

CONCEPTUAL ART AND FEMINISM

Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Wilson

By Jayne Wark

When feminist art emerged around 1970, Conceptual art was the prevailing art world practice, yet the relationship between the two remains largely unexplored.¹ Although many early feminists rejected Conceptual art, some, like Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Wilson, both drew upon and engaged in a critical reassessment of its concepts. These are not the only women artists whose works from the early 1970s can be considered within the parameters of Conceptualism, but what distinguishes them is their adaptation of its methodological premises to their growing awareness of the vital struggles of the civil rights and feminist movements, which in turn constituted a crucial shift in the notion of how art could have a critical social and political resonance.

Conceptual artists considered themselves cultural critics—of the prevailing modes of art production on the one hand, and of its larger system of display, reception, and commodification on the other.² With respect to the prevailing modes of art production, it was an aesthetic negation and refusal of modernism. As the historian Alexander Alberro noted, this self-reflexiveness carried “the implicit message...that art can only make meaningful statements about itself and the systems that determine its limits.”³ With regard to the system of display, reception, and commodification, Conceptual artists sought to establish a link between art practice and the ideological and institutional structures in which it is embedded. Described by Benjamin Buchloh as “institutional critique,” and associated primarily with artists like Dan Graham, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and Hans Haacke, this Conceptual approach endeavored to strip away the last vestiges of artistic transcendence and expose the previously suppressed fallacy of the sphere of artistic production as separate from the conditions of instrumentality and consumption that bear upon all aspects of social and cultural experience.⁴

But if this trajectory within Conceptual art signaled a move away from self-reflexive preoccupations, it must also be acknowledged that the political scope of its critique, at least in North America, was circumscribed by certain limitations and restrictions. Coinciding with the deepening social crises of the late 1960s and 1970s, this was a time when many artists confronted the dilemma as to whether they had a responsibility to engage directly with the contingencies of social and political reality in their art. Although this dilemma was extensively debated, Thomas Crow has argued that “any persuasive fusing between art and 1960s activism was unlikely from the start. The conceptual demands of advanced artistic practice had become so elevated that anything less than full-time application of one’s resources was unlikely to make a mark.”⁵ Crow attributed the general reticence to reprise the *engagé* relationship between art and politics that had characterized the historical avant-garde to a “stark choice...between the demands of ‘the Movement’ and the demands of a career in art, however radically conceived.”⁶ Buchloh, on the other hand, argued that, because “Conceptual Art was distinguished by its acute sense of discursive and institutional limitations, its self-imposed restric-

tions, its lack of totalizing vision, [and] its critical devotion to the factual conditions of artistic production and reception,” it resulted in a dystopian “disenchantment with those political master-narratives that empowered most of 20th-century avant-garde art.”⁷ Either way, what is evident here is a profound ambivalence about art’s capacity to bring about liberating change.

At precisely this historical moment, however, new forms of political understanding began to enter the art world, primarily through the agencies of the feminist and civil rights movements. Though aligned broadly with the New Left, the emancipatory struggles of these agencies made the participants aware of the limitations of class-oriented politics in accounting for how oppression and ideological control are embedded within all forms of social institutions—from the publicness of the art world to the privacy of home and family—and are thus experienced socially and at the subjective level of the individual. This new political understanding led inevitably to a skepticism among artists like Rosler, Piper, Antin, and Wilson about the adequacy of Conceptual art, with its insular focus on aesthetic debate, to articulate their emerging concerns with problematic social relations. They did, nevertheless, recognize the potential of subjecting Conceptual art’s strategies and methodological premises to modifications that would advance the fundamentally different critical ethos informing their work.

One of the earliest instances of such a modification is evident in the work of Martha Rosler (b. 1943). Born, raised, and educated in Brooklyn (she received a B.A. from Brooklyn College in 1965), Rosler attributes the strong public and political focus of all her work to her yeshiva education and her immersion as a teenager in the protest culture and leftist politics of the period.⁸ Even at this early age, Rosler was exhibiting the multiplicity of interests that has characterized her work: She was involved in New York poetry circles, painting in an Abstract Expressionist style, taking photographs on the street, and making photographic collages.⁹ These photomontages, influenced by Max Ernst’s Surrealist collage novellas as well as James Rosenquist’s painted Pop collages, used strategies of disjunction and distanciation to create socially critical images.¹⁰ For example, in the series *Body Beautiful*, or *Beauty Knows No Pain*, begun in 1965, lingerie advertisements are cut and pasted with body parts from *Playboy* magazine to reveal not only the objectification of female sexuality but its role as commodity sign as well.¹¹

