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Cecily Brown and Maureen Gallace: Teaching Covert Feminism in Public School

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CECILY BROWN AND MAUREEN GALLACE: TEACHING COVERT FEMINISM IN

PUBLIC SCHOOL

by

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B.A. August 2010, Old Dominion University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
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ABSTRACT

CECILY BROWN AND MAUREEN GALLACE: TEACHING COVERT FEMINISM IN PUBLIC SCHOOL

Danielle Salyers
Old Dominion University, 2020
Director: Dr. Vittorio Colaizzi

Feminist art consisting of explicit, provocative, and politically charged imagery is common in the university setting and the wider art world. Although this freedom from inhibition certainly functions as a valuable source of inspiration for those fortunate enough to participate in the institution of higher education, content of this nature potentially works against feminism's goals by excluding the youngest audience at the moment they are forming ideas about gender relations; students at the K-12 level. As a public-school art educator, I am faced with strict censorship policies that make it difficult to include students in the ongoing feminist conversation by sharing iconic feminist artists such as Carolee Schneeman and Lynda Benglis. Given the current political climate in the United States, in which a culture of sexual assault is perpetuated, feminist activism is more visible and necessary than ever. Using Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, I argue that this movement's emergence into mainstream culture as well as the graphic and often divisive content of some of the major artworks associated with it keeps the patriarchal power structure firmly in place through exclusion from public discourse. American painter Maureen Gallace (b.1960) and British painter Cecily Brown (b. 1969), who are known, respectively, for serene landscapes and gestural expressionism that integrates or camouflages figurative elements, have both been criticized for seeming to avoid direct agitation, instead indulging in an excessively

conservative and traditionally male-dominated style of painting. Artists like these, who appear to have opted out of overwhelmingly confrontational feminist iconography, are perhaps arguing the most effectively. By eluding controversy through passive resistance, the seemingly mundane is able to evade censorship, disrupt the expectations of polarized perspectives and claim the goals of feminism: autonomy for the woman as both artist and citizen.

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This thesis is dedicated to my dog, Tiger Lily. I am forever grateful for your unwavering love, support, and companionship during every step of this seemingly unending journey. I could not have reached the finish line without you. Thank you for being my very best friend for the last 14 years and I hope you live forever.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Feminist art is often conflated with art that is visually explicit, often jarring, and socially motivated to bring about change. Although this particular style of art created by women and for issues faced by women is accepted in collegiate academia and high-brow art world settings, it becomes difficult to bridge the connection between these worlds and those of mainstream culture that are perhaps not ready to submerge themselves into the provocative for long periods of time. The reasons for this can be found in social standards set forth by society but also in the acknowledgment that change is uncomfortable and shifting from one normative practice into another can be a real challenge for many people who would prefer to choose comfort over agitation when at all possible. These seemingly vulgar images created by female artists, whose level of offensiveness can be debated depending on one's stance on both the issues being presented and one's own normative practices of decency, make up an important catalog of artists whose voices are often discounted if not silenced all together. This research does not aim to discredit the efforts of the women artists working in this way or condemn their work to be stricken from history. Instead, my research seeks to draw attention to the some of the key roots to understanding the systemic exclusion of women artists from the level of success male artists have enjoyed since art as the world knows it began. In order to discuss this exclusion with students, educators must introduce appropriate female artists to students according to their age, level of education, and path of study in a university setting. A high school student is exposed to a curriculum that is deemed appropriate based on the assumption that the student is a

minor. The guidelines detailing acceptable content for public school lessons are vague and often left up for interpretation within each school district, some more conservative than others. According to the administrative code regarding K-12 licensures for the state of Virginia under section 7, teachers may have their licenses revoked for engaging in “conduct with direct and detrimental effect on the health, welfare, discipline, or morale of a student or minor.”¹ It is again important to note this clause does not expound upon what offences would fall under this category leaving that power up to the individual school systems throughout the state. In 2019, Deborah Smith, an English teacher at Kempsville High School in Virginia Beach, Virginia was placed on administrative leave and subsequently fired after a parent complained to the district about a lesson Smith conducted with her students that investigated the negative impacts of stereotypes in conjunction with, *American Born Chinese*, a graphic novel her class was reading about a Chinese American boy facing adversity after relocating to a predominantly white neighborhood.² School districts face intense pressure from their communities, parents, and government to adhere to appropriate standards of learning. On July 8, 2020 president Trump posted to his twitter account:

Too many universities and school systems are about Radical Left Indoctrination, not Education. Therefore, I am telling the Treasury Department to re-examine their Tax-Exempt Status and/or Funding, which will be taken away if this Propaganda or Act Against Public Policy continues. Our children must be

¹ Virginia Law Information System. Administrative Code. Title 8. Education. Agency 20. State Board of Education. Chapter 23. Licensure Regulations for School Personnel. https://law.lis.virginia.gov/admincode/title8/agency20/chapter23/section720/?fbclid=IwAR0GBQEM-3GN6bzxVe2ywidWZiB2feo7RfR8bsoHokeQJxRmP9j6c_sRoB4 Accessed July 9, 2020.

² Gordon Rago. Ex-Virginia Beach Teacher Sues for Firing After Racial Stereotypes Lesson. The Virginian-Pilot. Sept 12, 2019. <https://www.pilotonline.com/news/education/vp-nw-virginia-beach-teacher-sues-20190912-yhsi3ei7d5eufqjl6cfnaskxfa-story.html> Accessed July 9, 2020.

Educated, not Indoctrinated!^[sic]³

By the following morning, Trump's post had received two-hundred seventy-four thousand and eight hundred likes and had been retweeted ninety-two thousand and two hundred times. Influence like this, sparks fear in school districts that rely on the conservative amount of annual federal funding and essential tax-exempt status to operate, often still coming short of meeting their bottom line. The fear of public persecution and potential job loss makes planning my instruction as an art teacher a delicate operation. Female artists like Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) can be introduced and discussed for compositional arrangement and use of color but very little can be divulged about the sexual criticism the artist often gets concerning her work because it is deemed outside the realm of appropriate content for a K-12 education. Without the backstory detailing the sexualization of both her work and self as an artist in the criticism that is applied to her rather than what comes from within her own voice, her story is distorted. Students are then left with a diluted narrative reduced to a female artist that really appreciated flowers. On the other hand, students who are studying O'Keeffe at the university setting will not be given the censored version of her story and will therefore develop a deeper understanding of why she is relevant in the greater story of art, especially for women. In describing her work, O'Keeffe is quoted as saying, "I found that I could say things with colors and shapes that I couldn't say in any other way—things that I had no words for."⁴ The artist advances this description further by

³ Donald J. Trump. User Name: realDonaldTrump. Twitter. July 8, 2020.

⁴ Anna Chave. "O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze." *Art in America*. January 1990. Pg. 115-125. Footnote #15, Statement by O'Keeffe in "Alfred Stieglitz Presents One Hundred Pictures: Oils, Water-colors, Pastels, Drawings, by Georgia O'Keeffe, American," New York, Anderson Galleries, 1923.

claiming a desire to be “magnificently vulgar” unintentionally creating an obstacle for a younger audience to fully engage with her work.⁵ O’Keeffe provides a great example of how a lesson gets censored to the point of irrelevancy to fit the audience that is receiving it but in some other circumstances key women artists are just not mentioned at all leaving an entire generation of young people out of the conversation. Carolee Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll* performance from 1975 is considered by many to be an era-defining work that captures a critical and active response to the criticism women as artists had received up until this point (figure 1). In the performance, Schneemann disrobes and stands nude on a top of a table. After applying dark bold strokes of paint around her face and body, the artist begins to pull a sheet of paper from her vagina while reading the words on it aloud to the audience. The words written on the scroll and spoken by Schneemann address the different ways in which the female experience is felt in real time by women and interpreted by men after the fact. An excerpt from the scroll reads,

I met a happy man
 a structuralist filmmaker...
 he said... there are certain films we cannot look at
 the personal clutter the persistence of feelings
 the hand-touch sensibility the diaristic indulgence
 the painterly mess the dense gestalt...
 he said we can be friends equally tho we are not artists equally
 I said we cannot be friends equally and we cannot be artists equally.⁶

⁵ Chave. Ibid.

⁶ Carolee Schneemann. Excerpt from *Interior Scroll* Performance. 1975.

The performance is intentionally provocative and illustrates the struggle within the power dynamic between how women are and how they are interpreted. Schneemann is not creating art in the same capacity as painters like Brown and Gallace but connections are evident. Her performance reaches beyond the act of painting while maintaining core similarities to painting through the way she engages in gesture, the mark, and physical subjectivity. Like many other students of art, despite having been enrolled in some form of art class from Kindergarten through my senior year of high school, the first time I was exposed to this artwork was in an upper level *Women in the Visual Arts* course taught by Dr. Linda McGreevy at Old Dominion University in my junior year of Undergraduate Art History studies. The performance although raw and shocking, sparked something in me, helping me to finally grasp and embrace the battle cry of the feminist art movement while also forcing reflection on the many years and instruction I had received prior to this moment that made no mention of this work or other works like it. This initial exposure to Schneemann triggered a personal transformative experience that led to a deeper investigation of overtly feminist practices in the artworld and ultimately proposed the assertion that although much of the work is incredibly powerful and immensely important in the story of art, some of the practices limit the scope of its audience and impact. For example, *Womanhouse*, an all-female group exhibition orchestrated by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro in 1975, grew out of the frustration women artists experienced in working in an oppressive patriarchal society that refused to listen or honor their personal narrative and experience. Chicago and Schapiro created an entire feminist art program to educate and train women artists to articulate their experience without hesitation in an environment that would nurture

and support their endeavors. This utopian style environment for women artists harbored two major parochial drawbacks that worked against the goals of its founders. The participants of the school and the artists who ultimately participated in *Womanhouse* were limited to white middleclass, heterosexual, cisgender women and despite being open to all visitors, the exhibition was only attended by women.⁷

Understanding that both the work of O'Keeffe and Schneemann is rooted in sexuality and experience that cannot be separated from that core, the task to include these artists in the education of students outside of the university setting becomes proves to be incredibly difficult. In fact, it is also fair to note that even in the liberal parameters of a university, unless a student is specifically majoring in art, a survey course required for general electives will also not dive into this type of content leaving those students outside of the conversation. The selective way in which some individuals are exposed while others are left out helps to reinforce the patriarchal power structures that have excluded women artists for so long.

⁷ Balasz Takac. *Inside Womanhouse, A Beacon of Feminist Art. Widewalls.* June 2, 2019. <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/judy-chicago-womanhouse> Accessed July 11, 2020.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

On the surface it appears that the feminist art movement has become a bit predictable through uses of overt sexuality or content that falls directly in line with political imagery that can be incorporated into protest material, like artist Sarah Levy's portrait of Donald Trump, painted from her own menstrual blood (figure 2). Levy's work sought to challenge societal aversion to menstruation, particularly in relation to comments Trump made about news reporter and presidential debate moderator Megyn Kelly having "blood coming out of her wherever" after becoming defensive against her questions towards him concerning past misogynistic and sexist remarks he made about women.¹⁰ Levy's art responds to Trump by placing his image in the purview of feminine materiality, thereby turning the tables on the commonly assumed right to view and sexualize women through an act of dominance that brackets him within a feminine signifier that is empowering by virtue of its reclamation from its societally imposed abjection. Levy's approach is bold, making no amends for her inflammatory content and risqué medium choice but there is indication that a change in practice is looming. Past and current scholarship along with stylistic choices of select contemporary women artists point to the buildup of a paradigm shift that gives way to a new form of un-gendered inclusion and autonomy for women artists to work in that has been afforded to their male counterparts since the profession of artist existed. In an interview in 2015, renowned art historian Linda Nochlin discussed in great detail the importance of

¹⁰ Holly Yan. *Donald Trump's 'blood' comment about Megyn Kelly Draws Outrage*. CNN Politics. August 8, 2015. <https://www.cnn.com/2015/08/08/politics/donald-trump-cnn-megyn-kelly-comment/index.html>. Accessed July 9, 2020.

avoiding the pigeon-hole practice that associates all women artists with overtly feminist themes in relation to their artistic practices and subject matter.¹¹ Such preemptive labeling limits the scope of the artist's range and autonomy while also separating women from their male counterparts, a practice that seems to be in direct conflict with the goals of the feminist movement altogether. As will be shown in this review, although the gender stereotypes associated with art are known or at least have been acknowledged to have negative implications, many players within the art community continue to fall back on these generalizations for a variety of reasons. In these stereotypes, women artists are expected to engage with political subject matter in their work and the criticism that follows operates against the artist's own narrative as it seeks to better explain the artist's true intentions. It is apparent through the continual practice of all-female exhibitions and the feminist slant evident in critiques that many people in the art community feel that inclusion and recognition are adequate tradeoffs for engaging in the practice of lumping women together by gender and analyzing their work under a feminist lens regardless of what content is being presented to the viewer. Developing a strong understanding and belief in the negative impacts such practices can influence is essential in understanding how women artists have become increasingly disillusioned with simply having a seat at the table if they are forced to make a spectacle out of their gender to deserve that inclusion. The frustration regarding obligatory gender expectations is not a new phenomenon and many artists of the past

¹¹ Maura Reilly. "Interview," "A Dialog with Linda Nochlin; The Maverick-She." *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015), page 25.

are noted for playing key roles in illuminating this issue through their own artistic choices. It is only in the current social climate that ignoring the negative impacts associated with gender stereotypes in regard to women artists is finally being taken seriously and has real weight as a societal problem worthy of correction.

