

Tableaux Vivants, Dying Empires Eleanor Antin's *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Roman Allegories* and *Helen's Odyssey*

Lisa E. Bloom

Eleanor Antin has an unusually prolific and long career as a feminist performance artist, filmmaker, and conceptual artist in the U.S. A key figure in the body, performance and conceptual art movements of the 1970s, Antin from the late 1960s onward has consistently dealt with issues of identity, autobiography, masquerade, and the construction of history in her work.¹ Steeped in satire and humor, much of Antin's work offers an interpretation of history that taps nostalgia and an undercurrent of ironic understanding. For Antin, nostalgia is not the return to a vision of stability and authenticity from some conceptual "*golden age*" whether it was the silent-era classics of Yiddish film or the world of Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* – two periods amongst many that Antin draws on from her earlier work. She is not interested in the conventional sense of nostalgia as yearning alone, but rather borrows and quotes from the past – not as a mark of cultural amnesia,² but as a way of revealing the pressure of the past on the present moment. Antin refuses to simply perform a "*straight*" or "*corrected*" history (though she often goes out of her way to mimic its period feel), since she is more concerned with the web of

implications between past and present. Thus, the bodies of those in her performances, films and photographs never deliberately match the historical bodies they represent. Overall, Antin uses sentimentality and engages with nostalgia fairly strategically since her project isn't one of simply recuperating the past but of embodying the repetition of the past in the present moment to create a new form of critical Jewish feminist art.³

I became interested in Antin's early work in the mid-1990s when I started writing articles on the topic of Jewishness and feminist art since her work was an especially pointed example of the ways a unitary history of US feminism, in which gender is the sole emphasis, was inadequate for dealing with the complexity of her work.⁴ Antin provides a rare example of a Jewish artist bringing to conceptual art and performance art questions of feminism, sexuality, assimilation, and class with an unprecedented degree of explicitly Jewish humor and content. Much of the force and humor of her work lies in how she often deliberately redraws the lines of history from a position of social and class exclusion, as a woman, a Jew, and an artist. Antin's ability to conjure up this absence and



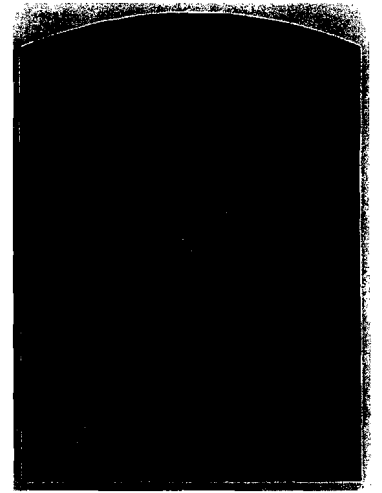
Left: Eleanor Antin Eleanora Antinova in "The Hebrews" (1980) from *Recollections of My Life with Diaghilev 1919-1929* film still

Right: Eleanor Antin "Myself 1854" detail from *The Angel of Mercy* (1977) tinted gelatin silver prints mounted on paper with text 30 1/2 x 22 ins.

Page 14, above: Eleanor Antin *The Death of Petronius* from *The Last Days of Pompeii* (2001) chromogenic print 46 9/16 x 94 1/2 x 1 3/4 ins.

Page 14, below: Eleanor Antin *At the Edge of Night* from *Roman Allegories* (2004) chromogenic print. 48 1/2 x 61 1/8 x 2 ins., edition of 4.

All photos: Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York



imagine what the ghost would say if she was able to speak has been played out by her constant experimentation with other identities in her work.⁵ Not all of these have been Jewish, for example, her role as a nurse in a nineteenth century tour of the Crimea for her series *Angel of Mercy*, and, in some cases, she has taken on male roles as the King of Solana Beach or as the "forgotten" Russian male film director, Yevgeny Antinov. As much as her early work could be read as a commentary on the invisibility of Jewish women in the art world at that time, there is the consistent effort in standard accounts to read her contributions to feminist art as more ethnically and politically neutral than my account of her work suggests.

In the mid 1990s when I wrote about Antin's work initially, it was very difficult to bring up the issue of Jewishness in the arts despite the fact that it was a topic extensively written about in other disciplines.⁶ As a result of this, some of the most interesting aspects of Antin's art practice had not been explored partly because the Yiddishkeit culture that she came out of – specifically her red diaper baby status⁷ – as well as her interest in this as a subject in her work and her ironical sense of humor were seen as more of interest to an ethnic sub-culture, rather than a general art audience.

