

FEMINIST ART IN THE '70s

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ABSTRACT

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The second surge for women's liberation in the 20th century has seen the emergence of a new feminist consciousness in the visual arts of the '70s. This thesis defines feminist art as that which grows out of women's experiences, concerns and interests as women. In other words, the transformation of their circumstances as women into their subject matter for art.

Feminist art is manifested in certain types of subject matter, the most prevalent being sexual. It asserts woman's independent sexuality which has heretofore been denied her by her male counterparts. Feminist art also expresses itself by historicizing gender. Prominent women, as well as women's traditional work, are commemorated literally and metaphorically in painting and sculpture. The political feminist art takes the form of statements of protest and is reflective of the basis of feminism in general, a protest against the status quo. Many feminist artists are concerned with the assertion of an identity that corresponds to the reality of a woman, and not how she is perceived by men. This results in a large body of work with the self as subject matter, executed mostly in a post-modern idiom, and includes

the development of feminist content in my own art, from the time of entering the Graduate Programme to the present.

In addition to focusing on the subject matter of feminist art, this thesis also examines writings on art feminism by other artists, critics and historians.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In the past few years with the rise of a powerful and articulate women's movement, the sense of "the creative self as a woman" in the form of a conscious feminine identification has become a dominant factor in the work of many women artists.¹ They have begun to define themselves more concretely as women, to identify their feelings and interests with those of other women, and to move "to a formidably overt contact with their own experiences as women".² They have made this new consciousness of femaleness the form and content of their art.

Because the women artists' movement of the '70s owes its initiative, rhetoric and goals to the second surge for women's liberation in this century, any consideration of "women's art as a category" has until very recently been measured against some notion of feminism.³ At the present time, however, a distinction must be made between

¹Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, Women Artists: 1550-1950. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p.59.

²Lucy R. Lippard, From The Centre: Feminist Essays On Women's Art, (New York: E. Dutton Co., 1976), p.145. (Hereafter referred to as From the Centre.)

³Martha Rosler, "The Private and the Public: Feminist Art in California", Artforum 16 (September 1977): 66. (Hereafter referred to as "Feminist Art in California".)

"women's art" and "feminist art", the latter being a category of women's art, with feminist art being that which is consciously intended as opposed to art which stems from unconscious or semi-conscious motives. While I acknowledge that a woman artist may not be a feminist, it is equally true that a feminist (woman) artist may make art not concerned with feminism; that is, a distinction must be made between political and art-world feminism.¹ Art feminism may define itself as that art which grows out of a feminist consciousness regarding women's experiences, concerns and interests as women. It may also include a more radical view and assume an activist stance, necessitating a sociopolitical critique of society.² Both these understandings are at the core of my interest in art feminism and form the guidelines in my selection of work discussed below.

Some further examination of definitions and hypotheses of what feminist art might be is in order, however, because as with any new term, the definition and identification of feminist art varies according to who is taking it into consideration. Linda Nochlin proceeds cautiously:

The fact that a given artist happens to be a woman, rather than a man counts for something: it is a more or less significant variable in the creation of a work of art, like being born poor, or being born in 1900. Like any other variable, little can be predicted on its basis in isolation from the specific context in which it exists.

The artist's sense of the creative self as a woman -- her concentration on what is generally considered woman's realm of experience, either because of social pressures or personal choice -- may play a greater or lesser role in women's work, depending on the circumstances... At times when the issues of women's rights, status and identity have been critical -- at present, for example,

¹Ibid., p.66.

²Ibid., p.69.

and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries -- this sense of the creative self as a woman could play an important role.¹

The critic Lucy Lippard has written a book about female sensibility in art, yet she remains tentative about what it might be and is still seeking answers to the question "What Is Feminist Art?". She will, however, affirm the existence of an art which is unique to women. "There are aspects of art by women which are inaccessible to men and these aspects arise from the fact that a woman's political, biological and social experience in this society is different from that of a man".² Assuming that art comes from the "inside", it follows that it has to be different. Lippard continues:

We are only now recognizing that... those emphases on female experience are positive, not negative characteristics... It is not the quality of our femaleness that is inferior, but the quality of a society that has produced such a viewpoint. To deny one's sex is to deny a large part of where art comes from. I do not think it is possible to make important or even communicable art without some sense of source and self on the one hand and some strong sense of audience and communication on the other.³

Miriam Schapiro, an early and articulate spokeswoman for feminism, and an innovator in feminist education (see below), candidly describes a feminist artist:

An artist who incorporates feminism into her art tries to project some sense of her power as a woman, her own sense of beauty as a woman, her own memories as a woman, her childhood, her own history, her family as a woman -- whatever. I'm not talking about one style, or about one subject matter. I'm talking about individual

¹Nochlin, Women Artists: 1550-1950. pp.58-59.

²Lippard; From the Centre, p.143. Lippard points out that features of the female sensibility occur sometimes in male artists, and are denied just as often by some women artists.

³Ibid., pp.145-148.

interpretations by different women artists, and have decided that they will have a content-based on their being a woman artist.¹

In this, Schapiro is similar to Lippard, but she goes on to advance the notion of collectivity.

I have come to see feminist art as a house, an ideological house, under whose roof each woman has her own individual room. She no longer has to be isolated; she can have community and she can work out her ideas collectively as a characteristic of feminist art.²

Lawrence Alloway reaffirms the aspect of collectivity and shared enterprise in a recent controversial essay. He defines a feminist as a woman "who is willing to work with other women, to reduce inequality... or to achieve a specific reform", and he asserts that "without the aspect of collaboration, whether it is to found a co-operative gallery, infiltrate an art school or expose the prejudices of art dealers, a woman artist is not a feminist."³

Although collaboration in artistic enterprises is found in such feminist works as Judy Chicago's Dinner Party, Alloway errs in using collaboration or collectivity as the sole or primary criteria of feminist art. Even when he expands the notion to encompass collective action to include activities such as women's caucuses, committees studying federal employment rules and consumer rights, faculty-hiring patterns at universities and sports programs in high schools, he misses the fact that these social and political concerns may not appear

¹Harriet Lyons, "Women's Art: It's the Only Goddam Energy Around", interview with Miriam Schapiro, Ms. Magazine 6 (December 1977): 40.

²Ibid.

³Lawrence Alloway, "Women's Art in the Seventies", Art in America 64 (May/June 1976): 64.

in an artists work. Feminist activity and collective action are not necessarily feminist art, nor do they necessarily find their way into feminist art.

It would appear then that feminist art can be defined primarily through its content, and the existing aesthetic systems created by and for the male art establishment -- that is, white middle-class male -- with its formal anti-content tradition for the past twenty years, does not allow an understanding of feminist art which is more content-oriented, more personal. For those not born white, male, middle-class, things remain oppressive and frustrating. The fault, according to Linda Nochlin, lies in our institutions and our education, and not in our biology.¹ Women whose reputations were made before the advent of the women's movement, tended to feel that they had earned the right to sexual neutrality in a context where overtly feminine qualities were considered incompatible with the production of "good art". These artists are noted for their adaptiveness to prevailing trends, and there are many of them around.²

But current feminist artists have been working to establish a sympathetic environment and a critical forum where work can be developed and understood on its own terms. The authenticity of a feminist statement is very dependent on the context, the intention.

¹Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", Art and Sexual Politics, (Collier-MacMillan Canada Ltd., 1973) pp.5-6.

²Lisa Tickner, "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Housewife", Studio International 193 (3/1977): 188. See also some of the replies to Nochlin's essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?". People such as Elaine de Kooning and Roslyn Drexler are notable for their adaptiveness to the male-establishment aesthetic.

You cannot always apprehend that by looking. Sometimes you have to be told.. If an artist says that her work reflects some aspects of her femaleness or a feminist view of the world, then we must take her word for it, and consider it an enhancement of our understanding of the world and part of its content. In other words, feminist art must be considered on its own terms,-- terms that the art itself sets up.

When we look at a painting of a flower, we question the meaning: a flower means female sexuality only when painted by a woman, or a flower means acknowledgement of some woman who painted flowers in past history, or a flower means only a flower. That flower's meaning differs depending on how it is presented, the personal and social environment of the artist, and the personal and social context in which the work exists, and in this respect is no different from other art.¹

No distinctive style, imagery or technique bind together all feminist artists. Rather, they are compatible for their common subject matter, which must not be equated with style or the choice of any particular image. Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's early '70s work was so close to the prevalent non-representational style in California, that their meaning -- the symbolism of femaleness -- was lost to the audience.² In her abstractions, Chicago was desperately trying to convey the fact that her images, when used by a woman, could be subject as well as object. She found that no matter how much she talked about her intentions, public perception was unable to grasp the meaning of

¹"What Is Female Imagery?", Ms. Magazine 3 (May 1975): 62.

²Rosler, "Feminist Art in California" p.68.

the work as she had intended it. Because of a form language evolved out of a male culture, still superficially recognizable as being within that culture, even to a female audience, it was read back into that culture. Only when her imagery grew increasingly sexual and overt, and only when this process coincided with a higher level of consciousness in the general art world as well as the Los Angeles women's community, did it begin to make sense as feminist art.¹

Perhaps with this experience of Chicago's in mind, it would make sense to look at art in a more subjective, more interpretative manner.

The art which this thesis examines is that which conforms to my definition of feminist art on page two: it is art which has grown out of a highly raised consciousness regarding women's experiences, concerns and interests as women, and/or it is art which may take a more radical/activist position, necessitating a sociopolitical critique of society. I assert emphasis on feminist consciousness in art-making activity, and not strictly on sociopolitical activity. A feminist activist whose art follows a modernist mainstream line devoid of feminist content, cannot for purposes of this paper, be defined as a feminist artist. Furthermore, I will not restrict my definition of a feminist artist as one who must be committed to collective action.

