

Which makes it interesting. Because while you don't have a choice about what you *are*, you have a choice about what you show. You always have a choice about whether you "out" yourself.

Sexual and ethnic frankness are related in so far as they may be repressed or expressed. The latter is the course of Alderman's novel and its lesbian protagonists. When Dovid takes up his role as religious leader of the Orthodox community, with Esti as his publicly lesbian wife, romance and polymorphous perversity finally find a fictional place within mainstream Judaism.²⁴

Conclusion

This essay has surveyed some sexual concerns of contemporary British Jewish novelists. Although such concerns are related to ethnicity, it should be stressed that they are by no means restricted to Jewish novelists. Ian McEwan, Pat Barker and Alan Hollinghurst are among a host of British novelists focusing on sex and sexuality today.²⁵ Nor is it a new development. Simon Blumenfeld in *Jewboy* (1935), Bernice Rubens in *Madame Sousatzka* (1962) and Clive Sinclair in his collection of short-stories *Hearts of Gold* (1980) represent some of the lineage of British Jewish fiction featuring sex. Further, much remains to be explored on this subject in contemporary British Jewish drama and poetry. The playwright Patrick Marber and poet Joanne Limburg, for instance, are fascinating in this regard. My essay offers only a fragment of what deserves to be studied in wider generic, ethnic and national contexts.

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Chapter Ten

"Barbie's Jewish roots":

Jewish Women's Bodies and Feminist Art

Lisa E. Bloom

Introduction

This chapter examines some of the possibilities and problems currently haunting the subject of Jewish participation in the making and the history of feminist art in the United States and the United Kingdom and the explicit role gender, the body, and sexuality plays in these concerns. Sander Gilman's work on *Difference and Pathology* (1985) and the *Jew's Body* (1991) is critical here since he argues that abject sex is used historically to mark Jewishness as "other". He charts this history in his analysis of the sexualization of nineteenth-century urban prostitutes in Europe examining how Jewish women were marked as both lower class and sexually abject. Gilman's work on tracing the history of anti-Semitic discourses that associated Jewish identity with disease, a pathological sexuality, and non-middle-class status is provocative and has not been adequately explored in relation to women and feminist art to understand how the renegotiation of Jewish feminist artists also entailed an examination of issues of their class and sexuality.

Sexuality is understood to encompass how people experience and express themselves as sexual beings. As Michel Foucault wrote in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge* (1976), the concept of what activities and sensations are "sexual" is historically (as well as regionally and culturally) determined, and it is therefore part of a changing "discourse". He goes on to explain that the construction of sexual meanings is an instrument by which social institutions (religion, the educational system, psychiatry) control and shape human relationships.

Following Foucault, this chapter discusses the way artists raise questions about the regulation of Jewish women's, and, in some cases, gay men's bodies and sexualities through both historical anti-Semitic discourses, as outlined by Gilman, as well as more recent ones, and the visual strategies they employ to articulate Jewish self-consciousness and engage with aesthetic questions. Jewishness in the context of this chapter stands for a cultural identity rather than a strictly defined religious one, and for a

shifting set of historically diverse experiences rather than a unified and monolithic notion of Jewishness. This piece will also draw on research completed in my book, *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* (2006), that examines the unacknowledged but powerful roles of assimilation and Jewish identity in US Jewish feminist art, but will take further some of its insights in relation to the new context established by this anthology. The artists' whose art work I will discuss include Rhonda Lieberman (USA), Deobrah Kass (USA), Rachel Garfield (UK) and Ruth Novaczek (UK).

