

FEMINIST IMPOSITIONS

Performing Parasites in Contemporary Digital and Performance Art

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This dissertation by Anna Watkins Fisher is accepted in its present form
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For A.T., my host

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* * * * *

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[L]ife itself is essentially appropriation, injury,
conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms,
incorporation, and at the least, putting it mildest, exploitation; but why should one for
ever use precisely these words for which ages a disparaging
purpose has been stamped?

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1964:226)

* * * * *

Still, perhaps things are not so simple.
The conceptual significations and values which would seem to decide the stakes or means
in Nietzsche's analysis of the sexual difference, of the eternal war between the sexes, and
the mortal hatred of the sexes, of love, eroticism, etc., are all based on what might be
called a process of *appropriation* (appropriation, expropriation, taking, taking possession, gift
and barter, mastery, servitude etc.) Thus, in numerous analyses (which it is impossible to
elaborate here), the woman's appearance takes shape according to an already formalized
law. Either, at times, woman is woman because she gives, because she gives herself, while
the man for his part takes, possesses, indeed takes possession. Or else, at other times, she
is woman because, in giving, she is in fact giving herself, is simulating, and
consequently assuring the possessive mastery for her own self...Henceforth all the signs of
a sexual opposition are changed. Man and woman change places. They exchange masks
ad infinitum. Women have known how to secure for themselves
by their subordination the greatest advantage,
in fact the upper hand.

Jacques Derrida, *Spurs* (1979:109-111)

* * * * *

The parasitic relation is intersubjective.
It is the atomic form of our relations. Let us try to
face it head-on, like death, like the sun.
We are all attacked, together.

Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (1982:8)

* * * * *

In many cases, the man can commit acts with woman's complicity that degrade her without tarnishing his lofty image...Officially the man renounces her, those are the rules of the game...it is all the women who serve as the gutter to the luminous and clean palaces where respectable people live. When one speaks to these women of dignity, honor, loyalty, and all the lofty virile virtues, one should not be surprised if they refuse to 'go along.'

They particularly snigger when virtuous males reproach them for being calculating, actresses, liars: they know well that no other way is open to them...

woman has been assigned the role of parasite...

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (2011:653)

* * * * *

If [the parasite] is a [woman], [she] is an actor. [She] goes on stage, sets up the scenery, invents theater, and imposes theater... [She] is social technique and knows how to play at the mastery of men and at their domestication.

Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (2007:64)

* * * * *

PARALOGUE

IT'S NOT YOU, IT'S ME PARASITISM IN A DIGITAL AGE

Our world is full of copiers and repeaters, all highly rewarded with money and glory. It is better to interpret than to compose; it is better to have an opinion on a decision that has already been made than to make one's own.

-Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (2007:8)

HELLO, OPERATOR

The British artist Roisin Byrne, a breakout star of the 2010 BBC4 reality series *Goldsmiths: But Is It Art?*, recently began to make a name for herself in the art world by sabotaging work by more-established male artists. In June 2009, while still an MFA student, she initiated an email correspondence with the Turner prize-winning, environmental artist Simon Starling. Claiming admiration for his work, she used the information she gained against him when she posed as a horticulturist, stole, and smuggled a rhododendron from his earnestly titled 2000 installation *Rescuing Rhododendrons* at the Parque Los Alcornocales in Spain back with her to the U.K. on a budget airline flight. Byrne exhibited their electronic correspondence in full, hanging printouts of the emails alongside the plant for her final student show at Goldsmiths in a piece she entitled *You Don't Bring Me Flowers Anymore* (fig. 1). This is but one of five different works for which Byrne has engaged

prominent male artists through correspondence, often using flattery to get what she wants from them.¹



Figure 1. Roisin Byrne, *You Don't Bring Me Flowers Anymore* (2009).

For another piece, *Look What You Made Me Do* (2008), Byrne enticed the artist Jochem Hendricks into an extended correspondence that resulted in her putting her own bank details on his financial form so that she could later receive his payment and use it to create a replica of one of his works (fig. 2). For *Massage* (2009), Byrne placed an order for a neon sign that she intended to remain switched off, only to be told that she was the second artist that week to place such an order. The other order, in a stroke of luck that is hardly believable, was for a neon sign to read “Massage,” ordered by the British artist

¹ Byrne’s conceptual projects have appropriated the practices of well-known male artists, among them: Santiago Sierra, Roberto Cuoghi, Jochem Hendricks, Ryan Gander, and Simon Starling.

Ryan Gander. Byrne claims that, upon hearing this, she ordered and exhibited an exact copy of Gander's sign, an assertion that Gander disputes (fig. 3).²



Figure 2: Roisin Byrne, *Look What You Made Me Do* (2008).



Figure 3: Roisin Byrne, *Massage* (2009).

² At the conclusion of the final episode of *Goldsmiths: Is It Art?*, the viewer is informed with an intertitle that Gander denies Byrne's claim that her work is a copy of his.

In early 2011, I became fascinated by Byrne's artistic practice and what appeared to me to be the *parasitism* of her provocative and ingenious artistic reversals of power and their potential for reinvigorating feminism. *You Don't Bring Me Flowers Anymore* recontextualizes the horticultural valence of the parasite as, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "an organism that lives on, in, or with an organism of another species." Byrne performs the parasite by becoming what literary theorist J. Hillis Miller described as a strand of poisonous ivy twining around "the mighty, masculine oak" (1977:440). I wondered how parasitism might articulate itself as not merely an experimental art practice but as a model for contemporary feminist politics. French philosopher Michel Serres' widely read, if not fully contended with, important 1980 book *Le parasite*, translated into English in 1982 (*The Parasite*), argues that the world is a system of parasitical relations wherein production gets exploited by a maintained order of interloping consumption, organized by one-way relations that are not reversed. As the book progresses, however, Serres complicates this image of non-reversability by offering many parasites intervening in all directions. "L'homme est le parasite universel," he writes (1980:38).

This line of thinking became the basis for a dissertation prospectus, in which I argued that Byrne's art conceptualizes the creative reversal at the heart of the performance of parasitism that this dissertation introduces; it challenges artistic and feminist economies with its compelling manipulation of normative approaches to the production of value and representational etiquette. I asked what a reading of Byrne's practice through the conceptual lens of parasitism might offer a rethinking of not only the increasingly vexed states of contemporary feminism and contemporary feminist art, sites that have become

bogged down by accusations of cultural cliché and creative stagnation, but also political economy in the age of global mass media broadly. What might be possible for a notion of feminism unbounded by vague and idealistic objectives such as self-determination, dignity, and independence? Whereas the curatorial and journalistic discourse surrounding Byrne's artistic practice has focused almost solely on questions about the ethics of stealing and forgery, I wondered what it would mean to consider her work not as the sociopathic betrayals of one individual woman artist but as performative actions that literalize and hyperbolize, in ways compelling and problematic, long-held notions of femininity as a bad copy of or vampiristic threat to masculinity.³

Byrne has said of her work: "I'm not interested in placing it in some kind of art discourse: I'm interested in a relationship to information and to ownership. The separation between you and that thing you desire is changing..." (Jones 2010). A symbolic reading of Byrne's conceptual practice demands that one question the ethics of stealing and forgery *as feminist tactics*, if what Byrne calls "that thing you desire," that coveted object taken without permission, is not so much the fetishized commodity in a society based upon private property but more so, the very cultural and commercial capital possessed by the male artists that she targets. Despite her claimed disinterest in art history, Byrne's practice is clearly informed by the feminist subgenre of twentieth-century appropriation art and rides a century long wave of artistic and critical interest in forms of copying and simulation. In Byrne's parasitical practice, the gender politics of the discourse of

³ In her 1981 essay "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," Rosalind Krauss proposes that, with its obsession with origins, originals, and originality, the avant-garde has repressed its corollary: repetition. This tendency has come under criticism for its association of hybrid forms and feminine or racialized bodies with bad copies. In her essay *Solo Solo Solo* Rebecca Schneider, for example, has described the "longstanding feminization of, and heterosocial gender panic toward, theatricality as debased mimesis, debauched and hollow hysteria, wombastic copy machine" (2004:34).

appropriation are made visible, as is the production of art historical discourse. Byrne's parasitical performance lays bare the mutuality of art and art historical criticism. Indeed it reveals the role of art historical discourse in the production of art and systems of value at large.

"Precisely what is a parasite?" writes David Bell. "It is an operator that interrupts a system of exchange. The abusive guest partakes of the host's meal, consumes food, and gives only words, conversation in return. [She] does not pay in any material sense for what [she] takes" (1981:886). Serres writes: "I call this semiconduction, this valve, this single arrow, this relation without a reversal of direction, 'parasitic'" (1982:5). In French, *parasite* at the same time denotes the unwanted noise of communication, an uninvited guest, or a life form that lives off another. The parasite, on which Serres founds his study of the figure as an "interdisciplinary operator," bridges the domains of 1. Biology, 2. Information theory, and 3. Social theory—charting the course by which my three chapters will proceed. From its Greek etymology, the parasite has denoted an entity said to live at the expense of another or of society in general. The parasite enters a system and diverts toward itself resources normally meant for the host organism. The parasite makes do with what it finds before it, turning its host's logics against it. Yet as Serres argues, rather than representing a drain on or excess to the system, the parasite helps constitute the system. Cast as a feminist paradigm, parasitism shifts the feminist debate from one of impasse to one of use-value and, in so doing, foregrounds the issues that emerge when feminists appropriate their impositions to self-serving ends. Parasitism centralizes the problem of Western feminism's collusion with patriarchal, racial, and economic privilege—its attachments to the very structures that it would seek to challenge. Taking

feminism as its case study, parasitism evidences anxieties about enterprises or persons deemed to be somehow complicit or contaminating. A codependent counterfigure to dominant narratives about contemporary Western feminism, the parasite poses questions of whether one can be a part of or “attached to” an institutional body without aiding it, and what happens when one is incorporated into a system that one seeks to work against.

As recent theorists of appropriation have observed, from the Dadaists’ use of found materials to Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades to William S. Burrough’s literary cut-ups to Cage’s found sounds to Grandmaster Flash’s remixes (to say nothing of non-narrative cinema, cable television, and user-generated content), practices of appropriation—*détournement*, pastiche, collage, sampling, cutting and pasting—have a longstanding presence in Western popular and avant-garde culture (Boon 2007; Lethem 2007; McLeod and Kuenzli 2011). Furthermore, as Marcus Boon has pointed out, “[t]here is a power structure in evidence in all appropriation” (2007:6), whether this takes the form of cultural appropriation enacted by dominant groups on minority cultures (as an act of material colonization) or the forms of counter- or re-appropriation that Byrne’s practice appears to index, whereby minorities “borrow back” forms co-opted by dominant groups (in an act of subversive re-signification). What is striking here is the way in which parasitism functions readily as an epithet for the latter case, whereas there appears to be no ready epithet to describe the former. When minorities take from dominant groups, they are parasites. When dominant groups take from minority groups it is called capitalism, colonialism, sexism, racism, or “just the way it is.”

“What is appropriation?” writes Boon, “The word has at least two contradictory but related meanings. First...that of taking something and making or claiming it as one’s own, or using it as if it was one’s own. Secondly, that which is proper to a situation or a person...” He continues, “Appropriation, according to the first definition, often involves taking something which arguably belongs to someone else. There is the sense of seizing, of making a claim on something that is claimed by someone else. According to the second definition, it is that which one has a right to claim as one’s own, which is ‘properly’ one’s own” (2007:1-2). Boon’s former definition draws on Karl Marx’s notion of appropriation, which argues that under the economic and political conditions of capitalism, the more a worker acquiesces to the demands of capital, the more that worker him or herself becomes a commodity and thus alienated from his or her nature as a creative being. Writes Marx, “appropriation appears as estrangement, as alienation; and alienation appears as appropriation” (1977:79).

The latter definition of appropriation that Boon offers is symptomatic for how capitalism has come to script all social relations under neoliberalism, which has naturalized the corrosive operations of appropriation. “In popular usage, neo-liberalism is equated with a radically free market,” writes Wendy Brown, “maximized competition and free trade achieved through economic de-regulation, elimination of tariffs, and a range of monetary and social policies favorable to business and indifferent to poverty, social deracination, cultural decimation, long term resource depletion and environmental destruction.” “For progressives,” she adds, “neo-liberalism is thus a pejorative not only because it conjures economic policies which sustain or deepen local poverty and the subordination of peripheral to core nations, but also because it is compatible with, and sometimes even

productive of, authoritarian, despotic, paramilitaristic, and/or corrupt state forms and agents within civil society” (2003).

The term parasite is thus rarely applied to acts of material colonization because this kind of appropriation has become convention, standardized as “proper” through the economic, legal, and moral apparatuses of private property and social mores endorsed by neoliberal political rationality. Nevertheless, Serres argues that to appropriate is to mark and thus to sully a space in order to make it one’s own—to make it “mine” [*mon proper*] by making it not clean [*improper*] (2007:144-145). The parasite is thus never clean, as the prefix *para-* measures distance and *sitos-*, in Greek, can mean excrement (145). Parasitical appropriation can thereby be seen, as Byrne performs it, as a matter of shitting on someone else’s work to claim it as your own.

If parasitism can be regarded as a form of “appropriation art”—an art practice that consists of borrowing elements from existing works for the creation of a new work that is nevertheless distinct, what would it mean to take seriously the word “borrow” and all that it implies? Borrow would seem to suggest that the appropriation artist would ultimately *give something back* when they are done. The difference between parasitism and appropriation is that parasitism harnesses the power to be found in refusing appropriation’s pretention to be “proper.” Exploitation, colonialization, dispossession, primitive accumulation—the terms mount and bleed into each other. When one “appropriates down,” these are the words we use. When one “appropriates up,” it is called resistance or the politics of reversibility.

In *The Twilight of Equality*,² Lisa Duggan argues that “attacks on downwardly redistributive social movements, especially the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, but including feminism, lesbian and gay liberation, and countercultural mobilizations during the 1960s and 1970s” were central to the construction of neoliberal hegemony within the U.S. specifically (2004:xii). As “*cultures of downward distribution*,” progressive-left social movements sought to level hierarchies by redistributing money, political power, cultural capital, pleasure, and freedom *down* (xvii, her emphases). They were met, however, from the early 1970s on, by pro-corporate neoliberal policies of fiscal austerity, privatization, market liberalization, and governmental stabilization that fought to secure private property relations. Duggan characterizes this counter-movement as “a *culture of upward (re)distribution*” (xii, xvii). The parasite is thus a figure of complicity because it exploits the logic of appropriation *both up and down*. It performs a kind of neoliberal mimicry as reparative progressive-left politics. In the parasite-host relation, I am identifying an antagonism between social forces, classes, or actors—whether that of the class warfare, race relations, or other such dynamics. In every instance of parasitism, there are two “bodies” in conflict; the operational binary that these bodies stand in for is, nevertheless, *always gendered*. The parasite infests the binary and wrenches it apart.

Byrne’s maneuvers echo those of 1980s feminist appropriation artists Louise Lawler, Barbara Kruger, and, most strikingly, Sherrie Levine. Levine is well known for exhibiting copies of works by famous male artists such as bronze reproductions of Duchamp’s urinal and rephotographs of Walker Evans’ 1936 photographs for her project *After Walker Evans* (1979). Levine’s appropriations of Duchamp’s work can be read as a comment on the gender bias that subtends even avant-garde traditions like appropriation art—a point that

Byrne's appropriation of Starling, himself a celebrated appropriation artist, makes as well. Unlike the work of male appropriation artists such as Duchamp and later Richard Prince, women artists' turn to appropriation makes a self-conscious statement about the connivance at work in the act of appropriation by pointing to the patriarchal operations in art as well as in the marketplace. Feminist appropriation art turns the tables on women's historically circumscribed role as muses for the "great masters," as Levine and Byrne's practices use appropriation art as a means for claiming economic reparation for women artists through the backdoor of the avant-garde contemporary art market.

Whereas Levine's work has thematized postmodernism's parasitism on modernism, Byrne's work signals the digital's parasitism on appropriation itself within a wider cultural landscape of media cannibalism. Levine's own work has become under digital infestation over the last decade. Consider *AfterSherrieLevine.com* (2001), an Internet art project created by Michael Mandiberg, a digital artist who features his own scanned reproductions of Levine's work on his website (Jana 2001). In a further turn of the screw of parasitical "remediation," to use the term coined by Jay Bolter and Robert Grusin to describe the self-parasitism of new media, Swedish-based artist Bujar Bala downloaded scanned photos from Mandiberg's project and uploaded them to an online photo album named *After Michael Mandiberg* (2010) that was also made available as an iPhone app.

"The remix is the very nature of the digital," writes William Gibson in *Wired*, describing an encounter with Burroughs, who he says "interrogat[ed] the universe with scissors and a paste pot" (2005). Gibson writes, "...when our paths finally crossed, I asked Burroughs whether he was writing on a computer yet. 'What would I want a computer for?' he

asked...But I already knew that...the scissors and paste pot were already there for me, on the desktop of my Apple IIc. Burroughs' methods...were built into the technology..." (2005).

"All technology, as Heidegger tells us, is a framing. Within the framing, certain kinds of appropriation are possible, in that certain materials are taken, transformed, and reframed" (Boon 2007:6). The Internet, a medium comprised of "mash-ups" of found visuals, sound, and text that yield an intricate and seemingly infinite digital collage, is a technology that is based on software encoded for textual manipulation, duplication, and multiplication—hypertext, feeds, cut and paste—drawing together forms and genres in order to reassemble them within the "new" frame of the interface. The search engine is a citation machine. The digital's compulsive drive to appropriate teeters tenuously on the hinge of copyright law and free use. By exploiting appropriation and conceptual art's institutional absorption as a recognized and marketable practice in the twenty-first century, Byrne is an artist who has "latched on" to the deregulatory *zeitgeist* of our neoliberal digital age, securing it as the "host"-guarantor of her "feminist" claim to that which would otherwise lie beyond her reach.

Byrne is not just a compelling case study for feminism but also for the challenges to traditional notions of feminism posed by the digital age. Reading Byrne's practice as a self-conscious feminist performance of parasitism opens up a number of important questions: how might forms of institutional power be complicit with the popular derision of feminist politics as an imposition in both mass media and academic vernaculars? On

what moralistic, taste-based, or otherwise normative valuative terms has women's drive to acquire cultural and commercial capital—awards, renown, influence, financial success—been characterized historically as a parasitical imposition deemed unacceptable? How might we understand the discursive registers of “conceptual art” and “performance,” in particular, as further authorizing a certain appropriative deregulation—and in so doing, freeing up a set of experimental feminist tactics—that might be used to infest spaces that have been maintained by otherwise hollow or dogmatic impulses within feminist theory regarding ethics and etiquette?

Whereas Heidegger (who has long been associated with “the question” of the complicity of critical use) questioned how appropriation might contain a gesture for reordering the order of domination, I query whether parasitism might offer tactical potential for feminism's renegotiation with the patriarchal order. “What if Appropriation...were to remove everything that is in present being from its subjection to a commandeering order and bring it back into its own?” he asked in “The Way to Language” (qtd. in Boon 2007:1). Conversely, what are the dangers of advocating a tactical parasitism for feminism? What are the threats of laying bare feminism's darker or more ambivalent drives (its complicity with forms of oppression, its death drive), and what might constitute the collateral damage of such a maneuver? What is lost in the move from a feminist politics of radical utopianism to one of pragmatic parasitism?

Such questions lie at the heart of this project: How have contemporary digital and performance artists sought to redirect the flows of value in our current economy of

relations *by performing parasites*? How have the economies of 21st century art and performance, and increasingly that of the digital world in which art and performance trafficks, compelled a fundamental redefinition of what counts as a valuable political contribution, indeed a feminist intervention? I advance *parasitical feminism* as an “anti-strategy” for how “minoritarian subjects,” including women, might exploit a majoritarian host-territory by becoming the very thing that they are *already given to be*. The “female parasite,” long derided by Western feminists for representing women’s dependence on patriarchy has been newly imbued with feminist potential in recent work by a younger generation of artists. Drawing on new media and performance theory, parasitical feminism offers a rubric for reassessing the current use-value of historical feminist imperatives and analytics for combating the ever more diffuse and multifaceted social forms that oppression has taken over the last decades. Performance theory conceives of performance as a function of re-presentation, citation, and the double of theater, both registering the obsolescence of these feminist analytics and offering modalities for refashioning them as feminist tactics. In new media, “classic” Western feminist problematics like vulnerability and dependency are recast as, rather than mere manifestations of inequity, conditions for exchange and participation (Chun 2005). The parasite, which thrives in its role as a dependent and secondary entity, cuts through the binds of imperatives like autonomy and originality.

At the moment of this writing, the tactic of “occupying” a host territory in order to change it is undergoing very serious trial as the revolutions and uprisings of the Arab Spring and the mass protests of the Spanish Indignant Movement and the U.S. Occupy Movement play out across the world. Whereas the critical and journalistic discourse

about the U.S. movement has focused on its appropriation of the discourse of imperialism, the movement has engaged more aptly a *politics of parasitism*. While these protests cannot be conflated nor their individual rationales easily glossed, these movements have all sought to confront the dominant order's treatment of the common as a *parasite*. By "occupying" city centers, protestors have used mass demonstrations to call for wide-scale corporate divestment, denouncing the absurdity of a world system that has alienated the common from the commons and in which the 1% has effectively marginalized the 99%. They show the economic oppression of a ruling class that exploits its workers while, at the same time, calling them parasites. This dissertation will argue that *the parasite works*. And furthermore, that the parasitical epithet does very particular ideological work that feminists might ultimately exploit.

This prologue at the same time anticipates and overshoots the issues that I will explore in the dissertation. Because it sits beside and beyond the dissertation itself, I have called it my "paralogue." Roisin Byrne's parasitical performance is the problematic exemplar of this study and shapes the line of questioning that anchors it: what do artists like Byrne have to tell us about the possibilities and limitations of feminist resistance today? It has been suggested that, in our hypernetworked postmodern moment, there is no exit. In an epoch defined by watchwords such as globalization and interconnectivity, what remains of a discernable contemporary feminist politics when Western feminism's emancipatory project of seeking some liberatory "outside" to patriarchal oppression has appeared an impoverished ground for contemporary politics? Our current political climate is better represented as an ecology of interdependence and exchange than by the inside/outside model that has been used by much Western feminist inquiry over the last century. In the

age of global mass media, what is the aim of feminist politics if principles such as freedom and agency have been found to be impoverished objectives for feminism (Zerilli 2005; Mahmood 2005; Halberstam 2011)? If, as neoliberal subjects, we are increasingly controlled through what Lauren Berlant has called our “cruel optimism” with respect to these ideals, then how do feminists think beyond and beside (*para*) these old constructions (*sites*)?

Re: HELLO

The tactics of appropriation have been co-opted. Illegal action has become advertisement. Protest has become cliché. Revolt has become passé...Having accepted these failures to some degree, we can now attempt to define a parasitic tactical response. We need a practice that allows invisible subversion. We need to feed and grow inside existing communication systems while contributing nothing to their survival; we need to become parasites.

-Nathan M. Martin for the Carbon Defense League,
“Parasitic Media” (2003)

The mutuality between criticism and art was demonstrated in my own project on the parasite, producing a chain reaction that began with my reading of Roisin Byrne’s work in my dissertation prospectus and developed over an animated period of exchange with the artist, intensified by publication, exhibition prostheses, and mainstream and art press. What came of this encounter is compelling for what it can tell us about how digital media has enabled a newly visible form of parasitism. The temporality of the digital, as I will argue, has enabled a culture of parasitism in which the demarcations between art, criticism, and entertainment have been eroded, as my own experience with Byrne demonstrates.

In January 2011, I began to write about Byrne's artistic practice. I shared my early writing about Byrne with a small group of fellow graduate students as a part of a biweekly research group at Brown University. An early draft was uploaded onto our university-sponsored "wiki"—a collaborative online space for sharing files—to be accessed by the group, workshopped, and revised for a dissertation chapter. When the group met, my readers were also intrigued and excited by Byrne's work. A few weeks later, I was surprised to find myself on the receiving end of a correspondence from Roisin Byrne herself. First there was a Facebook friend request and then a message. Our website had not been password protected, and she had gained access to my unpublished writing about her work through an online search. The artist had set up a "Google Alert" for herself, using a service offered by Google that allows users to specify a query for the search engine to monitor and notify the user by email when a change in the search occurs, which notified her about my own writing. In our exchange, Byrne praised my reading of her work and subsequently emailed me a few weeks later to ask if she could have permission to "take some terms" of mine for her artist's statement for an upcoming solo exhibition in Madrid.⁴

Subject: Hello

April 17 at 6:17am E.S.T.

Hello Anna

I thought i would drop you a line to run something by you..i hope you don't mind.

I have a solo show coming up at the end of May at my gallery in Madrid and i would really like for the works to be positioned properly ..it's time!...

Anyhows, i was wondering if i could ask you whether it might be possible to take some terms you use like sexually harassing patriarchy for example , exploit exploitation, capitalise on capitalism, skillful manipulation of authoritarian codes (im not sure if they are yours or someone else's?) for my blurb for my upcoming show???

⁴ All of the emails reproduced here are excerpted.

Faced with having my research repurposed with no publication to cite, I found myself unsettled at receiving her request. Byrne's track record gave little indication that she would pose a threat to me, my being neither male, nor affluent, nor well established. Nevertheless, the request brought into tension the academy and the art world's distinct appropriative protocols. While academic criticism is, like conceptual art, a hypercitational genre, the accepted parasitism of the scholar turns on the quotation mark, the requisite Works Cited, whereas the parasitism of the conceptual artist depends on the viewer's art historical knowledge for its citation (its "sight-ation") or for the "meaning" of the work to become visible. Byrne had called the bluff on my own critical parasiting of her art practice by asking if she could make me her host, since she had already played mine. What was it that made Byrne's former projects seem so compelling and this request seem somehow unfair? After some deliberation, I hit reply, reproducing the parasite-host system in my subject line: "Re: Hello." This set a chain of parasitical citation underway, as Jonathan Lethem notes, "[W]e make a copy every time we accept an emailed text, or send or forward one..." (2007). In replying, I recognized that I was entering into some form of parasitical contract with the artist, as I was hardly unfamiliar with her methods, the terms of which would remain shifting.

Subject: Re: Hello

April 19 at 5:29pm E.S.T.

Hi Roisin,

I am honored that you are interested in my work. Would this be for a catalog essay? If so, I would be thrilled if you quoted me (I could provide you with a quote if so) and perhaps even better, I could write something about your work for it.

As a young female graduate student who is working to establish myself as a critic—just as you are as a young artist—it means a lot for my ideas to be acknowledged (and yes those are my phrasings). Perhaps we could collaborate on something here.

In my response, I found myself still trying to say that my work on the politics of parasitical reappropriation was somehow original, despite how well Byrne's work has demonstrated that the claim to authorship is an increasingly hard one to make in the age of digital media. The terms Byrne had inquired about from my draft ("sexually harassing patriarchy," "exploiting exploitation," "capitalizing on capitalism") were *sort of* my phrasings. "Exhausting exhaustion" was a phrase that I had borrowed from an at-the-time unpublished article by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, to different ends.⁵ I had borrowed Chun's formulation to ask if such a seemingly tautological construction (this "X-ing the X") might offer a frame for rethinking parasitism as a generative reversal. Might the problematic entity offer its own performative solution? Could the verb form effectively cancel out the noun form? Appropriation art having called out criticism's narcissistic claim to originality, I exaggerated the purity of my own discourse in response to Byrne's question about whether the terms of my project were, in fact, really mine.

Byrne replied:

Subject: Re: Hello

April 20 at 2:53am E.S.T.

Hi Anna

I am delighted I found your ideas! and i think it would be a good thing to do something together. You articulated things in my work in a way that no one else has which i am i have to say really happy about. A collaboration sounds like something i would be more than happy to do.

At this stage the gallery in Madrid won't be doing a catalogue, it would just be a press blurb positioning the work, do you think you would be interested in being credited on something like this? It's small fry but...

⁵ Chun asks what it would mean to "exhaust exhaustion" in her essay "Crisis, Crisis, Crisis, or the Temporality of Networks" published November 2011 in the journal *Theory, Culture & Society*.

In her obliging response, Byrne had played the parasite: “The parasite is also a guest, who exchanges his talk, praise, and flattery for food,” notes translator Lawrence R. Schehr in his introduction to Serres’ *The Parasite* (1982:6). “Small fry or not...” I wrote back to Byrne on April 26th, assuring her that I would indeed like to be acknowledged and providing her the relevant information to do so. I did not hear back again.

On May 26th, I received a Facebook message from Byrne. It was a group invitation to her exhibition “It’s Not You, It’s Me” at The Goma in Madrid, an exhibition documenting Byrne’s efforts to take on the identity of the Italian artist Roberto Cuoghi. Presented by Byrne as more of an art myth than an actual person in her publicity for the show, Cuoghi is said to have himself assumed his ailing father’s persona, undergoing a dramatic physical transformation in the process (Byrne and MacGilp 2011). An art critic described Cuoghi’s metamorphosis as “[n]either a performance nor a disguise,” explaining that “Cuoghi maintained his new persona for several years, in an ambiguous struggle between fiction and reality. Although it generated no further art works, news of Cuoghi’s attempt to ‘life-share’, to duplicate and consequently prolong another existence, spread by word of mouth until it passed into art-world lore” (Cerizza 2008). After failing to find out much about the project, Byrne decided that if he had become his father, then she would *become him*. The project, the artist claims, included her legally changing her name to “Roberto Cuoghi,” obtaining a credit card and creating an online persona in his name, and exhibiting work related to the project, including two “self-portraits,” at the Irish Museum of Contemporary Art (IMoCA) as Cuoghi. The exhibition in Madrid was populated by Byrne’s documentation of these actions (figs. 4 and 5). As a woman artist

historically denied a place in the historical record, Byrne undertakes to remedy this by, rather than laboring to change the parameters that systematize women's institutional exclusion, simply *altering that official record*.



Figure 4. Installation view of *Roisin Byrne: It's Not You, It's Me* at Alma Enterprises, London, U.K., December 2011.

Figure 5. Roisin Byrne's *Credit Card of Roberto Cuoghi* (2011).

In the body of the invitation and, as I would discover, in the internationally distributed press release for the exhibition, Byrne's artist's statement read, in part, as follows (fig. 6):

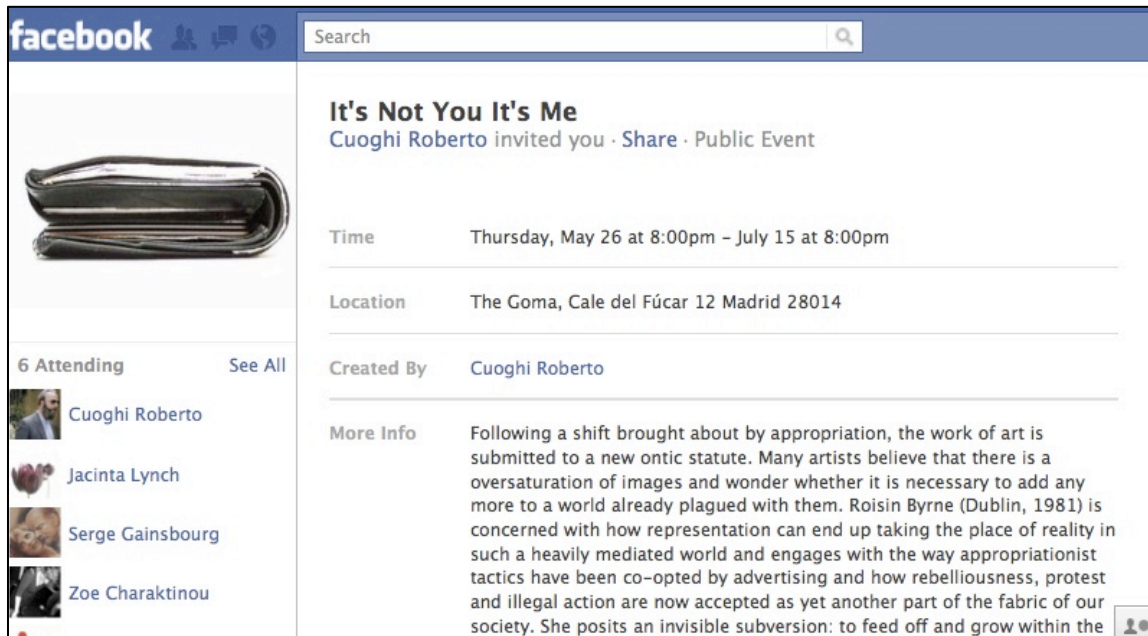


Figure 6. Facebook invitation to Roisin Byrne's *It's Not You, It's Me* exhibition at The Goma in Madrid, Spain.

Roisin Byrne (Dublin, 1981) is concerned with how representation can end up taking the place of reality in such a heavily mediated world and engages with the way appropriationist... tactics have been co-opted by advertising and how rebelliousness, protest and illegal action are now accepted as yet another part of the fabric of our society. She posits an invisible subversion: to feed off and grow within the communication system without contributing to its survival, to become a parasite...

Not only does Byrne appropriate my reading of her work as parasitical without attribution, but she also lifts from Nathan M. Martin's 2003 article for the Carbon Defense League that appears as my epigraph above. However unsettling, Byrne's move, is symptomatic of contemporary feminism's forced confrontation with the question of how we can *use* use. The artist's response suggests a tactical answer to the contamination of market co-optation and state collusion by unsubtly and crudely *co-opting it*, word for word. "[We] need to feed and grow inside existing...systems while contributing nothing to their survival...we need to become parasites." Byrne had, of course, encountered this epigraph before, when she first read it in my draft. Six months later, when "It's Not You,

It's Me" moved to London's Alma Enterprises in November 2011, Byrne struck again, this time more brazenly. The press release and website for the show plagiarized a full paragraph of my unpublished dissertation prospectus, verbatim (fig. 7). The only citation that appears in the press release is credit given to a male magazine blog critic for a phrase of his that she reproduced without quotation marks.

The parasite, as Byrne models it (even as she advertises for her first "solo show") indexes, above and beyond the ethics of stealing and forgery, questions of what forms of productivity are valued and devalued within late capitalism and how the giving and withholding of attribution work to regulate the currents of privilege and power within this political economy. The parasitical "drag" of Simon Starling's proper name into her project was essential to its conceptual effectiveness, while inclusion of my name offered the artist little reward (just as it offered me little reward to credit Chun in my response to Byrne's questions about the terms of my project). Yet, had I been acknowledged by the artist, this dissertation would be without this prologue. The intriguing system of rewards for playing the role of weakened host, even momentarily, complicates the picture of parasitism.



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38 Glasshill Street
London
SE1 0QR
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PRESS RELEASE

November 26th 2011 -
January 15th 2012

Roisin Byrne - *It's Not You It's Me*

Private View: Friday November 25th - 6pm - 9pm

Alma Enterprises is proud to present a solo show by London based artist Roisin Byrne. *It's Not You It's Me* is a work that takes this break-up platitude and perversely stands it on its head¹. Taking on the guise of a false collector in order to find out information on a quasi mythical work by Italian artist Roberto Cuoghi, Byrne discovered that the artist himself did not exist. Cuoghi had sought to become his father over 7 years by gaining weight, dying his hair and adopting the lifestyle and mannerisms of a 60 year old man. Byrne became fascinated by his apparent non-existence and that this 'event', always written about as 'not being a work' was what the artist Cuoghi was most renowned for.

Taking the opportunity to become the artist herself she legally changed her name to Roberto Cuoghi, opened a bank account and began to buy up work on the secondary market with a credit card in Cuoghi's name. Adopting the online persona of the artist Byrne began to receive exhibition invitations as Robert Cuoghi. Having new works made for a show in particular Byrne's project *It's Not You It's Me* tracks the inhabitation and/or occupation of one artist's territory and the production and exhibition of works in another artist's name.

Byrne's practice humorously yet aggressively challenges the boundaries of how an artist is allowed to behave prodding and provoking to unravel the accepted rules that structure art and its associations with culture, freedom and independence. Her work depicts the shift in art practice in which ideas and information become fluid, a common property which can be invoked, adapted and absorbed, violating the established mechanisms for making art, as well as the status of artwork itself.

In June 2009 Byrne began a correspondence with the Turner prize-winning artist Simon Starling, claiming admiration for his work, only to use the information she gained against him. She posed as a horticulturist, stole a rhododendron from his earnestly titled installation *Rescuing Rhododendrons* (2000) at the Parque Los Alcornocales in Spain and smuggled it back with her to the U.K. on a budget airline flight. Byrne exhibited their email correspondence in full, along with the plant, in a piece she entitled *You Don't Bring Me Flowers Anymore*. In *Look What You Made Me Do* from 2008, she enticed the artist Jochem Hendricks into an extended correspondence that resulted in her putting her own bank details on his financial form so that she could later receive his payment and use it to create a replica of one of his works; a single gold bar.

¹ Kaleidoscope Magazine online, Chris Sharp review of Roisin Byrne at The Goma, Madrid

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Figure 7. Alma Enterprises Press Release for Roisin Byrne: *It's Not You, It's Me*, 26 November 2011 – 15 January 2012.

I struggled to find an “unimplicated” vantage point from which to read Byrne’s practice.

My difficulty unmooring myself from the privileges of authorship had to do with my

struggle to theorize Byrne's practice as a dramatic example of parasitical feminism. Doing so meant recognizing that I was also a shameless parasite. The endeavor of reading the artist as parasitical, nevertheless, made possible a reading of the critic. The critic occupies the privileged position of the one who does the labeling in the first place, that of those who have the power to speak. My role as a critic is thus inextricable from the operations of economies of cultural production, to which Byrne's work calls attention.

'WORKING' THE SYSTEM

The parasite's relationship to concepts of productivity, authorship, and ownership betrays an internal paradox at work in the parasite's popular figuration. In common parlance, the parasite indexes the metaphorical *social leech* who exploits the law and lives off of the work of others—very often a gendered epithet for the “work-shy” woman thought to sponge off the wealth and access of a man. And yet, it, at the same time, indexes a performative figure of hyper-productivity. Serres describes this apparent paradox: “I work hard, I don't work at all...Life is work, simply, and work is life itself” (87). The parasite, it seems, works hard to *un-work*. It perverts, as Byrne does, the mechanics of productivity, bending and re-directing the normative meaning and value of labor to its benefit.

In the parasitical exchange, the parasite gets something for nothing, though this nothing is not without utility, as Serres argues. Every relation is parasitical, and furthermore, the parasite *does something* to what it takes: in appropriating an object, it resignifies it. “The parasite invents something new. Since [she] does not eat like everyone else, [she] builds a new logic. [She] crosses the exchange, makes it into a diagonal...People laugh, the

parasite is expelled, [she] is made fun of, [she] is beaten, [she] cheats us; but [she] invents anew. This novelty must be analyzed,” writes Serres (1982:35). Contrary to definitions of the parasite as an organism that takes and gives nothing in return, I argue that it offers something, if not in direct reciprocity. It does something even if it does not give back. The parasite *performs*. And by performing, the parasite makes something else possible.

There is no such thing as an unproductive parasite under the economy of relations that structure the host-parasite system of production and consumption. Taking something thought to be counter or supplementary to the system and putting it to work for that system is the very logic by which capitalism functions, as Christian Marazzi affirms:

From a theoretical point of view, it is very clear that there is an uncertainty in the classics’ treatment of the so-called ‘unproductive workers,’ although it is often masked by dismissive judgments...Marx himself who had put all his bets on the industrial workers, will end up affirming...that thieves, rogues, and striking workers are also productive, since thieves, for instance, inspired the invention of locks, jurisprudence, manuals and academic tenure... (2010:52).

By performing the parasite, Byrne makes explicit a process of perversion that is already apparent in Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection as a kind of performed labor. “The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition,” she writes, “a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them...[like] *an artist who practices [her] art as a ‘business’*” (1982:15-16, my emphasis).

Byrne has doggedly promoted her artistic practice as one concerned with public performances of self-interest, institutional manipulation, and other micro-incursions on

the regime of private property, consistently eliding the persistent specter of gender raised by her art. On *Goldsmiths: But Is It Art?*, Byrne strives visibly to perform the conceptual artist who *hardly works*. “I am very interested in ideas of property and what belongs to who,” she asserts, “So I just steal everything, so therefore I don’t have to work to maintain my artistic practice. I don’t have to be focused on creating original artwork.” Meanwhile a fellow conceptual artist and foil on the show offers with conviction his sense of the paradox of trying to make it as a professional conceptual artist: people do not see the work in conceptual art, he explains, and if you cannot see the labor, it is not considered an artwork. Byrne routes around this paradox by ironizing it. Her performance demonstrates that parasitism is a productive form of non-productive labor, a kind of reclamation of the gendered work that has historically been undervalued and dismissed by Marxists.

Byrne’s parasitical performance does not necessarily work toward something: a focused goal, an ethical logic. It *just works*. The parasite, and increasingly digital media as a parasitical medium, threatens not only the integrity of the boundaries between the self and other but, in this case, also those between criticism and art, between a private draft and public persona, between my reading of Byrne’s art and Byrne’s art itself. The parasite is an unruly *agent provocateur* not simply because it refuses to abide by the rules but rather because by appropriating, indeed performing, the mechanisms of capitalism, it exposes that there *are few rules*, if any, in neoliberal economies of cultural production. Either the conditions under which Byrne would parasite had changed between her earlier projects and 2011—her professional and economic situation becoming more precarious and therefore necessitating an ethical slippage from seeking

out powerful, well-known, male artists to a female peer to play her host—or Byrne’s parasitism never, in fact, had a stable ethical dimension in the first place. Or perhaps we might recognize the parasite as occupying a rather more shifting position than a stable one, as the linguistic shifters “you” and “me” of her exhibition title “It’s Not You, It’s Me” evidences the way in which the current system produces all of us as parasites with, in this case, the artist and the critic taking turns playing exploiter and exploited. Serres reminds us that to be a parasite is to be a shifter: “To play the position or to play the location is to dominate the relation...And that is the meaning of the prefix *para-* in the word *parasite*: it is on the side, next to, shifted; it is not on the thing, but on its relation. It has relations, as they say, and makes a system of them” (1982:38). “An invariable term through the transfer of the gift. It might be dangerous not to decide who is the host and who is the guest, who gives and who receives...” he warns (16).

FLATTERY WILL GET YOU...VIRAL

They are parasites of the parasites of the social body.

-Rosa Luxemburg, speaking of bourgeois women in a speech for suffrage (1971[1912]:220)

The parasited one parasites the parasites.

-Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (1982:13)

Parasites parasite parasites.

-Stephen Crocker, apparently misquoting Serres in “Noises and Exceptions” published on C-theory.net (2007)⁶

⁶ In his online essay, “Noises and Exceptions: Pure Mediality in Serres and Agamben,” Crocker puts quotes around this sentence in his discussion of *The Parasite*, an apparent misquote (but perhaps his own translation of the French?) of Serres’ *The Parasite* that is, at the same time, not given an explicit citation in the text. Even with respect to Serres’ landmark text on parasitism, one can track a parasitical trace in its digital reappropriation.

A few months later, I did publish something about my experience with Byrne.⁷ As the online text of the article was beginning to be formatted by the publisher—*Artforum* and *e-flux journal's Art&Education*, which had already put the article online even as they were still working on it—the editorial manager received an unexpected email. “The encounter you describe with Roisin in your text has...been slightly echoed,” she wrote to me. Byrne had preemptively discovered it through her Google Alert and was inquiring how soon it would be officially published and advertised. The artist had learned of my publication before I had.

Indeed, Byrne had already begun to advertise the article on her Facebook and Twitter accounts before I had time to submit my revisions to the publisher. Whereas my project had positioned Byrne’s work as a symptomatic reading within a larger project about the state of contemporary feminism, Byrne promoted the article as a “monumental review” of her work. Just as Jacques Derrida asks in *Of Grammatology*, “[W]ould [it] suffice to conclude that what thus comes ‘after’ is parasitic? And what is a parasite? And what if writing were precisely that which makes us reconsider our logic of the parasite?” (1998:105) The opportunistic timing of the parasite—its “*coming after*” in order *to come first*—had resurfaced, just as it had when Byrne requested to “para-cite” me before there was anything yet to cite. Such an encounter might be seen as typical of the dynamics of digital culture. For, as Geert Lovink writes, “This leaves us with the general question of how knowledge stored in books can operate in a fast-changing environment like the Internet. Often, the object of criticism has long disappeared by the time the theoretical

⁷ My essay “We Are Parasites: On the Politics of Imposition” was published on *Artforum* and *e-flux journal's Art&Education* in July 2011.

objections have been well thought through. The answer can only be a theory on the run” (2003:42). Byrne’s parasitism seized upon the exploitable window of opportunity created by academic print publishing’s glacial pace in the digital age to me “on the run” as I rushed to get my edits back to the editorial manager. Mark Hansen has described the accessibility offered by social-networking platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter to upload one’s work and to view others’ works as facilitating forms of productivity based upon connected consumption: “by taking full advantage of the many-to-many connectivity facilitated by the Internet, the explosion of use-generated digital ‘content’ (blogs, discussion forums, photo-sharing, video animation, and so on) has refocused the function of computational media from storage to production, from the archiving of individual experience to the generation of collective presence and of connectivity itself...” (2010). Using a panoply of corporate digital platforms to her every advantage, from Google Alert to wiki software to Facebook, Byrne threatened to repackage her consumption as production—“pre-cite” my citations of her artistic texts, indeed to pre-parasite my parasitism of her, before my critical writing could be stamped as “my own” by the legitimization machine of academic publishing. Whereas my authority as a scholar came from observing this delay, Byrne’s reputation as an artist depended on *getting there first*, or as Serres would have it, from disrupting criticism’s system of exchange. I, in turn, scrambled to respond faster than she could by slapping together a makeshift website about my research using Wordpress.com.

The stakes of originality—or, in this case, where the parasitism “begins” in this account—are de-centered by digital media, which pushes cult value even further into the realm of

the simulacrum. The “digital text” produced from Byrne’s creative process is fundamentally different from the text that literary scholars debated when they tangled over the parasitical “wounding” of the citation. “What happens when a critical essay extracts a ‘passage’ and ‘cites’ it?” J. Hillis Miller asked in his well-known essay “The Critic as Host”: “Is this different from a citation, echo, or allusion within a poem? Is a citation an alien parasite within the body of its host, the main text, or is it the other way around, the interpretative text the parasite, which surrounds and strangles the citation which is its host?...Or can host and parasite live happily together, in the domicile of the same text, feeding each other or sharing the food?” (1977:439). It would appear that digital appropriation, and the ease built into the computer’s very functionality, as exemplified in operations like “copy and paste,” fundamentally changed the stakes of citationality. To be sure, Byrne’s practice disregards originality in favor of citationality, treating “the bite” of parasitism as, far from weakening, hollowing, or contaminating, indeed *fortifying*.

New media’s accelerated reproducibility is crucial to these operations of the parasite. Byrne’s parasitism is bound up in a simultaneous reverence for and destruction of the value systems on which her work feeds. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin writes “...mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an even greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes *the work of art designed for reproducibility*...the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics” (1968:224, my emphasis). Byrne sucks the auratic marrow out of “original works”

and transforms their ritual value into virtual value, seizing on their capacity for their “viral” reproducibility. She embraces in media parasitism the ethos that there is no such thing as bad publicity. The accumulation of citations is computed as an accrual of value. By dissociating from, while still depending on, the logics of originality, autonomy and independence, Byrne’s work negotiates its worth not in terms of its exchange value but of the value of its exchange. Virality can thus be understood as, rather than pure reproducibility, a value acquired in the rapid proliferation of a certain form of contamination. In the viral, one finds not just the happy reproducibility that has been celebrated by postmodernism but a form of accelerated reproducibility that acknowledges that it both feeds on and undermines an authenticity that, nonetheless, remains if only spectrally.



Figure 8. “Is Parasitism the Future of Feminist Art?” Bob Duggan for *Big Think*. July 17, 2011.

In the weeks that followed the publication of my essay about Byrne, it was picked up by a few mainstream websites as a news story. Taking a page from Roisin Byrne’s playbook, I set up my own “Google Alert.” A few days later, I received an email alert. An Austrian online fashion magazine called *FashionOffice* ran a mobile feature called “Culture/art: A

Culture Philosopher about ‘Parasitical Feminism’ in Art” about my article (describing, incredibly, this graduate student as a “U.S. Philosopher”).⁸ The next day, the online news forum *Big Think* featured an article about my essay by art blogger Bob Duggan, which asked in its title: “Is Parasitism the Future of Feminist Art?” (fig. 8)⁹ *Big Think* is a blog aggregator specializing in “intellectual news,” so it is not surprising that the piece flattered both the scholar and artist with publicity in exchange for free content. The progressive telos of the feature’s title, however, stood in marked tension with my own article’s stated desire to move away from a developmental or “solution-based” model of feminist futurity. Duggan offered his own reading of my experience with Byrne, which at the same time framed itself as a review of my article, culminating in the final line: “At the very least, Fisher boldly tries to make ‘parasite’ a good thing, and sounds a call for feminist art to take a new tact, *even if it means breaking the law*” (2011; my emphasis). Breaking the law? The website had appropriated my work, as I had Byrne’s, in terms that I found no longer recognizable as my own. Duggan’s recourse to hyperbole demonstrates how, when it is not ignored altogether, criticism has at times been appropriated to feed the machine of infotainment, wherein even a genuine engagement with scholarly work can appear to find it necessary to dramatize criticism in order to survive. This would seem to be the moment when criticism is reproduced as pop culture and becomes grounds for ridicule.

⁸ See “Culture/art: A Culture Philosopher about ‘Parasitical Feminism’ in Art” *FashionOffice* 16 July 2011 <http://www.fashion.at/mobile/2011/byrne7-2011.htm>.

⁹ See Duggan, Bob. “Is Parasitism the Future of Feminist Art?” *Big Think* 17 July 2011 <http://bigthink.com/ideas/39343>.

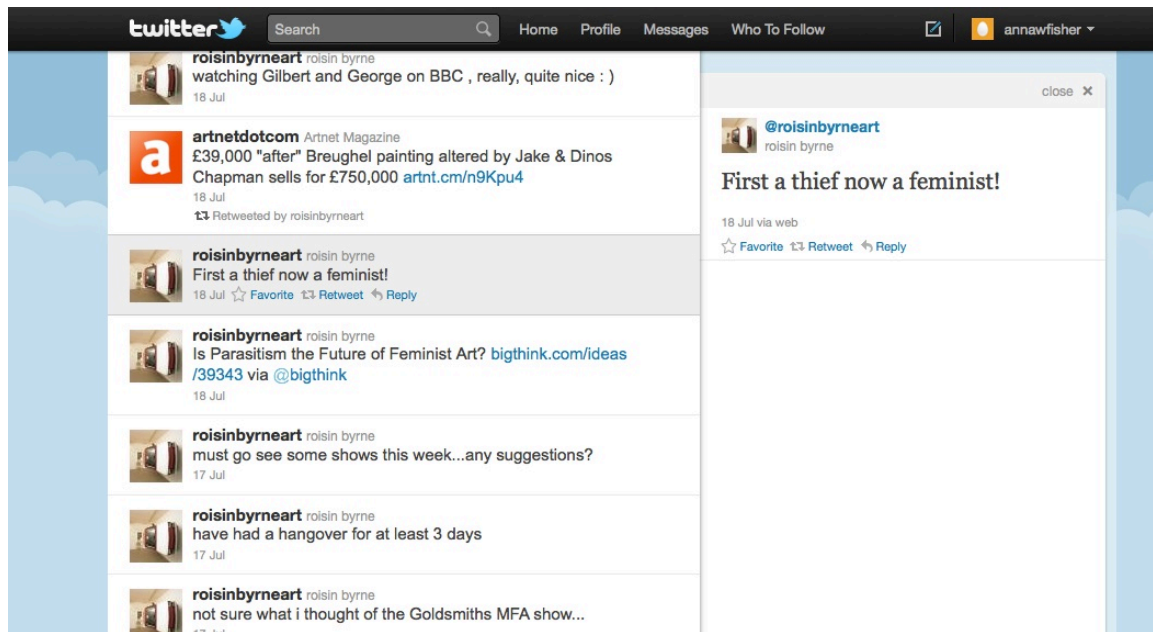


Figure 9. Roisin Byrne’s Twitter page on July 18, 2011.

Both articles were formatted to encourage users to “share” them on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google+, to “like” or “tweet” them, including imbedded counters that refreshed the numbers of users who had used these features. Byrne advertised the *Big Think* piece on her Facebook page, but this time her tone had shifted from one of elation over the *Art&Education* piece to one of ridicule, likely prodded by Duggan’s emphasize on the critical reading over the artwork itself, which exaggerated the parasitism of the critic on the work of art. “First a thief now a feminist!” she tweeted [fig. 9]). Duggan concludes his article by remarking that “Byrne herself may have felt [she] more than...intellectually articulated [the issues in her work], at least until Fisher came along to provide the words,” recalling David Bell’s description of the parasite as the operator who participates in an exchange by “giving only words...in return.” A Facebook friend of Byrne’s added: “well for all Fisher’s whining that she was used as host, she has pretty successfully parasited her way out of obscurity on the back of your work!” Serres writes, “The parasited one

parasites the parasites. One of the first, he jumps to the last position. But the one in the last position wins this game. He has discovered the position of the philosopher” (1982:13).

In December 2011, *Time Out London* published a review of Byrne’s London exhibition of *It’s Not You, It’s Me*, which appeared both in print and online. “I’m not sure if there is such a thing as ‘parasitic art’” critic Helen Sumpter began, “but it’s certainly a description applicable to the work of Roisin Byrne” (fig. 10). Sumpter subsequently concludes,

All of which brings me back to the idea of the parasite...It’s an interesting comparison. Both Starling and Ryan Gander, whose work Byrne has also co-opted, certainly seemed more annoyed by her interference than accepting of her as a fellow conceptual artist. But parasites also have a regulatory function in that they can accentuate any weaknesses in their host. At the moment Byrne’s mirroring interest in the artists she targets seems more reverential than critical (2011).

As one online commenter noted in response to Sumpter’s review, Byrne’s work appears more concerned with co-opting male artists’ celebrity than their actual process. In the works exhibited in *It’s Not You, It’s Me*, Byrne does not attempt to physically become Robert Cuoghi, in notable distinction to the extraordinary lengths that Cuoghi goes to create his own ostensible performance; rather, she becomes him gesturally. She inhabits him less than she *exhibits* him. As with *You Don’t Bring Me Flowers Anymore*, her emphasis is more on the act of taking Starling’s plant than doing anything creative to it—as a conceptual artist, she operates on the concept of the thing rather than the thing itself. As a result, the plant ultimately withers and dies while on display, since it was not so much the object that Byrne wanted but documentation of it.

In all of these cases, Byrne plays a political “short game” with her incident-based performance-hits, matching the intensity of the neoliberal market’s ruthless drive for capital as she draws attention to these very mechanics. The artist reframes late capitalism’s appropriative force, much as Duchamp did the urinal. Her projects ride the exceptional labor of their hosts, compressing their impressive feats into conceptual “one-liners.” Byrne’s provocations appropriate the artists *virtually*. The question of whether any of the events that her work “documents” actually happened, however, remains unanswered. Online commenter “MJ” writes in response to Sumpter: “[Based on t]he way Roisin [is] represented [in reviews]...people will...perhaps take for granted these events occurred...It leaves me asking why it’s hard to locate the work, why we only see documentation? Why do you see her and her practice as ‘parasitic?’” It is true that why Sumpter thinks that Byrne’s work is parasitical is a question that the review never addresses. The term appears without explanation, as if self-evident. Sumpter’s treatment of the parasite is symptomatic of how user-generated content has fundamentally changed the way in which information circulates. “It’s an interesting comparison,” Sumpter writes of Byrne and the parasite, but where “it” comes from, we are not told. This lack of context evidences the way in which authorship has increasingly been treated online, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that Internet has been sold as making accessing information faster and easier.

“MJ” further notes Byrne’s skill at exposing the twinning mechanisms at work in both art/criticism and digital media, in her very manipulation of them. He or she writes, “I think Roisin is perhaps interested in subverting the mechanics of the support structures that create and make visible those artists and their careers. Her practice relies heavily on

the artists she focuses on being known and also on the way her interventions are subsequently talked about in reviews or interviews...” (Sumpter 2011). Certainly, this is where the artist’s labor appears most visibly in the work. “I am delighted I found your ideas!” she replies in her email to me, a statement that is revealing for how entities like Google have removed the logical connector between merely wanting something and making it one’s own. “Art for me is very much about what I can get away with,” Byrne explains on *Goldsmiths: But is it Art?*, her fingers tickling the mousepad of her MacBook as the computer screen is reflected back in her eyes. If the parasite can be said “to work” by disclosing—indeed, reflecting back—the logics of its relational system, Byrne’s art both exposes and exploits the conditions that make her practice possible. Byrne is a media artist who has found a way to insert herself into the machines of reality television (as a cast member on *Goldsmiths But Is It Art?*)¹⁰ and social media. As much as Starling or Cuoghi, Byrne parasites the technologies of neoliberalism.

¹⁰ There is certainly as much to say about Byrne’s parasitism of the machine of reality TV, as one of three artists selected to be featured on the two-part BBC series *Goldsmiths, But is it Art?*, as there is to say about her use of digital media. There has been an increasing, and increasingly difficult to parse, *interrelationship* between Reality TV and performance art, two supposedly distinct categories of practice. In *Subversive Expectations: Performance Art and Paratheater in New York, 1976-85*, Sally Banes observes that “... by the end of the 1980s, performance art had become so widely known that it no longer needed to be defined; mass culture, *especially television*, had come to supply both structure and subject matter for much performance art; and several performance artists had indeed become crossover artists in mainstream entertainment” among whom she includes Laurie Anderson, Spalding Gray, and Ann Magnuson (1998:10). In a two-part series of articles entitled “Guest Stars” for the contemporary art magazine *Frieze*, Jennifer Doyle has further elaborated performance art’s extended conversation with television, describing it as one that was amplified by the emergence of video art in the 1970s (2010).



Figure 10. Time Out London’s Twitter page promoting Roisin Byrne’s London exhibition.

USE OR BE USED

In *Tactical Media*, Rita Raley discusses the tactical turn to parasitism advocated by the Carbon Defense League, a media collective made up of artists, theorists, activists, and technologists. Raley writes that “incident-based parasitic media” operate in the time and space of the “here and now,” using themselves up in their operations, since “[t]here is no need for the parasite to live longer than a few days or even a few seconds” (2009:9). “Generative parasitic media,” on the other hand, Raley explains, must adapt and grow with their host system, creating greater sustainability for backdoor hacks and unexpected hijacks (9). Distinguishing between these two parasitical modes is useful for thinking about what is at stake in feminist adoptions of the parasite as a political model. The paradox of the parasite is that she can be either an operator that lives by destroying her host from within or one that thrives in her host’s survival. The extent to which what Raley calls “generative parasitic media” is resistant, as opposed to just complicit, is a

question that this dissertation will consider at length, and yet Byrne's work reveals that more radical "incident-based" media performances are not outside of the problematic of complicity either.

The parasite has been figured prominently, rhetorically and symbolically, in discourses on digital resistance and tactical media, as engaged by cyber activist and performance groups such as Carbon Defense League, The Yes Men, Critical Art Ensemble, and Electronic Disturbance Theater. As such the parasite has been presented as metaphorical shorthand for the "minoritarian agent" in global late capitalism that seeks to act out on forms of domination by mobilizing its very forms and practices against it. Critical Art Ensemble writes of their methods: "...tactical media is a form of digital interventionism. It challenges the existing semiotic regime by replicating and redeploying it in a manner that offers participants in the projects a new way of seeing, understanding, and...interacting with a given system. The already given and the unsaid are the material of a tactical media event" (2000:8). Theories of tactical media are especially relevant to my study of performance artists who have engaged tactics of insistence and overaccumulation—as many accounts of digital resistance have worked to—rather than frontally or obviously destroy the machine—flood it by forcing it to redouble, and thereby intensify and *overjustify*, its own logics to the point of causing its own self-alienation. If the parasite-host system is the paradigmatic system for the relation of gender in this contemporary moment, recognition of the parasitical character of certain aspects digital media—for example, the infrastructural dependence on databases at the core of social media and search engine platforms that have the effect of making users complicit with their system of operations—necessitates a fundamental rethinking of feminism as a political project that long struggled

to move beyond the impasses produced from its own complicity within a larger system of exploitation.

Parasitical performance builds on what practitioners of tactical media, particularly Critical Art Ensemble, have called “simulationist tactics,” which describe what has elsewhere been called mimicry—that is simulating the threat so as to perform maneuvers of inversion that render it a bad copy. The Yes Men playfully call this “identity correction,” describing their practice as that of “Impersonating big-time criminals in order to publicly humiliate them.” In moving back and forth between theories of performance and media, readings of performance artists and digital artists, my project attempts to further elaborate the critical affinities that align discourses of performance art and new media.

“By digital,” Critical Art Ensemble writes, “CAE means that tactical media is about copying, recombining, and re-presenting....We deconstruct the ‘givenness’ to show the cracks that sutures have patched, to demonstrate that what is taken as privileged discourses is merely a construction that conceals power and self-interest” (8). Whereas these tactical media groups have engaged the parasite for its representational function promoting a tactics of the user, I argue that the strong association of the parasite with the user has obfuscated the parasitism *of the system itself* and thus the parasitism of our gender system. Tactical media’s persistent identification of parasitism with the user therefore fails to offer an adequate reading of Byrne’s work, as it is unable to account for the gender operations that undergird a feminist turn to parasitism in the first place. Parasitical feminism is crucial to digital media interventions, even if it is not always acknowledged as

such. Dara Greenwald has argued that its theorists and practitioners have forgotten tactical media's feminist prehistory—for example, how “stunting” draws on early feminist performance art “actions.” Greenwald suggests, “‘Tactical media’ is a term made popular in political art circles by Geert Lovink and David Garcia’s 1997 essay, ‘The ABCs of Tactical Media.’ The protagonists of contemporary tactical media are often men (usually white) who do funny political pranks to land themselves in the media spotlight” (2011). Represented as a discourse of masculine incursion, tactical media has tended to posit the white male as the default subject of its micropolitics, effecting an erasure of other models, such as the aforementioned feminist ones as well as African American models of resistance, such as the “Trickster” archetype, from which the “Tactitioner” draws upon, as well.

Byrne is not a parasite because she is a “bad girl” but rather because she is a *good online user*. In my encounter with the artist, Byrne often appeared parasitical if only because of the speed and skill with which she made use of new technologies (such as Google Alert). It was as if her knowledge and utilization of widely available technology somehow made her a “dangerous” and “dependent” woman who was “without boundaries.” Yet it may be the Google Corporation itself that is found to lack boundaries. This gets at the way in which our own “searches” construct parasitical relations. Bob Duggan makes an interesting point when he notes how parasitism shifts the question from “Who does *she* think she is?” to “Who do *we* think she is?” Concerns about the artist’s ethical project displace the rather more challenging work of questioning the institutional and corporate entities that both make her parasitical actions possible and interpellate all of us as parasites.

This has as much to do with the current historical moment of media technologies as with out construction as subjects. Digital media has been described as less a medium in its own right than a parasite on forms of old media (Chun and Keenan 2005). The parasitical structure of digital media has turned *all living artists* into digital artists, progressively drawing artists and critics alike into the intertwined “web” of the art market, academic criticism, and the mainstream press. Digital platforms like Facebook, Google, and wikis are parasitical technologies that pose as transparent mediums for content, while they are in fact, highly generative; in their rapacious capacities as content hosts, they are macroparasites, to borrow Bruno Latour’s useful distinction between macro- and microparasites, a productive refinement of Serres’ parasite.¹¹ Sites like Facebook that bill themselves as a platform *for users* rather than one created *by users*, betray the “hidden productivity” of the parasite typically regarded as a figure of leisure that does not produce but only consumes information. As Tiziana Terranova has shown in her work on digital labor, the digital—like the parasite—refigures our assumptions about value, work, use, and exploitation. “The process whereby production and consumption are reconfigured within the category of free labor,” Terranova writes, “signals the unfolding of a different

¹¹ In *The Pasteurization of France*, Bruno Latour shows the emergence of the hegemony of the macroparasite in the story of the pasteurization in nineteenth-century France and its transformation of the social field through regimes of sanitization. Latour writes, “As McNeill suggests when discussing the millennium-long struggle between the microparasites and the macroparasites, a struggle that seems to him to be the motive force of history, *the scale is turned in favor of the macroparasites*. The rich and the empires will at last be able to spread...Now, wherever the Pasteurians and hygienists gained ground, the microparasites lost ground. We can see why nobody, even today, can seriously question the contribution of bacteriology. Indeed, all opinions speak with the same voice, and everybody works together to attach the microparasites: exploiters, exploited, benefactors of mankind, merchants, the clergy, and above all the doctors, the hygienists, the army medical corps, and at the end of the parasitical chain, the Pasteurians. The only losers in all this are the microbes” (1993:41, my emphasis). In his article “Give Me a Laboratory and I Will Raise the World,” Latour writes: “...the displacement of microparasites allows the macroparasites—here the farmers—to grow fatter by feeding off healthier cattle. By the same token all the macroparasitic chain of tax collectors, veterinarians, administrators and landlords prosper by feeding off the richer farmers” (1983:154).

