

**BETWEEN FRAMES: FEMINIST EXPERIMENTAL MEDIA 1960-2010**

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### Abstract

My dissertation maps a trajectory of feminist experimental media made between the 1960s and 2010 that explore the boundaries between bodies, spaces and media. I argue that this work constitutes an under-explored area within feminist film and media criticism, which requires renewed critical engagement from an interdisciplinary perspective. I develop a critical frame based on definitions of embodiment, liminality and intermediality from the discipline of performance studies. I focus on how these diverse art works engage with different formal thresholds including those between the art object, artist, and viewer within the exhibition site, and those between moving image, visual art, sculpture and performance. I argue these works pose a challenge to existing definitions of cinematic specificity and expand the significance of the medium.

I provide three comparative analyses of feminist experimental film and media made between the 1960s and the early 2000s. In the first comparison, I read together Carolee Schneemann's film *Plumb Line* (1967-72) and Yvonne Rainer's film *Lives of Performers* (1972). I argue Schneemann and Rainer share a formal aesthetic approach that positions both artists as author and image, employs the body as an art medium and critiques the dynamics of the male gaze within everyday life. In chapter four I consider how Canadian feminist experimental film during the late 1970s and 1980s employed different modes of inter-subjective address. I outline how Patricia Gruben, Brenda Longfellow, Kay Armatage and Midi Onodera construct liminal viewing spaces that blur the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic space in order to

fully engage the viewer. In chapter five I examine the contemporary screen-based art of Shirin Neshat and Eija-Liisa Ahtila. I argue Neshat and Ahtila's use of intermediality includes a feminist critique of cinematic traditions and women's limitations within public and private life.

My dissertation concludes that this trajectory of feminist film and experimental media importantly troubles the boundaries of time and space, presence and absence, and subject and object, and expands the possibilities of the different media involved. I situate this research within the intersecting fields of performance studies and media studies. I aim to bridge the discourses of film and performance together, arguing that each discipline benefits greatly from the insights of the other.

This work is dedicated to  
the memory of my grandmothers,  
Bonnie and Irene.



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“All we wanted was to find a new form, a new way, a release”

(Women Without Men)

## Chapter 1

### Mapping a Feminist Aesthetics of Embodiment, Liminality and Intermediality

#### Introduction

Shary Boyle's 2010 performance *The Monkey and the Mermaid*<sup>1</sup> presents a series of dreamlike vignettes that reflect upon the fragility of childhood and the tenuous but redeeming nature of love. These brief stories come to life through a combination of rear projections, bodies dancing in silhouette, Boyle's hand-drawn illustrations enlarged on overhead projections, and a musical score performed live by composer Christine Fellows and musician Jason Tait. The live presence of Boyle and the musicians furthers the narrative themes and encourages a fleeting, joyful connection between performers and audience. Boyle's illustrations are integral to this sense of connection. Her presence within the shifting and polyvalent *mise en scène* evokes a truly intermedial dynamic between the live and the recorded. In the moments when Boyle is positioned on center stage performing a live animation, the audience bears witness to her intense concentration, her spontaneous reactions to the surrounding environment, and the sense of play she brings to her art. This inter-subjective encounter creates an intimacy that undercuts both the scale and publicness of the performance.

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<sup>1</sup> In April 2010, Images Film Festival in co-presentation with V-tape, premiered the performance at St. Anne's church in downtown Toronto. The work was a collaboration between Shary Boyle and Christine Fellows, with additional musical accompaniment by Jason Tait.

*The Monkey and the Mermaid* engages the surfaces of the domed cathedral where it first premiered, transforming the ornate space into an absolutely *other* space. It is not a cinema, a theatre, or a concert hall, even as it simultaneously enacts all three. Boyle turns the walls and ceilings of the church into screens by moving the projectors in a well-choreographed waltz around the space. She uses reflective surfaces to bounce images across the dome, further illuminating the church's architectural beauty. These moving projections challenge audience expectations of what a screen should 'do' or 'be.' The performance successfully transforms the church into a liminal space. Here nothing is fixed, surfaces and images as well as bodies are multiple and fleeting in the projective illuminations. The boundaries of where an image should be, what a frame should contain, what bodies should and shouldn't be seen are constantly refigured. *The Monkey and the Mermaid* foregrounds both the process-based nature of the performance and the different media it involves. The reflexivity forged between the various media and bodies produces a highly affective encounter with the images, music and narrative.

The performance was scheduled as the closing event of the 2010 Images Festival in Toronto. Boyle's performance also closed the second International Experimental Media Congress.<sup>2</sup> The Congress opened with a collaborative performance between Yvonne Rainer and John Greyson. *The Monkey and the Mermaid* was a fitting bookend to Rainer and Greyson's opening performance.

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<sup>2</sup> The Experimental Media Congress was notably the first of its kind since the International Experimental Film Congress, held previously in Toronto in 1989. The second congress significantly placed emphasis on film *and* media, revealing important shifts in moving image practice and discourse, especially around questions of filmic specificity in the last twenty-two years.



Boyle's work reflects many of the touchstones of Rainer's artistic oeuvre including: an interest in live performance, experiments with narrative, the interrogation of melodrama and affect, the overlap between movement, screen, image, and text, and a commitment to forging a dialogue between audience and artist. The correlations between the work of Rainer beginning in the late 1960s and Boyle's performance from 2010 are not coincidental. Like Rainer's earliest film and performance work, Boyle produces an aesthetic space that is truly between media. As such, *The Monkey and the Mermaid* is a key example of the type of work I examine in my dissertation.

My dissertation studies feminist film and media work that share an aesthetic interest in embodiment in art practice, liminal viewing spaces and intermediality. The dissertation provides three different comparative analyses of experimental film and media works. These include an analysis of films by Carolee Schneemann and Yvonne Rainer, a comparative study of works by Canadian experimental filmmakers Patricia Gruben, Brenda Longfellow, Midi Onodera and Kay Armatage, and a consideration of recent screen-based works by interdisciplinary artists Shirin Neshat and Eija-Liisa Ahtila. By combining different media in a single work, these artists broaden existing notions of medium specificity, expanding the significance of each medium involved. All of these works, like *The Monkey and the Mermaid*, are situated at the borders between various media. Each is equally interested in mining the threshold points between bodies, spaces and media. These thresholds function as markers that frame the passage from one space into another. They indicate a point of entry or a

beginning, as well as the point at which something is felt or comes into effect.<sup>3</sup> In this way thresholds function as a place of possibility. The examples I consider throughout my dissertation each experiment formally with the threshold as a point of passage, a transitional site that refigures women's traditional roles as artists, images and spectators. More specifically, these works explore the threshold between bodies on screen, behind the camera and in the audience; the threshold between diegetic space onscreen, off screen space and the space of the audience; and finally the threshold between media, including that between live and recorded performance, documented and mediated images. I study this particular group of feminist experimental film and media artists together because they share a common aesthetic vision. While feminist scholars have critically discussed the eight artists I consider, there is no existing reading of their shared aesthetic interests. For instance, my analysis of Schneemann and Rainer compares similar formal experiments found in their early films. This is a departure from more conventional readings of the two artists, which often situates them in different aesthetic paradigms. Canadian feminist experimental film of the 1980s is often situated within a broader tendency during this decade towards formal dissonance. My reading of the films, on the other hand, considers the inter-subjective connections (rather than the disruptions) fostered by each film's spectatorial address. My final comparison of the work of Neshat and Ahtila suggests the need for feminist film and media studies to examine moving image media not contained by the traditional film frame and to consider the feminist implications of intermediality. In

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<sup>3</sup> Oxford English Dictionary., s.v. "threshold." <http://www.oed.com/> Retrieved February 20, 2012.

revisiting artists with existing critical histories I hope to point out areas for further development in film and media criticism, specifically around questions of representation, spectatorship and medium specificity. While I am not interested in producing an overarching theory of feminist artistic practices, my engagement with these films and media works seeks to develop an alternative critical lens that highlights the strengths and insights of this particular area of aesthetic experimentation.

The combined work of Schneemann, Rainer, Armatage, Onodera, Longfellow, Gruben, Neshat and Ahtila generate a compelling dialogue on issues of embodiment, liminality, inter-subjective spectatorship and intermediality. However, they do not reflect an exhaustive list of feminist film and media concerned with what I describe as a feminist aesthetics of the in-between. To this end, I briefly consider the work of additional feminist artists at the opening of several chapters in order to highlight that a broader range of artists fit within this aesthetic trajectory. Throughout this and the following chapters I provide additional readings of *Glimpse of the Garden* (Marie Menken, 1957), *My Name is Oona* (Gunvor Nelson, 1969) *Water Sark* and *Reason Over Passion* (Joyce Wieland, 1965 and 1969 respectively), *The Gold Diggers* (Sally Potter, 1983), *DRINK ME, or Alice was beginning to get very tired* (Christine Davis, 2006), and, as mentioned above, *The Monkey and the Mermaid* (Shary Boyle, 2010). Further research and criticism in this area could include the work of a larger number of artists both historical and contemporary, including films such as *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *At Land* (Maya Deren, 1943 and 1944 respectively), *Riddles of the*

*Sphinx* (Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 1977), *Daughter Rite* (Michelle Citron, 1978), *Soft Fiction* (Chick Strand, 1979), *Thriller* (Sally Potter, 1979), *Daughters of Chaos* (Marjorie Keller, 1980), *Covert Action* (Abigail Child, 1984), *Girl From Moush* (Garine Torossian, 1993), *Bright and Dark* (Ellie Epp, 1996), *Like a Dream that Vanishes* and *surfacing* (Barbara Sternberg, 1999 and 2005 respectively), *Jours en fleurs* (Louise Bourque, 2000), *Echo* (Izabella Prushka-Oldenhoff, 2007); videos and video performances including *360°* (Hermaine Freed, 1972), *Birthday Suit with scars and defects* (Lisa Steele, 1974), *Vital Statistics of a Citizen Simply Obtained* (Martha Rosler, 1977), *Hey, Chicky!!!* (Nina Sobell, 1978), *Feathers: An Introduction* (Barbara Aronofsky Lantham, 1978), *Measures of a Distance* (Mona Hatoum, 1988), *The Ballad of Myra Furrow* (Helen Mirra, 1994), *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much* and *I Want To See How You See* (Pipilotti Rist, 1986 and 2003 respectively), *Heal Me* (Hester Scheurwater, 2000); *five more minutes* (Dena DeCola and Karin E. Wandner, 2005); and screen-based media works like *Etant donne le Bleu* (Arghyro Paouri 1992), *Rain Woman (I Am Called a Plant)*, *Gravity Be My Friend* and *Pour Your Body Out* (Pipilotti Rist, 1999, 2007, and 2008 respectively), *Awaken Your Skin* (Wu Meli, 2000-2004), *Erasure* (Ariane Littman, 2011), *Unsubtitled* (Nguyen Trinh Thi, 2012). In future versions of this research I would like to develop my critical frame further to focus on video art, public art, and screen-based installations, as well as consider the specific ways in which these aesthetics are engaged from post-colonial, queer, and trans perspectives. The critical readings I engage in the dissertation function as a starting point for this broader critical project.

Presently I situate my research within developments in feminist film and media studies over the last fifteen years. Since the late 1990s a range of feminist scholarship has addressed an often-noted impasse, or fatigue within the field. In response, feminist film and media scholarship has seen a resurgence of publications and renewed critical interest.<sup>4</sup> Significantly this revival in feminist film and media scholarship has turned its attention to the task of criticism, emphasizing women's film and media practices as a vital part of the academic field. This focus on the scholar-as-critic can be read as a counter-point to the so-called theoretical abstraction that often characterizes feminist film scholarship in the 1980s. In the particular case of feminist experimental media, an additional critical voice is needed to counter the proportionally small focus on this area of production in the last decade. Of the larger list of feminist publications, only two books - *Women's Experimental Cinema* and *Women and Experimental Filmmaking* - are specifically dedicated to experimental practices.<sup>5</sup> Both books include an excellent range of filmmakers in a broad historical frame. However what is missing from these studies is a critical engagement with

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<sup>4</sup> In the last decade several anthologies and special issues in academic journals have published on women's filmmaking practices. See *Visions of Struggle in Women's Filmmaking in the Mediterranean*, ed. Flavia Laviola (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); *There She Goes: Feminist Filmmaking and Beyond*, eds. Corinn Columpar and Sophie Mayer (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2009); Sharon Lin Tay, *Women on the Edge: Twelve Political Film Practices* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); "Camera Obscura at Thirty" *Camera Obscura* 21 1/61 (2006) as well as the on-going section in the journal titled "An Archive for the Future" from this 2006 to the present; Kathleen McHugh and Vivian Sobchack, eds. "Beyond the Gaze: Recent Approaches to Film Feminisms" *Signs* 30 (Autumn 2004); *Women's Cinema: The Contested Screen*, ed. Alison Butler (London: Wallflower Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. Robin Blaetz (Durham: Duke UP, 2007); *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*, eds. Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wexman (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2005). Two other recent publications Columpar and Mayer's *There She Goes*, and Lin Tay's *Women on the Edge* also examine feminist experimental filmmakers but with a specific focus on single filmmakers rather than mapping the aesthetic linkages between filmmakers.

feminist experimental media practices working beyond the boundaries of traditional cinema.

The larger question my dissertation asks is how to read feminist art that fits in-between different disciplinary frames and epistemological projects? What methods can best assess a feminist aesthetic that constantly troubles the boundaries of media, time and space, presence and absence, subject and object? Throughout my dissertation I draw upon insights from performance studies in order to devise useful critical strategies for engaging this specific area of feminist experimental film and media. I apply this interdisciplinary critical frame to my close readings of Schneemann, Rainer, Armatage, Gruben, Onodera, Longfellow, Neshat and Ahtila. No studies to this point have attempted to read a broad range of feminist film and media work from the perspective of performance studies. The strength of this interdisciplinary approach is that it recognizes or highlights additional elements within feminist experimental film and media that may not be fully addressed by the existing critical vocabulary of film and media studies. Shannon Jackson speaks on the value of an interdisciplinary methodology when she notes “the act of placing different genealogies in conversation...[is] helpfully defamiliarizing, exposing as it does some of the critical assumptions, lingering resistances, and perceptual habits” of established disciplines.<sup>6</sup> It is precisely this potential to defamiliarize and expose certain critical habits and legacies within film and media studies that compels me to situate the discipline in conversation with performance studies. Film and media art practices fit

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<sup>6</sup> Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: performing art, supporting publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 3.

well within performance theory's frame of study. As Jackson notes, performance studies is focused on "art events that are inter-relational, embodied, durational," including works composed of "cross-media collaboration across image, sound, movement, space, and text."<sup>7</sup> While Jackson is speaking directly about performance, she describes key elements of film and media as well. Building from Jackson, I read the experimental film and media I am concerned with as durational art founded on a cross-media collaboration between image, sound, movement, space, and text, which emphasizes an embodied, inter-subjective viewing experience. My dissertation elaborates on Jackson's call for an art criticism situated between different media or aesthetic categories, a criticism that does not rely on one singular disciplinary perspective.<sup>8</sup>

Performance studies' interdisciplinarity has enabled the field to incorporate necessary critical interventions by feminist, queer and post-colonial theory as foundational to its methodology. Basing their critical methods within a feminist politics, as well as their openness to multiple objects of study, are two of the greatest strengths of the field. This comprehensive methodological frame could be valuable for feminist film and media studies to consider further. In developing an expanded

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> As an interdisciplinary field, performance studies embraces a wide range of practices within its field of study including: performance art, ritual, everyday performances of identity, media spectacle, politics, public interactions and embodied forms of resistance to name just a few. Performance studies solidified as a discipline in the 1980s with the establishment of independent academic departments at NYU in 1980 and Northwestern University in 1984. The department at NYU merged the complimentary interests of environmental theatre and 1960s experiments in theatre with anthropological studies of ritual. Meanwhile, the Northwestern department developed from a grounding in speech act theory and elocution studies. For a detailed discussion of the emergence of the discipline see Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy From Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004).

critical method for feminist experimental film and media, I draw upon three critical tropes developed in performance studies around the concepts of embodiment, liminality and intermediality. In the rest of this chapter I will define my use of these three key terms. I explore the development of these terms within performance studies and outline their usefulness for feminist film and media studies. I concretize the uses of the terms through readings of films by Marie Menken, Gunvor Nelson and Joyce Wieland. These readings aim to demonstrate the value of employing these concepts in future critical reassessments of feminist film and media.

### Challenging the Disembodied Critic

Embodiment is a useful concept to draw on within performance studies. I am interested particularly in how feminist performance studies situates the critic as an embodied spectator who holds an affective relationship to the works they encounter. This critical self-reflexivity acknowledges corporeality as an important element of the viewing experience and provides a crucial counterpoint to the privileging of transcendence in criticism. Foregrounding one's personal investments and bodily responses as central to the act of criticism is a necessary point of politics for feminist performance scholars. Performance studies has addressed work from this perspective for over twenty years and helpfully provides an example of how to extend notions of critical embodiment into other disciplines.



Jill Dolan's early influential book *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, argues that critics are spectators first and that criticism is predicated on the material act of spectatorship. Dolan reads the feminist spectator as an outsider who "cannot find a comfortable way into the representation," as she is "excluded from its address."<sup>9</sup> For Dolan, a critical feminist politics must recognize that the ideological base of representation has "very specific material consequences" which requires scholars to mark "the differences between spectators positioned in front of the representational frame."<sup>10</sup> Dolan grounds her notions of feminist critical spectatorship in a materialist frame that does not allow a universal female spectator to stand in for the diverse ways in which women experience their position as spectators. The conceptual shift from a broadly conceived female spectator to a critical feminist spectator offers important insights into earlier debates on spectatorship in feminist film theory.<sup>11</sup> For instance, the feminist spectator as critic alters the conditions of Mary Ann Doane's female spectator who is caught in a paradoxical relationship of proximity and distance with the image of woman on screen. For Doane, the female spectator is both alienated from narrative address and over-identified with the objectified image.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in her early work, Teresa de Lauretis situates the female spectator in an impossible duality, occupying the position of the male viewer whom the film addresses while

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<sup>9</sup> Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator As Critic* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1988), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 22-23.

also being pinned by the reductive treatment of women's agency on screen.<sup>13</sup> Dolan's figure of the feminist spectator as critic breaks challenges these impossibilities, shifting the role of spectatorship away from identification and towards a critical engagement with the text. This critical engagement is motivated by the varied material experiences of the viewer, suggesting that there are multiple critical perspectives to be derived from the same work. As such, the feminist spectator de-emphasizes the idea of a singularly gendered viewing figure, opening the category of woman to a wider variety of gendered performances and identifications.

In line with Dolan's feminist spectator, I acknowledge my reading of the artwork in this dissertation as provisional and situated in the specificity of my material encounter with them. The performative dialogue required by critical writing reveals a creative and intimate portrait of our personal response to the art we engage with. In this way, I cannot speak for any other feminist spectator's experience of the work. What I hope is that through from my own position as feminist critic, the dialogue between artists, art works, and critic/spectators develops and transforms in a variety of small-scale, unanticipated directions. As a spectator I seek out and celebrate artists who encourage viewing positions that are unencumbered by the gendered restrictions of more traditional modes of artistic and cinematic address.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, 138-155. This position is complicated in subsequent work by de Lauretis. See in particular *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> I discuss the material consequences of spectatorship in "Materiality and Metaphor: Rape in Anne Claire Poirier's *Mourir à tue-tête* and Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend*," in *Rape in Art Cinema*, ed. Dominique Russell (New York: Continuum, 2010).

Dolan's argument complements Amelia Jones' interest in countering the masculinist imperatives of the disinterested critic through an emphasis on embodied criticism. This critique of the masculinist rhetoric within modernist art discourse is one of the most important interventions made by the field. Jones notes that modernist art criticism often "protected the authority of the (usually male, almost always white) critic or historian by veiling his investments, [and] proposing a Kantian model of "disinterested" analysis."<sup>15</sup> In particular, modernist criticism disguises the investments evoked by a critic's bodily responses to the art they encounter, situating them beyond affective address. Jones argues that by removing both art and critic to a realm of transcendence, modernist criticism ensured artists committed to an aesthetic centered on the body were left out of the discussion. Such oversights were systematically encouraged by a criticism that presented itself as objective, and thus, disembodied. In this model, critics were safely shielded from the challenges and difficult questions posed by feminist art. For Jones, the rhetoric of the disinterested critic refuses the inter-subjective "*engagement and exchange*" that takes place between art and the spectator.<sup>16</sup> As she argues, "our interdependence with our environments asserts the necessary responsibility of the multiplicitous and dispersed, but fully embodied, social, and political subject."<sup>17</sup> Jones' notion of an embodied viewing subject recalls Vivian Sobchack's belief that the lived body, and its corresponding subjective consciousness, are situated in a dialectical relationship with the world. As Jones

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<sup>15</sup> Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998), 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. Emphasis in original.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

argues, in this relationship, each part is engaged with and transformed by the others.<sup>18</sup>

For Sobchack there is no fixed, pure or direct experience but rather “radically material” interactions between our “lived bodies” and “other bodies and things” including technology, history, and cultural contexts.<sup>19</sup>

As Rebecca Schneider points out, this disembodied perspective misses the important intervention made by the ‘explicit body’ of much feminist work from this era. Feminist art emerging “with a certain *en masse* fervor in the 1960s,” was informed by both the ferment of avant-garde aesthetic precursors and a rapidly developing feminist politics. This work made visible “the link between ways of seeing the body and ways of structuring desire” that operated in large part “according to the logic of commodity capitalism.”<sup>20</sup> Schneider argues that feminist art’s “ribald refusal to vanish” as well as its disruption “of normative ‘appropriate’ vision” encouraged a critical reflection on social and cultural inequalities and suggested ways in which these inequalities may be transformed.<sup>21</sup> For both Jones and Schneider, overlooking the role of the body in feminist art practice misses some of the most formative interventions that have shaped aesthetics in the last half of the twentieth century.

The revisionist perspective advanced by performance scholars is equally relevant for the case of avant-garde film criticism, which in the 1960s was closely linked to the work of high modernist critics Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>19</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2004), 4-5.

<sup>20</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3-5.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 6-7

What performance studies suggests, and what existing feminist criticism on avant-garde film echoes, is that the rhetoric of the 'disinterested critic' counters the critical relevance of spectatorship as an implicitly intimate and embodied experience -- an experience actively encouraged by many of the 'explicit body' films made by women during this decade. Performance studies insists that an embodied critical reflexivity opens scholarship up to works that have been dismissed for being *too bodily* in form. This critique is equally applicable to avant-garde film scholarship, as well as early feminist film scholarship, which broadly favored either modernist or realist aesthetics over those centered on explicit female bodies. In the emerging moment of feminist film discourse, the politics and critical aesthetics of many explicit body films were not readily supported. Many women artists who began working in the 1960s faced a double exclusion from these critical histories, largely because their emphasis on the body contradicted critical and theoretical investments at the time.<sup>22</sup> Feminist performance studies' interest in reclaiming the explicit body in performance and visual art seeks to redress similar oversights in art, theatre and performance criticism. It demonstrates an important model for extending a critical appreciation of the explicit body in feminist experimental film and media from the embodied perspective of the 'feminist spectator as critic.'<sup>23</sup> Jones and Dolan's positions suggest that the universal female spectator of early feminist film theory shares with modernist art

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<sup>22</sup> See arguments by Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power, and Politics in the New York Avant-garde Cinema, 1943-71* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Champaign: U of Illinois P, 2003), B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham: Duke UP, 1998), Tamara Trodd, "Introduction," *Screen/Space: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*.

criticism a common discursive veiling of the body. Their situating of the materially situated experience of the spectator suggests the need to develop further reflexive viewing practices for critically engaging with feminist experimental aesthetics interested in the body. It is useful to consider the charges against modernist art criticism made by performance studies when re-examining the contributions of women filmmakers to the avant-garde between the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these artists were expressly challenging modernist notions of both the masculinist artist/hero and disinterested critic through an emphasis on the body and the inter-subjective encounter between art and spectator.

I wish to provide a short example of how this perspective can prove useful by providing a counter-reading to existing criticism on Marie Menken's film *A Glimpse of the Garden* (1957). *Glimpse* is a five-minute color film surveying the extensive home gardens of Dwight Ripley, a personal friend of Menken. The film alternates between sweeping wide shots and intimate, idiosyncratic close ups, accompanied by a persistent and at times unsettling birdsong. In the majority of critical writing on the film three phrases are repeatedly used. It is a "little film," it is "amateur," and it presents a "child-like perspective of the garden."<sup>24</sup> These phrases are found in early reviews by Jonas Mekas in *The Village Voice*, Stan Brakhage in *Film at Wit's End*, and most recently in Scott McDonald's article "Avant Gardens."<sup>25</sup> What is curious

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<sup>24</sup> These descriptors are usefully countered in a more recent reading of Menken's work by Melissa Ragona, "Swing and Sway: Marie Menken's Filmic Events," in *Women's Experimental Filmmaking*, 20-44.

<sup>25</sup> Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: the rise of the new American cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Macmillan, 1972); Stan Brakhage, *Film at Wit's End: Eight Avant-Garde Filmmakers* (Kingston, NY:

about McDonald's reading in particular, is the way he attempts to rescue this somewhat dismissive set of qualifiers from earlier critics as elements inherent to Menken's approach. Rather than questioning the usefulness of these descriptors, he celebrates the fact that she purposefully made an "amateur," "child-like," "little film."<sup>26</sup>

Conversely, I read Menken's treatment of flowers and plants in the film as reminiscent of her early documentation of Isamu Noguchi's sculptures in *Visual Variations on Noguchi* (Menken, US, 1947). Like *Visual Variations*, the presence of the filmmaker is unmistakable in *Glimpse*.<sup>27</sup> It seems as if Menken intentionally makes visible her perceptual experience as she walks through the garden with the camera pressed against her eye. These handheld walking shots are remarkable in the way they index the body of Menken behind the camera. Additionally, static shots of flower bushes convey an impatient vision as they are subject to very quick cuts. When the flower bushes move in the static frame it does not feel natural, but forced, again perhaps by the filmmaker actively 'directing' the plants' action with her own hands.

*Glimpse* engages with the artifice of natural settings in much the same way as Kenneth Anger does in *L'eaux d'artifice* (1953). This exposure of artifice is found in every element of the film's composition and offers insight into the actual complexity of the seemingly simplistic visuals. The camera movements become faster, more

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McPherson & Co., 1991); Scott MacDonald, "Avant-Gardens," in *Women's Experimental Filmmaking*, 208-237.

<sup>26</sup> Scott MacDonald, "Avant-Gardens," 213-214.

<sup>27</sup> For a recent comprehensive reading of the "somatic camera" in Menken's work see P. Adams Sitney, "Marie Menken and the Somatic Camera," *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson*. (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), 21-47.

hurried, leaving no opportunity for the viewer to take in the realism of the garden image. The film is much less about documenting the garden than it is about enacting an impatient pacing about the garden space, one which is often associated with the domestic. The film is deeply conscious of its viewer, placing itself in dialogue with her, conversing on the limits and possibilities of the culturally loaded and gendered site of the garden. This alternate perspective allows critics to value both the intimacy and chaos Menken introduces into the garden setting. The continuous accompanying sound of birds chirping reasserts itself in its most telling form at the end of the film. The sound is both grating and in contrast with the extreme close ups of petals and leaves. The tension between audio and image causes the viewer to contemplate the juxtaposition and its dissonance. The gestures towards artifice and tonal discordance make it quite difficult to read the film as simplistic and engaged in some form of childlike wonder.

My alternative reading of *Glimpse* considers both the implicit dialogue established between Menken's presence behind the camera and the viewers. In this film the camera work is unrelenting, curious, at times frantic and aggressive in its attempt to dissect and reveal the absolute beauty and banality of the garden space. In most readings, however, Menken's signature camera work here (often credited as a formative influence on filmmakers like Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas) is problematically cast as amateur. In contrast, I read *Glimpse* as a deeply ironic film that attempts to undermine the supposed tranquility of the domestic garden setting; a fact made even more prevalent through the disarming birdsong on the soundtrack. My



brief re-reading of *Glimpse* takes seriously performance studies' call to consider the role of the explicit body in feminist art. What may best serve Menken's work and those of her contemporaries, is to now consider what perceptual and critical relations are made visible by Menken's "ribald refusal to vanish" from the screen. What epistemologies are challenged through recognizing the performative and explicit presence of the woman filmmaker's body in this work? This perspective is vital for expanding the critical reception of feminist experimental film and media in the present. To this end, I raise a similar series of questions in chapter three, where an equally explicit use of the artist's body is found in the films of Rainer and Schneemann. The artists' use of their bodies onscreen, behind the camera, and in the editing rhythms and soundscapes of the films, invites a dialogue with the viewer that is predicated on a shared critique of women's limited positions within film production and reception.

Elin Diamond's definition of embodiment points to what is at stake in the inter-subjective exchange found in the work of Menken and others. For Diamond, any form of aesthetic catharsis "situates the subject at a dangerous border" where corporeality (seen through the body's physical responses to a text) threatens to undermine the rationality of language (embedded in the text). This is where "the material body...makes itself felt to consciousness" as an image. This image is a social construction that Diamond calls "embodiment." Embodiment for Diamond is "haunted" by the material body and functions as a sort of trace or index of its

materiality.<sup>28</sup> What is key in Diamond's notion of embodiment is that it is not an actual body but a represented one; we imagine our bodies in relationship to the art we encounter. By placing the viewing subject at the border between their corporeality and the text, Diamond acknowledges the crucial inter-subjective element of spectatorship. Once the embodied spectator imagines herself within the realm of representation, she can freely engage in an inter-subjective exchange with the art *at the level of representation*. Diamond's definition of embodiment helpfully dissolves the boundaries between the separate positions of spectator and art within the viewing space. This places both art and spectator at the border (as Diamond terms it) between the contingency of corporeality and the presumed certainty of the art object.

We can further apply this notion of embodiment to the explicit presence of Menken within *Glimpse*. As I mentioned above, there are many times in the film when you imagine Menken behind the camera guiding the spectator. Menken's use of sound and her restless pacing of the garden push the viewing experience to a place where her corporeality undermines the traditional structures of cinema and the garden. Menken's material body is made conscious as an image in the critic's mind as we imagine her lived experience of the space she documents. I believe this is a useful notion of embodiment for feminist experimental film and media because in a large number of the examples I consider the artist's body clearly functions as an index that haunts the work. Further, it is the artist's body as trace that enables the inter-subjective dialogue with the spectator to unfold. This understanding of an inter-

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<sup>28</sup> Elin Diamond, "The Shudder of Catharsis in Twentieth Century Performance," in *Performativity and Performance*, eds. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (New York: Routledge 1995), 154.

subjectivity grounded in embodied experiences anticipates the notion of liminality that I explore in the following section. If embodiment is the condition of inter-subjective exchange at the level of the viewer, the construction of liminal viewing space provides the site for this exchange.

### Exploring Liminal Space

Definitions of the liminal proposed by performance scholars tend to share several overlapping components. Across the field, the liminal aspect of performance is defined as reflexive, process-based, and potentially transgressive. As an aesthetic strategy and a critical paradigm, it is situated in spaces that according to Jon McKenzie, are “[m]arginal, on the edge, in the interstices of institutions and at their limits.”<sup>29</sup> McKenzie cites performance as a central example of liminality, “whose spatial, temporal and symbolic ‘in-betweenness’ allows for social norms to be suspended, challenged, played with, and perhaps even transformed.”<sup>30</sup> The works I consider in my dissertation construct filmic spaces at the edges of critical institutions and traditional structures of representation, placing the work at the limits of established aesthetic histories. By positioning the liminal as a symbolic site of the “in-between” McKenzie recognizes the possibility for suspension, play and transformation within such spaces. These aesthetic qualities of liminality are

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<sup>29</sup> Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 8

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

prevalent in the work of Schneemann, Rainer, Gruben, Longfellow, Onodera, Armatage, Ahtila, and Neshat, among others.

McKenzie's definition draws on the work of anthropologist Victor Turner who argues the subject of liminal space is held within an ambiguous and indeterminate state, with little to no stability; this is a subject that is "betwixt and between."<sup>31</sup> Positioning a spectator in the liminal space between existing viewing conventions foregrounds their corporeality and the uncertain position they hold within the indeterminate viewing space. In this aesthetic space, the spectator's suspension between normative structures encourages a reflexive process that challenges and transforms traditional viewing practices. Turner describes the liminal as a site of passage, a marginal zone, and "a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state."<sup>32</sup> The spaces I address in feminist experimental film and media works exist as a site of possibility for exploring different structures of representation. These sites construct a different relationship between viewer and artist that neither reflect existing structures of cinema spectatorship, nor anticipate future viewing positions. Set apart in this way, the liminal in art provides a space to re-imagine women's position within traditional sites of representation and reception.

I read the exploration of liminal space in feminist experimental film and media as an attempt to place viewers in a transitional state of provisional and immanent engagement. This space casts spectators as witness to the audiovisual

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<sup>31</sup> See Victor W Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*," in *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967.

<sup>32</sup> Turner, "Betwixt and Between," 94.

projection. There is a need to read these liminal viewing spaces as important sites of investigation within experimental feminist aesthetics. This perspective opens a new range of questions particularly for feminist works that have not been fully accounted for by existing critical frames. This frame is useful for a film like *My Name is Oona* (1969) by Gunvor Nelson, which has been largely overlooked by feminist film criticism. In the following reading of the film, I consider specifically how Nelson formally and thematically addresses issues of liminality from her dual position as filmmaker and mother.

*My Name is Oona* is Nelson's unconventional portrait of her daughter Oona during her transition from girl to adolescent. Nelson captures the ephemeral quality of Oona's developmental "in-betweenness" through a rhythmic collage of her daughter's image and voice. The film's form reflects Oona's personal transformation by producing an equally liminal film space. This formal mirroring evokes a sense of forward pushing momentum within the film frame that is similar to Oona's headlong movement toward young adulthood. The film's construction of a transformational aesthetic space is one of the strongest formal elements in the work.

The film's first image is a close-up of Oona looking directly at the camera and smiling. It is a blown out image of Oona's face in a frame of white bright sunlight. She seems to be floating in a nowhere space. As an establishing shot, it does not provide a recognizable space; instead, it places viewers in an uncertain and groundless position. The audio starts towards the end of this opening shot with Oona stating, "My name is Oona." The declaration provides the foundation of the film's

audio track. The repetition of this statement throughout marks it as a performative utterance used by Oona to assert her emerging identity. The opening sequence is followed by a series of fleeting shots of Oona, on rich high contrast black and white film, running in and out the frame, interspersed with sections of black leader. The audio repeats Oona's assertion of her name over and over, punctuating the images and becoming a chant that echoes and overlaps as it gets louder. The chaos and frenzy of Oona's energy on screen and in her voice-over is palpable. This section establishes Oona's willful drive; she is both playful, and, seriously determined, even in these moments of play. Again, the images provide no grounding in a specific location. Viewers remain suspended while watching Oona in this space of transition.

In the next visual sequence Nelson presents a negative film image of a large tree rendered as a white mass of branches and leaves against a black sky. This reversal of the film image further disorients the viewer's sense of space, bringing forward an *other* space that only exists in the material in-between of the film's chemical processes. The transition from the material imprint of light on a filmstrip to a chemically transformed image is seen in the negative print projected onscreen. The camera travels through these otherworldly trees as the soundtrack asserts over and over again "My Name is Oona...Oona...Oona...Oona." The formal merging of Oona's assertion with these images of nature turned inside out is compelling. The motion of the camera passing through the trees dissolves into a superimposition of Oona's face as she looks downwards in quiet concentration. This is cut with more images of Oona running wildly back and forth in front of the camera, almost as if she

is taunting it. Here, the repetition of “Oona” gets louder, becoming a relentless, rhythmic assertion in varying intonations. Viewers are given a sense of Oona’s intensity both through the physical movements and her aural utterance(s).

