

BODY ART/  
PERFORMING THE SUBJECT

AMELIA JONES



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[G]o back to the body, which is where all the splits in Western Culture occur.

—CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN.

*CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: UP TO AND INCLUDING HER LIMITS*

Only the Slave can transform the World.

—ALEXANDRE KOJÈVE.

"INTRODUCTION TO THE READING OF HEGEL"

Nancy Buchanan, Thatcher Carter, Meiling Cheng, Judy Chicago, Michael Cohen, Allan deSouza, Sandra Goldman, Lou-Anne Greenwald, Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtius, Bea Karthaus-Hunt, Kris Kuramitsu, Sam McBride, Yong Soon Min, Mira Schor, Barbara Smith, and Lisa Tickner for their good thoughts on bodies/selves in culture. I am deeply grateful to Mario Ontiveros for his ongoing intellectual insights as well as his assistance with the picture research on this book, to Rebecca Weller for research assistance, and to the other deeply intelligent students from the seminars I have taught on body art in the last four years at University of California, Riverside, and UCLA.

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Finally, this book is dedicated to Virginia S. and Edward E. Jones, my mother and father, whose intersubjective postwar identities conditioned my approach to the set of questions raised in this study in deep ways I have not yet fully grasped. A special note of admiration is due to Mom, who has continued bravely to develop her selfhood beyond the sudden death of my father in 1993: she has enacted for me how subjects chiasmically intertwine but remain stubbornly particular.

## INTRODUCTION

We abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind, which will become the theater of the action. *A direct communication will be re-established between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it.*

—ANTONIN ARTAUD<sup>1</sup>



As Artaud realized in 1938, the radicalization of cultural expression would most dramatically take place in this century through a direct theatrical enactment of subjects in relation to one another, such that the hierarchy between actor and spectator would be dissolved and social relations would be profoundly politicized. In Artaud's "Theater of Cruelty," the performance of subjects in a "passionate and convulsive conception of life" would correspond "to the agitation and unrest characteristic of our epoch."<sup>2</sup> This book argues a similar relationship for body art practices, which enact subjects in "passionate and convulsive" relationships (often explicitly sexual) and thus exacerbate, perform, and/or negotiate the dislocating effects of social and private experience in the late capitalist, postcolonial Western world. Body art is viewed here as a set of performative practices that, through such intersubjective engagement, instantiate the dislocation or decentering of the Cartesian subject of modernism. This dislocation is, I believe, the most profound transformation constitutive of what we have come to call postmodernism.<sup>3</sup>

### CASE ONE: CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

In 1963 Carolee Schneemann stated the following in her personal notes:

That the body is in the eye; sensations received visually take hold on the total organism. That perception moves the total personality in excitation. . . . My visual dramas provide for an intensification



CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN, *EYE BODY*, 1963. PHOTOGRAPH BY ERRÒ, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

of all faculties simultaneously—apprehensions are called forth in wild juxtaposition. My eye creates, searches out expressive form in the materials I choose; such forms corresponding to a visual-kinaesthetic dimensionality; a visceral necessity drawn by the senses to the fingers of the eye . . . a mobile, tactile event into which the eye leads the body.<sup>4</sup>

In the same year Schneemann performed her eroticized body in a performance called *Eye Body*. “Covered in paint, grease, chalk, ropes, plastic,” she has written, “I establish[ed] my body as visual territory,” marking it as “an integral material” within a dramatic environmental construction of mirrors, painted panels, moving umbrellas, and motorized parts.<sup>5</sup> As early as 1963, then, several years before the development of a cohesive feminist movement in the visual arts, Schneemann deployed her sexualized body in and as her work within

the language of abstract expressionism but against the grain of its masculinist assumptions. Describing this piece in her book *More Than Meat Joy*, Schneemann is clear about her motivations: “In 1963 to use my body as an extension of my painting-constructions was to challenge and threaten the psychic territorial power lines by which women were admitted to the Art Stud Club.”<sup>6</sup>

In *Interior Scroll*, originally performed in 1975, Schneemann extended her sexualized negotiation of the normative (masculine) subjectivity authorizing the modernist artist, performing herself in an erotically charged narrative of pleasure that challenges the fetishistic and scopophilic “male gaze.”<sup>7</sup> Her face and body covered in strokes of paint, Schneemann pulled a long, thin coil of paper from her vagina (“like a ticker tape . . . plumb line . . . the umbilicus and tongue”), unrolling it to read a narrative text to the audience. Part of this text read as follows: “I met a happy man, / a structuralist filmmaker . . . he said we are fond of you / you are charming / but don’t ask us / to look at your films / . . . we cannot look at / *the personal clutter / the persistence of feelings / the hand-touch sensibility*.”<sup>8</sup> Through the action, which extends “exquisite sensation in motion” and “originates with . . . the fragile persistence of line moving into space,” Schneemann integrated the occluded *interior* of the female body (with the vagina as “a translucent chamber”) with its *mobile*, and apparently eminently readable (obviously “female”) exterior.<sup>9</sup> Schneemann projects herself as fully embodied subject, who is also (but not only) object in relation to the audience (her “others”). The female subject is not simply a “picture” in Schneemann’s scenario, but a deeply constituted (and never fully coherent) subjectivity in the phenomenological sense, dialectically articulated in relation to others in a continually negotiated exchange of desires and identifications.<sup>10</sup>

Through works such as *Interior Scroll* Schneemann has established a “passionate and convulsive” relationship to her audience that dynamically enacts the dislocation of the conventional structures of gendered subjectivity characteristic of this explosive period. Not only does Schneemann clearly refuse the fetishizing process, which requires that the woman not expose the fact that she is *not* lacking but possesses genitals (and they are nonmale), she also thus activates a mode of artistic production and reception that is dramatically *inter-subjective* and opens up the masculinist and racist ideology of individualism shoring up modernist formalism. This reigning model of artistic analysis (dominated by Clement Greenberg’s then hegemonic formalist ideas) protected the authority of the (usually male, almost always white) critic or historian by veiling his investments, proposing a Kantian mode of “disinterested” analysis whereby the interpreter presumably determined the inherent meaning and value of the work through objective criteria.<sup>11</sup>



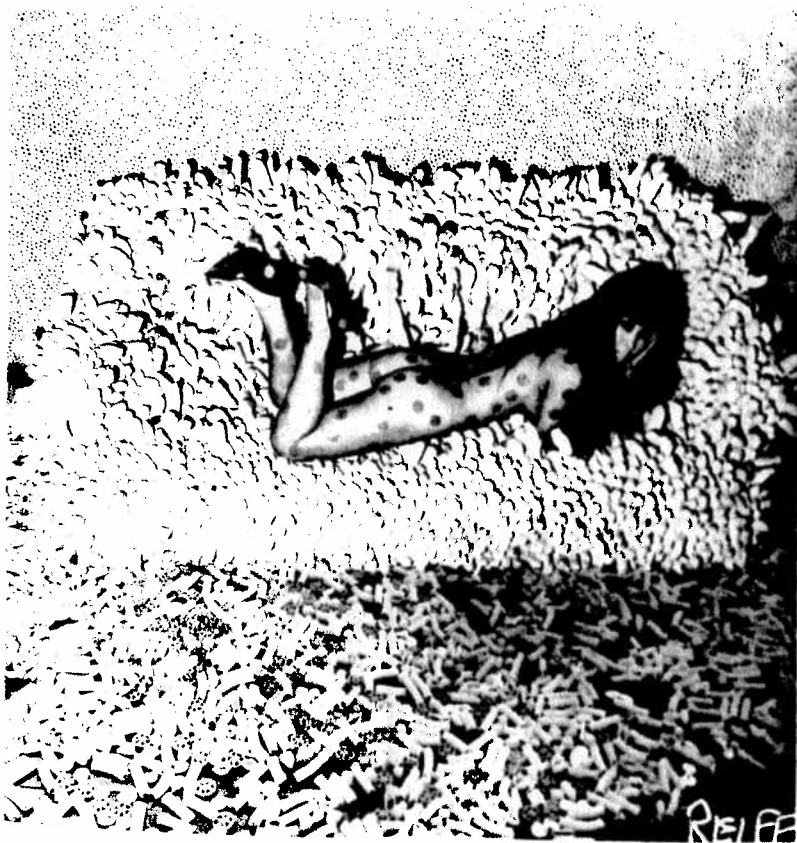
CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN, *INTERIOR SCROLL*, 1975. PHOTOGRAPH BY ANTHONY MCCALL. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

Body art is specifically antiformalist in impulse, opening up the circuits of desire informing artistic production and reception. Works that involve the artist's enactment of her or his body in all of its sexual, racial, and other particularities and overtly solicit spectatorial desires unhinge the very deep structures and assumptions embedded in the formalist model of art evaluation. Schneemann's self-enactment and engagement with the audience seriously compromise the myth of a "disinterested" art history or art criticism. The performative body, as Schneemann argues, "has a value that static depiction . . . representation won't carry"; she is concerned with breaking down the distancing effect of modernist practice: "my work has to do with cutting through the idealized (mostly male) mythology of the 'abstracted self' or the 'invented self'—i.e., work . . . [where the male artist] retain[s] power and distancing over the situation."<sup>12</sup>

Schneemann's work thus points to what I will argue in this book to be the particular potential of body art to destabilize the structures of conventional art history and criticism. In addition, *Interior Scroll* opens up the issue of the potentially heightened effects of *feminist* body art, as well as body-oriented projects by otherwise nonnormative artists who *particularize* their bodies/selves in order to expose and challenge the masculinism embedded in the assumption of "disinterestedness" behind conventional art history and criticism. As I will argue at length, it is such work that has the potential to eroticize the interpretive relation to radical ends by insisting on the *intersubjectivity* of all artistic production and reception. By surfacing the effects of the body as an integral component (a material enactment) of the self, the body artist strategically unveils the dynamic through which the artistic body is occluded (to ensure its phallic privilege) in conventional art history and criticism. By exaggeratedly performing the sexual, gender, ethnic, or other particularities of this body/self, the feminist or otherwise nonnormative body artist even more aggressively explodes the myths of disinterestedness and universality that authorize these conventional modes of evaluation.

#### CASE TWO: YAYOI KUSAMA

The particularization of the subject took an especially charged turn in the performative self-imagining of Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama. In a collage from the mid-1960s Kusama enacted herself as pinup on one of her vertiginous landscapes of phallic knobs, here a couch cradling Kusama as odalisque; this phallic/feminine image of Kusama embedded in her own work is glued above a strip of decidedly unerotic macaroni with a labyrinthine maze of one of her *Infinity Net* paintings covering the surface behind her. Here, naked and heavily made up in



YAYOI KUSAMA. *SEX OBSESSION FOOD OBSESSION MACARONI INFINITY NETS & KUSAMA*. 1962. PHOTOGRAPH BY HAL REIFF. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

the style of the 1960s, Kusama sports high heels, long black hair, and polka dots covering her bare flesh: all surfaces are activated in a screen of decoration, merging the body of the artist with her created universe of phallic, patterned hyperbole. I am especially interested in the role such images, as performative documents, play in *enacting* the artist as a public figure.<sup>13</sup> As Kris Kuramitsu has argued, this photograph “is only one of many that highlight [Kusama’s] naked, Asian female body. These photographs, and the persona that cultivated/was cultivated by them is what engenders the usual terse assessment [in art discourse] of Kusama as ‘problematic.’”<sup>14</sup> Or, in the words of J. F. Rodenbeck, “Priestess of Nudity, Psychotic Artist, the Polka-Dot Girl, Obsessional Artist, publicity hound: in the 1960s Yayoi Kusama was the target of a number of

epithets, some of them self-inflicted, all of them a part of an exhibitionist’s notoriety.”<sup>15</sup>

Working in New York at the time she was producing these performative images, Kusama played on what Kuramitsu calls her “doubled otherness”<sup>16</sup> vis-à-vis American culture: she is racially *and* sexually at odds with the normative conception of the artist as Euro-American male. Rather than veil her differences (which are seemingly irrefutably confirmed by the visible evidence of her “exotic” body), Kusama exacerbates them through self-display in a series of such flamboyant images. In this posed collage, she performs herself in a private setting for the public-making eye of the camera. But Kusama enacts her “exoticism” on a public register as well, executing other performances (including at least seventy-five performative events between 1967 and 1970)<sup>17</sup> and posing in more public situations. In a portrait of artists participating in the 1965 exhibition of the Nul group at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam,<sup>18</sup> Kusama sticks out like a sore thumb: there she stands, front and center—among a predictably bourgeois group of white, almost all male Euro-Americans (dressed in suits)—her tiny body swathed in a glowing white silk kimono.<sup>19</sup>

The pictures of Kusama are inextricably embedded in the discursive structure of ideas informing her work; viewers are forced to engage deeply with this particularized subject who so dramatically stages her work and/as her self. Too, in the collage images of Kusama such as the one discussed here, her body/self is literally absorbed into her work and indeed *becomes* it: “I was always standing at the center of the obsession over the passionate accretion and repetition inside me.”<sup>20</sup> As Schneemann did in *Interior Scroll*, Kusama enacts her body in a reversibility of inside and out, the work of art/the environment is an enactment of Kusama and vice versa.

