

ANNETTA KAPON

TOO MUCH NOT ENOUGH

1992

aluminium

60 x 12" diameter

Courtesy: the artist

FROM DADA TO MAMA

FEMINISM, THE READY-MADE AND CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

MARGARET MORGAN

Against the 'hard masculinities' of science and industry, visual art conventionally takes the place of the feminine. In the last century the 'feminine' has been invoked in production as consumption; in discussions of the Ego, as the Id, and in modernism, as the decorative. The little masculinity of visual art, however, is then sustained by its distinction from the so-called feminine spheres of the body, the domestic and the decorative in a series of relative hierarchies.

Modernism has its 'alibi of abstraction'¹ and the relations between modernism, decoration, gender and the rhetoric of art history are conventionally rendered marginal. Running threads from surrealism, dada and seventies radical feminism to their antecedents in the assisted ready-mades of some contemporary artists working in the U.S. and in Australia, I will argue for the historical centrality of feminist practices. This is not a revisionist history but rather a reprieve to what is still, lest we forget, a remarkably unimpeded hegemonic discourse.

¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*. Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1990, p. 164

FRILLY BITS

The decorative has not always taken the brunt of such derision. Frilly bits, decorative effects, shiny fabrics have at least since the Renaissance been trophies that signify the power held by a ruling class. In seventeenth century Holland² the more opulent the tapestry, the more detailed the *meister werk*; the more craftspeople and work-hours required to render an object, the more prestige attributed their patrons. In nineteenth century Europe, the more flurried the home-decorating of the bourgeois wife, the more elaborate her *petite point*, the more detailed her flower painting, the more shining a reflection of the luxury and privilege wrought by her husband's enterprise³. But as the power of a dominant social class waned, these *frilly bits* were used as evidence against that class on their basis of their feminine assignation. As modernity advanced and capital found markets elsewhere, the bourgeoisie was vilified in terms of their *modesty* and the decorousness of their domestic

² Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing, Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984

³ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses, Women, Art and Ideology*. New York, Pantheon, 1981, pp. 50 - 81

lives. Thus, it is in the flux of shifting power that the *spectre* of femininity haunts the discourses of modernism. Indeed, the bourgeois home, ideally Man's Castle, but always femininity's seat, is characterized as cyclical, repetitive and stable, and is, by definition, antithetical to the avant-gardist, modernist paradigm of rupture, change and usurpation. Clement Greenberg, rather later and across the Atlantic, reiterated:

Decoration is the specter that haunts modernist painting.⁴

⁴ Clement Greenberg, 'On Milton Avery', *Art and Culture*, Boston, Mass, 1961.

Formalism argued its superiority in terms of superseding the European tradition of easel-painting as part of a regime for the adornment of European bourgeois interiors, as if the new home for Modern Art, the Modern Museum, was not itself a bourgeois institution: So much carping about the old order at the expense of *domestic* space.

DRIVE STRIVES FOR TOTAL CLEAN

Modernism is about cleaning up. It's a place where industry is efficient, capital rational; where we look at Art in square white plaster cubes and eat burgers from square white styrofoam boxes; where outside is outside and inside in; where plumbing invisibly carries away our shit and vacuum cleaner lint never touches our fingers⁵. The rhetoric that is used to naturalise white as neutral, unadorned as good, and efficiency as most desirable — all of which takes a lot of work — is the rhetoric of the aesthetics of high modernism and of an idealised domestic space. In a Taylorist model of manufacture, workers are but cogs in the wheels of industry to be streamlined and maximised in output as any other component machine. In the home, idealised woman is the transparent keeper of the lore that seamless streamlined interiors are natural and elegant. It takes lot of invisible work, usually women's, as housewife or head of household or cleaning lady, to maintain all that whiteness, to maintain the seamlessness of its design, to repeatedly, endlessly, polish its surfaces, stow away its gadgets, wipe down its spills.

⁵ see my 'Cleaning Agents' and 'Portrait of Modern Art as Sanitary System', from the exhibition *Portraits of Modern Men (Lost We Forget)*, William Mora Galleries, Melbourne, June 1993

In a piece by Michele Beevors, *Guess Who's Mum's Got a Whirlpool*, of 1993, she asked her mother to save all the empty containers from her household cleaning for one year. The bottles and canisters, brightly coloured and lit from behind, are stacked to fill an oversized entrance to what could be an adult-sized dolls' house. The disposable detritus of a Merrylands home, doubly banished from high cultural practice on the strength of its class and gender significations does, indeed, taking Greenberg at his word, come home to haunt the hallowed vaults of High Culture. No longer useful, these empty vessels become the decorations of a modernist nightmare. By the late nineteenth century bourgeois domesticity and women's place in it was reified by consumption and the rise of the department store. Indeed, a stroll through the

