Published on the occasion of the exhibition
The Visible Vagina
Francis M. Naumann Fine Art, LLC
David Nolan Gallery, Inc
New York, January 28 - March 20, 2010

ISBN: 978-0-98-00556-3-4

Book Design: Dana Martin
Preface © Eve Ensler
Introduction © Francis Naumann
Essay © Anna Chave 2009
Copy Editor: John Cauman
Printed: JohnsByrne Co., Illinois
Special thanks to Emilie Selden, Katherine Chan, Dana Martin and Rumaa Mirchandane

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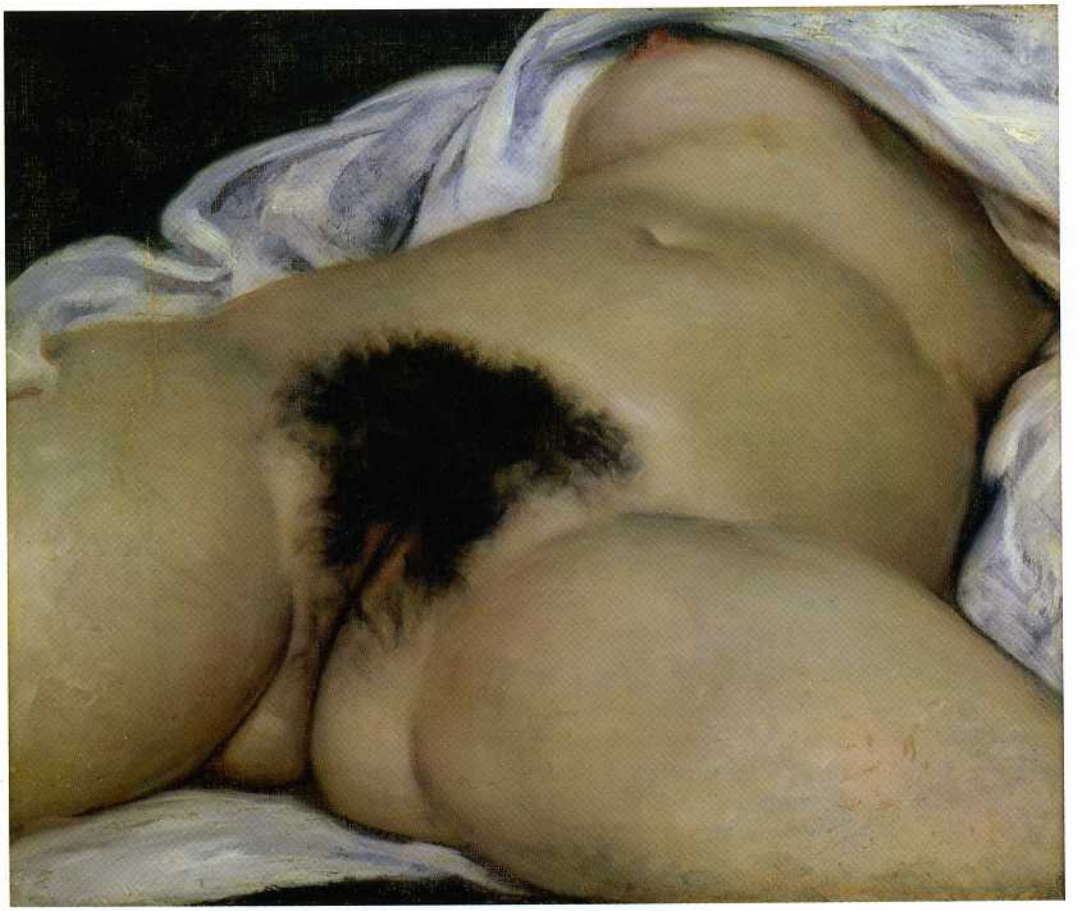


Gustave Courbet
The Origin of the World, 1866

"Is this good for Vulva?" Female Genitalia in Contemporary Art

Anna C. Chave

In the beginning of image-making can be found the vulva, so some scholars have argued. Locating the "origins of art" to southwestern France around 30,000 B.C., Desmond Collins and John Onians remarked how engravings of simplified vulvic forms predominated over imagery of animals or of the (quite scarce) phallus. Historically, the emergence of the so-called "venuses"—female statuettes with exaggerated sexual features, such as the iconic *Venus of Willendorf* (page 3)—is said to have followed, before the heyday of cave painting around 13,000 B.C., when animal imagery flourished. In postulating that the makers of the early genital imagery were libidinous young men demonstrating sexual behaviors that paralleled their contemporary counterparts (thus, the vulvic reliefs and the statuettes both evince "manual love play" that "match[es] almost exactly the erotic interests of the sensually alert modern male"), Collins and Onians provided a kind of origin-site for a hoary trope: that of the endemically male creator who inscribes his needs and desires in his work.[1]*

Collins and Onians' 1978 thesis has since been contested. In some subsequent accounts the cryptic female genitals become (so-called) "female genitals,"[2] and by 1996 a (male) specialist would conjecture that women carved the venuses—an idea the artist Carolee Schneemann had been floating since around 1960.[3] However, the dominant reality remains that creative capacity in the west has historically, reflexively been deemed the province of "bachelor machines," autogenous creators of "*filles nées sans mère*" (daughters born without mothers), as Francis Picabia's Dada formulation had it. In Ovid's Pygmalion tale, not only did the king manage magically to shape an actual human life whilst undertaking to shape a statue, but a specifically "female life as he would like it to be—pliable, responsive, purely physical," Sandra Gubar once noted. "Most important," she added, "he has evaded the humiliation…of acknowledging that it is *he* who is really created out of and from the *female* body."[4] Whether with female or male issue, for that matter, "'the asexual reproduction of fathers on their own' is part of the European literary tradition from Genesis and *Paradise Lost* to Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark' and James Watson's *The Double Helix*," as Elaine Showalter stated.[5]

As for the visual arts: "A persistent comparison between artistic creativity and masculine procreativity inflects academic discourse of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries," with the "widespread presumption [being] that *all* creation depends upon the action of a masculine principle," Elizabeth Mansfield observes.[6] Others, including myself, have demonstrated that a rhetoric of potency underpins the formation of more contemporary canons, most transparently in the case of Jackson Pollock's putatively ejaculatory process, but also in more oblique cases, as with the virility linked with the Minimalists' practices.[7] Diverse though they may be, Marcel Duchamp's 1946 *Paysage Fautif*, Vito Acconci's 1971 *Seedbed* performance, Andres Serrano's 1980s *Ejaculate in Trajectory* photographic series, and Anselm Kiefer's *Twenty Years of Loneliness* books and installation (1971-91)—all works involving the artists' actual semen—can be said to have served the baldly instructive purpose of literalizing an age-old euphemism: that of the "creative juices" as being definitively phallic.

*Endnotes to this essay begin on page 114.

Marcel Duchamp
Wedge of Chastity, 1954

The preeminent origins narrative attached to contemporary art locates Duchamp, a.k.a. Rrose Sélavy, as both father and mother to postmodern art practices broadly.[8] Duchamp's elaborate culminating statement, begun in 1946, was the startling *Étant Donnés* installation with its creepy 'true crimes' vignette of a nude, spread-eagled woman supine in a meadow, her distorted and denuded genital cleft centrally visible through the peephole that grants the public's sole access to the tableau. If not on that account (for that work was not completed until 1966), then instead because of the 1950 *Female Fig Leaf* (page 35) and the 1954 *Wedge of Chastity* fetishes, the artist's ardent partisans may yet nominate Duchamp/Sélavy the honorary founder of "cunt art"—an epithet informally attached to an important subset of women's art practice from the 1960s and '70s. After all, Duchamp may be the first western artist to shape explicit imagery of the female genitals—body parts long taboo within the official visual regime in the west—into publicly circulated, and so legitimated aesthetic forms. He did so with imagery complexly evincing the dialectic of occlusion and revelation connected with those genitals. True in a way to its title, the cast-like form of the "fig leaf" defines the vulva by indirection; and the removable "wedge" blocks visual access (for all but the privileged few) to what curator Helen Molesworth memorably describes as "a shocking pink interior that is an intensely intimate, loving, and erotic depiction of a pussy."[9]

His female doppelganger notwithstanding, the heterosexual male Duchamp cannot, of course, be credited with authorizing a vital genre of women's art practice *avant la lettre*. Instead, the durable trope of the autogenous male creator (which Duchamp epitomizes) has served to eclipse a space of agency for female creators by effecting an inversion and so a refutation of that ironclad biological law that female bodies are the procreative site of origin, so numerous feminists have taken pains to point out. As psychoanalytic theorist Luce Irigaray pointedly suggested in 1974:

> one might be able to interpret the fact of being deprived of a womb as the most intolerable deprivation of man, since his contribution to gestation—his function with regard to the origin of reproduction—is hence asserted as less than evident, as open to doubt... It does not seem exaggerated, incidentally, to understand quite a few products, and notably cultural products, as a counterpart or a search for equivalents to woman's function in maternity.[10]

Irigaray's countrywoman, French literary theorist Hélène Cixous, mused in 1976 that "the origin is a masculine myth... The question 'Where do children come from?' is basically a masculine, much more than a feminine, question. The quest for origins, illustrated by Oedipus, doesn't haunt a feminine unconscious."[11] Film theorist Teresa de Lauretis pithily summarized the "ultimate purpose" of the Oedipal myth, as propounded by Claude Lévi-Strauss, as an effort to resolve "that glaring contradiction" that men are born of women and so to "affirm, by the agency of narrative, the autochthonous origin of man."[12] In 1980—as a retort to Freud's influential notion that women, in their putative state of 'castration', must

suffer pitiably from 'penis envy'—artist Hannah Wilke contrived the title *Venus Envy* for a comical series of photographs in which the balding head of artist Richard Hamilton appears at first to be issuing from, and then, on closer inspection, to be disappearing back into Wilke's vagina, as if reclaiming his place in the womb. In a strategy of reversal—such as was commonplace in early feminist art practice—she thus inverted the tired origins story whereby Man creates Art by creating Woman. (That this story continues to haunt art production is suggested, for instance, by Anish Kapoor's compelling 1992 relief sculpture *When I am Pregnant*, with its centered, telltale bulge interrupting an otherwise ordinary—perfectly flat, white, sweeping—gallery wall.[13])

Hannah Wilke
Venus Envy, with Richard Hamilton, 1980

For all its predictability, Collins' and Onians' origins tale exhibited a less commonplace aspect, in its prominent positioning of an *explicitly* sexualized female body, or fragments thereof, at the advent of image-making: "there is no later culture, with one or two very isolated exceptions, which accords such prominence to the vulva [or to] ...representations of the entire female body in all its full and naked roundness," asserted Onians, while pointing to the visual traditions of classical Greece and Hindu India as male-centered cases in point.[14] One could question Onians' Hindu example, since the *yoni*, an emblem of the divine female genitals (those of Parvati, rendered as a triangle or a horizontal oblong or plinth), was rife in Southern India and Southeast Asia from prehistoric times, and examples of the *yoni* combined with the *linga* (a vertical, round-topped cylinder that emblematizes Parvati's husband, Shiva) would also become rife, dating from the early centuries of the common era. (In recognition of the reverence attaching to the genitals in India's ancient Yogic system, Californian Anne Severson would choose the title "Near the Big Chakra" for her radical 1971 film featuring a relay of close-ups of thirty-eight different vulve.[15]) But the female genitalia have indeed been effaced in the official western visual regime, as conventionally traced to Greece. In the "dominant scopic economy," Irigaray commented in 1977,