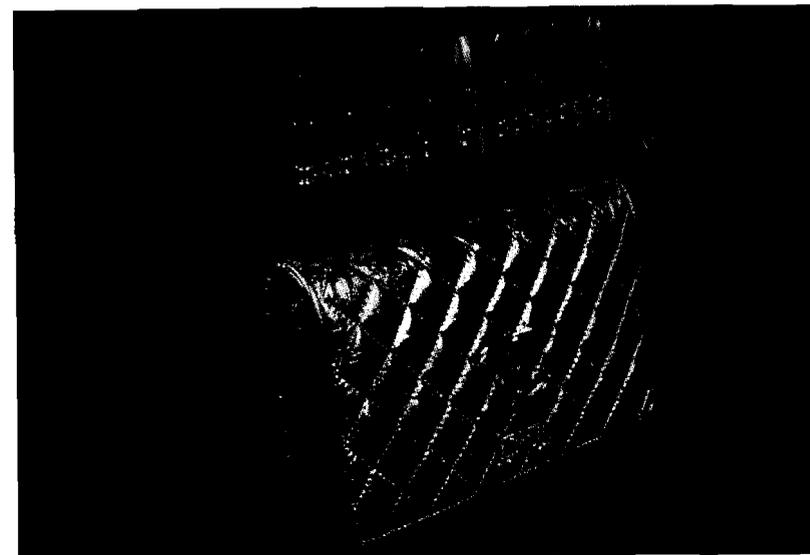
Until the 1990s, public discussions of Jewishness and sexual identities in the New York art world were very rare given how the arts at that time were dominated by a white, heterosexual male power structure. Given the power of the anti-Semitic discourses which Gilman writes about and which underscore the idea that Jewishness was seen as an undesirable pathology, the anxiety about making Jewishness visible was felt widely among secular Jewish-Americans particularly in the second half of the twentieth century following the Shoah, and continues to create a generational fault line among Jewish artists and critics of both genders. To expose the erasure of Jews and their sexuality in the art world in 1991 and the artists' own participation in that, artists Rhonda Lieberman and Cary Leibowitz put together a landmark exhibition titled *Fear of a Jewish Planet: Let my People Show!* at Four Walls Gallery in Brooklyn, New York. This was followed in 1996 by a major exhibition and catalogue curated by Norman Kleeblatt appropriately titled *Too Jewish?: Challenging Traditional Identities*, presented at the Jewish Museum in New York. Part of what made both exhibitions so important was that it touched on the issue of how Jews historically were trying to pass as non-Jews not only in the art world but also for each other, at a time that the AIDS pandemic and the culture wars were dividing art communities in the United States around the issue of homosexuality. Some Jewish artists were out in the art world if they were homosexuals or lesbians but somehow it wasn't acceptable for them to be out also as Jews.

Rhonda Lieberman and Deborah Kass: Popular Culture as a Therapeutic Ally

Rhonda Lieberman, a New York artist and essayist who had her work exhibited in the *Too Jewish* exhibition in 1996, scripts

herself very much in terms of her suburban Jewish-American identity. The Jewish values set forth in her parents' home were intensely secular and liberal but, as she puts it, "It was okay to be a 'person of the book' as long as you made a good living!" When she entered the doctoral programme at Yale, she deviated from familial expectations since a career as an academic was not considered lucrative enough. What is significant about the artwork and writing of Lieberman, is the way her work consciously keeps the tension of what she refers to as the "conflicted space" alive, and how she refers to it as an integral part of her "Jewish experience". This tension is then presented visually in her provocatively titled *Chanel Hanukkah* from 1991, which she did for the *Fake Chanel* show with gay artist Cary Leibowitz.

In this work, the artists teamed up to take on the constructed image of Jewish women and gay men as the embodiments of a vulgar and un-erotic Jewish materialistic identity and to parody this stereotype by using overt Jewish content as well as designer products as part of their strategy. Using a fake Chanel bag, they fashioned a Hanukkah *menorah* from it using nine designer lipsticks as substitutes for candlesticks. The force of the work comes



Rhonda Lieberman and Cary Leibowitz, Chanel Hanukkah, mixed media, 1991. Courtesy of the artist.

from its subversion of the sacredness of the Jewish holiday by eroticising the *menorah* through material consumer objects that are associated with fashion rather than religion. In addition, there is a tension between critical distance and humour in the work. The artists express how they are caught between self-identifying as secular Jews and feeling entrapped by derogatory stereotypes of secular Jews as materialistic. Indeed, in this artwork Lieberman and Liebowitz are trying to open up another space of Jewishness outside of the religion from which they can throw stereotypes of being “conspicuous consumers” back at the audience, at the same time, they express a more ironic Jewish identity through this kind of public gesture.

