

ELUDING DEFINITION

KATE LINKER

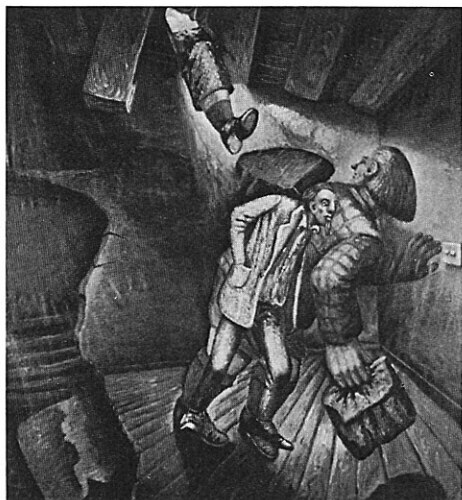


Sarah Charlesworth, *Red Mask*, 1983. Cibachrome print, 30 x 40".

Among the tortuous texts of Jacques Lacan, several speak with unusual lucidity and pertinence about the constraints surrounding the very idea of women. In "Encore," an essay from the early 70s approaching the terra incognita of feminine desire, Lacan speaks "of all those beings who take on the status of the woman."¹ Lacan exposes the problem as one of authority, for "status" is a juridical term, denoting a condition or position with regard to the law. Woman's supposed "nature," he implies, is highly unnatural; it is not inherent but assumed (or imposed) from outside. But in another text Lacan goes further, as if to answer our inevitable ques-

tion about sexual formation: "Images and symbols for the woman cannot be isolated from images and symbols of the woman. It is representation, . . . the representation of feminine sexuality . . . , which conditions how it comes into play." In a manner radical for feminism, Lacan discloses sexuality as a problem of language.

If this privileging of language is crucial, it is because it calls attention to the way feminism participates in a larger and more encompassing direction, the investigation of cultural constraints. Lacan's insights coincide with deconstructive theory, which views reality as the effect of systems of representation, as a product of



Steven Campbell, *Wee Nook Cottage*, 1983. Oil on canvas, 100 x 91". Private collection.



Steven Campbell, *Happy Camper*, 1983. Oil on canvas, 99 x 113". Collection of the High Museum of Art, Atlanta.



Steven Campbell, *Through the Ceiling, Through the Floor etc.*, 1984. Oil on canvas, 111 x 65".

complete a painting in six days, with no preliminary drawing, he must rely on known factors, before forcing himself to improvise. This ends in buffo painting, in which the object is to emerge triumphant over the forces of disorder.

So great is the emphasis on the battle between order and disorder that an unusual generic claim can be made for Campbell's work. Gradually it has shifted from fun to comedy, from comedy to farce, and from farce to the fringes of nonsense, a peculiarly British form. Only by categorizing it as nonsense, perhaps, can the work be approached at all. In the works of Edward Lear or, in particular, Lewis Carroll, a delimited world is proposed, which operates like a game with rigid laws which cannot be questioned within the game itself. To accept these rules is to gain freedom. Played by treating the familiar things of the world as counters, the game is emotionless and irreconcilable. (People too are treated as inanimate objects.) The poles between which nonsense functions are those of singularity, the additive tendency, and an all-engulfing sameness of the kind which triumphs at the end of Alexander Pope's *Dunciad*. Its aim may be to preserve a model of a universe that is never more than the sum of its parts.

It must be significant that so many writers of nonsense—Lear, Carroll, Hilaire Belloc, G.K. Chesterton, T.H. White—felt the need to illustrate their work, and that an untutored style was almost always felt to be most suitable. (Why, when he was a highly sophisticated academic painter, did Lear make drawings with little regard for perspective, with characters who clap their hands behind their backs in a manner that has been described as medieval?) Elizabeth Sewell, who held that nonsense resulted from the dialectic between different parts of the psyche, suggested that because the effect of these pictures is to inhibit half of the mind, though apparently provided to nourish the imagination, they in fact extinguish it by means of detail and precision.⁷ A parallel argument would be that "imagination" is so subordinated to "fancy" in Campbell that it is only perceptible in the spirited rendering of the nickname marks, admissions of the contingent nature of signs.

The unseating of imagination in his work is linked to the banishment of "expressionism," still the accepted Modernist stance in his native Scotland. Abstract Expressionists painted the myth of the point of emotional origin. Campbell and other postconceptual painters may be painting the esthetic moment itself, a moment in which stillness and movement are confused, blocky poses become natural and eloquent, distinctions between levels of reality are broken down as art is pushed to its limits, and the artist's selfhood is put in danger of total eradication as space is folded concertinallike and time collapses altogether. While a Wodehouse dénouement is prepared with Aristotelian precision and progressive haste, Campbell's exists unmotivated, beyond past and future, as a sudden "presence." The energy released in the recent paintings—in one a man breaks Van Helsing's neck in order to obtain the charge for a galvanic battery—is pure power. It serves to dramatize the suspension of cause and effect generated by a moment that is totally unforeseen and unforeseeable. "Were a man such as Adam, created in

the full vigor of understanding, without experience," wrote David Hume, thinking of his favorite game of billiards, "he would never be able to infer motion in the second ball from the motion and impulse of the first."⁸ Little wonder that Hume is summoned from the grave by the turn of events above his head.

