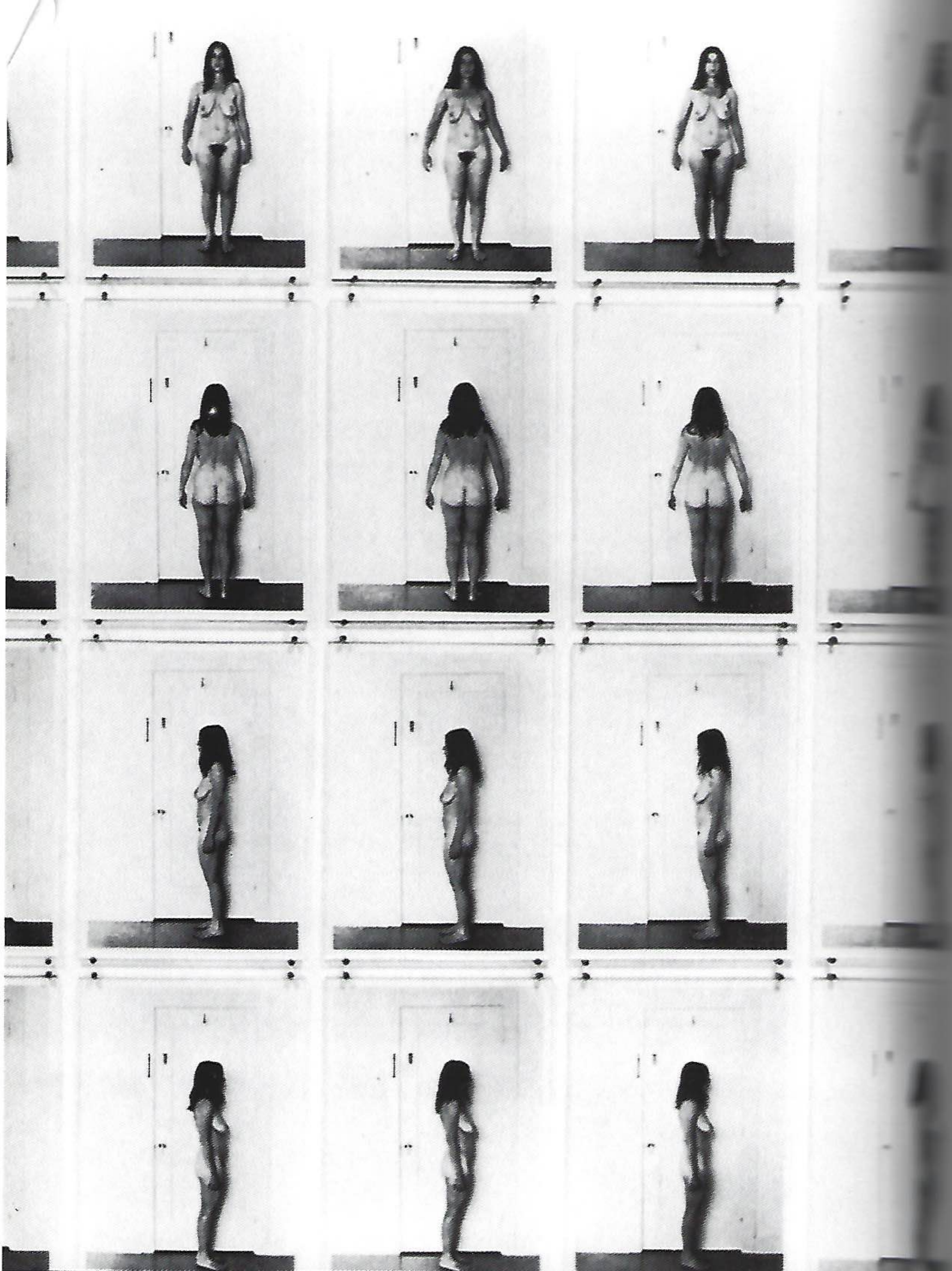
Rewriting the Script: Eleanor Antin's Feminist Art

Lisa E. Bloom

THE FEMINIST ART PROGRAM AND THE RETHINKING OF ART HISTORY

In 1974 a group of young women from the Feminist Art Program in Los Angeles invited Eleanor Antin to write a letter addressed to "anonymous young women artists" about what it meant to make art from a woman's point of view. The resulting project, titled *Anonymous Was a Woman,* was part of a seven-day arts festival that "celebrate[d] the emergence of [women's] new spirit of visibility and vitality in the arts."[1] The seventeen younger women artists who helped launch the project under the auspices of the Feminist Art Program and the direction of Miriam Schapiro succinctly expressed the sentiments of the group in their letter to Antin and the other contributors:

> Your personal vision and achievements have moved us and enriched our development as young women artists. You are a model to us. . . . We would be deeply honored to include such a letter from you about your experiences, or advice, or whatever feelings you might wish to express. . . . Your letter would be an invaluable contribution in our efforts to build a strong identity for women.[2]



detail of *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, 1972
Checklist no. 19

The responses to the organizers' letter explored not only what it meant to be an artist from women's points of view, but also the ways women artists were often hindered from reaching their potential. The hope of many of the older women was that the younger ones would come to believe in their own abilities. As contributor Rhys Caparn puts it: "You must believe in yourself, and in other women as artists. This conviction is the first and most important step in building a strong identity for women in art."[3] Eleanor Antin's response, however, is somewhat at odds with those of many of the other contributors. On the one hand, she supports the goals of the Feminist Art Program's project. She writes that women need not be "a supporting player in somebody else's script" and even advises "rewriting the script," because the standard one is obsolete. On the other hand, Antin's perception of the realities of everyday life is too complex for her to advise that such a program would be easy to follow. She cautions that this is "not a comfortable way to proceed," because it "means you have to defend your right to be there." Even if you are successful, she claims, you still risk being alone. In the end that can be fatal, for "art is the most communal activity in the world."[4] Antin indirectly suggests that women artists are often oppressed by having to compete for, and live up to, an idealized male image of what women artists should be like, but her response departs somewhat from the optimism of most of the other contributors. For Antin, building a "strong identity for women" is not a simple matter of solidarity. Though she recognizes the importance of sisterhood, she claims that it is not always comforting or empowering. She ventures that the script might have been written not only by men, but also by women who have power over other women.[5]

Many years passed before the questions Antin raised about sisterhood in her 1974 letter were taken up by other feminists in a concerted way. Explaining why this was the case requires a backward glance at feminist art and art history. This brief overview will then allow us to return to

Antin's work and to rethink it in terms of a different trajectory from the one given in conventional histories of the period.

