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The Voiceless Mouth: Orality in Postmodern Feminist Body Art

Jacquie Kolodiejchuk

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
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ABSTRACT

The Voiceless Mouth: Orality in Postmodern Feminist Body Art

Jacquie Kolodiejchuk

Since the 1970s, women artists have been using their bodies in their work to explore issues of identity, gender roles, female sexuality, and the social construction of the female body in relation to patriarchal systems of thought. A stratum of North American feminist body art made at the turn-of-the-century has based itself in the biology of the body and enlisted orality: it has focused on the mouth and its mechanics of biting, licking and sucking. These actions, which physically impair the act of speaking, are notable since feminist artists have previously used the mouth primarily for speaking and activism.

The body art of two contemporary American women artists – Janine Antoni's 1992 work *Gnaw* and Jenny Strauss's 1999 work *Intake* – provides ground for a discussion of orality in a postmodern feminist art context. Both works were made primarily through the act of biting, and both mimicked the eating disorder bulimia. Orality, as the stage in an infant's development when he/she negotiates independence from the mother and the outside world largely through biting and sucking, relates to the mother figure, the notion of the abject, and subjectivity development. The eating disorders of anorexia nervosa and bulimia also relate to orality, the mother-infant relationship, and food. Furthermore, the fasting practices of medieval women mystics substantiate a specific relationship that can exist between women and food in a patriarchal society. Through a discussion of all of these elements, the relationship

between orality, food and women is revealed as having always been a site of a complex social and political struggle and efficiency in relation to the mother and to the patriarchal order. For these contemporary artists, enlisting orality and mimicking the infantile state in their artworks has offered a way to address the mother-infant relationship as well as the socio-political underpinnings to women's relationship to food. Coupled with the ambiguity and ephemerality of body art as an art form, this actually points to a possibility of speaking from somewhere else: the gap between patriarchal assumptions and actual women's lived experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most compelling and telling developments in North American art made at the turn-of-the-century has been the shift to art as life and life as art. In this trend, the "artist as performer" becomes his or her own work of art, completely "in" the work, losing the usual boundaries between "art" and "life" and "artist" and "art work." Some artists have continued to work from the traditional root of the self-portrait, but others have gone further towards a belief that all art is a self-portrait, since it comes from the artist's subjectivity and life. Some contemporary artists have deliberately worked from their lives to make their lives and artwork reflect each other and unify as one. This thesis looks at contemporary feminist body art made from the 1970s to the turn-of-the-century, with a focus on the stratum of feminist body art made in the nineties that incorporated orality – that is, it enlisted the mouth and its mechanics of biting, licking and sucking. Work that bases itself in the body is linked to the artist's subjectivity, as the body is the primary indicator of the self. Furthermore, work that incorporates orality can play with the boundaries of the subjectivity demonstrated in the work and the intimacy of the viewer to that subjectivity. Melanie Klein's writings on the human drives, and Julia Kristeva's writings on the abject, comprise the main body of literature and feminist psychoanalytical approach used in this discussion.

Throughout history, the visual arts have been important sites for self-visualization. In contemporary art practices that include performance and body art, this unification between artist and life is intensified by the direct use of the artist's body, and the element of real time that is often employed. By using their bodies as prime material in

time-based exercises that can include self-imposed rituals, artists can create not only self-representations, but also transformations of the self. This harbors the socio-cultural belief that one can "sculpt" one's life and body, and that there is a degree of plasticity and choice that allows one to shape it.

By working directly from personal trauma, insights, or rituals in one's life, artists can begin to collapse the separation between their lives and artwork – though the relationship between art and biographical subject is always complex and not necessarily coherent. The job of the viewer or critic of these works is not to make the life of the artist mirror the artwork and the artwork to confirm an originary, biographical subject. Rather, in this kind of artwork it is precisely the role of the audience that is emphasized, as the everyday events that comprise the content aim to minimize the distance between the artist and viewer. To a certain extent, the traditional exaltation of the Artist, associated with being a "master" or "genius" is contested. Links made between artistic creation and divine creation have traditionally elevated the artist from the everyday to a glorified status. Only certain male artists within art history have been credited with the status of master or genius, but the title sets up the standard by which other artists have been evaluated. Thus seeing an artist using him or her self as the subject in emotionally, physically, and/or psychologically challenging artworks can somewhat democratize the artist/viewer relationship, leading into the art of self-examination.

Furthermore, as Tracey Warr points out, "artists' work with the body [is] resistant to the mythology of the artist-as-individual-genius through the sheer ephemerality of the product."[1] "The open-endedness [of much bodywork] is highly threatening to the systems

[1] Tracey Warr, "Preface," in *The Artist's Body*, ed., Tracey Warr, survey by Amelia Jones (London: Phaidon, 2000), p. 13.

by which meaning and aesthetic value are secured within the art critical system, where the 'artist-hero ... is ... a distillatory of the Essential from the world.'"[2] By using the body as their medium, body artists refute the traditional art object, instead offering an impermanent experience of time to the viewer. This impermanence is a kind of indefinability in which the artwork appears just as it disappears. It opens up a dialogue between the viewer and the artist, a space fostered by the presence and immediacy of the artist's body. In this immediacy and presence, the artist and the viewer experience the work simultaneously.

"The major themes of body artists: rituals of self-transformation, social interaction and the inter-relationship of creativity, sexuality and dying, ... [draw] from the dramatic contexts of everyone's customary social role playing."[3] As Lea Vergine, author of the notable book *Il corpo come linguaggio (La Body-art e storie simili)*, remarked, "We end up with the individual who is nothing more than an individual ... He is only a man full of the fear of uninterrupted banality, full of damning affections and disaffections."[4] The traditional positions of artist/viewer become vague, as each becomes implicated in the other's experience of the work: one creates the other. The interrelationship between the two is highlighted. In the way that performance challenges Western culture's conventional notions of what constitutes art, the media for making art, and the traditional roles for artist and viewer, it is a quintessentially modern, and postmodern, art form.

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[2] Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 143.
[3] Warr, p. 252.
[4] Lea Vergine, "Bodylanguage," in *The Artist's Body*, p. 236.

The audience is indeed integral to the execution of a performance. Its presence brings meaning to and thus helps construct the work, during the specific amount of time that the two meet and coexist. After this amount of time, the performance ends, and cannot be duplicated, though it can be re-enacted and performed at another date, with a different audience, time, and, to a varying degree, different reception. It can also be documented by means of video or photography. Peggy Phelan writes about the tracelessness of performance in her book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, asserting that the prevailing quality of performance art is that it cannot be re-produced. In fact, performance becomes itself through disappearance, as it leaves no objective evidence, only memories in those who were present. Though it may be documented, it is a performance only in the present moment of its being performed, in the interactive exchange between the art object/artist and viewer. Hence, even writing about performance alters the event according to Phelan.[5] She asserts that this quality of "tracelessness" can open the way for a revaluing of the conceptions of emptiness and temporality.[6] Given Western society's dependence on visibility and rationality, this is where Phelan locates performance's oppositional edge.

While Phelan focuses on the notion of loss as endemic to a definition of performance, other critics have offered variations on its definition. There is an important distinction to make between body art and performance art. Body art may or may not take place in front of an audience. If not, the artist engages with his/her body (or someone else's) and documents the event so that it can be experienced later through photography, video, and/or text. Amelia Jones goes on to point out that this type of body art is a

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[5] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 148-9.
[6] Phelan, p. 148.

"complex extension of portraiture in general."[7] The decision not to have an audience can affect issues of identity, subjectivity, and dichotomies such as private/public and presence/absence within the work, in a specific way. For the purpose of this thesis, the terms body art and performance are used somewhat interchangeably, though the distinction is relevant to the discussion and noted where necessary. In addition, while not all performance makes the body its principal focus, all the art works discussed here deal primarily with the body as subject matter and artistic material.

In terms of work made at the turn-of-the-century that incorporates the material female body, a stratum of feminist work has, in a vein reminiscent of the work from the 1970s, based itself more intimately in the biology of the body. These works have been made via the mouth by means of biting, sucking, or licking.[8] Significantly, early feminist body art from the 1970s used the mouth primarily for speaking, for asserting a strong female voice in male-dominated society. Recent work from the nineties and into the new millennium, however, has focused on the mouth and its mechanics as a physical organ. This difference amounts to a shift from the linguistic to the oral, a "regression from speaking to biting";[9] or, rather, a staged or mimicked regression, since once one enters into the Symbolic order, the structure of the art work, the preverbal stage cannot "truly" be returned to. Mignon Nixon views this use of orality as a "renewed determination to explore female aggression through the infantile body."[10] Given the traditional dichotomy of passive/active for females and males, these assertions can be valuable in a feminist context. This thesis addresses the use of orality in two feminist body artworks made

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[7] Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, p. 13.
[8] Mignon Nixon, "The Gnaw and the Lick: Orality in Recent Feminist Art" in *Art and Feminism*, ed., Helena Reckitt, survey by Peggy Phelan (New York: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2001), p. 275.
[9] Nixon, p. 275.

primarily via the mouth: Janine Antoni's 1992 work *Gnaw* and Jenny Strauss's 1999 work *Intake*. The discussion of these artworks, the history of feminist body art, and "real-life" women's experiences with orality and rituals involving food will demonstrate the specific relationship that can exist between the female body, food, orality and women subjects' socio-political agency.

When body art first began to make real headway in the international art scene, during the 1960s, it was responding to a climate of conflict. This critical climate was spurred by the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, and feminism, which aim to tackle the authority of established power systems. The latter two movements specifically target patriarchal authority. The traditionally ideal, *a priori* (male) subject was coming to be understood as a racialized/sexed/gendered subject in relation to other subjects. The artist's body,

> which previously had to be veiled to confirm the Modernist regime of meaning and value, more and more aggressively surfaced during this period as a locus of the self and the site where the public domain meets the private, where the social is negotiated, produced and made sense of.[11]

The opportunity to assert one's position in relation to the patriarchal structure of society was afforded by the nature of body art and performance: since much discrimination (racism, sexism) is visibly rooted in the physical body, putting one's body on display can heighten this expression through art.

Allan Kaprow, whose Happenings in the 1960s are cited along with the Dadaists and Fluxus artists as the building blocks to the first performances in the 1970s, theorized the movement in the art world during the 1960s as "the secularization of the entire art situation: genre, frame, public and purpose. The critical move ... was the shift of art away

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[10] Nixon, p. 276.

from its familiar contexts, the studios, museums, ... etc., to anywhere else in the real world."[12] This approach to art challenges the traditional image of the artist as seated before an easel and palette, and of the museum or gallery as the acceptable forum for showing art. This perspective on the artist's role, a shift from symbolic to actual action, is important to a conception of art that aims for social change, which includes early feminist activist art.

The first generation feminist art from the 1970s, which asserted, "the personal is political," was significantly comprised of much body art and performance. This work, which broke down the walls of conventions for the representation of female bodies and subjectivities, has since been criticized as essentialist for its significant focus on the female material body and biology. Formally, many of these works presented a raw, material, and visceral body. Central core imagery, female bodily processes, and the mimicry of social markers of "femininity" played fundamental roles in this decade of work. The 1980s' feminist artists, working amidst the infiltration of new post-structural theories of gender differentiation, challenged the approaches used by feminist artists in the seventies. They viewed the earlier strategies as grounded in a biologically defined female body, while post-structuralism asserts the body as cultural construct. It is fair in any case to say that a woman/artist dealing with the female body in her work within a patriarchal society always runs the risk of repeating the codes of representation that construct femininity/Woman within that society. However, such an approach involving

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[11] Jones, "Survey," in *The Artist's Body*, pp. 20-1.

[12] Kaprow, as quoted in Suzanne Lacy, including a conversation with Judith Baca, "Affinities: Thoughts on an Incomplete History," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, eds., Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), p. 269.

the body and its stereotypical perception can also be a political strategy, revealing a gap between the conventions of femininity and actual lived experiences of female selves.

The seventies' feminist art, which often took itself out into the streets, subways, or other non-traditional venues for art, advocated activism and social transformation as important to its agenda. It was oriented towards making women's voices be heard, socially and politically. By and large, this decade of work endeavored towards defining collective experiences of women, in relation to, for example, sexual objectification or the codes of femininity, as a way to unite socially and politically. Since women artists had not before been able to show their bodies in such material and/or active ways, it makes sense that the early work started here, at the site of obstruction.

In the 1980s, the material body almost disappeared in feminist body art in favor of technological mediations, text and theory. The impact of post-structural theories, which view the body as a semiotic construct and not a biological given, can be seen in the work of the eighties, such as that of Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer. This kind of approach, structured around the notion of representation, reads the body like a text. The 1990s and into the new millennium have witnessed a return to body art using many of the approaches from the 1970s. This return to the material body and embodied subject can be significantly aligned with the work done in the 1970s through formal qualities and social contexts of the work, specifically in the visceral quality and materiality of the body used, and uncertainty of the social climates. The 1990s saw an unprecedented surge in new scientific and medical technologies, the AIDS epidemic, and an increasingly fast-paced, choice-ridden capitalist structure – each of which effect significant instability to the body. This has affected (and continues to affect at the time of writing) the ways North

American artists deal with the body. "They have addressed issues of risk, fear, death, danger and sexuality, at [a time] when the body has been most threatened by these things."[13] Under these circumstances, the body becomes prime territory on which one can enforce discipline, boundaries, and gain a sense of control and identity. Similar to an eating disorder, in which food must be denied yet gains supreme symbolic power in one's life, "the body – its desires, its mortality, the forces that contain it and empower it – becomes the focus of what we are."[14]

These developments in North American society have cleared way for new and emerging ways of enlisting the body in art practice. Technological developments have had a significant impact on the media for art making as well as the relationship between people and their bodies in contemporary life. This has led to artistic strategies of fragmentation and technological mediation in order to reflect a sense of decentering.

The engagement with orality is one artistic approach involving the body that reflects these changes in artistic strategies and society. The mouth and its mechanics as a physical organ relate to the oral stage of infant development, the separation from the mother, and autonomy of the self. American artists Janine Antoni and Jenny Strauss have each incorporated biting and eating in bodyworks relating to rituals around food. Antoni's work *Gnaw* and Strauss's work *Intake* both mimicked the eating disorder bulimia and focused on biting and chewing.

New York-based artist Janine Antoni's 1994 work entitled *Gnaw* directly imitated a bulimic binge. Two six-hundred-pound cubes, one of chocolate and the other of lard, were created in an arduous process of melting/cooling the materials. Antoni then bit and

[13] Warr, "Preface," in *The Artist's Body*, p. 11.
[14] Richard Noble, "The Laboratory of the Self," *Parachute* 64(Oct/Nov/Dec 1991), p. 41.

chewed the respective foods, spitting each mouthful out before they could be ingested. The chewed-up chocolate was re-melted and formed to make many heart-shaped, Valentine's Day-type boxes for chocolates. The spit-out lard was colored red, poured into lipstick molds, and inserted in readymade lipstick cases. All of this was done in private, and at the end of the process the chocolate boxes and lipsticks were exhibited with the bitten, yet still enormous cubes. The immateriality of Antoni's body in the work, evident only by means of her teeth marks on the cubes, seems to show the futility of obsessive behavior over the body. In the end, only more products representing social expectations and accepted gender roles were created for further consumption.

In California artist Jenny Strauss's performance *Intake* (1999), she subjected her naked, obese body to a literal association with the social connotation of the fat pig. Over the duration of the twenty-four-hour performance she rolled around in and urinated on dirt and hay, smashed large quantities of junk food into her mouth and on her body as in a bulimic binge, and otherwise attempted to embrace the social projections of repulsion and libidinal gratification associated with obesity. Strauss's work built on personal pain and the explicitness of her naked body mirrors the potency of the feelings of humiliation she said she confronted. The exercise at times led the artist into a trance-like state. Therein lies the possibility of "losing oneself," or learning something about oneself that is unwanted. In order to control the projections Strauss had to embrace and embody them, but at the same time risk loss of control and identity in the process.

There is a significant connection between the regression to the pre-verbal in these feminist art works from the nineties and the symptoms and effects of eating disorders. Both entail a simultaneous denial and increased intimacy with the body, and both place

the subject in an infantile state through orality. Freud described the oral stage in an infant's development as the "first ... phase of the organization of the libido, in which the object that we long for and prize is assimilated by eating and is in that way annihilated as such."[15] The infant is unified with the mother by the link between its mouth and the mother's breast. Separation from her is the site of conflict and anxiety, which leads to sadistic impulses: she both represents desire and is the object of aggression, the source of satisfaction as well as disavowal of desire. That is, the pleasure that the infant experiences from taking things into the mouth and sucking on them is given more or less at the infant's demand, but as a fundamental pleasure, it can be experienced as a punishment or a reward. Orality is a basic way a developing (preverbal) child recognizes his or her separation from the mother and builds a relationship to the world.

> [Psychoanalyst Melanie] Klein asserts that it is through infantile oral sadism that the subject experiences the destructive effects of its own aggression. In effect, subjectivity forms around an experience of loss enacted through destructive fantasies; it is, we could say, formed by the mouth in the act of biting.[16]

Klein's theory locates the site of conflict in subjectivity development not in others, such as one's parents, but within one's self: anxiety over one's own aggressive capability. In her theory (disregarded, not surprisingly, by Freud and his followers), "aggression toward the mother and depressive anxiety about the destructive effects of this aggression, rather than identification, structure the ... mother-infant relation."[17] Aggression and the fear of the effects of one's aggression are what structure subjectivity for both males and females.

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[15] Sigmund Freud, "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (1921)" in *Civilization, Society and Religion, Group Psychology, Civilization and Its Discontents, and Other Works*, ed., Albert Dickson, trans., James Strachey (New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 1955), p. 135.
[16] Mignon Nixon, "Bad Enough Mother," *October* 71(Winter 1995), p. 75.
[17] Nixon, "Bad Enough Mother," p. 85.

These assertions can be seen as especially valuable in a feminist context, given the traditional dichotomy of passive/active for females and males.

The foray into a regressed state of infantilism, by way of being preverbal and rooted in the primary nature of the drives, can also be linked with the abject. The abject lies at the contested wavering border between unification and separation, infant and mother, subject and object. It "disturbs identity, system, order."[18] The preverbal stage signals the ambiguous breaking away from the mother, when one is not yet independent through language, and is aligned with the indeterminate borderline status of the abject. As the drives lack structure and evade representation in patriarchy, yet maintain immense significance in the construction of one's sense of self, they too are related to the abject. Since, as Julia Kristeva holds, the model for the abject must be the maternal body,[19] a specific relationship can exist between the preverbal, the drives, and the female body. For a woman, self-subjection to the abject, through orality, can be a way of experiencing or inhabiting a preverbal stage and sense of union or symbiosis with the maternal body. This can be a subversive act in light of the repression of the maternal body in western society. Furthermore, the exploration of orality can help show a specific relationship between food and the female social body, and how "food links the social body with its individual members."[20]

Food and eating clearly have symbolic value beyond supplying caloric energy. Significantly, there is an unprecedented number of cases of eating disorders, particularly in women, that has arisen in North American society since the 1970s. These disorders,

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[18] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 3-4.
[19] Kristeva, p. 13.

namely anorexia, bulimia, and obesity, relate to the social female body, female sexuality, the role of the Mother, and notions of self-development and transformation in a consumerist framework of production, consumption and order. While viewed in a negative and unhealthy light, eating disorders are equally personal, politicized strategies as well: "[they] can be a defense against sexuality and a defense against control by others."[21] The body becomes ground for negotiating control through the binge and fast: consumption and redemption. Aside from the intense mental and physical energy consumed by the preoccupation with food, there are intoxicating or hallucinatory effects of a fast and binge, both physical and emotional: a temporary slippage in the ego and rigidity of rationality.

This thesis explores the shift towards orality as exemplified in the body art of Antoni and Strauss. These artists assumed the role of the bulimic, using the strategy of mimicry so integral to feminist art of the 1970s. In doing so, they offer a social critique of the status and function of the female body in contemporary Western society: one designed for purposeful discipline, yet yearning for sensorial experience. In order to address and situate Antoni's and Strauss's work, chapter one traces the history of feminist body art in a North American context and examines some of the strategies common to women artists dealing with the female body. In particular, the strategic use of mimicry and the place of the female body in relation to rituals around food are addressed. A chapter is devoted each to a discussion of *Gnaw* and *Intake*, expanding on the role of food, orality, and abjection in the foundation of subjectivity and society, in relation to the

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[20] Martha J. Reineke, "'This Is My Body': Reflections on Abjection, Anorexia, and Medieval Women Mystics," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58:2(Spring 1990), p. 248.
[21] James R. Hodge and Erwin A. Maseelall, "The Presentation of Obesity," in *The Eating Disorders*, eds., A. James Giannini and Andrew E. Slaby (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1993), p. 40.

female body as presented in the works. Melanie Klein's psychoanalytical theory of the drives and Julia Kristeva's writings on the abject comprise the primary theoretical approach. The final chapter opens up the discussion to women's asceticism, building on some historical precedents with medieval women mystics. The medieval context provides an exemplary moment for a discussion of women and rituals around food: the mystics negotiated their place within their medieval, patriarchal society through their practices of fasting and self-abjection. These practices relate to the contemporary phenomenon of eating disorders, including anorexia nervosa and bulimia, which are discussed from a psychoanalytical point of view. The "real life" instances of orality and asceticism in women provide ground to discuss the mimicked regression to orality in Antoni's *Gnaw* and Strauss's *Intake*. The effect of this artistic approach as a feminist socio-political tool can then be properly assessed, specifically within a society that is rife with paradox and insecurity itself.

CHAPTER 1: SURVEY OF FEMINIST BODY ART

This chapter provides a broad survey of feminist art in North America, beginning with its proliferation in the 1970s through to the 1990s. The different strategies employed by women artists using the female body in their artwork, particularly mimicry, and the ambiguities encountered with the representation of the female body in a patriarchal society, are explored in relation to the changes in social context since the 1970s. In addition, the use of food as an artistic material is examined within a feminist art context in order to shed light on the significance of this material to feminist strategies of subversion.

The 1970s saw a marked increase in women artists and their collaboration, a reflection of the turbulence and changes of the decade, specifically the feminist movement that no doubt built upon the energy of the coinciding civil rights and peace movements. The sexual revolution and introduction of the birth control pill similarly created an environment of social change and transformation for women. For the first time in the art world, women were voicing their opinions on the experiences of their female bodies and subjectivities. Social and class relations, sexual, gender, and race power relations became vital sources for art making, and the artist's body surfaced as the site of intersection with these sources of authority. The discipline of art history, which has since been revealed as a male-dominated discourse that not only ignored, but often worked to silence the expression of female artists, also changed during the 1960s and 1970s towards the view of culture as the site of struggle.

Much of the early body artwork from the 1960s and 1970s was indeed feminist, and often differed from male body art of the same time. In her book *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Amelia Jones describes this disparity as indicative of the way men and women experience their bodies and subjectivities differently within patriarchy, and the way masculinity is implicit in the conception of "artist" in Western culture.[1] She asserts that male body artists, of whom her main example is Vito Acconci, may play with or manipulate their masculinity, but will not surrender it or its authority. Women, on the other hand, must work from their position as Other in patriarchy – as "doubly alienated."[2] That is, male body artists and subjects in general, as culturally defined as superior to females, are the models for and aspire to the coherence of the self that Western culture and philosophy promise. Males contend with "either the incorporation or the exclusion of otherness" in their subjectivity development. Females, however, "are construed as lacking in relation to phallic transcendence" and thus "have no access to the myth of Cartesian coherence."[3] Early feminist body artists, of whom Jones' main example is Hannah Wilke, "tend[ed] to explore their body/selves from their experience of their alienation in their image *as other* (to be experienced by the masculine subject.)"[4] They worked to recognize their own objectification and to reverse it into subjectivity,[5] exposing the underlying assumptions surrounding femininity, gender roles, and the male gaze that had in part made up their experiences specifically as women. This approach relies on the acknowledgement of one's relationship with others and of intersubjectivity:

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[1] Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998), p. 149.
[2] Jones, p. 149.
[3] Jones, p. 149.
[4] Jones, p. 149.
[5] Jones, p. 239.

the impossibility of the ideal, unified, originary subject. In this way it has the potential to be radical and/or transformative.

In early feminist works, one can see a desire to connect to a collectivity of women's experiences in a patriarchal, North American society: "to discover the 'I' in relationship to the collective ego,"[6] to learn about oneself through inhabiting the persona and character of the society's stereotypically feminine roles and experiences. Or, as Jones has put it, to explore woman's image as other as it is to be experienced by the masculine subject. In this way, the artworks recognized the objectification of women's bodies in aiming to reverse it into subjectivity.

Many of the feminist performances from the 1970s entailed the staging of an identity or in some cases the masquerade of an identity with the artist in dramatic clothing, setting, and/or dialogue. Josephine Withers writes that "what seems to distinguish feminist performance [in the seventies is] its creators' desire to communicate an alternative vision of themselves and the world they lived in – sometimes dystopic, more often utopian and transformative."[7] "In California at Fresno State in 1971, Judy Chicago's students donned masks and costumes as a dramatic way of creating alter egos and confronting their pent-up feelings during their consciousness-raising sessions."[8] Linda Montano performed as *Chicken Woman* over a seven-year period during the seventies, saying that *Chicken Woman* was a "'nun, saint martyr, plaster statue, angel, absurd snow white dreamlike character ... the chicken became my totem and my twin.'"[9]

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[6] Josephine Withers, "Feminist Performance Art: Performing, Discovering, Transforming Ourselves," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, eds., Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), p. 168.
[7] Withers, p. 160.
[8] Withers, p. 158.
[9] Withers, p. 165.

In California in the early seventies, Eleanor Antin used costumes to create four archetypal characters, including a king, a ballerina, a nurse, and a black movie star, who played ongoing roles in her artwork. She said that by living through the "four great personas, [she] learned ... about [her] life and character and [her] situation in the world."[10] In New York in the mid 1970s, Martha Wilson and Jacki Apple collaborated, creating and inhabiting one character named Claudia. She "was a magnification of role models and stereotypes of power media images programmed into [women] ... [Wilson and Apple] exaggerated [the illusion], 'lived' it in order to also shatter it, expose the illusion, blow it up, not reinforce it, or validate it."[11]

Mimicry was perhaps the most widely used strategy in the feminist performances from the 1970s. As many feminist theorists, such as Luce Irigary, have pointed out, mimicking femininity is an important strategy in fighting oppression. A curious aspect to understanding oppression is the need to play the position of the stereotype, in order to reveal its absurdity. By deliberately assuming the feminine style and posture assigned to her within patriarchal discourse, a woman can uncover the mechanisms by which it exploits her.

Womanhouse (1972), a collaborative artwork developed by a group of students in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, and directed by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, utilized mimicry in a feminist context. It took place in a house donated to the artists by the city, in which each of the six rooms used dealt with the relationship between biology and social roles. *Womanhouse* replicated the rooms of a normal house but challenged the ideas using icons, such as clothing and make-up. In one

[10] Withers, p. 167.
[11] Withers, p. 168. See "Correspondence between Jacki Apple and Martha Wilson, 1973-1974," in *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics 1* 2(May 1977), p. 47.

of the rooms, entitled *Leah's Room*, a woman continually applied layers of makeup, mimicking this social marker of feminine beauty. The artistic context, which made the act being mimicked a conscious one, opened a space where the act could be reflected upon and questioned as part of a discursive, patriarchal system.

While it is a powerful and remarkable (feminist) tool, there is equally always the possibility of a mimicry being perceived as a simple reinforcement of the very stereotypes it aims to deconstruct. In repeating the codes of representation for women there is a risk of things falling back on themselves and thus not effecting any critical ground. In this situation all women are assumed alike, and any social and historical differences between women are not addressed. The overwhelmingly white, middle class women who made these early feminist works did not address these differences, such as the differences between a black and a white woman or an upper class and lower class woman.