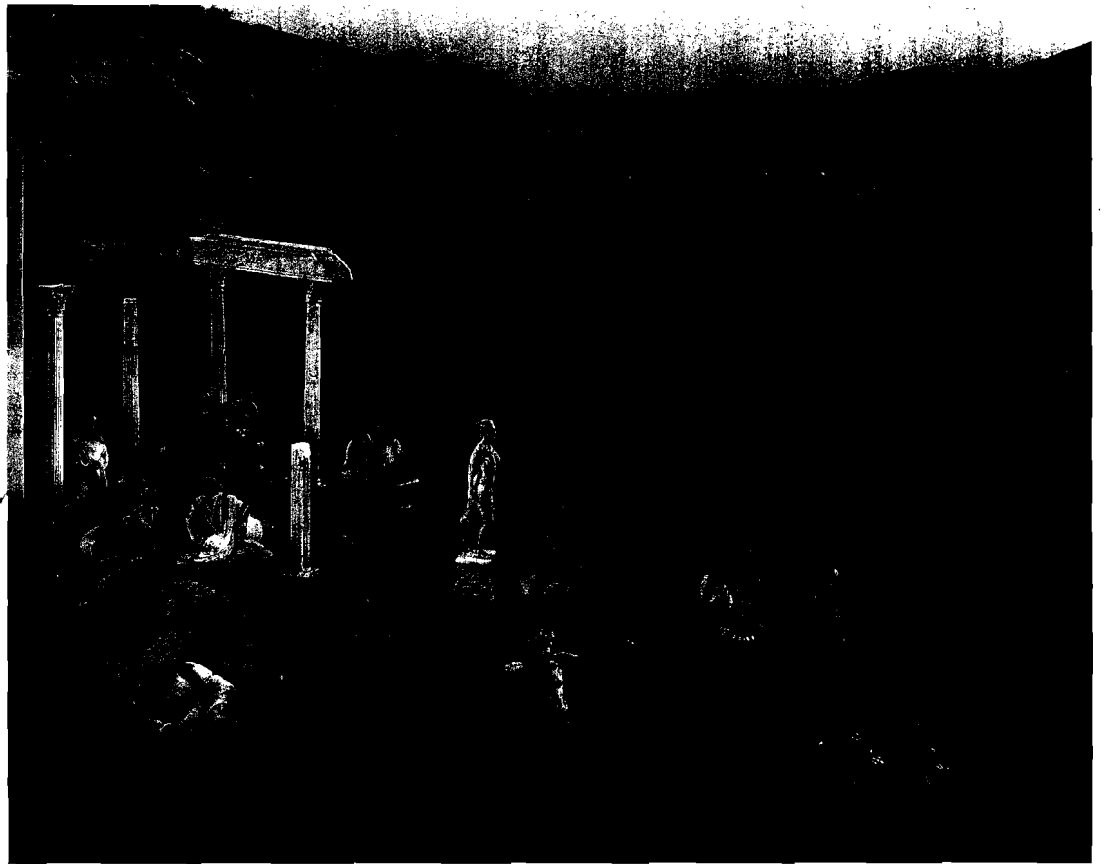
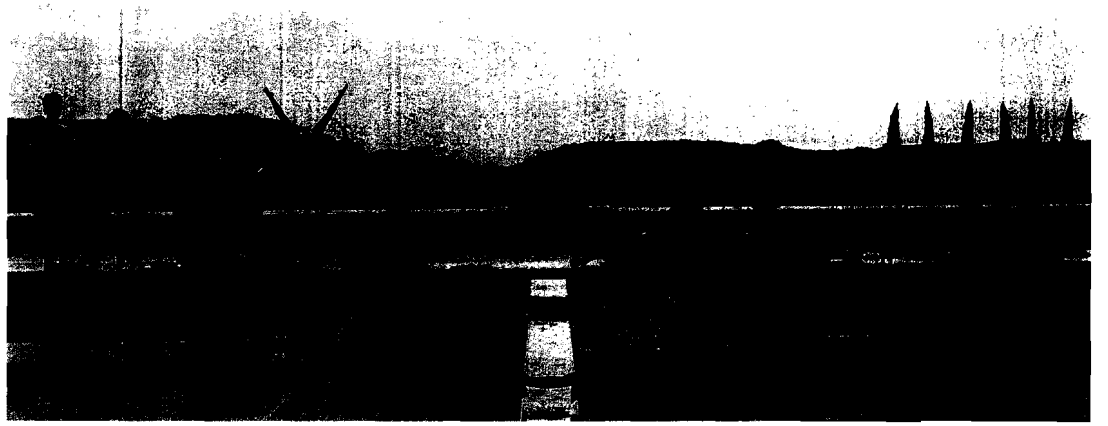
In what follows I want to return to how an insolent kind of Jewish black humor and social satire plays out in Antin's recent work on Ancient Greece and Rome and compare this to her earlier feature film *The Man without a World* (1991) which has an obviously Jewish subject. The comparison is illuminating since both works, despite their different mediums