In the mid-1970s the members of the Feminist Art Program in California felt that feminists should concentrate on how men oppress women, and not on how unfairly women treat one another. The project *Anonymous Was a Woman* was conceived apropos of that sentiment, with the express purpose of contesting the masculinist nature of what had previously, exclusively rated as art, artistic genius, and art education. As Miriam Schapiro put it in the introduction to *Anonymous Was a Woman,* "I did not want Rembrandt as a role model—he had a penis. . . . I wanted to learn from *women* what it felt like to want to be an artist."[6] Such feminist art projects in the U.S. and the U.K. subsequently inspired related efforts to build and maintain feminist intellectual space in art schools and universities. One major goal was to raise the questions of why and how women had "disappeared" from the history of art.[7] This in turn stimulated further creative activity: critical concepts and theories, art-historical research projects, explanatory frameworks, as well as new kinds of art that attempted to redress the situation.[8] Assumptions were questioned, and women-centered art-historical scholarship, art criticism, and art developed.[9] But reconstructing the arts entailed reevaluating and redesigning the terms and topics that had dominated the practices of art schools and art history programs in the first place. Indeed, beginning in the mid-1970s, art and art history were forever altered by such "reconstructive" feminist projects. The critical energy involved in challenging gender-blind and gender-biased art and art history reinvigorated the field and led to the growth and diversification of what came to be known as feminist art and art history.

Reconstruction also generated reflexivity—that is, self-awareness and self-criticism—among practitioners in feminist art and art history. This led to serious conceptual and theoretical debates about such issues as

exclusion from mainstream-U.S. feminist concerns.[11]

The fact is that feminist art history and feminist art practitioners, as a result of their growing self-awareness and self-criticism in the U.S. and elsewhere, are very different now than they were in the mid-1970s when Eleanor Antin inquired in *Anonymous Was a Woman* about the tensions between women's commonality and difference. Among the changes that have been crucial are the growing awareness of the diversity among women; the significance of groundbreaking conceptual philosophies of difference and postmodernism on feminist art history; feminist art's intersection with models emerging from Jewish studies, gay and lesbian studies, as well as the postcolonialist and antiracist debates. Despite the positive changes over the past two decades, there have also been signs of the demise of feminism as a political movement in the arts. In the past decade, for example, we have seen the emergence of "postfeminism" and the backlash against feminist art in the media; the attack and dismantlement of affirmative action in public universities; and the end of a feminist art movement that was oriented primarily toward concerted public action.

ANTIN, FEMINISM, AND WHITE ETHNICITY

My particular interest in feminist art that deals with gender, racial, and ethnic differences has led me to revisit the work of Eleanor Antin, who stands out as one of the few artists from the 1970s who actually fore-grounds these issues in her work. Providing a critical account of what it meant for Antin to be a white, Jewish, feminist artist is important, since it contributes to a more meaningful understanding of white ethnic feminism

artistic practices in the U.S.[12] Moreover, many well-known feminist artists, poets, and critics who were prominent during the 1970s in California, such as Antin, Kathy Acker, Martha Rosler, Judy Chicago, Joyce Kozloff, Lynn Hershman, Miriam Schapiro, among others, were Jewish and emerged from households in communities in New York and Chicago that were heavily marked in terms of ethnicity, race, religion, and class before they made the move (permanently for some, temporarily for others) to California in the 1960s.[13]

Since readers are also ethnically constituted, such a study may interest younger viewers of this retrospective exhibition, for it attests to the difference and diversity among feminists along these axes of identification, not simply racially and ethnically, but also generationally. A younger contemporary feminist academic community might be especially alert to certain ethnic references in Antin's work, familiar as many of them are likely to be with theorists such as Sander Gilman, Ann Pellegrini, and Richard Dyer, whose work examines how ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and race have signified different relations between the body and society at various historical moments.[14]

How I situate myself as a feminist has been in part shaped by such writings. Though I am of a younger generation than the artist whom I am writing about here, my own Jewish family's trajectory—from Eastern Europe and Russia to the U.S., then from New York to California, and finally (in my case) from California to Japan—shapes how I perceive myself in relation to U.S. culture. In rethinking Antin's work along such lines I am interested in setting up a new history of feminist work from the 1970s. This history would establish space for other divergent and competing histories of the Jewish immigration. These competing histories, in turn, would allow us to follow how Jews shaped, and were inflected by, the models and lifestyles that dominated Southern California feminism of the period.

The concerns and passions that inform one of the few major publications on 1970s feminist artistic practice, *The Power of Feminist Art: The*

American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact, alerted me to some of the specific directions and priorities of the 1970s generation. In their introduction the authors write:

> How then do we situate the Feminist Art Movement on the broader stage, conceptually and historically? Is it merely another phase of the avant-garde? Or is it not, rather, to borrow a phrase that has been used to describe the cultural climate of the 1960s, "one of those deep-seated shifts of sensibilities that alter the whole terrain"? The feminist critic Lucy R. Lippard argued persuasively in 1980 that feminist art was "neither a style nor a movement," but instead "a value system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life," like Dada and Surrealism and other non styles that have "continued to pervade all movements and styles ever since." What was revolutionary in feminist art, Lippard explained, was not its form but its content. Feminist artists' insistence on prioritizing experience and meaning over form and style was itself a challenge to the modernist valorization of "progress" and style development.[15]

Because women of my generation no longer face the same kinds of highly structured resistance from patriarchal institutions, it is easy to forget the force that feminism had at that moment when women were engaged in activist movements and aimed to alter their personal lives as well as their art practices and teaching. The feminist commitment to revolutionary socialist ideals was an important part of the idealism of the 1970s.

However, if we are to have a greater understanding of generational differences within feminism now, some of the older histories and antagonisms of the past must be revisited and rethought. Given the example of the last twenty-five years of work theorizing differences in many other fields, it seems that one of the key strategies in revisiting this period should

be to examine how race and ethnicity have operated within the U.S. feminist art movement as it has been conceived from the 1970s to the present. Responding to such a concern, Yolanda M. López and Moira Roth write:

> There is a dramatic inequality of information on women of color as opposed to Euro-American women. The feminist art movement . . . suggests an identity prioritized by gender not race. For women artists of color—despite their concern with women's issues—ethnicity more than gender has shaped their primary identities, loyalties, and often the content of their art. Also from the start the women's art movement has been dominated by Euro-American leadership.[16]

López and Roth provide a means of describing the larger cultural issues that have conditioned the development of North American feminist art up to our current historical moment. Their emphasis on the need for a complex understanding of the way that gender and ethnicity are interarticulated is important, but I would extend their discussion to include not only women of color but also white ethnic women, who have also had an uneasy allegiance to a feminism that erases the consideration of other differences beyond gender. Thus, for example, there still remains a great need for an examination of how Jewish women's identities are tied to other social identities and are mediated through institutional discourses of art history and modernism. Such a study would have to take into account the uneasy terms of Jewish women's dominant position in the feminist art world, which they themselves helped to shape and define.[17] Furthermore, it would be a mistake to believe that ethnicities could be understood in isolation, without considering the ways in which they are part of a complex matrix of differences among women.