To many early feminists, an essentialist stance was a subversive one, attacking the patriarchal construction of the female body through the very biology that has traditionally subordinated it. While this focus could be understood as necessary in the beginning stages of women's rights and liberation – and one could say that the representation of women in a patriarchal society necessarily, always runs this risk – there are significant drawbacks to such a center of attention, the biggest one being a belief that all women share the same innate nature and oppression. As well, while this early essentialist feminism asserted that women should reclaim control of their bodies, it stressed the need for a separate feminine structure. It set up a parallel system that, since it urged women to leave behind the patriarchy, could never intersect with it and effect change.

Much early feminist bodywork has been criticized and oversimplified as essentialist. However, this kind of reception of body-centered work by women artists has actually worked to reveal the underlying assumptions about women, sexuality and beauty in patriarchal society. Hannah Wilke exemplifies this complication with her oeuvre. She became well known for her performances and photographs of the 1970s of herself nude or semi-clothed, posing like a fashion model or "flirt," "cringing, nude, against a wall with a toy gun; ... sitting provocatively on a stool in a gallery selling herself as a 'sculpture'; standing in high heels, chest exposed, in the pose of a Christian martyr ..."[12] (Figure 1). By using the rhetoric of the pose, as well as her own traditionally beautiful body, as her subject, Wilke pinpointed the sexual objectification of women in patriarchy. Her critical reception, by both men and women alike, overwhelmingly focused on the beauty of her body and her assumed narcissism in continuously displaying it. Lucy Lippard obviously targeted Wilke when she wrote, in her book *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, "I must admit to a personal lack of sympathy with women who have themselves photographed in black stockings, garter belts, boots, with bare breasts, bananas, and coy, come-hither glances."[13] Wilke's work was seen as "too pleasurable, too invested in the seductive capabilities of the attractive female body."[14] As Lippard herself put it,

> Because women are considered sex objects, it is taken for granted that any woman who presents her nude body in public is doing so because she thinks she is beautiful. She is a narcissist, and [Vito] Acconci, with his less romantic image and pimply back, is an artist.[15]

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[12] Jones, p. 171.
[13] Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1976), p. 124.
[14] Lippard, p. 173.
[15] Lippard, p. 125.

Equally true, as Amelia Jones points out in her analysis of Wilke's work in *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, is that Wilke's staging of narcissism also raised questions about how it and femininity are constructed socially and culturally. As a desiring subject and a desired object in her work, Wilke confronted the construction of femininity through the male gaze, and the desire of the (male) viewer to possess the female body as an object. The association between women and narcissism highlighted in the reception of her work is a complex and far-reaching one. Simplistically, patriarchal ways of thinking "woman" conflate self-love and woman's sexuality to its own structures, where women are expected to be beautiful by the society's standards, but as caregivers not concerned with their own needs and bodies. The reception of Wilke's work remains a solid example of the biases involving women artists, their bodies and their beauty.

In a surprising yet unfortunate turn of events, Wilke was diagnosed with cancer. She continued making her art, including photographs "of [herself] undergoing cancer treatment, self-portrait watercolors, medical objects-cum-sculptures, and images fabricated from the hair she lost during chemotherapy"[16] (Figure 2). This body of work, called *Intra-Venus*, ironically (or logically?) changed the art world's perception of her work.

> [A]fter the posthumous exhibition of *Intra-Venus* in New York in 1994, the New York art world began to shower Wilke with encomiums, as if her loss of attractiveness and her death (and her aggressive introduction of illness/trauma into her formerly "beautiful" image) had somehow ameliorated the "narcissistic" effects of her earlier work.[17]

Throughout women's body art works in general, there runs a common thread of connection: the risk of repeating the codes of representation that construct

[16] Jones, p. 183.
[17] Jones, p. 186.

femininity/Woman as the object of the male gaze, and the threat of being reduced to narcissism.

Another stratum of early feminist performance work pointed to the ugly side of women's objectification in patriarchal society. It dealt directly with aggression, violence and oppression towards women, specifically rape. These works were aggressive and shocking. They sometimes entailed the use of mimicry, but seem to have been based more on the objective truth of incidents of sexual violence. It may be common today to hear public expressions or confessions about rape, but during the seventies it was still considered a shocking experience. These performances aimed to cause a stir, building upon real life testimonies from other women, real bodies of women, and often a visceral quality in materials. Elements such as raw eggs, blood and earth were used in *Ablutions* (1972), a performance by Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Sandra Orgel, and Aviva Rahmani, which used the recordings of testimonies of women who had been raped. Ana Mendieta performed *Rape-Murder* in 1973, in which unwarned audience members entered the room to find her bloody, half-naked body bent over and tied to a table. Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz performed *Three Weeks in May* (1977), an ambitious series of media events and activities throughout Los Angeles that publicized and dramatized sexual violence against women (Figure 3). *Three Weeks in May* built upon the actual rapes and other acts of sexual violence that had occurred against women in the area.

Aside from the work about sexual violence, which played on the reality of such acts happening or possibly happening, there was a particular strain of masochistic performances that entailed the artist inflicting pain on him/herself. The self-imposition of

pain can be seen as another kind of strategy of mimicry, resisting patriarchal control by mimicking it. This rather male-dominated area of body art and performance included the work of Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Barry Le Va, Dennis Oppenheim and Bruce Nauman. French artist Gina Pane is one of the few women, along with Bulgarian-born artist Marina Abramovic, to have worked with her body in physically dangerous situations.

Pane made performances during the 1970s in which she cut her own body using razor blades, knives, and other instruments, or subjected it to extreme proximity to fire or other physically dangerous elements. She documented that her

> masochistic attempt to dominate self-imposed pain symbolized for her observers the pain of their own social domination. And, even more importantly, it suggested methods for alternative social change that were not as extreme as those to which she pushed herself.[18]

As Kathy O'Dell asserts, Pane's social context, working during a time of great political changes and events such as the Vietnam War, makes it possible to see her pain as the expression of political oppression and violence occurring around her.[19]

Although Pane may not have specifically aligned her work with the feminist movement, her masochistic actions targeted society's complicated beliefs about feminine beauty and passivity. In the performance *Le Lait Chaud (Warm milk)* from 1972, for example, Pane cut her back with a razor blade, and then began playing with a tennis ball to juxtapose the game and the violent act of cutting. Then she turned to face the audience and cut her face on both cheeks with the razor blade. "The tension was explosive ... They

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[18] O'Dell, p. 50.
[19] O'Dell, p. 50.

yelled 'No, no, not the face, no!'"[20] Pane hit upon the importance of the face to beauty, and by extension feminine beauty. The audience members were shocked at her choice to inflict such scarring onto herself; not only as a reflection of the thought of such pain inflicted on their own bodies, but also, one could say, because as a woman Pane "should" have displayed qualities of gentleness and passivity.

Another example of a masochistically inclined performance is American artist Adrian Piper's series called *Catalysis* (Figure 4). In 1970, she performed the series of unannounced performances in the streets, subways, and other public places of New York City. *Catalysis* presented the artist in various embarrassing or humiliating social situations. She saturated a set of clothing in a mixture of vinegar, eggs, milk, and cod-liver oil for a week, then wore them on the subway during evening rush hour; she dressed very conservatively but stuffed a large red bath towel in the side of her mouth, letting the rest of it hang down her front as she rode the bus, subway, and Empire State Building elevator; she filled her purse with ketchup, then added her wallet, comb, keys, etc., opening and digging out change for the bus, a comb for her hair in the ladies' room at Macy's, a mirror to check her face on the bus.[21] The events came nowhere near to the physical endangerment encountered by Pane and Abramovic, however Piper attested that in "violating [her] body ... [and] making it public [she] was turning [herself] into an object."[22] In these scenarios, the objectification and transformation of Piper's body produced effects on her self as experienced internally and by the culture at large. Significantly, *Catalysis* was a series of unannounced performances. Though documented

[20] Pane, quoted in "Performance of Concern: Gina Pane discusses her work with Effie Stephano," in *The Artist's Body*, ed., Tracey Warr, survey by Amelia Jones (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000), p. 121.
[21] Lippard, pp. 167-68.
[22] Adrian Piper, as quoted in Lippard, p. 170.

with photographs, passers by did not know that Piper was making an artwork. There is a difference between a viewer who consciously meets with an artist or artwork and one who meets with them unannounced. When the artwork interacts with life unexpectedly it secures even less guarantee of meeting with a willing and open audience.

These kinds of aggressive or masochistic performances can be seen as feminist tools in so far as the disruption of social laws governing appropriate costume, conduct, and interaction in the patriarchal society specifically targets male authority (even if it is a male performing it). Specifically, when a woman performs an action or appears a certain way that is contradictory to the established norm, this excludes the "father" of patriarchal authority and displaces onto the "mother" the task of exercising and applying paternal law, of deciding what is acceptable.[23] This reversal of power has the potential for breaking conventions of supremacy and gender roles. Its intersection with notions of female beauty and femininity is a shocking juxtaposition: Western culture dictates that a woman should exhibit "self-restraint, acquiescence, measured ambition, maternal aspirations, and bodily perfection,"[24] none of which are encouraged or exhibited in women's masochistic behavior. "Because of the 'always already' quality of women's woundedness, ... [the] exploration of the scarring of the subject (as in the work of Gina Pane) contrasts strikingly with the work of male artists who damage their bodies masochistically."[25]

Pane experienced her endangering performances intimately with her own body, in a directly physical way. Her decision to undergo pain was not only antithetical to survival, but also specifically in opposition to typically "feminine" behavior. She

[23] Gilles Deleuze, as quoted in O'Dell, p. 50.
[24] Nancy Spector, "Flesh and Bones," *Artforum International* 30(March 1992), p. 98.
[25] Jones, p.309, n. 96.

explored the body's vulnerability; "the not yet socialized, natural body-*object* [that] is the express charge of the caregivers in the mothering environment."[26] Within the history of feminist performance from the 1970s, the use of masochism can be seen to confer with the overriding objectification of the female body and the inquiry into female subjectivity and its position as "doubly alienated."

Carolee Schneemann is another early feminist artist who used her own material body to blur the lines between pleasure and aggression, acceptable and non-acceptable behavior. While in the work of artists like Gina Pane, the primary response of the viewer was to pain, Schneemann's early body works often entailed the celebration of the female body as a source of pleasure and knowledge. She is arguably the first female artist to use her own naked body as primary material in her work, beginning to work with the body in the 1960s. She remains an important artist in a feminist art history because she worked largely from her own subjectivity, rather than with or through other characters; thus her work focused precisely on the presentation of the naked female body. Interestingly, like Wilke, the critical response to her work was often clouded by remarks on her traditionally beautiful body and assumed audacity in showing it explicitly.

Schneemann's conscious use of her body in primal and sensual works challenged the tradition of the nude, woman's sexuality, and women artists in art history. In 1964, she presented a theatre piece dealing with the subject of human sexuality called *Meat Joy*. The fact that she was one of the only women artists working with her body at this time (an exception being Yoko Ono) makes her work especially relevant and precedent to the history of feminist performance. She described *Meat Joy* as "an exuberant sensory

[26] O'Dell, p. 27.

celebration of the flesh."[27] It was comprised of male and female performers who, working loosely under Schneemann's direction in rehearsals, improvised interactive gestures and movements with each other and a variety of fleshy, bloody, messy materials in a live performance. "They smeared themselves with blood, imprinted their bodies on paper, tore chickens apart, threw chunks of raw meat and torn fowl about, slapped one another with them, kissed and rolled about 'to exhaustion,' and so on."[28] Sausages, wet paint, transparent plastic, rope, brushes, and paper scraps were included as materials at hand. Additionally, audience members were placed in close proximity to the performers in order to heighten each other's experience of the frenzied energy. Schneemann noted the excessive, indulgent, and ecstatic character of the piece: "shifting and turning between tenderness, wildness, precision, abandon: qualities which could at any moment be sensual, comic, joyous, repellent."[29]

Meat Joy may have had more in common with the theatrical, Fluxus, and Happenings work executed in the early 1960s than with the feminist performance of the 1970s. In particular, it relates to Hermann Nitsch's performances of the early 1960s, known as *Orgies Mysteries Theatre*, which incorporated ritual sacrifice of bulls and sheep as a means to catharsis. In part, the performance (more like a festival, with a large number of performers and spectators) entailed the disembowelment of animals, with the entrails and blood pouring over participants, in a revival of the Dionysian ritual called the *sparagmos*.[30] Schneemann's *Meat Joy* similarly incorporated aspects of shamanism and

[27] O'Dell, p. 27.
[28] Carolee Schneemann, *More than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works and Selected Writing*, ed., Bruce McPherson (New York: Documentext, 1979), p. 66.
[29] Carolee Schneemann, *More than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works and Selected Writing*, p.63.
[30] Thomas McEvilley, "Art in the Dark," in *The Artist's Body*, p. 223.

ritual that reflect the interest in ancient or primitive sensibilities and oneness with nature, which was so widespread in the 1960s and early 1970s.[31]

In 1975 Schneemann performed *Interior Scroll*, in which she read from a scroll she pulled from her vagina. The text she read off the scroll targeted the male-oriented world of art and art criticism that set predetermined strata for women artists. The art world had difficulty accepting her as a woman, a filmmaker and especially an artist who used her own body as an active force in creating her own self-image. In *Interior Scroll*, Schneemann attacked what she called the "art stud club," the patriarchal art world that admitted women "so long as they behaved *enough* like the men, did work clearly in the traditions and pathways hacked out by men."[32] The centrality of her vagina to the work confronted the taboo of its image, its obscenity. Furthermore, the scroll's placement and Schneemann's inch-by-inch extraction and reading of it presented "an ethic about knowledge itself – received from and in the body."[33]

The importance of this "reading" of the body in *Interior Scroll* lies in the relationship it holds to the Cartesian subject. In Cartesian subjectivity ("I think, therefore I am"), the body must be excluded, opposed to the soul or spiritual dimension of being.[34] Cartesian subjectivity offers a conclusive analysis and division of the body and mind, with the mind holding a finite hierarchical position. In this philosophy that pervades modern Western thought and has its foundations in Ancient Greece, the immaterial mind or soul is advantaged over the material body. The body is driven by, and dependent upon the satisfaction of, instinctual urges like food and sex.

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[31] McEvilley, p. 223.
[32] Carolee Schneemann, quoted in Leslie C. Jones, "Transgressive Femininity: Art and Gender in the 1960s and 1970s," in *The Artist's Body*, p. 262.
[33] Carolee Schneemann, "Interior Scroll," in *The Artist's Body*, p. 251.
[34] Jones, p. 35.

> Plato, Augustine, and, most explicitly, Descartes provide instructions, rules, or models of how to gain control over the body, with the ultimate aim of learning to live without it. That is: to achieve intellectual independence from ... its illusions, to become impervious to its distractions, and most importantly, to kill off its desires and hungers.[35]

The mind then is the "real self" and must reign over the body's susceptibility to desire; the soul is disembodied. Following the rules of patriarchy, the inferior body is aligned with the feminine, and the superior mind has a masculine quality. In *Interior Scroll*, Schneemann played with the connectedness of mind, body and spirit. The female body was at once presented as a source of desire, oppression, pleasure, knowledge and language, refuting the patriarchal urge to objectify, simplify, and/or silence it.

In both *Interior Scroll* and *Meat Joy*, the viewer was confronted with a celebration of the body; specifically, the female body, since its inclusion against the tradition of the passive female nude made gender particularly significant. The female body that Schneemann and early feminist performance artists in general submitted was one in need of being celebrated, commemorated, or explored as a source of pleasure. The early body works overwhelmingly objectified the female body in order to explore it, transform it, and to attribute power to it. The strain of works entailing self-imposed pain and rituals notwithstanding, the seventies' feminist body art generally promoted a "privileging of pleasure and desire over hatred and aggression."[36]

What gives the works from the seventies their edge is largely their context as pioneering works that broke down conventions of female bodies and female artists. The real-time experience of the works by audience members, the presence of the material

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[35] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 93.
[36] Mignon Nixon, "The Gnaw and the Lick: Orality in Recent Feminist Art," in *Art and Feminism*, ed., Helena Reckitt, survey by Peggy Phelan (New York: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2001), p. 276.

female body, and the tendency to bring the art outside of the traditional confines of the gallery or museum context, were the main ways that early feminist work targeted power relationships in daily life. The artists hoped "to have a *measurable* effect on [the conditions of women's lives]," by uniting those conditions with art, in order to bring about social transformation. [37] "The desire to connect, to name similarities, and to unite in the service of social transformation" remains apparent in this early work. [38]

During the 1980s, feminist activist art and performance took a back seat to more comodifiable art forms. With the increasing commercialization of the era, material art objects like paintings were needed to feed the market push of galleries. The work of feminist artists like Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer represented the photo-and-text approach that dominated 1980s art made in New York[39] (Figure 5). This approach incorporated aspects and themes of popular culture, mass media and advertising, reached larger audiences, and integrated changes in society such as increasing technology. By using text as a primary visual element, it typifies the vein of women's work that was sanctioned by the critical avant-garde during the 1980s. This postmodern approach of appropriation and simulation art was in line with feminist critical theory coming from England and France.

Within feminist performance and criticism, the 1980s saw a semiotic analysis of the body not as a biological given, but as a cultural construct.[40] The influence of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault's

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[37] Nixon, "The Gnaw and the Lick: Orality in Recent Feminist Art," p. 269.
[38] Suzanne Lacy, including a conversation with Judith Baca, "Affinities: Thoughts on an Incomplete History," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, p. 270.
[39] Laura Cottingham, "The Feminist Continuum: Art After 1970," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, p. 284.
[40] Nixon, "The Gnaw and the Lick: Orality in Recent Feminist Art," p. 275.

philosophical critiques was apparent in the backlash during the 1980s against 1970s' feminist art. These post-structural theorists and their followers assert that sexuality and gender are produced by culture at the service of ideology, that "to subscribe to the binary opposition man/woman is to remain a prisoner of the metaphysical with its illusion of presence, Being, stable meanings and identities."[41] There is no absolute origin, only a system of differences, of alternation and deferral that creates meaning. Post-structural theorists like those mentioned above posit a subject that is in a constant state of becoming and change, garnering meaning in relation to changing social and cultural conditions.

First generation feminist art was thus condemned as being "essentialist," playing back into the hands of the patriarchal system, which has traditionally relied on biological difference to assert its own hierarchical power. In the early 1990s an exhibition of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* planned for a gallery in Los Angeles was disputed on the grounds of its apparent essentialism (though work by male artists, such as Francesco Clemente's pastels of primitivistic, generalized women was not generally criticized harshly[42]). The post-structural theories introduced in the 1980s are of an individual-based nature: as opposed to the ideas of a collective identity and activism in feminist art of the 1970s, they focus on particularities of different identities, refuting universalizations (that can be confused with the desire for collectivity). Thus any generalizing or essentializing of the female experience can appear naïve and inadequate in their light.

The shift to a "'theoretically' differentiated notion of identity from the socially contextualized, inclusive and activist" conception of the 1970s[43] coincided with a

[41] Mira Schor, "Backlash and Appropriation," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, p. 254.
[42] Schor, p. 257.
[43] Lacy, p. 269.

general, culture-wide resistance to feminism.[44] Susan Faludi's 1991 best-selling book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* documented the recoil towards feminism that had become politically and socially acceptable in the Reagan/Thatcher era. The "disembodied" politics of this era can be characterized by "political retrenchment and reactionary, exclusionary economic and social policies and by the scrupulous avoidance of addressing the effects of such policies on the increasingly large numbers of bodies/selves living below the poverty line."[45]

Mira Schor writes of the critically acceptable approach for women artists in the 1980s:

> The best strategy was consciously to cull images from patriarchy's repertory and deconstruct them through ingenious juxtapositions and changed contexts. Representations by women were permissible only if they were of and about representation, mediated by culture.[46]

This approach can be seen in the work of Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Sherry Levine, and Cindy Sherman, who all used appropriation of patriarchal practices. There is a significant connection between the notions of appropriation and mimicry, though 1980s' feminist art rarely incorporated the material body, favoring text and visual imagery. In the 1980s, the body was image and the image was text.

The rise in technology was evident in 1980s' work that incorporated television, computers, video, audio, and/or other technological elements. Laurie Anderson's complex, theatrical performances were indicative of the growing influence of technology on Western ways of living and contemporary conceptions of the body. Anderson targeted an audience that had grown up with television and mass media. By making technology

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[44] Lacy, p. 270.
[45] Jones, p. 198.
[46] Schor, p. 255.

obvious in her work, she "emphasize[d] the always already technologized, mediated nature of the experience of the body/self."[47] Her performances were close to rock concerts – theatrical, with costumes, masks, audio arrangements, etc. – taking place in large-scale venues, using visual and audio technologies. Although her approach mimicked mass culture and could thus be regarded as quite superficial, the content of her work remained insightful and critical of American society. In performances like *United States* (1983) (Figure 6), Anderson targeted major themes of American life like political and economical power with audio, visual, and narrative media. The technology she used ("technologies developed almost entirely by and for men"[48]) allowed her to be a woman alone on stage, but sound like a chorus of people singing, a male voice, a synthesized voice.

> While acknowledging, indeed exacerbating, the radical dislocations that technologies such as video and computers have introduced into the conception of the body/self, [Anderson's work] also emphasize[d] the *embodiment* of this subject *as*, in fact, a body/self (rather than a "transcendent," masculinized self of pure thought or an immanent feminine body).[49]

The appeal of popular culture fueled the increasingly public nature of art in the 1980s. Suzanne Lacy notes, "It is in the work of artists of color, many of them women, that individual identity in the 1980s remained connected to a sense of community, an activist agenda, and the necessity of relating to a broad and diverse audience."[50] The work by and about minorities is indeed a strong link within the history of feminist art. The perspective and awareness of minorities seems to go hand in hand with body art and art of a public nature: racism and sexism are rooted in the body, and a public is never

[47] Jones, p. 213.
[48] Jones, p. 210.
[49] Jones, p. 206.
[50] Lacy, p. 271.

homogenous. Furthermore, women artists of color have challenged the feminist art movement itself, which has been largely biased itself. Latina artist Judy Baca said of her experiences during the 1970s,

> The problem was always the same – white feminists thought that they would determine how to approach and confront racism ... [To believe] that gender is a unifying concept is an assumption. It assumes you are central. That is what we call "thinking white."[51]

But patriarchal society is not only sexist, it is also racist. "The experiences of women artists of color within their own communities placed the larger cultural politics of oppression high on their agendas and underscored the link between identity and action, themes [that] return[ed] in the '90s."[52]

In the 1990s and at the time of writing, there has been a marked return to body art and to the politics of representation in relation to the embodied subject,[53] as well as a return to the natural materials and emotive strategies found in work from the 1970s. As Lucy Lippard states, one can see "ever-more obvious affinities [between feminist art of the 1970s] and what's going on [in the 1990s]. ... It seems politically and esthetically crucial that the work done [in the seventies] not be forgotten now, and that its connections to the succeeding decades be clarified."[54] The activism, use of elements from daily life, and consciousness-raising so integral to the first generation feminist art, has resurged in this recent work. Post-structural theories concerning the production of gender, introduced during the 1980s, have remained central to much of the work done during this time period. These theoretical philosophies have enabled the understanding of identity as

[51] Baca, as quoted in Lacy, p. 271.
[52] Lacy, pp. 271, 273.
[53] Jones, p. 198.
[54] Lippard, as quoted in Lacy, p. 264, p. 299, n.2, from "In the Flesh: Looking Back and Talking Back," catalogue essay for "Back Talk," an exhibition of California women artists at the Santa Barbara Contemporary Art Forum, 1993, curated by Marilee Knode and Erica Daborn, with a video exhibition curated by JoAnn Hanley.

discursive and lacking any originary locus. "The 1990s' [body art] often involve[d] complex strategies relating to the body: fragmenting it, symbolizing it, rendering it through highly distorting technologies of representation."[55] This fragmentation, which continues to be seen in work made past the turn of the century, relates to the awareness of particularized bodies and subjectivities, such as: people of color, displaced people, gay and lesbians, the homeless, the mentally ill, the overweight, the criminal, etc.

The turn-of-the-century has witnessed increasing globalization, unprecedented growth in science and technology, and the proliferation of AIDS, all of which offer a reflection on the impetus for the work being produced. One could say that the collapse of the private and public spheres at the hands of urbanization and globalization, the technological and medical breakthroughs by science, and increasing liberalism of cultural ideals has created a social climate of uncertainty. The material body is threatened by science, by AIDS, and by a crisis in identity. Art has compensated for this dispersal with the rise in visibility of artists of color and other minorities or particularized subjectivities to articulate that "embodiment is always instantiated, local, and specific."[56] With the increase in art that uses the body as primary artistic material, the artist becomes physically involved, in turn asking his/her audience to be active, to question why the artist has done what he/she has done, and to question social institutions that may be repressing them.

In feminist body art made in the nineties and at the time of writing, the body has returned in a more material sense as the site where the social is negotiated, produced and

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[55] Jones, p. 314, note 9. Jones advocates the term "body-oriented practices" rather than "body art" for the work done in the 1990s, because so much of it was oriented toward the body but did not use the artist's body directly.

[56] Jones, p. 318, n. 51.

made sense of.[57] Artists like Kiki Smith, Mona Hatoum, and Jana Sterbak explore the female body turned inside out, subjected to intrusive technologies, disjointed and/or not fully knowable through visible presence. There is no such thing as a "natural" body or one that is not already socialized and thus created by surrounding contexts. Rather, particularities of identity, the subjection of the body to power structures, and the aesthetics of repulsion and abjection are highlighted to prove the very instability of institutions and other structures of power and authority. This work exhibits some of

> the most basic tenets of postmodernism: the understanding that gender is socially and not naturally constructed; the widespread validation of non-"high art" forms such as craft, video, and performance art; the questioning of the cult of "genius" and "greatness" in Western art history; the awareness that behind the claim of "universality" lies an aggregate of particular standpoints and biases, leading in turn to an emphasis upon pluralist variety rather than totalizing unity.[58]

A turn towards the bodily drives and a more literalized conception of the body can be found in postmodern work that entails the enlistment of orality. This focus on the biology of the mouth can be seen as a "theoretical regression" to the preverbal, which can be overly simplified to essentialism, in much the same way that work from the 1970s has been. Interestingly, in an article issued in *Art Press* in 1975, Catherine Francblin expressed her view of women's early body art as

> a return to infantilism and an inability to separate one's own identity from that of the mother, or subject from object. She blame[d] these artists for "reactivation of primitive autoerotic pleasures. For what most women expose in the field of art ... is just the opposite of a denial of the woman as object inasmuch as the object of desire is precisely the woman's own body."[59]

This negative view of infantilism is tied up in a negative view of women's body art and the association of women with narcissism.

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[57] Amelia Jones, "Survey," in *The Artist's Body*, pp. 20-1.
[58] Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, "Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth Century," *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, p. 10.
[59] Catherine Francblin, as quoted in Lippard, p. 123.

Seen another way, the preverbal can be deemed an assault on the Patriarchy, as it refuses the structuring of male/female roles by language, and can thereby open a way to unite with a maternal source. I argue (as does Nixon) that engagement with the indefinability of the stage of orality is not simply an attack on language or the Father. Although femininity and masculinity are polarized as passivity and agency, at the infantile stage, aggression is a "deeply structuring element of fantasy [and subjectivity] for both sexes."[60] The turn towards orality and the drives could then be understood as a kind of "regendering" of lived experience. Perhaps, it could further point to a desire to experience an androgynous state of being.

Julia Kristeva, in her writings on the abject, addresses the drives – "the internal rhythms, the sonorous distinctiveness that does not yet signify anything and will be at the same time repressed and brought to light by articulated language."[61] The drives relate to the abject as raw, out-of-order disturbances of patriarchal structure, and therefore to the maternal body, which is the model for the abject.