Campbell has proceeded by considering painting synchronically, as an ideal he must strive to emulate. His process of "making mistakes" is a critique of his own version of painting, concentrating on points he considers illogical. The resulting works are the doubles of painting, a "signing" which takes place at an ironic distance from the traditions on which he depends. By putting himself in the position of an Old Master, he is free to isolate painting like a new chemical element and strive to regain its lost innocence. There are other issues—like its relation to the outside world. Perhaps the leg can be read as the intrusion of a chaotic force into a sacrosanct realm. Perhaps it is the ultimate power which will subsume all detail in the architect's office at Wee Nook, the created and the planned, the quick and the dead. Or perhaps it can act without effect. "God," wrote St Thomas Aquinas, "is pure act without any potentiality," a miraculous fulfillment of Hume's little myth.⁹ Begin anywhere; there's no knowing where details will lead. Could the waggling leg really be the hand of God? Or is it just Freddie Threepwood upstairs being silly? ■

Stuart Morgan is a regular contributor to *Artforum*.

1. P.G. Wodehouse, *Leave it to Psmith*, New York: Doran, 1924, p. 325. One problem is that every Wodehouse "reference" in Campbell's work may turn out to be conflated or misremembered. Cf. the episode when Chimp Twist breaks down Hash Todhunter's door at Mon Repos, Burberry Road: "Arriving on the threshold he raised his boot and drove it like a battering-ram. The doors of suburban villas are not constructed to stand treatment . . . And Chimp, though a small man, had a large foot." (*Sam in the Suburbs*, New York: Doran, 1925, p. 326; English ed. *Sam the Sudden*, London: Methuen, 1925, pp. 232–33.)

Titles for two later paintings seem to be remembered from the same novel. *Through the Ceiling, Through the Floor etc.* may refer to Sam's breaking down the wall between San Rafael and Mon Repos at the end of the book, a deliberate "accident" which makes him rich (op. cit., p. 343). Another title, *God's in His Heaven, All's Well with the World*, 1984, is a misquotation of "Pippa's Song" by Robert Browning ("God's in His Heaven/All's right with the world"), which Sam recites to his friend Hash when life is trouble-free (op. cit., p. 251).

2. P.G. Wodehouse, *Summer Lightning*, Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1931, p. 31.

3. Gisela Richter, *The Sculpture and Sculptors of the Greeks*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970, figs. 133–34.

4. Stuart Morgan, "Soup's On: An Audience with Steven Campbell," *Artscribe* no. 48, September–October 1984, p. 31.

5. John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, New York: Pantheon, 1984, p. 26.

6. After accepting an invitation to Blandings Castle from Lord Emsworth, who assumes that he is a Canadian poet, Psmith insists on moving into an unoccupied gamekeeper's cottage in the west wood, some distance away (4–5. R-S on Ironicus' map "Blandings Castle, Shropshire," in frontispiece to P.G. Wodehouse, *Sunset at Blandings*, ed. R. Usborne, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977). "What a horrible looking place," [Eve] exclaimed. "Whatever did you want it for?"

"Purely as a nook," said Psmith, taking out his key. "You know how a man of sensibility and refinement needs a nook." (*Leave it to Psmith*, New York: Doran, 1924, p. 295.)

The name Wee Nook occurs in *Joy in the Morning*, when Jeeves arranges that Lord Worplesdon, the second husband of Bertie's aunt Agatha, lends them a "small but compact residence" in the grounds of his home in Steeple Bumpleigh. It is named Wee Nook. Bertie calls it "a decentish little shack . . . A bit Ye Olde, but otherwise all right" (*Joy in the Morning*, New York: Doubleday, 1946, p. 68). Immediately after his arrival, however, Lord Worplesdon's young son Edwin, a Boy Scout and "as pestilential a stripling as ever wore khaki shorts," performs his daily act of kindness by cleaning the chimney. Having put gunpowder up to clear the soot, he sets the whole cottage alight, then throws paraffin on the flames instead of water. Wee Nook lasts for only one chapter.

