

# "COURAGE."

by Kathi Norklun

**P**ostfeminism, like postmodernism, describes a phase in which the feminist (modernist) discourse has been assimilated by the culture it critiques. The term is useful to describe a state of affairs in which any treatment of social roles is affected, admittedly or not, by feminist precedents. Art which deals with social roles and social conventions can and should be discussed in postfeminist terms. The term postfeminism, like postmodernism, is neither negative nor positive, but rather descriptive.

Postfeminism has been used by journalists (1) to describe a perceived turning away from or abandonment of feminist principles and politics on the part both of women who lived through the movement and of women who came of age after it. To limit its definition in this way is to ignore the extent to which feminism has pervaded the public consciousness and to deny the legacy of feminist politics. Both exist within the present conservatism.

Barbara Kruger is a postfeminist artist. So are Dara Birnbaum, Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, Martha Rosler and Jenny Holzer. These are the names Benjamin Buchloh gives as his examples of deconstructivist artists of the late Seventies who address ideological discourses outside the frame of mod-



Laurie Simmons: *Green Kitchen*, 1983.

ernism.(2) It is not coincidental that the artists he names are all women, nor that their work follows rapidly upon the period of intensified activity and widespread media attention that feminism achieved in the early Seventies. It is women who have been the most successful at deconstructivist strategies that attempt a secondary mythification, because women have access to the recent historical experience of feminism, which, in exposing the latent (misogynist) meaning of existing institutions, provided a stance, strategy and discourse external to and deconstructive of an existing, dominant ideology. Feminism provided a counter ideology that has reached, in some form, even to the popular, mass media. Women have been encouraged in their attempts to assimilate discourses external to modernism in their work by this precedent.

Dorit Cypis is a California artist who can be included with the women mentioned above—indeed, the title of this essay comes from a recent work of hers. *In Quest of the Impresario: Courage* was installed in a small room at LACE in Los Angeles in 1982. A slide projected on the wall showed a car interior, shot from the back seat, the back of the driver's head, and the rearview mirror with a reflection of the driver's face (a woman's), eyes closed, head back. By standing on an X on the floor the viewer blocked one of two slide projectors, and a second slide, obscured by the first, was revealed: a gun. The single word "courage" from the soundtrack of the *Wizard of Oz* played repeatedly.

By restaging the detective genre, Cypis attacks the structure of the film-viewing situation, a passive one in which the images move, or replace one another, at an uncontrollable and indistinguishable rate. Her work reverses this situation. The viewer controls the rate of exchange and is the only moving element. Participation in the filmic process reveals its nonparticipatory character.

Cypis' work reveals a (politicized) woman-identified subtext. Cypis' references to psychoanalytic theory come in somewhat illustrative juxtapositions of male and female images and in reflected images of women. I have used her borrowed phrase in my title to underline the commitment by women to a political stance that is not mainstream and to encourage a continuation of this development.