These early photomontages established both the formal technique and political critique Rosler employed in another series from this period, *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*. Executed at the height of the antiwar movement (1969-72) and originally published in antiwar journals, these montages seamlessly spliced photographs of elegant homes with grim images of the Vietnam war, cut from the pages of *House Beautiful* and *Life* magazines, respectively.¹² Rosler’s series calls up direct associations with Conceptual art’s use of photography to question notions of visuality, pictorialism, and depiction by subjecting it to a self-reflexive critique aimed both to distance and complicate its relationship

to existing traditions of art and documentary photography. Specifically, Rosler's images address the "problematic of art-photojournalism," which Jeff Wall identified as crucial to the discourse of photoconceptualism.¹³ They draw some of their components from that quintessential model of photojournalism, *Life* magazine, yet they are permeated by a skepticism, even a cynicism, about such fallacies as "truth" or "mythic symbolism," which abound in documentary photography, especially war photography.¹⁴ Rosler's cut-and-paste method may also be aligned with what Wall referred to as the deliberate "de-skilling," or aesthetic reductivism, in photoconceptualism.¹⁵ Although Rosler's technique aligns her with the historical avant-garde tradition of appropriation and montage (via Hannah Höch), her placing of journalistic images taken from the chaotic tumult of a contemporary war theater within meticulously ordered domestic interiors creates not only a clash of images but a critical confusion between the static, ideal tableau of commercial pictorial photography and the instantaneity and unpredictability of the documentary's "jittery flow of events."¹⁶

This line of analysis reveals something of the extent to which Rosler's series draws upon Conceptualism's premises, yet sheds no light on what is actually contained within these images. First and foremost they are antiwar pictures, though by no means are they a mere exhortation on the tragedy of war. Playing upon the cliché of Vietnam as the "living-room war," Rosler's shattering intrusion of its belligerents and victims into the serene enclaves of suburban domesticity exposes the normally obscured, but irrevocable "web of connections between distant wars of conquest and the more subtle and ongoing class war at home."¹⁷ A terrified Vietnamese woman carries her dead baby up the stairs of a well appointed split-level in one image, while in another, *Red Stripe Kitchen* (1969-72; Fig. 1), armed American soldiers root around in a pristine kitchen. In the assumed domestic sanctuary of the middle-class home, we are confronted with our own complicity in the bourgeois aspirations that lay at the heart of the war. Nor does the complicity of the art world in sustaining these aspirations escape Rosler's withering scrutiny. Also in the series is *House Beautiful: Giacometti* (1969-72), an image of an art collector's luxurious home, with period furniture, Surrealist coffee table, Giacometti sculpture, and paintings by Delaunay and Cézanne. The slaughter of the "Yellow Peril" that lies just outside the windows starkly conveys both the cost and the justification for condoning a war aimed to protect such wealth and privilege by beating back the communist menace. Rosler asserts here what would become a recurrent theme in her art: The forces of domination and oppression played out within the privacy of home and family are inseparable from our more conventional understanding of their impact in the public sphere.¹⁸

The shocking juxtapositions in *Bringing the War Home* strip away the conventions of the liberal documentary, thus clearly aligning Rosler's series with a Conceptual problematizing of representation and pictorialism.¹⁹ Yet the artist's insistence upon subject matter is at odds with what Buchloh identified as photoconceptualism's ambition to situate "itself as much outside of all conventions of art photography as outside of those of the venerable tradition of documentary photography, least of all that of 'concerned' photography."²⁰ Nor do Rosler's images aspire to what Wall described as the notion of photoconceptualism as "a model of art whose subject matter is the idea of art."²¹ Indeed, their point is not to escape or find alternatives to the burden of depiction, but to frame the conceptual and ideological nature of representation itself. Rosler's war series thus stands at that historical juncture between Conceptualism's aggressions against pictorialism and the critical restoration of pictorialism "as a central category of contemporary art by around 1974."²²

The social crises of the early seventies also had a profound effect on the work of Adrian Piper (b. 1948, New York City). A precocious student with a diverse range of interests—literature, philosophy, music, the visual arts—Piper enrolled in New York's School of Visual Arts in 1966. During the summer of 1967 she also took courses at the City College of New York, where she met Vito Acconci and encountered a cultural milieu that fostered her developing interest in Conceptual art. In 1968 Piper began to produce Conceptual works such as the book folio *Here and Now* and the typescript work *Concrete Infinity 6" Square*, where the emphasis was shifted away from the object or medium to the idea of art as declarative proposition that generates its own self-reflexive system.²³ By 1969, already gaining recognition as a Conceptual artist, Piper had some of her pieces published in Acconci's *0 to 9* magazine, with others included in group exhibitions in New York and Europe.²⁴

In spite of this early success, Piper later recounted in her autobiographical study, *Talking to Myself*, that everything changed for her following a series of events that took place in the spring of 1970: the invasion of Cambodia, the resurgence of the women's movement, the brutal attacks against antiwar protesters at Kent State and Jackson State universities, and the student rebellion at City College, where she had just begun undergraduate studies in philosophy (she received her B.A. in 1974).²⁵ Her initial response was to revise the work she had planned for the "Information" show at the Museum of Modern Art and replace her submission to the "Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects" show at the New York Cultural Center with the following statement:

The work originally intended for this space has been withdrawn.... I submit its absence as evidence of the inability of art expression to have meaningful existence under conditions other than those of peace, equality, truth and freedom.²⁶

