned stereotype: while she provides shelter and support to her daughter, the price for this care is the daughter’s self-censorship and concealment of her career. As

---


26 It should be noted that in *Domestic Peace* Antin does gesture toward her role as mother, for many of the “conversation starters” are about her son Blaise.

27 The Jewish-American artist Ilene Segalove’s *The Mom Tapes* (1974–78) also articulates a daughter’s perspective. This series of short videotapes humorously dramatizes intergenerational tensions between Segalove and her mother in a parody of popular television.

Lisa Bloom has argued, by using a particular ethnic background to shape her depiction of a mother-daughter relationship Antin shows that these relationships are not universal, which is part of her larger critique of essentialist conceptions of identity.29

Antler argues that performance has been the most fertile ground for iterations of the Jewish mother stereotype, starting with vaudeville acts that depicted a mother who, full of self-sacrifice and good intentions, threatened to hinder her child’s success. A quintessential depiction of this mother is found in Al Jolson’s film The Jazz Singer (1927), the crux of which occurs when Jack Robin (born Jakie Rabinowitz) must choose between fulfilling his professional ambitions as a singer on Broadway and appeasing his mother by singing at synagogue on Yom Kippur (fig. 2.7). The commonality between The Jazz Singer and Domestic Peace is clear: in both the vaudeville film and the Conceptualist artwork the protagonist is a second-generation Jew who must navigate the dilemma of choosing between his or her first-generation Jewish mother’s ideals and his or her art.30

After vaudeville came the more negative image of the depression-era Jewish mother who manipulates her children to serve her own selfish ends, as reflected in Clifford Odets’s hit play Awake and Sing! (1935). The 1940s and 1950s saw the rise of Borscht-Belt comedy and its invention of the Jewish mother joke, which caricatured its

29 See sources cited in Chapter One, footnote 45.

object as excessively demanding, guilt-wielding, and naïve—a woman with no aspirations beyond the success of her son. In one such joke, at her daughter’s presidential inauguration, a Jewish mother turns to the senator next to her and asks, “you see that girl up there? Her brother’s a doctor.”

Antin grew up familiar with vaudeville and Borscht-Belt comedy, for her mother had in Poland been a star of Yiddish theatre, the source of both comedic traditions. Though Antin’s mother gave up her acting career upon immigrating to New York, she made sure her children were well-acquainted with this theatrical genre and its offspring. Antin has reflected, “I think there is an aspect of me that comes out of the Yiddish theatre tradition. This melodramatic tradition in which the world is like a black joke. It’s the way I was brought up.” From the 1940s through the 1960s the Jewish mother joke tended to center on tensions in mother-son relationships. Indeed, it allowed Jewish sons to frame themselves by their lineage even as they derided and distanced themselves from the traditions their Jewish mothers represented. As Antler puts it, “freezing the Jewish mother as a caricature in time was one way to deny their likeness to her and move on.”

---

31 This joke is cited in Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write!: A History of the Jewish Mother*, 5.


In 1976 Adrienne Rich wrote *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, one of the first texts to critically interrogate the relationship between mothers and daughters.\(^{35}\) Rich observed that while Jewish sons had an established outlet to assert distance from their mothers, Jewish daughters (along with their non-Jewish sisters) were left with a form of anxiety she named “matrophobia.”\(^{36}\) Rich describes matrophobia as “the fear not of one’s mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one’s mother*….there may also be a pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one’s guard one will identify with her completely….The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers’; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery.”\(^{37}\)

*Domestic Peace* figures a version of matrophobia. In the work the threatening closeness that Rich describes is not only a function of the mother-daughter bond but also, more literally, it is found in the physical conditions that inspire the work: mother and daughter are staying under the same small roof for an extended period of time.


\(^{36}\) Rich further observes, “‘matrophobia’ is a late-arrived strain in the life of the Jewish daughter,” for the mother occupied a central and highly respectable social and familial role in the shtetl. It was “only in the later immigrant generations, with a greater assimilationism and pressure for men to take over the economic sphere” that women began to occupy “the full-time mother-housewife role already invented by the gentile middle class….In the absence of other absorbing and valued uses for her energy, the full-time ‘home-maker’ has often sunk, yes, into the over involvement, the martyrdom, the possessive control, the chronic worry over children, caricatured in fiction through the ‘Jewish mother.’” Ibid., 236.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 235–236.
Furthermore, this closeness is rendered graphically in the parallel lines that stand for Antin and her mother, and clearly evoke Electrocardiogram graphs. Mother and daughter are signified by proximate (and, given the work’s operating system, mutually dependent) heartbeats.

Antin asserts distance between herself and her mother—in Rich’s terms she performs radical surgery—in two primary ways: by deploying the more provocative conversation starters, which she knows will antagonize her mother, and by making her mother the unwitting subject of an experiment, the results of which will be made public. Antin’s mother is, in a sense, the butt of a joke. One might say that excluded from “my son, the doctor” jokes, Antin invents a “my daughter, the artist” joke. Embedded in an artwork, the structure of Antin’s joke diverges significantly from that of its precedent. Whereas “my son, the doctor” jokes tend to rely on a punchline, the humor of Domestic Peace is predicated on the incongruity between its unwieldy content—the tensions and power relations that exist between mother and daughter—and the elaborate, quasi-scientific system Antin devises both to manage that content and to document it. Furthermore, whereas a punchline is delivered in an instant, the humor of Domestic Peace builds over the course of the work, for as the days accumulate, Antin’s method of documentation appears increasingly absurd.

*  

Antin’s use of joking in Domestic Peace is a function not only of her ethnic cultural background, but also of the artistic field in which she emerged. To fully understand the joke work of Domestic Peace it is important to recall that the project was first displayed as an example of drawing in the solo exhibition that Antin organized in
1972, *Traditional Art: ‘Painting,’ ‘Sculpture,’ ‘Drawing.* As shown in Chapter One, the traditions at stake for Antin in *Traditional Art* were the ones that immediately preceded her own emergence as an artist: Minimalism and Conceptual art.

In his important essay “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” Benjamin Buchloh characterizes Conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s as “the most rigorous elimination of visuality and traditional definitions of representation.” Within this framework Buchloh cites artistic practices that use an “aesthetic of administration”—ordering systems such as taxonomies and typologies, statistical graphs, accounting ledgers, bureaucratic documents, and deadpan image and text—in the service of economic political critique. For Buchloh, an example of work that operates in this way is Hans Haacke’s *Visitors’ Profiles* (1969–70) in which Haacke asked museum visitors to fill out a survey with questions related primarily to their demographic background and political persuasions. Haacke later exhibited this data in the form of charts and graphs. The work thus posited the spectator as a political subject and called attention to the specific economic sphere in which art’s primary sites of distribution operate.

Another work by Haacke, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971), is also paradigmatic of Buchloh’s claims for Conceptualism’s capacity to “[mime] the operating logic of late capitalism and its positivist instrumentality” and “turn the violence of that mimetic relationship back onto the ideological apparatus itself, using it to analyze and expose the social institutions

---

from which laws of positivist instrumentality and the logic of administration emanate in the first place” (fig. 2.8).\textsuperscript{39} The central element of \textit{Shapolsky et al.} is a series of 146 photographs of New York apartment building façades, each accompanied by typed text that locates the building geographically and discloses the details of financial transactions related to its ownership and maintenance, which was information that Haacke had gleaned from public records. The work revealed that Harry Shapolsky, a powerful New York real estate broker, had committed a number of fraudulent and unethical acts related to the management of these buildings, for which he had been forgiven by New York’s legal system. In \textit{Shapolsky et al.} Haacke holds accountable the very sorts of capitalist administrations whose aesthetics determine the form of his work.

If early Conceptual art introduced a critique that imbricated artistic transcendence and modernist traditions of visuality with economic politics, art informed by feminism of the 1970s by such artists as Antin, Mary Kelly, Adrian Piper, and Martha Rosler expanded the terms of this critique to address politics related to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and psychic investments. In 1995, looking back on this period, Antin recalls: “I saw it [Conceptualism] as an attempt to move away from fixed genres toward genres of real human activity—things like dieting, for instance….There was a tremendous freedom during that period, and a number of young women who were feminists started working conceptually because it allowed them to investigate personal areas of concern very precisely.”\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 143.

\textsuperscript{40} Kristine McKenna, “It's Art, Because They Say It's Art,” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, October 8, 1995.
In her essay “Inadequacy,” Rosalyn Deutsche critiques the dominant histories of Conceptual art, which include Buchloh’s essay and Alexander Alberro’s book *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, a history of the gallerist Seth Seigelaub’s Conceptualist stable.\textsuperscript{41} Deutsche argues that through their exclusively materialist lens, these histories repress contemporaneous art informed by feminism, which shared many of Conceptualism’s concerns, most notably the aim to challenge “totalizing visions of art, politics, and history.”\textsuperscript{42} This omission is particularly glaring in Buchloh’s essay given his argument that Conceptualism’s radicality is predicated on a critique of vision. By eliminating feminism from their accounts of Conceptualism, Deutsche contends that these histories “[push] sexuality to the back of the aesthetic, political, and historical mind,” thereby offering a skewed historical account and compromising the political effectiveness of their arguments.\textsuperscript{43} She suggests, for example, that in Buchloh’s essay a more politically generative account of Conceptual art would have included Mary Kelly’s Conceptualist work, *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79) (figs. 2.9 & 2.10).

In fact, a productive comparison can be made between *Domestic Peace* and *Post-Partum Document*. In the latter Kelly presents an expansive theoretically and psychically dense archive that records the first six years of her son’s life through 135 records and keepsakes including charts, statistics, transcriptions, notes, and objects. The work is divided into six parts, each of which focuses on a particular stage of Kelly’s son’s

\textsuperscript{41} Rosalyn Deutsche, “Inadequacy,” in *Silvia Kolbowski: Inadequate – Like – Power* (Cologne: Walter König, 2004), 70.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 70.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 70.
mastery of language and individuated sense of selfhood. Though the artist ostensibly tracks her son’s development, she also foregrounds her own ambivalent experience of pride and abandonment as her son becomes increasingly independent. Similar to *Domestic Peace, Post-Partum Document* presents a strong contrast between the psychic and emotional states that drive the work and the pseudo-scientific way in which they are presented.

When considering *Domestic Peace* and *Post-Partum Document*, Deutsche’s critique cannot be far from our minds. It is indeed hard to understand how Buchloh could overlook these and related projects when writing about contemporaneous work he celebrates for “its self-imposed restrictions, its lack of totalizing vision, its critical devotion to the factual conditions of artistic production and reception without aspiring to overcome the mere facticity of these conditions.”\(^4^4\) For Antin, Kelly, and many of their feminist peers, sexually-determined domestic responsibilities were precisely the factual conditions of artistic production. Through an aesthetic of administration, these artists produce a Conceptual art that critiques not only the bourgeois subject, but also the masculinist universal subject, which had not previously been questioned in these artistic terms.

*Domestic Peace* and *Post-Partum Document* share a ludic texture, which is a function of the clash between the works’ uncontainable content and their rigid forms.\(^4^5\) It


\(^4^5\) In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* Freud emphasizes the impact of the joke-form on the way the joke’s content is received—a joke is not merely a veil that smuggles irrecoverable material into the psyche; rather it is an active medium. For an
is ridiculous to attempt to map, chart, or quantify the feeling of being stifled by one’s mother, or abandoned by one’s son, for this content completely exceeds such confining structures. We are, once again, returned to the laugh that initiates *The Order of Things* when Foucault encounters Borges’s absurdist taxonomy of animals. As Brian Wallis has observed, “Foucault’s laughter underscores his recognition that the cultural codes we live by, the orders of discourse we follow, all manners of representation—are not natural and secure, but are arbitrary and historically determined; they are therefore subject to critique and revision.”\(^{46}\) Particularly as understood through Wallis’s reading, Foucault’s laughter reverberates in Antin and Kelly’s work as the artists intervene in first generation Conceptualism’s formal structures.

Looking back to her early Conceptualist projects, Antin recently remarked, “I was always a woman story teller and woman image maker creating a conceptual theater of both human and female experience while ironically teasing the boys who had it so much fucking easier.”\(^{47}\) A few months before Antin made *Domestic Peace* she had produced another Conceptualist work, *Library Science* (1971), which was also motivated by an impulse to tease the boys. In 1971 Antin was included in the exhibition *Women in the Arts* at San Diego State University’s Love Library. Her contribution to the show, *Library Science*, began with a request she sent to her co-exhibitors asking them to submit to her a


\(^{47}\) Eleanor Antin, email message to author, February 20, 2013.
“piece of information” that would serve as a self-representation. She received twenty-six responses in the form of letters, postcards, photographs, collages, the contents of a purse, a pair of clogs, a potted plant, a bowl of fruit covered with a kerchief, and resolutions written on scraps of paper with promises like “not put myself in subordinate positions, a condition that makes me angry,” “recognize when I am angry and accept it,” and “not to be so totally subject to the opinions of others.” Antin classified each “piece of information” by subject as if it were a book in accordance with the Library of Congress classification system. For example, the potted plant, “authored” by Faiya Fredman, was named Guerilla Warfare because, as Antin explained, “presenting me with a living plant was an assault on me. I had to be responsible for it or it would die” (fig. 2.11).\textsuperscript{48} Guerilla Warfare was assigned the call number U 240 F2. U represents “military,” one of the main classes within the Library of Congress classification system; 240 stands for a subdivision within military somewhere between “logistics” and “maneuvers (combined arms)”; F2 indicates “Fredman.”\textsuperscript{49} Antin titled the pair of clogs sent by Pauline Oliveros Arms and Armour, Primitive because “they looked perfectly adequate for holding in one’s hands and clobbering an enemy” and also because in Antin’s experience, the clogs’ author had a volatile personality.\textsuperscript{50} This “book” was classified as GN 498 O6 (GN 498 indicates the main category “geography, anthropology, recreation,” and the sub-category “societal groups, ethnocentrism, diplomacy, warfare, etc.”; O6 stands for Oliveros). The final

\textsuperscript{48} Nemser, “Eleanor Antin,” 238.


\textsuperscript{50} Anita Schiller, “Aware,” American Librarian (February 1972): 185.
presentation, first exhibited at Love Library before traveling to other library venues, consisted of the objects and ephemera, their corresponding library catalogue cards, a statement describing the artist’s process, and the twenty-one-page “Outline of the Library of Congress Classification” system. After the initial exhibition the objects and ephemera were returned to their owners or discarded; in the work’s later incarnations they were represented through photographs.

In the informational supplement to Library Science Antin explains in a deadpan tone, “the Library of Congress classification is a vast system for partitioning by subject the potentially infinite domain of human knowledge in such a manner that any catalogued ‘piece of information’ (book) may be located precisely between two other precisely specified ‘pieces of information’ (the book to the right of it and the book to the left).” Accordingly, she notes, “anyone wishing to ascertain the ultimate characterization of any of the catalogued ‘books’ [in Library Science] could do so by entering the stacks and locating the call number between the two adjoining books.” This suggestion—that the viewer physically locate the non-existent book—is important to the larger meaning of the work, for if the viewer (or reader) were in fact to follow the call number to the stacks, she would find a hole where the book was meant to be. Antin thus creates a scheme that directs her viewer to missing books that stand for larger absences: voids in history and art history where women’s lives have not been recorded, stored, and classified.

By 1971 language was a primary medium in Conceptual art. In America such artists as John Baldessari, Dan Graham, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner made work that recast the passive spectator as an active reader. Also crucial to the emergence of language as one of Conceptual art’s primary terrains was Art & Language, the English collaborative founded in 1966 by Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin, and Harold Hurrell and later expanded to include many other participants, most centrally Charles Harrison and Mel Ramsden. The primary aim of Art & Language was to establish language as the dominant terrain for Conceptual art. In the introduction to the first volume of Art & Language’s journal *Art-Language: The Journal of Conceptual Art*, the editors wrote, “the type of analysis that the British group have spent some considerable time upon is that concerning the linguistic usage of both plastic art itself and of its support languages. These theses have tended to use the language form of the support languages, namely work-language, and not for any arbitrary reason, but for the reason that this form seems to offer the most penetrating and flexible tool with regard to some prime problems in art today.”

Antin has noted the relationship between the style in which she uses language in *Library Science* and the writing style of Art & Language. In *Library Science*, however, she expands her inquiry beyond the treatment of language as a medium; Antin considers one of language’s physical supports—books through which history is constructed—and


she takes into account the institution that carries those constructions, the library.\textsuperscript{54}

Through its expanded textual field, \textit{Library Science} posits language as a site that serves different subjects differently in accordance with the power structures operating beyond the page, book, or library. In other words, Antin connects linguistic representation to ideology, once again detouring the conventions of Conceptual art as the movement’s dominant practitioners had established them.

\textbf{Sisters}

Whereas the vertical orientations of maternal and paternal relations tend to be rooted in fixed power structures, the lateral orientations of sibling relations seemed to feminists and other activist communities in the 1960s and 1970s to offer modes of interaction that were potentially more egalitarian.\textsuperscript{55} In 1970s feminism the fear of becoming one’s mother catalyzed a turn to the proverbial “sister,” indicated in the slogan

\textsuperscript{54} In \textit{Library Science} Antin also recasts the operations of Robert Morris’s Conceptualist work \textit{Cardfile} (1962). In \textit{Cardfile} Morris fills a store-bought metal and plastic wall file with index cards on which he notes events, experiences and, most relevant to Antin’s appropriation, encounters related to the production of the work; the cards are alphabetized by subject—starting with “accidents,” and ending with “working” (with “delays,” “forms,” “mistakes,” “possibilities,” and “signatures” in between). While Antin is clearly drawing on the form of \textit{Cardfile} and its reference to systems for ordering books, she departs from the earlier model in that her work is not self-reflexive. For an analysis of \textit{Cardfile}, see Dan Graham, “The Artist as Bookmaker [II]: The Book as Object,” \textit{Arts Magazine} 41, no. 8 (Summer 1967): 23. For the impact of \textit{Cardfile} on early Conceptual art, see Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, Alexander Alberro, Thierry de Duve, Martha Buskirk, Yve-Alain Bois, “Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp,” \textit{October} 70: The Duchamp Effect (Autumn 1994): 126–146.

\textsuperscript{55} For an in-depth analysis of the social, political and psychic stakes of sibling relationships, see Juliet Mitchell, \textit{Siblings: Sex and Violence} (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).
“sisterhood is power.” At this time Antin too found strength and inspiration in sisterhood. Southern California’s epicenter of sisterhood was the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles, and although she lived one hundred miles south, Antin was affiliated with the cooperative through her close friendships with Woman’s Building co-founder Arlene Raven and members Ruth Iskin and Suzanne Lacy. Her work was also included in several events at the Woman’s Building soon after it opened. In a recent interview Antin recalls that her affiliation with women artists made her feel at home artistically in San Diego:

I started making connections with people, especially with women artists. That was, I think, one of the first really meaningful things that happened. I remember Suzanne Lacy, Arlene Raven—these people were in L.A.—and then I was also meeting people here. Martha Rosler was an old friend from New York. She came to San Diego to study in grad school, and Suzanne, Arlene, and Marty were my closest friends here…Eventually, I didn’t feel so isolated and that happened through our feminist art concerns.

In 1972 Antin and the artist Ida Horowitz (later Appelbroog) formed an artists group for women. For approximately one year, the group would meet weekly for twenty to forty-five minutes during which they would collaborate on sculptural performances, which Antin describes as “improvising out of each other’s actions, movements, contact, trying

---

56 In 1974 Antin did two live performances, *Eleanor 1954* and *The Ballerina Goes to the Big Apple*; in 1975 she led a discussion on autobiographical art as part of a three-day conference, “Personal & Public Ritual: A Conference about Women & Performance Art”; and in 1977 her video *The Adventures of A Nurse* was screened as part of the program “7 Evenings of Video by Women.”

to work harmoniously together—or not….a sort of ‘tuning’ to other people.” This was
the context in which Antin made the next work I will consider, *Four Transactions* (1972).

As was the case with *Domestic Peace*, *Four Transactions* entailed acts of covert
performance. Antin planned four actions that subtly transgressed the etiquette of feminist
consciousness-raising groups; she typed up—or scripted—her actions on 8 ½ x 11-inch
paper, had the documents notarized, and then carried out the actions during four
consecutive meetings of her women artists group (figs. 2.12 & 2.13). The first action,
“Withdrawal #1,” required Antin to remain seated for the duration of the meeting,
regardless of what others were doing. The second action, “Withdrawal #2,” entailed a
posture of disrespect with relation to others—she would only address the women in the
group from the side or rear, but never from the front. *Four Transactions* reached a
crescendo in the third action of the project, “Encounter #1,” when Antin designated
herself the group’s “ombudsman,” a role that “will necessitate me pointing out to each
member of the group, and in any manner I choose a particular failing she displays in
relation to the others.” What constituted a failing was left open—it could be “of an
ephemeral sort such as personal bugginess taken out on someone else” or it could be
graver such as “a rip-off of the entire group.” The one condition was that these actions
had to benefit the group: “I must always keep in mind that my statements are intended to
bring about more satisfactory behavior from the others and are never to be used for
egoistic purposes of my own.” If Antin had not carried out her assignment by the time the
group was ready to disperse she would prolong the meeting until the task was complete.

---

58 Fox, “A Dialogue with Eleanor Antin,” 207–208. In this interview Antin compares her
group’s activities to Grand Union’s work in the late 1970s in New York.
The last action of the work, “Encounter #2,” though provocative, did not demand confrontation: Antin would “come in drag” wearing clothes she would not typically wear, that is, “a green velvet maxi-dress, Spanish boots, and a brown suede gaucho hat from Saks 5th Avenue.” Also, she would not tell anyone it was her birthday, thereby preventing the display of affection from her sisters that would otherwise have occurred.

*Four Transactions* is centered on conflict in a community of women. Although Antin felt warmth for and affinities with the women in her artist's group, she distinguished herself from them through the provocative acts she performed. That these acts were small has significance for the work’s overall meaning. As opposed to Lee Lozano’s *No Title* (1967) in which the artist performed and documented her commitment to “boycott women,” Antin inserts a more moderate distance between herself and her female peers so that while positioning herself in tension with them, she can maintain a communal allegiance with them (fig. 2.14).