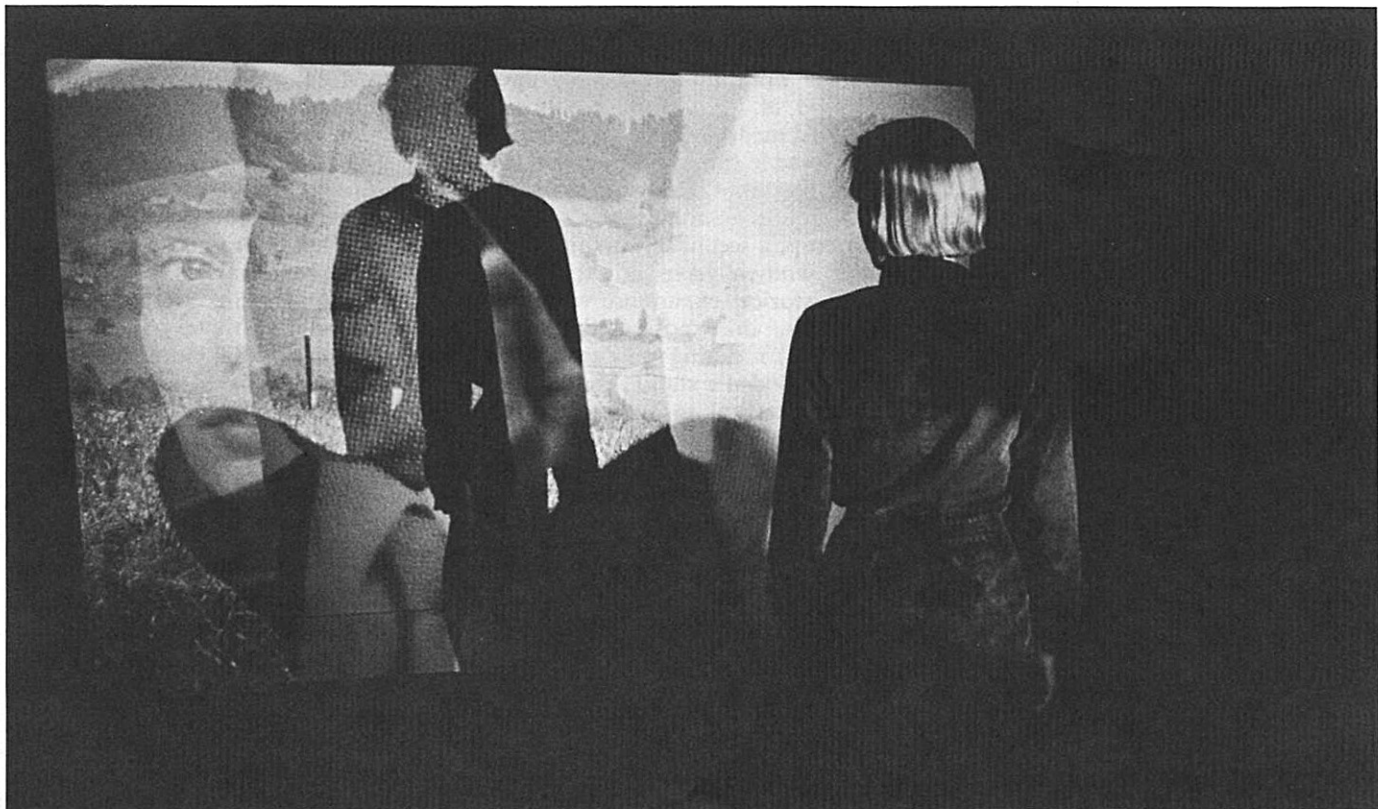
Barbara Kruger is a transitional figure in this history. Her work of the early Seventies was squarely (!) in the feminist camp—centered, craft-orient-

ed wall reliefs. By the mid-Seventies she was working with text: one series combined text with photographs of women's panties around women's ankles as they sat in public toilets. Another showed non-narrative photographs of domestic architecture with texts that evoked dramatic or narrative tension. Kruger gained visibility, at P.S.1 and Peter Frank's *Exxon National* at the Guggenheim (feminists may smile bitterly), with text/image work whose content was more specifically the deconstruction of text and less obviously a feminist rhetoric. Her current success with deconstructive work with an obvious feminist text demonstrates the assimilation of the feminist discourse into the general conversation. The work is postfeminist in that it posits a prior knowledge of feminist discourse. "Your gaze hits the side of my face"—even without recourse to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, one understands that a (familiar) male/female confrontation is being described. Kruger's well-turned aphorisms are cues to an existing political text. They are also clues, for a woman, too common experience. The artist's old, found imagery catches the offending culture *flagrante delicto* and produces, not nostalgia, but a sense that this is an old story. The work is not cathartic (much feminist art was cathartic) nor simply accusative. It exemplifies an art strategy that successfully incorporates (political) content external to the body of art history.