As Piper reflected on her "position as an artist, a woman, and a black," she found herself unable to express new concerns "in any aesthetic terms I had at my disposal." Her need to take account of what was going on around her led her to reject art that referred back to what she called "conditions of separateness, order, exclusivity, and the stability of easily-accepted functional identities which no longer exist."²⁷ She grew increasingly dissatisfied with the notion of art as an autonomous, "Kantian 'thing in itself,' with its isolated internal relationships, and self-determining esthetic standards."²⁸

Rejecting the idea of art as a mediation between the artist's creative process and the viewer's passive reception of it, Piper wanted to confront the viewer directly with her own unpredictable and uncontrollable presence so as to induce a reaction or change. Her first effort in this direction was an unannounced performance in April 1970 at Max's Kansas City, a popular hang-out for the New York art world. Wearing a blindfold, ear plugs, nose plug, and gloves, Piper walked around the crowded bar for an hour, speaking to no one (Fig. 2).²⁹ Her dual role as artist and art work allowed the entire artmaking process to be internalized in her rather than in a separate and discrete object. Her self-objectification turned her into a spectacle, but, paradoxically, this enabled her to function as a subjective agency capable of affecting change in others. She referred to this agency as a catalytic force that concentrated the entire artistic experience into a moment of confrontation in which "the work has no meaning or independent existence outside of its function as a medium of change. It exists only as a catalytic agent between myself and the viewer."³⁰

By the fall of 1970, Piper had developed these ideas further in her *Catalysis* performances. These took place in ordinary public settings because she wanted to preserve the impact and uncatego-

rized nature of the confrontation and avoid any association with an art context, which she felt would “prepare the viewer to be catalyzed,” thereby eliciting a predetermined set of responses and making actual catalysis impossible. In these works, Piper carried out normal, everyday activities but with alterations to her appearance, ranging from the bizarre to the grotesque. In *Catalysis I* she rode the subway at rush hour and went browsing in a bookstore wearing clothes that had soaked for a week in a putrid mixture of vinegar, eggs, milk, and cod-liver oil. In *Catalysis III* she painted her clothes, attached a “WET PAINT” sign, and went shopping at Macy’s, while in *Catalysis IV* she walked around Manhattan and rode the bus with a towel stuffed into her mouth and trailing down her front. In *Catalysis V* she signed out books at New York’s Donnell Library with a concealed tape recorder playing loud belches at full volume. What interested Piper in the *Catalysis* series was not only “letting art lurk in the midst of things,” but being both the subject and object of an art capable of provoking an active and undetermined response.³¹ Although people sometimes reacted to her street performances with hostility, Piper found that if she addressed people in ordinary ways (for example, by asking for the time or apologizing for bumping into someone), she could elicit a normal response. This was enlightening to her because it showed she could transcend “the differences I was presenting to them by making that kind of contact.”³²

Piper’s study of philosophy enabled her to articulate her artistic concerns more precisely as an investigation of subject-object relations between “myself as solipsistic object inhering in the reflective consciousness of an external audience or subject; and my own self-consciousness of me as an object, as the object of my self-consciousness.”³³ In *Food for the Spirit* (1971), Piper documented the metaphysical and physical changes she underwent during a period of isolation and fasting while reading Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. In response to her anxiety that she was disappearing into a state of Kantian self-transcendence, she periodically photographed her physical self, either nude or nearly so, in front of a mirror while reading passages from the *Critique* into a tape recorder. By thus documenting herself as the embodied object of her philosophical inquiry, Piper simultaneously made explicit her own particularized subjecthood as a black woman.³⁴ As Maurice Berger noted, this marked a shift away from the aesthetic privileging of the mind over the body and of the intellectual over the corpore-



Fig. 1. Martha Rosler, *Red Stripe Kitchen* (1969-72), color photomontage, 24" x 20".

al, a shift more decisive than in any other Conceptual artwork of the period.³⁵ Although *Food for the Spirit* was a private performance, Piper’s disavowal of artistic autonomy soon led her to return to the problematics of the external world and what would become an ongoing preoccupation with the social negotiation of racial identity. Recognizing that even her passive presence posed a threat to a racist society, Piper sought to engage the viewer in a direct interaction with her own subjectivity.³⁶ As she explained: “I identify myself... as a conceptual artist working with political concepts in a variety of media.”³⁷ Moreover, she describes her approach as a “methodological individualism” that ensures that the idea/work cannot be separated as a discrete object from herself as the conceptual generator of its meaning.³⁸

As is evident from Rosler’s and Piper’s work, Conceptual art offered women artists a potent resource of methods and strategies. But, at the same time, Conceptual art’s dominant preoccupations posed considerable limitations to the articulation of many feminist concerns, such as Rosler’s insistence upon the previously unexamined links between the public sphere of politics and the private sphere of domestic life. Similarly, the subjective basis of Piper’s work ran counter to Conceptualism’s prohibition against subject-centered inquiry as part of its general critique of modernist individualism.³⁹ This prohibition was and is problematic for many women artists politicized by feminism because, as Nancy Miller has pointed out, it perhaps “prematurely forecloses the question of identity for them.”⁴⁰ In fact, many feminists are suspicious about the motivations of those who proclaim, from a position of power and privilege, “the death of the author,” at precisely that historical moment “when women have just begun to remember their selves and claim an agentic subjectivity.”⁴¹ Miller also noted that the death of the authorial subject was aligned with the decentered, disoriginated, and deinstitutionalized position of the feminine at a time when, for women, “the condition of dispersal and fragmentation that Barthes valorizes (and fetishizes) is not to be achieved but to be overcome.”⁴² Thus, for women in the early 1970s, questions of subjectivity and “otherness” were just beginning to take on crucial significance.