For the purpose of this paper, I have divided the work to be discussed into themes of private and public concerns. The more inward looking private concerns of feminist art manifest themselves as sexual imagery, both figurative and abstract; the former being overt imagery, the latter, including of course, central-core images, covert.

¹Lippard, From the Centre p.8.

The public concerns deal with the artists' relationship to the outside world -- the involvement with political oppression of women, and the historicizing of female gender, including the revival of heretofore taboo materials and techniques traditionally considered the realm of women -- textiles, sewing, decorative arts, and so on, as tools for art-making. I will also consider the conceptual celebration of the self, the assertion of an identity that corresponds to the reality of a woman, and not how she has been perceived by men.

CHAPTER 11

Figurative Sexual Imagery

Historically, erotic expression in art has been a no-woman's land. Male painters and sculptors have prevailed and metamorphosed, allegorized, and idealized women as sacred virgins, passionate romantics, or seductive sorceresses; all of which has resulted in a denial of woman's independent sexuality.¹ Realizing that women's image has been distorted and rendered alien to the way women see and know themselves and their sexuality, a growing number of women artists have been turning to overtly figurative imagery to express and celebrate femaleness. Artists such as Sylvia Sleigh and Joan Semmel are turning the tables on men and making strong overt statements which reveal their candid and erotic interest in the male nude and in woman as active and participating sexual being, in control of her most intimate life.

Sylvia Sleigh, a realistic painter made the sex-role reversal quite explicit in a series of paintings of male nudes, either as solitary figures or in groups. In Phillip Golub Reclining, (1972), (illustration no. 1), she represents herself as the clothed, active artist in the process of painting the nude male model before her -- a

¹Jamaica Kincaid, "Erotica", Ms. Magazine 3 (January 1975): 30.

pictorial reversal of customary expectations.¹ I quote from Nochlin's text:

While not overtly political in intention, works like her nude portraits, as well as her large-scale group compositions like... The Turkish Bath (1973), (illustration no. 2), are certainly political in effect, if we accept sexuality as one of the major political arenas of our day. It seems apparent that many of the ostensibly formal criticisms levelled at Sleight's work... and actually reactions to the underlying political implications of her work: her male nudes force a questioning of what is 'natural', 'acceptable', or 'correct' in the realm of feeling or being, as well as in the realm of art...

Both celebratory and ironic... these nudes suggest that to a contemporary woman painter, male nudity need be no more heroic, no less voluptuous than the female variety. The problem of gentling the male without destroying his -- at least potential -- potency is connected with the difficulty of creating an up-to-date imagery of male sensuality with a predominantly female audience in mind. Individuation is perhaps the key to Sleight's response to this problem. She... refuses to consider her naked subject as anonymous models. Sleight's male nudes are all portraits, and, so to speak, portraits all the way down to the most idiosyncratic details of skin tone, configuration of genitalia or body-hair pattern... (illustration no. 3).

...Sleight often relates her nudes to the Great Tradition, both as an assertion of continuity in scope and ambition, and, at the same time, as a witty and ironic reminder of what values have been rejected, or in her case, deliberately stood on their heads. At the same time, her reinterpretations of traditionally female nude group scenes, like, The Turkish Bath, permit her to carry her responsiveness to the generic appeal of male sensuality; and at the same time to each man's distinctive type of physical or psychological attractiveness to its ultimate pictorial fulfillment...

The ironies of her work of course reveal the reality of the sexual situation. If we compare Sleight's male harem scene with Ingres' Turkish Bath we see that she has actually dignified her male sitters by stipulating through portrait heads and distinctive physiques, that they are differential human beings. The faces of Ingres' women are as close to being bodies as they can possibly be without suffering a complete metamorphosis, like Magritt's body-head in Rape: they are as devoid of intelligence or energy as breasts or buttocks. This depersonalization is a prime strategy of what Susan Sontag has called the pornographic imagination; indeed, a token of its success is sexualizing all aspects of experience and

¹ Linda Nochlin, "Some Women Realists": Part 11, Arts Magazine 48 (May 1974): 31.

rejecting anything that might divert from this single-minded goal. Sleight's wit is at once a weapon and a token of her humanity: instead of annihilating individuality she envisions it as an essential component of erotic response: instead of depersonalizing the heads of her sitters, she not only accepts their uniqueness but goes still further and intensifies the uniqueness of their bodies as well.¹

Nochlin interestingly points out that while female viewers of Sleight's work find the male nudes sensually appealing and physically attractive in just the same manner as male (or male-trained) art historians respond to the erotic appeal of the nudes of Goya, Watteau or Ingres, heterosexual male viewers are harshly critical of, and turned off by her work. They criticize the formal properties and technicalities of the drawing and painting, perhaps feeling threatened by the reversal of the power structure, and their discomfort at being turned into "languid creatures of the bedroom rather than active, privileged visual consumers of centuries of aesthetically certified erotic art products".² Men have always taken liberties with the female body for purposes of increased aesthetic and sensual pleasure, and this has always been completely acceptable. But, as Nochlin goes on to remind us, "the ideological contexts in which these judgements of quality are formulated, since they are generally hidden or unconscious, are far less amenable to change or even rational consideration".³ An artist such as Sleight raises our consciousness regarding these ideological assumptions, as well as prompts us to question the male-defined notions of quality.

¹Ibid., pp.32-33. Only by quoting at length can I convey the complexity of the issue as seen by so many authors.

²Ibid., p.33.

³Ibid.

The subject of Joan Semmel's paintings is her own perception of herself, or, more specifically, she paints what she sees of herself -- her point of view -- at intimate moments, when she is alone or with someone with whom she is emotionally and physically close.¹ In her paintings she assimilates two great traditions -- the nude and the self-portrait. Semmel herself is always the woman in her paintings depicting couples making love, and they are painted from her viewpoint as artist/participant/observer (illustration nos. 4-7). She uses the figure as a vehicle for an erotic theme which grew out of her reaction to "girlie" magazines which proliferate urban newstands -- the exploitation of women. In an interview with Womanart Magazine Semmel remarks:

I was seeing all this stuff that for me wasn't even sexual, it was just hard sell in a way I found demeaning of women. In the past, women's sexuality had always been used against them. I felt very strongly the sexual issue was crucial in terms of real liberation. So I started to work in the erotic theme, but I was very conscious of it being erotic from a woman's point of view, rather than from what is normally a man's point of view....

...The self that I look for is a woman who understands first, that her sexuality and sensuousness is a power, not a commodity for exploitation. It's not something that should be repressed, it is natural and part of what a woman is in herself and is not in any way demeaning.²

Another experience which Semmel tries to convey in the paintings is the sense of intimacy, of "how one really relates to another individual, to another person, to another situation. The real quality of contact, of touch, of the eroticism of touch". After her

¹Judith Tannenbaum, "Joan Semmel", Arts Magazine 50 (May 1975) : 7.

²Ellen Lubell, "Interview With Joan Semmel", Womanart 2 (Winter 1977-78): 14-17. All of Semmel's following statements are quoted from this interview.

years in Europe. Semmel had found in the United States a lack of "that real feel of contact. I was trying to get through some of that and get a feeling of real touch, of real contact with whomever or whatever it was that I was touching, or seeing or whatever, in my most intimate contact with my children, with a pet, with a lover". And indeed, these paintings are a celebration of Semmel's awareness and perception of communication -- of people expressing their humanity to each other through touch. The way she touches, handles, and holds her own body, as well as that of a lover, child or pet, and the emotion expressed in such physical contact constitute the dramatic content and action of each picture.¹ Tannenbaum remarks on Semmel's paintings:

The cropping of the monumental figures and their facelessness ...underscores the thematic focus on the nature and quality of physical communication; and in each painting the incidents of touch are gentle but sure and controlled... The larger-than-life scale, the full modelling of the solid monumental forms that come out at us, and the steep perspective that conversely draws us into the space of the canvas, all contribute to the sense of intimacy and the powerful immediate impact of the work.²

In making these close-up visions of huge landscapes of human flesh -- of woman's flesh -- she asserts her rejection of the male fantasy of what a woman is, and the idealization of women throughout art history in terms of the idealization of the figure which is always presented in terms of availability and delectability, and not in any way "as a person who comes from herself".³

Although Semmel has gone on record as denying any political content in these paintings, her women audiences have found them to

¹Tannenbaum, "Semmel", p.7.

²Ibid.

³Lubell, "Interview", p.17.

make a strong subjective statement for woman as an active, participating sexual being. They recognize in them who Semmel is, and what she is, and what she feels and thinks. Semmel and Sleigh announce women's taking control of the way in which the world views female sexuality.

But these overtly sexual images of Sleigh and Semmel are not the only types of figurative images to fall into the sexual imagery category. Let us turn for a moment to the problem of the "close-up vision" -- the minutely depicted object -- flower, pomegranate, seed-pods and so forth, rendered realistically. It cannot be denied that their current use by women artists is to some extent determined by the fact that a major woman artist, Georgia O'Keefe, made such imagery her trademark. Many women artists today have no hesitation in declaring the aforementioned depiction of these close-up, large-scale views of fruit or flowers as consciously intended, albeit covert conveyors of feminine iconographic symbols. Concealed meaning need not necessarily be hidden in an abstract form, but can surface as well in realistic images.