> Kristeva ... argues that the bodily drives and rhythms to which the maternal semiotic or the poet give expression are themselves structured like a language. There is a pattern of checks, interruptions, tracings of desire that the linguist can make visible ... The raw, "maternal" experience ... is capturable only because it is already in writing, the writing of drives on the biological-physical organism.[62]

The disruption of structure that occurs with a return to this preverbal state can open a temporary break in the social order and allow for a subversive, feminist act. It can be a

[60] Nixon, "The Gnaw and the Lick," p. 276.
[61] Andrea Nye, "Woman Clothed with the Sun: Julia Kristeva and the Escape From/To Language," *Signs* 12:4(Summer 1987), pp. 674-5.
[62] Nye, p. 677.

woman's way of suiting her own abjection to herself, of unsettling the dominant order, of making it, "at least for her, defiantly joyful."[63]

In another light, the return to the drives could be seen as a strategy in a capitalist society that dictates "individuals submit their bodies so that they can function more efficiently under its obsessively rational imperatives ... (production, consumption and order)."[64] Command over physical drives, like eating, has traditionally been linked to the cultivation of the spiritual self. It can lead to a feeling of control and power, in a time when choices in all areas of life abound, or are at least highly visible through rampant advertising. The individual, particularly a woman living in a patriarchal society where agency may not come easily, may decide that less is more, or be driven by an exhaustive search for a bodily experience detached from so much "stuff." At the same time as this kind of "Western Buddhism" is bought into, allowing one to remain within the capitalist game, one can also be happily outside of it.[65]

Consumption, compulsion, obsession, empowerment and dependence are issues that lend themselves to life in late capitalism, where the body is somewhat disciplined to be an efficient producer/worker and consumer. In a similar vein, one could say that the use of food as artistic material and the artist's engagement with orality equally lends itself to association with these issues. Food can be an allegory for capitalist consumption, regimented through dieting, and is linked with the notion of shaping one's body and self through diet. As the vital material of survival, food is a source of pleasure, reward, and punishment. It is tied to bodily expression, celebration, indulgence and bodily repression.

[63] Nye, p. 672.
[64] Critical Art Ensemble, *Flesh Machine: Cyborgs, Designer Babies and New Eugenic Consciousness* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1998), p.11, as quoted in Jones, "Survey," in *The Artist's Body*, p. 21.
[65] Slavoj Zizek, "Is Psychoanalysis Anti-Capitalist?" McGill University, Montreal, 22 March 2001.

In fact, "there is scarcely a culture where people have not managed to work out a distinction between foods of high and foods of low status, and where food does not become associated with the self image."[66] Furthermore, the consumption and production of food is gendered: patriarchal structuring creates a specific place for women in its society, for food taboos exist in cultures around the world. These taboos usually follow the "pattern, of women and children being the last fed, of food prohibitions, of men monopolizing animal protein sources,"[67] even though women usually do the food preparation and historically much of its production.

Food and eating have played significant roles in artistic representation for centuries. The *Vanitas*, a painted memento mori, is a tradition in art that relates the body with food. In a moral lesson pointing to the body's mortality and decay and the vanity of its pleasures, it "warns of the ephemerality of human existence through [a still life mode of depicting] perishable items such as burning candles and mounds of fresh food."[68] Specifically in the context of feminist art, food has been a way for women artists to address the issues of female beauty. In 1973, for example, Eleanor Antin documented her weight loss over a five-week diet with daily photographs of various angles of her body in her work *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture.* Antin said that her intention was to "make an academic sculpture," playing with the tradition of the ideal female nude as something that, along with social objections to obesity, works to shape and fix a "socially correct" woman.[69] Adrian Piper performed *Food for the Spirit* in 1971, which entailed a two-month juice and water fast, the practice of yoga, and study of Immanual Kant's *Critique*

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[66] Jules Henry, *Culture Against Man* (New York: Random House, 1963), pp. 355-56.
[67] Kathie Brown, "Thinking About Food Prohibitions," *Heresies* 6:1(1987), p. 10.
[68] Nancy Spector, "Flesh and Bones," *Artforum International* 30(March 1992), p. 96.
[69] Eleanor Antin, as quoted in Joanna Frueh, "The Body Through Women's Eyes," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, p. 195.

of Pure Reason to explore an intensity of intellectual, spiritual, and bodily experience, the notion of embodiment, and endurance. Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* used food as a connecting force between people and sexuality. This work, with its quality of ecstatic frenzy, points to a common theme amongst artists who have dealt with food: excess. Gina Pane has eaten until she was sick. Jana Sterbak received much attention, both positive and negative, when she exhibited her *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987), a simple, jagged-edged dress made of forty pounds of raw red meat. As a dress, the garment was gendered, thus opening up interpretations of the place of woman in her social reality. As it slowly decayed and shrunk, taking on a different form, smell, and texture, the dress turned the body inside out, exposing its mortality and degeneration,[70] and addressed issues of aging and self-improvement. In the 1980s and 1990s Karen Finley made explicit performances about violence against women, using her own body in pain and sometimes in conjunction with food. In *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1989), Finley's reaction to the murder of a young girl, she smeared her body with chocolate, then put on red heart candies and alfalfa sprouts to show the connection between violence, love, and sex. Installation artist and photographer Sandy Skoglund has also used food as a material in her art, raising awareness of the seemingly banal, daily interaction with this vital substance. In *Spirituality in the Flesh* from 1992, she covered the walls of her studio and a seated female mannequin with eighty pounds of raw hamburger.

While food and eating played varying degrees of importance in the making of these artworks, the actual actions of biting, sucking, chewing, and/or licking associated with them were not particularly highlighted. Rather, an overriding connection between

[70] Marni Jackson, "The Body Electric: Jana Sterbak," *Canadian Art* 6:1(Spring 1989), p. 65.

food and feminist art has been that both food and women are objects for male consumption. As Carol Adams wrote in her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, "Sexual violence and meat-eating, which appear to be discrete forms of violence, find a point of intersection in the absent referent. Cultural images of sexual violence, and actual sexual violence, often rely on our knowledge of how animals are butchered and eaten."[71] The traditional role of woman, "a creature who requires no meat, who is herself meat, who saves herself and her resources for male consumption,"[72] yet may also have a voracious sexual "appetite," can be contested in artwork that uses food symbolically.

The mouth, which realistically is centrally involved with food and eating, has not been a particular focal point in previous feminist artwork. As mentioned earlier, the mouth has formerly been used primarily for speaking, the site of an activist voice in society. Or, conversely, the mouth can be purposefully bound or gagged in a way that further reiterates a subject's silencing as a particularly positioned subject within a society. The mouth can also be objectified as a fetishized part of the body, showing the tendency of patriarchal society to disengage and sexualize certain parts of the female body. But rarely has the mouth been used as a sculptural tool in making art, or presented/represented in its fundamental actions of biting, licking or sucking. These mechanics of the mouth significantly alter or block the voice. The mouth can physically bar the expression of ideas by making them incomprehensible. The acts of biting, sucking, and licking lie at the limit of the inside and outside of the body: what is repulsive, inviting, incomprehensible, and intimate.

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[71] Carol Adams, as quoted in Sarah Milroy, "The Flesh Dress: A Defense," *Canadian Art* 8:2(Summer 1991), p. 72.
[72] Milroy, p. 71.

The link between the mouth and language thus remains, but in an altered state: the mouth endangers or renders unintelligible the act of speaking, the transference of ideas, the symbolic order of representation. At the same time, through interactions with food or other materials, the mouth becomes a way of exploring the outside world, primarily through sensorial experience and exchange. This infantile state of being can offer a kind of detachment from the complexity of an increasingly fragmented, commodified society, and a Western culture that advocates sight over any other of the senses.

Janine Antoni's 1992 work *Gnaw* and Jenny Strauss's 1999 work *Intake* provide ground for a discussion of bodily drives, food, and infantilism within a feminist art context. In keeping with the turn towards particularized bodies in postmodern body art from the 1990s, they do not offer a generalized conception of woman. Rather, they work towards negotiating particularized bodies and subjectivities through an experience of bodily drives. These works were made largely by way of eating, biting and sucking. Do they signal a regression in development, a refusal to follow the rules of language, patriarchy, and rationality? As such, are they a futile attempt to feel control over one's life, like the anorexic that denies sexual development and attractiveness and the dictates of her/his parents by choosing to starve? Possibly, the only effect could be to choose between a "'voice without body' or a 'body without voice.'"[73] The incomparable intimacy of eating, biting and sucking to one's body could make this a narcissistic venture, inevitably leading back to and bound within one's self and body. In terms of feminist art history, the traditional association between woman and narcissism could be reinforced. Perhaps these works are simply effective in reaffirming Antoni's or Strauss's own identity as an artist (more narcissism).

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[73] Nye, p. 680.

However, I argue that the regression to an infantile state and the bodily experience of a preverbal state willingly and consciously encountered in an artwork is an act of feminist subversion. The conscious choice to experience paradox and the disorder of the preverbal state can be an act of empowerment, specifically for a woman, who has traditionally been socially disempowered and associated with borderline conditions and positions. As a kind of mimicry of these underlying assumptions about women, it can allow for an exploration of those assumptions and of particular subjectivities. It can also address the traditionally tenacious relationship between women and narcissism.

> [F]or a woman to be able to redirect the insatiable craving for a fine distinctive image toward her inner bosom, or, in more psychological terms, her inner solitude, in the exquisite pain of contemplation, daydreaming, or even hallucination – that amounts to a true resolution of narcissism that is not at all erotic (in the Greek sense of the word) but is, quietly or fanatically, wholly amorous.[74]

If women are associated apprehensively and ambiguously with patriarchal conceptions of desire, then the exploration of a preverbal orality can be subversive, opening the door for a "regendered" or innovative language, and a reevaluation of the mother-infant relationship. The kind of mimicking of patriarchal assumptions, in the embracement of abjection, can be transformative for both the woman artist and the audience, specifically in a society rife with uncertainty and rapidly changing social ideals.

[74] Kristeva, "Narcissus: the new insanity," in *Tales of Love* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 112-13, as quoted in Hilary Robinson, "Border Crossings: womanliness, body, representation," *New Feminist Art Criticism*, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester, 1995), p. 141.

CHAPTER 2: THE BODY MARKED AS LOSS: JANINE ANTONI'S *GNAW*

Janine Antoni has built an oeuvre of bodyworks around everyday events and rituals that question stereotypical gender roles and the social construct of "Woman" in patriarchal society. She has often incorporated obsessive behavior and self-imposed rituals that target the endless pursuit of physical beauty. Antoni's 1992 bodywork *Gnaw* targeted the issue of obsessive eating specifically in relation to capitalist society: food became an allegory for consumerism. Significantly, the viewer could only "see" her body through marks of loss. The issue of women's agency, of "having a voice" in society, is brought into focus.

Antoni has acknowledged the influence of feminist performance artists from the 1970s on her work. She said that while the 1980s have been historically significant to her development as an artist, it is the bare, raw, extremist works from the 1970s by artists like Hannah Wilke and Ana Mendieta that she feels akin and indebted to. These artists used their body as the focus of their work to deal with issues relating to femininity, female beauty and ritual in ways that have also been apparent in Antoni's works from the 1990s and into the millennium:

> My strategy has more to do with feminist artists of the 70s – the humor, the process, the emphasis on performance, the intensely visceral quality of their work. The 80s feminists used a language that was already respected and they put their content in it, whereas the 70s feminists were much more extreme, and they have paid for it by being dismissed.[1]

What is more apparent in Antoni's work is the infiltration of everyday rituals and actions as the subject or building block of her artwork. She said, "I'm interested in

[1] Janine Antoni, as quoted in Laura Cottingham, "Janine Antoni: Biting sums up my relationship to art history," *Flash Art* XXVI:171(Summer 1993), p. 104-05.

everyday body rituals and converting the most basic sort of activities ... into sculptural processes."[2] These rituals – such as eating, mopping, sleeping and bathing – happen on a daily basis but carry a specific feminist meaning, given the complicated constructed association between women and domesticity, beauty, and sexuality. The rituals are specific ways that the stereotypically feminine role is created in Western culture: everyday beauty rituals, scrutinizing judgments of one's mirror image, eating disorders hidden away in fear and shame. In order to be feminine, and a socially acceptable woman, one must, somewhat, look good, smell good, and be domestic.

The banality of such rituals as eating, mopping, and bathing is exposed as complex and discursive once in an artistic context. By using them as integral components of her artwork, Antoni has revealed the laborious, tedious, repetitive, and somewhat masochistic aspects of the rituals. In a previous performance called *Loving Care* (1992), she dipped her hair in hair dye and mopped a gallery floor with it, leaving only the swirls of dye on the floor as indicators of her body's movements. She said, "It was very satisfying to make the floor dirty,"[3] in a spin on the conventional association between women and housecleaning. *Loving Care* also addressed issues of women artists' place within abstract painting, building on Yves Klein's use of women models like paintbrushes in his *Anthropometries* from the 1960s. In *Lick and Lather* (1993-1994), Antoni built on the daily rituals of cleaning and eating, as she licked and washed, respectively, chocolate and soap Classical busts of herself until her facial features were partially dissolved, disfigured, or erased. Without this artistic context the bodily rituals are often executed blindly, unquestioningly. Once seeing them isolated and framed, the

[2] Antoni, as quoted in Cottingham, pp. 104-05.
[3] Antoni, as quoted in Sarah Bayliss, "The 24-Hour-a-Day Artist," *ARTnews* 98:10(November 1999), p. 167.

question of how fruitful they can be in securing identity, femininity, and pleasure is raised.

Antoni's 1992 work *Gnaw* attacked the purpose and futility of everyday rituals connected to eating. This work, developed over a period of several months, was comprised of a long and often arduous process that can be divided into three steps. When beginning the work for the piece, Antoni was aware only that she "wanted to chew on a 600 pound cube of chocolate."[4] The rest of the piece remained unknown from step to step, "the meaning reveal[ing] itself to [her] through the experience, through the process."[5] She had not anticipated the connection to eating disorders that would become apparent in the work, although the primary materials of huge quantities of forbidden foods seem to signal it.

In preparation for the work, she sculpted two cubes of six hundred pounds each, one in chocolate and the other in lard. As a material the lard could be seen as almost an extension to or consequence of the chocolate: chocolate can lead to, or at least is associated with, one becoming fat. Antoni has used lard in other works, including *Eureka* (1993), in which she was lowered into a bathtub filled with lard. She then mixed the lard that was displaced by her body with lye to make a large cube of soap with which she washed herself. In *Gnaw*, the lard seems to signify the forbiddance of fattening foods, like chocolate, that are nonetheless craved. At the same time as it is desired, the lard is repulsive in appearance and taste.

In the first step of Antoni's process for *Gnaw*, thin layers of chocolate had to be melted and then cooled into the cubic shape (Figure 7). The lard, with its opposite

[4] Cottingham, p. 105.
[5] Cottingham, p. 105.

properties of viscosity, had to be cooled and then formed into a cube. The enormous, excessive amounts of food seem appropriate for the types of foods chosen, both fattening and forbidden, both desirable, whose qualities come in only one size: formidable. Fat may be avoided at all costs (and lard considered unsightly and disgusting), only to be consumed in a cheating bout of fast foods; chocolate may be driven off, but it is said to be something that sometimes, one just "has to have." The immensity of the cubes seems to symbolize the immense hold these foods are capable of having over one's life; and with the sharp increase in diets, eating disorders, and obesity that has taken place in North America especially since the 1970s, this hold is not hard to believe.

The process of forming the cubes of chocolate and lard for *Gnaw* was both tedious and compulsive, even more so for the simple and Minimalist sculptures it produced. The Minimalist forms created, in fact, added an element of irony to the piece, juxtaposing the rigidity and essentialism of that artistic movement with the unruliness and unexpectedness of the performative nature of the whole process involved in *Gnaw*. Antoni said,

> I feel Minimalism has influenced and defined me as an artist ... I feel attached to my artistic heritage and I want to destroy it; it defines me as an artist and it excludes me as a woman, all at the same time.[6]

In the next stage of the process, over a month and a half in a closed gallery setting, Antoni partook in a private ceremony of biting, chewing and spitting out mouthfuls of each cube (Figure 10). She said, in relation to the preceding quote on artistic heritage, "I was interested in the bite because it's both intimate and destructive; it sort of sums up my relationship to art history ... [C]hewing the minimalist cube is ... funny and

[6] Antoni, as quoted in Cottingham, p. 104.

even absurd."[7] The nature of each of the materials affected her body in different ways, so that the taste and texture of the lard was difficult to take into her mouth and made her feel sick, and the chocolate gradually made painful sores develop inside her mouth and on her lips. After spitting out a mouthful, Antoni decided she wanted to re-melt the chewed up pieces and form them into other things. In this unfolding and unplanned process of ingesting, spitting out, and recreating something new, there is a strong reference to the eating disorder bulimia. Ingestion, then regurgitation, of the forbidden foods, done in private: the process is indeed close to the condition of bulimia, in which one gorges on foods to later purge oneself of them by means of self-induced vomiting, laxatives, diuretics, or other means. In addition, many women do nibble chocolate only to spit it out before swallowing, just as Antoni has done, in order to escape its caloric content while still being able to fulfill some of the craving for the food.

In the next step in the process of the piece, Antoni re-melted the spit out portions of chocolate and lard. She poured the chocolate into molds that formed twenty-seven heart-shaped boxes commonly used for Valentine's Day chocolates, with individualized compartments for each kind of chocolate. This seems to be a play on form and function: they were not only boxes for chocolates, but also chocolate boxes that could be eaten themselves. That there was little need to fill their compartments with more candy, calls into question their purpose. Antoni acknowledged that the choice to create such romantic objects from the chocolate gnaws stemmed from the knowledge that chocolate releases the chemical phenylethylamine in the brain, which simulates the feeling of being in love.[8] The lard was mixed with beeswax and red pigment and poured into ready-made lipstick

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[7] Antoni, as quoted in Cottingham, p. 104.
[8] Cottingham, p. 105.

holders to form three hundred viable, slickly red lipsticks (lard being an original ingredient in lipstick) (Figure 11). Through this process, Antoni's body became a kind of conduit whereby the materials were transformed, from spitty balls of abject material, to surprisingly romantic objects associated with sexual desire and femininity.

Antoni left the viewer with (still) huge cubes of chocolate and lard, and with chocolate boxes and lipsticks. The viewer was presented with the gnawed cubes, of which the chocolate gnaw bore rows of her teeth marks, while the lard gnaw had chin, nose, and mouth impressions because of the malleability of the material. The cubes were arranged in front of the chocolate boxes and lipsticks, which were called *Lipstick/Phenylethylamine Display* (Figure 12), in a mirrored room filled with the mingling scents of chocolate, beeswax, and lard. The candy boxes and lipsticks were displayed on glass shelves, mimicking the set up of a drug or department store. The mirrors, doubling the size of the room and contents (and implicating the viewer in their reflection), added a further comment on excess in contemporary society (i.e. the "Buy 2, Get 1 Free" mentality). Antoni said she "was thinking about [*Gnaw*] as a metaphor for a culture that was consuming and spitting itself out faster and faster."[9]

The defining performative act of the piece – Antoni gnawing on the cubes – occurred in private, without an audience. The choice to conduct the chewing in a public gallery space and not a studio, and yet to keep it hidden, points to the issue of public/private in the work. The decision to work privately in a public space relates to eating disorders and other bodily rituals, which are themselves largely secretive, yet domestic, habitual, and one would think, noticeable behaviors. Significantly, the exhibition of *Gnaw* did not contain any documentation, photographic or otherwise, of the

[9] Antoni, as quoted in Bayliss, p. 166.

months Antoni spent biting and spitting out the materials. It was instead left up to the viewer to make the connection between the cubes and the chocolate boxes and lipsticks. She continued gnawing on the lard and chocolate in the evenings, in private, after the viewers left. In an unexpected twist, some time after the cube of lard was installed for the exhibition, it collapsed and trickled off its pedestal. In relation to this unforeseen event, Antoni said, "This is how we experience fat in our own bodies. We can't control it."[10]

The critical reception of *Gnaw* tended to read it as an attack on Minimalism – "everyone was saying, 'It's the cube – Donald Judd'"[11] – and saw "her biting into art history ... as a repetition of seventies feminist performative uses of the body."[12] Interestingly, Antoni noted that members of the audience of the exhibition responded differently according to their gender:

> Men are aroused by the erotic implications of obsessive nibbling and licking. Women, on the other hand, respond with repulsion. For them, the work apparently triggers sensitivity to the multimedia assault on female egos and their lifelong struggle to shape up and slim down to wafer-thin proportions.[13]

The gender of the viewer inflected the reception of the work, which seems to reflect the ambiguous connection between desire, pleasure and the construction of femininity, a connection that tends to objectify and fetishize a woman's enjoyment of her body.

The ironic end objects of chocolate boxes and lipsticks were created by means in line with methods of mass production: generic molds. One could say that Antoni's body played a role like that of a factory. Her body was a processor of things meant to be nourishing, but she did not allow their energy to be ingested. This, and the aspect of

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[10] Linda Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over* (Litchfield, Connecticut: Art Insights, 1996), p. 128.
[11] Arthur Danto, as quoted in Bayliss, p. 165.
[12] Mignon Nixon, "Bad Enough Mother," *October* 71(Winter 1995), p. 77; see, for example, Simon Taylor's review in *Art in America* 80(October 1992), p. 149.
[13] Weintraub, p. 127.

isolation in her privatization of the gnaws, seems to point to the sense of alienation in contemporary society, created by industrialization, technology and the private/public split. As well, the disconnection from others inherent to eating disorders was addressed: compulsive eating of forbidden foods is disconnected from the biological needs of the body. Antoni's *Gnaw*, like the eating disorder it mimicked, worked to confront issues of individual choice and control. The fact that her obsessive gnawing occurred in private is important, not only for a convincing mimicry of an eating disorder (which Antoni did not initially intend), but also for getting closer to issues of the body, and feminist issues. Antoni spit out the chocolate/pure fat before it could be swallowed and absorbed by her body. For all the desirable qualities of both materials, they were denied of their pleasure, ultimately viewed as distasteful and ejected from her mouth. In fact, her body took on an ambiguous role: its presence verified only by teeth marks, its fundamental need of nourishment by food seemingly denied. As necessary as it was to the piece's construction, the body was not there for the viewer; the marks left by Antoni's teeth were indicators of her body. The absent chunks of chocolate and lard pointed to the presence of Antoni's teeth, and her teeth indicated the body in whole. The absence of chocolate and lard marked presence. The body itself was marked as absence and loss.[14]

Peggy Phelan asserts that performance "repeats the disappearance of the subject who longs to be always remembered."[15] Antoni's negation of her body confronted the loss of stability and coherency that the ephemerality of performance points to. Her obsessive gestures, not only in the gnawing stage of the work but also in the preparation of the cubes and in the final stage of re-melting and re-forming the materials, point to this

[14] See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 150-1.
[15] Phelan, p. 147.

curious, continuous inability to secure a relation between subjectivity and the body. One does not guarantee the other in any necessary relationship. This in turn points to the "philosophical conundrums put in play by body art, which highlight the fact that the body is both insistently 'there' and always absent (never knowable through vision), that, in the words of Jed Perl, 'wholeness is an illusion, an ideological trap.'"[16]

The fact that one could only "see" Antoni's body through absence not only pointed to the self-effacing nature of her activities in *Gnaw*, but also, one could say, conjured up a similar sense of disappearance in the viewer. Antoni's decision to undergo pain enacted the inevitably painful, never fully satisfied search for self-identity. One may wonder at the decision to endure a painstaking process, and to ingest unpleasant materials and materials that create sores in one's mouth. Yet there are everyday rituals (which she asserted in the work) that people do, which create similarly painful experiences. Eating disorders were particularly highlighted in *Gnaw*, but it could be said that any relationship between one and another necessitates pain and loss of the sense of independence. The way that Antoni's body was absent in the exhibition of *Gnaw* is likely to have fallen back reflexively on the viewer and elucidated these kinds of patterns in everyday behavior. "For the spectator the [art work was] itself a projection of the scenario in which his/her own desire takes place."[17]

Antoni's "missing" body worked further to suggest feminist issues, which are reinforced by the association between the work and eating disorders, as well as the romantic chocolate boxes and lipsticks that were created. One could say that her female

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[16] Jones, p. 32, p. 253, n. 34. In part of Perl's analysis of early body art, he sees it as significantly challenging to the notion of the "completeness of art."
[17] Phelan, p. 152.

body remained unseen in the work as in itself it really is in patriarchy.[18] Beauty rituals, social beliefs about thinness and beauty, and romanticized notions about femininity combine to create an objectification of the female body that negates its complexity and subjectivity, translating to the subordination of women. In this kind of culture and system of representation, women "should" disappear. Visibility is implicated in this arrangement: it is equated with presence; presence is equated with the Phallus and the Phallus with power. The trace of Antoni's body pointed to the invisibility of women in patriarchal culture, the silencing of women's issues and voices that places them outside of the dominant discourse, and the objectification of the female body that works to create fetishistic parts rather than a whole subjectivity. In this way *Gnaw* explored the female image as other, as it is to be experienced by the masculine subject. Anthony Iannacci points out that

> through this strategy Antoni places viewers in a fetishized relationship to her process. We can [conjure] up visions of her mouth, for example, isolating it as a chisel but then any physical presence of it has been removed from the work. By presenting this fetishized vision of a female presence, Antoni challenges not simply the notion of female fetishism but the position of women within art.[19]

One could say that her engagement with an obsessive act in private was an unsettling act, subversive to dominant ideologies precisely because it was her choice to be, in a way, "doubly alienated" within the context of her artwork. At least, the work opened up this possibility.

In executing the artwork *Gnaw*, Antoni delved into an exercise of discipline. She had to continue to gnaw at the materials even though the lard made her retch and the chocolate created painful sores in her mouth. When confronted with the end products,

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[18] Phelan, p. 150. Phelan discusses the invisibility of Woman in patriarchy in her analysis of Angelica Festa's 1987 performance *Untitled Dance (with fish and others)*.
[19] Anthony Iannacci, "Janine Antoni," *Kunst-Bulletin*, (June 1994), p. 25.

displayed in the gallery besides the gnawed cubes, the viewer might have wondered at the necessity of the months Antoni spent gnawing and spitting out the material in private. The end products, showing no evidence of having been processed through Antoni's body, could have easily been made in one direct step by simply melting down the material into the molded forms. Furthermore, from a feminist standpoint, the result of more products that "feed" into the construction of femininity is unsettling. What could be the purpose of Antoni's intervention, and more pointedly, her self-subjection to difficulty and pain?

Having had her body play such an integral role in the work raises questions about the relationship between the body and mind in *Gnaw*. If the body is material, where was it in Antoni's work? If the mind is what must demarcate and control the body, why would Antoni choose to endure months of bending, gnawing, spitting out (imaginably) sticky and spitty mouthfuls to create the work? *Gnaw* radicalized the Cartesian split between the body and mind. Here the mind forced the body to do an unpleasant exercise but not for obvious reasons. These actions seem to point to the wish for, and the debilitating effects of, the control and annihilation of the body's instincts. Was Antoni's body merely an object, a processor? Why was it forced to endure this encounter with the almost consumed, but not ingested, judged-too-intolerable, abject material? Might the alternating experience of pleasure and discomfort (chocolate/lard, chewing/spitting out), located in the body, be the dictating force of the piece? The issue of choice was targeted, as well as intention. Like much of contemporary body art, *Gnaw* held a lack of certainty in the projection of intentionality, "marking the fact that the subject is never fully coherent in his/her intentionality."[20]

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[20] Jones, p. 50.