Fig. 2. Adrian Piper, *Untitled Performance at Max’s Kansas City, NYC* (1970), black-and-white photograph, 16" x 16". Photo: Rosemary Mayer.

For Eleanor Fineman Antin (b. 1935, New York City), the questions of subjectivity and otherness led to an ongoing inquiry into the diverse formations and representations of identity.⁴³ As early as 1965 Antin had explored the “essence” of identity in her *Blood of a Poet Box*, a work in the Fluxus mode,

containing 100 glass microscope slides of poets' blood in a wooden box. The work refers to Jean Cocteau's film, *Le Sang d'un poète* (1930), which exalted the fantastical inner life of the creative artist, but, by contrast, Antin's blood smears reveal nothing about the individual poets.⁴⁴ Concluding that biology was neither identity nor destiny, Antin began to investigate identity as a confluence or fragile link between self-definition and the forces of social interaction. After moving to San Diego in 1969,⁴⁵ Antin produced *California Lives*, a series of "portraits" of individuals (some real and some invented), each consisting of artifacts of consumer or domestic culture and a typed character sketch. Although these portraits were cryptic, their rebuslike configurations anticipated the narrative structure and psychological exploration that dominated her later work.

In 1970, with the advent of the feminist movement in the arts, Antin made a second series, *Portraits of Eight New York Women*, which she installed in a room at New York's Chelsea Hotel (Fig. 3). Like the *California Lives* series, these portraits were not representational likenesses but were assemblages composed of objects suggesting the character and professional role of each woman. In this case, all the portraits were of real people, several of whom, like Yvonne Rainer, were well known art world figures. This evocation of both their personal and professional attributes directly challenged the "selective traditions" of an art world that invalidated the private and the personal—especially as they pertained to women—as "unproductive" and irrelevant to the "public" importance of art.⁴⁶ Moreover, the fact that these were portraits *in absentia* may also allude to the suppression of women's self-representation with this system of authority in which "woman" was ubiquitously present as the object of representation, but only as "a mediating sign for the male."⁴⁷

This absence of presence was, of course, one of the defining issues for feminist artists struggling for recognition and self-definition during the 1970s. Although much of the work from that period has been repudiated for its supposedly essentializing belief that a "true" female identity or "sensibility" could be discovered, a closer scrutiny reveals that feminist thinking about questions of identity was far more complex and sophisticated than such reductive criticism suggests.⁴⁸ Indeed, given that women were seeking political emancipation and agency just as the privilege of subjectivity and authorship



Fig. 3. Eleanor Antin, *Portraits of Eight New York Women* (1970), 1998 installation, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Photo: Zind/Fremont. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

and defining my self...[as] the Ballerina, the King, the Black Movie Star and the Nurse."⁴⁹ By slipping into and out of these characters, both as artist and person, Antin confounded the distinctions between art and life, fiction and reality, acting and being. One day she was the King, swilling beer with his surfer-subjects at Solana Beach; on another she was Nurse Eleanor, aiding the sick and wounded in the Crimean War, or the great prima ballerina, Eleanora Antinova, preparing for her New York premiere. The job of the Black Movie Star was not to *be*, but to *act*, and so in that role she played all of her other characters, thus blurring reality with layer upon layer of fiction.⁵⁰

The fluidity of Antin's movements between these shifting positions underscored her rejection of "the usual aids of self-definition—sex, age, talent, time, and space" as "merely tyrannical limitations upon my freedom of choice."⁵¹ The autobiographical origins of Antin's characters bound them to herself, but no matter how complete the transformation, a gap always remained between herself and her personae that signified her subjectivity not as being but as the agency of being. This foregrounding of imposture was characteristic of much feminist performance at the time. As Robyn Brentano wrote:

*Concern with showing the contingencies of identity and representation of women led to a kind of doubly-aspected performance in which the artist was both herself and other. In many works, the performer conveyed both an air of authenticity and falseness of her inscribed identity. Performance used disruptive strategies to reveal the multiplicity of selves required of women in daily life.*⁵²