Such is also the case with her *Jewish Barbie* series a humorous lament over a frustrated Jewish princess who has “body image issues” and undergoes a “healing journey” to repair her sense of self. Ran in “Glamor Wounds”, the provocative column that launched her career at *Art Forum*, her satirical narrative details the life of Jewish Barbie a creation spawned from the story that Barbie was invented by a Jewish woman, Ruth Handler, and was named after her daughter Barbara. Dissatisfied with the depressing “real” story of Barbie, Lieberman writes her a new origin story:

...born, in 1959, in a parallel universe an *Other*. Barbie emerged with all the qualities *repressed* from the Barbie we have come to know in our one reality system; for example: Barbie — blond, Jewish Barbie — brunette or frosted; Barbie — no thighs, Jewish Barbie — thighs; Barbie — mute, Jewish Barbie — whines incessantly about perceived injustices. Jewish Barbie is not evil, merely *repressed*; the conscious system we call “reality” can’t recall where it has stored her information.¹

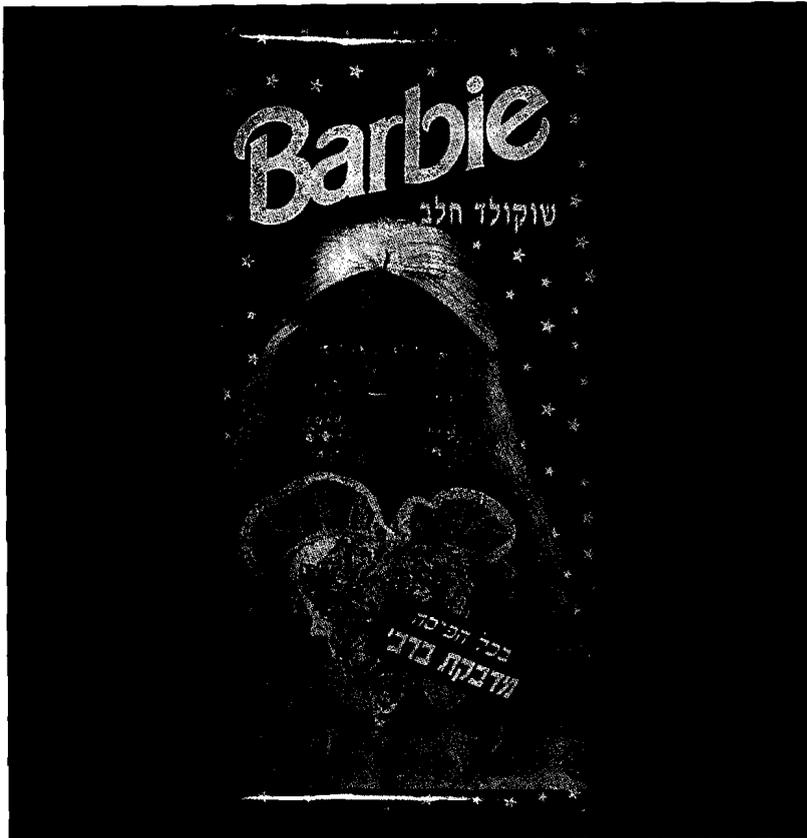
Fascinated by the idea of “Barbie’s Jewish roots”, Lieberman tells a satirical narrative about this “other” Barbie, though traumatised by birth she eventually succeeds to become “a beaconness of Jewish glamor in a world hostile to multitalented strong women”.² The piece conveys a wry and ironical story about the set of choices that propelled Jewish Barbie to come to terms with her psychological and physical alienation from a materialistic, normalised Barbie, using tongue in cheek humour to mock any simple notion of “liberation” in her attempts to repair her psyche/sense of self from what is after all a plastic



Rhonda Lieberman, *Portrait of Rhonda Lieberman*, photo credit: Dana Byerly, 1995. Courtesy of the artist.

character. After all, Jewish Barbie, like Barbie herself, is a plastic character.

