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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Pathopolitics: Feminist Performance Art, Biopolitics, and Affect in 1970s America

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Visual Studies

by

Jason M. Huber

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Cécile Whiting, Chair
Associate Professor Bridget R. Cooks
Associate Professor Lucas Hilderbrand

2017

DEDICATION

To

my father, for all the thanks I have left unsaid,

my inner circle, whose rituals have helped keep the flame inside me alive

and

the memory of my mother, who may be gone but burns still through me

My contemplation is an excruciation only because it is also a joy.

Simone de Beauvoir
The Ethics of Ambiguity

I must feel the fire of my soul so my intellectual blues can set others on fire.

Cornel West
Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud, a Memoir

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I am profoundly grateful for the support and guidance of my committee members, Associate Professor Bridget Cooks and Associate Professor Lucas Hilderbrand, who stoked my intellectual curiosity all these years and kept me convinced that there is a light at the end of this tunnel. Without Associate Professor Hilderbrand, I would never have come to understand the rich tradition and history of cultural studies and cultural theory that have come to inform all of my work. And without Associate Professor Cooks, I may have forgotten that a profound intellect and a steadfast commitment to critical scholarship do not necessitate the sacrifice of kindness and warmth.

Additionally, my thanks go to the Visual Studies faculty who accepted me with open arms and shaped my mind into what it is today, and the staff of the Art History and Film and Media Studies offices for their friendship and help throughout my years here.

CURRICULUM VITAE

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American contemporary art of the 1960s and 1970s; feminist art movements and theory; identity politics and antiwar politics; countercultures as visual cultures; performance art and the everyday; phenomenology and affect in popular culture; taste and/as class; disability studies.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Pathopolitics: Feminist Performance Art, Biopolitics, and Affect in 1970s America

By

Jason M. Huber

Doctor of Philosophy in Visual Studies

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Professor Cécile Whiting, Chair

This dissertation brings affect theory (the study of the political dimensions of emotion and feeling in culture and everyday life) in contact with the history of American feminist performance art, a fitting yet underexamined overlap. Following Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics, my theory *pathopolitics* scrutinizes the increasingly politicized nature of the cultural representation of emotions in contemporary American culture. I argue that feminist performance artists of the 1970s were particularly attuned to the multifaceted ways the cultural politics of emotion were shifting in their time in popular culture, news media, and capitalistic enterprises, especially advertising and the medical-industrial complex. The politics of feminist art practice across the nation worked to disturb conventional ways of "thinking feeling" that had theretofore hindered political objectives of the feminist movement. To demonstrate this, I turn to three artists representing three geographies across the U.S. Ana Mendieta, a Cuban-American artist working in Iowa, performed horrifyingly realistic *Rape Scenes* in response to a grisly local murder, overcoming her own fears of violence and radicalizing audiences' encounter with the subject of rape. Adrian Piper, an African-American artist-philosopher working in New York and most known for her later work in the 1980s and 1990s, utilized a Kantian model of rationality and meditative practice in *The Mythic Being* and *Food for the Spirit* to devise a methodology of art

production that confronts the illogical nature xenophobia in her audiences while forestalling their psychological projection, which could undermine the political efficacy of her work. Finally, Lynn Hershman adopted the depressed persona of *Roberta Breitmore*, whose experience in her daily life of writing in her diary, working, meeting dates, and going to psychiatrist appointments and support groups testifies to the contemporaneous shift in psychological thought and medical practice to an individualistic, biomedical model of mental illness, leaving many to bear the burden of mental illness alone. Together, these case studies demonstrate a tidal shift in 1970s America in the articulation and contestation of cultural politics through individual affect, attesting to the need to refine our theoretical and historical methodologies in the study of the politics of emotion.

INTRODUCTION

A motivating presupposition of this dissertation is that in 2017, one of the most important tasks for the critical humanities is to refine scholars' (and students') skill at analyzing the political mobilization of affect in our shared media landscape. The past several years have seen numerous unsettling developments that can reasonably be tied to the affective intensification of discourses surrounding social identity and politics, enabled and likely exacerbated by televisual, print, and new media. A veritable reactionary male-chauvinist insurgency¹ influenced the vitriolic rhetoric and ultimately explosive violence of Elliot Rodger who killed six and injured fourteen in his shooting rampage in Isla Vista, CA the night of 23 May 2014. My home institution, University of California, Irvine, has witnessed numerous heinous acts of racism over my eight years here, including the hanging of nooses throughout university buildings—a kind of racial terrorism encouraged by online communities like Stormfront. And the Stormfront community saw a massive bump in usage during the campaign of Donald Trump, who, upon his disturbing success in utilizing inflammatory, divisive, and deeply problematic sophistry founded on racism, misogyny, White nationalism, and xenophobia, is currently the Forty-Fifth President of the United States.² It is clear that affect is playing an increasingly significant role in the consideration and debate of social and cultural politics in contemporary America, and critical humanist scholars would do well to strengthen our theoretical finesse in examining such cultural developments.

While strictly speaking, affect has always had some relevance to political and social discourse, and every work of cultural carries its own affective valence that is worth analyzing

¹ I am referring to such social movements as the so-called Men's Rights movement, the "Red Pill" movement, and most broadly the sexual and gender entitlement bred by such communities as the Pickup Artists.

² Ben Schreckinger, "White supremacist groups see Trump bump," *Politico*, 10 December 2015. <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/12/donald-trump-white-supremacists-216620>.

and mining, I propose that scholars have a particularly ripe trove of work to draw inspiration from in feminist performance artists of the 1970s, whose work, surprisingly, is seldom examined in explicitly affective ways. Historically, I would argue that the function of affect in media and social discourse was made a self-conscious political battleground with unique intensity and reflexivity with the development of Second-Wave Feminism.³ Aesthetically, feminist artists working during the rise of Second-Wave Feminism had a particularly nuanced insight into the function of affect in representational forms due to the nature of their profession. And feminist performance artists, I will argue here, were especially poised to intervene in the cultural politics of affect due to the ontology of performance as an art medium: performance's locus is the body and its interaction with space, both physical and social.

What I undertake in the subsequent pages is an effort both historical and theoretical, with the histories I survey informing my theory and vice versa. The purpose of this study is likewise dialectical: to incorporate affect theory, the relatively recent cultural studies theoretical turn toward the study of affect and emotion in culture, into the history of performance art, especially feminist performance art; and to augment affect theory with the commitment to analyzing structures of power—cultural, social, political, and psychic—foregrounded in the methodologies of feminist art history. The former goal is intended to introduce affect theory to a field of study that seems particularly ripe for such a theoretical orientation, yet has rarely included it. The latter aim is to push back against the recent turn away from analyses of power in recent cultural studies works in the field of affect theory, which have largely come to favor examinations of coping and making do. Especially in such culturally distressing times such as these, coping certainly has

³ NB: I capitalize “Second-Wave Feminism” to indicate that the term is essentially an ideological construct made ex post facto and not a historically cohesive term, since numerous types of feminism existed and organized during the period ranging from the mid 1960s through the 1970s with varying objectives, organizational structures, and activist principles.

political weight to it; and given the affective drain capitalistic modes of production exert on their subjects, making do is a radical maneuver. However, I believe that the humanities must make of itself more than merely making do in such politically dangerous times as we currently face. I thus propose to construct a theory I have come to call *pathopolitics* through a historical examination of feminist performance works of the 1970s by Ana Mendieta, Adrian Piper, and Lynn Hershman.

Pathopolitics: Etymology and Underpinnings

As does a preponderance of theoretical cultural studies work, I owe the inspiration for both the nomenclature and structure of my theory to Michel Foucault, most especially his 1975-76 lectures at the Collège de France, “Society Must Be Defended.”⁴ Though it is only a small part at the end of his lectures on the relationship between warfare, sovereign power, and institutional power in Western modernity, arguably the most lasting concept to come from these lectures, at least for the humanities, is that of biopolitics. If conventional sovereign power derives ultimately from the power of the sovereign to kill individual subjects or let them live, biopolitical power introduces a new paradigm for how power operates: to make live and let die. Rather than the physical punishment of individual bodies, biopolitics functions through the control of the conditions of life itself among broad populations. Emerging over the second half of the eighteenth century and maturing in the nineteenth century, biopolitics developed along with and indeed through key scientific disciplines concerned with the conditions of life: medicine, demography, sociology, psychology, climatology, and so forth. As Foucault argues, with the expansion of population sizes—in part due to such developments as the birth of modern medicine and certainly the boost to production seen in industrialization—traditional sovereign

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

power becomes a less optimal means of political control due to its intrinsic and necessary focus on individual bodies. And while it functions specifically through its internalization by individuals and could therefore be called “automatic” in its functioning in some sense, disciplinary power still has to be instilled through a pervasive sense of perpetual surveillance that always carries with it the threat of corporeal violence for violating the disciplinary code: individuals, in other words, must feel themselves vulnerable even when they are not. Biopolitics, however, shifts the locus of state and institutional power from the individual bodies to populations defined around certain features that come to be defined in biological terms: race, gender, age, wellness, physical and mental fitness, and so forth. By manipulating the conditions that enable certain types of life to flourish—and conveniently allowing those outside the chosen forms of life to perish—biopolitics gradually molds the population to fit the outline favored by institutional power. The most obvious examples of biopolitics in Western history are typically those involving eugenics (e.g., Nazi Germany’s ideology of *das Herrenvolk*, the master race whose survival, it was postulated, necessitated the elimination of *die Untermenschen* from the gene pool), but the forms biopolitics can take are nearly limitless, precisely because the types of life that can and do exist are themselves exponential. Given that biopolitics allows traditional sovereign power (the right to kill) to be turned on large swathes of a state’s own population in the name of “protecting” the chosen form of life, Foucault claims that biopolitics allows for a degree of genocidal state racism on an unprecedented level.

Biopolitics, then, is a subtler means of enacting institutional power than conventional sovereign authority, but allows sovereign authority to function in an altogether different and arguably more terrifying way. Still, in many ways, the final emphasis of conventional biopolitics is state power over subjects: constituting the “rightful” subject of the state through preferentially

empowering conditions of life among favored populations, and leaving “undesirables” to perish. This might be one of the primary reasons affect theory has come to look unfavorably on power as the crux of humanistic analysis and criticism: in a media-saturated age, state power is (for the Western world, at least) an abstraction from the experience of the embodied subject; the rhythms of life under global capitalism are more pressing, as is how to cope with those rhythms. Thus, while a biopolitical analysis of the 1980s HIV crisis in the United States would quickly point to the function of the state in “letting die” through willing neglect those members of the American public who were none too popular among the Reagan Administration—particularly gay men and IV drug users, many of whom in both groups were poor and even homeless—an affective analysis of the crisis would more readily examine how activist groups worked to preserve the memories of those lost to the crisis in the AIDS quilt, for instance.⁵

Pathopolitics is how I propose to reconcile biopolitical humanistic scholarship’s unique finesse with analyzing modern power structures with affect theory’s profound foregrounding of the lived subject’s experience of life under global capitalism. In my theoretical debt to Foucauldian cultural studies, the term I have developed is, like biopolitics, derived from the Greek: patho-, from the word πάθος (*páthos*), meaning “sensation” or “feeling”; and -politics, from the word πολιτικός (*politikos*), meaning “relating to the citizens” or “civil.” Therefore, while a loose translation from the etymologies of biopolitics would read “[biological] life of the citizens,” pathopolitics can loosely be translated as “civil feeling.” If the power to make live and let die defines the modus operandi of biopolitics—controlling the conditions of life—pathopolitics is to make live and leave dull, or with less wordplay to enliven or tamp down affect: controlling the conditions of our affective lives, the shared affective context within which

⁵ My example of affect-theory analysis refers to Marita Sturken’s landmark work *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

ideas are exchanged and debated. As with biopolitics, pathopolitics is not about direct control over the affect of any single individual, but rather that of populations: over the emotional tenor that forms the background of social, cultural, and political debate and discourse between groups. Biopolitics offered a less centralized and direct means of political influence over the population through taking hold of the conditions of life and necessitated the inclusion of broader institutional networks of science, demography, and medicine than the brute force of centralized sovereign power—but builds upon and enables sovereign power’s function in previously unseen ways. Likewise, pathopolitics is still further removed from the centrality and might of the sovereign and includes yet broader networks of influence: mass and print media. These are furthest removed from state power in terms of direct control, but given the increasingly close relationship between traditional state power and corporate power and the latter’s overwhelming control of mass and print media and their circulation, pathopolitics is not entirely removed from the state either. And as biopolitics does for the sovereign power upon which it expands, pathopolitics enables and emboldens the function of biopolitics in new and unsettling ways.⁶

It is foreseeable that many critics of the necessity or utility of pathopolitics to cultural studies would posit that the concept of ideology serves much the same function analytically as my proposed theory. Indeed, affect theory itself has been known to receive this criticism from some of the more formative and influential voices in cultural studies as a field.⁷ My claim in

⁶ Psychiatry in particular shows the new potentials of biopolitics after the advent of pathopolitics. While in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, psychiatry usually removed the mentally unwell from the body politic through institutionalization and violent physical treatments (effectively a kind of “killing” without actually ending a life), modern psychiatry modulates the affect of the mentally ill through psychotropic drugs and elaborate “talk treatments.” What and who are treated with what kinds of drugs could arguably be considered a kind of pathopolitical biopolitics, but that is beyond the scope of this argument. For more on psychiatry and pathopolitics, see chapter 3.

⁷ I am thinking here of Michael Warner, whose work in queer theory has been foundational to the field. He notably claims that academia has a tendency toward intellectual fads and that affect theory broadly and the focus on affect specifically as an axis of power relations is merely one of these fads, and that the concept of ideology—around since Marx—performs this critical and analytical function just as well. Michael Warner, “Notes on Normativity,” lecture delivered at University of California, Irvine, 15 May 2013.

rebuttal is that the notion of ideology is itself frequently overly reductive: revealing the bias of theoretical cultural studies for the printed form⁸, ideology as a concept is unidimensional in its approach to politically charged content and works better for print media, whose form is concrete and static.⁹ Inasmuch as ideology privileges the epistemic as a field of power—in other words, the contents of knowledge and how knowledge is supported and verified—it overlooks the phenomenological as a field of power. *What* is (claimed to be) known *how* is doubtless important to structures of power, but leaving the consideration here neglects to consider how reality is equally ordered by phenomenology as it is epistemology, if not more so: the manner in which ideas are shared and considered influences the valence of their perceived merit and overall relationship to a field of knowledge, not to mention the relationship of a given piece of knowledge to an individual thinker. In other words, ideology has a context beyond its epistemology: the affective relationships people (both individual and collective) create with propositions and bodies of knowledge.

Owing much of my understanding of class to Marxian scholars, I do not mean to reject ideology as an analytical tool, but rather to add a further context to its broader analysis that places not texts but their affective contexts of circulation and discussion at the center of analysis. In fact, the incipient concepts that formed the basis of this dissertation pull significant inspiration from Raymond Williams, one of Marxian cultural studies' most formative figures. In his

⁸ This bias for print is itself reflective of the disciplinary bias of much cultural studies, certainly the scholars who have the most influence in the theoretical wing of the field: namely, while cultural studies has many members from film studies and media studies, a large proportion of cultural studies scholars hail from English and comparative literature. In cultural studies, film and media scholars work more in the tradition of studies of fandom and subcultures. This wing of cultural studies, largely tracing back to the work of Dick Hebdige, frequently looks at much more diverse cultural forms than print, but also infrequently generates novel theoretical paradigms extending beyond the examination of subcultures and fandom. Hence, a disproportionate quantity of cultural studies theory comes from disciplines privileging the print form.

⁹ Given the privileging of texts over the body—to say nothing of the complicated and rarefied manners in which these texts are read by scholars—one could also argue that there is a tinge of classism and elitism to the centrality of ideology to humanistic analyses of power, as well.

landmark *Keywords*, Williams provides what is at once a glossary of terms central to Marxian humanistic analysis—concepts such as class, ideology, and hegemony—and a theoretical network that places these terms in a dynamic relationship to one another in line with humanistic styles of analysis.¹⁰ While this work is central to the history and development of cultural studies, one term from his analysis is rarely discussed, likely in large part due to how relatively underdeveloped it is in comparison to most others in *Keywords*: what Williams calls structures of feeling. As he elucidates, structures of feeling involve “a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulated and defined exchange.”¹¹ They are in essence social formations in process: the foundations of practices and beliefs that have not taken an explicit form yet. Revealing, perhaps, my claim about the privileging of the textual by the concept of ideology, what this effectively reads as is formless ideology or ideology-in-progress. My theory builds on this concept, but instead of positing ideology as a kind of telos for structures of feeling, I understand structures of feeling as the phenomenological context for ideology, and pathopolitics is the political battleground over the dimensions shaping them.

Feminist/Performance/History: Affect Theory, Performance Art, and Feminist Art-Historiography

Affect theory and the history of performance art seem like a natural match for each other. The medium of performance art is the human body and its movement through physical and social space, and more broadly the ethics and aesthetics of such movement through its use of cultural signification, physical form, and social interaction. Affect theory is likewise concerned with human bodies and their interaction with one another through cultural representation. Building an

¹⁰ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

analytical mode that is at once less regimented in approach and more sophisticated in its application, affect theory takes psychoanalysis's focus on embodied psychic life but largely abandons older Freudian paradigms for schematizing psychic life in favor of an analysis more attentive to circumstance and our embeddedness in social and cultural power structures extending beyond sexual desire and the nuclear family.¹² The complex interaction between the embodied experience of feeling and emotion, processes of representing and interpreting such experience, and networks of social, cultural, political, and economic power forms the general locus of affect theory's analysis, which would appear to share much in common with the concerns of performance artists and their work.

Surprisingly, however, the history of performance art has not much engaged affect theory and is only recently seeing an increased interest in an affective mode of analysis. As the history of performance art has developed, the three largest fields from which performance studies borrows methodologically and theoretically are feminist theory, film studies, and psychoanalysis, and an unwavering foregrounding of the social and cultural politics of performance has asserted itself as a core element of performance studies. Two of the most foundational texts in the history of performance art, Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked* and Amelia Jones's *Body Art*, define themselves largely among this axis, with Jones relying on psychoanalysis more heavily than Phelan, and Phelan positioning herself in relation to film studies more than Jones, but both maintaining feminist theory as their ultimate commitment.¹³ Scholars have drawn on other theoretical traditions but typically such engagements do not result in a lasting adoption of a given tradition

¹² I write "largely abandons" because one of the two paradigms of affect theory with which I am not engaging heavily here, following in the footsteps of Gilles Deleuze, inherits psychoanalytic concepts and more generally psychoanalysis's greater emphasis on determining and defining the structure of psychic life per se rather than as culturally positioned. I will expand on the distinction between the two paradigms in later paragraphs.

¹³ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993); Amelia Jones, *Body Art/performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

as an analytical lens. For instance, Kathy O'Dell's *Contract with the Skin* is novel in incorporating contract theory into the study of masochism in performance art of the 1970s, but hers is largely alone as a study of the subject rooted largely in contract theory.¹⁴ But affect theory has only made limited contact with the study of performance art, most notably with José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*.¹⁵ As the title indicates, his study is concerned with abandoning positivist, presentist, and historicist readings of queer identity and especially moving past the embrace of negativity and pessimism in queer theory with such works as Lee Edelman's *No Future*.¹⁶ Muñoz instead examines queer theory and art through the lens of futurity in its overlap with the utopian impulse.

Muñoz's work is especially representative for my purposes here because not only does *Cruising Utopia* demonstrate the relatively limited overlap between the history of performance art and affect theory, but it also illustrates a more recent turn in affect theory towards the examination of optimism and coping in politically trying circumstances. From the early 1990s when the study of affect began to take shape in cultural studies, two camps began to emerge: on the one hand, there was a fairly open-ended group of cultural studies scholars who, inspired by early queer theory's critique of normalcy and recent inquiries into temporality and memory, wished to reexamine psychoanalytic paradigms and thus began studying the politics and semiotics of affect in cultural forms and their relationship to subjectivity. These endeavors could range from heavily theoretical works following Foucauldian notions of governmentality to largely historical research into such topics as the development of memoir as a genre. A central

¹⁴ Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

¹⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

¹⁶ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

theme, however, was an abiding interest in the politics of everyday life and how broader forms of cultural and social politics influence personal life on both the individual and collective levels.

Aside from this thematic core, there was no paradigmatic methodology or even concrete shared terminology per se. On the other hand, a more systematic model developed following a particular philosophical tradition with a definitive interest in schematizing a conceptual model based in concrete definitions of terminology: namely, a tradition following in the steps of Gilles Deleuze.

As Ann Cvetkovich observes, this is

a body of scholarship inspired by Deleuzian theories of affect as force, intensity, or the capacity to move and be moved. Crucial to such inquiry is the distinction between affect and emotion, where the former signals precognitive sensory experience and relations to surroundings, and the latter cultural constructs and conscious processes that emerge from them, such as anger, fear, or joy.¹⁷

Though the systematic rigor seems riper for extensive theoretical development, the range of influence of the former camp has come to dwarf that of the latter, in part due to the imprecision and therefore malleability—and it is for this reason that I align myself with the former, especially given the need to adapt the approach to extant models for the study of the history of performance art.

A more recent trend has come to dominant this first, open-ended camp of affect theory. While it was once a wide-ranging field that could as easily look at negativity and power as optimism in political minority communities, the focus has shifted overwhelmingly away from power and largely from negativity to a rethinking of positivity and coping, especially in the Public Feelings working group that has formed as an alternative scholastic collective in parallel with the Deleuzian school. Cvetkovich—a leading member of Public Feelings—notes, “For some time now, there have been calls to think beyond the well-worn grooves of the search for

¹⁷ Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 4.

forms of cultural management and hegemony, on the one hand, and modes of resistance and subversion, on the other.”¹⁸ Largely, the critique stems from the notion that such narrative modes and theoretical models operate at a level too abstract from the conditions of everyday life to make such investigations much more than theoretical speculation—the particularity of texts and people falls by the wayside in such a globally abstract system. Again, Cvetkovich writes,

Looking at neoliberalism from the vantage point of everyday affective life offers, however, an alternative approach to master narratives about global conditions that are currently circulating in cultural studies. Talk of permanent war, states of exception, and new security states, important and useful as it might be, frequently operates at such a high level of abstraction that it fails to address the lived experience of these systemic transformations.¹⁹

Among those working in the Public Feelings group, broader cultural contexts of power are most present in Cvetkovich’s work—if only between the lines—and I thus draw heavily from her approach to affect theory, but even in her work, as can be read here, a tension still exists between these broader contexts and everyday affective lives. My purpose with pathopolitics is to form a kind of linkage between the examination of neoliberalism in the affect of the everyday and larger structures of power and resistance to power found at a more abstract societal level, thus working towards reconciling one of the biggest current divides in cultural studies, and integrating affect theory with performance studies in a more self-conscious manner than has yet been done.

¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹ Ibid., 12. For a much fuller account of the state of affect theory, turn to the remainder of Cvetkovich’s introduction, *ibid.*, 1-26.

Feminist Performance Art and Affect in 1970s America: Ana Mendieta, Adrian Piper, and Lynn Hershman

“We started doing performance because it was easier to get access to personal subject matter through performance.”

—Judy Chicago²⁰

“And one of the most profound ways [that performance art breaks down preconceived barriers] is the inclusion of, of [*sic*] audiences, the inclusion of personal feelings, the inclusion of experience and content, and the idea of collaboration. Not just with other people, but with the audience itself, where there was a larger dynamic of what was going on. So that the audience was included as part of the artwork. And making that art work something that could go on, and, and change culture, change things, bring awareness.”

—Lynn Hershman²¹

One of the many ways that what we have come to call Second-Wave Feminism branded itself in mid-1960s and 1970s America was through the anthem, “The personal is the political.” Not surprisingly, then, feminist performance artists in the United States were also keen on emphasizing the sometimes subtle, sometimes egregious ways in which our approach to daily life in all its varieties is molded by social, cultural, economic, and conventional political forces. As the above quotes from Judy Chicago and Lynn Hershman demonstrate, changing the politics of the personal necessitated first accessing and outlining the dimensions of our personal lives with the aim of collective awareness, and then pressing up against and breaking through the limitations of our current existential and phenomenological world through shared expression.

Given how I have outlined pathopolitics above, then, it may come as no surprise that I turn to feminist performance art as an exemplary pathopolitical battleground in contemporary history and perhaps the most appropriate area of art history in which to develop the theory. I

²⁰ Quoted in Meredith Tromble, “Double Tale: The Counterstory of Lynn Hershman,” in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson: Secret Agents, Private I*, ed. Meredith Tromble (Berkeley: University of California Press; Seattle: Henry Art Gallery University of Washington, 2005), 203.

²¹ Quoted in Kyle Stephan, “Interview with Lynn Hershman, October 24, 2006, San Francisco, CA,” accessed 10 July 2016, https://lib.stanford.edu/files/WAR_Hershman_2006.pdf.

have chosen to focus on works by three feminist artists that were made primarily in isolation from other artists and feminist collectives for two strategic reasons, both of which have to do with limiting the scope of my field of investigation to allow the contours of my theory to develop without losing particularity. First, their relative distance from feminist collectives allows me to focus my historical work in the following chapters much more narrowly and personally, permitting my theory to develop in the careful examination of the works and contexts of three artists rather than performing a much broader historical project. Perhaps more importantly, though, my choice of artists accords with three strategies that I will argue are central to pathopolitics.

Corresponding to the works I examine in the following by Ana Mendieta, Adrian Piper, and Lynn Hershman are three strategies I have come to call pathogenesis, pathological thought, and pathonormativity. Two of these three terms—pathogenesis and the pathological—are new spins on extant words, and not coincidentally they both conventionally refer to contagion and disease: this is a conscious choice owing in part to the aversion to strong emotion found in much of the Western intellectual tradition and, until fairly recently, academia, in both of which emotion is regarded as a threat to rationality and therefore objectivity; furthermore, it is a nod to pathopolitics’ overlap with and contribution to conventional biopolitics. Pathogenesis, in my usage, indicates politically deliberate agitation of emotion, often an overwhelming or aversive one, surrounding a culturally controversial topic. Pathological thought here designates the degree to which emotion is allowed to influence and shape argumentation, epistemic proof, and logical thought. And pathonormativity refers to the norming of a given population’s affect, in two senses of the word “norming”: both a sociological sense of a groups affective tendencies (what they feel and how strongly about a range of things), and the policing of appropriate and inappropriate

affective behavior of individual members of community by both figures of authority and the exigencies of social etiquette.

Although these three strategies of pathopolitics are not meant to be exhaustive of all the manners in which pathopolitics manifests, they are representative of the most common ways in which the influence of pathopolitics can be felt. Nor are these meant to be hermetically pristine categories, but rather theoretically useful demarcations of modes of the politics around affect that can and often do bleed into one another. As Cvetkovich has indicated, part of the power of affect theory (in the Public Feelings approach, at least) is its openness to examining resonances with comfortable imprecision. An academic praxis that wishes to push back against the obsession with productivity and the production of knowledge-power must become more comfortable with fuzzy boundaries, loose definitions, and open-ended thinking. In respect of this goal, I have left countless loose threads in the following chapters, dropped in numerous personal references that may only resonate with members of subcultures I occupy, and left open many resonances between the artists I propose to study, particularly around the centrality of ritual, the yoking of science to capital, and the specter of affect in the Western intellectual tradition. I invite my readers to pull at these loose threads and interpret them as they see fit and useful.

CHAPTER ONE

Blood, Fire, Death: Ana Mendieta's *Rape Scenes* as Sympathetic Magick¹

When mention is made of the Cuban-born American artist Ana Mendieta, two associations, for better or worse, pop to mind for most who recognize her name: the first is her impressive and poetic series of what she called “earth-body” sculptures, typically incorporating the outline of her own figure articulated in positive or negative space in soil, sand, grass, flowers, leaves, twigs, and/or water. The most substantial of these works, executed almost exclusively in total isolation and left to history only in the form of photographs, are the *Siluetas* (Spanish for silhouettes) and the *Fetishes*. Importantly, the “actual” physical works (as opposed to their photographic record) were always destroyed, either left to be reincorporated by living nature or actively destroyed by the artist herself. Adding dramatic effect and climactic impact to these works was the frequent incorporation of fire, blood, and gunpowder, whose effects on the eerie echoes of the artist’s body lent a further air of ritual and mysticism to the already magickal works. Given the sheer quantity of known works made (more or less literally) in this mold, the theme and approach were clearly important to Mendieta, although arguably these works have had too extensive a monopoly on the collective knowledge of Mendieta’s impact on and contributions to art history.

¹ I have chosen the spelling “magick,” a spelling originating in the work of Aleister Crowley and subsequently used by myriad Neopagan belief systems including Wicca, in order immediately and unambiguously to distinguish it from the performance of illusions through sleight of hand, which also goes by the name “magic.” (Accordingly, and for the same reasons, I will forego the use of the word “magician” and instead use “mage.”) This is as much a heuristic choice—intended to nip the possibility of confusing these two unrelated practices in the bud—as an ontological one: to categorize the type of magick I discuss in this chapter with the same word used to describe the performance of deceptive illusions would be an insult to the sincere belief invested, by the artist and billions of others, into the power and efficacy of the magickal traditions and the performance of magick as a sacred rite.

Still, better these are remembered than the other association so inextricably tied to any mention of Mendieta: namely, her brutal and untimely death on 8 September 1985, when she fell to her death from her husband Carl Andre's thirty-fourth-storey balcony in his Greenwich Village apartment. Despite the charges levelled against him and the contextual evidence weakening allegations that Mendieta had committed suicide, Andre was juridically exonerated of all charges of homicide thrice in court over the subsequent four years (not without ample testimony on behalf of Andre's character from a legion of art-world big-wigs).² Nevertheless, her violent death has intractably stained much of the writing on Mendieta, from 1985 until today, and continues to be a point of active contention for feminists in the art world. Indeed, on 19 May 2014, on the opening evening of a massive Andre retrospective at Dia:Beacon, artist Christen Clifford collaborated with the feminist performance collective No Wave Performance Task Force to pay tribute to Mendieta in a fitting, if depressing, display at the Dia Art Foundation's Chelsea, NY branch, at which a lecture by Leslie Hewitt on Andre's work was scheduled. Along with charged readings from Christa Wolf's novel *Cassandra* and Christine Redfern's biographical graphic novel *Who Is Ana Mendieta?*, the artists and activists laid a large banner

² Mendieta's death and the suspicion that Andre indeed murdered the young artist are still points of serious contention in the art world, particularly among feminists. The artist's sister Raquelín spoke to the artist no more than forty-five minutes prior to her death and reported in subsequent interviews that the artist, who had had a terrible argument with Andre prior to calling her sister, was in no way despondent, much less suicidal, but rather angry and recalcitrant. Further, Mendieta had an intense fear of heights and, at just five feet tall, would have had quite the difficult time leaping over the balcony's tall railing without the assistance of a chair or stepladder, neither of which was near the balcony when police arrived on the scene. The argument was, additionally, in no wise atypical, since the lovers were frequently at odds, as the artist's sister and sole confidante could attest. And though Mendieta had a famously ferocious temper, it is highly unlikely she would have ended her life over such a trifle as an argument given the recent success she had had getting her work exhibited and recognized, having just returned from her tenure at the American Academy in Rome after winning the Prix de Rome. Indeed, entries in her diary prior to her death ring only of hope and optimism, and no mention is made of any pressing concerns, save her increasingly frequent disagreements with her husband. Casting further doubt on the legitimacy of the three trials is the extensive involvement of a cadre of art-world wheelers-and-dealers, from equally famous artists to prominent museum curators—many of whom were men with some degree of sexist tendencies in their histories—in the trial proceedings. For more information on the circumstances surrounding and following her death, see Robert Katz, *Naked By the Window: The Fatal Marriage of Carl Andre and Ana Mendieta* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990).

reading “I wish Ana Mendieta was still alive” at the foot of Dia:Chelsea’s entrance and spilled rotting chicken viscera and blood on it and the surrounding sidewalk. Given the prominence of blood and theatricality in Mendieta’s massive yet tragically abbreviated oeuvre, the choice of elements could hardly have been better.³

The continued art-actions may commendably make a martyr of Mendieta in the feminist fight for the visibility of women artists and against violence against women (the best sense that can be made out of such a senseless death); and the literature on Mendieta’s work, ever-growing since scholars took interest in her after her death, continues to delve deeper into the intricate body of her work. However, few would contest the claim that the aforementioned associations dominate discussion of the artist’s mark on history. Though all her work has been discussed to some extent, from her earliest performances beginning with her 1972 *Glass on Body* to her unexecuted plans for a permanent sculpture installation in a New York park, the overwhelming majority of scholarly attention privileges her earth-body artworks. While these series constitute a significant portion of her output, they by no means define, let alone exhaust, it. And although we shouldn’t shy away from her death, as earlier scholars did in the wake of the media sensationalism surrounding it, we shouldn’t let it too firmly determine how we view the range and content of her work. Given the extensive anxiety in the literature over “pinning her down” as any singular type of artist or human being, can we not do better in maintaining Mendieta’s legacy in all its complexity and variety? Further, are we not capable of contextualizing seemingly one-off pieces within the aegis of a holistic and well-understood career trajectory the artist was clearly and consciously blazing before her career was abruptly ended?

³ For more information on this art-action, see Jillian Steinhauer, “Artists Protest Carl Andre Retrospective with Blood Outside Dia:Chelsea,” *Hyperallergic*, 20 May 2014, < <http://hyperallergic.com/127500/artists-protest-carl-andre-retrospective-with-blood-outside-of-diachelsea/>>.

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I will argue that two of the artist's earliest performance works—including the first artwork in her oeuvre to bring together the omnipresent elements of her body, blood, and nature—have not only gone underexamined, but also underestimated in the literature in terms of their formative impact on the artist's aesthetic maturation and experimental expansion. This omission is even more remarkable given the extent of feminist scholarship on Mendieta, bearing in mind that these two performances are arguably the most explicitly “feminist” out of her entire body of work.⁴ Further still, in glossing over these two pieces, feminist art history is indeed ignoring among the earliest and most affectively confrontational artworks dealing with a crucial issue in the political movement of American Second-Wave Feminism: namely, the blight of violence against women and its widespread sexualization, especially in the form of rape. And importantly for the general theme of my dissertation, I will claim that these two performances constitute some of the most *pathogenic*—here meaning “generating πάθος (*páthos*),” more on the term to come later—art to be created by feminist artists of the 1970s in an effort to promote feminist causes.

Admittedly, Mendieta's *Rape Scenes*, from spring and fall of 1973, are the artist's most unsettling and gruesome works without contest. However, as grueling an ordeal looking at the documentary photographs of the two performances unquestionably is, only that much more grueling must their performance have been. That the artist would return to such a psychic tribulation for a second performance only underscores the importance of the series for Mendieta.

The two performances are also unique in the artist's oeuvre in being directly inspired by a

⁴ Despite the evident political concerns of the two performances, I put “feminist” in scare-quotes here because at this time in her life, Mendieta did not consider herself a feminist. See Julia Herzberg, “Ana Mendieta, the Iowa Years: A Critical Study, 1969 through 1977” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1998), 258. Further, Mendieta later became dissatisfied with the feminist art movement and disassociated herself from the scene when she resigned as a partner at the foundational feminist A.I.R. Collective on 18 October 1982.

concrete, local historical event: the grisly 13 March 1973 murder of a twenty-year-old nursing student from Morrison, Iowa, Sarah Ann Ottens, at the University of Iowa—the university at which Mendieta had just completed her MA in painting and begun her work as an MFA student in the university’s trailblazing Intermedia program. Early details released by the authorities on the murder were sketchy, but what is known for certain is that the murder occurred shortly before midnight in Room 429 of Rienow Hall dormitory.⁵ Her corpse was found by Brenda Simpson, a student from Waterloo who was the only other student on the fourth floor at the time of the murder, as Ottens had remained in Iowa City for spring break to make some extra money at her job as a waitress.⁶ She was discovered partially naked under a clean bed sheet, her hair and face bizarrely having been washed and bloodied water left in the sink.⁷ Reports from witnesses on the scene recount that the authorities removed a bloodied broom handle from the apartment, and suspicions that she had been brutally raped prior to her murder circulated thereafter, particularly in sensationalized local news reports.⁸ Further speculation around Ottens’s possible sexual assault hastened when authorities began questioning women in the University of Iowa area who had been victims of sexual assault.⁹ In fact, the mythology around the sexual assault was so widespread that the activist group WAR (Women Against Rape) issued a statement urging women in the Iowa City area to be cautious:

⁵ Mark F. Rohner, “Probe into Slaying of Coed to Be Widened,” *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, 17 March 1973, 1A-2A; Claren F. Dale, “UI Coed Apparently Slain, Body Found in Reinow Hall,” *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, 14 March 1973, 1A-2A; 1A.

⁶ Mark F. Rohner, “Detectives Seek Clues from Friends of Slain Coed,” *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, 16 March 1973, 1A-2A; 2A.

⁷ Mark F. Rohner, “UI Student Indicted in Slaying of Coed,” *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, 19 September 1973, 1A-2A.

⁸ Nancy Bowers, “Spring Break Killer: Murder of Sarah Ottens 1973,” *Iowa Unsolved Murders: Historic Cases* <<http://www.iowaunsolvedmurders.com/beyond-1965-selected-unsolved-iowa-murders/spring-break-killer-murder-of-sarah-ann-ottens-1973/>>.

⁹ Mark F. Rohner, “Detectives Seek Clues from Friends of Slain Coed,” *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, 16 March 1973, 1A-2A; 1A.

In light of the fact that very little information has been released concerning the murder of Sarah Ottens and in light of the fact that no arrests have been made, we urge all women in the cities of Iowa City and Coralville to be cautious and use all means necessary to protect themselves. We urge you to be aware of the potentially dangerous situation that does exist in Iowa City.¹⁰

The broom handle did factor into the murder, for, as argued by the prosecuting attorney Garry D. Woodward, though, Ottens had been strangled violently with the broom handle and her corpse mutilated with it; Woodward even “implied that the crime was sexually motivated, and that the killing resulted when Miss Ottens resisted the advances of the assailant.”¹¹ Roughly six months following the murder, James Wendall Hall, a Black twenty-year-old fellow University of Iowa student and former football player who was apparently acquainted with Ottens, was charged with her murder. He was found guilty seven months thereafter of second-degree murder based on fingerprint and DNA evidence from hair samples found at the scene and sentenced to fifty years in prison.¹² However, in November 1983 his lawyer was able to get the case dismissed as a mistrial due to the defense claiming the prosecution had withheld evidence, and Hall was released from prison. In 1993, he was convicted of strangling to death another young woman, thirty-one-year-old Susan Hajek of Cedar Rapids, Iowa on 20 March 1992.¹³

Mendieta performed her first *Rape Scene* later in March 1973 as a consciously politicized reaction to the macabre murder. It would not be until November of that year that Ottens’s autopsy would be released to the public, whereupon it was reported that evidence indicated that she had been asphyxiated to death, and had allegedly not been sexually molested prior to or after dying, though she had been brutally beaten and her corpse mutilated after her death.¹⁴ It was

¹⁰ “Women Urged to Be Cautious,” *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, 4 April 1973, 2A.

¹¹ Mark F. Rohner, “Hall Found Guilty, Sentencing June 27,” *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, 24 May 1974, 1A-2A; 2A.

¹² Mark F. Rohner, “James Hall Arraigned in Murder,” *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, 20 September 1973, 1A; Mark F. Rohner, “Hall Found Guilty,” 1A-2A.

¹³ See Bowers, “Spring Break Killer,” and Herzberg, “A Critical Study,” 161-62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

upon release of this news and consequent re-escalation of media sensationalism that Mendieta performed her second *Rape Scene*.¹⁵ For the purposes of Mendieta's performances, the likelihood that Ottens was not raped on the night of her murder is not as important as the fact that the media covered her death as if it were a rape-murder and focused on details of her gruesome mutilation; for it is on the highly publicized media reports that Mendieta based her performances.¹⁶

In fact, the first *Rape Scene* of March 1973 was intended as a recreation of the scene of the crime as it was depicted in the media.¹⁷ This performance was staged in Mendieta's own apartment, and she utilized the help of her friends in setting the tableau.¹⁸ Sheila Kelly bought beef blood with Mendieta and helped the artist destroy plates and scatter debris throughout the apartment. Her other friend Jane Hedrick (née Noble) helped the artist apply blood to her groin, buttocks, and legs and tied her to the kitchen table with her undergarments, also bloodied, around her ankles. Hedrick then poured the rest of the blood into the sink and the toilet, leaving it there unflushed, and proceeded to leave Mendieta's apartment, leaving the door ajar. Virtually anyone could have walked into the artist's apartment to find her like this, but this—an exemplary case of Mendieta's much-admired unflinching passion for and brazen conviction to her art, regardless of any danger to her person—was the way Mendieta wanted the scene set. She in effect played the part of a rape-murder victim, lying motionless, face down on her kitchen table in a pool of beef

¹⁵ See Julia Herzberg, "Ana Mendieta's Iowa Years: 1970-1980," in *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body: Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985*, ed. Olga M. Viso (Washington, DC: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution; Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 256n.66.

¹⁶ Furthermore, Mendieta continued to refer to the murder as a rape-murder in her own discussions on these early works up until her death. Whether she didn't read the articles on Ottens's autopsy or she refused to acknowledge the allegations released by the police is unclear.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 152-5.

¹⁸ It is worth mentioning here that Mendieta would later deny that these pieces were performances at all, and would instead refer to them consistently as 'tableaux.' Though it is likely she did sincerely consider these works to be tableaux, part of her reaction against being considered a performance artist at any point in her career was to set herself apart from her artist colleagues, both American and European, many of whom worked in performance during the 1970s as the avant-garde continued their excursions into ever more experimental, dematerialized territory. On the dematerialization of art, see Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

blood, as she waited for her peers at the University of Iowa to arrive to see a performance piece she had announced but about which she had given no details.¹⁹ One can only imagine, given the horror of the documentary photographs, the shock her peers must have felt walking in to find the resolutely unresponsive artist like this in her own apartment.

The second *Rape Scene*, performed in November 1973, was executed under strikingly different— perhaps even diametrically opposite—circumstances. Instead of her apartment, Mendieta chose an area in the woods on the outskirts of Iowa City. Further, she had invited none of her peers to witness this performance. Instead, she had her mentor and then-lover Hans Breder document the performance, snapping some thirty photographs in the process. Like the first piece, she had an unbuttoned shirt on but no pants, and her groin, buttocks, and thighs were again bloodied. If one follows the sequence of the photographs, one can almost imagine it telling the story of a hiker coming upon a scene that slowly reveals itself to be the site at which a rape-murder victim's body was literally left for dead by the perpetrator.

As I'll be arguing, these performances are not only among the earliest and most literal feminist artworks to deal with rape as an act of violence, but they also bring together for the first time significant themes that will come to typify the artist's work up until her death: affectively impactful theatricality centered on the artist's own body, or more precisely the remnant of it; excruciating attention to detail and remarkable control over how her work would officially be presented, through the meticulous orchestration of the documentary process; and the creation of art as a magick spell through the use of magickal elements and ritual with the intent to effect change in both the world and herself. The magick involved in the *Rape Scenes* is one that even the most skeptical would grant effects real change in the world: specifically, it generates

¹⁹ Information on the performance's execution was retrieved from Herzberg, "A Critical Study," 162-4.

overwhelming, largely aversive affect in its viewers—in a process I am calling *pathogenesis*, one of the three strategies I am analyzing under the aegis of pathopolitics. Considering that in vernacular speech, pathogenesis refers to the incubation and generation of disease, the word choice may seem odd, but the parallel is deliberate: the affect generated here is a decidedly sickening affect, and one meant to tie nausea to a political situation, here the act of sexual violence, in the hopes of warding off such evil from those who witness it, as if by magick. While significant ink has been spilled over the elements of Afro-Cuban religion present in Mendieta's work, particularly those of Santería—and a young Mendieta indeed took interest in the religion when she and her sisters would eavesdrop on the conversations of the family's Black hired help about Santería²⁰—there has been a consistent overemphasis on how her ritualism relates to particular practices of magick with an equally significant neglect on how her practice *is* magick, and a highly personal and idiosyncratic magick at that—intended to reap actual effects on the world and the artist-mage through seemingly non-causal, performative means. In my understanding of Mendieta's approach to religion and magick, it is perhaps appropriate that Santería is the religion most conjured in discussions of Mendieta's mysticism, for Santería is above all a syncretic religion, hybridizing vestiges of African faiths brought by slaves to the Caribbean and the Roman Catholicism of Spanish colonialists. Mendieta's spirituality and magickal praxis were not just syncretic, but, as I would call it, *idiosyncretic*, a syncretism of many faiths and spiritual practices that followed her own idiosyncrasies.²¹ Her belief in and practice of magick can be seen in practically all her work, but I will argue that it is here in the

²⁰ See Raquelín Mendieta, "Childhood Memories: Religion, Politics, Art," in *Ana Mendieta*, ed. Gloria Moure (Barcelona: Fundació Antonio Tàpies; Santiago de Compostela: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, 1997), 223-28.

²¹ In mystical circles today, she would be considered a practitioner of chaos magick, a form of magickal practice that refuses preordained dogma and instead pragmatically borrows from any and all faiths and systems of belief inasmuch as they are suited to the mage's purposes at a given moment.

Rape Scenes that she first begins approaching artmaking as a magick ritual. In other words, it is here that she first made of her art a grimoire of sympathetic magick—i.e. magick that exerts control over a situation by imitating its conditions or appearances.

A Brief History of the Mythologies of Rape

“[T]he ideology of rape is aided by more than a system of lenient laws that serve to protect offenders and is abetted by more than the fiat of total male control over the lawful use of power [i.e., police, military, jurisprudence, etc.]. The ideology of rape is fueled by cultural values that are perpetuated at every level of our society, and nothing less than a frontal attack is needed to repel this cultural assault.”

—Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*²²

Before I can devote my attention to rethinking Mendieta’s artistic practice as a form of sympathetic magick, and examine how the *Rape Scenes*, as particular interventions in both the discourse surrounding Ottens’s murder and the understanding and depiction of rape in culture generally, especially play a foundational role in shaping her work as such, it is important to examine the history of rape’s mythologies, against which the *Rape Scenes* are fighting for representational currency. As one of the earliest artworks on the subject of rape in the Second-Wave Feminist movement—and one executed in total isolation from feminist communities, let alone other feminist artists fighting against violence against women—these mythologies form the symbolic context for the representation of rape against which Mendieta was fighting: an uphill battle that likely informs the extreme bluntness and abject terror of the performance works.

Part of my goal for the following is to historicize how Second-Wave Feminism was beginning to understand, talk about, and fight against rape, and to do so, I will be drawing from Susan Brownmiller’s pathbreaking work on rape, essentially the first attempt to provide both a history of rape and a feminist polemic and hermeneutic for fighting it, titled *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. The author draws primarily on historical accounts and criminology,

²² Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1975), 389.

along with some field research in the form of interviews of rape victims, to form the substance of her account. Although she occasionally writes with polemical ferocity, especially when defining key terms and proposing her primary theses or relaying victim accounts, the majority of her account, although confrontational and bold, is not reliant on pathos but rather on the blunt force of historical and criminological facts. A thoroughgoing feminist study of rape had been unprecedented up until *Against Our Will*, so perhaps part of the goal in avoiding pathos-ridden rhetoric was to avoid alienating readers who had not yet formed an opinion on the Women's Movement, and to lend the work a more serious, scholarly tone.

Aside from the fact that it is among the first extensive studies of rape, and one of only a few by feminists to exist at that time²³, not to mention the first ever to undertake the task of providing a full history of rape, there is good reason it Brownmiller's study became one of the cornerstones of Second-Wave Feminism's fight against rape. First, it is the initial feminist work on rape to task itself with unseating dominant Freudian models of rapists. Prior to Brownmiller, the popular understanding of the rapist derived from Freudian psychology was essentially a sexual deviant whose neuroses prevented him from being able to copulate without force or

²³ Other studies of rape to come prior to Brownmiller's include Menachem Amir, *Patterns in Forcible Rape* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971), and Ann Wolbert Burgess and Lynda Lytle Holmstrom, *Rape: Victims of Crisis* (Bowie, Maryland: Robert J. Brady Co., 1974). The former is the first sociological monograph on rape, but made no attempt to link rape to sexist ideologies, while the latter details clinical problems and practices in hospital and emergency room settings in handling rape as well as the responses victims in such settings go through, written by a psychiatric nurse and a sociologist. Both works fall prey to Freudian models of the typical rapist, however. The first feminist work to detail rape to some degree, but not as a focus, is Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), but rape is only a small portion of the study, which overall examines the history of women's gender roles and women in literature. The first explicitly feminist study of rape exclusively is Susan Griffin, "Rape: The All-American Crime," *Ramparts* 10.3 (1971): 26-36, which adopts an investigative-journalistic approach and confronts the legal system that handles victims and prosecutes perpetrators, briefly exposing the gender ideologies and rape mythologies at work within it. Diana E.H. Russel, *The Politics of Rape: The Victim's Perspective* (New York: Stein and Day, 1975) was published the same year as Brownmiller's work, but as the title suggests, it focuses exclusively on the experience of rape victims and is more ethnographic in approach. For more information on these works, see Julia R. Schwendinger and Herman Schwendinger, "A Review of Rape Literature...", *Crime and Social Justice* 6 (fall/winter 1976): 79-85; and Sabine Sielke, "The Politics of the Strong Trope: Rape and the Feminist Debate in the United States," *Amerikastudien/America Studies* 49.3, *Gewalt in den USA der 1960er und 1970er Jahre* (2004): 367-84.

violence. As one reviewer puts it, “Thanks to the Freudians, we have been stuck with the image of a wretched, maladjusted, love-starved loner. This weirdo creep could never be confused with a ‘normal’ male, and that point has been dear to the hearts of normal males.”²⁴ And indeed, as Brownmiller argues, such a characterization of the rapist only makes the act seem to be only the result of mental illness, and not an extreme part of a continuum of an ideology of male sexual entitlement to female bodies: “the serious failure of the Freudians stemmed from their rigid unwillingness to make a moral judgment. The major psychoanalytic thrust was always to ‘understand’ what they preferred to call ‘deviant sexual behavior,’ but never to condemn.”²⁵ This unwillingness to condemn may serve practical purposes in a psychological setting aimed at rehabilitating convicted rapists, but should not, she argues, have any influence over how rape is viewed morally in society at large; alas, that was the prevailing cultural view of rape in America, she claims.

The second major draw of this work to feminists combating rape is an extension of the first: in eliminating the Freudian paradigm of rape, Brownmiller cleared the way for a successful politicization of the act of rape as part and parcel of a misogynistic ideology that treats women’s bodies as men’s property and sex as men’s right: to demonstrate, as summarizes another reviewer, that rape is not “the ‘natural’ response of highly sexed males to overwhelming temptation, but a form of repression, the violent part of a system of social control which inhibits women's mobility in society and their access to many of its resources.”²⁶ Brownmiller conceptualizes rape as a form of terrorism that keeps women subjugated under patriarchal power

²⁴ Janis Kelly, “Review: *Against Our Will*,” *Off Our Backs* 6.3 (May 1976), 17.

²⁵ Brownmiller, 177.

²⁶ Frances Heidensohn, “Review: *Against Our Will*,” *The British Journal of Criminology* 18.3 (July 1978): 308-09; 308. Interestingly, Heidensohn sees Brownmiller’s attack on the Freudian model as evidence of her American focus: “It is a token of her American focus that Brownmiller so determinedly attacks the neo-Freudian concept of the rapist as a lonely pathological inadequate suffering from a mother complex and castration fears.” *Ibid.*

structures out of fear: “From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious state of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear.”²⁷ Her polemic is evident here, but serves as a means to communicate her primary political thesis in as unequivocally as possible, and is further supported with copious research.

Interestingly, though, despite her vitriol for Freudian paradigms, Brownmiller does engage in some speculative psychology of her own, arguing that, in a patriarchal society in which the means of representation in the media are owned and controlled almost exclusively by men, and in which male fantasies are given representational space and seriousness almost exclusively, the sexual psychology of women begins to adopt male patterns of fantasy. One reviewer explains,

Large areas of current culture surrounding sexuality are conducive to rape mentality, even among women. For Ms. Brownmiller argues that the context of sexual fantasy is so male dominated that women almost *have* to adopt masochism as a means of imaginative expression. Everywhere in the media, a sado-masochistic image of sex relations is reinforced, and even given credence on the left as the macho-hero expresses his attitudes to the oppressor group in his attitudes to 'their' women (e.g. Eldridge Cleaver). In her view, even the respected female psychologists Helene Deutsch and Karen Horney have betrayed their sex by arguing for a neobiological basis for female masochism.²⁸

Although she may be overextending her logic some and ironically overlooking her own psychologism in interpreting women's sexual fantasies, for which the reviewer Janis Kelly takes her to task²⁹, one can see Brownmiller in places advancing arguments that share much in common with the pathopolitical mode of analysis that I am advancing here. This is especially the

²⁷ Brownmiller, 15.

²⁸ Carol Riddell, “Review: *Against Our Will*,” *Sociology* 11.2 (May 1977): 389-91; 390.

²⁹ Kelly says, “One contention I cannot entirely agree with is that rape fantasies are just another aspect of the masochism we are taught as women. It is a mistake to consider female sexuality without taking into account the extent to which we are taught not only to be passive but that our sexuality is bad and that we shouldn't want sex. One component of fantasized rape is that the woman involved can participate in a sexual act without taking responsibility for or being blamed for this ‘bad’ sexuality.” Kelly, 17.

case when she is discussing the manner in which women are trained to be rape victims by cultural forms and social expectations of femininity. For an example, consider the following:

Women are trained to be rape victims. Simply to learn the word ‘rape’ is to take instruction in the power relationship between males and females. To talk about rape, even with nervous laughter, is to acknowledge a woman’s special victim status. We hear the whispers when we are children: *girls get raped*. Not boys. The message becomes clear. Rape has something to do with our *sex*. Rape is something awful that happens to females: it is the dark at the top of the stairs, the undefinable abyss that is just around the corner, and unless we watch our step it might become our destiny.³⁰

Though the particular rhetoric and approach may seem crude to our ears some forty years after she wrote this, and the notion that men do not get raped outside of institutionalized settings is now outrageous, the attempt to link modes of feeling to a politics of representation and discourse is laudable, and part of the pathopolitics of feminism that I am arguing for here.

All the above is not to say that Brownmiller’s account is without its problems, either to our more theoretically developed eyes today or to those of her feminist allies, and the problem Kelly raises above is only the most minor. First, for all the work she does to cover a remarkable range of history, she does not make much of an attempt to perform a structural analysis of how or why power relations between men and women evolved the way they have; this effectively leaves her primary thesis about the politics of rape historically ungrounded, despite all her efforts to historicize rape in many different contexts.³¹ And that is an accusation that comes from a sympathetic feminist. Those unsympathetic to her cause, such as historian Edward Shorter, were even more hostile in their analysis of her historical shortcomings. He scathingly writes of two problems: “for one thing, Brownmiller has misunderstood the *nature of rape* in times past; for another, she has missed out on an apparent *decrease* in the incidence of rape over the past

³⁰ Brownmiller, 309.

³¹ Heidensohn, 309.

century which puts the recent increase in a somewhat different light.”³² Much of his analysis is rife with his own ideological projections—including presupposing that a lack of sexual relations among large populations of men will drive up incidents of rape, failing to consider that an apparent decrease in the incidence of rapes could be attributed to decreases in reporting, and even accusing the Women’s Movement of essentially driving men to rape to keep women in their place—but the point that her historical approach was not received well in all circles is worth making.

Another issue is her proposal for how feminists ought to begin dealing with combating rape: eliminating prostitution and pornography. To an extent, this is the precursor to arguments proposed by feminists in the 1980s, most especially Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, that the heterosexual sex act itself is part of the patriarchal oppression of women, which led to the uneasy alliance between feminists engaged in this mode of argumentation and the Religious Right to clamp down on prostitution and ban pornography outright.³³ As Kelly explains, “Both of these suggestions are questionable on economic and civil-libertarian grounds,” at the very least. Moreover, subsequent work by feminists has argued convincingly that prostitution, pornography, and feminism can function amenably side by side, and that any legalistic attempts to limit prostitution or pornography through state intervention might actually be more harmful; the correct approach may be to fully legalize and regulate these large, old industries.³⁴

But by far the largest issue with Brownmiller’s account of rape is the insidious presence of racism and classism throughout, largely the result of her unquestioning and decontextualizing

³² Edward Shorter, “On Writing the History of Rape,” *Signs* 3.2 (Winter 1977): 471-82; 472.

³³ For the logical connections between the Second-Wave Feminist approach to rape and that of radical feminists in the 1980s, see Sielke: 368-69.

³⁴ See in particular Drucilla Cornell, *At the Heart of Freedom: Feminism, Sex, and Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

approach to using statistics generated by state apparatuses of power, i.e. the police and FBI. This is particularly ironic, given her caveat, provided at the beginning of her heavily criminological section:

One must approach all statistics with caution if one is going to make generalizations, particularly statistics regarding violent crime. Statisticians of crime are routine fact gatherers, and the raw material they work with is usually mined from police-precinct arrest records or from records of convictions. Since there are many acts of rape, few arrests and fewer convictions, a huge gulf of unavailable information unfortunately exists.³⁵

Brownmiller here apparently loses sight of the fact that statistics about violent crimes committed by disenfranchised populations can perhaps be exaggerated, to say nothing about how “violent crime” comes to be defined in the first place. Her racism is especially clear when she excoriates communists and Leftists generally for what she sees as exculpating Black rapists in the name of racial justice:

By pitting white women against black men in their effort to alert the nation to the extra punishment wreaked on blacks for a case of interracial rape, leftists and liberals with a defense-lawyer mentality drove a wedge between two movements for human rights and today we are still struggling to overcome this historic legacy. Yet the similarities between the types of oppression suffered by blacks and women, and heaped upon black women, are more impressive than the antagonisms between us.³⁶

Note that this finger-wagging comes in the context of defending the attempt to try the Scottsboro Nine, despite the confessions of the alleged victims that their testimonies were lies. Despite her apparent attempt to acknowledge shared suffering at the hands of societal discrimination across differences, even this gesture is taken to an uncomfortable length in her analogy, “Rape is to women as lynching was to blacks: the ultimate physical threat by which all men keep all women in a state of psychological intimidation.”³⁷ Although the attempt at coalition politics here is to be

³⁵ Brownmiller, 174.

³⁶ Ibid., 254.

³⁷ Ibid.

admired for acknowledging the similar functions of two forms of prejudicial violence, the comparison provided is incongruous and simply offensive to the history of the Black Freedom Struggle.

It is in light of Brownmiller's implicit and explicit racism and general ignorance towards racial problematics that her most opprobrious critic forges her rebuttal. Alison Edwards pamphlet *Rape, Racism and the White Women's Movement* is among the earliest Black feminist accounts of the ways in which Second-Wave Feminism had effectively all along been a White Women's Movement that excluded Black women and abetted racism against African Americans.³⁸ As Edwards pithily explains, "[Brownmiller] is representative of a majority tendency in the white women's movement, a narrow view of women's consciousness which prevents the movement from developing programs making possible alliances with other oppressed groups."³⁹ Beyond Edwards's race-conscious approach to her critique, her analysis is also insightful on class, arguing that Brownmiller's perhaps largest oversight is her inability to connect women's oppression to their structurally marginalized role in the production process under capitalism, and that competition between oppressed groups is used to keep the owners of the means of production in power. Edwards proposes that "This competition is maintained by various kinds of inequalities imposed by the ruling class on different sectors of the population, or adapted by it from earlier social systems to serve current needs. Such is the case with the oppression of women."⁴⁰ By over-privileging gender oppression among all forms of oppression, Brownmiller shuts down the possibility of coalitional politics from the outset:

³⁸ Alison Edwards, *Rape, Racism and the White Women's Movement*, 2nd edition (Chicago: Sojourner Truth Organization, 1979). The first publication was in January 1976. See *ibid.*, 33.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

From Susan Brownmiller's analysis, that women's shared oppression by men outweighs all potential for alliances along other lines, the decisive alliance is among women. In this framework, Happy Rockefeller has more in common with a Black woman in an auto plant than has a male Black autoworker.⁴¹

The majority of Edwards' critique of Brownmiller takes to task Brownmiller's approach to criminological statistics and failure to contextualize them in broader sociological conditions among the Black urban poor.⁴² Aside from bitingly chronicling the racism, both explicit and implicit, in Brownmiller's methodology, verbiage, and argumentation, Edwards's account also provides the most succinct and powerful repudiation of Brownmiller's proposal to further crack down on prostitution and ban pornography:

They pose absolutely no challenge to the structure of our society. In fact, they bolster its framework: make more laws, put more criminals (Black people) in jail, beef up police forces and make them half women, give guns to women to shoot men, make our streets safe for women, and build more jails, even if they don't do a thing to stop crime. This is why the press loves Susan Brownmiller's book. And this is why any liberation movement, including the movement for women's liberation, should hate it. Law-and-order solutions won't liberate women. Law-and-order solutions will just create a police state in which nobody will be free.⁴³

Doubtless, there are nearly innumerable problems with Brownmiller's approach, many of which serve as testimony to the conditions giving rise to the tensions between Black feminists and the White Women's Movement.

However, Brownmiller's account is truly revolutionary in the history of feminism and deserves acknowledgement on several fronts, hedged though that acknowledgement may be. She is among the first feminists to take criminology to task for the creation and popularization of the concept of victim precipitation, which has been used successfully by defense attorneys in countless rape cases to get their clients off the hook by essentially arguing the victim was

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² See *ibid.*, 2-22, for a full critique much broader than I can summarize here.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

“asking for it.” As previously mentioned, regardless of the flaws in her methodology, she is the first to even begin to attempt to provide a history of rape—a truly monumental undertaking if ever there was one. And she can even be seen as one of the first scholars to come up with a definition of the ideology of rape that resembles contemporary models of “rape culture.”⁴⁴ It is for these reasons, along with the fact that the book essentially became the Second-Wave Feminist handbook on rape, that I feel mostly comfortable, if a bit skeptical, using it in the following as a sort of template for how feminists of the 1970s approached the issue of rape in the relatively young Women’s Movement.