and subjects deploy similar aesthetic strategies, are about worlds that are about to end. In the case of *The Man Without A World* it is the world of the Jewish shtetl that she references in the film as well as the Yiddish culture that by the time she made this film was gone. In the recent work, it is the decadent world of Pompeii before the volcano erupts and the world of the Roman Empire before it crumbles. The parallel references in both are to how our world now seems on the verge of financial collapse.

In *The Man Without a World* the nostalgia for both the shtetl and the Yiddish high-cultural tradition that she comes from is personal and has been an important force that has animated most of her work. Antin writes:

The world I was brought up in was devoted to Yiddish high culture.... My childhood world was fashioned by the great Yiddish writers, the Yiddish art theatre, the revolutionary fervor of the Haskalah, and the Jewish enlightenment.⁸

Indeed, I argue in my book *Jewish Identities* that Antin reinvents a new tradition of Jewish feminist art in part out of her nostalgia for a kind of Jewish cosmopolitanism with its European and Eastern European roots but also from her own experiences in her mother's high yiddish cultural left-wing hotel tucked away in the Jewish Catskills borsht belt, the avant-gardist cosmopolitan art and theatre cultures of New York that she was part of in the 1960s and the feminist art cultures in California that she encountered later. These multiple influences and experiences have made her work rich in references, layers and allusions. In what follows I ask if her current photographic work *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Roman*



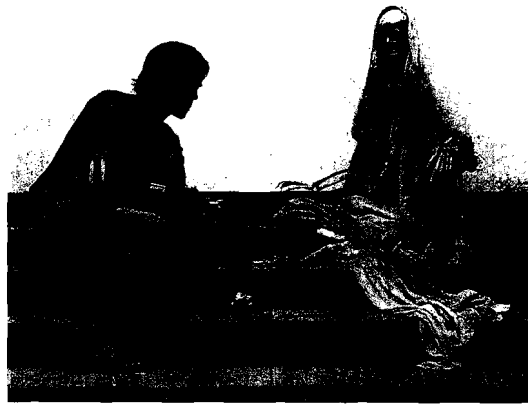


Eleanor Antin *Plaisir d'Amour (after Couture)* (2007) chromogenic print 61 x 92 1/2 ins.
edition of 5 Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

Allegories and Helen's Odyssey is also a nostalgia project and if so what is she saying goodbye to? Is it nostalgia for a world of erotic possibilities, beauty, and utopian romanticism from the 1960s that no longer exists? Does it represent the death of the fantasy of imagining ourselves as someone else: something that has been a continuous thread in her own work? This thread has been part of avant-gardist culture's critical revisiting of the assimilationist possibilities of Broadway and Hollywood as well as its out of control excess and eroticism but it also emerges in work of the younger post-modernist photographers and video makers that have followed Antin, such as Cindy Sherman, Dara Birnbaum, Laurie Simmons, Barbara Kruger, amongst others.⁹ Is this all part of the death that she mourns in this recent work and its prophetic reference to the imminent destruction of our world as we know it? Though much of this work was done in the wake of 9/11 before the actual financial collapse, much of it anticipates some of the stories of excess which have come after this event. Her work, *Plaisir d'Amour*, for example, was made as a commentary on the financial excess that preceded the current economic crisis, but this work can also be read – after the current economic crisis – as satirically conjuring up many contemporary news stories about the

bonus culture such as what AIG employees out on a junket at Las Vegas' Caesar's Palace might look like.¹⁰