Anne Severson (a.k.a. Alice Anne Parker)
Still from *Near the Big Chakra* 1971

> ...[woman] is to be the beautiful object of contemplation. While her body finds itself thus eroticized, and called to a double movement of exhibition and of chaste retreat in order to stimulate the drives of the 'subject', her sexual organ represents the horror of nothing to see. A defect in this systematics of representation and desire. A'hole' in its scopophilic lens. It is already evident in Greek statuary that this nothing-to-see has to be excluded, rejected, from such a scene of representation. Woman's genitals are simply absent, masked, sewn back up inside their 'crack'.[16]

According to Freud's long-lived account (to which Irigaray alludes), the sight of the mother's genitals comes to terrify the young boy because "he sees an absence," as Irigaray said. "Mark that he does not see what is there"—the vulva, the labia, the

Carolee Schneemann
Interior Scroll, 1975

clitoris, the mons pubis…—"he sees the absence of a phallus. Nothing to see, nothing that looks like a phallus, nothing of like measure."[17] The title of the present exhibition notwithstanding, the vagina is indeed all but invisible to the gaze, absent the medical device of the speculum; only its very brink, the introitus, may be viewed if a woman splays her legs and parts her labia.[18] In her path-breaking *Interior Scroll* performance of 1975, however, Schneemann contrived to give an implied visibility and voice to the/her vagina by gradually pulling a "scroll" out of it while reading aloud the text she inscribed there—a text wryly addressing the professional invisibility to which she was vulnerable as a woman artist who dared to mark her subject position within her work ("there are certain films / we cannot look at," complains a male "structuralist filmmaker" cited on the scroll; "the personal clutter / the persistence of feelings / the hand-touch sensibility / the diaristic indulgence…").[19]

Regardless of their obscurity from view, the muscular vaginal walls are of course subject to other, arguably less privileged kinds of sensory perception, including touch. In part on that basis, in part because the female labia continually rub up against one another, Irigaray would tendentiously link women in general to an economy organized around touch, a 'non-scopic' economy. For modern women specializing in the visual field, however—i.e., for women artists—the perennial suppressions of the dominant visual regime and the lingering specter of the 'nothing to see' would at times prove to be a crucial goad to visual invention. "I feel there is something unexplored about women that only a woman can explore," mused O'Keeffe, who reveled in picturing (in her words) "the sky through the hole" and "slits in nothingness."[20] Or as Eva Hesse ruminated in 1969: "I wanted to get to non art, non connotive [sic], non anthropomorphic, non geometric, non, nothing, everything, but of another kind, vision, sort. from a total other reference point. is it possible? I have learned anything is possible. I know that, that vision or concept will come through total risk, freedom, discipline. I will do it."[21] For a contemporary generation freshly steeped in feminist thinking (such as that of Simone de Beauvoir, whose postwar tome, *The Second Sex*, made an impact on Hesse), a realization dawned that virtually "All knowledges and social practices have thus far represented the energies and interests of one sex alone," as Elizabeth Grosz phrased it, and that there could be "other ways of undertaking cultural activity and intellectual endeavor than those developed thus far. A completely different set of perspectives—this time based on women's specificities, experiences, positions, rather than on those of men, who hide themselves and their specificities under the banner of some universal humanity."[22] Many women ambitious to establish their bona fides as creators and, in so doing, to conjure a fundamentally different kind of art, took inspiration from the prospect of an originative moment that might be specially inscribed as feminine. Despite Cixous's assertion that origin myths

Jay DeFeo
The Rose, 1958-1966

fail to haunt women, then. "There is above all the search for origin," affirmed the exiled Cuban Ana Mendieta, for one.[23]

An affinity for prehistoric female effigies and symbolically vaginal caves notably surfaced in Euro-American women's art practice in the 1960s. Nikki de Saint-Phalle's flamboyant, comical Great Mother-like 'Nanas' were among the more literal cases in point, one made most spectacularly with *Hon* (page 49) (Swedish for 'She'), the circa thirty-yards-long female effigy that she realized (temporarily) in a Stockholm museum in 1966 with Jean Tinguely and Per-Olof Ultvedt. Swarms of visitors entered this prone, gigantic woman (also termed a 'cathedral') via a 'tunnel of love' between her legs, and proceeded to a series of diversions and amenities arrayed over three stories, ranging from a slide, a cinema, and a gold fish pond in the area of the womb, to a milk bar in one breast, and a planetarium in the other. By contrast, Jay De Feo's loosely archaic-looking and iconic *Rose* represented a more occulted and subdued case, that of a monumental relief/painting executed in a series of campaigns between 1958 and '66, with radiant lines converging on an aperture-like center and a heavily bulging (so-called 'pregnant') profile. On her first journey to Europe (from California, around 1951), the destination De Feo most longed to reach was not the Louvre or the Uffizi, but the caves of southwestern France and northern Spain, a tour she supplemented with library study-trips to view available documentation on those and other prehistoric sites: "I was very excited about this sort of thing. So what I wanted to do in Europe, which I did, was to crawl through all the caves and look at all the cave paintings and scrawls." [24] In filming *Fuses* of 1964-67, a poetically montaged account of a woman's sensual and heterosexual pleasures, Schneemann was moved in part by images of the Altamira caves,[25] while numerous of her other projects from the 1960s onward stemmed from her research on ancient goddesses, including those whose totemic snakes emblematized (by her account) not, or not only phalluses, but an externalized form of the vaginal canal. And, in the late 1960s, Louise Bourgeois produced some abstract female figures resonant of Paleolithic venuses, such as her pin-headed *Harmless Woman* with a swollen torso, while her *Lair* and *Soft Landscape* sculptures of the same period evince at once female genitalia and prehistoric caverns. "Hollow forms...grew in importance" to Bourgeois, as she recalled, "until

Carolee Schneemann
Still from *Fuses*, (1964-67)

Louise Bourgeois
Le Regard, 1966

their consciousness was crystallized by a visit to the Lascaux caves with their visible manifestations of an enveloping negative form."[26]

The 1960s works of Hesse, De Feo and Bourgeois emerged in a US cultural context dominated by formalist criticism, and therefore averse to reading meanings into artworks—above all into the abstract artworks championed by the formalist regime. (By contrast, no such prohibitions had inhered during the inter-war period, when heavy-handed critics subjected Georgia O'Keeffe's suggestive natural forms to exceedingly literal, tritely erotic readings, to her mortification.[27]) The abiding resistance to hermeneutic interpretation would provide a protective cover, then, for these and other women artists who wanted to experiment abstractly with provocative or genital forms. Little fearing that any critic of consequence would be willing to call her out, Bourgeois, for one, made some shockingly explicit work in the '60s—such as the extravagantly vulvic (and eye-like) *Le Regard*, or the bi-gendered *Fillette*, which reads bizarrely both as an effigy of a lynched, deformed, and mummified infant (the 'little girl' of the title), and as the putrefied genitals of some giant male, 'hung' or strung up like a (female) trophy hunter's bounty. "People talked about erotic aspects, about my obsessions, but they didn't discuss the phallic"—nor yet the vulvic—"aspects. If they had, I would have ceased to do it," Bourgeois admitted.[28] When, in 1970, a trail-blazing feminist interviewer tried to pinpoint the abstractly genital, at once male and female allusions in Hesse's sculpture, the artist hastily demurred, intent on guarding the works' ellipticality.[29]

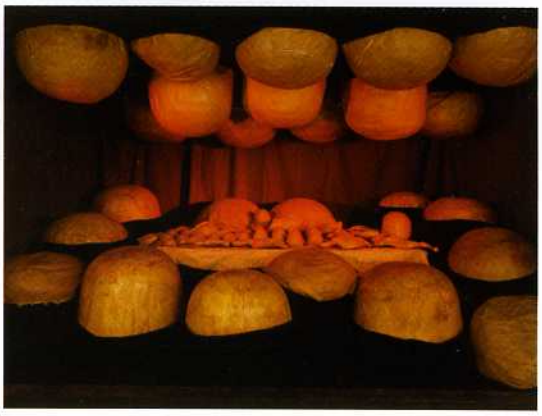
In the early 1970s, when Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro began to promote an ideologically-driven account of women's art, pointing to abstractly vulvic, vaginal, or womb-like motifs—a "central core" perceived to be latent or conspicuous in much of modern women's art practice, from O'Keeffe to Barbara Hepworth, and De Feo to Lee Bontecou—many would shun this theory as reinforcing the regressive truism of women's biology dictating their destinies.[30] But the theory caught fire with others, and it provided a template for a quotient of feminist art practice, conspicuously including the grandiose *Dinner Party* authored from 1974 to '79 by Chicago with her enormous retinue. Chicago proved that she could rely on metaphoric devices for the vulvic forms that comprised her opulent dinner plates to shield her from the charges of obscenity that were widely attached to explicit images of female genitalia found outside a scientific context.[31] But, as feminist ideology increasingly permeated

Judy Chicago
Georgia O'Keeffe Place from *The Dinner Party*, 1974-79

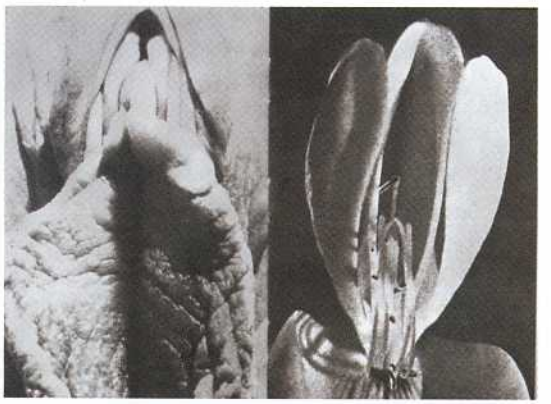
contemporary art discourse during the 1970s, and as the formalist regime collapsed—in no small part under feminism's weight—remaining oblique about the sexual valences of their practices became not only less of a necessity, but also less of an option for women generally. Thus, as an example, it would not escape those suspicious of Maya Lin's concept for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial that its pronounced 'V' shape evoked not only the anti-war movement's 'peace' hand signal, but also an age-old emblem of the female pubis—the more so because the V in question was to be wedged in the earth. Lin, in fact, conceived the vertex of her monument as the "origin" (she started the chronology of the war dead there, and she had meant for the vertex to serve as the visitors' initial arrival site on approaching the work). In the early 1980s, angry veterans "denounced Lin's design in a language that implicitly evoked primal (male) fears about the power of the passive yet all-engulfing female body," characterizing the memorial as "a black hole...a black gash of shame and sorrow...a shameful, degrading ditch...a black pit," and so forth. They thereby impugned at once Lin's gender and her ethnicity, as the Chinese-American artist proved to some insufficiently distinguishable from the so-called "gook" enemies of the war.[32]

Occupying the spotlight with a politically sensitive project, Lin was impelled to remain opaque about the symbolic overtones to her design. But most other women artists of this era were consigned to operate from the margins, and from that vantage point many would see incentives attaching to more overt or polemical strategies. They foresaw, that is, the upwelling of a radical, declaratively female or feminist art movement. In a 1973 essay headlined "Another Cuntree," critic Maryse Holder would giddily trumpet "an amazing phenomenon," namely: "Women all over the country [US] and in all media are describing unprecedentedly explicit sexual content... redeeming their cunts from male pawn shops... All those years of doodling (not to mention diddling) our own anatomy has given rise to a great sexual blossom... Whereas male sexuality is a cliché...female sexuality is uncharted."[33] Western women had been taking cues, of course, from the left-wing, civil rights, anti-war, and anti-colonial movements burgeoning globally during the '60s—cues that the time had come to formulate and advance their own agendas, whether as part of a larger field of liberatory initiatives or (as most came to feel was necessary, in view of the sexism often rife in those movements) independently. At a 1969 meeting of the radical Art Workers Coalition in New York City, artist Lee Lozano avowed that there could be no "art revolution that is separate from a...political revolution...a sex revolution," and other revolutions besides.[34] And in France in 1971, Cixous was exhorting women writers (or artists) to "speak the body," and predicting revolutionary consequences for the outcome.[35] Many shared an idealistic dream, in short, that the epochal emergence of the first full generation of female artists might spell not merely an expansion of art world business-as-usual, but a duly epochal shift in art practice, befitting the radicalism of the times.