On the other end of the spectrum from Lozano’s work was the ethos of the Woman’s Building, which was founded—and to some extent depended for its survival—on ideals of a mutually supportive, collaborative, and cooperative community of women. Woman’s Building scholar Jenni Sorkin argues that “fueling the Building’s formation was the ideal of consensus. In seventies-era feminism, hierarchy was widely identified as a patriarchal form of governance. Instead, equality in decision-making and collaboration were seen as quintessential paradigms of community building, as was enthusiastic volunteerism, given the constant lack of financial resources.”

---

might all be regarded as positive, Sorkin notes that “the politics of this self-producing, self-assured, and amorphous ‘we’…became stultifying.” To this point, Sorkin cites a letter from 1976 written by Arlene Raven to another Woman’s Building co-founder, Sheila de Bretteville: “Somehow I feel the need to feel like a separate person instead of a cog in our group/organizational wheel, marching as I have been these last years to the sound of what I think is my duty.”

_Four Transactions_ falls between the models of total rejection of female affiliation as practiced by Lozano and the idealization of female community at the Woman’s Building. In _Four Transactions_ (and in _Domestic Peace_) Antin shows that while there is not inherent harmony among people who are biologically similar, functional relations can be maintained even without total consensus. Whereas Lisa Bloom has argued that _Four Transactions_ “stages the complicated relations of betrayal and power between women and reminds the viewer of the more unsightly side of feminism,” Antin’s model of a community that accommodates dissent and allows for—even expects—precarity actually points to a hopeful feminist future.

Chantal Mouffe’s model of agonistic pluralism has important implications for a variety of democratic struggles, including that of feminism. Agonistic pluralism accepts

---

60 Ibid., 69.
61 Ibid., 60.
62 Bloom, _Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art_, 70.
“ongoing confrontation” as vital to democracy’s existence. At its heart, Mouffe argues, conflictual thinking is inherent to democracy because progressive change can only be brought about when alternatives to the existing order—which are in conflict with that order—can be imagined. Furthermore, conflict is a prerequisite for the coagulation of collective identities around which rights are sought—that is, in order to create an “us” a group must envisage a “them” against which it defines its own specific experiences and priorities; a range of such groups presents an array of alternatives with which individuals can choose to identify. For Mouffe, then, democratic society is predicated on precarity, rather than plenitude, functioning only when there is “room for the expression of conflicting interests and values.” Within a framework of precarity, democratic society “aims at the creation of unity in a context of conflict and diversity.” Toward this end, Mouffe suggests that “the ‘other’ is no longer seen as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an


64 We can consider the dynamic Antin presents between herself and her mother through Jessica Benjamin’s conception of intersubjective relations between a mother and child. As Benjamin articulates it, “intersubjective theory sees the relationship between self and other, with its tension between sameness and difference, as a continual exchange of influence. It focuses, not on a linear movement from oneness to separateness, but on the paradoxical balance between them.” Benjamin, The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 49.


66 Ibid., 756.

67 Ibid., 755.
‘adversary,’ i.e. somebody with whose ideas we are going to struggle but whose right to defend those ideas we will not put into question.’”\(^{68}\) Even as adversaries are in disagreement, they “see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place.”\(^{69}\)

Appropriating Mouffe’s conception of agonistic pluralism, I contend that in *Four Transactions* Antin models a form of agonistic feminism.\(^{70}\) She instantiates a dynamics of differentiation contained within association, and performs a skepticism of consensus even as she is committed to her group’s shared endeavor. The embrace of difference was atypical in the field of early 1970s art informed by feminism, especially in southern California. For this reason, Antin did not announce to the women in her artists group that she was making *Four Transactions* at the time, nor did she show anyone its documentary component until her 1999 retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Explaining her choice to keep the work concealed Antin writes:

> at some point, the sense of community, no matter that it was transitory, must have brought out the troublemaker in me. I’m not a good joiner. So I did my 4 secret pieces, “The 4 Transactions.” But I liked everybody in the group, even the bad artists, and California feminism was supportive and you were supposed to be loving and what the hell, a part of me rebelled at being good. But I never told the group, I never told anybody until Howard Fox and the art critic, Lisa Bloom, happened to see the piece among my older conceptual work when Howard and I were choosing works for my 1999 retrospective at the LA County Museum of Art ….I had hidden the piece away because the “nice” part of me was ashamed of it.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., 755.

\(^{69}\) Mouffe, *On the Political*, 20

\(^{70}\) For an analysis of agonistic feminism that draws on Hannah Arendt’s conception of agonism (by which Mouffe is informed), see Bonnie Honig, “Toward An Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, 215–235.
It seemed like a betrayal. Everybody would think I was a bad feminist. Sort of like a little kid tormenting the neighbor's cat and keeping it secret.\textsuperscript{71}

A survey that Ruth Iskin, Lucy Lippard, and Arlene Raven circulated in art publications and by mail in 1976 illuminates the climate within which Antin made—and hid—\textit{Four Transactions}. The survey asked, “If you consider yourself a feminist, would you respond by using one 8 ½ x 11 [inch] page to share your ideas about what feminist art is or could be.”\textsuperscript{72} The authors of the project received over 200 responses (almost exclusively from women) in the form of poetry, prose, drawings, collages, photographs, résumés, quotations from feminist writers, and dictionary definitions the respondents deemed relevant to the matter at hand.\textsuperscript{73} These documents and images were featured in the exhibition \textit{What is Feminist Art?} at the Woman’s Building in February 1977, which was mounted as a complement to the contemporaneous exhibition \textit{Women Artists 1550–1950} at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Almost without exception, the respondents’ conception of feminist art was predicated on a fixed notion of gender. Judy Chicago wrote that feminist art “reaches out and affirms women and validates our experience and makes us feel good about ourselves.”\textsuperscript{74} For Harmony Hammond feminist art was “not just about women’s experience,” but it was “by women, for women.”\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{71} Eleanor Antin, email message to author, October 29, 2010.

\textsuperscript{72} Woman’s Building records, 1970–1992, box 15, folder 35.

\textsuperscript{73} The only response from a man that I have located was submitted by the artist Douglas Huebler. Woman’s Building records, 1970–1992, box 25, folder 3.

\textsuperscript{74} Woman’s Building records, 1970–1992, box 24, folder 34.

\textsuperscript{75} Woman’s Building records, 1970–1992, box 25, folder 3.
Rosemary Mayer loosened the bond between feminism and biology when she wrote that while “feminist art is artwork which is either intended to further the position and possibilities of women in society or to explore the problems and pleasures relating to women in society,” this goal is not rooted in the body of its maker, for “all work done by women artists is not necessarily feminist. A feminist could, in her work, be primarily involved in concerns other than feminism. Neither is it the case that feminist art would have to be done by a woman.”

Martha Rosler’s answer is the most anomalous in the survey response pool, for it articulates feminist art primarily as a socially-grounded aesthetic-political position, which, as part of its project, takes into account the contingency of gender. The title of Rosler’s text, “what feminist art is or might be…,” looks toward the future, suggesting that the author believes feminist art has not yet reached its potential. Rosler writes:

I think that feminist art is, most fundamentally, a means of provoking critical awareness….feminism has contributed heavily to the assault on Modernism, by insisting on opening the field of attention to include more than the “picture plane,” in both the making and seeing of art. A work is to be taken as part of an on-going, socially rooted & socially determined, dialogue. Its partisanship is revealed, & art is whisked back to earth….I think that all we can know of female consciousness is that it is a product of one’s time & place & particular position in the socioeconomically defined world. If so, then ideology—roughly, social myths & explanations—plays a large part in determining human consciousness & expression, & a universalist conception of femaleness is less useful than a particularist one.

In *Domestic Peace* and *Four Transactions* Antin challenged essentialist and universalist conceptions of feminism that were predicated on the conviction that all

---


differences between female subjects were subordinate to the shared trait of femaleness.

Antin’s position in these works reverberates in Judith Butler’s argument that “any effort to give universal or specific content to the category of women, presuming that the guarantee of solidarity is required in advance, will necessarily produce factionalization, and that ‘identity’ as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement.”78 Indeed, what follows from an acceptance of different and destabilized subjects is the potential for differing—even conflicting—feminisms. Butler helps us to see the value of this predicament. She asks:

Through what exclusions has the feminist subject been constructed, and how do those excluded domains return to haunt the “integrity” and “unity” of the feminist “we?” And how is it that the very category, the subject, the “we,” that is supposed to be presumed for the purpose of solidarity, produces the very factionalization it is supposed to quell? Do women want to become subjects on the model which requires and produces an anterior region of abjection, or must feminism become a process which is self-critical about the processes that produce and destabilize identity categories?79

Butler equates feminist politics with putting into question the normative foundations upon which social systems are built, possibly to undo those foundations, but more importantly to keep them open to contestation, and thus vital. By showing that contestation and feminism need not be at odds, Antin’s work offers promise for this vitality.

Once it is denied that there is a single mechanism of women’s oppression, an immense field of action opens up for feminist politics. One can then perceive the importance of

78 Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism’” in Feminists Theorize the Political, 15.

79 Ibid., 14–15.
punctual struggles against any oppressive form of constructing sexual differences, be it at the level of law, of the family, of social policy, or of the multiple cultural forms through which the category of “the feminine” is constantly produced.

- Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe

The ways in which Antin’s work challenges strictly gendered denominations of subjecthood places her work in the lineage of art informed by the postmodernist feminism that would coalesce in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Drawing on psychoanalysis’s claim that sexual difference is determined by meanings attached to anatomical difference and not by those differences themselves, art informed by postmodernist feminism emphasized the socially constructed nature of masculinity and femininity. What followed from this logic was that men are not naturally the oppressors and women are not naturally the oppressed; rather, masculine and feminine subject positions have been constructed around this power dynamic.

These ideas were importantly manifested in the exhibition *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* at the New Museum in New York in 1984–85. Curated by Kate Linker, with Jane Weinstock as curator of film and video, *Difference* included work by twenty artists, both male and female, that explored the reciprocal relationship between

---


81 After it was shown at the New Museum (December 8, 1984–February 10, 1985), *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* traveled to The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago (March 3–April 7, 1985) and to the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (July 19–September 1, 1985). At the time when this dissertation was written, the archives for *Difference*, housed at the New Museum, were not publicly accessible.
representation and sexuality. Through a variety of methods and mediums, these artists posited visual and other means of representation as a system of signification that is shaped by sexuality; at the same time they presented sexuality not as a fixed biologically-determined identity, but as a constellation of meanings that is informed by the representations that filter through the subject’s social world.

The positions put forward in the art on view in *Difference* were also framed discursively in the exhibition catalogue in which Craig Owens contends that “if these artists all regard sexuality as a pose, it is not in the sense of position or posture, but of imposition, imposture; judging from the work exhibited here, neither the masculine nor the feminine position would appear to be a tenable position.” This conception of a destabilized sexuality was strongly influenced by psychoanalytic theory, which entered feminist discourse—especially in New York and London—in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Psychoanalytic theory also forms the foundation for Jacqueline Rose’s essay in the *Difference* catalogue. Rose argues that one of the “chief drives” of the work in the

---

82 The artists included in *Difference* were: Max Almy, Ray Barrie, Judith Barry, Raymond Bellour, Dara Birnbaum, Victor Burgin, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Cecilia Condit, Jean-Luc Godard, Hans Haacke, Mary Kelly, Silvia Kolbowski, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Yve Lomax, Stuart Marshall, Martha Rosler, Philippe Venault, Jeff Wall, and Marie Yates.


84 Particularly important to psychoanalytic feminism was Jacques Lacan’s theories of the subject’s formation within a linguistic field and his rearticulation of Freud’s interpretations of sexuality and desire.
show is “to expose the fixed nature of sexual identity as a fantasy and, in the same
gesture, to trouble, breakup, or rupture the visual field before our eyes.”

Rose’s imbrication of a ruptured visual field and the troubled stability of identity
brings us back to the ways that Antin complicated essentialist conceptions of feminism in
the works this chapter has addressed. Once feminism allows for subjects who are
determined by a constellation of traits and experiences, the possibilities for consensus are
increasingly rare; indeed, consensus becomes a fantasy that requires repression in order
to be upheld. The precarious whole, on the other hand, offers democratic promise. What
follows then is the necessity for feminist structures that create alliance in the face of
difference—or, as is modeled in Domestic Peace and Four Transactions, kinship despite
discord.

My aim in positing a link between the work made by Antin in San Diego in the
early 1970s and the work made by postmodernist artists mostly based in London and
New York in the late 1970s and early 1980s is not so much to argue for the significance
of who came first; rather, I want to complicate a binary that is structured around the early
1970s in California and the late 1970s and early 1980s in New York. Although I would
not collapse the considerable differences between the work being made in these discrete
geographic and temporal contexts, I do contend that there is more connective tissue
between these sites than has previously been recognized.

Hal Foster has articulated the stakes of permitting historical continuities rather

---

and Sexuality; reprinted in Rose, Sexuality in the Field of Vision (London: Verso, 2005),
227–228.
than insisting on rupture narratives in a manner that is applicable to the matter at hand. In “Re: Post” Foster argues that one of the problems with rupture narratives is that their “rhetoric of discontinuity” rests on the perception of a stable past that can be tidily left behind. Foster makes this argument in the context of postmodernism, challenging the absolute degree to which postmodernism’s primary spokespeople sever the field from modernism. Given that Foster wrote “Re: Post” in 1982, before sexuality had entered postmodernist discourse, it is worth returning to his intervention with feminism in mind.

If we grant porosity between the different frameworks for art informed by feminism, even as we allow for those frameworks’ differences, we open the possibility for a feminist art history that is understood not as a fixed teleological evolution but rather as a series of shifting synchronic constellations—the sorts of relations, even, that one might find among siblings. This model of art history is a bit messy and unwieldy; it is harder to tame within the structures of a syllabus or textbook. But perhaps its real challenge and opportunity are that it demands the assimilation of difference and conflict; it increases the possibilities for an agonistic art history.


A small black-and-white photograph shows distant waves crashing against the shore on an overcast day (fig. 3.1). In the upper register of the image the horizon is just barely visible, the sky a slightly paler grey than the ocean over which it hovers. The image is mostly filled by the sandy beach, leading to the shore, which registers footprints headed in that direction; the footprints function as invitations—a walking path to follow—into the image. The agents of the footprints are visible as well: 100 black rubber boots stand in a neat horizontal line facing, as though contemplating, the infinite sea before them. 

100 Boots Facing the Sea was the inaugural image of Antin’s postcard series, 100 Boots (1971–73). The work consists of fifty-one postcards that the artist

1 After looking into the stock of various boot distributors in America and Hong Kong, Antin bought her boots from Pacific Surplus in San Diego. Eleanor Antin to Henri Ehrsam, n.d., Eleanor Antin papers, 1953-2010, box 1, folder 28, The Getty Research Institute.

2 Mark Godfrey has described 100 Boots Facing the Sea as a “reworking of one of the most famous (anti)compositional modes of 1960s sculpture (Andre’s Lever, 1966).” Henry Sayre has also addressed 100 Boots with relation to Andre’s work, suggesting that “Antin literalized Carl Andre’s arrangements of modular geometric units, which invited the viewer to walk on them or suggested paths across open space.” While the conception and distribution of 100 Boots as a series of postcards is central to the project, the implied sculptural dimension of the work illuminates Antin’s roots in Minimalism. Inviting viewers to project themselves bodily into the image, Antin engages Minimalism’s preoccupation with the body of the spectator and, like Andre’s fire bricks or Donald Judd’s plywood boxes, the boots accumulate as “one thing after another.” However, as she did in Carving: A Traditional Sculpture, in 100 Boots, Antin adapts the formal logic of Minimalism to her own interests, replacing its abstractions with references that are at once personal and political. Godfrey, “Image Structures,” Artforum 43, no. 6 (February
mailed between March 15, 1971 and July 9, 1973 to 1,000 recipients around the world (fig. 3.2).

*100 Boots* drew on the conventions of mail art that had emerged over the previous decade and was modeled on the literary form of the picaresque—an episodic, often disjointed narrative that follows the exploits of its protagonist.³ Between the beach in San Diego and the streets of New York Antin’s boots engage in a number of activities and adventures, from the mundane to the exotic. Early in the series, the boots march in sync and with purpose down the aisle of a supermarket, making a beeline for the Cornflakes (fig. 3.3). Later on, at ease, they assume a more haphazard formation around the edge of a pond; a few remain upright, but most are lounging on their sides soaking up the sun (fig. 3.4). The boots inhabit a range of environments, including empty suburban streets, factory plants, and wooded clearings (figs. 3.5–3.7). We see their penchant for mischief when they jump the fence protecting a power plant on which a sign reads “trespassing, loitering, tampering forbidden by law” (fig. 3.8). At one point the boots go to war.⁴ In keeping with the diversity of the boots’ activities, there is a wide range of form, style, and mood in the images that comprise *100 Boots*. The boots are shown during the day and night, inside as well as outside, prominent in their environment as well as lost in it; in

---

³ Antin explains that she chose the form of the picaresque for its “open narrative…There isn't the straight jacket of the traditional novel. You can surprise yourself and your readers.” Eleanor Antin, email message to author, March 21, 2012.

⁴ Vicki Goldberg relates the trajectory of *100 Boots* to socioeconomic class, noting their descent “from middle-class military to scruffy bohemia.” Goldberg, “As a Feminist, a King; as a Ballerina, a Klutz,” *New York Times*, August 8, 1999.
some images the boots are not featured in the frame, while in others they are joined by people. *100 Boots*’s recipients included “artists, writers, critics, curators, friends, and friends of friends” scattered in the United States, Canada, South America, and Europe. Everyone on the mailing list received a complete set of postcards unless they were added late to the list, or, in rare cases, asked to be removed from it.

All of the images that comprise *100 Boots* were conceived and composed by Antin and photographed by her friend, the artist Philip (Phel) Steinmetz. Antin mailed the postcards in intervals that ranged from three days to five weeks depending on what she determined were the “tempo and logic demands” of the narrative. The caption for each postcard includes the date and time it was made and the date it was mailed. The two chronologies are inconsistent with one another—that is, the order in which the images were produced does not correspond exactly to the order in which they were distributed.

The initial impetus for *100 Boots* was practical: Antin wanted to distribute her work to an audience without leaving the comfort of her own home. The year before she began producing *100 Boots*, she had spent three cold winter weeks in New York City organizing, paying for, and arranging staff to tend her own solo show after the gallery that represented her had suddenly closed. Of this time she recalls, “I was exhausted, buggy, lonely. There had to be a way to get art in front of people other than sticking it in

_____________________________


6 Ibid.
between the blank white walls of New York galleries. Why not the mail? In those days, all I needed was a six-cent stamp for a first-class postcard.”

As Lucy Lippard wrote in 1973, “one of the important things about the new dematerialized art is that it provides a way of getting the power structure out of New York and spreading it around to wherever the artist feels like being at that time.” This was one of the reasons that distributing art through the mail had become a favored practice of Fluxus and Conceptualist artists. Ray Johnson, often credited as the inventor of mail art, began using this medium in 1958 with his work *Please Send To*, and the New York Correspondence School (NYCS) that Johnson initiated was active by the early 1960s. At its height, the NYCS consisted of seventy-five to one hundred participants, including such artists as Ken Friedman, Dick Higgins, and Ed Plunkett, who exchanged objects, ephemera, and ideas through the postal system. As Fluxus coalesced in the 1960s correspondence art and mail art expanded into new forms such as newsletters, periodicals, postcards, stamps, and stationary. Friedman writes, “Fluxus was the first group of artists to understand the potential of the postal system as a world-spanning, cost-effective distribution system.” In 1966 a Fluxus Postal Kit was developed, which even

---

7 Eleanor Antin, “Remembering 100 Boots,” in *100 Boots*, n.p.


9 While she was distributing *100 Boots*, Antin received mail art from a number of mail artists, including Ray Johnson, Ken Friedman, Anna Banana, and General Idea.

included a Fluxpost cancelation mark. By 1970 the phenomenon of art’s distribution through the mail was gaining institutional exposure, including, notably, an exhibition curated by Marcia Tucker at the Whitney Museum.¹¹

Unlike many of her fellow mail artists, however, early on Antin determined that 100 Boots’s final destination would be the Museum of Modern Art in New York. From May 30 to July 8 of 1973 the full set of postcards was shown at MoMA along with additional photographs of the boots’ adventures in New York and an installation of the boots themselves. The exhibition was mounted as part of MoMA’s “Project Series,” a program that had recently been initiated to showcase contemporary art.¹²

100 Boots is one of Antin’s best-known works of Conceptual art. The features of the project that have garnered the most attention are its narrative whimsy, anthropomorphic charm, and especially the fact that it was mailed over such an extended period, and thus subtly and unpredictably infiltrated the daily lives of its recipients. 100 Boots has not, however, been sufficiently interpreted with relation to the political context

¹¹ Antin’s use of narrative—and narrative uncertainty—in 100 Boots distinguishes the project from most of its mail art precedents. Because of its evocation of narrative, On Kawara’s I Got Up (1968–79) has a correlation to 100 Boots. Kawara sent two picture postcards from his location each day to recipients around the world for a nine-year period. Following 100 Boots Martha Rosler incorporated narrative into three “serial postcard novels”: Service: A Trilogy on Colonization (1974–76); A Budding Gourmet (1978); and McTowers Maid (1978).