Although the examples of women artists working in not demonstratively feminist subject matter and mediums is plentiful not just in the United States but also throughout the world, the specific research for this thesis is limited to an extensive review of two painters Maureen Gallace and Cecily Brown, who are both currently living and working in New York City. Both artists are middle-aged white women, known, respectively, for serene landscapes and gestural expressionism and who have been criticized for seeming to avoid direct agitation, instead indulging in the ostensibly conservative and traditionally male-dominated language of painting. The leap from feminist performance art to traditional painting is extensive but the reasoning is meant to emphasize the subversive potential painting holds as a solution to getting around content limitations set forth by institutions that prefer more prudent curriculums. This caution along with the the masculine connotations associated with painting, provide alternate paths for this research to expose surreptitious opportunities Brown and Gallace utilize to reach audiences that would be inaccessible if their work was more provocative.

Although studies have been conducted on feminist art as well as on new trends in social behavior regarding gender performance, little research has been conducted specifically on how certain branches of feminist art are deviating from expected imagery and context within the prescribed feminist agenda in favor of styles and subject matter that are considered outside the scope of the movement. My research places the focus

on painting to illustrate this shift because of the subversively pervasive nature of the medium making it accessible to students of all ages and backgrounds. Examples of this practice taking place in contemporary society are illustrated clearly in the paintings of both Brown and Gallace. In Brown's 2016 oil on linen painting titled *When Time Ran Out*, the artist utilizes a variety of historically masculine techniques that allow her the freedom to engage in a political discourse, as much as she is willing to do so, while preserving her own style and autonomy free from the confines of an expected feminist art narrative (figure 3). The painting features a centrally focused composition that draws the viewer's eye out to each edge. Upon first glance the work looks almost completely non-representational. However, under closer inspection, figural elements begin to emerge from the surface and the components of a shipwreck becomes clear. The bold gestural brush strokes that had been unrecognizable moments before now take on the likeness of contorted limbs strewn about the wreckage. Human faces also appear scattered just above the waterline foreshadowing the grim fate that awaits as the vessel continues to break down around them. Although this painting is considerably abstracted, the composition and subject matter is undeniably reminiscent of Romantic era French painters Eugene Delacroix and Théodore Géricault, influences that the artist does not deny.¹² The figures and vessel in Brown's painting are vague, lacking any specifics that could identify or date them to a particular time or place in history. Dramatic subjects like shipwrecks and loss of life are depicted throughout the history of art, usually by male artists who, especially during Romanticism, emphasized the active masculine "hero"

¹² Jason Rosenfeld. "Cecily Brown with Jason Rosenfeld: Art in Conversation." The Brooklyn Rail. Jan/Dec 2017. Accessed June 5, 2020. <https://brooklynrail.org/2017/12/art/CECILY-BROWN-with-Jason-Rosenfeld>

while portraying female figures as objects to be observed.¹³ Brown embodies this masculine style through her use of abstraction to aesthetically depict otherwise tragic subject matter. In an interview with *The Brooklyn Rail* in 2017, Brown admits Syrian refugees were her influence for the subject matter but notes that the politics for this work are present but subliminal so as to preserve the integrity of well-executed painting.¹⁴ This stylistic choice allows Brown the ability to let her skill as a painter enter the room before her political stance reinforcing her position as a successful painter first and an activist second.

Gallace utilizes a similar practice of concealment in her work but maintains an even tighter grip on the critical narrative by never admitting her paintings are anything other than what they appear. In her 2013 oil on panel painting titled, *Blue Beach Shack*, Gallace depicts exactly what the title has described (Figure 4). A modest robin's egg blue beach shack on stilts appears alone in the center of the panel. The structure sits on a sandy beachscape surrounded by dark green vegetation with clouds and blue sky above it and a body of calm water placed behind it. The shack contains a small wooden porch leading up to a door that offers viewers a glimpse inside and through the building to the other side at what might be a window or second door. There are no figures represented and no signs of human life. The brush strokes are careful and calculated as they form the outlines of the house but are loose and carefree in all other aspects of the landscape. If Gallace is speaking out on a political issue with this peaceful serene painting, no one would ever know it and she has certainly offered no insight to

¹³ John Williams. "Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' in Context: Gender, Art and Romanticism." In *Romanticism: Theory : Gender: News From Nowhere 1*, edited by Pinkney Tony, Hanley Keith, and Botting Fred, 120-34. Croydon: Edinburgh University Press, 1995.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

perpetuate this idea in the limited number of interviews she has given. Gallace's strict adherence to describing her paintings exactly as they appear, without any additional elements of symbolism or influence, demonstrates her refusal to relinquish the control of her own narrative in terms of meaning behind her artwork and process. This research argues that her choice to do this stems directly from the many times history has demonstrated that once the power shifts from artist to critic, critics will tell women what their art is about much more quickly than they will listen and attempt to understand.¹⁵ Declaring jurisdiction over one's story and work is not a new or particularly revolutionary phenomenon on its own. Schneemann was attempting to do exactly that in *Interior Scroll* by contrasting her approach with one sanctioned by critics. However, these artists introduce the concept through strategies that are allowed to slip through the prohibitions that inhibit the curriculum of younger students drawing them into the conversation much earlier resulting in a deeper transformative experience that carries on throughout their education and development into adulthood. Through acts of concealment and knowing references to art history, both Brown and Gallace are fighting and winning autonomy in their careers to be recognized as women artists who control their own narrative.

¹⁵ Anna Chave. "O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze." *Art in America*. January 1990. Pg. 115-125.

CHAPTER III

THE LINK BETWEEN SOCIAL PRACTICE AND ART HISTORY

In order to grasp how significant this stylistic break from tradition is for women artists in regard to controlling their own autonomy, basic understandings of both social theory as well as accepted normal practice in art history must be unpacked and investigated further. This review will attempt to weave together traditional beliefs held in art history towards feminist iconography, female artists, and painting as an avatar of the masculine tradition. In addition, the review will call on the historical social theorists Antonio Gramsci and Judith Butler to further explain why society has been so reluctant to embrace such a paradigm shift up until this point. Finally, theories about marketplace feminism articulated by co-founder and creative/editorial director of *Bitch Media* Andi Zeisler will bring the argument to bear on contemporary practice, while simultaneously shedding light on the perfect storm of frustration and action that has allowed this change to manifest in mainstream culture so that it to garners enough acceptance to be on the cusp of normative practice.

CHAPTER IV

INCONSISTENCIES IN BEST ART PRACTICES FOR FIXING THE WRONGS OF THE
PAST

In terms of scholarship regarding female artists, it is fairly consistent in all research that women artists have been excluded from participating in art and have not been afforded the same opportunities as their male counterparts. Artists, historians, and theorists remain divided as to how that wrong should be rectified. As the issues surrounding women artists become more ingrained in mainstream culture, the efforts to include them and to also fix the problematic behavior of the past becomes a point of discussion. Many museums and artists have thus taken action by participating in or curating group shows of all female artists like *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, show that opened at the Museum of Contemporary art in Los Angeles in March of 2007.²¹ This show bears suggestive language in its title and sought to serve as a form of empowerment for women artists that had been excluded from the narrative of contemporary fine art. When the inclusion of women is the most important focus of a movement, this exhibition provides a clear and effective solution. However, group shows consisting of all women artists potentially serve as just another way of perpetuating a cycle of exclusion by isolating them from artists as whole by their gender alone. Linda Nochlin discusses all-female group exhibitions in an interview with Maura Reilly in which she acknowledges that she is on the fence about the practice. She finds merit in a group show since women have been underrepresented but at the same time believes that true equality cannot possibly stem from gender entrance requirements for

²¹ Cornelia Butler. *WACK! Art and The Feminist Revolution*. The Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. 2007.

exhibitions.²²

²² Maura Reilly. "Interview," "A Dialog with Linda Nochlin; The Maverick-She." *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015), page 35.

CHAPTER V

SOCIAL THEORY FOUNDATION

Antonio Gramsci's writings from his prison notebooks make reference to the notion of cultural hegemony and its ability to create a false consciousness that allows for people to act in superficial ways that promote the idea that change towards something better is being effected when in reality, the status quo remains the same because the power structures have not yet allowed for a change to occur.²⁵ Gramsci's theory addresses the complex ways power circulates within an industrialized society keeping the subordinate group content through a series of consent building practices that ultimately work to keep power superstructures in place until those in power are willing to adjust.²⁶ In 2017, Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till sparked outrage throughout the art world (figure 5). Many believed that the artist, a white woman, had no business defining and profiting off of black suffering in America.²⁷ Schutz's tone deaf approach to depict what critics later described as "white shame," along with the ongoing tragedy of modern day lynchings of black Americans through police brutality and dangerous vigilantism illustrates an occurrence of false consciousness. In Schutz's case, the disconnect between artistic intention and critical response is rooted in issues of cultural appropriation but the way in which critics refused to listen to her explanation, however misguided, illuminates the bigger issues of women artists being considered

²⁵ Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. New York: International Publishers. 1971.

²⁶ Steve Jones. *Antonio Gramsci*. 2006. *Hegemony*. New York: Routledge. Pg. 41-57.

²⁷ Lorena Munoz-Alonso. "Dana Schutz's Painting of Emmett Till at Whitney Biennial Sparks Protest." *Artnet News*. March 21, 2017. Accessed June 11, 2020. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/dana-schutz-painting-emmett-till-whitney-biennial-protest-897929>

unable to comprehend their own reasoning for creating art. Although this concept was conceived out of the Marxist theories of the 19th century, the basic structure of this belief still rings true today. Artists, historians, and critics recognized the diminishment of artists based on their gender along with a refusal to honor a woman's capacity to fully understand the work she was creating is a problematic practice but because the power structures were not yet ready for change to occur, little had been done until recently to rectify the wrongs.

Gramsci is without a doubt much more specifically interested in social classes and economics, but his findings are still applicable to the art world albeit indirectly. A more direct approach to understanding how and why women artists have been treated as different for so long is more specifically in line with the work of Judith Butler. Butler deals directly with feminist theory in her work and addresses gender and more accurately issues surrounding gender performance. Butler argues that a person's gender carries a set of predictable characteristics that is not predetermined by birth but rather influenced heavily by the power structures set in place by what a particular society deems to be normative practice for each specific gender.²⁸ This belief plays directly into the issues that Nochlin addresses. If a society deems certain characteristics to be inherently tied to specific genders, it will be allowed to be so until the majority of people within that society begin to believe otherwise regardless of whether or not an expert in the field draws attention to it. It is for this reason that even though society is aware that lumping women together in gendered group shows can have lasting negative impacts on the goals of gender inclusion and equality, that society will continue to do so

²⁸ Judith Butler. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." Theatre Journal, Vol. 40, No.4 (Dec., 1988), pp. 519-531. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

until the majority of that group deems it inappropriate and make a conscious effort to move in a different direction. To illustrate how the group show works against women artists as a teacher, I ask high school students at the start of the year to create a list of ten artists from history that they know. The lists usually contain names like Picasso, Monet, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Van Gogh, but what they do not contain is women. These male artists along with so many others are allowed to stand alone and shine in solo shows and sometimes even have entire museums dedicated to their work. Group shows deny artists this opportunity and lead to exhibition visitors perhaps remembering a particular work that stood out to them but not usually the artists name resulting in that person being forgotten and left out of the greater story of art. Independent recognition is important because it confirms that a person is valid and worthy of accolades in their own right and not just because they belong to a particular group or subscribe to a certain ideology.

Another negative impact from group shows can be linked to the practice of applying feminist critiques to works that are inherently not feminist at all thus limiting the artists autonomy within the cultural traditions of painting. Art of course does not exist in a vacuum free from outside interpretation, but the voice and style choices made by individual artists can become diluted and sometimes unrecognizable when curators take certain liberties when creating their group shows. For example, in 2016 The Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) opened *Turn the Page: The First Ten Years of Hi-Fructose*. The artists represented reflect the taste of the editors of this particular magazine and of course do not represent a final decree on the only relevant art of this time frame. However, one placement within the exhibition was particularly puzzling and

illustrates a clear disregard for the individual artist's voice. Juxtaposed beside the Kehinde Wiley's painting, *Phillip the Fair* (2006) (Figure 6), a large-scale oil painting typical of Wiley's style featuring an African American male figure posing in contemporary clothing in a pose reminiscent of Renaissance portraiture surrounded by a floral decorative pattern was Austrian artist, Erwin Wurm's sculpture, *Hoodie* (Figure 7). The sculpture consists of an exterior form of a small faceless figure wearing a white and black hoodie and loose-fitting pants lacking a physical body underneath the clothing garment. The figure is shown with the hood up around the void that would contain a head and is slightly crouched down, positioned with its limbs bent as if in motion. Wurm has said on record that his work is in no way a response to racial tension in America surrounding issues of police brutality, particularly in the case of Trayvon Martin, the young teen who was shot to death while wearing a hoodie in 2012.²⁹ The artist has explained that he was responding to and condemning the riots and looting that frequently occur at the conclusion of soccer games in Europe because the individuals causing the destruction wear hoodies to conceal their identity. In this situation, the curator saw an opportunity created by the group show to make a political statement and her actions restructured this artist's entire narrative for his work, intentionally misleading the viewer on its contextual meaning and removing his voice from his own work. Women artists already have to fight against criticism that refuses to listen to their own descriptions of meaning and the group show is just one more area in which they are vulnerable to these attacks through curatorial decisions that are out of their control.