This understanding of O'Keefe was predicted by Goodrich and Bry in their catalogue of O'Keefe's one-woman show at the Whitney Museum in 1970. They wrote:

In the flower paintings, nature's organisms often bore sexual associations. The forms were flower-forms, but they also suggested the forms of the body, its subtle lines, its curves and folds and hidden depths; and the colors and textures recalled the fineness and bloom and delicate colors of flesh...¹ (illustration nos. 8,9).

Linda Nochlin reaffirms this interpretation in her catalogue essay in Women Artists: 1550-1950, where she puts it neatly into its

¹Lloyd Goodrich and Doris Bry, Georgia O'Keefe, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1970), p.18.

ironic historical context:

...It would seem that Georgia O'Keefe, in her vastly magnified, frontal flowers, like her Black Iris (1926), (illustration no. 10), or her suggestively closed and open clam shells ...is making claims for the unity of the feminine and the natural order. In such imagery, the forms of nature, while never losing their own integrity, exist at the same time as strong schematic metaphors of female sexuality, (illustration no. 11), universalized by their separation from any sort of concrete locale or visual context. As such, like Modersohn-Becker's similarly isolated and powerful maternal images ...they function as potent and vastly attractive mythic projections of essentialist notions of femininity. Such images of female sexuality were basically apolitical if not outright conservative: woman reduced to her sexual being, conceived as part of Nature, was the very antithesis of historical action. Paradoxically, however, in the context of today's feminist activism, such imagery has acquired potent political implications, for woman's control over her sexual destiny is now seen as a central issue in her struggle for self-determination.¹

Elsewhere, Linda Nochlin confirms the importance of O'Keefe's flowers as a forerunner to feminist iconography, not, however, as a psycho-physical metaphor of the female sexual experience, but as a morphological metaphor of the female genitalia or reproductive organs. She writes:

In O'Keefe's Black Iris (1927), or Ruth Gray's (illustration no. 12), Midnight Flower (1972), the connection iris-female-genitalia is immediate: it is not so much that one stands for the other, but rather that the two meanings are almost interchangeable. The analogy is based not on a shared abstract quality, but rather upon a morphological similarity between the physical structure of a flower and that of a woman's sexual organs -- hence on a visual, concrete similarity rather than an abstract contextually stipulated relation. In the same way, Boffie Johnson's Pomegranate (1972), suggests woman as a fruitful being -- it is morphologically similar

¹Nochlin, Women Artists: 1550-1950, p.67. Elsewhere in her text, Nochlin cites that O'Keefe has continually denied any relationship to vaginal iconography in her work. She is so acutely aware of the sexual associations viewers have attached to the images of the clam shells and the flowers, that she has refused to have the flower paintings in the Women Artists: 1550-1950 show, or, even reproduced in the catalogue for fear of reinforcing this misinterpretation in the context of a show of women artists, (p.59).

to the uterus; the richness of female fecundity -- the seeds well up from inside the pomegranate; and her reproductive expandability -- the fruit splits under the pressure of its own ripeness -- without ever being anything other than a carefully observed and described, if large-scale pomegranate.¹ (illustration nos. 13-15).

Isolated, centralized, up-front, realistic images of nature can also be said to be continuing the Northern Romantic tradition, however, it was only fifteen to twenty years earlier that Mondrian, as Robert Rosenblum tells us, "had begun to single out individual flowers for an almost mystical scrutiny ... in which the flower is removed from a human environment and magnified to that Romantic scale which lets us peer into the microcosm of nature".² Whereas, Nochlin related O'Keeffe's flowers -- at the time of doing -- to "the unity of the feminine and the natural order" ... that dark timeless unity with and acceptance of nature which seemed ... inseparably bound with ... true femininity.³ The isolated, central and magnified flowers of Mondrian in the period 1900-1910 are vested with a different symbolism which transcends mere aesthetic contemplation.⁴ Rosenblum continues:

Mondrian's flowers ... pertain to mystic traditions of flower painting, both old and new ... His intuitive penchant for examining the individual facts of nature as if their mysteries could be so extracted was indebted to Romantic traditions that could find their origins in Runge's wide-eyed scrutiny of single flowers, and in the neo-Romantic botany of Rudolf Steiner, who found in flowers

¹Nochlin, "Some Women Realists": Part 1, Arts Magazine 48, (February 1974):48.

²Robert Rosenblum, Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko, (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p.178.

³Nochlin, Women Artists: 1550-1950, p.67.

⁴Rosenblum, Modern Painting, p.178.

the key to life, death and resurrection...¹

Possibly the same interpretation holds true in the case of O'Keefe and the existence of such contrary interpretations exemplifies the difficulties in defining feminist content.

¹Ibid., pp.178-80.

CHAPTER 111

Abstract Sexual Imagery

In discussing figurative and abstract sexual imagery, attention must be drawn to the fact of visual polarization in the work I have chosen to discuss. The figurative work is, for the most part, aggressively overt, while the abstractions operate as consciously intended, but covert conveyors of biologically based feminine iconography.

Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro were seminal figures in art-world feminism and the development of feminist abstract sexual imagery in the early '70s. Before turning to their work it is important to mention their pooling of intellectual and emotional resources in the early '70s to organize the Feminist Art Programme at the California Institute of the Arts and to educate women artists as feminists through consciousness-raising techniques and through a system of support, encouragement and collaboration. In short, these two women are responsible for the founding of the feminist art movement on the West Coast, and the energy and reaction it has prompted all across North America in terms of education, exhibition practices and the development of the beginning of a new feminist aesthetic should not be underestimated. One cannot imagine a more exemplary pair to function as role-models for their young women art students.

Any discussion of the work of Schapiro and Chicago should start with their theory of "central-core imagery" which they developed during

their tenure as co-directors of the aforementioned Feminist Art Programme at Cal Arts from 1971-73. This is their theory: feminist art consists of pictorial or sculptural images which bear sexual associations. They described the prevalent images as: a central focus (or void), spheres, domes, circles, boxes, ovals and overlapping flower forms¹ (illustration nos. 16-22). The formal organization of these centralized, often isolated images is usually a metaphor for a woman's body -- a woman's sexuality.² They, and their students in the Feminist Art Programme at Cal Arts consciously and enthusiastically adapted these sexual symbols as covert, surrogate images of themselves. Their theory of central imagery is based on their need to articulate an independant female sexuality in the face of male oppression in a patriarchal society. Schapiro explains:

Judy and I had each harboured covert notions about the forms we were imaging. Each of us knew that on the surface our forms resembled mainstream abstraction, but we each felt the drive toward our special subject matter (not knowing or finding out until later how common our feelings were). Finally when we 'spoke our piece' we learned from many other women that the drive towards incorporating covert meaning within abstract form was a secret many women artists kept to themselves.

Although the 'central-core image' was specifically inspired by the need to describe a stand-in for one's self, a surrogate for high sexual consciousness, a metaphor for femaleness, I now think that the specific nature of that esthetic transaction is only part of the story. The 'central-core image' has greater significance than we realized at the time. It is not so much the importance of the ovoid or circular form but more the use of an acceptable, available form to stand in for covert female meaning -- meaning which would not be acceptable in the culture. The education of women for natural defeatism would militate against the celebration of women's fantasies of assertion and power in painting and

¹Lucy R. Lippard, "A Note On the Politics and Aesthetics of a Woman's Show", Women Choose Women, (New York: New York Cultural Centre, 1973), p.7.

²Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago, "Female Imagery", Womanspace Journal 1 (Summer 1973): 11.

sculpture. This, therefore, is the real meaning that would have to be hidden in the work.¹

Chicago and Schapiro cite Georgia O'Keeffe as the first woman artist to adopt this specifically female iconography, and her floral and seashell paintings as innovative in terms of expressing the experience of female sexuality. And indeed, they have adopted the flowers of O'Keeffe as symbols of the reaffirmation of women's sexual identity in the face of the contradiction a female artist feels in the experience of being both an artist and being a woman. They describe

Black Iris:

...she painted a haunting mysterious passage through the black portal of an iris, making the first step into the darkness of female identity. That step moved her out of the reference points of art-making as it had been defined by men throughout history. She painted out of an urgency to understand her own being and to communicate as yet unknown information about being a woman.²

In 1968 Miriam Schapiro did a series of paintings and drawings entitled Ox (illustration no. 23). These paintings are abstract with quasi-alphabetical, quasi-gynomorphic images (body-sign). In choosing her title, she mines the idea of "Otherness"³ -- if only men are subject, then women are object. If therefore, only men are fully human, women are beasts.⁴ Because Schapiro experienced deeply rooted sexual-identity conflicts while she was an art student, she admits to

¹Miriam Schapiro, "More On Women's Art: An Exchange", Art in America 64 (November/December 1976):19.

²Schapiro and Chicago, "Female Imagery", p.11.

³"Other" in the sense used by Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex.

⁴Rosler, "Feminist Art in California", p.71.

developing a "monster" image of herself.¹ How could a woman fulfill her destiny as a woman, socially speaking, and at the same time be an artist? She felt herself to be woman's body with man's concerns, hence the monster image which she was able to work out in her paintings. Years later she described Ox as the final solution to the monster problem:

It is the most explicit 'Cumt' painting I painted. It is large, has the configuration of an 'O' in the centre of an 'X'. The colors are startling red-orange against silver ... The interior of the painting is painted in tender shades of pink and the invitational and seductive nature of the painting is sexual and transcends sex at the same time. It was the final solution to the monster problem. How could you have strong, male-assertive, logical, measured and reasonable thoughts in a female body?²

Arlene Raven, an art historian at the Feminist Studio Workshop in California, was in close contact with Schapiro during her years in California. She speaks of the beast in mythological and metaphorical terms:

In the legend of 'Beauty and the Beast' lives a being who assumes an appropriate physical form through the interaction of the kiss of Beauty -- the inspiration for artistic creative transformation. Schapiro ... declares her right for human transformation to occur within her -- through her art -- and for this transformed consciousness to assume a physical form in her pictures.³

Most of the controversy about the "central-core imagery" theory has focused on Judy Chicago. She was the first all-out feminist artist of the current movement, the first to get it together as a

¹Moir Roth, "Interview With Miriam Schapiro", Miriam Schapiro, (La Jolla, Mandeville Art Gallery, University of California at San Diego, 1975), pp.8-15.