¹² Other artists featured in the inaugural years of the “Projects” exhibitions included Carl Andre, Mel Bochner, Chuck Close, Sam Gilliam, Nancy Graves, Richard Long, Liliana Porter, Richard Tuttle, and Robert Whitman. In 1973 an art critic wrote, “at present, there’s more of photographic interest going on in the Museum of Modern Art’s ‘Projects’ series than in the Department of Photography itself. Things have been dull upstairs but the ‘Projects’ exhibits have included Liliana Porter’s trompe-l’œil photographic string sculptures and 100 Boots (staged by Antin, photographed by Philip Steinmetz).” Greg Houghton, “Shows We've Seen,” Popular Photography (October 1973): 67.
in which it was made, an aspect of the work that has received no more than passing 
mention. This oversight has likely occurred because 100 Boots’s visual wit and narrative 
play distract from the work’s bleaker dimension: for every pair of boots present in the 
images, there is a missing body, and as the boots accumulate with every new narrative 
installment, so too do the absences for which each pair stands.

Karen Moss has suggested that Antin’s photographs of “unoccupied boots 
may…pose a…somber reference to the legions of ‘absent bodies’ of young men who 
perished during that time in the Vietnam War.” In fact, the missing bodies that 
accumulate over the course of 100 Boots constitute only one of a series of absences that 
structures the project: the narrative that frames 100 Boots is unstable—it is fragmentary, 
comprised of separate images that are grouped into seemingly discontinuous, potentially 
rеarrangeable episodes and isolated from one another by the time that elapsed between 
mailings; furthermore, although 100 Boots was substantial in its duration, the medium of 
the project, paper postcards, is fragile (subject to marks, bends, and tears) and 
impermanent—in Antin’s words, the postcards were “biodegradable.”

———

Henry Sayre has also noted the parallels between some of the activities in which Antin’s 
boots engage and contemporaneous social trends and events, including the Vietnam War 

Antin’s emphasis on the “biodegradable” nature of 100 Boots invites us to read the work as a counterpoint to the irrevocable interventions into the earth enacted by land artists working at the time such as Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria, Robert Smithson, and others. Unlike the spills, cuts, and constructions performed by these artists, Antin’s boots left no traces and the evidence of their exploits would eventually disintegrate, not unlike the bodies on whose absences 100 Boots centers.

Antin’s investment in absence is further illuminated when considered alongside her interpretation of Ed Ruscha’s Conceptualist work Twentysix Gasoline Stations (1963) (fig. 3.9–3.11). In 1973, the year she completed 100 Boots, Antin wrote, “[Ruscha’s] structure is deliberately sparse…and filled with holes, and it is here that actual experience resides. Suggestions are offered by the material he does give and spaces are left for us to enter.” In 100 Boots, by using as her narrative’s protagonist rubber boots of the sort into which most people have at some point slipped their feet, Antin creates images into which the spectator can physically project herself. She invites the viewer into the image in art historical terms in 100 Boots Facing the Sea by evoking the tradition in German Romantic painting of rückenfigur, in which a figure is shown with his back to the spectator contemplating a view that is available to the viewer as well; in this position, the figure serves as a surrogate for the spectator, allowing her to project herself onto him and

15 Antin has compared the extended duration of 100 Boots to the physical expansiveness of Michael Heizer’s work. Cindy Nemser, “Eleanor Antin,” in Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists (New York: Scribner, 1975), 238.

into the image (fig. 3.12). From the start of 100 Boots, then, as was common in Antin’s work of this period, the artist establishes a reciprocal relationship between the image and its viewer.

Whereas in the 1960s artistic responses to the Vietnam War centered on explicit and aggressive antiwar images and visual messaging, by the 1970s as the war endured—and America remained involved in it—artists sought new ways to make their work a site of protest. For example, some artists attempted to intervene in economies of cultural distribution, while others addressed the Vietnam War not as an isolated event, but as a symptom of larger social and political crises. Antin, who was committed to the antiwar effort, developed an aesthetics of precarity.17

In Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence, Judith Butler’s collection of essays written in the wake of September 11, 2001 and specifically “in response to the conditions of heightened vulnerability and aggression that followed from those events,” the author wonders “what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry

---

17 Like many of her fellow artists in the 1960s and 1970s Antin was active in the antiwar movement, participating in marches, petition drives, and art auctions to raise money for the antiwar effort. Although this effort was not as widespread in San Diego as it was in larger liberal cities such as San Francisco or New York, there was enough local furor over the war that the Republican National Convention of August 1972 was relocated from San Diego to Miami because, as Special Assistant to the President Jeb Magruder recounted, it seemed that San Diego was “particularly vulnerable” to “massive demonstrations,” given “the thousands of indigenous antiwar activists in Southern California.” Jeb Stuart Magruder, An American Life: One Man’s Road to Watergate (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 199–200, 250; cited in Tom Wells, The War Within: America’s Battle Over Vietnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 549. In fact Antin had been planning an artwork for this convention before it was canceled. As she wrote to Jane Necol, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, “since they’ve changed their plans about coming to San Diego I shall spend at least some of my time at the beach instead of in jail.” Eleanor Antin to Jane Necol, n.d., Curatorial exhibitions files, exh. #1035, the Museum of Modern Art Archives.
for war.” For Butler, the September 11 attacks presented “an opportunity for a reconsideration of United States hubris and the importance of establishing more radically egalitarian international ties.” Although such a reconsideration would entail that “narcissistic and grandiose fantasies” of world sovereignty be lost and mourned, Butler suggests that “from the subsequent experience of loss and fragility” might emerge “the possibilities of making different kinds of ties…that would crucially rearticulate the possibility of democratic political culture here and elsewhere.” In Butler’s estimation, then, states of precarity have the potential to be ethically productive. Antin’s *100 Boots* supports Butler’s belief, for what I have called the work’s aesthetics of precarity figured an alternative to the aspirations of conquest and fantasies of invincibility embedded in the rhetoric of military triumphalism that was prevalent at the time, feeding, fueling, and propelling the Vietnam War.

And whereas some forms of public mourning are protracted and ritualized, stoking nationalist fervor, reiterating the conditions of loss and victimization that come to justify a more or less permanent war, not all forms of mourning lead to that conclusion.

- Judith Butler

Artists began responding to America’s participation in the Vietnam War immediately. In her account of the development of American artistic practice in the

---

19 Ibid., 40.  
20 Ibid., 40.  
21 Ibid., xix.
Vietnam War era, Julia Bryan-Wilson cites 1965 and 1966 as key years for the emergence of a collective antiwar effort by artists. In 1965 four hundred artists, critics and novelists affiliated with the Writers and Artists Protest group signed a letter published in the *New York Times* urging the Times’ readership to “end your silence.” In 1966 the *Artists Tower of Protest* or, as it is more commonly known, the *Peace Tower* was erected at the corner of La Cienega and Sunset boulevards in Los Angeles, where it stood for three months (fig. 3.13). The *Peace Tower* was a six-story-tall structure designed by the sculptor Mark di Suvero and built by di Suvero and other Los Angeles-based artists. It served as a support for hundreds of two-foot-square panels on which artists from all parts of the world offered images and messages protesting the Vietnam War and pleading for peace.

Throughout the late 1960s, in addition to artists’ collective antiwar efforts, many individual artists used their work as a site to address their rage and fear over America’s involvement in the war. In Nancy Spero’s *War Series* (1966–1970), small gouache paintings on paper depict phallic bombs wreaking havoc on land and bodies alike (fig. 3.14). Between 1966 and 1967 Judith Bernstein made a series of paintings and assemblages in which she combined vociferous antiwar graffiti that she gleaned from men’s bathroom stalls with images of sexual obscenity and bodily defilement. Ed Kienholz’s *The Portable War Memorial* (1968) is a large-scale tableau that uses objects and images to suggest the imbrication of American military imperialism and consumer culture and to put into relief the violence that underlies both spheres (fig. 3.15).

---

By the early 1970s when Antin began making *100 Boots*, the strategies by which artists addressed the war were changing. Bryan-Wilson tracks a shift from the production of posters and antiwar art to modes of withdrawal and a “motif of work stoppage” such as strikes and various acts of removing art from exhibitions and other mainstream channels of economic circulation.\(^{23}\) According to Bryan-Wilson, these tactics were meant to show solidarity with the strikes that were integral to the antiwar movement and they marked “a refusal to let things proceed as normal” in the face of a war that was becoming the norm.\(^{24}\) For artists who continued to make and distribute work in the later Vietnam period one strategy was to address the war through less explicit and specific terms. Carrie Lambert-Beatty writes that in her 1970 dance *WAR*, Yvonne Rainer “actively sought out ways to insert distance in her engagement with Vietnam,” instantiating a model of “spectatorship that acknowledges distance.”\(^{25}\) Lambert-Beatty distinguishes Rainer’s model of performative distance from “the Brechtian resistance to empathic absorption,” arguing that Rainer’s project was primarily grounded in an ethical insistence on “the ongoing existence of events outside one’s immediate situated experience” thereby proposing an “aesthetics of concurrence.”\(^{26}\) These practices attempted to think about the implications of the Vietnam War beyond its literal acts of violence and desecration.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 153.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 117–118.


\(^{26}\) Ibid., 247.
Antin’s aesthetics of precarity participated in this expanded field of antiwar artistic practice. At no point in *100 Boots* does Antin directly address the Vietnam War. However, the work’s iconography of missing persons, its narrative instability, and the frailty of its medium give form to lack and loss—experiences that were, in official rhetoric and actions, aggressively disavowed and repressed for the sake of upholding myths of national invincibility that invigorated supporters of the war.

In *100 Boots* Antin introduced narrative only to fragment it. The work grew in episodic installments. By the end of the project—and retrospectively—these episodes fit into the larger story of the boots’ journey from San Diego to New York. During the project, however, the episodes were experienced by their recipients as disjointed pieces difficult to assimilate into a whole: in one postcard the boots proceed around a suburban street corner in single file and soon thereafter pass by oil rigs; they go from a gambling hall to the woods, from a military mission to a series of adventures in New York City. Antin has said of *100 Boots*’s pacing, “I deliberately employed a slow tempo, about 4 to 5 weeks between installments, specifically to exploit the uncertainty about whether or not it was a long work. Sort of a Judson technique….I was curious just how long I could allow interference in an art work and not destroy its wholeness, or in this case, its continuity.”

The fact that *100 Boots*’s recipients engaged with the mail on a daily basis meant that the uncertainty of the project was pervasive. As John Perreault noted in 1973, “what first I read as a not too clever joke became part of my everyday life, lived by beginning each

---

day with a cautious gander at the mailbox.”28 For this reason in particular, Perreault designated 100 Boots “one of the best works of its kind.”29

Fragmentation had long been a central operation in Antin’s art. Some of her earliest works were part of a series she describes as her “valentine paintings” in which multiple fragments of valentines, dispersed among canvases of different sizes and shapes, were meant to be assimilated in the viewer’s mind. Shortly thereafter Antin began a series of collages, Fragments from Roissy (1966–67), which were comprised of images from disparate and discontinuous moments throughout art history brought together in a single composition (fig. 3.16). Fragments from Roissy indicates that from early on disrupting tidy conceptions of history (and especially art history) was a priority for Antin. Antin’s next engagement of fragmentation was in Movie Boxes (1968–69) which consists of nine three-by-two-foot metal cases with a glass door, each of which holds an arrangement of three to four framed black and white photographs plus a hand-lettered placard bearing a single word (fig. 3.17). Together the images and words were meant to evoke movies. As Antin wrote in 1972, “though these movies give the appearance of being objects, their movie properties reside only in the conceptual connection between the individual stills which constitutes the plot of any given movie. No movie is anything

28 John Perreault, “These Boots Were Made for Mailing,” Village Voice, June 7, 1973, 39. Perreault’s choice of words—“a cautious gander”—to describe the way he looked for 100 Boots in his mailbox evokes the way one might have waited for word of loved ones at war.

29 Ibid., 39.
more than a handful of images offered to the mind. I have only removed the padding.”

Antin’s interest in the ways that juxtapositions of still images might suggest narrative and cinematic time also shaped *100 Boots*.

The fissures in the narrative of *100 Boots* reiterate the voids that punctuate each image. For example, in the third image of the series, *100 Boots at the Bank*, the boots are shot at close range; a primary feature of the image is the formal rhythm of oval openings at the top of each boot that the legs of its wearer would normally obscure (fig. 3.18). The composition in this image suggests a ceremonial salute—the boots are arranged in a tidy formation before a building whose patriotic allegiances are indicated by the California and American flags that enter the frame near the upper left corner. Given what was occurring beyond the image’s frame, the image posits an equation or causal relationship between patriotism and absence; a ghostliness permeates the image. Following *100 Boots at the Bank*, image after image shows ghosted boots as they gather on the porch of an abandoned house in disrepair, cross paths with a flock of ducks, pair off in the lot of a drive-in movie theater, and congregate around a freshly dug grave at a ramshackle cemetery. The accumulation of these voids, mounting over an extended duration, mirrors the sense of endlessness that by the early 1970s marked the Vietnam War and its casualties. The absence of the bodies in the boots is echoed in the mostly unpopulated scenes that the boots inhabit, which cumulatively conjure a barren world.

---

30 In the same essay cited in the body of this text, Antin insisted that the movies should be shown all together as a “coherent FILM FESTIVAL to make it understandable. For an appropriate exhibition it would be necessary to insist on the presence of the regular movie reviews, Sarris, Mekas, Farber, Phelps, Kael, Adler, Schlessinger though it might not be inappropriate to invite the art press as well.” Eleanor Antin, “Proposal or a Film Festival Exhibition,” *Art & Artists* 6 (March 1972): 47
The ghosted boots that stand in deference to the flag recall a sculpture that Antin had made in 1969 as part of her first series of “consumer goods portraits,” *California Lives.* The series consists of twelve groupings of four to nine brand-new, American-manufactured consumer products arranged to evoke a person, either real or invented. Antin selected and purchased the goods from a Sears Roebuck catalogue in keeping with the practice of shopping over the telephone, which was, to the artist’s surprise as a New Yorker newly transplanted to San Diego, widespread in suburban southern California. Collectively, *California Lives* depicts subjects that were for Antin archetypes of California. Antin has described *Tim,* one of the sculptures from *California Lives,* as “the quintessential Marine recruit” of the sort she regularly encountered in San Diego:

They would line these kids up at Lundbergh Field on their way to boot camp at Pendleton. Were these the murderous soldiers we hated? The monsters who napalmed people and defoliated forests? These poor, sad, pasty-faced children. It was like the triumph of white bread. And I thought, oh, my God, this is pathetic. They were the sorriest physical specimens you ever saw in your life. I felt so sorry for them, I mean, I was still profoundly against the war, but now because it was going to kill these kids as well. I knew these people. I recognized them. These

---

31 The sculptures were exhibited at Gain Ground gallery in New York in early 1970.

32 This mode of representation evokes Francis Picabia’s objects portraits in which the artist would conjure a subject through a drawing of a given object that was related to the subject’s personality or work. As with Antin’s reference to Duchamp in *Blood of a Poet Box,* here we see, once again, the Dada precedent in her work. Antin’s consumer goods portraits also recall Daniel Spoerri’s *tableaux piéges* (trap pictures) in which the artist affixed everyday objects to the surfaces on which he found them—for example, he often glued plates, silverware, glasses and other remains of a meal to a table—and then hung these assemblages on the wall. Spoerri began this practice in the 1950s in the context of his participation in the French nouveau realisme movement, Antin would likely have come into contact with him in the 1960s when Spoerri was involved with Fluxus.

were my neighbors, the kids at the checkout counter, guys who pumped gas. It was a profound awakening, and it all became a part of my art.\textsuperscript{34}

The primary element of \textit{Tim} is a packed duffel bag, suggesting a marine ready to deploy, though the marine himself is nowhere in sight (fig. 3.19). The bag is propped up against a wall. Sitting on top of the marine’s bare necessities are a car-racing magazine and a gift basket of dried fruit and preserves; the frivolity of this juxtaposition is poignant within the larger context of the work’s suggested narrative.

Although the poignancy of this project is predicated on the accumulation of stuff, \textit{California Lives} is suffused by a sense of absence. At the time when the project debuted Gerrit Henry surmised that the installation was “evidently intended to give the spectator a feeling of someone he didn’t know having said ‘Be right back,’” while David Antin succinctly described the works as “portraits from which the sitter walked away.”\textsuperscript{35} Both critics evoke a viewer who experiences abandonment as he engages with an image.

Recalling the period when she made \textit{California Lives}, Antin writes, “it was the height of the Vietnam War and California was Nixon’s world, lethal and very sad. After all, San Clemente was only a short car ride away up the coast on Route 5, separated from the cluster of little beach towns where I lived by the Camp Pendleton Marine Base, the San

\textsuperscript{34} Howard N. Fox, “A Dialogue with Eleanor Antin,” in \textit{Eleanor Antin} (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999), 203.

Onofre Nuclear Power Plant, and the check station for illegal aliens…It was like living in a Chekhov play—sitting around while the Redwoods fell down.”

Antin’s ghosted soldiers and marine prefigure a work that Martha Rosler made the year after *100 Boots* was completed. While she was working on the first of three “serial postcard novels” of her own, Rosler produced *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974–75). In *The Bowery* she juxtaposed twenty-one photographs that mostly depict unpopulated storefronts and doorways in New York’s Bowery skid row neighborhood, with twenty-one text panels bearing typewritten adjectives for drunkenness (figs. 3.20 & 3.21). Rosler made the work in opposition to conventional systems of representing economically disenfranchised subjects that assume the guise of empathy, while reinforcing hierarchies of power. In her 1981 essay, “in, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography),” initially published in conjunction with *The Bowery*, Rosler observed, “documentary is a little like horror movies, putting a face on fear and transforming threat into fantasy, into imagery. One can handle imagery by leaving it behind. (*It is them, not us.*)” In *The Bowery*, fear is faceless, for the figure in each image is extracted from the ground. As with *100 Boots*, a ghostly quality pervades *The Bowery*, growing stronger as the empty storefronts and referent-less linguistic signifiers accumulate over the course of the work. As *The Bowery* progresses the words and imagery become increasingly bleaker, descending into, as Rosler has described the

---


work’s final affective tenor, “the baldness of stupor and death.” The last text panel states, “dead soldiers dead marines” (fig. 3.22). One of this text panel’s proximate images shows a cluster of empty bottles and cans nestled in—swept into—a corner formed by the end of a sidewalk and a chain link fence (fig. 3.23). This image is a notable departure from all the images that preceded it, which causes a stutter in the visual rhythm of the work: whereas in the previous images the photographer shoots straight ahead and from at least several feet away, here she turns her lens toward the ground and shows her object of representation from a closer perspective. The next and last image of the series, shot even closer, shows two bottles among some rubble, and offers virtually no indication of the photographer’s perspective (fig. 3.24). Without these visual cues the spectator cannot coordinate her body with relation to the image and thus Rosler uses compositional tactics to simulate a consequence of excess drinking.

Although as Craig Owens points out, in _The Bowery_ Rosler “denies the caption/text its conventional function of supplying the image with something it lacks,” we cannot ignore the ways the text panels and images make meaning in reciprocity with each other. Dead soldiers dead marines. In the context of the larger stakes of _The Bowery_—and taking into account the metonymic operations that have long guided Rosler’s artistic practice—the empty bottles are surrogates for the bodies of the

38 Ibid., 194.

disenfranchised soldiers and marines that Rosler refused to represent. Both Antin and Rosler foreground absence in their art of the late Vietnam period as a political and ethical aesthetic project that is deeply related to the social context in which the work was made.

By derision...is meant that you must refuse all methods of advertising merit, and hold that ridicule, obscurity and censure are preferable, for psychological reasons, to fame and praise. Directly badges, orders, or degrees are offered you, fling them back in the giver’s face.

-Virginia Woolf

Antin began shooting *100 Boots* on February 9, 1971. This was the day after Richard Nixon had ordered United States troops to invade Laos, an invasion that commenced with the deployment of fifty tons of bombs, incurring the deaths of thousands of soldiers on both sides in a single day. The Laos invasion was initiated only three months after Nixon had intensified bombings in North Vietnam; it was within a year of Nixon’s announcement that the United States’ had invaded Cambodia, the event that inspired the protests at Kent State University and Jackson State College where demonstrators were killed by the National Guard.

One organization that was especially active in its response to the United States’ growing involvement in the Vietnam War was Vietnam Veterans Against the War

---


42 On that day she shot the first three, the thirty-second, and the final images of the postcard series.
(VVAW), a collective of veterans for whom, as Marilyn Young writes, “struggling to end the war was the only way to make sense of the 365 days they had spent fighting it.”43 On April 24, 1971, a day of mass protests in Washington and San Francisco, John Kerry, the twenty-seven-year-old former navy lieutenant and leader of VVAW, offered a testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations committee. In this well-known speech, Kerry stated:

The country doesn’t realize it yet, but it has created a monster in the form of thousands of men who have been taught to deal and to trade in violence and who are given the chance to die for the biggest nothing in history….Each day to facilitate the process by which the United States washes her hands of Vietnam someone has to give up his life so that the United States doesn’t have to admit something that the entire world already knows…that we have made a mistake….How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?44

It is not only violence and death that Kerry names as tragedies of the war, but also hubris. Lives continue to be lost, he contends, so that the United States does not have to concede its failure of judgment.

As early as 1938, at the threshold of World War II, Virginia Woolf wrote her antiwar text *Three Guineas*, in which she warned that “vanity, egotism and megalomania” lie behind the political and so-called patriotic motives that lead to war.

Since then, scholars whose work draws on feminist psychoanalysis have held triumphalist aspirations, with their fantasies of invincibility, accountable for the militarism in which we remain entrenched. In her recent book on contemporary art and war Rosalyn Deutsche reminds us that in 1915 Freud characterized war as a regression not only to barbarism but

43 Marilyn Blatt Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990*, 255. The 365-day period to which Young refers was the length of the Vietnam War draft.

also to “the instinctive and impulsive heroism” of the unconscious, which “flouts danger in the spirit of…: ‘Nothing can happen to me.’” Deutsche characterizes this fantasy as “heroic masculinism, understood as an orientation toward ideals of wholeness that disavow vulnerability.” Accordingly, Deutsche notes the important ways that art informed by feminism have “explor[ed] the role played by totalizing images in producing and maintaining heroic, which is to say warlike subjects.” Judith Butler makes a complementary point when she suggests “that both our political and ethical responsibilities are rooted in the recognition that radical forms of self-sufficiency and unbridled sovereignty are, by definition, disrupted by the larger global processes of which they are a part, that no final control can be secured, and that final control is not, cannot be, an ultimate value.”