(rather than completely new) logic of value...” (2000:35). Since its inception, the Internet has been framed through the rubrics of danger and dependency, from William Gibson’s groundbreaking treatment of “cyberspace” as a collective hallucination in his now field-defining novel *Neuromancer* to the aura of sex crimes and porn addiction surrounding the personal computer to the “inseparable” prostheses of cell and mobile gaming devices (Chun 2005). The parasite, however, offers a more resonant model for the “user” as the network has come to exemplify the parasitical structure of our global economic system at large. It speaks to a neoliberal ecology organized by mutual antagonisms, rampant proliferation, and wide-scale depletion.¹² Like tactical media, neoliberalism subjectivizes and individualizes, emphasizing the subject of politics over the system that produces it.

As my encounter with Byrne illustrates, digital media’s parasitical hold revealed itself as I attempted to detach myself from the lure of Byrne’s email message, only to find my response embedded in communication’s recursive chain of signification, each new message trafficking and topping the last in the browser. Indeed, the very vocabulary of digital media betrays its parasitical logic—consider the terms “sites,” “feeds,” and “host domains.” My email contrived to make it impossible for me not to respond to Byrne and for Byrne not to respond to me. Posing as pure information, the digital conspires to make us react, to be reactive to the information of others: my Facebook news feed “feeding me” with new material about the artist, her Google alerts drawing her back into the fray, and copy/paste functionality pervading our culture of information, urging on the feeding frenzy. The pervasive rhetoric of the online “user,” where every online citizen is induced

¹² See David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005); Neil Smith’s *Endgame of Globalization* (2005); and David McNally’s *Global Slumps: The Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance* (2010).

to participate through naturalized and decontextualized performances of appropriation—to *be a user*—requires that feminist theory shift its critical emphasis from the problem of exploitation to the question of circulation and complicit participation in the twenty-first century. If feminism is no longer recognizable as a politics about the problem of a society that produces women specifically as dependent—because, in fact, most people have increasingly been made dependent—then what is it? And, what then is “feminist art”? Certainly, Byrne’s appropriative methods fail to adhere to a discernable, normative feminist “code.” Rather than a statement about sisterhood, her appropriation of men’s work is a comment on the rabid parasitism dictated by the neoliberal market and her insistence on surviving within these. But this can also lead to an appropriation of women’s work, as we have seen.

What kind of feminism are we to celebrate if Byrne’s work is feminist? The neon sign that she claims to have originally ordered, before pursuing Gander’s instead, was to read: “Work will set you free.” That the German “*Arbeit macht frei*” was placed over the entrances of many Nazi concentration camps, most famously Auschwitz, is disturbing. Her reproduction of the phrase out of context turns it into a publicity slogan and threatens to enact, under the banner of irony, a self-serving display of historical ignorance. The parasite’s *raison d’être*, taking what it wants and leaving the rest behind, may prove dangerous for feminism as a project that has itself struggled to resist “leaving behind” forms of difference if only because they exceed the restless category of “woman.” For example, Byrne’s project casts Starling as naïve, when in fact Starling originally made *Rescuing Rhododendrons* as a statement against British immigration policy. When Starling learned that the plants were going to be destroyed in Scotland, where they had been

imported from Spain in the 18th century and had since come to be regarded as weeds, the artist drove the plants in his red Volvo 240 Estate back to their place of origin. Byrne's project imposes a feminist reading on Starling that holds his politics hostage to gender, obscuring other political pathways into this work. Immigrants have often, of course, been accused of being parasites, as well as women. Likewise, the stereotypical portrait of Gander proves rather incomplete. The fact that Gander is also a disabled artist who works from a wheelchair is left out of Byrne's conceptual narrative, as is his and Starling's shared artistic investments in tactics of appropriation and institutional critique. In this sense, the parasite commits a double violence when she not only latches on but hollows out her hosts. She not only redirects her hosts' resources but she instrumentalizes them by representing them as *mere hosts*, tokens in her conceptual game.

Roisin Byrne demonstrates that the parasite is a dangerous subject because there are no guarantees against its mechanisms—a dangerous subject of study and a dangerous subject on which to base a feminist politics—and, for this very reason, it is an intriguing one. The political tension produced out of holding Byrne's work up as a feminist model has something to do with how, rather than merely exposing the disciplinary efficiency of our current system, mass media, legal and otherwise, her work also evidences her ability to get away with the breaches she produces. She exposes limitations on both sides.

Byrne explains on *Goldsmiths: But Is It Art?*: “If people are thinking, ‘Why has this girl done this? Why is this girl not making her own work? Why is this girl taking work from someone else and claiming it as her own? Why does this girl not want to be original?...’ those are probably the exact questions that I want people to think about.” We may ask

about the meaning of her repetition in this statement and why it is that she refers to herself as a “girl.” Despite her initial enthusiasm at the attention a feminist reading of her work heeds, the artist later takes every opportunity to distance herself from a relation to feminism and feminist art. In a Facebook comment responding to the *Art&Education* article, she writes: “i [sic] can’t say feminist tactics have ever much been a concern of mine” and after the *Big Think* piece, a more aggressive Facebook repudiation, she offers this Facebook status message: “i can’t say i give a shit that i am a woman. i can say i give a massive amount of thinking time about being part of a structure that keeps you dependant on it if you let it.”

Byrne’s claimed ignorance as to the relationship of feminism to the economy in which women inhabit is—real or performed—nevertheless useful. It is a reminder of misconceptions that feminists have long confronted as to “the point” or relevance of feminist politics. In 1987, Barbara Kruger reprimanded an interviewer who attempted to dissociate feminist art from the economy of its circulation,

[Do] you think that feminism exists outside the discourses of capital, as a kind of primordial meandering which escapes all economies except those of birth and rhythm? I consider sexuality and capital to be inextricably wedded and this coupling has the power to dictate the feel of the moments of our lives...I think our ‘accomplishments’ or lack of them, our property or lack of it, our ability to feed and clothe ourselves and to eke out some degree of sustenance in this world is dependent, to a large extent, on both the power and caprice of monetary flow (2009:114).

This reprimand might be levied at Byrne as well, even, or especially, if Byrne doesn’t acknowledge these terms. Byrne’s explicit engagement with, and yet persistent disavowal of, gender politics in her work is striking as it is with many of the artists explored in this

dissertation. Byrne's public repudiation of feminism is symptomatic of how many women artists feed off of feminism's work while still refusing it.

What does saying that something is feminist produce in our current moment? What are the impositions of a feminist reading? Serres asks whether we can permit impositions. "[To impose] is usually understood as cheating," he writes, "the swindler imposing himself" (2007:201). This dissertation models a parasitical reading practice that works to relocate the question of feminist agency in the parasitical act. It asks how feminism might take advantage of the closing gap between criticism and performance to reanimate feminism a critical object. In my own analysis, I perform a critical reading practice of feminist imposition—one that imposes on texts by *overreading* them for what they might offer for thinking about feminism. In so doing, the dissertation *imposes feminism* on these artists, staking its own parasitical claim to them for feminism. I offer a means for imposing feminism, in places where it may be said not yet to reside.

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INTRODUCTION /

PARASITICAL FEMINISM FROM IMPASSE TO IMPOSITION

The word ‘feminist’...according to the dictionary, means ‘one who champions the rights of women’...Let us write that word in large black letters on a sheet of foolscap; then solemnly apply a match to the paper. Look, how it burns!

-Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (2006 [1938]:120-121)

PERSONA NON GRATA

Korean American playwright Young Jean Lee, an established figure of the New York City avant-garde theater scene, begins each new project by asking herself: “What’s the last thing in the world I would ever want to write?” (Bent 2012). This question has led to plays about identity politics (whether it be Asian American identity in *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* or African American identity in *The Shipment*), religion (*Church*), or a cabaret show for which she, a self-described non-actor, told stories and sang about loneliness, illness, and death (*We’re Gonna Die*) (Bent 2012). By all accounts, Lee has built a successful career from executing the “worst idea possible.” In January 2012, Lee debuted her *Untitled Feminist Show* (originally titled *Untitled Feminist Multimedia Technology Show [UFMTS]*) at New York City’s Baryshnikov Arts Center, featuring six performers from the downtown theater, dance, cabaret, and burlesque worlds.

“I generally pick political topics because I think political topics are really hard to do well when you’re making any kind of art,” Lee explains, “It usually ends up coming across as didactic or simplistic. Feminism fell under that category. And, multimedia technology...I feel pretty alienated by it. I thought I would combine those two things together. What ended up happening was it felt like two different shows, and I had time for one or the other and I picked feminism” (Lee and Hammons 2012). “Feminism has really taken a huge hit. Women are in danger of losing a lot of rights that they have already fought for...[Feminism] has been neglected in the mainstream for a while. It felt like the right moment to focus on it again” (Lee and Hammons 2012).

Prior to its January 2012 re-opening (and critical embrace), *Untitled Feminist Show* underwent several significant reworkings, originally developed in residency at the New Museum in 2010 and subsequently travelling in New York and Minnesota for other residences (Young Jean Lee Theater Company 2012). Lee is known to produce, direct, and write her shows through a process of collaboration with her actors during rehearsal and not beforehand. In an interview with *The Nation*, Lee describes her process:

In the collaborative groups a lot of the time it’s democratic, but I definitely wanted to be the boss. I started this process, which is I cast the show before I write it. I don’t know what gender the characters are going to be a lot of the time; I don’t know how many there will be. It’s just based on who comes into the room, who triggers that desire to write for them. People will say, I wish you would do this for my character; I wish this would happen—and then I go home and write more and bring it in. I’ll take feedback from anybody. Between somebody else’s good idea and my good idea, if theirs is better I have no issue with whose good idea it was. I just want the best idea (Smallwood 2009).

Not unlike Byrne, Lee’s creative method actively co-opts and incorporates the work of her

collaborators—and in the case of her “political” works, the very women and minorities that she seeks to engage—as the shows are billed as the work of the Young Jean Lee Theater Company.¹³ During *Untitled Feminist Show*, Lee admits, “The question of ownership got really difficult” (Orel 2010). While early performances initially included an extended dialogue with the audience about feminism, the final version of the show effectively stripped the performance of all of its explicit signifiers for feminism—replacing nearly all dialogue with dance (except from a Hebrew song, there is but one, barely discernable, word spoken in the fifty-minute show). The six dancers perform entirely in the nude, and the title was ultimately simplified to *Untitled Feminist Show*. “[A]ny text that we gave the audience, they just latched on to it and it just became all about the text,” Lee explains of the decision to cut the text and make it movement-based, “People were being so intellectual about feminism and the show that they weren’t having an emotional response to it at all. That was really unsatisfying” (Lee and Hammons 2012). While the final version of the show presents clichés and gestures (six nude women, screaming and seducing, dancing and recreating feminine myths), the performances are so stripped down that they barely signify at all (fig. 1). The show takes some of the most vexed and dramatic signifiers for feminism and wears them down, emptying them of their signifiatory substance. In so doing, it seizes on and dwells in the very position that it seeks to rework.

In its rejection of feminist imperatives of authenticity, the dissertation identifies an underlying *antitheatricity* in popular conceptions of feminism as a fully transparent, legible

¹³ Of *The Shipment*, Lee has said, “This show in particular, I had no content to contribute, because I have no idea what it feels like to be black...So we would have all these conversations in the room with the actors, and they would say all the things that bothered them that they wanted to express” (Collins-Hughes 2010).

or frontal politics of identification. I ask what it might offer to disassociate contemporary feminism from its historical treatment as a representational logic based on truth, following Nicholas de Villiers, who has recently introduced opacity as a queer idiom. “But what if we were to take seriously...strategies of *opacity*,” he asks, “not necessarily of silence or invisibility?...[against] form[s] of power [that make] individuals into recognizable subjects by imposing a category and interpretive regime of truth” (2012:3). By treating not only gender but also feminism as *itself a performance*, these artists challenge the notion that feminism is a politics of visibility with fully coherent or legible signifiers.

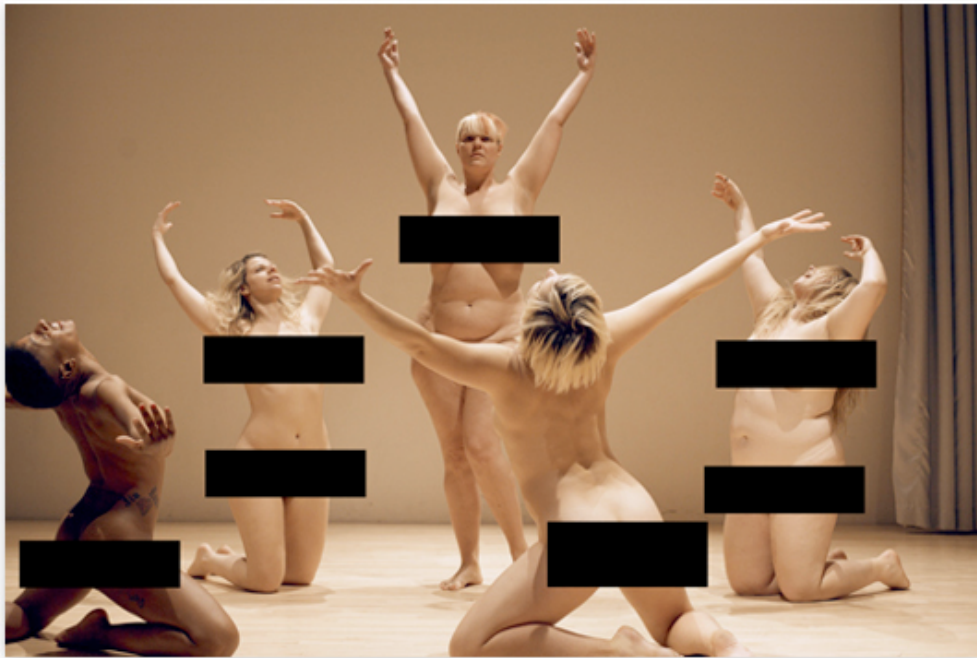


Figure 1. Publicity image from Young Jean Lee’s Untitled Feminist Show (2012) in collaboration with Faye Driscoll, Morgan Gould, and the Company. Starring Becca Blackwell (not pictured), World Famous *BOB*, Hilary Clark, Katy Pyle, Regina Rocke, and Amelia Zirin-Brown (aka Lady Rizo) (Courtesy of Young Jean Lee’s Theater Company).

Performance offers a protective space for negotiating their relationship to feminism, without being defined solely by one’s place within the ideological category of feminism.

Performance art's arguably exceptional status affords them the means to *occupy a feminist position* that is walled off from traditional political imperatives of authenticity and legibility. By engaging the conceptual registers of "art" or "theater" as rehearsal spaces for the interrogation of feminist themes, performance imbues feminist politics with a generative irony. By performing parasites, these artists play the imposition of Western feminism in order to animate what aspects of feminism remain useful to them. They show that *performing feminism*, more so than quote-unquote "being feminists," has become crucial to feminism's political utility in our current moment.

In *Three Guineas*, a book that expands on themes initiated in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf suggests that the word "feminism" should be written down and burned. "Since the only right, the right to earn a living, has been won, the word no longer has a meaning," she wrote, "And a word without a meaning is a dead word, a corrupt word. Let us therefore celebrate this occasion by cremating the corpse" (2006:121). Insofar as we might consider Woolf's provocation to burn "feminism" itself a feminist act, it echoes and anticipates a number of the performances I consider in this dissertation. Emphasizing *the act* of burning over *the object* being burned, we might read Woolf less as announcing feminism's obliteration and more as suggesting, in the very act of igniting it, that feminism still has the ability to create sparks. In much the same way, the digital and performance art that I examine present feminism not so much as a position to be held but an imposition to be acted upon.

As a result of feminism's "bad reputation" as a parasitical nuisance, bully, or burden, a younger generation of would-be feminist artists, like Young Jean Lee, have modeled

performances of feminist dissimulation and drag that play a relation to feminism in order to *play with it*. Serres writes (as I quoted, in part, in the Paralogue), “To play the position or to play the location is to dominate the relation. It is to have a relation only with the relation itself. Never with the stations from which it comes, to which it goes, and by which it passes. Never to the things as such” (1982:38). And this is the definition of the *para-* of parasite, he writes: “it is on the side, next to, shifted; it is not on the thing, but on its relation. It has relations, as they say, and makes a system of them. It is always mediate and never immediate” (38-39). In playing the so-called “feminist position” off of its so-called “feminist contents,” artists like Lee have expanded the repertoire of what might constitute a feminist *imposition*. By treating feminism as a performance rather than a state of being, these artists model it not as a designation of what someone “is” but as something to which one *is in relation*. Refashioning feminism as, not an identity, but rather a *pose* (or persona) affords these artists a means for revisiting feminist problematics with the critical distance offered by the mask of theater.

We might think of Dutch artist Erik van Lieshout’s video *Fantasy Me* (2004), in which he attempts to teach the correct pronunciation of the word “Feminism” to a character named Tessa, played by a Chinese actress (fig. 2). The European male artist stages a brutal English lesson in which he presides over a forced re-education: “Familism?” she says. “FEE-MII-NII-SM!” he booms (Zolghadr 2007). The work enacts the hegemonic Eurocentrism that has been at the heart of the most devastating critiques of Western feminism. The performance implicates feminism as a shared burden and failed encounter that plays out in relation to another.



Figure 2. Still from Erik van Lieshout's video *Fantasy Me* (2004)

Scholars such as Gayatri Spivak, Saba Mahmood, and Linda M. G. Zerilli have critiqued the exclusions produced by its Western tradition. In *Politics of Piety*, an explication of the limits of Western feminist analysis through the Egyptian women's mosque movement, Mahmood offers a trenchant critique of Western feminism, arguing that notions of feminist agency have depended on normative liberal assumptions about human nature that unravel when applied within a transnational context. Employing a rhetoric of exclusion from occupation, she observes that feminism has itself been an unwelcoming host for women's practices that have challenged its idealism: "The pious subjects of the mosque movement occupy an uncomfortable place in feminist scholarship," she writes, "they pursue practices and ideals embedded within a tradition that has historically accorded women a subordinate status" (2008:4-5). Mahmood recalibrates agency, historically understood in the Western context as autonomy—freedom, consent, and individual will—with notions such as community, custom, tradition, and social will. She

challenges a grounding of feminism around projects of freedom requiring an assertion of feminist agency as an imparting of the individual will over and above social norms. She poses the question: “does the category of resistance impose a teleology of progressive politics on the analytics of power—a teleology that makes it hard for us to see and understand forms of being and action that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion and reinscription of norms?” (9). I argue that perhaps Western feminism has been held accountable for its ambition to be something more than what it is, a guiding concept, that fails to capture the idealism that it has nevertheless sought to describe. Perhaps recognizing this is necessary to reclaiming it, as Timothy Bewes writes in the distinct context of postcolonial shame, “from the ignominious position in which scholarship has tended to place it, between the conceptualization of freedom and its realization” (Bewes 2011:8).

With this lesson in mind, my analysis of Western feminism is especially attentive to theoretical, art historical, and popular feminist debates within the U.S. and Western European context. While “Western feminism” remains an inadequate designation, it provides the basis for and marks the limitations of the dissertation insofar as it does not account for global feminism or non-Western feminisms. These limitations certainly mark the aporias of my thinking but are also intentional insofar as the project seeks to turn the “problem” of Western feminism *inside out*, in order to expose it from within. My own use of the singular throughout the dissertation (“feminism” instead of “*feminisms*”) is intended to provide clarity, and, while it inevitably does, it is not intended to obscure the dense fibrousness of feminism as a multivalent signifier of diverse methods of thinking and practice over and above the scope of this project. While the deficiency of vocabularies for

critically engaging something like “Western feminism” is a crucial problematic of this dissertation—this is not in any sense a problem that parasitical feminism is imagined to resolve.

“Feminism” is conceived here as a radically contingent project of often diverse and contradictory efforts made to improve the conditions of gendered subjects. It is a project that has been mired in a certain set of normative conventions and stereotypes that have claimed to represent it in both mainstream and scholarly arenas. In the sense that it has become bogged down by its own circulation and use as an imposition, feminism has remained caught in a double discourse of failure and privilege. Parasitical feminism is resoundingly not an alternative to feminism but a tactical approach for working *with* and *from within* its problematics. It does not have the pretension to purport to be a feminist movement or subfield but proposes a mode of improvisation for addressing feminism’s place within a larger field of relations to dominance.

The project tries to imagine what a non-emancipatory, non-progressive, non-autonomous feminism might look like and how experimental art practice offers a site for modeling such a feminist approach. Focusing on U.S. and Western European digital and performance art after 1995, the dissertation asks how these experimental practices reappraise the value of feminism, as well as notions of feminist value, following a number of important historical shifts since the ‘60s and ‘70s, the period when feminist art emerged as a category of cultural production. These include: 1) the institutionalization of performance as a disciplinary paradigm, 2) the critical and artistic periodization of postmodernism, 3) the rise of neoliberalism, and 4) the emergence of digital technology.

This study is concerned less with feminist historical and activist accounts of what feminism has become and more with feminism's perceived currency within theoretical, popular, and artistic spheres, or *what it has been imagined to be*. The dissertation reads contemporary articulations of feminism that infest more ambivalent strands of feminism. These performances tease out anxieties registered by representations of liminality, relationality, and simulation, sites that have been historically denigrated by versions of feminism conditioned by logics of affirmation and positivism. Such issues have proven challenging for feminisms grounded in idealism: that is, those that are sustained by classical political and aesthetic values and based on the paradigm of sovereignty, which privileges a conception of the liberal autonomous individual that has been challenged by encroachments of the minor, the derivative, and the relational.

What does it offer to say that feminism has been perceived as a parasite—a corrupt word, a Eurocentric hangover, a hanger-on of the decaying body of identity politics? Roisin Byrne's public maligning of feminism seems to illustrate this much. "Some have left feminism behind as white, heterosexual, and a bourgeois *tic*," observes Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* (2011:155, my emphasis). How, more precisely, has the cruel optimism of Western feminism been imagined as a *tick* on the back of contemporary social theory? "The parasite's bad reputation," Michel Serres said in an interview, "has to do with the fact that [it causes] the host to become ill or even die...The initial reaction to a parasite is disgust, flight or waging a massive attack against them" (Wiek and Serres).

Parasitism models tactics for thinking both *beyond* and *beside*—*para-* to—critical impasses

that have stymied a number of leftist political projects, taking Western feminism as its privileged case study. This “move to the side” joins others who have proposed non-hierarchical alternatives to the “verticality” that undergirds logics of domination and imperialism. The imposition makes its presence known in the moment of impasse.¹⁴ From *imponere*, the term imposition originally means “to place upon” or “to put into.” I want to hear its prefix as both indexing an emphasis and a negation. On the one hand, an imposition insists on the force and weight with which a thing *positions itself* where it is unwelcome (i.e. the imposition as a daunting presence, such as that of the tax collector). On the other, we can read it as the negation of the position (*im-* or *in-*, meaning not, without, or lacking), an emphasis on the very fact of its *not having a place*, of its being unfamiliar or undesirable. Feminism has often been felt as an imposition in both senses of the term. In parasitical feminism, the imposition embraces the conditions of its exclusion as a tactic for claiming its place. It calls for plugging into, for moving further in rather than moving away from the position that has been found problematic for feminism.

Feminism has been increasingly perceived as a carrier of the threat of ossification within the marketplace of cutting-edge scholarship, avant-garde art practice, and commercial art. Western feminism, which has historically had a phobic relationship to those it perceived as parasites, subjects believed to be too deeply imbedded within the patriarchal power structure, has itself become the parasite. The artists in this dissertation often appear reticent about being called a “*feminist* artist.” As an adjective, “feminist” has been seen as

¹⁴ To be an imposition is to be an embarrassment, argues Nicholas Ridout in *Stage Fright*. “Sharing origins with the word embargo, an embarrass is ‘an obstacle,’ and ‘embarrasser’ is ‘to block.’ Barely used in English now, the noun ‘embarras’ includes among its meanings a number of particular instances of blockage or obstruction, including, for example...*Embarras*, an American term for places where the navigation of rivers...is rendered difficult by the accumulation of driftwood” (2007:81). As a verb, to embarrass is “to encumber, hamper, impede (movements, actions, persons moving or acting)” (81).

a corrupting modifier, sullyng or tainting the substantive to which it attaches itself. I argue that this reticence, contrary to how it has been read, is neither a reflection on the individual's feminist politics (or lack thereof) nor on the state of feminist politics, but rather a commentary on the value economy in which feminism has come to circulate.

FEMININE PARASITES

There is, however, an advantage that woman can gain from her very inferiority. Since she is from the start less favored by fortune than man, she does not feel that she is to blame a priori for what befalls him; it is not her duty to make amends for social injustice, and she is not asked to do so.

-Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1993
[1949]:695)

The parasite holds a crucial if undertheorized place in the history of Western feminist discourse. The term “parasite” has consistently been invoked to describe a fundamental problem for feminism: that of women's constitution in relation to, and secondarily to, patriarchal structures. The figuration of feminist complicity *par excellence*, the so-called “feminine parasite”—perceived as a contaminating and duplicitous presence—has typically represented the antithesis of radical politics. As early as 1796, Mary Wollstonecraft describes women as parasites locked in an interdependent relation to patriarchy in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*:

Though, to reason on Rousseau's ground, if man did attain a degree of perfection of mind when his body arrived at maturity, it might be proper, in order to make a man and his wife *one*, that she should rely entirely on his understanding; and the graceful ivy, clasping the oak that supported it, would form a whole in which strength and beauty would be equally conspicuous. But, alas! husbands, as well as their helpmates, are often only overgrown children; nay, thanks to early debauchery,

scarcely men in their outward form—and if the blind lead the blind, one need not come from heaven to tell us the consequence (iv).

Wollstonecraft's allusion to the feminized ivy wrapped around the masculinized tree draws on biblical and classical themes of marriage¹⁵ and anticipates J. Hillis Miller's 1977 reading of the parasitism of the critic on the text as an interlocked embrace, which Byrne's *You Don't Bring Me Flowers Anymore* enacts as conceptual art. This image is one of a "natural" unity that conceives of the parasite-host relation as what I will argue is the *ressentimental* trap of compulsory heteronormativity. This trap is represented by the "sentimental burdens" of bourgeois family life: marriage, home, and children, which designate the "woman's place" as *in contradiction*. In order for woman to be *whole*, she must make herself *dependent*.

In her historical account of feminist utopian thinking in *The Feminist Avant-Garde*, Lucy Delap writes, "The fierce rejection of parasitism that characterised feminist texts of this period resonated with descriptions of 'the freewoman' as financially and emotionally independent...Readers of feminist texts would have been familiar with the parasite metaphor, as well as with calls for a transformation in feminine character" (2007:119,120). This is largely due to the substantial role given to the parasite in the writing of the utopian feminists Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), and Olive Schreiner, all of whom described women as economic parasites made to occupy a system that keeps

¹⁵ This image of the feminized ivy that wraps itself around a masculinized tree goes back to the bible (appearing in Psalms) and Greek mythology (appearing in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) (Stephen Greenblatt et al 2008:737). It appears as an Elizabethan homily on marriage in Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*. Act 2, Scene 2 reads: "Thou art an elm, my husband; I a vine, whose weakness, married to thy stronger state makes me with thy strength to communicate. If ought possess thee from me, it is dross, usurping ivy, briar, or idle moss, who, all for want of pruning, with intrusion Infect thy sap, and live on thy confusion." (Act 2, Scene 2) (737).

them financially dependent on the patriarchal order. They contend that women must rebel against their economic dependency.

Gilman writes with antipathy in *Women and Economics* (1898), “Housewives [are] an endless array of ‘horse-leech’s’ daughters, crying Give! Give!—[a] parasite mate devouring even when she should most feed...” She reasons that if women’s economic dependency were attended to, “the natural evolution of the sexes into a complementary, organic unity” would be possible (qtd. in Delap 2007:38). The feminine parasite was thus a figure deployed as a “bad object” of feminist utopian thinking.¹⁶ Radical feminists regarded women’s tacit consent to their own oppression as disabling the “natural order” represented as heterosexual equilibrium. Delap argues that Vernon Lee’s description of women’s parasitism in her 1908 *Gospels of Anarchy and Other Contemporary Studies* marks a moment when “feminism,” though the word was not yet in use, began to take on avant-garde connotations (2007:2). In *Woman and Labour* (1911), Olive Schreiner observes that for women “all labour is our province,” excoriating feminine economic parasitism, which she describes, in distinctly orientalizing terms, as “bedecked and scented” (qtd. in Delap 2007:81). Schreiner held the feminist belief, characteristic of the period, that women were responsible for their own freedom (Delap 2007:37), even if they were not necessarily materially able to realize it, and that their continued subordination was therefore attributable to them. She finds the dependence of women on men morally reprehensible and as a result of the corruption of their character, leaving them “effected and enervated” and acting like a “deadly microbe” on the constitution of the race (37). She writes

¹⁶ To be clear, these first-wave feminists’ target was more that of the patriarchal order than other women as they also advocated for female kinship values.

“[both] internal effort and external intervention was needed to overcome parasitism, but ‘the will’ was seen as the most fundamental site of reform, since ‘the ultimate effect of parasitism is always a paralysis of the will’” (37).

Delap writes, “Debates among feminists strongly reflected these themes of simplicity and self-sufficiency. Through their social critique of Edwardian society and the capitalist economy, many feminists sought redemption from the capitalist machine economy” (227). For these women, the bourgeois woman represented the contaminating effect of capitalism’s parasitical taint. “Dora Marsden for example,” she continues, “described capitalism using the parasite metaphor commonly ascribed to women in this period: ‘capital is insatiable; it is not a necessity of wealth, but a ghastly poisonous fungus which has fastened upon wealth and which is rapidly crushing it out of existence’” (227).

In 1912, Rosa Luxemburg addressed a group of women on the issue of suffrage:

Most of these bourgeois women who act like lionesses in the struggle against ‘male prerogatives’ would trot like docile lambs in the camp of conservative and clerical reaction if they had the suffrage. Indeed, they would certainly be a good deal more reactionary than the male part of their class. Aside from the few who have taken jobs or professions, the bourgeoisie do not take part in social production. They are nothing but co-consumers of the surplus product their men extort from the proletariat. They are parasites of the parasites of the social body (1971:220)

Simone de Beauvoir wrote most extensively in *The Second Sex*, published in 1949, about the woman perceived as too tightly attached to patriarchy—namely marriage and domestic life—encapsulated by the housewife. She observes:

A parasite sucking out the living strength of another organism...the [housewife’s] labor does not even tend toward the creation of anything durable.... [W]oman’s work within the home [is] not directly useful to society, produces nothing. [The

housewife] is subordinate, secondary, parasitic. It is for their common welfare that the situation must be altered by prohibiting marriage as a 'career' for woman.

De Beauvoir struggles, with more empathy than Gilman, over the problem of parasitism as a relatable one: that of the woman who is made a parasite because she is *forced to be hospitable*.

Reiterating sentiments that appeared in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Gloria Steinem published a hotly debated editorial in *Time* a few years later called "What It Would Be Like If Women Win." In it, she writes:

[Imagine that there are no] more men who are encouraged to spend a lifetime living with inferiors; with housekeepers, or dependent creatures who are still children. No more domineering wives, emasculating women, and 'Jewish mothers,' all of whom are simply human beings with all their normal ambition and drive confined to the home. No more unequal partnerships that eventually doom love and sex" (1970).

That same year, British writer Germaine Greer resuscitated the metaphor as a provocation for a different cultural moment, famously declaring war on "feminine parasites" in her book *The Female Eunuch*. Her controversial polemic framed "feminine behavior" as the heart of the feminist problematic. In it, Greer suggests that such women should not be included in the feminist sisterhood. She urges women "[to] stop pretending and dissembling, cajoling and manipulating, and begin to control and sympathize" (328), to claim "the masculine virtues of magnanimity and generosity and courage" (330). Greer writes,

If [this book] is not ridiculed or reviled, it will have failed of its intention. If the most successful feminine parasites do not find it offensive, then it is innocuous. What they can tolerate is

tolerable for a woman with any pride. The opponents of female suffrage lamented that woman's emancipation would mean the end of marriage, morality, and the state; their extremism was more clear-sighted than the woolly benevolence of liberals and humanists who thought that giving women a measure of freedom would not upset anything. When we reap the harvest which the unwitting suffragettes sowed we shall see that all the antifeminists were after all right (12).

By examining the early Western feminist canon through the concept of parasitism, we recover a particularly vigilant strand of radical feminist thought mobilized around the problem of women's consent to patriarchal norms of marriage and childrearing in exchange for the rewards of bourgeois privilege. By making their homes within the territory of patriarchal dominance (as housewives or homemakers), the women most intimately bound to patriarchy were defined as parasites. Forced, in turn, to play hosts themselves, they were regarded as reproducing the problems posed by patriarchy.

This strand of feminist thinking resonates with the current urgency of issues such as complicity, assimilation, consent, occupation, and territory. Such thinking offers a feminist prehistory to its contemporary analog in recent queer theory that has responded to the problem of homonormativity by advocating for a turn to queer utopia. Some of the most interesting recent thinking about the problem of normativity has nevertheless, in large part, sidelined feminism as the very parasite that these early radical feminists actively sought to renounce. In its utopian thinking, recent queer theory has privileged discourses of radical autonomy that have offered little means for moving contemporary feminism out of its perceived impasse. In this sense, the dissertation explores queer theory's relationship to feminism, attending to what has been seen as queer theory's displacement of it (while at the same time bringing feminism in through the backdoor) by

looking at how a new generation of feminist artists have modeled practices that observe little distinction between feminist and queer representational modes. While the aim of this dissertation is not to historicize Western feminism's so-called "bad reputation," it will attempt to deconstruct and denaturalize the conditions under which a particular reading of feminism—for example, as a normative project that is necessarily distinct from queer, antiracist, and Marxist discourses—has been represented as a degraded form within certain U.S. scholarly and cultural formations.

When asked "What's 'wrong' with feminism today?" during a 1991 interview for the *Angry Women* edition of the American cult magazine RE/Search, Avital Ronell responded: "It's dependent on what man does. Feminism today has a *parasitical*, secondary territoriality..." (1971:127). Later, interviewer Andrea Juno asks what might constitute a 'feminist' revolution, to which Ronell appears, in apparent contradiction to her earlier comment, to describe something like a *parasitical mimicry*:

Right now we're in this genuine impasse. We see what has paralyzed and neutralized our desires and our political *engagement*. By cultural definition, women are not satisfied; Lacan said that woman's essential signifier is 'encore'—more, more, more! So if there *were* an essence of woman, it would be *to demand more*...women are on the side of what Deleuze will later call 'multiplicity; more; surplus. (Here I don't want to essentialize the biological model—nor to repress it) (146).

Over the course of the interview, Ronell appears to shift from a position of diagnosing parasitism as feminism's malady to prescribing parasitical mimicry as its cure. In history, science, and art, women have always been "appendages onto a male world," Ronell continues, "We have to overturn all of that" (147). "Women's survival weapons have always been covert rather than overt, involving seduction rather than 'open warfare,'"

Ronell says, to which Juno adds, “seduction, secretiveness, and manipulation were a natural outcome of having no other options...” (153). This interview represents a tentative cultural marker for the historical shift in the early 1990s toward a form of reflexivity that allows for the performance of the parasite to emerge as a mimetic answer to the impasse of contemporary feminism.

The argument that women are rendered “secondary” or “dependent” in their relation to men has been explicit in foundational texts in early lesbian and gay studies, as well, espoused in the work of feminist separatists like Marilyn Frye. Black and postcolonial feminists, though with less explicit address of the parasite, have remained critical of feminisms grounded in racial and colonial complicity, thereby suggesting a critique of the parasite as a figure that, ironically, nevertheless implies a certain access to resources. In “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Audre Lorde asked,

What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable...For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support (1984).

The limits of this project and its most apparent site for further exploration are the ways in which race and ethnicity expose the parasite’s access to its host. “Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill,” Lorde said. Characterizing class and race relations as themselves parasitical, bell hooks has

highlighted the ways in which, in claims of “reverse *parasitism*,” the poor are persistently characterized as “mere parasites and predators” on the upper and middle class (2000). The parasite is the marginalized intercultural figure forced to assimilate to the logics of its host territory. The parasite has thus represented the threat imposed by the integrated outsider. As Lorde and hooks show, a politics of parasitical mimicry has largely remained foreclosed to those “parasites” consistently denied a seat at the table. This dissertation grapples with the problem of Western feminism as the figure of, at the same time, complicity with and resistance to dominant power.

In all of these texts, the parasite is represented as shorthand for the perceived threats to feminism by forms of dependence upon patriarchy—manifest as the problem of a contaminating *symbiosis*. The parasite represents a form of complicity that is inherent to a gender politics of “subversion” when subversion has itself become a privileged form. Given Western feminism’s historical aversion to the parasite, the dissertation explores the improvisational political potential and limits of the parasite’s recent *antibiotic* mobilization in contemporary digital and performance art practices.

Parasitical feminism marks a decisive shift away from the utopian imaginary of early feminist thinkers like Gilman and Schreiner that called for the radical exclusion of the relational parasite. While I do not want to lose the critical vigor of this history, its fetishization of radical refusal proves ill-adapted for a political present as characterized by economic precarity and global connectivity. Rather, parasitical feminism proposes that feminists *perform* a radical pragmatism or radical assimilation. It is a political imaginary that appeals to the duplicity of theater to challenge normative Western cultural feminist

imperatives of independence, maturity, and self-mastery as outmoded products of American and European shared fundamental individualism.

By untethering feminism from freedom and agency, the parasite undoes the notion of the “free agent,” as the rational, responsible subject that has underwritten feminism as a legacy of enlightenment liberal and rationalist discourse, exposing it as an impoverished analytic for attending to the densely networked set of relations that structure consumption and production within late capitalism. The parasite figures a polemic against utopian romances of refusal and escape that prove inadequate for accounting the fractured, intersectional, and relational experience of global capitalism.

ART OF THE WEAK

[B]ecause she is a good model, [woman] is in fact a bad model. She plays at dissimulation, at ornamentation, deceit, artifice, at an artist's philosophy. Hers is an affirmative power. And if she continues to be condemned, it is only from the man's point of view where she repudiates that affirmative power and, in her specular reflection of that foolish dogmatism that she has provoked, belies her belief in truth.

-Jacques Derrida, *Spurs* (1979, 67-68)

“What might a parasitical performativity actually achieve?” asks Rebecca Schneider in *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (2011:125). In a moment when parasitism has become a way of life under the economy of relations conditioned by late capitalism, what would it mean to render such relations explicit and tactical: to exploit exploitation or capitalize on capitalism? “What is economy?,” writes Derrida.

“[E]conomy no doubt includes the values of law (*nomos*) and of home (*oikos*, home, property...). *Nomos* does not only signify the law in general, but also the law of distribution (*nemein*), the law of sharing and partition [*partage*], the law as partition (*moira*), the given or assigned part, participation...[E]conomy implies...exchange, of circulation, of return” (1992:6). Named by the Greeks (*parasitos*), parasites were once a standard character in ancient Greek comedy, complete with their own mask (Damon 1997). Parasitism articulates both a critical paradigm for feminist performance and a performative model for reassessing the state of contemporary feminist politics. This dissertation delimits an arsenal of artistic procedures by which feminists have engaged the figure of the parasite to produce moments of ideological dissonance or majoritarian frustration: tactics that skillfully manipulate symbolization, that perform a “sincere” relation to, hyperbolize, and put on display authoritarian codes, that appear at first to adopt certain political poses only to attack them through rabid and exaggerated adoptions and reappropriations of such codes (Shukaitis 2010). I consider how what Slavoj Žižek and others have articulated as a tactics of overidentification might recommend parasitism as a corrosive move that challenges recent work that has privileged, under the appellation “negativity,” moves of cynical distancing, pure refusal, exit, and escape to argue instead for maneuvers of autoimmunity, overintimacy, exaggerated mimicry, and excessive appropriation for feminist theory.

Parasitical feminism offers an alternative to theories of negativity that would seek to quarantine, by way of maneuvers of refusal and exit, troubling feminist histories. These, I argue, can be more usefully confronted and contested through methods of appropriative reversal. Parasitical feminism puts to work, perverts, and deterritorializes structures that

have otherwise been held as corrupt or debased for feminism. It recommends a counter-model to feminisms of both pure acceptance and pure refusal, a third term for negotiating untenable histories and impossible exits; it is a tactical feminism that aspires to negativity as impurity rather than purity. It is a model for exploiting, rather than evading, the difficulty that feminism has often had with relationality, a model that remains committed to retaining the form of feminism at the same time that it turns it inside out, drags it, and performs its impositions.

As a social metaphor, the parasite raises crucial questions for feminist politics, namely how institutional discourses have adopted parasitism in order to naturalize their treatment of racial and ethnic minorities, queers, women, the disabled, the unemployed, the undocumented, and so on as burdens on a system that claims to tolerate them with little benefit for doing so. This dissertation seeks to expose and denaturalize this ideological strategy, wrenching apart the very particular political work of claims of social parasitism from their grounding in biology. Parasites litter our intellectual and socio-cultural landscape, despite having until now been written relatively at the margins of critical theory. In this sense, the dissertation is both indebted to Michel Serres's important work and an attempt to confront more directly the political dimensions, particularly those of gender. There are four discourses in particular that have taken up the parasite as a critical paradigm, as opposed to a theme or trope: a) the work of Serres; b) Jacques Derrida's the ethics of hospitality; c) debates on performativity in linguistics and literary criticism; d) most recently, studies of tactical media.

Reading these together, I argue that the parasite is, rather than an unproductive or

superfluous figure, an important political actor in an age of networked circulation and use. Discourses of social parasitism fail to account, for instance, for the symbiosis that often underlies the biological parasite-host relation. In what sense, and to what ends, is the parasite necessarily *undesirable*? If the parasite can be said to give *nothing in return*, then why does the host “tolerate” and “maintain” its relation to the parasite? To what extent might, in fact, the dominant *depend upon* the characterization of minoritarian subjects as parasites? What work does the parasite do for the system? The parasite—the resource drain, the unabashed consumer, the shameless appropriator, the bad actor, the decadent that refuses to work—must instead be seen as a figure of and for capitalism that displaces the burdens of an exclusionary system onto the very bodies that it forces to adapt in order to survive.

Could the logics of imposition provide the means for transforming perceptions of Western feminism as a cultural imposition and lost cause and for figuring new and inventive models of feminism? Steve Pile has argued, “There is never one geography of authority and there is never one geography of resistance. Further, the map of resistance is not *simply* the underside of the map of domination—if only because each is a lie to the other, and each gives the lie to the other” (1997:23, my emphasis). We might put pressure on the intriguing ambiguity of this “simply” to ask if indeed a map of resistance *can* be drawn from reversing, flipping over, and dragging structures of domination, if only to dwarf or exaggerate the original image in scale and significance. My chapters ask: what could it mean to *sexually harass* patriarchy (Chapter One)? To *juvenilize* adolescence (Chapter Two)? To *occupy* “women’s work” (Chapter Three)? Can performed, maniacal responses to or engagements with problematic figures be used to undermine their ideological effect?

Parasitical feminism should be understood as, far from a historical break or departure from feminist art history (despite the artists examined in this dissertation's "real" or performed claims to the otherwise), instead a continuation of the tactics of appropriation that has long been associated with feminist art. In "'Taking' Pictures," Barbara Kruger describes feminist appropriation, and I quote her at length:

[The strategy of parodying that which one opposes] is employed by a number of artists working today. Their production, contextualized within the art subculture, frequently consists of an appropriation or 'taking' of a picture, the value of which might already be safely ensconced within the proven marketability of media imagery. Using, and/or being informed by fashion and journalistic photography, advertising, film, television, and even other artworks (photos, painting, and sculpture), their quotations suggest a consideration of a work's 'original' use and exchange values, thus straining the appearance of naturalism. Their alterations might consist of cropping, reposing, captioning and redoing, and proceed to question ideas of competence, originality, authorship and property...On a parodic level, this work can pose a deviation from the repetition of stereotype, contradicting the surety of our initial readings. However, the implicit critique within the work might easily be subsumed by the power granted its 'original' thus serving to further elevate cliché. This might prove interesting in the use of repetition as a deconstructive device (2009:106).

The parasite figures the mechanisms of appropriation under neoliberalism, using widespread market deregulation and boundary breaching as an alibi for its incursions onto private property. It accelerates the act of *taking* that Kruger describes in "'Taking' Pictures." Parasitism mimics the fervor and voracity that Marx and Engels, and many since, have attributed to capitalism as a maniacal logic of relentless appropriation.¹⁷

¹⁷ Marx and Engels describe capital's logic as manic and unyielding in *The Communist Manifesto*: "Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their

This project draws what Michel Foucault termed in volume one of *The History of Sexuality*, “reverse discourse,” which he defines as the characteristic fragmentation and instability of discourse that enables its improvisational potential.¹⁸ Parasitism manifests this quality of discourse, indeed its ability to turn inside out, as both instrument and effect of power that makes such a reversal possible. It is this reversibility of discourse that suggests that the very same mechanisms define dominance and offer the means for its resistance. For Judith Butler, it is also in improvisational engagement with the tools of dominance that there emerges hope for negotiations of power. In *Bodies That Matter*, she cites Foucault to ask about the resignificatory promise of performativity: “How is it that the apparently injurious effects of discourse become the painful resources by which a resignifying practice is wrought?...further, how is it that the abjected come to make their claim through and against the discourses that have sought their repudiation?” (1993:224).¹⁹

Parasitical feminism draws on a practice of antisocial mimicry that Leo Bersani describes

train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify...*The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere*” (2001:12, my emphasis).

¹⁸ Foucault writes in *The History of Sexuality*: “[I]t is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. And for this very reason, we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments of whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable. To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies... Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (1980:100-101).

¹⁹ Butler further notes the commonalities between Foucault’s discourse of power and Nietzsche’s notion of the “sign-chain” that he describes in *On the Genealogy of Morals*: “the entire history of a ‘thing,’ an organ, a custom can be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion” (1993:77).

in *Homos*, “[The homosexual] repeats societies accusation of him as a homosexual outlaw, meticulously seeking out every ramification, every implication of that association...He is willfully offering transgressive spectacles to others, making himself into a gaudy performer of their most lurid views on him” (161). While I recognize the influence of the antisocial turn on parasitical feminism, I am wary of what José Esteban Muñoz has described as its whitewashing tendencies. Muñoz critiques theories of antirelationality as authorizing, for queer scholars like Bersani and Lee Edelman, a flight from relationality that often gets instrumentalized as a distancing from the contamination of race, gender, and other particularities that “taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference” (2009:11). Following Bersani’s provocation: “Should a homosexual be a good citizen?” (1996:113), we may ask whether the feminist should strive to be a good citizen.

The dissertation reappraises feminist theory’s aversion to instrumentalization and calls into question Western feminism as a redemptive project in order to defang detractors of feminism who point to its limitations as reasons to abandon it entirely. By considering feminism as an exemplary system, I follow Serres in asking if we can rewrite a system not in the key of preestablished harmony and order but in the register of difference, noise, and disorder *already within*, rather than external, to the system itself. “A system is often described as a harmony,” writes Serres, “...but where do we put the dirt?” (2007:12-13). How can feminism be revisited as just another system that, like others, is already contaminated as a way of moving beyond the problem of contaminating relations for feminism? Rather than think of these as modes of pure refusal, I argue that the artists in this dissertation perform what Muñoz calls disidentification, itself an articulation of minoritarian parasitism on a majoritarian host culture. Parasitism traffics in the impurity

of appropriation to offer a new model of feminist economy. The dissertation is also conceived in conversation with Judith Halberstam's recent book *The Queer Art of Failure*. She advances queer failure as a worthy alternative to victory's "violent triumphalism," proposing a feminist reboot of her own that she calls "shadow feminism." Halberstam asks what feminism stands to gain from discourses of antirelationality, which have remained stubbornly the province of queer theoretical work on (often white) male homosexuality. She conceives shadow feminism as a project "grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, silence" that "offers spaces and modes of unknowing, failing, and forgetting as part of an alternative feminist project" (2011:124). Feminists, she argues, should refuse the choices on offer and seek escape routes in incoherence, unbecoming, disorganization, and passivity that make up her shadow archive of resistance. Such an embrace of negativity for feminism belies a tendency (on the part of many scholars, not only her) to wield negativity in absolute terms that erode the very critical promise that the concept offers. Yet much in the same way utopian feminists did in their rejection of the parasite, shadow feminism, in its radicality, risks reiterating its own version of purity by removing itself from the causal linkages of inheritance and contamination, even as it turns to postcolonial feminists and feminists of color. Parasitical feminism proposes instead that feminists must confront feminism's longstanding struggle with relationality through a model that remains committed to inhabiting, rather than fleeing, the ruins of feminism.

How have long-held anxieties within feminist theory over the notion of the parasite emerged as a tactical model for reinvesting contemporary feminism? In what ways and to what extent have certain strands of feminist theory "pre-scripted" and thereby circumscribed feminists in a set of compulsory performances oriented around a political

subject represented as dignified, mature, and autonomous? Might performed reversals or inversions of these terms—what my chapters respectively explore as tactical performances of *dependence*, *immaturity*, and *vulnerability*—be found to aid or further to damage the feminist project? Parasitical feminism “calls the bluff” on the derided figure of feminism, as well as derided figures within feminist theory, to query whether tactically and preemptively assuming the imposition of such figures might take advantage of a cultural logic akin to double jeopardy whereby one cannot be charged with the same crime twice. Rather than evading, by seizing on the impositions, parodies, and caricatures said to represent contemporary feminism, a younger generation of artists has already begun to re-image it by performing it back to itself—assimilating internalized ironies, awkwardness, and equivocality for its tactical gain. The paradox of the parasite is that it can be either an operator that lives by destroying its host from within or one that thrives in its host’s survival. Thus it not merely exemplifies the double bind of contemporary feminism—its vexed status as a project of both resistance and complicity—but mobilizes it.

In sum, this dissertation responds to debates about what exactly feminism’s objective is at a juncture when concepts such as liberation and revolution have appeared increasingly inadequate for accounting for the fractured, intersectional, and relational experience of gender in global late capitalism. In an age that has overwhelmingly been described as *one of occupation*, the territory of dominance on which we find ourselves has, nevertheless, become increasingly impossible to locate. “There are some black spots in language,” writes Serres, “The field of the host is one such dark puddle...we don’t know what belongs to the system, what makes it up, and what is against the system, interrupting and endangering it” (1982:16). In 1991, Fredric Jameson famously described this as a

problem of cognitive mapping or the lack of grasp on our position within a global system of enormous complexity or a grasp that he describes as necessary for us to “regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as social confusion” (54). Ien Ang summed up the challenges that this apparent paradox has presented in this way, “In the last two decades or so, a transformation in the theorization of power has taken place in critical theory—largely through post-Althusserian elaborations of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony and Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge” (1994:170). Ang suggests that this transformation has taken place “not because [critical theory] no longer believes in domination but because...‘it is faced with the formidable task of unveiling structures of domination when no one is dominating, nothing is being dominated and no ground exists for a principle of liberation from domination’” (170). Rey Chow’s latest project makes the case that the rubric of entanglement best represents the contemporary topology of power relations, confirms the continued relevance of these concerns. “What are these relations of power in which we are caught and in which philosophy itself...has been entangled?” she asks, after Foucault (2012:1). Indeed, the map of parasitical relations draws a series of enmeshing loops, marking complicity as the defining term for our political experience.

The parasite represents a political agent that is not outside of the consumptive ecology of capitalism; rather, it “makes do” with what it has in front of it. In this sense, the dissertation revisits Michel de Certeau’s inauguration of a turn to tactics in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. “The space of a tactic is the space of the other,” he writes. “*Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it* and organized by the law of a foreign power...It does not have the means to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and

self-collection: it is a maneuver ‘within the enemy’s field of vision’...and within enemy territory...In short, the tactic is an art of the weak (1988:37). De Certeau employs, in his landmark study, the rhetoric of imposition to advocate improvisational, short-term, and fragmentary modes of resistance but stops short of an explicit engagement with the parasite.

In her incisive book *The Aftermath of Feminism*, Angela McRobbie examines the instrumentalization of “feminism” within Western European and U.S. culture. She argues that, while elements of feminism have been “absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life,” at the same time, feminist watchwords like “empowerment” and “choice” have been co-opted by neoliberalism in a new guise within media and popular culture and agencies of the state as a kind of substitute for feminism. “[T]his is done through active vilification and negation conducted mostly at the cultural level, which makes feminism quite unpalatable to younger women,” she writes. “A kind of hideous spectre of what feminism once was is conjured up, a monstrous ugliness which would send shudders of horror down the spines of young women today, as a kind of deterrent” (2009:1). She points to this cultural reappropriation of feminism as cause for her growing frustration with a Certeanian-inspired tactical feminist approach.²⁰ She states:

When feminist cultural studies pursued this pathway, a concern to understand dynamics of power and constraint gave way to celebratory connections with the ordinary women, or indeed girls,

²⁰ “Some years ago I subscribed to a way of thinking which was influenced by the work of de Certeau, which sought to give value and meaning to the subversive strategies, the ways of ‘making do’ which ordinary, often seriously disadvantaged people took part in, and which became, as a result, vernacular features of resistance and opposition, visible within and across landscapes of everyday life...[W]hen it transpired that this kind of argument could so easily be rolled out, in a ‘cultural populist’ vein, and end up being a defence of women’s capacities to turn around and subvert the world of consumer culture in which they were invested, for possibly subversive purposes, many alarm bells began to ring,” McRobbie writes (2009:2).

who created their own, now seemingly autonomous pleasures and rituals of enjoyable femininity from the goods made available by consumer culture...If this could be done with what capitalism made available, then there seemed to be no real reason to challenge the principles upon which capitalism is based. Just how oppositional were these seemingly subversive practices? How far did they reach? What value did they deliver women in the context of the relations of power and powerlessness within which they still found themselves inscribed? (2009:2)

McRobbie's argument affords my own an opportunity for important clarification: 1. The problem of complicity (i.e. the breakdown of a purely oppositional model) must be seen as, rather than the failure of feminist politics, its *raison d'être* and evidence of its continued necessity; 2. The "seemingly autonomous pleasures" derived from encounters with capitalism must be understood as structuring forms of parasitical dependence that are two-way; 3. Rather than be used as the rationale for feminism's "aftermath," value itself must be subject to critique as a metric that itself is subject to the appropriating hand of neoliberalism. Instead of asking what value these tactics "deliver women," we might ask what work the notion of value, and feminist value, does in, for, and against neoliberalism.

Taking seriously the influx of controversial, scholarly polemics on the crisis of contemporary feminism in recent years (as seen in texts like McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), Janet Halley's *Split Decisions: How and Why To Take a Break from Feminism* (2006), and Elisabeth Badinter's *Dead End Feminism* (2006), among others), I argue that these books problematically posit closure (aftermath, breaks, ends) as the answer to what ails feminism, failing to see the "open wounds" and recursive force of its *ressentiment* as,

instead, conditions of parasitical possibility.²¹ During this period, there have also surfaced a number of scholarly studies that have weighed the academic viability of feminist theory, in its most obvious correlative in the uncertain institutional security of women's studies, with respect to critical formations like critical race theory, queer theory, and gender studies. Texts in this vein include: Joan Wallach Scott's *Women's Studies on the Edge* (2008), Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman's *Feminism Beside Itself* (1995), Wiegman's *Women's Studies On Its Own* (2002) and most recently *Object Lessons* (2012).²² These titles bespeak widespread anxiety about the *topos* of feminism (as marginal, alone, abjected) at a critical moment when Western feminist theory has appeared increasingly *out of place* with respect to the upsurge of intersectional social formations such as transnational feminism and queer of color critique. As Wiegman has persuasively argued across her various studies, academic feminism has found itself competing with, and thus set apart from, the very disciplines with which it should be most in conversation, (indeed, that it should be incorporating and incorporated into), for its institutional "piece of the pie." In her widely read article "Academic Feminism Against Itself," Wiegman writes that "for the last decade there has been an increasing uneasiness among many feminist scholars, sometimes overt despair, over the future of academic feminism..." (2002:18). She writes that "many scholars are worried that the institutional site inaugurated by feminism may encounter a

²¹ Toril Moi observed in her 2006 *PMLA* article "I Am Not a Feminist, But...: How Feminism Became the F-Word" that it has been conservative voices that have been the loudest in silencing feminism as an unworthy site of critique. She writes, "I have tried to show that in the 1990s a wave of books and essays by malcontent feminists and ex-feminists, or women with various ideas of how to change feminism, furthered the conservative feminist-bashing agenda. Some did it consciously; others simply played into antifeminist hands. The result is the situation we see today: *feminism* has been turned into the unspeakable F-word, not just among students but in the media too" (1739).

²² Robyn Wiegman writes, "You recognize the titles: *Feminism Without Women*; 'What Ails Feminist Criticism?' 'Success and Its Failures,' 'Women's Studies on the Edge,' *Disciplining Feminism*, even my own *Feminism Beside Itself*. When the 2001 NWSA Conference featured a plenary session called 'The Future of Women's Studies: Is It Feminist?' it asked us to take seriously such negative affect as it relates to the political imaginary of Women's Studies as a field" (2002:19).

future no longer informed by feminism's political concern for women...A second and no less pervasive interpretation of concern over the future of the field arises from anxieties attached to institutionalization" (19).

The parasite has provided a figure for reinvesting the negative affects of feminist theory as a form of generative "self-negation." As a maneuver of "self"-resignification, performing the parasite has represented the act of *turning against the self*, recalling Wiegman's title as well as de Beauvoir's suggestion that it can be productive "to think against oneself" (1992:173), as a vital critical move for feminists in this moment. Only in making itself hospitable to forms of self-contamination can feminism short-circuit the isolationism that has ghosted its historical attachment to the idealism of autonomy and independence. And yet how are we to understand such a move when it appears nevertheless to be one that reproduces the self in the very same gesture? Does this turn represent an inventive form of radical subversion or an elite retreat, or both? This turn implies a number of attendant questions for feminism, which shore up the limitations of such a micropolitics. To be sure, parasitism often appears to rely on a tactical model that exploits a certain privilege to maneuver in and out of spaces of dominance, modeling modalities that prove rather more challenging for artists of color and other minoritarian subjects for whom visibility regulates border crossing and thus making a model of parasitism less easily adaptable. In this sense, parasitical feminism can be understood as a form of radical "irradicality" or pragmatism for contemporary feminism. I therefore argue not for a wholesale embrace of the parasite but that we should remain critical of its figuration in recent projects that have instrumentalized complicity for feminist politics in intriguing ways.

HOW TO DO THINGS WITH PARASITES

This dissertation responds to polemics that have positioned Western feminism as irrevocably caught in and undone by emancipatory discourses of autonomy and originality. Contesting these imperatives, the parasite deconstructs autonomy and originality as they have represented *both* the grounds of Western feminism *and* bourgeois aesthetic ideals (Krauss 1981). By “actually becoming” the impositions that feminists are said to be, these artists infest and hollow out the content of such charges. Performance, which understands itself always in re-presentation, citation, and the double of theater, registers the impoverishment of outmoded feminist analytics and offers modalities for refashioning them as feminist tactics. The project intervenes in debates that have preoccupied queer studies, performance studies, and media studies alike about what repetition or reiteration effects—namely, the political economy of performativity (the speech act, drag, parody, reenactment) and digital reproducibility and dissemination (the viral, open source, piracy). Media and performance (as opposed to science studies, philosophy, or otherwise) are thus critical sites that have always already been defined by parasitism. It is in media and performance objects that parasitism is made representable and by enacting it, these artists make these dynamics available for theoretical and political use. The vigor and insistence represented by parasitism offers a model of iterability that does not simply repeat a given form but that also performs it and thereby *modifies it*.

My first chapter, “Yours *Truly*: Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle’s Manic Correspondence,” reads the literary motif of “correspondence” onto the host-parasite dyad by examining

two epistolary projects that engage in practices of feverish accumulation, in which the artists produced hundreds of love letters that stalk, and eventually overwhelm, the male “hosts” of their projects. By way of an analysis of these projects, my argument rechannels second-wave feminist anxieties about heterosexual romance and love, read through feminist literary theory’s love/hate relationship to French theory. My second chapter, “Like a Girl’s Name: The Adolescent Drag of Amber Hawk Swanson, Kate Gilmore, and Ann Liv Young,” examines three intermedial artists whose performances of “adolescent drag” disrupt the “mother-daughter” generational conflict often misread as evidence of feminism’s supposed irrelevance to young women. One might recall, here, my earlier discussion of Tessa’s response of “Familism?” in Lieshout’s *Fantasy Me*. Offering a critical alternative to the impoverishment of both what’s been labeled postfeminism and/or third-wave feminism, the chapter rebuts those who have argued that a younger generation of women has opted out of feminism by showing how many actively negotiate their feminist inheritance. My third chapter, “User Be Used: Occupying the Network,” asks how crowdsourcing and other forms of digital labor “rework” women’s work. It argues for a performance of neoliberal mimicry, suggesting that feminists should become users in the face of large-scale exploitation and challenging feminism’s tendency to treat instrumentalization as a foreclosed site of tactical potential.

Actively engaged in making themselves into bad copies, the artists that I discuss across the dissertation nevertheless lay claim to their originality. Iterating feminine stereotypes at a level of mania, they *insist* that their performances bear a relationship to life beyond the stage (“to be perfectly honest” is a favorite phrase of artist Ann Liv Young). Despite the often very apparent artificiality or hyperbole of their contrived spectacles, the artists

refuse to break character, to let their “real meaning” be finally pinned down. Theirs is an insisted-upon theatricalization of sincerity that enables them to stage their critique, as Silvija Jestrovic writes, “[to play] out the ambiguity between the performativity of the staged and the theatricality of the authentic” (2008:160). In *Performing Remains*, Schneider has picked up this strand of her earlier thinking²³ to ask how the good copy *shows up* a bad original. “The more precise or overt the replication *as replication*...the greater the antitheatrical panic about the propriety of the pristine original,” she writes. “At the same time, the more precise the translation, the greater the challenge to comprehensibility, leaving the original both *touched* and distinct. The more the same, the greater in respect to difference” (2011:113).

Rather than ignore, deny, or contradict feminist stereotypes or feminine clichés, these artists I address hyperinvest these clichés, pervert them, and make them work. They perform the parasite that feeds on and yet is regarded as supplementary to the system that cannot fully come to terms with it. They test the limits of the systems they inhabit—forcing them to expose that they are, in fact, their very limits. In the force of accumulation, they insist on making something from the system’s inassimilable excesses—such as affect and contamination—that, according to the logics of dominance, have been deemed inadmissible. In this way, it is not incidental that the works are predominantly intermedial performances, cobbled together across culturally devalued forms seen as retarding their own commodification: performance art, epistolary and diaristic practices,

²³ Rebecca Schneider has noted, following Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Task of the Translator,” that literal translation (here understood as the artists’ insistence on earnestness despite their very apparent parody or irony) poses a “direct threat to comprehensibility,” having coined the phrase “the explicit body” as a means for explicating “the explosive literality at the heart of much feminist performance art and performative actions” (1997:2).

inexpensive, free, or “lo-fi” digital platforms.

The artists therefore inhabit feminism as what has been deemed a *kitsch politics*. “To call something kitsch is in most cases a way of rejecting it outright as distasteful...” writes Matei Calinescu, “kitsch dismisses the claims or pretensions of quality of anything that tries to be ‘artistic’ without genuinely being so” (1987:235). Lending itself to irony, kitsch implies aesthetic inadequacy and a sense of being ill placed, inappropriate to a thing’s context or arrangement (230, 234). Something that is kitsch is anachronistic, ostentatious, an imposition seen as having lost its relevance or having dulled out. As Benjamin suggests, art becomes kitsch when it becomes approachable again. It is in the moment when feminism has been thought to lose its edge, to be no longer effective, that these artists have seized on and parodied it.

As such, kitsch suggests the banality of reuse and the triteness of repetition (226). Artist and critic Laura Cottingham has said of her film *Not For Sale* (1998), which documents the 1970s feminist art movement, that because so few women had commercial support during this period, a large number of the works were reproduced and preserved using substandard technical conditions. “Even the works produced in the then-new media of video and performance were often resistant to being historicized in video in the 1990s,” Cottingham writes, “as many performances had purposely not been documented...while other...works...were...literally lost...or only partly retrievable” (1998). The lack of technical and economic support for early feminist performance and media-based art production fostered the conditions for feminism to circulate as a kitsch aesthetics, an image of this period that, in its limited reproductions played as a loop of the same images

over and over, has since been inextricable from feminist politics in the cultural imaginary. These would-be feminist artists shrewdly co-opt kitsch as an aesthetic accusation to reclaim feminism from its ossification as a maligned chorus or refrain. They embrace repetition as, rather than a limitation, a conceptual and critical tool of digital media and performance. As the circulation of a repetition, feminism's very "novelty" is produced by these artists from, rather than in spite of, the logic of repetition.