The gnaws that Antoni performed mimicked the split between body/mind, outside/inside. Her actions teetered slightly from one side of the division to the other, the food having almost been ingested, prepared for ingestion, tasted but not eaten. She seems to have thus inhabited an indeterminate "space in-between." This play back and forth between spitting out and accepting in, between separation and integration, calls attention to the much-discussed separation between the mother and child. The child begins with a semiotic relationship with the mother and its environment inside the womb, living with and through the mother without any consciousness of a separation from her. For the first while of its life in the outside world, the infant, now joined to the mother through her breast, still does not realize the separation from her. The mother represents both desire (milk, nurturance) and is the object of aggression (as she has the ability to regulate the disavowal or satisfaction of such desire). In time, the separation from the mother is a site of conflict and anxiety. Biting is one vehicle for the acting out of this infantile anxiety and aggression. It is through it, and the mouth in general, that the infant explores the outside world.

The focus on biting in *Gnaw* brings attention to the significance of orality to one's development of self. Antoni has said, "I've been interested in the fact that a baby puts everything in its mouth in order to know it. And sometimes, through that process, destroys it."[21] The anxiety connected to food in her actions, never allowing her body to take it in completely, and the sheer size of the cubes of chocolate and lard seem to indicate an enormous symbolic value for the act of biting and eating. In addition, the size of the cubes would have somewhat overshadowed Antoni, who, kneeling and gnawing, would have been more in scale with an infant to the materials.

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[21] Antoni, as quoted in Bayliss, p. 167.

The infantile aggression enacted through Antoni's biting was ironic in that it "[led] to a compulsive behavior in the form of an eating disorder (gnawing and spitting out) that in turn [was] recuperated by the production of objects of [female masochistic] desire (lipstick and chocolate [boxes])."[22] This cyclical process seems to have disallowed her actually ratifying any aggression, keeping her in relation to the self-subjected, belligerent strategies without any solution to them. The sculptural objects she created feed back into the conventional construction of femininity, reinforcing it. We are back at the question of why she would subject herself to such an arduous process, when the finished products show no evidence of her laborious intervention. In this way, *Gnaw* highlighted an important side to Melanie Klein's object-relations psychoanalytical model: the suppression of aggression. According to Klein, not just aggression, but specifically the effort to suppress it, is the pivotal site of psychic struggle.

This effort at suppression is also integral to the development of eating disorders. There is, in this and in Klein's overall model regarding aggression, an overriding concern with the bodily drives. Eating disorders confront the hunger drive and Klein's model confronts the death drive, but both drives confront the subject with an anxiety-inducing power. In eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia, the drive for food is threatening in its innateness, in one's dependence on it. According to Klein, the infant fears "the loss of all objects to its destructive impulses."[23] The anxiety over aggression is like the anxiety over the lack of control of hunger and the need for food. Moreover, as has been pointed to, biting, chewing and sucking – all fundamental parts of eating – are also factors in infantile aggression.

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[22] Nixon, p. 78.
[23] Nixon, p. 81.

Antoni provided an interesting thought in relation to this. She said she has "wonder[ed] whether one can get too internal. At a certain point, does the body start to attack itself?"[24] She made this comment in reference to a photograph she made in 1998 entitled *Ingrown*, of her hands with fingernails painted red, intertwined and seemingly fused together. However *Lick and Lather*, previously described, also confronted the self's relationship with itself: according to Antoni, it was an "attempt to see herself 'by feeding myself with myself and washing myself with myself.'"[25] This interplay between subject and object (the subject enacts a motion onto itself, and becomes an object by so doing) has been used as a strategy in much feminist art. A great deal of feminist body art has worked to objectify the female body, in order to explore its subjectivity, making the artist both subject and object. This notion is often discussed particularly in reference to the early feminist body art of the seventies, like that of Hannah Wilke, and is significant given women's objectification in patriarchal society.

Moreover, the relationship of the self to itself leads to a discussion of the condition of abjection. The abject, according to Kristeva's definition,

> is a phantasmatic substance not only alien to the subject but intimate with it – too much so in fact, and this overproximity produces panic in the subject. In this way the abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries, of the spatial distinction between our insides and outsides as well as of the temporal passage between the maternal body and the paternal law. Both spatially and temporally, then, abjection is a condition in which subjecthood is troubled, "where meaning collapses."[26]

Waste products; filth; body fluids like blood, excrement, saliva, tears; the corpse: these materials lie at the "border of [the] condition as a living-being." They inhabit a "space

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[24] Antoni, as quoted in Bayliss, p. 167.
[25] Antoni, as quoted in Bayliss, p. 167.
[26] Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," *October* 78(Fall 1996), p. 114.

where one is not yet and yet which permits one to be,"[27] and are therefore crucial to the foundation of subjectivity and society. The abject is neither subject nor object, but the byproduct of always incomplete processes of separation – most notably separation from the mother, who in the symbolic order is the site of defilement, taboo, and sin. Here there is a kind of divergence from Klein's theory, in which the "mother does not exist as a subject, but only as the object of the infant's aggressive projections."[28] Although one could argue that, as a representation of the abject and therefore the repressed elements of society, the mother in Kristeva's theory of the abject is only an object too.

Significantly, Kristeva articulates a difference between the operation "to abject" (which is fundamental to subjectivity and society) and the condition "to be abject" (which is subversive of both formations). This addresses the temporal dimension of the abject, which is itself not an object, but rather at the border between subject and object. Hal Foster addresses these questions in his book *The Return of the Real*[29]:

> If subjectivity and society abject the alien within, is abjection not a regulatory operation? That is, is abjection to regulation what transgression is to taboo – an exceeding that is also a completing? Or can the *condition* of abjection be mimed in a way that calls out, in order to disturb, the *operation* of abjection?[30]

Kristeva writes that while the abject is used to test the limits of sublimation, the task remains to purify the abject:

> The various means of purifying the abject – the various catharses – make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion. Seen from that standpoint, the artistic

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[27] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 3-4.
[28] Nixon, p. 85.
[29] The article "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic" from the Fall 1996 issue of *October* is a partial extrapolation from Foster's book *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), in which he delves deeper into these terms and issues.
[30] Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," *October* 78(Fall 1996), pp. 114-15.

> experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity.[31]

She writes of "the essential struggle that a ... man or woman has to engage in with what he calls demonic only to call attention to it as the inseparable obverse of his very being, of the other (sex) that torments and possesses him."[32] And in contemporary times, "in a world in which the Other has collapsed," Kristeva asserts that "the task of the artist is no longer to sublimate the abject, to elevate it, but to plumb the abject, to fathom 'the bottomless "primacy"' constituted by 'primal repression.'"[33]

Antoni seems to have been willing to do this. She accepted the "essential struggle" and subjected herself to months of repeated chewing or gagging, as the sores developed in her mouth. The cubes of chocolate and lard were the sculptural objects created in order to enact her gnawing aggression. Collapsing the artist and artwork is tempting here, but Antoni did not herself suffer from an eating disorder. She said, "It's too easy to have the focus on me ... I want the viewer to have a relationship with the object and imagine the process."[34] She was not confronting these particular foods in the same way as, for example, Jenny Strauss was in a more personal way to negotiate their influence in her life. In Antoni's work one can see her actions as a reflection of contemporary society, as she said, of a culture that is consuming and spitting itself out faster and faster. In this sense, eating, as an act of communion, and as an act of incorporation between something and the body, is juxtaposed against a society where the lack of cohesion of ideals and fast pace rarely offers itself as a place to stop and accept, take in, absorb within the self, the body, or the senses.

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[31] Kristeva, p. 17.
[32] Kristeva, pp. 207-10.
[33] Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," p.115, including quotes from Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 18.
[34] Antoni, as quoted in Weintraub, pp. 127-8.

Paradoxically, Antoni had to objectify her body in order to experience this pivotal foundation of subjectivity, the abject. Her obsessive-compulsive behavior could be said to mimic the surrounding Western culture of consumerism that tries to cover up abjection under a variety of media imagery, self-help technologies, and beauty ideals. One could say that in Western culture of the turn-of-the-century, where the public engulfs the private self, and the distance between these two spheres continues to collapse, the subject is evacuated and elevated at once. "The imperative to acknowledge the disrupted subjectivity that comes of a broken society on the one hand, and the imperative to affirm identity at all costs on the other,"[35] creates a culture of contradiction. Hal Foster writes about a "fundamental fatigue" in such a culture: "a strange drive to indistinction, a paradoxical desire to be desireless, a call of regression that goes beyond the infantile to the inorganic."[36] This condition significantly affects and even disallows agency on the part of the subject.

Antoni can be seen in relation to the "desire to be desireless," in that her obsessive gnawing and re-forming of the spit out material led only to more products that dictate femininity and deny female subjectivity. Antoni's body was a kind of instrument through which the materials were transformed: she did not ingest them, only altered them into other forms with different meanings and functions. These meanings and functions could be seen in relation to her prior step of encountering abjection as further debasements of her self as a woman, further ways of disciplining her body. When she forced herself to continue gnawing on the disgusting lard, and the sore inducing chocolate, she seems to have been acting out aggression, objectifying herself in order to symbolically provide a

[35] Foster, p. 124.
[36] Foster, p. 122.

kind of battleground with two opposing sides for her actions. Through this, she became both the cause and effect of her aggressive act; and the fact that she created only more products that similarly force her into a position, is reiterative and troubling.

Perhaps this reiteration, a kind of double alienation or negative negation, is telling only of the condition of abjection. Kristeva writes,

> Put another way, it means that there are lives not sustained by *desire*, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on *exclusion*. They are ... articulated by *negation* and its modalities, *transgression, denial, and repudiation.*[37]

"The one by whom the abject exists ... *strays* instead of ... desiring, belonging, or refusing ... Often, moreover, he includes himself among [his abjections], thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations."[38] One endures the abject, "for [one] imagine[s] that such is the desire of the other ... *[T]hey* see that 'I' am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death."[39] Antoni's biting and spitting out worked to reveal the abject as the foundation of being. If we can see her in a kind of infantile position, when she took in the material, then rejected it, she seems to have been saying,

> 'I' want none of that element, sign of their desire; 'I' do not want to listen, 'I' do not assimilate it, 'I' expel it. But since the food is not an 'other' for 'me', who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*.[40]

The abject "appears in order to uphold 'I' within the Other." It does not seem to follow the superego's rules, but rather challenges them, merges with them. "It takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken

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[37] Kristeva, p. 6.
[38] Kristeva, p. 8.
[39] Kristeva, pp. 2-3.
[40] Kristeva, p. 3.

away – it assigns it a source in the non-ego, drive, and death. Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego)."[41]

Surprisingly, the abject quality of the process of creating *Gnaw* was not visible in the final exhibition of the cubes, chocolate boxes and lipsticks. This points to the same cover-up in the production of much of the food and products that are available to consumers: genetically manipulated, tested on animals, and garnered through inhumane breeding tactics and slaughter. By not seeing Antoni's retches and spitting, the viewer may have become aware of the impulse to cover up what is unpleasant. The piece then turned towards romance and superficiality, surfaceness: things one brings or puts on for a date, masks of perfect behavior – trying to be a gentleman and bring chocolates, trying to be a woman with a pretty red pouty mouth. The two "feed" into each other much like, one could say, the binge and the purge regulate each other. Producing more romantic feminine products from her contact with the abject seems to point to a kind of back and forth reiteration of the conventional feminine stereotype that a consumerist, patriarchal society proffers. Is this the only way a woman can be, or signify, a woman in such a society? Or conversely was Antoni enacting an aggressive, subversive woman, in an air of irony (we can hear her laughing in the background)? Kristeva contends, "laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection."[42] In the uncertainty of cohesion that Antoni created, she did risk a splitting of the ego, but also a kind of reunion with the self, a symbiosis in the reflexivity of using herself as a tool and material to work on artistically. She remained a borderline subject, which can be seen as a subversive gesture, providing

[41] Kristeva, p. 15.
[42] Kristeva, p. 8.

ground "for a sublimating discourse ('aesthetic' or 'mystical', etc.), rather than a scientific or rationalist one."[43]

Antoni's actions and the relative invisibility of her body also pointed to a kind of anonymity, a generic non-differentiation in gender. By means of a double negation, she seems to have cancelled herself out, resulting in a kind of impersonality. Her body, as mentioned before, could be seen as a kind of machine that processed and transformed the materials. Could this kind of anonymity point to a desire to be like everyone else, to not be different, to not be the "Other"? A machine is unaffected by chaos and rapid changes. There is a kind of solitude and seclusion that may be a necessity in a life with so much compounding imagery and roles to play. Given the confusion of gender roles and questioning of "proper" social etiquette that seems apparent in contemporary Western society, this "desire to be desireless" can be a way of adapting to the loss of common ideals, allowing a space of distance from the muddle.

In another way, the transformation of the materials as processed through Antoni's body pointed to a very subjective unease and anxiety at the separation from the material world. This brings us back to the infant's separation from the breast, the mother, and, in fact, the entire world, in order to assert his/her independence. While Antoni was physically separate from the cubes of chocolate and lard, she could chew the materials, incorporate them within her being and then spit them out, transforming them by combining the chocolate/lard with her own spit. "What had previously been absolutely separate had first to be absorbed, incorporated, then projected back into the world,

[43] Kristeva, p. 7.

externalized, but this time containing elements of her own body."[44] Thus her body was not exactly objectified. Rather, it was its organic nature (her spit), which enabled her to negotiate her independence from and at the same time her dependence on the materials, and by extension the outside world. The "outside" was thereby rebuilt, integrated with/from the "inside."

In any case, a distance from the body through methods of externalization can allow for knowledge of it. Antoni said, "In many of my works, I have been trying to get outside of myself to experience myself."[45] The repetition of her process in *Gnaw* allowed for this. Slowing down time and regulating it in a steady process is a way of aligning the body and its actions with time frames. The depth of involvement pushes self-consciousness out of awareness, deterring distractions and worries about how one is doing, or how one looks to others. The compulsive behavior that comprised Antoni's process, like real-life neuroses, seems to have taken over and she had to relinquish some degree of hold over its outcome. Just as the cube of lard unexpectedly collapsed and oozed over onto the floor, there were aspects of the work that contested Antoni's will. The process was also the content of the work, messy, chaotic, but needing a sense of structure and control. By relinquishing some of that control (and choosing the abject over the superego) Antoni could exist apart from it.

This seemingly self-effacing delve into abjection and desire to be desireless demands attention to the self (and by default, the body), but cannot occur with self-

[44] Author F. David Peat tells of a conversation he had with Antoni during which "I drew attention to the table which was physically separating us. Antoni hypothesized that she could chew the table, incorporate it within her being and then spit it out, particle by particle in order to rebuild it by combining the wood particles with her own spit, hair and flakes of skin." Online, available www.oraculartree.com/peat_alchemy_creativity2.html, accessed 31 August 2002.
[45] Antoni, as quoted in Bayliss, p. 165.

consciousness or self-centeredness too close at hand. A self-conscious person is constantly worried about how others perceive him/her, and cannot experience enjoyment. A self-centered person can see things only in relation to his/her desires. Either way, one's attention is directed too tightly around the self to allow for growth, transformation, and the ability to relate to activities for their own sake.[46]

> When people restrain themselves out of fear, their lives are by necessity diminished. They become rigid and defensive, and their self stops growing. Only through freely chosen discipline can life be enjoyed, and still kept within the bounds of reason. If a person learns to control his instinctual instincts, not because he *has* to, but because he *wants* to, he can enjoy himself without becoming addicted.[47]

The difference between having to do something and choosing to do something addresses the arena of self-improvement. The "have to" is in line with the superego's dictates of what one "should" do. The person who is constantly worrying about fitting in to those ideals cannot spare the energy to think about anything else, and the self cannot change, but must only be rigidified to conform. If one chooses to do something, there is a fluidity that can allow for transformation. Mimicry is a way to choose what one has to do and therefore distance oneself from the constraints of social imperatives.

The difference here can be exemplified in that between a vertical space and a horizontal space, a concept that is a component to Klein's theory. She aligns the horizontal field with the infant: "'[a] horizontal, punctuated duration rather than a historical, vertical temporal perspective.'"[48] A vertical space implies an externalized position or goal that one strives for. It can point to an ideal of perfection in terms of

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[46] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 84-5.
[47] Csikszentmihalyi, p. 115.
[48] Juliet Mitchell, ed, *The Selected Melanie Klein* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), p. 26, as quoted in Nixon, "Bad Enough Mother," p. 88.

identity or self-image, a standard, or a fixed goal. A horizontal space, on the other hand, can provide a "perpetual present"[49] to be marked with positions along its axis. "According to Klein, psychic life is structured by unconscious fantasies driven by bodily experiences, and these fantasies, present from early infancy, persist not as states into which the subject may regress, but as ever-present positions in which ... 'one is sometimes lodged.'"[50]

> Thus, the move from the gendered to the infantile body that [could be seen to] constitute a regression, functions in Kleinian terms simply as a shift of position along the horizontal axis of a model that theorizes, as [Juliet] Mitchell has written, "the very absence of history."[51]

One can see a horizontality of space in the "desire to be desireless." In a way, the repetitive process in the creation of *Gnaw*, and the creation of more products of feminine desire, comprised a horizontal space. The reiterative and ironic nature of the process can be understood as a position and not a finite resolution. As it created positions, not objectives, it can provide for a more fluid sense of self that yet retains structure, which in turn can relinquish anxiety in a subject that faces uncertain social imperatives.

Antoni's mimicry of this "desire to be desireless" provided a further layer of distance for her in the exercise. By locating the process of *Gnaw* within her body, she undertook an exercise in which the drives played a role, putting the ego at stake, getting her close, but not burned. The strategy of mimicry allowed her to explore the relationship of the self to desire and to the power of control. The fact that the viewer of the exhibition did not see her body, but only her teeth marks, pointed to incompleteness. When confronted with the chocolate boxes and lipsticks that were created, seemingly reiterating

[49] Nixon, p. 88.
[50] Nixon, including a quote from Mitchell, in "Bad Enough Mother," p. 73.
[51] Nixon, including a quote from Mitchell, in "Bad Enough Mother," p. 73.

the conventions of desire and femininity, one senses that her body was somewhere else, laughing at the absurdity.

CHAPTER 3: THE BORDERS OF THE BODY: JENNY STRAUSS'S *INTAKE*

California artist Jenny Strauss is one of the few artists ever to have used the overweight body in art. Moreover, Strauss used her own overweight body as the primary element in her most recent performance, *Intake*, which focused specifically on the status of her body as a social body. In her performance-based work, Strauss has used ritualized behavior, food, and durational endurance to explore cultural archetypes, social beliefs, and repression of instinctual urges. *Intake* brings the societal fear of being fat, issues of consumerism, personal control, and the human drives to the center of attention.

At noon on 25 November 1999, Strauss entered a warehouse/gallery space where she was to spend the next twenty-four hours living like a pig for her performance entitled *Intake*. The performance took place in Toronto under the curatorial direction of Paul Couillard of FADO, a Toronto-based, artist-run organization dedicated to performance art. *Intake* was part of FADO's year-long series of durational performances twelve hours in length or longer, called *Time Time Time*. The works in this series explored issues of ritual, endurance, attention span, community building, altering states of consciousness, narrative and transformation.[1]

The warehouse space of *Intake* housed several elements associated with or depicting pigs, ranging from the connotations of filth and gluttony to cuteness and cuddliness. Strauss inhabited the space, her naked, overweight body the principal material element of the work. Also included was garbage audience members were encouraged to bring in; eighteen bales of hay; a raw pork roast dressed in baby clothes in a baby basinet;

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[1] Available on FADO's website at *www.performanceart.ca.*

a pile of dirt that she urinated on; a plastic pool of mud; an armchair; a blanket; a mound of junk food, including potato chips and hundreds of Twinkies cakes; a papier-mâché pig that was intended to hold comments from visitors; and a television that repeatedly played the movie *Charlotte's Web* (a coming-of-age children's story involving a friendship between a pig and a spider) (Figure 13). By doing this she was inviting the comparison between her body and a pig, a comparison that she said she has encountered throughout her life.[2]

Strauss has said she had no way of knowing exactly what to expect during her performance of *Intake,* no matter how long or in which way she tried to prepare herself. Her initial idea was to "explore the idea of 'pigness'" since "as a fat woman [she has] been reacting to pigness [her] whole life."[3] Her choice of the word "intake" as a title for the performance had to do with consumption, on several levels:

> It was about everything that is ingested personally and culturally, everything we take in constantly – food, projections, information ... Looking up the word 'intake' in the thesaurus, three words stuck in my mind: accept, admit, receive. All of those words have multiple meanings. Accept that something is happening, accept it into your body. Admit the hidden, admit the shame to the world, allow admission. Receive information, receive grace, receive projections ....[4]

Thus, as in Antoni's work *Gnaw*, *Intake* had an allegorical dimension wherein food stood for consumerism and other behavior for which absorbing, expending, incorporating or partaking is symbolic.

Though the performance took place in Canada where the holiday takes place a month earlier, *Intake* was timed to coincide with the American Thanksgiving. Quite

[2] Press release for *Intake*, available *www.performanceart.ca/time3x/strauss/html.*
[3] Jenny Strauss, "The Performance Art Front," online, available *http://www.Sirius.com/~jenny/PAF/Intake/html.* Accessed 28 February 2001.
[4] Jenny Strauss, as quoted in "FADO interview: 'Encountering Endurance': A Conversation between Jenny Strauss and Paul Couillard," online, available *http://www.performanceart.ca/time3x/strauss/interview.html.* Accessed 7 June 2002.

literally, this holiday conjures images of people unbuttoning their pants after "pigging out" on too much turkey and fixings. It may be something that a great many, if not most, people do, but as an overweight woman Strauss has dealt with "pigging out" as an overriding social projection onto her character. The unwanted characteristics of a pig – lazy, filthy, selfish – become associated with overweight people in a society that clearly says, "happiness is being thin."

The range of emotions and motions that Strauss experienced during the twenty-four hours of the performance testified to the complexity of identity that stereotypes aim to deny.[5] She started the piece by entering the warehouse space on her hands and knees and smelling the garbage that had been brought in. Her choice to enter on all fours invited a literal comparison between her and an animal. She said, "Each thing had an individual smell – 'Oh, there's a banana peel; oh there's the smell of something molding; oh there's a nice smell of bathroom tissue …' I thought it might make me sick, but it didn't."[6] The sense of smell became pivotal to Strauss's and the viewer's experience of *Intake*, as the smells of the garbage, junk food, urine, hay, and general muddiness mingled together in the space with the progression of the performance.

After smelling the garbage, Strauss went on to explore the rest of the space with her nose and body (Figure 14). Over the course of the duration of the performance, she often sat in the rocking chair in silence or making rocking movements, only then to experience diverse emotions relayed through tears, seemingly hysterical laughter, mumbling, and sometimes screaming. The hundreds of Twinkies cakes at hand provided

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[5] Special thanks to Jenny Strauss and Paul Couillard for providing me with videotape of *Intake*, as viewing the performance proved invaluable to my sense of understanding of it.
[6] Strauss, as quoted in "FADO interview: 'Encountering Endurance': A Conversation between Jenny Strauss and Paul Couillard."

material for eroticized and novel interactions with junk food. Strauss also ran on spot in the pool of mud in order to heat it up and provide herself with a warm place to lay, the weight of her body apparent in this exhaustive exercise. She made mud imprints from her dirty body onto the wall, writing "PIG" in mud above the one of her back and making the imprint of the front of her body into the image of a pig goddess (Figure 15). She rocked and talked to the "baby" pork roast, seemingly comforted by the prospect of a companion, as incapable as the roast may be in this capacity.

Although there were long periods of Strauss sitting silently, she endured the twenty-four hours without any sleep. This is another factor to the performance that is important to its understanding, as Strauss was not only pushing herself to test her body's limits, but had also specifically constructed a twenty-four hour time period within a certain space in order to do this. The warehouse/gallery, as a non-artistic space, created a provocative and intense environment for her exercise. The performance fell at the end of a workweek and relatively few people, approximately sixty in total, saw it. This forced her to go through the experience in relative isolation, although,

> people came and went over the course of the whole performance, with the festival art director and a friend of [Strauss's] there for support [and to document the work, through video and photography,] almost the entire time ... [Strauss said] the hours from 3 a.m. to 7 a.m. were the most grueling, with dark outside the windows, no one there to watch and [her] exhausted and cold. It became difficult to be naked for such a long period of time.[7]

She said that the energy of the audience feeds her – "through their energy, I am given energy" – and because there were not many visitors to the performance of *Intake* she had to "find the energy somewhere else – and to stay inside of [her] experience no matter how

[7] Strauss, "The Performance Art Front."

difficult, isolating or frightening."[8] When there, the audience played a profound role, providing the physical presence of the gaze of others, which is what largely comprises body image and forces a confrontation of embarrassment, rejection or negative judgments based on the body.

The relationship to food was integral to the performance, to the concept of pigness and to broader issues at play in the work. Strauss began with eating large amounts of the junk food available, which included potato chips, Cheetos, and Kool-Aid. This is where it was necessary for her to start, and this is what directly mimicked not only the myth of overweight people "wolfing down food" (studies have shown no real difference between the way non-obese and obese people eat[9]) but also the eating disorder bulimia. Strauss binged, then spit out or purged the food. When her body gagged she forced more food into it, shoving it into her face. This could be seen as a sign of reprimand, punishing herself for her obesity; as an act of freedom and exhilaration, where calories do not count; or as an aggrandizement of what many people do, eating out of boredom. What Strauss did confirm is that the exercise induced extreme feelings of shame and humiliation.[10]

The food then became a tool in the performance that Strauss used in more complex ways (Figure 17). She said,

> I wanted to lay down somewhere soft, so I unwrapped the Twinkies and laid them in rows and made a bed out of them. Later I used the chips to make a mask [for my face, and hooked the Cheetos in my mouth so that I resembled a wart hog, something with fangs] ... [M]uch later, I made a junk food mandala [out of corn chips, Cheetos and potato chips].[11]

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[8] E-mail interview with Jenny Strauss, 18 March 2001.
[9] James R. Hodge and Erwin A. Maseelall, "The Presentation of Obesity," in *The Eating Disorders*, eds., A. James Giannini and Andrew E. Slaby (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1993), p. 38.
[10] E-mail interview with Jenny Strauss, 18 March 2001.
[11] Strauss, as quoted in "FADO interview: 'Encountering Endurance': A Conversation between Jenny Strauss and Paul Couillard."

The food became a source of comfort as a bed, particularly given the scratchy and uncomfortable nature of the hay, which was her alternative bedding. The laborious process of making the bed from the cakes, involving unwrapping each individually wrapped cake and laying it down in rows to form a large rectangle, hinted at another aspect of food: we have become accustomed to prepared and fast food to the point that the aspect of time and labor with it is avoided at all costs. We have become distanced from the animals (or chemicals) food often comes from, and the hands-on allocation of different parts of it for different human necessities like clothes and shelter. In this contemporary version, the Twinkie (an icon of American junk food) ironically answered the call to a fundamental need.

After a bout of shoving Cheetos into her mouth, Strauss began hooking them under her lips and then piling them on top of each other on the front of her face. She said, "something happens at certain points in any work like this where you are no longer doing actions that you planned." The Cheetos formed a kind of mask over her face, an "orange screen" which she saw through: "I suddenly felt 'not me' ... I definitely felt outside of the realm of my own experience. I left it there for a long time, until the whole thing fell down." [12] She then did a similar screen with potato chips, piling them on top of her face (Figure 18). She said,

> I felt [like] half a potato-chip-monster-god-goddess-thing and half human, looking at the world through a screen. Then I decided to get up and move as this entity ... Some of the chips fell, but the ones that remained looked like a snout. I started moving in circles around the space ... I started bending my knees and spreading my legs out, walking in an animal, ritual fashion ... I was being given strength in my body in a way that I couldn't have had on my own. I had been going for a long

[12]Strauss, as quoted in "FADO interview: 'Encountering Endurance': A Conversation between Jenny Strauss and Paul Couillard."