An example of the fatal grandiosity feminist writers and artists have critiqued is found in Nixon’s rhetoric surrounding the massive airstrikes he ordered over South Vietnam in spring of 1972. On April 4, anticipating the attacks, Nixon told Attorney General John Mitchell and White House Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman, “the bastards have never been bombed like they’re going to be bombed this time.” Then, after the unrelenting aerial attacks were unleashed on “densely populated areas,” killing hundreds


46 Ibid., 4.


of civilians, the president reportedly boasted to Haldeman, “we really left them our calling card this weekend.” In May of 1972 the president named the increased bombing and mining of North Vietnam’s ports “Operation Linebacker,” while the “Christmas bombings” of Hanoi and Haiphong later that year were called “Operation Linebacker II.” Comparing war to sport, Nixon invokes the position on a football team that is often held by the largest and most aggressive players.

A more vulnerable soldier is conjured when Antin’s boots go to war. 100 Boots Taking the Hill, 1–5 depict the most explicitly militaristic episode in 100 Boots, which Antin has described as “a series of war games” (figs. 3.25–3.29). All the images were photographed on June 13, 1972 and mailed between April 16 and April 30, 1973. As opposed to the strong soldier military triumphalism celebrates, these boots are precarious—diminutive specks in open space. Furthermore, the images’ perspective suggests that the boots are perhaps under surveillance, for the camera eye remains at a distance, yet encroaches on its target as indicated by the bush that expands to fill the frame in the middle three images of the sequence. The covert position of the photographer becomes especially evident in the fifth image of this sequence where the branches in the bottom left corner are so close to the camera that they are out of focus, as if the photographer needed to hide in the brush while taking the picture. In 100 Boots Take It this exploit comes to an end (fig. 3.30). The boots survey the damage they have

49 Wells, The War Within, 537.

apparently done: charred the interior of a small home leaving it mostly empty and in disarray. Hardly a large-scale triumph.

Reflecting on the Gulf War, Judith Butler has noted that as operations succeeded and were celebrated in public media, “this apparently seamless realization of intention through an instrumental action without much resistance or hindrance was the occasion…to champion a masculinized Western subject whose will immediately translates into deed, whose utterance or order materializes in an action…and whose obliterating power at once confirms the impenetrable contours of its own subjecthood.”

Through her representations of disembodied soldiers, Antin challenges the notion of the self-possessed, autonomous subject, who, impervious to incursions from the outside world, is structured by fantasies of domination.

I have been arguing that given the political context in which Antin made 100 Boots, we must reverse the usual treatment of this work and consider its imagery less in terms of present boots and more with regard to the boots’ missing bodies. By confronting the Vietnam War through an iconography of missing persons and by framing that iconography within a ruptured and unstable narrative, Antin opposes the rhetoric that underlies fantasies of military triumphalism. It is not surprising, then, that at one point Antin had plans (which were ultimately not realized) to turn the boots into antiwar demonstrators in a distinct but related project.

---

A Ghost March

In August of 1971, six months after Antin started shooting *100 Boots*, she wrote to Henrietta Ehrsam of the Henri Gallery in Washington, D.C., proposing that the boots take a different hill, that they go on a “March on Washington”—or, as she described the project elsewhere, “a ghost march conducted by 100 empty boots.” Antin’s plan was to photograph the boots in positions and settings around Washington, D.C., which would suggest that they were protesting the Vietnam War. The scenario of the boots’ march as Antin outlined it at the time was as follows: “in the middle of February, 1972, 100 BOOTS will march to Washington. They will come in on Route 66 (from the West naturally), pass through Arlington, cross the Potomac over one of the three bridges and then generally pass around the perimeter of the city several times, making no less than 15 stops (or stations)...Not unlike a hunter circling his prey they will move in, in a narrowing circle, till they finally reach the Capitol steps.”

At the Henri Gallery, which Antin referred to as the “Central Headquarters” for the project, there would be a large street map of Washington. When the boots reached a new protest station a gallery attendant would mark this spot on the map so that the route could be followed. Although the general public would be informed that the Capitol was the boots’ final destination, the particular sites at which they would stop along the way

---


54 Ibid. Antin’s proposed use of maps here evokes Douglas Huebler’s road map pieces in which the artist presented a map on which he designated potential road trips with a felt tip pen and accompanied the routes with straightforward textual descriptions.
would remain unknown until they had been reached. “Thus,” writes Antin, “the element of surprise vital to all strategic maneuvers will be maintained.” The carefully choreographed photographs of the boots marching, along with more spontaneous ones taken at each protest station, would be shown at the gallery. The boots too would reside at the gallery except when they were out marching. The installation would build over a designated period of seven days. In one letter to Ehrsam Antin explains, “the reason I think the actual events should occur during the first week of the show rather than preceding it is that its always more interesting to have the action unfold in real time rather than canned time,” an inclination that relates the boots’ march to the narrative logic of their postcard series. In addition to the images, Antin planned to include audiotapes in the installation that would feature interviews with people who witnessed the boots’ various stops around Washington; this would be projected into the gallery on a continuous loop. The archival dimension of this project was important to Antin, for she thought the boots’ march should, like all historic marches, “exist as history” through documentation.

Reflecting on this project as she was conceiving it, Antin wrote to a friend:


58 Ibid.
The March on Washington of 100 BOOTS as planned now, for the Winter–Spring of 1972 has the full pathos of a ghost march. Do you know that Washington has had a history of marches going way back even before the anti-war movement? From slave marches in the 1800s through veterans marches, Indian marches, farmers marches, civil rights…and, of course, now, the attempts of the young and the politically disenfranchised to make themselves heard. Do you think any of these marches ever succeed in righting the wrongs felt by the marchers? 100 BOOTS will be marching for everybody. They will march gaily with style. If they get a little tired by the end that is part of the form which is by virtue of its history, a ritual….Isn’t failure a part of the ritual.\(^{59}\)

Antin planned to take a break from the mailings during the march. As she explained, “I do not want the Washington trip to be on post cards but a shift of medium—the way an army may move from a land march to an amphibious career.”\(^{60}\) More than a shift of medium, this project would have involved a shift of character, for the boots would have gone from being soldiers to being protesters, not unlike the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, who had recently mounted one of the most expansive antiwar protests in American history, DEWEY CANYON III, which lasted for five days from April 19 to 23, 1971.\(^{61}\)

Ultimately, the boots’ March on Washington never happened at the Henri Gallery because of logistical complications.\(^{62}\) In the summer of 1972 Antin had the opportunity to


\(^{60}\) Eleanor Antin to Henrietta Ehrsam, August 11, 1971, Henri Gallery records, circa early 1900s, 1940–1996, box 1, folder 14.


\(^{62}\) Antin wrote to Jane Necol, “Henri is not used to the kind of back-up required for such a large enterprise [the March on Washington] and with me 3,000 miles away, the logistics of the event, even in the preparatory stages, became just too uncertain. I began to doubt that she could even find out accurate information or get the requisite permits. (You can’t breathe in Washington without a permit.)” Eleanor Antin to Jane Necol, n.d. (received
do the project at the Corcoran Gallery with Hal Glicksman as her curator, but she decided instead to turn her focus to *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* since she believed the latter would enable her to express her growing feminist politics more explicitly—politics that were, as I have been arguing, latent in *100 Boots*. Although the boots never did engage in a protest march, Antin’s elaborate designs for such a project reveal the importance of the antiwar sentiment underlying *100 Boots*. In some ways, it is lamentable that *100 Boots* never did march on Washington, for this project would have provided the opportunity for a potentially fruitful analysis on the relationship between precarity and practices of protest.

**Spectators and Recipients**

As already noted, although *100 Boots* existed primarily outside of art’s institutional structures, its final destination was art’s ur-institution of the time, the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Of her desire to conclude the project in such a setting, Antin writes, “I had always intended to end this piece with a museum exhibition in order to provide the work with a final and apparently unequivocal art context—not so much to canonize 100 BOOTS as a ‘bona fide art work,’ as to insist on the problematic

---

63 Eleanor Antin, interview with author, February 17, 2012. Although the postcards from *100 Boots* were mailed regularly up until July 9, 1973, all but six of the photographs used for the postcards were shot on or before July 6, 1972.

64 In spring of 1972 Antin approached Jane Necol, assistant curator in MoMA’s Department of Painting and Sculpture, about showing *100 Boots* at MoMA. Eleanor Antin to Jane Necol, n.d. (received May 8, 1972), Curatorial exhibitions files, exh. #1035, The Museum of Modern Art Archives.
relationship between the free gift, the disposable, the private, outsider transaction, and the pristine arena for the high-priced, authenticated art object.” MoMA was a particularly fraught venue at which to attempt this critique, given that in the immediately preceding years it had been a central site of antagonism for artists involved in the antiwar effort.

The meaning of *100 Boots* is probably not best understood within the framework of institutional critique, for ultimately the installation does not put the museum’s “pristine arena” under significant duress. To at least one critic at the time, Richard Martin, Antin’s choice to end *100 Boots* at MoMA was cause for alarm:

> That Eleanor Antin’s *100 Boots* have now come under the patronage of the Museum of Modern Art and the New York State Council on the Arts is a paradox for mail art. Having been begun in denial of museums and galleries, the project concludes with a museum exhibition….It is more than merely another episode to have the *100 Boots* at the Museum of Modern Art: it is a demonstration of the increasing return of experimental and conceptual art to the gallery and museum.

In fact Antin did create some tension between her project and the museum by denying the spectator full visual access to the boots at MoMA even as she installed them there. Antin designed the boots’ installation, *100 Boots in Their Crash Pad*, to evoke a tenement apartment: an alcove within the exhibition space was painted green, illuminated by a single bare light bulb and furnished with an old sink, a mattress, sleeping bags, blankets,

65 Eleanor Antin, press release for *100 Boots: The Transmission and Reception*, Franklin Furnace Archive.

66 For more information on artists’ protests at MoMA, see Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), and Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*.

a kitchen chair, and radio. In keeping with the fragmentary nature in which the boots’ adventures had been communicated to its recipients in the postcard series, the Crash Pad was, according to Antin’s specifications, “visible only through a partially open door held in place by a security chain” (fig. 3.31). Thus visual restriction shaped the encounter between the spectator and the object ostensibly offered for display. As she had done in other projects, in 100 Boots in Their Crash Pad, Antin frustrated the spectator’s visual access as a strategy to instantiate desire—to make desire central to the act of looking. Furthermore, through this restrictive display, Antin gave primacy to the boots’ representation in mass-produced photographic postcards over their physical presence.

Although in its mailed incarnation 100 Boots was not predicated on operations of exchange, as many of its mail art precedents were, during the two and a half years that Antin distributed the project its recipients responded by sending the artist letters, postcards, newspaper clippings, and artwork. These materials, some hundreds of items,

68 Checklist for Projects: 100 Boots by Eleanor Antin, Curatorial exhibitions files, exh. #1035, The Museum of Modern Art Archives.

69 Ibid.

70 Reflecting on the correspondence she received, Antin writes, “it seems entry into one’s mailbox is regarded by many people as an intimate act, which can be seen either as hostile or friendly…For a few people I seem to have provided their first opportunity to strike back against unsolicited mail. For them, I suppose, I was a kind of liberator…” Eleanor Antin, press release for 100 Boots: The Transmission and Reception, Franklin Furnace Archive.
constitute an archive that reveals a community linked by the common experience of reception that Antin’s project instantiated.\textsuperscript{71}

Judith Butler proposes that one of the beneficial outcomes of precarious states is their potential to breed community, for in a state of vulnerability the individual has no choice but to depend on others. She suggests “reimagining the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss,” contending that the experience of loss reveals that “the ties we have to others…constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us. It is not as if an ‘I’ exists independently over here and then simply loses a ‘you’ over there, especially if the attachment to ‘you’ is part of what composes who ‘I’ am.”\textsuperscript{72} The connection between the precarity figured in \textit{100 Boots} and the reception community that the work engendered, evokes Butler’s hopeful proposition.

Beyond notes of appreciation (and the very occasional note of discontent), \textit{100 Boots}’s recipients sent Antin ephemera that reminded them of her project.\textsuperscript{73} Antin received advertisements and photographs that featured shoes and feet in funny places. Then too, the seriality central to many of the compositions in \textit{100 Boots}’s images

\footnotesize{
\textsuperscript{71} Eleanor Antin 100 Boots Archive, Balch Art Research Library, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.


\textsuperscript{73} Even in recent years people have continued to send Antin items that remind them of \textit{100 Boots}. In 2000 she received an advertisement for Samsonite Ultralite 4 Series suitcases that shows a progression of black suitcases disappearing into white sands. In 2006 she received a clipping that shows a woman and two children kneeling next to a pair of boots amid a field of boots. The caption reads: “War Dead: A collection of military boots represent the soldiers killed in the war in Iraq as part of the exhibition ‘Eyes Wide Open: The Human Cost of the War in Iraq,’ in Columbus, Ohio.” Eleanor Antin papers, 1953–2010, box 6, folders 4 and 16.
}
apparently resonated with the work’s recipients—the archive is full of pictures of things (including drill team marchers, mailboxes, the stars on Hollywood boulevard, and cats) arranged in rows (fig. 3.32). The fragmentation that was integral to *100 Boots* was appreciated by the Canadian art collective General Idea. They created ten *Boot Splits* each of which is comprised of fragments of different postcards from *100 Boots* affixed together with pieces of scotch tape (fig. 3.33). Each *Boot Split* was mailed to a third party with the question, “how many boots are in the picture?” and an instruction to return the *Boot Split* to Antin. Through this intervention, General Idea deepened *100 Boots*’s fragmentation, going so far as to fissure the work’s single authorship and generate an authorial exchange.

Out of the hundreds of items that comprise the archive of *100 Boots*’s reception, two newspaper clippings merit particular attention. Antin received photographs cut out of the *International Herald Tribune* and the *San Diego Tribune* in the winter and spring of 1973 respectively (figs. 3.34 & 3.35). The people who sent Antin these images were clearly reminded of *100 Boots* when they saw photographs of a barren tree near Frankfurt, Germany where American soldiers slung their boots upon being discharged from the army. To symbolize the end of their military service, these soldiers cast off their boots to a spot from which they could not be retrieved. These boots had gathered traces of the ground the soldiers traversed and they were also, literally, the agent of the American footprint on foreign soil—they were the carriers and producers of war’s traces. Each soldier’s boots represent his term of service. To signal that his service is over, the soldier cancels his boots’ capacity to function. As opposed to the tradition of boots
serving as memorial objects for fallen soldiers, here they are jubilant markers of soldiers’ good fortune in returning home.

*100 Boots* also ends in the negation of the boots’ function. *100 Boots on Vacation*, taken February 9, 1971 and mailed July 9, 1973, was the final postcard of the project (fig. 3.36). At first I thought the title of this image was facetious, that the image signaled the death of the boots, shown in a mass grave, as it were, baring their soles (a visual pun the artist intended). But if these boots are treated as markers of war, then seen in repose, they offer a more hopeful vision—or perhaps a wish for a time when boots can cease marching.
MULTIPLE OCCUPANCY

100 BOOTS have gone on vacation after 2 ½ years of strenuous work. They deserve it and so do I. For the next 2 years I will be continuing to make videotapes in which I transform myself into all the selves I have chosen not to be or could not be.

-Eleanor Antin

From 1972 to 1991 Antin created multiple personae of different genders, races, professions, historical contexts, and geographic locations. She called this motley group her “selves.” The selves’ manifestations were as diverse as their stories: in some works they were embodied by Antin, their actions captured in photographs and on video; in others they had surrogates in the form of paper dolls; sometimes the selves were absent, traceable only through the drawings, texts, and films they had ostensibly left behind. Exploring “the transformational nature of the self” was the artist’s method of rejecting “the usual aids to self-definition—sex, age, talent, time and space,” which she experienced as “tyrannical limitations upon my freedom of choice.”

In her first phase of production, between 1972 and 1977, Antin invented a king, a ballerina, and two nurses. During this period she also began work on another self, producing a series of sketches and texts from the hand of Eleanora Antinova, an imaginary African American prima ballerina of Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes and, in


what would come to seem a rough draft for Antinova, she made one videotape as a character she referred to as the “black movie star.” Antinova did not come into full bloom until 1979; from then until 1987 she was almost exclusively the focus of Antin’s work (except for one reappearance of the king in 1983), starring in a number multimedia works. In 1991 Antin introduced her final self, Yevgeny Antinov, an exiled Russian film director from the 1920s.

When Antin started the selves project she was part of a wider network of mostly female artists who were altering their own identities as a political artistic strategy. Vito Acconci, Jacki Apple, Lynn Hershman, Suzy Lake, Linda Montano, Brian O’Doherty, and Adrian Piper used techniques of masquerade, posing, body modification, narrative invention, and doctored photographs to fracture identity and emphasize the performative nature of gender, race, and sexual orientation. One distinctive feature of Antin’s early identity transformations was their commitment to putting spectatorship on view, thereby continuing the Conceptualist critique of vision that had grounded the artist’s practice from her first works, explored most rigorously in *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*. As much as they draw on the project of Conceptualism, the selves, in their challenge to the

---

3 Although Antin had originally intended her “black movie star” to be a stand alone self, she soon determined that “black is a color” and not a complete character in and of itself. Kim Levin, "The Angel of Mercy and the Fiction of History" in *The Angel of Mercy* (La Jolla: The La Jolla Museum of Art), n.p. Antin’s phrase echoes the title of artist Raymond Saunders’s 1967 pamphlet, *Black is a Color*, in which Saunders argued against an approach to art that places the race of the artist above other characteristics of the work she or he produced.

4 In 2007 Jori Finkel explored the intersections of some of these practices in her exhibition *Identity Theft: Eleanor Antin, Lynn Hershman, Suzy Lake 1972–1978* at the Santa Monica Museum of Art.
ideal of a stable subject, anticipated art informed by postmodernist feminism, serving as yet another component of Antin’s practice from the 1970s that makes her a bridge between these two artistic paradigms.

Attempting to bring into a unity all of Antin’s selves in their myriad manifestations would be antithetical to the logic of fragmentation that structures the project. Characteristic of all the selves, however, is that through their biographies, they are all at odds with—disenfranchised by—the worlds they inhabit. Narratively, then, the selves are precarious subjects, a status that I relate to the post-Vietnam War context in which this body of work emerged. In addition to the vulnerabilities that lie at the core of each of Antin’s individual selves by virtue of their particular narratives, the selves project as a whole is structured around fragility and the impossibility of a stable, singular identity, for during the selves years, Antin was constantly altering her own self-presentation, slipping with ease between one self and another. Judith Butler has argued that “without the compulsory expectation that feminist actions must be instituted from some stable, unified, and agreed-upon identity, those actions might well get a quicker start and seem more congenial to a number of ‘women’ for whom the meaning of the category is permanently moot.” Reading Antin through Butler once again, we see the feminist promise of Antin’s aesthetics of precarity.

---

The Ballerina

In the photograph *The Two Eleanors* (1973) a ballerina (played by Antin) looks into a mirror (fig. 4.1). She is shown from the shoulders up. In the right half of the image we see the ballerina from behind; on the left side of the image her face, with its delicate features, fine bone structure, and earnest eyes, is revealed through its reflection in the mirror. The ballerina opens her eyes wide as if searching the reflection for some information that is not readily available. As Antin has written, “ballerinas are always seeking corroboration in mirrors.” However, the mirror cannot deliver a smooth reflection as its surface is covered in smudges, nicks, and scuffs. These marks, along with two prominent lipstick stains in the upper right corner of the image, call attention to the surface of the mirror that separates the ballerina from her reflection. In the context of Antin’s work of the early 1970s this picture of a ballerina’s interrupted reflection proposes that perceptual experience is mediated by the frames of visual representation.

As she did in *100 Boots*, in *The Two Eleanors* Antin invokes the tradition of *rückenfigur*, positioning herself in the image as a stand-in for the spectator of the image, inviting us to share the experience of the ballerina’s mediated visual perception.

Antin made *The Two Eleanors* on the stage set of another ballerina project, *Caught in the Act* (1973), which also explores the way images mediate experience. The largest component of *Caught in the Act* is thirty-nine black and white photographs that show a ballerina, played by Antin, donning various tutus and point shoes, and modeling a series of elegant ballet poses (fig. 4.2). In addition to these static images, however,

---

Caught in the Act contains a time-based element—a thirty-six minute black and white videotape that reveals the process by which these images were produced: to assume a given pose the ballerina steadies herself by holding onto one end of a stick, which is offered to her by a man described in the video’s credits simply as “Help”; once she feels confident in her balance the ballerina lets go of the stick and at that instant the photographer freezes her image; following the click of the shutter the ballerina clumsily collapses and the whole process starts again (fig. 4.3). The durational nature of Caught in the Act’s videotape exposes the unglamorous physicality, performed by Antin, which is behind the apparently effortless feminine grace of which the ballerina is an icon. This aspect of the work recalls the time-based tedium that Antin employed in Carving: A Traditional Sculpture and Representational Painting to reveal the work involved in attaining feminine aesthetic ideals.

Upon seeing Caught in the Act when it was first shown, Los Angeles Times art critic William Wilson aptly described the ballerina as a “touching impostor.” This clumsy self-taught ballerina’s fraudulence becomes poignant when we learn through other ballerina works, the videotape The Ballerina and the Bum (1973) and the videotaped performance The Little Matchgirl Ballet (1975), that the ballerina aspires to move from “the sticks” to New York City to become the star of George Balanchine’s

---

7 In Caught in the Act “Help” was played by the artist Fred Lonidier, while the photographer was Philip (Phel) Steinmetz; both were faculty in UCSD’s Visual Arts Department.

dance company, dancing to the music of Stravinsky against the backdrop of sets designed by Picasso.

