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Through the Body: Corporeality, Subjectivity, and Empathy in Contemporary American Art

by

Elissa Yukiko Weichbrodt

A dissertation presented to the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

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To Noel,
coram Deo

INTRODUCTION

There was certainly no shortage of forceful responses to the highly politicized artworks included in the 1993 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City:

All of the artists in the [1993 Whitney Biennial]...are probing the complexities of subjectivity – issues of race, class, and sexuality – in terms of multiple discourses and shifting social interactions. From their own life situations, often outside, displaced, or marginalized from the mainstream, they work to overcome both political divisions and entrenched tribalism; they are warriors fighting to expand and enrich the larger culture.¹

One of the things that I find symptomatic of the situation you are calling the return of the signified is the tendency of recent art criticism to avoid talking about the art itself and instead just to name a set of ideas that the art might invoke. I was struck reading the catalogue texts for the [1993] Whitney Biennial by this constant deflection of attention from the texture of the work. The work is seen to have a meaning that one can succinctly name and then use that name to pass from the object to a register of “important” ideas.²

One of the few things worth pondering at the 1993 Whitney Biennial was a fragrant, glistening, two-part installation by Janine Antoni.³

At best, say in Janine Antoni’s gruesome subversion of Minimalist sculpture, with her dizzingly huge block of gnawed chocolate that speaks of desire and nausea, the subject of repression is inventively reimaged.⁴

In the above statements, one of the exhibition curators praises the political content of the artworks in question; a scholar remonstrates those same artists and curators for this overemphasis on politicized subject matter and the resultant inattention to visual qualities; and two reviewers mention, in passing, the ways in which a particular artwork affected their bodies. Such divergent attitudes towards artworks and disagreements regarding their purpose, value, and efficacy are, of course, hardly unusual. But it is my contention that there is more at stake in these differing reactions than mere variations in personal aesthetic taste. By reading between the lines of these responses and situating them within their

¹ Lisa Phillips, “No Man’s Land: At the Threshold of a Millennium,” in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art; Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 61.

² Rosalind Krauss in Hal Foster et al., “The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial,” *October* 66 (Autumn 1993): 4.

³ Amy Jinker-Lloyd, “Chewing the Fat,” *Art Papers* (March/April 1996): 2.

⁴ Steven Henry Madoff, “Whitney Biennial: Apocalypse Now?,” *ARTnews* (April 1993): 129.

historical context, we can generate an ethical imperative to reconsider artworks that have long been limited by the interpretive framework of strident identity politics.

One such work was Janine Antoni's sculptural installation *Gnaw*, the subject of the final two quotes above (Fig. 1). The work's primary components were two massive, 600-pound cubes on low marble plinths, one cast in chocolate and the other in lard. But, as the title suggests, the artist had gnawed on the cubes, interrupting the smooth geometric planes with ragged bite marks. Antoni transformed the masticated lard into red lipsticks and the chocolate into heart-shaped candy box liners, and then she displayed them in a brightly lit, mirrored case. Without directly representing the body, *Gnaw* nevertheless invoked an absent body through the traces of teeth, lips, and a tongue that marked the cubes.

But for the curators of the Whitney Biennial Exhibition and for many reviewers, the knowledge that this was a specifically *female* body was deemed critical. As exhibition texts made abundantly clear, Antoni's work was to be understood as a critique of both "the consumer fetishism of female youth and beauty" and "a patriarchal community where eating is transgressive and the fat woman is an obvious taboo."⁵ Her identity as a woman was thus considered to be practically inextricable from the artwork itself. Indeed, the artist's politicized identity – and, presumably, her politicized body – tended to eclipse the actual affect of the artwork itself.

Antoni's work and its related critical response were hardly anomalous. In the mid to late 1980s, a wave of New York artists began using marginalized bodies – that is, bodies of those excluded from traditional centers of power on account of gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation – as a visual or conceptual launching point for their work. Emerging in the context of the increased conservatism of

⁵ Elisabeth Sussman, "Coming Together in Parts: Positive Power in the Art of the Nineties," in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 19.

the Reagan administration, the AIDS crisis, and intensifying identity politics, these deheroicized, fragmented, or abstracted bodies gained critical attention due to their inclusion in prominent New York exhibitions. Large survey exhibitions such as the 1990 *Decade Show* at the New Museum and the 1991 and 1993 Whitney Biennials showcased female, minority, and gay artists whose work addressed issues of sexism, racism, and homophobia.⁶ When grouped together as such, these artworks were generally termed “identity art.” Regardless of whether they deemed it to be a boon or a detriment, curators and scholars assumed that the expression of artists’ marginalized, politicized identities was the primary intent of their artworks.

My project, in contrast, moves away from a fixation on only what these works signified and towards a consideration of their affect. I focus on works by six artists, linked by the manner in which they evoke marginalized bodies as a means to elicit somatic responses from viewers. I consider the artists in tandem: Kiki Smith’s seeping wax nudes alongside Robert Gober’s precisely crafted wax legs and chests; David Hammons’s hairy sculptures with Lorna Simpson’s cool, photographic and textual juxtapositions; and Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s glittering piles of candy and austere stacks of paper in conjunction with Janine Antoni’s lard, chocolate, and soap sculptures. All of these artists attracted a good deal of critical attention in the late 1980s and early 1990s, generating a sizable archive of exhibition reviews, articles, and interviews exists, which allows me to reconstruct a reception history. Taking viewers’ passing descriptions of their physical responses to the artworks as my point of departure, I argue that the works themselves function as theorizing agents. The primary theoretical models applied to these artworks in the 1990s – pluralism and poststructuralism – cannot adequately

⁶ See Sussman, “Coming Together in Parts,” in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, 12-25; Eunice Lipton, “Here Today, Gone Tomorrow? Some Plots for Dismantling,” in *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990), 18-35.

account for other, simultaneously emerging discourses in queer, black, and diasporic communities that shaped the artists' practices as well as their understandings of the relationship between embodiment and selfhood. By activating viewers' bodies, these artworks propose a notion of subjectivity that is deeply relational and that initiates an empathic response in viewers through a dynamic combination of affective and intellectual operations.⁷

State of the Field

In each case study chapter I summarize and evaluate the significant critical writings that relate to each of the six case study artists. This archive primarily consist of exhibition reviews and curatorial texts from the early 1990s, scholarly articles that usually attempt to engage the artworks in theoretical terms, and monographs that narrate the development of the artists' practice. What is missing, however, is a historicized account of the artworks' exhibition and reception.

Indeed, there is very little scholarship that considers the art production and exhibition practices of the 1980s and 1990s in a self-consciously historical fashion. While well-known artworks by each of these artists do appear in textbooks on contemporary art, they tend to be offered primarily as examples of art world trends rather than as active participants in a broader cultural discourse.⁸ The 2004 tome *Art Since 1900*, co-authored by *October* journal editors Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh,

⁷ I am differentiating consciously between the terms "identity" and "subjectivity." Merriam Webster defines "identity" as "sameness of essential or generic character in different instances." In this historical instance of the 1980s and 1990s, "identity" refers to the politicized adoption of certain social categories – such as ethnicity or gender – as a unifying platform between subjects. I use "subjectivity," on the other hand, to describe the *formation* of the subject and the emphasis on one's sense of self being subject to outside forces. Philosopher of subjectivity Linda Martin Alcoff simply and clearly defines subjectivity as referring "to my own sense of myself, my lived experience of my self, or my interior life." Linda Martin Alcoff, "Who's Afraid of Identity Politics?," in *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, ed. Paula Moya and Michael Hames-Garcia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

⁸ For examples of usage of these artworks in textbooks, see Edward Lucie-Smith, *Art Tomorrow* (Paris: Terrail, 2002); Gillian Perry and Paul Wood, *Themes in Contemporary Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 2004); Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

and Yve-Alain Bois, is more ambitious in historicizing works by Gober, Smith, Simpson, and Gonzalez-Torres.⁹ But, as we will see, their self-proclaimed uneasiness towards the identity politics that shaped the initial exhibitions of such artworks stymies any investigation into how the works might be emerging out of multiple, converging contexts.

Still, a relatively new impulse to reconsider artworks from this period is evident. Jennifer González's 2008 book *Subject To Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* demonstrates how artists James Luna, Fred Wilson, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Peon Osorio, and Renee Green were engaging with critical race discourses in the 1980s and 1990s, not simply asserting stable, multicultural identities. Even more recently, Amelia Jones's 2012 book *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification in the Visual Arts* offers a historical overview of how and why we "identify" works of art with an expressive subjectivity. Jones covers a period between the end of World War II to the present, but she gives special attention to the multiculturalist impulse of the eighties and nineties. In addition, two very recent exhibitions are initiating a new, historically minded review of the period. *This Will Have Been: Art, Love, and Politics in the 1980s*, curated by Helen Molesworth in 2012 for the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art, draws together works made between 1979 and 1992 and focuses in particular on the effects of the AIDS crisis and feminist theory on artists' practice. According to Molesworth, the exhibition is "definitely retrospective in its gaze...narrativiz[ing] the decade from the position of memory and hindsight – with all of the open wounds, elisions, anachronisms, and blank spots implied therein."¹⁰ The even more recent *NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star* is even more focused, concentrating on art made and exhibited in New York over the course of a single

⁹ Hal Foster et al., *Art since 1900 Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, vol. 2 (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004).

¹⁰ Helen Molesworth, "This Will Have Been: Art, Love, & Politics in the 1980s," in *This Will Have Been: Art, Love, & Politics in the 1980s*, ed. Helen Molesworth (New Haven: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in association with Yale University Press, 2012), 15.

year and highlighting intersections of art, pop culture, theoretical writing, and politics. Curated by Massimiliano Gioni, Gary Carrion-Murayari, Jenny Moore, and Margot Norton at the New Museum in New York, the exhibition opened in February 2013 and presents itself as both a “time capsule” and an “experiment in collective memory” for a “pivotal moment in the New York art world.”¹¹

This dissertation contributes to this new interest in historicizing the late 1980s and early 1990s, seeking to understand these artworks in a more productive relationship with the criticism and theory that has powerfully shaped their reception and legacy. Such an investigation is significant not only in filling a gap in art historical scholarship but in addressing the ethical dimension of art’s capacity to elicit compassion from a viewer and forge solidarity through an acknowledgement, rather than erasure, of difference.

Methodology

Admittedly, it can be difficult to quantify these artworks’ affect historically.¹² Whereas today’s widespread popularity of personal blogs and social media can make museum-goers’ opinions immediately and publically available, much of the public response to these artworks in the early 1990s was never recorded and is in large part unrecoverable. We have no detailed survey responses from New York museum visitors to the Biennials or the Decade Show. Most comment books from gallery shows

¹¹ Massimiliano Gioni et al., *NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star* (New York: New Museum, 2013), 4.

¹² Because this project attempts to historicize reception, I made the conscious choice not to interview still-living artists and curators. Instead, I focused on interviews, recorded talks, and published artist and curatorial statements from the early 1990s. I did, however, conduct informal interviews with other artists who were living in New York in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a means of outlining the contours of the cultural landscape and acquiring vernacular knowledge about popular publications, the reputations of different galleries and gallery owners, and the character of certain neighborhoods. Having now firmly established a historicized base, I can imagine a fruitful second project in which I trace the ways in which the artists and curators considered in this dissertation have re-framed their older work in light of contemporary trends. Janine Antoni’s more recent foregrounding of her Caribbean background at a time when Caribbean art is gaining significant attention is one such example, which I discuss briefly in Chapter Four.

have disappeared or are filled primarily with visitors' signatures and general congratulations to the artist rather than extended ruminations on how the artworks did or did not affect them.¹³

Still, I have been able to reconstruct at least some aspects of the physical effects of these well-known artworks on viewers in the early 1990s. First, I assembled and carefully sifted through an archive of reviews, interviews, and scholarship from 1989 through 1996 that focused on or mentioned Smith, Gober, Simpson, Hammons, Gonzalez-Torres, and Antoni. As I read, I noted instances in which critics, scholars, and sometimes the artists themselves mentioned their somatic responses to the artworks in question. Though occasionally delivered as a hyperbolic metaphor – Ali Subotnik, for example, declared that Robert Gober's fragmented wax leg made her “want to cut [her] arm off” – authors who narrativized their encounter with the works regularly located their initial reactions in their bodies.¹⁴ Some would describe a sense of physical disorientation, others would acknowledge the onset of nausea, goosebumps, or pooling saliva, and still others might refer to the works' scent, taste, or imagined texture. These scattered, passing references rarely served as the focus of the authors' articles, and yet the consistency with which writers mention such somatic effects was notable.

It is worth acknowledging that my interest in piecing together a textual account of visitors' physical responses to artworks in the 1990s was prompted in part by my own embodied encounter with *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, a 1991 candy spill by Felix Gonzalez-Torres at the Art Institute of Chicago. Kneeling next to Gonzalez-Torres's work – pulling a piece of candy from the pile, and allowing it to slowly dissolve in my mouth – awakened new intellectual and emotional curiosity in me. I

¹³ Smith, Gober, and Simpson have all changed gallery representatives since the early nineties. Their current galleries do not have ephemera from earlier exhibitions and their former galleries have either discarded their old files or are unwilling to provide access to researchers. David Hammons has eschewed gallery representation throughout his career, and his primary exhibition venue, Exit Art, closed its doors in 2012 and their archives will not become available to researchers until they have been processed by the New York University Library. I have looked through the available comment books for Felix Gonzalez-Torres's exhibitions at the Andrea Rosen Gallery and the available comment books for Janine Antoni's shows at the Sandra Gehring Gallery.

¹⁴ Ali Subotnik, "Cumulus from America: Back to Life," *Parkett* 77(2006): 185.

learned that I had participated in an act of mourning for a man I did not know, whom had died from a disease I did not understand. The artwork activated me in holistic fashion, compelling me to learn more about the circumstances surrounding Ross's death but also to consider *why* I was moved, both literally and metaphorically. As I noted reviewers' invocations of their own bodies in their written responses to artworks like *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, I recognized something of my own reaction.

At the same time, I recognize that in some ways my physical response to these artworks is necessarily different to the historicized encounters described in texts from the early nineties. Thus, I also examine how the specific context in which these artworks were displayed might have shaped visitors' physical reactions. For example, in order to understand the reception of Robert Gober's and Kiki Smith's works, I describe the effects of the United States' AIDS crisis on perceptions of bodily fluids and visibly frail male bodies. Linking reviewers' physical uneasiness upon encountering Gober's segmented, pale legs or Smith's oozing, dripping bodies to the particularity of that political moment acknowledges how the artworks themselves participate in cultural discourses and are not simply illustrations of a presumably universal psychic aversion to the uncanny or repressed.

Third, I consider not only the artworks' visual signifying qualities, but also their material, spatial, and temporal characteristics in their exhibition contexts. In some cases these traits are inherent to the artworks themselves: chocolate always produces an aroma, lard eventually melts if left exposed, cellophane candy wrappers crackle when being opened, and the glossy black of a photograph behind glass functions as a mirror under gallery lights. In addition, my research on exhibition floor plans enables me to occasionally imagine visitors' phenomenological encounter. For example, we can know that since David Hammons's ten-foot wide sculpture made from hair was displayed in a relatively small gallery room, viewers had only a narrow space in which to walk around the shedding, larger-than-life

work. These attributes suggest a certain way in which the artworks would have affected viewers' bodies in the nineties, as well as how they might continue to affect us today despite our differing context.

Significance of the Project

The question then becomes, what are we to make of these somatic effects? Although my project resists the reduction of these artworks to mere signifiers of marginalized identities, their intersection with politicized issues of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and nationality is unquestionable. By activating viewers' bodies, might these works then fold viewers into a similar engagement? Of course, some viewers, as we will see, adamantly shut down any possibility of exchange. But I, like art historian Jill Bennett, persist in the belief that artworks can operate through "forms of embodied perception in order to promote forms of critical inquiry."¹⁵ That is, artworks have the capacity to transform how we perceive and participate in the world, and the corporeal and emotional affect of these particular artworks can serve as a catalyst for such change.

Even more specifically, I propose that the artworks considered in this dissertation offer viewers the opportunity to respond with empathy. The term "empathy" has a history of varied usage, particularly in Continental philosophy, but here I am using it to describe a simultaneously emotional, cognitive, and physiological response of openness to another subject, a kind of alignment of oneself with another.¹⁶ There is of course the danger of what German theorist Bertolt Brecht called "crude empathy,"

¹⁵ Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 10.

¹⁶ German philosopher Theodor Lipps (1851-1914) was the first modern philosopher to use empathy – to him, the inner imitation of what we observe externally – as a central philosophical concept. According to Lipps, empathy was inextricably linked with aesthetics and also served as the primary epistemic means for understanding other minds. British psychologist Edward Titchener translated the German word "Einfühlung" (literally "feeling into" as the word "empathy" in 1909. The idea fell out of favor among most philosophers in the mid-20th century, but in the 1980s, social psychologists such as Americans Daniel Batson and Martin Hoffman began to research the role of empathy as a motivation for moral behavior. For more on the history of the usage of the term see Louis Agosta, *Empathy in the Context of Philosophy* (Houndmills,

the emotional overidentification with another subject and the resulting failure to acknowledge the particularity of his or her experience.¹⁷ However, recent interdisciplinary research has increasingly put forth a unified concept of empathy, in which affective and cognitive operations work in conjunction with mirror neurons.¹⁸ That is, our bodies respond on a neural level when we witness the physical or psychic pain – or joy – of others.¹⁹ Thus, rather than projecting ourselves onto the marginalized bodies that these artworks evoke, we might inhabit the space between ourselves and another, acknowledging difference while allowing ourselves to be reshaped by another's experience.²⁰

But this empathic response also presupposes a notion of subjectivity in which this kind of cooperative, intersubjective relationship is possible. Ultimately, I find the failure of the dominant theoretical frameworks of the 1990s to be their assumption that antagonism drives subjectivity formation. Multiculturalist theorizations reduced subjects to a single plane of identity, and their demand for political recognition maintained a hierarchical subject-object relationship, where those who were in power would deign to acknowledge those who were previously invisible. Poststructuralist theorizations conceived of subjectivity as a constant and violent psychic struggle, a repeated jettisoning of anything or anyone who is deemed a threat to one's sense of a stable self. Both of these prevailing models understood subjectivity in negative terms, as the result of subordination, dependency, or

Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Lauren Wispé, "History of the Concept of Empathy," in *Empathy and Its Development*, ed. Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). In art history, the best-known use of empathy is Wilhelm Wörringer's 1907 *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (see *Abstraction and Empathy*, trans. Michael Bullock (New York: International University Press, 1953). Wörringer uses Lipps's notion of empathy to argue that our sense of aesthetic beauty comes from being able to relate to the specific work of art. He argues that the move to abstraction in art is not a failure of technical ability, but the result of a desire to create images to which viewers can relate in spiritual terms.

¹⁷ Bennett helpfully critiques Brecht's dismissal of empathy: Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 10, 110-12.

¹⁸ See Karsten R. Stueber, *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

¹⁹ See Giacomo Rizzolatti and Laila Craighero, "The Mirror-Neuron System " *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 27(2004); Jean Decety and William John Ickes, *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009).

²⁰ See Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, 123.

exclusion. Such theorizations removed any possibility of loving exchange between subjects while either grossly simplifying or altogether denigrating the role of corporeality in subject-formation.

If, however, we acknowledge the importance of the artworks' eliciting of somatic and affective responses, we might find other models of subjectivity that allow for relational exchange. Indeed, as I argue throughout this dissertation, conceptions of subjectivity that embraced the complex imbrication of discursivity and embodied experience were emerging concurrently in the 1990s from communities outside of the relatively small New York art world. These alternate models allow for the kind of empathic engagement that might open these artworks up to us today.

Outline

Chapter One lays out the broader cultural, political, and theoretical landscape in which these artworks were first encountered. The AIDS crisis, multicultural initiatives, and the Culture Wars politicized the ways in which bodies were understood in relationship to identity. In this context, two distinct trends emerged in the New York art world: the pluralist position expressed by exhibitions such as the Decade Show and the 1991 and 1993 Whitney Biennials; and the poststructuralist critique of such efforts, which found its most vehement expression in the journal *October*. Each of the three chapters that follow focuses on a particular visual strategy used to elicit somatic responses from viewers.

Chapter Two explores the emphasis on craft and construction in the grotesque and fragmented figural wax sculptures of Kiki Smith and Robert Gober (Figs. 2 & 3). Smith's and Gober's work give expression to some of the tensions between AIDS activism and emerging queer theory in the late eighties and early nineties. How, for example, could queer theorists' emphasis on discursive identity be reconciled with the physical reality of AIDS and the solidarity engendered by physical participation in

activism?²¹ I suggest that their unsettling sculptures of fragmented or leaking bodies challenged and transformed the poststructuralist notion of discourse to include somatic experience.

Chapter Three considers the use of hair in works by David Hammons and Lorna Simpson within the context of the popular, sociological, and theoretical discussions of black hair and identity in the late eighties and early nineties. The then-prominent psychoanalytic notion of abjection offered a universalized account of subject formation in which hair always functioned as a danger to a stable sense of selfhood. I contend, however, that Hammons's dynamic sculpture of dreadlocks crafted from discarded hair and Simpson's juxtapositions of looped braids with evocative texts invested hair with a powerful cultural specificity that was life affirming rather than hostile (Figs. 4 & 5).

Chapter Four investigates the tropes of absence and dispersal in the candy spills of Cuban American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres and in the gnawed sculptural work of Bahamian-born artist Janine Antoni, arguing that these works decenter western notions of subjectivity that privilege presence and coherence. Both works hinge on that which is no longer present: the missing candies from Gonzalez-Torres's pile and the expurgated chocolate and lard from Antoni's cubes (Figs. 6 & 1). I propose that their uses of absence as a central motif can be productively understood in relationship to Caribbean diasporic narratives that emphasized the loss associated with exile and dispersion. In addition, by activating visitors' senses of smell and taste, Antoni and Gonzalez-Torres's works resonate with postcolonial critiques of vision and acknowledge the epistemological value of embodied experience.²²

²¹ I am thinking here of the highly theoretical writings of Judith Butler in contrast to the how-to manual for AIDS activism written by Douglas Crimp. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge), 1990; Douglas Crimp, *AIDS DemoGraphics* (San Francisco: Bay Press), 1990.

²² All of these artists pairings are meant to shed light on particular aspects of the artists' works. Other combinations that might prove fruitful in future study would be a consideration of Hammons's and Antoni's use of humor or Lorna Simpson's and Felix Gonzalez-Torres's use of text.

Throughout these case studies, I argue that the artworks assume a model of subjectivity that is relational rather than fundamentally antagonistic. Such a model allows for the particularity of subjects' own histories without such particularities resulting in unbreachable distance. The somatic upheaval we experience can function as an opportunity rather than a rupture, an invitation to engage with objects and concepts might be unfamiliar. Instead of being threatening, these encounters can be what Kelly Oliver calls "loving adventures," the advent of something new.²³

²³ Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 224.

CHAPTER ONE: Bodies That Mattered

Introduction

The art review section of the May 15, 1992 issue of *The New York Times* began with the headline: “Body, Body Everywhere, Whole and Fragmented.” According to critic Roberta Smith, the weekend’s contemporary art offerings were bound together by their use of the human body as a point of departure. “The fact that the body has become a canvas of conflict is hardly surprising in an age of AIDS, racial riots, and new and bitter battles over the rights of women and gays,” she wrote.¹ Smith then went on to describe eight new solo exhibitions and three group shows in New York, all of which featured artworks that used the body “to address social injustice, sexism, homophobia, and disease.”² Many of these artworks, Smith implied, were part of a broader turn towards “identity politics” in art of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and a good number of the artists included in these shows were becoming quite popular on the New York exhibition circuit.

A striking disjunction emerged, however, between the proliferation of these body- and identity-related artworks and the prevailing art historical and theoretical scholarship being written on late modern and contemporary practices. On the one hand, artworks engaging with the politics of traditionally marginalized social identities were gaining increased institutional recognition. Supporters demanded recognition for these artists and artworks on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition had previously been denied: *because* of the artist’s race, *because* of the artist’s gender, *because*

¹ Roberta Smith, “Body, Body Everywhere, Whole and Fragmented,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 1992.

² Ibid. The exhibitions were: “Kiki Smith,” at Fawbush Gallery; “Sue Williams,” at 303 Gallery; “Kiki Smith & Byron Kim,” at the AC Project Room; “Charles Ray,” at the Feature Gallery; “Alfred Leslie,” at Flynn; “Mike Glier,” at the Drawing Center; “Stephen Schofield,” at Horodner Romney Gallery; “George Segal,” at Sidney Janis; “Georg Baselitz,” at Michael Werner; “Masquerade (Body Double),” at Postmasters; “Between the Sheets,” at P.P.O.W.; and “The Banquet” at The Thread Waxing Space.

of the artist's sexuality.³ On the other hand, some art critics and historians – including the editors and contributors to the prominent and influential journal *October* – were promoting theoretical positions that emphasized the discursive construction of subjectivity and, by extension, the superfluity of identity politics. Drawing from the writings of French thinkers, these American scholars critiqued what they perceived to be the dangerous naturalizing of identities through an uncritical emphasis on visibly marked bodies. The resulting scholarship – which has continued to shape the interpretation and legacy of much of the work produced in this period – tended to denigrate corporeality in favor of discussing the symbolic import of bodies.

This chapter charts the emergence and influence of both this insistent linkage of bodies with politicized identities and the reconceptualization of bodies as merely discursive effects. I begin by describing two important social and political contexts for this turn to the body in artistic practice: the rise of multiculturalist scholarship and activism and the onset of the AIDS crisis. I go on to consider three major New York exhibitions that used the body and identity as an organizing principle and explain how curators interpreted the artworks in these shows in relationship to these contemporary political issues. Finally, I summarize critiques of identity politics in general and of identity-based art in particular that were being raised by scholars influenced by psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories. Sketching out this cultural and theoretical landscape offers a basic framework for understanding the primary reception of the artworks that I examine more closely in subsequent chapters. But this overview also begins to suggest some of the ways in which these dominant models of subjectivity could obscure how the artworks themselves actually operated.

³ I am borrowing this concise formulation of the politics of recognition from Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 85. Also, when I choose to use the term “race” in this dissertation, I am referring to the historical construction of a category of identity that elided bodily markers with cultural or national practices.

The Body Politic(ized)

“The body,” curator Thelma Golden wrote in her catalogue essay for the 1993 Whitney Biennial, “provides an immediate site for discussion of cultural, gender, class, and sexual specificity.”⁴ Indeed, bodies – marked by marginalized identities – were at the center of many of the fiercest social and political controversies of that moment. Women’s bodies were at issue in the debates surrounding abortion during the increased conservatism of the Reagan administration. Racialized bodies garnered particular attention in Jesse Jackson’s bids for the Democratic nomination to run for President, in the Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill sexual harassment investigation, and in the beating of Rodney King and subsequent riots in Los Angeles. And the bodies of gay men came under censure as the AIDS crisis peaked and an exhibition including homoerotic photographs by the late artist Robert Mapplethorpe were censored and tried for obscenity before Congress.⁵ But the furor induced by these incidents was itself the result of a particular intersection of social and political phenomena in the 1980s and early 1990s. Before we can explore how artists were using politicized bodies in their artworks, we must understand how the bodies they represented became so deeply politicized in the first place.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the civil rights and women’s rights movements were primarily focused on creating and supporting legislation intended to expand the access of black people and women to opportunities traditionally denied to them on account of race or sex.⁶ By the late 1960s, however, new groups of younger activists began challenging the efficacy of simply claiming ontological equality with whites and men. Thus, rather than arguing against their difference, these new activists

⁴ Thelma Golden, “What’s White?,” in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art; Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 28.

⁵ For more on the Mapplethorpe controversy and the debate surrounding National Endowment for the Arts funding see Steven C. Dubin, *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Peter F. Spooner, “David Wojnarowicz: A Portrait of the Artist as X-Ray Technician,” in *Suspended License: Censorship and the Visual Arts*, ed. Elizabeth Childs (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).

⁶ Linda Nicholson, *Identity before Identity Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

began proudly asserting their difference and, by extension, demanding a more radical restructuring of the social order.⁷ As political scientist Sonia Kruks has explained, “The demand [was] not for inclusion within the fold of ‘universal humankind,’ on the basis of shared human attributes; nor [was] it for respect ‘in spite’ of one’s differences. Rather, what [was] demanded [was] respect for oneself *as* different.”⁸ The Black Power, Chicano, Women’s Liberation, and Gay Liberation movements, among others, shared this new form of identity politics, insisting that dominant culture acknowledge the particularity of their experiences as part of these marginalized social groups.

By the late 1980s, this politics of recognition had been stretched to include an even broader range of ethnic groups, particularly the growing population of minorities in the United States. In the 1980s, the nation experienced its most significant growth of the ethnic minority population. The 1990 census reported that “nearly one in every four Americans claiming African, Asian, Hispanic or American Indian ancestry.”⁹ The author of a 1991 article on the census published in *The New York Times* seemed unsure of what to make of these results, at first assuring readers that “European roots still dominate” and then ominously declaring that whites were “edg[ing] towards the minority.”¹⁰ While much of the increase of ethnic minority populations could be attributed to immigration, the dramatic 37.9% increase in the American Indian population reflected a move among people of mixed ethnic ancestries to identify themselves with their minority heritage.¹¹

⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁸ Kruks, *Retrieving Experience*, 85.

⁹ Felicity Barringer, “Census Shows Profound Change in Racial Makeup of the Nation,” *The New York Times*, March 11, 1991, A1.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. See also Eva Marie Garroutte, *Real Indians: Identity and the Survival of Native America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

The term “multiculturalism” emerged as a useful but fraught term to describe this new emphasis on representing and celebrating cultural diversity in a variety of arenas.¹² As with the identity politics of the 1970s, multiculturalism hinged on the notion of “recognition,” outlined by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor in a 1992 long-form essay entitled *Multiculturalism and the “Politics of Recognition.”* The essay consolidated much of the general language used to describe multiculturalism in the United States in the early nineties and laid out a philosophical argument in more precise terms.¹³ Taylor proposed that recognition plays a crucial role in the formation of individuals’ identities. He offered a historical account of liberalism, via the ideas of philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant, and the development of the “politics of equal dignity.”¹⁴ Since the breakdown of earlier centuries’ clearly defined social hierarchies, however, recognition has had to be acquired through exchange with other members of society. According to Taylor, this dependence on recognition to acquire not only equal rights but also a fundamental sense of identity has become problematic in a modern pluriform society.¹⁵ Liberalism, as a philosophical position, has been unable to accommodate people of different cultural backgrounds because it itself inherently privileges white western culture.¹⁶ As a substitute for the historical politics of equal dignity, Taylor instead suggested a “politics of difference” where individuals belonging to minority cultures would be recognized *as* different and their cultures will be valued.¹⁷ He cautioned, however, that recognition given from a sense of obligation,

¹² Perhaps the only thing that scholars of multiculturalism consistently agree on is the fact that it is, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam declare in their 1994 book, “[multiculturalism] has become an empty signifier on to which diverse groups project their hopes and fears.” Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994), 47. For the purposes of this project, the term “multiculturalism” functions in a historicized fashion, reflecting how the term was deployed in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the United States, primarily as it manifested itself in visual art production, exhibition, and related writings.

¹³ This is also the text to which subsequent US critiques of multiculturalism refer.

¹⁴ Charles Taylor and Amy Gutmann, *Multiculturalism and “The Politics of Recognition”: An Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

rather than respect, was condescension, not true recognition.¹⁸ Thus, he additionally suggested a “politics of equal respect,” grounded in “the presumption of cultural equality.”¹⁹ That is, he asserted the fundamental belief that “all human cultures that have animated whole societies over some considerable stretch of time have something important to say to all human beings.”²⁰ This politics of recognizing diversity could and did find expression in several different arenas.

Through the 1980s, multiculturalism’s primary impact in the United States was felt in the academy.²¹ A wave of scholars – many who were themselves ethnic minorities and just emerging in their respective fields – worked to dismantle dominant myths of American exceptionalism by exposing passages of American history that had been forgotten or suppressed. A proliferation of new historical accounts of the experiences of Native Americans, African Americans, more recent Asian immigrants, as well as homosexuals were published, complicating any attempts to maintain a single, coherent vision of the United States as a protector of freedom and democracy for all.²² In addition, some scholars launched an attack on the western “canon” – the supposedly objective standard of excellence in cultural production – by pointing out how its formation simply served to reinscribe existing structures of exclusion.²³

¹⁸ Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, 70.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Timothy Powell, “All Colors Flow into Rainbows and Nooses: The Struggle to Define Academic Multiculturalism,” *Cultural Critique* 55 (Fall 2003): 160.

²² For just a few examples see Colin G. Calloway, *New Directions in American Indian History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988); Ronald T. Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Robert Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1989).

²³ Two well-known examples of a critique of the canon are Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (New York, NY: IconEditions, 1992). For a defense of the western canon see Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

By the end of the decade, however, multiculturalism had gained both public support and censure. Advocates frequently used the term expansively, including not only a recognition of ethnic diversity but also gender and sexual difference and applied this principle to a variety of practices in business, education, politics, and the popular and fine arts. In some contexts – such as college admissions and human resource departments – the notion of multiculturalism suggested a move towards prioritizing ethnic and gender diversity in admission and hiring practices. In the arts, musicians, artists, and performers increasingly explored and utilized their own ethnic heritage as the basis for both the subject and content of their work. And in education, advocates pushed to revise curriculum in order to reflect a wider range of cultures and “show greater sensitivity to the role of nonwhite culture.”²⁴

The metaphorical language used by multiculturalist supporters, particularly in elementary education and children’s literature, provides further insight into how the politics of recognition functioned in relation to visible, bodily difference. For example, in 1991 the New York City Board of Education published a multicultural teacher education guide entitled *Children of the Rainbow*.²⁵ The book was available in multiple languages and was intended to teach children in kindergarten through third grade about other cultural practices and contributions. In a similar vein, children’s books published in the early 1990s often utilized the notion of the “rainbow” or “colors” as a means of explaining cultural diversity.²⁶ In contrast to the earlier, preferred notion of the “melting pot” – in which different cultures were expected to blend together and become indistinguishable from each other – the symbol of the rainbow emphasized the distinctiveness of each color on the spectrum while

²⁴ Sam Howe Verhovek, “Way Cleared for Changes in Curriculum,” *The New York Times*, July 26, 1991. Verhovek is reporting on the New York Board of Regents’ vote in favor to revise the state’s social studies and history curriculum.

²⁵ New York Board of Education, *Children of the Rainbow: First Grade* (Brooklyn: New York City Board of Education, 1991).

²⁶ For just a few examples see P. K. Hallinan, *A Rainbow of Friends* (Nashville: Hambleton-Hill Pub., 1994); Sheila Hamanaka, *All the Colors of the Earth* (New York: Morrow Junior Books, 1994); Bobbi Jane Kates and Joseph Mathieu, *We’re Different, We’re the Same* (New York: Random House, 1992).

connoting a positive attitude and a sense of new beginnings. However, this use of color as a metaphor for cultural difference was often conflated with the historical usage of “color” to describe skin tone and, by extension, a biological conception of race. Thus in picture books, such as P.K. Hallinan’s *A Rainbow of Friends*, the young – white – protagonist was shown surrounded by other children with varying shades of skin and hair. The concept of “recognition,” on which the multiculturalist project rested, assumed a kind of visible difference, the ability to be easily categorized as part of a particular ethnic community due to outward, most often physical, markers.²⁷

But even as proponents of multiculturalism were using the body as a signifier of difference and thus a point of pride and celebration, the discovery and subsequent devastating effects of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) prompted a different kind of politicization of the body. In 1981, doctors and the Center for Disease Control began to grow concerned about emerging clusters of patients in New York and San Francisco, mostly young men, who were being diagnosed with Kaposi’s Sarcoma (KS) – a skin cancer that tended to occur in older people – and Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP) – a rare opportunistic infection known to occur in people with highly compromised immune systems.²⁸ The CDC formed a task force to study the cause of these unusual cases, and by the following year researchers had designated the condition Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome but were still at a loss to explain what caused the disease or how it was transmitted.²⁹ Confirmed infections and AIDS-related deaths in the United States grew exponentially in the early eighties. By the end of

²⁷ For a critique of how this emphasis on visibility was especially problematic for “mixed race” people, see Ronald Sundstrom, “Being and Being Mixed Race,” *Social Theory and Practice* 27 no. 2 (2001).

²⁸ Centers for Disease Control, “Kaposi’s Sarcoma and Pneumocystis Pneumonia among Homosexual Men- New York City and California,” *MMWR Weekly* 30, no. 4 (1981).

²⁹ Centers for Disease Control, “Current Trends: Update on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) - United States,” *MMWR Weekly* 31, no. 37 (1982).

1984, the CDC was reporting 7,699 AIDS cases and 3,665 AIDS deaths.³⁰ Despite this, the epidemic remained largely unacknowledged. Indeed, President Ronald Reagan did not publically address the existence of AIDS until 1986.³¹

Due in part to this long government silence regarding AIDS, as well as scientists' attenuated struggle to determine the cause of the disease, public misinformation and confusion were rampant. This general ignorance was reflected in the 1985 article in *The New York Times* reporting on a recent poll done in the city. According to the results, nearly half of those questioned thought that they could contract AIDS by sharing a water glass with an infected person.³² Such uncertainties and unfounded beliefs manifested themselves in a particular fear of bodily fluids and secretions, as well as any physical contact with people with AIDS (PWAs). In a follow-up article, the author repeatedly insisted that the virus was known to be transmitted only through blood and sexual secretions, thus rejecting the then-popular hearsay that it could also be spread through saliva, tears, perspiration, urine, and feces.³³ Other questions in the article range from the safety of having children with AIDS in schools – “Can the disease be spread through biting?” – to questions about contamination via swimming pools or food handlers.³⁴ A year later, an editorial entitled “Curbing the Fear of AIDS” emphasized the findings of a new study that confirmed that “there is virtually no chance of acquiring AIDS through casual contact.”³⁵ The authors continued, “There is no justification, hence, for society to turn victims of AIDS

³⁰ Center For Infectious Diseases, Centers for Disease Control, "Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), Weekly Surveillance Report- United States," December 31, 1984, <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/surveillance/resources/reports/pdf/surveillance84.pdf> (accessed February 12, 2012).

³¹ Allen White, “Reagan’s AIDS Legacy: Silence Equals Death,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 8, 2004, <http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/openforum/article/Reagan-s-AIDS-Legacy-Silence-equals-death-2751030.php> (accessed February 12, 2012).

³² Erik Eckholm, “Poll Finds Many AIDS Fears That the Experts Say Are Groundless,” *The New York Times*, September 12, 1985, B11.

³³ Eckholm, “Fears on AIDS Termed Largely without Cause,” *The New York Times*, September 13, 1985, B3.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Editorial Desk, “Curbing the Fear of AIDS,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 1986, A16.

into pariahs, forcing them out of jobs and apartments, refusing to provide them services, or to let them, in the case of children, stay in school.”³⁶ Such injustices had become common in New York and reflected people’s worries that even casual bodily contact could lead to infection. This deep-seated and recurring concern over the spread of AIDS through bodily fluids or even a simple touch demonstrates how the body and its effluvia became a site of fear in the late eighties.

At least some of the panic surrounding AIDS and this more general pathologizing of bodily fluids could be attributed to the seeming invisibility of both the disease itself and the social group associated with it: gay men. While AIDS could be acquired by anyone, it unquestionably ravaged specific communities: poor African American and Latina women, intravenous drug users, hemophiliacs, and gay men. According to playwright Larry Kramer, who helped found both the Gay Men’s Health Crisis group and the activist organization ACT UP, three out of four AIDS cases in New York were diagnosed in gay men.³⁷ Indeed, in the minds of many Americans, AIDS was believed to *only* affect homosexuals.³⁸ The virus and gay identity were linked from its initial diagnosis in 1981, when some doctors termed the condition Gay-Related Immune Deficiency.³⁹ Although the CDC disproved that causality in 1982, the belief that AIDS was a “homosexual disorder” persisted, as did the colloquial referencing of AIDS as “gay cancer.”⁴⁰ In his controversial 1987 book *And the Band Played On*, journalist Randy Shilts argued that this linkage between AIDS and homosexuality was the reason that the national government dragged its feet in response to the crisis. Shilts accused the Reagan

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Larry Kramer, “The Beginning of ACTing Up,” (1987) in *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics*, ed., Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan (New York: Routledge, 1999), 609.

³⁸ Further proof can be seen in the repeated editorials and health articles in *The New York Times* reiterated to the public that the disease was not exclusive to homosexual men and that heterosexual promiscuity could also spread the virus. See, for example Lawrence Altman, “Heterosexuals and AIDS: New Data Examined,” *The New York Times*, January 22, 1985., C1

³⁹ Altman, “New Homosexual Disorder Worries Health Officials,” *The New York Times*, May 11, 1982, C1.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

administration of homophobia, stating that because they saw the gay population as dispensable, the response to the epidemic was compromised.⁴¹ Shilts, and others who made similar arguments, also cited Reagan's communications director Pat Buchanan's statement that AIDS was "nature's revenge on gay men."⁴²

This conflation of AIDS with gay identity also had implications for gay identity politics. Gay identity had only recently become more visible in the United States but often remained hidden or highly coded. Although late nineteenth and early twentieth century scientists attempted "to constrain queer bodies within the registers of identity and visibility," as historian Dana Seitler terms it, the social repression and vilification of homosexual practices along with the absence of clear physical markers of sexual identity created a hidden or "invisible" community.⁴³ When, on June 28, 1969, hundreds of gay men, lesbians, and transvestites spontaneously resisted a police raid on the Stonewall Inn – an underground gay bar in Greenwich Village in New York City – their defiance marked a new insistence on the visibility and social recognition of a hitherto marginalized group. The Stonewall Riots served as a rallying point for the Gay Liberation movement that emphasized gay pride and encouraged gay men and lesbians to "come out" to family, friends, and colleagues.⁴⁴

But, in the 1980s and early 1990s, when the AIDS crisis was at its peak, this radicalized emphasis on hypervisibility and a concrete, recognizable identity became increasingly problematic and even dangerous. Indeed, Charles Krauthammer, writing in the *New Republic*, mused, "Just as society was ready to grant that homosexuality is not an illness, it is seized with the idea that homosexuality

⁴¹ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 55.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 312.

⁴³ Dana Seitler, "Queer Physiognomies," *Criticism* 46, no. 1 (2004): 73.

⁴⁴ For more on the Stonewall Riots and the Gay Liberation movement, see David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004).

causes illness.”⁴⁵ Many gays and lesbians found themselves in the seeming double bind of being deemed either invisible and ignored in their distress *or* being considered too visible and thus vulnerable to further social censure because of the coupling of gay identity and AIDS in the public imagination.⁴⁶

The histories and effects of multiculturalism and the AIDS crisis in the United States are of course more complex than this brief sketch. But understanding these concomitant influences on public perceptions of the body in the 1980s and 1990s provides us with a valuable context for engaging body-related artworks from this period. Even more importantly, they help us appreciate how such works were received and popularized by particular curators and institutions in New York.

“Body, Body Everywhere”

As art critic Roberta Smith observed, bodies – politicized, fragmented, ruptured, or abstractly evoked – seemed to be ubiquitous in the New York art world of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Group exhibitions organized around issues of the body and identity were especially popular. The New Museum of Contemporary Art, a young institution focused on exhibiting emerging artists, inaugurated its new permanent location in the Bowery neighborhood of New York with the exhibition *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* in 1984. The show consisted primarily of artists using the medium of photography as a means to explore what curator Kate Linker called “the continuous production of sexual difference.”⁴⁷ Other New York exhibitions, such as *Race and Representation: Art Film/Video* at Hunter College Art Gallery in 1987, *Autobiography: In Her Own Image* at the INTAR Gallery in 1988, and *Prisoners of Image: Ethnic and Gender Stereotypes* at The Alternative Museum in 1989, similarly

⁴⁵ Charles Krauthammer, “The Politics of a Plague: The Metaphor of Illness Revisited,” *New Republic*, August 1, 1984, 18.

⁴⁶ I take up some of the varied responses to this crisis, including the emergence of queer theory and memorial practices in the visual arts in Chapter Two.

⁴⁷ Kate Linker and Jan Weinstock, *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 3.

examined issues of ethnicity and gender through representations of the body. There were, however, three major exhibitions between 1990 and 1993 that were particularly influential in establishing how such artworks were to be understood: *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity*, the 1991 Whitney Biennial exhibition, and the 1993 Whitney Biennial exhibition.

In 1990, three New York City art museums – The New Museum of Contemporary Art in the Bowery, The Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art in SoHo – presented *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*. Ambitious in both scale and scope, *The Decade Show* has remained a touchstone in subsequent discussions about art and identity politics. Organized thematically and staged across the three separate institutions, the exhibition included almost 200 artworks by over 100 artists engaging with issues of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality that the curators felt defined the past decade.⁴⁸ While works such as Nestor Millan’s homoerotic photographs and Barbara Krueger’s graphic posters addressed homophobia and sexism, *The Decade Show* especially foregrounded ethnic diversity. Many of the non-white artists included in the exhibition used racially marked bodies as a means of dismantling dominant stereotypes or exposing suppressed histories. Artists deployed a variety of visual strategies, ranging from the appropriation of popular visual representations of race or gender to the use of the artist’s own body.

For example, Robert Colescott, in his painting *Knowledge of the Past is the Key to the Future: Matthew Henson and the Quest for the North Pole* (1986), blatantly adopted stereotypical imagery of

⁴⁸ The curators were Julia P. Herzberg from the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, Laura Trippi and Gary Sangster from the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Sharon F. Patton from the Studio Museum in Harlem. The Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art featured the themes Biography/Autobiography and Sexuality/Gender; the New Museum featured Myth/Spirituality/Nature and Discourse/Media; and the Studio Museum featured Social Practices/Cultural Criticism and History/Memory/Artifact. In terms of artist demographics, the 132 individual artists in *The Decade Show* included 39 Latinos (25 men and 14 women); 28 African Americans (14 men and 14 women); 16 Asians and Asian Americans (12 men and 4 women); 9 Native Americans (6 men and 3 women); and 38 Caucasians (17 men and 21 women).

African Americans: white eyes, full red lips, flat noses and almost-black skin (Fig. 7). He used these seemingly degrading images of Matthew Henson, a black sharecropper's son, in a narrative painting that recounted Henson's journey to the North Pole in 1909 with Robert Peary. According to Colescott and some African American historians, Henson played a crucial role in Peary's expedition and likely reached the destination before Peary. Yet, Peary, who was white, received the historical commendation while Henson's role was reduced to that of a mere porter. Through his foregrounding of stereotypically rendered black bodies, Colescott suggested that this historical excision was racially motivated and he worked to reclaim Henson's contribution *as* an African American.

James Luna's performance and installation *The Artifact Piece* (1990) similarly used stereotypical imagery but also employed the artist's own body as part of the critical apparatus (Fig. 8). Luna literally put his own body on display in the museum, lying down in an open exhibition case filled with sand and surrounded by personal artifacts: his divorce papers, college diplomas, childhood photographs, clothing, some of his Motown tape collection, and other items of personal significance. Assuming that his appearance and his name would alert viewers to his American Indian heritage, Luna critiqued museums' traditional practice of presenting American Indian culture as if it were a thing of the past rather than acknowledging its perpetuation in contemporary communities.

In a quieter photographic and textual installation, Lorna Simpson demonstrated the interconnectedness of visible markers of identity to particular histories of oppression. *Necklines* (1989) consisted of two identical black and white photographs, cropped in a circle, of a person's mouth, chin, and collarbone (Fig. 9). The images flanked a column of engraved plastic text panels that began with "ring, surround, lasso, noose" and concluded with "feel the ground sliding from under you." Although Simpson offered very little visual information about the subject, she expected that viewers would use

certain clues – the relative darkness of the skin tone, the full lips, and the sweeping neckline – to designate the subject as a black woman.⁴⁹ Such recognition could, in turn, influence viewers’ interpretation of the series of words, shifting them from benign and seemingly random choices to a suggestive, fragmented histories of slavery and lynching. The evocative power of Simpson’s work thus hinged on the specificity and visibility of a black female body.

Works such as Colescott’s, Luna’s, and Simpson’s clearly fit the curators’ stated intention for the exhibition. In the opening essay for the exhibition catalogue, Eunice Lipton introduces *The Decade Show* as “an exhibit attempting to construct a multivocal artworld” by showing “art by African Americans, Asian Americans, Latin Americans, Native Americans, gays, women, and more.”⁵⁰ The organizers thought carefully about the implications of stretching the show across three institutions with differing commitments and differing constituencies. They also expected the exhibition to be both physically and intellectually discomfiting. At the close of her catalogue essay, Lipton imagined that visitors, forced to travel between three relatively modest museum spaces in distinctly different neighborhoods, would “have to experience something new in the trip; just making the trip will be disconcerting – even scary – to many.”⁵¹ She continued, “Viewers may have to face their own positionality and power – or lack thereof – more directly than they ever have. They may also be forced to confront their aesthetic (and cultural) biases.”⁵²

But the curators and other catalogue authors still seemed to be struggling with an unspoken tension: how could they dismantle dominant power structures while still insisting that those same structures recognize marginalized cultures as distinct and valuable in their difference? Thus critic Judith

⁴⁹ The process of “decoding” Simpson’s photographs is discussed in much more detail in Chapter Three.

⁵⁰ Eunice Lipton, “Here Today, Gone Tomorrow? Some Plots for Dismantling,” in *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990), 20.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵² *Ibid.*

Wilson simultaneously derided traditional art histories for ignoring African American artists' contributions to modernist and postmodernist developments while claiming that a new African American aesthetic was independent from Western forms.⁵³ Similarly, Studio Museum curator Sharon Patton argued that the African American artists in the exhibition, including Robert Colescott and Lorna Simpson, were making work with a universal message that was nonetheless inextricable from their own experiences of racist exclusion.⁵⁴ Artist Jimmie Durham also expressed his own ambivalence towards pluralism in the art world: "Sometimes I got the feeling that people thought, 'This pluralism has gone too far – even the Indians want in on it.' At other times it seemed people thought, 'See, we even have Indians in the show.' There is an ocean between showing and being included in the discourse."⁵⁵ But how, Durham wondered, could American Indians participate in this kind of exchange when such critical discourses did not exist for them in the first place?⁵⁶

Most of the exhibition reviews for *The Decade Show* glossed over these nuances. *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith summarized the purpose of the show thusly:

The show is important as an effort to democratize and widen post-modernist art theory, which has often argued that art should be critical of various forms of power and oppression while supporting a rather short list of white artists, most of whom are men. This show's message is: when dealing with issues of oppression and difference, let's hear from the oppressed and different, from artists whose sensibilities have been shaped by being Asians or women or homosexuals.⁵⁷

Her colleague, Michael Kimmelman, echoed this estimation, writing that the exhibition

“embrace[d] many ways of looking at things, many sources, many voices” and that “high among the [its]

⁵³ Judith Wilson, "Seventies into Eighties – Neo-Hoodooism Vs. Postmodernism: When (Art) Worlds Collide," *The Decade Show*, 132.

⁵⁴ Sharon Patton, "The Agenda in the Eighties: Socially Conscious Art," *The Decade Show*, 78, 80.

⁵⁵ Jimmie Durham, "A Central Margin," *The Decade Show*, 167.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁵⁷ Roberta Smith, "Three Museums Collaborate to Sum up a Decade," *The New York Times*, May 25, 1990, C22.

goals [was] the promotion of a cultural pluralism.”⁵⁸ Both critics struggled, however, with precisely how to evaluate the artworks in the exhibition. Smith admitted, “It must also be said that much too often the art in this exhibition nourishes the heart and mind more than the eye. Sincerity, alienation, and just causes don’t necessarily make convincing artworks.”⁵⁹ Kimmelman, likewise, dismissed some works as “agitprop” and “haranguing,” but then concluded that “there [were] a good number of works that demand[ed] to be judged not simply on polemical grounds but also on formal terms, although the roots of their formalism [were] not necessarily European.”⁶⁰ Taken together, the curators’ essays and the critics’ responses express some of the difficulties and pitfalls of organizing an exhibition around the notion of identity politics. These challenges would be further intensified in the 1991 and 1993 biennial exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Unlike the younger museums that hosted *The Decade Show*, the Whitney Museum was an established, well-funded institution. In fact, in her essay for *The Decade Show* catalogue, Eunice Lipton derided the Whitney – along with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Guggenheim, and the Museum of Modern Art – for being a “grandiose building” that said, “We are special, we are for the privileged. Enjoy, but remember this is our house, not yours.”⁶¹ But under the new directorship of David Ross, the museum set out to self-consciously collect and exhibit politically engaged contemporary artworks. The 1989 Whitney Biennial had been widely panned for an “overall tone of calculated whimsy and naughty academicism” and an “apparent disinterest in overt political content.”⁶² The 1991 Biennial, on the other hand, was far more expansive in scope, occupying all four floors of the museum building. The curators – Richard Armstrong, John G. Hanhardt, Richard Marshall, and Lisa Phillips,

⁵⁸ Michael Kimmelman, “The Force of Conviction Stirred by the 80’s,” *The New York Times*, May 27, 1990, C25.

⁵⁹ Smith, “Three Museums.”

⁶⁰ Kimmelman, “The Force of Conviction.”

⁶¹ Lipton, “Here Today, Gone Tomorrow,” 32.

⁶² Holland Cotter, “Report from New York: A Bland Biennial,” *Art in America* (September 1989): 81, 83.

assisted by an advisory committee of curators representing seven regions of the United States – grouped the artists in “generations,” with one group displayed per floor. The second floor was devoted to older, established American artists such as Ellsworth Kelly, Roy Lichtenstein, Chuck Close, and Bruce Nauman. The third floor showcased artists who came of age in the 1980s, such as Mike Kelley, Cindy Sherman, and Vito Acconci, all of whom were included in either or both of the two previous biennials. Finally, the fourth floor – which garnered the most publicity – displayed works by emerging artists, most of which confronted issues such as gender, race, or sexuality. In addition, the first floor lobby featured the *AIDS Timeline* by the collective Group Material, thus bracketing the entire exhibition between overtly political artworks.

Los Angeles Times reviewer Christopher Knight dubbed the fourth floor “the new kids floor,” describing it as “pandemonium” with its riot of bodies and political messages.⁶³ Whereas only one non-white artist was included in the 1989 Biennial, the fourth floor of the 1991 Biennial included a good number of artists whose work had been recently brought to prominence in Lucy Lippard’s best-selling 1990 book *Mixed Blessings: Art in a Multicultural America* or in *The Decade Show*.⁶⁴ As in *The Decade Show*, most of the fourth floor artists in the 1991 *Biennial* who engaged issues of identity represented or otherwise referenced the body in their work.

Among the most-discussed works included in the exhibition was Kiki Smith’s untitled pair of nude figures, one male and one female, which hung just above the gallery floor on metal racks (Fig. 2).⁶⁵ The life-size bodies were made from yellowy-peach beeswax, colored with gray hair, darker patches in the pubic regions, and reddened nipples. Disconcertingly, however, the bodies also seemed abraded,

⁶³ Christopher Knight, “Four Floors of Evolution: The ‘91 Whitney Biennial Divvies up Painters, Sculptors and Photographers from the ‘50s to the ‘90s Floor by Floor – and the Curators’ Conceit Works,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1991, http://articles.latimes.com/1991-04-28/entertainment/ca-1141_1_fourth-floor (accessed June 12, 2012).

⁶⁴ These artists included: Nayland Blake, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Luis Jimenez, Glenn Ligon, Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Lorna Simpson, Kiki Smith, Carrie Mae Weems, and David Wojnarowicz.

⁶⁵ This sculpture, along with Smith’s other work from this period, is further discussed in Chapter Two.

scabbed with reddish brown and dirty gray on their limbs. White liquid seemed to be dribbling down from the man's penis and the woman's nipples, leaving milky trails down his legs and her torso.

Smith's works resonated with the figural fragments made by Robert Gober and exhibited on the third floor. Both untitled sculptures were highly naturalistic, cast in pale peach beeswax and embedded with individual human hairs. One sculpture consisted of a truncated, seemingly hermaphroditic torso: a rounded breast on one half and a smooth pectoral muscle on the other (Fig. 3). In the other sculpture, the lower half of a man's body protruded from the gallery wall, naked except for socks and shoes. More unnerving, though, was the musical score stamped across his buttocks like a tattoo (Fig. 10). Curator Richard Armstrong linked Smith's and Gober's darkly "poetic" depictions of weak or fragmented bodies with "a widespread desire to foster wider, metaphoric meanings, partly in response to a stark recognition of mortality in the face of AIDS."⁶⁶ The works did not proudly assert a politicized identity, but they both used the body to implicitly suggest how the body operates as a site of both identity and political struggle.

Even when bodies were not literally represented, their presence was strongly evoked. Nayland Blake's assemblages of ankle fetters, mirrors, stainless steel tables, black leather straps and lengths of black rubber hoses created spaces that bodies could fill (Fig. 11). The fetters articulated a void for legs, for example, and the mirrors and table required bodies to make them functional objects. Whether the space was threatening or sexually exciting, a reference to hospitals or sadomasochistic practices, remained ambiguous and largely depended on viewers' own social or sexual contexts. To curator Lisa Phillips, Blake's work was explicitly homoerotic, an affirmation of alternative sexual practices where

⁶⁶ Richard Armstrong, "Circa 1991," in *1991 Biennial Exhibition*, ed. Richard Armstrong (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art; W.W. Norton, 1991), 14.

pain becomes pleasure.⁶⁷

There were, of course, artworks on the fourth floor that depicted the body or referenced bodily fluids or excrement without reference to politicized identity. Sally Mann's controversial nude photographs of her children, for example, while eliciting public censure, were more related to nineteenth century photographic traditions than identity-driven strategies of feminism. In a similar fashion, John Miller's *Natural History* (1989) diorama-like sculpture, crafted from Styrofoam and paper mâché but made to look like feces, garnered attention because of its seeming disregard for social mores. While such works may have been especially inflammatory in the volatile political context of the early 1990s, neither artist was directly engaging questions of subjectivity or marginalized identity.

Although *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman described the biennial as one that "aimed to please," many other reviewers complained about what they saw as a marked preference for "political art."⁶⁸ The question of aesthetic quality versus political didacticism dominated reviews such as the one written by Arthur Danto for *The Nation*. Discussing Group Material's *AIDS Timeline*, Danto allowed that it "was art," but he further declared, "There is a sad lesson that activist artists must sooner or later learn: the goodness of the message of art does not translate into goodness of art."⁶⁹ He similarly criticized the artists on the fourth floor, including Smith and Blake, for seeming "angry or sullen, confrontational or condemnatory, arrogant and menacing and hostile."⁷⁰ This affect could be understood as at least the partial result of an aggregated viewing experience, the result of so many works being shown together in a relentlessly provocative sequence. Unlike *The Decade Show's* almost chaotic and certainly ebullient celebration of cultural difference, the 1991 Biennial seemed to project a more

⁶⁷ Lisa Phillips, "Culture Under Siege," *1991 Biennial Exhibition*, 21.

⁶⁸ Michael Kimmelman, "At the Whitney, a Biennial That's Eager to Please," *The New York Times*, April 19, 1991, C1. For the latter position, see Roger Kimball, "Culture Under Siege: The Politics of the Whitney Biennial," *New Criterion* 9 (June 1991); Arthur C. Danto, "Art for Activism's Sake: The 1991 Whitney Biennial," *The Nation*, June 3, 1991.

⁶⁹ Danto, "Art for Activism's Sake," 743.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 745.

somber air and focused more on artists whose work explored issues of gender, sexuality, and particularly related social issues such as AIDS.

Two years later, the Whitney Biennial became the object of even more vituperative critical furor. Curated by Elisabeth Sussman and a team that included Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt, and Lisa Phillips, the exhibition explicitly set out to feature socially engaged artworks with an emphasis on female, gay, and minority artists. In her introductory catalogue essay, Sussman specifically cited the body as a “major synthesis of interest that has fully emerged in the early 1990s.”⁷¹ Indeed, representations and evocations of bodies dominated the entire exhibition, ranging from the abstracted to the elegiac and even aggressive.

