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Blind Spots and Failed Performance

Abortion, Feminism, and Queer Theory

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A friend, a deeply committed feminist scholar, asks me what I am working on.

"Abortion," I write.

"Yuck," she writes back.

She was, of course, kidding—but only partly. I know what she means. I am sick of the topic before I start. Abortion is the *one* subject I stay away from in the classroom. Like many, I avoid keeping company with student fundamentalism on this issue, and, more disturbingly, I do not trust the institutional apparatus to support how I would teach such a subject even as I count on that same institution to support (in its own way) my teaching of art and literature that engages nearly every other issue of importance to queer studies. My hesitancy to take up the topic in the classroom reflects not only a suspicion that academic freedom does not extend to the conversations about abortion I would like to stage, but a deeper disciplinary issue regarding the place of abortion as a subject within queer theory as it is practiced in the humanities.¹ Perhaps that hesitancy reflects my own identification, too, as an abortive subject—as we will see, speaking as an aborting body, speaking from within abortion can feel impossible. If I found myself tired of the idea of writing about abortion before I'd even written a word,

it was because I'd given myself over to the effects of the deadening rhetoric that seeks to police and contain our relationships to the topic. As becomes clear in the second half of this essay, my critical interest was activated by a recent scandal over the place of abortion in a college student's art project. No feminist took a public position defending this student (quite the contrary)—this surprised me only until I noticed my own previous critical passivity around the topic. *That* is even more surprising given my personal sense that the abortion I'd had as a student at Rutgers in the 1980s was one of the most singularly empowering experiences I've had as a sexual subject. But, of course, I have hardly ever said so in public.

Jeanne Ludlow observes that there is a hierarchy within feminist discourse about abortion, with a premium placed on "traumatized" abortion stories—in which the ordinariness of abortion is eclipsed by politically expedient narratives about unwanted pregnancies brought on by sexual violence and abuse. The implicit demand that "abortion be the exception, and not a normal part of women's lives" ("TW," 32) pushes the extreme suffering of victims of rape and abuse into the public sphere and throws a blanket of silence, shame, and anxiety over nearly every other kind of unwanted pregnancy as they become stigmatized as personal failures. "Because they are presented so frequently, these circumstances [rape and abuse, medically dangerous pregnancies] have become reinscribed as the 'appropriate reasons' to have an abortion, and they render all other reasons for aborting questionable at best, and frivolous at worst" ("TW," 33). One of the many nasty effects of this form of narrative policing is the stigmatization of the agency of the vast majority of women who choose to have abortions—their choice becomes a disorder of will and desire. Ironically, too, we become more comfortable with abortion stories in which the pregnant woman is herself more like a child than an adult—a helpless victim of circumstance, pregnant through no fault or desire of her own. And so, for example, in a pro-abortion film like *Four Months, Three Weeks, and Two Days* (Mungiu, 2007) the pregnant woman seeking an illegal abortion is represented as a helpless baby—even as the film makes clear that in Romania during this period the most basic forms of contraception had been criminal-

ized. The suggestion is that Gabriela's pregnancy is a result of her passive relation to the world. The protagonist of the film is, in fact, not the pregnant woman, but Otilia, the highly competent, savvy friend who takes care of Gabriela—and is raped by the abortionist for her troubles. The pregnant woman is thus represented as a child-like fuck-up, and the story of an abortion is recuperated via the friend's "mothering" of the abortive woman in order that maternal care, in one form or another, can be kept safely in view. This film represents the leading edge of pro-choice narratives. My questions here: How do these liberal protocols regarding the representation of abortion—and the abortive body—impact our work as queer theorists? What would it mean to absorb a radicalized position vis-à-vis abortion into discourse on queer sex politics?

As it happens, abortion plays a key role in Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, perhaps the most hotly debated text in queer theory published in the past decade.² This may come as a surprise to some readers not only because this text is almost totally uninterested in female figures or questions of femininity—but because, as far as I can tell, this fact has not been taken seriously in any of the critical responses to Edelman's book. Early in his polemic against "reproductive futurism" Edelman describes "a local moment in the ongoing war against abortion" (NF, 14). He writes: "Not long ago, on a much traveled corner in Cambridge, Massachusetts, opponents of the legal right to abortion plastered an image of a full-term fetus, larger in size than a grown man, on a rented billboard that bore the phrase: 'It's not a choice; it's a child!'" (NF, 14). He continues:

The Cambridge billboard . . . seemed to announce what liberalism prefers to occlude: that the governing compulsion, the singular imperative, that affords us no meaningful choice is the compulsion to embrace our futurity in the privileged form of the Child, to imagine each moment as pregnant with the Child of our Imaginary identification. (NF, 15)

Edelman associates the way he found himself cornered by the billboard's image and slogan with the ideological presumptions that underwrite much contemporary writing in queer studies—in our

collective turn toward the future, he suggests, we are merely extending heteronormativity's reach. His description of the experience of being hailed by this mandate to reproduce is one of the book's primary scenes—for the billboard “makes clear” an “ideological truth” crucial to *No Future's* intervention against what he sees as the watering down of queer theory into sexual liberalism. Here he points to the “common stake in the militant right's opposition to abortion and to the practice of queer sexualities”—such militants see in both women who abort, and men who have sex with each other, a threat to life itself. Perhaps, he wonders, these militants have a point.

One might say that much of the book's rhetorical force is generated through his encounter with this image and the intersection of abortion and queer theory. Edelman aims to unsettle queer scholarship's critical investment in utopianism, futurity, and compassion. Although he explicitly focuses on Judith Butler's *Antigone's Claim*, his argument is with a larger field of scholarship that might include, for example, José Muñoz's writing on Ernst Bloch and utopianism, and Elizabeth Freeman's arguments for queer historiography.³ Edelman associates such work—which is reparative in its tone and overtly political in its commitments—with heteronormative/reproductive structures of thought and oppression. He wonders if such work really contests the normalizing pressure of mainstream liberal gay politics and its investment in family, marriage, and domesticity.