> *There is no point at which she suddenly stops being Eleanor Antin. What she becomes is already part of her, and she never ceased to be what she is to begin with. There are no borders, no precise contours, no center.*
>
> —Jonathan Crary, *The Angel of Mercy*, La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1977

Eleanor Antin's work is particularly appropriate for the purposes of this study, since it reveals some of the ways a unitary history of U.S. feminism, in which gender is the sole emphasis, is inadequate for dealing with the complexity of many artists' work. The importance Jewishness poses for Antin is evident throughout most of her oeuvre despite the fact that her artistic practice has not been written about from such a perspective previously. Instead, her art has been praised mostly for its rejection of formalism, or for the way the autobiographical pieces brought back a "renewed focus onto the self in all its aspects."[18] Even more recently, early feminist work such as Antin's is primarily seen as significant by feminist critics for its innovative subject matter, such as "language and personal narrative, discussion of the self, sexuality, women's experience in the world, and the presence of everyday life."[19] Somehow, however, self, experience, and everyday life have not included ethnicity.

A key figure in the body and performance art of the 1970s, Antin still remains best known for her live performance work, published memoirs, and photographic and video work in which she takes on the personae of the King, the Black Movie Star, the Nurse, and the Ballerina. For Antin these invented personae provide what she calls a "mythological machine . . . capable of calling up and defining my self. I finally settled upon a quadripolar system, sort of a magnetic field of four polar-charged images."[20] Antin's presentation of these four characters has changed over time, and they have frequently been re-presented in videotapes, photographs, stage props, live performances, and everyday life. The Nurse, for

example, began as a bawdy contemporary American and later became Eleanor Nightingale, a Victorian "Angel of Mercy" on the Crimean battlefield. Similarly, her other personae have had different ethnic, racial, and historical identities as well as different nationalities. On occasion she has adopted, in public and in private, the manners and worldview of her personae. She has also written and published their "memoirs," documenting their "experiences." In addition to these compelling characters, Antin is also well known for her 1971 black-and-white video, *Representational Painting* (no. 14, p. 45) in which she spends nearly forty minutes applying makeup to her face. The work questions prevailing notions of what constitutes ideal femininity and female beauty. This work is something of a companion piece to a video made the following year, *The King* (no. 21, p. 63), another lengthy work about making up. In this piece, however, Antin transforms her face to assume the male character of the King. Another extremely influential work that deals with gender issues is her postcard piece, *100 BOOTS*, 1971–73 (no. 12, pp. 52–57). This work centers on one hundred black rubber boots, Antin's male picaresque "hero," and "his" travels from suburban San Diego to New York City. The project itself is composed of fifty-one photographic postcards, depicting the BOOTS trip, which she mailed to one thousand people over two years.

Like other feminist performance artists from this period, such as Adrian Piper, Carolee Schneemann, and Lynn Hershman, Antin uses her own body and experiences as the subject in most of her works, and in so doing she begins to explore what it means to be both an embodied female and an intellectual ethnic woman. In this respect her work references other modes of identification, for instance those grounded in ethnicity as well as in gender. In *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, 1972 (no. 19, pp. 47, 158), which began as a sculpture-in-process piece that Antin performed from July 15 to August 21, 1972, the artist had herself photographed every morning over the course of a strict thirty-six–day dieting regime. This piece in its final version as a photographic document was seen at the time

and continues to be interpreted as the work of a white woman making an ironic comment on how the ideal of the generic nude has been gendered in the history of art. Emphasizing its feminist importance, a 1975 essay by art critic Cindy Nemser claims that *Carving* is about "how women are always concerned with the need to improve their bodies."[21] Here Nemser is referencing all women and focusing on how female desire in general is courted by the promise of future perfection through the lure of the ideal—whether it be that of the classical male nude or that of an emaciated female body, achieved through dieting. According to Nemser, Antin shows that the ideals on offer don't actually exist for women. Similarly, Joanna Frueh writes on *Carving* that "just as the Classical Greek nude occludes women's bodies in this kind of aesthetically rigid form, so the socially correct beautiful body disciplines and punishes women, through frustration, guilt, anxiety, and competitiveness with other women."[22]

However, these arguments overlook a crucial aspect of *Carving*, namely the ethnic subtext. Antin's photographic self-portraits depict an attractive, short Jewish woman. Thus, her body is far from being the generic female body. In my view, *Carving* sets up a challenge to the unacknowledged racial and ethical assumptions underlying Kenneth Clark's *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form.*[23] Antin herself acknowledges that she was drawing on this study's account of the differences between the naked and the nude in the Western European painting tradition to bring the embattled subject of the unclothed body to a head in contemporary and feminist terms.[24] The piece plays off what Clark identifies as "the ideal"—the Greek, classical, white, male nude—and what he describes as the "alternative convention"—the Germanic, medieval, dark, naked female. Antin can be seen as inverting Clark's ideal nude by presenting herself in four different views and, as she puts it, "without my life, history, or achievements to give me courage, barely awakened from sleep, hair uncombed, not yet with a face to present myself to the world."[25] With the

reversal of Clark's opposition, "the naked" becomes a positive term, and it is here that Antin alludes to her Jewishness.

Carving's repeated photographic views also deliberately reference police or medical photographic and cinematic practices of the early twentieth century. These practices, in which discourses of physiognomy, photographic science, and aesthetics coincided and overlapped, targeted ethnic and social marginals, including many Jews. This connection between Antin's work and these practices is established through her use of a sequence of photographs that appear almost as film stills: the stills present her isolated body, which changes slightly from frame to frame, standing in four different poses against a stark white background in a seemingly exhaustive catalogue of her physical appearance. In this regard Antin's attempt to exert formal control over her own body in order to achieve the aesthetic ideal has also a great deal to do with societal constructions built upon body differences, a legacy not only of art history but also of the physiognomically based racial theories of the last century.

Antin plays off these early traditions in order to mark herself as Jewish. Cultural critic Sander Gilman, writing on the difference of the Jewish body, explains how medical theories of the nineteenth century included the notion of adaptability: "One form of that difference was [Jews'] uncanny ability to look like everyone else (that is, to look like the idealization of those who wanted to see themselves as different from the Jew)."[26] In this sense Antin's project can also be seen as a willful failure to adapt to the ideal feminist subject and thus a failure to assimilate as a generic subject. Antin doesn't offer an easy solution to the dilemma of being both Jewish and female, but she points to the limits of fitting in by presenting a series of anti-aesthetic photographic self-portraits that refuse to offer a neutral and undisturbing aesthetic experience.