* * * * *

The ways in which rape has been defined and (mis)understood throughout recorded history are rife with a mythos centered on denying the inherently violent nature of rape through overdetermined concepts of femininity and masculinity and the “proper” nature of (hetero)sexual relations. The origin of the word “rape” itself is evidence of such: it comes from the Latin “*rapere*,” meaning to steal or to carry away. It is in property law that the first legal definition of rape originated, in the Code of Hammurabi, one of the oldest surviving written legal codes from circa 1750 BCE. In it, rape is defined as a property offense against a man, the “property” of course being “his” woman, whether wife, sister, or child. The punishment for rape is equally draconian: drowning for the convicted rapist and, if the victim is married, her as well. Rape appears in equally distorted and indirect terms in the Ten Commandments only in the forms of “thou shalt not steal” and “thou shalt not commit adultery.” And in the US, it wasn’t until the mid-1990s that rape, *de jure*, was no longer defined as “forcible,” a qualification found for

⁴⁴ “However, the ideology of rape is aided by more than a system of lenient laws that serve to protect offenders and is abetted by more than the fiat of total male control over the lawful use of power [i.e., police, military, jurisprudence, etc.]. The ideology of rape is fueled by cultural values that are perpetuated at every level of our society, and nothing less than a frontal attack is needed to repel this cultural assault.” Brownmiller, 389.

practically no other offense. Even after the change in legal definitions, rape was still de facto understood in such terms, as lack of evident, forceful resistance on the plaintiff's part was often enough to get the defendant off the hook, utterly overlooking the fact that forcefully resisting rape could potentially mean risking death or serious injury.

The mythologies surrounding rape are almost too many to list. Attendant to the aforementioned prejudice, a common assumption is that women often "let" themselves be raped by not resisting appropriately, or by going into situations that others may consider seedy. Relatedly, the victim's sexual history has historically played a significant factor in deciding the defendant's guilt or innocence, a patent absurdity that reveals its unique hypocrisy with a simple substitution: would we blame a victim of burglary if they didn't lock their doors? Is the murderer to be acquitted if it is discovered that the murder victim had previously engaged in high-risk behavior such as rock climbing or drug abuse? The concept of "asking for it" found significant, albeit dubious, sociological substantiation in the 1960s and '70s from the pens of criminologists. As noted in Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*, criminology was dominated by Freudians up until the 1960s, when a more statistical-sociological approach took the reins.⁴⁵ One of the brainchildren of this ascendant methodology was the notion of "victim precipitation."

Brownmiller explains:

Victim precipitation is a new concept in criminology. It does not hold a victim responsible, but it seeks to define contributory behavior. Victim precipitation says, in effect, an unlawful act has been committed but had the victim behaved in a different fashion the crime in question *might have been avoided*. Part *a priori* guesswork and part armchair-detective fun and games, the study of victim precipitation is the least exact of the sociological methods, for it rests in the final analysis on a set of arbitrary standards.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ See Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 177-79.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 353.

Needless to say, these “arbitrary standards” are even more culturally loaded in cases of rape than other violent crimes.⁴⁷

Further, the frequent allegation that false accusation is truly rampant often detracts, directly or not, from a plaintiff’s case, and may even prevent the victim from reporting a rape at all. This assumption is neither new nor uncommon, and is held by civilians and law-enforcers alike, the latter with unambiguously deleterious effects. “Lord Chief Justice Matthew Hale, the famous seventeenth-century English jurist, assured himself of immortality when he wrote the words [known as Hale’s saw], ‘Rape is an accusation easily to be made and hard to be proved, and harder to be defended by the party accused, tho never so innocent.’”⁴⁸ The outrageous claim that a rape accusation is easily made flies in the face of reason and colossal circumstantial evidence when one considers the overabundant challenges—social, psychological, and legal—that a plaintiff in such a case faces. This is no irrelevantly cherry-picked quote, either: Hale’s saw has had lasting influence on Anglo-American jurisprudence. In fact, Hale’s saw was included in California jury instructions for cases of rape *as recently as 1973*.⁴⁹

In few other scenarios is victim testimony so frequently seen as inadequate for an indictment to lead to official charges, putting an unrealistic burden of proof on the victim’s shoulders. “[A]ccording to the FBI itself, forcible rape is ‘one of the most under-reported crimes due primarily to fear and/or embarrassment on the part of the victim,’ and one in five rapes, or possibly one in twenty, may actually be reported, which skews all recordable statistics.”⁵⁰ The

⁴⁷ As Brownmiller explains, “While most rational people might be able to agree on what constitutes rash, reckless behavior leading to a homicide, in rape the parameters are indistinct and movable.” *Ibid.*, 354.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 369.

⁴⁹ “[Camille E.] LeGrand pointed out that irrelevant as Hale’s old saw might be to the twentieth-century American experience, it was included as late as 1973 in California’s standard set of jury instructions for rape cases, where it was followed by the admonition, ‘Therefore the law requires that you examine the testimony of the female person named in the information with caution.’” *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

FBI's official publication on violent crimes, the *Uniform Crime Reports*, for 1973 states that 15% of rape claims were considered unfounded by the police, which leaves a total of some 51,000 "founded" rape cases. Only 51% of the offenders were actually apprehended by law enforcement; of those apprehended, 76% were prosecuted; and of *them*, a staggering 47% either had their cases dismissed or were acquitted.⁵¹ (These official statistics overlook cases of rape-murder, since in 1973 the vast majority of police departments in the US treated such cases simply as murders.⁵²) Given the statistical likelihood that bringing an official case of a rape charge to court would result in no convictions, not to mention the psychological and social ordeals rape victims face when recounting their rapes to authorities, families, and friends alike, it is wholly, if horribly, unsurprising that merely one in five rape cases was reported in 1973—and this is by all official accounts a generous estimate. Alarming, it was not until 1974 that New York, Connecticut, and, incidentally, Iowa dropped legal requirements of witness corroboration for juridical prosecution of rape.⁵³

Then there are the overwrought tactics of delegitimization that manifest in such forms as claiming that acquaintance or date rape is not "real" rape, or that a wife cannot be raped by her husband—the former finding frightening reality in the fact that marital rape was not formally criminalized in all fifty of the United States of America until 1993. To return to a dubiously authoritative figure in the history of rape jurisprudence,

Sir Matthew Hale explained to his peers in the seventeenth century, 'A husband cannot be guilty of rape upon his wife for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind to her husband, which she cannot retract.' In other words, marriage implies consent to sexual intercourse at all times, and a husband has a lawful right to copulate with his wife against her will and by force according to the terms of their contract.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 197.

⁵³ Ibid., 372.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 380.

That sexual consent can be withdrawn at any point, even after having been previously given, was and is a point that both the law and culture generally have difficulty grasping.

Even more disturbing, there is the insidious assumption that women may secretly want to be raped, or even enjoy it, as can be seen in the discourse surrounding the extremely delicate and complicated issue of orgasm or sexual excitement during rape or the incidence of sexual fantasies involving rape. During the late 1960s and early '70s, when rape was finally becoming a topic of American public discussion, feminists essentially deemed it *verboten* to bring up the possibility of women's sexual fantasies actively involving rape actually being part of a healthy, active sexual imagination; even more taboo was to consider the issue of sexual excitement during an actual rape. This was an understandable position to take rhetorically at the time, of course, given the novelty of the topic as a political issue. But many radical feminists may have gone too far in their discourse on these matters, as is evident in Brownmiller's assertion:

The rape fantasy exists in women as a man-made iceberg. It can be destroyed—by feminism.... [O]ur female sexual fantasies have been handed to us on a brass platter by those very same men who have labored so lovingly to promote their own fantasies.... I am vehemently hostile to suggestions that some known, popular sex fantasies attributed to women are indeed the product of a woman's mind, or the product of a healthy woman's mind.... For this reason, I believe, most women who reject the masochistic fantasy role reject the temptation of all sexual fantasies, to our sexual loss.⁵⁵

Brownmiller attributes any sexual fantasies in women involving submission to a "feminine masochism" that is propagated by patriarchal sexual values that ultimately serve to underpin common (heterosexual) male desires. While such a line in the sand was a necessary safeguard for

⁵⁵ Ibid., 322, 323-24.

Second-Wave Feminism in America to propound a successful political agenda, fortunately feminist discourse has become much more nuanced regarding these issues in recent years.⁵⁶ And finally there's that classic gem: "no" doesn't always (generally? ever?) mean *no*.⁵⁷ The patent absurdity of such a claim needs no unpacking.

It certainly took the refined world of (Western) high art quite some time to face the violence that lies at the heart of rape directly, or even obliquely. Classical history and legends featuring rape were frequent subjects for the European Masters and allowed the artists to expose female flesh in a "tasteful" fashion. One such subject is within the context of the founding myth of the Roman Kingdom, the Rape of the Sabine Women. The story is familiar to most any art historian: the first generation of men in the recently founded kingdom of Rome in the eighth century BCE were sorely lacking in companions of the fairer sex. Needing to propagate their progeny, the men at first tried to "negotiate" with their Sabine neighbors to procure some wives for the sake of the kingdom. The Sabines feared the emergence of a powerful enemy and refused; the Romans, in an act characteristically treacherous Roman deception, backtracked on their promises of peace and raided the Sabines at the festival of Neptune Equester, to which the Romans invited the Sabines, fighting the men and stealing away the women.

Although the most famous rendition of this episode in Classical history/mythology is likely Jacques-Louis David's 1799 *L'intervention des Sabines* (*The Intervention of the Sabine Women*), it has arguably been analyzed to death, so I will turn to the Flemish master Peter Paul Rubens's ca. 1635/40 *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. In accord with his namesake Rubenesque

⁵⁶ See, for a contemporary example, Emma Green, "Consent Isn't Enough: The Troubling Sex of *Fifty Shades*," *The Atlantic*, 10 February 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/consent-isnt-enough-in-fifty-shades-of-grey/385267/>.

⁵⁷ In addition to Brownmiller's opus, the previous six paragraphs draw heavily on Susan Caringella-MacDonald, "The Mythology of Rape: Excusing the Inexcusable," in *The Ohio State University Gallery of Fine Art Presents RAPE: Dedicated to the Memory of Ana Mendieta, Whose Unexpected Death on September 8, 1985, Underscores the Violence in Our Society* (Columbus: OSU, 1985), 95-99.

style, the scene is pervaded with a smoky, dreamlike ambience, and sensuous colors loosely defined with fanciful line, with ample, rosy female flesh on display. The painting is unquestionably masterfully executed, featuring such poetic passages as the subtle contrast, found in the immediate foreground, of soft, pale yet rosy flesh playing off silky, royal blue fabric and white lace next to glinting brazen armor equally complemented by rough, deep-crimson drapery. The Roman soldier's tanned, leathery hide and gnarled hands also play off the woman's voluptuous, soft, pinkish-white skin. And in typical Baroque compositional flourish, the soldier's hard left-downward glare, ending in the insistent tight grip of his hand on slipping garments, falls on a perfect diagonal with her pleading, right-heavenward gaze, itself extending past her clasped hands, in a canonical gesture of supplication.

For all its expertise, however, the whimsy of the scene quickly loses its charm when one scrutinizes its affective tenor. The aforementioned woman is one of the only women in the scene to show any hint of distress at her plight—after all, perhaps she's someone's wife! (Lest we forget, rape, as a crime, is commonly and legally understood to be an issue of property at this time in history.) The younger women seem less like panic-stricken damsels than coquettish flirts, given their teasing smiles and coyly stolen glances at their attackers. One young maiden in pink, in the center of the pyramidal mound of flesh and dress in the left middleground, directly across from the imperious King Romulus himself, even gazes longingly at the viewer in a teasing direct-address quite common in scenes of this sort from the Renaissance and Post-Renaissance—a device obviously intended to further titillate the presumably (straight) male viewer. From its mythic origin, the Rape of the Sabine Women has served as fanciful tantalization for male artists and poets who in turn dismiss the disgusting misery such a story would bring upon its female characters. “And so it was the poet Ovid, the Roman celebrant of love, who wrote of the rape of

the Sabine women, ‘Grant me such wage and I’ll enlist today,’ setting a flippant attitude toward rape in war that has persisted for two thousand years.’⁵⁸ Whether artists or warriors, the forceful seizure of women in the “heroic,” manly context of war has captivated untold legions of male cultural figures for millennia.

Other classicized examples of thinly-veiled excuses to depict sexually tense scenes and lasciviously exposed female skin abound. In another Rubens piece, his ca. 1600 *Leda and the Swan*, depicts the ever-lustful and casually adulterous Zeus partaking in his favorite pastime: “seducing” (read: raping) young women in absolutely outlandish physical guises, here in the kinkily bestial form of a waterfowl. The scene appears to be one of an orgy more than that of sick sexual deception, with Zeus’s sinuous bird-neck—nestled perfectly between her pert, young, exposed breasts—rhyming with the charming feminine contours of Leda’s swooning figure, legs wrapped around her “seducer.” The curious couple is flanked by putti on the left and more passages of naked female flesh to the right, under the approving smile of a “matronly” woman—here meaning older than fifteen—in garb evincing the idiom of the Virgin Mary, thus lending a subtle sense of heavenly approval to the scene of (*at best*) perverse debauchery.

That conniving, constantly concupiscent Zeus gets up to more shenanigans in a story perhaps more widely known and depicted: the Rape of Europa. Again he appears in the semblance of an animal, here a bull, to “seduce” another young lady. Giuseppe Cesari’s ca. 1603-06 *Rape of Europa* is as typical as any. Zeus’s phallic manliness is underscored in this painting not by a long neck as in *Leda*, but rather by heaps of bulging muscle in the figure of the impressively rendered bull. As he absconds to the sea with his latest “mistress” on his back, prepared to found the Cretan society according to the mythic account, the bull gives what could

⁵⁸ Brownmiller, 289.

be described as a nod and a wink to the viewer, his left eye, surrounded by horn and coat rendered in equally fluid form, staring directly through the picture plane to the viewer. The women in the scene seem not to be party to a forceful abduction, as the story so goes, but rather look like the bride and bridesmaids at the end of a wedding, with doe eyes silently communicating only bittersweet farewells, not desperate resistance. Some women on the shore even wave goodbye or wipe a sentimental tear from their eyes. The “bride” herself, reclined and twisting on Zeus’s bovine backside—unsurprisingly bare-breasted, bosom bracketed in blue and white—is beautifully framed with an arch of golden, billowing drapery, looking graceful and majestic in her virginal splendor, seemingly oblivious to the fact that she’s being kidnapped, over the sea and by a cattle-form god no less.

Or we could look at the warped noblesse of Lucretia, who, upon her rape and “confession,” commits suicide to preserve her honor.⁵⁹ Who better than Titian to preserve the honor of the fairer sex while exposing as much of their “sex” as possible? His ca. 1570-76 *Rape of Lucretia by Tarquin*’s tight, centered composition and subtly placed voyeur in the shadows of the upper-right corner—perhaps her father, perhaps one of the slaves who slept outside her sleeping chamber—function to give the viewer a sense of vicarious excitement and heighten the “erotic” tension. The threat of violence that defines the story—not coincidentally, like the Sabines, legendarily associated with a major transition in Roman history, here being the soon-to-follow overthrow of the Tarquin tyrants—is literally brushed to the side, the dagger brandished by the terrible Tarquin hidden in the shadows to the right, with the faintest glint of light off the pommel betraying its clandestine presence. More prominent is the arm holding the dagger, whose virile “potency” is underscored by cheekily phallic, throbbing veins. The naked Lucretia

⁵⁹ See *ibid.*, 328, for a brief discussion of Lucretia.

seems more flustered than fearful, giving the rapist a skeptical, blushing gander as he thrusts his left knee—suggestively covered with fur—into her groin.

Examples such as these truly fill the annals of art history, while women artists wouldn't begin to appear in survey textbooks until the groundbreaking work of Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris had blazed a clear trail in the '70s, with Griselda Pollock contributing heavily to the cause beginning in the early '80s⁶⁰; this is not to mention the absence of any art by women depicting rape as a depraved brutality, or for that matter the scarcity of any art by women. It would be insincere of me, however, to pretend that *every* treatment of themes of rape in the history of art prior to the rise of historical feminism was as obtuse and callous regarding the violence of rape as the abovementioned Masters. One of the earliest works by a male artist on such a theme that gives some indication of the violence and terror of rape is Nicolas Poussin's *Abduction of the Sabine Women* of 1634-35. Unlike Rubens's treatment, Poussin's doesn't seem simply like an excuse to expose female flesh. Indeed, very little flesh is to be seen, and what is seen is accompanied not by dubiously flirtatious visages, but faces of fear, pain, resistance, or at least distress. The centermost figure in the foreground demands our attention in her affectively fascinating, crumpled pose of sheer woe and expression of absolute, overwhelming grief. At the old woman's knees is an infant on all fours, wailing in terror and confusion at the explosive violence. On the old woman's other side is another infant, fallen onto her back, threatened to be crushed by the rushing mass of bodies above her to her right. What is perhaps more surprising—

⁶⁰ The first major feminist article published by a feminist art historian is generally considered to be Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," *ARTnews* (January 1971): 22-39, 67-71. She was also one of the two curators, along with Ann Sutherland Harris, of the first international exhibition dedicated to women artists, *Women Artists: 1550 to 1950*, which opened 21 December 1976. Griselda Pollock is one of the leading feminist art historians today, and some of her most significant early works include *Mary Cassatt* (London: Jupiter Books, 1980); Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988); and *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement, 1970-85*, edited and introduced by Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker (London: Pandora, 1987).

Poussin is known for being somewhat ahead of his time in his persistent gestures toward historical realism, in the final analysis—is that the Romans aren't depicted as heroes, or at least as sympathetic figures. In fact, they appear as they should: lecherous, debauched, perhaps even drunken with wine and wrathful lust. The dignified attitude of Romulus, seen at the left above the crowd, is entirely belied by the chaos at his feet, which he after all ordered. A noble start to the preeminent Classical city-state, this is not.

As the above example begin to document, the issue of rape has been covered overwhelmingly in Western art history only in historical and mythological scenarios, and even there, it was overwhelmingly rare for artists to depict these scenes with any manner of sympathy for the women victims. If anything, the rape scenario was merely treated as an excuse to titillate the viewer with exposed female flesh, and the women were almost always depicted teasingly rather than distressingly. Even in the more compassionate renditions, such as Poussin's, it is arguable that this affective approach was more to maintain historical veracity as best as possible, not to elicit sympathy for women victims of rape. It would not be until the 1970s when feminist artists began creating art centered on the issue of rape that the emotional trauma and emotional and physical violence of the act would become central to the representational vocabulary of artmakers.

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Rape may be one of the most powerful, effective, and depressingly common tools of pathopolitical control throughout history. As Brownmiller was quoted arguing above, "From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious state of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of

fear.”⁶¹ The affective impact of rape extends far beyond the act itself, in both time and space: not just for the victim of rape, but for all others who feel kinship with her.⁶² The fear of rape, its potentiality, can impact decisions as relatively trivial as what one wears to as consequential as what occupation one pursues or where one lives or goes out for the night; and it has considerable significance in deciding with whom one chooses to spend time and share personal space, under what conditions, and when. Rape’s power extends from the individual level all the way to the trans-societal. Few tactics of control and domination have found such extensive “application,” from wartime terrorism to weapon of personal retaliation to force of humiliation to domestic/partner abuse to enforcement of sexual privilege, and everything in between. And fewer still have had such extensively, intensively elaborated discursive strategies of apologetics, minimization, and dismissal. As can be seen simply in the art objects mentioned above, a gargantuan cultural apparatus has been put in place to curtail the stigmatization and excoriation of rape and maximize its acceptance, either in direct embrace or indirect complaisance or apathy.

Naturalization, acceptance, apathy, indifference, derision, rejection out of hand—these are among the myriad strategies of pathopolitical control, the politics of rendering politicized affect (in other words, emotive [pre]disposition towards codes of social, civil, and interpersonal conduct) into internalized, more or less unquestioned mores. One of the primary lessons of cultural studies, as I’ve come to understand it—from Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams to Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau to more recent scholars such as Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant—is that how we come to understand and represent personal and collective experience is

⁶¹ Brownmiller, 15.

⁶² My choice of gender here is deliberate, but not in ignorance of the facts: though rape can and does happen to men at an alarming rate, it is practically beyond question that, statistically, men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators and women are generally the victims. Cases of women date-raping men are certainly not unprecedented; they are just not as common as the reverse. My loaded choice of verbiage is not to dismiss the suffering of male victims of rape, who may face even more humiliation than women victims and thus more hesitation in reporting rape. Rather, my gender choice is one paying respect to the reality of the history of the crime.

never merely given: to wit, how we feel about what we undergo needs a structure into which it can be fitted in order for sense to be made of it, let alone for it to gain social sanction, a structure which is no more natural than our idioms of dress or rituals of cleanliness. Food, hygiene, shelter, garb, and so forth, are all indeed unavoidable necessities to daily life, as are feelings and social interaction. The forms and styles these take, though, are not simply a given, but always already overdetermined by forces at once social-historical and personally expressive.

Brownmiller was onto something when she discussed the pervasive affective violence of rape in culture in this general line of reasoning, if not in these exact terms. In a poetic yet petrifying passage, Brownmiller compares rapists to Achilles's mythic Myrmidons: utterly merciless soldiers of war and legendary terrorists, who as ants-turned-human followed his orders blindly and without hesitation, they struck terror into the hearts of his enemies and gained such legendary repute that the mere mention of their approaching legions could immediately turn the tables in a battle:

Police-blotter rapists [that is: statistically average rapists] in a very real sense perform a myrmidon function for all men in our society. Cloaked in myths that obscure their identity, they, too, function as anonymous agents of terror. Although they are the ones who do the dirty work, the actual *attendant*, to other men, their superiors in class and station, the lasting benefits of their simple-minded evil have always accrued.... Rather than society's aberrants or "spoilers of purity," men who commit rape have served in effect as front-line masculine shock troops, terrorist guerrillas in the longest sustained battle the world has ever known.⁶³

The pathopolitics of rape is essentially written into gender norms in the United States. This extends beyond the "femininity" of women victims of rape to the feminization of male rape

⁶³ Ibid., 209. Brownmiller had this to say on the average rapist: "To those who know them [i.e., police-blotter rapists], no magic, no mystery, no Robin Hood bravura, infuses their style. Rape is a dull, blunt, ugly act committed by punk kids, their cousins and older brothers, not by charming, witty, unscrupulous, heroic, sensual rakes, or by timid souls deprived of a 'normal' sexual outlet, or by *super-menschen* possessed of uncontrollable lust. And yet, on the shoulders of these unthinking, predictable, insensitive, violence-prone young men there rests an age-old burden that amounts to an historic mission: the perpetuation of male domination over women by force." Ibid., 208-09.

victims, especially within the penal system.⁶⁴ For this reason, legal reforms will never be sufficient measure against rape, as radical feminists realized in breaking with liberal feminism's touting the significance of the law. Brownmiller again:

I am of the opinion that the most perfect rape laws in the land, strictly enforced by the best concerned citizens, will not be enough to stop rape. Obvious offenders will be punished, and that in itself will be a significant change, but the huge gray area of sexual exploitation, of women who are psychologically coerced into acts of intercourse they do not desire because they do not have the wherewithal to physically, or even psychologically, resist, will remain a problem beyond any possible solution of criminal justice. It would be deceitful to claim that the murky gray area of male sexual aggression and female passivity and submission can ever be made amenable to legal divination—nor should it be, in the final analysis.⁶⁵

A full-out cultural onslaught is needed, when all things are told.

Pathopolitics is the affective vehicle through which the never-already-given comes to appear as though, and be treated as if, it always is always given. And the pathopolitics of rape is one of the more extensive instances of such. Pathopolitics, of course, is performative, in Judith Butler's sense: its reality and power as a form of social control comes only through its repetition and routinization. As such, pathopolitics, including that of rape, is not simply or singly a monolithic force of social control: there is always the possibility of contesting received "wisdom," of resisting the conventional politics of personal life.

Early Signs of Resistance

"The real reason for the law's everlasting confusion as to what constitutes an act of rape and what constitutes an act of mutual intercourse is the underlying cultural assumption that it is the natural masculine role to proceed aggressively toward the stated goal, while the natural feminine role is to 'resist' or 'submit.' And so to protect male interests, the law seeks to gauge the victim's behavior during the offending act in the belief that force or the threat of force is not conclusive in and of itself."

-Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*⁶⁶

⁶⁴ See *ibid.*, 257-68, for a historically relevant discussion of this phenomenon in the penal system.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 400-01.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 385.

Poussin deserves credit for representing rape in a somewhat more realistic light than his artist peers. Ultimately, though, the sense one gets of the milieu presented in his *Abduction of the Sabine Women* is not that it shows a scene of rape, in the sense of intimate sexual violence as we conventionally understand it today, but rather that of a mass kidnapping—which in many senses the Rape of the Sabine Women was, owing in part to the etymological root of the word rape. But the *sexual* violence of the violent scene is at least obscured, if not entirely lost, in the panicked and frenetic commotion. It is hard to deny that the true trauma of rape has been notably invisible in the history of art. Reasons abound as to why this is so, not least of which is the abovementioned pathopolitics of rape. Further, Stephanie Blackwood, in reference to feminist works grappling with the existential reality of rape, explains: “The reason [for this invisibility] may have been that this art—this art about abuse, crime, control—attacks too forcefully our consciences. It doesn’t allow us to rest. It exhausts our ability to excuse violation of a person, a country, a culture.”⁶⁷ It is practically impossible to deny that viewing such work—hearing the tortured and tortuous stories of women who’ve faced rape and survived—leaves one feeling emotionally drained, affectively assaulted, even if the work (or testimony) in question comes in the most formally delicate and stylistically beautiful composition.

There are a few examples that precede the dawn of Second-Wave Feminism that approach sexual violence/violation without losing sight of its perversely sexualized nature. Perhaps the first in known history was executed by one of the heroines of feminist art history, Artemisia Gentileschi, namely her *Susanna and the Elders* of 1610. Not only is this painting one of the only instances in which the biblical story—in which a young woman is sexually hounded by respected elders of her community while she is bathing—is presented as a scene of trauma

⁶⁷ Stephanie K. Blackwood, “Curator’s Notes,” in *RAPE*, 3.

rather than titillation; this painting, the first of her budding career as an artist, also predates her rape at the hands of her perspective teacher, Agostino Tassi, thus debunking claims that this was merely an overwrought emotional response to a traumatizing event on her behalf.

Leaving aside that incident and the debacle of her trial afterward, the painting is truly a tour de force in directly addressing sexual violence—losing neither the “sexual” aspect nor its “violence.” The two men are unflinchingly depicted as what they are: partners in sexual crime, conniving to get the young woman to give herself up sexually to them lest they frame her as a harlot to the community. The older bearded man is seen shushing Susanna, enjoining her to compliance with their devious wishes, while his comrade whispers in his ear, exchanging strategies of criminal coercion. One can practically feel their lechery and disgusting moral turpitude drip from the canvas. Indeed, Gentileschi uses an ingenious device to make the scene feel even more cramped and creepy: joining a tight, full composition with the stone wall stretching across the canvas, over which the men stoop, lends a feeling of claustrophobia and inescapable confinement to the scene, imparting to the viewer a taste of the panic and distress the young Susanna here feels. And her distress is clearly communicated: her hands are up in self-defense, her face turned clear and away from the menaces. Her face is contorted in a clear display of anguish and disgust. Gentileschi also takes the opportunity to show off her Caravaggiesque sophistication both in the restrained but unmistakable use of chiaroscuro in the shadows of the faces, and in the stark and unsettling contrast between her soft, pale skin, the bright blue sky, the sullen gray stone, and the deep shadows the artist employs. With a scanning glance, one might even fail to register that the young woman is even naked, so tasteful is the use of realistic, decidedly unarousing nudity and so unambiguous is the pervasive, threatening mood of the scene.

Though several of Gentileschi's works would be pertinent here, I will skip ahead, as ample ink has been spilled on her work since Nochlin and Pollock have reclaimed her from history's oblivion. Instead, I will turn now to one of the earliest works on rape in the twentieth century that approaches the subject as a violent trauma, a work that the late Arlene Raven claims is the only work that does so directly and explicitly before the 1960s, despite being executed over fifty years prior to that decade.⁶⁸ Käthe Kollwitz's *Vergewaltigt (Raped)* is a surreal, haunting etching executed in 1907. Unlike most painting, sculpture, or performance, etching's generally small scale lends a sense of intimacy and reflection to all works executed in the medium. The medium's intimacy in this scene is nothing if not disturbing. What one must assume is a woman, based on her skirt (dress?) and long hair, lays supine and apparently motionless, pushing up against the picture plane and occupying roughly a third of the picture space. The suspicion that she may be dead is given some metaphorical support by the withering, crinkled vines in the background directly above her body. Her face is mostly occluded due to the worm's-eye perspective Kollwitz employs, but we can see her head is tilted unnaturally far back and her facial features are obscured by shadow. The style is fluid and sketchy, her outline quickly and loosely articulated. Her bare left leg juts out at the viewer and is highly foreshortened, heightening the dizzying sense of unease. It is difficult to tell where her arms are, as the foliage threatens to overcome and envelope the prostrate woman. To be sure, the foliage seems to be given more detail than the woman. Its beautiful naturalism is belied both by the grim, unmoving body, and by the fact that the vegetation comes from all seasons, making this even further an unreal, surreal scene.⁶⁹ Such a tactic has been employed by Dutch Baroque artists, such as Ambrosius Bosschaert (the Elder), in *Bouquet in an Arched Window*, c. 1620, to

⁶⁸ See Arlene Raven, "We Did Not Move From Theory, We Moved to the Sores of Wounds," in *RAPE*, 10.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

instill a sense of whimsical fantasy to a scene of incredible naturalistic detail. Here, however, one senses a different purpose altogether. The presence of foliage transcending seasons above a prostrate, possibly dead but certainly “vergewaltigt” everywoman must have not merely an aesthetic but a political purpose: to depict rape as a horrifically universal, practically timeless act of violence. The intimacy of the etching medium combined with the unarticulated woman and trans-seasonal vegetation combine in a pointed form of disturbing direct address to the viewer: this could be anyone—this could be you.

Taking Back the Night, One Artwork at a Time

That it took humankind until the rise of Second-Wave Feminism to discuss the traumatic crime of rape publicly, as an act of sexual violence against women rather than property offense against men, is one of the darker blights on modern history. By the late 1960s, feminism had begun to spread in America as a legitimate social and political movement, and consciousness-raising groups were one of the first forums where this issue was tackled head-on. Women who had felt isolated in their experiences of sexual violence, anxiety, unease, and so forth finally had a venue through which to find common ground on what were once assumed to be wholly personal problems. Unlike reporting acts of sexual violence to the police, women weren't met with skepticism and suspicion, perhaps even scorn or disgust, but rather compassion and acceptance. This was in itself an incredible political victory, further underscoring that credo of Second-Wave Feminism: the personal is, indeed, political.

The changing tenor of the conversation surrounding rape as a political crime, no longer a hush-hush topic best left behind closed doors, is evident in the international media coverage of the nine-month Pakistan-Bangladesh war of 1971. It is estimated that between 200,000 and

400,000 Bangladeshi women were raped in the span of the war.⁷⁰ Those who have studied the history of war know that rape has long been an unofficial tactic of demoralization and conquest, and that this tactic continues to wars in the present day.⁷¹ This, however, was the most knowingly devastating and rampant case of rape-as-terrorism in recorded history. The incomprehensible suffering this caused—exacerbated by the backward response of many men, who disowned their raped wives in keeping with a dreadful religio-cultural custom and left them economically stranded—at least had one positive outcome: this was the first war in which systematic rape received “serious international attention” and became a subject of moral outrage and concerted efforts to rehabilitate survivors to society.⁷²

No number of consciousness-raising groups alone, even combined with more sympathetic media attention, would combat and drive back the social disease, although the morale they built and empowered was an indispensable part of the public fight. Though certainly not the lone heroines fighting the public image of sexual violence and its belittlement and minimization, feminist artists of the Second Wave were an integral part of making public what had remained private for far too long, articulating the violence in dramatic form to battle the apathy and rejection facing an issue that affected millions.

The coasts of the US were the epicenters of the feminist art movement seeing the birth of key institutions that built a formal network for a growing consciousness. On the West Coast were the Feminist Art Programs (FAP) at Fresno State and CalArts—the former founded by Judy Chicago in 1970, and moved to CalArts in 1971 with the assistance of Miriam Schapiro. FAP itself birthed another significant institution of the West Coast, namely the Woman’s Building, in

⁷⁰ See Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 78-86 for a discussion of the war in Bangladesh and the attendant mass rape of Bangladeshi women.

⁷¹ For a fuller discussion of rape in the context of war, see *Ibid.*, “War,” 31-113.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 86.

1973. On the East Coast was the A.I.R. (Artists in Residence) Collective, founded in New York in 1972—later becoming one of the most important stepping stones in Mendieta’s professional art career. The importance of these institutions to establishing common ground for the feminist art movement and providing integral education, networking, and exhibition opportunities to aspiring and established feminist artists is impossible to overestimate.⁷³

It is under the auspices of these programs that many feminist artists began to publicly deal in their work with the issue of sexual violence. Perhaps the first work on rape to be produced in the US during the feminist art movement is Suzanne Lacy’s 1972 artist’s book *Rape Is*. The book greets the viewer with an interactive requirement in order for her to read it: faced with two leaves folded toward the center and sealed with a red seal reading “RAPE,” the viewer must first break the seal in order to open the book at all. This symbolic violence echoes the sense of irreversible trauma that often haunts a rape victim, as well as mirroring the discourse that publicly circulates around rape in such vile slang phrases as “damaged goods” (itself calling to mind rape’s historical treatment as a property crime). Upon breaking the seal, the book opens to reveal on the left the boldface, capitalized words “RAPE IS,” and on the right a definition of the word/experience rape. Each successive page proceeds thusly, adding a sense of multiplicity to something so often reductively dismissed in so-called “civil” discourse as an act easy to understand and control, unworthy of extensive public efforts to be quelled. Many of the definitions of rape echo some of the discourse that feminists—mostly, but not exclusively, non-academics—use to describe what has come to be called “rape culture.” Rape culture can be defined as the social normalization of rape, even its acceptance as an inevitability, dependent on

⁷³ For an extensive history of these and other key feminist organizations and institutions, see Marry Gerrard, “Feminist Politics: Networks and Organizations,” in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary Gerrard (New York: Henry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 88-101.

common societal definitions and understanding of gender, violence, and sex. In short, it is the attitudes that are commonly held within a society that in one way or another abets rape and sexual violence. In Lacy's book, for example, one page reads: "RAPE IS [...] when a stranger in the street uses you for his fantasy and leaves you feeling naked." While not in any way "rape" *strictly defined*, the attitudes upon which this scenario depends are among those that enable and reproduce "rape culture": male (hetero)sexual entitlement allowing one to stare publicly at a woman's body in a salacious manner; the public acceptance of such a fact; and the affective reality that a woman faces in that situation—a sense of violation and helplessness, as Lacy's book has it here. Today, catcalling has been attracting increasing and persistent public attention as an act that sustains rape culture; further efforts are being made to confront the act, as well as the sense of entitlement and the (feigned or genuine) obliviousness to others' feelings that sustain it, which marks a significant advance made possible by thoroughgoing feminists of the Second Wave and their efforts to confront these sociocultural concerns publicly and unabashedly.

Collaboration has played a key role in feminist art, particularly in its early, heady days of experimentation, questioning, communal catharsis, and resistance. The earliest collaborative work on rape brings together elements of cathartic ceremony, candid testimony, and self-cleansing in a ritualistic performance. Work began on *Ablutions*, by Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Sandra Orgel, and Aviva Rahmani, in 1971—particularly the gathering of recorded testimony from women who had faced sexual assault and/or rape. One of these testimonials was provided by none other than Arlene Raven herself. In a gruesome and overwhelming twist of fate, the scholar was raped just one week prior to her visit to LA to meet Judy Chicago and the rest of the Feminist Art Program in May 1972. Telling her story to the artists was a central part

of her process of recovery—and politicization.⁷⁴ As the art historian notes, in her essay accompanying the landmark exhibition *RAPE* at Ohio State University in 1985 featuring twenty artists, over half of whom were themselves raped at some point in their lives, “Our shared reality with the artist can be the bedrock for building a powerful, authentic bridge from personal testimony to political analysis and practice. But first there is rage when we begin to face the truth about rape.”⁷⁵ This rage proved to be a key motivating force in the Second Wave.

For its subject matter, however, *Ablutions* is a subtle and esoteric work, focusing more on the catharsis of ritual cleansing and the release found in the open expression of rage. In a large studio in Venice, CA, the testimonies the artists recorded beforehand play as a woman undergoes various stages of ritual bathing—i.e., ablutions. The woman is sequentially bathed in earth (our shared material reality), blood (shed in suffering), and eggs (the nearly timeless symbol of fertility, renewal, and rebirth). After her ablutions, she is tied to a chair and to other parts of the room, simultaneously signifying the entrapment felt by many victims of rape as well as the network of women who’ve come together in sharing their experiences—the retellings of some of which are playing in the background. The performance is a contemplative and elusive piece, although the testimonies in the background lend an almost paradoxical sense of literalness and concreteness to the scenario. This sense of paradox is perfectly fitting however; an experience of sexual violence can sometimes bifurcate a woman’s being against itself. Ultimately, this is a work of coming together and mourning, sharing experiences and experiencing catharsis. As Rachel Rosenthal notes, this coming-forth and baring form an indispensable part of the function of the performance medium: “In performance, you squeeze you out of yourself, you dredge it up from your unconscious. It is a process of giving it a form from the inner to the outer. The process

⁷⁴See Raven, “We Did Not Move From Theory,” 11.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

cannot be frivolous, but must be deep, a deep commitment to yourself. It can be really transformational.”⁷⁶ The ritual ablutions and recorded testimonies of *Ablutions* speak of nothing if not transformation reaped from the robust soil of self-disclosure.

Another historic work that brings rape to the public realm, much more vocally and confrontationally than *Ablutions* or Lacy’s intimate artist’s book, comes some five years later in Suzanne Lacy’s (in collaboration with Leslie Labowitz, Barbara Cohen, Melissa Hoffman, and Jill Soderholm) series of performances and art actions titled *Three Weeks in May*, from 1977. As Josephine Withers claims, “Instead of the anguished passivity expressed in *Ablutions*, *Three Weeks* was angry, assertive, and out to change the consciousness of a large and wholly new public.”⁷⁷ Bringing to the fore another integral aspect of performance qua artistic medium, i.e. the increasingly blurred boundaries between art and life found in late-modern and contemporary artworks, this series of art-actions seems as much an act of political intervention as an artwork, if not more so. One facet of the series was the installation of a large map of LA at LA’s City Hall. On the map were dozens of red pins exhibiting the locations of confirmed rapes over a mere three week period in May (hence the title). This literal, fact-oriented approach is echoed further in the picketing the artists and other feminist collaborators did on the streets in front of City Hall, displaying statistics on rape and violence against women. Concurrently with these art-actions, leaflets with statistical information about rape’s daily reality were distributed, also containing information on how to get help after suffering a rape. The events were culminated with an esoteric performance installation by Lacy called *She Who Would Fly*. The very process of producing the piece, very much like *Ablutions*’ recordings, mimicked—really, *was*—an actual

⁷⁶ Quoted in Josephine Withers, “Feminist Performance Art: Performing, Discovering, Transforming Ourselves,” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 170. For more information on *Ablutions*, see *ibid.*, 168.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

consciousness-raising session. Lacy invited many women into a gallery to discuss their experiences with rape and sexual violence, and had them write their testimonials on the walls of a small room within the gallery. Lacy then taped maps of all fifty of the United States to the wall surrounding the testimonials, a symbolic representation of the pervasiveness of rape throughout the entire country. More arcane is the ceremony that she curated just prior to the performance installation's debut: the women got together, anointed themselves with red dye, and broke bread together. Finally, Lacy made a sculptural piece to hang from the ceiling of the tiny room: she put wings onto the sheered, mutilated carcass of a lamb, symbolizing both the violation of rape—the sacrificial lamb, *victim* coming etymologically from the Latin word for sacrifice—as well as the flight from self that often accompanies its experience, all the while suggesting the possibility of transcendence.

She would then have viewers enter the cramped room four at a time. Seen first would be the disquieting yet angelic lamb carcass. Upon moving further into the room, the testimonies and maps would become visible. However, this was not the entirety of the piece. Lacy had four women who had participated in the anointment ceremony perch naked and birdlike on a wooden ledge located a few feet above the lamb carcass. Sitting in silence, the women would watch the viewers as they moved through the room. Given its high location, the ledge with the women would not be visible from the entry to the room, nor from the vantage in front of the carcass. It would take the viewer some time to finally notice the silent, red sentries. The shock that this revelation would give the viewer, coupled with the fact that the viewer suddenly realizes she has become the viewed, was designed to imitate the adrenaline-packed sense of objectification and depersonalization that the experience of rape entails. From practical canvassing to obscure but

disturbing high art, *Three Weeks In May* was an art event that is a serious contender for one of the most powerful dissolutions of the boundary between art and life from the '70s.

Further still, another work performed later that year by Lacy and Labowitz utilized performative intervention and media imitation to force politicized art into workaday life. Staged as a media event, with bite-sized segments intended to work perfectly in the fragmented and fast-paced format of television news and soundbites, *In Mourning and In Rage* may be one of the most famous artworks on violence against women in history. Staged as a legitimate media event including a press release, with onlookers mostly consisting of politicians and journalists, Lacy, Labowitz, and collaborators gathered in front of LA City Hall for another intervention. The event was a response to the sensationalism of the media's coverage of the Hillside Strangler—later found to be two men, Kenneth Bianchi and Angelo Buono—who had just claimed his (their) tenth victim days prior to the performance, which was undertaken on 13 December 1977. Standing beneath two banners reading “In Memory of Our Fallen Sisters,” “Women Fight Back,” ten women dressed in unsettling black clothes and taking ghastly form—with a large, roughly two-feet tall headpiece draped with a black, opaque veil—took turns one by one approaching the microphone, reciting brief monologues, no longer than fifteen seconds each, proclaiming various statistics on sexual assault and violence against women, providing information on the recent killings, and decrying the media coverage which had heightened to a fevered pitch. After her brief monologue, each woman was then mantled with a red cloth while the others said in chorus “In memory of our sisters, we fight back,” and walked to the banners, standing in line. The final quotable quote was provided by Lacy, who had been mantling the women, saying: “I am here for the rage of all women. I am here for women fighting back!” Finally, the women gathered in a circle and chanted “Women fight back!” in front of a platoon of cameras.

In Mourning and In Rage is a milestone for feminist intervention in the public sphere, as well as appropriation art—here the appropriation of the sensational spectacles and soundbites the media utilizes to sell their news to the public. As Lacy explains, “We attempted to subvert various conventions of sex-violent reporting—like focusing on the identity of the victim as an explanation of why the crime occurred—with both imagery and statements made during the performance. In subsequent appearances on television we further developed this analysis.”⁷⁸ The piece is effective both as public intervention and “high art,” and crucially utilized the help of a political network Lacy and Labowitz had helped found, Ariadne, A Social Art Network, bringing together women politicians, artists, and media workers for interventional events on special issues of the feminist movement. Lacy and Labowitz’s work so thoroughly fused art and political action that to call these “performances” seems to be missing the point.

Though the feminist strategies above are many and sundry, all these works have one commonality beyond their shared subject: an affective assault through the unflinching representation of the experiential and affective realities of rape, as actually experienced rather than mythologically misrepresented. The direct effort to redefine common understandings of rape in *RAPE IS* takes nothing for granted and challenges the viewer pedagogically to expand their thinking about what the term is and the contexts in which an idea of “rape”—i.e. rape ideology—circulates. *In Mourning and In Rage* takes advantage of media spectacle and theatricality to deliver its poignant message. Conversely, the mysticism and symbolism of *Ablutions* works not as a political intervention but as a space of healing and reflection, enacting perhaps only in its documentation and history the trauma of rape and the incredible struggle it may require to move beyond. *Three Weeks in May* uses a combination of the two strategies, with

⁷⁸ Suzanne Lacy, “Affinities: Thoughts On an Incomplete History,” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 267.

direct political intervention through graphics—the map of LA pinpointing recent rapes—and the room containing women’s handwritten testimonials, but also the theatrical and disturbing confrontation with the mutilated lamb carcass-turned-angel and the sudden shock after encountering this eerie scene of realizing one has been watched the whole time, by none other than apparently blood-covered, naked women perched like hell-sent harpies to exert their judgment. In light of how perversely pervasive rape is and has been throughout history, across cultures, and veritably beyond comprehension, it boggles the mind that the blunt though admittedly burdensome confrontation with the reality of such a common event took so many millennia to be undertaken. Then again, such a profoundly mobilized and organized network of politically minded women has hardly existed in history prior to the rise and spread of Second-Wave Feminism, arguably being preceded only by the feminist First Wave—the Suffragettes and their progenitors, the Prohibitionists of the Temperance Movement.

“[T]he kind of art that smells and burns”⁷⁹

It is unquestionably a testament to Mendieta’s courage, vision, and conviction that she performed her *Rape Scenes* in complete isolation from this network of activism, community, and support. In fact, she performed these pieces roughly two years before she even met prominent feminist art critic and organizer Lucy Lippard, who would introduce the young artist to the feminist art and political movements, give her access to the network and resources that they had been building, and work to bring her mature career to a strong public start. Then again, the one thing people who knew Mendieta would affirm univocally and unequivocally is that she was a fiercely independent and spirited woman and artist; her vision was uniquely and proudly her own.

⁷⁹ Ana Mendieta, quoted in Judith Wilson, “Ana Mendieta Plants Her Garden,” *The Village Voice*, 13-19 August 1980, 71.

It is no surprise, then, that her *Rape Scenes* are decidedly different from all the pieces mentioned above. There is a confrontational frankness, an overwhelming literalness that practically assaults the viewer. There is no mistaking what has transpired in these pieces, as there may be looking at documentary photographs of *Ablutions*. Absent here is any trace of didacticism or pedagogy, as one may find in Lacy and Labowitz's work together. (Granted, their didacticism is an altogether necessary one, given the discourse surrounding rape and general ignorance of its factual reality; their pedagogical tone, in other words, is what lends these pieces their own political power.) And there is no attempt to define the meaning or experience of rape, as in *Rape Is*. There is only the brutal facticity of the aftermath of a violent assault on a woman, a depiction that, like *In Mourning and In Rage*, responds directly to a concrete historical incident and attempts to impart to the viewer, as in the recording of testimonies in *Ablutions*, a sense of the gritty reality and horrible trauma of rape as experienced in the first person.

Formally, both *Rape Scenes*, but especially the latter one in the woods, may share the most in common with Käthe Kollwitz's *Vergewaltigt*. This work, like Mendieta's two performances, makes no attempt to gloss over the viciousness of what has happened, the decisive finality of the trauma, and unambiguously presents the viewer with the irrecoverable aftermath of violence. The use of nature in *Vergewaltigt* also echoes the second *Rape Scene*: nature, life, goes on, in spite of the assault on human life that lies amidst its silent, impassive beauty. Finally, since these three works can only be seen in photographs or (in the case of Kollwitz's) in person on a small scale, they all catch the viewer unawares, if you will: the intimacy of a photograph or an etching, its decidedly personal scale and nature, makes the violence it portrays all that more existentially and emotionally upsetting.

Mendieta herself would have been—and was—the first to say that the photographs or general appearance of the scenes, *not* the process of executing the performances, are the works themselves. On the *Rape Scenes*, she had the following to say:

I don't consider this part of my main work, but I did do it. [A] young woman was killed – raped and killed at Iowa in one of the dorms – and it really freaked me out. So I did several rape performance-type things at that time using my own body. They were tableaux. So I guess that was the first kind of way in which I started using my body and doing something [...] I did something that I believed in and that I felt I had to do. I didn't know if it was okay, or not, or if it didn't matter, but that's what I did.⁸⁰

There are several things of great importance from this relatively small quote: Mendieta considers these to be tableaux, in other words, she feels these are scenes to be seen, whether in person or through photographs, not (more or less) interactive art experiences as much performance art is. They are an aesthetically arranged slice of life, consciously blurring the lines between art and life only insofar as their subject is found too frequently in profane existence. Worth noting here as an aside, Mendieta never considered herself a photographer; the photos serve as a means of conveying her art, which she adamantly resisted putting within the confines of the dehumanizing and petrifying White Cube of the museum/gallery up until nearly the end of her life. As noted in an essay by John Perreault, one of the first academic works published on the artist after her death, “Photography was a means, not an end.”⁸¹ Second, the pieces were done in direct response to how “freaked out” she was by the (rape?)murder of Ottens—and believing that Ottens was in fact raped before her murder. Third, she sees these works as something of a stepping stone to her mature work—a central part of my thesis here—insofar as she sees them as inaugurating her formal work with her body and its impression on the environment. And fourth, she sees the *Rape*

⁸⁰ “Joan Marter and Ana Mendieta in Conversation,” 1 February 1985, excerpted in *Traces: Ana Mendieta* (London: Hayward Publishers, 2013), 229.

⁸¹ John Perreault, “Earth and Fire: Mendieta’s Body of Work,” in *Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective* (New York: New Museum for Contemporary Art, 1987), 13.

Scenes as distinct from her mature body of work, something she was compelled to do but no longer considers to be part of the thematic core of what she was aiming to do in her mature career.

One of the most central aspects of her artistic practice that one must internalize in order to understand her art generally, and the *Rape Scenes* and their relationship to magick specifically, is how she viewed the ontology, the nature, of her art. In a certain sense, her artistic career was always a wholly personal, spiritual undertaking, coming to grips with nature, life, death, humanity, and humanity's metaphysical place in the order of Being. Insofar as her art is a means of negotiating the metaphysical relationships of the various elements of our world, it is in this sense a form of magickal divination, a way to glean esoteric knowledge of the Nature of Things. This metaphysical journey is what she recognized in the art of "primitive" cultures, and consequently what drew her to such art, as she said in late 1977:

It is perhaps during my childhood in Cuba that I first became fascinated by primitive art and cultures. It seems as if these cultures are provided with an inner knowledge, a closeness to natural resources. And it is this knowledge which gives reality to the images they have created.

It is this sense of magic, knowledge and power, found in primitive art, that has influenced my personal attitude toward art-making.⁸²

Even in her paintings, this metaphysical impulse was the primary motivation for her practice. Indeed, it is because of the insufficiency of painting, in the artist's eyes, to approach the metaphysical underpinnings of our world, their lack of immediacy and their merely indexical relationship to the artist's Being, that drew her toward creating art with her body and the elements: in 1972 she explained "my paintings were not real enough for what I wanted the

⁸² Ana Mendieta, Exhibition: Ana Mendieta, Silueta Series 1977, 5-23 December 1977 (Corroboree: Gallery of New Concepts, University of Iowa)

images to convey, and by real I mean I wanted my images to have power, to be magic.”⁸³ Her art was concerned, practically exclusively, with the essence of existence, a quest for knowledge on which she invited the viewer, but by no means undertook only or primarily for the sake of her audiences.

It is rather surprising, in light of this, that she would concern herself with a rather direct reference to a specific, historical act of violence. Further, the news surrounding Ottens’s murder not only directly inspired the artist to do her two *Rape Scenes*; it also induced her to explore the theme of violence for around an entire year.⁸⁴ Some of the works in this yearlong series, aside from the *Rape Scenes* themselves, do seem directly related to the murder. For instance, an *Untitled* in situ installation piece from 1973 seems to be the trace remnants of a brutal struggle to the death. Most obvious and startling in the scene is a beat-up, old mattress completely drenched in what appears to be blood. Blood is smeared elsewhere on the floor and walls, as well, echoing the apparently deliberate placement of blood in the bathroom sink at the scene of Ottens’s murder. In characteristic fashion, Mendieta made this piece in isolation and told nobody about it. In fact, one of her classmates stumbled upon the scene completely by accident, exploring the barn in which Mendieta made the installation for a scene to photograph. Only when he told of his seemingly horrific discovery did the artist step up to claim responsibility for it.⁸⁵

Other works seem, at most, obliquely related to the violent crime. For example, one of her many super-8 films, *Sweating Blood*, 1973, prominently features blood on her body, though normal associations of violence/injury with bleeding are difficult to attach to the film given the

⁸³ Ana Mendieta, quoted in Petra Barreras del Rio, “Ana Mendieta: A Historical Overview,” in *Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective* (New York: New Museum for Contemporary Art, 1987), 28.

⁸⁴See Herzberg, “Ana Mendieta’s Iowa Years: 1970-1980,” 137-78 .

⁸⁵ See Julia Herzberg, “Mendieta’s Work in the Contexts of Multimedia and the CNPA, Fall 1972 through Summer 1973,” in “A Critical Study,” 150-97.

action, or technically lack thereof. The three-minute film features a tight shot of Mendieta's face, hair pulled back and eyes close, as blood is slowly poured on top of her head and drips down her scalp and face. The scene unravels as a meditative reflection on the spiritual experience of anointment, as the blood is poured on Mendieta's head as Jesus Christ was said to do to his followers with scented oils, and as he was anointed by a woman just prior to his Passion. (This association was surely not lost on the artist, who grew up in a devout Roman Catholic family in Cuba.) The solemn air of the ceremony rhymes with the sober ritualism of *Ablutions*, though the resonance is unlikely deliberate, and seems to serve a similar purpose of symbolic death and consequent spiritual rejuvenation for the artist here as she allows the blood to cover her. But it is difficult to shake the eeriness of the scene: it seems almost as if the artist's life-force is seeping through her pores, a sentiment echoed in the title; still, the attitude of sincere acceptance that Mendieta's calm visage radiates contradicts any fear or unease for the artist that the viewer may feel. If anything, if the viewer were to understand the blood pouring from the artist's head as her own, what we are seeing is not a sign of violence or injury, but of incipient martyrdom welcomed with open arms. We are serving witness to her transformation into the "anointed one," a religious honorific indicating divine sanction dating to at the latest the beginning of Abrahamic religion.

Blood features prominently elsewhere, indeed almost everywhere, in Mendieta's career. As in many religious traditions of the world, Mendieta saw blood as a potent magick element: reflecting on her career up until then, she declared in 1980 that "I started immediately using blood—I guess because it's a very powerful, magic thing. I don't see it as a negative force."⁸⁶ Many of the scholarly works on Mendieta's oeuvre have emphasized the sacred nature of blood

⁸⁶ Ana Mendieta, quoted in Wilson, "Mendieta Plants," 71.

in Mendieta's work, though often they privilege Afro-Cuban iconographic and religious sources too much.⁸⁷ References to Catholic imagery accompany the presence of blood at least as often as echoes of Afro-Cuban religion. An *Untitled* work from the summer of 1973—one of several summers Mendieta spent in Mexico with Hans Breder—directly alludes to the Sacred Heart of Christ. In the artwork, Mendieta, lying on a slab of stone in an ancient Aztec temple's vestibule, is wrapped in a white sheet and blood is poured over her figure and on the surrounding ground. Then a cow's heart is placed on top of her chest. This image of blood dripping from a heart on the outside of a human figure's chest openly imitates the visual presentation of the Sacred Heart of Christ, the symbol of Christ's mercy and suffering on behalf of the sins of humankind. As in the artwork, the Sacred Heart is normally represented on the surface of Christ's chest. Often dripping blood, other iconographic elements include thorns wrapped tightly around the heart, referencing the Crown of Thorns; a refulgent halo of golden aura and/or flames; and a cross on the top of the heart to reference the Crucifixion. The image is a specifically Catholic symbol of Christ's suffering and compassion, figuring especially prominently in the Catholic traditions of Latin cultures in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America, and thus would have been an image quite familiar to Mendieta.

Another example comes from an *Untitled Silueta*, executed in Mexico in 1976, wherein a white sheet is placed vertically in a niche in an ancient Aztec temple, framed at the bottom by a loose, horseshoe-shaped wreath of twigs. The sheet bears the red imprint of the artist's body, and was produced by being placed on her body after she was drenched in blood. It is difficult to deny the similarity the sheet bears to the Shroud of Turin, which some theologians hold to be the

⁸⁷ See, for an example of this, Mary Jane Jacob, "Ashé in the Art of Ana Mendieta," in *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. Arturo Lindsay (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 189-200. While Santería is doubtless a syncretic religion that draws much from Catholicism, Jacob's essay puts sole emphasis on the elements of the Afro-Cuban religion that are distinct from Catholic tradition.

burial shroud of Christ. It further calls to mind a similar relic, received with more serious claims to authenticity in Catholicism, known as Veronica's Veil, or the Volto Santo. Not a recorded story from the Bible, the Volto Santo is said to have been produced during Christ's Passion, when a woman offers her *sudarium* (Latin for sweat-cloth) to Christ as he carried his Cross, beaten and bloodied, up to Calvary. With the cloth, he wipes his face, and a perfect image of the Christ is said to have been transferred to the cloth. All these Catholic associations carry the connotation of suffering yielding religious transcendence and salvation.

But the *Rape Scenes* are unquestionably distinct from these and other works featuring blood. They are decidedly profane, vulgar, and morbid in their usage of blood, which is clearly the result of violence unwillingly suffered by an innocent; in this sense, they are diametrically opposite the affective overtones of sacredness, spiritual ritual, and/or self-transcendence in all her other works incorporating blood. If blood was such a holy and powerful magick element in Mendieta's eyes, as her retrospective claims on her early career suggest, and functioned as a spiritual force that was *not* negative in its iconographic connotations in her oeuvre, how is it that she could come to use this sacred element in an unequivocally violent and overwhelmingly mundane context? Are the *Rape Scenes* sacred or spiritual in some significant sense, or does Mendieta vulgarize the sacred, living element of blood by incorporating it into them; or is there some other solution to this dilemma of signification and significance?

Curse and Charm, Apotropaic Catharsis

“My art is grounded on the primordial accumulations, the unconscious urges that animate the world, not in an attempt to redeem the past, but rather in confrontation with the void, the orphanhood, the unbaptized earth of the beginning, the time that from within the earth looks upon us.”

-Ana Mendieta, 1984⁸⁸

“Mendieta’s goddess was both a healer and an avenger.”

-Lucy R. Lippard, 2011⁸⁹

For all their ruthless bluntness, the *Rape Scenes* are firmly articulated yet subtle in their references to profane culture, which provides crucial context to their magickal elements. In order to understand Mendieta’s oeuvre, one must open oneself to the poetic associations sprinkled consistently throughout them—indeed, as John Perreault has said,

The whole range of it [her art] is not without a certain formal beauty, which we can place in time. But to really understand it, we must use poetic ploys, for the strength of the work is its poetry. This sets it off from work that is formally similar.... Ultimately the strength of Mendieta’s work is that it requires more than contextual and formal analysis. Poetic works require poetic exegesis.⁹⁰

Her art beckons us to read it within a network of poetic connection, of personal and cultural associations at once intrapsychic and intercultural. The first *Rape Scene* is the more unflinching and confrontational of the two. The documentary photographs have the detached, objective nature of crime scene photography, and if one did not know otherwise, they could easily be mistaken for such. The most reproduced of these images is taken from a few feet behind the artist. Bent over a table and surrounded by broken dishes and blood, her head and face are obstructed from view. All that the viewer sees of the artist in this starkly lit image is her upper body flush against the table, clothed in a plaid long-sleeved shirt, and her bare, bloodied buttocks and legs with equally bloody panties loosely lying around her ankles. Other images have a

⁸⁸ Ana Mendieta, “Proposal to Bard College for *La Maja de Yerba* (The ‘Maja’ of Yerba),” 1984.

⁸⁹ Lucy R. Lippard, “Introduction,” in Christine Redfern and Caro Caron (New York: The Feminist Press, 2011), 14.

⁹⁰ Perreault, “Earth and Fire,” 14.

similarly detached documentary quality about them: images of blood on the ground amidst a field of broken dishes; a photo of blood spattered into a toilet bowl; details of the artist's wrists bound to the table with rope; and a close-up of her head, her face blocked by her arm, lying motionless in a pool of blood.

Mendieta had chosen to abandon painting shortly before this scene in search for something "more real," something befitting the numinous power of magick that fascinated her for her entire life. This artwork, however, is practically *too* real. The brutal facticity of the images, void of any living humanity to soften the crippling spectacle of dehumanization and brutality, can make one's blood run cold.

Such an appropriation of the forensic-photography style of detached observation in documentary photography, tightly cropped and focused on revealing as much detail of a violent scene as possible, has a notable resonance with a series of artworks from roughly a decade prior: Andy Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series of 1962-'63. For this series, Warhol directly appropriated forensic-photography documentation of actual mortal accidents, most especially automobile accidents, using the images to create silkscreens. As was typical of his idiom, he would then silkscreen the image serially onto a (usually garishly colored) canvas, in black ink, creating horrifying spectacles of echoing violence made all the more nauseating by the jarringly inappropriate, brightly monochromatic fields of color onto which the serial images were silkscreened. The commentary that these pieces constructed, then, was as simple yet macabre as their execution: even among gruesome imagery not seen as fit to print in mass media, popular culture has become desensitized by the constant circulation of violent imagery, both verbal and visual. Not coincidentally, *giallo* films—Italian low-budget horror flicks, effectively the predecessor to the slasher, that serve as an even more extreme counterpart to American

exploitation—were beginning to gain traction at the time of Warhol's series, and the American grindhouse was working to catch up. Implicitly, then, these forensic images too graphic for journalism were mild in comparison to some imagery from films of the same time.

In a certain sense, however, this process of dramatization adds an intellectual filter to our viewing experience: our sense of culpability and guilt in the face of these spectacles is dulled by our almost immediate understanding that our viewing is in effect a form of token disdain for the media industry's obsession with shocking the audience for profit, and the use of real-life tragedies too macabre for print is only a rhetorical device in making this point. The very process of turning the photographs into an artwork operationally sublimates our confrontation with the subject, for these are decidedly aestheticized images: the silkscreens, as was typical of Warhol's work, have formal discrepancies that draw attention to the process of fabrication—here, a washed-out corner, and there, a blurring oversaturation with ink, no two of the repeated images are *exactly* identical. The bombastic monochrome fields onto which the images are inked further highlight their distance from the media they mock and forensics they appropriate. Aside from the aestheticization of these somber spectacles, the process of serially repeating the images changes their signification, turning a direct documentation into indirect critique. While the inspiration for the *Rape Scenes* was, similarly, directly to comment upon the media's hypocrisy of shielding the public from violence while sensationally profiting off of a brutal destruction of life that affected the artist deeply, such an intellectual filter as found in Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series is not as notable or immediate in these pieces. Rather than an appropriation of concrete examples of forensics documentation, they appropriate the *style* of such documentation in a terrifyingly believable *recreation* of forensic representation. In this sense, an affective immediacy is maintained in the images that defies sublimation through intellectualization and stultifies our

efforts at deferring or diverting the all-too-straightforward signification. We are stuck with the sickeningly literal images, affectively captivated by what we normally would not see instead of affectively numbed by what we see too much already—and this is the root, the weapon, that constitutes Mendieta's pathogenic strategy. (Given the sexualized nature of the violence they depict, such images would hardly stand a chance of being printed in an American newspaper in the 1970s, though the written accounts on Ottens's murder and mutilation went into lurid detail, invidiously seducing the reader's imagination.)