Edelman's “reproductive futurism” refers specifically to the ideologies entwined in the figure of the Child. As described in *No Future*, radical queerness is achieved by the identification of homosexuality with all that is outside or against reproductive futurisms. There can be no reclamation of terms like “the future” for the queer because of the future's permanent ideological association with reproduction. *That* discursive field (compulsory, heteronormative reproduction) seeks to contain and colonize the disruptive force of the queer by making queerness meaningful, by making queerness future-directed. He writes, however:

queerness names the side of those *not* “fighting for the children,” the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the

absolute value of reproductive futurism. . . . Queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place [outside and beyond . . . political symbols, the place of the social order's death drive], accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure. (NF, 3)

Queerness is, in other words, the Other not only to reproductive futurism but to political community itself insofar as the latter depends (or at least is here defined as depending) on making representational sense.⁴ The disruptive force of queerness, according to Edelman here, originates in its capacity to work as an anti-political and anti-communitarian intervention exactly insofar as it interrupts future-oriented discourse and its movement toward the meaningful. To return to his critique of Butler—Edelman focuses his line of attack on the place of intelligibility in conversations about political community. Edelman argues that Butler's reading of *Antigone* finally pivots on the absorption of Antigone's acts and speech, and her death into political discourse. Butler, he writes, seems to have staked her flag in the desire to expand the political sphere to include *more*, to absorb that which had previously been abjected and unintelligible. Edelman asks that we hold onto another possibility.

What if Antigone, along with all those doomed to ontological suspension on account of their unrecognizable and, in consequence, “unlivable” loves, *declined* intelligibility, declined to bring herself cataphorically, into the ambit of future meaning—or declined, more exactly, to cast off the meaning that clings to those social identities that intelligibility abjects: their meaning as names for the meaninglessness the Symbolic order requires as a result of the catachresis that posits meaning to begin with. (NF, 106)

This refusal of intelligibility is the work of the *symptomosexual*.

Rhetorically at least, Edelman sees a kinship between the topic of abortion and queerness. It is in his negation of the slogan, in his “stand *against* reproduction, *against* futurity, and so against life” that he is positioned (and positions himself) as queer. He briefly gestures toward the intersection of this version of queerness with pro-abortion politics by pointing to the resistance within main-

stream feminist political discourse to naming abortion as a site of political identification. The monkier "pro-choice," he quite rightly points out (as have feminists since the term's earliest use), reproduces a heteronormative universe in which having a family, making a family, is represented as just a matter of the right time for making the right choice. Of the difficulty of building a political community around abortion, Edelman writes, "Who *would*, after all, come out *for* abortion or stand *against* reproduction, *against* futurity, and *so against* life?" (NF, 16). Edelman's rhetorical question seems to suggest that the answer to this is no one but the radically queer—embodied by a figure he calls the *sinhomosexual* (borrowing from Lacan), a figure that is throughout his work at least invariably male. Weirdly, on closer look, we find that a similar kind of representational interference is created by another figure in this story—the pregnant woman.

In responding to his book, critics have so far stayed away from *No Future's* primary scene—Edelman's interpellation is, in fact, enacted not by an image of a child, but by an image of a fetus embedded in a woman's uterus, named by a slogan as "child" (and by Edelman as a symbolic image of "the Child").⁵ The discourse that makes sense of this image—that makes it "intelligible"—harvests the humanist subject from the mother's body. Like Edelman's book, Mary Poovey's 1992 essay "The Abortion Question and the Death of Man" starts from the figuration of abortion and a critique of pro-choice discourse.⁶ Her essay on the death of the humanist subject is not psychoanalytic, but Marxist/feminist. Poovey uses the intersubjective complexity of the scene of abortion to interrogate liberal humanism and the political violence generated from its presumption/reproduction of a coherent, autonomous subject. Subjective coherence is a discursive effect, and this coherence, Poovey argues, lies at the heart of abortion discourse. "In the mouths of antiabortionists, 'choice,' 'privacy,' and 'rights' invert effortlessly into their opposites, precisely because, regardless of who uses them, these terms belong to a single set of metaphysical assumptions" ("AQ," 249). The metaphysics of substance that currently underwrites legal advocacy for the liberalization of access to abortion is, she continues, "an inadequate basis for all the argu-

ments thus far advanced for the right to legal abortions" ("AQ," 249). She explains:

The individualism implied by the metaphysics of substance is a dead end appeal for supporting abortion on demand for two reasons: first, because the appeal to individual rights *in the absence of* an interrogation of the metaphysical assumptions behind the idea of rights leads almost inevitably to a proliferation of those considered to have rights—in other words, to a defense of fetal personhood; second, because appeals to this metaphysics obscures that both the metaphysics and legal persons are always imbricated in the system of social relations, which, given the existence of social differences, are also inevitably politicized. ("AQ," 249)

We need an alternative politics, she argues, one grounded not in the discourse of individual rights (and their expansion), or notions of privacy and embodied personhood (which rhetorically ground both the decriminalization of abortion in the United States and the ongoing erosion of women's access to abortion on demand). Such a politics "would emphasize not the ways in which subjects are isolatable, autonomous, centered individuals, but the ways in which each person has conflicting interests and complex ties to other, apparently autonomous individuals with similar (and different) needs and interests" ("AQ," 252). From nearly the same starting place as Edelman (a recognition of the necessity of resisting the representational logics of liberal humanist discourse), Poovey moves not toward the "anti-social thesis" (as Edelman's position is sometimes identified) but toward a deeply relational model for thinking the politicized sexed body.

As Poovey explains, that billboard's image of fetus-as-man (and fetus as coherent subject) has come to define discourse on abortion and to mediate both popular and legal understanding of the relationship between women and the fetal. Feminist theorists, of course, have been fighting the humanist logic that structures discourse on reproduction and abortion since at least the emergence of "pro-life" and "pro-choice" discourse—*especially* as that discourse has been animated by the image of the fetus. In that image,

the future is bodied forth by the framing of the fetus as future-child—by the personification of the fetus in the womb as a visible subject, distinct in its identity from the body that contains it. The pregnant woman disappears into an amorphous and undefined background, even in Edelman's refusal of the image's ideological call. Of course, it is a particular woman's body that is here "pregnant with the Child of our Imaginary identifications." "Fetal personhood", writes Carol Stable in an essay on "fetal imaging," "depend[s] upon the erasure of female bodies and the reduction of women to passive, reproductive machines."⁷ Stable points out that even the term for this kind of photography renders the woman's body invisible in the service of a larger discourse on reproduction that renders her disposable. Humanism, here, is a zero-sum game. Stable explains, "Whatever rights 'women' may have had within the legal system . . . are dramatically being reversed in the so-called interests of an amorphous subject: the fetus, or as advocates of IVF (*in vitro* fertilization) technologies as well as anti-abortion factions put it, 'the early human being'" ("SM," 173).