Though less well known than *Carving*, Antin's *Domestic Peace*, 1971–72 (no. 16, opposite and pp. 40–41, 173), operates in a similar way, offering no easy closure to the problem of marked identities. Moreover, unlike other renowned works from the period, such as Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, 1979, which comfortably frames women within the spaces of dominant cultural aesthetic practices and Christian iconography, *Domestic Peace* allows Antin to explore the loaded subject of conflict in mother-daughter relations within the context of her own Jewish family. The piece consists of a written record, complete with oscillations on graphs, that Antin made of "interactions" with her mother during a weeklong visit. Given the fact that art-historical discourses tend to privilege references to the history of art and high culture over the popular and the everyday, it is not surprising that this project has received relatively little critical attention. According to Cindy Nemser, "The art world did not like it because it disrupted the whole romantic myth of the artist as someone who doesn't have the same everyday family connections as everyone else."[27]

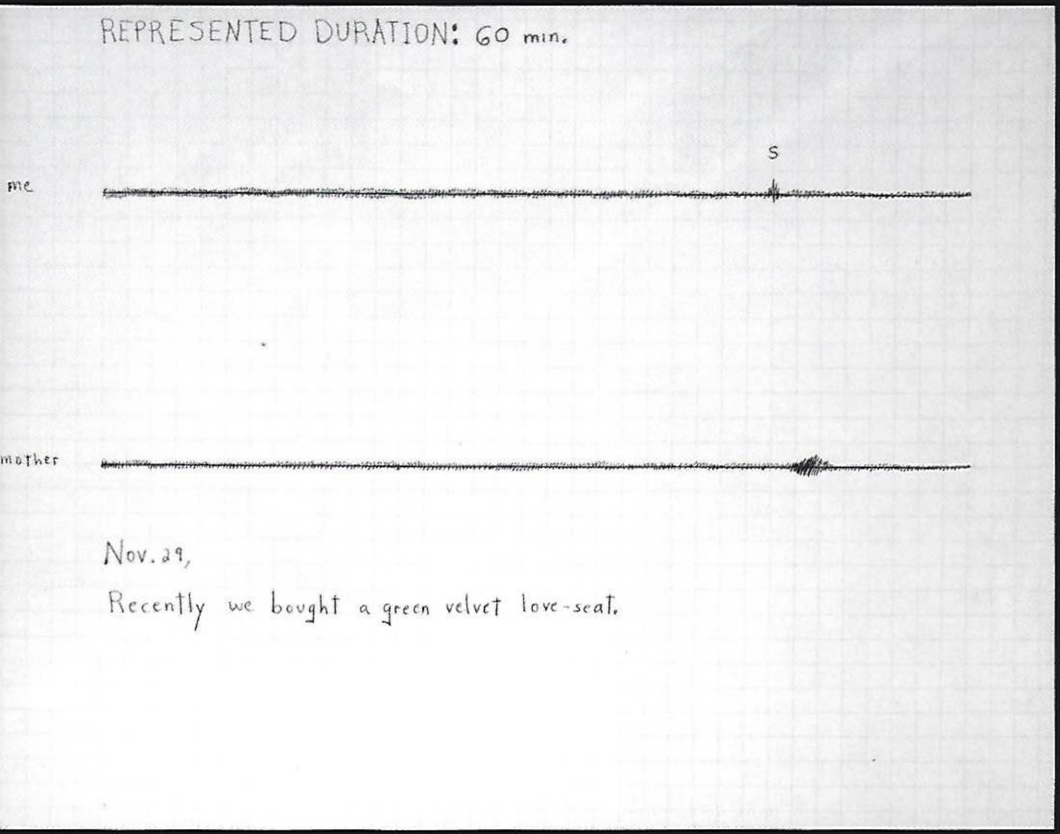
At the time, avant-garde artists felt uneasy with *Domestic Peace* because it dealt with the taboo topic of bourgeois (Jewish) familial relations. Feminists also kept their distance because the piece was at odds with the then accepted feminist view of the mother-daughter bond as an unproblematic relation that was not threatened by feminism. Antin's description of her mother in this conceptual work highlights the fact that generational differences between Jewish women are not so conflict-free, and, indeed, the kind of independence that feminism offers women artists can become a divisive force, separating certain mothers and daughters:

> I live in California and from Nov. 29th to Dec. 15th, 1971—a period of 17 days—I planned to visit New York City with my husband and small child. We planned to stay with my mother in her Manhattan apartment. It would serve our economic and domestic convenience but was also an opportunity for me to discharge

in's *Domestic Peace,*
es in a similar way,
dentities. Moreover,
h as Judy Chicago's
within the spaces of
onography, *Domestic*
conflict in mother-
sh family. The piece
ons on graphs, that
ng a weeklong visit.
ivilege references to
nd the everyday, it is
little critical atten-
not like it because it
meone who doesn't
e else."[27]

ith *Domestic Peace*
wish) familial rela-
ce was at odds with
ighter bond as an
feminism. Antin's
nlights the fact that
ot so conflict-free,
ffers women artists
s and daughters:

15th, 1971—a peri-
with my husband
ny mother in her
omic and domestic
me to discharge



from *Domestic Peace,* 1971–72
Checklist no. 16

> familial obligations. However, though my mother insists upon her claim to the familial she is not at all interested in my actual life but rather in what she considers an appropriate life. No matter what kind of life a person leads he can always, by careful selection, produce an image corresponding to anyone else's view of appropriateness. By madly ransacking my life for all the details that suited my mother's theory of appropriateness and by carefully suppressing almost all the others, I was able to offer her an image of myself that produced in her 'a feeling of closeness'. It should be kept in mind that this closeness was a closeness to her theory rather than to her life but appeal to her didacticism was the only way to give her sufficient satisfaction to ensure the domestic peace necessary to free me for my own affairs. I planned a daily set of conversational openers consisting of carefully chosen stories. Several of these stories contained slightly abrasive elements which might be expected to mitigate peace. I considered these to be alternates for use only on 'good' days. For those hectic times when I would be forced to remain in the apartment for fairly long periods, I kept a set of reserves I could throw in to hold the line. Hopefully, these stories would act as gambits leading to natural and friendly conversation.