Antin’s invention of the untrained ballerina continues her engagement with the practice of Yvonne Rainer, whose choreography in the 1960s radically rejected the traditions of the very dance world that Antin’s ballerina cannot enter. To this end a key strategy for Rainer was parody, which, along with other modes of humor and play, permeated Antin’s work of the 1970s. Rainer’s *Three Seascapes* (1962) culminates in a solo female dancer’s hysterical fit performed on an oversized pile of white tulle in a parody of traditional classical dance’s emotional and gestural indulgence. In *Duet Section*, part of *Terrain* (1963), Rainer plays a classic ballerina while Trisha Brown performs the part of a burlesque dancer; together the two strike exaggerated parodic poses as pin-up girls, aligning the idealized ballerina with the female sex object (fig. 4.4). Indeed, Antin’s ballerina might have been cast in Rainer’s *Parts of Some Sextets* (1965) in which dancers heaved, lugged, and dragged mattresses—props that canceled any possibility of classic balletic grace (fig. 4.5). Of this dance Rainer wrote, “no rhythm, no emphasis, no tension, no relaxation. You just do it, with the coordination of a pro and the non-definition of an amateur.” At stake in Rainer’s work was, as Carrie Lambert-Beatty has shown, a challenge to modernist conventions of spectatorship, which treated artwork

---


as independent of both its surrounding world and the spectators who consumed it.

Lambert-Beatty argues that Rainer’s work is not about the body as such, but “the body as offered to the eye [of the viewer].”  

11 By taking into account the performing body’s relationship to the consuming audience member, Rainer conceives of spectatorship as a dynamic and reciprocal relationship.

As I have been arguing, Antin also made spectatorship central to her work. She treats the spectator as a desiring subject—a subject who interprets images through her own drives and experiences. At the same time, Antin probes the ways that the subject herself is constructed by her encounters with images. Subject and image, Antin contends, come into being reciprocally. With recourse to Martin Heidegger’s published lecture, “The Age of the World Picture,” Craig Owens has argued that making visible the reciprocal relationship between subject and image was one of postmodernism’s foundational operations, for it intervened in modernism’s claims for the mastering subject by virtue of its capacity to produce the world in representation.  

12 In Caught in the Act, the spectator is shown to be vulnerable, for Antin reveals the capacity of images to deceive her. The title of this work ostensibly refers to the amateur ballerina who is caught posing as an accomplished ballerina. I want to argue, however, that the title has a double meaning, referring as well to the spectator who is caught in the

---


act of looking and desiring to believe the image before her eyes. In *Caught in the Act*, in the face of the videotape’s revelation, the spectator of the work is invited to contend with her experience of the still images’ ruse. She is furthermore reminded that every time she encounters an idealized image there is potentially a less elegant reality lurking beyond the image’s frame. To seek out that reality permits the disruption of an aesthetic ideal. The final moments of the video show the photographer putting away his equipment—the time-based medium gets the last laugh.

**Little Nurse Eleanor**

In Antin’s performance *The Little Matchgirl Ballet*, the ballerina declares: “A horse can jump. A plane can fly. A ballerina can pose.” Indeed, through the ballerina Antin suggests a connection between idealized imagery and freezing, for the ballerina’s ability to project an aesthetic ideal is dependent on the camera’s capacity to fix her image in a fraction of a second.¹³ For Craig Owens, fixing the body is a key operation of the stereotype, which, like an ideal, is grounded in fantasy and projection. Owens characterizes the stereotype as “a form of symbolic violence exercised upon the body in order both to assign it to a place and to keep it in place…it promotes passivity, receptivity, inactivity—docile bodies.”¹⁴ Written after Antin’s selves were well underway, Owens’s argument offers a useful framework through which to interpret Antin’s second female self, Little Nurse Eleanor. While Antin was developing the

---


ballerina, an icon of feminine grace, she began exploring other feminine stereotypes, such as, in the artist’s words, “scapegoat, nurturer, servant, sex object, fantasy,” through this next self. Antin gives material expression to the “passivity, receptivity, inactivity” of these stereotypical roles by rendering Little Nurse Eleanor in the form of a paper doll, mute and with an unchanging expression (fig. 4.6). Antin animates her paper doll nurses through play and make-believe scenarios. In the hour-long videotape Adventures of a Nurse (1976) Antin, dressed in a nurse’s uniform, gives voices to and moves a cast of eight one-foot-tall paper dolls through a series of scenes that highlight the nurse’s naïvety and sexually degraded status (fig. 4.7). The narrative unfolds atop a pink bed with a few rudimentary props, including a cardboard motorcycle, some Styrofoam blocks that stand for the bar at Greenwich Village’s famous White Horse Tavern, and torn bits of paper that fall as snow. As the nurse tries to do her work, spend time with her friends, and explore new places she is constantly being seduced in spite of herself—at the end of each scene the nurse finds herself having sex with a different suitor, an act indicated when Antin rubs two paper dolls together and makes ecstatic noises.

Performing as the ballerina and Little Nurse Eleanor, Antin occupies particular personae as a strategy by which to address the ways that representation determines the subject positions of women. Antin had explored this issue through strategies of non-occupation in a project she made shortly before inventing the selves. Portraits of Eight New York Women (1970) was Antin’s second series of “consumer goods portraits” after California Lives (1969). They consisted of seven sculptural tableaux and a printed

statement, each of which served as an equivalent for a particular woman: Naomi Dash, Amy Goldin, Margaret Mead, Rochelle Owens, Yvonne Rainer, Lynne Traiger, Carolee Schneemann, and Hannah Weiner.\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Portraits of Eight New York Women} debuted in close quarters: room 322 at the Hotel Chelsea, which was Antin’s alternative and self-funded venue after her gallery, Gain Ground, suddenly closed (fig. 4.8).\textsuperscript{17} The show was open for just over two weeks, from November 21–December 6, 1970 with more or less regular gallery hours of 12–6 pm daily, which were staffed by an attendant whom Antin had hired.\textsuperscript{18}

In the press release for \textit{Portraits of Eight New York Women} Antin wrote that “the artist considers herself a special variety of representational sculptor and each of her pieces as a rigorously realistic ‘portrait from which the sitters happen to have walked away.’”\textsuperscript{19} Throughout the tableaux there is a sense that the objects are in use and thus

\textsuperscript{16} Antin had originally planned on doing portraits of more than eight women. Additional potential subjects were: Emily Evans, Marilyn Fischback, Gloria George, Grace Glueck, Lita Hornick, Joan Jonas, Vaughn Kaprow, Alison Knowles, Jill Kornblee, Annette Michelson, Sylvia Sleigh, Diane Wakowski, Anne Waldman. Prospectus, \textit{Portraits of New York Women}, Eleanor Antin papers, 1953–2010, box 31, folder 3.

\textsuperscript{17} The same year \textit{Portraits of Eight New York Women} debuted in New York, four of the eight portraits were included in Lucy Lippard’s exhibition 2,972,453.

freshly abandoned. Yvonne Rainer is represented by a stationary exercise bicycle with a sweatshirt on the seat as though the rider has just gotten up for a moment; on the right handle-bar is a large horn; on the left is a rear-view mirror, suggesting that the rider makes noise as she moves forward but always keeps an eye on what is behind her (fig. 4.9). In Schneemann’s portrait it seems a work of art is in the making: a tall wooden easel is draped with a large piece of dark velvet (fig. 4.10). In contrast to these icons of academic painting, at the base of the easel sits a jar of honey, likely an allusion to the organic materials that were integral to Schneemann’s performance practice. The whole tableau is reflected in a full-length mirror. Part of Mead’s tableau, the main elements of which are a director’s chair, umbrella, and binoculars, is an open thermos as if Mead has just taken a sip. Next to Mead, Dash is conjured by a towel rack affixed to the wall from which hang a towel, shower cap, and a pair of dark sheer pantyhose that still hold the shape of Dash’s legs as if she has just peeled them off (the pantyhose dangle above a cat’s litter box, which offers a humorous contrast to this assemblage of femininity) (fig. 4.11). Tossed on Goldin’s neatly-made no-frills institutional cot are a pair of pearl earrings—left there so carelessly it seems their owner is nearby about to put them on or, having recently taken them off, will soon put them away. Traiger’s primary object is a front door (installed against the wall of the actual hotel room) in the midst of being unlocked—a key, attached to a wallet, is suspended from the lock as if someone had been called away while she was opening the door. The absence that is figured in these tableaux is explicit in Owens’s portrait, a label that states in all capital letters: “ROCHELLE

OWENS REMOVED – PIECE DID NOT LIVE UP TO SUBJECT.” In Portraits of Eight New York Women, Antin’s act of absenting the portraits’ subjects serves as a rejection of the history of images that has held up women as objects to be visually consumed. By the time she embarked on the selves, however, occupation and embodiment were the strategies that Antin utilized to put forward her feminist critique.

As Antin continued to work on her selves throughout the 1970s she referred increasingly to events that formed the series’ political backdrop. In addition to Adventures of a Nurse Antin made another paper doll video drama, The Nurse and the Hijackers (1977) (fig. 4.12). In this work a different stereotype is depicted—that of the leftist idealist who has utopian ambitions but lacks a viable program to meet her goals. The Nurse and the Hijackers’s seventy-five minutes follow a script, which Antin performs, once again, by giving voices and movements to a cast of approximately forty paper dolls on the set of a model (seventeen-feet long by five-foot wide and four-feet tall) cardboard airplane interior (fig. 4.13). Spoofing the disaster movie genre while referring to the oil and energy crises of the early 1970s in America, The Nurse and the Hijackers shows an airplane hijacking gone awry.²⁰ Four radical idealist environmentalists take control of an airplane headed from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C. Although she is not technically one of Antin’s selves, the protagonist of this video is the head revolutionary Citizen Morton (named after the artist Ree Morton).

Citizen Morton explains to the passengers:

²⁰ A specific reference for The Nurse and the Hijackers was a television movie, Raid on Entebbe (1976), which was based on Operation Entebbe of 1976 in which Israeli soldiers rescued approximately 100 Israeli and Jewish hostages who were being held by pro-Palestinian hijackers at the Entebbe airport in Uganda.
you and we have been hostages to an imperialist technology that in the apparent and only short-run interest of the few has taken nearly endless advantage of the many to produce an illusion of affluence and freedom provided by a progressive technology. It is not a progressive technology. It is regressive and it is destroying the earth and the people from which it sprang. The capitalist state has entered a new phase in which the state is technology and technology is the state. We mean to liberate you from this state.

The hijackers reroute the plane to a series of OPEC nations where they attempt but fail to convince the leaders of these nations to stop exporting oil to the United States in the hope that this will compel the United States to find alternative energy solutions. In the final scene, upon landing in Egypt the plane is stormed by Israeli soldiers who kill the hijackers and some of the passengers.

The hijackers’ powerlessness is emphasized by their comically performed challenges to communicate their political agenda via the media, which, as Antin notes in the work’s original press release, was a basic incentive of airplane hijacking. Soon after the plane has been hijacked Citizen Morton demands television airtime to convey her message, but she can only reach flight control. Settling for that she boldly declares to flight control, “this plane has just been liberated in the name of the people.” Flight control cannot make out the message. Finally, one of the passengers on the plane, a buffoonish Los Angeles sportscaster, is able to get Citizen Morton airtime on his local television network.

21 The press release for The Nurse and the Hijackers notes, “in this age of massive centralized government and institutions within which individuals are increasingly more removed from the sources of power, hijacking has become one of the ways in which the powerless can appear to reach the power centers quickly and cheaply via the communications media, who have been quick to recognize and maximize their own importance in this new political genre.” Draft of press release for The Nurse and the Hijackers, Eleanor Antin papers, 1953–2010, box 18, folder 7.
Antin gives form to the fact that stereotypes are cultural constructions in the crude aesthetic of *Adventures of a Nurse* and *The Nurse and the Hijackers*, which calls our attention quite literally to the way each stereotypical character was physically constructed; we see the paper dolls’ hand-cut edges and the folded tabs that keep their paper clothing attached to their two-dimensional bodies. By emphasizing the constructedness of the image Antin blocks our immersion in it. When smooth visual consumption is interrupted—frustrated—the spectator is left to reflect on what she had been hoping the image would deliver. Desire in visual representation structures the content of *Adventures of the Nurse* and *The Nurse and Hijackers*, for we watch not simply the paper dolls in action, but also Antin’s performative engagement with the dolls—she herself invests in their images. Antin has said that in her paper doll works her “means are those available to little girls everywhere—paper dolls and narrative invention.”22 As we watch Antin perform the part of a child lost in her imaginary world, we participate in the deep-rooted desire to animate images and believe in those animations.

**Nurse Eleanor Nightingale**

Antin’s engagement with the political context of her selves included a turn to war. Specifically, she explored the relationship between home and war in a second incarnation of the nurse, Nurse Eleanor Nightingale, based on the English nurse Florence Nightingale (1820–1910). Eleanor Nightingale appeared in two series of photographs, *The Angel of Mercy: The Nightingale Family Album* and *The Angel of Mercy: My Tour of Duty in The

---

22 Ibid.
Crimea, and a play, *The Angel of Mercy*. The photographs depict imagined scenes from Nightingale’s life. Staged by Antin, they are composed and printed in a manner that makes them appear to be legitimate nineteenth century artifacts. The images refer to work by such photographers as Matthew Brady, Julia Margaret Cameron, Roger Fenton, Alexander Gardner, and in the tradition of early pictorial photography, they evoke painters, including Thomas Eakins, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, and Winslow Homer. Outfitted in period costumes, Antin’s artistic circle in San Diego populates the pictures: Fred Lonidier is a doctor; John Perreault plays Nightingale’s suitor; Jerome Rothenberg a general; and David Antin, Helen and Newton Harrison, Pauline Oliveros, Martha Rosler, and Moira Roth are featured in minor roles. Antin plays Nightingale.

Throughout *The Nightingale Family Album* a sheltered and frivolous world is depicted, which reflects Florence Nightingale’s opinion of the upper-class Victorian English society into which she was born. In most of the images (each of which ranges from between four-by-six to eight-by-ten inches) the characters are shown among leafy woods and gardens engaging in such activities as croquet, play-acting, picnicking, fishing, boating, and flirting. This is the world in which Antin’s Nightingale resides, though it is clear she occupies its margins. One photograph in the album, *The New Arrival*, is set in the clearing of a lush garden punctuated by dappled light (fig. 4.14). A seated woman cradles her newborn baby while four other women, including Nightingale’s mother, gather around her to admire the baby. Nightingale herself stands apart from the group, looking down at her hands (perhaps considering their idleness), unengaged by the domestic bliss her cohort celebrates. The light shines brightest on her, almost functioning as a spotlight that indicates she is the character who will become
central to the narrative as it unfolds. In *The Gentleman’s Game is The Ladies Gain* six figures play croquet in a sunny garden (fig. 4.15). A gentleman in a top hat takes a swing while a woman watches him, covering her mouth in suspense. The other players look on, predicting the success of the shot. Nightingale is placed right in the middle of the image, but stands at a slight distance from the players, with her back to them (and to the viewer of the image), indicating in no uncertain terms her alienation from the world she inhabits.

Indeed, by the age of twenty-seven Florence Nightingale started to estrange herself from her social world when she informed her family that she believed her calling was to pursue the profession of nursing. Soon thereafter, against her family’s wishes, she received training as a nurse and by 1853 she was the (unpaid) superintendent of the Hospital for Invalid Gentlewomen in her hometown of Derbyshire, England. This was the same year that the Crimean War began. In 1854 when the London-based newspaper *The Times* printed reports from the Crimea detailing the horrible healthcare conditions available to English soldiers, Nightingale, with the support of Secretary at War Sidney Herbert, assembled a team of thirty-eight nurses to assist with the war effort. She and her fleet arrived at Scutari, the English hospital in Turkey, on November 4, 1854. Nightingale served there and in the Crimea itself until the war was over in 1856. When she returned to England, Nightingale continued to work as a nurse and published various educational materials on the burgeoning field that she had helped to establish.

The image from *The Nightingale Family Album* that shows Nightingale most animated is ‘They Also Serve... ‘ in which she reads a war dispatch from a newspaper aloud to her family as they sit around the breakfast table (fig. 4.16). This image portends Nightingale’s next destination, which is depicted in the second series of photographs. *The*
Angel of Mercy: My Tour of Duty in The Crimea portrays a different Nightingale. She has left her life of shelter in a garden to go to war. These works are larger—the photographs are between six-by-eight and eight-by-ten inches. In Operation in the Field Hospital she attentively examines a patient who lies on a stretcher in the makeshift medical care facility (sheets tied between trees in a clearing in the woods) while in War Games she appears engrossed in a game of chess with a soldier (figs. 4.17 & 4.18). In The Trenches Before Sebastopol Nightingale surveys with distress an array of fallen soldiers, and in The Angel of Mercy she cradles an injured soldier, lifting a cup to his lips and looking with concern toward what might be the source of his wounds beyond the edge of the photograph’s frame (figs. 4.19 & 4.20).

The play, The Angel of Mercy, which was first performed in 1977 in M.L. D’Arc Gallery in New York, where The Angel of Mercy photographs hung, renders live the narrative that is depicted in the photographs: Eleanor Nightingale is clearly dissatisfied with her comfortable upper class life while injustice continues outside the parlors and ballrooms where she passes her time, so she goes to be of service as a nurse to soldiers in the Crimean War. In The Angel of Mercy Antin plays Nightingale alongside a cast of twenty nearly life-sized “puppets”—doctors, generals, and soldiers cut out from Masonite bearing fixed painted expressions—whose voices she provides and with whom she interacts (fig. 4.21). The puppets were modeled on Antin’s friends—the same circle that populated The Angel of Mercy photographs (figs. 4.22 & 4.23). Drawing on the form of Brecht’s lehrstücke, Antin punctuates The Angel of Mercy’s narrative progression with monologues in which Nightingale reflects on the meaning and morality of war as well as her implication in it through her labor as nurse to the soldiers. At one point Eleanor
Nightingale muses, “if one soldier is killed, he merely dies, but if you heal him, he returns to kill at least one other before perhaps dying himself. So it is in this that I am not a healer, but a double killer.” The play bears a clear relationship to the nurse paper doll video dramas, for once again, as spectators, we are prevented from engaging with the actors on stage and instead watch Antin’s own performance investing in these images.

Florence Nightingale’s biography, the story of a woman who wrestled with her domestic and professional allegiances, made her a compelling figure to Antin. Beyond Nightingale’s personal story, however, she serves as a vehicle to resuscitate the history of the Crimean War. The Crimean War’s visual history had a relationship to that of the Vietnam War, which had just ended when Antin was making *The Angel of Mercy* projects. Like the Vietnam War, the Crimean War was to an unprecedented degree the subject of visual representation, thereby enmeshing home and war in ways that had not previously been possible.

The Crimean War was fought between October 1853 and February 1856, mostly on the Crimean peninsula, between the Russian Empire and an alliance of the French, British, and Ottoman Turkish empires. The conflict revolved around the question of who would control parts of the Ottoman Empire. During the war’s nearly two and a half years an estimated 750,000 soldiers died in battle or from illness and disease. The Crimean War is widely regarded as an unnecessary war in which many armies were badly mismanaged. Beyond its particular military history, the Crimean War is notable for being the first war that was accessible to distant audiences via candid reportage and

---

23 The French-British-Ottoman alliance was joined in 1855 by the Sardinia-Piedmont Italian army.
photographic images. Accounts of the war were most widely disseminated in England: from 1854–56 *The Times* reporter William Russell sent daily dispatches from the Crimea and for four months in 1855 the photographer Roger Fenton documented the war in copious images. Russell spared no details about the English military authorities’ ineptitude and the inadequate provisions that were available to fighting as well as ailing and wounded soldiers. Alongside Russell’s articles, *The Times* published letters written by soldiers and officers reporting the horrible conditions in the Crimea as well as editorials that were highly critical of military mismanagement. As public distress over England’s participation in the war mounted, the British government knew something had to be done to counteract it. Photography had recently made a strong impression in London through its presence at the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in 1851 and there was much excitement around—and trust in—the new medium. Thus the camera seemed the right tool to offset *The Times*’s damming words. By 1854 Fenton was one of England’s foremost spokesmen for photography and Prince Albert and Queen Victoria were patrons of his work. He was therefore in the right position to be commissioned by the British government to go to the Crimea and construct a narrative in pictures that would justify the British war effort. In April of 1855 Fenton went to the Crimea for four months. During this time, using multiple cameras, a self-made darkroom facility, and with the aid of two assistants, he produced approximately 350 negatives.

---

While Fenton was in the Crimea, his images were printed as lithographs in *The Illustrated London News*. When he returned to England his photographs made their way through royal circles and a show, *Photographic Pictures Taken in the Crimea*, which featured 280 images by Fenton, traveled to eight venues around the country, garnering great praise. One review exclaimed, “Men will fall before the battle scythe of war, but not before this infallible sketcher has caught their lineaments and given them an anonymous immortality….As photographists grow stronger in nerve and cooler of head, we shall have…the battle itself painted; and while the fate of nations is in the balance we shall hear of the chemist measure out his acids and rubbing his glasses to a polish.” 25 Another commentator described the new photographs as a “direct window onto the realities of war.” 26

Despite this rhetoric, what Fenton’s photographs (and letters) actually reveal is that the realities of war were remote from his experience in the Crimea. In Susan Sontag’s words, “Fenton went about rendering the war as a dignified all-male group outing.” 27 The majority of Fenton’s images were posed portraits. He tended to photograph the leaders of the allies’ armies as well as notable officers—as he put it in a letter, the “great guns” and “the persons and subjects likely to be historically

---


interesting.” As for the anonymous soldiers, they were generally pictured enjoying rest or leisure at camp (fig. 4.24). Fenton set the local scene in images of the harbor at Balaklava and indigenous individuals whose physiognomies and dress might seem exotic to an English audience. The image by Fenton that is widely regarded as the most apt depiction of war’s desolation is *Valley of the Shadow of Death* in which a windy unpeopled road scattered with rocks and cannonballs snakes into a barren horizon (fig. 4.25).