In the United States, the law takes action against what is increasingly represented as the hostile environment of the pregnant woman's body—in which fetal interests are at war with the mother's desires, with her appetites, with her illnesses, with her vices. In fact, the anti-abortion movement has started borrowing from the language of abolition in making its case—casting the mother's body as a slaveholding state, from which the fetal person must be liberated. The rhetorical violence of abortion politics nearly always hinges on the personification of the fetus and the de-personification of the body of which the fetus is a part. As Drucilla Cornell puts it, "Explicitly or implicitly, this assumption demands a vision of the pregnant mother and her fetus that artificially separates the two. Without this view of the pregnant woman and the fetus, it would be obvious that the 'life' of the fetus is inseparable from the physical and mental well-being of the woman of whose body it is a part."⁸ One of the most profound effects of this image's work in discourse on abortion had been the way it is used to divorce the future embodied by the fetus from the present embodied by the woman—her "present" is recast, in fact, as the future's abject past.

Within mainstream discourse on reproduction, in other words, the body standing in the way of reproduction, futurity, and life itself is quite specifically that of the abortive woman.

The centrality of the politics of subjection, identification and modes of address embedded in a slogan like "It's not a choice, it's a child," is famously explored by Barbara Johnson in her 1986 essay on feminist poetics, "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion"—the lone feminist scholarship on abortion cited by Edelman.⁹ There, Johnson considers a handful of poems by women writers that experiment with tropes of personification in order to explore the termination of a pregnancy and its relationship to the production of poetic voice. Lucile Clifton thus writes, "the time I dropped your almost body down" to a baby that was never born; Anne Sexton writes around an abortion—seeding the Pennsylvania landscape with the attributes of the infantile body aborted by a doctor there, creating space, finally, in the poem's last stanza, to "say what you meant / you coward . . . this baby that I bleed." "I" is only produced in Sexton's "The Abortion" in conjunction with "bleed"—expressed alongside and as the aborted, as a last word. Adrienne Rich's "To a Poet," on the other hand, concludes her poem on abortion with:

I write this not for you
 who fight to write your own
 words fighting up the falls
 but for another woman dumb
 with loneliness dust seeping plastic bags
 with children in a house
 where language floats and spins
 abortion in
 the bowl

As Johnson explains, "you" here is the poem's reader, but the poet addresses herself not to that reader—not to us—but to "another woman" excluded from the space of poetry altogether—surrounded by house and child, but "dumb / with loneliness." There is no mistaking the sense that for Rich, to write "abortion" into a poem

is, in essence, to create a new kind of poet, it is to drag language both up and down ("where language floats and spins / abortion in / the bowl")—it is, paradoxically, to write as "mother": the difficulty of doing so, Johnson argues, reflects the challenge of trying to produce "a full elaboration of any discursive position other than that of child" ("AA," 39). This is a compound form of difficulty—formally, narrative itself seems structured by the child's perspective (by the movement from childhood to adulthood, from dependence to independence), and materially, for as long as heteronormative paradigms organize our lives, women carry the burden of child rearing and simply find writing difficult (barred by early motherhood from the luxury of education, by the endless chores of domestic work from the time in which to write, etc.). Abortion, in some of these writings at least, is what makes poetry possible.

Edelman cites Johnson's essay not for its reading of the fluid, indeterminate self articulated by Clifton, Sexton, and Rich, nor for Johnson's important observation of the figural identification of feminist authorship with infanticide (its most controversial assertion within feminist studies). Nor does he engage her critique of the dominance of the speaking position of the child within both literature and criticism as liberal humanism's preferred subject location. He references instead Johnson's analysis of the deployment of personification by pro-life activists—the article's most obvious and accessible point.

His citational erasure of both the complexity of Johnson's article and the elaborate body of feminist theoretical work on the subject is hardly unique within queer theory, and it handicaps his argument—or, at least in this instance, he puts the feminist reader off. Let us return briefly to that figure that Edelman holds up as the refusal of reproductive futurism, for example. *No Future* is organized as a series of readings of queerly disruptive figures—as an investigation of "machine-like" figures that "stand outside the 'natural' order of sexual reproduction." Edelman uses Lacan's "sinthome" to name this figure the "sinthomosexual." He explicitly resists the call to think of how this term might apply to women. In a footnote plainly written in anticipation of feminist critique, Edelman explains the near total absence of the female figure from

his review of "sinthomosexuals" as a reflection of how women are generally positioned in cultural representations "as 'naturally' bound more closely to sociality, reproduction, and domesticating emotions" (*NF*, n. 165).¹⁰ But the situation is more complex than this. If female figures are less likely to operate as sinthomosexuals, it is not because women are represented as bound by "domesticating emotions." At least one feminine version of this disruptive figure is the anti-reproductive, abortive, and monstrous woman (another, which I do not consider here, is what Lisa Duggan calls "the Sapphic slasher").¹¹ To take just one vector of scholarship on the ways that the mother's body is pitted against the life force of the Child, feminist legal studies have shown how deeply the assumed affinity between women and the naturalness of reproduction, nurturing, and so on has eroded where fetal personhood is at stake. Increasingly, from the legal perspective, women's interests are represented as in diametrical opposition to those of the fetus. Legally, as Cornell and other legal scholars explain, her flesh is that which stands in the way of fetal autonomy. Discourse on maternity has been radically altered by the very image with which Edelman begins his discussion. If there is no future in that image, it is no future for the woman erased from the picture.

In stepping over complex and important scholarship on abortion and radical feminist critique of reproductive discourse by scholars working in political theory, philosophy, the law, as well as in visual studies and literary theory, Edelman comes awfully close to speaking from exactly the reproductive position he so forcefully challenges—speaking as Child cut from the body of mother (which I take here to be not only the maternal body that disappears into the background of the anti-abortion poster, but the "past" feminist theory *No Future* ignores). It seems to me that the disarticulation of this thread in queer theory from radical feminist writing on reproduction (from, say, the scabrous brilliance of Valerie Solanas, Shulamith Firestone, or Donna Haraway) is not wholly unrelated to the seductiveness of the position that "queerness names the side of those *not* fighting for the children"—this is the statement of the entitled subject who can afford the simple negation.¹²

Wouldn't it be nice to imagine that children aren't our problem? That fantasy goes hand in hand with another: that we've birthed

ourselves. That subject position—generated via the separation of child from mother and the fantasy of autonomy generated in the cutting of that cord—is *not* anti-reproductive. It is the very gesture through which heteronormative patriarchal authority manufactures itself.