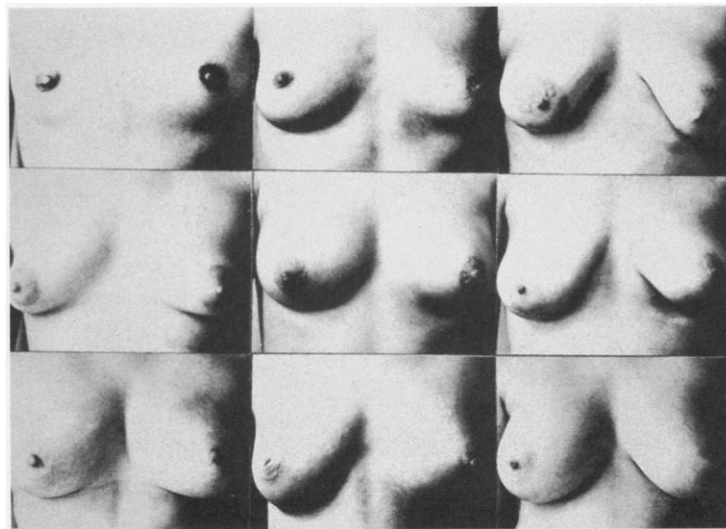


Fig. 4. Martha Wilson, *Breast Forms Permuted* (1972), black-and-white photograph and text, 4 1/2" x 6".

By thus counterposing authenticity and artifice and dissembling fixed distinctions between being and acting, Antin asserted the growing conviction that femininity was simultane-

ously a role that women played and a position that determined how they experienced the world.

Antin was among the nine women included in "Reconsidering the Object of Art." This is ironic, since her insistence upon irrationalism, narrative, fiction, and embodiment went against the structural/linguistic grain of Conceptual art, with its general repression of those practices that were "of performance, of the body."⁵³ But inasmuch as Antin stressed temporality and process over object-making, her performative work was fully commensurate with Conceptualism's broader tendencies as chronicled in 1973 by Lucy Lippard in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. Yet, as Lippard noted more recently, even though the "inexpensive, ephemeral, unthreatening character of the Conceptual mediums themselves...encouraged women to participate," and they were given a degree of support by male colleagues, that support was often in the form of "lip service."⁵⁴ In reality, women artists still faced formidable difficulties in having their work recognized as legitimate art at all, let alone as legitimate even within the broadest definitions of Conceptual art.

This struggle for legitimacy was played out by Martha Wilson (b. 1947, Philadelphia) at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD), Halifax, during the early 1970s, when it was an important center of Conceptual art. Having graduated in 1969 with a major in English literature and a minor in art from Wilmington College in Ohio, Wilson came to Halifax to do graduate work at Dalhousie University. She completed her M.A., but dropped out of the Ph.D. program in 1971 after a dispute with her supervisor, and then took a job teaching English at NSCAD. The Conceptual orientation at NSCAD opened up new possibilities for Wilson, who said "it was an unbelievable revelation that visual art could consist of language."⁵⁵ She immediately began making language-based art works in the spare, laconic mode of people like Lawrence Weiner or John Baldessari, but her work differed radically from theirs in that hers dealt not with abstract aesthetic concepts but with propositions about genetic and cultural relationships between parents and offspring:

Unknown Piece: A Woman under ether has a child in a large hospital. When she comes to, she is permitted to select the child she thinks is hers from among the babies in the nursery.

Double Piece: Two couples agree to have babies and trade them. The real parents are in no way permitted to interfere with the upbringing of their child.

Along with eight other linguistic propositions, these two examples were part of a series Wilson called the Chauvinistic Pieces (1971), a title that is itself an indictment of the alienation she experienced as a woman and artist.⁵⁶

By 1972 Wilson was using herself as the subject of an inquiry into identity formations. Though no feminist community existed at the time in Halifax, and certainly not at the College of Art and Design, Wilson's explorations of gender constructs as fluid and potentially transformative exactly paralleled the kind of work feminist artists were then doing across North America. Her works consisted of textual propositions about identity or appearance, which Wilson enacted by making herself up in different guises and then documenting the outcome in color photographs. In *Posturing: Drag* (1972), Wilson set out to discover how "form determines feeling" by posing as a man who had made himself up as a woman, while in *Captivating a Man* (1972), she posed as a man enhanced by make-up in "a reversal of the means by which a woman captivates a man

[because] the man is made attractive by the woman...captivation is emasculation." In other pieces she investigated the characteristics and limitations of her own identity by subjecting herself to the objectifying process of self-scrutiny. In *Painted Lady* (1972), she used makeup to mask her own features so that a "range of possible expression, of unaccustomed attitudes can fill this vacuum; absence of self is the free space in which expression plays."⁵⁷

Wilson concluded from these investigations that since identity was not singular or fixed, "artmaking [could be] an identity-making process...I could generate a new self out of the absence that was left when my boyfriends' ideas, my teachers', and my parents' ideas were subtracted."⁵⁸ This realization focused her attention on the difference between how she felt during the process of transformation and how she appeared in the resulting photographs. In 1974 she documented the process of transformation itself in a video entitled *I Make Up the Image of My Perfection/I Make Up the Image of My Deformity*. Using make-up, the optimum tool of feminine perfectibility, Wilson sat before the camera and made herself up to bring out her best features and then her worst. Her (spoken) descriptions of her actions underscored the tenuousness of any assumed congruence between identity and appearance. Identity is thus seen as a kind of representation, as the masquerade of femininity that film theorist Mary Ann Doane described as the artifice of the surface, "the decorative layer which conceals a non-identity."⁵⁹