Gramsci and Butler's social theories provide an answer as to why certain harmful

²⁹ Carolee Thea. "Between Fun and Desperation: A Conversation with Erwin Wurm." *Sculpture* 31, no 4 (May 2012): 54-59.

practices surrounding gender were and are still allowed to continue despite society developing an awareness of their toxicity. This research is interested in identifying how those theories play a key role in helping to move society forward to the moment when everything changes, and normative practices are renegotiated and adjusted to fit the interests of the altered power structures following a paradigm shift. Andi Zeisler's research on marketplace feminism provides the perfect segue into the efforts it takes to convince a society that one particular method of practice is simply no longer working towards the best interests of the people and something entirely new must be implemented to re-stabilize the power superstructure. As feminism turned from something aggressive and divisive into something trendy and profitable, attitudes towards the movement changed drastically. In her book *We Were Feminists Once*, Zeisler points out how the marketability of feminism in a capitalist economy creates an environment in which the feminist movement can be bought and sold to the highest bidder for real monetary profit at the detrimental cost of stripping the movement of any authenticity it may have once carried.³⁰ If feminists cannot even own their own movement because it has sold itself out, then the only clear option to carry on the fight is through covert operations of guerilla feminism that is so tongue-in-cheek that it cannot be detected at surface value for any real marketability for financial gain. If the artists are so clever to avoid the layers of feminism that have become so pedestrian that they can be bought and sold to a person that wants to subscribe to the movement without actually understanding or living by its ideals then they can successfully use this loop hole as a means to the same end that the original movement sought. This practice

³⁰ Andi Zeisler. *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to Cover Girl, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement*. New York: Public Affairs, 2016.

works much like subliminal messaging for the individuals in which it desires to inspire change while simultaneously leaving the activists feeling disenchanting with their furious efforts and ultimately guiding them towards a more covertly tactical path. This combination of differing motivations from both sides creates a perfect storm in which actual change can be put in motion because all players have reached a point of willingness to accept something new because the practices and beliefs of the past no longer ring true.

In conjunction with the aforementioned scholarship and along with a variety of other supportive references, the artworks of Cecily Brown and Maureen Gallace will be analyzed as primary sources alongside the art critical writings and interviews concerning their evident style and medium choices with regard to feminism. It is through this in-depth analysis that the scholarship of both past and present will come together to illustrate a clear path of how the feminist movement in the art world arrived at its current place and how the current climate will aid in facilitating lasting changes in both the ways that the general population thinks about the movement as well as how the power structures are bending to adapt to a new belief system. The scholarship referenced above will help to construct the bulk of the argument discussed in this thesis, but other sources will be necessary to paint the entire picture. Catalogs from gender specific group exhibitions, and critiques published in online and in print at a variety of forums will also be referenced to show the multi-layered issue of women artists striving for equal recognition and autonomy within the art world. It is my goal that this review will illuminate a clear path of research towards proving the arguments of my thesis and persuade the reader to also understand that a new paradigm has arrived or at the very

least is on the cusp of fully transforming gender practices within the contemporary western art world.

CHAPTER VI

METHODOLOGY

The thesis of this research is multi-faceted and will therefore require several different types of research methodologies to work together to produce the final argument. In order to fully understand the argument, I will be using, a brief historical account followed by an archival analysis to illustrate the paradigm shift that has occurred in the practice and style choice of women artists. Finally, a case study of two specific artists will be analyzed to provide clear concrete evidence of how the argument of the thesis is being used in practice today. This chapter will be organized according to the previous description of research methodologies. Each research method will be briefly defined and unpacked with its specific relation to the thesis argument. It is the aim of this chapter to provide clarity towards the thesis argument and the method of proof will further justify the thrust of the argument's claims. In addition to elaborating on the research methods being utilized in this investigation, this chapter will serve to highlight the positive and negative aspects associated with each methodology as to how they pertain to the claim of a paradigm shift in their autonomy of women artists. There is no one method that works perfectly on its own and even with this combination of methods there will be issues that arise and will allow for further debate, yielding potential for further research.

The first methodology that will be utilized within this thesis research is a historical approach. This approach uses a variety of primary and secondary sources to construct a narrative that is then used to explain phenomenon that has occurred in the past. This method is especially helpful in this thesis situation because in order to understand how

far the achievements of women artists have advanced within the art world, it is first important to both understand the climate of the past and the challenges these women faced along the way. A historical investigation of the art world from the time in which art became a defined career path all the way up until the second wave of feminism that began in the 1960s and lasted for nearly twenty years is needed. The thrust of this historical section is to highlight the obstacles that stood in the way of women who wished to practice as artists such as traditional domestic responsibilities, lack of respect for their ability to work to the level of their male counterparts within the field, and standards put in place by those in dominant positions within the field that were used to shape and interpret how women artists were to behave within western society. A thorough investigation of women's rights not only within the art world context but also in general everyday practice provides a necessary platform on which to build the argument. This knowledge lays a foundation of oppression and helps bring to light and emphasize the immense power that these harmful normative behaviors had on lives of women during the past and plays an important role in showcasing the efforts made in society to right these wrongs. In addition to providing the obvious information regarding the accomplishments of women, a thorough understanding of the deep-rooted oppression of the past plays a vital role in shedding light on which issues still exist and how some of the issues that have been "fixed" are really just oppressions that have morphed into a different form. The recognition and fanfare that feminism gets during its second wave provides important insight into understanding how this practice created a false sense of security in terms of equality falling in line with the theories of both Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci. This false sense of equality and safety in the belief that the

hard times are over, and the future is a level playing field for both genders allows for discriminatory behavior to thrive under the radar of general understanding making its execution even more insidious.

Overall the history section lays the framework for the rest of the methods to argue upon. Without it the other argumentative methods fall flat and have less impact on proving the claims of the thesis. However, with this knowledge firmly in place and acknowledged, the arguments have an overall more impactful and lasting message for the reader that echoes throughout the rest of the investigation as a system of checks and balances for how the publicly accepted achievements of gender equality actually stack up against the oppression that persists today in newly transitioned forms.

It is important at this point to once again reiterate that no research method is perfect and the historical approach, on its own, has many flaws and an undeniable bias that can make the information it provides problematic. For example, the second wave of feminism is criticized by many historians and social theorists for being too centered around white hetero normative women while leaving women of color and the LGBTQ community out of the equation. With this in mind, one may question how such a selective account of the past can serve to accurately argue a new paradigm shift into contemporary culture. The answer is not simple but the best approach is to accept that the morality of the past cannot be analyzed through the lens of moral normativity that has become compulsory practice today. Although the wrongs of the past and the shortcomings of the second wave of feminism will always exist as a glaring warning to do better in the future, there is still valuable information to be gathered from reviewing and analyzing the data from historical sources in helping to better understand

contemporary phenomenon. Societal actions do not manifest in a vacuum so the past will always remain relevant as a blueprint guiding the actions of the population and their beliefs into the future.

The next research methodology that will be utilized in this investigation is an archival analysis. At first glance this method seems like a reiteration of the historical method, but its differences are actually fairly significant. To best understand the difference, one should think of the historical approach as a culmination of facts or rather accounts that a group of people deem to be true about situations that have happened in the past. The account is simply stated but no real connection is made into contemporary time. However, with an archival analysis methodology, the research can analyze events from the past in conjunction with current events and bridge meaningful connections between the two. The archival analysis can be interpreted as the follow-through from the historical methodology because it takes that initial information and reactivates it to hypothesize current phenomena.

The practice of both understanding the past fully and then analyzing that information to make assessments about why situations of inequality for women exist in the art world is essential to understanding fully the intent of this thesis argument. Without connecting the past to the future, the assessment on culture provided by a historical methodology falls short and leaves the audience feeling unconvinced or at the very least very confused and disjointed. An archival analysis provides essential clarity needed to understand why certain gender discrimination motives existed in the past and then morphed into new more complex forms as they responded to a changing social climate. It is also through archival analysis that individuals who argue against the

presence of gender discrimination can be successfully proven wrong. There is a strong belief amongst certain women that inequality is a plight of the past and women have risen to a status equal to their male counterparts and by worrying themselves with these issues are actually creating more gender problems. This argument can be easily dismantled by forming a strong historical understanding and then applying that knowledge to present issues. The biggest takeaway is to understand that just because the issues of discrimination have changed from those that existed in the past, the underlying cause is still the same and the plague has not been eradicated but rather only had its symptoms altered to the point of causing mass confusion.

Although the positives that surround utilizing an archival analysis are plenty, there nevertheless remain some factors that can be deemed negative that are worth noting. Archival analyses are in their very nature built on the connections deemed worthy by the person making the argument and are therefore never without a certain level of bias. In any argument made under the methodology of archival analysis another, “but what if” argument can be made against it. This is not to say that the archival analysis is trivial and should be taken lightly but rather that it is best used when paired in conjunction with other forms of research methods as it is in this argument. By providing additional methodologies, the arguments made under the archival analysis serve as an overarching theme throughout the investigation that is proven true through the essential addition of the case study methodology that will be discussed in the next section. On its own, archival analysis is easily argued and can make proving specific truths to be difficult but again, in pairing it with other methods, the arguments of the investigation become more clear and harder to dispute. For this reason, much like the

similar situation surrounding the historical methodology, the archival analysis is an important ingredient in preparing the recipe that results in a successfully argued thesis but on its own, at least in this investigation, would not suffice standing alone.

The next methodology of argument used in this research is the case study method. There are several different approaches researchers can take when utilizing the case study method and some of them are more invasive for the case study participants than others. In general, a case study methodology involves selecting a group of participants or variables that are then investigated under the guidelines needed to proof the argument of a thesis. There are lots of regulations in place to ensure that subjects are not exploited or harmed during investigations and there are also strict rules in place to ensure that personal bias remains minimal. In this research investigation, the case study participants are not directly involved in the research process personally through interviews or survey requests but rather through the artwork that they produce and the styles and subject matter in which they choose to create it in. In many ways this particular use of a case study methodology is more of an in-depth extension of an archival analysis. In order to successfully argue this thesis a variety of female artists and their artwork will be thoroughly analyzed and used to illustrate key arguments needed to prove the main components of the thesis.

Although as a researcher I am not directly engaging with these individuals to carry out my investigation, their indirect participation is an essential component. Although a direct interview would provide valuable insight into the artist's thought process and motivation in their own autonomy and dominion over their artwork and career, the fact that I remain on the outside analyzing their actions from a far provides a

less biased result from the case study group. As with other research methodologies, particularly the ones being utilized within this thesis investigation, there will always exist a set of possible negatives when utilizing each method. The case study method can of course be flawed by the bias of the investigator, but the actions of the case study group can also be influenced and possess bias in the environment of the investigation. When people know that they are being studied for whatever reason, they can have a tendency to act differently than they normally would or say things that they believe the researchers want to hear rather than what is actually happening to them resulting in flawed and unreliable data. However, because the subjects in this research study do not in fact know that their actions and beliefs are being studied, they undoubtedly will act more freely and in line with their normal autonomous selves thus resulting in a much more accurate collection of data. It is also important to note that the artists chosen to participate in this case study are working in the public domain and their work is published and exhibited regularly and is accessible to the public. It is for this reason along with the fact that an interview conducted by me will not be utilized to complete this investigation that I can definitively determine that institutional review board approval is not needed.

Although there will be mention of many women artists in this investigation in order to support the arguments of the thesis, the two primary artists considered in this study are Cecily Brown and Maureen Gallace. These two artists were chosen specifically for this case study because their artistic styles and autonomy in practice are representative of a substantial shift in the way women artists have practiced in the past and provide important insight into how these changes are inspiring the ways women will

be able to work in the contemporary climate as well as into the future. Both of these artists work in the traditionally male dominated genre of painting so immediately out of the gate these women are breaking society's standards that have been put in place to limit the success of women artists. In addition to the medium in which they work, these painters both work in styles that are unusual for women artists in the contemporary western art world. Gallace's work focuses on stripped down New England landscapes absent of any signs of human life or figures with sporadic tufts of sparse wild beach grass encroaching on singular unornamental structures like beach houses and barns. Brown's style choice is much different as she chooses to work in an abstract expressionist style with breaks of figural representation disguised under vigorously evident brush strokes. Although these two artists present styles from very different ends of the creative spectrum, the message is glaringly similar. Both women work in styles that had been reserved for male painters in the past and then deemed to be "out of fashion" once women artists started gaining traction in the art world around the mid 1970s. It is through this blatant refusal to conform to the societal standards that arguably work against the advancement of women artists that these two individuals are taking back control of their art careers and claiming a more autonomous environment for themselves and other artists.