We can better track the particular usefulness of abortion to thinking about sex radicalism by looking at a case in which an artist breaks with liberal feminist tradition in her engagement with abortion discourse, and at the reaction to her work. In general, recent scholarship about abortion and art focuses on artists who trouble the distinctions drawn between art and activism by raising awareness, distributing educational information, and even facilitating women's access to abortion. Women on Waves, for example, is a Dutch activist organization that sends a small ship to locations around the world to offer abortion services to women in countries that severely restrict their access to termination. Their work bears a strong resemblance to AIDS activist projects that used the creative expertise of their members both to raise awareness about homophobia and HIV/AIDS and to educate and offer services to the local communities—as these artists did so, they used visual and performance-based actions to imagine other possibilities to the world within which they worked.¹³ As Carrie Lambert Beatty explains in her essay on the group, Women on Waves “racks between art and politics in much the same way it moves between actual human rights mission and media-political campaign, legality and piracy, fact and myth.”¹⁴ It is a cutting-edge example of the most visible way that feminist artists engage abortion via activism and consciousness raising. Without taking away from either the material opposition to their project or the interestingness of such work as a practice that breaks down boundaries between art and political action, I want to suggest that within feminism it is also perhaps one of the most socially sanctioned ways an artist might take up the topic. We know how to talk about this kind of work.

As a point of contrast, we might look at a recent scandal involving an artist's work with abortion—a scandal that signals the degree to which her actions queer abortion discourse. For her final project as a Yale University fine arts student, Aliza Schvarts artficially

inseminated herself once a month over the course of nine months, and took abortifacants near the date when her period was due, with an eye toward producing a narrative about the experience, as well as an installation using video showing her bleeding into a cup and traces of her induced periods.¹⁵ An element of uncertainty figures in her conceptualization and enactment of the process. Because she never took a pregnancy test, there is no record of her having successfully fertilized an egg, of having been pregnant, or of having aborted an embryo. The biological possibility of pregnancy was left open only as a possibility in order to foreground the ideological investments in legal and medical management of the artist's body as the most reliable framework for reading the truth of the piece (for reasons that will become clear below, there is, in fact, no “proof” that any of the events she describes ever took place).¹⁶ The “truth” of the piece resides in how the reader chooses to interpret Schvarts's story.

This deployment of ambiguity as a means of denaturalizing reproductive ideology and its hold on the body is not unheard of in visual work about abortion. Reading Aline Mare's experimental video *S'Alaine's Solution* (1991), Valerie Hartouni traces how the artist asks if “what are, in effect, pro-life representations, meanings, and practices [can] be (re)deployed and oppositionally inflected to tell precisely the kind of story their deployment has otherwise worked to silence.”¹⁷ Mare poses this question in a surprising way—her video layers the soundtrack of a female voice repeating “I choose, I chose, I have chosen” and images that make us feel that we are “spectators to an apparent real-time [saline] abortion from what we are encouraged to view as the unmediated view of the victim” (“VW,” 202). The video's opening sequence sets the frame-work through which we read the rest of the video—a poetic meditation on loss, birth, and motherhood. That first image sequence, however, is not actually a cinematic record of the “biospace” of a saline abortion, but of male ejaculation—learning this forces an interrogation of “what images ‘are,’ and what they ‘mean’” (“VW,” 210). Hartouni explains:

What permits us to read ejaculation as a violent, traumatic, distinctly unnatural rupture of natural processes is not only our

general illiteracy with respect to the functioning of bodies—this is to be expected. It is our illiteracy coupled with powerful, prior notions and anxieties themselves shaped by a larger public discourse and culture of abortion about what the practice is, means, and entails. (“VW,” 208)

Schvarts works in a similar territory when she scrambles biopolitical narratives about the female body in a deliberate refusal of “the contemporary grammar and culture of abortion” (“VW,” 209). Where Mare makes her critique of that grammar by underscoring “the conspicuous absence of . . . the gestating body . . . in contemporary renderings” of abortion (“VW,” 209), Schvarts insists on placing the body back in the story in order to explore its disruptive effects. The attempt to shift the conversation about the artist’s body away from pregnancy and abortion to something less determined by reproductive frameworks proved controversial.

Predictably, a *Yale Daily News* article about the project stirred up national controversy (Powers 2008).¹⁸ It was broadcast on U.S. national news, and made headlines in such newspapers as the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*. Daily scandal sheets in London plugged the story into their roundup of attention-grabbing headlines. Several Facebook sites are devoted to hate campaigns against Schvarts, newspapers across the country received scores of letters and e-mails responding to their coverage of the story, and it became minor news in the art world as an occasion to grandstand about the state of performance art.¹⁹

Surprisingly, given its support of the distribution of “the morning-after pill” without a prescription and also the facilitation of abortion-on-demand for the students who rely on its health services (though you won’t find the word “abortion” anywhere on its website), Yale University did not stand behind Schvarts’s work: in response, campus officials distanced themselves by insisting on reframing the entire action as “fictional” while also condemning what they avowed was a simulation *had it been real*. The student was, in their view, “never pregnant” and had “never miscarried”:

“The entire project is an art piece, a creative fiction designed to draw attention to the ambiguity surrounding the form and function of a woman’s body.” University publicists claimed that the art-

ist’s statements to the contrary were also fictional and part of the performance. “Had these acts been real,” explained spokesperson Helena Klasky, “they would have violated basic ethical standards and raised serious mental and physical health concerns.” University administrators then threatened to prevent the work’s display unless the artist would “confess in writing that the exhibition is a work of fiction.”²⁰ The director of the 2007 Venice Biennale, Robert Storr, who had recently become dean of Yale’s art school, reiterated the institution’s position when he declared: “If I had known about this, I would not have permitted it to go forward. This is not an acceptable project in a community where the consequences go beyond the individual who initiates the project and may even endanger that individual.”²¹ Schvarts refused to sign any disclaimer about her descriptions of the action, and was barred from presenting any aspect of it in the final thesis show. The project remains untitled and unexhibited—it exists only in the stories told about it, including this one.

“Was Aliza Schvarts ever pregnant?” became the central question in the controversy. The project’s most virulent critics (who were offended by the idea of abortion, or by the idea that the whole thing was a hoax, or by both) were obsessed by this question. (Newspapers consulted fertility doctors, for example, to get the odds.) On this point, the project theatricalized a defining part of the lives of heterosexually active female college students who do not use contraception (or experience failure)—the monthly uncertainty, conversations with roommates about sage tea, the search for signs of pregnancy or period, and the circumstances that produce a deep sense of relief, a feeling of escape, twinges of regret, an abiding sense of loss. For Schvarts, the question of whether or not she was ever pregnant was never the point: the point was to explore the discursive field surrounding sex and reproduction—and, in particular, to draw attention to the strange status of the artist as author within the context of performance, where the female body is concerned. On this point, the work returns to old issues within feminist theory and art making: to the entanglement of authorship with reproductive discourse, the assertion of patriarchal authority as a means of disabling epistemological models grounded in

feminine forms of relationality, the anxiety produced by the female body that attempts to disarticulate itself from reproductive discourse.