Deborah Kass is an appropriation artist who, along with Lieberman, was a key participant in the Jewish Museum’s *Too*

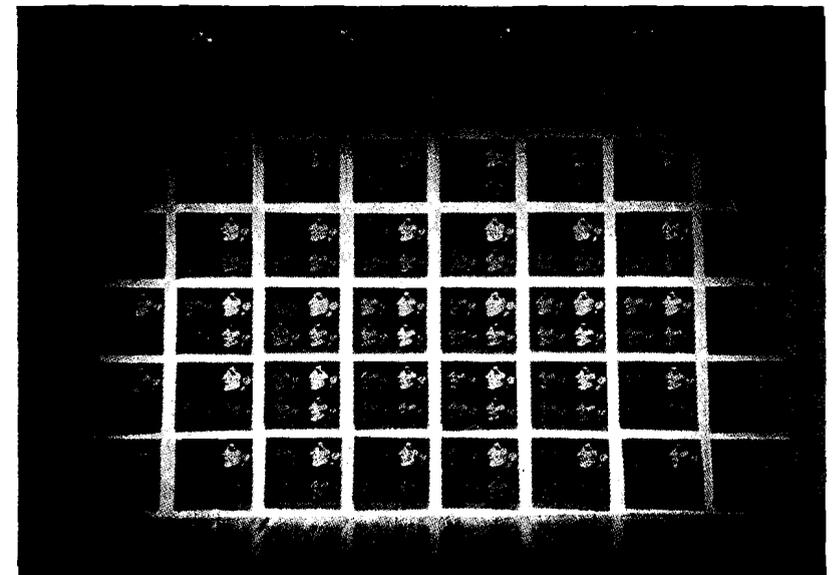


Rhonda Lieberman, *Barbie Chocolate Bar (in Hebrew)*, photo credit: Dana Byerly, 1995. Courtesy of the artist.

Jewish show. Kass shares with Lieberman a certain sensibility about Jewishness, but she extends it to critique some of the assumptions implicit in the cool Pop Art aesthetic of the 1960s and its legacy, particularly in terms of Andy Warhol's work. Warhol made art about commodity culture that brought together actresses that were sex symbols such as Marilyn Monroe and Liz Taylor, as well as politician's wives such as Jackie Kennedy, as cultural icons. He would start with an iconic and glamorous photographic image and then print multiple versions of it in a colourful grid. Kass questions the very context of Warhol's work. She asks: for whom are these images iconic and for whom are

they not? Though Warhol did a whole series of Jewish intellectuals and celebrities as well as other portraits of Jewish collectors, Kass also questions why Warhol left out equally iconic female stars from his period that did not conform to his notion of American feminine beauty and erotic sex appeal.

Kass imitates the format of Warhol's celebrity portraits to make us see what most artists and critics have failed to notice about his work: that he excluded from his 1960s cosmopolitan Hollywood register the one major female star whom he frequently cites in his diaries as the embodiment of bad taste, in Warhol's words, "a nouvelle riche" — Barbra Streisand. Given Warhol's own modest background and subsequent rise to fame, his comment makes one wonder why he was so particularly troubled by Streisand's similar shift in social class, and why he saw her as incapable of being seen as unglamorous, Kass's rendition of Barbra in her ironically titled, *The Jewish Jackie Series* is not only meant to point out Warhol's refusal to engage with Barbra in his work, but also pays homage to Barbra Streisand, a cultural figure that had a particular resonance for Kass (as well as for



Deborah Kass, detail of *Four Barbras, 48 Times*, from *The Jewish Jackie Series*, silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas, 1992. Courtesy of the artist.

Lieberman) growing up as a Jewish girl on Long Island: “She [Barbra] was really in touch with her difference as an attribute. It was fantastic. For me it was as if she was saying: I’m me; I’m not changing my nose; I am not changing my name; I’m not changing my ethnicity. I know how glamorous that can be”.³

What appealed to Kass was the way Barbra unapologetically flaunted her sexuality and her Jewishness together and that made her a new kind of star that she could relate to. For Kass, the combination of Barbra’s looks and her own understanding of her appearance, talent and brains — created a new kind of cultural and erotic power. Because Kass identifies with Barbra as iconic of Jewish glamour, someone who publicly presented herself in a way that shifted the norms of female beauty and sexuality during the period when Kass was growing up — her “appropriation” is an ironic commentary on her relation, as an artist, to the legacy of Pop Art and Warhol as it relates to Jewishness and



Deborah Kass, *Four Barbras*, from *The Jewish Jackie Series*, silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas, 1992. Courtesy of the artist.

dominant norms of acceptable femininity, social class, and ways of behaving publicly that express desire and sexuality.