As with the other research methodologies, the women chosen for this case study are not the perfect fit for arguing every scenario and of course there are other artists that could be brought into the study to add more power to the argument. It is for this reason that this case study is to be viewed as a jumping off point to encourage further research and inspire others to participate in the conversation. When more people are

engaged and participating in discourse on this issue then the issue of autonomy for women artists will without a doubt be thrust into mainstream dialog and will hopefully serve as a catalyst resulting in the freedom of these artists to work in the same un-gendered environment that is afforded to their male counterparts. Although this study is predominantly focused on women artists, it seems absolutely possible that as the issue of female autonomy in art gains more traction the benefits will reach beyond female artists and into other marginalized communities like people of color and the LGBTQ community.

CHAPTER VII

PAINTING: A TRADITION OF MASCULINITY

It is important to address head-on why painting is regarded as a traditionally masculine medium. The exclusion of women artists from the art world has less to do with an elaborate sinister plan amongst its leaders than societal standards already in place that limit inclusivity. In her article titled, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," Linda Nochlin lists several key factors that limited female success.³⁶ First, before we even consider gender in terms of successful artists, it is important to note that becoming a master within the field is still very rare. There are far more undocumented mediocre artists that history has forgotten than artists that have achieved great notoriety. The development of artist into master is really a perfect storm situation and that storm more often than not simply fizzles out and does not pan out in the way it did for individuals like Sandro Botticelli or Pablo Picasso. Many artists that do go on to experience great success are products of long hereditary lines of artists, so they are quite literally born into the profession and spend a great deal of time from a young age encouraged to perfect their skill. When these artists come of age, they are afforded the opportunity to receive training as an apprentice to another artist already deemed by western society to be successful. Nochlin does acknowledge this practice is almost always also true for the few female artists known in western art history from earlier periods like the Baroque, most notably coming not only from talent but also from advantages provided through family connections and societal support, like Artemisia

³⁶ Linda Nochlin. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*, December 2018, 145-78.

Gentileschi (b.1593-d.1653). Gentileschi's father was an artist and he allowed her to practice painting and encouraged her to advance her skills to a certain extent. This was not the norm and even with her father's permission and financial backing to continue painting, the opportunities available to her were still far more limited than that of male artists from the same time period therefore making the path to fame and recognition in the artworld even harder to achieve. Although Gentileschi is a bit of an anomaly in the western history of art in that she is a woman artist from the Baroque period and her name is known well enough in the canon of art, it is important to note that a great deal of her reputation is propped up on the tragic scandal that defined her life and career. Gentileschi is notable and celebrated for challenging the expected grain of society for a woman of her time period. Her artistic skill is undeniable, but art critics seem unable to discuss her body of work without drawing direct parallels to the artist's own personal rape and subsequent court case when discussing the emotional and visceral content of her paintings. For example, in Gentileschi's 1620 oil on canvas painting, *Judith and Holofernes*, the biblical story of the two figures for which the painting is named often gets directly paralleled to the artist's sexual assault (Figure 8). In an article about the rediscovery of Gentileschi's life and career, Elizabeth Cohen notes how the scholarship written about this artist has evolved over time.³⁷ Cohen notes that early discourse on Gentileschi implies that she was a scandalous and overtly sexual woman as a means to explain the violence portrayed in her work but that as the feminist movement looked towards the past to fill in the blanks in history that left women out of the narrative,

³⁷Elizabeth S. Cohen "The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no. 1 (2000): 47-75.

Gentileschi was transformed into a feminist icon of strength and power who overcame her sexual assault through her work.³⁸ When contemporary scholars rewrite narratives of the past to justify goals of the present, problems arise. On one hand, Gentileschi cannot be considered a respected “great” artist because by simply existing as a female painter she is a salacious threat to societal normative practice and then when she is finally granted approval to be considered great it is only in connection to her ties to a feminist movement of which she had no knowledge of during the time in which she was alive and can therefore not be definitively counted as a member. In the end, yes, Gentileschi has secured a spot in the ongoing story of art in a period of time when women artists were incredibly scarce, but the argument here is that this inclusion is not equality. The recognition is based on her gender and sexuality which is not asked of men. The same relentless investigation is not required of male artists and it is certainly not thrust into every article ever written as a defining trait of their career. In order for female artists to stand the test of time and leave a lasting impression on western art history, they must not only be talented at their medium of choice but they must also have an interesting story that propelled them into the art world and they appear even more valuable if they overcome a tragedy that directly links back to the limitations traditionally associated with their gender.

If it can be assumed and expected that becoming a master artist is a difficult task for anyone, male or female. To better understand why that process is even more difficult for a woman, Nochlin asks us to consider the limiting difference in training that artists are exposed to in regards to their gender, specifically in the medium of painting.³⁹ Painting,

³⁸ Ibid. Cohen. 47-75

³⁹ Ibid. Nochlin

it is understood in western art history, has a tradition rooted in classical Greece. Historical painting, rich in mythological content was long accepted and understood to be the highest and most evolved form of painting. Although this belief was undercut by impressionism and later completely shattered by modernism, the historical root is undeniable. Women with the financial means could practice painting, but the fact remained that they were not allowed the same studio experience as other male artists. In order to be an accomplished historical painter, one had to study and understand human anatomy and women did not have access to nude models. Because of this restriction, women artists were forced to engage with subject matter that was within their scope of accessibility like flowers and animals. Yes, women could paint a portrait, as long as the sitter was fully clothed, but those types of paintings were considered limiting and inferior to the history genre perpetuating the mindset that truly great painting and the artists creating it had to be male. Women could be master painters of subject matter they were allowed to engage with, but this forced their skill set into a very restrictive corner. For example, Dutch painter Rachel Ruysch (1664-1750) was considered during her lifetime a master painter of flowers and insects and experienced great success in selling her work in the Netherlands. Her talent is evident in her painting from 1704 titled *Still Life with Bouquet of Flowers and Plum* (Figure 9). The composition features a lush assortment of realistic flowers in different stages of blooming along with several insects scattered about the vegetation. Although flower paintings in the Netherlands during the 17th and 18th centuries were popular, artistic success in this genre is isolated to a small

region and did not spread with the same fervor into France, Italy, and other areas of Europe where the Baroque style full of human figures enacting historical or biblical scenes was preferred.⁴⁰ Ruysch's success in a genre of painting whose popularity was restricted to a small geographical area and whose subject matter was accessible to women earns her the distinction as a master painter of flowers and not a master painter like Rubens or Titian.

The backhanded acknowledgment of women painters continues into modern art and beyond in part due to critics declaring painting "dead" as soon as women were entering the movement in large numbers.⁴¹ Douglas Crimp's article, "The End of Painting," addresses this issue head on in its reference to MOMA's 1974 exhibition titled, *Eight Contemporary Artists*. Crimp calls upon the scathing critique given by art critic Barbara Rose in *Vogue* in the same year.⁴² According to Rose, the exhibition was too conceptual and in breaking from traditional painting created a possible threat to the museum institution that was supporting it. The show was unappealing to Rose because it included works like Daniel Buren's striped panels (figure 10). Buren placed these panels on windows, interior walls, and garden walls throughout the exhibition space and even applied leftover panel pieces to billboard signs in Manhattan (figure 11). Buren's work expands beyond the realm of what painting had been up until this point and distorts its path moving forward. Crimp concludes that Rose's disdain for this particular work in the show implies the traditional museum was possibly not the right space to

⁴⁰Margaretta Salinger. "Early Flower Paintings." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 8, no. 9 (1950): 253-61.

⁴¹David Reed in Arthur C. Danto, Isabelle Graw, Thierry de Duve, David Joselit, Yve-Alain Bois, David Reed, and Elizabeth Sussman, "The Mourning After," *Artforum* vol XLI no 1 (March 2003): 210.

⁴²Douglas Crimp. "The End of Painting." *October* 16 (1981): 69-86. Accessed April 23, 2020. doi:10.2307/778375.

exhibit works of this nature, setting up a new battle over rights to cultural territory in the exhibition space.⁴³ Crimp believes that if only polite traditional styles of painting are allowed to exist within the museum institution and conceptual art is too disruptive then the styles of painting that conform to this standard are no longer relevant.

Bucking the status quo of what had been deemed acceptable content by museum institutions, or more realistically, going against what the wealthy committees of trustees providing financial backing to these institutions wanted culture to look like felt reckless and dangerous to Rose. It was like holding high tea to celebrate your wealthy investors during the day and then lurking around the CBGB bar at night for inspiration to ultimately plotting their demise. The power structures did not want to give up their stronghold on the control of the art world, so they therefore attempted to change the attitude towards art that addressed social issues to portray it as lesser. Believing the museum was trying to have its cake and eat it too, Rose justifies her hesitation as to the inclusion of conceptualism through unwavering support of traditional painting values like illusion and beauty. Although Rose would not agree with Crimp's assertion that her resistance to conceptual art lay firmly in the self-preservation of wealth and privilege, his declaration set up a barrier to the traditional style for future artists like Brown and Gallace that choose to use it.

Crimp's dismissal of traditional painting by linking it to a complacency with oppression, along with Rose's belief that art outside of traditional ideals belongs in a space other than the museum, created a division within the artworld that continues to this day. These claims set up a validity system based on style association that has

⁴³ Crimp. Ibid. 72

potential to drown out the voice of the artist. If conceptual art dealing with social issues carries the stereotype of appearing dangerous, those creating the art are vulnerable to also be labeled as such. To categorize all women artists as “feminist” can have similar consequences especially for artists who might agree with the ideology of the movement but do not create art that subscribes to its defining polarizing characteristics. The patriarchal history of painting serves to validate the claim that this particular medium has and always will be just out of reach for female artists. Women are not and have never been fully restricted from utilizing paint of course but the very nature of its gender exclusive evolution throughout history does not allow them much room to achieve greatness. Furthermore, subscribing to the belief that painting already reached its purist cultural peak under the command of male artists during the 20th century makes women artists choosing to practice painting problematic from the start. The entire scene feels much like ants desperately vying for the fallen crumbs scattered about the ground following the grand conclusion of an apex predator’s triumphant feast. Postmodernism certainly opens doors for painting to be reimagined under new contexts and many artists both male and female utilize it as a vehicle to openly advance and advocate for a variety of social issues, including feminism, but this research argues that painterly painting might not be “dead” after all. It is possible that the declaration of painting as being old fashioned is in fact a false gate that can be opened by simply refusing to conform to the postmodern trap of wearing your cause on your sleeve. If an artist remains coy, refusing to give too much away to the critic and allows the painting to be simply that, a painting, then perhaps she gains a bit of access into a world once forbidden to her in the past. In fact, it could also be true that these women are in fact not

scavengers combing the artworld for stale crumbs of a greater past but are rather, fiercely radical red herrings navigating an evolved patriarchal sea with clearer eyes and bolder intentions than any of the predecessors before them. Curator Helen Molesworth presents an initial apprehensiveness to this covert technique but later argues that a female artist's choice to work in traditional abstraction is itself a subversive feminist action that breaks tacit masculine rules.⁴⁴ Molesworth's initial concerns are rooted in a fervor to abandon the patriarchal past in favor of a bold revolution but she ends up demonstrating, through analysis of the work of Howardena Pindell, Mary Heilmann and Louise Fishman that understated insurgence can actually reach and change a wider audience. Thomas Lawson's essay, "Last Exit: Painting" supports this claim by acknowledging traditional painting as a mode of information transfer, both familiar and approachable that welcomes participants into a conversation rather than illustrating ways in which they do not belong.⁴⁵ Lawson, referencing Crimp's stance on Buren's art in "Eight Contemporary Artists" says,

Buren's work runs the risk of invisibility, that since it is intentionally meaningless in a formal sense, it might fail to operate on a critical level. And indeed it is a problem that the work needs an explanatory text, a handbook of the issues raised, a guide to one's approach.⁴⁶

Conceptual art seeks to challenge societal structures. However, if the only people clued into the intention are the artists creating it and a very select audience viewing it then the goal is stunted and unable to affect change in the range it desires. Traditional painting

⁴⁴ Helen Molesworth. "Painting with Ambivalence." *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*. The Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. 2007. Page 429-439.

⁴⁵ Thomas Lawson. "Last Exit Painting." *Artforum* (October 1981). Vol 21 Issue 2 Pg. 143.

⁴⁶ *Ibid* Pg. 151.

has the ability to achieve the same goals as conceptual art by engaging with a broader range of viewers through the initial hook of aesthetic imagery and illusion and once the trusting audience is invested, the message can be administered.