Byron Kim’s *Synecdoche* (1991-92) consisted of 204 eight inch by ten inch canvases, hung together to form a coolly geometric grid in warm, nuanced shades of peaches, browns, and tans (Fig. 12). Each monochromatic canvas was painted with an oil and wax pigment matched to the skin color of particular individuals Kim knew. The resulting expanse of opaque rectangles seemingly suggested that Kim’s sitters could be represented by – or reduced to – just their skin tone.

While Kim’s work stressed the surface quality of skin color, Nan Goldin’s photographs worked to make the largely unseen visible. Employing a casual, snap-shot aesthetic, Goldin created hundreds of portraits of friends living alternative lifestyles in her East Village community, offering a glimpse of bodies that were rarely depicted in art or popular visual culture. In *Jimmy Paulette and Taboo! In the Bathroom*, for example, Goldin captured two shirtless figures, one facing the camera, one turning away (Fig. 13). The seeming confusion of gendered markers – the muscular back, flat top hair cut, and

⁷¹ Elisabeth Sussman, “Coming Together in Parts: Positive Power in the Art of the Nineties,” in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 15.

rhinestone collar of one figure and the flat chest but elaborate, glittering makeup of the other – unsettled normative gender roles and exposed a subculture that would be unfamiliar to many viewers.

An underlying theme of racial violence also seemed to be woven through the exhibition. For example, in her monumental photo and text panel installation *What You Lookn At?* Pat Ward Williams enlarged an offset printed photograph of five young African American men staring back directly at viewers (Fig. 14). Williams scrawled, “What you lookn at?” on top of the image in spray paint, suggesting in both language and the graffiti-like execution a sense of imminent confrontation. The violence that Williams intimated in her photograph exploded in another Biennial inclusion, the video of white Los Angeles police officers beating Rodney King in March of 1991. King, a black man who was on parole for robbery, had led officers on a high-speed car chase in the Lake View Terrace neighborhood. Nearby resident George Holliday, shot the subsequent confrontation between King and police officers, using his new camcorder. The dark, blurry film captured several figures repeatedly and brutally striking a lone, struggling figure on the ground.⁷² The inclusion of the video suggested the immediacy and urgency of the artists’ expressed concerns regarding broader social practices of bigotry and exclusion on account of particular social identities.

For the curators of the biennial, this sense of immediacy and urgency was critical. Director David Ross introduced the show’s catalogue with the declaration that “there is no single set of questions with more relevance at this moment, no set of shared concerns with more resonance *of* this moment than those raised by artists concerned with identity and community.”⁷³ According to the curators,

⁷² The Los Angeles District Attorney charged four police officers with use of excessive force. The trial was moved out of Los Angeles to the neighboring county in April, 1992. The jury acquitted three of the officers but could not agree on charges regarding the fourth officer. Following the announcement of the acquittal, large scale riots broke out in Los Angeles, lasting for six days and calling attention to complex and systemic problems related to class and racial inequalities, urban decay, immigration, and the justice system. Divergent histories and interpretations of the events persist. See Mark Baldassare, *The Los Angeles Riots: Lessons for the Urban Future* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).

⁷³ David Ross, “Know Thy Self (Know Your Place,” *1993 Biennial Exhibition.*, 9.

particularly Elisabeth Sussman, Thelma Golden, and Lisa Phillips, most artists chose to address such issues by using the body as “a major synthesis of interest.”⁷⁴ Golden characterized much of the artwork in the exhibition as “work[ing] consciously to deconstruct and de-center the politically constructed site of whiteness,” and she argued that “the body provides an immediate site for discussions of cultural, gender, class, and sexual specificity.”⁷⁵ Phillips seemed to agree with that estimation, organizing her catalogue essay, “No Man’s Land: At the Threshold of the Millennium,” around the different strategies artists in the exhibition adopted in relationship to the body.⁷⁶

Lead curator Elisabeth Sussman readily acknowledged the challenges of exhibiting and looking at such artworks. “Such...work,” she wrote, “is most often regarded by the art world as propaganda or agitprop,” anticipating critics’ fears that assertions of identity would preclude the possibility of unity or collaboration.⁷⁷ Her overall intent for the exhibition, however, seemed to be a hopeful one. “Identities fragment but do not destroy the social fabric,” she argued, “[they] declare communities and produce a decentered whole...a community of communities.”⁷⁸ Sussman was optimistic that viewers would allow themselves to be changed by the work that they saw.

Still, when discussing the works of particular artists in the catalogue, the curators tended towards didacticism in their interpretations. For example, according to Golden, Byron Kim’s multi-paneled installation, *Synecdoche*, was “about” the complexities of racial difference (Fig. 12). Sussman described Nan Goldin’s photographs as expressing “the desire not to see sexual longing as deviancy or transgression, nor to fix it within more socially acceptable ‘romance’” (Fig. 13).⁷⁹ And Pat Ward William’s monumental photo mural, *What You Lookn At?*, was similarly explained as “subvert[ing] the

⁷⁴ Sussman, “Coming Together in Parts,” 15.

⁷⁵ Thelma Golden, “What’s White?,” *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, 27-28.

⁷⁶ Lisa Phillips, “No Man’s Land: At the Threshold of the Millennium,” *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, 52-61.

⁷⁷ Sussman, “Coming Together in Parts,” 14.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 22.

proverbial gaze” and breaking black men’s “societal silencing.”⁸⁰ Thus, even as the curators claimed to welcome contradiction and open-endedness, they presented the artworks as stable signifiers of marginalized identities and implicitly demanded that a mainstream populace recognize these examples of social difference.

A few, younger critics, writing for new magazines that focused on contemporary art and culture, cautiously affirmed Sussman’s choices. In their review for *Frieze*, Laura Cottingham and Hilton Als praised the show for its diversity, speaking not only of the artists’ cultural backgrounds but also the breadth of media and artistic approaches. In particular, they commended the display of artworks that demanded viewers to be active, against “the conventional aesthetic dictum...that art should present the viewer with a unified, full frontal, visual-centered experience.”⁸¹ John Rian, writing for *Flash Art*, similarly appreciated the Whitney’s foregrounding of less-established artists who worked outside of traditional media, but he also worried that for some works “the production outscale[d] artistic merit,” threatening to turn the museum simply into “an exposition of social discontent.”⁸²

Most critics, however, particularly those writing for mainstream publications, were dismissive and at times even apoplectic in their reviews. *New Yorker* critic Adam Gopnik complained that the Whitney had “reached a nadir of sanctimonious, self-congratulatory sloganeering,” exhibiting works that were either “grindingly obvious” or else “bafflingly oblique.”⁸³ Robert Hughes, reviewing the show for *Time*, called the exhibition “a saturnalia of political correctness, a long-winded course in marginality” where the “aesthetic quality is for the most part feeble.”⁸⁴ In a review for *U.S. News and World Report*, John Leo similarly scoffed at the exhibition as “yet another politically correct art show meant to

⁸⁰ Golden, “What’s White?”, 32.

⁸¹ Hilton Als and Laura Cottingham, “The Pleasure Principled,” *Frieze* (May 1993): 12.

⁸² Jeff Rian, “The 1993 Whitney Biennial: Everyone Loves a Fire,” *Flash Art* 170 (May/June 1993): 78.

⁸³ Adam Gopnik, “The Art World,” *The New Yorker*, March 22, 1993, 100.

⁸⁴ Robert Hughes, “A Fiesta of Whining,” *Time*, March 22, 1993, 68.

frighten the white folks.”⁸⁵ Indeed, the most frequent complaints were that the exhibition was “politically correct” and that the focus on social issues resulted in artworks with no discernible aesthetic merit.⁸⁶

While much of the virulently negative press can be dismissed as being agitprop itself, a few useful observations did emerge in more modulated reviews. One such example was Eleanor Heartney, in her article for *Art in America*. Heartney began by crediting Sussman’s attempt to promote artists from social groups that the Whitney had historically ignored.⁸⁷ She went on, however, to argue that many of the works in the show adopted a simplistic view of identity as only externally imposed, rather than being the product of a complex intersection of political, social, historical, and economic forces. Much of the show, she complained, took on “the tone of hectoring schoolmarms” or returned to the notion of the naïve artist who directly transcribes his or her experience.⁸⁸ Still, she found a few works that were “complex and powerful,” inviting multiple readings rather than merely operating polemically.⁸⁹ Heartney blamed the curators and the institution – rather than the artworks themselves – for the show’s overall affect. The organization of the exhibition and its accompanying texts flattened the artworks, “reduc[ing] complex social issues to a politics of identity.”⁹⁰

These three exhibitions – *The Decade Show*, the 1991 Whitney Biennial, and the 1993 Whitney Biennial – all set out to call attention to marginalized identities and related social issues. And indeed, the shows succeeded introducing the general public to a great number of emerging artists whose

⁸⁵ John Leo, “Culture War at the Whitney,” *U.S. News and World Report*, March 14, 1993, http://www.usnews.com/usnews/opinion/articles/930322/archive_014839 (accessed 12 January 2012).

⁸⁶ See for example Terry R. Myers, “Never Yell ‘Fire!’ In a Crowded Whitney Biennial,” *New Art Examiner* 20 (May 1993); Steven Henry Madoff, “Whitney Biennial: Apocalypse Now?,” *ARTnews* 92 (April 1993); Arthur Danto, “The 1993 Whitney Biennial,” *Nation* 256, no. 15 (1993).

⁸⁷ Eleanor Heartney, “Identity Politics at the Whitney,” *Art in America* 81 (May 1993): 43.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

work engaged with the body and identity. But these exhibitions' tendency towards didacticism also strongly impacted the ways in which these artists' works were interpreted, largely limiting them to a model of identity based on the notion of recognition.

Against Identity

While the linkage of bodies with politicized identities was seemingly ubiquitous in art world, particularly in New York, a “pathologizing of identity” – a deep criticality towards identity politics – was simultaneously emerging in the early 1990s.⁹¹ According to feminist philosopher Linda Martin Alcoff, some scholars saw “strongly felt identities as a political danger for democracy as well as a metaphysically erroneous view about the true or fundamental nature of the self.”⁹² Thus even as advocates of identity politics were garnering increased momentum and attention, particularly in the visual arts, thinkers on all point of the political spectrum were offering critiques of such identities and their relationship to physical bodies.

Perhaps the most familiar critique of identity politics was the charge articulated by historian and social critic Arthur Schlesinger in his bestselling 1992 book *The Disuniting of America*.⁹³ Schlesinger began by describing an “America of old” in which self-reliant immigrants would cast off their old identities and become a “new race of men” without “ancient prejudices and manners.”⁹⁴ This vision of America was clearly grounded in classical liberal tenants of individualism, egalitarianism, and universalism. According to Schlesinger, this progress towards a strongly individualist democracy was

⁹¹ Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 12.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Schlesinger published an article-length version of his argument, “The Cult of Ethnicity, Good and Bad” in *Time* magazine in 1991. In 1993, *Time* dedicated its December 2 issue entirely to the issue of multiculturalism with most contributors echoing Schlesinger’s arguments.

⁹⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America* (New York: Norton, 1992), 1.

derailed by the “cult of ethnicity” that emerged in the United States in the 1960s, compromising “the historic right of Americans to decide their ethnic identities for themselves.”⁹⁵ He painted a picture of intellectual elites ramming ethnicity down the throats of naïve citizens as a means of achieving their own selfish ends. The result, Schlesinger feared, would be tribalism and balkanization. He complained:

The recent apotheosis of ethnicity, black, brown, red, yellow, white, has revived the dismal prospect that in happy melting-pot days Americans thought the republic was moving safely beyond – that is, a society fragmented into separate ethnic communities. The cult of ethnicity exaggerates differences, intensifies resentments and antagonisms, drives ever deeper the awful wedges between races and nationalities. The endgame is self-pity and self-ghettoization.⁹⁶

Interestingly, Schlesinger conflated visible racial markers – in this case skin color – with cultural differences. To him, the emphasis placed on visible difference by proponents of multiculturalism would inevitably lead to separatism and the fracturing of national identity. His preference, instead, would be to ignore visible, physical differences in favor of embracing a shared single culture.

Schlesinger contrasted contemporary “cult[s] of ethnicity” with white Americans’ willing and rational separation from their European identities. Yet even as he did so, he simultaneously asserted that it was uniquely *European* ideas of democracy that shaped American culture.⁹⁷ Importantly, Schlesinger’s definition of democracy implicitly depended on citizens’ capacity for rational deliberation. In his view, rationality required that citizens possess sufficient distance from their embedded cultural traditions in order to objectively pursue the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

Leftist political scientist Wendy Brown leveled a similar but even more strident critique against identity politics in her 1995 book *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*.⁹⁸ Brown declared that politicized identity “becomes attached to its own exclusion...because it is premised on this

⁹⁵ Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America*, 17.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122, 27.

⁹⁸ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). Although the book was not published until 1995, three of the chapters, including the ones in which Brown specifically discusses politicized identity, were published in scholarly journals between 1991 and 1993.

exclusion for its very existence as identity.”⁹⁹ In Brown’s mind, those who insisted on organizing around a marginalized identity were compulsively reinscribing a history of subjugation, fixating on oppression rather than rising above it. Further, claiming such an identity would inevitably result in that person being “reduced to observable social attributes and practices...as if their existence were intrinsic and factual, rather than the effects of discursive and institutional power.”¹⁰⁰ Brown argued that the “language of recognition” on which identity politics hinges becomes itself “a vehicle of subordination through individualization, normalization, and regulation.”¹⁰¹ That is, recognition on the basis of past oppression could only lead to continued oppression. Because she understood identity politics as grounded in recrimination, rancor, and resentment, Brown deemed it a movement without a hopeful future.¹⁰²

Brown further positioned identity politics as antagonistic to class politics. Asserting that class stratification is the primary cause of oppression, Brown worried that self-identification along lines of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity obfuscated this underlying problem:

Yet when not only economic stratification but other injuries to the human body and psyche enacted by capitalism – alienation, commodification, exploitation, displacement, disintegration of sustaining albeit contradictory social forms such as families and neighborhoods – when these are discursively normalized and thus depoliticized, other markers of social difference may come to bear an inordinate weight; indeed, they may bear all the weight of the sufferings produced by capitalism in addition to that attributable to the explicitly politicized marking.¹⁰³

Other leftists writing later in the nineties, including Todd Gitlin, Richard Rorty, and Nancy Fraser, expressed similar concerns over the *ressentiment* – the moralizing revenge of the powerless – intrinsic in

⁹⁹ Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 73.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 60.

identity politics of the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹⁰⁴ Such antagonism and entrenchment, they worried, eviscerated any potential for real political change, much less broader, class-based alliances.

While Schlesinger's and Brown's critiques of identity politics primarily focused on the political implications of the movement and were echoed in various forms in mass media, scholars in the early 1990s also raised philosophical arguments against politicized identity.¹⁰⁵ Drawing heavily from the writings of a cluster of French thinkers, including Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, Felix Guattari, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Louis Althusser, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous, some American academics began questioning the epistemic validity of the traditional western notion of selfhood, arguing that bodies, experiences, and any sense of identity were products of social discourse, not fundamental realities. This loose grouping of theoretical approaches came to be known as poststructuralism and acquired extraordinary influence in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s, dramatically altering the cultural and intellectual landscape.¹⁰⁶

In their 2001 book *French Theory in America*, Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen suggest that this so-called "French theory" influenced American academic discourse and, by extension, cultural thought, in four primary ways. First, it brought "a politics in *language*," a critique of foundationalist thinking through "the scuttling of any discursive mode that refuse[d] to account for its 'implicit presuppositions.'"¹⁰⁷ Second, thinkers such as Deleuze and Guattari, in particular, convinced American scholars that "the dominant modes of conceiving history and subject were inadequate to the violence

¹⁰⁴See Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked with Culture Wars* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995); Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁰⁵ Of course, most scholars offered a blended critique that pulled from both political and philosophical issues.

¹⁰⁶ See the introduction to François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

¹⁰⁷ Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen, *French Theory in America* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 5.

and terrorism of capitalism.”¹⁰⁸ Third, Lotringer and Cohen declare that French theorists’ readings of Nietzsche prompted Americans to reject metanarratives, “the autonomy and majesty of history.”¹⁰⁹ Finally, these influential French thinkers dispensed with any attempts to salvage or rehabilitate a coherent subject, instead choosing to emphasize, even through their writing style, the discursivity of identity and, by extension, bodies.¹¹⁰

A significant number of scholars in the United States in the 1980s grounded their critiques of contemporary identity politics in notions of subjectivity proposed by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and philosopher Michel Foucault.¹¹¹ Both Frenchmen rejected any conception of a “natural” body and were deeply skeptical of the physical body’s ability to access or generate knowledge. The subject, in their views, was a construct, created through social relationships and language.

Psychoanalysis – the belief that human behavior and modes of thinking are governed by unconscious, irrational drives – underwent a profound reorientation and application in the 1950s and 1960s when Lacan offered a rereading of Sigmund Freud’s late nineteenth and early twentieth-century writings.¹¹² Lacan’s reinterpretation of Freud maintained concepts such as the ego and castration complex, but reformulated them under the belief that the unconscious is structured like a language. Because language existed before we were born, we must locate ourselves within language in order to take our place in the world.¹¹³ But, when we enter into the symbolic order of language and leave behind the

¹⁰⁸ Lotringer and Cohen, *French Theory in America*, 7.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹¹ Queer theorist Judith Butler, whose writings from the early 1990s will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 in relationship to the work of Kiki Smith and Robert Gober, is a primary example of a theorist synthesizing Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucauldian discussions of power, but other well-known examples include Gayatri Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, Susan Bordo, and Diana Fuss.

¹¹² See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1958).

¹¹³ Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 39.

“imaginary” realm, we also abandon the illusory sense of wholeness experienced as an infant.¹¹⁴ Thus, according to Lacan, a sense of “lack” drives a subject into an endless pursuit of desires that can never be fully satisfied.

While Lacan himself did not offer a critique of identity politics, scholars elaborating on or drawing from his writings fundamentally question the possibility of identity as such. In his introduction to the 1994 edited volume *The Making of Political Identities*, Ernesto Laclau used the psychoanalytic category of identification as his launching point for a critique of identity politics. “Identification,” he wrote, “[is the] explicit assertion of a lack at the root of any identity...one needs to identify with something because there is an originary and insurmountable lack of identity.”¹¹⁵ In his view, the loss of access to the real was haunting, and that sense of lack drives a desire for identification. But, in a Lacanian framework, any attempt to assert identity would necessarily fail as a lack would continuously re-emerge in the psyche. Thus, according to Laclau, “The politics of identity formation can only be understood as a politics of impossibility. If the ego is based on the imaginary misrecognition of the impossibility of fullness and closure, it also entails a constitutive alienation, making visible a certain lack.”¹¹⁶ For Laclau, in accordance with Lacan, identification is always alienating and never truly productive or restorative.

While Lacan’s conception of subjectivity formation hinged on familial relationships, Foucault’s theorization focused more broadly on all power relationships. According to Foucault, no identity can exist that would not be a form of subjugation.¹¹⁷ The subjugation of identity is that in which the

¹¹⁴ The imaginary and symbolic are modes of representation that make the world and the self intelligible. The symbolic is Lacan’s term for the way in which reality becomes intelligible and takes on meaning and significance, through words; the imaginary refers to the mode of intelligibility offered by images.

¹¹⁵ Ernesto Laclau, *The Making of Political Identities* (London; New York: Verso, 1994), 3.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹¹⁷ See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978); *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1979).

individual is interpellated – or named – within structures of discourse. There could be no self prior to or outside of discourse. In a lecture in 1976, Foucault explained:

The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike, and in doing so subdues or crushes individuals. In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals. The individual, that is, is not vis-à-vis of power; it is, I believe, one of its prime effects. The individual is an effect of power, and, at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle.¹¹⁸

Thus, in Foucault's estimation, human beings have been the very material of power, and subjectivity has been only a fiction. Politicized social identities were, likewise, dangerous in that they produced disciplinary mechanisms and tended to normalize and naturalize categories such as gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. Yet while Foucault deemed identity both metaphysically inaccurate and potentially dangerous, he also seemed to pessimistically assume its inevitability.

American interest in Lacan, Foucault, and other French theorists began in the early 1970s amidst the political resistance enacted by student groups, feminists, and Black Power activists against dominant power structures. In the wake of the French worker and student strikes in May 1968 – seen by many as the progenitor of the social unrest and dissent that spread across the Atlantic – French theory gained an increasing mystique and status in alternative literary journals on American college campuses.¹¹⁹ Such journals offered rough translations of French texts alongside long review essays – modeled on the French journal *Critique* – and experimental literary writing. Two of the pioneering journals were *Diacritics*, begun by young professors David Gorssvogel and Robert Matthews at Cornell in 1971, and *SubStance*, also founded in 1971 by the French department at the University of

¹¹⁸ Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon (1980), 98.

¹¹⁹ Cusset, *French Theory*, 56.

Wisconsin.¹²⁰ In its inaugural issue, *Diacritics* published an exchange between Foucault and George Steiner and followed, in subsequent issues, with articles by Harold Bloom and Paul de Man, essays on Lacan, a review of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, and, in a playful gesture, a complete edition of the *Superman* comics. Similarly, *SubStance* included essays by Saussure, Kristeva, and Derrida, along with poetic typographical experiments, critiques of Freud, and essays on Deleuze and Guattari. Fourteen other similar journals appeared in a twelve year span, beginning with 1971, in the United States, including *Glyph*, *Diaspora*, and *Semiotext(e)*. While all of these journals declared their purpose as introducing to American readers new theoretical paradigms from Europe, their chief commonality was less thematic and more stylistic. The writing employed wordplay and acronyms, along with what historian François Cusset described as “a similar allusive or parodic relation to one’s own erudition, signal[ing] a self-critique of academic procedures.”¹²¹

A second wave of journals engaging with French theory were more academic and less textually playful than these initial literary publications. *Critical Inquiry*, begun in 1974 at the University of Chicago by Wayne Booth, Arthur Heiserman, and Sheldon Sacks was, according to Cusset, “more historicist, less politically engaged” than earlier journals.¹²² Historians Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen characterized the journal as sponsoring “a progressive historicist agenda” and “defend[ing] humanist responsibility.”¹²³ Other journals that similarly took French theory into account – while not entirely espousing its propositions – included *Raritan*, *Representations*, *Public Culture*, *Signs* and *Contention*.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Both journals are still in existence and are archived online. See <http://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/diacritics/> and <http://uwpress.wisc.edu/journals/journals/ss.html>

¹²¹ Cusset, *French Theory*, 62. Sacks died in 1979, and W.J.T. Mitchell joined the editorial board at that time.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 64.

¹²³ Lotringer and Cohen, *French Theory in America*, 202.

¹²⁴ Cusset, *French Theory*, 64.

October, founded in 1976 by art historians Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson and artist Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, was among this second wave of journals and the only journal at the time that explored the issues of French theory in relation to art and artistic practice.¹²⁵ In *October's* inaugural issue, Krauss and Michelson positioned it at the intersection of art history, aesthetic theory, and political philosophy. They announced, "We have named this journal in celebration of that moment in our century when revolutionary practice, theoretical inquiry and artistic innovation were joined in a manner exemplary and unique. For the artists of that time and place, literature, painting, architecture, film required and generated their own Octobers."¹²⁶ Later, in a ten-year retrospective of *October's* first decade, Krauss and Michelson added that the name was "emblematic...of a specific historical moment in which artistic practice joined with critical theory in the project of social construction."¹²⁷ As prolific writers, occasional curators at major museums, and professors at elite East Coast universities, the editors and primary contributors to *October* played a key role in shaping the reception and reputations of much of the work being produced, particularly in New York, in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

October's interest in French theory can be understood as emerging from a concern with writing a history of Western subjectivity and an interest in the late modern breakdown of any transparent relationship between signifier and signified. Lacanian psychoanalysis became extremely important in *October's* discourse, and its influence was made particularly clear in the 1981 summer special issue, "The New Talkies," which was devoted to new studies in film. All of the long-format essays called upon psychoanalysis as a key framework for understanding everything from film's political potential – as in Philip Rosen's "The Politics of the Sign and Film Theory" – to the representation of women in film –

¹²⁵ Cusset, *French Theory*. 64.

¹²⁶ Annette Michelson and Rosalind Krauss, "About October," *October* 1 (Spring 1976): 3.

¹²⁷ Annette Michelson and Rosalind Krauss, *October: The First Decade, 1976-1986* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987),

as in Mary Ann Doane's "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body."¹²⁸ Even a cursory search of *October's* index reveals that Lacan and psychoanalytic theory figured prominently in almost every issue from the early 1980s through the 1990s. In fact, in 1987, the journal devoted an entire issue to Lacan's *Television*.¹²⁹

Lacan was, however, far from the only French theorist deployed in *October*. An essay by Foucault, on Rene Magritte's drawing and painting *Ceci N'est Pas Une Pipe*, was included in the journal's inaugural 1976 issue, clearly signaling the editors' interest in bringing French theory to bear on modern art.¹³⁰ Another essay by Foucault, "Erotics," was included in a 1993 issue, and essays by Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard were also published through the 1980s and early 1990s.¹³¹ But it is the frequency with which *October* editors and contributors invoked these writers that most suggests the tremendous influence French theory wielded in a dominant forum of philosophical art history and criticism through the 1980s and 1990s.

While *October* embraced such French theory from the journal's inception, an important shift in editorial voice occurred in the early nineties. After co-founder Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe left, Douglas Crimp, a former student of Krauss's joined the journal's editorial board in 1977. Until 1990, *October's* three editors were thus Krauss, Michelson, and Crimp. By Crimp's own admission, he did not begin consciously considering a relationship between his subject position as an openly gay man and his art

¹²⁸ Philip Rosen, "The Politics of the Sign and Film Theory," *October* 17 (Summer 1981); Mary Ann Doane, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," *October* 17 (Summer 1981).

¹²⁹ "Television," *October* 40 (Spring 1987).

¹³⁰ Michel Foucault and Richard Howard, "Ceci N'est Pas Une Pipe," *October* 1 (Spring 1976).

¹³¹ Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (1992); Gilles Deleuze and Rosalind Krauss, "Plato and the Simulacrum," *October* 27 (1983); Michel Foucault and Robert Hurley, "Erotics," *October* 33 (Summer 1985); Jacques Derrida and Craig Owens, "The Parergon," *October* 9 (1979); Jean Baudrillard, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, "The Beaubourg-Effect: Implosion and Deterrence," *October* 20 (1982).

historical scholarship until the early 1980s.¹³² By 1986, however, as AIDS began to affect his gay and art world communities, Crimp's approach underwent a dramatic change.

In 1987 Crimp organized and edited the 1987 winter special edition of *October*, titled *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*. At first he planned to address AIDS "from within *October's* usual purview – how the art world was dealing with AIDS."¹³³ As he began contacting possible contributors, however, he also began attending meetings of the recently formed AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power group (ACT UP) in New York.¹³⁴ This exposure to AIDS activism prompted him to begin soliciting contributions from people working within and on behalf of communities affected by AIDS, not just academics.¹³⁵ "In the end," he stated in an interview, "it became a strange hybrid of different kinds of voices speaking about AIDS, including people who were writing as activists, writing manifestos."¹³⁶

Less than three years after publishing the AIDS issue, Crimp left *October*. In his words, he was "pushed out" because Krauss and Michelson found the content and approach to be outside the journal's intended purpose and, presumably, editorial position.¹³⁷ After Crimp departed in 1990, four new editors joined the staff: Benjamin Buchloh, Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier, and Hal Foster. Each of these scholars had previously published essays in *October* and shared Krauss and Michelson's broader philosophical commitments.

In 1992, the editorial board of *October* asserted its skepticism towards identity-based politics and its emphasis on bodies with its special summer issue "The Identity in Question," a transcription of

¹³² Mathias Danbolt, "Front Room – Back Room: An Interview with Douglas Crimp," <http://www.trikster.net/2/crimp/2.html> (accessed 15 June 2011).

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ ACT UP was effectively formed in March 1987 at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in New York. More on the history and activism of the organization, particularly its use of visual propaganda, will be considered in Chapter Two.

¹³⁵ Danbolt, "Front Room – Back Room: An Interview with Douglas Crimp."

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

a symposium by the same name co-sponsored by the journal and held at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center. Participants included Joan Scott, Judith Butler, Stanley Aronowitz, Jacque Ranciere, and Ernesto Laclau, among others, and topics ranged from racial, gender, and sexual identities to the very concept of nationhood. With a few exceptions, the symposium speakers aligned themselves with the Lacanian and Foucauldian critiques of politicized identities, arguing against perceived biological essentialism and any appeal to embodied experience in favor of an emphasis on the production of identity through relationships of power.¹³⁸

While this symposium suggested *October's* editorial sympathy with the poststructuralist critiques of identity proposed by the participants, the journal offered even more pointed criticism of identity-related artwork in their 1993 round table "The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial." Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, Silvia Kolbowski, Miwon Kwon, and Benjamin Buchloh discussed what they saw as the shortcomings of the artworks foregrounded in the most recent and controversial Biennial.¹³⁹ Foster began by framing the discussion in terms of a traditional "form versus content" debate. He described a "turning away from questions of representation to iconographies of content; a certain turn from a politics of the signifier to a politics of the signified."¹⁴⁰ That is, the curators of the 1993 Biennial seemed to be assuming a transparent relationship between form and content, signifier and signified. According to him, the typical "turn to a theoretical concept and/or a political position as content, as the message of the work" has resulted in a lack of concern for the material and form of the work itself.¹⁴¹ To Foster, the Biennial's curators and artists were obsessed with content rather than interested in *how* works come to make meaning. He implied that this fixation on

¹³⁸ See in particular Joan W. Scott, "Multiculturalism and the Politics of Identity," *October* 61 (Summer 1992): 12-19.

¹³⁹ Hal Foster et al., "The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial," *October* 66 (Autumn 1993): 3-27.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

the signified, rather than the signifier, was an unquestionable shortcoming. Krauss echoed Foster, similarly bemoaning this perceived slide away from consideration of the art object itself in favor of an emphasis on artists' autobiographical experiences.¹⁴²

Some of the ire was directed towards the Whitney as an institution for its apparently restrictive conception of identity. Miwon Kwon complained that "because of the way that the works are framed, the complex works – like Lorna Simpson's – fade out or get reduced."¹⁴³ She continued, "They get assimilated into this pluralistic, multiculturalist project, and you can't see her work being more than an expressionistic politics of a black woman artist with anger."¹⁴⁴ Kwon thus suggested the political uselessness of multiculturalism while implying that what made Simpson's work valuable was its formal quality rather than her engagement with the historical marginalization of black women in the United States.

The discussion continued with other complaints leveled against the artists, artworks, and the Whitney. Krauss mourned the loss of irony and paradox in contemporary artworks; she declared sweepingly, "There's a tremendous fear of resonance, of irony, or paradox, of any kind of complication."¹⁴⁵ Later, she criticized contemporary critics for failing to look at and talk about the artworks themselves, instead interpreting the work through a purely theoretical vocabulary.¹⁴⁶ A few pages later, however, she also condemned artists for making work that simply imitated models of discourse.¹⁴⁷ Foster concluded the discussion by stating that while no one on the panel denies the reality of oppression, "a problem arises when this reality is conflated with a realist code that awards certain

¹⁴² Ibid., 5.

¹⁴³ Foster et al, "The Politics of the Signifier," 15.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.,

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 16.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 18.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 23.

positions political truth on the basis of essentialist associations.”¹⁴⁸ His statement suggested some of his – and other participants’ – desire to distance themselves from any position that hinted at a simplistic connection between physical bodies and social identities, or even the notion that embodied experience might have epistemological implications.¹⁴⁹

Indeed, while the subject of “The Body” appeared frequently in *October* through the early 1990s, its corporeality tended to be denigrated in favor of its signifying power. Such a position reflected the belief that a subject’s experience was always and absolutely discursive in nature. Subjects’ embodied experiences, then, had no significance in and of themselves. Thus art historians drawing from poststructuralism, whether discussing contemporary art or earlier modernist projects, frequently metaphorized body parts and bodily acts. Mouths, eyes, rectums, genitalia, blood, eating, sex, masturbation, and even the act of dying gain significance through their symbolic meaning or discursive function rather than through their somatic effects. While they frequently recognize and even explicitly comment upon the physical qualities of whatever bodies are under consideration, *October* essayists tended to locate the historical significance of artists and artworks in their invisible operations of transgressing or challenging social structures.¹⁵⁰ In their view, knowledge was produced through the discourse surrounding these bodies, not through the embodied experiences of artists, their subjects, or their viewers.

Real Identities

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁴⁹ Some might argue that this suspicion of the body is characteristic of 20th century French theory. Martin Jay argues that French theorists as diverse as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Althusser, and Irigaray are all bound by a mistrust of vision and its supposed capacity to provide access to the world. See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

¹⁵⁰ Specific examples will be given in subsequent chapters.

These two different approaches to identity – multiculturalism and poststructuralism – thus informed much of the response to identity and body-based artworks produced in New York in the late eighties and early nineties. And yet, as dominant as these two paradigms were, they were not the only theoretical frameworks from which artists could draw. In particular, many cultural critics who aligned themselves with marginalized social groups were working to conceive of a notion of identity that acknowledged both its discursive construction and its embodied reality. Before moving on to more specific case studies, I want to offer a brief example of how an artwork and a collection of theoretical texts addressed this issue and to demonstrate how an artwork can function as theorizing agent in itself.

A particularly effective example of an artwork that played with how bodily difference and social discourse work together to create identity was Howardena Pindell's 1980 video *Free, White, and 21* (Fig. 15). The work was a marked departure from Pindell's previous practice, which primarily involved abstract collage. But, as Pindell explained, "I was bristling at the women's movement as well as the art world and some of the usual offensive encounters that were heaped on top of the racism of my profession."¹⁵¹ Recognizing the intersectionality of her assumed social identities, Pindell demonstrated how gender and race inflected each other. In the video, the artist directly addressed the camera, recounting some of her own experiences of racial discrimination: being held back from an honors program in school, being removed from the ballot for student body officer elections, and being ostracized by white guests at a wedding. As she spoke, she slowly wrapped her head in lengths of white gauze, covering her dark skin and black hair. At several points in the film, Pindell would assume the identity of a white woman – wearing a mask, sunglasses, and a blonde wig – and dismiss the veracity of

¹⁵¹ Howardena Pindell, "Free, White and 21," *Third Text* 19 (Summer 1992): 32. The video was first shown in *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States*, organized by Ana Mendieta at the A.I.R. Gallery, New York, in the fall of 1980.

her black counterpart's claims with the airy refrain, "...but of course, I'm free, white, and 21." Through the performance, Pindell asserted that individuals' physical appearance, their recognizability as black or white, unquestionably shapes their social experience. In addition, Pindell's direct address to the camera, both as "herself" and in the guise of a white woman, meant that viewers' own identities were thrown into flux. Viewers thus oscillated between assuming the position of the white woman, listening to Pindell's stories, and of Pindell herself, being ignored by the white woman. *Free, White, and 21* did not simply illustrate a model of subjectivity. Instead, the film demonstrated – acted out in a temporal fashion – how embodiment and discourse were inextricably bound together. The performative, discursively constructed nature of race that Pindell acknowledged did not make her lived experience as a black woman any less real.¹⁵²

Further, despite the tendency towards reductionism in the catalogues for the identity-based exhibitions described earlier, significant and nuanced writing about identity, bodies, and artistic expression did exist. In 1990, the New Museum published *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, an anthology edited by Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West. Published at the same time as *The Decade Show* catalogue, the book brought together a range of essays – most of them previously published in scholarly journals in the late 1980s – that addressed marginalized identity and personal politics. According to Marcia Tucker, Director of the New Museum, the collection was to be understood as a "sourcebook" for contemporary artists, a reflection of the writings that had influenced artists in *The Decade Show* and a resource for artworks

¹⁵² Pindell's video of course also relates to the notion of intersectionality – the assertion that forms and categories of oppression relate to and are shaped by each other – that was articulated by Kimberle Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins in the 1980s and early 1990s. See Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989); Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991).

that were yet to be made.¹⁵³ To Tucker, these critical writings and the artworks in the exhibition were participating in a shared conversation about “how we position ourselves in relation to [our race, our gender, our age, or our country of origin].”¹⁵⁴

Many connections emerged between the 27 essays, but the repeated discussions of visible markers of identity and a stress on embodied experiences of marginalization as constitutive of subjectivity were particularly striking. Kobena Mercer explored the cultural practice of black hair styling as a means of identity formation.¹⁵⁵ Even as he argued for the hybrid references of contemporary black hairstyles and explored issues of class, the market economy, and gender, he took for granted the power of hair as a physical means of creating and re-creating one’s sense of self. Mercer acknowledged that the experience of living with and styling “black hair” affects both how a person lives his or her daily life and is perceived in social contexts. Richard Rodriguez poignantly recounted the ways in which he internalized shame and inferiority through the responses – both from within his family and from white acquaintances – to his dark skin. “I wanted to forget that I had a body because I had a brown body,” he wrote.¹⁵⁶ But the significance of his skin color changed as he grew older. As an established author and poet traveling the world, he realized that “the registration clerk in London wonders if I have just been to Switzerland...My complexion [has become] a mark of my leisure.”¹⁵⁷ And while Rodriguez stressed that his skin, in itself, means nothing, he could escape the fact that “no one would regard my

¹⁵³ Marcia Tucker, “Director’s Foreword,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson, et al. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 7.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Kobena Mercer, “Black Hair/Style Politics,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson, et al. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990). This is a slightly edited version of the original 1987 essay, which will be discussed further in Chapter Three. See “Black Hair/Style Politics,” *new formations*, no. 3 (Winter 1987).

¹⁵⁶ Richard Rodriguez, “Complexion,” in *Out There*, 271-72.

¹⁵⁷ Rodriguez, “Complexion., 277.

complexion the same way if I entered such hotels through the service entrance.”¹⁵⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa sensuously evoked the languages, smells, tastes, and sounds that constituted her sense of ethnic identity.¹⁵⁹ She wove Chicano Spanish phrases into her otherwise standard English text while describing the scents of wood smoke and cow manure and recalling the reverberations of *corridos* love songs playing from cheap amplifiers. Even Douglas Crimp, though carefully avoiding any suggestion that a “gay body” might exist, argues that his identity as a gay man is constituted through the intense, somatic pain of repeatedly losing loved ones to AIDS and the unquestionably physical experiences of reinventing sexual pleasure and publicly protesting along side hundreds of others who have been similarly affected.¹⁶⁰ In these essays, bodies constituted identity not through biological determinism but through the lived experiences of having brown skin or kinky hair, slipping between languages, or even marching as an activist.

These scholars, like Pindell as an artist, did not express a pluralist politics of recognition. Rather than denoting what constituted a particular marginalized identity and demanding accommodation, they described their identities as being in-process and in-relationship to others, both in and out of their communities. They emphasized the formation of identities instead of celebrating identity as an endpoint. At the same time, they foregrounded the epistemic value of embodiment, the ways in which we know ourselves and our world through our socially situated bodies.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," in *Out There*, 203-212.

¹⁶⁰ Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," in *Out There*, 233-246. Crimp's essay will also be discussed further in relationship to AIDS activism in Chapter Two.

Conclusion

Pindell's video and the essays in *On the Margins* offer a fruitful starting point for reconsidering artworks from the eighties and nineties that were limited by multicultural politics of recognition or ignored by poststructuralist critics. They suggest that we reconceive of identities as *lived*, what Linda Martin Alcoff describes as "a site from which one must engage in the process of meaning-making and thus from which one is open to the world."¹⁶¹ In her 2006 book *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, Alcoff proposes that we might conceive of identity as an interpretive horizon, the context – both physical and social – from which one experiences the world. Alcoff explains that "horizons are open-ended, in constant motion, and aspects of our horizon are inevitably group-related or shared among members of a social identity."¹⁶² Importantly, however, she insists that we understand the "situatedness of horizons as a material and embodied situatedness, and not simply mentally perspectival or ideological."¹⁶³ Bodies matter, not as a mere surface manifestation of identity but because of the tacit knowledge they produce.

The case studies that follow explore the ways in which certain artworks from this period of the late eighties and early nineties enacted notions of subjectivity that were embodied, relational, and open. Works by Kiki Smith, Robert Gober, Lorna Simpson, David Hammons, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Janine Antoni did more than simply represent embodied identities. They also activated *viewers'* bodies, calling attention to the epistemological import of affect. Thus, rather than understanding these artworks as bids for recognition within a pluralist framework or manifestations of a hopeless psychic struggle, we might instead consider them in the context of horizons: the horizon of the artist, of the viewers in the nineties, and of ourselves today.

¹⁶¹ Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, 43.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 2 Constructed Bodies: Robert Gober and Kiki Smith

Introduction

In the early 1990s, New York based artists Robert Gober and Kiki Smith both began making figurative wax sculptures. While formally dissimilar in many respects, the works still expressed a striking degree of consonance in terms of visual strategies and conceptual underpinnings. The untitled sculptures by each artist that were included in the Whitney Museum of American Art's 1991 Biennial Exhibition demonstrated this accord with particular force.

Gober's untitled 1991 bleached beeswax sculpture wavers between being recognizable as a fragment of a human figure and a banal domestic object (Fig. 3). At first, it appears to be a highly detailed representation of a torso, perhaps even evoking a piece of a broken marble figure found in classical ruins. But Gober's figural fragment is a strange hybrid, with a round, sloping female breast on the left and a flat male pectoral muscle on the right. The right half is covered with a dusting of dark, individually inserted hairs that trails down to the navel. Soon, though, we realize that this is not at all a sculpted likeness of a human torso but is instead an altered cast of a full, sagging feed sack. What at first seemed to be wrinkled skin we now recognize as the folds of a bulging bag. Even its placement in the gallery, propped up in the corner on the floor, reiterates its status as a familiar, cheap object. And yet, the quivering hairs and convincingly naturalistic breast and pectoral muscle repeatedly call attention back to the sculpture's figural suggestion in an endless loop of increasingly discomfiting associations and disassociations.

On the other hand, there is no mistaking the subject matter of Smith's 1990 untitled pair of nude beeswax figures (Fig. 2). The two bodies, one male and one female, dangle just above the gallery floor from simple metal racks that press into their armpits. Slumped forward, their heads droop, arms

hanging limply and eyes closed. Pale, translucent beeswax molded over red wax suggests the pulsing warmth of flesh, but their limbs are also mottled with violent bruises and abrasions. The white fluids that appear to be leaking from the woman's breasts and the man's penis, apparently involuntary emissions, further reinforce the battered, dejected state of the figures.

Neither Smith's nor Gober's sculptures can be perceived passively. Both works insist that we come closer or run away altogether, that we squat down to examine the coarse hairs implanted in Gober's bag-turned-torso or physically circle Smith's hanging figures. But as we peer and bend and walk, these sculptures of bodies elicit, in turn, other bodily responses: a tight, heavy chest, aching joints, prickling skin, or even a lurching stomach.

As we will see later in this chapter, critics who saw these works in the early nineties recorded such reactions in reviews and essays. In just one example, Ken Johnson, reviewing the 1991 Biennial for *Art in America*, called Gober's Frankenstein-like torso "viscerally repellent" and Smith's figures "painfully resonant."¹ The psychic and somatic upheaval caused by encounters with Gober's fragmented body and Smith's leaking figures could not be disentangled. Viewers registered their emotional discomfort physically.

The significance of such responses, however, was judged in widely disparate fashions. For example, *The Nation* contributor Arthur Danto, also reviewing the 1991 Whitney Biennial, described a sense of physical weariness and pain upon seeing Smith's figures hanging "as helpless as meat on the table."² Danto criticized Smith's work and others like it in the exhibition for failing to be aesthetically moving in their perceived political activism. To him, the somatic effects of the artwork signified a degree of "artistic crudeness." It was as if, he complained, the "artist [was] implying that there [were]

¹ Ken Johnson, "Generational Saga," *Art in America*, no. 6 (June 1991): 42.

² Arthur C. Danto, "Art for Activism's Sake: The 1991 Whitney Biennial," *The Nation*, 3 June 1991, 745.

much more urgent matters, calling for more immediate interventions, than applying aesthetic polish to the vehicle through which the message...is advanced.”³ In Danto’s mind, “formal values [had] become the enemy of political ones.”⁴

On the other hand, the curators of the 1993 exhibition *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* at the Whitney Museum of American Art noted viewers’ physical reactions to Smith’s and Gober’s sculptures as proof of the works’ “abject” status.⁵ Drawing from the writings of French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, the curators proposed that such artworks were somatically unsettling because the references to death, bodily fluids, and gendered body parts threatened viewers’ sense of individual selfhood. Thus, the embodied responses were significant as a symptom of a psychic assault that also had social and political consequences.

Both of the untitled works described above were typical of Smith’s and Gober’s most popular work in the early nineties. Smith made about a half dozen wax figures, primarily female, that appeared to be leaking or otherwise excreting bodily effluvia, while Gober cast a series of fragmented wax legs and torsos. And, as with the untitled works, those who wrote about their encounters with these sculptures consistently referenced the somatic nature of their response. Michael Kimmelman, for example, writing for *The New York Times*, described Gober’s truncated legs to be “almost unbearably painful to look at.”⁶ Similarly, fellow *Times* reviewer Roberta Smith described Smith’s figures as “wrenchingly vivid” and “almost painful to look at.”⁷ Even scholars writing many years after their first encounter with these artworks could recall their visceral reactions with striking clarity. Art historian Linda Nochlin, in a 2005 retrospective catalogue of Smith’s work, wrote, “The first Kiki Smith piece that I remember seeing

³ Danto, “Art for Activism’s Sake,” 743.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Jack Ben-Levi et al., “Introduction,” in *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993).

⁶ Michael Kimmelman, “Setting One Visual Trap after Another,” *The New York Times*, October 4, 1992, C5.

⁷ Roberta Smith, “Body, Body Everywhere, Whole and Fragmented,” *New York Times*, May 15, 1992, C24.

[in 1993] created a visceral shock....I still remember the intensity of the feeling, as though the bottom had suddenly dropped out of the sedate world of the gallery and my own place within it.”⁸ Critic Ali Subotnik had a similarly memorable reaction the first time that she saw one of Gober’s wax legs in the early nineties. “The chills never diminished,” she wrote. “[The] wax leg first repulsed me, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away.”⁹ Later, she admitted, “This leg still makes me want to cut my arm off.”¹⁰

These undeniably physical and seemingly instinctual responses to Smith’s and Gober’s sculptures suggest a rich starting point for exploring how the works themselves theorize a complex relationship between corporeal experience and subjectivity, particularly in terms of gender and sexuality. The notion of the abject that dominated interpretations of the artists’ works in the early nineties does not sufficiently account for the inherent formal and conceptual tensions that their figurative sculptures expressed. Despite their initial impression of naturalism, Smith and Gober insistently call attention to the constructedness of the bodies they put on display. And yet, viewers find themselves responding, in an apparently intuitive, somatic fashion, to these obviously non-natural bodies. Positioning the artists and their works within an additional community of discourse – that of AIDS activism in New York in the early nineties – allows us to see another manifestation of a similar tension between corporeality and language and to recognize the ways in which such a push and pull can be cognitively and even politically vital and productive.

⁸ Linda Nochlin, “Unholy Postures: Kiki Smith and the Body,” in *Kiki Smith: A Gathering, 1980-2005*, ed. Siri Engberg (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005), 31. Nochlin is describing *Tale* (1992), considered later in this chapter.

⁹ Ali Subotnik, “Cumulus from America: Back to Life,” *Parkett* 77(2006): 185.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

Bodies in Bodies of Work

Robert Gober and Kiki Smith were both born in 1954, but their paths to becoming well-known New York artists – and in particular artists who took the body as their subject matter – were quite different. Born and raised in Connecticut, Gober studied art in Rome with the Tyler School of Art for a year following high school, then attended Middlebury College in Vermont. He moved to Manhattan in the mid-1970s, shortly after graduating with his BFA, and had his first show – an exhibition of paintings – at the well-known Paula Cooper Gallery in 1984. By 1990, Gober was an established figure in the art world, with solo shows at The Art Institute of Chicago and the Tyler Gallery at Temple University as well as frequent inclusions in prominent group exhibitions, including the 1988 Venice Biennale and the 1989 Whitney Biennial.¹¹

Smith took a more itinerant path to becoming an established artist. She was born in Germany to minimalist sculptor Tony Smith and opera singer Jane Lawrence Smith, but grew up in South Orange, New Jersey, just west of Newark. Following high school, she worked variously as a waitress, industrial baker, electrician's assistant, and puppeteer. In the late 1970s, she moved to New York with the intent to focus on “making things,” and became involved with Collaborative Projects, Inc. – better known as Colab – a loosely organized artist's collective that worked outside the established gallery system. Colab artists created publicly accessible art such as murals, banners, and posters, organized “traveling suitcase shows,” produced an independent cable TV show and created exhibitions in improvised public spaces. In 1980, Colab took over an abandoned building in midtown Manhattan for the riotous *Times Square Show*. Smith's work in this exhibition – a bed sheet-sized piece of fabric

¹¹ See Robert Gober, *Robert Gober: Sculptures and Installations, 1979-2007*, ed. Theodora Vischer (Basel, Switzerland; Göttingen: Schaulager; Steidl, 2007). Early prominent group exhibitions also included *New Sculpture: Robert Gober, Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach* at The Renaissance Society in Chicago, Illinois, in 1986; *Avant-Garde in the Eighties* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1987.

depicting severed limbs – marked her initial artistic interest in the body. Although Smith had her first solo show in 1982 at The Kitchen, an alternative arts space in the Meatpacking District, her work did not receive broader recognition until 1990, when she had solo shows at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia and at the Museum of Modern Art, as part of their *Projects* series on contemporary artists.¹²

Sculptural representations of the human body or body parts, most often rendered in beeswax, typified Smith's and Gober's production in the early nineties. For Smith, these explorations of the body characterized her career as a solo artist. Curious about the body's internal workings, Smith enrolled in a training course for emergency medical technicians in 1985.¹³ Using what she learned about anatomy at the hospital, she began crafting internal organs in a range of media. Her associations of various body parts with particular materials played both with and against cultural connotations: a stomach cast in sparkling glass, fragile terracotta ribs barely held together with thread, a precious hinged, bronze uterus, a rustic bowl filled with a liver, heart, spleen, and lungs rendered in earthy clay, and limbs and entire bodies crafted from translucent Japanese paper.¹⁴ In 1989, she created an installation of twelve water-cooler bottles, silvered to a mirror surface, each one engraved in gothic script with the name of a different bodily fluid: vomit, oil, blood, sweat, pus, tears, mucus, milk, urine, semen, diarrhea, and saliva. Since the glasses were reflective, the swirling text offered the only clue as to what might be inside. In the sculptures that followed this untitled installation, Smith seemingly allowed these once contained fluids to be spilled, such as in the untitled pair of beeswax nudes that apparently dripped with milk and semen.

¹² See David Frankel and Kiki Smith, "In Her Own Words," in *Kiki Smith*, ed. Helaine Posner (Boston: Bulfinch, 1998). Smith's 1982 solo show at The Kitchen was titled *Life Wants to Live*. In 1988 she had her first solo show at Fawbush Gallery in SoHo. In 1990, Smith was also included in the exhibition *The Body* at The Renaissance Society in Chicago, Illinois, and in Nan Goldin's exhibition *Witnesses Against Our Vanishing*, at Artists' Space in New York, which was discussed in Chapter One.

¹³ Susan Tallman, "Kiki Smith: Anatomy Lesson," *Art in America* 80, no. 4 (1992): 52.

¹⁴ Smith speaks about her material choices as they relate to her subject matter in her interview with David Frankel: Frankel and Smith, "In Her Own Words," 38-39.

Several other similar wax figures soon followed, including *Pee Body* (1992) and *Train* (1993) where coils of glass beads stood in for urine and blood, respectively, and the especially controversial *Tale* (1992), in which a nude female figure on all fours appeared to drag a trail of feces behind her (Figs. 16, 17, & 18).

Gober, on the other hand, turned to the body later in his career. Much of Gober's early work took the form of seeming recreations of urinals and sinks. From 1984 to 1988 the artist crafted these plumbing fixtures from wood, wire, lath, and steel armatures covered in plaster and paint.¹⁵ The final results were almost indistinguishable from the porcelain they mimicked, but they lacked faucets, handles, and, initially, drains. The reference to Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) was unmistakable, but rather than industrially produced readymades, Gober's pieces were handmade from craft materials and also utterly unusable. Through the mid to late eighties, Gober created a range of familiar objects. Some – such as a sack of kitty litter, a paper bag full of fried donuts, a woven dog bed – were seemingly banal while others – such as leaning or twisted doors, chairs, and children's playpens – projected an eerie and occasionally aggressive affect. When installed together, the objects transformed a gallery into a kind of a domestic space, albeit a haunting, unsettling one.¹⁶

In 1989, Gober began to make and exhibit cast sculptural works of body fragments. A series of untitled works consisted of a single leg jutting out from a wall, clothed in a cotton trouser, dress sock, and dress shoe, but with a pale strip of beeswax flesh, flecked with hundreds of quivering hairs, exposed between the pant and sock (Fig. 19).¹⁷ In another series of related works, Gober cast a man's lower half

¹⁵ Gober describes some of the technical aspects of this process throughout his catalogue raisonné of his sculptural work: Robert Gober and Elisabeth Sussman, "Robert Gober: Installation and Sculpture," in *Robert Gober: Sculptures and Installations*, ed. Theodora Vischer (Basel: Schaulager, 2007).

¹⁶ See Roberta Smith, "The Re-Invented Americana of Robert Gober's Mind," *The New York Times*, October 13, 1989, C28; Robert Gober, Joan Simon, and Catherine David, *Robert Gober* (Paris: Editions du Jeu de Paume, 1991).

¹⁷ Gober first used his own legs and buttocks for these casts but later turned to studio assistants and friends to serve as models. Gober, *Sculptures and Installations*, 272.

in beeswax and installed it, buttocks up, protruding from the wall. Sometimes the legs were clothed in dark trousers, dress socks, and scuffed dress shoes; sometimes only the footwear and white cotton briefs remained. In a few instances, a musical score was tattooed across a bare rear end (Fig. 10). And in other versions, the legs were pocked with drain holes or set with thick, tapered candles (Figs. 23 & 24). Apart from these leg sculptures, Gober created several iterations of the hermaphroditic chests described at the beginning of the chapter, placing the chests into milk crates or wicker baskets or setting a nickel-plated drain into the sternum.

In the early nineties Gober and Smith worked frequently in overlapping spheres. Gober's legs and plaster-bag-torsos and Smith's leaking, unregulated bodies appeared together in quite a few exhibitions, including the politically charged 1991 and 1993 Whitney Biennials. Most often, they both participated in shows that purported to deal with bodies and politics, including the 1992 exhibitions *This is My Body, This is My Blood* at the Hertner Art Gallery at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, *Corporal Politics* at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Art Gallery, and the 1993 show *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* at the Whitney Museum of American Art.¹⁸ This last exhibition, in particular, served as the primary reference point for subsequent scholarship on both artists' work from this period and, as such, deserves careful consideration.

The Limitations of Abjection

Curated by students of the Whitney Museum's prestigious Independent Study Program, *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* applied French psychoanalyst Julia's Kristeva's term

¹⁸ Susan E. Jahoda, May Stevens, and Elizabeth Hynes, *This Is My Body, This Is My Blood* (Amherst: Herter Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts, 1992); Donald Hall, Thomas Walter Laqueur, and Helaine Posner, *Corporal Politics: Louise Bourgeois, Robert Gober, Lilla Locurto and William Outcault, Annette Messager, Rona Pondick, Kiki Smith, David Wojnarowicz* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Jack Ben-Levi et al., *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993).

“abjection” to a selection of artworks from the museum’s permanent collection. The show’s catalogue begins with a quote from the 1982 translation of Kristeva’s book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, in which she describes the abject as that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”¹⁹ Although *Abject Art* was not the first exhibition to relate the concept of abjection to the visual arts, it consolidated much of the existing interpretive and theoretical literature on Smith, Gober, and related artists under a single term.²⁰ Smith’s untitled pair of nudes was included in the exhibition, along with Gober’s *Untitled (Leg with Candle)* (1991), a beeswax cast of a man’s leg, clad in a trouser, sock, and dress shoe, with a tapered candle shooting up from the thigh (Fig. 20).

The Bulgarian born but French-trained Kristeva wrote *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* in 1980, as a rethinking of the psychoanalytic status of the mother.²¹ She formulated the creation of the subject as a process of rejection and separation from the mother: an infant is born into the semiotic *chora*, without any borders separating the self from others, and the formation of subjectivity begins with the process of “abjection,” the repulsion of that which seems to be a part of the self. For infants, the first thing to be abjected would be the maternal body. But in rejecting the mother, the infant must reject a part of him- or herself in order to become *a* self. However, abjection was not simply a passing stage of development. Instead, Kristeva suggested that the abject persists throughout a person’s life, always

¹⁹ Ben-Levi et al., “Introduction,” 7.

²⁰ Three years later, in 1996, *October* editors Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois curated *L’Informe: mode d’emploi* at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, France. Instead of Kristeva, they took the Surrealist George Bataille’s concept of *l’informe* as their organizing principle. In opposition to the Whitney’s unapologetic conflation of abject form and content with a specific political agenda, Krauss and Bois’s exhibition suggested a kind of formalist history of artists’ engagement with “formlessness.” See Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *L’informe: Mode D’emploi* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996). For examples of other scholars who align Smith and Gober with the abject, see example Frazer Ward, “Abject Lessons,” *Art + Text* 48, no. May (1994); Hal Foster et al., *Art since 1900 Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, vol. 2 (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 645.

²¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

hovering at the borders of selfhood, repugnant but seductive, threatening but alluring.²² Philosopher Nöelle McAfee observed that, because of this combination of danger and attraction, the subject's borders "are, paradoxically, continuously threatened and maintained. They are threatened because the abject is alluring enough to crumble the borders of the self; they are maintained because the fear of such a collapse keeps the subject vigilant."²³ Although Kristeva did acknowledge some socio-political implications of her theory, she presented it primarily as an investigation into the violent operations of psychic expulsion that she believes are necessary to achieve and maintain individual subjectivity.²⁴

Curators of the *Abject Art* exhibition defined the eponymous term broadly, according to both material and intent: "a body of work which incorporates or suggests abject materials such as dirt, hair, excrement, dead animals, menstrual blood, and rotting food in order to confront taboo issues of gender and sexuality."²⁵ Formally, they also connected abjection to a visual literalization of dissident Surrealist writer George Bataille's notion of *l'informe* or formlessness.²⁶ That is, artworks that rejected an aesthetic of singularity, coherence, or solidity could themselves be abject based solely on their appearance.

Smith and Gober, along with Cindy Sherman and Mike Kelley, served as the primary examples of a contemporary trend towards abjection in art. In his catalogue essay for the exhibition, curator Simon Taylor argued that Gober's and Smith's works fall under this Kristevan notion of the abject primarily through their references to death or the ways in which they mingle life and death together. Taylor wrote that Gober's fragmented body parts, such as his hermaphroditic chest or solitary legs, "invoke the abject through the sense of horror they elicit in the viewer, a horror related to the fear of

²² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 36.

²³ Nöelle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 50.

²⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 20.

²⁵ Ben-Levi et al., "Introduction," 7.