Despite the significance of Wilson's achievements, she felt treated like an outsider at NSCAD, that "there was no recognition that [what she was doing] could be art, let alone that it was art." Critical commentary amounted to such insights as, "serious art is only made in black and white, and women don't make it anyway." During one of his visits, even Vito Acconci dismissed her work as "self-indulgent and irrelevant."⁶⁰ Wilson first received recognition for her work in 1973, when Lippard included *Breast Forms Permutated* (1972; Fig. 4) in "c. 7,500" at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, the first and only exhibition of Conceptual art by women.⁶¹ Like all the works in this exhibition, *Breast Forms* is a postcard work. On the back is a textual proposition referring to various shapes of women's breasts (conical, spherical, pendulous, etc.), while the front consists of photographs of nine different pairs of breasts arranged in a modernist grid with the theoretically "perfect set" in the center. While *Breast Forms* may be seen as a characteristic example of an early feminist parody of the objectification of women's bodies, it also functioned as a critique of Conceptualism's "rigorous elimination of visibility" at a time when women artists were beginning to assert the political importance of investigating and problematizing representation itself.⁶²

The works of Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Wilson indicate that there indeed existed a vital interaction between the precepts of Conceptual art and emerging feminist efforts to challenge prevailing values and authorities within and beyond the art world. The extent to which these artists drew upon Conceptualism's aesthetic and critical strategies negates any predilection to portray the crucial differences in their concerns and approaches as simply constituting a counter-paradigmatic practice. Nevertheless, it is evident that the priorities of the Conceptual paradigm militated against the articulation of many feminist concerns. This underlying conflict of values was sometimes expressed with open hostility, but it also existed at more subtle levels. For one thing, Conceptual art's denial of subject-centered inquiry and the downgrading of the personal was problematic for new social groups seeking to articulate their experiences and redress existing relationships of power and inequity. For another, Conceptual art's emphasis on the perceptual withdrawal of visibility was not conducive to questions about how women and others are seen within the "regimes of representation" that structure

power and powerlessness along lines of difference.⁶³ And finally, in order for those women to make connections between their aesthetic practice and the social and political imperatives that informed it, it was necessary to move outside the abstract, self-reflexive, and disembodied investigations that had dominated Conceptual art.

Although the works of Rosler, Piper, Antin, and Wilson deviated substantially from what some consider to be Conceptualism's central premises, that deviation is precisely the point. In order for hitherto silenced voices to find a place from which to speak, the dominant cultural narratives and discourses must be dislocated. The dialogue these voices took up with Conceptual art can tell us much, not only about how certain of its strategies were adapted to the work of these four artists but about how their work challenged its limitations and questioned some of its principal values. ●

NOTES

1. In 1995 Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer curated "Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975," an exhibition of Conceptual art held at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. Fifty-five artists were included, of whom nine were women, but, as David Joselit noted in his review of the exhibition and catalogue of the same name (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1995), no analysis was made of how the women's methods, strategies, and goals may have differed from those of their male counterparts; see "Object Lessons," *Art in America* (February 1996), 70. The best source of information about early feminist and Conceptual art is Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: Dutton, 1976).

2. See also the published roundtable discussions, "The Reception of the Sixties," *October* (Summer 1994), 3-21, and "Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp," *October* (Fall 1994), 127-46.

3. Alexander Alberro, in review of "Mel Bochner: Thought Made Visible 1966-1973," *Artforum* (February 1996), 81.

4. Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* (Winter 1990), 136-43.

5. Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent* (New York: Abrams, 1996), 179. The question of the artist's political role was discussed in numerous publications from the period, including "The Artist and Politics: A Symposium," and Philip Leider, "How I Spent My Summer Vacation," *Artforum* (September 1970), 35-39, and 40-49, respectively; Dore Ashton, "Response to Crisis in American Art," *Art in America* (January-February 1969), 24-35; Lucy Lippard, "The Dilemma," *Arts Magazine* (November 1970), 27-29; Jeanne Siegel, "Carl Andre: Artworker, in an Interview with Jeanne Siegel," *Studio International* (November 1970), 175-79, and "The Role of the Artist in Today's Society," *College Art Journal* (Summer 1975), 327-31. See also the proceedings of the debates of the Art Workers' Coalition, *Art Workers' Coalition Open Hearing, April 10, 1969* (New York: Art Workers' Coalition, 1969).

6. Crow, *Rise of the Sixties*, 180.

7. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969," 141.

8. See Benjamin Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler," in Catherine de Zegher, ed., *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 23-30, the catalogue for her 1998-2000 traveling exhibit organized by the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England.

9. Rosler's work from the 1960s to the present has encompassed performance, video, photography, installation, postcards, and books, as well as critical writing. Her refusal to develop a signature style or adhere to a particular medium has rendered her somewhat invisible to the institutionalized art world and its critical apparatuses; see Alexander Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life"; in *ibid.*, 79.