magazine was as close as a respectable woman got to the female equivalent of a *flaneur*⁶. By the late twentieth century consumer capitalism is pitched to the flimsiest of markets sustained by working class women just able to buy the next bottle of Mr. Kleen in an endless cycle of disposable, high volume products bought at the supermarket. This economy's detritus becomes the siphon by which tells this very different tale of consumption. Her *bottle collection* is a monument to untalented labour, to behaviours, which, were they not legitimated by the aesthetics of an idealised cleanliness, would be deemed obsessive. Conventionally transparent, domestic labour is made concrete by this *unwholesome* retaining of that which is normally discarded. Yet the deliberateness of this excess leaves little room for the dismissal of artistic expression as madness. No *l'amour fou*, this fascination is about taking a *good look* at that which is usually invisible and as such, bears the legacy of an earlier generation of feminist practitioners that has been so easily and so conventionally overlooked. In the 1973 performance piece *Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Maintenance Art Activity III* by Mierle Laderman Ukeles⁷, the artist, on hands and knees, scrubs the floors of the Museum, allows people to track up more dirt and then cleans it again, and again, all the while accumulating the used rags in a pile at the site. Her performance in public of *unsightly* domestic duties points to the degree to which the activity of *tidying up*, and its ramifications for women and working people, is antithetical to the tidy spaces of the Museum. Too firmly rooted in a *real politic* for poetic invocation Ukeles' work (sic) suffers history's oversight, only to be reinscribed by Beevors, whose used cartons turn Pop's bright and celebratory fascination with packaging into a contemporary testimony to unacknowledged domestic labour.

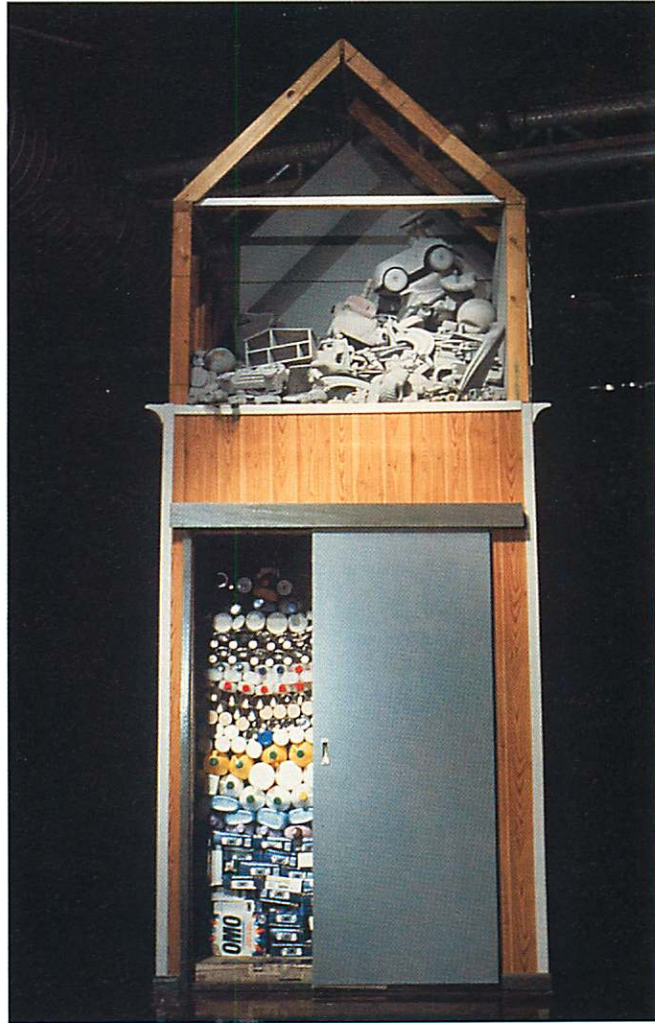
⁶ Thomas Crow, 'Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts', in ed. Francis Francina, *Pollock and After, the Critical Debate*. London, Harper and Row, 1985, p. 242

⁷ Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Maintenance Art Activity III*, performed at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn., July 22, 1973

In the small sculptural work of Los Angeles artist Nicole Eisenman, commonplace cartons appear with venerable Pop mainstays like the Brillo box, which, stripped of its iconic status, is returned to being just one more packet from the supermarket shelf. Eisenman fabricates toy-sized *Formula One Race Cars* from these cardboard consumerables. Though purchased from different aisles, each carton bears a marker for obsessive cleanliness, be it bodily or household, like so much modern rhetoric: Purex, Cascade, Stayfree. The toy cars made from these cartons clutter the floor like the play things of a young boy. While feminism has given license to label masculinity as infantilised, Eisenman's assisted ready-mades mark the drive that links this infantilism to consumerism, cleanliness and modern domesticity. Masculinity is to household consumerism as modernism is to the domestic: both dominant marginalise that upon which they are utterly dependent.