Iteration (also called citation or performative utterance) has been described as *parasitical* by J. Hillis Miller and J. L. Austin,²⁴ as well as by Derrida who "para-cites" Austin (famously debating with and performing parasitism on John Searle in *Limited Inc.*). Derrida links the accumulative nature of language, and ultimately performativity, to a kind of parasitic chain.²⁵ The parasite imagined here is one of a certain reiterative or viral resignification. This recalls Judith Butler's massive theoretical contribution to studies of performativity as well as the scholarly debates that informed her writing. Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* that gender is not an expression of what one is, but rather is

²⁴ In *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin famously called theater *parasitical*, "A performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage...Language is in such circumstances in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the etiolations of language" (1955:22, his emphases).

²⁵ In "Signature, Event, Context," Derrida writes, "Therefore, I ask the following question: is this general possibility necessarily that of a failure or a trap into which language might fall, or in which language might lose itself, as if in an abyss situated outside or in front of it? What about parasiticism? In other words, does the generality of the risk admitted by Austin surround language like a kind of ditch, a place of external perdition into which locution might never venture, that it might avoid by remaining at home, in itself, sheltered by its essence or telos? Or indeed is this risk, on the contrary, its internal and positive condition of possibility?...Is it that in excluding the general theory of this structural parasiticism, Austin, who nevertheless pretends to describe the facts and events of ordinary language, makes us accept as ordinary a teleological and ethical determination (the univocality of the statement—which he recognizes elsewhere remains a philosophical 'ideal'...the self-presence of a total context, the transparency of intentions, the presence of meaning for the absolutely singular oneness of a speech act, etc.)? For, finally, is not what Austin excludes as anomalous, exceptional, 'non-serious,' that is, citation (on the stage, in a poem, or in a soliloquy), the determined modification of a general citationality—or rather, a general iterability—without which there would not even be a 'successful' performative? Such that—a paradoxical, but inevitable consequence—a successful performative is necessarily an 'impure' performative, to use the word that Austin will employ later or when he recognizes that there is no 'pure' performative" (1991:103, his emphases).

something that one *does*: “an identity, instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” produced over time (1990:179). Butler’s theory cites a particular lineage of performativity that echoes both J. L. Austin and Derrida in proposing the performative as that which “enacts or produces that which it names” (1993:197). Comparable notions have also been productively engaged in work by Eve Sedgwick on queer performativity (224).²⁶ For Butler, as she further articulates in *Bodies that Matter*, performativity operates through “the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (2). It is not in a single act that the subject is brought into being, but through re-citation and repetition, thus allowing performativity, with its transgressive potential, to bear the capacity for parody. Butler writes that while “bodily gestures, movements, and styles constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self,” the gendered self has no ontological status apart from the acts that condition it (1990:139-140). Gender and sexuality—and, I argue, feminism as itself a political performance—can therefore be understood, not as fixed categories, but rather as regulative fictions that produce the illusion of stability as a truth-effect of discourse.

Each chapter proposes a different “problem figure” for tactical feminist *overidentification*: the overly dependent woman, the adolescent, and the hostess, respectively. In each case, the parasite refigures Western’s feminism’s vexed relationship to relationality and attachment, examining and countering rationales that have been invoked to announce feminism’s demise. The chapters argue that, rather than necessarily a threat or impasse

²⁶ Butler cites Sedgwick’s work in *Bodies that Matter*, noting that her work on queer performativity has asked one not only to consider how a certain theory of speech acts applies to queer practices but how it is that queering persists as a defining moment of performativity. Both scholars have noted the heterosexualization apparent in J. L. Austin’s paradigmatic examples of performativity (“I now pronounce you...”) (1993:224).

for feminism, attachment is a site of possible reinvigoration for feminism. Parasitical feminism dispenses with attachment as a merely site of melancholy or *ressentiment*—as self-abasement, injury, or redress—instead circuiting attachment through parasitism.

The artists that demonstrate this for me violate social contracts, putting pressure on legal and moral codes of conduct. They seize upon the contract, which Chandan Reddy has argued of queers of color, has historically denied certain figures consensual representation in matters of inheritance, patrimony, property, and autonomous personhood (2011:211). Parasitism renegotiates the terms of the gift economy that, through discourses of morality, has produced compulsory constructions of femininity as congenial, gracious, and obliging. By refusing to give what is expected, these artists attempt to expose the ways in which gender oppression is made possible by a functional gift economy. The parasite, who “gives only words in return” and “does not pay in any material sense for what [she] takes,” *gives* but *gives badly*. “It may...be a matter of a good thing or a bad thing,” writes Derrida. “[I]f giving is spontaneously evaluated as *good* (it is *well* and *good* to give and what one gives, the present, the *cadeau*, the gift, is a good), it remains the case that this ‘good’ can easily be reversed...it can also be bad, poisonous (*Gift, gift*), and this from the moment the gift puts the other in debt” (1992:12, his emphases). These parasites offer themselves as *bad gifts*. They perpetrate egregious invasions of privacy, refuse to accept their inheritance, and at times openly play with themes of criminality, as Byrne does. Likewise, Kraus tries the laws of privacy, stalking Dick with hundreds of unreturned love letters. Young tests the codes of moral decency—pissing, shitting, masturbating, and fucking in front of a live audience. They all expose the extent to which the system is ill prepared to respond to such incursions. They infest consensual spaces within dominant forms unable to adapt.

The artists that I discuss *perform* a relation to feminism as “*themselves*,” occupying feminism as the undecidable space of the performer’s “personal politics.” To return to the artist with whom I began, Young Jean Lee, in an interview, describes *Untitled Feminist Show* as wrestling “with what Feminism is not perceived to be.” She explains, “I am [a feminist] obviously in that I care about women’s rights. But in terms of how Feminism is defined, culturally, I wouldn’t be able to say that I necessarily fit that. I don’t know Feminist theory or history. I do a lot of stuff that is not very empowered” (Orel 2010). Lee’s capitalization of “Feminism” is striking. The question of whether or not she is herself producing the very problem (of a limiting definition of “Feminism”) that she then feels limited by remains an open one. This could equally be the result of how feminism is represented in the mainstream media (in this case, that of *The Washington Post*).

“I’m not a super political person,” Lee continues, “I’m making these shows trying to be a little bit less stupid.” When her interviewer challenges her on her claimed ignorance of feminism, reminding her that she was, in fact, “a Berkeley grad,” Lee insists further: “Somebody sent me a link to a Wikipedia entry on radical Feminism. I tried to read it and couldn’t get through it. I haven’t read any Feminist theories in theatre, nothing, zero. I talk to other women about their experiences, feelings, and opinions...that may prove to be inadequate, but it’s my first step” (Orel 2012).

“I absorb what people tell me,” Lee explains. “*I’m like a sponge*.” Like Young Jean Lee, the artists in this dissertation perform the parasite as a form of intensified Socratic irony, incorporating and mirroring back the logics to which they find themselves already

attached. Rather than claiming “agency” as a form of autonomy, they present themselves as agents of the system, hospitable bodies for its infectious logics. “If I’m trying to understand a subject, I have to go read a children’s book,” Lee says. “It’s the only thing written clearly enough [for me] to follow it. That’s my alternative to the patriarchal structure...” (Orel 2010). “I write from my stupid place,” she says (Smallwood 2009). The scripts available to them provide these artists the content for their parasitical performances. Theater gives them a position—a “stupid place”—from which to perform the contagious literality of such scripts. Already charged with being parasites, they seek out the rewards to be claimed by enacting the crimes for which they have already been punished.

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parasite | 'parəˌsaɪt |

Definition

1a. *Biological.* An organism that lives on, in, or with an organism of another species, obtaining food, shelter, or other benefit; specifically one that obtains nutrients at the expense of the host organism, which it may directly or indirectly harm.

1b. In extended use: a climbing plant, which is supported by or creeps on walls, trelliswork, trees, etc., without necessarily being parasitic on a host.

The term *parasite* originally included (and is still sometimes used for) animals and plants that are now considered to be commensals, mutualists, epiphytes, or saprophytes, as well as birds or other animals that habitually steal food from, or use the nests of, other species.

[P]arasites are usually smaller than their hosts, while predators are usually larger... They can multiply faster than their hosts and control or reduce the host population. The predator merely follows the abundance of its prey.

-Matt Ridley, *The Red Queen: Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature* (1993:66)

CHAPTER ONE /

YOURS TRULY CHRIS KRAUS AND SOPHIE CALLE'S MANIC CORRESPONDENCE

The letters are a rhizome, a network, a spider's web. There is a vampirism in the letters, a vampirism that is specifically epistolary.

-Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986:29)

[There] is the moment when Echo traps Narcissus in a certain way...Echo, in her loving and infinite cleverness, arranges it so that in repeating the last syllables of the words of Narcissus, she speaks in such a way that the words become her own...she appropriates his language. In repeating the language of another, she signs her own love.

-Jacques Derrida, in the documentary *Derrida* (2004)

Love can be the becoming which appropriates the other for itself by consuming it, introjecting it into itself, to the point where the other disappears. Or love can be the motor of becoming, allowing both the one and the other to grow. For such a love, each must keep their body autonomous. The one should not be the source of the other nor the other of the one. Two lives should embrace and fertilise each other, without either being a fixed goal for the other.

-Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions* (1992:27)

RETURN TO SENDER

In my preface, I argued that British conceptual artist Roisin Byrne's tactics of stealing and

forgery are symptomatic of parasitical feminism. I tracked the problematic complicity of Byrne's work to show how the artist explores themes of codependence, trafficking them in her project in order to find success within the very system that her work also appears to critique. The titles of her pieces *You Don't Bring Me Flowers Anymore* (2009) and *It's Not Me, It's You* (2011) offer the rationale of Byrne's parasitical practice as that of a break up. Like the "para" that rides on that which it "cites," these two works undertake a codependent severing from the very male artists that the conceptual projects at the same time stalk. This double bind of resistance and complicity recalls Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*: "...woman has been assigned the role of parasite: all parasites are necessarily exploiters; she needs the male to acquire human dignity, to eat, to feel pleasure, to procreate; she uses the service of sex to ensure her benefits; and since she is trapped in this function, she is entirely an instrument of exploitation" (2011:563). The ambition of this chapter is to analyze the implications of this form of attachment for a parasitical feminist politics.

Both projects document the artist's spurning of normative ethics and emotional divesture from the instantiations of institutional and patriarchal authority that the male artists she targets represent. For *You Don't Bring Me Flowers Anymore*, it is through her use of email that Byrne gains access to Turner Prize winner Simon Starling and subsequently "seduces" him into unwittingly assisting in his own theft, a dynamic that I analyzed at length in the preface. Byrne provides this description of the project on her website, "On the 16th of June 2009 motivated by a desire for the artist, his work and his contacts [sic] correspondence [sic] was initiated with the 4 main dealers for Simon Starling. Asking for current information on a work from 2000 a week later Starling helped locate the original.

Stolen and smuggled back to the UK it was immediately put to work, 2009” (2011).²⁷ Byrne’s claim that the piece was motivated “by a desire for the artist” exposes a slippage between the sexual and conceptual politics of the artwork. This maneuver is a recognizable one within Byrne’s oeuvre, as the artist has claimed that all of her projects “start from genuine art crushes” (Byrne and MacGilp 2011). A recent work by the Toronto-based performance artist Jess Dobkin is an intriguing analog to Byrne’s 2009 work. In April 2011, Dobkin performed a five-minute lip-sync to Barbra Streisand and Neil Diamond’s duet “You Don’t Bring Me Flowers” at Toronto’s Buddies in Bad Times Theatre (fig. 1), resulting in the short film *Flowers* (2012). In a Facebook invitation for the performance, Dobkin writes, “I perform the duet by myself...the part of Babs is performed by my face and the part of Neil is performed by [my] pussy.” In their explicit and ironic treatment, Dobkin and Byrne render the “impossible romance” between feminism and patriarchy a comic affair.



²⁷ Byrne’s website describes the exhibition of *You Don’t Bring Me Flowers Anymore* as follows: “1 *Rhododendron ponticum* plant stolen from Parque Los Alcornocales Spain and smuggled into the UK after being rescued and re-introduced into cultivation by Simon Starling in 2000, flight documents, book pages, research image, email correspondence [sic]” (2011).

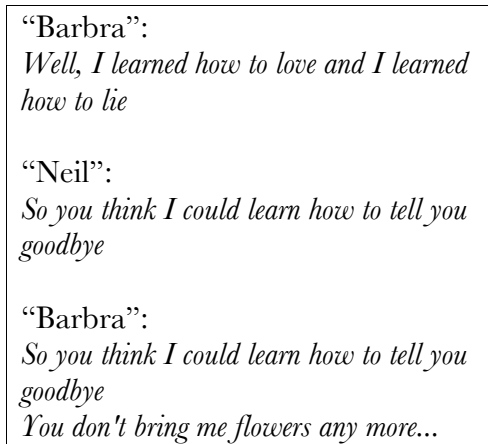
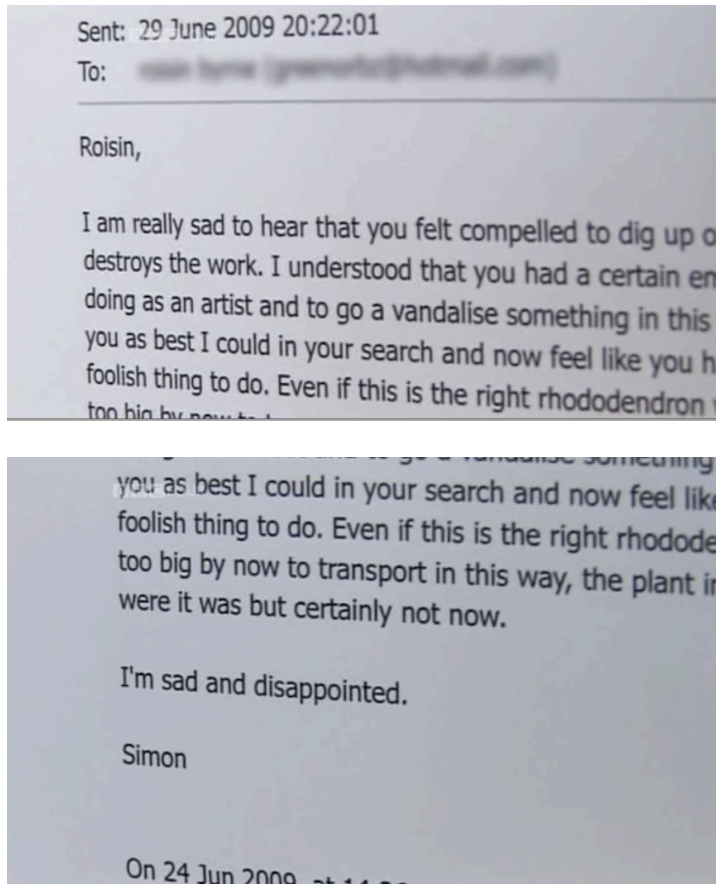


Figure 1. Photo and lyrics from Jess Dobkin’s short performance-based film *Flowers* (2012) (Courtesy of Tania Anderson).

Most of Byrne’s projects begin with her posing as a fan and emailing a famous male artist with a question about one of his works. Byrne initially draws Starling into her project with honeyed words, but after she gets what she wants from him, her tone becomes dryer, more matter-of-fact.²⁸ Her shift in tone compels Starling to expose the conditions under which he was originally happier to engage her, betraying his narcissistic, and perhaps erotic, investment in the power differential that naturalizes his status as prizewinner and hers as struggling artist. Performing this bait and switch, Byrne inverts the structural conditions of their correspondence, treating him as her prey, and Starling no longer wants to play. During an episode of the BBC4 reality show *Goldsmiths: But is it Art?*, documenting the making of the work, Byrne explains: “What’s important for the work to actually work is [for the] situation that I provoke [to get response]...if there is no response, if I didn’t get any response from his gallery or from him, if they didn’t care, well then I’d have no project.” When Byrne shows her Goldsmiths instructor Starling’s threat of legal action, he replies, “Yes, I got one too. I very carefully didn’t respond because I didn’t

²⁸ Upon receiving Starling’s email on *Goldsmiths But Is It Art?*, Byrne says, “He’s a bit upset. But you can’t be taking these things too seriously.”

want to become part of your work.” Ironically, corporate protocol intervenes on the artist’s behalf to block a counter-attack on Byrne, as her own email address is visibly blurred on the show (figs. 2 and 3). This would appear a calculated effort to keep Byrne from becoming a victim of her own game.



Figures 2 and 3. Stills from the BBC4’s *Goldsmiths: But is It Art?* of Simon Starling’s email response to Roisin Byrne.

In setting up the game, Byrne plays the obsequious female artist to the seasoned male artist, art groupie to the art star—Echo to his Narcissus. Tapping into Starling’s sense of self-regard, she lures him into her trap by staging an epistolary exchange governed by the laws of courtly etiquette. Byrne induces vulnerability from Starling’s obligatory performance of chivalry, playing one “gentlemen’s code” off of another. Turning

Starling's professional cordiality against him, Byrne finds protection in his chivalry, that knightly code of conduct that mandates men's courteous behavior toward women, which at the same time offers her a backdoor for an attack on patriarchal codes of law and ethics. "I'm sad and disappointed," he signs his email back to her, email serving as both a medium of capture and witness. Their electronic correspondence is ultimately printed and exhibited by Byrne as a trophy, evidence of her unlikely "exchange" with Starling. Byrne's exhibited work is often forensic and minimalistic, as that of cut-and-dry documentation. The aesthetic of her exhibitions stand in stark contradiction to the performances of excess and efflorescence by which the artist obtains her materials. The successful male artist's "disappointment" is exhibited and sold as fetish commodity. Byrne exploits what scholars have characterized as the seductive informality and immediacy of the medium of electronic mail—its tendency to "develop a level [and] conversational playing field," "encourag[e] personal disclosure," and "become emotional," and thus its influence on the changing definitions of privacy and social etiquette (Baron 2000:249). The artist bends the gender dynamics of correspondence to her advantage, drawing the unsuspecting male artist into her project by taking advantage of the digital medium's still largely unwritten rules of engagement. Trafficking still in the promises of "traditional" epistolary modes, email exposes the false promises of the letter, as commonplace practices of forwarding and blindcopying undo any semblance of a distinction between one-to-one and one-to-many messaging²⁹ and, further, of the precarious notion that a letter seals an intimate bond between sender and receiver.

²⁹ "The personal letter comes into being only with the rise of the vernacular, and even then a writer sometimes seems conscious of an audience beyond the immediate one," writes Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus in *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre* (1993:4).

In this chapter, it is in close correspondence that the parasite pursues her host. My argument overlays the concept of “correspondence” (as a “one-to-one” relation) onto the parasite-host dyad to analyze how these projects enlist practices of feverish accumulation, producing hundreds of love letters that overwhelm their male “hosts.” Simply put, my analysis aspires to a rethinking of feminist models of male-female relationality. Developed at the crossing of literary and political theory, my argument engages in a mode of performative writing, as it is itself parasitical on the French intellectual fathers that the projects it studies work to seduce and eventually overtake. These projects play masculinized language off of feminized image, writing off of reading. As Derrida has argued: “authority is a writing effect; the post, police, literature, philosophy, and psychoanalysis work in tandem to buttress that authority” (qtd. in Kauffman 1992:87). Originating from the Latin *correspondētia*, the etymology of *correspondence* reveals that the term simultaneously references the concept of relationship broadly (“relation of agreement, similarity, or analogy”), and as a social problematic (“relation between persons or communities; usually qualified as good, friendly, fair, ill, etc.”), interpersonal communication (“intercourse, communication by letters [between persons]”), and sex (“sexual intercourse”).³⁰ As such, it poses the “problem of relation” between the sexes as one of *responding to the other*, as Jacques Derrida would have it, and thus, one that situates the feminist project as fundamentally a politics of deep embeddedness and relationality.

Correspondence does not always occur, however. When the artist Ryan Gander does not respond to Byrne’s email teasing for his response to her having stolen his idea for a neon sculpture, she shrugs: “Some correspondences you win and some you lose.” Before

³⁰ See “correspondence” in *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

receiving Simon Starling's response, Byrne says in an episode of *Goldsmiths But Is It Art?*, "I guess I just have to wait. It might take a couple of days...I only have a couple of days. I feel like the girl waiting for the fucking phone call." Recognizing that such a conceptual process positions her as a lady-in-waiting, Byrne changes her strategy for *It's Not You, It's Me* (2011). When asked in an interview if she has had any response from the Italian artist Roberto Cuoghi, whose identity she allegedly stole for the piece, the artist replies: "Nothing that I know of. Sometimes the works depends [sic] very much on involving the people I choose to work on or inhabit even, but for this project it really wasn't about having a conversation with Cuoghi directly...so his input didn't make or break that process" (Byrne and MacGilp 2011). Nevertheless, Byrne's off-handed comment about how correspondences can be won or lost is useful for thinking about how the epistolary art pieces that will be discussed in this chapter pit gendered representational modes against one another as a game of strategy between the sexes. Byrne's suggestion that "correspondences" can be won and lost gestures toward the multiple registers of exchange at work in her project. Her use of the plural form rather than the singular produces a "play on words" that hints at the polysemy of the term correspondence as denoting not only the sending and receiving of letters but also a modality of social interrelation broadly. Byrne's statement places correspondence at the intersection of the familiar pairing of conceptual art with games of strategy,³¹ a little friendly fire exchanged in a battle of the

³¹ Conceptual art movements like Dada and Fluxus have widely been recognized as movements linked to games of strategy or chance for their exploration of concepts such as indeterminacy, collaboration, and open-endedness. As Dalia Judovitz has noted in *Unpacking Duchamp*, it was the Dadaist artist Marcel Duchamp (who is frequently cited as a precursor to performance art practices) who famously exploited the strategic affiliation between art and chess, which enabled him to change the rules of the art-market game by redefining artistic creativity as a form of production based on the potential to radically appropriate the conditions within which one finds oneself. Judovitz writes, "If the sequence of paintings and sketches from *The Chess Game to Portrait of Chess Players* represents Duchamp's artist brothers playing chess, in later paintings the chess pieces themselves become the subject matter of art. They take over the board, as it were. Having

sexes. Conceptual art is the game, and the epistolary genre sets the ground rules. On a related if different metaphorical register, we might recall Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's suggestion in *The Madwoman in the Attic* that in the masculine tradition, the text is woman, the pen is penis, and writing is coitus (2000:3). This chapter witnesses a persistent knotting together of the figurative registers of romance, war, and writing within certain Western feminist artistic and literary idioms. Rather than work to untether these, the chapter will regard this tendency as symptomatic of the *ressentiment* at work in feminist representational practices on the concept of relationality.

This chapter will examine two art projects that mobilize epistolary exchange to remap the territory of the parasite-host system. The two artists explored in this chapter, Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle, contest the masculine authority of the "letter of the law" using the historically feminized literary practices of diary and letter writing. Exploiting the supposed correspondence between the parasite-host, this chapter advances the wider claim of the project that the predominant socio-cultural use of the term *parasite* is a deeply ideological one that has been used to discipline women and minorities who attempt tactics of survival and resistance. From its ancient Greek etymology (*parasitos*), the definition of the parasite is: "a person who lives at the expense of another, or of society in general; [especially] (in early use) a person who obtains the hospitality or patronage of the wealthy or powerful by obsequiousness and flattery." In later use, the term has been

uncovered the affiliation between art and chess by revealing their shared strategic and positional nature, Duchamp now proceeds to examine the plastic dimension of the mechanics of strategy...Duchamp's understanding of art as a strategic game enables him to redefine the notion of artistic creativity as a form of production based on reproduction. Duchamp's redefinition of art in terms of chess involves, on the one hand, accepting one's affiliation to traditions, that is, the readymade character of pictorial convention, and on the other hand, the effort to redraw the board in order to radically rethink the terms of the game. Consequently, artistic innovation is freed from the 'anxiety of influence,' since tradition itself provides conventional or ready-made elements that Duchamp can redeploy in a strategic fashion" (1998:42).

influenced by its biological sense as “an organism that lives on, in, or with an organism of another species, obtaining food, shelter, or other benefit” to mean “a person whose behaviour resembles that of a...sponger.”³² This etymology of *parasitic* affirms parasitism as often issuing from *a discourse of the host*. The epithet “parasite” deployed from a position of privilege—that of the majoritarian subject who encounters its minoritarian other as one who “feeds on or exploits others.” The moniker functions to obscure and naturalize the operations of dominance.³³ Kraus and Calle instigate this response from their “hosts,” creating works that impose a line of questioning about the situational irony of the host that feels that *he* is the exploited. The feminist imperative of this dissertation responds to an unmistakable gendering in the use of the feminized romantic partner as parasite (“parasitism is the heart of relation,” writes Serres [2007:52]), imagined, for example, as the “clingy” female mistress, trophy wife, pool boy, idle companion, kept whore, or trophy wife—a creature who “dines with a superior officer,” “lives at another’s expense and repays him...with flattery,” and “makes it [his or her] profession to dine at another’s table.”³⁴

The gender politics of Serres’ own theorization of the parasite demands further analysis in its treatment of the position of woman as never far from that of the parasite. The trafficking in and triangulation of women in Serres’ account runs throughout his work, a fact that the philosopher consciously builds into the problematic of the parasite but does not or cannot think apart from the question of social relation that the book takes up broadly. For example, of Molière’s *Tartuffe*, Serres describes the impostor’s swindles: “To

³² See “parasite” in *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

³³ See “parasitic” in *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

³⁴ See “parasite” in *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

intercept the daughter and the wife, the money-box, the inheritance, the signature, and the deposit. To take, as is customary, the words, women, and goods” (2007:201).

The parasite is said to trade in “flattery,” a form of social currency that circulates as a pejorative often used to denigrate reproductive and affective labor, undocumented forms of labor practice such as dependent care or sex work.³⁵ Writes author Isaac Bashevis Singer in his 1969 novel *The Estate*, “[Women] wove a net about a man, entangled him with duties, ensnared him with parasitic children, and finally destroyed him” (vii, 85). If the parasite is the guest at the host’s table, we can ask, who made the dinner? That the parasite is figured prominently within the scene of the meal, rather than sidelined to the servants’ quarters, concedes an intriguing doubleness in the epithet—that of the privilege of “getting to be” the parasite. “[N]ot all voices bear information; not all winds bear tidings. Not all smooth talkers are invited to dine...” reminds Serres (2007:36).

Like Byrne, Kraus and Calle explore women’s attachment to patriarchy as a form of parasitism. They do so by reworking the trope of romantic love, in its historically oppressive function in women’s lives, by resignifying the stereotype of the *parasitical woman* said to be emotionally and financially dependent on a man (“time draining” and “moneysucking”). The artists embody and enact the compulsiveness and overintimacy with which the parasite has already been charged. “Why does everybody think that women are debasing themselves when we expose the conditions of our own debasement?” writes Chris Kraus in a letter, “Why do women always have to come off clean?”

³⁵ I am grateful to Nicholas Ridout for pointing out that the parasite’s withdrawal from wage labor poses a significant threat to a system in which power is meant to be attained through one’s contribution to production.

(1997:217). Kraus invokes a question posed by the feminist performance artist Hannah Wilke to make her point: “If women have failed to make ‘universal’ art because we’re trapped within the ‘personal,’ why not universalize the ‘personal’ and make it the subject of our art?” (217). Scholars of the epistolary genre note that the personal or “familiar” letter was first thought of as literary form in the sixteenth century, with male commentators noting that the genre seemed “particularly suited to the female voice” (Cherewatuk and Wiethaus 1993:1). Our modern notion of correspondence, moreover, has assumed an exchange of letters between two persons (4). The projects explored in this chapter track in correspondence the problem of attachment, or what for deconstruction is that of the vulnerable position one puts oneself in when one responds to the other.

TO THE LETTER

“There is only one love and a thousand copies of it.”

-Francois de La Rochefoucauld, aphorism

As for Byrne, correspondence is the metaphorical framework that artists Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle use to investigate the dialectics of the contemporary male-female power relationship. Kraus and Calle model feminist tactics that feed on and destabilize the male subjects of their projects by redrawing the “lines of correspondence” between the feminine parasite and her masculine host. Both of their “art book” projects, Kraus’ *I Love Dick* (1997) and Calle’s *Take Care of Yourself* (2007), borrow the motif of romantic epistolary exchange, be it postal or electronic, to make intermedial works perhaps best designated within the contemporary art subgenre of literary performance (“My goal is to occupy the role of the page of the book as artist,” Calle has claimed (Calle 2011)). Why

these artists would turn to literary forms in these projects is one question that subtends my reading of them—Kraus having turned to “the book form” as a self-identified “failed” filmmaker and Calle as a widely celebrated photography-based conceptual artist. Yet, both artists become writers to outperform the vocation of the men on which their projects voraciously feed. That is, Kraus and Calle “parasite” literature to occupy the territories of their hosts, as both men are themselves writers. In fact, almost all we know about “Dick” is that he is an influential academic, and all we are told about “X” is that he has published a book.³⁶

A literary tradition associated with heterosexual romantic courtship, the love letter is the object of exchange in both projects. It represents a state of play by which the artists and their hosts feed on each other in a dynamically unstable game, recalling a question that Judith Butler has posed: “Can the exchange of speech or writing be the occasion for a disruption of the social ontology of positionality?” (1995:441-442). And yet, it would be reductive to read the symbolic status of heterosexual romance in these projects as merely heteronormative. With near-parodic embellishment, the heterosexual couple is engaged in its status as a cliché, a hyper-available model for deconstructing the mythos of femininity’s “love affair” with patriarchy. The artists explore how love functions like a parasite on politics. Falsely regarded as apolitical, love is often treated as supplemental, irrelevant and benign in politics because it resides within the secondary territory of the private.

³⁶ As a preface to the email on which her project is based, Calle writes in the book version of *Take Care of Yourself*, “The day I received this letter by email, ending our relationship, its author published a book. The book was dedicated to me and he left me the day it came out” (2007:no page number).

Both projects flirt with a naïve aesthetic, love treated as a kind of schoolgirl crush, apparent in the repeated refrain of “*Dear Diary*” in Kraus’ *I Love Dick* or the shiny pink cover that adorns Calle’s *Take Care of Yourself*. I analyze the implications of rather more hyperbolic instantiations of this as “adolescent drag” in my second chapter. Here, instead, I want to stress how women’s relationships with men are situated within the heterosexual discursive framework but, like the parasite, heterosexuality is activated in these projects most forcefully in its figurative capacity. Monique Wittig has argued that if womanhood depends upon a heterosexual framework, then lesbians are not “women,” and furthermore, if lesbians are not “women,” then they fall outside of patriarchal norms and can re-work their gender performance. This point is relevant to these artists’ works given their own performative play. The figural invocation of heterosexuality in these projects, however, would seem to offer in parasitism a symbolic structure for the problem of “gender relations” that is inescapable—the ressentimental economy of “patriarchal attachment” woman is given to want, even when she doesn’t. “[A]s with all seductions, the question of complicity poses itself,” Jane Gallop observes in *The Daughter’s Seduction* (1982:56).

Kraus and Calle are not the first artists to mobilize epistolary and diaristic practices, traditionally regarded as benign feminine literary forms, to challenge heterosexual romance’s complicity in women’s abjection. These works draw on thematics established by earlier feminist art works such as Carolee Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll* (1975)³⁷ or

³⁷ During her now iconic feminist art performance *Interior Scroll* (1975), Schneemann retrieves a scroll from her vagina from which she reads: “I met a happy man / a structuralist filmmaker... / he said we are fond of you / you are charming / but don’t ask us to look at your films / we cannot... / the personal clutter / the persistence of feelings / the hand-touch sensibility / the diaristic indulgence / the painterly mess...”

Adrian Piper's *Calling Cards* (1986), which mobilized questions of racial as well as sexual abjection. "Letters were veritable tools of her feminism," art historian Kristine Stiles has written of Schneemann (2010:xli). Writes Stiles:

...Schneemann's letters served her own intimate self-discovery, self-creation, and self-determination...a letter was something through which Schneemann could perform her self for others, as well as perform for herself. For that matter, all letters represent an exercise in the formation of an autobiographical self-representation in an unfolding dialogue with an interlocutor. Such mimetic 'acting out or role playing within the text...allows the woman writer better to know and hence expose what it is she mimics' (lii).³⁸

As described in the introduction, the parasite has been overwhelmingly deployed as a pejorative term rooted in the misogyny of the supposed alien threat of femininity, a destructive and out-of-control dependence on a presumably healthy patriarch. In his 1977 essay "Critic as Host," literary theorist J. Hillis Miller further probes the parasite's gendering in the term's etymology, writing that the parasite "...suggests the image of 'the obvious or univocal reading' as the mighty, masculine oak or ash rooted in the solid ground, endangered by the insidious twining around it of ivy. English or maybe poison, somehow feminine, secondary, defective, or dependent, a clinging vine, able to live in no other way but by drawing the life sap of its host..." (1977:440).

(1973:33). Kraus and Calle not only refuse to keep their "persistence of feeling" and "diaristic indulgence" to themselves, but they also expose and thus profane the "intimate correspondence" that stands in for the purity and sanctity long associated with the heterosexual romantic contract with patriarchy understood to come with it.

³⁸ Writes Stiles of Schneemann in *Correspondence Course: An Epistolary History of Carolee Schneemann and Her Circle*: "Schneemann's letters to such male colleagues and friends demonstrate her relentless battle for self-representation, independence, and equality, while her letters to her many long-term female friends and women colleagues confer in critiques of patriarchy" (xli-xlii).

As I outlined in the introduction, Western feminist discourse internalized these anxieties, warnings of parasitism cropping up in foundational texts by U.S. and European feminists. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote that "...in order to make a man and his wife one, she should rely entirely on his understanding...the graceful ivy, clasping the oak that supported it..." (1796:36). Rosa Luxemburg warned that bourgeois women, complicit consumers of what their husbands extort from the proletariat, are "parasites of the parasites of the social body" (1971:220). Germaine Greer famously urged "feminine parasites" to stop "cajoling and manipulating" and instead to claim "the masculine virtues of magnanimity and generosity and courage" (1970:22,330). Simone de Beauvoir called women "clinging," "dead weight," "parasite[s] sucking out the living strength of another organism" (1993, 724); Gloria Steinem called them "dependent creatures" (1970).

To combat such dependency, Marilyn Frye has argued for feminist separatism, which she describes as "separation of various sorts or modes from men and from institutions, relationships, roles and activities which are male-defined, male-dominated, and operating for the benefit of males and the maintenance of male privilege—this separation being initiated or maintained, at will, *by women*." Frye writes that feminist separation can take many forms: "Breaking up or avoiding close relationships or working relationships; forbidding someone to enter your house; excluding someone from your company, or from your meeting; withdrawal of communications and influence from certain quarters, [etc.]...separation...is the instinctive and self-preserving recoil from the systematic misogyny that surrounds us." She continues, "Generally, the separations are brought about and maintained for the sake of something else like independence, liberty, growth, invention, sisterhood, safety, health, [etc.]" (1983:92). Frye explains, "There is

an idea floating around in both feminist and anti-feminist literature to the effect that females and males generally live in a relation of parasitism, a parasitism of the male on the female...that it is, generally speaking, the strength, energy, inspiration, and nurturance of women that keeps men going, and not the strength, aggression, spirituality, and hunting of men that keeps women going” (93). Frye bases her argument on her belief that women’s contribution of material support has always been substantial. “One can and should distinguish between a partial and contingent material dependence created by a certain sort of money economy and class structure, and the nearly ubiquitous spiritual, emotional, and material dependence of males on females,” she writes (93).

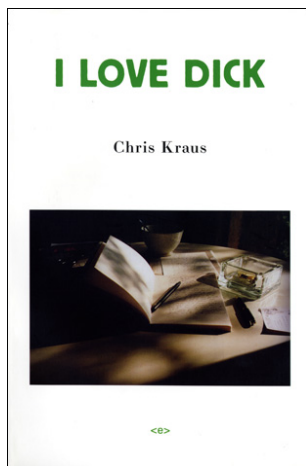
Whether in writings on Victorian labor rights or lesbian separatism, the parasite has appeared as shorthand for perceived threats to feminism at various historical junctures, indexing the problem of parasitism for feminism as one of a contaminating complicity. These writings have further contributed to Western feminism as a political project grounded by the imperatives of emancipation and autonomy—positing the horizon line of feminist liberation as that of some form of structural and interpersonal independence. The rhetoric of the parasite has persistently been invoked to articulate the problem of women’s attachment to the privileges on offer to her by patriarchy—the problem epitomized by white, bourgeois, heterosexual romance and marriage that would appear too deeply to *imbed* a woman within the structure of patriarchal privilege, to find her, duplicitously, *in bed* with “the enemy.” This analytic mode has been a predominant one within normative Western feminism and is one founded on three problematic postulates: 1.) that there is such a place as an “outside” to patriarchal power; 2.) that complicity is

antifeminist; and 3.) that the parasite-host relation is necessarily one of *symbiosis*, assumptions that this chapter contests. Such anti-parasitical discourse imposes a particular line of questioning about feminism: that of the nature and effects of women's "involvement" with individual men, when women's position in society is largely determined by a system of society and governance in which men hold much of the power. Read through the "feminist problem" posed by parasitism, feminism can be understood as a theoretical problematic that becomes increasingly urgent as issues of influence, territory, consent, and contamination have become simultaneously more dispersed and harder to track over the last centuries. "[S]eparation [is] part of the conscious strategy of liberation," Frye writes (93), in an argument for separatism that reads as deeply anachronistic in an increasingly networked and hyperconnected contemporary moment. I would argue that the presence of the parasite in these writings is symptomatic of an aporia in Western feminist theory—betraying the need for a feminist theory of relationality in the age of global mass media, when the potential violence of interconnectivity can hardly be adequately attended to by a separatist politics of "conscious strategy." Parasitical feminism should be understood as a way of also putting pressure on the feminist inadequacy of contemporary queer theories of antirelationality, which might be said to function, in a certain sense, as a present-day queer analog to earlier separatist impulses within gay and lesbian studies. These theorists posit proximity as a form of implied consent and separatism as a baseline for feminist "health," equations that are untenable in a hypernetworked age when "separation" is unsustainable and interrelationality inevitable. This chapter seeks to shift the question from "does intimacy produce complicity?" to "how can the inevitability of complicity be used to women's advantage?" Furthermore, my analysis seeks to defang intimacy as necessarily an

impasse for feminism and for the Left, to recall Wendy Brown's description of Left melancholy as a relationship to liberal democracy in neoliberalism "amidst ambivalent attachment and dependence" (2003). The move to thinking intimacy in the parasite-host system is an opportunity to think beyond the impasse of feminist melancholy: that is, to engage questions of problematic identification beyond the psychoanalytic imperative and to animate alternative avenues for thinking feminism *in* attachment and incorporation through the model offered by parasitism.

In Kraus and Calle's work, long-held anxieties within feminist theory over the notion of the parasite are transvalued into tactics for reinvesting contemporary feminism. The artists step into the role of the parasite to avenge women's real and performed hostility toward men, the designated "guilty agents" of their real and performed suffering. In both, women's desire to "literalize," to *put into letters*, their social revenge on patriarchy by making surrogate victims out of "actual" male subjectivities teeters at the edge of compulsion, taking on a decidedly literary character, as reading and writing become conditions of possibility for turning "the law of the father" against itself, letter by letter. In their play between fact and fiction, these projects engage performance for its effectiveness at keeping the question of intentionality open-ended. In so doing, Kraus and Calle at the same time invite important questions about the "realism" of their wounded attachments, leaving open the "feminist question" of their "actual" injury. Rather than fleeing charges of being overly dependent, Kraus and Calle follow them "to the letter," performing what Slavoj Žižek and others have described in the concept of *overidentification* as a manic maneuver by which one pretends to take the system at its word—performing sincerity at a fevered pitch—and plays so close to it that the system

ultimately cannot bear the intensity of one's participation (Shukaitis 2010). Parasitical performances, such as those modeled by Roisin Byrne, often give the initial impression of assuming majoritarian poses. Such poses, however, rather than adopting these positions, *impose* on them, staging intimate relations with dominant forms as leverage to attack them, if not through direct, open, or straightforward critique but through rabid and exaggerated adoptions of such codes (Shukaitis 2010). Hyperbolizing their attachments in compulsive correspondence, the artists stay a little *too* “*in touch*” with their hosts; theirs is a tactical model of parasitical intimacy that is *too close* for comfort. In these works, overidentification manifests in the artists' manically performed insistence on “loving” men who reject them. Simply put, these artists trick men into being their muses.³⁹



³⁹ This tactic of turning men's romantic or sexual prowess against them in order to make them into fodder for women's art production is reminiscent of work by rising young art star Laurel Nakadate, whose MoMA P.S.1 solo exhibition *Only the Lonely* ran from February to August 2011. “The urge to insinuate herself into other people's lives was evident in her earliest artworks,” writes Jeffrey Kastner for the *New York Times*. Nakadate's photography and video projects include scenes in which she play-acts scenes with strangers, often single, middle-aged and apparently socially awkward men that she has met during her everyday life. Ken Johnson writes in another *Times* article, “Ms. Nakadate's eureka moment happened when she decided that rather than brush off the attention of unknown men, she would engage with some of the least appealing specimens: balding, overweight, badly dressed, pathetic solitaires in their 40s, 50s and 60s. In response to their advances, she would propose to go home with them if they would collaborate with her in making an art video” (2011). “The scenarios range from the goofy (Ms. Nakadate and her co-stars on all fours, pretending to be dogs and cats) to the disturbing (a series of men screaming invectives at absent former lovers)” (Kastner 2011).

Figure 4. Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* book cover published by Semiotext(e), reprinted edition 2006.

Figure 5. Installation View, Performative Philosophy: The Films and Writings of Chris Kraus and Semiotext(e) Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, Austria October 13, 2011-December 17, 2011.

This chapter asks what correspondence offers a feminist rethinking of the interpenetration of sexual difference. It undertakes a rethinking of the tendency within Western feminism to regard relational attachment as a potential wounding that mandates a particular protocol of healing. The epistolary art practices of Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle model in parasitism an alternative to the classic feminist discourse of homeopathic procedures of “natural” or “self-healing” that I argue problematically posit a space of purity outside of patriarchal injury as the horizon line of feminist “health.”

Dear Dick

...the most offensive beast of a man I ever found I
baptized Parasite: it would not love, yet wanted to
live by love.

-Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*
(1969:212)

Chris Kraus is a U.S. filmmaker turned writer. Her most well-known work, *I Love Dick* (1997) (fig. 4), chronicles her protagonist, a character named “Chris Kraus,” in her romantic obsession with “Dick,” widely identified as the British cultural theorist Dick Hebdige, an academic colleague of Kraus’ husband, Sylvère Lotringer, the influential French theorist and New York downtown cult figure. After only a single meeting, one described by Dick in a letter he wrote published in *I Love Dick* as “genial but not particularly intimate or remarkable” (1997:143), Kraus undertakes to make Dick into an

idol and object of worship onto whom she confesses her feminine abjection and intellectual rapacity. In the accumulation of over two hundred, confessional letters written to Dick, she manipulates Dick's identity into a faceless, patriarchal screen (as in "Dick and Jane" or "Every Tom, Dick, and Harry") onto which she projects her sexual fantasies, personal anxieties, and critical interventions.

In an afterword to the new edition of *I Love Dick*, Joan Hawkins writes, "Critics don't seem to like Chris Kraus' 'novels' much. I say 'novels' (in quotes) because I'm not entirely sure Kraus' works belong in the generic category of 'novel.' Rather...Kraus' prose works constitute 'some new kind of literary form,' a new genre, 'something in between cultural criticism and fiction'" (2006:263). Whereas Hawkins resolves to name this genre theoretical fiction, I argue that *I Love Dick* is rather a form of performance art. While the book cannot be mistaken for a factual account, the *scandal* of the book, nevertheless, is its *insistence* on representing itself as conceptual performance art rather than a piece of fiction. Kraus' book, like (as I will later elaborate) Calle's, induces its own performance from its readers as well, asking us to suspend disbelief that the work is mere artifice, just a piece of fiction. Writes Kraus in a letter to Dick, "But Dick, I know that as you read this, you'll know these things are true. You understand the game is *real*, or even *better than*, reality, and *better than* is what it's all about...*Better than* means stepping out into complete intensity" (11, her emphases). In situating this work within a genre of literary performance, there emerges an alternative to the widely accepted poststructural hermeneutic that would have us observe a strict separation between the author and the narrator. Kraus challenges this division by maintaining in her prose the urgent relationship between the hand that holds the pen and the words on the page. Kraus' performance manifests in her very denial of

the book as a performance, her theatrical insistence that it is real and not an act. “Collaborating” with both willing and *unwilling* participants, the artist rides the line of fiction and non-fiction in her unflinching use of *real names* and seemingly real contexts. She insists that it is really about her producing a conflation of the author and narrator. Kraus insists that the book is, at the same time, diary and epistolary documentation, that it is “*really about*” her, contaminating the two poles of author and narrator and so producing a certain undecidability. I argue that this move is a generative one insofar as Kraus’ work overreaches the bounds of fiction, writing into *I Love Dick* an authorial excess that is not fully attended to by a reading of the book as “mere fiction.” The project thus poses the question of whether *literature can be performed*. Writes Jane Gallop, “Love letters have always been written from the body, in connection with love” (1985:108). What happens when the performance artist appropriates literature as the medium of her “embodied” performance, imbuing her text with what performance theorist Richard Schechner has called the simultaneous state of “not being and not not being” of performance? In a performance context, the character of “Chris Kraus” in *I Love Dick* both is *not* and is not *not* Chris Kraus. This characteristic liminality of performance allows these artists to exploit a certain intentional opacity. Such opacity at the same time obscures any straightforward answer as to the feminist content of their projects and might be said to offer feminism armor against regimes of authenticity in the “grey area” between absolute theatricality and absolute sincerity. The success of Kraus’ project relies on the reader acknowledging both frames of her narrative.

By Kraus’ hand, the proper name *Dick* becomes *dick*, though a process that Derrida terms “emajusculation,” his play on the emasculation of the “majuscule” that is the capital letter

(Gaston 2005:111). It is through this “capital punishment,” the castrating force of writing as a kind of cut reflected in the gesture of “the letter,” that, in Kraus's work, *Dick* is separated from his personality, leaving behind only *the dick*—the phallus that is the paragon of masculinity *and* vulgar slang used to name its most (in)sensitive member. Or more accurately, “the dick” is not the phallus, precisely because it as a diminutive, it is silly. With the blunt force of her pen, he is cut from the Real and forced into the Symbolic where he is made to stand for the very idea of men in Kraus’ litany of disappointments in the spheres of love, sex, and art.⁴⁰ In her novel, *The Correspondence Artist*, Barbara Browning makes a similar point about the word “dick” and its symbolic valence: “Cock is sexy. Dick is ridiculous (it's in the middle of the word ridiculous, that might be part of it, but it's also a silly name for a man, as is Willy)” (2011:24).

In graphic verbal depiction, Kraus recounts her humiliations, due not only to Dick's refusal to get romantically involved with her, but also to the “insults, slights, and condescension” that she endured as the wife of a successful public figure who is well-remunerated and tenured. He gets top billing, and she gets “on the guest list as his *plus one*.” Sylvère—known for his kinky sexual and critical appetite—plays dominant-submissive to her submissive-dominant, even-keeled academic darling to her raving, amateurish supplementarity. “Sylvère’s fans were mostly young white men drawn to the more ‘transgressive’ elements of modernism, the heroic sciences of human sacrifice and torture as legitimized by Georges Bataille,” writes Kraus, “...But even more inexcusably, they were often rude to Chris...the Boys resented any barrier (especially a wife, and an unseductive one at that) between themselves and the great man. Chris responded by

⁴⁰ I am referring here to the Lacanian sense of the Real and Symbolic.

milking money from Sylvère's growing reputation, setting ever-higher fees" (16-17). Kraus' outsidership is less paradoxical than it might seem for her status as a very well connected, if still parasitic, "hanger-on," his perpetual "*plus one*." A self-described financial and emotional drain on resources available to her famous husband, she is the emotive excess that spills over the institutional permissiveness granted to his "subversive" Ivy League, deconstructive critical cachet. Perhaps her claimed spiritual connection with "Dick" is unsurprising, as Kraus describes her own position in her marriage as *unsightly appendage* attached to something larger or more important. Kraus writes to Dick, "And I wonder if they'll ever be a possibility of reconciling youth and age, or the anorexic open wound I used to be with the money-hustling hag I've become" (23).

Kraus admits early into the pages of *I Love Dick* that "Dick's presence in their lives was a vacation from this kind of scheming. It was a foray into scheming of another kind" (17). And yet she swears by her belief in and love for Dick like a little girl clings to the idea of Santa Claus, concluding her daily letters to him with affirmations of her unequivocal faith in his sexual power, critical majesty, and patriarchal omnipotence. To be sure, Kraus's high-pitched performance of earnestness hits some hilarious notes. Kraus signs off in one entry, "I keep you in my heart, it keeps me going" and in another, "Knowing you's like knowing Jesus. There are billions of us and only one of you so I don't expect much from you personally. There are no answers to my life. But I'm touched by you and fulfilled just by believing" (98).

Kraus' "love letters" to Dick constitute a brutally public practice in forced voyeurism ("...you, poor Dick, do not deserve to be exposed to such a masturbatory passion" [17]),

recalling Jacques Derrida's reflections on the postcard that is *an open letter*, a mode of intimate exchange that remains unsealed and thus, can be read at any moment. The letters taunt Dick (like email spam or junk mail), mocking him for his status as a forced exhibition/ist, and, at one point, even inviting him to write the "Introduction" for their publication, "It could read something like this," Sylvère suggests, having agreed to play the role of co-conspirator, "...I believe these letters will interest the reader as a cultural document. Obviously they manifest the alienation of the postmodern intellectual in its most diseased form. *I really feel sorry for such a parasitic growth, that feeds upon itself...*" (26). The letters are received as irritants because, while they are apparently arbitrary, they are addressed to him. They are all the more taunting and mocking precisely because they insist on him, even as they make him stand in for "anyone" (or more accurately, any man). Because they are both personal and impersonal, they are not anonymous (and therefore, immediately trashable) like junk mail or spam. Making *him* into the parasitic appendage, and ultimately literally in the appendix to her book, Kraus publishes the letter that Dick Hebdige eventually sends to Sylvère (in which he misspells Kraus' first name), exposing a moment intended to be shared just between men:

...I can only say that being taken as the objective of such obsessive attention...was, indeed still is, utterly incomprehensible to me. I found the situation initially perplexing, then disturbing and my major regret now is that I didn't find the courage at the time to communicate to you and Kris [sic] how uncomfortable I felt being the unwitting object of what you described to me over the phone before Christmas as some kind of bizarre game (Kraus 273).

Kraus' correspondence stalks Dick, shocks him into stillness, assigning him in the public record of her "open book" with the post of unwitting art object (Derrida 1987:xxvi). The

violence of *her* letters is in the gesture of their “binding.” Published and publicized as a book, Dick has no choice but to hold the post/pose Kraus has given him. Just as Derrida “plays the post card against literature,” Kraus’ love letters/diary entries make themselves into unlikely weapons, “inadmissible literature” for Dick’s defense (Derrida 1987:9). Dick fails to find protection under patriarchy or “the law of the father.” Kraus’ feminine subterfuge turns Dick’s own logic against him, as she insists on the excess produced by the system’s supplementary parts—bad taste, affect, contamination—that by dominance’s own logic cannot be taken into the metaphorical court record.

Kraus undertakes to pervert the meaning of the letter, typically thought to record the material bond between two subjects in exchange. Instead, the letters in *I Love Dick* are serialized and bound for their diaristic quality, and Dick is rendered impotent not only by the manic intensity of their proliferation as a joke-turned-conceptual art project but also finally by the force of their very “serious” circulation as a published book. What would be “just a game” is legitimized by the poststructural cultural stakes by which Dick himself has made his name, as the “real-life” Birmingham school cultural critic well known for his work on cultural resistance and punk subcultural style—and since famously critiqued by feminist Birmingham school scholars, such as Angela McRobbie, for championing of masculine subcultures and styles to the exclusion of women in subcultures and subcultural studies (Rimanelli 1998). (Remarkably, Michel Serres implies in an aside in *The Parasite* that, were he to “rewrite [Molière’s] *Tartuffe* today,” he might look something like Dick does in *I Love Dick*. “[H]e would be an ideologue, a political moralist, an intellectual of the avant-garde who fills his pockets and gets power by defending the rights of man or in playing the role of the sacrificed victim” [2007:201]. Poor Dick.)

Kraus calls Dick's intellectual bluff, poking fun at his complicity as, simultaneously, "subcultural transgressor" and member of the "white male institution" that he would seek to transgress. As one critic has recently noted, "Shortly after *I Love Dick* was released, *New York* magazine reported that Hebdige had attempted to block publication of the book on grounds that it invaded his privacy. 'I don't like reading bad reviews,' he said, 'and this book reads like a bad review of my presence in the world...If someone's writing gets read because it exploits a recognizable figure, then it really is a despicable exercise'" (Gumport 2012). "Kraus defended her project on the grounds it 'explod[ed] the "right of privacy" that serves patriarchy so well.' Hebdige scoffed: 'A feminist issue? Tell her to take it up with Princess Diana'" (Gumport). What is ingenuous about *I Love Dick* is Kraus' ability to turn Dick's sense of his absolute right to personal privacy and sense of deserved autonomy against him, reappropriating patriarchy's historical claim on the public domain in order to seek her revenge by rendering him representatively public.⁴¹

Despite the lengths to which Kraus goes to perform the wretchedness of her own less-than-flattering female self-portrait, the joke always appears to be *on Dick*, and as the letters mount, a conceptual chorus seems to sing louder and louder: "Dick, you're so vain. I bet you think this book is about you." It turns out that Dick has little "point," as the letter-as-

⁴¹ Writes Elizabeth Gumport: "[P]rivacy is a feminist issue, one that underlies so many others. As the labor movement made questions of 'private' property and private time into public issues, women's liberation swung open the door of the home to reveal the political dimensions of childcare and domestic labor. It was a door that had long been locked: domestic work was not really uncompensated labor, the assumption went, because love paid the wages. The natural affection a mother felt for her child set parenting apart from other kinds of activity. A similar logic ran through 19th-century America's arguments against giving women the vote, or property rights: all men, first as sons and then as husbands, were privately influenced by women. By exerting this influence, women were as good as represented. Private relationships constituted, or compensated for, public recognition. Women held the key to no kingdom: they belonged outside the public sphere, and yet were denied a private life of their own" (2012).

diary signifies only the relationship of Kraus-to-Dick as that of subject-to-object. Indeed, Dick's value is mostly as a token of exchange, first between Kraus and Sylvère and finally between Kraus and her reader, as the book serves as guarantor that the letters made "to his address" are always already intercepted by the reader. As "Dear Dick" replaces "Dear Diary," the form of the letter becomes a means of transforming Dick from subject to *object*, writer to *text*, critic to *critique*. This time it is Dick who finds himself on the receiving end of things.⁴²

I Love Dick is, to some extent, anticipated by artist Joseph Grigely's *Postcards to Sophie Calle* (1991). In what he dubs his "monospondence," Grigely wrote 32 unsolicited postcards to Calle in which he offered obsessive critical feedback on her exhibition at the Luhring Augustine Gallery in New York, melding the critical writing of "high art" with the "low form" of the love letter.⁴³ Grigely "romances" Calle with his discomforting insistence on responding to her work with the forced intimacy of the first-person, first-name basis. "Dear Sophie," he writes, "I am—how shall I say it?—entranced. No other word will do. Yours, Joseph" (2000:18). Grigely's project highlights, as *I Love Dick* does, the predatorial dimensions of criticism, staged in these works as one-sided courtships, criticism standing

⁴² In a letter, Dick Higgins suggested that Carolee Schneemann hire younger female artists to substitute for her middle-aged body in her performances (March 1981). Stiles writes, "After several exchanges on the topic of his letter, Schneeman finally responded using the salutation, 'Dear DICK,' the capital letters summoning the double entendre. Thus did Schneemann rebuff Higgins for advice that was both sexist and ageist" (xxxiii).

⁴³ Grigely's project too is conceptualized around a one-way epistolary relationship that dramatizes the asymmetrical power relations of the lover/loved relationship. Whereas Kraus compares the inequity of this relationship to that of the masculine/feminine, Grigely, who is deaf, takes up a position of the disabled artist/critic to the able-bodied artist. Grigely's postcards become a way of speaking back to Calle's exhibition *Les Aveugles*, a project in which she asks people who were born blind to describe their image of beauty and frames the texts alongside accompanying images. In his final postcard, Grigely writes, "Perhaps, Sophie, you might some day return what you have taken, might some day undress your psyche in a room frequented by the blind, and let them run their fingers over your body as you have run your eyes over theirs" (Siebers 2000:40).

in for the unwelcome interpretative proximity taken in the stalking of a critic's art-object prey.

Grigely's finds an analog in *Guest of Cindy Sherman* (2008), a documentary by the filmmaker Paul Hasegawa-Overacker ("Paul H-O"), which was made during the demise of his relationship with art star Cindy Sherman. Like Grigely's, Hasegawa-Overacker's project highlights his own attachment to a high-powered woman in the art world, a position that is described as more painful and isolating than systemic, a problem of personal insecurity rather than societal marginalization. Like Kraus, Hasegawa-Overacker—former *small-time host* of the now defunct public access show *Gallery Beat*—uses his "fly on the wall" status in the art world to document it fully and without pretense. Hasegawa-Overacker wields his camera at all of Sherman's art openings as Kraus does her pen with respect to Sylvère's intellectual circles. As one reviewer notes, "Whereas Paul H-O is clearly vulnerable in the picture, it seems that Sherman was unable to submit to the same level of open access and candor. Though, admittedly, the stakes are higher for her: Sherman's work, most famously her enigmatic makeup-and-costume self-portraits, thrives on the ambiguousness and ambivalence of its creator" ("The Fritz" 2008). While Sherman is initially supportive of the project, offering rare interviews and later, after their relationship had turned romantic, allowing him to film their life together, her support ultimately proves unsustainable as it becomes clear that her boyfriend's happiness ultimately depends on her undoing. The success of Hasegawa-Overacker's film depends on him exposing the artist who has made her career on maintaining a sense of personal anonymity. In a final attempt to shed her parasitic attachment, Sherman put out a press release disowning the film.

Grigely's *Postcards* is but one of the ways that Kraus' project finds critical resonance with the work of French artist Sophie Calle, a conceptual inheritance acknowledged throughout the pages of *I Love Dick*. "It's kind of like Calle Art," write Kraus and Sylvère of their project (1997:28). While practically all of Calle's works homologize the female-male relation as one of pursuer-pursued, I would argue that *I Love Dick* most closely resembles *The Address Book* (1983), one of Calle's early works and a piece that Lotringer and Kraus were likely familiar with at the time of their writing. Having found an address book on the street, the artist enacts her performance *by the book*. Calle photocopies its contents and then anonymously returns the address book to its owner, whom she referred to as "Pierre D." (Incidentally, this is not the only one of Calle's works that begins with the artist making a copy of a man's book. For what was to become *Double Game/The Gotham Handbook*, Calle xeroxed pages from Paul Auster's novel *Leviathan*, for which the author based his character "Maria" on Calle. Calle then used a red pen to highlight those passages that relate to her work and to annotate points where Auster's fiction departed from her practice.) Calle then proceeded to interview all of the people whose addresses appeared in the book, constructing an imaginary portrait of him, that in its sheer accumulation of informants, sought in principle to approximate him (Bois 2000). Yves Alain Bois writes, "Each morning the newspaper published an interview along with a related photograph, not necessarily taken by Calle (that of an artwork Pierre D. was said to like, for example). The fact that the piece kept building for a whole month, day after day, added to the mystery...Three weeks after the final entry appeared, *Libération* published, in the same half-page format, the furious response of Pierre D. (who signed his real name, Pierre Baudry)" (2000). Bois writes that Baudry, a documentary filmmaker,

had been in Norway the whole time, and had discovered his exposure—“that so many facts of his life and traits of his character—including his repugnance toward any form of publicity”—upon returning (2000). Baudry, Calle claims, retaliated by discovering and publishing a headless photograph of her nude. “He is still resentful,” Calle has said, “he has let me know” (Bois 2000). Given that Calle had already published *The Striptease*, a project that featured a photograph of the artist working as a stripper in Pigalle, Baudry’s revenge was preemptively defanged (Jeffries 2009).

It was also reported that Baudry threatened to sue for invasion of privacy (Calle has said she has nearly been sued twice⁴⁴), recalling Dick’s attempt to block the publication of *I Love Dick* on the very same grounds. “What the pretense of privacy often does is protect us from reality. It is called on to conceal the fact that there are *two* realities: the world as it is lived in by men, and the world of women, which has historically been exiled from political and philosophical consideration,” writes Elizabeth Gumpert. “It has been regarded as *beneath* such consideration, its truths narrowly and inescapably personal—rather than universal—and therefore inevitably trivial. Hence Hebdige’s invocation of Princess Diana...Placing domestic and intimate relationships outside the boundaries of legitimate public interest in this way condemns them permanently to the status of intractable nature, or ‘frivolous gossip,’ discouraging intervention and thereby preserving invisible practices of domination” (2012, her emphases). Dick sought his revenge on Kraus by refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of her work and by denying her a place in the conversation as his intellectual equal, ultimately addressing Sylvere in his response

⁴⁴ “I would love to make a project about being sued,” Calle told an audience at the University of California Berkeley in March 2011, noting that she almost been sued on two separate occasions (Calle 2011).

to the project and merely sending her a photocopy of the letter. Likewise, Baudry attempted to punish Calle by transforming her into a disembodied sexual object, reducing the celebrated woman artist into an unnamed picture.

Like Kraus, Calle's projects engage "stalking" (with these quotation marks I mean to mark whatever degree to which her choices of subjects is more or less arbitrary) as a conceptual mechanism for the production of art. *Suite vénitienne / Please Follow Me* (1980) has been read as the artist's own parasitical reenactment of Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969), performed ten years later (Iversen 2010:16). Like Acconci, who followed a randomly selected stranger walking in the street while remaining unobserved, Calle followed a male stranger on a trip to Venice, documenting the results in her project. Calle is, of course, widely credited with having set the gold standard in the genre of "break-up art," having made works such as her film *No Sex Last Night*, also known as *Double Blind* (1996), and the piece "Exquisite Pain" (2004), among other projects that centralize thematics such as infatuation, pursuit, and unrequited of heterosexual love and loss (Gentlemen 2004). Many of her projects begin out of flirtatious collaborations with, and shadowing of, various boyish artists, intellectual studs, and theoretical father figures, from *Suite vénitienne / Please Follow Me* (1980) with Jean Baudrillard, to *Appointment with Sigmund Freud*, a project about the *über* father figure (1998), to "Psychological Assessment" (2003), a collaboration with Damien Hirst (originating out of Calle's request that Hirst send her a love letter), to her most well-known intellectual creative courtship with American writer Paul Auster and the whole series of performance-based projects that grew out of their artistic and literary entanglement (*Gotham Handbook* [1994], *The Chromatic Diet* [1997], and *Days Under the Sign of B, C, & W* [1998]). In *Gotham Handbook*,

Calle writes:

In his 1992 novel *Leviathan*, Paul Auster thanks me for having authorized him to mingle fact with fiction. And indeed, on pages 60 to 67 of his book, he uses a number of episodes from my life to create a fictive character named Maria, who then leaves me to live out her own story. Since, in *Leviathan*, Auster has taken me as a subject, I imagined swapping roles and taking him as the author of my actions. I asked him to invent a fictive character which I would attempt to resemble. He preferred to send me ‘Personal Instructions for SC on How to Improve Life in New York City (because she asked...)’ (2003:no page number).

Auster’s parenthetical, (“because she asked”), is curious. The parentheses make themselves into armor for his text, betraying his need for self-protection in his “friendly” game with Calle. Auster acknowledges, in a way that Starling and Dick never do, that to enter into a “contract” with the artist—and an artist like Calle in particular—is to make oneself vulnerable to having one’s identity borrowed and manipulated as the artist wills. The stakes of romance is imagined here as the danger of entering into such a contract. In one of several references to Calle, Kraus weighs in on this very collaboration in *I Love Dick*, writing of her own abject identification with “Maria.” Writes Kraus in *I Love Dick*:

...the artist Sophie Calle appears in Paul Auster’s book *Leviathan* in the role of writer’s girlfriend. ‘Maria was far from beautiful but there was an intensity in her gray eyes that attracted me.’ Maria’s work is identical to Calle’s most famous pieces—the address book, hotel photos, etc.—but in *Leviathan* she’s a waif-like creature relieved of complications like ambition or career (60).