²Ibid., p.12.

³Arlene Raven, "Women's Art: The Development of a Theoretical Perspective", Womanspace Journal, 1 (February/March 1973):17. Raven must be credited for shifting the "central-core image" theory from the crudelybiological to the psycho-biological.

painter, a woman, and a political force; and the first with enough vision, energy, intelligence and emotion to build a community of female peers, independent of the established art world that has heartily rejected women's art for so long.¹

Chicago explains this "central" imagery:

The visual symbology ...must not be seen in a simplistic sense as 'vaginal or womb art'. Rather, we are suggesting that women artists have used the central cavity which defines them as women as the framework for an imagery which allows for the complete reversal of the way women are seen by the culture. That is, to be a woman is to be an object of contempt, and the vagina, stamp of femaleness, is devalued. The woman artist, seeing herself as loathed, takes that very mark of her otherness and by asserting it as the hallmark of her iconography, establishes a vehicle by which to state the truth and beauty of her identity.²

The artists she is referring to, whose work shaped this theory, and whose forms she identified with as if they were her own body, are people such as Barbara Hepworth, Lee Bontecou, and the aforementioned Georgia O'Keefe.³

It was around 1968 that Chicago first started to explore her own subject matter. Like Schapiro, her work up to this point was still embedded in '60s formalism and, as such, was acceptable to the male art world. In understanding her work from this period on, which develops into a mature style fusing form and content, I will quote her in conversation with Lucy Lippard:

Throughout this period I was also discovering that I was multi-

¹Lucy R. Lippard, "Getting Hers", review of Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist, by Judy Chicago, Ms. Magazine 4 (August 1975):42.

²Schapiro and Chicago, "Female Imagery", p.14.

³Gaston Bachelard uses the term "muscular consciousness" to refer to that sensation of physical identification between a work of art and the maker and/or viewer.

orgasmic, that I could act aggressively on my own sexual needs. The forms became rounded like domes or breasts or bellies, and they opened up and became like donuts, and then the donuts began to be grasping and assertive. I went from three forms to four and started the Pasadena Lifesavers (1969) (illustration no. 24). I was developing color systems which made forms turn, dissolve, open, close, vibrate, gesture, wiggle; all those sensations were emotional and body sensations translated into form and color. I called them lifesavers because in a way they did save my life by confronting head-on that issue of what it was to be a woman.¹

Together Lippard and Chicago affirm the particularity of "central-core imagery" as being female, as being closed off to men because their bodies don't contain. "But what", asks Lawrence Alloway, "is the difference between Chicago's Lifesavers and Kenneth Noland's circles, especially his earlier ones where the edges melt and tremble?"² Chicago answers him by saying: "the difference between Pasadena Lifesavers and a Noland target is the fact that there is a body-identification between me and those forms and not between Noland and the target".³

Alloway insists on the formal aspect of looking at art rather than the interpretive approach.. Chicago's Lifesavers, as Miriam Schapiro has explained (to him), carry a concealed meaning within an abstract form.⁴ They are subject as well as object.

Lucy Lippard also makes an eloquent plea in favor of subjectivity in apprehending women's art:

...the time has come to call a semisphere a breast if we know damn well that's what it suggests, instead of repressing the

¹Lucy R. Lippard, "Talking to Judy Chicago", Artforum 13 (September 1974): 60.

²Alloway, "Women's Art in the '70s", p.70.

³Lippard, "Talking to Chicago", p.64.

⁴Schapiro, "More on Women's Art: An Exchange", pp.17-21.

association and negating an area of experience that has been dormant except in the work of a small number of artists, many of them women. To see a semisphere as a breast does not mean it cannot be seen as a semisphere and as endless other things as well, although the image of the breast used by a woman artist can now be subject as well as object. By confronting such levels of seeing again, we may be able to come to terms more quickly with that ... suppressed imagery so rarely acknowledged today. And such a confrontation can only produce a deeper understanding of what makes women's art different from men's art, thereby providing new and broader criteria by which to evaluate the concerns of half the world's population.¹

¹Lippard, From the Centre, p.148.

CHAPTER IV

Political Art

As has been seen, the key to some of the art produced by the women's movement seems to be what Donald Kuspit calls, "reversal of expectation",¹ women artists give society what it does not expect from images made by women. This chapter will be devoted to a discussion of the way in which women use images of sex and violence as instruments for political comment. Male sexual imagery is employed here in a context that is not solely sexual, but as a symbol of power and authority in a male-dominated society.

If women depict nudity and male genitalia, they do so, not because of a special affection, but because the phallus is a traditional symbol of authority and power, and women artists are in the process of taking some of this power for themselves.² By adopting the phallus as an image, they not only mock tradition which has denied them the right to depict the male nude, but also assert their right to a share of the establishment sceptre, and perhaps use it as an image to challenge the existing male-dominated political arena.³

To this mainstream of erotic reversal, two feminist artists,

¹Donald B. Kuspit, "Nancy Spero at AIR", Art in America 63 (July 1975):99.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

Nancy Spero and May Stevens add violence, power and authority, creating a pointedly political subject matter using phallic imagery.¹ The possibility of overlap and interaction between the terms "political" and "feminist" exists. Whatever the interpretation of their work, there is no doubt about the dedication of these two artists to what Lippard calls, "allegiance to an active, outgoing use of art and an awareness of larger than aesthetic issues".²

Nancy Spero has been labelled a "protest artist", a rather facile term which became attached to her when she abandoned painting upon settling in New York in the sixties, and found herself responding to the political situation in Vietnam. Her helicopter bomb series of drawings on paper showed "bombs like penises and tongues, bombs spewing death".³ Donald Kuspit explains her imagery:

...The key to interpretation of her imagery is a quotation from Artaud ...'with the obscene phallic weight of a praying tongue'. This not only qualifies the violently protruding -- in vehement contempt as well as with predatory lust -- tongues of many of her small figures (generally female), who share the field of her pictures with the large words of her signs, but is the central clue to her message. It indicated the presence of a desperate personal hope in the midst of the obscene communal events mentioned in the signs -- of prayer which has to be as obscene as the devilish social reality to make itself felt. Spero's violent tongue speaks the messages of the sign pictures, which is where its 'obscene phallic weight' comes from; at the same time, it is important purely for the gesture of spiteful prayer it makes. The combining of the private and public in the tongue -- an intimate body part that goes public in speech -- gives an emotional import beyond the communicating of a message.

¹Ibid. Conventions of sex and violence, the bread and wine of social communion are political strategies in the world of men.

²Lucy R. Lippard, "Caring: Five Political Artists", Studio International 193 (3/1977):197.

³Corrine Robbins, "Nancy Spero", Arts Magazine 51 (November 1976):11.

In a sense, Spero's art is a sticking out of her tongue at the world, but with a mix of defiance and hope that gives it added expressive value.¹ (illustration no. 25).

In her more recent work, Torture of Women (1976), (illustration nos. 26, 27), collage and text are fastened to a twenty inch strip of paper which goes around the gallery walls. On this scroll are excerpts from the Report On Torture by Amnesty International containing descriptions of Chile's missing persons, bodiless women, and winged monster gods.² Corinne Robbins writes:

Giant yellow hand-printed letters, with two elongated 'E's' capitalize the title Explicit Explanation, her heading for a wall of bulletin-typed messages devoted to defining and describing the implicit nature of torture, to detailing in legal language just what are its components....

...The laws regarding torture and descriptions of its goals appear alongside three and four line stories of individual women who suffered, witnessed, and died under it. The women's ages, professions, places and circumstances are documented....

...One moves on, through a white field, only to be confronted with the beautifully printed story of Marduk and Tiamat, on whose body Marduk took his stand, splitting it like a flat fish into two halves, from one of which he made a covering for the heavens. Thus, through an act of torture, a god wrested from the body of the goddess Tiamat our skies. Torture of women has a long history in ancient stories, and a longer one in modern reports. The names of the countries Chile and Uruguay are blocked in red letters. The messages sometimes stumble: 'When I did not -- when I did not/ When I did not answer' and the voices of individual women came through. Spero is dealing with what is, with our history, with half-hidden fragments of our world that for a long time have been outside the provenance of art. And yet, one of the provenances of art is to hold up a mirror of ourselves.³

And, it would seem, Spero's work fulfills this very well by its reflection of violence in the world. There is a feeling of deep

¹Kuspit, "Spero", pp.99-100. Dali's limp penis has been said to be linked to the tongue in the French phrase "montre molle", and is interpreted as a symbol of impotence.

²Robbins, "Spero", p.11.

³Ibid.

concern on the part of Spero for all people who are victims of violence and brutalizing forces, not only women. As Spero is not a widely known artist, I have no knowledge of her more recent work regarding feminist/political issues. I would pose the question of her continued interest in political violence and whether that interest manifests itself in feminist imagery or simply as political statements in the form of texts and ideographs.