Following the publication of Nochlin's article that both poses and answers the question of why there have been no notable women artists up until 1970, the qualifications for "greatness" were renegotiated and many prominent women artists from the past were added to the canon and an increase in the number of women artists such as Eva Hesse, Judy Chicago, and Carolee Schneemann who were working and exhibiting in major western circles exploded. Many of these female artists focused on content that was provocative and experimented in new forms of media in the artworld that had not yet been claimed exclusively by men including performance and mixed media installations in the same way painting had. With a focus on the changing future and a goal of advancing the status of women artists, new and edgier media without the traditional, old fashioned patriarchal baggage of painting naturally became more sought-after vehicles to bring about this exciting revolution. Although the women artists living and working during this time created a body of work that undeniably impacted the story of art forever, these achievements do not change the male dominated past that came before them and do not make up for the fact that this era of feminist art set women artists up to be forever defined by their gender in all forms of art critique moving forward regardless of whether or not the artists intended their gender or female experience to play a role in the finished context of the work. In fact, even when women artists paint with modernist ideals, their gender is still brought into discussion in terms of execution and end result unlike their male counterparts. For example, Helen Frankenthaler, a

stylistic pioneer and a rare example of a female artist working alongside male artists and gaining recognition in the aftermath of the abstract expressionism movement, fell victim to overly gender-focused critiques of her work. Many in the art world, including other women artists, suggested that Frankenthaler was not active enough in feminist politics because of her exclusive commitment to her abstract expressionist painting style.⁴⁷ Although Frankenthaler's style evolved throughout her career, *The Bay* (1963) is a suitable example of her style (figure 12). Acrylic on unprimed canvas bleeds into the surface of this non-objective composition, which contains an organic mass made up of varying shades of blue extending from the top of the canvas downward towards the bottom. The background is defined by three different sections of color, a pale lavender at the bottom, a majority of dim green, and a very light, almost white beige at the top. The entire palette is cool aside from the one very small pop of orange just left of the center of the canvas. This work captures early fragments of Frankenthaler's use of abstraction as well as her transition into color field painting and contains no imagery stereotypical of feminist art and is instead all her own. The widespread belief that Frankenthaler could be doing more and quite frankly, should be doing more to help advance the feminist cause like other female artists with more polarizing content within their work helped to fuel the conversation around gender whenever her work was critiqued. Frankenthaler's career as an artist spanned six decades beginning both before the feminist movement and continuing to exist after it as her style evolved along the way. Her position in history helped shape Frankenthaler's view on feminism: "For

⁴⁷ Elisabeth Tissier-Desbordes & Luca M. Visconti (2019) Gender after gender: fragmentation, intersectionality, and stereotyping, *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 22:4, 307-313, DOI: [10.1080/10253866.2018.1512238](https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2018.1512238)

me being a 'lady painter' was never an issue... I don't resent being a female painter. I don't exploit it. I paint."⁴⁸ Frankenthaler's establishment as an artist had fully taken shape before second-wave feminism and her attempt to remove herself from the stereotypical narrative surrounding the movement as it gained traction gave her more autonomy over her work and style even if art critics were not yet ready to go along. The same can be said for Georgia O'Keeffe, who also sought to evade gender-focused discussions about the content of her work, thereby achieving the same autonomy afforded to male artists by speaking of her work through formal analysis as an alternative to the feminist slant critics often apply to her work.⁴⁹ This practice was a coping method for both O'Keeffe and Frankenthaler to at least attempt to opt out of a conversation in which their work was categorized differently from that of similar male artists because of their gender. The conversations around gender influence of course continued to happen but these two women opened the door for future generations of covert feminist artists. The fact that both of these women refused to be labeled and therefore categorized as being overtly feminist in their work in no way means that they were not feminists in practice. In many ways, these women work towards the goals of feminism more successfully than those with more provocative content because their neutrality allowed them a more surreptitious freedom to navigate different realms of the artworld as undetected threats inspiring contemporary artists to work in similar covert methods to achieve the same goals.

⁴⁸ Ibid Tissier-Desbordes. Pg. 307.

⁴⁹ Julia Markoe. "Rejecting the Feminine Mystique: Re-interpreting Georgia O'Keeffe." *Bowdoin Journal of Art*. 2016. Pg. 1-14.

CHAPTER VIII

REINFORCING A CYCLE OF GENDER EXCLUSION

It is important to shift the focus from artists of the past to contemporary artists to understand how cultural boundaries and practice still shape painting styles and criticism today. The two artists that best fit to illustrate the main argument of this research could not be more different from each other in terms of the style of their artwork but if one looks beyond the initial differences, both Maureen Gallace and Cecily Brown unapologetically commit to painting while refraining from gender discourse when discussing their work. Both artists appear to seek the same autonomy that male artists are routinely granted through the command of a medium history has attempted to diminish as no longer relevant while also making zero apologies for the lack of stereotypical feminist content or conversation. Again, much like the women artists such as O'Keefe and Frankenthaler who came before them, it is quite probable and at least in the case of Brown, glaringly obvious that these women are in fact the embodiment of the feminist movement and therefore likely subscribe to the ideals of the social platform but their participation is contorted and carefully calculated. It is through careful and precise public image construction that these two artists are able to claim for themselves what the artists in the first and second wave of feminism wanted all along. The desire is to be treated equally on all fronts, meaning that a museum cannot put on an exhibition that includes a female artist and in all of its publications and press use gender essentialism as a means to explain every aspect of the final product of her work.⁶³ In the past and to a great deal still in the present, there are certainly issues of under-

⁶³ Lucy R. Lippard. "Judy Chicago Talking to Lucy R. Lippard." *Artforum*. Vol. 13, No. 1 (September 1974): 60-65.

representation of women artists in solo exhibitions in reputable museums across the world. But is it really fair to tell these women artists to be satisfied with their achievement when they arrive, and all the critics want to discuss is their vagina? Simply being allowed the opportunity to be included is frankly not good enough for true feminism. The inclusion must come with the same respect, dignity, and privilege afforded to male artists. Although plenty can be said with regard to the sexual exploits and misgivings of male artists surrounding how their gender constructs drive them to behave badly throughout history, these shortcomings are not printed in museum catalogs or debated on the pages of *Artforum* in the same way women artists must bare their sexuality like a scarlet letter in every aspect of their career. Granted, some women artists find sexually explicit subject matter freeing and look to it as a way to take back control on their own narrative. If the critics are going to critique women artists through a lens focused on sexuality, artists like Ghada Amer reclaim their control by choosing to rise to the occasion through utilizing explicit imagery that leaves no room to assume her intentions are anything but sexual. Amer uses embroidery on canvas to “paint” sexually explicit imagery of nude women inspired from soft-core pornography through a variety of tight and loose stitching methods. In some of her work, the contours of the nude figures and the often lude acts they are engaging in are obvious to the viewer from a distance, but in others one has to engage with the work intimately to uncover the scenes being depicted. Amer’s *Revolution 2.0* initially appears to be a composition of pure non-objective abstraction created through tangled thread arranged in lines of color repetition across a black background (figure 13). However, as the viewer moves closer to the canvas and observes the stitching with more detail, it becomes clear that under the veil

of tangled thread on the surface, there are numerous figures of nude women in positions derived from pornography and sometimes even engaging in masturbation.

When asked if her work can be considered intimate, Amer says,

Yes. But when people buy my work, I don't like it when they put it in their bedroom. It should go in the dining room or the living room. I prefer the living room, and if it leads to intimacy, I don't mind. If the intimacy starts in the living room, then it can end wherever they want. It's intimate for me because I feel it more as pain. I would rather have lived my own sexuality than paint it.⁶⁴

It is clear that Amer's art is a vehicle of freedom for the artist that reflects areas of her life in which she has had to live more concealed than she would have liked to. This type of art is important and valid in its own right and is in no way inferior to the work of Brown or Gallace but the scope in which it can be appreciated must be noted. In 2018, The Chrysler Museum in Norfolk, Virginia opened a group exhibition called "Chaos and Awe: Painting for the 21st Century" and Amer's *Revolution 2.0* was among the works in the show. As a teacher, I like to walk my students over for a tour whenever new shows open. Teenagers gravitate towards bold graphic imagery in art because in many ways it reflects their current capacity to engage with the world. In my experience, it is rare that teens naturally gravitate towards work that is completely abstract without any narrative on the surface. So when the majority of my class gathered in front of *Revolution 2.0* it became clear that there was more to this composition than what one could see from across the room. As I approached the canvas and quickly realized we were staring at embroidered pornography, students were already snapping detail photographs with their

⁶⁴ Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh. "The Thread of Painting: An Interview with Ghada Amer." *Border Crossings Magazine*. Issue 111. August 2009.

cellphones and the dread of censorship took over. This feeling was not the fault of the artist but rather a conservative K-12 education system that firmly discourages exposing children to art of this nature. If these teenagers had been my own children, I would have talked with them about sexuality and explained how Amer's portrayal of women comes from a deeply personal place of meaning stemming from her own life and experiences growing up in a Muslim household in Egypt. However, when I am not the legal guardian I cannot make decisions to have these conversations without parental consent so the students were left snickering about the images they had just uploaded to their social media accounts, the intent of the work was misinterpreted, and I was left hoping that future trips to the Chrysler Museum would not be banned because of unpredictable explicitly sexual content.

Early in her career as an artist, after moving to New York City, Cecily Brown was heavily criticized for a series of photographs she posed for that many argue convey an overly sexualized image of herself that overshadows her artwork.⁶⁵ In one of these controversial images, photographer David LaChapelle captured Brown's image for an article in the publication *Interview* (figure 14). In this photograph, Brown is standing in front of one of her paintings wearing a metallic velvet string bikini top and an extremely low rise yellow mini skirt with blue plastic boots. She has accessorized her outfit with a metallic collar and chain that draws the viewers eye down to her waist and over to her right hand that holds a lit cigarette. Brown stands with her left hand raised up, resting on the top of one of her paintings that is larger than her. The painting, which shows an abstracted male figure masturbating, commands the viewer's attention because of its

⁶⁵ Eleanor Helaine Posner, Nancy Princethal, and Sue A. Scott, *The Reckoning: Women Artists of the New Millennium* (Munich: Prestel, 2013), 36.

saturated hot pink palette. Once the viewer has a second to take in both the artist and her work presented boldly in the foreground, it becomes apparent that there is much more to dissect in the peripheral areas of this photograph. The viewer then realizes that Brown and her large painted canvas are posed next to a full trash can and trash bag directly to her left. In the background a mother and child walk down the street with shopping bags with an industrial building in the background bearing the painted words, "True Value Grand Home" but the "home" is cut short by the artwork and reads only as "Ho." This type of subject matter is not out of character for LaChapelle, who is known for commercial fashion photography with a socially critical slant. In fact, this exact style of dichotomy is what makes his paradoxical content so successful. As an artist, he is asking the viewer to consider the unflattering underbelly of societal practice and assess that alongside of their own core values. The end result is both disturbing and profound. In LaChapelle's case, he gets to be the artist curiously engaging with humanity but for Brown, this image called into question her seriousness as a painter. Brown was not afforded the same luxury as LaChapelle; instead of being a knowing participant in the joke, she became the joke.

CHAPTER IX

CHANGING THE CULTURE

After the La Chapelle photographs and a few additional jarring press releases that used overt sexual appeal to call into question Brown's seriousness as an artist, she adopted a new more calculated approach to managing her image and her career. In her early painting *Performance* from 1999, Brown tackles sexuality with reckless liberation, presenting figurative painting with just enough abstraction to blur the faces of the figures but keeping the sexually explicit act taking place on the canvas intact through careful defining lines around the contours of the two bodies (figure 15). What may have started as an aggressive attempt to shame the art world and turn the male gaze back onto itself through imagery that combined traditional painting and hardcore pornographic themes soon transformed. As Brown's style matured, she eventually found her voice through working in a masculine style, instead of overcompensating through overly sexual content, she allowed the paint to abstract inequality, granting her access to control her own persona. In Brown's more recent work, like *Make it Rain* from 2014, the title could still be considered slightly provocative by hinting at activities that take place in strip clubs but the imagery has shattered, leaving behind distorted flesh-toned color that implies the human body without actually presenting it (figure 16). In interviews, Brown is keen on portraying herself as "one of the guys." For example, in an excerpt from an article by Rachel Cusk for the *New York Times*, entitled "Can a Woman Who Is an Artist Ever Just Be an Artist?," Brown describes her un-domestic traits in regards to housekeeping and also acknowledges her apprehensiveness towards motherhood

because of its inherently taxing effects on her artistic career.⁶⁹ Like many female artists eager to make their mark on history, Brown initially approached her career with a reckless passion, playing up societal expectations of gender stereotypes but realized through experience and critical response that she could claim more autonomy for herself as an artist if she refused to subscribe to the narrative surrounding her own gender. As her own femininity became abstracted so did the explicit figural representation in her artwork, resulting in less discussions about the salacious content of her work and more dialog about her talent as a master colorist and painter splintering representation with bold and confident painting technique. For example, curator Elena Crippa explains that her inclusion of Brown in the “All Too Human” exhibition at the Tate Britain in 2018 was not contingent on gender or sexuality specifically; instead Crippa honed-in on her talent at painting to depict figural representations.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Rachel Cusk. “Can a Woman Who Is an Artist Ever Just Be an Artist?.” *The New York Times Magazine*. Nov. 7, 2019. Accessed April 24, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/07/magazine/women-art-celia-paul-cecily-brown.html>.

⁷⁰ Elena Crippa. “All Too Human: Bacon, Freud, and a Century of Painting Life”. Exhibition Guide. 2018.