²⁶ Ibid.

dismemberment and death.”²⁷ When discussing Smith’s pair of nudes, Taylor described “an undeniable morbid sensibility [that] infuses the work.” He continued, “The ‘sperm’ dripping from the man’s penis and ‘milk’ trickling out of the woman’s breasts signal the regeneration of the grotesque body.”²⁸ To him, the works thus related to the “abject loss of selfhood...loss of flesh, sex, fluid.”²⁹

But, for the *Abject Art* curators, Kristeva’s theory of abjection served as the basis for far more than an abstract investigation into psychoanalytic models of subjectivity. While discussions of artworks in the exhibition catalogue often began with an acknowledgement of how the work might affect an individual’s sense of selfhood, the discussion rapidly moved on to how it upended certain social structures. As the catalogue introduction clearly stated, the curators conceived of the exhibition primarily as a political response and corrective:

Such a project was deemed urgent partly because of a disturbing trajectory of ‘politics’ in America that dates from the time of Daniel Bell’s neo-conservative treatise, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, through the Reagan and Bush administrations, to the quiescent Clinton presidency. The attempt to censor art, which reached its greatest intensity at the end of the eighties and in the early nineties, is connected to the attacks on multiculturalism, ‘political correctness’ (a slogan of the right), the reproductive rights of women, the pathologizing of gay men and lesbians, and the patriotic campaign against flag desecration.³⁰

As in the 1993 Biennial that preceded the *Abject Art* exhibition by only a couple of months, the politicized body operated as the most potent tool for expressing political grievances and protesting the status quo. Taylor concludes his catalogue essay by stating, “Abjection within recent art practices signals a profound attack whose weapons are the very forces that the armored subject most fears: ‘sexuality and

²⁷ Simon Taylor, “The Phobic Object,” in *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 72.

²⁸ Taylor, 65.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ben-Levi et al., “Introduction,” 8.

the unconscious, desire and the drives, the *jouissance*...that shatters the subject, that surrenders it precisely to the fragmentary and the fluid.”³¹

As an exhibition, *Abject Art* had several shortcomings. For instance, the curators’ usage of Kristeva’s psychoanalytic term proved slippery, particularly as applied to a wide historical range of American art. Throughout thematic sections such as “The Maternal Body,” “Unmaking Modernist Masculinity,” and “Transgressive Femininity,” multiple usages of the term “abject art” were frequently conflated or confused. For example, “The Maternal Body” section included Willem de Kooning’s *Woman* (1952-3) and Mary Kelly’s *Prototype for Post-Partum Document* (1972). The curators deemed De Kooning’s aggressive figural abstraction abject because it represented a kind of threatening mother figure *and* because of its formal disintegration of figure and ground. Thus, the work both depicted an abject subject and was itself abject in form. Kelly’s piece, on the other hand, was declared abject because it used an actual abject material – in this case, a feces sample from Kelly’s infant son – as a means of representing the psychic upheaval of a mother preparing for, in psychoanalytic terms, the trauma of her child entering the Symbolic order. On the other hand, John Miller’s three and a half foot high pile of a lumpy brown substance topped with a decaying model house evoked a scatological substance (Fig. 21). In reality an odor-free construction of Styrofoam, wood, paper maché, and modeling paste, the work’s apparently sole purpose was to shock viewers through a visual approximation of bodily waste. Miller’s sculpture thus might *effect* abjection while not itself *being* abject. Perhaps most confusing, however, was the inclusion of Jackson Pollock’s *Number 27*, one of his iconic drip paintings (Fig. 22). The curators suggested that Pollock’s all-over network of paint splatters – like de Kooning’s erasure of a subject-ground distinction – was an example of the *informe* aesthetic and thus inherently anti-masculinist and

³¹ Taylor, “The Phobic Object,” 80.

psychically unsettling.³² But by focusing only on the formal quality of Pollock's painting the curators failed to explain how such a work, which had become an icon of high modernism and readily absorbed into a traditional art historical narrative of successive genius, could be inherently disruptive to contemporary social mores, much less an individual's sense of self. The curators attempted – through the inclusion of a wide range of objects – to suggest that abjection in art had a long history. Yet by largely disregarding the objects' historical specificity and social uses, they diluted their claim to the immediate political urgency of the exhibition.

But most importantly for Goyer and Smith, the *Abject Art* exhibition and its accompanying catalogue evidenced a strange mix of theoretical approaches – psychoanalysis, poststructuralist thought, and identity politics – that undercut or limited possible interpretations of the artists' works. Though never stated explicitly, Goyer's fragmented leg and Smith's leaking bodies were to some extent deemed abject because of the identities they represented. The hairy leg and candle were understood as threatening *because* they were made by a gay artist and concern the "visibility of gay male desire."³³ The despondent figures, dripping with bodily fluids, became offensive in their signifying of the supposed unbound excess of feminine identity, a critique of the historical patriarchal separations of mind and matter, culture and nature.³⁴

While the curators used Kristeva, Lacan, and Freud to explain the individual psychic trauma presumably experienced when viewing the artworks in the exhibition, they then called upon Foucault and Butler to extrapolate the political implications of such encounters. In this, the physicality of the reactions elicited by works like Smith's and Goyer's – the aching chest, prickling hairs, or roiling

³² Ben-Levi et al., "Introduction," 9. Here the curators are drawing from Rosalind Krauss's connection of Bataille and Pollock in Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993).

³³ Taylor, "The Phobic Object," 72, 75.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

stomach – tended to become incidental. Instead, bodies, both the artists’ representations of bodies and the bodies of the viewers who encounter the work, became metaphors, place-holders in a discursive political battle. For example, in his catalogue essay Taylor described Gober’s dismembered *Leg with Candle* and declares that it is, “among other things, a metaphor of the pathology of homophobia.”³⁵ He continued, “Ideologically, the fragmented body functions as a critique of the body politic, continuing a long tradition in political satire and iconography.”³⁶ Similarly, he suggested that Smith’s pair of nudes “can be used to renegotiate social relations in a contestatory fashion.”³⁷ The artworks’ value thus lay in their potential to confront and upset their viewers by offering a symbolic confirmation of the artist’s social oppression.

Indeed, in some ways the entire exhibition was premised on the assumption that certain identities – traditionally marginalized in western culture – would always and automatically be offensive to an audience of presumably white, straight, middle-class Republican males.³⁸ Although Kristeva’s theory ostensibly supported a disintegration of boundaries, *Abject Art* demonstrated a willingness to shore up an existing social and political divide. In this respect, the exhibition intentionally offended those it meant to offend.

In the wake of the exhibition commentators at all points on the political spectrum commented on this reification of difference. Martin Mawyer, president of the Christian Action Network, remarked

³⁵ Taylor, “The Phobic Object,” 75.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 66.

³⁸ The question of who *actually* saw the Whitney exhibition is difficult to answer. The Whitney’s primary audience at that time seems to have been primarily white, well-educated, and upper or upper-middle class. Whitney director David Ross, in his introduction to the catalogue for the 1993 Biennial Exhibition, expressed his hope that the exhibition would expand the museum’s audience in terms of both ethnic and class diversity. Elisabeth Sussman et al., *1993 Biennial Exhibition* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), iii. We can assume that the smaller, more theoretically dense *Abject Art* show was largely seen by visitors already familiar with the contemporary art world. The curators also seem to assume that their political position is the minority position in the United States as a whole, but one shared by most who would see the exhibition or at least read the catalogue. Ben-Levi et al., “Introduction,” 15-16.

pointedly, “The goal of the exhibition was to repulse, and I was repulsed. I guess that makes me an art connoisseur.”³⁹ Similarly, in a “Conversation” on abjection in the journal *October*, Hal Foster, Helen Molesworth, and Denis Hollier all expressed concern over the tendency of abject art to reinscribe the status quo. Foster called Kristeva “too oppositional,” and he worried that “even as the notion of abjection opens up productive ways to think about racism and homophobia, it threatens to render them innate and endemic.”⁴⁰ He further observed that the show’s application of Kristeva “allows for a referencing of the abject that right and left tend to agree upon today.”⁴¹ Molesworth agreed: “They serve to shore one another up. . . .In the show, as in Kristeva, there was little attempt to work out the representational act involved in something called ‘abject art.’ It is as if the exhibition, the religious right, and Kristeva could all agree that John Miller’s sculpture really is a pile of shit.”⁴² Denis Hollier likewise expressed his disappointment: “When I saw the ‘Abject Art’ show at the Whitney, I thought, ‘What is abject about it?’ Everything was very neat; the objects were clearly art works. They were on the side of the victor.”⁴³ Perversely, the exhibition merely effected a reiteration of a sharp ideological and cultural divide.

Abject Art thus fell short of offering a politically relevant and theoretically robust interpretive framework for its artworks, including Smith’s and Gober’s figurative sculptures. The loose chronological, formal, and conceptual application of the term “abject” confused and diluted the potency of Kristeva’s concept. Rather than being understood as a destabilization of the boundaries of individual subjectivity, “the abject” became conflated with anything that would upset or offend the

³⁹ Joyce Price, “Art Turns Heads, Stomachs; ‘Repulsive’ Show Revives N.E.A. Flap,” *The Washington Times*, July 6, 1993, A1.

⁴⁰ Hal Foster et al., “The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the “Informe” and the Abject,” *October* 67, (Winter 1994): 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

perceived hegemony of the conservative social order. The exhibition implied that the physical repulsion elicited by the abject was a natural state, a primordial reaction to that which disturbed the accepted order. The curators transformed these somatic responses to artists' works into signifiers of the body politic, embodied proof of the artwork's – and by extension the artists' – abject position. In this formulation, Smith's and Goyer's sculptures simply reflect the inevitable psychic repulsion and social exclusion of the marginalized bodies they represent.

Yet Smith's dejected, dripping bodies and Goyer's truncated body parts resist such a naturalization of abject identities. Instead, they evince a definite formal tension. Both artists' sculptures evidence a relatively high degree of naturalism. And yet, they also visually assert their status as made objects. As such, they actually *denaturalize* the bodies they represent and, by extension, the responses they elicit from viewers.

Constructed Naturalism

It is not difficult to ascertain the subject matter of either sculpture. Rendered life-sized with accurate, if somewhat generalized, features and attributes, Smith's limp, dangling bodies can be immediately apprehended as male and female figures, and their sagging breasts and spongy bellies further heighten their believability. Similarly, the highly naturalistic scale, coloring, and detail of Goyer's sculptures swiftly offers the impression of a human torso or leg. Both artists use beeswax, a material which art historian Roberta Panzanelli calls “the ultimate simulacrum of flesh.”⁴⁴ Similarly, art historian Georges Didi-Huberman describes a kind of instinctual recognition of the similarities between flesh and wax:

⁴⁴ Roberta Panzanelli, *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2008), 1.

Wax “moves”: it warms up in my hand, it assumes the temperature of my body, and at the moment becomes capable of involuting before the detail of my fingers, taking my prints, transforming softly, as though biologically, from one form to another. Thus this vegetal material that bees have “digested” in their bodies and in a sense rendered organic, this material nestled against my flesh, becomes *like flesh*.⁴⁵

Thus both in terms of its manipulability and materiality, beeswax serves to heighten the mimetic quality of Smith’s and Gober’s figures. But despite these formal and material choices, neither artist allows the naturalism of their work to remain uninterrupted. Rather than presenting a seamless extension of or intervention into the viewer’s reality, both works call attention to their own constructedness. These are most assuredly *made*, not natural, bodies.

The creamy flesh, rosy nipples, and smattering of hair in Gober’s untitled torso sculpture from 1990 are compellingly lifelike (Fig. 3). But while such precision allows for a temporary suspension of disbelief, the illusion is quickly and deliberately disrupted. For one thing, the lateral division of the torso by an inverted triangle of dark hair and the asymmetry of the breasts – round and feminine on the right, flat and hairy on the left – alert the viewer to the fact that this is not a figurative fragment cast in the tradition of idealized classical sculpture. The blended anatomy of breast and pectoral muscle push at the limits of believability. The swooping curve that at first seemed to be a collarbone, the creases that suggested armpits, and the folds that appeared to be evidence of a flabby gut register, instead, as the wrinkles of a sagging feed sack. The beeswax flesh that initially appeared to be pliable and organic now seems hard and leaden. Even the dark chest hairs, though human, seem too uniform in length and placement, intimating a kind of obsessive process of collection and insertion.

⁴⁵ Georges Didi-Huberman, “Wax Flesh, Viscious Circles,” in *Encyclopedia Anatomica: A Complete Collection of Anatomical Waxes*, ed. Georges Didi-Huberman and Marta Poggesi (London, Cologne: Taschen, 2004), 65.

Critics and scholars who wrote about Gober's figurative sculptures in the early nineties repeatedly refer to the tediousness of his work.⁴⁶ Gober laughingly gripes about this perception in a 1993 interview with Richard Flood. When Flood mentions how much of Gober's work "is labor intensive" Gober responds, "It actually isn't, though...it just looks like it is."⁴⁷ Regardless of how long it actually took Gober to create his casts and insert individual human hairs into the wax, he is clearly self-conscious about the importance of his process and the role it plays in viewers' engagement with his work. In his 2007 catalogue raisonné *Sculptures and Installations*, he includes numerous photographs of the steps required to make his leg and chest sculptures. There are images of his left leg being cast by a studio assistant, an image of a friend preparing to be cast from the waist down, and an image of implanting hairs with the tool he developed for that purpose.⁴⁸ In the 1993 interview with Flood, Gober subsequently admits, "I think I have a knack for making things look like they take a long time to make."⁴⁹ His aim, then, is not to deceive the viewer into believing that an *actual* torso slumped against the wall of the museum but to create something that appears to be a labor-intensive *object*.

Similarly, Smith does not conceal the constructed nature of the figures that constitute *Untitled* (1990) (Fig. 2). Like Gober, she uses beeswax to cast the nude bodies, in this case coating a red wax interior structure with pale bleached beeswax. The result quite convincingly suggests the translucency of skin with blood and muscle beneath.⁵⁰ But the precision of the cast is apparently of little concern to her. Instead, the seams of the mold remain evident, lines of red wax serving almost as a contour around the figures. There is a roughness and roundness to the couple's forms, an overall unevenness and

⁴⁶ See for example Smith, "The Re-Invented Americana of Robert Gober's Mind," C28. Taylor, "The Phobic Object," 75.

⁴⁷ Richard Flood and Robert Gober, "Robert Gober: Interview with Richard Flood," in *Robert Gober*, ed. Judith Nesbitt (Liverpool: Tate Gallery, 1993), 11.

⁴⁸ Robert Gober and Elisabeth Sussman, *Robert Gober: Installation and Sculpture*, ed. Theodora Vischer (Basel: Schaulager, 2007).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁵⁰ Frankel and Smith, "In Her Own Words," 38.

indentations from the artist's fingers that suggest the modeling process. Hands and feet are club-like, with fingers and toes never fully articulated, and their features are generalized, almost as if they remain beneath a waxy mask. Further, the entire sculpture is cast in wax; there is no differentiation of material between flesh, hair, or the bloody abrasions. Even her coloring, though relatively naturalistic, is simplistic.

This play between mimetic naturalism and obvious construction was characteristic of all of the artists' figurative sculptures of this period. In Gober's case, the untitled leg sculpture included in *Abject Art*, evidenced a kind of naturalist precision. Gober cast the sculpture from his own leg, and then thoughtfully selected pants, sock, and shoe (Fig. 19).⁵¹ Individual hairs sprung up from the swath of waxy flesh visible between the sock and the trouser hem and the shoe bore evidence of being worn, with slight scuffing on the sole and toe. In fact, Gober purchased shoes for this and other leg sculptures from Brooks Brothers, a retailer of resolutely inconspicuous, conservative business wear, and asked an acquaintance – a drag king – to wear the shoes until they had acquired the desired patina.⁵²

Again, Gober's finely rendered details may initially seem to create the illusion of a natural, biological leg, but the incongruity of the tableau in its entirety quickly upends that belief. The leg itself appears to be a perfect replica of a human limb, but its position – touching the ground and jutting out perpendicularly from a solid wall – raises a litany of questions, including, "Where is the rest of the body?" What position must the imagined body assume in order to enable this single, right-angled protrusion through the wall? Is the leg bursting out or is its body being subsumed? Or, has it been separated from its body altogether? If so, was it a violent or a clinical removal? How is it that no traces

⁵¹ Gober made eleven of these leg sculptures, dressed in different combinations of pants, socks, and dress shoes. Some casts included the leg up to the mid-thigh, others ended at the knee or lower calf. For a complete catalogue of his leg sculptures, see Gober, *Sculptures and Installations*.

⁵² Gober, *Sculptures and Installations*, 255.

of violence remain? Amidst these questions, the work's meticulous detail extends viewers' engagement, luring them back to examine the specificity of the leg and the precisely placed hairs and to wonder, perhaps, if the artist himself also created the trouser, sock, and shoe.

Gober further exaggerated this push and pull of illusionism and objecthood as he began adding other elements – candles, drains, and a musical score – to his sculptures of fragmented limbs. For example, in *Untitled (Leg with Candle)*, which was described earlier as part of the Whitney Museum's 1993 *Abject Art* exhibition, a thick, tapered candle sprouts out of the thigh through a square hole in the trouser (Fig. 20). The seamless blending of body and object is disorienting. The leg, which at first appeared to be flesh, must now be understood as wax. If not, we are faced with the unsavory possibility of the candle being made of flesh.

Gober employed similar strategies in his casts of male buttocks and legs, which he began in late 1990.⁵³ The sculptures were also rendered in flesh-toned beeswax and dusted with hundreds of neatly implanted hairs, displayed buttocks-up in the gallery and perpendicular to the wall. But in these works Gober disrupted the illusionism even more abruptly. In its first iteration, the pair of legs sprouted naked from the wall, wearing only white tube socks and black shoes (Fig. 10). A musical score was seemingly tattooed or imprinted across the bare cheeks and upper thighs, following the curvature of the flesh.⁵⁴ In a second version, the legs are clothed in black trousers, gray socks, and black dress shoes, but three candles emerge from the waxy flesh and through square holes cut in the trouser fabric (Fig. 23). And in a third version, the truncated figure is wearing thin white briefs, white tube socks, and dingy gray tennis

⁵³ Gober used friends, not himself, as the model for these sculptures. Gober, *Sculptures and Installations*, 278.

⁵⁴ Gober cites Hieronymous Bosch's painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights* as the source for this sculpture. He recalls flipping through a book of symbols in art history and seeing a reproduction of a detail from Bosch's painting in which a large musical instrument appeared to be squashing a man with musical notes running across his buttocks. Gober, *Sculptures and Installations*, 278.

shoes, but the limbs are perforated with circular drains, reminiscent of old-fashioned bathroom drains (Fig. 24).⁵⁵

Other scholars have helpfully investigated the potential associations with and symbolism of the candles and drains. Erika Doss argues for an understanding of the candles in relationship to Gober's Catholic upbringing.⁵⁶ In Catholicism, candles, as a light source, can represent the presence of God in a worship space. But candles can also function as a kind of substitute, a symbol of the persistence of worshippers' spiritual interventions in prayer even after they have left the sanctuary. In the western tradition, candles have come to serve a commemorative function even apart from religion. Thus, candles are lit at memorials as an act of remembering those who have died and are no longer corporeally present. The drains, too, also suggest a host of associations. Hal Foster and David Joselit discuss the drain as an object of desire, loss and longing, trauma, and a compulsion to cleanse oneself from implied pollution.⁵⁷ As a referent to plumbing, drains suggest the internal systems of fluids that circulate through and exit from the body. Helen Molesworth understands this as a kind of psychic metaphor where "the liminality of the drain marks the simultaneous pleasure and anxiety offered by the bodily orifices, the drains of the body."⁵⁸ Rather than protruding from and extending the body, as the candles do, the drains act as punctures or even wounds. Again, these cultural associations further push Gober's sculptures from being perceived as bodies to being recognized as objects.

⁵⁵ When Gober displayed variations of these three works together at an installation at the Jeu de Paume in Paris in 1991, he suggested that together they referenced a "trio of emotions:" pleasure (the buttocks), disaster (the pair of legs with the drains), and resuscitation (the pair of legs with the candles). See Richard Flood and Robert Gober, "Interview," in *Robert Gober: Sculpture + Drawing*, ed. Karen Jacobson (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1999), 125.

⁵⁶ Erika Doss, "Robert Gober's *Virgin* Installation. Issues of Spirituality in Contemporary American Art," in *The Visual Culture of American Religion*, ed. David Morgan and Sally M. Promey (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

⁵⁷ See Hal Foster, "An Art of Missing Parts," *October*, no. 92 (Spring 2000): 128-162; David Joselit, "Poetics of the Drain," *Art in America* (December 1997): 64-70; Helen Molesworth, "Stops and Starts," *October*, no. 92 (Spring 2000): 157-162.

⁵⁸ Molesworth, "Stops and Starts," 160.

Finally, while Gober's material choice of beeswax does contribute to his work's initial verisimilitude, it also threatens any sustained illusion. If Gober's purpose was to create a sculpture that approximated the texture and appearance of human skin as closely as possible, he could have used other materials, such as silicone, fiberglass, or resin. The beeswax – and particularly the pale, bleached wax that is his preference – gives the torsos and limbs the appearance of embalmed or prosthetic pieces. Indeed, Gober's highly detailed leg fragments in particular most closely resemble not a human leg but a medical prosthetic or a stray piece from Madame Tussaud's wax museum. Painter and critic Richard Kalina, writing for *Arts Magazine* in 1991, argues that Gober's leg sculptures reference death more than life. The legs more closely resemble prosthetic limbs – which were never alive – than amputated appendages – which were previously living.⁵⁹ Additionally, while Gober suggests multiple origin points for this series of sculptures – including his mother's stories of serving as a nurse for a surgical amputation – he repeatedly mentions his fascination with dioramas, like those he saw at the Natural History Museum in Bern, Switzerland.⁶⁰ His untitled wax legs could be part of such a display, self-consciously mimetic but not deceptively realistic. They are crafted objects, not illusory props.

While not as highly detailed as Gober's fragmented torso or legs, Smith's other sculptures of leaking bodies also evidence a degree of naturalistic specificity. For example, *Tale* (1992) consisted of a life-sized nude female figure, modeled from peach colored wax, crouching on hands and knees and excreting a brown trail, almost twenty feet in length, from her rear (Fig. 18). Though the woman's features and finer details are somewhat generalized, Smith captures subtle cues that register a moment of exertion. The woman's breasts droop pendulously and she looks down at the ground. But a sense of tension runs through her form, evidenced in the taut line of her neck, the slight bend of her arms, and

⁵⁹ Richard Kalina, "Real Dead," *Arts Magazine* 66 (1991): 49.

⁶⁰ Gober, *Sculptures and Installations*, 255.

the angle of her shoulder blades. She is not, as some scholars have described, “dragging” a tail of feces behind her.⁶¹ Instead, she is arrested in the act of excretion, straining to push this literal tail from her body. Similarly, *Pee Body* (1992) and *Train* (1993) depict women in specific moments of bodily dejection (Figs. 16 & 17). In *Pee Body*, a pale yellow figure – bald and with pink-tipped finger and toe nails – squats, buttocks hovering just inches above the ground and above the coils of yellow glass beads beneath and behind her. With her head bowed and arms draped limply over her bent knees, she seems as if she is on the verge of collapse. The figure in *Train* is standing, but she is bent slightly at the waist – one hand resting on her thigh, the other on her knee – as she peeks over her shoulder at the red glass beads that trail down to the floor. These are not the generalized, idealized poses of classical statuary. Rather, Smith seems to represent specific bodies – albeit ones whose facial features are obscured – frozen in particular moments of exertion, discomfort, or pain.

But, like Gober, Smith never allows the naturalistic elements of her works to be unquestionably accepted. As described earlier in regards to *Untitled*, Smith does not obscure her modeling and casting process. In fact, she seems to willfully call attention to it by allowing excess wax to remain as part of the figures or by leaving indentations from her fingers in their waxy flesh. Particularly in works such as *Pee Body* and *Train*, which are cast in pale wax, these ridges and crevices readily show the accumulation of dirt or other detritus. In *Pee Body*, the unevenness of the cast even allows viewers a glimpse of the wire armature that supports the figure. Thus despite her interest in representing certain physiological specificities, Smith simultaneously emphasizes the objecthood of her sculptures.

Another way that Smith disrupts any illusionism in her work is through the inclusion of an additional material: glass beads. While *Untitled* and *Tale* were both constructed entirely from wax,

⁶¹ See for example Mira Schor, “Patrilineage,” in *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 114.

Smith uses beads in *Pee Body* and *Train* to represent urine and blood, respectively. All the yellow beads in *Pee Body* are all small, uniform spheres, strung together to create a long, glittering rope that extends behind the figure in increasingly looser loops. In *Train*, the crimson beads are a variety of different sizes and range from spheres to oblong or multifaceted shapes that suggest the clumping, viscous nature of the blood they are meant to represent. Five strings of beads drop from between the figure's legs as an initial gush that subsequently separates into individual, serpentine trickles across the floor. The hard, cool materiality of the beads contrasts with the warm, pooling fluids they represent. Smith represents liquids with solids, bodily wastes with precious objects.⁶² Like a magician explaining the secrets of an illusion, Smith emphasizes the transformative quality of her work, not its mimetic potential.

In the tradition of figurative sculpture, artists from the Italian Baroque sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini to the contemporary hyperrealist Duane Hanson have belied the process and material of their work, rendering their media transparent. Rather than seeing marble or fiberglass, viewers apprehend animated human figures. The naturalistic quality of their work asks viewers to look *through* the constructedness of the forms and accept them – even momentarily – as real. In this paradigm, such disregard for a sculpture's objecthood in favor of what it represents serves as a testament to the artists' skill. For Smith and Gober, however, the evident construction of their figures does not imply a lack of proficiency.

We might also consider comparing their sculptures to the highly detailed wax anatomical models that were popular in European museums in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Art historian Joan Landes writes that these models initially offered medical professionals in the eighteenth

⁶² See also Eleanor Heartney's and Linda Nochlin's connections of this transformation to Smith's Catholic upbringing. Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2004); Linda Nochlin, "Unholy Postures: Kiki Smith and the Body," in *Kiki Smith: A Gathering, 1980-2005*, ed. Siri Engberg (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005).

century “a refined, ordered, idealized representation of the exposed materiality of the body.”⁶³ Yet by the 19th century wax models of human forms, sometimes in states of grotesque decay, had begun appearing in fairs, amusement halls, and even cinema.⁶⁴ Landes observes, “Ultimately, not even the clean surface of a wax model could disguise the transgressive, violent cutting upon which its anatomy depends.”⁶⁵ Gober and Smith do not peel back their figures’ skin, nor do they appear to have aspirations towards physiological didacticism. But by departing from accepted social conventions regarding depictions of the body, their works do make visible the ways in which bodies are culturally conceived and perceived. Though some critics accused Smith and Gober of a kind of spectacular and gratuitous grotesquery – such as at those nineteenth century fairgrounds and museums described by Landes – the deliberateness with which the artists called attention to the objecthood of their figurative work suggests a purposeful denaturalization of the body.⁶⁶

The formal tension in Smith’s and Gober’s sculptures between naturalism and obvious craft frames a conceptual dilemma: Why do viewers’ bodies respond in such a visceral, seemingly natural fashion to bodies that are so obviously unnatural? Certainly, other modern sculptors have emphasized the materiality of their work in their renderings of human figures. Auguste Rodin, for example, embraced the vagaries of the bronze casting process, such as the missing limbs and mold marks of his *Walking Man* statue, in order to call attention to his own role as the artist-creator. But whereas Rodin’s medium of bronze recalls a venerable tradition of sculpture, Smith’s and Gober’s artworks, composed of wax, hair, and glass, elicit an entirely different reaction. As recounted at the beginning of this chapter,

⁶³ Joan B. Landes, “Wax Fibers, Wax Bodies, and Moving Figures: Artifice and Nature in Eighteenth-Century Anatomy,” in *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, ed. Roberta Panzanelli (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2008), 45.

⁶⁴ Landes, “Wax Fibers, Wax Bodies, and Moving Figures,” 59.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ See for example Roger Kimball, “Oozing out All Over,” *Modern Painters* 8 (Spring 1995): 52-53; Philippe de Montebello, “Making a Cause out of Bad Art,” *The New York Times*, October 5, 1999, A5.

numerous critics and scholars recorded their embodied engagement with Smith's and Gober's sculptures: a twisted stomach, prickling hairs on the back of the neck, the ache of a phantom limb, and an overall sense of physical disorientation. Viewers react to their sculptures of leaking, excreting, or fragmented bodies as if they are indeed organic, vital forms. Knowledge of the bodies' constructedness does not negate the physical impact of an encounter with them.

Constructed Bodies and Embodied Knowledge

This formal push and pull of naturalism and obvious craft expressed in Smith's and Gober's figurative sculpture is echoed in the artists' own understandings of the body as relating to social discourse and individual subjectivity. Our knowledge and experience of bodies are socially coded. And yet, embodied experience also serves as a unique and powerful form of knowledge formation.

In scholarship on Smith and Gober from the early nineties, the conflation of bodies and identity seemed almost inevitable amidst the heightened rhetoric of identity politics at that time. Some scholars and critics proposed a causal, practically essentialist relationship between Smith's and Gober's focus on the body and their traditionally marginalized identities as a woman and a gay man. Helaine Posner, for example, suggested that Smith's interest in depicting uncontained, uncontrollable bodies is a distinctly feminine approach that butts against the western tradition of Cartesian dualism. Echoing French feminist Hélène Cixous's notion of *écriture féminine*, "women's writing," Posner praised the explosive corporeality of Smith's sculptures for rupturing the phallogocentric cultural space of the museum.⁶⁷ Similarly, Gober's eccentric body fragments and tableaus have been interpreted as offering a

⁶⁷ Helaine Posner, "Separation Anxiety," in *Corporal Politics: Louise Bourgeois, Robert Gober, Lilla Locurto and William Outcault, Annette Messager, Rona Pondick, Kiki Smith, David Wojnarowicz* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 28; Helaine Posner, David Frankel, and Kiki Smith, *Kiki Smith* (Boston: Bulfinch, 1998), 20.

kind of recondite gay iconography or homosexual desire.⁶⁸ Yet, as interviews from the early nineties by Smith and Goyer attest, both artists understood the body as socially coded and each worked to express, in their work, to question biological essentialism while exploring the complexities of the body's relationship to social discourse.

Although Smith studied anatomy and physiology in her training to be an emergency medical technician in the mid-1980s, her impetus went beyond biological curiosity. In a 1993 conversation with M.A. Greenstein she admitted to a deep suspicion of Western medicine, which she believed “robs people of authority over their own bodies.” She and one of her sisters thus enrolled in the class to get a sense of what bodies “*looked like*” as a means of regaining some degree of control.⁶⁹ “Our bodies are basically stolen from us,” she said in another interview, and she saw her art as “trying to reclaim one’s own turf.”⁷⁰ But, this process of reclamation was also a process of acknowledging the ways in which both social and personal understandings of the body were culturally coded. In an interview with Carlo McCormick in 1991, Smith described her early sculptures of internal organs and biological systems as trying to “make people look at and examine those philosophies and ideologies that own you in every aspect of your life – be it religious, government, health, gender definition, or whatever.”⁷¹ She further explained, “Look at it, look at the skin surface, or the endocrine system, or how much blood there is in the body, and try to see how these things relate to the social or the political, now that all these different factions in society are trying to vie for control of the body, or the ideologies and philosophies of the body.”⁷² Indeed, in Smith’s mind much of society’s systemic injustices have stemmed from a disparaging view of the body. Again in her interview with McCormick, Smith declared, “Lots of the things that

⁶⁸ See Bordowitz, “Against Heterosexuality;” and Jim Drobnick, “In Pieces, of Pieces: Robert Goyer,” *Parachute*, no. 64 (October-December 1991).

⁶⁹ M.A. Greenstein, “A Conversation with Kiki Smith,” *Artweek* 24 (January 7, 1993): 24.

⁷⁰ Tallman, “Kiki Smith: Anatomy Lesson,” 152.

⁷¹ Carlo McCormick, “Kiki Smith,” *Journal of Contemporary Art* (Summer 1991): 84.

⁷² *Ibid.*

justify racism and sexism, it seems to me, have to do with our perceptions of the body, and the dichotomies that exist within them in which everything is kind of broken up – like how the body and those things closer to the physical world are always denigrated and not seen as an integral part of society.”⁷³

Having grown up with a Catholic mother, Smith also repeatedly described the role of religion in shaping her own and others’ perceptions and experiences of the body. To her, Christianity’s “contempt for the physical” was one of the religion’s defining characteristics.⁷⁴ The Christian, and particularly Catholic, notion of denying the flesh – whether through fasting, celibacy, asceticism, or the avoidance of other carnal pleasures – was offered as a means of personal sanctification and redemption. In a 1992 interview Smith termed Christianity “a religion of physical suffering,” in which, per the traditional dualistic notion of selfhood, bodies exist to be disciplined and subjugated by the mind.⁷⁵ Yet, as Smith also pointed out, “Catholicism, as a visual tradition, is a tradition of manifesting things physically that aren’t necessarily physical.”⁷⁶ When participating in the Mass, for example, faithful Catholics have long professed that they consume the very body and blood of Christ when they take the host and the wine. Smith recognized how her own understanding of the body is enmeshed with this paradoxical repudiation of and fascination with flesh, bone, and blood.

While Gober was not as forthcoming as Smith in discussions of his own work in the early nineties, his turn towards figurative sculpture was also clearly marked by a recognition of the social role of the body. Like Smith, Gober was raised Catholic. He, too, described the religion’s visual tradition as

⁷³ McCormick, “Kiki Smith,” 85.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Greenstein, “A Conversation with Kiki Smith,” 23.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

possessing “rich body-bound imagery, from the ecstasy to the suffering.”⁷⁷ But Gober also recalled the church’s role in his adolescent trauma of coming to terms with his homosexuality, a kind of helpless realization that what his body wanted was at odds with what the religious institution demanded.⁷⁸ Catholicism imposed a set of conventions and restrictions on its followers’ bodies but implicitly naturalized such expectations. Thus, heterosexuality was declared biologically “natural,” rendering homosexuality unnatural and deviant. Dave Hickey has wondered if it was precisely this personal belief that Catholicism – and by extension western religious conservatism – sought to discount or eliminate his body’s desires which prompted Gober to create sculptures and tableaus that made the *absence* of bodies extremely conspicuous.⁷⁹ Gober’s initial eschewing of the body from his work and his later fragmentation of the figure certainly suggested the artist’s acute awareness of the ways in which social contexts powerfully shape our perceptions of bodies. Thus, for both Smith and Gober, bodies could not be unquestionably accepted as merely biological. Instead, bodies were understood as a site of contestation, where actions, reactions, and even appearances are coded and shaped by social, political, and religious forces.

Of course, Smith and Gober were not alone in holding to this notion of the body as socially contingent. Through the 1980s, scholars in the US and Britain – particularly those influenced by poststructuralist writing, as described in the previous chapter – emphasized the ways in which meanings, categories, and behaviors are social products rather than natural extensions of biological forces. Artists like Jenny Holzer, Cindy Sherman, and Barbara Kruger, who were exhibiting in New York in the eighties and early nineties, explored this notion of the social construction of identity primarily through

⁷⁷ Paul Schimmel and Hal Foster, *Robert Gober* (Los Angeles; Zurich; New York: Museum of Contemporary Art; Scalo, 1997), 44.

⁷⁸ Dave Hickey, “Robert Gober: In the Dancehall of the Dead,” in *Robert Gober*, ed. Karen Marta (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1992), 37.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

the use of text and pre-existing imagery.⁸⁰ Kruger, for example, collaged images and text together to create trenchant works that commented on women's presumed role in society as both consumers and objects to be consumed. In *Untitled (You Are Seduced By the Sex Appeal of the Inorganic)* (1981), Kruger appropriated a grainy, black and white catalogue image of a pair of women's gloves, arranged so that they appear to be clasping each other (Fig. 25). Kruger framed the photograph with blocky white type on a garish red ground: "You are seduced by the sex appeal of the inorganic." Her confrontational text disrupted a seemingly innocuous image, denaturalizing an image meant to encourage female consumption. Similarly, in *Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face* (1981), Kruger applied her bold text on top of a photograph of a sculpture of a female bust (Fig. 26). The stone woman literalizes the objectification of women that Kruger's text suggests is the socially accepted norm in the West. But, in her collage the object is brought to life and speaks back to the scopophilic male spectator. By refusing to create any new representations of bodies, artists like Kruger hoped to circumvent any further naturalization of the categories of identity their works confronted.⁸¹ Kruger's work operated negatively, deconstructing existing representations, rather than generatively offering new, alternative representations of women.

We can understand Gober and Smith as continuing in a similar effort to denaturalize the body and identity. However, unlike artists such as Kruger who eschewed specific representations of the body, Gober and Smith embraced the body's possibilities. Even as they acknowledged the social

⁸⁰ Although best known for her works in the early eighties, Kruger was well known and popular into the nineties. In 1988 she became the first female artist ever represented by the influential Mary Boone Gallery and had solo exhibitions there in 1989, 1991, and 1994, and she also participated in group exhibitions in New York at MOMA and the New Museum. Like many other artists whose popularity peaked in the late eighties and early nineties, Kruger enjoyed a retrospective exhibition at the turn of the millennium, staged by the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in 1999 and traveling to MOMA in 2000.

⁸¹ For more on this trend of using text and appropriated images to deconstruct categories of identity, see Juliet Steyn, *Other Than Identity: The Subject, Politics and Art* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1997).

constructedness of the body, they insisted on the epistemological significance of *embodiment*. Indeed, a simple transformation of the corporeal into the discursive would be at odds with how these two artists seemed to conceive of the relationship between their work and viewers' bodies. Both artists expressed an interest in how their figurative sculpture would engage and affect viewers somatically.

Even before he began making legs and butts and torsos, Gober was aware of how his work related phenomenologically to viewers. As he explained to Craig Gholson in a 1989 interview for *BOMB!* magazine, the objects he chose to fabricate were “almost all emblems of transition; they’re objects that you complete with your body, and they’re objects that, in one way or another, transform you. Like the sink, from dirty to clean; the beds, from conscious to unconscious; rational thought to dreaming.”⁸² After turning to the body as subject matter, Gober used the placement of his works within the gallery space to ensure that viewers interacted physically with his figural fragments. Eschewing pedestals, he never placed his sculptures directly in viewers’ sight lines. Instead, gallery visitors were forced to bend or squat to examine a bag-turned-torso in the corner or to circumspectly step around the legs that jutted out from the wall. Though he never spoke directly about the more discomfiting responses his work elicited, Gober clearly positioned his works to be corporeally engaging.

Smith was even more explicit in talking about the somatic effects her work engendered. “People feel their emotions very physically,” she told Claudia Gould in 1992. “I mean, I certainly do. Like you feel the fronts of your legs, or sometimes you feel your nervousness in your knees.”⁸³ She also understood that her material choices would impact viewers’ bodies in different ways. “Materials do things to you physically,” she told Chuck Close in 1994.⁸⁴ For Smith, bodies – both the representations she fabricated

⁸² Craig Gholson and Robert Gober, “Robert Gober,” *BOMB*, no. 29 (Fall 1989): 34.

⁸³ Claudia Gould, “Interview,” in *Kiki Smith* (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, the Ohio State University, 1992), 70.

⁸⁴ Chuck Close, “Interview with Kiki Smith,” *BOMB*, no. 49 (Fall 1994): 39.

and the bodies of those who engaged her work – were sites where invisible emotional, social, or spiritual struggles could be realized. In an interview with David Frankel, she mused, “In working with the body, I feel I’m actually making physical manifestations of psychic and spiritual dilemmas. Spiritual dilemmas being played out physically.”⁸⁵ As art critic Eleanor Heartney would later write, “For Smith, knowledge is subjective and cannot be separated from our sensate experience of the world.”⁸⁶

Viewers’ physical responses to Gober’s and Smith’s sculptures must be understood within the context of these twin concerns: the denaturalization of the body through discourse and the affirmation of knowledge gained through the body.⁸⁷ Both artists acknowledge that we can understand bodies only through discourse, and they call attention to this by eliciting seemingly instinctual responses of discomfort or disgust to obviously unnatural bodies. It is discourse that declares these constructed bodies to be socially unacceptable or transgressive. Yet, the fact that viewers consistently responded to these figures as if they were natural reveals the complexities of the relationship between materiality and language. We contemplate and interpret these leaking bodies through discourse even as they exceed discourse and challenge the norms that would constrain them. Both artists suggest that such embodied responses have a kind of epistemological value, that such experiences might elude speech and yet result in forms of non-intellectual cognition.

After all, despite some critics’ distressed cries, these sculptures are actually non-sensational. Though they might be upsetting, they are visually modest, not spectacular. Rather than immersing viewers in the midst of corporeal violence, the way that a graphic film might, the artworks provide an initial, visceral jolt and then allow space for viewers to observe and imagine. Philosopher Brian Massumi

⁸⁵ Frankel and Smith, “In Her Own Words,” 32.

⁸⁶ Eleanor Heartney, “Kiki Smith: A View from the inside Out,” in *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art*, ed. Eleanor Heartney, et al. (Munich; London: Prestel, 2007), 199.

calls such an effect “a shock to thought.” The somatic upset is not itself a revelation, but it can offer an opportunity for critical engagement with issues raised by the artwork.⁸⁸ In the case of Gober and Smith, their artworks’ affect – and the negotiation of discursivity and embodiment – pointed to a social issue that was particularly pressing in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

AIDS activists, particularly gay AIDS activists, engaged with similar questions of language, corporeal experience, and identity. Both artists were involved in this community, and by placing them within this context conceptually, we can begin to understand how their works participate in a broader dialogue that had incredibly potent personal and political import at that moment.

Discourse and Embodiment in AIDS Activism

Both Smith and Gober experienced significant personal heartache during the AIDS crisis in New York in the late eighties and early nineties, and their experiences undeniably affected their art-making. Gober lost many close friends to HIV and AIDS-related complications. In an intensely personal essay in 1989 for the magazine *Parkett*, Gober concluded by comparing his rambling, anecdotal writing as following the “structure of an amateur eulogy.”⁸⁹ “The only problem,” he stated, referring to his close-knit community, “...is that most of us are no longer amateurs.”⁹⁰ Smith also lost friends to the disease, but the deaths of her sister Beatrice in 1988 and of her close friend and collaborator David Wojnarowicz in 1992 were especially devastating. Both Smith and Gober chose to extend their personal experiences of grief into political activism. They were members of ACT UP New York, an activist organization committed to public protests, public information and anti-

⁸⁸ Brian Massumi, “Introduction: Like a Thought,” in *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Brian Massumi (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

⁸⁹ Robert Gober, “Cumulus from America,” *Parkett*, no. 19 (March 1989): 171.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

discrimination campaigns, and lobbying efforts for legislative action to support research for the treatment and cure of the disease. Further, the artists willingly used their artworks in support of activist or public information causes, such as donating their work for ACT UP benefit auctions or allowing their work to be in exhibitions related to AIDS.⁹¹

While neither artist should be understood as making art *about* AIDS as such, their experiences of caring and grieving for friends and relatives living with and dying from the disease unquestionably affected their work. Through the eighties Gober maintained relative silence regarding interpretations of his artwork. In 1989, however, Gober published the emotionally raw essay, quoted earlier, in the Swiss journal *Parkett*, in which he described how thoroughly his experience of the AIDS epidemic infused his daily activities and thinking. "For me," he wrote, "death has temporarily overtaken life in New York City."⁹² He recounted, with a kind of aching breathlessness, a litany of anecdotes: keeping track of time by remembering whose funeral he had last attended, caring for a friend whose parents had deserted him because of his sexuality, and listening to thoughtless platitudes offered by an "intelligent, informed, liberal mother of three."⁹³ He concluded by describing how completely AIDS had infused his daily experience and created a new kind of community:

These are the thoughts that criss-crossed my heart -- how many people have died, and how many people perform daily unsung acts of courage and love, giving kindness and hope to those who are ill....And should gay men succeed in moving through the discrimination that has nurtured this pandemic, their achievement will be remarkable – because for the most part they will have succeeded without the support of family and religion, the two mainstays of succor and strength for previously oppressed minorities.⁹⁴

⁹¹ See Paul Richard, "Art, the Picture of Generosity: Washington's Aids Fund-Raising Show," *The Washington Post*, May 12 1990.

⁹² Gober, "Cumulus from America," 169.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

In his interview later in 1989 with *BOMB!* magazine, Gober again acknowledged the pervasive effect of AIDS on his own life and work. Interviewer Craig Gholson asked whether Gober sees his own work as being cynical and about death. Gober replied that he thinks that art is “inherently hopeful,” but admits that his work might evidence a preoccupation with death.⁹⁵ “Of course,” he concludes, speaking of AIDS, “it’s hard living in New York not to be. It’s always on your plate.”⁹⁶ The same year in which Gober began speaking about the effect of the AIDS epidemic on his life and work was also when he began casting his own legs in wax. While his work was not specific to the AIDS crisis or bodies living with AIDS, his turn to the body as subject matter was certainly influenced by his personal experiences of discrimination, protest, and mourning.

Smith similarly acknowledged the ways in which AIDS changed her understanding of the body. In a 1991 interview she stated, “AIDS has really pushed the body forward in people’s minds in a way that it became more than something they were simply stuck in, freaked out about, or having pleasure with. We’ve become aware of the body as a social organism that is very much manipulated by different venues and different agendas.”⁹⁷ Smith’s work also changed significantly in 1989. Whereas her earlier work explored various internal organs and anatomical systems, her first foray into depicting a body in its entirety followed shortly after her sister’s death. Smith described making a full figure out of delicate, translucent paper and hanging it up in the corner of her studio “just to get it out of the way.”⁹⁸ But, after seeing it suspended there and thinking about her late sister, she began thinking of it as a kind of spirit.⁹⁹ She later created an installation at the Tyler School of Art Gallery at Temple University in Philadelphia that consisted of about a dozen white paper figures floating near the ceiling in a room covered with

⁹⁵ Gholson and Gober, “Robert Gober,” 32.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ McCormick, “Kiki Smith,” 87.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

blood red paper (Fig. 27). “With all these people we know dying from AIDS,” she explained, “you have this hovering of people’s presence who you don’t have physical access to anymore but are still quite vital to your life.”¹⁰⁰ It is also notable that shortly after this installation Smith began making her sculptures of uncontained, oozing bodies. Certainly she was aware that her depictions of bodily fluids – including blood and semen – acquired threatening or morbid connotations amidst public fear concerning the spread of HIV.

The activist community with which both artists aligned themselves faced a difficult dilemma. How could they acknowledge the corporeal reality of the disease – and the solidarity engendered by participation in physical activism – while still resisting the conflation of AIDS with gay identity? As described in the previous chapter, the HIV/AIDS epidemic affected the gay male community of New York especially deeply, and gay male bodies became perceived as threatening bodies, a moral *and* physical danger to society. In the minds of the frightened and misinformed general public, AIDS developed into what theorist Tim Dean calls “a disease of identity – something you would catch because of the kind of person you were.”¹⁰¹ Writing in the early nineties, sociologist Josh Gamson described the difficulty of disentangling AIDS from gay identity: “AIDS activists find themselves simultaneously attempting to dispel the notion that AIDS is a gay disease (which it is not) while, through their activity and leadership, treating AIDS as a gay problem (which, among other things, it is).”¹⁰²

In response to this dangerous elision of gay male bodies and AIDS, some in the gay intellectual community began to argue for a denaturalization of sexual identity, thus proposing that AIDS was a

¹⁰⁰ McCormick, “Kiki Smith,” 87.

¹⁰¹ Tim Dean, “Lacan and Queer Theory,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabate (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 240.

¹⁰² Josh Gamson, “Silence, Death, and the Invisible Enemy: AIDS Activism and Social Movement ‘Newness,’” *Social Problems* 36, no. 4 (1989): 356.

disease that a person contracted through what he or she *did* rather than *who* he or she was. Instead of insisting on a unified, stable identity as gay, they began to argue for a position critical of and outside of dominant heterosexual, white, male middle-class society. They reclaimed the formerly pejorative term “queer” to describe this discursive positioning as critical of the notion of fixed identity. Thus, rather than conceiving of their position as oppositional to the status quo, queer theorists proposed strategies of subverting and dismantling normative structures to reveal them as artificially constructed. The term “queer theory” was coined by Teresa de Lauretis in a conference talk in 1990, and the phrase and nascent idea were quickly expanded upon by other scholars, including Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, David Halperin, and Judith Butler, all of whom drew heavily from the work of poststructuralist thinker Michel Foucault.¹⁰³

Queer theory is, by its self-definition, impossible to systematically categorize. But a primary recurring theme emphasized in the writings of those scholars who adopted the term is a rejection of gay and lesbian identity politics in favor of deconstructing categories of identity altogether. For these theorists, the notion of homosexuality as an identity of an individual or group, whether understood as natural or social in origin, was politically dangerous.¹⁰⁴ Such a perspective, they argued, left a binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality intact as a kind of overarching conceptual framework and could not fundamentally challenge “a social regime which perpetuate[d] the production of subjects and social worlds organized and regulated by [this] binary.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, rather than explaining or resisting the

¹⁰³ Three foundational queer theory texts were published in 1990: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). For two helpful overviews of the history of queer theory, see Steven Seidman, “Deconstructing Queer Theory or the under-Theorization of the Social and the Ethical,” in *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, ed. Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); William Benjamin Turner, *A Genealogy of Queer Theory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

¹⁰⁴ Seidman, “Deconstructing Queer Theory,” 126.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

repression of homosexuality in western culture, queer theory in the early nineties critically examined the ways in which cultural categories such as gender, sexuality, and even the body were linguistically or discursively constructed and, as such, were unnatural and unstable.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, published in 1990, has persisted as one of the most influential and enduring works of queer theory, particularly in its approach to the body and identity.¹⁰⁶ Butler began her book by attacking the central assumptions of earlier feminist theory: that the categories of "woman" and "women" signify a universal identity across cultures, class, and history. This belief, she asserted, has resulted in "an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations" that reinforces the patriarchal gender binary of men and women.¹⁰⁷ Thus, according to Butler, "the category of 'women,' the subject of feminism, has been produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought."¹⁰⁸ She went on to argue for a new theoretical approach that questions the very basis of identity and gender in particular.

The central claim in *Gender Trouble* was that gender itself is performative: no essential identity could exist behind one's actions within society. In Butler's formulation, one cannot "express" gender. Instead, culturally influenced acts – the way we talk, walk, dress, and so on – have *constituted* the illusion of a stable gender identity.¹⁰⁹ This incompleteness of gender identity has permitted those categories to serve as permanently available sites of contested meaning.¹¹⁰ But Butler went even further, suggesting that *sex* – previously assumed to be a biological given – has also been constructed through discourse. Butler wrote, "This very concept of sex-as-matter, sex-as-instrument-of-cultural-

¹⁰⁶ Although *Gender Trouble* was not published until 1990, Butler had published several essays in the late 1980s that served as the core of the book, including "The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva," *Hypatia*, Vol. 3, No. 3, French Feminist Philosophy (Winter, 1989), pp. 104-118 and "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec., 1988), pp. 519-531.

¹⁰⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 4.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

signification...is a discursive formation that acts as a naturalized foundation for the nature/culture distinction and the strategies of domination that that distinction supports.”¹¹¹ Indeed, in Butler’s formulation, there could be no prediscursive body at all.

“‘The Body’ is itself a construction,” she declared, “as are the myriad ‘bodies’ that constitute the domain of the gendered subject.”¹¹² Butler critiqued the pervasive Cartesian understanding of the body as inert matter, a “passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as ‘external’ to that body.”¹¹³ But why, she persisted, should “the body” be accepted as an unquestionable given? Even theorists writing prior to Butler, such as Foucault, who argued for the constructed nature of gender, assumed “a materiality prior to signification and form.”¹¹⁴ Butler proposed, however, that discourses regarding the body, sexuality, gender, biology, and nature have themselves determined what we consider to be the body. Further, the only way to have access to the body has been through discourse. Butler denaturalized both gender *and* sex, arguing for the impossibility of interpreting the physical body at all without using language. In her mind, just as it was impossible for a subject to exist outside of or prior to discourse, the subject’s corporeal self, too, could not be an antecedent to discourse.¹¹⁵

Although Butler did not directly address the implications of her argument on an understanding of AIDS, it would follow that physical diseases, such as HIV and AIDS, should be recognized as linguistic constructions. The diagnosis, treatment, and experience of AIDS could not, in Butler’s view, be accepted as an objective, biological given. In this theoretical context, Smith’s and Gober’s insistence on the constructedness of their wax bodies could take on an additional layer of significance. Their artworks did, in some way, literalize Butler’s denaturalization of sexed and gendered bodies. At the same

¹¹¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 37.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹¹⁵ Butler’s position has changed or been nuanced in later writings, but this summary reflects her writing on the subject up until 1990 and this interpretation remains the most influential on subsequent scholarship.

time, however, the sculptures worked to affect viewers on a corporeal, not just intellectual or psychological, level. In this, Smith and Gober might seem to be less akin to Butler and more sympathetic to a particular current of art-making explicitly related to AIDS.

While queer theorists threw the very notion of the body into question, others affected by AIDS, particularly in the arts community, chose to emphasize the corporeality of those living with the disease. In doing so, they hoped to make a previously hidden condition visible to those outside the immediate community. An especially poignant and well-known example of this kind of action was the exhibition *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, curated by photographer Nan Goldin in 1989. Held at Artists Space, a nonprofit gallery in SoHo, the exhibition included the work of 23 painters, photographers, and sculptures, all addressing the topic of AIDS. According to Goldin, the influence of “the New Morality and the effective use of AIDS as the most powerful tool for sexual repression” fed her desire “[to] portray sexuality as a positive force,” “to prove that sex=death is a false equation,” and “to show that the strictly demarcated lines between homo and heterosexual cultures can be seamlessly crossed.”¹¹⁶ The artworks were unapologetically political and personal, functioning, as Goldin described them, “as an articulation, as an outcry, and as a mechanism for survival.”¹¹⁷ As the title of the exhibition suggested, much of the work was premised on artists’ desire to not vanish, to leave a legacy of some sort in their community and to insist on the importance of their existence to a broader culture that had frequently ignored or maligned them. “The show,” Goldin wrote, “proves its own premise – that AIDS has not and will not eliminate our community, or succeed in wiping out our sensibility and silencing our voice.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Nan Goldin, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* (New York: Artists Space, 1989), 5.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Kiki Smith's untitled paper body, which she made immediately following her sister's death from AIDS-related complications, was included in the exhibition (Fig. 27). Smith's delicate figure was noticeably more abstracted and generalized than the majority of other works in the exhibition. Portraits of people with AIDS – or people who had recently succumbed to the disease – dominated the show, and in these images physical deterioration functioned as visible proof of the virus's existence and deadly effects. Among the most affecting images was Mark Morrisroe's Polaroid *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 28). The artist's frank appraisal of the camera and coy pose contrasted with his body's obvious frailty. But the curatorial text informing visitors that Morrisroe had passed away only months after taking the photograph and before the exhibition's opening turned the image of his body into a kind of relic, an index of his life, suffering, and death. Other artists in the show used the physical deterioration of PWAs as a foil for the vibrancy of their lives and spirits. Philip-Lorca Di Corcia's color photograph *Vittorio* (1989) is a blurry, overexposed portrait of artist Vittorio Scarpati lying in a hospital bed, gazing steadily at the camera, his face gaunt and chest covered in white bandages (Fig. 29). Scarpati's body seems almost to dematerialize amongst the white sheets and light from the window. Yet, he is visually framed in a kind of wreath of colorful decorations and gifts from friends – a string of bright balloons hanging from his IV pole, beads and greeting cards pinned on the wall to his right, and a plush gift-shop bear and straw hat sitting on his side table – all of which serve as visible reminders that Scarpati is not dying alone, that he is loved and cared for by others. Goldin's essay and curatorial choices suggest that she was less interested in deconstructing the popular conflation of gay identity and AIDS than she was intent on expressing the sorrow and outrage of the gay community in light of this crisis. The bodies of those living and dying with AIDS operated as an vital means of bearing visible witness to a crisis that the US government and general public was either ignorant of or had tried to suppress.

A tension thus emerged within the overlapping spheres of the gay and PWA communities: how could queer theorists' emphasis on purely discursive identity be reconciled with the corporeal reality of AIDS? Though seemingly paradoxical, these twin concerns shaped the potent, transformative activism of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, known as ACT UP, first in New York and then throughout the United States. Though neither were leaders, both Smith and Gober were members of the organization, and their artworks resonate with the coalition's efforts to create a unique and vital community that disarmed the binary of discourse and embodiment.¹¹⁹

ACT UP was formed in March 1987 at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in New York following a speech by gay activist Larry Kramer.¹²⁰ Kramer passionately argued that due to government mishandling and misinformation, the gay and lesbian community needed to take direct and immediate action to fight the virus. "Do we want to start a new organization devoted to political action?" Kramer asked.¹²¹ The audience responded resoundingly to the affirmative and two days later approximately 300 people met to form ACT UP.¹²² ACT UP quickly launched a multi-pronged agenda of political actions, staging large-scale demonstrations and widely disseminating printed material. The group's stated purpose was to be a "diverse, non-partisan group united in anger and committed to direct

¹¹⁹ Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 186.

¹²⁰ Although ACT UP was formed primarily under the leadership of gay activists, the organization was well-aware of the need to address the threat that AIDS posed to other communities, particularly poor women of color who comprised a significant percentage of HIV/AIDS cases in the United States in the late eighties. See Marion Banzhaf, Act Up New York Women, and Aids Book Group, *Women, AIDS, and Activism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990). Still, most of the press coverage on ACT UP from the period tended to fixate on the organization's primarily gay membership and the notion of AIDS as a disease that only afflicted gay men. Thus, my focus on the overlap of the gay and PWA communities in New York reflects how the crisis was perceived at that moment. For some useful histories of AIDS activism that focused on and rallied the support of other communities see Gena Corea, *The Invisible Epidemic: The Story of Women and AIDS* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Douglas A. Feldman and Julia Wang Miller, *The AIDS Crisis: A Documentary History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998).

¹²¹ Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, *AIDS DemoGraphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 4.

¹²² *Ibid.*

action to end the AIDS crisis. We meet with government and health officials; we research and distribute the latest medical information; we protest and demonstrate. WE ARE NOT SILENT.”¹²³

ACT UP’s initial core membership included artists, designers, and media professionals, who created a set of activist practices that capitalized on media spectacle and graphic design. Their practice was extremely effective, both in pushing through policy changes on the national level, and also, as founding member Jon Greenberg pointed out, serving the function of empowerment.¹²⁴ For Greenberg and other members, ACT UP offered the “structure and opportunity...to work through their obstacles to empowerment” by confronting oppressive power structures, personal fears, and suppressed anger.¹²⁵ Greenberg concluded, “For people with AIDS [this direct action] could mean the difference between dying now and dying much later.”¹²⁶

ACT UP’s strategies evidenced a powerful convergence between the two responses to the AIDS crisis described above. On one hand, ACT UP recognized the power of language as a social tool for fundamentally shaping the perception and experience of, as well as response to, AIDS. On the other

¹²³ This is the self-definition of ACT UP used on the organization’s printed matter from the late 1980s and its use continues in current publications and on their official website. The ACT UP New York website functions self-consciously as an online archive and resource bank. See ACT UP New York, “About Act up New York,” <http://www.actupny.org>.

¹²⁴ Jon Greenberg, “ACT UP Explained,” <http://www.actupny.org/documents/greenbergAU.html> (accessed February 12, 2012). The flyer publicizing the first ACT UP demonstration – on March 24, 1987 on Wall Street in front of Trinity Church – listed seven points for immediate action, including demands for the immediate release of drugs that could help PWAs, for massive public education to stop the spread of the virus, and for non-discrimination policies to protect PWAs. The flyer concluded, “AIDS is the biggest killer in New York City of young men and women. AIDS IS EVERYBODY’S BUSINESS NOW.” Over 250 ACT UP members descended on Wall Street at seven o’clock in the morning to “protest the profiteering of pharmaceutical companies,” particularly Burroughs Wellcome, the producer of AZT – the only government-approved drug therapy for AIDS – which had recently announced that it would charge patients upwards of \$10,000 annually for this antiviral medication. The protest itself was both passionate and carefully orchestrated. ACT UP disseminated thousands of copies of a recent *New York Times* op-ed piece by Larry Kramer that detailed the community’s grievances against the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The organization also created and handed out its own fact sheet, highlighting in bullet point format the ways in which the FDA and pharmaceutical companies seemed to be withholding valuable treatments from PWAs. Seventeen people were arrested for acts of civil disobedience, prompting national press coverage. Shortly after the demonstration, the FDA announced that it would shorten its drug approval process by two years. For ACT UP members, this policy change was proof of the effectiveness of their grassroots activism. Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS DemoGraphics*, 28.