The 1960s and '70s did bring an historic and momentous swelling in the ranks of women artists, many of whom would somehow inscribe the female body as a way of staking claim to the role of agent or subject—a claim made in defiance of a visual regime wherein the female body served mainly as an object designed to requite the libidinal and other needs, wants, and whims of the straight male viewer. The kinds of forays that Holder was observing—initiatives to remove "what had been considered our wound...from the realm of smut," to 'deobscenify' it, as she put it[36]—conveyed a wide range of feeling, from rage to rapture, and from biting irony to absolute sincerity.



Louise Bourgeois
The Destruction of the Father, 1974



Suzanne Santoro
"Placing a flower near the clitoris is a means of understanding its structure...", *Towards New Expression*, 1972

Among the enraged was Bourgeois, for example, who executed an extravagant magnum opus, her stagy, weirdly cave-like *Destruction of the Father* installation of 1974, from a wellspring of what she vividly described as "emotional aggression, dislocation, disintegration, explosion, and total destruction or murder."[37] Among the ironists was Wilke, who cast in chocolate an effigy of her own comely form vamping as a self-styled "Venus."

As for the more earnest women, there O'Keeffe's example proved especially fertile, and a repertoire of natural metaphors—caves, ravines, flowers, shells, leaves, etcetera—found its recrudescence, for instance, in Schneemann's *Fuses* (page 11), in Suzanne Santoro's 1974 artist's book *Towards New Expression*, and in photomontages overprinting images of vulvae on images of the earth, such as *Isis in the Woods*, by lesbian artist Tee Corinne. Lesbians had arguably the more vested interest in the feminist campaign to redeem representation of the vulva—their own libidinal (part) object, whose image had circulated mainly though a vast illicit trade in pornography targeted at male consumers, and lesbians would make some signal contributions to repositioning the female genitalia as the centerpiece instead, or also, of female erotic pleasure. Barbara Hammer overlaid imagery of a cave's interior on footage of her genitals filmed as she masturbated to multiple climaxes in her 1976 *Multiple Orgasm*, an affirmative, ecstatic demonstration of a power or capacity that women alone possess—possessing too, as they (or we) do, the only bodily organ whose sole function is to give pleasure.[38] At once a blatantly auto-erotic and erotic statement, *Multiple Orgasm* (which followed on the heels of Hammer's *Great Goddess* film of 1972), constituted a brave attempt to "contribute to abolishing lesbian invisibility" by "re-present[ing] at least one lesbian's experience."[39] (In this aim, Hammer's exercise contrasted with "Near the Great Chakra," (page 9) whose heterosexual author, Severson—though she did include footage of a vulva oozing with semen—did not aim for a predominantly erotic statement, and even acted to subvert such a statement by including some vulvae that off-puttingly leaked blood or sported tampon strings. That this film possessed a complex erotic charge came home to Severson, however, both when she showed it to an audience heavily peopled with lesbians, and when she happened upon it serving as an off-beat stag film.)

Barbara Hammer
Still from *Multiple Orgasm*

Vulvic and cave-like forms, and an archaizing tendency, also animated the oeuvre of Ana Mendieta. In her 1981 *Rupestrian Sculptures*, she inscribed the outlines of Amerindian goddesses—of the moon, menstruation, the wind, and the waters—into the soft limestone and grotto walls of the Escaleras de Jaruco rock outcroppings in a state park in Cuba, to which she was returning after having been torn from both parents and homeland during the revolutionary period that coincided with her childhood.[40] From the mid-1970s, in rural

Ana Mendieta
Rupestrian Sculptures, 1981

settings in Iowa and in Miami, and in archaeological settings in Mexico, Mendieta—who sometimes called herself a Neolithic artist and spoke of performing "magic" through her art—had been privately rendering vulvic forms that were equally 'Siluetas', simplifed silhouettes of her own or (as time passed, more so) a generic woman's body. She generally inscribed these vulvic silhouettes with and into natural substances and artifacts while recording the results photographically for exhibition purposes. Mendieta liked to say that, "My art...is a return to the maternal source," a claim with at once deeply personal and would-be universal valences; "Through the making of earth/body works," she added, "I become one with the earth. It is like being encompassed by nature, an after-image of the original shelter in the womb."[41]

Since Mendieta's untimely, violent death in 1985, numerous critics have pointed to the subtleties endued in a project that, besides affirming the presence of a mythic Earth Mother, also addressed absence, alienation, and loss.[42] Excepting the cases of Bourgeois and Wilke, however, the other above-described archaizing initiatives all entail some degree of romanticizing a prehistoric moment of matriarchal power, and entail as well a model of female sexuality centered on the maternal. Notions of the maternal body as representing a "mythic plenitude," "fullness of presence" or "originary harmony" stretch far back in western philosophical traditions. So Rita Felski has observed, adding: "The assumption that an authentic female culture would reverse the instrumental and dehumanizing aspects of urban industrial society has been a recurring motif within both feminist and nonfeminist thought."[43] (Not only in its evocation of a womb-like prehistoric cave, but also by affirming women's superadded orgasmic potential, Hammer's *Multiple Orgasm* film might be seen as confirming an additional fantasy of female plenitude, namely that exemplified by Jacques Lacan's concept of *jouissance*.)

While many feminists were drawn to archaizing strategies, others came to mistrust this recourse to an atavism whereby, in a sense, women were reverenced chiefly for their biologically-assigned instrumentality in perpetuating the human race. Moreover, while motherhood has long been idealized—at least rhetorically, if not in terms of social policy—it has also often served as an excuse for depriving women of a full range of possibilities for social participation. "Female sexuality and women's powers of reproduction are the defining (cultural) characteristics of women, and, at the same time, these very functions render women vulnerable, in need of protection or special treatment, as variously prescribed by patriarchy," Grosz has observed. "By implication, women's bodies are presumed to be incapable of men's achievements, being weaker, more prone to (hormonal) irregularities, intrusions, and unpredictabilities. Patriarchal oppression, in other words, justifies itself, at least in part, by connecting women much more closely than men to the body and, through this identification, restricting women's social and economic roles to (pseudo) biological terms."[44] Or, as Hesse laconically put it to a female artist friend in 1965: "A singleness of purpose no obstructions allowed seems a man's prerogative... A woman is sidetracked by all her feminine roles from menstrual periods to cleaning house to...having babies... She's at disadvantage from the beginning."[45]

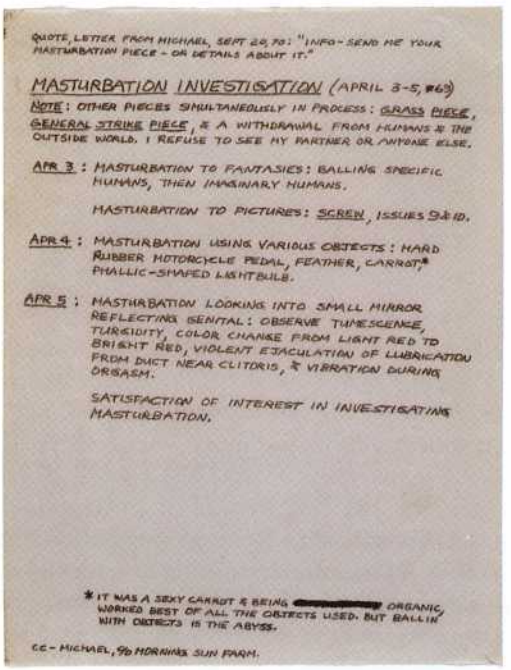
Many women intent on displacing the paradigm of the male pro/creator would purposely shy away, then, from emphasizing their own procreative powers. And despite the hymns to the Great Goddess that animated certain sectors of feminist practice, there emerged elsewhere a certain aversion to extrapolating maternal themes. Thus, Lucy Lippard could conclude a 1976 survey of women's "body art" with the observation that none of the artists in question had "introduced pregnancy or childbirth as a major image... Perhaps procreativity is the next taboo to be tackled," she suggested.[46] In fact, a notable flight, both from the representation and from the exercise of maternal capacity might be charted, particularly among the US women artists who became the first generation to enjoy an earth-shaking new right to remain at once sexually active and childless (or "child-free") following the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision.[47] "The body wanted to have muscles, not babies, and the mind obeyed," Lozano, for one, was noting in a diary entry already in 1968.[48] Whether (would-be) mothers or not, however, many women would look to extrapolate different models of feminine creative production from that of the Earth Mother.

An alternative comeback to the conceit that the true artist 'paints with his prick', as Renoir allegedly put it, emerged in Shigeko Kubota's prescient 1965 *Vagina Painting*, a Fluxus performance in New York that would prove too daring even for her daring Fluxus peers. Perhaps expanding on a vulgar geisha's gambit—that of using her genitals to entertain customers by performing tricks, such as drawing calligraphy with a brush retained in her vagina—Kubota attached a brush to the crotch of her underpants, dipped it in a pail of red pigment, and squatted and waddled (judging from the still photos) across large sheets of white paper unrolled on the floor, making marks as she traveled.[49] The idea of deploying menstrual blood, or a facsimile thereof, as women's distinctive creative juices would occur to many women in Kubota's wake; and menstrual art forms another subset of feminist art practice. But menstrual artworks do not, of course, equate to "seminal" ones—such as the Pollocks to which Kubota seemed to be responding implicitly—for menstruation betokens, not only a patent lack of virility, but also a lack or a contravention of fertility (though bodies capable of menstruation remain withal the biological locus of creation).[50] For that matter, Chicago's 1971 photolithograph of a blood-drenched tampon emerging from her vagina—an image that she offered to feminists as a would-be radical *Red Flag* (page 38)—targeted then stringent menstrual taboos in part because evidence of the menses carried a liberatory charge in pre-Roe v. Wade days when motherhood was all but compulsory for sexually active women. The awful penalties, including death penalties attached to unwanted pregnancies proved then a decisive factor in politicizing many women.[51]

Shigeko Kubota
Vagina Painting, 1965

Besides recasting maternal or atavistic models of creative production, many women would likewise look to articulate alternate models of a released sexuality for women. Freud, and Lacan in his turn, had mystified the question of what women want, of what their pleasure consists in. And the vagina—which functions centrally during heterosexual intercourse to sheathe and excite the penis (indeed the word 'vagina' comes from the Latin for 'sheath' or, more militarily, the sword's 'scabbard'[52])—had long been the focus of the virtually all-male medical establishment's approach

to women's sexual function. Due to that emphasis, those who failed to attain 'vaginal orgasms'—the vast majority of women, as studies have it—were susceptible to being branded sexually deficient or 'frigid.' The game-changing *Our Bodies, Ourselves* medical manual, a feminist self-help text first published in the US in 1970, set out to demystify the gynecological realm for women, urging them to defy taboos against exploring their vulvae, and even to 'seize the speculum' (as a catch-phrase of the day would have it) and examine their own, and one another's, vaginas and cervixes.[53] Anne Koedt's path-breaking tract, "Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," likewise published in 1970, set out to debunk the normalcy of the vaginal orgasm and to refocus women's sexual energies around their clitorises.[54] Erotic artist and budding sexologist Betty Dodson held workshops of sexual self-exploration for women, with special attention to the joys of the clitoris, and would publicly demonstrate the use of five kinds of vibrators at an early NOW conference on Female Sexuality.[55] "When Dodson showed a series of slides of her own drawings, anatomical diagrams, and photographs of the vulvae of participants in her body workshops during a conference of the National Organization of Women (NOW) in 1973, a thousand women, many of whom had never looked at even their own genitals, gave her a standing ovation."[56] For Dodson, who went on the next year to author a hugely popular text on masturbation,[57] and for others, an emphasis on masturbation or "self-love" was key to liberating women from the received idea that they were dependent on men, or more specifically the penis, to provide them with genital pleasure (a pleasure that, in the event, too often failed to arrive); key to empowering them to seek actively their own libidinal satisfaction, whether in autoerotic activities or during partnered sex.