> time and I'm a big woman, so it takes a lot of energy to bend and have all my weight on my knees like that, but it felt wonderful.[13]

In this and in the creation of the "junk food mandala," there was a kind of spiritual function for the food. With the masks, the junk food again served as a kind of comfort, leading to a new feeling of energy that was likely sorely needed in light of the feelings of humiliation inflecting Strauss's experience of the performance. The mandala was Strauss's offering to the "pig mother," a source of inspiration for the work. There are many ancient sacred traditions that bestow the sow with fertility, security, and abundance. Pigs have been associated with and sacrificed to fertility, the Mother, the Underworld, and agricultural gods and goddesses such as Isis, Demeter, Tiamat, Mars, and Phaea. In contrast, the pig symbolizes desire/attachment in Buddhist iconography, and is represented on the Buddhist Wheel of Rebirth as one of the obstacles to be overcome in order for rebirth, alongside a snake (symbolizing anger) and a rooster (for ignorance). In Christianity the pig is for the most part associated with lust, gluttony, ignorance, and the Wrath of God, which seems to be from where the common day Western world's association has developed. What holds true across the board, whether the association is considered positive, as in fertility, or negative, as in gluttony or wrath, is that the pig is a highly symbolic, powerful, and sacred character.

The installation elements of the performance offered a view of the paradoxical ideas about pigs in western society. Not only are they considered dirty farm animals, hence the mud and hay, but also cute and decorative, as in collectible pig figurines, the sweet-hearted character of Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web*, and Clovis, the papier-mâché pig

[13] Strauss, as quoted in "FADO interview: 'Encountering Endurance': A Conversation between Jenny Strauss and Paul Couillard."

that welcomed visitors' comments with an innocent smile. This grouping of disparate characteristics of the pig pointed to the complexity of its projection onto people, from a subhuman, faulty animal to an anthropomorphized, benign one. When someone calls another person a pig, the immediate connotation may be someone who is greedy and overly self-indulgent, yet there are layers of meaning to this identification. Ironically, the pig is not associated with intelligence, although reports have shown that it is an intelligent animal, and its organs and skin are relatively compatible with humans'.

An interesting aspect of the stereotype of the pig is that despite its discursivity and complexity, once applied to a person it becomes definitive and superficial. It becomes a label of identification that aims to pin down what may disrupt the "perfect edges" of social norms and constraints: in this case, an overweight body. One might wonder at the distaste over indulgence in food in turn-of-the-century, Western society: the same self-indulgence and lack of self-constraint associated with an overweight person also keeps consumerist society turning. The difference lies in indulgence in the body versus indulgence in material products and goods; equally, both can "swallow one up." Fatness connotes failure and misery, while new products claim to guarantee comfort and ease of living, and serve capitalist society's aims. The exclusivity of seeing an overweight body abandoning caution and recklessly eating, or enacting the behavior of an eating disorder in public, points to the ambiguous disapproval of overeating in society. An overweight body is unwanted, not belonging, disturbing; the rareness of seeing an overweight naked body in the public, media, or even art points to this.

Strauss, by putting her overweight body on display in *Intake*, confronted the rarity of the presentation of obesity in the media. First, by being totally naked, and by being the

performer and therefore in the spotlight, she invited supreme focus on her body. Because of being negatively judged by society, many overweight people avoid social contact. They do not go anywhere their bodies are spotlighted, or else risk embarrassment and rejection. In severe cases they may not even leave their homes. Being naked in public exposed Strauss differently than private exposure could. It was in public that she could feel the weight of social constructions and the depth of her discomfort – there was nowhere to hide the raw physicality of her body, and the strangers who came to view the performance were free to think what they wanted to about her. This could force her to confront herself more directly and stay within her experience. It could also work to force the audience into a confrontation of the issues at hand.

In the sense that the overweight body touches on the fragility of boundaries and seems to summon anxiety of overproximity, it can be aligned with the abject. In fact, visually and formally, *Intake* can be qualified as abject art. Kristeva writes about the intolerable significance of the abject in society[14] and asserts that this powerfulness makes the abject regulatory of society and subjecthood, that it is what ultimately guarantees the social category, identity.[15] The viewer of *Intake* was confronted with things he/she does not want to see; things that are too close to him/her, things that disturb "identity, system, order," things that both repel and attract – what "shows [him/her] what [he/she] permanently thrust[s] aside in order to live."[16] Strauss's actions in *Intake*, eschewing "civilized" behavior in favor of a bodily experience of the drives (Figure 19), worked to question the repression of the drives that is supposed to take place in culture.

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[14] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 3-4.
[15] Frazer Ward, "Abject Lessons," *Art + Text* 48(1994), p. 50.
[16] Kristeva, pp. 3-4.

Her behavior and the fact that Strauss was naked were important to both her experience of *Intake* and that of the audience. Strauss said that she highly values the role of the audience, and sees her art work as a creation for cultural/social transformation, in which the witnessing of it creates it. This was surely an impetus behind her decision to include the papier-mâché pig that invited and held viewers' comments – most of which, she attested, were of personal experiences and views towards obesity and support for Strauss. But the performance also became a way to confront anger towards the public, as Strauss recounted: "In a way the performance felt like 'this is what you think about me, isn't it? Well, now suffer with the viewing of your own thoughts. You made me with your assumptions, now deal with them.'"[17] It is likely that at least some people would have found Strauss's appearance, mashing Twinkies into her face, offensive, but this discomfort is interesting as it can set the viewer into a process of reflection and introspection. It can lead one to see, physically and quite literally embodied in front of one, those parts of oneself that one does not want to. The temptation to retreat is almost always a sign of rejecting and retreating from the part of oneself that is capable of the same thing. In this way, *Intake* aimed to make others see both the complexity and the interdependence of being, the ways that each individual creates meaning for others. It is in the realization of this intersubjectivity that the performance, like much contemporary performance, could effect social change.

Strauss's presentation of her overweight body therefore held the potential of disclosing this relationship between obesity (abjection) and identity. The viewer may have realized his/her part in creating stereotypical beliefs about overweight people, and even the way that those beliefs have helped secure his or her own sense of identity,

[17] E-mail interview with Jenny Strauss, 18 March 2001.

thereby disproving the superficiality of the stereotype. In trying to explain why she undertook an emotionally (and physically) painful exercise for the performance, Strauss said, "I wanted to go towards the projection [of fat woman] rather than run from it – not as an act in overindulgence, but as an angry fuck you toward the culture that told me that's all I was in the first place."[18]

Embracing the "overweight-ness" of her body (the abject) and the superficiality of the stereotype of pigness could have a further cathartic effect. By mimicking the stereotype, she could garner distance from its projection onto her. Strauss was also clear that the work was not about making an overt political statement about fat people. She said, "It's not about cause and effect, it's about having an experience. I think it's important that audience members encounter my endurance. That I am a fat naked woman enduring means something different than if it were a thin man enduring."[19]

In choosing to inhabit the role of a pig, Strauss used the political strategy of mimicry that has been important in the history of feminist art. In contrast to the use of this strategy by early feminist body artists – overwhelmingly physically attractive females – where most of the behavior being mimicked consisted of ways of dressing or putting on make up and taking care of household chores, *Intake* mimicked another aspect of the construction of femininity. This is more in line with the traditional association between woman and voracious sexuality, witchcraft or hysteria. Strauss also mimicked bulimia, by binging and purging junk food. The viewer was shown the perspective of a particularized experience of an overweight woman, a woman who not only challenges the

[18] E-mail interview with Jenny Strauss, 18 March 2001.

[19] Strauss, as quoted in "FADO interview: 'Encountering Endurance': A Conversation between Jenny Strauss and Paul Couillard."

ideal of female beauty, but also represents a (threatening) feminine power in subversion. Strauss said,

> I'd say that in some sense I was firmly taking control through the performance of pigness. This is because it is a disempowered, out-of-control act to react to society's projections by trying to be everything but the thing one is projected as being.[20]

Instead of refusing to deal with those projections, Strauss situated herself in a position for them to literally bombard her. This, as she pointed out, was a step towards regaining control after spending much of her life "trying to be the 'perfect fat woman'"[21] and fit into society's confines.

Strauss's use of mimicry went further in the sense that not only did she point to the "negative" side of the stereotypical woman as formed by patriarchal desire, but that she also "really" experienced this foray into the stereotype with her own body, even though it was the social role of an obese woman that she was enacting. She worked through her personal relationship to it, not as a character. The element of real time in the performance effected this. Strauss described her personal relationship with time this way:

> Time is this thing that runs me. It runs other people. It's slippery. No matter how much anticipation you have for something, that thing happens and then it's over ... I want to make time stand still, but I don't want to be stuck in it.[22]

In the performance, time became a material element. The continuous replay of the movie *Charlotte's Web* in the far corner of the room played with the notions of time and banality or predictability; however, one need only think of two different audience members entering the space an hour apart to see the inherent fluidity of time: whereas

[20] Strauss, as quoted in "FADO interview: 'Encountering Endurance': A Conversation between Jenny Strauss and Paul Couillard."
[21] Strauss, as quoted in "FADO interview: 'Encountering Endurance': A Conversation between Jenny Strauss and Paul Couillard."
[22] Strauss, as quoted in "FADO interview: 'Encountering Endurance': A Conversation between Jenny Strauss and Paul Couillard."

one viewer might have seen Strauss sitting silently on the rocking chair, the other might have seen her creating the mandala, or running in the mud, or urinating on the pile of dirt. Thus time only appears to be fixed or fixable.

The time taken in each step in the process of Strauss making the bed, the masks, and the mandala was painstakingly deliberate: i.e., one potato chip at a time was laid down in the mandala; one Twinkie at a time was unwrapped and laid gently down in a row; and later on, the 204 Twinkie wrappers were brought, one by one, over to the garbage area. The process of paying such slow, careful and internalized attention to one's actions and surroundings can lead to a trance-like state. Each moment holds heightened awareness of one's surroundings.[23] Through repetition and extreme concentration one can equally lose consciousness of surroundings, becoming "more and more remote from others in the space,"[24] as one goes deeper into a trance state. This opens a door for things to happen that are unplanned, unwanted, unregulated or (socially) unacceptable. This may not lead to a complete "loss of self," but it can allow things to happen that jeopardize one's usual conception of one's identity, and put the ego at stake. Along with this, one could say that the slowing down of time had a pay-off for Strauss, who could feel some sort of regulation and control in an exercise that could have resulted in a continuous state of chaos, numbness, or boredom.

As well, the body changes throughout the day, hitting peaks and lows of energy, and affecting one's reactions and desires. Staying awake for twenty-four hours can push one's body towards a threshold, where more intimate and raw emotions can be accessed. The body weakens in a state akin to intoxication, in the sense that it may become more

[23] E-mail interview with Jenny Strauss, 18 March 2001.
[24] E-mail interview with Jenny Strauss, 18 March 2001.

emancipated from social imperatives for behavior. Strauss said, "That's the beauty of durational performances. You get to such a state of exhaustion that you become free, and you start to explore out of desperation."[25] This can help one go to places one does not go in everyday life: towards what is difficult and underlying to the judgments, preconceptions, and hopes one may have about oneself or others. Encountering deeper emotions than on an everyday level can be a transformative experience.

This slowing down of time, given the importance of food to the performance, conjured further associations with eating disorders. In cases of anorexia, bulimia and obesity – each different disorders, but all tied up in the obsession with food – time becomes a regulatory factor, as the appropriate amount of time in between eating is part of the psychological fixation on and dispersal of calories. The obsessive counting of calories and fixation on times for meals and portions of food provide a regulatory safety. This, and the regulation of food, is a way of feeling in (or out) of control of one's life. The anorexic's refusal of food is antithetical to everything that sustains life; herein lies the defiance of becoming what is prescribed or at least perceived as prescribed for one to do. Being overweight has been similarly discussed as a form of resistance in the face of approved gender roles and familial expectations.

At the same time, the physical effects of adrenaline and endorphin production that accompany and intoxicate an anorexic fast, and the rush experienced in a food binge, perhaps indicate a desire to escape responsibility and control. This combination of regulation and chaos makes eating disorders extreme and paradoxical conditions in which one is completely absorbed, constantly out of reach of relief and scrambling for control.

[25] E-mail interview with Jenny Strauss, 18 March 2001.

In cases of anorexia, bulimia and obesity, the attempt to have control over the body through food is constantly thwarted by an obsessive preoccupation with food itself. The refusal of the body entails a contradictory, intensified experience with it. Similar to the real-life enactment of the eating disorders, the conscious attention to time during the performance of *Intake* was endemic to any sense of control or lucidity in the "slippery" context. Although, it could also be said that this concentration of time also conjured a state in which Strauss faced an acute identification with her body and potential loss of self.

The focus on eating in *Intake* makes a discussion of bodily drives relevant. The decision to purposefully undergo this exercise in confrontation of personal pain provoked questions about individual control, choice, and identity involving the body. In the Western philosophical tradition, the body has been made inferior in relation to the superior mind; Plato exemplifies this view when he outlines in the *Republic* that "sensory experience, always relative and ambivalent, can never lead to knowledge or logical clarity. The seeker after knowledge must reject his bodily existence."[26] Whether or not one views the body in this way, it holds true that it is integral to, if not the ground of, subjectivity, and that disciplining or regulating the body is linked with disciplining or regulating the self. Eating disorders illustrate this connection.

Food carries not only caloric content and pleasing or displeasing tastes, but also has symbolic significance. Strauss pointed to this when she eyed a Twinkie towards the beginning of the performance. As if in a food fantasy, hundreds of the cakes lay before her. For once, she was not supposed to say no to them, but rather, was free to do whatever

[26] Plato, as quoted in Andrea Nye, "Woman Clothed with the Sun: Julia Kristeva and the Escape To/From Language," *Signs* 12:4(1987), p. 666.

she wanted in the experiment. Strauss picked up one of the cakes, still wrapped, and held it in her hands. The forbidden food was now recontextualized as free for the taking. She sat for a moment with it and appeared to relate both pleasure and fear over the now stupendous ease of simply having this prohibited food. She repeatedly licked along the edges of the cellophane wrapper, and squeezed the still-wrapped cake, so that it lost its form and became a mushy mixture of cake and frosting. She played with it in her mouth, biting at it, though it was still wrapped and therefore non-edible. There appeared to be a boundary between her and the food keeping her from indulging in it now that she knew she could, and did not need to nor could hide it if she did. As thin as the plastic wrapper, through which the food could be seen and felt, but not tasted or eaten, this boundary blocked the pleasure associated with eating by introducing guilt into the equation.

In this sense, the audience, or at least the ever-present possibility of viewers entering the space, played a foundational role. Strauss said that "to have witnessing without interaction was an amazing thing." [27] That she did not speak directly to audience members seems to have been a decision on the part of the audience members, for they were not barred from communication with her, and were able to walk throughout the space. People did come back to see what had happened with her (and upon returning would have seen her, most likely, in a different state of activity/inactivity.) At least one viewer indicated the wish to interact with her but did not; to the curator of the performance Paul Couillard, who was present, the audience member said, "'if she [Strauss] really were an animal, I would probably go over and pet her right now.' [Couillard] said, 'That's your impulse; you should go over and do it.' She said, 'but I

[27] Strauss, as quoted in "FADO interview: 'Encountering Endurance': A Conversation between Jenny Strauss and Paul Couillard."

know she's human, so I just can't go.'"[28] While this pointed to an interesting difference in the ways people relate to animals and other people, it also meant that Strauss could let her feelings and behavior go as long as they could possibly go, but at the same time have them witnessed. Her interaction with the Twinkies, for example, was both open-ended and unrestricted, and still visible and tied to outsiders' judgments and expectations of her particularized body. In this way, the public space and the audience acted as a "superego" to Strauss's exercise. They were the standard of social morality, providing a ledge from which she could see their effects on her life and could attempt to separate from them.

Strauss's focus on eating brings attention to the role her mouth played in creating the work, including what she said/was able to say. Her binge of junk food was integral to a construction of the quality of "pigness," to evoke the unpleasant imagery of gluttony and self-satisfaction that creates the perception of fat people "wolfing down" food. It was important that the viewer be directly confronted with Strauss's forced ingestion of junk food to be able to see that satisfying the urge to eat carelessly may not be the underlying reason for obesity. As the viewer saw her anguished face, gags and lurches to vomit the excessive amounts of food, he/she could understand that a libidinal satisfaction of taste buds had nothing to do with this intake of food.

By undergoing this performance that stemmed directly from personal confrontation with emotional pain, Strauss faced that which has helped create her self-image. In *Intake*, she confronted the objectification of her body and the subjection of it to power, through the subjectification of her experience: "What cannot be spoken may still

[28] Paul Couillard, as quoted in "FADO interview: 'Encountering Endurance': A Conversation between Jenny Strauss and Paul Couillard."

perhaps be shown and the silence broken by a personal and fractured poetry." But she could not do that "without risk of regression to psychosis or infantilism."[29] Laughing was interspersed with crying, periods of silence, rocking, and whatever else came to her. There were moments where it appeared as though she wanted to cry, but laughed, and vice versa, showing the connection between these two states of high emotion and degrees of rational abandon. In these states of emotion, something of Strauss's experience was communicated, though not (usually) through language (especially not during the time of binging, when speaking was physically impossible). With no one really to talk with but herself, Strauss encountered a kind of "free association" exercise in which she did not always make rational sense. There was a kind of futility in her isolation. If language is a bridge to connection with others, Strauss had little more than herself to tell her thoughts and feelings to, and thus questioned the foundational role of words.

The kind of language that inflected Strauss's performance was more akin to intuition, to body language, a nonverbal or preverbal language that was largely comprised sensorially. There are signals that one picks up from other people and objects through the senses of smell, taste, and touch. The "smell of garbage and Twinkies – the sweet sickly smell of Twinkies and of piss and [Strauss's] body"[30] – combined with her experience of taste, the coldness of the mud where she lay, the scratchiness of the hay, the decomposing garbage, in a bombardment of sensations that would also have confronted (to varying degrees) the viewer. In this immediacy and enclosure, there was a possible kind of symbiotic sensation within. Like the symbiosis with one's mother before separation,

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[29] Nye, p. 673.
[30] Strauss, as quoted in "FADO interview: 'Encountering Endurance': A Conversation between Jenny Strauss and Paul Couillard."

learning how to talk, and gaining independence, this sensorial experience was an encompassing one, and could thus be seen as a source of comfort.

This, however, did not guarantee it as a pleasant enclosure; smell can have a particularly strong emotive link to one's memories, and can conjure recollections that are both pleasant and unpleasant. In the case of *Intake*, the smells of urine, garbage, spilt junk food and spit-up, are not considered desirous smells, nor do they seem to offer any pleasant associations. These are not smells that one usually surrounds oneself with, particularly during times of eating. The disgust that they incur presents itself to one's being with immediacy, arresting the body in ways that may not be formable in language, but which are preverbal by nature.

The regression to the preverbal, infantile state is driven by the need to satisfy oneself, to avoid pain at all costs. The infant knows only the pleasure of being satisfied and the discontentment of not being satisfied or being physically hurt. Paradoxically, Strauss consciously subjected herself to displeasure and pain. She could not say for sure how the performance would unfold, but she was well aware before it began that it would be a physically and emotionally difficult twenty-four hours, and that the effects of her experience might be negative as easily as positive. She entered into the performance with both positive and negative preconceptions and notions: for example, a positive feeling of creating a social transformation and affecting viewers in a constructive way, and a kind of hatred towards the public and its construction of obesity as pigness. Her experience was infantile in that she brought herself to experience the elementary emotions of pleasure and pain, through eating; however, this state was an imposed one, and experienced from her perspective as an adult.

The narcissistic quality of the preverbal, infantile state, driven as it is by pleasure and self-satisfaction, relates to the maternal source. In relation to the oral stage, the mother provides the primary source of pleasure through the mouth by providing breast milk. In her regression to the oral stage, Strauss indicated a longing for a reunification with the maternal. This (utopian) reunion would necessarily entail a confrontation with the abject.

> The abject confronts us ... at this time within our personal archaeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling ... what, having been the mother, will turn into an abject.[31]

"The 'I' of logical order confronts the feeling, out-of-order, maternally identified 'me.'"[32] Kristeva has written about the

> attention to self as spiritual exercise, which she exemplifies with Plotinus' belief that the attainable ideal of self reflects the One (i.e. God), and she draws out resonances between the relationship of the self to the One and the relationship of the girl child to the all-powerful mother.[33]

It is possible to see Strauss's performance as a longing for "truth," and that as a reunion with a maternal source, through a reunion and symbiosis within.

Freud wrote about guilt, the need for punishment, and the superego in his essay "Civilization and Its Discontents." He contended that

> the super-ego is an agency which has been inferred by us [whose] function consists in keeping a watch over the actions and intentions of the ego and judging them, in exercising a censorship. The sense of guilt, the harshness of the super-ego, ... is the perception which the ego has of being watched over in this way, the assessment of the tension between its own strivings and the demands of the super-ego. The fear of this critical agency ... , the need for punishment, is an instinctual manifestation on the part of the ego, which has become masochistic under the

[31] Kristeva, p. 13.
[32] Nye, p. 681.
[33] Hilary Robinson, "Border Crossings: womanliness, body, representation," *New Feminist Art Criticism*, ed., Katy Deepwell (Manchester: 1995), p. 142.

> influence of a sadistic super-ego; it is a portion, that is to say, of the instinct towards internal destruction present in the ego, employed for forming an erotic attachment to the super-ego.[34]

Following this, Strauss would have been striving for the love of those who view her unfavorably because of her appearance. But this was not exactly it: Strauss was looking for self-acceptance, to a negotiation between the social construction of her body and the ways that that construction does not hold up to her character. In order to do this, she had to (somewhat masochistically) subject herself to a bodily alignment with that construction, a pig. Hers was ultimately an attempt at control (and therefore, one could say, pleasure). Resolution lay in the gap between the socially constructed experience of her obesity, and her need to assert her difference from that. Like the early feminist body artists, she had to objectify her body in order to experience its subjectivity. Society objectified her body already, and the performance of *Intake* further objectified it, creating a recognition of her "doubly alienated" status in society as a woman who is overweight. This severity allowed her to gain a distance from the body in order to see how it might be.

Aggression, though traditionally coded as masculine, is a structuring element of subjectivity for both sexes. Freud asserted that "our civilization is built up on the suppression of instincts,"[35] and that this inhibition leads to aggression. Strauss's renunciation of "civilized" behavior in her exploration of the hunger drive brought about a confrontation with aggression, and with behavior that could be labeled "aggressive" because it does not follow social etiquette of appropriate demeanor in the public. By way

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[34] Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents (1930) [1929]" in *Civilization, Society and Religion, Group Psychology, Civilization and Its Discontents, and Other Works*, ed., Albert Dickson, trans., James Strachey (New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 1955), p. 330.
[35] Freud, "'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness (1908)" in *Civilization, Society and Religion, Group Psychology, Civilization and Its Discontents, and Other Works*, p. 38.

of the relationship of aggression to social mores – particularly for a woman – it seems antithetical to life to invite it unto oneself. The patriarchal structuring of masculine and feminine characteristics by way of inscribing hierarchy (which is confronted in the preverbal state) leaves little room for an aggressive female to exist in agreement with social ideals. The aggression makes judgments from others more easily defended, and thus leads to social isolation and discrimination. Why would one choose to face, within a concentrated time period, to a concentrated degree of potency, an experience that makes one especially fearful and/or angry? Strauss's anger was as much towards society as it was, presumably, towards herself; a mixture of disgust over the degradation of her self as an obese body in North American society, and her own feelings of struggle or even disgust over her physical appearance, augmented by the abjection she submitted herself to. Although, it is fair to say, that without the "superego" of society Strauss would not have judged herself in this way, and that society's expectations could be perceived in different ways and to different degrees by different people. The performance was aimed, somewhat directly, towards and within herself.

In the way that it inevitably led back to and was bound within her self and her body, Strauss's performance of *Intake* could then be seen as a narcissistic venture. This narcissism was not physical per se, in the way that Wilke and Schneemann's work with their culturally defined beautiful bodies has been perceived, but it was a concern with self-image. (Perhaps my belief that it could not have been about narcissism in the physical sense only reveals my biases towards physical beauty as influenced by my social context. Paleolithic sculptures like the *Venus of Willendorf* (c. 28,000 – 25,000 B.C.) show that obesity was considered prosperous and desirable in women during prehistoric

times. It still is, at the time of writing, in some societies. In addition, analyses indicate "that thin has become beautiful during periods of upheaval, periods of transition, periods of war, and when new knowledge becomes important. Plumpness is seen as more attractive during periods of stability"[36]).

The concern with self-image apparent in Strauss's work was not explicitly with outer appearance. Rather, it harbored the socio-cultural belief in the concept of inwardness: on an inner personality and inner morals that one must search out. In reference to Freud's assertion of self-punishment as a longing for an erotic attachment with the superego, Strauss's foray into pain was a strongly ego-centered exercise. In dealing with the ego, the denial of desire reinforces desire, perhaps summoning it in others. Anger against one's own anger doubles the anger; in trying to humiliate the ego, one only serves to prove the ego exists and that it is strong. Similarly, in eating disorders, the attempt to have control over the body through food is constantly thwarted by an obsessive preoccupation with food. That which one wishes to have freedom from is precisely what stops that freedom from becoming. In the historic report on anorexia by Sir William Withey Gull (credited with first using the term anorexia in 1874), "he attributed a major role to psychological factors in his assumption that it was caused by 'perversions of the "ego."'"[37] That is, believing that one is allowed only so much to eat leads one to obsess on the amount of food one has. The constant preoccupation with defiance creates a greater state of paralysis and depression for the anorexic, who is always fighting against feeling enslaved by her body.

[36] James R. Hodge and Erwin A. Maseelall, "The Presentation of Obesity," *The Eating Disorders*, p. 29.
[37] Andrew E. Slaby and Randal Dwenger, "History of Anorexia Nervosa," *The Eating Disorders*, p. 10.

The body was the material that became the site of Strauss's struggle. Her refusal of sensorial comfort led to an experience of raw, body-centered emotion. In the focus on bulimia and obesity in the work, the weight of the body retains importance. Studies have shown that the body tends to settle around a certain weight usually set early on in life. Overeating during some previous period in a person's life may mean that the body sets itself biologically at that point. "Because of sociological pressures, obese people attempt to reduce their weight below the set point that is biologically normal for them so that they become biologically underweight (and feel starved) while remaining statistically overweight."[38] This sets up a cycle in which the body itself becomes defiant to control and shaping; it seems to have a mind or knowledge of its own. The body fights external regulation.

The obese body, however, was not the sole issue in *Intake*; the struggle was not over weight per se, or the hunger drive (the Id) alone. Nor was it just about the exertion of power from authority figures like one's parents or society (the Superego). Rather, the struggle lay within the subject's negotiation (the Ego) between the two in search for compromise and unity. In seeking this, the ego must explore both the unconscious, bodily-driven instincts and engage with external reality to a certain degree. The moral imposition of others is inescapable in reality, where social beings exist and the public sphere more and more usurps private life. The bodily drives, however, present particularly fertile ground for the seeker after self-understanding. The disordered structure of the infantile state could be a way of mimicking the disorder of society and exposing the narrative form that Western culture chooses to represent reality with as inadequate. It could therefore allow a person to have a more individually grounded

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[38] Hodge and Maseelall, p. 36.

experience that is not made under conformity to a perceived ideal. The drives offer the gift of materiality (in the body) and a somewhat androgynous, pared down territory in which to explore. They are something that cannot, thankfully, be controlled. This means that an individual may not have control over them, but equally so, nor can authoritative sources.

By demarcating her experience and performing it as an artwork, Strauss could to some degree – and temporarily – objectify it. There is a distinction between accepting suffering as it comes versus creating suffering for one's self. The anorexic, for example, chooses and fights her own battle, making the attempt to come clean of desire a life mission of futility. Significantly, while the anorexic fights the authority of "superego" figures like one's parents, the performance of *Intake* was as much an exercise for Strauss herself as it was for the audience. This is one instance of greater fluidity in the construction of the artwork rather than in a "real life" experience; this is how the witnessing of the performance can lead to "cultural/social transformation." For the anorexic, the specific relationship to the role of the mother, and the weight of cultural constructions of the mother and codes of femininity, prompt her to fast, to "get it off, all off." Even the menstrual period, involved in social and food taboos around the world, literally ceases to exist for the anorexic, a welcomed rejection of its significance. This seems to be more a denial of the abject than a facing of it.