10. For a discussion of the importance for feminist artists of such "dis-identificatory" practices, derived ultimately from Bertolt Brecht's theories of spectatorship, see Griselda Pollock, "Screening the Seventies, Sexuality and Representation," in her *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge,

1988), 155-99. See also, Alberro, "Dialectics of Everyday Life," 76.

11. This series is illustrated in *Positions in the Life World*, 147-51.

12. Among the publications where Rosler's antiwar montages appeared was *Goodbye to All That* (October 13, 1970), a feminist newspaper in San Diego. See Laura Cottingham, "The Inadequacy of Seeing and Believing: The Art of Martha Rosler," in M. Catherine de Zegher, ed., *Inside the Visible* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 163. In 1968, Rosler had moved to San Diego, where she worked in the publishing industry and expanded her political involvement by speaking to high school and community groups on antiwar and feminist issues. Through such work Rosler developed her commitment to address various publics, an ideal she has discussed in numerous essays, such as "The Birth and Death of the Viewer: On the Public Function of Art," in Hal Foster, ed., *Discussions in Contemporary Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987), 9-15. In October 1991, ten images from the antiwar series were exhibited in an art context for the first time, at the Simon Watson Gallery in New York.

13. Jeff Wall, "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," in *Reconsidering the Object of Art*, 251.

14. Brian Wallis, "Living Room War," *Art in America* (February 1992), 105.

15. Wall, "'Marks of Indifference,'" 258-63.

16. *Ibid.*, 249.

17. Wallis, "Living Room War," 107.

18. See Jan Weinstock, "Interview with Martha Rosler," *October* (Summer 1981), 90. Significantly, as Rosler told me during an interview, May 4, 1996, she produced these images at her own kitchen table after doing the washing up and putting her son to bed. Rosler says that the domestic interiors in the antiwar series also relate to the feminist concerns invoked in *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain*; see Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler," 47.

19. See also Martha Rosler, "In, Around and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)," *Three Works* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981), 59-86.

20. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969," 122.

21. Wall, "'Marks of Indifference,'" 258.

22. *Ibid.*, 266.

23. Adrian Piper, "The Logic of Modernism," *Flash Art* (January-February, 1993), 58. For Piper's early thoughts on Conceptual art, see "My Art Education" (1968), in her *Out of Order, Out of Sight, I* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 3-7.

24. See Adrian Piper "Untitled," *0 to 9* (January 1969), 49-52, and "Untitled," *0 to 9* (July 1969), 79-81. Her work was included in exhibitions at the Dawn Gallery and Paula Cooper Gallery in New York, and at the Städtisches Museum Leverkusen, and the Kunsthalle Bern. See Adrian Piper, "Personal Chronology," in Maurice Berger, ed., *Adrian Piper: A Retrospective* (Baltimore: University of Maryland, 1999), 188.

25. Adrian Piper, *Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object* (Bari, Italy: Marilena Bonomo, 1975), 38-39.

26. Quoted in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 168. Piper's statement was not published in the *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects* catalogue.

27. Piper, *Talking to Myself*, 39-40, 53.

28. Quoted in Lucy Lippard, "Two Proposals: Lucy Lippard Presents the Ideas of Adrian Piper and Eleanor Antin," *Art and Artists* (March 1972), 45.

29. Piper's *Untitled Performance at Max's Kansas City, NYC* was documented in six black-and-white photographs taken by her friend, Rosemary Mayer.

30. Piper, *Talking to Myself*, 53.

31. *Ibid.*, 54, 47.

32. Adrian Piper, in Lippard, "Catalysis: An Interview with Adrian Piper," *From the Center*, 170. Photographs of the Catalysis performances were taken by Rosemary Mayer.

33. Piper, *Talking to Myself*, 62.

34. The photographic documents and artist's statement of this performance were first published in Adrian Piper, "Food for the Spirit, July 1971," *High Performance* (Spring 1981), 34-35. In Lorraine O'Grady's estimation, Piper's naked self-portraits signaled "the catalytic moment for the subjective black nude"; see "Olympia's Maid," in Joanna Frueh, Cassandra Langer, and Arlene Raven, eds., *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 155.

35. Berger, "Styles of Radical Will: Adrian Piper and the Indexical Present," in *Adrian Piper: A Retrospective*, 18.

36. Piper's engagement with Kantian philosophy serves as the foundational grounding of her work. She wants to reconcile Kant's moral theories, which posit the self as dependent upon a rationally consistent and coherent view of the world that enables experience to be assimilated into a priori categories, with her awareness of how people respond to difference (e.g., race, gender, class) by making what she calls "pseudorational defences." Piper's intent is certainly not to celebrate difference, and she repudiates those deconstructionists who denigrate Kant's values of universality because they "ignore much of what we all have in common as human beings, the cognitive capacities we actually share." See Berger, "The Critique of Pure Racism: An Interview with Adrian Piper," in *Adrian Piper: A Retrospective*, 91. For a poststructuralist reading of Piper's work, see Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998), 162. Jones acknowledges the conflict between Piper's views and her own, 303, n. 43.