QUOTE, LETTER FROM MICHAEL, SEPT 20, 70: "INFO - SEND ME YOUR MASTURBATION PIECE - OR DETAILS ABOUT IT."

MASTURBATION INVESTIGATION (APRIL 3-5, '69)

NOTE: OTHER PIECES SIMULTANEOUSLY IN PROCESS: GRASS PIECE, GENERAL STRIKE PIECE, & A WITHDRAWAL FROM HUMANS & THE OUTSIDE WORLD. I REFUSE TO SEE MY PARTNER OR ANYONE ELSE.

APR 3: MASTURBATION TO FANTASIES: BALLING SPECIFIC HUMANS, THEN IMAGINARY HUMANS.

MASTURBATION TO PICTURES: SCREW, ISSUES 9 & 10.

APR 4: MASTURBATION USING VARIOUS OBJECTS: HARD RUBBER MOTORCYCLE PEDAL, FEATHER, CARROT,* PHALLIC-SHAPED LIGHTBULB.

APR 5: MASTURBATION LOOKING INTO SMALL MIRROR REFLECTING GENITAL: OBSERVE TUMESCENCE, TURGIDITY, COLOR CHANGE FROM LIGHT RED TO BRIGHT RED, VIOLENT EJACULATION OF LUBRICATION FROM DUCT NEAR CLITORIS, & VIBRATION DURING ORGASM.

SATISFACTION OF INTEREST IN INVESTIGATING MASTURBATION.

* IT WAS A SEXY CARROT & BEING [redacted] ORGANIC, WORKED BEST OF ALL THE OBJECTS USED. BUT BALLIN WITH OBJECTS IS THE ABYSS.

CC - MICHAEL, 96 MORNING SUN FARM.

Lee Lozano
Masturbation Investigation, 1969

If the "cunt" had long been publicly unspeakable, unless as a calumny, it had likewise been invisible, except as the illicit focus of the straight male's onanistic pastimes. ("Women has [sic] had a valid representation of her sex/organ(s) amputated," as Irigaray put it.)[58] So visual artists had a notable part to play in the feminist initiative to explore women's erotic experience. Lozano's wry, conceptual and textual *Masturbation Investigation* of April 3-5, 1969, represents a particularly radical and graphic contribution. In diary-like entries, she recorded (all in capital letters) how, on April 3rd she had masturbated "to fantasies: balling specific humans, then imaginary humans," followed by "masturbation to pictures: *Screw*, issues 9 & 10." On April 4th, her masturbation activities creatively entailed "various objects" ranging from a "hard rubber motorcycle pedal" to an especially "sexy carrot" that, "being organic, worked best of all the objects used." On April 5th, finally, she employed a small mirror, the better to "observe tumescence, turgidity, color change from light red to bright red, violent ejaculation of lubrication from duct near clitoris, & vibration during orgasm." As for Schneemann's *Fuses* (page 11)—though she has lamented that it lacks "a really beautiful cunt shot" (for want of a close-up lens)—the film comprised an important early attempt at depicting heterosexual activities, including cunnilingus and fellatio, largely from a woman's point of view, one entailing "an equitable interchange [where] neither lover is 'subject'

Hannah Wilke
S.O.S.: An Adult Game of Mastication, 1974

or 'object.'"[59] Meant to describe visually "woman's pleasure, authentic pleasure, created by herself of her lived experience," *Fuses* was filmed at home in the bedroom the artist shared with her long-time partner James Tenney, and was conceived expressly in contradistinction to the masculinist and commercial formulae of pornography (with which Schneemann had an added familiarity, having earned money serving as an extra in such movies). Regardless of her anti-porn intent, Schneemann experienced difficulties getting her film processed. Even a lab accustomed to handling avant-garde films "refused to process it unless each reel was accompanied by a letter from a psychiatrist," and the film was subject to censorship and seizure on numerous occasions following its release.[60]

Differently from Lozano's point-blank approach and Schneemann's commitment to authenticity, Wilke's means of extrapolating a model of released sexuality for women generally entailed skewed enactments of feminine stereotypes, including those derived from soft-core porn, often deployed through tongue-in-cheek performance projects and the off-beat, quasi-documentary artifacts that sometimes accompanied them. Whereas she began, in the early 1960s, making sexually suggestive ceramic boxes, in the 1970s Wilke would craft innumerable vulvic or labial objects from contemporary materials, ranging from the chewing gum 'scars' used in the *SOS (Starification Object Series)*, to the kneaded erasers of the *Needed Erase-Her* series, to dryer lint and Playdoh—ostensibly worthless, vulgar stuff transformed by her wit and ingenuity. Affected by Claes Oldenburg's *Mouse Museum* project (1965-77) with its Ray Gun wing incorporating found, phallic objects (found in part by Wilke, she claimed), she also began to find or to counterfeit vulvic shapes from among objects within the general culture, such as fortune cookies and tortellini.

Regardless of her long-time liaison with Oldenburg, Wilke was renowned for a sexual licentiousness more typically ascribed to male artists; hence the often charged tone of the messages from a queue of art-world men animating the cache of answering machine tapes that she spliced together in her riveting *Intercourse with...* project of 1975. Insofar as *Intercourse with...* afforded a glimpse into the mundane operations of the intertwined social and professional networks of a noted female artist of her day, it served incisively to demystify the art world's back channels, where (as with the better-known Hollywood casting couch) sex could and did function as currency of a kind. Though the initial *Intercourse with...* project relied primarily on aural suggestion, a 1977 version featured one of Wilke's off-kilter stripteases, as she methodically deleted the names of her callers spelled out across her body. Prior stripteases had included a 1976 gambol behind *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (a.k.a. *The Large Glass*) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, affirming the artist's

Hannah Wilke
I Object: Memoirs of a Sugargiver, 1977-78

intensive engagement with Duchamp's legacy, and *Super-T-Art* of 1974, in which Wilke rearranged a tablecloth around her bare body into getups ranging from goddess-like drapery to Christ's loincloth. A still photo from *Super-T-Art*—of the high-heeled artist tickling a bare nipple—later figured in *Give: Hannah Wilke Can*, subtitled *A Living Sculpture Needs to Make a Living* (1978), where the artist posed as a seductive mendicant whose coin-collection canisters announced that she "can"..., as the kittenish image reinforced the invitation to 'give' it to her in her 'can' or through her slot.

Throughout her performance work, Wilke's intent was evidently at once mischievous and serious, coyly and slyly feminist. In a (1977-78) book jacket-like pairing of photos entitled "I Object," where she assumed poses resembling that of the, perhaps victimized nude woman in Duchamp's *Étant Donnés* (page 2), Wilke pithily summarized her dual sense of herself as at once a model sex object and an artist-agent or subject who might, indeed, object to being objectified. But few of Wilke's fellow feminists could detect her professed objection, and their drive to constitute women as full-fledged artistic or other subjects could not then countenance the, no less human or ordinary drive to occupy the role of the object. At a somewhat puritanical moment for feminist discourse—a moment when defeating the indiscriminately objectifying 'male gaze' seemed an overriding errand, and when feminists were widely policing one another over the cosmetic use of razors, tweezers, and the like—Wilke's efforts to mime and send up the part of the object tended to be viewed as irredeemably complicit.[61] Indeed, not only for projects that *Oui*, *Penthouse*, and *Playboy* would all welcome to their pages during the '70s (namely those of Wilke), but also for vulvic imagery by feminists generally, the concern that such works could be recuperated to masculinist readings and agendas would be raised repeatedly, more or less emphatically by feminists until such work all but died away over the course of the 1980s. Some artists would prove more alert than others to these issues: Hammer, for instance, is said to have wanted to premiere her *Dyketactics* film of 1974 exclusively to a female audience; and according to Laura Cottingham, circulation of a significant quotient of lesbian art activity was purposely confined to lesbian sub-cultural channels.[62]

The 1980s and '90s witnessed the outbreak of intensive, not to say tooth-and-claw debates amongst feminists over the permissibility of pornography and erotica generally. Among the questions animating these debates was whether all sexually explicit visual material featuring women was *ipso facto* exploitive of those women, whom some feminists identified as typically victims of abuse or dire economic circumstances or both (a story told poignantly, for instance, by Susan Meiselas's subtle 1976 *Carnival Strippers* photo-documentary and audiotape project). Further debates surrounded the question whether meaningful distinctions could be made between the allowably erotic and the indefensibly obscene—that irresolvable question that famously prompted Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart to utter the legally reckless (later recanted) remark, "I know it when I see it," in a 1964 obscenity/censorship decision. An important related question was whether there might be forms of erotica that straight, gay, or bisexual women might rightly, freely enjoy. But it soon emerged, of course, that (for women as for men) one person's vile trash could equally be another's treasure. Such questions culminated for a time in a polarization between rigorously anti-porn feminists, such as Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin (who upheld the watchwords, "porn is the theory, rape is the practice"), and self-styled 'sex-positive' feminists, such as Deborah Bright or Annie Sprinkle, a sex-worker turned 'feminist porn activist' and performance artist. That left plenty of room for other feminists to position themselves in between, such as in an agnostic, pro-first amendment/anti-censorship posture. All this argumentation had been somewhat anticipated in the '70s, however, in feminist conversations over whether all-female audiences might be preferable for certain sexually explicit initiatives; whether the 'male gaze'—a problematically homogenizing concept developed and complicated gradually over the course of the 1970s and '80s—could be foiled somehow by feminist work that treated the vulva, and whether, how, or how much feminist endeavors to affirm the pleasures of the female genitalia ultimately differed from their masculinist counterparts, be they in lowbrow commercial spheres or in more recondite arenas (as with the work of Hans Bellmer).

Valie Export
Action Pants: Genital Panic, 1969/2001

Some women did find ways of disrupting the habitual viewing pleasures of the straight male viewer—albeit with the female viewer's appetites often as a collateral casualty—such as through recourse to dark humor and the abject. Bourgeois demonstrated this tactic in *Le Regard*, for instance, rendering a vulvic form multifarious and grotesque. In the 1980s, Nancy Spero experimented with the medieval *Sheela-na-gig* figure (page 83)—a gnome-like, bug-eyed Celtic goddess, at once of fertility and destruction, whose long arms reach around and behind her spread-eagled legs to stretch wide the gaping maw of her vagina— and who appealed to Spero, she said, on account of having a "frightening," as well as a "beguiling, childlike, and funny" aspect.[63] Another strategy for putting the straight male viewer off his sexual feed, so to speak, while seriously addressing genital matters, entailed recourse to an aggressive form of realism. In Valie Export's confrontational *Action Pants: Genital Panic* performance of 1968, as a key example, the Austrian artist—dressed in black with the crotch cut out of her jeans to expose her hairy pubis and vulva—entered a Munich art-house cinema and announced that she was making real genitals available to the patrons, who had presumably bargained at most for their camera-ready celluloid equivalent. More shockingly still for the disrupted audience, Export made her peculiar offer (that, more usually, of one preschool child to another) while brandishing a machine gun. As she later described the tense encounter:

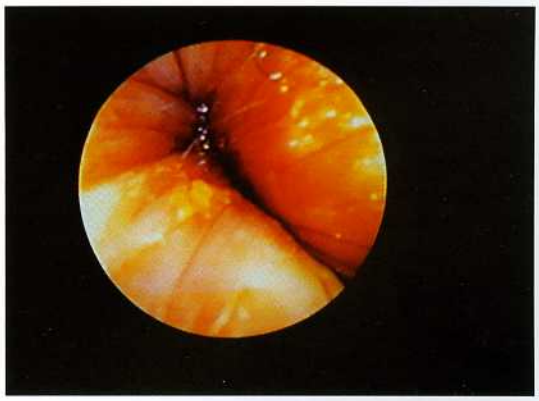
> I moved down each row slowly, facing people. I did not move in an erotic way. I walked down each row, the gun I carried pointed at the heads of the people in the row behind. I was afraid and had no idea what people would do. As I moved from row to row, each row of people silently got up and left the theatre. Out of film context, it was a totally different way for them to connect with the particular erotic symbol.[64]