Dara Birnbaum's deconstruction of the medium of television does not demand a feminist reading; indeed, the artist does not identify herself as a feminist. But Birnbaum credits the movement's importance, and her task of addressing the myths underlying the medium is abetted by historical proximity to the women's movement.

Birnbaum, like Kruger, incorporates a woman's point of view in what she does: thus *Wonder Woman*, *Laverne and Shirley*, *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry*, *General Hospital/Women Olympic Speed Skating*, to state the obvious. The TV shows from which the first two pieces derive are themselves flawed reflections of the women's movement, responses to a surge of popular interest in women's roles and relationships. Birnbaum's "systems of disbelief" in institutions and the roles they proffer, conveyed through fragmentation, focus primarily on the depiction of women in what the artist has described as a "hard" medium (technological and male-dominated).





Dorit Cypis: *Still; To Be Seen*. Installation at Artists Space, New York, 1983. Photo: Kenji Fujita.



Dara Birnbaum: *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978. Still from videotape.

Birnbaum's dissection of television technique—reverse angle, two shot, etc.—offers a post-structuralist strategy to the art world. But the artist's concern is social function, not art strategy. Her work is marginal (at least in terms of presentation) in the art world; viewers are led to question the ability of the work to distinguish itself from the medium it critiques. But the strength of the work lies precisely in its non-art subject matter. It is neither academic exercise nor cynical gesture. Like Jenny Holzer, Birnbaum exemplifies the risk-taking of women who step outside the mainstream ideology, given "the bonus of [their] own efforts and earlier feminist efforts" (Holzer's words).

Sherrie Levine operates strictly within a modernist framework. In deconstructing the production of art, she does not introduce material external to the art process. Her stance is strangely "other"—she has (until recently) remained outside the production process. She deconstructs paintings by men; she does not paint nor does she produce objects. The extreme alienation embodied in her work is an extension of the alienation of women from the means of production. Levine initiated her rigorous, even clinical approach with an accessible subject. Early works framed the mythification involved in the imaging of women. Levine was not attacking the stereotypes per se, as feminists had earlier done; she used sensitivity to the stereotypes as such, a sensitivity given us by feminist critiques, to point to the stereotyping process. From this fairly familiar realm she moved into more problematical areas, in which the stereotyping was not as clearly conceded. This is her rephotographic work about nature vs. culture in art production.

These women work with a strategy of deconstruction and secondary mythification that parallels the strategy of political feminism.<sup>(3)</sup> The postfeminist stream immediately widens to include artists whose work does not parallel feminism, but clearly comes after it. Obvious examples are Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons.

Sherman's work is a copying of types by which woman is portrayed, without a built-in (feminist) critique of the types. Her identification of self with types is extremely unguarded. As her images continue to narrow in focus, from Sherman mise-en-scene to Sherman in costume to Sherman's face and residual cues, they invite projection through the familiar strategem of woman as metaphor. Sherman uses that

impulse to deny it. Clearly this has a feminist precedent.