37. Letter from Adrian Piper, April 28, 1996.

38. Adrian Piper, "Xenophobia and the Indexical Present," in Craig B. Little and Mark O'Brien, eds., *Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990), 289.

39. The rejection of the primacy of individual subjectivity has been frequently noted in recent discussions of Conceptual art; see, for example, the roundtable discussion "Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp," 140-44, and Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969," 139-40.

40. Nancy K. Miller, "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader," in Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1986), 106. Miller's concerns are also valid, of course, for other socially marginalized groups.

41. See Jane Flax, "Remembering the Selves: Is the Repressed Gendered?" *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 26: 1 (1987), 106; Susan Brown, "Where is the Sex in Political Theory?" *Women & Politics*, 7: 1 (1987), 3-23; and Nancy Hartsock, "Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories," *Cultural Critique* (Fall 1987), 187-206.

42. Miller, "Changing the Subject," 109.

43. Antin received a B.A. in 1958 from the City College of New York, where she studied creative writing and art while also taking acting classes. She also studied phenomenology at the New School for Social Research. This nexus of interests is central to Antin's work.

44. Antin underscored the enigmatic indeterminacy of the *Blood of a Poet Box* in an interview with Cindy Nemser: "You could read the names of the poets with these smears of blood on a slide. If you thought there was a relation between the blood and the name there was one; if you didn't there wasn't." See Cindy Nemser, "Eleanor Antin," in *Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 278.

45. Antin moved to San Diego with her husband, David Antin, who had accepted a position teaching critical studies at the University of California, San Diego. She has been on the faculty there since 1975. Her California Lives are briefly discussed and illustrated in Howard N. Fox, *Eleanor Antin* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999), 26-31.

46. Francis Frascina, "The Politics of Representation," in Paul Wood, et al., *Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties* (New Haven: Yale University, 1993), 82, 165.

47. Lisa Tickner, "The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists since 1970," in Rosemary Betterton, ed., *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media* (London: Pandora, 1987), 237.

48. The critical and historical reception of early feminist art has recently begun to be reassessed. See especially, Amelia Jones, "The 'Sexual Politics' of *The Dinner Party*: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 84-118. While this reassessment is needed, Jones's argument is problematic. First, it is contradictory in that she maintains that the appraisal of 1970s feminism as "essentializing" is false since it belies the actual multiplicity of feminist art of that period, while she also argues that the "essentialism" of Chicago and others "was a crucial component of 1970s identity politics." (99) Further, she attributes the derogatory use of this term to British feminist art historians like Griselda Pollock and Lisa Tickner, who, Jones claims, used it as a basis for rejecting "1970s feminist art from the United States." (98) In my view, not only does this represent the worst kind of partisan nationalism, it replicates the kind of oversimplification Jones ostensibly seeks to redress.

49. Eleanor Antin, "Dialogue with a Medium," *Art-Rite* (Autumn 1974), 23-24.

50. As Howard Fox has noted, Antin "retired the Black Movie Star after one exhibition, quickly realizing the limitations of making skin color a determinant of character," although she did reintroduce blackness in the persona of Eleanor Antinova, the Black Russian ballerina; see his *Eleanor Antin*, 72.

51. Quoted in Lippard, "Making Up: Role-Playing and Transformation in Women's Art," *From the Center*, 105.

52. Robyn Brentano, "Outside the Frame: Performance, Art, and Life," in *Outside the Frame: Performance and the Object* (Cleveland: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 1994), 49-50.

53. Buchloh, "The Reception of the Sixties," 18. As Frazer Ward has noted, however, there was considerable overlap between Conceptual and performance art, especially in the early 1970s; see his "Some Relations between Conceptual and Performance Art," *College Art Journal* (Winter 1997), 36-40.

54. Lippard, "Escape Attempts," in *Reconsidering the Object of Art*, 23. Lippard's views are echoed by Piper: "In those days, conceptual art was a white macho enclave, a fun-house refraction of the Euroethnic equation of intellect with masculinity. Christine Kozlov and I were the only women admitted, and we were perceived as mascots"; see her "Some Very Forward Remarks," in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, 1, xxxv.

55. Interview with Martha Wilson, April 12, 1995.

56. The Chauvinistic Pieces, which consist of two pages of typescript, were included in the exhibition "Conceptual Art...The NSCAD Connection, 1967-1973" (Anna Leonowens Gallery, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, 1994).

57. These quotations are from the accompanying texts for these pieces, which were provided to me by the artist. For a more detailed discussion of Wilson's early work, see my article, "Martha Wilson: Not Taking It at Face Value," *Camera Obscura*, 45 (2000).

58. Quoted in Lippard, "Making Up," in *From the Center*, 106.

59. Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," *Screen* (September/October 1982), 81.

60. Interview with Wilson.

61. The title, "c. 7,500," comes from the approximate population of the town. Lippard curated a series of exhibitions during this period titled to coincide with the venue's population.

62. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969," 107.

63. Janet Wolff, "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics," in her *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990), 138.

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