In an extreme way, Export's insinuation of danger—through the inclusion of the rifle in her intervention—invoked an utterly mundane, yet utterly crucial issue for feminists and women generally: the fact of female sexual vulnerability; of the threats of molestation or assault entailed merely in having a female (far more so than a male) body; and, concomitantly, of the female subject's habitual need for tactics of self-protection. In the act of forcibly, publicly illuminating the difference between celluloid genitalia and the flesh-and-blood kind, Export perceived herself as susceptible to attack. By arming herself, then, she acted to illuminate the vulva's complicated role as, at once a magnetic site of pleasure and an age-old target of attack, hence a source of fear and pain (not to mention, in this context, the pain routinely entailed in childbirth or other gynecologic miseries). Though rape comprised the theme of a small minority of feminist artworks, it was not overlooked; and those works that approached this treacherous subject matter often involved some form of realist strategy. So it is in Yoko Ono's 1969 *Rape*, where an unprepared young woman was tailed and hounded, from the street to her apartment, by a movie camera (and cameraman); or in Suzanne

Ana Mendieta
Untitled (Rape Scene), 1973

Lacy's and Leslie Labowitz's 1977 *In Mourning and in Rage* performance, designed to address the sensationalized media coverage of a series of rape-murders in Los Angeles; or in the 1973 *Rape Scene* that comprised Mendieta's response to the grisly rape-murder of a fellow University of Iowa student. Mendieta performed the part of a bloodied, stripped, prone victim, positioning herself to be discovered by an (unsuspecting) audience of her classmates, in exercises that she documented photographically.[65]

Another important case of the deployment of a realism so extreme as to become patently unerotic is Mona Hatoum's *Corps étranger*, conceived around 1980, but realized only in 1994, in Paris. Here the vagina is less threatened than threatening, or apotropaic. By displaying video footage obtained by an endoscopic device that traversed the artist's vagina and other orifices, *Corps étranger* may give the viewer a sense of being "on the edge of an abyss that can swallow you up, the devouring womb, the vagina dentata, castration anxiety," as Hatoum summarized. In fact, *Corps étranger* involves an invasive bio-medical tour—"the ultimate violation," in the artist's mind[66]—not only of her vagina, but also of the entire digestive system. It thus affords a loosely systematic surveillance by the 'foreign body' of a camera of the 'foreign body' of the artist, a Palestinian raised in Lebanon who exhibits mainly in the west, and whose alien status made her feel the more targeted by the surveillance cameras pervasive in her adopted home of London.[67] Hatoum's project rendered her body foreign, less in its ethnic specificity, however, than because the hyperrealist view of it that the microscopic camera proffered served to make her body strange. Viewers tend to express confusion over what parts of the body are being traversed by the camera, as well as over when or whether the genitals themselves are being featured. The seemingly lurid prospect of a tour of the artist's genitals loses its frisson, in short, as the genitals become assimilated to a scientifically-colored view of the anatomical body as a larger whole. While that view takes in numerous orifices (mouth, stomach, intestines), not only in her verbal accounts of the work, but also in the way she displayed the video—such that it forms a round, Narcissus-like pool or (virtual) opening at the viewers' feet on the floor of a cylindrical booth with slit-like doors on two sides—Hatoum would emphasize the project's vaginal aspect. The sense of disorientation visited upon the viewer by the unexpected strangeness of the utterly normal features of an ordinary (female) body, akin to the viewer's own, underscores how foreign our physical selves may seem. Hatoum conceived *Corps étranger*, for that matter, in part to address a feeling of bodily estrangement that she sensed as endemic in the west: "I come from a culture where there isn't that tremendous split between body and mind. When I first went to England it became immediately apparent to me that people were quite divorced from their bodies and very caught



Mona Hatoum
Corps étranger, 1994

Carolee Schneemann
Vulva's Morphia, 1995

up in their heads, like disembodied intellects. So I was always insisting on the physical in my work."[68]

"The body has remained a conceptual blind spot in both mainstream Western philosophical thought and contemporary feminist theory," wrote Grosz in 1994. "Feminism has uncritically adopted many philosophical assumptions regarding the role of the body in social, political, cultural, psychical, and sexual life and, in this sense at least, can be regarded as complicit in the misogyny that characterizes Western reason." Concurring with Irigaray that "the question of sexual difference is *the* question of our epoch," Grosz argued further that sex "has a pervasive influence on and effects for the subject... one's sex makes a difference to every function, biological, social, cultural, if not in their operations then certainly in significance."[69] *Corps Étranger* rendered the female body in a way at once highly literal or physical and profoundly abstract. As it happened, the 1980s and early '90s would oversee the ascendance of more abstract, drier, more highly theorized approaches to the body within feminist discourse, and a curtailment in the use of bodily imagery by an upcoming generation of women artists leery of promulgating 'essentialist' conceits of the feminine. "By making the body central to the theoretical projects of dismantling biological determinism and essentialism, deconstructing dualisms, and emphasizing fluidity and transformation, the price may be—ironically—a disembodied body," Kathy Davis observed in 2007, while adding that "feminist body theory seems to have fallen prey to a kind of 'somatophobia'."[70]

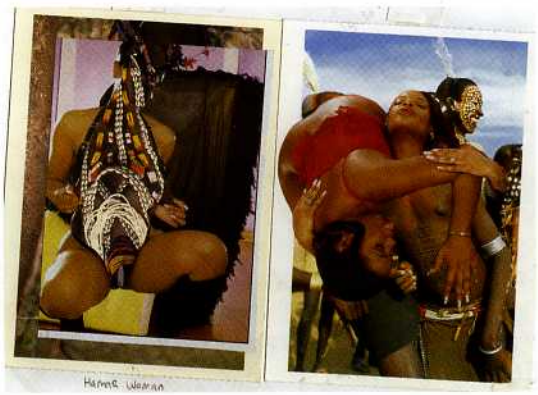
Among those women artists who would distance themselves from early feminist approaches to the body was Silvia Kolbowski, who framed some loaded questions circulated by *October* magazine for a special "feminist issue" in 1995—that is, at a moment of a perceived rehabilitation of '70s body art modalities. "How can we understand recent feminist practices that seem to have bypassed, not to say actively rejected, 1980s theoretical work, for a return to a so-called 'real' of the feminine?" Kolbowski asked plaintively (her own career prospects implicitly hanging in the balance).[71] In the event, numerous of *October*'s respondents would balk at the editorial cues to valorize later, more intensively theorized feminist initiatives as against a putatively archaic or recidivist, corporeally founded or essentialist feminism of yore. While expressing hopes for a moratorium on the term 'essentialism' in the new millennium, critic Emily Apter mused: "Nineties feminism seems to be worried about periodizing essentialism, worried, that is, about essentialism's periods (its shameless emissions of bodily fluids, menses, and tears)."[72] As for Schneemann, who was evidently positioned as a kind of dupe or mark in this context, she drew her witty response to *October*'s questions from *Vulva's School* (a textual section of her *Vulva's Morphia* project of 1992-97) which sketches a kind of pithy *Bildungsroman* for a diligent naïf, one Vulva: "Vulva deciphers Lacan and Baudrillard and discovers she is only a sign, a signification of the void, of absence, of what is not male... (she is given a pen for taking notes...)." Further, "vulva decodes feminist constructivist semiotics and realizes she has no authentic feelings at all; even her erotic sensations are constructed by patriarchal

Maureen Connor
Still from *Heads from The Sixth Sense*

projections, impositions, and conditioning..." Finally, a shrewder "Vulva learns to analyze politics by asking, 'Is this good for Vulva?'"[73]

The 1990s resurgence of body art that discomfited *October*'s editorial staff resulted in some productive extrapolations of '70s initiatives, including a revisiting of the realm of female genital pleasure. Importantly, those extrapolations hailed not only from a rising generation, but also from the pioneering generation. Besides *Vulva's Morphia*, there is Mira Schor's epigrammatic, textually sexual, glossy and viscous *Slit of Paint* (page 36) from 1994, for instance. Or, consider a video sequence from Maureen Connor's 1992 *Sixth Sense* project, in which the slender artist's fantasies of gorging on a plate piled with food, and of her face morphing dreamily into those of Katharine Hepburn and Grace Kelly, bracket fantasies of such paragons of masculinity as Cary Grant and Paul Newman—all of which haunt the mind's eye of the artist (playing over her forehead), only to be interpolated with close-up footage seemingly of Connor vigorously masturbating. While she constructs herself as a hapless sponge for the desires that Hollywood and women's magazines so effectively manufacture (as she visibly yearns to become the exquisite Kelly, and to possess the elusive Grant), those tame, stock desires fail to remain properly the stuff of womanish daydreams and become startlingly, literally genital, through graphic footage cadged, in fact, from a pornographic source.

As fears of inadvertently sating the appetites of the straight male viewer have faded into memories of a more doctrinaire time, an unabashed explicitness has newly characterized much of women's art production from the 1990s to the present, including among a now more visibly global cast of participants. Take, for example, the Kenyan collagist Wangechi Mutu, who appropriates, fragments, and mixes imagery from myriad sources, including porn featuring black participants, as well as fashion and ethnographic imagery; or, the case of South African painter Marlene Dumas, who regularly transposes hard-core porn formulae through the freedom and immediacy of her painterly approach; or Egyptian artist Ghada Amer (page 72), who turned to porn as a centerpiece of her painting practice in 1993. Rather than worrying over whether erotically charged work by women might appeal to male appetites, a new generation has liberally, unapologetically plumbed the received visual repertoire of porn made by men for men, claiming the unauthorized pleasures available to them there, or a right to disrupt the pleasures on offer, or both. In place of the truism that women must reflexively form the objects to the male subject's gaze, it was increasingly accepted that everyone looks at everyone else and may take some degree of pleasure—not only from looking but also from being looked at—no matter how asymmetrical the circuit of the gaze (and so the power dynamic) may be in any given situation, or



Wangechi Mutu
The Ark Collection, 2006

over all. This sense of permission for women to look unabashedly or to flagrantly court the gaze, would resonate differently, inevitably, in different cultural milieux. "To me the female figure is enchanting and power-filled, it astounds me, it baffles me," says Mutu, for one, who tells of being deeply impressed by the spectacle of "middle-aged women in Nairobi protesting their children's detention at a notorious torture prison. They slowly put a curse out—by disrobing and exposing their bodies—causing the riot police to freak out and flee."[74]

For her part, Amer describes being raised in France by observant Muslim parents whose strict views regarding female comportment would inhibit her sense of herself as a sexual being. By looking at images in *Hustler* and *Club* of women masturbating, kissing, and engaging in coitus, she discovered "pleasure, really", and found "a way to exorcise that negativity... It helped me so much."[75] Although Amer has used porn in a direct way as a creative springboard—tracing the contours of the female sex workers' bodies on carbon straight from magazines, then transferring them to canvas—she also intervenes in this salacious imagery by realizing it through the homey, dainty activity of embroidery, a technique that effectively abstracts and mediates the literalness of the porn: "Pornography is the starting point of the image. Then it becomes something else," affirms Amer, who insists, "my paintings are not pornographic."[76] They reportedly remain, regardless, a source of deep unease to her parents, despite the domestic, crafted aspect of her practice. That could be in part because Amer is purposely untidy about her ladylike craft, leaving countless long strands of multicolored threads dangling across the surface of her paintings (in an effect widely compared to the dripping process of Pollock), and then affixing the tangled mess with gel.