The limited extent to which Fenton exposed the true nature of the war he was documenting must be first and foremost attributed to the fact that he was in the Crimea making government propaganda—his commissioned assignment was precisely *not* to provide a direct window but rather a rose-tinted one onto all he encountered there. Furthermore, even if Fenton had wanted an honest glimpse of war’s brutalities, it would probably not have been granted to him; since he arrived in the Crimea equipped with letters of introduction from Prince Albert, he would likely have been sheltered from the most gruesome aspects of the war. Then too commercial incentives guided his body of work, for he was planning to sell the images he made in the Crimea when he returned to England. The price Fenton set for his Crimean portfolio was sixty pounds, which was expensive for the time and indicates that he had a particular audience in mind. As Sarah Greenough notes, “this audience, many of whom had lost family and friends in the conflict, did not want to see photographs of death, suffering, chaos, and ineptitude, or images that would challenge their closely held belief in the necessity and correctness of

---

the conflict.”

To this end, writes Greenough, Fenton drew on his background in history painting, depicting “timeless and noble qualities such as fraternity, leadership, or dedication to country.”

Finally, there was a technological hindrance to the veracity of Fenton’s representations: the wetplate process by which negatives were made at the time required a glass plate to be exposed for up to twenty seconds. Still, while he could not have shown battle in action, Fenton could have shown battle’s aftermath (as Matthew Brady and Alexander Gardner would do just a few years later in their photographs of the American Civil War).

The Crimean War and the Vietnam War, separated by an ocean and more than a century, reveal that enhanced technological visual access to war does not necessarily amount to adequate representation. In *The Angel of Mercy* photograph series Antin foregrounds the inadequacy of visual representation of war by putting the spectator in an uncomfortable position with relation to the images. The photograph series teeters on the border between fiction and reality—the pictures are grounded in history but staged by Antin—and for the average spectator it is difficult to discern whether they are genuine documents of nineteenth century Europe or fabrications. Antin thus returns to the theme she had addressed in *Caught in the Act*: images are not transparent. And, as with the paper doll video dramas, in the play, the constructedness of images is once again revealed, this time writ large in Antin’s performance with the nearly life-sized Masonite puppets.

---

29 Ibid., 21.

30 Ibid., 22.
Just as photography ultimately failed to bring the war home to England from the Crimea, during the Vietnam War, television as a nascent news medium also had limitations. During the Vietnam War, spectators were granted an unprecedented degree of visual access to events unfolding on a different continent, largely through expanded television coverage. However this visual access did not offer the kind of transparency that many attributed to it; that is, the Vietnam War was not in fact an “uncensored war.”

Examining television coverage of the Vietnam War between 1965 and 1973, Daniel Hallin points to the prevalence of what he calls “consensus reporting” in which reporters advocated non-controversial and official values. Hallin furthermore argues that given television’s roots in entertainment and drama, Vietnam coverage conformed somewhat to the idea that “the best materials for television drama are the ones in which Good and Evil can be represented as clear and separate, where the source of conflict can be located outside the National Family,” a framework that left no room for self-implication.

Another factor diminishing the transparency of televised coverage of the war was the control that network executives had over what viewers saw. For example, following the violent footage that was broadcast during the Tet offensive of 1968, in March 1969 Av Westin, the executive producer of ABC News, sent word to the network’s Vietnam staff “to alter the focuses of their coverage from combat pieces to interpretive ones, pegged to

---


32 Ibid., 125.
the eventual pullout of American forces.”\(^{33}\) Around the same time “The Huntley-Brinkley Report” on NBC diminished its coverage of the war as well.

Aside from its inadequacies in terms of content, as some have argued, the defining medium properties of television had the potential to alienate viewers from the actuality of what was being represented on the screen. In 1969, in the essay that famously dubbed the Vietnam War the “living room war,” Michael Arlen addressed what constituted for him the inadequacies of televised representations of war:

I can’t say I completely agree with people who think that when battle scenes are brought into the living room the hazards of war are necessarily made ‘real’ to the civilian audience. It seems to me that by the same process they are also made less ‘real’—diminished, in part, by the physical size of the television screen, which for all the industry’s advances, still show one a picture of men three inches tall shooting at other men three inches tall, and trivialized, or at least tamed, by the enveloping cozy alarums of the household.\(^{34}\)

The year before Arlen’s essay was published, Yvonne Rainer had also commented on the way television seemed to reduce the gravity of war: she described her “horror and disbelief upon seeing a Vietnamese shot dead on TV—not at the sight of death, however, but at the fact that the TV can be shut off afterwards as after a bad Western.”\(^{35}\)

The clash of war and the living room that Arlen and Rainer cite is at play in Martha Rosler’s photomontage series, *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967–


72), in which Rosler incorporates images from the Vietnam War into magazine spreads depicting comfortable bourgeois domestic interiors. In one image a woman earnestly cleans her drapes while outside her window armed soldiers are stationed amidst craggy terrain. In another image a man carries a maimed baby up the stairs of a well-appointed living room in which a pile of balloons suggests the aftermath of a birthday party (figs. 4.26 & 4.27). In House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home there is an unsettling tension between the compositional seamlessness with which the images are integrated with each other and the utterly divergent—inassimilable—worlds they depict. This tension is amplified by the way the figures in the homes are unaffected by the scenes of war. The photomontages, then, implicitly question the degree to which images of the Vietnam War actually impact the living rooms into which they are projected.

Different from Rosler’s use of contemporary imagery, Antin reflects on the present through an analogy with the past, thereby offering history as a patchwork of temporalities as opposed to straightforward progress. As she wrote in 1973, “once an event is over it becomes history and history is always fiction. The reality of experience is not that ‘once in a particular place a certain event occurred’ but that we recognize it.” In the wake of the Vietnam War Antin’s turn to history also serves as a plea not to forget. Following collective national trauma official rhetoric tends to enjoin populations to seek closure, be resilient, and move forward. Marilyn Young cites President Reagan’s pronouncement in 1982 at the dedication of the Vietnam War Memorial that the erection of this structure marked the moment “to move on, ‘in unity and with resolve, with the

resolve to always stand for freedom, as those who fought did, and to always try to protect and preserve the peace.”

In this injunction Reagan rationalizes the war and attempts to restore a sense of wholeness to America’s self-image, rather than confronting the loss and fragmentation that the trauma of war necessarily entails. Official calls to curtail mourning seem to be growing increasingly impatient, for it was just ten days after the September 11 attacks that President Bush announced that “we have finished grieving and that now it is time for resolute action to take the place of grief.”

Susan Jeffords has argued that in response to the loss of fantasies of national invincibility and self-sufficiency incurred during the Vietnam War, American pop culture entered a compensatory phase of what she terms “remasculinization.” Through a plethora of American films, television shows, and books from the post-Vietnam War period, Jeffords shows the ways that patriarchal power was recuperated through narratives that centered on masculinist subjects who conquered all that threatened their capacity for domination. As opposed to the restored subject that is regularly glorified in post-war institutional and popular rhetoric, Antin’s early selves are defined by their


39 Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), xi. Jeffords contends that additional social and political factors from the Vietnam War period, such as the women’s rights, civil rights, and gay liberation movements also put phallic masculinity under duress.

40 Jeffords’s primary case studies are the following movies: *First Blood, First Blood Part II, Missing In Action, Missing in Action 2, Platoon, Gardens of Stone, Rambo*, and *Full Metal Jacket*. 
vulnerabilities. As we have seen, her ballerina and hijacker strive toward goals that they cannot meet and Little Nurse Eleanor has agency neither in the narrative she inhabits nor in her form as a paper doll.

The King of Solana Beach

Antin’s first male self, the King of Solana Beach, San Diego is, like her anti-heroines, a powerless figure. We first meet Antin’s king as he comes into being in an eponymously titled videotape. For fifty-two minutes The King (1972) shows Antin slowly and meticulously adding basic masculine facial characteristics—a moustache and beard—to her own feminine face (fig. 4.28).41 Once she has satisfactorily glued on and trimmed her new facial hair, she puts on a denim hat and a cape and assumes a regal pose (fig. 4.29). This king, however, did not enjoy a terribly regal fate, a failure that was part of Antin’s initial conception of his character. After making The King, upon studying her new appearance in the mirror, Antin found a likeness between herself and the Dutch painter Anthony Van Dyck’s portrait of King Charles I. She came to appreciate this external affinity when she discovered similarities between herself and the seventeenth century English king. As she explains, “He was…a small guy and a hopeless romantic. He was a loser like me…Nobody I ever voted for got elected, we couldn’t stop the war, they wouldn’t stop bombing Cambodia or napalming people. I mean, we were all

41 The videotape The King was initially named Representational Painting 2, which suggests that at the time when Antin made this work she had in mind her videotape of the previous year, Representational Painting, discussed in Chapter One.
hopeless against a government determined to fight an insane war in Vietnam. What could the king of a tiny little beach kingdom do?"  

The king’s ineffectiveness was elaborated most explicitly in *The Battle of the Bluffs*, which Antin performed eighteen times between 1975 and 1982. In this one-woman show, partially scripted and partially improvised, Antin narrates and performs “the great battle of Solana Beach.” When local developers destroy a cluster of Torrey Pines, an endangered tree species native to southern California, in order to make room for new real estate, the king galvanizes an army of local residents to defend their indigenous ecology. “My infantry,” the king explains, “consists of the very old carrying shuffleboard sticks and a cavalry of the very young on skateboards.” The narrative reaches a climax when the king engages in a fencing duel with the chief developer. Things seem auspicious when to save his own life the developer agrees to help the opposition achieve their “utopian dream” by tearing down the building that was erected on the land where the trees had been destroyed and returning that land to the king and his subjects. The king and his army, however, are betrayed. As the king laments, “the developers return the next day, not with bull-dozers, but with bull-horns and police arrest everybody. I alone escape to tell the tale. In exile.”


44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.
Productive vulnerability

Like *The Nurse and the Hijackers*, *The Battle of the Bluffs* addresses impotent revolution in the face of capitalism. In both works the revolutionaries have honorable intentions: they want to defend local and global ecologies respectively from corporate greed. Their problem is that these intentions have no traction in the worlds they inhabit. In the artist’s words, her selves are “always down at the heels or desperate about their helplessness in the face of pain and injustice.” This aspect of the selves must be interpreted in relation to the social and political context in which Antin created them. As the Vietnam War era turned to the post-Vietnam War era a climate of political anxiety and disillusionment enveloped America. On August 15, 1973 the American government withdrew its troops from Vietnam, but this was after eight years of deployment (which most Americans thought was eight years too long) and many thousands of lives lost. As Americans were confronting the trauma, evidence was mounting against the Nixon administration for the break-in it had engineered in June of 1972 at the Democratic National Committee Headquarters at the Watergate complex; the extensive measures the administration took to hide the crime and related illegal activities were also coming to light. While these ethical travesties would eventually lead to Nixon’s resignation in disgrace on August 9, 1974, it was disheartening to many that less than one month later, Nixon was pardoned by his presidential successor Gerald Ford. These events unfolded against the backdrop of an energy crisis and its economic ramifications. Given that Antin was, like many of her fellow artists, politically active, participating in antiwar protests

---

46 Eleanor Antin, email message to author, February 18, 2013.
and involved in the civil rights and feminist movements, her selves must be interpreted with reference to, even regarded as surrogates for, the average American subject, betrayed by its government.

Antin’s selves are vulnerable if vulnerability is understood as a state of being susceptible to—unable to transcend—the conditions by which one is surrounded. As addressed in the previous chapter, feminist discourse has long celebrated an acceptance of this sort of vulnerability, or precarity, as a productive political position, for if one cannot transcend an unsatisfactory environment, the only option left is to change it. Furthermore, as I noted at the outset of this dissertation, feminist proponents of a politics of vulnerability argue that the opposite, a will to triumphalist totality, necessarily demands the repression and subordination of alterity, which has dangerous consequences, including war. By foregrounding precarity and rejecting plenitude in the composition and depictions of the king, Citizen Morton, Little Nurse Eleanor, and the ballerina, Antin developed a model of feminist performance that responded to the post-Vietnam War era’s will to heroism.
100 BOOTS have gone on vacation after 2 ½ years of strenuous work. They deserve it and so do I. For the next 2 years I will be continuing to make videotapes in which I transform myself into all the selves I have chosen not to be or could not be.

-Eleanor Antin

From 1972 to 1991 Antin created multiple personae of different genders, races, professions, historical contexts, and geographic locations. She called this motley group her “selves.” The selves’ manifestations were as diverse as their stories: in some works they were embodied by Antin, their actions captured in photographs and on video; in others they had surrogates in the form of paper dolls; sometimes the selves were absent, traceable only through the drawings, texts, and films they had ostensibly left behind. Exploring “the transformational nature of the self” was the artist’s method of rejecting “the usual aids to self-definition—sex, age, talent, time and space,” which she experienced as “tyrannical limitations upon my freedom of choice.”

In her first phase of production, between 1972 and 1977, Antin invented a king, a ballerina, and two nurses. During this period she also began work on another self, producing a series of sketches and texts from the hand of Eleanora Antinova, an imaginary African American prima ballerina of Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes and, in

---


what would come to seem a rough draft for Antinova, she made one videotape as a character she referred to as the “black movie star.” Antinova did not come into full bloom until 1979; from then until 1987 she was almost exclusively the focus of Antin’s work (except for one reappearance of the king in 1983), starring in a number multimedia works. In 1991 Antin introduced her final self, Yevgeny Antinov, an exiled Russian film director from the 1920s.

When Antin started the selves project she was part of a wider network of mostly female artists who were altering their own identities as a political artistic strategy. Vito Acconci, Jacki Apple, Lynn Hershman, Suzy Lake, Linda Montano, Brian O’Doherty, and Adrian Piper used techniques of masquerade, posing, body modification, narrative invention, and doctored photographs to fracture identity and emphasize the performative nature of gender, race, and sexual orientation. One distinctive feature of Antin’s early identity transformations was their commitment to putting spectatorship on view, thereby continuing the Conceptualist critique of vision that had grounded the artist’s practice from her first works, explored most rigorously in Carving: A Traditional Sculpture. As much as they draw on the project of Conceptualism, the selves, in their challenge to the

---

3 Although Antin had originally intended her “black movie star” to be a stand alone self, she soon determined that “black is a color” and not a complete character in and of itself. Kim Levin, "The Angel of Mercy and the Fiction of History" in The Angel of Mercy (La Jolla: The La Jolla Museum of Art), n.p. Antin’s phrase echoes the title of artist Raymond Saunders’s 1967 pamphlet, Black is a Color, in which Saunders argued against an approach to art that places the race of the artist above other characteristics of the work she or he produced.

4 In 2007 Jori Finkel explored the intersections of some of these practices in her exhibition Identity Theft: Eleanor Antin, Lynn Hershman, Suzy Lake 1972–1978 at the Santa Monica Museum of Art.
ideal of a stable subject, anticipated art informed by postmodernist feminism, serving as yet another component of Antin’s practice from the 1970s that makes her a bridge between these two artistic paradigms.

Attempting to bring into a unity all of Antin’s selves in their myriad manifestations would be antithetical to the logic of fragmentation that structures the project. Characteristic of all the selves, however, is that through their biographies, they are all at odds with—disenfranchised by—the worlds they inhabit. Narratively, then, the selves are precarious subjects, a status that I relate to the post-Vietnam War context in which this body of work emerged. In addition to the vulnerabilities that lie at the core of each of Antin’s individual selves by virtue of their particular narratives, the selves project as a whole is structured around fragility and the impossibility of a stable, singular identity, for during the selves years, Antin was constantly altering her own self-presentation, slipping with ease between one self and another. Judith Butler has argued that “without the compulsory expectation that feminist actions must be instituted from some stable, unified, and agreed-upon identity, those actions might well get a quicker start and seem more congenial to a number of ‘women’ for whom the meaning of the category is permanently moot.”\(^5\) Reading Antin through Butler once again, we see the feminist promise of Antin’s aesthetics of precarity.

The Ballerina

In the photograph *The Two Eleanors* (1973) a ballerina (played by Antin) looks into a mirror (fig. 4.1). She is shown from the shoulders up. In the right half of the image we see the ballerina from behind; on the left side of the image her face, with its delicate features, fine bone structure, and earnest eyes, is revealed through its reflection in the mirror. The ballerina opens her eyes wide as if searching the reflection for some information that is not readily available. As Antin has written, “ballerinas are always seeking corroboration in mirrors.”^{6} However, the mirror cannot deliver a smooth reflection as its surface is covered in smudges, nicks, and scuffs. These marks, along with two prominent lipstick stains in the upper right corner of the image, call attention to the surface of the mirror that separates the ballerina from her reflection. In the context of Antin’s work of the early 1970s this picture of a ballerina’s interrupted reflection proposes that perceptual experience is mediated by the frames of visual representation. As she did in *100 Boots*, in *The Two Eleanors* Antin invokes the tradition of *rückenfigur*, positioning herself in the image as a stand-in for the spectator of the image, inviting us to share the experience of the ballerina’s mediated visual perception.

Antin made *The Two Eleanors* on the stage set of another ballerina project, *Caught in the Act* (1973), which also explores the way images mediate experience. The largest component of *Caught in the Act* is thirty-nine black and white photographs that show a ballerina, played by Antin, donning various tutus and point shoes, and modeling a series of elegant ballet poses (fig. 4.2). In addition to these static images, however,

Caught in the Act contains a time-based element—a thirty-six minute black and white videotape that reveals the process by which these images were produced: to assume a given pose the ballerina steadies herself by holding onto one end of a stick, which is offered to her by a man described in the video’s credits simply as “Help”; once she feels confident in her balance the ballerina lets go of the stick and at that instant the photographer freezes her image; following the click of the shutter the ballerina clumsily collapses and the whole process starts again (fig. 4.3). The durational nature of Caught in the Act’s videotape exposes the unglamorous physicality, performed by Antin, which is behind the apparently effortless feminine grace of which the ballerina is an icon. This aspect of the work recalls the time-based tedium that Antin employed in Carving: A Traditional Sculpture and Representational Painting to reveal the work involved in attaining feminine aesthetic ideals.

Upon seeing Caught in the Act when it was first shown, Los Angeles Times art critic William Wilson aptly described the ballerina as a “touching impostor.” This clumsy self-taught ballerina’s fraudulence becomes poignant when we learn through other ballerina works, the videotape The Ballerina and the Bum (1973) and the videotaped performance The Little Matchgirl Ballet (1975), that the ballerina aspires to move from “the sticks” to New York City to become the star of George Balanchine’s

---

7 In Caught in the Act “Help” was played by the artist Fred Lonidier, while the photographer was Philip (Phel) Steinmetz; both were faculty in UCSD’s Visual Arts Department.

dance company, dancing to the music of Stravinsky against the backdrop of sets designed by Picasso.

Antin’s invention of the untrained ballerina continues her engagement with the practice of Yvonne Rainer, whose choreography in the 1960s radically rejected the traditions of the very dance world that Antin’s ballerina cannot enter. To this end a key strategy for Rainer was parody, which, along with other modes of humor and play, permeated Antin’s work of the 1970s. Rainer’s *Three Seascapes* (1962) culminates in a solo female dancer’s hysterical fit performed on an oversized pile of white tulle in a parody of traditional classical dance’s emotional and gestural indulgence. In *Duet Section*, part of *Terrain* (1963), Rainer plays a classic ballerina while Trisha Brown performs the part of a burlesque dancer; together the two strike exaggerated parodic poses as pin-up girls, aligning the idealized ballerina with the female sex object (fig. 4.4). Indeed, Antin’s ballerina might have been cast in Rainer’s *Parts of Some Sextets* (1965) in which dancers heaved, lugged, and dragged mattresses—props that canceled any possibility of classic balletic grace (fig. 4.5). Of this dance Rainer wrote, “no rhythm, no emphasis, no tension, no relaxation. You just do it, with the coordination of a pro and the non-definition of an amateur.” At stake in Rainer’s work was, as Carrie Lambert-Beatty has shown, a challenge to modernist conventions of spectatorship, which treated artwork

---


as independent of both its surrounding world and the spectators who consumed it. Lambert-Beatty argues that Rainer’s work is not about the body as such, but “the body as offered to the eye [of the viewer].”\textsuperscript{11} By taking into account the performing body’s relationship to the consuming audience member, Rainer conceives of spectatorship as a dynamic and reciprocal relationship.

As I have been arguing, Antin also made spectatorship central to her work. She treats the spectator as a desiring subject—a subject who interprets images through her own drives and experiences. At the same time, Antin probes the ways that the subject herself is constructed by her encounters with images. Subject and image, Antin contends, come into being reciprocally. With recourse to Martin Heidegger’s published lecture, “The Age of the World Picture,” Craig Owens has argued that making visible the reciprocal relationship between subject and image was one of postmodernism’s foundational operations, for it intervened in modernism’s claims for the mastering subject by virtue of its capacity to produce the world in representation.\textsuperscript{12}

In \textit{Caught in the Act}, the spectator is shown to be vulnerable, for Antin reveals the capacity of images to deceive her. The title of this work ostensibly refers to the amateur ballerina who is caught posing as an accomplished ballerina. I want to argue, however, that the title has a double meaning, referring as well to the spectator who is caught in the


act of looking and desiring to believe the image before her eyes. In *Caught in the Act*, in the face of the videotape’s revelation, the spectator of the work is invited to contend with her experience of the still images’ ruse. She is furthermore reminded that every time she encounters an idealized image there is potentially a less elegant reality lurking beyond the image’s frame. To seek out that reality permits the disruption of an aesthetic ideal. The final moments of the video show the photographer putting away his equipment—the time-based medium gets the last laugh.