Issues of Subjectivity and Sexuality in Britain: Rachel Garfield and Ruth Novaczek

It was also in the 1990s that British Jewish women artists felt more confident in dealing with their Jewishness in a more direct way. The landmark 1996 show in Britain *Rubies and Rebels: Jewish Female Identity in Contemporary British Art* was exhibited at the Barbican Centre in London and at the University of Leeds. It was also the subject of a conference and influential special issue of the journal *Issues in Architecture Art and Design* entitled “Gender, Religion, and Ethnicity: Jewish Women in the Visual Arts” (1998). Comparing the British exhibit to the American one: *Too Jewish*, Monica Bohm-Duchen, the curator wrote:

The absence of humour, evident in the work of many Jewish writers in this country, was duly noted, both by us, the curators, in the course of our researches, and by others. How much this has to do with the visual arts in general lending themselves less readily to an exploration of the comic aspects of life, and how much to a lack of the brazen, ironic and confident self-mockery characteristic of contemporary American Jewish artists (and by implication, American Jewry as a whole) — must remain open to question.⁴

Norman Kleeblatt, the curator of *Too Jewish*, reminded a British audience that *Too Jewish* was influenced not just by the confidence of American Jews but the influence of a series of exhibits in New York that focussed on identity issues, including exhibits such as “Extended Sensibilities” that focussed on gay issues in the arts at the height of the AIDS pandemic and the culture wars in the United States. For Bohm-Duchen, “in the present cultural climate (itself of course the product of a very different history), an exhibition such as the [*Too Jewish* exhibition] would be unthinkable in Britain”,⁵ citing the most critical review of her own show, which she claims uncomfortably reminded her of the anti-Semitic and anti-American response to the Kitaj retrospective at the Tate in 1994.

Rachel Garfield, one of the artists in the *Rubies and Rebels* exhibition, is one of the few artists in Britain to foreground her Jewishness in her work and has written at length about Jewish

artists such as herself and Ruth Novaczek and others, who acknowledge their identity as Jews in their art making. Throughout Rachel Garfield's writing and art practice, the fabric of Jewish identity has been interwoven with the complex formations of anti-Semitic discourses and how they form Jewish subjectivity in contemporary Britain. In *Unmade up* (2002) Garfield records the reactions she received when interviewing Jews about their feelings towards dating other Jews. Her artwork is a large video installation featuring a series of self-portraits of the artist where Garfield moves between presentations of her private and public self. In part of the tape's loop that is continuous, Garfield appears as the cultural critic using headphones as she listens to the responses of her interviewees. However, her self-presentation is not static as she also functions as a transfer point of sorts for the Jewish women that are being referenced by her male subjects. In this sense, she is both subject and object of the gaze, looking at various moments pensive and other moments sexually available.

The comments taken from the twelve people she interviewed for this project range from the stereotypical to the ridiculous and many of the comments often contradict each other. Jewish women are criticised by the Jewish men interviewed for their conventional notions of identity and narrow bourgeois middle-



Rachel Garfield, Still from Unmade Up, 2002.
Courtesy of the artist.



Rachel Garfield, Still from Unmade Up, 2002.
Courtesy of the artist.

class values. Jewish women are seen as “middle-class girls that don't like to take risks”, but another voice claims that they are “unstable but become transformed when they became married”. Another explains that he “put a ring on her finger and she turned into the exorcist”. For most of the men Jewish women were “too Jewish” in the wrong way: retrograde, narrow, rule-ridden and authoritarian and many of the men, as well as the women, who were interviewed, were eager to place as much distance as possible between themselves and the Jewish community by marrying a British man or woman.