A STITCH IN TIME

Half a generation before Michelle Beevors asked her mother to collect the



MICHELE BEEVORS
**GUESS WHOSE MUM'S
GOT A WHIRLPOOL** 1993
installation and detail
wood, plaster, newspaper,
tiles, laundry detergent packs
approx. 2 m x 1 m x 0.6 m
Photograph: Maria Stukoff
Courtesy: the artist



NICOLE EISENMAN

FORMULA ONE RACE CARS

1993

cardboard

approx 15 x 28 x 25 cm

Courtesy: Shoshana Wayne

Gallery, Santa Monica, L.A.

Private collections

refuse of her cleaning habits, Elin Slavick's mother was collecting her daughter's childhood dresses of her own accord. The ordinarily repetitious nature of domestic life leaves little but snapshots as its record and the impulse otherwise to retain is deemed compulsive, obsessive, as if the desire for a more concrete history is madness. That the work of mothers has been turned into art by their daughters is not to conflate the two but rather to elucidate that which tacitly is passed from one to the other. For women who reared children in the fifties the impulse to retain and reify is rather poignant. Middle class women in particular had the financial means to materially as well as psychologically invest in their children. They had margin enough to accumulate objects and bric-a-brac and, as their daughters' opportunities slipped ineluctably from their own life experience, had the drive to do so. For their daughters, the desire to collect their mother's unacknowledged collecting habits is particularly strong. Indeed, it is no accident that mainstream feminism has been a predominantly middle-class movement. Be that as it may, Slavick recuperates the clothes her mother kept in a piece entitled, *A Wall of Incoherent Dresses*, that is at once a history of the artist's pre-adulthood and a history of unspoken longing. The artist's psychic investment in these histories is articulated in the verses she stitches onto the displayed collection, most clearly so in the second to last dress on the wall. The embroidered words read: *I want my mother's tongue*. Embedded in the possessive construction, Slavick's *mother's tongue* bespeaks ownership rather than attribution. In a culture that privileges the law of the father this declarative *tongue of one's own* demands the unspeakable: a sexualized voice that links mother to daughter in a line eliding the paternal. It is only in the sense that it is in defiance of phallogocentric prohibition that *A Wall* is incoherent.

In Maureen Conner's piece, *Ensemble For Three Female Voices*, three generations of voices over-run one another in a Cixious-esque interplay. Wordless expressions of joy, amusement, distress and need loop through the space. In conjunction with the audio track the installation comprises three microphone stands. Upon the top of each stand has been mounted an entire tongue fashioned from lipstick. Under the hot lights these organs of speech melt, ooze and rub against a surrounding curtain, smearing the fabric with a vivid cerise. While the enclosure suggests both a hospital ward and a department store fitting room, at each suggestion there is an interdiction: There is sound without words; voices without bodies; microphone stands with no instrument; organs without flesh; lipstick without lips; a ward without patients; a dressing room without patrons. That the body is absented from Connor's work is crucial. Woman is at once signifier of excess and of lack, as Tania Modleski puts it, 'at once only body and no-body.'⁸

Connor's work suggests the absented performance and body art of their feminist predecessors such as Carolee Schneemann, Marina Abramovic and Yvonne Rainer, whose work of the seventies so emphatically addressed the

⁸ Tania Modleski, *The Incredible Shrinking Ho(r)man, Feminism without Woman: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age*. London and New York, Routledge, 1991, p 103

characterization of woman as body. If twenty years before, feminists used their bodies as the place from which they as women could work, contemporary feminists address the very construction of the body as feminine. While feminist interventions of this sort do not exhaust the scope of the inquiry, they are, none the less, crucial to its history. In this light Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document* becomes a crucial interface between conceptualism and body-art.

THE BABY AND THE BATHWATER

Growing up learning an art history from which they, as women, inevitably have been distanced, Janine Antoni, Annetta Kapon and Rachel Lachowicz share an ambivalent relation to their artistic roots. The confluence of feminism, modernism and post-modernism has produced a critical ambivalence about these historical formations. This is not to suggest that gender is the privileged signifier of difference; of course such distancing can be argued on the basis of any number of factors that mitigate against an artist's unequivocal identification with the history of their practice. It is my concern here, none the less, to address the work of artists who continue a critique of modernist practices on the dual bases of feminism and post-modern criticality. Susan Rubin-Suleiman writes of the suppressed knowledge of Surrealism in terms of the continued invocation of woman as trope against which to argue the claims of Surrealist radicality.⁹ What does it mean for a practitioner who is a woman to have as many of her number floating above, a la Man Ray's 1924 photograph of the *Surrealist Centrale*, as seated amongst, the founders of the movement?