CHAPTER X

MAUREEN GALLACE AND CECILY BROWN

Maureen Gallace, like Brown, is a female painter but her career is defined less by lessons learned from outspoken and shocking behavior in her early years as an artist and more by maintaining the elusive mystery all along. Gallace is known for her serene Cape Cod landscapes that are noticeably absent of any human figures. The paintings are quite small for contemporary standards, most not exceeding ten x ten inches, requiring the viewer to approach the canvases intimately to observe and appreciate both the imagery of each composition and the ways in which the paint is carefully applied to the surface. Gallace, like Brown, looks to master painters of the past for inspiration and does not shy away from giving credit to male painters that came before her like Fairfield Porter, Paul Cézanne, and Edward Hopper. When speaking about her work, Gallace is extremely precise and careful to never expose too much of her personal narrative. In an interview with Allie Biswas in *Studio International*, Gallace provides perhaps the most exclusive look into her unconventional artistic choices regarding subject matter when she comments on the beginning of her career in New York City:

I think I was an anomaly in that I wasn't straining to do anything clever with such an odd or seemingly unfashionable way of painting. In many ways, it was the antithesis of everything swirling around me, especially in hindsight. Since I was as informed as any young artist at the time about contemporary art – having gone to proper art schools – before moving to NYC in the late 80s, and then quickly establishing a place in the community once there – the combination of being in

the know, but being OK with having a practice a little out of step, turned out to be a good thing.⁷³

This quote exposes Gallace's intention to control access to her own narrative in order to craft the persona she wants to put forward. In fact, in the same interview, Gallace acknowledges that, "from a critical standpoint, I have rejected an imposed narrative in the work... Although I do have a narrative like anyone else, I focus only on my ability to make the paintings work as paintings."⁷⁴ This declaration of privacy and separation of self from her artwork echoes the undertones of independence which run through Gallace's career as an artist, freeing her from the narratives that could possibly be attached to her based on gender, projecting her work into the same discussions of merit and technique as her male counterparts. Despite her firm stance on controlling her own narrative and leaving it out of the discussion there are still articles that attempt to read more into her work than what she is willing to provide publicly. For example, in his review of her exhibition *Clear Day* at MoMA P.S.1., Gregory Volk challenged Gallace's refusal to expose any underlying personal narrative in her work.⁷⁵ The article was for the most part celebratory of Gallace's career and painting style but the author could not resist using the current political climate in the United States to bait the artist's work as protest and commentary upon the divide and inevitable feeling of gloom hanging over the country. In one notable excerpt, Volk boldly states,

⁷³ Allie Biswas. "Maureen Gallace: 'I wasn't straining to do anything clever with such an odd or seemingly unfashionable way of painting.'" *Studio International*. Published November 11, 2016. Accessed April 24, 2020. <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/maureen-gallace-interview>

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Gregory Volk. "Maureen Gallace's Uneasy Sublime." *HYPERALLERGIC*. May 6, 2017. Accessed April 30, 2020. <https://hyperallergic.com/376173/maureen-gallace-clear-day-moma-ps1-2017/>

Gallace's local paintings tap into a pervasive national anxiety, an ill-defined feeling of threat coupled with a nagging sense that a bright promise is faltering and may be already gone.⁷⁶

This association of Gallace's work with a social issue appears to be precisely the situation the artist seeks to avoid by opting out of political conversations and instead offering up only commentary on formal aspects of painting along with minimal backstory into what her subject matter might actually represent. In a program with The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2016 called "The Artist Project" Gallace parallels Cézanne's painting style and use of medium to her own.⁷⁷ Through describing the admirable qualities of Cézanne's work, Gallace offers insight into her own painting style by saying,

The emotion comes from the way paint is handled. The forms seem kind of crude because they're built up from the marks. They're so solid that the apples almost become sculptural. It's like you can feel those apples from your hand and then there's a black outline that doesn't quite touch the shape, so they vibrate. There is an uneasiness to this painting.⁷⁸

One might argue that this type of focus on painterly details to the exclusion of social issues is the equivalent of burying one's head in the sand and isolating oneself from the problems of the world while resting on the comforts of acquiring success. Is it really possible that Gallace, an accomplished artist and educator in New York City could exist in a vacuum, oblivious or at least unwilling to engage in the plight other women artists

⁷⁶ Ibid. Volk

⁷⁷ Maureen Gallace. Metropolitan Museum of Art Facebook Post March 25, 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/metmuseum/videos/10153583557227635/>

⁷⁸ Gallace Ibid.

face on a regular basis? Gallace, up until her recent move to Gladstone Gallery, had been represented by 303 Gallery in New York City for most of her career, and as is customary for artists, has her own page on their website. The website is organized into a variety of different tabbed sections that showcase Gallace's artwork, detail her biography, reference participation in past exhibitions and also, the most telling detail, links to press articles. Under this tab, there are only two press articles listed. The first, the article previously referenced from *HYPERALLERGIC*, and the second, another release from the same year by Jason Farago for *The New York Times*, that is equally as invasive in terms of accessing that personal narrative Gallace seems so keen on shying away from.⁷⁹ Farago says, "Her paintings, while rooted in the American Northeast, make little concession to escapist fantasies. Spend a few minutes with them, and you may find them anodyne; stick with them, and their subtle intelligence is revealed."⁸⁰ It seems peculiar that an artist who spends so much effort to keep of her elusive, vague appearance would choose two articles to represent her career that make such deeply contradictory and personal claims about her work. Unless the elusiveness is part of a calculated act to assert more autonomy as an artist unconfined by gender and this inclusion is merely a wink breaking the fourth wall and letting her followers know she is in on the plot and completely in control of her career and success.

⁷⁹ Jason Farago. "Maureen Gallace's Restrained Palette of House, Sea, Sky." *The New York Times*. April 20, 2017. Accessed April 30, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/20/arts/design/maureen-gallaces-restrained-palette-of-house-sea-sky.html? r=0>

⁸⁰ Ibid. Farago.

CHAPTER XI

BENEDICT ANDERSON: IMAGINED ARTIST COMMUNITIES

By taking on alternative, less aggressive and divisive approaches, Brown and Gallace actually infiltrate the artworld with more lasting impact than female artists who agitate more directly and are straightforward in their agenda-driven methods. Artwork like Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1974-1979) (figure 17) and Barbara Kruger's *Your Body Is a Battleground* (1989) (figure 18) are more obvious about their stance on social issues and although they bring about important awareness to these cultural issues, they certainly create an "us versus them" environment. The result is the power structures that work to facilitate the inequality cling to and twist the messages behind these works of art to further the divide. Going back to Douglas Crimp's article, "The End of Painting," Barbara Rose did not take issue with anyone included in the MOMA show in regard to gender, race, or sexuality. Her major qualm surrounded the idea that the museum as a cultural institution built on a history of aesthetics chose to include an artist like Daniel Buren whose conceptual work weakened the power structures to their core and potentially could have orchestrated their entire demise because his regular stripes de-emphasized visual invention in favor of an exploration of physical context and accompanying ideology in which painting is displayed.⁸⁹ Political scientist Benedict Anderson's research and theories on imagined communities illustrates the length of effort individuals are willing to go and sacrifice in order to belong to a particular group.⁹⁰ In many cases of nationalism, individuals are unable to see the injustices occurring right

⁸⁹ Ibid. Crimp

⁹⁰ Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1990.

under their noses because the advantages of belonging to a particular group are too appealing. In this situation, Rose is a proud citizen in the traditional nation that Buren's conceptual art runs the risk of dismantling. This divisive warlike attitude leaves little room for compromise on either side of the argument, in a stalemate in which both sides believe the other is completely to blame.

CHAPTER XII

ANTONIO GRAMSCI: CULTURAL HEGEMONY IN ACTIVE PAINTING

In nature, a successful parasite enters into a host and maintains a symbiotic relationship in which both organisms can continue living and even though the parasite is usually smaller in size, can make small adjustments to the host to ensure that it gets what it needs to survive. A parasite does not do itself any favors if it instantly kills the host that it is living within because that would also result in the death of the parasite. It is important to note that this analogy does not in any way aim to label female artists as parasites but rather seeks to emphasize the successful ways in which smaller and perhaps less powerful sub-groups may take on and successfully impact change on a larger and stronger group. If artists who want to participate in the museum institution go in with torches and gasoline, burning the structure to the ground, then at the conclusion of their battle there is nothing left for them to claim in their victory and they have in a greater sense failed the mission. However, if these artists can enter the museum space as undetected instruments of change like a virus and slowly alter the practice and belief system of the institution without being detected then the goal is achieved and the power structure adapts because it believes that it was in fact its own idea organically derived from within itself.

In addition to perpetuating the cycle of exclusion through participation in a series of imagined communities, the division between gender in the artworld is further solidified today by means of false consciousness. Early twentieth century social theorist Antonio Gramsci greatly expanded upon Karl Marx's original theory of false consciousness by relating the main concept back to the working class people, drawing specific attention to

hegemony as a key and fatal component resulting in the oppressed, in this case, working class people, playing a willing role in maintaining their own oppression at the hands of the Bourgeoisie.⁹³ This same theory is still incredibly relevant in many aspects of society but is particularly illuminating in terms of understanding oppression within the artworld against female artists. Gramsci would argue that museum institutions along with art critics like Barbara Rose create a system of rules and procedures that determine cultural value and practice within the artworld that work to keep the power structures in place while appeasing the artists who in this case would be the working class. These institutions of power thus superficially align themselves with a sufficient amount of social issues to gain access to enough cultural collateral to placate those who are fighting for equal rights. Museums that have all-women group survey shows like the 2007 Exhibition at Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles entitled, "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution," are able to claim participation and membership to align themselves with social movements but the curation of a show based on gender is a setback in itself, thus perpetuating the oppression that women artists like Gallace and Brown are working so hard to overcome. In this exhibition, curated by Cornelia Butler, a survey of 119 female artists from all over the world are compiled together, and their work exhibited for the role they played in the feminist movement spanning the 1960s into the 1970s.⁹⁴ This exhibition allows this museum institution to proudly declare that it is fact including women artists in their exhibition seasons and that they support the feminist movement without really scraping the surface and getting their hands dirty

⁹³ Ron Eyerman. "False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory." *Acta Sociologica*. Vol. 24. No. 1/2. Work and Ideology. 1981. Pp. 43-56.

⁹⁴C. Butler, *Ibid*.

completing the actual cultural change work required to truly meet the requirements of such a claim. In discussion about the exhibition, Butler acknowledges several key points that illustrate good intentions with underlying negative consequences for the autonomy of the women artists being represented. First, Butler describing the title of the exhibition and claims, “The violent and sexual connotations of ‘WACK’ serve to reinforce feminism’s affront to the patriarchal system.”⁹⁵ The connection between sex, gender, and violence in relation to the validity of female artists as artists is problematic for obvious reasons and it helps to perpetuate the ideology that women are passionate, unpredictable, and dangerous creatures that lack control over their own emotions and desires.

The second issue is highlighted when Butler willingly acknowledges, “many of the artists in *WACK!* do not necessarily identify themselves or their work as feminist.”⁹⁶ Through curating this exhibit whose title is so closely aligned with not only the ideology platform of feminism but also the belief that such rights can only be obtained through the act of violent aggressive revolution, Butler takes autonomy away from artists that perhaps believe in a different path to obtaining equal rights and respect within the art world. It is these women who lose their autonomy and artistic platform as they are unwillingly steamrolled into the stereotypical characteristics of a movement that they might not subscribe to completely like Nasreen Mohamedi or Eva Hesse. Mohamedi, an abstract painter from India aligned herself and style with “The Progressive Artist’s Group,” a collective of artists in Mumbai in 1947 that developed and adhered to their

⁹⁵ C. Butler, *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ C. Butler, *Ibid.*

own formalist manifesto in an attempt to gain international notoriety.⁹⁷ Mohamedi rarely spoke publicly about her work and was not cognitively involved in the feminist revolution of the western world as it is portrayed in *WACK!*. On the other hand, Hesse, a German born artist who grew up in New York City from the age of 3 on, never aligned herself with feminism but was frequently cited as if she were the poster child for the movement.⁹⁸ In fact, when Cindy Nemser asked Hesse about the presence of “sexual elements in her art,” Eva replied, “Excellence has no sex” and “The way to beat discrimination is by art.”⁹⁹ Offering “feminist” as a sweeping label for women artists limits the control of those involved over their own sovereignty which again aids in this cycle of oppression that those being oppressed cannot seem to break out of. Holland Cotter from *The New York Times*, questions the lasting impact of *WACK!* specifically when he says,

Do such roundups – several are scheduled at American museums in the year ahead – help correct the gender inequity of the art world, which is very real (look at auction figures and exhibition schedules), or perpetuate it? Do they give women visibility that will lead to their full integration into the larger art system? Or do they position them forever as outsiders, separate but, in terms of rewards, unequal?¹⁰⁰

Finally, Butler addresses the issue that the show itself uses a specific gender as the first qualifying factor that must be met to be considered for inclusion in the

⁹⁷ Grant Watson. “Nasreen Mohamedi: Passage and Placement.” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 21 (2009): 28-35.

⁹⁸ Anne M. Wagner. “Another Hesse.” *October* 69 (1994): 49-84.

⁹⁹ Cindy Nemser. “My Memories of Eva Hess.” *Woman’s Art Journal* 28, no.1 (2007): 26-28.