In her large-scale mirrored installations, such as *Kusama’s Peep Show—Endless Love Show* (at Castellane Gallery in 1966), she forced the viewer into a similarly reversible relation.<sup>21</sup> Here, while listening to a loop of Beatles music, visitors poked their heads through openings in the wall of a closed, mirrored hexagonal room to see infinitely regressing reflections of themselves, illuminated by flashes of colored lights. A vertiginous sense of dislocation rocketed the visitor out of the complacent position of voyeurism conventionally staged and assumed vis-à-vis works of art. With such works, the spectator is locked into an exaggerated self-reflexivity that implies an erotic bond (an “endless love show”)—one that is both completely narcissistic and necessarily complicitous with Kusama’s (here absent) body/self.

In all of these works, Kusama refuses the artificial division—that which enables a “disinterested” criticism to take place—conventionally staged between

viewer and work of art. Folding the work of art into the artist (and vice versa), Kusama also sucks the viewer into a vortex of erotically charged repulsions and attractions (identifications) that ultimately intertwine viewer, artwork, and artist (as artwork). Kusama constructs obsessional scenes both to stage her particularized body/self and to express it externally—to spread it over the surrounding environment while simultaneously incorporating the environment into her own psychically enacted body/self: everything becomes a kind of extended flesh. But these scenes never fully contain Kusama, who performs herself well beyond the controlling mechanisms of art historical and critical analysis (hence her disturbance to the critical discourse, noted by Kuramitsu).

Am I an object? Am I a subject? Kusama performed these questions from the 1960s on, enacting herself ambivalently as celebrity (object of our desires) or artist (master of intentionality). Either way, Kusama opens herself (performatively) to the projections and desires of her audience (American, Japanese, European), enacting herself *as representation* (pace Warhol, she's on to the role of documentation in securing the position of the artist as beloved object of the art world's desires).<sup>22</sup> Kusama's gesture, which plays specifically with the intertwined tropes of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity (as well as those of artistic subjectivity in general), comprehends the particular resonance of such performative posing for women and those outside the Western tradition, subjects whose nonnormative bodies/selves would necessarily rupture embedded conceptions of artistic genius. It is Kusama's exaggeration of her otherness that seals this disturbance, building it into the effect of the work rather than veiling it to promote a formalist reading.<sup>23</sup>

Kusama's artistic strategies were inextricable from her identity politics and social politics; her work makes explicit the connections I trace throughout this book among social and identity politics and the deep interrogation of subjectivity characterizing this period. Kusama activated her always already marginalized body/self in a classically 1960s protest against bourgeois prudery, imperialism, racism, and sexism. Many of her public events were posed as demonstrations against the Vietnam War, and her strategic use of self-exposure was intimately linked to the openness urged by the sexual revolution: like Schneemann's body art works, Kusama's are both enactments and effects of the sexual revolution and antiwar movements as well as the women's movement.<sup>24</sup>

In its radical narcissism, where the distances between artist and artwork, artist and spectator are definitively collapsed, such body art practices profoundly challenge the reigning ideology of disinterested criticism. As I have already suggested, when the body in performance is female, obviously queer, nonwhite, exaggeratedly (hyper)masculine, or otherwise enacted against the grain

of the normative subject (the straight, white, upper-middle-class, male subject coincident with the category "artist" in Western culture), the hidden logic of exclusionism underlying modernist art history and criticism is exposed. The more exaggeratedly narcissistic and particularized this body is—that is, the more it surfaces and even exaggerates its nonuniversality in relation to its audience—the more strongly it has the potential to challenge the assumption of normativity built into modernist models of artistic evaluation, which rely on the body of the artist (embodied as male) yet veil this body to ensure the claim that the artist/genius "transcends" his body through creative production. As I will explore at greater length in chapter four, the narcissistic, particularized body both unveils the artist (as body/self necessarily implicated in the work of art as a situated, social act), turning her inside out, and strategically insists upon the contingency of this body/self on that of the viewer or interpreter of the work. As the artist is marked as contingent, so is the interpreter, who can no longer (without certain contradictions being put into play) claim disinterestedness in relation to this work of art (in this case, the body/self of the artist).

#### BODILY ENGAGEMENTS: A THEORETICAL PROJECT THAT IS DEEPLY HISTORICAL

It is important to emphasize that I argue that such body art works have the *potential* to achieve certain radically dislocating effects: it is one of the goals of this book to enact just the kind of engagement that I argue these works open up. That is, if I were to insist that Schneemann's and Kusama's practices *necessarily* destroy the structures of interpretation in art history and criticism, I would be denying the very notion of interpretation-as-exchange that this book attempts to argue through body art. I would also be hard put to explain why these structures are still so firmly in place so much of the time if this work I discuss has really been so destructive of them; and, finally, I would be catching myself in a fundamental hermeneutic dilemma, since I would be defining works that supposedly will not allow definitive interpretation (and suggesting that I am somehow "outside of" the structures and assumptions of conventional interpretive models). To this end, all of the projects highlighted in this book are described and interpreted through a model of *engagement* that allows for and indeed frequently foregrounds my own investment in reading them in particular ways. These are strategic readings meant to highlight specific aspects of postmodern subjectivity and specific art historical questions. At the same time, I have tried throughout to stay close enough to the documentation and other critical discourses that have framed the works historically so as not to provide readings that are pure fantasy.<sup>25</sup> I am fully responsible for these readings, which are highly invested and meant to be provocative.

Again, I stress the notion of *engagement* and *exchange*: I engage with what I experience as these works in relation to contemporaneous theories of subjectivity and aesthetics; I consider my readings to be a dialogue with the bodies/selves articulated in these important practices. This project thus attempts to enact the “paradoxical performative” that art historian Thierry de Duve has located as constitutive of postmodernism: it proclaims body art projects as radically postmodern even as it makes them so—it *performs* their postmodernism.<sup>26</sup> My readings themselves are offered as “performances,” as suggestive, open-ended engagements rather than definitive answers to the question of what and how body art means in contemporary culture.<sup>27</sup> But a fundamental dilemma is built into this project: while I argue that these works in various ways challenge the framing apparatuses of modernist criticism and art history and reconceive the subject, in so doing I inevitably reframe them through my own invested point of view and refix the works as having particular meanings. I have generally tried to avoid sinking too deeply into the mire of this contradiction by reading the works as enactments of subjects (bodies/selves) whose meanings are contingent on the *process* of enactment rather than attributing motives to the authors as individuals or origins of consciousness and intentionality; in the cases where I know the artists personally, this is inevitably a fraught enterprise and I simply try to surface the particularities of these relationships.<sup>28</sup>

It should be clear by now that this book is not a history of performance or body art but a study, through the intensive exploration of particular practices, of the ways in which body art radically negotiates the structures of interpretation that inform our understanding of visual culture. It is also an exploration of body art as an instantiation of the profound shift in the conception and experience of subjectivity that has occurred over the past three decades. Schneemann’s and Kusama’s performative self-exposures, their enactments of themselves as both author and object, dramatize this shift: these projects insistently pose the subject as *intersubjective* (contingent on the other) rather than complete within itself (the Cartesian subject who is centered and fully self-knowing in his cognition). These projects make clear that the Cartesian “I think therefore I am,” the logic powering modernist art theory and practice wherein the body (privileged as male) is transcended through pure thought or creation, is no longer viable in the decentering regime of postmodernism (if it ever was).

The issues addressed in this book, then, are deeply theorized in terms of models of subjectivity, artistic meaning, and identity formation, but they are also implicitly and explicitly historical. I suggest—reading through body art—that the very poststructuralist model of the subject as decentered is itself a

broadly historical idea, corresponding to the complex interrelationships and transformations in recent intellectual history as well as shifts within the political, social, and cultural arenas. Frustrated with what I view as an increasingly narrow, instrumental conception of postmodernism in the visual arts (as characterized by formal techniques such as montage and allegory or avant-gardist strategies such as Brechtian distancing), as well as by the frequent use of reductive Lacanian models that reduce art reception to purely visual models, I turn strategically to body art and to a phenomenologically inflected feminist poststructuralism (particularly the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as read through Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and others) to *re-embody* the subjects of making and viewing art.<sup>29</sup> Informed and driven by the vicissitudes of body art itself, I attempt to provide a more complex model for understanding postmodernism.

In this book, theory and practice are viewed as mutually constitutive. Thus, I do not view poststructuralism (or even economic or social shifts or body art itself) as having “caused” the death of the centered subject; nor do I view any of these as, strictly speaking, effects of the decentering of the Cartesian subject. I view poststructuralism (in its feminist and phenomenological dimensions) as one of the most dynamic modes of the speaking of a new experience of subjectivity, as the philosophical version of what body art enacts in the realm of culture. While body art is surely not the *only* type of cultural production to instantiate the dispersal of the modernist subject (a fair amount of the discourse surrounding feminist art has pivoted around claims that various practices exemplify this dispersal), I argue here that it is one of the most dramatic and thorough to do so *if it is engaged with on the deepest levels of its production*, precisely because of its entailment of the subject as embodied in all of its particularities of race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on.

At the same time, social, political, and cultural context is crucial to this analysis of what body art (and, for that matter, poststructuralism, feminism, and theories of postmodernism) can tell us about our current experience of subjectivity. I address throughout the book issues such as the suppressed crisis of masculinity in the 1950s and the rise of activism in the 1950s and into the 1960s and 1970s (including the rights movements, which began insistently to foreground the particularization of subjectivity that the most powerful body art projects address); the obvious impact of the Vietnam War and its attendant protests on, especially, Americans’ conception of their relationship to the state is a subtextual but also crucial context in the shift to an unveiled, activist artistic body, as are the free love and drug cultures so active during this period (they promoted an atmosphere of experimentation to which body art is intimately



connected).<sup>30</sup> The multinationalization of economics and the proliferation of increasingly advanced technologies of representation and communication are discussed as deeply implicated in articulations of the body in more recent work.

It is important to stress again that neither poststructuralism nor these other social events and processes are to be viewed as “causes” of body art, nor is body art seen to be their motivating “origin.” Rather, body art—like these other elements—is examined as an *instantiation* (both an articulation and a reflection) of profound shifts in the notion and experience of subjectivity over the past thirty to forty years. The key question I address through my engagement with body art is the question that initially motivated my interest in this topic: why, climaxing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, did the implicitly masculine, modernist artistic subject (who had been largely veiled under the rhetoric of “disinterestedness” in art criticism and art history) come increasingly into question through a performative conception of the artist/self as in process, commodifiable *as* art object (*viz.* Kusama), and intersubjectively related to the audience/interpreter?<sup>31</sup>

## BODY ART VERSUS PERFORMANCE

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a disassociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration.

—MICHEL FOUCAULT<sup>32</sup>

The body is at once the most solid, the most elusive, illusory, concrete, metaphorical, ever present and ever distant thing—a site, an instrument, an environment, a singularity and a multiplicity. The body is the most proximate and immediate feature of my social self, a necessary feature of my social location and of my personal enselfment and at the same time an aspect of my personal alienation in the natural environment.

—BRYAN TURNER<sup>33</sup>

[T]he body itself . . . is both biological and psychical. This understanding of the body as a hinge or threshold between nature and culture makes the limitations of a genetic, or purely anatomical or physiological, account of bodies explicit.

—ELIZABETH GROSZ<sup>34</sup>

These evocative descriptions of the body open up the problematic of body art and lead me to clarify why I use the term “body art” rather than the perhaps more obvious “performance art” rubric. I use “body art” rather than “perfor-

mance art” for a number of interrelated reasons. First, linking back to the descriptions of the body I have mentioned (all exemplary of a poststructuralist theory of embodied subjectivity), I want to highlight the position of the *body*—as locus of a “disintegrated” or dispersed “self,” as elusive marker of the subject’s place in the social, as “hinge” between nature and culture—in the practices I address here. The term “body art” thus emphasizes the implication of the body (or what I call the “body/self,” with all of its apparent racial, sexual, gender, class, and other apparent or unconscious identifications) in the work. It also highlights both the artistic and the philosophical aspects of this project— aspects that, I am arguing, are deeply intertwined and mutually implicated in the profound shift in the conception of subjectivity that I am “performing” here (through body art) as constitutive of the condition of postmodernism.

Second, while I tangentially make note of the broader history of “performance” in the visual arts, I focus in this book on a particular moment in which the body emerged into the visual artwork in a particularly charged and dramatically sexualized and gendered way. The work that emerged during this period—from the 1960s to the mid 1970s—was labeled “body art” or “body-works” by several contemporaneous writers who wished to differentiate it from a conception of “performance art” that was at once broader (in that it reached back to dada and encompassed any kind of theatricalized production on the part of a visual artist) and narrower (in that it implied that a performance must actually take place in front of an audience, most often in an explicitly theatrical, proscenium-based setting).<sup>35</sup> I am interested in work that may or may not initially have taken place in front of an audience: in works—such as those by Kusama, Schneemann, Vito Acconci, Yves Klein, and Hannah Wilke—that *take place through an enactment of the artist’s body*, whether it be in a “performance” setting or in the relative privacy of the studio, *that is then documented such that it can be experienced subsequently through photography, film, video, and/or text*. In this way, I see body art as a complex extension of portraiture in general (as will emerge in chapter 2) as well as an obvious negotiation of the trajectory of performance art that emerged from the early-twentieth-century European avant-gardes.<sup>36</sup>

Performance art has typically been defined as motivated by a “redemptive belief in the capacity of art to transform human life.” as a vehicle for social change, and as a radical merging of life and art.<sup>37</sup> As I explore it here, body art is both far more and far less than this. Articulated by artists such as Schneemann, Kusama, Vito Acconci, and Hannah Wilke, body art does not strive toward a utopian redemption but, rather, places the body/self within the realm of the aesthetic *as a political domain* (articulated through the aestheticization of the particularized body/self, itself embedded in the social) and so unveils the

hidden body that secured the authority of modernism.<sup>38</sup> Again, in this regard body art is *not* “inherently” critical, as many have claimed,<sup>39</sup> nor (as we will see others have argued) inherently reactionary, but rather—in its opening up of the interpretive relation and its active solicitation of spectatorial desire—provides the *possibility* for radical engagements that can transform the way we think about meaning and subjectivity (both the artist’s and our own). In its activation of intersubjectivity, body art, in fact, demonstrates that meaning is an exchange and points to the impossibility of any practice being “inherently” positive or negative in cultural value.