Calle writes of the collaboration in *The Rules of the Game* (1999):

Since in *Leviathan*, Auster has taken me as a subject...I asked him to invent a fictive character which I would attempt to resemble. *I was in effect, inviting Paul Auster to do what he wanted with me, for a period of up to a year at most. Auster objected that he did not want to take responsibility for what might happen when I acted out the script he had created for me.* Instead he preferred to send

me ‘Personal Instructions...’ (Martin 2007:198-199, my emphasis)

In Calle’s games with Auster, art, like love, becomes a trap staged around the rules of seduction, and the public sphere becomes the high-stakes domain in which to act out the conceptual reverberations of its so-called intimate politics. French philologist Barbara Cassin writes of Calle: “The hermeneutic situation, i.e. the rules of the game, defined as the rules of her game. This is her habitual game, each time neither quite the same nor quite different: putting on show, from time to time a single, erotico-voguish object that affects her deeply or glancingly, and to do so in such a way as to drain—unravel, exhaust, integrate, and catharsize—this object” (2007:no page number).

Signed, X.

I am a very dedicated friend and correspondent. Actually, that’s probably my real talent. I’m what you might call a correspondence artist.

-Barbara Browning, *The Correspondence Artist* (2011:4)

In 2007, Calle raised the stakes of a career made on the conceptual politics of romantic art practices based on her “one-way” investigatory performances and, like Byrne, forensic autobiographical aesthetics⁴⁵ with her much-praised 2007 Venice Biennale exhibition and subsequent book project *Take Care of Yourself* (fig. 6). Both exhibition and book showcase the abundance of Calle’s return on her missive to 107 women professionals when she requested that these women read and analyze a break-up email

⁴⁵ The Paula Cooper Gallery, Calle’s New York representation, describes Calle as “...well-known for her sleuth-like explorations of human relationships, which led her to follow a stranger in the streets of Venice and document his every move, or to find work as a hotel chambermaid in order to photograph the belongings of the hotel’s guests” (2009).

that she received, according to their particular occupational skill sets. Calle frames the project with these words: “I received an email telling me it was over. I didn’t know how to respond. It was almost as if it hadn’t been meant for me. It ended with the words, ‘Take care of yourself.’ And so I did” (2007).” And so *they did*—over a hundred of Calle’s “girlfriends,” chosen for their professional skills and distinctions. The lexicometrist produces an extended literary and linguistic analysis of the email, including textual meditations on its typographical appearance, genre, enunciation and vocabulary, bar graphs of its sentence lengths, color-coded diagrams of its verb tenses, and chart analyses of its subject references (showing an overwhelming dissymmetry in sentence structures with *I* to *You* pronouns of 4-1). The proofreader rips the email apart, citing “awkward repetitions,” “clumsy sentence openings” and “long, ill-constructed sentences.” The cartoonist literally makes him into a caricature of himself, the press agent “yesterday’s news.”

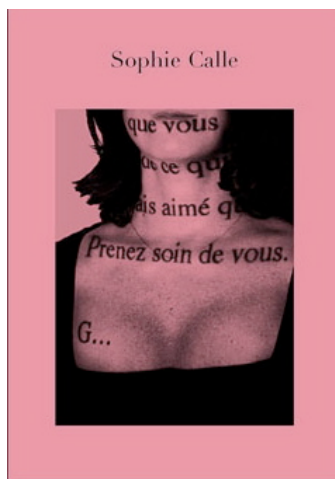


Figure 6. Sophie Calle, *Take Care of Yourself* book cover published by Actes Sud, 2007.

“Take Care of Yourself,” her ex writes to close. Appropriating his parting words for the project’s title, it is Calle who has the last word. Jilting her, her ex-lover leaves her with

this parting shot, a polite imperative to do as he asks one final time. This imperative recalls Michel Foucault's late work on "the care of the self" in his third volume of *The History of Sexuality* in which he describes self-care as, "The name of the ethical principle that leads people to cultivate themselves, that is to work to improve themselves: This 'cultivation of the self' can be briefly characterized by the fact that one must 'take care of oneself.' It is this principle of the care of the self that establishes its necessity, presides over its development, and organizes its practice" (1986:43). Calle's project cleverly exposes the apparent paradox of this Socratic injunction that, according to Foucault, prompted the entire enterprise of philosophy (1984:300-301). This paradox emerges when "Take care of yourself"—a translation of Socrates' "Know yourself"—is thus glossed: "Make freedom your foundation, through the mastery of yourself" (1984:301). Calle's project reveals the insidious arrogance of the parting line, what can be read as a larger critique of the Western patriarchal tradition that offers the door to freedom as a trap, thus installing and maintaining a culture of *ressentiment*. How can a woman exercise her liberty if doing so means obeying an imperative? How can a woman make freedom her goal, if she doesn't possess the freedom to do such a thing in the first place?

Grand in size and ambition, *Take Care of Yourself* is a massive effort that echoes Kraus' turn to multiplication, the mathematical operation of scale, to quantify the infinitely subjective stakes of heartbreak. Barbara Cassin notes Calle's use of seriality as a formal technique that, in a sense, feeds on itself and is used to draw together the self and other into the shared relation of the many: "To create a series oneself via others, the others making up a series themselves to the extent that they have an identity trait—you'll all be women reacting to his way of leaving me...you're all laid out in this notebook...in the

case of me barbara, it's in the role of a philologist to fill in the sophie series. You want to be used up this way, you want that? Yes I want" (no page number).



Figures 7 and 8. Installation view, *Sophie Calle*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, UK October 10, 2009-January 31, 2010 (Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York).

Calle outsources a “mass production” of interpretative labor that alchemizes the brutally masculine text into an intermedial army of female re-representations (figs. 7 and 8)—

photographic portraits of her “sister-readers” each holding the email, their accompanying textual analyses personalized in a diverse lexicon of graphic styles (handwritten, digitized, animated), and filmed performances of them singing or citing the text. Calle welds together a networked proliferation of diverse media—film, performance, painting, sculpture, text, and photography—into a sophisticated, conceptual weapon to be wielded against X’s crude and informal electronic text. It is a product of skilled and networked, creative *mass* production, as a 424-page “volume” exceptional for its sheer size. As an object, the book is voluminous, massive, protuberant.

Given the “calculated” quality of these conceptual projects, it would seem no coincidence that our encounter with Calle’s “ex” is signified by the very “*sign*” of *multiplication*. In the place of its absent referent is the signature “X.”⁴⁶ The logic of supplementarity, as Derrida notes, must be read as that of the parasite. The supplement theorized in *Of Grammatology* is that which is, on the one hand, allegedly secondarily, a supposedly inessential residue. It is presented “as exterior and foreign to the ‘essential’ nature of that to which it is added or in which it is substituted” (Culler 1982:103). Yet, on the other hand, Derrida shows that the supplement is in fact no less essential than the supposedly complete and self-sufficient entity to which it is purportedly attached. This conception of the supplement-whole correspondence operates by the same logic as the

⁴⁶ In the book version of *Take Care of Yourself*, the break-up email is signed “G.” However, Calle explains in a short note preceding the reproduced email, “The day I received this letter by email, ending our relationship, its author published a book. The book was dedicated to me and he left me the day it came out. In his email the author mentioned its title and signed off with his first name. In order to keep his identity from interfering with the interpretations, only seven women knew who he was. *I replaced the name with an X and the title of the book with the word ‘writing.’ Once the project was finished I told him about it and, at his request, I reinstated the initials of his name and his book*” (2007:no page number, my emphasis). This is to say that “G” circulates as “X” until the project is complete, at which point, Calle does not replace the variable (X) with an exact quantity (or more precise signifier, his full name), but rather with *another* variable (“G”).

parasite-host system. Significantly, Derrida's theory of supplementarity translates to a gendered system of correspondence in which women are said to be dependent on men while men are not dependent upon them in return. By elucidating the logic of supplementarity as parasitical, Derrida offers a useful model for understanding the production of *ressentiment* in the relation between men and women, even as it is revealed by the deconstructive procedure to be a fiction.

"And what is a parasite?" writes Derrida, "And what if writing were precisely that which makes us reconsider our logic of the parasite?" (1998:54). For Derrida reading Rousseau, "if supplementarity is a necessarily indefinite process, writing is the supplement *par excellence* since it proposes itself as the supplement of the supplement, sign of a sign, taking the place of a speech already significant" (1998:281). Derrida suggests that another example of the supplement might be masturbation (1998:153). Literalizing the supplementarity of writing, Kraus and Calle render "masculine writing" masturbatory. If the supplement is "something that completes or *makes an addition*" (Culler 1982:102, my emphasis), the manic accumulation of Kraus and Calle's letters visualizes the operations of supplementarity *run amok*. Their art literalizes the so-called "excess" of the parasite that manifests itself as *absolutely excessive*.

The artists' modeling of a revved up aesthetic of *manic overiteration* makes the "Dicks" ostensibly at the core of their projects begin to look insignificant and marginal under the swelling accumulation that is Kraus' proliferating sentiments and Calle's interpersonal mediations. Calle writes of *Take Care of Yourself*, "I asked 107 women...chosen for their profession or skills, to interpret this letter. To analyze it, comment on it, dance it, sing it.

Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand it for me...Answer it for me" (2007). Likewise, Kraus dissects Dick. Initially taking him up as an idol, Kraus' words ultimately pick Dick apart, just as Calle's triangulated dissections undo "X," making both men into details that just *can't quite be recalled* within the vast expanses of the projects' larger, and far more striking, critical and aesthetic fields. Calle's "ex/X" *literally becomes a footnote* in her larger project, as translator Adriana Hunter, one of her 107 readers, drops this footnote, giving X a new kind of appendage, in "X₁₄":

This is not really a translator's comment but a more general one: "I am intrigued by this 'X.' Is it a kiss, or the writer's initial? It would be much more tender to end with a kiss...but there is something rather presumptuous about leaving just a kiss or a simple initial rather than a full name at the end of such a solemn and final letter. Perhaps I am reading too much into this X: it may be a simple device used by Sophie to hide the letter-writer's identity (2007 no page number).

While it is indeed merely a device used by the artist to hide his identity, the translator's note nonetheless renders Calle's "ex/X" into *just something else to puzzle over*, a "puzzle piece" among many [X₁₄], resembling the kind one plays in a board game, one that might just as easily be lost and forgotten under a sofa cushion. This tactic recalls Roland Barthes' approach to reading as a "dissection" of ideology in *A Lover's Discourse*. Writes Barthes, "If you put the lover in a love story, you reconcile him with society because telling stories is a coded activity. Society tames the lover through the love story. I took Draconian measures so the book would not be a love story, so the lover would be left in his nakedness, a being inaccessible to the usual forms of social recuperation, the novel in particular" (1985:302-303). In a similar way (if to different effect), the artists Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle empty out their so-called leading men, rendering them flatly and

impersonally “Dick” and “X,” in order to pick apart and denaturalize the means by which systems of representation at the same time admit to and reproduce the conditions of their masculine privilege.

THE PARASITE’S SEDUCTION

Parasites and their hosts are locked in a close evolutionary embrace.

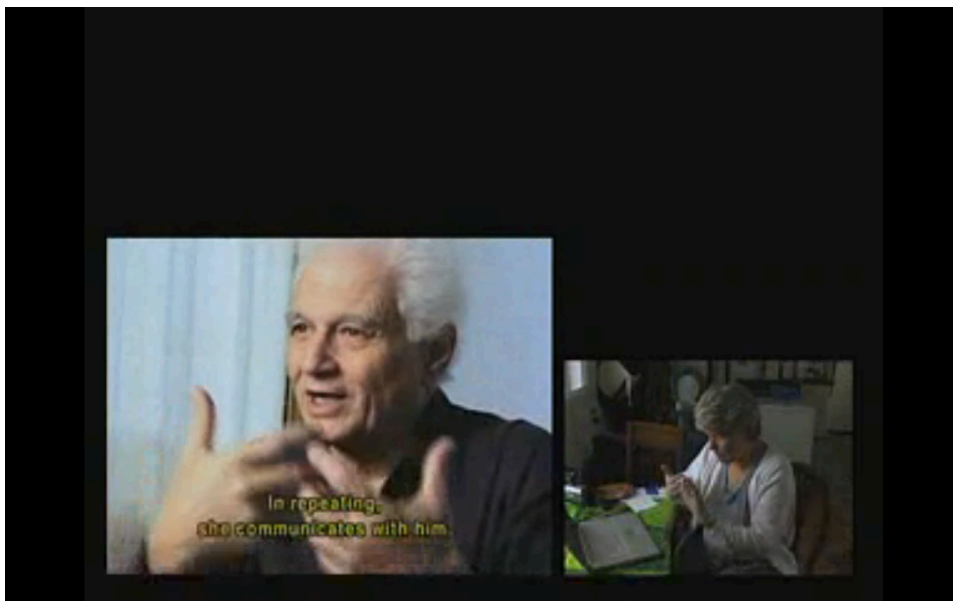
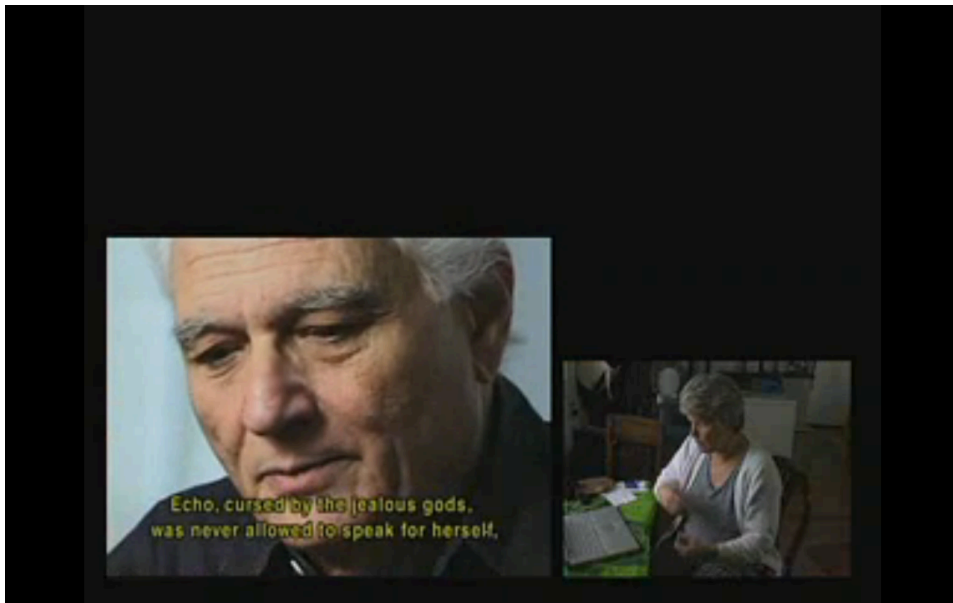
-Matthew Ridley, *The Red Queen: Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature* (1993:66)

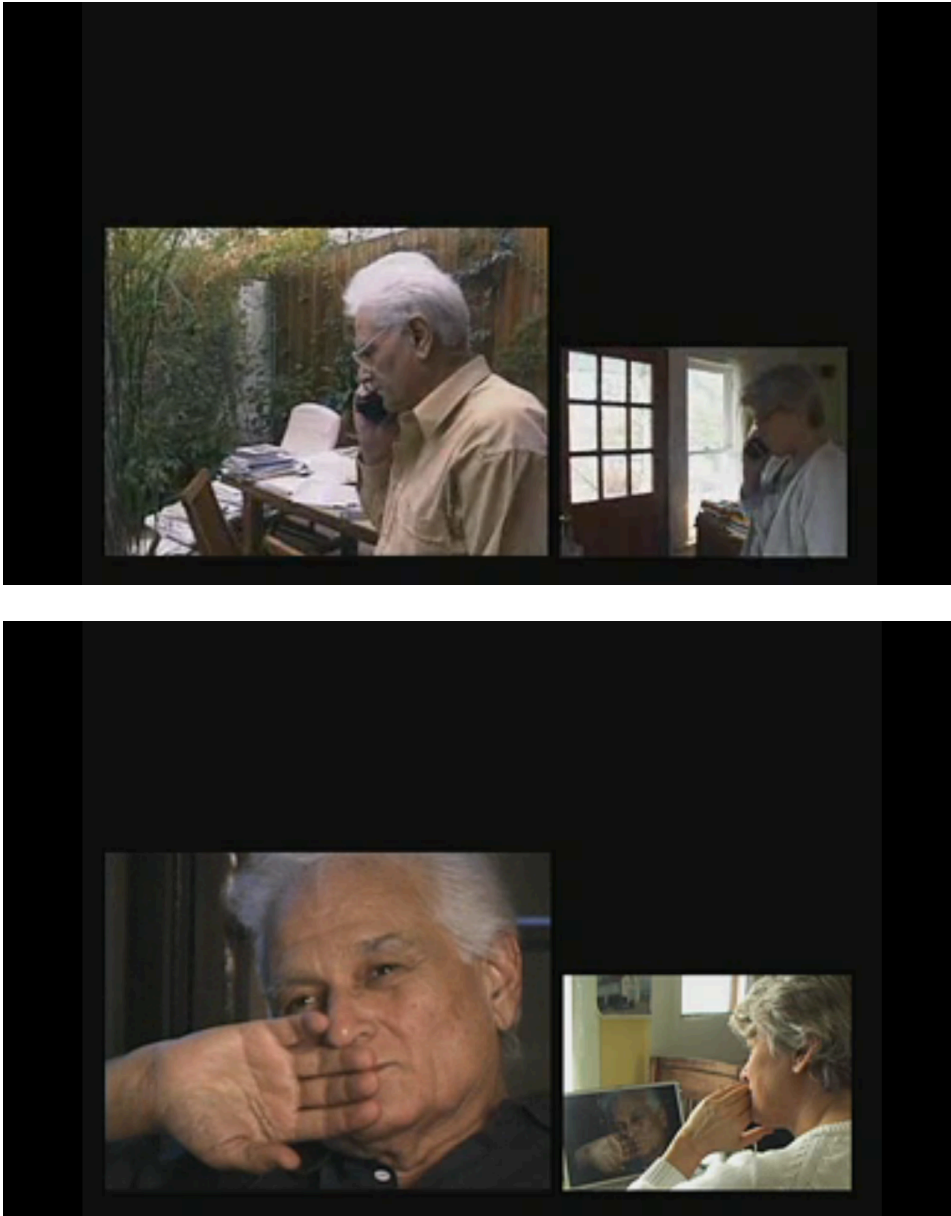
“Why did you become an artist?,” an interviewer once asked Sophie Calle. “To seduce my father,” she answered. “Did it work?,” he asked. “Oh yes,” she responded (Jeffries 2009). To be sure, both works capture contemporary feminism’s amorous struggle with the French intellectual father and the impossibility to escape him. Taking the concept of correspondence “at its word,” Kraus and Calle perform deconstruction, quite literally. The artists model a concept of deconstruction, which has itself been called “plainly and simply parasitical” (Miller 1977:439). Derrida describes deconstruction as follows: “In a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), occupies the commanding position. To deconstruct the opposition is above all, at a particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy” (Derrida 1981:56-57,41). Like the parasite on its host, “[t]he practitioner of deconstruction works within the terms of the system in order to breach it” (Culler 1982:86). As I’ve elaborated, Kraus and Calle transform deconstruction from a philosophical strategy into a tactical performance, thereby showing how the “fathers” and “sons” of deconstruction (from Derrida to the theoretical inheritors

addressed in their projects) at times elide their own privileged position within the very system they seek to critique. The artists charge these men with flattering themselves that they are the wrench in the machine – indeed deconstructive parasites on the host of Western metaphysical philosophy – failing to register that they themselves are also its living hosts. The artists are intentionally reductive, parodying deconstruction as a conceptual art practice, dramatizing the internal contradictions that subtend what is commonly accepted as the “deconstructive method.” By self-consciously over-simplifying conceptions of “patriarchy” (a notion already comically inadequate), by consolidating it into single individuals, the artists reduce gender oppression to its “constituent parts” in order to call attention to the masculine authority that simultaneously undergirds and undermines deconstruction’s usefulness for feminism.

In 2007, U.S. performance artist Janice Perry began staging her interactive multimedia installation *Being Derrida*. The video portion of the installation is available on the artist’s Vimeo page. The roughly edited montage depicts the synchronized footage of two different videos—what the artist describes as their “deconstructive dance.” On a larger screen plays the 2004 documentary *Derrida* and on a smaller, adjacent screen plays a video that the artist made of herself imitating the philosopher’s movements while watching the documentary on her laptop (figs. 9-12). When Derrida butters his morning toast, the artist butters her toast. When Derrida gesticulates wildly while elaborating a concept, the artist follows suit. Perry literalizes the play of deconstruction, breaking down his movements into an improvisational choreography, which she mimics frame for frame. When she impersonates Derrida, she becomes Echo, and he is Narcissus. He can speak and she cannot. She can see him and he cannot see her. She sees his reflection—that is

both his image of the screen and his thinking, and she reflects it back. She is the parasite that reflects back to him but does not contribute anything. Her status as parasite and his as host is formalized in the arrangement of the screens depicted side-by-side and set against a black background. Perry appears in the smaller frame, with him facing the camera and her facing him on her screen. Her female presence sits next to his, literally secondary, minor, imitative (Fig. 6-10).





Figures 9-12. Janice Perry's *Becoming Derrida* (2007).

In much the same way, Kraus and Calle's projects also function so as to produce their "objects of affection" as pure ego, only they use letters rather than dueling video projections to stage the parasite-host relation as two "interposing screens." The artists' epistolary proliferation offer "reflections" of the men, which become bigger and bigger over time. This recalls Deleuze and Guattari's reading of Kafka's letters to his own

“father figure.” In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari describe “the interest of the letter” as lying in “a particular sliding effect” by which Kafka moves from a classic Oedipal conflict “where the beloved father is hated, accused, and declared to be guilty, to a much more perverse Oedipus” (1986:9). Much as Kraus and Calle represent “Dick” and “X” in numbed-out hyperbole, Kafka’s letters dramatize and allegorize the father to the point of rendering him unrecognizable as an individual entity.⁴⁷ Deleuze and Guattari write: “[it is] a reproach that is so strong that it becomes unattributable to any particular persons and unlimited...and passes through a series of paranoid interpretations” (10). They propose a maneuver for using the impasse of the father as its own way out:

This perverse shift, which finds in the supposed innocence of the father an even worse accusation, evidently has a goal, an effect, a procedure behind it. *The goal is to obtain a blowup of the ‘photo,’ an exaggeration of it to the point of absurdity. The photo of the father, expanded beyond all bounds, will be projected onto the geographic, historical, and political map of the world in order to reach vast regions of it...An Oedipalization of the universe...beyond that, to the degree that one enlarges Oedipus, this sort of microscopic enlargement shows up the father for what he is; it gives him a molecular agitation in which an entirely different sort of combat is being played out.* One might say that in projecting the photo of the father onto the map of the world, Kafka unblocks the impasse that is specific to the photo and invents a way out of this impasse... (10, my emphases).

By re-presenting the father of the classic Oedipal narrative in such enlarged terms, by “overidentifying with him” to the point of absurdity, Kafka produces the father as a

⁴⁷ In a reversal that resonates with the reading of the host as “meta-parasite” that I introduced in my preface, Walter Benjamin describes Kafka’s literary fathers not as hosts but as “giant parasites”: “Uncleanness is so much the attribute of officials that one could almost regard them as enormous parasites. This, of course, does not refer to the economic context, but to the forces of reason and humanity from which this clan makes a living. In the same way the fathers in Kafka’s strange families batten on their sons, lying on top of them like giant parasites. They not only prey upon their strength, but gnaw away at the sons’ right to exist. The fathers punish, but they are at the same time the accusers. The sin of which they accuse their sons seems to be a kind of original sin” (1968:114).

patriarchal caricature, whose overexaggerated pores are distended into pixilated openings, primed for infestation. In Kraus' and Calle's work, this infestation is perpetrated through love letters that might be said to resemble more closely spam—fired in rapid succession, hitting random targets. Deleuze and Guattari note the vampiristic (or parasitical) quality of the epistolary genre, in the passage that is my epigraph, which I have argued also posits in correspondence a gendered exchange. “But how do...letters function?” Deleuze and Guattari continue, “Without a doubt, because of their genre, they maintain the duality of two subjects...a subject of enunciation as the form of expression that writes the letter, and a subject of the statement that is the form of content that the letter is speaking about...” (30). The parasitical letter thus feeds on the ego of its host-receiver. By obsessing over “Dick” and “X,” making them into the unconsenting muses and patrons of their work, Kraus and Calle position themselves as the mirror effect of their hosts. The “obsequious and flattering” parasite holds up a mirror as a shield behind which she continues to grow—getting bigger and bigger until it is too late for her host. This mirroring effect is what Barthes calls love: “It is my desire I desire, and the loved being is no more than its tool. I rejoice at the thought of such a great cause, which leaves far behind it the person whom I have made into its pretext” (1979:31). Kraus and Calle's projects would likely position love in terms more closely aligned with Lauren Berlant, who writes that “[f]rom a certain political perspective, a feminist one, it has long been argued that love is a bargaining tool for convincing others to join in making a life that also provides a loophole through which people can view themselves nonetheless as fundamentally noninstrumental—selfless, sacrificial, magnanimous—in their intimacies. The code phrase for this loophole is the distinction between the public and the private” (2011:181). Berlant writes,

This structure is what Jurgen Habermas points to as well when he distinguishes the modern bourgeois as someone who shifts between his identity as a calculating man of the market and his identity as an *homme* who locates his true self in the performance of intimacy in the theater of domestic space. The displaced relation within the capitalist subject between his instrumental persona and his loving persona enables him to disidentify with what's aggressive in his pursuit of desire and interest in all spaces, and to see himself as fundamentally ethical because he means to have solidarity with some humans he knows (181).

It is reading their hosts *so closely* that prompts Kraus and Calle to write *so much*. In *The Daughter's Seduction*, Jane Gallop describes Irigaray's mode of "close reading" Freud's final text on woman in *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Irigaray's reading is for Gallop "an important training ground for a new kind of battle, a feminine seduction/disarming/unsettling of positions of ideology" (1982:56). Gallop writes, "Irigaray's tactic is a kind of reading: close reading, which separates the text into fragments of varying size, quotes it and then comments with various questions and associations...The Man's order is disturbed by the woman with the impertinent questions and the incisive comments" (56). "As parasites," Kraus and Calle likewise perform "close readings" produced from a relation of overintimacy. "Too close for comfort," the virality of their letters takes on a choking or *smothering effect*. David Bell has described the parasite as an "abusive guest [that] partakes of the host's meal, consumes food, and *gives only words...in return*" (1981:886). The parasite would seem to name the figure that is willing to follow language *as far as it will take it*. Kraus and Calle's creative logorrhea feeds and nourishes them. As the substance of language replaces its object, the men on which the projects are ostensibly based are forced to eat their words.

If to smother or overwhelm denotes "to suffocate or drown, to bury beneath a huge

mass”—the mimetic crime committed by these acts of parasitical repetition is a kind of representational violence, by way of drowning or burying alive.⁴⁸ Kraus pleads guilty, writing during her early collaboration on the project with Sylvère: “At first they just share the letters with each other, but as the pile grows to 50 then 80 then 180 pages, they begin discussing some kind of Sophie Calle-like art piece, in which they would present the manuscript to Dick. ...‘Dear Dick,’ she writes at one point, ‘I guess in a sense I’ve killed you. You’ve become Dear Diary...’” (81). At a certain point, the project has accumulated in material and velocity, lending gravity to what began as a lighthearted game. In an interview, Calle notes that what began as a form of personal therapy developed into art, “After one month I felt better. There was no suffering. It worked. The project had replaced the man” (Chrisafis 2007).

The artists’ inhabitation of the position of the parasite is, especially in the work of Kraus, pushed to an extreme in which the parasite overtakes its host—dwarfing “Dick,” de-centering X, displacing the man. The parasitical work of responding, again and again (in Kraus’ case, responding to letters that Dick has never actually written; in Calle’s, responding 107 times to one letter) disquiets the authority-effect of the men’s writing (for Kraus, Sylvère and Dick’s scholarship; for Calle, X’s email). Barthes has also claimed that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author” (1977:148). Kraus and Calle’s parasitism does kill the idea that “Dick” and “X” are *larger than life*; they pierce the notion that patriarchy is somehow impenetrable.

⁴⁸ See “overwhelm” in *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

FEMINIST ATTACHMENTS

*Love grows in me like a tumor,
parasites bent on devouring its host.
I'm developing my sense of humor,
till I can laugh at my heart between your teeth,
till I can laugh at my face beneath your feet.*

-Jenny Owen Youngs, song lyrics to "Fuck Was I"

When Avital Ronell was asked to provide a diagnosis for what ails contemporary feminism in her 1991 interview with Andrea Juno for *Angry Women*, she answered, "Feminism today has a *parasitical*, secondary territoriality. If you respond to present conditions, you're subject to reactive, mimetic, and regressive posturings. So the problem is: *how can you free yourself?* How can you not be reactive to what already exists as powerful and dominating? How can you avoid a *resentimental* politics?" (1991:127). Some forty years earlier, a similar diagnosis appears in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*:

...man could not prevent himself from being a man. So there he is, culpable in spite of himself and labouring under the effects of a fault he did not himself commit; and here she is, victim and shrew in spite of herself. Sometimes he rebels and becomes cruel, but then he makes himself an accomplice to injustice, and the fault becomes really his. Sometimes he lets himself be annihilated, devoured, by his demanding victim...(1993 [1949]:723-724).

De Beauvoir goes on,

The evil originates not in the perversity of individuals and bad faith first appears when each blames the other – it originates rather in a situation against which all individual action is powerless. Women are 'clinging,' they are dead weight, and they suffer for it; the point is that their

situation is like that of a parasite sucking out the living strength of another organism. Let them be provided with living strength of their own, let them have the means to attack the world and wrest from it their own subsistence, and their dependence will be abolished...(724).

These passages echo those of Wollstonecraft, Luxemburg, Greer, and others for whom the parasite indexes the “resentimental trap” of feminist politics: the imperative of having to make *central* the pain of its marginalization. These feminists lament feminism’s struggle to liberate itself from its secondary service to the primacy of patriarchy. De Beauvoir suggests that the problem of the parasitical female is that of the coupled woman who experiences *ressentiment* in being made complicit in the romance of her own oppression:

[T]he wife is condemned...[T]o realize an apparent equality in their association, he has to give her more because he possesses more. But precisely because she receives, takes, and demands, she is the poorer. The dialectic of the master and slave has its most concrete application here: in oppressing, one becomes oppressed. Males are in chains by their very sovereignty; it is because they alone earn money that the wife demands checks, because men alone practice a profession that the wife demands that they succeed, because they alone embody transcendence that *the wife wants to steal it from them by taking over their projects and successes* (2011:522, my emphasis).

Ronell argues that women must leave behind what she sees as feminism’s recursive choreography—the well-worn track of a codependent feminism that remains tethered to the patriarchal logic of the prefix that haunts her diction and suggests that women’s politics are fundamentally programmed for return, that they are re-active, re-gressive, re-sentimental.

These two accounts evince the manner in which the parasite has been invoked to articulate a fundamental problem for twentieth and twenty-first century feminism and

feminist theory: namely, women's constitution in relation to, and secondarily to, patriarchal structures as a result or redress of injury. According to Ronell, feminism is best characterized by the Nietzschean concept of *ressentiment*, denoting a psychological state arising from feelings that cannot be acted upon, often resulting in a form of self-abasement and a tendency toward a symptomatic, reactionary politics. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche describes the moment of *ressentiment* as the one in which suffering crystallizes around a site of external blame by which one can avenge, and thus displace, one's hurt.

In *States of Injury*, Wendy Brown revisits Nietzsche's account of *ressentiment* to argue that it has effected a definition of contemporary political identity that understands itself as mediated through notions of injury and redress rather than freedom, producing versions of "resistance" prefigured and contained by the very power they purport to oppose.⁴⁹ "*Ressentiment* in this context is a triple achievement: it produces an affect (rage, righteousness) that overwhelms the hurt, it produces a culprit responsible for its hurt, and produces a site of revenge to displace the hurt (a place to inflict hurt as the sufferer has been hurt)," writes Brown, "Together these operations both ameliorate (in Nietzsche's terms, 'anestheticize') and externalize what is otherwise 'unendurable'" (1995:68). While articulated as a problem in both Nietzsche and Brown, *ressentiment*, or what Brown describes as liberalism's "wounded attachment" to the trauma associated with systems of inequality, finds a useful inflection in the metaphor of the parasite for whom it is *literally*

⁴⁹ Brown politicizes Nietzsche's notion by making it speak to the liberal subject in contemporary American leftist politics. Brown argues that liberalism contains from its very inception a generalized incitement to *ressentiment* as "the moralizing revenge of the powerless," or for Nietzsche, "the triumph of the weak as weak" (1995:67).

the attachment to the wound that articulates the site of open contact that makes its relationship to the host most felt. *Ressentiment* usefully mimics the parasitical attachment as a logic that aims at satiation in its thirst for reparation, making it possible to see the recursive tracing of *ressentiment's* wounded attachment as facilitating a productive, if counterintuitive, move away from feminism's fantasy of closure, suture and healing. Writes de Beauvoir, who herself turns to the tactics of a Nietzschean *ressentiment*: "[T]he tyranny wielded by the woman only manifests her dependence: she knows the success of the couple, its future, its happiness, and its justification, resides in the hands of the other; if she bitterly seeks to subjugate him to her will, it is because she is alienated to him. *She makes a weapon of her weakness; but the fact is she is weak*" (2011:522).

By turning to the parasite to characterize the limitations of feminism, Ronell and de Beauvoir both evidence a certain tendency of feminists to treat feminist theory as the work of positivistic redress, a political objective that has been put into crisis by any number of recent critiques. Advising feminists as one would a friend trapped in a bad relationship, Ronell and de Beauvoir ask how women might free themselves (in de Beauvoir's words find "living strength of their own" and "the means to attack the world and wrest from it their own subsistence"), and instead of going backward again, how they might move forward and beyond their structural dependence upon patriarchy—to *get a place of their own*. They demand to know how feminists can recover once and for all and finally achieve a sense of independence. This tendency has produced an "incurable" or insurmountable paradox for feminism. This logic problematically posits the space of feminism as outside the space of the patriarchal order, an externality that I have argued is pure, utopian displacement. By evoking a romantic externality for feminism, this

discourse of an “outside” justifies the idea of the parasite as purely external, and thus stigmatized other, rather than as inherent to the very political economy that is our contemporary network of relations. I argue, following Lauren Berlant, that to “treat” feminism’s *ressentiment* as a malady that women must heal themselves from—or to use the familiar imperative, that they should *take care of themselves*—is to engage in a feminist politics of cruel optimism. “All attachments are optimistic,” Berlant writes, “When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us. This cluster of promises could seem embedded in a person, a thing, an institution, a text, a norm, a bunch of cells, smells, a good idea—whatever...” (2011:24). The false promises of a feminist resolution to the *ressentiment* of patriarchal complicity must thus be read as perpetuations of what Berlant calls “cruel optimism.” Berlant writes,

[C]ruel optimism’ [is] a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic. What’s cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the *subjects who have X in their lives* might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachments is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object (24, my emphasis).

What if *ressentiment*, rather than being a mere symptom of feminism’s cruel optimism, was recognized as offering a means by which it might exploit feminist theory’s frustrated recursivity? The performance of parasitism modeled by Kraus and Calle intervenes in

these debates to argue that this discourse fails to register *ressentiment* as a condition of possibility for a new modality for feminism that, in articulating itself *as a performance*, avoids the trap of simply reiterating and reinscribing old wounds and, instead, offers the potential for deterritorializing sites that have previously been dismissed as contaminated. The parasite, historically a dangerous and disparaged figure within feminist discourse, gets redeployed and acquires new potential in the work of Kraus and Calle.

This renegotiation of the parasite-host relation finds its biological corollary in the “Red Queen hypothesis,” which is used by biologists to talk about “antagonistic co-evolution.” The idea is that evolutionary change by one species can lead to the extinction of the other species. The Red Queen hypothesis is used by biologists to describe coevolutionary “arms races,” particularly between predator and prey (2003:18). In other words, the parasite and host relationship is not a fixed one but rather one of reciprocal, if not necessarily equal, influence: “any current host-[and]-parasite interaction may not reflect the initial or even the intermediate interaction of by-gone years...However, as a general rule of thumb, parasites usually do not serve themselves well if they kill their host (quickly). An on-going host better benefits on-going parasites if the host stays alive and full of nutrients” (Mackey 2000:41). Enacting this scientific logic within their aesthetic practice, artists like Kraus and Calle offer feminist theory is a way of conceptualizing parasitism as a relationship to dominance that is not merely one of complicity—of an uncritical *symbiosis* in which women believe themselves to benefit equally from their relationship to patriarchy. Rather, Kraus and Calle model a certain antibiosis—an antagonistic co-evolution. By visualizing procedures by which “Dick” and “X” undergo a figural erasure, the artists perform a hostile relationship that, over some amount of time,

adversely affects the host who is slowly eaten alive by the work. What begins for both women as an “it’s all about *you*” project slowly turns into “it’s all about *me*,” as the title page of the 1997 Semiotext(e) edition of *I Love Dick* visualizes, as the large bolded “I” outstrips “Dick” in size (fig. 13), with the word “Love” awkwardly mediating the subject and the object. The designation “X” comes to represent the absent center played by the male figures left to ghost these projects, confined by language to the purgatory of signification. “X” represents Calle’s conceptual “ex” whose decidedly smarmy email to the artist serves as an invitation for an extended reading that he unwittingly has agreed to host. Dick naively initiates his role as the project’s host when he invites Kraus and her husband to dine with him and then to spend the night at his remote cabin in the Antelope Valley of southern California. Offering them wine and showing them home videos of himself, his generosity quickly gets re-territorialized. Dick naively accommodates the parasitic trap around him, as he hospitably supplies Kraus the proximity that she uses against him.

Drawing a finer distinction between these projects is necessary to appreciate their differences (i.e. Dick’s initial “niceness” to, and later indifference and distance from, Kraus versus X’s creepy intimacy with Calle). These differences would seem to yield distinct parasite-host relationships with different valences and effects, particularly as models for feminism and feminist relations with patriarchy. We might, further, ask: would it have helped Dick to write back? To engage in a correspondence, as “X” does, if with questionable success? It is very likely that Dick doesn’t respond for the same reason that Auster avoids Calle’s trap when she asks him to script a year of her time—because he doesn’t want to be swallowed up by the Kraus machine. But perhaps this is

an inevitability and his lack of response only makes things worse for him? In this light, there would seem to be a kind of ethical imperative to respond to the call of the parasite (as in, me to Byrne, Byrne to me)? Avital Ronell has described the importance of answering the call of the other. “What does it mean to answer the telephone, to make oneself answerable to it in a situation whose gestural syntax already means yes, even if the affirmation should find itself followed by a question mark: Yes? No matter how you cut it, on either side of the line, there is no such thing as a free call. Hence the interrogative inflection of a yes that finds itself *accepting charges*,” she writes in *The Telephone Book* (1991:5, my emphasis). If to answer the call is to rise to meet its demand, to pay a debt, as she argues, then Dick at first just lets it ring for a while and finally takes the phone off the hook. If answering is to show oneself willing to receive an order, to accept the conditions of one’s answerability, Dick isn’t interested in being answerable for his place within patriarchy. To answer, Ronell argues, is to accept the imposition: “Who answers the call of the telephone, the call of duty, and accounts for the taxes it appears to impose?” Ronell asks (2).

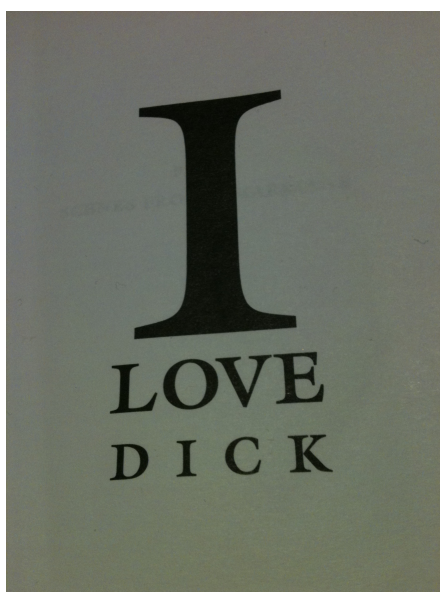


Fig. 13. The title page for the 1997 Semiotext(e) edition of *I Love Dick*.

We might ask if these projects really leave room for Dick or “X” to answer—indeed, if *any answer* might have been accepted, indeed acceptable. What if Dick responded to Kraus’ “junk mail” by sending it back instead of ignoring it? What possibilities lay in engaging the parasite, instead of avoiding it? Can one engage the parasite *parasitically*? That is, can one welcome the parasite *as a parasite*, rather than as a host?

In turn, “X” for Calle signals a kind of landmark for something that has “crossed her heart” and in turn, been crossed off. It is a symbol of what must be searched for and what has been buried. Maybe it represents the presence that has been barred or kept out? Or, in fact, the “X” may represent the *variable* that stands for the many possibilities that always coexist, among them, the possibility that, rather than “X” marking the thing that one must get away from, “X marks the spot” *where one must burrow in even deeper*. Like perfect hosts, Dick and “X” supply the very structures that threaten them, feeding the artists’ discursive attacks against them and growing the projects until they are emptied almost entirely of their substance, as Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle are recognized by the art world as never more unique.

NO TWO PARASITES ALIKE

A finer distinction must be drawn between the parasitism of the individual artists that I have so far discussed. First, a distinction can and should be made between Byrne on the one hand and Kraus and Calle on the other. It is by becoming parasite that *Byrne seeks to become a host*. Kraus and Calle, by contrast, do not seek to become hosts but rather to *grow as parasites*. The two artists, however, stage very different temporalities for the

parasite's antibiotic contestation of the host, calling for distinct readings of their individual service to the host's survival over time. While Calle's relationship with her "X" is indulged more in the realm of the symbolic, remaining an ongoing hypothetical in her collaborator's interpretations ("if *X actually exists* then *I*"), Kraus' relationships to Dick and Sylvere are more exposed, given her willingness, indeed her *pleasure in*, naming (actual) names and toying with the so-called "fictive" identities of two very real, and very public, men. And yet, this description could also be reversed, as Calle claimed a "real" intimacy with "X" and Kraus' relationship with Dick was based originally on one material encounter, and so it might be seen as the more hypothetical one. The possibility of such reversibility is essential to the "parasitism" of these projects. "How could I make you understand the letters were the realest thing I'd ever done?" writes Kraus in a letter to Dick, "...The only way I knew of reaching you apart from fucking was through ideas and words." Kraus recounts telling Dick, "'Cause don't you see?' I said, 'It's more a project than a game. I meant every word I wrote you in those letters...Don't you think it's possible to do something and simultaneously study it? If the project had a name it'd be *I Love Dick: A Case Study*'" (153-154).⁵⁰ This is a key question for a scholar of cultural studies such as Hebdige, given the field's positioning as the study of aspects of daily life. Kraus' dueling relationships with Dick and Sylvere make her a parasite in double measure. She is literally Sylvere's *perpetual dinner guest* (his eternal "plus one"). Given his professional success, their relationship feeds, clothes, houses, and makes

⁵⁰ The Austrian performance artist Elke Krystufek reproduced this quote from *I Love Dick* in her 1999 exhibition *Sleepingbetterland*, a series of mixed media collages of photographs, paintings, and text. The exhibit chronicles Krystufek's disastrous trip to visit a boyfriend in Hollywood, California—documenting her breakup, worsened bulimia, hospital visit, and broken heart. Kraus' text is juxtaposed in these images with photographs of sinks filled with blood, close-up images of what is ostensibly the artist's vagina and anus, a hospital bracelet, and pictures of her crying face. As Kraus claims in *I Love Dick*, Krystufek once said in an interview that: "I have decided to turn my life into a work of art. I have no private life: everything is public" (Gorsen 2003:59).

possible her creative work, ultimately ensuring the book's publication by the couple's press, *Semiotext(e)*. Conversely, her relationship with Dick is characterized by habitual indulgence and professional exploitation. Both relationships appear to emerge out of the scene of a dinner invitation gone awry ("Dinner is served among the parasites," writes Serres [2007:5]).

Michel de Certeau implies that a tactic is always a parasitical maneuver, gesturing to the problem of complicity in the parasite's willingness to "live with" that which might be understood to be oppositional to it. De Certeau writes: "A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance" (De Certeau 2002:xix). While both Kraus and Calle's projects expose not only the double bind of contemporary feminist theory—feminism's dependence of the very structures of domination that it finds its *raison d'être* in critiquing and, therefore, its vexed status as a project of both resistance and complicity—but also mobilize it, the artists' individual relationships to their hosts produce different mappings of the status of complicity in their work. By engaging the epistolary as a motif of heterosexual romance's parasitical structure, feminism's double bind, rather than being resolved, is even more deeply inscribed in its tactical recourse to parasitism. Kraus appears more explicitly troubled by this than Calle, not incidentally, who puts far less of "herself" into her project, employing others to speak on her behalf, a tactic that Chapter Three explores as outsourcing.

There would seem to be something altogether more honest, if frankly more unhinged, about Kraus' "parasitic growth" in comparison to Calle's, which remains firmly

measured by the boundaries set by the rules to her own coolly played representational game. Calle “plays” the parasite, but one has the sense that it is just that: a piece of theater or a game with a finite duration, as Calle has described her desire “to find a natural end” to her projects (Calle 2011). Perhaps Calle takes care of herself after all by modeling a deconstruction that is not self-destructive, engaging in less a tactic than a stratagem, which might offer a third term to sit alongside de Certeau’s opposing strategies and tactics. A stratagem is a way of playing the game without necessarily trying to win big at all costs (or for Foucault, without succeeding in reversing the state of domination [1994(1984):292]). This is not unlike what José Esteban Muñoz has proposed with his concept of “disidentification,” which is, for queers of color in majoritarian culture, ultimately a strategy of survival (1999).⁵¹ By contrast, there is little buffer between fact and fiction in Kraus for whom deeper and darker drives seem to lurk. Kraus’ game posits no foreseeable end, as she has no visible boundaries. Names are not changed to protect the innocent, leaving everyone foolish enough to let Kraus near them looking pretty guilty.

Calle and Kraus bifurcate notions of a “parasitical performance” to different ends. These performances of parasitism register something of the feminist implications of terms like performance and performativity. Butler’s theory cites a particular lineage of performativity that echoes both J. L. Austin and Derrida in proposing the performative as that which “enacts or produces that which it names” (1993:197). In *Bodies that Matter*,

⁵¹ Muñoz writes, “Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (1999:4-5).

Butler outlines a distinction between performance and performativity: A performance is a “bounded act” that is differentiated from performativity on the grounds that performativity: “consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s ‘will’ or ‘choice’” (1993:24). As I argued at the beginning of this chapter, Byrne’s practice, and here I would argue Kraus’ too, betrays the complicity in performativity as a form of iteration that carry its antagonists with it. Kraus’ project, more than Calle’s, performs a certain resistance to resolution—a desire to have the performance continue on beyond the boundedness of the encounter, the page, the book—and, at the same time, a recklessness toward survival. For Sophie Calle, the performance of the parasite gets worn as a theatricalized, protective cloak, a costuming that to some degree shields the “real” just long enough to leave people wondering, “Was she or wasn’t she just playing herself?” Calle’s parasitism is a carefully elaborated game of pleasure that, as a result, endures to play again, whereas Kraus’ performance takes on the inflection of a high velocity event, the “break a leg” or “big break” of an opening night that seems mere minutes from a very real breakdown. Her parasitical “performance” would appear to signal that which is extreme, durational, and lived in constant rehearsal. At the halfway mark of *I Love Dick*, she and Sylvère decide to separate. Her husband who was once “game” is no longer sure if the structure of their marriage is capable of withstanding the devastating blows of each hacking letter to Dick (whether relevant or not, Kraus and Lotringer have since divorced). In the midst of all of this, Kraus describes showing up unannounced to Dick’s home and having sex with him, transgressing the rules of her epistolary game. J. Hillis Miller writes, “The host feeds the parasite and makes its life possible, but at the same time is killed by it, as ‘criticism’ is often said to kill ‘literature.’”

Or can host and parasite live happily together, in the domicile of the same text, feeding each other or sharing the food?” (439). In these two images of the parasite, that of either the fatal attraction or the ongoing battle, we see Kraus on one side and Calle on the other.

In a later interview about the project, Sylvère admits, “You have to pay for indulgence...it was a risky operation” (“Monogamy” 1998).⁵² As if surgically to remove herself-as-appendage from her husband’s overpowering career, Kraus’ conceptual project hacks away at the relentlessly accommodating (super)structure of patriarchy but with little appreciation for the implications of its collapse for Sylvère, her marriage, and her own survival without it. If this is a feminist operation, how much blood is lost? What happens when the host/parasite bond is severed? If Dick and Sylvère reject her, who will be there to buttress the conceptual interest of the project and finally to publish her manuscript as Semiotext(e) ultimately does? To give her the intellectual nod of approval on which the project so depends? To watch and desire her dangerous performance of femininity? Kraus’ maniacal dedication to the project bespeaks the intensity of an artist willing to go deeper and further than anyone expects her to go, begging closer examination and further study of feminism’s own willingness to acknowledge its internal death drive and of what relation this disavowal bears on the persistence of feminism’s *ressentiment*. Is Kraus’ feminist performance a way of letting go, an epistolary deconstruction of Dick that will be the talking (writing) cure for her *ressentiment*? Or, in fact, does Kraus need this performance more than she’s willing to admit, as a performance artist and writer who must stay in crisis if the show is to go on? Lee Edelman describes the death drive as

⁵² Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer were interviewed together on the radio program *This American Life* about *I Love Dick*.

functioning like the parasite, as “a pressure both alien and internal to the logic of the Symbolic as the inarticulable surplus that dismantles the subject from within” (2004:9). Indeed, Kraus and Calle suggest feminism’s own need to ask the question that Edelman posed to queer theory: What would a (feminist) theory that is not oriented toward a “better” future look like? Can feminism move forward not in spite of its own thrall to negativity but *because of it*?

Unlike Calle, who might best be described as a parasite who feeds at the surface of the skin by operating in the sphere of the conceptual, Kraus prefers a more dramatic depth-model (“There’s dynamite here...” writes Cassin), desiring to burrow ever further into the inner depths of the real until the accommodating structure finally gives way. Kraus writes,

But Dick, I know that as you read this, you’ll know these things are true. You understand the game is real, or even better than, reality, and better than is what it’s all about...Better than means stepping out into compete intensity. Being in love with you, being ready to take this ride, made me feel 16, hunched up in a leather jacket in a corner with my friends. A timeless fucking image. It’s not about giving a fuck, or seeing all the consequences looking and doing something anyway (11).

In the closing lines of her same letter to Dick, Kraus writes, “Sylvère thinks he’s that kind of anarchist. But he’s not. I love you Dick” (11).

In the end, Kraus’ “love” for Dick always appears to be a performance most intended for Sylvère. Her anarchic parasitism, with its willful destructiveness toward the moral proprietary structures of marriage, home, and self, becomes a way for Kraus to *literalize* Sylvère’s investment in poststructuralism. This literalization manifests in the sense that Kraus insists on the notion of transgression valorized in the writings of the coterie of

French thinkers published by Semiotext(e) *in its most basic sense* and that she expresses this *in letters*. By deconstructing Dick, Kraus pushes poststructural premises to their furthest conclusions, simultaneously impressing and alienating Sylvère in the process. What appears to be her own spectacular self-liberation and/or self-abasement would actually seem to be a very self-conscious performance for Sylvère's critical attention and romantic approval. Rather than rebelling against the "law of the father," which is in this case poststructural theory (a fraternity in which Dick is a brother), Kraus positions herself as deconstructive poster girl, who, in the name of feminism, is willing to (death) drive her banner right off a cliff.

By piercing and feeding on the X that is "Dick," both Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle begin to swell in critical and self-import, *remapping the ideological territory of the host who is incrementally dwarfed by its parasite*. In both projects, it is romance—or its correlative, intimate correspondence—that is the conduit for relational exchange across gender boundaries. Reversing the stakes of women's emotionality as a point of weakness, affective and sexual attachments are remapped as sites of the "para"—a prefix indicating "beside or alongside, wrongfully, harmfully, unfavorably, among," which, Miller notes, has come to mean "the boundary line, threshold, or margin, and at the same time beyond it...at once a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside [and] confusing them" (441). In other words, women's emotionality is transfigured in the parasite as a kind of *parachute*—the promise of a way out of the same old gender binaries. The parachute offered by a parasitical feminism, however, does not guarantee survival or even successful escape. Casualties are inevitable.

CODA / AGENTS, NATIVE AND FOREIGN

In May 2011, I received a correspondence from Chris Kraus. As in the case of my dialogue with Byrne, the very fact of working on living artists in the age of Google had created the conditions for the parasitical artist to “be in touch” with her parasitical critic. In her email, Kraus expressed both enthusiasm and concern over my reading of *I Love Dick*, explaining that a short article that I had published about the book had come to her attention.⁵³ “The concept you develop of parasitical feminism is provocative and fascinating. I respect your right to discuss the book on your own terms but would like to bring a factual error to your attention,” she wrote. Kraus was uncomfortable with my reading of *I Love Dick* as a book framed by an *institutional dependence* on Lotringer as its publisher. Kraus, upon her initial reading of my article, objected to the notion that she was supplemental to—and thus a parasite on—the very press of which she was co-editor. She wanted to correct this, writing: “*I Love Dick* was published by Semiotexte in 1997. I became a co-editor of Semiotexte in 1989 when I launched the Native Agents imprint...Therefore, *I Love Dick* was self-published (abjection maybe of another kind) but not dependent on Sylvere’s editorial decision.” She added in a subsequent email:

I had already published books by Ann Rower, Cookie Mueller, Kathy Acker, Lynne Tillman and Barbara Barg in the Native Agents series. Sylvere and I saw the fiction books as an American analog to French theories of subjectivity (Deleuze Guattari Foucault) published in the Foreign Agents series - which, by the 90s, had already in our minds run its course - by that time, these theorists were being published by university presses in the US; Semiotexte had already done its job by introducing them. Our goal has always been to intervene intellectually at certain cultural moments. Semiotexte remains an amateur enterprise: our list is highly curated - we never do a

⁵³ See my article “Parasitical Politics and Epistolary Games: The Art of Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle” (“Politique parasitaire et jeux épistolaires : les jeux d’adresse de Chris Kraus et de Sophie Calle”) in the French journal *Le Texte étranger*.

book that we don't feel is vitally important. So when [*I Love Dick*] shaped up as a book, with the upstate NY essays, it seemed like a perfect fit for the series. In a way, I'd been studying this form of writing for years and began publishing it in '89 with the first books in the Native Agents series.

Kraus' desire to correct the public record with respect to her integral, rather than marginal, role in the founding of the Native Agents series, and more generally in the operations of Semiotext(e), was furthered by a February 2012 essay published in *n+1* by Elizabeth Gumport. In "Female Trouble," Gumport describes Kraus' contribution to Semiotext(e) in the establishment of the Native Agents series as a feminist corrective to Lotringer's Foreign Agents series. Gumport describes the Native Agents imprint as nothing less than the reincorporation of feminism from the margins of French theory to the center of American fiction and critical theory. Semiotext(e) "permanently transformed the landscape of American thought," Gumport writes, citing François Cusset's book *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*. Cusset writes that the magazine and books series, which Lotringer established in 1983, played "a pathbreaking role in the early diffusion of French theory" (qtd in Gumport 2012).

The small, black, inexpensive paperbacks published by Semiotext(e)'s Foreign Agents imprint introduced a generation of American students to a number of French authors, among them Paul Virilio, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard. (The first title in the series—an excerpt adapted from Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*—sold more than 20,000 copies.) Lotringer imagined these complex but unacademic volumes as how-to books: what they taught you was "how to think with your own mind . . . how to eroticize thinking, make it a pleasure of the senses." It was, he declared, "philosophy for the boudoir" (Gumport 2012).

"Kraus—who had met Lotringer earlier that decade, when she was working to make a

name for herself as an artist and filmmaker in the downtown circles in which he was revered,” writes Gumport, “suggested Semiotext(e) turn to face America directly and recover the original, unpardonably forgotten contribution the United States had made to intellectual life in the years after 1968, namely, feminism. This recovery took the form of the Native Agents series.” Gumport writes,

When the imprint was launched in 1990, with Kraus as editor, Foreign Agents had never published a book by someone who wasn’t a white man. Semiotext(e) had “missed out” on the feminist movement entirely. “It happened,” Lotringer told an interviewer, “and I wasn’t aware of it.” He hadn’t published women, Kraus explained, “because the only women he knew writing theory were doing psychoanalytic theory, which he wasn’t so interested in” (2012).

Native Agents sought to recover a different line of feminism, publishing female authors who—as Kraus also noted when she wrote to me—used what she described as “the same public ‘I’ that gets expressed in these other French theories . . . a personal ‘I’ that is constantly bouncing up against the world—that isn’t just existing for itself” (Gumport 2012). In an interview, Lotringer offers a similar account of the founding of Native Agents:

We began looking instead for an “American Theory” that would be in the making, unaware. We found it in the first person female narrative. Narratives, in the United States, are usually hopelessly confessional...Chris Kraus created the new “Native Agents” series to investigate subjectivity that wasn’t turned inward (there’s nothing there but trouble), rather turned outward and capable of providing a vision of the world as it is, not as it is supposed to be. It was a snub at those who love thinking to be outlandish and “incomprehensible” in order to feel legitimate. What the existence of “Native Agents” really meant is that thinking can be found everywhere, not just in theory books (Waltemath 2006).

Despite Kraus' insistence that the ultimate publication of *I Love Dick* by Semiotext(e) was not a result of her being Sylvère's "plus one," it can perhaps be seen as a reaction, all the same, to the "bracketing of the feminine" formalized in the "the silent e" (in French, *e muet*), the feminine supplement, of the name of Semiotext(e) itself, a publisher that became known, for supporting—if not *creating* in its subcultural marketing of—a "boys only" theoretical tradition (Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault, Baudrillard, etc.). This is a bracketing that Kraus, nevertheless, persists in *trying to unbracket* in her exchange with me, writing in each of her emails: "Semiotexte" instead of "Semiotext(e)." This is to say that Semiotext(e)'s institutional hospitality of (or is it *hospitality to*?) Kraus-as-parasite would seem to function much like the Native Agent series itself, as a kind of *integrated outsider*, a feminist structural parasite (if ironically) on the masculinist Foreign Agent series, figured like the bracketed feminine (e) or the feminist addendum of a forgotten critical discourse that has since been retrieved. The pronouns *of* or *to* carry with them very different implications, signifying either Kraus as host, with her own hospitality, or as parasite on someone's hospitality. The choice of "Native Agent" as the name for a series said to stand in for the recovery of feminist discourse for a publisher and distributor that is widely credited with having set the agenda for cutting-edge theory and literature over the past three decades is remarkable. The name conveys an attempt to render women writers like Ann Rower, Eileen Myles, and Barbara Barg *at home within* Semiotext(e) and to make the intellectual avant-garde *hospitable to* feminism.

Lotringer's admission that, despite his enthusiastic personal involvement with the emergence of French theory in the U.S., he had somehow "missed out" on the feminist movement ("It happened and I wasn't aware of it") would seem to invite questions about

his “participation” in *I Love Dick*, as both a named character in the project and publisher. What exactly are we to understand is Chris and Sylvère’s contract? How is it distinct from the professional contract that Semiotext(e) represents between Kraus and Lotringer? In 1989, the very year that Kraus became a co-editor of Semiotext(e) and launched the Native Agents series, Lotringer and Kraus cowrote the foreword (which they titled “Foreward”) for a reprinting of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s classic novel *Venus in Furs*, credited with introducing the dominant/submissive relationship in literature and with yielding the very term of masochism. “Sacher-Masoch was an early feminist,” Lotringer and Kraus write playfully. “He supported ‘women’s studies’ and celebrated them throughout the ages...” (1989:6). “Always an ardent idealist and utopian, a champion of the downtrodden—he himself loved being under the foot of a powerful female—Masoch unconditionally supported women, urging them to be strong the way *he* wanted them to be” (1989:7, their emphasis). The use of italics here is key. It makes dynamic the irony that is Lotringer and Kraus’ feminist critique of Sacher-Masoch’s contract as a contract that ultimately serves *the masochist himself*.

In her work on male masochism, Suzanne R. Stewart further elaborates this critique, writing of *Venus in Furs*:

It is here, before the signing and the writing [of the masochistic contract], where the question ‘Am I a man or a slave?’ is posed, that Severin finds his identity...it will depend on the possibility or the promise that Severin can see himself being seen, on the condition that the passive phrase ‘I am tortured by Wanda’ means ‘I can direct my own torture at the hand of Wanda.’ *Thus, the passive or masochistic subject-position must be just that: a subject-position in charge of its own destiny.* It must allow for a kind of self-reflexivity that permits a representation or projection that transforms the passive construction of being tortured and being seen into an agent or subject of that same

passive sentence (1998:87, my emphasis).

Stewart reads in Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* a feminist problematic in the passive construction of male masochism in the sadomasochistic contract. It is always read within "the letter of the law" underwritten by patriarchal dominance. In the novel, it is Severin who determines his own submissive position, a contracted vulnerability that is nevertheless subject to interruption and redirection, as Stewart notes. "Severin ultimately loses consciousness as his only way of escape, and when he comes to, he finds blood running down his arm: Wanda has bitten him," Stewart writes, "This is clearly not the form of domination that Severin has in mind, and he continually insists on punishment and humiliation instead of passionate lovemaking. Here too, however, Wanda seems unable to get it right. Obviously her capacities for imaginative activity are limited; she takes things too literally" (1998:66-67). As a result, the story of Wanda's dominance over Severin is, in fact, just one narrative within the novel's larger set of narrative frameworks, as a story-within-a-story. It is a scripted dialectics of power that plays out within a larger meta-narrative of power relations.

The way in which scenes of women's empowerment come undone in this scene-within-a-scene structure might be read against Kraus' claim that *I Love Dick* is essentially self-published. *I Love Dick* itself represents that of the contract between Chris and Sylvère wherein she plays sadist (and at times, masochist as well) to his masochist, as triangulated through Dick. These dynamics, however, prove intransferable to their work together on the foreword for *Venus in Furs*, despite the subject matter, which invites the reader to read into their "collaboration" that Chris would "play" Wanda and Sylvère would Severin. The limitations of Chris' dominance, like Wanda's in the story, become abruptly clear

when one reads that, despite both signatures appearing under the foreword, it is Lotringer alone who is credited on the copyright page of *Venus in Furs*, which reads only “Foreword © Sylvère Lotringer.”

In “having” the first word (solo recognition for the Foreword), Sylvère has the last word. As such, it appears that it is within the bounds of fiction that woman is able to play the role of dominant, when the terms can be set by phallocratic editorial discretion. We will recall here that the Native Agents series began as an imprint for *publishing fiction*, mainly by women, promoted as the feminist analogue to Semiotext(e)’s celebrated tradition of publishing French theory by men.

In contrast to the book, Kraus insists in her emails to me that *I Love Dick* is a novel, distancing herself from a reading of *I Love Dick* as purposefully blurring the distinction between art and life by re-emphasizing the work as literary art. She notes, “the novel’s literary strategy of writing through a series of familiar tropes and masks: the love-struck girl, the scheming wife, the stalker,” thereby suggesting that its fictionality is clear. “You seem troubled by the invasion of Dick’s privacy the novel constituted,” she wrote to me, “This was never my intent. The character ‘Dick’’s nationality, physical appearance, biographical details and even the title and quotations from his book were fictionalized. Before publication, I invited Dick (Hebdige, as I’m sure you know) to write an introduction. He declined. His surname only became public when he used it to denounce the novel.”

In my response to her (“Dear Chris...”), I expounded on my interest in what I saw to be

the feminist significance of reading *I Love Dick* not merely as a piece of fiction but as a piece of performance art by a writer who uses literature as the medium of her performance. I suggested that this might provide a way of exploiting performance as a feminist imposition on phallocratic control within literary theory. “I have long felt that *I Love Dick* has more to say about the state of contemporary feminism than practically anything I’ve read,” I wrote to her, “It troubles me because of its performative trace...something that I don’t find a purely literary reading quite to satisfy.” “What are your thoughts on the figure of the parasite I have proposed—a figure that I absolutely regard to be the familiar trope/mask of femininity *par excellence* (the love-struck girl, the scheming wife, the stalker all rolled into one) but one that I also think speaks to the extra-literary insistence that I am drawn to in *I Love Dick*?,” I asked her.