7. Elizabeth Sewall, *The Field of Nonsense*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1952, pp. 111–12.

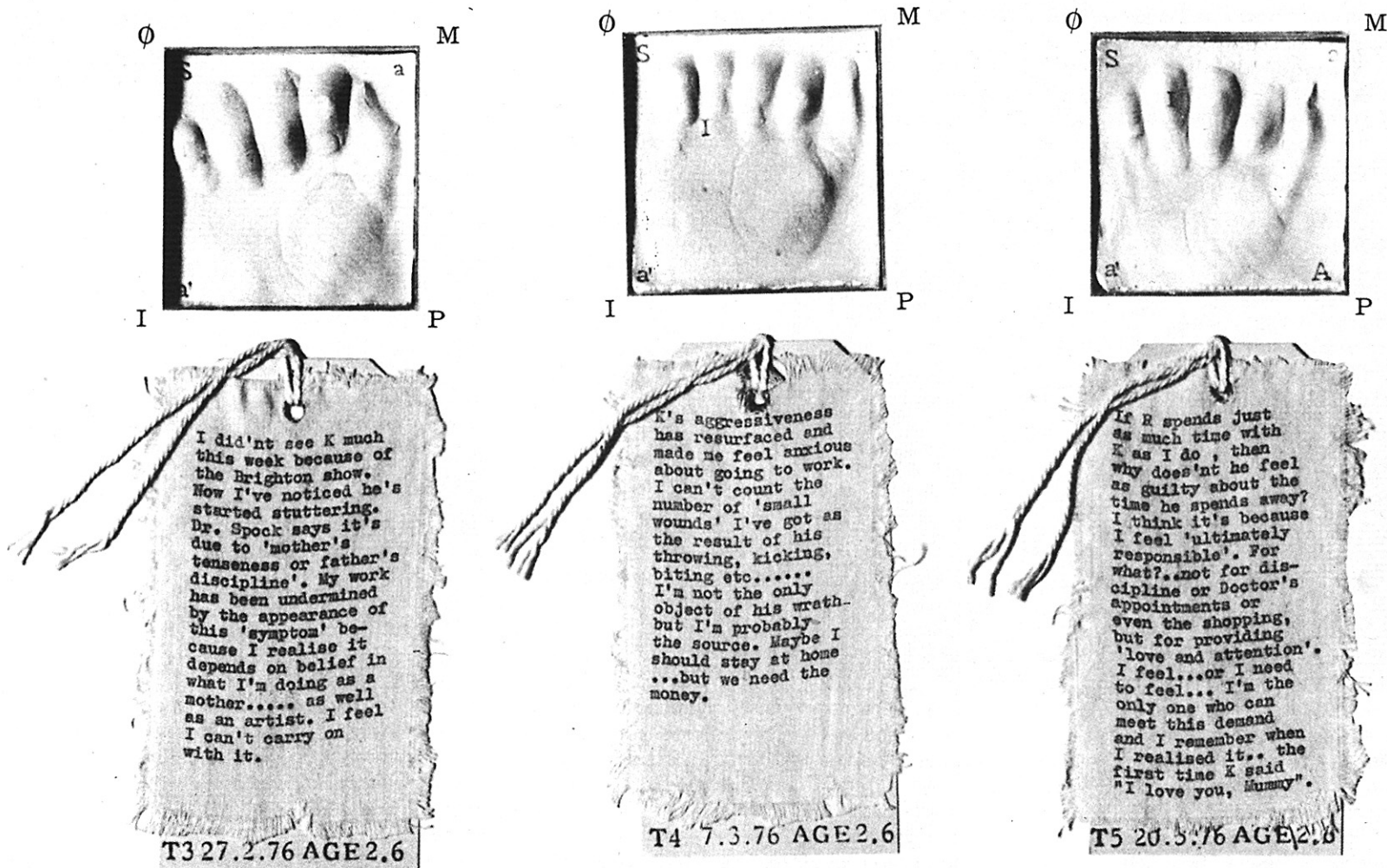
8. David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature: Book One*, ed. G.B.C. McNabb, London: Fontana, 1962, p. 342. Campbell, who claims to know almost nothing about Hume, acquired this knowledge from BBC Open University programs on philosophy. (See D. Cockburn/G. Bourne, *Hume: Reason and Experience*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, pp. 44–62, in which the question of the billiard balls is debated at length.)

9. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Westminster: Christian Classics, 1948, vol. 1, Question 3, Article 3, pt. 1, p. 16. Sewall strongly argues the case for a parallelism between nonsense and Scholastic thought.

body. The humanist emblem of the period is found in the phrase *From the Center*, which titles Lucy Lippard's important book (1976) on feminist work. And its timeless and universalizing dimensions impel the metaphors of woman as landscape, nature, Great Goddess and Mother Earth. However, the strategic benefits that are derived from this designation of sex and sexuality as natural, rather than cultural, categories are questionable.

her as an object to be domesticated or "mastered" in the masculine conquest of Nature. As variously noted, the concept of woman as a dark continent to be pacified has an ample history, one that places her within the compass of colonial exploitation. For political reasons, feminists have refused such imperialistic and universalizing reductions. Many women artists have insisted that the female body be placed, as Doane comments,

reread by Lacan. Lacan's theory employs what is most forceful in Freud—his analysis of the construction of the psychological structures of sexuality—using the sciences of linguistics and semiotics, which were unavailable to him. Underlying Freud's importance is his focus on a primordially alienated subject which will make itself in culture through a continued series of provisional and unstable attempts at unity.



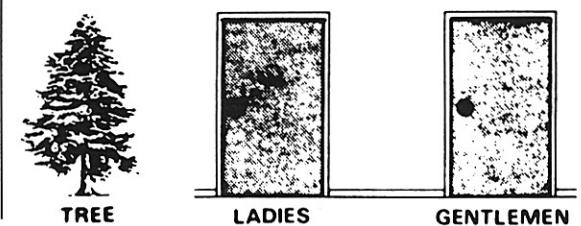
Mary Kelly, "Documentation IV" (detail), 1976, from *Post-Partum Document*, 1973-79. Transitional objects, diary and diagram, 3 of 8 units, each 14" x 11". Collection of the Zurich Kunsthhaus.