⁹ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent, Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1990, pp 20

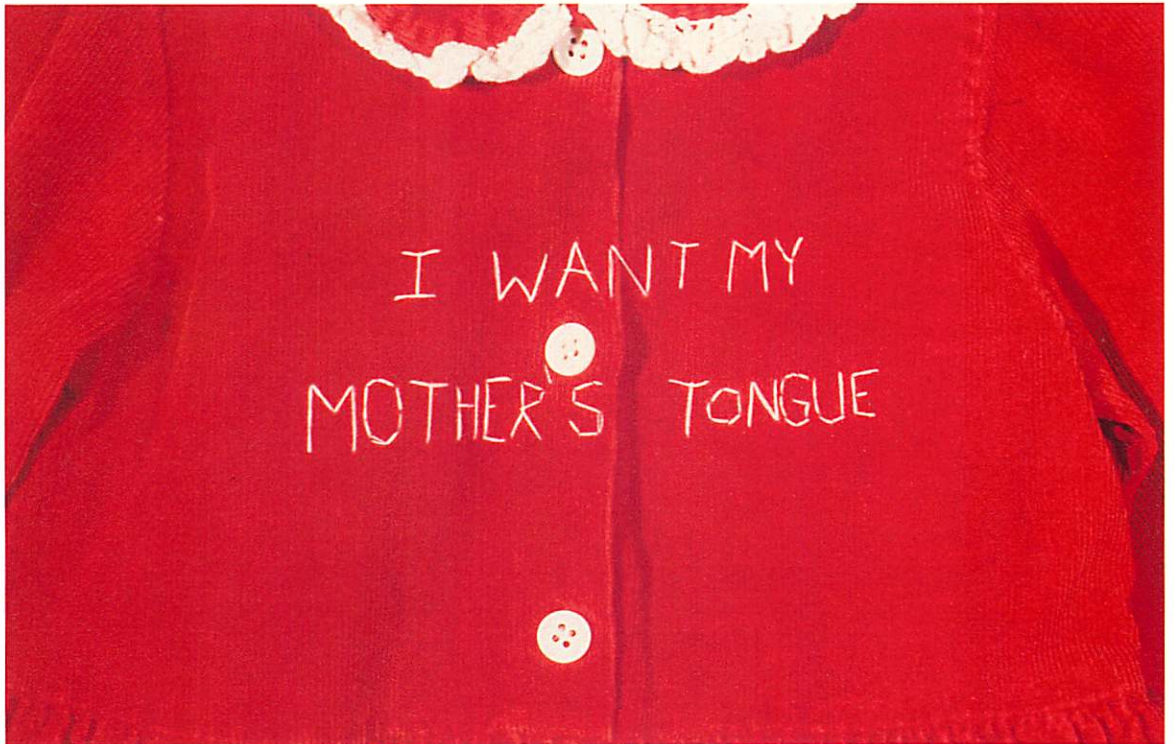
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I believe that men, since creating patriarchy, that is, since the devaluation of the female, projected the femininity inherent in themselves, which is regarded as being inferior, onto woman. This means for the women that they have to live their own femininity plus the femininity projected onto them by the males. They are therefore *females squared*.¹⁰

Oppenheim's image of woman-as-cubist-construct ironically sheds light on the question. What then, are the implications for contemporary practitioners who draw upon the not insignificant legacy of art history but whose work is also informed by a feminist criticality? Rachel Lachowicz' urinals, made of tomato red lipstick, reinscribe their canonical status as High Art, to which she as artist is inevitably and ambivalently tied, while pointing to their specifically masculine assignments. Just as his nineteenth century predecessor was, by definition male, a dandy who could stroll through the spaces of modernity, so too the twentieth century artist who grabbed objects found in his reach, coat hangers, urinals, *a bride stripped bare*, was a man. While dada's relation to gender is complicated, the play of signification, none the less, tends to run patrilineally.