It also resonates with the increasingly bizarre world of legal discourse on reproduction, in which questions about parental rights have come to be articulated in the courtroom as questions of authorship—as in the resolution of one U.S. court case in which a surrogate mother sued for parental rights over the child she carried to term, and lost—as the court found that the “idea” for the child belonged to the genetic parents who had hired her to carry the baby.²² Here, concepts like life, personhood, and family are grounded not in the gestating body but in the acquisitive desires and material privilege of the domestic subjects empowered enough to engineer the transformation of that idea into a pregnancy (in which the pregnant woman becomes little more than a hot house with an inconvenient sense of attachment). Schwarts provoked a moralizing disgust grounded very much in a collective sense of ownership over the artist’s body: anti-abortionists and liberal feminists alike responded to the scandal as though Schwarts had mutilated—anti-abortionists condemn her as a reproductive citizen who willfully turns biology *against* destiny; feminists are disgusted by her realization of the right wing’s claims that abortion on demand leads to women aborting at will, recklessly, pointlessly, and for fun. In this, Schwarts found herself placed in a public space similar to that of radically queer artists who became flashpoints for controversy about sex and art. During the “NEA wars” of the 1990s, Robert Mapplethorpe, Ron Athey, and David Wojnarowicz’s work seemed to literalize homophobic fantasies about what gay sex looks like: violent, perverse, dangerous. All three were subject to suspicion and moralization from liberals who resist incorporating anti-dominestic models of sexual being into their politics.

Exploring the controversy sparked by Schwarts’s project suggests provocative intersections between the abortive and the queer. On its face, Schwarts’s project explores the discursive field through which the female body is produced and read as a reproductive body. She hardly needed to exhibit in the student thesis show to realize the full impact of this dimension of the project. In fact, the interrup-

tion of the project by Yale’s interdiction arguably brings the work to its most compelling formal conclusion.

The project raises a more interesting issue, however, when it draws attention to the fact that access to abortion-on-demand is an effect of entitlement—a white college student attending one of the most expensive universities on earth can afford to toy with this, because as long as she is a member of that community she has access to a significant amount of resources supporting the decision to abort. Indeed, it would be far more scandalous for a Yale student to see a pregnancy through and have a baby than it would be for her to have an abortion. None of *that* was raised in the moral panic produced by the idea of this performance—or, rather, it was, insofar as blogs, editorials, and comments posted in response to stories about the action dismissed Schwarts as a “spoiled brat.” It is here that Schwarts’s work takes on a political charge—as a conceptual performance of sexual entitlement. From the indignation of right-wing pundits (who accuse her of subordinating potential life to the pursuit of an idea—or worse, her own career), to the paternalistic self-righteousness of Yale’s administration (who worry about the artist’s mental and physical health), to liberal feminists (who condemn the action as a “bad” representation of the issue), we bear witness to the difficulty of identifying with abortion itself as of a piece with the practice of sexual freedom. Grandstanding around the topic masks much more complex, much darker social truths about gender, class, and reproduction. Interestingly, even though the act of insemination was disarticulated from “sex,” Schwarts’s story produces the interruption of pregnancy as not the negation of sexuality, but as part of the practice of a free sexual life—in part because the story moves abortion into exactly the domain aggressively silenced by liberal discourse (abortion as an ordinary aspect of many women’s lives). The destigmatization of abortion is, as it happens, the very horizon toward which projects like Women on Waves sail. However, it is one thing to frame abortion in terms of human rights—in which we discuss access to abortion as something that women of the Global South need in order to resist social, economic, and political oppression, for example. It is another to frame it as the practice of sexual freedom—to integrate abortion into a story about sexuality, desire, and the body. The story Schwarts tells

is unapologetic about the “reproductiveness” of her body, and the right to determine one’s own relationship to that fleshy reality—to, in fact, establish what the reality of that flesh is, and means. Her project surfaces the production of sex in the disciplining of the reproductive body.

In her analysis of ways that political states reproduce power, authority, and their borders through their regulation of family, Jacqueline Stevens writes:

It is not that some people give birth and others do not that leads directly to gender roles. Rather, gender is what occurs through very specific rules a political society develops as it reproduces itself. The marked mother, subject to the institution of men talking her for the purpose of having children (matrimony), affects all who grow up as potential mothers. Perhaps these effects are what we perceive as sex.²³

The attempt to free the body from this discursive regime registers as criminal, queer, and, in fact, an attack on sex itself. As Michelle LeDeouf and Penelope Deuschler have argued in their work on legal discourse about abortion, the liberalization of access to abortion in the 1970s in countries like France, the United States, England, and Australia reflects not a decriminalization of abortion, but an “affirmation of abortion’s illegality except in certain circumstances.”²⁴ The criminalization of abortion, Deuschler points out, is embedded in the very wording of *Roe v. Wade*: “a woman’s right to terminate her pregnancy is not absolute, and may to some extent be limited by the state’s legitimate interests in safeguarding women’s health, in maintaining proper medical standards, and in protecting potential human life” (cited in “IE,” 63). Legislation and regulation of access via obligatory parental consent, counseling about alternatives (such as adoption), and state-mandated bureaucratic approval (as in Spanish law requiring medical confirmation that the pregnancy is damaging to the woman’s mental health) confirm this strange truth. Abortion remains, both legally and conceptually, in a category of criminalized acts for which the law makes occasional exceptions. The scandal produced by Schvarts’s conceptual project underscores the fact that within contemporary

discourse on abortion it is always in some sense “wrong”; it is always bad, and even in liberal settings women may abort only when given permission by the apparatus and are spared condemnation only when they manifest the proper degree of regret.²⁵ That institutions are deeply invested in the reproductive body isn’t news. The organization of that policing—around not only the body, but also the “idea,” the presentation, the context—is, however, worth examining more closely, for it is here that we see the political problems raised by resistance to Shvarts’s work most clearly.