According to Claude Lévi-Strauss,⁶ the opposition between nature and culture is an elementary structure; it divides what is universal and unchanging from what, being dependent on a system of norms, is capable of variation from one society to the next. In the words of Edward Said, the opposition repeats the terms of a "conflictual economy," contrasting the vision of domination (demand for identity, stasis) with change, difference—the temporality of history. Not unpredictably, many women artists have objected to a naturalization of sexual difference that repeats established terms of definition, conferring on them an immutability which has been consistent with feminine oppression. Recourse to the idea of a feminine nature, as presumed by the biological view, has had the effect of both mystifying Woman (of consigning her to a realm outside of culture, as the unknowable eternal feminine) and of installing

"within quotation marks"—that it not be celebrated, but contextually described.⁷ They have protested a liberal perspective that in no way accounts for the ideological structures of which discrimination is but a symptom, which leaves untouched the integrated value system through which feminine oppression is enacted. It is with the aim of understanding the construction of sexed subjectivity in language that artists have turned to the theoretical priming of psychoanalysis.

This recourse by artists is not isolated, but belongs within a general movement in the social sciences to seek a model for the development of subjectivity different from the centered humanist model. Psychoanalysis, or one branch of psychoanalysis, has offered an account of the subject's development through interpersonal relations; the approach is generally associated with a "return to Freud" and, in particular, to Freud as

In this manner, as Gallop writes, Freud provides a description of the human being in culture, not of the natural animal, man⁸—nor of his complement, woman. Throughout his writings there is an insistence that there is no precultural real, no reality beyond representation. In a famous diagram Lacan illustrates this social construction of sexuality, opposing it to the natural version, based on the immanence of meaning:



The first image designates the now-classic model for the linguistic sign as a correspondence between signifier and signified, by which the word substitutes for (stands in place of) the thing. As has been noted, "the only delimitable thing the signifier woman could possibly 'mean,'" according to this equation, "is the biological female"⁹. However, in the second image Lacan privileges the signifier over the signified, stressing, in particular, the bar that separates the two terms. For, in that the doors are identical, their meaning is produced only in, and through, signification; as Jacqueline Rose notes, "it is essential to... [Lacan's] argument that sexual difference is a legislative divide which creates and reproduces its categories."¹⁰ The structure of "ladies" and "gentlemen" is imposed from outside—that is, by culture—through the operation of a law which Lacan terms the Symbolic. Each individual must place itself on either side of this divide: one cannot be a subject in any other manner. Sexuality, then, does not come from within, as in the essentialist model, but is the signifier's "effect": it is *in consequence* of the Symbolic.¹¹

Lacan's diagram, however, is more complex still. For what is salient is not only its delimitation of a structure, but also the specific texture of relations it describes. If we read it correctly, masculinity and femininity are not absolutes, but positions; sexuality has no content in and of itself, but is determined differentially, by reference to another term. In this, Lacan draws on Ferdinand de Saussure, who had criticized the notion of language as absolute reference, describing it instead as a chain that moves from link to link, producing meaning from the relationship between terms.¹² Through an elaborate conceit Lacan conflates sexuality with the structure of language, with its polarities of marked and unmarked terms, of presence opposed to absence. If the phallus is the privileged signifier in Western society and the penis its physical stand-in, then woman can only occupy the position of absence, of lack. For Freud, as for Lacan, the presence or absence of the penis is only significant insofar as it already has meaning within a system of difference; it is specific to patriarchy, to its particular attribution of values. And Freud's genius was to indicate, by insisting on psychic rather than somatic factors, the arbitrariness of the laws by which the initial bipolar drives are channeled into the polar structures of adult sexuality. The repressions revealed in the unconscious demonstrate this arbitrariness, its foundation in a cultural exaction that crosses Western civilization; in the symptoms produced through the unconscious operations we see the hesitance, the "imperfection" of that construction called sexuality.¹³ Much of Lacan's late writing is devoted to unmasking the fraudulence of phallic supremacy, revealing its dependence for power on subjection of the other (presence depends on, is a *function of*, absence); as Juliet Mitchell remarks, the phallus and, with it, the whole edifice of sexual constructions only figure because of what the woman lacks.¹⁴ Furthermore, if sexuality is structured in language there can be no fixed identity, for sexuality is continually restructured, revised in discourse. Lacan's last texts accentuate this instability, insisting on the plurality of positions that crosses language, countering conventional oppositions. But these texts also accentuate the

strategies by which the masculine order employs Otherness, or complementarity, to secure a wholeness denied by the inherent partiality of subjecthood—a unity, then, that is a fantasy.