¹²⁵ Greenberg, “ACT UP Explained”.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

hand, the leaders of ACT UP emphasized the vital role of physical, active bodies within their activist agenda. Rather than operating in an oppositional fashion, the resulting tension was immensely productive. Douglas Crimp, the former *October* editor whose departure from the journal in 1990 signaled a shift in its editorial policy towards formalist and away from activist concerns, wrote prolifically about his experience as an early and active member of ACT UP, and his scholarship in particular expressed this tenuous negotiation of the complex relationship of discourse to embodied experience.

In the introduction to *October's* special issue on AIDS in 1987, Crimp emphasized the discursive nature of the AIDS crisis. He declared, "AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it."¹²⁷ While careful to insist that he was not denying "the reality of illness, suffering, and death," he asserted that there was no "underlying reality of AIDS, upon which are constructed the representations, or the culture, or the politics of AIDS."¹²⁸ Crimp thus insisted on the separation of the physical effects of AIDS, one's social identification as "gay," and the representation and presentation of AIDS conjured by the media and government agencies. His longer essay, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," in that special issue of *October*, was an extended review and critique of Randy Shilts's popular 1987 book *And the Band Played On*.¹²⁹ Crimp foregrounded the narrative construction of what he ironically refers to as Shilts's "heroic" undercover journalism, demonstrating how Shilts *and* those whom Shilts's book condemns use language to create, shape, and perpetuate knowledge about AIDS. Both Shilts and Crimp recognized the formative power of language, the affective difference of calling someone an "AIDS victim" rather than a "Person with

¹²⁷ Douglas Crimp, "Introduction," *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 3.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *October* 43 (Winter 1987). I discuss the content of Shilts's book in Chapter One. The influence of Shilts's book into the early nineties can also be seen in its adaptation to an Emmy Award-winning television docudrama in 1993.

AIDS” or PWA, or of referring to someone as “sexually active” rather than “promiscuous.”¹³⁰ But while Shilts treated such linguistic choices as a politically correct desire not to offend, Crimp positioned the same discursive moves as part of a kind of Foucauldian power struggle, where language creates and consolidates regimes of power.¹³¹

ACT UP was perhaps best known for punchy slogans such as “ALL PEOPLE WITH AIDS ARE INNOCENT” and “THE AIDS CRISIS IS NOT OVER,” but they also created and disseminated sample letters to politicians, highly detailed fact sheets, and volumes of public health information on the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS. Most of their bullet-point fact sheets emphasized the ways in which knowledge – about the epidemic itself or about the government’s mishandling of it – could be converted to political action.¹³² ACT UP adopted a position of using language to dismantle existing positions of power while constructing, again through discourse, new ways of understanding the existence and experience of HIV/AIDS.

At the same time, ACT UP also placed significant emphasis on the role of bodies in response to the AIDS crisis in the United States. Politically, the success of their activism hinged on the marshalling of physical bodies at demonstrations and events and the ways in which these vital bodies created a

¹³⁰ Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” 240.

¹³¹ Ibid. In the same special issue, Leo Bersani also offered a similar critique of how language was used to exclude gay men from media discourse on AIDS. Bersani argued that the ways in which the government and media were characterizing the AIDS crisis was fundamentally related to a cultural devaluing of the loss of power. He wrote: “Phallogocentrism is exactly that: not primarily the denial of power to women (although it has obviously led to that, everywhere and at all times), but above all the denial of the *value* of powerlessness in both men and women.” See Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 197-222.

¹³² For example, flyers handed out at a demonstration at the White House in June of 1987, noted, “In one day the Pentagon spends more than the total spent for AIDS research and education since 1982,” and, “By 1991, more Americans will die from AIDS each year than were killed in the entire Vietnam War.” Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS DemoGraphics*, 33. The “National AIDS Demonstration” took place at the White House in Washington D.C. on June 1, 1987. The bolded text is part of the original flyer. At other protests, activists handed out letters addressed to President Reagan, which they encouraged people to mail to the White House. The letter stated their grievances with his extended silence in regards to AIDS, mixing statistical statements with calls for action. For example, “Why haven’t you, Mr. President, read your own surgeon general’s report on AIDS, which was prepared in October 1986? Since then, over 4,800 Americans have died from this disease.” See Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS DemoGraphics*, 31.

spectacle that contradicted dominant visual representations of PWAs. But, ACT UP leaders also acknowledged the epistemological significance of the embodied experience of protesting, the empowerment that could occur through bodies massing together in solidarity. Before exploring the ways in which ACT UP mobilized physical bodies, it is helpful to first consider the organization's wariness towards visual representations of PWAs.

The group's critical response to the 1988 exhibition *Pictures of People* at the Museum of Modern Art expressed this skepticism. The show of photographs by Nicholas Nixon included four series of portraits that Nixon took of people infected with AIDS – two gay men, a male hemophiliac, and a straight woman – taken at monthly or weekly intervals. One of the most haunting and frequently reproduced photographs from the exhibition was a portrait of Thomas Moran, a PWA whom Nixon photographed from August 1987 until Moran's death in February 1988. In the image, *Tom Moran, East Braintree, Massachusetts, September 1987*, Moran faces away from the camera, reaching out to touch a window with his right hand (Fig. 30). His spine and shoulder blades protrude through the paper-thin skin of his back and the flood of light through the window makes his hand appear to be even more skeletal. The show received positive responses from many writers in the popular press, who praised Nixon's photographs as an honest and unsentimental record of the devastating effects of AIDS.¹³³ For example, in his review for the *New York Times*, photography critic Andy Grundberg wrote:

The result is overwhelming, since one sees not only the wasting away of the flesh (in photographs, emaciation has become emblematic of AIDS) but also the gradual dimming of the subjects' ability to compose themselves for the camera. What each series begins as a conventional effort to pose for a picture ends in a kind of abandon; as the subjects' self-

¹³³ See Crimp's summary of the exhibition's reviews: Douglas Crimp, "Portraits of People with AIDS," in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on Aids and Queer Politics*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002): 83-109.

consciousness disappears, the camera seems to become invisible, and consequently there is almost no boundary between the image and ourselves.¹³⁴

Grundberg suggested a kind of visual metaphor put forth by the photographs. The slow disappearance of the subjects' corporeal bodies was echoed in their loss of posturing and "self-consciousness," and both portended their inevitable death. Photography's historical claim to objective truth would make us incapable of denying the physical reality of the disease, and the documented fragility of Moran's body would prove that, contrary to conservative politicians' claims, he was not a threat.

In an essay on Nixon's photographs, Douglas Crimp offered two criticisms of the exhibition and, in particular, the visual representation of the PWA's bodies. First, Crimp implied that the "growing intimacy" that reviewers described actually robbed the subjects of "the individuality of their lives and deaths."¹³⁵ "Do their lives and deaths," he asked rhetorically, "become, through some process of identification, ours?"¹³⁶ Second, Crimp argued that "what we see in Nixon's photographs is their reiteration of what we have already been told or shown about people with AIDS: that they are ravaged, disfigured, and debilitated by the syndrome; they are generally alone, desperate, but resigned to their 'inevitable' deaths."¹³⁷ ACT UP staged a small and quiet protest of the MOMA exhibition, offering museum visitors alternate images of PWAs. For example, a young woman held a photograph of a smiling middle-aged man with the caption: "This is a picture of my father taken when he'd been living with AIDS for three years."¹³⁸ The protestors also handed out flyers to MOMA visitors, explaining what they saw as the danger of images such as Nixon's:

We believe that the representation of people with AIDS affects not only how viewers will perceive PWAs outside the museum, but, ultimately, crucial issues of AIDS funding, legislation,

¹³⁴ Andy Grundberg, "Nicholas Nixon Seeks a Path to the Heart," *The New York Times*, September 11, 1988, H37.

¹³⁵ Crimp, "Portraits of People with AIDS," 86.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

and education. In portraying PWAs as people to be pitied or feared, as people alone and lonely, we believe that this show perpetuates general misconceptions about AIDS without addressing the realities of those of us living every day with this crisis as PWAs and people who love PWAs.¹³⁹

The flyer went on to explain that experimental drugs and better information about treatment were extending the lives of many PWAs. Further, they pointed out that the majority of AIDS cases in New York City were in fact women, particularly women of color. Recognizing the power of images to affect the possibility of substantial political change, the protestors concluded with a call for PWA bodies to be represented differently: “We demand the visibility of PWAs who are vibrant, angry, loving, sexy, beautiful, acting up and fighting back.”¹⁴⁰ The demonstrators did not take issue with the practice of representing PWAs’ bodies, nor did they deny the importance of visual representations of PWAs. What they suggested, instead, was a desire to see bodies of PWAs that asserted their own agency.¹⁴¹

We can understand ACT UP’s emphasis on organized public protest and civil disobedience as both a participation in a history of political protest movements and a direct response to dominant misconceptions regarding AIDS and PWAs.¹⁴² Public assembly and demonstrations were considered vital to accomplishing ACT UP’s objectives, and protests were thoughtfully organized to maximize their immediate impact and obtain sustained media coverage for sustained effect. The massing together

¹³⁹ Crimp, “Portraits of People with AIDS,” 87.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Notably, many of the artists who participated in Goldin’s *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* exhibition in 1989 were themselves ACT UP members. While the exhibition was in no way sanctioned or vetted by ACT UP leadership, it can be seen as a kind of alternative to Nixon’s *Photographs of People*. The specificity of the bodies represented did render visible the kinds of vibrant, angry, loving, sexy, beautiful PWAs that the protestors at the Nixon exhibition demanded.

¹⁴² Crimp’s entire book *AIDS DemoGraphics* is in effect a call for gatherings of public protest, for marches, rallies, and parades. As an organization, ACT UP compiled a “Demonstrator’s Manual” and offered “Civil Disobedience Training” to members.

of ACT UP protestors also pointedly rejected the lingering public fear of contracting AIDS through casual contact.¹⁴³

Perhaps the most telling and powerful example of how ACT UP deployed both language and embodied action in contingent tandem can be seen in the use of the ubiquitous SILENCE = DEATH graphic. Designed by the art activist collaborative the Silence = Death Project, the emblem was adopted by ACT UP in its second demonstration in 1987 (Fig. 31). A pink triangle – a reclamation and inversion of the patches homosexuals were forced to wear under Hitler’s National Socialist regime – floats in the middle of a flat black field. The pale pink words SILENCE = DEATH anchored the bottom of the poster, in a thick, condensed typeface. Below, in a much smaller font, was the text “Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the Center for Disease Control, the Federal Drug Administration, and the Vatican? Gays and lesbians are not expendable...Use your power...Vote...Boycott...Defend yourselves...Turn anger, fear, grief into action.” The equation of silence with death implied that the opposite must be true: discourse equals life. It was a fundamental demand for language – for public acknowledgement, for the dissemination of information, and for proactive and protective legislation – as a direct means of saving lives.¹⁴⁴

The triangle emblem and main text were subsequently disseminated on placards, t-shirts, buttons, and stickers and appears repeatedly, in multiple forms, in photographic images of ACT UP rallies throughout the late eighties and early nineties. While this compelling graphic did not directly

¹⁴³ On June 1, 1987, ACT UP members gathered in Washington D.C., at the Third International Conference on AIDS, to condemn President Ronald Reagan’s lack of action in response to the AIDS crisis. Police arrested 64 protestors in front of the White House, but did so wearing bright yellow rubber gloves, as if afraid that they would be “infected” by simply touching the protestors. See Chapter One for a discussion of public misinformation and misunderstandings regarding the spread of the HIV virus. ACT UP widely disseminated photographs of the gloved policemen, berating them for their ignorance and “AIDS-phobia. See ACT UP New York official capsule chronology: <http://www.actupny.org/documents/cron-87.html> (accessed February 12, 2012).

¹⁴⁴ For a deconstructionist reading of the SILENCE = DEATH graphic, see Lee Edelman, “The Plague of Discourse: Politics, Literary Theory, and AIDS,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 313-314.

reference the body, it arguably accumulated much of its power and effect through its use on and alongside physical bodies. In the contexts of ACT UP's rallies, parades, and other gatherings, graphics such as SILENCE = DEATH served as a means of identification and community-building. Describing the 500,000 person March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in October 1987, Crimp recalled that "our legions [were] immediately recognizable from our SILENCE = DEATH t-shirts."¹⁴⁵ "If you were wearing one of our t-shirts," he continues, "you could be sure to be asked countless times, 'Who is that group?'"¹⁴⁶ Throughout his book, Crimp suggests that the sheer number and massing of bodies visibly identifying themselves with ACT UP was imperative for any radical change to occur in the understanding and treatment of people with AIDS.

The activist strategies utilized by ACT UP in the late 1980s and early 1990s thus demonstrated the potent tension of acknowledging the simultaneous discursivity and corporeality of the AIDS crisis. The organization acknowledged the discursive construction of AIDS and the importance of using language to strategically reconstruct an understanding of the causes, treatments, and experience of living with HIV/AIDS. At the same time, while remaining cautiously aware of the potentially generalizing and politically eviscerating potential of simplistic representations of PWAs, ACT UP leaders did not denigrate the importance of either the corporeal effects of the disease or the embodied act of public protest.¹⁴⁷

Conclusion

¹⁴⁵ Crimp and Rolston, *Aids Demographics*, 37.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ I have chosen not to focus on the AIDS Quilt in this dissertation. Although a popular and powerful project, it functioned more as a memorial and a means for those who had lost loved ones to AIDS to participate in communal mourning. ACT UP, on the other hand, was primarily focused on political activism and improving the lives of those *living* with AIDS. For more on the AIDS Quilt project, see the excellent recent anthology Charles E. Morris, ed., *Remembering the AIDS Quilt* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011).

An encounter with Smith's leaking nudes or Gober's abandoned body parts expresses a push and pull between language and corporeality similar to that engaged by the AIDS activist community. When confronted with Smith's unruly bodies or Gober's solitary legs and torsos, reviewers responded somatically. But these reactions were not as instinctual or unmediated as they may have seemed at first. Smith's and Gober's bodies insist upon their own constructedness. Smith calls attention to her materials – glittering beads and tactile wax that bears the traces of her fingers or the excess of the casting process – and in doing so precludes any sustained illusion that one might be seeing literal dead, defecating, or dejected bodies. Even Gober's work, despite – or perhaps because of – their obsessive, handcrafted detail, announce themselves as knowing replicas, not realities. How, then, might we understand such visceral, somatic responses?

Rather than looking to the psychoanalytic notion of abjection as an interpretive framework, a more helpful context for understanding the corporeal effect of these sculptures can be found within the AIDS activist community in which both Smith and Gober participated. The tension of discourse and embodiment that characterized seemingly opposing approaches to the AIDS crisis proved to be immensely productive for the activist organization ACT UP. As we have seen, ACT UP's leadership recognized the personal *and* political efficacy of demonstrators physically massing together to actively protest government inaction and discrimination. The marches and protests served to disprove public misperceptions of AIDS being transferred through casual contact and of PWAs as victims inevitably on the brink of death. But it was through language that ACT UP stimulated specific political change. The group's leadership recognized the power of discourse to fundamentally shape people's perception and experience of, as well as response to, AIDS. ACT UP's strategies demonstrated the potency of holding discursivity and corporeality in tension. Even as they used language to denaturalize a connection

between sexual identity and AIDS, the activists continued to affirm the unique epistemological role of embodied experience.

Though not leaders, Smith and Gober were ACT UP members and they acknowledged the effects of the AIDS crisis on their own art-making and understanding of the body. They recognized the body as socially coded, shaped by and apprehended through cultural systems, and their sculptures literalized this knowledge by emphasizing their constructed objecthood. And yet, Smith and Gober still insisted on the importance of viewers' embodied encounters with the artworks. After all, as Smith told an interviewer in 1992, "You feel your nervousness in your knees."¹⁴⁸

Smith's and Gober's represented bodies affected *viewers'* bodies through the discourse that located them outside the parameters of social acceptability. Using their clearly constructed bodies as a foil for the discourse that would animate them and declare them offensive, Smith and Gober avoided either biological or linguistic essentialism. Their sculptures allowed the body to be, as feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz writes, "...fully material and for the materiality to be extended and to include and explain the operations of language, desire, and significance."¹⁴⁹ As such, Smith and Gober dismissed the traditional binary of language and corporeality. Their works called attention to how social discourse functions while simultaneously underscoring the ways in which bodies create knowledge and meaning through sensate experience. The artists did not simply represent the uncomfortable permeability of bodies by fluids or hair or fracture as a metaphor for fragile identity. Instead, sculptures like Smith's hanging pair of dripping, despondent nudes and Gober's plaster bag-turned-torso actually enacted this destabilization somatically, through viewers' own bodies.

¹⁴⁸ Gould, "Interview," 80.

¹⁴⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 210.

Smith's and Gober's works are not themselves *about* AIDS or AIDS activism, nor does their connection to that community negate the value of other, helpful scholarship that explores the art historical and religious dimensions of these sculptures. But, placing these artists within the context of AIDS activism offers an additional framework for understanding the formal and conceptual tension evident in their work. It points to a consonance of ideas and allows us to recognize Smith and Gober as contributing to – rather than simply reflecting or representing – an important dialogue on the body and identity. The works themselves become theorizing agents. And, helpfully, the effective work of ACT UP suggests the power of allowing these tensions to remain unresolved, to affirm the role of language in constructing our experiences while still acknowledging the ways in which our bodies themselves create discourse. Smith's and Gober's works demonstrate that the body is not merely a site of social inscription but is itself a possible inscribing agent.

CHAPTER THREE
Unnatural Naturals: David Hammons and Lorna Simpson

Introduction

In a 1991 article for *The Village Voice*, cultural critic Lisa Jones declared, “Hair is the be-all and end-all. Everything I know about American history I learned from looking at black people’s hair.”¹ Though the statement may have seemed hyperbolic, Jones was quite serious. In her mind, black hair – highly visible, highly personal, highly political, and highly malleable – operated as both metaphor and microcosm of Black identity in the United States.²

New York-based artists David Hammons and Lorna Simpson might have agreed with Jones’s statement.³ Though they approached the substance differently, black hair serves as a recurring motif in artworks they created between 1990 and 1994. For example, David Hammons’s 1990 sculpture *Esquire (John Henry)* consists of a large smooth stone resting on a tin of black Esquire shoe polish, which in turn is perched on the end of an upright steel railroad track (Fig. 33). The top of the stone is covered with dark curly fuzz, hair that Hammons gathered from barbershops in his Harlem neighborhood. Although he made only three works using hair in the early nineties – *Esquire (John Henry)*, an untitled 1992 sculpture, and a performance piece that took place inside a Harlem barbershop – the simple, vernacular materials and their cheeky, even absurd anthropomorphism are typical of Hammons’s

¹ Lisa Jones, *Bulletproof Dive: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 11-12.

² I am choosing to use the term “black” as a means of acknowledging the constructed nature of that social identity and to acknowledge the Black Diaspora beyond African Americans. I have also decided, at this time, not to capitalize “black” as I am not convinced of the political efficacy of such a move. When quoting other writers, however, I respect their decision about whether or not to capitalize “black.” Finally, when I do use the term “African American,” it is a reflection of either that particular subject’s self-identification as such or as a specific historicized term, such as “African American Studies.”

³ Like Robert Gober and Kiki Smith, Lorna Simpson and David Hammons also gained mainstream critical attention in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Both were living and working in New York, and both exhibited extensively at major U.S. and international institutions and events around this time.

métier.⁴ Critic Kellie Jones describes Hammons as a “hip junk dealer” who transforms the material elements of black urban culture into a commentary on that experience.⁵ His works presented themselves as punchy, like snappy one-liner jokes.

In contrast, a work by Simpson from the following year, *Coiffure*, has a quieter visual presence that encourages lengthier contemplation (Fig. 5). Simpson made numerous photograph-and-text installations between 1991 and 1994 that included images of dark, kinky hair, and *Coiffure* is representative of many of her recurring visual tropes. Three large black and white photographs – each almost four feet high – create a triptych. On the left, we see the back of a woman’s head; in the middle, there is a coil of braided hair; and on the right, we peer at the inside of a wooden mask.⁶ The woman is dark-skinned, with short, curly hair, and wears a simple black top. As in a Baroque tenebrist painting, the figure emerges from a velvety black expanse, the right side of the body disappearing into shadow while the left is brightly spot lit. Although the bust-length format is reminiscent of traditional portraiture, the woman faces away from the viewer, concealing what we would consider to be her identifying features. The braided hair and wooden mask similarly float against a black field, their crisp focus and squared compositions recalling both anthropological images and the sumptuous modernist photography of Edward Weston. Below the images are a series of black plastic plaques engraved with what seems to be hairstyling instructions such as “braid into four circles.” Taken together, however, the text panels do not offer a coherent set of directions, nor do they adequately label the images above. At once frustrating and compelling, the work in many ways withholds more information than it reveals.

⁴ Hammons’s three hair works in the early 1990s actually marks his return to using hair as a medium. He also created hair sculptures and weavings in the mid-1970s and it was while recreating some of those sculptures for his 1991 retrospective exhibition at PS1 that he decided to make the works I discuss in this chapter. For a description of the earlier works and their relationship to 1970s hair culture see Kellie Jones, “In the Thick of It: David Hammons and Hair Culture of the 1970s,” *Third Text*, no. 44 (1998).

⁵ “The Structure of Myth and the Potency of Magic,” in *David Hammons: Rousing the Rubble*, ed. Tom Finkelpearl and David Hammons (New York; Cambridge: Institute for Contemporary Art; P.S. 1 Museum; MIT Press, 1991), 15.

⁶ Notably, all three of these images appear in other photographic installations produced between 1991 and 1993.

Even in the early nineties, at least one critic positioned the artists' divergent aesthetic practices as representative of two oppositional approaches to art-making found within the black community. Hammons's assemblages sprawled, shed, and occasionally smelled. On the other hand, Simpson's photographs evinced a metaphorical and literal slickness. Simpson's work was glossy; Hammons's was greasy. David Cameron, writing for *Flash Art* in 1993, used Simpson's cool aesthetic as a foil for what he characterized as Hammons's renegade, populist approach. He described Simpson's art as having an "air of sanctimoniousness" whereas Hammons's vibrant work expressed "the experience of being a fully engaged African-American male at the end of the 20th century."⁷ Cameron suggested that Hammons embodied an earthy, authentic approach to distinctly African American art, while Simpson chose to engage with critical theory, which Cameron implied was an effort to assimilate into the white-dominated art world.⁸

But an important point of comparison remains unexplored: the artists' concurrent uses of hair. For both Hammons and Simpson, hair serves as a complex signifier. It can represent an individual, but it can also suggest a community. It can reference both recent and distant histories. It can conjure the smell of grease or talcum powder or frying fish. It can make fingers twitch and scalps prickle. It can be a source of racial pride or a metaphor for oppression. Like hair itself, these multiple strands together create a richly textured, dense field of meaning that was too often flattened by critics in the early nineties.

⁷ David Cameron, "David Hammons: Coming in from the Cold," *Flash Art* 26, no. 168 (1993): 70, 68.

⁸ Cameron's characterizations of Hammons and Simpson can be understood as echoing a long struggle within the African American community over how to respond to white cultural and political oppression. Disagreements over this very issue date back to W.E.B. Du Bois chastising Booker T. Washington for his "accommodationism" in the Atlanta Compromise of 1895. In the 1920s, Du Bois would criticize Marcus Garvey for his endorsement of racial separatism, while Garvey denounced Du Bois's hopes for an integrated society. For a useful history of this debate and study of its continuing impact on black politics, see Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

Contrary to a multiculturalist politics of recognition, Hammons's and Simpson's hair works question the very notion of a stable, essential black identity.⁹ At the same time, in a break from poststructural denigrations of corporeality, they affirm the particularity of the embodied experience of living with black hair. While their use of hair directly engages with contemporary artistic practices of the late eighties and early nineties, Simpson and Hammons also draw from other, overlapping cultural spheres: Black popular and vernacular cultures, mainstream American news and advertising, and African American Cultural Studies. In their works, black hair is part of an unstable dialectic, in which its multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings are often tied to false binaries. By capitalizing on the polysemic nature of black hair, Hammons and Simpson more fundamentally propose a notion of subjectivity as constructed, collaborative, and processed through – but not emanating from – flesh, bone, and, of course, hair.

Being A “Black Artist”

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Hammons and Simpson both received significant attention from mainstream media outlets and art institutions. Both artists had eponymous solo shows at fairly well-known New York galleries in 1989 – Hammons at Exit Art and Simpson at Josh Baer Gallery – and the following year they were included in the New Museum's expansive, multiculturalist-oriented *The Decade Show* exhibition. Also in 1990, Simpson participated in the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) *Projects*, a series of small exhibitions intended to support emerging contemporary artists. In 1991, curator Robert Storr, then newly appointed at MoMA, featured Hammons as one of four artists in his inaugural exhibition *Dislocations*. While Hammons declined invitations to exhibit at the self-

⁹ See Chapter One for a discussion of multicultural politics of recognition.

consciously pluralist 1991 and 1993 Whitney Biennials – “Their relationship with black artists has been negative since day 1,” he told one interviewer – Simpson participated in both Biennials.¹⁰

The art world’s new penchant for “diversity,” described in Chapter One, certainly buoyed Simpson’s and Hammons’s profiles in New York on the cusp of the nineties. But such notice also came with certain limitations. Art historian Kellie Jones has subsequently observed that mainstream press reviews of artists such as Simpson and Hammons tended to be “at once wholly ignorant about issues of race and yet complicit in upholding its formations.”¹¹ Indeed, writers frequently introduced Simpson or Hammons as a “black artist,” “Afro-American artist,” or “African American artist.”¹² By using the artists’ ethnicity or social group as a grammatical modifier, writers implied that Simpson’s and Hammons’s artworks were themselves necessarily modified by that association. Coco Fusco similarly complained that “the wave of criticism of these works was bound by its reliance [on] notions of instrumentality, literalism in relation to artmaking (i.e., an image of something can only be interpreted that way.”¹³ There were, of course, some scholars who focused primarily on Simpson’s investigation of photography

¹⁰ Amei Wallach, “Rubble-Rouser New York Artist David Hammons Has Lived and Found Inspiration in the Streets, Using Discarded Objects to Capture the Black Experience in a White World; Now He Too Has Been Discovered,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 1991, http://articles.latimes.com/1991-08-18/entertainment/ca-1418_1_david-hammons (accessed March 3, 2013). Also, during archival research in the Whitney Museum’s curatorial files, I located correspondence between head curator Elisabeth Sussman and associate curator Thelma Golden regarding David Hammons needing to be taken off the list for the 1993 Biennial. Ironically, the Whitney had just purchased Hammons’s 1992 *Untitled* hair sculpture, discussed later in this chapter, for their permanent collection. The work was included in subsequent Whitney shows, but not the Biennial.

¹¹ Kellie Jones, “(Un)Seen & Overheard: Pictures by Lorna Simpson,” in *Lorna Simpson*, ed. Kellie Jones, Thelma Golden, and Chrissie Iles (London; New York: Phaidon, 2002), 74.

¹² For just a few examples see Michael Brenson, “Art View; Black Artists: A Place in the Sun,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 1989; Wallach, “Rubble-Rouser New York Artist David Hammons;” Ronald Jones, “Bankers’ Daughters: Lorna Simpson’s Documentary Photography,” *Artscribe* 80(March/April 1990): 52-53; Roberta Smith, “Linking Words and Images Explosively,” *The New York Times*, July 20, 1990, Arts Section, 3. For a sense of how their work was framed by curators see Eunice Lipton, *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, ed. Nilda Peraza Peraza, Marcia Tucker Tucker, and Kinshasha Holman Conwill (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990); Thelma Golden, “What’s White?,” in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art; Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993).

¹³ Coco Fusco, “The Bodies That Were Not Ours, Black Performers, Black Performance,” *NKA* 5 (Fall 1996): 29.

as a medium or Hammons's relationship to street art and culture, but by and large both artists were embraced and popularized through multiculturalism in museums and art-writing.¹⁴

Hair As Signifier

This kind of positioning of course also influenced how curators and scholars understood the artists' use of hair in their works. Hammons and Simpson were just two among many artists in the early nineties who chose to work with and reference hair in their art. Like Hammons, some artists worked with actual hair as a material substance. Hair appeared *as* hair – in Robert Gober's hair-flecked wax legs, for example – as well as being transformed into a kind of textile, as in Kiki Smith's *Dowry Cloth*, which consisted of felted human hair and sheep's wool.¹⁵ Photographers also turned their lenses on hair as primary subject matter. Simpson's black and white photographs of braids separated from the body recalled scientific specimens, while works such as Andres Serrano's large-scale cibachrome print *Dread* (1987) and Jeanne Dunning's *Red Detail* (1990) abstracted the hair into a formal investigation of color and texture. Before specifically considering Simpson's and Hammons's use of hair in the work, it is useful to explore why so many artists found hair to be a compelling subject or medium.

Whether used as a material substance or represented in photography, hair – particularly hair separated from the body – always seemed to reference something beyond itself, to serve as a stand-in for

¹⁴ See for example Beryl J. Wright, "Back Talk: Recoding the Body," in *Lorna Simpson: For the Sake of the Viewer*, ed. Beryl J. Wright (New York: Universe Publishing, 1992); Calvin Reid, "Kinky Black Hair and Barbecue Bones: Street Life, Social History, and David Hammons," *Arts Magazine* 65 no. 8 (April 1991).

¹⁵ Janine Antoni, whose chocolate sculptures will be explored in the subsequent chapter, used a thick braid of dark hair in her 1991 installation *Deficit*. In that work, dark hair, braided and shaped to look like a businessman's tie, laid across the keyboard of a fabric-encased corporate workstation. Other artists using hair – human, synthetic, and animal – as a material at that time included Ann Hamilton, Lynne Yamamoto, Ava Gerber, and Ann Wilson. The 1993 exhibition *Hair*, at the John Michael Kohler Art Gallery in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, offers a useful look at a range of artists working with hair in the late eighties and early nineties.

the now-absent individual from whose head it originated.¹⁶ Hair could never be *just* a fiber or *just* the subject of a formal study. Its significance always extended beyond its own materiality and into its role as a social marker of identity. Although part of one's body and thus deeply personal, hair is also highly visible and highly malleable, serving as a public form of declaration or affiliation. In his sociological history of hair in the twentieth century European and American context, sociologist Anthony Synnott summarizes: "Hair not only symbolizes the self but, in a very real sense, it *is* the self since it grows from and is part of the physical human body; furthermore, it is 'immortal' since it survives death."¹⁷

As Synnott suggests, hair operates as an important carrier of social meaning. The length, color, texture, and style of hair has come to signify an individual's alignment with a broader group, a particular gender, ethnicity, or even class. Long hair, for example, has been associated in the western tradition with femininity, desirability, and youthfulness.¹⁸ In stories ranging from biblical narratives to European folklore, from Mary Magdalene to Rapunzel, long hair crowns and occasionally saves the most attractive and noble women. Hair color, too, is laden with cultural assumptions that frequently manifest in stereotypes such as the seductive sexpot blonde or the passionate redhead.¹⁹

Hair has also been racialized. In a Euro-American context, black hair has long been associated with those who are *not* of Anglo-European descent: indigenous peoples of the Americas and Oceania, or those from Asia or Africa. Additionally, the discourses of scientific racism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries included hair texture in the list of observable differences between races that were

¹⁶ The use of hair to create mourning jewelry and mourning portraits in the late 18th and early 19th century in the United States and England is an excellent example of hair functioning as a personal stand-in. See Helen Sheumaker, *Love Entwined: The Curious History of Hairwork in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Deborah Lutz, "The Dead Still among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39, no. 1 (March 2011).

¹⁷ Anthony Synnott, "Shame and Glory: A Sociology of Hair," *The British Journal of Sociology* 38, no. 3 (1987): 404.

¹⁸ Synnott, 384.

¹⁹ Rose Weitz, "Women and Their Hair: Seeking Power through Resistance and Accommodation," *Gender and Society* 15, no. 5 (2001). 667-86.

then used to construct a hierarchy of being that supported European superiority and African inferiority.²⁰ Europeans considered the Africans' wiry hair to be "wooly" – animal-like – and further proof of their insignificance and stunted social and cultural development.²¹ Thus, as historian Kobena Mercer remarked, "within racism's bipolar codification of human value, black people's hair has been historically devalued as the most visible stigma of blackness, second only to skin."²²

Amid the intense politicization of the body in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many artists struggled with the implicit connotations of power and exploitation that riddled traditional representations of women and people of color. How could an artist address the politics of the body while working against – rather than reifying – prevailing values and beliefs? Hair provided one means to reference the social and cultural construction of identity without depicting a body in its entirety and thus encountering problems of objectification or stereotyping.²³

Affirmative or Abject?

Reviewing critical and curatorial texts from the early nineties reveals a curious bifurcation in regards to the theoretical treatment of hair-related artworks. Depending on the ethnicity of the artist in question and the racialized quality of the hair they referenced, scholars tend to adopt remarkably oppositional stances on the relationship of hair to identity. When considering the literature on Hammons and Simpson from this period, then, we must also pay attention to which theoretical circles avoided their work or otherwise struggled to interpret it.

²⁰ Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," *new formations*, no. 3 (Winter 1987): 35.

²¹ Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 24.

²² Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," 35.

²³ Certainly, this was not the first time that artists had used hair in their work. David Hammons created numerous works with hair in the mid-1970s, weaving it through mesh screens to create tapestries, stringing it on flexible wires, or gluing it to larger assemblage sculptures. For a very thorough chronology of Hammons's earlier hair-related practice, see Jones, "In the Thick of It: David Hammons and Hair Culture of the 1970s."

On one hand, many curators and critics consistently interpreted minority artists' use of recognizably "ethnic" hair as a declaration of racial or cultural identity. Thus, in a move consistent with their broader positioning within multiculturalist ideals, Hammons's and Simpson's hair-works were most commonly deemed to be "about" black identity. For example, when writing about Hammons's use of found materials, including hair, critic Dan Cameron remarked that the artist was "invent[ing] new and positive images of blacks" in opposition to "images that have been used to foster feelings of cultural inferiority."²⁴

Similarly, in the educational brochure that accompanied Simpson's show, *Projects 23*, at the Museum of Modern Art in 1990, curatorial assistant Jennifer Wells asserted that "Simpson used hair as a vehicle for the consideration of race and identity since hair often reveals more about ethnic and racial background, and thus ourselves, than does eye color or body shape and height."²⁵ Deborah Willis, in conversation with Simpson in 1992, also assumed that the photographs of hair served as a kind of racial iconography, variously relating the images to metaphors of "familial and folkloric issues" and "the perpetuity of suffering."²⁶ Within the prevailing climate of multiculturalism, kinky black hair's efficacy as a marker of racial identity and pride tended to be unquestionably accepted.²⁷

This simplistic linkage had roots in the Black Power movement of the mid-1960s when leaders such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael introduced a powerful rhetoric of distinctively black culture and politics coupled with a rejection of dominant white ideals. The refrain "Black is beautiful"

²⁴ Cameron, "David Hammons: Coming in from the Cold," 70.

²⁵ Lorna Simpson and Jennifer Wells, *Projects 23: Lorna Simpson July 6-August 26, 1990* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1990).

²⁶ Deborah Willis and Lorna Simpson, "A Conversation," in *Lorna Simpson*, ed. Deborah Willis (San Francisco: Friends of Photography, 1992), 59-60. I am indebted to Brooke Belisle for this sharp observation. See Brooke Belisle, "Felt Surface, Visible Image: Lorna Simpson's Photography and the Embodiment of Appearance," *Photography and Culture* 4, no. 2 (July 2011): 161.

²⁷ An important exception to this is Beryl Wright's powerful essay "Back Talk: Recoding the Body," in which she suggests that the "clarity and stability" of hair as a racial signifier has been increasingly broken down. I push Wright's initial claim further, expanding its interpretive significance. See Wright, "Back Talk: Recoding the Body," 20.

emerged as part of this effort to consolidate a communal identity and dispel the notion that black people's skin color, facial features, and hair were inherently ugly.²⁸ In that moment of reclamation and proud assertion of difference from white hegemony, hair became, for many, a physical expression of one's own alignment with an increasingly visible and politicized identity. To the leaders of the Black Power movement, black Americans' practice of straightening their curly hair by using heat or chemicals was in fact a manifestation of self-hatred, borne from years of white devaluation.²⁹

This rejection of white standards of beauty necessitated the creation of a new aesthetic, one that was distinctively "Black." The "Afro" hairstyle – a halo of bushy, springy, kinky hair, untouched by heat or chemicals – offered one such alternative. Proponents described the Afro – also known as "the Natural" – in terms of psychological liberation, a freeing of one's mind from the hold of the straightening comb. In a popular hairstyling handbook from the late sixties, *All About the Natural*, the authors described Afro as "a hairstyle that lets you say, 'I've got my own beauty with my sisters and my brothers.' ...It says, 'look at us as we are, because that's how it is.'"³⁰ They concluded, "Simply put, it is a matter of reclaiming our soul."³¹ At that moment, untreated black hair functioned as a literal embodiment of new black political consciousness.

Although this conflation of kinky black hair and black cultural pride was brief and contested, "natural" black hair achieved an almost mythic status that persisted in mainstream and black media for

²⁸ Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 29-57.

²⁹ In his 1965 autobiography, Malcolm X described having his hair "conked" for the first time as a teenager, and his delight at seeing his straight hair in the mirror after the chemical process was completed. But reflecting back on that experience, he declared that was his "first really big step toward self-degradation," an attempt to "violate and mutilate [his] God-given bodies to try to look 'pretty' by white standards." Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 61.

³⁰ Lois Liberty Jones and John Henry Jones, *All About the Natural* (United States: Clairol Inc., 1971), 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*

several decades.³² Indeed, many art critics and curators in the early 1990s seemingly accepted this equation without question. For the purposes of multicultural politics, the artistic use or referencing of unprocessed black hair served as a kind of shorthand for declaring the artist's racial identity.

But when *white* artists used hair in the nineties, many scholars understood them to be fundamentally destabilizing the very notion of individual identity. In their introductory catalogue essay for the *Abject Art* exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1993, the curators included hair in their list of substances that “disturbs identity, system, order.”³³ Hair’s biological liminality – the fact that it was composed of dead cells but grew from a living body – perfectly embodied the “in-between substance” that philosopher Julia Kristeva described as abject. According to Kristeva, confronting an abject material, like hair, would result in one’s own abjection, a reminder of the permeable boundaries of selfhood. Scholars categorized works such as Robert Gober’s hairy legs, Kiki Smith’s felted hair cloth, Rona Pondick’s hair-flecked “mouth balls,” and Ava Gerber’s dangling, attenuated wigs as “abject,” that is, they enacted a threat to viewers’ individual identities.³⁴

An assumption of whiteness as normative arguably underpinned this interpretive bias. In the *Abject Art* catalogue, for example, curator Simon Taylor discussed Robert Gober’s hairy, peach-tinted torsos and legs as having universal resonance. The body parts and hair were not identified as “Caucasian” or related to white identity. Instead, Taylor took for granted that all viewers would find themselves

³² The Afro quickly lost its political specificity and became more of a fashion statement than ideological manifesto. See Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 60-62. In terms of consensus throughout the black community, many upper and middle-class African Americans worried that these so-called “natural” hairstyles would feed into the already negative image of black people as wild and unkempt. For other negative responses to the Afro from African Americans see Byrd and Tharp, *Hair Story*, 62-63.

³³ Jack Ben-Levi et al., “Introduction,” in *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 7.

³⁴ Indeed, no artists of color are included in lists of canonical “abject artists.” See Ben-Levi et al., *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993); Jennifer Riddell, “The Abject Object: A Recent History of the Ephemeral Found Object in Contemporary Art,” *New Art Examiner* 23 (October 1995); Frazer Ward, “Abject Lessons,” *Art + Text* 48 (May 1994); Hal Foster et al., *Art since 1900 Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, vol. 2 (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 646.

affected – their sense of self being assaulted – regardless of their own ethnicity or cultural background. On a broader level, Taylor and the other curators assumed that the “abject” was a culturally and temporally unencumbered category, meaning that hair, as a material, would always be equally horrific or taboo, regardless of cultural or historical context. But this theoretical commitment resulted in some interpretive clumsiness when Taylor discussed the untitled hair sculpture by David Hammons that was also in the exhibition (Fig. 4).

Hammons’s inclusion in the *Abject Art* exhibition and catalogue marked the only published scholarship relating Kristeva’s theory of abjection to artwork by an artist of color. His almost nine foot wide and five foot tall sculpture – originally made for the *Documenta IX* exhibition in Kassel, Germany – consisted of long black ropes of hair exploding like a fountain from a pile of smooth, pale rocks.³⁵ Hammons threaded cut bits of kinky, dark hair onto lengths of copper wire to create something akin to the matted dreadlocks that had been recently popularized by the late Rastafarian musician Bob Marley. Despite Hammons’s evident obsessiveness in collecting and stringing the hair, the piece itself was sprawling and untidy. In places, matted lengths of hair dangled from the wires. A dusting of hair coated the ground around the sculpture with a fine black fuzz, creating the appearance that the smooth, pristine gallery floor needed a shave. Quivering slightly with nearby movement, the spray of hair suggested at once a wild hairstyle, an exotic plant, and even a threatening creature like a tarantula or sea urchin.³⁶

In his curatorial essay, Taylor quickly glossed over the obvious connections between the untitled sculpture and African American culture, asserting that the “economic oppression of African-

³⁵ The sculpture was purchased by the Whitney Museum of American Art that same year for its permanent collection. Initially the hope was to include the work in the 1993 Whitney Biennial, but Hammons declined the invitation. See Robert Storr, “You Have to Be Prepared: A Conversation between David Hammons and Robert Storr,” in *Yardbird Suite*, ed. Linda Shearer (Williamstown, Mass.: President and Trustees of Williams College, 1994), 55.

³⁶ Simon Taylor, “The Phobic Object,” in *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 79.

Americans [sic] provides a parallel to the position of the American working class.”³⁷ He went on to suggest that Hammons’s use of “base materials,” such as discarded hair, triggered a viewer’s reaction by embracing an “ideology of dirt,” where “dirt reflects the everyday environment and offers itself as a critique of antiseptic polish and anality (authoritarianism).”³⁸ No mention was made of how dreadlocks themselves might operate as a cultural signifier, nor did Taylor acknowledge the significance of the communal space from which Hammons gathered the hair. Instead, the sculpture’s import lay only in its literal soiling of a clean gallery and the symbolic implications of that act against the museum establishment. Taylor seemed to be caught in a double bind; he recognized that viewers would apprehend the cultural and racial connotations of the wiry black hair, but he then dismissed the specificity of such references in order to make an abstracted theoretical argument. He wanted hair to serve only as a metaphor, denying its existence in culture as a tangible substance that carries social meaning.

Related interpretive difficulties emerged over Lorna Simpson’s work in a 1993 roundtable discussion published in *October*. Editor Rosalind Krauss seemed torn over how to evaluate Simpson’s photographs.³⁹ While expressing her fascination with Simpson’s use of the grid, she worried that other critics were applying the artist’s identity as a black woman too deterministically to the perceived

³⁷ Taylor, “The Phobic Object,” 79.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ostensibly the roundtable participants are discussing Simpson’s installation *Hypothetical?* (1992), which was included in the 1993 Whitney Biennial, though their evaluative comments and references to Simpson’s use of text and the grid seem to be aimed at the artist’s work in general. *Hypothetical?* is an unusual piece for Simpson. On one wall a large photograph of a dark-skinned figure’s mouth is accompanied by a newspaper clipping, mounted on Plexiglas, that reads, “Asked whether he would now be afraid to be a black man in Los Angeles if he were not the Mayor, Mr. Bradley paused, then said: “No. I would not be scared. I would be angry.” On the opposite wall, horn mouthpieces, arranged in a grid, emit a persistent buzzing noise. But Kellie Jones, writing in a 2002 monograph on Simpson, still connects *Hypothetical?* to the rest of Simpson’s work from the early nineties, both in terms of the questions it pursues and the visual trope of the fragmented black body. See Jones, “(Un)Seen & Overheard: Pictures by Lorna Simpson,” 58-62.

meaning of her work.⁴⁰ Krauss wanted to consider Simpson's work on purely formal terms, in relationship to a particular art historical genealogy. For her, the presence of black bodies – and, presumably, black hair – in the images was essentially a hindrance to understanding how the work might be considered formally avant-garde.⁴¹ Yet, despite Krauss's suggestions that Simpson's photographs might not be simply a consolidation or affirmation of black identity, neither she nor any of the other contributors offered an alternative reading.⁴²

The question of what or how black bodies – or, more particularly, black hair – signified, thus limited curatorial and critical engagement with Hammons's and Simpson's work in the early nineties. In the context of multicultural politics, many scholars assumed that racialized hair necessarily operated as a stable marker of identity. Meanwhile, scholars drawing from psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theory critiqued such assertions of identity without thoughtfully investigating how else the hair might function. Thus the opportunity remains to closely consider both how the works unfold experientially as well as how they relate to a complex network of overlapping contexts.

Constructed Realities of Black Identity

Multiculturalism is premised on the existence of stable, identifiable subjects who demand recognition from dominant groups. But when curators and critics tried to press Hammons's and Simpson's work into the service of multiculturalism the artworks themselves resist the notion of

⁴⁰ In particular, Krauss complains about Thelma Golden's curatorial declaration that Simpson's work was related to "black rage." Hal Foster et al., "The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial," *October* 66, no. Autumn (1993): 6. Krauss is referencing Golden, "What's White?," in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art; Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993).

⁴¹ Foster et al., "The Politics of the Signifier," 15.

⁴² In fact, this roundtable was the only time that Simpson's photographs from the early 1990s were discussed in *October*.

essential blackness. In works such as *Esquire (John Henry)* and *Coiffure*, for example, hair functions as part of a larger argument about the cultural construction of black identity (Figs. 32 & 5).

In *Esquire (John Henry)*, a dense mass of wiry curls covers the top half of an egg-shaped rock like spongy black moss. Even without the addition of facial features or any other alteration, the hair animates the rock, and we readily assume both gender (male) and race (black). Though these connections may seem logical, even natural, the other components of Hammons's sculpture, along with the title, persistently throw the validity of such assumptions into question.

The rock sits on a tin of black *Esquire* shoe polish, which serves as the stone's neck. But the seemingly innocuous tin also takes on a host of cultural connotations. Shoeshining has traditionally been the purview of lower class boys, and in the United States in particular it was associated with young black boys for much of the twentieth century. The necessarily subservient posture that a shoeshiner must adopt – crouched at a well-dressed gentleman's feet – in many ways served to reiterate presumed white superiority. But the profession also boasts a certain rags-to-riches mythology, fed in part by the successes of men such as singer James Brown and activist Malcolm X, both of whom once worked as shoeshiners.⁴³ On the other hand, black shoe polish also relates to the history of blackface, in which performers would darken their faces and hands with polish to create a stereotyped caricature such as the “happy-go-lucky darky” or the “dandified coon.”⁴⁴ This notion of “performing race,” however fraught, calls attention again to the unstable construction of such categories. As a reference to the unnatural darkening of one's skin to appear black, the shoe polish serves as a counterpoint to the seemingly natural hair that adorns the rock.

⁴³ Jessie Carney Smith, Millicent Lownes Jackson, and Linda T. Wynn, “Encyclopedia of African American Business,” (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2006), 723-25.

⁴⁴ William Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 9.

Instead of a pedestal or traditional base, the rock and shoe polish tin rest on an upturned piece of steel railroad track. Both the track and the work's subtitle, *John Henry*, refer to the historical labor of black men on the nation's railroads. As the folktale goes, John Henry is a former slave who becomes the greatest steel-driver in the country. When a modern steam-powered hammer threatens to take the place of the mostly African American steel-driving crew, Henry challenges the machine's owner to a race to dig a new tunnel. He beats the machine but then collapses and dies on the other side of the mountain, chisel and hammer still in hand. The mythical figure of John Henry – a man who proved his worth against a machine – serves as a stand-in for the hundreds of now-anonymous black laborers.⁴⁵

Through this amalgam of vernacular objects, Hammons references myth, history, and contemporary culture to create a literal column that is both physically and figuratively unstable. Rather than offering neat alternatives to stereotypes of black men, *Esquire (John Henry)* instead foregrounds how such stereotypes have been constructed. As artist Glenn Ligon would later remark, Hammons's work was "always too Fellini, too carnivalesque, too damn freaky-deke to be useful as a set of cheering fictions, an expression of an essential, unchanging blackness, or a standard-bearer for some multiculturalist agenda."⁴⁶

Simpson's *Coiffure* (1991) does something similar, pressing viewers to acknowledge the troubling process by which we assume "natural" connections between bodies and identities (Fig. 5). Engaging the piece is a constant push and pull, with confident assertions being immediately followed by uneasy backtracking or clarification. Even naming what it is, exactly, that we see in each of the photographs is a contested act. To say that the leftmost panel is a portrait of a black woman is almost

⁴⁵ Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁴⁶ Glenn Ligon, "Black Light: David Hammons and the Poetics of Emptiness," *Artforum International* (September 2004): 242.

instinctual, and yet the ways in which this image pushes against conventions asks us to pause and to reconsider how it is that we have come to such a determination. The figure's face is turned away from the camera, so we see only the back of a closely cropped head of curly hair, sloping shoulders, and an expanse of skin exposed by the wide square back of the figure's clothing. Still, we readily proclaim the figure to be a black woman. Such confidence seems almost absurd as we consider how little information we are actually given. The short hairstyle and rather shapeless garment hardly connote femininity in strong terms. And, given our declaration that this is a "black" figure, it is ironic that her skin is literally the lightest, whitest section of image. Is the perceived texture of her hair alone sufficient to categorize her as being of African descent?⁴⁷ Although we come easily to a particular conclusion, we are asked to admit that a disjunction exists between what we have convinced ourselves is present and what is actually offered.

Indeed, though we recognize each image as separate and distinct, we interpret each in relationship to and through the other images. Those connections are tenuous and fuzzy, unraveling as soon as we put them into words. Perhaps we name the figure on the left a woman because we assume that the coiled braid in the center panel is her hair. Perhaps we assume that she is black because we relate her to the wooden African mask in the right hand image. But even these seemingly straightforward connections are weak. Does long hair necessarily denote the female sex? And can we really name the mask as being of African origin given how little we actually see of it? Do we make this connection only because we have already assumed that the woman is African American? What is at stake if we so easily elide ethnicity and geographical origin?

⁴⁷ The notion of hypodescent – that "one drop" of black blood made a person black – was prevalent in the 19th century United States and its influence persists today. See Scott L. Malcomson, *One Drop of Blood: The American Misadventure of Race* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

If we turn to the text to help elucidate the content and meaning of the images – as we would turn to the caption of a documentary photograph – we are further stymied. The text panels offer snippets of directions for braiding hair, but they are incoherent as a set of actual directives: “braid into four circles,” “a hair piece is/attached to the crown,” “braids meander over entire head,” “a section of hair is parted/and held firmly/between left thumb & forefinger,” “starting just behind the ears,” “tips of each strand/are connected until they form a circle,” “the transverse braids from a series of zig-zags.” Simpson appropriates the gravitas of documentary photography and its relationship to text, but then throws the historic truth claims of the medium entirely into question. Instead, she demonstrates how our interpretation of photographs is a learned behavior and she destabilizes, by extension, the ways in which we naturalize ethnicity and gender.⁴⁸

In these works, both Hammons and Simpson make visible the ways in which we construct identities through reiterations of histories and myths. Though a biological, and thus presumably natural substance, hair is no more reliable as a marker of identity than the railroad tie, shoe polish, or wooden mask. Further, *Esquire (John Henry)* and *Coiffure*, like the artists’ other hair-related works, encourage viewers to explore the multiplicity of meanings that such signifiers can express. It becomes imperative, then, to consider the various and sometimes contradictory ways in which the black community, the mainstream media, and black cultural scholars understood black hair and particular hairstyles in the early 1990s. What social and political points of reference might have framed viewers’ intellectual, emotional, and physical engagement with Simpson’s and Hammons’s hair works?

⁴⁸ For an excellent analysis of how western viewers learn “how” to look at photographs, see Wright, “Back Talk: Recoding the Body.” Wright also offers a useful discussion of the relationship between Simpson’s photographs and historical practices of documentary photography.

Black Hair and 1990s Culture: Pluralism, Politics, Controversy, and Commercialism

By the early 1980s, many in the black popular media had begun praising the *malleability* of black hair as a source of cultural pride.⁴⁹ Whereas “natural hairstyles” such as Afros, dreadlocks, and cornrows were originally worn in direct and self-conscious opposition to white conventions, the eighties spawned an enthusiastic pursuit of the myriad styling possibilities that black hair offered. No single hairstyle was given political preference. For men, the Jheri curl – which required a chemical treatment – and the “fade” – which worked with unprocessed hair – emerged as equally popular options.⁵⁰ Many men also chose to carve designs into the back of their fade hairstyles – geometric designs, cartoon characters, or even words – thus using their hair as a vehicle for highly personalized self-expression. For women, “big” hair, exemplified by Patti LaBelle’s “wings” and Oprah Winfrey’s fluffy curls, marked a new trend. Working class and low-income black women were perhaps the most daring with their hair, creating hairstyles that seemed to flout gravity or were extravagantly sculpted from braids and curls.⁵¹ Black lifestyle magazines from the period, such as *Ebony* and *Essence*, published a plethora of hairstyling-related pieces, offering how-to articles on and abundant praise for braids, long hair, colored hair, wavy hair, and permed hair.⁵² Black hair’s malleability was repeatedly emphasized. For example, in a 1990 beauty editorial entitled “Hair for the 90s,” *Essence* editors listed a range of options available to black women from “fluffy perms” to “molded dreads.”⁵³ The underlying rationale for the Afro a decade earlier had hinged on its presumably natural connection to black hair, the belief that what made black hair unique was that it could grow, unfettered, into that particular style. In the eighties and

⁴⁹ Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 103.

⁵⁰ For images of these and other hairstyles, see Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 100-131.

⁵¹ Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 120.

⁵² See “Back to Braids,” *Essence* (May 1990); Ruth Houston, “Extension Braiding and Weaving: The Facts,” *Essence* (February 1988); “Creative African Coiffure Catches On,” *Ebony* (Nov 19, 1979): 112; Eunice W. Johnson, “Long Hair, Doing it with Style,” *Ebony* (November 1981): 132-136; “Summer Hair Care Updated,” *Ebony* (June 1984): 70; Elsie Washington, “Freedom Is Defining Your Own Beauty,” *Ebony* (May 1995): 23-30.

⁵³ “Hair for the 90’s,” *Ebony* (January 1990): 60.

early nineties, however, black hair's capacity to be so readily transformed was what made it exceptional and valuable.

Yet, natural hairstyles were also simultaneously serving also as a visual metaphor of authentic blackness. Director Spike Lee's 1988 musical film *School Daze* uses hairstyles as an allegory for black identity. Set at a fictitious historically black college, the movie offers a look at the relationships between students and town residents who represent different social classes and political persuasions. The film opens inside the well-appointed space of Madame Re-Re's Beauty Salon with the musical number "Straight and Nappy." The mostly lighter-skinned members of Gamma Ray sorority face off against another group of female students, most of whom are darker skinned and sport shorter, unprocessed hair. The sorority members all wear sweatshirts with giant "W's" – for "Wannabe's" on the front – while the protagonists wear bright sweatshirts emblazoned with the letter "J," for "Jigaboos." "Don't you wish you had hair like this? Then the boys would give you a kiss," croons Jane, the leader of the Gamma Rays who sports long, straight strawberry blonde hair. The Jigaboo's leader, Rachel, responds, "If a fly should land on your head, then I'm sure he'd break all his legs, cause you got so much grease up there. Dear, is that a weave that you wear?" The dance number perpetuates the familiar 1960's equation of enlightened political consciousness with "bad" or "nappy" hair and false consciousness with "good" or "straight" hair. Lee's film suggested that a transparent relationship exists between ethics and aesthetics and unequivocally asserted that blacks who straighten their hair "wannabe" white.⁵⁴

Ultimately, it was this contradiction – that hair could be simultaneously declared a purely aesthetic choice and an index of political commitments – that best characterized popular attitudes towards hair within the black community. For example, author Bebe Moore Campbell wrestled with

⁵⁴ For a useful critique of Lee's film, see Judith Wilson, "Beauty Rites: Towards an Anatomy of Culture in African American Women's Art," *International Review of African American Art* 2, no. 3 (1994). A similar linkage can also be seen in the 1991 comedic film *Living Large*, directed by Michael Schulz and starring T.C. Carson.

that reality in her June 1982 article for *Ebony* magazine entitled, "What Happened to the Afro?" After recounting the popularization of the hairstyle and its separation from its militant ideological roots, she described her own ambivalence after wearing an Afro for eleven years: "Even though, intellectually, I knew that with straightened hair a Black woman could feel the same pride and love of self and people that she'd felt wearing an Afro, the day the hairdresser took my 40 bucks and I swiveled down from the high chair looking like Sister Slick, I felt like Sister Sell-Out."⁵⁵ She wondered, "Are Black women abandoning the feeling of self-pride they first realized in the '60s or are they secure enough to wear their hair in any 'style' and still feel that Black is beautiful?"⁵⁶ While Campbell offered a variety of reasons for the shift away from natural hair, including advertising blitzes by black hair care companies and what she called a conservative political and economic climate, her own position remained deeply conflicted.

Similarly, Elsie B. Washington, then senior editor of *Essence*, wrote a January 1988 editorial expressing concern over the recent trend among some young black celebrities to dye their hair blonde and wear colored contacts. For Washington, such efforts to change one's hair and eye color so dramatically could not be *merely* aesthetic. Instead, she feared that it was a return to the "self-deprecation, self-hatred and self-mutilation" that typified black people's earlier submission to white cosmetic standards.⁵⁷ Washington carefully sidestepped essentialist claims in her concluding sentences: "The genetic coding that makes our eye color and hair texture varied is not intrinsically important. But it's the political and social uses of these traits that enrich us or defeat us."⁵⁸ These editorials reflect the recognition that although those who *wore* a Natural or a perm or a Jheri curl or braids might have claimed that their hair was apolitical, it nevertheless had political meaning to those who *saw* it.

⁵⁵ Bebe Moore Campbell, "What Happened to the Afro?," *Ebony* (June 1982): 82.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Elsie Washington, "The Bluest Eye," *Essence* (January 1988): 14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Simpson's 1988 piece *Stereo Styles* and scholars' interpretation of that work in the early nineties demonstrates a similar disagreement over if and how black hair creates meaning (Fig. 33). Ten large black and white photographs depicting the back of a black woman's head are arranged in two parallel rows. Although always dressed in a white shift, the model's hairstyle changes radically from image to image. Text panels between the rows of images prompt us to play at matching words with the pictures. Which hairstyle is "Daring"? "Boyish"? "Sensible"? "Country Fresh"? The images themselves have something of a parodic quality to them. In one photograph, flat-ironed sections of hair defy gravity, as if the woman had stuck her finger in an electrical socket. In another, hair is haphazardly pulled up into a messy bun and stuffed with an overabundance of white daisies. These are exaggerations of hairstyles, a collection of clichés.

Yet in a 1992 interview with Simpson, art historian Deborah Willis insisted on interpreting the work as "commenting on an element of self-hate among black women."⁵⁹ She continued, "I sense a lack of self-esteem latent in the woman's compulsion to change her hairstyle."⁶⁰ Simpson, however, responded that she saw *Stereo Styles* as being a "very light, funny piece" that, through humor, denied any necessary connection between one's appearance and one's psychic state.⁶¹ "The way you wear your hair is supposed to say something about you, which is basically bull," she concluded.⁶² *Stereo Styles* expressed this frustration, using humor to make visible the presumed social and political transparency of black hairstyles while still acknowledging the reality of such public judgments.