Let’s compare the scope of the controversy to another scandal related to body art, performance, and pedagogy. On its surface, Schvarts’s project and the uproar left in its wake bear a striking similarity to problems created several years earlier by Joseph Deutch, an MFA student at the University of California, Los Angeles. In a 2004 course on extreme performance, this student brought a gun to the class, told students that it was loaded, and then—amazingly—appeared to play Russian roulette with himself.²⁶ No one was hurt, but, understandably, some students in the class became very upset. Deutch had to answer to an angry campus administration that reprimanded him for not thinking about the consequences of his action on fellow students, on the course instructor, and on the department itself. Regardless of what one thinks about *that* piece, one must marvel at the nearly identical positions adopted by both programs (which have long been associated with the vanguards of contemporary art): UCLA stated that the student’s action was, again, fictional, that the gun was never real, and that it was never loaded. (The gun was never seen after the performance, and so no one really knows.) They, too, worried about the student’s mental health and recommended counseling. Unlike Yale’s administration, however, at no point did UCLA insist the student’s performance be excluded from material used to evaluate his work in the seminar. In fact, Chris Burden (infamous for having shot himself, crawling through glass, and nailing himself to a Volkswagen in early performances), then head of the Art Department, resigned at least partly in protest of the university’s generosity toward the student, who was allowed to continue his studies.²⁷ And while the whole story eventually made its way into the media, and generated very heated

debates within the department, it did not create a scandal of nearly the order induced by Schwart's piece. (There are no Facebook campaigns against Deutch, for example.)

I do not have an easy answer as to why this is. The different degrees of scandal partly reflect the different structures of the universities: Yale, as a private institution, can act much more unpredictably and secretly than the University of California, which is, as a public institution, legally obliged to adhere to stated policy regarding the disciplining of its students. That said, Deutch may have broken not only university rules regarding weapons but state law as well. Whether or not one believes Schwart's story, and whether or not she was ever pregnant, she broke no rules, laws, or student codes of conduct. Deutch's action is far more problematic, less ethically ambiguous, and, in my view, much easier to dismiss as an art action (his approach is not entirely original and makes no interesting point I can think of regarding gun violence, suicide, or even witnessing). Schwart's project has more in common with Ron Athey's work than does Deutch's action (Athey was the instructor for Deutch's seminar, and, as it happens, later taught Schwart—after the Yale incident—in Praxis Mojave, the collaborative workshop he runs with the artist Julie Tolentino). Athey and Schwart both work with the sexual body—and both have found themselves the object of controversy generated by the perception that their work constitutes an abuse of the body, and—amazingly, given the beginning of this conversation in Edelman's identification with the abortive—both have been condemned for taking risks with life itself.²⁸ The controversy surrounding Schwart's untitled, unfinished, and unexhibited project reveals the nearly absolute difficulty of integrating abortion as a material process into the discursive field of art—in the reaction to both artists, in the intensity of the controversy provoked by artists who work with queer sex and against the reproductive matrix, we see the particular limits of art discourse when it comes to thinking intelligently about sex.

The difficulty of integrating (for example) piercing, sado-masochistic gestures, and the abortive into art discourse does not seem surprising until we consider the things that we *do* accept in art: Santiago Sierra's exploitative use of day laborers to perform me-

trial tasks, Vanessa Beecroft's regressive displays of nude women, Andreas Serrano and Teresa Margoles's work with the bodies of the dead, Zhang Huan's use of human ash. All of these practices are controversial, but they also have extensive exhibition histories and significant places in critical discourse about the politics of art (all are, in fact, "blue chip" gallery artists with very successful careers).

Part of the problem here is that of the literalism of the response to feminist and queer body art. As Jane Blocker explains in her work on this subject, artists who work with the sexual body—and especially artists who reference flesh and blood in their work—are subjected to a literal interpretation that functions as "an effective strategy of marginalization." Examining critical reception of the 1972 feminist project *Womanhouse* and of Judy Chicago's installation *Menstruation Bathroom* (1972) (a white bathroom stocked with toiletries and blooded sanitary napkins and tampons overflowing from a large wash bucket), Blocker explains that such work complicates the distinctions between the figurative and the literal and the tendency to represent the former as "more noble" (*WB*, 113). "What troubles [critics] most is the prospect that [such] work could be both 'literal' and 'a statement' at the same time" (108). She continues, "The female and the queer" are both defined against and precluded from the figurative "because they are not seen to be performing at all" (113). Moral panic about queer art practices are almost universally shaped by this—we see this in the attempt to censor Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs for fear that looking at them will make viewers gay, and in the willful misrepresentation of Ron Athey's performances as exposing audience members to HIV. We see this, Blocker reminds us, in the categorical resistance to feminist art that works with flesh—to the reactions of critics who see in feminist art the literal body, who see a metonymical extension of the artist's flesh into their critical space. That reaction, though, often misses the ways such artists deploy the literal body against the trope of the metaphorical—to politicize processes of figuration, the dynamics of representation itself. This describes perfectly the reception of Schwart's conceptual performance as the conversation devolved into discussions of the

likelihood that she would have gotten pregnant by using the methods she described.

The difficulty of talking about Schwarts's project reveals not only the discursive field surrounding the reproductive body (this is its most obvious element), but also the deep policing from every corner of narrative and affect around the representation of abortion as an aspect of sexual life. Mirroring the ideology that requires that sex be defined through reproduction, art engaged with the topic of abortion should be *productive*. It should be appropriately serious, and reluctant. It should not be "real," and yet it should *do* something. Amazingly, the problem nearly everyone seemed to have with what Schwarts says she did goes right to the heart of not only discourse on abortion but also critical questions about what art should be and do: Should artists refuse the autonomy of the world of art, integrate their practice into the everyday and work toward a better social good (as does *Women on Waves*)? Or (as critical theorists like Adorno have argued) does this instrumentalism dictate a kind of functionality that is fully commensurate with the ideological machinery of capitalism, which demands a product from even its art? From this perspective, the integration of reproductive gestures into the aesthetic field may be thought of as a wildly utopian attempt to produce the sexual body outside the disciplining mechanisms of sexual discourse. On this level, Aliza Schwarts's project was destined to fail, to never be fully realized—it was always already, in other words, abortive.

Notes

I owe much thanks to programmers and the audiences who heard earlier versions of this paper: Mark Turner and those who attended my January 2008 talk at King's College, University of London, heard my first foray into this territory and gave me necessary encouragement and direction. Arakis, the speakers and seminar participants at the Montehermoso Center in Victoria, Spain, offered valuable feedback—especially Elisabeth Lebovici, whose recommendations for further research were pivotal. Amelia Jones invited me to give this paper on a panel at Performance Studies International (Copenhagen, 2008) and was, as she is always, an ideal interlocutor. The participants in Ron Athey's four-day seminar on performance

in Riverside, California (February 2009), heard a draft of this paper, and helped me to sharpen its focus. I also owe some gratitude to the members of the editorial board at *Signs* who read an earlier (very different) draft of this essay and rejected it with thoughtful criticism that helped me to see what the essay was really about. This project was initiated while I was a Leverhulme Trust Visiting Fellow in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths College, and would not have been written without the research time granted by this award and the unique intellectual community offered by the faculty and students at Goldsmiths. Aliza Schwarts was very helpful, mostly because she would not speak in any detail about the performance itself.