For Lacan the self lacks a point of truth or ultimate meaning to which it might appeal to heal division. What is significant in his own questioning of certainty is its correlation to, and coincidence with, a more general problematization of reference. In the most concise statement of this theme—a massive critique of the metaphysical apparatus underlying Western representation—Jacques Derrida has described our situation as one in which "the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences."¹⁵ As with the phallus, the privileged reference or centered self is only a relational construction; its value is determined by its position in a structure whose limits we cannot "transcend." Or as the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has written, posing links between sexual politics and metaphysics:

By no means can the question of masculine/feminine relations be reduced to a problem of the division of labor at the heart of the social body. The frontier passing between the two sexes does not separate two parts of the same social entity. Not only is it the border where the Empire comes into contact with barbarians, but also the line of demarcation between an empirical given, women, the great unknown, and a transcendent or transcendental order that would give them meaning. The complicity between political phalocracy and philosophical metalanguage is made here: the activity men reserve for themselves arbitrarily as *fact* is posited legally as the *right* to decide meaning.

With the result, Lyotard concludes, that "we Westerners must rework our space-time and all our logic on the basis of non-centralism, non-finality, non-truth."¹⁶

"True" to Lyotard's statement, the last years have witnessed a critique of signification based on immanent meaning before meaning's social production. Notable focuses include the inherence of meaning to specific structures of representation (the classical sign, the expressive subject), to narrative modes (such as the Modernist novel), and to the structures of dominant society. Within the latter area the assault on meaning has involved a critique of representation's ability to attain truth, as well as analysis of the ways in which "truth effects" are produced within discourses that—as Foucault observes—are neither true nor false in themselves.¹⁷ Such ideological maneuvers depend on "duplicated representation,"¹⁸ by which the idea of reality is taken for reality; they operate through processes of repetition and reinforcement that convey the illusion of universality. Recent art practice has protested this naturalization of culturally fixed meanings as the major support of ideology in society, noting its operation in institutions, norms, traditions, and stereotypes. And it has exposed their appeal to eternity as a function of specific investments. As Roland Barthes wrote, "If power is on its side, [language] spreads everywhere in the general and daily occurrence of social life, it becomes *doxa*, natural...."¹⁹

For these reasons contemporary women artists have refused to be "identified," to be reduced to signs within the patriarchal order; notable among projects that

question essentialism is Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, 1973–79, a six-section, 135-part work tracing the first six years of her son's life. As a compendium of materials and personal objects, Kelly's *Document* might seem a simple record of a child's development, following his inscription into language, sexuality, and society. But it is, most importantly, a demonstration of the construction of maternal femininity: through her analysis of the mother-child relationship, Kelly stresses the continuous production of sexual difference within specific

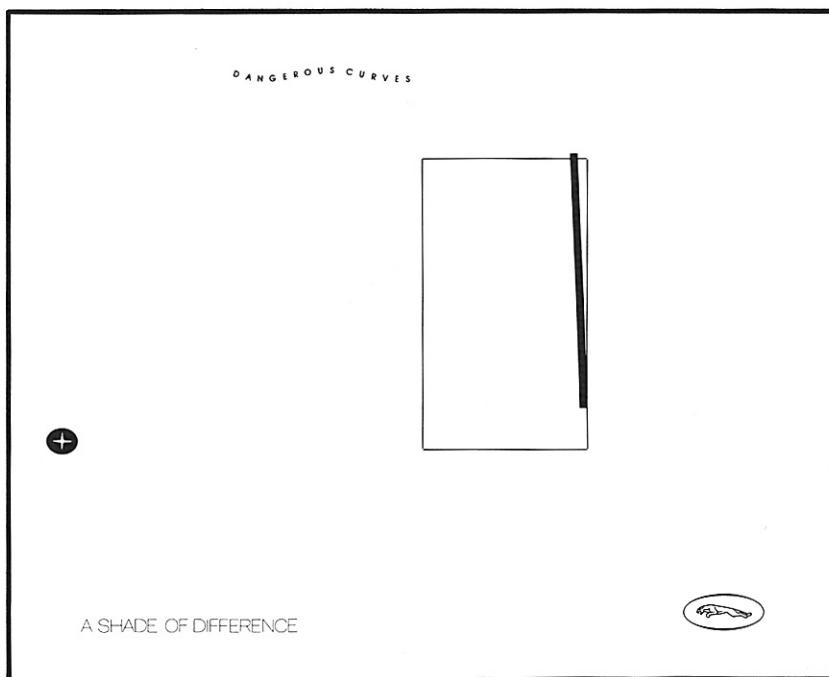


systems of representation. The mother-child dyad, the family, the school, and varied other social institutions act to construct femininity in variable configurations, indicating its hesitance, its perpetual instability. Sexuality, Kelly states, cannot be mapped as a category onto biological gender, but is produced within an interdiscursive network.

In the latter part of his life Barthes repudiated much of his early methodology, stressing the implications of psychoanalysis for ideological analysis. In a corresponding way, much work primed by psychoanalytic theory has turned to his example, opposing *jouissance* or textual "play" to the sign conceived as closure. For Barthes, *jouissance* was both loss of identity and instability of meaning; pleasure is a function of the subject's mobility in language, and of the plurality of positions it fills. The concept of *jouissance* thus implies an economy of pleasure that would account for the multiplicity of sexuality. But it has also been useful in challenging signification's ideological character, for it is noted that all texts position their readers in relation to the production of meaning, allowing for active participation or literally subjecting them to meaning in an attitude of passive consumption. The argument runs that the closed text is ideology's prime instrument, serving to perpetuate its contents (Charles Levin: "As we 'consume' the code... we 'reproduce' the system.")²⁰ and produce normal-



Left and above: **Bette Gordon, *Variety*, 1983.** Stills shot on set of color film in 16 mm., 85 mins. Christine (Sandy McLeod). Photos: Nan Goldin.