May Stevens is a painter whose work has reflected political and social concerns since the early fifties. In the late sixties Stevens developed the work she is best known for, the Big Daddy series. Big Daddy is, in actual fact, her own father, and as such, the archetypal male-authoritarian figure, as well as a symbol of American imperialism. In conversation with Cindy Nemser, Stevens explains: "He ...represented to me an authoritarian and closed attitude toward the world. It was a middle American attitude toward culture, toward politics, toward black people, and toward Jews."¹

This reactionary attitude was prefigured in an earlier series of paintings entitled Freedom Riders (1964). These dealt with the Civil Rights Movement in the Southern United States. Martin Luther King wrote the preface to the catalogue for this show which travelled to the Southern United States as well as the AFL-CIO headquarters in New York. Stevens has been active in the peace movements in the United States, and has contributed heavily to all of the peace exhibitions.² She compares her Big Daddy figure to the Ingres portrait

¹Cindy Nemser, "Conversations with May Stevens", Feminist Art Journal 3 (Winter 1974-75):4

²Ibid.

of Louis Bertin. "I read that the French people have always been very fond of this portrait as the epitome of the rising merchant class. I just love the way he sits there in his solidity, his mass, his authority and his unimpeachable rightness. That was very close to my feelings about Big Daddy".¹

Stevens' own personal rebellion against those values is signalled in these paintings. She casts the character of Big Daddy into many scenes and situations and in different contexts (illustration nos. 28, 29). But, for the most part, he is depicted naked, and, usually has a bulldog in his lap where a penis might have been.² "The bulldog is his 'attribute' to which he is literally as well as metaphorically interchangeable".³ The wrinkled, pushed-in multi-folded face of the dog echoes the self-satisfied fleshy face of the middle-American who is depicted in a variety of guises. There is a mixture of terror and humor -- a metamorphosis from human to animal as in the images of Francis Bacon. May Stevens talks about this to Cindy Nemser:

...I like Bacon and hate him at the same time. His paintings are quite beautiful and yet quite terrifying. There's a beastiality in Bacon and in some of my images too. The human and the beast is a very ancient, deeply felt racial memory. It's the ambiguity that human beings feel about their bodies, the mind-body dichotomy.⁴

The head of Big Daddy, as well as the negative spaces surrounding his head in many of the paintings are very phallic in form. Or,

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³Donald B. Kuspit, "May Stevens at Lerner Heller", Art in America 65 (March 1977):177.

⁴Nemser, "Conversations with May Stevens", p.4.

perhaps they are bomb-shaped? At any rate, on the penis-bomb-head she generally places a hard hat. Small motifs of the American flag are often scattered throughout the paintings. In one such example, Pax Americana (1973) (illustration no. 30), she depicts a nude Big Daddy totally wrapped in the "Stars and Stripes". "There's an imperial grandeur to his figure draped in the flag. He's an American hard-hat, but he's also a very kingly regal figure with lots of power and clout".¹

A combination of Big Daddy roles is put into the large canvas of 1971, entitled, Big Daddy Paper Doll. Stevens describes it as a culmination of the work done previously:

...It has five figures in a simple frieze going across the deep blue background. While one is supposed to read the central figure as a paper doll who could wear the four costumes that surround him, which are cut out so he could fit underneath them, in a way it's like five separate figures. We see headless and faceless figures in the uniforms of the policeman, the soldier, the executioner, and the butcher. They contain no human being; they are bodiless forms. The background is accurately drawn to fit over the white figure that's in the centre, but becomes mysterious with the blue from the background bleeding into those negatives and showing upon those spaces where arms and head would show. There's also a red, white and blue motif that occurs throughout the painting, sometimes there are fragments of flags with stripes, occasionally stars, although I try not to use them in too obvious a way.²

Donald Kuspit reaffirms Stevens' intent in having meant Big Daddy function as an abstract form as well as social and personal content. Big Daddy is:

...a visual convention and meaning cliché as well as passionate shape and portentous idea -- rhetoric as well as reality. Big Daddy is at once an ideological image of America's indifferent use of power and a personally charged form with theatrical potential, a potential which can be turned against it-- and used to mock its

¹Ibid., p.5.

²Ibid.

ideological meaning ... While reducing Big Daddy to a culture phenomenon, undermining his authority by trivializing him into a toy, she also finds him still uncannily expressive. Her contradictory response to him -- to at once underplay and overplay him -- prevents his image from going stale. Her ambiguous attitude also indicates a personal working through of his import, freeing her from his overbearing presence and her implicit dependance on him.¹

Another group of paintings from this series functions investigation of lifestyle and attitude. In these paintings Stevens is ambiguously caught between Big Daddy's static sober manner, and the animated personages of various black activists: the artist Benny Andrews for one, Andrew's wife, and the black martyr and lover of Angela Davis, George Jackson. The scenario calls for Stevens to try to internalize the expressive, empathetic mode of the blacks while exorcizing Big Daddy's authoritarian mode.²

Stevens and Spero show a new public spiritedness and public purposive in feminist art. They deal with male sexual imagery in a context that is not solely sexual, but as a symbol of authority and power in a male-dominated society, a symbol of the world's destructive forces, responsible for wars against defenseless peasants, oppression of women, and racist murders. Their content is harsh and brutal, their means of expression, subtle.

¹Kuspit, "May Stevens", pp.117-18.

²Ibid., p.118. It must be noted that political or protest art is an unresolved subject in the current art world. It is not surprising that its practioners are few. In style it sometimes lends itself to a poster-like format. Adrian Piper has done such a poster. It shows a photograph of herself with a group of Hispanic working-class people demonstrating against their eviction from their slum dwellings. Alongside the other picketers, she carries a sign with the words, "This if not a performance", a reference to and refutation of her previous work making store and performance art.

In conclusion, feminist political art is primarily protest art and shares with much protest art the subject matter of violence, discrimination and authoritarianism. The fact that feminist political art takes the form of statements of protest is reflective of the basis of feminism in general, a protest against the status quo. Unlike male protest art their statements are expressed using images or iconography which stem from or are peculiar to the female experience.

CHAPTER V

Historicizing Gender

Another way that women artists have exemplified a specific feminine iconography has been through the process of historicizing their gender. This they have done in two ways. Firstly, in a literal way through painting and sculpture which stood as metaphors for female personae, and secondly, by reviving women's traditional art forms in assigning significance to materials heretofore associated with the realm of traditional women's work-- fabric, sewing, crafts, and so forth. This has manifested itself in much work necessitating collaborative efforts.

Judy Chicago, for one, has said "I want my work to be seen in relation to other women's work, historically, as men's work is seen".¹ This thinking resulted in a series of paintings, Fleshgates (1972), in which the grid is built on the paintings of Miriam Schapiro, her contemporary and co-founder of the Feminist Art Program at Cal Arts. One of Chicago's most impressive series on this theme is the Reincarnation Triptych (1973), (illustration no. 31). It is connected to her rebirth and is a summation of her struggle as a feminist. She describes it to Lucy Lippard:

In the Reincarnation Triptych, each 5' canvas is an inside square in relationship to an outside square; each is named after a woman whose work I really identify with -- Madame de Stael,

¹Lippard, "Talking to Chicago", p.62.

George Sand, and Virginia Woolf. The border around each picture has forty words on it about the woman. The change in the nature of the image in the three paintings reflects two things -- the change of consciousness through the last two hundred years of women's history, and a stage in my own development. In Madame de Stael, the inside square is very bright; it's in front of a much softer color, hidden and protected by the bright one. It says 'Madame de Stael protected herself with a bright and showy facade' and it stands for me protecting myself with the reflections and transparencies and fancy techniques in my earlier work. In George Sand, the inside and outside are more at odds, like the inside wants to come out and the outside is stopping it. A strong orange glow in the centre represents her/my repressed energy. In Virginia Woolf, the central square is just a shadow behind the other. At first, I wondered if the third painting should have no square at all, and I decided that it would be dishonest. I didn't come out of all that struggle undamaged.¹

In The Great Ladies series of 1972, Chicago tried to make her form language and color reveal something specific about a particular woman in history, something about that woman's personality. The Great Ladies are all queens -- Christina of Sweden, Marie Antoinette, Catherine the Great, and Queen Victoria. She used the quality of opening, and blockage, and stopping to express some aspect of subjectivity. There is both a level of literalness in them and a level of emotional meaning.²

Building a pantheon of heroines was also a preoccupation of sculptress Rosemary Mayer. In 1973, she exhibited three larger-than-life-sized fabric sculptures relating both in appearance and content to historical women. The first woman, Hroswitha was a 10th century German nun, who wrote Latin poetry; the second, Galla Placidia (illustration no. 32), was an empress of the late Roman Empire; and the third, entitled Catherine (illustration no. 33), is an amalgam of

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

namesakes, including Catherine Sforza, Catherine de 'Medici, Catherine of Aragon, Catherine Comaro, Catherine the Great, Catherine of Valois, Catherine, Queen of England, and Catherine of Sienna.¹ Lawrence

Alloway discusses her imagery:

The idea of taking heroines as subject matter arose out of a consciousness-raising group to which Mayer belonged in the early '70s. It is important to characterize the use she made of such subjects ...Mayer has taken the Surrealist concept of the personage and invested it with renewed semantic power. The personage was a totemic, ancestral, or regressive image manifested in forms that relied on the human contour, but without specifying details. Mayer revivifies this evocative but sometimes banal form brilliantly. The feminine presence is evoked, to use her own words, 'enveloped in huge gowns, over centuries', but in tacit rather than overt allusions. Galla Placidia, for example, is constructed of colored transparent materials, which, draped from a rigid hoop, imply a style of feminine clothes, though not that of the 5th century. The scale of the piece, combined with its ample volumes has an imperious presence, but the image is not simply that of a costume; it connotes both wings and a boat's prow. Thus the feminine figure is absent as well as present, missing, as well as given.²

This subject of presence and absence is the theme of some drawings of drapery which also refer to historically prominent women. The masses of drapery imply a body which is not depicted, but which carries the imprint of gesture and wear, so that human presences are subtly recalled.³ Prominent among the drapery drawings are a series depicting angel sleeves (without the angels), (illustration no. 34), which are derived from the late Renaissance paintings by Grunwald and

¹Lawrence Alloway, "Women's Art in the '70s", p.70.