Kraus replied. “The idea of parasitical feminism is so apropos on a number of levels,” she wrote, noting that she had re-read my work with these ideas in mind. “Because (as you point out) this parasitism is a real strategy, an intellectual terrorism—a means of making a symbolic point from a position of relative powerlessness: recognizing one’s place within a host culture and then acting upon it. I agree with you about Sophie Calle’s work. Nominally I’m a fan but have always found it a bit clinical.” Kraus continued, “I think my immediate reaction to the text was a jolt because it didn’t represent my experience as its writer—but that isn’t really the job of a critical essay.” “For whatever it’s worth, the word ‘hostility’ caught [me] a bit in my throat, [because] I never felt motivated by hostility. Confusion, yes—desire, frustration. But the adulation of ‘Dick’ began as something genuine...conflating ‘Dick’ with the whole alt/male/underground culture I’d aspired to since my teens, and then having to realize it excluded me. Describing the

genesis of the project through Dick's account—"a genial but not particularly remarkable meeting"—makes it sound perhaps even crazier." "The heavy flirtation during a long drunken night in front of Sylvère coupled with the morning disappearance triggered something. And then of course...there were subsequent meetings and sex. Dick was a notorious womanizer and the way men of that type/generation sexualized every encounter with women triggered something. Confusion! (This, I realize, may not be pertinent to your project)," she wrote. "Hope this is helpful," she concluded. "I look forward to reading more of your thesis as it continues. All best, Chris."

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CHAPTER TWO

***parasite* | 'pa-ra-zi-t' |**

French Definition

2. *Telecommunications.* An unpredictable signal disturbing a message by superimposition, static or interference.

Masked, so as not to be seen. But what is a joker,
if not a pile of masks?

-Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (2007:210)

CHAPTER TWO /

LIKE A GIRL'S NAME THE ADOLESCENT DRAG OF AMBER HAWK SWANSON, KATE GILMORE, AND ANN LIV YOUNG

The ironist does not have the new within [her] power...[s]he destroys the given actuality by the given actuality itself.

-Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony: With Constant Reference to Socrates* (1965:279)

If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion that emerges from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself.

-Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990:93)

The idea of revolution is an adolescent fantasy.

-Jenny Holzer, Twitter (7:02pm, 19 October 2011)

VULGARITY AND UNICORNS

Whereas Chapter One analyzed the parasitical figure of the dependent lover, this chapter explores the parasitical figure of the adolescent. While the parasite has widely been thought of as a figure that takes *without giving back*, one thought to interrupt the gift economy rather than participate in it, I will argue that the parasite gives back by overconsuming, indeed by taking too much. The adolescent-as-parasite “contributes” to

feminism if only by refusing to contribute, and thus it offers a interruption to historical approaches to questions of feminist legacy and inheritance, which have widely been characterized as stalled by feminism's much-hyped "mother-daughter conflict." Rather than see this conflict as a defining present-day problem for feminism, I argue that it presents a falsely binary for a younger generation of would-be feminists. As a countermove and third possibility (to that of clashing "mother" vs. "daughter" feminisms), the chapter introduces three young artists who mobilize what I call *adolescent drag* as a form of parasitical self-parody. Adolescent drag offers a critical frame for reappraising cultural forms that has often been misread as evidencing feminism's supposed irrelevance to young women. As younger women have appeared progressively to treat feminism as a form of ideological parasitism, I ask: what if the future of feminism lay not in images of self-mastery, dignity, and maturity but in performances of teen regression?

Such a performance is evident in the work of choreographer-cum-performance artist Ann Liv Young. Any day of the week, you might happen upon her labyrinthine personal website to encounter something like the following, which appeared in the Spring of 2009: "march 12th/7pm/bring your girls along and let's do a girls night. It's a girl's night out. tickets are \$15 per person. we'll do facials, nails, a little cooking and some masterbation techniques! (of course we do not descriminate against men or trans.)" Careless spelling errors, cursing, unicorns, dogs, and raw, naked exhibitionism greet you when you land in Young's kitschified fairytale universe, along with the voice of what sounds like a demented witch screaming through your speakers, "Mwahahahaaa!! Welcome to my website. I am Ann Liv Young, demon master!!!" Her homepage features collaged, scrapbook cutout images of evil trees, a fairy princess castle, and Young in a bikini staring down the camera

with her young child playing beside her (fig. 1). Further in, you find a selection of buttons on a background of ornamental doilies, lavender doodles, and amateur drawings done in Microsoft Windows Paint, inviting you to click on: “DVDs,” “Dance company,” “Copyright,” “Performances,” “Animals,” “Raps,” and “Contact Us” (fig. 2). Animals? Raps? Almost none of the links work.⁵⁴

Young’s appeal to all her “girls” satirizes third-wave feminism’s slogan of “girl power” with the same humor as her ironic juvenilizing misspellings. Young’s feigned fervor for “girl stuff” (facials, nails, cooking, masturbation) lampoons the commercial production and exploitation of a privileged representation of femininity (“\$15 per person”) in her own comically DIY attempt to do so herself. Young hyperbolizes and degrades the adolescent figure that Western culture mandates as a permanent performance for all women—“Femininity is a kind of ‘prolonged childhood’” wrote de Beauvoir (2011:129)—while it at the same time figures the girl as unattainable ideal: as an endlessly reproducible object of desire and infinitely viable commercial subject, as that which is constantly renewed and yet entirely replaceable.



⁵⁴During my interview with the artist, Young—who told me that she made her website while “at home...in [her] room”—claimed the website’s inaccessibility to be an aesthetic choice: “People actually say ‘I can’t find where the button is’ but it would be really easy for me to make a little button that says ‘Click here.’”

Figure 1. “Mwahahahaaa!!” the homepage of Ann Liv Young’s website beckons. Annlivyoung.com, 2011. (Courtesy of Ann Liv Young).



Figure 2. The online menu served up on Ann Liv Young’s doily covered webpage. annlivyoung.com, 2011. (Courtesy of Ann Liv Young).

In the self-conscious performance of adolescence, the once paternalistic and demeaning appellation “girl” has increasingly become a recognizable queer resignification of compulsory constructions of “womanliness” presented in the mainstream media and certain strands of feminism. Young is one of a number of female contemporary artists in their 20s and 30s whose intermedial performance practices propose the aesthetic of adolescence as a coded response to the question of feminism’s continued relevance for the “daughters” of the second wave.⁵⁵ This survey of three such artists—Amber Hawk Swanson, Kate Gilmore, and Ann Liv Young—advances a hermeneutic for reading the improvisational aesthetic of *adolescent drag*, a parasitical operation that redirects notions of kitsch and regression to critique the limited identificatory positions available to a generation of young women said to be the heirs of Western feminism: positions like those

⁵⁵ Earlier contemporary art progenitors of this move toward the performance of adolescence might be said to include artists such as Tracey Emin, Elke Krystufek, and Chris Kraus, as well as male artists like Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, who have been associated with boyish adolescent aesthetic practices. Over the past decade, female artists who take adolescence as the subject of their portraiture have become extremely visible in the field of contemporary art: see for example, Lisa Yuskavage, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Rineke Dijkstra, Miwa Yanagi, Tomoko Sawada, Julia Fullerton-Batten, Nikki S. Lee, Sue de Beer, Anna Gaskell, Justine Kurland, Katy Grannan, Sarah Jones, and Laurel Nakadate.

of either the sanctimonious convert or the rebellious postfeminist, the good or the bad daughter. Their performance of adolescence is decidedly *not* a further proliferation of postfeminism, understood here as a form of antifeminism that has itself co-opted the adolescent tropes that these artists seek actively to reclaim.⁵⁶ Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon write that “postfeminism emerges in the intersections and hybridisation of mainstream media, consumer culture, neo-liberal politics, postmodern theory and significantly, feminism...It has been denounced—particularly by feminist critics—as a contaminating presence, a parasite charged with infiltration and appropriation” (2009:16). They further argue that “the prefix ‘post’ occupies an uneasy position suggesting an invasion and appropriation, a ‘parasite riding on the back of the original movement which benefits from the ground it has won but uses this for its own means” (16). Adolescent drag, on the other hand, adopts and rechannels the appropriative fervor of postfeminism to renegotiate feminist representation. It is a performance of “pre-feminism” offered in response to the threat of “postfeminism.”

While it reflects a shared investment in a *working with* the state of contemporary feminism, rather than an attempt to escape or supersede it (as postfeminism would imply), parasitical feminism is not a rearticulation of what Amelia Jones has called “parafeminism.” In *Self/Image*, Jones articulates parafeminism, which she opposes to postfeminism, in dialogue video artist Pipilotti Rist, as a “conceptual model of critique and exploration that is simultaneously parallel to and building on (in the sense of

⁵⁶ Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra have described postfeminism as a popular idiom “generated and primarily deployed outside the academy, [and therefore] lack[ing] the rigor we expect of scholarly work” (Genz and Brabon 2009:18). Adolescent drag trafficks in irony to neutralize the anticriticality of postfeminism.

rethinking and pushing the boundaries of, but not superseding) earlier feminisms” (2006:213). Jones’ proposal of the prefix “para-” as a modifier for feminism is, nevertheless, useful for thinking through a conceptualization of feminism that is not prescriptive but rather seeks to function both “side by side” and “beyond” feminist critical inheritances. If postfeminism represents itself in the prefix “post” as a claim that we are somehow beyond certain issues that no longer need to be discussed, Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young model art practices that insist on the relevance of such issues.

Adolescent drag is a younger generation of women artists’ tactical negotiation with their cultural inheritance from 1960s’ and ‘70s’ feminist art and from second-wave feminism more broadly. While theorists such as Elisabeth Badinter and Janet Halley have offered polemics arguing Western feminism’s exhaustion, and Gayatri Spivak, Linda Zerilli, and Saba Mahmood have powerfully critiqued its conceptual grounding in discourses of freedom and autonomy,⁵⁷ few, however, have asked if an earnest and transparent identification with feminism is necessary, or even desirable, for the overall health of feminism as a political project. How do these performances mediate historically positivistic strands within feminist theory that have proved challenging for a younger generation of would-be feminists?

The aesthetic of girlishness dragged by the artists discussed in this chapter has become a recognizable cultural distillation of womanhood. There is a current interest in this aesthetic across disciplines in contemporary art, as several recent exhibitions demonstrate:

⁵⁷ See Badinter (2006), Halley (2008), Spivak (1988), Zerilli (2005), and Mahmood (2005), who offer diverse critiques of Western feminism, simply stated, as a majoritarian project.

“Girl’s Night Out” at the Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach, California, 14 September 2003 to 25 January 2004; “Heartbreaker” at the Mary Boone Gallery in New York from 2 November to 16 December 2006; and “Girlish Ways: The Next Generation of Female Artists” exhibit from 28 June to 6 July 2008 at the Bobby Fisher Memorial Building in Washington, DC. In a certain sense, this art institutional fascination with “the girl” that these exhibitions evidence is nothing new but rather is a recurrence of themes of childishness and adolescence that have long marked the thin “dividing line” between representations of “feminism” and “postfeminism” by the mainstream art world. Contestations over attempts to reappropriate the girl (“Is it or is it not *really* feminist?”) have framed feminism’s vexed relation to the term “girl” and its vast cultural associations and appropriations since the ‘80s. These latest exhibitions appear to be less contemporary reincarnations of the notorious “Bad Girls” exhibitions from the mid-90s than attempts to reinvest in the commodification of an institutional branding of “naughty” feminism and *at the same time* to rethink the potential of the girl altogether for a very different political moment for feminism.

“Bad Girls” is often cited as a low point in the sensationalizing of feminist art for a wider contemporary art market. It was a much-discussed and much-maligned two-part 1994 exhibition at New York’s New Museum of Contemporary Art, curated by Marcia Tucker, and it also had a West Coast counterpart called “Bad Girls West” at LA’s UCLA Wright Art Gallery that was curated by Marcia Tanner. In her symptomatic contribution to the exhibition catalog, Tanner writes, “*Real* bad girls however—truly unruly women who threaten to turn the social order upside down—aren’t welcome [in Hollywood imagery]...Has Hollywood totally co-opted, usurped, domesticated, exhausted and

invalidated all the ironic meanings of ‘bad girls’? No fucking way” (1994:48). In a review in *Art Review*, Charles Hall wrote, “At their worst, the artists in *Bad Girls* have nothing to offer beyond a general adolescent feeling that, since everyone else is obviously a fascist, they’re going to either paint their rooms black, rip their jeans or, on a good day, piece their nipples” (1994:55). Curator and critic Iwona Blazwick wrote of the exhibition, “The title ‘*Bad Girls*’ stresses an infantile, naughty, rebellious posture whereas there was actually a very serious and powerful thrust to a lot of work in the show. I suppose it aimed at trying to finding [sic] a young audience who are going to respond because it feels trendy—the rationale being not to look didactic, agit-propish or oppressive when certain aspects of feminism could be seen to be all of these things” (“Who’s Bad?” 1994). Given this history—which foregrounds deep-seated feminist concerns over the market’s enthusiastic collusion with the avant-garde to represent women *as adolescents*—it appears ever more urgent to interrogate the relevance of the continued and insistent reverberation of adolescence as a theme within the visual fields of art and performance to contemporary feminist discourse. Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young model the performance of adolescence as a prism through which they refract and redefine the project of contemporary feminism.

Notably, all New York City-based, relatively commercially successful, white artists, Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young simultaneously luxuriate in and lampoon the aura of Western privilege and whiteness as they attend to the aesthetic of adolescent femininity and the perception of feminism at large. The adolescent figure is inextricable from the white, Western privilege that affords the time and space to be a child, the luxury that laboring or forgotten children are not afforded, and the “development” withheld from

racialized or colonialized subjects.⁵⁸ The artists thus model adolescence as indexing a particular set of questions about the gender and racial privileges inherent to the acts of appropriation and consumption that, at the same time, reproduce adolescent white femininity as a *trademark* of late capitalism. The adolescent is both trademark in the buying and selling of white bourgeoisie adolescence as the fetish object of Western consumer culture *and* the marker of trade in the buying and selling of adolescent and pre-adolescent bodies in many parts of the world, which is the unexplored, dark underside of the Western narrative explored in this chapter. In adolescent drag, the artists I discuss attend to this association of problems of femininity and feminism as an historically bourgeoisie problematic and a white, first-world class project.

These artists seek to pervert such an image of privilege, visualizing its excess and rendering its myopia comic. They “act out” an adolescent confrontation. Rather than *actually* being or behaving like adolescent girls, these artists appropriate and *stage* the adolescent as a serviceable figure for articulating a more loosely ordered and multifarious contemporary feminism, organized by tactical disidentifications both with the mother (and the previous generation of women performance artists), figured by second-wave feminism, and with the daughter, figured by third-wave feminism. The strategic reappropriation of the adolescent exploits a double prejudice in the genre of feminist performance art, as the figure of the adolescent indexes failure within both the spheres of

⁵⁸The kind of adolescent nostalgia I am describing here at the same time props up and critiques white supremacy and bourgeois privilege in the Western cultural imaginary. See Robin Bernstein’s *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011) for further reading on the construction of girlhood as a racial formation.

feminist theory and performance art.⁵⁹

The 20th and 21st century adolescent girl, a figure inextricable from the cultural commodification that has both constituted and appropriated her,⁶⁰ has represented a slippery, at times exasperating, subject for a critical feminist project historically oriented toward the fully mature political subject “woman,” as evidenced by bitter dividing lines cited in the “mother-daughter” conflict between second and third-wave feminism. The characteristic ambivalence and protean nature of the adolescent challenges historical political inclinations within feminism toward a certain unequivocal, transparency, and frontalism thought to be necessary for a communicable politics. These tendencies have at times manifested themselves in a dangerous universalism that has been rigorously critiqued by scholars of critical race, postcolonial, and queer studies, tendencies that have nonetheless often yielded a priggish and exclusionary image of feminism. These critiques of a prescriptive feminism have been further, if ironically, marshaled to accuse feminism of appearing like too much of a reified type, and especially, too much like a mother figure.

Likewise, figuring performance art as adolescent has long been a critique used to disparage it as a nontraditional or experimental genre, adolescent as epithet for the kind

⁵⁹*New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter wrote in 2002, “Of the liberation movements for which the late 20th century will be remembered, few have been as disparaged as feminism, and that scorn extends to the women’s art movement. Even presumably well-intentioned art-worldlings seem incapable of talking about it without condescension, as if it were some indiscreet adolescent episode best forgotten” (Cotter 2002).

⁶⁰Write Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber in their groundbreaking essay “Girls and Subcultures,” “When girls do appear, it is either in ways which uncritically reinforce the stereotypical image of women with which we are now so familiar[.] [G]irls...have always been located nearer to the point of consumerism than to the ‘ritual of resistance’ (1975:112, 116).

of art perceived to be too crude, petulant, or awkward for inclusion in the museum.⁶¹ The adolescent refigures the internalization of this disparagement, this shame, as potential—an affect that Chris Kraus explored extensively in *I Love Dick* as a byproduct of adolescent infatuation, which Chapter One examines at length. Kraus writes of her own adolescent feelings of feminist and artistic inadequacy well beyond her teenage years: “Cause shame was what we always felt, me and all my girlfriends, for expecting sex to breed complicity. (‘Complicity is like a girl’s name’)” (1997:171). While my first chapter examined this shame as the internalization of misogyny as sexual shame, in this chapter I consider how misogyny produces age as an affective category—producing women—like Kraus—that, no matter their age, still feel like girls.

The portrait of the adolescent developed here is one drawn rebelliously *between* the mother and the child, typified by the anachronistic bricolage that offers a hodgepodge of signifiers plucked from both children’s cultural and aesthetic references (fairytales, dress-up games) and mature associations (explicit nudity, pornography, cursing). In these artworks, the mature/immature developmental binary gets mapped onto the highbrow/lowbrow taste divide, as amateur aesthetics emerge as the condition of possibility for, what I will argue is, a queering of the adolescent figure that transverses and troubles such normative binaries. I argue that adolescent drag is “queer” in as far as it actively indexes queer-feminist theoretical debates regarding the antisocial turn, queer temporality, and the aesthetics of

⁶¹The equation of performance art to adolescence is one that continues to reveal itself in the public consciousness. During an episode of Bravo’s popular reality TV show *Work of Art* entitled “A Shock to the System” (season 1, episode 4), which premiered 30 June 2010, contestants were asked to create a shocking work of art. Upon judging a performance piece created by the performance artist Nao Bustamante, art critic Jerry Saltz declares with disgust: “This comes across as adolescent mixed with ‘shock your grandmother’ performance art.” Saltz’s condemns Bustamante’s piece for being, in other words, too shockingly familiar.

failure that have emerged over the last half-decade, even as it, at the same time, represents the adolescent girl in the visual vocabularies associated with heteronormative, feminine ideals.

Not only do these artists perform a kind of “straightface,” but they perform the adolescent girl as “whiteface,” made more and less uncanny because they are performed by young, white women. Adolescent drag is an appropriated form of primitivist mimicry that, in its manipulation of these binaries, borrows from a tradition of artists of color who have engaged the aesthetics of amateurism as a form of antiracist or postcolonial critique. The performances effect a kind of self-parody. As the identificatory possibilities of drag have become ever more elastic within performance discourse over the last decade,⁶² the adolescent is mobilized as a site of performance exemplary of what Elizabeth Freeman has called “temporal drag,” (2000) a concept to which my analysis will return.

These works recall those of Brooklyn-based, downtown performance artist Neal Medlyn’s ardent dragging of Britney Spears and Miley Cyrus for his two-part performances ...*Her’s a Queen* (2009) and *Brave New Girl* (2010) (fig. 3).⁶³ They also call to mind the practice of

⁶² “Drag” has been a key term wielded within the broader campaign of lesbian and gay studies, and subsequently queer theory and increasingly performance studies, to unhinge identification from what some have perceived as its psychoanalytic orthodoxies and to understand it as a more fluid and transitive performative site for social contestation in staging and improvisation. See José Esteban Muñoz’s discussion of “terrorist drag” in *Disidentifications* (1999) and, more recently, punk’s utopian “stages” in Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* (2009), David Román’s “archival drag” (2005), Elizabeth Freeman’s “temporal drag” (2000), and Rebecca Schneider’s recent writing on the cross-temporal “drag” of reenactment art in *Performing Remains* (2011) as attempts to move questions of identity into wider fields of cultural figuration that have been associated with post-identity politics. Here, opportunities for identity play have become increasingly marked by greater transitive ease and mobility of identificatory signifiers, from which the adolescent emerges as but one example among many.

⁶³ Part One of his performance, presented by the Dance Theatre Workshop in October 2009, entailed the transition of Britney Spears from “destroyed icon to purity through a candy-drug induced forgetfulness” (Stonebraker 2010). Part Two, *Brave New Girl*, opened at the Chocolate Factory in October 2010.

recently anointed art market-darling Ryan Trecartin, whose generally cracked-out video-performances were recognized with the 2011 solo exhibition *Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever* at New York City's MoMA PS1 (fig. 4) and the work of performance and video artist Kalup Linzy, best known for his low-quality soap opera videos in which he performs in drag (fig 5). These male art personas' penchant for blonde wigs manifest the contemporary zeitgeist of adolescent drag. Like Young, Medlyn, Trecartin, and Linzy—to say nothing of women artists such as Cindy Sherman and Vanessa Beecroft, who have also used wigs to play with themes of alienation in narratives of white privilege—these artists “try on” “Barbie hair” as a signifier for privilege in late capitalism.⁶⁴ That is, the blonde wig has been utilized by these artists to attend to the “overprocessed” quality of conceptions of identity. The projects thus express the manner in which white femininity has emerged as a privileged site for mining questions about the production of identity through media consumption within practices of avant-garde cultural production.



Figure 3. Neal Medlyn poses in a publicity photo for his September 2010 debut of *Brave New Girl* at The Chocolate Factory, New York City. (Courtesy of Neal Medlyn).

⁶⁴ I thank Joseph Roach for pointing out the significance of the blonde wig in Ann Liv Young's adolescent drag performances, in particular.



Figure 4. Still from Ryan Trecartin's *Temp Stop (Re'Search Wait'S)*, 2009-2010 - HD Video (Courtesy of Elizabeth Dee Gallery).



Figure 5. Still from Kalup Linzy's *Conversations wit de Churen III: Da Young and Da Mess*, 2005 (Courtesy of the artist and Taxter and Spengemann Gallery, New York).

In all of these works, we see a turning of the screw of performances of excess—a thematic that, as Rebecca Schneider demonstrated with the explicit body, is fundamental to the genre of feminist performance art. She writes, “At base, the explicit body in much feminist work interrogates sociocultural understandings of the ‘appropriate’ and/or the appropriately transgressive—particularly who gets to mark what in(appropriate) where,

and, who has the right to appropriate what where—keeping in mind the double meaning of the word appropriate (1997:3). “As the argument goes, late capitalism appropriates, incorporates, consumes transgression...” (3).

The parasitism of these artists, shot through adolescence, is a parasitism in an age of decadence—an overfeeding, indeed an aesthetic gorging, that finds its condition of possibility in a political economy characterized by exceptional precarity. Dysfunction, self-fascination, experimentation, humiliation, and vulgarity are all marshaled in adolescent drag as costuming for bittersweet play-worlds that serve as the stage for trying on new relationships to one’s gendered identity and for trying out new models of feminism that remain always *in rehearsal*.⁶⁵ The characteristic liminality of both adolescence and performance are conjoined as a single critical register. They allow the feminist project, and the generational “waves” that have represented it within popular and critical discourse, a generative free play. Given this generative play, these works, and my analysis of them, strive not to recapitulate tired generational models, heteronormative family metaphors, and other modalities of reading that seek to pit women against each other, but instead are interested in how performed and ironic *activations of such models* might open up impasses within feminist theory.

These performance works exist both as live performance and, in their afterlife, as media documentation on the artists’ personal websites, in the popular and art press, and as

⁶⁵ In *Becoming*, Carol Mavor writes of the thrall to the adolescent as the lure of the open: “The fantasy of the child, pure tabula rasa, is ripe and ready for our own predetermined inscriptions: pink, blue, pants, skirt, dress-up, play [...] naughty or nice” (Mavor 1999:xxxii).

photographs and videos of live performances available in museums and online.⁶⁶ Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young's performance practices are perhaps best described as intermedial, engaging as they do various forms of media simultaneously—video and photography, digital media, sculpture, painting, and installation—and in so doing, recalling intermedia and adolescence's shared status as *intermediate forms* organized by a logic of “between-ness.”⁶⁷ Increasingly, new media works to produce all contemporary artists as new media artists, just as it can also be said that trends of media convergence would seem, if paradoxically, to produce more and more intermedial artists as performance artists. All three of these artists utilize new media platforms such as Vimeo, YouTube or social media sites such as Facebook to exhibit and share news about their work, if with decisively “lo-fi” aesthetics. The artists' relationships to media are not “unformed” (like the child's) as Rosalind Krauss argued of intermediality⁶⁸ but rather reflect a vigorous proliferation of forms that contribute to the aesthetic of adolescence as being one of overaccumulation produced from an interdisciplinary play across genres. The “kitsch effect” of their intermedial approach is amateur and baroque, as no one form is isolated and no one medium is mastered to the point of anything approaching virtuosity.

⁶⁶For further reading on the question of live performance's afterlife in media, see Rebecca Schneider's essay “Intermediality, Infelicity, and Scholarship on the Slip.” Schneider describes intermediality as the “problem” of the slippage intrinsic to performance studies—of “slipping between and across media, playing with terminology that might belong, properly, to one medium more than another (2006:253). This slip is useful for explicating Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young's adolescent exploitation of the temporal slipperiness between media. Adolescent drag performs an undoing of the medial and temporal logics that say, as Schneider does in *Performing Remains*: “The then is *then*, the now is *now*, the dead are dead, lost: we cannot go back” (2011:49). Schneider refuses divisions that have long pitted performance against the archive and the live against mediation within performance studies (see for example Schechner 1985:50; and Phelan 1993:146).

⁶⁷Intermedia is a concept usually attributed to Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, who used it to describe the ineffable, often confusing, interdisciplinary activities between genres that became prevalent in the 1960s, during the same period performance theory emerged as a discipline.

⁶⁸In her influential essay “Reinventing the Medium,” Rosalind Krauss posits intermediality as a state in which art essentially becomes complicit with capital by an undoing or unforming of the autonomy of the medium (understood as a subtractive or disintegrative process). I, however, would contrast this rather dour view of intermediality (as an un-forming) with intermediality as a productive accumulation.

Media functions in these works in much the same way that allegory does: as a stalling of movement. Allegory for Walter Benjamin is a mode of figuration that supposes discontinuity as opposed to the fallacious continuity offered by romantic symbolism (2003:160-163). If the value of allegory lies in its failure to express the idea it aims at, adolescence can be seen as an allegorical deferral of “succeeding” into womanhood, and the endlessly looped mediation of performance ensures its failed progression. Adolescence here appears less as a developmental line of flight and more as an awkward arrest, like an embarrassing snapshot or the shock of being caught unprepared—a hovering in (and out of) time that understands the adolescent in terms deeply informed by recent work in queer theory on queer temporality. Adolescent drag builds on recent work in queer theory on rethinking normative standards for being in relation to temporal progression by asking how the adolescent might be mobilized as a form of feminist drag. This work invests in temporality as an identificatory category, along with race, sexuality, and gender.⁶⁹ Both Judith Halberstam and Elizabeth Freeman’s interventions ask how queering time might be used, not to leave feminism or other so-called “anachronisms” behind, but rather (as Freeman’s terminology of “temporal drag” suggests) to demand that feminism be picked up and pulled into a queer futurity. These performance artists engage media that arrest or freeze the temporality of their adolescent performance in order to underscore their use of adolescence as queer, rather than a capitulation to progressive developmental trajectories or otherwise heteronormative ways of being in relation to time. My engagement with these performances extends from my understanding of the adolescent, as an allegorical figure for a state of becoming that is

⁶⁹ See for example Dinshaw (1999), Love (2007), Halberstam (2005) and (2011), and Freeman (2000).

queer insofar as it is also shot through a certain performance of idealized heteronormative, white femininity.

The child has represented a divisive figure for theorists who have sought to frame a queer critical agenda. Both Lee Edelman and Kathryn Bond Stockton have argued that the child is a particularly charged figure for queer theory for the way that it has been activated as a political figure to deprive gays and lesbians of rights: to compare queers to the child stalled out of time or cast as developmentally stalled or to deny them other rights, such as the right to adopt children because they choose not to reproduce as heterosexuals. For Edelman, the child figure has represented the anti-queer figure *par excellence*, symbolizing in his book *No Future* the “‘self-evident’ one sidedness” of reproductive futurism and absolute privilege of heteronormativity (2004:2). The potential queer use-value of the child is reconsidered by Stockton, who argues that the always already queer child provides a model for deflating or delaying the “vertical, forward-mother metaphor of growing up,” alternative mappings of becoming that register more broadly experimental, disturbing, and disruptive vernaculars of self-knowing (2009:11). Muñoz has argued, contra Edelman, that the queer’s so-called developmental stall offers in adolescent aesthetics its own utopian glimmers: “The celebration of an aesthetics of amateurism are reminiscent of punk rock’s aesthetics. The performances of amateurism [...] signal a refusal of mastery and an insistence on process and becoming” (2009:106).

The adolescent plays with the potential to be found in performances of failure and uncertainty, operations that challenge the progressive narratives by which concepts of affirmation and liberation have historically been trafficked within identity politics, as a

number of queer theorists have recently described. Heather Love argues that the association of homosexual love and loss proposes a queer “turn backward” that refuses “frontal” logics of normative progress or success (2007). Judith Halberstam proposes failure as an oppositional tool of refusing to acquiesce to the capitalistic narratives of power and discipline. “As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed, failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities,” she writes (2011:88). Awkwardness binds all of the sins of adolescence in its propensity for illuminating the difficult, inappropriate, clumsy, and self-conscious political subject. The adolescent here embraces, lingers in, and insists on an awkward stance for feminism, as awkwardness⁷⁰ is activated as the thing that disrupts teleological time, as that which “causes difficulty or inconvenience, is not smooth or graceful.”⁷¹

The stakes of “becoming a woman,” as Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote in *The Second Sex* (1949), are called into question by the figure of the adolescent. The progression toward womanhood is contested, as is emancipation as the guiding principle of feminist politics. In this critical-historical moment, concepts such as “liberation” and “revolution” appear increasingly inadequate for accounting for the fractured, intersectional, and relational experience of gender in postmodernity, especially as one’s ability fully to

⁷⁰ Performance theory certainly has its own adolescent awkwardness. In *Professing Performance*, Shannon Jackson playfully dramatizes the unavoidable “dinner table conversation” dreaded by all Performance Studies scholars, the conversation that stages the intellectual affect of *feeling just not quite understood*: “Per-form-a-tiv-ity...what does...that mean?” “At dinners, in deans’ offices, in department meetings, at academic conferences, in office hours, in rehearsals, such interactions testify to an awkward and emergent period in the study and practice of theatre and performance,” writes Jackson, “I happen to believe that it is necessary both to analyze the dispositions that produce that awkwardness as well as to embrace awkwardness as a condition of emergence” (Jackson 2004:1–2).

⁷¹ See “awkward” in *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

visualize, conceptualize, and somehow escape the field of social violence in global late capitalism is, at this point, impossible.⁷² Not yet recognized as tactics, these performances appear as excesses that go beyond current expressions of second and third-wave feminism. Engaging such excess, Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young embrace adolescence, as both a conceptual and aesthetic modality, to argue for a representation of a conception of feminism that can assimilate irony, awkwardness, and equivocality—indeed performance—for feminism’s own tactical gain.

THE ARTISTS

Amber Hawk Swanson

For Amber Hawk Swanson’s *The Feminism? Project* (2006), made while she was an MFA student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the artist asked women from her home state of Iowa—from fellow sorority sisters to her own mother—about their relationship to feminism. In a series of short videos, Hawk Swanson performs these responses as monologues, while engaged in highly charged sexual scenarios: giving a handjob to a young man presumed to be her boyfriend, being spanked by him, being penetrated by him, having her toenails painted by her father, being fondled by a woman,

⁷² As I argued in the introduction, there is something about this contemporary moment that has appeared to foreclose the possibility of “liberation” or “revolution.” Whether it be Louis Althusser’s theory of interpellation (2001), Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony (2000), or Michel Foucault’s theory of discipline (1995), theorists of dominance in the twentieth century were concerned with questions of dominance have consistently articulated the increasing impossibility of isolating the mechanisms of power within the constantly shifting ideological grid of postmodern space and time. Fredric Jameson described this as a problem of “cognitive mapping,” or our inability to grasp our position within a global system of enormous complexity and what he describes as necessary for us to “regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as social confusion” (1991:54). If cognitive mapping proves impossible in the present world system, then Jameson’s intervention reveals the very stakes of *feminist* strategy in a moment when being a strategist (if a “strategist” is a leader capable of perceiving the whole field of action at once) is no longer possible.

and finally penetrated by another woman.⁷³ In the scene with her father, the “Lolita scene” *par excellence*,⁷⁴ the artist props herself up on a ruffled bedspread in what appears to be a young girl’s lavender bedroom (fig. 5). Wearing a matching pink sweatshirt and shorts, the artist poses in the foreground with a teddy bear perched behind her. In another, Hawk Swanson performs the perpetually pubescent ritual of applying depilatory cream on her eyebrows and upper lip in the bathroom mirror as she delivers a naïve script with deadpan Valley-girl intonation:

I don’t really spend a lot of time thinking about feminism because I view women and men as *equals* and *that’s the definition*, so... I do think it is represented in me. I don’t ever think of myself as *inferior* to a *man*. In fact, most of the time I find myself smarter or more well-rounded. But I don’t know, I mean, men and women are equal and whether the guy next to me thinks so or *not*, this is *my life*, so... I mean I know a lot of women, and not necessarily *lesbians*, or people who are really *political*, spend a lot of their life fighting for it. I guess I just have *other things to do...* (Hawk Swanson 2006).

The confused content of Hawk Swanson’s monologue, representative of the body of work as a whole, underscores the narcissism of a fundamental lack of logic at work in one young woman’s refusal of feminism. Feminism here is given as the very definition of its own cultural outmodedness, a claim that is nevertheless undone by its own tautology (“because men and women are equals and *that’s the definition*”). Feminism is further cited as a project reducible to “lesbians” or “people who are really *political*,” and thus one ancillary to the young woman for whom feminism constitutes more of a threat than “the

⁷³ Given that performance art typically engages “real bodies” as its medium, and typically the artist’s own body, the spectator of Hawk Swanson’s work is invited to assume that the “boyfriend” and “father” in these videos to be Hawk Swanson’s own boyfriend and father though these could just be assumptions. Hawk Swanson clarified in an email that while it was her real father who appeared in the video, the young man who appeared was not, in fact, her boyfriend at the time but an acquaintance (Hawk Swanson 2012).

⁷⁴ This image restages the scene from the opening credits of Kubrick’s film adaptation of Vladimir Nabakov’s *Lolita*, where the viewer discovers Lolita (played by Sue Lyon) lying down while Humbert Humbert (James Mason) paints her toenails.

guy next to [her].” In her Valley-girl delivery, Hawk Swanson capitalizes on the girl’s failure to produce logical connectors, theatricalizing the adolescent quality of her discourse’s suspended inarticulation (“I mean...” “I guess...” “so...”), a rhetoric that is stuck reproducing the same ideas over and over. The disruptive hiccup “this is *my life*” interrupts the young woman’s discussion of feminism, as if feminism, as opposed to the injustices it attends to, threatened the speaker’s ability to live without the intrusion of politics. Hawk Swanson brilliantly exposes this solipsistic fantasy (“I guess I just have *other things to do*”) as *political* in her own ironic restaging of it as art.



Figure 5. Still from Amber Hawk Swanson’s video “Not a Feminist Way of Thinking, Daddy’s Little Girl” from her *The Feminism? Project* series (2006) (Courtesy of Amber Hawk Swanson).

Hawk Swanson’s performance of over-processed, plastic-tiara femininity satirizes oversexed sorority girls and suburban princesses by juxtaposing their predictability with graphic sex acts. Hawk Swanson’s send-up of sorority-girl femininity is shocking not so much for its exaggerated quality as a parody, but rather for its status as a highly recognizable cultural type that far exceeds the confines of the sorority house and instead

has come to pervade every level of commercial culture. As definitions of feminism get rehearsed, the scenes get more and more gay, “climaxing” finally in an interruption of the given “feminist script” as Hawk Swanson reaches orgasm with her female partner in the final scene. As the scenes progress, Hawk Swanson, the former sorority girl, outs herself as the lesbian that the young woman had phobically coded as feminist. Hawk Swanson’s project brilliantly ironizes the disjuncture between the typification of femininity in mass culture and its more illusory lived experience to imply that such irony might have something to tell us about the “open question” of contemporary feminism, as posed in her title (*The Feminism? Project*).

In 2006, Hawk Swanson also began *To Have and To Hold and To Violate* (2006–2008), a work that brings new meaning to the old adage “a labor of love.” Part coming-out project and part experiment in public sadomasochism, Hawk Swanson’s project explores themes related to her latent lesbian desire alongside her performance of a sorority-girl brand of hyperfemininity, a thematic juxtaposition that has become Hawk Swanson’s trademark. In this latest work, Hawk Swanson orders a Realdoll (the Hollywood special effects version of a blow-up sex doll) in her own likeness (fig. 6) and makes the doll into her own personal voodoo doll and lover. The artist (who has the word “Bully” tattooed on her wrist) and her doll (for whom the word “Prey” was painted on her wrist) are married in Las Vegas in 2007 and then celebrated with reception in the backyard of Hawk Swanson’s Chicago home.⁷⁵ Hawk Swanson’s work appears to call the bluff on

⁷⁵ Hawk Swanson’s marriage to Amber Doll was documented in an 11-minute video of the performance event during which guests were invited to interact with Amber Doll for the cutting of the cake, the first dance, the tossing of the garter, and the bouquet toss. Attendees of the reception could also pose with Amber Doll in portraits later exhibited as part of the project.

feminism's claimed incorporation of lesbianism and sadomasochism, as she explores the aesthetic impact of the seeming ideological incongruities that arise from her double embodiment of femininity as that which would seek both to *have* and to *hold* itself. Hawk Swanson evokes diverse tonalities of femininity simultaneously, enacting femininity's ability to stand as both object of *desire* (its to-be-hadness) and object of *oppression* (its to-be-heldness or to-be-violatedness). In so doing, Hawk Swanson's projects dramatize femininity as its own "threat" to feminism—as not merely a site of political agency as many third-wave feminists have argued but also as a site of complicity, cruelty, and sadomasochistic pleasure.

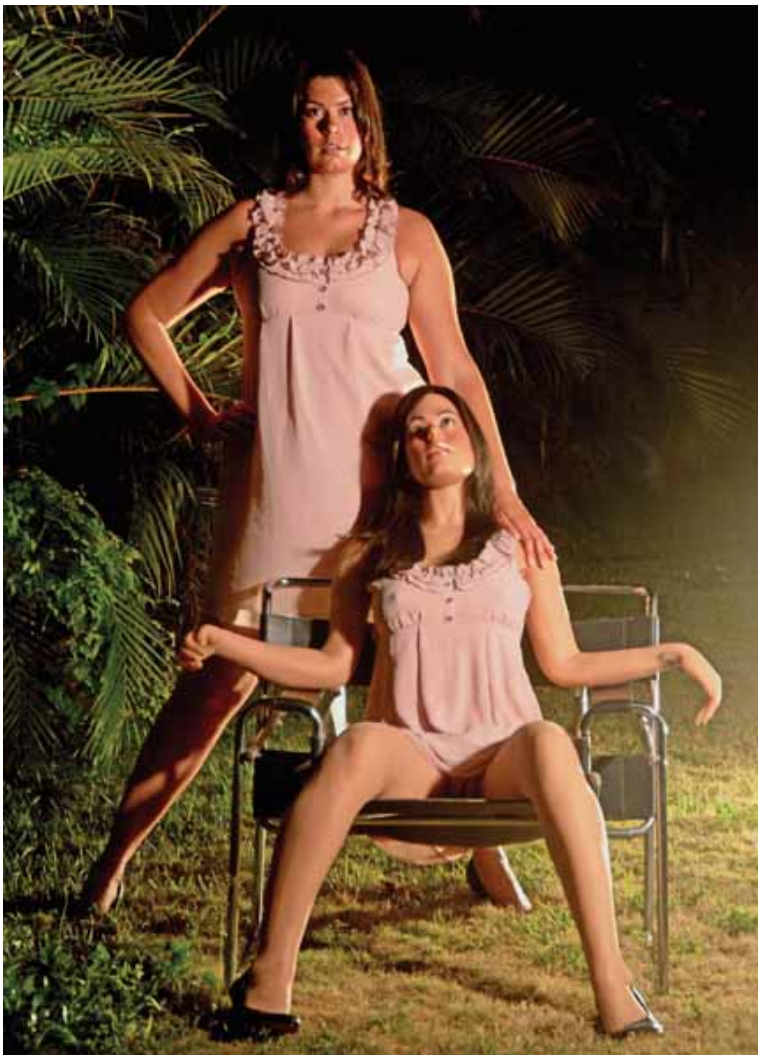


Figure 6. Amber Hawk Swanson poses with Amber Doll in *To Have and To Hold and To Violate* (2006-2008). (Courtesy of Amber Hawk Swanson).

Swanson creates and manipulates the doll as synecdoche for childhood, which comes to be associated in her project with extremely sexualized femininity. Thus, Hawk Swanson produces a disquieting image of femininity by conflating the cultural currents that index and shape it but nevertheless are given to contradict each other. The doll here convenes, rather disturbingly, these two usually partitioned sites of rigorous commodification of femininity: the child and pornography. In the figure of the doll, the same signifier that sends one to the realm of pure innocence *and* to the realm of pure perversion gets collapsed into one. As a site of the conflation of two supposedly separate realms, the doll becomes the instrument by which Hawk Swanson can explore the darker impulses of women's supposed sexual emancipation. Of her decision to acquire "Amber Doll," Hawk Swanson has said, "I was looking for a receptacle for the onslaught of attention and negative feedback—a stand-in for myself. It was just the right amount of crazy to order a \$12,000 doll" (McClure 2009). Hawk Swanson continues, "The total time from the beginning of my discussions with them [the Realdoll company] to eventually picking her up to be mine was nine months. Which of course cracks me up, thinking about her as my twin, my wife, and a baby of sorts." As this suggests, the artist creates the doll less as an oppositional object to distinguish herself from and more to materialize a sexual milieu that the artist herself inhabits. The doll is a parody, but a parody of herself, in her own likeness. By making the doll symbolize women's objectification—by making herself into an object for her own self-objectification—Hawk Swanson produces herself as an objective correlative of femininity through which she can exorcise her own ambivalent feelings toward "herself."

Kate Gilmore

With a background in sculpture, the performance artist Kate Gilmore is best known for methodically constructing physical obstacles and claustrophobic environments—propelled objects, plaster walls, piles of rocks—that she must either withstand or demolish in the short durational performances that she documents as videos. Gilmore kicks, hacks, claws, and hurls her weight through her physically demanding performances. Her targeted actions are reminiscent of conventions established by Fluxus artists, as if she were following a simple “score” or set of instructions for performing the work: keep smiling while things are thrown at you, break through a wall, stuff your head through a wooden cutout of a star (fig. 7). In her performance *Walk This Way* (2008), Gilmore performs for a still camera. Wearing a color-coordinated dress and high heels, the artist begins to knock down an exposed wall, hurling the weight of her body and the applied force of her high-heeled shoe (fig. 8). The vaginal rupture reveals that the interior side of the wall is a glossy magenta, matching the silk flower in her hair. This earlier work seems to anticipate its three-dimensional version, the performance piece *Standing Here* (2010), featured in the 2010 Whitney Biennial, which has garnered Gilmore more mainstream recognition (as she is certainly the most commercially palatable of the three artists discussed in this chapter). In the work, Gilmore, adorned in polka-dotted dress and ponytail, uses the full force of her body to puncture holes, find footing, and ultimately scale the inside of a column—an uncanny structure akin to a vertical tunnel or upstanding birth canal—which she herself has designed. In both of these works, Gilmore dramatizes the “labor” of femininity, playing the part of Sisyphus in pink to expose femininity’s absurd complicity in often destroying the thing that it has itself built. In this

way, Gilmore's work visualizes the frustrating impossibility of final closure, as the motif of ceaseless repetition in her performed tasks conveys the narrative of femininity (and perhaps, by extension, of feminism?) as one without the promise of easy resolution. While Gilmore has said, "The core of my work is about obsessively and determinedly trying to achieve something" (Rockland Center for the Arts 2010), the artist's performances nevertheless "thwart victorious resolution" (Kilston 2009).

In May 2010 the artist changed gears. Rather than performing the work herself, the artist directed and choreographed a work funded by the Public Art Fund called *Walk the Walk* (2010) in New York City's Bryant Park (fig. 9). Seven young women hired by Gilmore, dressed in identical, brightly colored yellow dresses (and when it was colder, matching bright-pink cardigans), walk across an eight-foot-high, enclosed, yellow platform. They look like 1950s-inspired paper dolls come to life atop a minimalist Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade float. Purposefully, collectively, constantly, they walk together and into one another, with only 100 square feet of surface area available to them. Various critics have observed the work as homage to the urban pedestrian or a performance about Manhattan working girls. "Is it a psychology experiment? A catwalk gone horribly wrong? A reality show? An ad for organic bananas?" asks one *New York Times* critic (Kennedy 2010). At times the young women's walking styles appear spirited or focused, but more often than not they just looked bored, tired, or cold. Spectators might just as easily have regarded the piece as a fairly explicit metaphor for the limited political positions available to young women in the Western contemporary context. The image is striking; it resembles that of seven young women trapped in an elevated playpen or crib, as if to caricature the tendency for bourgeois femininity to be at the same time put

on a pedestal, infantilized, and circumscribed by a limited number of options.



Figure 7. Kate Gilmore strains to push her face through a star cutout in a piece of plywood in *Star Bright, Star Might* (2007). Still from performance video. (Courtesy of Kate Gilmore).

Figure 8. Gilmore uses her high heel to break through drywall in this still from her video *Walk This Way* (2008) made on-site for her show at New York City's Smith-Stewart Gallery. Still from video performance. (Courtesy of Kate Gilmore).



Figure 9. Sponsored by the Public Art Fund, Kate Gilmore's *Walk the Walk* was staged during office hours in New York's Bryant Park throughout the work week of 10 through 14 May 2010. (Courtesy of Kate Gilmore).

Art critic Lyra Kilston has written of Gilmore in the magazine *Modern Painters* (referencing Carolee Schneemann's groundbreaking 1975 performance *Interior Scroll*): "The bluntness of her acts seems appropriate for the female stereotypes Gilmore parodies, yet this is *not your mother's* feminist video art: lipstick, color-coordinated hair ribbons, and an eager-to-please smile usurp 1970s scraggly underarm hair and vaginal scrolls" (2009). To be sure, Gilmore indexes femininity as a stand in for frustrations of and with feminism—a motif that appears in Hawk Swanson and Young as well. Her choices appear to be symbolically important for their flattened-out, preordained quality—her "matchy matchy," monochromatic color schemes, her minimalist sculptural forms. Her carefully chosen imagery appears as if reduced to the pure conceptualization produced out of the

high contrast between tropes of femininity and the comparatively unadorned surface of their armature. While the adolescent quality of Gilmore's work may prove less persuasive than in Hawk Swanson and Young, the over-thought quality of her passive aggressive symbolism is undeniable. Her use of symbolism is one that insistently *gestures* toward feminism but never dares speak its name—suggests that there is something necessarily opaque about young women's present-day relationship to making explicitly feminist representations, an assertion that gets mediated, as Kilston suggests, in the adolescent transmission of Gilmore's nonetheless feminist art.

Ann Liv Young

Ann Liv Young's "anything goes" performance style seems to be serving her well. Performing camp adolescence as a deranged fairytale, her performances have been puzzled over in the pages of *Artforum* and, recurrently, in the *New York Times*, rewarding her with an intrigued, if befuddled, cult following. Recently, Young has appeared to seal her professional transition from choreographer to performance artist, adjusting to her ill-fitting costuming as "Sherry"—her trash-talking, Southern alter ego, who incidentally has also made her more than a few enemies over the past few years.⁷⁶ Empathetic, brash, and ambitious, Sherry embodies the hyper-assimilated American cultural figure who is always looking for new avenues of "spiritual" self-commodification. Therapeutic guru, small business owner, karaoke maestro, Christian radio host, and self-employed entrepreneur,

⁷⁶ In February 2010, during Brooklyn Is Burning at the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center (now MoMA PS 1), Young was abruptly shut down when P.S. 1's Director Klaus Biesenbach ordered the power cut in a windowless room. Young, performing as Sherry, had confronted the performer who went on just before her, Georgia Sagri, and had, according to the account in the *New York Times*, "embarked on a blunt, profane monologue accompanied by masturbation, urination and an attack on Ms. Sagri's work" (La Rocco 2010). Sagri and friends responded by threatening Young in return and, according to witnesses, had to be physically restrained. More recently, Young is said to have incensed veteran performers and activists at a January 2011 Delancey Lounge performance as part of the American Realness Festival (DiGiacomo 2011).

all rolled into one woman who is constantly taking off her pants and losing her wig.



Figure 10. Ann Liv Young debuts her *Cinderella* with a stage made for a (13-year-old) princess at Brooklyn’s ISSUE Project Room on 4 September 2010. (Photo by Davide Trentini).

In early November 2010, Young opened *Cinderella* (2010) at Brooklyn’s ISSUE Project Room. After three “false starts,” the performance began when Young-as-Sherry-as-Cinderella glided out on a pair of roller skates through a field of iridescent balloons (fig. 10). Young’s self-conscious aesthetic of failure has been consistently misread as such. In a review of *Cinderella*, filed as a dance review, *New York Times* critic Alastair Macaulay makes clear that he came to the show expecting to see a particular brand of avant-garde virtuosity (pegging Young, at the beginning of the review, as “belong[ing] to the movement in the arts that was labeled Sensation in the 1990s” (2010) and left very

disappointed.⁷⁷ He writes: “there are three things for which I was unprepared on Friday night [...] the startling ineptitude of Ms. Young’s performance; the campy, cliquy way she assumed that everyone present already knew all about this show and her previous ones; and the silly consensus whereby most of her audience, giggling coyly now and then, encouraged her” (2010). Macaulay scolds Young for her general ineptitude, boring performance style, and weak diction: “[the show’s] first 95 minutes demonstrated many layers of failure. Principally, Ms. Young lacks technique. In addition to the problems already cited, she had to consult notes, repeat passages to get them right and tell her audio technician to change things” (2010). The extraordinary pretension of this review proves a thinly veiled attempt to account for all the things that Macaulay—and many others—simply don’t *get* about what Young is doing as an artist: principally, her shrewdness as an artist who cannot possibly fail because failing is exactly what she sets out to do in the first place. Macaulay proves unable to recognize her as an artist for whom failure is the condition of possibility for creating something unpredictable and surreal, indeed for her own kind of success. Poorly fitting prom dress, campy animal balloons, terrible wigs, false starts, cheesy pop music—calling Young’s performances “bad” is like calling Santa chubby. As an adolescent might say: “Duh.”

Macaulay critiques the artist, and her audience, using the very same aesthetic and ideological frameworks that her performance practice works to expose as self-righteous and shortsighted—frameworks that disallow new possibilities by postulating, for instance, that art must aim toward ideals of mastery, beauty, coherence, professionalism, and

⁷⁷ By comparing Young to one of the Young British Artists, such as Tracey Emin or Damien Hirst, and then chastising her for failing to measure up, Macaulay insists Young be bad in a good way: that she be, in spite of all, commercially appealing.

resolution. In so doing, Macaulay and likeminded critics unwittingly validate the very relevance of her method, more grist for the mill of an artist who has said of her process: “I want to regurgitate what people think of me onstage” (in Conlan and Beckman 2009:31). As this reference to regurgitation suggests, adolescent drag is a performance of excess that, in the adolescent’s relationship to consumption, draws on old tropes of abjection in feminist art such as disgust, ingestion, and expulsion that most immediately recall the work of artists like Karen Finley and Cindy Sherman. The “bulimic” model of Young’s artistic production offers a model of excess in reappropriation that cannot easily be appropriated back in mass consumption. Young has a gift for exposing institutional orthodoxies by overidentifying with them so as to perform back for her audience their very own taboos.⁷⁸

Many, many weird and interesting things were, in fact, happening during her performance of *Cinderella*, a performance that really began in the lobby when a female usher bullied waiting audience members into buying candy from her for five cents. Inside the theatre, Young’s male collaborator and real-life romantic partner Michael Guerrero, who in one interview she comically describes as playing the role of “stunt double” in the show, is adorned in an even cheaper version of Young’s own spectacular costume: a worse-fitting wig and a cerulean Lycra leotard with what appears to be a menstrual stain down the back (Kourlas 2010). As the show begins, he fidgets over the technical aspects of the show under Young’s hostile glare. Before long, we hear Suzanne Vega’s 1984 a

⁷⁸ A similar sentiment appeared in the pages of *Artforum*. In September 2010, David Velasco wrote: “Sherry is, after all, not as mad as she appears: she dramatizes the capriciousness of power, but when confronted with authority, she seizes the occasion to expose its ‘twisted’ logic, making authority reflexive, getting it to turn in on itself” (2010).

cappella song “Tom’s Diner” playing over the speakers, while one of Young’s two male backup dancers, sweating and exhausted as the song continues on, keeps the rhythm by violently cracking a whip against the floor. The innocent and nostalgic quality of the folk-inspired song is disrupted through this juxtaposition of a young man of color forced to overexert himself in time with the tune of Suzanne Vega. He stops when she stops, starts when she starts, corrupting a particularly earnest portrait of whiteness in a scene decorated like a little girl’s cracked-out birthday party. In what follows, Young-as-Sherry-as-Cinderella performs her trademark hardcore karaoke, singing Whitney Houston’s “I Wanna Dance with Somebody” and rapper T.I.’s “Whatever You Like” as if her life depended on it. She sings: “Stacks on deck / Patrón on ice / And we can pop bottles all night / Baby you can have whatever you like (you like) [...] / Late night sex so wet and so tight [...] / Baby you can go wherever you like (you like).” The soberness of Young’s vigorously performed hip-hop minstrelsy refuses the conniving wink with the audience that might defuse the cringe effect of her aesthetic choices and awkward seeming lack of politically correct awareness. Rather than rushing through particularly graphic lyrics of a song, she enunciates them as one might declaim romantic poetry. But instead of reproducing or valorizing the seeming misogyny of T.I.’s song, which positions women as easily attained and discarded materialists (a reading that the song’s music video makes particularly pronounced), Young’s caricatural re-performance cartoons it as just another commodity to be mined for her not altogether accessible, if undeniably ironic, creative universe. By performing an overidentification with the song’s supposed misogyny, Young discloses an ironical, rather than straight-forwardly critical, affiliation with the song. This effects a certain opening up of ironic affinities that demonstrate the adolescent performed by Young as a political subjectivity endowed with more complexity than she is often

granted by either capitalism or feminism.

Young's girlish aesthetic is informed by her longtime preference for popular culture (and in particular, pop music) over art, fabrics and textures over fashion *per se*, social dynamics over the history of choreography and theatre.

I wasn't interested in any sort of choreographers at all. I wasn't influenced by that. I never even took a dance history class... I was really inspired by pop culture. The same thing all 29-year-olds were inspired by. Like I love Michael Jackson. I loved... I don't know. I think a big inspiration for me was what I was surrounded by... I think I'm more influenced by like social dynamics and the way people interact and the way women interact and the way men interact and the way men and women interact then I am like, "Oh I love this visual artist." You know what I mean? (Young 2010).

Young made *Melissa Is a Bitch* (2005) when she moved to New York after graduating from the dance program at Hollins University. The performance begins with a young bikini-clad woman doing an extended dance to Lionel Richie's '80s hit "Running with the Night." The audience becomes her bedroom mirror as she dances energetically from one position onstage for the entirety of the song. In the next scene, two new girls come onstage, eating ice cream. The entire cast's costumes seemed to have been dyed green in the same batch. Throughout the performance, and as she does in others, Young shouts orders at her performers. From offstage, Young's drill-sergeant-like voice screams a command and the two dump their ice creams on the ground simultaneously. A second command prompts them to take off their clothes at warp speed, again perfectly in sync. Two swings drop from the sky and the girls mount them on a third command. The completely unclothed girls hang upside down and begin to shout in unison: "I wish I were dead / I want to fuck everybody I see. / If the world were fair P. Diddy wouldn't get /

the prettiest woman in the world, J-Lo.” The bawdiness of Young’s play with graphic if utterly de-eroticized nudity, foul language, and erratic behavior takes a surreal form under her militaristic direction and disciplined choreographic methods. Young is a perfectionist reigning over a total mess.



Figure 11. Ann Liv Young is Snow White (right) with Emily Wexler as the Evil Queen in her 20 November 2006 premier performance at *Théâtre de la Bastille*, Paris. (Photo by Nicholas Strini).



Figure 12. Cigarettes and coffee at hand, Young as Cinderella attempts to defecate onstage. ISSUE Room Project, Brooklyn, 4 September 2010. (Photo by Davide Trentini).

Young explains that *Melissa is a Bitch* was influenced by *Peter Pan*, with the performers resembling the Lost Boys, drawing comparisons with her staging of *Snow White* (2007) (fig. 11) and *Cinderella* (fig. 12). Young defiles her fairytale princesses, staging deconstructed versions where her protagonists appear lost, their gowns dirty and tattered, and their heterosexual romances perverted. In *Snow White*, “Prince Charming” is played by a young actress who dons a ridiculous nude strap-on to the tune of Aaliyah’s “Are You That Somebody?” In Young’s *Sleeping Beauty Part I* (2012), the artist-as-Sleeping Beauty panted and gyrated over her blow-up doll Prince to Adele’s lovesick hit “Someone Like You.” As critic Siobhan Burke wrote in a review for *The Brooklyn Rail*, recalling Hawk

Swanson's passionate embrace of the artificial, "Seated right beside the dummy—whom Young straddled, groped, licked, and otherwise accosted—I was privy to the details of her chillingly sincere performance: her longing eyes peering into his hollow ones, her lips pressing against his stenciled-on mouth" (2012).

Cinderella concludes not with a "happily ever after" but with Young attempting to defecate on command. In a closing monologue, Young-Sherry-Cinderella reads from her Apple laptop: "I am dirty. By dirty, I don't mean skanky or fresh. I mean filthy [...] I am overwhelmed with the idea of myself, who I am, who I may never become and all I see is me [...] I'm sick of regurgitating myself, if there were interesting things around me, I guess I wouldn't have to."⁷⁹ In her adolescent drag, Young borrows the camp fairytale back from drag performers. In her now-classic study of the underground gay male female impersonators of the late 1960s' New York City drag subculture, *Mother Camp*, Esther Newton explains the typical drag scenario: "Almost every joke the camp makes elaborates [...] the stories of Snow White or Cinderella" and the drag queen, she writes, goes, "'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?' and the mirror [responds] (sarcastically), 'you are, girl.' [...]" But usually the mirror brutally replies, 'Snow White, you ugly bitch!' Newton observes, "the camp is always the evil stepmother, the jealous ugly sisters, or the wicked queen" (1979:56). Young's camp fairytales borrow more from drag subcultures than Disney to effect a reflexive disruption of the narrative, though with tension between her and the gay performers and activists of precisely these subcultures. The adolescent protagonist is the pure and unqualified ideal, who, in Young's hands, is

⁷⁹ This is excerpted from Young's unpublished script for the fourth monologue of her September 2010 performances of *Cinderella* at the ISSUE Project Room.

camped, debased, and worn down.

HISTORICAL DEBTS, PARASITICAL LEGACIES

The host is in the row in front, the parasite behind [her], a bit in [her] shadow. The host comes before and the parasite follows.

-Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (2007:14)

Seeing your ideas live on in the work of others.

-Guerrilla Girls, “The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist” poster (1988)

The neoliberal art market in the early 21st century has produced the conditions for adolescent drag’s emergence as a recognizable mode of feminist performance. Hawk Swanson, Gilmore and Young are young artists who have become known during a period when feminist art has undergone something of a cultural “revival” in the United States. This mainstream attention has brought into view the conditions for feminist art’s “imposition on” the neoliberal art market and, in particular, the limitations of feminism’s symbiosis with the institutions that play host to it. Echoing recent scholarly debates within feminist and queer theory, the discourse that has surrounded feminism’s heightened visibility in the white cubes of high art institutions has been framed around a treatment of feminism strongly coded in terms of nostalgia and legacy, with an emphasis on celebrating the “feminist glory days” of bygone eras and of planning for uncertain feminist futures that has, by and large, left bracketed the question of the feminist present.

There have been two major feminist art retrospective exhibitions in recent years in the United States, most famously *WACK! Art and The Feminist Revolution* at Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art (2007)—later travelling to DC, New York City, and Vancouver—and *Global Feminisms* (2007) at the Brooklyn Museum. *WACK!* was promoted as offering a historical examination of feminist art during the period of 1965-1980, focusing heavily on U.S.-based artists, whereas *Global Feminisms* claimed to offer an international survey of feminist art from 1990-the (then) present. As many feminists have noted, the overlaying of these two timelines effected the historical erasure of an important generation of feminist artists from the archive. The feminist artist and writer Mira Schor wrote this in her 2008 article “I am not now nor have I ever been...”:

...most of *my entire generation* has been eliminated from the history of feminist art by the two major museum shows devoted to the subject in 2007-2008. In determining the composition of *WACK!* Cornelia Butler concentrated on what might be termed the pioneer generation: since this was part of ‘Second-Wave Feminism,’ let’s call it ‘Generation 2.’ In the case of *Global Feminisms*, Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin selected women born after 1960, Generation 3. So a chronological ditch was created into which fell most of the artists born after 1945 but before 1960. Call it Generation 2.5: the first generation whose members were able to embrace feminism as a path in their youth. The generation who really developed most of the tropes we think of as feminist art... (2008, her emphasis)

Schor describes this group of excluded artists⁸⁰ as generally “forming a politically conscious cohort,” if not outright making “*Political Art*.” She expresses her offense at how

⁸⁰ Among the artists excluded in the representations of feminist art’s legacy represented by these major exhibitions include, according to Schor: “Women such as Maureen Connor, Judith Shea, Rona Pondick, Robin Mitchell, Shirley Kaneda, Suzanne Joelson, Joan Waltemath, Zoe Leonard, Rochelle Feinstein, Abigail Child, Deb Kass, Leslie Labowitz, Vanalyne Green, Barbara Kruger, Erika Rothenberg, Nancy Bowen, Pat Ward Williams, Peggy Ahwesh, Beverly Naidus, Terri Berkowitz, Shu Lea Cheang, Nancy Fried, Elise Siegel, Shelly Silver, Valerie Jaudon, Susan Bee, Laurie Simmons, The Guerrilla Girls, Sophie Calle, Jana Sterbak, Johanna Drucker, Lenore Malen, Kiki Smith, Susanna Heller, Elena Sisto, Bailey Doogan, Perry Bard, Lisa Hoke, Elissa D’Arrigo, Elana Herzog, Xenobia Bailey, Nancy Davidson, Faith Wilding, among many others” (2008).

this coterie of publically committed feminist artists has been denied historical recognition at the very moment that an artist like Marina Abramović has been celebrated while, if not for, exploiting feminism's name in her own public denial of any association with it. Abramović's rhetorical strategy with respect to feminism has, without question, rewarded her with more mainstream art institutional recognition than any other woman artist in recent memory, culminating in her 2010 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present*. The *WACK!* catalog notes that "Many of [Marina] Abramović's best-known performances from the 1970s stand, in part, as critiques of the traditional role of women in the arts...Despite this, the artist has distanced herself from the feminist movement: 'I have never had anything to do with feminism'" (qtd. in Schor 2008). "At the MoMA symposium The Feminist Future at the end of January 2007," Schor writes, "[Abramović] introduced herself that way (as she does at every *feminist* art event to which she is invited) to an audience that included...major women artists who have identified themselves with the feminist movement, who were not invited to the podium..." Schor suggests that Abramović's ritual of public disavowal fetishizes feminist denial ("I am not a feminist/feminist artist") that, she claims, has both underwritten and *overwritten*—has scripted—"all feminist exhibitions, symposia and journal forums since the late '80s," and exhibitions like *WACK!* and *Global Feminisms*, in particular. The catalogue biographies of the artists in *WACK!*, Schor notes, demonstrates the curators' attempts to "justify the inclusion of the artist in a show of feminist art by citing some indication of her public or private identification as a feminist." This proves untenable for Schor, "as further reading reveals that a significant portion of the show's 119 individual artists and artists' collectives are described as having *little or no public relationship* with feminism, or as

denying the identification outright” (emphasis mine).⁸¹ “It is quite interesting to track how many of the women included in *WACK!* were not, are not feminists in any *active sense*,” she writes, “even if you agree that the value of an artist’s work to a feminist analysis of representation and form is not dependent on her private politics or intentionality (the age-old struggles between individual creativity and public politics notwithstanding)” (2008, emphases mine). What this discourse exposes is the way in which the feminist project, writ large, has become deeply embedded in a set of antitheatrical moral codes that—as I argued in my introduction—have endorsed a politics of visibility and transparency as *the* feminist signifiers for a normative project of representation that has come to be illegible outside of a gift economy of clearly demarcated acknowledgement and exchange. In this way, contemporary feminism has been defined by art historical discourse in the language of the art market. Feminist identification has thus been one of “paying by credit,” a phenomenon that Roisin Byrne subverts in her literalized sabotage on the logics of art historical credit with her *Credit Card of Roberto Cuoghi* (2011), discussed in my preface. While Schor reduces Abramović’s disassociation with feminism to a dynamics of “embarrassment with feminism,” read through an equation of speech with transparency, I argue that what is at issue in her denials is rather more opaque and further, that her performance of opacity is one that we see appropriated by Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and

⁸¹ Schor quotes from the *WACK!* exhibition catalog at length: “[Louise] Bourgeois’s relationship to feminism is complex...“There is no feminist aesthetic. Absolutely not!” (220); “[Theresa Hak Kyung] Cha’s work is not overtly feminist but...” (223); ‘Perhaps indicative of her lifelong antipathy to categories, [Jay DeFeo] did not identify herself as a feminist’ (226); ‘Although [Rita] Donagh was not intimately engaged with the burgeoning feminist discourse in 1970s England...’ (229); ‘While [Lili] Dujourie has recalled feeling marginalized by her primarily male colleagues and acknowledged a debt to feminist film theory...she has also rejected a specifically feminist reading her of her work.’ (231); [Louise] Fishman too was struggling to resist a movement that had supported her and through which she was able to develop her identity as an artist.’ (236); ‘Although [Catalina] Parra does not identify herself as a feminist artist...’ (280); ‘Although [Katharina] Sieverding does not explicitly ally herself with feminism...’ (299)” (2008).