Simpson's work and this subsequent exchange with Willis echo the ambivalence and occasional frustration typical of discussions surrounding black hair in the late eighties and early nineties. Who

⁵⁹ Willis and Simpson, "A Conversation," 58.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

controls how hair signifies? The person whose head the hair is on, or the person who sees it there? And how might different contexts alter the ways in which different hairstyles create meaning?

Context certainly affected how the general public apprehended two particular hairstyles – braids and dreadlocks – that Simpson and Hammons referenced in their work. Though not as politically charged as the Afro of the 1960s, both styles marshaled a range of connotations in the late 1980s and early 1990s. And it is precisely the breadth of these associations that give additional complexity to our engagement with Simpson’s and Hammons’s hair-related artworks.

One such example is how viewers in the eighties and nineties might have understood Simpson’s photographs of braided hair, such as the braided coil in *Coiffure* (Fig. 5). In addition to taking close-up photographs of lengths of braid, Simpson also regularly used a model with braided hair. Braids became increasingly popular through the 1980s, following black actress Cicely Tyson’s appearance on network television wearing cornrows (Fig. 34). As the name suggests, many rows of small braids, usually flat to the scalp, created the appearance of a cultivated field. Alternately, women could have all their hair woven into tiny braids without creating patterns along the scalp. Braids could be made with only the wearer’s own hair, or greater length could be achieved through the addition of extension pieces.⁶³ Though adapted to suit a contemporary aesthetic, such intricate braided hairstyles had precedence in traditional African cultures, as seen in sculptures dating as far back as the 5th century BCE. In addition to this cultural point of connection, the hairstyle – which required no chemical alterations to the hair – was especially popular among women who wanted to give their hair time to recuperate from previous treatments.⁶⁴

⁶³ Cornrows are a subset of the broader style category of “braids.” I follow the conventions of black lifestyle magazines and beauty columns and use them interchangeably here unless the finer distinction is important in a particular case.

⁶⁴ “Back to Braids,” 40.

In 1981, Renee Rogers, a ticket agent for American Airlines, was fired for wearing cornrows to work. She filed a discrimination suit – the first hair-based federal lawsuit – but lost. Judge Abraham D. Sofaer of the Federal District Court of New York rejected her argument that the style evoked her African heritage since she had adopted it shortly after the release of *10*, in which Bo Derek wore braids.⁶⁵ The suit received little media coverage until 1987 when a cluster of similar cases garnered national attention. In Chicago, Pamela Walker, a concierge at the Hyatt Regency Chicago, was fired after she adopted a braided hairstyle.⁶⁶ In Washington D.C., two other Hyatt employees – Cheryl Tatum, a restaurant cashier at the Hyatt Hotel Crystal City, and Sydney M. Boone, a telephone operator at Grand Hyatt Washington – were asked to cover or unraid their cornrows. Boone began wearing a wig to work, but also filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).⁶⁷ Tatum complied with her manager’s initial request to pull her braids back into a bun, but three weeks later the personnel director told her that the hairstyle was “extreme and unusual,” in violation of company policy, and needed to be removed.⁶⁸ Tatum refused, resigned from her job, and also filed a complaint with the EEOC. In late December of 1987, Pamela Mitchell – a phone reservations agent at the Marriott Downtown in Washington D.C. – was similarly sent home because of what her manager termed as her “extreme, cornrowed hairstyle.”⁶⁹ Both the Marriott and Hyatt Corporations insisted that the targeting of braided hairstyles was not racially discriminatory, but simply an issue of consistently upholding company grooming standards and maintaining a particular corporate

⁶⁵ E.R. Shipp, "Braided Hair Style at Issue in Protests over Dress Codes," *New York Times*, September 23, 1987, C1.

⁶⁶ Carol Kleinman, "Corporate Dress Codes Can Turn Hair-Raising: Women at Work," *Chicago Tribune*, March 28, 1988, C6.

⁶⁷ Shipp, "Braided Hair Style at Issue," C1.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

image.⁷⁰ Marriott spokesman Robert Souers said that cornrows and other “faddish styles,” such as spiked locks, were not business-like. “We want our employees to project what we feel to be a professional image that reflects well on the corporation,” he stated. “The word ‘cornrows’ is not in the policy, but they are generally thought to fall under the ‘extreme’ category.”⁷¹

The women and their supporters, however, insisted that this application of the company dress codes unfairly and unequally targeted Black women. Tatum explained that cornrows were worn “almost exclusively by African and African-American women and are quite popular among black professional women.”⁷² To ban them, she argued, and to expect all women to wear “white European hairstyles,” was to “discriminate against black female workers.”⁷³ A psychologist quoted in an article covering the story for *The New York Times* similarly highlighted what she saw as the racial bias underpinning the controversy. Dr. Ayana Watkins-Northern, who worked at Howard University Counseling Center, opined, “Essentially what black women are being told is that they, in their natural state, are unacceptable and that they must do something to change it.”⁷⁴ Couched in these terms, the issue became far more significant than a question of personal expression through one’s physical appearance.

After receiving growing negative publicity, the Hyatt and Marriott corporations settled out of court with the women and in most cases offered them their jobs back.⁷⁵ Still, both companies maintained a cautionary stance. Officials for the Marriott warned that cornrows conformed to hotel

⁷⁰ Shipp, “Braided Hairstyle at Issue,” C1.

⁷¹ Courtland Milloy, “Curbing a Century-Old Fad,” *Washington Post*, January 7, 1988, J1.

⁷² Kleinman, “Corporate Dress Codes Can Turn Hair-Raising,” C6.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Shipp, “Braided Hair Style at Issue in Protests over Dress Codes,” C1.

⁷⁵ The controversy gained even more exposure when Jesse Jackson Sr., who was then campaigning for the Democratic Presidential nomination, entered the fray. Jackson’s campaign sponsored a meeting between Eric Steele – the lawyer representing Tatum, Boone, Mitchell, and another woman, Cheryl Parahoo – and the Hyatt Corporation’s legal team. If the issue was not resolved, Jackson said, he would cancel all plans to use Hyatt hotels during his campaign. Meanwhile, the newly created Coalition for Cultural Equity, the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union Local No. 25, and multiple women’s and civil rights groups organized protests outside of Hyatt hotels and encouraged people to boycott the chain. Kleinman, “Corporate Dress Codes Can Turn Hair-Raising,” C6.

policy as long as they were not “outlandishly sculptured.”⁷⁶ The Hyatt similarly allowed employees to wear braids, but spokesman Julie E. Milsten dismissed questions of racial discrimination stating, “All we’re trying to do is maintain a quality image.”⁷⁷

In many ways, then, cornrows elicited the same responses that the Afro had two decades earlier. While some in the black community declared that braids should be reclaimed as a challenge to dominant social expectations, others worried that the hairstyle would only feed continuing associations of blackness with dirt, poverty, or radicalism.⁷⁸ The February 1988 issue of *Essence* magazine included a three-page photo spread – “9 to 5 Braids” – and an accompanying article by E.R. Shipp entitled “Are Cornrows Right for Work?” Shipp, who also reported on the braids controversy for *The New York Times*, described how different workplaces addressed hairstyles such as cornrows in their company dress codes. Shipp looked not only at large, predominantly white companies, but also interviewed Human Resources personnel at traditionally black institutions, concluding that “there is no one point of view among Blacks about the appropriateness of braids in the workplace.”⁷⁹ She quoted Yvonne M. Simmons – whom she identified as “black and a business-education teacher at Virginia Union University in Richmond” – as saying, “You either look professional or you don’t. There is nothing in between. I see very little difference between a punk cut, purple hair, dreadlocks, or braids. They are all extreme hairstyles that don’t belong in the office.”⁸⁰ Braids clearly operated socially as far more than a personal, aesthetic preference. These legal disputes, as well as the subsequent debates within the black community,

⁷⁶ Rene Sanchez, “Hotel Worker May Keep Cornrows; Marriott Officials Decided Hair Style Is Not Extreme, Fits Policy,” *Washington Post*, January 7, 1988, D5.

⁷⁷ Jim Schachter, “Perfect Fit: The 80’s and Dress Codes,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 1988, B1.

⁷⁸ The women involved were acutely aware of these negative connotations and specifically emphasized their education, cleanliness, and work ethic when interviewed about the lawsuit. Walker and Boone, for example, were always described as a “doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Chicago” and “Howard University student,” respectively. And Tatum was frequently quoted as declaring that her braids were “impeccably groomed, carefully wrought, and cost-efficient.” See Kleinman, “Corporate Dress Codes Can Turn Hair-Raising;” Shipp, “Braided Hair Style at Issue.”

⁷⁹ E.R. Shipp, “Are Cornrows Right for Work?,” *Essence* (February 1988): 109.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

opened up complex questions of assimilation, racial pride, and stereotyping while offering few definitive answers.

But despite its prominence in both the mainstream and black press, the controversy over the professionalism of braids has never been included as a useful context for understanding Lorna Simpson's frequent references to braids in her work. One of her best-known works from this period, *Guarded Conditions* (1989), consists of six life-sized, full-length portraits of a black woman, seen from behind and clothed in a shapeless white shift (Fig. 35). The woman wears her hair in cornrows. Each figure is broken into three separately framed segments, but the edges of the woman's arms and dress do not quite line up between panels. It is as if several images have been cut up and rearranged without regard for their original particularity. Below the figures, three successively shorter rows of text panels read, in dizzying repetition, "SEX ATTACKS/SKIN ATTACKS/SEX ATTACKS/SKIN ATTACKS." A typical interpretation of the work in the early nineties is that of Beryl Wright, who suggested that the repeated, isolated bodies invoked "slave auctions, hospital examination rooms, and criminal line-ups," as well as "those women who stand guard against the evils of the world on the steps of black fundamentalist churches on Sunday mornings."⁸¹ Indeed, all such connections are possible and provocative, albeit rather safely distanced by time or abstraction. Though Simpson may not be directly referencing these legal battles over hairstyles in the workplace, there is a certain poignancy in acknowledging how her six cornrow-wearing figures in *Guarded Conditions* serve as a visual echo of these six female employees who were told that they must either change their hairstyle or lose their job.⁸²

⁸¹ Wright, "Back Talk: Recoding the Body," 19.

⁸² The six women were Renee Rogers, Pamela Walker, Pamela Mitchell, Cheryl Tatum, Cheryl Parahoo, and Sydney Boone.

Simpson's 1991 work *Same*, also suggests that these women's experiences were far from unusual (Fig. 36). The work depicts the backs of eight black female figures in pairs, with each pair tied together by long braids that swing across four separate, framed color Polaroids. Between each row of photographs run text panels that suggest ways in which the women were the same, such as the fact that they "pronounced water the same way" and that they "worked for the same pay." But the simple equation of one woman to another is visually disrupted by the wooden frames, which fragment the braids that seemingly link them together. Indeed, even as one text panel states that the women "didn't wear their hair the same way" another asserts that they "were let go for the same reasons." Thus in effect, hair, as a visible marker of raced and gendered identity makes the women invisible as distinct individuals. On a plaque sandwiched between different images of the same woman, Simpson expresses an acute awareness of this simultaneous hyper-visibility and erasure: "Read the news accounts and knew it could have easily been them." Perhaps we can imagine that the braids that literally connect Simpson's figures within the work also link them to the women whose braids cost them their jobs.

Hammons, meanwhile, referenced another hairstyle with specific cultural associations in his 1992 untitled sculpture: dreadlocks (Fig. 4). Although never the focus of any discrimination suits covered by national news organizations, dreadlocks were often listed alongside cornrows as either an "extreme" hairstyle or one with important cultural origins. A style in which uncombed hair is twisted into long matted or ropelike "locks," dreadlocks were generally associated with Afro-Caribbean culture, particularly the Rastafarian movement personified in many Americans' minds by the late singer Bob Marley.

In a 1988 article for *The Washington Post* entitled "Ease of Care, Cultural Identity Woven Into Hair Styles," Esther Lazarus reported on the creation, care, and perception of both cornrows and

dreadlocks.⁸³ One interviewee, Monica Jackson, a social researcher at a think tank in Washington D.C. emphasized that her locks were an expression of her cultural identity, an extension of her personal study of African and black diasporic history. But the article also acknowledged employers' general reluctance to hire people with dreadlocks and the negative attention that those with locks often received. Jimmy Banks, a restaurant owner, reported that he had been stopped by the police several times since he adopted dreadlocks three years earlier. "I guess people assume that you are a Rastafarian or into drugs," he surmised.⁸⁴ Writer Naadu Blankson, in her essay "The Dreaded Decision" for *Essence* magazine, recalled how her hairstyle affected her job search. A representative at a job-search agency warned her that few employers would feel comfortable hiring someone with such an "ethnic" look, the suggestion being that dreadlocks were antithetical to white corporate culture.⁸⁵ Thus, like cornrows, dreadlocks were both hailed as an act of cultural reclaiming and decried as socially unacceptable by mainstream culture.

And yet, even as these hairstyles were unsettling human resources departments and inciting fear and suspicion, many popular black celebrities were making dreadlocks and braids part of their signature style. Even more strikingly, the Gap – a clothing retailer known for its classic, all-American aesthetic – featured some of those same celebrities in a new, slick advertising campaign. By the late eighties, Gap was struggling to maintain its appeal as a one-stop shop for wardrobe staples like t-shirts, khakis, and jeans. Then, in 1988, new ad director Maggie Gross launched the "Individuals of Style" campaign, a series of seductive black and white photographs of public figures wearing Gap clothes. Well-known

⁸³ Elizabeth Lazarus, "Ease of Care, Cultural Identity Woven into Hair Styles," *Washington Post*, January 15, 1988, E1.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Naadu Blankson, "Dreaded Decision," *Essence* (October 1991): 37.

photographers, including Annie Leibowitz and Herb Ritts, shot a diverse line-up of sitters, ranging from jazz great Miles Davis to popular actress Kim Basinger and notorious artist Andres Serrano.

The success of the campaign hinged on relating rather unconventional people to admittedly conventional clothing.⁸⁶ The images were dramatic and sensuous in black and white, with sitters frequently adopting unusual or dramatic poses that underscored the distinctiveness of their personalities. In other cases, the portraits seemed incredibly intimate, with celebrities embracing their children or appearing vulnerable rather than untouchable. While the photographs often stood alone as print ads – with just the sitter’s and photographer’s names in small type and the brand’s logo emblazoned across the bottom – they were occasionally part of a two-page spread, with the image on the right and a black field with white text on the left. In these cases, the text spelled out precisely what Gap hoped to achieve by tapping this surprisingly wide range of publicly recognizable individuals. For example, in her 1991 portrait, singer and comedienne Queen Latifah wore her braided hair swept up into a patterned headscarf. On the facing page, bold white text proclaimed: “BRASS. It’s a syncopation that informs, a rhythm that’s your message & your word. For those who make their beat their own, there’s GAP” (Fig. 37). Gap’s plain white tee shirt and jeans served as a kind of platform to showcase Queen Latifah’s personal distinctiveness. Her individuality, in turn, imbued the standard pieces with ineffable style. The ads thus presented the established brand as culturally relevant and even daring.

Between 1988 and 1993, the campaign used a number of portraits of black public figures, including musical icons and newcomers, actors, models, and athletes, and many of these celebrities wore

⁸⁶ Notable art world celebrities featured in the campaign in the late eighties and early nineties included Maya Lin (shot in 1989 by Annie Leibowitz), Robert Longo (shot in 1990 by Matthew Rolston), Jim Dine (shot by Matthew Rolston in 1990), Robert Rauschenberg (shot by Albert Watson, 1991), Louise Bourgeois (shot by Albert Watson in 1992), Francesco Clemente (shot by Gus Van Sant, Jr. in 1993), and Chuck Close’s 1993 self-portrait. Another portrait that was particularly notable was that of gay playwright Tony Kushner, who was photographed by Annie Leibowitz in 1992, wearing an ACT UP Silence=Death pin.

their hair in braids, dreadlocks, or other natural styles. In Whoopi Goldberg's 1989 portrait, signature braids spilled out from a dark hoodie, framing her face in a tightly cropped shot (Fig. 38). Another 1989 ad portrayed sisters and athletes Shola and Nhenna Lynch hugging each other, their loosely teased Afros tangling together. Popular musical groups FRESH 4 and Kris Kross wore dreadlocks in their 1991 and 1992 ads, and Lenny Kravitz's long locks dominated his 1993 portrait (Fig. 39). Certainly some photographed black celebrities wore straightened hair – such as Diana Ross and her daughter in their 1991 portrait – but by and large unprocessed hair, worn in braids, dreadlocks, and fades, was the norm. In these ads, natural black hair served as an ample visual marker of originality, individuality, and daring.⁸⁷

It would be unlikely that Gap pursued black celebrities with natural hairstyles *because* of their hair. But the company was indeed focused on selecting personalities who were perceived as being on the edges of mainstream culture, recognizable but not necessarily immediately so. It would be impossible to make a sweeping judgment as to how each of the celebrities photographed with dreadlocks, Afros, fades, and cornrows conceived of the social or political connotations of their hairstyles. But for Gap, these hairstyles were expected to function as a marker of the sitter's – and thus the brand's – status as attractive and creative, counter-cultural but never threatening.

It seemed to have worked. The campaign was a tremendous financial success, as Gap share prices rose rapidly throughout the duration of the campaign into 1996.⁸⁸ Thus, even as braids and

⁸⁷ Dominant culture's coopting of black cultural production was hardly a new practice. For a useful history of African American public appearance modes – including clothing, body language, hair style, dance, and public festivals and parades – from roughly 1737 to 1943, see Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1998). White and White argue that while black culture may have at times been a parody and subversion of white style, it rarely, if ever, was a passive imitation of it.

⁸⁸ For more on Gap's marketing and business history see Louis E. Nevaer, *Into -- and out of -- the Gap: A Cautionary Account of an American Retailer* (Westport: Quorum Books, 2001).

dreadlocks were being declared unacceptable and even morally and politically suspect, they were simultaneously absorbed into white consumer culture as a sign of edgy cultural cachet.

Perhaps the visual punning in David Hammons's untitled 1992 sculpture of wire and hair – unmistakably referencing dreadlocks – also express some of this cognitive dissonance (Fig. 4). As the preceding newspaper and magazine articles on dreadlocks suggest, the hair might conjure up fears of criminal activity or a vision of a lazy, hapless stoner. Or, as the Gap ads demonstrate, perhaps the dreadlocks might instead prompt a fetishizing of the cultural margins. Although the sculpture's representation of locks was clear, it also offered a number of other formal resonances: a life-giving fountain, a primal lion's mane, a desirable exotic plant, or a threatening spider. Depending on viewers' own associations, their psychic or emotional response to these connections could also shift radically. The sculptures could be frightening, inspiring, intriguing, disgusting, or even empowering. The multiplicity of possible visual comparisons to the sculpture's form served to underscore the hair's instability as a cultural symbol.

This seemingly incoherent double reality adds a layer of interpretive ambiguity to Hammons's and Simpson's representations of such hairstyles. Both artists' works eschew depictions of full, round Afros, a hairstyle that would perhaps be the most specific in its evocation of a particular black aesthetic or political stance. Instead, Hammons's fuzzy-headed rock sculptures and gigantic spray of dreadlocks and Simpson's photographs of braids and the backs of women's heads conjure up a slew of occasionally conflicting associations that do not fall neatly within positive or negative, much less black or white, binaries.

Meanwhile, scholars invested in revisionist history and culture studies were also engaging with many of these ambiguities and tensions that manifested themselves in vernacular culture. In 1987, black

British cultural theorist Kobena Mercer published the article “Black Hair/Style Politics” in the journal *New Foundations*. The essay became one of the most referenced sources for discussing black hair in the early nineties and subsequent scholarship frequently built upon or extended Mercer’s observations.⁸⁹ These writings serve as a final valuable context for considering how Hammons’s and Simpson’s artworks might, in their own ways, be expressing a notion of subjectivity – not just identity – that neither multicultural politics nor poststructuralist theory could fully accommodate.

Mercer began his essay by describing some of the criticism pop star Michael Jackson had recently received for adopting the “curly perm,” a glossy, loosely curled hairstyle also known as the Jheri curl. Mercer declared that he wanted to take issue with the widespread argument that any hairstyle that involves straightening must necessarily represent “either a wretched imitation of white people’s hair or, what amounts to the same thing, a diseased state of black consciousness.”⁹⁰ This persistent, underlying essentialism – manifested in popular films such as *School Daze* – perpetuated the belief that there could be a single, pure, and natural black way of wearing one’s hair. Mercer then asserted that we must “de-psychologize the question of hair-straightening and recognize hair-styling itself for what it is, a specifically cultural activity and practice.”⁹¹

Mercer noted the inherent contradiction of hair: an “organic matter produced by physiological processes” and yet also socialized, “almost always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed.”⁹² He went on to trace the racialization of hair vis-à-vis colonialism as hair and skin came to be accepted as physiological manifestations of one’s ontological status. In the particular social and political context of the late

⁸⁹ Mercer’s essay became especially popular after its inclusion in the important 1990 theoretical anthology *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture* alongside essays by Cornel West, Trihn T. Mihn-ha, and Homi Bhabha. The anthology was published by the New Museum on the occasion of *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 80s*, a book I analyze in some depth in the first chapter. Russell Ferguson et al., eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990).

⁹⁰ Mercer, “Black Hair/Style Politics,” 33.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹² *Ibid.*

sixties and early seventies, Afros, dreadlocks, and cornrows served as a targeted response to this systemic devaluation of black bodies. But, Mercer noted, these styles were never “just natural,” waiting to be uncovered.⁹³ Instead, they were “stylistically cultivated and politically constructed” at a specific historical juncture as part of a strategic contestation of white cultural dominance.⁹⁴ And, once that moment passed, the styles were rapidly *depoliticized* as they were incorporated into dominant culture. Mercer declared, however, that this presumed connection between “natural” hair, Africa, and liberation was only an inversion – rather than dismantling – of the same set of assumptions that structured white Eurocentric bias.

Instead of this binary, Mercer proposed that the artifice of contemporary black hair styling practices was valuable in and of itself. He argued that the syncretic strategies of “black stylization” – particularly obvious in inventions such as jazz – could also be understood in relationship to the increasing diversity of black hairstyles. Rather than making false claims to ethnic purity, such hairstyles refracted elements from black and white cultures through appropriation, imitation, and incorporation. The results, according to Mercer, were styles that were actually characterized by their ambivalence.⁹⁵ And, he concluded, it is precisely this ambiguity that imbues the “cultural utterances” of hairstyles with the force of political statements.⁹⁶

Judith Wilson, a scholar of art by African Americans, expanded upon one of Mercer’s claims in her 1994 essay “Beauty Rites: Towards an Anatomy of Culture in African American Women’s Art.” Mercer had mentioned in passing that elaborate hair styling practices were a part of most African cultures and Wilson, drawing from African sociological and historical scholarship, proposed an entire

⁹³ Mercer, “Black Hair/Style Politics,” 40.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 45.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 49.

genealogy of African American hairdressing organized around ideas of artifice and syncretism. Wilson described African American slaves' application of heat to straighten their own hair as a subversive act since in doing so they were inverting the method by which they curled their white mistresses' hair.⁹⁷ According to Wilson, slaves transformed a "European tool and a European practice into a unique device serving an opposite purpose."⁹⁸ Wilson concluded that certain hairstyling practices favored by contemporary black women – such as straightening their hair and wearing weaves or wigs – could thus be seen as an embrace of *African*, not white Euroamerican, traditions.⁹⁹

Lisa Jones, writing in her column for the *Village Voice* in 1993, similarly described the hair she saw in her neighborhood as an art unto itself:

[These] are not simply hairdos; these are elaborate constructions, with hair piled high, woven with ornaments and shaped like fans, wedding cakes, hourglasses, and halos. Maybe they're crowns, maybe they're altars. Extensions here are used not to showcase length or "naturalness." This is hair as textile, fiber art, as nothing less than sculpture.¹⁰⁰

Jones concluded, "What links the African-American/Africa-diaspora cultural practice with African traditional cultures is not the naturalness of the braids, it's the idea of construction."¹⁰¹ For the women that Jones described, the evident artificiality of their hairstyles was an accomplishment, not a failure. Like Mercer, Wilson and Jones emphasized the notions of creolization, cultural adaptation and synthesis, as recurring strategies in black cultural production.

⁹⁷ Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," 14.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Wilson, "Beauty Rites: Towards an Anatomy of Culture in African American Women's Art," 13.

¹⁰⁰ Jones, *Bulletproof Dive: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair*, 296-97.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 296.

Denaturalizing the Natural

A similar embrace of the artifice and theatricality of black hairstyling practices pervades Hammons's and Simpson's work. Both artists use or depict kinky, unstraightened black hair in their work, adopting different visual strategies to foreground the constructedness of such styles. In effect, their works denaturalize "natural" hair.

Hammons's giant dreadlocks sculpture, for example, uses exaggeration as a humorous device. By enlarging the hairstyle to such a degree and animating it by using flexible, bending wires, Hammons renders its supposed naturalness absurd. Instead of being truly threatening, either as a symbol of black radicalism or as a mutant spider, the oversized spray takes on an almost farcical quality. In addition, Hammons – in a fashion similar to Robert Gober and Kiki Smith – emphasizes that the piece is a *made* object. The hair fibers are threaded onto wire somewhat haphazardly, with color and bulk varying from one clump to the next. The wire itself is occasionally visible where bits of hair have fallen to the ground or are dangling precariously. Hammons's interest in process, typical of his work in the late eighties and early nineties, takes priority over a visually polished product. In one sense, the acts of gathering and stringing the cut hair can serve as a kind of reenactment of the labor required for someone to lock their hair.

And indeed, wearing dreadlocks demands a good bit of labor. As kinky hair grows, it "locks" together with neighboring strands, eventually knitting together to create ropes. But the myth is that dreadlocks – much like the Afro – are the natural result of black hair remaining untouched by heat or chemicals.¹⁰² In reality, most of those who wear dreadlocks in the black diaspora actually spend significant time and effort creating and maintaining their locks.¹⁰³

¹⁰² For the Rastafarian believers in Jamaica, dreadlocks' origins are found in the biblical injunction given to the Nazarites, or "separate ones," of the Old Testament: "All the days of the vow of the separation, no razor shall pass over his

Hammons's exaggerated locks interrupt, with laughter, the notion of a truly "natural" black hairstyle. Although dreadlocks have been praised as an embrace of nature in opposition to the artifice of corrupting colonial influence, they are anything but natural. To again echo Mercer, locks were conceived as part of a strategic resistance to the cultural power of whiteness.¹⁰⁴ Rather than revalorizing "nature" while still maintaining the Eurocentric binary of nature and culture, Hammons's sculpture upsets the terms of the discussion altogether. The hairstyle's powerful presence is not diminished by its obvious constructedness. If anything, it is enhanced.

While Hammons uses visual hyperbole to call attention to the artifice of black hairstyling, Simpson engages viewers in a deductive game of elimination, revealing that what some viewers may perceive as "natural" hair is anything but. Our interpretive push and pull with *Coiffure*, for example, prompts the slow realization that the hairstyling descriptions given beneath the images could not be applied to the depicted woman (Fig. 5). Her tight curls are too short to "braid into four circles" or to form braids that "meander over entire head." One text panel, however, suggests an alternative: "a hair piece is attached to the crown." With this in mind, the coiled braid in the center panel takes on new possibilities. Perhaps that hair is not, as we may have initially conjectured, a relic cut from the woman's head. Perhaps, instead, it is purchased hair that is about to be added *to* her head.¹⁰⁵

head. Until the day be fulfilled of his consecration to the Lord, he shall be holy, and shall let the hair of his head grow." (Numbers 6:5)

¹⁰³ The June 1990 issue of *Essence* includes an extensive set of directions explaining how to form dreadlocks. The article begins with a list of necessary tools and products, such as wax pomade, a "hard-head bonnet hair dryer," and a spray bottle with "combination of rosemary, nettle and lavender teas." The initial process involves about three hours of parting, clipping, waxing, rolling, and drying hair into hundreds of half-inch locks. For the hair to actually knit together, however, readers are warned against washing their hair for a month. Once the locks are secure, regular monthly maintenance – by retwisting old locks and twisting new growth – is mandatory. "Dreadlocks How To," *Essence* (June 1990): 13.

¹⁰⁴ Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," 40.

¹⁰⁵ Indeed, the literal hair that Simpson photographs is in fact bought from a hair retailer. During an artist's talk held as part of the Whitney Museum's "Seminars with Artists" series, an audience member asked Simpson whether the hair in the photographs was her own. Simpson chuckled and replied, "Oh no. It's just, you know, the kind of hair you buy on the street." Lorna Simpson, *Artist Talk, Seminars with Artists* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992).

Hairpieces had long been exceedingly popular among black women, and the early nineties were no exception.¹⁰⁶ If anything, women became increasingly open about discussing the practice. Wefts and wigs allowed women to radically alter their appearance overnight without compromising the health of their own hair. For example, the February 1988 issue *Essence* included a detailed “how-to” article on extension braiding and weaving. Notably, the piece began by praising extension braiding as both “a method of hairstyling that dates back to our African ancestors” as well as having the practical benefit of “protect[ing] the hair from breakage...and eliminat[ing] the daily trauma of brushing and combing.”¹⁰⁷ Likewise, in the article “Hair Trend Watch for the 90’s” in the January 1993 issue of *Essence*, beauty editor Lois Barrett applauded the “quick-change artistry” of wigs as well as calling them “*the* answer for busy women.”¹⁰⁸

Hairpieces were available for purchase in any number of colors, textures, and lengths, and those familiar with the inside of a hair shop might identify the braid in Simpson’s photograph as a weft of “Kinky Straight,” a designation for hair that approximates the look of hot-combed black hair. The complicated origin of such hair is remarkable in itself. Lisa Jones’s investigative 1993 article “The Hair Trade,” also for *The Village Voice*, sets out to crack a notoriously tight-lipped industry. Hair’s resistance to neat categorization – as not quite a human appendage, but neither animal nor mineral – means that its trade is regulated only loosely. Although hair sourced from Europe has long been deemed “first quality,” most imported hair now comes from India or East Asia.¹⁰⁹ After being cleaned with an acid

¹⁰⁶ This is not to say that the embrace of wigs and hairpieces was unique to the black community. Certainly, wigs were also popular with white women in the 1960s and 70s. My concern here is simply how a particular community narrated its relationship to hairpieces in mass and popular print media.

¹⁰⁷ Houston, “Extension Braiding and Weaving: The Facts,” 18.

¹⁰⁸ Lois Barrett, “Hair Trend Watch for the 90’s,” *Essence* (January 1993): 18-19.

¹⁰⁹ It is estimated that Asian companies represent at least 45 to 50 percent of the total distribution of hair products intended for black consumers. It’s unsurprising, then, that wig and extension distributors would work to market Asian-sourced hair as both exotic and of premium quality. For more on the history of Koreans and Korean Americans in the black

bath, it is sent to a processing center where it may be colored and then chemically treated to add a degree of texture that makes it suitable for braiding or curling. Thus, as Jones summarizes, “‘raw’ hair is magically, or not so magically, transformed from ‘Bone Straight’ (straight out of the Liaoning province) to ‘French Refined Wavy’ (aka African-American hair under the influence of a perm).”¹¹⁰ After visiting Lugo Hair Center in Brooklyn – an establishment with the motto “First Quality Caucasian Hair in All Colors & Textures!” – Jones observes, “They *make* human hair. This is not a grammatical error; this is a way of life.”¹¹¹

Simpson’s coiled braid, then, offers an unsettling misdirection. Hair from Asia is transformed into hair that is not only *used* by African Americans but also, as Simpson’s work demonstrates, frequently functions as a visible marker of one’s ethnic background. With this knowledge, the already plentiful ambiguities of *Coiffure* again deepen. Simpson demonstrates no concern for asserting a true, underlying black identity. Instead, the coiled hair functions in a fashion similar to the juxtaposed image of the reversed mask: an acknowledgement – and even an embrace – of artifice.

The theatricality of black hairstyling also serves as the primary focus of Simpson’s *Wigs* variations, a series of waterless black and white lithographs on felt entitled *Wigs*, *Wigs II*, and *Wigs (Portfolio)* (all from 1994). In *Wigs (Portfolio)*, Simpson offers viewers a set of 50 felt panels that mix printed text with photographs of wigs (Fig. 40). The depicted wigs and hairpieces range in style, tone, and texture, and include a wavy blonde wig, tight corkscrew curls, a shiny knot of black hair, and a dark wiry patch. The text includes poetic fragments typical of Simpson’s earlier work along with excerpts from sociological interviews about sexual identity, an escape narrative by a former slave, and an account

hair care industry and the resulting tensions between these communities see In-Jin Yoon, *On My Own: Korean Businesses and Race Relations in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2007).

¹¹⁰ Jones, *Bulletproof Dive: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair*, 279.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 285.

of the activist Sojourner Truth being asked to bare her breasts to prove her sex. Simpson recalls purchasing all of the depicted wigs from Fulton Mall in Brooklyn, a strip that, in the early nineties, was filled with hair shops targeted at black women.¹¹² Displayed in four stacked rows, the printed felt fills our field of vision, perhaps evoking an experience similar to Simpson's own shopping excursion.

Curatorial interpretations of *Wigs* tended to suggest that a black artist's representations of black hair must necessarily reflect a struggle for self-acceptance. For example, the Walker Art Center's interpretive guide for *Wigs (Portfolio)* (1994) stated that the piece "refers specifically to the identity of African Americans and how they conform to, or rebel against, prevailing white standards of beauty by braiding, dying, weaving, and processing their hair."¹¹³ The Toledo Art Museum's wall text for *Wigs II* (1994) similarly declared that "the installation raises the issue of how hair has played a central role in African American cultural and personal identity, especially as it relates to traditional white standards of beauty" which, in the case of Simpson's work, is represented by the bleached blonde wig.¹¹⁴ In these statements, a wig's obvious artifice was presented as a negative quality and is supposedly indicative of African Americans' desire to hide their natural hair and aspire to whiteness.

While the printed wigs certainly resembled, as many pointed out, anthropological specimens, Simpson's lithographs also recalled the advertisements for wigs and extensions that frequently appeared in black lifestyle magazines. The ad for His & Her Hair Goods Co., for example, published repeatedly in *Essence* through the early nineties, included images of 13 kinds of hair for purchase along with examples of custom wigs (Fig. 41). The different wefts of hair were identified by texture, such as "kinky

¹¹² Lorna Simpson, "Wigs (Portfolio) Audio Excerpt, MOMA2000: Open Ends (1960-2000)," <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/207/2006> (accessed March 4, 2013).

¹¹³ Walker Art Center, "Interactive Art Activity: Lorna Simpson, Wigs (Portfolio)," <http://www.walkerart.org/archive/9/B7838DD567B1D4546174.htm> (accessed October 8, 2012).

¹¹⁴ Don Bacigalupi, "Lorna Simpson: Wigs," in *Toledo Museum of Art Masterworks*, ed. Don Bacigalupi (Toledo: The Toledo Museum of Art, 2009), 352.

straight,” “silky straight,” “water wave,” and “zigzag wave.” The company even included side-by-side comparison photographs of “European Wave” and “French Refined Italian Mink” both “before wash” and “after wash,” so that purchasers could judge the product’s response to water.

In a 2002 article on Simpson’s *Wigs* installation, Brooke Belisle offers a particularly insightful analysis that embraces the multiple slippages between the real and represented, visible and actual. She argues that the wigs “both rely upon and undermine the perceived indexicality of hair,” in much the same way that Simpson’s work as a whole performs something similar with the truth claims of photography.¹¹⁵ As viewers, we assume that the hair can faithfully stand in for absent bodies – whom we imagine to be black or white, male or female – while still being cognizant of the fact that such wigs can be used to effect a physical transformation. According to Belisle, this conflation of a representation and what it would represent “not only exposes both wig and photograph as unreliable doubles, but also exposes how their mode of doubling relies on the perceived continuity of identity and appearance that it disproves.”¹¹⁶ While Belisle’s explanation of Simpson’s critique of photography as a medium is valuable, it does not acknowledge that these wigs could also be understood within the context of a community that embraces this discontinuity as part of its own cultural heritage.

Thus whether or not the artifice of black hairstyling has historic precedent in African tribal cultures, such rhetoric gained popularity in the late eighties and early nineties and was reiterated in venues as diverse as *The Village Voice* and a highly theoretical interdisciplinary journal. Hammons’s and Simpson’s works acknowledge the unapologetic artifice of black hair. As Mercer argues in “Black Hair/Style Politics,” they emphasize the grooming, the styling, the *effort* that goes into so-called natural hairstyles. Hammons’s exaggerated dreadlocks and closely shaved rock exemplify quite different

¹¹⁵ Belisle, “Felt Surface, Visible Image,” 167.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 169.

hairstyles, but in both cases he visually and conceptually disrupts any naturalized connection between black hair and black identity. In works like *Stereo Styles* and *Wigs*, Simpson playfully pokes fun at the assumption that hair can provide some insight into a person's identity or character. Rather, she highlights the ways in which hair can be used to transform, conceal, or quite literally liberate. Such practices are not condemned as inauthentic. Rather, they serve as a creative space that can also level a critique against the presumably natural categories assumed within the dominant culture.

Hair as a Site of Collaboration and Exchange

Another recurring theme in Hammons's and Simpson's hair-related artworks was their acknowledgement of the communal, collaborative nature of hairstyling practices within the black community. Although hair may often be understood as a metonym for an individual, the hair Hammons used also suggested a community. Hammons gathered hair from barbershops in his Harlem neighborhood, often sending a friend to bargain with the owner and then walking away with bags filled with hair from multiple customers mixed together.¹¹⁷ Even though *Esquire (John Henry)* and the untitled dreadlock sculpture both suggest a single head of hair, they were crafted from hair cut from many different heads.

Hammons's hairy spider construction, in particular, evidences this mixing (Fig. 4). Though at first the sculpture seems to be made from only black hair, we soon begin to notice the varying lengths of hair, the occasional severed braid, and the lighter brown or reddish bits. Towards the work's center is a graying dreadlock, matted around a glass bead. Physical traces from many bodies, then, are quite literally woven together to create a single form. But Hammons's sculpture should not be understood as a paean to the self-obliterating ideal of "E Pluribus Unum." Instead, his literal inclusion of a community of

¹¹⁷ Kellie Jones and David Hammons, "Interview," *Real Life Magazine* 16 (August 1986): 4.

bodies relates to the central role of the barbershop within black communities as an important site for the collaborative formation of subjects.

In 1953, Ralph Ellison, the author of *The Invisible Man*, wrote, “There is no place like a Negro Barbershop for hearing what Negroes really think. There is more unselfconscious affirmation to be found here on a Saturday than you can find in a Negro College in a month or so it seems to me.”¹¹⁸

Indeed, barbershops have a long history as a “mediating space” for the creation of black male identity.¹¹⁹

In 1988, Harlem photographer Jeffrey Scales produced a series of images entitled *Harlem Barbershop*, and his pictures suggest how men in Hammons’s own neighborhood understood the role of barbershops. In one of Scales’s photographs, *Buy Black*, we face two mirrors in a barbershop, each one reflecting a client and his barber (Fig. 42). A long counter, piled with haircutting and grooming implements, cuts across the bottom of the composition. The focal point of the composition, however, is the strip of wall that runs between the two mirrors. The space is crammed with photographs of African American leaders such as Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, Malcolm X, and Louis Farrakhan, along with graphic signage declaring “Buy Black,” “No Justice, No Peace,” and “Our God Reigns.” A specific legacy of cultural, political, and economic activism thus pervades -- and formally grounds -- the scene. Carefully composed and framed for visual and rhetorical impact, Scales’s image presents the barbershop not as a space primarily for personal grooming, but for constructing community.

In an ethnographic study, anthropologist B.K. Alexander explains that in black culture the barbershop operates as a site where information can be provided and circulated in order to create and strengthen relationships and orientations to people, space, and time.¹²⁰ To go to a barbershop is to

¹¹⁸ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 9.

¹¹⁹ See Bryant Keith Alexander, “Fading, Twisting, and Weaving: An Interpretive Ethnography of the Barbershop as Cultural Space,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 9, no. 1 (2003).

¹²⁰ Alexander, “Fading, Twisting, Weaving,” 106.

initiate a series of exchanges, both the economic exchange of services for money and the social exchange of participating in conversation with the barber and other clients. According to Alexander, discussions of sports, music, politics, and sex all serve as a means for individuals to engage in the social and cultural process of “sense making.”¹²¹ Through these rituals, black men create a version of masculinity alternative to the stoic, violent, sexualized, or criminal stereotypes that persist in the mainstream imagination. This cooperative masculinity Alexander writes, “is a resistant performance against the public consumption of our image.”¹²² The barbershop is thus a kind of stage where identity can be forged in cooperation with other community members.

Hammons further underscored his interest in the communal aspect of black hairstyling in a 1992 untitled performance. Having glued an Afro-styled wig to a head-sized rock, the artist brought the rock into a barbershop to be shaved. Hammons’s friend, poet John Farris, sat in the next chair over, also having his hair cut while other men watched and offered commentary on the event (Fig. 43). Hammons initiated his rock-head into his community through the act of hairstyling. The rock was anthropomorphized not only through its visual affinity to a human head, but through its participation in this coming-of-age rite.

While the barbershop has historically been primarily a masculine space, hair salons and the kitchen serve a similar function for black women.¹²³ A multitude of ethnographic studies over the past two decades have explored how the specific practices of black hairstyling create a space for the active

¹²¹ Alexander, “Fading, Twisting, Weaving,” 113.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 120.

¹²³ In fact, “the kitchen” also serves as a slang term for the hair at the nape of one’s neck, generally believed to be the kinkiest in texture and the hardest to straighten with a hot comb.

and collaborative construction of women's sense of self.¹²⁴ Feminist author bell hooks writes movingly about her memories of straightening her hair with her sisters:

Getting our hair pressed...is not a sign of our longing to be white...It is a sign of our desire to be women...It is a rite of passage... There is a deeper intimacy in the kitchen on Saturday when hair is pressed, when fish is fried, when sodas are passed around, when soul music drifts over the talk. We are women together. This is our ritual and our time.¹²⁵

Throughout personal narratives such as hooks's, women emphasize the deeply formative nature of this physical and emotional vulnerability. To some degree, the specifics of the hairstyle mattered far less than the collaborative act of hairstyling and the conversations that take place during that time.

Simpson's hair works express a similar understanding. In *Coiffure*, her language suggests the presence of another, unseen body that performs the described actions. The text panels in *Coiffure*, for example, include directives such as "over-hand/under-hand/whichever you prefer" and "part into eight sections/from the crown." Such references to the practice of braiding conjure a social space of women caring for each other's hair. Imagining the actions outlined in *Coiffure* situates us in a buzzing hair salon or with neighbors on a front porch. This dense backdrop of exchange, cooperation, and negotiation is precisely the opposite of the photograph of the lone woman who has turned her back on us. In this moment we realize, again, the persistent tension between what Simpson's images show and what her texts imply.

A similar effect is achieved through the text in *1978-1988* (1990) (Fig. 44). Four narrow gelatin silver prints, each just over four feet high and 17 inches wide, are framed in dark red wood and abutted

¹²⁴ See Sheila Battle-Walters, *Sheila's Shop: Working-Class African American Women Talk About Life, Love, Race, and Hair* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004); Yolanda Majors, "Shoptalk: Teaching and Learning in an African American Hair Salon," *Mind, Culture, Activity* 10, no. 4 (2003). Battle-Walter's book summarizes insights gleaned from a 16-month study of a southern beauty salon to describe how working-class black women come to see themselves as victors rather than victims during salon conversations. Majors's article explores constructions of self among African American women vis-à-vis their "shoptalk" as a means of illuminating how women learn, construct, and transmit their understandings of the world through verbal strategies such as participation, collaboration, and negotiation.

¹²⁵ bell hooks, "Black Is a Woman's Color," *Callaloo*, no. 39 (Spring 1989): 382.

together like panels of a screen. Within each panel two braids run vertically, parallel to each other, occasionally interrupted by small knots. Magnified and in crisp focus, the hair's texture is articulated by a web of delicate, kinky highlights that seem to vibrate against the black ground. Single word text panels are scattered across the work, placed on top of the photographs themselves. Simpson seems to indicate the passage of time, offering three dated plaques: "1978" on the far left, "1982" on the adjacent image, and "1988" on the far right. The interspersed text panels read: "tangle," "split," "cut," "tie," "tear," "knot," "weave," "tug," "twist," and "part." Notably, all of these words can all operate as either verbs and as nouns. As such, there is the implication that more than one body might be involved in caring for the depicted hair: I get a cut, she cuts my hair; she weaves a braid, I wear a weave. Though we may initially assume that the artwork expresses only an individual woman's personal hair history – or that a single history is intended to stand in for that of an entire social group – the communal context of black hairstyling reorients our understanding of the language. As Deborah Willis notes, the text could relate to the depicted hair, but it could also "describe changes within a relationship," a recounting of lives tangled together and then torn apart.¹²⁶ This interpretation is echoed by Beryl Wright, who writes that Simpson "invests the braids with a feeling of shared intimacy" to which we as viewers are granted access.¹²⁷ We are invited symbolically to touch and braid a woman's hair, an act of physical closeness that also grants emotional access.

Simpson's and Hammons's invocations of the communal spaces and practices of black hairstyling emerge from a similar practice in twentieth-century African American literature. The inherently social act of hairstyling features as a prominent motif in novels ranging from Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*, to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Toni

¹²⁶ Willis and Simpson, "A Conversation," 59.

¹²⁷ Wright, "Back Talk: Recoding the Body," 21.

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*. In these and other writings, politics, religion, and fundamental sense of selfhood are collaboratively shaped in these shared moments spent on cutting, cleaning, and styling hair.¹²⁸ Hair salons and barbershops are oracles of community memory, necessary for understanding one's own identity. Black hairstyling practices and spaces thus reflect a fundamentally collaborative notion of subjectivity, in which community is vital and subjects become themselves in cooperation with, rather than opposition to, others.

Hairstyling as an Intimate and Embodied Encounter

These moments of exchange, which mark the cooperative formation of subjects, are inextricably linked with the sensate experience of getting one's hair "done." In both literary and sociological accounts, women's hair-related memories are vividly embodied, though not always with pleasure. Over and over again, they recount the prickling tugs on their scalp from braiding, the slow burn of a chemical relaxer, and the sizzling, lingering pain of a hot comb nicking an ear. Many, like bell hooks, can recall a particular mix of scents: "Smells of burning grease and hair, mingled with the scent of our freshly washed bodies, with collard greens cooking on the stove, with fried fish."¹²⁹ And finally, they speak of the warmth of sitting pressed between another women's legs and the intimate connection of bodies touching.

In his ethnography of black barbershops, B.K. Alexander describes a similar experience, sparing no detail as he recounts the feel of the barber's hands on his head, the tickle and scent of shampoo bubbles, the warmth of the water, the bursts of laughter, the drone of conversations and the shop

¹²⁸ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1947); Nella Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986); Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye: A Novel* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970); Sherley Anne Morrow, *Dessa Rose* (New York: W. Morrow, 1986); Alice Walker, *The Color Purple: A Novel* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

¹²⁹ bell hooks, "Straightening Our Hair," in *Tenderheaded: A Comb-Bending Collection of Hair Stories*, ed. Juliette Harris and Pamela Johnson (New York: Pocket Books, 2001), 112.

television, and the buzz of a razor. For Alexander, having his beard trimmed is the climax of his barbershop ritual and the epitome of the corporeal connection it engenders. “[The barber] Luke leans his body against mine,” Alexander writes, “...[and we] come into an unacknowledged yet sanctioned intimate contact with each other.”¹³⁰ The comfort he derives from his barber’s close proximity is an acknowledgement that Luke possesses a form of embodied knowledge: “The knowing – that a Black man who knows and understands the growth pattern of Black hair and the sensitivity of Black skin – is caring for another Black man.”¹³¹ Ultimately, Alexander suggests that the “deep penetration of cultural memory” that occurs in the barbershop is directly related to its physical and acoustic sensuousness.¹³²

For bell hooks, there are both cultural and historical dimensions to the power “In a culture of domination,” she writes, “one that is essentially anti-intimacy, we must struggle daily to remain in touch with ourselves and our bodies, with one another. Especially black women and men, as it is our bodies that have been so often devalued, burdened, wounded in alienated labor. Celebrating our bodies, we participate in a liberatory struggle that frees mind and heart.”¹³³ Indeed, African American writers have historically linked together memory and bodies: a tremor in one’s muscles, a rumbling system of sound, an ache at the small of one’s back.¹³⁴ Thus it is in these social spaces of styling black hair – barbershops, hair salons, and kitchens – an intractable interweaving of corporeal and cultural exchange takes place. The scents, sounds, and sensations of styling one’s hair create a particular bond of knowledge, and this physical closeness expresses in turn the collaborative work of becoming a subject.

Hammons’s and Simpson’s works do not replicate the physical experience of having one’s hair done, but they do engage viewers’ bodies with more than just their sense of sight. The strength of their

¹³⁰ Alexander, “Fading, Twisting, Weaving,” 120.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*, 123.

¹³³ hooks, “Straightening Our Hair,” 116.

¹³⁴ Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un)Becoming the Subject* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 13.

work lies not merely in what they represent but in *how* that representation affects viewers' bodies.¹³⁵ For example, despite their differences in media, both artists emphasize the tactile nature of hair. This is perhaps most evident in Hammons's work. The literal fuzzy, spongy quality of the hair – whether glued onto a rock or in the creases of a paper bag or hanging on a copper wire – incites a desire to touch, to confirm with our hands what we imagine due to appearance. Even beyond hair, most of Hammons's material choices similarly prompt viewers' to imagine the feel of rough paper bags, greasy chicken bones, cool glass beer bottles, or crumbling coal.

Although Simpson uses photographs of hair, rather than hair itself, in her work, she frequently emphasizes texture through her use of macro focus and high contrast black and white images. Particularly in works such as *1978-1988* and *Coiffure*, the velvety blacks and crisp white highlights – like finely etched, wavy lines – evoke the tight coil of much black hair. But Simpson's photographs also challenged the surface quality of traditional photography, the expectation that, as a presumably indexical record of light and shadow, all necessary facts could be gleaned from a surface inspection. In a review of Simpson's 2006 retrospective, art historian Carol Armstrong recalled seeing one of the artist's black and white photograph-and-text pieces in person for the first time in the nineties:

Suddenly the play among the surfaces of "black" skin, "white" fabric, and "silver" print became vibrant, making me pause and seriously question what was black, what was white, what was gray or silver or in-between, and whether what I was seeing was 'real' or not. (For several moments, what I knew to be silver print looked like it was really white fabric, and the texture of skin began to trade places with that of emulsion-coated paper.)¹³⁶

As Armstrong describes, Simpson's lush black and white images called attention to their own materiality. These were photographs as objects, not only images.

¹³⁵ Neuroscientists have established that our brains can respond to a visual representation of texture as if our own hands were touching that texture. See Matthew Botvinick and Jonathan Cohen, "Rubber Hands "Feel" Touch That Eyes See," *Nature* 391(1998).

¹³⁶ Carol Armstrong, "Identity Aesthetics," *Artforum International* 46, no. 1 (2007): 131.

Simpson heightened this awareness in her *Wigs* series, which was printed on felt. As a surface, the felt was lush and substantial, and its slight ripple called attention to itself as a material rather than a mere surface. This tactility was further underscored both by the word itself – which suggests our impulse to reach out and touch it – as well as the means of creating the images. Simpson used serigraphy, a process more akin to painting than photography. Instead of being projected, the serigraphed images were inked onto the felt through direct contact with a stenciled screen.¹³⁷ Because of the ways in which they call attention to the intersection of the haptic and optic, Simpson’s felt photographs presented – as Brooke Belisle has argued – “[the] photograph as a relational, unstable, and visceral appearance rather than a singular, flat, and static image.”¹³⁸ By foregrounding of the materiality of her photographs, Simpson undercuts the authority of the sense of sight in the western tradition and asserts the value of embodied – that is, “felt” – knowledge.

The physical relationship between Simpson’s and Hammons’s artworks and their viewers also produces a corporeal awareness. At five feet high, Hammons’s dreadlock sculpture is shorter than average human height, but at nine feet wide it can fill our field of vision, surrounding us in its spray. The sprawling work resists any sense of containment, offering no clear delineation of where its space ends and our space as viewers begins. We might dare to step between arcing wires or perhaps, in our uncertainty, we press ourselves up against the gallery wall. Unwilling to brush against the threaded tufts of hair, we become intensely aware of our own bodily boundaries.

In *Esquire (John Henry)*, as well as in Simpson’s figurative photographs, we respond to the works’ very human scale. The rock in *Esquire (John Henry)* is about the size of an adult human head, and the hair further affirms this connection between what we see and what we know of our own bodies.

¹³⁷ Belisle, “Felt Surface, Visible Image,” 165.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 166.

Simpson's photographs of women's backs and heads are generally life-sized or slightly larger. As Huey Copeland notes, when we adopt a typical pose of thoughtful engagement – feet shoulder-width apart, hands clasped behind the back – we essentially mirror the posture of Simpson's figures in *Guarded Conditions*.¹³⁹ But perhaps just as we recognize our physical affinity to the model, any efforts at self-projection are thwarted by the fragmenting effect of the white tri-part frames. In these moments of acute awareness, however fleeting, we engage the artworks with our bodies, not just our eyes.

Indeed, the invitation to participate cannot be any clearer than when we stand in front of *Coiffure*, facing the interior of the carved mask.¹⁴⁰ We view the mask not as a connoisseur contemplating an object, but as a performer about to step into character. Beneath glass, the rich black background of the photograph serves as a mirror, and our own bodies become a part of the image before us (Fig. 45).

Signifyin'

Hammons's and Simpson's works are not keepers of a hidden message or coded expressions that need to be deciphered. Their sculptures and photographs – like the black hair they reference – are polysemic, rich with shifting, slippery meaning. Indeed, the works themselves are premised on the multiplicity of possible associations, visual and verbal, that we may have with the images, objects, and words they encounter. Thus (*Esquire*) *John Henry* might evoke anything from contemporary black urban street culture and traditional African sculpture to Dada anti-art gestures and institutional practices of display. Instead of offering a precise iconography, Hammons engages in a kind of punning, a playful shuffling of meanings. Similarly, *Coiffure* conjures up histories of slavery, colonialism, and Black

¹³⁹ Huey Copeland, "Bye, Bye Black Girl: Lorna Simpson's Figurative Retreat," *Art Journal* 64, no. 2 (Summer 2005); "Bye, Bye Black Girl: Lorna Simpson's Figurative Retreat," *Art Journal* 64, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 62. Copeland describes seeing *Guarded Conditions* for the first time in the late 1980s.

¹⁴⁰ Of course, the same argument might be made about all of Simpson's installations that use images of inverted masks.

Power while also drawing together communal hair styling rituals, the commercial hair trade, Gap advertisements, and anthropological photography. The structure of the works themselves echoes black hair instability as a signifier. There can be no single interpretation, no coherent, positive message or specific negation of a stereotype.

In this sense, these artworks functioned as a visual expression of what literary critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. called “signifyin’.” Drawing from both pan-African folklore and black slave culture, Gates, in his landmark 1988 book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, described a “a theory of criticism that is inscribed within the black vernacular tradition,” particularly the practices of intertextual repetition and revision to create new meaning.¹⁴¹ He introduced the term “signifyin(g)” – with a bracketed final “g” intended to connote the spoken erasure of this sound by many black people – as a means of simultaneously relating to and differentiating between the black practice he cites and the “received, standard English” term.¹⁴² As a homonym of the Saussurian term “signifying,” Gates’s black variant itself thus demonstrated a culturally specific practice of disrupting and recoding the relationship between a signifier and its signified.

Through an analysis of slave testimonies, black speeches, written literature, and of course music, Gates identifies a “trope of tropes,” a practice of “double voicedness” that “turns on the play and chain of signifiers, and not on some supposedly transcendent signified.”¹⁴³ The most familiar expression of signifyin’ is jazz, which involves the constant realignment of existing musical signifiers. Instead of repetition being devalued as unoriginal, as it has tended to be in Eurocentric literary criticism, the creative act of signifyin’ takes, twists, and transforms to create new meaning. Although it relies on

¹⁴¹ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), ix.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 51, 52.

shared black experience to generate double and triple entendres, signifyin' – as Gates describes it, is “immanently performative” rather than an essential black characteristic.

Coco Fusco found Gates's notion of signifyin' to be a useful interpretive framework for both Hammons and Simpson. In a 1995 article for *Frieze* magazine, “Wreaking Havoc on the Signified,” Fusco argues convincingly that an understanding of Hammons's art is enriched through an acknowledgement of this signifyin' process. She writes, “[Hammons] works offer familiar, highly charged iconography; he creates parodies that deflate pretension and conservatism; and his puns conjure up some of the more contradictory and even painful aspects of contemporary black life.”¹⁴⁴ A similar case can be made for Simpson's photo and text works, particularly in the intertextuality of her references and the ways in which she uses visual and verbal repetition to unsettle rather than reify expected meanings. Fusco observes, in her 1993 article “Uncanny Dissonance: The Work of Lorna Simpson,” that in Simpson's work “a once privileged denotative reading of a photograph or word is destabilized through continual juxtaposition.”¹⁴⁵ A sense of closure is perpetually postponed, leaving the possibility for further transformation available to viewers.

Conclusion

In an essay on David Hammons, Glenn Ligon opined, “It's hard to leave your body behind, especially when your body is always being thrown up in your face. But being heavy is a motherf-----.”¹⁴⁶ Hammons has long been of the opinion that viewers will take his “blackness” for granted when interpreting his work. In a 1991 interview with curator Robert Storr, Hammons announced, “Everyone knows that I am black, so my work doesn't have to shout it out anymore.... I am black. The work will

¹⁴⁴ Coco Fusco, “Wreaking Havoc on the Signified,” *Frieze*, no. 22 (May 1995): 38.

¹⁴⁵ Coco Fusco, “Uncanny Dissonance: The Work of Lorna Simpson,” *Third Text*, no. 22 (Spring 1993): 29.

¹⁴⁶ Ligon, “Black Light: David Hammons and the Poetics of Emptiness,” 248.

automatically be thought of as a part of my African-American culture.”¹⁴⁷ He readily acknowledges that his visible identity as “black” inevitably shapes how his work is understood, even as his work itself resists the notion that an essential blackness exists.¹⁴⁸

Simpson’s work *Same* also expresses some of this ambivalence (Fig. 28). Like the women who were fired for wearing their hair in braids, Simpson’s figures – bound together by long, ropelike braids – are singled out yet conflated on account of visible markers of difference: their hair and their skin. Simpson suggests that the women are different in spite of their hair and yet, in many ways, their experiences are the same because of it. Though she carefully and repeatedly resists simple autobiographical readings of her work, Simpson does acknowledge that a work like *Same* does represent, in more general terms, some of her own experiences. In an interview with Thelma Golden, she relates how, during graduate school at the University of California, San Diego, fellow students and teachers frequently confused Simpson with the two other black women in her program. “It was like these three separate women, differently graduated in height and body size, were all interchangeable,” she recalls.¹⁴⁹ Perhaps then, as Simpson seems to suggest, though blackness does not originate from the body it is constructed through it.

Rather than using hair as an index of blackness, Simpson and Hammons capitalize upon its liminality as both body and not-body to demonstrate the complex relationship between social discourse and embodied experience. Feminist philosopher Linda Martin Alcoff argues that “the interpretive horizon that constitutes our identity is undoubtedly constituted in turn by a wealth of tacit knowledge

¹⁴⁷ Robert Storr, *Dislocations: Louise Bourgeois, Chris Burden, Sophie Calle, David Hammons, Ilya Kabakov, Bruce Nauman, and Adrian Piper* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 27. See also Ligon, “Black Light: David Hammons and the Poetics of Emptiness;” Robert Storr and David Hammons, “Here, There, Everywhere, Nowhere,” *Art Press*, no. 183 (1993).