²Lawrence Alloway, "Rosemary Mayer", Artforum 14 (June 1976):36

³Ibid.

Pontormo.¹ Drapery in these drawings, as in the fabric sculptures is a metaphor for women, a metaphor for female presence.²

Miriam Schapiro is another artist who utilizes the notion of connection to other women in her art. However, rather than alluding to specific individuals it is in her use of traditional feminine techniques that this connection occurs. To Schapiro, sewing means connection, and Schapiro makes the connection figuratively and literally when she collects, from the women she meets on her speaking tours -- handkerchiefs, bits of lace, aprons, tea towels -- some objects from their past which she recycles in her paintings. "I saw this as a way to preserve the history of embroidered (often anonymous) works which are our 'connection' to this history of a woman's past."³ These ties of community and family are now worked into women's art by the use of skills traditionally passed from mother to daughter; such as weaving and sewing.

Furthermore, there has been a conscious effort to attach

¹Ibid. When I spoke to Alan Soundheim, editor of Individuals: Post-Movement Art in America (E.P. Dutton), in which Mayer figures prominently, he seemed reluctant to attribute any feminist consciousness behind her work. His understanding of her work is solely in art historical terms. That is, in terms of its influence from the Italian Mannerists -- Pontormo, Fiorentino, and Rosso with their complex forms of drapery and figure style and resulting high emotional content. However, I personally agree with Alloway -- the theme of Mayer's work is women.

²From another point of view, Mayer's sculptures can be said to be painterly visions as sculptural reality, in that they easily relate to Morris Louis' Veils. By transferring Louis' imagery from canvas to sculptural space, she can be said to have literalized Louis' paintings.

³Katherine Hoffman, "Toward a New Humanism: Conversations with Women Artists", Womanart 2 (Winter 1977-78):24.

affirmative meanings to subject matter and media formerly avoided as unsophisticated and unsuitable, or worse yet, as decorative.¹ The women's movement has questioned the hierarchies between the decorative arts (those traditionally made by women), and the high arts, (those traditionally made by men), and started to examine the sources of the stereotypes which have kept women's art out of the cultural mainstream.²

Miriam Schapiro and Harmony Hammond (see below), are two artists who use crafts and decorative techniques defiantly and ironically to reproduce women's traditional skills, and take them, from a conceptual point of view, to a high level of sophistication. Schapiro's fabric collages of 1972-76, (illustration no. 35), are works of imposing and heroic scale. Linda Nochlin has written:

...Schapiro has placed the raw materials of everyday domesticity -- chintzes, checks, cretonnes -- in their novel ambience of bold, often disturbing, abstract structure; frameworks at times stringently geometric, at others, explosive, in which the innocently displaced drygoods spring to unsettling new life ...These works constitute a radical statement of Schapiro's identity as an artist working in the vanguard of contemporary abstraction and, at the same time, as a feminist struggling with other women to create a valid imagery of women's consciousness.

Three years later, Donald Kuspit praised these collages as well:

...Anatomy of a Kimono (1976), (illustration no. 36) ...takes over a room rather than simply shows in it -- operates on a grand scale which not only implies the heroic existence of women, but makes this existence public in a way it has never been before. The point is clear: women will never again lead a 'retiring'

¹Lubell, "Interview", p.19.

²Barbara Zucker and Joyce Kozloff, "The Woman's Movement: Still a Source of Strength or One Big Bore", Art News 75 (April 1976):49.

³Linda Nochlin, "Miriam Schapiro: Recent Work", Arts Magazine 48 (November 1973):38-41.

existence. Newly self-assertive, they have, as it were, come out of the closet, with full, however troubled and scarred identities ...In (her) art (she) works through the old assumptions about woman, her traditional 'destined' role -- victim and servant ...toward a new sense of her power demonstrated just by the ability to overcome and transcend the old roles, by her refusal of her familiar place ... (She) refuses to accept the old verities about woman, purging them by writing them large in art. In sum, by becoming fully conscious of the old actuality of woman (she) creates the possibility of a new kind of woman.

...Schapiro's current work still has her familiar central focus ...but it is now thick with explicit meaning, overlaid with meaningful material, made abstractly and freshly expressive. The self-centeredness of the imagery acquires universal implications by being made of woman's universal material -- the narcissism becomes emblematic of woman's coming to consciousness of her situation. There is additional, if somewhat more conventional, aesthetically speaking, universality in Schapiro's use of a colored modular grid, its clarity somewhat tedious from overuse at this point in art history. However, the stasis of the grid underpinning easily carries the material which often alludes to it by size and shape -- as in the small woman's handkerchiefs of Connection and Sampler -- so that the work as a whole acquires a sturdy unity, in the end one in which the surface refers back to the support. In other words, Schapiro puts to modernist use (in the Greenbergian sense), 'the real nature of (woman's) materials', achieving an original synchronization of woman's medium and art's medium. The serendipity of this conceptual connection, as well as of the decorative surface connections, confirms the sense that Schapiro has found a fresh legitimate use for modernism. Because of her use of woman's material medium Schapiro shows that the modernist aesthetic can lead to a sumptuous, even latently voluptuous art. The modernist transcendence Schapiro gives ordinary woman's material symbolizes the possibility of liberation from woman's traditional role, as well as, more conventionally, a sympathetic immortalization of her past existence.¹

Whereas Miriam Schapiro works on a grand scale which implies and publicizes the heroic existence of women, Harmony Hammond, a younger New York artist -- a radical feminist involved with the politics of aesthetics -- employs a small format in her mixed media pieces. This is meant to be read as a feminist rejection of the

¹Donald R. Kuspit, "Nancy Spero at AIR and Miriam Schapiro at Andre Emmerich Downtown", Art Journal 35 (Winter 1976-77):144-46.

heroics of much New York abstraction¹ (illustration no. 37). Hammond, like Schapiro, uses the element of repudiation of "women's work" as her feminist thesis. Her recent Floor Pieces in the form of rag rugs, looked like the work of a woman who had not yet arrived at a feminist self-consciousness. However, by placing these "rugs" in a gallery setting, Hammond created an ironical situation: what looked like "women's work" was intended to repudiate this label. "Women's work" was invested with a new political-aesthetic value, long overdue.²

Hammond, like Schapiro, makes the ironical conversion -- from "women's work" to "high art" by the decision to subject these "bits of craft objects" to an aesthetic attitude, not unlike a Duchampian readymade. In her recent paintings, she employs a thickly painted herringbone pattern as an embodiment of feminist concerns (illustration no. 38). Again, as in the "rugs", she attempts to break down the barrier between high art and craft images, which, in this case, are drawn from her affirmation of weaving as archetypal women's work.³ "...Layered, impacted, intensely hand patterned presences of this sort are given a political insistence, to be associated with the feminist claim for an individual, cultural, self-sufficiency."⁴

In her most recent show, along with the herringbone pattern paintings Hammond exhibited a group of fired clay fragments which

¹Carter Ratcliff, "The Paint Thickens", Artforum 14 (June 1976):43-47.

²Carter Ratcliff, "Harmony Hammond", Arts Magazine 50 (March 1976):7.

³Ratcliff, "The Paint Thickens", p.45.

⁴Ibid.

displayed traces of basket and sandal weaving. They were displayed as though in an ethnological museum's store room. Some were in glass cases atop a chest of drawers, and some were within the drawers. These clay fragments were treated like rarely exhibited treasures.¹

Carter Ratcliff continues:

Its important to note that Hammond's new works are not the results of weaving processes; they are not woven objects. They refer to weaving, they exhibit traces of it. This particular kind of "women's work" is being treated as important enough to warrant references that drew on the mediums, styles, and display methods of modernist art (the allover paintings on the wall), and likewise important enough to warrant display and storage methods drawn from ethnological museums (the fragments in the chest of drawers).²

It can be said that both Schapiro and Hammond are "literally conservative", that is, they conserve the everyday materials of woman's life, politically radicalizing them by artistically transforming them.³

All the women artists discussed in this chapter "establish continuity with the past history of women, and find the revolutionary message in its 'old news'. These women revolutionize materials symbolic of women's oppression so that they communicate her new power and purpose. They thereby create a new sensibility and make clear that sensibility is a product of history and society, not of nature."⁴

¹Ratcliff, "Harmony Hammond", p.7.

²Ibid.

³Kuspit, "Spero and Schapiro", p.146.

⁴Ibid.

CHAPTER VI

Identity

In this current wave of feminism in the '70s, the changing definition of women has resulted in the search for an identity both personal and generic. Moreover, women artists have insisted on the assertion of an identity that corresponds to the reality of a woman and not how she is perceived by men.

The most visible expression of this search for identity is manifested in the growing number of artworks by women with the self as subject matter. In fact, the whole emergence of the women's movement coincided with Conceptual Art's shift toward content, autobiography, narrative and behaviorism.¹ Therefore, it is not unusual that the shift to personal information as opposed to formal information, the move from formalism to content results in women using their own lives as content in their art.