For Strauss, there has been a lasting effect of her step in the ambiguous space of the preverbal, allowing for "brief moments of acceptance."[39] She said,

> I was never comfortable eating alone in public until *Intake*. I feared harassment, dirty looks and judgment of others. Since that performance though, I've been able to eat without company in restaurants. This is a profound change in my life.[40]

[39] E-mail interview with Strauss, 18 March 2001.

Intake, then, did result in a kind of self-transformation. The experience of a personal, body-centered understanding and familiarity with – and paradoxical distancing from – herself led to a transformed understanding of her body. Her mimicry of the stereotype of obesity as pigness externalized the projected metaphor; that is, as she embraced it, she gained a distance from it and more control of its effects on her everyday life.

The objectification of her body was necessary for a transformation to take place. A mimicked regression to an infantile, preverbal state allowed Strauss to gain some objectivity by its very preverbal, sensorial, and disordered nature. She could, for this duration, free her energy from "trying to be the 'perfect fat woman.'"[41] From there she could explore aggression and destructive capabilities of her own. In *Intake*, despite the high visibility of Strauss's body – as opposed to, for example, Antoni's relatively invisible body in *Gnaw* – one can see how the body does not necessarily guarantee presence. Strauss had to fight to stay within her experience of the work, and in the midst of the surrounding pigness, one questions what of the real Strauss we were able to meet.

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[40] E-mail interview with Strauss, 18 March 2001.
[41] E-mail interview with Strauss, 18 March 2001.

CHAPTER 4: WOMEN, FOOD, AND ASCETICISM: THE LIVES OF ANOREXICS AND MEDIEVAL WOMEN MYSTICS

The preceding chapters have addressed issues in recent feminist body art, namely a return to the physical female body and a kind of organized or mimicked regression to an infantile state. In addition, as both Antoni and Strauss mimicked the eating disorder bulimia in their works, the relationship between women and food has been addressed. Overwhelmingly, the connections between women, hunger, eating and orality are entangled in the social regulation of desire. The female body has historically served as a measure by which taboos, and therefore power, danger, and desire, have been delineated for a society. Women's activities and bodily processes have been regarded as deviant: at the border known by the sorceress and the hysteric. "Bodily orifices are especially invested with the symbolism of power and danger ... In many cultures, matter that issues from bodily orifices – spittle, blood, milk, urine, or feces – attests to ... the threat of pollution."[1]

How can body art that features a kind of regression to orality, and focuses on the mouth not for its link to spoken language but for its mechanics of licking and biting, be a socio-political tool? In order to address this question, I will look at eating disorders, including anorexia nervosa and bulimia, and medieval women mystics' use of ascetic practices involving food. Issues of self-control, independence, and gender roles arise in these ritualistic actions organized around food, and offer insight to the question of agency

[1] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1969), p. 121.

– not only for these "real-life" women's experiences with orality, but also for the subjectivities demonstrated in Antoni and Strauss's artworks.

A psychoanalytic discussion of eating disorders will elaborate on the relationship between the body and the regulation of eating, as it induces both a sense of control and an experience of chaos within the body. The turn-of-the-century upsurge in cases of eating disorders will be discussed in relation to this paradoxical "flight from and to the body," the mother-daughter relationship, and late capitalism, in order to establish the complexity of the disorders as personal, politicized strategies. The fasting practices of medieval women mystics – or "holy anorexia" – will be discussed to further elucidate the forces behind the specific relationship that can exist between women, food, and orality. Despite tremendous differences in social contexts, the medieval mystic's fasting and use of orality can be used to reflect on contemporary practices involving fasting, asceticism and orality. In fact, the medieval woman mystic's activities provide an exemplary moment for a discussion of women and food: within the confines of Christendom, fasting was a highly symbolic act that allowed the mystic to negotiate her place within her uncertain, patriarchal society, effecting an ambiguous agency. The traditional Judeo-Christian view of the body as inferior to the spirit or mind, and the association of woman with the body and man with the mind, played an integral role in her actions. This tradition persists in western culture, affecting those with eating disorders; it is manifested in the media and in industries designed to enforce control on the body.

The discussion of this relationship for both contemporary women with eating disorders and medieval women mystics will further work to contextualize the notions of embodiment and autonomy in Antoni's *Gnaw* and Strauss's *Intake*. What kind of

tradition, or even universal need, were Antoni and Strauss emulating when they elected this strategy incorporating orality? I will show that women's relationship to food has always been the site of a complex social and political struggle and efficiency in relation to the mother and to the patriarchal order.

Barely known a century ago, anorexia nervosa and bulimia, marked respectively by self-starvation and binging then purging food, have reached epidemic proportions since the 1970s. A study in 1993 indicated that over half the college women in North America suffered from some sort of eating problem,[2] and other studies in the 1990s revealed that as many as twenty percent of all private-university women were bulimic;[3] in addition, bulimia often occurs along with anorexia. "The reported ratio [in 1996] of female to male anorexics and bulimics [was] nine to one."[4] This discrepancy is not surprising given the extreme supremacy of images of women and thinness in the media. Through this inculcation, women are shown body ideals that are simply unattainable for the majority of them, but which nonetheless signal attractiveness, independence, and happiness. Significantly, overall, "anorexia and bulimia are present in the industrialized western societies and are absent in non-western cultures."[5] Thus visual culture is indeed closely related to eating disorders.[6] In North America, cases of anorexia markedly diminished during the "roaring twenties'" deconstruction of sex role stereotypes, only to

[2] From a study by Betz and Fitzgerald (1993), as quoted in Peter Gray, *Psychology*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 1994), p. 608.
[3] A. James Giannini, "A History of Bulimia," in *The Eating Disorders*, eds., A. James Giannini and Andrew E. Slaby (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1993), p. 20.
[4] Sharlene Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin Enough Yet? The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 129, n. 1.
[5] Wioleta Polinska, "Bodies under siege: eating disorders and self-mutilation among women," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68:3(September 2000), p. 572.
[6] Polinska, p. 572.

increase sharply in the 1960s and 1970s with the shift in attention to sexual freedom, rapidly changing beauty ideals, and popular culture.

> Studies documented the shift towards the thin body by analyzing changes in the *Playboy* centerfolds and in the criteria for Miss America Pageant Contestants from 1959 to 1988[, ... and comparing the findings] to the female average weight. As the ideal became increasingly emaciated, the average woman under thirty has become heavier.[7]

But media embracement and aggrandizement of slenderness is not the sole, nor should it be viewed as the primary, force behind distorted behavior related to eating. Anorexia, for example, is a disorder "with familial, perceptual, cognitive, and, possibly, biological factors interacting in varying combinations in different individuals."[8] Dysfunctional family characteristics of overprotection, depression, mental disorders and sexual abuse have been linked with anorexia and bulimia. Those with eating disorders feel out of control of their lives. In fact, it is not the fear of being fat that leads to eating disorders, but rather, anxiety over the unruliness of the drive of hunger.

This constant to every human body – the drive of hunger – is at the core of human survival. When it (like the other drives of thirst and sex) ceases to exist, so do we; therefore it has powerful consequences to a notion of self. One cannot possibly conceive of oneself independent of the drives or the body. As a desire and a primary pleasure, hunger – or food – can be used as a punishment and a reward. Furthermore, in the Western tradition,

> the "virile" capacity for self-management is decisively coded as male. By contrast, all those bodily spontaneities – hunger, sexuality, the emotions – seen as needful of containment and control, have been culturally constructed and coded as female ... Female hunger has long been a powerful cultural metaphor for female power, desire, and sexuality. If there is "no such thing as an uncoded body," then

[7] Polinska, p. 573.
[8] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 140.

> the body's determination by the culture's practices may be particularly exemplified by hunger.[9]

As so fundamentally significant to the self, eating and hunger become important avenues for exploring or delineating the relationship of the self to desire. The body provides the material for control or improvement of the self.

It has been discussed that those with anorexia identify the body with the female self – dependent and needy – as it has been stereotyped throughout Western discourse. The feeling of being at the mercy of events (passive and therefore typically "feminine") is an underlying force in eating disorders. Hilda Bruch, a psychoanalyst who contributed several case studies of anorexia commencing in 1961, reported that many anorexics "talk of having a 'ghost' inside ... 'a little man who objects when I eat.'"[10] This masculinization of the part of the self that can exert control and strength of will shows that it is the "male side ... that is being expressed and developed in the anorexic syndrome."[11] An important point here is that, while anorexia can lead to a woman looking like a man (losing "womanly" curves, stopping the menstrual period and even growing facial hair), the regulatory binging and purging of the bulimic tends to keep the body within the frame of a more "womanly" shape. In fact, "most bulimics are of normal weight or very close to a normal weight for height."[12] Therefore, although

> bulimia is thought to be four to five times more common than anorexia, [it] is more difficult to detect. Bulimics are usually secretive about their gorge-and-purge episodes, and since there is often nothing about their external appearance to alert anyone to the presence of the disorder, the condition goes undiagnosed unless they seek help themselves.[13]

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[9]Ellen Driscoll, "Hunger, Representation, and the Female Body," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 13:1(Spring 1997), pp. 95-6.
[10] Hilda Bruch, as quoted in Bordo, p. 155.
[11] Bordo, p. 155.
[12] June Ventimiglia, "Dietary Management of Eating Disorders," *The Eating Disorders*, p. 261.
[13] Hesse-Biber, p. 81.

The secrecy inherent to bulimia perhaps intensifies the addictive pull of the preoccupation of food. In Antoni's *Gnaw*, the mimicry of bulimia exhibited the secrecy and isolation of the body endemic to her bulimic actions. A bulimic feels the back and forth movement of binge and diet, chaos and control (culturally coded as feminine and masculine, respectively), largely under a veil of secrecy.

To the person suffering from an eating disorder, hunger is an uncontrollable force, originating from somewhere outside of her grasp. It is a separate, alien thing that divides the body from the self. The

> "basic delusion ... of not owning the body and its sensations" is a typical symptom of all eating disorders ... Patients with eating disorders have similar problems in identifying cold, heat, emotions, and anxiety as originating in the self.[14]

Thus the body is experienced as a kind of alien to the self, as confinement and limitation, and as the enemy against one's attempt at control.[15] If we can say that in these cases the body is aligned with the female self through the quality of dependence, this points to a rejection of traditional female roles and social limitations, through the rejection of the body's needs. A fundamental rejection of authority in the defiance of becoming what is prescribed or at least perceived as prescribed for one to do takes place in the refusal of food (most apparent with anorexics), since refusing to eat is antithetical to everything that sustains life.

Susan Bordo writes about how this view of the body as an obstacle mirrors the Western dualistic philosophy of body/mind that has been handed down through Plato, Augustine, and Descartes, in her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Culture, and the*

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[14] Hilda Bruch, as quoted in Bordo, p. 147.
[15] Bordo, pp. 144-5.

Body. Such body imagery leaves one feeling trapped within the body and only results in creating more anxiety over self-control. As Bordo puts it,

> the attempt to subdue the spontaneities of the body in the interests of control only succeeds in constituting them as more alien and more powerful, and thus more needful of control. The only way to win this no-win game is to go beyond control, to kill off the body's spontaneities entirely – that is, to cease to *experience* our hungers and desires. This is what many anorexics describe as their ultimate goal.[16]

The futility of this quest for bodilessness – the desire not to "be" body, to be nonbody (the thin body), or the "desire to be desireless" – prompts Bordo to conclude that eating disorders collude with the oppression of women by participating in the normalizing imperative of thinness. In cases of both anorexia and bulimia, a temporary achievement of control over the body through food results ultimately in self-destruction. For the anorexic, symptoms can range from anxiety, depression, and infertility to death by starvation. For the bulimic, feelings of anxiety and depression can be coupled with "esophageal irritation, dental erosion, and gingivitis," among other symptoms[17] if, for example, laxatives or drugs are used as a means of undoing the effects of the binge. Thus the disorders do not, in the end, seem to provide any sense of real empowerment. In fact, they sustain the view of the body as a confinement of the self by eluding attempts at control and causing more physically rooted problems.

Eating disorders thus seem as much about the loss of control as any procurement of it, about anxiety over things getting too big to handle while that anxiety itself spins out of control. The physical effects of adrenaline and endorphin production that accompany and intoxicate an anorexic fast, and the "high" that one experiences from an excessive, indulgent binge, perhaps indicate a desire for an illusionary experience, an escape from

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[16] Bordo, p. 146.
[17] Polinska, p. 571.

reality, responsibility, and control. Both of these disorders exhibit a desire to be free of the caloric effect of food (its chief consequence). At the same time, the obsession over food and the meticulous regulation of caloric intake, times for meals and portions of food provide a regulatory safety. This combination of order and chaos creates the circular quality that prevents resolution in eating disorders.

The fact that the disorders of anorexia and bulimia "are especially high in the female adolescent student population"[18] is important, for it is perhaps at no other time than this that the female body undergoes such great biological changes. One's acceptance by one's peers, and the relationship to one's parents, can be exceptionally poignant during adolescence as well. It is at this time that one begins to have more influence over the shape of one's experiences. This brings one to the qualities of interpersonal distrust, perfectionism, and maturity fears that are key psychological markers of eating disorders.[19] It also brings the parent-child relationship into focus, particularly the mother-daughter relationship. Sharlene Hesse-Biber's study of college women suffering from eating disorders showed that the father tends to remain silent about his daughter's body image.[20] In contrast, the mother is often insistent on thinness and her attitudes about her own body image and eating behavior can strongly influence her daughter. Indeed,

> having a mother who is obsessed with being thin and who diets regularly is considered ... [a] risk factor for the development of an eating problem in an adolescent girl ... [who can mimic] her mother's attitudes about weight and eating issues in her own way, by becoming bulimic[, anorexic or overweight.][21]

While previous theories on eating disorders have linked them with psychosexual development (anorexia as the fear of oral impregnation and a rejection of sexuality) or

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[18] Hesse-Biber, p. 129, n. 2.
[19] Hesse-Biber, p. 82.
[20] Hesse-Biber, p. 88.
[21] Hesse-Biber, p. 87.

with biological factors (linked with the body's chemical imbalance that is an indication of depression), many studies in the 1990s focused on family dynamics, especially the mother/daughter relationship, as the key influential factor.[22]

The relationship between food and the mother is in fact inherent, as the mother nourishes the fetus inside the womb, and provides it with its first food, milk, after birth. Importantly, an infant's cryings out – his or her means of a language – are largely wails of hunger for food. Thus food and language are closely connected. In terms of the infant's process of gaining autonomy from the mother, the breaking away from her is a long and significant one, part of the relationship between food, desire, and language. Recent research has shown that a struggle to break away from an overbearing mother is a consistent force behind cases of anorexia. Many anorexics use the necessity of food to mark out their battle for autonomy from the control of the mother and preconceived gender roles for women. The anorexic feels unable to lead a life of her own, over-controlled by her mother – or both parents – and "locked in a desperate fight against feeling exploited and enslaved."[23] She refuses to follow the mother's demands or role, instead choosing to starve: "I can't gain weight, I can't be like my mother tied to home, dishes, laundry, a husband, my father ... I can't be that woman. I won't be. No kids. ... No belly, no fat, I don't eat. I get it off, all off."[24] Somewhat conversely, an anorexic may also mimic her mother's anorexic or other distorted eating behavior, in effect building on her mother's own use of food as a tool for control of the self. The mother-daughter relationship remains paramount in both scenarios.

[22] Hesse-Biber, p. 15.
[23] Andrew E. Slaby and Randall Dwenger, "History of Anorexia Nervosa," *The Eating Disorders*, p. 14.
[24] Joanne Giannino, "The Menu for Love," *Heresies* 6:1(1987), p. 59.

Several contemporary scholars have discussed anorexia in relation to the ascetic practices of late medieval women mystics. The relationship between food, desire, language, and the mother was central to the lives of these women and their pronounced behavior involving food. The medieval mystics

> mutilated themselves with knives, whipped themselves with chains, wore crowns of thorns, gorged [and starved] themselves, experienced stigmata, elongated their bodies, burned their skin, and suffered debilitating illnesses.[25]

Given that late medieval asceticism "arose in a religious world whose central ritual was the coming of God into food as macerated flesh,"[26] many women mystics of this time abstained from all food but the Holy Eucharist. In the miraculous events linked to their asceticism,

> their bodies bore stigmata[, or] their breasts or mouths [proffered] healing, saving fluids. In their mystical ecstasy, these "women ate and became a God who was food and flesh. And in eating a God whose body was meat and drink, women both transfigured and became more fully the flesh and the food that their own bodies were."

The women mystics' abstinence from food exemplifies how "food links the social body with its individual members."[27] "Food is important to women religiously because it is important socially."[28] Food preparation was the basic social responsibility of women in Medieval Europe (as it has been in many cultures across history). In Europe during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries,

> food structured the culture, dividing rich from poor, and informed its ethic: overeating was a mark of privilege, and sharing food ... was a primary symbol of benevolence .... [Moreover,] food was the sign that marked the borders of Christendom. The body that ate or refused food, so imbued with religious

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[25] Polinska, p. 570.
[26] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 294-5.
[27] Bynum, p. 248.
[28] Bynum, p. 189.

> meaning, was the primary vehicle by which – through feast or fast – the tasks of Christendom were carried out.[29]

Therefore, food and its denial (given that world-denial was a favorite Medieval religious theme) procured much symbolic meaning.

Significantly, the ascetic practices occurred drastically more in the lives of women saints than men during this time. "Self-starvation (or 'holy anorexia') was so common among women that it affected between 37 and 61 percent of saints from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries."[30] Men saints expressed their spirituality quite differently, renouncing what they controlled – money, property, sexual activity, and family ties. Since food was the resource that women controlled,

> [they] found it easier to renounce eating than anything else ... It was far more difficult to flee one's family, to deny a father's plans for one's betrothal, or to refuse sexual relations to a husband than it was to stop eating.[31]

For the mystic, fasting and charitable food distribution, and their miraculous counterparts – surviving on the Eucharist alone, food multiplication miracles, the female body that exuded food or curing liquid – were thus, in one sense, religious expressions of social facts, manifesting in religious behavior the sexual division of labor.[32] "To prepare food is

[29] Martha Reineke, "'This is my body': Reflections on abjection, anorexia, and medieval women mystics," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58(Spring 1990), p. 252.
[30] Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 146, as quoted in Polinska, p. 570. Martha Reineke explains how Bell arrives at his figures in her article "'This is my body': Reflections on abjection, anorexia, and medieval women mystics," p. 253: Bell narrows his focus to the Italian peninsula and to those 261 women recognized by the Roman Catholic Church as saints, blessed, venerables, or servants of God. Excluding 90 women about whom the historical record remains virtually silent, of the remaining 170, half engaged in severe ascetic practices. Using J.P. Feihgner's criteria for anorexia nervosa, Bell demonstrates that for 39 percent of these women, an anorexic pattern is evident. Amongst the Dominicans, the pattern is evident in over half the women. Caroline Walker Bynum augments this research by looking not only at female hagiography but also at the lives and writings of men, confirming the exceptional value placed on hunger and food in the lives of women saints as compared to men.
[31] Bynum, p. 193.
[32] Bynum, pp. 192-3.

to control food,"[33] and "if women's food distribution or food avoidance became acute enough to disrupt their role as food preparer, it could wreak havoc with social relations .... [and] be an extremely effective form of manipulation."[34] Indeed, for the women mystics, their

> food practices frequently enabled them to determine the shape of their lives – to reject unwanted marriages, to substitute religious activities for more menial duties within the family, to redirect the use of fathers' or husbands' resources, to change or convert family members, to criticize powerful secular or religious authorities, and to claim for themselves teaching, counseling, and reforming roles for which the religious tradition provided, at best, ambivalent support.[35]

Through these practices the mystics enlisted their bodies in order to effect salvation on others. Their bodily practices tested and sometimes broke, though ambiguously, the borders of prescribed gender roles, affording them significantly powerful religious roles. The mother/infant relationship, somewhat surprisingly, held a specific relevance within the context of the medieval women mystics' efforts: in the medieval social context, the female (social) body was a metaphor for the physicality of Christ, who was seen as a kind of "Mother of humanity." Thus by aligning themselves with the flesh of Christ through the Holy Eucharist, the mystics were also addressing the role of the mother.

Interestingly, "perhaps at no other time were the fractures at the foundations of the phallic economy deeper or the possibilities for women's subversion of the Law greater than during the late medieval age."[36] The instability of social order during this time, the immense power of the church in society, and the backlash against the church's growing materialism allowed for openings in the social infrastructure and new

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[33] Bynum, p. 191.
[34] Bynum, p. 192.
[35] Bynum, p. 220.
[36] Reineke, p. 263.

opportunities for women's religious roles. Similar to the importance of the factor of adolescence to contemporary young females with eating disorders, the precarious and changing nature of medieval society was pertinent to the women mystics and their ascetic rituals involving food (and other elements).

> The period from 1100 to 1400 saw not only the creation of new types of religious life for women but also an increase in the number of female saints ... The proportion of female saints rose from less than 10 percent in the eleventh century to about 28 percent in the fifteenth.[37]

Particularly from the thirteenth century on, research shows that religious women fulfilled fewer roles that paralleled typically male roles, and gained the possibility of shaping their own religious experiences, even though there remained resistance on the part of the Church towards women's religious power.[38] In fact, the women mystics' relationship to food was used as an alternative to, and a critique of (the male forms of) religious authority. It was, in part, a rejection of the "triumph" and success of the late medieval church.[39]

The mystics' practice had to do with a disapproval of and detachment from the materialism of the world, and with using the "possibilities of [the body's] full sensual and affective range to soar ever closer to God."[40] Their type of discipline, known as asceticism, aspires to a higher good, to unison with the Divine. As a "way to channel and counteract 'passions,' which range from the appetite passions for food and sexual pleasure to emotions such as anger, jealousy, avarice, and hubris,"[41] asceticism aims for the perfect life – one that is in fact disconnected from materiality. The regimen of denial

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[37] Bynum, p. 20.
[38] Bynum, p. 22.
[39] Bynum, pp. 233, 243.
[40] Bynum, p. 295.
[41] Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 13.

and control has its origins in religious practices and rituals such as prayer, chant, meditation, the steps of a pilgrimage, the ritual bowing and kneeling, fasting, or more dramatically, self-flagellation,[42] and is linked to innocence and objectification of the self.

One precise way of showing the link between the physical and social female body, and relating the women mystics' asceticism to the medieval social context, is sex. Hunger and sex are psychically connected. As associated with the body (and the inferior of a dualistic system) in patriarchy, women are also associated with sex and "the fear of female sexual pollution."[43] The Christian Church strongly cautions against gluttony, lust and the pleasure of sex. "Abstinence from food [is] linked with sexual abstinence, which enhance[s] the spirit and defie[s] sexual desire."[44] Through the "archetypal image of the female as hungering, voracious, all-needing, and all-wanting,"[45] the denial of food by women takes on a specific meaning. The "fear of woman as 'too much'"[46] is apparent, to varying degrees, in cultural expressions throughout western history, and seems to flourish during times of great environmental and social change. It is rife with metaphors of eating and hungering.[47] The "hunger" of the female body's sexuality enabled the significance of the mystic's fasting. Her ascetic discipline of the body through food guarded against the temptation to lust or gluttony. Her "self-imposed starvation [could thus signify] the defeat and destruction of the dangers that threatened the church."[48]

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[42] Charles A. Riley II, *The Saints of Modern Art: The Ascetic Ideal in Contemporary Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Music, Dance, Literature and Philosophy* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998), p. 18.
[43] Reineke, p. 250.
[44] Reineke, p. 255.
[45] Bordo, p. 160.
[46] Bordo, p. 161.
[47] Bordo, p. 161.
[48] Bordo, p. 258.

While this could easily be understood as the manifestation of dualistic or misogynistic thinking, dualism and a negative view of the female body were actually not at the core of medieval religious life. The Christian women mystics' ascetic practices, even though "deliberate and systematic physical punishment was part of the daily routine for many religious women,"[49] were not clearly rooted either in self-hatred or in dualism.[50] Rather than as an obstacle, the mystics viewed the body as a vehicle, engaging it and pushing the limits of physical comfort and pleasure by denying the body of such comfort, in order to comport humility and a relationship with God. "Medieval metaphors and symbols express the experiencing of the body more than the controlling of it ... To deny bodily responses toward the world is often ... to release torrents of bodily energy toward God."[51] In fact, "no other period in the history of Christianity ... placed so positive (and therefore so complex and ambiguous) a value on the bodiliness of Christ's humanity."[52] Christ's body was the occasion for human redemption and Mary's body, as the source of Christ's body – since Christ had no human father – was the symbol of the bodiliness of us all.[53]

The gender of the women mystics, and the status of the female social body in the context of medieval Christendom, was crucial to the significance of their ascetic practices. To medieval natural philosophers, breast milk was blood, and blood was therefore the quintessential food, provided by female bodies. The female body was thus an obvious image for a God who died to give birth to the world and who bled to feed all

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[49] Bynum, p. 209.
[50] Bynum, p. 209.
[51] Bynum, pp. 245-6.
[52] Bynum, p. 252.
[53] Bynum, p. 269.

souls.[54] In her important book *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Caroline Walker Bynum stresses the need to understand the women mystics' acts in relation to the late medieval notion of *imitatio Christi*, the fusion with the suffering physicality of Christ, and the late medieval notion of the female as flesh.[55]

The sense of *imitatio* as becoming and being, not merely feeling or understanding, lay in the background of Eucharistic devotion. Suffering was considered an effective, redeeming activity.

> Not only did medieval women deny themselves food [like contemporary anorexics], they also *became* food – in their own eyes and in the eyes of male admirers. And when they ate God, they were not merely focusing their hunger sensations ... on the Eucharist .... They were "eating" a God whose edible body ... was in some sense seen as female and therefore as food ....They were also reversing their ordinary cultural role of food preparers and food abstainers.[56]

Food was pivotal to religious ceremonies. In the Eucharist, Christians ate their God and obtained their salvation. Eating was a way of becoming one with the suffering Christ on the cross.