The one historical script that Antin perhaps would belong in as a Jewish woman, but not as modern feminist, was the world of the patriarchal shtetl in *The Man Without a World*. Antin rewrites that past and she creates feminist art from this unlikely subject-position utilising Jewish remnants from pre-World War II Eastern European shtetl communities, as she does Roman in her current cycle of works, *Helen's Odyssey*. Her film *The Man without a World* looks at the rich shtetl life of Poland in a satirical way to explore and ultimately re-imagine the script without erasing the problems presented by the limited choices for Jews overall and the especially confining roles for Jewish women as either virgins, mothers, or whores. In rethinking women's roles, Antin references an older Jewish culture that no longer exists, but her fascination for early Yiddish cinema and early Jewish writers such as Babel and Singer, does not prevent her from willfully rewriting the narrative, making women more central to the intellectual world of the shtetl, and at the same time more playful, sexually excessive and insolent. Women are not always presented as confined or controlled by the socially-imposed limits, even in the most traditional scenes, where a bride is fitted for her



Above: Eleanor Antin *The Gamblers* (2004) chromogenic print
48 1/2 x 61 1/8 x 2 ins., edition of 4
Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

Eleanor Antin *The Man without a World* (1991) film stills
Left above: 'Market Day'; middle: 'Bride anointed in mikvah';
Below: (non-Jewish) woman with pig'
Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

wedding dress or being anointed in the mikvah or in more unlikely scenes, such as the still of a (non-Jewish) woman shown tormenting a fat pig with sticks. 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 parents' and grandparents' struggles as Jews. Antin's work rethinks an older Jewish Eastern European world where Jewish women were not able to participate outside prescribed feminine roles. Part of her rethinking of this period from a feminist perspective extends to the way she positions herself as the director by presenting it as a "*recently rediscovered*" film by a forgotten male Jewish film director, suspiciously named Yevgeny Antinov as her male alter-ego. The untraditional and sometimes irreverent way that the Jewish female characters are presented as well as the naming of the film and her use of a made-up male pseudonym suggests her playful insertion of herself into a narrative that was at an earlier historical moment meant to exclude her as a woman but not as a Jew.

It is not just her feminist perspective and her humor however, that makes her film so rewarding to watch, the film also works as both a tribute to Yiddish cinema of the 1920s and 1930s and as a critique given that she alters aspects of that particular culture and reinvents it through her irreverent

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mimicry. Even though the Shoah is not evoked directly, Jeffrey Skoller points out in his reading of the film, that the audience is well aware that this is the starting point for Antin.¹¹ This is reinforced by the film's over-the-top beginning when she opens the film with a figure who comes to be known as the 'Angel of Death' but who introduces us to what follows by simply snapping his fingers. The film's end titles speak to the end of this "*world*", through references



Eleanor Antin *The Man without a World* (1991) film stills. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery

to Jewish deportation out of the region. Thus, Skoller argues that Antin is self-consciously reproducing aspects of a culture that was subsequently annihilated with most of European and Eastern-European Jewry during World War II. The viewer's prior knowledge that this culture is doomed is important for Antin since she wants us to watch this film knowing as Skoller puts it that '*The Man Without A World is a world of ghosts.*'¹²

If the Yiddish cinema of the 1920s and 1930s in *The Man Without a World* is drawn from the memory and culture of her own Jewish ancestors re-experienced as if it were her own – what Marianne Hirsch calls 'postmemory'¹³ – Antin's more recent series on Greece and Rome reveals a nostalgia for different periods in history that isn't directly hers but one she was fascinated with as a teenager and then later as an adult. Her interest is to engage with two earlier eras of Empire, not just Greece and Rome, but also nineteenth century France and England as she appropriates their style of history painting in her photography. Her point is to draw parallels between the classical themes and excesses of nineteenth century history painting and the present, deliberately using the past references to former empires to refer to modern America's role as Empire.¹⁴ In this irreverent work, she ironically seeks out the more showy examples from the nineteenth century for her critique such as the work of Eugene Delacroix,

Odalisque (1857), Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888) and Thomas Couture's *The Roman of the Decadence*, (1847) amongst others.¹⁵ Antin shares a genuine interest in the Greeks and Romans based on her own education. Maureen Dowd in a *New York Times* column, aptly titled '**With modernity crumbling, our thoughts turn to antiquity**', wrote about how:

the study of Latin and Greek, with illuminations on morality, philosophy, mob rule and chariot races, are being revived now, but had gone out of fashion for many years during the 1980s and 1990s, when it seemed irrelevant for kids who yearned to be investment bankers and high-tech millionaires.¹⁶