The tone of the film changes in the next sequence where Oona and a boy around the same age are wrestling. Here the echo of her name lessens to only one voice in repetition. The image of Oona and the boy is in slow motion; their shirtless skin is highlighted against the dark background. There is something both innocent and sensual about the encounter, indicating that Oona is starting to shift away from non-sexual play, even if not yet consciously. This is marked as well by a shift in the audio, which now includes a track of Oona reciting the days of the week. The new audio bridges the film into another visual sequence of Oona and her horse. This section is made up of close-ups of Oona moving in and out of frame as she prepares her horse for a ride. The way Nelson frames her daughter in this sequence similarly reveals Oona’s spirit of serious determination. Nelson’s portrait of her daughter as a willful woman with a grounded sense of self was, and is, a rare vision of young adulthood.

The final set of images frames Oona in a cape, riding her horse, backlit by a sunset. Once again Nelson superimposes different images of Oona, this time including slow motion close-ups of her in action. Oona rides away from the camera, and in the last rays of sunlight looks very much like an otherworldly figure in transition. This sense of transition is underscored by the audio of Oona, who gradually gains more confidence as she struggles to list the days of the week in their

proper order. She begins with an uncertain questioning in her voice but continues trying until she can recite the days quickly and correctly. Some images in this section are out of focus and very dark, it seems as if Oona is melding with the landscape she rides through. And yet, she seems to never lose her purposeful concentration or curiosity. A new audio layer of "My name is Oona" emerges just at the point in the visuals when it seems like Oona is unearthed and about to fly away (from both the camera's gaze and her mother's grasp). This audio track includes many new and different intonations of the statement including one that slowly drags out the four words, and another that is quick and certain. The audio builds to a crescendo of echoing "Oonas" that sound like a chorus singing. This audio lessens as the spectator encounters a final vision of Oona smiling gently as she looks into the camera and, it seems, directly toward her mother. The look is kind, curious and self-assured. It is a breathtaking snapshot of someone in the midst of becoming. Oona's certainty in this image reassures the viewer, who has to some degree taken on the anxiety that Nelson conveys with her searching camera. This image is held to the end of the film as a final audio track emerges while the other tracks fade away. The final audio is of Nelson singing a Swedish lullaby, which continues through the credits only to fade out as the image goes to white.

Nelson constructs a transitional and ambiguous film world in order to mirror the transitional space of her daughter's world. Her portrait of this transformation comes across as loving, uncertain, and at times distanced. It reveals Nelson's attempt to understand her daughter's emergence as a separate, willful being. Through her



formal experiments, these complex feelings are shared with the viewer. The strength of the piece is found in Nelson's honest presentation for the viewer of a rare but important moment in both her and her daughters' lives. The film captures the connected rituals of Oona's personal development and Nelson's mourning of a passing version of Oona. By inserting her own voice at the end of the film, Nelson completes her elegy to the passage of time and to the intangible space between her love and yearning for her daughter and Oona's move towards independence. The overlapping audio and superimposed visuals impart this difficult space of limbo. The film offers a sense of formal liminality that challenges what is possible in film, especially with regards to representing mother-daughter relationships during an acute moment of transformation.

Jackson speaks to the notion of liminality in her discussion of the ambiguous separation between performance and its environment. She is interested in how performance foregrounds the audience as a part of its aesthetic form, framing an "inter-subjective exchange, not as the extraneous context...but as the material of performance itself..."<sup>33</sup> By refiguring performance in these terms Jackson importantly asks "What if performance challenges the strict divisions about where the art ends and the rest of the world begins?"<sup>34</sup> I ask a similar question about film and media works that undermine the divisions between diegetic onscreen space and the space of the spectator. These works formally frame inter-subjectivity as a material basis of the work and equally challenge the divisions between the site of projection and that

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<sup>33</sup> Jackson, *Social Work*, 27.

<sup>34</sup> Jackson, *Social Work*, 27.

which surrounds it. This is the aspect of liminality that I am most interested in pursuing in my study of feminist experimental film and media. I believe that it provides a generative place to contemplate how such work opens up new possibilities for seeing women's roles within art practice, reception and criticism differently.

### Expanding the Frames of Medium Specificity

A final intervention that is useful for feminist film and media studies is the challenge posed by performance studies to notions of medium specificity. Scholars in the field have re-interpreted Michael Fried's work, questioning both the logic of his aesthetic criteria and his critical legacy. In "Art and Objecthood"<sup>35</sup> Fried asserts that art needs to overcome itself as an object in order 'to be truly transcendent.' For Fried, the most offensive element of Minimalist sculpture (the direct subject of his critique) is how it foregrounds material objecthood as central to its form. Minimalist sculpture does not encourage a state of transcendence because viewers are made aware of the work's material presence, and by default, their bodily relationship to it. Fried reads minimalism's interest in the interaction between viewer and object as "theatrical," and it is this theatricality that turns minimalism into a "negation of art."<sup>36</sup>

Performance studies takes issue with, and, transforms Fried's claims that "what lies

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998), 148-172.

<sup>36</sup> Maurice Berger, *Minimal Politics: Performativity and Minimalism in Recent American Art* (Baltimore MD: University of Maryland, 1997): 11-12

between the arts is performance,” into a celebration of the theatrical, or, the performative across avant-garde art.<sup>37</sup>

Maurice Berger argues that Fried’s condemnation of Minimalism misses a crucial question, namely, why did “theatrical space and time” become a central aesthetic concern within the 1960s avant-garde.<sup>38</sup> Performance studies scholars read Fried’s polemic as a key instigator in the epistemological crisis that enveloped the New York art world in the 1960s. In this light, performance and body art (among other movements) posed a challenging counterpoint to high modernism’s edict of transcendence. Reading the 1960s New York avant-garde from this historical perspective singles out the important impact feminist assertions of the *body as medium* had on the art world. Performance studies recognizes this as a moment when the affective relationship being between art and viewer was actively interrogated, a point that would have far reaching consequences in the decades that followed.<sup>39</sup>

The immediate consequence of this critical position against Fried is that it opens up a new set of questions of experimental or avant-garde art from the 1960s. Rather than evaluating an artist’s work within the set categories outlined by critics at the time, scholars may now begin to assess why particular artistic endeavors didn’t fit within existing categories and ask what those anomalies tell us about that historical

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<sup>37</sup> Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 163.

<sup>38</sup> As such, Fried’s critique is “one of the most cogent arguments for [minimalism’s] ‘theatrical’ nature.” Ibid., 10.

<sup>39</sup> As Jones notes, body art’s ability to de-center ‘the Cartesian subject of modernism’ is “the most profound transformation...of what we have come to call postmodernism.” *Body Art*, 1.

moment. This perspective acknowledges the significance of artists moving away from transcendence and towards new forms of immanence at that time.<sup>40</sup>

Recent film studies debates around medium specificity in the context of the digital age have concentrated on the indexicality of celluloid film. While there are many important concerns around film and its threatened obsolescence, it is vital that scholars also look more broadly at film's interrelationship with other media. One important area of study is the role film practice played for visual artists over the last fifty years, especially within on-going experiments in expanded cinema, paracinema and screen-based installations.<sup>41</sup> Building upon existing scholarship in this area of film studies, I wish to consider the forms of intermediality explored by feminist film and media artists. There is a need to study further how other art practices informed the film work of many feminist experimental artists who were often overlooked during the formation of the New American Cinema canon in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>42</sup> For instance, Menken, Nelson, Joyce Wieland, and Carolee Schneemann all began their careers as painters and visual artists, while Yvonne Rainer and Chick Strand began as dancers and choreographers. One benefit of this research is that it

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<sup>40</sup> This critique of Fried's work usefully extends performance studies' focus beyond performance art proper to include an examination of the performative in all art. Performance studies reads this move towards performativity, particularly in the 1960s, as a shift directly intent on undermining the separation between the arts that Fried championed. This is a rhetorical position engaged with by many early critical champions of the New American Cinema Movement developing within the same historic and cultural milieu of New York avant-garde modernism within which Fried was writing.

<sup>41</sup> See for example Jonathan Walley, "The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film," *October* 103 (2003): 15-30 and "Identity Crisis: Experimental Film and Artistic Expression," *October* 137 (2011): 23-50; George Baker, "Film Beyond Its Limits," *Grey Room* 25 (2006): 92-125; Alison Butler, "A deictic turn: space and location in contemporary gallery film and video installation," *Screen* 51.4 (2010): 305-323.

<sup>42</sup> For a specific example of this history see the feminist critique of Anthology Film Archives in Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, 150-183.

reconsiders the misplacement of certain artists into experimental film categories that do not best represent their overall approach to film. For example, early avant-garde film criticism often situates Joyce Wieland as a structuralist filmmaker. While films like *Sailboat* (1968), *1933* (1968), and *Solidarity* (1973) certainly share structuralist traits, the label does a disservice to the breadth of Wieland's filmic oeuvre.<sup>43</sup> Notably, a film like *Water Sark* (1965) cannot be explained or fully engaged through this frame. Existing readings of Wieland's filmmaking and *Water Sark* in particular have already addressed the narrow-scope of this early categorization. Kay Armatage reads the film as a poetic feminist treatise and an empowering exploration of woman's body.<sup>44</sup> Paul Arthur situates it as a reflexive "performative self-portrait" which comments ironically on the domestic setting of the kitchen.<sup>45</sup> I read *Water Sark* as successfully constructing a compelling dialogue between film, painting and sculpture. The film is not structuralist, lyrical, or mythopoeic (the three most common terms applied to films during the 1960s and 1970s). Rather, it is highly intermedial. Like Menken's work, it has a roving, animated, and performative camera eye. However, unlike Menken's presence behind the camera in *Glimpse*, Wieland explicitly represents her body within the camera's frame.

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<sup>43</sup> While I take exception here to the categorization of Wieland as a structuralist filmmaker this in no way minimizes the important contribution made by early experimental film scholars, and P. Adams Sitney in particular, who were instrumental in advocating for the importance of American avant-garde cinema and for developing formative critical frames. Developing terms such as structural, lyrical or mythopoeic was an important initial step in the development of this criticism. See P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 2002).

<sup>44</sup> Kay Armatage, "The Feminine Body: Joyce Wieland's *Water Sark*," in *Canadian Woman Studies* 8 1 (1987): 84-88; "Fluidity: Joyce Wieland's Political Cinema," in *The Gendered Screen: Canadian Women Filmmakers*, eds. Brenda Austin-Smith and George Melnyk (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2010), 95-114.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Arthur, "Different/Same/Both/Neither: The Polycentric Cinema of Joyce Wieland," in *Women's Experimental Cinema*, 53-61.

I want to briefly define the concept of intermediality before expanding upon it my reading of Wieland's work. Dick Higgins first employed the concept of intermedia in 1963 when making an important distinction between intermedia and multi-media. With intermedial work 'there is a conceptual fusion,' whereby it is not possible to 'separate out the different media in an integral way.' Thus the visual element is "inseparable" from textual, audio, or live/recorded elements.<sup>46</sup> This is different from multi-media work, which places various media alongside one another without any sense of integration between them. The 1960s is often characterized as "the beginnings of an 'intermedia' condition," with the rise of screen technologies in the visual arts and the consequent loosening of the borders between film and art practice.<sup>47</sup> Within theatre and performance studies, definitions of intermedia are grounded in a notion of change. Specifically, scholars outline how intermedial work enacts changes within media, the viewing experience and larger knowledge paradigms.<sup>48</sup> As Freda Chapple argues, "intermediality is about the process of becoming something else...it is about moving to inhabit different philosophical and aesthetic spaces that reside, touch and are located in-between media."<sup>49</sup> Karen Savage echoes this sense of residing in the in-between in her definition of intermediality as "a process between artists, materials, ideas, exhibition and audience,' which includes "a

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<sup>46</sup> Higgins took the term from a lecture delivered by Samuel Taylor Coleridge sometime between 1812 and 1814. Dick Higgins and Nicholas Zurbrugg, "Looking Back," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 21 2 (May 1999): 24.

<sup>47</sup> Tanya Leighton, *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader* (London: Tate, 2008), 13-14.

<sup>48</sup> Freda Chapple, "On Intermediality," *Culture, Language, and Representation* 6 (2008): 7-8.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

crossing, a boundary, a gap, another space.”<sup>50</sup> Savage’s definition is reminiscent of the concept of the threshold that I outline above. For Savage a work cannot be intermedial without the dissolution of the boundaries upheld by different media. She argues, “through the deconstruction of traditional artistic boundaries there is a contamination of the traditional spaces and a challenge to the ways in which work is made and received and discussed.”<sup>51</sup> Chiel Kattenbelt usefully argues that intermediality is inherently performative as it “is very much about the staging (in the sense of conscious self-presentation to another) of media.”<sup>52</sup> As a consequence, these performative “interrelations between media” redefine and alter “pre-existing medium-specific conventions...allowing for the exploration of new dimensions of perception and experience.”<sup>53</sup> The field’s critical interest in intermedial exchange is incredibly useful for film and media studies, particularly in the case of screen-based art exhibited beyond the traditional movie theatre. This focus on dissolving media boundaries and altered codes of representation and reception is key for engaging such works.

Wieland’s film *Water Sark* is an intermedial work that formally refashions both the still life painting and Dadaist sculpture within the cinematic frame. Early in the film there is a recurring image of a table that is set with flowers in a vase, a teapot and a glass of water. Combined in this setting, the objects resemble the scene of many

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<sup>50</sup> Savage, Karen, “Black to White: The fading process of intermediality in the gallery space,” *Culture, Language and Representation* 6 (2008): 165-166.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-168.

<sup>52</sup> Chiel Kattenbelt, “Intermediality in Performance and as a Mode of Performativity,” in *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, eds. Sarah Bay-Cheng, et al. (Amsterdam UP 2010), 29.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

traditional still life paintings. In *Water Sark* however, these objects are splintered in the reflective surfaces of broken mirror shards and distorted through glass placed in front of the camera lens. Wieland transforms the still life and undermines its position in the history of art through a playful cinematic gaze. The still life is not longer static, with Wieland's camera it is fragmented into close ups of petals and leaves, each altered by various framing devices.

Towards the end of the film a hand in a large rubber glove bats around a toy boat. In this nonsensical gesture to Dadaist readymade sculpture the everyday is made absurd. Wieland appropriates Dada's aestheticization of banal everyday objects, placing the practice within the specific space of her kitchen. Like the still life, the legacy of Dada is undermined by Wieland's presence as woman artist and by her use of film to complicate the principles of the readymade.

The majority of the images in the film include a mirror reflection of Wieland using the camera. This formal trope reveals the usually absent body hidden behind the camera as a central subject of the film.<sup>54</sup> *Water Sark* seeks a dialogue with the audience through the dual address of Wieland's camera eye *and* her body on display. As a film about the explicit body, Wieland's work precedes the video performances of Vito Acconci and Chris Burden that arose with the invention of closed circuit video technology in the 1970s. Like Gunvor Nelson, Wieland explores liminal space, transforming the overwrought site of the domestic kitchen setting into a space of

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<sup>54</sup> Here I would agree with Robin Blaetz's reading of both Menken and Wieland as artists who included a sense of wit and irony in their work. This is something I believe is clearly manifest in the reflexive camera movements present in both films. See Blaetz, "Introduction," *Women's Experimental Cinema*, 7-9.



creative play. The film asserts a certain frustration with the domestic, but also explores the kitchen as a potentially surreal, interior, and *other* space. This treatment of the kitchen as a liminal zone challenges popular views of domestic space as a site of constraint. *Water Sark* illustrates how different media forms can be brought together within film in order to dissolve disciplinary boundaries. This blurring between the still life, the readymade and the self-portrait in *Water Sark* reveals Wieland's feminist critique of authorship, spectatorship and the limited position of women in filmic and everyday space. These negotiations between film, visual art and performance in Wieland's work provide further insight into her contributions and influence on feminist film practice.

In discussing the important aesthetic overlaps between performance art and visual art discourse, Jackson argues that there is "a kind of experimental chiasmus across the arts" within which "the breaking of one medium means welcoming the traditions of another."<sup>55</sup> I believe a similar observation can be made about the chiasmus between the moving image and performance. What Jackson is careful to recognize is that "cross-arts collaboration means different things as projects integrate some art forms, revise other art forms, and often break from the traditions of their own art practice by resuscitating the art traditions of others."<sup>56</sup> This is a compelling observation in the context of my overall investigation of feminist experiments with intermedia. Each of the artists I study in this dissertation forge a relationship with other art practices in order to break with cinematic traditions. It is precisely the

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<sup>55</sup> Shannon Jackson, *Social Works*, 2.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

aesthetic interaction with the principles of other media that help artists like Schneemann, Rainer, Longfellow, Gruben, Armatage, Onodera, Ahtila and Neshat revise and resuscitate cinematic principles from a feminist standpoint. Further research in this area may consider what elements of visual and performing arts are equally challenged and resuscitated within feminist experimental media. Performance studies' purposeful reclamation of artistic practices eschewed by Fried suggests the importance of asking what drew artists, beginning in the 1960s, towards the integration of painting and sculptural traditions with film and performance. In my dissertation I demonstrate how this perspective usefully alters our historical mapping of feminist experimental film and media practices.

## Conclusion

“For the mirror which is delegated to her as the special locus of female subjectivity reflects back to her as she is in the process of theorizing her own, untenable situation under patriarchy.”<sup>57</sup>

Upon entering the site of Christine Davis' installation *Drink Me, Or Alice Was Getting Very Tired* (2005), the spectator is confronted with a projection screen made up of densely packed white roses. The tactile beauty of the screen invites the viewer forward just as the rabbit hole invites the main character Alice forward; both enter together into an unknown space. The viewer watches as Alice first, falls down the

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<sup>57</sup> Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, “Introduction,” in *Re-vision Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1984),14.

rabbit hole, and then, rips and eats pages of *Alice in Wonderland* upon landing. The simple sequence is revealed through 24 slides projected in slow cross-dissolve across the rose filled screen. There is a warmth and richness to the images that evokes the dreamlike state of the diegetic world. The slow transformation of Alice's face and gestures, played out across the screen of roses, is seductive and captivating. Alice's body exists in an impermanent state -- with every slide dissolve her features transform and blur into the contours of the rose petals, after which, an entirely different image of her emerges. *Drink Me* is a photographic performance of a work of literature, which is exhibited as cinema (24 slide frames) and projected onto a sculptured screen. As such Alice and (the viewer) reside in an intermedial space that blurs the borders of reality and fiction, media and environment. It is notable that Alice consumes her own narrative and that she eats it rather than drinks it (as the title commands). Alice is a resistant image who alters her own narrative while in the midst of continuous transformation. Like the other works considered in my dissertation *Drink Me* is situated between the traditional boundaries of representation, spectatorship, and disciplines. It shares the formal strengths of these other works, successfully pushing the boundaries of cinema through an exploration of the textured, sculptural projection screen. The figure of Alice interrogated by Davis' work also points to larger questions around resistant language and the function of thresholds within feminist experimental aesthetics.

The looking-glass metaphor was a popular trope of 1970s and 1980s feminist thought, referring to both Alice's journey through it, and to Virginia Woolf's

observation that women serve as “looking glasses...reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.”<sup>58</sup> For Woolf, women’s role as mirrors convinces men of their superiority on a daily basis, noting, “mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action.”<sup>59</sup> However, women’s use of language provides a site of feminist possibility. Woolf argues that if women speak and begin “to tell the truth, the figure in the looking glass shrinks...”<sup>60</sup> This possibility is also suggested by Alice’s journey in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). In the story, Alice leaves her comfortable, yet confining, room to explore another world of her own imagination. In her journey through the looking glass, Alice falls into an in-between space; not entirely unlike the structures of her lived reality, but not governed by the same rules. While she struggles to find her position in the society on the other side of the mirror, she makes creative interventions through language that change her status there. In *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, de Lauretis commends the fictional Alice on her refusal “to be caught up in her own reflection,” and on her ability to play the logic of language against its masters during her journey through the mirror.<sup>61</sup> Like Alice, the feminist art I map in this dissertation also imagines new arenas for women, spaces that enable a different set of aesthetic rules. This art successfully turns the looking glass inwards rather than standing as a mirror for male desire. The work engages in a formal reflexivity that presents a more varied set of women’s images to the feminist spectator in the audience. The looking glass

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<sup>58</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1989, 35.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t*, 2-3.

has often discursively reduced women to objects of vanity; images with no lived presence or agency. Yet, as Davis's work reveals, it can also been an evocative figure for a feminist aesthetics based on embodiment, liminality and intermediality.

In her study of body art, Jones concentrates on "practices which enact subjects in 'passionate and convulsive' relationships."<sup>62</sup> The experimental media I trace across the following chapters are equally engaged in passionate and convulsive relationships with the traditions of art history, the codes and spaces of representation, and with the viewers and critics of the work. Both the bodies of the artists as well as the bodies on and off the screen work against a masculinist history of art criticism, viewing practices and representation. These refigured bodies don't do what they are supposed to, they defy what is expected of them, they are slippery, and contesting, they won't comply or go away. They are bodies that sit on the thresholds between what is acceptable and required of them and that which is not yet imagined for them. They threaten prevailing gender structures and cultural order with a sense of uncertainty. This dissertation then is a history of ill-fitting women; those artists, spectators, and images on screen that are always held in uneasy and unsatisfying positions within film criticism and its established canons.

In the end this is perhaps the most important trait shared by these various works – together they map out a series of women who don't fit, who are all larger than the frames of representation as well as cultural and critical categories which seek to contain them. Whether it be a lonely mermaid wandering through haunting

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<sup>62</sup> Jones, *Body Art*, 1. Here she is building upon Antonin Artaud's use of the phrase in "Theatre of Cruelty" which she quotes at length in her introduction.

dreamscapes, a woman with a camera roving through a pristine garden, a young girl running headlong into a new phase of her life, a woman filming herself with plastic wrap around her head, or a woman reframing the conditions of her own story, each refuses to comply with the norms of femininity required of them. These are women who instead move between spaces, borders, and the contested lines of art and culture. They dwell in the thresholds, suggesting the possibility of alternative spaces and subject positions. In seeking points of connection and collaboration with the audience these works build new forms of inter-subjective engagement that are often fleeting and provisional, undermining the fixity of traditional viewing positions. These fluid and changing formal elements may be what we need to celebrate the most in these works as they reflect the provisional and mobile dynamics of feminism within art and everyday life.

## Chapter 2

### The Critical Histories of Yvonne Rainer and Carolee Schneemann

“At any time, there exist different perceptions of the same reality, or material expressions of coexisting and often conflicting realities. That which does not fit has too often been dismissed, delayed, or rendered invisible.”<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

In this chapter I outline a critical approach to feminist experimental film and media that draws on the work of feminist performance scholarship. As the previous chapter indicated, constructing a critical frame for art that is situated at the threshold of different bodies, spaces and media requires a method that is itself between the boundaries of different disciplines. I look to feminist performance methodologies in order to develop an expanded critical frame for feminist experimental aesthetics. I ground this research in a comparison of the different ways film and performance studies approach the work of Carolee Schneemann and Yvonne Rainer. Schneemann and Rainer’s foundational feminist works in film and performance art have been of great interest to feminist film and performance scholars for a long time. Feminist

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine de Zegher, *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and From the Feminine* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1996), 21.

criticism in both disciplines has often developed in conversation with either Schneemann or Rainer's work.

My comparison addresses several key oversights within feminist film studies' critical accounts of Schneemann and Rainer. I focus on the disproportionate scholarly emphasis on Rainer, in contrast to the virtually non-existent critical treatment of Schneemann.<sup>2</sup> I argue that this disparity reflects a need for the discipline to revisit questions of the explicit female body, spectatorial address and intermediality in feminist film. Performance studies' writing on Schneemann and Rainer explores these areas of feminist aesthetics in greater detail. They revalue the explicit representation of women's bodies in feminist art, reformulate the 'female' spectator as an embodied feminist spectator, and locate aesthetic crises in the early 1960s avant-garde as greatly informing contemporary intermedial feminist media. This perspective helpfully provides a more comprehensive perspective on the subsequent feminist experimental work that followed Schneemann and Rainer's lead. From the conclusions of this comparative analysis, I propose my own critical methodology for addressing feminist experimental work at the borders of different formal methods and disciplines.

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent recent account of the critical oversight of Schneemann's work see Marielle Nitoslawska's film *Breaking the Frame* (2012)



## Contrasting Discourses on Schneemann and Rainer in Film and Performance

I begin my comparison with an overview of Rainer and Schneemann's disparate critical treatment in feminist film studies.<sup>3</sup> I contend that early feminist film discourse largely established the critical focus within the field and influenced the subsequent treatment of Rainer and Schneemann's films in more recent decades. It is important to examine this early critical attitude more closely for what it left out in order to build an expanded critical focus in the present moment. Through this re-examination, critics may begin to see the overlaps between Schneemann and Rainer's oeuvres.

Feminist film studies has historically focused a great deal of critical attention on Rainer, celebrating her formal challenges to cinematic narrative conventions and spectator relations. Feminist film theorists situate Rainer's work within the radical avant-garde politics of the 1970s and 1980s and describe it as being both rigorously formal and a touchstone example of the feminist 'theory film.' In contrast, the same feminist critics have often dismissed or overlooked Schneemann's films, particularly during 1970s and 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Few have discussed her film work, and those who do, overtly criticize a perceived narcissistic and exhibitionist use of her own body on screen.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I draw largely upon feminist film criticism from the late 1970s and 1980s, and benefit greatly from the historical perspective of the ensuing forty years.

<sup>4</sup> With the exception of B. Ruby Rich who was a rare defender and programmer of Schneemann's film works since the late 1970s. For further reference see footnote 17 below.

<sup>5</sup> This is not confined to Schneemann's treatment in film criticism but in art criticism as well. Schneider notes that Schneemann's repeated focus on female sexuality and her own body caused her to be

Feminist film scholars often cite Rainer's career as an index of the shifts and transformations in avant-garde aesthetics and politics over the last forty to fifty years.<sup>6</sup> de Lauretis argues that Rainer's work was "[p]roduced at the intersection of" various "creative and critical practices" including "the avant-garde and the women's movement, filmmaking and theories of representation and spectatorship, performance art and psychoanalysis, autobiographical writing and the critical study of culture."<sup>7</sup> As such, Rainer's oeuvre allows for "a sustained exploration" of key formal and political concerns across these particular decades.<sup>8</sup> I argue that Schneemann's work is also situated at a variety of intersections between her creative and critical practices. She is similarly involved with avant-garde and feminist movements, and is equally concerned with questions of representation and spectatorship, performance art, psychoanalysis, autobiography and the critique of culture. As I will demonstrate below, early feminist film scholarship's critical alignment with political modernism influenced their interest in Rainer's formalism. It is precisely these theoretical alignments that obscured Schneemann's artistic contributions to feminism, as they did not fit within these popular frames.

A brief survey of feminist film publications highlights these deeply contrasting critical histories. In the *Camera Obscura* archive only three articles

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frequently "dismissed as self-indulgent and narcissistic by the art establishment" Schneider, *Explicit Body*, 31.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Teresa de Lauretis "Strategies of Coherence: Narrative Cinema, Feminist Poetics, and Yvonne Rainer," in *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 265-286; B. Ruby Rich, Introduction. *The Films of Yvonne Rainer*. ed. Yvonne Rainer. (Bloomington: Indiana UP 1989), 2-4.

<sup>7</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, "Forward," *The Films of Yvonne Rainer*, vii.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

mention Schneemann, and all three have been published since 2003. None of these articles focus on her work specifically but rather mention her within a broader context. In Blaetz's article "Rescuing the Fragmentary Evidence of Women's Experimental Film," Schneemann is included in a list of filmmakers whose work Blaetz believes deserves greater critical recognition and preservation efforts.<sup>9</sup> In Melinda Barlow's piece "Feminism 101: The New York Women's Video Festival 1972-1980," Schneemann is mentioned in a footnote on the historiography of living artists, specifically referencing Schneemann's treatment by Kristine Stiles.<sup>10</sup> Finally, in "Imagining Future Gardens of History," Jackie Hatfield recognizes Schneemann's expanded cinema and performance work as central to a history of film.<sup>11</sup> Rainer, on the other hand, is referenced in thirty-four articles as a leading feminist experimental filmmaker. These articles include extensive close reading of her early films, an interview with the artist in the 1976 inaugural issue, and a stirring piece by Rainer herself in the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary retrospective special issue.<sup>12</sup> The journal *Wide Angle* provides a more sustained analysis of Schneemann in the 1998 special issue "Femme Experimentale" on women's experimental film. The issue features an interview between Schneemann and Kate Haug, Caroline Koebel's formative article "From Danger to Ascendancy: Notes Toward Carolee Schneemann," as well as four

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<sup>9</sup> See Robin Blaetz, "Rescuing the Fragmentary Evidence of Women's Experimental Film," *Camera Obscura* 21 3/63 (2006):155.

<sup>10</sup> Melinda Barlow, "Feminism 101: The New York Women's Video Festival 1972-1980" *Camera Obscura* 18 3/54 (2003): 31.

<sup>11</sup> Jackie Hatfield, "Imagining Future Gardens of History" *Camera Obscura* 21 2/62 (2006): 185.

<sup>12</sup> See "Mulvey's Legacy" *Camera Obscura* 21 3/63 (2006):167-170.

additional articles in that cite Schneemann<sup>13</sup> While Rainer is not discussed as extensively as Schneemann in the journal, her own reflections on the critical reception of her films in “More Kicking and Screaming from the Narrative Front/ Backwater,” was published in a 1985 issue.<sup>14</sup> Between 1977 and 2010 *Millennium Film Journal* published eleven separate articles either written by Rainer or that contain sustained references to her work. Schneemann is referenced in six articles during the same time frame.<sup>15</sup> However, more recently, *Millennium* publicly addressed Schneemann’s critical oversight through a special focus section in their Fall 2011 issue.<sup>16</sup> The section is comprised of seven critical articles on Schneemann including a reprint of David James’ comprehensive reading of *Fuses* and J. Carlos Case’s more recent close reading of *Plumb Line*. Both these readings reference feminist politics within their analysis, but neither is grounded in a specifically feminist framework. Despite the fact that both films deserve further consideration from a feminist perspective, such scholarship is often rare and far too brief.<sup>17</sup> In the

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<sup>13</sup> See Kate Haug, ed. “Femme Experimentale,” *Wide Angle* 20 1 (January 1998). The issue includes discussions on Barbara Hammer and Chick Strand as well.

<sup>14</sup> Yvonne Rainer, “More Kicking and Screaming from the Narrative Front/ Backwater,” *Wide Angle* 7 1/2 (1985): 8–12.

<sup>15</sup> On Rainer see *Millennium Film Journal* 3-9, 14-18, 25, 30, 31, 35-36; On Schneemann see *Millennium Film Journal* 7-11, 14-18, 19, 35-36.

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth White, ed. “Focus on Carolee Schneemann,” *Millennium Film Journal* 54 (Fall 2011): 22-91.

<sup>17</sup> For existing discussions of *Fuses* B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham: Duke UP, 1998), 19-29; Kate Haug, “An Interview with Carolee Schneemann,” *Wide Angle* 20 1 (Winter 1998): 20-49; Caroline Koebel, “From Danger to Ascendancy: Notes Towards Carolee Schneemann,” *Wide Angle* 20 1 (Winter 1998): 50-57. Also see M. M Serra and Katherine Ramey, “Eye/Body: The Cinematic Paintings of Carolee Schneemann,” in *Women’s Experimental Cinema*, 103-126, for an overview of Schneemann’s entire oeuvre, including short summaries on *Fuses* and *Plumb Line*; for a discussion of *Fuses* from performance studies see Schneider, *The Explicit Body*, 66-77.

following chapter I address the lack of feminist criticism on Schneemann's films in my reading of *Plumb Line*.

In addition to feminist and avant-garde film journals, feminist book-length publications in film studies reveal an even greater imbalance in the critical reception of the two artists. Between 1974 and 2000, twelve separate discussions of Rainer appear in books written by feminist film theorists, including close readings of her films by de Lauretis, Judith Mayne, Annette Kuhn, Patricia Mellencamp, Lucy Fischer and E. Ann Kaplan.<sup>18</sup> Schneemann is discussed in a passing reference in just one of these publications.<sup>19</sup> Only B. Ruby Rich provides close readings of both Schneemann and Rainer in *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement*.<sup>20</sup> In the book Rich recounts a screening of *Fuses* where the audience was so offended by the sexual acts portrayed onscreen that Schneemann locked herself in the projection booth to avoid an angry confrontation with them.<sup>21</sup> Rich's account provides a very tangible example of Schneemann's at times hostile reception from feminist film circles.

The close readings of Rainer in these books share an interest in her critique of narrative conventions and her formal address of the female spectator. Rainer is often

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<sup>18</sup> For close readings of Rainer see Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (1982) 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Verso, 1994), 163-171; Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women's Cinema* (Princeton, N.J.; Princeton UP, 1989), 301-329; Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1990), 73-85; Patricia Mellencamp, *A Fine Romance: Five Ages of Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1995), 184-187; Teresa de Lauretis *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1987); E. Ann Kaplan, *Women & Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methune, 1983), 114-125.

<sup>19</sup> Schneemann is discussed briefly in Lucy Fischer's reading of Stephanie Beroes's film *Recital* that included a quote by Schneemann in the film. Fischer, *Shot/Countershot*, 127-128.

<sup>20</sup> B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks*, 19-28 (Schneemann), 129-155 (Rainer).

<sup>21</sup> Rich, *Chick Flicks*, 21.

cited in these readings as part of a group of feminist filmmakers (alongside her contemporaries Sally Potter, Lizzie Borden, Michelle Citron and Chantal Akerman) who were redefining the conditions of cinematic form and narrative address. For de Lauretis, Rainer's films provide a compelling re-inscription of the woman's look and reflect a feminist cinema that formally explores the deep contradictions of gender.<sup>22</sup> For Annette Kuhn, Rainer's films are a clear example of the rise of oppositional feminine writing (or *écriture féminine*) in film.<sup>23</sup> For Rich, Rainer's films offer a "redefinition of melodrama for our time."<sup>24</sup> The extent to which Rainer is referenced by feminist film texts demonstrates her centrality within the feminist film canon. Conversely, Schneemann's absence from this critical discourse reveals not only her specific marginalization, but also several areas of hesitation within feminist film criticism. The hostility towards Schneemann's vision of sexuality and the support of Rainer's experiments with narrative, melodrama and the filmic gaze, point toward the field's priorities between the 1970s and 1980s.

In contrast to the unequal treatment of Rainer and Schneemann's work in film studies, performance studies engages with Schneemann much more comprehensively, displaying a balanced critical approach to each artist's contributions. Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975) is often heralded as a definitive example of early feminist performance art. In feminist performance criticism, Schneemann is celebrated rather than excluded for her use of her nude body. Rainer, in her multiple roles as dancer,

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<sup>22</sup> de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, 272-277.

<sup>23</sup> Kuhn, *Women's Pictures*, 163-169.

<sup>24</sup> B. Ruby Rich, "Introduction," *The Films of Yvonne Rainer*, 4-9.

choreographer, and performer, is also celebrated as an influential feminist artist. Her earlier dance works are often cited as historical examples of the emergence of minimalist performance.

A survey of articles published in performance studies journals confirms that there is much less disparity in the critical writing devoted to each artist within the field. For example, *Women and Performance* has included five articles dedicated to Schneemann and eight on Rainer.<sup>25</sup> In *The Drama Review* (TDR) citations of each artist between the 1960s and the present are also relatively equal.<sup>26</sup> In *Performing Arts Journal* (PAJ) Schneemann is cited approximately eighty times, while references to Rainer are included in close to one hundred articles. While the citations in *TDR* and *PAJ* do not include extensive readings of either artist, they all situate both Rainer and Schneemann as important figures within the development of American performance art since the 1960s. The number of times each is referenced in all three journals attests to the relatively equal level of recognition accorded to their influence within the field.