The domestic setting of the first *Rape Scene* is only in part due to Mendieta's attempt to recreate the scene as closely as possible to the scene that news accounts of the crime had constructed, and may hold the answer to the question of why Mendieta felt compelled to do such a seemingly uncharacteristic artwork in the first place. Insofar as rape is a specifically *sexual* violent crime, to rape is to brutalize and defile what is normally considered at minimum an enjoyable expression of affection, to steal with force that which is normally given willingly and lovingly in the context of a romantic connection, no matter how serious. As is evident in many of the world's religions (e.g., Tantric Buddhism, certain strands of Christian mysticism, the Hindu *Kama Sutra*, etc.), the sex act is frequently considered a sacred experience, a taste of divine bliss in the framework of a distinctly mortal and human circumstance. In the context of such an attitude toward sexuality, then, to rape is not just to commit an act of atrocious violence and to disrespect the basic humanity and essential rights of another person; *it is blasphemy*, defiling the divine gift of sexuality and perverting a holy sacrament.

Mendieta most certainly held this spiritual understanding of sexuality, and wrote on the topic with consistency in her diary. Here is one such excerpt, dated 16 January 1984:

Physical love seeks & secures our human origin.
Making love is a search for the confirmation of our being by another being.
It is the most profound experience of what being is and its beauty lies in that “this profound experience” is shared by another.
Our truest confirmation of our being is caused & felt by the one we love.
Love seeks & secures our human origins. Making love is a search to find out what BEING is.

It is the most profound and direct experience of your LIFE.
Our truest confirmation of our BEING is caused and felt by the one we love.
Happiness is a subsequent fulfillment of a pre-historic wish.⁹¹

The metaphysical overtones are quite clear: making love is a spiritual journey toward understanding the nature of Being, in much the same way as Mendieta understood the purpose of her artistic career. In light of this, Mendieta’s fixation on this crime makes more sense: not only was she “freaked out” by the violence, insofar as it was so literally close to home for her, but she was also repulsed by what she would have conceived as the debasement of something sacred, one of the most direct means of spiritual communion available to human beings. Setting the scene in her own home, then, was not just to imitate the reports of the violence in Room 429 at Rienow Hall, but also an oblique but crucial commentary on the atrocity of defiling romantic coupling and its sacred sexual expression.

That she would do such a performance in her own apartment also makes sense in light of the above, when one considers what compelled Mendieta to work with blood in the first place. Mendieta’s sister has stated in several interviews with scholars that Mendieta had a deep-seated fear of violence and of a violent death. Indeed, aside from the magickal and spiritual power of blood, the artist’s choice to work with blood as one of her primary media, according to her sister, was as much about exorcising her fear of violence—magickally warding off such a fate, exorcism through an exercise in vicarious experience—as it was a magickal appropriation and

⁹¹ Mendieta, *Diary*, c.1979-1984.

deployment of blood's sacred power.⁹² Other scholars have picked up on this notion vis-à-vis the *Rape Scenes*, as well: as Mary Jane Jacob says, "For Mendieta, too, these rape works were a means of personal and cultural exorcism of this brutal act. With these works she aimed to give women *ashé* [divine power in Santería], empowering them to regain control of their bodies."⁹³ However, I claim that both the personal, spiritual significance of this exorcism and the significance of these works to her artistic development have not received the emphasis they deserve. Her performance in her apartment served the function of an apotropaic magickal ritual: motivated both by repulsion at the violent debasement of sacred sexuality and her own fears of facing such violence, she undertook the ritualistic performance in her apartment to ward off such potential evil through a form of psychological self-sacrifice—self-sacrifice, whether through physical self-harm, emotional or physical tribulations of endurance or deprivation, or extensive investments of time, being a key component determining the successful use of magick—as well as to condemn and curse those who could commit such vicious blasphemy.

The lengths to which Mendieta went to render herself psychologically and physically vulnerable for the *Rape Scenes*, most especially the first, indicate the import she placed on the ritualism of the performances. She arranged the first scene such that she was absolutely vulnerable, totally dependent on others for her safety: bound to her table, mostly naked, and door ajar, she waited alone for her audience to show up, with no assurance that it would be her intended audience who would arrive at this scene first. As Lucy Lippard noted only a few years after these performances, such psychologically charged self-sacrifice invested for the purposes of ritualistic rebirth and psychological expurgation was a definitive difference between men's and women's body art of the late '60s and '70s, both in America and Europe:

⁹² See, for example, Herzberg, "A Critical Study," 209.

⁹³ Jacob, "*Ashé*," 193.

It was not just shyness, I suspect, that kept many women from making their own body art in 1967-71, when Bruce Nauman was “Thighing,” Vito Acconci was masturbating [for his infamous *Seedbed*, 1972], Dennis Oppenheim was sunbathing and burning himself [such as in *Reading Position for Second Degree Burn*, 1970] and Barry La Va was slamming into walls [in *Velocity Piece (Impact Run – Energy Drain)*, 1967]. It seemed like another very male pursuit, a manipulation of the audience’s voyeurist impulses—not likely to appeal to vulnerable women artists just emerging from isolation.... A good deal of this current work by women, from the psychological make-up pieces to the more violent images, is not so much masochistic as it is concerned with exorcism, with dispelling taboos, with exposing and thereby defusing the painful aspects of woman’s history.⁹⁴

The point here being that—while many women artists were engaged in body art, such as those mentioned earlier, or those affiliated with *Womanhouse*, or Carolee Schneemann—women approached the body not as a site of phallic mastery over pain but rather a space of the sacred, the spiritual symbolic, and a space to be revered rather than considered taboo: a space for psychological expansion rather than pure endurance of physical pain. In fact, one of the only notable women artists to do brutally, physically self-destructive body works on a par with works like Chris Burden’s 1971 *Shoot*, in which he literally had himself shot, was French artist Gina Pane. But even her works, such as her 1973 *The Conditioning*, in which she stoically laid on a bare bedframe over the open flames of over a dozen candles, bore an air of mystical ritual—typified by psychological endurance rather than the experience of sudden physical trauma—that was infrequently found in men’s self-destructive body art. And the first *Rape Scene* is defined by nothing if not the psychological endurance of genuine and serious physical vulnerability: an openness to harm that flagrantly flies in the face of fear, echoing the magickal rituals of the advanced practitioners of non-Abrahamic religions.

⁹⁴ Lucy R. Lippard, “The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women’s Body Art,” *Art in America* (May-June 1976): 75; 80.

Understanding the significance of these works to Mendieta's artistic maturation requires juxtaposing the two *Rape Scenes*, not just for their thematic similarities, but for crucial and telling differences that reveal important, previously unacknowledged meaning. No scholar has adequately and satisfactorily addressed why Mendieta would *return* to the theme of rape after performing the first, relatively clearly apotropaic *Rape Scene* in her apartment, especially since she had gone to such great pains to recreate the scene of Ottens's murder as presented in the media in her first performance/tableau. Aside from the subject matter of rape and the use of the artist's body, the two performances have almost nothing in common: her fellow students were invited to witness the first performance, which took place in the artist's personal space and meticulously recreated an actual crime that had a profound impact on the artist's sense of personal safety. The second, to which nobody was invited to be an audience, was performed in isolation in the woods of Iowa City, and included only Hans Breder, specifically and solely for the purposes of documentation, stripping away all details that could associate it with Ottens's murder. Significantly, while the first *Rape Scene* references Warhol, taking his approach and stripping away artistic sublimation, the second nods to Marcel Duchamp's ca. 1946-1966 *Étants donnés*.

At this point in her career, Duchamp was a major inspiration for Mendieta, and she cited and referenced him frequently in her work and statements.⁹⁵ She gravitated toward his iconoclastic view of the ontology of the artwork, specifically his willingness to claim as art whatever he declared to be art—a sentiment clearly important to Mendieta as scholars continue to debate what the “actual” medium of her art is (photography, performance, earthworks, sculpture, etc.). In fact, one would be justified to believe that she admired his iconoclastic

⁹⁵ See Stephanie Rosenthal, “Ana Mendieta: Traces,” in *Traces: Ana Mendieta*, ed. Stephanie Rosenthal (London: Hayward Publishers, 2013), 13.

attitude toward notions of fixed, “objective” ontology generally: her statement for her 1972 painting thesis, the *Untitled* (Facial Hair Transplants), in which she glued the freshly clipped facial hair of a male colleague onto her face and created self-portraits as a man, makes explicit reference to Duchamp’s gender play as his female alter ego Rose Sélavy.

Étants donnés was by all accounts an unexpected work for Duchamp to make, the final in his career, allegedly created after he publicly retired from his artistic profession. A carefully constructed tableau with explicit and meticulous instructions for its assembly—specifically to be installed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art after his death—it is a complex, mysterious, and unsettling sight to behold. Its design is intentionally voyeuristic: the tableau is assembled behind a wooden door installed in a stucco wall, the door having only two peepholes for viewing. What is inside is a bizarre scene of indeterminate meaning: behind what seems to be a hole in a broken brick wall, a mixed-media representation of a nude woman lies prostrate on the ground—her face obfuscated by the brick wall and her legs splayed, revealing her vulva—set in a fantastical landscape, part painting, part photography, part sculpture. The scene seems to lack a middleground, as the prostrate woman, holding up a gas lamp, is pushed to the front of the scene on what appears to be a hill riddled with twigs and dead leaves. Vividly unnaturally colored, outlandish trees and vegetation spring up out of a rolling hill in the background, which is rendered even more fantastical by an evanescent, smoky atmosphere.

The voyeuristic position the viewer must, by design, adopt in viewing this work is not as straightforward as it may seem. As Rosalind Krauss has argued, in becoming a voyeur, one renders oneself vulnerable to the gaze of other museumgoers. As one views the body of this mysterious woman, one’s own body is put on display in front of the wooden door. Given the position of the peepholes, it is only possible for one person to view the tableau at a time. Other

viewers must wait their turn, and as such the viewer of the work herself becomes part of the artwork. To become a voyeur in this scene is to become the subject of voyeurism—a voyeurism, no less, that captures one as a voyeur.⁹⁶

Mendieta's second *Rape Scene* seems to reference *Étants donnés* in at least one of the documentary photographs, specifically the one most frequently reproduced to reference the artwork. Mendieta's body, again nude from the waist down and bloodied in the groin and legs, lies over a log in an early fall landscape, her upper torso stretching out of our view. The splaying of her legs and the central-frontal display of her genitals rhymes with the composition of the woman's body in *Étants donnés*, just as the natural elements of the landscape mirror the odd juxtaposition of elements in Duchamp's piece: the upper half of the picture plane is dominated by dead, browning vegetation, riddled with twigs, while the lower half is largely composed of verdant grass, flipping the arrangement of natural elements that Duchamp employed (i.e., the vibrant and fantastical in the upper picture plane/background, and dead and dying in the lower picture plane/foreground).

Similar to how the first *Rape Scene* resonates with Warhol's work only to strip away the artistic and intellectual elements of sublimation, this *Rape Scene* rips away the distance between voyeur and viewed that exists by the very arrangement of the tableau in *Étants donnés*: no broken brick wall or wooden door separates us from the scene, and the ambiguity surrounding the potential violence of the scene is rendered decidedly unequivocal. The viewer is no longer rendered culpable for their voyeurism through the unwitting, policing gaze of other viewers in the setting of a museum: *the scene itself* renders us culpable through its pathogenesis; to echo Jacques Lacan's conjectures on the Gaze, the object (or here, *abject*) stares back at us.

⁹⁶ See Rosalind Krauss, Chapter Three, in Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 94-148, for a much fuller discussion on the existential and psychoanalytic significance of Duchamp's arrangement.

And what we see is indeed a scene of utter abjection. Too often it is assumed that Mendieta was primarily or only a romantic when it came to her views and treatments of nature. Though she undoubtedly had an immense fondness for and fascination with nature, the nature that we find in Mendieta's work is not simply a scene of pastoral return, an escape from civilization, or a resplendent abode of Beauty; *the cradle is always our grave*. To quote the artist's diary once more:

The ties that bind us to nature / A reality at once creative and destructive:

MOTHER AND TOMB

I feel suspended between sky and earth

Our cult of death is also a cult of life, in the same way that love is a hunger for life and a longing for death. Our fondness for self-destruction does not derive uniquely from masochistic tendencies but also from a certain religiosity.⁹⁷

“Mother Nature” is both a nourishing and an engulfing mother, and one cannot extricate the two essences from one another. Mendieta seems to presage Julia Kristeva's work on the abject in this attitude toward nature: the Real—the raw realm of death, violence, and existential vulnerability and indeterminacy—is only ever barely contained by the order of the Symbolic—the semiotic system of meaning-making and –mapping adopted by social convention to create order out (or on top) of disorder—and the scenes of rupture, of abjection, threaten to undo the Symbolic. This is why the maternal body is often a scene of such abjection in Kristeva's theory: nourishment threatens engulfment, birth ensures death.⁹⁸ The signs of the mother's mortality, that the birthing and nursing body is also a shitting, pissing, and bleeding body, tears through the Symbolic, threatening to overwhelm us with the Real.

⁹⁷ Mendieta, *Diary*, ca. 1979-1984.

⁹⁸ See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

According to Kristeva, beyond the maternal body, the most threatening object of abjection, the thing that most troubles our social distinction between object and subject—so elaborately and delicately constructed through the Symbolic—that is necessary for the functioning of the ego, is the corpse: the subject-turned-object, the cast-off (literally, *ab-ject*) machine void of its ghost. What we are confronted with in Mendieta's second *Rape Scene*, then, is a tear in the Symbolic order, a stain on the Romantic landscape that threatens to undo its Romance entirely, rendering us potentially culpable for the violence we see in its immediate, intrinsic indictment of our voyeurism. And crucially this corpse is the result of sexual violence, a defilement of a sacred experience that cuts through to Being itself, in Mendieta's eyes. This disastrous perversion of desire refuses to hide in obscurity any longer. The crime is ejected from its statistically typical milieu—the victim's home (as in the first *Rape Scene*), a hideaway of the perpetrator's elaborate choosing, the backseat of a car, or the most highly proverbialized “dark, secluded alley”—into that most “timeless” milieu of apparently untouched Nature.

Such a total break from the circumstances of the murder that first inspired Mendieta to undertake this work needs to be levelled with the self-evident similarities in subject. Further, what is perhaps more difficult to level is the similarities between this scene—the remnants of a human form set into an otherwise untouched natural vista—and the work she had just begun that prior summer: the *Siluetas* and other earth-body artworks. I argue that the second *Rape Scene*, considered in tandem with the first, serves as a bridge from her more direct and literal student work to her mature and mystical earth-body oeuvre; indeed, the second *Rape Scene* can serve as a cipher for her later work.

The two *Rape Scenes* are not simply two separate tableaux that happen to overlap in theme and content: they are, I claim, a diptych, a pair of works whose meaning only becomes clear or makes itself manifest vis-à-vis one another. It is no coincidence that around this time, feminist scholars were just beginning to tackle the binaristic *episteme* of patriarchal culture in earnest. Only one year prior to the *Rape Scenes* did Sherry B. Ortner publish her canonical “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?”⁹⁹ Though it would take some time for feminist scholarship to escape the structuralist determinism of these early works with the later work of poststructuralist feminists such as Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, I hold that Mendieta offered in her work a highly complex ethical commentary on the indeterminacy of the concepts of nature and culture, an esoteric dialectics made most exemplary in the *Rape Scenes*, prior to the emergence of more deconstructive discourse and in fact isolated from the feminist community altogether.

Fundamentally, Mendieta conceived of culture as the accumulated attempts of humanity to deal with the naked power of nature, of managing their way through the forces of the world that at first were too magnificent even to comprehend, let alone to control: violence, death, need, and desire being primary among these forces. To quote the artist at length:

There’s a very interesting book called *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* – it was written by a Californian artist named Susan Griffin. It’s a very interesting book in which it compares women’s condition in society from biblical times to the present, and it equates it to the treatment that nature has received from the times too, and there is definitely a connection. I think that men have tried to control nature through the... It could even go back to the Aristotelian Theory of what construction and destruction, and all of a sudden, all of these very innate ways of rela [sic]...

⁹⁹ Sherry B. Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” *Feminist Studies* (1972): 5-31.

This very direct way of relating lives and things around you, you get caught up in some kind of an intellectual mumbo-jumbo. I think, basically, we're all here on the earth from earlier civilizations on, trying to deal with nature. Now they did it through religion and the shaman and this kind of thing, knowing that they couldn't control nature, but trying to influence it somehow. What our most advanced technological societies have done today is that they have almost destroyed nature by imposing technology upon it. Now, I am not against technology, but I'm against abuse.¹⁰⁰

What is key here is the relationship between influence, control, and abuse: human culture inevitably tries to influence the workings of nature, insofar as we are living beings thrown into a world that is beyond our sovereign dominion and to which we are, in our finitude and fragility, ultimately subject. However, the means by which humans go about attempting to influence and make meaning of the course of natural forces—in essence, our culture—are neither readymade nor inevitable, and have profound implications for the type of world that humans create, the attitudes a given culture adopts toward life and living things, either in a cooperative relationship of communion and mutual support or a domineering relationship of exploitation and abuse.

It is easy to see a latent primitivism in Mendieta's unabashedly high esteem for shamanistic and magickal attempts to influence nature versus more or less destructive, technological means of control. Indeed, though she often cited her Cuban roots as self-evident justification for her identification with and indirect appropriation of the magickal traditions in the Afro-Cuban religions of Santería, Palo Monte, and Abakuá, she had at most secondhand experience with these religions through overhearing conversations regarding religion that her family's Black housekeepers sometimes had in the kitchen.¹⁰¹ Her family was not only a politically influential (in pre-Revolutionary Cuba), upper-middle class family, but also ardently Roman Catholic and regarded Santería as a perversion of the faith. Still, Mendieta seemed to feel

¹⁰⁰ Ana Mendieta, lecture, Alfred State University, New York, September 1981, excerpted in *Traces: Ana Mendieta* (London: Hayward Publishers, 2013), 208.

¹⁰¹ For discussion of this, see Raquelín Mendieta, "Childhood Memories," 223-28.

comfortable proclaiming that “these cultures are provided with an inner knowledge, a closeness to natural resources. And it is this knowledge which gives reality to the images they have created.”¹⁰² How can such a seemingly fetishistic approach to other cultures, which were ultimately not her own, not be considered, at heart, primitivistic?

In order to move beyond accusations of primitivism and understand the reason behind Mendieta’s exposition of such seemingly archaic worldviews, one must examine the politics behind her identification with these cultures and how such identification fits into her metaphysical and ethical philosophy of nature-culture dialectics. She used her Third-World positionality as a means to distance herself from what she saw as neglectful trends in White Second-Wave Feminism. As she explains in her introduction to an exhibition she co-curated at A.I.R. Gallery in 1980, *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States*, “During the mid to late sixties as women in the United States politicized themselves and came together in the Feminist Movement with the purpose to end the domination and exploitation by the white male culture, they failed to remember us [i.e., Third-World women]. American feminism as it stands is a white middle class movement.”¹⁰³ (Indeed, Mendieta was certainly not alone among critics of Second-Wave Feminism who saw it mainly as a White bourgeois movement.¹⁰⁴) She cited this as a primary reason for her resignation from

¹⁰² Ana Mendieta, “Artist’s Statement,” Exhibition: Ana Mendieta, Silueta Series 1977, 5-23 December 1977 (Corroboree: Gallery of New Concepts, University of Iowa).

¹⁰³ Ana Mendieta, “Introduction,” in *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States* (New York: A.I.R. Gallery, 1980), n.p.

¹⁰⁴ Aside from the Edwards pamphlet and the Schwendinger and Schwendinger, “A Review of Rape Literature...,” was can look to several other authors, most of them Black feminists: Maxine Williams and Pamela Newman, *Black Women’s Liberation* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970); and Mary Ann Weather, “An Argument for Black Women’s Liberation as a Revolutionary Force,” *No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation* 1.2 (February 1969): 66-70. Several others published in the early 1980s chronicle the work of feminists of color in the 1970s, including bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Combahee River Collective, *The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties*, foreword by Barbara Smith (Albany: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1986); and *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, foreword by Toni Cade Bambara (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981).

A.I.R. and her ultimate disassociation from feminism as a political movement generally. Just as she utilized her identification with Third-World political activism as a way to distinguish herself from what she saw as the political failings of a White, middle-class Feminism in the Second Wave, so too did she use her positionality to attack and undermine what she saw as destructive tendencies in Western, technocratic, patriarchal culture. Mary Sabbatino has observed that “marginality because of cultural or sexual difference can also become an active strategy, and a liberating source. Mendieta used her difference in precisely this way; as a strategy to reclaim the traditions of Hispanic and Latin American culture, the strength of the indigenous people, and the mark they made upon the earth.”¹⁰⁵ If one is to accuse Mendieta of primitivism in her art and philosophy, it must be understood to be a self-consciously political primitivism intended to assuage what she saw as a destructive relationship between nature and culture in Western society, and to offer an alternative model for such a relationship.

Mendieta had no qualms with culture *per se* or its attempts to maintain influence over natural forces. In fact, to a certain significant degree, to live totally in the thrall of natural forces is to shun our humanity, insofar as culture is understood as humanity’s collective attempt to negotiate and create meaning from natural forces at the mercy of which we, in the final analysis, find ourselves as mortal, vulnerable, living beings. The artist actually saw nature as the wellspring of culture, most especially the most highly spiritual aspect of culture: art. As she stated, “Art must have begun as nature itself, in a dialectical relationship between human and the natural world from which we cannot be separated.”¹⁰⁶ Further still, she explains:

¹⁰⁵ Mary Sabbatino, “Ana Mendieta: Identity and the Silueta Series,” in *Ana Mendieta*, ed. Gloria Moure, 138.

¹⁰⁶ Ana Mendieta, Grant Application, proposal for the New York State Council on the Arts, 17 March 1982.

I like to think of culture as the memory of history. However, according to Levi-Strauss, culture is the combination of customs, beliefs, habits and aptitudes acquired by man as a member of society. I believe that art, although it is a material part of culture, its greatest value is its spiritual role and the influence that it exercises in society, because art is a result of the spiritual activity of man.¹⁰⁷

Her wholly spiritual understanding of art and fervent belief that art *qua* art must maintain a dialectical relationship to nature is undeniably evident in her later earth-body works, whose poignant, numinous mystery has been the subject of most essays on her art. One of the more poetic expressions of this essence of her art can be found in Adrian Heathfield's essay, "Embers," where the author states:

Her use of elemental substances (earth, air, water, fire *and* flesh), her deployment of the figure and the ground, move through the emotive paradoxes of mortal existence: the lived tensions between the material and the immaterial, the present and the absent, what remains and what departs. As such, these works operate at the limits of what can be thought and said through language. They access feelings of elemental existence, and gesture towards boundlessness and eternity... Far from colonising the alien wild, making a mark of ownership upon it, there is a being-with-nature in these works [i.e., the *Siluetas*] that disempowers the human claim.¹⁰⁸

Her work demonstrates how the overwhelming power of our physical fragility and the often inexpressible order of emotional experience rupture the orders of the rational; her art seeks a meaning incomprehensible in strictly rationalistic/logocentric terms, especially if these terms try to cleave themselves from intricate attention to environment, in all its meanings, expressing the spiritual essence of human existence amidst the living natural system of the Earth. But her *Rape Scenes* appear superficially neither numinous nor mysterious—save perhaps in the jarringly eerie violence dumped on the natural vista in the second performance.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Adrian Heathfield, "Embers," in *Traces*, 21, 22.

However, I maintain that the key to the numinous mysticism of her art, as a whole, is indeed exemplified in her pair of *Rape Scenes*, insofar as we are able to grasp the essence of the nature-culture dialectics she constructs in them and the spiritual significance of her commentary. The three most crucial and defining elements of the diptych couch themselves in the terms of the relationship between nature and culture: blood, violence, and sexuality. All three occupy a liminal territory that permeates both sides of the nature-culture dialectic. The elemental liminality of blood is seen in its arbitration of life and death, in humans and most animals (and if we extend our understanding of ‘blood’ metaphorically, in plants as well in the form of sap and nectar). Blood is the necessary life-force, the wellspring of vitality whose shedding can beckon a descent into nonexistence. It is the symbol of both life and death, and such is why it occupies so prominent a spiritual space in religions the world over, and has developed a nearly endless bounty of cultural signification. The practice of bloodletting has found and continues to find spiritual and social significance in cultures the world over: the voluntary shedding of blood has been touted variously as a cure for illness (as in Medieval Europe) or as a vehicle for magick (as in Santería), but its cultural significance, regardless of the specific details in which it manifests, is as mediator between naked vitality and eternal stasis.

Violence occupies a more complicated space in the nature-culture dialectic. Mendieta does not, I believe, shun violence *qua violence*, since to condemn all violence is to deny one of the most fundamental truths of existence: life feeds on life, and out of death rises new life. Mendieta was not what is disparagingly referred to as a “tree-hugger,” but held profound reverence for the all-encompassing power of nature, a sincere respect for the natural process of birth, death, and rebirth. This found *formal* expression in the process of her art, which we have today only in the form of traces in photographs (save for the few exceptional sculptures she

created for gallery spaces near the end of her life): her creations were never meant to last physically, but were either destroyed or left to be consumed by natural processes, expressing her view of the cyclical nature of life and her own sense of mortality. “The fact that these silhouettes have an autobiographical reference base, and are constructed with the knowledge that they will soon be reclaimed by the elements, parallels the artist’s understanding of her own finitude.”¹⁰⁹ Violence in nature thus serves a regenerative or recuperative role, subsuming what was to make way for what will be. It is only in the cultural context of *unnecessary human violence* that the violence of the natural order is perverted, turning a highly complex and delicately balanced constructive force into a force of sheer destruction and control.

Sexuality is not something specific to humans, but is found in all the animal kingdom, serving as a bare necessity for the continuation of life. The rawness of the sexual act in many ways presages the necessary violence of regeneration: parents pave the way for their children in an act that at once definitively expresses the fundamental mortality of all living creatures and ensures the eternal continuation and renewal of their lineage. It can even be argued that humans are not alone in having a sexual culture. Elaborate courting rituals, monogamous pair-bonding, and self-sacrifice for the safety of one’s young are not unheard of in the animal kingdom. It would be hard to deny, however, that human sexual culture is exponentially more elaborate than that of even the most sophisticated and intelligent animals. Not only is sexuality rent apart from reproduction among humans, but it has a level of complication and nuance of expression that allows for absolute antinomies in how it is expressed: the sacred valuation of celibacy in one culture finds its polar opposite in the exaltation of polygamous sexual license in another. And ultimately it is only in the context of human culture that the idea of rape and its excoriation can

¹⁰⁹ Janet Heit, “Ana Mendieta,” *Arts Magazine* 54.5 (January 1980): 5

hold significance. As should be evident from the discussion of the mythologies surrounding rape above, the sociolegal and ethical meaning of rape—our notions of what constitutes “actual rape”—are entirely bound with cultural definitions of autonomy, consent, the nature of the sex act, gender relations, and personhood. At bare minimum, the notion of rape necessitates, in order to carry ethical significance, a concept of self-determination contingent upon our definition of free will and autonomous personhood—ideas that, as far as we can tell, are wholly unique to the development of human culture.

These three forces are intricately interwoven in the *Rape Scenes* at the juncture of nature and human culture. What we see in their subject matter, though, is blood *involuntarily* spilt, violence unwillingly suffered and torn asunder from natural processes of regeneration, and sexuality debased and abused, ending a life rather than expressing it and perhaps beckoning in new life—in short, we see the stealing and perversion of sacred life-forces that mediate the bounds of nature and culture in human existence. Critically, the commentary the two works form together is not only a feminist diatribe against rape, but also a statement on the proper (in Mendieta’s ethical philosophy) relationship between nature and culture. In the first rape scene, the crime is fully within the confines of culture: not only is it performed in an apartment, as human a domicile as there is, but it is also executed as a recreation of news coverage of an actual crime that was historically local to Mendieta, both in its menacing significance and its spatiotemporal position. The second performance, though, is excised from its cultural context. The bounds of human creation are nowhere to be seen, as the scene is set in a wholly archetypal territory of untouched nature. Further, the details of the crime have been expunged: all we see is the violent, destructive aftermath of a human being stepping over the culturally defined limits of their personhood into the autonomy of another.

Crucially, however, there is a *formal* resonance between the two works that both transcends and cements their similarities in subject. First is the artist's presence in both scenes: she has become the sacrificial lamb in crafting and reiterating her ritual and delineating her contempt for the heinous crime that beckoned her to action. Moreover, the artist is not only present in both scenes, but appears similarly adorned: the bright, plaid long-sleeved shirt and the placement of the blood rhyme between the two, despite all other differences. What we see in the first, then, is the debasement of natural forces of sexuality, violence, and blood that can find expression only within human culture; and in the latter, we see this cultural derangement spill over into the natural realm, the source from which human culture began. Indeed, the apparently dead, evidently defiled body is dropped on the scene like a stain, a tear in the natural relationship between these forces, at once natural and cultural.

And it is this stain, this transposition of a cultural violence from the realm of the wholly human into the domain of nature seen in the second *Rape Scene* that ultimately drives home the ethical commentary that Mendieta is constructing on the proper relationship between nature and culture. For it is not simply a reductive primitivism that drew Mendieta to the magickal traditions of Afro-Cuban religion (not to mention other cultures, such as the ancient matriarchal religion of Malta¹¹⁰): what she admired in their traditions was ultimately what she saw as a respect for natural forces; their efforts to influence the course of natural forces were indirect and cooperative, in her estimation, rather than domineering and exploitive as she saw Western modern culture. Despite what scholars have argued regarding her art's relationship to such specific traditions as Santería, Mendieta's magick and mysticism was similar in spirit, not content: she appropriated the attitudes of these religious traditions, not their exact rites and

¹¹⁰ See Olga Gambori, "Magical Body, Political Body," in *Ana Mendieta: She Got Love*, ed. Beatrice Merz (Milan and Rivoli: Skira Editore S.p.A. and Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 2013), 22-57.

dogmas. Indeed, her working process itself shows that she was more paying homage to these traditions in her occasional references to them, not intending to directly to appropriate them.¹¹¹ Ultimately, what she adored in these religious traditions was their harmonious approach to negotiating sacred life-forces, and what she condemned in modern Western culture was the abusive relationship it established toward the natural forces from which it sprung and upon which it depends. The *Rape Scenes* then are not just condemnations of an actual crime, or feminist invectives against rape. Nor are they simply an apotropaic charm intended to ward off the possibility of Mendieta facing such an evil or a venomous curse against those who could commit such crimes. They are also, and finally, an essay on the dialectical relationship between nature and culture that can be viewed as a cipher for the rest of her career, marking her move from more or less directly political student works to her mystical earth-body artworks, reinforced in the very composition of the second *Rape Scene*.

Sympathetic Magick, Affect, and Experience

“I think my art deals with female issues, because I’m a woman and I make art. So just out of that, it deals with that. It deals with my culture because it’s what gives me the driver [sic] to make it, meaning, Cuban Culture. And I think that all art, being a social activity, is political at that level.”

-Ana Mendieta¹¹²

“On one hand, [Mendieta] cherishes the ritual aspect of her involvement with nature and insists her work is a private act, rather than ‘a performance kind of thing.’ On the other, she feels ‘art has to be experienced’ and describes herself as making ‘the kind of art that smells and burns, as opposed to an object you can own.’”

-Judith Wilson¹¹³

¹¹¹ See, for instance, her comments on how she came to name her *Rupestrian Sculptures*, one of the few permanent artworks that she made, not coincidentally on her return to her motherland: “[T]hey were named after goddesses from [Taíno] culture which was the original culture of the Caribbean area. I named them after goddesses to bring them back into the culture – to reactivate them. But *I didn’t study each goddess and then make the work. I just named them afterwards.*” Emphasis mine. Ana Mendieta, “Joan Marter and Ana Mendieta in Conversation,” 1 February 1985, excerpted in *Traces*, 230.

¹¹² Ana Mendieta, lecture, Alfred State University, New York, September 1981, excerpted in *Traces*, 208.

¹¹³ Wilson, 71.

One need not believe in magick for it to exercise a certain efficacy in the social ties that bind human beings to one another. As I have argued, I view Mendieta's *Rape Scenes* as a crucial juncture in her career that carries multiple connotations and several levels of significance: on one level of meaning, they are overwhelmingly powerful denunciations of rape—both a concrete historical example and the crime in the abstract—that appear in feminist art history both relatively early in the feminist art movement and in significant isolation from the larger networks of feminist art production; on another level, they are also artistic expressions of her understanding of the ethics of the nature-culture dialectic. And finally, they are magickal rituals, intended both as an apotropaic charm and an invective curse—a curse that carries its power through what I have called pathogenesis, the motivated conjuring of extreme, here aversive, emotion in another in connection with an idea or situation. I mentioned earlier in this essay that the magickal properties of the works operate through a form of sympathetic magick: this being magick whose effects manifest themselves through association, here between the recreation of a violent scene and actual violence.

The key word in the term “sympathetic magick,” I maintain, is not magick, but *sympathetic*. The etymological roots of “sympathetic” literally translate to “sensing together” or “feeling with,” and this is an operative condition of all of Mendieta's work, but most especially the *Rape Scenes*. The definitive “magick” at work in Mendieta's art is the magick of empathic, vicarious experience: the realization, on an affective and not merely cognitive or rational level, of our shared existence and the interconnection of our being with *all Being*. As the artist stated,

The viewers of my work may or may not have had the same experiences as myself. But perhaps my images can lead the audience to speculation based on their own experience or what they might feel that I have experienced. Their minds can then be triggered so that the images I present retain some of the quality of the actual experience.¹¹⁴

The core of Mendieta's working process is emotional resonance based on a sense of shared experience; her works, always created initially as personal expressions of spirituality and communion with natural forces, are meant to trigger an emotional response in the viewer pathogenically. It is precisely in the *gulf* between viewer and artist that their magick operates.

And it is also precisely where what I have called pathopolitics operates. To the degree that Mendieta's work is pathogenic, that is, an endeavor in sympathetic magick intended to spark affective resonance between two entities who have no other connection, her oeuvre is an exemplar of feminist pathopolitics. She summons associations from her audience in order to shake them up, to put new light on that which may otherwise be taken for granted, which is the way in which pathopolitical control operates, i.e. in mistaking for natural, and thereby internalizing affectively, what is always already culturally constructed. These are not always forces of overt, intentional manipulation, *per se*, but of the elision and collapse of meaning. They are the weight of shared experience collectively reiterated and interpreted. And to the extent that Mendieta's primary medium is this primordial force of shared experience, she is an artist, a mage, of pathopolitics.

¹¹⁴ Ana Mendieta, "Artist's Statement," Exhibition: *Ana Mendieta, Silueta Series 1977*, 5-23 December 1977 (Corroboree: Gallery of New Concepts, University of Iowa).

CHAPTER TWO

*Casus Luciferi*¹: Rationality, Identity, and Affect in the Early Performance Art of Adrian Piper

It can be mind-boggling to consider the nearly innumerable horrors that have been committed in the name of rationality, even if we just limit ourselves to the last century. Eugenics, phrenology, excluding women and people of color from the franchise, icepick lobotomies, electroshock therapy, prohibitions against “miscegenation,” strict policies of segregation, even the Holocaust—all these and scores of other atrocities had earnest proponents arguing that they rationally serve the best interests of society. Then when we consider the harrowing technologies that have been spawned by the forward march of scientific reason—tools of devastation like mustard gas, the machine gun, napalm, Agent Orange, and the atomic bomb—the ends to which rationality has been employed seem to cast into doubt the faculty of reason entirely. While concerns about the limits and applications of reason have found myriad voices in popular culture, they have been adopted with particular adamancy in the critical humanities, most especially since the emergence of the New Left but dating back as far as the beginnings of the Frankfurt School. And this critical stance to scientific rationality and Enlightenment models of reason is adopted for good reason: exposing and deconstructing devastatingly illogical ends of logical thought may hopefully cultivate an analytical faculty to recognize the emergence of latent forms of such treacherous reason before it causes too much suffering in our own time.

¹ Literally, “emissary of Lucifer,” loosely translated to “devil’s advocate.” As I shall argue, Piper’s feminist intervention in affect and the identity politics of the early 1970s depends heavily on a perhaps shockingly conventional definition of rationality, allying her to a brand of Enlightenment reason that has been the object of heavy criticism in much of the body of post-New Left humanities scholarship generally and feminist cultural studies specifically. As such, Piper as a feminist philosopher and Conceptual artist is in a significant sense the devil’s advocate of Enlightenment (i.e. Kantian) rationalism vis-à-vis feminist scholarship and feminist politics vis-à-vis 1970s Conceptualism.

But there has been one artist that pervades discussions of contemporary art—most especially considerations of progressive art dealing with identity politics—who is staunchly opposed to the reason-critical intellectual developments that are loosely categorized under the umbrella term “postmodernism,” and who has adamantly allied herself to a traditional Enlightenment, most specifically Kantian, interpretation of rationality. Not only does she have significant disdain for and distrust of postmodern thought equaling in passion only her admiration of Enlightenment rationalism, but she also argues that her understanding of rationality is a key component in the efficacious fight against racism, sexism, homophobia, and other ethical and epistemological defects and derangements in the judgment and treatment of other human beings. This woman, who today spends most of her professional time working as a Kantian philosopher and professor in Germany, is none other than Adrian Piper, veritable icon of antiracist art since her retrospective at the Alternative Museum in 1987. As I shall be proposing here, the cathartic and empowering process of esoteric ritual so essential to Mendieta’s *Rape Scenes*, which served to purge her fear and anger in the wake of a local atrocity—the rape and murder of a young woman who was a fellow student at University of Iowa—while mobilizing it for creative and constructive ends, is echoed in critical artwork by Adrian Piper, who in practically all ways except her feminism could be considered Mendieta’s inverse image.

Thesis and Notes on Methodology

Central to my argument in this chapter is my contention that the current literature on Piper’s art has not grappled sufficiently with the centrality of Kantian rationality to her artistic career and general project; further, none of the art-historical literature has interpreted her rationalism by utilizing her extensive body of philosophical work or connected these publications

to her art, even artworks that deal explicitly with philosophy. I aim to begin correcting this oversight in my argument, the substance of which can be abstracted in the following:

Art historians who have surveyed the developmental trajectory of Piper's artistic career have frequently observed that a marked and definitive change in the tone and content of her work occurred in the early 1970s. The shift has generally been described as a turn away from her early, largely apolitical, abstract, and explicitly Conceptual and Minimal artworks, toward an approach that prioritized a direct confrontation with the audience, typically concerning issues of racism and sexism. Her change in focus is often described as beginning in her 1970-72 *Catalysis* series, in which she orchestrated unannounced guerilla performances in highly public spaces—e.g. the bus, the library, the department store—and confronted her unwitting audience with outlandish and eccentric appearances and behaviors, attempting to challenge their preconceived notions of how a person should and should not act in public and pushing her viewers toward a reevaluation of their social expectations. Her concern with interpersonal interaction took up its definitively political scope and tone—one that has been a defining feature of her art ever since—in her 1973-75 *Mythic Being* series, which scholars tend to describe as a project involving her cross-dressing impersonation of a young, aggressive Black man in increasingly confrontational performances in spaces that could be described as stereotypically “White”: museums and galleries, exhibition opening parties, cocktail dinners, an Ivy-league college campus, and so forth. Her work following this series is then cast as a logical extension of these investigations of race and gender, though typically understood as more measured, precise, and nuanced in approach. This sharp and lasting change in her artistic methodology and subject matter is generally attributed to her politicization in the early 1970s in light of the US invasion of Cambodia; the politically motivated and state-sponsored police massacres of students at Kent State and Jackson State

Universities; and the closing of the City College of New York during the student rebellion, during which time she was an undergraduate philosophy student.

I will work to demonstrate that the turn that Piper's work took in the early 1970s, while certainly encompassing the issues broached above, needs to be understood in greater depth with reference to her overall career, and to do this necessitates looking more explicitly at the historical context and formal properties that have been largely underappreciated in the extant literature. Looking at her criminally underappreciated 1971 private performance *Food for the Spirit* and the oft-misunderstood Mythic Being series, I will argue that these early works both marked a turn toward the political as the literature has acknowledged *and* did the necessary personal and philosophical groundwork for her subsequent art. In fact, though the feminist art-historical literature dealing specifically with Piper's work in the 1970s and generally with the art of feminism often nods toward the conceptual collapse of the personal and the political as fully separate and distinct categories of experience, none of the literature on Piper has dealt fully enough with how important this collapse was methodologically for Piper's work during this period—and interestingly how this purgation of the personal and rendering it fully political was a necessary process for Piper to undergo in order to do the political work she later accomplished, in both art and philosophy.

The relationship between *Food for the Spirit* and the Mythic Being series should be understood as a kind of philosophical two-step dealing with the boundaries and relationship between the personal and the political, turning on a key issue experienced by professional women, especially professional Black women, for decades: while the personal is no doubt political, exposing it as such can also be a liability—socially, personally, and professionally. On the one hand, *Food for the Spirit* was an exercise in building the ontological and epistemic

foundations of her self in a time of ultimate self-doubt. In the midst of confronting Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in an extended period of intensive study, Piper began losing her faith in her own existence. This private performance was her mystical, ritualistic process of redefining and reaffirming the veracity and significance of her personal existence. On the other hand, Piper's Mythic Being series involves what seems to be the opposite goal: distancing herself from her own personal feelings and history in a dual process of 1) ascribing aspects of her personality to an externalized fictional creation, while also 2) adopting, through performance, characteristics of a personality with which she had no sense of identity. The performances considered together, I argue, are the prolegomenon of a project to cultivate in herself a certain apathy—in the literal sense of lack of emotion, not in the sense of indifference—that was necessary both for her own personal survival in dealing with the emotional traumas she had suffered up until that point *and* for establishing a methodological rationalism that would obviate any attempt to marginalize her thought or politics through ad hominem argumentation, ultimately revealing the political short-sightedness of those who would choose to attack her rather than rationally engage the content of her aesthetic and philosophical arguments. Her approach to artmaking, then, would make her one of the most avowed and self-aware practitioners of a feminist artistic practice of pathopolitics in contemporary art (as I am working to define it in this dissertation)—one geared explicitly toward drawing viewers' attention to the subliminal affective character of most prejudice in order for the viewers to critique self-consciously this typically unacknowledged aspect of their own psyches and its impact on their social relationships, all through rational means.

In an effort, therefore, to revitalize the interpretive nexus of her work from the early 1970s and restore the nuance of their historical significance, I will take a two-pronged, apparently contradictory methodological approach. As I have indicated, one of the primary

difficulties around studying Piper's work with a rigorous historicist methodology is her common refrain of the necessity of her meta-art² and her frequent assertion that most of the meaning she places on her own work is born of her retrospective interpretation of and rumination upon her art. Though I will be working toward a historicist reinterpretation of the aforementioned works, I will simultaneously establish them within the context of her later career and argue that they occupied a significant role in the success of her artistic and philosophical evolution. To do so will require breaking the typical paradigm of historicist methodology in order to insert Piper's later philosophical publication and artwork into dialogue with her work from the early 1970s. Such a move is born as much of my desire to honor Piper's own interpretation of her art—especially given the devious ad hominem ways in which her work has been read in many cases, which provides ample ethical concerns about methodology—as it is of my personal appreciation of her later mature philosophy and more didactic art and my attendant concern that art historians have given short shrift to the philosophical aspects of her artistic career. In a sense, I am methodologically walking the line between a firmly art-historical and a loosely philosophical approach in much the same way Piper walks the line between artist and philosopher, seeing the two as contributing to one another symbiotically with neither of the two monopolizing or exhausting the meaning and significance of her work. To do so will first necessitate briefly

² In her essay "In Support of Meta-Art" (published in October of 1973, reprinted in entirety in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume II: Selected Writings in Art Criticism, 1967-1992* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 17-27), she offers the following definition of meta-art: "By 'meta-art' I mean the activity of making explicit the thought processes, procedures, and presuppositions of making whatever kind of art we make." (Ibid., 17) One should not confuse this concept with the now-familiar concept of the artist's statement, for the artist's statement serves to explain the artwork itself and general intentions for creating it. Meta-art rather is a reflection on the artist's consciousness as an agent, not just *in regards to* a specific artwork, but *surrounding* it. Piper explains, "The work per se is without pragmatic value, and this is as it should be. If we are going to justify the activity, it can't and shouldn't be by reference to the product of our labor, but to ourselves as conscious and responsible agents. It is not the art but our role as artist that needs analysis." Ibid., 25. Artists serve a significant societal role as critical mirrors of social and cultural trends, Piper claims, since "...our activity epitomizes the social currents of this society..." Ibid., 26. It is precisely this activity that requires articulation, not the artworks themselves, since artworks are by Piper's definition aesthetic, not epistemic, objects, and as such the range of an artwork's significance is verbally ineffable.

looking at her art career preceding the performance works that will constitute the body of my analysis.

Spiral Out: The Flight of Abstraction

In her 1987 essay “Flying,” Piper engages in a self-reflective exercise of mapping her evolution as an artist, characterizing her work prior to her politicization in 1970 firmly within the realm of conceptual abstraction, uninterested in politics—though still wholly personal insofar as conceptual abstraction and analysis have always been a powerful passion of hers.³ While she does not intend to dismiss or demean the intellectual process of abstraction, she does cast it as a form of flight, both in the prosaic sense of moving upward independent of solid support and in the sense of escape from some force or entity—here, the social world and the particulars of politics. Her ultimate turn toward the social and political is understood as the necessary response to her sobering collision with the difficulties caused to her by the prejudices of art-world wheelers and dealers. In the essay, and consequently in art-historical literature, she describes how she had a modicum of success as a Conceptual artist—but only up until the point that curators and exhibition organizers attached the name “Adrian Piper” to her specific identity: a young, audacious Black woman. The consistency of withdrawals of support for her work upon hearing her voice or seeing her person effectively clipped her wings, Piper explains, and tethered her to the ground. Her work thus took on issues of social politics as a kind of survival response and coping mechanism, though her love of abstraction as a process never died—and, what’s more, never left her art.

³ Adrian Piper, “Flying,” in *Adrian Piper: Reflections, 1967-1987*, curator Jane Farver (New York: Alternative Museum, 1987), 24-33.

The art following her brief psychedelic period in her teen years—a short expanse during which she painted surrealistic paintings after experimenting with LSD—and preceding her Catalysis series rivals in pure abstraction and Minimal aesthetic the most esoteric work produced by her Conceptualist compatriots. Her 1968 *Sixteen Permutations of a Planar Analysis of a Square* is directly inspired by Sol LeWitt's presentation of *46 Three-Part Variations on Three Different Kinds of Cubes* at the Dwan gallery in New York earlier that year. Her piece is as bare-bones and austere as any Conceptual artwork LeWitt has produced, the text on the page being set off only by sixteen small-scale line-drawings representing the titular “subject”—a subject that stretches the relevance of the term with its formal simplicity and exhaustive reiteration. Likewise, an artwork of the same year titled *Parallel Grid Proposal for Dugway Proving Grounds* took a Minimal formal approach—utilizing the favored industrial materials of Minimalism, here monolithic steel beams connected with telephone cables forming a massive rectangular grid—that would evade political reading even with its tangentially political subject. The Dugway Proving Grounds were a frequent weapons testing area for the US military, and had within the prior year played host to a test of VX nerve gas, which had unintentionally been detonated too high in the atmosphere. The gas drifted through the hills of the local farming community and killed thousands of sheep. Therefore, so the logic went, the Minimalist construct would serve for the local population as a reminder of the potential threat lurking overhead—though Piper herself would be first to admit later on that works of this type would be inscrutable to all but the educated art elite who constitute the proverbial choir to which her early work preached.

These and other abstract Conceptual-Minimal works of her early career were concerned with two related ideas: first, provoking in viewers reflection on how much rationality depends on vision for notions of order, by playing conceptual order off of visual chaos; and the idea “that the particular encounter with another person or object provokes the subject to organize perceptions according to categories of information that necessarily diminish and misrepresent the infinite characteristics making the situation unique.”⁴ To a significant extent, these ideas bear in seed form the concerns her later art would tackle: respectively, the critique of our cultural and social reliance on visuality, particularly in encountering and judging others, and the ethical injunction to respect and attend to individuality and uniqueness in all pursuits, even the most abstract and universal, demonstrating among her most arcane art that none of her work is entirely anomalous or out of character.

Nevertheless, work of this ilk is quite removed from the trenchant, explicit, and didactic social critique for which she eventually became renowned. The faintest hint of social consciousness can be discerned in her first major series of works: the Hypothesis series, 1968-70. In these works, Piper took up another issue precious to Minimalism—namely, the investigation of phenomenology, relating space and objects to the particularity of the body and demonstrating the import of physical contingency to perception. An important distinction from traditional Minimalism, though, is that the body in question was not the viewer’s body, but rather her own. The idea behind each of the “situations” in the Hypothesis series was to track her experience in the first person as an “object” among others, albeit one capable of consciousness and self-consciousness. The works are visually austere and difficult: each has a sparse graph, laid on grid paper, measuring space over time with particular points on the graph marked with a photographic

⁴ John Bowles, *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 44.

insert documenting her visual experience at the charted point in time and space. The revolutionary potential of these works is underappreciated among discussions of Minimalism, for they opened up the entire world to the spatial and relational discernment of the Minimal phenomenological approach. Their revolution is not limited to Minimal aesthetics alone, however. The situations they documented, as John Bowles has argued in his monograph on Piper, were typically quite gendered, bringing feminized spaces or situations (shopping for groceries, watching a soap opera, moving around in the kitchen, etc.) into the context of high art, most specifically the world of Minimalism, which was more often than not heavily gendered toward machismo, with its industrial materials, hulking and brutal forms, and self-styled macho artists. Thus, Piper's work charted the spaces and objects of the stereotypically feminine world to a female body, turning the gendered discourse of Minimal aesthetics on its head, and marked the beginning of her foray into performance art.

Catalytic Agency

“I see now that the crisis and solution was the result of the invasion by ‘the outside world’ of my aesthetic isolation.”

-Adrian Piper, “An Autobiographical Preface,” in *Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Biography of an Art Object*⁵

As explained above, Piper underwent a sudden and profound politicization in 1970 that left an indelible mark on her artmaking practice. Like many of her artist peers, she no longer felt that creating art to hang on museum and gallery walls in exhibitions with little to no concern with political goings-on was something she could conscientiously continue doing. However, unlike many of her activist peers, she was wary of artist action coalitions like the Art Workers Coalition and forged her political agenda in relative isolation. She used tactics similar to those of the

⁵ The whole text of *Talking to Myself*, originally published in two editions in 1974 and 1975, is reproduced in Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968-1992* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 29-53. This quote is from *ibid.*, 31.

organized groups, such as withdrawing her art from exhibition walls and leaving statements regarding the political motive behind her decision in the art's place. But she ultimately felt that forcing art institutions to change would be of little use if art practice itself did not change.

It is at this point in her career—and really ever after this—that Piper turned toward making art that functioned as a catalytic agent, that is, something that can cause fundamental changes in other agents without itself being changed in the process. What's more, she began to think more formally about utilizing her own physical form as an art "object," especially in contexts that were not bounded by the confining walls of the White Cube, which often functions, in her perspective, to negate the potential for art to genuinely transform the viewer by inserting it into constraining narratives and contexts that focus too much on formal relations to other artworks and too little on social and psychological contexts. Her interest in art's transformative potential and general mistrust of traditional art-showing environments are two characteristics that did indeed emerge around the time of her politicization in 1970, which have remained prevalent in her art practice since their inception, and the typical narrative spun around the events of this year is accurate in these regards at least.

Still, it is somewhat surprising that the series in which these concerns were explicitly put front-and-center and in which she did her most experimentation with them—the Catalysis series of 1970-72— frequently gets only a passing mention in several art-historical accounts on her work. Part of this is likely attributable to the relative scarcity of the performances' physical documentation. Not only were few of her art-actions documented by a photographer Piper hired for the purpose—mainly out of fear that having a photographer present might make the performances evidently contrived and thus still their catalytic potential—but also the artist found still photography simply uncondusive to capturing the important aspects of such performances,

namely the organic reactions of unsuspecting audience members. Some of the photographs that are frequently published in articles and books discussing the *Catalysis* series frankly lend themselves better to humor than to artistic insight. In *Catalysis IV* (1971), for instance, Piper stuffed as much of a red bath towel as she could manage into her mouth, to the point where her cheeks ballooned out like those of a squirrel hoarding nuts, and let the rest hang out of her mouth. She then boarded a bus during the New York rush hour and rode as if nothing was off about how she looked. Four of the five documentary photos show Piper seated next to a fashionably dressed young White woman. Though the next woman over steals a confused glance over at Piper, one can tell that the leather-clad young woman is trying her absolute hardest to pretend that Piper is not sitting next to her, looking practically everywhere else on the bus but to her right where the artist sits.

In an interview with Lucy Lippard in 1972, Piper discussed the *Catalysis* series and the rationale behind her seemingly outlandish behavior. Despite the oddball character of the art, evident in such photographs as those described above, what comes through in the interview is an endearing sense that she genuinely wished to reach through to people with the art, that she felt this is at best a rare achievement in typical art contexts, and that she wanted the artwork to affect her on a personal level, as well.⁶ One of the performance experiences she relates in the interview is telling. In (for this moment in her career) typical eccentric fashion, she wore an extremely baggy sweatshirt, under which she piled in as many helium-filled Mickey Mouse balloons as she possibly could, until her physical form seemed grotesquely bulging and awkward, and proceeded

⁶ Here as elsewhere when dealing with Piper's seemingly self-referential art, one must bear in mind the distinction, repeatedly made by Piper, that the artist-performer Adrian Piper is not identical to Adrian Piper the person. Therefore, claims that the art object itself undergoes no change can be squared with equally important claims that she wanted to undergo changes in her personality as a result of the artworks: the catalytic agent is the artist-performer-qua-art-object Adrian Piper, not the person who shares the proper name.

to ride a full subway car. At one point in the performance, she asked a nearby man for the time, and she was shocked to see him react perfectly normally: he simply gave her the time and made no issue of her apparently abnormal form. Reflecting on the experience, she explained, “This was very enlightening. I decided that was a worthwhile thing to go after. Somehow transcending the differences I was presenting to them by making that kind of contact...”⁷ Here we see what I would contend to be the definitive metaethical principle of all her work: the goal of treating all human beings as people regardless of the apparent differences they present to us, even if those differences are difficult, absurd, or frightening to comprehend.

Other scholars have characterized this tendency of hers as the aim of “tackling xenophobia”—xenophobia being her preferred word choice when discussing the tendency to react negatively to those whom one deems different than oneself, and its attendant tendency of treating this difference hierarchically (i.e. all with trait X are better than all with trait $\neg X$)—racism and sexism being paradigmatic examples of xenophobia. But this locution, of describing her aim as that of “tackling xenophobia,” mistreats a metaethical principle as an ethical principle, and thus to a certain extent misses the point. This is to say, with less philosophical jargon, that the goal of her work is not necessarily to establish an anti-xenophobic approach as a moral principle, which even she admits may not be a possibility for the human creature, being so limited in rational faculties. Rather, she would argue that cultivating this attitude is the necessary starting point of all morality, the standpoint from which ethics must proceed: in order to approach ethics in a manner that can transcend self-contradiction, logical inconsistency, and fallacious rationality that treats itself as if it were rational (what she calls pseudorationality⁸), we

⁷ Lucy Lippard, “*Catalysis: An Interview with Adrian Piper*,” *The Drama Review* 16.1 (March 1972): 77.

⁸ For a discussion of pseudorationality and its fallacies, see Adrian Piper, “Xenophobia and Kantian Rationalism” (Berlin: Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation [APRAF herein], 1991).

must *begin* from a point where humans are always treated as ends in themselves, as a definitive bound to the discourse, and never merely as a means to an end.

Her concept of pseudorationality is a key principle in my argument, inasmuch as her goal is always to obviate pseudorational processes of reasoning and belief-formation in the viewer so that genuine ethical considerations can begin under the aegis of rational thought. What she calls pseudorationality I would broaden and encompass under a term of my own: *pathological thought*. I propose this term not only to expand the concept of pseudorationality beyond the boundaries of strictly philosophical discourse but also to suggest the affective nature of much putatively rational thought. Pseudorationality is intended to expose erroneous reasoning that believes itself to be founded in sound reason, yet the explanation for how the process of exercising reason goes wrong is vaguely defined and essentially left at accepting a Kantian principle about the self as sufficiently explanatory (i.e. reason functions in part by reinforcing its own structure, therefore exercising a kind of confirmation bias). I would suggest with *pathological thought*—that is, logical thought subject to formation through πάθος (*páthos*), i.e. feeling or emotion—that the faculty of reason has its own affective nature, and if when the affect of rationality is unexamined, the rigor of rational thought can be swayed by emotions, most notably those evinced by prejudice. Bearing this in mind, to say that the goal of Piper’s art is to eradicate xenophobia not only proposes as an existential ethic something that cannot be proven, namely that xenophobia can be definitively eradicated from practical reason (i.e. the reason we use in daily life to motivate our actions) under the influence of pathological thought, but also posits as an end-point that which must permeate our foundations. That is to say: from Piper’s well-reasoned perspective, all ethical discourse must be conducted in a space in which

xenophobia has been rooted out through the conceptual definition of the discourse itself and the exposure of and vigilance against pseudorationality.

Like most of her work, the *Catalysis* series then is part of Piper's larger metaethical project. Her concern is not with prescribing morality, but rather with defining the spaces in which a properly constructed ethical discourse can begin. Xenophobia (itself the result of pseudorational generalization and pathological thought) is inimical to ethics, proposes Piper, since any ethics properly conceived must take into account human difference and variation, even irreconcilable difference, if it deserves to be called an ethics⁹, and xenophobia refuses to deal reasonably with difference, but rather only pseudorationally or pathologically; this is not however the same as saying that our primary ethical principle must be anti-xenophobia. That such a fine-tuned difference can be discerned in works that involve a grown woman going out in public with a towel stuffed in her mouth may seem the stuff of farce, and perhaps that is why most scholars only deal with the *Catalysis* series to mark a transition into explicitly political work. But I would contend that in a certain sense these works embody Piper's metaethical goals in their purest (*viz.* their most abstract and general) forms. One can begin to see this in a moment of uncertainty during her interview with Lippard, reflecting on the *Catalysis* project:

The scary thing about it for me is that there is something about doing this that involves you in a kind of universal solipsism. When you start realizing that you can do things like that, that you are capable of incorporating all those different things into your realm of experience, there comes a point where you can't be sure whether what you are seeing is of your own making, or whether it is objectively true.¹⁰

⁹ Here especially Piper's Kantian inclinations pervade her definition: every ethics must will itself to the universal, the Kantian paradigm contends, for an ethics without the universal is not an ethics but mere idiosyncrasy. This is the logical significance of the maxim in Kantian philosophy—though an ethical maxim must conform to the universal law of reason, it is up to every individual to arrive at every ethical maxim for herself through the operation of her own reason. This is how one must make sense of the claim that the maxim is a universal law personally conceived.

¹⁰Lippard, "An Interview": 77.

Not only does this quote demonstrate a communicative vagueness that is entirely out of character for Piper, whose precision of expression is difficult to rival, but the fundamental fear it hedges on is also highly telling: the fear that she is projecting the goal she hopes to achieve onto her interpretation of things, that it is merely a figment of her imagination, shows that she fears she is approaching things too generally for audiences to attach existential significance to her efforts. Tellingly, this quote comes right after she raises the fact that she has yet to go through and document all the reactions she has experienced in her spontaneous audiences. This may shed some light on why she found the encounter on the subway so powerful: it told her that her effort to elicit existential recognition from her audience despite her absurd manifest difference *could succeed*. Though at times clumsy and frequently awkward, the works in the Catalysis series most fully approach the abstract metaethical ideals that would guide her career.

Her works broaching topics of racism and sexism in more pointed and delimited form may approach xenophobia *too specifically*, from her philosophical perspective, though the sacrifice in conceptual generality may be necessary for political efficacy, which is reflected, I would argue, by the artworks most preferred in the literature (not to mention the timing of her rise to art-historical recognition following the creation of her most prosaic and didactic works dealing with identity politics in the 1980s). The level of abstraction of the metaethical discourse in Catalysis may best be left to the philosophers—but I would argue this is also why the Catalysis series is so revealing of her philosophy on the purpose of art. There was still another purpose to her art during this period in her career that, though often mentioned in her publications, is rarely discussed by art historians. She wanted to transform her audience with her art, certainly; but she also counted herself among the members of her audience. The transformative work she wished to perform in her art during the early 1970s, I argue, was

philosophically necessary, from Piper's perspective, in order to reach viewers in the ways she ultimately wished to.

On the Natures of the “Artwork” and the “Audience”

Just as the Catalysis series came to fruition at a time of serious political enlightenment and enlivening for Piper, so did it usher in a revolution in her approach to the idea of art and the notion of art's audience. In *Talking to Myself*, which served as the meta-art context she constructed for her Catalysis works, a palpable disdain for the typical exhibition context permeates the body of her text. As she explains parenthetically, “I follow Kant in contending that what cannot be categorized cannot be recognized; and ... the very presence of a traditional art context has the function of pre-categorizing a work before it is even seen.”¹¹ She attributes to the exhibition context a categorical tendency to limit the meaning a work can have, and by extension the possibility of genuine transformation in any given viewer, by doing a large proportion of interpretation before the viewer even encounters the artwork. This served as her rationale for abandoning the exhibition environment and trying to forge an art praxis in non-art contexts.

Having set for herself the artistic goal of effecting change in the viewer and determining that typical art contexts are out of bounds because they are uncondusive to this end in light of their constraining effects on artistic meaning, she strives to define what forms art can take that satisfy these conditions. If an artist has a particular goal in mind, the means most in line with fully realizing that goal must be utilized. In reflecting on the relationship between artist and artwork, Piper claims, “Separating the work from the artist (giving it discrete formal/external existence) gives it independent status as an artwork but decreases its potential strength as a

¹¹ Piper, *Out of Order I*, 50.

catalytic agent.”¹² Borrowing the terminology of the “discrete form” from the Minimal aesthetics that had up until this point in her life occupied her attention, she proclaims the following:

The characteristics of any discrete form that occupies its own time and/or space apart from the artist limit the viewer’s reaction to the work. Verbal documentation and verbally transmitted information have impact almost exclusively on an intellectual, contemplative level. The impact of a static sculptural form is on an almost exclusively physical or sensory level: When a strong work manipulates a set of physical conditions in an exciting way, it is a way that produces a unique affective response in the viewer.¹³

Her claim here is doubly significant, for it relays not only that she had an increasing sentiment concerning the insufficiency of discrete forms for the kind of existential transformation in the viewer that she set as her goal, but also that what she was interested in was primarily affective changes in the viewer, not changes in the viewer’s intellect or sensorium. Therefore she determines that “I like the idea of doing away with all discrete forms and letting art lurk in the midst of things.”¹⁴ She is quick to note, however, that she does not simply mean “art as life” or the personality of the artist, but rather that the parameters and conditions of execution themselves function as the artwork.