¹⁰⁰ Holland Cotter. “Are All-Women Shows Good or Bad for Art.” *The New York Times*: Art Review. March 16, 2016. Accessed June 9, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/17/arts/design/are-all-women-shows-good-or-bad-for-art.html>

exhibition. Butler recalls other all-female survey shows like, the 1996 exhibition “Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and From the Feminine,” at The Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and notes that she did consider the curator, Catherine de Zegher’s regret in not including in male artists in the show.¹⁰¹ In describing de Zegher’s hindsight reaction to the choice to only include women, Butler says, “Her contention was that most women artists want to have their work seen in an equitable situation where history is evaluated by criteria other than the sociopolitical or gender-based mandates of “the all-women group show.”¹⁰² This statement in and of itself clearly illustrates the problematic nature of all-female shows in regard to both the compromisation of the personal choice and freedoms of the artist while simultaneously allowing the institutions of power to claim valuable cultural collateral in social movements they only superficially support when it is deemed popular and advantageous to do so.

Illustrating the missteps Butler took in designing yet another all-female museum show is not meant to vilify the curator as an evil cog in the overall oppression against women but rather to shed light on just how tricky hegemony and false consciousness can be in creating avenues for power to circulate in ways that maintain the oppressive power structures rather than altering them to bend to the desires of the sub group. It is without a doubt that Butler intended to help raise awareness of the contributions of women artists during a critical period in western history but it can be concluded that her actions, albeit unintentionally, served to advance her own personal interpretation of not only a movement but of the individuality of each artist included in the exhibition rather

¹⁰¹ C.Butler, Ibid.

¹⁰² C.Butler, Ibid.

than the identity the artists had claimed for themselves, evident in the earlier mentioned anti-gendered response Hesse provided about her work. This association with the other is yet another major fault of the group show because it draws connections to other artists and ideologies through outside interpretation rather than actual association. Although Butler brought many women artist to the surface of a major show garnering them unprecedented exposure, the exhibition forever ties these women together as a collective unit in a sisterhood they may have never elected to join in the first place.

The false consciousness emerging from the hegemonic relationship between the museum institutions and artists through group exhibitions tied to gender might still feel a bit like the original Marxist ideology that engaged exclusively with upper class citizens outside of the realm of the working class as Gramsci envisioned when he reevaluated the concept. However, these larger institutional practices and belief systems have a trickle-down effect on average working-class people, and this can be illustrated through the relatively new term of “slacktivism.” The Oxford English Dictionary defines slacktivism as “The practice of supporting a political or social cause by means such as social media or online petitions, characterized as involving very little effort or commitment.”¹⁰³ With nearly all major museum institutions active across a wide variety of online social media platforms, the displays of false consciousness through gender exclusive exhibitions of these power structures are able to fall under the radar of average people, who initially may not have been part of the overall conversation. These average working-class citizens are then exposed to these carefully curated actions taken by the museums resulting in mostly celebratory emotions in regard to how far

¹⁰³Oxford English Dictionary. Accessed June 15, 2020. <https://www.lexico.com/definition/slacktivism>

society has come in accepting women artists and achieving gender equality. People can share these “feel good” stories across whatever platforms they choose online, thus aligning themselves with and benefiting from, the cultural collateral created by the museum. This rapid spreading of awareness for social causes is undeniably helpful in getting certain issues to “go viral” resulting in an infinitely larger exposure but this online activism has a major caveat linked directly to the false consciousness Gramsci warns about in his research. The concept of false consciousness can be defined as “a distorted and limited form of experience in society that could be applied to all social groups and classes” and in this case used to imply one believes that they are affecting more change than they actually are through minimal participation in a movement.¹⁰⁴ If museums put on these group shows and the press releases are shared online by all classes of people, everyone can celebrate that the goal has been achieved and society as a whole has overcome gender inequality without fully examining the seedy underbelly of why the group show needed to exist in the first place instead of the much rarer career defining solo show for an individual artist. If the institutions of power can utilize “slacktivism” to their advantage, convincing the masses that the problem has not only been solved but the knight in shining armor that defeated the dragon of inequality is in fact the very thing perpetuating the inequality in the first place then nothing changes and no major social justice victories were gained leaving behind only an illusion.

Slacktivism resonates beyond social media and often times spills out into commodities that can be purchased by individuals wishing to align themselves with whatever social movement is being peddled. In terms of museum institutions,

¹⁰⁴ Eyerman, Ibid.

slacktivism can spread past the pages and posts on social media and into the giftshops located within museum spaces. For example, the Brooklyn Museum in New York, home to the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, has a “feminism” tab located on their museum shop website that showcases a variety of pro feminist items available for purchase like, a Judy Chicago Skateboard deck priced at \$350 and a Guerrilla Girls jigsaw puzzle featuring a compilation of the group’s protest slogans for just \$24.¹⁰⁵

Author and social theorist Andi Zeisler, addresses these issues of marketplace feminism and the role they play in the perpetuation of false consciousness in regards to the feminist movement. Zeisler while commenting on the absurdity of women’s underwear with the label of “feminist” across the backside being sold and marketed as a way to join the movement and do one’s part says,

The rise of feminist underpants is a weird twist on Karl Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, wherein consumer products once divorced from inherent use value are imbued with all sorts of meaning. To brand something as feminist doesn’t involve ideology, or labor, or policy, or specific actions of processes. It’s just a matter of saying, “This is feminist because we say it is.”¹⁰⁶

An example of Zeisler’s claims from art that purports a feminist message while being strictly exhibitionist can be found in Kristen Visbal’s bronze sculpture, *Fearless Girl* located in New York City (figure 19). This sculpture was commissioned by large scale financial firm, State Street Global Advisors, to commemorate international Women’s Day in 2017 and in a covert operation placed directly in front of the *Charging Bull* statue, already in place by Arturo Di Modica. *Fearless Girl* is exploitative and damaging to the

¹⁰⁵ <https://shop.brooklynmuseum.org/collections/ea-sackler-center-for-feminist-art>

¹⁰⁶ Zeisler, Ibid.

feminist cause for two main reasons. First, the guerilla style positioning of a sculpture commissioned by a private company whose net worth is valued at over a trillion dollars on public land without any permits or approval provides that company with unmeasurable amounts of free advertising.¹⁰⁷ The second problem with the sculpture has to do with the false narrative of gender equality it creates for the company that commissioned the work. At the base of the sculpture is a plaque commissioned by advertising firm McCann New York that reads, “Know the power of women in leadership... She Makes a Difference” accompanied by the brand’s logo below the quote. According to an article by Jullian Steinhauer for Hyperallergic, neither McCann, who commissioned the plaque, or State Street Global Advisors who commissioned the statue have great track records with actually hiring women and have both been involved in ethically questionable business practices to profit from misleading investors.¹⁰⁸

Although Zeisler’s quote is her reaction to the production and sale of women’s undergarments, and can be connected to art that is commissioned, the same thought process can easily be aligned with feminist skateboards, or more importantly in the labels assigned to artists through the production of group shows centered around social movements framed by gender. If the artists included in these group shows are willing to be featured, labeled, and exhibited in the ways expressed by the curator then there is no harm done. However, as Butler noted, she did in fact choose artists that did not openly identify as feminist and is therefore over-stepping the boundaries of autonomy

¹⁰⁷ Sarah Cascone. “A Bunch of Bull? Wall Street Firm Behind ‘Fearless Girl’ Settles Gender Discrimination Suit.” *Artnet News*. October 10, 2017. Accessed June 9, 2020. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/fearless-girl-settles-gender-discrimination-suit-1110587>

¹⁰⁸ Jillian Steinhauer. “The Sculpture of a “Fearless Girl” on Wall Street Is Fake Corporate Feminism.” *HYPERALLERGIC*. March 10, 2017. Accessed June 9, 2020. <https://hyperallergic.com/364474/the-sculpture-of-a-fearless-girl-on-wall-street-is-fake-corporate-feminism/>

and working to further the hegemonic relationship between institutions of power and those who engage with them. If either Maureen Gallace or Cecily Brown appeared on the roster for this particular group show, their association with this “brand” of women’s art would greatly challenge the narrative they are both working so tirelessly to carve out for themselves as artists. In an interview with Jasper Sharp, at the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Brown gives clear insight into her goals for the escapist narrative she wants her art to convey when describing why she chooses not to engage with subject matter that is too in-step with real-time issues. When explaining why she would not portray a scene like the biblical story, “The Massacre of the Innocents” as a metaphor for contemporary life, Brown says,

I wouldn’t want to depict it and partly because of the horrendous news and just how ghastly the world is and every day is such an onslaught of hideous real life that I think there’s something trite about putting it into art. I mean I think some people manage very well to make topical art that deal with what’s actually happening but I have to go about it in a more round-about way.¹⁰⁹

Brown chooses to align her career with figurative painters that are known for their skill at painting and not for the social causes that they subscribe to. This does not mean that she is in conflict with those social issues but rather that she chooses to keep them separate from her work.

¹⁰⁹ Jasper Sharp. “Cecily Brown in Conversation with Jasper Sharp.” Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien. February 2, 2018. Accessed June 9, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuiaXaJ0TLI>

CHAPTER XIII

JUDITH BUTLER: GENDER PERFORMANCE IN PAINTING STYLE

Gender when used as a means to both include or exclude, along with the power struggle created by the phenomenon of false consciousness, poses the question of where to go from here. Brown and Gallace appear to have both found a loophole to this problem and have opted to change the rules and perform their gender differently. In her book, *Gender Trouble*, American philosopher Judith Butler states, “It seemed to me, and continues to seem, that feminism ought to be careful not to idealize certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion.”¹¹⁰ Butler’s insight that gender is a social construct and individuals perform their gender based on societal norms and standards can be applied to Brown and Gallace in terms of their reluctance to follow given templates for demonstratively feminist artists. Through practice and through creating their individual identities as artists both Gallace and Brown have taken Butler’s advice to heart and are redefining what it means to be both woman and artist.

As is evident in the title of Tate Britain’s 2018 exhibition, “All Too Human: Bacon, Freud, and a Century of Painting Life,” it was in fact a group show whose requirements for inclusion had little to do with gender and everything to do with the engagement of media, in this case, paint. Due to the show being curated by Elena Crippa and housed at the Tate Britain, the artists included were of course, all of English heritage. This qualification may appear to be a bit limiting on the surface, however, a brief investigation of 20th and 21st century painting will quickly reveal that England was

¹¹⁰ Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 1990. Routledge. New York , NY.

brimming with notable painters and was in fact a hotbed for painting as a medium during this time. Although her name was not featured in the title of the show, Cecily Brown along with several other women artists were included and celebrated within the exhibition, not for being women, but for the way that they utilized painting as a means to capture both the human figure and human experience as it relates to their own chosen and performed identity. Crippa treads very carefully in adding her own voice and interpretation on the written narratives of each artist provided in the exhibition guide. For example, when talking about Paula Rego, Crippa focuses on discussing the medium preferred by the artist as well as her painting process, which entails working from live models in her studio.¹¹¹ When discussing the content of Rego's paintings, Crippa is even more careful to express that although women are frequent and prominent subjects in Rego's work, the artist captures her subjects as dynamic characters free from socially established gender limitations and expectations; they are simply human.¹¹² In describing the work of Brown, Crippa notes that the artist is concerned with identity and stereotypical associations of gender but champions Brown as an artist who maintains freedom to choose and define her own identity through a formal approach to painting which is realistically a more ideal alignment with feminism than the *Wack!* exhibition mentioned earlier.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Crippa, Ibid.

¹¹² Crippa, Ibid.

¹¹³ Crippa, Ibid.

CHAPTER XIV

CONCLUSION

As gender performance and definition continues to become more fluid within contemporary society, it is more imperative than ever for artists to seek autonomy over their own work and intentions. If women artists find empowerment through use of sexuality, like Ghada Amer or Barbara Kruger, then they should absolutely have that choice available to them, but it should never be made without their consent. Artists like Brown and Gallace have made it extremely clear that they both want to be recognized for the way that they utilize paint as a medium to be the most prominent defining trait of their artistic careers. Although many artists who are no longer living do not have the opportunity to provide commentary or opinion on how their work is interpreted, Brown maintains an active Instagram account in which she personally posts and comments responses to her followers. On March 14, 2018, Brown posted a snapshot of the *All Too Human* exhibition flyer in which she commented, “Like an art school dream come true.”¹¹⁴ Brown’s post is telling on many levels. On one hand the artist is ecstatic to be included in an era-defining show at a museum as respectable as the Tate Britain. On the other hand, this statement illustrates the defeat of the fear and anxiety Brown noted as having early in her career when she was finishing art school and setting out into the world to be a painter. Not only has Brown arrived as an artist whose work consistently sells in auctions for amounts in the millions, but she has done it on her own terms and with her personal identity intact.

¹¹⁴ Cecily Brown. Personal *Instagram* Account. March 14, 2018. Username DellyRose.

Female painters like Gallace and Brown have taken to a medium once reserved for exclusively for men and laid claim to their own success by refusing to allow tradition to define their practice and achievement. Both artists work in a medium and style not typical of this era and for their gender but in doing so, they blaze a trail for other women and other minorities to find their voice and autonomy in a patriarchal system. Their methods are not angry battle cries for revolution but rather subliminal currents that travel through the power structures and weaken the oppressive ideology so that it becomes susceptible to change before it ever becomes aware of what is happening. Brown and Gallace have spent their careers building their identities and bodies of work to be bigger than their gender and in doing so have sparked a paradigm shift. This shift in ideology and practice will hopefully provide a space for artists regardless of gender to stake out and define their own identity and claim autonomy over their own body of creation. Although there will be artists that wish to utilize gender as a key element of their work, they will be doing so and evaluated as such under the knowledge that it is their choice to do so and not one that is being forced upon them for reasons out of their control. It is the hope that in this new paradigm women who are also artists will be known as just that artists. It is only when the limitations of stereotypical gender specific norms are eliminated that women artists will breach the patriarchy and achieve complete autonomy over their careers and work resulting in full access to participate in an inclusive artworld for all humans.