Sylvia Kolbowski, untitled, 1984. Black and white photograph, 16 x 20".

ized subjects, and for this reason some contemporary practice has opposed the expression of any message, no matter how oppositional. The problem is accentuated for women since it is they who, excluded by the structure of representation, usually figure in a subjected position, as passive (and pacified) object. Drawing on the figures of dominant discourse and their attendant power relations, many artists have attempted to erode this "place" assigned by culture to women; notable here are Barbara Kruger's dislocations of the "mastering" position, as inscribed in mass media texts. Kruger's deployment of the deictic terms "I," "me," "we," and "you" show that the place of the viewer in language is unsettled, shifting, indefinite, refusing alignment with gender.

Kruger's terms tally with those of Freud, who resisted the notions of the "masculine" and "feminine" ("among the most confused that occur in science"), arguing instead for "active" and "passive" relations, and connecting sexuality to the situation of the subject. In Dorit Cypis' work, which employs photomontages, superimposed image projections, and, often, sound, the conventional relationship between viewer and viewed is inverted; the spectator is encouraged to intervene and actively construct the narrative, and elude masculine and feminine roles. Others have investigated positioning from a more analytic view, showing its immanence to the representational structure laid down by patriarchy. Silvia Kolbowski's use of media images (specifically, images taken from fashion magazines) indicates their address to the viewer in terms of coded body representations, but these representations are only aftereffects, echoes, ghosts of an earlier system. Much of her project depends on a double directive, exploring the masculine attempt to fix woman within a specular system (as object of the controlling gaze) and as object of fantasy (the paradoxically idealized and subjected Other). The sexual direction of visual pleasure which Freud located in the scopic drive is associated, here, with a phallic economy, as it is installed in difference and repeated in its figures (Nature/Culture, Other/One); woman's visual subordination, like her mystical elevation, is seen as a male project aimed at healing the division inherent in subjectivity.

Throughout Kolbowski's work the ways in which woman is looked at, imaged, mystified, and objectified indicate her exclusion from representation; denied access to language, she cannot "speak" but is, rather, "spoken." Several projects, like *Model Pleasure III*, 1982, articulate the position of the hysteric who, by refusing fixed divisions, oscillates between masculine and feminine, threatening phallicentric order. Hysteria's political dimension as a resistance to the symbolic has been emphasized in recent theory; it opposes universalizing reduction and the legitimizing function it implies. Hysteria also embodies Lacan's injunction to "dephallicize," to assume the phallus critically (and with it, a theoretical position denied to women in Western society), so as to expose the arbitrary privilege on which it stands.

Such re-presentations of representation examine and question their binding constraints; other practices have investigated how these constraints are executed in and through specific apparatuses of representation. In recent years a significant body of theory has addressed

the mastering role of the photographic apparatus, exploring how the camera's falsifying monocular perspective constructs the viewed scene as subject to the central masculine position.²¹ A sense of controlling individuality, of mastery through technological, legal, and social means, informs the capitalist conquest of nature and, after it, humanity, so it is not surprising to find this perspective inscribed within those reproductive apparatuses—photography, cinema, and television—that coincide with and support the ideology of capital-

ism. Sherrie Levine, for example, has addressed this photographic theme; much of her work features images of Otherness—nature, women, the poor, the insane²²—as they are sighted through the lens of desire and fixed by the masculine "camera eye." Even when Levine rephotographs a painting by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, she chooses an image whose emphatic triangular geometry focuses the position of the woman, accentuating her domination within, and through, the visual field.

Attention has also turned to the psychic effects of the photograph's visual allures—to the shimmering surfaces that recall the mirror stage, as recounted by Lacan, echoing our first mis-recognition of unity. Lacan calls such instances of false unity the Imaginary, and locates in them the sites of identifications by which subjectivity is constructed. The illusory coherence it offers has made the Imaginary ideology's aid, and its inheritance in images has primed awareness to photogra-

phy's role in social normalization. Thus when Sarah Charlesworth examines the seductive powers of photographed images in a recent series, "Objects of Desire," 1983–84, the practice extends her exploration of the visual modalities inherent in the photograph. Glistening laminated surfaces bound by lacquered frames contrive a specular brilliance, creating images of images, exaggerations of the effects we attribute to photographs. Within them, a scarf, a mask, a bombshell-blond shock of hair present "... the forms and postures

of seduction—the shapes, forms or gestures," as the artist remarks, "that are the exterior trappings of identity."²³ Such partial objects function as fetishes, elements to which desire attaches to fulfill a fantasy of wholeness. Furthermore, as Charlesworth adds, they are "embodiments in a social 'attitude'"—the configurations of desire accounting for the (always historical) perpetuation of norms. But desire is not caused by objects, but in the unconscious; it can only be known through its displacements, through the substitutions it endures. Consequently, fetishism in its various forms only serves to repeat and reactivate the one, and primary, fantasy. What is at stake in our fascination with photographs, the artist seems to imply, may be their ability to restage (replay? re-present?) a fundamental striving for unity.