As François Pluchart melodramatically warned in 1974, body art “is not a new artistic recipe meant to be recorded tranquilly in an history of art which is bankrupt,”<sup>40</sup> particularly in its shifting of the very parameters by which this history is constructed. Body art—which projects the body of the artist into the work as a particularized subject, revising, as Ira Licht argued in 1975, “the relationship among artist, subject and public”—encourages us to rethink the very methods by which we fabricate histories of art and to rethink the ways in which we understand meaning to take place.<sup>41</sup> Thus, we will see that it is *body art* rather than performance art that specifically opens out the closed circuits by which the art object was determined to have significance within modernist criticism. Body art proposes the art “object” as a site where reception and production come together: a site of intersubjectivity.<sup>42</sup> Body art confirms what phenomenology and psychoanalysis have taught us: that the subject “means” always in relationship to others and the locus of identity is always elsewhere.

As I view body art here, it does two potentially radical things. By surfacing the desires informing interpretation, it encourages a “performance of theory” that aims “to replot the relation between perceiver and object, between self and other,”<sup>43</sup> illustrating what is at stake in such claims by encouraging acts of interpretation that themselves are performative. And it opens out subjectivity *as* performative, contingent, and always particularized rather than universal, implicating the interpreter (with all of her investedness, biases, and desires) within the meanings and cultural values ascribed to the work of art.

## THE BODY OF THE TEXT

The chapter following this introduction seeks to provide a firm historical and theoretical basis for the book by aligning body art with the philosophical (phenomenological, feminist, poststructuralist) theories of subjectivity that it both amplifies and takes radical value from. Following an examination of the tendency to downplay or ignore body art in art discourse from the mid 1970s onward, which locates the politics of this omission in relation to the fixation on

avant-gardist theories of cultural production and narrowly visual models of the “gaze.” I trace a particular intellectual history in the United States and France from the 1950s onward. I foreground Ana Mendieta’s performative artistic project as exemplary of the problematics of presence and absence brought to the surface by body art, exploring the ontology of body art projects and addressing the specificity of their multiplicitous existence as “live” performances, photographic, textual, film, and/or video documentations.

This history highlights the repressed phenomenological dimension of the French poststructuralist theories that have so deeply informed dominant discourses about postmodern art, stressing the *embodiment* of subjectivity over what has come to be a reigning model of pure visuality. In order to understand the way in which body art (which I discuss largely as a U.S. and European phenomenon, foregrounding U.S. practices) inflects and is inflected by the poststructuralist conception of the dispersed or decentered subject, I thus trace an intellectual history through the phenomenological arguments of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, linking his radical critique of the Cartesian subject to Simone de Beauvoir’s specifically *feminist* rethinking of the existentialist and phenomenological theory of the social subject in *The Second Sex* and then to phenomenologically inflected, feminist poststructuralist models of performative subjectivity.

Through this renewed attention to a phenomenology updated through poststructuralist and feminist thought, I set the stage for a new understanding of the ways in which body art, in particular, can radicalize our understanding of postmodernism as not only a new mode of visual production but also a dramatically revised paradigm of the subject and of how meaning and value are determined in relation to works of art. The chapter thus suggests that engaging deeply with the contradictions and insights regarding the subjects of making and viewing put into play in body art projects can develop a new (implicitly feminist) reading praxis that is suspicious of the assumptions and privileges embedded in and veiled by conventional, masculinist models of artistic interpretation.<sup>44</sup>

Chapter 2 is an extended exploration of Jackson Pollock, who has functioned in art discourse as a kind of hinge or pivot between the modernist genius and the performative subject of postmodernism. Pollock (as perceived and interpreted through the well-known series of photographs of him painting by Hans Namuth and others taken around 1950) is a figure who was first, in de Duve’s paradoxical performative, *spoken* as the quintessential modernist genius: Pollock’s body is veiled and his transcendence averred by enthusiastic supporters such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, whose image of Pollock as “action painter” celebrates his existentialist triumph over the mute

canvas.<sup>45</sup> Pollock is then *rearticulated* as a crucial origin for the performative artistic subject of postmodernism by younger artists such as Allan Kaprow (who, in his formative 1958 essay "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," reworks Rosenberg's action painting existentialist Pollock into an aggressively performative one).<sup>46</sup> Pollock is thus engaged with and opened out as a *performative author function* (Michel Foucault's useful term for the "plurality of egos" put into play by the cultural text).<sup>47</sup> This focus on Pollock clarifies my approach to the "author" (the body/self) of the body art project as a "function" of my engagement with its multivalent "texts" (photographs, "live" performance, etc.). Stressing its performative dimension, I call this particular author function the "Pollockian performative."

Examining at some length the historical contexts for what I term Pollock's "equivocal masculinity" (with Pollock enacted both as a quintessential centered subject of *modernism* and then as feminized/homosexualized and *postmodern* subject/object of spectatorial engagement in his theatrical photographic display), I address 1950s U.S. culture and its celebration of the "individual" (which itself relates to the Cartesian subject addressed by French theory). The chapter thus reviews the critical reception of Pollock through a feminist and phenomenological grid that emphasizes the transferential, intersubjective dimension of how, on the one hand, an artist and her or his works come to mean in relation to her or his publicly articulated body/self; and, on the other, of how performativity is not simply "adopted" by a younger generation of artists spontaneously in the 1960s but, rather, was always already a part of modernism (again, this relates to the paradoxical performative that appropriates and exaggeratedly rearticulates particular modernist practices as postmodern).

Chapters 3 and 4 take on specific case studies in order to delve more deeply into the dramatic shifts I identify in relation to body art. Chapter 3 deals with Vito Acconci's body art practices from the late 1960s and early 1970s, which I read in relation to the then still powerful Pollock myth. I view Acconci's performance and video-oriented works through poststructuralist, feminist, and phenomenologically oriented theories of subjectivity to argue that he both stages the heterosexual masculine norm of subjectivity and, by overtly theatricalizing himself in relation to his own eroticism and the desires of female subjects (often within the pieces themselves), potentially destabilizes its link to cultural privilege. As I engage with his work, Acconci opens himself to the other and makes his heterosexual, white masculinity extremely vulnerable to the penetratory gazes of spectatorial desire (both female and male).

In relation to Hannah Wilke's work I explore at length the way in which the female subject who displays her body/self is always forced to negotiate what

Craig Owens astutely termed the "rhetoric of the pose."<sup>48</sup> Wilke's work, which insistently articulates what I call the radical narcissism typical of much feminist body art from this period (already noted in relation to Kusama), flamboyantly objectifies the (her) female body but also simultaneously performs her body/self as subject. At the same time, a usually ignored dimension of Wilke's work traces the intersection between her woundedness as an objectified female in Western culture and her "scars" from the anti-Semitic prejudices that externally condition her relationship, as a Jewish female, to dominant Western culture. In this way, I argue that Wilke's radical narcissism (which perverts the simplistic conception of self-other relations by pulling the viewer/other inexorably into Wilke's interpersonal structures of viewing and self-display) also politicizes white feminism by particularizing her femininity in terms of her ethnicity.

The final chapter explores the return to the body in recent work after a decade or so of antipathy in art discourse toward any artwork negotiating, representing, or otherwise addressing subjectivity in terms of the body. Again, I use several practices as case studies to explore in some depth the ways in which recent body-oriented practices articulate even more aggressively the dispersal of the subject traced in poststructuralism and earlier body art. The performative installation work of Maureen Connor and the large-scale techno-performances and CD-ROM project of Laurie Anderson facilitate a discussion of what I call the "technophenomenological body," allowing a preliminary reworking of phenomenology through these technologically based rearticulations of the gender-particularized subject. Lyle Ashton Harris's dramatic extension of a feminizing narcissism and Laura Aguilar's highly charged articulation of a personalized and particularized subjectivity—both enacted through the technological gaze of the photographic image—exemplify the ways in which the effects of new technologies and the transformations wrought by 1970s identity politics have informed a powerful new approach to identities and explorations of subjectivity. Thus Aguilar uses her body in her work, mediated through technologies of representation, to enact a subject that is simultaneously particularized (Latina, lesbian, artist, dyslexic) and dispersed (engaging with the audience, she defines the viewer as the "self" that has designated her elusive "otherness"). Aguilar enacts just the dynamic of intersubjectivity that I argue is constitutive of the most powerful effects of recent body-oriented practices: she solicits her viewers to *make us responsible* for the effects of our own perceptions and interpretive judgments.

Finally, I examine the work of artists Orlan and Bob Flanagan, both of whom (for very different reasons) have had their bodies mutilated, turning them *inside out* and thus deeply interrogating what it means to be a body/self in

this hypercommodified end of the millennium. Orlan's now notorious facial surgeries, choreographed and publicly documented in performances that aim to transform her either into an amalgam of ideal feminine features from art historical images or into a grotesque parody of "perfect" femininity, and Flanagan's humorous approach to having his body parts lacerated in sadomasochistic performances bring to the surface basic taboos informing our ongoing desire to *transcend* our bodies through fantasy, technology, or (in Cartesian terms) "pure" thought. Their projects, I argue, also end up reinforcing the inexorability of our embodiment, of the body as "meat," and thus reconfirm the importance of maintaining an embodied theory of postmodern art and subjectivity that accounts for rather than suppresses the contradictions, difficulties, and traumatic engagements involved in our relationship to the world.

Often using high tech modes of presentation—such as digitized imagery projected in installation formats—artists in the 1990s construct fragmented, dispersed, and explicitly particularized subjects that encourage the spectator's committed engagement. These works are not only insistently intersubjective, they are also what Vivian Sobchack terms *interobjective*: they clarify the subject's interrelatedness with the world (of others as well as things).<sup>49</sup> Such an insistence on the interrelatedness of subjects and objects, our inevitable simultaneous existence as subject and object, and our interdependence with our environments asserts the necessary responsibility of the multiplicitous and dispersed, but fully embodied, social and political subject.

Thus, while I am arguing that postmodernism is, indeed, characterized by the splitting, decentering, dislocation, or fragmentation of the self that is either celebrated or lamented in so much contemporary cultural theory, this dispersal is played out here, through recent body-oriented practices, as having potentially radically progressive and inevitably political effects. It is in these recent projects, which extend the intersubjective dimension of 1960s and 1970s body art as well as exaggerating the dispersal and particularization of the subject enacted in poststructuralist theory, that the postmodern "cyborg" subject so popular in much recent technothory is most dramatically enacted in all of its complexities. The profound shifts in our experience of ourselves and the world occasioned by new bio-, communications, and travel technologies are both performed by and reflected in recent body-oriented practices, which can thus tell us a great deal about the philosophical and political implications of this rethought paradigm of the condition of postmodernism.

Finally, then, this book *uses* body art (including here the body-oriented practices of recent years) to move beyond the rather reified conceptions of postmodernism dominating contemporary art discourse. When it is engaged

with through a phenomenologically informed feminism, body art can open up the entire domain of art interpretation, encouraging the development of a new reading praxis that acknowledges the masculinist, racist, homophobic, and classist assumptions underlying the disciplines of art history and criticism and their rhetoric of "disinterested" aesthetic judgment and historical narration. Body art practices surface our embeddedness in the determinations of meaning and value. Body art practices *perform* the gradual but dramatic shift that has occurred over this past half century in the very articulation of the subject within the social domain.

POSTMODERNISM, SUBJECTIVITY, AND  
BODY ART: A TRAJECTORY

Body art and performance art have been defined as constitutive of postmodernism because of their fundamental subversion of modernism's assumption that fixed meanings are determinable through the formal structure of the work alone.<sup>1</sup> Thus, M. Bénamou states unequivocally that "performance [is] the unifying mode of the postmodern," a claim seconded by Johannes Birringer and numerous others.<sup>2</sup> And yet in 1980s art discourse, while performance art in its more theatrical manifestations continued to generate intellectual support and broad audiences (often outside the parameters of the art world), body art was increasingly frequently dismissed by those interested in debunking or overthrowing modernism because of its supposedly reactionary desire to ensure artistic presence. By the late 1970s, artists had generally moved away from the relatively modest, raw staging of themselves in body art projects.<sup>3</sup> Body art mutated into either performative photographic work, such as the "film stills" of Cindy Sherman, or large-scale, ambitious, and at least seminarrative performance art practices such as Laurie Anderson's theatrical, proscenium-bound *United States*.

Understanding this shift away from the body enables a deeper contextualization of body art projects from the earlier period, projects that were largely dismissed, ignored, or downplayed in subsequent art critical discourses. In the 1980s, body art as conceived in the late 1960s and early 1970s was increasingly perceived and spoken of as modernist in the conservative, Greenbergian sense—especially by art historians and critics from England and the

United States oriented toward a Marxian, feminist, and/or poststructuralist critical theory.<sup>4</sup> A look at one particular example of the negative evaluation of body art during this period will highlight my strategic motivation in pulling body art out of this state of critical oblivion and will set the stage for a deeper examination of the philosophical issues I believe to be at stake in such negative determinations.