While close readings of Rainer and Schneemann are relatively sparse, a growing number of feminist performance studies books include substantial readings of their work. The authors often situate their overall discursive project in relation to either Schneemann or Rainer's work. The early and formative work of Schneider, Jones and Peggy Phelan provides three clear examples of a critical frame that address

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<sup>25</sup> Rainer is referenced in 27 articles and Schneemann in 14. More sustained engagements with their work in the journal number eight and five articles respectively. This summary shows a much more balanced critical history between them.

<sup>26</sup> Both are referenced just under twenty times each.

Schneemann and Rainer's use of the explicit female body, feminist spectatorship and intermediality. In *The Explicit Body in Performance*, Schneider singles out Schneemann's work *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera* (1963) as the first feminist body art performance. Schneider situates Schneemann's early emphasis on bodily materiality and sexuality as a formative "entry into issues at the heart of contemporary feminist performance art and the explicit body."<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Jones begins *Body Art/Performing the Subject* with an epigraph by Schneemann and references her as a central example of body art in her introduction. For Jones, Schneemann's use of her sexualized body poses a vital challenge to the modernist artist as an exclusively masculine subject.<sup>28</sup>

Phelan studies Rainer's feminist critique of women's misrepresentation in cinema as a central case study in her book *Unmarked: the politics of performance*.<sup>29</sup> Rainer's decision not to visually represent her central female protagonist in *The Man Who Envied Women* (1985) exemplifies Phelan's interest in the unmarked elements of cultural production.<sup>30</sup> For Phelan, that which remains unmarked radically undermines the politics of representation. The unmarked cannot be commodified, co-opted or reproduced in the same way as more visible forms of dominant culture. In this way the unmarked in art resists, refuses, and most importantly provides the possibility of an alternative means of expression. It highlights what has been made invisible, and in

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<sup>27</sup> Schneider, *Explicit Body*, 31.

<sup>28</sup> A challenge Jones pursues in various forms throughout the book. Jones, *Body/Art*, 242 fn 7.

<sup>29</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked: the politics of performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 28.

<sup>30</sup> The unmarked is defined as the forms of film, theatre, painting, photography, performance art and protest, which challenge dominant definitions of the gaze as well as "the seen and the unseen." She continues: "with every mark, the unmarked summons the other eye to see what the mark is blind to – what the given to be seen fails to show, what the other cannot offer." Phelan, *Unmarked*, 27.



turn destabilizes any notion that representation is certain and totalizing.<sup>31</sup> For Phelan, Rainer's film provides a very clear example of this theoretical premise.<sup>32</sup>

As Jones, Schneider and Phelan's work shows, Schneemann and Rainer are embraced by performance scholars for completely different reasons: Schneemann for the explicitness of her representations of women's image, and Rainer for her removal of women's image altogether. This dichotomy upholds the oppositional positioning of Schneemann and Rainer's formal approaches in other fields, and especially within film studies. However, all three theorists are keenly aware of the limitations placed on each artist by critics and address this clearly within their readings. All three theorists read Schneemann and Rainer as broadly interdisciplinary artists, importantly situating their oeuvres in the spaces between film, theatre, painting and performance. As a consequence, Schneemann is given a critical support in performance studies that she has not been accorded by feminist film studies. Performance studies identify and outline Rainer's important negotiations with filmic space and the politics of visibility to a much greater degree than feminist film scholars. I build upon these particular critical insights in my own readings of Schneemann and Rainer in the following chapter.

In assessing the critical oversight of Schneemann in feminist film studies it must be noted that there is a temporal disparity between the production and exhibition Schneemann's films and the emergence of feminist film discourse in the academy.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 32. Phelan argues, "precisely because the gaze is "not-all, representation cannot be totalizing." 27.

<sup>32</sup> For Phelan this is most clearly seen in the ways the film contemplates "the usefulness of the term "woman" as a category for visible being." Ibid, 28.

Schneemann completed her last film, *Kitch's Last Meal*, (the final section of her *Autobiographical Trilogy*) in 1978, just as feminist film studies was establishing itself as an academic field. Schneemann's work at this point moved to video, a medium not as fully explored by early feminist film scholarship. At this point her earliest films were over ten years old. This temporal gap may account for why her film oeuvre was not forefront in feminist scholars' minds at the time.<sup>33</sup> This is in marked contrast to Rainer, who only began making films outside her performance work in the early 1970s. Rainer's film career thus coincides with the rise of feminist film studies as an institution. Rainer's films functioned as a more immediate reference point for a variety of feminist debates unfolding at this time.<sup>34</sup> While this gap between the production of Schneemann's film and the emergence of feminist film studies as a coherent project is valid, many key catalogues of feminist film published in the early 1970s also excluded Schneemann's work. This is perhaps due to the overwhelming focus in the catalogues on narrative and documentary. However, Schneemann films were being shown within the swell of feminist film screenings and retrospectives curated at this time and clearly constituted a part of feminist film history even if they were not fully acknowledged. This makes her omission from this history even more

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<sup>33</sup>David James notes "In practice, neither the mobilization of a women's alternative cinema nor even women's intervention in the avant-garde was...easy" as collective feminist film groups did not fully emerge until "the mid-seventies" despite the fact that this moment was "prefigured...by numerous interventions by women in previous oppositional cinemas...[however] [i]n each instance women were marginalized within already marginalized subcultures." As such, "these women's film could only come into being as a sub-category among but also within pre-feminist marginal cinemas. Each had to distinguish itself against the male discourses that surrounded it, against the sexism that was systemic in the mass media, but also endemic among the independents" David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1989), 313-314.

<sup>34</sup>Judith Mayne argues precisely this in "Theory Speaks," in *A Woman Who...Essays, Interviews, Scripts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999), 18-26.

important to explore further. Recent anthologies on women's experimental film including *Women's Experimental Cinema* (2007) and *Women & Experimental Filmmaking* (2005) redress this problem by including close readings of both Rainer and Schneemann.<sup>35</sup>

It is notable that this critical oversight of Schneemann occurred during the same period that feminist critics celebrated Rainer for her 'radical formalism.' While Rainer's work does not employ the same explicitly sexualized female imagery, it does not mean that Schneemann's sexual explicitness is any less formally radical.<sup>36</sup> Rainer's films are also situated in-between established cinematic categories, namely those between narrative and non-narrative, text and performance, melodrama and the avant-garde. However, Rainer's overt challenges to classical Hollywood narrative and her refashioning of melodrama better reflected two of the key concerns of feminist film studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In what follows I will examine particular critical readings of Schneemann and Rainer from both feminist film and performance studies looking specifically at the three areas of oversight noted above – the explicit body, the embodied critic within liminal space and intermediality. I hope to demonstrate the useful ways in which performance studies challenges the critical categories Schneemann and Rainer were placed within by early feminist film studies.

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<sup>35</sup> See for example Serra and Ramey, "Eye/Body," 103-126; Noël Carroll "Moving and Moving: From Minimalism to Lives of Performers," in *Women's Experimental Cinema*, 53-61; Maureen Turim "The Violence of Desire in Avant-Garde Films," in *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*, 71-90; Patricia Levin, "Yvonne Rainer's Avant-Garde Melodramas," in *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*, 149-176; Scott MacDonald "Avant-Gardens," 208-238.

<sup>36</sup> An interesting future critical project would be to consider different interpretations of the sexually explicit body put forward by feminist filmmakers during the 1970s and 1980s, including Schneemann, Rainer, Barbara Hammer, Chick Strand, Annie Sprinkle, and Monika Truet, among others.

## Representing The Explicit Body

I believe the main reason for Schneemann's dismissal by early feminist film theory was due to her exploration of the explicit female body -- a subject that was problematic for many feminist critics at the time. The cornerstone of early feminist film criticism is the sexist representation of woman in dominant cinema.<sup>37</sup> Regardless of method, institutional or national affiliation, early texts similarly critique woman's image in cinema as rooted in an oppressive cultural paradox. In foundational essays from the 1970s the cinematic image of woman is described as iconographic, ideological, stereotypical, naturalized.<sup>38</sup> She is a "patriarchal projection," a reflection of male desire, the "ground" of all "cultural exchange", and a spectacle on display.<sup>39</sup> She is both abstract and absent - a 'hybrid of cultural distortions'<sup>40</sup> that signifies sexual difference and the objectified 'other' of man.<sup>41</sup> Feminist film scholarship in the 1970s was tied to the grassroots politics of the women's movement and lent its critical support to women filmmakers who legitimated the political aims of the movement. Dissatisfied by this prevalence of sexist images in film, feminist critics

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<sup>37</sup> See for example Joan Mellen, *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film* (New York: Horizon Press, 1974); Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974); Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus* (New York: Avon Books, 1973); Claire Johnston, *Notes on Women's Cinema* (London, Society for Education in Film and Television, 1975); Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 3 (1975): 6-18; Patricia Erens, *Sexual Stratagems: The World of Women in Film* (New York: Horizon Press, 1979); Doane, *Femmes Fatales*; de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*; Mayne, *Woman at the Keyhole*; Kaplan, *Women and Film*; Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures*.

<sup>38</sup> Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," in *Notes on Women's Cinema*, 2-3.

<sup>39</sup> Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 6-18.

<sup>40</sup> Rosen, *Popcorn Venus*, 19.

<sup>41</sup> Following Mulvey's publication of "Visual Pleasure" the image of woman is most often understood as being structured by the cinematic apparatus and most importantly through a tri-partite (male) gaze.

sought out films that countered the female as spectacle. For some critics this included promoting the positive images of women found in many documentary and narrative films produced by women in the 1970s. However many feminist film scholars who shared a commitment to psychoanalytic and semiotic theory were critical of these positive images as they failed to address the broader sexism inherent within the cinematic apparatus. British feminists Claire Johnston and Laura Mulvey both emphasized the need to not just interrogate the image of woman on screen but the entire ideological construction of dominant cinema in culture. This critique set the stage for the majority of feminist debates within film studies over the next decade. Feminist filmmakers radically invested in exploring the explicit female body were not easily embraced within this discursive history. For instance, the type of avant-garde formalism encouraged by Mulvey challenged pleasurable or eroticized representations of women in film. Further, the feminist use of psychoanalytic critical models cast artists exploring women's sexuality in film as naïve at best. This critical setting explains how artists like Schneemann were readily overlooked.

For Schneemann, early feminist theory situated the erotic only in relation to patriarchy, wherein: "female sexuality is inhabited and constructed by male need, desire, control, and therefore cannot escape internalizing the phallicized projection of femininity as the place of absence, void, and the abject."<sup>42</sup> This projection of femininity as abject is what Schneemann sought to counter in her work. A central argument found across her oeuvre is that "the life of the body is more *variously*

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<sup>42</sup> Carolee Schneemann, *Imagining Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 24.

expressive than a sex-negative society can admit.”<sup>43</sup> Schneemann describes a critical climate in the 1970s where feminist theorists, “proclaimed my body-identified work as ‘essentialist and naïve,’ as being less significant in comparison to a whole list of work by other women they recognized and engaged with.”<sup>44</sup>

Bruce McPherson argues in his introduction to Schneemann’s *More Than Meat Joy* catalogue: “Schneemann is a miner of the hidden, the unseen, the stolen and misappropriated. By striking close to taboo, she uncovers unconscious anxiety in the social matrix, constructs of self buried and denied.”<sup>45</sup> As McPherson makes us aware, Schneemann’s assertion of the erotic body in film resonates with a particular anxiety of early feminist film criticism and 1970s feminism more generally. The consequence is that Schneemann’s films were overlooked, kept out of the canon and misrepresented in critical literature as essentialist.<sup>46</sup> This tension between the artist and the discipline shows both a crucial area of oversight in the field and a potential site of possibility for future feminist film criticism to explore.

While Rainer’s formalism is often seen as conceptually challenging for its audience (a fact which makes it all the more celebrated by some feminist film critics), Schneemann’s constant exploration of specifically taboo subjects complicates critical receptions of her work. In earlier works like *Fuses* Schneemann engages in explicit

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<sup>43</sup> Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics*, 24.

<sup>44</sup> Schneemann argues that while no feminist film theorist has ever contacted her, David James, Scott MacDonald, Gene Youngblood and Robert Haller have written on the early film work. *Imaging Her Erotics*, 197.

<sup>45</sup> Carolée Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works & Selected Writings* (New Paltz, NY: McPherson & Co, 1979), vi.

<sup>46</sup> In interview with Linda Montano, Schneemann states: “My work presents particular difficulties because its source and its forms examine eroticism; but that can also be used against it. The content can be used to trivialize the formal complexity.” *Imaging Her Erotics*, 134.

heterosexual acts which were almost unanimously read as both essentialist and self-objectifying. Schneemann's embrace of taboo subjects is present in latter works as well. In *Vulva's School* (1995) Schneemann performs a monologue as a vulva that insists on being heard amongst the competing discourses of semiotics, Marxism and psychoanalysis. Like the earlier embrace of her nude form, this work challenges the institutionalized frames of feminist film scholarship. Further, *Vesper's Stampede to My Holy Mouth* (1992) documents Schneemann's erotic relationship with her cat Vesper, alongside a graphic critique of female genital mutilation. This work pushes past many spectators' level of comfort with representations of sexual intimacy. These thematic challenges may be another reason why her work has been historically overlooked by feminist film criticism.<sup>47</sup> And yet, this rationale does not convincingly defend Schneemann's broader exclusion as a vital contributor to feminist experimental film and media. Rainer has also embraced charged thematic topics including lesbian sexuality, racism and white privilege, cancer, menopause, aging and sexuality. This shared exploration of taboo subjects raises the question of why some feminist taboos are deemed laudable and embraced by feminist scholars, while others are avoided.

In contrast to film studies, performance scholarship has routinely celebrated Schneemann as a paradigmatic example of feminist body art – a practice central to the feminist frames of the discipline. Early in *The Explicit Body in Performance*,

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<sup>47</sup> Schneider does explore these later works and their foregrounding of the quotidian banality of base human desires in *The Explicit Body* (see specifically 46-49). Schneider argues "Her work causes cultural assumptions about the natural and the unnatural to ricochet against their own projections, off the screen of her own body, the scene of her art, the seen of her everyday life, into a kind of critical relief." *Ibid.*, 50.

Schneider praises Schneemann's sustained representation of herself as "both artist and object."<sup>48</sup> In the book, Schneider critically recovers Schneemann from the charges of essentialism waged at her. Schneider does not deny the presence of essentialism in Schneemann's work. However, she reads Schneemann as being deeply conscious of how social structures determine the contradictions and possibilities of women's position in dominant culture. Schneider outlines how Schneemann's work enacts an "Irigayan 'double gesture,'" which "simultaneously embraces essence and social construction."<sup>49</sup> For Schneider, Schneemann's embrace of essentialism is "strategic," as she actively encourages the uneasy position between essence and social construction in her work.<sup>50</sup> Schneider observes that feminist artists like Schneemann "present their bodies as dialectical images," prompting the audience "to take a second look."<sup>51</sup> These dialectical images reveal what they are meant to mask or hide, offering "a counter-history" to the illusion that the image projects. This dialectical image, or double gesture, reveals what is required of an image to maintain its illusion. In this way, the dialectical images enacted by Schneemann "can be read back against pervasive mythos of nature, value and social order."<sup>52</sup> While few feminist film critics see both of the sides at play in Schneemann's work, Schneider insists on reading Schneemann as encouraging this dialectic. Methodologically, the double gesture and the dialectical image are key critical concepts for understanding how the female body can be usefully situated as subject and image within feminist experimental film and

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<sup>48</sup> Schneider, *Explicit Body*, 29.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>51</sup> Schneider here is drawing on Walter Benjamin's use of the dialectical image. *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



media. These two related ideas encourage an entirely different critical attitude towards what has been deemed essentialist in feminist art and opens feminist film studies up to a range of works that have been historically overlooked due to their exploration of the explicit female body. Schneider's intention to recover Schneemann from the charge of essentialism, instead situates her work in active dialogue with the cultural limitations of femininity. Feminist film and media studies need to take seriously Schneider's observations on the dual nature of Schneemann's engagement with essentialism. This is especially vital for dealing with Schneemann's films beyond *Fuses*. In the following chapter I apply the notion of the 'double gesture' to a reading of her film *Plumb Line*.

Beyond Schneemann's films, this critical perspective has a broader application for feminist media art that engages with the body as dialectical image.<sup>53</sup> For instance, Rainer is equally interested in the explicit female body,<sup>54</sup> even if this is not immediately apparent in existing readings of her work. Part way through *Film About A Woman Who* (1974) a woman is slowly stripped bare by two pairs of hands during a lengthy voice-over monologue. The viewer cannot escape the erotic charge of the undressing as it is thrown into conflict onscreen with Rainer's attempts to de-eroticizing the image through voice-over and text. A similar foregrounding of the explicit body is found in a pivotal section in *Lives of Performers* (1972) where the character of Valda performs a piece of choreography that displays her bodily

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<sup>53</sup> This is already evidenced in Schneider's discussion as she situates the concept of the dialectical image between a joint discussion of Schneemann and Annie Sprinkle. See Chapter 1 of *The Explicit Body*.

<sup>54</sup> However it is in a formal manner quite different from Schneemann's use of the body.

eroticism and vulnerability with equal intensity. In the more recent work *MURDER and murder* (1996) Rainer's post-menopausal body and mastectomy figure centrally in the film's comments on women and representation. Feminist film criticism has not fully addressed this aspect of Rainer's work, especially in the early films. This is also an area of Rainer's aesthetic that deserves greater attention and reflects an overlapping interest in the work of Schneemann and Rainer.

#### Reconsidering the Feminist Spectator

A second possible reason for feminist film studies' lack of critical engagement with Schneemann's work is the challenge it poses to the certainty of the critic as a disembodied spectator. Both Schneemann and Rainer foreground the viewer's bodily experience as central in their films. Both experiment with modes of address that complicate the traditionally anonymous and removed position of the audience. In their films, the divide between diegetic space and the space of the audience are blurred, precipitating an intimate, inter-subjective encounter between film and viewer. This prohibits viewers from remaining 'untouched' by the appeals of the film. This element of Rainer and Schneemann's aesthetics has been almost entirely overlooked in critical discussions of their work.

The female spectator is one of the most generative and contested figures within the history of feminist film scholarship. Since the mid-1970s scholars have explored how the female spectator is addressed by both dominant and feminist

cinema. These debates are positioned in response to Mulvey's distinction between an active male spectator, aligned with the male protagonist onscreen, and a passive female spectator, aligned with the objectified woman on screen.<sup>55</sup> Countless scholars have troubled this formula by asking how it applies to actual women spectators in an audience.<sup>56</sup> This widespread interest in defining and delimiting the female spectator sparked a spirited debate (particularly around the Hollywood melodrama) spanning across the 1980s and culminating in a special issue on 'The Spectatrix' in *Camera Obscura* in 1989.<sup>57</sup> Feminist film studies' early approach to spectatorship relied on an abstracted spectator constrained by both psychoanalytic gender binaries and the limited viewing positions afforded to women viewers by classical narrative. This focus directed feminist film scholarship towards a study of women in Hollywood films and conventionally gendered readings of spectator-film relations. What this frame overlooks is the different ways women spectators were and are addressed by feminist experimental cinema beyond the 'passive' position of the filmgoer in the space of the theatre. In addition within these early debates on spectatorship, feminist film critics often failed to situate themselves as embodied (as well as gendered, racialized, class based) spectators connected to the viewing subjects they were

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<sup>55</sup> Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 8-9.

<sup>56</sup> See my discussion of Doane and de Lauretis in chapter one, 11-12.

<sup>57</sup> See E. Ann Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's *Stella Dallas*," *Heresies* 16 (1983): 81-85; Linda Williams, "'Something Else Besides a Mother': *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama," *Cinema Journal* 24 1 (Fall 1984): 2-27; Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane, "The Spextatrix," *Camera Obscura* 7 2-3/20-21 (May/September 1989).

theorizing.<sup>58</sup> Mayne argues that within feminist film debates on spectatorship, “few theorists thought they were talking about themselves, or if they did speak of themselves it was in coded terms, hidden beneath the imperatives of the subject, desiring, or speaking or otherwise.”<sup>59</sup> This oversight has been usefully addressed by film studies since the mid to late 1980s but not nearly to the same degree that it has in performance studies. Feminist performance studies emerged in the academy about ten years after feminist film studies (between the late 1980s and the 1990s). Its methods developed alongside the concurrent rise of queer theory, post-colonial studies and cultural studies debates around deconstruction, which greatly informed their theoretical approach to the gendered nature of representation and spectatorship. This historical context is, I believe, one of the main reasons why feminist performance studies since the mid to late 1990s has been able to move beyond what some see as a methodological fatigue within feminist theory.

The particular oversight of embodied spectatorship is seen in feminist film studies’ at times fraught relationship to Rainer. A key example of this is found in an interview between Rainer and the *Camera Obscura* editorial board that was published in the first issue.<sup>60</sup> This often-discussed interview reveals a division between Rainer and the editor’s perspectives on the political potential of avant-garde aesthetics. As Rainer reflects twenty years later: “I had somehow found myself playing devil’s

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<sup>58</sup> See Jane Gaines, “White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory,” *Screen* 29 4 (Autumn 1988): 12-27; Jackie Stacey, “Desperately Seeking Difference,” *Screen* 28 1 (Winter 1987): 48-61.

<sup>59</sup> Mayne “Theory Speaks!” 22.

<sup>60</sup> The Camera Obscura Collective (Constance Penley, Janet Bergstrom, Sandy Flitterman and Elizabeth Lyon) dedicates almost a third of the journal’s inaugural issue to the work of Yvonne Rainer. See: *Camera Obscura* 1 1 (Fall 1976): 53-96.

advocate throughout, dragging my feet through [the editor's] certainties."<sup>61</sup> In the interview, Rainer does not agree with the editor's assessment of her work as employing a radical formalism. The editors felt feminist cinema required a "structure of distanciation" that would leave "room for critical analysis."<sup>62</sup> Rainer's first two films were seen as emblematic of a formally rigorous reflexivity that challenged the dominant conventions of cinematic narrative.<sup>63</sup> Rainer however, was wary of this equation between radical formalism and politics.<sup>64</sup> She resisted their interpretation, arguing that she was not interested in distanciation but, rather, in exploring the tensions and tropes of melodrama and emotional identification within the viewing experience.<sup>65</sup> *Camera Obscura's* early reading of Rainer's work posits a correlation between what they were actively defining as feminist cinema and Rainer's work, making her work an emblem of their particular position.

At the center of these differing perspectives is a question of spectatorial address. While the editors were content to locate Rainer within a formalism that disavowed affective experience, Rainer argues her work sought to encourage the exact opposite response in the viewer. The feminist perspective adopted by the

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<sup>61</sup> Rainer continues: "Now they are all dispersed in their widely divergent interests...while I have stayed behind to struggle over and over with the same questions. It was fun while it lasted." The humor and critique in Rainer's reflection indicates that in 1999 she is still struggling with core issues of form and politics while in her perspective feminist theorists have moved on. *A Woman Who...*, 141.

<sup>62</sup> Thus for the editors Rainer's films avoid the limited potential of feminist documentary which for them often falls "into the trap of trying to employ an essentially male-oriented, bourgeois' approach to filmmaking that does not take into account the ideology informing the apparatus itself. Constance Penley et al., "Yvonne Rainer: An Introduction," 59.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> For Rainer what was lacking in *Camera Obscura's* reading of her films was primarily narrative analysis; she felt the editors too easily focused on form and politics without considering her exploration of narrative. *A Woman Who...*, 141.

<sup>65</sup> Penley et al., "Yvonne Rainer: Interview," 76-82. The editors do not read the melodramatic impulse in the films, nor Rainer's desire to evoke affect in spectator.

*Camera Obscura* board built its critical frame from a theoretical precept rather than an embodied experience as viewers – an approach which contradicted how Rainer wished her work to be engaged.

Feminist film studies' oversight of Rainer's interest in an embodied critical spectatorship is countered by feminist performance scholars' readings of her work. Performance studies' broader emphasis on the embodied aspects of spectatorship lead to a productive exploration of how feminist artists forge new spectator relations specifically located in the formal manipulation of space both onscreen and in the viewing context. This is a necessary critical frame for approaching Schneemann and Rainer's relationship to the spectator in their films.

Phelan has a very different view on Rainer's formal approach to spectator-film relations than that of feminist film studies. In fact, she situates her position somewhat in response to what she characterizes as feminist film studies' faith in an aesthetic of rupture. For Phelan, the most generative element of Rainer's film aesthetic is her constant refashioning of the spectator dynamic. According to Phelan, Rainer's unfixing of gendered viewing positions in her films challenges "feminist film theory's reliance on gender-specific forms of identification, and the implicit valorization of the difference between a male gaze and a female one."<sup>66</sup> Rainer's reformulation of traditional spectator relations exposes feminist film theory's commitment "to the woman who appears" and equally "blind to the woman who fails to appear."<sup>67</sup> She argues that Rainer poses a direct challenge to the psychoanalytically driven focus of

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<sup>66</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*, 84

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

feminist film theory through the way she resituates the male gaze in her 1985 film *The Man Who Envied Woman (TMWEW)*.<sup>68</sup> In the film the male gaze is undermined through the film's "continually shifting point of view," which "incites" in viewers a transformed understanding of "the means by which we know and perceive one another."<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Mayne argues that Rainer's films directly confront this guise as she "stands alongside her audience, pokes and prods" while still managing to avoid "the authoritative and all knowing presence of the omniscient narrator of classical film narrative."<sup>70</sup> Building on Phelan and Mayne, I suggest Rainer provides an inter-subjective form of address that promotes a dialogue between narrator and audience beyond the film's diegesis.

Phelan concludes that feminist film theory must recognize that "the apparatus of the gaze" is never absolute or constant. She argues the discipline must accept the failure of the coherent gaze in order to allow for the representation of woman to be more than a mirror for the masculine self.<sup>71</sup> Rainer's formal rearrangement of perspective in *TMWEW* challenges feminist film theory's drive to demarcate a discursive space built on possession and ownership.<sup>72</sup> Through this example Phelan

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<sup>68</sup> Which in Phelan's description includes such "privileged terms" as "the male gaze, voyeurism, scopophilia and fetishism." Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> While Mayne is talking of *Murder and MURDER* and *Privilege* in particular, I believe this is a consistent theme in her work especially early films like *Lives of Performers* and *Film About a Woman Who*. Mayne, "Theory Speaks!" 23.

<sup>71</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, 90-91. Here we may argue Phelan provides a compelling solution to the paradox of feminist theories of spectatorship described by Teresa de Lauretis (among others) via the metaphor of Alice and the looking glass in *Alice Doesn't*, 12-36.

<sup>72</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, 89.

urges critics to displace their focus on the visible in favor of the more un-reproductive (and for Phelan performative) elements of “contemporary representation.”<sup>73</sup>

Phelan’s argument is useful for grounding a reconsideration of feminist films not deemed valuable by previous decades of scholarship. Phelan’s advocacy for a critical search of the unmarked – the invisible, the off screen, the absent in feminist film – asserts the value of studying what cannot be reproduced by the dominant codes of representation. These unmarked elements of feminist film are important sites of aesthetic intervention that need to be further recognized as they offer new possible relations between spectator and image in film. I believe Phelan’s view of Rainer’s aesthetic can be extended both to the work of Schneemann and to broader practices of feminist experimental film production.

### Intermedia Histories

As an artist working across many media, Schneemann has always fit somewhat uncomfortably at the edges of cinema specificity. This may be why her films were not easily categorized within feminist film canons. Schneemann was not part of the Classical Hollywood system like Dorothy Azner and Ida Lupino, nor was she making documentaries like Geri Ashur or Shirley Clarke. Her films fit equally at the edges of the avant-garde, as they were not tied to the psychodrama or mythopoeic structures of Maya Deren’s work, nor the structuralist label applied to Wieland’s

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 91.



films. Schneemann's film aesthetic worked both in and against the formal explorations of the New American Cinema movement.<sup>74</sup> Her idiosyncratic and painterly approach to the filmstrip as a moving canvas and her commitment to intermediality posed a problem to critics of both the avant-garde and feminist film. Schneemann's work is better served by a critical view that considers the impact of performance art and intermedia practices on experimental film. This is something that performance studies' readings of Schneemann provide in their historical placement of her work in the experimental firmament of the 1960s avant-garde. Film criticism needs to consider how this moment informed the work of feminist filmmakers.

Since the early 1990s film studies has witnessed the rise of what Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams term 'theoretically informed historical inquiries.'<sup>75</sup> This historiographic research within the field covers a large range of topics including: modernity, new technologies, visibility, mass culture and the cinema of attractions, national identity and the public sphere, and the relationship between cinema and urban experience.<sup>76</sup> This includes a substantial body of literature within feminist film

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<sup>74</sup> And Stan Brakhage's films in particular. See Schneemann's letter exchanges with Brakhage in Kristine Stiles, ed. *Correspondence Course: An Epistolary History of Carolee Schneemann and Her Circle* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), 9, 18, 169, 184, 221, 240, 249, 255, 282, 284, 309, 336, 342, 439.

<sup>75</sup> Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, "Really Useful Theory," *Reinventing Film Studies* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 5. The shift that Gledhill and Williams address can be understood as a move away from traditional forms of historical investigation towards a more reflexive historiographic approach best represented in the work of Tom Gunning, Thomas Elsaesser and Miriam Hansen. See for example Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," in *Viewing Positions* 114-133; Miriam Hansen, *Babel & Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1991); Thomas Elsaesser *Fassbinder's Germany: History, Identity, Subject* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 1996).

<sup>76</sup> In addition to works by Gunning, Hansen and Elsaesser, see for example Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994); Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1992).

studies, which focuses specifically on the role of women in early cinema.<sup>77</sup> Feminist film historians have made valuable connections between women's historical conditions within the rise of modernity, cinema and mass culture.<sup>78</sup> Additional eras for feminist film history to consider include the rise of feminist art practice and feminist criticism within post-war North America and Europe.<sup>79</sup> This includes an examination of the position of feminist artists within the aesthetic crises of the 1960s avant-garde. This historical moment functions as a crux between the early and latter part of the twentieth century. Recognizing the post-war period as a crucial moment in feminist film history highlights the influential contributions of women filmmakers to both the women's movement and future feminist art practices.<sup>80</sup> This opens the field to more contemporary feminist uses of the moving image beyond traditional forms of cinema. The discipline presently needs to find new historical frames to account for the use of the moving image in visual art practices. This includes critical approaches to Schneemann as many of her films, and later videos are directly tied to her performance and visual art practices. For instance, *Viet Flakes* (1965) was often

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<sup>77</sup> See for instance Jennifer M Bean and Diane Negra, eds., *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002); Patrice Petro, *Aftershocks of the New: Feminism and Film History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2002); Jonathan Auerback, *Body Shots: early cinema's incarnations* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2007); Karen Ward Mahar, *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2008); Vicky Callahan, ed. *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2010).

<sup>78</sup> Patrice Petro notes that this work "affords insights to our own global media culture," as "the early years of the twentieth century are remarkably prescient of our own modernity." See Petro, "Reflections on Feminist Film Studies, Early and Late," *Signs* 30 1 (Autumn 2004): 1274.

<sup>79</sup> The 1960s and 1970s were particularly fraught times that both encouraged regressive ideas about women's role within public life, and yet also encouraged a renewed assertion of empowerment and articulation amongst second wave feminists. The paradoxical nature of this shift from post-war conservatism to political activism within a twenty-five year period is rich with historical insights.

<sup>80</sup> This was tied as well to technological advances. As this historical moment reflects greatly upon contemporary issues of medium specificity it is deeply relevant to current film discourse in general.

shown in conjunction with her performance *Snows* (1967). Many of her videos since the 1980s are embedded within performance and installation pieces or exclusively shown in the gallery setting. The convergence of film and video within performance and installation settings have not always been central to film studies' critical purview, particularly within a feminist frame. This may account for why Schneemann's films and videos outside the *Autobiographical Trilogy* were and are largely overlooked by film studies. Once again, this is in contrast to Rainer, whose films since the 1970s are all feature-length narratives that coincided with the rise in narrative avant-garde experimentation starting in the 1970s.<sup>81</sup> It is interesting to note that Rainer's six earliest films, produced in conjunction with her choreographed works and exhibited only during performances are also not focused on within film criticism.<sup>82</sup> The formation of Rainer and Schneemann's overlapping aesthetic within the 1960s New York avant-garde reflects an overlooked element of feminist film history that needs to be more fully accounted for. Further, their early work prefigures the rise of intermediality in film and screen-based art in over the last twenty years.

Performance studies cites the aesthetic backlash against modernist art criticism as a foundational historical starting point for understanding (what they term) post-modern feminist art. They consider feminist aesthetic relationships to intermedial practices as central to this history. Further, the field recognizes the

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<sup>81</sup> See Rosaline Krauss and Annette Michelson, eds. "The New Talkies," *October* 17 (Summer 1981). This special issue of the journal heralds these new aesthetic experiments with narrative form and includes an essay by Rainer.

<sup>82</sup> These films include *Volleyball* (1967), *Hand Movie* (1968), *Rhode Island Red* (1968), *Trio Film* (1968) and *Line* (1969). The films are discussed in Phelan, "Yvonne Rainer from Dance to Film," in *A Woman Who...*, 8; Carrie Lambert "Other Solutions" *Art Journal* 63 3 (Autumn 2004): 48-61.

centrality of liminal and threshold spaces for women artists who formally explore embodiment and inter-subjectivity in their work. For Schneider, Schneemann's *Eye Body* clearly breaches the threshold between media frame and external environment. Moving the body off the canvas, she argues Schneemann "stepped directly into her environment, entering and becoming her own work."<sup>83</sup> Schneider notes Schneemann is notably one of the first American artists to do this via installation work.

Phelan argues that much criticism on Rainer is too singular in its disciplinary focus. She specifically calls the critical framing of Rainer within feminist film theory a 'truism' that overlooks Rainer's broader engagement with "cross-disciplinary" pursuits.<sup>84</sup> For Phelan, Rainer's dance work deeply informs her film work,<sup>85</sup> and she reads all Rainer's work as repeatedly returning "to the central questions of performance" including: "what constitutes an act," what enables its reception, and how are such acts informed by the spaces they occur within.<sup>86</sup> Phelan reads Rainer's aesthetic project as being generative and repetitious rather than tied to a radical formalism of rupture.<sup>87</sup> In her study of *TMWEW* Phelan argues that intermediality informs the film's spatial relations. Rainer's use of photographic images of a Donald Judd sculpture, the main character's art collages of news events displayed on a wall, and the off screen address of the main character all exemplify an intermedial approach within the film.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Schneider, *Explicit Body*, 33.

<sup>84</sup> Phelan, "Yvonne Rainer: From Dance to Film," 15-16.

<sup>85</sup> Phelan describes Rainer's films as "revisions of the concerns she first articulated in dance." *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-11.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>88</sup> See in particular Phelan, *Unmarked*, 79-81.

Returning to the interview with Rainer in *Camera Obscura*, there is an exchange that demonstrates the editors' inability to account for the intermedial impulses of Rainer's work. At one point, Rainer asks the editors "Don't you see...I am, or was, a dancer? I'm very involved with space and motion...the space of the frame, metaphors for relationships, the physical space of intimacy." Rainer views film as a way of extending the concerns she explored in dance because both media "move across space and unfold in time."<sup>89</sup> Overlooking the intermedial aspect of Rainer's aesthetics allowed the editors to position her within their existing critical focus. However, Rainer's question points to an area not explored by the editorial focus on radical formalism. What Phelan usefully points out is how Rainer's interest in space, motion, framing, and intimacy greatly inform her aesthetics. These additional formal concerns are fundamental aspects of both Rainer's and Schneemann's aesthetic oeuvres. Rainer's exchange with *Camera Obscura* suggests a critical gap within feminist film criticism on Rainer as well. The formal concerns described by Rainer inform my expanded critical frame. I wish to take seriously both her and Schneemann's interests in the spatial relations of the moving image and to explore further how their backgrounds as interdisciplinary artists informs their practice. Feminist film scholarship needs to read Schneemann and Rainer as artists merging multiple disciplines within their aesthetic practice. Many of the artists who have been historically and presently overlooked by feminist film scholarship are intermedia artists that engage the moving image in a variety of different contexts. The

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<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Phelan, "Yvonne Rainer: From Dance to Film," 9.

methodological consideration of intermediality that I am advocating needs to be extended to other feminist artists working across different artistic disciplines. For instance, the artists that I consider in my final chapter (much like many feminist experimental filmmakers from the 1960s) come to film from a background in the visual or performing arts. This is an important insight to keep in mind when reading their film and moving installation works. This opens film studies up to a more generative dialogue with works situated between film and other art forms.