Antin's desired "domestic peace" could never be on her own terms nor could it ever conform to nostalgic feminist notions of harmony between mothers and daughters. Neither does it follow the more conservative, mythic script of the gifted (male) artist who does not need domestic peace, since he is seen as separate from economic, social, familial, sexual, and social relations. Antin provocatively casts mother-daughter relationships as the private sites of warfare, where female conflict is expected. Thus, in order to achieve "peace" whenever she was forced to remain in the house for long periods of time, Antin would stage conversations that

REPRESENTED DURATION: 7 hrs.

me

mother

Dec. 15,

There arent any Salvation Army stores in California. The nearest equivalent is Good Will, a disabled veterans outfit, but they're expensive and the stuff is low class. Even if they had bargains you wouldn't want them.

from *Domestic Peace*, 1971–72
Checklist no. 16

she believed would best coincide with what her mother considered reveal-ing of an appropriate middle-class life—for example, a sixty-minute dis-cussion of the artist's purchase of a green velvet love seat (p. 171).

These conversations, which specified a white Jewish ethnicity situated in middle-class affluence, were short and peaceful in comparison with others that deviated from her mother's notion of middle-class success. The latter type is exemplified by a seven-hour agitated interaction between the mother and daughter (p. 173): Antin discourages her mother from shopping at Goodwill stores because the "stuff is low class." Trying to gain her mother's acceptance, she ventures, "Even if they had bargains you wouldn't want them." The conversations that incite the strongest disagreements between mother and daughter, however, explore ideological conflicts in the workplace between middle-class Eastern European Jews and African Americans or that delve into class and even racial tensions within the Jewish community.

Domestic Peace reveals how harmony and calm between mother and daughter come only at the price of the artist's own "silence." Yet, the comic form of the project—the pseudoscientific way it meticulously records Antin and her mother's reactions—enables the artist to lighten the oppressiveness of the relationship.

In this respect *Domestic Peace* has much in common with *Encounters & Transactions*, 1972 (no. 17, p. 39), which also deals with the problematic bonds between women but this time in a setting that ordinarily would not allow much space for the examination of their differences—a feminist group of working women artists in San Diego in 1972 and 1973. The performances consisted of four meetings in which Antin had decided on a particular course of action in advance. The artist also had a text description of her preplanned actions notarized before attending the meetings. *Encounter # 1* provides an example:

> At the February 20th meeting, I shall take on the job of ombudsman. This will necessitate my pointing out to each member of the group, and in any manner I choose, a particular failing she displays in relation to the others. These may be of an ephemeral sort such as personal bugginess taken out on someone else or of a more serious nature like, say, a rip-off of the entire group. I must always keep in mind that my statements are intended to bring about more satisfactory behavior from the others and are never used for egotistical purposes of my own. I must complete these 8 tasks before the group normally disperses, otherwise I must keep the session going by whatever means I can until I do complete them.

What makes this piece unusual for the time is the way in which Antin perversely performs the problem that she claims to identify and remedy. At first glance the use of the official rhetoric of the notary document, with its seal and signature, seems to suggest female authoritarian behavior referencing a legal discourse that subjects the women in the group to unexpected scrutiny and observation. In fact, Antin's use of such a device has the effect of dislodging the women from the pretense of a safe utopian environment and reestablishing them within the context of the more complex pressures that the art world and academia present for feminists such as Antin (a university professor): hierarchy, competition, and distrust on the one hand; coalition, mentorship, and respect on the other. Moving beyond simple utopian feminist art projects of the period, Antin's piece stages the complex relations of betrayal, knowledge, and power between women and reminds the viewer of the more unsightly side of feminism. The fact that the text pieces were done in secret and have never been publicly shown before this retrospective exhibition is revealing: it suggests that even within a progressive social movement such as feminism, many issues could be examined only with great difficulty, if at all.

Despite the rhetoric of openness that seemingly prevailed, imbalances within the movement were not addressed, and artists like Antin were not willing to risk being misunderstood perceived as disloyal to their peers or to the larger feminist

Antin's sculptural series *Portraits of Eight New York* (nos. 9–11, pp. 33, 178–79), which combined text with biographies of eight New Yorkers, also confronts one of the insoluble dilemmas presented by women's relations with that is, how a woman artist's use of other women as the traiture can itself become a source of tension. In these addresses the certainty that women are confronted by dual, ple, allegiances. For women artists to take feminism seriously, be committed to a policy of transformative representation, male-dominated New York art world and the fact that Antin teaching at the University of California, San Diego, it is clear obligated to please mostly male reviewers and exhibition curators her art projects to a certain extent did entail the transformation very institutions and galleries that she depended on for her success.

Writing on *New York Women* in *Artnews* in 1971, Antin some insight into her process. She does not insist on a sisterhood ed in a sense of common oppression; rather, her interest lies in the ent and complex activities and functions generated out of women's

> I am determined to present women without pathos or ness. Since a life style is the ability to recognize in the morning same person who went to bed at night, it can be said to be son's most important decision. My women had all chosen styles independent of men's. It is true that some life styles more successful in practice than others, but they were all ing and complex enough to be worth the try.[28]

inda Nochlin's pathbreaking essay, "Why Have There Been No
omen Artists?" Antin writes, "I agree with Linda Nochlin that the
'Why have there been no great women artists' is a useless one and
re are very real questions to be considered about the relation of
to the arts."[29] Though the questions that concern Antin are the
es that concerned most female artists of the period, including
present women differently so as to challenge their construction in
al histories of art, what made her work especially unusual was its
nflection and its insistence on presenting women "without pathos
essness." In *New York Women,* Antin wants to tell a different tale
e women of that time and place, one that deals directly with the
e of the U.S. media on issues of assimilation, glamour,
nness, and ideals of female beauty. For this exhibition, she writes,
erately chose expensive, shiny, glamorous objects. I chose bright
eds, and pinks. And as much chrome as possible. I didn't want the
o come too close. We women have had enough love. Frank O'Hara
e that he loved Marilyn Monroe. Protect us from such love!"[30]

Antin's comment about Marilyn Monroe evokes the underlying
eme of her project; it reveals the ambiguous boundaries between
, *the* American sex symbol of the early 1950s, and the more mar-
ostly Jewish white women artists, gallery workers, and critics
ntin represents in *New York Women.* By building up images of
omen from carefully chosen "brand-new American manufactured
Antin is also referencing the influence of U.S. mass media, which
ed to secure white, American middle-class values through the
ng of model homes and new consumer goods in the formative
the post–World War II era.

Antin's *New York Women* ironically examines the process through
generic home and its shiny objects become signifiers of national
ilial identity as well as female beauty and proper behavior, a

Naomi Dash, from *Portraits of Eight New York Women*, 1970; replicated 1998
Checklist no. 9

Photograph by Peter Moore

Ruth Moss used to live in an old house on Cornelia Street. There were still slave quarters rotting in the backyard. Whenever she heard the fire engines (usually in the middle of the night) she would grab Rasputin with one hand, her box of sterling with the other and still dressed in her night clothes rush down the 5 flights to the street.