As for the American Judie Bamber, in her case, too, we might find an effort at once to recuperate and to dispatch the formulae of porn through her 1994 miniature, hyper-realistic paintings of vulvae (page 110). Those paintings provide, in a way, a crude, point-blank 'beaver shot,' while refining and dignifying, as well as specifying or individualizing that formula by rendering it, through an exactingly observant oil painting technique, more in the vein of a staid Old Master's portrait—if one characterized by an unusually rigorous centrality and symmetry. Or, in 1992 Bamber interpolated a layer of commentary into the stock beaver shot, by attaching swarms of insects—repulsive houseflies and seductive butterflies—alternately atop each of a pair of photographic images of vulvae, in *My Little Fly, My Little Butterfly*. The erosion of porn's status as a hot-button issue for feminists became evident also in the US, meantime, through the reception of the 1993 *Made in Heaven* series done by Jeff Koons with his Hungarian-born wife Ilona Staller, a.k.a. Cicciolina, the Italian porn star and politician. Koons produced photographically generated paintings with theatrical scenes of fellatio, cunnilingus, anal sex, and so forth, that capitalized on Cicciolina's professional repertoire and sets. Rather than assailing the all-fired evils of porn, however, some feminists complained simply that Koons' collaborator ought to have received fuller credit for their joint endeavor.[77]

Jeff Koons
Manet, 1991

During an era when a voracious art marketplace would prove itself capable of swallowing no-matter-what—as Koons' success was often said to epitomize—some influential critics would belittle the emergent (so-called) "neo-avant-garde" on the grounds that it could not produce truly challenging or disruptive art after the model of the historic avant-garde of yore. The example of '70s feminist art came to acquire a new cachet or allure in this context, among female and male artists both, for feminist art practices had

proven so edgy, exorbitant and indigestible as to prevent them consistently from being assimilated to mainstream narratives and institutional visibility, never mind to the walls of profit-conscious dealers or socially ambitious collectors. For that matter, it followed that what emerged in the 1990s—from artists ranging from Zoe Leonard and Janine Antoni to Matthew Barney—would often reflect less a rediscovery of 1970s feminist work than a discovery of it (so long had it been marginalized), as well as a sometimes unknowing reinvention of certain '70s strategies.

Zoe Leonard
Untitled, 1992

Consider, as an example, a comparison of artists' projects designed to highlight the institutional neglect of women. In 1970, livid about the poor representation of women artists in the Whitney's Annual shows, members of WAR (Women Artists in Revolution) staged an outrageous, eminently unlicensed intervention by leaving noxious emblems of femininity, including smashed eggs and used tampons, strewn in the museum stairwells. In 1992, by contrast, dismayed by the chronic tokenizing of female participants in the international Documenta exhibitions, Zoe Leonard was able to mount a fully licensed exercise in institutional critique: she had the male portraits, history paintings, and landscapes removed from the walls in a suite of rooms of Kassel's Neue Galerie and replaced them with point-blank photographs of women's genitalia, framed similarly to those in Courbet's notorious *Origin of the World*,[78] (page 6) thereby remaking the museum as a gynocentric realm. Leonard's photographs of her friends' vulvae differed from Courbet's composition in medium, of course, but also because—rather than figuring orifices passively awaiting penetration—each woman's exposed crotch was augmented by the presence of a female hand poised to tickle and dandle the genitals. Leonard's openness about her lesbianism brought added valences to this gesture; though her sexual identity would not keep her images from functioning also as potential sites of straight male desire, it cast them as, in the first instance (or in the artist's mind), examples instead of women taking their pleasures into their own hands. "I wasn't interested in re-examining the male gaze; I wanted to understand my own gaze," Leonard explained.[79] (Interpolated among the stiffly elegant portraits of patrician 18th- and 19th-century women, her crotch shots served also indirectly to mark an anatomic site of origin for those [male] sitters gone unaccountably missing.)

Leonard's intervention in Kassel was inspired in part by a poster she produced earlier in 1992 with a small activist collective. Together with "Gang," she plastered New York streets with a close-up image of a woman's hairy vulva, labeled (all in caps) "Read My Lips Before They're Sealed" (a reference to the first President Bush's famous promise, 'Read my lips; no new taxes'), and urging reversal of the Supreme Court's ban on abortion information, a.k.a. the Title X (Family Planning Order) "gag rule." (Gang's graphic initiative might be compared with the 1971 *Red Flag* that Chicago ended up withholding as too problematic for public distribution, or contrasted with Barbara Kruger's 1989 *Your Body is a Battleground* poster for the freedom-of-choice cause, a work that rejected genital explicitness in favor of an image of a woman's face divided into photographically negative and positive halves.) Asked about the fate of Gang's posters, Leonard recalled that they were "Torn down, immediately. And the ones that stayed up were scratched at." Infuriated responses hailed not only from reactionary quarters, but also from feminists who "felt protective of this image," Leonard related. She continued:

> ...I understand that, no matter how liberated and powerful and strong we are, women still feel threatened on the street... But we were trying to own this image, much in the same way that we decided to own the words 'fag' and 'dyke' and 'queer.' That owning our image, owning our bodies and owning our representation is radical. That is how you make freedom. Freedom has to be made. It has to be taken.[80]

Soon after this intervention, with her upcoming participation in Documenta in mind, Leonard spied the poster's blunt image on her studio floor, and had an epiphany: "'That has everything in it'," she recalled saying to herself; "It's the most aggressive image and the most passive image. It's the thing that people are most afraid to look at, most afraid to talk about, most eager to look at, most eager to talk about, and it is the very thing that's both missing and overly present in all those paintings."[81]

The drastically conflicting emotions surrounding the vulva, and the long history of the suppression of those emotions, would provide fodder also for Eve Ensler's evolving theatrical work, *The Vagina Monologues*, which first emerged in 1996. As a former child abuse and incest victim, and a refugee from a marriage to a philandering husband, Ensler seems to have embarked initially on an odyssey to reclaim her genitals by interviewing other women about the history of their relationship to theirs.[82] In speaking with hundreds of women, across age, class, ethnic, and national lines, Ensler would find some heartening, humorous, and sexy stories to tell, and she initially conceived her theatrical work as predominantly an act of affirmation. As the work has unfolded over time, however, the majority of Ensler's tales would have at best a humiliating, and at worst a horrific aspect—as in the case of her narrative on the victims of mass rape during the Bosnian conflict. Violence against women became so much the centerpiece of Ensler's interests, in fact, that she proceeded to develop a major charitable organization called V-Day that operates both domestically and internationally. Lately, V-Day, which spotlights different issues at different junctures, has been calling attention to the atrocious rape-mutilations and rape-murders of hundreds of thousands of women and girls during the ongoing civil conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—a cause also movingly and importantly addressed by the 2006 documentary, *The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo* by US filmmaker Lisa F. Jackson. (A former gang-rape victim herself, Jackson even succeeded in interviewing on camera some self-confessed rapists.) However, Ensler's decision to focus her energies on sexual violence—including also the extensive and entrenched problems of sexual trafficking and female genital mutilation—has made her the target of some harsh criticism from 'pro-sex' feminists, such as Dodson, who cast her as simplistically anti-male and who see her as setting back their cause.

Attention to halting female genital mutilation—to which an estimated 130 million girls and women have been subjected (per the *New York Times*)—is on one level, of course, precisely a form of attention to women's sexual pleasure, for FGM quells or curbs forever women's possibilities for experiencing genital satisfaction, while also often leading to a lifetime of gynecological ordeals, including pain, botched child-bearing, and issues with elimination. The notion that such practices ought to be of compelling importance to Euro-American feminists broadly, despite their foreignness, is comparatively recent. Due to good reasons of respect for cultural difference, and justifiable concern with the prospect of behaving in neo-colonial ways, as well as out of plain-old parochialism, Euro-American feminists have historically tended to keep their distance from women's issues elsewhere.[83] But one of the few feminists to make an important early mark on the Euro-American stage without hailing from that stage was Yoko Ono, who insisted from the first on the importance for feminists to think globally. "We have to keep on going until the whole of the female race is freed," she declared in a 1971 appeal to universal sisterhood. "The aim of the female revolution will have to be a total one, eventually making it a revolution for the whole world."[84] However utopic and dated, Ono's rhetoric may sound, the hardly utopic *New York Times* has lately caught up with her, though with rhetoric framed in terms of human rights rather than sisterhood—a crucial shift in tactics associated with the watershed 1995 United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing.

"The oppression of women worldwide is the human rights cause of our time. And their liberation could help solve many of the world's problems," read the headline by the crusading reporter Nicholas D. Kristof and his partner Sheryl WuDunn in a recent *Times* magazine issue devoted to this question.[85]

Of course, the initiatives of Ensler's V-Day and of other organizations that work on women's causes in partnerships internationally, such as Equality Now and Women for Women International (not to mention the UN and the World Court, which have also played key roles), transpire predominantly through legal and human-rights channels. While documentary filmmakers and photographers can play a part, those in the visual culture arena have not otherwise been conspicuous in these endeavors. As for artists visible in the Euro-American context who may hail from the developing world or from regions where women's status is particularly tenuous (or both), many tend to be leery of expectations that they should somehow stand for a given population, leery of being pigeonholed by their ethnicity. The Euro-American public's belated desire to behold new work from new places often runs up against artists' fears, in short, of seeing their art stereotyped or deployed instrumentally. For her part, for instance, the displaced Palestinian Hatoum has tended at once to speak from, and to sharply resist speaking from, the specificities of her subject position. And the Kenyan Mutu explained in conversation with Barbara Kruger that:

> I don't use the work as a platform to be didactically and politically obvious, because if I did, I would ruin the one place that I can actually be contradictable. I don't want to be ambiguous and vague politically; I want to be clear about why I'm not interested in this or that or why I think something is inhumane or should be illegal. But I don't want my work to be this black-and-white thing. I like to have that sanctuary in my art to allow for places where I feel like I'm complicit.[86]

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"Yvonne Rainer used to say to me, 'You make sexuality too easy.' And I would say to her, 'You make it too hard'," Schneemann once reminisced, about a confederate from the '60s. But Schneemann acknowledged at the same time that it is only "if you are lucky enough not to have suffered major psychic erotic damage, [that] you can enter this arena of potential pleasure."[87] Though Schneemann has always been more vested in issues surrounding sensual pleasure than sexual pain or devastation, in the "Vulva's Bestiary" segment of *Vulva's Morphia*, she included a 1995 Amnesty International finding concerning the systematic use of rape as a weapon of war in Bosnia and Rwanda, and that segment of her project concluded with a line from an African song sung after the clitorodectomy of young girls: "You creep like a bird and crawl now like an insect."[88] Like Ono, Schneemann belongs to a generation that dared to paint in large strokes because it had to conceive a big picture: to secure a place for itself, after all, it had to upset an entrenched, purportedly neutral or universal, yet actually masculinist and eminently western visual regime. So natural is it nowadays that the art 'world' should incorporate a quotient of women and of artists from outside the Euro-American field, that many artists—having lost sight of the fact that their predecessors achieved what once seemed a practically impossible feat—have become less audacious in framing their ambitions. On top of the understandable resistance to conceiving of art in instrumental ways, moreover, there is also the apparent futility of deploying art as a social means. "No sort of artwork is immediately going to change men who abuse and kill their pregnant wives, rape and torture women in war,...assault their girl children or other girls they can catch," as artist Jenny Holzer bluntly put it; "I wouldn't go to art to stop a man in his tracks."[89] Or, as Hatoum says, "I don't think any artist's work is going to move armies. I don't have any illusions about that." On the other hand, as Hatoum modestly added, "If the work creates an awareness of certain issues, a questioning in the mind of the spectator of certain assumptions, then that's something."[90] There are, by now, innumerable artists who have tacitly addressed some form of that ostensibly naive question, "Is this good for Vulva?"—artists who may indeed claim to have done something. They may yet do something more.