1. My comments are made from a very specific disciplinary location—from within the humanities, and from within queer studies. Reproductive rights are, of course, discussed extensively within women's studies courses, especially, and abortion has been consistently studied by feminists working in a range of disciplines in the social sciences—see, for example, Faye Ginsburg's *Contested Lives: Abortion Debates* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Kathy Rudy, *Beyond Pro-Choice and Pro-Life: Moral Diversity within the Abortion Debate* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997); Laurie Shrage's *Abortion and Social Responsibility: Depolarizing the Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Jeannie Ludlow, "The Things We Cannot Say: Witnessing the Traumatization of Abortion in the United States," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, nos. 1–2 (2008): 28–41 (hereafter cited as "TW")—to name just a few works that unpack abortion discourse within the United States. But as I explain below, the connections between the pro-abortion position and the sex/gender radicalism at the heart of queer theory's central texts have been relatively unexamined.

2. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). Hereafter cited as *NF*.

3. Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Elizabeth Freeman, "Time Binds, or, Erotichistography," *Social Text* 23, nos. 3–4 (2005): 57–68; Elizabeth Freeman, "Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations," *New Literary History* 31, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 727–44.

4. For an interesting synthesis and redeployment of the critique of politics of representation see Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niammh Stephenson, and Vassilis Tsianos, *Escape Routes: Control and Subversion in*

the 21st Century (Seattle: Pluto Press, 2008), 55–71. Here, the authors lay the groundwork for addressing and enacting what they call “imperceptible politics”—local moments of struggle and escape that refuse absorption into the liberal political sphere as their aim.

5. The intense critical debate sparked by Edelman's book is in itself an interesting phenomenon (though too complicated to examine here in any meaningful detail). The Modern Language Association's journal (*PMLA*) published a series of position papers based on a panel in which several key figures in queer studies took on Edelman's arguments from their perspectives (Robert Caserio, Tim Dean, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” *PMLA* 121, no. 3 [May 2006]: 819–36). There Judith Halberstam rails against the whiteness and masculinity of his archive (*all* of the radically queer literary and cinematic figures that he celebrates are white men) and proposes other sites in which we might read antisocial queer politics—such as Valerie Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto*. Halberstam's point isn't simply that Edelman needs to expand his archive, but that his archive reinforces a larger cultural politics of affective policing. It is as “camp archive” with a very specific idea of what “queer negativity” might be—excluded are the more punk affects that define radical lesbian writing and cultural production in particular. José Muñoz writes that “shouting down utopia is an easy move,” and insists on the importance of resisting Edelman's naturalization of the link between heteronormativity and futurity because, he writes, “queerness is always on the horizon,” and therein lies its political force. Muñoz refuses the association of futurity with compromise. Drawing especially from Bloch, he argues for “a critique of the totalizing and naturalizing idea of the present” that characterizes the writing of scholars like Edelman and Leo Bersani (in his work *Homos* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996]). Muñoz furthermore points out that the kind of critical methodologies under attack in Edelman's model have an indispensable place in queer scholarship engaged with race—Edelman's galvanizing rhetoric is less than inspiring for those working against the effects of racist ideologies. Some of Edelman's strongest critics (David Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz) co-edited “What's So Queer about Queer Studies Now?” a special issue of *Social Text* 23, nos. 3–4 (2005), intended to counter tendencies to associate queerness with an anti-political turn. Mandy Merck, in a paper given at a conference on Edelman's book in London in 2007, critiques his arguments as indicative of the ways

that queer theory can, at its worst, reveal itself to be disengaged from the most pressing issues of the times (such as ecological disaster). As much as Edelman's brilliant turns of phrases (like the unforgettable “fascism of the baby's face”) have inspired readers, the narrowness of his archive, his ebullient embrace of what appears to be an anti-political and ahistorical stance (at least on its surface), and his shameless contempt for historically and politically committed critical practices have left a lot of readers angry.

6. Mary Poovey, “The Abortion Question and the Death of Man,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 239–56. Hereafter cited as “AQ.”
7. Carol A. Stable, “Shooting the Mother: Fetal Pornography and the Politics of Disappearance,” in *The Visible Woman: Imaging Technologies, Gender, and Science* ed. Paula Treichler, Lisa Cartwright, and Constance Penley (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 171–97, 172. Hereafter cited as “SM.”
8. Drucilla Cornell, “Disembodied Selves and Wandering Wombs,” in *Left Legals/Left Critique*, ed. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 337–72.
9. Barbara Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986), 29–47. Hereafter cited as “AA.”
10. Much of what Edelman identifies with the sinthomosexual defines feminist writing. The issues managed by the rhetorical question “who would stand against futurity and so, against life” structure much of Toni Morrison's fiction, for example. As Marianne Hirsch details, Morrison's women are positioned in a dialectical relationship to motherhood—it is what makes them but also what threatens their existence: “There is no escaping it. Mothers and motherhood are fulcrum points around which historical forces turn in her novels. The threat of being dragged back to slavery leads a mother to murder her child in *Beloved*, but that murdered baby haunts Sethe and provides the very architecture by which the story (“not a story to be passed on”) is told—providing the narrative structure through which she comes into being. The title character of *Sula* asserts, “I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.” Her grandmother Eva murders her troubled son Plum to put an end to his efforts to “crawl back in my womb . . . I had room enough in my heart . . . but not in my womb, not no more” (Morrison, cited in Marianne Hirsch, “Maternal Narratives: Cruel Enough to Stop the Blood,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, ed. Henry Louis Gates [New York: NAL, 1990], 415–30,