## Conclusion

Despite the constant positioning of Schneemann and Rainer as formally disparate filmmakers, I suggest they share many areas of aesthetic overlap. Schneemann is excluded from film canons for being too tied to her work as a performance artist and too aligned with difficult or taboo subjects. I believe the same charges could be raised against Rainer but they are not. More importantly, the reverse is also true. Rainer is celebrated for her critique of narrative, address of a female spectator, feminist redefinition of film form, and exploration of the contradictory gendering of representation and looking practices. I believe the exact same criteria can be celebrated in Schneemann's work, albeit for separate reasons. Schneemann and Rainer's similar formal interests unite their work rather than placing it on opposing sides of formal and historical divides. This overlap has been largely

overlooked by both feminist film and performance studies and is something I aim to recover in the following chapter.

The critical method I develop over the next three chapters draws upon the performance studies models outlined in this and the preceding chapter. This includes revaluing the explicit body as an important feminist strategy within film, engaging a model of embodied feminist criticism that recognizes the critic as an embodied spectator, and mapping the historical linkage between feminist and intermedia art in the 1960s avant-garde. While together the following three chapters explore particular filmmakers in the context of these insights, each chapter pays particular attention to one aspect of my method in particular. Chapter three reads Schneemann and Rainer's work in the context of the explicit body onscreen. Chapter four examines the use of liminal spaces within narrative address in the work of Canadian experimental filmmakers Longfellow, Gruben, Armatage and Onodera. Chapter five extends the historical link between feminist art and intermedia into the present by examining the screen-based art of Ahtila and Neshat.

### Chapter 3

#### The Overlapping Aesthetics of Carolee Schneemann and Yvonne Rainer

##### Introduction

In the winter of 1967 Carolee Schneemann and Yvonne Rainer both participated in Angry Arts Week -- a series of happenings, performances and art interventions staged across New York City protesting the Vietnam War. Rainer performed *Convalescent Dance*, a variation on her well known work *Trio A*, at the Hunter Playhouse. *Convalescent Dance* sought to connect the vulnerability of her body, recovering from major surgery, and those of soldiers' bodies in the Vietnam War. The performance was not overtly political but rather proposed an empathetic relationship between her "frailty and the condition of soldiers wounded in action."<sup>90</sup> During the festival Schneemann presented her intermedia performance *Snows* at the Martinique Theatre. This event combined performers and film projections with lighting and audio sequences controlled by audience movements in an immersive environment. The film *Viet Flakes*, which includes graphic images of violence against Vietnamese civilians, was projected as part of the performance. Schneemann brought these various elements together in the performance space in order to make the viewer acutely aware of the bodily consequences of war.<sup>91</sup> These performances took place in an era when daily images of violence in the media prompted women artists, including

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<sup>90</sup> Ramsey Burt, *Judson Dance Theatre: performative traces* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 17.

<sup>91</sup> For a detailed account of this performance see Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics*, 60-73.



Schneemann and Rainer, to “make work in which bodies themselves took on the status of media.”<sup>92</sup> Rainer and Schneemann’s focus on the body as art medium formally contested the political apathy and conservatism present within dominant American culture at this time. Their shared interest in the body was tied to a critical stance against the political repression of socially marginalized people including women, people of color, and cultures colonized by American exceptionalism globally. The inequalities Rainer and Schneemann encountered in both art discourse and everyday life were formative in the development of their shared aesthetic approach.

In the previous chapter I compared the critical history of Schneemann and Rainer in the fields of film and performance studies. I argued that while feminist scholars in both fields have addressed Rainer and Schneemann’s impact on feminist art practice, few have addressed their contributions equally, or in dialogue with one another. As chapter two illustrated, existing criticism separates Rainer and Schneemann into distinct aesthetic trajectories and consequently reads them through very different critical frames. It is imperative that feminist scholars recognize how Schneemann and Rainer’s shared cultural history informs each artist’s critique of post-war American high-modernism. Schneemann and Rainer equally challenged modernist notions of dance, painting, sculpture, performance and film, and worked tirelessly against the often masculinist-informed principles of modernist critics, curators, and teachers. They individually confronted these modernist limitations through formal experimentation, transforming their critique into comprehensive

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<sup>92</sup> Pamela M. Lee “Bare Lives” in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: Tate, 2008), 140.

counter-aesthetic practices. Schneemann and Rainer's early work reveals different reactions to a shared set of aesthetic, epistemological and cultural problems women artists faced in the 1960s.

I begin this chapter by reviewing Schneemann and Rainer's encounters with the major shifts and explosive experiments taking place in the New York art world during the 1960s. In the second section I compare their shared set of formal experiments through a reading of Schneemann's film *Plumb Line* and Rainer's film *Lives of Performers*. I argue that Schneemann and Rainer successfully extend the position of the female body in cinema beyond the traditional role as object to include an embodied form of authorship, and a complex, affective performance of woman onscreen. Outlining these shared aesthetic concerns provides the foundation for my reading of the embodied, intermedial experiments found in feminist experimental film and media in the ensuing decades. The formal themes emerging from this comparison form the basis of the aesthetic trajectory I will trace in the following chapters across a range of feminist film and media works produced between the 1980s and the early 2000s.

#### Rainer and Schneemann's Shared Histories of the New York Avant-Garde

The 1960s was a rich creative period in the early careers of both Rainer and Schneemann. In this decade Rainer and Schneemann established themselves as internationally recognized artists, performing and exhibiting for the first time many of

their best-known works. Schneemann and Rainer developed their formative aesthetic styles in conjunction with major shifts in the New York art world at this time. Both were part of emergent aesthetic movements like minimalism, Fluxus, Happenings and performance art. Reflecting on this moment Schneemann states “we felt this enormous wave of energy: something significant was underway.”<sup>93</sup> She further notes, “[f]or most of us certain formal parameters were to be thrown open, and the risk, unpredictability, and incorporation of random factors presaged burgeoning forms of social protest in our volatile culture.”<sup>94</sup> Schneemann’s reflection outlines the close ties between aesthetic experiments and political resistance for artists at this time. Similarly, Rainer reflected that in the 1960s “certain practices that had become accepted and downright respectable in critical circles” were now under attack, including “the exalted transformation of the performer” in dance, and “the Abstract Expressionists and their heroic gestures” in painting.<sup>95</sup> For Rainer, this spirit of political intervention was also directed at more established forms of art practice. From early in their careers both artists incorporated different media into their environments, performances, events and choreography, including the use of moving image technology in conjunction with live bodies.

This merging of media reflects a broader struggle in the 1960s American avant-garde against the institutionalization and commodification of earlier twentieth

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<sup>93</sup> Schneeman, *Imaging*, 116.

<sup>94</sup> “American Experimental Theatre: Then and Now,” *PAJ* 2 2 (Autumn 1977): 22.

<sup>95</sup> Rainer notes such practices were open for critical opposition by a younger generation following the lead of “Marcel Duchamp, Merce Cunningham and John Cage.” While Rainer admired the openness to new potential in this era she felt it was marginalizing for artists of colour, queer artists and women. *A Woman Who...*, 130.

century avant-garde movements.<sup>96</sup> This institutionalization produced a rigid critical canon out of what was originally anti-establishment art, but that was quickly turned into fetishized commodities sold to museums and private collections. Experimental art movements in the 1960s were attracted to the anti-establishment element of their predecessors. However, this institutionalization and commodification complicated many emerging artist's relationships to the avant-garde. In response, younger artists began working against the rigidity of aesthetic divisions encouraged by high modernism and sought to destabilize the commodification of the art object.<sup>97</sup> This resulted in a greater interest by artists in public engagement, as well as in employing the body as a viable (and non-commodity based) art medium. This emphasis on the spectator and the body as art medium influenced the rise in intermedial art practices that challenged the high modernist push for greater purity within the arts. For instance, Jackson Pollock's gestural painting style was integral to the transition away from traditional painting methods and towards performance art for a subsequent generation of artists. Allan Kaprow famously stated, Pollock "created some magnificent paintings. But he also destroyed painting."<sup>98</sup> Pollock did so by shifting the focus of painting from representation to the kinetic gestures of the artist. He also

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<sup>96</sup> Günter Berghaus, *Avant-garde Performance: Live Events and Electronic Technologies* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) xxii.

<sup>97</sup> The intent was to produce ephemeral events that could not be bought or institutionalized. Thus, we must read avant-garde art and performance not as "autonomous creations...for aesthetic contemplation" but rather as "controversial statements thrown into the public arena." Berghaus, *Avant-Garde Performance*, *ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 2. Emphasis in original.

broke with the canvas frame by “going beyond the literal dimensions of any work,”<sup>99</sup> which in turn made spectators more aware of the viewing environment. The size of Pollock’s paintings further reinforced an awareness of the viewing space as his “mural-scale paintings ceased to become paintings and became environments.”<sup>100</sup> These shifts towards performative gestures, breaking the frame and expanded environments are central elements of Schneemann and Rainer’s art events, performances and films throughout the 1960s and are equally found in their respective film works including *Plumb Line* and *Lives of Performers*.

The 1960s also mark the emergent use of cinema and moving image screens within the visual art environment. This emergence is characterized most often as “the beginnings of an ‘intermedia’ condition,” or a loosening of the borders between film and art practice.<sup>101</sup> What this ultimately produced was “hybrid filmic objects, installations, performances and events” in place of traditionally separated forms of film, painting or sculpture.<sup>102</sup> A notable use of film within an intermedia event occurred at Black Mountain College in 1952 through a collaboration between John Cage and Merce Cunningham.<sup>103</sup> This event consisted of a forty-five minute performance with multiple participants who performed during various overlapping time segments. The performance included poetry, paintings, the playing of records, dancing, piano, film projections on ceilings and Cage reading a lecture on Zen

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<sup>99</sup>As his gestures, manifest in the paint splatters on the canvas, extend always beyond what is held inside the frame. *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>101</sup> Leighton, *Art and The Moving Image*, 13-14.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Black Mountain college was a center they founded alongside Robert Rauschenberg in the late 1940s for experimental artists from many disciplines

Buddhism. The chairs were organized so that performers were able to move among the audience.<sup>104</sup> Branden W. Joseph observes that events such as this “radically altered the relationships between film, performance and the audience.”<sup>105</sup> Like Pollock’s large abstract paintings, this constellation between film, and other art forms emphasized the performance environment itself. Such experiments refigured the viewing space, encouraging a more interactive experience for the audience. This spatial unfixing, which dissolved the boundaries between media, artists and audience, was a central organizing principle of the avant-garde project explored by both Rainer and Schneemann in the 1960s and beyond.<sup>106</sup>

Informed by these changing aesthetic conditions, Rainer and Schneemann’s early works encouraged new perspectives of the body, space and intermediality. Their early work directly challenged high modernism’s attachment to medium specificity, artistic heroism, and the constraints of the frame in painting, theatre and film.<sup>107</sup>

While modernism is the foundation upon which they built their aesthetic experiments, like many of their peers, Rainer and Schneemann often situated themselves in

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<sup>104</sup> The event followed Artaud's decree that "the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it... immerse[d]... in a constant bath of light, images, movements and noises." This event eschewed extensive rehearsals and previously arranged scripting, costuming, music, and characterization. The ideas promoted at the college greatly influenced a range of artists well into the 1960s. For a more detailed account see Roselee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 82.

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Leighton, *Art and The Moving Image*, 17.

<sup>106</sup> Intermedial events using projection screens that followed the work at Black Mountain College include Andy Warhol's *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* (1966-67), Stan VanderBeek's *Movie-Dome* (1957-65), works by the Charles and Ray Eames including *Think* (1964-65).<sup>106</sup> Tanya Leighton lists *9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering* (1966), E.A.T.'s pavilion at Expo 70 in Osaka, as well as the Expanded Cinema Festival NYC 1965 as additional works that demonstrate the rise of the expanded cinema field.

<sup>107</sup> This is something Schneemann herself argues in her notebooks from 1958-1963 reprinted in *More Than Meat Joy*, 52.

opposition to it.<sup>108</sup> Rainer and Schneemann were as equally committed to the move away from high modernism as their male counterparts. What Rainer and Schneemann brought to this move was a distinctly feminist critique based on the body as medium.<sup>109</sup>

Rainer arrived in New York in 1956 via San Francisco where she had previously trained as an actor.<sup>110</sup> Once in New York, she quickly gravitated towards a group of dancers experimenting with chance operations and incorporating the quotidian into their performances. She was deeply influenced by both Cage and Cunningham and sought to employ their ideas within her work.<sup>111</sup> During this period Rainer choreographed extensively, premiering key works such as *Three Satie Spoons* (1961), *We Shall Run* (1963) and *The Mind is a Muscle* (1966) which included her most famous dance *Trio A. Three Satie Spoons*,<sup>112</sup> a solo dance in three sections, developed out of workshops held by Robert Dunn at Merce Cunningham's studio in 1960, Rainer and others explored ways to "adapt" John Cage's scores into

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<sup>108</sup> I would further argue that neither artist's work is wholly postmodern (despite the fact that many critics will read them this way). Neither artist explicitly defines their work in relation to postmodernism exclusively, while both speak extensively about their intricate/complex relationship to modernism. Rainer in particular is resistant to the label of postmodernism. See her discussion with Nicholas Zurbrugg in *Art, Performance, Media: 31 Interviews* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2004), 295-305.

<sup>109</sup> Whether this was overtly recognized by the artists at the time or not is debatable. Schneemann displays a much earlier concern with feminist politics in her personal letters and artist statements, whereas Rainer notes it was not until the 1970s that she began to expressly identify as a feminist.

<sup>110</sup> Rainer, *A Woman Who...*, 49-50. For a more detailed history of Rainer's move to New York see *Feelings Are Facts: A Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 151-197.

<sup>111</sup> In an interview with Christine Iles, Rainer notes: "The early 1960s was a very fertile time for intermingling of avant-garde activity in all the arts, primarily through the influence of John Cage; his writings about chance and Zen and silence affected painting, sculpture, dance and performance. Some of this activity took place in Yoko Ono's loft between 1960 and '61. Also at the Ruben Gallery and the Judson Church Gallery artists like Robert Whitman, Claes Oldenburg and Allan Kaprow presented their work." From "Life Class" *Frieze Magazine* 100 (Summer 2006).

[http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/life\\_class/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/life_class/) retrieved October 12, 2011.

<sup>112</sup> Rainer's *Three Satie Spoons* is actually re-performed in the film *Film about a woman who...* (1974).

choreographed dance.<sup>113</sup> The dance includes Rainer's signature interests in everyday actions contra the psychodrama celebrated in modern dance at this time. Rainer writes on the impact of watching Simone Forti do an improvised dance during a workshop session, "what she did brought the god-like image of the 'dancer' down to human scale...It was a beautiful alternative to the heroic posture" prevalent in Rainer's training at the Graham School.<sup>114</sup> It was within these group studio sessions with Forti, Robert Morris and others that Rainer's incorporation of pedestrian movements and the everyday into her choreography began.

This interest was taken further in Rainer's *We Shall Run*, where non-professionals and dancers dressed in everyday clothing ran continuously in various patterned formations. The piece incorporated elements of the everyday (bodies, clothing, and movements) in an effort to counter the more elaborate staging and costuming of modern dance at the time. Again, the work was a direct response to the feted tendencies of modern dance, "the ecstatic, the heroic, the regal" which Rainer notes "seemed very tired to us, used up, effete." In contrast, *We Shall Run* celebrated the "the pedestrian, the quotidian, and the athletic" body foregrounding it as an equally viable subject of choreography and performance.<sup>115</sup> Rainer describes a Robert Dunn course she attended where "all he did was present various examples of chance operations: mostly chance-derived scores created by John Cage, which could be adopted to dance." From this course Rainer developed her "own movement

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<sup>113</sup> Yvonne Rainer, *About a Woman Who...*, 55

<sup>114</sup> Yvonne Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973* (Halifax: Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design: 1974), 5.

<sup>115</sup> Rainer, *Feelings*, 243.



tendencies” which included “a lot of gesture” as well as “sounds and sentences – not necessarily related to the movements that accompany them.”<sup>116</sup> The favorable response to this work, and later on to *Trio A*, situated Rainer at the vanguard of 1960s minimalist dance. This alignment with minimalism was explicitly supported by Rainer’s publication of the “NO Manifesto” in 1965 and “A Quasi Survey of Some “Minimalist” Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of *Trio A*” in 1966.<sup>117</sup> Both texts eschew the humanist and romantic tendencies of modern dance, adopting instead painterly minimalist principles into the realm of dance.<sup>118</sup>

In the mid-1960s Rainer began using film, and later in the decade, narrative structures in her choreography. These particular explorations with film and narrative reveal Rainer’s growing tension with the minimalism she had readily ascribed to earlier in the decades.<sup>119</sup> These explorations and the tensions they produced greatly impacted the direction her film work would take in the following decades. Her earliest films made between 1967-1969 were projected during dance performances, and reflected her on-going interest in “the body in motion,”<sup>120</sup> as she sought to

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<sup>116</sup> This quote is taken from a lengthy letter Rainer wrote to her brother Ivan Rainer reprinted in *Feelings*, 204.

<sup>117</sup> On the “NO Manifesto” see Rainer, “Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses Called Parts of Some Sextets,” in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. Mariellen R. Sandford (London, Routledge, 1995); “A Quasi Survey of Some “Minimalist” Tendencies” was first published in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995).

<sup>118</sup> Rainer later notes that “the mantra of minimalist aesthetics” required art to “eschew topicality, metaphor, reference, organizational structure.” These are tendencies that are clearly present in her dance works from the 1960s. Rainer, *A Woman Who...*, 28.

<sup>119</sup> Rainer offers a very candid account of the shortcomings of minimalism in relation to politics in *A Woman Who...*, 130-134.

<sup>120</sup> Quoted in Phelan, “Yvonne Rainer: From Dance to Film,” 8; original quote in Rainer, *Work*, 209.

juxtapose the bodies moving on-stage with the more tightly framed bodies and objects in motion onscreen.

Schneemann similarly produced a body of work in the 1960s that established the major themes and formal concerns of her art in the ensuing five decades.

Schneemann settled permanently in New York in 1962 after completing her MFA in Chicago.<sup>121</sup> In the early part of the decade Schneemann continued developing her painterly interest in the human figure within and against the dominance of abstract expression.<sup>122</sup> Schneemann cites the work of Robert Rauschenberg, Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg as formative influences on her experiments with kinetic sculpture and kinetic theatre.<sup>123</sup> Her earliest work includes the action-environment *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera* (1963), the performances *Meat Joy* (1964) and *Snows* (1967), and her most well known film *Fuses* (1964-67). Much of her work at this time explored ways to re-sensitize viewers to their bodily experiences and bring forward a politics of eroticism. The body in her films, photographic installations, and on-stage performances, prompted a sensual awareness in the audience through a series of tactile, material entanglements with other fleshy, visceral objects. Even at

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<sup>121</sup> For a history of Schneemann's early career and move to New York see "Interview," *ND* 14 (1991), reprinted in Schneemann, *Imaging*, 113-126.

<sup>122</sup> Schneemann's use of the term kinetic is in direct reference to her own personal brand of collage based work and performance which operates on the principles of objects and bodies in motion. For further discussion of these ideas see Schneemann, *Imaging*, 125, 229, 251, 256, 261.

<sup>123</sup> In a letter from November 1961, Schneemann observed a move in the New York art world away from abstract expressionism, which she observed was losing popularity: "The gang, swinging on top of its own scene, has finished with FEELING" [capitalization in original], and towards the Happenings, events and experiments of Claes Oldenburg, Allan Kaprow and Robert Rauschenberg. She counts herself as being similarly aligned in her experiments with the latter three artists. Schneemann, "Letter to Peter and Collie Hooven," in *Correspondence Course*, 51-54.

this early stage Schneemann displayed an interest in the interchanges between performers on-stage or onscreen and viewers.

*Eye-Body* is a series of actions of Schneemann's nude body situated within a collaged environment made of mirrors, glass, motorized objects. In response to her encounters with "a few artists...introducing real and literal materials to an extended canvas (or picture plane)," she chose to incorporate herself in her "work as an additional "material." In 1963 these movements were photographed by Icelandic artist Errol. The photos became "a variation of the environment itself."<sup>124</sup> *Eye-Body* reflects Schneemann's abiding interest in intermediality and in positioning her body as the central subject of her artwork.<sup>125</sup> The piece established Schneemann's desire to move off the painting canvas and into a more dimensional exploration of spaces and frames. After *Eye-Body*, Schneemann consistently produced performances in complex spatial environments that challenged the boundaries between media. *Meat Joy*, first performed in 1964, included live performers interacting with everyday items such as fish, chicken, paint and paper, and responding to a collaged musical score. This early performance precedes the more structurally complex *Snows* which, as noted above, combines sculptural environments, cinema and live performances and audience participation with complex lighting and audio scores.<sup>126</sup> In *Snows*, audiences entered

<sup>124</sup> Carolee Schneemann, *Cezanne She Was A Great Painter* (New Paltz, NY: Tresspass Press, 1975).

<sup>125</sup> Schneemann, *Imaging*, 55-56.

<sup>126</sup> Schneemann's describes *Snows* as comprised of "revolving light sculpture above 20x15x4 foot rear wall construction in an open grid filled with plastic sacks containing coloured water. 20x30x6 foot floor-to-ceiling collage of torn white paper. 75 white branches hung in semicircle from stage curtain rod. Manila rope, 2 bales of pink plastic foam, 2 silver planks, floor lights. Floor covering: plastic sheeting over silver foil. 4 contact microphones under stage floor. 30 contact microphones placed

the back door of a performance space through “two floor-to-ceiling foam rubber ‘mouths’” and then crawled along planks leading from the stage to the aisles.<sup>127</sup> The performance mixed film projections and live performers in a dynamic power struggle that highlighted and then subverted the dominance inherent in traditional gender hierarchies and in the encounters between soldiers and victims of war. Both Schneemann and Rainer mix projection and performance in order to juxtapose the position of bodies onscreen with the bodies in the performance space. Through this each artist forges inter-subjective relations between art, performer and audience.

Schneemann and Rainer present two very different notions of bodies - one minimalist and one erotically charged. Both expand the intermedial possibilities of dance, performance, sculpture, photography, and film by encouraging various interactions between the bodies of the performer, the art object and the spectator. They challenge existing cultural and aesthetic codes to develop very different but equally important images of the body. Rainer's is unadorned, stripped down, and interested in the banality of the quotidian. Her use of minimalism emphasizes the viewing environment and a corporeal sense of immanence rather than the transcendence of modernist criticism. She places screens and bodies in dialogue with one another, successfully extended a key principle of minimalism into the realm of film. Schneemann's work viscerally explores the tactility, sensuality and pleasure of physical experience through a bricolage aesthetic. Schneemann's abiding emphasis on

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randomly under theatre seats. 5 films, 3 16mm film projectors, 3 sound tapes, 5 speakers, SCR switching system.” *Imaging*, 82.

<sup>127</sup> Schneemann, *Imaging*, 77.

the human figure as an expressive medium directly confronts the loss of figuration in abstract expressionism. The exploration of her body as the central subject of her work contrasts with – or perhaps competes with -- the heroic male artist of high modernism.

*Plumb Line*, made between 1967 and 1971, is the second in Schneemann's *Autobiographical Trilogy*. In the fifteen-minute film, Schneemann relentlessly manipulates and distorts images of herself and a former lover<sup>128</sup> in order to examine the relationship's demise. *Plumb Line* is comprised of photographic stills and film sequences of Schneemann and her lover (both alone and together), as well as shots of buildings, European plazas, beaches, and roadways edited into densely collaged sequences that are often split into framed quadrants onscreen. The images are reprinted on high-contrast film stock using deeply saturated color filters, giving the images a vibrant, textured quality. The images are counter-posed by an equally dense soundtrack of sirens, psychedelic rock, a cat meowing, unidentified moaning, and a recording of Schneemann's voice while under emotional duress. Schneemann is both a key player within the *mise en scène*, and an external observer retrospectively engaging with a past image of herself.

Completed in 1972, *Lives of Performers* is Rainer's first feature-length film. The film is composed of different sections including a dance rehearsal; photographic documents of a performance; scenes acted on a theatrical stage without synchronized sound, a lengthy solo dance by a female performer; and a series of tableaux

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<sup>128</sup> The late experimental composer James Tenney (1934-2006).

reenacting film stills from G. W Pabst's *Pandora's Box* (1929). These segments are intercut with different voice-overs that at different times describe the images and at others narrate the intimate experiences of the performers. The narrative is based on a script from Rainer's dance piece *Performance* (1972). Like Schneemann's position in *Plumb Line*, Rainer's presents herself as both a performer and director, engaging the audience from both inside and outside the diegesis.

My comparative reading of these two films highlights Schneemann and Rainer's overlapping concerns with the explicit body in three ways. The first is the positioning of their own bodies in the dual roles of performer and author within the films. The second is their shared exploration of women's everyday experiences of objectification. Both address the prevalence of this objectification through consciously gendered performances that undermine the certainty of the male gaze. The third overlap is found in Rainer's and Schneemann's challenge to cinema specificity by foregrounding the body as an art medium that pushes against the film frame. These three areas employ different types of bodies including that of the artist/performer, the represented bodies onscreen and the embodied spectator the films' address.

#### The Double Gesture: Performing The Artist as Image and Author

In *Plumb Line* and *Lives of Performers* Schneemann and Rainer employ the formal double gesture outlined in chapter two. This double gesture is enacted through

Rainer and Schneemann's inclusion of themselves in the dual role of onscreen image and off screen narrator. Schneider defines the double gesture as that which embraces both the essence and social construction of women's bodies, situating it as a useful formal device for revealing what is often masked or hidden by dominant representation. By acknowledging women's bodies as both a construct and as materially specific, the double gesture unravels the gendered illusion required or maintained by dominant culture, and I would argue dominant representational codes. In these two films, Schneemann and Rainer present themselves as participants within the film world and as external authors who comment on the films' form. Both artists gesture towards themselves as representations *and* as material bodies. This index of their roles as authors outside the film frame is a common trope in modernist art cinema, which is often used to establish the filmmaker as an omnipotent commentator. However, Schneemann and Rainer use this reflexive trope not to establish a position of dominance, but to comment on their status as images and to reveal intimate insights into their personal faults and vulnerabilities. This challenges traditional assertions of the director's authority in both modernist and classical cinema.

*Plumb Line* begins and ends with a plumb line<sup>129</sup> swinging like a pendulum in front of a large projected image of Schneemann's former male lover.<sup>130</sup> Flames appear and consume the projected image. Following this sequence, Schneemann's hand

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<sup>129</sup> A tool that suspends a weighted object from a line in order to measure depth or verticality.

<sup>130</sup> The lover was a carpenter and thus the choice of a plumb line as a signifying object in the film corresponds with it being traditionally a tool of his trade.

enters the frame and inscribes the title of the film and then her name on the space where the man's image was. This sequence establishes Schneemann's inscription of herself (and her subjectivity) over the trace of the male image as a main trope of the film. Schneemann's signature marks an intervention into traditions of cinema authorship. The gesture claims her authority over the film and the space of the screen. This is strengthened by the inclusion of her body -- a woman's body -- as the agent claiming this space. The gesture is both unremarkable, as artists have been signing their work for centuries, and powerful, as it asserts a woman as the author of her own image.

There is a similar reflexive inscription in *Lives of Performers* where early on Rainer situates herself as the choreographer directing the performers of the title. Like Schneemann, Rainer establishes her authorship through both the image and the audio.<sup>131</sup> The first image of the film shows Rainer directing a group of dancers in a rehearsal. Rainer is heard throughout this sequence on a separate, non-synchronized audio track, giving the dancers directions. Her voice is very clear, engaged, and passionate while explaining certain moves and phrases to the dancers. It is a commanding voice that matches the strength of the choreography and the concentration of the rehearsing group. Similar to Schneemann's signature at the beginning of *Plumb Line*, Rainer's directorial presence places her in a position of authority over the images -- it is her choreography and her direction that we are watching. The film was made ten years into Rainer's career as a pivotal figure in the

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<sup>131</sup> Here the audio and image are placed in juxtaposition to one another, and are rarely, if ever in sync.



dance world. As such, there is a certain degree of gravity to her presence in the film as well as a voyeuristic thrill in seeing Rainer-the-choreographer at work. This thrill is extended in a shot of Rainer and the group of dancers laughing together during a break. In this sequence the viewer is a privileged witness to Rainer's process as an artist and the particular way she engages with others in the rehearsal space. This opening scene establishes Rainer's strong directorial presence, but also allows us to see her creative process. This mix of authority and intimacy in the same instance brokers a familiarity between Rainer and the audience. Here the double gesture garners the trust of the viewer by allowing them to see the quotidian experiences of the dance rehearsal.<sup>132</sup> It establishes Rainer as performer and observer standing alongside the viewer. This gesture is different from uses of Brecht's alienation-effect (or, A-effect) in feminist performance, wherein the actor stands rhetorically beside the character they perform. The A-effect is used by feminist performers in order to counter the tendency toward illusion in theatre. The actor indicates to the viewer that she is performing a historically situated, representational construct that is entirely separate from her own historically positioned subjectivity. As Diamond argues: "one way that the actor alienates or distances the audience from the character is to suggest the historicity of the character in contrast to the actor's own present-time self-awareness on stage."<sup>133</sup> Here the performer brackets herself as separate from her character. While Rainer is certainly interested in countering the tendency toward

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<sup>132</sup> Even if this "behind-the-scenes" view is itself a choreographed performance it encourages in the viewer an identification with the "real" Rainer.

<sup>133</sup> Diamond, "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Towards a Gestic Feminist Criticism," *TDR* (Spring 1988):87.

illusion in cinema, she does not separate her performance on screen from her position as director of the text. She is *both* performer (Rainer the choreographer on screen) and author (Rainer to voice-over). She does not stand beside her image within the frame but instead positions herself beside the viewer through the voice-over audio. She takes the audience into her confidence and asks them to view the image on screen with her. This does not alienate the audience but places them in a critical dialogue with Rainer as she speaks to and of herself as an image. This experimental mode of address is found in various forms throughout the film.

In the second sequence of the film, following the initial dance rehearsal, Rainer describes a series of photos documenting a performance of *Grand Union Dreams* (1971). Here she explains the context of the piece and comments on the choreography. With the first photograph on screen Rainer tells the audience: "This is the first of eight photos from *Grand Union Dreams*. Shirley was immortal, Fernando and Valda were heroes, I was one of the gods." Rainer describes the movement occurring in the photo and then says "My question is, what does it mean? Are they celebrating something? Yes that sounds good. Epp and James are doing a dance of pleasure at the advent of spring." Her tone is dry, deadpan, and without a lot of expression. It sounds as if she is reading quickly off a script. Another voice interrupts "Actually it was spring when we started rehearsing the piece and I first met you Fernando..." This interjection both expands the dialogue to include other performers and establishes the main narrative of the film - a love triangle between several of the performers. In this sequence Rainer's voice-over reaffirms her authorial position and

the intimacy of her conversational address to the audience. Spectators are once again privy to background or “behind-the-scenes” information, which creates the sense of proximity or confidence with the director. This technique is repeated throughout the film, giving the impression that the viewer is in a screening room with Rainer as she watches the film unfold.

In the third section of the film Rainer participates in a read-through of a script for her work *Performers*, in which she further positions herself as a vulnerable rather than impervious author. During the read-through Rainer reads a long quote by Carl Jung that was used in the documented performance she is describing. In response, Shirley, one of the performers in the piece, critiques Rainer and the quote as being overly righteous.<sup>134</sup> Rainer responds, “Well you know Shirley that I have always had a weakness for the sweeping revelations of great men.” At this point we hear an audience responding with laughter over top of Rainer’s final statement: “That’s why I’m going at this concert so differently.” Rainer here refers to her attempt at a different form of storytelling. This final dialogue sequence is a clear example of Rainer’s attempt to establish a dialogue both inside the film (as performer) and outside the film (as commentator standing alongside the viewer). She includes other voices on the audio to interact and contradict her position as author. Additionally, she allows those other voices to critique her position, thus revealing herself, perhaps with a hint of irony, to be a flawed character both within the film and as its author.

Acknowledging “her weakness for the sweeping revelations of great men” positions

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<sup>134</sup> Rainer defends the quote as being quite the opposite, however Shirley critiques both Rainer’s delivery and her taking the quote out of context.

Rainer as a conflicted author engaged in an auto-critique. Again, this invites the viewer to see up close the self-conscious reflexivity that informs her process. Finally, her inclusion of the audience laughing over her work is an important example of Rainer's use of audio to reconfirm the viewer's position as part of the dialogue. In this instance our position as extra-diegetic viewers is mirrored (and brought into closer proximity) by the diegetic sound of the audience in the film. Through this audio Rainer creates a space for the viewer, acknowledging the extra-diegetic audio as an integral and interactive part of the film.

Similarly, Schneemann includes an audio recording of herself in a moment of deep despair towards the climax of the *Plumb Line*. The affect contained within the audio recording intimately reveals for the viewer the limits of the author. She notes that the voice-over text was "made by me flipping on a tape recorder as I wandered through my studio in a state of emotional collapse triggered by the endless Vietnam atrocities and the dissolution of my long relationship with Tenney."<sup>135</sup> Schneemann expresses great vulnerability in sharing this recorded moment of distress in the aftermath of her relationship. The monologue records Schneemann talking in a labored manner about pills, not being able to stand the sun, losing weight, the advice of her concerned friends, and ends by describing food on a plate. Schneemann has difficulty articulating herself clearly throughout the monologue. The slurred mumbling convey the extent of her emotional collapse. The force of her words exceeds the film's diegesis and the traditional comforts of voyeuristic distance.

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<sup>135</sup> Schneemann quoted in Serra and Ramey, "Eye/Body," 118.

Instead of this being a wholly negative encounter, however, Schneemann presents her pain as a site of articulation. Here Schneemann clearly attempts to “speak the body differently.”<sup>136</sup> While the woman’s body in emotional pain is conventionally found in the realm of melodrama, Schneemann does not rely on representational tropes from the genre. Her body is not punished or constrained by a traditional narrative arc. Rather her body becomes a speaking subject, one that refuses clarity, coherence, and instead stumbles, struggles and bravely acknowledges such painful experiences as part of women’s subjectivity. Schneemann creates an encounter with the viewer through a moment of emotional excess. Her recording articulates the chaos of bodies in pain, and gives greater depth to women’s representational possibilities in film. This is not the enactment of an overwrought body on display for the viewer’s catharsis, but a body articulating its trauma for its own catharsis and placing the viewer in the position of witness. As with Rainer, this gesture fosters a sense of intimacy between herself and the audience.

Both Schneemann and Rainer’s inclusion of themselves in this dual position of image and author reveals a central illusion masked by the cinematic apparatus -- that of the separation between author and viewer. Schneemann and Rainer simultaneously embrace themselves as both performing image and embodied author, reflecting an interest in reconciling their presence as a body on screen and also as a voice off screen. The result, as I explain above, is that the artists somehow stand beside the projected image and beside the viewer watching. This in turn requires the

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<sup>136</sup> Mary Ann Doane, “Women’s Stake: Filming the Female Body,” in *Feminism & Film*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Oxford University Press 2004), 86-99

viewer to recognize, through the intimacy of their encounter with the author's address, their position as spectators. This shared formal approach reflects a broader concern in the 1960s avant-garde to promote a direct engagement between spectator, art object and artist. Unlike the more dominant reflexive authorial position in 1960s films, like those of Jean-Luc Godard, that speak *at* rather than *with* an audience (often from a place of physical and moral remove), Rainer and Schneemann seek an intimate dialogue that is based on mutual vulnerability. The viewer can no longer maintain a position of distance and voyeuristic superiority when addressed by a speaker who acknowledges her own internal conflicts and challenges. This double position provides a more complex expression of authorial reflexivity. This dialectic form of address successfully asserts the artist's body as a key element in formally refiguring the spatial relations between image on screen and spectator in the viewing space.