¹⁰ Meret Oppenheim, quoted in *Old Mistresses*, op.cit., p 144

Janine Antoni's *Gnaw* takes minimalism's blank cube and literally eats away at



Elin Slavick

A WALL OF INCOHERENT

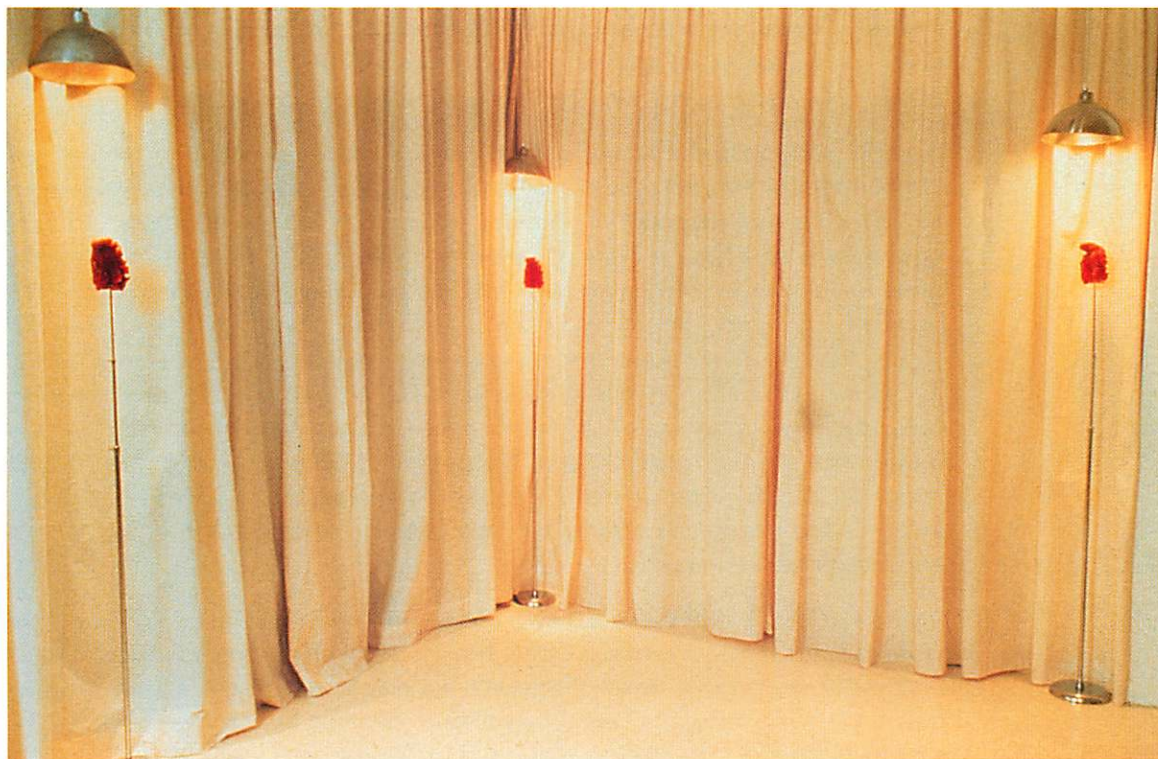
DRESSES 1991

installation and detail

15 dresses, embroidered text,

approx 3 m x 7 m

Courtesy: the artist



MAUREEN CONNOR

ENSEMBLE FOR THREE

FEMALE VOICES 1990

*lipstick casts of the human
tongue and larynx,*

steel stands, muslin, audio

4 m x 3.2 m x 3.2 m overall

sound in collaboration

with Lisa Love

*Courtesy: Germans van Eck
Gallery, New York*

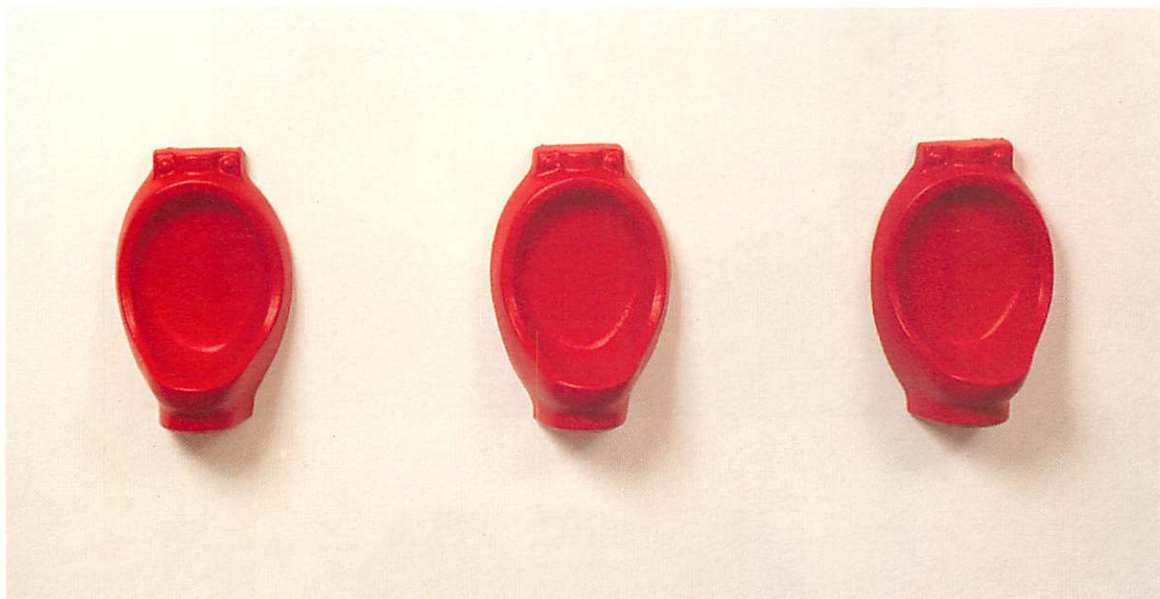
its totalising symmetry. Her cubes are 600 pounds of chocolate or lard. Rat-like, she gnaws corners from the sculpture, leaving drag marks of her teeth in the soft surfaces. The masticated discard is then placed into chocolate box moulds or manufactured into lipsticks which are together displayed in a discreet corner, like so many sentimental samples at the cosmetics counter of David Jones. In form *Gnaw* references minimalism; in materials, Beuys; and in concept feminism and the anteriority of woman to the discourses of modernism and modernity. Turning the convention around, modernist aesthetics become the tropes by which the artist articulates the impossible longing of a bulimic female body, always too much and not enough, that endlessly bites off more than it can chew, only to regurgitate it as the very consumerables that are its undoing.