For Dowd, '**the classics have staged a comeback because we've learned the hard way that greed is bad – *avaritia mala est.***'¹⁷ Though Antin might well agree with Dowd's concerns regarding the loss of interest in engaging with the more serious issues of our times, her work isn't simply about giving us moral lessons from the ancients. Nor is she turning the prospect of a horrific end to decadence (by the Barbarian hoards or natural disasters) into a joke. Rather, she is restaging old histories that parallel with our current circumstances, and although in the case of the Greeks and Romans, it is the world of the wealthy that is coming to an end, she shows us how we are also actors in



Eleanor Antin *The Tourists* (2007) chromogenic print 61 x 77 7/8 ins. edition of 5
Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

a drama that we can't control and as vulnerable within the decline and fall of the American empire. It is this anxiety and fear that fuels the humor in her work. It is our worry of being swept up in this imminent decline that she expresses and why Antin deliberately makes her characters so tawdry in their gorgeous colors and elaborately staged settings. She is creating a meaning set in ancient times but excessive and deliberately larger than life which she refuses to dignify, mockingly adding Hollywood Technicolor and exaggerating the plots. She creates a soap opera like pathos befitting an over-leveraged culture filled with selfish and vindictive characters living on the precipice. Antin makes sure that there are no particularly "good" characters in her work. The two Helens (a blonde and brunette) that play the mythical Helen of Troy in *Helen's Odyssey* often have the leading roles. Yet these figures remain identifiable as modern Californian women and men seem to pop up in these historical melodramas. In *The Tourists*, for example, two Californian women wearing dark sunglasses carry large purses as if they were returning from a shopping spree at a Californian mall but instead took a detour to see some dead bodies.

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Antin often insinuates a new form of subversion into traditional gender roles and knowingly side-steps historical accuracy as she explains in her difficulties in manufacturing the portrayal of a woman in her work *The Artist's Studio* from 2001:

I spent a lot of time trying to make the young woman's body curl into the same slightly supine, bending, accommodating, almost supplicating curves that the sculpture has. She tried but never really made it. No healthy modern American girl's body could fall into such a posture. It's too alien, too subservient. And that was interesting, too – the difference between the real and the representation.¹⁸

Antin is not looking back to the Greeks in order to dignify or elevate their treatment of women as minors who were segregated from men and treated as their property. Rather, her recycling of the past is a way for her (and us) to maintain our humor even as she prophetically hints at the grounds for our imminent destruction in this recent work. Like her fascination in some of her earlier works with the fragile intellectual world of the shtetl that is gone and cannot be brought back to life, Antin in her more recent work might be mourning in the wake of 9/11 as Amelia Jones puts it 'the



Eleanor Antin *The Artist's Studio from The Last Days of Pompeii* (2001) chromogenic print
46 5/8 x 58 5/8 inches. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

loss of a viable language of critique amongst artists and intellectuals' in the face of financial excess, fantasy and empire. As in her work *The Man without a World*, Antin tries to defy the odds that would have our artists and intellectuals disappear without a trace. But before our civilization has turned to dust, Antin boldly creates her own historical fictions to remind us how history can repeat itself for those of us who don't have her wild and perverse imagination to challenge it.

Lisa Bloom is the author of *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* (Routledge, 2006); *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993) and editor of *'With Other Eyes': Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Her current book project is tentatively titled *'Melting Ice and Melting Markets: Feminist Visual Culture during a Moment of*

Environmental and Economic Crises'. She is an independent scholar who also teaches visual culture and art history at the University of California, San Diego.

Notes

1. For a detailed overview of Antin's work, see: Howard Fox, Eleanor Antin, and Lisa Bloom (eds.) *Eleanor Antin* (New York and Los Angeles: Distributed Art Publishers in Conjunction with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999). Also see the 2008 catalogue on her recent work: Betti-Sue Hertz (ed.) *Historical Takes* (Prestel in conjunction with the San Diego Museum of Art, 2008) and reviews from the exhibition *Identity Theft: Eleanor Antin, Lynn Hershman, Suzy Lake, 1972-1978* at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2008, particularly Matias Viegner 'She, Her, I, and Mine' in *X-Tra*, vol. 10, no.2 (Winter, 2007) pp. 26-31 and Sarah Valdez 'Reports from Santa Monica: In the Land of Make-Believe' in *Art in America* 95, no. 10 (November 2007) pp.119-121. Thanks to Betti-Sue Hertz for inviting me to participate in a panel discussion on Eleanor Antin's recent work in conjunction with the San Diego Museum of Art's exhibition *Historical Takes*.