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APPENDIX

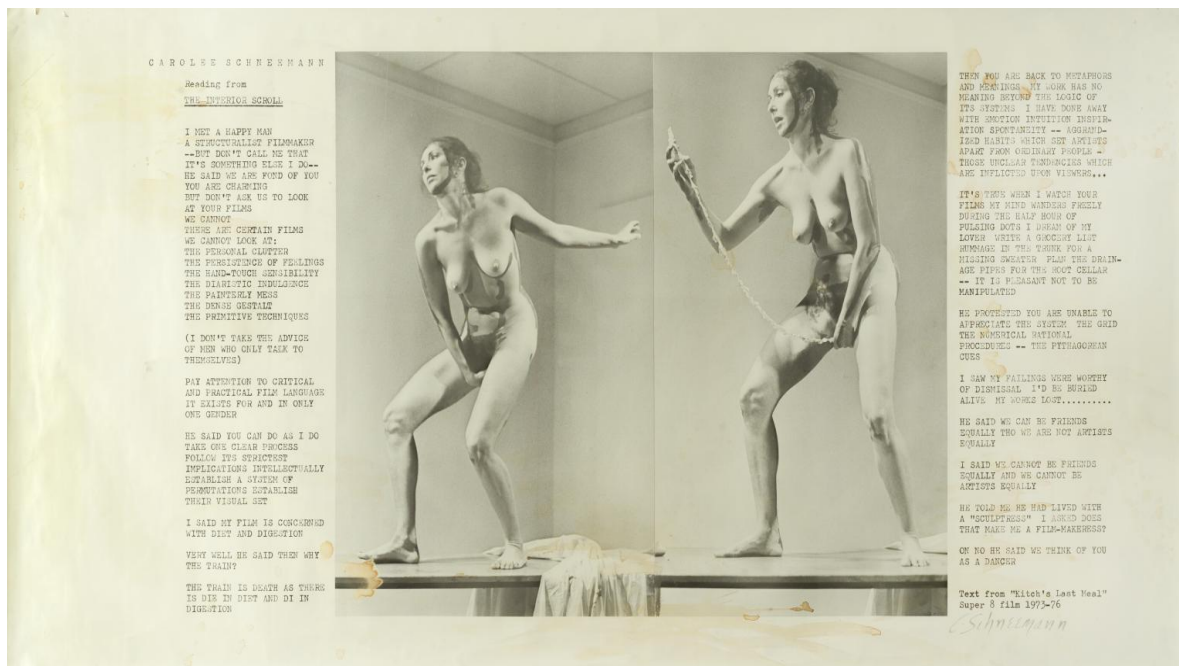


Figure 1 Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, 1975, Performance Still of *Interior Scroll*, ARS, NY and DACS, London



Figure 2 Sarah Levy, "Whatever" (Bloody Trump), 2015, Menstrual blood on mat board, 11.5 x 13.5 in.



*Figure 3 Cecily Brown, When Time Ran Out, 2016, Oil on linen, 77 x 97 x 1 1/2 in.,
Paula Cooper Gallery*



Figure 4 Dana Schutz, Open Casket, 2016, Oil on canvas, 39 x 53 in., New York



Figure 5 Maureen Gallace, Blue Beach Shack, 2013, Oil on panel, 9 x 12 in., Kerlin Gallery



Figure 6 Kehinde Wiley, *Philip the Fair*, 2006, Oil and enamel on canvas, 112 x 86 in.



Figure 7 Kehinde Wiley and Erwin Wurm in "Hi-Fructose: Turn the Page," Exhibition press photograph, 2016, The Virginian Pilot



Figure 8 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1612-1613, Oil on canvas, 78.33 x 64.12 in., Museo Capodimonte, Naples, Italy



Figure 9 *Still-Life with Bouquet of Flowers and Plums*, 1704, Oil on canvas, 92 x 70 cm.,
Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium



Figure 10 Daniel Buren, From and off the windows, 1974, Photograph, Dimensions unknown, Photo-souvenirs: Daniel Buren



Figure 11 Daniel Buren, From Billboard in Manhattan, 1974, Photograph, Dimensions unknown, Photo-souvenirs: Daniel Buren



Figure 12 Helen Frankenthaler, The Bay, 1963, Acrylic on canvas, 6 ft., 8 7/8 in. x 6 ft. 7/8 in., Detroit Institute of Arts

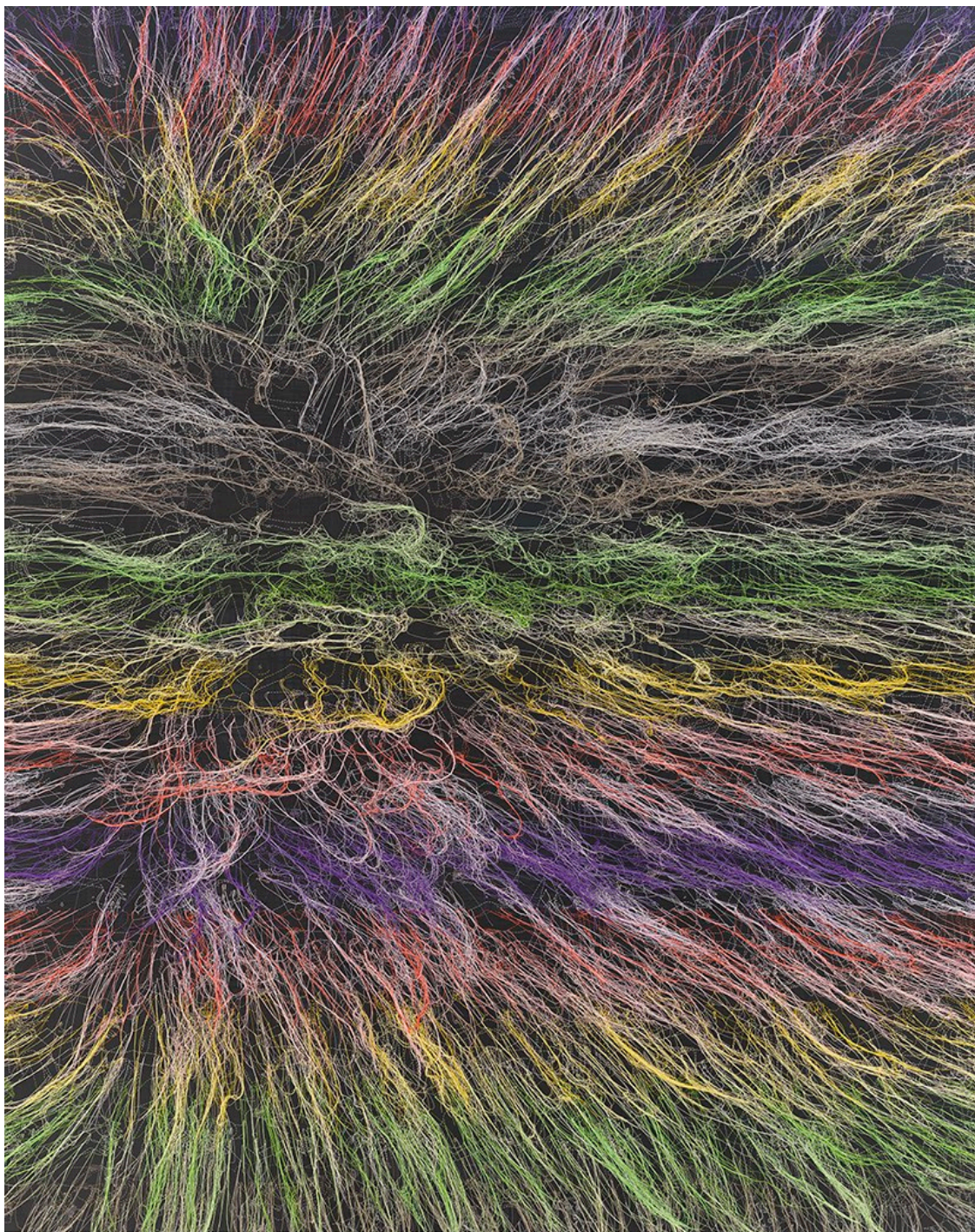


Figure 13 Ghada Amer, Revolution 2.0, 2011, Acrylic, embroidery and gel medium on canvas, 88 x 70 in.



Figure 14, David LaChapelle, *Portrait of Cecily Brown*, 1999, Photograph, *Interview Magazine*



Figure 15 Cecily Brown, Performance, 1999, Oil on linen, 100 x 110 in., Gagosian Gallery



Figure 16 Cecily Brown, Make it Rain, 2014, Oil on linen, 246 x 262 cm.

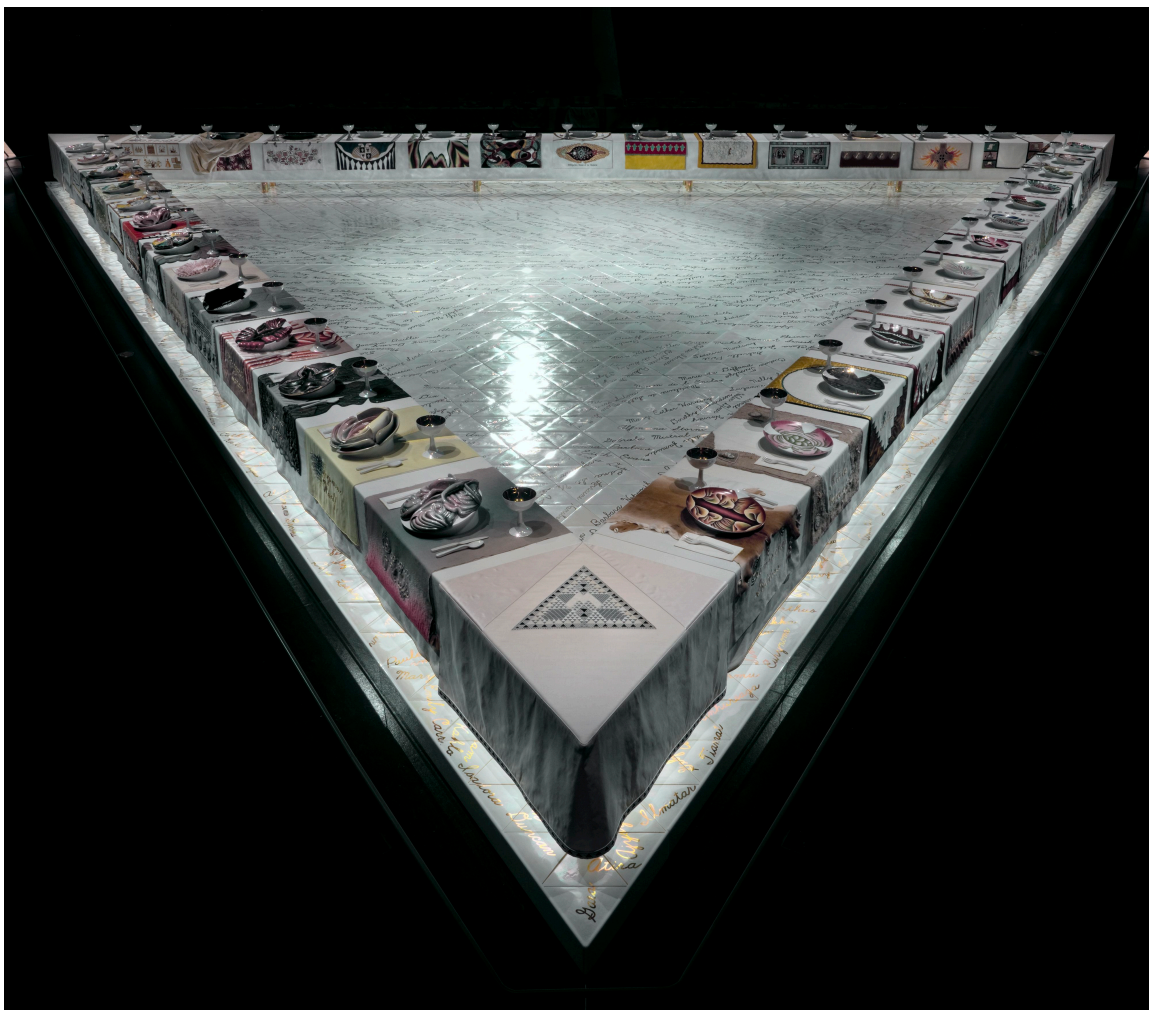


Figure 17 Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1974-1979, Installation, Full Room, Brooklyn Museum of Art



Figure 18 Barbara Kruger, *Your Body is a Battle Ground*, 1989, Graphic Photograph, Los Angeles County Museum of Art



*Figure 19 Kristen Visbal, Fearless Girl, 2017, Bronze Sculpture, 50 in. tall, State Street
Global Advisors*

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