**Little Nurse Eleanor**

In Antin’s performance *The Little Matchgirl Ballet*, the ballerina declares: “A horse can jump. A plane can fly. A ballerina can pose.” Indeed, through the ballerina Antin suggests a connection between idealized imagery and freezing, for the ballerina’s ability to project an aesthetic ideal is dependent on the camera’s capacity to fix her image in a fraction of a second.\(^{13}\) For Craig Owens, fixing the body is a key operation of the stereotype, which, like an ideal, is grounded in fantasy and projection. Owens characterizes the stereotype as “a form of symbolic violence exercised upon the body in order both to assign it to a place and to keep it in place…it promotes passivity, receptivity, inactivity—docile bodies.”\(^{14}\) Written after Antin’s selves were well underway, Owens’s argument offers a useful framework through which to interpret Antin’s second female self, Little Nurse Eleanor. While Antin was developing the

---

\(^{13}\) Lambert-Beatty has interpreted certain works by Rainer as a challenge to the photographic freeze. Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*, 138.

ballerina, an icon of feminine grace, she began exploring other feminine stereotypes, such as, in the artist’s words, “scapegoat, nurturer, servant, sex object, fantasy,” through this next self. Antin gives material expression to the “passivity, receptivity, inactivity” of these stereotypical roles by rendering Little Nurse Eleanor in the form of a paper doll, mute and with an unchanging expression (fig. 4.6). Antin animates her paper doll nurses through play and make-believe scenarios. In the hour-long videotape Adventures of a Nurse (1976) Antin, dressed in a nurse’s uniform, gives voices to and moves a cast of eight one-foot-tall paper dolls through a series of scenes that highlight the nurse’s naïveté and sexually degraded status (fig. 4.7). The narrative unfolds atop a pink bed with a few rudimentary props, including a cardboard motorcycle, some Styrofoam blocks that stand for the bar at Greenwich Village’s famous White Horse Tavern, and torn bits of paper that fall as snow. As the nurse tries to do her work, spend time with her friends, and explore new places she is constantly being seduced in spite of herself—at the end of each scene the nurse finds herself having sex with a different suitor, an act indicated when Antin rubs two paper dolls together and makes ecstatic noises.

Performing as the ballerina and Little Nurse Eleanor, Antin occupies particular personae as a strategy by which to address the ways that representation determines the subject positions of women. Antin had explored this issue through strategies of non-occupation in a project she made shortly before inventing the selves. Portraits of Eight New York Women (1970) was Antin’s second series of “consumer goods portraits” after California Lives (1969). They consisted of seven sculptural tableaux and a printed

---

statement, each of which served as an equivalent for a particular woman: Naomi Dash, Amy Goldin, Margaret Mead, Rochelle Owens, Yvonne Rainer, Lynne Traiger, Carolee Schneemann, and Hannah Weiner.\textsuperscript{16} Portraits of Eight New York Women debuted in close quarters: room 322 at the Hotel Chelsea, which was Antin’s alternative and self-funded venue after her gallery, Gain Ground, suddenly closed (fig. 4.8).\textsuperscript{17} The show was open for just over two weeks, from November 21–December 6, 1970 with more or less regular gallery hours of 12–6 pm daily, which were staffed by an attendant whom Antin had hired.\textsuperscript{18}

In the press release for Portraits of Eight New York Women Antin wrote that “the artist considers herself a special variety of representational sculptor and each of her pieces as a rigorously realistic ‘portrait from which the sitters happen to have walked away.’”\textsuperscript{19} Throughout the tableaux there is a sense that the objects are in use and thus

\textsuperscript{16} Antin had originally planned on doing portraits of more than eight women. Additional potential subjects were: Emily Evans, Marilyn Fischback, Gloria George, Grace Glueck, Lita Hornick, Joan Jonas, Vaughn Kaprow, Alison Knowles, Jill Kornblee, Annette Michelson, Sylvia Sleigh, Diane Wakowski, Anne Waldman. Prospectus, Portraits of New York Women, Eleanor Antin papers, 1953–2010, box 31, folder 3.

\textsuperscript{17} The same year Portraits of Eight New York Women debuted in New York, four of the eight portraits were included in Lucy Lippard’s exhibition 2,972,453.

\textsuperscript{18} Of her decision to use the Hotel Chelsea as an exhibition site, Antin has written, “its New York ambience seemed so relevant and fitting. Is there a New Yorker who hasn’t walked those thick vulgar carpets—always bright green or blue so the dirt won’t show? Who hasn’t spent time there between apartments, visiting a country brother and his wife or a lover in for a week?” Eleanor Antin to Rosalind Constable, n.d., Eleanor Antin papers, 1953–2010, box 1, folder 15. For more information on the evolution of this installation, see Cindy Nemser, “Eleanor Antin,” in Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists (New York: Scribner, 1975), 251; Nancy Bowen, “On Art and Artists: Eleanor Antin,” Profile 1, no. 4 (July 1981): 7; Ely, 1953, Eleanor Antin papers, 1953–2010, box 54, item C1.
freshly abandoned. Yvonne Rainer is represented by a stationary exercise bicycle with a sweatshirt on the seat as though the rider has just gotten up for a moment; on the right handle-bar is a large horn; on the left is a rear-view mirror, suggesting that the rider makes noise as she moves forward but always keeps an eye on what is behind her (fig. 4.9). In Schneemann’s portrait it seems a work of art is in the making: a tall wooden easel is draped with a large piece of dark velvet (fig. 4.10). In contrast to these icons of academic painting, at the base of the easel sits a jar of honey, likely an allusion to the organic materials that were integral to Schneemann’s performance practice. The whole tableau is reflected in a full-length mirror. Part of Mead’s tableau, the main elements of which are a director’s chair, umbrella, and binoculars, is an open thermos as if Mead has just taken a sip. Next to Mead, Dash is conjured by a towel rack affixed to the wall from which hang a towel, shower cap, and a pair of dark sheer pantyhose that still hold the shape of Dash’s legs as if she has just peeled them off (the pantyhose dangle above a cat’s litter box, which offers a humorous contrast to this assemblage of femininity) (fig. 4.11). Tossed on Goldin’s neatly-made no-frills institutional cot are a pair of pearl earrings—left there so carelessly it seems their owner is nearby about to put them on or, having recently taken them off, will soon put them away. Traiger’s primary object is a front door (installed against the wall of the actual hotel room) in the midst of being unlocked—a key, attached to a wallet, is suspended from the lock as if someone had been called away while she was opening the door. The absence that is figured in these tableaux is explicit in Owens’s portrait, a label that states in all capital letters: “ROCHELLE

OWENS REMOVED – PIECE DID NOT LIVE UP TO SUBJECT.” In Portraits of Eight New York Women, Antin’s act of absenting the portraits’ subjects serves as a rejection of the history of images that has held up women as objects to be visually consumed. By the time she embarked on the selves, however, occupation and embodiment were the strategies that Antin utilized to put forward her feminist critique.

As Antin continued to work on her selves throughout the 1970s she referred increasingly to events that formed the series’ political backdrop. In addition to Adventures of a Nurse Antin made another paper doll video drama, The Nurse and the Hijackers (1977) (fig. 4.12). In this work a different stereotype is depicted—that of the leftist idealist who has utopian ambitions but lacks a viable program to meet her goals. The Nurse and the Hijackers’ seventy-five minutes follow a script, which Antin performs, once again, by giving voices and movements to a cast of approximately forty paper dolls on the set of a model (seventeen-feet long by five-foot wide and four-feet tall) cardboard airplane interior (fig. 4.13). Spoofing the disaster movie genre while referring to the oil and energy crises of the early 1970s in America, The Nurse and the Hijackers shows an airplane hijacking gone awry.20 Four radical idealist environmentalists take control of an airplane headed from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C. Although she is not technically one of Antin’s selves, the protagonist of this video is the head revolutionary Citizen Morton (named after the artist Ree Morton).

Citizen Morton explains to the passengers:

---

20 A specific reference for The Nurse and the Hijackers was a television movie, Raid on Entebbe (1976), which was based on Operation Entebbe of 1976 in which Israeli soldiers rescued approximately 100 Israeli and Jewish hostages who were being held by pro-Palestinian hijackers at the Entebbe airport in Uganda.
you and we have been hostages to an imperialist technology that in the apparent and only short-run interest of the few has taken nearly endless advantage of the many to produce an illusion of affluence and freedom provided by a progressive technology. It is not a progressive technology. It is regressive and it is destroying the earth and the people from which it sprang. The capitalist state has entered a new phase in which the state is technology and technology is the state. We mean to liberate you from this state.

The hijackers reroute the plane to a series of OPEC nations where they attempt but fail to convince the leaders of these nations to stop exporting oil to the United States in the hope that this will compel the United States to find alternative energy solutions. In the final scene, upon landing in Egypt the plane is stormed by Israeli soldiers who kill the hijackers and some of the passengers.

The hijackers’ powerlessness is emphasized by their comically performed challenges to communicate their political agenda via the media, which, as Antin notes in the work’s original press release, was a basic incentive of airplane hijacking. Soon after the plane has been hijacked Citizen Morton demands television airtime to convey her message, but she can only reach flight control. Settling for that she boldly declares to flight control, “this plane has just been liberated in the name of the people.” Flight control cannot make out the message. Finally, one of the passengers on the plane, a buffoonish Los Angeles sportscaster, is able to get Citizen Morton airtime on his local television network.

21 The press release for The Nurse and the Hijackers notes, “in this age of massive centralized government and institutions within which individuals are increasingly more removed from the sources of power, hijacking has become one of the ways in which the powerless can appear to reach the power centers quickly and cheaply via the communications media, who have been quick to recognize and maximize their own importance in this new political genre.” Draft of press release for The Nurse and the Hijackers, Eleanor Antin papers, 1953–2010, box 18, folder 7.
Antin gives form to the fact that stereotypes are cultural constructions in the crude aesthetic of *Adventures of a Nurse* and *The Nurse and the Hijackers*, which calls our attention quite literally to the way each stereotypical character was physically constructed; we see the paper dolls’ hand-cut edges and the folded tabs that keep their paper clothing attached to their two-dimensional bodies. By emphasizing the constructedness of the image Antin blocks our immersion in it. When smooth visual consumption is interrupted—frustrated—the spectator is left to reflect on what she had been hoping the image would deliver. Desire in visual representation structures the content of *Adventures of the Nurse* and *The Nurse and Hijackers*, for we watch not simply the paper dolls in action, but also Antin’s performative engagement with the dolls—she herself invests in their images. Antin has said that in her paper doll works her “means are those available to little girls everywhere—paper dolls and narrative invention.”²² As we watch Antin perform the part of a child lost in her imaginary world, we participate in the deep-rooted desire to animate images and believe in those animations.

**Nurse Eleanor Nightingale**

Antin’s engagement with the political context of her selves included a turn to war. Specifically, she explored the relationship between home and war in a second incarnation of the nurse, Nurse Eleanor Nightingale, based on the English nurse Florence Nightingale (1820–1910). Eleanor Nightingale appeared in two series of photographs, *The Angel of Mercy: The Nightingale Family Album* and *The Angel of Mercy: My Tour of Duty in The*

²² Ibid.
Crimea, and a play, *The Angel of Mercy*. The photographs depict imagined scenes from Nightingale’s life. Staged by Antin, they are composed and printed in a manner that makes them appear to be legitimate nineteenth century artifacts. The images refer to work by such photographers as Matthew Brady, Julia Margaret Cameron, Roger Fenton, Alexander Gardner, and in the tradition of early pictorial photography, they evoke painters, including Thomas Eakins, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, and Winslow Homer. Outfitted in period costumes, Antin’s artistic circle in San Diego populates the pictures: Fred Lonidier is a doctor; John Perreault plays Nightingale’s suitor; Jerome Rothenberg a general; and David Antin, Helen and Newton Harrison, Pauline Oliveros, Martha Rosler, and Moira Roth are featured in minor roles. Antin plays Nightingale.

Throughout *The Nightingale Family Album* a sheltered and frivolous world is depicted, which reflects Florence Nightingale’s opinion of the upper-class Victorian English society into which she was born. In most of the images (each of which ranges from between four-by-six to eight-by-ten inches) the characters are shown among leafy woods and gardens engaging in such activities as croquet, play-acting, picnicking, fishing, boating, and flirting. This is the world in which Antin’s Nightingale resides, though it is clear she occupies its margins. One photograph in the album, *The New Arrival*, is set in the clearing of a lush garden punctuated by dappled light (fig. 4.14). A seated woman cradles her newborn baby while four other women, including Nightingale’s mother, gather around her to admire the baby. Nightingale herself stands apart from the group, looking down at her hands (perhaps considering their idleness), unengaged by the domestic bliss her cohort celebrates. The light shines brightest on her, almost functioning as a spotlight that indicates she is the character who will become
central to the narrative as it unfolds. In *The Gentleman’s Game is The Ladies Gain* six figures play croquet in a sunny garden (fig. 4.15). A gentleman in a top hat takes a swing while a woman watches him, covering her mouth in suspense. The other players look on, predicting the success of the shot. Nightingale is placed right in the middle of the image, but stands at a slight distance from the players, with her back to them (and to the viewer of the image), indicating in no uncertain terms her alienation from the world she inhabits.

Indeed, by the age of twenty-seven Florence Nightingale started to estrange herself from her social world when she informed her family that she believed her calling was to pursue the profession of nursing. Soon thereafter, against her family’s wishes, she received training as a nurse and by 1853 she was the (unpaid) superintendent of the Hospital for Invalid Gentlewomen in her hometown of Derbyshire, England. This was the same year that the Crimean War began. In 1854 when the London-based newspaper *The Times* printed reports from the Crimea detailing the horrible healthcare conditions available to English soldiers, Nightingale, with the support of Secretary at War Sidney Herbert, assembled a team of thirty-eight nurses to assist with the war effort. She and her fleet arrived at Scutari, the English hospital in Turkey, on November 4, 1854. Nightingale served there and in the Crimea itself until the war was over in 1856. When she returned to England, Nightingale continued to work as a nurse and published various educational materials on the burgeoning field that she had helped to establish.

The image from *The Nightingale Family Album* that shows Nightingale most animated is ‘*They Also Serve...* ’ in which she reads a war dispatch from a newspaper aloud to her family as they sit around the breakfast table (fig. 4.16). This image portends Nightingale’s next destination, which is depicted in the second series of photographs. *The
Angel of Mercy: My Tour of Duty in The Crimea portrays a different Nightingale. She has left her life of shelter in a garden to go to war. These works are larger—the photographs are between six-by-eight and eight-by-ten inches. In Operation in the Field Hospital she attentively examines a patient who lies on a stretcher in the makeshift medical care facility (sheets tied between trees in a clearing in the woods) while in War Games she appears engrossed in a game of chess with a soldier (figs. 4.17 & 4.18). In The Trenches Before Sebastopol Nightingale surveys with distress an array of fallen soldiers, and in The Angel of Mercy she cradles an injured soldier, lifting a cup to his lips and looking with concern toward what might be the source of his wounds beyond the edge of the photograph’s frame (figs. 4.19 & 4.20).

The play, The Angel of Mercy, which was first performed in 1977 in M.L. D’Arc Gallery in New York, where The Angel of Mercy photographs hung, renders live the narrative that is depicted in the photographs: Eleanor Nightingale is clearly dissatisfied with her comfortable upper class life while injustice continues outside the parlors and ballrooms where she passes her time, so she goes to be of service as a nurse to soldiers in the Crimean War. In The Angel of Mercy Antin plays Nightingale alongside a cast of twenty nearly life-sized “puppets”—doctors, generals, and soldiers cut out from Masonite bearing fixed painted expressions—whose voices she provides and with whom she interacts (fig. 4.21). The puppets were modeled on Antin’s friends—the same circle that populated The Angel of Mercy photographs (figs. 4.22 & 4.23). Drawing on the form of Brecht’s lehrstücke, Antin punctuates The Angel of Mercy’s narrative progression with monologues in which Nightingale reflects on the meaning and morality of war as well as her implication in it through her labor as nurse to the soldiers. At one point Eleanor
Nightingale muses, “if one soldier is killed, he merely dies, but if you heal him, he returns to kill at least one other before perhaps dying himself. So it is in this that I am not a healer, but a double killer.” The play bears a clear relationship to the nurse paper doll video dramas, for once again, as spectators, we are prevented from engaging with the actors on stage and instead watch Antin’s own performance investing in these images.

Florence Nightingale’s biography, the story of a woman who wrestled with her domestic and professional allegiances, made her a compelling figure to Antin. Beyond Nightingale’s personal story, however, she serves as a vehicle to resuscitate the history of the Crimean War. The Crimean War’s visual history had a relationship to that of the Vietnam War, which had just ended when Antin was making The Angel of Mercy projects. Like the Vietnam War, the Crimean War was to an unprecedented degree the subject of visual representation, thereby enmeshing home and war in ways that had not previously been possible.

The Crimean War was fought between October 1853 and February 1856, mostly on the Crimean peninsula, between the Russian Empire and an alliance of the French, British, and Ottoman Turkish empires.²³ The conflict revolved around the question of who would control parts of the Ottoman Empire. During the war’s nearly two and a half years an estimated 750,000 soldiers died in battle or from illness and disease. The Crimean War is widely regarded as an unnecessary war in which many armies were badly mismanaged. Beyond its particular military history, the Crimean War is notable for being the first war that was accessible to distant audiences via candid reportage and

²³ The French-British-Ottoman alliance was joined in 1855 by the Sardinia-Piedmont Italian army.
photographic images. Accounts of the war were most widely disseminated in England: from 1854–56 *The Times* reporter William Russell sent daily dispatches from the Crimea and for four months in 1855 the photographer Roger Fenton documented the war in copious images. Russell spared no details about the English military authorities’ ineptitude and the inadequate provisions that were available to fighting as well as ailing and wounded soldiers. Alongside Russell’s articles, *The Times* published letters written by soldiers and officers reporting the horrible conditions in the Crimea as well as editorials that were highly critical of military mismanagement. As public distress over England’s participation in the war mounted, the British government knew something had to be done to counteract it. Photography had recently made a strong impression in London through its presence at the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in 1851 and there was much excitement around—and trust in—the new medium. Thus the camera seemed the right tool to offset *The Times*’s damning words. By 1854 Fenton was one of England’s foremost spokesmen for photography and Prince Albert and Queen Victoria were patrons of his work. He was therefore in the right position to be commissioned by the British government to go to the Crimea and construct a narrative in pictures that would justify the British war effort. In April of 1855 Fenton went to the Crimea for four months. During this time, using multiple cameras, a self-made darkroom facility, and with the aid of two assistants, he produced approximately 350 negatives.

---

While Fenton was in the Crimea, his images were printed as lithographs in *The Illustrated London News*. When he returned to England his photographs made their way through royal circles and a show, *Photographic Pictures Taken in the Crimea*, which featured 280 images by Fenton, traveled to eight venues around the country, garnering great praise. One review exclaimed, “Men will fall before the battle scythe of war, but not before this infallible sketcher has caught their lineaments and given them an anonymous immortality….As photographists grow stronger in nerve and cooler of head, we shall have…the battle itself painted; and while the fate of nations is in the balance we shall hear of the chemist measure out his acids and rubbing his glasses to a polish.”

Another commentator described the new photographs as a “direct window onto the realities of war.”

Despite this rhetoric, what Fenton’s photographs (and letters) actually reveal is that the realities of war were remote from his experience in the Crimea. In Susan Sontag’s words, “Fenton went about rendering the war as a dignified all-male group outing.” The majority of Fenton’s images were posed portraits. He tended to photograph the leaders of the allies’ armies as well as notable officers—as he put it in a letter, the “great guns” and “the persons and subjects likely to be historically


interesting.” As for the anonymous soldiers, they were generally pictured enjoying rest or leisure at camp (fig. 4.24). Fenton set the local scene in images of the harbor at Balaklava and indigenous individuals whose physiognomies and dress might seem exotic to an English audience. The image by Fenton that is widely regarded as the most apt depiction of war’s desolation is *Valley of the Shadow of Death* in which a windy unpeopled road scattered with rocks and cannonballs snakes into a barren horizon (fig. 4.25).

The limited extent to which Fenton exposed the true nature of the war he was documenting must be first and foremost attributed to the fact that he was in the Crimea making government propaganda—his commissioned assignment was precisely *not* to provide a direct window but rather a rose-tinted one onto all he encountered there. Furthermore, even if Fenton had wanted an honest glimpse of war’s brutalities, it would probably not have been granted to him; since he arrived in the Crimea equipped with letters of introduction from Prince Albert, he would likely have been sheltered from the most gruesome aspects of the war. Then too commercial incentives guided his body of work, for he was planning to sell the images he made in the Crimea when he returned to England. The price Fenton set for his Crimean portfolio was sixty pounds, which was expensive for the time and indicates that he had a particular audience in mind. As Sarah Greenough notes, “this audience, many of whom had lost family and friends in the conflict, did not want to see photographs of death, suffering, chaos, and ineptitude, or images that would challenge their closely held belief in the necessity and correctness of

---

the conflict.”\textsuperscript{29} To this end, writes Greenough, Fenton drew on his background in history painting, depicting “timeless and noble qualities such as fraternity, leadership, or dedication to country.”\textsuperscript{30} Finally, there was a technological hindrance to the veracity of Fenton’s representations: the wetplate process by which negatives were made at the time required a glass plate to be exposed for up to twenty seconds. Still, while he could not have shown battle in action, Fenton could have shown battle’s aftermath (as Matthew Brady and Alexander Gardner would do just a few years later in their photographs of the American Civil War).