Considering the catalytic ends toward which she wished to mobilize her art, however, we need also to consider the audience. Reflecting on what can most move a viewer, Piper claims, “The strongest impact that can be received by a person in the passive capacity of viewer is the impact of human confrontation (*within oneself or between people*). It is the most aggressive and the most threatening, possibly because the least predictable and the least controllable in its consequences.”¹⁵ (Bear in mind that confrontation is not defined strictly as interpersonal, but inclusive of the interpersonal.) Deciding that the impact of human confrontation is the greatest

¹² Ibid., 33.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 37n6.

¹⁵ Ibid., 34. Emphasis added.

and that discrete forms are not best disposed to effecting profound change, the art medium Piper has in mind is clearly performance. Though her fixation on catalysis remains the same, there is a decided shift in her attitude toward performance as the essay proceeds. Part of this was yielded by her experience performing the Catalysis series: “But one result of doing these works was the experience of complete and intense alienation from my audience. At the same time that I existed in and for that audience, I became aware of the extreme disparity between my inner self-image and the one they had of me.”¹⁶ Eventually she divides her approach to performance into two distinct orientations separated by time: “(1) myself as solipsistic object inhering in the reflective consciousness of an external audience or subject; and (2) my own self-consciousness of me as an object, as the object of my self-consciousness.”¹⁷ The shift in concern and orientation, I claim, is a shift from a frightening solipsism, in which perspective is lost and the gap between self and Other seems insurmountable, to a rationalistic objectivity—here being defined in the philosophical sense of an object or set of relations that exists independently of the observer and that can potentially be understood equally by any subject. And importantly for my argument, the shift to objectivity happens when she starts approaching herself as an object of consciousness and making herself into her own audience.

“An Object in the World Among Others”: Internalizing the Other in *Food for the Spirit*

“Formerly, the problem was that of solipsism, the balance between my own consciousness and a problematic external world. That seems to have resolved itself by the possibility of assimilating as much of that external world, as other, into my sense of myself. The more I assimilate, the more easily I am able to see myself as ‘an object in the world among others.’”

-Adrian Piper, *Talking to Myself*¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., 47.

¹⁷ Ibid., 50.

¹⁸ Ibid., 52.

In the midst of the Catalysis series, Piper produced another performance that, I argue, played a definitive role in the shift from the solipsistic to the objective in Piper's art praxis: 1971's *Food for the Spirit*. Moreover, it laid the groundwork for her later work by validating to herself the objective existence of her own personality not as a mere accident of a world of objective relations but as a full agent—an accomplishment that would allow for her later cleansing in the Mythic Being series of her own affect in her working process to achieve a truly rational methodology with which to combat pathological thought. The *Food for the Spirit* performance is as mystical as it is mysterious: while studying, practicing yoga, and engaging in transcendental meditation in the midst of a juice-and-water fast, Piper was grappling with Immanuel Kant's infamously dense and challenging *Critique of Pure Reason* (herein First Critique). One of the seminal works of modern philosophy, it sets the goal for itself—which many argue Kant successfully achieves—of utilizing theoretical reason to define the limits of pure reason itself, to resolve what can and cannot be claimed as the productive faculties of speculative reason and what these can and cannot do, to demarcate and analyze the principles of logic, and to establish the character of the transcendental subject, most especially its way of knowing the world and itself.¹⁹ While reading Kant's First Critique, Piper had an existential crisis that nearly drove her to the point of madness. In order to counteract the depersonalizing and derealizing effect the philosophy had on her, she had to go to great efforts to reassure herself of her personal existence, so the account goes, by photographing herself in various states of

¹⁹ It must be noted that I used three terms in this sentence which are, for all intents and purposes in philosophical discourse, synonymous: theoretical reason, pure reason, and speculative reason. All three refer to that form of reason which functions purely *a priori*, that is, prior to actual or possible experience. In other words, these refer to intellection without regards to experience whatsoever, hence the term "purely *a priori*." All analytic deduction—i.e. all reasoning that proceeds from a given concept to its attendant logical constituents solely with reference to the definition of the concept alone, for the purposes of explication—is by definition *a priori*.

dress/undress in a full-length mirror while reading the passages in Kant that were troubling her sense of self and recording herself doing so on a tape recorder. She explains:

The *Critique* is the most profound book I have ever read, and my involvement in it was so great that I thought I was losing my mind, in fact losing my sense of self completely. I would read certain passages that were so intensely affecting and deep that I would literally break out into a cold sweat.... Often, the effects of Kant's ideas were so strong that I couldn't take it anymore. I would have to stop reading in the middle of a sentence, on the verge of hysterics, and go to my mirror to peer at myself to make sure I was still there. Because I was on a two-month juice-and-water fast at the same time, this seemed to be a serious question. It felt as though I was on the verge of abdicating my individual self on every level, becoming Kant's analysis of the Transcendental Unity of Apperception in the *Synthesis of Appearances according to Rules given by Understanding for Reflective Self-Consciousness*.²⁰

This private performance in her loft was not mentioned publicly for a decade after its actual execution, and not exhibited until her retrospective at the Alternative Museum in 1987; even then, it was only exhibited in part, as only the photos (of a total fourteen) in which she was dressed were shown.²¹ In all public showings, the work consisted of the photos, ordered from lightest to darkest in tone—irrespective of her states of dress or the order in which they were taken—interspersed in a binder with pages torn from her copy of (Norman Kemp Smith's translation of) the *First Critique* heavily marked with her annotations. The pages torn from Kant outnumber the images with the last nine leaves consisting solely of pages from Kant.²²

Art-historical accounts of this work have interpreted it in a few limited ways: as a successful attempt to ground the self in its own embodiment in the face of abstract universalism and highly rational, subjectivist metaphysics; as a failed attempt to do this; and as a powerful proclamation of and claim of ownership on the female body and sexuality made by a Black woman. The most successful argument, though certainly not the only convincing one, is

²⁰ Piper, "Food for the Spirit," in *Out of Order I*, 55.

²¹ See Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, 207.

²² See *ibid.*, 209, 217-18.

Bowles's: "Emerging within *Food for the Spirit* as a rational subject, Piper grounds her claim to the transpersonal universality of Kantian metaphysics in personal experience. However, by emphasizing the need to repeat her attempts to master the material conditions of experience, she poses her claim in the form of a dilemma she cannot resolve conclusively."²³ Distinct from most accounts then, Bowles argues that the failure of photography, as an always-already past index of an event experienced in real time, to prove Piper's existence to herself is actually and counterintuitively the work's greatest success: she occupies universal rationality and the claims of transcendental subjectivity with her radical contingency as a body, made all the more radical by her sex and race when one considers Kant's chauvinism regarding the irrationality of women and Africans.²⁴ Nevertheless, one must not discount arguments claiming the endeavor to be a successful affirmation of self, and be a little wary of Bowles's dismissal of these arguments given the precarious terrain he treads: speaking from his subject-position as a White man making an unequivocal claim on the success of a Black woman's self-affirmation. Still, his argument is powerful insofar as it makes a rare earnest attempt to contend with Kantian philosophy and square it off with meditations on the ontological incertitude of indexical media; the political precariousness of making his argument from his subject-position should not discount it out of hand, especially since he is well aware of the problematic nature of such a dynamic.²⁵ Ultimately, all of these approaches and arguments have their merits and their respective historical importance bears examination, which I intend in part to do in this section.

²³ Ibid., 206.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See *ibid.*, 12-14.

The current literature on *Food for the Spirit* falls short in at least two interrelated respects, though. On the one hand, efforts to establish the performance as a formidable project in self-affirmation are commendable, particularly given the historical and political realities of the piece: it is the first known nude self-portrait photography created by a Black woman artist.²⁶ On the other hand, it is not obvious in the literature how well art historians have grasped exactly what kind of self-affirmation it involves from Piper's perspective, and this fundamentally has to do with the object of Piper's fears while doing the performance in the first place: Kant's transcendental idealism and the arguments put forth in its construction in the First Critique. It is not readily evident how seriously scholars have taken her concerns, given the way they are typically framed; the notion that she genuinely feared she was literally physically fading, as most literature on the piece has described it, is difficult to take at face value. How could an intelligent and grounded grown woman possibly fear in any solemn sense that reading a book would make her vanish without believing in arcane magic, true and wholly solipsistic metaphysical idealism, or radical divine intervention? Even Bowles's attempts at explaining the kind of self-affirmative project in which she was engaged come off as overreaching: he describes it as an attempt to claim for herself variously either her own agency and rational self-determination; her equal participation in pure reason and transcendental subjectivity; her right to see her own experiences as embodying the universal that serves as the archetype of the transcendental self; and/or her own humanity and egalitarian personhood in contradistinction to Kant's demeaning opinion on the irrationality and thus incomplete personhood of both Africans and women.²⁷ While he

²⁶ Ibid., 207.

²⁷ The importance of the latter of these claims should not be understated: "Given Kant's explicit endorsement of the subordination of wives to their husbands, and the exclusion of women from intellectual or political rights, it is no surprise that many feminists consider Kant to be an exemplar of philosophical sexism. [...] For example, Kant describes the scholarly women who 'use their books somewhat like a watch, that is, they wear the watch so it can be noticed that they have one, although it is usually broken or does not show the correct time.' Piqued by this comment, the reader might turn to Kant's earlier works and find his view that women's philosophy is 'not to reason, but to

demonstrates a better sense of the situation than many other scholars, I would argue that his argument concerning these claims either risks patronizing Piper or does not comprehend Kant in a manner analogous to how Piper herself understands the philosopher.

Regardless of which scholar with whom one wishes to take issue, the abovementioned problem depends on a more fundamental problem: there has been no effort in the art-historical literature to perform a thorough and complete formal analysis of the work. In the final analysis, scholars have contended formally only with less than half of the piece, namely the photographic self-portraits. Granted, the pages torn from her copy of Kant are not visual art in the same sense the photographs are; however, Piper-the-artist is above all else a Conceptualist, and the verbal has always played a prominent role both in Conceptual art and in analyses thereof. As such, by not grappling with the pages Piper annotated and tore from her copy of the First Critique for inclusion in *Food for the Spirit*—for after all, the photographs themselves, alone or together, have never been considered the final artwork, only the binder containing both photos and pages from her copy of the book—no scholar has truly formally analyzed the artwork.

What is most significant to grasp about Piper's understanding of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* for our purposes here is Kant's demonstration of the necessity of a transcendental subject and the establishment of not just the possibility of but importance and indispensability of synthetic *a priori* judgment to the formation of knowledge. (The transcendental subject must not be confused with actual subject that exist in our world: it is a theoretical device used to prove the nature of the human sensorium and its relationship to the world, or more precisely, it is the schematic foundation of human experience shared by all human subjects.) It is in light of the

sense.' And, 'I hardly believe that the fair sex is capable of principles.'" Robin May Schott, "Introduction," in *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant*, ed. Robin Mary Schott (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 5; 10-11. Note that the quoted claims within this quotation are Kant's own words.

logical certitude and ontological universality of the transcendental subject as the fundament of all human experience—in comparison to which all subjects must appear merely incidental to the world, a meek result of objective physical contingencies—that Piper felt she was losing her sense of her own objective existence.²⁸

I grant to my reader that, no matter how mystical its context, such a simple and apparently straightforward performance as *Food for the Spirit* seems altogether too innocent to constitute demonstrative evidence of the attainment of such vertiginous metaphysical insights as those crudely summarized in the appendix, let alone to demonstrate that these form the cipher to Piper's career. The fourteen images constituting the visual component of the completed artwork are redundant to the point of borderline seriality, their almost-identical, simple compositions echoing the hypnotic repetition of a Warhol. In each image, the reflection of a decidedly passionless Piper in a full-length rectangular mirror gazes out of the picture plane at the viewer. She holds her camera over her navel, somewhat above elbow-height and just below her breasts. Piper's figure cuts off at the bottom of the picture plane slightly above her knees, while her head occupies a roughly central position with hair draped behind her neck. We see in each image a bookshelf that is absolutely packed with books, perhaps serving an iconographic function similar to books in Renaissance portraits of intellectuals such as Hans Holbein the Younger's *Portrait of Erasmus of Rotterdam* (1523): demonstrating the expansive intellect of the subject. All the images are quite dark and, ordered in increasing darkness, her form is barely discernible in the final image. Wires hanging down a wall are visible to the right of the mirror, and a window with Tudor-style cross-filamentation disappears behind the left edge of the picture plane, though it is

²⁸ For a more thorough exegesis of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, especially his demonstration of the necessity of the transcendental subject and synthetic *a priori* judgment than I can reasonably provide in an art-historical argument, please see the appendix of this dissertation.

only readily visible by means of light from outside the loft in half of the images; in fact, most reproductions use digitally brightened versions of the images, and next to no contexts reproduce all fourteen.²⁹ Though she has been petite her whole life, she is particularly slight in these photographs, likely due to her abstemious fasting. In the images in which she appears fully nude, her hip bones are noticeable, though due to lighting only barely. The clothing she does wear in the other images is conservative and darkly colored, variously: high-waisted underwear, a skirt that falls past the picture plane, and a sleeveless blouse. Given the deadpan presentation and austere and faintly gloomy mood of all the images, her nude figure is anything but erotic (though shockingly this has not stopped the appropriation of her nude photographs in a more or less erotic context).³⁰ The compositional repetition only heightens this mood, and Piper's wasting form begs a hint of pathos, which may nevertheless be held in check by the awareness of her mystical purposes: a form of spiritual transcendence through rigorous fasting and yogic exercise, made all the more pronounced by her concomitant, perhaps even loftier, intellectual pursuits.

But just like Warhol's silkscreens, the minute differences between each reproduced image are invaluable to a fleshed-out understanding of the work. The two most readily apparent features that change from image to image have already been noted: lighting conditions and her level of (un)dress. The former constitutes the ordering principles for the photographs included in the binder. Her stated intent in having the images proceed toward darkness was to lend the intuition to the viewer that her physical form was disappearing, which establishes the importance

²⁹ The only source I have found that does reproduce all images in roughly their original brightness and contrast levels is the catalogue to her 1999 retrospective. See Adrian Piper, *Adrian Piper: A Retrospective* (Baltimore: Fine Arts Gallery, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 1999), 130-31.

³⁰ See the (admittedly humorous and somewhat informative but nonetheless decontextualized) coffee table book, Melissa Harris and Francine Prose, *Master Breasts: Objectified, Aestheticized, Fantasized, Eroticized, Feminized by Photography's Most Titillating Masters...* (New York: Aperture, 1998). See page two for the reproduction from *Food for the Spirit*.

of the visibility of her physical form to the work's meaning.³¹ It is easy to see, then, where art historians have previously grounded their interpretation of the work: what seems to be at issue in light of this assertion is the bald fact of Piper's physicality, the literal presence of her body within the world. One can also easily deduce how Bowles arrived at his conclusion regarding the work's structural failure actually to confirm her bodily existence, since the final photograph leaves the viewer with at most a faint impression of Piper's presence, if indeed any can be comprehended at all in spite of the inky blackness that defines the image, forming an at best nebulous telos for her image. The phrasing of Piper's published statement about the performance likely also lends to this interpretation: "I would have to stop reading in the middle of a sentence, on the verge of hysterics, and go to my mirror to peer at myself to make sure I was still there. Because I was on a two-month juice-and-water fast at the same time, this seemed to be a serious question."³² As I shall argue, though, what was really at issue wasn't the simple fact of her bodily existence, but her *particular* individuality as a person, the ineffably embodied mind and soul Adrian Piper.

How then do we make sense of the nudity in the work; how could the dress of the body contribute to or detract from the definitiveness of its presence in the world? Few scholars have had much to say on this, even Bowles, who includes the term "desire" in the subtitle to the chapter dedicated to *Food for the Spirit*, the other component of the subtitle being "transcendence"; though the latter is discussed at some length, the former is rarely mentioned at all. The three instances in which substantial discourse around desire is mobilized in his chapter concern: the historic fact of the work containing the first known nude photographic self-portraiture done by a Black woman artist; the unsettling fact of the appropriation of one of the

³¹ See Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, 217.

³² Piper, *Out of Order I*, 55.

photos in the decontextualized *Masters Breasts* volume; and the relation of the bare facts³³ of her particular identity—as a young Black woman artist—to what he claims this work in fact accomplishes, namely championing her particularity in the face of Kantian universalism as the only means of her access to the universal, thus, in his account, undermining the strictly *a priori* character of transcendental subjectivity and defying Kant’s ideological³⁴ chauvinism of rationality. Bowles, therefore, provides the most grounded interpretation of the purpose of her photographs and the significance of her nudity in some of them, particularly if one wishes to do her appreciation of Kant any degree of justice.

Nevertheless, even Bowles’s comparatively sophisticated argument fails to establish that what Piper wanted the photographs to proclaim is her embodied identity as a Black woman artist, and that the effort at self-proclamation proceeds from those grounds to (fail to) achieve the abovementioned. His reasoning goes as follows: “...if the photographs included in *Food for the Spirit* represent the artist’s body, then this is evidence that the artist seeks proof of her existence that photography fails to provide.”³⁵ First, even if the antecedent in his conditional proposition (that is, the statement proposed in the “if” part of his “if/then” statement) is valid, it is not clear

³³ I reuse the phrase “bare fact(s)” several times in this chapter and mean for it to carry a special meaning, specifically in reference to existential philosophy. Inasmuch as we are agents in the world, there are what we can call “bare facts” of our existence: the most significant bare fact of existence is mortality, which provides a formative, if chiefly adversarial and defiant, focal point of subjectivity and in Jean-Paul Sartre’s existential philosophy. No matter what we may believe or how we may act, we will always be subject to this bare fact. Likewise, in a more socially conscious existentialism, race, ethnicity, gender, and other visually stratified markers of identity can be considered bare facts of existence. Though we may have some agential role in shaping how these manifest socially and personally, the fact remains that we will remain in regimes of gender, racial, ethnic etc. identification and therefore in some way subject to prejudices that may hold over from such identification. To claim, then, that Piper’s race and gender are “bare facts” of her existence is to convey that fundamentally she is a social being who “means” in a social semiotic system. How these bare facts come to mean, and specifically what they mean to her self-identity, are not merely given, though.

³⁴ As opposed to argumentative or constitutive chauvinism, i.e. his chauvinistic views have little direct relation to his arguments, and in fact what relation they in fact have to his arguments is contradictory at best: his own philosophy undermines the ideologies he otherwise espouses, as Piper stridently points out in most of her writing on his social nescience.

³⁵ Bowles, 210.

that the consequent logically follows: that she was seeking proof of “her existence”—here apparently implying bodily existence, given the phrasing of the antecedent. Even in the context of Piper’s statements, this is not a logically necessary consequence of the antecedent, since there is enough ambiguity and obscurity in the statements she has made to give us pause before concluding with certainty that her bodily existence is what is at issue. More fundamentally, though, the very claim in the antecedent is problematic to begin with; in fact, ample evidence provided by Piper herself would oppose reading her image as focused upon the sheer facticity of her body in the world, let alone her body specifically considered as raced and gendered. Although she is first to admit that the racializing and gendering structure of the gaze frequently overdetermines her position in social ontology, she contests just as adamantly that such a gaze and the oversimplifying schemas it deploys have a positive role in her self-conception and daily functionality.³⁶ Even more basically, to return to Kant, inasmuch as the sensory apparatus/sensibility is concerned, embodiment as such is a characteristic of the transcendental subject, and by extension losing herself *bodily* to her ruminations thereupon would be far from her mind if we are to follow the logic she presents: that it was her reading and understanding of Kant’s First Critique that caused her such feelings of emotional overload.³⁷ In contradistinction, I would argue that the photographs do not merely represent the artist’s body: they represent the particular *subjectivity* of Adrian Piper, the person, not exclusive of her race or gender, but certainly not focused upon these bare facts of her existence.

³⁶ For instance, see the interview Adrian Piper, “Adrian M.S. Piper, Wellesley College,” in *African-American Philosophers: 17 Conversations*, ed. and interviewer George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 1998), specifically pages 69-70, whereupon she discusses how her race and gender are rarely on her mind, and it is only when someone forces her to reflect on them—normally through an instance of racism or sexism—that they actually are. This holds *a fortiori* for her youth, given how she characterizes herself in all her later accounts of this period as totally ignorant of her race and gender and how they factored into people’s evaluations of her, which did not significantly shift until she had begun applying for jobs after receiving her PhD from Harvard.

³⁷ It stands to reason to emphasize that the particulars of embodiment—the type of body a subject actually occupies—are by no means given, let alone a definite attribute of the transcendental subject.

As explained above, the phrasing of her statement regarding *Food for the Spirit* is likely one of the most significant factors contributing to the interpretation of the project as seeking confirmation of her bodily existence. What is not usually grappled with is what immediately follows the two sentences from her statement cited above: “It felt as though I was on the verge of *abdicating my individual self on every level*, becoming Kant’s analysis of the Transcendental Unity of Apperception in the Synthesis of Appearances according to Rules given by Understanding for Reflective Self-Consciousness.”³⁸ Her phrasing here is critical: she does not imply she was simply afraid of vanishing physically and transcending incorporeal, but rather that she feared losing her selfhood in its individual particularity. What may keep many art historians from analyzing this sentence is the opacity of that concept to which she feared she was losing her individuality: the Transcendental Unity of Apperception in the Synthesis of Appearances according to the Rules given by Understanding for Reflective Self-Consciousness. In order to understand this cumbersome concept, we should break it down into three components: “transcendental unity of apperception”; “synthesis of appearances according to the rules given by understanding”; and “reflective self-consciousness.” The latter of the three is easiest to comprehend: reflective self-consciousness is simply self-awareness in the conventional sense, with our attendant notions of existence, self, agency, and continuity of personality. The “transcendental unity of apperception” refers to consciousness under the necessary conditions of experience, all of which, Kant argues, logically imply and necessitate one another: the necessity of the unity of experience to consciousness (without which would be perceptual chaos, effectively an essential lack of perception); the self that this consciousness implies (without which experience is impossible); the unity of the self that constitutes consciousness (without

³⁸ Piper, *Out of Order I*, 55.

which a *unitary* experience is impossible); and the necessity of the transcendental aesthetic, of space and time, to that unity of self and experience (as demonstrated in the appendix). Simply stated, then, what is denoted by the term “transcendental unity of apperception” is the archetypal modality of consciousness constituting the transcendental subject and the ways Kant argues that subject must experience the world, if the subject is to experience the world at all. The “synthesis of appearances according to the rules given by understanding” is the most complicated term, primarily due to the obscurity of the rules given by understanding. As mentioned in the appendix, these rules and their proof are what constitute the majority of the book, and going into too much detail will only lead down an unnecessary (and unnecessarily long) tangent. The very basic argument is fairly straightforward, however, and is basically an extrapolation of the conceptual underpinnings of our understanding of objects—i.e. that we can only make sense of our experience of the world with a foundational network of general concepts that can map experience into a systemic, generalizable networks—to the general structure of the understanding as such. Kant explains,

All experience also contains, besides the intuition of the senses through which something is given, a **concept** of an object which is given in intuition, or which appears in it. Concepts of objects in general thus underlie all empirical knowledge as its *a priori* conditions, and the objective validity of the categories, as *a priori* concepts, rests on this very fact that through them alone experience is possible (as far as the form of thought is concerned).³⁹

Extending from this to the structure of understanding itself, Kant states that all judgments must have one characteristic each of quantity, quality, relation, and modality, and abstracting from this, all thought must have this character, since no intelligible thought can be conceived without them. And given the nature of the subject-object relation and what pure reason can say with

³⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Marcus Weigelt, based on the translation by Max Müller (New York: Penguin Classics, 2007), B126, A93. All quotes from and citations of Kant in this dissertation refer to this edition, and unless otherwise noted, all emphasis is Kant’s own.

sufficient ground—namely, the character of experience must be within the subject herself, since the subject cannot say anything definitive with certainty about the ontology of the world apart from her perceptions—we can logically mobilize Kant’s transcendental argumentation to conclude with reason that these categories must be solely within and proper to the subject, not the object or the world at large. These rules must constantly and necessarily synthesize the manifold of appearances—meaning that they provide the conceptual structure ordering the perceptual chaos with which we would otherwise be inundated—and present these to the pure reason that alone belongs to the transcendental unity of apperception. Thus, the lengthy phrase quoted in Piper above roughly translates (and simplifies) to the heart of transcendental idealism, being the *a priori* transcendental subject, writ large, devoid of human particularity, personality, and character—as these are by definition *a posteriori*. If a pure (human) consciousness can be conceived, emptied of all individuating traits and left only as a form-function, this is what it must look like. As I like to say, it is the subject as such, not the subject as “such-and-such.”

What this tells us is not that Piper was afraid her physical body was vanishing per se—or perhaps to say the same: in a technical sense she was, but only to the extent that her physical form is the particular manifestation of her person in the world of experience and not the abstract, pre-experiential theoretical construct of the transcendental subject. She feared losing herself to this construct, as if she was becoming it. But this may not be a much more satisfying answer, given that this, too, may seem at face value just as ridiculous a thing to worry about as physically vanishing. After all, Kant himself would scoff at such a concern. The transcendental subject is not a “real” thing, all things considered, insofar as it is something wholly *a priori* and more of a framework that the flesh-and-blood human fills in the world of actuality, a ground rather than an agential potentiality, a starting point and no possible telos. It is less akin to a model guiding our

subjectivity—as may be misunderstood by the use of the term “subject” in the transcendental subject—than it is to Plato’s Ideas guiding actual Being-as-such: it is like the form of chair, whose being is not contingent in the least upon any given *actual* chair, or anything an actual chair can become, but that whose structure forms the schema by which any chair in the world we occupy can be understood as such, indeed that which makes a chair a chair. Given that Piper’s understanding of Kant, even at that young age, much exceeds mine, it would be at best misconceiving the matter and at worst patronizing to assume that she was literally concerned with becoming the transcendental subject, much less physically vanishing.

It is only after establishing this that we should (and we must) return to the self-portraits, for they hold the key to resolving the apparent conflict between what Piper wrote regarding *Food for the Spirit* and what Kant’s philosophy means. The precise choice of media and the structure of the gaze in the photographs constitute the principal elements that may solve the mystery, which I argue demonstrates that Piper did not fear literally becoming the transcendental subject, but rather losing the objectivity and certainty of her own individual character—a character that, compared to the absolute, structural certainty of the transcendental subject, is at once uncomfortably contingent, fragile, fickle, arcane, and imprecise. We must bear constantly in mind that the medium in which she chose to create her self-portraiture is photography; therefore, I wish to return to Bowles’s argument concerning the ontological indexicality of the photograph in order to amend it. While a painting or a clay sculpture may also be indexical, they are not indexical in the sense that photography is: the index these media register is one related to the artist’s body like self-portrait photography, but unlike photography it is specifically the artist’s body qua medium of expression, in most cases literally “the artist’s hand,” purveyor of the artist’s Sublime Idea—the Romantic artifact that formed the basis of Abstract Expressionism’s

fetishism of creative genius, and Pop Art's deliberately mechanical backlash against it. A self-portrait created in painting or sculpture would thus bear a relationship to Piper still structurally mediated by her mind as a creative agent: insofar as the index of painting or sculpture is the artist's hand in the full meaning of that term, the index they would literally objectify, no matter how mediated by her body, would only be one of her aesthetic and conceptual creation. Given that these still bear an inseparable relationship to Piper's mind—the very mind that must structure her experience of the world, the mind fretting over its ontology in *Food for the Spirit*—their independent existence as objects in the world, independent of her own being-in-the-world, would objectify (i.e. concretize in an object) her creativity independent of her, but would *not* objectify her being as such. Even this former objectification may be hoping for too much from a painted or sculpted self-portrait: such things could, after all, be counterfeited, the idea made into a mere imitation created by a hand unrelated to the alleged artist. Regardless of the Romantic mythos shrouding the radical individualism of Abstract Expressionism, even the artworks in this lineage potentially bear no literal, objective relationship to the artists themselves. The artworks' authenticity can be reasonably argued and even practically guaranteed through the most expert studies of painterly style, records of provenance bespeaking the highest precision, the most resolute systems of physical security—but the specter of forgery still haunts them, faintly but irredeemably. Their indexical properties are simply insufficiently objective if one is looking for the kind of epistemological certitude that interests someone as philosophically inclined as Piper.

Photography, however, holds an altogether more fundamental level of objective existence in the world. Not only is a photograph, like any physical artistic creation, existentially separable and objectively distinct from the being of the artist who created it; but a photograph also holds a significantly more objective indexical relationship to what it represents. The process of

photography is widely known to involve the intake of photons through a lens, focusing the energy on a physical (during the 1970s, at least) medium coated with a photosensitive chemical reagent. Exposure causes the reagent to develop areas of light and dark (and sometimes color) directly related to the light that is shined onto it: a one-to-one simulacrum of that which occupies the space in front of the lens, from that particular perspective. The medium then is indexically related to the physical world, to other objects (in this case, to actual photons at specific wavelengths bouncing off actual surfaces) that objectively exist regardless of the camera's operator. A self-portrait photograph stands in an objective indexical relationship to the artist's body; what it registers is not the movements of the artist's hand guided by her creative genius, but rather the physically independent image of the artist herself. It is true that photographs can be edited and manipulated. But in the 1970s, manipulation was technologically limited since this period had no tools for digital montage and manipulation such as Photoshop: all manipulation was physically dependent on further light exposure onto another chemically reactive surface. Layering images still required the actual existence of another filmic image, itself an index physically related to something that was actually in the world at the time of exposure. And all other processes like overexposure, underexposure, drawing on a piece of film, etc., still involve the creation of an original image to form the creative fodder for manipulation. Simply put, the indexicality of a photograph holds a more fundamentally objective relationship to the world of things than any other artistic medium, aside from perhaps performance. But performance does not involve representation, strictly considered, but presentation: the artist "represented" in a performance is, if highly artificial and context-specific, nonetheless the selfsame human being as the one creating it, and no physical mediation of being and likeness is present; such mediation is strictly contextual, a product of artificial constraint and understanding, not ontological. Bowles is

right to argue that the ontology of the photographic index is fundamentally stuck in the past tense; that it can never assert the continued (or even present) existence of the represented; that it is incapable of true objective proof. But in the world of representation, this is as close as one can get to such things as these, and that is the noteworthy dynamic, not the fact of its ultimate ontological failure.

That the physical indexicality of a photograph was the significant factor in Piper's choice of self-representational medium is corroborated by her use of two other media: the voice recordings (now destroyed), which hold a similar indexical relationship to objective sounds as photographs do to objective light; and the annotated pages from Piper's copy of Kant's *First Critique* bearing her handwritten commentary. While these two media are much easier to forge than a photographic image, this is inconsequential when one considers the relationship the three bore to each other: each one marked a specific existential moment of ideation on Piper's part—her confrontation with a particular passage in Kant that unsettled her psychologically—and recorded that moment through three specific, interrelated indexical idioms. The photographs and voice recordings, in fact, were created contemporaneously: she snapped an image of herself as she recorded herself reading aloud a specific passage from Kant, which in turn was included in the final notebook in the guise of an annotated page torn from her personal copy of the *First Critique*. The three media work together to create an independent record of her existence as a particular being in the world, generally, and specifically a particular moment in her life as she contends with the abstruse philosophy she was then reading. Her individuality, as the real person Adrian Piper existing in space and time in her particular form, is captured in an objective manner essentially impossible through any other artistic medium; and crucially, with these indices of her existence in the world, she was able to establish a subject-object relationship with an object that

bore an objective relationship to her being. Thus, through the mediation of precise corroborating indexical artifacts, she was able to transcend the typical relationship of a subject to itself—subject-subject—and relate to herself “*as an object in the world among others.*”⁴⁰ While looking at the mirror may provide roughly the same image as that captured on film, with the added advantage of being experienced in real time and not always-already past, the actual presence of the form in the mirror is necessary for the mirror image to exist: once the form is physically removed, so too is the image; it is in this sense a mere phantasm. Only the indexical means employed in *Food for the Spirit* could sufficiently establish her particular existence in the world in a satisfactorily objective fashion.

It is in light of these considerations that her decision to photograph herself multiple times in multiple states of dress begins to make sense. The repetition of the photographic and voice-recording process creates a timeline of sorts demonstrating her existence repeatedly—even performatively, through objective artifacts. The overall small but comparatively significant differences in the precise position of her image vis-à-vis the picture plane—due to variations in her stance, orientation, bearing, and aim—evidence the subtle variation of which only a live photographer is capable. Capturing her image at different times of the day not only similarly demonstrates the passing of time, and thus establishes her objective, particular, and sustained existence in the world; they demonstrate her existence in *a* world, *her* world: her loft in Greenwich Village that was occupied at that time by nobody else but the artist herself. This placing-function is only heightened by the various states of dress seen in the final photographs. On the one hand, the depiction of her clothed form documents her tastes in fashion and basic self-presentation, these being a central if not defining characteristic of the personality. Though

⁴⁰ Piper, *Out of Order I*, 52, emphasis added. It is worth noting that the essay from which this is pulled, “Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object,” was written after performing *Food for the Spirit*.

Piper frequently lamented the subjective nature of taste and its ultimate contingency, surely *that* she has tastes is objective, especially if this can be established and documented via objective means without her personal presence; in other words, these photographs will long exist past the death of their creator and provide a glimpse, as infinitesimal as it may be, into an actual moment in her life and the choices she was then making. On the other hand, tastes are indeed fickle and do change with time. Her body, however, remains more or less the same. Though features may shift and transform, the body depicted in the nude self-portraits is hers and hers alone: it is the selfsame body as the one living and breathing today in Berlin, and no other; and it will one day cease to breathe and become part of the Earth. There never has been and never will be another like it that can claim identity with that which is represented in these photographs.

Ironically, then, the philosophical argumentations presented in such a thesis as Bowles's may stand in a similarly abstruse, inaccessible, and existentially oblique relationship to "ordinary life" as the esoteric Kantian philosophy presented above and maintained by Piper—the latter of which is often decried as dehumanizing in non-philosophical humanities discourse, often by the same authors proposing what may be considered equally contra-existential perspectives as the former, albeit considered as such from an altogether different orientation. This is meant not to imply that "ordinary life" is any the less rife with ideological skewing and hefty predeterminations as the philosophies just mentioned, but only to throw the two into a position of relativity to what might (and usually must) pass muster in mundane but nonetheless consequential and existentially pertinent considerations.

* * * * *

As explained in the epigraph of this section, *Food for the Spirit* was performed during a time when Piper was preoccupied with creating a more objective relationship to the world “by the possibility of assimilating as much of that external world, as other, into my sense of myself. The more I assimilate, the more easily I am able to see myself as ‘an object in the world among others.’”⁴¹ I have argued that part of the project of *Food for the Spirit* is establishing with as much certainty as possible her objective existence as a particular person in the world of actual experience in the face of the threatening ontological certitude and determinations of the experience-structuring transcendental subject—therefore validating her personal history as objectively as possible. Doing so involved enabling an (in all senses) objective relationship to herself by means of the objectifying the distancing mechanisms of simulacral self-representational media and the repetition of this process of self-representation and self-objectification. This simultaneously establishes the certainty of her being-in-the-world as much as possible, given her philosophical predilections and agreement with Kantian meditations on pure reason, and further defines the limits of her being, both ontologically in the context of particular subjectivity versus transcendental subjectivity and (in tandem with the *Catalysis* series) socially in the context of the self versus the Other. The work, then, devolves on resolving in one project with as much confidence as possible what Piper can know about herself, about the Other, about the transcendental subject, and about the ontology of the world, not least of all the social world.

We must, however, acknowledge and deal with the fact that, while this was in many ways a personal project for Piper that holds a pivotal position in her career both as artist and philosopher—doing what could be considered philosophical groundwork for her later

⁴¹ Ibid.

explorations—this was a private performance that was also made public at a later date. Though it took some ten years for this performance to be seen by the eyes of anyone other than Piper (and perhaps her close social relations over the years), the fact that it was publicized at all indicates it was meant to have some relatable significance to parties other than Piper. The potential meanings the work could hold for any given viewer are manifold and quite likely vary from person to person, more so than typical since the work involves such intense philosophical contexts and such arcane methodology and purposes. Several reasonable interpretations of the work present themselves in even a cursory confrontation with it: showing an artist-philosopher's work in her sophisticated and earnest dialogue with Kantian philosophy; demonstrating a particular person's anxiety while exploring the overwhelming logical consequences of compelling philosophical concepts (itself demonstrative of the affective nature of all rational thought); presaging a young woman's future career as a professional philosopher with prodigious international rank among Kantian philosophers and metaethicists; marking a turning point in an artist's career to direct considerations of identity and social positionality in the dense web of interpersonal interaction and meaning-making; instancing the historically first known nude self-portrait photography by a Black woman artist; situating a talented young artist in a roughly contemporaneous nexus of feminist confrontations with the socially constructed self via nude self-portrait photography, such as Eleanor Antin's 1972 *Carving* or Hannah Wilke's 1974 *S.O.S. (Starification Object Series)*; and so forth. All of these interpretations hold more or less true, but I would argue that they fetishize the artwork and render it into an object with significance primarily or exclusively in terms of historical, artistic, and philosophical relations, when the primary purpose of the work, as I have argued above, is in short to establish and objectify Piper's personhood. I would argue along with this that its most significant meaning, in the context of the

artwork-viewer confrontation, involves its formal and philosophical import as a primarily, perhaps even strictly, personal encounter. It is only with this aspect of the work in mind that we can truly begin to contextualize the work in a broader network of historical significance and dialogue, especially within her expansive career.

The pages from Kant, along with Piper's statements about *Food for the Spirit*, give us some contextual sense of Piper's personal encounter and struggle with Kant; but the photographs provide us a chance to have an encounter, albeit highly mediated and in most meaningful senses one-sided, with Piper. That the encounter with Piper is structurally mediated should not deter us from considering the significance of the work in this context, for all encounters with the Other are structurally mediated in some way. Aside from pragmatic issues—such as the medium of the encounter (e.g., a Skype video call versus a chat in person in a cozy corner of the local coffee shop), differences in social upbringing or cultural contexts (e.g., British working class versus American upper-middle class), or linguistic concerns (e.g., differences in levels of language mastery or even simply familiarity with colloquial contexts)—there are significant philosophical considerations, especially in light of the explicit philosophical context of this particular encounter.

The problem of other minds, closely related to the problem of solipsism, has long occupied the minds of philosophers: how can we know with any degree of certainty that other minds exist—let alone that they exist in a fashion similar to ours—especially when we only have direct access to our own experiences (and only in a limited capacity, at that)? The communicability of ideas and emotions, the significance of our feelings about other people and their basis in any reality outside our own subjectivity, the problem of establishing an ethical code that operationally treats others with the decency afforded to persons and can be applied

consistently despite our relations to people, the increasingly relevant questions of artificial intelligence and nonhuman animal consciousness: these are only a few of the issues raised by the question of other minds, before we even begin forming a solution to the problem itself. Kantian philosophy certainly doesn't resolve the problem ontologically—but then again, it doesn't have to do so. Though posited as essentially necessary, establishing the existence of things in themselves—let alone the nature and details of that existence—is not a central concern for Kant, because regardless of the actual ontology of anything besides our own mind, it is necessary to act “as if” the answer is established, for the consequences are too disruptive not to act thusly; otherwise no action is possible without either significant internal inconsistency or possible ethical violation. In simple terms, we need to be able to assume the basic accuracy of our perceptions of the world. Furthermore, Kantian philosophy demonstrably provides us with a functional (if sketchy) representation of what other minds *must* be like: the psychological model proposed by the transcendental subject, including the ever-important rational coherence of the self—along with the tendencies of that self to react against that which threatens its coherence—and certain necessary ways of relating to the reality (we must at least assume) we share. While we may never be able (philosophically, at least) to establish without doubt *that* other minds exist, we do know with sufficient reason, Kant argues, many of the basic characteristics those minds must have *if* they exist, and we are reasonably coerced by ample ethical and practical considerations to act as if they do regardless of what we can or cannot know. What we do not and cannot know is confoundingly, indeterminately expansive, and our means of understanding other minds are always limited and constructed by sociocultural context, the inherent ambiguity and variability in semiology both personally and socially, and the limited access to and understanding of our own minds exacerbated by what we can assume is an analogous self-

opacity in others. Still, when we sincerely attend to these issues, we are reminded that our access to the experience and subjectivity of the Other is always mediated, but nevertheless we are not cut entirely adrift.

No matter the philosophical context, the photographs formally beckon us to consider Piper's personhood and relate ourselves to it, with the very structure of the images placing us in such a relationship to her. Unlike the self-portraiture utilized by Wilke or Antin in the works mentioned above, in which the artists are entirely separate from the photographic apparatus and strictly in front of the lens, Piper holds and operates the camera: her *actual* form is behind the lens, and before it is only the reflection of her image in the mirror that we see from the camera's perspective. While we are in many ways meeting Piper's gaze as viewers, the photographic structure of the work places us in Piper's position, and indeed gestures toward us to consider ourselves *as if* we were Piper. We simultaneously look *at* Piper and look *as* Piper, in much the same way as we are positioned as both spectating viewer and sitter-royalty, both the subjects of the royalty and the Royal Subjects, in Diego Velazquez's *Las Meninas*.⁴² Empathy is sutured into the structure of the gaze and placement of the viewer (as simultaneously before Piper and as her), with her vulnerability amplifying the effect by begging from us some degree of fellow feeling. This only becomes more apparent when we return to the philosophical context: what we can know about the self and the Other based on the meditations on the transcendental subject forms the common ground, our access point to the beginning of an understanding of the subjectivity of others and how experience molds their perceptions. When it comes to the metaethical context of Piper's art, being the sort of groundwork that we are required to examine and lay down before

⁴² For a discussion of the sophisticated viewing dynamics of the abovementioned Baroque masterpiece, see Michel Foucault, "Las Meninas," in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994; Pantheon Books, 1971; Random House, 1970), 3-16.

we can enter into an ethical discourse proper, this work doesn't simply invite us into it: it shows us that we structurally always already are in it the moment we turn our gaze her way and consider the person creating this performance, and asks us to bear that always in mind.

While ethical concerns may be far from most people's minds in day-to-day affairs, any kind of interaction with the Other that depends on a degree of mutual understanding requires what Piper calls modal imagination:

The term *modal imagination* is intended to remind us of our capacity to envision what is possible in addition to what is actual. We need modal imagination in order to extend our conception of reality—and, in particular, of human beings—beyond our immediate experience in the indexical present; and we need to do this in order to preserve the significance of human interaction. To make this leap of imagination successfully is to achieve not only insight but also an impartial perspective on our own and others' inner states. This perspective is a necessary condition of experiencing compassion for others.⁴³

A few things are important here: first, the use of the term “indexical present,” another term of Piper's vintage, referring to our experience of the present moment and the things in that experience which do or can occupy our attention at any given moment, with emphasis on what is in fact occupying our attention and structuring our experience in the present. If you are reading and comprehending these words, your indexical present is at the moment filled with this sentence, which you are reading on a computer screen or piece of paper, and mine is occupied with writing it on my laptop—though this present will have passed for me by the time these words are read by another. So for Piper, modal imagination is a necessary feature of our consciousness if our experience in the indexical present is ever to refer to anything beyond what is in fact given to our minds in the immediate environment through literal, present-tense experience; according to her, this holds *a fortiori* for envisioning the minds of others.

Additionally, and crucially for someone who more or less sides with Kant's deontological ethics,

⁴³ Adrian Piper, “Compassion, Impartiality, and Modal Imagination,” *Ethics* 101.4 (July 1991): 726.

modal imagination, when appropriately applied, yields strict impartiality, which “is to ascribe an evaluative predicate to a subject on the basis of the attribute or attributes the predicate denotes rather than on the basis of some other, irrelevant attribute which one happens to value or disvalue.”⁴⁴ Not only does this view of impartiality fly in the face of opponents of Kantian ethics who assert that his ethical modality is inhuman, impossibly detached, and dismissive of contextual factors in yielding ethical judgment; it also forms the metaethical foundation of all of Piper’s work on ethics, including but not limited to the ethics of Other-judgment and self-evaluation through heuristics of identity (based on, for instance, race and gender) and her opprobrium for the moral evil of xenophobia—the two constituting the primary targets of her artwork concerning identity and social relationality.

To approach Piper as a person, then, in our encounter with her in *Food for the Spirit*, we necessarily utilize some degree of modal imagination, though it is by no means a given that the level of imagination we employ will be appropriate to the ends to which we use it. In order to work toward an appropriate use of modal imagination, we must respect the personhood of all parties under consideration, including ourselves, bearing in mind that “when we refer to someone as a person, we ordinarily mean to denote at the very least a social being whom we presume – as Kant did – to have consciousness, thought, rationality, and agency.”⁴⁵ Full respect for all parties’ personhood and the appropriate use of modal imagination will impart an impartial approach, which for Piper forms the necessary metaethical standard for the creation and deployment of any substantive moral theory and provides the indispensable support for the use of compassion as a moral emotion.⁴⁶ In her creation of *Food for the Spirit*, Piper worked to lay the foundations for

⁴⁴ Ibid., 727.

⁴⁵ Piper, “Xenophobia and Kantian Rationalism,” 26.

⁴⁶ For compassion to serve not as a moral obligation but as a moral impetus—which it clearly does in our experience—it is necessary that impartiality is merely a metaethical principle and not itself an ethical principle, and

centralizing impartiality in her metaethics, both professionally and personally, by objectifying herself and proving to herself the substantiality of her own personhood in the world. And by publicizing this performance, she beckons us as viewers to do the same, both for ourselves and in respect to her when we approach the work, through formalizing the process of modal imagination in the encounter with her carefully crafted image. Important for my argument here, this performance began in response to a panicky sensation of personal dissolution while reading Kant's First Critique, and the actual performance itself was an attempt to hold this feeling in check in order to contend productively with the philosophy she was confronting. This is the first of her works, then, explicitly formalizing what I call an apathetic artistic methodology: she was working to rein in her emotions in order to approach the world—and herself—impartially.

Purpose versus Motive in Art-Historical Interpretational Methodology: An Illustrative

Ethical Detour

“My ability to understand you depends on my ability to confront my own deep fears, fantasies, and angers, and to observe their expression in my behavior. My ability to confront my own responses depends, in turn, on my observation of yours, and on my recognition that we share some of these responses in common, however much I deplore them.”⁴⁷

“Instead of attending to the meaning and implications of the work, one discusses – or speculates on – the motives and beliefs of its producer as a guide to the meaning of the work itself. This leads to odd hybrid locutions such as ‘the work tries to...,’ ‘the work assumes...,’ and so forth, in which mental states that properly belong to a human subject are ascribed to an aesthetic object instead. This fetishizes the work to an exaggerated and confusing degree.”⁴⁸

-Adrian Piper, “Ways of Averting One’s Gaze”

this postulate forms part of Piper’s proof of impartiality’s role as a metaethical principle: “That strict impartiality is a metaethical requirement of adequacy on the application of any substantive moral principle and not itself such a principle implies that the fact that one’s experience of identifiable compassion for one or many sufferers will move one to ameliorate their suffering does not by itself commit one to ameliorative action on their behalf: feelings of compassion may need to be balanced against considerations of efficiency, rational prudence, or other moral obligations—such as those to friends or family—and may not always override them.” Piper, “Impartiality”: 755-6n22.

⁴⁷ Adrian Piper, “Ways of Averting One’s Gaze,” in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume II: Selected Writings in Art Criticism, 1968-1992* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 132.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

The above discussion and that to follow broach an issue that has historically been a problem facing critical interpretation of performance art generally and Piper's work specifically: namely substituting the psychology, beliefs, motives, and identity of the artist for the artwork itself as the object of interpretation. This is an especially threatening potential problem for an analytical approach such as mine that proposes to interpret the affective politics of specific artworks and the cultural contexts with which they are in dialogue, and merely stating that it is not my intent for the artists themselves to be the object of my discussion will not preclude such from being the case in fact. It is worth undertaking a brief detour, then, in order to clarify some of these issues and specify the methodology I am utilizing here more precisely.

The difficulty some critics have had in the past with refraining from a substitution of artist for artwork in their discussions of performance and body art is especially pronounced in the case of Adrian Piper. In fact, Piper has found this to be such a significant issue in interpretations of her art that she has published on the issue in response to specific publications on her work at least thrice, though I refer the reader to both her publications and the publications to which she is responding to form a judgment on the issue.⁴⁹

What is worth noting here is that Piper highlights two dangers in her rebuttals to others' reviews of her artwork: first, critics' ascription of the emotions they felt in response to seeing Piper's artworks to the works themselves, rather than realizing and owning their culpability in their own reactions to Piper's provocations; and second, based on this projection, critics may

⁴⁹ I say "at least" because there are numerous articles in which she refers more or less obliquely to such interpretations of her work. For the two specific cases, see Piper, "Ways of Averting One's Gaze," in *Out of Order II*, 127-46; "An Open Letter to Donald Kuspit," in *Out of Order II*, 107-25; and "It's Not All Black and White" (Letters to the Editor), *The Village Voice*, 9 June 1987, 4, 6. She responds in these articles to Elizabeth Hess, "Ways of Seeing Adrian Piper," *The Village Voice*, 26 May 1987, 100; Hess, "Reply," *The Village Voice*, 9 June 1987, 6; and Donald Kuspit, "Adrian Piper: Self-Healing Through Meta-Art," *Art Criticism* 3.3 (September 1987): 9-16. It is worth noting that Kuspit edits the journal *Art Criticism* in which his piece on Piper—whose publication Piper opposed—is published.

make conclusions about the maker of the works, without explicit anchoring in Piper's art. Regardless of the contexts, the purpose of such maneuvers in criticism, as Piper perceptively explains, is to put the artist in her place in order to write off the social and cultural criticisms her works make, which may and usually do implicate the critic. Significantly, Piper notes, "Their groundless fantasizing is rationalized by constructing yet another racist stereotype: that of the Other as enigmatic and inscrutable, inaccessible to the ordinary context of shared comprehension..."⁵⁰ They thereby foreclose the possibility of useful and constructive dialogue to reach a mutual understanding in the same gesture that they justify their speculations that ultimately work to dismiss what Piper has already said in order to establish an interpretative baseline; this works to silence her at the same time as it discredits her.

To expand on the previous quote, we as art historians should not be discouraged from working to understand the artist's creative intent in making a work because of philosophical questions about the inscrutability of the Other,⁵¹ the fear of ad hominem interpretations that affix evaluative judgments to the artist, or concerns over assigning too much interpretational hegemony to the artist. Although each of these hesitations has a valid point that should be honored, it is perhaps more dangerous to cut the artwork entirely off from its creator, thereby fetishizing it and foreclosing an exceptionally helpful interpretational cipher: the artist herself. Furthermore, by closing down the artwork as a specifically *communicative medium* (instead of simply a mostly blank artifact open to interpretation and situation in whatever context can be somewhat reasonably justified), we both silence the artist who created it and sterilize the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 138.

⁵¹ Piper, it should be noted, even as a philosopher thinks the questions of other minds and of solipsism, though interesting and worth exploring, have functionally no practical significance: "The deep philosophical problems of private language, other minds, and solipsism do not necessarily engender correspondingly deep practical problems when the effort to understand another is committed, persistent, and sincere." Piper, "Impartiality," 740.

potential ethical concerns an artwork can broach as a specifically *social* artifact. These are avenues that are worth exploring, and we are overly self-limiting our interpretational apparatus, and by extension the significance of our interpretations, by dismissing them for one or another reason: as Piper would be first to proclaim, it is both more than worth the effort to try to understand the Other and absolutely necessary if we are to live full and ethically conscious lives.

What can we do to limit the chances of ethically dubious and critically baseless explorations of art that work to silence the artist? The most basic pitfall to avoid is essential misrecognition of purpose as motive. As Piper explains, in an exploration of practical reason and action that expands upon Kant in his *Critique of Practical Reason* (the Second Critique herein), “A *purpose* for acting is the goal, end, or intentional object to the achievement of which my behavior is directed. A *motive* for acting is the psychological cause of action, i.e., that which moves me to behave intentionally.”⁵² It is within the occupational purview of the art critic and art historian to work to discern the purpose an artist has for creating a piece; motive should rarely factor into such analyses, perhaps having a place only in polemical or editorial pieces, and when it is invoked, the only way to avoid the risk of either slandering the artist or pigeonholing her is to base one’s arguments concerning motive only on what can be traced back to the explicit assertions of the artist herself. An artwork can afford us ample insight into an artist’s purpose, and indeed this is one of the proper roles of art in contemporary culture; but an artwork itself can never be used solely as the basis for the ascription of motives to that artist.

To apply these reflections to my own undertaking, my dissertation is primarily concerned with the affective politics of limited examples of 1970s feminist art and the culture with which they dialogue. Inasmuch as affect is embodied emotion, it is not straightaway unreasonable to

⁵² Adrian Piper, “Moral Theory and Moral Alienation,” *Journal of Philosophy* 84.2 (February 1987): 112.

conclude that this means I am dealing primarily with people's psychological constitutions and emotions. This however would be to mistake an oblique object of reference for the central object of analysis: I am working to evaluate how cultural artifacts mobilize affect—how they frame it, interpret it, expose it, conceal it, work to shape and mold it, and to what sociopolitical and cultural-political ends they do all this—and am concerned with analyzing actual affect only to the extent that it serves to better highlight the politics of its origination, use, and interpretation. Thus, while I have been discussing apathy in the context of interpreting Piper's performance works in the early-mid 1970s, the "apathy" to which I refer is not an apathy I presume Piper in actual fact to feel, but more a methodological approach to the specific work I am interpreting her as doing: it is not an emotion as much as it is a function, less a noun than a verb. The purpose of this, I have so far argued, is a) to minimize as much as possible the influence of her own emotions on the work she is trying to do, in an effort to exact as much objectivity in her approach as possible; and b) to lessen the possible traces of her personal psychology in the artworks she creates in order to diminish the possibility of viewers ascribing their own feelings in reaction to viewing her work to the artist's psyche—the feelings of viewers being the primary means by which Piper works to expose the insidious pseudorationality of xenophobia and the excessive influence that heuristics of prejudice have on evaluations of self and Other and by extension social existence (in short, what I am calling pathological thought in social and cultural discourse). This has been an important and previously underexamined aspect of a critical methodology dealing with social provincialism and reticence to self-examine it critically, both for Piper specifically and for many feminists generally, who often risk ad hominem backlash and efforts at gaslighting in response to their provocations which expose the presence of prejudice and discrimination within the social, cultural, and political functioning of society. And this has

been especially important and surprisingly unexamined in one of Piper’s most significant and well-known bodies of work—one which takes the newfound subjective certitude Piper established in *Food for the Spirit* and works to decouple traces of the personal from her working process, to mobilize apathy as methodology.

“[N]othing but an inverted reflection of my own”⁵³: Mythicizing Psyche and Overcoming the Self in the Mythic Being Series

“To become the Mythic Being was to elicit, through contacts with others and recollection of my own personal past, a masculine version of myself. It was to invert the significance of the events that have formed me, and to invert their sexual effect on my psyche.”⁵⁴

“I’ve been doing posters in unlimited editions, centered around the image of the Mythic Being as a static emblem of alien confrontation. He appears as an abstract, generalized, faintly unholy emblem of expressed hostility, fear, anxiety, estrangement. His obsessions are the failure of friendship, of dialogue; self-interest, mistrust, and mutual indifference; dishonesties, evasions, polite surfaces, deflected contact. He addresses his obsessions directly to you, because it is you he confronts and you whom he reproaches. The content of his obsessions are shared by all of us: If they were continually acknowledged and articulated, they would transform our interactions into acts of violence – perhaps eventually transform the world that causes them. Thus he is a permanently hostile object, alien to our superficial sense of things, but he is also the personification of our subliminal hatreds and dissatisfactions, which blind and enslave us by being subliminal.”⁵⁵

-Adrian Piper, “Notes on the Mythic Being, I-III”

The Mythic Being is one of Piper’s most iconic creations, and has been discussed in innumerable contexts. In fact, the Mythic Being is so ubiquitous that one may mistake his meaning as straightforward, and resultantly the interpretive nexus surrounding him may have calcified. His appearance, though, is indeed iconic and relatively direct, looking like a character from a then-popular Blaxploitation film come to life, walking off the screen and into the flesh-

⁵³ The full quote reads as follows: “To contemplate his image is, despite myself, to wonder what that image conceals. It is to hypothesize character traits inferable from the image itself. But those character traits have a curious familiarity; his surface may be nothing but an inverted reflection of my own.” Adrian Piper, “Notes on the Mythic Being I-III,” in *Out of Order I*, 125.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

and-blood world of nuanced social relations and complex, layered emotions. The four definitive iconographic features that appear in every one of his representations are a loosely styled Afro or Natural⁵⁶ as it was then called (which is actually a wig that Piper wears), a (false) moustache, aviator sunglasses, and an ever-present cigar, normally dangling from the corner of his mouth. When the representation of the Mythic Being is a photograph of a cross-dressed Piper out and about in the world, he can also usually be seen sporting flip-flops and flared jeans, and given the delicacy of her features, Piper normally embellished her eyebrows with an eyeliner pencil.

The Mythic Being comes to us in three different guises in a multiplicity of artworks: a) documentary photographs of live performances on the streets of New York and Harvard's campus; b) photographs of Piper as the Mythic Being in several different contexts, embellished with charcoal crayon on their surface; and c) the *Village Voice* ads that were the series' first recorded incarnation. In the latter, with a total of seventeen ads actually executed and published roughly once monthly from September 1973 until February 1975,⁵⁷ the image is always the same: a shot of the Mythic Being from mid-torso up, localized to the lower left corner of the picture plane, in a dark zigzag-striped sweater and holding his cigar to the left corner of his mouth with his left hand, in front of a plain draped backdrop. Onto each image is superimposed a thought bubble with text handwritten by Piper. The short text (each of which she called a mantra—a further reminder of the importance of mystical practice and spiritual self-discipline to Piper's artistic process at this moment in her career), no more than a few sentences, is in each case pulled verbatim from one of her journal entries between 1961 and 1972, whose selection process was structured to follow a systematic, almost algorithmic, pattern. Beginning with an entry from her journal for September 1961, the next would add one month and one year to arrive

⁵⁶ Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, 231.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

at October 1962, and the selection process would proceed thusly until 1972 is reached. The cycle would return to 1961 once twelve entries were completed, starting this time in October and proceeding with the same algorithm from there. The project's intent was to have twelve twelve-month cycles, for a total of 144 entries, but the project was halted in early 1975 due to lack of funds to purchase ad space and was never resumed.⁵⁸ Throughout the period between each publication, Piper would ritually recite the mantra from the most recent iteration, both out loud while walking about her environment and to herself at home, and explicitly describes her intent in doing so as working toward denaturalizing the content of the mantra and defamiliarizing the events to which each one referred. (Perhaps it is no coincidence that mindfulness meditation is today used therapeutically in the treatment of anxiety from traumatic events in the past of a patient with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.)

Given how Piper discussed the Mythic Being in her publications on him, it would seem she intended the ads in *The Village Voice* to be the primary incarnation of the series, for these ads allowed her to make public the mythos of the Mythic Being. As she describes it in her personal notes for the series, unpublished until 1996, she was attempting to engage in “The creation of an immaterial art entity – a personality who is at the same time not an individual.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ For more information on this cycle's planning, see Adrian Piper, “Preparatory Notes for *The Mythic Being*,” in *Out of Order I*, 91-115. The actual published ads deviate somewhat from the intended structure, with the publication dates being as follows: 27 September 1973; 25 October 1973; 29 November 1973; 3 January 1974; 31 January 1974; 28 February 1974; 28 March 1974; 25 April 1974; 30 May 1974; 27 June 1974; 25 July 1974; 29 August 1974; 26 September 1974; 31 October 1974; 2 December 1974; 30 December 1974; and 3 February 1975. Further, two of the seventeen ads do not display text from her journal: 27 June 1974, which was censored for sexual content (reference to masturbation) and instead showed only handwritten text announcing that the ad for the 6 June 1970 journal entry could be seen at JAAP Rietman Bookstore until 24 July 1974; and 26 September 1974, which instead announces the end of Cycle I in the thought bubble. The dates of the journal entries actually published in *The Village Voice*, then, are as follows: 21 September 1961; 25 October 1962; an unspecified day in November 1963; 12 December 1964; 9 January 1965; an unspecified day in February 1966; an unspecified day in March 1967; 12 April 1968; 7 May 1969; 13 October 1961 (the 6 June 1970 ad having been censored); 24 November 1962; an unspecified day in December 1963; and an unspecified day in January 1964, the entry reading only “Thanks,” which was one of several short entries Piper would write when she didn't feel in the mood to journal but still felt obligated to write something.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

This tells us a couple things. First, it shows that her thinking regarding the Mythic Being as an artwork was much in line with her logic in the *Catalysis* series: taking art out of traditional art contexts, removing any overt signifier that the artwork is actually an artwork, and trying to avoid the creation of art as a discrete object. While the publication of the ads does in fact create objects in the form of newspaper prints, it is worth noting that these are traditionally culturally “low” objects: part of popular culture, reproduced tens of thousands of times and most likely discarded by most who actually saw the ads whose historical significance would have been absolutely undetectable, given her silence around the piece and deliberate avoidance of letting art-world figures know about her project until after the *Village Voice* cycle had completed.⁶⁰ Second, the quote tells us that she didn’t intend for the Mythic Being to be perceived as an actual person (if the name alone weren’t enough to alert us to this): he has a personality, a history even, but he is not a person and is not a material entity in any conventional sense.

As the name implies, what the Mythic Being partakes of is not conventional personhood but rather myth, and it is in terms of myth that Piper discusses him. The first time she so discusses him, which is immediately after first recording the designation of Mythic Being in her preparatory notes, she does so in terms mimicking the traditional definition of myth: “A ‘mythic being’ is a fictitious or abstract personality that is generally part of a story or folktale used to explain or sanctify social or legal institutions or natural phenomena.”⁶¹ Not only is the mythic being abstract and possibly fictitious, but he is part of a cultural explanatory and sanctifying apparatus for social, legal, and natural phenomena. Her next expansion on this line of thought

⁶⁰ Only two critics actually wrote about the work remotely close to its creation, both of whom were part of the feminist movement: Lucy Lippard and Cindy Nemser. See Lucy Lippard, “The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women’s Body Art,” *Art in America* 64.3 (May-June 1976): 73-81; and Cindy Nemser, “In Her Own Image Exhibition Catalog,” *Feminist Art Journal* 3.1 (Spring 1974): 11-18.

⁶¹ Piper, “Preparatory Notes,” 108n1.

starts defining the mythos of the Mythic Being in more particular terms: “A mythic being is timeless with reference to the actual history of the world. His own narrated personal history is either prior to the history of the world or unspecified in relation to that history.”⁶² His history is ahistorical, as far as real-world historicity is concerned; in many ways, he is beyond such history. When juxtaposed with the previous note, the implication is that his history, which does not in any straightforward sense follow the historical proceedings of our world, can be used to explain or justify phenomena as they change historically; thus, the interpretation of his history is not a given, and the possibility that contradictory interpretations could emerge is opened up.