Young. In her stated repudiation of feminism, Abramović is not so much repudiating feminist politics but the necessary association of feminism with a moral script. Because of its very repetitive character (“I am a feminist...”), this “feminist script” proves untenable for the avant-garde artist who must present herself as original in order to find success within a late capitalist art market where feminist politics is structurally unable to produce such novelty *ad infinitum*. Adolescent drag emerges as a form of recycled novelty in this moment as a parasitical tactic for keeping feminism in play while mediating the structural “unoriginality” of feminist allegiance as a form of scripted discourse in mainstream curatorial and art historical writing about women’s art. “The parasite invents something new,” writes Michel Serres. “[She] builds a new logic...[She] establishes an unjust pact; relative to the old type of balance, [she] builds a new one” (2007:36).

In early December 2011, Ann Liv Young’s first solo exhibition, *Ann Liv Young: Sherry is Present*, opened at the Louis B. James Gallery in New York City’s Lower East Side. Spanning the holiday season, the exhibition was advertised as a camp exercise in holiday overkill, Young’s own version of the “Twelve Days of Christmas”—with nightly events including a Christmas stress coping lecture, tree trimming (“Trim the tree and then trim your bush,” the gallery advertised), and “Holiday masturbation workshop.” The exhibition invited seemingly endless opportunities for Young’s obliging self-commodification as the omnitalented Sherry, professional multitasker (couples Sherapy® for \$75 per session! Sherr-aoke party!). The exhibition borrowed the title of Abramović’s MoMA exhibition (*Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present*).

Young restages *The Artist is Present*, if only in her title’s promissory allusion, not in the

lofted and spacious white cubes of midtown Manhattan but in the cramped quarters of Louis B. James' downtown location. Upon entering the gallery, one is greeted with encasings of fake nails and yellow pumps worn by Sherry, exhibited alongside the artist's urine displayed in glass bottles (fig. 13). The gallery's lower level has been transformed into the "Sherry Shop," a veritable garage sale of Young's performance props and castoffs (fig. 14). "Everything is for sale!" a young woman supervising the shop booms as she greets newcomers, "*Everything* is for sale..." And she isn't kidding. Young's curatorial shakedown knows no shame as a half-inflated balloon from her performance of *Cinderella* hangs pitifully from the gallery ceiling, available for purchase.

Young's exhibition strip away the slick museum veneer of the live artist as commodity to revel in the kitsch underside of Abramović's apparent pretension to embody performance art as somehow sterile or uncontaminated by the vulgarities of the art market as an affective service industry for explicit consumption. When Young asked me to write the wall text for the exhibition, I noted her clear appropriation of Abramović's exhibition title in what I wrote: "*Ann Liv Young: Sherry is Present* lampoons the austere self-importance of the much-hyped 2010 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present*, challenging Abramović's claim to the throne of feminist art." Young wrote back to me that she and Guerrero did not think there should be any mention of Abramović, explaining: "sherry doesn't know or care who M A is....unless of course she's met her at a bible study (which i don't think she has)" (Young 2011).



Fig. 13. *Sherry's Sculptures* (2011). James B. Louis Gallery, New York City. December 5, 2011-January 7, 2012 (Courtesy of Louis B. James Gallery).



Fig. 14. Installation view of the *Sherry Shop*. James B. Louis Gallery, New York City. December 5, 2011-January 7, 2012 (Courtesy of Louis B. James Gallery).

Young's re-use of Abramović's MoMA title puts into dramatic relief the differences between the two events, highlighting two very different artists' presents. It demonstrates

that Abramović's repudiation of feminism is, rather than an ideological rejection, a rejection at the level of aesthetics. If Abramović's is a distancing from the kitsch associated with too overtly political art, Young appropriates Abramović's discourse to revel in what I described in the introduction as *feminism's kitsch*. Young resists the notion, which Schor and Abramović appear to have in common, that feminism is, in some sense, a scripted performance—that it must necessarily be “public” or “active,” to use Schor's terms. Like the generation before her, Young is “inventing and building [on the tropes we associate with feminist art] at the same time as [her] pioneer mentors” (2008). In her performance of adolescent drag, Young parasites Abramović's parasitism and, in doing so, makes Abramović her host. To be sure, Abramović's move *into* the institution is, rather than a parasitical move, one of accepting the hospitality of the high art institution by becoming a host.

In the May-June 2011 issue of the art magazine *Flash Art*, Abramović began a regular column called “Marina's Diary,” in which she wrote that she intended to document her “quest to create a legacy for not only her performance art, but for the genre of performance art itself” (Duggan 2011). “At the moment,” Abramović writes, “all my attention goes toward establishing a legacy that will permit performance art to continue growing and developing” (qtd in Duggan 2011). “‘Reperformance is the new concept, the new idea!’ Abramović apparently proclaimed at the workshop about the preservation and exhibition of performance art held at MoMA before the opening of her retrospective, ‘Otherwise it will be dead as an art form’ (Carol Kino qtd. in Schneider 2011:4).

In *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, Rebecca Schneider writes, "...the battle of the 'rebel art' to enter the esteemed galleries of high art museums should be approached with a great measure of irony, since so much performance-based artwork in the 1960s and 1970s (influenced by a lengthy heritage of 'anti-art' avant-garde forms) was arguably more invested *at that time* in seceding from the...Great Masters than joining it" (2012:4). In November 2005, Abramović reenacted a series of major performance art pieces from the '60s and '70s for *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim Museum, including works by Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Valie Export, Gina Pane, Joseph Beuys, and two of her own works. In her *New York Times* article, "A Rebel Form Gains Favor, Fights Ensue," Carol Kino writes:

Ms. Abramović saw [*Seven Easy Pieces*] as a way "to take charge of the history of performance." In the 1990s, as younger artists became interested in work of the '60s and '70s, she said she noticed that some were restaging historical works themselves, often without consulting or even crediting the originator. 'I realized this is happening because performance is nobody's territory,' she said. 'It's never been mainstream art and there's no rules.' Finding this unjust, she decided to set them herself, by recreating the works in consultation with the relevant artists and estates. Better she do it now, she said, because "they will do it anyway when you're dead behind your back (qtd. in Schneider 2012:4).

Indeed Abramović's enthusiastic promotion of reenactment has appeared a counter-move to young artists such as Gretchen Holmes or Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen, who have expressed interest in the practices of Abramović's generation. Young artists like Holmes and Rasmussen are threatening to Abramović because they are less reenactors than *recreators*. Rather than being "hosted" by an entity that they seek to perform for, their recreations are reproduced independently of explicit monetary claims or institutional constraints on their work.

Holmes has recreated Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975), a performance for which the young artist has admitted—in a clear ideological departure from the original—that she got her first bikini wax (Holmes 2010). Rasmussen recreated Shigeko Kubot's *Vagina Painting* (1965) at her opening at the Renwick Gallery. This was one of thirteen different recreations that she performed, including Janine Antoini's *Loving Care* (1992-1996), including a piece of her own called *The Artists' Song*, within a three hour span. Rasmussen's "marathonning" of the archive of feminist performance injects her own contemporary take on these classic works.

Schneider writes, "...Marina Abramović herself is interested in the 'correct' transmission of 'seminal' works, including 'extremely strict instructions,' payment of copyright, and permissions to reperform—and she sees the move into venerated art museums as ensuring her ability to control history from beyond the grave" (2012:4). Schneider cites Abramović: "My idea was to establish certain moral rules. If someone wants to remake a performance, they must ask the artist for the rights and pay for it, just like it's done with music or literature. For me, this is the honest way to do it, even if you want to make your own version" (2012:6). "The hypocrite imposes taxes on us to impose on us," writes Serres (2007:201), drawing on the French meaning of *imposition* as *impôt*, denoting a tax levied in order to weaken the one made to pay. Serres continues, "For the term *imposture* has permitted us to forget its link with tax-collection [*perception d'impôt*], with the exaction of money. Imposture draws attention toward swindling...and covers up the economic operation of diverting funds (201). By making a younger generation of women performance artists into impostors of her work, Abramović demands that they pay taxes

on their inheritance.

In her 2010 retrospective, Abramović reenacted only her own works, also engaging a number of younger artists to re-perform her works. As one art blogger queried, however, “For a genre as here-and-now based as performance art, is it even possible for it to have a legacy?” (Duggan 2011). As both Schor and Schneider point out, Abramović’s “one-sided” investment in legacy appears to *begin with her* (“toward *establishing* a legacy,” the artist writes) as she appears to advocate for a future of acknowledgement and debt in which she herself refuses to participate but *in the present*, as the artist who is (always) present. Differentiating performance art’s legacy from that of feminist art would indeed seem a questionable maneuver given the widely acknowledged tangle of these constitutive social and creative histories. The question we might ask—indeed the question that adolescent drag *poses*—is rather: is it possible for feminist art, and indeed for *feminism*, to have a legacy when feminism has *always been* a politics of redoing what has come before it? And conversely, is there ever the possibility of novelty with respect to feminism?

Schneider considers the political promises of reenactment, citing curator and scholar Chrissie Iles who has herself written extensively of Abramović’s work: “...maybe what’s interesting is the way in which the past is reframed in the present.” “Reenactment,” writes Schneider, “is a term that has entered into increased circulation in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century art, theatre, and performance circles. The practice of re-playing or re-doing a precedent event, artwork, or act has exploded in performance-based art...” (2011:2). It has been embraced as an appealing strategy for a neoliberal art

market that has sought innovative ways of making performance—historically characterized as ephemeral commodities resistant to archive and sale—reproducible and thus, financially marketable long after the originator has ceased performing them. As has been evident in Abramović’s recent turn to reenactment in her MoMA retrospective and elsewhere, this strategy has found an obliging solution in a recent turn to outsourcing, a trend which Claire Bishop has examined as outsourced or delegated performance. Writes Bishop: “...artists of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s—for example, Marina Abramovic, Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, and Gina Pane—turned to their own bodies as the privileged site of artistic action...Today their bodies also function art historically, as signs of an artistic practice that consciously placed itself at one remove from the market: in Western Europe and North America, performance and body art of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s frequently stood as a refusal of the portable object and the circulation of commodities” (2009:111). Bishop argues that in the early 1990s, particularly in Europe, there began to be a shift away from this paradigm, an art historical development that was paralleled by the turn to business logics of subcontracting in order to maximize profits (2009:111,119). Following this logic, Abramović’s adoption of the outsourcing paradigm that is reperformance follows a logic of bodily commodification that her original performance worked to undermine; her own body functions art historically, according to Bishop, as a political stance against the circulation of commodities that her own late-career turn to reperformance denies to a younger generation of artist-bodies. Still Bishop’s analysis does not account for the exploitative generational dynamics of outsourcing and delegation when the delegating artist does not allow for a loss of control over the authorship of the work. Her essay does not examine Abramović’s turn to reperformance and notes only that “[m]anipulation and coercion do not invalidate a work if it exists in critical dialogue

with a larger social and political context...” (2009:122). By maintaining her status as author, Abramović effectively displaces the emotional and physical labor of the performer onto a younger generation of precarious artists without the financial reward or agency allowed by creative authorship or collaboration. This move has been found to be ethically unsavory by many who have charged Abramović’s, and indeed performance art’s, “legacy” with generational exploitation, making the gift of “the mother” of performance art, something of a curse. In the case of Abramović, the economy of reenactment has been one of substituting other, younger bodies to feed her artistic legacy. As one insightful online commenter notes,

The idea of substituting new, younger performers is what leads to the appearance of inequities and the charge of abuse of privilege. When Abramović herself was the performer, willingly suffering the slings and arrows for the sake of her art, the worst charge that could be leveled was masochism. But when other bodies - young, powerless, on display for the delectation of the powerful - are drafted for the sake of aggrandizing the arts institution, and for the ambitions of art plutocrats, there is obvious exploitation. The idea of substituting new, younger performers is what leads to the appearance of inequities and the charge of abuse of privilege (Blog commenter “StevenKaplan” qtd. in Halperin 2011).

It is in this context that a younger generation of artists have seen inheritance, and feminist inheritance, as both debt and potential value. Adolescent drag represents a counter-model to the turn to reenactment in the field contemporary art. The generational paradigm of reenactment is one wherein younger performers, often artists in their own right, are constrained by conditions of vulnerability to accept the task of reperforming the works of famous artists. Reenactment’s effect of *keeping marginal by making parasitical* a younger generation of artists was even reproduced in legendary dancer and feminist filmmaker Yvonne Rainer’s attempt to raise awareness of the problem when she became

the public spokesperson and intellectual surrogate of one of Abramović's young performers, on whose behalf Rainer complained to MOCA director Jeffrey Deitch in an letter.

According to the account provided in Julia Halperin's November 2011 article published on *Artinfo*, Rainer felt compelled to write to Deitch after hearing an account of the audition process from her friend, the dancer Sara Wookey, who told Rainer that she felt that the young performers were being taken advantage of. Wookey's experience, as represented in Rainer's letter, re-centers reports of under-remuneration and lack of institutional support for the reperformers of Abramović's MoMA exhibition, three of whom—Abigail Levine, Gary Lai, and Rebecca Brooks—wrote their own open letter about the experience noting that their initial offer from MoMA “struck many of us as untenable: \$50 for a 2 ½ hour performance shift, no compensation for prep time or time in between shifts, and, most troublingly, no workman's compensation, which would cover us in the case of injury” (2011).⁸² Rainer's letter, which may or may not have been actually sent but was nevertheless obtained and published by various media outlets, denounced the fact that, according to Wookey's emailed account to Rainer, performers had been asked to spend three hours with “their heads protruding through the gala's tabletops, kneeling on Lazy Susans below to slowly rotate in circles while maintaining eye contact with guests [while other] performers [were to] lay nude on tables with fake skeletons on top of them, recreating Abramovic's famous *Nude With Skeleton*

⁸² Noting that in 2008-2009, the MoMA's operating budget was \$160 million, Levine, Lai, and Brooks add: “Through a first round of negotiations, we achieved a modest pay increase and a change of status to ‘temporary employee,’ which provided us workman's compensation and some other benefits. However, we were only able to approach a fair wage for our work after two fainting performers made evident the difficulty and risk of our work” (2011).

performance, as reperformers did at her MoMA retrospective” (qtd. in Halperin) The participants were to be paid \$150 and to receive a one-year MOCA membership. As Wookey informed Rainer: “Of course we were warned that we will not be able to leave to pee, etc. That diners may try to feed us, give us drinks, fondle us under the table, etc., but will be warned not to.” “Whatever happens, we are to remain in performance mode and unaffected.”

Ultimately, Rainer’s letter exacerbates the problem that it attempts to alleviate, placing Wookey at yet another remove from her own discourse, as it is Rainer’s letter rather than Wookey’s letter⁸³ that receives attention. The younger artist is ultimately doubly displaced in what is widely billed as “Rainer vs. Abramović/Deitch.” Whereas adolescent drag might be described as a “parasiting up,” this “parasiting down” offers an interesting reversal of the Guerrilla Girl’s tongue-and-cheek line from their poster “The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist”; rather than having to worry about “Seeing your ideas live on in the work of others,” a younger generation of women artists now must face “Seeing your *work* live on in the *ideas* of mothers.”

Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young, however, are younger artists who represent an alternative narrative to the predominance of reenactment as the story of a younger generation of women performance artists. These artists resist the turn to reenactment represented by Abramović’s recent work, as the neoliberal art market’s answer *to the problem of generational precarity*. In the face of Abramović’s wanting to them to pay her due,

⁸³ See this account for Sara Wookey’s own open letter about the incident and her reasons for refusing to participate in the MOCA performance: <http://occupyduniya.wordpress.com/2011/11/23/abramovic-deitch/>.

they model practices that reject the appellation protégé for parasite instead. Rather than bending to a market that forces young people into a life of debt and exploits their powerlessness by engaging their labor power in exchange for capital, in adolescent drag Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young respond by simply refusing to *acknowledge their debts*.

ADOLESCENT AUTOGENESIS

The past: it ‘re-bites’ [*il re-mord*] (it is a secret and repeated biting). History is ‘cannibalistic,’ and memory becomes the closed arena of conflict between two contradictory operations: forgetting, which is not something passive, a loss, but an action directed against the past; and the mnemonic trace, the return of what was forgotten, in other words, an action by a past that is now forced to disguise itself.

-Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (1986:3)

At a January 2011 show for the American Realness Festival of contemporary dance and performance at New York City’s Abrons Art Center, Young mocked the pioneering gay activist Jim Fouratt (a member of the audience whom she did not recognize) about his age, only to have the emcee, the established downtown fixture Penny Arcade intervene to give the younger performance artist a piece of her mind, yelling “Pull off her head!” Young responded by throwing things at the stage, hitting a noted photographer on the head with her ceramic necklace. When Young removed her top, Arcade boomed: “Being topless in the East Village [in 2011] is not radical,” ultimately calling Young “a fake radical” who “lacks material” and “has no technique.” Young later said of the event that she was uninterested in “studying performance history or what other people have done.” Stating that she did not know who Fouratt was and “I still don’t,” Young further speculated that Penny Arcade was “probably [just being] defensive about her own age” (DiGiacomo

2011). This spectacle suggests that a younger generation of performance artists, for whom I suggest Young stands in, have embraced a parasitic relation to their avant-garde predecessors and to the very concept of political inheritance.

Despite its refusal of claiming an affinity with previous feminist work, Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young's work has, nevertheless, consistently raised the question of its relation to feminist practices that have come before it. How indeed should such work—performances so clearly indexing issues associated with contemporary feminism—be read in relationship to feminism? How has what signifies as feminist art changed over the past 40 years?

Whereas the celebrated women performance artists of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s (Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, Adrian Piper, Yayoi Kusama, Karen Finley, Ana Mendieta, and Abramović, among the most commonly cited) engaged in arguably more explicit and overtly politicized body art practices, this younger generation of artists exhibits work that visualizes a certain amount of ambivalence about what it means to inherit a feminist position—something that I want to distinguish from ambivalence about, in fact, *being* a feminist. When asked this question directly in a 2007 interview about *Snow White* with the magazine *Time Out New York* (“Is this a feminist piece?”), Young responds:

I don't know. I don't know what the fuck it is. I mean, some people would say it is. We're actually doing two shows in Italy this year, and one is a women's-gender yadda yadda. These people are really into the piece, which I find very interesting. It makes sense that they would be, but I don't know. I feel like this piece is so open-ended. I guess I don't really see it as a feminist piece. I see it more as a solo (*Time Out New York* 2007).

In my own interview with the artist, Young responded to this same question with an altogether different answer:

Definitely. 100% for sure. I think [the works] are feminist because I'm a female and I made it. The word feminist is so funny to me because it's become such a broad term, and I think that in some ways that's good and in some ways it's sort of confusing. I think they are feminist, but I am not trying to make feminist work. [...] Whatever I am thinking about at that time, whatever I'm trying to do at that time is... I'm not like women should be free. You know what I mean? For Sherry, it is like women should be free. But that's not my goal. My goal is to portray this character. But yeah I think they are definitely feminist. I don't see how they couldn't be. [...] it's like yes and no mean the same thing to me. I could say maybe. (Young 2010)

Young reserves for Sherry the position that “women should be free.” By rendering a liberationist position caricatural, its revolutionary politics are deferred to the land of make-believe. Reserving the positivistic outlook for her alter ego, Young offers a sly critique of a feminist position that would imagine such a thing as “freedom” to be within the realm of possibility and offers instead forms of tactical irony that make use of maneuvers such as obfuscation and multiplication: *no, yes, maybe*. Sherry might be likened to Hawk Swanson's sorority girl or Gilmore's anonymous walking girls, as caricatural embodiments of the overdetermined positions offered by a conception a feminism that, ironically not unlike misogynist discourse, puts pressure on women to take a position and stick to it.

Performance provides the artists with “masks” that grant the feminist project access to greater political latitude, a wider field of what might count as feminist, and, however paradoxically, one possible way out of caricature. Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young's

performance art suggests that it is *through caricature* that feminists might, in fact, escape the problem of their own caricature. Young, a self-described “escape artist” when it comes to having to explain her practice to people,⁸⁴ plays the politics of performed ideological inconsistency and historical ignorance to avoid being made to maintain a single political pose that would too easily risk becoming dogmatic or fossilized over time. In our interview she told me that she “[doesn’t] really know what feminist art is”; that she, “to be perfectly honest,” had never heard of Marina Abramović until “the other day”; that she has “never seen anything by” Karen Finley despite constant comparisons, having poured chocolate all over herself in her aptly titled piece *Solo* (2006);⁸⁵ and that she knows “a little bit about” Annie Sprinkle. Claims Young:

What is so funny is that I am really not influenced by anybody else and I think for some people that is frustrating because I don’t go see performance and I don’t support my community, whatever that is supposed to mean. I think that is so silly because what is supporting community? Is there only one way to do that? By making work I am supporting my community. Yes it’s feminist art (Young 2010).

Karen Finley has been doing basically the same thing for 30 years, only better,” writes Andy Horwitz, a dance and theatre blogger (in La Rocco 2010).⁸⁶ Claudia La Rocco

⁸⁴ In our interview, Young explained her response when asked what her profession is: “I’m always like, ‘I’m sorry I don’t really know what I do.’ [...] If it is somebody who I don’t want to understand what I do and for instance, if it is somebody doesn’t know what a choreographer is, I usually use the word choreographer... And if it is someone who would know choreographer is, I usually say performance artist. It’s evasion. I am an escape artist” (Young 2010).

⁸⁵ Young said that she was recently approached by someone about doing a double bill with Karen Finley, an offer that she says Finley subsequently declined. Says Young: “I feel like she is offended or something because she is like ‘she is trying to replace me,’ but I don’t know anything about her. I would think that might be insulting to her. I was thinking like, should I approach her and try to get her to do this double bill with me and act as if I am a huge fan? Or should I tell her, ‘I don’t know anything about your work?’” (Young 2010).

⁸⁶ Blogger Andy Horwitz wrote in 2008 on *Culturebot*, a contemporary dance and theatre blog, in a post that has since been removed: “For that matter Penny Arcade, Diamanda Galás and countless other women performers have explored these ideas—and presentations of the human body—in more intelligent, capable, insightful and artful ways” (in La Rocco 2010).

and Gia Kourlas, for the *New York Times*, write of Young's show, *The Bagwell in Me* (2008):

[T]here was nothing in this half-baked mess that many an artist hasn't done before, and better. Ms. Young has trumpeted her willed artistic ignorance and disdain for her peers. Let's hope for her sake that's the truth, as, just 27, she still has time to look around and learn her history. Either of these actions would enrich her compellingly raw but one-note stage presence. If only she would show less of herself and more of the world (La Rocco and Kourlas 2008).

Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young all respond with a shrug of ironic indifference to those who have come before them, a reaction that is actually more attuned to the aesthetic and political projects of their predecessors than the reverence called for by La Rocco and Kourlas. These expectations betray the critics' own misunderstanding of artists such as Schneemann and Finley, whose own body art critiqued masculinist formal preoccupations with patriarchal concepts such as originality and genius. Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young lay no claim to novelty and insist instead on employing hackneyed signifiers toward an aesthetic of amateurism. Sidestepping the logic of art historical progression may just be their way of refusing the anxiety that comes with acknowledging the influence of the "mother," which would, if ironically, put them deeper into conversation with the "mother" artists of which they are said to be heirs, a claim that nevertheless becomes more tenuous when their work is considered in its conceptual frame.⁸⁷ In their play with adolescence, they call for a reconsideration of cumulative

⁸⁷ Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* proposes that poets are hindered in their creative process by an ambiguous relationship to the poets who came before them (1973). Bloom argues that "the poet in a poet" is inspired by reading another poet's work and will then tend to produce poetry that is derivative and therefore weaker because it is not original. Bloom's argument links inheritance to parasitism as the enemy of originality. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have responded to Bloom's analysis, noting its treatment of poetry as an Oedipal struggle that is "intensely (even exclusively) male, and necessarily patriarchal." Gilbert and Gubar ask, "Where, then, does the female poet fit in? Does she want to annihilate a 'forefather' or a 'foremother'? What if she can find no models, no precursors? Does she have a muse...?" (2000:47).

history and progress as aesthetic and political ideals. They challenge the very desirability of a developmental model as a yardstick of political agency. La Rocco and Kourlas may chastise Young for her “willed artistic ignorance,” but such a judgment does not account for the possibility that the artist’s purported historical ignorance is, rather than a sincere insight into Young’s admitted egotism or laziness, instead part and parcel of her adolescent spectacle. Rather than wag a finger at Young and her peers for failing to fall in line within a larger historical scheme of feminist art, we should read Young’s claimed ignorance as instead a tactical performance of political forgetting, one that Judith Halberstam has described as effecting a willful interruption of generational modes of transmission that allow for a different conception of history to become possible (2011:161).

Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young’s performance art inhabits a structure of feminism that no longer necessarily bares its name openly and obviously. In picking up and dragging with them the remnants of feminist art, these artists necessarily maintain some vested interest in feminism, even if only in salvaging its conceptual form. The impossible position of being both inside and outside of feminism (Timothy Bewes has described this, as the event of postcolonial shame, “the simultaneous impossibility of identifying and disidentifying” [2011:7]) speaks to the adolescent awkwardness of the feminist inheritance that can never be given back, *even if it is refused*. “Clearly, this ain’t your grandmother’s storybook heroine,” La Rocco and Kourlas write of Young, echoing Kilston’s “not your mother’s feminist video art” proclamation about Gilmore. I know somehow it’s feminist art, critics seem to say, but it no longer looks like it. Young’s claim to “see it more as a solo” indicates a preference in certain moments to maintain her independence by refusing to claim her inheritance and, in others, claiming it, if only up to a point. By saying “I

think [the works] are feminist, but I am not trying to make feminist work,” Young argues that feminism always exceeds that which has the pretension to represent it, suggesting her provocative methods as attempts to disallow an all-too-easy consolidation of feminism with a particular set of visual and rhetorical practices. In this way, Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young’s performative activations of the adolescent as allegory-cum-caricature make a lot of sense, given allegory’s work to “designat[e] primarily a distance or relation to its own origin” (de Man 1983:207), here a distancing “of relation” to a particular set of assumptions about feminist art.

The critical reception of these works has been laced with certain preconceptions about so-called antiquated “feminist content”—the “women’s-gender yadda yadda” represented by the “ickiness” of Schneemann’s “1970s scraggly underarm hair and vaginal scrolls” that critics claim these works index. These works suggest a nostalgia for a lost origin and yet pay homage to the simulacrum through the artist’s aesthetic accumulation of borrowed signs, bad copies, and passing fads culled from childhood: fairytales, sentimental pop, baby-doll dresses. Susan Stewart has written of nostalgia as a longing for the purity of home and origin that inevitably proves unreachable. Stewart writes, “Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears [...] a face that turns toward a future-past” (1983:23). The depropriative quality of this work—its quality of a certain political homelessness—might be a way of coming to terms with the sense one has that, for these artists, everything is borrowed. The unintelligibility of irony makes it a fitting mantle for the strand of feminism represented by these artists. Given such refracted

accumulation around the concept of feminism, these artists engage irony as a tactic for re-producing images of themselves by reworking borrowed images of “themselves.”

Elizabeth Freeman has been especially attentive to the political multivalence of “the girl.” She develops her concept of “temporal drag” through her own set of questions about the “commitment to the ‘girl’ icon [in the] contemporary political context.”⁸⁸ Freeman writes, “But the ‘girl’ revolution also refuses to locate the ‘girl’ as the beginning of either identity or politics; instead, she represents what Elspeth Probyn calls ‘a political tactic [...] used to turn identity inside out’” (in Freeman 2000:741). Like temporal drag, adolescent drag is a tactical model for “turning inside out” the soiled garment of a politics that feminists want to wear again, but differently this time. Deploying the girl figure to different ends, Freeman writes: “‘girl’ embraces an embarrassing past as the crucial augur of a critical, yet also contingent future [...] The girl-sign acknowledges [...] the uncontrollability of the past, its inability to explain the present—and the promising distortions effected when the past suddenly, unpredictably erupts into the present forms of sexual and gendered personhood” (2000:740–41). Like the lesbian for Freeman’s “temporal drag,” these artists drag 1960s and ’70s feminist art, like one would something regarded as a “big drag,” that which appears outdated in its over-earnest politics, symbolized by “scraggly underarm hair,” not unlike the nagging mother who just won’t leave you alone. “Let us

⁸⁸ Freeman writes, “The deployment of the girl in recent queer/feminist videos, ‘zines, song lyrics, and so on, implicitly critiques radical feminists’ repudiation of their own 1950s girlhoods as false consciousness, allowing the politicized adult a more empathetic and even erotic relationship to her former vulnerabilities and pleasures” (2000:740). Freeman’s argument engages an extended reading of Elizabeth Subrin’s independent film *Shulie* (1997), a shot-for-shot remake of an unreleased 1967 documentary film by the same name by the feminist Shulasmith Firestone. Both the film and Freeman’s essay explore regression as a strategy for feminist redress.

call this ‘temporal drag,’” writes Freeman, “with all of the associations that the word ‘drag’ has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past upon the present” (2000:728).

In their *performed* ignoring, forgetting, and denying of the figure of the foremother (the feminist theoretical foremother, the art historical foremother) and in their reluctance to accept their position within a generational cultural model as daughters, these artists visualize an uncanny wish *to give birth to themselves*. Hawk Swanson literally undertakes to produce herself as her own child, “giving birth” to Amber Doll. Gilmore’s work obsessively reenacts a birthing of the self through her own physical materials, pushing her face through holes, breaching barriers with the full force of her being. Young sees it all “more as a solo.” What is intriguing about this desire to “re-produce” the self is that, much like their predecessors before them, these artists utilize their diverse media as a means to produce an image of themselves through which they can emerge as political subjects produced in their own likeness (here one need only think of the significance of genres of autobiography and self-portraiture to feminism). Carol Mavor uses the phrase “reading girlishly” to describe the creation of one’s own subjective playground, finding “my own place to revel [...] a place to play ‘out’ those girl-things disavowed by the culture that I call home: from dress-up, to a love for girls, to motherhood itself” (2007:28).

Mavor continues, “The Greek root of the word nostalgia, *nostos* means ‘the return home.’ But anyone who has been there knows that the return home can be painful” (38). Such has been one lesson of queer theory. Freeman writes, drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s suggestion in her essay “How To Bring Your Kids Up Gay,” that “a genuinely queer politics must refuse to abject even the most stigmatized child-figure from

formulations of adult political subjectivity” (2000:741). As queer theory has actively intervened on behalf of those subjectivities rendered homeless or orphaned by compulsory logics of normative development and social maturation, some homes must be made in the time and space of the in-between. Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young, I argue, represent a generation of women who are actively in the throes of a certain disidentification with “themselves”: those commercialized stereotypes that claim to mirror them in mainstream culture and with the overdetermined political positions on offer to them in supposed contradistinction.

Nothing would seem to support this reading more than a recent project of Young’s: during an early 2011 artist-in-residency in the choreography department of the Amsterdam Theaterschool (School voor Nieuwe Dansontwikkeling [SNDO]), Young produced a performance with 36 students, based on her character Sherry, called *37 Sherrys* (2011). The show effectively literalizes my reading of Young’s work as a performance of adolescent self-refraction and ideological multiplication (fig. 15). Some of the 36 Sherrys eventually turned on Sherry, in what Young claims was an ambush in which four students attempted to force her onto a table and to tape her down (Young 2011).⁸⁹

⁸⁹ In a post on the artist’s Facebook account, Young (as Sherry?) writes: “I think they were saying that Sherry forces people to do things so they were gonna force me onto a table and tape me down but they didn’t get that far” (Young 2011).



Figure 15. 37 Sherrys (2011), Ann Liv Young’s collaboration with students from the School of New Dance Development at Amsterdam’s School of the Arts. Something Raw Festival, 18 February 2011. (Photo by Michael A. Guerrero).

Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young “drag” themselves, soberly and irreverently, adorning themselves in the cultural costuming and staging of the white girl fairy princess in late capital. A visual metaphor for this was made apparent in Young’s solo exhibition, for which the artist displayed Sherry’s costumes for *Cinderella*, *37 Sherrys*, and her performance at P.S. 1 (fig. 16). They resemble effigies or hollowed out mannequins hung out to dry. Only this time, the gown is worn too tight or too baggy, stained and dirty, lopsided and terribly unflattering, much like Young’s perfectly disturbed Snow White, who literally pulls herself across the floor or Gilmore’s surrogates who are all dressed up with nowhere to go. In their performances of autogenesis, the artists present allegories, caricatures, and parodies in their own image. Adolescent drag thus emerges as a mode for staging tactical refusals of compulsory constructions of feminine identity and feminist politics that some women refuse to recognize as representative. And while they may give

birth to images of themselves, these images are far from idealized or aspirational—rather, they model a feminist politics that does not aspire to redemption.



Figure 16. Installation view of *Sherry is Present*. James B. Louis Gallery, New York City. December 5, 2011-January 7, 2012 (Courtesy of Louis B. James Gallery).

ADOLESCENT INTERFERENCE

“If we refuse to become women [...] what happens to feminism?” Judith Halberstam asks in *The Queer Art of Failure*, which proposes a queer feminist approach that she terms “shadow feminism” (2011:123–25). Her project, which follows the antisocial turn in queer theory to ask what’s in it for feminism, is one “grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, silence” that “offers spaces and modes of unknowing, failing, and forgetting as part of an alternative feminist project” (124). Halberstam writes, “This shadow feminism speaks in the language of self-destruction, masochism, an anti-social femininity and a refusal of the essential bond of mother and daughter that ensures that the daughter inhabits the legacy of the mother and in doing so, reproduces her

relationship to patriarchal forms of power” (124). Halberstam argues that feminism should “lose the mother,” citing Saidiya Hartmann to advocate for a dismantling of conventional feminist politics by refusing to become the woman defined by Western philosophy and particularly by Western feminism. She engages Gayatri Spivak and Saba Mahmood to critique Western feminism’s prescriptiveness regarding notions of freedom and resistance that have, as Mahmood has suggested, “impose[d] a teleology of progressive politics on the analytics of power” (in Halberstam 2011:127) and further reproduced this model by “passing down” knowledge from mother to daughter that has, according to Halberstam, benefited white heteronormativity in the process. Rather than follow that model, Halberstam proposes that feminists refuse the choices on offer to seek escape routes in incoherence, unbecoming, disorganization, and passivity that make up what she calls “a shadow archive of resistance” (129).

Halberstam’s position appears to pin the burden of humanism, colonialism, and universalism on a particularly unsympathetic image of the white feminist “mother,” which she prefers to forget by identifying instead with postcolonial and critical race feminism. Her argument met with resistance in an article by Susan Faludi in which she argues that the “mother-daughter” divide within feminism has become a significant impasse for the contemporary feminist movement, “[a] generational breakdown [which] underlies so many of the pathologies that have long disturbed American feminism” (Faludi 2010:29). Faludi describes the faultlines said to separate the feminist “mother figure” of second-wave feminism and the “daughter figure” of third-wave feminism. Despite her claim not to take sides in the fight, Faludi appears to identify with the “mother,” an affiliation betrayed by the article’s ultimate declamation against

Halberstam's scholarship (implied as too adolescent) juxtaposed with a sentimental portrait of an older feminist, disputing Halberstam's desire to take down "just the mother part of the equation" (Faludi 2010:41). Rather than addressing Halberstam's written work, Faludi takes issue with a conference presentation the scholar made at the "No Longer in Exile" symposium at the New School in the Spring of 2010 where Halberstam argued that Lady Gaga's music video *Telephone* proposed a "brave new world of Gaga girliness" that represented "something like the future of feminism" (in Faludi 2010:42.)⁹⁰ Faludi's critique of "theoretical and consumer-saturated academic feminism" suspiciously conflates Halberstam's theoretical approach with her investment in the tactical possibilities suggested by Lady Gaga's queering of pop culture to argue that such an approach derails the feminist project from what she describes to be its ultimate objective: "revolutionary change."

Faludi and Halberstam at the same time debate and *perform* the so-called "mother-daughter conflict," with Faludi assuming the stereotypical role of conservative mother and Halberstam that of provocateur daughter, even as they work to expose it as inadequate to the complexities of feminism's present situation. Astrid Henry's study *Not My Mother's Sister* describes the increasing tendency to articulate feminism by drawing

⁹⁰ According to Faludi, Halberstam describes the "brave new world of Gaga girliness": "What one wants to inspire is new work that one barely recognizes as feminism, and that's what I'm going to call Gaga feminism" (in Faludi 2010:42). In response to Faludi's article, Halberstam writes on the blog: "While Faludi characterizes me as a glib twit who proposed Lady Gaga as the answer to what ails feminism, I actually had tried to show that Lady Gaga's duet with Beyoncé in *Telephone* provides an exciting and infectious model of Sapphic sisterhood that moves beyond sentimental models of romantic friendship and references a different kind of feminism [...] The Gaga piece of my talk was just a humorous ending to a lecture that covered changing notions of gender, evolving models of institutional relevance and argued for an improvisational feminism that kept up with the winds of political change" (Faludi 2010). In her March 2010 blog entry "You Cannot Gaga Gaga," Halberstam writes that Lady Gaga "is camping camp, she is dragging drag, she is ironing irony..." (2010), suggesting affinities between what I am calling parasitical feminism and Halberstam's Gaga feminism.

generational lines to argue that an overemphasis on metaphors of generational rebellion has come at the expense of political action (2004).⁹¹ This is borne out in the Faludi and Halberstam debate. Restaging long-held debates between second- and third-wave feminism about feminism's (in)attention to other forms of difference and the pleasures and dangers of commercial culture, their disagreement evidences a symptomatic elision within similar feminist discourse as both Faludi and Halberstam forget the possibility of the intermediate figure: the adolescent who might avoid having to take sides in the conflict between mother and daughter. The adolescent plays the parasitical interrupter of this exhausted debate, offering a much-needed third term, a productive interruption that Michel Serres argues is the productivity associated with the parasite who generates disorder and, in so doing, produces new, more complex forms of communication (2007:5).

Serres writes in *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*:

[T]he interlocuters play on the same side; they do battle together to produce truth on which they can agree, that is, to produce a successful communication.' The 'truth' agreed upon, he suggests, borrowing from the realms both of abstract mathematics and of Platonic forms, is that of an 'unvarying' or 'abstract form.' Secondly, that model of agreement/communication is triangular, no dyadic, in its most basic logic: *'To hold a dialogue is to suppose a third man and to seek to exclude him;* a successful communication is the exclusion of the third man (1982:66-67).

⁹¹ Henry writes, "In recent years, there has been an increasing tendency to speak of feminism in terms of generations. In fact, within feminism, the 1990s may well be remembered as a decade defined by the notion of feminist generations, so commonplace was the use of this concept to mark differences among and between feminisms—and feminists[...]. In its most-often-used form, the phrase 'feminist generations' points to the existence of at least two—if not more—coexisting generations of U.S. feminists: second-wave feminists of the 1970s and a new generation of feminists, who emerged in the 1990s, who are being called the third wave. This latter term 'third wave,' has frequently been employed as a kind of shorthand for a generational difference among feminists one based on chronological age" (2004:3).

According to Serres, the existence of a relation between two communicating ‘stations’ implies mediation, the disruption of an immediate relation. I argue that in the communication system of the “mother-daught conflict,” the adolescent is this excluded third term, this parasite. Writes Martha J. Koehler, “...Serres emphasizes the productivity associated with the parasite, which, although it generates disorder, also produces new, more complex forms of communication...and put new messages into circulation. ‘The parasite can expose every system to ruin...[it] can kill everything it meets. But at the same time it multiplies complexity...it exalts and accelerates the exchanges of its hosts...it raises up, here and there, productive multiplications’” (2005:64). Cary Wolfe, in his introduction to the 2007 edition of *The Parasite*, elaborates this point, writing that “we need to remember that ‘noise’ (for the English reader) forms the third and unsuspected meaning...As we know from classical information theory and its model of the signal-to-noise ratio, noise was typically regarded as simply the extraneous background against which a given message or signal was transmitted from a sender to receiver.” “For Serres, however, ‘as soon as we are two, we are already three or four...’” Wolfe continues, citing Serres’ *Genesis* (*Genèse*) written just after *The Parasite*: “‘In order to succeed, the dialogue needs an excluded third’; we may begin with ‘two interlocuters and the channel that attaches them to one another,’ but ‘the parasite, nesting on the flow of the relation, is in third position’” (qtd. in Wolfe xiii). For Serres, noise is both productive and creative. “Or as [Gregory] Bateson puts it...” writes Wolfe, “‘All that is not information, not redundancy, not form and not restraints—is noise, the only possible source of *new* patterns’” (xiii, his emphasis).

Adolescence exploits the poverty of both options, asserting childishness as an excuse and adulthood as too conditioned by tradition. In an October 2010 entry, Halberstam writes on her blog: “Faludi, though she may sound like your grandmother, is actually my age, so I guess this is sibling rivalry if one must stick to familiar metaphors” (2010). That Halberstam and Faludi are around the same age is only further evidence of the mother-daughter conflict as positing a false binary. The adolescent figure usefully intervenes in this debate as both and neither mother and daughter, both and neither second- and third-wave feminism. Adolescent drag, significantly, does not purport to be a performance of radical refusal, as proposed by Halberstam for shadow feminism. Neither does it claim to occupy a neutral territory. Rather, Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young stage both mother and daughter as they image their own autogenesis in the adolescent, as the figure of their own self-birth. The artists embody adolescent drag not as a performance of pure refusal—a way of fleeing the ruins of an objectionable political past that they inherit, whether acknowledged or not—but rather as an enactment of messiness and contestation. Halberstam presents feminism as the white mother who bears all of the blame for its own failure, a failure that is not bequeathed with any tactical potential. Within the wide landscape of her book’s broader inquiry into the queering of failure, it is notable that the white mother proves an exemplary site for failure that is in no way redeemable. The ironic quality of Halberstam’s playful call to abjure the force of the maternal, however, is highly generative for my own analysis and a move that I would be remiss to read too earnestly. Nevertheless, it bears troubling that the protagonist of “shadow feminism” emerges as the default queer daughter/child figure in order to (re)claim the innocence and purity of childhood offered in the tabula rasa of orphanhood. Halberstam’s sincere identification with critical race and postcolonial feminism is, thus, nevertheless

problematic. The condition of possibility for her claim to purity in performances of refusal (passivity, absence, silence) threatens to position scholars such as Spivak and Mahmood as the healers or surrogate mothers of Western feminism. Halberstam seeks relief from the failures associated with the white mother and, as such, appears to attempt to quarantine a certain set of conventions within second-wave feminism, as if a form of contagion.⁹² Her turn to feminist negativity, however, seeks to effect a problematic erasure that would sterilize troubling histories that might instead be contested directly through methods of appropriative reversal.

Adolescent drag is instructive for this debate as a tactic that aspires to impurity over purity, an operation that models an alternative both to Halberstam's shadow feminism and Faludi's outright rejection of today's media culture. Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young's adolescence engages irony instead of negativity or shadow play, which prove too purely consequential, risking too little by removing itself from the causal linkages of inheritance and contamination in which these artists instead choose to immerse themselves, drawing upon the popular media cultures that Faludi rejects in their performances of adolescent drag. Halberstam's shadow feminism risks, in its radicality, an unsavory purity reversed in the performance of the adolescent for whom the accumulative potential of irony, rather than refusal, mediates an inheritance that cannot be refused.

⁹² In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz critiques theorists for whom the anti-relational turn sanctions an escape from relationality that gets equated as a distancing from the contamination of race, gender, and other particularities that "taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference" (2009:11). "In other words," Muñoz writes, "antirelational approaches to queer theory are romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference." Halberstam's shadow feminism is a romanticization of difference that, I argue, nevertheless reproduces the thrall to feminist purity that she wants to work against.

CARICATURING GIRL POWER

Adolescent drag enacts a double disidentification: challenging both second-wave feminism and third-wave feminism in its performance of autogenesis. The self-engendering described by autogenesis is, significantly, an *ironic* representation of the self that is neither pure reproduction nor pure refusal. Instead it bespeaks a process that José Esteban Muñoz has termed disidentification and characterized as neither a straightforward identification nor a counter-identification but rather a “working on, with, and against a form at a simultaneous moment” (2000:70). Muñoz’s description of disidentification helps to explicate the important difference between refusal and irony in adolescent drag. While Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young may at first glance appear to perform disidentification as a dissociation with second- and third-wave feminism, closer inspection reveals their adolescent drag instead to be a form of dissimulation effecting in its use of irony not a closure but an accumulation of possibilities or interpretations, recalling the multiple women in Gilmore’s *Walk the Walk* piece in Bryant Park or Young’s successive responses of “no,” “yes,” and “maybe” to the question of her feminism.

Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young engage irony not merely by saying one thing and meaning another but as a form of circumnavigation that, rather than being cynical or malicious, is the creative and political pose assumed in adolescent drag.⁹³ The turn to irony critiques the limited spectrum of representational models available to young women who do not accept the paucity of positions on offer by the mass media and by feminism

⁹³ See Claire Colebrook’s *Irony* for an extended account of the term. Colebrook writes, “Despite its unwieldy complexity, irony has a frequent and common definition: saying what is contrary to what is meant, a definition that is usually attributed to the first-century Roman orator Quintilian who was already looking back to Socrates and Ancient Greek literature” (2004:1).

and who instead undertake to contradict themselves through performance. In this sense, irony indexes a means of saying or doing something with the understanding that it does not necessarily correspond with one's consciousness. While cynicism speaks from a position of power or mastery, irony responds as an "adolescent" maneuver for renegotiating models imposed from outside, a performance that attempts to thwart the problem of totalization. The mediums of conceptual art and performance—which seize the characteristic capriciousness of the adolescent taken as their subject—align as frameworks befitting a game of action and language that do not transparently offer their meanings, modalities wherein the question of what one "actually means" often remains an open one. Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young engage the ironic stance as one that lends feminism a multiplicity of meanings (no, yes, maybe) that, activated in the undecidable liminality of performance, remain imbued with potential. These artists perform the adolescent for her ability to say something that power does not completely understand, something that cannot be easily assimilated as telos or cliché, because it is already allegory, already caricature.

Adolescent drag, enacted as tactical dissimulation, proposes a critical framework for interpreting the contemporary phenomenon that Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young dramatize, whereby young women have increasingly claimed to disidentify with feminism: uttering the now-familiar phrase personified by Hawk Swanson's sorority girl, "I'm not a feminist but..." In her 2010 book *Enlightened Sexism*, Susan J. Douglas associates this phenomenon with what she calls "the new girliness" that emerged in 1990s media representations, a collage of images that straddle both third-wave feminism and postfeminism. This proliferation of representations, she argues, contributed to a girl

culture of “postfeminism triumph.” “Young women were not supposed to identify with feminism; instead, they were supposed to actively *dis*-identify with it,” Douglas writes (2010:103). Douglas does not account for the possibility that such “girliness” might be a performance, rendering it instead as evidence for her diagnosis of a pervasive political nihilism that threatens the legacy of feminism. Without the depth model offered by Muñoz’s account of the term, Douglas misreads “girliness” as a flat counter-identification, failing to register it as a tactical maneuver available to young women who seek to work on the concept of feminism in their very disavowal of it. What would it mean to consider this form of dissimulation as, rather than the crisis for feminism that Douglas claims, a performance staged by young women who desire to expand the repertoire of feminist discourse beyond the normative borders (patrolled by feminists such as Douglas and Faludi) of affirmation and frontal earnestness? The sense of estrangement that has been produced within feminism by these apparent denials, cast as the mother-daughter conflict, gets reworked in the figure of the adolescent for whom irony manipulates pressures to render oneself coherently and legibly feminist, staging a critique of compulsory performances of having to “bear witness” in order to be counted.

Recognizing adolescence as a form of drag, rather than always a “straight” or sincere identification (as Douglas reads “girliness”), recommends a widening of the normative feminist scope beyond the rubric afforded by third-wave feminism. In her study of third-wave feminism, a phenomenon she describes as little understood even by feminists, R. Claire Snyder surveys popular and academic literature in an attempt to read beyond the movement’s appearance as “a confusing hodgepodge of personal anecdotes and individualistic claims” (2008:175). Third-wavers, Snyder explains, rejected media-

sensationalized postfeminism and were unwilling to cast aside completely the agenda of second-wave feminism.⁹⁴ Snyder identifies third-wave feminism with its active play with signifiers of femininity toward a “fun, feminine, and sex-positive” politics that nevertheless has often been critiqued for reproducing the same white, middle-class bias that first and second-wave feminism did, despite claims made to queer, multiracial, and ideologically flexible multivocalities. Snyder notes third-wavers’ “girly” play with femininity, sexual pleasure, and self-expression through consumption:

Girl power, or girlie culture, is a central—yet contested—strand within the third wave [...] Girlie encompasses the tabooed symbols of women’s feminine enculturation—Barbie dolls, makeup, fashion magazines, high heels—and says using them isn’t shorthand for “we’ve been duped.” Makeup isn’t a sign of our sway to the marketplace and the male gaze, it can be sexy, campy, ironic, or simply decorating ourselves without the loaded issues (2008:179).

Yet, rather than merely reproducing signs of third-wave feminism, Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young *caricature* its investment in the adolescent figure, dragging its “girl power” slogan to mock its commercial complicities with their own amateur aesthetics—from Hawk Swanson’s cheap parodies of pornography to Young’s ironic mash-ups of karaoke, fairytales, and improv comedy. All the signs are distorted and degraded: the doll is rendered as life-size by Hawk Swanson, the makeup caked on like a clown by Young’s alter-ego Sherry, the high heels soiled and broken down by Gilmore. The artists challenge third-wave feminism’s presumption to represent them by reproducing and manipulating characteristics associated with the movement, satirizing the “spiritedness” of its “spirited individualism,” allegorizing the “girl” of its embrace of “girlie culture,” and

⁹⁴ Snyder differentiates third-wave feminism from postfeminism, which she associates with a number of figures (such as Katie Roiphe, Camille Paglia, and Rene Denfeld) who gained prominence by misrepresenting second-wave feminism and exploiting such misrepresentations (2008:176).

camping its “camp” celebration of sex, gay culture, and fashion. The girlish aesthetics of Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young mock the at times naïve, hyperbolic, and liberationist rhetoric of a “girl power” feminism that celebrates a discourse of mastery over and purity within commercial culture, advocating instead a representation of the girl that, quite simply, does not aim to master her universe. All the while, the artists also demonstrate their inheritance from the third-wave, further elaborating on what Snyder considers third-wave feminism’s turn to tactical approaches by which they negotiated three important critical impasses with the second-wave. The politics of adolescent drag is deeply informed by third-wave feminism’s embrace of the collapse of the category of “woman,” their turn to multivocality and action over synthesis and theoretical justification after the rise of postmodernism, and their emphasis on approaches that refuse to police boundaries of feminist politics following the sex wars (Snyder 2008:175). By wearing out its own overprocessed forms, adolescent drag presents a critique of third-wave feminism’s complicity with dominant narratives of success, refusing to move easily within certain artistic and political economies of profit, influence, and triumph with their use of vulgarity, awkwardness, and amateurism that render their work less easily commercially digestable by the public body that might buy pornography and kid culture separately but not together. Such “vulgar” juxtapositions are enabled by irony, which at the same time exposes the artists’ own complicity within structures of dominance that sanction their art (no, yes, maybe...). The play with enjoyment and humor to be had in caricature enacts a generative distortion in adolescent drag that produces an image of feminist impurity through irony, whereby everything cannot be made neatly reconcilable.

At the close of *Brave New Girl*, Neal Medlyn’s October 2010 drag performance of pop

sensation Miley Cyrus's onscreen alter ego Hannah Montana, he tells the audience that you can be as many people as you want at once. Snow is projected onto The Chocolate Factory's small stage, falling throughout the show, though the stage "never remains lily white for long,"⁹⁵ despite Medlyn's description of the show as "about": "purity, snow, teenage-hood, multiple personality, secrets, pop, indie music, 5 a.m. 'me' time, loneliness, parenting, ghosts, forests, cassettes, pop music, Disney, Twitter and fairytales" (in Stonebraker 2010). But as one critic of the show writes, "At the center of this look at purity is Mr. Medlyn, a performer who evokes giggles by the nature of his gawky appearance (greasy hair, a slightly distended stomach and hunched shoulders)" (Stonebraker 2010). Adolescent drag, for Medlyn as for Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young, visualizes the ironic potential in failing to pass as the ideal.

Adolescent drag exploits the already fractal and performative identity of the adolescent girl in mainstream and feminist discourse, refracted back by Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young as a generative and ironic reflection for its very overcitationality. Adolescent drag draws upon the adolescent figure as a chain of significations, a network of reflections that bounce off of each other—the "girliness" of girl power, the African-American inflected "grrl," the "riot grrrl," the "girl" camped by queens. She is always multiple, always overloaded, both allegorical and caricatural. Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young mobilize in adolescent drag a set of tactics whereby feminists might exploit such

⁹⁵ Medlyn's irreverent association of the false innocence and purity of youth with the "snow" of white privilege is reminiscent of Muñoz's interview in *Disidentifications* with artist Vaginal Davis who is pictured in the chapter dressed as a white child—blond wig, pigtales, polka-dot dress—an image that recalls those of Medlyn, Trecartin, and Linzy. Davis provides this description of her disidentification with the white girl: "When you come home from the inner city and you're Black you go through a stage when you try to fit the dominant culture, you kinda want to be white at first—it would be easier if you were White... That's what I call the snow period—I just felt like if I had some cheap white boyfriend, my life could be perfect and I could find some treasured thing (1999:97).

impurity by reappropriating images that have been projected onto them, images that they do not recognize as representative of them. As a performance of alienated self-parody, adolescent drag enacts a model of autogenesis or self-making whereby feminists might give birth to the self that they are given and that they are given to embrace, to have and to hold.

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CHAPTER THREE

parasite | 'parə,sīt |

Definition

1a. *Social.* A person who lives at the expense of another, or of society in general; especially (in early use) a person who obtains the hospitality or patronage of the wealthy or powerful by obsequiousness and flattery.

1b. A guest permitted at the table of a host.

GN: There's just one thing I ask, that you include me
in your crowd...

PHA: Agreed.

CH: And welcome.

-Terence's *Eunuchus* in *The Mask of the Parasite: A Pathology of Roman Patronage*
(Damon 1997:87)

CHAPTER THREE /

USER BE USED OCCUPYING THE NETWORK

By the side of independent producers who carry on their handicrafts...in the traditional old-fashioned way, there stands the userer or the merchant, with his userer's capital or merchant's capital, feeding on them like a parasite.

-Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. I* (2011[1906]:559)

Capital circulates, as it were, through the body of the laborer as variable capital and thereby turns the laborer into a mere appendage of the circulation of capital itself.

-David Harvey, *The Limits of Capital* (1982:97)

I just don't know what to do with myself

Don't know just what to do with myself.

I'm so used to doing everything with you.

-Dusty Springfield, "I Just Don't Know What To Do"
lyrics

A TASK NO ONE ASSIGNED

In the wake of the 2008 Financial Crisis, the Occupy movement has engaged a discourse of occupation to draw attention to the twinning logics of U.S. imperialism and American capitalism. By "occupying" cities around the world, demonstrators have called for wide-

scale social reform, denouncing the economic and social oppression of a ruling class that exploits its workers while, at the same time, treating them as parasites. This was made explicit when, in October 2011, conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh said of the Occupy movement: “What, exactly, are the contributions to society these protestors have made?...These protestors, who are actually few in number, have contributed nothing. They’re parasites. They’re pure, genuine parasites. Much of them are bored, trust-fund kids, obsessed with being something, being somebody. Meaningless lives, they want to matter.” By January 2012, an image began to circulate on Facebook, Tumblr, and the news aggregator Reddit. In it, Marxist scholar Jason Read is pictured at a podium with this quotation: “People who dismiss the unemployed and dependent as ‘parasites’ fail to understand economics and parasitism. A successful parasite is one that is not recognized by its host, one that can make its host work for it without appearing as a burden. Such is the ruling class in a capitalist society.”

By flipping the frame of Limbaugh’s illocution, Read exposes the ideology that subtends his use of the term “parasite” and, in so doing, shows how Limbaugh is himself a *parasitical host*—a radio host who serves as mouthpiece for the interests of the ruling class and indeed one who (as Michel Serres writes of the French denotation of parasite as a kind of static in the system) quite literally represents the unwanted noise of communication. As soon as something is identified as a parasite, it runs the risk of eradication, Read explains. The most successful parasite is thus never labeled a parasite. Read later clarified that his main point was that “if people are concerned about those making money without work, then they should look at the top 1 percent” (Martin 2012). The real figure of parasitical decadence is thus the financial industry in a post-bank

bailout era of mass unemployment. It is the profiteers of capitalism that truly live without working, drawing paychecks from the dividends of so-called “real work.”

Read’s “response” to Limbaugh replicated across the net, going viral in January 2012. The meme originated as a Facebook status update that Read, a philosophy professor at the University of Southern Maine, had posted on his personal page on December 29, 2011. By January 8th, a friend had lifted the quote and superimposed it onto a photo of him, posting it on his profile page and the Occupy Maine Facebook page. The image’s host site had recorded 152,272 views of the meme as of January 21st (Martin 2012). The intensity with which Read’s meme replicated evinces the *zeitgeist* of parasitical politics in the age of Occupy.

Calling a person or group “parasitical” has become a recognizable political speech act of our current moment as both sides of the protest barricade have decried the other as being the *real users* of the system. The lie of the parasite is that it is the “other” of politics. Calling the demonstrators “parasites” has therefore been a neoconservative strategy for refusing their place in the system and for denying that their participation is vital to a functional economy. Read’s deconstruction exposes how “parasite” has been an epithet deployed from a position of privilege, the moniker functioning to obscure and naturalize the operations of dominance. The claim of parasitism, as I have argued, has thus commonly been used by the powerful to stigmatize minoritarian subjects who engage in tactics of survival and resistance. It mobilizes the protestant work ethic to feminize the so-called unproductive or dependent’s outsider-status to the function of patriarchal dominance, to make tenable the untenable claim that a majoritarian entity has suffered

abuse at the hands of a minoritarian entity. By refusing this deferral to such an outside, the so-called parasite demands its place within, rather than at the periphery of, politics. What is offered by simply reversing the terms of neoliberal discourse, as Read does, by calling the 1% *parasites*? Rather than reversing these terms, might the 99% push this logic *even further* by inhabiting the imposition of the parasite?

Paolo Virno, describing the “expectation of work” perpetuated by entrepreneurs and politicians amidst a crisis of wage labor, has gestured toward the “catch 22” of the figure that, at the same time, is a parasite because it does not work and yet, is not allowed to work because it is a parasite. The parasite, in other words, is brought into being by the very conditions under which it finds itself hosted. Virno situates the “parasitic” as such:

That the crisis of the welfare state results from an ungovernable rise in social spending, destined to confront an expanding area of non-labor, is something we are told *ad nauseam*. In other words, the taxes raised on income derived from market transactions are supposedly being used to finance an inactive or “unproductive” social sector—one that tends to violate the rules of competition and remuneration (2007:36).

He continues, “In this account, labor and non-labor, labor and welfare, the free market and the political marketplace confront one another through a precise distribution of moral roles and values: economic viability versus social parasitism, entrepreneurial vitality versus the stagnation of welfare.” “It’s a powerful ideology, to be sure, all the more powerful inasmuch as it presents itself as common sense, revealing the real causes of the crisis like a mirror—accurately, but the wrong way around” (36).

The limits of both Virno and Read’s Marxist readings are their inattention to the way that the charge of parasitism trades in misogyny. How can minoritarian subjects reverse

the ideological stakes of “social parasitism” to their advantage, or as Virno puts it, turn the mirror back on the real parasites of the system? If not only some but *all relations* are parasitical, Limbaugh’s claims exemplify how only one side of the feedback loop is registered, while the parasitism of the powerful remains invisible. The structural invisibility of one side of the feedback loop is of deep feminist consequence as the logic of social binarism conditions the giving and withholding of credit and other forms of social capital in a so-called U.S. meritocracy. One need only think of the delegitimizing force of neoliberal claims of “resource draining” and “moneysucking” leveled at “housewives,” “welfare queens,” and “illegal aliens” in our political field. Their lack of a “proper” occupation is implied as inextricable from their gendering or racialization—producing a tautological rationale for their exclusion. Denigrated as feminized and/or racialized, their labor is thus systematically denied the social status and benefits of “real work.” In *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, bell hooks writes:

Many greedy upper- and middle-class citizens share with their wealthy counterparts a hatred and disdain for the poor that is so intense it borders on pathological hysteria. It has served their class interests to perpetuate the notion that the poor are mere parasites and predators. And, of course, their greed has set up a situation where many people must act in a parasitic manner in order to meet basic needs—the need for food, clothing, and shelter (2000:45).

In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant reminds us that, at its root, precarity is a condition of dependency: “[A]s a legal term, *precarious* describes the situation wherein your tenancy on your land is in someone else’s hands,” she writes (2011:192, her emphasis). The onset of precarity as a problem of the unraveling fantasy of western exceptionalism in the United States and contemporary Europe spans the last three decades of the “state’s withdrawal from the even expansion of economic opportunity, social norms, and legal rights that

motored so much postwar optimism for democratic access to the good life” (2011:3). “The fantasies that are fraying include, particularly, upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy,” writes Berlant, “The set of dissolving assurances also includes meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project of adding up to something...” (3). Berlant thus privileges *impassé* as the affective genre for this sense of our precarious present.

To be precarious today is to be a *guest* who depends on the hospitality of an *owner* and who must work to pay their debt; it is to be a parasite who must pay for living on the territory of another. “[I]t is a question of rent,” writes Serres. “Rent, that is to say, a price for a space, a payment for territory. The one who is at home is my lessee: this double locative is a veritable hornet's nest where regulated hospitality passes many a time to hostility” (1982:22). Precarity—austerity, scarcity, resource shrinkage—is thus the training ground for the parasite’s very survival within an environment that holds it accountable for its very thirst for resources.

“Who is the host and who is the guest?,” asks Serres. “Where is the gift and where is the debt? Who is hospitable, who is hostile...?” (1982:23). Wendy Brown asks in *Regulating Aversion*, “What kind of political discourse, with what social and political effects, is contemporary tolerance talk in the United States? What readings of the discourses of liberalism, colonialism, and imperialism circulating through Western democracies can analytical scrutiny of this talk provide?” (2006:4) We might ask, why are these so-called parasites *tolerated*? If they were ostensibly never invited and clearly not wanted, why are

they permitted to stay as a guest at the table of the host? That is, is the ecosystem of U.S. neoliberalism hospitable or hostile, and if it is both, then how are these parasites *allowed to stay* on the backs of their host? She writes, “The *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies the Latin root of tolerance as *tolerare*, meaning to bear, endure, or put up with and implying a certain moral disapproval” (25). “The very invocation of tolerance...indicates that something contaminating or dangerous is at hand, or something foreign is at issue, and the limits of tolerance are determined by how much this toxicity can be accommodated without destroying the object, value, claim, or body” (27). “Tolerance appears, then, as a mode of incorporating and regulating the presence of the threatening Other within...[in this sense] tolerance may be understood as a unique way of sustaining the *threatened* entity” (27, her emphasis). Tolerance thus offers a means for managing the parasite by incorporating it. Rather than casting out the parasite, the host oscillates between rejecting and assimilating it, managing its hostility in thinly veiled hospitality. If what the parasite *pays in return* for its place is with *words*—with obsequiousness and flattery—as Serres claims, or otherwise with a kind of labor that is not valued by the host, tolerance is the receipt given back to the parasite for its rent. The thin veil of tolerance is ultimately a shroud that keeps one from seeing that the host actually *needs* its parasites to stick around.