¹⁴⁸ Glenn Ligon’s own artworks sometimes operate in a similar fashion.

¹⁴⁹ Thelma Golden and Lorna Simpson, “Interview,” in *Lorna Simpson*, ed. Kellie Jones, Thelma Golden, and Chrissie Iles (London: Phaidon Press, 2002), 9.

located in the body.”¹⁵⁰ By literally activating viewers’ bodies and metaphorically referencing embodied memories of hairstyling practices, Simpson and Hammons press against a devaluation of corporeality and its epistemological significance. As Alcoff further contends, “Group identities can be misnamed, misrecognized, or misrepresented, but they are real entities, and thus are not *inherently* or *inevitably* incorrect descriptions. They are not illusions, or reducible to the machinations of power, or stable and fixed with closed borders and clear criteria of inclusion.”¹⁵¹ There is a social basis to individual selves, and though raced and gendered identities may be socially produced, they still operate as what Alcoff calls “epistemological perspectives or horizons” from which certain aspects of reality are experienced or made visible.¹⁵²

This is not to say, of course, that Simpson’s and Hammons’s works somehow make viewers, regardless of our own interpretive horizons, physically engage in the experience of living with black hair. But, by activating viewers’ bodies through visual strategies of tactility, scale, and repetition, they situate us as active participants in an exchange. We are invited to play with meaning, to volley, to pun, to be disoriented, and then to try it all again. Through this process of signifyin’ we are offered the opportunity to be collaborators and to fold another subject’s stories into our own sense of self.

Though black identity may be, as Simpson and Hammons suggest, a construction, it is nonetheless a lived reality. And the evasive, ambiguous signifying power of black hair, both within and outside of the black community, testifies to a notion of subjectivity in which artifice and authenticity are not forced into false opposition. Rather, subjectivity is forged cooperatively – not antagonistically –

¹⁵⁰ Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 106.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 126.

through both discursive exchange and embodied experience. In this sense, Lisa Jones's declaration that hair is the "be-all and end-all" is perhaps not so hyperbolic as it initially seems.

CHAPTER FOUR

Touching Visions: Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Janine Antoni

Introduction

At the 1991 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Felix Gonzalez-Torres exhibited *Untitled (Lover Boys)* (1991): a pile of candies, each piece individually wrapped in silver cellophane (Fig. 6). Heaped into a mound and pushed into a corner of the gallery, *Untitled (Lover Boys)* was a spare, non-representational artwork in an exhibition populated with works that clearly – and often graphically – addressed contemporary social or political issues.¹ Despite its unassuming appearance, however, the work served as a site of multiple subversions. At the artists' invitation, viewers breached established museum conventions by removing and eating the candies, touching and in effect dismantling the artwork. Each night, museum staff replenished the installation to its “ideal weight,” as Gonzalez-Torres termed it, of 355 pounds. As the parenthetical title suggested, the weight of the candies referenced the bodily mass of Gonzalez-Torres with his boyfriend, Ross Laycock. According to museum wall text, the depletion of candies throughout the day echoed the depletion of Ross's body due to AIDS, while the replacement of the candies suggested a hopeful deferral of death and endless continuation of their love.²

Two years later, at the 1993 Whitney Biennial, Janine Antoni exhibited a three-part installation entitled *Gnaw* (1992) (Fig. 1). Two giant cubes – one cast from 600 pounds of chocolate and the other cast from 600 pounds of lard – sat on low marble pedestals, their edges and corners deeply

¹ See Chapter One for a discussion of the 1991 Whitney Biennial. Lorna Simpson's *Double Negative* (1991), Kiki Smith's untitled dangling, leaking bodies (1990), and Robert Gober's untitled severed wax limb (1991), all discussed in previous chapters, were also included in that exhibition.

² Exhibition wall text, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres" box 1, folder 4, Exhibition Archives, Whitney Museum of American Art.

scalloped with the unmistakable fluting of human teeth. In contrast to the raw quality of the partially masticated cubes, the installation's final component was a sleek, mirrored display case in an adjacent room (Fig. 46). Tubes of bright red lipstick and heart-shaped candy box liners, cast in chocolate, filled the brightly illuminated glass shelves (Fig. 47). Referencing a chemical both produced by the body during orgasm and contained in chocolate, this "Phenyl-ethylamine Display," as Antoni called it, suggested the strange interrelationship of beauty, desire, and consumption.³ In her catalogue essay for the exhibition, curator Elisabeth Sussman positioned Antoni as delivering a feminist message, exploring "the consumer fetishism of female youth and beauty" while "critiqu[ing] a patriarchal community where eating is transgressive and the fat woman is an obvious taboo."⁴

Although they have never been paired together by scholars, these two artworks by Gonzalez-Torres and Antoni shared a number of significant similarities. Both were exhibited as part of politically charged biennials and framed as speaking from marginalized identity positions. Both made clear references to Minimalism in their use of simple, geometric forms, but also similarly eschewed the industrial materials of that movement in favor of vernacular and perishable materials, including food. Both referenced the body: Gonzalez-Torres used the candies as a stand-in, while Antoni left traces of her body's work evident on the chewed cubes. Both emphasized absence in these works, calling attention to that which is *not* present or is being removed. And, as we will explore throughout this

³ In an artist's talk given to train Biennial docents, Antoni explained somewhat facetiously, "You wear lipstick to get someone to fall in love with you and give you chocolate, and then when you break up you eat chocolate and get fat." Janine Antoni, *Janine Antoni, Seminars with Artists* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art Education Department, 1993), 1 sound disc; digital; 4 3/4 inches.

⁴ Elisabeth Sussman, "Coming Together in Parts: Positive Power in the Art of the Nineties," in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 19.

chapter, both elicited somatic responses from viewers, thus linking them to the rest of the artworks included in this project.⁵

But there is one additional point of connection between these two artists that has been largely unexplored by scholars: their mutual experiences as part of the Caribbean diaspora.⁶ Gonzalez-Torres was born in Cuba in 1957, but left as a teenager to live in Cuban exile communities, briefly in Spain and then in Puerto Rico for eight years where he also began studying art and literature at the University of Puerto Rico at San Juan. He emigrated to the United States for college and graduate school in New York, and then settled in the city while also spending significant time in California and Miami, Florida. Antoni was born in the Bahamas to Trinidadian parents. She was primarily raised in Freeport, Bahamas, but attended a boarding school in Florida for high school and then matriculated at Sarah Lawrence College in Yonkers, New York. Following her graduation with her bachelor's degree, she spent a few months as an artist's intern in Japan and then returned to the Bahamas before attending graduate school in Rhode Island. After completing her MFA, she settled in New York. But in the art world of 1990s New York, this transience and cultural hybridity that typified Gonzalez-Torres's and Antoni's lives tended to be constrained or misconstrued by multiculturalist notions of fixed identity and poststructuralist deconstructions of identity.

⁵ Also like the other artists considered in this project, both Gonzalez-Torres and Antoni received significant critical and scholarly attention in the early nineties as emerging artists. Interestingly, the only exhibition in the nineties to include both Gonzalez-Torres's and Antoni's work was the *Aperto* at the 1993 Venice Biennale, curated by Olivia Achille Bonito.

⁶ Merriam Webster defines diaspora as "the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established or ancestral homeland" or "people dispersed by whatever cause to more than one location," or "people settled far from their ancestral homelands." The word has come to refer to historical mass-dispersions of people with common roots, particularly movements of an involuntary nature, such as the expulsion of Jews from the Middle East. See the introduction to Melvin Ember, Carol R. Ember, and Ian Skoggard, *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures around the World*. (New York: Springer, 2004); as well as Kim D. Butler, "Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2001).

Relocating these artists within the context of the Caribbean diaspora – a discourse unfamiliar to most art scholars in the early nineties – helps to enrich our understanding of the artworks while bringing to light the inadequacies of then-dominant interpretive models to accommodate such complexities. In particular, we might now recognize their works as quietly but effectively critiquing the notion of vision presupposed within theoretical writings in the early nineties. Two strategies shared by Gonzalez-Torres and Antoni – a foregrounding of absence and an activation of senses other than sight – undercut both the primacy of visibility in a multiculturalist framework and the alienation of vision implicit in much poststructuralist thought. Within the context of Caribbean diasporic theory and literature being written in the early nineties, viewers’ embodied responses to these artists’ works take on additional significance. The corporeal acts of smelling, touching, and tasting carry epistemological significance which, in turn, suggests a notion of subjectivity that operates through mutual exchange rather than psychic separation and repulsion.

Practices

For both Gonzalez-Torres and Antoni, the cohesiveness of their bodies of work emerged through the distinctiveness of their processes rather than from commitments to a particular medium or the creation of a recognizable personal style. Trained as a photographer, Gonzalez-Torres translated his fascination with that medium’s reproducibility to his subsequent transformations of mundane, easily accessible items such as candy pieces, sheets of paper, a pair of clocks, or strings of holiday lights. His art actively blurred private and public spheres: he displayed an intimate photograph of an empty, rumped bed as a billboard, he repeatedly referenced his partner Ross in the works’ parenthetical titles, and he

encouraged viewers to take the candies and papers out of the public museum and into their private homes.

These candy and paper works are some of the best-known pieces from Gonzalez-Torres's oeuvre. The artist began making "stacks" in 1989. These literal stacks of paper, installed at an "ideal height," diminished throughout the day as gallery visitors removed individual sheets of paper from the seemingly solid, implacable blocks.⁷ Some stacks were printed with politically charged snippets of text or copies of newspaper clippings. Others seemed to be primarily formal investigations, such as an untitled set of three graduated stacks placed next to each other like steps with a blue stripe running down the center of each sheet of paper (Fig. 48). Later, Gonzalez-Torres would create stacks from photographs: a sunburst behind clouds, a lone bird flying, or rippling water catching the sunlight (Figs. 49, 50, 51). The endlessly available copies that comprised each artwork offered a quiet but incisive critique of the art market and the traditional obsession with "original" art objects.⁸

But Gonzalez-Torres's parenthetical titles could also powerfully shift the meaning and the affect of the stacks. With *Untitled (Loverboy)* from 1990 (Fig. 52), the sheets of pale blue paper became a stand-in for the artist's partner. The disappearing stack thus functioned not only as a critique of capitalism but also as a metaphor for a particular body that was wasting away from illness. Or, in *Untitled (Passport)* from 1991, the dispersal of the large, blank, square sheets of white paper served less as a commentary on institutional practices and more as a perpetual re-enactment of a diaspora's geographic scattering (Fig. 53).

⁷ Gonzalez-Torres first exhibited stacks in the exhibition "In the Center of Doubt" at Massimo Audiello Gallery in New York City in 1989: *Untitled (Veteran's Day Sale)* and *Untitled (Memorial Day Weekend)*. Dietmar Elger and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue Raisonné* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz Verlag, 1997), 43.

⁸ Tim Rollins and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres," in *Between Artists: Twelve Contemporary American Artists Interview Twelve Contemporary American Artists*, ed. Lucinda Barnes (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1996), 88.

In 1990, Gonzalez-Torres made this concept edible, installing *Untitled (Fortune Cookie Corner)* at the Massimo Audiello Gallery in New York.⁹ A few months later, he turned to candy, creating almost twenty spills over the next two years. For each work, Gonzalez-Torres designated the kind of candy or what the candy wrapper should look like as well as an “ideal weight,” but he generally allowed for curatorial freedom regarding the work’s installation. Candy might be piled in a corner, heaped against a wall, or spread out like a carpet on the floor. As with the stacks, the particular affect of each spill differed according to the associations Gonzalez-Torres created. Some of the spills, like *Untitled (Lover Boys)*, served as portraits; the ideal weight of the work referenced the physical heft of the subject or subjects. Others alluded to political concerns, such as *Untitled (Placebo)*, a glittering field of 1200 pounds of silver-wrapped candy that suggested, among other things, the U.S. government’s inept handling of the AIDS crisis (Fig. 54). Intensely personal but also left intentionally open and in flux, Gonzalez-Torres’s works created, according to curator Nancy Spector, “a communal space in which a dialogic relation between artist and audience be[came] possible and in which various meanings of the work...coalesce[d].”¹⁰

Antoni, meanwhile, evidenced a similar interest in blurring public and private realms and in using such vernacular materials such as hair dye, mascara, chocolate, lard, and soap. In the five years following her graduation from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1989 with her MFA in sculpture, Antoni created a loose collection of works that explored traditional practices of western art – drawing, painting, sculpting, and the like – alongside intimate personal care rituals such as dying one’s hair,

⁹ Elger and Gonzalez-Torres, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue Raisonne*, 52.

¹⁰ Nancy Spector and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum; Hardcover edition distributed by H.N. Abrams, 1995), 18.

eating, and bathing.¹¹ For example, in 1993, Antoni performed *Loving Care*; she mopped the floor at the Anthony d'Offay Gallery in London with her long hair dipped in black dye, slowly pushing viewers out of the room as she filled the space with wet, swirling strokes (Fig 55). Antoni thus used her own feminine body to replace the virile masculine body associated with Abstract Expressionism. As Ewa Lajer-Burcharth observed, "Antoni seemed to explicitly follow Hélène Cixous's famous feminist injunction: 'Write your self. Your body must be heard.' Yet, using a hair dye to make her body speak, she complicated this postulate, forestalling its potentially essentialist interpretation."¹² To Lajer-Burcharth, *Loving Care* thus destabilized two cultural myths: that of the male genius and that of a biological feminine essence.¹³

More frequently, Antoni eschewed performance and allowed her created objects to suggest her process to viewers. The bite marks on the cubes of chocolate and lard in *Gnaw*, of course, were a clear testimony to the artist's efforts at chiseling with her teeth. Two other works made from combinations of chocolate, soap, and lard – *Lick and Lather* (1993) and *Eureka* (1993) – similarly evidenced the artist's prioritizing of her process over the appearance of a final product. To make *Lick and Lather* (1993), she cast fourteen self-portrait busts, seven in chocolate and seven in lye soap, and then proceeded to efface her likeness, swiping away the chocolate with her tongue and washing away the soap in the bath (Figs. 56 & 57). And for *Eureka* (1993), Antoni filled a bathtub to the top with lard and then had assistants lower her into the fat, creating an impression of her body in the white substance

¹¹ These works formed the basis of her 1995 exhibition *Slip of the Tongue* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin and the Centre for Contemporary Art in Glasgow. They include: *Wean* (1990), *Gnaw* (1992), *Lick and Lather* (1993), *Eureka* (1993), *Loving Care* (1993), *Butterfly Kisses* (1993), and *Slumber* (1993).

¹² Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Antoni's Difference," *differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (1998): 138.

¹³ Of course, *Loving Care* also strongly resonated with Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Maintenance Artwork* performances from the early 1970s in which she performed tasks such as sweeping, dusting, and mopping at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. Lajer-Burcharth also makes this connection, albeit briefly, in Lajer-Burcharth, "Antoni's Difference," *differences* 10, no. 2 (1998): 139.

(Fig. 58). She then took the lard her body had displaced from the tub, mixed it with lye to create a large cube of soap, and finally washed herself with that soap. In each instance, Antoni up-ended the tradition of the crafted female body operating as a symbol of the artist's creative power by using her *own* body as creative tool. Thus, rather than the female body being represented in chocolate, lard, and soap, the artist's body functions as an agent for exploring cultural constructions of femininity, beauty, and artistic genius.

About Bodies

How did critics and scholars in the early nineties understand Antoni's and Gonzalez-Torres's overlapping material and conceptual interests? Pluralist politics informed the most prevalent interpretations of Antoni's and Gonzalez-Torres's works, as curators and critics positioned them as being "about" contemporary social issues relating to the body. Reviewers immediately declared that Antoni's work addressed cultural beauty standards and women's obsessive efforts to achieve and maintain their physical appearance.¹⁴ In particular, many offered glib, straightforward interpretations of *Gnaw* as a condemnation of society's preoccupation with thinness. Roberta Smith, writing for *The New York Times* on Antoni's solo exhibition *Gnaw*, stated that "eating disorders and other female obsessions were evoked and converted into a form of artistic suffering."¹⁵ Similarly, in a 1992 review of the same show for *New York Magazine*, Rowan Gaither wrote, "[Antoni] views eating disorders as metaphors for how society has packaged the body, decorating it with lipstick and forgetting both hard physical labor

¹⁴ Antoni actually exhibited very little in the early and mid-1990s, but because she participated in high profile exhibitions such as the 1993 Whitney Biennial, the 1993 *Aperto* at the Venice Biennale, the 1994 *Bad Girls* exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and the 1996 *Young Americans* exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery in London, her work received a lot of attention in the press.

¹⁵ Roberta Smith, "Women Artists Engage the Enemy," *The New York Times*, August 1, 1992, C1.

and the raw fat of ourselves.”¹⁶ In addition, *Lick and Lather* and *Eureka* both referenced bathing, and critics related them to a particularly feminine concern over bodily cleanliness as a kind of cultural conflation with sexual purity.¹⁷ Reviewers seemed to be fascinated by *Antoni’s* body, describing her as “lithe and fine boned as a super model” and contrasted that seeming feminine fragility with her feats of physical endurance, describing in great detail her perseverance in gnawing at the chocolate cube despite blistered lips and an aching jaw.¹⁸

Meanwhile, many critics understood Gonzalez-Torres’s works as primarily addressing gay identity in general and AIDS in particular.¹⁹ This designation was due in part to Gonzalez-Torres’s participation in the artists’ collective Group Material, which created a series of artworks intended to serve as politically charged public service announcements about AIDS.²⁰ Certainly, much of Gonzalez-Torres’s work as an individual artist addressed his relationship with his boyfriend, Ross Laycock, and Ross’s AIDS-related death, though he did so using abstracted rather than representational visual strategies. Despite this absence of immediately visible “gay” content, curator Lisa Phillips still listed Gonzalez-Torres among artists addressing “homoerotic subjects explicitly” in her essay “Culture Under Siege” for the 1991 Whitney Biennial catalogue.²¹ From 1990 to 1992, the majority of thematic

¹⁶ Rowan Gaither, “A Sculptor’s Gnawing Suspicion,” *New York Magazine* 25, no. 10 (1992): 24.

¹⁷ For examples see Roberta Smith, “Janine Antoni,” *The New York Times*, March 11, 1994, C30; and Lajer-Burcharth, “Antoni’s Difference.”

¹⁸ Bruce James, “Antoni Chews up and Spits out Ruminations on the Beauty Myth,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 24, 1996, Arts 19; Smith, “Women Artists Engage the Enemy,” *The New York Times*, August 1, 1992, C1; Simon Taylor, “Antoni’s Principle,” *World Art* 1, no. 2 (June 1994): 54; and Laura Trippi, “Untitled Artists’ Projects by Janine Antoni, Ben Kinmont, Rirkrit Tiravanija,” in *Eating Culture*, ed. Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 142.

¹⁹ See Rob Banker, *The Art of AIDS* (New York: Continuum, 1994); David Deitcher, “What Does Silence Equal Now?,” in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University Press, 1999); and Robert Storr, “Setting Traps for the Mind and Heart,” *Art in America* 84, no. 1 (1996).

²⁰ For more on Group Material, see Julie Ault, *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material* (London: Four Corners Books, 2010).

²¹ Lisa Phillips, “Culture under Siege,” in *1991 Biennial Exhibition*, ed. Richard Armstrong (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art; W.W. Norton, 1991), 21.

exhibitions that included Gonzalez-Torres's works were organized around topics such as AIDS, the body, and gay identity.²² Thus by the mid-nineties, it had become commonplace among critics and reviewers to introduce Gonzalez-Torres's work as "reflect[ing] the everyday facts of the artist's life as a gay man facing the loss of lovers and friends from AIDS."²³ On the other hand, Gonzalez-Torres's dealer, Andrea Rosen, insisted that the artist overcame the art community's compulsion to categorize him as an "identity artist" by creating works that possessed "universal qualities."²⁴ Later, curator Nicholas Bourriaud would adopt a similar approach, treating Gonzalez-Torres's identity as a gay Latino man as a kind of foil that he merely played against.²⁵ Still, the categorization as a gay artist was so pervasive that in a 1995 interview with Robert Storr, Gonzalez-Torres began by offering frustrated rebuttals to those who characterized him as a "politically correct artist" dealing only with "gay issues."²⁶

In the highly charged political culture of the early nineties, many critics and curators assumed that artists addressing issues of gender or sexuality did so in order to assert a coherent minority identity or position that demanded recognition from dominant culture.²⁷ But even more so than the artists discussed in previous chapters, Gonzalez-Torres and Antoni seemed to be actively undermining the prevailing multiculturalist obsession with identity politics. To "recognize" an object suggests its visibility, and yet the efficacy of these works by Gonzalez-Torres and Antoni hinged on what was *not* visible.

²² These exhibitions included *Rhetorical Image* at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (1990-91); *Mapping the Body* at the Simon Watson Gallery, New York (1991); *The Body* at The Renaissance Society in Chicago; the ACT-UP Benefit Auction at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York (1991), *From Media to Metaphor: Art About AIDS*, a traveling exhibition originating at Hamilton College, Clinton, New York and traveling to eight other locations; and *Dissent, Difference, and the Body Politic* at the Portland Art Museum (1992). From 1994 onwards, he began being included in more exhibitions organized around specific media, such as photography or prints.

²³ Jo Ann Lewis, "'Traveling' Light Installation Artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres Shines at the Hirshhorn," *Washington Post*, July 10, 1994, G4.

²⁴ Coco Fusco, "'Hispanic Artist' and Other Slurs," *The Village Voice*, August 9, 1988, 22.

²⁵ Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Presses du réel, 2002), 38-72.

²⁶ Robert Storr and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Interview, Etre Un Espion," *ArtPress* (January 1995): 24.

²⁷ See Chapter One for a discussion of the multicultural politics of recognition.

Absences

A particular visual trope manifests itself in our temporal engagement with these works by Gonzalez-Torres and Antoni: the role of absence. The western artistic tradition has long considered a “sculpture” to be the substance that is present, that which has been built up and shaped or which remains after being worked over with chisel or knife. We expect sculptures to take up space, to fill a gallery or occupy an outdoor plinth. Even after sculpture’s representational content increasingly gave way to abstraction in the twentieth century, the emphasis on presence, on its status as an object, has remained. But when encountering Antoni’s and Gonzalez-Torres’s work, we must pay attention to what is *not* present, to what has been or is being removed.

Two of Gonzalez-Torres’s stacks and spills – *Untitled (Loverboy)* (1990) and *Untitled (Placebo)* (1991) – offer a prime example of this foregrounding of absence through visitors’ physical engagement. As we peel back layer after layer of pale blue paper from *Untitled (Loverboy)* the stack slowly decreases (Fig. 52). Or, the once neatly defined edges of the silvery field of *Untitled (Placebo)* diffuse unevenly as we remove candies (Fig. 59). The installations are perpetually in transition. Their form is always unstable. Yet significance is not imputed to the present, physical mass of blue paper or silver candies. Instead, the absences in the work – the *missing* paper, the *eaten* candies – are themselves the site of signification.

Similarly, Antoni calls attention to the act of removal rather than that of formation. As even her title suggests, the damaged cubes themselves are not the focus of *Gnaw* (Fig. 1). Instead, the import of the work lies in the recognition that something is missing and that the cubes have, in fact, been gnawed upon. We are drawn to the furrows, the grooves, the impressions of teeth set into chocolate and fat, and these negative spaces also alert us to the artist’s process of removal. Further, by transforming the

expurgated material and displaying them in a separate space, Antoni disperses the seemingly monolithic cubes of chocolate and fat. Parts of a seeming whole are thus scattered, yet they have become something new. But, even more compellingly, each time *Gnaw* is exhibited, the lard cube inevitably collapses into a formless mess under the hot gallery lights, spilling off of its marble pedestal (Fig. 60).²⁸ Then, the sticky, glistening pile of white chunks, in contrast to the dark brown cube nearby, only serves to underscore the form's dissolution.

Antoni's other chocolate, lard, and soap sculptures also foreground absences. The self-portrait busts that comprise *Lick and Lather* are striking not in their verisimilitude to the artist, but in their partial effacement under the artist's tender ministrations. We return again and again to the blank eye sockets, the rounded void where we expect a mouth to be, the missing ears, the flattened nose, or the eroded chin. As with classical sculptures that have been eroded away by time and nature, the absent elements invite us to imagine what might have been there previously. In *Eureka*, the lard-filled bathtub bears the impression of the artist's body and, as Amy Capellazo observes, "for the moment absence replaces presence."²⁹ Next to the tub sits Antoni's literal displacement of herself, a cube of soap created from the displaced lard (Fig. 58). But even the block of soap bears witness to what is missing. The sloped corners and smoothed sides serve as a record of Antoni bathing herself with the soap, the stand-in for her body having been washed down the drain of another, absent bathtub. In all these works by Antoni, what is left behind is important because it calls attention to what we can no longer see and to the process of that removal.

²⁸ Antoni has created molds of the completed works and replacement lard cubes and soap and chocolate busts have been cast for exhibitions over the past twenty years. The particular conservation issues surrounding *Gnaw*, *Lick and Lather*, and *Eureka* are discussed in Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).

²⁹ Amy Cappellazo, "Mother Lode," in *Janine Antoni* (Küsnacht Switzerland; New York: Ink Tree; Distributed in the US by DAP, Distributed Art Publishers, 2000), 113.

Gonzalez-Torres's and Antoni's privileging of absence was particularly striking because of their works' direct engagement with the visual language of Minimalism. Antoni's cubes in *Gnaw* and *Eureka*, Gonzalez-Torres's brick-like stacks of paper, and his metallic planes or pyramids of candy clearly referenced Minimalist works from the 1960s such as Donald Judd's enamel and aluminum blocks, Carl Andre's lead floor plates, or Tony Smith's steel geometric constructions. Marked by a kind of formal austerity and use of industrial materials, such sculptures were undeniably a *presence*, a projection into what artist Donald Judd called "actual space." According to Judd, in his seminal 1967 essay "Specific Objects," occupying such space was "intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface."³⁰ The "thing as a whole" would be "intense, clear, and powerful," forcing viewers to acknowledge its presence, to negotiate around it, to adjust their own bodies in response to the large, sleek, geometric shape.³¹

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, Minimalism had been canonized and was receiving new positive attention from scholars and venerated institutions.³² But feminist art historians, such as Anna Chave, had also begun to critique the hypermasculinity implicit in Minimalist art. In her influential essay "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," published in 1990, Chave analyzed artworks such as Morris's "carceral images" and Flavin's phallic "hot rods" in conjunction with their material and critical vocabularies. She demonstrated how the artworks deployed what she called a phallogocentric rhetoric that reinforced existing power structures.³³ Using solid, heavy forms and industrial materials,

³⁰ Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003), 827.

³¹ Ibid.

³² In 1988, the Whitney Museum of American Art staged a retrospective of Donald Judd's work, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington D.C. hosted a solo exhibition of Robert Morris's work in 1990, and the Guggenheim Museum opened a traveling exhibition of Morris's work, curated by Rosalind Krauss, in 1994. In 1992, the Guggenheim celebrated the opening of its Frank Lloyd Wright building with an exhibition of Dan Flavin's fluorescent lights, which had by that point reached a kind of iconic status.

³³ Anna Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* 64, no. 1 (1990): 56, 45.

Minimalist sculpture penetrated space, asserting presence as power. The effect, according to Chave, was a “denial of subjectivity” that “act[ed] to distance and isolate viewers, rather than integrate them into the cultural...system.”³⁴

Both Gonzalez-Torres and Antoni, having received MFAs from East Coast art schools known for their rigorous theoretical training, were quite conscious about their choice to contradict, play with, push against, and quite literally nip at the visual language of Minimalism.³⁵ In a 1992 interview with fellow artist Tim Rollins, Gonzalez-Torres explained, “This type of work, the [paper] stacks, has this image of authority, especially after so many years of conceptual art and minimal art. They look so powerful, they look so clean, they look so historical already.”³⁶ But then, according to Gonzalez-Torres, his viewers would realize that the presumably impersonal form has “been ‘contaminated’ with something social.”³⁷ Antoni understood her relationship to Minimalist sculpture in a similar fashion. In a 1993 interview with Laura Cottingham, she admitted, “I feel Minimalism has influenced and defined me as an artist.”³⁸ She continued, “I was interested in the bite because it’s both intimate and destructive; it sort of sums up my relationship to art history. I feel attached to my artistic heritage and I want to destroy it; it defines me as an artist and it excludes me as a woman, all at the same time.”³⁹ Gonzalez-Torres’s and Antoni’s purposeful engagement with the visual rhetoric of Minimalism was thus couched in an acute awareness of the cultural machinations of authority and exclusion. Art historian Jan Avigkos, writing about Gonzalez-Torres’s work in the early nineties, situated the artist amongst others

³⁴ Chave, “Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power,” 61.

³⁵ Gonzalez-Torres received his MFA from the International Center for Photography through New York University and also attended the Whitney Independent Study Program in 1980 and 1983. Antoni received her MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design.

³⁶ Rollins and Gonzalez-Torres, “Interview,” 93.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Laura Cottingham, “Janine Antoni,” *Flash Art*, no. 171 (1993): 104.

³⁹ Ibid.

of his generation who opposed Minimalism's assumption of a physical but non-subjective body. Artists like Gonzalez-Torres and Antoni were, according to Avgikos, "concerned with a discursive body," that is, how bodies are shaped, perceived, and experienced through culture.⁴⁰

Some scholars, however, sharply criticized this incorporation of subjectivity into the impersonal facade of Minimalism. For those who prioritized Minimalism's supposed clarity of aesthetic experience and erasure of content, the appropriation of these forms by younger artists was, to quote contributor Sylvia Kolbowski, "really problematic."⁴¹ In an *October* round table discussion on the reception of 1960s Minimalist art in the 1990s, Kolbowski complained that Antoni "[took] something for its pictorial value, with no relation to what it meant historically, and produce[d] work that critiques it purely on a pictorial level."⁴² In Kolbowski's mind, Antoni attacked a red herring version of Minimalism, one in which Minimalist art was "bereft of 'emotion'" and needed to have "the body and emotion [put] back into the work."⁴³ Fellow *October* editor Benjamin Buchloh echoed Kolbowski's complaint, deriding Antoni's work as a "spectacularization of feminist theory" rather than a considered critique of masculinist art historical practices.⁴⁴

But, as the earlier descriptions of the voids in Antoni's and Gonzalez-Torres's work demonstrated, these artists' critical engagement with Minimalism extended beyond a mere injection of the personal or political into a blank form. Instead, they offered a fundamental restructuring of what constituted "sculpture," foregrounding absences and dispersal rather than material presence. Still, scholars in the nineties who did note the artists' use of absence as a visual strategy tended to accept the

⁴⁰ Jan Avgikos, "This Is My Body," *Artforum International* 29, no. 6 (1991): 81.

⁴¹ Rosalind Krauss et al., "The Reception of the Sixties," *October* 69 (1994): 14.

⁴² Krauss, et al., "The Reception of the Sixties," *October* 69 (1994): 14.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

persistent, traditional binary that privileged presence and denigrated absence, usually linking it with the psychoanalytic term “lack” as defined by Jacques Lacan.

Absence as Lack

Lacan’s psychoanalytic model is concerned with how ideological structures, particularly language, control the ways in which we understand ourselves in relationship to others. A child becomes a subject upon entering what Lacan calls the “Symbolic,” the realm of language, and leaving behind “The Real,” the realm of purely physical drives.⁴⁵ With the acquisition of language, subjects are cut off from the immediacy of the corporeal as relations to things and other subjects are now mediated through signifiers. As many feminist scholars have pointed out, Lacan genders this process of becoming a subject through his use of terms such as the “phallus” – meaning a privileged signifier and symbol of power – and “castration” – meaning the moment of loss when a child’s primordial sense of self is fractured by his new access to language.⁴⁶ Although Lacan insists that the phallus and the penis are distinct, the “phallus” operates most often within his framework as that which male subjects long to “have” and female subjects long to “be.”⁴⁷ The phallus functions as the signifier of desire and desire is driven by Lack.⁴⁸ “Desire,” Lacan writes, “is a relation of being to lack...It isn’t the lack of this or that, but lack of being

⁴⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book 2: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 27-39.

⁴⁶ Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus,” in *Ecrits: A Selection* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1958), 576. Perhaps the most well-known critique of Lacan’s phallogocentrism can be found in Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca (N.Y.): Cornell University Press, 1985). For a summary of other feminist approaches to Lacan see E. A. Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London; New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁴⁷ Jacques Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus,” in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1958), 287. Also see Minsky, 150.

⁴⁸ Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus,” 317.

whereby the being exists.”⁴⁹ It is this notion of lack and desire – of longing oriented towards that which one does not have – that appears most often in subsequent applications of Lacan’s theory to art.⁵⁰

Indeed, in Antoni’s case, some writers interpreted the absences in her installations to be a literalization of such psychoanalytic desire. When reviewing *Gnaw* at its initial exhibition at the Sandra Gehring Gallery, Simon Taylor rattled off a litany of psychoanalytic terminology – “infantile regression, oral fixation, fetishism, and repetition-compulsion” – that he saw as “deliberately suggested” in the work.⁵¹ Similarly, art historian Ewa Lajer-Burcharth also applied Lacan’s theory to *Lick and Lather*. According to Lajer-Burcharth, Antoni portrayed a Lacanian psychological split, where the contrasting busts reinforced the notion that the self emerges by dividing against itself, resulting in perpetual loss and separation.⁵²

At the same time, Antoni’s work was also interpreted in another psychoanalytic framework, that of the Austrian-British child psychologist Melanie Klein. Mignon Nixon, in her 1995 essay for *October*, “Bad Enough Mother,” suggested that Lacan’s model of language-dependent subjectivity could not adequately account for the ways in which artists like Louise Bourgeois, Rona Pondick, and Antoni were representing and deploying female bodies.⁵³ Nixon proposed instead that these artists were enacting Klein’s object-relation model in which one becomes a subject through realizing relationships with “objects,” a term which broadly covers things and people. But, as Nixon acknowledged, in Kleinian psychoanalysis the mother-infant relation was one of radical alienation, not positive self-identification. The mother’s removal of her breast from her infant created an absence where there was once had been an object of desire, and this traumatic moment of rupture was what, according to Klein, turned a child’s

⁴⁹ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, 223.

⁵⁰ See the helpful introduction to Maria Walsh, *Art and Psychoanalysis* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2013).

⁵¹ Simon Taylor, “Janine Antoni at Sandra Gehring,” *Art in America* (October 1992): 43.

⁵² Lajer-Burcharth, “Antoni’s Difference,” 167.

⁵³ Mignon Nixon, “Bad Enough Mother,” *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 70-92.

inherent “death drive” into aggression.⁵⁴ Thus, in Nixon’s interpretation of Antoni, the artist’s assault on the cube of chocolate and cube of lard, with teeth, tongue, and lips, was a manifestation of her own oral-sadistic fantasy, an outworking of her own psychic violence.⁵⁵

In Gonzalez-Torres’s case, a few scholars interpreted the visual emptiness of the artist’s forms, along with the acts of removing sheets of paper or pieces of candy, as a psychoanalytic “lack.” In her 1991 essay for *Artforum*, “This is my Body,” Jan Avgikos suggested that “the codes of displacement (connoted by the dispersible columns) and of erotic desire and loss (collectively articulated in the parenthetical titles) converge on the blank or empty pages that serve as symbolic sites of homosexual identity.”⁵⁶ Lacan’s theory, as many queer scholars have since pointed out, was heteronormative: the only way that a female could participate in male power was through a heterosexual relationship.⁵⁷ Because Lacan slips between description and universalizing normalization in his theory, he effectively eliminated homosexual subjectivity from his account. Like a woman who lacks the phallus, Gonzalez-Torres – a gay man who desired a phallus – could not be represented within the symbolic order. Taking Lacan’s erasure of gay subjectivity as representative of western society more broadly, a few critics suggested that Gonzalez-Torres perhaps used the absences in his work as a reference to such social invisibility.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Klein adopts the notion of the “death drive” from Sigmund Freud, conceiving of it as an instinctual pull towards self-destruction and a return to the inorganic. For more on Klein’s notion of identification and aggression see Melanie Klein and Jacqueline Rose, *Melanie Klein* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012).

⁵⁵ Certainly, some of Antoni’s own remarks about her process may have influenced such theoretical connections to psychoanalysis. “From the beginning,” Antoni remarked in 1999, “I’ve been interested in the fact that a baby puts everything in its mouth in order to know it.” Sarah Bayliss, “The 24-Hour-a-Day Artist,” *ARTnews* 98, no. 10 (1999): 67.

⁵⁶ Avgikos, “This Is My Body,” 81.

⁵⁷ Jan Campbell, *Arguing with the Phallus: Feminist, Queer, and Postcolonial Theory* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2000), 132; Tim Dean, “Lacan and Queer Theory,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabate (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 238.

⁵⁸ See Avgikos, “This Is My Body”; Russell Ferguson, “The Past Recaptured,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Amada Cruz (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, 1994); Spector and Gonzalez-Torres, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*.

For those who assumed the psychoanalytic model of subjectivity to be normative, Antoni's and Gonzalez-Torres's works were merely a manifestation of a reality in which subjects fight for recognition and separation from each other. The motif of absence was deemed to be an illustration of the artists' own subject positions – as a woman and as a gay Latino man – outside of traditional centers of power. Yet, the affective power of these visual voids and the ways in which they seemed to create a space of engagement for viewers would seem to contradict the antagonism inherent in a psychoanalytic framework. Both artists insisted that the absences in their works – for Gonzalez-Torres, the removal of candies or paper, for Antoni, the traces left by her own body's laborious displacement of material – were intended *for* viewers. When discussing viewers' participation in his stack and spill works, Gonzalez-Torres declared, "I need the viewer, I need the public interaction. Without the public these works are nothing. I need the public to complete the work. I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in."⁵⁹ Antoni expressed a similar sentiment. In a 1999 interview with Stuart Horodner in *BOMB!* magazine, she explained:

For me, that removal [of my body] is a generous act, in the sense that it creates a place for the viewer. Imagining the process is so much more powerful than watching me do it. Imagining is much more provocative and makes each viewer's story slightly different. By imagining me, the viewer's experience turns out to be about their own wish fulfillment. It is an effort to connect. It's a crazy thing—to remove in an effort to connect.⁶⁰

Even though Antoni's physical body was not present in the gallery, the traces of her body remained, negative spaces which she hoped viewers' would imaginatively fill. The work could thus never be solely about her experience or solely about the viewers' projection. Instead, the artist's absent body and viewers' present bodies seemed to inhabit each other's space.

⁵⁹ Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 57.

⁶⁰ Stuart Horodner, "Janine Antoni," *BOMB* 66 (Winter 1999): 50.

These artworks thus suggested a notion of absence that was not a negative condition or precursor to endless frustration. Such a theorization, however, seemed itself to be absent in scholarship from the early nineties. Those who assumed a pluralist position insisted on locating identitarian content in Antoni's and Gonzalez-Torres's works and cared less about the actual visual strategies at work.⁶¹ On the other hand, those who did recognize the recurring trope of absence interpreted it as a literalization of a psychic order in which we fruitlessly long for that which we can never fully possess. In general, however, scholars failed to consider an alternative context: Caribbean discourses of identity.

Absence and Caribbean Diasporas

Within the last fifteen years, the popularity of Caribbean art among museums and art historians has seemingly increased in direct proportion to interest in the possibilities and pitfalls of late twentieth-century globalization. As multiculturalism's shortcomings became increasingly evident in the late nineties, many critics and curators began to look for alternative models of identity that privileged cultural hybridity and exchange. Artworks about or from the Caribbean – the islands and the surrounding coasts of the Caribbean Sea – seemed to fit these demands, and they began to enjoy new popularity in exhibition circuits, almost to the point of fetishization.⁶² Over the last five years, several major traveling exhibitions – all of them many years in the making – have introduced Caribbean and

⁶¹ The same could actually be said of Krauss and Buchloh, who seemed to have taken such popular, pluralist interpretations of Antoni's work at face value and leveled their critique against that red herring rather than thoughtfully engaging with the work on its own terms. This is made especially clear when Buchloh inaccurately described Antoni's *Loving Care* performance and none of the other panelists corrected him. See Rosalind Krauss et al., "The Reception of the Sixties," 14-15.

⁶² Erica Moiah James's forthcoming book promises to critically examine the rising popularity of Caribbean art in conjunction with globalization. Erica Moiah James, *Caribbean Art in the Global Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

Caribbean diasporic art and theory to a new audience.⁶³ Still, there has yet to be a rigorous consideration of how Gonzalez-Torres's and Antoni's experiences as members of Caribbean diasporas might have shaped their work in the early nineties.

Current attempts to link the artists to the region have been limited by a seeming fixation on obvious Caribbean subject matter or Caribbean artistic legacy. For example, some of Antoni's more recent work, such as the 2002 video *Touch*, explicitly foregrounds her Bahamian roots. In the film, the artist appears to be tightrope-walking across the horizon as seen from a beach in Freeport, her feet just touching the line where blue water meets blue sky (Fig. 61). Unsurprisingly, curators included *Touch* in the most recent blockbuster exhibition of Caribbean art, *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*.

In the case of Gonzalez-Torres, scholars have tended to draw formal or process-based connections between his work and that of other Latin American artists. For example, in the catalogue for the 2004 *Latin American and Caribbean Art: MOMA at El Museo*, curator Deborah Cullen emphasized the shared visual strategies of accumulation and humble materials used by Gonzalez-Torres and other contemporary Puerto Rican and Cuban artists.⁶⁴ And in the small 2006 exhibition of the artist's earliest photographs, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Early Impressions*, held at El Museo del Barrio, curators Deborah Cullen and Elvis Fuentes Rodriguez argued that Gonzalez-Torres's political

⁶³ In 2007 Tumelo Mosaka curated *Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art* for the Brooklyn Museum. The show included 80 works by 45 artists with roots in fourteen Caribbean territories. In 2010 the *Global Caribbean* exhibition, curated by Edward Duval-Carrie, a Haitian painter and sculptor, traveled from the Haitian Cultural Center in Miami, Florida to four additional venues. The show included 23 artists from the region, primarily ones working in installation and new media. Most recently, the ambitious 2012 *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World* exhibited simultaneously across three New York museums: El Museo del Barrio, Queens Museum of Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem. Organized by nine scholars and curators – Gerald Alexis, Rocio Aranda-Alvarado, Deborah Cullen, Hitomi Iwasaki, Naima J. Keith, Yolanda Wood Pujols, Lowery Stokes Sims, Edward J. Sullivan, and Elvis Fuentes – the expansive show offered a non-linear history of the Caribbean through art, including works by artists born in the Caribbean, artists who visited the Caribbean, and artists now living in the Caribbean.

⁶⁴ Deborah Cullen, "Jean-Michel Basquiat's *Untitled* and Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*," in *Latin American & Caribbean Art: Moma at El Museo*, ed. Miriam Basilio (New York: El Museo del Barrio and the Museum of Modern Art, 2004).

consciousness and interest in multiples were the result of his Latin American-oriented art education at the University of San Juan.⁶⁵ His work was not, however, included in any of the recent Caribbean exhibitions, nor did it appear in the many Cuban exile-themed exhibitions that have peppered the last two decades.⁶⁶

Gonzalez-Torres died of AIDS-related complications in 1996, so we do not know how he might have chosen to engage with this more recent fascination with Caribbean art and theory. But even in the early nineties, Gonzalez-Torres offered hints that his experiences within the Cuban diaspora did shape his work. In the biography he composed for the eponymous 1994 book published by ART Press, Gonzalez-Torres detailed each episode of dislocation from Cuba, giving them just as much importance as his education and his relationship with Ross Laycock.⁶⁷ He even described the blue that he used for the paper stack *Untitled (Loverboy)* as “Giotto blue in the Caribbean – saturated with bright sunlight.”⁶⁸ When Tim Rollins challenged him – “It’s lighter than Giotto blue,” he argued – Gonzalez-Torres insisted, “When you go out in the Caribbean sun, the colors get very washed out....a memory of a light blue.”⁶⁹ The Caribbean clearly remained a point of reference for the artist – a place that shaped his perception and was embedded in his personal memory – even though it was never the overt content of his work.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Antoni became more forthcoming about how her background shaped her practice, although she never commented directly on artworks from the early

⁶⁵ Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Elvis Fuentes Rodríguez, and Deborah Cullen, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Early Impressions* (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 2006).

⁶⁶ The exception was a small 1991 exhibition at the Ninart, Centro de Cultura in Mexico City, Mexico, *15 Artistas Cubanos: The Diaspora of the '80s*.

⁶⁷ Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Susan Cahan, and Jan Avgikos, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1994), 89.

⁶⁸ Rollins and Gonzalez-Torres, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres," 90.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

nineties. For example, in a 1998 conversation with German artist and collaborator Marcel Odenbach, Antoni admitted, “My experience of growing up in the Bahamas is at the core of my work, although this has never been addressed critically. When I first came to America, I became painfully aware that my body language was inappropriate. This situation is what brought me to use my body as a tool.”⁷⁰ In another interview, a decade later, with Douglas Dreishpoon, Antoni further elaborated, “Coming from the Caribbean Islands, I was painfully aware that, by American standards, I always get too close to other people. I really can’t make a point without touching someone. It’s a form of emphasis that transcends words.”⁷¹ According to her, the influence of the Bahamas was integrated into the content of her art, but since her art education took place primarily in the United States, Euro-American visual forms dominated her own production.⁷²

Rather than attempting to perceive distinctly Caribbean subject matter or forms in Gonzalez-Torres’s and Antoni’s art, we can instead conceive of the impact of their Caribbean origins as diffused throughout their work. The artists’ experiences of living on and *leaving* their island homes should be understood as fundamentally shaping certain ways in which they understood absence and, by extension, the very notion of subjectivity.⁷³ And indeed, in the early nineties, many Caribbean scholars were thinking about the region in just such an expansive fashion.

⁷⁰ Marcel Odenbach and Janine Antoni, “Advertisement for Myself,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 21, no. 2 (1999): 34.

⁷¹ Douglas Dreishpoon, “Escape Hatch: Janine Antoni in Conversation with Douglas Dreishpoon,” *Art in America*, no. 9 (October 2009): 126.

⁷² Odenbach and Antoni, “Advertisement for Myself,” 34.

⁷³ The use of absence as a visual strategy is of course also striking in the work of Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta (1948-1980). Like Gonzalez-Torres, Mendieta’s family were upper-middle class in Havana prior to the Cuban Revolution, and Mendieta’s parents sent her and her sister to the United States in 1960. Mendieta’s best known works are her *Siluetas Series* (1973-1980), “earth-body” works in which she used her body to create “silhouettes” – body-shaped excavations – in sand, soil, grass, and trees. Mendieta died tragically in 1980, but her work did receive renewed attention and scholarship in the early 1990s. For more on Mendieta’s work, particularly the trope of absence as it relates to diaspora see Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

According to Caribbean historian Brian Meeks, the 1990s marked the beginning of a revival of Caribbean intellectual production.⁷⁴ Scholars, many of whom were born in the Caribbean but trained and worked in the United States or Europe, endeavored to locate and highlight the historical and cultural threads that bound the Caribbean together as a geopolitical region.⁷⁵ Martinican-born Édouard Glissant's writings were particularly instrumental in understanding how the history and identity of the linguistically and culturally diverse geographic region was nevertheless knit together.⁷⁶ Glissant described the Caribbean as a "sea that explodes the land. A sea that diffracts."⁷⁷ He opposed the essentialism integral to the *négritude* movement, which was championed by the older Martinican writer Aimé Césaire in the 1930s and 1940s and which sought to link Caribbean culture directly with Africa.⁷⁸ Typical Western approaches of tracing roots and neatly narrativizing a chain of influence could not adequately account for the unique cultures of the region and its peoples. In fact, Glissant proposed that no real Caribbean history could exist in the traditional sense because the history of the Caribbean has been one of repeated dispossession, eradication, and dispersal. There could be no "return" to Africa, no

⁷⁴ Brian Meeks, "Introduction," in *New Caribbean Thought: A Reader*, ed. Brian Meeks and Folke Lindahl (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2001), xv.

⁷⁵ Over 7000 islands, islets, reefs, and cays comprise the Caribbean, in addition to Belize in Central America and Guyana in South America, which are culturally part of the British West Indies. The region is organized into 30 territories, including sovereign states, overseas departments, and dependencies. Since the early 1990s, scholars have generally conceived of the Caribbean as: "a sociohistorical category, commonly referring to a cultural zone characterized by the legacy of slavery and the plantation system. It embraces the islands and parts of the adjoining mainland – and may be extended to include the Caribbean diaspora overseas." Norman Girvan, "Reinterpreting the Caribbean," *New Caribbean Thought: A Reader*, 3.

⁷⁶ Glissant was born in Martinique in 1928. He attended high school at the well-regarded Lycée Schoelcher, then moved to Paris in 1946, where he studied history and philosophy at the Sorbonne and ethnology at the Musée de l'Homme. While in Paris, he remained close friends with fellow-Martinican Frantz Fanon. Through the 1950s, Glissant was involved in several radical political activist groups, including the Front Antillo Guyanais, which agitated for the decolonization of French overseas territories. Glissant returned in Martinique in 1967 and founded Institut Martiniquais d'Études. Later in his career, he worked in Paris for UNESCO, taught at Louisiana State University, and then headed a French-government initiated committee for the formation of a National Centre for the Memory of Slavery and of their Abolitions. Glissant died in Paris in 2011. Glissant's writings ranged from loosely historical novels to poetry and theoretical essays. His most famous book is *Poétique De La Relation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990. For more on Glissant's biography see J. Michael Dash, *Édouard Glissant* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁷⁷ "...une mer qui eclate les terres. Une mer qui diffracte." Édouard Glissant, *Poétique De La Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 46. Translation is my own.

⁷⁸ Dash, *Édouard Glissant*, 94.

restoration of indigenous practices, no complete absorption into the colonizing cultures of Britain, France, Spain, or the Netherlands. Rather than developing from a single source, the Caribbean's history was, according to Glissant, a void, a "web of nothingness."⁷⁹ He argued for a notion of *créolité*, or creolization, the creation of new cultural processes and identities through the unexpected, uneven, and unstable commingling of existing cultural fragments. He explained: "Creolization is not an uprooting, a loss of sight, a suspension of being. Transience is not wandering. Diversity is not dilution."⁸⁰ Without suggesting that Gonzalez-Torres and Antoni were reading and directly referencing Glissant, we might imagine them exploring, through their artworks, this same notion of a void – the absence of a single origin – being at the center of Caribbean and Caribbean diasporic identity.

Antoni's biography could be understood as being in many ways illustrative of the Caribbean that Glissant theorized: marked by mixing, transience, and the absence of a stable, monolithic history or culture. Both of Antoni's parents were born in Trinidad, white Creoles with roots in the island extending over 200 years. In Trinidad, "Creole" has long denoted a person born on the island of either European or African descent. White Creoles, like Antoni's family, were the descendants of the French cedulants, the original colonists of old Spanish Grandee families, and the Irish, Corsican and German families who had intermarried with them.⁸¹ White creoles occupied an ambiguous space in West Indian society. As literary scholar Belinda Edmonson has pointed out, a white Creole woman was both a

⁷⁹ A "toile du néant." Édouard Glissant, *Le Discours Antillais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981; repr., 1997), 11. Current scholarship on Glissant has begun exploring his relationship with Gilles Deleuze. The two met in France in the 1980s and became friends. Though neither cites each other directly, a clear synergy is evident between their writings, particularly in their interest in rhizomatic relationships. See Christina Kullberg, "L'île Qui Capte Et Diffracte: La Rencontre Entre La Poétique D'Édouard Glissant Et La Philosophie De Gilles Deleuze Et Félix Guattari," in *Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari Et La Politique*, ed. Manola Antonioli, Pierre-Antoine Chardel, and Regnault Hervé (Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2006); Nick Nesbitt, "The Postcolonial Event: Deleuze, Glissant, and the Problem of the Political," in *Deleuze and the Postcolonial*, ed. Simone Bignall and Paul Patton (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

⁸⁰ Édouard Glissant, "Creolization in the Making of the Americas," *Caribbean Quarterly* 54, no. 1/2 (2008): 82.

⁸¹ Bridget Brereton, "The White Elite of Trinidad" in *The White Minority in the Caribbean*, ed. Howard Johnson and Karl S. Watson (Kingston; Oxford; Princeton: Ian Randle Publishers; J. Currey Publishers; M. Wiener Publishers, 1998), 33.

descendant of the colonizer and “by virtue of her color she is virtually guaranteed a position of relative power and privilege if she so chooses.”⁸² And yet, according to Edmondson, the white Creole is “culturally black” and thus representative of both colonizer and colonized.

Antoni spent her childhood in Freeport, where her father was a respected doctor, and then attended high school at a Catholic all-girls boarding school in Florida.⁸³ After graduating with her BFA from Sarah Lawrence College in New York in 1986, she moved to Japan to work with an artist there who was a friend of her parents. However, the experience was not fruitful and Antoni returned home to the Bahamas to live with her parents and create a portfolio for graduate applications.⁸⁴ In 1987, she began studying at the Rhode Island School of Design, and after graduating there with her MFA in 1989 she settled in New York. Although she was clearly economically privileged, Antoni’s movements across oceans and between countries were not atypical in the Caribbean. In the late 20th century, many others from the region shuttled back and forth, their lives marked by the impermanence and hybrid forms and experiences that Glissant described. Indeed, Antoni has recounted her mother telling her, “Go out and see the world, Janine, because this place we come from is behind God’s back,” suggesting that she, too, thought of the Caribbean as a kind of non-place, invisible even to the Almighty.⁸⁵

But for Antoni, as for Glissant, this absence could be seen as a space of creative possibility. Considering her works as creolizations deepens our understanding of her practice while problematizing notions of influence. Mira Schor, who taught Antoni in graduate school and introduced her to the

⁸² Belinda Edmondson, “Race, Privilege, and the Politics of (Re)Writing History: An Analysis of the Novels of Michelle Cliff,” *Callaloo* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 190. Thanks to Erica James for pointing out this valuable resource. See also Percy C. Hintzen, “Race and Creole Ethnicity in the Caribbean,” in *Questioning Creole: Creolisation Discourses in Caribbean Culture*, ed. Verene A. Shepherd and Glen L. Richards (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2002).

⁸³ Dreishpoon, “Escape Hatch: Janine Antoni in Conversation with Douglas Dreishpoon,” 126.

⁸⁴ Erica Moiah James, “Caribbean Art in the Global Imaginary,” (2012), 192-93.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Janine Antoni, Centre for Contemporary Arts, and Irish Museum of Modern Art, *Janine Antoni: Slip of the Tongue* (Glasgow and Dublin: Centre for Contemporary Arts, 1995), 12.

work of feminist artists such as Hannah Wilke, Caroline Schneeman, and Ana Mendieta, raised the issue of artistic lineage in her trenchant 1991 essay "Patrilineage."⁸⁶ Schor criticized art critics and scholars for their propensity to legitimize new women artists by designating them as inheritors of canonized male artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, Pablo Picasso, and Vito Acconci. For example, when *Gnaw* was first exhibited, many writers linked Antoni's chocolate and lard cubes to Beuys, who used lard in many of his works from the 1960s and 1970s, and Dieter Roth, who had also made sculptures with chocolate and other foodstuffs in the 1970s.⁸⁷ Schor complained that while the Beuys connection was indeed an admissible point of engagement for Antoni, authors never acknowledged the resonances between Antoni's work and that of established feminist artists Ann Hamilton and Maureen Connor.⁸⁸ But while Schor called for replacing a patrilineage with a matrilineage, Antoni's works – like her island home – might be better understood as productively hybrid. Her installations called upon numerous traditions, effecting the kind of creolization that Glissant described as "add[ing] something new to the components that participate in it."⁸⁹

Antoni did not merely mix together feminist and Minimalist practices, and she did not need to claim a direct lineage from either group of artists. Instead, *Gnaw* could be both entirely Antoni's own *and* entirely composed of generative fragments of earlier artistic practices. She literally processed these critical discourses through her body, gnawing, chewing, spitting, and reshaping her way to the final artwork. With this understanding in mind, Kolbowski's criticism of Antoni – that the younger artist

⁸⁶ Mira Schor, "Patrilineage," in *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

⁸⁷ "Schor, Patrilineage," 113.

⁸⁸ A few months before *Gnaw* opened, Ann Hamilton presented a performance piece, *malediction*, in which she sat at a table surrounded by wine-soaked cloths and repeatedly bit into lumps of bread dough, which she then placed aside in a basket to rot. Maureen Connor, who also taught Antoni at the Rhode Island School of Design, had also recently made *Ensemble for Three Female Voices*, in which she cast female larynxes in red lipstick, and in other works such as *Thinner Than You* (1990) engaged with the gendered nature of eating disorders.

⁸⁹ Glissant, "Creolization in the Making of the Americas," 82.

displayed a shocking misapprehension of the aims and practices of Minimalism – would become a moot point.⁹⁰ Antoni was not intent on resurrecting or even directly critiquing Minimalist objects. Rather, her creolized works demonstrated an active, willful, and creative fragmentation and reconstitution of western art histories, feminist social concerns, and, as we shall see, a Caribbean epistemology of embodiment.

In addition, considering Antoni's installations in the context of creolization enables us to recognize her destabilization of a western binary of purity and impurity in regards to historic conceptions of race. In *Lick and Lather*, Antoni cast her self-portrait in white soap and brown chocolate. Yet despite the prevalence of multiculturalism in the art world of the early nineties, only one scholar even acknowledged this seemingly obvious reference to the racialization of skin tone.⁹¹ Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, in her article "Antoni's Difference" for a 1998 issue of the journal *differences*, wrote that "...the contrasting materials articulate that play of difference in terms of racial identity, through the trope of 'race' as skin color. (This is also an issue of relevance for Antoni, who was born of parents of different color in the Bahamas, where she also grew up.)"⁹² For Lajer-Burcharth, Antoni's ethnic and cultural background was literally only a parenthetical addendum to her interpretation. Lajer-Burcharth conceived of the artist's actions within a feminist-inflected psychoanalytic framework in which self-fashioning, self-love, and self-hate were deemed universalized processes, disconnected from any particularities other than gender.

⁹⁰ Krauss et al., "The Reception of the Sixties," 14.

⁹¹ Erica James has also noted this gap in the scholarship on Antoni. James, *Caribbean Art in the Global Imaginary*, 218. As I will argue later in this chapter, I believe that the failure to consider this interpretation of Antoni's installation was due largely to the fact that most critics and scholars simplistically considered the artist to be a "white" woman and therefore uninterested in issues of ethnicity.

⁹² Lajer-Burcharth, "Antoni's Difference," 151.

Further, Lajer-Burcharth mischaracterized Antoni as being “born of parents of different color,” suggesting that one parent was “black” and the other was “white.” Antoni’s parents are, in fact, both white Creoles. But unlike the United State’s historical fixation with hypodescent – the notion that “one drop of black blood” makes one “black” – the construction of race in the colonial Caribbean was far more complicated and did not neatly separate into a black and white binary.⁹³ A complex and almost laughably precise chart produced by explorer W.B. Stevenson in 1825, demonstrated the racial equations he observed in South America and the Caribbean (Fig. 62). According to Stevenson’s observations, one could claim Creole status even with a certain percentage of African or indigenous Indian blood.⁹⁴ Thus, anthropologist Percy C. Hintzen has described the Creole space of the West Indies as a “hybridized reality,” where “racial and cultural purity cannot exist together.”⁹⁵ In the wake of both the miscegenation and hierarchization of the plantation system, the Creole could never claim the symbolic capital of white purity claimed by colonial administrators.⁹⁶ In the Caribbean, to be a “white Creole” was not and is not the same as being “white.”

Erica James proposes a crucial connection between the soap used in *Lick and Lather* and European colonists’ approach to race in the Caribbean.⁹⁷ Following the historical research of Caribbean cultural theorist Stuart Hall, James suggests that Antoni’s decision to use soap and chocolate were specifically connected to her Bahamian upbringing. Hall links both soap and chocolate to “commodity racism,” the use of marketed commodities to establish particular racial and ethnic norms. He describes

⁹³ James, *Caribbean Art in the Global Imaginary*, 222.