Lynn Traiger, from *Portraits of Eight* [illegible]
1970; replicated 1998
Checklist no. 11

Her friend was dying so [illegible] Greyhound Bus to Guadaloupe. [illegible] first she stopped off to [illegible] us. We talked most of the [illegible] used to open her heart in [illegible] to Frank O'Hara when they [illegible] at the Museum of Modern Art. [illegible] grabbed her in the middle [illegible] crowded party, forced back [illegible] and planted a passionate [illegible] mouth. It lasted perhaps [illegible] minutes. He always singled [illegible] She missed him.

Portraits of Eight New York Women,

Photograph by Peter Moore

dying so she took a
Guadaloupe. But
ed off to visit with
est of the night. She
r heart in this way
when they were both
f Modern Art. Once he
the middle of a
forced back her head
assionate kiss on her
perhaps several
ys singled her out.

Photograph by Peter Moore

One summer Hannah bought a lot in Springs. An Art Director had bought the adjoining lot next door. Martin Carey was considering buying on the other side but changed his mind, and several years later moved to Woodstock. A few miles away Armand Schwerner owned 1/3 of a lot and was in the process of buying out his partners. They all told her it was a great buy. She couldn't lose. All the lots were covered with scrub, pink oak, swamp maple, white pine. Everyone was going to clear off just enough to build. Hans, who lived in the marsh, bought some wooded property, got married, and began building a 2-story house with an open porch on the top level. Allan and Sylvia D'Arcangelo drove around looking and pricing. Tania and her husband were rebuilding an old barn in a small wood while Aaron Kuriloff had just completed his cinder-block and glass house on the other side of Springs. Allan Planz bought a place in the swamp between Sag Harbor and Easthampton and David Ignatow bought one over on Gardiner with his Guggenheim money. There were other people who had bought long ago and were now sitting pretty. Paul Georges painted mornings and played chess in the afternoons with Pace Sainz on the Coast Guard Beach. Manufacturer and gallery owner Sam Dorsky played a wild game of poker. There was a rich woman named something like Jean-Christophe who gave parties sometimes and sponsored events. In an important baseball game - writers against artists - the writers turned out to be ad men. They were in their 30's and won because the artists were in their 50's, with the exception of Jim Dine who played for keeps. Esteban Vicente wandered under a pop fly and made a double play when the ball fell out of his hand. Pink-trousered Harold Rosenberg was nearly hit by a foul. Various attached women walked in and out of the house. The plan was that Hannah would build later when she could raise the money. The Art Director set up a tent under his trees and lived there with his children and girlfriends. Hannah continued to live in a rented house in Amagansett but her mortgage payments were very low so she was able to pay them out of her unemployment insurance.

process through which toiletries are the stuff of dreams of
national belonging, and female desirability. Although most of the
in this project were single, urban, white ethnic women, pursuing
pendent careers in the arts and living in modest New York
with little room and few modern conveniences, Antin captured
plex lives using consumer goods. The kinds of consumer objects
used were similar to ones that are typically associated with
tional women, yet Antin's subjects make these otherwise
their own in unexpected ways. In her portrait of Yvonne Rainer,
ple, Antin chooses a new chrome exercise bicycle that might
fortably existed in a suburban basement or garage. Such a
object—especially one with a superfluous basket and horn—
completely different meaning in its connection to Rainer, who
the best-known postmodern dancer-choreographers with Judson
Theater. Rainer was known for her early experiments with
movement and repetition as a means to break down the traditional
ulary of classical modern dance.

Antin's portraits go against the grain of the period, for
renders likenesses among the women, she does not necessarily
that their experiences are identical, in kind or degree. Moreover,
traits tend to focus neither on women's oppression nor on women's
ic and exemplary qualities. They are more everyday. What distin
the women are their idiosyncrasies. In several of the more disturb
traits (say of Hannah Weiner or of Lynn Traiger) Antin presents
who are ill armored against the difficulties associated with trying
interesting, independent lives for themselves. Weiner, a lingerie
and poet, is represented by a perfect little breakfast nook, with
upholstered chairs, a teapot, and an elegant wrought iron gate
window (p. 179). Antin conveys Weiner's vulnerability and repressed
by placing a large hammer on the dainty breakfast table, introdu
disturbing flaw in the otherwise perfectly appointed interior.[32]

THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE WITH ETHNICITY AND GENDER IN ANTIN'S WORK

In certain ways Antin's work reveals her interest in addressing the discourse of modernism, even if only to critique and occasionally reference it, as she does in her late-1970s invented autobiography of the black ballerina Eleanora Antinova from Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Moreover, there is a tendency in Antin's work to mime and parody whiteness, as in the bright, perfectly immaculate but empty spaces of her portrait of Hannah Weiner in *New York Women,* and this tendency complicates the relations between the universalizing discourses of feminism and modernism that she is in part situated within. Spareness and coolness in Antin's work distance it from the typically cluttered interiors and traditionally melodramatic theatrical gestures of immigrant Eastern European Jewish culture and from the presumed high emotional content of Jewish ethnic relationships. Conflict, anger, and disagreement among women are literally mapped by codes, graphs, notarized documents, or the perfectly cool interiors and objects in *New York Women.* Official documents and stereotypical domestic interiors stand in for the pressure to assimilate and adopt the relatively more controlled body language of Anglo-American Northern European culture, which has stigmatized expressive gestures and clutter as signs of backward, uncultivated societies. Antin's projects satirize bourgeois codes of American etiquette, privacy, politeness, and good manners in a way that reduces these conventions to their hypocritical core. Even the U.S. women's movement does not escape Antin's critical scrutiny in this regard.