Annetta Kapon's *Floor Scale*, a floor piece comprising bathroom scales laid out in a modernist grid across the gallery floor, implicates the *universal* viewer as one who is obsessed in one way or another with their weight. Though bathroom scales have a particular resonance in the conventions of femininity, these ready-mades are taken from their usual context so as to implicate the purported neutrality of minimalist form. Like *Floor Scale*, Rachel Lachowicz' *Color Chart #4 (Eyeshadow Series)*, comprising eye shadow pats employed to the same ends as Ellsworth Kelly's rectangles of coloured paper, takes the wind out of the sails of her historical mentor. From a distance or in reproduction the panels look like so much rehashed formalism. On closer scrutiny, *Color Chart* suggests that the fascinations of the Canonical Artist are no more and no less those of the cosmetics display and that beauty, charade and illusion are of equal significance in both.

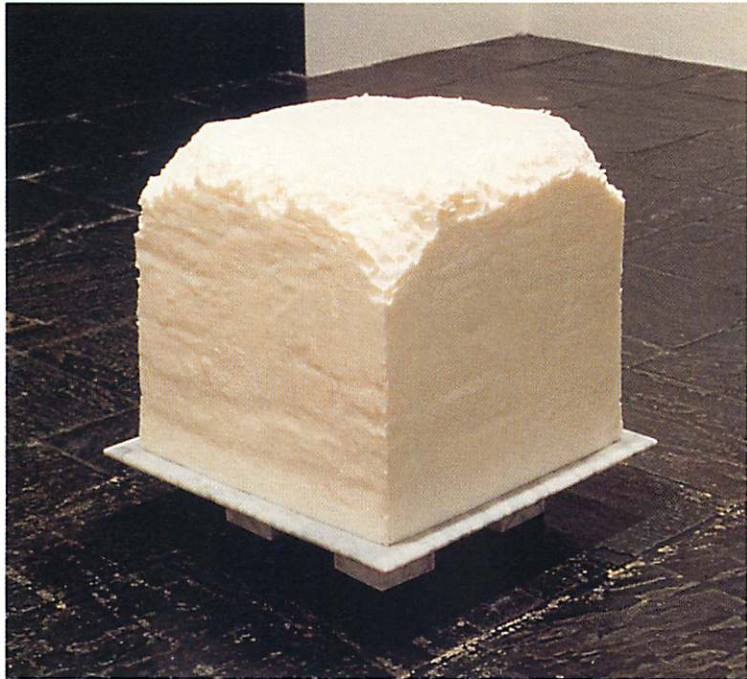
An impossibly tall aluminium cooking pot stands in the middle of a gallery like a Doric column, like a minimalist plinth, like the cook's undoing. Not dissimilar to Lachowicz and Antoni, Annetta Kapon's surrealist use of the assisted ready-made turns modernism's characterisation in on itself by articulating minimalist principals through the manipulation of quotidian female-associated household objects. Entitled *too much not enough*, this piece articulates the relation of tropeic woman to modernity, to the idealizations of domestic space, to the production of minimalism, to the endlessness of domestic labour: echoing Modleski's observation, this figure is doomed always to be too much and not enough. Within the tropes of modernism, black, woman, anyone deemed alien or peripheral to modernist practice is characterised simultaneously as lacking or deficient and as excessive or out of bounds.

AIRING LINEN

Ann Hamilton's installation entitled *still life*, includes a mountain of men's white shirts, each gilded with brocade and singed at the edges, piled onto a table, as if the repetitive activities of ironing and decorating had completely spilled



RACHEL LACHOWICZ
UNTITLED (URINALS) 1992
ipstick, wax
each 15 x 9 x 6 inches
Courtesy: Shoshana Wayne
Gallery, Santa Monica, L.A.