- 421; hereafter cited as "MN"). As hard as these women struggle to keep motherhood from taking them over, they are defined by that struggle. They cannot define themselves except through it—they have no choice. Hirsch writes that in Morrison's novels, "women who reject unconditionally the lives and the stories of their mothers [have] nowhere to go" ("MN," 426). Commenting on the tendency for feminist theory to approach the story of reproduction from the perspective of daughters, Hirsch asks if by centering our lines of inquiry instead on the mother—and on the mother's ambivalent relationship to children—"we might try to envision a culturally variable form of interconnection between one body and another, one person and another, existing as social and legal as well as psychological subjects" ("MN," 428). Her comment echoes Barbara Johnson's earlier argument (itself informed by feminist psychoanalytic theory): narrative conventions are so deeply structured as the child's articulation of self against the body of the mother (even within feminism) that attempts to generate a maternal voice trouble the very fabric of storytelling itself. Mothers often bring the story, in other words, to an end.
11. Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashes: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).
 12. Citational practices aside, Edelman knows these areas of sexual politics are profoundly linked, if only by "the common stake in the militant right's opposition to abortion and to the practice of queer sexualities" (NF, 15).
 13. See Douglas Crimp, *AIDS Semiotics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), for a comprehensive map of the political actions staged by Gran Fury and other AIDS art activist groups. The book invites readers to adopt the strategies they used and to reproduce any of the images included in the book.
 14. Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Twelve Miles: Boundaries for the New Art Activism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 309–27, 316.
 15. Details of Schwart's project are from her statement, published in the *Yale Daily News*, April 18, 2008. Accessed online at <http://www.yale.edu/dailynews.com/articles/view/24559> on July 2, 2008.
 16. E-mail discussion with the artist, June 2008.
 17. Valerie Hartouni, "Fetal Exposures: Abortion Politics and the Optics of Allusion," in *The Visible Woman: Imaging Technologies, Gender, and Science*, ed. Paula Treichler, Lisa Cartwright, and Constance Penley (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 198–216, 199. Hereafter cited as "FE."
 18. Martine Powers, "For senior, abortion a medium for art, political discourse," *Yale Daily News*, April 17, 2008, online at <http://www.yaledailynews.com/articles/view/24513> (accessed July 31, 2009).
 19. Charlie Finch, "Mission Aborted," <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/finch/finch5-12-08.asp> (accessed July 28, 2008).
 20. Klasky's statement as well as my description of the administration's negotiations with Schwarts are here taken from Zachary Abrahamson, Thomas Kaplan, and Martine Powers, "Schwarts, Yale Clash over Project," *Yale Daily News*, April 18, 2008, <http://www.yaledailynews.com/articles/view/24651> (accessed July 2, 2008). There is ambiguity in the public record of the project over whether Schwarts actually went through the process she describes—in part because the project was interrupted, and so we do not even know how Schwarts might have presented documentation of the performance. We have perhaps a discursive version of Haley Newman's series of "Performance Photographs" that document performances that never happened (and indeed hide this fact from the viewer). But there, Newman's own statement anchors our understanding of those photographs as "fictional." No such ground is given here. I chose to bypass the question of "what really happened" to focus on what *did* happen—the near universal condemnation of the whole enterprise.
 21. Quoted by Catherine Donaldson-Evans, "Yale to Cancel Controversial 'Abortion Art' Exhibit Unless Student Admits It's Fiction" (April 21, 2008), <http://FOXnews.com/story/0,2933,351984,00.html> (accessed July 2, 2008).
 22. Mark Rose, "Mothers and Authors: Johnson v Calvert and the New Children of Our Imaginations," in *Imaging Technologies, Gender, and Science*, ed. Paula Treichler, Lisa Cartwright, and Constance Penley (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 217–39.
 23. Jacqueline Stevens, *Reproducing the State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 210.
 24. Penelope Deutscher, "The Inversion of Exceptionality: Foucault, Agamben, and 'Reproductive Rights,'" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 55–70, 63. Hereafter cited as "IE."
 25. For scholarship that steps outside the regulation of narratives of abortion to consider how women narrate their own experiences with abortion, see Lisa Alvaros, "Hindsight and the Abortion Experience: What Abortion Means to Women Years Later," *Gender Issues* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 35–57. Expanding feminist sociological work on this topic, Alvaros explores the fluidity and complexity with which

women narrate their experience of abortion, and how those narratives shift for some women over time. Those narratives can interestingly be read as divided by the narrator's identification with what abortion makes possible or what it negates. Much feminist art about abortion navigates between this narrative tension between past, present, and future.

26. Some of the details regarding this incident are taken from conversations with the instructor, Ron Athey (November 2004).

27. Jeffrey Kasner, "Gun Shy," for "Scene and Heard: January 20, 2005," *Artforum*, online at <http://artforum.com/diary/id=8299> (accessed July 28, 2008).

28. In 1994, as a part of Athey's performance "4 Scenes in a Harsh Life," he cut into collaborator Darryl Carlton's back and parted the wound with paper, which was then strung up on clothes lines. Mary Abbe, a local art critic, filed a front-page story about this performance with the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (March 24, 1994). She described audience members fleeing the space, after having been exposed to HIV-infected blood. She had not seen the performance, and, of course, this was a gross misrepresentation of the event (audience members were never at risk; the blood used in any case was not Athey's, nor was it infected with HIV; and audience members did not "flee" from the performance). This apocryphal story was picked up by the Associated Press wire service, and it made national headlines as it sparked a controversy over the \$120 dollars of federal funding indirectly used by the Walker Center to support this off-site event. Athey stood accused not only of "spreading" sexual perversion (the usual charge applied to out gay artists in that decade), but also of putting audiences at risk of coming into contact with contaminated blood. And although he had never benefited directly from federal support for his work, he became the favorite example in a successful attack on the idea of federal funding for politically legible, challenging work. For a more complete overview of this controversy, see Jane Blocker, *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). Hereafter cited as *WB*.

Reincarnating the Knowing Subject *Scientific Rationality and the Situated Body*

HÉLÈNE MIALET

The new anthropology, history, and sociology of science tend to describe science in terms of action, cultural practice, social construction, or, better still, as an entanglement of multiple actions, practices, and socio-technical realities. In doing so they have eliminated the presuppositions of an implicitly or explicitly recognized epistemology of rationality (and/or a diffusionist model of science) that takes for granted the dichotomy between knowing subject and known object. In short, by offering a new definition of rationality, these studies make it possible to reflect anew upon the nature of the knowing subject. To understand how such a question becomes relevant again, my aim in this essay is to describe the deconstruction of scientific knowledge and simultaneously to suggest ways that we might fruitfully return to—and reassess—our analysis of the knowing subject. Thus, we shall see the omnipotent and bodiless knowing subject of the rationalist tradition brought into the light of day, at the same time that he or she loses his or her monopoly of action. This is the paradox that I wish to explore. Drawing on an empirical study of the practices of an inventor, I shall try to paint a new picture of the subject: a subjectivity not at the origin of the constitution of an object, but emerging from a collective consisting of heterogeneous elements—that is, a subjectivity that is

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