⁹⁴ According to Stevenson’s chart, children that resulted from White + Mestizo, Mestizo + Mestizo, and White + Quinteroon couplings were considered Creole. It seems that someone who appeared “white” but was not directly from Europe would be considered Creole.

⁹⁵ Percy C. Hintzen, “The Caribbean: Race and Creole Ethnicity,” in *A Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies*, ed. David Theo Goldberg and John Solomos (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 478.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 482.

⁹⁷ James, “Caribbean Art in the Global Imaginary,” 222.

how soap played this role in late nineteenth century British colonies: “In its capacity to cleanse and purify, soap acquired, in the fantasy world of imperial advertising, the quality of a fetish object. It apparently had the power to wash black skin white as well as being capable of washing off the soot, grime, and dirt of the industrial slums and their inhabitants.”⁹⁸ Indeed, one late 19th century advertisement for Pears Soap depicts a dark-skinned man, clothed in a loincloth, topped with a feathered headdress, clutching a spear, and standing on a beach gazing at a bar of soap cradled in his right hand. Above the image, the advertising copy reads, “The Birth of Civilization – A Message from the Sea.” Below, the text announces, “The consumption of soap is a measure of the wealth, civilisation, health and purity of the people.” (Fig. 64) Hall observes that advertisements such as this one “racializ[ed] the domestic world and domesticat[ed] the colonial world” while perpetuating the myth of racial purity that did not and could not exist.⁹⁹

Advertisers also used black bodies to sell chocolate.¹⁰⁰ The grinning black figures used by the French companies Felix Potin and Banania from the 1890s through the 1950s suggested an equation between the darkness of the man’s skin and the dark chocolate being offered for consumption. Cultural historian Jan Nederveen Pieterse has also observed that blacks were frequently alluded to “as candy” in early twentieth century European countries with colonies in Africa and the Caribbean. In Germany, for example, a chocolate cake known as the *Negerküsse* was referred to as the “edible negro.”¹⁰¹ And in

⁹⁸ Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the Other,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage: The Open University, 1997), 241.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ While a good portion of the chocolate being imported into Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came from Africa, cocoa was also being grown on plantations in Jamaica, Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Trinidad and Tobago.

¹⁰¹ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 193.

interwar France, the term *petite chocolatière*, or “little chocolate bonbon,” was a term of endearment for dark-skinned women.¹⁰²

Echoes of this commodity racism still reverberate in the Caribbean today. Sociologist Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor has demonstrated that contemporary sex tourism promotes the Caribbean as a “lived colonial fantasy” where the sexualized, racialized “Other” is available – at a low price – for the white tourist.¹⁰³ In this context, chocolate serves as a metaphor for both the desirability and skin color of Caribbean women. She quotes one sex tourist’s description of the Caribbean’s appeal: “You think of those incredible...women, ranging in colour from white chocolate to dark chocolate, available to you at the subtle nod of your head.”¹⁰⁴ This commodification of women’s bodies as something “good enough to eat” reflects some of the ways in which the history of colonialism in the Caribbean and the related exploitation of people and resources continue to shape contemporary perceptions of the region.¹⁰⁵

While Antoni certainly recognized the specific connotations of chocolate, soap, and lard in the American context in which she first displayed her works, we would be remiss in failing to acknowledge the embedded histories that such materials would have for her, as a diasporic white Creole woman, or for others from the Caribbean who encountered her installation. The soap and chocolate self-portraits, do engage with issues of racialized identity, not by asserting a single identity but by throwing the possibility of racial purity into question. Antoni presents herself as both soap and chocolate; she is impossibly and simultaneously an agent of colonial cleansing and an object of colonial desire. Thus in

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor, *Tourism and “Embodied” Commodities: Sex Tourism in the Caribbean* (London: Pinter Press, 2000), 42.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. See also Marcy Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

addition to its other effects, *Lick and Lather* also seemingly expresses the “ambiguous space” that white Creoles inhabit in the Caribbean.¹⁰⁶

The absences and blank spaces in Antoni’s chocolate, lard, and soap sculptures, then, occlude the kind of visible, recognizable difference demanded by multicultural politics. But, they also resist being understood as a psychoanalytic lack or unattainable, perpetually delayed desire. The indentations, grooves, erosions, and cavities of *Gnaw*, *Lick and Lather*, and *Eureka* can both alert us to the artist’s now-absent body while serving as an invitation to viewers’ own physical, emotional, and intellectual responses. The absences in Antoni’s sculptural work take on new richness when considered in light of Glissant’s emphasis on the void – the “non-placeness” of the Caribbean – that made creolization possible.

A series of dislocations similarly marked Gonzalez-Torres’s experience. He was born in 1957, in Guáimaro, Cuba, the second of what would be four children. Two years later, in 1959, Fidel Castro and his supporters overthrew the dictator Fulgencio Batista and established a Communist regime in Cuba. In 1971, when Gonzalez-Torres was fourteen years old, his parents sent him and his older sister Gloria to Spain. After three months, they moved to San Juan, Puerto Rico, where they lived with their uncle. Gonzalez-Torres became a naturalized U.S. citizen there, in 1976. He and his sister only returned to Cuba once, in 1979, during Castro’s short-lived family-reunification program.¹⁰⁷ After several years in the art program at the University of Puerto Rico at San Juan, Gonzalez-Torres immigrated to New York City to enter the Pratt Institute for Photography in 1979. Until his death in 1996 in Miami, Gonzalez-Torres moved primarily between his homes in New York and in Miami, where his parents and younger siblings settled.

¹⁰⁶ Edmonson, “Race, Privilege, and the Politics of Rewriting History,” 180.

¹⁰⁷ Two years later, in 1981, his parents and younger siblings left Cuba for Miami during the Mariel Boatlifts.

In this context, *Untitled (Passport)* takes on an additional layer of meaning. A passport is a legal means of identification as well as surveillance. It codes the holder's nationality, gender, and age, it tracks her movements across borders, and it can prevent her entrance or exit from particular countries. Yet the papers that comprise Gonzalez-Torres's *Passport* are empty, bearing neither identifying information nor any records of travel.

In her 1995 monograph on the Gonzalez-Torres, curator Nancy Spector understood the blank passport sheets as a general metaphor for travel: "These blank pages, available for the taking, announce journeys not yet made and borders not yet crossed – travels between not only geographic locations but also interior, ontological spaces, territories of negotiation between the psychological, the sexual, and the social."¹⁰⁸ She did not, however, acknowledge Gonzalez-Torres's own complicated movements across oceans, a specific tangle of exile and migration in which a Cuban passport would initially deny him access to the United States but later designate him an exile and thus eligible for American citizenship. Spector situated *Untitled (Passport)* within a broader theme of "travel" that she observed in the artist's work. To her, the notion of travel implied a degree of agency on the part of the traveler and a sense of optimistic expectation.¹⁰⁹ Admittedly, Gonzalez-Torres – perhaps in an attempt to distance himself from attempts to categorize him as a multicultural artist – did not insist that Spector foreground his Cuban heritage. And yet, such an experience cannot be so easily dismissed. The pages might indeed be waiting to be filled with future travels, but they might also signify the voided history of the artist's Cuban citizenship.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Spector and Gonzalez-Torres, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 55.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹¹⁰ This idea of an erased or invisible history also, of course, resonates with the erasure of queer histories and indigenous histories.

It is important to recognize that Gonzalez-Torres's migrations – from Cuba to Spain, Spain to Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico to New York, between New York and Miami – were not all motivated by autonomous choices or effected as an individual. Instead, Gonzalez-Torres was part of the “1.5 generation” of exiles who left Cuba on the brink of adolescence and came of age in diasporic enclaves.¹¹¹ Unlike Antoni's individual, but not singular, journey to the United States for schooling, Gonzalez-Torres's initial moves occurred as part of a broader collective. In addition, the communities in which he participated, particularly in Spain and Puerto Rico, were deeply invested in crafting a new notion of Cuban identity that would make sense of their abrupt absenting from their homeland.

In the 1960s, somewhere between 125,000 and 200,000 Cubans arrived in Spain.¹¹² Primarily middle and upper-class and Catholic, they left Cuba voluntarily, hoping to avoid what they saw as the negative repercussions of Castro's communist government.¹¹³ Few saw the relocation to Spain as permanent. According to Mette Louise Berg, in her essay “Homeland and Belonging Among Cubans in Spain,” those who left Cuba for Spain in the 1960s did so believing that they would soon be returning to a post-Castro Cuba.¹¹⁴ For many exiles, Spain was also seen simply as a stepping-stone to the United States, necessary after the United States and Cuba broke off diplomatic relations in 1961.¹¹⁵ Like Gonzalez-Torres and his sister Gloria, at least 80,000 of those who immigrated to Spain subsequently departed for the U.S.¹¹⁶ While later generations Cuban-Spaniards embraced more postmodern

¹¹¹ Silvia Pedraza and Ruben Rumbaut, *Origins and Destinies: Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in America* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1996), 278. Gonzalez-Torres and his peers did not possess the autonomy of adult, first generation exiles. But, they were also not solely reliant – as second generation exiles were – on their parents to narrate memories of Cuba.

¹¹² Mette Louise Berg, “Memory, Politics, and Diaspora: Cubans in Spain,” in *Cuba: The Idea of a Nation Displaced*, ed. Andrea O'Reilly Herrera (Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 2007), 18.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

¹¹⁴ Berg, “Homeland and Belonging among Cubans in Spain,” *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 14, no. 2 (2009): 268.

¹¹⁵ Berg, “Memory, Politics, and Diaspora” 18.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

discourses of hybridity, the first wave of exiles were especially committed to crafting a viable narrative of “true” Cuban identity abroad in opposition to the country’s new communist identity.¹¹⁷

Notably, however, all of these generations of exiles turned to the metaphor of the body in pain as a means of describing their diasporic experience. As Berg has noted, the phrase “*el dolor de Cuba*,” the pain of Cuba, occurred repeatedly in diasporic narratives. Exiles described their bodies aching with separation from Cuba; they spoke of being severed, injured, or in constant pain.¹¹⁸ The official language of communist nationalism in Cuba imagined the nation as a body and the diasporic population – the bourgeoisie – as sick limbs that needed to be expunged. Cuban exiles flipped this language around, pointing to their *own* bodies as entities that together comprised “Cuba.”¹¹⁹

Though Gonzalez-Torres was in Spain for only a few months, it is likely that he would have been aware of this metaphor of the aching, broken body that resonated within his exiled community. With this in mind, the suggestion of depleted bodies in works such as *Untitled (Lover Boys)* takes on another layer of significance. While the piece certainly functions as a kind of elegy for a dying lover, there can also be a sense of creative potential in its dissolution. The interpretive shift is subtle but powerful. Rather than serving only as a sign of weakness and inevitable decay, loss and the pain of separation seems to function within Cuban-Spanish subjectivity in an almost generative fashion, affirming a bond between exiles.

After three months in Spain, Gonzalez-Torres and his sister moved to San Juan, Puerto Rico. He would spend almost ten years on the island, first living with his uncle’s family in San Juan and then moving into a shared apartment with his older sister while he studied literature and visual art at the University of Puerto Rico. Historically, Cuba and Puerto Rico had a close – if somewhat mythologized

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 25.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 27.

¹¹⁹ Berg, “Memory, Politics, and Diaspora,” 27.

– relationship. Thousands of the Cubans who left their own island for Puerto Rico rather than Miami did so because of the shared language and overlapping cultures.¹²⁰ By the time Gonzalez-Torres arrived in Puerto Rico in 1971, at least 30,000 residents identified themselves as Cuban immigrants.¹²¹ Yet, the Cubans in Puerto Rico, particularly those who emigrated in the 1960s and 1970s, remained largely distinct from the Puerto Rican community and continued to conceive of themselves as only temporary residents, still believing that Castro would shortly be overthrown and the “old” Cuba would be reinstated.¹²²

Given this mindset of transience, it is little wonder that the Cuban community in Puerto Rico self-consciously worked not only to maintain ties with each other, but also to narrate their exile in a way that asserted their continuing identification with an indefinable *cubanía*, or “Cubanness.” A particularly potent example is the *Anuario de familias cubanas* (Yearbook of Cuban Families) that was edited by Joaquin Posada from 1967-1982.¹²³ Riffing off of the *Social Guide* that had followed prominent families in Havana prior to the revolution, Posada compiled the names, phone numbers, and addresses of Cuban exiles living in Puerto Rico along with photographs of family events. Though Posada’s lists were not entirely inclusive or accurate and distribution was not even, Gonzalez-Torres’s

¹²⁰ Jose Cobas and Jorge Duany, *Cubans in Puerto Rico: Ethnic Economy and Cultural Identity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 69.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Anthropologist Jorge Duany, himself born in Cuba and raised in Puerto Rico, has written several texts on the diasporic Cuban community in Puerto Rico. Duany explains that most of the Cuban exiles who came to Puerto Rico in the two decades following the revolution were lighter-skinned, well-educated, professionals who enjoyed quick economic success and stability in Puerto Rico. But despite joining the middle and upper rungs of the social structure, Cubans were, according to Duany’s research, “still perceived as marginal and outsiders.” This had changed dramatically over the past two decades, and the notion of being Cubarican, a hybrid of Cuban and Puerto Rican identities, has become increasingly common. See Jorge Duany, “Caribbean Migration to Puerto Rico: A Comparison of Cubans and Dominicans,” *International Migration Review* 26, no. 1 (1992); Duany, “Two Wings of the Same Bird?: Contemporary Puerto Rican Attitudes Towards Cuban Immigrants,” *Cuban Studies* 30 (1999).

¹²³ Duany, “Two Wings of the Same Bird,” 51.

uncle's family was included in at least the 1973-74 edition.¹²⁴ Apart from the utility of providing contact information, the *Anuario* served as a symbolic space where a dispersed community could be reunited. In the preface for the 1971 *Anuario* Posada explained that since "our collectivity has lost the physical proximity...in order to maintain our unity and cohesion, we are forced to seek a spiritual contact and intercommunication that will compensate for this physical dispersion."¹²⁵ Similarly, the 1982 *Anuario* opened with the statement: "Each issue of the *Anuario de familias cubanas* is a living piece of Cuba abroad, an indestructible affirmation of *cubania*."¹²⁶ Martinez-San Miguel observed that the *Anuario* "reiterate[d] obsessively the presence and existence of the emigrants as part of the same Cuban tradition that is no longer located in the insular territory."¹²⁷ Thus, exiles claimed that even in their dislocation they were part of the "same" Cuba, or, indeed, that their shared experience of displacement was the very thing that *made* them Cuban. As in Spain, those in the first wave of exiles continued to mythologize their identity as "real" Cubans against the new revolutionary identity proposed by Castro.¹²⁸

As with the metaphor of the body in pain, this notion of dispersion as the source of an admittedly constructed identity adds another dimension to our understanding of Gonzalez-Torres's stacks and spills. Works such as *Untitled (Lover Boys)* were activated through their displacement. The way in which Gonzalez-Torres understood *cubania* – an identity constructed not through physical proximity but through absence – can be seen as undergirding these artworks in which the threat of disappearance is the very thing that creates meaning and affects visitors. The removal and consumption of the silver cellophane-wrapped candies from *Untitled (Lover Boys)*, for example, subverts institutional

¹²⁴ Joaquin Posada, *Anuario De Familias Cubanas 1973-74* (San Juan, Puerto Rico).

¹²⁵ Posada, *Anuario De Familias Cubanas 1971* (San Juan, Puerto Rico), 3.

¹²⁶ Posada, *Anuario De Familias Cubanas 1982* (San Juan, Puerto Rico), 5.

¹²⁷ Yolanda Martinez-San Miguel, "Puerto Rico Cubanness: Reconfiguring Caribbean Imaginaries," in *Cuba: The Idea of a Nation Displaced*, ed. Andrea O'Reilly Herrera (Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 2007), 53-54.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

standards of maintaining a venerable distance from art objects. Further, because the work is constantly changing as visitors eat the candies, no “original” exists, challenging a capitalist art market’s obsession with originality and ownership. And finally, the candy pile that represented Gonzalez-Torres’s and his boyfriend’s bodies could only be replenished if it was first depleted. *Untitled (Lover Boys)* is not a static monument to a lost love. Instead, the inherent hopefulness of the work, this metaphor of commingled lives persisting beyond death, hinged on its literal dispersal. The absences were necessary, not negative.

Even after moving to the United States, Gonzalez-Torres maintained ties to the Caribbean region, moving between Puerto Rican and Cuban communities. Gonzalez-Torres had a home in Miami, where his parents and younger sibling settled, and was part of the vibrant “Little Havana,” the largest concentration of Cubans outside of Cuba.¹²⁹ Most of his time, however, especially in the 1980s, was spent in New York, attending in succession the Pratt Institute, the Whitney Independent Study Program, and the International Center for Photography’s MFA program. While in New York, Gonzalez-Torres was regularly involved with the Puerto Rican community, a community largely characterized by its transnational character.¹³⁰ According to Latino Studies scholar Juan Flores, “Nuyoricans” were marked by “a culture of commuting...a constant back-and-forth transfer between intertwining zones.”¹³¹ When Gonzalez-Torres was living in New York in the late 1980s and early

¹²⁹ Gerardo Mosquera, “Remember My Name,” *Artforum International* 34, no. 9 (May 1996): 19.

¹³⁰ Mosquera, “Remember My Name,” 20. This is unsurprising for several reasons. First, the Pratt Institute, where Gonzalez-Torres received his BFA is on the edge of the Williamsburg neighborhood in Brooklyn, home to one of the largest Puerto Rican *barrios*. Second, in the face of more dramatic language and cultural differences of the United States, Spanish-speaking Caribbean diasporas – Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Cubans – were more likely to ally with each other, downplaying cultural specificities when necessary to forge a broader Hispanic Caribbean community. See Jorge Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island & in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity*, Popular Cultures, Everyday Lives (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

¹³¹ Juan Flores, *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* (Houston, Tex.: Arte Publico Press, 1993), 104. See also Jorge Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Juan Flores, “The Diaspora Strikes Back: The Politics of Race and Globalization, Part 3,” *NACLA Report on the Americas*. 39, no.

1990s, the diasporic community was asserting itself as “Puerto Rican” *because* of their hybridity and self-conscious occupation of a cultural border zone.¹³² According to Cuban-Puerto Rican anthropologist Juan Duany, Puerto Rican migrants and their descendants have self-consciously chosen not to completely assimilate into American culture, instead choosing to occupy a more liminal state.¹³³ According to Duany, this shared, purposeful occupation of the margins served as a point of solidarity and political resistance.¹³⁴ Thus, Puerto Ricans in New York in the 1980s and 1990s increasingly embraced the idea of cultural identity being forged reciprocally, through circular migrations, diffusion, and accommodations, and resistance to hegemony came not through outright rejection of their host culture but through transformation and reclamation at points of intersection.¹³⁵

Gonzalez-Torres suggested an awareness of this notion of identity as a space of convergences in his interview with Tim Rollins in 1993. He criticized those who attempted to pull supposedly “Latin” motifs from his work, such as a fascination with altars. He asserted:

I don't know the ghetto, I have never lived in the jungle, and I despise altars. I grew up in San Juan, which is like a small New York City without subways....They don't really know what we're about. They don't know about our experiences, how hybrid we all are. They are stuck with images from National Geographic circa 1950.¹³⁶

Indeed, works such as *Untitled (Lover Boys)* demonstrated Gonzalez-Torres's belief in marginality and hybridity and possible means of creative resistance. Gonzalez-Torres's stacks and spills tended to be placed in a corner or along a gallery wall and were always low to the ground. The artist chose these locations consciously. In an interview with curator Nancy Spector he explained: “I don't want to

3 (2005); Ruben Gowricharn, *Caribbean Transnationalism: Migration, Pluralisation, and Social Cohesion* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006).

¹³² Jorge Duany, “Nation on the Move: The Construction of Cultural Identities in Puerto Rico and the Diaspora,” *American Ethnologist* 27, no. 1 (2000): 18.

¹³³ Duany, “Nation on the Move,” 22.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Flores, “The Diaspora Strikes Back,” 21.

¹³⁶ Rollins and Gonzalez-Torres, “Interview,” 19.

occupy space....I love the spatial margins. I love placing the work where it's unexpected, the places where I have less authority."¹³⁷ For Gonzalez-Torres, the margins served as a potent space of institutional or social critique.

We could also see *Untitled (Lover Boys)* as a hybrid or creolized artwork. Art historian Gerardo Mosquera proposed a relationship between Gonzalez-Torres's inviting candy spills and South American conceptualist work that Gonzalez-Torres may have seen while in classes at the University of Puerto Rico, like the Brazilian Neo-Concretist Hélio Oiticica's encompassing and interactive installations (Fig. 63).¹³⁸ Gonzalez-Torres himself never acknowledged such a connection, but he did understand his work as a blend of the visual aesthetic of minimalism with the political intent of activist art, particularly feminist art of the 1970s, which used personal experience as a launching pad for social critique. In interviews, Gonzalez-Torres repeatedly asserted the hybridity of his own identity and then linked his refusal to make what he called stereotypical Hispanic "maracas sculptures" as a means of infiltrating or "contaminating" a seemingly monolithic visual language dominated by straight white men.¹³⁹ For Gonzalez-Torres, the seeming absence of his own, particular artistic tradition was hardly considered a drawback. Like Glissant, he embraced that void as a creative space.

Gonzalez-Torres's own political views and the nature of his attachment to Cuba as a homeland are somewhat difficult to reconstruct. He never spoke openly as an adult about his feelings regarding Cuba and Castro, nor did he try to politicize his identity as a Cuban exile. Still, there are some clues to

¹³⁷ Spector and Gonzalez-Torres, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 175. As an aside, it is interesting to note that as Gonzalez-Torres's reputation has increasingly grown and solidified over the past two decades, some curators have spectacularized the installation of his work, moving it out of the spatial margins. I am thinking in particular of the New Museum's most recent installation of Gonzalez-Torres's photographs and light strings in the *NYC 1993* exhibition. Two of Gonzalez-Torres's photographs are blown up and applied to large gallery walls as murals, framing a double string of white lights hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the space. The effect is aesthetically compelling, but also incredibly monumentalizing.

¹³⁸ Mosquera, "Remember My Name," 19.

¹³⁹ Tim Rollins and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Interview," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1994), 21.

how he chose to navigate the complex terrain of his overlapping cultural identities and political interests. According to the curators of *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Early Impressions*, the artist had already begun to demonstrate an awareness of the dangers of rampant capitalism and the Caribbean's colonial past even while he was an art student in San Juan.¹⁴⁰ He certainly read a good deal of Marxist theory while at the Whitney Independent Study Program, and in later interviews with Tim Rollins, Nancy Spector, and Ross Bleckner he referenced such theory as a context for his endlessly reproducible installation components.¹⁴¹ Although he focused much of his political activism on the AIDS crisis, Gonzalez-Torres's concerns did extend to broader social issues. In a particularly telling example, he concluded an artist's talk in 1993 by offering a lengthy list of statistics about the worsening social conditions in the US during the Reagan and Bush administrations, ironically contrasting this litany of facts against a backdrop of a projected formal portrait of the wealthy family from *Dynasty*, a well-known 1980s TV series.¹⁴² Still, at times Gonzalez-Torres's insistent dismissal of stereotypes – such as his comment to Rollins that he had “never known the ghetto” – could seem dismissive of poor or working class Cubans and Puerto Ricans, even though he chose to engage those diasporic communities on a personal level.¹⁴³ Indeed, the fact that in that same interview he described himself as having “grown up” in San Juan, rather than Cuba, suggests that by the early nineties he was conceiving of his cultural identity in more fluid terms, as part of the Hispanic Caribbean more generally. But perhaps the artist's

¹⁴⁰ For example, in an 1982 performance piece, Gonzalez-Torres slathered himself in sunscreen and languished on a bed of melting ice, laying bare the contradictions of a tropical paradise marked by “rampant unemployment, massive emigration, high crime rate, and political unrest.” Gonzalez-Torres, Fuentes Rodríguez, and Cullen, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Early Impressions*.

¹⁴¹ Ross Bleckner and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” *BOMB*, no. 51 (Spring 1995): 45; Rollins and Gonzalez-Torres, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” 22.

¹⁴² Deborah Cherry, “Sweet Memories: Encountering the Candy Spills of Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” paper given at “Encuentro II: Migratory Politics Symposium,” University of Amsterdam, 2007, <http://home.medewerker.uva.nl/m.g.bal/bestanden/Cherry%20Deborah%20paper%20encuentro%20READER%20OPM%20AAK.pdf> (accessed October 16, 2012).

¹⁴³ Rollins and Gonzalez-Torres, “Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” 19.

frustrations with multiculturalism's over-determined emphasis on visible identity contributed to his adamant, rhetorical distancing of himself from certain aspects of Hispanic culture.

Unlike most ethnic minority identities in the United States, there was no clear list of physical markers that would denotatively link someone to the Caribbean region. Still, Gonzalez-Torres's own body was racially marked, and he certainly understood the powerful effect of such visible signs of identity. He remarked to Tim Rollins, "When we come into a room we are automatically bad. When someone like you, white, comes into a room you are given the benefit of the doubt. We don't get that benefit, we are already suspicious – 'bad'."¹⁴⁴ He knew that certain physical features marked him as "Latin" or "Hispanic," but in New York City such a body might just as easily be from Mexico or Columbia as from Puerto Rico or Cuba.

On the other hand, critics – who might comment on Antoni's "limber" body and her "pre-Raphaelite mass of black hair" – assumed an unproblematic white identity, noting the artist's birthplace simply as a kind of factual aside.¹⁴⁵ But in both cases, ledgers of visible identification were incorrect or incomplete. As the earlier discussions of Caribbean history and theory have demonstrated, to be part of the Cuban diaspora was a very different subject position than being Mexican or Chicano. To be a white Creole from the Bahamas was a very different subject position than being a white, upper-middle class, United States-born woman. Physical markers of identity could not account for the particularities of Gonzalez-Torres's and Antoni's Caribbean backgrounds. The non-visibility, non-legibility of being part of the Caribbean diaspora precluded the artists from easy accommodation within a multiculturalist framework of identity. For Gonzalez-Torres and Antoni, cultural identity emerged from an absence of

¹⁴⁴ Rollins and Gonzalez-Torres, "Interview," 29.

¹⁴⁵ Bruce James, "Antoni Chews up and Spits out Ruminations on the Beauty Myth," *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 24, 1996, Arts 19.

visible signifiers, and their artworks manifested a similar conviction that meaning could be predicated on blank spaces, on missing candy and paper, on absent chocolate, lard, and soap.

An Epistemology of the Senses

This trope of absence – a foregrounding of the unseen – can also be understood within the broader context of the artists’ skepticism towards the prioritizing of vision that had dominated Western thought for millennia. Within the Western philosophical tradition, smell, taste, and touch have long been deemed “lower” or “base” senses and thus marginalized in epistemological and aesthetic investigations. From antiquity this hierarchy was constructed along the lines of a mind-body dualism, where presumably detached, abstract mental exercises took priority over the animalistic flesh.¹⁴⁶ Vision and hearing could foster philosophical investigation, observation, and the communication of knowledge with the least amount of reliance upon one’s physical body. In his *Republic*, Plato declared, “Least encumbered of all the senses in its attachment to the body, sight may aid or support the intellect in the eventual apprehension of the Forms.”¹⁴⁷ The other senses, however, required a kind of physical intimacy to be activated, either in terms of proximity or direct contact. Aristotle, despite differing from Plato in his metaphysics, agreed with the other philosopher’s characterization and ordering of the senses: in his Great Chain of Being, that sense hierarchy is echoed in the very ordering of the universe, where spirits ruled over flesh.¹⁴⁸

Such hierarchies also formed the basis for the naturalization of oppression along lines of gender or race. Feminist philosophers such as Moira Gatens have called critical attention to the implicit

¹⁴⁶ The history of this hierarchization is carefully outlined in Robert Jütte, *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA, USA: Polity, 2005).

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 16.

¹⁴⁸ Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*, 20.

gendering of traditional binary combinations – mind-body, reason-emotion, and so forth, stating that these pairs are not merely correlative. Rather, they are ranked pairs in which the first item is taken to be naturally superior to the second.¹⁴⁹ To give an even more particular example, Carolyn Korsmeyer points out in her book *Making Sense of Taste* that Plato believed that “the ability to transcend the body, to govern the senses, to gain knowledge, is a masculine ability that, when exercised well, [would] keep one embodied as a male.”¹⁵⁰ Within this long tradition of favoring vision as a means of the objective acquisition of facts from which one could make reasoned judgments, sight also became increasingly understood as both a mechanism and metaphor of asserting control over others.¹⁵¹

This repeated linkage of vision with authority – where the one who assumes the active role of looking asserted control over those who were being passively “seen” – was also characteristic of European imperialist thought. In her 1992 book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt demonstrated how travel accounts from the 18th and 19th centuries created a literary trope of specular control as explorers and colonizers would carefully describe vistas, generally seen from an elevated position, as a means of symbolically claiming that space.¹⁵² According to Pratt, following the European invention of science as an authority, seeing, naming, and claiming all become a single integrated act. The physical distance that vision afforded was understood as a reiteration of the emotional distance necessary for rational thought and, by extension, cultural superiority. Importantly, however, the significance of colonizers’ specular narratives lay not only in what they reported as having

¹⁴⁹ Moira Gatens, *Embodiment, Ethics and Difference* (Hamilton, N.Z.: Centre for Women's Studies, University of Waikato, 1991), 92.

¹⁵⁰ Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*, 31.

¹⁵¹ See Gatens, *Embodiment, Ethics and Difference*; and Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

¹⁵² Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992).

seen but also in what they omitted: the already existing traces of colonialism on the landscape and the bodies of their indigenous guides.¹⁵³

In Western philosophical aesthetics, too, the physical distancing of vision was credited with allowing for contemplation and evaluation of the art object.¹⁵⁴ In fact, Antoni's and Gonzalez-Torres's engagement with Conceptualist practices was especially striking because of Conceptualists' dismissal of materiality. Joseph Kosuth, for example, in his essay "Art After Philosophy," first published in 1969, argued for a move to a disembodied aesthetic, setting up the idea and the material basis of its form in opposition to each other.¹⁵⁵ For Antoni and Gonzalez-Torres, however, their ideas, the materials of their installations, and viewers' physical interaction with the artworks were inextricably intertwined. Indeed, it was virtually impossible for someone to be merely a *viewer* of the artists' polysensory works.

Antoni's chocolate, lard, and soap sculptures unquestionably incited visitors' sense of smell. When encountering *Gnaw*, for example, viewers could smell the thick heady aroma of chocolate as well as the fainter but distinctive odor of melting fat. Writings from the early nineties regularly cited this olfactory component. Critic Amy Jinker-Lloyd described *Gnaw* as "fragrant," exclaiming, "It smells so wonderful!"¹⁵⁶ Janet Hand, when recounting her experience of *Lick and Lather* wrote that there is "...a significant impact before you enter the gallery, before you *see* anything of her artwork....The fragrance leaves you salivating, awash in an invisible sea of thick cocoa and scented fat."¹⁵⁷ Speaking of an exhibition that included both *Gnaw* and *Lick and Lather*, reviewer Bruce James noted that "the

¹⁵³ This linkage of vision and colonial power also manifested itself in visual culture, both in fine art and commercial media. See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and Leigh Dale and Helen Gilbert, *Economies of Representation, 1790-2000: Colonialism and Commerce* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007).

¹⁵⁴ The most influential articulation of this position was perhaps Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911).

¹⁵⁵ Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," in *Art after Philosophy and After*, ed. Gabriele Guercio (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991).

¹⁵⁶ Amy Jinker-Lloyd, "Chewing the Fat," *Art Papers* (March/April 1996): 2, 3.

¹⁵⁷ Janet Hand, "Disappearing Acts: An Impossibility of Identity," 221-234, in *Other Than Identity*

maddening scent of chocolate pervaded the otherwise sanitized atmosphere.”¹⁵⁸ But for these critics, the smells that hung about Antoni’s works were only important insofar as they connoted desire or disgust and thus related to the work’s implicit social commentary on beauty culture and eating. For more politically conservative critics like Roger Kimball and Saul Ostrow, Antoni’s efforts to elicit a somatic response were proof of her avant-garde desire to offend.¹⁵⁹ On the other hand, feminist critics praised the multisensory aspects of Antoni’s installations as an inversion of the dominant phallogocentric view of the body.¹⁶⁰ The works’ olfactory components were notable merely because they meant the works could not be apprehended solely on visual terms.

Certainly, Antoni was not the first or only artist to use scent as a part of her artistic practice. Art historian Jim Drobnick, in his essay “Reveries, Assaults, and Evaporating Presences,” published in 1998, explored artists’ deployment of odors in works since the 1970s, including Bill Viola’s 1975 installation *Il Vapore*, in which the artist juxtaposed a boiling caldron of eucalyptus leaves with a projected image of a woman dropping leaves into a similar pot of water.¹⁶¹ He also mentioned Suzan Etkin, whose 1992 *Self-Portrait* – consisting of an atomizer spraying her favorite perfume into the gallery every fifteen minutes – was exhibited in New York around the same time as Antoni’s first exhibitions at Sandra Gehring.¹⁶² Indeed, olfactory artworks have become increasingly common since the 1990s, with perhaps the most well-known practitioner being the Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto,

¹⁵⁸ Bruce James, “Antoni Chews Up and Spits Out Ruminations on the Beauty Myth,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 24, 1996, Arts 19.

¹⁵⁹ Andrew Renton and Saul Ostrow, “Spotlight: Janine Antoni,” *Flash Art* (Summer 1994); Arthur Danto, “The 1993 Whitney Biennial,” *Nation* 256, no. 15 (1993); Roger Kimball, “Of Chocolate, Lard, and Politics,” *National Review* 45, no. 8 (1993).

¹⁶⁰ Cappellazzo, “Mother Lode,” and Taylor, “Antoni’s Principle.”

¹⁶¹ Jim Drobnick, “Reveries, Assaults, and Evaporating Presences: Olfactory Dimensions in Contemporary Art,” *Parachute*, no. 89 (Winter 1998): 15.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

whose installations of spices hanging in sheer sacks surrounded viewers with heady aromas as they moved through the space.¹⁶³

But what might be the importance of the works *smelling* in the first place? Is there significance in the act of breathing in, of sensory cells in a nose converting chemical signals into electrical signals that travel up the olfactory nerve and to the brain?¹⁶⁴ Certainly, there is a strong connection between smell and memory.¹⁶⁵ Particular scents might remind of us of a childhood home, a favorite relative, a first date, or a past holiday. In fact, Drobnick suggests that one of the reasons that a number of contemporary artists have begun using smells in their artworks is because of how odors are inextricably and intimately linked to personal identities.¹⁶⁶

In addition to pleasant recollections, smell's affective potency can also vividly conjure up traumatic experiences. Recent research on posttraumatic stress disorders has demonstrated how an odor associated with a horrific past event can trigger a whole-body response, essentially re-enacting the stress of the trauma, in patients.¹⁶⁷ Researchers have also established that there is an epistemological dimension to our sense of smell, a "uniquely privileged neuroanatomical relationship" that links olfaction to our "emotions, memory, and associative learning."¹⁶⁸ Thus, while humans might have initially refrained from touching rotting meat, for example, because of an evolutionary mechanism

¹⁶³ For more on smell and art see Patrizia Di Bello and Gabriel Koureas, eds., *Art, History, and the Senses: 1830 to the Present* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2010); Jim Drobnick, *The Smell Culture Reader* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2006); Larry Shiner and Yulia Kriskovets, "The Aesthetics of Smelly Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 3 (2007).

¹⁶⁴ Avery N. Gilbert, *What the Nose Knows: The Science of Scent in Everyday Life* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008), 26.

¹⁶⁵ Gilbert, *What the Nose Knows*, 198.

¹⁶⁶ Drobnick, "Reveries, Assaults, and Evaporating Presences," 13.

¹⁶⁷ Eric Vermetten and J. Douglas Bremner, "Olfaction as a Traumatic Reminder in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Case Reports and Review," *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* 64 (2003): 202-207.

¹⁶⁸ Rachel Herz, "Odor Memory and the Special Role of Associative Learning," in *Olfactory Cognition: From Perception and Memory to Environmental Odours and Neuroscience*, ed. Gesualdo Zucco, Rachel Herz, and Benoist Schaal (Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub. Co., 2012), 109.

meant to protect us from ingesting bacteria, this impulse also had social implications. The recognition of “good” and “bad,” “familiar” and “strange” smells promoted social learning and odor-related modulation of behavior, tightening bonds between group members.¹⁶⁹

And yet, as Diane Ackerman observed, in her book *A Natural History of the Senses*, while “our sense of smell can be extraordinarily precise” it can be “almost impossible to describe how something smells to someone who hasn’t smelled it.”¹⁷⁰ Smell has seemingly evaded discourse, sitting outside the bounds of language. Ackerman concluded, “Smell is the mute sense, the one without words.”¹⁷¹

Within the particular context of the Caribbean in general and the British West Indies in particular, Antoni’s olfactory activation can also be seen as a kind of actualization of a literary trope in some contemporary Caribbean diasporic literature. Isabel Hoving, in her book *In Praise of New Travelers: Reading Caribbean Migrant Women Writers*, asserts that “one of the strategies through which the difference of postcolonial and Black writing is articulated is the dismissal of writing as the privileged practice for obtaining knowledge.”¹⁷² Instead, authors refer “to the ways of knowing through other senses.”¹⁷³ Scholars such as Antonio Benítez-Rojo and Kamau Brathwaite have already paid substantial attention to postcolonial epistemologies of hearing and dance, but, as Hoving notes, additional efforts “to criticize Eurocentric forms of theorizing” also take place through “representations of the body in terms of smells and tastes – senses that do not easily translate into terms of textuality.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁹ Markus Bastir, et al., “Evolution of the Base of the Brain in Highly Encephalized Human Species,” *Nature Communications* 2 (2011), <http://www.nature.com/ncomms/journal/v2/n12/full/ncomms1593.html> (accessed March 5, 2013).

¹⁷⁰ Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Random House, 1990), 6.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Isabel Hoving, *In Praise of New Travelers: Reading Caribbean Migrant Women Writers* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), 226.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 227.

Hoving focuses on the novels of Antinguan-born author Jamaica Kincaid, in which Kincaid offers “a sense of the body that is wildly at odds with the tidiness of the text.”¹⁷⁵

Under the plantation system in the Caribbean, colonizers simultaneously dismissed the sense of smell as having no epistemological importance, but also *used* smell in order to construct a social hierarchy. They declared colonized bodies to be polluted and smelly, in need of the literal and metaphorical purification of European culture. But Kincaid, according to Hoving, actually privileged smell – and being smelly – as a means of knowing one’s world and one’s own self.¹⁷⁶ In Kincaid’s 1996 novel *The Autobiography of My Mother*, for example, the main character Xuela observed that

whatever I was told to hate I loved and loved the most. I loved the smell of the thin dirt behind my ears, the smell of my unwashed mouth, the smell that came from between my legs, the smell in the pit of my arm, the smell of my unwashed feet. Whatever about me caused offense, whatever was native to me, whatever I could not help and was not a moral failing – those things about me I loved with the fervor of the devoted.¹⁷⁷

Xuela thus described her fascination with smells as a means of resisting colonial authority. Throughout the novel, she used scents as a means both of reminding herself of her own selfhood and of identifying others. Kincaid’s textual approximation of these specific, pungent scents affected viewers. “The book,” Hoving asserted, “invites reading positions that do not interpret the written body as text, but that consist in a strong physical reaction to the text.”¹⁷⁸

Certainly we must acknowledge how Antoni, as an upper-middle class and well-educated Creole, and the character Xuela, as a black, working class woman, would differently experience the legacy of colonialism in the Caribbean. And yet, as her comments about struggling to mimic American standards of personal space demonstrate, Antoni’s own patterns of communicating knowledge and

¹⁷⁵ Hoving, *In Praise of New Travelers*, 227.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹⁷⁷ Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1996), 33.

¹⁷⁸ Hoving, *In Praise of New Travelers*, 227.

relating to other people socially were steeped in what she understood as a distinctly Caribbean propensity for physical engagement.¹⁷⁹ In terms of Antoni's art itself, there is a striking consonance between her and Kincaid's approach to their work and the effects they elicit. Visitors' olfactory engagement with *Gnaw*, *Lick and Lather*, and *Eureka* precedes their optical encounter and might linger long after they leave. By activating a sense that resists textual description, Antoni's artworks demand physical, present engagement. There is a knowledge of the works that can only be acquire through embodied encounter, and, in turn, visitors' sense of their own bodies and histories are heightened. What memories might one associate with chocolate? With fat? With soap? By activating a "base sense," one traditionally denigrated as irrational and animalistic and used to suppress women and colonized peoples, Antoni critically asserts the epistemological significance of smell in particular and of embodied experience more generally.

Antoni's epistemology is made explicit in *Eureka*, the lard-filled bathtub that bears the impression of her body and is paired with a block of soap made from the displaced fat. The title refers to the ancient Greek legend of Archimedes, a mathematician who was struggling to determine the amount of gold that comprised the king's crown. But then, as the story goes, upon setting himself into a tub full of water to bathe, Archimedes recognized the principle of displacement and, leaping out of the bath, yelled, "Eureka!", "I've found it!" For Antoni, the key component of this story was that Archimedes came to this supposedly abstract, mathematical knowledge through his own body.¹⁸⁰ Antoni did not deny the social connotations of lard, bathing, and the female body, and in fact she fully embraced the unsettling contradiction of washing her body with a substance made from the fat of another kind of

¹⁷⁹ Dreishpoon, "Escape Hatch: Janine Antoni in Conversation with Douglas Dreishpoon," 126.

¹⁸⁰ Trippi, "Untitled Artists' Projects by Janine Antoni, Ben Kinmont, Rirkrit Tiravanija," 147-48.

body.¹⁸¹ But even as she remained acutely aware of how cultural discourses shape our experiences and perceptions of our bodies, Antoni still insisted on the possibility of relational knowledge being formed through an embodied engagement with her work. “I want the viewer to imagine what it is like to do these things,” she told critic Laura Trippi, “to feel it through their bodies, to relate to the work in terms of bodily knowledge.”¹⁸²

Gonzalez-Torres’s candy spills also evoked an inherently embodied, multisensory response. Certainly, when we first encounter *Untitled (Placebo)*, we see the pile of silvery candies, a glittering but physically unobtrusive piece, spread out on the ground (Fig. 59). And then, we touch. We bend or squat or kneel, reach out and grasp a candy – or several – feeling the slick, shiny wrapper and the hard, round pastille at the center of the wrapper. Perhaps we pause for a moment, recalling a teacher or parent admonishing us not to eat things that are on the ground. But since we have already breached museum etiquette by touching the art, we forge on anyway. We hear the rustle of cellophane as we unwrap the translucent yellow nugget, and, finally, we smell and taste the strange, tart flavor of pineapple and the cloying sweetness of dissolving sugar as we place the candy piece into our mouths.¹⁸³ Most likely we are surrounded by other gallery-goers, and we observe fellow viewers become active participants, removing candies, stuffing them into coat pockets or purses, or surreptitiously popping them into mouths.

Narrative accounts of engaging with Gonzalez-Torres’s works are plentiful in scholarship on the artist. In the early nineties, it was virtually imperative that critics and scholars mention that visitors were “invited to eat the candy and help themselves to a piece of paper,” implying physical contact with

¹⁸¹ Cappellazzo, “Mother Lode,” 110.

¹⁸² Trippi, “Untitled Artists’ Projects by Janine Antoni, Ben Kinmont, Rirkrit Tiravanija,” 148.

¹⁸³ Gonzalez-Torres only specified the color of the cellophane wrapper for *Untitled (Placebo)*, not the flavor of the candy. When I saw – and tasted – *Untitled (Placebo)* installed at MOMA as part of their permanent collection in early 2012, they had used pineapple flavored candies.

the works themselves.¹⁸⁴ Gonzalez-Torres himself reveled in telling stories about visitors interacting with his candy spills. In a 1995 interview with curator Robert Storr, Gonzalez-Torres gleefully recounted his observations of museum guards at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington D.C. encouraging visitors to touch *Untitled (Placebo)* and take candies away with them.¹⁸⁵ Storr, likely taking a cue from Gonzalez-Torres, later began an essay on the artist with an anecdote about children rushing towards a shimmering field of candy and eagerly dropping to their knees.¹⁸⁶ Critic Peter Schjeldahl, meanwhile, wove his own narrative of encounter into his review of Gonzalez-Torres's exhibition *Traveling*. "Let's go to live action," Schjeldahl wrote in 1995. "As I write this sentence, I am sucking on the hard candy I just took from the blue wrapper. It's okay tasting, a 'grape' whatsit [sic] undoubtedly containing lots of chemicals."¹⁸⁷ Following Gonzalez-Torres's death in 1996 from AIDS related illness, this kind of first-person account peppered new scholarship on the late artist.¹⁸⁸

The intimacy of these personal narratives mirrors the intimacy of the sense of taste itself. While the sense of smell often requires relatively close proximity between the object of perception and the organ of perception, taste goes even a step further. As Carolyn Korsmeyer points out, "Taste requires perhaps the most intimate congress with the object of perception, which must enter the mouth, and which delivers sensations experienced in the mouth and throat on its way down and through the

¹⁸⁴ Susan Tallman, "The Ethos of the Edition: The Stacks of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Arts Magazine* (September 1991): 13. In 1991 alone, at least eighty-percent of U.S.-based reviews that discussed Gonzalez-Torres stack and spill works mentioned this interactive component. For just a few examples, see Vince Aletti, "Voice Choice: Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Village Voice*, May 14, 1991; Gretchen Faust, "New York in Review," *Arts Magazine* (January 1991): 95-96; R.J. Merrill, "Rituals and Allegories: Felix Gonzalez-Torres at Luhring Augustine Hetzler," *Artweek* (November 14, 1991): 12; Eric Troncy, "Soft Touch," *Artscribe International* (September 1991): 54-57.

¹⁸⁵ Storr and Gonzalez-Torres, "Interview, Etre Un Espion," 27.

¹⁸⁶ Robert Storr, "Setting Traps for the Mind and Heart," *Art in America* 84, no. 1 (1996): 70.

¹⁸⁷ Peter Schjeldahl, "Tender Sentience," *Village Voice*, March 21, 1995, 76.

¹⁸⁸ My favorite examples include Julie Ault, "Introduction," in *Felix-Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2006); Cherry, "Sweet Memories: Encountering the Candy Spills of Felix Gonzalez-Torres". Glenn Ligon, "My Felix," *Artforum International* (Summer 2007): 157-158; Robert Storr, "When You See This Remember Me," in *Felix-Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2006); Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez Torres: America* (Ostfildern; Maidstone: Hatje Cantz, 2007); Ian MacMillan, "I Remember You," *Modern Painters* (Spring 1997).

digestive tract.”¹⁸⁹ In the West, taste has thus been understood as a completely unmediated sense, one that operates directly and that “is intimately acquainted with incorrigible pleasure.”¹⁹⁰ Indeed, as Ackerman observed in *A Natural History of the Senses*, it is not coincidental that we use a vocabulary related to food and eating to describe our libidos and sexual relationships. Human lips, tongue, and genitals all have the same highly sensitive neural receptors, called Krause’s end bulbs, and our physical responses to sexual stimuli and gustatory stimuli are physiological echoes of each other.¹⁹¹

How might the activation of our taste buds affect our understanding of Gonzalez-Torres’s art? As we have already noted, by inviting viewers to taste – to swallow and ingest – his work, Gonzalez-Torres offers a pointed critique of the persistent notion of the artwork as an autonomous object intended for disinterested observation and evaluation. Indeed, some scholars in the early nineties related Gonzalez-Torres to a relatively widespread interest in institutional critique that emerged in the early nineties.¹⁹² To touch an artwork, to dismantle an artwork, and then to *eat* an artwork rebels against expectations of how one should act in a museum setting. The dispersing, dissolving candies demystify and democratize a long-lauded practice of aesthetic contemplation.

In addition to acknowledging the gustatory aspect of Gonzalez-Torres’s candy spills as a mode of institutional critique, some scholars have also pointed out the sacramental quality of the act of taking and eating from the portrait candy spills.¹⁹³ As Gonzalez-Torres himself stated, “I’m giving you this sugary thing; you put it in your mouth and you suck on someone else’s body. And in this way, my work

¹⁸⁹ Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*, 3.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁹¹ Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*, 132.

¹⁹² See Avgikos, “This Is My Body”; Amada Cruz, “The Means of Pleasure,” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Amada Cruz (Los Angeles, Calif.: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994).

¹⁹³ See Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2004); and Okwui Enwezor, “Infinite Silences,” *Atlantica* 17 (1997). Enwezor’s essay is actually on Gabriel Orozco, but it begins with Enwezor recounting a conversation with the artist and critic Coco Fusco about the Catholic imagery that she saw as pervasive in Gonzalez-Torres’s work.

becomes part of so many other people's bodies."¹⁹⁴ Even the language that Gonzalez-Torres used, of a body becoming part of another body, echoed that of the Catholic Mass, where a wafer and wine become the body and blood of Christ when taken and eaten by believing participants. Gonzalez-Torres was raised Catholic, but in later interviews he quickly dismissed any thoughts of a lingering belief in God as well as any allegiance to a religious order that deemed his sexual orientation immoral.¹⁹⁵ Thus in works such as *Untitled (Lover Boys)*, the artist co-opted an embodied Catholic ritual, replacing the body of Christ with the bodies of gay men with AIDS. In tasting the candies, visitors bear sacramental witness to the deaths of Ross and Gonzalez-Torres, but there is also, as Gonzalez-Torres explained, something "very sexy" about putting someone else's body, symbolic or literal, into your own mouth.¹⁹⁶

Still, as with Antoni's installations, Gonzalez-Torres's candy spill portraits acquire an additional layer of references when linked with Cuban diasporic approaches to knowledge, particularly as relating to memory and identity. Like West Indies writings, Cuban diasporic narratives emphasize the aural, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory.

After interviewing hundreds of Cuban exiles living in Spain between 1959 and 1990, Mette Louise Berg observed that many in the Cuban diaspora spoke of their memories of their homeland in intensely personal, corporeal terms. Many interviewees mentioned the particular smells of Cuba, "of rubbish, of the sea, of grandmother's kitchen, the scent of a particular eau de cologne that was used for small children on Sunday family outings in 1950s Havana."¹⁹⁷ One exile, Jose Maria, recalled, "Of the good memories may be the Cuban landscape, the dawns of Cuba, the scent of the dawn that I have

¹⁹⁴ Spector and Gonzalez-Torres, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 149-50.

¹⁹⁵ Rollins and Gonzalez-Torres, "Interview," 29.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ Berg, "Memory, Politics, and Diaspora: Cubans in Spain," 28.

never again experienced in any other country.”¹⁹⁸ Or, Berg further noted, people invoked the sense of taste, recalling “Cuban coffee, sweet and black, sent by friends or family from the island, of Cuban food, of rum.”¹⁹⁹ Ultimately, the accuracy of such memories matters little. But, Berg argued, the embodied, multisensory language used to frame these anecdotes was deeply significant since “such private, intimate memories of Cuba [were] anathema to the collectivist and militaristic symbolism of the government.”²⁰⁰ These “spaces of remembrance,” as Berg termed them, were thus “evoked through sensory and bodily memory and longing.”²⁰¹ A similar emphasis on memories of smells, tastes, and sounds – rather than sights – of Cuba also permeated the poetry and novels of the Cuban diaspora in the United States. Poet Nilda Cepero, for example, in her poem “Tropical Flavors,” cited “the smell of black beans and fried plantains,” the sounds of “Olga Guillot pouring out melodies that my mother loved,” and “caramel and lemon peels” as the conduits for her memories of Cuba.²⁰² By locating *cubania* in such corporeal experiences the diaspora disavowed both “the nationalist-revolutionary discourse, in which identity equate[d] territory” as well as the “exoticized, gendered, and racialized images of Cuba” that dominated the American imagination.²⁰³

Touching Sight

There were other ways, too, that Gonzalez-Torres’s and Antoni’s artworks affected viewers corporeally. In addition to activating viewers’ sense of smell, Antoni’s chocolate, lard, and soap sculptures compelled viewers to imagine with their bodies. After seeing Antoni’s sculptures in 1995,

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 29.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Nilda Cepero, “Tropical Flavors,” in *Remembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora*, ed. Andrea O’Reilly Herrera (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 195-96.

²⁰³ Berg, “Memory, Politics, and Diaspora: Cubans in Spain,” 29.

critic Judith Findlay declared, "I can touch this work without actually touching it...I can imagine what it would be like to press...into soft, wet material (like when you leave your footprint in wet cement in a pavement, or your fingerprint in tacky paint). I can imagine the sensation of chewing on 600 lbs [sic] of chocolate or biting into a piece of lard."²⁰⁴ Findlay suggested that works like *Gnaw* incite a kind of sense memory. Although she did not physically place her hands or mouth on the sculpture, she could marshal the sensations of doing so. These were not the abstracted aesthetic contemplation of art objects but instead physical responses: an aching jaw, a swollen tongue, pressed nostrils, a roiling stomach. For some, of course, such imaginings were an unpleasant experience. Reporters quoted gallery visitor Brian Sewell complaining about *Gnaw*: "It is pretty revolting. I can't imagine what lard tastes like but the idea is really rather horrible."²⁰⁵ Although Sewell stated that he could *not* imagine biting into the lard, his words suggest that he *did* do so, resulting in seemingly visceral discomfort coupled with a fundamental wariness of a sensuous engagement with artworks.

Certainly in a few extreme instances viewers did not rely only on their imagination. When *Gnaw* was first shown at the Sandra Gehring Gallery in New York in 1992, a delighted two-year-old boy sank his own teeth into the cube of chocolate.²⁰⁶ Then, in 1993, when *Lick and Lather* debuted at the Venice Biennale, a young woman bit off the noses from three of the chocolate busts. Subsequent incidents also took place at the Irish Museum of Modern Art and in Philadelphia at the Institute for Contemporary Art, where the sculptures again lost noses as well as a shoulder.²⁰⁷ Though outliers, these responses suggest something of the power of the somatic effects wrought by Antoni's chocolate, lard,

²⁰⁴ Judith Findlay, "Press Me, Push Me, Feel Me, Find Me," *Women's Art Magazine* (May/June 1995): 15.

²⁰⁵ Adrian Shaw and Lucy Turner, "Gnawing Lard Is Bad for the Art," *Daily Mirror*, January 26, 1996, News 3.

²⁰⁶ Gaither, "A Sculptor's Gnawing Suspicion," 24.

²⁰⁷ Horodner, "Janine Antoni," 51-52.

and soap sculptures. However one might interpret the significance of such responses – whether imagined or acted out – the artworks’ propensity to elicit such embodied reactions is undeniable.

In the case of Gonzalez-Torres’s candy spills, Deborah Cherry, in her essay “Sweet Memories: Encountering the Candy Spills of Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” astutely observes that even if a visitor elects not to touch a candy spill like *Untitled (Lover Boys)*, a somatic effect still occurs:

...even if we do nothing, decline to move forward, bend down, the sense of vision is present for sighted viewers. Triggered by the sight, or the presence, of the candy, viewers might simply imagine or remember the sensations of its consumption. And whatever we do, the sounds of the movements by other visitors will be there to be heard. These involuntary sense experiences can run parallel to, or counter, the ones which we decisively seek. And the senses and sensory responses exist as much in the memory and imagination as they do in actuality.²⁰⁸

Even without physically touching Gonzalez-Torres’s candy spills, then, visitors’ bodies could be activated. We might moisten our lips. Our fingers may twitch. Perhaps we rub our tongues against the roofs of our mouths, unconsciously mimicking the action of dissolving those final slivers of hard sugar.

Thus optical encounters with both artists’ works result in polysensory experiences. Though we may only intend to *look*, our bodies respond as if we have been touched. The haptic and the optic become inseparable from each other. The conflation of touch and vision that these works enact offers a two-pronged critique. On the one hand, possibility of touching vision pushes against the traditional western privileging of vision, discussed earlier. But it also resists a skepticism towards vision that was a recurring theme in poststructuralist writing.

In his 1994 book *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought*, Martin Jay described how a range of thinkers, from Jacques Lacan to Luce Irigaray had either criticized the priority given to vision in Western philosophy or demonized vision as a necessary evil.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ Cherry, "Sweet Memories: Encountering the Candy Spills of Felix Gonzalez-Torres," 12.

²⁰⁹ Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*.

Lacan, along with Michel Foucault and Jean-Paul Sartre, assumed a paranoid notion of vision, in which looking upon others is an alienating act with violent implications. The physical distance between observer and object that Plato extolled as the virtue of vision was now considered an empty, hostile space of separation. Jay's book proposed that these French thinkers' negative understanding of vision signaled the end of occularcentrism. But, as feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver has shown, when such philosophers supposedly denigrated vision, they "effectively perpetuate[d] this particular alienating notion of vision by presupposing it in their criticism."²¹⁰

If, like Lacan, Foucault, and Sartre we presuppose a notion of vision in which there is a gap between the body and its image, we are left with an insurmountable dilemma. In order to know the object we must be separate from the object, but if we are separate from the object, how can we know it? As Oliver observes, the notion of vision as a distancing force brings with it the illusion of control and the normalization of hostility between subjects.²¹¹

Certainly, Gonzalez-Torres's and Antoni's artworks do not deny the historical power of the phallogocentric and colonial gaze. Gonzalez-Torres even stated in an interview: "After twenty years of feminist discourse and feminist theory, we have come to realize that 'just looking' is not just looking, but that looking is invested with identity: gender, socioeconomic status, race, sexual orientation. Looking is invested with lots of other texts."²¹² Yet, they also do not seem to accept the implicit antagonism of that gaze as normative. Rather than the one-way vision of the colonizer gazing upon the object of colonization, these somatically affective candy spills, paper stacks, chocolate, lard, and soap suggest a different kind of looking altogether.

²¹⁰ Kelly Oliver, "The Look of Love," *Hypatia* 16, no. 3 (2001): 57.

²¹¹ Oliver, *Subjectivity without Subjects: From Abject Fathers to Desiring Mothers* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 154-55.

²¹² Rollins and Gonzalez-Torres, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres," 93.

Following French feminist thinker Luce Irigaray, Kelly Oliver proposes a conception of vision as connection, a “tactile look” that acknowledges the texture of light and density of air that fill the spaces between subjects and actually enables the physiological process of sight.²¹³ Indeed, as Oliver writes, “If vision involves touching light, then we are touched by, and touching, everything around us even as we see the distance between ourselves and the world or other people in the world.”²¹⁴ The purported chasm between object and subject thus becomes a space for the circulation of energy between subjects.²¹⁵

It is this notion of the tactile look that resonates with Gonzalez-Torres’s and Antoni’s works. We hold candies in our hands and dissolve them in our mouths. We salivate or shiver when confronted with blocks of chocolate and lard. Indeed, even if we set out to only look at *Gnaw*, our bodies are nevertheless touched by its scent. And even if we refrain from touching or tasting Gonzalez-Torres’s *Untitled (Placebo)*, we still see and hear the interactions of other visitors. The artworks simultaneously undercut the traditional Western privileging of sight while bridging the apparent gap between object and subject that so troubled late twentieth-century thinkers.

Through this corporeal connection, the works can initiate a process of empathy. Gonzalez-Torres himself understood the instability of his works as creating a potential space of exchange. When discussing the seeming opacity of symbolism in his work and his desire for viewers’ participation he stated, “I want you, the viewer, to be intellectually challenged, moved, informed.”²¹⁶ Such a statement, which invokes both the cerebral and affective qualities of empathy, suggests a fundamental belief in subjects’ capacity for exchange and relationship.

²¹³ Oliver, “The Look of Love,” 69.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

²¹⁶ Oliver, “The Look of Love,” 87.