JANINE ANTONI

GNAW 1992

three part installation:

Lard Gnow

lard and marble base

36 x 27 x 27 inches

Chocolate Gnow

chocolate and marble base

36 x 27 x 27 inches

Lipstick Display:

Phenylethylamine

heart shaped packages for
chocolate, made from chocolate
removed from Chocolate Gnow;
Lipslick, lipstick made with
pigment, beeswax and chewed
lard from Lard Gnow
approximately 84 x 96 x 96
inches overall

Courtesy: Sandra Gering
Gallery, New York

Saatchi Collection, London

over to a state of obsessive and *useless* excess. The interior walls of the room in the Santa Barbara home where it was installed were covered with neatly arranged eucalyptus leaves, filling the room with a fragrance that suggests the exteriority of such an ostensibly interior space. Here inside is not necessarily inside nor outside out. In an anecdote about the personal significance of her piece, Ann Hamilton tells of the woman who lived in the house having continued to press her husband's shirts long after his death. It was only when a friend of the woman one day removed the accumulating shirts and made them into a quilt for her that the spell finally was broken. What is the difference between this kind of repetition and those other repetitions, heroised for their rationality, such as the plastic mould, the standardised format, the assembly line, Taylorism? Indeed the histrionic impulse to heroise standardisation in industry while reviling it in domestic labour points to the inconsistency of that very order.

OUT OF ORDER

It is important to admit that not all these New strategies are really new.... and an earlier generation of feminist artists used female-associated craft-like practices to subvert standard codes. But many of these earlier occurrences were scattered, obscure, or ignored, appearing briefly, then disappearing, influencing few other artists directly.¹¹

11 Bill Arning, '(strategies of) The Anti-Masculine (Overlapping but not corresponding to the feminine)', curatorial essay. Kim Light Gallery, Los Angeles, 1992, p. 6

12 for a detailed account see: William A. Camfield, 'Marcel Duchamp's Fountain, Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917', eds. Mary Ann Caws and Rudolf E. Kuenzli, *DaDa! Surrealism*, No. 16, 1987, pp. 64 - 94

13 Sander L. Gilman, 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature', ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 'Race', *Writing and Difference*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 223-261

The characterization of an earlier generation of feminists as obscure or fleeting is hardly a distinction in the history of art. As if that daddy of dada, R. Mutt's *Fountain*, wasn't obscure. Indeed the origins and whereabouts of Duchamp's famous urinal are to this day *cloaked in mystery*. How is it that this fleeting *objet* has attained such canonical status in spite of its obscurity?¹² What makes one obscure object mysterious and another merely forgotten?

The implication in Bill Arning's analysis, that historical memory is contingent, is taken up in the work of Renée Green. In an untitled work on paper from 1990–91, she *explored* the relation between the constructions of Victorian womanhood and the Hottentot Venus. A recovered history, the piece is a series of simple but telling juxtapositions that reference Sander Gilman's account¹³ of a nineteenth century African woman who was paraded around Europe for five years before she died at the age of twenty-five. The woman was immortalized in the Musée de l'Homme, Paris, where, to this day, her dissected genitalia are still housed. In Green's juxtaposition, the European woman and the African woman are leveled in as much as modern man, apparently obsessed with buttocks, not only invented the bustle for the European female but invented the study of *steatopygia* to describe the buttocks of the African female. Green's ready-made histories undo themselves only with effort, testimony as they are to the occlusions of the official story.

LEST WE FORGET

If the first major Pop artists had been women, the movement might never have gotten out of the kitchen. Then it would have struck those same critics who welcomed and eulogised Pop Art as just women making more genre art. But since it was primarily men who were painting and sculpting the ironing boards, dishwashers, appliances, food and soap ads or soup cans, the choice of imagery was considered a breakthrough.¹⁴

Disconcertingly, some twenty years later Lippard's observation still rings true. Indeed, many visual arts practices sprung from a nascent radical feminism are the invisible conduits that, by any other name, would be deemed central to contemporary cultural discourse. The Woman's Building in Los Angeles in the early seventies exemplified radical departures from modernist authorship in terms of appropriation, collaboration and quotation, yet has been given no historical credence at all. In the name of post-modernism the ready-made has been championed as a founding moment in twentieth century art history that emphatically by-passes seventies feminist uses of the ready-made on the way back to dada. Thus, in the eighties our historical memory stretched, for instance, via Baudrillard, from Sherrie Levine to Marcel Duchamp. In fact, the very emphasis on Duchampian *objet trouvé* reinscribes the privileging of the originary moment at the expense of histories of reception. Much more recently than dada, seventies feminist practitioners employed assisted ready-mades and installation. Yet these practices have been refused their place. Why is it that seventies feminism is treated with such disdain? How is it that that body of work is shunned as if unclean? As Lippard states, when installation is about the concerns of a 'special interest group', like women, it doesn't count. Thus 'Womanhouse', the 1972 environmental piece developed in the Cal. Arts Feminist Art Program, headed by Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro, is extraordinary for its radical formal innovations, those things much touted in the dominant culture, yet its historical significance is conventionally denied. All the more disconcerting is the contemporary feminist dismissal of such work on the basis of its *essentialism*. It would be useful for feminists to reconsider the period in terms of Stuart Hall's advocacy of 'five minutes of strategic essentialism' and, thereby, give our history (ourselves) a break. Contemporary feminist cultural practice must leave room for its own historical precedents, which is not to say that critique cannot exist but rather that such critique must also allow for historical contingency. This active forgetting, this historical amnesia, is an extremely dangerous condition that lends itself to an endless loop, a cultural holding pattern out of which it becomes difficult to move.