The next explanatory notes get even more particular to the actual execution of the Mythic Being series: “The utterances of the Mythic Being are symbolic parables. When made the focus of awareness, these utterances, in conjunction with contemplation of the Mythic Being Himself, will be found to yield both personal and general truths.”⁶³ Like most mythic figures throughout history, then, he speaks only as a parabolist, and the interpreter of his parables will find upon considering them that they hold some seed of personal wisdom while also speaking to more general worldly truths. She finally explains, “The Mythic Being is an abstract personality, a folk character. His history constitutes the folktale used to explain current social phenomena, namely myself, my behavior, my relationships. As such it is a part of the common folklore and folk consciousness of all who read the *Village Voice*.”⁶⁴ Here, a researcher’s attention should catch: his story is intricately bound to that of Piper, she explains, and her social personhood is partially mythicized in his dispersal. This history, which is a mythicized version of her history, is not limited to the particular, though, since this is not the nature of myth. It is broad, relatable, and

⁶² Ibid., 109n2.

⁶³ Ibid., n3.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 112n6.

accessible, albeit abstract and open to interpretation, intended to hold potential significance to several—indeed any who read his thoughts. She finally says that “My past, up to the point at which the Mythic Being was born (9/73) will disperse into myth with the advent of the personal history of the Mythic Being. The personal history of the Mythic Being will become independent of my own when Cycle XII is exhausted.”⁶⁵ Though they share the same verbiage for expressing the contents of the mantras, then, she never intended the Mythic Being to be identical to her, though he is intimately tied to her. He is her means of rendering her past public and therefore disarticulating it from her own identity, freeing herself from the shackles of habitual interpretation of past events that had weighed down her identity and limited its freedom. If *Food for the Spirit* objectivized Piper’s personal subjectivity, the Mythic Being series works to depersonalize it.

Given her contemporaneous characterization of the Mythic Being, it is somewhat surprising to find that he has largely been interpreted by scholars in fairly literal terms of his appearance and thus his intersection with racial discourse; in fact, in several contexts, the *Village Voice* ads are not mentioned at all, despite their inceptive role in the formation of the Mythic Being. His race is not specified by Piper in the 1970s beyond calling him “an anonymous, third-world young boy.”⁶⁶ In fact, Piper did not identify the Mythic Being as “a young black male” until 1991.⁶⁷ While gender dominated the early discussion of the Mythic Being much to the neglect of race (early on being examined only by feminist critics⁶⁸), since her 1987 exhibition at

⁶⁵ Ibid., 109. She explains in a footnote, “The life saga of the Mythic Being will continue independently of my own when the last journal entry of the cycle is at once absorbed as an articulated thought into his personality and dispersed from mine. From that point on, I will know his thoughts as intimately but will only be able to guess at the experiences they denote.” Ibid., 109n5.

⁶⁶ Piper quoted in Roselee Goldberg, “Public Performance: Private Memory,” *Studio International* 192.982 (July-August 1976): 22.

⁶⁷ Adrian Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present,” in *Place Position Presentation Public*, ed. Ine Gevers (Amsterdam: Jan Van Eyck Akademie, 1993), 145.

⁶⁸ See Lippard, “Rebirth”; and Nemser, “In Her Own Image.”

the Alternative Museum, race has primarily occupied the discourse—despite never being explicitly mentioned in her notes, while gender is mentioned many times. What is even more surprising is that in many contexts, the Mythic Being is characterized as a threatening or even angry Black man who must intimidate his viewers, whom many presume, implicitly or explicitly, to be White.⁶⁹ Though in several contexts, the Mythic Being is indeed aggressive and violent, either in speech or action (*The Mythic Being: Getting Back*, July 1975; *The Mythic Being: I Am the Locus*, 1975; *The Mythic Being: I Embody Everything*, 1975), he is more often lecherous than violent, albeit aggressively lecherous (*The Mythic Being: Cruising White Women*, 1975; *The Mythic Being: It Doesn't Matter*, 1975; *The Mythic Being: Let's Talk*, 1975; *The Mythic Being: Say It*, 1975; *The Mythic Being: Look But*, 1975). As if to prove the point, one work in the Mythic Being series that is perhaps the most explicitly violent, *The Mythic Being: I/You/Us* 1975, doesn't even feature the Mythic Being avatar: it is a picture of Piper in her very early adolescence, with a speech bubble over her head, the first print (out of a series of six) of which says, "Be sure to attend very carefully to what I have to say to you. For if you do not, I will make a sincere effort to kill you." While this does fit the general intention Piper describes in her notes for the Mythic Being project, namely freeing herself from the shackles of habitually accepted self-imposed meaning from formative events and proclaiming an assertive and self-determined new identity freed of it, the Mythic Being avatar is absent entirely, perhaps implicatively residing in her in spirit. As she notes, assertive masculinity has always been a part of her personality, though one she had until then been uncomfortable fully owning and expressing:

⁶⁹ For a brief discussion of general trends in interpretation, see Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, 234.

...I discover that the familiar contexts of my past are not familiar enough to sustain themselves in an alien presence. The presence of the Mythic Being in the environments that formed me force [*sic*] me to acquiesce in identifying with him; I acknowledge the extent to which I have always identified with what he represents: his maleness, his careful expressionlessness, his protective shades and cigar.⁷⁰

Those interpreting the Mythic Being simply as a hostile Black man at least need some more historical support for their claims, for the works themselves rarely lend themselves readily or self-evidently to such an interpretation.

It may be that the imagery that he conjures holds the reason for the prevailing interpretation of the Mythic Being as the embodiment of Black hypermasculinity and rage: it is undeniable that his appearance echoes the appearances of many popular heroes and anti-heroes in Blaxploitation cinema from roughly the time of his creation, from his self-assured coolness to his phallic cigar to his stylish Natural, moustache, and aviators. What is more, at least insofar as his masculinity is concerned, Piper does seem to have Blaxploitation in mind. During one of her first adventures out in public as the Mythic Being, she notes, “When I was waiting for the subway, I found myself deliberately aping more ‘masculine’ body movements and behavior to be convincing. I deliberately contemplated a sexploitation ad for a few minutes.”⁷¹ For an example, one could juxtapose *The Mythic Being: Getting Back* with the titular character from Melvin Van Peebles’s 1971 Blaxploitation hit *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, generally considered the parent of the Blaxploitation subgenre of exploitation cinema. Indeed, many scholars who invoke Blaxploitation in their discussions of the Mythic Being cite this particular film, Bowles included among them. This may in part owe to the general theme in the film of a poor Black man fighting back against unjust oppression perpetrated by “the Man.” After an esoteric opening shot

⁷⁰ Piper, “Notes I-III,” 124.

⁷¹ Piper, “Preparatory Notes,” 104.

depicting a young Black boy being fed in a small kitchen by several Black women of widely ranging ages, styles of dress, and complexions, the film cuts to an extreme long shot of a Black man, whom we soon find out is Sweetback, running toward the camera out of a dark tunnel. A short epigraph (labelled as a traditional prologue of the dark ages) appears in both English and French, reading, "...Sire, these lines are not a homage to brutality that the artist has invented, but a hymn from the mouth of reality..." This short sentence establishes, in spite of the overall surrealism of the picaresque film, that the events depicted therein find their inspiration in the genuine lived experience of countless Black people in the United States. After the epigraph fades and a police siren begins screaming in the distance, a dedication follows, this time reading only in English: "To all the Brothers and Sisters who had enough of the Man." Shortly thereafter, a short scene evolves that gave the film its controversial reputation: a scene of the young boy (actually Mario Van Peebles, the son of the director) making love to a Black woman in her twenties, whose moans overlap in mildly carnivalesque fashion with a rendition of the traditional hymn "This Little Light of Mine," sung a Capella by a youth choir. After the title appears and a funk theme by Earth, Wind, and Fire begins to play, a short, stylized montage of their intercourse continues until the credits end, whereupon the boy suddenly and inexplicably transforms into the adult Sweet Sweetback, played by Melvin Van Peebles, who also wrote, directed, edited, and performed stunts for the film.

As one might guess based on such a scene, this establishes the surreal, often bawdy, always baroque tone of the film, whose artistic use of montage and avant-garde editing techniques makes it arguably the most unusual Blaxploitation film in history, if nevertheless the first. This may make the film seem an unusual choice for comparison with the *Mythic Being*, given the existence of other prominent films like 1971's *Shaft*, 1972's *Super Fly* and *Trouble*

Man, and 1973's *The Mack*. It would appear upon analysis that two aspects of Van Peebles's film, though not unique to it, lend to its frequent invocation in the literature: Sweet Sweetback's stylish appearance—coupled with his flagrant and potent sexuality—and his single-minded defiance of (White, racist) authority, his flight from which constitutes the bulk of the film. His garb, echoing the historical styles of picaresque literature and imbuing his character with the rakish bravura of the rogues depicted therein, is a groovy mashup of Spanish Baroque and funk chic: mustachioed, he dons a black hat with a wide and sweeping floppy brim over his short-cropped Natural and long sideburns, paired with a black tunic with long, flared sleeves and large collar, over which he wears a buckled gold velvet waistcoat that matches his gold bellbottoms. Early in the film, he also sports a black coat and cane, but he quickly loses these accoutrements in his first brush-in with the police. Shortly into the film, he is apprehended by two White detectives after performing in a sex show onstage in the brothel in which he grew up—though the detectives are quick to say they don't actually suspect him in any crime but just wish to "show face" at the station. Driving to the station, a crime in progress is announced on the police radio and they take their cruiser to the scene, with Sweetback still seated in the back. They quickly arrive and immediately arrest a young Black man, cuffing him to Sweetback, only to drive a short distance away, remove the suspect and remove his handcuffs, and beat him viciously. Sweetback cannot tolerate the scene any further, and turns his handcuffs into a makeshift cudgel, using it to beat the cops unconscious and free the young man, whereupon he too flees the scene. The rest of his film is an account of his flight from the authorities and run-ins with motley characters, ultimately ending with his implied escape into Mexico. The penultimate scene is a tight shot of a dead dog in a river, over which appear the words: "WATCH OUT. A BAADASSSSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES..."

Courageous, principled, defiant, virile, and powerful, Sweetback's no-nonsense persona has a certain resemblance to the Mythic Being's, and certainly taps into the same White fears as the Mythic Being in *Getting Back*: the fear of racial retribution for centuries of scantily checked racism, violence, and exploitation. The *Getting Back* miniseries comprises five black/white photographs, and was performed in Cambridge in collaboration with David Auerbach, a fellow Harvard Philosophy PhD student whom Piper describes as a White Jewish man. The first image shows the Mythic Being standing on a sidewalk reading a newspaper, with an unnamed man clad in a disheveled suit leaning against the wall to the left; as David Auerbach reads over his shoulder, the Mythic Being glances back at him in annoyance, apparently "ask[ing] him to please get out of [his] face;" Piper continues in her description of the performance:

Shocked, he withdraws, having appropriated the newspaper I've finished reading. But my hostility hasn't been fully expressed, so I decide to mug him and steal his money. I follow him to the nearest park, jumping him from behind, throwing him to the ground, and making off with the newspaper (he has no money).⁷²

The four other images show this retributive mugging then, with the Mythic Being coming from behind and sweeping Auerbach's legs out from under him, throwing him to the ground. In the final image, the Mythic Being, still hunched over Auerbach's prone form, leans back over his shoulder at the photographer, simultaneously breaking the "fourth wall" of the performance's documentation and implying that the viewer/photographer might be the next victim of his violent outbursts.

On the one hand, then, this apparently random act of violence does seem to conjure the fantastical fears of random violent Black retribution for White racism. It figures the popular racist fear of an uprising of "Angry Black Folk" violently attacking anonymous, essentially random White people for a "crime they didn't commit," as slavery (not to mention the indentured

⁷² Adrian Piper, "The Mythic Being: Getting Back," in *Out of Order I*, 147.

servitude, segregation, disenfranchisement, terrorism, and Jim Crow laws that followed Abolition) is commonly described in the White racist apologia. Sweetback's mauling of the two detectives in Van Peebles's film similarly conjures such fears, though presumably a viewer would feel at least somewhat more sympathetic toward the hero, given the brutal context in which his retribution takes place. However, Sweetback ends up killing several other police and other White terrorists throughout the film in his attempt to flee the reach of the law; reasonable justification for such violence is generally less self-evident, though it is demonstrated in several scenes that the police and the Los Angeles District Attorney are hardly concerned with pursuing justice with fairness and equity, battering several other Black characters in their pursuit of Sweetback. Nevertheless, what is demonstrated as an isolated incident in the film is treated with the fervor and paranoia of a ubiquitous outbreak of violence against White police, who apparently fear the transition of this violence into public acts of violence against White civilians. Regardless, the Mythic Being's act of violence has much less apparent justification than does Sweetback's defiance of a cruel and unjust authority.

On the other hand, the Mythic Being appears to be dwarfed by Auerbach in the photographs constituting *Getting Back*, with the White man towering roughly eight inches over the Mythic Being's slight figure, lending the photos a more humorous than intimidating air—almost akin to watching Groucho Marx mug someone. Further, the violence is not apparently racially motivated judging strictly from the images themselves; given the progression, it would more readily seem to do with the newspaper than the race of the parties involved, with Auerbach just prior to the attack holding the paper that was in the hands of the Mythic Being in the first image. Ultimately, the Mythic Being does not have the same visual impact as does Sweetback, based solely on their physiques: the Mythic Being is short, thin, and even fragile, in comparison

to the solid and strong musculature of Sweetback, whose physical strength is echoed sexually, both implicitly and directly given that his genitals get significant screen time. With these considerations, it becomes evident that the Mythic Being is more a conjuring act for Piper's own personal and emotional constitution than he is a manifestation of robust Black masculinity. While the Natural (or Afro) was strongly associated with the radical politics of the Black Panthers in the 1960s and was adopted by several other contemporaneous groups espousing countercultural politics, by the time the Mythic Being manifested in the social world, it had become more of a fashion statement than a political one, particularly after the trial and acquittal of Angela Davis.⁷³ It is in the context of such a performance as *Getting Back* that Bowles's argument concerning the Mythic Being series holds weight. He explains, "The Mythic Being represents a black feminist parody of a rambunctious and predatory heterosexual masculinity as well as an attempt to inhabit the liberatory pose of Black Power and Soul style."⁷⁴ Similar to his argument concerning *Food for the Spirit*, the Mythic Being works as a series precisely to the degree that it fails. Piper cannot embody him convincingly, which stages the difficulty she has embodying either masculinity or femininity and thereby demonstrating their artifice and the double standards Black women are held to: they are excluded from masculinity inasmuch as they aren't Black men, and excluded from femininity inasmuch as they fail to embody femininity as figured in White culture and by extension, hegemonic popular culture.

While his argument makes important and valid points concerning the difficulties of gendered discourse once it intersects with race and also convincingly depicts the double-bind Black women face, Bowles nevertheless places too much emphasis on failure and as a result neglects what might be considered successful about the performances. For one thing, the

⁷³ See Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, 237.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

charcoal-overdrawn photographs are much more convincing, precisely because Piper is not bound so strictly to her physique in representing the Mythic Being in them as in the straightforward performance documentations. While not displaying the evident physical aggression seen in *Getting Back*, many of these are much more convincing at expressing hostile, masculine Black anger. One of these, *The Mythic Being: I Embod* (1975), displays what has essentially become a catchphrase of the series as a whole. Composed of a tight close-up of the Mythic Being's bust in a dark environment with his right hand obscuring the lower half of his face as he holds a cigar to his mouth, he says into the dark "I EMBODY EVERYTHING YOU MOST HATE AND FEAR." Paired with the convincing exaggeration of the charcoal, this vague proclamation does indeed come off as intimidating. Nonetheless, the phrase is open to the interpretation of the viewer, holding true to Piper's declarations concerning the Mythic Being's parabolist nature; the viewer may very well interpret the artwork racially, but this is not simply to be assumed. In such a racial context, he can come off as a particular racist stereotype. As Bowles claims,

As stereotype, the Mythic Being is the figure whites feared meeting and whom middle-class blacks did not want to be compared with—the naturalized justification for an unspoken racist ideology that casts blackness as masculine, heterosexual, and menial. He is, for the white viewer, the figure against whom all blacks are judged and, as fantasy, he establishes a racialized norm for blackness in the American imagination.⁷⁵

Importantly, this interpretation leaves room for a Black viewer of the work, which throws the racial and gender discourse into yet murkier terrain with the addition of the dimension of class. It is not just Whites who may avoid such a figure: the Black middle class may have even more reason to fear this apparition precisely to the degree that they may be compared with him.

⁷⁵ Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, 6.

Still, this dissociates Piper too starkly from what the Mythic Being represents and can signify, for her “failure” to embody the Mythic Being is not merely given; indeed, as just seen, she can effect a convincing (if more extensively mediated) likeness of the particular Black masculinity the Mythic Being may signify. His embodiment of everything the viewer most hates and fears serves another purpose, altogether more psychological for Piper: owning and threatening to follow through with the racist fantasies projected onto her due to her skin color. Rather than disavowing that people may view her in an overdetermined racial context or whitewashing herself to flee from the implications of stereotyping, both of which ignore and thus degrade the reality faced by others so stereotyped, she may own the imposed meanings thrown onto her by the racist Other and threaten that perhaps the nightmares of the racist may come true after all, that the threat they erroneously and ignorantly perceive could come to fruition. While this may not be a desired path to pursue, inasmuch as the possibility of a genuine understanding is cut off, this at least affords Piper a degree of power she might not have in the other two possibilities mentioned above. A closed mind is not easily pried open, and the victim of racist stereotyping should not be expected solely to bear the burden of opening the eyes of the racist Other; in many contexts, the most life-affirming and sanity-preserving avenue may be simply to allow the Other to believe what they are so committed to believing and to move on with one’s life. As Frantz Fanon observes, “to speak is to exist absolutely for the other,” meaning that when we communicate, we are doing so on the terrain of the Other and open ourselves up to their particular understanding.⁷⁶ This holds to an extent for all signification, even that over which we have no control such as the color of our skin. If what is signified cannot be directly controlled,

⁷⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967), 17.

the most power we may be able to exert over the process is to own what is signified, especially if it is a threat to others.

In the specific context of *Getting Back*, it would seem that Piper had this in mind, owning the implications of power that such threats can hold and using such implications to play into her own fantasies. She explains:

But when I left New York to live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I found the image of the Mythic Being becoming a foil for many of my fantasies of power, aggression, and secrecy: The smaller and less anonymous the environment became, the more I wanted to make an imprint on it, which I did by inviting the participation of other people and photodocumenting many of the actual street performances. I found the guise of the Mythic Being allowed me to express as art many of my actual feelings of macho masculinity toward my male friends that even the women's movement hadn't facilitated. I have always had a very strong aggressive streak.⁷⁷

The guise of the Mythic Being gave her license to express and act upon many of the more aggressive aspects of her psyche that her gender and middle-class upbringing had made otherwise taboo. Importantly, this is not figured as a primarily racial hang-up, but rather as a gendered one. She even notes that the overt standoffishness and removed, reactive superiority of the Mythic Being were not aspects of her experience she found typical, but rather what she felt like acting out: "Together with *Cruising White Women* and *Strutting*, *Getting Back* expressed overtly my sense of difference and alienation from others in the Harvard environment, feelings I rarely experienced in day-to-day life there."⁷⁸ Even in a piece that seems explicitly about retributive violence, then, it would appear that Piper herself wanted more to give expressive free rein to feelings she had rather than make a commentary, oblique or otherwise, about race relations. Indeed, she makes clear that hierarchical relations didn't factor terribly much into her self-perception; after explaining that a friend of hers at Harvard had discovered he was in fact

⁷⁷ Piper, "Getting Back," 147.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Jewish and expressed with envy “that, but for a slight defect of ancestry, [Piper] almost could have been a pampered WASP female,” she states:

This brought home to me how distant I actually was from any position in the hierarchy at all. I felt above it, below it, inside it, and beyond it all at once. This made me feel free enough to manifest whatever part of myself I chose, and throughout my years at Harvard I felt generally very comfortable, both in and out of costume.⁷⁹

Being outside of the WASP/Jew, pedigreed/unpedigreed, prep-schooled/public-schooled dichotomous Ivy-League hierarchies, Piper did not consider the hierarchy that relevant to her identity, and instead chose to explore parts of herself she might have felt uncomfortable exploring earlier in her life.

The personal-psychic dimension of the Mythic Being series is evident in another one of her Cambridge performances, which she mentioned above: *Cruising White Women*. As the title implies, the performance—also done in collaboration with David Auerbach—features the Mythic Being on the streets of Cambridge gawking at White women as they walk by, perhaps even catcalling them. *Cruising White Women* plays on a related racist fantasy-fear of virulent, sexually insane Black masculinity that has been the uncanny preoccupation of White racists for centuries: namely the fear of White women getting raped by Black men, which is itself historically a mask for a deeper fear of White women finding Black men more attractive and manly than White men⁸⁰ and the miscegenation that will result from this, slowly eradicating the visual signifier of the alleged differences White racism needs to proclaim in order to shore up White masculinity in the face of the Black Other. As in *Getting Back*, Piper-as-Mythic-Being has a small frame

⁷⁹ Ibid., 149.

⁸⁰ This, of course, is not to say that no Black man has ever raped a White woman in the history of America, as the White racist apologist will counter against this claim. The historical occurrence of such atrocities is not negated by attending to their overrepresentation in the fantasies and fears—the mythos—surrounding them.

belying the potentially threatening implications of the performance, particularly since the Mythic Being is seated in the three images making up the photodocumentation of the performance.

While the women walking by him in the three shots do avert their gaze from the Mythic Being, it is again unclear if this is to be read racially. For one thing, the Mythic Being has a companion in the gawking, and thus the averted gazes could owe to the discomfort caused by two men leering as each woman passes by. Another possibility is the presence of the camera, which is only a few feet away from the Mythic Being as it shoots images of the performance. Once again, then, the implications of the performance are open to the interpretation of the viewer, who may or may not read the images in a racially oriented way.

And once more, we have textual evidence provided by Piper herself that leads toward an interpretation not conceptually focused on race. As has been documented, Black radical groups such as the Black Panthers, though espousing radical racial politics, were in fact rather conservative when it came to sexuality. An artist such as Emory Douglas, one of the preeminent visual artists of the Black Panthers whose illustrations appeared in essentially every issue of the party newspaper *The Black Panther*, almost always represented women in conventional gender roles: even when sporting a gun, they were usually also carrying or at least accompanied by a child.⁸¹ Much like women in the hippy counterculture, women were typically expected to occupy supporting roles for Panther men, and lesbianism was a fraught subject, as demonstrated by the experiences of Audre Lorde, who once proclaimed “I am the face of one of your fears.”⁸² The resonance with the Mythic Being’s statement in *I Embod*y should not be downplayed: the specter of homosexuality haunted many radical groups in the 1960s and 1970s, not least of all Black

⁸¹ See Erika Doss, “Imaging the Panthers: Representing Black Power and Masculinity,” *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 23 (1998), ed. Jack Salzman: 483-516.

⁸² Audre Lorde, untitled statement, *Sinister Wisdom* 6 (1978): 13.

radical groups. In the guise of the Mythic Being, Piper felt less apprehension concerning the expression of her feelings of same-sex attraction. She explains in regards to her experience as the Mythic Being,

My sexual attraction to women flows more freely, uninhibited by my fear of their rejection in case my feelings should show in my face; unencumbered by my usual feminine suspicions of them as ultimately hostile competition for me. I follow them with my eyes on the street, fantasizing vivid scenes of lovemaking and intimacy.⁸³

Alternately, she describes immediately following this how, as a man, she feels more hesitation concerning her typical attraction to men and more inclined to feelings of “masculine empathy” that limit her sexual predilection for fear of alienating these feelings of kinship.⁸⁴

Early in the planning process for the Mythic Being series, well before Piper had a title for it, deconstructing her own sexuality factored as a major component of the project, which she then only referred to as the “spectator series” in which her intent is to make herself fully an object by means of operationalizing the spectator role in her own self-conception.⁸⁵ Though her explicit discussions of sexuality come in the notes proper, such as considering using for mantras only entries concerning other women or trying to approach the world as a straight man, this gets prefigured much earlier, before the series has any proper form. In one of the first entries in her preparatory notes, in a section she titles “Vestiges of History,” she lists six experiences in her life that operationalized her objectification, both by others and by herself. The six entries are “Musical prodigy,” “Fashion model,” “Keeping a journal,” “Getting into yoga,” “Discotheque dancing,” and “Drawing.”⁸⁶ While the last entry may seem dubiously objectifying, she explains:

⁸³ Piper, “Notes I-III,” 118.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ See “Preparatory Notes,” 94, for the first instance.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 89.

Losing myself in the object I was drawing. Becoming the object. Finishing the drawing like being reborn with a newly completed self. Scrutiny of object revealing its ultimate absurdity, leading to the conviction that one ought only to point to or draw objects, never describe or talk about them. Extrapolation to myself: the cosmic absurdity of my attempt to “define” myself.⁸⁷

Unexpectedly, then, this may hold the key to deciphering precisely what “objectification” means in this context, and it is intricately related to what it meant in the context of *Food for the Spirit*.

While at least two of these involve objectification in the sense intended in feminist discourse concerning objectification of women (fashion model and discotheque dancer), and three involve performance for the enjoyment of another (musical prodigy and the two just mentioned), the primary feature shared by all six is making oneself and the phenomenal world one occupies an object of observation which one analyzes at a remove. Rather than getting hung up on the initial significance one might feel toward an object, event, or aspect of the self, one inserts it into a critical context, whether it is representationally evaluative (drawing, journaling), revisory (yoga), or performative (dancing, modelling, musical performance).

Even more importantly, all these operations intrinsically involve the possibility of actively restructuring what is presented to one’s consciousness, based on the evaluative/revisory/performative context, and the pretext for such restructuring must be removing one’s initial investment in the object and considering it with as little bias as possible. If one’s ego investment in one’s activity were not abandoned, a dancer, model, musician, or draftsman would never be able to improve her craft. If one cannot experience one’s body as an object in the world and rather gets caught up in the proprioceptive experience of movement, a yogi would never be able to advance to more nuanced and complicated exercises. And if one is unwilling to admit the possibility that an initial belief or (re)action is inaccurate or inappropriate,

⁸⁷ Ibid.

journaling would be a purposeless and self-indulgent pursuit. Indeed, Piper says about journaling: “This has taught me more about objectivity and objecthood than almost anything else... it keeps me situated in THE world rather than MY world.”⁸⁸ Crucially, then, the self-objectification involved in the six Vestiges of History listed above is tightly bound to what is conventionally meant by the word “objective” in epistemic discourse: holding valid (or becoming valid) independently of the position of the observer. Therefore, while the self-objectification involved in *Food for the Spirit* was a validating form, wherein one established for oneself the validity of one’s being-in-the-world and affirming the objective nature of one’s personal history, the one involved in the Mythic Being series is fundamentally complementary: taking this being-in-the-world that we call selfhood, having been demonstrated as a legitimate independent object in the world, and evaluating its position vis-à-vis the objective world, putting it in a position that allows for amendment and repositioning. As the previous quote would demonstrate, after all, objectivity and objecthood appear to be closely related.

That the Mythic Being series principally concerns literally re-presenting aspects of Piper’s psyche and selfhood is evident in many other artworks in the series that rarely get any mention in the literature. At least three private performances involve pursuits of primary importance to Piper: *M.B. (Dancing)*, *M.B. (Doing Yoga)*, and *M.B. (Writing)*, all from 1975. They comprise twelve, six, and seven black-and-white photographs, respectively, depicting Piper-qua-Mythic-Being performing in her loft the activities described in the titles. Aside from his appearance, none of the performances shows the Mythic Being in any sense that can be read as overtly racial, or for that matter even gendered. They each simply depict the Mythic Being doing something he (and Piper) enjoys, with no regard for the documentary apparatus or viewer.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 90.

None of these performances gets anything more than a passing mention in the literature, and perhaps for good reason: none of them conforms easily to the narrative that has solidified around the Mythic Being. However, if we consider them in the context I am constructing, they make more sense and even seem a natural outgrowth of the project: Piper is experiencing these activities and then evaluating their documentation *as if they were being done by someone completely different*.⁸⁹

Yet another piece, this one a six-photograph charcoal-modified piece called *A 108 (Kant)* (November 1975), further discloses the exploratory and re-evaluative purpose of the series. This may be one of the most aesthetically pleasing in the series, yet it is almost unmentioned in the literature. The six shots begin from behind and above the Mythic Being, who is shown typing on a typewriter while seated at a desk covered with books and papers and smoking his trademark stogie. The shots move progressively to the Mythic Being's left and continually lower until the penultimate image, which is directly in front of him at eye level. The final image is a close-up of the Mythic Being's face, his eyes shielded from our view by his reflective aviators. Each image has handwritten text, each of which is a snippet of a lengthy direct quote of Kant (the passage having been cited in the title), and they read progressively:

The original and necessary consciousness of the identity of the self...
Is thus at the same time...
A consciousness of an equally necessary unity of the synthesis of all
appearances...
According to the concepts, i.e. according to rules, which not only make them
necessarily reproducible,
But also in doing so determine an object for their intuition,
i.e. the concept of something wherein they are necessarily interconnected.

⁸⁹ It is a shame that we do not know what the Mythic Being is engaged in writing in the relevant performance, for this could definitively confirm or deny my sub-thesis here.

The reappearance of “the unity of the synthesis of all appearances” is not coincidental, I hold, and the quote chosen here expands upon the lengthy phrase Piper utilizes in her meta-art piece on *Food for the Spirit*. If “the Transcendental Unity of Apperception in the Synthesis of Appearances according to Rules given by Understanding for Reflective Self-Consciousness” is basically a phrase describing the transcendental self and its undeniably central role in conscious perception as we know it, the quote cited in *A 108* is the necessary and formative transcendental idealist notion describing the inherent mediation of the noumenon by the mind of the perceiving agent. The concept of an object (“i.e. the concept of something wherein they [the appearances] are necessarily interconnected”) is something in the mind of the perceiver that is necessary to consciousness itself (“A consciousness of an equally necessary unity of the synthesis of all appearances”) and, moreover, that *determines the form that the object must take to the perceiver* (“so determine an object for their intuition”).

This is the ultimate truth of Kantian philosophy that Piper utilizes not just in her philosophy but also in her art: the centrality of categories both to the necessary unity of the perceiving self and to the very form that a perception can and does take. Piper’s most major disagreement with Kant, aside from saying that rationality is truly universal and not just limited to White men, is in the definition of the categories. While Kant says there is a specific and limited number of categories of the understanding and that these are all truly *a priori*, Piper holds that the number of categories is effectively infinite and that almost all of them—aside from the subject-predicate relation—are formed *a posteriori*, i.e. are empirical concepts. She explains:

This conception [i.e. the self as rationally unified consciousness] differs from Kant's actual pronouncements in only one respect: I incorporate Strawson's suggestion that, among the candidates for innate concepts in Kant's Tables in the *Metaphysical Deduction*, only the subject-predicate relation can be understood as what Kant would call a transcendental concept or judgment-form. On this view, all other such concepts are empirical, including that of causality.⁹⁰

In our attempt to make sense of the world, we generalize from our experiences based on our past systems of meaning, and when generalized these become categories of the understanding that themselves shape perception; we are naturally inclined to want to protect our explanatory theories, as they make the world make sense and hold together our sense of self. Unlike Kant, Piper holds that these categories can and are applied to people, and this process can form stereotypes that reduce people to a minimal set of attributes, whether or not they actually fit them; and the xenophobe is inclined to explain away anomalous data through pseudorationality. Thus, “The phenomenon of xenophobia is a special case of a perfectly general human intellectual disposition to literal self-preservation, i.e. preservation of the internal rational coherence and integrity of the self against anomalous data that threaten it.”⁹¹ This is not to say that rationality simply cedes to bigotry: in fact, rationality provides our only means of saving ourselves from bigotry, Piper holds.

But this means that we are disposed reflexively to regard anomalous data as more than mere threats to the integrity of our conceptions of the world and ourselves, for the disposition to inquire further and to seek a more inclusive explanation of experience remains, even when literal self-preservation has been achieved. We also are disposed to regard those data as irresistible cognitive challenges to the scope of our conceptions, and as provocations to reformulate them so as to increase their explanatory reach.⁹²

If we can resist the temptation of pseudorationality and instead the other impulse rationality provides us when we get over the anxiety caused by challenges to our explanatory theories—i.e.

⁹⁰ Piper, “Xenophobia and Kantian Rationalism,” 2.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 44.

a curiosity and desire to revise our theories in order to explain the world better—we are actually driven to overcome our stereotypical thinking and amend our erroneous views. Thus, rationality has within it *both* the cause for and the antidote to bigotry, in Piper’s analysis—and in my analysis both the root of pathological thought and the precondition for its elimination, i.e. the affective nature of rationality. It is precisely this disposition of rationality that makes it so crucial for us to attend to the Other in all her specificity, then: if we instead opt for categorizing the Other through our explanatory theory, levelling stereotypes against the Other, the temptation to pseudorationality or pathological thought when the Other inevitably breaks out of our necessarily limited conceptual apparatus will be too great.

Returning then to the artwork that opened this section, namely the *Village Voice* ads, it should now be much easier to understand what Piper’s goal was in creating them. It was not, as others have argued, primarily just to play with and invalidate the limitations created by gender categories; she was not mainly trying to level a commentary about the difficulties Black women in particular experience presenting themselves as gendered beings; though it may to a degree be an experiment concerning the means of publicizing one’s art to a public, this was not the sole purpose. It was most centrally a thoroughgoing deconstruction of experiences that held a formative function in her life and therefore her self-conception and worldview, in an attempt to dislodge their hold on her mind and attain a more objective understanding of herself and the world around her. Thus, while the following may hold a good deal of significance concerning what is acceptable for a middle-class Black woman versus a working-class third-world man to say—“My first sexual summer romance with J. has changed me. Nothing pleases me, everyone bores me, I’m failing all my subjects. I ache for maturity, tastes, intellect. 11-63” (published 29 November 1973), or “No matter how much I ask my mother to stop buying crackers, cookies,

and things, she does anyway, and says it's for her even if I always eat it. So I've decided to fast. 12-12-64" (published 3 January 1974), or "I told him we were just platonic friends, so he said he'd never jump on me unless I jumped on him first. Well, that's all right. When I'm ready to jump on him, I will. 1-9-65" (published 31 January 1974), or "Don't feel particularly horny, but feel I should masturbate anyway just because I feel so good about doing it. 6-6-70" (censored on 27 June 1974)—there is yet another, so far underappreciated dimension. By ascribing them to another entity and publicizing them as if spoken by that entity—coupled with meditating on the experiences and repeating the journal entries as a mantra until the experience to which it refers is entirely denaturalized and depersonalized—Piper is freeing her identity from the significance of those events to her self-conception and attendant understanding of the world. In other words, she is specifically cultivating a form of apathy regarding those experiences, in order to free up her mind to reconceive the world and herself in objective terms.

All Hail the New Objectivity: The *Apathesis* as the Prolegomenon to Piper's Art Career

"A person frees himself in the very act by which he makes himself an object for himself."

-Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*⁹³

I wish to conclude this chapter by briefly discussing *Food for the Spirit* and the Mythic Being series together, and relating these to the broad project of the rest of Piper's career. As I have argued, these two bodies of work, considered in tandem, can be understood as a cipher to Piper's later work, both artistically and philosophically. Not only do they bridge two markedly different periods in her art career—with Minimalist and highly abstract Conceptualist art coming before them and Conceptualist art specifically dealing with identity coming after—they are also both part of a wider project working to limit the influence of certain emotions on Piper's

⁹³ Quoted in Piper, "Notes I-III," 117. Not coincidentally, this is the quote she chose to open her notes on the Mythic Being.

understanding of the world, and functioned to clear away ground for her later career by creating a methodology of operationalizing apathy. Working to decouple her ingrown understanding of the world and her own selfhood from her intellectual and artistic labor, these works cleared away the nettlesome brush of habitual thought, deep-seated emotion, and unexamined belief (in other words, pseudorationality, or pathological thought as I have termed it) in order to build a bedrock of rationality, pushing her art career toward a universalism focused counterintuitively on the contingent, as Bowles calls her work, by both enabling her to evaluate the world and herself more objectively and removing artifacts of her personality from her art. (While her art involves personal content, she is decidedly averse to considering it in any way autobiographical.⁹⁴) Doing so allowed her to adopt the method she utilized later in her career: affectively provoking viewers to reconceive their own pathological thought and re-evaluate how they approach others in the social world without also providing an easy target for viewers to project their reactions onto—a result that would render Piper’s provocations ineffectual. Piper has been mistrustful of the art world generally and inimical to the project of postmodernism specifically—which she calls an “Easy Listening Art” that breeds an attitude of “cultivated triviality”—because the disempowering intellectualization and disarming familiarity bred broadly in the art world and the glib distance and stultifying irony forged in postmodernism dispel the power of art to provoke the viewer emotionally, which she esteems as the single most potent weapon in art’s arsenal as a catalytic agent.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ As Bowles clarifies very early into his monograph, “While she uses personal content—her experiences—in some of her work, these anecdotes are carefully chosen and presented tools used to make ideas concrete rather than to make her personal life and emotions the subject of her art.” Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, 1.

⁹⁵ Piper, “Goodbye to Easy Listening,” in *Out of Order II*, 181. Piper holds that the overly broad range of possible salient interpretations in postmodern art undermines its catalytic potential. On the highly art-educated in general and postmodern art specifically, Piper is scathingly critical: “For the educated (or rather, well-programmed) viewer, the significance of Easy Listening Art is supplied primarily by a background framework of traditional reference that lies outside of the work itself. Its low-key ambiguity trades on such a framework to provide the viewer with a range of salient interpretations, any one of which is acceptable.” *Ibid.*, 178. The method she prefers is as follows: “...political

On the one hand, *Food for the Spirit* worked to establish the objectivity and thus independent value of Piper's being-in-the-world in the face of the overwhelmingly compelling ontological and epistemic certitude of the transcendental subject and its centrality—not just as an inevitable component, but the very ground itself—to any and all human phenomenology. On the other, the Mythic Being series took this newly validated subjectivity and opened it up to objective critique, in a dual process of a) embodying a subjectivity which she felt was the polar opposite of what she felt was her own in order to decouple her attachment to long-held aspects of self (i.e. her performances proper as the Mythic Being), and b) making her subjectivity a fully externalized object of analysis by ascribing it to another entity and publicizing it as myth (i.e. the *Village Voice* ads, charcoal-altered photographs, and documentation for performances).⁹⁶ As Piper noted several times throughout the Mythic Being project, the series marked a turning point in her career away from tightly controlled art that functioned like a thought experiment or algorithm to an intuitive process that she lived out rather than painstakingly planned, therefore ushering in a new artistic methodology.⁹⁷ In a certain sense, then, this double maneuver mirrors the double maneuver of rationality in the Kantian model: at the same time that rationality compels us to defend our prior convictions against anomalous information, inasmuch as these convictions provide the structure for the coherence of the self, rationality also provides us the

content may be collaboratively constructed through an interactive process in which the object explicitly confronts the viewer with her own condition, and the viewer reacts to that confrontation by constructing an interpretation of it that expresses her own particular level of political self-awareness. This process is inherently catalytic because it elicits cognitive and affective change in the viewer's own conception of her condition. As this conception evolves, her interpretation of the object's effect on her will also evolve." Ibid., 177-8.

⁹⁶ She notes in an entry for 4 October 1974: "The Persona is my opposite in every conceivable respect. He and I are the complements. When he has mastered the cycles, up through *n*, he will achieve personhood, independence, and history." Piper, "Preparatory Notes," 105.

⁹⁷ Before the Mythic Being received his name, she wrote in an entry dated Wednesday, 18 June 1973: "I really must stop stalling around this piece. To hell with its presuppositions and logical implications. It would probably be a whole lot healthier if I don't pursue that line of thought for a while anyway. I've gotten too involved lately with articulating the ramifications of what I'm doing. I suspect it's partly that that's been responsible for the paralysis I've felt lately over this thing—which has been going on since January [1973]. If I start thinking about the extent to which this piece is going to threaten my sense of self and my sanity, I'll never get anything done." Ibid., 95.

tools and the impetus to amend our systems of belief and understanding in order better to understand the world and to explain more comprehensively the limitless phenomena that populate it. Making an object of ourselves is the only means we have of actualizing our subjectivity as simultaneously rational and moral agents; in order to persist, we must constantly change, or else we will violate both our own rational agency and the moral personhood of others.

The implicit goal of *Food for the Spirit* and the explicit goal of the Mythic Being series were personal transcendence. The transcendental purposes of the former are fairly clear, given the mystical praxis in which she was engaged during its creation, and the transcendental philosophy with which she was concurrently grappling. Piper explains, regarding the Mythic Being,

The transcendence is successfully achieved to the extent that I (1) succeed in recognizing the arbitrary – and ultimately unimportant – spatiotemporal limits of my personhood (I might easily grow a penis or redistribute the fatty tissue of my breasts to my stomach sprout a moustache or coarsen the muscles in my neck or wrists); (2) dilute and generalize my remembered experiences till they are nothing more than the autobiographical words which denote them and (3) reascribe them as biographical utterances to a partially unknown other, the Mythic Being.⁹⁸

In more prosaic terms, the personal transcendence she sought was achieved precisely to the degree that the definition of her personhood is rendered logically arbitrary and the formative experiences of her life became unfamiliar (therefore, impersonal) to her. Later she continues,

The M.B. is essentially a device to relieve me of the weight of the unshared intimacy of my own past (ascribe it to another, make it public)... The use of the mantra divests my expressed feelings of personal significance (repeat it until it is meaningless, garbled)... The piece, *Dispersion: Mythic Being* is a *medium* through which I can free myself of the past.⁹⁹

Inasmuch as the spiritual goals of *Food for the Spirit* were a path to realizing a philosophy by means of self-control and the aims of the Mythic Being were to divest her past of personal

⁹⁸ Piper, "Preparatory Notes," 112.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

significance and therefore evaluative power in her life, the two projects can be considered the operationalization of apathy in her life: they are the verb-form of apathy, working toward clearing a space for the reconsideration of social relations and the mobilization of rationality in an effort to seek the universal and establish fundamental commonalities shared between all members of humankind. They were created under the aegis of a particular personal project aimed at controlling the impact of certain parts of her identity (i.e. her emotional response to certain events and ideas in her life and the significance these hold to her) on the clarity and incisiveness of her incipient rationalism and its philosophical edification—an exorcism of unwanted aspects of the self in much the same way as Mendieta, in the two *Rape Scene* performances, worked to exorcise the dread and depression a grisly crime in her community had on her.

We can consider these bodies of art, to coin a term, Piper's "*apathesis*." The triple wordplay is intentional: first, I would characterize this as a form of pathopolitics (and a stage in the development of her pathopolitics specifically), hence the presence of the root word "pathos." While the Second-Wave Feminist movement offered many women a powerful venue of exploring their psychic constitutions and the relationship these have to social and cultural institutions and practices, many women, especially lesbians and women of color, found the movement did not speak to the particularities of their experiences—in much the same way Black women felt their gender was ignored by Black radical groups such as the Black Panthers. As a result, many formed their own identity politics groups, such as the Black feminist artists group *Where We At*, with the intention of pooling together resources and experiences in order to address the specificity of intersectional women's identities. Still others, like Piper, struck out on their own to mine the depths of their experiences and reorient themselves not only to the culture at large, but also to their own selfhood. (That Piper's particular project also foregrounded rooting

out what she calls pseudorationality and what I call pathological thought makes her project all the more unique and representative of the feminist pathopolitical strategies I am examining in this dissertation; see next paragraph.) Broadly speaking, this kind of work on the affective particularities of one's experiences and the concerted effort to re-evaluate one's approach to them is one of the largest social revolutions of Second-Wave Feminism expansively conceived, and the pathopolitical tools developed by women like Piper are as potent as they are innovative.

Second, *Food for the Spirit* and the Mythic Being series mark the beginning of her concerted effort to “rein in” the force and influence of emotions on her operationalization of logic and rationality—rooting out pathological thought as part of a greater effort to establish a universal foundation for her antiracist, antisexist, and generally “xenophilic” politics.¹⁰⁰ Apathy is mobilized as a force for her politics of identity to the extent that methodological apathy is the necessary affective counterpart for proper rationality as she conceives it. There is a reason why conflicts of interest are considered an impediment to objectivity in fields as far-ranging as natural science, medicine, journalism, business, government, and beyond to practically any field involving intellectual labor: one's attachments in these cases can provide impetus, conscious or unconscious, to skew information to favor one's personal preferences. As Piper would see it, removing these attachments operationally decreases the likelihood of such bias. Piper's methodological apathy does this for her work personally, both artistic and philosophical. It should not be assumed that she feels that personal investment, attachment, or emotions prove to

¹⁰⁰ On xenophilia, Piper has the following to say: “Thus xenophilia in the sense I am defining it should be distinguished from a superficially similar, but in fact deeply perverse form of xenophobia, in which the xenophobe reinforces her honorific, stereotypical self-conception by treating the other as an exotic object of research, whom (like a rare species of insect) it is permissible to examine and dissect from a superior vantage-point of inviolate disingenuity. By contrast, the xenophile acknowledges the disruption and threat to the integrity of the self caused by the other's difference, and seeks understanding of the other as a way of understanding and transcending the limitations of her own self-conception.” Seeking challenges to the self, through encountering difference, is one of the most powerful means of developing the strength and explanatory potential of one's concept of the world and the categories occupying it. Piper, “Xenophobia and Kantian Rationalism,” 56n36.

be inherently an ethical vice, for each can provide significant moral impetus to certain actions; rather, their epistemic influence is always a possibility and thus a liability, and performing as full a personal inventory as possible is a crucial step to a sound epistemology and methodology. Her work in the two projects above, then, is in a sense the apotheosis of apathy as a methodological tool for purifying one's epistemology, and by extension the methodologies that depend on it.

Finally, the two works are a sort of thesis: they mark the beginning of her career-long work to purge the influence of stereotypes and other overgeneralized/oversimplified conceptions of identity on how individuals approach one another on a day-to-day basis: in other words, to combat pathological thought's communal and societal influence in social, cultural, economic, and conventional politics. As explored above, the primary foundation of bigotry in Piper's view is xenophobia, which stems from a natural and indeed inherent aspect of the Kantian self: its propensity to use pseudorationality in order to defend the integrity of the self's worldview and by extension the unity of the self that depends on it. Given that all selves have this propensity, the work of clearing away one's own pseudorationality or pathological thought, primarily by means of examining the emotions that keep it engrained in the mind, is necessary. The two bodies of art establish the metaethical space necessary for Piper's broader project of tackling xenophobia. Ultimately Piper, as a self-proclaimed "methodological individualist," sees all racism and sexism (inclusive of their institutional and cultural incarnations) as reducing to and based upon everyday individual interactions, which forms part of her understanding of the importance of the indexical present to a politics that would combat these evils.¹⁰¹ Her later works that unflinchingly tackle racism and sexism head-on would not be possible were it not for her apathesis.

¹⁰¹ "My work tends to target interpersonal manifestations of racism rather than institutional ones. This reflects my methodological individualism. I believe that institutions are composed of individuals, and that institutional manifestations of racism are composed of interpersonal ones." Piper, "Xenophobia and the Indexical Present I: Essay," in *Out of Order II*, 246.

Though many critical humanists have shied away from it, universalism, founded in a rigorous soft rationalism such as Piper's, is in many senses necessary for certain of the ethical tenets we hold dear. We revile categorically such things as actions and beliefs founded in stereotypical prejudice; the normalization and institutionalization of violence against women, against members of the LGBTQ community, against people of color; the pathologization of non-normative sexualities and genders; and the dehumanization of those whose bodies don't fit the cultural construct of the "average." What Piper works to do, then, is to demonstrate this *methodologically and universally* and argue for an ethics of the encounter that takes difference and particularity seriously and fights against the mobilization of generalizations about identity as inimical to the human. Overall, she utilizes a foundational universalism that I would call "categorical humanism." Holding that rationality is a faculty shared by all human beings, regardless of any aspect of their identity, she believes it is also our best tool in the fight against bigotry and for the eradication of the violence—physical, emotional, social, cultural, institutional, and epistemic—that bigotry inevitably breeds. To shore up rationality in this fight requires a rigorous and genuine evaluation of one's self, and a systematic inventory and exorcism of the emotional foundations of pseudorationality/pathological thought, which ultimately poses the biggest threat to rationality, parading itself as it does as genuine rationality. The two artworks discussed above are projects that attempt these things for Piper as a thinker and a human being, a performative levelling ritual that establishes the free space necessary for such a prolegomenon to her mature work, both artistically and philosophically, and one of the most rigorous examples of a pathopolitics of rationality to be found in contemporary art.

CHAPTER THREE

*Abrahamabra*¹: Performing the Social Interface of Mental Illness in Lynn Hershman's *Roberta Breitmore Series*

She's around thirty, a Jewish woman with flowing blonde hair, though if you look closely you could probably tell it's just a wig she's wearing. Her posture "deeply affected" and hiding behind her hair—with sunken shoulders, drooping head, and crossed arms—she avoids eye contact as if her life depended on it.² Tense and lacking spontaneity in her gesture, her movements are stiff and contrived and she looks as if she could collapse in on herself at any moment; having put on some weight recently, she might even tell you she is slowly doing as much. When she speaks, her voice is soft and almost always inaudible, her gaze staying safely on the ground or at her feet. Despite her general passivity, she's eager to please whomever she happens to be sharing her space with. You can tell she puts time into her appearance, although she doesn't do a great job at owning and flaunting her style: her garb is modern and sexy, comprising patent-leather boots and daring pumps and suave slacks and bold blouses and quirky skirts, and entirely belied by her blatant lack of confidence; her use of makeup is so aggressive it nearly offends the eyes—just another mask to hide behind, it seems, like her wig and wardrobe. If you aren't too nonplussed by her style and are willing to listen, she may tell you she's new here in the Bay Area and struggling to find a way to make ends meet. The rent's too expensive

¹ A magickal modification of the word "Abracadabra" from stage magic, this is the opening word of Aleister Crowley's *Book of the Law*, the central text of the mystical religion Thelema, meaning roughly "I will create as I speak." I assume the word's performative undertones are evident to the reader.

² This and all descriptions in this paragraph come from Roberta's psychiatric case history in Lynn Hershman, *Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore: An Exhibition April 1-May 14, 1978, M.H. DeYoung Memorial Museum, Golden State Park, San Francisco* (San Francisco: Fringe Press, 1978), R24. The exhibition catalogue is in ways its own work of art: flipped on its lateral axis, it has two fronts, each with its own title (*Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore/Roberta Breitmore Is Not Lynn Hershman*), proceeding normally to the middle of the book, where it inverts. I call the side with Hershman's name first the obverse and the other the reverse, and demarcate their pagination respectively with an O or an R.

and she can't find a roommate, despite her attempts via personal ads in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. In fact, she seems to struggle to make friends or even contacts at all, especially since she can't hold down work. As a result, she has become significantly depressed—hence her weight gain—and her waking life is increasingly typified by anxiety as the \$1800 with which she came to San Francisco from Cleveland Heights, Ohio, is beginning to dwindle. The anxiety, loneliness, and sadness typifying her waking life drive her into the world of dreams, and she spends ever more time in bed. Increasingly desperate for both help and human contact, she's tried reaching out in various ways: she's a regular at Weight Watchers, has tried Erhard Seminars Training (EST), attends more and more encounter sessions as time passes, and has started seeing a psychiatrist. None of it seems to stick, though. Consequently, she withdraws from the world outside of her structured self-help groups and meetings, and her thoughts turn to suicide with growing regularity. Her name is Roberta S. Breitmore, and she was a work of performance art by Lynn Hershman between Roberta's first manifestation in 1974 and Roberta's exorcism on 1978.³ But I'd still like you to get to know her as I have because her story is as much a revelation as it is artifice. Having gone through her psychiatric case history, peeked at her diary, read accounts from her few companions, even seen some private detective-style photographic sleuthing—all of which I base the above description on—I feel confident in saying: she's worth getting to know.

A Woman of Her Time: Introducing the *Roberta Breitmore* Series

If ever a work of feminist art deserved to be called a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, it is without doubt the *Roberta Breitmore* series.⁴ More than blurring the boundary between art and life,

³ In 1991, Lynn Hershman became Lynn Hershman Leeson upon her marriage to George Leeson. Robin Held, "Foreword: Hershmanlandia," in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson: Secret Agents, Private I*, ed. Meredith Tromble (Berkeley: University of California Press; Seattle: Henry Art Gallery University of Washington, 2005), n1 xviii. Given that all works discussed in this chapter were created well before her marriage, I refer to the artist simply as Lynn Hershman throughout.

⁴ Katerina Gregos, "The Importance of Being Roberta," October 2011, <http://www.galeriewaldburger.com/lhershman/onroberta.pdf>, 3.

Hershman's performance of Roberta Breitmore was so radical and wide-ranging that it makes questioning where this boundary lies essentially useless. Unlike most other works of performance art, Hershman's act of artistic creation rivaled divine genesis, inasmuch as a separate human being emerged into the world with her own social and communal existence and personal identity. To almost everyone who knew her during her four years of existence, Roberta Breitmore was in fact a real, ordinary person. In the twenty-seven public adventures that Roberta undertook during her corporeal existence, Hershman did everything in her power to prevent her "real" identity from being discovered.⁵ Hershman devised and gave to Roberta "her own language, her own voice, her own gestures," making Roberta as physically distinct from herself as she could manage, even going so far as to give her handwriting of her own.⁶ It was not until around 1977 that anybody else knew that Breitmore had been sharing Hershman's body the whole time, when the artist enlisted three other women to perform as Roberta multiples.⁷ From this point forward, three additional women—Kristine Stiles (also a major writer on the project), Michelle Larsen, and Helen Dannenberg—adopted the style and mannerisms of Roberta under Hershman's guidance and went on independent excursions as Roberta, acting as her primary physical incarnation thenceforth.⁸

The impulse behind this multiplication was naturally in large part artistic, to "assert the importance of the sort of Everywoman whose existence routinely goes unnoticed."⁹ But some of the impulse also came from the psychic distress that Hershman's time as Roberta caused her: as

⁵ Lynn Hershman, "Private I: An Investigator's Timeline," in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson: Secret Agents, Private I*, ed. Meredith Tromble (Berkeley: University of California Press; Seattle: Henry Art Gallery University of Washington, 2005), 26.

⁶ Patricia Maloney, "Looking for Roberta Breitmore," *Art Practical* 2.15 (14 April 2011). http://www.artpractical.com/issue/performance_the_body_politic/.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye, "tracing: Lynn Hershman Leeson," in *Performing Presence: Between the Live and the Simulated* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011), 43.

⁹ Sarah Valdez, "In the Land of Make-Believe," *Art in America* 95.10 (November 2007): 121.

the artist puts it, Roberta's life "infected mine."¹⁰ A year later in 1978, her distress reached a fever pitch and she had to terminate the project. Though she had originally planned to have Roberta commit suicide by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge, Hershman found it more artistically and symbolically fitting to exorcise her ceremoniously, in coordination with a Roberta multiple, at Lucrezia Borgia's crypt in Palazzo Dei Diamanti, Ferrara, Italy.¹¹ Reflecting on this episode and the worrisome and increasing overlap between her and Roberta's psyches, Hershman says, "Closure and transformation of her life would surely encourage my own individuation. Eventually, I no longer needed to define my life through her."¹² Hershman sought not only to free herself, but also Roberta: "The cure for Roberta's negative spiral was a ritualistic exorcism. I hoped not only to liberate Roberta from oppression, but metaphorically to free other women who suffered as deeply as Roberta. 'Metaphor' derives from the Greek for 'to move on.'"¹³ Allowing Roberta to move on would allow Hershman to move on and metaphorically help other women who suffered like her, like them, to move on.

Roberta's suffering was, from the beginning, a figuration of broader societal ills and most especially those of women in America at the time, rendering them concrete and exploring them through embodied metaphor as a living, flesh-and-blood personality. The artist writes, "Roberta represented a fragmented identity that both mirrored and reflected her society."¹⁴ Taking on that suffering in her work was of vital importance to Hershman but unsurprisingly bearing the weight

¹⁰ Linda M. Montano and Lynn Hershman, "Lynn Hershman," in *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*, ed. Linda M. Montano (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 61.

¹¹ See Lynn Hershman, "Roberta's Exorcism, 1978," in *Secrete Agents, Private I*, 30-31. Regarding the artist's original intent for the project to end in Roberta's suicide, the artist wrote in her first published statement regarding the project, "When Roberta has become 'real' enough, it is likely she will commit suicide. The accumulated articles of her research will then be made public." Lynn Hershman, "Roberta Breitmore: An Alchemical Portrait Begun in 1975," *La Mamelles* 5 (1976): 27. The information regarding the intent to have Roberta leap off the Golden Gate Bridge comes from Andreas Beutin, "Face, Surface, Interface: The Motif of the Mask in the Work of Lynn Hershman Leeson," in *Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar*, ed. Peter Weibel (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2016), 206.

¹² Hershman, "Private I," 33.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

of such pain and going to profound lengths to represent it by living it stressed the foundation of Hershman's life. And though Hershman sought some psychic reprieve through the dissolution of this mirror, her "personal life seemed to decompose" after the exorcism.¹⁵ Her daughter had grown to resent Hershman's time away to work on her art, and her husband accused her of wasting money on a frivolous pursuit; on 25 November 1978, her husband's fortieth birthday, he left for good, literalizing the marital separation that began Roberta's journey to San Francisco.¹⁶ Interestingly, the Roberta multiples "followed a similar progression into increasingly negative experiences and feelings of alienation"; the project was concluded within the year after the 1 April to 14 May 1978 exhibition *Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore*, the first and only exhibition focusing on this intricate body of performance work.¹⁷

As should be evident from this brief overview of the performance series' evolution and conclusion, Roberta's feelings of isolation and depression are a structuring force for the entire project. As a whole, the *Roberta Breitmore* series comprises five categories of output: 1) legal, civil, and personal ephemera that prove Roberta Breitmore's existence as a person (her own birth certificate, bank account, personal checks, California driver's license, diary, etc.); 2) vague and vaguely desperate personals ads in the *San Francisco Progress* seeking a roommate, the forty-three letters she received from respondents, and her meetings with a handful of prospective roommates, each clandestinely documented by a photojournalist; 3) her (necessarily undocumented¹⁸) participation in various support and self-help groups (including Weight

¹⁵ Montano and Hershman, "Lynn Hershman," 63.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

¹⁷ Hershman, "Private I," 26.

¹⁸ A central and sacred feature of support groups is their anonymity. As such—though this is shockingly unacknowledged in any of the literature on the performance series, either primary or secondary—directly documenting these highly personal encounters would entail a grave ethical infraction of this social contract. The inevitable lack of documentation has established a seemingly inscrutable lacuna in all writing on this aspect of the *Roberta Breitmore* series. As I will argue here, the artistic and scholastic poverty of resources produced by this ethical dilemma simultaneously figures the inherent difficulties of documenting performance art archivally and thus

Watchers, Erhard Seminars Training, individual encounter sessions, and so forth); 4) meetings with her psychiatrist, and selected case notes from these meetings; and 5) physical media (photographs and charts of Roberta) altered by the artist with acrylic paint, charcoal, ink, and/or collage. Categories one, two, and five make up the overwhelming majority of the scholarly focus on the project in the extant literature. In part, this is likely due to the fact that these three categories also contain most of the documentation of the performance series. I claim beyond this, however, that the imbalance in the literature stems from a lack of adequate focus on what I will argue is the most prevalent thread in the project, undergirding all its disparate elements and uniting the project thematically in all of Hershman's writing on it: namely, the changing face and significance of mental illness in America in the 1970s, both as a lived experience and as a pathological (and pathologized) condition to be treated by a psychiatric discipline undergoing dramatic transformation in its praxis and self-conception.

Buried by Time and Dust: A Brief Overview of the Literature on *Roberta Breitmore*

It is not just the analytic focus on a limited range of the output in the extant literature that omits significant portions of the *Roberta Breitmore* series' output and conceptualization, but the thematic approach and methodologies as well. My intended addendum to this body of scholarship should be interpreted neither as an indictment of any failures in this work nor as a refutation of the various arguments that have been propounded in it, as many of these works having been penned by the leading scholars of feminist performance art. Rather, my argument should be understood as a supplement (necessary as it may be in my interpretation) to what these

art-historically, as well as the necessity of implementing a methodology and heuristics of the autobiographical in all work on performance, equally in scholastic as in artistic practice. In other words, the personal and affective are often the only dimensions through which it is possible to explore and elaborate upon performance work as an artist or an academic and thus all culture workers involved in performance art must theorize, hone, and own a rigorous politics and poetics of affect as a structuring practice in our work.

scholars have written before me, as well as a challenge to reconceive and complicate our methodological approach to one of the most complex works of feminist art in this time period. Though the authors who have worked on the series have had much of importance to say, it has been said in a relatively limited number of ways.

The *Roberta Breitmore* series being perhaps the most frequently invoked work in discussions of the artist's oeuvre, the vast majority of general analyses of Hershman's career output have had at least something to say about the series. In these contexts, authors typically couch their interpretative frameworks for the series within their more general thematic characterization of Hershman's work. In the most recent retrospective—and shockingly only the second monograph—on Hershman's artistic career, Peter Weibel, CEO and Chairman of ZKM Karlsruhe at which institution the retrospective was arranged and initially displayed, had the following to say on the thematic categories of Hershman's career:

Five major areas can be defined in the work of Lynn Hershman Leeson. Firstly, there are works dealing with feminist viewpoints about gender, sexual difference, politics of identity, multiple identities, alter egos, clones, and virtual existences, issues of self-representation, a penchant for masquerades, doublings, and mirrors. Secondly, there are works questioning the politics of representation, understanding the burden of representation as a variation of the burden of identity. Thirdly, Hershman Leeson engages with biopolitics, artificial life and genetic engineering. Fourthly, Hershman Leeson deals with institutional critique by way of site-specific works, for example, the foundation of an anti-museum *The Floating Museum* (1974-1978) and her exhibitions in off-spaces like hotel rooms. Fifthly, her work engages with surveillance, control, censorship, and the loss of privacy.¹⁹

Virtually all writing on Hershman's career as a whole takes one or more of the above themes as the interpretive focus, and as such *Breitmore* is interpreted within the parameters of the chosen approach; though a strong argument can be made to include the series in any of the five abovementioned categories, it is most often circumscribed within the first of the areas Weibel

¹⁹ Peter Weibel, "The Work of Lynn Hershman Leeson: A Panoply of Identities," in *Civic Radar*, 45.

outlines. In such a context, the elements of the series that most emphasize Roberta's nature qua woman become the critical focus: her obsession with the signs and iconography of contemporary femininity (hair, wardrobe, makeup, mannerisms, attitude, etc.), as well as the nearly inevitable failure of these signs to become a "sufficient" performance of gender, which thus necessitates further compensatory performance. The lessons that Roberta has to teach us in this regard conventionally turn on the following in scholarly accounts: femininity is not merely a performance but a perpetual masquerade, in which the identity of the performer collapses with the proliferation of the signs of femininity circulated in written and visual media, proscribing the performer to a never-ending game of performance that is doomed from the start to failure. This in turn contains and restrains the potential of the performer both in self-conception and in her social relationships and therefore exacts a grave existential violence upon women who are interpolated by this ever-multiplying (and ultimately unattainable) set of gendered conventions.