#### The Everyday Object of Gendered Viewing Pleasures

Schneemann and Rainer rely heavily on autobiography and the quotidian in their films. In addition to being subjects and performers, each often includes elements of their personal histories within their work. Both incorporate autobiographical elements into the content of *Lives of Performers* and *Plumb Line*.<sup>137</sup> This again derives from a shared concern with the everyday within the 1960s New York avant-

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<sup>137</sup> This is something that is perhaps more clearly pronounced in Schneemann's film as she interrogates a personal love affair. However Rainer's tendency to construct all of her feature films loosely around autobiographical material is a well-established element of her filmmaking practice.

garde, which sought new ways to counter the grand narratives and Romantic impulses of high modernism. Schneemann and Rainer engage in a specifically gendered critique of the everyday in their films. These examinations of women's everyday negotiations of objectification within public space are perhaps the most valuable and unsettling elements of each film. In this section I outline how Schneemann and Rainer aestheticize women's everyday experiences as a site of critical investigation in film.

Throughout *Plumb Line* Schneemann reflexively counters the image of herself onscreen through tactile hand-manipulated interventions onto the filmstrip. These formal gestures index the tensions between lived experience and social ideals. As Schneider notes, Schneemann's aesthetic reveals how "woman has existence relative only to her representation," and explores the ways "woman stands beside herself...as a successful or failed, compliant or belligerent copy."<sup>138</sup> A key example of this is found in Schneemann's critical analysis of her image within the film's *mise en scène*. A central image in the film is of Schneemann walking in a bright, color-saturated Italian *piazza*. Her repetition of this shot launches a sharp critique of representation and viewing pleasure. In this sequence, Schneemann walks towards the camera, directly engaging the viewer's gaze. The framing, lighting and angle of the shot make the action quite striking to behold – there is undeniable visual pleasure in watching Schneemann walking. This gesture is both an act of self-presentation and a conscious gendered performance of walking in public space. By foregrounding this duality she acknowledges how in cinema and public life she is always on visual display. In this

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<sup>138</sup> Schneider, *Explicit Body*, 51.

scene, Schneemann mimetically re-enacts the traditional framing of woman as spectacle in classical Hollywood cinema.<sup>139</sup> However, in the reverse shot she frames a group of well-dressed men who turn to stare as she passes by. Schneemann's editing of the footage catches the men in the act of looking. This sequence successfully interrogates the syntax of the female body through the specificity of the film medium.<sup>140</sup> Schneemann's camera appropriates and performs dominant forms of looking in order to reveal their gendered dynamics. By placing herself wittingly as the spectacle on-view, she is pushing an otherwise repetitive visual stereotype to a place of critique.

Rainer makes a similar critique in a scene towards the end of *Lives of Performers* where dancer Valda Setterfield performs a lengthy solo. The moving, dancing, performing body in the scene successfully breaks with narrative coherency. Rainer's depiction of Setterfield reveals strikingly similar intentions to Schneemann's interrogation of her own position vis a vis the male gaze. Kaplan notes that in *Lives of Performers*, physical gesture is pushed beyond the constraints of language as the characters equally use the body and movement to convey meaning.<sup>141</sup> Setterfield performs the dance under the pretense of showing it to Fernando, with whom she is having a fraught love affair.<sup>142</sup> Without any dialogue to advance the narrative,

<sup>139</sup> Similar to the presentation of Rita Hayworth's performance of "Put the Blame on Mame" in *Gilda* or Marlena Dietrich's initial entrance on stage in *Blonde Venus*, Schneemann is filmed as the central figure walking towards a purposefully positioned camera.

<sup>140</sup> Doane, "Women's Stake," 98.

<sup>141</sup> Kaplan, *Women and Film*, 119.

<sup>142</sup> The sequence comes at the end the longest section of the film where performers read a script of their intimate lives while images of themselves enact various spatial dynamics upon a sparse stage – neither



Setterfield's performance portrays her vulnerability and the tension between her desire for connection and the constraints of her lover's ambivalence. Her solo successfully addresses and undermines "women's position as spectacle for the male gaze"<sup>143</sup> through the forward propelling motions at the center of the choreography.

The scene begins with Valda on stage, a spotlight highlighting her shadow on the wall behind her. Standing still she moves her arms gracefully as the straps of her dress fall off her shoulders. There is silence as Valda moves with an apple in her hand, moving into a beautiful arabesque with her upper body. The spotlight follows her, maintaining the shadow on the wall as an equally important, separate performer. Rainer's choreography includes a series of arresting slow moving arcs and contracting movements of Valda's upper body. These are punctuated by sporadic turns of her body that contrast the slow unfolding of the dance. As the pace of the dance picks up, Valda does several traveling movements across the stage with the spotlight closely following her. The rapid shift between the slow and spinning action reveal both as affectively charged. Valda drops the apple and moves to pick it up. This movement transitions her into a series of still poses where she balances the apple in palm of her hand. Eventually the apple slips off but she stays still in the pose. The shadow behind her looks like a statue or a Victorian silhouette with a very defined, solid outline. She returns to other side of the stage again with apple under her chin, she bends back as the apple drops and rolls away. The camera pans to stage left following the apple, and

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the image or audio fully meeting each other, but together establishing the broad strokes of their relationship struggles. The title card at the start of the dance reads: 'Valda shows Fernando her solo.'

<sup>143</sup> Kaplan, *Women and Film*, 119.

the light fades out. At the end of the performance Fernando asks her on the audio track why she is showing him a piece that he has seen a 100 times before. She replies that she performed it differently this time, but he argues that it looks the same. This dialogue is set over an image of them standing together. Fernando does not look at the camera but Valda turns directly towards the audience, twisting her face in frustration and disbelief at his response. This exchange is the climax of the love triangle narrative that dominates the middle portion of the film. The beautiful dance performed by Valda, and Fernando's failure to connect to it, are the culmination of their love story.

Valda's vulnerability within the dance critiques an idealized image of the performing body, helping viewers to connect with an intimacy beyond representation. The sequence produces a dynamic tension between stillness and movement as she breaks with poses in order to dance across the stage. This functions as a metaphor for her agency, which is constantly at odds with her role as performer and image. This is mirrored by her vulnerability in relation to Fernando who misreads her intentions and stands as a metaphor for a more broadly disinterested masculinist critical response to feminist art. The sequence poses a similar challenge to the audience that Schneemann's use of her own image as public spectacle does in *Plumb Line*. Both evoke the explicit female body positioned in an exchange with the male gaze (the men in the plaza, Fernando) in order to highlight the public viewing dynamics women negotiate on an everyday basis. In *Plumb Line* it is the everyday task of walking in public space; in *Lives of Performers*, the everyday disappointment of a lover's

misrecognition. Schneemann and Rainer's careful attention to women's movement within and across public and private spaces is a second shared aesthetic trait between them that is also found in other moments of feminist experimental film and media history. I explore this trope in further detail in my discussion of Eija-Liisa Ahtila and Shirin Neshat in chapter five.

### Unfixing The Cinematic Frame: The Body as Medium

A final point I wish to consider is how Schneemann and Rainer use the performing body to trouble the fixed structure of the film frame. In Schneemann's film this is done via the aesthetic violence her body inflicts on the celluloid. Her physical gestures alter the film image and threaten to dismantle the traditional cinematic frame. In the final rehearsal sequence of *Lives of Performers* the certainty of the film frame is also undermined through the actions of the performers' bodies. In this sequence different types of visual frames are continuously constructed and then undone by the dancers' exploration of the rehearsal space. This repeated action of the performing body creating and unmaking frames onscreen question the certainty of the film frame. Crucial to both of these examples is the role of the body as an intermedial agent. Working against the traditional role of the body in narrative cinema, these performing bodies evoke the principles of painting, sculpture, theatre and dance within the context of the film frame.

In *Plumb Line*, the film's first image – a photographic still frozen on screen- is not just as an entry point into the film, but is also an index of the film frame. This index is a consistent visual theme throughout the film. Schneemann engulfs the opening photograph in flames in order to assert the instability of the (projected) image. Here, the viewing process, as an act of consumption is refused, as instead flames consume the image. There is violence in Schneemann's act of framing the male image burning within the opening sequence.

In another formally aggressive scene, a siren sound erupts over top of images of Schneemann and the man kissing. It produces a dissonance in the film's tone and signifies love as danger: something that causes alarm. The formal interrogation of her lover's image takes on a searching quality, as well as a desire to deconstruct it. The film seeks out the memories, desires and anxieties contained in the photographic image. This interrogation suggests that man's image functions similarly to how woman's image has functioned throughout the history of cinema. The male is not the central protagonist of the film; rather, Schneemann is. He is the object and muse to be contemplated and manipulated by the artist's hand, sometimes literally as in the case of burning his image, or towards the end when Schneemann takes a sledgehammer to his projected image. The film disrupts conventional representations of men by framing her lover's image as one of at times sadistic voyeuristic pleasure. In contrast, Schneemann's image of herself is very active both within the frame and it what she does to the frame.

Through *Plumb Line* Schneemann precipitates her own catharsis by reconstituting her “relationship through the mechanics of the lens and the split frames of the optical printing.”<sup>144</sup> Within the aesthetic process of “burning, step-printing, multiplying and fragmenting,” she effectively “exorcises psychic chaos and transforms it into a work of art” and through this “reclaims her sanity as a woman and as a filmmaker.”<sup>145</sup> Schneemann’s body interrupts and conditions the entire way in which we read the image and the film frame. She undoes the film frame through her use of dark lines that split the image onscreen into four. This quadrant reflects the same image in mirror formation – moving into and away from itself. There is no stability in this image – it is rapidly changing, the viewer can never quite grasp what is onscreen.<sup>146</sup> We are met with a raw, visceral, aggressive film style, that allows for the possibility of women to be more than what dominant representations allow. Rather than dispensing with the image, Schneemann uses an image of herself as a means of disrupting clichés. Within the film, this image is broken down and then reconstituted in order to incorporate greater complexity into their visual explorations of woman as subject of inquiry.

The dance rehearsal described in the first section of *Lives of Performers* is repeated at the end of the film as a bookend to the film’s narrative. In this second rehearsal sequence, the camera trails down to torsos and feet moving sometimes in unison (and sometimes not), and occasionally creeping up to reveal the faces. As

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<sup>144</sup> Schneemann, *Imaging*, 75.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Here the tools of dominant cinema (both narrative and avant-garde) are used, but disrupted. There is a non-compliance towards following the rules and norms of how a woman should be presented.

noted earlier, there is something very compelling about watching the rehearsal, particularly in the way the dancers communicate with each other both verbally and bodily. As in the dance solo by Setterfield, here Rainer asks us to train our attention on the body as opposed to the voice-over in order to piece together the meaning of the scene. Compellingly, the camera moves as if dancing to its own choreographed movements. These movements resist fixity, and instead follow the more fluid and natural movements of the dancers. This suggests the filming of the rehearsal is a document and a performance in itself, further complicating notions of cinematic specificity. In this scene, viewers are made aware of their viewing pleasure, seduced by the beauty of the dance rehearsal. Some are perhaps prompted to move themselves, as they follow the camera's gestures on screen. There is a feeling of intimate involvement in the scene, alongside an absolute separation from it. Viewers come up against the contradictions of aesthetic distance and a desire for greater proximity and participation in the rehearsal scene. They feel close to the performance space because of the casualness of the performers and the camera movement but are also unable to join in, separated as they are by the constraints of the film frame. Rich notes that within this scene:

If the performer could not be separated from the performance, nor the performance (with its 'ordinary' movement) from daily life, then how to sort the dancer from the dance? Thus rehearsal time was now screen time, the private now public, and motion, so long off-limits for ascetic modernists –

now itself a form of melodrama, expressed via a vocabulary of cliché and banality in place of drama.<sup>147</sup>

Building on Rich's observations, I would further ask how to separate the camera from the dance in the scene? The inclusion of both forms brings forward an intermedial experience that draws on the conventions of performance and dance.

One of the only props within the rehearsal space is a wooden box that is open, upright, tall and shallow. There is a sequence within the scene where different performers, including Fernando and Valda, move in and out of the box in various configurations. First, Fernando is situated within the box, then the camera pans away to performers dancing in the middle of the space and then pans back to the box to find Valda in it with him, both of them contorting their bodies to fit inside the frame. Then we find Valda alone in the box while Fernando is off to the side talking with Shirley. The title card in this sequence reads: "Emotional relationships are relationships of desire, tainted by coercion and constraint: something is expected from the other person, and that makes him and ourselves unfree." This cuts back to an image of Valda and a group of dancers including Rainer, all struggling to fit in the constraints of the box. As a framing device, the box becomes a metaphor for narrative frames. Rainer reconfigures the narrative love triangle through the dancer's interactions with the box and by the title card that accompanies the action. Rainer also alludes to principles of sculpture via the box's frame within the image on screen. I see this as a compelling example of intermediality where the principles of one form – minimalist

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<sup>147</sup> B. Ruby Rich, "Yvonne Rainer: An Introduction," *The Films of Yvonne Rainer*, 4.

sculpture – become a means with which to complicate and expand another – the conventions of narrative film. This example further underscores the usefulness of Shannon Jackson’s understanding of intermediality wherein artists employ the principles of other artistic disciplines in order to challenge conventions within their own field.<sup>148</sup> Throughout the film Rainer experiments with different ways of telling stories that all use bodies and voices to undermine traditional narrative codes. Through Rainer’s formal strategies, viewers are implicated in the film frame suggesting how we are all in some sense performers within the filmic text.

#### Conclusion

My comparative reading of *Lives of Performers* and *Plumb Line* suggest the Rainer and Schneemann share a feminist aesthetic predicated on portraying resistant bodies engaged in various relations with the film medium, viewing spaces, and the audience. Both artists treat spaces as transformational sites and explore the boundaries of media in order to undermine film specificity. Rainer and Schneemann’s films forge an intimate relationship with the audience through their use of non-diegetic voice-over and by addressing viewers from a liminal space outside the film frame. They explore the thresholds between different media and types of representational frames, and foreground a clear interest in the screen as more than a site of projection.

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<sup>148</sup> Jackson, *Social Works*, 14. For a more in-depth outline of Jacksons argument, see chapter one.



As the first section of this chapter demonstrated, both Rainer and Schneemann emerged out of the same artistic milieu in NYC in the 1960s. Both came to film from other artistic disciplines/specialties (Rainer from dance, Schneemann from painting). Both used film projection in their live performance events in the 1960s. Both artists' work fits between media and, as such, reveals an interdisciplinary flow of different forms of projection across their work. However diverse Rainer and Schneemann's work is, I believe it is important to read them for their overlapping experiments with intermedia.

Schneemann and Rainer's aesthetic overlaps offer a historical foundation for the trajectory I trace in this dissertation across feminist experimental film and media since the 1960s. As such, a central claim of this dissertation is that Schneemann and Rainer's separate artistic responses to their shared milieu has had a profound impact on the direction of feminist avant-garde film, media, dance and performance art over the ensuing five decades. In singling out Rainer and Schneemann in the previous and present chapter I seek to reconfirm their importance as early figures in the history of feminist experimental film and media. I believe many crucial early feminist connections made by both artists have been rendered invisible by a history of feminist criticism. This chapter sets out the early formative history I wish to link to later feminist experimental film and media works created between the 1980s and early 2000s in subsequent chapters.

## Chapter 4

### Modes of Inter-subjective Address in Canadian Feminist Experimental Film 1979-1987

#### Introduction

Early in Joyce Wieland's film *Reason Over Passion* (1969), the filmmaker frames herself silently mouthing the words to 'O Canada.' In the image, Wieland's chin rests on her camera and the entire action is filmed through a mirror reflection. Underscoring the film's formal reflexivity, the image reveals Wieland in the act of filming while simultaneously performing the action. Wieland's silently moving lips reference a visual theme found across several of her films and art works.<sup>1</sup> For Kristy Holmes-Moss the leitmotif of lips, also found in Wieland's visual art,<sup>2</sup> advances a specifically "feminine corporeality," situated against the dominance of "technology, rationality, logos."<sup>3</sup> While I agree that the leitmotif signifies a corporeal intervention (asserting Wieland as a speaking subject rather than as a passive object), in her films, these lips are also notably *silent*. As Janine Marchessault notes, they are "[f]rozen

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<sup>1</sup> Including most notably her own lips in *Water Sark* (1965), as well as close up of the main character's lips in both *Paul Vallières* (1972) and *The Far Shore* (1976). Unlike the women's lips in *Water Sark* and *The Far Shore*, Vallière's lips mouthing words are not silent.

<sup>2</sup> This is most notably seen in *O Canada* (1969) where the stain of Wieland's lipstick mouth the lyrics of 'O Canada' once again.

<sup>3</sup> Kristy Holmes-Moss, "Negotiating the Nation: "Expanding" the Work of Joyce Wieland," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*. 15 2 (Fall 2006): 26.

between a yearning to speak and an unwillingness to be spoken.”<sup>4</sup> This silent aspect of Wieland’s lips highlights the historically difficult relationship between women’s bodies and expression. The image enacts a curious refusal; despite the promise of articulation, the silent lips prohibit the speaker from being heard. The tension evoked between speaking and silence reflects a feminist aesthetic critique of cinematic representation. Neither compliant with, nor entirely outside of larger representational systems, Wieland seeks a negotiation - a silent, troubling dialogue from within the cinematic frame.

I begin my chapter with this mediation on Wieland because it underscores my interest in modes of address in feminist experimental film and media. Here, I consider how several Canadian feminist filmmakers in the 1980s use a highly performative audioscape and *mise en scène* to foreground the liminal and tenuous positions of women’s bodies within representation and reception. I will consider four films in this chapter: *The Central Character* (Patricia Gruben, 1977), *Speak Body* (Kay Armatage, 1979), *Ville-Quelle Ville?* (Midi Onodera, 1984), and *Our Marilyn* (Brenda Longfellow, 1987).<sup>5</sup> These films were made during an era when Canadian feminist

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4 Janine Marchessault, “Feminist Avant-Garde Cinema: From Introspection to Retrospection,” in *Gendering The Nation*, eds. Armatage et al. (Toronto: U of T Press 1999), 141.

5 Each film is part of a historical moment when a large number of women filmmakers entered experimental film communities across Canada. An increase in funding opportunities for women and a greater presence of women in film festivals, the film industry and the academy fostered rise of women’s presence across these different arenas. Kay Armatage’s early advocacy through the feminist film journal *Take One* and the groundbreaking women’s film festival in Toronto in 1973 drew filmmakers like Onodera, Gruben and Longfellow into the developing area of feminist film. The filmmakers I consider in this paper were initially oriented around the experimental film community in Toronto and were connected to various organizations such as CFMDC and the Funnel. The Funnel was run early on by David McIntosh, the board and staff included at various times Anna Gronau, Michelle McLean, Midi Onodera and Cindy Gawell among others. Longfellow and Gruben both cite the presence of women peers within this community as vital for their development as filmmakers. Brenda

filmmakers, like their global counterparts, began to challenge avant-garde traditions upheld in previous decades. While these four films are diverse in subject matter and form, they share an interest in critically re-framing modes of cinematic address through a mix of formalism and feminist politics. Combined, the voice-over and visual composition of these films encourages an inter-subjective dialogue with the spectator. The filmmakers all experiment with hybrid film forms and new approaches to directly engage the feminist spectator.<sup>6</sup> Formally, the filmmakers expand the potential of the film medium, challenging both the limits of the frame and the discrete categories of narrative, documentary and experimental film form. Each film successfully achieves this through the construction of liminal soundscapes and visual environments that trouble the illusion, both onscreen and in the audience, of women as a coherent and static signifier of sexual difference.<sup>7</sup> Like the work of Schneemann, Rainer and Wieland in the 1960s and 1970s, these formal interventions by Canadian feminist filmmakers in the 1980s successfully blur the boundaries between spaces and bodies, filmmaker and image, spectator and screen. With the image of the lips, Wieland reveals a body exceeding the systems of meaning placed upon it. A similar exceeding of cinematic signifying systems is found in the films of Gruben, Armatage, Onodera and Longfellow between the late 1970s and the late 1980s.

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Longfellow, personal conversation with author, May 15th, 2011; Patricia Gruben, email correspondence with the author, April 29th, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> As Longfellow notes “we were looking for a form that could mix pleasure, history, politics [with a] reflexivity about the representation of the body.” Longfellow, email with the author, June 1, 2011. These explorations both challenged cinematic traditions and importantly addressed feminist debates around representation that were actively being debated at the time (such as the question of “positive images” and theories of *écriture féminine*) Marchessault, “Feminist Avant-garde,” 143.

<sup>7</sup> Brenda Longfellow helpfully suggested this term on reading a draft of this chapter.

While feminist film from the 1970s and 1980s is often described as engaging in disruptive and dissonant practices, my comparative reading of these four films focuses on the connection they forge with their feminist audience.<sup>8</sup> Here I draw on Marchessault's observation that the epistemic crisis in 1980s Canadian feminist experimental film prompted a shared exploration of "intricate sound-image relations," and a formal emphasis on "thinking through the body." Building on Marchessault, I consider how the films place different bodies into dialogue with one another. The common thread woven across them is that the voice-over and the film frame are linked to an off screen narrator and camerawoman. This encourages the viewer to consider how different types of bodies (real and imagined) function within the complex, interwoven layers of cinematic space. In the first section of this comparison I consider the voice-over of an off screen narrator included in each film. I address how all four filmmakers use this voice-over to produce an inter-subjective dialogue with the spectator, impressing upon viewers the affective dimensions of women's voice in cinema beyond its fixed relation to women's bodies on screen. The second half of my analysis considers the forms of visual address used by the films that successfully unsettle traditional cinematic codes.

Sobchack's chiasmatic or dialectic model of film perception is useful for grounding my analytic frame in this chapter. In her schema, the filmmaker's perception is documented through the initial act of filming, which then becomes the

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, earlier versions of this chapter focused specifically on what I called "an aesthetics of rupture" in feminist experimental film. This broader tendency may in part reflect early feminist film calls for the disruption of dominant cinema, most notably found in Laura Mulvey's call to strike a "blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions" by freeing "the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space." Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 18.

site of the spectator's perceptual engagement.<sup>9</sup> For Sobchack a trace of the filmic act always resides in the viewing act.<sup>10</sup> This convergence between different levels of lived experience within the film projection is key to understanding the inter-subjectivity sought by the films I consider below. All four filmmakers use the figure of the narrator and of the camerawoman to performatively inscribe their perceptual experiences into the film's diegesis. The traces of this lived experience call the spectator to witness the unstable, shifting, and layered nature of cinematic time and space. This echoes Diamond's definition of embodiment outlined in chapter one. Diamond's notion of embodiment recognizes that aesthetic works index the traces of bodily materiality within their form. Within their experience of the text, viewers situate their bodies alongside the imagined bodies of the artist. Through the formal interventions of the work, the binary divisions between spectator and artist dissolve into an inter-subjective exchange. This is a crucial element of spectator address in the works I examine. The four films considered in this chapter function as a pivotal point between the earlier experiments of filmmakers like Schneemann, Rainer and Wieland and the contemporary media work of Shirin Neshat, and Eija-Liisa Ahtila. Their experiments with cinematic address provide an important historical marker of the move towards more fluid experiences of moving image space that are found in contemporary feminist screen-based art.

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<sup>9</sup> Sobchack, "Phenomenology and the Film Experience," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1995), 41.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

### The Speaking Body in Narrative Address

The first half of my analysis considers the use of voice-over as a central mode of address in the four films. Feminist film theory reads women's voice in feminist experimental film as a site for "dissonance and dislocation," often detaching the voice from the image of woman onscreen.<sup>11</sup> This disembodied female voice is rarely used in classical Hollywood because it makes woman inaccessible to the gaze, thus displacing the male protagonist from his position of authority. In experimental film this separation of voice and body does not merely re-position itself in the role of male mastery but rather disallows the illusion of a coherent, unified cinematic subject altogether. For Kaja Silverman the voice-over in feminist film often blurs the "distinction between diegetic interiority and exteriority" effectively redefining "the relationship between spectator and spectacle."<sup>12</sup> Silverman reads this feminist use of the voice-over as working within the threshold between body, language and the social.<sup>13</sup> This linking of voice, images, and cinematic spaces is an integral element of the films that I examine here. Each film's use of voice-over reveals complex cinematic arrangements between bodies in space and attempts to bridge or overcome the limits of the film frame. In different ways the films situate the voice-over in direct relationship to the images of women on screen. Similar to Rainer and Schneemann's use of voice-over in *Lives of Performers* and *Plumb Line*, the voices in these films are

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<sup>11</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1988), 140.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

not those of the women onscreen, but are of off screen authors who address the onscreen characters while simultaneously engaging the audience in an inter-subjective dialogue. In relation to the film work of Rainer, Phelan asks, "If presence is registered not through a visible body but through a voice...how are the models of identification between spectators and their screen surrogates challenged?"<sup>14</sup> Expanding on this question, I consider how the off screen voice in these films interacts with both the images onscreen and with the viewer.<sup>15</sup> The voice-over in each film exists in an undefined space beyond the frame while still being intimately connected to it. The dual address of image onscreen and spectator off screen further contributes to the sense of a narrator existing in the thresholds between viewer and screen. This uncertain positioning of the voice within ambiguous cinematic space evokes a similar sense of uncertainty in the viewer. The spectator is never fixed by the audio or the visual address; rather her position is constantly refigured, challenged and undermined.

My reading of *The Central Character* and *Our Marilyn* diverges from existing critical descriptions of the off screen narrator in each film as being disembodied. While it is true that voice-over in the films is not synchronous with a body on screen, the voice-over narration is situated in direct conversation with the images rather than in radical juxtaposition to them. I read the voice-over narrator in *The Central Character* as addressing an image of herself in the third person. While asynchronous, the film forges a conceptual link between the character's voice and body. In *Our*

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<sup>14</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, 71.

<sup>15</sup> This reading expands upon earlier the discussion on Schneemann and Rainer's presence as double gesture in *Plumb Line* and *Lives of Performers* in the previous chapter.



*Marilyn*, the narrator describes the profound impact that Marilyn Bell and Marilyn Monroe's bodies, the central images in the film, had on her sense of self. The spectator is witness to the profoundly intimate discussion between the narrator and the images on screen. The voice-over in both films is neither disembodied nor embodied, but is better understood as an exploratory figure situated somewhere in the imaginary border between embodiment and dis-embodiment.

*The Central Character* is a fifteen minute experimental narrative that follows a woman from her orderly, pristine kitchen, into her rapidly over-grown garden and finally into a forest space full of discarded junk where she dissolves entirely as an autonomous subject. The film's visuals are lush and highly stylized, printed on high contrast black and white film stock and altered by a vibrant green filter used at various intensities throughout. *The Central Character* positions nature and disorder against language and its attendant desire for rationality and control. The film is punctuated by an incongruence between the woman's third person narration of herself and a second 'voice' represented by title cards, which describes her efforts to maintain control and trace the film's inevitable "movement towards disorder."<sup>16</sup> The protagonist is referred to in the film, both by herself and by the title cards, as 'she.' We first encounter her not through an image but through three different audio moments. In this scene we first hear her reciting a grocery list, then through third-person narration she reads her daily tasks. At first the woman dutifully follows the instructions of title cards onscreen, which include imperatives to cook a meal, clean a

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<sup>16</sup> Kathleen McHugh, "The Films of Patricia Gruben: Subjectivity and Space," *Jump Cut* 35 (April 1990): 110.

floor, sweep patio tiles. Increasingly, these projects are left uncompleted as she begins to traverse spatial, and perhaps psychic, boundaries in a floating, dreamlike state. As she fails to control the natural world she also loses her subjective footing.

We do not see an image of the woman until six minutes into the film when she is framed in close-up floating in a shallow pool of water in a darkened, undecipherable space.<sup>17</sup> This first image provides an early visual indication of her liminal state; she is not grounded in her surroundings. From this point the character moves into her garden. Once in the garden the woman begins the task of sweeping patio stones and sets out in search of more containers to “hold the uncontrollably growing plants” around her. The title cards note that she never returns from this search because the trail of seeds she left to find her way back are eaten by birds. The final part of the film takes place in a forest space, perhaps a deeper level of interiority, where language and boundaries break down. Here, there is a merging of subject and space. The lack of title cards in this final section signifies the end of rationality. The remaining minutes of the film are increasingly abstract. The hi-contrast stock creates a starkly polarized image of deep blacks and over-exposed white highlights. In this final section of the film we follow the central character as she examines various objects and tries to cut a frog with a fork and knife before it jumps away. The last shot is of a gothic looking forest where her face is incorporated into the overgrowth.

The main character’s narration of her own story is a significant intervention against the traditionally male driven narratives of Hollywood and the voice-of-god

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<sup>17</sup> This is almost an inversion of Wieland’s figure of silent lips, here we have audio but the woman is not visible.

narrations of documentary. There is a split between the voice-over and the image of 'herself,' but despite the radical separation they are still intrinsically linked. What the narrator describes is what the character encounters onscreen. These experiences are always bodily, always grounded in physical actions, never abstracted from the materiality of the character's experiences. For instance, when the voice-over speaks an imperative such as "sweep up the dirt," the corresponding image on screen is of a broom sweeping dirt on patio stones. The narrator, speaking to the audience about her (image's) actions, establishes a critical relationship between narrator, image and audience.<sup>18</sup> This is something that this film shares with the narration in *Our Marilyn*.

I would like to explore the entrance into the third space of the character's journey in more detail. This moment in the film follows the transition from the garden into the forest. Once the character is lost to the forest, she also becomes lost to coherent linguistic expression. In this space, we begin to hear her speak differently. She is no longer speaking the list of imperatives "sweep up the dirt, put it in the pot, take it to the plants." Here she struggles to articulate herself beyond the mundane tasks that up to this point have defined her. In one of the most compelling moments in the film, the character begins to repeat over and over "That I would like to say, that I would like to say, that" continuously for several minutes. The soundtrack is a dominant and structuring force in this section of the film. The phrase is presented as

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<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, it is the voice of the title card that remains disembodied, functioning as a 'silent' voice of imperatives and detached description. This significantly reinforces the connection between the woman narrator and her image as united against the text, which functions as the signifier of dominant language - within which women has no place. Here, the text has no place; it is positioned outside the filmic diegesis, whereas the woman's narration of herself remains intrinsically tied to the image of the woman onscreen.

an open-ended sentence whose meaning shifts depending on where you place the punctuation and emphasis - something that the repetition of the phrase refuses. Do we interpret her to mean “I would like to say that...” or “That I would like to say...”? What is it that she would like to say? What is she trying to express? Here, as with Wieland’s silent lips, there exists a refusal to communicate through logical linguistic forms. The repetition of the phrase “that I would like to say” holds a sense of both potential and non-compliance. While it refuses clarity, it also sets out a desire. The phrase indicates a desire to communicate, even if this desire is challenged by the endless circularity and repetition of the utterance. It also represents a shift from third-person to first-person – it is not “that she would like to say,” but rather “that I would like...” Voice and image meet within this space of interiority; it is a tentative meeting between seemingly disembodied elements. There is a sense of catharsis occurring within the repetitious articulation of the character’s desire to speak. The materiality of the voice exhibits the understanding of embodiment defined by Diamond. The voice gives us a sense of the character’s body as we hear, but do not see, an image of her for almost one third of the film. Her speaking body makes itself present in our minds as an image, which is not yet present on screen.

Like *The Central Character*, *Our Marilyn* articulates women’s subjectivity through an embodied voice-over. *Our Marilyn* is an experimental documentary about a fictional character named Marilyn, who grows up between the images of Marilyn Bell and Marilyn Monroe. The film alternates between archival footage of Marilyn Bell’s historic swim across Lake Ontario and Marilyn Monroe’s journey to visit US

troops in Korea. They represent opposing poles: the virginal, athletic body of the young Bell in contrast with the seductive, sexualized body of Monroe.<sup>19</sup> The film is structured around the time line of Bell's swim, culminating with her successful finish. It is a documentary of the lives of these two historical figures, but it is also a personal reflection on the role of these women as icons. The film weaves together five overlapping voices including a reenactment of Bell's internal thoughts as she struggles to swim across Lake Ontario; a fictional narrator named Marilyn; speaking about growing up between the shadows of these two public figures; the voice of radio broadcasts charting Bell's swim; and a male coach shouting encouragement to Bell while she swims. My analysis focuses on the narrator, who Longfellow scripted, as a semi-autobiographical figure that draws on Chris Marker's narrator in *Sans Soleil*. For Longfellow the narrator in *Sans Soleil* represented an attractive "fictional device," a "phantom narrator" who is both "personal but...completely invented." Most notably, the fictional narrator in *Our Marilyn* provides an important sense of intimacy within the film. With her, we are in the realm of memory, reverie, and personal reflection. As Adam Dickinson notes, the narrator carries a "subjective presence" as well as a real sense of "proximity."<sup>20</sup> With her voice, the film privileges the subjective over the objective. It is through her that we view the factual fragments of the film. This relatedness to the narrator's voice stands in marked contrast to the notion of a disembodied voice-over.

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<sup>19</sup> The film contemplates questions of identity, nationalism, the mediated construction of women's subjectivity and perhaps most importantly, offers a portrait of women's bodies as active and capable of physical endurance.

<sup>20</sup> Adam Dickinson, "The Rhythm of Happening: Antagonism and Community in Brenda Longfellow's *Our Marilyn* and *A Balkan Journey*," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 12 1 (Spring 2003): 47.

In the film's opening and at two additional points throughout the film, the narrator repeats an observation that is integral to the film as a whole. She states: "Growing up between your bodies, never one without the other, I keep moving, watched your moving and dreamed of another story." Notably in all three instances the narrator does not address the audience directly, but rather speaks to the two Marylins onscreen. She describes to them (and consequently to the audience) their impact on her life. In other parts of the film the narrator asks Bell and Monroe questions about their life experiences. This form of address offers a dimensionality and historicity to the iconic, canonized images of both women. Suddenly, they are invited to speak (whether they do or not) and the materiality of their experiences, their perspectives and their everyday life is validated as a subject of interest. This marks the images not as empty signifiers but as embodied. Through the narrative address the corporeal traces haunting their images is made visible. The narrator often compares the two Marylins through stories of bodily experience. In one instance the film recounts Marilyn Bell's specific struggles swimming in "dangerously" cold water. This is connected by the narrator to a story of Monroe insisting on wearing a sleeveless dress and open-toe shoes despite the cold while performing for US troops. The women are linked in the narrator's mind through their bodily experiences of performing for others (and specifically, their nations) despite the physical discomfort of the cold. The film's emphasis on material, physical experience embedded within the narration, never lets us escape the trace of the lived body.

The figure of Marilyn Bell is also represented by a fictionalized voice-over. The struggles Bell faced in her historic swim are revealed through an interior monologue that appears sporadically throughout the film. The inclusion of Bell's inner thoughts adds depth to the story of her young body in action. What is significant about Bell's monologue is how successfully it expresses her fears through her whispered voice. This voice makes palpable her exhaustion, as well as her physical struggle against the waves in a way more immediate or personal than the images can. In contrast, the image of a beautiful blue lake and sun sparkling on the wave tops does not show a body. This absence of image further reinforces the voice as holding a form of corporeal presence for the viewer.