"Is this good for Vulva?" Female Genitalia in Contemporary Art

Endnotes:

[1] Desmond Collins and John Onians, "The Origins of Art," *Art History* 1, no.1 (March 1978): 1, 13, and passim.

[2] See, for example, Whitney Davis, "The Origins of Image Making," *Current Anthropology* 27, no. 3 (1986): 197.

[3] LeRoy Mc Dermott, "Self-Representation in Upper Paleolithic Female Figurines," *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 2 (April 1996): 227-75. See also Carolee Schneemann, "Woman in the Year 2000" (1977) and "Interior Scroll" (1977) in *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 147-48, 153-54.

[4] Susan Gubar, "'The Blank Page and the Issues of Female Creativity," in Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 292. (Emphasis in original.)

[5] Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990), 78.

[6] Elizabeth C. Mansfield, *Too Beautiful to Picture: Zeuxis, Myth, and Mimesis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 75. (Emphasis in original.) Social consequences ensued from such beliefs, of course, such that, at the moment when "the codification of artistic production as masculine reached a crescendo," in the late eighteenth century, women were increasingly debarred from the French and British art academies, ibid., 73.

[7] See Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts* 64, no. 5 (January 1990): 44-63, and Anna C. Chave, "Pollock and Krasner: Script and Postscript" (1993), rpt. in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews, 1943-1993*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999).

[8] Here the key text is Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[9] Helen Molesworth, "Duchamp: By Hand, Even," in *Part Object Part Sculpture* (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 2004), 179. Although the *Wedge of Chastity* was an editioned work, it was made, in the first instance, as a wedding gift for Duchamp's second wife. Its interior was recently photographed for the first time for the above-mentioned exhibition catalogue by Molesworth, who notes that "*Wedge of Chastity* is a work for which touch is essential. Only through physical engagement with the object can the play between what is seen and unseen become evident," ibid.

[10] Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 23.

[11] Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" (1976), trans. Annette Kuhn, in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, no.1 (1981): 53.

[12] Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 156.

[13] Kapoor describes himself as deeply interested in "the theme of Origin... in the idea that the artist can somehow look again at that very first moment of creativity, when everything is possible and nothing has actually happened," cited in Mary Jane Jacob, "Being with Cloud Gate," in *Anish Kapoor* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, and Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 126.

[14] John Onians, Part II, "Commentary" (on "The Origins of Art"), *Art History* 1, no.1 (March 1978): 11.

[15] The chakras are nodes of, at once, physical and spiritual energy within the body, according to yogic philosophy. Severson's film, which is silent, lasts seventeen minutes, and features girls and women ranging in age from three months to sixty-three years. Severson recalls that she filmed her subjects in San Francisco in 1971, including several women of color, two lesbians, a prostitute, "two virgins (I think), a lot of mothers,...three grandmothers, four women menstruating," and so on. Scott MacDonald with Anne Severson and Yvonne Rainer, "Two Interviews: Demystifying the Female Body," *Film Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (autumn 1991): 22.

[16] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 26. Also germane here is the oft-told story of how the illustrious John Ruskin fled his marriage on his wedding night upon discovering that his wife's pudenda failed to resemble the depilated and tidy anatomy of classical statuary.

[17] Irigaray, "Another 'Cause'—Castration," excerpt, in Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 490.

[18] A note on the sexual politics of terms: In *The Vagina Monologues*, Eve Ensler explains that she uses the term 'vagina,' for want of a better term, to allude to the female genitals generally, and the organizers of the present exhibition have conformed to her practice, not without awareness of its questionability. Ensler contends that an alternate word-choice, the term "vulva," is not widely understood. (Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues*, 10th anniversary edition [New York: Villard, 2008], xl.) But the term "vulva" generally encompasses (as "vagina" patently does not) all the external female genitalia--such as the labia minora and majora, the vaginal introitus, and of course the clitoris, now generally acknowledged as the primary center of women's sexual pleasure. (By contrast to the immensely sensitive clitoris, the vagina has rather few nerve endings, though some contend that it is endued with an especially sensitive spot, termed the "G spot.") While some feminists and sexologists have come to distinguish clitoral from vaginal orgasms, then, many others would insist that (Freudian orthodoxy to the contrary) only the former exists. (See Anne Koedt's 1970 "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," cited below.) Compared to the legitimate terms available, the slang term "cunt" (not to mention the cuddly, but likewise loaded term "pussy") has the virtue of encompassing women's genitals in their entirety, and numerous feminists have embraced it for that and another reason, namely the prospect of detoxifying, by reclaiming a poisonous epithet; hence the "cunt art" nomenclature. Some other feminists have viewed this tactic as a loathsome capitulation to a misogynist trope, however. Thus, a debate once brewed over Tee Corinne's 1975 *Cunt Coloring Book*, with its line drawings of a diverse array of vulvae, and the abashed Corinne would attempt in 1981 to assign the project a more anodyne name, "Labiaflowers" (though the new title tellingly failed to take hold). See Laura Cottingham, "Eating from the Dinner Party Plates and Other Myths, Metaphors, and Moments of Lesbian Enunciation in Feminism and Its Art Movement," in Amelia Jones, ed., *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (Los Angeles: UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 228, n. 21.

[19] Schneemann, "Interior Scroll," 159. The "scroll" is not in fact rolled, but is repeatedly folded (origami-like) instead.

[20] O'Keeffe, 1925? letter in Jack Cowart, Juan Hamilton and Sarah Greenough, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1987), 180. See also Anna C. Chave, "O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze," *Art in America*, January 1990, 124.

[21] Eva Hesse, "Artist's Statement" (1969) rpt. in Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan, *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon, 2001), 198. (Orthography as in the original.)

[22] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xi. Some feminists were inspired by the writings of Anais Nin, who poetically suggested that "woman's creation far from being like man's must be exactly like her creation of children, that is it must come out of her own blood, englobed by her womb, nourished by her own milk. It must be a human creation, of flesh, it must be different from man's abstractions," as cited in Trinh T. Minh-ha, excerpt from *Woman, Native, Other* (1989), rpt. in Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, eds., *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 259.

[23] Ana Mendieta, "Artist's Statement" (1988), rpt. in Reckitt and Phelan, *Art and Feminism*, 98.

[24] Paul Karlstrom, Interview with Jay De Feo [2], 18 July 1975, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., unpublished typescript, 3. (De Feo credits a professor of "primitive art," Margaret Peterson O'Hagan, with firing her interest in this material, in ibid.) Besides its Christian identification with the Virgin (*Annunciation* is the title of another major De Feo painting, of 1957-59), a rose or rosebud also conventionally symbolizes the female genital. In fact, Severson put a red rose on the flyer she used to recruit subjects for *Near the Big Chakra*: it was "a good symbol for the vagina: spiritual unfolding, femininity, fecundity," she explained; MacDonald with Severson and Rainer, "Two Interviews: Demystifying the Female Body": 21. A "jewel" is another code word for female genitalia, and De Feo has spoken of *The Jewel* as "the companion painting to *The Rose*," while speaking also of *The Rose* as forming "a triptych" with two earlier paintings, *Origin* (1956) and *Veronica* (1957). See Karlstrom, Interview with Jay De Feo [3], 23 January 1976, unpublished typescript, 3, 10.

[25] Schneemann, "Interview with Kate Haug" (1977), in *Imaging Her Erotics*, 33.

[26] Cited in Anne M. Wagner, "Bourgeois Prehistory, or the Ransom of Fantasies," *Oxford Art Journal* 22, no. 2 (1999): 15.

[27] See Chave, "O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze," 114-25+.

[28] Cited in Lucy Lippard, "Louise Bourgeois: From the Inside Out," *Artforum* 13, no. 7 (March 1975): 31. At the time she first completed *Fillette*, Bourgeois downplayed her work's erotic content, telling William Rubin of the Museum of Modern Art (as he prepared a publication on her work): "My sculptures please me because they represent a certain harmony and certain emphases, and I wouldn't say my work is erotic, even though this side of it seems obvious to many people." When Rubin, who was prone to a certain modernist orthodoxy, probed Bourgeois as to whether she felt "any conflict between the allusive and formal levels of the work," Bourgeois reiterated that she was "not particularly aware or interested in the erotic of my work [sic], in spite of its supposed presence," stressing that she was "exclusively concerned…with the formal perfection," Statement of ca. 1969, in *Louise Bourgeois: Destruction of the Father/Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923-1997*, ed. Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 84-86.

[29] In an almost panicky and adamant, yet confused formulation, Hesse responded to Cindy Nemser's query: "No! I don't see that at all. I'm not conscious of that at all or not even unconscious. I'm aware they can be thought of as that even in the process of making them, but I am not making that." Cited in Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 214.

[30] Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, "Female Imagery" (1972), rpt. in Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 40-43. Bontecou was among those who abhorred this feminist tactic.

[31] "Whether genital imagery is appropriate for portraits of great women of history is the question most often asked. Chicago sidesteps this issue when she insists that the image does not have to be taken as genital but as a butterfly, a flower and so on… that it does not have to be taken as *literal*… 'I'm amazed the museum hasn't had fifty letters objecting to the piece as pornographic', says one critic," in Diana Ketcham, "On the Table: Joyous Celebration" (1979), rpt. in Reckitt and Phelan, *Art and Feminism*, 227.

[32] See Geraldine A. Johnson, "Sculpture, Photography, and The Politics of Public Space: Serra's *Tilted Arc* and Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial," in Johnson, ed., *Sculpture and Photography: Envisioning the Third Dimension* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 222. (Ellipses as in original.)

[33] Maryse Holder, "Another Cuntree: At Last, a Mainstream Female Art Movement" (1973), rpt. in *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology*, ed. Arlene Raven, Cassandra L. Langer, and Joanna Frueh (Ann Arbor, Mi.: UMI Research Press, 1988), 1. The issue of women artists' relation to the 'mainstream'—the idea that what women wanted (or ought to want) was to constitute or to enter a 'mainstream'--would be problematized by others in years to follow.

[34] Helen Molesworth, "Tune In, Turn On, Drop Out: The Rejection of Lee Lozano," *Art Journal* 61, no. 4 (winter 2002): 68.

[35] Hélène Cixous, "Le rire de la méduse" (1971), rpt. as "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *Signs* 1, no. 4 (summer 1976), 875-93.

[36] Holder, "Another Cuntree," 5.

[37] Statement of 1981, in Bernadac and Obrist, *Louise Bourgeois*, 136. (Bourgeois would eventually tie this aggressive impetus to a very particular autobiographical narrative, namely to childhood fantasies of dismembering and devouring her father in revenge for his tyranny over the family dinner table, and for his cruel sexual infidelity. Statement first published in 1988, rpt. in ibid., 157-58.) "Now I admit the imagery. I am not embarrassed about it," Bourgeois later acknowledged; cited in Lippard, "Louise Bourgeois: From the Inside Out," 31.

[38] Science writer Natalie Angier affirms that the clitoris "is the only organ in the [human] body designed purely for pleasure. The clitoris is simply a bundle of nerves: 8,000 nerve fibers, to be precise. That's a higher concentration of nerve fibers than is found anywhere else in the body…and it is twice…twice…twice the number in the penis." Cited in Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues*, 51. (The latter two ellipses are as in the original.)

[39] Barbara Hammer, "Artist's Statement" (1991), rpt. in Reckitt and Phelan, *Art and Feminism*, 213. Although Hammer recalled that she lacked "the theory or the words" to explain her early filmic initiatives when she produced them, she was heartened to discover early translations of Luce Irigaray's work, notably the 1981 "This Sex Which is Not One," with its poetic account of "the multiplicity of woman's sexuality. Woman with her two genital lips is already two according to Irigaray, two who stimulate and embrace continually and who are not divisible into ones," ibid.