As one point in the development of a profoundly accomplished career, then, most scholars interpret *Breitmore* as the earliest in Hershman's fully developed feminist argument about the instability and insecurity of identity, its incessant and neurotic performative repetition of signifiers in an attempt to define a signified that is always-already inconceivable as a stable referent. In short, there is no self qua stable personal identity, but only always incomplete selves in a constantly shifting field of signifiers that will never suffice to yield a stable identity—and this field is particularly unstable and treacherous for women. Tory Dent expresses this particular thread in the literature most appropriately:

For women the pressure to conform mandates most nefariously, for only in our efforts to resemble an homaged image are we able to fulfill one of our most basic human needs, which is to relate to others and be sexually desired. Only by distancing ourselves from ourselves, distorting ourselves beyond what we are, can we obtain the opportunity to satisfy ourselves. That point of fulfillment, as it becomes most possible, the “self” from which our longing arose and strove in pursuit of its happiness, by virtue of that process, may not survive.²⁰

In this literally self-destructive quest for identity and fulfillment, Roberta is definitively an Everywoman whose quest for feminine attainment is nothing if not exemplary of a broader social problem in an age of ubiquitous mass media. Such an approach to the series is only strengthened when one considers the exponentiation of Roberta in her multiples and the uncanny uncontrived commonalities in their experiences of living as Roberta. However, in reading these interpretations we must resist an easy poststructuralist interpretation and remember, as Amelia Jones does, that “Hershman stages the self as *both* simulacral and embodied.”²¹ What may seem a mere postmodern game of signifiers has genuine lived impressions and undeniable corporeal ramifications, in everything from eating disorders and other mental illnesses to compulsive shopping to “just” existential malaise.

Most of the essays that set out to explore the *Roberta Breitmore* series in depth generally expound upon this theme and add some further theoretical or analytical focus. For instance, in their essay, Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye argue that *Roberta Breitmore*, being a collection of fragments and remains of acts that refer to a person who no longer exists, can only be encountered as a palimpsest; to wit, it is “the site of a work never complete, or *always to be completed*, whose operation is analogous to the performance of a ‘real’ site: a place that evidences itself in traces of what has happened and is to be read and realized by those who

²⁰ Tory Dent, “First Person Plural: The Work of Lynn Hershman,” *Arts Magazine* 65.3 (November 1990): 89.

²¹ Amelia Jones, “This Life”, *Frieze* 117 (9 September 2008), http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/this_life/. Emphasis added.

encounter, enact and so occupy ‘its’ signs....”²² In other words, in approaching Roberta, we only reconstruct her through the fabrications of our own interpretation, based on what are only the traces of a whole that never existed: not only does Roberta demonstrate the incompleteness of identity, but she also restages this incompleteness through getting to know her. And important to my argument, Giannachi and Kaye claim that “Roberta Breitmore gains a proximity to the viewer or reader precisely through their investment....”²³ All readings of Roberta are invested readings, and by extension Roberta is not only a mirror for her time and society but also a mirror for her interpreter—a truth that is infrequently explored in any depth (i.e. with any personal disclosure of the interpreter’s encounter with the work) in the literature, even in this otherwise sophisticated essay that soundly identifies the structural issue in the first place.

Peggy Phelan takes the realization that the importance of the series is solely neither “here” (within the mind of the interpreting scholar) nor “there” (in the documents that constitute the remnants of Roberta Breitmore) but in their meeting yet further by implicating the artist’s own identity in this transformative alchemy, what Phelan calls the performance of co-identity. She argues “that Hershman was not (yet) herself when the Roberta Breitmore series performance took place; the performance itself produced the possibility of the emergence of Lynn Hershman Leeson.”²⁴ Phelan observes that, while Hershman never intended for Roberta to serve as a stand-in for the psyche of the artist, Hershman nevertheless projected elements of her own psychic traumas onto the narrative of Roberta’s traumas—most notably her sexual abuse at the hands of family members. In so doing, Hershman collapsed not only the distance between the art-persona

²² Giannachi and Kaye, 47.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Peggy Phelan, “The Roberta Breitmore Series: Performing Co-Identity,” in *Civic Radar*, n1 p101. Note that in this essay, Phelan uses “Hershman” to refer to the person of the artist prior to the performance and “Hershman Leeson” to refer to what the artist was able to become following and precisely because of the performance.

and the artist-persona but also the boundary between fictional and real itself. By having her own personal traumas in effect “held” by a fictive persona who in turn went into the world to have her own real and unpredictable experiences, “[t]he outward social manifestations of Breitmore’s identity transmuted Hershman’s internal self-comprehension; this transformation produced the condition for the security of Hershman Leeson’s public identity as a successful and influential artist.”²⁵ The uncertainty of the boundary between the creator and the created, which serves as the foundation for the liberation of Hershman’s own identity from her traumatic past, also functions as the basis upon which other scholars come to project their own motivated investments:

The *Roberta Breitmore* series can only be reconstructed imaginatively through documents and images. It relies on speculation, while remaining as truthful and accurate as possible; for fiction and fact blur in the retelling just as potently as they merged in the enactment. The performance of co-identity at work in the series threads through the unconscious—hers, theirs, mine, yours, ours.²⁶

This inherently speculative and personal interpretive methodology, as well as the transformative potential it holds, will be central to my argument.

The “realness” of Roberta’s personhood is pivotal to Phelan’s argument, and though she uses this aspect of the series to develop a concrete conclusion about it—that the performance of the series allowed Hershman to become the public artist she is—the realness of Roberta introduces more problems and questions than the performance project can resolve, which may very well be the series’ point as Katerina Gregos argues. There are many documents that can be taken to prove Roberta’s identity, she argues, and which we use to prove our identities in our daily lives: driver’s license, Social Security number, bank account, and so forth. With this established, what further can we say about who Roberta *actually was as a real person*, though?

²⁵ Ibid., 105.

²⁶ Ibid., 107-8.

But who exactly was Roberta Breitmore and how can we come to know her? To what extent? Indeed how do we come to know anyone (including ourselves) and to what extent? How far was Roberta Breitmore fashioned out of Lynn Hershman Leeson? And how much of Roberta permeated into and shaped Lynn Hershman Leeson, given that Lynn spent considerable time being Roberta? If Roberta Breitmore is a figment of the imagination, then how much ‘reality’ resides within her?²⁷

Her reality as a person only introduces further questions about the interpretive viability (or at the least the concreteness) of Phelan’s conclusions. Further, it is always treacherous terrain to make an effort psychologize the artist, even if in a circuitously careful and nuanced manner. If we can only get to know Roberta obliquely, this holds more so for the artist as knowable through her work.

In an even more art-historically specific interpretation of the unknowability of a definitively real person, the artist Wayne Wright argues that the *Roberta Breitmore* series indexes the absolute self-negation at the core of the project of Modernism through simultaneously seeming to purge illusionism for total honesty about the means of art-production and yet also obtaining illusionistic perfection in its flawless mimesis of the human form. On the one hand, “Roberta Breitmore is pluperfect illusion. Has any artist since the time of Alberti created an isomorphism so perfect, with so many of the details indistinguishable from real life; so perfect that the viewer must be specifically informed that the work is not life itself? *Roberta Breitmore* is the nemesis of Modernism's program to eliminate illusion from art.”²⁸ Nothing may be more anti-Modernist than the quest for perfect representational illusionism, let alone its achievement—so perfect, indeed, as to be mistaken for the “real” thing. Yet at the same time, “One could almost argue that it is runaway Modernism: self-investigation of the artist as means

²⁷ Gregos, “The Importance of Being Roberta,” 2.

²⁸ Wayne Wright, “Yes You Are Roberta Breitmore: A Post-Mortem on Modernism,” *Wayne Wright Art*, http://www.waynewrightart.com/Writing/Yes_You_Are_Roberta_Breitmore4.htm.

of production, through the deconstruction of personal identity itself, into its own constituent media.”²⁹ Ultimately, Wright claims that Roberta undermines the Modernist obsession with the heroic individual, especially the artist-hero so lauded in the project of Abstract Expressionism, using what can be understood to be exemplarily Modernist techniques of critical self-investigation of the means of production. What is found in the place of this hero is a mere fabrication, a contingency of time and circumstance, or in short, a true historicity of self:

Hershman reveals optimistic Modernism's hallowed self to be a hollow shell of support for evidentiary and preferential documentation. Selfhood is a constructed narrative, a list of experiences and interactions, chosen preferences and idiosyncrasies, an artifice, a work of art, and nothing more. Paradoxically, in the end, there is of course no denying it: Hershman is indeed Roberta Breitmore; we are all Roberta Breitmore.³⁰

Roberta gives the lie to not only the notion of a fixed or stable identity in social life generally, but also specifically the heroic self that had undergirded the Modernist avant-garde for the prior century—and achieves both with nothing more than the very stuff of social identity and Modernist aesthetics, a monumentally personal work of feminist-Modernist anti-Modernism.

As powerful and poetic as are all the above arguments (and the rest to be found in the literature, roughly modeling some variation of the themes above), I find myself feeling there is still something too glib and noncommittal about them all, both methodologically and substantively. The idea that identity is an unstable fabrication propped up on the flimsy support of an always-incomplete system of signifiers whose signifieds are faint and shifting has circulated for several decades in critical theory. The theory has its merits (and analytical utility), but seems to overlook something critical: as much as a fiction identity might be, it is nonetheless a useful fiction that holds immense currency in life at all levels: personal, interpersonal, familial,

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

communal, institutional, economic, legal, and so forth. Beyond this, the theory overlooks that in at least one critical way, identity is frighteningly concrete, and not merely an interchangeable void as Wright implies above: how we are identified by our community, by institutions of medical and economic power, and by the law can dramatically shape and limit any and all aspects of our lives. There are serious lived consequences to our identities, much of which may exist beyond our direct control. This oversight in the name of theory may also be the contributing factor to the overwhelming lack of efforts towards historicizing *Roberta Breitmore* in anything outside of strict art history (i.e. art historicized through art). In addition to historicizing Roberta, I will argue that Roberta's experiences with mental illness—remarkably seldom-examined in the literature—demonstrate the existential burdens of identity, especially in light of the communal and medical ramifications her (and all) mental illness has in its historical contexts.

Additionally, the literature makes little *applied*³¹ methodological effort to approach Roberta as a person rather than simply as a demonstrative work of art, even in the cases where Roberta's personhood is acknowledged to be one of the guiding features of the performance series. As I hope to demonstrate, scholarly writing on Roberta has to adopt a personal approach that relates to her in a manner transcending the conventional heuristics and methodologies of art analysis (representational, formal, stylistic, iconographic, etc.). Indeed, the only way actually to analyze her as an artwork is to approach her as a person, because that is her ontological status qua artwork: she is art *because* she is a person. Of course, she is a person created by an artist with aesthetic (and political) motivations and deliberate aspirations concerning the manifestation of the project. No doubt, this is unique among persons taken in the familiar sense of our collective social existence, but it does not negate the facticity of her personhood nor does it

³¹ Emphasis is added here to note the discrepancy between acknowledging theoretically that this methodology is crucial to interpreting *Roberta Breitmore* and actually using this methodology to so interpret.

eliminate the social injunction to treat her as we would another human being we had met in our workaday lives. One can justifiably claim in a more scholarly sense that the “subject” of the artwork is precisely how her interactions with the environment shape her person and by extension her relationships to others (and thus determine our potential relationship to her, repeating the mutual exchange ad infinitum). But to approach her strictly in these terms is dehumanizing inasmuch as it objectivizes her existence instead of subjectively relating to her. And though it may seem odd to worry about dehumanizing an artwork, this is in many ways the “point” of the work, though one would do better to call it a lesson or a revelation, a potent and portentous afterimage of the work’s unfolding in real time and real (social) space. We must open ourselves empathically and relate to her personally, though this by no means implies that we should forego thinking about her “life” (art-)historically. As such, my analysis here will be both historical and personal, and while I do claim that my methodology is in fact mandated by the nature of *Roberta Breitmore*, I have no pretense of presenting an exhaustive or exclusive examination. After all, how could any one person crack the code, nail down the story, or decipher the mysteries of another human being?

* * * * *

As other scholars have pointed out regarding Hershman’s career-spanning explorations of the ‘cyborgification’ of human existence and the general synthesis of biological and artificial life through technology and its interfaces, Roberta Breitmore was also far ahead of her time and predicted major structural shifts in culture in the early years of their inception. But here, instead of predicting trends in technology per se, her work marks and interrogates the beginning of what I will call medicalized pathonormativity³² through psychiatry, wherein aspects of human

³² *Pathonormativity* is a word I have coined, as a facet of pathopolitics, for this chapter. It is modeled on *heteronormativity*, and refers to commonly held social expectations regarding what is to be considered “appropriate”

suffering that previously would have found some attention and resonance in community and social life become pathologized and individualized through the body, subjected to the medicalizing gaze and treatments of psychiatry, which not coincidentally was in the incipient stages of its turn toward biologization at this moment in history. “Treatment” of these “conditions” began to be relegated solely to highly trained professionals, therefore limiting personal agency in conquering one’s suffering and dissuading those suffering from seeking care in their social and communal lives; correlatively, these new norms in psychiatric treatment, which rapidly spread into lay culture, discouraged those in the community from attempting to reach out to the increasingly stigmatized and ostracized psychiatric patient. Progressively more, as Breitmore’s habits show, the newly pathological sufferer of mental distress could only find community in “support groups”—also a burgeoning social trend during the period and one of the project’s above-outlined principal areas of investigation—that only served to draw more attention to the patient’s difference from the community, constraining self-conception and limiting communal care to increasingly unidimensional aspects of the individual’s life. In short, we see a historically novel neoliberalization of affect at this time that cut the suffering individual off from traditional sources of support and undermined her ability to succeed in self-care by deferring “treatment” to hyperspecialized medical professionals and single-minded support groups. I will argue that not only is this social-historical aspect of the *Roberta Breitmore* series seriously neglected in the literature on it, but it is also perhaps the most prevalent element that unites what is otherwise an expansive and disparate performance series.

affect in social life, as well as how that affect should structure our behavior and to what degree, both in intensity and duration. Though pathonormativity is seen most often in social policing of deviant affect, it has profound legal and ethical implications in daily life in all its aspects, not to mention the medical implications that will form a significant focus of this chapter. I draw inspiration from Foucault's discussion of madness and its increasing medicalization and socio-legal sequestering during and since the Enlightenment.

Dante's Shadows: The *Dante Hotel* as Precursor to *Roberta Breitmore*

To historicize my argument regarding *Roberta Breitmore* in the context of Hershman's own artistic development, and demonstrate that the series developed more from concerns regarding community and mental health than personal identity per se, it is worth briefly examining the piece that directly precedes, inspires, and indeed founds *Breitmore*: the installation piece *Dante Hotel*. Not only is this site-specific piece the thematic springboard for the *Breitmore* series, but it also shares a key site with Roberta herself: the Dante Benedetti Hotel in the North Beach area of San Francisco. According to the so-called 'fragments of an ongoing novel' titled "Three Years Condensed" in the *Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore* catalogue, Roberta arrived at the hotel on 12 August 1975 and made her first ventures into the life of the Bay Area community with this as her temporary base.³³ The history of the *Dante Hotel* installation overlaps dramatically with Roberta's, but not merely due to their temporal proximity or geographic commonalities.

Dante Hotel (30 November 1973 – 31 August 1974) was Hershman's contribution to a collaborative installation project with Eleanor Coppola. Each artist rented a room in the hotel for one year in which each set up her own installation. The driving impulse behind Hershman's decision to be involved in such a project was both the sacred value of women's collaborative work to the feminist art movement of the time and her desire to escape the institutional confinement and consequent aesthetic limitation that the artist felt the museum posed to her work. Shortly before the *Dante Hotel* became a concrete idea for Hershman, the curator for the University Art Museum in Berkeley had ejected Hershman's work from an exhibition at the institution due to his belief that it was not genuine 'art.' (The work to which the curator, Brenda

³³ See "Three Years Condensed," in *Not Roberta Breitmore*, R19. The author as in much of the catalogue is unnamed, but is presumably either Kristine Stiles or Lynn Hershman.

Richardson, objected was among Hershman's earliest: the *Breathing Machines* from the mid to late '60s, comprising wax heads cast from Hershman's own likeness, wearing wigs, glass eyes, and makeup, accompanied by hidden cassette tape players projecting the sound of breathing. The curator, responding to one particular *Breathing Machine* Hershman had in the exhibition titled *Self-Portrait as a Blonde* (1967), believed that "sound does not belong in a museum."³⁴

The aesthetic liberty of fully determining her work free of the constraints of myopic and ultimately arbitrary definitions of what constitutes true art was but one benefit to such a project, however. The institutional confinement of the museum is not a burden solely for artists: visitors face many constraints, as well. Beyond the most obvious—viewing objects selected by another entity for your consumption, during restricted hours, and in many cases only for a price—the museum places many subtle strictures on the viewer. The most relevant restraints here are twofold: first, one is always viewed while viewing. Whether this viewing is done by other visitors at the museum or by its staff, the fact remains that social surveillance is at play, and that this social surveillance carries certain expectations regarding how the viewer should approach the art: how long to look, what to look at, how to react while looking, from what distance and standpoint it is appropriate to look, and so forth. At the *Dante Hotel*, every viewer was expected to enter the room alone, after requesting the key (for no fee and at any time of day or night) from the hotel attendant. There were no expectations beyond returning the key at some point: the viewer could stay as long as she wanted, and even theoretically interact physically with the

³⁴ For this and further information on the motivations and foundations of the *Dante Hotel* installation, see Kyle Stephan, "Interview with Lynn Hershman, October 24, 2006, San Francisco, CA," accessed 10 July 2016, https://lib.stanford.edu/files/WAR_Hershman_2006.pdf, 3-4. The quote and the identification of the curator come from Kathy Noble, "The Alternating Realities of Lynn Hershman Leeson," *Mousse* 47 (February 2015): 152-65; 153.

installation³⁵—an absolute taboo in most museums, unless permission is expressly given, and even then, it is arguable that visitors limit how much they actually interact.³⁶

The tactile prohibition forms the second restriction placed on viewers and limits not only what sensory modalities the visitor can use to interact with the art (namely, only vision and hearing if applicable) but also how the visitor perceives herself in relation to the art object and environment. The visitor is implicitly placed as the less powerful party in the viewer-art encounter, with the art object being elevated to a near-sacred level, not to be sullied by the hands of those not anointed by the museum. This further entails the subordination of the viewer's experience of the art object to a preordained vision constructed through some combination of the artist's and the museum's preconceptions. The museum experience is, after all, curated in all senses of the word.³⁷

Fundamentally, then, Hershman was shirking the museum's limitation of choice, both artistic and spectatorial, and she took full advantage of her newfound freedom of choice in creating the installation at the Dante Hotel. The centerpiece of the installation was composed of two female wax mannequins, one black and one white (modeled in much the same way as her *Breathing Machines*, and indeed including the same cassette player projecting the sounds of breathing), lying next to each other on a bed. The radical sexual implications of this arrangement are fairly self-evident: not only is there a tacit physical intimacy between two women, but it is

³⁵ In fact, so few were the expectations in the room that the wax mannequins (a part of the installation, room description to follow) were eventually stolen—if under the pretense of the law. A visitor to the exhibition had feared they were corpses and called the police, who promptly confiscated them (and never returned them!). See Maayan Glaser-Koren, "Lynn Hershman Leeson's Roberta Breitmore and the Art of Becoming a Woman" (Master's thesis, San Jose State University, 2014), 16; and Noble, 154. Aside from the hotel's prohibitions against doing damage to the hotel room and the visitor's requirement to return the key, both Hershman and her individual viewers had full liberty in the space.

³⁶ My point here is not to deny that this is both necessary and desirable for many artifacts in museums, given their singular status and often significant age. Rather, this argument is directed at exhibition practices surrounding contemporary art, which generally hold the same standards as exhibiting for instance ancient Chinese scrolls.

³⁷ A strong argument could be made regarding the pathopolitics and especially the pathonormativity of the museum setting, but this exceeds the scope of this dissertation.

also an interracial relationship. The political power of the then-controversial relationship hinted at by the mannequins finds its counterpart in the radical aesthetics of the rest of the installation: it is simply the stuff of everyday life—makeup, pocket mirrors, discarded clothing, newspapers, a radio (playing a local station), toothpaste and other toiletries, and so forth. Though Hershman certainly is not alone among installation artists in including such mundane artifacts in her art, the banality of the scene of everyday life combined with the perhaps surprising relationship between the two figures certainly bears acknowledgement as a worthy entry in the avant-garde practice of institutional critique.³⁸

Her expansive and unlimited aesthetic vision allowed her to elaborate an intensively philosophical and complicated vision of identity and its formation. Throughout all of Hershman's writings and lectures on the *Hotel*, the most consistent thread throughout is the theme of negative space. Hershman links this to her early training as a painter, a principal study of which is the articulation of negative space as a positive form—i.e. the deliberate creation of negative space through the application of pigments.³⁹ If we think about the language of negative space, one way we can think through how the term can apply equally to form as to social practice and identity is that negative space is fundamentally a product of what exists positively in a given environment. Though in a limited sense negative space has no concrete material form of its own (if we think about representation in a strictly positivistic sense), we can clearly delineate and

³⁸ The institutional criticism of the *Dante Hotel* installation was also continued by Hershman in the following years, primarily in a project called *The Floating Museum*, whose timeline overlaps with the *Roberta Breitmore* series. The purpose of the project was to coordinate and support site-specific installations by scores of other artists with whom Hershman had come into contact during her work and whose vision she wished to support, given the lack of institutional support. *The Floating Museum*, then, carries forth the project of institutional critique at the heart of *Dante Hotel* as *Roberta Breitmore* propagates and expands its philosophical examination of how identity is formed as a sort of shadow of the community and cannot exist without inheriting some contours of the broader social context.

³⁹ See Wendy Vogel, "Portfolio: Lynn Hershman Leeson", *Modern Painters Magazine*, 12 December 2014, <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1067137/embodied-performance-lynn-hershman-leeson-gets-a>.

refer to it symbolically through language. It is as present and real, as articulable through language and other symbols, as positive form.

As with lines and space, so with the social fabric. One can regard each individual as a node in a complicated point-graph that renders the social space of the community. While the community is more than any of these individuals, or even the whole of the group of individuals considered collectively, the nodes formed by these individuals are the necessary components through which social space can be seen to hold any concrete, identifiable form—just as positive form would cease to have any meaning without the negative space that constitutes the contrast of its contours. Individual identity cannot be fully understood through mapping the reliefs of social space, nor can we determine the map of social space entirely through outlining the individuals that inhabit it—but we learn more about their shapes in examining their boundaries and see how they in part mutually constitute and construct one another.

The specific purpose of the installation *Dante Hotel* was to encourage viewers to attempt to figure out who a person is simply through the environment she keeps and the objects she uses—all of which must come from somewhere, namely the local community. It is akin to trying to determine the interests and agendas of a curator through her curated exhibition: none of the objects (in most cases) are her own creation, but through their selection and placement, we can ascertain to a surprising level of detail what is significant to her, the communities she pulls from and relies on, and the general form of her sensibilities. Much can be said about how these interests, finding their first manifestation in the *Dante Hotel*, pan out in Hershman's later, more specifically technologically oriented work: how we as subjects in a highly digital, media-saturated age strive to form our identities in the increasingly slim space left by this exponentially growing proliferation of forms and ideas, and how large swathes of society feel lost in the flood

of these images that seem to occupy more and more space in our minds, as would data on a hard drive.

This would go far from the purpose of this chapter, however, and in fact this detour into the Dante may already seem far afield. The fact remains, however, that Roberta was conceived as an immediate outgrowth, both temporally and conceptually, of the *Dante Hotel*. As Hershman explains,

Roberta evolved directly from The Dante Hotel. In fact, in her background narrative, when she arrived in town on a Greyhound bus, she went to the Dante Hotel and stayed there until she found a room. The Dante Hotel was an environment, but what if you had the trappings, the discards that defined a person, the negative space, and, from that, you actually made a person who went out to live in real space and time, who was part of reality, but also separate from it, and track what it was like to live as her at that time?⁴⁰

Aside from the obvious fact that *Roberta Breitmore* was a performance piece that essentially sought to create a whole person, a living member of society, and *Dante Hotel* was an installation that would yield a portrait of an individual (or really a couple) through the ephemera of their daily lives, the two works share far more similarities than they have differences, and the biggest difference between them is their relationship to audience. The *Dante Hotel* positioned itself as an artwork and sought visitors through newspaper ads in local publications. While *Breitmore* would also significantly involve newspaper ads as a major component, these ads never positioned her as an artwork. Hershman explains about Roberta, “She was totally anonymous, and I wanted it that way. It wasn’t a work that would go out and seek an audience. It was one that would seek a reflection, and if I were to let people know that’s what I was doing, it would skew how people reacted.”⁴¹ If *Dante Hotel* presented the portrait of an individual through the shadow of her

⁴⁰ Lilly Wei, “Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar”, *Studio International: Visual Arts, Design, Architecture*, 22 January 2015, <http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/lynn-hershman-leeson-civic-radar-review>.

⁴¹ Vogel, “Portfolio.”

community and environment, *Roberta Breitmore* presented the portrait of an individual through the reflection of her society and her interactions with it, and the only way to keep that reflection true was to remove the obvious markers of the artistic gaze staring back at it.

The negative space, the shadow, the reflection: all these terms can and have been used to define Roberta's relationship to the society she inhabited. And the fact remains that we can come to know Roberta almost exclusively through the negative space surrounding her, the shadows she cast in her encounters with the social world. Inasmuch as she was a person, there are few remnants of her as a personal, social entity: fragments of psychiatrist notes, photographs taken by the journalist hired to document her encounters, the letters she received in response to her personal ads, the legal and financial ephemera she accumulated, and some remnants of her personal diary. There are no testimonies from people she met. She had no "friends" to live and later recollect their experience of her as a social entity. Nothing remains of her workplace encounters, no bosses to reflect on her enthusiasm or lack thereof for her work and no coworkers to gossip about her behavior in the workplace. There are absolutely no archival traces of her presence in her social support groups (as well there should not be).

The only other artifacts that document her existence are drawings, diagrams, overpainted photographs, and writings and reflections by Hershman herself. What is glaringly absent from the literature on *Roberta Breitmore* is the acknowledgement of the ontological discrepancy these artifacts have with Roberta herself: they are all clearly marked as artwork, and thus fundamentally misalign with Roberta's status as a person (and paradoxically, insofar as Roberta's status as artwork was strictly delineated as her personhood itself, even her status as artwork). They are clear fabrications that draw attention to Roberta's status as a fabrication—exactly the opposite perception of Roberta that Hershman sought to confer and evoke. It is for

this reason, I contend, that art historians are in a bizarre bind when writing on *Roberta Breitmore*: Roberta is an artwork only to the extent that she is not—but the objects remaining that document her only call attention to the fact that she *is* an artwork. This is why so many scholars, especially in more recent literature, have called attention to the fact that *Roberta Breitmore* functions primarily to evoke reactions and projections from the interpreting subject—that indeed the ‘meaning’ of this ‘artwork,’ if there can be said definitively to be any, is her evocation of personal and affective responses from her ‘viewers.’

Regardless of how well this has come to be acknowledged in the literature, though, it fails to hold weight methodologically in the arguments propounding theses like this. The personal and affective evocations Roberta (or *Roberta*) is said to elicit are stunningly invisible in the texts themselves, which thus posit the existence of something that remains utterly formless. The absence is likely largely due to the general taboo against waxing emotional in scholastic work, related to the academic injunction to maintain objectivity, particularly among the humanities in the discipline of history. It is all the more disconcerting though given that *Roberta Breitmore*’s most vocal proponents have been feminist art historians—the veritable motto of Second-Wave Feminism being that the personal is the political. My purpose in the remainder of this chapter, then, is to provide this affective dimension while striving to place *Roberta Breitmore*’s existence in the broader context of social (and especially medical) history, an effort that has seen little exploration so far.

The personal is the historical.

Du, mitt konstverk⁴²: The Art-Work of *Roberta Breitmore*

The following shall be staggered between roughly three different categories of writing and analysis—though naturally they will bleed into one another. The first and most prominent will be art-historical analysis of the media and performance elements of the *Roberta Breitmore* series, from the perspective of social art history, but with a hefty emphasis on formal analysis. These analyses will proceed by looking individually at each of the five categories of production I outlined above as encompassing the totality of the *Roberta Breitmore* project. The second type of writing will comprise historical analysis of the trends in American practices in psychology and psychiatry from the ‘60s into the early ‘80s, pulling from both contemporary historians of medicine and contemporaneous accounts from the leading critics of the shift toward biomedical psychiatry—most of whom were practicing psychiatrists themselves. The third and most risky style of writing will be autobiographical, exploring my own history with depression and other mental illnesses, the difficulties of finding adequate care for these conditions, and their broader impact on my life, in order to draw attention to the personal and affective resonances the *Roberta Breitmore* project has with me—an effort ultimately in giving life to the personal reverberations the project is fairly often claimed to evoke yet rarely if ever shown in actual fact. Given the potential risk of falling into sheer navel-gazing introspection, these observations will be supported with Cultural Studies work on depression, most especially a relatively recent entry in affect theory, Ann Cvetkovich’s *Depression: A Public Feeling*.⁴³

The most reasonable manner by which to conduct this investigation will be to start with the most concrete and self-evidently “artistic” elements of the project and work back toward the more esoteric and rarified aspects of this project, many of which have little to no archival

⁴² Swedish for “You, my artwork.” A song by Swedish depressive-suicidal black metal band Shining.

⁴³ Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

documentation to speak of. Although my selections of particular pieces to focus on do strive to be representative of the larger body of work that constitutes the *Roberta Breitmore* project, in light of the enormity of the goals of this chapter (to wit, art-historical analysis buttressed by history of psychiatry and theory-anchored autobiographical work), it is necessary to examine only select works (or entries) from the various categories I have outlined. I will thus begin presently with the modified physical media, i.e. category five outline above.

* * * * *

The most iconic image from the *Roberta Breitmore* series, reproduced in practically every passing mention of the performance series in any given piece of art-historical scholarship, is the *Roberta Construction Chart #1*, 1975. It is not hard to see why, as the work reads immediately as an “artwork,” unlike many of the other archival remnants: checks, driver’s license, surreptitious photos of public rendezvous, diaries, and so forth. Three elements make up the piece: the first is a fairly standard black/white glamor-shot photograph of Lynn Hershman made up as Roberta. The shot is a medium-close up taken from slightly above the subject in roughly three-quarters profile, her right cheek and eye occupying the approximate center of the composition. She gazes boldly at the viewer and shows a mysterious shadow of a smile, a slight turning at the corners of her mouth. The stiff, starched collar of her white blouse juts out from under her dark cardigan sweater top, framing her face with simple elegance in a manner redolent of the ruffs so typical of aristocratic portraits from the Renaissance. The high-left placement of the light and slight dip of the subject’s chin create rich, but not engulfing, shadows under the protruding bangs of her wig and on the left half of her face behind the profile of her nose, creating an attractively moody look. Despite her lack of self-confidence, Roberta looks quite beautiful in this shot, and one could easily imagine seeing this among many others in a folio of actors’ headshots.

The second component, however, is what distinguishes this from headshots as a clear artwork, namely dyeing and drawing by the artist, the stylization of which creates a psychedelic composition-within-a-composition of vivid, rolling colors and breathing, organic lines reminiscent of a post-Cubist Picasso. Royal blue fills the void between her eyes and eyebrows, the left side of her face exhibiting a richer, deeper hue than the right. Deep crimson covers any visible remnant of her lips in a highly stylized, near-cartoonish mouth-like shape. Splashes—quite literally, since they seem haphazard and unshaped—of rose and fuchsia, with hints of coffee, cover the sides of her nose and her cheekbones, with a smidge on the tip of her chin. A light, nearly jaundiced amber wash covers select portions of her hair, primarily on the left half of her head with a swathe on the right half of her head bleeding out expressionistically (or perhaps merely accidentally) onto her forehead.

The line work gives additional shape to the coloring, but adds to the confusion in its dizzying complexity and arcane nuances. For instance, her nose is more similar to a stylized tree than anything: outlined in a dashed line and filled with dots, the bridge is further accented with an additional dashed line on either side, branching out where her nose meets her forehead with further vertical dashed lines following the contours of her face. We also see a cloud-like shape over her right eye, echoed by a semicircle under her eye topped with hash lines on the lower eyelid; her right eyebrow is covered in a strange amoeba shape that calls to mind the organic surrealist paintings of Joan Miró. Immediately below the semicircle and echoed on the other half of her face is a bizarre organic shape (which reminds this Midwesterner of the outline of Ohio) filled with short horizontal squiggles, much like the stylization of bodies of water on old hand-drawn cartographic maps. The effect is only strengthened by the presence of a design resembling

a rose compass: a circle with arrows pointing out in six directions. But inside the circle is the number two.

This is where the third part of the piece becomes relevant. Throughout the work, we see the presence of several circled numbers, between one and nine, some repeated in places. These correspond to a typewritten paper key pasted at the bottom designating the corresponding entries.

It reads in full as follows:

Constructing Roberta Breitmore [Hershman's signature, with date 1975, appears right]

1. Lighten with Dior eyestick light. 2. "Peach Blush" Cheekcolor by Revlon. 3. Brown contour makeup by Coty. 4. Shape lips with brush, fill in with "Date Mate" scarlet. 5. Blond wig. 6. Ultra Blue eyeshadow by Max Factor. 7. Maybelline black liner top and bottom. 8. \$7.98 three piece dress. 9. Creme Beige liquid makeup by Armatic.

Interestingly, all of the numbers are hand-circled with ink except number five, designating Roberta's trademark blonde wig. Though this could be a simple oversight, the difference in annotation does correspond to two categorical differences between this entry and the rest: first, all the other entries require hand-crafting by Hershman. All the makeup must be applied with the artist's discretion, and even the three-piece dress has to be laundered, fitted, likely pinned, and styled to her liking. Second, and perhaps more importantly, this element may be part of Roberta herself. It is never particularly clear, either in the primary or the secondary literature, whether the wig is really a wig when Roberta is out and about or if it is her "actual" hair, being a "wig" only to the extent that Lynn Hershman is not Roberta Breitmore.⁴⁴ All other elements in the transformation would have to be applied by Roberta Breitmore to become her publicly

⁴⁴ It is true that Roberta's trademark blonde hair is often referred to as a wig in the *Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore* exhibition catalogue, but it is purposefully difficult to distinguish whether the wig is being called a wig because Hershman is wearing it or because Roberta is wearing it—i.e. whether it is Hershman-as-Roberta or Roberta-as-person wearing it. What is undeniable, though, is that blonde is not Roberta's natural hair color, so regardless there is artifice to her hair, whether in color or substance; further, public 'viewers' of Roberta often notice that her blonde hair is actually a wig due to its improper placement. See for instance her psychiatrist's notes, quoted in Giannachi and Kaye, 42.

presentable self just as much as they had to be applied by Lynn Hershman in order for her to become Roberta Breitmore. Crucially, though unacknowledged in the literature, this construction chart then is as much a construction chart for Breitmore's use in crafting herself as it is for Hershman's use in crafting Breitmore.

The circumlocution and subject-object proliferation and confusion of the prior three sentences bring our attention to an important implication of the chart: *Roberta Breitmore performs Roberta Breitmore just as much as Lynn Hershman does*. One would not be exaggerating to say that the *Breitmore* performance series is really the performance of a performance, a meta-performance akin to Adrian Piper's meta-art (though much more performative than academic as in the latter). And as Piper's meta-art is a self-styled creation intended to limit and control the reception and interpretation of her art, this meta-performance is a self-styled creation intended to limit and control the reception and interpretation of a person (as ontologically fictive and artistic as she is). The subject of this and other construction charts—the application of makeup and wardrobe—forms an interface, as Peter Weibel tells us: they “are instruction manuals detailing how the artist transformed herself into this alter ego: the mask of makeup became the interface between the artist's identity and the fictional character's.”⁴⁵ But the interface is not just between artist and art-persona: it is also between Roberta's self-constructed image and her “inner self,” between her public face and her inner sense of her own identity.

The idea that our persona is a premeditated fabrication, a performance we create in order to be received in some predetermined fashion in the social world, is by no means a revelation, nor is this the first, let alone only, feminist artwork that grapples with the concept. The obsessiveness and meticulousness of the work in creating this persona—not just for the artist but

⁴⁵ Weibel, “A Panoply of Identities,” 46.

also the art subject she creates—are however quite staggering. Doubtless many women can sympathize with the sophisticated routine Hershman (and Breitmore) goes through to put on Roberta’s face: the artful application of makeup, attentive styling of wardrobe and hair, careful correction and concealment of “flaws,” and so forth. But realizing and recording this process in an artwork give it an added significance and beckon the viewer to consider it with the sober weightiness that she would a Renaissance Master’s history painting.

The circuitous algorithm involved in creating Roberta’s public face finds echoes in many feminist artworks from the period, perhaps most notably in Eleanor Antin’s 1972 *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*. The piece, arguably also a performance work, consists of 148 black/white photographs, taken from four perspectives at a predetermined time every day over a period of thirty-seven days. The photos are formally repetitive in the manner and invite the viewer to closely contemplate small differences between each iteration. In each we see the artist standing naked: front, back, and each side. The “performance” they document is the artist’s process of losing ten pounds over the period of the work’s duration. Therefore the “carving” and “sculpture” of the title refer to the artist’s body: artist and art object are one and the same in this case, and the carved-away excess, the “sculpture’s” negative space, is fat and muscle mass. The implications of the work are considerable: contemporary standards of beauty push women to treat their embodied selves as objects to be contoured to some ideal, through “discipline” or deprivation. Further, the work implicates High Art in the propagation of unreal standards: the beauty of art’s cavalcade of nude women subjects are as much a rarified, unattainable ideal as the Arcadia in which these carefree nymphs so often prance about.

The ramifications of *Roberta's Construction Charts* go a few steps beyond Antin's bold and groundbreaking piece, however. Antin's work is more akin to a lived thought-experiment than anything else. Presumably, after the work's duration had passed, she went back to her regular eating and exercising habits. Though it is possible (likely?) the performative nature of the piece had psychological effects on the artist, they were set apart from her identity. Roberta, however, no matter how much an artwork she is, is also a human being, and the fanatical care she pours into her appearance speaks to larger aspects of her identity and psychology and is not contained to a feminist manifesto on unrealistic standards of beauty. The compulsive routine is not contained in just the artwork itself: it is part of her person, her identity. To this extent, then, her obsession with presenting a very particular appearance needs to be considered in juxtaposition with other elements of her personality. The artwork, after all, is more than—sometimes even other than—the sum total of the components that constitute it.

It is clear here and elsewhere that Roberta's preoccupation with her appearance is implicated both in her mental illness and in the media of her time, and transitively her mental illness is therefore implicated in that media. Her most recognizable feature, her blonde wig (hair?), is frequently invoked in characterizing her personality in the literature, both primary and secondary. Kassia Orloff astutely picks up on this, noting, "Roberta wears a great deal of makeup to conceal the natural contours of her face and a blonde wig because advertising has convinced her 'blondes have more fun.'"⁴⁶ She goes on to point out, "All of her attempts are doomed to failure because her dream self is, in fact, a dream of anonymity—to be like the vacuous models who stare out of fashion magazines and TV commercials.... Thus, the tasks Hershman performs in the character of her persona make Roberta a trope of the woman victimized by pop-culture

⁴⁶ Kassia Orloff, "Women in Performance Art: The Alternate Persona," *Heresies* 17 (1984): 38.

values.”⁴⁷ Inasmuch as the images Roberta seeks to imitate are genuinely unattainable, and insofar as she nevertheless insists on continuing her hopeless quest to attain them, the media culture in which her psyche is steeped encourages her down the path toward a traditional definition of insanity (originating from Albert Einstein): repeating the same actions in hope of different results.

The mythology of bloneness is a ubiquitous reference in the earliest literature on Roberta, and equally ubiquitous is the discussion of commodity culture and advertising alongside the mythology of bloneness—indeed the inextricability of commodity culture from bloneness as a cultural construct, most especially Roberta’s earliest appearance in literature. Contained within the *Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore* exhibition catalogue are a series of dated entries, written by Kristine Stiles, that read like philosophical reflections in a scholar’s journal and are structured like poetry: each line’s first word is capitalized, regardless of its place in the sentence. The only exceptions to this rule are the occasional block quote—even if a source for the quote is not clear. One such case is found in the entry dated January 17, 1978. After referring obliquely to and citing Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies* (saying, “Social usage bestows multiple connotations upon pure matter then makes / Bundles of collected myth”⁴⁸), Stiles writes an uncredited block quote that reads:

Blonds have more fun. If I have only one life to live let me live it as a blond.
Blond is goodness and purity. Blonds are beautiful. Blond angel. Gentlemen
prefer blonds. Shallow like a blond. Vacuous blond. Dumb blond. Only her
hairdresser knows. Blonds age quickly. Men date blonds then they only marry
brunettes.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁸ Kristine Stiles, “January 17, 1978,” in *Not Roberta Breitmore*, R9.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Perhaps the block quote is uncredited because who (or really what) Stiles is quoting is popular culture writ large. Regardless of the source of the “quote,” what is clear is both that an abundance of myths proliferates and cathects to the cultural symbolism of bloneness and that these myths cut both ways: promising fun, allure, and attractiveness, the price seems to be rapid ageing, assumptions of idiocy, and the omnipresent air of subterfuge.

Immediately following this block quote, Stiles writes in the typical script: “Blond implies intensification of social experience, sexual adulation and / Companionship, even curiosity. The myth is so pervasively powerful, blond issues / Magic. Roberta treats these myths as commodities purchasable with her yellow / Wig.”⁵⁰ The promise of this magic is as near as one’s credit card, a mythical gilding through the exchange of gold. The symbols of the mythology are truly skin-deep, and our desire for the mythology is created by the circulation of the very products that promise to fulfill it: a vicious circle as profound as the dual-cutting nature of the mythologies of bloneness. Invoking Roberta’s mask of makeup, Stiles goes on to say,

A / Mirage swabbed with color creates exaggerated bone structure where her / Reality offered other contours. She gleans these tricks from the perfected / Mannequin. But both men and women scan body and beauty books admiring false / Bulges and hollows. She devours these same books, today.... Roberta’s bouts with weight demonstrate her longing for the / Cultural ideal sylph, a mortal, slender Being supposed to inhabit the air but totally / Soulless. Swollen curves of the Frederick of Hollywood women now come to represent / Mass, a density undesirable. Anonymous perfections in fashion magazines entice / Camouflage.⁵¹

Four things are interwoven here through makeup, bloneness, and commodity culture more broadly: advertising (Frederick’s of Hollywood, body and beauty books), deception (mirage,

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid. I should note that my ellipsis skips over a brief quote that I feel would distract the reader’s attention from the bigger point of the excerpt. The full sentence reads, “She devours these same books, today, searching the key to / Androgeny [*sic*].” Not only is the allusion to androgyny difficult to decipher, but it also holds next to no place in the literature outside of this catalogue, and generally seems to be an attempt to attach Roberta’s mythos more directly to the work of Karl Jung, whose approach to psychoanalysis relied in places quite heavily upon androgyny and dualistic symbolism more generally.

false bulges and hollows, anonymous perfections, camouflage), lifelessness (whether of the mannequin, the soulless sylph, or the weightless mass), and real, physical bodies—specifically women’s bodies, but vicariously men’s bodies too, inasmuch as men are enculturated to desire these mirages.

And Roberta is caught squarely within the circulation, both imagistic and material, of these weighty, costly myths. Indeed, she is in many ways the personification of the woman caught in these myths, as noted by Orloff above. Roberta’s self-definition and –conception are intricately imbricated in the media mythology, tied squarely to consumption and bred by a lack she is convinced she has. The subsumption of personal identity by media imagery is what Hershman calls the “eye for an I” relationship, and Roberta is one of Hershman’s starkest demonstrations of this concept.⁵² What we see in *Roberta Construction Chart #1* (and all other construction charts) is not just the illustration of the process by which Hershman becomes Roberta, or even how Roberta becomes Roberta, but also the illustration of the performance of lack, bred by imagery circulated in the sale of commodities, with a helpful key of the commodity-accomplices used to perform and underscore that lack. And to the extent that Roberta is intended to be archetypal, this is a lack shared by many women in the US at the time of Roberta’s “creation.”

* * * * *

Advertisement intrinsically preys upon desire, and every desire points to some lack. To the extent that the mythology of blondeness is constructed and circulated through commodity culture, it creates the lack that it utilizes to create desire for commodities. Though this is standard fare in Marxist and post-Marxist literature critiquing the commodity culture of late-stage

⁵² Quoted in Dent, “First Person Plural,” 88.

capitalism—the creation of a demand for commodities that in turn necessitate labor, the wages of which fuel the accrual of capital for the ruling class that further fuels the creation of yet deeper demand for commodities, ad infinitum—Roberta’s imbrication in this process has two further implications beyond the standard Marxist reading. First, as indicated above, femininity holds a special place in this cycle precisely to the degree that woman is herself constructed as image, an image attainable through commodity culture. Feminist art from around the time of the *Roberta Breitmore* series had already begun to explore this conflation thoroughly.

What had not had such a thoroughgoing investigation by feminist artists, though, was the psychic life of the lack created by commodity culture. Antin’s work above demonstrates something of the prototype for how most feminist artists who engaged this topic approached their work: showing how the proliferation of images of highly idealized femininity impacts the physical bodies and daily routines of everyday women. It is true that works such as Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document*, interestingly nearly precisely contemporary with *Roberta Breitmore* (1973-77), had begun to explore how the routines of women’s lives had deleterious (and theretofore unacknowledged) effects on the minds of women. Kelly shined a harsh light on the idyllic process of raising a child through doting affection by documenting the darker side of a mother’s attitudes toward her child: the animosity for childbearing’s effects on the body, the physical pain of nursing, the jealousy toward the child occupying the spotlight, the sense of betrayal and loss as the child attains individuality and ventures further out into the world, and the sheer exhaustion of being a mother while trying to do any other work. In fact, the document itself, often referred to by the initialism *PPD*, refers to the infamous mood disorder that affects a large portion of women after giving birth: post-partem depression.

However, though Kelly's work is groundbreaking and plunges boldly into unexplored territory in order to give legitimacy to women who suffered likewise, it is also highly personal and deals largely with the powerfully particular psychodynamics of the mother-child relationship. On the one hand, Kelly's *PPD* is not intended to probe broader culture any further than to the extent that it forgets and neglects the needs of mothers following the birth of their child. On the other hand, *Roberta Breitmore* is presupposed on the fact that Roberta is a reflection of her cultural context. Hershman even undertook several years of graduate study in psychology to begin working up a psychological model of Roberta as a piecemeal portrait of women at the time, in addition to maintaining something of an individual personality based on her traumatic background. Hershman clarifies,

I spent three years studying towards a PhD in psychology to get Roberta's background to be a creative composite of stereotypes for the particular traumas that she underwent. I did that to think about the facets that make a personality or an identity or something as fleshed out as possible, not an obvious performance, but more an invasion of an alien personality.⁵³

As a "creative composite," Roberta was able to transcend limitation either to Hershman's personal experiences or to a simple parade of cultural stereotypes. She was conceived from the beginning to be both personal and transpersonal, both extraction and abstraction, exceeding definition through either Hershman's own history of trauma or Hershman's philosophical condensation of cultural tropes. And the lack of commodity culture that forms much of the language of Roberta's self-hatred and despair was clearly linked to her mental illness.

⁵³ Hershman, quoted in Giannachi and Kaye, 45-6.

Neka morgondagen⁵⁴: Roberta's Would-Be Suicide

To explore Roberta's depression, it is best to begin with the end⁵⁵, the telos: her suicide. Or to be more accurate, I will begin with her intended suicide, a plan that was abandoned by the artist, as mentioned above. Although Roberta was cast into the universe through a ritualistic exorcism—at least in part at the behest of Hershman's and the other Robertas' psychic distress from performing as Roberta and their need to symbolically cut her loose—archival remnants still persist documenting Roberta wrestling with her suicidal impulses, and not just in written media.

In fact, one of her excursions involved her contemplating suicide publicly. One photograph remains to attest to this, *Roberta Contemplating Suicide on the Golden Gate Bridge*, 1978. Shot from on the bridge's sidewalk, the composition is dominated by verticality: not only is the framing vertical, akin to a vertical snapshot on a phone today, but both towers of the Golden Gate Bridge appear in the frame, one looming monumentally in the middle ground and jutting out of the frame, and the other in the background, slightly obstructed by the left pylon of the first tower and thinly cloaked in haze. The strong verticals are echoed by three walking figures—a pedestrian couple walking towards the camera in the distance and Roberta closer to the camera, facing away and turning towards the bridge's edge—and a series of streetlights receding towards the vanishing point between the couple. Everything in the composition is moving towards the viewer, except for Roberta, who seems exceptionally alone despite the presence of the two men and roughly a dozen cars. Her isolation is achieved in three ways: her orientation away from the camera; her figure continuing the vertical line of the nearest streetlight, as part of the longest vertical line in the composition that bridges nearly the whole

⁵⁴ Swedish for, "Deny tomorrow." A song by Swedish depressive-suicidal black metal band Shining.

⁵⁵ It would not be inaccurate to say that one's struggle with depression begins also with the end: either suicide as an actual exit from the suffering, or reaching out for help upon the realization that the illness must be conquered or it will consume you through suicide.

image (tower pylon to streetlight to Roberta nearly to the bottom edge); and her compositional isolation in the left corner, on the left side of the leftmost pylon—she is the only figure not part of the bridge to appear there.

We would not be able to determine that the woman is Roberta were it not for the title: her face is not visible, her wig (hair?) looks wavier than normal, and the quirky polka dots on her skirt are almost unrecognizable due to how distant she is from the camera and how dark the rest of the skirt is. Her uncharacteristically somber appearance accompanies another disquieting feature of the image: the cars and couple are all clearly in motion and moving purposively in parallel with the bridge, but she breaks the omnipresent perpendiculars of the composition and takes a tentative step diagonally to her left, seemingly just after pivoting on her left foot. The image is in most regards quite mundane, but this hesitant turn rips it out of its banality and makes of it something *unheimlich*. Even without the title of the piece, those with a passing knowledge of Golden Gate Bridge’s history likely know it is an infamous destination for suicides.⁵⁶ While the location is also a destination for tourists, many of whom may pause along the bridge to admire the view of the bay, the step diagonally to the left of Roberta’s right foot hints at a purposive movement, as hesitant as it may be, to the bridge’s edge. One gets the sense that Roberta is not gazing into the bay, but rather the bay is gazing into her.⁵⁷ She looks as though she is being pulled in magnetically by a force greater than she can resist. And for those suffering from severe depression, the seductive pull of death is nothing less than magnetic.

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⁵⁶ For a moving and intense exploration of this subject, see the 2006 documentary *The Bridge*, directed by Eric Steele.

⁵⁷ I am paraphrasing Nietzsche’s famous line from *Beyond Good and Evil*, “And when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.”

To say I've "suffered" from severe depression seems a poor description of my experience with it. "Suffer" not only carries an unwanted sense of pity—and self-pity, should one fall for it, turns quickly into self-contempt, in my experience—but the word implies something definite and determinable; it also suggests something separate from the person, or at least an unwelcome presence; and it certainly entails pain. None of this accurately describes the experience of depression, as I've come to know it. (In fact, "the experience of depression" is itself a fallacy: the range of interior perceptions of depression; the symptomatology it can manifest; the behavior it can encourage; the treatments that will help defeat it, ad nauseam—almost every symptomatic dimension of depression could encompass its diametric opposite and still be considered the "same" illness within the still-underdeveloped diagnostic criteria of contemporary psychiatry. This is a sign both of the profound power of depression—it doesn't so much push in a predictable direction as it pushes towards *any* direction, *to its extreme*, for instance, oversleeping or not sleeping; overeating or not eating, emoting too much or not at all, etc.—and the fledging state of psychiatry even today. Our terminology is inaccurate and inadequate, and the best "objective" measures of the illness's severity today still rely on remarkably unsophisticated techniques like self-reporting on numerical scales. But practically every depressed person can find a grain of truth in any given account of depression; there's a commonality to the experience that is both inarticulable and ungeneralizable.) Every one of the items I appended to the verb "to suffer" is simply wrong in my experience.

But if I am going to try to demonstrate why Roberta, to me, is so relatable, I have to make an effort—inconsistent, incomplete, and inaccessible though it may be—to describe how I have experienced it, which is for me my single greatest point of entry to a sense of fellow feeling with Roberta. My description will not match others' descriptions, but it is my truth, and speaking

the truth of one's mental illness, regardless of how it resonates or fails to resonate with others, is a necessary part in combating it. To begin an inadequate account as an attempt to speak my truth: In the darker moments of my depression, I did not see myself as deserving of pity. I was not so much pitiable as pitiful. A somewhat trite turn of phrase common among psychiatrists and psychologists trying to explain the concept of depression in its simplest terms, especially to children and adolescents and most especially males among them, is that depression is "anger turned inward." (The number of times I've heard that phrase coming from the literally scores of mental health professionals I have seen nauseates me to this day, especially considering how gendered it often is.) Regardless of how artless or even glib the expression is, it explicates one of the subjective dimensions of depression that has remained most consistent in my experience of the illness: the only passion that survives in depression is hatred, particularly the hatred of self. The vernacular conception of the term "depressed" is that it is effectively synonymous with "sad," and thus in popular imagination, "to be clinically depressed" practically translates to "to be unhealthily sad." But sadness is not really the emotion one feels most in depression, I discovered: only hatred of self is consistent.

The above is not meant to imply that depression never brings a feeling of sadness, or that the mundane experience of depression is continual, focused self-hatred. Sadness and self-hatred are doubtless to be found in depression, as I've felt it, and self-hatred is particularly articulable as at least a subtext in most of the distorted logic of depression. In fact, the most definitive and omnipresent emotion of the depressed experience—my depressed experience—is somewhat paradoxical: the emotional life of depression is a void of emotion; depression's emotion par excellence is non-emotion, apathy. While having a break from the vicissitudes of emotions may sound welcome to some, it is anything but, for this apathy is quite deadly. In most cases, apathy

simply means not caring one way or another, and the object of that apathy usually isn't something critically important. In depression, however, apathy cuts to the bone and devours the significance of all significant things in one's life: self-worth and self-esteem, deepest pleasures and fondest memories, social networks and beloved connections, dignity and meaning, purpose and drive, self-care and self-respect, will and want.

To use a relatable (albeit simplistic) metaphor, the feeling one develops toward life while living with depression can be compared to chewing a piece of gum for too long: the flavor begins to fade until it not only ceases to taste like anything, but becomes curiously disgusting and may even inspire vague nausea. What was soft and chewy and pleasant to the mouth becomes hard and rigid, eventually tiring the jaw muscles to the point of aching. Every motion of the jaw, every additional round of chewing, only makes the next one more difficult: the harder one tries to soften the gum, the worse the situation gets. If one were to take the gum out of one's mouth, the gum's original color would have likely dulled or even grayed out entirely. Eventually, one decides it is best to give up on it and toss it away.

Such is my experience of living with depression, and I intuit at least some other people who have lived with prolonged depression can relate: the color and flavor are drained out of life to the point of blandness and nausea (in the Sartrean sense here). The effort it takes to manage daily routines seems to grow exponentially with every passing day. What once brought pleasure now seems utterly pointless and even irritating. Memories of happier times become faint and dim, and one may even begin to doubt they were ever real; remembrances of hardship occupy all recollection. The only change one can foresee is the worsening of already-dismal circumstances. Living itself becomes so painful—meaning here, so overwhelming, anxiety-inducing, exhausting, upsetting, disappointing, and ponderous—that one withdraws physically and

emotionally from the world at large and shuts down internally and externally, a kind of pupation sans chrysalis promising no beautiful metamorphosis, except perhaps the grace of Azrael. If severe enough, the experience of depression can so totally engulf one in despair, emptiness, and hopelessness that surrender becomes the only apparently reasonable escape. The unthinkable thus becomes not only thinkable, but convincing: such is the logic of suicide.

This Was My Life: Personhood in an Age of Bureaucracy

A familiar figure to us all, she [Roberta] participates in the popular interests of our day, such as “interpersonal growth encounters” and “higher-consciousness.” But, paradoxically, these self-validating experiences serve only to alienate her further and contribute to her sense of detachment and anonymity.

—Susan Levitin⁵⁸

Even among art historians, the concept that an artwork could possess a unique personhood that deserves ethical consideration might be outlandish; that this “person” could also be depressed and suicidal is yet another step beyond the absurd, then. It is worth looking at how Roberta’s personhood is constituted before considering in finer detail how Roberta ended up considering suicide that day on the Golden Gate Bridge.

As evidenced by the veritable libraries filled with philosophical treatises on the topic, the concept of personhood is a difficult one to define, and, as political activists and theorists alike will attest, one rife with treacherous possibilities of exclusion from hegemonic definitions that particularly threaten disempowered groups. Nevertheless, there are pragmatic elements we could more or less agree upon given the historical context under consideration. In twentieth-century America, to be a person carries at minimum some legal and political significance, both in rights and responsibilities—and given the pervasiveness of capitalistic forms of economy in the

⁵⁸ Susan Levitin, Untitled Preface, in *Not Roberta Breitmore*, R4. Note that this essentially frames the *Roberta Breitmore* series as a critique of popular means of self-improvement and -help, especially those favored in California in the 1970s.

country, it also likely entails certain institutional entanglements. To exist as a person in this context then means that one makes up a point in a vast dot-matrix of legal, political, financial, and fiduciary institutions and relationships. And one's existence on this dot matrix entails an extensive array of documentation. To paraphrase English empiricist George Berkeley's famous metaphysical formula, *esse est documentum*, or "to be is to be documented"—a turn of phrase that, while offered somewhat tongue-in-cheek, takes on an ominous tone in the contemporary American context of ferocious debates over undocumented immigrants.⁵⁹

As historians will no doubt affirm, often the only remnants we have of the existence of a person are these collections of documentary ephemera—and this is largely all we have left of Roberta Breitmore. She possessed a bank account, in which the money with which she went to San Francisco was originally deposited. This bank account also had checking capabilities, so she had her own checkbook with checks embossed with her name and address. The checks and other documents affirm that she had a residence that she rented. Roberta also had credit cards, despite her relatively low and unreliable income: a sign of the times, in the shadow of the exponentially expanding financial industry. Her income necessitates paychecks and hiring forms, so these occupy the archive as well. What may be most surprising on this list is that she even had her own driver's license. This above all other artifacts affirms that, at least to the state, Roberta S.

Breitmore was a real, flesh-and-blood person with an officially recognized, unique identity.

Many art historians writing on the *Roberta Breitmore* series have largely gotten caught up in this dimension of the project, though from a strictly art-historical vantage point, it is not difficult to see why. While artists have adopted performative personas for at least five decades prior, with Marcel Duchamp's *Rrose Sélavy*, the series genuinely does seem to be the first to

⁵⁹ The original formula Berkeley offers is, to be is to be perceived (*esse est percipi* in the original Latin).

involve the creation of an independent, *legally recognized* person. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, it seems little short of some kind of metaphysical alchemy—a word that was, not coincidentally, perpetually appended to the project in its earliest public manifestations qua explicit art project. But one can quickly demystify the achievement by accounting for the era: Roberta’s creation predates public criminal concerns around identity fraud, massive campaigns of state and corporate surveillance, the widespread private use of the Internet and social media, and easily accessible digitized archives. Hershman emphasizes this in a passing comment in an interview:

I thought I would do it for a week or so, but the longer I was Roberta, the more I needed to prove she existed. If I had tried it 10 years later, it would have been fraud. But it was preinternet [*sic*], no one tracked those things then. Other people were doing identity works and role reversals, but they were doing it more for a camera. They didn’t live it; they never put themselves at risk.⁶⁰

In addition to corroborating how unique the series was to its time, Hershman calls attention to the peculiarity of her approach to identity work and the genuine danger involved in her creating and living this identity—and perhaps most importantly, she exposes how personally invested she was in “prov[ing] she existed” by actually living as Roberta Breitmore.

Roberta’s official personhood has many other archival elements to it, not least of which is her own personal diary—an artifact conventionally associated with the inner life of a person, something that it is typically assumed all able, mature persons have to some degree, whether documented or not. But the point I want to emphasize here is that art historians have largely treated this dimension of the series to be an end in itself: one of the many accomplishments that make the series a worthy occupant of the annals of art history. While I do not contest the historical merit of the accomplishment, treating it as an end in itself both ignores the whole idea

⁶⁰ Hershman quoted in Wei, “Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar.”

of personhood as a social category—to designate an individual as worthy of certain rights and considerations and wielding certain responsibilities—and neglects the significance the artist invested the attainment with. There was a *purpose* to demonstrating Roberta’s personhood. Fortunately, I am not alone in this protestation. As Katerina Gregos argues, “Though these [ephemera] ‘prove’ the existence of Roberta, what was of fundamental importance to Hershman Leeson, were the real experiences of Roberta, which perhaps more importantly ‘determined’ her character.”⁶¹ Something about Roberta’s experiences and character was vital to Hershman’s investment in the project, and Roberta’s personhood was more or less a means to substantiating and validating her experiences and character.

There are two dimensions to her experiences and character that consistently pop up in the earliest literature on the series (which, it bears repeating, was written and overseen by Hershman and Stiles, who was Hershman’s most significant co-performer): that Roberta was created to act as a mirror to society, both taking shape from the image of society that she encounters and reflecting that image back at society; and that she was an individual typified by a profound level of suffering, both pathological (i.e. deriving from mental illness) and representative (types of pain most frequently encountered in contemporaneous society). As curator of exhibitions at M.H. de Young Memorial Museum (at which *Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore* was first exhibited) Susan Levitin says,

In her work, Lynn Hershman explores and confronts the painful, difficult aspects of the contemporary, meaning-seeking individual’s experience. Although Robert [*sic*] Breitmore may not necessarily reflect the absolute human condition, her misery is valid and cannot be denied. She is not truly a person but she is disturbing; her experiences and aspirations recall painful elements of all our lives.⁶²

⁶¹ Gregos, “The Importance of Being Roberta,” 2.