Like *Our Marilyn, Speak Body* presents multiple, overlapping voices on its audio track. The film is the most overtly political documentary of the four films but it also includes formally experimental elements.<sup>21</sup> The film opens with a closely framed tilt down a woman's body from the top of her head to her nude torso. The shot ends with the frame resting on an image of her breast in her hand. The title card flashes "Speak Body." The rest of the film is composed of seven sequences accompanied by overlapping voices on the soundtrack. A single body onscreen represents the voices, but the variation in cadence and use of words on the audio track reflects a diverse group of women sharing their experiences of abortion. These multiple voices reveal very different material experiences, reflections, and emotions that at times contradict each other. Each shot corresponds to a particular point within their experience. For

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<sup>21</sup> This film uses the same techniques as are used in Armatage's documentary *Striptease* made one year later, which is formally quite straightforward with only a few experimental and narrative elements.

instance in the first sequence we see a close up of hands distractedly flipping through a day planner on a generic kitchen table. The hand begins to flip more quickly, counting a set of days. The setting of the kitchen table is the intimate space of the quotidian. The voice-over begins with several women describing when and how they figured out that they were pregnant. In the audio we hear many different reactions to this experience. There is a clear contrast between one woman who states “Every time I fucked I thought I was pregnant, so it wasn’t as if it was a sudden shock,” and another who says, “I didn’t think that I would get pregnant ever, and I did.” The additional seven sequences are similarly structured.<sup>22</sup> In the seventh and final tableaux a bouquet of flowers at a wooden kitchen table are framed like a painterly still life. The audio track includes various descriptions of moving beyond the experience. As one woman states, “I began to see things in perspective again.” The closing image is a similar tilt to that of the opening image. The camera moves down a woman’s hair, face, body as a single voice states: “This is over and these are the images I remember. But the dilemma continues, IUDs, pills, watching the moon, celibacy, abortion laws and abortion practices, raising children alone, jobs for women, salaries, not having

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<sup>22</sup> The second section again is situated at a kitchen table, the date book at the top of frame is closed, yellow journal open face down and a hand with pen in it is absently circling the surface of a placemat. On the audio track various women discuss the process of making the decision to have an abortion, reasons why and how they went about making the appointment. In the third shot it is the same table with a black rotary phone in the center, a woman’s hand comes in and dials numbers. The voice-over describes the wait leading up to each woman’s abortion including a list of statistics on the lack of political and economic support for women. The fourth, fifth and sixth shots are perhaps the most formally experimental in the film. They represent the process of arriving at the appointment, the abortion, and the immediate moments following the abortion. The visuals include out of focus point of view of someone on their back looking up at institutional overhead light found in hospitals, blurry glass window panes in a very layered, abstract effect, and a hazy, out of focus, extreme close up of one woman helping another walk up stairs. The audio of a woman crying inconsolably in distress, descriptions of morphine, the hospital, the procedure is powerful and discomforting.



children, all are unsatisfactory.” The single voice narrating this concluding statement seems tied to the film’s author, as if Armatage includes her own voice and experience among the many others within the film.

Onodera’s film *Ville-Quelle Ville?* also refuses to provide a direct connection between voice-over and image onscreen. In *Speak Body* the polyvalent collage of women’s voices works within and against the tightly framed fragments of a woman’s body. In *Ville-quelle Ville?* the third-person voice-over recites a narrative of a woman while never including *any* images of her onscreen. Both films employ more traditional narrative and documentary voice-over technique, but they still refuse to confirm the speaking body as a coherent subject. In *Speak Body* there are many bodies and voices speaking at once and not one of them corresponds to the body onscreen. These voices exceed representation, undermining any sense that the images onscreen express the complexity of the documentary subjects. The overlapping and contradictory voices ensure that the expansive material complexity and reality of abortion could be truly heard. In *Ville-Quelle Ville?* the narrator describes a woman’s experiences of city space in correspondence with images of the city. It is unclear if the narrative of her life corresponds with the onscreen tableaux of cityscapes shown throughout the film. The tone of the narrator and the vague nature of her narrative render the representation and delivery equally ambiguous. Even though we are learning intimate details of one woman’s daily life, the information is elliptical. There is nothing concrete we can take away from these descriptions. The voice-over style references the narrators of classical hard-boiled detective films. This odd pairing

further complicates the viewer's reading of the narrative. The spectator questions whether this voice is trying to convey something insidious about this woman. With the non-correspondence to the image, or lack of an image, viewers are confronted with the failures of cinematic representation and classical narrative's tenuous ability to encapsulate the complexities of women's lived experience. As with *The Central Character*, *Ville-Quelle Ville?* uses voice-over to comment directly on the actions occurring in a woman's daily life. However, unlike *The Central Character*, Onodera's narrator oftentimes does not directly comment on what is occurring within the visuals onscreen. In *Ville-Quelle Ville?* it is unclear whether the point of view represented on screen is that of the narrator or of the mysterious 'she' the narrative describes. Either way, the voice-over clearly negotiates a fictional woman's subjectivity within questions of space and place, identity, and the experience of everyday banality. In one sense, the visuals counter the mystery and aura of the woman in film noir because they are at times bright and sunny, familiar, and inviting.

Through unconventional narrative address each film reconfigures the potential uses of women's voice in cinema against its traditional position of silence. Silverman argues that an "enormous conceptual and discursive range" can be found in the female voice "once it is freed from its claustal confinement with the female body."<sup>23</sup> I would add that exploring the terrain between women's bodies and voices in cinema provides an equally compelling discursive range in feminist film. *The Central Character* and *Our Marilyn* do not completely mark a break between women's image

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<sup>23</sup> Silverman, *Acoustic Mirror*, 186.

and voice. While they do counter women's silencing by cinema and dominant language, they do so via an embodied iteration of the voice. In *The Central Character*, the voice and the character onscreen are brought together in their position against the disembodied and objective title cards. At a certain point, these title cards disappear as they no longer hold any function as the film moves deeper into the character's interiority. The character is left to explore her sense of self at the margins of functional language. While the voice also ceases to speak with any coherence, unlike the absent title cards, it is still a part of her journey. In a different manner, *Our Marilyn* also forges a relation between voice and body. The narrator's voice actively comments on the life of the images, treating them critically as fixed representations that require further examination. Crucially, the voice in both films establishes an inter-subjective relation between image, sound and audience. The films broach the threshold between the voice and the image through their emphasis on bodily experience and mundane tasks. In *Speak body* and *Ville-Quelle Ville?* the voice and the onscreen body are placed in a more tenuous relationship to one another. It is not intimate but rather strained and purposefully contradictory, even in its direct ties to the subject visually presented by the film. However, I maintain that the voice-over is not disembodied in either film. The voice presents a speaking body off screen that addresses the spectator watching the images onscreen.

My reading of these films counters the tendency to categorize the voice in feminist avant-garde film from this decade as formally disruptive. While dissonance and dislocation are present in feminist avant-garde uses of voice, I do not read them

as ever being entirely disembodied especially with regards to spectatorial address. My reliance here on a different notion of embodiment outlined by Diamond, suggests women's voices in these four films are more generative than disruptive. I argue the feminist avant-garde use of a disjunctive voice-over can promote and inter-subjective viewing relationship to the women on screen but that it is not necessarily a disembodied experience.

#### The Gestic Camera in Visual Address

In this section I expand further upon the silent gesture of Wieland's lips by considering a second important sequence in *Reason Over Passion*. In the middle of the film she includes footage of Pierre Trudeau during the 1968 Liberal convention.<sup>24</sup> In the sequence Trudeau's image is slowed down, frozen, brought in and out of focus, and framed through a circle made by Wieland's thumb and finger. This visual interrogation of Trudeau at the center point of her cross-Canada journey complements her critique of his famous statement "la raison avant la passion" throughout the film. In addition, her interrogation of the former Prime Minister *as* image through various framing techniques formally reveals her purposeful presence within the *mise en scène*. Wieland's defamiliarizing manipulation of Trudeau takes his image out of its historical location and into a temporal and spatial liminality enframed through her idiosyncratic lens.

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<sup>24</sup> The formal placement of the scene has thematic implications that speak directly to Wieland's broader interrogation of Trudeau's vision of Canada in the film.

This section builds upon performance studies' interest in the feminist potential of the Brechtian *gestus*.<sup>25</sup> Diamond defines *gestus* as "an action" that makes "visible" for the spectator the prevailing "social attitudes" of a work.<sup>26</sup> In theatre the "gestic moment" both "explains...(and) exceeds the play," illustrating for viewers the "ideologies that inform its production."<sup>27</sup> An important effect of the *gestus* in feminist theatre is that it "undermines the stability of the spectatorial 'self,' for in the act of looking the spectator engages with her own temporality."<sup>28</sup> I extend Diamond's definition to consider the *gestus* in feminist cinema. I question specifically how the film *gestus* makes visible prevailing social attitudes within cinema, exceeds the traditional constraints of the medium, and challenges the spectator. Each of the four films employs this gestic mode of visual address to engage the spectator's personal sense of temporality, blurring the line between the diegetic space of the film and the viewers' position in relation to it.

Extending Diamond's definition of *gestus*, I attribute the filmic *gestus* not to the body of a performer onscreen, but through the author's inscription "performing" the formal composition of *mise en scène*. The ways in which these films perform the gestic act calls into question prevailing social attitudes of the film medium. I will look at how each filmmaker evokes a sense of liminal space within the film frame that exceeds the ideologies of the apparatus. By exceeding these frames and cinematic constraints, Wieland's second filmic *gestus*, "asks us to consider the author's

<sup>25</sup> See Elin Diamond, "Brechtian Theory," 82-94, and Jill Dolan *The Feminist Spectator As Critic*.

<sup>26</sup> Diamond, "Brechtian Theory," 89.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>28</sup> Diamond, "Brechtian Theory," 90.

inscription”<sup>29</sup> and what it reveals about the possibilities and constraints of the medium. The four films I consider in this chapter evoke a similar set of questions through the performative inscription of the camera’s frame. The filmmaker’s “performing” of the framing makes visible traditional codes of representation. Diamond argues that “the female performer, unlike her filmic counterpart, connotes not “to-be-looked-at-ness”...but rather “looking-at-being-looked-at-ness”<sup>30</sup> I would supplement Diamond’s reading by suggesting that the camera woman behind the camera equally connotes a reflexive “looking-at-being-looked-at-ness,”<sup>31</sup> which incites a greater awareness in the audience about the embodied and idiosyncratic aspects of camera movement and framing.

As I have already outlined briefly above, for Vivian Sobchack the act of filming encourages an inter-subjective viewing experience. The camera records the filmmaker’s perception, which informs and engages the spectator’s own act of perception. Within this schema, Sobchack views the film and the spectator as both being engaged in performative actions.<sup>32</sup> The cinematic performative utterance is found in the entanglement between the filmmaker and spectator’s different acts of perception, both of which are grounded in the film image. The film retains a trace of

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<sup>29</sup> Diamond, “Brechtian Theory,” 90.

<sup>30</sup> She continues “this Brechtian-feminist body is paradoxically available for both analysis and identification, paradoxically within representation while refusing its fixity.” Diamond, “Brechtian Theory,” 89.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>32</sup> Sobchack, *Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992), 42. This notion follows J.L Austin’s definition of the performative utterance, which implies that the very actions of expression and perception engender a change in their situation, produce their own contextual conditions. See J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975), 5-7.

this lived perceptual experience in its material form and translates this 'liveness' through signification. This performative element of signification enacts a change; it translates an absent act of perception into the presence of the viewing experience. As such it transforms the relationship between the spectator, filmmaker and the film into a dialogue of inter-subjectivity.<sup>33</sup> This inter-subjective address encourages an embodied viewing experience that unsettles the spectator's position and calls into uncertainty the practice of viewing cinema more broadly.

In the second half of this chapter I argue that the inter-subjective encounter forged through visual address is a compelling element of feminist experimental aesthetics. In these four films in particular the camera articulates a meta-critique of women's absence in dominant cinema through the use of framing rather than audio voice-over. Like the sense of liminal space produced by the embodied off screen voice-over, the visual address in these films also evokes an affective experience of liminal space for the viewer. In *Our Marilyn*, this is seen in the seemingly endless body of water that the figure of Bell struggles within and against throughout the film. In *The Central Character* it is found in the dense overgrown forest that functions as the visual site for the woman's subjective collapse. In *Speak Body* women are figuratively suspended throughout the seven 'still life' scenarios in a temporally determinate, transitional experience reflecting the in-between nature of their movement between pregnancy and abortion. In *Ville-Quelle Ville?* the absent character is represented by continuous transitions between different cityscapes, yet

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<sup>33</sup> Sobchack, *Address*, 42.

never located within any of them; she could be anywhere or nowhere. This indeterminacy within the frame leaves the spectator searching for the main character within the shifting city spaces.

This double sense of liminality within the audio and diegetic space is central to each film's formal construction. In *The Central Character* and *Our Marilyn* the use of high-contrast film stocks pushes the image almost to the point of visual incoherence, blurring the lines between women and their environments. In *The Central Character*, the framing purposefully dissolves the boundaries between environment and body. Onscreen, the camera frames the body and space as they shift, interrupt, and deteriorate into one another alongside the deteriorating coherence of the voice-over. The visual dissolution of the woman's image in the frame is both gripping and unsettling. In *Our Marilyn*, Longfellow performs the role of the main character, her own body reenacting Marilyn Bell's swimming journey. This framing of Longfellow's body as Bell dissolves the boundaries between her role as author, image, and performer. As well, her choice of framing in these segments challenges the fixed certainty of her body as it is overwhelmed by the vast expanse of water she swims in. In *Speak Body* and *Ville-Quelle Ville?* the almost hyper-coherence of the realist tableaux offer a different sense of instability as the image does not match the experiences of the narrator off screen. In contrast to the moving, fluid nature of the visual frame in *The Central Character* and *Our Marilyn*, *Speak Body* and *Ville-Quelle Ville* explore the formal challenges posed by the static frame. In *Speak Body* the camera draws awareness to the purposeful composition of each of the seven tableaux



shots. The camera is static as it frames the woman onscreen. This purposeful lack of camera movement reflects a film frame frozen between moments of upheaval and everyday banality. Here the image poses a striking contrast to the fluidity of the voices. The woman's body onscreen in *Speak Body* does not provide a direct visual address but is rather disengaged and highly composed – almost like a still life. The fragments of her body and her daily routine emphasize the fragmented and contingent nature of the stories shared on the audio-track. *Ville-Quelle Ville* also provides a series of tableaux that are impersonal and noticeably static. The film's framing emphasizes a tension between stasis and transition, as vehicles or people often move across the screen. The fixity of the image is juxtaposed by the wondering ellipses of the narrative address, which enforce an almost restless pace within the film. What we see, somewhat empty scenes of urban life, is not what we want to see, an image of the unknowable 'she.' In each film, the *mise en scène* reveal a critically reflexive attentiveness to the parameters and function of the visual frame. In all the films this highly visible approach to framing further emphasizes the dialogue that is being forged with a feminist spectator.

In *The Central Character* and *Our Marilyn*, the filmed bodies are not static or frozen onscreen but rather are *bodies in motion*. There are several significant points to extract from this observation. To begin, these bodies move within noticeably malleable spaces, which, above all, do not constrain the characters. As a complement to this, both films use high-contrast stock or optical printing to abstract the images on screen. The effect is a visual blurring of the division between the bodies onscreen and

what surrounds them. These blurred bodies in liminal spaces highlight the mutually constitutive nature of bodies and their environments. They reflect the vulnerability and permeability of these bodies, but also their potential, as they are both fluid and in motion. We see this in the physicality of Bell's body fighting against the waves and the chaotic movement of the central character in the forest, moving deeper beyond language and into the excessive and imaginative spaces of the film. For Amelia Jones this body in art indexes the uncertainty of the viewer: as the representational body is "marked as contingent, so is the interpreter."<sup>34</sup> Since the bodies on screen are contingent upon that which surrounds them, these environments are central to critical readings of the films.

In *The Central Character*, the garden can be read as an exterior space, but also as I have suggested, a deeper interiority. Gruben notes that in the movement from kitchen to garden to forest: "it's as though the character keeps waking up into a deeper and deeper dream."<sup>35</sup> In the third space of the forest, or perhaps the deepest area of interiority - language and boundaries break down. Here, there is a merging of subject and space. The last few minutes of the film are increasingly visually abstract; the hi-contrast stock creates a starkly polarized image of deep blacks and over-exposed white highlights. Here the woman raises herself from the ground slowly. Her white shirt reveals a series of dark stains, which Gruben refers to as resembling a "gestalt ink-blot." The high-contrast stock causes the image to resist holding a

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<sup>34</sup> Jones, *Body/Art*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Patricia Gruben, email correspondence, April 29, 2011.

concrete form. Instead, it wavers and jumps around in the frame, never static. The boundaries or outlines between body and environment seem to shift and bleed into each other. Additionally, the woman's figure moves in an elusive, strangely fluid, yet frenetic manner; it refuses to be pinned or fixed by the camera. The woman stares directly at the camera and then spirits away into the dark background of the forest. In this gesture, she slips by the camera's gaze and chooses an alternate path into the space of the forest.

The woman's entrance into the third space has an impact on the audience, who up to this point has maintained a rather distanced position. I believe that this is a key moment of catharsis in the film. Here spectators begin to lose their bearings as the dialogue that has anchored them begins to fall away. They are positioned in a space that lacks clear boundaries and distinctions. This experience is compounded by the increasing abstraction of the images. Where all these forms of language falter, anything becomes possible. This locates spectators once again in a space of possibility as much as in a space of loss. The two co-exist, allowing and encouraging spectators to enter the space because they are no longer held by narrative or textual address.

Viewers are confronted with a central character who voices a desire that is not fully articulate and an image we cannot clearly identify. The impression we have is of a dynamic body, unfixed and in motion. Central to this image is the dissolving of the boundaries, opening the relation between bodies and their environments into a pointed exchange. This is what Laura Levin describes as "performing ground"

whereby “the body comingles with or is seen as a direct extension of its setting.”<sup>36</sup>

This comingling draws attention to our embeddedness in space and successfully complicates both Cartesian models of subjectivity and in the case of feminist art, the binaries that constrain women’s bodies in representation.

*Our Marilyn* offers a similar dissolution between body and space punctuated by an abstracted, destabilized image of women. This is most clearly seen in the images of Bell/Longfellow swimming. In researching Marilyn Bell for the film, Longfellow discovered a notable lack of archival accounts of Bell’s actual swimming experience in the official history of the event.<sup>37</sup> For example, there is no mention of the physical difficulties or psychic challenges Bell faced in her arduous and lengthy swim. For Longfellow, the feat of swimming for twenty hours is an image of women not often found on screen – that of a woman’s body in action. As a corrective to this un-recorded history, Longfellow filmed herself swimming in Lake Ontario with Super 8 film, and used this as her source material. Longfellow’s insistence on showing the woman’s body was a response to Peter Gidal’s argument that as she paraphrases it, “women can never take place in representation because she is always going to be captured and objectified by the patriarchal gaze.”<sup>38</sup> Rather than remove women’s bodies from film altogether, Longfellow decided she would “foreground the

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<sup>36</sup> Laura Levin, personal correspondence, April 10, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> The press did not focus much on Bell when she began her swim across Lake Ontario, because the CNE had sponsored American swimmer Florence Chadwick. There are some initial images of Bell entering the water but no footage of her swimming the long-distance. This is contrasted by the swell of footage of Bell once she was the remaining contender in the competition.

<sup>38</sup> Longfellow, personal conversation, May 15, 2011.

body in a different kind of a way.”<sup>39</sup> She succeeds in this by creating footage where none existed. This footage is reenacted and hand manipulated by Longfellow, who notes she was inspired by feminist performance art while making the film. The inclusion of her own body, both in the swimming footage and her optical printing suggest a performance on her part. She is not only the filmmaker, but also the swimming body, and through the autobiographical voice of the narrator, the phantom voice addressing both the image and the audience. She articulates her own subjectivity as a woman, a feminist, and a filmmaker within these multiple layers of audio and image in deeply moving ways. This is again an example of performing ground, whereby the subtle relations between disparate elements of the film come together. These connections destabilize any sense of a singular, coherent subject, offering instead a more polyvalent vision of women in cinematic space.

The body in *Speak Body*'s seven tableaux sequences is similarly destabilized through its predominant framing solely from the shoulders down. In the film the images represent different daily, yet emotionally charged, experiences. Yet, the body on screen is detached from the viewer as we rarely see her face or expressions. This impersonal framing contradicts the body's placement within the intimacy of these everyday scenarios. This juxtaposition reflects the equally marked contrast between the body in these seven sequences, and the more intimate tilts of the woman's body that book end the film. The multiple voice-overs evoke images on their own, and as such exceed the highly composed, static *mise en scène* on screen. However, the

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<sup>39</sup> Longfellow, personal conversation, May 15, 2011.

images on screen evoke a more fragmented and fleeting sense of proximity. These two observations require a further consideration of how sound and images are juxtaposed within the film.

One possible answer is to read these juxtapositions metonymically rather than as simply engaged in a metaphoric signification. In Erin Hurley's reading of Quebec national performance she makes a clear distinction between metaphoric and metonymic forms of representation. The metaphoric image flattens the embodied or affective elements associated with the represented figure.<sup>40</sup> For Hurley a more nuanced and complicated approach to representation is found within a metonymic figure who is defined by her partiality, thus making the relations between signifier and signified much less certain. This partiality is contextually contingent, and as such, reveals the constructedness of representational processes, while also calling into question the fixed nature of the signifying relation. The metonymic representation effectively undermines the wholeness of metanarratives. Reading these films' cinematic representations of women as metonymic acknowledges their imagistic ties to a material body while recognizing their partiality. In this contradiction, the metonymic representation of women usefully counters the metaphoric woman, who exists as an over-determined object.<sup>41</sup> Armatage's use of a static singular image of a faceless woman onscreen is metonymic in that a generic image of woman stands as a

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<sup>40</sup> Her most compelling example being the large group of 'hostesses' hired to guide tourists through their Expo 67 experience. These women metaphorically represented a welcoming image of 'modern' Quebec and became an iconic touchstone on posters and advertising while being simultaneously emptied of any sense of individuality both at the time and in historical documents. See Erin Hurley, *National Performance: Representing Quebec from Expo 67 to Celine Dion* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> Hurley, *National Performance*, 122-123.

part for the whole of women's experience. Armatage works with the limitations of the image to draw awareness to the constructedness of representation. At the same time, the recognizable everyday spaces and activities the woman engages with onscreen are for some, familiar quotidian experiences. The layered, complex audio comprised of many voices stands against any notion of women's experience of abortion as singular, revealing instead the material specificity and nuance of the experience. Reading this image/audio juxtaposition as metonymic allows critics to see the vital formal intervention Armatage is making in this film.

In *Ville-Quelle Ville?* the images do not match the audio at all. Notably all the shots are static. The street scene that opens the film is very sunny and contrasts with the moody, seedy jazz soundtrack with which the voice-over is combined. The second shot is of a dead end street overlooking a field with pigeons and branches in foreground. The third shot is of a Becker's storefront. The fourth shot is of a stone wall with a man working on a platform and ladder, with a car in the foreground. The fifth shot is of an empty swing set moving with no one there. All images to this point are bright and sunny.<sup>42</sup> The film continues with five additional tableaux sequences that very obliquely correspond to the narrative voice-over, which often drifts into

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<sup>42</sup> The sixth image image of two houses shot from back alley behind houses with fences and hanging laundry foregrounded, voice-over here says "she would become like her brothers, list of North American consumer habits," - but it is also a bit nonsensical at same time, almost like a stream of conscious listing bordering on the poetic. In the seventh shot we see a factory building/loading dock and voice-over about life cycles. This cuts to the eighth image of the highway, with a voice-over that states "last week her life took a turn, she moved from one end of the city to another." In the ninth and tenth shot there is a beer store, and a man running by an empty rainy summer setting. In the eleventh and final shot we see a woman walking by and then away from camera with a bicycle. A voice-over states "commuters, consumers, collectives, co-ops, co-existing" and a list of elements of everyday life finally noting that "she" doesn't understand the city. The film ends with the title card: "provence- quelle province?"

points of reverie and stream-of-conscious observation. The story is entirely elliptical – viewers never quite grasp who is the ‘she’ the narrator refers to. This complements the rather elliptical nature of the tableaux images, which hold no real sense of interconnection. The ninth image is the first shot where we see images of a body in the film: a non-descript man jogging by a rainy summer park in the background.

In the films *Speak Body* and *Ville-Quelle Ville?* the visual address functions quite differently than in the two previous film especially in their relationship to the visuals onscreen. The connection between off screen voice-over and the images on screen is less intimate and immediate; it forges a more tenuous relationship that works in tension with the more static, tableaux images formally favored by both films. The films thus present less certainty around the voice and image correspondence; the link is challenged and yet never fully negated. Again, I read this relationship as one of liminality – it moves through various forms of connection and dislocation – residing somewhere in between. I also read the narrator in these two films as being both disembodied and directly connected to the image onscreen. However, unlike *Our Marilyn* and *The Central Character*, the relationship between onscreen image and off screen voice-over in *Ville-Quelle Ville* and *Speak Body* is more tenuous, less certain. In *Speak Body*, the multiple narrators’ overlapping voices feel more alive than the image because they are animated, personal, idiosyncratic. The multiple voices and stories stand out against the singular image on screen.. In *Ville-Quelle Ville?* the voice-over is un-locatable as it is an omniscient third-person observer describing a woman’s story. And yet it is also more embodied for the sheer fact that the film does



not contain an image of the main character being described by the narrator. The image of the woman described is replaced by framed cityscapes mostly emptied of people. Only the voice-over offers a sense of who “she” is. The narrator (the symbolic voice of the absent woman) is the only point in the film that we gather the sense of an embodied character. The image of woman exists in the narrator’s description and in the spectator’s imagination – both notably off screen. The film offers an important refusal of the classical Hollywood model of fixing women’s voices and bodies in the cinematic frame. A similar act of refusal is found in all four films considered in this chapter. In none of the films is the woman’s voice tied to a body on screen. The voices used to narrate the films stand outside the diegetic action. They are situated in-between the image and the audience, commenting on the image for the benefit of a future viewing encounter.

## Conclusion

At the very end of *Reason Over Passion* there is an image of a passing winter landscape filmed from the inside of a train. This exterior image includes the reflection of an interior domestic space with a picture frame and a warm light emanating from a lamp on a dresser. The exterior image notably contrasts the warmth of the interior setting and the cold blue light of the snowy landscape outside. It also noticeably complicates and dissolves the traditional discrete boundaries between interior and exterior space. The viewer is uncertain of Wieland’s location as she occupies the

interior space while simultaneously occupying the space in a moving vehicle. She seemingly films both places and times at once. In addition to merging time and space in the double exposure, the viewer is left wondering why Wieland purposefully frames these two spaces together. The spectator who perceives warmth and cold together feels the contrast between the spaces viscerally. Both images are inviting for different reasons and it is difficult to locate or align oneself in either space exclusively. Like Wieland's position filming between the two places, the spectator inhabits a similar place of duality. Here again, Wieland's camera address reinforces both the uncertainty and embodied aspect of spectatorship.

In a formative discussion on feminist film aesthetics, de Lauretis champions Chantal Akerman's formal focus in *Jeanne Dielman* on "woman's actions, gestures, body and look" as they successfully "define the space of our vision, the temporality and rhythms of perception, the horizon of meaning available to the spectator."<sup>43</sup> De Lauretis is talking here about both the performer onscreen and Akerman's position behind the camera. A similar observation can be made about Gruben, Longfellow, Armatage and Onodera's different engagements with this particular aspect of feminist film aesthetics. The gestures of the camera body framing the bodies on screen (or in Onodera's case the absence of bodies onscreen) absolutely define the spectator's viewing spaces. The visual address in each film tests and often blurs the boundaries between different spaces of embodiment, determining a new set of possibilities for spectator-film relations.

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<sup>43</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, "Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema," *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985): 154-175.

Insofar as these films are situated at a series of thresholds or margins between genres, forms, histories and languages, they still remain avowedly 'inside the visible,' in Catherine de Zegher's terms. They incorporate "material traces and fragmentary histories" into aesthetic "convergences" which, when "recombined...produce new meanings." These convergences are grounded within "the specificity of the encounter between work and viewer."<sup>44</sup> It is this foregrounding of the relationship of cinematic bodies to space and the audience that is so compelling in these films. They enable a dialectic relationship between spectator and film to occur, a relationship that, in the case of *Our Marilyn*, includes the embodiment of the filmmaker in compelling ways. While the films reveal shared aesthetic interests with Wieland's image of women's lips, they do not remain either static or silent. They take her image, frozen and resistant, as a clarion call and push beyond women's containment, absence and silence in cinema. They offer new formal possibilities for exploring the relationship between image, voice and audience, and refigure women's bodies as subjects (rather than objects) in motion. Through the re-figuring of women's bodies and voices the films re-articulate women's subjectivity as central, but in ways that always frame subjectivity as unfixed and incomplete.

Through different forms of narrative address, these films map an ambiguous space between onscreen and offscreen environments. As Jackson perceptively notes this form of inter-subjective exchange must be recognized as a material aspect of any

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<sup>44</sup> Catherine de Zegher, *Inside the Visible*, 20.

art medium.<sup>45</sup> While she specifically references performance in her arguments, a similar observation can be made of the feminist experimental cinema considered here. Through their address of the viewer, these four films extend the possibilities of cinema. The intermedial use of inter-subjectivity moves these films to “inhabit difference spaces,”<sup>46</sup> where the viewer cannot easily remain separate or remove themselves from the diegesis. This collapsing of cinematic space into a charismatic viewing experience in Canadian feminist film from the 1970s and 1980s anticipates subsequent experiments with the spatial deconstruction of the viewing environment in feminist screen-based work of the 1990s and 2000s. As such, Gruben, Longfellow, Armatage and Onodera’s films reveal elements of the feminist political impulse within intermedial art that I explore more fully in the following chapter.

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<sup>45</sup> Jackson, *Social Work*, 27.

<sup>46</sup> Chapple, “On Intermediality,” 7.

## Chapter 5

### Enacting Other Cinemas: Intermediaity in Feminist Screen-Based Art

“any time-based art encounters its most interesting aspect in the fold: the double, the second, the clone, the uncanny, the againness of (re)enactment”<sup>1</sup> – Rebecca Schneider

#### Introduction

Sally Potter’s 1983 film *The Gold Diggers* includes several sequences situating the main character Ruby (Julie Christie) across three very different landscapes. In one of the most compelling scenes in the film Ruby moves between her weather-beaten childhood home in a vast barren landscape<sup>2</sup> and a replica of the home on a theatre stage. On stage she reenacts her traumatic memories of the home for a sparse audience of bored men. This vulnerable performance for the disengaged male audience is contrasted by a subsequent recurring image of Ruby, literally upon a pedestal, passed between dancing men in a grand ballroom. In different ways these three scenes stage the, at times, tenuous position women occupy within public and private life. The barren landscape reenacts Ruby’s formative memories of domestic, interior space. Here the harsh wasteland exterior threatens what is held within. Ruby’s theatrical performance of this remembered space enacts her fraught personal memory

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<sup>1</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 6

<sup>2</sup> This landscape is beautifully shot as a cold and endless wasteland by Babette Magolte.

for a cool, impassive audience. Here the all-male public sphere critically negates the performance of her personal memories. The ballroom scene shows the all-too-familiar dynamic of woman as commodity. In this scene Ruby's successful performance of femininity confirms her exchange value amongst the male dancers. Across these three scenarios Ruby's body moves between space and time, between private memory and public spectacle, between subjective agency and performing object on display, and between barren land, theatre stage, and living stage. Beyond these conceptual and thematic borders, the three scenes also evoke a movement between media. While each scene is contained within a feature narrative film, they each call forward additional principles of different media. These include the intricate and beautiful photographic space of the wasteland, the *mise en abyme* of the theatre and the performative 'dance' of gender masquerade in the ballroom.

I open with these three scenes from *The Gold Diggers* as they exemplify my focus on the conceptual and formal traversing of media within contemporary feminist art. The feminist experimental film and media I have studied in the previous four chapters makes clear how such formal traversing exposes in-between spaces as important sites of possibility. This chapter focuses on recent feminist screen-based work that engages in particular with the 'in-between' spaces of different media. Drawing on recent theories of intermediality from performance studies, I argue contemporary feminist screen-based art employs intermedia in the service of an inter-subjective exchange with the spectator, and a critique of the gendered codes of public and private life. I examine here how Eija-Liisa Ahtila and Shirin Neshat successfully

challenge traditional cinematic boundaries through intermedial experiments with time, space, and narrative convention. I compare Neshat's *Turbulent* (1998) and Ahtila's *The House* (2002), arguing that both works use screens (and the spaces in between screens) to confront gendered viewing practices and representational traditions.

While intermediality is already a part of existing discussions of screen-based art, it is not often framed as such. Film and media studies need to consider more fully questions of intermediality in screen-based art, especially as the last decade has seen a notable increase in the use of projected images within the gallery. Studying the screen in the gallery offers film studies the opportunity to further explore questions of medium specificity in the digital age. As Erika Balsom suggests, the convergence of screens and galleries enables film scholars to consider "the changing contours" of cinema as an object of study. Such an opportunity allows the discipline to dispense with "a purity of the cinema in favor of variable and multiple medium specificities irreducible to a stable essence."<sup>3</sup> This position echoes Raymond Bellour's call for "a new inventory" of the cinema which "finds itself redistributed, transformed, mimicked and reinstalled" into other forms. Bellour calls this shifting terrain an "*other cinema*" and applies it to works that notably spatialize the moving image and its projection screen.<sup>4</sup> These existing critical investigations into contemporary screen-based art usefully address the convergence between projected images and visual art

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<sup>3</sup> Erika Balsom, "A cinema in the gallery, a cinema in ruins," *Screen* 50. 4 (Winter 2009): 412.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Bellour, "Of An Other Cinema," in *Art and The Moving Image*, 407-408. Emphasis in original.

from an historical perspective.<sup>5</sup> This approach expands critical understandings of screens beyond their technological functions of exhibition and display. What I wish to add to these discussions is a more fully developed definition of intermediality from performance studies that encourages a deeper understanding of the relationship between intermediality and feminist aesthetics. My readings of Neshat and Ahtila provide constructive examples of this relationship within the arena of contemporary screen-based installation.

#### Calling the Spectator To Witness

In her writing on intermedia, Rebecca Schneider explores what she terms the ‘inter(in)animation,’ of the “live *and* mediated,” which “is always *at work*” in the recorded image.<sup>6</sup> Schneider claims that photographic images are not just records, but are themselves ‘durational events’ that hail the viewer into the role of witness.<sup>7</sup>

Recorded media “live in an inter(in)animate or syncopated relationship with other times and other places” which they both record and anticipate. The image and the event it records are placed in a “cross-temporal and cross-geographic ‘between’” that

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Tanya Leighton, *Art and the Moving Image*; Maeve Connolly *The Place of Artist's Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*, (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2009); Christine Iles, *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001); Erika Suderburg, ed., *Space, Site, Intervention: situating installation art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Matthias Michalka ed., *X-Screen: Film Installations and Actions in the 1960s and 1970s* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Wather König, 2004); “Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art,” *October* 104 (Spring 2003): 71-96.

<sup>6</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 138.

<sup>7</sup> Compellingly Schneider makes her argument via examples of Civil War reenactment photos and the documented atrocities of Abu Ghraib.



asks viewers to be accountable for the recorded scene as “an ongoing live event.”<sup>8</sup> She argues that we need to recognize “a more complicated leakages of the live (and the remain) across seemingly discrete moments” of recorded images.<sup>9</sup> Such points of leakage, as well as the breakdown of discrete divides between media, time, space, and bodies are key elements of both form and narrative in Ahtila and Neshat’s work. Schneider’s perspective on intermedia helpfully opens up a critical perspectives on Ahtila and Neshat’s screen-based work as “on-going live events” that require “a dynamic of witness, and a call for account that the scenes desperately require.”<sup>10</sup> In *Turbulence* and *The House*, Neshat and Ahtila purposefully position the viewer as a witness within the screening environment.