This article came out of the paper that I wrote for my talk presented at the museum on 17 October 2008

2. Fredric Jameson relates an emergent 'nostalgia mode' to a culture of amnesia and historicist crisis in his *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991)

3. Alisa Lebow, a feminist film theorist, is one of the first critics to theorize on the relationship between Antin's work and nostalgia in her detailed article on Antin's film *The Man Without a World*.

See 'Strategic Sentimentality: Nostalgia and the work of Eleanor Antin' in *Camera Obscura* 66, vol. 22, no. 3 pp. 129-167. Also see, Ellen Zweig 'Constructing Loss: Film and Presence in the Work of Eleanor Antin' *Millennium Film Journal* no. 29 (1996)

4. Lisa E. Bloom 'Ethnic Notions and Feminist Strategies of the 1970s: The Work of Eleanor Antin and Judy Chicago' in *Jewish Identities in Modern Art History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) pp.135-163. A later article 'Rewriting the Script: Eleanor Antin's artwork' appears in Lisa E. Bloom *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* (Routledge; London and New York, 2006) pp. 56-82

5. My reference to the "ghost" also references my argument in my book *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* and how the manifestation of American feminism in the arts has long been imbricated with certain unacknowledged questions of Jewish identity. These "ghosts" are the focus of my book's exploration into a vital component of US art.

6. Until the 1990s, public discussions of Jewishness and sexual identities in the Euro-American art world were very rare given how the arts at that time were dominated by a white, heterosexual male power structure. 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 ground-breaking 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 US 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.

7. This is a topic of her more recent writings and art projects on Stalin.

8. Correspondence between Lisa Bloom and Eleanor Antin, 8 May 2009

9. Sara Valdez in her review of Jori Finkel's exhibit *Identity Theft: Eleanor Antin, Lynn Hershman, Suzy Lake, 1972-1978* at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2007 rightly points out that the exhibition sets the historical record straight and positions Eleanor Antin, Lynn Hershman and Suzy Lake's work as part of the generation before Cindy Sherman, Sherry Levine and others that invented the genre of 'purloined-persona art'.

See Sarah Valdez 'Reports from Santa Monica: In the Land of Make-Believe' in *Art in America* 95, no. 10 (November 2007) p.119

10. Barbara de Lollis ' "AIG effect" Tones Down Lavish Business Events' *USA Today* 29 January 2009

11. Jeffrey Skoller 'Shadows: Historical Temporalities 1' in *Shadows. Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005) p. 46

12. Ibid

13. For a definition of her term 'postmemory' see Marianne Hirsch 'Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy' in Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer *Acts of Memory*

14. For a more in-depth discussion of how Antin overlays five empires in her three recent works dating from 2001-2007 (British & French nineteenth century colonial empires, Ancient Greece and Rome, and more recently, the American Empire) see Betti-Sue Hertz 'Eleanor Antin's Transpositions: A Feminist View of Academic Painting in the Age of Digital Photography' in Betti-Sue Hertz (ed.) *Historical Takes* pp. 81-91. Also see, 'Classical Frieze', a film about Antin's recent work (2001-2009) recreating the ancient world through the screen of nineteenth century neo-classical painting, as well as several works from that series. This was shown in conjunction with *Pompeii and the Roman Villa: Art and Culture around the Bay of Naples* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, May 3-October 4, 2009.

15. Again see Hertz's article for the list of historical references from nineteenth century painting and photography that Antin draws on. Also see Max Kozloff's interview with Antin, 'Impossible Facts: Max Kozloff Interviews Eleanor Antin' in Betti-Sue Hertz (ed.) *Historical Takes*.

16. Maureen Dowd 'With modernity crumbling, our thoughts turn to antiquity' *The New York Times* 11 October 2008.

17. Ibid

18. Quoted in 'Impossible Facts: Max Kozloff Interviews Eleanor Antin' in Betti-Sue Hertz (ed.) *Historical Takes* p.76

19. See Amelia Jones' article 'Time Traveler: Eleanor Antin as Mythographer of the Self' in Betti-Sue Hertz (ed.) *Historical Takes* pp.93-99