#### FEMINIST CONDEMNATIONS OF BODY ART AS NAIVE ESSENTIALISM

In her important 1981 essay "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism," the feminist artist and theorist Mary Kelly articulated a harsh critique of 1970s "performance work" as theoretically unsophisticated and idealist:

In performance work it is no longer a question of investing the object with an artistic presence: the artist is present and creative subjectivity is given as the effect of an essential self-possession. . . . [According to supportive critics] . . . the authenticity of body art cannot be inscribed at the level of a particular morphology; it must be chiselled into the world in accordance with direct experience. The discourse of the body in art is more than a repetition of the eschatological voices of abstract expressionism; the actual experience of the body fulfills the prophecy of the painted mark.<sup>5</sup>

Kelly's argument, part of her extended and compelling critique of Greenbergian, formalist modernism, marks the decisive shift in 1980s U.S. and British art critical discourse away from an appreciation of the overt enactment of the artist's body. Here and elsewhere, Kelly has been unbending in her condemnation of artists (especially women) who deploy their own bodies in their works.<sup>6</sup> Working at the time in the developing context of British poststructuralist feminist discourse in the visual arts and film (including the work of well-known figures such as Laura Mulvey and Griselda Pollock), Kelly focused her critique primarily on the rather crudely metaphysical statements of 1970s supporters and practitioners of body art (such as Lea Vergine and Ulrike Rosenbach),<sup>7</sup> which she then criticizes for their idealism. Her criticism is convincing (especially when one understands the importance of this argument in its particular context at the time), but in dismissing wholesale the possibility of an embodied visual practice, I believe that Kelly's polemic is far too limiting in understanding the ways in which such work can radically engage the viewer toward ends not incompatible with those Kelly calls for in her own work and writing (activating the viewer, positing sexual and gender identities as fully contingent and intersectional with class, race, and other aspects of identity, etc.).

In the essay Kelly, whose writing and artwork have come to be paradigmatic of what we might call "antiessentialist" feminist postmodernism as it developed in England in the 1970s and 1980s, demotes body art to the provinces of a naive essentialism—an untheorized belief in the ontology of presence and in an anatomical basis for gender. Again, Kelly's criticism of body art, which she aligns with her critique of Greenbergian modernism, was highly strategic at the time in that it served well the purpose of legitimating a rigorous antiessentialist feminist art discourse and practice. While acknowledging the importance of Kelly's writings and art practice to the development of a critical feminist practice in the 1970s and 1980s, it is useful at this point to open up the prescriptive dimension of Kelly's critique, which implies that *any* artwork including the artist's body is *necessarily* reactionary.

As I have suggested, Kelly's antipathy to body art is typical of 1980s art discourse in the United States and England, both feminist and otherwise, which tended to be motivated in its judgments by suspicion of the embodied and desiring subject—in Marxian terms, especially the spectatorial subject who could easily be manipulated by the seductive effects of commodity culture. Informed by an avant-gardist and Marxian conception of the political importance of building cultural resistance to capitalist structures and drawing on a particular interpretation of Jacques Lacan's model of subjectivity evacuated of its phenomenological dimension, this discourse turned definitively away from the body.<sup>8</sup> Employing a psychoanalytic, castration-oriented model of subjectivity pivoting around the registering of sexual difference in terms of the (visual) presence or absence of the penis/phallus as determined through the (male) "gaze," proponents of this art critical approach evaluated art practices in terms of their putative ideological effects on the spectatorial subject, in turn conceived virtually entirely as a function of vision. The phenomenologically experienced dimension of the corporeal (the subject as desiring and intersubjectively articulated body/self) slipped away in this emphasis on the body as image, whose visual effects are experienced on a psychic register.

While it is obviously tempting to focus exclusively on the visual in addressing a mode of expression (the "visual" arts) that works to produce images and objects that can be seen, I would like to suggest, precisely as I believe body art is teaching us, that such a focus is not enough. Such a focus can miss the point of practices that, as I read them, beg us to reconsider the artistic and broader cultural dimensions in relation to open-ended but also definitively *embodied* intersubjective relations. Body art asks us to interrogate not only the politics of visibility but also the very structures through which the subject takes place through the inevitably eroticized exchange of interpretation.<sup>9</sup> While 1980s

art critical discourse (including Kelly's article) viewed body art as reactionary and metaphysical, as reinforcing rather than challenging problematically exclusionary aspects of modernism, I insist here that this interrogation on the part of body art is deeply political when it is engaged with through a phenomenological and feminist model. Body art, unlike the static, almost inevitably commodified works produced in response to Lacanian-oriented theories of the oedipal subject, more effectively gets at the *structures* of interpretation, encouraging us to see that all political and aesthetic judgments are invested and particular rather than definitive or objective.

The feminist articulation of this turn away from the corporeal was particularly vehement about the absolute need to remove the *female* body from representation; *any* presentation or representation of the female body was seen as *necessarily* participating in the phallogocentric dynamic of fetishism, whereby the female body can only be seen (and, again, the regime is visual in these arguments) as "lacking" in relation to the mythical plenitude represented by the phallus. Feminist artists, then, simply must avoid any signification of the female body (since it is always already an object). In a 1982 interview, Kelly asserted that

when the image of the woman is used in a work of art, that is, when her body or person is given as a signifier, it becomes extremely problematic. Most women artists who have presented themselves in some way, visibly, in the work have been unable to find the kind of distancing devices which would cut across the predominant representations of woman as object of the look, or question the notion of femininity as a pre-given entity.<sup>10</sup>

The negative attitude toward body art on the part of many feminists, then, seems to have stemmed from a well-founded concern about the ease with which women's bodies have, in both commercial and "artistic" domains, been constructed as object of the gaze.<sup>11</sup> It also often stemmed in part from an anxiety about the dangers of the artist (especially the female artist) exposing her own embodiment (her own supposed "lack") and thus compromising her authority.<sup>12</sup>

The "distancing devices" Kelly invokes here relate to the Marxian dimension of the critical model dominant in 1980s art discourse. Bertolt Brecht's theory of *distanciation*, an avant-gardist theory of radical practice, was adopted and developed by British feminists (including Kelly, a U.S. transplant at the time) as a model: the radical feminist practice must aim to displace and provoke the spectator, making her or him aware of the process of experiencing the text and precluding the spectator's identification with the illusionary and ideological functions of representation.<sup>13</sup> The rejection of 1970s body art in general ex-

tends in part from this Marxian distrust of art forms that elicit pleasure, that seduce rather than repel viewers, engaging them in the ideological field of the work of art as passive consumers rather than active critics.<sup>14</sup> As Griselda Pollock, a British feminist art historian who has strongly articulated this view within feminism (and who has been a longtime supporter of Kelly's visual artwork), argues, distanciation is a crucial strategy for feminist artists because of its "erosion of the dominant structures of cultural consumption which . . . are classically fetishistic. . . . Brechtian distanciation aims to make the spectator an agent in cultural production and activate him or her as an agent in the world."<sup>15</sup> This is a feminist strategy for Pollock because the objectifying regime of consumerist capitalism is consummately patriarchal. Work that does not distanciate, then, is not effectively (or properly?) feminist.

My discomfort with arguments such as Pollock's and Kelly's stems from what I view as their insistence on one mode of production that will supposedly have effects in the viewer that can be determined in advance through an analysis of the formal structures and historical context of the work. I believe such readings, which polemically aim to produce a critical mode of cultural engagement as constitutive of a radical postmodern (or in this case radical feminist) practice, fundamentally foreclose on the most dramatic and transformative potential of such engagement precisely by assuming that spectators will necessarily react or participate in a predictable way. In this way, body art projects and body-oriented feminist art are simply rejected as necessarily reiterating the structures of fetishism; no possibility is allowed for the myriad disruptions that, in fact, these practices *have* made in the modernist fabric that Pollock and Kelly want so to dismantle.<sup>16</sup> The wholesale dismissal of body art practices (or, in Pollock's case, non-"Brechtian" practices) in 1980s art discourse fails to account for the strategic force of body art projects in the late 1960s and 1970s and for the contingency of all meanings and values of cultural products on the social and political contexts of reception as well as on the particular desires of the interpreter in question (here, Pollock and Kelly themselves).

What I hope to suggest in this book as a whole is that such sweeping dismissals of a particular kind of practice (here, the performance of the artist's body in or as the work of art), while certainly strategically articulated at the time, can be seen with hindsight as reiterating one of the most damaging impulses of modernist criticism: the definitive evaluation of works of art in terms of an externally conceived, hierarchical system of value (in this case, replacing Greenberg's aesthetic categories with Brechtian ones). It is probably inevitable that we will tend to evaluate practices according to some arbitrary system of value, for art history and criticism are structured by this impulse. But, if we are

to extend the insights of poststructuralist philosophy into art discourse in a convincing way, we must at least surface our own implication in such determinations. Body art, I believe, encourages such a surfacing in its dispersal and particularization of the subject (as body/self) and opening of the art-making and -viewing processes to intersubjective desires and identifications.<sup>17</sup>

The issue of interpretive engagement can be brought to the fore through attention to works such as Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* series (1973–1980) or, in fact, Kelly's own *Corpus* installation (part of the *Interim* project first installed in 1990), which produces certain effects that I interpret here (certainly against the grain of Kelly's proposed reading) as consistent with body art.<sup>18</sup> Born and raised in Cuba and brought to the United States at the age of thirteen, Ana Mendieta involved her body in ritual acts (related to Santería rites she first came into contact with as a child and to the Taíno Indians' goddess culture) that were documented by photographs in which she increasingly absented her body altogether.<sup>19</sup> These luminous, eerie photographs present the impression of her body on the landscape, often in vulvar formations reminiscent of stone-age "goddess" sculptures. In the later photographs especially, with the body absent, Mendieta is marked as mere trace rather than idealist or essentialized, fully feminine self.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, Mendieta herself wrapped these pieces in an elegant shroud of essentializing language:

I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). . . . I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth . . . I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body. This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs . . . [in] an omnipresent female force, the after-image of being encompassed within the womb, in a manifestation of my thirst for being.<sup>21</sup>

While the *Siluetas* project is thus framed by the artist in terms of bodily performance of rituals and spiritual ideas concerning women's relationship to "mother earth," I insist in engaging the *Siluetas* pieces for their other aspects, deeply disruptive to modernism's desire for presence and transparency of meaning, which Kelly's wholesale condemnation of body art would overlook.

Kelly's model would position Mendieta's assertion of her body, and her verbal reiteration of an essential link between her female body as maternal and



ANA MENDIETA. UNTITLED FROM *SILUETA* SERIES, 1978; EARTH WORK WITH GUNPOWDER. EXECUTED IN IOWA. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY GALERIE LELONG.

as the womb of the earth, as acceding too easily to psychoanalytic notions of women's incapacity to be subjects; in Griselda Pollock's terms, Mendieta is offering herself as fetish object for a pleasure-seeking male gaze. And yet, working through her own body and ultimately producing photographs documenting its absence (marking her body's having been there as a wound on the landscape), Mendieta's project also opens itself to an intense intersubjective engagement—one that encourages the spectator's acknowledgment of Mendieta's *particularized* relationship to the earth through her adoption of Cuban Santería beliefs, including the idea that the earth is a "living thing" from which one can derive personal power.<sup>22</sup> I experience the burning wound that links Mendieta's body to the earth as the same wound that marks the absence and loss of her body/self (as Cuban immigrant woman trying to be an artist in the United States in the 1970s). Mendieta's feminist desire to recuperate lost goddess cults or matriarchal cultures, with their putative celebration of women's power, "female" attributes such as nurturing, and holistic attitudes toward life, merged with her particular experience as a privileged Cuban exiled from her country as a child. This particular experience or identity has no "essential" meaning in relation to her work: on the contrary, I read her particularity *through* the works (including the discourses contextualizing them) and vice versa; I know her particularity only as I engage with the codes I experience in the works and their descriptive contexts.





## *Extase*

MARY KELLY. *INTERIM PART I, CORPUS*, DETAIL FROM "EXTASE," 1984-85; ONE OF THIRTY PANELS 48 X 36 INCHES, LAMINATED PHOTO POSITIVE ON PLEXIGLAS. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY POSTMASTERS GALLERY AND THE ARTIST.