It is significant that Garfield deliberately refuses to present herself in a visually appealing way and the jarring self-portraits are a deliberate part of Garfield's critical style. Her self-portraits are too close to the camera and her pose is deliberately one of exaggeration. Thus, these anti-aesthetic self-portraits with their physical excess is meant to deliberately fall outside the traditional concepts of acceptable middle-class British female beauty and sexuality and which are referenced as desirable by the Jewish men in the tape. Her work is also deliberately meant as a critique of the documentary form and her tape refuses to speak about Jewish women on their behalf through a first-person testimonial in which she presents herself as the “authentic subject”, or

illuminates their “truth” from a safe distance. In this way, the viewer is not given the satisfaction of hearing from a first person narrative a heart-felt account regarding an experience derived from anti-Semitic hate speech. Indeed, we never get a direct reaction from Garfield regarding what she thinks of what is spoken — thus she avoids presenting herself as a victim, but at the same time she sets up a tension between the viewer and viewed that can’t be easily resolved since her work refuses to make claims about safe notions of community and ethnic insiderism.

Throughout the tape, Garfield creates a subject — the British Jewish woman — that seems to be crushed under the weight of the anti-Semitic discourses of Jewish men directed towards Jewish women within the community. The desired Jewish woman’s sexuality as discussed by the men seems to conform more to the one-reality system of the British version of Ruth Handler’s Barbie than Rhonda Lieberman’s more enlightened version of *Jewish Barbie*. Garfield’s work evokes questions regarding the alienation and marginality experienced by Jewish women and the racial dis-identification that might emerge from such discourses in its interest in the distinction between the visible and invisible other fundamental to the position of Jews in the contemporary West. In this respect, Garfield’s work deliberately recalls that of the light-skinned African-American performance artist, Adrian Piper, whose performance work draws on the indeterminacy of race and raises questions about what it means for someone like herself to pass as white in the New York art world of the 1970s and 1980s where being a darker skinned black could have destroyed her hopes for a career as an artist.⁶ Garfield is also interested in what it means for Jews to go public with their Jewishness in the British art world, but she programmes dissonances — between the shifting self-portraits of herself and the voiceovers to create another kind of uncertainty, revealing the way that Jews specifically — both men and women — can also feel unsafe and distrustful about each other within the Jewish community itself, an issue also raised by the work exhibited in the *Too Jewish* exhibition.

Like Garfield’s work, Ruth Novaczek’s *Rootless Cosmopolitans* (1990), as well as some of her later work, also deals critically with issues of Jewish subjectivity in Britain, and she is one of the first artists in Britain to interrogate issues of Jewish identity along such lines. However, the style of the two women is completely

different. Novaczek has a more cinematic sensibility than Garfield — her work borrows more from art house cinema and includes influences Wong Kar Wai, Derek Jarman and Jean-Luc Godard. Garfield’s work by contrast borrows more from art world conventions of New York feminist performance art from the 1970s and the rewriting of that history by feminist art historians and cultural critics such as Amelia Jones and Judith Butler, as well as important critical writing on race, post-colonialism and nation coming out of Britain by writers such as Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and others. Both women play with humour in their work, but fantasy plays a more important part in Novaczek’s work. What draws these two women together is their focus on Jewish women directly as subjects and a multicultural perspective situated in response to the prevailing narratives of difference in the visual arts in Britain. This preoccupation comes through in some of their shared visual strategies that one can see in their work by the way both artists self-consciously shift the ways Jews might look in their work by positioning their Jewish subjects amongst and in relation to other cultures, as evidenced in Garfield’s *So You Think You Can Tell* (2000) and Novaczek’s *Rootless Cosmopolitans*.

Characteristic of Novaczek’s style is the way that humour and fantasy comes through in the energy Novaczek puts into her film’s sound track, as dialogue and music often carries equal weight in her work with the visuals. The images and voices of women in Novaczek’s work are often seductive, fragmentary, and haunting; her soundtrack can at times be poetic as informed by the Beat poets or direct and funny as influenced by Jewish comedians as when she introduces her main character, Lily Klein, in *Rootless Cosmopolitans*: “Take Lily Klein, a real Princess. She didn’t have real estate, she didn’t have media control. She drank”.

“Growing up in Americana” is the umbrella theme for a series of short films that Novaczek made between 1998 and 2005 during a period that she spent in New York. Most of these films are quite short — at around five minutes each — and are striking for the rawness of their soundtrack that combines American popular music, fractured voices from the media and her own gravelly seductive voice. References to the United States repeatedly turn up in her soundtracks throughout her work, as in her use of American voiceovers and urban US landscapes, as in *Series 2*

from 1999 in which the humour is the most parodic and her imagery the most irreverent among all her tapes. In this tape she delights in the “too Jewish” kitschy humour of US public culture — the jokes of Jackie Mason and Barbra Streisand.