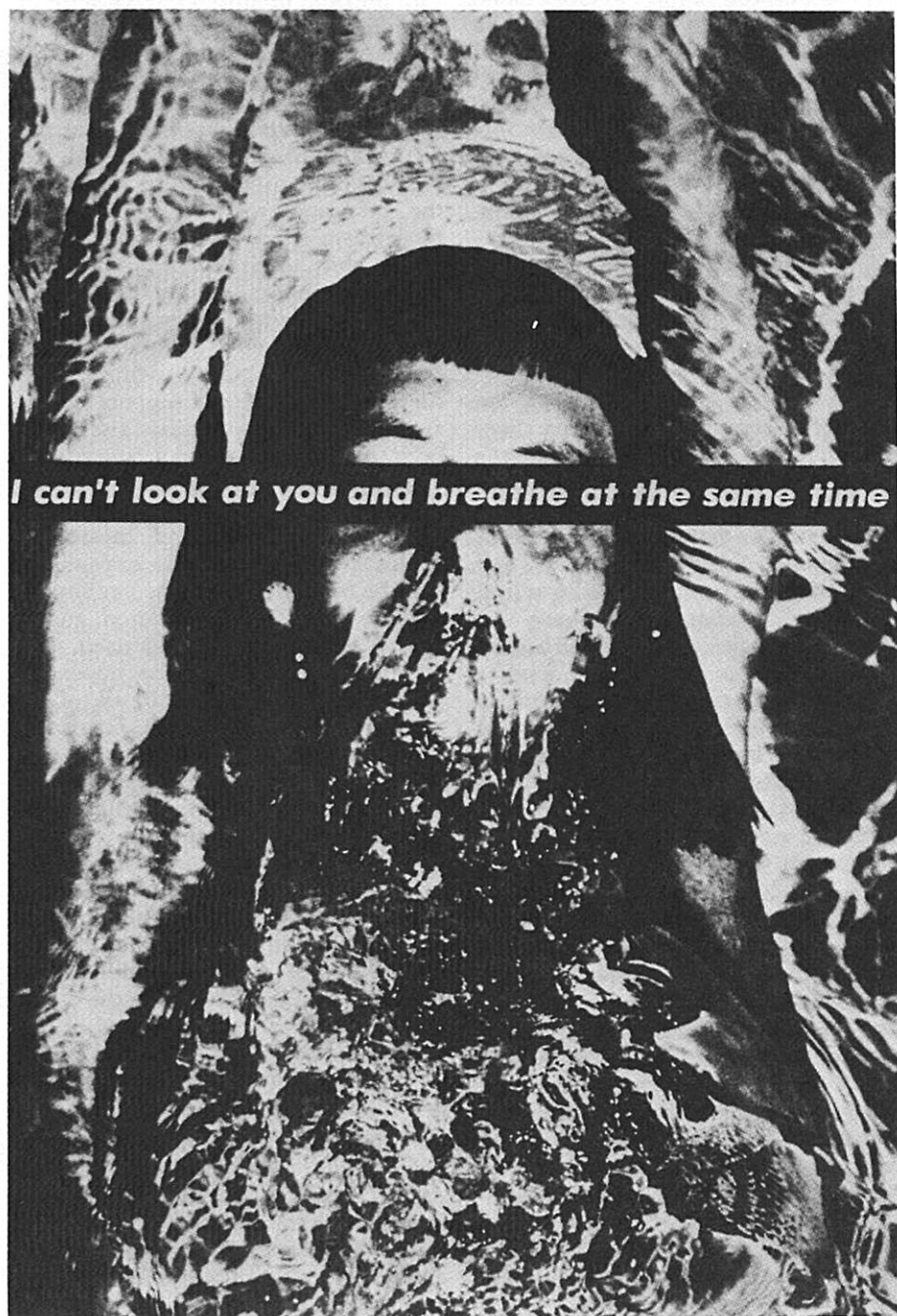
Neither do Simmons' images of women criticize stereotypes so much as they display the mannerisms by which stereotypes are recognized. Her series of ballet figurines emphasize the gesture of swooning femininity while rendering it sterile. Her Sixties-revival living rooms, color-coordinated with their plastic doll residents, are similarly mannered. The work again has the precedent of the women's movement, which made women's roles and images problematical.

Feminism is part of a constellation of cultural forces from the Sixties whose effects are presently being re-examined. To speak of the end of feminism is naive; to ignore its assimilation is equally unproductive. Postfeminism is a useful term for delineating certain aspects of this time after feminism.

1) I used the term "postfeminist" in a review of Barbara Kruger's work, *L.A. Weekly*, March 26, 1982; the term achieved journalistic currency with "Voices From the Post-feminist Generation," by Susan Bolotin, *New York Times*, October 17, 1982.

2) Benjamin Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum*, September 1982, pp. 43-56.

3) Buchloh, *op. cit.*, describes the time in which these women are working as a "historical situation in which radical political practice seems to have been restricted to feminist practice."



Barbara Kruger: Untitled, 1983.