The Crimean War and the Vietnam War, separated by an ocean and more than a century, reveal that enhanced technological visual access to war does not necessarily amount to adequate representation. In \emph{The Angel of Mercy} photograph series Antin foregrounds the inadequacy of visual representation of war by putting the spectator in an uncomfortable position with relation to the images. The photograph series teeters on the border between fiction and reality—the pictures are grounded in history but staged by Antin—and for the average spectator it is difficult to discern whether they are genuine documents of nineteenth century Europe or fabrications. Antin thus returns to the theme she had addressed in \emph{Caught in the Act}: images are not transparent. And, as with the paper doll video dramas, in the play, the constructedness of images is once again revealed, this time writ large in Antin’s performance with the nearly life-sized Masonite puppets.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 22.
Just as photography ultimately failed to bring the war home to England from the Crimea, during the Vietnam War, television as a nascent news medium also had limitations. During the Vietnam War, spectators were granted an unprecedented degree of visual access to events unfolding on a different continent, largely through expanded television coverage. However this visual access did not offer the kind of transparency that many attributed to it; that is, the Vietnam War was not in fact an “uncensored war.” Examining television coverage of the Vietnam War between 1965 and 1973, Daniel Hallin points to the prevalence of what he calls “consensus reporting” in which reporters advocated non-controversial and official values. Hallin furthermore argues that given television’s roots in entertainment and drama, Vietnam coverage conformed somewhat to the idea that “the best materials for television drama are the ones in which Good and Evil can be represented as clear and separate, where the source of conflict can be located outside the National Family,” a framework that left no room for self-implication. Another factor diminishing the transparency of televised coverage of the war was the control that network executives had over what viewers saw. For example, following the violent footage that was broadcast during the Tet offensive of 1968, in March 1969 Av Westin, the executive producer of ABC News, sent word to the network’s Vietnam staff “to alter the focuses of their coverage from combat pieces to interpretive ones, pegged to

---


32 Ibid., 125.
the eventual pullout of American forces.” Around the same time “The Huntley-Brinkley Report” on NBC diminished its coverage of the war as well.

Aside from its inadequacies in terms of content, as some have argued, the defining medium properties of television had the potential to alienate viewers from the actuality of what was being represented on the screen. In 1969, in the essay that famously dubbed the Vietnam War the “living room war,” Michael Arlen addressed what constituted for him the inadequacies of televised representations of war:

I can’t say I completely agree with people who think that when battle scenes are brought into the living room the hazards of war are necessarily made ‘real’ to the civilian audience. It seems to me that by the same process they are also made less ‘real’—diminished, in part, by the physical size of the television screen, which for all the industry’s advances, still show one a picture of men three inches tall shooting at other men three inches tall, and trivialized, or at least tamed, by the enveloping cozy alarums of the household.

The year before Arlen’s essay was published, Yvonne Rainer had also commented on the way television seemed to reduce the gravity of war: she described her “horror and disbelief upon seeing a Vietnamese shot dead on TV—not at the sight of death, however, but at the fact that the TV can be shut off afterwards as after a bad Western.”

The clash of war and the living room that Arlen and Rainer cite is at play in Martha Rosler’s photomontage series, *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967–

---


72), in which Rosler incorporates images from the Vietnam War into magazine spreads depicting comfortable bourgeois domestic interiors. In one image a woman earnestly cleans her drapes while outside her window armed soldiers are stationed amidst craggy terrain. In another image a man carries a maimed baby up the stairs of a well-appointed living room in which a pile of balloons suggests the aftermath of a birthday party (figs. 4.26 & 4.27). In *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* there is an unsettling tension between the compositional seamlessness with which the images are integrated with each other and the utterly divergent—inassimilable—worlds they depict. This tension is amplified by the way the figures in the homes are unaffected by the scenes of war. The photomontages, then, implicitly question the degree to which images of the Vietnam War actually impact the living rooms into which they are projected.

Different from Rosler’s use of contemporary imagery, Antin reflects on the present through an analogy with the past, thereby offering history as a patchwork of temporalities as opposed to straightforward progress. As she wrote in 1973, “once an event is over it becomes history and history is always fiction. The reality of experience is not that ‘once in a particular place a certain event occurred’ but that we recognize it.” In the wake of the Vietnam War Antin’s turn to history also serves as a plea not to forget. Following collective national trauma official rhetoric tends to enjoin populations to seek closure, be resilient, and move forward. Marilyn Young cites President Reagan’s pronouncement in 1982 at the dedication of the Vietnam War Memorial that the erection of this structure marked the moment “to move on, ‘in unity and with resolve, with the

resolve to always stand for freedom, as those who fought did, and to always try to protect and preserve the peace.” In this injunction Reagan rationalizes the war and attempts to restore a sense of wholeness to America’s self-image, rather than confronting the loss and fragmentation that the trauma of war necessarily entails. Official calls to curtail mourning seem to be growing increasingly impatient, for it was just ten days after the September 11 attacks that President Bush announced that “we have finished grieving and that now it is time for resolute action to take the place of grief.”

Susan Jeffords has argued that in response to the loss of fantasies of national invincibility and self-sufficiency incurred during the Vietnam War, American pop culture entered a compensatory phase of what she terms “remasculinization.” Through a plethora of American films, television shows, and books from the post-Vietnam War period, Jeffords shows the ways that patriarchal power was recuperated through narratives that centered on masculinist subjects who conquered all that threatened their capacity for domination. As opposed to the restored subject that is regularly glorified in post-war institutional and popular rhetoric, Antin’s early selves are defined by their


39 Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), xi. Jeffords contends that additional social and political factors from the Vietnam War period, such as the women’s rights, civil rights, and gay liberation movements also put phallic masculinity under duress.

40 Jeffords’s primary case studies are the following movies: *First Blood, First Blood Part II, Missing In Action, Missing in Action 2, Platoon, Gardens of Stone, Rambo, and Full Metal Jacket.*
vulnerabilities. As we have seen, her ballerina and hijacker strive toward goals that they cannot meet and Little Nurse Eleanor has agency neither in the narrative she inhabits nor in her form as a paper doll.

**The King of Solana Beach**

Antin’s first male self, the King of Solana Beach, San Diego is, like her anti-heroines, a powerless figure. We first meet Antin’s king as he comes into being in an eponymously titled videotape. For fifty-two minutes *The King (1972)* shows Antin slowly and meticulously adding basic masculine facial characteristics—a moustache and beard—to her own feminine face (fig. 4.28). Once she has satisfactorily glued on and trimmed her new facial hair, she puts on a denim hat and a cape and assumes a regal pose (fig. 4.29). This king, however, did not enjoy a terribly regal fate, a failure that was part of Antin’s initial conception of his character. After making *The King*, upon studying her new appearance in the mirror, Antin found a likeness between herself and the Dutch painter Anthony Van Dyck’s portrait of King Charles I. She came to appreciate this external affinity when she discovered similarities between herself and the seventeenth century English king. As she explains, “He was…a small guy and a hopeless romantic. He was a loser like me…Nobody I ever voted for got elected, we couldn’t stop the war, they wouldn’t stop bombing Cambodia or napalming people. I mean, we were all

---

41 The videotape *The King* was initially named *Representational Painting 2*, which suggests that at the time when Antin made this work she had in mind her videotape of the previous year, *Representational Painting*, discussed in Chapter One.
hopeless against a government determined to fight an insane war in Vietnam. What could the king of a tiny little beach kingdom do?"\(^{42}\)

The king’s ineffectiveness was elaborated most explicitly in *The Battle of the Bluffs*, which Antin performed eighteen times between 1975 and 1982. In this one-woman show, partially scripted and partially improvised, Antin narrates and performs “the great battle of Solana Beach.” When local developers destroy a cluster of Torrey Pines, an endangered tree species native to southern California, in order to make room for new real estate, the king galvanizes an army of local residents to defend their indigenous ecology. “My infantry,” the king explains, “consists of the very old carrying shuffleboard sticks and a cavalry of the very young on skateboards.”\(^{43}\) The narrative reaches a climax when the king engages in a fencing duel with the chief developer. Things seem auspicious when to save his own life the developer agrees to help the opposition achieve their “utopian dream” by tearing down the building that was erected on the land where the trees had been destroyed and returning that land to the king and his subjects.\(^{44}\) The king and his army, however, are betrayed. As the king laments, “the developers return the next day, not with bull-dozers, but with bull-horns and police arrest everybody. I alone escape to tell the tale. In exile.”\(^{45}\)


\(^{43}\) “Description of *The Battle of the Bluffs*,” Eleanor Antin papers, 1953–2010, box 17, folder 17.

\(^{44}\) Ibid.

\(^{45}\) Ibid.
Productive vulnerability

Like *The Nurse and the Hijackers*, *The Battle of the Bluffs* addresses impotent revolution in the face of capitalism. In both works the revolutionaries have honorable intentions: they want to defend local and global ecologies respectively from corporate greed. Their problem is that these intentions have no traction in the worlds they inhabit. In the artist’s words, her selves are “always down at the heels or desperate about their helplessness in the face of pain and injustice.” This aspect of the selves must be interpreted in relation to the social and political context in which Antin created them. As the Vietnam War era turned to the post-Vietnam War era a climate of political anxiety and disillusionment enveloped America. On August 15, 1973 the American government withdrew its troops from Vietnam, but this was after eight years of deployment (which most Americans thought was eight years too long) and many thousands of lives lost. As Americans were confronting the trauma, evidence was mounting against the Nixon administration for the break-in it had engineered in June of 1972 at the Democratic National Committee Headquarters at the Watergate complex; the extensive measures the administration took to hide the crime and related illegal activities were also coming to light. While these ethical travesties would eventually lead to Nixon’s resignation in disgrace on August 9, 1974, it was disheartening to many that less than one month later, Nixon was pardoned by his presidential successor Gerald Ford. These events unfolded against the backdrop of an energy crisis and its economic ramifications. Given that Antin was, like many of her fellow artists, politically active, participating in antiwar protests

---

46 Eleanor Antin, email message to author, February 18, 2013.
and involved in the civil rights and feminist movements, her selves must be interpreted with reference to, even regarded as surrogates for, the average American subject, betrayed by its government.

Antin’s selves are vulnerable if vulnerability is understood as a state of being susceptible to—unable to transcend—the conditions by which one is surrounded. As addressed in the previous chapter, feminist discourse has long celebrated an acceptance of this sort of vulnerability, or precarity, as a productive political position, for if one cannot transcend an unsatisfactory environment, the only option left is to change it.

Furthermore, as I noted at the outset of this dissertation, feminist proponents of a politics of vulnerability argue that the opposite, a will to triumphalist totality, necessarily demands the repression and subordination of alterity, which has dangerous consequences, including war. By foregrounding precarity and rejecting plenitude in the composition and depictions of the king, Citizen Morton, Little Nurse Eleanor, and the ballerina, Antin developed a model of feminist performance that responded to the post-Vietnam War era’s will to heroism.
The central protagonist in Eleanor Antin’s varied work of the 1970s is the desiring spectator. As the 1970s progressed, eventually giving way to the 1980s, explorations of the sexual politics of looking became increasingly pervasive in visual representation through an expanding constellation of artists whose work was informed by postmodernist feminism. In the late 1970s, after leaving a career in commercial graphic design, Barbara Kruger began superimposing text on mass media images, endowing those images with a voice, typically one that directly addresses the viewer. *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)* (1981) includes a photograph of a bust of a woman’s head in profile (fig. E.1). Evoking themes that are prevalent in *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, the woman in Kruger’s image is twice petrified: first in the marble from which she was carved, and second in the photograph. But the woman is not silent. She speaks to the spectator in the phrase that runs down the left edge of the image: “Your gaze hits the side of my face.” This phrase reminds us that the pictured woman’s double-petrification is a result of her being imaged for consumption by the spectator, who is implicated in an act of visual aggression. Violence in looking is underscored by Kruger’s choice of “hit” to describe the gaze’s action upon the pictured woman’s face.

In her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–1980), Cindy Sherman put on view femininity’s construction in pictures by staging and inhabiting tableaux based on feminine stereotypes projected by the mass media. Throughout the series Sherman occupies the positions of the femme fatale, sexy housewife, working girl in the city, and ingénue in nature, among others (figs. E.2 & E.3). Viewing the work in its entirety reveals that the images are not
actual film stills, but rather pictures of the same woman assuming an array of poses.

Sherman performs the everywoman who copies what she sees on screen. Cumulatively, *Untitled Film Stills* makes vivid the power pictures have, not simply to elicit desire, but actually to compel mimicry on the part of their spectators. In this series of images there are two protagonists; there is, as many people have written, the character in the film each image conjures, but in addition to the parts Sherman plays, each image features Sherman herself performing the part of the spectator.¹ In *Untitled Film Stills*, then, Sherman plays two roles: the character whose guise she appropriates, and the spectator approximating different images.² In the second role Sherman is our surrogate, and as *Untitled Films Still*s’ spectators, we are invited to reflect on our own relationships to the images at which we look, and imaging in general.

Kaja Silverman has argued that the spectator’s point of psychic entrance into Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* is located in Sherman’s characters’ failure to achieve ideality.³ She articulates this argument most explicitly through *Film Still #2* (fig. E.4). In this image Sherman stands in the doorway of the bathroom, holding a towel to cover her body, which turns toward the viewer at a three-quarter angle. Her head twists away from the viewer, looking instead over her right shoulder into the mirror that hangs above the sink; the image that is reflected back to her—and to us as the image’s spectators—is a


² In her work since *Untitled Film Stills* Sherman has not maintained this balance between the two roles as I have described them, for once her own face became recognizable following from the wide reception of *Untitled Film Stills* she lost some of the ambiguity between her own identity and that of the characters she embodies.

lovely young woman’s face, made up, framed by coiffed hair, and exhibiting a carefully composed demure expression, her mouth slightly open. Silverman hones in on the difference between the mirror image, which she characterizes as “an embodiment of traditional female beauty,” and the camera’s picture of the body, which she describes as “a bit chubby and undefined.” Whereas the former, writes Silverman, “represents its protagonist as she wants to be seen” the latter “most definitely does not offer itself to be seen.” Silverman proposes psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott’s conception of the “good enough” as a lens through which to interpret Untitled Film Stills. In Winnicott’s formulation the “good enough mother” is preferable to the ideal mother, for the ideal mother, in striving for a state of plentitude, leaves no room for the lack upon which desire rests—the desire that is the basis for a bond between mother and child. Silverman argues that by foregrounding her protagonists’ “good enough” status, Sherman facilitates identification between those protagonists and their spectators: “it is not these women’s ideal imagos with which we identify….It is rather with the women themselves, in all their manifest distance from the mirror, that we are encouraged to form this psychic alignment….it is because the protagonists of Untitled Film Stills are shown to fall so far short of approximating their ideal imagos that we identify with them.”

Predicting Sherman’s “good enough” protagonists and the desiring spectatorship they invite, Antin’s selves fall far short of their ideals. They are built on precarious

---

4 Ibid., 208.
5 Ibid., 208.
6 Ibid., 224.
foundations marked by lack and incompleteness, which makes them desiring subjects. The self who lacks and feels that lack most acutely is Antin’s artist self, Eleanora Antinova, the African American prima ballerina of Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. Antinova’s primary struggle centers on her incongruities with the classifications that guide the society and culture in which she resides: she is a modernist in an art world that still clings to classicism, aging in an industry that celebrates youth, black when ballet’s star parts are written for white bodies. Because Antinova is so rife with contradictions, history finds no place for her and she is ultimately forgotten. Antinova’s strife is depicted in the extensive body of work that Antin created in this character. Having published writings and exhibited drawings in the hand of Antinova in 1974 and 1975, between 1979 and 1987 Antin embodied Antinova in performances, plays, elaborate installations (one of which incorporated a film component), and a videotape. Antinova’s journal was also published as a book.

In 1979, on the occasion of the first major Antinova work, Before the Revolution, a performance-play hybrid, Antin described Antinova’s plight:

---
7 In 1979 Antin performed Before the Revolution twice, first in New York at The Kitchen, with a concurrent exhibition of drawings and performance props at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, and later at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art with exhibition of drawings and performance props. Between 1980 and 1985 she performed Recollections of My Life With Diaghilev seventeen times, sometimes in the context of an installation, sometimes not. From October 11 to October 31, 1980, on a visit to New York, Antin embodied Antinova during all her waking hours; in 1983 Astro Artz published Being Antinova, a journal the artist kept during this period. In 1986 Antin made Loves of a Ballerina, an installation incorporating film. In 1986 and 1987 she performed a play, Help! I’m in Seattle in New York and California; in 1987 and 1988 she performed another play, Who Cares About a Ballerina, also in New York and California. Antin played Antinova one last time in 1987 in From the Archives of Modern Art, a twenty-four minute black and white film.
Eleanora Antinova, celebrated in her day as a leading figure in Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, was virtually lost to history for nearly 50 years. Classified as a decadent, condemned by her critics as inauthentic, eclectic and self-indulgent, she nevertheless constructed some of the most provocative works of her time. A restless spirit, an artist between media, she moved freely between the visual, literary and performing arts. Though one might think of her as the essential Diaghilev artist, who achieved a complete, if idiosyncratic, fusion of the genres, her career had fallen into such complete oblivion as to eclipse not only her choreography, stage sets, costume designs, but even her colorful role as the Black Ballerina of the Ballets Russes. Recent museum exhibitions have done nothing to repair the neglect of decades.  

*Before the Revolution* was performed twice in 1979, first at The Kitchen in New York and later at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. In these productions Antin played Antinova, her skin darkened with make-up. Revisiting the technique she had invented for *The Angel of Mercy* play, Antin performed with a cast of five nearly life-sized Masonite cut-out figures, speaking their parts as well as her own (fig. E.5). The crux of this work is the conflict between Antinova’s desire to play the part of the tragic French queen Marie Antoinette and Diaghilev’s contention that because she is black she can only play exotic types such as Cleopatra and Pocahontas. As the artist and writer Malik Gaines observes, “in Antinova’s scripted arguments with her ballet master, questions of representation are tied to the powers of European racism and framed through estranged performances, drawing attention to ideas of performativity that would be more fully articulated in the art and writing of coming decades.”  

---


It is fitting that Gaines situates *Before the Revolution* in relation to the period that succeeded it, for in 2012 he and Alejandro Segade produced a new version of *Before the Revolution*, directed by Antin and Robert Castro, for the Getty Research Institute’s Pacific Standard Time Performance and Public Art Festival.\(^{10}\) In the production’s program notes Segade insists that this was not a “re-performance,” but rather “a re-imagining, a transformation, a new production.”\(^{11}\) The most notable difference between the two versions of *Before the Revolution* was that in its recent incarnation, at the suggestion of Gaines and Segade, Antinova was played by an African American actress (Daniele Watts) (fig. E.6).\(^{12}\) Additionally, as per an allowance that Antin had specified when she initially conceived the work, the central Masonite cut-out figures were joined on stage by their human counterparts, yielding a final cast of eleven animate and inanimate actors.\(^{13}\)


\(^{12}\) Gaines explains that the impetus for casting an African American actress as Antinova stemmed from his own “fear of facilitating, explaining, and even watching a black-face performance, but also out of an equal interest in finally giving Antinova a black voice.” Gaines, “City After Fifty Years’ Living: L.A.’s Differences in Relation,” 104.

\(^{13}\) In a note that accompanies the original script of *Before the Revolution* Antin writes “it is entirely possible to dispense with the puppets and perform the play with a full cast of living actors.” Antin, *Eleanora Antinova Plays* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1994), 93.
The 2012 version of *Before the Revolution* garnered much attention and praise. To understand its contemporary resonance we can turn to the “ Interruption by the Argument,” a monologue that comes between Acts II and III. In 1979 Antin, in full Antinova get-up, performed this monologue while swinging over the audience on stage; in 2012 Antin, age seventy-seven, wearing jeans, a purple velour sweater, and glasses, walked out from the audience, perched on the edge of the stage and read the monologue from an iPad. Many of the concerns that have animated Antin’s artistic practice are embedded in the monologue:

> Sometimes there is a space between a person and her name. I can’t always reach my name. Between me and Eleanor Antin sometimes there is a space. No, that’s not true. Between me and Eleanor Antin there is always a space. I act as if there isn’t. I make believe it isn’t there. Recently, the Bank of America refused to cash one of my checks. My signature was unreadable, the bank manager said. “It is the signature of an important person,” I shouted. “You do not read the signature of an important person, you recognize it.” That’s as close as I can get to my name. And I was right, too. Because the bank continues to cash my checks. That idiosyncratic and illegible scrawl has credit there. This space between me and my name has to be filled with credit.  

In a Brechtian manner, the monologue’s position within the structure of the play emphasizes the gap between an actress and the character she embodies—or, in less purely theatrical terms, between an artist and her work. A gap between producer and production is also noted in the content of the monologue when Antin refers to the distance between herself and her representation in the different sense of a signature. The question at the heart of Antin’s argument with the bank manager is: how is identity signified, what constitutes identity’s legibility (literally in this case)? Once again Antin enmeshes the precarity of identity with issues of spectatorship, for if the artist’s relationship to her

---

artwork can be compared with Antin’s relationship to her signature, the bank manager is something like the artwork’s receiver, without whose recognition the work cannot function. In the monologue, failure to gain recognition is aligned with a lack of monetary credit. Thus precarious identity, which I have shown is at the foundation of Antin’s feminist politics, poses an economic risk, which must have seemed very real to Antin and her peers in an art world tumbling toward the 1980s. The stakes of precarious identity have continued to inflect art informed by feminism as that art has come to see identity as an increasingly complex and mutable condition.
Illustrations have been omitted due to copyright restrictions.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Henri Gallery records, circa early 1900s, 1940–1996

Lucy R. Lippard papers, 1940s-2006, bulk, 1968–1990

“Oral history interview with Eleanor Antin,” May 8–9, 2009

Woman’s Building records, 1970–1992

The Art Institute of Chicago

Department of Contemporary Art curatorial file (Eleanor Antin)

Balch Art Research Library, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles

Eleanor Antin 100 Boots archive

The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles

Lawrence Alloway papers, 1935–2003

David Antin papers, 1954–2006

Eleanor Antin papers, 1953–2010

Sylvia Sleigh Alloway papers, c.1955–2000

Yvonne Rainer papers, 1933–2006

The Museum of Modern Art, New York City

Artist file (Eleanor Antin)

Curatorial exhibitions files, exh. #1035
The Museum of Modern Art, New York City (continued)

Department of Public Information records II.A.600

Franklin Furnace artist file (Eleanor Antin)

PAD/D pamphlet file (Eleanor Antin)

Special Collections artist file (Eleanor Antin)

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Archives, New York City

Artist file (Eleanor Antin)
SECONDARY SOURCES


___., “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art.” Artforum 5, no. 10 (Summer 1967): 79–84.