Not surprisingly, the intersections of race with ethnicity and gender do not appear in the work discussed so far; even in *4 Transactions* Antin speaks about differences among women in a feminist space occupied exclusively by white ethnic, Euro-American, middle-class women. Only in her invented autobiographies, each of which creates a character and a history, does she deal directly with other kinds of difference. In

many of Antin's performances she deliberately situates herself [illegible] margins and plays roles that shift between invented and real [illegible] the seventeenth-century English king Charles I who becomes the [illegible] Solana Beach in San Diego, California; Florence Nightingale, who [illegible] impetus for the Little Nurse, who later transforms into [illegible] Nightingale; or in the case of the piece that I will discuss, the black [illegible] ballerina from the Ballets Russes, Eleanora Antinova. Before dealing [illegible] the specifics of Antin's blackface performance, however, it is useful [illegible] at Richard Dyer's description of the ballerina as the epitome of [illegible]

> The white woman as angel was . . . both the symbol of [illegible] tuousness and the last word in the claim that what made [illegible] special as a race was their non-physical, spiritual, indeed [illegible] qualities. It held up an image of what white women [illegible] could be, essentially were, an image that had attractions [illegible] drawbacks for actual white people. . . . The ambiguity of the [illegible] is caught in the figure of the ballerina in the Romantic ballet [illegible] the related genres of *féerie*, pantomime, and burlesque), where [illegible] soft, flaring gaslight caught and was diffused by the [illegible] multiple layers of the tutu, introduced in the mid-nineteenth [illegible] tury. Together with scenarios about sprites and the use of [illegible] work (ballerinas seeming to dance on the tips of their [illegible] thus to be weightless), the Romantic ballet constructed a [illegible] cent, incorporeal image.[33]

Dyer connects nineteenth-century representations of the [illegible] na with notions of femininity, virtuousness, whiteness, and [illegible] ment. Antin seems to be working out of similar assumptions, [illegible] the ballet as a "white machine," but then attempts to translate [illegible] across racial boundaries by constructing herself as "black." She thus [illegible] conforming to the image of what an unmarked white woman [illegible]

situates herself in the
nted and real figures—
ho becomes the King of
Nightingale, who is the
nsforms into Eleanor
iscuss, the black prima
va. Before dealing with
ever, it is useful to look
epitome of whiteness:

symbol of white vir-
at what made whites
itual, indeed ethereal
e women should be,
had attractions and
nbiguity of the image
Romantic ballet (and
urlesque), where the
d by the fluffed up,
nid-nineteenth cen-
d the use of pointe
s of their toes and
structed a translu-

ons of the balleri-
, and disembodi-
otions, describing
translate herself
." She thus avoids
oman performer

Being Antinova, 1981

should be: "I have a curved spine, my breasts are too large, my legs too short, my feet are weak, they bleed after pointe work, my skin is too dark to be a ballerina. Ballet is, after all, a white machine. There's very little room for life in it. I was a black face in a snowbank."[34] By representing herself as black, rather than what she is—white and Jewish—Antin seems to suggest that Jews like herself, who have assimilated to the point that they are now indistinguishable in appearance from dominant white Americans, can no longer be imagined as having parents or grandparents who were seen in terms of arbitrary racial distinctions. Thus Antin dresses up in blackface to point out that Jewish stereotypes and discrimination against Eastern European Jews earlier in the century are ideologically akin to such treatment of blacks.

Though Antin's black ballerina, Antinova, is from Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, she not only descends from the world of modern dance, but from a whole tradition of U.S. vaudeville theater, in which Jewish women as well as black women were seen as exotic and erotic spectacles. Antin both references and disrupts these images in her work, and her affinity with Antinova goes beyond an interest in presenting her as a mere spectacle. Antinova's memoirs, penned by Antin, present a complex commentary on the marginalization of both Jewish women and black women in exoticized modern dance and performance productions, such as those Diaghilev's Russian ballet company helped to shape and create. In this respect the piece shares affinities with Antin's earlier *4 Transactions* in its perverse performance of the stereotypes she claims to identify and remedy. The roles Antin creates for Antinova are parodies of the kinds of roles an African-American or European Jewish ballerina might have been compelled to perform by a European dance company: for example, Antinova as a slave girl in a ballet where she doesn't move her feet. Antin's Antinova is a comment on the exoticization of Jews and blacks within European modernist ballet. The performance challenges whiteness itself and its class

system as a defining set of normative high cultural practices against which all others are measured and into which all are expected to fit. Her parodic performance of Marie Antoinette as the shepherdess (the queen masquerading as the working-class other), for example, ironically reviews an older form of appropriating otherness, thus disrupting any notion of a transcendent position of whiteness that can be easily occupied.

If the power of the works by Antin that I have shown seems somewhat contingent on reading in the ethnic, racial, and gendered themes, it is important to note that Antin is currently constructing herself more self-consciously as white and Jewish in her recent work: the installation *Vilna Nights*, 1993 (no. 43, pp. 143, 145–47), and *The Man without a World*, 1991 (no. 42, pp. 139–41), a wonderful simulation of a silent-era Yiddish film.[35] *The Man without a World* is consistent with some of her earlier works: Antin looks at the rich shtetl life of Poland in a satirical way, a strategy that is linked to the presentation of the heterogeneity of identities among women in her earlier projects. In the film, however, Antin emphasizes the diversity of identities among Jews as well as the tensions they face living in a world of interlocking oppression, both from within and outside the Jewish community. The film provides new insights into the lives of Jews in Eastern Europe and especially into the conflicts between Jewish tradition and assimilation. By preserving the problems—the limited choices for Jews overall and the especially confining roles for Jewish women as either virgins, mothers, or whores—Antin resists romanticizing an older Jewish culture, a so-called vanishing world. It is worth noting that Antin, the daughter of a former actress in the Yiddish theater in Poland (who was also a passionate communist) and a socialist, fiercely atheist father, is also referencing her own generational struggles as a non-religious American Jew, a woman, and a filmmaker. She rethinks an older Jewish Eastern European world where women were not able to participate fully outside prescribed stereotypical feminine roles. Although Antin names the film

The Man without a World and presents it as a "recently rediscovered" film by a forgotten male Jewish film director, Yevgeny Antinov, the untraditional and sometimes irreverent way that the female characters are presented suggests a feminist point of view.

Antin's interest in questions of immigration suggests that second-generation Jews like herself—of Eastern European and Russian descent, but born in the U.S.—did retain their cultural ties to the nations they came from as well as an allegiance to Jewish culture and history. Indeed, Antin's work provides a rare example of a white woman dealing with questions of feminism, assimilation, and Jewishness from the 1970s to the present. One of the recurring pleasures of her work is the way that, through the use of performance as a critical strategy, she transforms conventional social roles into complicated relationships laced with humor and irony. At the same time, her notion of the performative also highlights the open-endedness of questions connected to identities, since it acknowledges her ambivalence at positioning herself or others as fixed, stable identities that can be fully knowable or controlled.

In placing Antin's work in historical perspective in terms of gender and ethnicity, I have attempted to provide a richer account of her work as well as her struggles as a Jewish artist who played a decisive role in the first wave of conceptual feminist art in the U.S. Besides her contribution to this wider social movement in the arts, Antin deserves attention as a committed artist and as an irreverent and original thinker, who is determined to follow her own independent path.

as a "recently rediscovered" film
, Yevgeny Antinov, the untradi-
t the female characters are pre-

migration suggests that second-
European and Russian descent,
ultural ties to the nations they
ish culture and history. Indeed,
a white woman dealing with
wishness from the 1970s to the
of her work is the way that,
l strategy, she transforms con-
lationships laced with humor
he performative also highlights
l to identities, since it acknowl-
self or others as fixed, stable
trolled.

ective in terms of gender and
er account of her work as well
ed a decisive role in the first
esides her contribution to this
serves attention as a commit-
hinker, who is determined to

This article is dedicated to the memory of Kathy Acker, a former colleague from the San Francisco Art Institute, whose work was in part influenced by Eleanor Antin's. It was Kathy Acker who initially suggested that I contact Eleanor Antin about my own work on Jewish identities and feminist art.