As the prevalence of parasitism around the Occupy movement has demonstrated, our precarious present registers a dire need to theorize the neoliberal economies of value that oppose the 99% as parasites on the 1%. In the wake of the systemic failures brought to light by the crisis, what happens to “minority politics” when the oppressed class has become “the 99%”? How have questions of difference been de-centered by an economics of “sameness” (the 99%)? That the discourse surrounding the movement has been mired

in the racism and misogyny makes it no surprise that Occupy has emerged at a historical moment when “*occupying*” a *feminist position* (that is, a critical relation to the operations of dominance) has appeared foreclosed—indeed, when being a feminist has been coded as an imposition. What is the place of feminism within the politics of Occupy? What place does feminism occupy as a critical project; what traction does it offer in our political moment? Feminism has largely been cast aside as superfluous to debates about our current situation, regarded as a bourgeois anachronism beside the politics of precarity that have defined the political moment. While suggestive for my attempt to further a feminist reading, Read’s response to neoconservative appropriations of parasitism fails to attend fully to the social dynamics that exceed a Marxist critique of these deployments as merely a question of class warfare in capitalist society. The general elision of feminism from the scholarly discourse that has surrounded the Occupy movement forgets Western feminism’s long-term investigation into the problem of *structural dependency*, staged around women’s entanglement within patriarchy culture. Occupy indexes a similar structural pragmatic: that of the status of radical politics in neoliberalism. This problematic would seem to have much to learn from feminist analysis of the problem of complicit attachment to one’s oppressive conditions indexed by parasitism.

How can we maneuver in impasse? What political positions are available to progressives when the field of resistance and dissent has appeared only to narrow in the face of full-blown neoliberal globalism, pro-capitalist governance and corporate control? Recent decades have witnessed a shifting ground of political relations: the steady erasure of long-held sites of abundance and security, the waning of safe spaces, relations, and objects and the grieving of models of belonging and progress. Things that we thought were safe are

no longer. In this chapter, I ask how we might invent new ways to occupy this system as sites of public protest have been steadily foreclosed in the U.S. and Western European context. If “to impose” denotes to force something unwelcome or unfamiliar to be accepted or put in place, how can we *impose ourselves* on a system that has proven so able to absorb and appropriate such disruptive gestures only to reinforce the hegemony of global capitalism? This chapter centralizes a tactic that has remained on the conceptual periphery of my two previous chapters, that of *occupation*. It explores the polysemy of the term “occupation” as the U.S. Occupy movement, referring to both an insinuation onto the space of the other and to professional or otherwise legitimate labor, has appropriated it.

In asking “What is the place of feminism?” with regard to the Occupy movement, we must also ask what place does feminism hold—or is feminism perceived to hold—within neoliberal capitalism? Are women, and women’s movements, at home in this system? In a talk devoted to Nietzsche later published as *Spurs*, Derrida said, “there is no place for woman”—that is, no single place. In the interview “Choreographies,” he observes: “It is without a doubt risky to say that there is no place for woman, but this idea is not antifeminist, far from it...Can one not say, in Nietzsche’s language, that there is a ‘reactive’ feminism, and that a certain historical necessity often puts this form of feminism in power in today’s organized struggles? It is this kind of ‘reactive’ feminism that Nietzsche mocks, and not woman or women” (1997:27). He explains:

Perhaps one should not so much combat [reactive feminism as the public image of “feminism”] head on...as prevent its occupying the entire terrain. And why for that matter should one rush into answering a *topological* question (what is *the* place of *woman* [quelle est *la* place de *la* femme])? Or an *economical*

question (because it all comes back to *l'oikos* as home, *maison*, *chez-soi* ['at home,' in this sense also means in French 'within the self'], the law of the proper place, and so forth, in the preoccupation with a woman's place?) (27-28).

Contemporary feminism is therefore confronted with the question: how can feminists *make themselves at home* in not having a place in the conversation, in not being at home, in being mere guests on the host's home turf? How do feminists become self-serving guests, parasitical users?

A refined understanding of the dynamics at work in exploitation demands a crucial reassessment of *the use of feminism* in a political moment in which most people consider themselves to be exploited and yet few people appear still to call themselves feminists. If feminism has long been conceived of as a politics fundamentally *about* the problem of exploitation, what happens to feminism when *the user* is being redefined by digital media? The status of use must be reappraised as the inevitable logic of all relation and a precondition for all work. Rather than the undoing or negation of relation, use is the condition of possibility for relations to (do) work. Indeed, rather than undoing the work of feminism, use is that which must be put to work by feminists.

Serres' study offers in the figure of the parasite what I perceive to be three extraordinary insights that elucidate the politics of the parasite his work lays the foundations for but does not fully undertake itself. 1) Like parasites, systems work because they do not work. In other words, failures, flaws, and non-functioning—rather than excessive—are fully integral to the system. 2) For Serres, “abuse” is not be understood in purely negative terms since it is the very condition of the existence of the system itself; we use one another

and there is nothing tragic about that. 3) The parasite is not an ontological entity but a position held in a field of shifting asymmetries. We might restate Serres to say that systems work not because parasites are integral but parasites are integral because *they work for the system*.

All three of these insights present parasitism as an exemplary paradigm for rethinking feminism's relationship to use through performance or performative value—use understood not merely as exploitation but as efficacy: *what work a thing does*. Distilling the performative value of Serres' project, Cary Wolfe writes:

[P]erhaps we will do more justice to the peculiarity and specificity of *The Parasite*...by understanding the 'abuse' of 'abuse value' not in the common pejorative sense of 'mistreatment' but rather in light of the Latin prefix *ab-* meaning... 'off or away from': 'abuse' value *at a tangent to* use and exchange value, at a distance from it: a different vector, a different type of value. Serres writes—again in obvious if indirect dialogue with the Marxian theory of value: "The producer plays the contents, the parasite, the position. The one who plays the position will always beat the one who plays the contents. The latter is simple and naïve; the former is complex and mediatized...To play the position or to play the location is to dominate the relation" (xx).⁹⁶

As a position to be held rather than an ontological fact, the parasite refigures the user as a performative position for feminists to occupy. "Use" is recuperable for feminism only insofar as it can be understood as a process of extracting value that can be distinguished from mistreatment or oppression (e.g. domestic abuse). Serres' reading makes it possible

⁹⁶ Writes Wolfe, "*The Parasite* asserts the importance not of exchange or use value but rather of what Serres calls 'abuse value' in the organization of societies—an abuse value that is indexed to the fundamental dynamic of a primary parasitism and secondary sacrificial expulsion...This dynamic, Serres insists, comes *before* property, exchange, and the labor theory of value. As Serres puts it, 'The balance of exchange is always weighed and measured, calculated, taking into account a relation without exchange, an abusive relation. The term *abusive* is a term of usage. Abuse doesn't prevent use. The *abuse value*, complete, irrevocable consummation, precedes use- and exchange-value. Quite simply, it is the arrow with only one direction" (2007:xviii, his emphases).

for feminists to apprehend use within a broader class of relations that renegotiates a limiting tendency within feminism to equate “use” with exploitation. I am interested in what avenues this return use opens up for feminism as a performative and emphatically *not* in advocating for a feminism of abuse, in the popular sense of the term. As Stephen Crocker observes: “If politics must get beyond the dialectic of legitimate and illegitimate ends, that is because the political is not so much about the definition of goals, so much as the way that the medium in which our actions take place affects what we can be and do” (2007). If use is the condition of every relation, feminists are freed up from circling the moralistic *cul de sac* imposed by questions such as: should we use or should we not use? They are opened up to ask rather: *how* do we use? The question of the parasite is thus not whether we are dependent upon each other but how we, as feminists, are to attend to this interdependent relation. As we find ourselves indebted to an inhospitable host system, precarity is the economic and social backdrop from which parasitism emerges as a viable political model. By using use, parasitical feminism offers women and other minorities a means for insinuating themselves into the network of neoliberal globalism that perceives them as mere parasites.

FEMINIST PREOCCUPATIONS

Self-determination, freedom, and autonomy have represented impossible imperatives (or put in Berlant’s terms, sites of cruel optimism) for Western feminism, producing insurmountable impasses for contemporary feminism in a networked age of use and circulation. “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing,” observes Lauren Berlant. “These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws

your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. All attachment is optimistic..." (2011:1). "[R]elations of cruel optimism [range] from objects or scenes of romantic love and upward mobility to the desire for the political itself. At the center of [this] project, though, is that moral-intimate-economic thing called 'the good life'" (2). "Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies—say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?" she asks (2).

The parasite has symbolized the very antithesis of post-enlightenment feminist ideals, often figuring the threat that structural dependency poses to radical politics in historical feminist writing. Feminists have, in particular, raised the specter of parasitism in their ambivalence about work that has lain at the heart of feminist accounts of agency. Women's relationship to work is trafficked in these texts to contradictory ends—tethered to notions of freedom and agency in feminist discourse to different ends. Work is perceived as playing the part of both barrier and bridge to women's emancipation. On the one hand, work is associated with subservience in certain strands of feminist discourse, associated with the figure of the slave or the suffering housewife. Here we may recall that in the scene of Greek theater, the parasite was the slave. The "binding contract of servitude," consensual or not, has been perceived as constraining, if not downright foreclosing, woman's autonomous agency, self-determination, and freedom—liberal presuppositions that, as Saba Mahmood argues, have historically been naturalized in scholarship on gender (2005:13). "[Is] not the world a vast prison and women born slaves?" asked Mary Wollstonecraft (Andermahr, Lovell, and Wolkowitz 1997:11).

Yet, on the other hand, in certain strands of twentieth and twenty-first century Western feminist discourse, working *outside* of the home has been associated with attaining a sense of independence. Emancipation has been framed in this sense as freedom from the bindings represented by home. The pursuit of one's desired form of labor, as a practice of self-making, has been seen as a legitimate claim to personal agency. In a number of early feminist texts, work is coded as the solution to woman's parasitical dependence on men; work outside of the home is seen as offering woman freedom in economic independence. Writes Wollstonecraft in 1796,

This desire of being always women is the very consciousness that degrades the sex...She must not be dependent on her husband's bounty for her subsistence...for how can a being be generous who has nothing of its own? Or virtuous, who is not free? How many women[...]waste life away, the prey of discontent, who might have practised as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by their own industry, instead of hanging their heads surcharged with the dew of sensibility[...]How much more respectable is the woman who earns her own bread by fulfilling any duty, than the most accomplished beauty! (1796:223)

In her 1911 book *Woman and Labor*, Olive Schreiner called for feminists to revolt against the threat of female parasitism. "The choice before her, as her ancient fields of domestic labor slip from her...is the choice between finding new forms of labor or sinking slowly into a condition of more or less complete and passive sex-parasitism!" she wrote (2005:75).

She continues:

Finely clad, tenderly housed, life became for her (the female parasite) merely the gratification of her own physical and sexual appetites, and the appetites of the male, through the stimulation of which she could maintain herself. And, whether as kept wife, kept mistress, or prostitute, she contributed nothing to the active and sustaining labors of her society...She was the 'fine lady'; the human female parasite—the most deadly microbe which can make its appearance on the surface of any social organism (81).

“But female parasitism does not mean necessarily the being supported in luxury,” read a *New York Times* review of Schreiner’s book, “The wife and daughters of the small professional or commercial man whose household labor is all done for them by maids, and who have no other useful occupation, are just as much ‘deadly microbes’ as are the self-indulgent, pleasure-chasing women-folk of the millionaire” (1911). The problem, as Simone de Beauvoir articulates it, is that which the class structure has posed for radical feminist politics since the 18th century. Because “the bourgeois woman clings to the chains because she clings to her class privileges” (2011:130), her class and embedded status within the family structure alienates her from other women and a political life. Writes de Beauvoir of the pseudo-“slavery” of the bourgeois domestic worker to her husband, analogizing the master-slave dialectic of the husband and wife as that of the parasite-host:

Biological need-sexual desire and desire for posterity—which makes the male dependent on the female, has not liberated women socially. Master and slave are also linked by a reciprocal economic need that does not free the slave. That is, in the master-slave relation, the master does not posit the need he has for the other; he holds the power to satisfy this need and does not mediate it; the slave, on the other hand, out of dependence, hope, or free, internalizes his need for the master; however equally compelling the need may be to them both, it always plays in favor of the oppressor over the oppressed...Now, woman has always been, if not man’s slave, at least his vassal; the two sexes have never divided the world up equally; and still today, even though her condition is changing, woman is heavily handicapped (2011:9).

In other words, the problem with parasitism for these feminists can crudely be summed up as that of the housewife regarded as a parasite believed to *work for the host*. The problematic model for feminism is that of the woman who works for the other, against

her own self-interests. “The wife is not allowed to do any positive work and consequently to have herself known as a complete person,” writes de Beauvoir, “Regardless of how well she is respected, she is subjugated, secondary, parasitic” (2011:484-485). “Only independent work on her own can assure woman’s genuine independence,” writes de Beauvoir (qtd. in Allen 1995:122). The “goal” of feminism, represented in positive agency, has thus been formulated as the work of women’s self-determination, of women becoming actors in their own terms or mediums of their own subjectization in labor (Andermahr, Lovell, and Wolkowitz 1997:11-12).

However, Western feminism’s tendency to equate work with freedom has been shown to be a fallacious ground for politics because, as Wendy Brown argues, “neo-liberal subjects are controlled *through* their freedom—not simply, as thinkers from the Frankfurt School through Foucault have argued, because freedom within an order of domination can be an instrument of that domination—but because of neo-liberalism’s *moralization* of the consequences of this freedom” (2003, her emphases). Given the impossibility of thinking freedom through escape or refusal in our society of control, feminists might make use of their attachments to seek freedom in constraint. In parasitical mimicry, feminists crowdsource the work of freedom to the host, appropriating the host’s strategy against it in a time of savage delocalization and outsourcing. By performing the parasite, feminists demonstrate that the host is itself highly networked and no less dependent than the parasite, which is attached to it.

TASK MASTERS

Occupation is a tactic by which the parasite seizes upon available host-infrastructures to do its work for it. The parasite labors in occupation; it works by outsourcing to its host. In Chapter Two, I argued that adolescent drag models a performance of autogenesis that contests the forms of feminist solidarity represented by generational or kinship paradigms. If, in autogenesis, the parasite *labors for itself* (quite literally, in the “self-generating” performances of artists Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young), how can parasitical feminism be understood to work with or for others? What structures of solidarity or collectivity are possible in parasitical feminism? Can the parasite be said to work alone when it works to extract the labor-power of its host? What might it offer to consider the “collaborative effort” of the parasite and host as a form of networked labor? “A collaboration sounds like something I would be more than happy to do,” Roisin Byrne wrote to me, putting to use the language of female collaboration toward her own ends. Byrne represents a model of *parasitical collaboration* that does not foreclose the productivity of two entities that, in using each other, labor together (*co-labor*). How can we take seriously Byrne’s correspondence tactics as the work of community making, however counterintuitive? The communitarian gesture of the parasite must be understood as one of *forcing the host to be hospitable*. In this sense, the solidarity effort of the parasite is that of wedging itself in the interstice between the hospitality and hostility of neoliberal capitalism. Parasitical feminism thus offers a model of tactical alliance across difference. We must therefore regard the parasite-host system as a form of solidarity based not on shared interest or sympathy but *on mutual use*. The parasite-host relation is a relation of co-use that invites a line of questioning around the work of learning to live in a system of use.

Parasitical feminism advances occupation as a tactical response to the general foreclosure of feminist solidarity efforts in the U.S. after the 1970s. The emergence of parasitism in the field of contemporary art has witnessed the rise of neoliberal late capitalism wherein revolutionary discourses have been found less readily available as sources of critique. Parasitical feminism is symptomatic of the privatization of feminist politics under neoliberal globalism but should also be read as a feminist parody of neoliberal privatization. On the surface, the move to a parasitical tactics may appear to evidence the individuation of politics, wherein a single entity confronts another, and the group or collective is represented as the thing to be confronted or worked against (i.e. the host). In the projects I have explored thus far, there has been a suspicious conflation of the group with the host (wherein the mass has often been framed as solely oppressive to the individual), we might invert this logic to explore how the group might be thought of as a parasitical network.

These artists reflect on the historically vexed relationship between art and work, asking what the significance is of art projects that *perform* labor, as opposed to laying claim to being “real” or “actualized” labor. A provisional answer to these questions has informed my readings thus far: performance, which understands itself always already in representation, citation, and the double of theater, would seem to offer feminism a kind of armor against certain regimes of authenticity within feminist theoretical discourse. The scene of artmaking provides these artists a rehearsal space for staging new encounters with feminism.

Sophie Calle's artistic practice is exemplary of the performance of radical dependency that I will explore here. Her performances follow a parasitical template: they are often based on duplications or interpretations of the actions of male artists. She uses their actions to choreograph her own responses, unbeknownst to them, effectively outsourcing "the work" of being original to them. Put in Serres' terms, she plays the position and they the contents. If her art places her at the mercy of others, her actions are nevertheless undertaken on her own terms. "I can give up control if I control the person I am giving up control to" Calle has said.⁹⁷ I read these as "outsourcing techniques" that afford the parasite a feminist alibi by making her "hosts" the unintended accomplices of her work. The parasite always wins because she is never caught in the trap of authentic or original production. The artists surveyed in this chapter use outsourcing as a structure for supplying the content of their artistic practice; they "source" their actions *out* to others, self-consciously placing themselves in the hands of others and, as a result, their practices rely on these structures and often express an ambivalent attachment to them.

Claudia LaRocco has described Ann Liv Young's art practice in strikingly similar terms, in her *Artforum* review of the artist's January 2011 performance of *Mermaid Solo* at the Abrons Art Center, during which a bare-breasted Young splashed around in a kiddie pool wearing a rubber fishtail. Young bit into a raw Spanish mackerel, flinging chunks into the audience, and let herself be dragged around the stage by her tail. LaRocco writes, "A few people did come to grief with the mackerel. But Young endured the most injury and insult, piercing her lip on a bone and getting her ankles wrenched around inside her

⁹⁷ Calle said this of her artistic process during a public talk at the University of California Berkeley in March 2011.

unwieldy mermaid costume.” “Everything that could go wrong did,” she observes, “from microphone malfunctions to what appeared to be Young’s allergic reaction to the fish. *And Young let it all hang out, completely in control of being out of control.* Is there any performer doing more interesting work with the art of failure right now?” (2011, my emphasis). Hawk Swanson, Gilmore, and Young have appropriated feminist failure and distilled its critical potential in the figure of the adolescent. They have insinuated themselves into the “hollowed-out” structures of the so-called ruins of “feminisms past” by drawing upon the work of previous generations while, at the same time, denying their influence. In this sense, while denying a politics of collaboration, they actively work with (or more accurately, through) others. These practices of networked self-surrender make possible a feminist reading that moves beyond the impasses of a hermeneutics of masochistic submission or of subservience as exploitative *tout court*. Rather than evidencing women’s oppression, they allow for a reading of these as parasitical impositions on the institutions that produce citizens as *guests* of the system and workers as parasites on the means of production. Witnessing a turn to the use of networks as frameworks for conceptual art, these art projects have converged around practices of precarious labor. They conceive feminism as a task that no one has assigned, using the compulsion to work as a neoliberal rationale for rethinking the precarious state of feminist politics.

These projects also testify to the ambivalence that has surrounded work for feminism, as a response to the double bind of work as subject forming. On the one hand, work is thought to offer one the means to attain a sense of independence—to contribute to one’s existence as an individual, sovereign subject—and, on the other, it is thought to be the tool of ideology, depriving the individual of the ability fully to consent to the conditions of

their existence. Crowdsourcing represents a cultural, artistic, and corporate phenomenon that encapsulates this bind, repackaged for our contemporary moment as that of the network. In this sense, crowdsourcing has come to represent all of the promises and perils of the network, indeed of “net-work,” in neoliberalism. I ask how the network can be made hospitable to parasitical feminism. Might turns to neoliberal business logics of outsourcing and crowdsourcing (the latter of which has been at the same time lauded as cutting-edge and widely critiqued as exploitative) be used by feminism? Can contemporary feminism be crowdsourced? I do not imply that feminism need accept wholesale the system within which it operates; parasitical feminism is neither a capitulation nor a resignation to feminism’s symbiotic relationship with capitalism. Quite the contrary, it is a form of tactical attachment that negotiates its relationship to capitalism *in use*.

Recent feminist art practices have resituated crowdsourcing within a larger paradigm shift in contemporary art production toward “collaborative” aesthetic practices. Within these, crowdsourcing, a model voraciously appropriated in business and art marketing contexts as a late-capitalist “problem-solving tool,” has offered a creative model for exploring contemporary art practices concerned with the creation and facilitation of new social networks and modalities of social interaction (Kester 2011:29). One aim of this chapter will be to situate the place of new media theory and performance theory in the critical dialogue that has emerged around “relational” or “dialogical” art practices in curatorial and art historical discourse. Much of this dialogue has fetishized, under the banner of what French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud has termed “relational aesthetics,” an aestheticization of work as collaborative and participatory—and thus “democratic.”

Claire Bishop has gone so far as to claim that these collaborative practices constitute today's "avant-garde" (2004). Bishop has, more specifically, described outsourcing as one of the most conspicuous trends in contemporary art since the 1990s. She has described the tendency of artists to "delegate" or "outsource" performances to other performers as a move away from the privileging of the live body in 60s and 70s performance art (Bishop 2009), a turn that is perhaps more aptly attributed to the birth of the Internet as a crucial medium for performance art, as I argue in this chapter.

"Welcome to the age of the crowd," wrote Jeff Howe in a 2006 *Wired* article, where he coined the term "crowdsourcing." With this, he named the emergent trend of corporate outsourcing to a largely amateur pool of volunteer labor. The Internet has become a means for labor networks to exploit "the spare processing power of millions of human brains," he observed (2006). Crowdsourcing first emerged as a business model after the open source software movement successfully demonstrated its market value to corporate interests. Open source demonstrated that online users volunteering their time could write code just as well as the highly paid developers at Microsoft or Sun Microsystems. "Wikipedia showed that the model could be used to create a sprawling and surprisingly comprehensive online encyclopedia. And companies like eBay and MySpace have built profitable businesses that couldn't exist without the contribution of users," writes Howe. In other words, crowdsourcing emerged as a viable business model when corporations saw that *users could be used*. Howe characterizes this recognition as producing the market pivot from outsourcing to crowdsourcing—essentially from the age-old, one-to-one ("user-used") model to that of one-to-many. By 2006, Western corporations had been insinuating themselves into labor markets in India and China for over ten years as

advances in the digital network have made it so that, according to Howe, “it doesn’t matter where the laborers are [anymore]...as long as they are connected to the network.” “Examples of online enterprises successfully built on crowdsourcing are abundant,” writes Howe, “EBay—which enlists users to stock a marketplace, consume from and police it; Amazon—which relies on users’ product reviews to sell to like-minded shoppers...” (2006). With outsourcing and crowdsourcing comes a shift from the association of sourced labor with professional expertise to amateurism and volunteerism. Crowdsourcing is sold as a “right” to participate, a marketing strategy that trades in the rhetoric of democracy to “sell” consumers the opportunity to donate their free labor.⁹⁸

By outsourcing to a precarious class—often to amateurs (and increasingly those who are “amateurs” insofar as they are unemployed)—businesses are relieved of the “exorbitant” fees of professionals and specialists. Rather than paying Mark Harmel, a freelance photographer, \$100 or \$150 per photograph, the National Health Museum in Washington D.C. can get the images they need from iStockPhoto, for about \$1 each. In this sense, crowdsourcing has had the effect of putting the out-of-work *to work* and putting the employed *out of work*. In 2009, it was reported that Twitter had crowdsourced its iconic graphic of a bird. The company had paid \$6 for it, without attribution (Buskirk 2009). That same year, Jeff Howe returned to the subject of crowdsourcing for *Wired*, this time in the context of the recession. The article, entitled “Is Crowdsourcing Evil? The Design Community Weighs In,” noted that the economic crisis had brought what had

⁹⁸ Howe cites Howard Rheingold’s 2002 book *Smart Mobs*, which described crowdsourcing enterprises as offering consumers “the power” to create what they consume. Howe credits Rheingold with predicting that “key breakthroughs [in technology] won’t come from established industry leaders, but from the fringes, from skunkworks and start ups and even associations of amateurs. Especially associations of amateurs” (2006).

been a fringe business model into the mainstream. “According to *Forbes* there are 80,000 freelance designers in the United States alone,” wrote Howe, “Most of these are, proverbially speaking, waiting tables” (2009). In their “Declaration of Occupation,” the Occupy movement noted this, citing the turn to a business model based on outsourcing as a grievance, writing: “They have consistently outsourced labor and used that outsourcing as leverage to cut worker’s healthcare and pay” (Occupy Wall Street 2011). What crowdsourcing lays bare is what forms of labor are valued and what forms are not in a crisis economy. It exposes what forms of expertise are perceived to be expendable and what forms are felt to be indispensable. In the hierarchy of labor value produced presumed by the logics of outsourcing and crowdsourcing, reproductive labor, dependency care, affective labor, and creative labor are on the bottom rungs of the latter.

In 2006, the same year that Howe gave crowdsourcing its name, the exhibition *Phantom Captain: Art and Crowdsourcing* opened at New York City’s apexart, exhibiting works that used crowdsourcing as a conceptual frame or crowdsourcing platforms as a tool for art practice. Curator Andrea Grover suggested in the exhibition brochure that crowdsourcing has become a conceptual practice that is “heir to the throne of 1960s and 70s happenings and participatory art,” shifting questions from “sole authorship and visibility” to “distributed creativity, gift economies, and other models that disrupt how we think about and assign value to art” (2006). The exhibit conceived of crowdsourcing as an explicit conjoining of business and high-art methodologies, making for a space “where such uneasy bedfellows lie down together” (Browne 2008:38).

In her article about emergent uses of crowdsourcing in contemporary art practice, Sarah Browne notes how the practice has been associated with art market and curatorial rhetorics of “relational aesthetics.” Nicolas Bourriaud’s “catch-all” phrase, describing “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space” (1997:14, his emphasis), was coined in the late 1990s in reference to particular contemporary art practices that centralized participation. Bourriaud argues that the 1990s had paid witness to an upsurge of convivial, “user-friendly” art practices exploring the artistic and conceptual potential to be found in exploring one’s the relationship to the other. These practices place forms such as “meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals” on the level of aesthetic objects, like paintings and sculptures, to engaged critically as such (28-29). “[T]he emergence of new technologies,” he suggests, “like the Internet and multimedia systems, points to a collective desire to create new areas of conviviality and introduce new types of transaction with regard to the cultural object” (26). Among these, Bourriaud cites as an example Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *Aperto* 93 for which the artist distributed dehydrated Chinese soups to visitors of the Venice Biennial during which it debuted, who were invited to add boiling water to and eat. “[I]s it a sculpture? An installation? A performance? An example of social activism?” asks Bourriaud of the piece (25). Across his disparate examples, which include Santiago Sierra’s hiring of local residents to pose as living sculptures and Jeremy Deller’s restaging of a 1984 miner strike in working-class England, Bourriaud reads these performance installations as producing “inter-subjective exchange”: a form of social exchange, or “conviviality,” in shared activity.

Debates about relational aesthetics as a critical and curatorial phenomenon capture the art market cachet that has surrounded the term, which has become a watchword of contemporary curatorial and art historical discourse through its promotion in the work of critics like Claire Bishop and Grant Kester. The dubiousness of Bourriaud's critical contribution aside, relational aesthetics has been embraced as an organizing concept for a fetishization of terms such as relational, participation, community, and collaboration in the gallery. Yet many critics have put pressure on this turn, questioning in particular the political stakes of its apparent thrall to "participation" in the white cube, arguing that it is little else than a case of corporate crowdsourcing appropriated for art consumption. Dave Beech writes, "The participant typically is not cast as an agent of critique or subversion but rather as one who is invited to accept the parameters of the art project. To participate in an event, whether it is organised by Rirkrit Tiravanijo, Jeremy Deller, Santiago Sierra or Johanna Billing, is to enter a pre-established social environment that casts the participant in a very specific role" (2010:25). In her response to Bourriaud's essay, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," Claire Bishop argued that relational aesthetics, rather than sparking new democratic encounters, serves the interests of the institutions that play host to them. "An effect of this insistent promotion of these ideas as artists-as-designer," she writes, "function over contemplation, and open-endedness over aesthetic resolution is often ultimately to enhance the status of the curator, who gains credit for stage-managing the overall laboratory experience. As Hal Foster warned in the mid-1990s, 'the institution may overshadow the work that it otherwise highlights: it becomes the spectacle, it collects the cultural capital, and the director-curator becomes the star'" (2004:53). She continues, "if relational art produces human relations, then the

next logical question to ask is what *types* of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?” (65, her emphasis).

In an essay for the 2008 Institute of Contemporary Art London exhibition monograph, *Double Agent*, Nicholas Ridout examined how relational practices might be read as service economy performances that place theater and performance practices squarely within the service industry in which they participate as forms of immaterial labor. For Ridout, it is “not that contemporary art and performance is mirroring the development in consumer capitalism from a market in goods to a market in services, nor that it is anticipating such a development, but rather than it constitutes a particular instance of that development in itself. It does not stand outside this development, neither spatially, as in a reflection theory, nor temporally, as in the anticipation thesis” (2008:130). Ridout refers to Hardt and Negri’s work on the labor of the service and knowledge economies, which draws on feminist scholarship on gender and work to theorize “affective labor”: “In their most famous collaborative project, *Empire*, Hardt and Negri summarise their understanding of this new form of work, stating simply that ‘what affective labour produces are social networks, forms of community’ and that, as a result of an economy increasingly built around such relations, ‘cooperation is completely immanent to the labouring activity itself’” (129). Ridout is particularly attentive to work’s strange relationship to notions of emancipation and enslavement, noting the absurdity of a claim that postindustrial labor is emancipatory in a moment when “waged and unwaged slavery remains the norm for many (if not most) of the world’s inhabitants” (128) and, following Maurizio Lazzarato’s analysis of immaterial labor, that through her work the contemporary laborer attains a feeling of autonomy through a process of deep subjectivization (129).

In these art projects I will turn to, “women’s work” is envisaged as a conceptual site for negotiating feminism’s stake in the dialectics of power as they operate in a network culture. Staging counterintuitive claims to self-empowerment, these artists make themselves into mediums or tools for something else. In so doing, they make the infrastructures that host them reflexive. The artists occupy the network as a stage, exploiting the critical potential of vulnerability, self-disclosure, and of “setting the terms” of their impositions. Many of these practices activate, or even explicitly draw upon, the rhetoric of feminist agency in performances of labor. We find a challenge to the notion that task-based women’s work, or what Betty Friedan famously called the “deadly dailyness” of the white, U.S. suburban housewife of the 1950s and 60s, is disempowering. Friedan’s well known critique centered on her belief that “self-realization” could only be attained through a sense of “personal purpose,”⁹⁹ exposing a certain mistrust of relationality (and specifically of the idea that one can acquire positive agency through one’s relationships with others) that has since become ossified within Western feminism.

Saba Mahmood has argued that autonomy is a feminist imperative that has obscured the importance of networks—institutions, communities, and alliances—for minoritarian groups (2005:13). She further observes that autonomy has long been a vexed concept for feminist theory. “While earlier critics had drawn attention to the masculinist assumptions underpinning the ideal of autonomy, later scholars faulted this ideal for its emphasis on

⁹⁹ Friedan writes in *The Feminine Mystique*: “The housewives who suffer the terror of the problem that has no name are victims of this same deadly ‘dailyness.’...Housewives who live according to the feminine mystique do not have a personal purpose stretching into the future. But without such a purpose to evoke their full abilities, they cannot grow to self-realization. Without such a purpose, they lose the sense of who they are, for it is purpose which gives the human pattern to one’s days” (2001:433).

the atomistic, individualized, and bounded characteristics of the self at the expense of its relational qualities formed through social interactions within forms of human community,” Mahmood writes, “Consequently, there have been various attempts to redefine autonomy so as to capture the emotional, embodied, and socially embedded character of people, particularly of women” (13).¹⁰⁰ An apparent paradox emerges, in these projects, where being subservient appears as a tactical response to the problem of securing a sense of mastery over one’s life; giving up control is proffered, counterintuitively, as a way to gain control. Parasitism provides feminists with a plan of action for surmounting the impasses caused by stalled out debates about questions of value in and of feminism. It is in surrendering to the network, in the apparent abandonment of one’s sovereign agency to a faceless crowd of online users, that the work of the parasite begins.

LIFE FOR SALE

In early 2009, several news outlets reported that, following a year of personal difficulty, Beijing resident Chen Xiao had decided to give her life over to the Internet. Her business had failed, and things were generally not going well. Chen “no longer knew what to do with herself” (Spencer 2009). As CNN tells it: “Chen Xiao had pretty much given up making her own decisions and so decided to throw open her life to the whims of China’s hundreds of millions of Internet users...” Chen explained her rationale: “Every time I had a plan for what I wanted my life to be like, nothing would come of it. It was very disappointing. I figured if other people came up with things for me to do, I might stumble upon something new and better” (Vause 2009). Chen outsourced her schedule

¹⁰⁰ Mahmood historicizes this criticism of autonomy: “A more radical strain of poststructural theory has situated its critique of autonomy within a larger challenge posed to the *illusory* character of the rationalist, self-authorizing, transcendental subject presupposed by Enlightenment thought in general, and the liberal tradition in particular” (13, her emphasis).

in increments. She offered to perform small tasks for others and, in turn, allowed them to decide what she would do each day, using the popular Chinese discussion board mop.com (猫扑网) (Spencer 2009). Chen sets limits on what she would agree to do (nothing illegal, immoral, or violent) (Vause 2009). She initially worked for free, but then—at the suggestion of her clients—she began charging a modest sum per hour to perform the tasks asked of her (Spencer 2009), asking eight yuan (or \$1.10 in U.S. currency) for eight minutes (更新时间 2009). She received many requests for sexual services, among them: “How much do you charge for a one-night stand?”, “How much would you charge to be my concubine?” and a message from a man asking to buy ten months of her time to carry his child (更新时间). Rejecting such offers, her tasks instead included accompanying a stranger to the birth of his baby, having lunch with a beggar, and running errands. “It’s your right to arrange Chen Xiao’s life, and it’s my obligation to serve you,” her ad read.

Versions of Chen Xiao’s story that ran on CNN, The Telegraph, and ABC News seized on the Chinese woman’s story as an parable for Western hope in a moment of global economic uncertainty in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. These Western news accounts appear to entertain in Chen’s story an orientalist fantasy of precarity. While Western audiences were welcomed to speculate on and specularize her, they were hardly compelled to take her as a model for self-empowering emulation. The stories emphasized Chen’s idiosyncratic resilience over the conditions of her precarity; they recounted her experience as one of, rather than subordination, self-empowerment. “It’s the way of life I chose for myself,” ABC News quoted her as saying. The Chinese news outlet Shenzhen

Daily, however, offered a somewhat less rosy image of Chen's story, which, translated into English, recounted the more insidious details obscured in what had appeared in the U.S. and British news. The Hunan native had begun selling her time after the clothing shop she owned had gone out of business following the financial crisis. Her advertisement had read: "Life has no meaning. But I can't die...so I've decided to let you, my friends on the Internet, arrange every day of my life. I just want to do something for others." Chen's rhetoric positions the Internet as a higher power to which she has willfully devoted herself, much as Chris Kraus does Dick ("Knowing you's like knowing Jesus," she wrote to him, "There are no answers to my life. But I'm touched by you and fulfilled just by believing"). "The Internet is very powerful," Chen says (Loyd 2009).

In these accounts, the Internet is held out as a *safety net* in uncertain financial times. Chen's words ("Life has no meaning. But I can't die...") echo, troublingly, reports that have surfaced of the abysmal conditions of Chinese workers in the Shenzhen, Chongqing, and Chengdu factories owned by the Foxconn Corporation. Foxconn is the single largest private employer in mainland China (employing 1.2 million Chinese workers as of February 2012 [Zhang]), and it manufactures many of the products—motherboards, camera components, and MP3 players—that make up the world's \$150 billion consumer-electronics industry (Johnson 2011). The Chengdu factory, which solely manufactures for Apple, including iPhones and iPads, is said to have uniformly worse conditions than those in Shenzhen and Chongqing, which sells to HP, Nokia, and Dell (Lee 2011). Foxconn is also known to manufacture other wildly popular electronics, such as the Kindle, PlayStation 3, Wii, and Xbox 360.

Chen's apparent resignation to her new conditions reiterates the poignancy of the influential distinction Foucault drew in his late work between systems of control and what he calls bio-power, which can be understood as the prerogative of the state to "make live and let die."¹⁰¹ Recent reports about the conditions of workers at Foxconn suggest that Foucault's notion of bio-power resonates increasingly with manifestations of pro-capitalist governance and corporate control.¹⁰² In January 2012, reports surfaced of mass suicide protests at the Apple factory where 150 workers threatened to leap from the factory roof in protest of their working conditions (Moore). Similar reports, this time of 200 workers threatening to jump in protest of their wages, resurfaced in April 2012, the same week that Apple reported that its fiscal second-quarter net income had almost doubled after a spike in iPhone sales (Reuters). Following a rash of suicides (some of which were not initially reported), the company responded by installing safety nets around many of the factories in May 2011. That same month, it was reported that workers at the Chengdu factory were made to sign a pact promising that they would not commit suicide (Lee 2011). Given the extremity of these workers conditions, how Chen could afford to live off of what she makes online, without—as she says—doing anything against her will, is curious, particularly in light of these reports of Foxconn workers.

¹⁰¹ Foucault marks in this distinction to the rule of the sovereign power which would "let live and make die" by the rule of the king.

¹⁰² David Harvey has usefully offered a means for understanding pro-capitalist governance as what he calls the "state-finance nexus," which "describes a confluence of state and financial power that confounds the analytic tendency to see state and capital as clearly separable from each other. This does not mean that state and capital constituted then or now an identity, but that there are structures of governance (such as power over the coinage of the realm in the post and central banks and treasury departments today) where the state management of capital creation and monetary flows becomes integral to, rather than separable from, the circulation of capital" (2010:48).

In late March 2012, the result of an audit that Apple commissioned of Foxconn's labor practices was released, revealing findings of major wage and overtime violations. The Fair Labor Association (FLA), an independent labor-rights organization, conducted the voluntary audit, which documented "dozens of major labor-rights violations, including excessive overtime, unpaid wages, and salaries that aren't enough to cover basic living expenses" (Pepitone 2012).¹⁰³ Given images in the U.S. mainstream press of Foxconn employees presumably made to wear t-shirts that say "I Love Foxconn," we might consider these instances of forced servitude, wherein one is made to kiss the hand of one's master (fig. 1). The workers are literally made to love their occupations as the parasites of capitalism, which appears increasingly to be the task that all workers face within neoliberalism.

In light of these reports, Chen Xiao's words locate the promises and perils of *the net* that *catches you* and, at the same time, *won't let you out*. The "net," that is the Internet in network culture—is a neoliberal machine, a system of control that works through its very promise of freedom (Chun 2005), and an analog for capitalism. Foxconn, and the consumers, governments, and corporations that reward from its exploitative labor practices, expose the complicity not only of the network—that is, of the social network that requires the iPod and iPad to function and the financial network that banks on its profit margins—but also of the *system the network runs on*, its very hardware, down to the

¹⁰³ As a result, Foxconn promised that it would achieve full legal compliance with Chinese laws by July 2013. Following the March 2012 findings, Apple released its own statement: "We care about every worker in our worldwide supply chain. We insist that our suppliers provide safe working conditions, treat workers with dignity and respect, and use environmentally responsible manufacturing processes wherever Apple products are made. Our suppliers must live up to these requirements if they want to keep doing business with Apple" (Zhang 2012). Foxconn's leadership had made similar public statements in 2010 when worker suicides made headlines (Barboza 2010).

conditions of its very factory production. Foxconn's digital economy is the dark underside of the digital economy of "free labor" that Tiziana Terranova has described; Foxconn actualizes the Western imaginary of the digital factory, the "24-7 electronic sweatshops" of the "NetSlaves" of the digital media industry. "They used to work long hours and love it; now they are starting to feel the pain of being burned by digital media," Terranova writes (2000:33). These discourses of "free labor" thus articulate the crude neoliberal global logic for outsourcing the digital economy. Terranova writes, that the Internet has meant for the West, a bittersweet relationship to free labor. "The expansion of the Internet has given ideological and material support to contemporary trends toward increased flexibility of the workforce, continuous reskilling, freelance work, and the diffusion of practices such as 'supplementing' (bringing supplementary work home from the conventional office)," she writes (34). Foxconn is the global support that makes (Western notions of) free labor possible.



Figure 1. Foxconn factory workers (Courtesy of The Huffington Post).

In a society in which, as Marx puts it, "[c]apital is *dead labor*, which...lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks" (McNally 2006:44), Chen's story

poses the question: how are we to find a way *to live as dead labor*? To this, she suggests that one possible answer lies in the very problematic: *the network* that has been built by the mechanisms of neoliberal globalism. An open network is thus crucial to lubricating the flows of capital. “Frictions within or barriers to this spatial movement take time to negotiate and slow down circulation,” writes David Harvey in *The Enigma of Capital*, “Throughout the history of capitalism much effort has therefore been put into reducing the friction of distance and barriers to movement” (2010:42). Furthermore, Gordon Laxer and Dennis Soron argue, “neoliberal globalism” is what, in tandem with U.S. imperialism, “attempts to create a seamless link amongst recent technological innovations, current trends towards greater global integration, and pro-capitalist governance [by mandating] that all countries encourage foreign ownership and control of their economies, remove foreign exchange protections...” (2006:16).

Even as the Foxconn Corporation is positioned in the Western press as something of a nagging parasite on Apple’s pristine back, it exemplifies the manner by which China has come into being a world power by “*playing host*” to the West. China’s massive holdings of U.S. government debt have bolstered the American economy by keeping interest rates low.¹⁰⁴ China’s holdings of U.S. Treasuries accounted for 54% of its foreign-exchange reserves as of June 30, 2011 (a record high at 74% in 2006), according to U.S. Treasury surveys released in March 2012 (Pierson 2012). As of that date, China—as the largest foreign holder of U.S. debt—held \$1.74 trillion in U.S. securities (Pierson 2012). By slowly buying up U.S. debt, China has slowly become America’s bank and thus has made the West its dependent. China represents that the power to be attained by being a host is

¹⁰⁴ I thank Coleman Nye for her keen insight on this point.

that of accumulating the debt of others. “[I]t’s my obligation to serve you...” writes Chen.

Chen’s story is proffered in the mainstream press as a neoliberal parable for Western worker-citizens facing a financial crisis that has exposed the diminishing returns for a life of hard work. In the articles about her, Americans are, rather than counseled on the alternatives that might exist beyond an exploitative global system of wage labor, encouraged to keep working if only to work differently and for less money. We are given no choice but *to use* the system of wage labor and, like Chen, simply to make it work. Indeed, readers are informed that Chen’s path to renewed personal meaning through work has been one of accepting the terms of a lower standard of living (we understand that she now makes in a month close to what she once made in a day [更新时间]). Hers is a glorified volunteerism or a just-professional amateurism, romanticized insofar as it is implied as a fair exchange for gaining a sense of purpose or control.

In his essay “On the Shameful History of the Amateur,” Nicholas Ridout argues, following Marx, that industrial capitalism requires labor to be “free” in the sense that the worker must be free from other obligations that would keep him from taking his labor into the marketplace. In order for an economic system to be based on the wage labor of free workers, “it is essential that work itself be understood as something that one would wish to do, into which one may enter freely, voluntarily, without coercion” (2012:89-90). Here we clearly see the impetus behind the circulation of Chen’s narrative as one of personal fulfillment, a positive or unthreatening example of (pseudo-) amateurism. For

Ridout, the amateur (in his reading, of amateur theater) is troublesome for capitalism because it “figures an ambivalent practice—useful on the one hand for modelling free wage labour, but dangerous because of the way that it simultaneously re-admits the spectre of unfree slave labour” (90). Ridout concludes that “we might perhaps see the work of [the amateur] as performing ideological labour on behalf of the idea of voluntary labour upon which capitalist wage labour depends. The image of people ‘working’ *for the love of it* is far better advertisement for work than the image of...slaves” (90, my emphasis). Chen’s labor is coded as “free” or “nearly free” not in the sense that it is unremunerated but in the sense that it pays in the promises of freedom. Ridout writes:

Slavery poses a problem for capitalism, then, in that it offers a fairly uncontrovertible demonstration that work is something the worker doesn’t want to do. The slave works under compulsion, under the threat of violence. If people must be forced to work by whips and chains how will it be possible to convince anyone to work of their own free will, for wages. The ideology of work under capitalism demands that slavery be abolished. Or rather, it demands that it be made invisible, lest it discourage the others from taking up the part of wage labour (90).

The parasite has been thought of as a figure that occupies the margins of wage labor, feeding on the secondary and tertiary scraps of so-called “real work.” As I have argued, while widely regarded as non-working, lazy, and as generally retarding production and value as subsumed by capital, the parasite is a figure of productive unproductivity. Ridout has suggested that figures like the parasite, who refuse to organize their labor as wage labor, threaten the system. The withdrawal of wage labor poses a major threat, since so-called parasites (“trophy wives,” “pool boys,” and “welfare queens”) do not

acquire their power through wage labor.¹⁰⁵ Ridout's reading of the amateur exposes how a fetishistic rendering of Chen's marginal attachment to employment covers over the problems posed by and to capitalism in a moment of mass un- and underemployment: that is, of the problem of occupation in precarity. The most significant work that the parasite does is make reflexive the values of the system it inhabits. As a form of static in the system, the parasite compels the system to respond: to move either to adjust to its presence or to expel it. The parasite thus forces the question: what work is valued? And more specifically, what forms of labor are prioritized over others—what forms are deemed not of value and are therefore devalued or categorized as outside of value within late capital?

Feminism's historical mistrust of *use* has encoded its politics as a *response to* the position women and minorities have traditionally held as those whose labor has historically been *used*. This use—the appropriation of their labor power as value—feminists have named exploitation or oppression. The systemic devaluation of certain categories of work, such as forms of reproductive and affective labor, has been central to the procedures by which women and other minorities have been used. We can think, for instance, of the work done by women for men within family relations such as housework, work for men's occupations, emotional servicing of family members, childcare, the care of sick and frail family members, sexual servicing of husbands and the bearing of children.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Thanks to Nicholas Ridout for his helpful framing of labor of the parasite made during the final roundtable of The Affect Factory conference at New York University (2012).

¹⁰⁶ Familial exploitation is demonstrated when women's contribution to the accumulation of family wealth is inherited by sons from their fathers, bypassing women. Many feminists also use the term 'exploitation' in sexual contexts, to refer to men's use of women's bodies for their own pleasure. For instance, MacKinnon's famous dictum that 'Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away' transposed the concept of exploitation from the economic domain to the personal, seeing

While Chen's story is, in many ways, a predictable repackaging of precarity as a serviceable commodity for furthering the work of capitalism, I argue for a perverse reading of her story for reimagining feminism's work. Rather than merely seeing Chen as paradigmatic of an impossible attachment to the fraying fantasy of "the good life," what Berlant calls the cruel optimism of our present moment, what if we accepted the mass media's invitation to take Chen as a model for the West, indeed as a model for a Western feminist politics? What might it mean to read her story *parasitically*? That is, to read her literally against or beside the grain (*para-sitos* meaning "beside the grain") of a classic feminist interpretations that would emphasize her oppression within a system that seeks to exploit her labor? What if we considered hers, foremost, a tactical engagement with the conditions of her precarity? What if we think of not only those who seek her labor out but also of Chen herself as parasitical? Chen's feminist potential lies not in her performance of dignity and self-determination but in her parasitism of the network. Rather than simply seeing her clients as outsourcing their work *to her*, Chen crowdsources the work of filling her time *to them*; and, in so doing, her online performance of willed subservience is, in fact, a parasitical model of feminist counter-sourcing.

Chen does not identify as an artist, though her actions follow a highly recognizable performance art script. She is an individual who appears to have decided to make herself a professional amateur. Her motives appear wholly disinterested in the artistic economy that she nevertheless actively indexes. Art practices since Kant have often been defined

the exploitation or appropriation of women's sexuality as the basis of women's oppression (Andermahr, Lovell, and Wolkowitz 1997:71-72).

by their very disinterestedness, and, as a result, disinterestedness has become its own interest. I want to suggest that there is something about her apparent disinterestedness in art that might make her practice especially useful for thinking about feminism.

Chen calls to mind a number of performance art works that have tested the logic of self-commodification, with artists attempting to sell their bodies or body parts as an extension of the notion that the artist is always selling an experience of his or herself. These artists have sought to push those boundaries of performance art's treatment of the live artist's body as a commodity, even as critics have often resisted this commodification by arguing that the performance remains stubbornly live. We might think of American artist Keith Townsend Obadike's *Blackness For Sale* (2001), in which he attempted to sell his "blackness" on ebay, promising the buyer a "certificate of authenticity" (fig. 2). "This heirloom has been in the possession of the seller for twenty-eight years," wrote Obadike in the product description, which used irony to draw attention to the Internet as a space that is, rather than an utopian escape from, a neoliberal extension of, the marketplace of black culture. "I really wanted to comment on this odd Euro colonialist narrative that exists on the web and black peoples' position within that narrative," Obadike has said of the project, "I mean, there are browsers called Explorer and Navigator that take you to explore the Amazon or trade in the ebay. It's all too blatant to ignore" (Fusco and Obadike 2001).

We might also think of Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* (2003) in which the artist had sex with a collector represented by the Friedrich Petzel Gallery, an exchange that was recorded by a stationary camera, resulting in a 60-minute silent, unedited film of the encounter in a hotel room.

These pieces elicited critical responses as to their propriety. Indeed, ebay ultimately removed Obadike's ad, citing it as "inappropriate." Whereas Fraser's performance documents the complicity of the art market in the unbridled commodification of the artist, Obadike's project demonstrates the hypocrisy of a system that treats black bodies as commodities for sale ("appropriable for capital") and yet seeks shelter in the rhetoric of propriety when confronted ("as inappropriate"). His project confronts the contradictions of a system that is hospitable to the figure of the artist as a precarious laborer only insofar as that figure works to deny the historical realities of slave labor.

What do these performances compel? They would seem to expose capitalism's anxiety over its own lack of boundaries. Deleuze tells us that capitalism would like to think that it has limits even as its very logic depends upon the undoing of all boundaries that might contain it. "Even art has left the spaces of enclosure in order to enter into the open circuits of the bank," writes Deleuze in his "Postscript on the Societies of Control." "Marketing has become the center or the 'soul' of the corporation. We are taught that corporations have a soul, which is the most terrifying news in the world," (1992:6). Capitalism would like to think that its limits are the propriety of private property and that some spheres are sacred, as ebay would like deny the notion that everything is for sale while selling everything. Fraser renders literal the fact that there is an ever-deeper penetration of the market into the body (as Craigslist has become synonymous with forms of sexual and bodily trafficking). Thus we must recognize that corporations do have a soul if, by this, we mean that capitalism has an *anima*, in that it is a self-sustaining system.

The screenshot shows an eBay listing for 'Keith Obadike's Blackness' (Item #1176601036). The listing is categorized under 'Black Americans' and 'Fine Art'. The current bid is \$152.50, with 1 quantity and 6 days, 0 hours left. The first bid was \$10.00. The seller is 'Obadike' (view comments in seller's Feedback Profile). The high bid is 'itsfuntobid'. The payment options are Money Order/Cashiers Checks, COD (collect on delivery), and Personal Checks. The shipping policy states that the buyer pays actual shipping charges and will ship to the United States and the following regions: Canada. The seller notes that if the item has received no bids, the buyer may revise it, and the seller revised this item before first bid. The description states that this heirloom has been in the possession of the seller for twenty-eight years and has been used primarily in the United States. It lists nine uses for the 'Blackness': 1. Creating black art, 2. Writing critical essays or scholarship about black people, 3. Making jokes about black people and/or laughing at black humor, 4. Accessing affirmative action benefits, 5. Dating a black person without fear of public scrutiny, 6. Gaining access to exclusive, 'high risk' neighborhoods, 7. Securing the right to use the terms 'sista', 'brotha', or 'nigga' in reference to black people, 8. Instilling fear, and 9. A use not fully specified.

Figure 2. Keith Townsend Obadike's *Blackness For Sale* (2001) (Courtesy of Keith Townsend Obadike).

Chen Xiao seemed to try to save her soul by transforming it into just such a corporate soul, if on her own terms. By transforming herself into “the performer” of her own life, Chen surrenders the notion that it was ever really her own. By letting her fellow Chinese netizens fill in the content of her days, she stages an ingenuous, if unclaimed or opaque, critique of our constrained conditions wherein our decisions are already, to some degree, scripted or predetermined in advance. In the apparatus of crowdsourcing, Chen makes the Internet into a personal improvisation machine for giving her life meaning, for scripting her surrender to a situation beyond her control. She outsources her daily performances to a network of anonymous users, who, essentially at random, script her actions. Chen’s example foregrounds precarity as a condition of possibility for the emergence of a different kind of relationship to control or agency. The “regulating” function of consent against mechanisms of mistreatment that have historically anchored conceptions of feminism in autonomous agency are surrendered—or perhaps, a surrendering of autonomous agency *is performed*—in a moment when the lie of the rational

and self-possessed consenting subject cannot easily be told. We are confronted instead with a seeking out of forms of relation in which one can be in control of being out of control, to restate Calle and LaRocco, fracturing the normative structure of individual consent into a cascade of consensual relations wherein the establishment of absolute consent to structural conditions proves an untenable organizing principle for contemporary feminism. Chen responds to neoliberalism's imperative to adapt to the "new normal" of a crisis economy by seeking out new precarious publics in the network.

CONSUMED, OR PRECARIOUS ATTACHMENTS

Brooklyn-based conceptual artist Danica Phelps' paintings track her income and expenditures. She uses a color-coded watercolor palette to document her financial life—red for expenses, green for income and grey for credit (figs. 3 and 4). Critic Julie Caniglia describes Phelps as the cataloguer of her own life in her *Artforum* review: "Those marks are a constant in a larger, increasingly complex system documenting not only her financial life but also her daily activities and relationships—along with the changing value of her art..." (2001:179). Phelps' "bookkeeping" art practice recalls the consumption art of Kate Bingaman-Burt, who in a project called "Obsessive Consumption," documented everything she bought over the course of a year (i.e. a lime, a pair of jeans, \$7.99 for Hulu Plus when she forgot to cancel after her free week, \$5 for extra Gmail storage space [fig. 5]). She subsequently stored and sold the drawings online. In September 2004, Bingaman-Burt began doing hand-drawn renderings of her credit-card statements, making the drawings available for sale on her website (fig. 6). "I have six credit card statements a month," the artist wrote on her Flickr account, where she posted the

drawings, “and I plan on drawing them until they are paid off in full” (2001). The artist reported that she had paid them all off as of February 2010. When she sold the “portrait” of her October 2004 Chase bank statement, she charged the “minimum balance due”: \$140. At one point, the artist’s cumulative total balance was for more than \$23,000, in part due to student loan debt (Walker 2006). While the artist acknowledged that there’s “a lot of guilt and emotion” involved in her practice of evidencing the money and interest of her expenses, she reportedly does not see her work so much as a negative reaction to consumer culture as an attempt to cope with it on its own terms (Walker 2006). As this suggests, the conventions of conceptual art have provided these artists with structures for negotiating their positions within a changing economy of value. Giving themselves apparently arbitrary “rules” by which to abide, these artists have sought to test the creative possibilities of conditions of constraint.



Figure 3. Danica Phelps, “Yearly Striped Panels, 2006” (2006) / Watercolor, pencil, and paper on board (Courtesy of Danica Phelps).

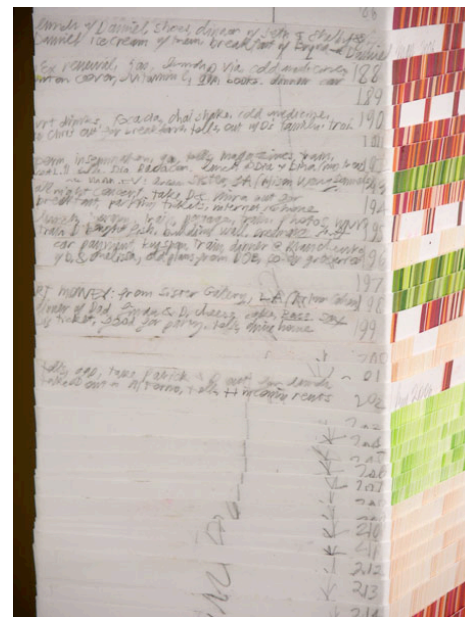


Figure 4. Danica Phelps, “Stripebook 7th generation sample” (2010) / Watercolor, pencil, and recycled US currency on paper on wood (Courtesy of Danica Phelps).

Both Phelps and Bingaman-Burt engage in autobiographical art practices that represent their lives through codified systems that capture their spending and consumption patterns. The artists offer a “D.I.Y.” response to what has become a common practice by banks of creating financial “portraits” of clients using data aggregation to speculate about their spending practices. They too make “portraits” of their practices, yet these artists attempt to reinsert the “hand-touch” sensibility of their art practice into the mass-produced, speculative and algorithmic operations of exchange in neoliberalism. The projects express a sense of ambivalence toward an economy that produces them as precarious: they reveal a sense of feeling both implicated within and alienated by this economy.

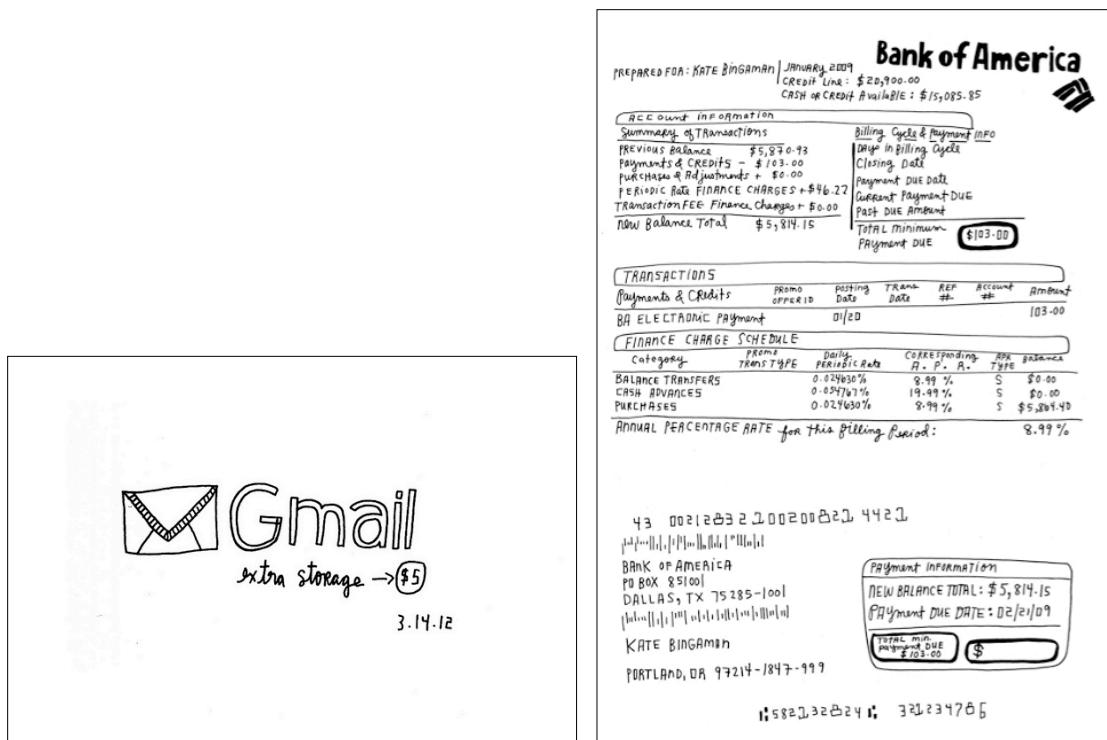


Figure 5. Kate Bingaman-Burt, “Obsessive Compulsive” (2010) / Watercolor, pencil, and recycled US currency on paper on wood (Courtesy of Kate Bingaman-Burt).

Figure 6. Kate Bingaman-Burt, “Credit Card Statement Drawing (September 2009)” / Ink on paper (Courtesy of Kate Bingaman-Burt).

A number of other projects have also explored anxieties around such questions of precarious “ownership.” John Freyer’s online project, *All My Life For Sale* (2000-01), began when he invited friends over for an “Inventory Party.” With their help, the artist listed everything he owned of worth (right down to the Vidalia onion in his refrigerator [DeVun 2007]) for sale on a website powered by ebay. On August 1, 2001, the final item of the project was listed, the domain name for the project itself: Allmylifeforsale.com. Freyer subsequently tracked down his belongings and visited their new owners in their new locations, documenting the results in a book (DeVun). Freyer’s project resembles Jennifer Dalton’s *The Appraisal* (1999). Dalton’s work was influenced by her experience working at an international auction house. She was inspired after witnessing the process by which value is ascribed to art and other objects, and she tried to pin down the concepts of personal “meaning” and “value” by attempting to ascertain her own net-value (Dalton 1999). Dalton photographed and cataloged every object in her home, from pencils to cleaning supplies to family heirlooms, listing both a personal appraisal of their worth and a second appraisal by Christie’s auction house. “Over 70 pages long and accompanied by 300 snapshot photographs of every item in her apartment, *The Appraisal* is an atlas of an artist’s humble life,” reads the project statement, “Everything has been listed, described and photographed for reference” (Dalton 1999). Dalton ultimately offered a selection of her belongings for sale on ebay. Christie’s assigned a sum total value of \$11,290, while the artist had estimated her personal worth to be valued at \$42,607. The discrepancy lay, crushingly, largely in the disparity between the diverging estimated values of Dalton’s own art (Harris 2009). The project ultimately documented Dalton’s institutional undervaluation.

Ten years later, Dalton revisited the work with *The Reappraisal* (2009). In the update of the project, Dalton added an additional category: sentimental value. Each item was given a different value: first what she judged it to be worth in 1999 and 2009, second what an appraiser from Christie's judged it to be worth in 1999 and 2009, and third, the amount that she wished to sell it for in 2009. The dress Dalton had bought for \$35 was put for sale for \$100,000 because she had worn it at her wedding; the artist's sex toys and porn, while bought for \$20, were valued at \$50,000 for reasons of privacy (Saltz 2009). For the exhibition, 548 five-by-seven inch archival photographic prints were displayed in acrylic frames on large metal shelves (figs. 7 and 8). Critic Jane Harris wrote of the exhibition, months after the financial crisis, "Beginning with an unfinished artwork Dalton pegs at \$500,000 and ending with an Ikea chair she says is worth \$5, the 545 (sic) items between tell a story of personal attachment that defies monetary logic...the results remind us that one person's trash is another person's treasure: an adage, if ever there was one, for these trying times" (2009).





Figure 7. Installation view of the exhibition of Jennifer Dalton’s *The Reappraisal*, New York. 3 April-9 May 2009. (Courtesy of Winkleman Gallery).

Figure 8. “A Green Upholstered Couch,” Appraisal card from Jennifer Dalton’s *The Reappraisal* (2009). (Courtesy of Winkleman Gallery).

While Dalton’s return to *The Appraisal* may have been, in some sense, ego-driven (as, ten years later, the artist’s net worth had increased substantially), these projects nonetheless demonstrate the uncertain status of artistic labor in a recession. By rendering explicit the gallery space as a site of commercial transaction, Freyer and Dalton reflect on the embattled state of professional art practice during a moment of economic crisis. These works resonate with Ann Liv Young’s *Sherry Shop* (2011-12), which I discussed in Chapter Two, for which the artist transformed the lower level of the Louis B. James Gallery into a veritable garage sale for old performance props and used goods. Freyer and Dalton take one step further the Sherry Shop’s slogan: *Everything is for sale*.

“Dalton’s encyclopedic index of her own life is a confession, a denial, a folly, fantasy, and a wonderful visual-cerebral experience. Plus everything’s really for sale,” wrote the celebrity art critic Jerry Saltz in a May 2009 review for *New York* magazine. Just a year

later, Dalton—a self-described “major lurker on online forums” (Vartanian 2010)—would turn the tables on Saltz with her piece *What Are We Not Shutting Up About? (Five Months of Status Updates and Responses from Jerry Saltz’s Facebook [Profile] Page)* (2010) exhibited at New York City’s Flag Art Foundation, bringing new meaning to his apparent enthusiasm that “everything’s really for sale.” Dalton’s piece is just what it suggests: a fifteen-foot-wide chart that graphically represents her statistical analysis of Saltz’s Facebook activity over the course of five months, from January 1 to May 31, 2010 (figs. 9 and 10). Dalton color-coded all of Saltz’s Facebook posts by subject to analyze which topics received the most “likes.” Dalton’s parasitical reversal makes the powerful and connected art critic *the artist’s object of analysis*, echoing Byrne’s treatment of celebrated male artists and Kraus’ of the celebrated male intellectual. Indeed, Saltz is not just any art critic: he is at the epicenter of the mainstreaming of the New York art world, as a senior art critic at *New York* magazine (and formerly of *The Village Voice*), a former solo advisor for the Whitney Biennial, and currently a judge on the Bravo series *Work of Art*.