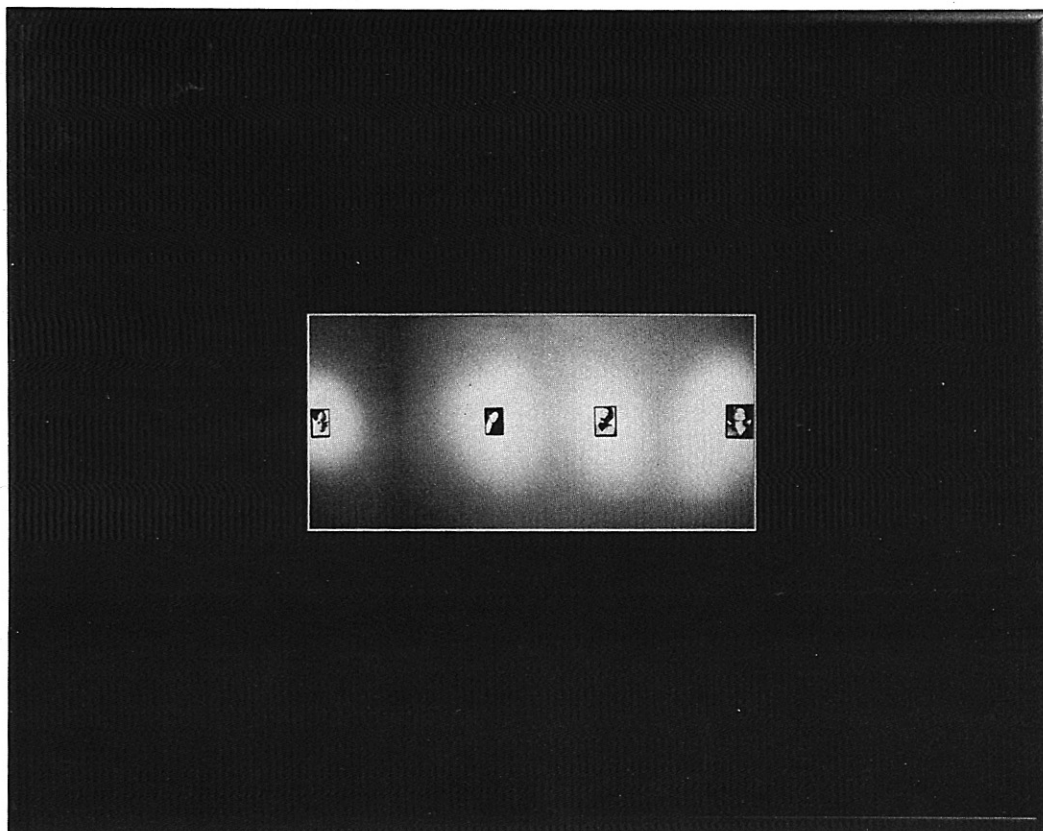


Louise Lawler, "Home/Museum Arranged for Living and Viewing" exhibition, 1984. Installation view, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn.

Haunted Houses, a novel-in-progress devoted (like her other work) to exploring the construction of sexual experience. When Tillman collaborates with Sheila McLaughlin, she joins a host of women filmmakers (Sally Potter, Bette Gordon, and Candace Reckinger among them) in challenging cinema's implication of image and code. Video as well contains a significant roster, including Dara Birnbaum and Judith Barry. Birnbaum's *Wonder Woman* and Barry's *Casual Shopper*²⁴, for example, are figures of narcissism, the one "the phallic mother" of

argues, as Julia Kristeva remarks, the impossibility of sociopolitical transformation without a change in subjectivity, in our relations to constraints, to pleasure, and to language and representation themselves.²⁷

Among women's projects that do not address sexuality but explore the dimension of social prescription, several deserve mention. Annette Lemieux, for example, has studied state and institutional signs which elicit universal meanings, while Nancy Dwyer's work explores the subject's construction through material codes. For



Silvia Kolbowski, *Model Pleasure I, Reposition*, 1984. Cibachrome print showing *Model Pleasure I*, 1982. 16 x 20".

television spectacle, the other the ideologized consumer seeking personal completeness, and libidinal pleasure, through the purchase of material objects.