Neshat’s 1998 work *Turbulent* is part of a trilogy that includes *Rapture* (1999) and *Fervor* (2000). In all three works Neshat juxtaposes two projection screens in order to critically comment on gender relations in Iran. *Turbulent* places two screens on opposing but facing walls.<sup>11</sup> The two projections map contrasting yet parallel images of a man on one screen, and a woman on the other, each performing a song. The piece begins with both screens showing a theatre auditorium from the perspective

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<sup>8</sup> This is described by Schneider as “the images’ theatre,” who looks towards the aspects/technologies of the live (tableaux vivant) and wonders how photography (and thus film) can be seen as “technologies of the live.” Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 140-141.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>10</sup> Schneider is talking specifically of image of torture from Abu Ghraib, but it extends quite clearly to the imperative for witness and accountability that the subjects of Ahtila and Neshat’s work requires equally – the woman within psychosis, the woman censored in public and as we will see in the following analysis of their more recent works – the violence of colonization and cultural revolution and how it impacts those most vulnerable – women and children.

<sup>11</sup> Note I am discussing the work in its original spatial arrangement. It is possible to view a version of *Turbulence* on DVD in which the two screens are placed side by side. This does not diminish the point of my analysis but in contrast, my reading of the work is enhanced or works equally well if not better with this alternative setting of the screens.

of the stage, looking out at the audience from behind a microphone at center stage. On one screen (screen A), the audience is full of men; on the other screen (screen B) the auditorium is empty. The difference between the two auditoriums provides an early example of the sustained visual contrasts explored throughout the piece. The men in the audience on screen A begin to clap just as the woman enters the opposite screen. This is quickly followed on screen A by the entrance of the male performer, who is the actual recipient of the applause. This brief overlap between the audio and action of the two separate screens is significant as it emphasizes the isolation of the woman performer facing the empty auditorium.

At this point only the backs of the male and female performers are visible. The male performer bows to the enthusiastic applause of the audience and then turns his back and walks towards the microphone so that he is facing the viewer and by virtue of the installation's spatial arrangement, the female performer on screen B. He begins to sing a beautiful ballad. On screen B the woman continues to face the empty auditorium with her back to the camera, remaining anonymous to the viewer. While the male performer sings, the viewer is made aware of his effort and his gestures as they are situated in stark contrast to the woman's complete stillness. His performance takes on the quality of the female masquerade in contrast to the woman's distanced and disengaged pose, creating an unsettling reversal of gender norms from within classical cinematic framing.<sup>12</sup> After three minutes the man concludes his performance

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<sup>12</sup> "The male singer represents the society's ideal man in that he sticks to the rules in his way of dressing and in his performance of a passionate love song written by the 13th-century Sufi poet Rumi. Opposite to him, the female singer is quite rebellious. She is not supposed to be in the theater, and the

to great applause and bows many times to the crowd before returning to face the microphone once more. He is now still but not completely frozen as he stares directly at the camera in a medium close-up.

At this point the woman begins to sing while still facing the empty theatre seats with her back to the camera. Shortly after she starts singing the camera begins to slowly circle around her body, framing her face in a matching medium close-up to that framing the man on screen A. Here a second visual contrast is achieved as it seems like the male performer is watching the woman performing on the opposite screen as the camera moves around her. The camera brings the woman into profile and then into full frame where she seems to almost float within the darkened empty space behind her. This framing complements the haunting and otherworldly nature of her song and performance. As the camera comes full circle it once again reveals the empty theatre audience and her back to us. Then the camera starts to circle her again as she keeps singing. Through all this the man in screen A continues to stare out at screen B. His gaze both watches the female performer and the viewers watching her in the exhibition site. He holds a slight look of confusion and curiosity as if perplexed by the shift in our focus from his performance, to the woman's performance on the other screen. Through his line of vision he becomes an audience member to her

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music she performs breaks all the rules of traditional Islamic music. Her music is free-form, improvised, not tied to language, and unpredictable, almost primal." Arthur C. Danto, "Shirin Neshat," *BOMB* 73 (Fall 2000). <http://bombsite.com/issues/73/articles/2332>. Retrieved November 24, 2012.

performance.<sup>13</sup> This is an exceptional and impossible circumstance as Iran prohibits women from singing in public.<sup>14</sup> The male performer watches the viewer shift focus away from him and towards a performer who is not allowed to perform. But Neshat's positioning of the male performer requires him to participate as an audience for the woman's performance. This is underscored by the very subtle but inquisitive expression he holds as he peers out of his frame, trying to get a better view and understand the implications of his and the audiences' new focus. This dynamic continues as the camera circles the performing woman several more times.<sup>15</sup>

At the end of the piece the male singer and the all male audience behind him are completely silent. Neshat represents them as speechless, at a loss -- literally without voice. As she puts it, "By the end, we wanted the male singer to be stunned, in a state of disbelief, and the female singer to be released—freed."<sup>16</sup> For the first time in the entire piece, the two screens are perfectly visually matched. The two performers are each framed on their own screen in a similar medium close-up. Both are silent and contemplative; he is still looking a bit perplexed, she looks thoughtful but somehow satisfied for having been able to perform. She looks off screen, not

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<sup>13</sup> In the DVD version of *Turbulent*, the male performer's position within the left screen's frame makes him spatially prohibited from seeing the woman's performance on the screen beside him, thus he is cut off from being a spectator and sharing the experience we are engaging in. However, because he is looking out it is almost as if he can see the audience viewing something that he cannot. This further emphasizes Neshat's intervention.

<sup>14</sup> Danto, "Shirin Neshat"

<sup>15</sup> The woman is given a much longer time than the man to sing her song. His was very precisely performed within three-minutes, hers is less precisely performed but also double in length of his performance.

<sup>16</sup> Danto, "Shirin Neshat."

meeting our gaze, he looks out towards her and the viewer, who is caught in between, imploring with his expression anyone to explain something he cannot understand.

Neshat notes that *Turbulent* is concerned with “the idea of opposites and of creating two completely different spatial and social situations in which we look at men and women conversing back and forth.”<sup>17</sup> In both *Turbulent* and *Rapture* men are “in their protected environment, conforming to the rules.”<sup>18</sup> While the man sings a very traditional song, the woman sings an untraditional one that sounds more like humming, moaning, mumbling, and breathing -- voicing wordless articulations. His is scripted, complying with the conventions of musical performance. Hers is unscripted, spontaneous, not contained by any cultural or audience expectations. It unravels almost like a stream of conscious expression that is both frantic and trancelike. The piece considers “what type of music or expression could be produced if women were not forbidden but could instead go about expressing herself?”<sup>19</sup> Neshat uses the circling of the camera around the woman performer in order to evoke “the idea of a whirling dervish dance.”<sup>20</sup> She does this in order to give the woman performer access to the Sufi tradition that she is culturally excluded from. The camera movement emphasizes the mystical transience she is not allowed to experience. The contrast Neshat sets up here is of a “man who is always shown as stationary” and “a woman

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<sup>17</sup> Shirin Neshat and Babak Ebrahimian, “Passage To Iran,” *PAJ* 24 3/72 (Fall 2002): 45.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 46. While Neshat is speaking mostly of *Rapture* here, I believe a similar case can be made for the restricted space of men in *Turbulence*.

<sup>19</sup> Neshat describing *Turbulence* in documentary “Expressing the Inexpressible” (Jorg and Ralf Raimo Jung, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

moves and goes to places, transcends like a dervish would.”<sup>21</sup> Neshat notes that “[t]hrough her own invented music” that breaks with Islamic music traditions, the woman in *Turbulent* “found her own way of escape, her own way of reaching that level of mysticism, of that which men had achieved through their traditional music. She ultimately began a rebellion, and ended up freeing herself in her own improvised way.”<sup>22</sup>

*Turbulence* addresses issues of spatiality and intersubjectivity from an intermedial perspective in two significant ways. First, the piece assigns the audience to the important role of bearing witness. Viewers are interpellated in a variety of ways through the piece. They are contrasted as an important counterpart to the all male audience on the left screen, which the piece critiques. Neshat describes the works in this trilogy as “sculptural,” focused less on narrative but on “a spatial experience...sculptural installations...interested in the relationship between the viewer and the piece.” Her intention was that viewers must “keep debating whether [they] should be looking at this side or that side... [they] can never watch both at the same time,” as such they must “decide which part [they] are going to sacrifice.”<sup>23</sup> This configuration situates the viewer in a more difficult position of accountability than that of the traditionally static and forward facing cinematic viewing experience allows.

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<sup>21</sup> Neshat, “Expressing the Inexpressible.”

<sup>22</sup> Neshat and Ebrahimian, “Passage To Iran,” 46.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

In *Turbulence*, viewers are placed on the side of Neshat's critique of the all male audience on screen A, giving them additional weight and responsibility. The viewers stand, while the male audience sits comfortably and somewhat smugly. They know what they have settled in to watch – a man skillfully performing a traditional song rehearsed specifically for them. The viewers in the exhibition space are uncertain of their role as they are missing the structural cues of the theatre seat and the proscenium to guide them. They are also uncertain about what it is we are about to watch and what to focus on with the presence of two similar yet contrasting screens. This initial viewing experience prompts several unanswered questions: Why does one screen contain an audience and one is without? Will the performers sing similar songs? Why is the woman so isolated? Why is the man performing for us with his back to the theatre audience? This final question points to the second significant point on inter-subjective address in the work. Through his position, the male performer assumes the traditional role of the female performer on center stage for the voyeur in the audience. This departs from classical cinema conventions where the gaze of the viewer onscreen matches the sight line of the audience. In *Turbulence* spectators are not collapsed with or interpellated by the male viewing audience on the screen. The male performer addresses them, instead, as his own diegetic audience and then, once he is finished singing, becomes himself positioned as a viewer.

In a further point of spectatorial unsettling, in the exhibition viewers face the reality that there is no audience within the woman performer's diegesis. Although she stands within a public space, she is isolated, alone, unsupported in her effort at

articulation and public performance. As the camera moves, the spectator becomes the implied audience or witness for her articulations as the camera mimics her point of view in the installation space. The spectators are given a great responsibility to bear witness where there is a prohibition or refusal for society to do so. They are hailed to both see her and see the prohibition that surrounds her gendered experience of public space and cultural roles. This distinction is emphasized by the difference between a static camera for his performance and a camera in motion for hers. This is a key trope in Neshat's work from this era and for this trilogy in particular. Neshat describes her interest in positioning "the audience in between...screens and...genders" so that they must "work out [their] positioning constantly, repeatedly repositioning [themselves] mentally and intellectually vis-à-vis the conceptual projections...on the screens as mirrors of difference rather than of similarities."<sup>24</sup>

*Turbulence* is inherently intermedial because, like minimalist sculpture, it foregrounds the viewer in the space of reception, not as a passive observer, but as an embodied witness. Additionally, as with visual art in a gallery, spectators are required to pass by framed objects. Further, the theme of the work is predicated on Sufi musical performing traditions. It employs all of these media principles in the service of transforming cinematic traditions. This is what the Neshat's aesthetic approach shares in common with Ahtila's work; both use intermediality in order to transform the viewing space of their work into a space situated between traditional media boundaries. In *Turbulence* (and as we will see equally in *The House*), cinema

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<sup>24</sup>Haim Bresheeth, "Shirin Neshat's Women Without Men," *Third Text* 24 6 (2010): 754.



specificity is reworked as a means of calling into question gendered codes of representation. Ahtila's multiscreen installation *The House* (2000) draws upon similar themes of prohibition and audience interpellation, not from the site of public performance, but rather within the domestic realm and the space of psychic interiority. Where *Turbulence* explores the taboo placed on woman as speaking (or singing) subject in public space in a repressive society, Ahtila's *The House* examines the taboo of women locked into forms of psychosis, anxiety, paranoia, and depression, looking out from the closed spaces of the interior, domestic sphere in a "liberal" society.

*The House* is presented as a three screen video installation. There is a screen in the middle of the gallery space flanked by two screens on either side. All are slightly askew rather than seamlessly joined together. The intentional gaps or breaks between the screens are architecturally significant. The spatial set up of the three screens are contrasted by the spaces between them which are illuminated by pot lights in order to highlight the break they represent within the viewing space. The splitting apart of the screens at the seams matches this thematic sense of "coming undone" within the work's loose narrative. Formally, this provides an architectural mirror of the thematic content outside the diegesis. Ahtila argues that "the house is a kind of metaphor of a human mind" and is structured as a "framed and arranged space."<sup>25</sup> She notes that ultimately it is a "story of a woman's breakdown: and as such "the breaking

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<sup>25</sup> Doris Krystof and Eija-Liisa Ahtila, "Interview," in *Eija-Liisa Ahtila*, eds. Eija-Liisa Ahtila et al., (Paris: *Jeu de Paume* 2008), 178.

down of her house is a metaphor for that.”<sup>26</sup> Through the installation she was interested in placing “side by side the realistic settings and logic” with “the unfamiliar or the imaginary.”<sup>27</sup> The screens are placed in dialogue with the viewer, which emphasizes both the divides between the house and the exterior and the divide between interior spaces that the woman negotiates as she paces through the rooms in the house. The restless movement of the character onscreen matches the fragmented shifts in the audience’s perspective when encountering the work. What the spectator sees and how they see it depends on where they stand in the space. The images that play across the screens run as an elliptical narrative within this fragmented tri-screen space.<sup>28</sup>

The narrative begins with a woman driving along a road to a house. The size and positioning of the screens provides a real sense of this space as the lush visuals of the forest beyond the road surround the viewer and are complemented by a dense soundscape. At the start of the piece the audio describes what the woman does when she arrives. It is a banal routine that shows the woman as she takes off her shoes, eats in the kitchen, and reads the paper. The house is pretty but empty and there is a palpable weight to this emptiness. The screens cut from this interior domestic routine to the world outside her window and then cut back to the woman’s disconcerted expression as she looks out the window. The screens track the passage of the sun

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> The three screens used in this projection follow a similar set up to her previous installation work. Ahtila’s signature use of three screens often shows three perspectives of the same event that together allow the narrative action to unfold across the fragmented spaces, that she worked with earlier. See especially *Today* (1996).

through the house's windows. The woman continuously steps aside from the rays of the sun coming into the house as they are an external threat to the safety of the interior space. At the point where the spectator begins to understand that the outside threatens her, the addition of non-diegetic sound begins with the repeated audio of a car racing back and forth in fast motion. As the sounds begin to get more intense, the woman gets up and goes through the door into the next screen – a kitchen – and then back into the living room in the previous screen and on to the couch as the sounds rise to a static noise.

The scene starts again with the woman driving through the forest road to the house. The unsettling audioscape has become more intense as she drives towards the house and once inside there is a deep rumbling base sound that accompanies her as she paces around speaking incoherently. The woman is distraught, describing that she can see the car through the window, but if she moves she can't see it. The sound intensifies further and there is a miniature car that drives around the tops of the walls by her head. At this point there begins a very clear breakdown between the divisions of interior and exterior space that reflect (and encourage) her personal psychic breakdown.

The scene restarts a third time. Now she is driving on the highway, down the forest road, and to the house, where she once again enters. More sounds are added to the soundscape including church bells and television noise. The breakdown between inside and out continues: a cow is on the TV screen and then is in the house on the left screen before walking through the house in the center screen. On the audio a

sewing machine begins whirling, and then the woman is seen sewing frantically in one corner of the house. A man with a dog appears outside the window, and then the dog is in the house near the woman while she busily sews black curtains. On the left and right screens there are shots of a city and a port while in the center screen the woman begins talking to the viewer, while still sewing. The surrounding screens have shots of a park, a street, a lake with boats, ducks on water, and the exterior of the house. On the center screen the woman walks awkwardly to the big window and pins up the dark curtains presumably to keep these exterior visions out. Here, the entire visual field shifts and the woman is seen flying through the trees with a calm, curious focus that contrasts greatly with the anxious fear she had inside the house. The image of her groundless and weightlessly soaring across the beautiful treetops is visually arresting. This reprieve is an affective counterpoint to the intensity of the woman's anxious movements in the house. After flying through the forest she reaches the roof, scales down the house to the porch. In effect this begins a fourth cycle of the narrative that signals the clearest collapse of both spatial boundaries between space inside and outside the house as well as the collapse of psychic boundaries. Instead of driving she arrives at the house through the trees, discovering a new way of entering the house. Once inside, she recommences sewing while engaging the audience in another incoherent monologue. After she puts up another curtain, the left screen reveals a close up of her face as she talks of people entering her mind and meeting them. She notes that they either sit with her a moment or forever. There are then several final

shots of an empty swing in an all white room with her voice over saying 'good, very good' and then three pastoral shots of homes in the countryside.

There are two separate points of interest that I wish to address in my reading of *The House*. Both revolve around what I read as Ahtila's intermedial reenactment of cinematic specificity, seen through both the spatial arrangement of the screens and the subject matter within the film. This reenactment refigures the conventions of the film medium and situates spectators within the woman's internal space of psychic and spatial dissolution. Alison Butler similarly notes that Ahtila "draws on the strategies of art cinema" and in particular their use of "spatial and temporal indeterminacy."<sup>29</sup> In Ahtila's installations, this is made manifest in the form of a "three-dimensional montage which forges relationships between screens" whereby the editing techniques employed across the screens are taken from art cinema in so far as "they generate ambiguity and uncertainty and combine continuity with discontinuity."<sup>30</sup> I wish to expand upon Ahtila's use of art cinema aesthetics and a three-dimensional form of montage in my reading below.

In discussing the formal construction of *The House* it is important to note that the narrative timing is always off between the screens. At any given point, the action on the separate screens does not follow the linear editing conventions of traditional montage. Even if the spectator is tempted to visually process the three screens as different shots and suture them together, Ahtila's a-temporal sequencing of the images refuses this comprehensibility. This is a key formal intervention of her work

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<sup>29</sup> Butler, "A Deictic Turn," 319.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

more broadly. All of her multi-screen works include narratives that follow the conventions of classical cinema to a certain extent, and yet they also always problematize or trouble these conventions by fragmenting the normally smooth visual transitions that link narratives together. Ahtila's narratives purposefully unfold across the screens through disrupted, non-linear editing sequences. Unlike early experimental interventions into the seamlessness of classical narrative editing, Ahtila's montages are distributed across the multiple screens rather than existing within the same screen. Ahtila's stories work from a place of narrative discordance. She reenacts the conventions cinematic apparatus in a way that is 'off' or, not quite right, and through this, re-imagines how we formally tell and view stories.

Butler notes that if Deleuze's modernist cinema of the time-image is concerned with "the gap, or the space between images," Ahtila's transfer of "the narrative strategies of art cinema to multiple screens...widens this gap and positions the spectator inside it." The consequence of this is that "for the spectator standing between the screens, the bodily experience of the mimetic effects of cinema is intensified by proximity and by the dynamic organization of movement across the screens."<sup>31</sup> As a work that explores a woman's troubled mental state, Ahtila's screen structures successfully externalize the character's psychic unrest. Formally Ahtila evokes this interior conflict by overlapping various events and experiences occurring within the house across the multiple screens. Here, the images on the screens are encountered simultaneously. There is no sense of linear temporality as different states

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<sup>31</sup> Butler, "A Deictic Turn," 320.

of the woman's disease, comfort, action and paralyzing fear merge in the space(s) on screen. In *The House* time is meaningless and spaces overlap. This provides viewers with a sense of the woman's immanent psychic collapse while also questioning the certainty of narrative time and space. This collapsing of multiple times and spaces at once, present the viewer with different iterations of the diegetic world at once evoking an almost cubist experience of the filmic world. The fragmenting of narrative film conventions across the multi-screen space highlights the sculptural approach to film taken up by Ahtila in constructing *The House*.

Throughout *The House*, Ahtila references iconic tropes and figures from art cinema. The narrative loosely echoes the central female character of *Repulsion* (1965), as both characters anxiously protect their domestic spaces from the threat of the outside world. Like the young woman in Polanski's film, Ahtila's character is unable to keep the flow of daily life contained; the outside is constantly coming in. However, in *Repulsion*, the cathartic resolution is the character committing murder, which paints an unsympathetic and over-determined picture of an unstable woman in film. In *The House*, the main character sews curtains to block out exterior threats. The act of sewing frees the character from her self-imposed constraints as she floats unconcerned through the trees above the threats of the exterior world. While still acknowledging the presence of psychic struggle, Ahtila's narrative refuses the traditional roles available to women experiencing psychic duress in cinema.

Additionally, the repetitious cycles of the narrative reflect the increasing intensity of the character's psychoses and breakdown, and her repeated entrance into

the house (and her own madness), recall a similar trope of repetition in Maya Deren's psychodrama *Meshes of the Afternoon*. *The House* even includes Deren's iconic and familiar pose of the looking out the window, contemplating the world outside. Similar to *Meshes*, Ahtila's narrative interrogates our psychic relationship to space (and images of groundlessness) to explore and wade through a woman's internal struggles, situating them as complex rather than one-dimensional.<sup>32</sup> A final film that is obliquely recalled when viewing *The House* is *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali, 1929). Ahtila's explores surrealist narrative logic with her inclusion of the cow that moves from audio and photographic representation to a live event literally passing through the different screens.

While Ahtila may not consciously reference these films within her work, the resonances or traces of the art cinema imaginary within *The House* transforms specifically modernist representation of women's psychic interiority. Ahtila's relationship to the cinematic past in *The House* is similar to Cindy Sherman's engagement with woman's cinematic representation in *Untitled Film Stills*. *The House* is rooted in a cultural cinematic history but, through both its imagery and its use of screens, it produces an elliptical fragmented narrative that both reenacts and refutes this history.

These considerations of *Turbulence* and *The House* highlight how Ahtila and Neshat share an interest in representing women who traverse different spaces and

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<sup>32</sup> Perhaps it is important that unlike the character's in *Repulsion* and *Meshes*, this exploration in *House* is undertaken outside of any tie or engagement with a male counterpart or an overly masculinist outer world. In *The House*, the troubled reality of the main character is entirely her own.



times. Both artists use multiple frames, intricately constructed sites of reception, and an affective emphasis on 'live' bodies both on screen and in the viewing space in order to upend the narrative and formal spaces of traditional cinema. Their use of narrative favors ellipses and their exhibitions often push media boundaries to the point of collapse, throwing multiple media together in order to provide genuinely intermedial sites of reception.

Schneider's characterization of inter(an)imated work that calls the spectator to witness reflect a formal aim of both Neshat and Ahtila's screen-based art. *The House and Turbulence* calls forward the spectator as witness, using formal gestures to encourage viewers to recognize limited gendered positions in public and private space. This element of Neshat and Ahtila's aesthetic is even more notable in their respective recent works *Women Without Men* (2009) and *Where is Where* (2009). In these two multi-screen works specific historical events from the twentieth century – the Iranian revolution and the French colonization of Algeria – are reenacted as fragmented narratives. In their screen-based installations Neshat and Ahtila represent the complexities of those who are often rendered invisible against the backdrop of formative political events.<sup>33</sup> Effectively giving space and time to the less considered perspectives within these cultural events, the artworks ask viewers to witness a past that was previously overlooked or absent. By representing that which remains invisible, they make these overlooked elements of history 'live' and present, altering

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<sup>33</sup> It is notable that both artists render these marginalized figures visible through narrative reenactment. It is necessary to do so as these are less historically recognized/documented experiences, thus the world of fiction gives a certain freedom to imagine and empower these experiences that a more strictly factual history may not.

viewers' relationships to these histories. Schneider's writing on intermediality asks us to shift our analytic emphasis from the record to the interrelational dynamic produced within the images' hailing capacity. This is an important insight for thinking about the inter(in)animation of Neshat and Ahtila's work. However, this interrelational dynamic and its hailing of the viewer is not singular to Ahtila and Neshat's aesthetic practice. A diverse range of contemporary art practices display a similar interest in foregrounding the performative gestures of the screen and the hailing capacity of the site of projection. I believe the most compelling examples of this work are found in recent feminist experimental media. This group of artists includes Pipilotti Rist, Rebecca Bellmore, Amy Jenkins, Sam Jury, Christine Davis, Marilyn Minter, and Monika Larsen Dennis. There is great value in the critical frame advanced by performance studies regarding the formal and conceptual possibilities of intermedia art. Understanding this work as being engaged in processes of reframing media boundaries, codes of representation and spectatorship practices is an important for film and media studies' critical approaches to screen-based art. Schneider's formulation of the 'live' address of reenacted images furthers the usefulness of performance definitions of intermediality particularly in the context of feminist art.

#### A Feminist Politics of Intermediality

If a man crosses a threshold to depict or engage a lived reality, he becomes a hero. To deal with actual lived-experience – that's a heroic position for a male

and a trivial exposure for a woman. A woman exploring lived experience occupies an area that men want to denigrate as domestic, encapsulate as erotic, arousing or supporting their own position.<sup>34</sup> – Carolee Schneemann

In this second section I argue that intermediality is an integral part of Ahtila and Neshat's commitment to a feminist aesthetic. As I have already made clear, the feminist experimental media that I considered in this dissertation is inherently intermedial. Each work examined situates itself within the in-between spaces and places that are "not visible." I read this intermediality as a feminist act that seeks to make visible what is too often hidden in visual representation. At the same time, this acknowledgement of how women's bodies are made invisible within cinema and art, open up new sites of possibility for women in representation. The in-between is a utopic space that each of the artists I have studied seeks out in order to provide depth and range to women's position both onscreen and at the level of artistic practice. This occupation of in-between space within the work of Ahtila and Neshat takes on particular resonance in the context of Schneider's arguments on feminist intermedia. Schneider's belief that the concerns of feminism constantly haunt the practice of intermediality is very useful.

A clear example for Schneider of how feminist politics haunts the intermedial is the self-portrait performances of Cindy Sherman. Schneider describes Sherman's *Untitled Film Series* as a "duplication of movie stills" which "both resist and

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<sup>34</sup>Schneemann quoted in Haug, "An Interview with Carolee Schneemann," 32-33.

underscore the live power of images as composed and *re*-composed in passage across bodies, across media, and across time.”<sup>35</sup> Schneider frames her argument on feminist intermedia through an examination of Arthur C. Danto’s critical resistance to Sherman’s series. Danto’s reading of *Untitled Film Stills* refuses to recognize Sherman as a photographer, and instead positions her as a performer who uses her body as a blank canvas for different iterations of woman-as-image.<sup>36</sup> For Danto, Sherman’s portraiture lacks the intentionality of an artist like Rembrandt who documents his physical specificity through time. What absents Sherman’s portraits from this historical lineage is the theatricality of her pose which Danto doubts “would have occurred to her had she not spent a fair amount of time before mirrors in the standard way of women...”<sup>37</sup> Danto disavows Sherman’s role as a photographer, relegating her to the role of the actress instead. Schneider suggests that if women artists can only ever be seen as an object of representative technologies, it becomes a political necessity for them to work between media in order to undo their continuous critical association with mimesis. Like women’s role in art, intermediality is also often dismissed because of its fluidity across practices of representation (mimesis) with no “authentic” grounding in a disciplinary specificity. Read together, intermediality threatens art criticism in the way that the woman artist threatens Danto (and aesthetic discourse more broadly), because both challenge a masculinist critical framework that distrusts the act of mimesis. Schneider links these relations between

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<sup>35</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 148.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 153

gender politics and intermediality through Michael Fried's critical assumption that what "lies between art is theatre."<sup>38</sup> For Fried, performance is feminized because performative acts of mimesis, like dominant cultural associations of woman, are seen as duplicitous.

Schneider explains how Sherman is problematic for Danto as both a gendered subject and as an intermedial artist. Her *Untitled Film Stills* series is a photographic document of a live performance of classical cinema imagery. She composes and records the frames that she poses within. She directs the camera, occupies the space in front of it, and conceptualizes the filmic scenarios from her position as a cinematic voyeur. For Schneider it is these multiple positions and medial interrelations that Danto struggles with. He cannot account for Sherman as concurrently an artist, performer, and image, nor can he account for an intermedial artwork that is photograph, performance, and cinema all at once. Schneider concludes that Danto's reading of Sherman as an actress, rather than an artist is inherently a critical misreading of her intermediality. It suggests that woman can be seen as performers but cannot be seen as those directing the image, because, to be both would mean treading into the territory of intermediality.<sup>39</sup>

Drawing on Schneider's claims, I suggest that the feminist artists I examine in my dissertation have a fluid relationship to media. Like Sherman, they seek to unsettle the boundaries between media through a variety of formal interventions. The

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<sup>38</sup> Fried quoted in Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 159.

<sup>39</sup> It would be worth considering further if a similar resistance played out to the artist/image dyad in the work of Schneemann from within film studies and as I have noted in chapter two, feminist film studies in particular.

critical reception of Sherman by Danto emphasizes Schneider's argument that women artists engage with the slipperiness of intermediality as a result of their experience as being the representational object *par excellence*. Feminist artists seek out the spaces in-between established art traditions and media boundaries as a result of women's status as unrepresentable within masculinist critical frames and signifying systems. For Schneider, the critical resistance to reading works as intermedial is in part due to the fact that the problem of gender always haunts the concept of intermediality. The between-ness of gender and, in particular, the feminine "problem of the second, the double, the masquerade, the theatrical" finds its correlate and its trace in what it haunts -- the intermedial.<sup>40</sup> Schneider's insights usefully address a key aesthetic concern of a broad range of feminist artists. Screen-based, installation and projection art may be attractive to feminist artists because it allows them to embrace an expanded intermedial space - especially in relation to the traditional role of women as an object on the screen and to the feminist spectator in the audience.

In the work of Neshat and Ahtila, these traditions are contested as the image of women on screen is spatialized and successfully hails the viewer to bear witness to the gendered problems of signification and cultural inscription. The dynamic set up by these intermedial spaces underscores the presence of the woman onscreen asking viewers to witness her image as a live, ongoing durational event. This mobility between time and space within and beyond the screen's frame foregrounds the spatial

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<sup>40</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 160.

logistics of the viewing environment and constructs a site where the moving image is both sculptural and performative in its address to the audience.

Both *Turbulence* and *The House* are interested in the material site of projection, and specifically the embodied experience of the spectator. Each work's formal experiments with space (both onscreen and off) usefully critique dominant representational codes and film form. These experiments often push viewers to a point of subjective dislocation. Through this, inter-subjective relations are foregrounded and often problematized in Ahtila and Neshat's work. The viewer cannot escape the implications directed toward them as they are inherently embedded within the formal structures of the works. The works successfully traverse spaces of projection. The fold within which both works dwell are quite literally that which exists between the screens. These physical gaps in the installations echo conceptual and thematic folds of transient space, evoking or allowing us to imagine and almost glimpse unrepresentational 'other' spaces. Presence and absence take on new meaning here; what is reenacted in these works is the history of cinema undone, as well as a purposeful un-doing of gender codes. Traditional aesthetic configurations of gallery and cinematic space as well as public and private space are represented alongside their invisible others.

These folds or spaces in-between resuscitate a history of bodies and images prohibited in the history of cinema. The women in *Turbulence* and *The House* are outsiders. Both works evoke utopic imagined spaces that allow women's bodies to be represented and addressed differently. The intermedial gesture of Neshat's

*Turbulence* confronts and undermines the prohibition of women's performances in public space. By merging the woman's performance with sculpture and cinema practices, Neshat constructs a viewing environment that is a truly "other" space, one that calls both the male performer, his audience and the viewers caught "in-between," to recognize the woman's legitimacy as an artist and her subjectivity within the cultural codes of public space. In *The House*, the intermedial environment also works to upend viewing dynamics and levels a critique against gendered dynamics of cinematic representation. The narrative is fragmented through the gaps between the screens and the a-temporal editing across the frames. This formal instability produces an equally unstable viewing experience that mirrors the unrest of the main character. This encourages an empathetic site of reception for the woman's struggles. Ahtila's translation of psychic unrest into a formal aesthetic also provides an "other" space in cinema history which allows the woman character a certain depth and complexity not traditionally afforded to her. It is clear in both *Turbulence* and *The House* that these formal experiments with intermedial environments are constructed in the service of feminist aesthetic critique. Collectively, these works and the many others considered throughout my dissertation all usefully expand the positions available to women as image, artist and spectator, and offer new formal possibilities of dwelling in-between the strict (gendered) divisions of separate media.



## Conclusion

I want to briefly consider one final example of feminist intermedia in Neshat's recent film *Women Without Men*, by unpacking further Neshat's commitment to "in-between" spaces and media within this film. *Women Without Men* is a narrative feature that explores the history of the British and CIA backed coup against Iran's only democratic government in 1953. The film is based upon the magical realist novel of the same name, written by exiled Iranian writer Shahrnush Parsipur. The story follows four women as they negotiate the public and private spaces of Tehran during this moment of great social unrest. This historical moment marks a decisive point in the ensuing rise of the Islamic Republic, and the dramatic reduction of women's freedom in Iranian public life.<sup>41</sup> The film was first presented as a multi-screen video installation in a gallery space, with each screen representing the journey of one of the women. In its second iteration it was released as a feature film where the women's separate stories are woven together into a linear narrative. Neshat notes that in the translation from installation to film she wanted to explore the possibility of making films that "could still be very visual and...not rely on dialogue...in which the image, as opposed to the word, could be given so much power of communication."<sup>42</sup> *Women Without Men* privileges the image over dialogue through its intricate construction of the *mise en scène* and otherworldly spaces that provide the women characters with an

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<sup>41</sup> For an excellent historical overview of this broader political context in relation to the film see Bresheeth, *Women Without Men*, 755

<sup>42</sup> Neshat and Ebrahimian, "Passage to Iran," 50.

escape from their daily experiences of cultural constraint. A major visual trope of the film is the passage of each woman out of their restricted positions in Tehran into an abandoned garden beyond the city limits. The garden is an imagined, utopic place that both visually and narratively evokes a sense of fluidity, which I believe also reflects the fluid intermediality of the film. The film is intermedial insofar as it is a narrative based upon a novel, and whose visual form is based upon the sculptural and painterly framing of Neshat's video installations. *Women Without Men* is an excellent (and somewhat singular) example of intermediality within the feature film format. Crucial to the reading of the film is to recognize that its formal intermediality is directly tied to Neshat's feminist politics. Neshat employs the principles of other media and their evocation of other-worldly spaces in order to complicate and bring dimensionality to the women's lives onscreen. The traces of the political call to witness that informs her screen-based installations remains within this narrative reenactment of this central moment in Iranian history. This translation or traversing between media within the film is perhaps its greatest asset.

The opening images of the film show Munis, the main narrator pacing on a rooftop with the sound of protest in the distance. She is framed from below, with the bright sky dominating a large part of the background. The effect of this visual composition is a sense of groundlessness. Munis resides in a non-place between the stifling domesticity of her home and the prohibited freedoms of the public streets just beyond her grasp. At the end of this opening scene Munis jumps off the roof and begins to float through the sky. While clearly falling to her death, Neshat delays this

harsh reality through slow motion, which allows Munis to be free for a moment from the constraints of her life/death on the ground. This image is followed by a second “groundless” image of an anonymous point of view shot floating over a small stream to a mud wall with a small opening. The camera hesitates, suspended above the opening, and then flows through it. Once on the other side, the camera weightlessly explores a lush garden space and then soars above its vast treetops. This play between freedom and constraint manifest through the camera’s delicate and searching choreography sets the tone between the very limited spaces of the women’s daily lives and the possibility for another mode of being within the imagined space of the garden.