Choosing the self as subject matter was a natural outcome of the process of consciousness-raising and led to an investigation of

¹This is not at all coincidental. Being a vanguard feminist puts an artist in the vanguard of those solving the post-modernist crisis of artists -- to not just follow modernist rules, but to find the possibilities of art in the present. (Carter Ratcliff addressing an audience at the Brooklyn Museum, October, 1977.)

all aspects of female culture.¹ Birth, motherhood, rape, household routine, labour practices, menstruation, family and kinship ties, and so forth, were explored usually in an art form embodied in a "reprographic" mode, to use a term initiated by Pincus-Witten, and, many chose to concentrate, as Lucy Lippard has remarked, "on a self that was not outwardly apparent, a self that challenged or exposed the roles they had been playing. By means of costumes, disguises and fantasies, they detailed the self-transformation that now seemed possible".²

Eleanor Antin is perhaps the best known artist to use self-transformation and fantasy role-playing as a means towards expansion of her identity, and speaks of her art as "moving out to, into, up to and down to the frontiers of myself". Lippard discusses her video work:

In video pieces, Antin has projected four selves: (illustration nos. 39,40) The Ballerina (every little girl's dream?), The King, The Black Movie Star, and The Nurse, discovering in the process that 'a human life is constructed much like a literary one', and that her characters -- hybrids of autobiography and fiction -- began to lead their own lives. 'Autobiography in its fundamental sense', says Antin, 'is the self getting a grip on itself ... (It) can be considered a particular type of transformation in which the subject chooses a specific, as yet unarticulated image and proceeds to progressively define (herself) ... The usual aids to self-definition -- sex, age, talent, time and space -- are merely tyrannical limitations upon my freedom of choice'.³

It is inevitable that in any exploration of (sexual) role-playing, the drag syndrome, first explored by Duchamp as Rose Selavy,

¹In consciousness-raising groups, feelings about being a woman and being an artist were discussed; feelings that had previously been repressed had permission to come out and were subsequently expressed in art forms. It is these groups that have allowed the personal to be political and public.

²Lippard, From the Centre, pp.103-104.

³Ibid., p.105.

would constitute an important component. Martha Wilson photographs herself "invading homosexual consciousness". In a performance piece entitled, Posturing: Drag, she did a double transformation in which she became first a man, then a man dressed as a woman.¹ In much of her early work (1971), she explored this concept of "invading" identities and of losing herself in order to forget her own identity. She writes of wanting to get picked-up on the Halifax waterfront as a prostitute, and of the risks that would entail.²

In collaboration with Jackie Apple, another artist exploring similar concerns of identity, Wilson created "Claudia", "a composite person who exists in the space between ourselves, a fantasy self-powerful, gorgeous, mobile -- who is the result of the merging of the realized and the idealized self".³

Lucy Lippard describes the public performance of the piece which they called Transformance (Claudia): (illustration no. 41)

One Saturday six New York women who shared this 'fantasy of omnipotence' dressed up fit to kill and lunched at the Plaza as Claudia: then they took a limousine to the Soho galleries, engendering admiration and hostility along the way. 'By manipulating elements from the culture to our own ends', they discovered an expansion of the self, 'power over destiny, choice of and responsibility for one's own actions'.⁴

¹Ibid.; p.106.

²Jackie Apple and Martha Wilson, "Correspondence 1973-74" Heresies 1 (May 1977):43.

³Lippard, From the Centre; p.106.

⁴Ibid. Six months later, Apple muses over this performance in her correspondence with Wilson. Claudia was a magnification of role models and stereotypes of power, media images programmed into all of us. The 'power' of the beautiful, rich woman. The illusion of power. We exaggerated it, 'lived' it in order to also shatter it, expose the illusion, blow it up, not reenforce it, or validate it. It's a fine line, a delicate balance of form and content, intent and context.

Make-up and disguise are certainly important tools with which to convey the concern with identity and role-playing. They lend themselves as vehicles for the artist's exploration of how she is seen by others, how she sees herself, and how she wishes to be seen by others. Jackie Apple works with the effects of disguise on other people, or, with the effects of disguise in relationship to herself. Her work deals with impersonation of both sexes, and the "relationship between the many views of a single person and the varying positions of the viewers to the object".¹ Lippard writes:

...She (Apple) has concentrated on three themes: 'Transfers/Exchanges (exploring (Freud's idea of) the four people in every relationship between two)'; 'Identity Exchange (changing roles with another person)'; and 'Identity Redefinition (many views of myself as defined by others' perceptions)'. Wilson and Apple solicited opinions about themselves and their appearances from acquaintances and documented them, evolving a new form of the self-portrait.² (illustration no. 42).

New forms of self-portraiture were also on Suzy Lake's mind when she made A Genuine Simulation of... (illustration no. 43). In a series of color photographs, the artist covers her face with white clown make-up converting it into a so-called blank canvas, a neutral ground. She then proceeds to apply ordinary everyday make-up to this "ground". In so doing, she reduces her own identity to zero, as in mime, from which a new face can then be made.³

Similarly, in a video work entitled, A Natural Way To Draw (1975), she applied this same white, mask-like make-up, again to approximate the blank canvas, did a drawing of her face onto this

¹Ibid., p.128.

²Ibid., p.107.

³Chantal Pontbriand, "What If Modern Art Had Begun In 1839?", Camerart, (Galerie Optica, 1974), p.52.

"blank" face, and then applied ordinary make-up to this face. All the while an unseen voice-over recited from Nicolaidis' book from which this piece takes its title. In doing this type of self-portrait, she at once reflects herself, and at the same time hides herself,¹ suggesting as Jackie Apple does, multiple views of herself. Lake has remarked, "We are multiplicity of personalities evolved from our own history of influences, events, or situations, both on a voluntary and involuntary level".²

Like Apple and Wilson, Lake is interested in personality modification through psychological and sociological influences. Unlike them, however, she uses her body metaphorically to define psychological (head) spaces, or states of mind, whereas, Wilson and Apple act out or perform, in real life, their new "identities". Lake's are private, static performances, in the form of narrative, sequential photographs.³ In a work of 1974, entitled, Suzy Lake as..., (illustration no. 44), she transforms her own face into that of a friend. (She uses individuals of different ages and sexes). It is important to note that it is always her own face which is the "passive receiver of the transfers and influences".⁴ The point Lake is making here is that our true

¹ Diana Nemiroff, "Suzy Lake and Sorel Cohen", Artscanada 34 (October/November 1977):59.

² Artist's statement in catalogue, The Winnipeg Perspective 1979 - Photo/Extended Dimensions, (The Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1979), p.20.

³ Lake has, of course, done performance work before an audience. However, the work considered here can be said to have been performed solely in front of a still camera.

⁴ Chantal Pontbriand, Suzy Lake, (Vehicule Co-op Press, Montreal, 1975) (no pagination).

identity is subject to the conditions of influence and adaptation to environment, and through these factors one is subject to change.¹

Her work affirms our ability to support and adapt to change in our lives.

Much of the feminist art in the early seventies dealt with the existential condition of womankind, and was used as a vehicle for the collective raising of consciousness, and of release -- exorcism.² The feminists in California, especially, concentrated on dispelling taboos, exposing and hopefully undoing the painful aspects of women's history. The pioneering project in this endeavor was Womanhouse at the California Institute of the Arts in 1972. This was a project of the aforementioned Feminist Art Programme at Cal Arts, directed by Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago.³ It consisted of the transformation of a large, decayed, abandoned house into a series of environments. This entire physical project was an exercise in exorcism of imposed sex roles, of cultural expectations, of childhood hang-ups, and so forth. It was in Womanhouse that Chicago made the infamous Menstruation Bathroom. It was painted stark white. On a shelf lay boxes of kotex, deodorants and hygiene apparatus. A wastebasket overflows with soiled kotex. Next to the basket on the floor, is a tampon painted red --

¹Ibid.

²Rosler, "Feminist Art in California", p.70.

³For a more detailed discussion of this see p.18 above. A group of women in London, England did a similar project in the South London Women's Centre, creating rooms which exposed the hidden side of domestic dreams: "Rooms as images of mental states from unconscious basements to hot tin rooftops". (Kate Walker in Sparerib, (September 1974):38).

"one of 10,000 a woman uses in her life".¹

How women really are, and not how they are required to appear is the theme of Penny Slinger's art. Slinger, an English artist, makes, in my opinion, the strongest statement for woman's self-definition.

Peter Fuller, in an article in Connoisseur, recognizes that her art incorporates John Berger's thesis on the representation of women in Western art as expressed in his book, Ways of Seeing.² Berger argues that according to conventions that have only recently been challenged, the "social presence" of a woman is different in kind from that of a man. Whereas, a man's presence embodies a promise of power always directed toward an object outside himself, a woman's presence expresses her attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Men act and survey women, but women themselves appear. This results in a woman's self being split in two: "She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself ... she has been taught to survey herself continually". And so, she eventually comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as "two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman". Moreover, since this internal surveyor is itself male, woman "turns herself into an object -- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight".

Berger goes on to explain how in paintings of the female nude

¹Miriam Schapiro, "The Education of Women as Artists: Project Womanhouse", Art Journal 31, (Spring 1972):269.