Bynum explains that the mother-infant relationship played a significant role in the mystic's Eucharistic devotion, since Christ had no human father, and was thus seen as taking his flesh from Mary. In this way the body of God, eaten by the mystics in the Eucharist, was in essence female. The notion of Christ as maternal has a long ancestry in twelfth- and thirteenth-century spirituality;[57] "the use of *mothering* as a description for the nurturing and loving (even the disciplining) that the soul receives from God ... [,] images of Jesus as lactating and birthing mother, [and] Jesus' birth-pangs" were

[54] Bynum, pp. 178-9.
[55] Bynum, p. 206.
[56] Bynum, pp. 206-7.
[57] Bynum, p. 178.

common.[58] There are late medieval portraits of a lactating Christ, one who feeds humanity with blood that flows from His nipple, signifying the belief that He, "like a mother, nourishes humanity from His breast."[59] Later on in the late fourteenth century, Julian of Norwich developed the theology of "God's motherhood" to include the notion that it is "also a taking on of our physical humanity in the Incarnation, a kind of *creation* of us, as a mother gives herself to the fetus she bears."[60] The significance of this resides in the fact that, as Martha Reineke puts it,

> the Father's Law ... resolves the struggle for individuation and identity, but only by concealing [Otherness,] the mother. Because the Law assigns paternity to the symbolic order, in which woman as creator/mother does not exist, we can say that the linguistic economy of Western culture is built on the murder of the mother.[61]

Thus the mystics' "embodied valorization of a mother Christ" subverted the inferiority and repression of the mother in the Western tradition, and has brought to light contradictions in that tradition.[62]

If the body of God was indeed essentially seen as female, then by eating a God that can be identified in physicality with a woman, the mystics were in a way eating the Mother. They thus returned to the "primordial drama of identification with and differentiation from the mother," the "abject, pre-individuated body of an infant ... who [is] fascinated by the mother and [fears] that its own proper self [will] sink irretrievably into her."[63] In essence, this is "the ancient fear that one could bite and take in the substance of the mother, but that one could also be bitten."[64] This reciprocal ambivalence

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[58] Bynum, p. 266.
[59] Reineke, p. 257.
[60] Bynum, p. 266.
[61] Reineke, pp. 261-2.
[62] Reineke, p. 262.
[63] Reineke, pp. 260-1.
[64] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 39, as quoted in Reineke, p. 260.

mirrors that which constructs the subject of the mother through her absence in patriarchal discourse. One could say that the saints enacted an instance of infantile aggression toward the mother, that in eating her they were expressing belligerence towards her ambivalence. It is fair to say that fasting and food distribution were ways for women mystics to reject the values of their mothers (and fathers) who clung to comfort and the family's social status.[65] Then, in uniting themselves (women) with the mother Christ through eating, the mystics encountered a kind of double denial, or, "the mimetic play of the sacred turned back on itself ... They became, in replay of the ... sacrificial crises [(the murder of the mother that enables social order)] both the sacrificers and the ones sacrificed."[66]

Reineke describes this mimesis as "the abyss of self-and-mother murder."[67] She does not, however, regard it in a hostile or aggressive manner: the mystics "did not have murder in their hearts. They ate the mother to save her and to save themselves."[68] It is because their bodies were always already inscribed within the patriarchy that their efforts were relatively incapable of bringing them the transformation and freedom they sought. Reineke suggests that "the oral images to which the mystics appealed signified, above all, a struggle of an oral economy within the social body of late medieval Christendom itself."[69]

It seems equally plausible that the symbolic eating of the mother could be read as an aggressive act, and that as such, a subversive one. A kind of double silencing or twice murder of the mother may seem obsessively reiterative and self-effacing. But if, as Melanie Klein suggests, the pivotal psychological problem is anxiety about one's own

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[65] Bynum, p. 223.
[66] Reineke, p. 263.
[67] Reineke, p. 263.
[68] Reineke, p. 263.
[69] Reineke, p. 261.

aggression,[70] and the infant fears most of all its own destructive capabilities and impulses, then an obsessive anxiety would be an instance of subjectivity formation. We would not accept the women mystics' behavior as hopeless irony, which is where, following Kristeva, we would arrive: rather, the aggressivity involved in their symbolic act, and material act as it was enacted on their bodies, could be seen as subversive in its agency, defiance, and in its disavowal of silencing, as it refused passivity. As well, in eating a Mother God in such a highly symbolic context, the mystic was imbuing the mother with a kind of sacred power; it was through eating her (meagerly and only her) that she could become holy and redeem not only other Christians, but also Christendom itself. Female flesh – the very weakness of woman – restored the world.[71]

The symbolic association between the Eucharist and a mother God allowed for a kind of externalization of the mother onto the wafer host. This externalization helped to bring about a distance between the mother archetype and the woman mystic. In a cyclical way, the mother was externalized only to then be internalized, eaten. But the initial externalization and objectification of the mother is what provided a gap through which the mystic's agency can be read. Her mystical ecstasy, the intimate and all-encompassing bodily experience stemming from the focus on a single idea, revealed the fragility and contingency of order itself. "The symbolic contract must always involve a denial of sensuous pleasure, and the duality between inarticulate, unsyntactical expression of pure feeling and logical thought remains."[72]

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[70] Mignon Nixon, "Bad Enough Mother," *October* 71(Winter 1995), p. 84.
[71] Bynum, p. 265.
[72] Andrea Nye, "Woman Clothed with the Sun: Julia Kristeva and the Escape From/To Language," *Signs* 12:4 (1987), pp. 674-5.

The mystic's practice brings forth the insertion of temporality to the development of subjectivity, through that moment of indistinction between inside and outside – the moment when, as Kristeva puts it, "I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*."[73] Thus the women "could sum up their love of God in paradox: ... 'I am the salvation itself of every creature ... for I am the sum of all evils.'"[74] The mystics could be seen in light of post-structural theories about intersubjectivity and interobjectivity, "with the latter understood to be a structure of engagement with the materiality of things in which we recognize what it subjectively feels like to be objectively embodied."[75] This interobjectivity has a specific relationship to a woman living in a patriarchal society, where her body must be objectified in order for society to be rationalized and normalized.

In this light, what could be the mystic's relationship to the Father and Patriarchal Law? Just as the wafer could be seen as a kind of externalization of the Mother – and it indeed was seen as a product of, a fragment and exuding of, the female womb[76] – the mystic's sustenance on the Eucharist alone could also be seen as an internalization and eating of the Father: "the desire to bite, ... to devour the one who oppresses with his speech."[77] One could see the wafer as the object of aggressive fantasy, and frame the mystic's food practice "as an attack on language through biting."[78] The mystic's "desire to speak" or have equal mobility and opportunities in society "and her frustration at being

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[73] Kristeva, p. 3.
[74] Bynum, p. 296.
[75] Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 239.
[76] Bynum, p. 266.
[77] Nixon, p. 74.
[78] Nixon, p. 75.

silenced was transposed into another desire for oral power and pleasure."[79] However, it does seem that the mother-infant relationship was of priority. The women mystics did not strive to fulfill men's roles; instead they worked from the position of the social female body and used symbols taken from their biological or social experience. In fact, it was the men saints who were drawn to role reversals, metaphorically or symbolically becoming women in order to express their renunciation of "male" power, authority, and status, and proceed as weak and human (women) toward God.[80] They often spoke of Jesus as mother and of themselves as women.[81]

The apparent self-imposed pain enacted on their bodies, then, gave the women mystics a kind of power and control within the realm of the church. By fasting, they encouraged the purging of one's sins and the strength against the excesses of greed, lust and gluttony, which would otherwise threaten the higher ideals and the dictates of Christendom. By eating only the Holy Eucharist, and therefore eating God, they became one with His suffering and were imbued with redemptive powers. "Many were drawn to the charismatic authority of the women who suffered and who saved."[82] As both sufferers and saviors (controlled by Christendom and in control of it), they signified, with the denial enforced and inscribed upon their bodies, the contradictory status of the female body within the medieval social context. Because of the borderline status of the female social body ("both the first line of defense against outside dangers which threatened Christendom, and, in the fragility of their embodiment, those who would succumb first to

[79] Nixon, p. 74.
[80] Bynum, pp. 284, 287.
[81] Bynum, p. 283.
[82] Reineke, p. 258.

corruption"[83]), the women mystics could embody and transform the crises of a society rife with conflict and battles for power.

One could say these women were merely signs, a kind of currency in their society. They could gain power, but their power was kept in relation to the patriarchal authority of the Church (although, one could argue, so was men's power during this time). Not surprisingly, all of the texts that have been passed down about the lives of the mystics and monks were written "by men and are for the most part addressed to men ... preserved only because [they] fit the orthodox canon."[84] What has been verified by research is the imbalance in the number of men and women mystics who were afflicted with illness or death because of ascetic practices.

> As [Donald] Weinstein and [Rudolph M.] Bell have demonstrated, women account for only 17.5 percent of those canonized in the later Middle Ages, but they account for 53.2 percent of those saints in whose lives patient bearing of infirmity was the central factor in reputation for sanctity.[85]

Furthermore, 23 percent of the women saints died from asceticism.[86] Their deaths and illnesses – the fragility the women mystics embodied – were rooted in the foundation of a society structured by Patriarchal law. "The freedom to which [the mystics] aspired was glimpsed only on the margins of the social body, at the point of bodily fracture."[87]

Conversely, one could say the women mystics worked from their position at the border of repression and representation in society and used it to their own means. In the collectivity of the medieval social context, given the immense power of the church over all medieval people, they were able to embody and redeem their society. One can see a

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[83] Reineke, p. 258.
[84] Elm, p. 10.
[85] Bynum, p. 199.
[86] Reineke, pp. 252-3.
[87] Reineke, p. 259.

position of mimicry in their efforts. By assuming the prescribed female role of fragility, they could take somewhat control of it, effecting a kind of inversing of gender roles, though an ambiguous one that may be only momentary at best. That is,

> through the denial of flesh, a woman can share in the hitherto unavailable male ethic and aesthetic of self-transcendence and power over others. Rather than being an obstacle to transcendence, her now disavowed body is her entry into the privileged male world.[88]

Furthermore, the aspect of mimicry – by assuming the traditionally female role of passivity and fragility – allowed the mystic not only to aspire to male levels of authority, but moreover to broaden symbols and to go beyond a male/female dichotomy. Women mystics used the belief that it is the contemptible who are redeemed, that Christ had preached "Blessed are the meek," that women are weaker and that therefore God could act through them.[89] They used symbols of continuity, building on the gender roles and imagery found in their actual lives, "expanding the suffering, giving self they were ascribed by their culture."[90] In eating the Eucharist, they "became [the body on the cross] not as a flight from but as continuation of self."[91]

Subsequently, one can see the mystic's fasting as vastly different from the anorexic's. The latter typically uses fasting as a means to experience control of self, seeing "the self as split or [losing] all sense of 'ego.'"[92] The mystic's practice, as a continuation and deepening of women's symbols and roles, perhaps worked more directly to prove that her ego existed and was strong. That is, while the anorexic may devote her life to defiance in the face of prescribed gender roles, familial expectations, and the need

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[88] Driscoll, p. 100.
[89] Bynum, pp. 279, 283.
[90] Bynum, pp. 293, 296.
[91] Bynum, p. 296.
[92] Bynum, p. 202.

for food in general, the mystic can more readily be seen as building upon the roles delineated for her and using them strategically. This is not to call the anorexic's battle imprudent or anything but complex, but rather to address the issue of her agency in society. Although the religious significance of the mystic's fasting substantiates an important difference between her and a contemporary anorexic, one can also see that the mystic's embracement of the assumed roles of women was as integral to her procurement of power as the anorexic's defiance of the roles comprises the futility of her fight.

The aggressivity of the mystic's behavior refuted passivity, and the choice of food and hunger as a means to enact this aggression brings the drives into the equation. Kristeva writes that

> drives ... serve to correlate that "not yet" ego with an "object" in order to establish both of them. Such a process, while dichotomous (inside/outside, ego/not ego) and repetitive, has nevertheless something centripetal about it: it aims to settle the ego as center of a solar system of objects. If, by dint of coming back towards the center, the drive's motion should eventually become centrifugal, hence fasten on the Other and come into being as sign so as to produce meaning – that is, literally speaking, exorbitant.[93]

The mystic's food practices enabled her to exceed her predetermined gender role. Her actions were the main way to symbolically unite with the suffering of Christ, to experience a mystical, visionary state, and to confer salvation on others.[94] They not only allowed the woman mystic to sidestep predetermined domestic roles (some women saints used trances at inconvenient moments in order to avoid domestic roles, like childcare, by, for example, letting babies fall into the fire while rapt with mystical ecstasy[95]), they also

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[93] Kristeva, p. 14.
[94] Reineke, p. 254.
[95] Bynum, p. 221.

created a charismatic, prophetic role authorized by her imitation of Christ the suffering man.[96]

The mystic's ascetic practice of denying her body food and comfort, then, signified the "victory of society over disorders that threatened the social body."[97] In another vein, similar to the way that anorexia is both a "flight from and to physicality," the mystics also experienced the body in an intense and intimate way. By "eating God" in the Eucharist, they became one with His suffering body, incorporating Christ's body and His suffering in their bodies. In doing so, the women mystics imbued their bodies with a sacred, redemptive power, which could save others. At the same time, their identification with the Church meant that "their actions could effect Christendom's salvation and not only their own."[98]

The importance of food to the lives of the medieval women mystics is a common link to the lives of those with an eating disorder at the end of the 21st century. Food takes on a highly symbolic value in both cases. As well, it is interesting to note that in order for the regulation of food to be possible or to have any significance, there needs to be an affluence of food available in the environment. "From medieval saints through Victorian hysterics to twentieth century anorexics most of the women came from either upper or middle classes."[99] The relative insecurity of food supplies in Medieval Europe brings with it a certain, possible reading of the woman mystic's fasting and engagement with food, as does the general state of abundance and waste of food in contemporary North America affect/effect the anorexic or bulimic.

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[96] Bynum, p. 233.
[97] Bordo, p. 255.
[98] Reineke, p. 258.
[99] Polinska, p. 582.

Mary Douglas has written about how "the physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society."[100] In "argu[ing] that individual bodies mirror larger social bodies ... [she points out] that contradictory expectations for males and females in a society mirror contradictions in the social system as a whole."[101] Because the female body holds such a crucial position within the life cycle (as capable of childbirth) and other female bodily processes like menstruation have historically been connected with social taboos and pollution or danger, it is often used in religions to

> demarcate order from disorder, sin from sanctity ... Moreover, ... religions also [choose the symbol of the female body] to effect order and control disorder ... Authority asserted over a female body is power asserted over the very forces of creation.[102]

The fact that in a patriarchal society, a woman not only has a body, but is also associated with the body (and nature, as opposed to the "masculine" traits of mind and culture) is indicative of the complexity of the female social body. In the medieval social context, religion could be seen as the discourse that "offer[ed] a sanitized version of the linguistic history of how we came to be, detailing the necessary refusal of the mother and the triumphal accession to the Father's Law."[103]

Although religion no longer plays such a foundational, structural role in western society – one built on individualism, urbanism, and increasing globalization – one could say that the refusal of the mother persists in the patriarchy, as it must. At the time of writing, the popular media continue to infiltrate visual culture with images of women

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[100] Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, 2nd ed. (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1970), p. 93, as quoted in Hesse-Biber, p. 148, n. 1.
[101] Hesse-Biber, p. 251.
[102] Reineke, p. 249.
[103] Reineke, p. 262.

who are culturally defined as beautiful. This, while (as Luce Irigaray has written) "each woman, whether she likes it or not, only exists in her culture as a potential mother."[104] Thus one finds the complicated combination of the ideals of beauty, sexuality, nurturing and motherhood asked of women. "[They] are presented as spectacle, while at the same time, as [Julia] Kristeva says, woman 'is simply a name for the unrepresented and repressed of patriarchal culture.'"[105]

What seems apparent, through the prominence of food to women rather than men saints, and the importance of food to the practice of Christendom, is that "the church in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries did mark the boundaries of Christendom with women's bodies[, and that it] made women primary bearers of this sign."[106] This particularity could not have happened without the specificity of the social female body: that "women are found in the social margins because they are precisely those beings the social organism produces in its development to fill its outer wall."[107]

In a kind of narcissistic vein, the woman mystic's struggle began and remained within her self; there was nowhere else for it to take place. This kind of performance of the self does rest on the self-other relationship. However, its primary concern is with the self and its interiority, as it is differentiated from the outer world through abjection. The woman mystic's antithetical behavior pointed to an ill-fitting interiority, one that was an effect and function of a social discourse. By "silencing" her pangs of hunger, she was

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[104] Rosi Braidotti, "Radical Philosophies of Sexual Difference, or: I think therefore she is," *Patterns of Dissonance: A study of women in contemporary philosophy*, trans., Elizabeth Guild (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 260.
[105] Driscoll, p. 93; n. 13: "Kristeva is discussed by Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of L'Ecriture Feminine," *Feminist Studies* 7:2(Summer 1982), p. 249, and cited by Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 144-5."
[106] Kristeva, p. 252.
[107] Reineke, in reference to Bryan Turner's organic metaphor for societal creation and maintenance, p. 249.

able to voice a very distinct and highly symbolic female role in medieval society. The religious significance of fasting and world-denial in the medieval social context purports an important difference between the mystic's actions and those of the anorexic, although both are similar strategies in that they use food as a way to demarcate a struggle for autonomy.

Some researchers in the late twentieth century have written that "a psychological or psychodynamic definition of anorexia seems at first glance applicable to some medieval women [mystics]."[108] These women exhibited the euphoria, the sleeplessness and hyperactivity, and inability to gauge body temperature and sensations characteristic of present-day anorexics.[109]

> Modern researchers have been aware, since the Carnegie Institute experiments of the early years of [the 20th century], that starvation or fasting ... produces queer behavior patterns and mental reactions ... It is thus possible that some medieval women who chose to fast developed, as a result of starvation, those psychological characteristics that some recent therapists see as symptoms or even "causes" of the mental disease anorexia nervosa.[110]

However, the women mystics cannot be called anorexics by today's understanding of the condition. Like most historical accounts of eating disorders before the twentieth century, the mystics' discipline of eating did not allude specifically to the fear of being fat,[111] or the equation of thinness as beauty. And perhaps most importantly, the fasting saints and contemporary anorexics inhabit very different cultural milieus: Joan Jacobs Brumberg writes that

> medieval culture promoted a specific form of appetite control in women, anorexia mirabilis, which symbolized the collective values of that age. Anorexia nervosa

[108] Bynum, p. 203.
[109] Bynum, p. 204.
[110] Bynum, p. 205.
[111] Andrew E. Slaby and Randall Dwenger, "History of Anorexia Nervosa," *The Eating Disorders*, pp. 2-3.

> expresses the individualism of *our* time ... To conflate the two is to ignore the cultural context and the distinction between sainthood and patienthood.[112]

While one should be wary of conflating fasting by the medieval women mystics and eating disorders in contemporary North American women, it is striking that both groups begin with "'the dream of a miraculous transfiguration, whereby the immolation of the flesh will be rewarded by its resurrection,' be that in the body of a model or of an angel."[113] "The fundamental identification is with mind (or will), ideals of spiritual perfection, [and] fantasies of absolute control."[114] In addition,

> [the] single-minded pursuit of thinness and beauty has many parallels to a religious [group]. In both cases a group of individuals is committed to a life defined by a rigid set of values and rules. Members of true [religious groups or] cults frequently isolate themselves from the rest of the world and develop a strong sense of community. They seem obsessed with the path to perfection, which, though unattainable, holds out compelling promises. In following their ideals, they usually feel that they are among "the chosen."[115]

The quotient of isolation creates a split between them and the "rest of society, who may come to be viewed as 'profane.' This split between what is considered sacred and profane mimics what [turn-of-the-century western] society associates with the terms 'thin' and 'fat.'"[116] That is, thinness connotes happiness, success, attractiveness, and morality; to be fat is to be ugly, to have lost control, to be lazy. "Those who indulge in gluttony and sloth do not want to be among the 'saved.'"[117] Dieters often use religious language like sinner, devil, guilt, confession, shame, absolution, and angel to describe

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[112] Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp.45-6, as quoted in Polinska, p. 576.
[113] Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* (Cambridge. Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 14, as quoted in Driscoll, p. 99.
[114] Bordo, p. 151.
[115] Hesse-Biber, p. 9.
[116] Hesse-Biber, p. 11.
[117] Hesse-Biber, p. 11.

experiences of being overweight, overeating, or having successfully lost weight.[118] This indicates the hold that the traditional dualism between body and mind continues to have over Western society.

Philosophical ideals have replaced religious ones in Western culture. Although the Church no longer holds such immense sway in social and personal matters, society is, still, male-oriented and hierarchically structured. The printing press, Industrial Revolution, medicalization of illnesses and growth in capitalism, to simplistically name but a few and somewhat divergent historical developments, all ascend towards the mass-production and consumption of goods and information in Western society. Roberta Pollack Seid contends that

> these economic imperatives [have] provided the metaphors that [have] shaped standards for what [is] considered the desired human body: "to be as efficient, ... effective, ... economical, [and] as beautiful as the sleek new machines ... These ... developments ... forged the society we know today and that established the framework for our prejudice against fat."[119]

Late capitalism bases itself on notions of the efficiency of the body to production and consumption of goods and services. As Bynum points out, this has undoubtedly arisen because we are able to control so much of our bodily experiences, namely fertility and pain.[120] Bryan Turner, in his writings on the social construction of the human body, ties anorexia with the capitalist social structure. He views the anorexic's behavior as

> overdetermined by culture ... She is already caught within the contradictions of late capitalism. The anorexic's dilemma – she dies to live free – is possible only because her body has already been fractured by dichotomies – reason and desire, public and private, body and mind – that characterize Western culture itself.[121]

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[118] Hesse-Biber, pp. 10-11.
[119] Roberta Pollack Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with Their Bodies* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1989), p. 83, as quoted in Hesse-Biber, p. 25.
[120] Bynum, p. 300.
[121] Bryan Turner, *The Body and Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 5, as quoted in Reineke, pp. 201-2.

The rapid shifts in Western society during the past century testify to new opportunities, non-traditional roles and professions, and gender role conflicts for women. While these developments shape a markedly different social context from medieval times, the uncertainty of social order is common to both societies. The women mystics confronted a society rife with conflict, and, as women and saints, were part of a minority group that was non-traditional in the context of Christendom. A study (Deborah Perlick and Brett Silverstein, 1994) on eating disorders and gender roles concluded that the disorders increased during periods of change in women's roles. According to the study, during these times,

> women took on tasks that were traditionally reserved for men but soon experienced steep obstacles on their road to equal opportunities. This awareness of professional disadvantages combined with the realization of relative disrespect for the traditional roles of wife, mother, and homemaker left some women on the road to bodily self-destruction.[122]

Interestingly, the rise of the women's movement during the 1920s, and the women's movement of the 1960s, coincided with an increased cultural demand for the slender body. "As women [demanded] more 'space' and more equality, the culture's standards of attractiveness demanded that they shrink." One could say that this is linked to the way women's independence threatens the patriarchy and traditional gender roles for men and women, and supplies the consumer interests that feed the diet, beauty, cosmetic, fitness, and health industries of the twentieth century. It is a normalizing strategy meant to

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[122] Perlick and Silverstein, "Faces of Female Discontent: Depression, Disordered Eating, and Challenging Gender Roles," in *Feminist Perspectives on Eating Disorders*, eds., P. Fallon, M. Katzman and S. Wooley (New York: Guilford Press, 1994), p. 90, as quoted in Polinska, p. 583.

maintain the traditional association between women and nature, domesticity and passivity.[123]

Many anorexics and bulimics have "express[ed] being caught between traditional conceptions of women's roles and expectations to participate in non-traditional roles and professions."[124] One can see a similar ambiguity in the plight for recognition within society and the Church in the eating habits of the women mystics, especially given the instability at the foundations of the patriarchy during the late medieval age. The anxiety that comes with an ambiguous changeover from old expectations to new opportunities can be seen as both a cause and an effect of distorted behavior relating to food. If the society is patriarchal, it seems obvious that women's equality with men and autonomy would be a site of contestation, and that the female body, given its personal and intimate connection to everyday life, would be a choice site for inscribing the boundaries of such matters. "As Michel Foucault has claimed, power seizes bodies ... not ... human minds and consciousnesses."[125] The development of autonomy is pursued, always in concert with or in opposition to the hold of traditional roles, on the territory of the body.

In both the cases of women mystics and anorexics or bulimics, women are using their bodies as the ground for inscribing control and maneuvering within patriarchy, for both the desire to protest and the desire to please. In both considerations, women are seeking control, and "absolute purity, hyperintellectuality and transcendence of the flesh" through the mind or will.[126] Rudolph Bell observes, in his book *Holy Anorexia*, how the

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[123] Hesse-Biber, p. 26.
[124] L.J. Cantelon, P.P. Leichner, and D.W. Harper, "Sex Role Conflict in Women with Eating Disorders," *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 5(1986), pp. 317-323, as quoted in Polinska, p. 583.
[125] Reineke, p. 248.
[126] Bordo, p. 148.

medieval women used culturally acceptable ways of expression, as do contemporary anorexics:

> [T]he same dilemma ... shifted the contest from an outer world in which she faced seemingly sure defeat to an inner struggle to achieve mastery over herself, over her bodily urges. In this sense the anorexic response is timeless. And at least temporarily, it is a real and powerful victory over the only thing western (or westernized) society allows a ... girl to conquer – herself.[127]

It should be reiterated that the female body is, by virtue of a patriarchal structuring of dualism and the repression of the maternal, used to demarcate order and meaning, as it is the model for the abject. The symbolic (religious) significance of the medieval women mystics' abstinence from all food but the Holy Eucharist could not have been accrued without this connection between women and social order/disorder, through the abject. One can argue the same significance for the affliction of eating disorders in late twentieth century western society; the markedly low (though rising) incidence of eating disorders in men points to a specific role for the female body in society. This specificity intensifies the use of orality enlisted by contemporary feminist body artists in terms of socio-political agency.

The question of agency for the anorexic and for the mystic relates to the agency of the subjectivities demonstrated in Antoni and Strauss's bodyworks. The ascetic actions involving food for the mystic and the anorexic could lead to death or physical complications, casting doubt on their agency. For the mystic, though, the sacred quality of food attributed it by her society played a large role in her securing a powerful religious role, making it difficult to apply her situation directly to contemporary eating disorders. The sacredness of food within the medieval context – and the gender of the woman

[127] Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 56, as quoted in Polinska, p. 578.

mystic – established agency through her food practices. For the contemporary anorexic, agency is not obvious. Her efforts are far more than the commonly perceived desire to be thin and beautiful. Her struggle is demarcated in visible terms – but with a body that becomes increasingly emaciated, in a society that views food as abundant and wastes it. The anorexic's agency can be glimpsed, and one has to look for it, through absence rather than presence: it is there in the gap between beauty ideals and how she looks, gender expectations and her battle to push them off, the power over her body she chases and the physical endangerments she frequently faces. As far as securing the autonomy and control she seeks, however, it seems that the anorexic remains within her battle, her "flight from and to the body," unless she seeks help to rectify her attitude towards eating.

For the subjects in Antoni's *Gnaw* and Strauss's *Intake*, death and physical complications were not put at stake, and yet agency remains ambiguous. In Antoni's work, there was a circular quality created by the production of more stereotypically feminine products from her gnaws. The presence of her body was slight, not easily recognizable in the work as it was exhibited, and even used like a machine. In Strauss's *Intake*, there was not much immediately proffered in the way of resolution or power for the subject. The viewer saw only Strauss's struggle to experience difficult emotions, to be physically uncomfortable, to try to stay awake. However Strauss, whose material body was in fact very visible in the work, has attested to being able to eat in public without feelings of embarrassment after the performance. It is possible that the increased visibility of Strauss (her obese body) pushed her out into the public sphere in a way that exceeded social expectations, so that the "overflow" produced more material, lasting outcomes perceived as positive. The priority and bias given to visibility in the western

world perhaps better allowed for material effects in the social sphere with both Strauss and the mystic (who was similarly "visible" in the social sphere because of her actions).

Yet, the woman mystic and Strauss, like the anorexic and Antoni, procured their visibility largely by denying their body. In fact, a refusal of the body was endemic to the actions of each subject, and so each endeavor can be looked at as an ascetic venture. That is, as an inwardly directed "means of defining one's thinking or self by refusal,"[128] each can be viewed as an exercise in asceticism. The subjectivities demonstrated here have enlisted food not as a source of pleasure, but rather as a material whereby pleasure has been called into question. The denial of sensory pleasure – the mystic's denial of food and materialism, the anorexic's self-starvation and its side effects, Antoni's continued gagging and arduous process in creating *Gnaw*, and Strauss's bath of freezing cold mud, exposed nakedness, and alignment with pigness in *Intake* – comprised a severity that allowed for each subject to gain a distance from the body, in order to see how it might be. The self-discipline involved was a kind of order imposed on an abyss of experience.

The distance from the body created by the asceticism of these actions relates to the application of narcissism to the subjects.