Lisa E. Bloom is an associate professor in women's studies and comparative cultures at Josai International University in the Chiba prefecture, Japan.

Portions of this paper are published in the following places: "Ethnic Notions and Feminist Strategies of the 1970s: Some Work by Judy Chicago and Eleanor Antin," in Jewish Identity and Art History, *ed. Catherine Soussloff (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999)* and *"Contests for Meaning in Body Politics and Feminist Conceptual Art: Revisioning the 1970s through the Work of Eleanor Antin," in* Performing the Body/Performing the Text, *ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (London: Routledge, 1999). A Japanese-language version of the latter essay appears under the same title in* Rim: Pacific Rim Women's Studies Association Journal *(Josai International University, Chiba-ken, Japan) 7, no. 1 (March 1998): 46–70.*

1. Miriam Schapiro, *Anonymous Was a Woman: A Documentation of the Women's Art Festival, A Collection of Letters to Young Women Artists* (Valencia, California: Feminist Art Program/ California Institute of the Arts, 1974), 53.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 66.

4. Antin quotations from *Anonymous Was a Woman* appear on p. 58.

5. For further background on the feminist art programs active in Los Angeles in the early 1970s, see the California Institute of the Arts exhibition, *The F-Word: Contemporary Feminisms and the Legacy of the Los Angeles Feminist Art Movement* (October 1998; curator, Nancy Buchanan).

6. *Anonymous Was a Woman*, 54.

7. See Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking article, "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?" in *Women in Sexist Society*, ed. Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran (New York: Basic Books, 1971); reprinted as "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Artnews* (January 1971), and in *Art and Sexual Politics*, ed. Thomas B. Hess and Elizabeth C. Baker (New York: Collier, 1973), 1–43.

8. For background on the impact feminism had on the arts in the U.S. during this period, [illegible] *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party" in Feminist Art History,* ed. Amelia Jones [illegible] and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996). For Britain, see *Framing Fem*[illegible] *and the Women's Movement 1970–1985,* ed. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (London: Pandora, 1987). For a thoughtful assessment of the current status of feminist art, art [illegible] and arts education in the U.S. and the U.K., see *New Feminist Art Criticism,* ed. Katy [illegible] (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995).

9. For two excellent examples of how a feminist political project effected the rethinking [illegible] tory, see Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (New York: Thames and Hudson, [illegible] and Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories* [illegible] York: Routledge, 1988).

10. See *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995) for the poster [illegible] and activities of the Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous group of U.S. feminist political [illegible] formed in 1985 to specifically critique racist and sexist art-world institutional practices.

11. For examples of available writings on the arts by Third World women and U.S. women [illegible] as well as ethnic white women, see *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender Politics* [illegible] *Culture,* ed. Lisa Bloom (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, fall 1999); and [illegible] Wallace, "Why Are There No Great Black Artists? The Problem of Visuality in African-[illegible] Culture," in *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 333–46. For more on lesbian [illegible] nism, see *Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs,* ed. Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser [illegible] Pandora, 1991).

12. It might be worthwhile to rethink the term "Jewish" with a capital *J,* especially since [illegible] used to reinforce the notion in mainstream American culture that "Jewishness" is strictly [illegible] gious identity. Also, though I focus in this essay on Eleanor Antin, a Jewish-American [illegible] Eastern European and Russian descent based in the U.S., it is important to emphasize [illegible] sity of the Jewish diasporic community. Consider, for example, the marked differences [illegible] German and Eastern European Jews (many of whom did not speak English in the mid-[illegible] or the complicated status of a Jewish Iraqi in the U.S. today.

13. Providing a critical account of the cultural aspect of Jewishness in the work of many [illegible] artists and critics from the 1930s to the present is part of my current book project, *Ghosts* [illegible] *Ethnicity: Rethinking Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Feminist Art Practices in the U.S.*

14. See Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Ann Pellegrini, *Perform*[illegible] *Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997); [illegible] Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997).

15. Introduction to *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History* [illegible] *Impact,* ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), [illegible]

16. Yolanda M. López and Moira Roth, "Social Protest: Racism and Sexism," in *The Power of Feminist Art,* 140.

17. For a fuller discussion of the issue of women's Jewish identities, see Lisa Bloom, "Ethnic Notions and Feminist Strategies of the 1970s: Some Work by Judy Chicago and Eleanor Antin," in *Jewish Identity and Art History,* ed. Catherine Soussloff (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

18. Arlene Raven and Deborah Marrow, "Eleanor Antin: What's Your Story?" *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Women's Culture* 8 (summer 1979): 44.

19. Ann-Sargent Wooster, *The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970–75* (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1993), 21.

20. Ibid., 41. (Originally cited in Eleanor Antin, "Dialogue with a Medium," *Art-Rite* 7 [autumn 1974]: 23–24.)

21. Cindy Nemser, "Eleanor Antin," in *Art Talk* (New York: Scribners, 1975), 281.

22. Joanna Frueh, "The Body through Women's Eyes," in *The Power of Feminist Art,* 195.

23. New York: Pantheon, 1956.

24. Unpublished correspondence with the artist, October 1998.

25. Ibid.

26. Sander Gilman, "The Jew's Body: Thoughts on Jewish Physical Difference," in *Too Jewish: Challenging Traditional Identities,* ed. Norman Kleeblatt (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 70.

27. *Art Talk,* 282.

28. Eleanor Antin, "Women without Pathos," *Artnews* (January 1971): 3–4; reprinted in *Art and Sexual Politics,* 86–87.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. In some ways this project resembles Elaine Reichek's *Post-Colonial Kinderhood,* 1993, displayed at the Jewish Museum, New York City. Both works are ironical portraits that deal simultaneously with questions of assimilation, domestic interiors, and white ethnic female lives.

33. *White,* 129–31.

34. Quoted in Henry Sayre's introduction to *Eleanora Antinova Plays* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1994), 13.

35. For an excellent review of the film, see Jeffrey Skoller, "The Shadows of Catastrophe: Eleanor Antin's *The Man without a World,*" *Film Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (fall 1995): 28–32. See also Ellen Zweig, "Constructing Loss: Film and Presence in the Work of Eleanor Antin," *Millennium Film Journal* 29 (fall 1996): 34–41.