My analysis of these few artists is hardly exhaustive; it is only the very tip of a much larger project. Indeed one striking feature of artists who *ambivalently* identify with art historical models and feminist precursors is that most of the artists I know who are working in this area are white, though not all from the same class, ethnic group, sexual orientation or gender. This suggests that both cultural feminism and *ambivalence* about a history learnt as one's own is itself a position of privilege and it is in this aspect that this paper remains an entirely unfinished business.

¹⁴ Lucy Lippard, *Ms.*, 1, No. 9, March 1973



ANNETTA KAPON

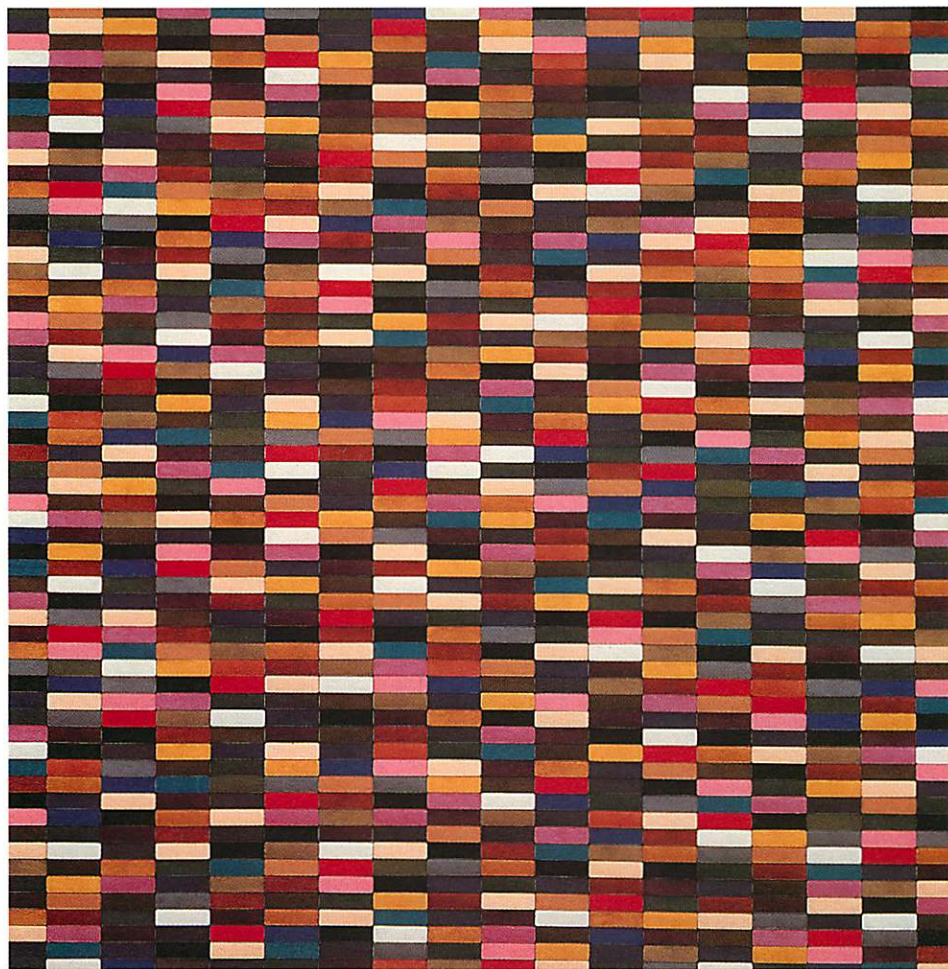
FLOOR SCALE 1991

bathroom scales

each scale 10 x 10 inches,

total dimensions variable

Courtesy: the artist



RACHEL LACHOWICZ
COLOR CHART #4,
(EYESHADOW SERIES) 1992
eyeshadow, aluminium
48 x 48 inches
Courtesy: Shoshana Wayne
Gallery, Santa Monica, L.A.



ANN HAMILTON

STILL LIFE 1988

installation and detail

table, 800 white dress shirts,

singed and gilded on the edge,

leaves, etc.

dimensions variable

Courtesy: Museum of

Contemporary Art, San Diego