⁶² Levitin, R4.

There are several crucial lessons to take from this earliest institutional framing of the *Roberta Breitmore* series. First, though she may not be a person in the exact same sense that you and I are persons, her suffering is legitimate and undeniable. Even in this earliest incarnation of thought about the series, it is clear that there is something of an ethical injunction to acknowledge Roberta's misery and empathize with it. The causes for the relative absence of this dimension of the project in later secondary literature will be taken up at the end of this chapter. For now, I will simply emphasize that personhood is clearly at stake here, and this is echoed elsewhere in the *Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore* exhibition catalogue. For instance, Arturo Schwartz in his contribution to the catalogue quotes Otto Rank's *Art & Artist*, which reads, "The artist does not create, in the first place, for fame or immortality; his production is to be a means to achieve actual life, since it helps him to overcome fear."⁶³ In other words, the artist overcomes the limitations of her own mortality not through fame, but through creating *in order to create actual life*, in herself and in the world, which Schwartz sees as operating in the *Roberta Breitmore* series.

The second lesson we can derive from Levitin's quote above is that Roberta's personal suffering is in some sense reflective of the suffering of many others considered as a group. Levitin denies that this is meant as a meditation on the "human condition," presumably because such "suffering" is too abstract. In few cases would everyday people consider themselves suffering in workaday life from "the human condition"; such is reserved for art and philosophy. Rather, Levitin sees Roberta's suffering as somehow representative of "the painful, difficult aspects of the contemporary, meaning-seeking individual's experience."⁶⁴ Therefore, the

⁶³ Otto Rank, quoted in Arturo Schwartz, "Who Is Roberta Breitmore?", in *Not Roberta Breitmore*, O16.

⁶⁴ Op. cit.

suffering in question is one particular to the time (contemporary), and somehow related to a sense of meaninglessness in the contemporary social scenario.

That Roberta reflects the contemporaneity of this sense of emptiness and how individuals of 1970s America (particularly the West Coast, and especially San Francisco) strive desperately and futilely to fight this feeling are facts ubiquitously affirmed in the exhibition catalogue. Roberta is described frequently as a portrait, but a particularly active one: “Essentially Roberta is a portrait. She is at once an invisible human double as well as a mirror magnet.”⁶⁵ Roberta attracts to herself the signs and behavior of her social context, acting as a double and reflecting these tendencies back to her environment. Not only is she a double—she is a representative one: “Roberta is the archetypal ego of a collective culture.”⁶⁶ Her ego forms the archetype of the collective characteristics of her environment. In fact, in creating Roberta, Hershman created “...the meta-portrait of an archetypal cultural construct, one which hides within us to a greater or lesser degree, Hershman included.”⁶⁷ Breitmore even gets called a “cultural cliché [*sic*],” so representative is she of her cultural moment and location.

The characteristics of which she is so steadfastly representative, however, are relatively limited, especially in this exhibition catalogue. As noted in earlier sections, later secondary literature characterized her as obsessed with bloneness, femininity, advertising and models, and consumer culture more broadly. These qualities appear in *Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore*, but not with any degree of frequency nearing that of one other obsession: self-improvement culture. In the final analysis, Erhard Seminars Training (EST), personal encounters groups, Weight Watchers, Zen meditation retreats, and other group self-improvement gatherings

⁶⁵ Schwartz, O13.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, O17.

⁶⁷ Sandy Ballatore, “Lynn Hershman as Roberta Breitmore: A Narrative Performance,” in *Not Roberta Breitmore*, O22.

are mentioned more often in this catalogue than are Hershman's blonde wig or quirky polka-dot skirt—two artifacts that have come in the past three decades to stand in metonymically for Roberta Breitmore more than anything else. But in this early literature, her representativeness of contemporary social isolation and distress that many seek to remedy through self-improvement groups is the clearly dominant interpretation. In her poetic journal entries in the catalogue, Kristine Stiles makes frequent mention of this: “Just about everybody accuses Roberta of self-indulgence in foolish / Acts. We pretend we are innocent in her doubling exchange, as we struggle for / Communication too. But our social isolation keeps us in the subject/object / Paradox.”⁶⁸ But these observations are not simply meditations on the *fact of* contemporary social isolation: they characterize it.

And the frequent characterization is in terms of none other than mental illness and psychological wellness. In fact, the first sentence in the first entry of Stiles's journal entries, appearing underneath the introductory title of “1.1.78 – 2.2.78” as an epigraph, reads, “*Eventually she began to swallow solid foods and to improve her interpersonal relationships.*” In a footnote, Stiles clarifies that this is “From an unidentified psychology text book read over the shoulder of a passenger on the bus.”⁶⁹ This frames the section—written by Stiles, one of the co-performers, thus arguably framing the entire project—as fundamentally linking Roberta to the contemporary obsession with psychology, most especially psychology understood to be deviant from some medicalized norm. Although this is especially important given the author, it is not isolated to her entries. Indeed, Hershman's own infrequent appearances also invoke mental illness, explicitly tying the social obsessions of the time to psychology, especially psychotherapy: in an untitled entry signed “*L.H. with K.S.*” (that is, Lynn Hershman with

⁶⁸ Stiles, “January 1, 1978,” in *Not Roberta Breitmore*, R5.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Kristine Stiles), the authors declare, “She participates in the world, reflects the social preoccupations of her contemporaries, attends psychotherapy and weight watchers and generally maps the passages through which many people travel.”⁷⁰ Here psychotherapy is put on the same level as Weight Watchers and other “social preoccupations of her contemporaries.”

I argue that this equation of self-improvement groups and mental illness should be read as mutually expository, that is, that it makes both an *evaluative claim* about such groups (self-improvement groups as a kind of social psychosis) and a *diagnostic claim* about the changing state and status of mental healthcare (the self-improvement culture typifying the treatment of mental health) in 1970s America. The *Roberta Breitmore* series is a polemical diagnosis of the contemporary moment, linking the self-focused nature of groups like Weight Watchers and EST to the problematic neoliberalization of affect occurring in the changing approach of psychiatry to mental illness in the 1970s. Roberta Breitmore herself, therefore, is a living meditation on what I will call *pathonormativity*. Modeled on a term originating from Michael Warner’s work, namely heteronormativity⁷¹, pathonormativity here has a double meaning: it both describes a set of sociocultural mores reflecting commonly held beliefs about what constitutes appropriate affect and pathological affect in a given context (Roberta’s outward, or mirror, function—diagnosing a socially corrosive set of practices and beliefs about emotion); and Roberta’s “normative” reflection of social obsessions of the 1970s (Roberta’s inward process of formation, her doubling of the culture of her time). What I will show is that the *Roberta Breitmore* series, in diagnosing an issue of pandemic social isolation and consequent psychic pain, establishes a troubling commonality between self-help/self-improvement groups and psychiatry/psychotherapy: they localize disturbances in affect and their treatment to the individual herself, thus both isolating her

⁷⁰ *Not Roberta Breitmore*, R18.

⁷¹ See Michael Warner, “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet,” *Social Text* 29 (1991): 3-17.

from traditional forms of support in the community and driving the individual further inward into her psyche, encouraging a self-understanding that diagnoses problems as atypical and self-induced. In other words, as Roberta's trajectory and experiences demonstrate, the person who suffers is encouraged to blame herself and retreat further inward into her social isolation—if not so much through the explicit forms of “support” provided as through their *failure* to help, a failure that is all too easy to internalize and personalize in the state of depression as I have come to know it.

Du er alene⁷²: Alienation in an Age of Self-Obsession

Roberta's “mask” is achieved by using cosmetics as paint and her skin as canvas. Her conversations reveal that everyone she meets is also wearing an “invisible” mask.

—Lynn Hershman with Kristine Stiles⁷³

Everybody is isolated in the game, enclosed by the absence of / Involvement in the risk of human engagement. But these are lonesome mental / Distances.

—Kristine Stiles⁷⁴

Unlike Adrian Piper's *Food for the Spirit*, the *Roberta Breitmore* series of performances, although also self-reflexive and meditative, was not executed in sheer privation. And unlike Ana Mendieta's *Rape Scenes*, the primary intended audience was not a self-aware crowd of art-versed (yet nonetheless deeply disturbed) art school students and professors. The *Roberta Breitmore* series sent Roberta out into the world to interact with the public—a public who crucially were neither expecting Roberta to be an “artwork” nor experiencing her as one: there were no announcements or signs marking her as a performance work; no leaflets or advertisements to go to a museum or gallery to see more of the work and learn more about it; not even any vague

⁷² Danish, “You are alone.” A song by the Danish depressive-suicidal black metal band Make a Change... Kill Yourself.

⁷³ Untitled segment, *Not Roberta Breitmore*, R18.

⁷⁴ Stiles, “January 5, 1978,” in *ibid.*, R6.

indication that Roberta was anybody but an ordinary woman. And Roberta related to people as would any other person—albeit extremely shy and reserved.

Likely in part due to her shyness, little survives archivally that would document how Roberta interacted with people in her workplace or even in support groups; the only class of people with whom Roberta had significant documented contact are those who responded to her want-ads, with some of whom Roberta went on short and casual dates. Most of her ads were placed in the *San Francisco Progress*, a now-defunct newspaper that was popular in her area. The language of her want-ads was left intentionally vague. One typical ad in the *Progress* in 1974 reads, “WOMAN, Cauc. seeks bright companion to share rent & interests. Write c/o Progress, Box 18, 851 Howard St., S.F.” The ad reveals nothing about Roberta other than her race and gender, and that she wants to share rent with someone with whom she could share some common interests. Given references in one letter she received (dated 25 October 1975) from a man referred to as “I.S.” (to protect his identity), it seems Roberta placed want-ads in *Art Weekly* as well, but it can be presumed that these ads are fairly similar to the *Progress* ad.⁷⁵

For such a bland and imprecise ad, Roberta received a surprisingly large number of responses, totaling to forty-three letters “sent from lonely people looking for a friend.”⁷⁶ Roberta would meet some half-dozen of these respondents for dates, secretly tape-recording the first ten minutes of their exchange while also having a private investigator taking photographs of them from a distance with a telephoto lens.⁷⁷ The surveillance photographs are largely unremarkable. The men are consistently in their early middle-age years and generally of average attractiveness. In many of the images, as one would expect of unstaged photography, Roberta’s face is turned

⁷⁵ I have been unable to locate any archival clippings of ads from any source other than the *Progress*.

⁷⁶ Hershman, “Private I,” 26.

⁷⁷ Frantisek Deak, “The Use of Character in Artistic Performance,” *The Dumb Ox* 10/11 (spring 1980): 70.

from or her back toward the camera; in others, the men are turned away from the viewer. What this means then is that in precious few images can we read the expressions of both Roberta and her date. One exception to this, from 1978, features Roberta and a man in his late thirties walking toward the camera, from medium-long-shot distance, amongst a small but tight crowd. The man has dark shaggy hair and a thick moustache, and wears a sweater with a zig-zagging pattern over a starched shirt and a leather jacket over that. Roberta is in her typical attire—the same as in *Roberta Construction Chart #1*—and also a long coat. The viewer gets a peek of her quirky polka-dot skirt at the bottom edge of the photo. The most striking feature of the image, however, is how little it seems either one cares to be there with the other. Although the man's eyes have been blacked out with a thin bar, the bar is transparent and his expression is therefore legible. He wears a completely blank look and seems mentally absent from his surroundings. Roberta's right eye is covered by her hair, but the other furtively glances slightly downward and stares into empty space. Her expression reads as vacant and bored, and she is slightly wringing her hands, either from boredom or coldness or most likely a bit of both. One gets the sense that they haven't exchanged words in some time.

There is not much of substance in the early literature about what occurred during the majority of these dates; what does predominate instead is the concerted characterization of the men who responded to the ads as lonely and desperate, almost pathetic individuals. Perhaps one could infer that sense of loneliness and desperation from the simple fact that over two score individuals responded to ads with such scant information. The exhibition catalogue does not leave it to the reader's imagination when discussing these men, though: "Inevitably, as this exhibition illuminates, these poor creatures prove to be more lost, lonely, and desperate than [*sic*]

the real Roberta at her most abject.”⁷⁸ Jack Burnham, the author of this quote, characterizes their desperate attempts at making contact as stemming from sexual frustration, being “lured with the hint of easy sex” he notes parenthetically.⁷⁹ I struggle to read such hints in the ads themselves, but the overwhelming fact of the vast majority of the respondents were men seems to corroborate Burnham’s suspicion. His assertion is further supported by Kristine Stiles’s reflections on Roberta’s encounters: “I.____ wasn’t afraid to show his need for love, neither were those / Other guys she met. All of them so anxious. Kind of like some organic / Specimens demonstrating cultural desperation.”⁸⁰ Notably, Stiles typifies their desperation as coming from a “need for love.” Although this could simply be a polite or euphemistic way of saying their lust for intercourse, I interpret it as implying a more general need for affection and attention. Generally, the men were not hostile or aggressive in their approach to Roberta, as the images seem to indicate; they are simply lonely souls looking for someone to care about them.

In one of the few surveillance photos to be altered beyond simple attempts to obscure the man’s identity, a collage dated “March 12, 1976” in ink, Roberta stands facing away from us and toward a bookish-looking man in his thirties in what appears to be a gallery. Bearing a slight resemblance to Rick Moranis, the man wears glasses and a long dark overcoat and stands a couple inches shorter than Roberta. In his right hand, he grasps some folios close to his body and his left arm reaches behind his head to scratch it—a look of nervousness and sheepishness so typical as to be almost clichéd, but performed earnestly. The most remarkable feature of the image though is its collage element: a thought balloon outlined in white ink on a dark piece of construction paper and cut out loosely following the outline, placed immediately behind and

⁷⁸ Jack Burnham, Untitled piece, in *Not Roberta Breitmore*, R17.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Stiles, “January 13, 1978,” in *Not Roberta Breitmore*, R8.

above Roberta's head. It reads, printed by typewriter in white ink, "Does that mean we'll have to... sleep together?" This indicates that at least Roberta was concerned that her date was being too forward for her comfort in his sexual advances. Additionally, it lends further credence to the narrative of sexual desperation spun in the exhibition catalogue.

This man appears in another untitled mixed-media work from the same date. The surveillance photo—and we should bear in mind that that is what these all are, as creepy as that is, lending (perhaps intentionally) a sense of guilt to the process of interpreting them in any way, given Roberta's counterparts' obliviousness in these scenarios—is a much tighter shot, a medium-close-up of the man and Roberta from roughly the same angle but a lower vantage point. Here, the man's left hand is under his chin in a typical gesture of thoughtful conversation, and his mouth is open as he speaks. Both he and Roberta have been partially colored with ink washes—his hair with dark blue, his forehead with beige, and Roberta and his clothes partially outlined in crimson; Roberta's hair is sparsely speckled with yellow. Further, the lower half of the man's face is covered with a cutout contoured to the shape of his head, leaving the hand on his chin uncovered. The cutout is small and bizarre, but what can be clearly seen is a painted or drawn (in pastel, oil crayon, and/or charcoal?) woman's eye, with the iris and a highlight over the pupil occupying the area of his mouth. The painting is done in shades of beige and black/white; there are also fragments of cursive handwriting. Underneath the image is a typewritten transcription of his letter to her, the same letter mentioned above from I.S. It reads:

Dear Rhoda,

I saw your ad in Art Weekly for a friend or roommate; you're an ex art student, that interests me. I'm in my mid thirties with no art school training, have recently begun to draw-and intend doing painting soon. I'd been doing concept word art and then find myself doing visuals.

I hope we could get together, discuss art, exchange views, maybe go to exhibits and openings.

San Francisco can be unfriendly and lonely, but things are more exciting
when congenial people meet.
I would appreciate hearing from you
Sincerely,

The letter is instructive, and reflects that there was some variation in her ads: at the least, we can see that Roberta gave her name as Rhoda in this ad and indicated that she was a former art student; given how out of place the comment seems, there is reason to believe she may have also indicated that she is new to San Francisco and lonely. Regardless, the letter seems to reveal a fairly casual investment surrounding primarily a common interest in art—though it seems he may be a little less versed, given his odd vocabulary (“concept word art”) and open admission to being an amateur practitioner.

There are further alterations to the image that are particularly striking, though: a sentence and a single word in two different areas. Handwritten in small print, following the outline of the man’s head, is the esoteric sentence, “Speech patterns and experience transform I. to fiction.” The word “fiction” is written just to the right of the cutout that covers the man’s face. Presumably, “I.” is the man, elsewhere referred to as I.S. But “fiction” is rather more opaque. If I. is turned into fiction, it is not immediately clear by whose speech patterns and experience he is so fictionalized. The three most likely candidates are the viewer, Roberta, and I. himself. The lack of action to speech patterns—either I.’s or Roberta’s—probably excludes the viewer from this declaration. My interpretation is it is the combination of I.’s speech patterns and Roberta’s experience that mutually constitutes a fictional version of I. Importantly this implicates the speaking agent in his own fictionalization, though not limiting it to his control. What this fictional version encompasses requires some supplementation beyond the image.

Aside from their ubiquitous description as desperate lonely souls, the men Roberta encountered from responses to her want-ads find an additional common description in the

primary and secondary literature: inevitably, they are read as coming to the encounter with loaded expectations of what was going to happen and what Roberta wanted, exceeding any reasonable anchoring in the ads themselves. Such a descriptive claim is implicit in those cases noted above wherein authors such as Stiles and Burnham attribute to these men a need for sex or love; it is more evident still in the epigraph of this section attributed to Lynn Hershman with Kristine Stiles: as much of a deliberate fabrication Roberta was in fact, and insofar as she was designed as a character to wear masks to distance herself from the world, so too did the men she met wear their own masks to these encounters, disguising their intentions and carefully crafting the presentation of their personalities. As Frantisek Deak explains,

The transcripts of the dialogues suggest that the other participant was doing some acting as well. Usually those who responded to the ads had a preconceived idea about the meeting. They all wanted to benefit from it in some way. In a short period of time they had to present themselves to Roberta in such a way so as to communicate a precise idea of themselves. To a degree they played a role or character.⁸¹

Such acting is an essential part of functioning in a diverse and complex social environment: one necessarily has to tailor one's image and behavior depending on context. But coupled with what I've argued above, a darker picture emerges. Their manipulation of their image and behavior stems from a deep loneliness that Hershman saw as pandemic to the contemporary moment of the 1970s—and their aim was to find some semblance of love, or perhaps just sex.

But this is just one side of the scenario. In the exhibition catalogue, Hershman and Stiles explain about Roberta's purpose and character, "As she gains experience and time dimension, the people that are incorporated into her history become fictionalized archetypal characters."⁸² Under this interpretation, I. is becoming fictionalized inasmuch as Roberta deciphers his

⁸¹ Deak: 70.

⁸² *Not Roberta Breitmore*, R18.

(carefully manipulated) speech patterns according to the guidelines of her past (quite traumatic) experience. The impetus for Roberta's move to San Francisco in the first place was her aforementioned divorce from her husband and general lack of satisfaction in Cleveland Heights. Beyond this, however, her psychiatric case notes indicate she had a number of sexual traumas and anxieties: "Patient admits to incestuous relationship with brother. Began pattern of masturbation. Finds intercourse painful. Achieves no orgasm. No pregnancies. Fearful of pregnancy..."⁸³ Her experience of adolescent incest, fear of pregnancy, and pain and lack of pleasure during sex limited Roberta's sexuality and made her wary of sexual relationships generally. After all, her want-ads make no mention of romance or sex, but only indicate that she was seeking a roommate and maybe a friend to share interests and rent.

Combining the men's general tendency to gear the encounter toward sex or romance and Roberta's paranoia regarding sex, the most unusual feature of the image now becomes clear: namely the cutout of an eye pasted over I.'s mouth. Though the cutout is very small, it bears a strong resemblance to some of Hershman's altered photographs of Roberta, on which she would apply pigment and write in Roberta's style. One of these is signed by Hershman February 1976 and technically untitled but referred to as "*Lay Off and Leave Me Alone*," owing to the application of this sentence in large, scrawled pigment to the right of Roberta's head in a typical glamor shot. In addition to this, there are large patches of writing and Roberta's trademark style, relaying tormented prose from what can be presumed to be her amateur poetry, for instance, "Lost / among lifeless / Seals of stone / Gray and cold / And lacerated / With the foam / Of my madness." This text is in large writing to Roberta's left, but much more is written in smaller lettering down the middle of Roberta's forehead and nose. Some of it is washed out with the

⁸³ "Excerpts from the Case History of Ms. R.S.B.", in *Not Roberta Breitmore*, R24.

watercolor washes applied to much of the surface of the photograph. The piece is powerful enough to examine on its own terms—its surprisingly hostile message in its unofficial title, psychedelic and unnatural application of pigment, and its angsty, tortured poetry, not insignificantly pointing to Roberta’s “madness.” But for our purposes here, the right eye is of special concern: it exhibits a similar painted-over look as the eye pasted over I.’s mouth, with deep, dark swirls circling the eye and applied highlights over the iris. Even the coloring is similar: deep blue and black immediately around the eye, a bright off-white highlight over the iris, and ochre washes in concentric circles out further from the eye. The most apparent similarity, though, is the handwriting, in roughly the same place and definitely the same style. And pragmatically speaking, this work exists in multiples, meaning Hershman would have been able to make collage elements out of extras. In short: this is likely Roberta’s eye, and crucially, not her eye unaltered, but from a work all about her obsessive focus on her pain and skewed view of herself.

Following this line of reasoning, the work becomes a legible metaphor for the mutually-constitutive fiction created through the self-conscious presentation of behavior by I. and the self-obsessive interpretation by Roberta. Roberta’s eye—her perspective—serves as the filter between I.’s words and Roberta’s: he utters sentences following a particular pattern that Roberta then recognizes and reads through her own traumatic history. Each party composes a language to reach the other: borrowing symbols from popular and high culture alike, the man talks in patterns meant to woo his temporary companion and the woman dresses in quirky and sexy fashion meant to exude an image of fun and flirtation. But one man’s loneliness and isolation and one woman’s abusive past and mental health struggles combine to create an “archetypal” fiction that pushes the two apart, despite the man’s desperation and the woman’s genuine desire for a friend in a

new and alien environment. Social isolation is only exacerbated in the attempt to overcome it due to a proliferation of symbols and cyphers of interpretation. And what's worse, Roberta's habit of reading others' behavior through the lens of her mental illness and pained history only pushes others away yet further and thus ensures that this lens will remain the one through which she can understand her world. This is, Hershman suggests, the story of the era—especially for women like Roberta.

* * * * *

It is worth noting that this is but one of the ramifications of Hershman's depiction of Roberta's encounters. Although the foregoing interpretation is still decidedly feminist—a resolute indictment of the social dangers of mixed signals begat of a cycle of sexual violence and mental illness butting heads with desperate loneliness and forced presentation in an age with media saturating the world in images of beauty, sex, happiness, and consumption—there is a more blunt feminist interpretation that is both more cynical and more representative of the contemporaneous state of feminist thought around sexual violence and normalized objectification of women. The most infamous story of Roberta's encounters with prospective dates takes place at the San Diego Zoo. Aside from her interviews on the occurrence, I can locate no works by Hershman or documentation directly from the event. All the visual material that survives is a brief entry on the event in a short comic book drawn by Spain Rodriguez that appears in the *Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore* catalogue.⁸⁴

Roberta goes to meet a date at the San Diego Zoo—why she would travel such a distance from San Francisco is unclear—but is greeted by what looks to be pimps leading a prostitution ring. They coerce her to get into their car, but she says she has to go to the bathroom. Once safe

⁸⁴ My advisor Cécile Whiting indicates that this could be a parody of “comics like *ZAP* that reveled in being outrageously sexist and misogynistic.” Email correspondence, 11 March 2017.

inside, she changes out of her telltale Roberta outfit and makeup and leaves the park unnoticed as Lynn Hershman. The comic depicts this as occurring at an amusement park, but all references in interviews indicate it happened at the zoo. Over the story vignette's seven panels, two pimps and a prostitute are represented in addition to Roberta. Nothing explicit in the dialogue—all of which is taken directly from Roberta's experiences—indicates that these people are trying to coerce Roberta into prostitution, but it is highly suggested through fairly stereotyped representational schemas used. The woman wears a wide-brimmed hat, a crop top revealing her midriff, and high-waisted Daisy Dukes. The men are even more stereotyped: the White one wears a leisure suit with a Hawaiian-print shirt and the Black man wears an ostentatious hat, a shirt and ascot with loud designs, a double-breasted jacket, an ankh necklace, flared pants, platform shoes, and dark sunglasses. Both are mustachioed and arrive in a stretch American muscle car. These are men of money and blatant luxury, wearing their status like a peacock's feather. Their female companion seals the package.⁸⁵

As heavy-handed and over-the-top the representations are, this and other stories of sexual abuse and violence against women dominate the comic and remind readers that these encounters were no mere social experiment. There were real dangers to the performers, which only further underscores the threat that women face in daily life of potential physical and sexual violence. Were Roberta not an artistic creation of Lynn Hershman, the depressed, eager-to-please, lonely woman could have ended up forced into prostitution—or facing serious violence. But though these stories carry clear evidence of women's sexual objectification (and commodification) and the gender-based violence women face, they also further demonstrate how the men who responded to Roberta had narrow ideas of what they wanted to get from the encounter, and that

⁸⁵ Spain Rodriguez, story by Lynn Hershman, "Roberta Breitmore (An Alchemical Portrait Started in 1975)," in *Not Roberta Breitmore*, O5-11. The relevant vignette is on O8-9.

to an extent Roberta's paranoia surrounding sex and intimacy is not unjustified. The feminist edge of performing and representing these encounters cuts many ways.

Dead Heart in a Dead World

The paradox of depression is that the one thing that is most likely to pull one out of the blackness of the abyss is exactly what the disease prevents: meaningful social contact. Celebrate the efficacy of drugs; proclaim the power of therapy; praise the utility of group therapy; even extol the necessity of institutionalization in the most severe cases. But nobody I have ever met or ever heard of has beaten back the encroaching darkness without the help of close friends and family. Pills are not necessary for remission; even therapy can be cut short without sacrificing progress. Winning without the help of loved ones? Impossible. But these are exactly the people one is least likely to be able to be near in depression.

First, the effects of the illness push one into an anti-social position. Constant exhaustion and apathy pin one to the bed. Inescapable loops of negative thinking, as habitual as breathing, dissuade one from going out or making plans. One's room becomes one's tomb. Given the ubiquity of the illness's ill effects, it is very likely that working has become difficult too, so trying to catch up on work becomes a convenient way to avoid making plans. The intrinsic pessimistic worldview of the illness convinces one that it might be better to cancel what plans one can be convinced to make. What's the point? It probably won't be fun. Besides, nobody likes me really.

And this is where depression's effects continue to cascade and remove one from loved ones. If friends can reach you, which is itself a miracle, it's unlikely you will be willing to do anything. You will always have a way out, a way to put off human contact. Frequent cancellations will push most away. Why bother with someone who is evidently uninterested in

you? In the rare event that they persist and succeed in getting you out of your tomb, you run the risk of being a spoil sport. It is not easy to react joyfully to even the brightest, sunniest disposition when the world is drained of color. The taciturn, apathetic mood that depression inculcates will make you unlikely to open up if your friends should happen to ask what is going on. If they continue to try to inquire into your condition, mood swings are certainly not uncommon in the condition, so you might lash out. Even if you can resist this temptation, the slow trickle of grief and sadness from your mouth to their ears may likely overwhelm your unfortunate companion. If it can tap some of the feeling that has slumbered in you for God knows how long, the outpouring of emotion will *undoubtedly* overwhelm. In short, alienating friends and family is par for the course with longstanding depression.

Pushing people away further reinforces feelings of self-hatred, worthlessness, and invisibility. Consider it confirmation bias: Look, see? I told you the world doesn't want me! Why should I continue trying? Your already global pessimism grows universal. Cynicism becomes your badge and contempt your armor. The illness deepens and only seems to pile on more evidence of your inadequacy to be alive. This cycle can go on unabated in perpetuity. The very thing that would help you stop it is the very thing you continue to push away; and the more you push it away, the worse it all gets.

While most would point to psychotherapy as a solution to this spiral of deterioration, it takes a certain degree of openness to be able to accept therapy in the first place. The demented logic of depression infects everything and cannot be put on hold when you go to therapy. You can easily convince yourself that the situation is transactional and cold: can you ever tell if this person *really* cares about you if you must continue paying her? The biggest danger in this—and there are plenty of dangers—is when this ill logic escapes the confines of therapy: holy hell,

maybe *all* relationships are crudely transactional!⁸⁶ Maybe the few people left in your life only interact with you out of some twisted sense of obligation or moral duty. What would keep someone coming to you in such abusive conditions, anyway? Even if they do love you, they may be better off without you—after all, codependency is a thing.

Group therapy is little better.⁸⁷ The forms of sociality involved here are just as contrived as, if not more so than, individual therapy. Out of necessity these groups have strict limits on how patients can socialize with one another. (We are dealing with crazy people, after all!) Patients are generally forbidden from interacting outside of the group. All interaction is therefore monitored by the involved counselor(s). The gaze of medical authority is quite coercive. You are forced to participate in some way, even if it's just to say "fuck off." This coercion makes any gestures of sympathy or kindness feel stiff and contrived, their motivations suspect; and even if they connect with your heart, the relationship will never become a genuine friendship, at least so long as you remain in the group. And if you terminate the group, the ire of the counselors is likely to rain down on you if you decide to take up a friendship; you will not get treatment from them again. Even in the less-panoptical twelve-step groups, in which the development of friendship is a kind of expectation, the nature of the sociality involved is off-putting in its

⁸⁶ This may seem a leap of logic, given that part of the benefits of psychotherapy's transactional nature is the liberty to express feelings with minimal constraints, but there are two reservations that make the logic of depression seem convincing. First, all friendship is indeed a two-way street, and thus subtly but certainly transactional; however, the emotional support provided by psychotherapy combined with the bluntly transactional nature can easily, in my experience, lead one to question just how transactional any friend's emotional support is—and the one-sidedness of the therapeutic relationship, one of the other perks for its overtly transactional nature, may further lead to a sort of hypervigilance for how much emotional support others are willing to provide for you, at least in cases where one is open about supporting a given social companion. Second, even in the confines of the transactional therapeutic relationship, the therapist (rightly, I must add) reserves the right to "fire" you, as is the terminology: to terminate the relationship unilaterally. This can call into question all emotional investment in friends and lead to paranoia about reliability, in my experience. If this still seems like faulty logic—and perhaps it should—that is indeed my point: this is the devastating nature of depressive logic.

⁸⁷ I shall shortly, following some psychiatric history, begin discussing the two most prominent and documented support groups in Roberta's life: Weight Watchers and EST. This section is more intended to reflect on the depressive logic with which a mentally ill person may regard these support structures.

operationalization: the disease in question is always front and center. It becomes the almost-exclusive topic of conversation, and even when the discussion strays from it, the disease always looms in the background. Any indication of regression or relapse becomes an opportunity for an intervention, and if the toxic behavior is not amended, the friendship will inevitably be terminated. Just hanging out and connecting are next to impossible.

Then again, alienation is the name of the game with depression. You can't even stand your own company.

Die Healing: The Changing Face of Psychiatry in the 1970s—and Its Critics

The *Roberta Breitmore* series may offer the most holistic meta-portrait of a specific time and place in culture in the history of contemporary art, creating a living personification of a moment of powerful social isolation and dramatic shifts in the understanding of personal problems in living—one that shines a feminist light on everyday patterns of social tension between the genders as argued above. I further claim that Hershman captures this tension as part of a larger social problem in dealing with trauma and estrangement, and connects cycles of violence and exploitation between men and women to a common contemporaneous obsession with self-improvement and the changing practice and nosological ontologies of psychiatry: one that entrenches a normativized and thus hegemonic ideology of average, healthy emotions and diagnoses deviations from the new norm as stemming from personal flaws in living that can only be fixed through an individual's work on themselves. The understanding of personal suffering as primarily or solely stemming from individual problems of living in isolation from broader social and cultural problematics I have called the neoliberalization of affect; and the social and cultural policing of deviant affect through entrenched expectations of average/healthy emotion I have called pathonormativity.

In the next section, I will explore how the *Roberta Breitmore* series examines these cultural tendencies through Roberta's own experiences with both self-improvement groups and psychiatry. (Due both to a lack of documentation of these experiences and the deep connection between them, in Roberta's own experiences and also in shifting attitudes towards affect in medicine and society, I will consider them together.) In this section, though, my goal is to briefly examine the changes through which psychiatry was going as a practice and a science in the '60s and '70s, as well as explore some of the greatest contemporaneous critics of these changes. I will work to demonstrate how the *Roberta Breitmore* series can be seen to be taking part in this critical dialogue—supplementing these critics' widespread focus on inpatient psychiatric practice in the asylum and its concomitant institutional violence with Roberta's revelation of the multifaceted problems outpatients face in getting adequate treatment for their suffering. If the opponents of the new face of psychiatry can be understood as concerned with *institutional critique* of psychiatry, I will claim that the *Roberta Breitmore* series is concerned with *existential critique* of psychiatry.

Following the psychological revolution of Freudian psychoanalysis and for most of the twentieth century, the reigning methodology of practicing psychiatrists was an approach termed dynamic psychiatry.⁸⁸ This approach to the mind focuses on unconscious dynamic processes of emotion underlying the conscious manifestation of thought and behavior: effectively, examining the mechanics of and origins behind how emotions operate in the unconscious mind and therefore undergird and motivate conscious thought and behavior. Critically, this approach to the mind had an open-ended approach to mental illness utilizing loose concepts that had porous and

⁸⁸ Much of this section pulls heavily from Allan V. Horwitz, *Creating Mental Illness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). The information on dynamic psychiatry specifically comes from the chapter "The Expansion of Mental Illnesses in Dynamic Psychiatry," 38-55.

permeable boundaries, lending to an exceptionally adaptable approach to problems of the mind that could suit the particular needs of the patient and strengths of the practitioner. One of Freud's greatest contributions to the dynamism of dynamic psychiatry was his creation of the concept of neuroses, because these—unlike preceding approaches to the mind seeing a stark and essentially insurmountable divide between healthy and insane—were on a continuum of health and dysfunction and recognized most people lay somewhere in the middle of the two extremes. “Mental illness” was therefore an expansive concept that was not posited as polar opposite of mental wellness but rather as a way of processing emotion that had become no longer useful or even an impediment to the analysand's functioning in everyday life. Dynamic psychiatry was of course no prelapsarian medicine of the mind. One of its most pernicious legacies, persisting into the next epoch of psychiatry up until the current moment, is its having spread the idea in popular culture that personal problems ought to be redefined as psychiatric problems—thus necessitating the intervention of a medical specialist whose authority and therefore power trump one's own, and placing the process of dealing with these personal problems into an inequitable context fraught with potential errors, biases, and abuses.⁸⁹

The dangers of deriving popular conceptions of problems with living and their solutions from medical authority would only worsen during and following the midcentury. The dynamic practice of psychiatry and its attendant models of the mind and of emotional function and dysfunction were overthrown by the emergence of what sociologist of mental illness Allan Horwitz calls diagnostic psychiatry. Unlike dynamic psychiatry, diagnostic psychiatry concerns itself with only observable symptoms and behaviors and applying standardized criteria to these in order to come to some positivistic diagnosis of a concrete medical illness of the mind. The

⁸⁹ See especially *ibid.*, 70.

diagnosis mandates a conventionalized course of treatment to “cure” the illness, a course from which little deviation is expected or even allowed. The most revolutionary—and problematic—paradigm shift introduced by diagnostic psychiatry was the disease model of mental illness, positing that mental illness stems from some form of biological dysfunction in the brain (and body, more generally). The history of the emergence of dynamic psychiatry is lengthy and complex and the potential problems with the practice are manifold. What follows is an extremely abbreviated account.

One of the largest motivating factors for the eventual abandonment of dynamic psychiatry and adoption of diagnostic psychiatry was the need for the psychiatric profession to justify its inclusion in the medical field and maintain its hegemony over helping those in mental distress. With the rapid expansion in medical science in the twentieth century, the methodology of dynamic psychiatry grew to be seen by medical professionals in other fields as grossly unscientific—by which I mean not depending on scientific proof grounded in experimental empiricism. Part of this recognition was spurred by discoveries in pharmaceuticals that dramatically changed psychiatry in institutional settings—discoveries of drugs like the anxiolytic Miltown and the antipsychotic Thorazine in the 1940s and 1950s gave a breath of hope to those once considered incorrigibly insane and written off as permanent members of the asylum (not to mention the barbaric practice of lobotomies for those most obdurate patients).⁹⁰ The psychiatric pharmaceutical explosion was in part a reflection of the rapid expansion in pharmaceutical usage in all medical practices around midcentury and early psychotropic drugs were frequently

⁹⁰ For an in-depth discussion of Miltown, see “Anxiety, the Crisis of Psychoanalysis, and the Miltown Resolution, 1955-60,” in Jonathan Metzl, *Prozac on the Couch: Prescribing Gender in the Era of Wonder Drugs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 71-126. For a more general history of the pharmaceutical revolution, see “The Name of the Father, the Place of the Medication: A Brief History of Psychiatry,” in *ibid.*, 33-70.

unintended byproducts of other pharmaceutical experimentation.⁹¹ The problem in psychiatry, however, was that those who were prescribing these drugs had precious little understanding of how they actually worked (a problem, not coincidentally, that persists to this day particularly for antipsychotics and antidepressants—though the pharmacokinetics of a drug may be understood more or less precisely, *why* a particular drug’s shift of the brain’s biochemical homeostasis produces the effect it does is basically a mystery). Coupled with the scientific imprecision of the concepts and models that constituted dynamic-psychiatric treatment of mental function and dysfunction, the inclusion of dynamic psychiatry among the medical sciences became extremely controversial. The fact that this controversy occurred alongside the rise of nonmedical professions that increasingly served members of the community in mental distress (social workers and nonmedical therapists primarily, who ironically served to take up overflow from the demand for therapy that dynamic psychiatry had culturally created⁹²) meant that psychiatry had to redefine itself to maintain its medical prestige and monopoly on handling psychological illness. Its approach was to adopt the biomedical model of disease and dysfunction that had already dominated all other fields of medicine.⁹³

This is not to say that psychiatry’s conception of mental illness was immediately shorn of all connection to community health, social wellness, and cultural influence. In fact, in the 1960s, in part inspired by the countercultural push to explore the social roots of public health and political problems, psychiatry began creating public health models for the treatment of mental

⁹¹ See especially Carl I. Cohen, “The Biomedicalization of Psychiatry: A Critical Overview,” *Community Mental Health Journal* 29.6 (December 1993): 515. As Cohen explains, “Between 1930 and 1960, the sale of drugs increased ten-fold. During this period the real per capita expenditure for professionalized medicine doubled.” Ibid.

⁹² “By the 1970s, dynamic psychiatry lacked not only the scientific credibility, but also the ability to maintain the professional dominance of psychiatrists in the mental health marketplace. Dynamic clinicians had been so successful in applying psychiatric definitions to personal problems that there was a greater demand for therapy than psychiatrists were able to supply.” Horwitz, *Creating Mental Illness*, 60.

⁹³ More to come at the end of this section on gendered views toward seeing psychiatric care in the 1970s.

illness on a *community* level and investigating the social roots of mental disorders.⁹⁴

Investigating broader social and cultural bases was partly an outgrowth of the abandonment of case studies in psychiatry as fundamentally unscientific, and the community-oriented model was a useful replacement for the case-study model of psychiatric academia.⁹⁵ The new practice even had the backing and encouragement of the federal government, with the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) supporting the creation of Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs). But this movement was very short-lived. Under the Nixon and Ford administrations, funding to these programs was cut and they were mandated to abandon their sweeping social agendas.⁹⁶

Beyond pressure from the medical community and government programs, the third major influence contributing to the biomedicalization of psychiatry was economic—which was ultimately part and parcel with these other forces. Cohen summarizes this well:

Economically, this transformation was driven by forces at three levels: third-party reimbursement, the pharmaceutical industry, and government funding. With respect to the former, during the 1970's [*sic*] the cost-effectiveness of high-priced psychiatric services was being increasingly compared with similar less expensive services being offered by psychologists, social workers, and counselors. By arguing that mental illness was biologically based, psychiatrists could reintegrate psychiatry into mainstream medicine as well as command higher fees because they were treating a biomedical condition.⁹⁷

In other words, psychiatry was facing a perfect storm for the emergence of a biomedical model rooted in a diagnostic approach during the 1970s: medicine had grown embarrassed with its touchy-feely cousin and implored psychiatry to conform to scientific standards, while at the same time it faced professional endangerment from nonmedical therapists and governmental pushback.

⁹⁴ See Cohen: 516.

⁹⁵ Horwitz, *Creating Mental Illness*, 58.

⁹⁶ See Horwitz, *Creating Mental Illness*, 76.

⁹⁷ Cohen: 516.

The fact that the biomedical model would allow psychiatry to get a piece of the pharmaceutical pie was only a bonus: biomedical diagnostic psychiatry saved the profession from oblivion.

The formal process of psychiatry's salvation was a rough and rapid invention and revision of formalized, standardized diagnostic criteria based in a biomedical model. John Feighner, who worked in the against-the-grain Department of Psychiatry at Washington University at St. Louis, provided the model for what became diagnostic psychiatry with his publication in 1972 of his codified diagnostic criteria, commonly called the Feighner criteria.⁹⁸ These criteria broke in every way from prior practices in dynamic psychiatry—although they were initially intended for research purposes only and comprised a mere fourteen diagnoses.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, they became the basis for the revisions to the second version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*—more commonly called the DSM-II—when psychiatrist Robert Spitzer was tasked by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1974 to lead the revision process and create a task force for it. Spitzer's goal was wide-ranging and changed the face of mental health practice after the publication of the revised edition of the DSM-II: “to create a diagnostic system that would serve the purposes not only of the relatively small psychiatric research community, but also of the vast and expanding ranks of mental health professionals in clinical practice.”¹⁰⁰ To do this monumental overhaul, it was not empirical research that drove the creation of diagnoses and diagnostic criteria, but rather a bottom-up consultation of thousands of practitioners across America of what they felt should be included, which effectively led to the creation of disease entities based on nothing but practitioner predilection—grounded worryingly in the symptom-based, allegedly objective categorical

⁹⁸ Horwitz, *Creating Mental Illness*, 64.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 64- 68.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

disease model of biomedical practice in order to placate researchers and science-minded critics in other medical fields.¹⁰¹ Horwitz puts it nicely when explaining the pragmatic benefit of this approach: “A symptom-based approach had the dual advantages of providing a seemingly objective and factual basis for diagnosis and of including any entity that mental health professionals currently treated.”¹⁰² In short, practical reliability trumped scientific validity, but it was still paraded as an objective practice. These changes would be canonized and dissent ostracized with the publication in 1980 of the DSM-III, which took the work done in the revised DSM-II and totalized it.

Academics in the critical humanities, as well as those in sociology and the more socially conscious practitioners and researchers in psychiatry, have the advantage of hindsight to identify the variegated problems and limitless dangers of this psychiatric revolution; a multivolume series could be written on this topic, so I will limit the discussion to mentioning the most obvious. The most evident is methodologically enshrining biological reductionism and thus oversimplifying overdetermined problems. This reduces issues stemming from intricate sociocultural problems to mere flaws in the individual’s ideal constitution; removes discussions surrounding mental health and attempts to tackle the problem on a community or interpersonal level and displaces them to the myopic realm of hyperspecialized expert discourse; limits the type of information considered epistemologically acceptable for experimental purposes and the development of healthcare practices and technologies; and isolates analysis of health from a consideration of environmental factors that could influence a person’s emotional wellness (e.g., economic downturns, disruptions in the climate, etc.).¹⁰³ The impact of biomedical reductionism is further exacerbated

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 72.

¹⁰² Ibid., 74.

¹⁰³ See Cohen: 510-11.

by rampant medicalization—the “process by which nonmedical problems become defined and treated as medical problems, usually in terms of illnesses or disorders”¹⁰⁴—which began with dynamic psychiatry but was bestowed the mantle of objectivity under diagnostic psychiatry. Of course, this objectivity is fallacious, not just in light of the above discussion of the remarkably contingent emergence of the revised DSM-II, but also the alarming mystery surrounding the mechanisms behind successful psychotropic treatments and thus utter lack of empirical data suggesting the etiology of mental illnesses.¹⁰⁵ Given how perfectly the diagnostic model fits with the neoliberal philosophy of capitalism, however, perhaps the dearth of empirical knowledge of the mechanisms of pathogenesis and successful pharmaceutical intervention may make sense—the pharmaceutical industry funds a majority of research on drug development and trials.¹⁰⁶ This has continued to mar and water down the public understanding of mental illness, as the “chemical imbalance” model for mental illness both mystifies and naturalizes the mechanics of mental illness—especially for depression¹⁰⁷ and schizophrenia¹⁰⁸. And perhaps the most tragic and consequential for our purposes here is that psychiatry was reduced to a vague practice of generalities that not only obfuscates public understanding of mental illness and encourages loved

¹⁰⁴ Peter Conrad, “Medicalization and Social Control,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 18 (1992): 209.

¹⁰⁵ “Although it is true that certain conditions are helped by biological interventions, we have no sense as to whether these interventions have anything to do with pathogenesis. That is, treatment does not imply causality.” Cohen: 513.

¹⁰⁶ Cohen: 516; Joanna Moncrieff, “Neoliberalism and Biopsychiatry: A Marriage of Convenience,” in Carl I. Cohen and Sami Timimi, eds., *Liberatory Psychiatry: Philosophy, Politics, and Mental Health* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 243, 245.

¹⁰⁷ Bradley E. Lewis, “Prozac and the Post-Human Politics of Cyborgs,” *Journal of Medical Humanities* 24.1/2 (summer 2003): 56.

¹⁰⁸ “The theory that schizophrenia is caused by over-activity of dopamine, another neurotransmitter, was formulated in the 1960s. It was first thought to be supported by evidence of increased dopamine receptors in the brain, until later it was found that this was due to the effects of long-term ingestion of dopamine blocking neuroleptic drugs.” Moncrieff, 243.

ones of the mentally ill to relegate their care to experts, but also cannot adapt to the particularities of individuals that do not fit its rigid models.¹⁰⁹

It didn't take hindsight, or even that much time, for vociferous critics of the transition of psychiatry away from dynamic and towards diagnostic practice to emerge though. In fact, the most troubling of the changes in psychiatric practice had not yet come when the critics first started forming in the late 1950s. With an additional wave coming in the 1960s, the movement eventually earned a name: anti-psychiatry. It may be surprising given this nomenclature that the constituents of this movement were largely practicing psychiatrists.¹¹⁰ What they stood against was the direction psychiatry was taking and the exclusions it was making, most particularly the portentous threat of a return to the grim and harrowing days of asylum psychiatry.¹¹¹ The manners in which they stood in opposition to a changing psychiatry however were manifold and their members were legion. For the sake of brevity, I will look at the thought of three of the most famous figures in the movement—although two of them would disavow the label of anti-psychiatry, itself telling of how firmly they were committed to the mission of the discipline and the rigor and compassion of its practices.¹¹²

Perhaps the most unique of the critics grouped in the anti-psychiatry movement is academic psychiatrist Thomas Szasz. It is not difficult to see most of his criticisms of psychiatric orthodoxy as stemming from or at least contingent to his libertarian philosophy: above all else,

¹⁰⁹ Conrad: 223-24. Further: "Modern psychology, which deals with averages and abstracted generalities, and which is more suited to industrial society's need to manipulate the masses, has found it increasingly difficult to be relevant to the experience and problems of particular individuals." Cohen: 519.

¹¹⁰ For an extensive examination of the anti-psychiatry movement and its most renowned figure, R.D. Laing, see Zbigniew Kotowicz, *R.D. Laing and the Paths of Anti-Psychiatry* (London: Routledge, 1997).

¹¹¹ Horwitz, *Creating Mental Illness*, 2.

¹¹² I am referencing here R.D. Laing and Thomas Szasz. The former disavows the label in R.D. Laing, *Wisdom, Madness and Folly: The Making of a Psychiatrist 1927-1957* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 8-9. One need look no further for the latter's disavowal than the title of his 2009 book. Thomas Szasz, *Antipsychiatry: Quackery Squared* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009).

he emphasizes liberty and personal responsibility, which he argued were inevitably curtailed by the practices of contemporary psychiatry. His most notorious book, *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct*, makes this case most potently.¹¹³ As one can intuit from the title, its premise is that mental illness does not in fact exist—at least not in the sense that psychiatry normally presumes: “Mental illness is a myth. Psychiatrists are not concerned with mental illnesses and their treatments. In actual practice they deal with personal, social, and ethical problems in living.”¹¹⁴ The distinction may seem fine, but it is radical, contesting the assumption that there is any physiological basis of disorders we call mental illness, even saying that laws of the mind have nothing in common with the laws of physics, the “hardest” of the “hard” sciences. Rather than physical correlates, psychology is relativistic to social conditions: therefore, “...*the laws of psychology cannot be formulated independently of the laws of sociology.*”¹¹⁵ Drawing heavily on social semiotics and game theory, the overwhelming focus on the book is the condition psychiatry was still referring to as hysteria, which Szasz claims is the most representative example of what “mental illness” actually is: namely, playing at being sick. The “hysteric” in this account, failing to keep up with sociological changes in the games of social interaction, is using the symbolic language of illness to simply seek some kind of help and affection because it’s the only language they have to get some kind of attention, and psychiatrists try in vain to “cure” them when there is no actual illness: “The spectacle that faces us is simply an aspect of the *human condition*—call it fate, destiny, life style, character, existence, or what you will—and what we hear and see are *the cries for help* and their

¹¹³ Thomas Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct* (New York: Hoeber Medical Division, Harper & Row, 1961).

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7. Emphasis in the original.

pictorial representations.”¹¹⁶ Treating these patients as ill will only, in his estimation, remove them yet further from social functioning, often restrain their liberty in institutions, and recuse them of their personal responsibility to maintain their own standards of living. What psychiatrists should do is learn the language of help-seeking behavior, decipher the patient’s “game of living” and how it fails to adapt to the game situations she finds herself in, and work with the patient to modulate their understanding of the rules of the various social games she finds herself in. His most damning statement on psychiatry comes near the end and is worth quoting in full:

The concept of mental illness and the social actions taken in its name serve the self-seeking interests of the medical and psychiatric professions, just as the notion of witchcraft served the interests of the theologians, acting in the name of God. As the theological game was the ‘opiate of the people’ in past ages, so the medical-psychiatric game is the opiate of contemporary peoples. By draining interpersonal and group tensions, each game fulfills the function of social tranquilization.¹¹⁷

While there are significant problems with his theory’s own neoliberal emphasis on personal responsibility and refusal to acknowledge that the body is one with the mind (and thus can be involved in mental disorders and thus limit the efficacy of his approach), his theory is worth considering for at least one reason: psychiatry often functions to pacify dissident or deviant elements in society rather than working to understand how communities can help them adapt—and perhaps more importantly, learn how social change comes to isolate and alienate people.

Another leading figure in anti-psychiatry, South African-born and London-based psychiatrist David Cooper, shared with Szasz a certain understanding of mental illness as in some way a problem with communication; moreover, he shared Szasz’s understanding that psychiatry often worked only to exclude the mentally ill—but with a much more militant perspective than Szasz, partly as one who embraced the anti-psychiatry movement and worked to

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 301. Emphasis in the original.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 306.

lead it. Indeed, his 1967 book *Psychiatry and Anti-Psychiatry* can be seen as the movement's bible.¹¹⁸ Cooper sees psychiatry as a pernicious, socially acceptable form of social invalidation:

This is a study of one mode of social invalidation, but it takes this term in a dual sense. First, a person is progressively made to conform to the inert, passive identity of invalid or patient.... second, the process whereby almost every act, statement, and experience of the labelled person is systematically ruled invalid according to certain rules of the game established by his family, and later by others, in their efforts to produce the vitally needed invalid-patient.¹¹⁹

With the role of patient, the mentally ill are made passive; with the label of mental illness, their perspectives are dismissed as inaccurate *a priori*. Criticizing psychiatry's definition of schizophrenia as a kind of panchreston (a term pulled from Szasz referring to a sort of catch-all theory used when no other explanation can account for a complicated array of problems)¹²⁰,

Cooper instead offers the following definition of schizophrenia:

... schizophrenia is a micro-social crisis situation in which the acts and experiences of a certain person are invalidated by others for certain intelligible cultural and micro-cultural (usually familial) reasons, to the point where he is elected and identified as being 'mentally ill' in a certain way, and is then confirmed (by a specifiable but highly arbitrary labelling process) in the identity 'schizophrenic patient' by medical or quasi-medical agents.¹²¹

In other words, schizophrenia is a way for people (usually families) to deal with unruly members of society that has the blessing of medical science—and its institutional power to do violence to the patient in the form of institutionalization, psychotropic drugs, and more radical surgical procedures. The process is fairly straightforward: the family essentially gaslights the patient, rejecting and labeling as psychotic any experiences or behavior they do not wish to affirm, and the patient may eventually begin to believe the narrative woven since her experiences are never validated: “These attributions [of madness and delusion] are highly functional and they function

¹¹⁸ David Cooper, *Psychiatry and Anti-Psychiatry* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967).

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, viii.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* Emphasis removed from the original.

in relation to a system of needs in the family at a certain point in its history.”¹²² What “psychosis” really is, then, is the allegedly mentally ill person effectively convincing themselves of the reality of the delusions they are told they are to have—a kind of psychological corollary to the nocebo effect¹²³: “When things reach this pass the identified patient must, in order to achieve some coherence in his world view, some ‘sanity’, imaginatively invent a representation of these mysterious influences that act on him.”¹²⁴ But psychiatry has failed to be useful even in less complicated disorders, since definitions of specific mental disorders almost always either simply medicalize social norms of expected and acceptable behavior or are so vague as to be operationally useless.¹²⁵ Regardless, psychiatry’s focus on “curing” is really only a focus on making the patient less distressing to others; Cooper claims the focus should instead be on healing, on helping people rediscover a sense of wholeness after falling to pieces—a process that can be necessary for personal growth and isn’t inherently a pathological development.¹²⁶

The final and arguably most important figure I will examine here is Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing, whose first book *The Divided Self*, first published in 1960, opened the doors to alternative conceptions of psychiatry.¹²⁷ As Cooper would later develop—albeit in a more radical manner—Laing saw mental illness as not purely a problem in the individual, but rather as stemming from dysfunctional family dynamics. However, his work is most heavily predicated on existentialist philosophy than any other figure in the anti-psychiatry movement. Laing is especially interested in and attuned to the particularity of a person’s own experience of the

¹²² Ibid., 35.

¹²³ The nocebo effect is the inverse of the placebo effect: if a person is administered a substance that they are told will harm them in some way, the person often begins to show signs of harm along the lines of what they were told to expect—even if the substance is absolutely inert.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 12.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 17.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 126.

¹²⁷ R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Penguin Books, 1990; c. 1960, 1965, 1969).

world, and the sense that effectively one's experience of the world is utterly unique (pulling for instance on Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world, the notion that what we call the self is a consciousness constituted of environmental relationships, not of inwardness or outwardness, a kind of consciousness arising between body and objects rather than in the human only). But our relationship to the world and consequent *Weltanschauung* needs some form of social validation in order to remain anchored and consistent rather than becoming prey to the whims of fantasy: *the subject needs to share her world with others*. We have an existential need to have our world ontologically validated through our social relationships, or as Laing says, "*The reality of the world and of the self are mutually potentiated by the direct relationship between self and other.*"¹²⁸ Without this validation or in the face of a perceived existential threat, what we understand as mental illness starts to develop—the subject begins to split, as he puts it. What we label psychotic delusions then are really those instances when a person's experience of the world is difficult or impossible to align with anyone else's. In Laing's account: "Such statements [of actually being dead, etc.] are usually called delusions, but if they are delusions, they are delusions which contain existential truth. They are to be understood as statements that are literally true within the terms of reference of the individual who makes them."¹²⁹ Indeed, within his theory of schizophrenia, psychosis and its delusions are effectively a perceptual or physical translation of existential truths in some kind of symbolically coded form: there is a truth to psychosis, and the job of the psychiatrist is to decipher that truth—perhaps the only way of reaching someone with severe delusions—and helping the patient deal with the existential problems the delusions indicate. After all, in his account, delusions come about through the isolation of an inner sense of self and world in which fantasy has more or less absolute control; it

¹²⁸ Ibid., 82.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 149.

is thus no surprise that the language of psychosis is a fantastical semiosis of existential reality. Fundamentally, schizophrenia “is a possible outcome of a more than usual difficulty in being a whole person with the other, and with not sharing the common-sense (i.e. the community sense) way of experiencing oneself in the world.”¹³⁰ Mental illness stems from isolation quite literally in this account: when one’s existential perspective is isolated from the validation of a social group or at least of one other person, the integrity of the self disintegrates. It is as if the mind is so intrinsically dialectical that in the absence of the Other, it simply splits.

I would be remiss to neglect to discuss the gendered dynamics of mental illness and seeking psychiatric help in the time period during which Roberta Breitmore “lived.” In fact, one of the sociologists from whom I have extensively pulled to research this section performed a study on just this issue in the 1970s: Allan Horwitz’s 1977 “The Pathways into Psychiatric Treatment: Some Differences between Men and Women.”¹³¹ The key thesis of his study is that men are both less capable of identifying (or at least less willing to do so) the signs of mental illness in themselves and less willing to seek treatment even when others notice disturbances in their behavior—to the point that men by a large margin are more likely to be forcibly committed to inpatient psychiatric treatment. Contrarily, women are both more likely to identify signs of mental illness in themselves and much more willing to seek professional help for mental illness. Part of this Horwitz attributes to women being more willing to discuss emotional problems with friends and family than men—presaging a common refrain among male feminists like myself today that (hegemonic) masculinity is a mask to cover one’s vulnerabilities and emotions. He further explains his findings with the following:

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹³¹ Allan Horwitz, “The Pathways into Psychiatric Treatment: Some Differences between Men and Women,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 18.2 (June 1977): 169-78.

First, the culturally learned ways of recognizing and responding to emotional problems make women more likely than men to recognize the existence of emotional problems, to discuss their problems with others, and to willingly enter psychiatric treatment as a solution to their problems. Second, since women more readily discuss their problems with others, their problems are *visible* at earlier stages of development and therefore open to a wider range of suggested resolutions offered by others. Third, since a larger number of persons are aware of their problems, women are more likely than men to come in contact with *information* about the availability of psychiatric treatment and to act upon their knowledge of professional solutions.¹³²

What I interpret in Horwitz's findings is that women may be more prone to overanalyzing their emotions for psychiatric problems than men in mid-1970s America; and men are more likely to be forcibly committed for mental illness, in part due to less vigilance for psychiatric disturbances, at least in self-reports, and fewer opportunities to explore troubling emotions with their communities. But perhaps as important in these findings is Horwitz conclusion that a main tenet of societal reaction theory is confirmed by his findings, namely "that people in greater positions of power are more able to resist being labelled mentally ill than relatively powerless people."¹³³ In other words, given gendered patterns of forcible commitment to psychiatric institutions, and the confirmation of this tenet of societal reaction theory, the overwhelming majority of people forcibly committed are men relatively low in social and economic capital—and that men with larger reserves of social and economic capital, even when demonstrating signs of significant mental illness, can avoid involuntary treatment. In other words, according to general demographical patterns, the average patient of psychiatry in the 1970s will likely be either a woman voluntarily seeking help or a disenfranchised man involuntarily committed to treatment. I contest that this speaks volumes about the power dynamics of psychiatric treatment along lines of gender and class.

¹³² Ibid.: 176.

¹³³ Ibid.: 170.

“And being human / Is fucked as it is”¹³⁴: Roberta, Self-Improvement, and Psychiatry

Senses of contemporary social distress confess a disturbed psychic situation: /
Feelings are incapable of being aroused, persistent sense of illegitimacy, a / Sense
of feeling dead in the world. We are the ‘Me’ generation. The cult of the ‘I’
reaches / Adulthood and there gains increasing numbers of adherents as self-
awareness, / Consciousness-expansion and self-improvement concerns expand to
an epidemic / Stage.

—Kristine Stiles¹³⁵

The need to be perceived is not, of course, purely a visual affair. It extends to the
general need to have one’s presence endorsed or confirmed by the other, the need
for one’s total existence to be recognized; the need, in fact, to be loved.

—R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self*¹³⁶

To approach the *Roberta Breitmore* series art-historically, I argue, paradoxically
necessitates letting go of the discipline’s typical methodological attachment to the visual. Such
an approach is certainly not unprecedented in art history: it is essentially necessary in the
analysis of most any work of Conceptualism. Performance art being a close cousin to
Conceptualism makes this even less of a jump. But as I have noted above, *Roberta Breitmore* is
not a typical performance series: it involves the creation of a truly new person. Regardless of
how artificial she may seem to us in retrospect, she was *existentially real* for people whose “real”
existence we cannot contest: her psychiatrist, her peers in Weight Watchers, EST, and other self-
improvement groups, and perhaps most particularly, her dates. As Kerry Doran notes, “there was
no ‘performance’ for the people who experienced Breitmore’s presence in the world: only those
who are looking back on this as a performance can distinguish it from everyday reality.”¹³⁷ In
order to keep *Roberta Breitmore* in context as an artwork, we have to approach Roberta
Breitmore as a person.

¹³⁴ Two lines of lyrics from the song “Possessions,” by Canadian extreme metal band Strapping Young Lad, off of their 2005 album *Alien*.

¹³⁵ Kristine Stiles, “February 2, 1978,” in *Not Roberta Breitmore*, R13.

¹³⁶ Laing, *The Divided Self*, 119.

¹³⁷ Kerry Doran, “Cyborg Origins: Lynn Hershman Leeson at Bridget Donahue”, *Rhizome*, March 19, 2015, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/mar/19/lynn-hershman-leeson-origins-species/>

This is not to say that we cannot historicize her, though, which is what the above exploration of psychiatry around the time of the *Roberta Breitmore* series is beginning to do. The connection to psychiatry is not one made arbitrarily: it seems that the thought of leading anti-psychiatry figures occupied the mind of those behind the project, and in addition to her graduate training in psychology, it would appear that Hershman was in contact with several of the more revolutionary figures in psychology at the time.¹³⁸ Stiles's dated entries in the *Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore* exhibition catalogue even make reference to R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self*. The entire entry "January 29, 1978" is devoted to exploring Roberta's relationship to mental illness. The tone of her writing here is more markedly humorous and even sarcastic. Stiles opens the entry, "Roberta's got this idea about having the crazies. You know, she thinks she's / Schizophrenic. Let's face it, her interests are all pretty ordinary, like the / Mirror reflection, the shadow and the soul."¹³⁹ The discrepancy set up with tongue in cheek here is between the alleged commonality of Roberta's interests and the abstract and frankly bizarre list of things that typify her interests—all of which point in equal measure to anthropology, mythology, Jungian psychology, morbid inwardness, and a kind of obsessive self-observation. The entry goes on to discuss the anthropology behind the emergence of the idea of the soul—tracing it somewhat dubiously to the doubling of our form by its shadow—and from there proceeds to talk about doubling and the fear of doubling more generally. Continuing back to Roberta, Stiles writes, "Anyway, Roberta calls her own doubling, Schizophrenia, a / Representation which is pretty much the popularization of one version of / Madness. Everybody knows what a Schizophrenic is,

¹³⁸ For an exploration of the figures of radical psychology with whom Hershman had contact, see Kristine Stiles, "Landscape of Tremors: Lynn Hershman Leeson, Toward an Intellectual History," in *Civic Radar*, 132-38. Stiles notes that Hershman and her work "attracted notice from a wide variety of public figures whose contributions to historical change and whose innovations, especially in psychology and politics, she thoughtfully examined." *Ibid.*, 133.