> On the one hand, in the narcissistic scenario it is the image ([in the Narcissus myth,] the reflection in the water) that allows the self to love the self, affording a distance between the self and the self-as-image, producing the self as other. This distance – like that required by aesthetics – is necessary for the self to master the other ... But, at the same time, in narcissism the image is the self, all distance is collapsed, and the borders of the frames of identity are imploded.[129]

This relates to the discussion of anorexia as a simultaneous "flight to and from the body," as an intense experience of the body at the same time as the body is alarmingly objectified. Narcissistic self-love jeopardizes Cartesian subjectivity, with its promise of

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[128] Riley II, p. 12.
[129] Jones, p. 180.

coherence, and its insistence upon "the oppositional staging of an other (who lacks) to legitimate the self (who ostensibly has)."[130] For a female (the "other" used to legitimate the male self in patriarchy), narcissism can be applied to her to reduce her to a body, too involved with her physical appearance. In fact, a commonly held belief about anorexics is that they are only obsessed with their physical appearance. In terms of art history, this alignment of women and narcissism has been apparent in the work and criticism of women artists like Hannah Wilke.

One could reduce the mystic, anorexic, Antoni and Strauss to narcissism, in various ways: the mystic whose supreme focus on her body resulted in religious power, the anorexic whose obsessive behavior over her eating habits consumes her life just as it demarcates her struggle for autonomy, Antoni's obsessive gnawing that created products associated with external beauty and appearances, and Strauss's staging of a twenty-four hour performance around her appearance and personal issues with it. However, the obsessive use of the body in each of these subject's actions

> produces a narcissistic relation that is far from conventional or passively "feminine," turning this conventional, regressive connection of women with narcissistic immanence inside out (even as it reiterates it).[131]

This narcissism, in effect, plays with, confuses, and even radicalizes the relationship between the body and the self. That is, it works to confuse attempts at easy reductions, and in this way exposes the complexity of ways in which the female body is used and garners meaning in patriarchy. One could look at the mystic, anorexic, Antoni and

[130] Bordo, p. 180.
[131] Jones, p. 175.

Strauss as both making subjects and viewed objects. "[This approach] collapses the distinction between the subject who desires and she who is desired."[132]

Yet, in relation to each of these subjects, how much are they the "desired"? Narcissism, as it has traditionally been aligned with women, situates itself in relation to the desires of the (presumably) male, heterosexual viewer. Amelia Jones writes, "the female narcissist is dangerous to patriarchy because she obviates the desiring male subject (loving herself she needs no confirmation of her desirability from him)."[133] Yet, the mystic, anorexic, Antoni and Strauss have not been presented in ways that would seem to encourage pleasure in the male viewer. The mystic is perhaps the exception. Her asceticism created a charismatic, desirable position within society. In addition, it is difficult to apply definitions of physical beauty to her, given the religiosity of her acts and difference in social context. None of the other subjects discussed suit western cultural definitions of a beautiful body. The anorexic typically becomes too thin to match society's standards for female beauty. The image of Antoni, spitting out chewed up chocolate and lard, would not, it seems, solicit feelings of physical desire in a male viewer, even though there could be erotic associations with her licking and biting. In Strauss's case, her naked, obese body defied all the standards of beauty that western society struggles to uphold. In fact, these subjects, including the mystic, each used food as a way to explore their relationship to patriarchal assumptions about desire, as well as preconceived gender roles. The culturally determined "hunger" of the female body effected the significance of their food practices. Food and the body were the materials

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[132] Jones, p. 180.
[133] Jones, p. 178.

used in questioning what and how power, the female body, narcissism, and self-control have come to mean socially as well as culturally.

If this is taken to be true, then the orality at the root of eating allows the mystic, anorexic, bulimic, or artist to go a step further by, theoretically, taking a step back. A kind of regression to orality, to an infantile state, brings the mother-infant relationship into view and allows a space where this relationship can be explored and repositioned. Since Phallic Law conceals the Mother and the origins of desire, a "regression" to the mother-infant relationship can be a potential site for a revising of conceptualizations of gender. Specifically, as Mignon Nixon asserts, this can open a space for an aggressive female subject to exist. Since femininity and masculinity are polarized as passivity and agency, a view of aggression as "structural to the subject of either sex and of any gender"[134] can be an assault on the patriarchy from the infantile position.

One advantage to the infantile position, given the evident inclination to reduce the female body to an essential characteristic such as passivity or voraciousness, is that "the distinctions of inside and outside or body and environment that are foundational for the gendered body are not observed by infantile fantasy."[135] This means that structures of hierarchy based on such exclusions are challenged. "Klein theorizes a nonlinear, horizontal play of positions in which the radically decentered subject defined by its relation to objects, moves between positions that are never either secured or foreclosed."[136] This fluidity can be especially advantageous in relation to the rigidity of conventional delineations of gender roles.

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[134] Nixon, "Bad Enough Mother," p. 91.
[135] Nixon, p. 89.
[136] Nixon, p. 73.

CONCLUSION

The fact that traditional gender roles cannot be changed overnight, but must rather go through a long and arduous, complex process in their transformation, brings up the importance of strategies like mimicry to the struggle for women's individuation, autonomy, and self-determination. For a minority population – the "Others" to a male-dominated society – the act of keeping one foot in and one foot out of traditional expectations can be a powerful and subversive tool towards "having a voice" in society. The feminist movement in North America during the 1970s used mimicry in this strategic sense. The changes these early feminists made in relation to social, economic, and political agency for women did not and could not happen overnight. Rather, they had to begin and build from the existing structure of inequality in order to have agency in society. For women in patriarchy, this means that identification with the pre-linguistic abject can be a kind of socio-political tool.

In terms of art practice, work that has addressed the female body and orality from a feminist position is particularly interesting as it has involved a conscious staging of a kind of protest. "Some authors interpret [the symptoms of anorexics] as a species of unconscious feminist protest, involving anger at the limitations of the traditional female role ... and a fierce rebellion against [following] the same direction as their mothers' lives."[1] "Anorectics are notoriously difficult to treat in psychotherapy because they lie; and the extent of their dishonesty suggests that they are incapable of perceiving their

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[1] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 156.

bodily urges and their food-related behavior realistically."[2] As well, Hesse-Biber's studies have shown that while many contemporary women

> engage in calorie restriction, chronic dieting, binging and purging, and the use of diuretics or laxatives, ... they [do] not exhibit [all] the psychological traits usually associated with an eating disorder ... Their behavior mimics anorexia and bulimia without the accompanying psychological profiles ... [in a kind of] "imitative anorexia."[3]

In relation to the medieval women mystics, one could say it was the consciousness of their actions that allowed for their religious significance. Hagiographers frequently pointed out that holy women did not excrete or menstruate, sweat or have sour breath, discharge any filth or dandruff, spittle, or tears. Instead of these ordinary fluids, substances, or odors, they exuded miraculous breast milk, blood, or oil.[4]

> Closing herself off to ordinary food yet consuming God in the Eucharist, the holy woman became God's body. And that body flowed out, not in the involuntary effluvia of urine or menstrual blood or dandruff, but in a *chosen* suffering, a *chosen* excreting, that washed, fed, and saved the world.[5]

Art works like Antoni's *Gnaw* and Strauss's *Intake* have been framed and contextualized as art, involving preparation and planning, and were intended (in somewhat different ways for each of the works) as public spectacles. These body works addressed bulimia, focused on hunger and desire, and rooted themselves in the presentation of the female body in comparable ways to "real life" instances of eating disorders. They addressed issues of control, self unity, and asceticism as well: Antoni, for example, subjected her body to the uncomfortable gnawing that resulted in an ironic and paradoxical production of more products designed for stereotypical gender role

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[2] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 202.
[3] Sharlene Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin Enough Yet? The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 82.
[4] Bynum, p. 211.
[5] Bynum, p. 274.

expectations. She seems to have colluded with the disregard for the female body in society by keeping hers from the viewers' sight, and disciplining her body in order to be an efficient producer. Strauss could be significantly aligned with bulimia (mashing food into her mouth, though against her will), and with ascetic practices. Not only did she deny herself comfort and sleep, but her entry into the space on her hands and knees, smelling the garbage, is reminiscent of a group of ascetic monks called grazers who vowed only to move on all fours and to eat grass or whatever else they found on the ground without using their hands.

Given that Strauss mimicked bulimia, but confessed to not wanting to gorge on the food (while for "true" bulimics the binge can be exciting and exhilarating), and that Antoni made herself like a metaphor for a machine without a body, there seems to be a kind of coldness or a barrier to the relationship between the artists, materials and content of these art works. This barrier is what allowed for the mimicry of a regression to an infantile state, and pushed gender stereotypes to their extremes. As artists working with a social, public space, Antoni and Strauss were building an image, a representation that worked to create a distance between them and the image. Strauss acknowledged the idea that "even though [during the performance of *Intake* she] was having extreme emotions, they were an image [she] was bringing to life, not necessarily [her]."[6] Thus, although she attested to entering a trance-like state, and addressing extreme severity of emotions that can be experienced as a threat to the ego's borders, she retained a control that is impossible in an eating disorder or mystical experience. In a sense Strauss was simply talking to herself (what could be called narcissism). In Antoni's case, the viewer did not

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[6] Jenny Strauss, "FADO interview: 'Encountering Endurance': A Conversation between Jenny Strauss and Paul Couillard," online, available http://www.performanceart.ca/time3x/strauss/interview.html.

see her forced gnawing on the cubes, or evidence of the sores in her mouth or repeated gagging. Her self-imposed, ascetic act produced more "feminine" products, seemingly bound together. Klein describes the condition of aggression as wound up within one's self, to the point it is "structurally impossible to 'see each other' ... Loss, the loss of the other that is destroyed in fantasy, is embedded in the structure of one's own aggression."[7]

In the article "Abject Lessons," Frazer Ward proposes that postmodern artworks dealing with abject imagery "suggest that interiority is imposed, forcibly, from outside. This points ... to the poor fit of that interior, and so to the possibility of speaking from somewhere else."[8] The sense that the viewer did not see the "real" Strauss or Antoni suggests this ill-fitting interiority and another speaking position – despite the blockage or distortion of coherent spoken language in both *Gnaw* and *Intake*. The "real" persons of Strauss and Antoni were held at a distance, although there is no disputing that their lives were changed by the execution of their artworks. It is through the protection of this distance that social and political transformation could take place through the work. This distance also kept the artists from meeting the sad fate of many of the women mystics and anorexics – death. Hopefully, the viewer was able to piece this together and recognize a gap in the equation filled by his/her own presence as a constructor of meaning.

The crucial position of the female social body is emphasized, if not doubled, in times of ambiguous social, economic, and political order and gender roles. Turn-of-the-century Western society has witnessed a surge in weight-loss programs, plastic surgery, exercise fanaticism, and a growing trend towards genetic manipulation, which indicate an overwhelming sense of urgency in reconstructing and shaping the self. Choices abound

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[7] Mignon Nixon, "Bad Enough Mother," *October* 71(Winter 1995), p. 92.
[8] Frazer Ward, "Abject Lessons," *Art + Text* 48(1994), p. 51.

without predetermined stations to fill. There is a power in shaping one's self that builds the individual's sense of identity. This identity is rooted in the concept of inwardness: one's inner personality and inner morals that one must "get in touch with" (hence, the recent upsurge in self-help therapies as well). The attention to interiority (a historical, ideological construct) and internal or self-directed action signals a need for unification of the self. As acts of survival, such attention to and modeling of the self predicates itself on the fact that the embodied self is and must be fully contracted with the social; that there is no such thing as a "natural body."

By choosing, within an artistic context, to endure self-imposed rituals based within the body, and explore the highly contested philosophical history that is the site of "the body," artists can address the instability and contingency of subjectivity. "Because of body art's *exposure* of the contingency of the performing self, ... [it] splinters rather than coheres the self; far from assuring some presocial coherence of the self, body art enacts narcissism as contingency."[9] The viewer of postmodern bodyworks enlisting orality is presented with a representation and mimicry of the ritualistic and ascetic structure of everyday practices, although, as framed artworks, there has been conscious forethought to them as politically and socially transgressive, transformative, and/or reparative. These artworks offer no finite resolutions, but rather retain a sense of incompleteness. This, coupled with the preverbal state of the artists, employing their mouths as parts or objects and not for speaking, actually points to the possibility of speaking from somewhere else. Herein lies the power of effective agency in terms of feminist strategy.

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[9] Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 51.

FIGURES

Figure 1. Hannah Wilke. *S.O.S. – Starification Object Series*. 1974. 28 black-and-white photographs from *Mastication Box*. 6 ¾ X 4 ¼ inches each. From original series *S.O.S. Mastication Box*, an exhibition-performance at the Clocktower, New York, January 1, 1975. [Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, p. 183.]

Figure 2. Hannah Wilke (with Donald Goddard). *June 10, 1992/May 5, 1992, #5* from *Intra-Venus.* 1992-93. Two chromagenic supergloss photographs. 71 ½ X 47 ½ inches each. [Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, p. 186.]

Figure 3. Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz. *Three Weeks in May*. 1977. Performance at Los Angeles City Hall. [Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, p. 172.]

Figure 4. Adrian Piper. *Catalysis No. 4*. 1970. Performance, New York City. [Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, p. 160.]

Figure 5. Barbara Kruger. *Untitiled ("We have received orders not to move").* 1982. Black-and-white photograph. 72 X 48 inches. [Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, p. 262.]

Figure 6. Laurie Anderson. Scene from *United States.* 1980. Performance, Orpheum Theater, New York. [Janet Kardon, *Laurie Anderson: Works from 1969 to 1983*, p. 23.]

Figure 7. Photograph of Janine Antoni in the process of creating the chocolate *Gnaw*. 1992. [Dan Cameron, "Parts and Whole: Three Works by Janine Antoni," p. 28.]

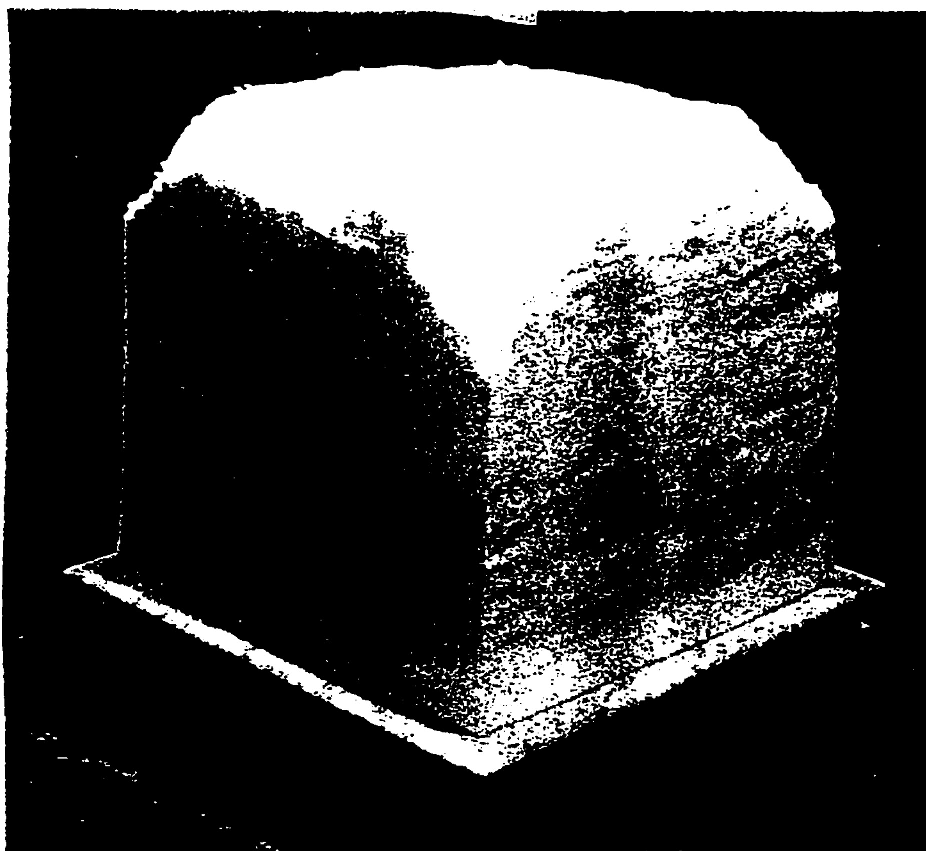

Figure 8. Janine Antoni. *Lard Gnaw.* 1992. 600 lbs. of lard, 24 X 24 X 24 inches. [Linda Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over*, p. 127.]

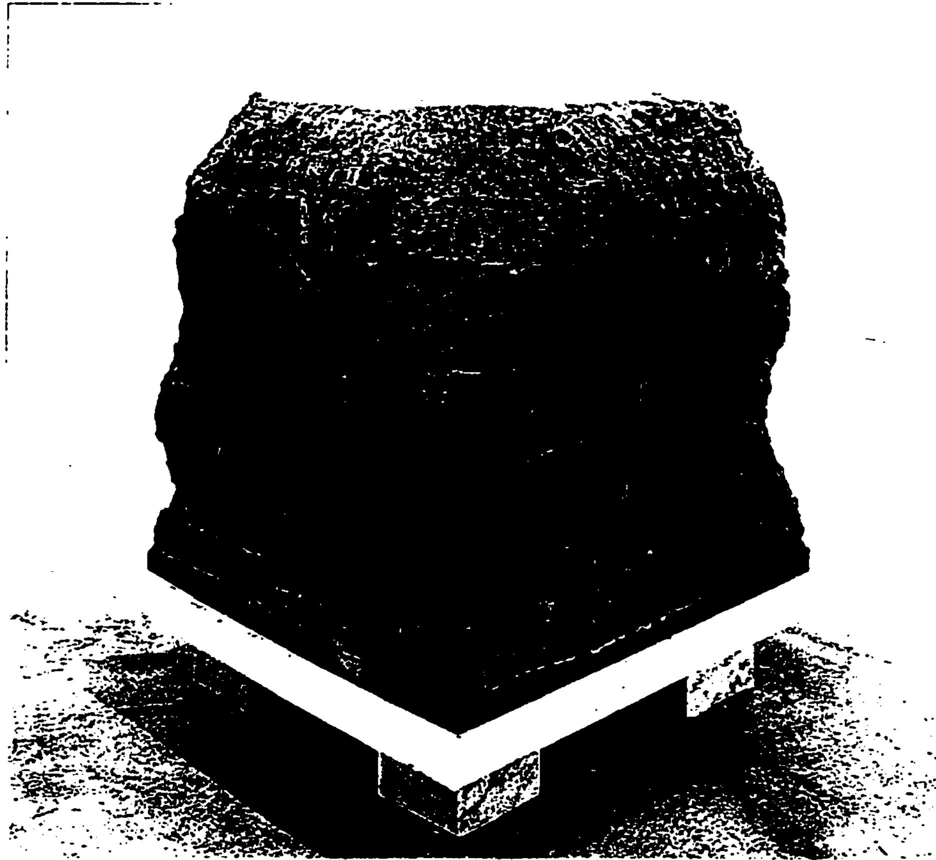

Figure 9. Janine Antoni. *Chocolate Gnaw.* 1992. 600 lbs. of chocolate, 24 X 24 X 24 inches. [Linda Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over*, p. 126.]

Figure 10. Photograph of bucket of spit-out lard. *Gnaw.* 1992. [Dan Cameron, "Parts and Whole: Three Works by Janine Antoni," p. 28.]

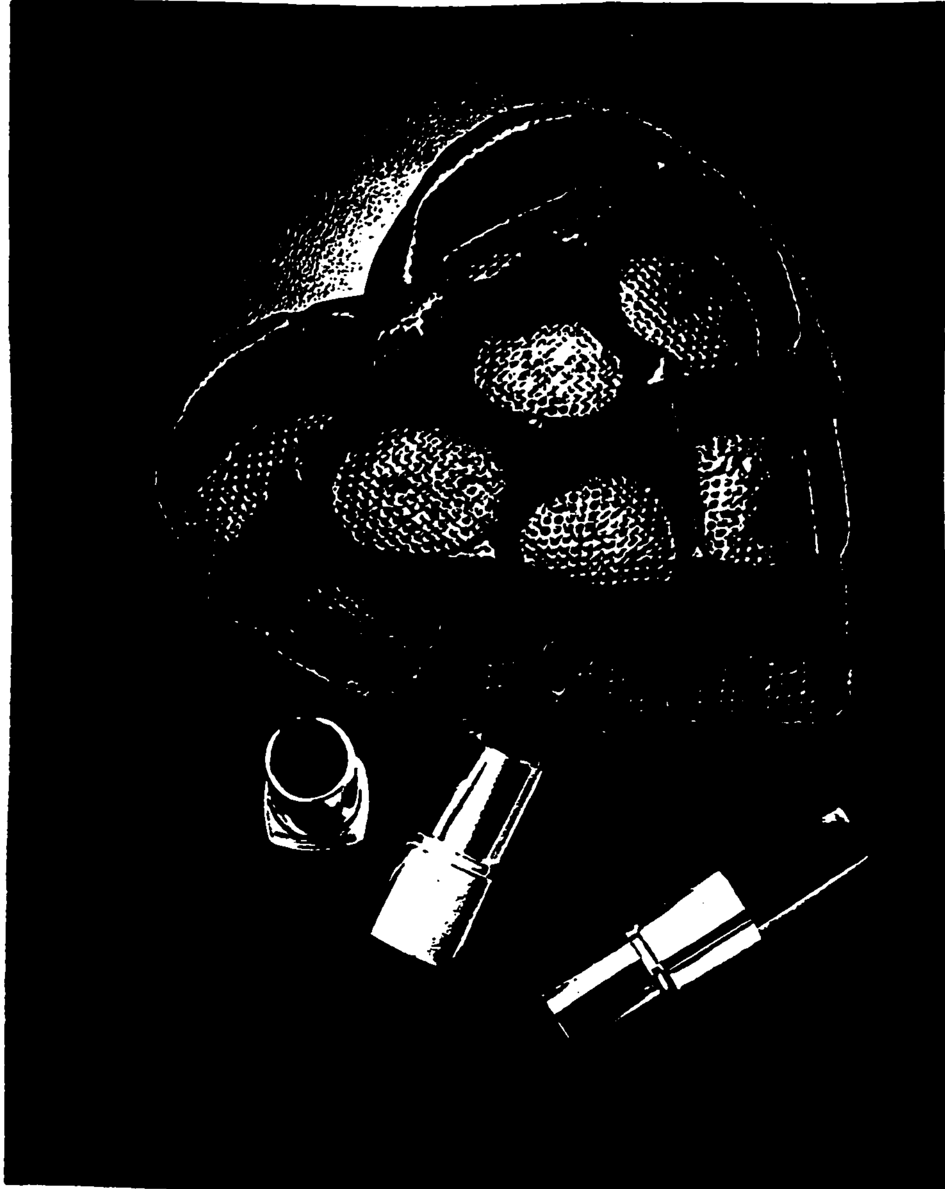

Figure 11. Janine Antoni. *Gnaw*. 1992. Detail of *Lipstick/Phenylethylamine Display*. 27 heart-shaped boxes and 300 lipsticks. [Linda Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over*, p. 19.]

Figure 12. Janine Antoni. *Gnaw*. 1992. Installation view of *Lipstick/Phenylethylamine Display*. 27 heart-shaped boxes and 300 lipsticks. [Photograph courtesy of the Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York.]

Figure 13. Jenny Strauss. *Intake.* 25-26 November 1999. Long view of warehouse/gallery space. [Photo by Paul Couillard.]

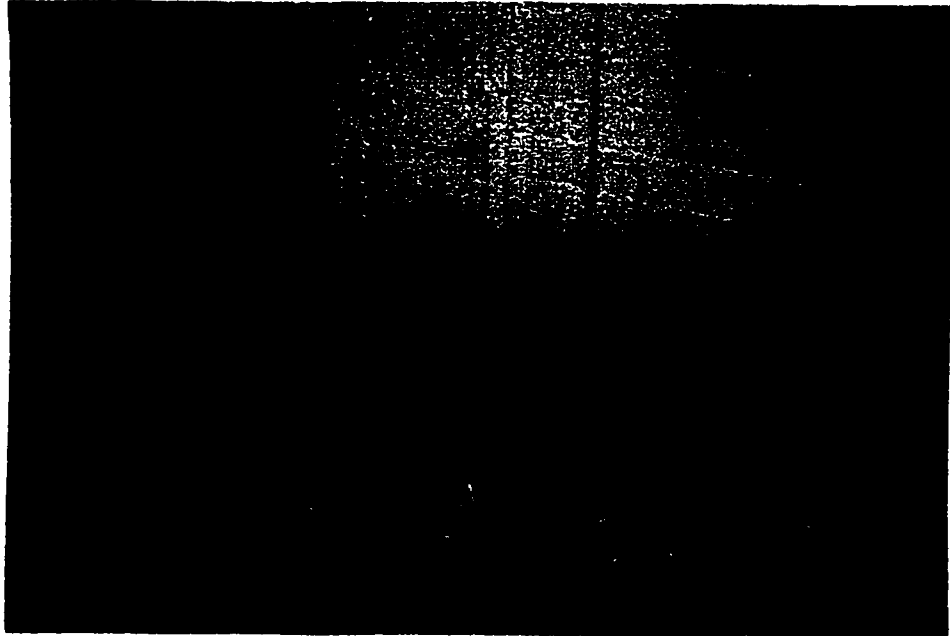

Figure 14. Jenny Strauss. *Intake.* 25-26 November 1999. [Photo by Paul Couillard.]

Figure 15. Jenny Strauss. *Intake.* 25-26 November 1999. View of Strauss and mud imprints made from her body. [Photo by Paul Couillard.]

Figure 16. Jenny Strauss. *Intake.* 25-26 November 1999. View of pile of Twinkies. [Photo by Paul Couillard.]

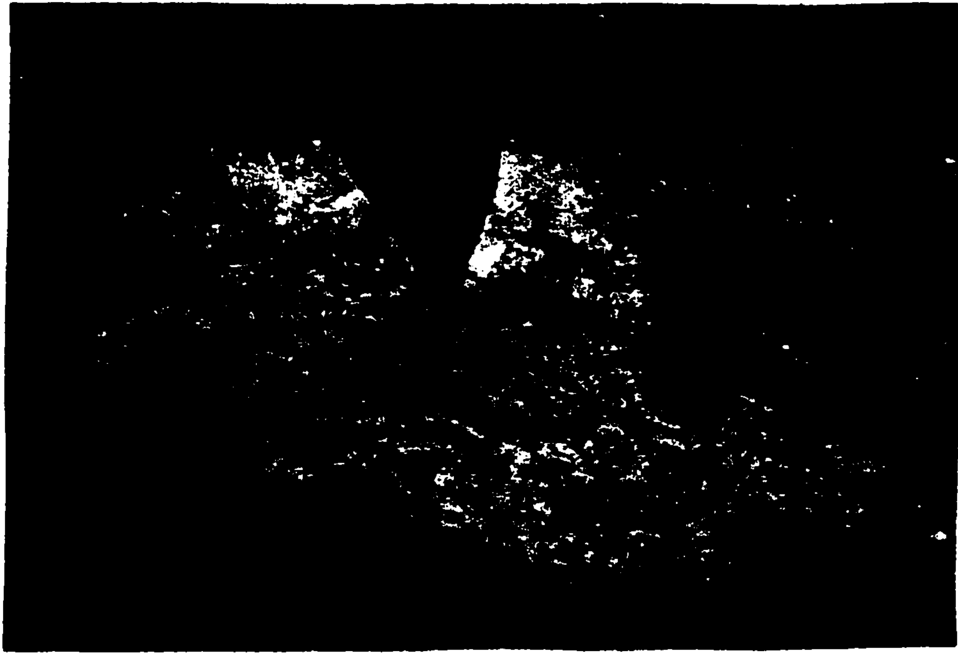

Figure 17. Jenny Strauss. *Intake*. 25-26 November 1999. View of Strauss crushing bed of Twinkies. [Photo by Paul Couillard.]

Figure 18. Jenny Strauss. *Intake.* 25-26 November 1999. [Photo by Paul Couillard.]

Figure 19. Jenny Strauss. *Intake.* 25-26 November 1999. [Photo by Ivonka, available http://www.Sirius.com/~jenny/PAF/Intake/html.]

Figure 20. Jenny Strauss. *Intake.* 25-26 November 1999. [Photo by Paul Couillard.]

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