Mendieta's late images of her body's trace as gashes in the earth relate closely to Kelly's *Corpus*. Mendieta marks *her* (highly particular) body (as absence) on the earth; Kelly marks *the* female body or "corpus" through photographed images of twisted and knotted articles of clothing, placed alongside text panels with hand-written first-person accounts of older women experienc-

ing their bodies in the social realm. Both produce a stand-in for the body itself in order to explore the effects of subjectivity as well as the social processes that inform it. Mendieta's primary referents are Santería and goddess rituals; Kelly's referents are the photographs of female hysterics taken under the direction of Freud's mentor J. M. Charcot (the articles of clothing are arranged in "passionate attitudes" reminiscent of these female hysterics and labeled with Charcot's terminology).<sup>23</sup> Mendieta's absent bodies are conditioned, written into, and given meaning by culturally specific discourses assigning spiritual value to the female body/self; Kelly's absent bodies are conditioned, written into, and given meaning by a theoretical project (Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis) and personal narratives construing femininity as a cultural construct. Both projects negotiate the (female) body/self in its absence/presence. Both ultimately confirm that it cannot be known outside of its cultural representations (which, paradoxically, produce subjectivity as absence rather than plenitude). Both may distance as well as seduce various spectators to various effects. Both produce female bodies/selves that are particularized in various ways, as they engage specific subjects in a negotiatory and highly charged project of reading and seeing.<sup>24</sup>

### POSTMODERNISM AS PASTICHE, ALLEGORY, OR MONTAGE: RESISTING THE BODY/SELF

As I have already noted, the prohibition against representing or including the body in the work of art and against the pleasurable effects assumed to accompany such inclusions resulted in the wholesale turn away from body art—and, not incidentally, a general devaluation and subsequent historical exclusion of 1970s body art and of most U.S. feminist practices (which did tend to reference the body)—in the 1980s.<sup>25</sup> In this turn away from the body, postmodernism came increasingly to be defined not in relation to subjectivity, identity, or embodiment but was generally stripped of its corporeal politics and situated in terms of strategies of production.<sup>26</sup> In mainstream critical writing, dominated by venues such as *October* and *Artforum*, postmodernism came to be defined again and again in relation to strategies such as appropriation, allegory, pastiche, or, more broadly, institutional critique. Thus, Benjamin Buchloh and Craig Owens, both associated with the *October* editorial board, published articles in *Artforum* and *October* in the early 1980s ("Allegorical Procedures" and "The Allegorical Impulse," respectively). These essays situate allegorical strategies of appropriation and montage as, in Owens's words, a "unified" impulse behind postmodern art.<sup>27</sup> Bypassing questions of subjectivity (here, especially, authorial identity) and interpretation (especially their own interpretive investments), Buchloh and any number of other historians and critics have focused on the political effects

of works (especially their capacity for institutional critique) as determined through their formal or narrative structure (read through coded symbolic systems such as allegory) and, to a lesser extent, content.<sup>28</sup> Not incidentally, the body/self, including the relations of desire informing particular interpretations, is generally left out of this broader picture: body art, with its solicitation of spectatorial desires and deliberate confusion of conventional artistic presentational formats, complicates the tendency to codify postmodernism purely in terms of artistic strategies of production.

The focus on production in dominant discourses of postmodernism links problematically to a metaphysics of intentionality that contradicts the poststructuralist claim to understand meaning as contingent rather than fixed. Thus, Kelly's wholesale rejection of all body art as necessarily essentialist, while it was strategic at the time, failed to account for Kelly's own investment—as an embodied artist and critic reacting to the messy and, in her view, ideologically problematic effects of other artists' bodies in performance—in interpreting them (*essentializing* their meanings) in this way.<sup>29</sup>

It is precisely the acknowledgment of such investments that Craig Owens remarked upon in a later, self-critical reflection on his allegory essay. In an essay published in 1983 as "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," Owens deconstructs his own earlier reading, in "The Allegorical Impulse," of Laurie Anderson's *Americans on the Move* (not incidentally, it is a multi-media performance/body art work that has motivated his rereading). In the 1983 essay he chastises himself for having completely ignored the ways in which her work particularizes the examination of language and subject formation in terms of sexual difference. He writes, "If I return to this passage . . . it is not simply to correct my own remarkable oversight, but more importantly to indicate a blind spot in our discussions of postmodernism in general: our failure to address the issue of sexual difference—not only in the objects we discuss, but *in our own enunciation as well.*"<sup>30</sup> Through his deep engagement with Anderson's body art work, then, Owens recognizes, precisely, both his own investment in interpreting her work and the particularization of subjectivity that it puts into play.

Owens's self-reflections highlight the limitations of much dominant writing about postmodern art, which, in its refusal to acknowledge interpretation as an exchange and haste to proclaim particular practices as politically efficacious or not, largely operates to reinforce the modernist project of privileging certain practices and derogating others on the basis of their interpretively determined cultural value. Such a strategy (which has entailed the derogation of body art) simply replaces the modernist formalist conception of aesthetic value

with an avant-gardist notion of political value, determined according to systems of judgment that are ultimately just as authoritative as those they seek to go beyond. The judgments of self-proclaimed postmodernist criticism (or criticism of postmodern art that aligns itself with poststructuralism) have tended to rely on value systems and methods of analysis that are still heavily informed by the rhetoric of avant-gardism so central to modernist criticism: a rhetoric that *disembodies*—that, as Owens acknowledges in his later essay, insists upon a "disinterested" relation to the work of art and that assumes that this work's cultural value lies in its formal structure or its conditions of production.

My interest in the work of Mendieta, Schneemann, Kusama, and other body artists is informed both by a desire to rethink postmodern culture (and subjectivity) in the broadest sense and by a desire to push beyond what I perceive to be the prescriptive nature of 1980s art history and criticism as well as its rather narrowly conceived focus on the formal or narrative structures of the work (including its for the most part disembodied structures of vision and power). I am intrigued by the propensity of body art to unveil the hidden assumptions still embedded in critical discussions about postmodernism, its interweaving of the corporeal, the political, and the aesthetic: thus, Mendieta's photographs of her body-as-trace both address the spectator's own interpretive body and thwart its conventionally masculinist, colonizing "gaze" by ritualizing and in many cases erasing the "actual" body from their purview. I have turned with pleasure to body art for its dramatic potential to interrupt the closed circuit of modernist and most postmodernist critical practice. I want both to *give in* to Mendieta's anti-Brechtian solicitation of a pleasurable gaze and also to extricate myself from moment to moment in order to interrogate my own desiring relationship (here, as potentially colonizing Anglo-American feminist "eye" gazing on Mendieta's "exotically" ritualized body) to the work that I study here.<sup>31</sup>

Body art practices solicit rather than distance the spectator, drawing her or him into the work of art as an intersubjective exchange; these practices also elicit pleasures—seen by Marxian critics to be inexorably linked to the corrupting influence of commodity culture, but interpreted here as having potentially radical effects on the subject as it comes to mean within artistic production and reception.<sup>32</sup> Body art, in all of its permutations (performance, photograph, film, video, text), insists upon subjectivities and identities (gendered, raced, classed, sexed, and otherwise) as absolutely central components of any cultural practice. In the following, I attempt to interweave phenomenological and poststructuralist philosophies of the subject and theories and practices of body art to highlight the issue of *subjectivity*, especially in its sexual/gendered dimension, as *the* central issue of postmodernism. I hope to suggest through an

exploration of the ontology of body art that body-oriented practices can be mapped quite differently from their codification in the 1980s as essentialist and reactionary.

#### THE ONTOLOGY OF BODY ART

In 1975 Laurie Anderson was invited to give a performance in conjunction with the "Bodyworks" exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. She noted at the time that she was struck by the term "body art": the show, she wrote, consisted of "pieces of paper on a wall, photographs, notes, tapes. Artists putting their bodies on the line, on the shelf, dressing in drag, assuming alter egos, putting themselves through various exercises, contortions, exorcisms. . . . But in fact, *no bodies were there*. Only paper."<sup>33</sup> Debunking the myth of presence circulating around body art at the time, Anderson's comments testify to the philosophical conundrums put in play by body art, which highlights the fact that the body is both insistently "there" and always absent (never knowable through vision), that, in the words of Jed Perl, "wholeness is an illusion, an ideological trap."<sup>34</sup>

Anderson's statements, too, are deeply performative and carefully orchestrated, constituting an integral part of her public display as performer, artist, and celebrity.<sup>35</sup> It is thus notable that Anderson reprinted this 1975 statement alongside her observations about documenting her work in her 1994 collection of writings and performance documentation, *Stories from the Nerve Bible*. Anderson notes here that, although she was initially strongly opposed to documenting her own work in photographs, film, or video, wanting to avoid the appropriation and commodification of her work ("I thought that since my performances were about memory, the best way to record them was in other people's memories"), she subsequently realized that "other people [don't] remember them very well."<sup>36</sup> The assumption that the body art or performance event is only "real" once, or that it remains itself only through the memories of people who were present during its live performance, is undermined by Anderson's own experience of having people ask her about elements of performances she never did or never remembered doing ("There was no orange dog. I never did anything with an orange dog"). Anderson thus claims that she began documenting her performances in order to be able to demonstrate to her fans when they are wrong ("I decided it was time to document a performance on film so that I could run the projector and say, 'OK! Now do you see an orange dog?'"): to make them more "real," more faithful to the event—to ensure their accurate existence in history.<sup>37</sup>

It is to my point that Anderson chose to publish these more recent ruminations, "A Note on Documentation: The Orange Dog," on the same page as

her 1975 discussion of body art: the juxtaposition makes clear that it is body art that most insistently raises the question of the "real" in relation to the subjects and objects of production and reception. One of the major conceptual and theoretical issues highlighted by body art as performance, as Anderson has recognized, is that of the *ontology* of the art "object" as well as the status of the subject of artistic production. Most early accounts of these practices made heroic claims for body art's status as the only art form to guarantee the *presence* of the artist. Thus, in the catalog for the 1975 Chicago *Bodyworks* exhibition, Ira Licht triumphantly proclaims that bodyworks do away with the "intermediary" mediums of painting and sculpture to "deliver . . . information directly through transformation."<sup>38</sup> And, also in the 1970s, Rosemary Mayer claimed body art to be a direct reflection of the artist's life experiences, while Cindy Nemser described the "primary goal of body art" as "the desire to bring the subjective and objective self together as a totally integrated entity," which is then directly projected to the audience.<sup>39</sup> In 1982, Chantal Pontbriand privileged performance by arguing that it "presents; it does not re-present."<sup>40</sup> More recently, Catherine Elwes argued that performance art "offers women a unique vehicle for making that direct unmediated access [to the audience]. Performance is about the 'real-life' presence of the artist. . . . She is both signifier and that which is signified. Nothing stands between spectator and performer."<sup>41</sup>

It is precisely such idealism of which Mary Kelly is, I think rightly, suspicious in her critique of the early claims about body art. But contemporaneous descriptions of the works do not fully constitute their meanings. This book specifically rejects such metaphysical conceptions of body art or performance as delivering in an unmediated fashion the body of the artist to the viewer, engaging the works on the level of a feminist phenomenology deeply informed by a poststructuralist suspicion of discourses of presence. Art historian Kathy O'Dell has trenchantly argued, to this end, that, precisely by using their bodies as primary material, body and performance artists highlight the "representational status" of such work rather than confirming its ontological priority. The representational aspects of this work—its "play within the arena of the symbolic" and, I would add, its dependence on documentation to attain symbolic status within the realm of culture—expose the impossibility of attaining knowledge of the self through bodily proximity. Body art, finally, shows that the body can never "be known 'purely' as a totalizable, fleshy whole that rests outside of the arena of the symbolic."<sup>42</sup> Having direct physical contact with an artist who pulls a scroll from her vaginal canal does not ensure "knowledge" of her (as individual and/or artist and/or work of art) any more than does looking at a

film or picture of this activity, or looking at a painting that was made as the result of such an action.

The self is inexorably embodied, body art tells us. And yet, as I will argue these works suggest, this does not mean that the performed body/self is ever completely legible or fixed in its effects. Body art, through its very performativity and its unveiling of the body of the artist, surfaces the insufficiency and incoherence of the body/self (or the body-as-subject) and its inability to deliver itself fully (whether to the subject-in-performance herself or himself or to the one who engages with this body). Perhaps even more to the point than O'Dell's suggestive observations is Peggy Phelan's insistence on the way in which the body in performance puts forward its own lack:

Performance uses the performer's body to pose a question about the inability to secure the relation between subjectivity and the body *per se*; performance uses the body to frame the lack of Being promised by and through the body—that which cannot appear without a supplement. . . . Performance marks the body itself as loss. . . . For the spectator the performance spectacle is itself a projection of the scenario in which her own desire takes place.<sup>43</sup>

As epitomized in Mendieta's images, in which the body is enacted as *tracce* or "silueta," body art can thus be said to flaunt the body itself as loss or lack: that is, as fundamentally lacking in the self-sufficiency (claimed by Elwes et al.) that would guarantee its plenitude as an unmediated repository of selfhood.<sup>44</sup> The "unique" body of the artist in the body art work only has meaning by virtue of its contextualization within the codes of identity that accrue to the artist's name/body. Thus, this body is not self-contained in its meaningfulness; it is a body/self, relying not only on an authorial context of "signature" but also on a receptive context in which the interpreter or viewer may interact with it. This context is precisely the point (always already in place) at which the body becomes a "subject."<sup>45</sup> Live performance, in fact, makes this contingency—the intersubjectivity of the interpretive exchange—even more pronounced and obvious since the body's actions can be interfered with and realigned according to other bodies/subjects; however, documents of the body-in-performance are just as easily, if not as obviously, contingent in that the meaning that accrues to the image of the body is open-ended and dependent on the ways in which the image is contextualized and interpreted.