¹³⁹ Kristine Stiles, "January 29, 1978," in *Not Roberta Breitmore*, R12.

you know like three / Faces of Eve. There's a lot more to being schizo than doubling. Seems more like / Narcissism to me."¹⁴⁰ From this point the line of thought begins to get more difficult to follow with a discussion of Narcissus that I will turn to momentarily.

For now, it is important to unpack this quote, which is telling in its reflections on madness and schizophrenia. Stiles calls the schizophrenic "like three / Faces of Eve," referring presumably to the popular 1957 film *The Three Faces of Eve*. The film, based on a book of the same name published by psychiatrists Corbett Thigpin and Harvey Cleckley, centers on Eve, who comes to be diagnosed with what was then called multiple personality disorder—today called dissociative identity disorder (DID). Importantly, DID was and still is frequently confused with schizophrenia—and Stiles implicitly indicates she is aware of this by referring to Roberta's doubling in the previous sentence as "a / Representation which is pretty much the popularization of one version of / Madness." She also states that there is more to schizophrenia than doubling (and one could argue that schizophrenia does involve doubling, inasmuch as one's mind generates and externalizes hallucinated voices in many forms of the illness; plus, this is one of the simplest ways of encapsulating Laing's argument about the false self system in *The Divided Self*). The comparison she then makes is to narcissism—but not in the conventional sense of self-aggrandizing, self-important egotism, as she goes on to explain. What seems to matter most here is Narcissus's obsession with his reflection and desire to unify himself through merging with it.

The most perplexing bit about the entry comes in the middle of the Narcissus discussion: "Narcissus would have no other lover than himself. And, her / Persona is the androgenous [*sic*] fusion of two separate sexualities, Robert/Roberta."¹⁴¹ The concept of Roberta's androgyny manifests regularly in the exhibition catalogue, but has almost never been discussed elsewhere,

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

either in the secondary literature or in Hershman's own interviews and writing after the fact. Only one source makes any sustained acknowledgement of this feature of the project in its earliest published form, and even then it is in a strangely yearning fashion.¹⁴² It seems that Stiles summoning this feature of Roberta's persona in this context is not coincidental: particularly in light of the absence of elaboration in other contexts, the androgynous doubling at work in the discussion of a fused, dual, hermaphroditic sexuality only makes sense as a distillation of a core feature of schizophrenia, which Stiles here connotes to be a kind of popular conceptual malapropism for a type of madness associated with a split or doubled personality.

Stiles's discussion of Narcissus and Roberta's doubling eventually gets plugged into a short discussion of R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self*. To quote Stiles at length,

Lover and beloved, Narcissus tries to unite in himself. Thus he chose his false / Image and lost his true self. Narcissus and the Schizophrenic share similar / Characteristics. In Roberta's version of Schizophrenia, a frightened / Personality splits. R. D. Laing's popular illustration, Self = (Body-World) is an / Equation of this breach. In it, the body is in touch with outer reality, the / World, but the Self becomes sealed off from bodily experience. Roberta has both / Feelings, a self removed from the world and a self lost in the pool's / Reflection.¹⁴³

The all-encompassing and ultimately deadly obsession of Narcissus is equated with Roberta's schizophrenia, which is further contextualized within Laing's theory of the false self system which develops in the schizoid mind: the self, existentially overwhelmed with its experience of the world, splits and creates a barrier between it and reality—a "false self" that functions as a mask and parrots what is expected of the person professionally and socially—and the inner self

¹⁴² See Pierre Restany, "Hershmanlandia: Please Touch," in *Chimaera Monographie: Lynn Hershman* (Hérimoncourt, France: Édition du Centre International de Création Vidéo, 1992). In the midst of this conversation, he proclaims "As soon as I entered Hershmanlandia, I saw that a specific destiny was reserved for me—to be Roberto for a Roberta, to exist incidentally to our encounters." Ibid., n.p.

¹⁴³ Stiles, "January 29, 1978," in *Not Roberta Breitmore*, R12.

is prey to ever more unreal (eventually psychotic) fantasies; the self no longer exists in the body or the world, as it does in non-schizoid people.

It is clear in this analysis that central figures of the *Roberta Breitmore* series (particularly Kristine Stiles who was Hershman's closest partner in the later years of the series) saw the project as overlapping with the more revolutionary thinkers in psychiatry in the 1960s and '70s, especially the existentialist approach adopted by Laing. In many ways, Roberta is typified as schizophrenic or schizoid, often referring to herself as such. It is further evident in the primary literature that the main thinkers behind the series (here especially Hershman) saw Roberta as seriously depressed, with her frequent weight gain connected explicitly to her depression.¹⁴⁴ Her struggles with mental illness are infrequently mentioned in the literature, however, despite being a clear motivator for her behavior in both Stiles's and Hershman's eyes and having a deep history in her profile. In an interview, Hershman works to explain why Roberta was typified as depressed, stating, "She was sexually and physically abused as a child. That is why she left home, to start her new life. She didn't have a full college education; she had only had a year of college. All of that impacted her. In fact, I started to get a PhD in psychology to work up her traumas and her background," even answering affirmatively when asked if Roberta's behavior evolved from this profile.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, considering that Roberta is supposed to evolve out of her interactions with her environment rather than having a predetermined path,¹⁴⁶ it would seem that, aside from her appearance, this dimension of her personality is the primary fixed aspect of the project. Having charted the significance of mental illness to the artist as well as others who

¹⁴⁴ See for instance the *Roberta Breitmore* comic on page O8 in *Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore* for an illustration of this, and Roberta's Vitae on R24 for a history of the connection between overeating and depression in her life.

¹⁴⁵ Hershman, quoted in Maloney, "Looking for Roberta Breitmore."

¹⁴⁶ See Gregos, "The Importance of Being Roberta," 2.

performed and wrote on her and the series' connection to the anti-psychiatry movement, I wish to spend the remaining pages analyzing the connections between historical developments in psychiatry and Roberta's own experiences in self-improvement groups and psychiatry and what these tell us about mental illness from an experiential perspective.

* * * * *

Based on the two pages of her psychiatric evaluation held at the Walker Art Center, dated to 1978 but likely from 1976 due to the timing indicated in Roberta's vitae, Roberta first saw a psychiatrist after struggling for some time to hold down a job and to find a roommate with whom to share her living expenses—during which time she had gained weight. Overall, the psychiatrist seems frustrated with how closed off Roberta is during the two interviews, describing her frozen affect, guardedness, and brevity. What the psychiatrist (and note these quotes are all from his writing, not Hershman's) does determine sounds pretty severe:

The patient presents a diagnostic dilemma which is aggravated by the paucity of history provided and contradictory or unrevealed symptoms. Chronic depression, paralyzing phobias, and impoverished object relations are apparent. While she revealed no autistic thought nor disturbed associations, her overwhelming ambivalence, social isolation, apathy, frozen affectivity, and abject lack of self-awareness and the chronicity suggests a schizophrenic condition, simple type. It is possible she is concealing past psychotic episodes. She would also fit the criteria for pseudoneurotic schizophrenia (Hoch) or borderline personality disorder (Kernberg and others).¹⁴⁷

The psychiatrist continues to say, "She is severely disabled and incapable of self-support.... Prognosis is guarded and further deterioration seems likely."¹⁴⁸ From this, we can conclude that the psychiatrist sees Roberta's condition as extremely serious; that her condition is clinically related to schizophrenic-type disorders in some way, though the types of schizophrenic disorders

¹⁴⁷ Taken from the second page of Roberta's psychiatric evaluation. See Walker Art Center, <http://www.walkerart.org/collections/artworks/untitled-from-robertas-internal-transformations-language-from-roberta-page-2-from-robertas-psychiatric-report>.

¹⁴⁸ See *ibid.*

under consideration are those without psychosis; and that the psychiatrist is clearly following the practices of the newly emergent diagnostic psychiatry as outlined in the previous section: very little psychoanalytic language is present (“object relations” being perhaps the only exception) and the psychiatrist’s primary concern seems to be in collating a list of symptoms and applying diagnostic criteria to the collected symptoms. What little discussion of Roberta’s history there is seems aimed towards determining the medical history of her family (mainly to see if relatives suffered from similar problems) and to outline her psychosexual history—another dimension of prime consideration for psychiatric nosology.

Given the psychiatrist’s apparent difficulty with classifying the specific disorder Roberta has, the course of treatment is fairly vague and more concerned with ruling out possibilities than describing them. Antipsychotic medications are eliminated given the lack of psychotic symptoms, and antidepressants are eliminated due to how “insidious and chronic” Roberta’s depressive condition is and because they could precipitate a psychotic episode. (This was well before the first of the newer generation of antidepressants had been developed, namely SSRIs, and therefore available antidepressants were much more potent and less targeted in their effects.) The proposal then is basically for her to develop social skills: “Long term supportive psychotherapy especially in a group setting might be beneficial. Adjunctive therapy to improve social interactions and develop functional skills is essential.”¹⁴⁹ The plan is scant on detail in part because the psychiatrist’s formulation of her condition is unclear (which may be a result of Hershman’s confessed difficulty staying in character due to her own desire to engage in psychiatric counseling).¹⁵⁰ Still, the most prominent element seems to be improving her social relations, both in group psychotherapy and adjunctive group sessions.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Stephan, “Interview with Lynn Hershman,” 5.

There is no indication that Roberta ever did any group psychotherapy; all literature seems to indicate that her interaction with psychotherapy was exclusively through her psychiatrist. In terms of adjunctive group therapy, the two most foregrounded in the primary literature are Erhard Seminars Training (EST) and Weight Watchers. There is evidence that the latter was recommended to her by her psychiatrist directly—a fact documented both in the secondary literature and in the comic Hershman commissioned by Spain Rodriguez.¹⁵¹ As suggested in both these sources, Weight Watchers was no help and she in fact ended up gaining weight. How she ended up in EST is not as clear. Given that it was at the forefront of the self-improvement groups of the 1970s (particularly on the West Coast), however, and promised self-transformation to allow for ultimate self-fulfillment and the achievement of contentment and happiness, it is not surprising that Roberta ended up there—and in fact she may have elected to pursue it on her own.¹⁵² After all, as explicated above, Roberta was meant to be a reflection of her culture’s obsession with self-improvement, and EST was all the rage among those seeking to actualize their potential—most especially among “the ‘ME’ generation.”

EST is a fascinating social and historical phenomenon that strangely has a relatively limited academic literature surrounding it, so it is worth examining EST in some detail here before turning to how Roberta is shown to have interacted with it. The program was founded in 1971 by Werner Erhard (birth name: Jack Rosenberg), a former used-car salesman, after he explored numerous Eastern religious philosophies and other so-called “human potential disciplines” (more on those in a moment)—and coincidentally, he is said to have come up with the idea for EST when stricken with his own theory of enlightenment while driving across the

¹⁵¹ Respectively, see Phelan, “The Roberta Breitmore Series,” 104; and Spain Rodriguez, story by Lynn Hershman, “Roberta Breitmore (An Alchemical Portrait Started in 1975),” in *Not Roberta Breitmore*, O10.

¹⁵² See Adelaide Bry, *est (Erhard Seminars Training): 60 Hours that Transform Your Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1976).

Golden Gate Bridge.¹⁵³ As he developed the program, it took root most strongly on the West Coast—which is in part a likely reason Hershman chose to involve Breitmore in the program. EST “emphasised [*sic*] the need for personal responsibility and the ‘possibilities of individual fulfillment’ through strict training. Erhard, with his slick good looks and startling blue eyes, became the ‘guru of gurus’ to a self-improvement vogue that many believed captured the essence of the ‘me decade’ of the 1970s.”¹⁵⁴ Typically, the sixty-hour seminar-based program would be executed over two consecutive weekends and quickly gained notoriety for its rigid structure and highly confrontational style. The results? “While many alumni claimed that the courses had taught them to realise [*sic*] their potential, others said that Erhard was offering quick-fix solutions with a mixture of pop psychology and military-style bullying.”¹⁵⁵ That the program was so affectively intense, by all accounts, and also more or less the dominant form of self-improvement on the West Coast in the 1970s is probably another contributing factor to Roberta’s involvement. All things told, Erhard made millions on the success of the program, although it had largely waned in popularity by the middle of the ‘80s, and due to run-ins with the IRS, Erhard went into hiding in the early ‘90s.

The most comprehensive scholarly examination of the program comes in a review of the literature on EST by Peter Finkelstein, Brant Wenegrat, and Irvin Yalom, in the context of a wider examination of the psychological literature on what they call “large group awareness training.”¹⁵⁶ A major component of their claim is that there really are no psychological studies of large group awareness training aside from those on EST—and perhaps this is one further reason

¹⁵³ Ben Macintyre, “New Age Guru Goes into Hiding,” *The Times* (London), 22 July 1992, 4.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Peter Finkelstein, Brant Wenegrat, and Irvin Yalom, “Large Group Awareness Training,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 33 (1982): 515-39.

why EST is the particular type of awareness training Roberta undertook. In their analysis, EST and other large group awareness training programs are an extension of the Human Potential Movement in the US during the 1950s, which styled itself as a kind of third way between behavioral psychology and psychoanalysis—the then-dominant paradigms for dealing with emotional problems. Interestingly, they claim, “By the 1960s the runaway scientific technocracy and the breakdown of intimacy-sponsoring social institutions resulted in widespread anomie. Large numbers of individuals turned toward the Human Potential Movement for a sense of purpose and community,” and that the movement was always loosely associated with a general critique of modernity.¹⁵⁷ The aim of the movement was to foster in its participants better communication skills and an improved experience of life, while “honesty and expanded consciousness were meant to free the person for further growth and creativity.”¹⁵⁸ Given the rise and spread of encounter groups generally and EST specifically, the authors of the study contend “that there are large numbers of people whose needs are being met neither by society nor by the professional psychotherapy disciplines.”¹⁵⁹ This may form the final piece of the puzzle of why Roberta sought EST: she felt she had no other choice, failing to have found support in the community and gaining little help in her therapy sessions with her psychiatrist.

The people who actually compose EST graduates, as of 1980, were 54% women and 94% White, suggesting that women make up a majority of participants, if only slightly a majority, while White people are the preponderant racial group to attend; perhaps more interestingly for our study of Roberta, over half of participants were not in wedlock, with 28% having never married, living alone, and 24% having divorced, split up, or widowed.¹⁶⁰ Roberta, as a divorced

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.: 516.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.: 517.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.:

White woman, certainly fits the profile of an average EST graduate, then. As we proceed from here, it is important to keep in mind that the “trainer” who does the instruction in EST is simply an EST graduate who has remained involved with the community: no formal training outside the program is required, so the trainers can span from professional psychologists to PE teachers.

Finkelstein, Wenegrat, and Yalom provide an extensive description of the EST process, a process that is focused on retraining participants to assume responsibility for their emotions, but I only wish to detail a few things here.¹⁶¹ Their description of the first encounter of the first hour of training is quite illustrating of the affective tenor of the program:

Neatly dressed and clean shaven, the est trainer is distinguished from his assistants only by an air of absolute authority. He betrays no affect, even when he excoriates the trainees. During the course of the training, he will repeatedly refer to them as “assholes,” and he will devalue their accomplishments with the repeated assertion that their lives “do not work.” He maintains complete control of the floor; trainees, who may only address the trainer, must raise their hands to stand and speak. Once recognized, they are expected to remain standing until their interaction with the trainer is terminated by his saying “thank you.” The audience then applauds and the trainee resumes his or her seat. The trainer meets anger and criticism with studied indifference, reminding the trainees that they have chosen to be there and implying that their feelings are irrelevant in any event, since if they merely stay in the room for the duration of the training, they will “get it.” At other times he tells trainees they will get nothing from the training, or that they should last it out and “take what you get.”¹⁶²

Although this may seem a precondition for seeking self-improvement, the fact that participants are failing at their lives is taken for granted—but beyond that, it is used as a cudgel to emotionally batter the participants into compliance and deference to the trainer’s authority, who has no regard (until they are broken in, at least) for their feelings.

¹⁶¹ For a full account, see *ibid.*: 518-23.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*: 519.

After a day that can be fairly described as humiliating, the second day involves exhorting participants to disclose feelings and explore past traumas in a highly affectively charged environment. As the authors describe here,

At the trainer's command, the trainees imagine a situation in which that problem has occurred and systematically explore the detailed bodily sensations and images associated with the problem itself. As the trainer orders the trainees to examine images from the past and from childhood, powerful affects are released. The room is soon filled with the sound of sobbing, retching, and uncontrolled laughter, punctuated by the exclamations of those remonstrating with figures from their past or the quieter voices of those imagining earnest conversations.¹⁶³

Effectively, participants are worked up into a state of emotional frenzy, all in the context of a large group expecting the performance of such extreme emotion.

On the third training day, the trainer sets out to convince participants that the reason they are miserable, or at least dissatisfied with their lives, is because they devalue their subjective experience in favor of consensual reality. Several exercises are utilized to demonstrate this fact, largely devolving to having participants perform (before the group) actions that are considered socially taboo. Any shame or guilt or what have you is attributed to the participant's in-built understanding of what she thinks other people expect from her, *not* from those expectations themselves, which it is tacitly claimed do not really exist in the form they are believed to exist by the participant. (This could be seen, on the one hand, as an attempt to "deprogram" the psychic influence of pathonormativity as I have come to define it; on the other, it could just as well be an attempt to ignore the reality of pathonormativity itself, the reality of the fact that there *are* expectations in the social contract that influence how we perceive our own affect and accordingly regulate it. Breaking the cycle of self-regulation could as easily be freedom as it is disregard for social mores.) As the authors pithily summarize, "Although the trainees may not

¹⁶³ Ibid.: 520.

have caused their misfortunes in a consensual sense, they remain totally responsible for their experience of them, and therefore for the realities in which they live.”¹⁶⁴ In effect, this is the “new-age” counterpart to the neoliberalization of affect found in psychiatry, as argued above: your bad feelings are your fault alone, full stop.

The final day of training is devoted to convincing participants that the brain’s organizational system functions in a dualistic manner: memories are all categorized as either threatening to survival or non-threatening (a contention that is interestingly echoed in Scientology, another movement that gained steam in the 1970s, especially on the West Coast). Networks of association are created in the brain on the basis of this structure and history. Given how simplistic the brain is at creating these associations, events and circumstances that pose no threat to a person may wrongfully be categorized as threatening, and the repetition of this process is what leads to dysfunctional emotional lives. The solution is to realize this process and turn awareness to it—what EST calls the Mind State—effectively working to choose to live in the eternal present, the ever-flowing state of consciousness rooted in the now, what EST calls The Self. At the end of this exercise, the trainer calls on the participants to perform their comprehension, by standing up in front of the group to demonstrate their level of “getting it,” with the trainer instructing those who “got it,” then those who “got it” but don’t like it, then those who got it but already had it, and so on until those who didn’t get it stand up—the latter being told that was the whole point all along, because conveniently there is nothing to get! The remainder of the day is spent reviewing the lessons: “the chimerical nature of beliefs, the necessity of fully experiencing problems, the higher reality of subjective life, and each individual’s responsibility as the source of his or her constructed world.”¹⁶⁵ And thus ends EST.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.: 521.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.: 522.

Actual psychological research on the results of EST is both slim and methodologically flawed, argue Finkelstein, Wenegrat, and Yalom. All extensive collections of testimonials have been compiled by EST advocates, and suffer thus from researcher bias and moreover fundamental methodological flaws. More objective analysis fails to demonstrate convincingly that it is the specific attributes of EST that contribute to positive psychological change, if they indeed find any. And though there are several reports of psychiatric breakdown following EST, these reports remain isolated and anecdotal—though the authors make sure to add “borderline or psychotic patients would be well advised not to participate.”¹⁶⁶ And that might be the deciding factor leading to Roberta’s involvement: a demonstration that the mentally ill are not only preyed upon by programs like EST, but also that they could be done harm or at best deceived by techniques that have not been proven to be efficacious in any reputable academic analysis.

Regardless of the statistics around EST, what the above shows us demonstrably is that EST is driven by a strongly authoritarian personality structure; utilizes a form of peer pressure to perform certain exercises and demonstrate certain results (namely positive ones); depends on the coercive elicitation of extreme affect, whether it is fear and compliance in the beginning, emotive self-disclosure in the middle, or an expected sense of euphoric triumph at the end; and fundamentally relies upon a neoliberal ideology that human emotions can largely be detached from circumstance and that it is up to the individual to regulate these emotions and make her life meaningful. As the authors summarize,

...Western psychology’s infatuation with radical critiques of consciousness, be they Eastern or existential, must be carefully scrutinized. Just as meditation is offered to the busy professional in order that she or he may work longer hours but feel more refreshed, enlightenment itself may be used as a “high state” which supplies “energy” for further colonial behavior on the part of the personality. As this is done, perhaps for the good of some technical end, the fully radical nature of the alternative view is obscured, perhaps even subsumed into the reigning

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.: 538.

psychology. Herein lies one of the hazards of a brief training program made up of an amalgam of diverse and borrowed techniques and teachings; it becomes difficult to assess how well the deeper wisdom which had spawned the technique survives in the training recipe.¹⁶⁷

Perhaps this technique could succeed for the mildly dissatisfied, overworked, business-class seeker of enlightenment, but it is a terribly dangerous program for people with serious mental illness. (Raising the “business class” here is no mere turn of phrase: another author has suggested that EST is a fundamental continuation of the individualist Protestant work ethic and a form of hygienic utilitarianism that takes the place of more traditional religious authority, adapting its participants to a culture of dissolving sources of community and ever-increasing work—a basic component of accelerating capitalism.¹⁶⁸) In this context, it may not have been a puzzle after all why Hershman chose to associate Roberta with EST: she is the perfect victim for it.

Turning to the Spain Rodriguez comic—Rodriguez being one of the first *ZAP Comix* artists, known for their cheekily raunchy style—it is worth noting that there is surprisingly little information about how or why he and Roberta Breitmore came to work together. All that can be determined concretely is that she apparently commissioned the famous comic book artist in 1975; and further, she would much later come to commission him again, this time to design graphics for her *!WAR: Women Art Revolution* (2010) documentary and for the fifty-seven-page *!WAR* graphic novel.¹⁶⁹ Apparently, then, they had a good working relationship, and Hershman provided him with the story content from her experiences as Breitmore, and Rodriguez performed all design elements for the “Roberta Breitmore” comic. Practically no interpretation of this comic exists in the art-historical literature on the *Roberta Breitmore* series, so I will posit

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ See Gary Abraham, “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Utilitarianism: The Case of EST,” *Theory and Society* 12.6 (November 1983): 739-73.

¹⁶⁹ For the date of the commission, see Held, xii. For Rodriguez’s work on *!WAR*, see the film credits on “About the Film,” *!Women Art Revolution*, http://womenartrevolution.com/about_film.php. See also Doran, “Cyborg Origins.”

two of my own. First, the comic-book style may be intended to foil the actual, generally depressing experiences of Breitmore and add some levity to an otherwise melancholic exhibition catalogue (for it is in *Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore* that the comic first appears). A second, and not mutually exclusive, possibility is that the cheeky, raunchy, and sexist style that typified *ZAP Comix* was being used as an ironic commentary on the cultural sexism and misogyny that led to the terrible circumstances that occurred in the comic itself. In both possibilities, the comic would function with self-awareness to draw attention to the disparity between the psychic trauma that actual women experience in a sexist culture and the trivializing manner in which that experience is often represented in popular culture. Regardless, the partnership was quite successful and yielded a fascinating artwork that has received criminally little attention in the art-historical literature and functions, in my argument, both to illustrate events in Breitmore's life that had no other documentation and also to provide a subtle criticism of the representation of emotional trauma (especially that suffered by women) in popular culture.

To delve into the comic's content, there are two panels in the Rodriguez comic that appear to address EST: in the first, Roberta is seated in a crowd of men and women listening to a male speaker on the stage, saying "Your life is a movie do you get 'it'." (Recall the frequent use of "get it" in the discourse of EST.) Over Roberta's head is a thought bubble in which appears "Get 'it'?!"¹⁷⁰ Roberta's clear confusion, while an obvious form of humorous irony (she does not get that she should get "it," or even what the "it" she should be getting is), seems to be a commentary on the calculated nebulosity of self-improvement language, especially in EST: like the Oracle of Delphi, the proclamations of self-help gurus are left obscure enough to allow nearly limitless readings. The reading is dependent strictly on the interpreter and what she finds

¹⁷⁰ Rodriguez, story by Hershman, "Roberta Breitmore," O10.

to be pertinent—to say nothing of social pressure and the performance of “being in the know.” The next panel puts this in further context. Roberta is seen walking down the street and thinking, “Now I’m in control of my life.” On the one hand, she clearly wants to believe that she is in control of her life—as EST works to convince its graduates. In addition to nebulous aphorisms, the functional efficacy of many forms of self-improvement seems to be through believing in the efficacy of the approach: in other words, a sort of placebo effect.¹⁷¹ A shift in attitude can indeed make a world of difference, even if the origin of the shift is mysterious or entirely misunderstood.

On the other hand, one’s attitude can only do so much in many cases—and that is where Roberta finds herself next. In the same panel, two men are seen shadily lurking in an alleyway behind Roberta. In the following panel, drawn dramatically off the strict grid of the comic, Roberta is seen getting accosted by the two men, surrounded by inky darkness but for what looks to be the ring of a light made by a streetlight. Above the struggle appears “EEEEEE” to represent Roberta’s shrieking. The following panel presents a police lineup, with an officer asking Roberta “Have any of these men taken advantage of you?” The humor of the juxtaposition of the two panels—one in which she proclaims herself in control and the immediately following depicting her being overwhelmed by two assailants—is pitch black and pointed. Just as with the dates above, Roberta’s inability to overcome her suffering and feel in control of her world seems limited by the vicious roles into which others wish to place her, particularly men looking to take advantage of her.

¹⁷¹ See, for instance, today’s trend of hypnosis treatments for quitting smoking.

Revealingly, the panel after the police lineup features Roberta gazing longingly into a bakery storefront window at a cake (a wedding cake, no less, topped with small bride-and-groom figurines), with a narration box at the bottom declaring “Life takes its toll.” The final panel on the page directly after this one shows Roberta lying on the psychiatrist’s couch, speaking to her psychiatrist. She says, “The more I eat, the more I get depressed, the more I get depressed the more I eat.” It is at this point that her apparently bored psychiatrist suggests Weight Watchers. This series of panels carries several meanings: in addition to the above, misogynistic violence is implicated in her cycle of worsening depression and feelings of not having control in her life; this is in turn implicated in her overeating and weight gain, which continues the cycle of depression. This cyclical struggle is underscored at the level of form, as well: earlier in the comic, we see a similar series of events, this time with the attempt to coerce Roberta into a prostitution ring leading to her overeating baked sweets and her consequent despair and turning to her psychiatrist.¹⁷²

The Weight Watchers evidently does not go well for her either. Beyond what Phelan documents, the comic proceeds from the suggestion of Weight Watchers directly to a meeting of the group. (The identity of this group is not as mysterious as what I take to be EST above: “WEIGHT WATCHERS” is plastered to the wall in the panel.) In this meeting we see an even larger group, this time composed solely of women, most of whom are middle-aged or older and all of whom are a little chubby. The speaker this time is a woman, seen shoulders down directly from behind—and behind carries two meanings here. Her rear end is front and center of the panel and accentuated by her clothing: extremely form-fitting flared jeans and a very tight t-shirt. The outfit emphasizes her large, round breasts, small waist, and ample hips and buttocks,

¹⁷² See *ibid.*, O9.

creating a marked contrast between the speaker and the spoken-at, further underscored by the sullen faces of the women in the crowd. Again, humor is involved in what is communicated: she demands her crowd, “All who have eaten illegal mayonnaise [*sic*] raise your hand.” Illegal mayonnaise likely refers to the general prohibition against such fatty condiments in the program, as well as the high point-count they have in the point exchange system that forms its basis; perhaps it means eating mayonnaise without counting the points. Regardless, the term “illegal mayonnaise” is absurd and more reminiscent of a punk band’s name than a topic of serious discussion. The humor is again heightened through a striking contrast in the next panel: Roberta, seen from behind from a canted high angle, stands wearing a bath towel in her bathroom weighing herself on a scale. Tragically, she says to herself, “Rats! I’ve gained 13 pounds in 3 weeks.” (Interestingly in the bathroom is a small table, upon which rest several prescription bottles of pills.¹⁷³) Again, it seems her group work has had the opposite effect from its intent. The last three panels of the comic, immediately following this, are ominous: first, Roberta is seen walking down another street, this one riddled with garbage. The narration reads, “Time passes; blue turns to grey.” Next is a close-up of Roberta’s finely manicured hand holding a bank checkbook (to record transactions); it is blank. Here the narration reads, “Roberta sees the end of the line and withdraws into her future.” The final panel—this one circular—is a shot of the Golden Gate Bridge, much like the one seen in the first artwork I analyzed in this chapter but without Roberta. Its menacing narration: “To be continued?”¹⁷⁴ Perhaps we are meant to intuit that Erhard’s Golden-Gate revelation has helped influence Roberta’s Golden-Gate demise.

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¹⁷³ Like the back-alley attack, there is no record supporting this detail in Roberta’s life outside of this comic.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, O11.

Roberta's experience with both psychiatry and self-improvement group work, particularly EST, echo many of the themes discussed above, both from the history of psychiatry and anti-psychiatry and from the primary literature's focus on self-improvement trends of the time. Self-improvement is positioned as ineffective at best and likely counterproductive—definitely counterproductive in Roberta's case. What benefit she does glean from the groups is short-lived and limited by the ill will of strange men inflicting sexist violence on her. Her psychiatric work is likewise unproductive. The primary literature indicates that following failure after failure, she contemplates suicide—an implication echoed in the comic. To quote the exhibition catalogue at length:

All of her attempts to become part of the community work in reverse. Like matter to anti-matter, she resists and echoes the opposite of that in which she seeks to be part. Her experiences shade her perspective and give dimension to Roberta's credibility. The meaningful coincidences of her miscalculations compound Roberta's deviant strains and attach her to the rim of experience, like a double edged razor. Each experience pulls her closer towards her center, towards the graveness of her situation. She tries therapy. She tries diets. All her pursuits mirror the invisible side of life she hopes to not face. As she turns inward to her inner silent space, her thoughts focus on self destruction [*sic*]. The chance of Roberta barely missing her targets multiplies in time. Her inner pain causes the broadening of her dimension as she gains weight, and the restlessness of her pursuit as she travels San Francisco by bus daily, as if in search for a magic square that would cast light on the growing darkness of her perspective.¹⁷⁵

Despite her struggles to integrate into the community, she remains forever alien; and no matter her efforts to overcome the constraints that prevent her from succeeding in her endeavors, she finds herself only worsening. Only an act of magick intervention, it seems, can save her from the encroaching darkness.

The reason for the failure of these attempts is outlined in the many little facets that construct the project. Lonely and poor, she seeks a roommate, but finds only men wishing to use

¹⁷⁵ "Three Years Condensed," in *Not Roberta Breitmore*, R19.

her sexually, either for their pleasure or profit. Her experiences here exacerbate her depression, and she overeats to self-medicate, consequently gaining weight and getting yet more depressed. In an effort to escape, she seeks a psychiatrist, but his primary aim is to categorize her, to crack the code of her psyche in order to prescribe the diagnostically appropriate treatment. Failing to do so, he recommends group therapy. These groups further place Roberta in a limited, predetermined role and address her from a vantage point she cannot fathom—the roles they insist upon placing her in are existentially meaningless to her, and thus her condition worsens still, in spite of her hopes. Cycles of patriarchal violence and sexist expectations of body image and sexual desirability encroach further on her. Her vision narrows and darkens. Help is not forthcoming in any effective way since none of the sources will treat her as anything but a unit in its limited worldview; no one approaches her as a human being full of untapped potential, contradictory ideas, complicated histories, conflicted perspectives, unfulfilled desires, fading dreams. She is forever a means to an end, and never an end-in-herself.¹⁷⁶ So she thinks of ending herself.

Those of us who have struggled with chronic mental illness can empathize with her struggle, even if she was “just” an artwork.

¹⁷⁶ I am referring her to the existentialist, specifically Sartrean, conception of humanity: the human being ethically demands always to be treated as an end-in-herself, never solely as a means to an end.

Yttligare ett steg närmare total jävla utfrysning¹⁷⁷: Reflections on the Sterility of the

Current Literature and the Dangers of Autobiography

Freedom is conferred by masks. But lurking below their boundaries are subtle /
Truths about exploring without risk of discovery. Seems to me like she wants /
Experiences without having to suffer from their realities. I guess when / We stand
looking at her, we perform a similar act. Seeking sensation, we wear / Masks
retaining our anonymous, uncommitted and irresponsible position as / Spectators.
—Kristine Stiles¹⁷⁸

While sabbaticals and research leaves can be considered a luxury enjoyed by faculty at Research I institutions, they are also a life-saving [break] respite from the obligation to write more, teach more, mentor more, and do more that is part of the speed-up in the workplace in academia and elsewhere. The struggle to protect that privileged position from being eroded by budget cuts and constant slams against not only radical cultural studies but the humanities in general can lead to the extreme weariness known as burnout. If even those of us in the most senior or prestigious positions are experiencing our labor conditions as, what does that mean for the many who have far less power, security, or freedom over their labor time? I consider my experience to be business as usual in the academy—an ordinary story, not an exceptional one. Thus, although one implicit message of *The Depression Journals* is that it is possible to come out on the other side of a period of blockage, struggle is also ongoing.

—Ann Cvetkovich¹⁷⁹

In many ways, *Roberta Breitmore* is the ultimate example of feminist pathopolitics: while her feminist critique is never heavy-handed, it is always there to be felt. Roberta's experience is one to which most anyone could probably relate, and that was how she was designed and executed. How we relate to her personally can lead us to profound political insights about the deep connection between the personal and the political—how these two are never entirely separate, just as the individual and her community are never entirely separate, despite the claims of groups like EST that would work to profit off of convincing her they are in exchange for a dubious and likely temporary personal insight. For me, mental illness is my point of contact with

¹⁷⁷ Swedish for, "Another step closer to total fucking ostracism." A song by Swedish depressive-suicidal black metal band Shining.

¹⁷⁸ Kristine Stiles, "January 21, 1978," in *Not Roberta Breitmore*, R10.

¹⁷⁹ Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 204-05.

Roberta. As such, what I have attempted in the above is to relate to Roberta Breitmore not as mere artwork but as person: to relate to her pain as if she were an ordinary person whose struggles I could understand. This of course means that there is much left out, because nobody can be summarized in one book, let alone one chapter of a dissertation. Still, I propose this as a supplement to the existing literature, not in an attempt to replace it but rather to grow it: to give more flesh to this portrait of a person who seems to embody all of society's obsessions at the time of her "birth."

This has required some autobiography, and some risky autobiography at that. Mental illness still carries a profound stigma, even in the allegedly progressive halls of the ivory tower in which critical humanistic work takes place. No doubt this has caused many readers discomfort, perhaps even alarmed some. Despite how much the critical humanities have worked to refine their methodologies to match political goals and needs of our time, academia is still a conservative, bourgeois establishment. As such, I am placing myself in a vulnerable position, especially since I am still a novice scholar who is submitting this to earn his PhD.

The risk involved is probably why most scholars have not incorporated the personal so explicitly in their work on the *Roberta Breitmore* series. But I hold that it is necessary if we are to approach the work on its own terms. As noted by Stiles in the epigraph to this section, we are only perpetuating the alienating use of masks when we approach Roberta strictly from the position of spectator—this role being one intrinsic to academic scholarship until the more recent emergence of affect theory. I only hope I have taken off my mask enough to treat Roberta with the dignity and respect she deserves as a person, or else I have failed to analyze the artwork.

* * * * *

Perhaps the worst part about suffering from refractory depression is a special kind of awareness it ingrains in one's psyche. While a cognitive behavioral therapy-oriented psychologist would categorize the following as a manifestation of the 'negative self-talk' the depressed mind is prone to do and encourage the depressed patient to distance herself from the thoughts—to assign them to the depression, to recognize that the thoughts are not really coming from 'herself'—I know for a fact that this is unconditionally, inevitably true: I am not special. I am not unique. I am not exemplary. I am just another faceless member in a rolling sea of people.

Of course, I'm not saying these things in a truly evaluative sense, but rather descriptively—though this does little to lessen the sting of the realization. What I am referring to is my suffering, the misery of depression itself. It is a nauseatingly common experience, and while as someone trained professionally to avoid making glib generalizations about history or declaring unscrupulous universals about society, it is difficult to avoid feeling like this is a pandemic particular to our present moment—that this special kind of hell is especially common in our contemporary period, an observation that seems to resonate with not just the themes of Hershman's media-oriented art but also her more philosophical musings on the effects of our visually obsessed media culture. The agony of depression, the acerbic corrosion it propagates in the deepest core of one's being and identity, and the corruption of one's very personhood that is its unwanted gift: these are shared with untold millions of people. That deeply personal misery is crushingly and impersonally shared. And it is difficult not to feel like the commonality of such profoundly personal pain somehow cheapens it.

Roberta Breitmore is in this way truly an Everywoman, and the Roberta multiples further attest to the unsettling truth of depression's communal misery, one which is free of any felt community or commiseration, no matter how many support groups or online forums or chat

rooms may proliferate in the effort to share the burden. (It bears repeating here that each of the women who performed as Roberta Breitmore, all four including the artist, had uncannily similar experiences of psychological deterioration and personal distress after performing as Roberta, and that this was an unforeseen consequence of the project.) The bizarre musings on the dual-gendered nature of Robert/a that crop up surprisingly frequently in the inaugural exhibition catalogue that first publicized the *Roberta Breitmore* series take on added significance—and perhaps their only discernible significance, if the corresponding absence of discussion surrounding this facet of the project in the secondary literature is any indication—in this context, namely that men and women alike share these features of Roberta’s make-up: her obsession with images of beauty, success, and happiness circulated in the media; her more or less unwitting acceptance of pernicious ideologies circulated in the mythologies constructed through the media (e.g., blondes have more fun); her apparently ineluctable compulsions, repeated daily in a doomed effort to actualize these mythologies in her life; her profound sense of loneliness and consequent attachment to social trends in an effort to transcend it, and so forth. And many of us share her depression too.

But there is a promise, or at least an untapped potential, in Roberta’s plurality, a goal both implicit and explicit to vast swathes of the feminist art movement: the creation of community. How to achieve this community was and in most ways still is an unsolved problem. Still, Roberta shows that pain, whether of the ‘diseased’ kind as in depression or the ‘political’ kind as induced by life in media-saturated late-stage capitalism, creates a foundation for this community through its very commonality. This, too, is the promise of pathopolitics.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflections and Conclusion

As I claimed in the introduction and have worked to demonstrate in my chapters on Ana Mendieta, Adrian Piper, and Lynn Hershman, American feminist performance artists in the 1970s uniquely positioned themselves among artists—even arguably feminists working in other media—to intervene in the political dynamics of affect in American culture during the early years of Second-Wave Feminism’s broader intervention in the social and cultural politics of the United States. Feminism as a political movement of the later 1960s and the 1970s made a conscious effort to expose and revise the political undercurrents of everyday life, most recognizably in the famous refrain of the Second Wave, “The personal is the political.” Feminist artists, as culture workers, were favorably poised to shift the cultural dialogue around the personal and the affective specifically with their production, and feminist performance artists were that much more advantaged in this effort due to the nature of their medium: the human body and the social fabric through which it operates. The general strategy of making affect an active political battleground that I claim Mendieta, Piper, and Hershman developed I have called pathopolitics—a term referring simultaneously to an increasingly significant dimension of social and cultural power and influence propagated through media as a means of influencing the affective response of populations to politicized social and cultural issues, and also the field of individual and collective cultural resistance to the motivated politicization or depoliticization of affect and its function in sociality.

This broad field of influence and resistance finds more particular and targeted form in concepts developed in each of the foregoing chapters. In response to a horrific rape-murder that occurred on her campus and the craven, opportunistic sensationalism of the news media covering

it, Mendieta staged her two *Rape Scenes* as rituals exorcising her fears of violence, bloodshed, and death—and passing these fears to her audience and, by dint of magick, to those who would inflict such violence on others. In other words, Mendieta politicizes the violence in a manner the media would not: through magickal practice, she empowers herself through a ritualistic purging of a paralyzing and highly gendered fear of the violence of rape and projects this paralytic energy onto the purveyors of violence, and furthermore renders rape into brutally personal and emotional terms for her audience, all of whom were acquaintances of hers. I have called this process pathogenesis, the evocation of aversive affect for political ends, namely putting sexual violence into visceral, personal terms more likely to inflame a political reaction than the media's tendency to focus on scandal and intrigue in lieu of political analysis.

Piper's work leading up to and including the *Mythic Being Series* takes an almost diametrically opposite approach: utilizing a keenly analytical rationality and uncompromising philosophical rigor, she developed and performed a persona that both embodies and undermines racist stereotypes of Black masculinity. According to her extensive work on the (il)logic of racism and xenophobia more broadly, discriminatory attitudes derive from a form of faulty reasoning that creates generalizations about groups of people (not coincidentally easily identifiable through visible markers of some kind) without a rational basis for doing so: either the evidence is not strong enough for such a truth claim or no such evidence could ever be produced for a claim of that strength. Fundamentally these missteps in reason originate in an affective leap of logic—emotion overrides the function of pure and practical reason, which all human beings are capable of, and posits a racist or xenophobic claim as universally true despite a lack of logical proof. This I have termed pathological reasoning. Piper's patho-logical intervention is to force a confrontation with the stereotype that renders obvious its illogic and

then neutralize the affective motivation through a heavy dose of reason, thus leaving the xenophobic viewer with the choice of either acknowledging and owning the illogic of their prejudice or amending their manner of thinking by facing the emotional underpinnings of their prejudice and its subsequent logical fallacies.

With the creation and performance of Roberta Breitmore in the *Roberta Breitmore* series, Lynn Hershman took to task the psychiatric profession's medicalization of deviant affect and the damage it has wrought on community support for those suffering from mental health crises or mental illnesses. Intent on creating an Everywoman who could serve as a stand-in for the obsessions and eccentricities of American culture (particularly in San Francisco) circa 1975, Hershman engaged in extensive graduate-level study of psychology to develop the case history of someone who had suffered great abuse over the course of her life and was left on her own to pick up the pieces of her mind in the psychological fallout that resulted. Using both academic insight and personal observation, Hershman created what I have called a pathonormative portrait of the psychology of the 1970s Bay Area—and used this persona to face and expose 1970s medical violence against and social neglect of those with deviant emotions, what I have called the attitude of pathonormativity. This normative attitude derived in large part from the popularization of psychiatric concepts that were developed in a time of crisis for the profession, concepts which were themselves consequences of the political maneuvering the profession utilized to maintain its place in medicine and society more broadly.

While I hope the arguments in the preceding pages have demonstrated the utility of pathopolitics as a lens of historical investigation and cultural critique, pathopolitics as a field of study is just in its infancy and needs much more development to become more scholarly viable. First, on the one hand, pathopolitics is a theoretical device intended to allow for a more sustained

analysis of the motivated politicization and depoliticization of affect undertaken in various media forms which function to influence the social and cultural function of affect in large populations—namely the consumers of media, as generally or specifically targeted an audience as they may be. A more thoroughgoing derivation of this theory from Michel Foucault’s concept of biopolitics than I could provide is in order. A good starting place, beyond Foucault’s original Collège de France lectures “Society Must Be Defended,” would be researching the place of the theory of biopolitics in affect theory. As noted in the introduction, contemporary cultural studies, and thus affect theory, has turned away from examinations of social power as a significant dimension of analysis; especially in affect theory, this has been abandoned in favor of examinations of coping and making do—practices that are, at least ex post facto, largely individualized. A robust examination of biopolitics—which at least originally was meant as a strictly populational form of political power—will better determine the place of pathopolitics as a tool of analysis in contemporary affect theory, and may well further refine the particular dimensions of pathopolitics beyond pathogenesis, pathological thought, and pathonormativity.

On the other hand, though, I have developed pathopolitics specifically in reference to the culture of 1970s America and the development of feminist performance art, and it is therefore at this moment a historically based theoretical device. Expanding the histories that I have examined will allow the theory itself to expand and nuance its utility. The most reasonable expansion here will be to feminist art more broadly considered—both in media (i.e. beyond performance art) and in praxis (i.e. community-based rather than individual artistic work, feminist art education, feminist art collectives, and so forth). Lines have already been laid in this dissertation for such investigation: the collective performance works of Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz; artists working in other media like Mary Kelly; and so on. More extensively studied feminist artists and

art-collectives are ripe for this analysis as well. Adding the pathopolitical dimension to histories of, for example, *Womanhouse* and Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's Feminist Art Program more broadly would have the dual benefit of complicating histories that have been so studied as to be rendered static as well as further refining pathopolitics as a theoretical device.

Although I have argued that feminist artists were particularly predisposed to the kind of pathopolitical culture work that I have examined here, it would be a disservice to the theoretical construct I have worked to develop to pretend that feminist artists are the only culture workers whose production operates in the pathopolitical domain. In short, male performance artists, by dint of their medium, could also be examined as actors in pathopolitics. Amelia Jones's "Dis/playing the Phallus: Male Artists Perform their Masculinity"¹ can be seen as a first step in this direction. In her argument, relying heavily on psychoanalysis, male performance artists shared a tendency of over-performing their masculinity through extensively gendered displays of violence against their own bodies (for instance, Chris Burden's *Shoot*, 1971, or *Trans-Fixed*, 1974), literal objectification of women's naked bodies (as in Yves Klein's *Anthropometries of the Blue Period*, 1960), or demonstrations of male sexuality (e.g., Vito Acconci's *Seedbed*, 1972). Though less a focus than the psychodynamics of the phallic display, the insecurity of the masculinity of male performance artists in the 1970s that Jones points to is ripe for further investigation, especially along the lines of a pathopolitical project working to historicize these artists' gender insecurity more widely in the cultural moment of their work.

¹ Amelia Jones, "Dis/playing the Phallus: Male Artists Perform their Masculinity," *Art History* 17.4 (December 1994): 546-84.

The range of potential investigations under this umbrella are nearly limitless, but the above present the most important and pertinent avenues to pursue in this early stage. What is without doubt, in the year 2017, is the vital significance a more extended leftist engagement with the politics of affect has to critical humanistic work. The personal has never been more political.

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APPENDIX

On the Transcendental Subject in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*

All attempts which have hitherto been made at establishing a metaphysics **dogmatically** may and must therefore be regarded as though they had never occurred. For whatever is analytic in one or other of those metaphysical systems, that is, whatever is mere analysis of the concepts that dwell in our reason *a priori*, is by no means the purpose, but only a preparation for true metaphysics, its purpose, that is, being to expand our *a priori* knowledge synthetically; indeed, that analysis is utterly useless for this purpose, since it only shows what is contained in those concepts, but not how we arrive at them *a priori*, in order for us to determine the valid use of such concepts in regard to the objects of all knowledge in general.

—Immanuel Kant, Introduction to *Critique of Pure Reason*, B23-B24

In order to understand the transcendental subject that forms the object of anxiety and sublime awe in Piper's *Food for the Spirit*, a sketch of Kant's philosophical position and his project in writing the First Critique is worth undertaking.¹ Among other things, Kant is most accurately and comprehensively considered a transcendental idealist (an appellation he created); this designation is to be distinguished from idealism and can be considered the triangulation of the opposing ideologies of rationalism and empiricism. Idealism in this context refers to a metaphysics—that is, a theory of being, particularly a system of demonstrating what actually exists, what we can rationally say exists, and how we can come to know with certainty what these are—that eliminates the notion of objects as such from ontology. All that can be said to exist in such a system are, unsurprisingly, ideas: both pure thoughts (e.g., “I exist”) and those intuitions that we understand as sensory perceptions; these latter do not refer to objects in the ordinary sense of the term (as a thing altogether separate from a perceiving subject, what philosophers tend to refer to as “things in themselves” or noumena), but are instead wholly

¹ For an excellent and accessible introductory account of Kant's philosophy and his First Critique, see the introduction by Marcus Weigelt in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Marcus Weigelt, based on the translation by Max Müller (New York: Penguin Classics, 2007), xv-lxvii. All quotes from and citations of Kant in this dissertation refer to this edition, and unless otherwise noted, all emphasis is Kant's own.

limited to the perceptions themselves (called phenomena). Properly speaking, objects do not exist as tangible things—only the appearances that manifest in the mind are real. Rationalism and empiricism are more properly understood as epistemologies rather than ontologies, though they can and usually do refer to metaphysics as well. Thus, although the term “idealist” might *prima facie* seem antonymous with the term “empiricist” since the latter refers to the primacy of experience as the ground of all knowledge, the philosopher George Berkeley is considered an empiricist *epistemically* while also being an idealist *ontologically*. The conceptual opposite of “ideal” in the metaphysical context is not “empirical,” but rather “naturalistic”: as opposed to ideas, naturalism counts as the sole constituents of reality only material things—proposing that all things, even ideas, ultimately find their ontological ground in the physical world.

Empiricism as an epistemology, then, claims that all knowledge fundamentally derives from experience, and the most certain truths we can discover must ground their epistemic validity in that which can be experienced. Rationalism, on the other hand, claims that all knowledge must essentially be grounded in the faculty of reason, with the most foundational knowledge being grounded in pure reason, i.e. reason that functions in a terrain preceding experience. While many humanistic scholars without a background in academic philosophy characterize Kant as a rationalist, this is technically inaccurate. While Kant certainly highly values rationality and can be considered a weak rationalist, his epistemology and attendant metaphysics find the middle ground between strong rationalism and strong empiricism. On the one side he rejects the canonical rationalist tenet that pure reason can make positive metaphysical assertions—i.e. that it can state conclusively that some particular object or manner of relations does exist *independently* of the subject, though he believes it can establish what purely *a priori* cannot be known to exist. Still, on the other side he does believe in synthetic *a priori* knowledge,

which is wholly antithetical to traditional strong empiricism. In fact, his transcendental metaphysics is dependent upon the synthetic *a priori*, and the majority of the First Critique is devoted to establishing how synthetic *a priori* judgments are possible at all, thereafter fleshing out the logical consequences of their existence, with a lengthy appendix concerning proper methodology.

To grasp the purpose of the First Critique, then, one must have a solid hold on the distinction between analytic judgments and synthetic judgments, and the importance of this distinction. An analytic judgment, as briefly mentioned above, depends only on the definition of a concept for its propositional content. Stated differently, an analytic judgment is the logical disambiguation of a concept: a breakdown into its constituent components proceeding solely from the definition of the concept itself, which nevertheless serves further to exposit the concept in question. For instance, the judgment “All bodies are extended in space” is a properly analytic judgment: it depends for its propositional content—the predication of “all bodies” with spatial extension—only upon the definition of the concept “body.” Given that the proposition depends only on conceptual definition, preceding confirmation in and holding true regardless of experience, the analytic judgment is indeed *a priori*. And in fact all analytic judgments are by definition *a priori*, since a concept does not depend on experience for its content.

Like all propositional knowledge—which is also called descriptive knowledge or declarative knowledge, being a description of or declaration regarding what is true, in fact, and not an unfounded belief—synthetic judgment also follows the subject-predicate form. However, unlike analytic judgment, the predicate is not contained in the definition of the concept specified in the subject. Instead, synthetic knowledge *adds to* the core concept through a form of logical association. To return to the example above, while “All bodies are extended in space” is an

analytic judgment, the judgment “All bodies are heavy” is not properly analytic but rather synthetic (in this case, *a posteriori*). This holds because the concept of “body,” though by definition necessitating spatial extension, does *not* necessarily imply mass strictly through definition, no matter how ubiquitously and seemingly inseparably the connection may be given through experience. Nor does the notion of mass *by definition* imply a body.² While “All bodies are extended in space” and “Everything extended in space is a body” analytically imply one another, “All bodies are heavy” and “Everything that is heavy is a body” do not, *even if* everything that is heavy is indeed a body.³ In short, the predication provided in a synthetic judgment adds to the meaning of the subject something further that is not solely dependent on the definition of the subject, but instead depends on logical extension into a larger system of meanings and relationships.

Just as all analytic judgments are by their nature *a priori*, so too are all empirical propositions by nature synthetic *a posteriori*. There can be no such thing as an analytic *a posteriori* judgment, since no conceptual definition can depend on experience for its validity. For example, the proposition “All unicorns have one horn” is not dependent on the proposition “Unicorns exist” for its analytic validity, nor is it contradicted by the true proposition “There are no such things as unicorns.” The latter is a true synthetic *a posteriori* judgment, since no unicorn has ever been discovered and what we know of zoology gives reason to believe we never will

² For an example, consider a point-singularity black hole, which by definition is ultra-massive, but conceptually lacks spatial extension—its gravitational singularity being only a point, having zero dimensions and no volume—and thereby contradicts a definitive aspect of the concept of a body. While “All bodies have mass” is a true synthetic judgment, the proposition “All mass entails a body” is not true. (For a less abstruse comparison, consider the veridically nonequivalent judgments “All humans are mortal” and “All mortals are human,” wherein humanity is universally linked to mortality but mortality is not universally linked to humanity.) As such, the former cannot be an analytic judgment, the class of which by nature achieves epistemic validity through the establishment of equivalencies. Inverting the subject-predication therefore violates the law of non-contradiction that is foundational to analytic judgments; massiveness cannot be an analytic property of the concept of body.

³ For what is confirmed through experience (*ergo* not properly *a priori*) can only have tentative or “weak” universality, not “strong” or absolute universality which connotes necessity in addition to generalizability. It is theoretically possible for experiential universals to be contradicted, as in the example in the previous note.

discover one. Therefore, one can justifiably link (or synthesize) the concept of unicorn to that of nonexistence; but this proposition does not and indeed cannot depend for its truth on the analytic definition of a unicorn, since nonexistence is not a part of the definition of unicorn. While all this may be more or less intuitive, the synthetic judgments considered so far have been wholly *a posteriori*; the possibility of a synthetic *a priori* judgment—which along with analytic judgments constitutes the proper domain of pure reason—is not so self-evident, let alone is its necessity.

Kant's proof of the possibility and necessity of synthetic *a priori* judgments is arguably the most complicated and dizzying reading in all modern philosophy. Nevertheless, what it promises is, to put it mildly, valuable: only the synthetic *a priori* can yield new knowledge (i.e. beyond the mere explication yielded by valid analytic judgments) that is both universally *and* necessarily true. For while the synthetic *a posteriori* does indeed provide new knowledge—which may even be considered (weakly) universal knowledge—the knowledge it yields cannot be necessarily true. The proposition “There are no such things as unicorns” is not only true, but can also be called universal knowledge, since there is not and never has been proof of the existence of unicorns. However, despite its universal truth, it is not true necessarily: it is possible that a real unicorn could be discovered, and indeed there may even be a unicorn prancing about in the remotest and most barren recess of the Earth at this moment. In order for the proposition to be necessarily true, unicorns must be existentially impossible (that is, nonexistent in all possible experience)—not just impossible based on what we have come to know through experience.

What synthetic *a priori* judgments concern, then, is not actual experience or conceptual definition, but the crux of Kantian philosophy: the *conditions of possibility* of experience itself. Synthetic *a priori* judgments do not simply hold as valid for everything that has ever been experienced, but for everything that could ever be experienced; they are the necessary fabric of

experience itself, without which no sense could be made. That is the meaning of transcendental idealism: there are certain transcendental properties that precede and mediate all possible experience that are intrinsic to the composition and functioning of the human subject itself whose experience of the world is always already shaped by these transcendental properties. What, then, are the conditions that must hold if human experience itself is to be possible? Like all philosophy loosely within the genealogy of the analytic tradition, a dense network of conceptual definitions and explications is necessary to answer such a question.

Kant begins with the fact that we have such a thing as sensory experience *in potentia*—a receptive faculty that he calls our sensibility—and adds to the consideration the simple subject-object relation, which produces in the mind what Kant calls a representation. The relation, in its facticity, of the knowing subject to some known object is an intuition, and intuitions are thought through the faculty of the understanding by concepts, which are then ordered, hierarchized, and generalized by the faculty of reason. When an object affects our receptive faculty (rather than being thought by a subject, i.e. being a pure thought), a sensation is produced, and all objects intuited through sensation are empirical, making sensibility our only necessarily empirical faculty in the tripartite model of sensibility-understanding-reason. These sensed objects, in themselves indeterminate to the subject, are given to us as appearances. He goes on to say, in characteristically dense but indispensable prose,

That in an appearance which corresponds to sensation I call its **matter**; but that which brings about the fact that the manifold of appearances [meaning the whole variety of possible matter in appearances] can be ordered in certain relations [by the understanding], I call the **form** of appearance. Now, that in which alone sensations can be ordered and placed in a certain form cannot be sensation again. Consequently, despite the fact that the matter of all appearance is given to us only *a posteriori*, its form must lie ready for the sensations *a priori* in the mind, and must therefore allow of being considered apart from all sensation.⁴

⁴ Kant, B34/A20.

In less convoluted speech, all sensations have a content—its empirical matter—but since these empirical instances can be related and grouped rather than just remaining a senseless bundle of perceptions of which no sense can be made, they must have another order separate from each instance of sensation, which he calls form. A representation is pure (or transcendental) if there is nothing in it that belongs to sensation (or the concrete intuition of an object separate from the subject); and this pure form of sensibility is pure intuition.

Abstracting from geometry and mathematics, Kant demonstrates that we have two pure intuitions that shape and mold all potential experience and form its necessary conditions: space and time, which together he calls the transcendental aesthetic. Thinking through a mathematical concept such as the arithmetical formula $5 + 3 = 8$, which is apodictically true (meaning it is true self-evidently and beyond all doubt), he argues that mathematics yields synthetic knowledge, and that this is *a priori* knowledge, being universally and necessarily true regardless of experience. While others had argued that such knowledge is simply analytic, Kant claims otherwise. The value 8, the reasoning goes, is not held within the definitions of the concepts of the values 5 and 3, since each concept of a value would have to hold within its definition every relation of real numbers to each other yielding the value in question (through addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division), which is not possible through *a priori* definition; such a definition would be functionally infinite, which contradicts the specifying purpose of a definition. Instead, the values of equations are synthesized through at least three concepts, namely at least two individual numeric values and a mathematical function. Therefore, mathematics can and must yield to us *a priori* knowledge through synthetic relations, otherwise mathematical knowledge would only be weakly universal, i.e. fully general but not strictly necessary. If we take the mathematical *a priori* knowledge contained in geometry, space is a concept that must be

available to it *a priori* in order for it to yield the knowledge it contains: for instance, the knowledge that the combined lengths of two sides of a triangle are greater than the length of the third, which is both *a priori* and truly synthetic, since this proposition is not strictly contained within the definition of the concept of a triangle. QED: Space is a pure intuition structuring all experience, since no possible sensation can be conceived outside of space. Likewise for time, once we abstract from the pure intuition of space: we can conceive a body existing. We can conceive this body occupying a specific space, and we can conceive it not existing in this same space ($\exists x$ & $\nexists x$). Since existence and nonexistence are contradictions if considered in the same space (the previous symbolic formula being a logical contradiction), the possibility of this body both existing and not existing in said space requires a relation of succession ($\exists x_{t=1}$ & $\nexists x_{t=2}$). Therefore, abstracting from space, time is a necessary pure intuition, as the relations of permanence, simultaneity, and succession are requisite for spatial intuitions to be possible *a priori*.

From there, Kant has a much lengthier and significantly more difficult argument concerning the necessity of *a priori* concepts of the understanding that are properly transcendental, in four categories of quantity, quality, relationality, and modality, and including such fundamental aspects of actual and possible experience as causality, possibility, existence, necessity, etc. The proof of the existence of these transcendental concepts is far beyond the scope of this appendix, and exceeds its purpose. What is important to take away from this exposition is that Kant succeeds in demonstrating the possibility and necessity of synthetic *a priori* judgment, and therefore, through proof of concept, establishing an ontology and epistemology of transcendental idealism that can be reasonably defended. Kant's philosophy, though often maligned in non-philosophical humanistic contexts as being inhuman, detached, and only

concerned with the universal and objective, actually creates a foundational space and role for subjectivity—albeit a structural subjectivity rather than the particularistic subjectivity often discussed in non-philosophical contexts. Indeed, epistemic objectivity *cannot exist* in Kantian epistemology without the essential role of the subject; objectivity fundamentally depends on the structure of the subject. Kant doesn't concern himself with the noumena, or things in themselves, as he claims these are impossible to know beyond mere appearances: we cannot with certainty generalize from how things actually appear to us to how they must appear to others; all we can generalize is *that* they appear to us, and the basic form this appearance must take for a human subject:

As the special conditions of our sensibility cannot be made the conditions of the possibility of things [in themselves, for to do so would be to posit positive metaphysical knowledge through the means of pure reason alone, which is the terrain of dogma in transcendental idealism], but only their appearances, we may indeed say that space comprehends all things which appear to us externally, but not all things in themselves, intuited or not, or intuited by any subject whatsoever [i.e. nonhuman subjects]. For we cannot judge in regard to the intuitions of other thinking beings whether they are subject to the same conditions which limit our intuition and which for us are universally valid.⁵

Every human subject can do this work of establishing these concepts as synthetically true *a priori* for themselves and positing them as universally true—because every human subject has the faculty of reason; and each subject must do this if she wants to make any sense of the experience of other people with any degree of philosophically sound insight. Though we cannot know with certainty how exactly other subjects experience the world, we can establish with certainty the basic form this experience must take if it is to be possible in human consciousness at all. Crucially to the discussion to come, then, Kant's transcendental idealism necessitates a transcendental subject—not to be confused with actual, existing subjects—that can be

⁵ Kant, B43/A27.

understood as the necessary basic schema of the human subject. And it is the features of the transcendental subject that Adrian Piper explores in her performance *Food for the Spirit* and fleshes out in the subsequent Mythic Being series, forming the groundwork of the epistemology and ontology that support the metaethics with which she is concerned for the rest of her career, philosophically and artistically: the core itself of her politics and, I argue, her pathopolitics.