The restlessness of her films and soundtrack from this group of films is evident in the following sequence of visual found footage and verbal non-sequiturs found in *Series 2*. Garfield, an astute critic of Novaczek’s work also gives weight to this film, and the description of this particular sequence is highlighted in Garfield’s own writing on Novaczek’s.⁷ Novaczek’s *Series 2* starts with a degraded image of the Statue of Liberty, with a voice-over of the US comedian Jackie Mason “you know you look Jewish, you *dreck*, you look Jewish, you’ll be lucky if you don’t get hit by a truck *shticks*”. Mason continues, “they don’t mind if you sound Jewish but look Jewish forget it!” From Mason, Novaczek jumps to the somewhat hysterical voice of Streisand that repeats a number of times a phrase from the film *The Way We Were* “I’m also taking a course in laughing and I’m studying Protestant cookery” with alternate images of a white-bread sandwich cut in half, hen quarters, an image of Woody Allen about to eat a chicken leg, a can of *tcholent*, and a Mexican cowboy on a horse with a guitar strapped to him.

In Novaczek’s chaotic imagery of fast-cut images of food and other found imagery of a degraded urban landscape clearly identified as from New York, the energy of the tape makes New York City appear as a promised land where British Jewish women can align their interests with a community that shares a similar diasporic sensibility, a level of comfort with a gritty and sometimes scary urban landscape combined with a sense of kitschy Jewish-American humour. Thus, New York is envisioned as a space that enables the viewer the experience of cinematic pleasure and identification, whereas in much of her later work the scenes often shift from London, to New York, to Italy, to the Middle East and it is often difficult to tell where it is being filmed to underscore her point that her body of work is about being uprooted and the tapes are also about conjuring a feminist Jewish community out of diaspora.

A powerful female sexuality and energy seeps out of her film in the way her urban landscapes are eroticised and through the sensuousness of the images and soundtrack, and in this respect she transforms imagery and sound that might be ordinarily



Ruth Novaczek, *Still from Sense*, 2005. (*Growing up in Americana* trilogy, 2002-2005). Courtesy of the artist.



Ruth Novaczek, *Still from Series 2*, 2000. (*Growing up in Americana* trilogy, 2002-2005). Courtesy of the artist.

associated with a more masculinist tradition of avant-garde art cinema and pop music into something more feminist and transgressive. Using this unexpected visual and verbal vocabulary, her films manage to convey that Jewish women's desires are no longer limited to the narrow patriarchal world with its conventional heterosexual and national boundaries. At the same time there remains a poignantly sad overlay to most of her films of the long shadow cast by British culture's erasure of Jewish difference and Jewish women's sexuality. This otherwise unacknowledged "ghost" contributes to the haunting and restless style of most her films.

Conclusion

I want to conclude with an image from one of Kass' new paintings titled ironically "Oh God I Need This Show" (2007) which draws its aesthetics from an American modernist painter Barnett Newman, heavily influenced by the aesthetic positions of Clement Greenberg, and derives its incongruous text from the first song in the 1970s play "A Chorus Line", the first Broadway play in the United States ever to feature a character who was out as a homosexual. Thus, in a single gesture, Kass reiterates the ongoing problems and difficulties that remain for women artists in negotiating their Jewishness and sexuality within a tradition



Deborah Kass, Oh God I Need This Show, oil on canvas, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

of aesthetic practices that remains hostile to bringing together the complex and disparate influences and traditions that matter most to these artists. Indeed, for feminist visual cultural critics like myself writing in a post-identity moment where questions of difference signal divisiveness rather than ways to think through tensions and disagreements, the problem of how to conceptualise US and British Jewish feminist artists as visual producers remains unresolved and hard to write about. By complicating notions around Jewish feminist art and identities and sexualities, the artists' work that I have discussed trouble a pervasive reticence on the topic in both the United States and the United Kingdom even at a moment of a revived interest in feminist art.