Seemingly acting as a "supplement" to the "actual" body of the artist in performance, the photograph of the body art event or performance could, in fact, be said to expose the body itself as supplementary, as both the visible

proof of the self and its endless deferral. Mendieta's later *Silueta* pieces, which document the body only through the marks it has left on the landscape, explicitly enact this doubled lack indicated by the photograph. The photograph, like the body image itself, is a supplement to the inescapable lack that founds subjectivity (the existence of the body in the social, vis-à-vis other subjects). The supplement, argues Jacques Derrida, is a "terrifying menace" in its indication of absence and lack but also "the first and surest protection . . . against that very menace. This is why it cannot be given up."<sup>46</sup> The sequence of supplements initiated by the body art project—the body "itself," the spoken narrative, video, and other visuals within the piece, the video, film, photograph, and text documenting it for posterity—announces the necessity of "an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, or originary perception. Immediacy is derived. . . . The play of substitution fills and marks a determined lack."<sup>47</sup> Derrida notes that "the indefinite process of supplementarity has always already *infiltrated* presence, always already inscribed there the space of repetition and the splitting of the self."<sup>48</sup>

Elsewhere, Derrida explicitly examines why the body must be excluded from determinations of meaning within the idealistic regime of signification and Cartesian subjectivity posited in Western metaphysics. The impure and *supplementary* body must be opposed to the soul, where the will is lodged and meaning is generated: "Visibility and spatiality as such could only destroy the self-presence of will and spiritual animation which opens up discourse. *They are literally the death of that self-presence.*"<sup>49</sup> Derrida's insight explains the equivocal position of the body in modernist and postmodernist art discourse. Within the modernist logic of formalism, the body of the artist—in its impurity—must be veiled, its supplementarity hidden from view. The formalist insists upon the "disinterestedness" of his interpretations, and such disinterestedness is predicated upon a pure relation between the art object and its supposedly inherent meaning (embedded in its "form," to be excavated by the discerning interpreter). The supplementarity of the body corrupts this logic. For those who wish to privilege performance or body art for its merging of art and life, its delivery of the body/subject of the artist directly to the viewer, the body must be seen as an unmediated reflection of the self whose presence guarantees the redemptive quality of art as activism.

Rather than confirming the ontological coherence of the body-as-presence, body art confirms—or, rather, exacerbates—the supplementarity of the body itself. This is not to say that body art is necessarily radically critical of essentialism and idealism (or is radically anti- or postmodernist) in all of its

dimensions, however. As we have seen, the discursive positioning of body art in the early 1970s often placed it definitively on the side of a conservative, modernist investment in a metaphysics of presence. Body art is not definitively or inherently progressive any more than it is definitively or inherently reactionary (as Kelly had wanted to claim). Precisely not: in its insistently intersubjective dimension, it marks the contingency of such meanings and values on the interpretive relation. Body art opens up the vicissitudes of subject/object relations within art discourse; in its refusal to confirm anything other than the absence of the body/self (the subject's contingency on the other), body art refuses to "prove" presence.

While, predictably, many have relied on the photograph, in particular, as "proof" of the fact that a particular action took place, of the meaningfulness of the subject-in-performance, or as a marketable object to be raised to the formalist height of an "art" photograph, in fact such a reliance is founded on ideological belief systems similar to those underlying the investment in the "presence" of the body in performance. Kristine Stiles has brilliantly exposed the dangers of using the photograph of a performative event as "proof" in her review of Henry Sayre's book *The Object of Performance*. Sayre opens his first chapter with the now mythical tale of Rudolf Schwarzkogler's self-mutilation of his penis, a myth founded on the circulation of a number of "documents" showing a male torso with bandaged penis (a razor blade lying nearby). Stiles, who has done primary research interviewing and retracing the event, points out that the photograph, in fact, is not even Schwarzkogler but, rather, another male artist who poses for Schwarzkogler's *entirely fabricated* ritual castration.<sup>50</sup>

Sayre's desire for this photograph to entail some previous "real" event leads him to ignore the contingency of the document in relation not only to a former action but also to the construction of what Stiles terms a wholly fictive space.<sup>51</sup> This is the very contingency that his book attempts to address through his argument that the shift marked by performance and body art is that of the "site of presence" from "art's object to art's audience, from the textual or plastic to the experiential." Sayre's fixation on "presence," even while he acknowledges its new destabilized siting in reception, and his lack of self-interrogation inform his unquestioning belief in the photograph of performance as "truth" (*why, after all, does he want the photograph to do this for him?*).<sup>52</sup> The photograph of the performance is a supplement of a supplement: a seemingly rigorous visual, indexical marker of a body's having "been there" before the camera/audience ("in the Photograph," Roland Barthes writes, "something *has posed* in front of the tiny hole and has remained there forever. . . . In Photography, the presence of the thing (at a certain past moment) is never metaphoric").<sup>53</sup>

Rosalind Krauss recognized the philosophical reciprocity of photog-

raphy and performance in her 1977 essay "Notes on the Index," in which she situates the two as different kinds of indexicality. As indexes, both labor to "substitute the registration of sheer physical presence for the more highly articulated language of aesthetic conventions."<sup>54</sup> And yet, I would stress, in their failure to "go beyond" the contingency of aesthetic codes, both performance and photography announce the supplementarity of the index itself (there is no original gesture toward which the index simply directs us). The presentation of the self—in performance, in the photograph, film, or video—calls out the mutual supplementarity of the body and the subject (the body, as material "object" in the world, seems to confirm the "presence" of the subject; the subject gives the body its significance as "human"), as well as of performance or body art and the photographic document. The body art event *needs* the photograph to confirm its having happened; the photograph *needs* the body art event as an ontological "anchor" of its indexicality.<sup>55</sup>

#### THE ONTOLOGY OF THE SUBJECT: THROUGH THE BODY/AGAIN

I read body art as dissolving the metaphysical idealism and the Cartesian subject (the artist as heroic but disembodied genius, the transcendent "I" behind the work of art) embedded in the conception of modernism hegemonic in Europe and the United States in the postwar period. This Cartesian subject has had a long history in Western thought. René Descartes's dualistic conception of a consciousness or cogito (disembodied and transcendent) opposed to the brute object of the body dominated Enlightenment and then modernist (nineteenth- and twentieth-century) ways of conceiving the subject. Predicated on vision (the "I" of the subject was a disembodied "eye" turning all bodies into objects), Cartesianism had a special force within artistic modernism, which was first dominated by French artists and writers embedded in the Cartesian tradition, then borrowed by the United States from France after World War II. Descartes's dualism is highlighted in his famous comment, from the *Discourse on Method*, that "this *me*—that is, the soul by which I am what I am—is completely distinct from the body; and is even easier to know than is the body."<sup>56</sup> Art history and criticism have long taken their direction from this conception—with the eye/I of the artist closely paralleled by the eye/I of the art critic or historian, who takes her or his authority from a close identification with the transcendent "vision" of the original creator.

But, as intellectual historian Martin Jay has suggested, it was precisely this issue of the dualism of mind and body that motivated "twentieth-century phenomenological critics of Cartesian perspectivalism like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty [to] . . . challenge his version of sight, and feminists like Irigaray

[to] . . . condemn the gender bias of his philosophy."<sup>57</sup> I would like to suggest, then, that it was the same assumption in artistic modernism that, at least in part, motivated body artists who, often drawing on phenomenological models of subjectivity (not to mention feminism), began to enact their embodied subjectivities in relation to audiences with this intersubjective exchange constitutive of the work of art. Working in concert with the major shifts in philosophical thought and in the social realm, where the normative subject was being profoundly challenged by the various rights movements, body art dissolves the opposition informing the Cartesian conception of the self and, in so doing, assists in dissolving the modernist subject.

In the very beginning of her 1971 article "Subject-Object Body Art," one of the major early discussions of body art, Cindy Nemser quotes Merleau-Ponty, substantiating the conceptual link between body art and phenomenology:

Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. It applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument, and when we wish to move about we do not move the body as we move an object. We transport it without instruments as if by magic, since it is ours and because through it we have direct access to space. For us the body is much more than an instrument or a means; it is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions. Even our most secret affective movements, those most deeply tied to the humoral infrastructure, help to shape our perception of things.<sup>58</sup>

Body art, however, does not *illustrate* Merleau-Pontyan conceptions of the embodiment of the subject and theories of the decentered self that we are now familiar with from poststructuralist theory; rather, it *enacts* or *performs* or *instantiates* the embodiment and intertwining of self and other.<sup>59</sup> Body art is one of the many manifestations or articulations of this contingency or reciprocity of the subject that we now recognize as postmodern. The trajectory linking French theories of subjectivity and signification—with the phenomenological attack on Cartesianism leading into what we now call poststructuralism—to body art is complex, but worth examining here at least in part. These links confirm the usefulness of exploring body art through a phenomenological and feminist framework, as all three phenomena are interrelated in their compulsion to dissolve and/or interrogate the modernist subject.

In 1959 the U.S. sociologist Erving Goffman published a book entitled *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which discusses the self as a *performance* in relation to others, a negotiation involving complex intersubjective cues and behaviors. The self, Goffman argues,

does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action. . . . A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location . . . it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented.<sup>60</sup>

Drawing from the work of sociologists, cultural theorists, and psychoanalysts, and from the existential phenomenological texts of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre (which Goffman "Americanizes" in the direction of a rather flat empiricism), Goffman's book links together the theoretical exploration of the self and the performative bodies of body art (especially in its U.S. manifestations). In the 1960s, a number of artists in the United States read Goffman's book, as well as some of the work of Merleau-Ponty. Goffman's instrumentalized version of French existentialist phenomenology along with Merleau-Ponty's own writings, among other texts, provided a model for younger-generation artists such as Vito Acconci who came of age after the heroic era of abstract expressionism, and within the explosive social changes in the 1960s.<sup>61</sup> The philosophical notion of the self as an embodied performance (a notion informed by and conditioning the experience of shifts in the social and cultural realms) was expanded and developed through body art's radical opening up of the structures of artistic production and reception. Body art enacted the activist, particularized body of the rights movements—the intersubjective, performative self of phenomenology—within the structures of art making and reception.

The performative self, whose meaning and significance is not inherent or transcendent but derived "from the whole scene of his action," dramatically overturns the Cartesian self of modernism, which construes the body not as enacting the self but as a brute object or hollow vessel given meaning only through the animating force of the consciousness that presumably can thus transcend it.<sup>62</sup> The lived body, Merleau-Ponty observed in his 1945 *Phenomenology of Perception*, is not discrete from the mind as vessel but is, in fact, the "expressive space" by which we experience the world. Unlike other objects in the world, the body cannot be thought as separate from the self, nor does it signify or "express the modalities of existence in the way that stripes indicate rank, or a house-number a house: the sign here does not only convey its significance, it is filled with it."<sup>63</sup>

Phenomenology interprets and produces the self as embodied, performative, and intersubjective—the critique of Cartesianism thus also involves a

Hegelian dimension as the French phenomenologists theorized a self that was both embodied but also articulated in relation to a self/other (master/slave) dialectic. Not incidentally, in fact, Alexandre Kojève had lectured on Hegel in a series of 1930s seminars in Paris to Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jacques Lacan.<sup>64</sup> This conception of an intersubjective, embodied subject contingent on her or his others (the master defining the slave and vice versa) has been expanded upon and radicalized by poststructuralism and feminism as well as, I am arguing, by body art. Thus, the intellectual trajectory of phenomenology (especially from France) and a feminist poststructuralism, both of which articulate an explicitly anti-Cartesian theory of the subject, underlies and informs my attempt to rethink body art and move it out of its consignment to essentialist oblivion.<sup>65</sup>

In the 1940s and 1950s, it was Merleau-Ponty and Lacan who most vigorously began to theorize (through philosophy and psychoanalysis) the splitting or dissolving of the Cartesian subject. Merleau-Ponty's observations about the contingency and reciprocity of the self/other, and his emphatic critique of vision-oriented theories that polarize subject/object relations, seem to relate closely to Goffman's paradigm but go far beyond its instrumental—more Sartrean and rigidly oppositional—dimensions: "The behavior of another expresses a certain manner of existing before signifying a certain manner of thinking. And when this behavior is addressed to me, as may happen in dialogue, and seizes upon my thoughts in order to respond to them . . . I am then drawn into a *coexistence* of which I am not the unique constituent and which finds the phenomenon of social nature as perceptual experience finds that of physical nature."<sup>66</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's antiempiricism and his insistence on the fully embodied nature of intersubjectivity enables him to conceptualize intersubjectivity as imbricated rather than oppositional (as in Sartre's existentialist model), as intersubjective and embedded rather than simplistically staged in a discrete social environment (per Goffman).<sup>67</sup> While Sartre sustains in his phenomenological work a more strictly Hegelian view of self/other relations as structured by conflict, Merleau-Ponty posits the self/other as reciprocal: not in the sense of oscillating positionalities but in terms of *simultaneous* subject/objectification—one is *always already both at the same time*. And Merleau-Ponty's insistence on embodiment and on going beyond vision-oriented models of self and other differentiate his work from Lacan's theories of self, at least as the latter have been popularized in contemporary cultural discourse in the United States (where, as noted, the subject is staged through a disembodied—if psychically invested—sense of vision that produces her/him as image).<sup>68</sup> Merleau-Ponty's writings

seem singularly interesting in relation to body art in that they articulate an understanding of intersubjectivity as dramatically *intercorporeal*: as embodied as well as contingent.