The two topics that received the most attention (over 800 comments) were on “old dead [male] artists” (a post on the auction of Picasso’s work) and on “art in general” (a post on the best artists’ names) (Vartanian 2010). According to Dalton’s gallery, “[A] few things she gleaned from [the 20,000 words published in responses to Saltz’s posts in January] were that: more men than women posted responses, the word ‘disagree’ is used nine times more often than the word ‘agree,’ five of Jerry’s ‘friends’ post almost 20% of all the responses” (Vartanian 2010). The chart’s x-axis registers the subjects of his posts while the y-axis represents the number of comments each post generated. Art critic Yaelle Amir notes, writing about the piece for *Art Slant*, “Dalton also color-coded the columns

according to general themes, such as ‘Music,’ ‘The Artist’s Life,’ ‘Art in General,’ ‘Old Dead Artists,’ ‘Jerry Saltz,’ and ‘Irony’” (2010).

Dalton herself does not frontload this reading in her representation of the piece, deflecting questions about the reason for her scrutiny of the prominent critic with banal pleasantries. Her discussions of the work play a careful political game: “Jerry Saltz makes himself very accessible,” she responds to interviewer Hrag Vartanian’s question (“Why is the online art world so obsessed with Jerry Saltz?”), “and he makes it clear that he values what artists...do and think...Jerry Saltz’s Facebook page is a community of colleagues and competitors, supportive, and antagonistic alternately, or sometimes at the same time. I am fascinated by it as an archive of conversations and emotions that ebb and flow, flare-up and smooth over” (Vartanian 2010).



Figure 9. Installation views of Jennifer Dalton’s *What Are We Not Shutting Up About?* (Five Months of Status Updates and Responses from Jerry Saltz’s Facebook [Profile] Page) (2010), Exhibited in *Making Sense* at the Winkleman Gallery, New York. 30 June–10 September 2010. (Courtesy of Winkleman Gallery).

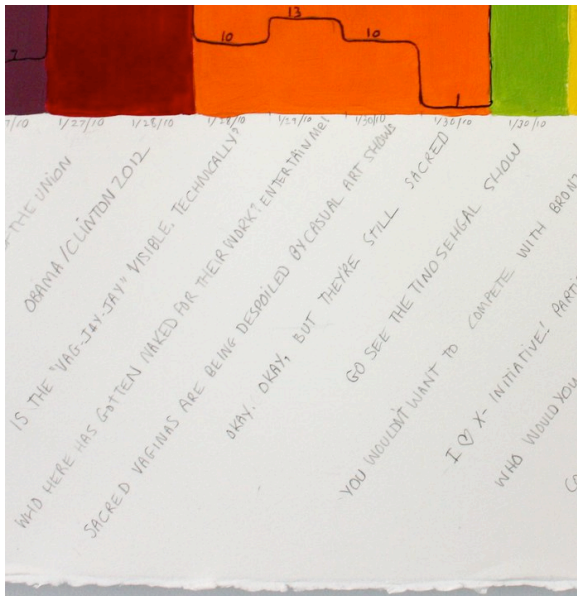
Figure 10. Printed Facebook pages from Jennifer Dalton's Facebook page (2010) (Courtesy of Hyperallergic.com).

As in the case of Byrne, the mainstream reviews made little mention of the work's apparent critique of Saltz's outmoded gender politics, likely for the very reason that Dalton tactically overinvests in the minutiae of Saltz's operations, or as Vartanian puts it: she "[gets] a PhD in Saltz." She takes the conceptual art work as opportunity to engage in some form of contemporary Guerrilla Girls action, as art critic Frances Richard has also noted.¹⁰⁷ Richard writes, "If the Guerrilla Girls styled themselves 'the conscience of the art world,' Dalton might be our superego..." (2002). While the activist art group is most famous for their bold-lettered billboards demanding increased attention and funding to women's art practices, Dalton's intervention unfolds in the fine print. Closer examination of the subjects of Saltz's posts show that the artist's parasitism lies in her *paraphrasing* of the critic: "Is the 'vag-jay-jay' visible, technically?" (1/28/10), "Who here has gotten naked for their work? Entertain me!" (1/29/10), "Sacred vaginas are being despoiled by casual art shows" (1/30/10), "Okay, okay, but they're still sacred" (1/30/10), "Go see the Tino Sehgal show!" (1/30/10) (figs. 11 and 12). Her tactical paraphrasings of Saltz are a crucial maneuver of her parasitism. By restating his posts *in her own words*, she makes the art-world infrastructures that play host to her reflexive through her use of Socratic irony. She offers herself as a re-presentation machine, a medium that processes his words, throwing them back at him. "The more precise or overt the replication as

¹⁰⁷ The Guerrilla Girls, a group of anonymous women artists-cum-activists who wear gorilla masks to protect their anonymity, have produced posters, stickers, books, printed projects, and actions that expose sexism and racism in politics, the art world, film and the culture at large. One of their most recognizable actions was a 1989 poster they created that asked: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" When they did a count, they—calling themselves "the conscience of the art world," found that less than 5% of the artists in the modern art sections of the museum were women while 85% of the nudes were female. The poster was designed for the Public Art Fund in New York and was subsequently used in demonstrations to lobby for increased support for women artists from art institutions (GuerrillaGirls.com, 1995).

replication...the greater the antitheatrical panic about the propriety of the pristine original,” observes Rebecca Schneider (2011:113).

Mining sources about the art world, from social networking sites to popular magazines, Dalton has made a career out of doing the kind of “hyper-analysis” that Sophie Calle encouraged of her readers in *Take Care of Yourself*. Dalton’s hardcore analysis will, no doubt, remind us of the lexicometrist who picked Calle’s ex apart in her lengthy analyses of his email, offering unyieldingly close readings of his typography, genre, enunciation and vocabulary displayed in bar graphs, color-coded diagrams, and chart analyses. Likewise, Dalton transforms Jerry Saltz, arbiter of the mainstream art world, into an object of data visualization. Her scientific research appropriates his prominence as a site for administrative intervention. The “work of art,” here, is represented as yet another a day job.



Figures 11 and 12. Details of *What Are We Not Shutting Up About?* (2010), acrylic paint, pencil, and ink on watercolor paper (54 x 196 inches overall) (Courtesy of Winkleman Gallery).

“What makes these exercises art?” asked art critic Peter Schjeldahl of a 2000 group show at New York’s Exit Art, “Well, what else might they reasonably be? They involve real work that is really gratuitous...[and] that’s distinction enough” (qtd. in Richard 2002). Dalton quotes Schjeldahl in the press release for her 2002 exhibition “A Task No One Assigned.” Frances Richard quotes an excerpt of it in her review published in *Artforum*, taking the dictates of his comments “characterizing art production as unmandated or self-commissioned effort...as both permission granted and gauntlet thrown down” (2002). Dalton’s art practice manifests as hard work, transforming sites of contemporary culture into a source of labor for analysis, administration, and archiving.

These works archive, with obsessiveness and precision, these artists’ precarious attachments. They explore a changing relationship to attachment over the last decade through relationships to exchange given the increased privatization and individualization of relations under neoliberalism. They use precarity as a conceptual structure from which to create new conditions for work, to fabulate new tasks, to generate new orders to undertake. “What does it mean even to propose that a spreading precarity provides the dominant *structure* and *experience* of the present moment, cutting across class and localities?” asks Berlant, who writes:

There is broad agreement on the emergence of this situation, but descriptions of the affected populations veer wildly from workers in regimes of immaterial labor and the historical working class to the global managerial class; neobohemians who go to university, live off part-time or temporary jobs, and sometimes dole while making art; and well, everyone whose

bodies and lives are saturated by capitalist forces and rhythms
(2011:192).

“In what sense...is it accurate to call this phenomenon a new global *class*—one that has indeed been termed the *precariat*?” asks Berlant (192, her emphases). “This emergent taxonomy raises questions about to what degree precarity is an economic and political condition suffered by a population or by the subjects of capitalism generally; or a way of life; or an affective atmosphere; or an existential truth about contingencies of living, namely, that there are no guarantees that the life one intends can or will be built,” she writes (192). Berlant concludes, “[The] situation is not, finally, proof that economic and political fragility everywhere has engendered a new globalized or mass-homogeneous class. That remains to be seen. It is that there has been a mass dissolution of a disavowal. The promise of the good life no longer masks the living precarity of this historical present.” “This is evidenced,” writes Berlant, “in the emergence of a new mask, a precarious visage that now graces myriad accounts of how people are living the end of both social and market democracy in Europe and the United States: a recession grimace has appeared, somewhere between a frown, a smile, and a tightened lip” (196).

As her contribution to the 2012 Whitney Biennial, Andrea Fraser, well known for her artistic and scholarly institutional critique, evidenced by works like *Untitled* (2003), wrote an essay called “There’s No Place Like Home.” In it, she described her gradual alienation from the art world and her frustration with, what she perceives as, the contradictory, and even fraudulent, disjunction it has enabled between the institutional critique and legitimization and her desire to support and participate in the Occupy movement—“its self-representation as a site of contestation and its narratives of radicality

and revolution” and its complicity with social and economic conditions. “Indeed, the art world itself has developed into a prime example of a winner-take-all market, one of the economic models that emerged to describe the extremes of compensation that have become endemic in the financial and corporate worlds and now also extend to major museums and other large nonprofit organizations in the United States, where compensation ratios can rival those of the for-profit sector,” she writes (2012:29). “Most of us, however, and most of the art world, exist uncomfortably and often painfully in between these extremes, embodying and performing the contradictions between them and the economic and political conflicts those contradictions reflect, unable to resolve them within our work or within ourselves, much less within our field” (29).

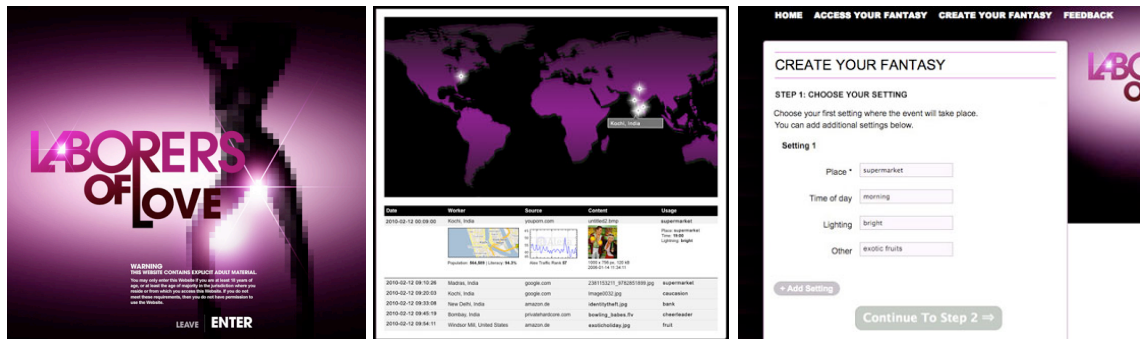
With tightened lips, these artists try to articulate their own changing relationship to the structures to which they find themselves often ambivalently attached. We see across these works, a certain “grab” for home or a negotiation with a loss of stability represented by home, and in all of them, anxieties about one’s own value in a changing environment and the possible foreclosures represented by the domestic—as both a cultural imaginary and a material sanctuary from the work of capitalism.

HELP WANTED

The whole question of the system now is to analyze what a point, a being, and a station are. They are crossed by a network of relations; they are crossroads, interchanges, sorters. But is that not analysis itself: saying that this thing is at the intersection of several series. From then on, the thing is nothing else but a center of relations, crossroads or passages. It is nothing but a position or situation. And the parasite has won.

-Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (1982:39)

Networks, from high-speed financial networks to ubiquitous social networks, have become a defining concept for our moment.¹⁰⁸ Networks have been understood as a global formation that encapsulates “the new,” whose force is increasingly expressed in how they are imagined to rework our sense of belonging (Chun 2012). Crowdsourcing has been given as a phenomenon by which we are asked to make ourselves at home within the network. The following projects answer this call, casting networked exchange as their medial support. We might place all three of these crowdsourcing projects on a continuum of digital performance that figures volunteerism and amateurism as the watchwords of networked self-representation.



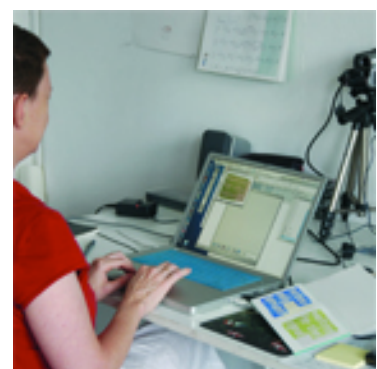
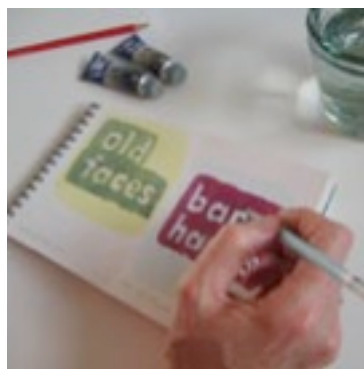
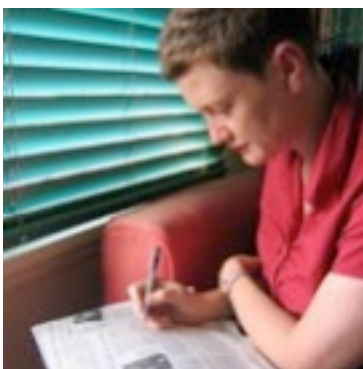
Figures 13-15. Stephanie Rothenberg and Jeff Crouse’s *Laborers of Love* homepage, customer input form, and data visualization of customer’s order. (Courtesy of *LaborersofLove.com*).

¹⁰⁸ See Wendy Hui Kyong Chun’s forthcoming book *Imagined Networks, Global Connections*. Chun’s work engages the conceptual and political power of networks following work such as Manuel Castells’ *The Rise of Network Society* (2000), Duncan Watts’ *Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age* (2004), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s trilogy of *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2005), and *Commonwealth* (2009), Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker’s *The Exploit* (2007) and Tiziana Terranova’s *Network Cultures: Politics for the Information Age*.



Figures 16. Stephanie Rothenberg and Jeff Crouse's *Laborers of Love* crowdsourced final product. (Courtesy of *LaborersofLove.com*).

The crowdsourcing project *Laborers of Love* (2010-ongoing) was created by Stephanie Rothenberg and Jeff Crouse (with Michael Schieben). It explores the relationship between online sex and emerging models of online work and global outsourced labor. The project uses the online crowdsourcing application “Mechanical Turk” to break down the tasks required to fulfill a customer’s sexual fantasy (figs. 13-15).¹⁰⁹ The final product is a mass-produced Dada-esque montage video assembled from images and video clips found on the internet (by what the website calls “a diverse, global workforce of everyday people...looking for jobs in this recession-wracked economy” (fig. 16).



¹⁰⁹ Mechanical Turk is Amazon’s crowdsourcing engine, a web-based marketplace that helps companies find people to perform tasks that computers do not master (such as identifying items in a photograph, skimming documents for information, writing product descriptions, transcribing, etc.). The tasks are designed to require little time and offer little compensation, most from a few cents to a few dollars.

Figures 17-19. Barbara Campbell's *1001 Nights* (2005-2008) (Courtesy of *1001.net.au*).

Raising related issues, though in a different arena, Australian artist Barbara Campbell's durational project, *1001 Nights* (2005-2008), borrows from the story of *The Arabian Nights* to explore, in digital media, a practice of constrained female, creative labor. The performance simultaneously engages crowdsourcing as a resource for building a reserve of material for the artist (as 243 writers ultimately responded to a writing prompt provided by the artist with a limit of 1001 words) and is the artist's performance of mechanized, ritualized artistic labor. Each day the artist woke up to read newspaper reports covering the Middle East. She would then select a word or phrase that she rendered carefully in watercolor and uploaded to the project's website. During the day, one of a pool of hundreds of international writers would write a story in response to the writing prompt that Campbell had extracted from the day's newspapers stories about events in the Middle East with only a few hours to write 1001 words (figs. 17-19). Every night at sunset, depending upon Campbell's location, the artist would tell the story on a live webstream on the project website for 1001 nights from June 21, 2005 to March 17, 2008.

"Sometimes it's a relief to be told what to do," write artists Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher in their introduction to the book version of their project *Learning To Love You More* (2002-09). The artists' (with web manager Yuri Ono) popular crowdsourcing project is a web-based and installation project (recently acquired by the SFMOMA) powered by visitor uploads to the site, the majority of whom are women in their teens and 20s, who respond to "performance prompts" posted by the artists. Fletcher and July explain in the

introduction of their book that they are two artists who are trying to come up with new ideas. “[O]ur most joyful and even profound experiences often come when we are following other people’s instructions...Sometimes it seems like the moment when we let go of trying to be original, we actually feel something new” they write (2010:1). Participants accept an assignment, completing it by following simple but specific instructions ranging from “Repair something” to “Photograph a significant outfit” to the much more intimate “Write a phone call you wish you could have” or “Take a picture of strangers holding hands” (figs. 20 and 21) and finally send in the required report to July and Fletcher (uploading photograph, text, video) to see their contribution posted online.

The site reads: “Like a recipe, meditation practice, or familiar song, the prescriptive nature of these assignments is intended to guide people towards their own experience.” The project evidences the willingness of an audience to submit themselves to a seemingly endless list of mundane tasks, with over 8000 people having participated. The project is populated by these returns on the assignments. The title of the project was itself outsourced insofar as it was “borrowed” from contributor and artist Emma Hedditch, who used the phrase in her submission of Assignment 35 (“Ask your family to describe what you do”). The artists acknowledge this in an asterisked footnote, which describes the title as “generously loaned.”



Figures 20 and 21. Submissions to Learning To Love You More for “Assignment 30: Take a picture of strangers holding hands” (Courtesy of LearningToLoveYouMore.com).

LTLYM's assignment-based structure offers a reframing of the questions of “reperformance” that I posed in Chapter Two. Marina Abramović has used reperformance as a self-replicating performance model that effectively outsources her past works to a younger generation of precarious artists, who are required to perform the works faithfully either as a part of her exhibition prostheses or by paying her for the rights to perform one of her pieces individually. This effects in certain instances, I argued, a stunting of new work and keeps a younger generation of performance artists locked into a system of servitude and historical indebtedness that resembles the U.S. debt structure and, for young people, student loan models. While Fletcher and July's directives are simple, contributors are required to follow them closely in order to be included in the project. The project website's “FAQ's” reads: “Do I have to follow the instructions exactly as they are written?” to which this answer is provided: “Every report that follows the assignment's instructions will be posted on this site. Work that does not follow the specifications will not be posted. It is very important that you attempt to follow the instructions as accurately as possible.”

Assignment 63, “Make an encouraging banner,” offers these detailed instructions (fig. 22):

Think of something encouraging you often tell yourself. For example: *Everything will be ok.* Or: *Don’t listen to them.* Or: *It’ll blow over.* Now make a banner, making sure to follow these instructions: 1. Draw each letter of the sentence on a large piece of colored construction paper or big squares of fabric. One letter per piece. Draw them blocky so you can cut them out. 2. Cut them out. 3. Glue each one onto a piece of construction paper or fabric that is a contrasting color. 4. Then glue the edges of all the pieces of paper or fabric together to make a banner. 5. Hang the banner in a place where you or someone else might need some encouragement...Or between two trees so that you and your neighbors can receive encouragement from it. Or in a gas station.

July and Fletcher give the following guidelines for documenting the assignment: “Take a picture of your hung banner and sent it to us. After it has been up for awhile, take it down and roll it up and put it under your bed or another safe place. We might very likely contact you wanting to exhibit your banner in a show someday.” The project poses itself as a form of group therapy, recalling Sophie Calle’s own claims that *Take Care of Yourself*—a title that captures a similarly schmaltzy brand of public sentimentality as *Learning to Love You More*—was a project that also functioned as a form of “self-therapy” in others.



Figure 22. *Learning To Love You More* “Assignment 63: Make an encouraging banner,” Submission by Aja and Sofia, Reston, Virginia USA.

These projects inhabit crowdsourcing technologies to effect a certain “domestication” of the network. *LTLYM*, for example, posts assignments that encourage users to “attach themselves” to public spaces with sentimental objects and gestures (e.g. suggesting that they hang handmade banners at gas stations, make intimate contact by holding hands with strangers, and so on). The projects thus insist on a community of amateurism—in the sense of their improvisational aesthetics (stories written in a few hours, “fantasies” composited following instructions that cannot be anticipated) and modes of sharing with little expected in return, drawing on discourses of exchange and borrowing. They make cottage industries out of the goods produced from staying occupied in uncertain financial times.

In this way, these projects occupy the structure of crowdsourcing to imagine new forms of community based not on logics of profit but on creative practices such as collage, storytelling, and crafts.¹¹⁰ These D.I.Y. skills and practices have increasingly been sold as “queer” and “feminist,” held out as access to new forms of community making. Whether these creative networks politicize or depoliticize feminism remains to be seen.¹¹¹ In their more mainstream manifestations, however, they appear to have the effect of framing politics, and indeed present-day feminism, as an object that can be bought or made and a professional hobby, a site of skilled leisure. In this sense, feminism, as it is only implicated in the twee rhetoric of projects such as *LTLYM*, has been perceived as an anachronistic craft—a form of handiwork available both to those who really don’t *have to worry about work* and therefore, to those who seek out new tasks to occupy their time and to those who *worry about finding work* and so participate in the hopes of this leading to paid work, artistic recognition, and so on.

ON INFRASTRUCTURE

In *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, Shannon Jackson is critical of the emphasis that has been placed on disruptive art practices that forget the infrastructures that support their interventions in the first place. Her project challenges my own to think not only of the work of parasites but also of hosts. “The social world is in fact a large systemic prosthesis for the normative bodies its structures support,” writes Jackson, “...this social

¹¹⁰ The projects evidence the availability of these discourses in a moment when the internet has increasingly been used as an alternative marketplace for “women’s work” as domestic work has been networked with the popularity of sites like Etsy.com or the ubiquity of beauty, design, or parenting blogs for which “domestic” skill sets are unmoored from the heterosexual family structure and instead become fodder for a new markets of conspicuous consumption.

¹¹¹ See Jeanne Vaccaro’s dissertation on the queer feminist politics of craft cultures: “Felt Matters: Crafting Transgender and the Politics of the Handmade Body.”

prosthesis...requires a break or deviation for us to remember that it is there” (2011:6). She argues that disruptive provocations fail to register the enabling system that supports them. Jackson’s analysis, without using the language of the parasite and host, reasserts the crucial importance of thinking the host infrastructure always in tandem with the parasite—indeed, of thinking not only the parasite as occupying, but the territory that is occupied. Parasitical actions depend on the “ground” that supports them; parasites both *need* their hosts and often fail to register the structure by which the host makes itself hospitable to the parasite’s presence. Social systems—from the environment to kinship structures, from labor to public infrastructure and social welfare—must be placed in the foreground of analysis, argues Jackson, “despite the fact that they usually occupy the background of experience” (6).¹¹²

The paradox of infrastructural disavow reposes the problem of home for the parasite as Jackson asks how we might qualify critical impulses to “equate radicality and progressivism with ‘anti-state’ or ‘anti-institutional’ resistance” (9). Her analysis questions models of political engagement that measure artistic radicality by its degree of anti-institutionality. “When a political art discourse too often celebrates social disruption at the expense of social coordination, we lose a more complex sense of how art practices contribute to inter-dependent social imagining,” she writes (14). Jackson thus calls for a politics of intervention framed by the language of inter-dependence. “[F]or the moment it might be useful to remind ourselves that autonomy, in both aesthetic and ethical

¹¹² “Such wider apparatuses of labor and infrastructure support our self-figuration, but often it is only when there is a break in their service that we register their presence. The ‘government’ or ‘state’ comes into view as a negative presence when the traffic light breaks or when we encounter a pothole in the paved street...in what we have come to call our contemporary neoliberal society, the tendency to feel inconvenienced by supporting operations is pervasive,” writes Jackson (2011:7).

discourses, is defined as ‘self-governing,’ opposing itself to objects and subjects who are heteronomously ‘governed by external rules,’” she writes (15). The risk of the language of inter-dependence, she argues, is that it might compromise aesthetic practice by being governed by the investments of others, recalling the fear that feminists have historically voiced of the parasite perceived as being too deeply interdependent on its patriarchal host environment.

The artists that I have discussed exhibit this interdependency and use the network as a host platform for making themselves into *mediums for use*. In this way, crowdsourcing is taken as the infrastructural support for their experimental practice. By improvising their art in response to arbitrary tasks or imperatives, these artists borrow the conceptual structure of the “performance art script” introduced by Dadaist and Fluxus artists, whereby a score designates simple instructions for performing a work. Avant-garde artists have long used chance procedures or mechanical apparatuses to introduce improvisational occurrences or outcomes into the work of art. These artists have “outsourced” improvisation to *instruction*. “The instruction dictates the initial conditions of this mock experiment,” writes Margaret Iversen of Marcel Duchamp’s *3 Standard Stoppages*, for which the artist recorded instructions for a year, “on the contrary, the instruction is a device for evading authorial or artistic agency and so generating chance events and unexpected results” (2010:12-13).

The experimental music composer John Cage was quick to see the interest of Duchamp’s work and took the principle of allowing chance to generate composition a step further. As Iversen explains, he did this “first with a complex system using I Ching coins and later

by leaving performers a great deal of scope in their interpretation of a score. This latter strategy, ‘indeterminacy’ lent itself to the idea of creating a dense field of resonating sound rather than a melodic, linear musical experience” (2010:14). Cage described an investment in an avant-garde that functions in relation to an instructional frame: “Life without structure is unseen. Pure life expresses itself within and through a structure.” The Fluxus artist George Brecht, a protégé of Cage, took the idea of the open-ended score out of the musical context and adopted it for an instructional performance art. “His work developed in the direction of minimal verbal instructions or ‘event scores’ for performance pieces which were presented on cards in precise graphic form...” writes Margaret Iversen. “A piece by La Monte Young, a Fluxus composer, *Composition 1960 #2* (‘Build a fire in front of the audience...’), as minimally performed by Brecht, involved lighting a book of matches. Another Young ‘composition,’ *Composition 1960 #10*...consists of the instruction, ‘Draw a straight line and follow it.’ The instruction is terse and open to any number of realizations” (15).

A tactical dependence on infrastructure undergirds all parasitical performance. Kate Gilmore’s performance actions, for example, play closely with this format, enacting scores like: “keep smiling while things are thrown at you,” “break through a wall,” and “stuff your head through a wooden cutout of a star.” Sophie Calle’s performances follow this format as well. Most obviously, *Take Care of Yourself* (2007) is a massive crowdsourcing project for which Calle outsourced the directive of responding to her ex’s email to 107 of her closest friends. In her 1999 book *The Rules of the Game*, Calle describes having offering to let American author Paul Auster “write” a year of her life, promising if he did she would follow his story to the letter (a request that came after Calle discovered that Auster

had *already* based a character on her in one of his novels. “I asked him to invent a fictive character which I would attempt to resemble,” she writes, “I was, in effect, inviting Paul Auster to do what he wanted with me, for a period of up to a year at most. Auster objected that he did not want to take responsibility for what might happen when I acted out the script he had created for me” (Calle 2007). These projects literalize the notion of the event that is *pre-scripted*, inhabiting a criticism that has often been leveled as a rationale for disidentifying with strands of Western feminism said to be prescriptive or programmatic. They locate the improvisational potential in activating the thing that is “pre-given.” In performing parasitism, these artists turn the notion of the “prescriptive” on its head, performing in the parasite, the score: Become what you are already presumed to be.

By making themselves into parasitical mediums, that is by letting themselves *be used*, these artists model practices that put pressure on historical accounts of feminist agency as a form of expressed self-determination in much of Western feminist theory. The emergence of these claims has not been fully attended to by feminist treatments of masochism or by feminist and queer discourses around play with forms of passivity. Feminism has long been construed as a project fundamentally at odds with the treatment of bodies as mediums, associating such practices with the exploitative or, to use the term more often associated with feminism, oppressive appropriation of certain bodies for the pleasure and labor of others.¹¹³

¹¹³ Because economic exploitation has historically been the province of Marxism, exploitation has been a less popular concept within feminism than the more loosely defined notion of oppression. Oppression has, nevertheless, proven a thorny organizing concept for feminists for whom the term threatens to position women as victims (Andermahr, Lovell, and Wolkowitz 1997:71-72, 155-156). Marx’s theory of economic

As such, the feminist project has been driven, much like media itself,¹¹⁴ by a desire to overcome the problem of mediation. Becoming a medium holds a neutral, and even positive, valence in these works as the condition of possibility for becoming *a site of connectivity* for and with others. Stephen Crocker writes, “Serres...point[s] out that the word media is related, etymologically, to ‘milieu’ and ‘means.’ A theory of media is then always also a theory of environment and a philosophy of means and ends. Serres’ books are filled with images of middles, medians and transformative in-between spaces” (2007). The lesson for feminism in Serres’ work is that, to refine Crocker’s reading, there are no ends but only ever *means*. By becoming go-betweens, these artists expose the fallacy of the notion that by severing ties with what produces one as a “free” or “autonomous” agent that one is, in any sense, made free.

By making themselves parasitical mediums, the artists use their hosts. They dislodge the “problem” of feminism from what is claimed to be its source. By outsourcing the “problem” of feminist agency, they quite literally place the source of feminism *out of itself* such that it cannot be thought to belong to itself. The problem of feminism thus becomes a *relational* problematic, one that finds in the other its *raison d’être*, its infrastructural support.

exploitation refers to the process by which the property-owning classes appropriate the surplus produced by the workers (that is, the value they produce over and above their wages). Since labor is the source of profit, the process of production in class societies must be understood as one of exploitation (Andermahr, Lovell, and Wolkowitz 71). Feminists have read the family context through Marx’s treatment of economic exploitation, treating the family as an economic system in and of itself, with hierarchically structured labor relations in which men benefit from, and exploit the work of women (Andermahr, Lovell, and Wolkowitz 71).

¹¹⁴ Writes Stephen Crocker in his essay “Noises and Exceptions: Pure Mediality in Serres and Agamben,” “Whether it is the frame, the wire, location, bodies or simply physical presence that it eliminates, each new device promises to deliver the same content as its predecessor, only more immediately, which is to say without the clumsy medium in which the signal had been trapped. Jay Bolter and Robert Grusin have shown how this desire to escape media by means of media has developed according to a logic that they call ‘remediation’” (2007).

Through reaching out to the other to do the work for oneself, we force the other to be hospitable.

NETWORKING USE

“What then, again, is living together?” asks Serres. “What is the collective? I don’t know, and I doubt that anyone does...This black category of collective, group, class, caste, whatever, is a being in turn, or a cluster of relations?” (2007:224). The collective “we” of the imagined network, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun argues, is not an anonymous “we” but increasingly a series of connected “yous” as in YouTube and “You” as chosen as *Time Magazine’s* Person of the Year in 2006. “It’s Not Us, It’s You,” she has put it, recalling my paralogue (2012). This “You” is both singular and plural for Chun, and in its plural mode, it still addresses individuals as individuals. Chun argues that the network is a structure of apparent connected disconnection, a matrix of unique “yous,” that produces value through repetition, through the co-laboring work of a collective of different “yous.” In this sense, for her, networks are different from communities, because they do not create a new identity, a “we” in common. This would seem to be the parasitism the network as community of use, which is, incidentally, a homophone for “yous.”

It is in the context of exchange and use that Serres describes the “quasi-object,” a concept that he offers for thinking about how the collective gets produced through networked singularity (of “playing the position”). “This quasi-object, when being passed, makes the collective, if it stops, it makes the individual...Who is the subject, who is an ‘I,’ or who am I? The moving [marker in a game] weaves the ‘we,’ the collective; if it stops, it marks the ‘I’” (225). Read through Serres’ articulation, the art projects that I have discussed help to

show us that the work of use is that it creates networks. This quasi-objectification is a parasitical model that can be said to generate quasi-subjects, beings who exist through their interdependence.

An imagined network of “yous” offers a feminist model for a parasitical economy that works through self-interested co-laboring. If, in trying to think our way *through* the logic of the network, we have become ever more tightly enmeshed *within* the network, the impossibility of freedom is an invitation to become networked users: to become parasites of the network. In an interview, Serres observes: “Before one can play together as a team, there has to be white noise. It is exactly this random noise that is parasitic, the din of disturbing sounds that precede order. Take the example of the Internet. Within the network, parasites compete against parasites.” “Parasites are necessary to translate the white noise of new circumstances into a system of relationships,” he explains, “The white noise attracts them, driven by their goals to profit, to collect information or to manipulate, and they can create meaning, a usable and implementable, where previously one didn’t exist” (Wiek and Serres).

The user refigures the master/slave dialectic internalized by Western feminism, shifting it to that of the parasite/host. Terranova argues of free labor that the digital, like the parasite, unsettles our assumptions about value, work, use, and exploitation. In our culture of use, the pervasive rhetoric of the “online user,” wherein to be an online citizen is to participate *as a user in a community of users*, invites Western feminist analytics to reappraise the value of use for feminism in an age of use-value. The critical potential of vulnerability, of self-disclosure, and of “setting the terms” of one’s own precarious

position would seem to have much to tell us about the feminist potential to be found in *using work* as a practice of self-scripting. In this sense, perhaps new media has understood something about relationality that Western feminism has not, where openness may prove a better tactical response to the problem of exploitation than a protective posture of closure. Tiziana Terranova writes: “[Digital labor] undermines [the] distinction between work as ‘servitude, misery, and communal liberation’ and artistic expression as the means to self-fashioning and communal liberation.” “The process whereby production and consumption are reconfigured within the category of free labor,” Terranova continues, “signals the unfolding of a different (rather than completely new) logic of value...” (2000:35). These digital performances model reevaluations of the way in which Western feminism has traditionally treated dynamics of use—blurring distinctions between the master and the slave, the dominant and the submissive, the active and the passive. Chun observes in *Control and Freedom*, “...vulnerability and a certain loss of control drives communication...it is by exploring the possibilities opened up by our vulnerabilities, rather than by relegating this vulnerability as accidental or pornographic, that the question of democracy can be rigorously engaged” (2005: 76). The web’s “constitutive vulnerability [is] the fact that in order to use, one is used, and that one’s online interactions are fundamentally open” (130). The model of relationality offered by digital networks of use at the same time confirms the impoverishment of feminist imperatives of autonomy and originality and offers feminists a paradigm for envisioning more resonant notions of political agency in the age of global mass media. Vulnerability and dependency are recast by the digital as, rather than mere manifestations of inequity, indeed the very conditions of exchange and participation (Chun 2005). This is,

nevertheless, an argument that has been made before the age of the digital, by feminists as well, if in different terms.

The pervasive rhetoric of the online “user” therefore compels feminism to shift its emphasis from the problem of exploitation to questions of networked use and circulation. Rather than asked to bracket or ignore the violent and ongoing force of gender exploitation today, feminists are challenged to negotiate a finer distinction between tactical and oppressive use. As Derrida put it in his essay “Eating Well,” “the question is...not, nor has it ever been: should one eat or not eat” but rather “since *one must* eat in any case...*how* for goodness sake should one *eat well*?” (qtd. in Wolfe, xvi). In other words, rather than denying feminism’s *own place within* economies of use—the fallacy that feminism exists (or should exist and thus fails) as a critical outside to relations of exploitation—the artists that I consider have sought to become users on the conceptual registers of art and performance.

As Cary Wolfe has noted, Serres’ economy of the gift marks a divergence from Derrida’s work, one that is amplified by how the two philosophers approach the figure of the hand, which we might think of here as the hand of the host or that of the artist. “[O]ne important difference between Derrida and Serres,” writes Wolfe, “is that ‘Serres partakes, he savours the materials he works with. There is demonstration and invention, but very little critique’” (qtd. in Wolfe 2007:xix). Steven Connor calls Serres’ “ethical claims for synthesis, a holistic *grasping* of the complete shape of things” (Wolfe xix). Serres’ reading of the *hand* is “an image of pure possibility, a readiness to take any shape” or as Wolfe retells, “‘a naked faculty,’ in Serres’ words” (Wolfe xix). Serres himself writes in *Genesis*,

published shortly after *The Parasite*: “When I think a given concept, I am entirely this concept, when I think tree, I am the tree...The hand is no longer a hand when it has taken hold of the hammer, it is the hammer itself...” (qtd. in Wolfe xix-xx).

For Derrida, however, there is no “naked” hand, Wolfe argues, “no pure potentiality or plenitude that would, in a second moment, make available the hand’s prosthetic transformation” (xx). Following Heidegger, for Derrida “Hand-Werk” is “less an act of ‘invention’ or ‘expansion’ and than one of ‘reception,’ of which the open, skyward-facing palm might be a fit emblem...” (Wolfe xx). “Thinking is not...Derrida writes, ‘of the order of conceptual grasping’; rather, it is a kind of *reception*.” Reception, Lynne Joyrich has argued in the context of television studies, has been figured as an essentially *feminine occupation*, one that is often “colonized by and for men (or at least for the dominant construction of heteromascularity)” (1996:78).

It is thus in the work of Derrida, more so than that of Serres, that we can truly *grasp the host*. “[N]othing is less assured,” writes Derrida, “than the distinction between *giving* and *taking*” (qtd. in Wolfe xx). In this sense, I would amend Wolf to say instead that, for Serres, there is no giving, but only taking and hence he is not so very different from Derrida, for whom the gift is impossible *and yet, necessary*. “[The gift is] not impossible but *the impossible*,” he writes. “The very figure of the impossible” (1992:7). The feminist imposition, indeed the ethical dimension of parasitical feminism, must be said to lie in this impossible necessity.

PLAYING HOST

To be sure, it has proven ever more difficult to distinguish between the parasite and the host, the user and the used, in our hyper-networked culture. The French word *hôte* means both host and guest. Out of context, the word is literally undecidable: the host *is* the guest. J. Hillis Miller examined the deconstructive implications of the term that sees itself in its other. “‘Parasitical’—the word is an interesting one,” he wrote, drawing on the etymology of the term to note that the word “parasite” also contains within itself its opposite (1977:440). The prefix “para,” Miller points out, has many contradictory meanings, simultaneously signifying both proximity and distance. Originally, explains Miller, the “parasite” was something positive, meaning simply someone who shares food with you, a fellow guest. “Later on, ‘parasite’ came to mean a professional dinner guest, someone expert at cadging invitations without ever giving dinners in return. From this developed the two main modern meanings in English, the biological and the social” (442). “A thing in ‘para’ is, moreover, not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and outside,” writes Miller. “It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is at once a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside, confusing them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing them but also forming an ambiguous transition between one and the other” (441). The word “host” has a more complex derivation: it means guest and stranger, a friend with whom you have a reciprocal duty of hospitality. Miller shows that each word has a reciprocal, antithetical meaning built into it, that the words “parasite” and “host” intertwine in their etymology.

Like the parasite, the “user” is simultaneously the person who gives and takes. From its etymology, to be a user, means both to lend and to receive. According to the OED, a *user*

or *usurer* is “a person who lends money at unreasonably high rates of interest.” In his *Sonnets*, Shakespeare writes of a “darkly attractive” mistress who puts her beauty to use. The poet condemns the mistress for having an affair with a young man, represented as collecting a debt: “The statute of thy beauty thou wilt take. / Thou usurer that putt’st forth all to use” (134.9-10). “I am myself mortgaged to thy will,” the young man responds to her. Water Cohen writes of these passages, “She will ‘take’ the full amount owed to her financially (sexually) because, like a ‘usurer,’ she employs ‘all’ her wealth (her body) for profit (‘use’ means both ‘engage in usury’ and ‘engage’ in sexual activity’ [Greenblatt et al. 2008:1750]). Cohen notes that, in other sonnets, “‘use’ antithetically means both ‘use up’ and ‘lend at interest’” (1750). The term use, like host and parasite, carries within itself its opposite.

In February 2012, a week after Facebook filed the government documents to become a publicly traded stock, Lori Andrews’ article, “Facebook is Using You,” was published in *The New York Times*. The article detailed how Facebook, estimated to be worth at least \$75 billion, has profited by selling ad space to companies based on its collected inventory of user data, such as relationship status, location, activities, favorite books, and employment. By allowing advertisers to use this information to “customize” targeted ads to its 845 million users, Facebook has made \$3.2 billion dollars in advertising revenue. Google has made more than ten times that amount based on a model of analyzing what users send over Gmail and what they searched and then itself using that data to sell targeted ad space, making an estimated \$36.5 billion in advertising revenue in 2011 alone (Andrews 2012). The voracious business models of Facebook and Google, both *sold* as *free services*, overwhelmingly evidence a moment in which the value of use can no longer (if it

ever could) be thought of in terms of pure exploitation since use necessarily implies opening oneself up for being used. We are made to see the user as not merely a parasite but also as a host, as platforms (*host domains*) like Facebook position us as users even as they devour our content for profit.

Let me cite another art project to illustrate this. A group of Austrian and Italian artists have collaborated on a project called Google Will Eat Itself (GWEI). The project appears to have been designed to test the limits of a parasitical tactical model, aiming at nothing less than taking down Google by using its own logics against it. GWEI exploits Google's financing itself through advertising. According to its creators, in a 2006 statement, "GWEI anonymously gives Google access to numerous advertising spaces, which are invisibly linked to each other...Clicking on one of these pages triggers clicks on all of the other pages, and Google has to pay for them" (fig. 23) (Allen 2006).

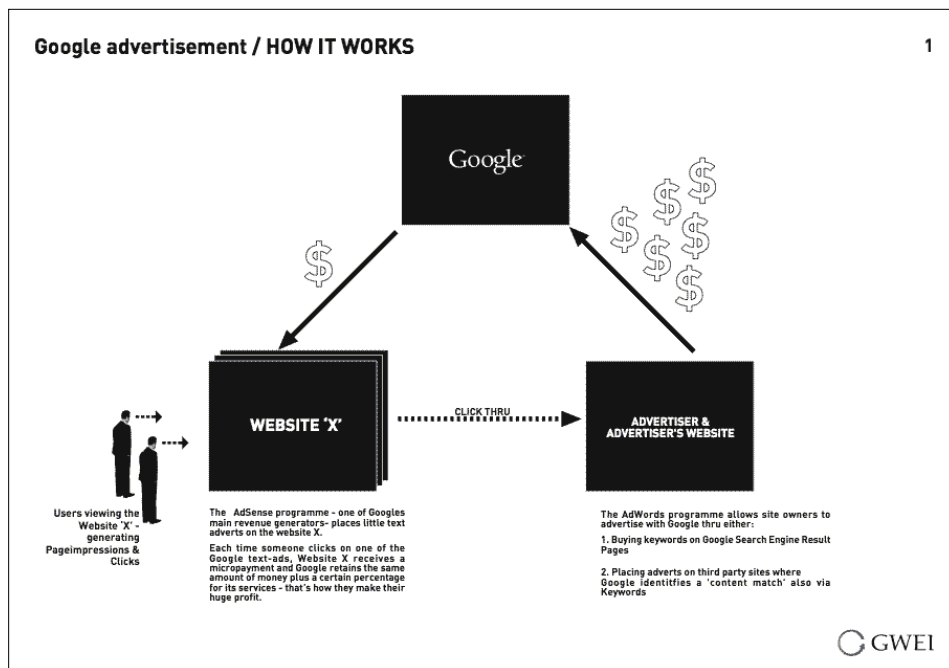


Figure 23. Google advertisement (Courtesy of GWEI.org).

What at first glance may seem like a project of parasitical infestation is quickly shown to be something else. According to the group's website, at its current rate, GWEI will fully own Google in 202,345,117 years. Notably, since the time of the 2006 creators' statement cited above, the amount of time until GWEI would own Google has not decreased but has, in fact, *increased* by 345,117 years. Google is not eating itself after all. With Google's stock price currently at \$495.01 a share, the project, rather than exposing the effectiveness of a tactical micropolitics, instead measures the limitations of a parasitical response to the voraciousness of capital (fig. 24).

The screenshot shows the UBS website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for Deutsch, Français, Italiano, Home, Search, Help, and Contact Us. Below this, the UBS logo is visible. On the left side, there's a sidebar with various links including 'UBS e-banking via Internet', 'UBS Funds', 'UBS Keyinvest', 'UBS Quotes', 'Update', 'Market Overview', 'News', 'Indices', 'Shares', 'Convertible Bonds', 'Bonds', 'Derivative Investments', 'Investment Funds', 'Investment Foundations', 'Forex/Banknotes', 'Money Market', 'Metals/Coins', 'Search News', 'Search', 'Secure Login', 'Standard Login', 'Register new user', 'WebCalculator', 'UBS Gold & Numismatics', 'UBS Private Clients', 'UBS Wealth Management', 'UBS Investment Bank', 'UBS Wealth Management in the USA', and 'UBS Global Asset Management'.

The main content area is titled 'Search' and shows the results for the search term 'goog'. The search criteria are displayed as 'goog'. The search type is set to 'all', and the instrument type is 'Shares'. The stock exchange is set to 'all', the GICS Sector is 'all', the currency is 'all', the country is 'all', and the industry is 'all'. The sorting options are 'Sorting 1', 'Sorting 2', and 'Sorting 3', each with a dropdown menu.

The search results table shows 4 instruments found:

Name	Type	Symbol	Valor	Place	Trade Vol.	Currency	Close	Bid	Ask	Last	Time
Google-A N 3M Shares	GOOG	1916494	NMS	3755682	USD	413.87	417.7	417.71	417.7	17:20:00	
Google-A N 3M Shares	GGQ1	1916494	FRA	3875	EUR	353	355.73	356.73	355.7	19:15:13	
Google-A N Shares	GOOG	1916494	SWX	525	CHF	542.5	550.5	551.5	551.5	16:34:10	
Google-A N 3M Shares	GGEA	1916494	LON		GBP	237.26	240.31	242.79	242.2531	17:02:10	

Below the table, there are search criteria fields for Search type, Instrument type, Stock Exchange, GICS Sector, Currency, Country, and Industry, each with a dropdown menu. There are also sorting options for Sorting 1, Sorting 2, and Sorting 3, each with a dropdown menu. At the bottom, there are 'Search' and 'Reset' buttons.

Figure 24. GWEI Swiss bank account, UBS (Courtesy of GWEI.org).

In March 2012, a similar project appeared on Kickstarter, a website that offers artists a platform for soliciting backers for various projects and thus crowdsourcing's answer to the privatization of arts funding in a post-NEA era. L.A.-based comedian Eric Money Penny

advertised that he would like to buy Kickstarter by raising money on Kickstarter. “I would like to raise money to by Kickstarter,” writes Moneypenny, “Worthofweb.com estimates Kickstarter’s worth at 18.6 million dollars. Therefore, I estimate that I will need at least 19,000,000 to make this happen.” The ad has since been removed with an “Error 404” message appearing instead that reads: “Oh my goodness. We apologize but something’s gone wrong—an old link, a bad link, or some little glitch.” Just as Obadike’s *Blackness For Sale* was deemed “inappropriate” by ebay, Moneypenny’s prank reveals the limitations of parasitical resistance. These projects compel the network to address them as parasites—as “bad links” or “little glitches”— within a much larger machine. And perhaps more significantly, GWEI and Moneypenny solicit Google and Kickstarter to expose that while they are designed to use, they cannot easily be used.

Why do hosts need their parasites? Because they are themselves parasites. In his 1965 essay “The Strategy of Refusal,” Italian political thinker Mario Tronti argued that labor comes first and capital *chases* labor: “there is no active life in capital without the living activity of labour power” (2007:31). The laborer thus hosts its parasite. It is the dominant, the host structure, that is the parasite, political theorist David McNally has said of capitalism, characterizing the neoliberal market as a voracious bloodsucker (2011). A similar, if more colorful, characterization appeared in the April 2010 issue of *Rolling Stone* in which Matt Taibbi described Goldman Sachs as “The world’s most powerful investment bank...a great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity, relentlessly jamming its blood funnel into anything that smells like money” (2010). Here we hear the familiar ring of first-wave feminists like Dora Marsden, who attributed to capitalism the characterization that radical feminists at the time were displacing onto

bourgeois women housewives. “Capital is insatiable,” writes Marsden, “it is not a necessity of wealth, but a ghastly poisonous fungus which has fastened upon wealth and which is rapidly crushing it out of existence” (qtd. in Delap 2007:227). It is minoritarian subjects that were, and continue to be, particularly vulnerable to the “infringements” of capitalism appropriated as bodily displacements of and surrogates for its logics. Capitalism not only functions like a parasite, but capital circulates as a kind of virus that infects the laborer’s body, turning her into an expendable drain on capital itself. By functioning as a hostile parasite, capitalism makes its others play host.

It is capitalism that is the true impostor: the parasite who masquerades as a host. It is “[t]he swindler who was able to impose on you for so long,” as Serres writes, quoting the character Valere of Moliere’s seventeenth-century comedy *Tartuffe* (2007:201), the story of a family that falls under the influence of a predatory guest. “The word *impose* is well chosen,” he continues, “[An impostor] is usually understood as cheating, the swindler imposing himself. But the same word and the same meaning would teach us that he keeps, collects, or intercepts a tax [*impot*]. The hypocrite imposes taxes on us to impose on us.” The hypocrite trades in women to gain other resources and obscure the transactional economy. Serres writes, “To intercept the daughter and the wife, the money-box, the inheritance, the signature, and the deposit. To take, as is customary, the words, women, and goods...For the term *imposture* has permitted us to forget its link with tax-collection [*perception d’impot*], with the exaction of money” (201). Of a “ruling class” that can both transcend and exploit nation-state distinctions, David Harvey observes that “the leading individuals within this class [may] attach themselves to specific state apparatuses for both the advantages and protections that this affords them,” but he

continues, “*Where* they specifically attach themselves is important, but it is no more stable than the capitalist activity they pursue” (2005:35, his emphasis).

We are forced to be hospitable to the capitalist networks that make us dependent on territories that we already occupy, compelled to play hosts to the parasites that make us pay rent. If Serres is right that the “woman is the universal hostess” (2007:215), then we *are all made women*. The question then for parasitical feminism is how hospitality might offer a framework for welcoming the other. Hospitality, if counterintuitively, offers the parasite a means for finding ownership—that is, a sense of self-possession not in autonomy but in relation. “Hospitality,” Derrida writes, “...presupposes waiting, the horizon of awaiting and the preparation of welcoming...on the other hand, the opposite is also nevertheless true...to be hospitable is to *let oneself be overtaken*...” (2002:361, my emphasis). In network culture, we are confronted with the fact that we are all users. In the face of our apparent complicity in our own exploitation by mega-conglomerates like Apple, Facebook, and Google, in a moment when it has appeared impossible to sever ourselves completely from our attachments to the 1%, the question of politics has reached an impasse and freedom has become the signature of a cruel optimism. Performing the parasite has thus emerged as a viable political maneuver in a global economy best encapsulated by the directive: *Use or be used*. It demonstrates how the user can be used.

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APPENDAGE /

BAD IN A GOOD WAY INFESTING THE DIALECTIC

The Devil or the Good Lord? Exclusion, inclusion? I don't know. But in any case I know these archaic questions. Struggles between two men are never anything but theatre: appearance, representation (show), scenery, moral, amusements. As soon as we are two, we are already three or four. We learned that a long time ago. In order to succeed, the dialogue needs an excluded third; our logic requires the same thing...These bivalent logics and dialectics are useful only as advertisements, promos, commercials, for those involved.

-Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (1982:56-57)

How can woman avoid being the flipside of a certain *metaphysics* onto which she's already imprinted?

-Avital Ronell, *Angry Women* (1991:128)

Even if all forms of complicity are not equivalent, they are *irreducible*. The question of knowing which is the least grave of these forms of complicity is always there—its urgency and its seriousness could not be over-stressed...

-Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit* (1989:40)

PARACRITICISM

As I noted in my introduction, in her 1991 interview for RE/Search's *Angry Women* issue, Avital Ronell observed that, in her view, the problem with contemporary feminism is that

it “has a *parasitical*, secondary territoriality...” (127, emphasis as printed throughout). She implies later in the same interview that a form of intensified mimicry might offer feminism a means for negotiating its impasse as a politics whose radicality threatens only to implicate it further within the systems of domination to which it responds. Later in the interview, she asks,

Could there be a feminine intensity or force that would not be merely ‘subversive’? Because subversion is a problem—it implies a *dependency* on the program that is being critiqued—therefore it’s a parasite of that program. Is there a way to produce a force or an intensity that isn’t merely a reaction (and a very bad and allergic reaction) to *what is*? In other words, could feminism be a pointer toward a *future of justice* that isn’t merely reproducing *what is*, with small reversals? (128).

“How do you terminate this cycle?” Juno responded. “How do women stop being the flipside of the coin—and start a whole new currency?” (128). “We have to get beyond this inheritance,” says Ronell. “An inheritance isn’t something you simply *ignore*—it’s part of you, it’s part of the *transmission system*” (129). “One has to posit theories that appear unacceptable or problematic,” Ronell observes of this impossible position, “it takes the *courage of indecency* to figure out *why* things have been so massively defeated...Now if our concern (whether it goes under the name of ‘feminism,’ ‘leftism,’ or whatever) is indeed to bring about justice, we need to think about where to locate it, what it might mean, what values it mobilizes, and what kind of violence in history it has depended on so far” (139). Ronell further argues that equality is an insufficient concept for thinking about a meaningful feminist tactical politics: “It would probably be necessary to move in the direction of *fundamental dissymmetry*” (143).

The parasitical turn that this dissertation has outlined responds to a political economy in

which modes of tactical resistance and political engagement cannot be understood in merely oppositional terms. Gender and sexual politics has remained exemplary sites for reading and interrogating the social constraints produced through oppositional binaries, for which feminism has offered an exemplary critical paradigm for such analysis. Oppositional political models fail to capture the problem of complicity paramount to the “consensual” experience of U.S. and Western European politics under neoliberal globalism as an entangled economy of relations. “[A]ny theory that privileges oppositionality or resistance is an incomplete account of responsibility,” Mark Sanders argues (2002:8). “When opposition takes the form of a demarcation from something,” he writes, “it cannot, it follows, be untouched by that to which it opposes itself. Opposition takes its first steps from a footing of complicity” (9). Rather than trying to revert the system of power—to offer a pure subversion—or to detach itself from the contamination of that to which it opposes itself, the parasite finds its resistant potential in such an encounter. As I have demonstrated across my case studies, the parasite explicates the unique ways in which digital and performance artists have sought to exaggerate, triangulate, and turn “outside in” the problem of oppositionality for a present-day feminism. “As the condition of possibility for oppositionality...parasiticism can be characterized as a complicity in the general sense...[S]uch complicities...cannot be avoided,” writes Sanders (10). The parasite interferes with the binary opposition of disruptive and constructive values.

Behind the question of adjudicating contemporary feminism therefore lies another problematic: the role of criticism more broadly. Recent work in queer studies, performance studies, and media studies has both produced and evidenced the changing

status of critique, setting the terms for new forms of critical engagement with Western feminism. These disciplines have been especially provocative in their calls over the last decade to shift criticism's objective, and thus feminism's, from judgment to gesture—from a diagnostic or moral imperative (judging whether something is good or bad or whether something is “feminist” or not) to a pragmatic or performative one (considering what something does or enables).

In his essay “To Have Done With Judgment,” Deleuze writes that “[i]t was Nietzsche who was able [to] lay bare the condition of judgment: ‘the consciousness of being in debt to the deity,’ the adventure of debt as it becomes *infinite* and thus unpayable” (1998:126, his emphasis). The affinity between judgment and debt—and by extension inheritance, private property, work, and so on—provides the key to understanding how our value system is conceived and enacted. The parasite pays its debt but pays in a currency that is not recognized. It disarticulates the logics of value. It pays in performance. It is never a question of judging in terms of moral or universal criteria with the parasite. Renouncing judgment does not deprive criticism of the means for distinguishing the “good” from the “bad,” but it prevents one from seeing things merely as good or bad *as such*; instead, as Nietzsche reminds us, they are always good *for* something and bad *for* something. Parasitism inscribes these valuative categories within a logical and predicative chain that is imbricated and relational. Rather than disempowering criticism, this reaffirms criticism's necessity, “its urgency and its seriousness,” as the work of analyzing the economy in which judgment operates. Daniel W. Smith writes,

The renunciation of judgment does not deprive one of the means of distinguishing the ‘good’ and the ‘bad.’ On the contrary, good and bad are both states of the becoming of Life,

and can be evaluated by criteria that are strictly immanent to the mode of existence or work of art itself. Life does not function in Deleuze's philosophy as a transcendent principle of judgment but as an immanent process of production or creation; it is neither an origin nor a goal, neither an *arche* nor a *telos*, but a pure process that always operates in the middle, *au milieu*, and proceeds by means of experimentations and unforeseen becomings (1998:liii).

The parasite thus figures an immanent mediation, operating as an interloper, an irreducible third. It is a conductor that enables the system to work by interfering with its operations.

In this way, the parasite figures a critical alternative to the impasse staged by criticism as judgment. This uninvited third is *bad in a good way*. This phrase undoes the clear-cut opposition between the "bad" and the "good" to see how they interanimate and imbed each other. It is a literal articulation of the terms of complicity as "the foldedness or 'contamination' of oppositional pairs" (Sanders 2002:9). The notion of "bad in a good way" offers a means for articulating the value of the bad object as a site of critical potential. In her response to an interviewer, Barbara Kruger describes such a practice of counter-reading when pressured to take an oppositional stance against Jean Baudrillard:

I do not set my statements up 'against' Baudrillard's, nor would I relegate his comments to the 'incorrect' kingdom of 'deadness' and 'wrongness.' I have always read him *critically*, savouring the rigour and economy of the 'good' parts and then quickly changing channels when 'His Master's Voice' hits the fan...I think it is possible to disagree without retreating into the armed camps of oppositional warfare, reversals, and binaryisms" (2009:113).

This mode of parasitical reading takes what is useful for its purposes, leaving the rest behind. Such a reading practice represents a hospitable imposition. It offers an approach

for *using the other generously*.

The dissertation has asked how we might rearticulate feminist politics as a generative site of critique when it has progressively been said, with ever-louder frequency, no longer to be one. Feminism's reputation as a politics of idealism—as a “hanger-on” of Euro-American Enlightenment thinking—has rendered it in various academic and cultural circles a crass anachronism, outmoded object, and kitsch form. To this problem, I have argued for a fundamental reassessment of the very grounding of feminism for the twenty-first century, calling for a redefinition of feminism from a centripetal set of “right” or “wrong” individual practices to a set of centrifugal critical and performative tactics. By moving the emphasis of feminist politics off of ontology and onto performance, feminism can be thought of as, rather than a politics of moralistic judgment, instead one of critique.

Proposing parasitism as a possible solution to the problem of feminism's claimed impasse, I have argued that rather than straining to deny such claims, we might instead ask ourselves how, precisely by not working, feminism works. For all of the pronouncements of the “death of feminism,” gendered logics have remained fundamental to the functioning of dominance under global neoliberalism, as not only a mode of critique for women but also for all minoritarian subjects who are routinely classified as “parasites” by the very system that seeks to put them to work. And yet feminism has roundly been criticized as a system whose hardware has proven not up to processing our historical moment.

Questions of whether feminism is alive or dead, good or bad, are traps that set feminism

up for irredeemable failure and stalled critique. Robyn Wiegman has described her desire for a feminist theory that works in the face of such traps. “Let’s stop reading it in order to kill it,” she has said, “Let’s let it live. Live on and live in. And let’s quit trying to read it only in terms of how it is not fulfilling our desire, whatever our desire is. Let’s try to encounter what somebody’s desire is when they try to do this experiment with the world with feminist theory” (2007). What it might mean to let feminist theory “live on” by living *in*? Might the performative dynamic of folding the bad *into* the good (as encapsulated in the idea of bad *in* a good way) offer a means of attending to the impasse by going further in? In *Truth in Painting*, Derrida has noted the fundamental equivocality of the preposition “in” in the expression “truth in painting.” The French *en* translated as *in* indexes both something that appears to be enclosed or surrounded by something else (i.e. in the box) and a manner of fashioning, gesture, or method (i.e. *in* writing or *in* motion). The emphasis in the latter case is on the gesture rather than the content.

The preposition *in* presents an undecidability that Derrida calls *parasitical*: “In letting itself be parasitized, the system of language as a system of the idiom has perhaps parasitized the system of painting; more precisely, it will have shown up, by analogy, the essential parasitizing which opens every system to its outside and divides the unity of the line [*trait*] which purports to mark its edges” (1987:7). While it seems like it marks the boundary between the inside and the outside, the preposition *in* is a syntactical operator that troubles this very partition. The parasite is thus not the exception to the rule but the rule itself. The preposition *in* belies that systems are not closed but porous and contaminable. Rather than be an operator that structures difference, the *in* indexes the unstructurability that pervades the very structure of the host system.

The emergence of parasitism as a reflexive figure responds to a moment in which it has become necessary to conceive feminism in another temporal register than that of crisis while still retaining its critical edge. Richard Dienst has shared his own anxieties about the status of radical refusal in an age of widespread debt. “[T]here’s always a way out’ is a motto...[that] has always struck me as a radical statement, a kind of Great Refusal, even the eruption of kairos out of chronos, a signal that the course of history is never fixed and that every situation can be changed radically, even to the point of leaving it all behind,” he writes. “But in this case, I [am not] so sure...[Perhaps the] rejoinder ‘there’s always a way in’ [could offer] an equally radical principle?” (2012).

Significantly, crisis and criticism share a common etymology from the Greek *krinein* meaning “to decide.” What might it offer to think of feminism’s impasse as a *chronic condition*? In “Theorizing the Chronic,” Elizabeth Freeman writes, “Since the 1980s, queer and feminist theories have privileged rupture: transgression, interruption, non-presence, spectrality—whatever disaggregates the self-same. It’s only relatively recently, in the wake of deconstruction, that we’ve revisited questions of *continuity*, with a turn toward new historiographies” (2011:1). “The form of continuity I am interested in here is the chronic,” she writes, “in part because we are in a moment in which all kinds of social injustices are described by the mainstream media as no longer crises, but chronic; that is, no longer the effect of historical actors and historically specific structures but simply there...” (2011:2). Calling something chronic, Freeman observes, is a way of emptying out its history. “Yet I want to argue,” she writes, “counterintuitively, that emptying out some of what we associate with ‘the historical’ may allow us to imagine some new bodies

into the frame of the social.” Freeman sees the chronic as conversant with what Sarah Lochlann Jain has called “prognosis time,” the time of patients diagnosed with a high-risk disease like cancer, which promises to upend the distinction between life and death. “[W]hat interests me about the chronic,” she writes “is precisely the way it foils differences between not only living and dying, but also transgression and the reproduction of the status quo, capacity and debility, action and passivity” (2011:3). The chronic thwarts the progressive thrall of the question “Feminism, to what end?” and in so doing, defangs the related question, “what is *the point* of feminism?” Unhooking feminism from the telos of its historically emancipatory objectives, the parasite figures a move beyond its supposed impasse by going further into it.

As Dienst proposes, perhaps there is no point in looking for an exit when the real problem is finding somewhere to stay. Indeed it is perhaps a politics of reorientation, rather than exit, that is in order. “Look again at the diagram, paying attention to the succession of parasites in stepladder formation,” writes Serres, “and ask yourself if it is something added to a system, like a cancer of interception, flights, losses, holes, trapdoors—if it is a pathological growth in some spot or if it is quite simply the system itself” (2007:12). “Nonfunctioning remains essential for functioning...Fluctuation, disorder, opacity, and noise are not and no longer affronts to the rational...Thus a system has interesting relations according to what is deemed to be its faults or depreciations” (12-13). By deconstructing the very terms by which we rule on feminism’s success or failure, we might see feminism’s functionality as, after all, *inherent to* its so-called failures. We must therefore seek out new openings and ways to break through its obstacles and exclusions. By taking up feminism as an imposition—that is, by embracing the conditions of its exclusion for

securing its position—instead looking for a way out, we might find new ways in.

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...O! your parasite
Is a most precious thing, dropt from above...
All the wise world is little else, in nature,
But parasites, or sub-parasites.—And yet,
I mean not those that have your bare town-art,
To know who's fit to feed them; have no house,
No family, no care, and therefore mould
Tales for men's ears, to bait that sense; or get
Kitchen-invention, and some stale receipts
To please the belly, and the groin; nor those,
With their court dog-tricks, that can fawn and fleer,
Make their revenue out of legs and faces,
Echo my lord, and lick away a moth:
But your fine elegant rascal, that can rise,
And stoop, almost together, like an arrow;
Shoot through the air as nimbly as a star;
Turn short as doth a swallow; and be here,
And there, and here, and yonder, all at once;
Present to any humour, all occasion;
And change a visor, swifter than a thought!
This is the creature had the art born with him;
Toils not to learn it, but doth practise it
Out of most excellent nature: and such sparks
Are the true parasites...

Ben Jonson, *Volpone* (3.1) (1606)

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