[40] Olga Viso, *Unseen Mendieta* (Munich: Prestel, 2008), 230. Already in the mid-1970s, Mendieta was exploring the goddess theme, "including Ixchell, the Maya patron of childbirth and weaving," ibid., 110. A 1978 drawing called *Cueva* (Cave) by Mendieta features echoing outlines of a form that evokes at once the mouth of a cave, a human figure, and a vulva, making explicit a chain of associations consistently appealing to her; see ibid., 229.

[41] Cited in Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1999), 57.

[42] As a recent example, see Abigail Solomon-Godeau, who praises Mendieta for not pursuing any naïve dream of "authentic and unified selfhood," in Solomon-Godeau, "The Woman Who Never Was: Self-Representation, Photography, and First-Wave Feminist Art," in Lisa Gabrielle Mark, ed., *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, and Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 344. Such estimations of Mendieta's project get it only half right, in my view. The self that she fashioned was often "an evacuated presence," but it was withal a presence, or the authentic trace of one, as well as an expression of yearning for a site of origin, explicitly identified with the female body.

[43] Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 38-39. The mother has been a central category in the poststructuralist theories of Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida: "For all of these writers, the mother must be rediscovered, differently, if we are to move beyond the repetitive dilemmas of our Oedipal, Western culture. It would seem, in fact, to be the mother who has the language, the maternal tongue, necessary for all of these writers in modernity," observed Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 116.

[44] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 14-15.

[45] Eva Hesse, "Letter to Ethelyn Honig" (1965), in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 593.

[46] Lucy R. Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art" (1976), rpt. in Reckitt and Phelan, *Art and Feminism*, 216. (Lippard credits Joan Simon with prompting this observation.)

[47] Early editions of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* focused especially on matters surrounding unwanted pregnancy (such as contraception and abortion). Only later—or, in due course, in editions targeted for Latinas, for instance--was maternity fully embraced and infertility introduced as a significant issue. See Kathy Davis, *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves*

(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 25. "No more than 13 to 17 percent of all the women who graduated from college between 1966 and 1979" would arrive at mid-life with both a career and a family to show for themselves. Among baby-boomers in the US, "Fully *half* of the women who had attained a career by midlife were childless," Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 32. (Emphasis in original.) More than a quarter of the educated baby-boomer women did not have children, and "the percentage of all American women who remain childless is also steadily rising," ibid., 107. It bears underlining, as a reminder of constraints that are often supposed to belong to a more distant era, that not until 1965 was birth control even "legal in all [US] states for all married persons," and that only in 1972 did the Supreme Court legalize "contraception for unmarried girls and women." See Rickie Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 20.

[48] See Barry Rosen and Jaap van Liere, eds., *Lee Lozano: Drawings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), n.p.

[49] See Midori Yoshimoto, *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 182. My thanks to J. Joon Lee for directing me to this source.

[50] There is, besides, the issue of control. "Can it be that in the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self-containment... My hypothesis is that women's corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage," writes Grosz, in *Volatile Bodies*, 203. Further, "It is not the case that men's bodily fluids are regarded as polluting and contaminating for women in the same way or to the same extent as women's are for men," ibid., 197.

[51] Chicago's *Red Flag* would misfire, for initially even female viewers, alienated as they were from their own bodily processes, shockingly misrecognized the image as that of a partially severed penis, grisly signature of that dread caricature, the hysterical castrating feminist. See Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (rev. ed., Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 135-37.

[52] From Medicinenet.com's *www.medterms.com*, accessed 13 August 2009.

[53] The initial publication of the book was by a non-commercial US press.

[54] Anne Koedt, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" (1970), rpt. in Reckitt and Phelan, *Art and Feminism*, 202. In the "Vulva's School" section of her wry *Vulva's Morphia* project, Schneemann writes: "Vulva studies Freud and realizes she will have to transfer clitoral orgasm to her vagina.../ Vulva reads Masters and Johnson and understands her vaginal orgasms have not been measured by any instrumentality and that she should only experience clitoral orgasms." Schneemann, "Vulva's Morphia" (1992-97), in *Imaging Her Erotics*, 299. (Ellipsis as in original.)

[55] Holder, "Another Cuntree," 1.

[56] Anette Kubitza, "Rereading the Readings of *The Dinner Party* in Europe," in Jones, *Sexual Politics*, 160.

[57] Betty Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation: A Meditation on Self-Love* (New York: Bodysex Designs, 1974). This book was later reprinted under different titles.

[58] Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 105.

[59] Schneemann, "Interview with Kate Haug," 42; Schneemann, "Notes on Fuses" (1971), in *Imaging Her Erotics*, 45.

[60] Schneemann, "Interview with Kate Haug," 32; Schneemann, "Interview with ND" (1991), in *Imaging Her Erotics*, 123.

[61] See Anna C. Chave, "'I Object': Hannah Wilke's Feminism," *Art in America*, March 2009, 104-109+ (from which parts of this section have been adapted).

[62] Cottingham, "Eating from the Dinner Party Plates," 220.

[63] Nancy Spero, cited in "Woman as Protagonist: Interview with Jeanne Siegel" (1987) rpt. in Stiles and Selz, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, 246. Spero's sources also included "the Venus of Willendorf, Helen of Egypt, archaic or Paleolithic figures,...sky goddesses," and so forth, as well as contemporary images of women, as Siegel noted in ibid.

[64] Valie Export, "Interview with Ruth Askey" (1981); excerpt rpt. in Reckitt and Phelan, *Art and Feminism*, 97. Phelan describes the venue for Export's performance as a "sex cinema," as it was likewise described (putatively by Export) in the interview that Phelan cites, ibid. Export recently explained that the theatre was instead a kind of art house, however, and declared that "I could never go into a pornography cinema with a gun, I would have been killed." In "Artist Conversation: Valie Export and Maria-Christina Villasenor," in "(Re)Presenting Performance: A Symposium," 9 April 2005, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NY. I am indebted for this information to Kathleen Wentrack, "The Female Body in Conflict: U.S. and European Feminist Performance Art 1963-1979, Carolee Schneemann, Valie Export, and Ulrike Rosenbach," Ph.D. dissertation, The Graduate Center, CUNY, 2006, 212-14. One imagines that a sexually explicit film was playing at the time Export staged her performance, but that remains obscure.

[65] "In the sixties and seventies, women rarely confessed sexual trauma to each other," Schneemann recalled. "Personal experiences would become encoded in work in ways that were often very bewildering... Profound issues of hidden sexual abuse and victimization of the feminine really began to claim an explicit language and descriptive grasp in the eighties... Women who had been raped or abused were not doing films about pleasure!" in Schneemann, "Interview with Kate Haug," 34. (Inexplicably, in view of the above passage, the publication date for this interview is given as 1977.) Regarding feminism's historically complicated relationship with issues surrounding victimization, see Anna C. Chave, "'Normal Ills': On Embodiment, Victimization, and the Origins of Feminist Art," in *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, ed. Eric Rosenberg and Lisa Saltzman (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2006), 132-57.

[66] Mona Hatoum, "Interview with Claudia Spinelli" (1996), in Michael Archer, Guy Brett, and Catherine de Zegher, *Mona Hatoum* (London: Phaidon, 1997), 138.

[67] Michela Arfiero, "A Conversation with Mona Hatoum: Measure the Distances," *Sculpture* 25, no. 9 (November 2006): 32.

[68] Hatoum, "Interview with Claudia Spinelli," 141.

[69] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 3, xi and 22. (Emphasis in original.)

[70] Davis, *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves*, 128-29. Davis credits a 1988 text by Elizabeth Spelman for the latter insight. As for essentialism, it may be understood as "the postulation of a fixed essence, unchanged historically or culturally. Very often, essentialism resorts to naturalism or biologism, but it may also plausibly appeal to cultural or theological factors. Biologism is the postulation of a biological universality, which is used to explain cultural and behavioral characteristics," in the words of Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 212, n. 15.

[71] Silvia Kolbowski, "Questions of Feminism," in *October* 71 (winter 1995): 3-4. Solomon-Godeau, "The Woman Who Never Was," rightly lays waste to the cliché of the unmediated work of the '70s (passim).

[72] Emily Apter, "Essentialism's Period," *October* 71 (winter 1995): 8-9. "In retrospect, what Kristeva called 'women's time' and what might otherwise be referred to as 'essentialism's period,' appears to have been a rather good time for women," ibid., 9.

[73] Schneemann, "Vulva's Morphia," 299-300. (Ellipses as in original.)

[74] Wangechi Mutu, interview by Kirsten Fricke (December 2005), excerpt accessed 28 August 2009 at *https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/gallery/wangechi_mutu.php*

[75] Carly Berwick, "Behind the Veil," *Artnews*, September 2006, 123.

[76] Roxana Marcoci, Interview with Ghada Amer, in *Threads of Vision: Toward a New Feminine Poetics* (Cleveland: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 2001), 23-24.

[77] Jan Avgikos, "All That Heaven Allows: Love, Honour, and Koons" (1993), rpt. in Reckitt and Phelan, *Art and Feminism*, 255.

[78] Regarding the Courbet, the key text is Linda Nochlin, "Courbet's *L'origine du monde*: The Origin without an Original," *October* 37 (summer 1986): 75-86.

[79] Anna Blume, "Bearded Woman," in *Secession: Zoe Leonard* (Wien: Wiener Secession, 1997), 16. Leonard photographed six different women and used about a dozen different images, some more than once, producing nineteen photos in all, ibid.

[80] Blume, "Bearded Woman," 14.

[81] Blume, "Bearded Woman," 16.

[82] At the outset of *The Vagina Monologues*, Ensler raises the topic of shaved pubic areas, an issue about which she takes a hard line: "You cannot love a vagina unless you love hair," she argues; "it's the leaf around the flower, the lawn around the house"; Ensler, *Vagina Monologues*, 9, 11. But the social tide has lately turned: "We live in the age of Xtreme grooming, and it's been pioneered by women," remarked Jerry Saltz, prudently adding, "Or I think it has. As a straight male art critic, I may not be qualified to say much on the subject, but it's become all but unavoidable." As cases in point, Saltz lists the depilated "private parts on figures in the work of Tracey Emin, Su-en Wong, Sarah Lucas and Marlene McCarty," as well as those in photos and self-portraits by Patti Chang, Malerie Marder, Katy Grannan, Kembra Pfahler and Vanessa Beecroft. See Jerry Saltz, "Pudenda Agenda," *Village Voice* (April 2002), accessed at *http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/saltz/saltz4-10-02.asp*. The trend toward fully depilated or otherwise barbered pudenda may be counted as further evidence of a new consciousness of or trend toward display associated with the female genitalia, a trend likewise evinced in the emergence of cosmetic surgical techniques for the vulva. Thus, a normative concept of genital attractiveness has been advancing, at odds with the diversity of genital appearance affirmed by Severson and Corinne, among others.

[83] An essay by Gloria Steinem, "The International Crime of Female Genital Mutilation," *Ms. Magazine*, March 1979, 65, is often credited with bringing this issue to western women's attention. But a deeper interest in the problem did not surface in the west until more recently.

[84] Yoko Ono, "The Feminization of Society" (1971), rpt. in Alexandra Munroe, *Yes Yoko Ono* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 299.

[85] Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, "The Woman's Crusade," *The New York Times Magazine*, 23 August 2009, 29 (and passim).

[86] Barbara Kruger, Interview with Wangechi Mutu, April 2007. *http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1285/is_3_37/ai_n18791212/* accessed 28 August 2009.

[87] Schneemann, "Interview with Kate Haug," 34.

[88] Schneemann, "Vulva's Morphia," 300, 307.

[89] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "An Interview with Jenny Holzer," in Elizabeth A.T. Smith, *Jenny Holzer* (Riehen/Basel: Fondation Beyeler and Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008), 122.

[90] Mona Hatoum, "Interview with Sara Diamond" (1987), in Archer, Brett, and de Zegher, *Mona Hatoum*, 127.