In its psychic and economic parallels, Barry's project suggests the existence of a total economy like that described by Hélène Cixous: "an ideological theater where the multiplication of representations, images, reflections, myths, identifications"²⁵ points to the phallus' sovereign power. Current practice has attended to this "insinuation" of politics into the "tissue of reality," where it comprises a network traversing the social body.²⁶ Significant, here, is Kolbowski's recent work, which explores the displacement of difference into advertising logos, illuminating the sexual investment of lines, forms, and supposed voids in (male) space. We find this approach, as well, in the links exposed by Kruger between women and money (Woman as Capitalized, as object of exchange) as sublimations of masculine interests. Most importantly, the approach

Dwyer, our most pedestrian responses are consequences of the signifier, of the languages of corporate capitalism (in one case) or urban racial strife. Forms, substances, colors develop the parameters of psychic space: black lacquer and leather, for example, speak a dialect alien to the subway formica drone. This sense of external regulation is strongest in work by Louise Lawler, who would challenge the very notion of the artistic text by indicating its dependence on institutional factors for meaning. Lawler's "arrangements of arrangements"—photographs showing artworks as they are privately, commercially, or institutionally displayed—point to the conditions surrounding the reading of art; they inquire into the role of placement or position in meaning's production, into the specific social inscription of the work. Meaning, Lawler implies, comes not from within, but from without. Nor is it fixed (natural? true?) but variable, cultural, a historical formation. And in this questioning of meaning's autonomy we recog-

nize a dagger directed at a tenet of Western esthetics: that artworks are unified structures, enduring objects, expressions of the creative subject.

Considered within contextualist practice in general, Lawler's art suggests the implications of a perspective based on historical constructions and definitions; contesting the authority of categories, its premises collide, and coincide, with current feminism, which would find in it an analogue to woman's construction in relation to a complex of social texts. In a recent installation Lawler extended her approach, considering the multiple factors that determine art's reading within an interdiscursive network. Not only institutional and architectural context are questioned in these works, but also titles, labels, descriptions of materials—the shards of language that impose meaning, anchoring the inherent plurality of the text. Lacan might call it attention "to the letter"—to the material products of language rather than to their essentialized "spirit." Within these surroundings, determined by culture, the question of origin recedes, as in retreat, toward a vanishing point established by ideology's eye. ■

Kate Linker is a freelance critic who lives in New York.

1. Jacques Lacan, *Encore*, Seminar XX as cited in Jacqueline Rose, "Introduction—II" in Juliet Mitchell and Rose, eds., *Feminine Sexuality*. Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne, New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co. and New York: Pantheon, 1982, p. 27. All other quotes from Lacan, including the following from "Guiding Remarks for a Congress on Feminine Sexuality" (1958), are derived from this source.
2. For a discussion see Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-modern Culture*, Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983, pp. 57–82. For a treatment of questions of representation in general see my "Representation and Sexuality," *Parachute*, no. 32, Fall 1983, pp. 12–23.
3. Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23, nos. 3–4 (September–October 1982), p. 87.
4. The formulation is an adaptation of Colin Mercer's. See "A Poverty of Desire: Pleasure and Popular Politics" in *Formations of Pleasure*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, p. 98.
5. See Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982, pp. 1–4.
6. See Leo Bersani, "Sexuality and Aesthetics," *October* 28 (Spring 1984), p. 27. My citations in this paragraph depend on a series of readings of specific texts, notably Claude Lévi-Strauss as read by Jacques Derrida in "Structure, Sign, and Play," Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, eds., *The Structuralist Controversy*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1972, p. 253; and Edward Said as discussed by Homi Bhabha in "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (Spring 1984), p. 126.
7. Mary Ann Doane, "Woman's State: Filming the Female Body," *October* 17, Summer 1981, p. 24.
8. Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction*, p. 3.
9. Gallop, p. 11.
10. Rose, *Feminine Sexuality*, p. 41.
11. Stephen Heath, *The Sexual Fix*, London: Macmillan, 1982, p. 154.
12. Rose, "Sexuality in the Field of Vision," essay in Kate Linker, ed., *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, catalogue published by the New Museum, New York, in conjunction with exhibition of the same name, December 1984–February 1985.
13. Ibid.
14. Mitchell, in "Feminine Sexuality: Interview with Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose," *m/f*, no. 8, 1983, p. 7.
15. Derrida, op. cit., p. 249.
16. Jean-François Lyotard, "Some of the Things at Stake in Women's Struggles," *Sub-Stance*, no. 20, 1978. Reprinted in *Wedge*, no. 6, Winter 1984, pp. 28–29.
17. Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton, eds., *Michel Foucault. Power, Truth, Strategy*, Sydney: Feral Publications, 1979, p. 36.
18. See discussion by Josué V. Harari in "Critical Factions/Critical Fictions," Harari, ed., *Textual Strategies*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 52.
19. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasures of the Text*, New York: Hill & Wang, 1975; quoted in Colin Mercer, "A Poverty of Desire . . .," p. 82.
20. Charles Levin, introduction to Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981, p. 5.
21. For a discussion of this photographic construction of subjectivity see Victor Burgin, "Photography, Fantasy, Fiction," in Burgin, ed., *Thinking Photography*, London: Macmillan, 1982.
22. Owens, p. 81n.
23. Sarah Charlesworth, interview with David Deitcher in *Afterimage*, Vol. 12, nos. 1 and 2, Summer 1984, p. 17.
24. As presented in Birnbaum's *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978–79, and Barry's *Casual Shopper*, 1981.
25. Hélène Cixous, "Sorties," in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., *New French Feminisms*, New York: Schocken, 1981, p. 96.
26. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979, pp. 25–26.
27. Julia Kristeva, "Women Can Never Be Defined," *New French Feminisms*, p. 141.