Furthermore, although he views sexuality as a universal phenomenon rather than one with asymmetrical effects, Merleau-Ponty understands the fully sexual nature of the body/subject: its saturation with an eroticism that instantiates the merging of the active, cognitive being with the sexual body. A body is perceived (and perceives itself through its relationship to others) as sexual through and through. Merleau-Ponty's theory of intersubjectivity becomes even less instrumental in his later work, moving away from the lingering idealism of *Phenomenology of Perception* (which posits an eroticism existing a priori to the subject<sup>69</sup>) to theorize a *chiasmic* intertwining of self and other. His "The Chiasm—The Intertwining," published posthumously in 1964, is especially rich in relation to body art. In this text, Merleau-Ponty embeds vision in touch, touch in vision, and their chiasmic crossing is the flesh of the world/the body itself: differentiating modes of vision (color and visibles) is a *tissue* that is "not a thing but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things." The chiasmus is the "doubled and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible," and the *flesh of the visible* indicates the carnal being—at once subjective and objectified.<sup>70</sup> There is a "reciprocal insertion and intertwining" of the seeing body in the visible body: we are both subject and object simultaneously, and our "flesh" merges with the flesh that is the world. There is no limit or boundary between the body and the world since the *world is flesh*.<sup>71</sup> (Mendieta's *Siluetas* pieces, which turn the earth itself into flesh and vice versa, seem to instantiate Merleau-Ponty's observation.)

The relation to the self, the relation to the world, the relation to the other: all are constituted through a *reversibility* of seeing and being seen, perceiving and being perceived, and this entails a reciprocity and contingency for the subject(s) in the world (with Mendieta's body made reversible in two directions: back to its cultural and personal siting, through Santería and goddess rituals; and forward to our situation, through our embodied experience and conceptual incorporation of it). The body/self is simultaneously both subject and object; in the experience of dialogue (or, in our case, the production and reception of works of art), the two subjects involved (art maker, art interpreter) "are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity."<sup>72</sup>

Through the notion of flesh—a hinge or two-sided boundary (that is also part of the things it separates) marking "being's reversibility"<sup>73</sup>—Merleau-Ponty theorizes the interrelatedness of both mind and body (the embodiedness of the self) and the reciprocity and contingency of the body/self on the other.



This is what Lacan, in a formulation that derives its theoretical force from linguistics and Freudian psychoanalysis but also, as is often not recognized in U.S. art discourse, from phenomenology, describes as the *phenomenology of the transference* by which the self is located in the other: "What I seek in speech is the response of the other. What constitutes me as subject is my question. . . . I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object."<sup>74</sup> Lacan redeploys Hegel's master/slave in terms of a metaphoric of desire, as articulated through language; in Kojève's words, "all human, anthropogenetic Desire—the Desire that generates Self-Consciousness, the human reality—is, finally, a function of the desire for 'recognition'" by an other, marking the contingency of self-consciousness, of the "master" on the "slave." In Lacan's terms, "it is in seeing a whole chain come into play at the level of the desire of the Other that the subject's desire is constituted."<sup>75</sup>

But, while the body/self is inexorably sexual in Merleau-Ponty's formulation, and while he acknowledges (with a distant glance toward the master/slave dialectic) the asymmetry of the reversibility of perception, like Lacan he theorizes the sexual subject/object from an implicitly masculine point of view. A number of feminist philosophers have reworked Merleau-Ponty's formulation through the lens of sexual difference, acknowledging the *gendered* configuration of the asymmetrical master/slave aspect of the subject/object relations in Western patriarchy.<sup>76</sup> Thus, Judith Butler pinpoints Merleau-Ponty's tendency, in the earlier work, to theorize self/other relations in terms that implicate without theorizing gender asymmetry.<sup>77</sup> And Luce Irigaray plays against Merleau-Ponty's blindness to gender by inserting the "maternal-feminine" into his language: the flesh is feminized as "a maternal, maternalizing flesh, reproduction . . . placental tissue."<sup>78</sup>

But it is Simone de Beauvoir, friend and colleague of Merleau-Ponty, lover of Sartre, who was the first to expose the gendered specificity of the self/other relation in her 1949 opus *The Second Sex*.<sup>79</sup> Beauvoir's book was the first to expand the general critique of the Cartesian subject of modernism and to interrogate it as having an exclusionary, masculinist dimension. Beauvoir's book begins a radical particularization of the phenomenological theory of a subject still (in the 1940s) largely assumed to be "universal." Here, the dialectic between the self and other outlined by Sartre (and more subtly transformed by Merleau-Ponty and Lacan) is reworked with an awareness of the mapping of power through gender in patriarchy. Sartre's existentialist argument, in *Being and Nothingness*, that the subject has the capacity to project himself into transcendence (the *pour-soi*) out of the fundamental immanence of the *en-soi*, is reread by Beauvoir as a privileged potentiality open only to male subjects in patriarchy.

Stating clearly her allegiance to an "existentialist ethics," Beauvoir goes on to specify its different applications for women subjects:

Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out toward other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, there is a degradation of existence into the *en-soi*—the brutish life of subjection to given conditions—and of liberty into constraint and contingency. . . . Every individual concerned to justify his existence feels that his existence involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects. . . . Now, what peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilize her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego . . . which is essential and sovereign.<sup>80</sup>

As Judith Butler has noted, Beauvoir's paradigm accounts for the masculine project of *disembodiment* by which men transcend their bodies by projecting their otherness (their immanence, their contingent corporeality) onto women.<sup>81</sup> Ultimately, Beauvoir's argument, especially as extended by feminist poststructuralists such as Butler, extends phenomenology's critique of Cartesianism but also interrogates its sex-blind models of self/other (as well as the male-centered paradigm of Lacan's model of sexual difference)<sup>82</sup> by exposing such projections as *failed* attempts to secure coherent selfhood on the part of male subjects in patriarchy. As Butler argues, the fact that the "Other" is, in fact, his alienated self "establishes the essential interdependence of the disembodied 'man' and the corporeally determined 'woman.' His disembodiment is only possible on the condition that women occupy their bodies as their essential and enslaving identities."<sup>83</sup>

Luce Irigaray, a one-time student and subsequent intellectual adversary of Lacan's, explores this dynamic at great length in her 1974 book *Speculum of the Other Woman*, in which she remarks that "man" exiles himself "ever further (toward) where the greatest power lies . . . [becoming] the 'sun' if it is around him that things turn. . . . Meanwhile . . . 'she' [as Mother Earth] also turns upon herself . . . [knowing] how to re-turn (upon herself) but not how to seek outside for identity within the other."<sup>84</sup> The immanence of women *is*, as Mendieta's





ANA MENDIETA. UNTITLED FROM *SILUETA* SERIES, 1979: GUNPOWDER SILHOUETTE, EXECUTED IN IOWA. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY GALERIE LELONG.

work enacts, their conflation with the static, unchanging "earth," which can only revolve around the "transcendent" sun/man/God. This ideological structure is necessary for the maintenance of the idea that the subject as self (a masculine prerogative) is coherent and beyond "earthly" intervention or reproach. Mendieta's *Siluetas* pieces, like Irigaray's subtle, poetic arguments, expose the fact that, precisely because of this *projection* of immanence upon the female, the (masculine) subject (Mendieta's interpreter?) is always/already earthbound, implicated in that which he attempts to survey through his distanced, "transcendent" gaze.

To this end, in her book on the split subject of postmodernism, Carolyn Dean argues that the model of the decentered self that U.S. scholars know primarily from Lacan is, in fact, a description of the fragmentation of the *male* subject in late capitalism. Lacan's model of the self situates it as constructed through a misrecognition, through the mirrored reflection of the self-as-coherent, of "the truth about the real fragmentation, helplessness, and lack that defines human identity."<sup>85</sup> Dean suggests that it was out of a specific crisis in male authority in the post-World War I period that such a model of lost coherence was constructed: it was only the male subject, after all (as Beauvoir pointed out), who had ever had access to this mythical coherence in the first place.

Dean's observation would translate interestingly to the crisis of masculinity during the post-World War II period, with the general cultural anxiety about conformity and the growing recognition that the (implicitly male) subject was not full-within-himself but, indeed, articulated in relation to others on whom he may or may not be able to depend for reinforcing his appearance of "coherent" masculinity.<sup>86</sup> As Barbara Ehrenreich has pointed out, David Riesman's influential sociological study, published in 1950 as *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, describes a shift in masculine subjectivity away from the self-contained, authoritative "inner-directed" man (relatively "immune to the . . . nudgings of peers") toward an "other-directed" character, who, rather than standing tall against social pressures, finds himself adapting his tastes and behavior to those of the people around him. The "other-directed" man is the ultimate conformist, and, as Ehrenreich notes, Riesman's book "reinforced the average gray flannel rebel's gnawing perception that conformity, notwithstanding the psychologists' prescriptions, meant a kind of emasculation."<sup>87</sup> Ehrenreich's observations highlight the way in which philosophical explorations have a political and social dimension (the phenomenological and nascent poststructuralist critiques of the Cartesian subject dovetailing with the collapse of this [masculine] subject as identified in negative terms by intellectuals such as Riesman). As I will explore in chapter 2, this confluence of discourses certainly marks an exacerbation of the crisis in masculinity noted by Dean as having occurred after World War I and in the post-World War II period.

The (masculine) subject thus became increasingly decentered and "other-directed" from the 1950s into the 1960s, when this dislocation became far more dramatic and often even self-consciously performed (as in body art projects or Andy Warhol's flamboyant self-construction on the stage of public life). Part of this decentering, as Riesman inadvertently highlights and as Lacan and Merleau-Ponty explicitly outline without fully opening up its gendered implications, entailed a rethinking of the (masculine) self as both other-directed and also fundamentally narcissistic (feminized and/or homosexualized). Thus, for Lacan as well as Merleau-Ponty, the (implicitly male) subject attempts to cohere himself in the eyes of the other, but in this move paradoxically enacts the subject in terms of himself: in Merleau-Ponty's terms, "since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision."<sup>88</sup> Lacan's now well known model of the mirror stage—in which the subject "coheres" in relation to a misrecognized image of his own unity as body/image/self (situating him always already as an "other" to himself)—coincides with Merleau-Ponty's observations (as well as with Beauvoir's) in its

acknowledgment of the simultaneous contingency of self on other and the fundamental narcissism of this relation. It is the image (of the self-as-other) through which the subject seeks to know herself or himself but fails, succumbing to self-alienation ("the total form of the body . . . is given to him only . . . in an exteriority"), and through which the subject attempts to cohere itself but can only do so at the price of becoming *other*.<sup>89</sup> Subjectivity—as we understand it in the postmodern condition—is performed in relation to an other yet is paradoxically entirely narcissistic. In its "other-directedness," it opens itself dangerously to the other, but always in an attempt to rethink itself.

In this way, while Riesman's other-directed man is viewed with some trepidation because he is open to the other, he is also described and examined entirely in relation to *himself* (and is thus necessarily viewed as horrifyingly emasculated).<sup>90</sup> The potentially felicitous effects of his openness to the other are never explored in terms of what it might mean for women or other "others." While the other-directed subject and the narcissistic (by definition, self-oriented) one may seem opposed, in fact they are different ways of defining the same—and specifically, in the eyes of 1950s culture, emasculated—subject. Calling the subject narcissistic might thus be another way of opening out how body art works in terms of a phenomenological conception of subjectivity as "other-directed" (reciprocal and intertwined with the other).

#### BODY ART AND THE "CULTURE OF NARCISSISM"

Not incidentally, body art, especially in its feminist varieties, has frequently been condemned (and occasionally exalted) for its *narcissism*; I discuss the particular alignment of narcissism with feminist body art in chapter 4. Here, rather than accepting the conventional negative connotations that accrue to this term, I want to open up this narcissism as manifested in body art (through a fixation on performing the self) for its potentially radical implications. As I have suggested, narcissism—the exploration of and fixation on the self—*inexorably* leads to an exploration of and implication in the other: the self turns itself inside out, as it were, projecting its internal structures of identification and desire outward. Thus, narcissism interconnects the internal and external self as well as the self and the other.