Across different points in the narrative the women flee their living situations in the city and find themselves within this garden space.<sup>43</sup> It functions both as an escape and a site of reprieve, a space for contemplation, prayer, and atonement. The garden is huge with a varied landscape. It is a visually shifting space, endless, and open. Each character that arrives there imagines it differently and conceives of new areas within the larger landscape. In its various incarnations it includes a forest, desert, fields of flowers, and areas of shrubbery. Each area is framed by an arresting sky that is at times full of puffy clouds framing the unending expanse of the land, and at others streaming rays of brilliant sunlight through the trees. At one point in the

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<sup>43</sup> Another important visual trope is the desolate dirt road that they must travel to get to the garden. Each of the women is seen walking or driving down this road from city to the country space of the garden. It is a liminal site that connects the two visually and narratively. The only woman who does not ever enter the garden space is Munis, who is in effect suspended in the film in the descent to her death. It is only as a ghost that she can take her place within the city’s protests. As a figure somewhere between life and death she also inhabits a liminal space of escape and contemplation that mirror’s the garden.

narrative two different characters, Zarin and Faezeh, come to the garden each seeking solace. Zarin is escaping a difficult life in a brothel and Faezeh flees the city after being raped by two men. They arrive in the space separately and meet in a middle point between the desert and the forest. Faezeh is running away from flashbacks of her rape that have revisited her in the forest. She stops abruptly as she encounters Zarin who is sitting in a bright field of flowers. The richness of the *mise en scène* brilliantly translates Neshat's strength as a photographer steeped in painting traditions. These traces of intermedial fluidity within this film frame allow it to function visually an "in-between" space that provides a healing escape for both characters. What I wish to underscore here is how closely aligned Neshat's intermedial vision is with her narrative pursuit of liminal spaces. This scene demonstrates the expanded visual possibilities of her intermedial formalism and how they enable the feminist assertion of other possible spaces for women's representation to occur within her narrative films.

At the film's climax we return to Munis' slow motion fall from the roof as she observes, "All we wanted was to find a new form, a new way, a release." For Munis, and the three other characters the search for an alternative to their existing conditions is paramount for their survival. The women's limited opportunities within public and private life as either wife or prostitute are not bearable. Each seeks a route of escape. Neshat provides this through the liminal space of the garden. Traversing this space is the only route they have to reaching the new way made available to them by the

filmmaker. It is a truly in-between space that provides solace but does not exist in any real connection with their everyday lived situations.

*Women Without Men* is a useful example to consider in relation to Schneider's discussion of feminist intermedia, particularly within the realm of screen-based art. The film is, in some ways, an extension of Potter's earlier exploration of intermediality in *The Gold Diggers*. They share a thematic interest in women traversing real and imagined landscapes in search of solutions to their conditions as object of exchange within masculinist culture. Part of the trope of traversing in both films takes place via the invocation of different media: theatre and photography in *The Gold Diggers* and sculpture and painting in *Women Without Men*. It is in the spaces made possible by the intermedial convergences within the *mise en scène* that the women find the site of escape and agency that they seek. Additionally, this traversing of spaces and media evokes a particular inter-subjective address of the viewer as they are confronted with visually complex environments onscreen that expand the conditions of media and their relationship to them. This reflects earlier experiments with inter-subjective viewing environments undertaken by Schneemann; Rainer's interest in fragmenting narrative as a means of critiquing gendered codes of representation; and Armatage, Gruben, Longfellow and Onodera's performative constructions of liminal diegetic spaces, which blur the boundaries between film and viewing space. Each of these critical pursuits reverberates in the feminist intermedial works I examine in this chapter. In some ways Neshat successfully answers the questions and ideas posed by Potter almost thirty years earlier in *The Gold Diggers*.

In Potter's film the characters search for an answer to women's role in the commodity economy, Ruby traverses between different sites in order to find a way out or through her position as commodity to be exchanged. Where Ruby struggles to find this space, Neshat's characters do, if only very briefly. Where Potter evokes the principles of different media within her film frame, Neshat transports them from different media contexts into the feature film format.

In the conclusion to "Still Living," Schneider asks, "How can we account not only for the way differing media cite and incite each other but for the ways that the meaning of one form *takes place* in the response of another?"<sup>44</sup> This is an important question for film studies to consider in critically approaching screen-based media. The feminist intermedia experiments of artists like Neshat and Ahtila make clear the political stakes of citing media forms within each other in order to incite a critical response to the gendered constraints of medium specificity and its critical support. Schneider follows this question with another, asking "how can we account for a temporal inter(in)animation by which times touch, conversations take place intertemporally, and the live lags or drags or *stills*?"<sup>45</sup> She argues that critics "would do well to trouble any distinction between live arts and still arts that relies on an (historically faulty) absolutist distinction between performance and remains."<sup>46</sup> As an extension of Schneider's focus on the dynamic between photograph and performance, the recorded and the live, this chapter asks how we may account for both the temporal

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<sup>44</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 168. Emphasis in original.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original.

and perhaps more importantly, spatial inter(in)animations of moving images, multi-screen constructions and the gaps in-between. As I have demonstrated in my readings of Neshat and Ahtila's work, critics would do equally well to trouble the faulty distinctions between the diegetic world onscreen and the performative presence of the screen in the intermedial viewing environment. The call to witness evoked by the inter-subjective spatial dynamics of Neshat and Ahtila's screen-based art recognizes the crucial role of the spectator as critic in accounting for the gendered limitations of signification both in art and everyday life.

## Chapter 6

### Contemporary Feminist Aesthetics: The Material and the Cultural

#### Introduction

In her 2006 article “Mulvey’s Legacy,” Yvonne Rainer writes

I sometimes find myself wondering if it will take something as draconian as the revocation of *Roe v. Wade* to incite young women to mount the barricades – either intellectually or as activists – with the same ardor and ferocity with which feminist artists, writers and activists were moved to think and act thirty years ago.<sup>1</sup>

Rainer’s observations were written in honor of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Camera Obscura*. The anniversary prompted reflections by feminist artists and scholars on the trajectory of feminism and film during the previous three decades. When I started working on my dissertation around the same time, I was similarly concerned with the state of feminist politics. I began writing about my experiences teaching feminist theory in my classes on film, performance and visual culture. My observations were written in part to clarify my doctoral project, and in part as a way to confront my growing frustrations. I was dismayed by my student’s lack of interest, and at times, outright refusal to discuss feminism. This seemed to mirror the climate surrounding my own art practice and scholarship. At the time I could not find the courses or

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<sup>1</sup> Yvonne Rainer, “Mulvey’s Legacy” *Camera Obscura* 21 3/63 (2006): 167-168.



discussions around feminism and aesthetics that I urgently sought.<sup>2</sup> My experiences reflect a broader hesitation around feminist identification and activism occurring around the end of the twentieth century and into the last decade. For instance, in the February 2007 issue of *Art News*, a feature article, "Saying the F-word," by Jori Finkle, examined contemporary artist's negotiations with the term feminism.<sup>3</sup> The catalyst of the article was Tamy Ben-Tor's controversial denunciation of feminism during a panel entitled "'Feminisms' in Four Generations."<sup>4</sup> Ben-Tor is quoted as saying "I don't think about feminism at all... It is problematic to associate myself with any ideology. It is fine if it serves the weak, but I don't feel affiliated with it."<sup>5</sup> Ben-Tor's dismissal of feminism directly criticized earlier generations of women artists present both on the panel and in the audience. Finkel's article notes that Ben-Tor is not alone in her position. Nikki S. Lee feels feminism is not an applicable term for her as she has "never had to think about the problem" and has "never been treated unfairly."<sup>6</sup> Amy Cutler admits that she doesn't identify as a feminist despite the fact that her art depicts "strong, independent women," because she does not "know the rules" or the theory associated with the term.<sup>7</sup> Finkel observes that on a more systemic level, many agents and curators avoid describing the women artists they

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<sup>2</sup> My early research focus on the emergence of feminist art during the rise of the second wave may have been in part a wistful nostalgia for a vibrant feminist era that to me at that time seemed very much in the past.

<sup>3</sup> Jori Finkel. "Saying the F-Word" *ArtNews* (February, 2007): 118-119.

<sup>4</sup> Saturday January 7, 2006 panel "'Feminisms' in Four Generations," moderated by Roberta Smith, with panelists Tamy Ben - Tor, Collier Schorr, Barbara Kruger, and Joan Snyder, held at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City as part of the 5th Annual New York Times Arts and Leisure Weekend.

<sup>5</sup> Finkel, "F-Word," 118.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

represent as feminist because it is simply “not a selling point.”<sup>8</sup> Ben-Tor’s polemic in particular reflects not only a hostility towards feminism but also a sense of political apathy. The danger of such apathy is that it enables a range of misogynist perspectives, cultural practices and government policies to (re)emerge unchallenged. This is certainly the case at present, with the troubling erosion of women’s reproductive rights and the insensitive rhetoric of slut-shaming surrounding public discussions of rape and sexuality in the media. It is not an exaggeration that many women’s rights, hard won thirty to forty years ago, are presently under attack. The political apathy that eschews feminist concerns in cultural and daily life is an important contributing factor to these present realities.

Within film and media culture, the consequences of this apathy were made clear to me when Kathryn Bigelow became the first woman to win an Oscar for best director in 2010. From my position as a feminist filmmaker this recognition seemed culturally significant and worth celebrating.<sup>9</sup> I was dismayed when Bigelow denied identifying as a feminist director in her subsequent press appearances. I was surprised that feminism was not a part of her public image, particularly because Bigelow was directly involved in feminist film culture in the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> While there were likely many complex reasons why she chose not to identify with feminism during these post-Oscar

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<sup>8</sup> Finkel, “F-Word,” 118.

<sup>9</sup> It was particularly moving for me having come of age in the late 1990s, during the celebration of “bad boy” directors like Quentin Tarantino. As a film student, I studied Bigelow’s films made between the 1980s and 1990s as a class unit. It was a significant and formative experience on my thinking and practice. My encounters with other women filmmakers during this time including Lisa Steele, Brenda Longfellow, Joyce Wieland, and Carolee Schneemann, among others, were equally formative.

<sup>10</sup> Including having a role in Lizzie Borden’s feminist feature *Born In Flames* (1983).

discussions, I saw it as a lost opportunity for her to reach out as a role model to a younger generation of artists.

At the conclusion of my doctoral work, I notice the position of feminism changing quickly and for the better. Feminists are speaking out in greater numbers against the continued rise of conservative values in politics and popular culture.<sup>11</sup> As Rainer feared, it is precisely the draconian erosion of women's rights that have helped to incite a renewed sense of activism amongst the next generation of feminists. This activism is producing important interventions against gender inequality. The word feminism is used much more readily and explicitly across a range of cultural platforms. A vibrant spirit of debate is occurring once again with an increasingly engaged public. Cultural and political forms of misogyny are being openly challenged in print, media and online journalism. This includes the broad feminist blogging community, which is producing new forms of consciousness-raising dialogue on the web, social media campaigns like Who Needs Feminism?, started by sixteen Duke University student activists, and the SlutWalk protests that have spread globally since 2011.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, reduced access to birth control and in the continued threat of sexual and physical violence against women on a global scale, the appropriation of feminist rhetoric by conservative political parties to dismantle women's rights, and the current veneration of the "cult of femininity" in popular culture as is seen in the recent sensationalist journalism around particular parenting practices as a marker of successful motherhood and by extension womanhood.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance Feministing ([feministing.com](http://feministing.com)), Now What? ([nowwhat.com](http://nowwhat.com)), Feministe ([feminist.us/blog](http://feminist.us/blog)), Alas, a blog ([amptoons.com](http://amptoons.com)), blac(k)ademic ([blackademic.com](http://blackademic.com)), shameless magazine ([shamelessmag.com](http://shamelessmag.com)), feminist current ([feministcurrent.com](http://feministcurrent.com)), Finally feminism 101 ([finallyfeminism101.wordpress.com](http://finallyfeminism101.wordpress.com)), jezebel ([jezebel.com](http://jezebel.com)), whoneedsfeminism.com, [www.slutwalktoronto.com](http://www.slutwalktoronto.com).

In the art world more spaces are opening to feminism at institutional and grassroots levels. For instance, Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1974-1979) found a permanent home at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art in 2007. This coincided with the center's inaugural, large-scale exhibition *Global Feminisms* that ran between 2007 and 2008. The last five years have also seen a rise in feminist film and performance festivals including *Feminists in Space* in Copenhagen, which began in 2011, and the London Feminist Film Festival, which opened in London, UK in 2012. In Toronto, the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG), opened in 2010, reflects the best of contemporary feminist activism. Their mandate to stand "in solidarity for new kind of sisterhood that isn't based on gender and privilege and a new kind of brotherhood that isn't based on rape and pillage," is both inspiring and mobilizing.<sup>13</sup> As the FAG mandate outlines, a key strength of contemporary feminism is its inclusivity beyond sex, gender or class categories. Present day feminism cannot afford to be exclusionary on the basis of gender divisions, or racial, ethnic and socio-economic privilege. To avoid the at times exclusionary rhetoric of second-wave feminist thought, we must reconsider how gender inequality affects people more broadly.<sup>14</sup> This broader form of investigation reflects the best of the second-wave movement's legacy and provides an important through line between then and now. It is within this renewed political focus and a personal sense of optimism that I write my conclusion.

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<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/FeministArtGallery/info>

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed account of divisive exclusions within second wave feminism see Susan Faludi, "Death of a Revolutionary" *New Yorker* (April 15, 2013).  
[http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/04/15/130415fa\\_fact\\_faludi](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/04/15/130415fa_fact_faludi)

One point that I wish to emphasize here is the need to read gender inequalities for both their material and cultural dimensions, which I believe are inseparable from one another. The troubling recent cases of gang rape and subsequent cyber exploitation of young women across multiple media channels reveals this interrelationship quite clearly. In each instance, documented evidence of material experiences of violence becomes a highly valued form of cultural exchange across peer social networks and the daily news.<sup>15</sup> A central challenge feminism faces at the moment is how to counter social systems that enable rape culture and victim blaming to perpetuate, particularly within mainstream media. This example demonstrates the very real dangers of women's continued position as symbolic and material objects of exchange within patriarchal culture. I highlight this interrelationship between the material and the cultural because it is at the forefront of current debates on the future of feminism in the twenty-first century. The level of media saturation that now shapes our social environment makes it impossible to consider these dimensions separately. It is crucial that feminism continues to challenge representational codes and practices within dominant culture and produce alternative modes of expression as a viable counter-point. I wish to momentarily draw attention to some key nuances within the interrelationship between the material and the cultural in order to contemplate the possibilities of experimental aesthetics for contemporary feminist politics.

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<sup>15</sup> For instance, the Stubenville rape trial (2013) highlights a prevalent cultural attitude that socially values the promising futures of male football stars over and above the material violence they inflicted on their victim.

In “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History,” Nancy Fraser revisits the “overall trajectory and historical significance” of second wave feminism in the present moment.<sup>16</sup> In the essay, Fraser argues that second wave feminism’s strength was its comprehensive critique of state-run capitalism at the economic, cultural, and political level.<sup>17</sup> For Fraser, this tripartite focus split apart with the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s. As a consequence, this earlier critique of capitalism waned to the point that feminism inadvertently helped legitimate a shift towards a “post-Fordist, transnational, neoliberal” form of capitalism.<sup>18</sup> Fraser’s concern is that under neoliberalism, cultural feminism (associated with identity politics), thrived and “began to eclipse feminist social theory.”<sup>19</sup> Fraser believes that feminism is well positioned in the wake of the recent global financial crisis to revitalize itself and break ties with neoliberalism. For her, this would require economic, cultural and political frames to reunite and “reconnect feminist critique to the critique of capitalism – and thereby re-position feminism squarely on the Left.”<sup>20</sup> Fraser is absolutely correct that capitalism needs to figure larger in present critiques of gender equality, particularly since advanced capitalism often co-opts the rhetoric of feminism by equating women’s independence with purchasing power.<sup>21</sup> However, Fraser’s

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<sup>16</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Feminsim, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History,” *New Left Review* 56 (2009) 97.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Fraser, “Feminism,” 99.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>21</sup> On the collapsing of feminism into capitalism see Angela McRobbie, “Postfeminism and Popular Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies* 4 3 (2004): 255-264, Charlotte Brunsdon, “Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha and Nigela,” *Cinema Journal* 44 2 (2005): 110-116, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007), Rosalind Gill and Christine Scharff, *Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, (London: Palgrave, 2011).

return to second-wave socialist-feminist frames overlooks a crucial point. The increased focus on cultural feminism and identity politics in the 1980s was directly tied to struggles within second-wave feminism to incorporate difference within its frame. There is danger in revisiting second-wave politics without acknowledging the movement's internal struggles at the same time.<sup>22</sup>

This is precisely Judith Butler's concern in her essay "Merely Cultural," where she takes issue with the notion that cultural feminism is devoid of a legitimate critique of capitalism.<sup>23</sup> For Butler, this argument dismisses identity politics as being solely about cultural concerns rather than economic or political ones, when in fact the opposite is often the case. She argues that living as an openly gay or lesbian person has very real, and at times, debilitating economic and political consequences.<sup>24</sup> Using Althusser's definition of ideology, Butler argues that, "even if homophobia were conceived only as a cultural attitude, that attitude should still be located in the apparatus and practice of its institutionalization."<sup>25</sup> Any form of marginalization based on identity is intricately tied to larger social structures and practices. As such, one cannot separate the two within politics or the practice of criticism.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> For an in-depth discussion on this matter see Robyn Wiegman, "What Ails Feminist Criticism? A Second Opinion," *Critical Inquiry* 25 2 (Winter 1999), 362-379.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Butler, "Merely Cultural," *New Left Review* 1/227 (Winter 1998), 33-44. The article was written ten years before Fraser's but is in part a response to Fraser's 1997 book *Justice Interruptus* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> Butler asks whether it is "only a matter of cultural recognition when non- normative sexualities are marginalized and debased?" "Merely Cultural," 41.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>26</sup> This is where I want to further locate my critical focus in the future. In this dissertation, I provide close textual analyses of feminist experimental media. I see this as the first stage of mapping the feminist aesthetic I am interested in. In subsequent versions of this work, I would like to further consider the relationship this work has to the larger social context it was produced within.

Butler draws on Claude Levi-Strauss's understanding of exchange in order to outline a useful working model for a cultural-materialist feminist criticism. She notes that for Levi-Strauss the "relation of exchange" is both "cultural and economic at once" because exchange "produces a set of social relations" and "communicates a cultural or symbolic value."<sup>27</sup> She concludes: "The question is not whether sexual politics thus belong to the cultural or to the economic, but how the very practices of sexual exchange confound the distinction between the two spheres."<sup>28</sup> Building on this, critical feminist politics cannot privilege an economic critique over a cultural one. Instead, feminism needs to recognize the interconnected nature of the cultural and economic factors that inform gender inequality and marginalization. Ultimately this is what Fraser wants as well in her regrouping of culture, economics, and political critiques of capitalism. Butler's use of Levi-Strauss suggests that capitalist oppressions are readily manifest within cultural discourse. This connection addresses how historically women have figured as central sites of exchange within culture -- a position that has undeniable material and economic consequences. One only has to recall Finkel's above example of the systemic reluctance to identify women artists as feminists within the trends of the current art market.

For feminist criticism to remain viable and dynamic it cannot separate the cultural and the material in art or in everyday life. From my particular interest in feminist aesthetics, several questions arise from this debate. Is a comprehensive critique of material and cultural oppression present in the feminist experimental

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<sup>27</sup> Butler, "Merely Cultural," 43.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid* 44.



media I have studied? And if so, what formal methods usefully encourage this shared critique in feminist art? Perhaps most importantly, can recognizing gender as a central site of exchange blur the boundaries between the social and the symbolic? These questions form an undercurrent of my critical readings throughout the dissertation. This has been manifest most clearly in my interest in the materiality of bodies engaged in an inter-subjective exchange with one another. In further articulations of this work I wish to take up this notion of exchange as including both symbolic and social (or material and cultural), dimensions further. I will consider more explicitly how this feminist aesthetic approach produces a set of social, structural relations and communicates a cultural, symbolic value. As a gesture towards this future work, I wish to briefly trace the symbolic and material role of exchange in the writing of Virginia Woolf. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf employs an aesthetic method that merges a cultural and materialist critique. In the text, Woolf suggests a way through the economic and cultural oppression in women's daily life through a playful, stream of conscious address. Woolf encourages an inter-subjective exchange that asks readers to recognize dialogue as central to political critique. After mapping the strengths of Woolf's aesthetic, I will discuss how the interrelation between the social and the symbolic informed a recent installation I co-created with Angela Joosee titled *Dear Ruth* (2009). My provisional reading of these two examples suggests a possible future direction for feminist experimental media practice that is based on emphasizing women's material experience as central to the reframing and refiguring of women's position within all aspects of cultural production.

## A Poetics of the Material Everyday

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf argues that in order to write, a woman needs five hundred pounds a year and a room of her own.<sup>29</sup> Her thesis is built on a specifically material critique of women's relationship to creativity and cultural production.<sup>30</sup> Woolf uses a fictionalized version of herself to observe the gendered conditions of her environment. She reveals these conditions strategically through the very banal activities of the narrator.<sup>31</sup> Her experimental aesthetic successfully places the problems of women's oppression within the site of practice, capturing the realism of the everyday in poetic terms. Larger questions about subjectivity and social structures are read through the practicalities of everyday life and the body. For example, the narrator's body betrays her when she is "flushed with anger," or when her thoughts are interrupted by her need to eat lunch.<sup>32</sup> According to de Lauretis,

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<sup>29</sup> Woolf asks if her lecture on women and fiction is supposed to be about women writing fiction, the fiction of women or what fiction about women means to the women who read it. I have asked a similar question about women and aesthetics – is about artists, the representation of women or what such representations mean to the women who view them? Like Woolf, I agree that with such a question each of these areas is "inextricably linked together" Woolf, *A Room*, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Woolf concludes her lectures noting, "I pondered... what effect poverty has on the mind; and what effect wealth has on the mind... I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in; and, thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and the poverty and insecurity of the other and of the effect of tradition and the lack of tradition upon the minds of the writer." Woolf, *A Room*, 24. This is a clear instance of how the materiality of her experience informed her thought, in order to make a direct intervention into the limitations of women's poverty. The quote also explores an indeterminate position between being locked out and locked into cultural gender constraints. She suggests that neither is desirable, so seeks to strike a line between them.

<sup>31</sup> In the first chapter we follow her as she wanders through an invented university campus, attends a luncheon, strolls along a riverbank and some gardens, has supper in a dining hall, retires to a drawing room and takes a late evening walk.

<sup>32</sup> A particularly clear example of this is seen in Woolf's assertion "The human frame being what it is, heart, body and brain all mixed together, and not contained in separate compartments... a good dinner is of great importance to good talk. One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if ones has not dined well." Woolf, *A Room*, 18.

Woolf “addresses the paradox of women in discourse not by stating it but by performing it.”<sup>33</sup> The paradox Woolf reveals (much like Wieland does in *Reason Over Passion*) is that women are often stuck between men’s language and women’s prescribed silence. In response, Woolf employs a “strategy of discourse,” which “allow[s] the speaker/writer to be with and for herself.”<sup>34</sup>

In developing her thesis on women and fiction, Woolf notes how she “pondered it, and made it work in and out of my daily life.”<sup>35</sup> This method weaves together stream of conscious thought, personal observations, and descriptions of daily life as evidence of women’s marginalization in the face of masculinist cultural privilege. She takes the reader into her confidence, sharing a dialogue of her inner thoughts and processes. She acknowledges at the start of the text that “[o]ne can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one’s audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies’ of the speaker.”<sup>36</sup> Like Rainer and Schneemann’s use of the double gesture, Woolf situates herself as a figure in the text and an external narrator commenting on the text. This doubling calls the reader to witness and offers to stand beside them offering reflective insights into the scene that unfolds.

Woolf’s writing also reflects an interest in liminal spaces. Her position within the text is mobile, fluid, traversing across time and space, and from psychic interiority

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<sup>33</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Figures of Resistance: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Champaign: U of Illinois P, 2007), 244.

<sup>34</sup> de Lauretis, *Figures of Resistance*, 245.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Woolf, *A Room*, 4.

to the practical details of the dinner she ate, the paths walked, and the weather. The desired room of one's own is a space between the restrictive, gendered public and private spheres available to women at that time. This room "evokes the figure of an empty center, a space of contradiction where opposites converge and cancel each other out."<sup>37</sup> It is a space of possibility similar to those envisioned by the feminist artists considered throughout my dissertation. Woolf constantly improvises within the two poles made available to her, traversing between them, and seeking out other options and spaces to think. In one instance she attempts to walk on the grass at the fictional Oxbridge and is denied access. She unhappily returns to the gravel, noting that it is not as comfortable. Dismayed by the two restrictive choices, she gives up both for a seated view by the river.

Each of the elements I have described above in Woolf's text echo the feminist aesthetic method I have traced in this dissertation. Woolf's formally reflexive representation of the everyday body traversing liminal space is a useful early model of this aesthetic approach. Further, Woolf's text highlights an aesthetic interest in engaging women's multiple positions as artists, scholars, feminists, and readers. Contemporary feminist aesthetics and politics can benefit from a similar conceptual dissolving of the boundaries between art and everyday life, or the material and the cultural, particularly in the divide often falsely constructed between the art world and feminist activism in mass culture. As Woolf makes clear, political critique and aesthetic practice can inform each other in mutually productive ways. Our material

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<sup>37</sup> de Lauretis, *Figures of Resistance*, 247.

conditions affect how we think, and the forms we use to communicate our pleasure and displeasure. Contemporary feminist political movements and the feminist aesthetics I am interested in share the desire for new sites of discourse. Both seek spaces between established structures, spaces that may usefully open up different conditions for gender identity than what is presently possible. The feminist aesthetic experiments examined in my dissertation foreground the political importance of inter-subjective exchange by calling viewers to witness what has been made invisible by dominant cultural discourse. Both contemporary activists and artists use a variety of formal structures, communication platforms, and disciplinary perspectives in order to encourage similar forms of inter-subjective exchange. It is crucial to think about this overlap between art and politics in greater detail particularly because a large portion of feminist politics takes place within representational media and social networks. To this end we must recognize that feminist art in the gallery and popular forms of feminist activism are both interested in fostering a direct dialogue with a critical feminist spectator.

I want to reflect on how I have been working through these particular ideas of art and activism in my own practice by examining the political interventions put forward by mine and Joosie's installation *Dear Ruth*. This work marks an important shift in my own artistic trajectory, highlighting a move away from my experimental film practice and towards site-specific installations dedicated to public engagement. It is only at the end point of my doctoral research that I have begun to realize how closely my art practice and critical scholarship are interrelated.

## Dwelling in The Space Between Theory and Practice

*Dear Ruth* was part of *The Leona Drive Project*, a large site-specific exhibition held in a series of six vacant bungalows in North Toronto in October of 2009. These houses were slated for demolition by a developer and six months later were torn down to make room for new million dollar town homes. In making *Dear Ruth*, my creative partner Angela Josse and I engaged with a particular set of objects that had been left behind in one of the boarded-up houses. The kitchen of this house later became the site of our installation. The collection of found objects included an assortment of recipes, a yearbook from Stratford Normal School in 1945, two autograph books dating from 1936-1945, photographs, magazines, as well as sewing and knitting patterns. Upon closer inspection, we discovered that these objects had belonged to the same person, a woman named Ruth Gillespie, who had lived in the house for over 40 years. We set about re-photographing and videotaping these objects, and then re-installed the images and the objects themselves into the kitchen of the house. We turned the drawers into archive boxes, the oven into a projection space, the sink into a sculptural screen, and the cupboards into textured light boxes. Through this process, a collection of items that would have been demolished along with the house made a categorical shift from abandoned junk to artists' materials and archival objects. In addition, the kitchen shifted into a variety of new roles. It became a *memento mori* of a certain way of life, an aesthetic retracing of common domestic gestures, and a eulogy to someone only glimpsed at through the fragments of her personal archive.

*Dear Ruth* negotiated the boundaries between archive and artwork. Through the piece we explored the history of suburban living and the means through which we remember such forms of living. The repetition, magnification, and close-up details in the piece question the way in which memory is embedded in material objects and intimate spaces. A large part of our process was concerned with space and the possible sites in which archives can exist outside of official institutions. Our approach in *Dear Ruth* built upon our previous collaborative work *Collect My Junk* (from 2007). In this earlier piece we created sculptural screen projections constructed out of discarded objects that had been collected from well-known areas of Toronto such as Trinity Bellwoods Park, Dundas Street, and Queen Street West. In *Dear Ruth* we drew upon this method of using found objects and further explored how the act of collecting forced us into very specific phenomenological relationships with the spaces we were working within. The central question we asked was: how we can begin to know a space differently through its abandoned and discarded items, through those things that are often overlooked? What value is there in representing a space through objects that are no longer deemed valuable? We went into the project knowing we wanted to somehow make visible the historical imaginary surrounding women's lived experience in the suburbs. This method caused us to move beyond our immediate perceptions of the suburbs and allowed us to develop a picture of what is often *not made visible* in our everyday encounters with our environment.<sup>38</sup> Shawn Micallef

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<sup>38</sup> What in my mind made this an interesting site for thinking through the notion of the archive was that it acted as a counterpoint to the more 'official' archive that was being constructed outside the house on an exterior wall that outlined the zoning maps of the original development, alongside photos of the area

states in his review of the project: “The vacant houses, interpreted and transformed by over a dozen artists, explore the deep territory of this suburban landscape, the one we’re led to believe (at least by popular mythology) has no worthwhile stories and isn’t interesting.”<sup>39</sup> Micallef notes that after touring the entire exhibit

every one of these near-identical bungalows now seem filled to the rafters with stories of so many Ruths who dreamed quiet dreams and lived quiet lives but weren’t boring and did matter. Nothing seems to happen in the suburbs because the stories haven’t been told often enough. *The Leona Drive Project* tells some of them.<sup>40</sup>

Micallef importantly picks up on the more personal nature of our piece and the exhibition more broadly, acknowledging the importance of untold or invisible histories of suburban development.

Our relationship to Ruth, her objects, and her kitchen was grounded in an awareness of the personal constructions and imagined history we were creating of Ruth and her home.<sup>41</sup> There was a sense of loss tied to Ruth’s absence from the house and the abandonment of the objects that documented her life that echoed the larger abandonment of living spaces and practices that the house signified as a whole.

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and the original developers in the mid-twentieth century. While that mapping constituted a more broad economic history of the area, the kitchen represented a much more intimate record, which recognizes how the material practices of everyday routines are equally as important historical artifacts as those found in planning documents.

<sup>39</sup> Shawn Micallef, “Psychogeography: Bungalow’s Last Stand.” *Eye Weekly* October 21, 2009. 8

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>41</sup> These constructions were tied up in our own, at times nostalgic, notions of domestic space. We were often confronted with an impulse to narrativize the space and fill it with stories and objects in order to recapture or reclaim what we felt was lost in the processes of redevelopment the house was undergoing.



Recognizing that our own desires and imagined narratives were a part of the installation, we framed *Dear Ruth* as a reconstruction of an unknowable life performatively enacted through a set of imagined memories, events and stories.<sup>42</sup> The growing connection we felt to the figure of Ruth is best reflected in the shifting title of the piece. We began by naming the piece *Attention to Detail* but over the course of the installation we changed the name to *Dear Ruth*. The final title was derived from the entries made in the autograph books, most of which began with the address "Dear Ruth." The title also reflected how our relationship to Ruth developed through our encounters with the fragmented story her objects told. The shift implies our own changed focus from the objects themselves (the details in the title), to our concern with Ruth. The title became a way of addressing her intimately as one would in the salutation of a letter, or perhaps an entry in her autograph book.

Reflecting on the installation I am interested in how we transformed a domestic space into a site of exhibition as a means of highlighting important tensions between private and public space. This was something viewers particularly responded to as they were placed in a dual role of familiarity with the routines of the kitchen space (opening cupboards) while simultaneously exploring the preserved artifacts of a woman's life on display. It was important that viewers bore witness to both our re-assembly of Ruth's life and her absence. The recognition of this tension and of the affective response of the public passing through the site was particularly important for

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<sup>42</sup> For example, the images projected into the sink document us remaking Ruth's recipes. The act of constructing and tasting deserts, which she noted were 'good' in her recipes was an attempt to re-perform her lived experience to some degree.

me, and perhaps one of the most rewarding aspects of the entire the project. My experience on-site during the ten days *Dear Ruth* was exhibited gave me particular insight into Schneider's notion of how images can be read as on-going, durational events. During the show's opening people kept sharing stories about Ruth, her likes, dislikes, hobbies and how she died.<sup>43</sup> These stories inhabited the space and encouraged a dialogue between the viewers congregating in the house. On the closing night a lot of people remained within the space, haunted by the knowledge that this was the last time people would be in the house before it was demolished. A neighbor of Ruth's told us that she would have loved that her house had been turned into an art gallery filled with people. It was hard in that moment not to feel the gravity of Ruth's forty years lived in the space, her absence and the future of the space. The poignancy of these exchanges greatly impacted my goals as an artist as I am becoming increasingly committed to engaging spectators in intimate rather than official ways.

Our aesthetic approach in *Dear Ruth* was concerned with making explicit the link between the cultural and material realities of suburban redevelopment. This opened the work up to larger discussions around the ethics of aestheticizing a personal archive, and our relationship as artists and viewers to these materials, spaces and memories. We were interested in formally mixing the banality of everyday life with a poetic and performative re-imagining of domestic space. The piece constructed the kitchen as a liminal space where viewers could traverse between past and present,

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<sup>43</sup> Up to this point we had no idea whether she was living or not, a fact that troubled us throughout the installation as we tried all possible avenues of finding Ruth or her next of kin. We were pleased that her niece came to the opening after having read about the exhibition in the *Toronto Star*. Our meeting with Ruth's niece allowed us to return all of her belongings to her family.

as well as between the private sphere of domestic space and the public sphere of the exhibition. We aimed to foreground these spatial and temporal dualities by indexing our own complicated relationship to the objects and the space. The re-photographing of the objects, re-performing of Ruth's routines and re-staging of her personal space specifically sought to address the complexities of historical remembering in art practice. We did this in order to re-conceptualize the function of the public archive and emphasize how the partial, fragmentary story of a woman's lived experience can serve as a legitimate archival document of redevelopment.

This work was built upon my experiences not just as an artist but also through my involvement with research and reading groups dedicated to studying the theories, politics and aesthetics of space. I believe this interrelationship between research and art is incredibly generative. A further draw then for me to contemporary performance studies is how the field "struggles to open the space between analysis and action, and to pull the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice."<sup>44</sup> This element of performance studies' methodological approach encapsulates the future direction of my work as an artist-scholar. It speaks to the value of a feminist aesthetic situated in the thresholds between the material everyday and the imagined symbolic, as Woolf's writing so persuasively demonstrates. In some sense all the works I have examined through my dissertation are invested in further opening the space between the existing codes of women's representation and an active feminist refiguring of such codes. This refiguring, while located at the level of the symbolic or representation, had a direct

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<sup>44</sup> Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," *TDR: The Drama Review* 46 2 (Summer 2002): 145.

material impact on the physical positioning and responses of the audience.

Throughout the previous five chapters I have traced a history of feminist experimental media concerned with embodiment, liminal sites of reception and intermediality. I argue that these overlapping interests are found in a diverse range of feminist experimental film and media made between the 1960s and 2010. Each of the works considered pose a challenge to existing ideas of what a moving image is, expanding the significance and the possibilities of cinema. The overriding trope of my dissertation is the notion of dwelling or residing in the in-between. I have been drawn to works inhabiting the slippery gaps around and within bodies, exhibition spaces, codes of representation, and aesthetic practices. In light of this, I want to return once again to the narrator in *Our Marilyn* who states: "Growing up between your bodies, never one without the other, I keep moving, watched your moving and dreamed of another story." For the narrator, the two Marylins in the film provide an example of women in motion, traversing different types of borders. They complement the narrator's desire to be a body in motion, a subject who is always moving, or, a subject *in process*. It is ultimately these two bodies in motion that enable the narrator to dream of another story for herself. These cinematic images of Monroe and Bell, successfully move, as the narrator suggests, "beyond naming, beyond the myths" pinned on women, and into "the space between images" where they may dream of another story. This movement beyond traditions of constraint and towards in-between spaces of possibility is the story I have sought within the history of feminist

experimental film and media. Further, it is the story I hope to find across new iterations of feminist scholarship, filmmaking and viewing practices in the future.



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