Antoni was even more explicit in articulating a connection between viewers' physical responses to her work and their empathic potential. "You come to understand the work through your own body," she told an interviewer.²¹⁷ Later on in the same interview she expanded on that comment:

The key word for me is *empathy*. It's something I think about a lot because I want to put the viewer into a particular relationship with the objects. That's different from how we have traditionally learned to approach a conceptual work of art. Traditionally, we stay objective and go through a process of decoding information to make meaning. I'm much more interested in the viewer empathizing with my process. I do these extreme acts because I feel that viewers can relate to them through their bodies.²¹⁸

Empathy becomes possible because of the knowledge we gain corporeally. Our bodies respond to the traces of Antoni's absent body, connecting us to the object as well as the artist. Indeed, Antoni's works seem to assume a notion of selfhood in which subjects are connected *to* each other rather than violently separating *from* each other. In her conversation with Dreishpoon she remarked:

I long for connection and see my objects as occupying the space between the viewer and myself. To be intimate with the object is to touch the viewer. It's always a profound experience for me to sit down in the subway and feel the warmth of the person who sat there before me. Some people might be repelled, but for me, it's really comforting that, on some basic level, we all produce warmth.²¹⁹

By activating our bodies, her works touch us, and close the perceived gap between subject and object. Like Édouard Glissant's description of the Caribbean region as an open-ended and constant circulation of people, ideas, and goods, Antoni suggests a model of subjectivity that places similar emphasis on generative, mutual exchange.

Rather than vision's privileging within a multiculturalist politics of recognition or poststructuralist scholars demonizing vision as a necessary evil, Gonzalez-Torres and Antoni's works fill

²¹⁷ Horodner, "Janine Antoni," 50.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Dreishpoon, "Escape Hatch: Janine Antoni in Conversation with Douglas Dreishpoon," 126.

the spaces between the organ and object of our perception, offering the possibility of vision as a loving touch instead of an unfathomable chasm.

Conclusion

Gonzalez-Torres's and Antoni's works are certainly not direct metaphors for their respective Caribbean diasporas, nor are they *about* their diasporic experiences. Yet considering these artists in tandem prompts a recognition of the richness that Caribbean diasporic theory and literature can add to our understanding of their works. While Gonzalez-Torres's disappearing stacks and Antoni's gnawed cubes certainly offer trenchant commentary on institutional practices, phallogocentric art history, and pressing social issues, they also have profound epistemological and ontological implications. Rather than emphasizing their visible presence, the artworks are premised on their absences and transformations: the dispersed sheets of paper, the digested candies, the missing chunks of chocolate or lard, and the dissolved soap. As such, they fail to offer a visible, legible identity that could be simply assimilated into the multiculturalist paradigm of the early nineties. But even further, when considered in the context of Caribbean writings such as Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relations*, the absences in these artworks offer generative possibilities rather than illustrating a psychoanalytic lack. In Antoni's and Gonzalez-Torres's works, blank spaces are open invitations where meaning diffracts and is shared rather than diluted.²²⁰

In addition, by surrounding gallery visitors with the scents of chocolate, lard, and soap or inviting them to unwrap and suck on sweet candies, the artworks further challenged both the primacy and the presumed hostility of vision in Eurocentric thought. In doing so, they resisted the typical mind-

²²⁰ Glissant, *Poétique De La Relation*, 34.

body dualism that has dominated western philosophy. Instead, the artworks invite visitors to create knowledge by smelling, touching, and tasting. But even if a visitor has a stuffy nose or refrains from picking up a piece of candy, the works initiate a kind of a tactile looking, activating sensations in viewers' bodies. Not only are such embodied epistemologies similarly enacted in Caribbean diasporic literature, they are also offered as a particular means of subverting structures of knowledge historically imposed by colonialism. As such, Gonzalez-Torres's and Antoni's works evidence a keen awareness of the ways in which bodies and bodily knowledge are embedded in and shaped by social practices. Rather than romanticizing the senses as unmediated and liberating, their works acknowledge the discursive construction of bodies without denigrating the corporeal dimensions of our lived experiences.

The tactile look elicited by Antoni's and Gonzalez-Torres's works suggests that our viewing may not take place across a cavernous, alien space. Instead, the works close the gap between object and subject, so that we know them through our own bodies rather than with clinical distance. Drawing again from Kelly Oliver's critique of poststructuralist accounts of vision and subjectivity, we might venture to reject the normalization of violence implicit in that model. If we understand subjects as being formed collaboratively, then we can regard Gonzalez-Torres's and Antoni's artworks as offerings of sorts, open gestures through which we become ourselves in cooperation with, rather than through exclusion of, each other. Such a conception of selfhood echoes Édouard Glissant's description of the artists' home region, a Caribbean characterized by mutual transformations and perpetual exchanges, where absence and dispersion create rather than destroy meaning.

CODA

Perhaps unsurprisingly, institutional interest in exhibitions organized around explicitly multicultural themes declined following the much-maligned 1993 Whitney Biennial. “Globalization” superseded “diversity” as the preferred keyword in the art world.¹ Proponents cited the proliferation of international art biennials as proof that the split between margins and center had been overcome, thus rendering identity politics irrelevant.² Having already declared post-modernism and feminism to be obsolete, some writers in both academia and the popular press declared our entry into a “post-identity” age.³

In 2001, Thelma Golden, then the newly appointed director at the Studio Museum in Harlem, mounted an exhibition of “post-black” art entitled *Freestyle*.⁴ Golden claimed to have coined the term “post-black” in conversation with her friend, artist Glenn Ligon in the late 1990s as “shorthand for post-black art, which was shorthand for a discourse that could fill volumes.”⁵ The exhibition featured 28 emerging artists of African American descent who, according to Golden, “were adamant about not

¹ For a brief history and critique of “globalization” in the art world, see Chin-Tao Wu, “Worlds Apart,” *Third Text* 21, no. 6 (2007). The trend has continued into the 2000s. High-profile exhibitions in the last decade which thematized globalization include Okwui Enwezor’s 2002 Documenta XI, Francesco Bonami’s “dictatorship of the viewer” at the 2003 Venice Biennale, and Robert Storr’s 2007 Venice Biennale.

² See, for example, Igor Zabel’s writing: Viktor Misiano and Igor Zabel, “Biennials,” *Manifesta Journal*, no. 2 (Winter 2003/Spring 2004); France Morin et al., “Beyond Boundaries: Rethinking Contemporary Art Exhibitions,” *Art Journal* 59, no. 1 (2000).

³ Something of a fad developed through the 1990s and early 2000s in which writers or theorists would add the prefix “post” to deem an earlier discourse obsolete: “post-postmodernist,” “post-feminist,” “post-ethnic,” and “post-racial” were among the most widely circulated. For some of the earliest key examples see: Allan C. Hutchinson, “Inessentially Speaking (Is There Politics after Postmodernism?),” *Michigan Law Review* (1991); Susan Bolotin, “Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation,” *The New York Times*, October 17, 1982, F9; David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995). The notion of a post-racial America became increasingly popular during the 2008 election cycle, with writers debating whether or not Barack Obama’s election as President of the United States signaled the end of racial division in the country. See Robin Givhan, “Edging (at Times Clumsily) toward a Post-Racial America,” *Washington Post*, March 16, 2008, M01; Juan Williams, “Obama’s Color Line,” *New York Times*, November 30, 2007, A23; Gregory Parks and Matthew W. Hughey, *The Obamas and a (Post) Racial America?* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴ Golden was also one of the curators of the 1993 Whitney Biennial.

⁵ Thelma Golden, *Freestyle* (New York: Studio Museum Harlem, 2001), 14.

being labeled as ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, and in fact deeply interested in, redefining complex notions of blackness.”⁶ The show received widespread praise, but the alacrity with which certain establishments welcomed the notion of “post-blackness” seemed suspect to feminist art historian Amelia Jones. Jones, in a 2002 review of *Freestyle*, argued that Golden’s term implied the “end” of identity politics while still disingenuously signaling a “singular category style of identity politics, pivoting around blackness.”⁷ Thus, Jones observed, critics such as the *New Yorker’s* Peter Schjeldahl could happily declare that the multiculturalism and identity politics of the 1990s were finally “moribund as artistic imperatives” and “political correctness and theory-think have receded from the art world”⁸

To Jones – and I am in agreement – the relief with which certain scholars treated the supposed obsolescence of identity suggests that the opposite is in fact true. Indeed, any number of recent examples – the debates over Barack Obama’s “blackness” during the 2008 election cycle, the frequent racial profiling experienced by Muslims, Blacks, and Latinos, and even the popular fascination with “outing” celebrities’ sexual orientations – demonstrate how questions of identity continue to shape our experiences and our relationships with communities at large. The question, then, is not if identities still matter but rather *how* we might go about engaging them in a meaningful and productive fashion. The artworks considered here from the late 1980s and early 1990s – explicit in their engagement with issues of identity – offer a starting point for this kind of reconsideration.

As art historians, we must dispense with the lingering belief that issues of form and content are somehow dichotomous. The persistent complaint leveled against artworks and art criticism from the

⁶ Golden, *Freestyle*, 14.

⁷ Amelia Jones, “The ‘Post-Black’ Bomb,” *Tema Celeste* 90 (March-April 2002): 52-55.

⁸ Jones, “The ‘Post-Black’ Bomb,” 53. Peter Schjeldahl, “Breaking Away,” *The New Yorker*, June 11, 2001, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2001/06/11/010611craw_artworld (accessed January 31, 2013).

early 1990s has been, as Rosalind Krauss put it in the 1993 *October* roundtable regarding the Whitney Biennial, that “no one is *looking* at the work.”⁹ Similarly, Hal Foster’s influential 1996 essay “The Artist as Ethnographer” bemoans what he sees as a troubling shift from “medium-specific concerns” in art criticism to “debates-specific concerns;” he clearly prefers the former.¹⁰ More recently, even Kobena Mercer, in a 2005 essay entitled “Iconography After Identity,” demands that, when looking at artworks by black diasporic artists, we pay attention to “the foreground matter of the aesthetic work performed by the object itself,” thus allowing them the “dignity of objecthood.”¹¹

I contend, however, that there is no “object itself.” Amelia Jones, in her 2012 book *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification in the Visual Arts*, writes, “The very premise of ‘art’ entails an interest in the subjectivity that we believe to have motivated its production.”¹² Our understanding of who we think the artist “is” – of his or her identity – is, as Jones says, “simply an in-built structure in relation to what we call art.”¹³ This does not mean, however, that the signified necessarily takes precedence over the signifier.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, we must acknowledge the full breadth of signifiers available to us. I consider not only the ocular but also the affective components of these artworks. Rather than simply displaying a marginalized body for us to cognitively identify, the artworks I focus on here allow us to feel something within our own bodies. They have made muscles clench, fingers twitch, mouths water, and, at times, even caused pain receptors to fire. Rather than standing

⁹ Hal Foster et al., “The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial,” *October* 66 (Autumn 1993): 21.

¹⁰ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 182.

¹¹ Kobena Mercer, “Iconography after Identity,” in *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, ed. David Bailey, Ian Baucom, and Sonia Boyce (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹² Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 137.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 138.

apart and above, viewers are immanently engaged and placed in relationship to the artwork and, by extension, the artist. We have seen that in asserting the epistemic value of such physical responses, these artworks participated in concurrent discussions within AIDS activist, black, and diasporic communities that were dismantling the presumed binary of discursivity and corporeality. The works simultaneously acknowledged the constructedness of identity while affirming its embodied reality.

Indeed, the way in which we understand subjectivity in turn shapes how we conceive of our ethical responsibility to others, particularly those whom we perceive as different from ourselves. If we conceive of subjectivity as a psychic struggle waged in discourse, or as a bid for recognition within existing structures of power, then we have no ethical need for artworks that evoke the experience of socially marginalized subjects. These models prevailed in the early nineties in New York, reducing such artworks to little more than political static.

If, however, we understand subjectivity to be the result of a cooperative process, then we are both able to respond to and be responsible to artworks that reference a marginalized identity while initiating a process of embodied engagement. The works considered in this dissertation invite viewers to gain knowledge of another subject through their own bodies. Such viscerally somatic experiences need not be a threat to the viewer's selfhood. Instead, they can be understood as offerings, generous gestures through which we become ourselves in cooperation with, rather than in rejection of, each other. Let our response be one of empathy.

APPENDIX: FIGURES



FIGURE 1. Janine Antoni, *Gnaw*, 1992. Three-part installation: 600 lbs. of chocolate gnawed by the artist; 600 lbs. of lard gnawed by the artist; display with 130 lipsticks made with pigment, beeswax, and chewed lard removed from the lard cube; 27 heart-shaped packages made from the chewed chocolate removed from the chocolate cube, Overall dimensions variable.



FIGURE 2. Kiki Smith, *Untitled*, 1990. Beeswax and microcrystalline wax figures on metal stands. Female figure, 64.5 x 17.325 x 15.25 inches; male figure 64.5 x 20.5 x 17 inches.



FIGURE 3. Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1990. Beeswax, human hair, and pigment. 61.6 x 43.2 x 27.9 cm.



FIGURE 4. David Hammons, *Untitled*, 1992. Copper, wire, hair, fabric, thread, and stone. 60 x 120 inches.

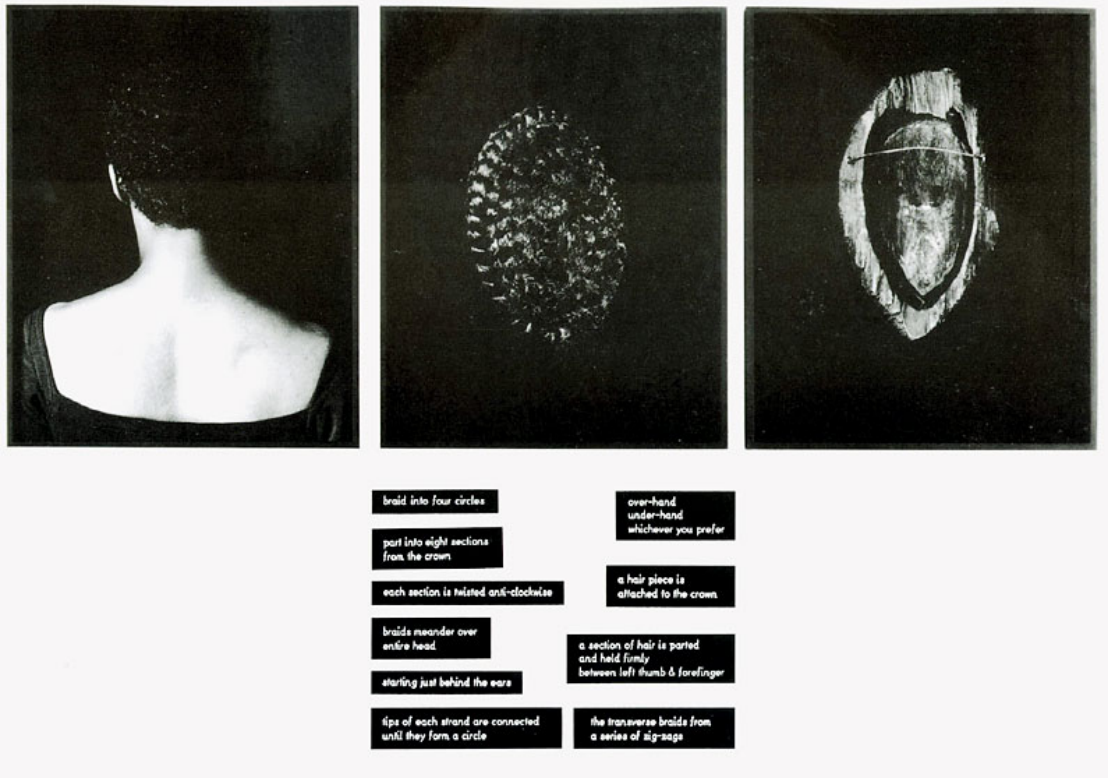


FIGURE 5. Lorna Simpson, *Coiffure*, 1991. 3 gelatin silver prints, 10 engraved plastic plaques. Images 119.5 x 99 cm; 119 x 447 cm overall.



FIGURE 6. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Lover Boys)*, 1991. Candies, individually wrapped in silver cellophane (endless supply). Dimensions vary with installation, ideal weight: 355 lbs.



FIGURE 7. Robert Colescott, *Knowledge of the Past is the Key to the Future: Matthew Henson and the Quest for the North Pole*, 1986. Acrylic on canvas. 228.6 x 289.6 cm.



FIGURE 8. James Luna, *The Artifact Piece*, 1990. Performance and installation. Dimensions variable.



FIGURE 9. Lorna Simpson, *Necklines*, 1989. 2 circular gelatin silver prints, with 11 engraved plastic plaques. Photographs are 91.5 cm in diameter; other dimensions variable.



FIGURE 10. Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1990. Wood, beeswax, pigment, cotton, wood, leather, and human hair. 9 x 16.5 x 45 inches.



FIGURE 11. Nayland Blake, *Restraint #6 (Ankle, Shelf, Mirror)*, 1989. Steel and leather. 47 x 24 x 10 inches.

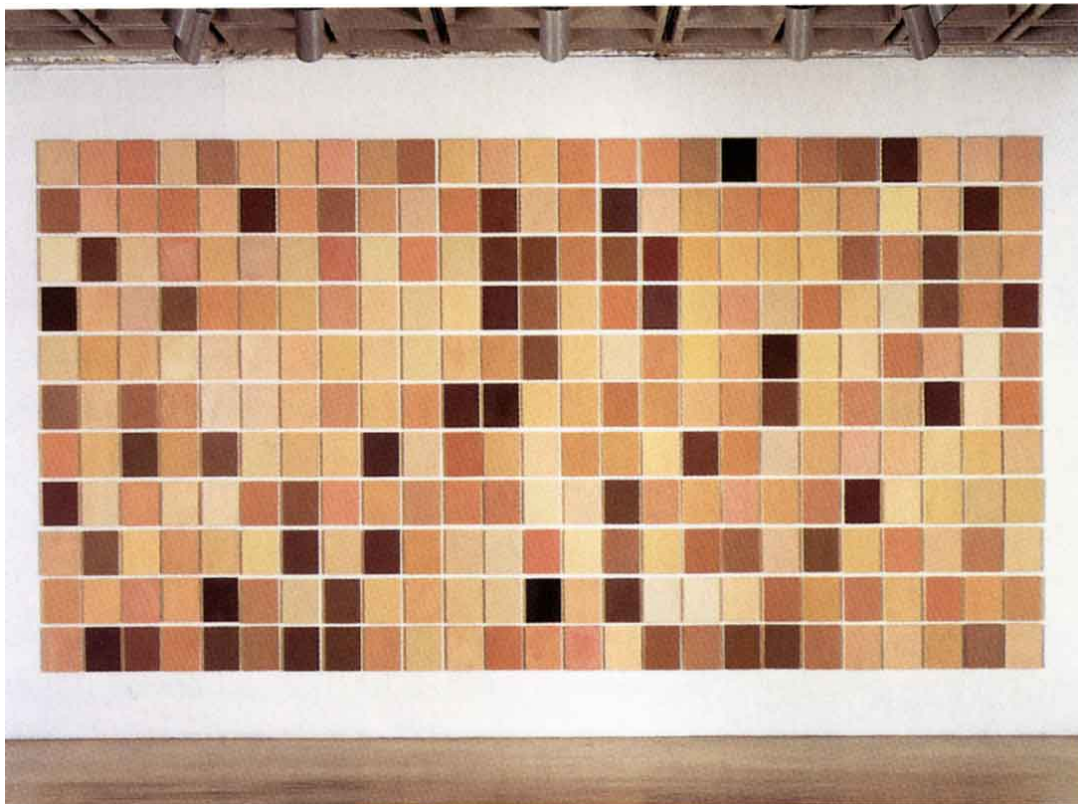


FIGURE 12. Byron Kim, *Synecdoche*, 1991-92. Oil and wax on panel. 204 panels, 10 x 8 inches each.



FIGURE 13. Nan Goldin, *Jimmy Paulette and Taboo! in the Bathroom*, 1991. Cibachrome print. 11 x 14 inches.



FIGURE 14. Pat Ward Williams, *What You Lookn At?*, 1992. Dot screen mural, paint, color Xerox, color photographs, and text. 96 x 192 inches.



FIGURE 15. Howardena Pindell, *Free, White, and 21*, 1980. Videotape. 12 minutes long.

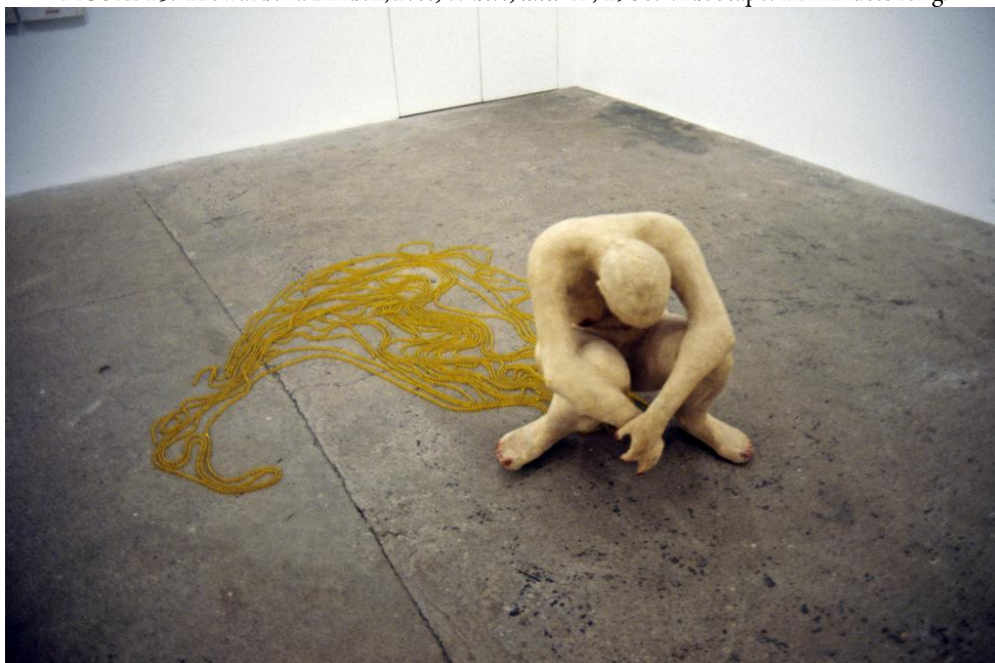


FIGURE 16. Kiki Smith, *Pee Body*, 1992. Wax and glass beads. Figure: 27 x 28 x 28 inches, beads: 23 strands of varying lengths, 1 ft. to over 15 ft. long



FIGURE 17. Kiki Smith, *Train*, 1993. Wax and glass beads. 134.6 x 139.6 x 427 cm.



FIGURE 18. Kiki Smith, *Tale*, 1992. Wax, pigment, paper mache. 160 x 23 x 23 inches.



FIGURE 19. Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1989-90. Beeswax, cotton, wood, leather, and human hair. 11 3/8 x 7 3/4 x 20 inches.



FIGURE 20. Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1991. Beeswax, fabric, wood, leather, and human hair. 13.5 x 7 3/4 x 7.5 inches.



FIGURE 21. John Miller, *Untitled*, 1988. Mixed media. 40 x 41.5 x 40 inches.



FIGURE 22. Jackson Pollock, *Number 27*, 1950. Oil on canvas. 49 x 106 inches.



FIGURE 23. Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1991. Wood, beeswax, leather, fabric, and human hair, 13 1/4 x 16 1/2 x 46 1/8 inches.



FIGURE 24. Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1991-93. Wood, beeswax, human hair, fabric, and leather. 13.25 x 16.5 x 46 inches.

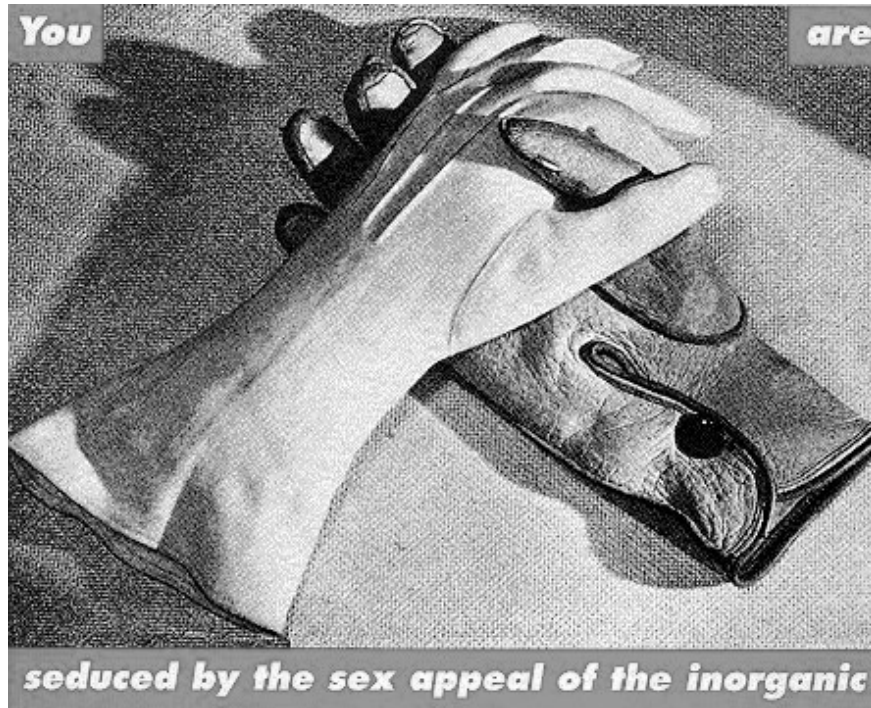


FIGURE 25. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (You Are Seduced by the Sex Appeal of the Inorganic)*, 1981. Photograph. 49 x 60 inches.

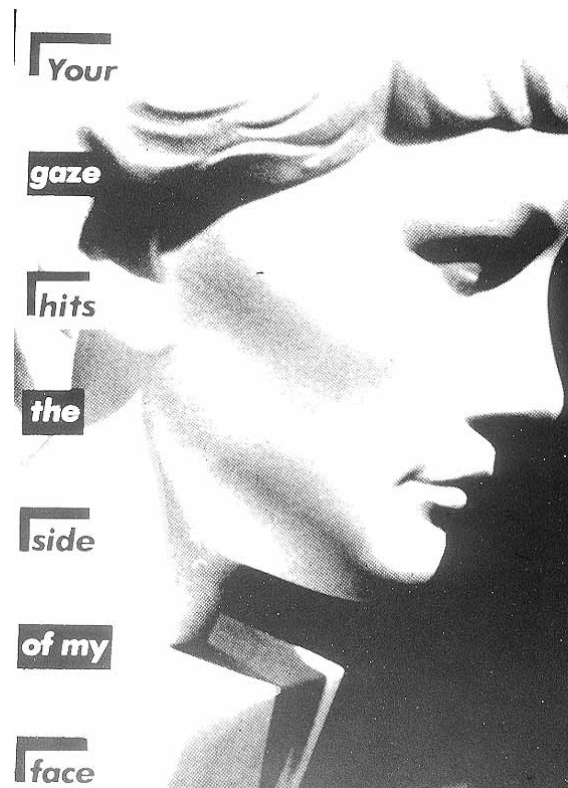


FIGURE 26. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)*, 1981. Photograph. 55 x 65 inches.



FIGURE 27. Kiki Smith, *Untitled*, 1990. Paper. 64.5 x 17.825 x 15.25 inches.



FIGURE 28. Mark Morrisroe, *Untitled (Self Portrait)*, c. 1989. T-665 Polaroid. 10.7 x 8.5 cm.



FIGURE 29. Philip-Lorca Di Corcia, *Vittorio*, 1989. Ektacolor print. 20 x 24 inches.



FIGURE 30. Nicholas Nixon, *Tom Moran, East Braintree, Massachusetts, September 1987*, 1987. Gelatin silver print, 7.75 x 9.75 inches.

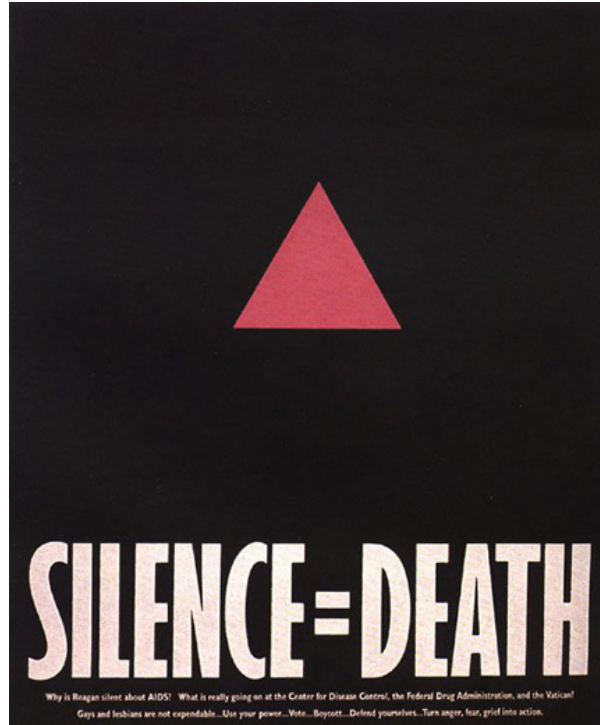


FIGURE 31. Gran Fury for ACT UP New York, *Silence=Death*, 1986. Offset lithograph. 29 x 24 inches.



FIGURE 32. David Hammons, *Esquire (John Henry)*, 1990. Hair, stone, railroad tie, shoe polish tin. 45 x 9 x 5 inches.



FIGURE 33. Lorna Simpson, *Stereo Styles*, 1988. 10 dye-diffusion prints, 10 plastic plaques. 167.5 x 294.5 cm.

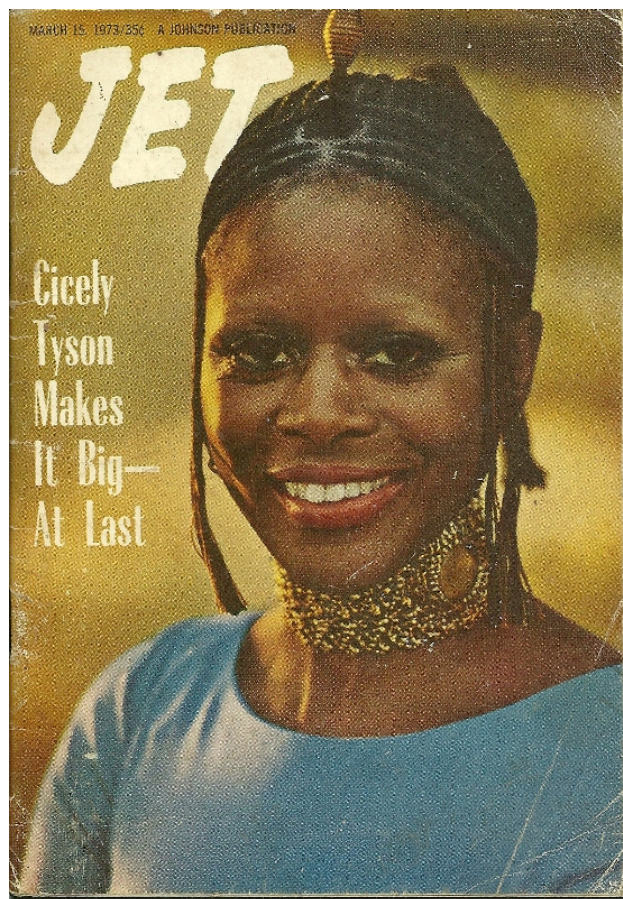


FIGURE 34. Ted Williams, photograph of Cicely Tyson for *Jet* magazine cover, March 15, 1973.

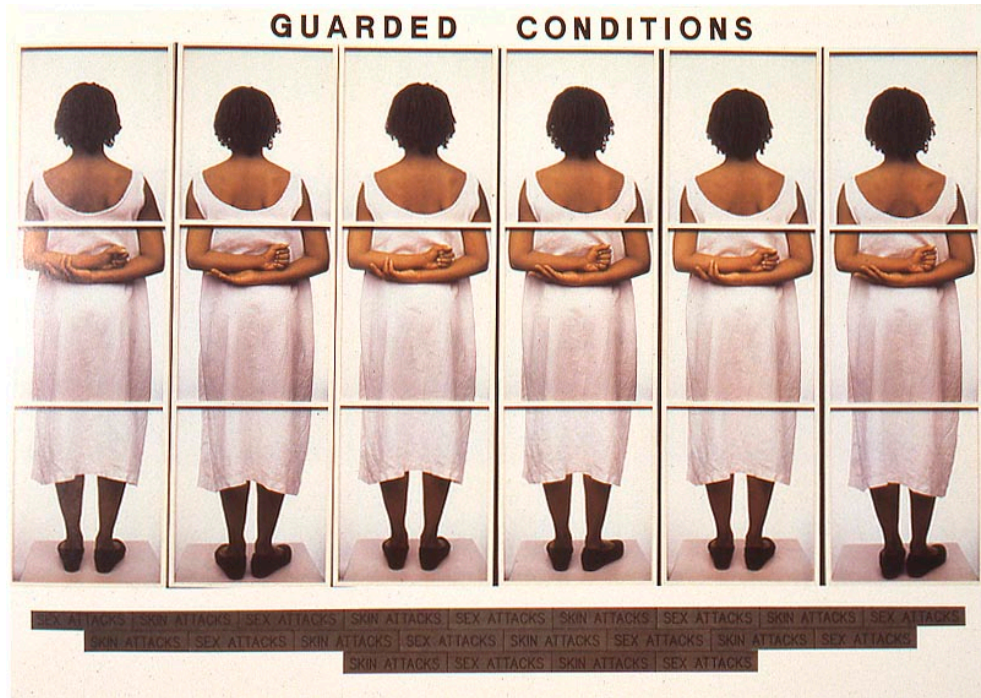


FIGURE 35. Lorna Simpson, *Guarded Conditions*, 1989. 18 color Polaroids, 21 plastic plaques, plastic letters. 231 x 333 cm.

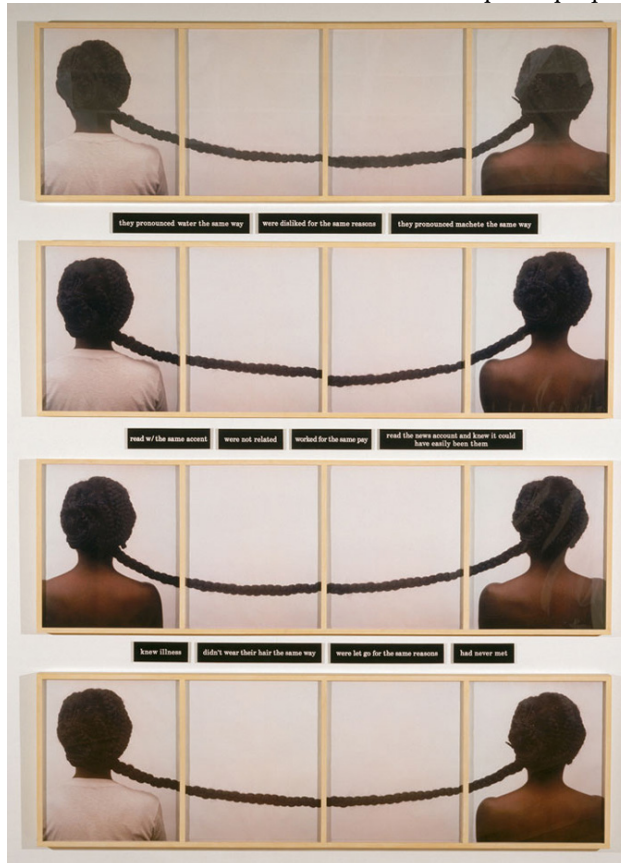


FIGURE 36. Lorna Simpson, *Same*, 1991. 16 color Polaroids, 11 plastic plaques. 302 x 209 cm.

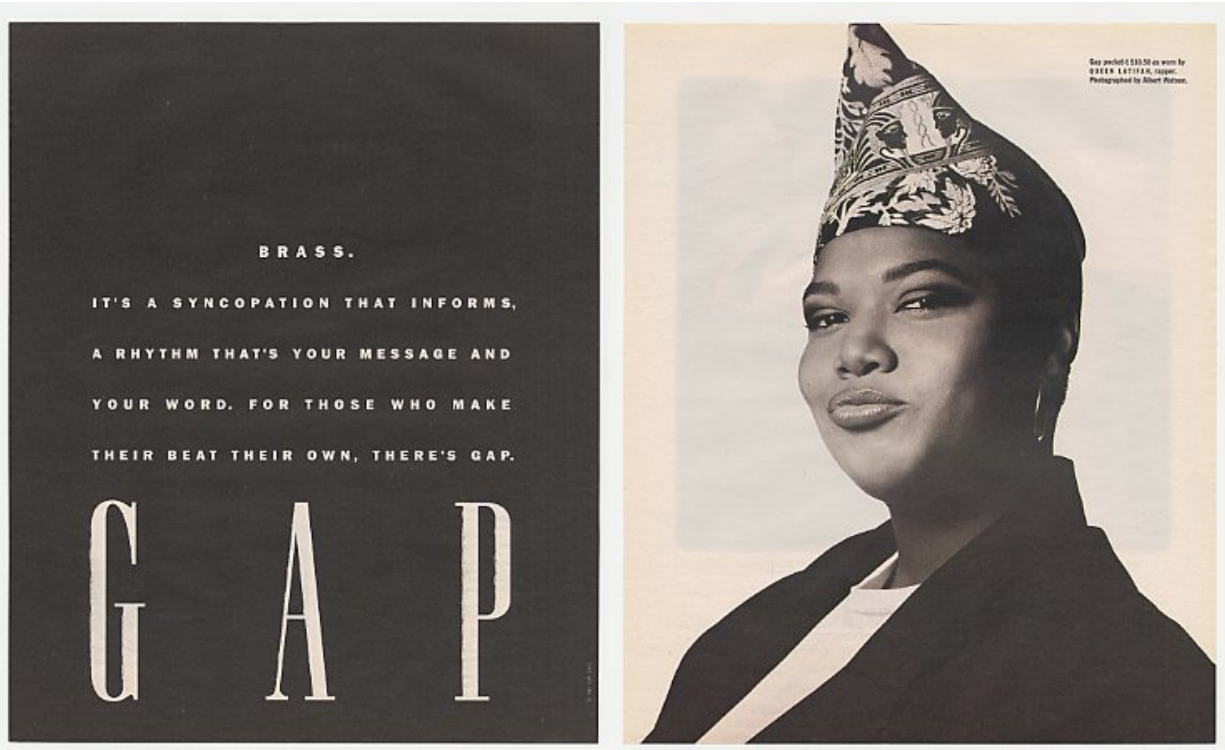


FIGURE 37. Two page spread for Gap Individuals of Style Campaign, *Brass: Queen Latifah*, photograph by Albert Watson, 1991. Offset print.



FIGURE 38. Annie Leibovitz, *Whoopi Goldberg* for Gap Individuals of Style Campaign, 1990. Offset print.

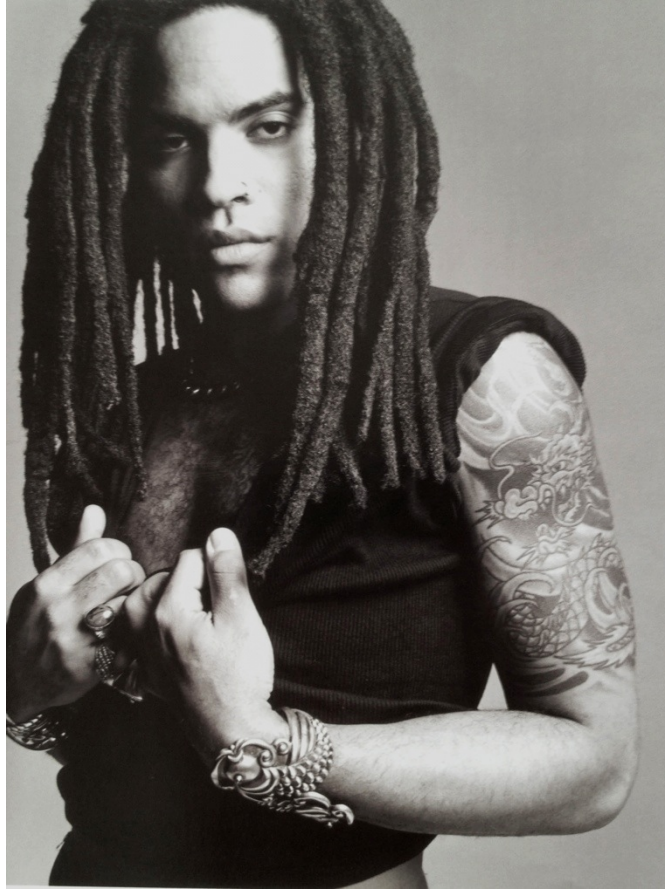


FIGURE 39. Patrick Demarchelier, *Lenny Kravitz* for Gap Individuals of Style Campaign, 1993. Offset print.



FIGURE 40. Lorna Simpson, *Wigs (Portfolio)*, 1994. Waterless lithograph on felt. 72 x 162 inches.

100% HUMAN HAIRS
Hair Extension Supplies,
Wigs, Toupees, etc.
 All major colors, textures, lengths are
 available for weaving and braiding.

Labels for hair samples: Kinky Straight, Hand Tied Weft, Water Wave, Hackle, Silky Straight, Jheri Curl, French Body Wave, Body Wave, Zig Zag Wave, Zig Zag Curl, Before Wash, After Wash, European Wave, French Refined Italian Mink, Gloria Head.

Custom Made Wigs (Hand Made)

HIS & HER HAIR GOODS CO.

(The largest, oldest human hair distributor in U.S.A.) Copyright ©
 5377 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90036
 (213) 931-1021, 1-800-421-4417
 Fax: (213) 981-5058, Telex: (213) 372-5860

FIGURE 41. Print advertisement for His & Hers Hair Company, in *Essence* December 1992, 118.



FIGURE 42. Jeffrey Scales, *Buy Black*, 1988. Gelatin silver print. 50.2 x 49.4 cm.

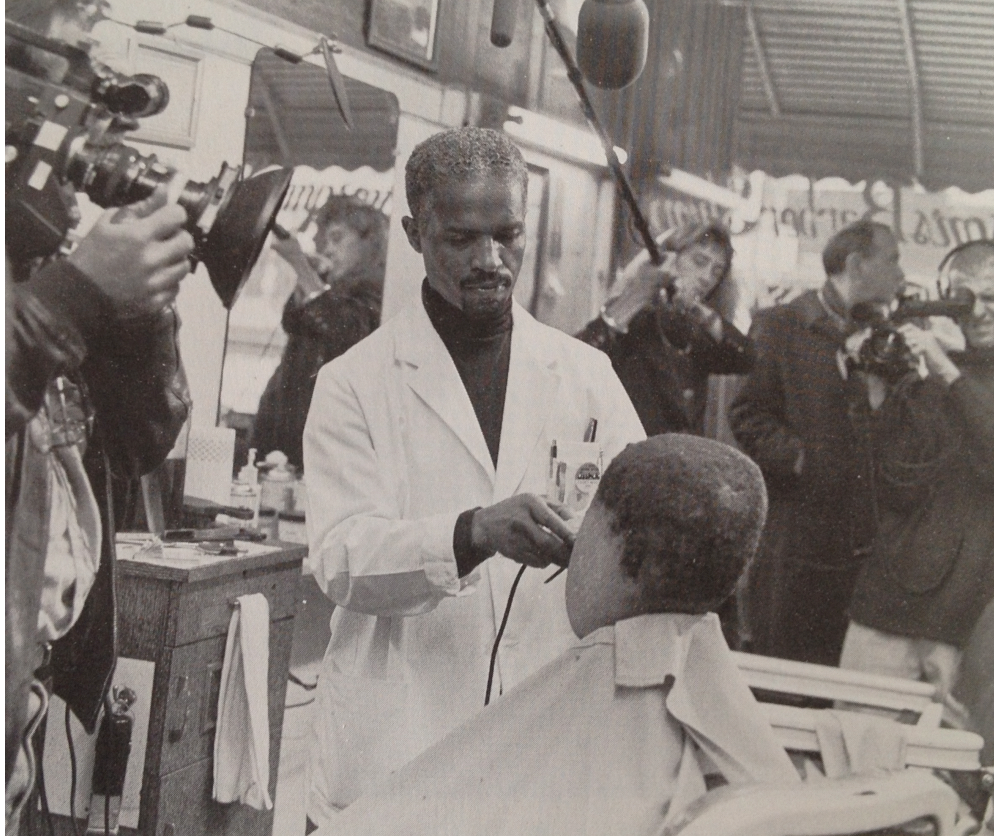


FIGURE 43. David Hammons, *Untitled*, 1992. Performance piece with John Farris.

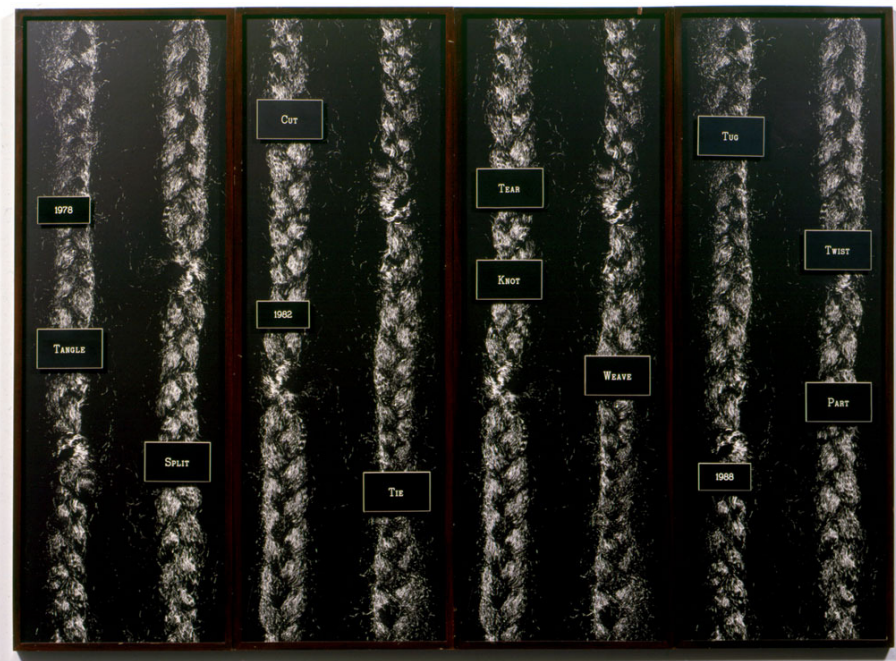


FIGURE 44. Lorna Simpson, *1978-1988, 1990*. 4 gelatin silver prints, 13 plastic text panels mounted on Plexiglas. 124.5 x 43 cm each, framed.



FIGURE 45. Ausländer, "MCA-Lorna Simpson," 2010. Digital photograph shared at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/punctiliouspig/4814367032/>



FIGURE 46. Janine Antoni, *Gnaw* detail, 1992. "Phenyl-thylamine Display."



FIGURE 47. Janine Antoni, *Gnaw* detail, 1992.

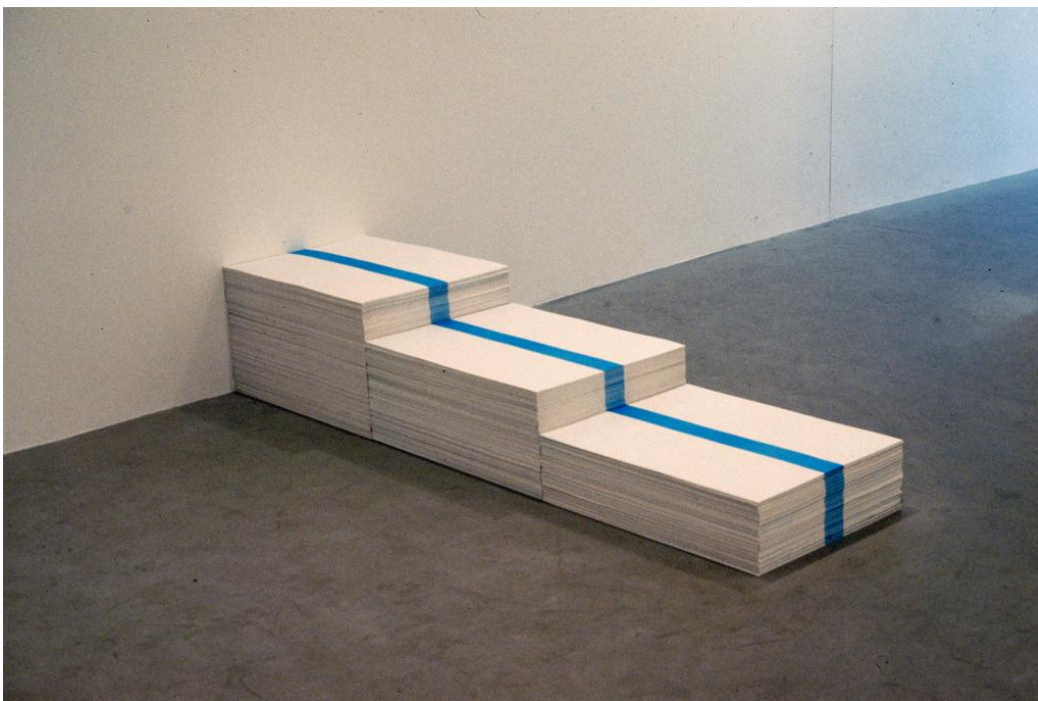


FIGURE 48. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1990. Offset print on paper (endless copies). At ideal height 17 x 23 x 87 inches.



FIGURE 49. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1991. Offset print on paper (endless copies), 7" at ideal height x 45.5 x 38.5 inches.



FIGURE 50. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Aparición)*, 1991. Offset print on paper (endless copies). At ideal height 8 x 45.825 x 29.75 inches.



FIGURE 51. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1992/93. Offset print on paper (endless copies). At ideal height 8 x 45.5 x 38.5 inches.



FIGURE 52. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Loverboy)*, 1990. Blue paper (endless copies). At ideal height, 7.5 x 29 x 23 inches.

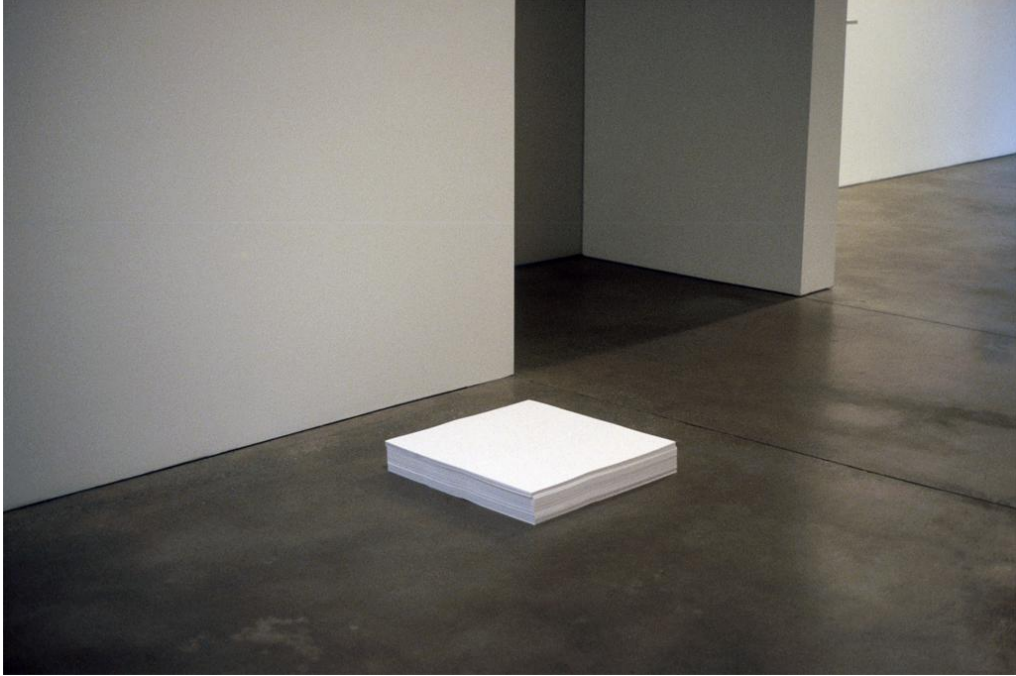


FIGURE 53. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Passport)*, 1991. White paper (endless copies). At ideal height, 4 x 23.625 x 23.625 inches.

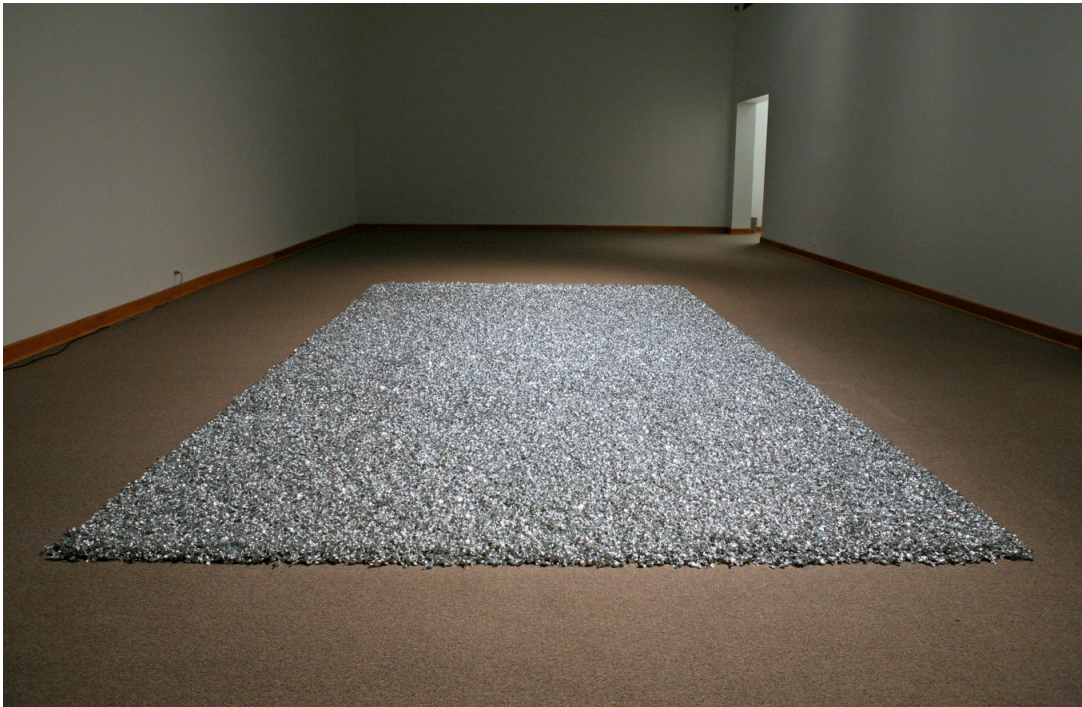


FIGURE 54. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Placebo)*, 1991. Candies, individually wrapped in silver cellophane (endless supply). Dimensions vary with installation, ideal weight: 1000 to 1200 pounds.



FIGURE 55. Janine Antoni, *Loving Care*, 1993. Performance with Loving Care Hair Dye Natural Black.



FIGURE 56. Janine Antoni, *Lick and Lather*, 1993. 7 chocolate busts, 7 soap busts. 24 x 16 x 13 inches each.



FIGURE 57. Janine Antoni, *Lick and Lather* detail, 1993.



FIGURE 58. Janine Antoni, *Eureka*, 1993. Bathtub, lard, soap, Corian. Soap dimensions: 22 x 26 x 26 inches; tub dimensions: 30 x 70 x 25 inches.



FIGURE 59. Installation of *Untitled (Placebo)* (1991) in front of the Grand Palais as part of the 2006 Nuit Blanche event in Paris, curated by Nicholas Bourriaud and Jerome Sans.



FIGURE 60. Janine Antoni, *Gnaw* detail 1992.



FIGURE 61. Janine Antoni, *Touch*, 2002. Video installation. 132 by 178 inches.

FATHER.	MOTHER.	CHILDREN.	COLOUR.
European.....	European.....	Creole	White.
Creole	Creole	Creole	White.
White	Indian	Mestiso	$\frac{2}{3}$ White, $\frac{1}{3}$ Indian—Fair.
Indian	White	Mestiso	$\frac{3}{4}$ White, $\frac{1}{4}$ Indian.
White	Mestiso	Creole	White—often very Fair.
Mestiso	White	Creole	White—but rather Sallow.
Mestiso	Mestiso	Creole	Sallow—often light Hair.
White	Negro	Mulatto	$\frac{3}{8}$ White, $\frac{5}{8}$ Negro—often Fair.
Negro	White	Zambo	$\frac{3}{8}$ White, $\frac{5}{8}$ Negro—dark copper.
White	Mulatto	Quarteron	White, $\frac{1}{8}$ Negro—Fair.
Mulatto	White	Mulatto	White, $\frac{1}{8}$ Negro—Tawny.
White	Quarteron	Quinteron.....	White, $\frac{1}{8}$ Negro—very Fair.
Quarteron	White	Quarteron.....	White, $\frac{1}{8}$ Negro—Tawny.
White	Quinteron	Creole	White—light Eyes, fair Hair.
Negro	Indian	Chino	$\frac{3}{4}$ Negro, $\frac{1}{4}$ Indian.
Indian	Negro	Chino	Negro, $\frac{1}{16}$ Indian.
Negro	Mulatto	Zambo	Negro, $\frac{3}{8}$ White.
Mulatto	Negro	Zambo	Negro, $\frac{1}{4}$ White.
Negro	Zambo	Zambo	$\frac{1}{16}$ Negro, $\frac{15}{16}$ White—Dark.
Zambo	Negro	Zambo	$\frac{7}{8}$ Negro, $\frac{1}{8}$ White.
Negro	Chino	Zambo-chino	$\frac{1}{16}$ Negro, $\frac{15}{16}$ Indian.
Chino	Negro	Zambo-chino	$\frac{7}{8}$ Negro, $\frac{1}{8}$ Indian.
Negro	Negro	Negro	

FIGURE 62. Table from W.B. Stevenson's *Narrative of Twenty Years Residence in South America* (1825). Reproduced in Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1992): 152.



FIGURE 63. Hélio Oiticica, *Tropicália, Penetrables PN 2 'Purity is a myth'* and *PN 3 'Imagetical,'* 1966-67. Mixed media installation. Dimensions variable.

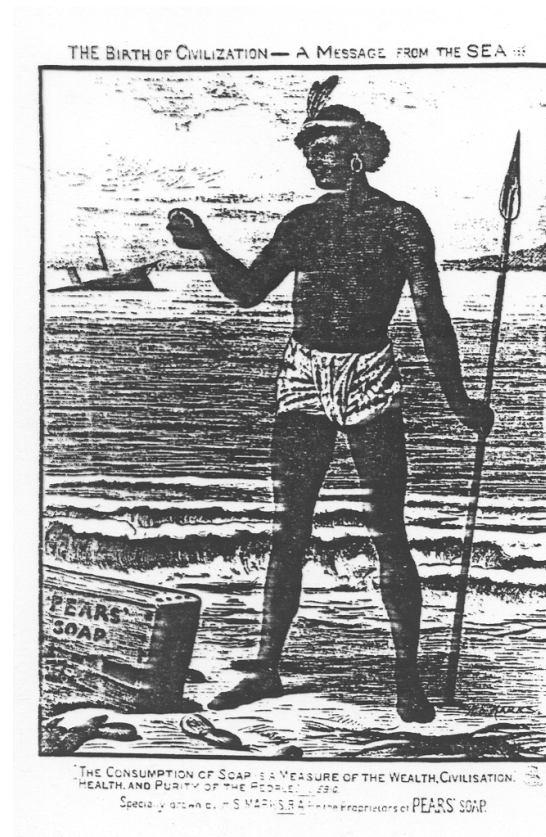


FIGURE 64. Pears' Soap advertisement in *The Graphic Stanley*, April 30, 1890. Offset lithograph.

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