Narcissism intersects with the politicization of personal life that was so empowering to feminists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For the majority of feminists from this period, for whom the clarion call was "the personal is political" and for whom activism was often a central part of their agenda, it was crucial to *embody* the female subject publicly in order to politicize her personal experiences. The enacted body/self is explicitly political and social in that it

opens out onto otherness and the world in general; in phenomenological terms, this body/self performs itself through its own particular social situation. Women's particular social situation entailed narcissism. Since women are always already interpellated in patriarchal culture as embodied objects who are, paradoxically, at the same time narcissistic (i.e., self-involved or *subjectified*), the overt expression of women's fully embodied, desiring experiences and (narcissistic) self-involvement was seen as the surest way to repudiate the objectification of women and to politicize personal experience. Women began to act narcissistically (that is, began to speak their personal concerns in the public domain) in order to proclaim their needs and particularities as subjects.<sup>91</sup>

Lea Vergine, ecstatic supporter of body art, explores the fundamental relationship between body art and narcissism in her important 1974 catalog *Il corpo come linguaggio (La 'body-art' e storie simili)*:

Narcissus projects himself outside of himself in order to be able to love what is inside of himself. . . . Projection expels an internal menace that has been created by the pressure of an intolerable impulse and thus it is transformed into an external menace that can be more easily handled. The artists shift their problem from the subject to the object, or from the inside to the outside. . . . The consensus of the spectator is essential if the artist is to find 'confirmation' in his work. The work is the artist and his narcissism [is] no longer invested in an art object but allowed to explode within his own body.<sup>92</sup>

The narcissism enacted by body artists is fundamentally intersubjective and highlights the psychic dynamic by which self/artist/artwork is constituted in relation to other/interpreter (and vice versa). Licht, in the *Bodyworks* catalog, also focused on the narcissistic dimension of body art, arguing that "body-works" are linked to the "tradition of the cult of the self" in art.<sup>93</sup>

But why would artists turn to themselves at precisely the moment when the fundamental fragmentation of these "selves" was becoming increasingly manifest (a fragmentation particularly dramatic in relation to the increasing challenges leveled at the normative male subject through the various rights movements and economic and geopolitical shifts)? Different subjects have had different relationships to this fragmentation of the subject, and body art projects can be seen variously as *enacting* and so exacerbating the fragmentation of the normative subject of modernism (the "transcendent" white male who projects his immanence onto women, people of color, the colonized, the poor) or, in some cases and contexts, as attempting to reverse the effects of this fragmen-

tation.<sup>94</sup> As I will explore in the chapters on Acconci and Wilke, precisely because of the asymmetry of their relationship to the coherent, Cartesian subject of modernism (the modernist artistic genius), we tend to view the men and the women body artists from the 1960s and 1970s as having approached the problematic of intersubjectivity from vastly different positions. For feminists (especially white feminists),<sup>95</sup> who were far more daring than were the men in exposing their narcissism (in particular through their unveiled and explicitly sexualized bodies), there was much to be gained in the exacerbation of the breakdown of the “inner-directed” (male) subject, the opening of the self to the other. Male body artists often produced works that equivocated the opening of their bodies/selves to otherness (Acconci is unusual in his narcissistic self-exposure to the other); far more commonly, they refused to acknowledge their “other-directed” narcissism, either through irony or authoritativeness reinforcing the veiling of the male artist that has conventionally ensured his alignment with the “phallus” of artistic authority.<sup>96</sup>

Narcissism, enacted through body art, turns the subject inexorably and paradoxically outward. For understanding the vicissitudes of narcissism in relation to body art, it is useful to explore the way in which narcissism opens out the intersubjective dynamic. Narcissism can be understood as endemic to late capitalist commodity culture, which requires the “manufacture” of desire and the simultaneous turning outward of the self toward commodities and obsessive self-absorption, in a “disturbance” of the oedipal structures by which subjects (and male subjects in particular) have long attempted to project themselves into coherent selfhood in Western patriarchy.<sup>97</sup> On the one hand, this disturbance has been viewed in a positive light by feminists and other theorists interested in decomposing the structure of the nuclear family, with its attendant privileging of the normative (white, male) subject as sign of transcendence (keeper of the law). Lacan mapped this “disturbance” on a theoretical register by shifting the paternal law away from the actual father, who had anchored Freud’s formulation of the post-oedipal subject, to the social order (to the *law of the father*); other leftist critics of modern patriarchy, such as French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, have explicitly privileged the “decoding” of the oedipal structure as a potentially revolutionary freeing of desire.<sup>98</sup>

On the other hand, and not surprisingly, conservative critics have viewed this disturbance with alarm, as a marker of the anarchic dissolution of the nuclear family and the authority and coherence of (masculine) subjectivity in late capitalist Western culture. Consistently with Riesman’s formulation, Christopher Lasch’s best-selling 1979 book *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* extrapolates from the individual to the social,

labeling the contemporary U.S. subject (who is implicitly male) in terms that align him negatively with immanence and emasculation. The narcissistic subject of late capitalism demands immediate gratification and, like Riesman’s “other-directed” man, depends on others to validate his self-esteem (thus Lasch labels as negative a quality that I am situating as positive in its radical effects: the narcissist’s overt dependence on the *other* to negotiate his subjectivity in the world). “The narcissist,” Lasch writes, drawing on the work of Goffman, “cannot identify with someone else without seeing the other as an extension of himself” — without, he continues, “obliterating the other’s identity.” Lasch makes this argument on the basis of his assumption that the other has a stable identity that is thus being obliterated by the narcissist’s specifically *performative*, but ultimately stabilizing, projections.<sup>99</sup> I am suggesting here, through Merleau-Ponty, that such projection of the self is, rather, a marker of the *instability* of both self and other (of their chiasmic intertwining) and that this, from the point of view of those who have every stake in dislocating the mythological, transcendent self of modernism, is a positive thing.

Affirming the social activism of the rights movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, the critique of what Audre Lorde has called the “mythical norm” of Western subjectivity (“white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure”), body art *plays out* the narcissism that Lasch identifies negatively with the postwar, late capitalist dissolution of paternal authority and the nuclear family.<sup>100</sup> Body art, following Judith Butler’s recent formulation, proposes a performativity of subjectivity that situates the sexual self through a “reiteration of norms or set of norms”: particularly through the *reiteration of the narcissistic relation* through which the subject, in Lasch’s psychoanalytic terms, projects itself into its own image as other.<sup>101</sup> Through this narcissistic self-conception (which thus always entails the other), as Rosalind Krauss has argued, “[i]dentity . . . is primarily fused with identifications (a felt connection to someone else).”<sup>102</sup> The fundamentally narcissistic imaginary by which the subject constitutes itself, paradoxically in relation to others through a fixation on itself, *turns the subject inside out* (via a relation of reversibility), producing the body/imago as the image of the other (hence its threat to conservative culture theorists such as Lasch).<sup>103</sup>

Butler further theorizes that the reiteration of norms, which compels the subject to sustain itself in relation to particular bodily standards through specific identifications, also thus opens up the possibility for *disidentifications*. Thus, while the heterosexual imperative that still works to structure self/other relations in Western late capitalism enables certain sexed identifications and disavows others, a reiterative narcissism, which exaggerates the structures by which

the self attempts (and fails) to coalesce in the oedipal regime, may access the domain of *abject* beings who otherwise form the outside to the domain of the subject.<sup>104</sup> It is this domain of abject beings that I believe the most interesting body art projects to be enacting: women as (provisional) subjects, men who are openly ambivalent in their relationship to the phallus and particular in spite of their privileged masculinity, subjects who are otherwise not normative.

Through the citation or reiteration of heterosexist and sexist codings of men and women subjects, the narcissistic body artist instantiates what Butler identifies as the always *derivative* aspect of performativity: marking the fact that the subject is never fully coherent in her or his intentionality. This lack of certainty in the projection of intentionality is, of course, what enables my critical interventions in these practices in terms of a 1990s dislocation of the very conception of gender that underlies such work. Through the reiteration of norms (such as Mendieta's reiteration of the link between nature and the bodies of women and "primitive," "Third World" subjects), Butler argues, "sex is both produced and destabilized."<sup>105</sup> The sexed, raced, classed bodies of body art performers figure into this narcissistic regime in complicated and provocative ways; especially for feminist body artists, the narcissistic reiteration of the nude or partially nude female body exacerbates to the point of absurdity the Western fixation on the female body as object of a masculine "gaze" (it is the very narcissism of such performances that take this body back from such alignments and link it to the contingent but active subjectivity of the woman artist).

Rather than Brechtian distanciation, body art proposes *proximity*: as a critique exploring rather than repudiating the seductions of late capitalism through specific bodies that force the spectator's own narcissistic self-containment to account (through its reversibility) for the "other" of the artist as the artist accounts for her or his interpreters by performing specific bodies that force the interpreter to acknowledge her or his implication in determining the meanings of the artist/work of art. This proximity, the loss of distance between self and other that feminists such as Mary Kelly and Griselda Pollock have argued has served patriarchal modernism (and modernist art history) so well, also parallels and exacerbates the collapse of the distinction between public (the male realm of exchange values) and private (the female domain of use values) that characterizes late capitalism, and the collapse of the distinction between self and other that Riesman and Lasch lament.<sup>106</sup> As I suggest here via Mendieta and explore in relation to Hannah Wilke's work in chapter 4, it is no accident, then, that feminist body artists and artists of color—with their explicitly sexualized and specifically encultured performances of their embodied subjectivities—are perhaps the most obviously successful in engaging narcissism to radical ends (in

the terms I have laid out here), even as they collapse the distinction between subject and object in a way that is anathema to Brechtian-oriented feminists such as Kelly and Pollock.

Feminists have had much to gain from the narcissistic collapse of the boundaries between self and other, the distinctions between the public and the private, the difference between the signifier and signified itself. Through the narcissistic constitution of the self, as Lacan maps it in "The Mirror Stage," we can see how the *alienation* that many have identified as constitutive of the postmodern condition is marked as fundamental to the human condition such that, as Krauss states in "Notes on the Index, Part 1," "identity (self-definition) is primarily fused with identifications (a felt connection to someone else)." Such a recognition has the potential of overthrowing the paternal function, with its stake in maintaining the illusion of an untouchable transcendence rather than a fantasy forever bound up in the corporeal immanence of the other. In this way, Schneemann's, Kusama's, and Mendieta's narcissistic, corporeal displays can be seen as claiming the immanence and intersubjective contingency of *all* subjects (as well as the particular oppressive history of women's bodies/subjects) in white, Western patriarchy.

Because of body art's *exposure* of the contingency of the performing self, the narcissistic focus on the self by body artists—including the male artists—hardly confirms in any simple way the heroic genius (and "transcendence") of the artistic subject; nor does it align with the rather simplistic, loosely Freudian usages of the notion of narcissism as a regressive inability to go beyond self-relations to object-relations (an inability to attain "normal" adulthood, which Freud first identified with the "pathology" of homosexuality).<sup>107</sup> Body art splinters rather than coheres the self; far from assuring some presocial coherence of the self, body art enacts narcissism as contingency. Schneemann's, Kusama's, and Mendieta's externalization of their "lack" both exposes the masculinism and Anglocentrism of the coherent self and ironizes the immanence projected onto women in patriarchy. While they might well be accused, per the Brechtian antiessentialism of 1980s feminist art discourse, of narcissistically projecting their body/self through an assumed, idealist conception of the female body as conveying the truth of female experience, they might just as well be seen as radically opening that experience to the multiplicity of intersubjectivity through their performance of the *flesh* of the world.

The poststructuralist and feminist discussion of the destabilization of the subject in postmodernism, the contingency of the self on the other, the interconnectedness of body/self, and the materiality of the body as subject can be seen as describing a set of conditions that both *explain* (retroactively) and

*motivate* (precede) the effects of body art. Such formulations *make evident* what modernism has labored to conceal: the fundamental narcissism of the self and the contingency of this narcissistic self on its others. Within art discourse, the goal has been to align the art historian or critic with the artist as ostensibly reflected in the work of art and to cohere the art historian's sense of authority and sense of self through identification with the creative other, whose identity must be decorporealized—made transcendental—and fixed through masculinized and heterosexualized (not to mention imperialist and Anglo) tropes of genius and mastery. The mediated nature of the narcissistic body/self recognized by poststructuralism and feminism and played out in body art projects complicates this goal, pointing not only to the dissolution of the nuclear family, state authority, and the general authority of the paternal function (or Lorde's "mythical norm" of subjectivity) in late capitalism but also to the dissolution of epistemological certainty within disciplines such as art history.

Attending to the body of the artist (the body as enactment of the self)—as the body artists encourage us to do—is a way of pointing out the ahistorical nature of the framing enterprise of conventional aesthetic interpretation, which works to eliminate that body in any but its most reduced, objectified forms.<sup>108</sup> Once the body in representation is returned to the body in production and linked—through interpretive desire—to the bodies of reception, history and sociality return. The enactment of the artistic body (particularly that of the usually objectified female artist) enables the circulation of desire among subjects of making and viewing. This circulation of desire is historically and socially specific: while the subject of making is situated within particular relations of production that inform her or his products in various ways, each subject of viewing interprets the body art work in a manner specific to her or his particular desires, which in turn have developed in relation to her or his psychic and social contexts. Two embodied socialities and subjectivities come into contact (in phenomenological terms, into "being") through the body art work.

As I will explore in the following chapter, the body/self Jackson Pollock provides a pivotal point of contact for both modernists and postmodernists, serving as an ambivalent figure of both regimes. While modernists such as Clement Greenberg veil Pollock's narcissism (and their own) to confirm him as a unified source of divinely inspired intentionality, incipient postmodernists such as Happenings performer and theorist Allan Kaprow claim Pollock's performativity openly, emphasizing his *body* in its public display as central to the transformation of the art project into an open-ended process rather than a set of "mute" products that can be made to speak their true meanings only by privileged specialists through authoritative structures of interpretation.

## 2

## THE "POLLOCKIAN PERFORMATIVE" AND THE REVISION OF THE MODERNIST SUBJECT



In a 1951 issue of *Art News*, Robert Goodnough published "Pollock Paints a Picture," one installment in a series of essays on artists "painting a picture" or "making a sculpture." This essay describes Pollock's working process in terms that stress his uniqueness and genius ("creating his unique world as a painter [and] . . . penetrating nature to the core,"

Pollock produces "a sense of the freedom" of the American landscape in his work) and is accompanied by photographs of Pollock working by Hans Namuth.<sup>1</sup> These images, as mobilized in relation to the artistic subject across the following decades, signal a shift in the conception and enactment of this subject and his relationship both to the work and to the viewer. While other essays in the series often showed the artist at work in a relatively conventional manner (artist sitting with easel and other tools of the trade), the Namuth images of Pollock show him standing above or within his huge canvases, overtly and theatrically *performing* the act of painting in photographs that overwhelm the layout of the article rather than appearing as incidental illustrations of the text.<sup>2</sup>

Namuth's photographs, along with photos by Rudolph Burckhardt and others, were disseminated around the world in the 1950s through *Art News* and other venues.<sup>3</sup> Namuth's film *Jackson Pollock* (filmed in 1950, at the end of the same year in which the photographs were taken) was screened first in 1951 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, marking even more dramatically the performative dimension of Pollock's practice.<sup>4</sup> These images of Pollock in the act of painting presented art as a performance (that is, thus contingent on