²John Berger, Ways of Seeing, (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), pp. 45-64. (All quotes in the following two paragraphs are taken from this text.)

there is always the implication that the subject (a woman) is aware of being seen by a spectator, and furthermore, that this female nude is not "naked as she is", but, "naked as the spectator sees her". He cites recurrent genres in paintings of women as evidence, observing that this nakedness is not "an expression of her own feelings; it is a sign of her submission to the owner's feelings or demands". And so, her own sexuality -- as opposed to her availability as a sexual object is denied in order that the onlooker (male) may feel a monopoly of passion. Berger asserts that "to be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be ~~seen~~ naked by others, yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude". Therefore, Berger concludes, the depiction of the female nude in painting not only reflects but also contributes to an oppressive social usage. The nude epitomizes the way in which men seek to limit and confine the experience of being a woman. She watches us watching her supine availability. She has sex appeal and beauty, but not sexuality. The idealization of women in the Western tradition implies that the appearance a woman is compelled to manufacture for men is synonymous with her reality. But of course, this is not so. Fuller explains how Slinger's photographs of herself reveal an awareness of this dicotomy:

...what she sees and presents is not just herself as men would have her appear, but herself as she is. She does not not deny the image of herself which all her education as a woman in a male-dominated society has created -- however, she is constantly saying that it is a degradation, an illusion, and a trap. She exposes it and tears it open to show what lies behind it: in Berger's terminology, she reveals rather than displays. (illustration no. 45).

In May 1971 ...Slinger published a book of photo-collages with accompanying poems: it was called '50% The Visible Woman'. The accompanying image (to one of the poems) consists of a photo-collage of a woman, standing to attention so that her body faces the viewer. Her head has been reversed upon her shoulders so that

instead of a face we see a cascade of hair, which partially covers her legs too. However, her torso, from the breasts right down to the top of the thighs, consists of a medical drawing of the open female genitals and pubic hair, on which the various constituents have been labelled. The words, and the collage, taken together, describe what it is to be a woman.

Slinger begins by telling us that she is surveyed so much (by men and the man within her) that she feels herself to be 'an ever-open secret'. She has become the half that man 'has always been looking for', a reflection, in fact, of man's 'soul'. This is the 'fifty percent' which is 'visible', but she then invites the observer to turn her around, to look behind this image of herself and see her. The collage goes on to exaggerate that which, generally speaking, is left out altogether in European paintings of the nude. Berger argues that women's bodies were stripped of hair in painting because hair is associated 'with sexual power, with passion'. As long as the male observer sees, (in Herrick's words), 'that dainty leg ... is as white and hairless as an egg', he may feel that his sexuality alone is important. The absence of the genitals in most female nudes is comparable. Slinger reverses these conventions: she presents us with an image in which the woman's body is only her hair and her sex, and by implication, forces us to confront her autonomous sexuality.¹

Whereas, women have felt free to deal with sexuality on abstract, figurative, literary and conceptual levels within an autobiographical framework, there has remained, until recently, one subject that has rarely been introduced into post-movement feminist art -- that of childbearing, childbirth, and childrearing. Indeed, artists have used their children in their work on occasion, from the 17th century on, as in Gainsborough's work, and the tradition continues to some extent at the present time in feminist art. For example, Alison Knowles has used her daughter in a dance piece, and Mary-Beth Edelson her children in ritual performances. But in the one area of childbearing and childbirth where men cannot ever retain the creative prerogative, there has existed a state of neglect. Lucy Lippard hypothesizes:

...(Have) women artists traditionally either refused to have children or have hidden them away in order to be taken seriously

¹Peter Fuller, "Penny Slinger", Connoisseur 187 (October 1974):104-07.

in a world that accuses wives and mothers of being part-time artists? Or because the biological aspect of female creation is anathema to women who want to be recognized for their art? Or is it related to narcissism and the fact that the swollen belly is unattractive in the male world? But if this were so, why wouldn't the more adamant feminists have taken up the theme of pregnancy and birth along with monthly cycles and aging? None of these explanations seems valid.¹

Recently, however, in the autumn of 1976, Mary Kelly, an English artist showed work at the ICA Gallery in London entitled, Post-Partum Document, which recorded her relationship with her infant son from his birth to his entry into nursery school. Three sets of panels present the three stages of the formation of the child's consciousness within a psychological framework -- from complete dependence on the mother, through the narcissistic phase to the Oedipal stage.² She emphasizes the point that this earliest period "not only forms the future personality of the child, but also reaffirms the woman's secondary position -- her negative place in our society".³ Jane Kelly remarks:

The Document follows three progressive stages of an infant's development and how they affect the mother: Part I. Weaning from the Breast, II. Weaning from the Holophrase (learning to speak), III. Weaning from the Dyad (entering a nursery). The notion of weaning is used metaphorically to suggest that the mother experiences these moments of separation as a loss of the child who was once a part of her and who, in their imaginary relationship is equated with the phallus. This loss reaffirms her negative place in the symbolic order -- the order of language and culture, because the privileged signifier of that order, in the patriarchy

¹Lippard, From the Centre, p.138.

²Jane Kelly, "Mary Kelly", Studio International 193 (January/February 1977):55. Renewed interest in Freud, initiated by Juliet Mitchell's book, Psychoanalysis and Feminism, sparked Kelly's interest in the use of psychoanalytic theory in a visual art context.

³Jane Kelly, "Mary Kelly", Studio International 193 (March 1977):187.

is the phallus. The psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan used in the work were not taken up without an awareness of their patriarchal foundation: yet the need for certain of his concepts, and the lack of any woman's theoretical work which achieves as much, necessitated its use....

The content of the exhibition pointed out that although men and women in our society share much of the work inside and outside the home, ultimately the job of rearing children is seen as part of a woman's 'natural capacity' -- and more particularly it presents the problems experienced by one woman artist who is also a mother. The art objects themselves reflect both this central division and the gap between male-dominated theory and the feminine area of intuition, in that they act in an antagonistic relation to each other: 'In the Post Partum Document I am using the 'art object' explicitly as a fetish object in order to suggest the operations of the unconscious that underly it. The stains, markings and word imprints have a minimum affective value in relation to my lived experience. In psychoanalytic terms, they are visible representations of cathected memory traces. These traces, in combination with the diaries, time tables and feeding charts, constitute what I would call a discourse which 'represents' my lived experience as a mother, but they are consciously set up in an antagonistic relationship with the diagrams, algorithms and footnotes, thereby constituting another discourse which 'represents' my analysis, as a feminist of this lived experience'. (Mary Kelly, press release, September, 1976).¹

As Lucy Lippard has remarked, "When women use their own bodies in their art work, they are using their SELVES; a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject".² I would argue that those women whom I have discussed above, become both object and subject. In their work they show the shift from being the "object of vision: a sight", (as discussed by Berger), to an object of woman's own consciousness, and the subject of her art -- an ideological construct. More importantly, these women are making statements of their existence, statements of reality, and reaffirming and redefining their selves. Their art is grounded in social reality and in issues affecting their total lives.

¹Ibid., pp.187-88

²Lippard, From the Centre, p.124.

CHAPTER VII

Art and Self.

At the time I entered graduate school as a painting student in 1974, I read an interview between Judy Chicago and Lucy Lippard, in which they discussed the issue of making art from one's experience as a woman, that is, transforming one's circumstances as a woman into one's subject matter. This interview caused me to rethink the way I was going about my art-making activities and to question the relationship between my sex (gender?) and my art. I realized then, that if I was going to be making artworks for the rest of my life it had better have something to do with me as a person, and in particular, as a woman. I now experienced a new freedom to explore my life in my art, to become more autobiographical, more exposed about my feelings and concerns, and to use my art to confront my existence as a woman.

I quit painting and began to sew. First, I made a group of stuffed and sewn canvas tubes which I tied and folded into knots, (illustration no. 46), and which I then hung from the wall or ceiling, followed by the creation of a large canvas grid (illustration no. 47), consisting of 98 identical stuffed and sewn, hollow twelve inch squares. These works relate directly to the anti-form aesthetic of the post-minimalists of the late sixties whose work challenged the formalist abstraction which was the normative style. This challenge

was, in part, energized by the insurgency and success of the women's movement.¹ The post-minimalists use of non-rigid materials placed great importance to the properties of the materials used, even to the making of the materials themselves. The materials and the action of gravity upon these materials determined forms which could not be totally forecast in advance.² In other words, the physical world acted on the properties of matter to determine form. I wanted to emphasize the flexibility and rearrangeability of the material: the fact that it was possible for these sculptures never to appear the same way twice. Although the shapes I used were abstract, any soft sculpture, regardless of how abstract will evoke the human.³ I felt that I had made a start in a new direction. I regarded these sculptures (as well as some stuffed appliqué paintings I did immediately preceeding them), as body images, as concrete analogues to body condition.

Equally important to me was the process of sewing -- the "art-as-experience" that craft people believe in -- the ritual and reenactment of an activity performed by my female ancestors.⁴ Lawrence

¹Robert Pincus-Witten, Postminimalism, (Out of London Press, New York, 1977), p.14. Soft sculpture predated post-minimalism in Oldenberg's work, but appears to be a characteristic found predominantly in much of women's art in the late '60s and '70s.

²Robert Morris, "Anti-Form", Artforum 6 (April 1968):35.

³Max Kozloff, "The Poetics of Softness", American Sculpture of the Sixties, (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, 1967), p.26.

⁴Of course men have used sewing in their work and continue to do so, but this activity must historically be associated with women because of its traditional domestic application.

Alloway comments on this: "If today there is a penchant for crafts, it would seem to be on this conscious basis, as an iconography in which process acts significantly, not because there is an instinctual female urge to craft".¹

At the time of the sewn grids (1975-76), I felt the need of a photographic image that would act as a memory deposit of my work. The Grid had been accepted in a national travelling exhibition. I wanted to have it exhibited, yet at the same time I wanted to hold onto this piece. My intention was to photograph some of the canvas modules and make a silkscreen print. But, instead, on the encouragement of some photographer friends, I made cyanotype prints of these modules. These were printed on cotton squares which were eventually sewn together as a "pieced work". It became a very large photo-print which was laid out on the floor as a "shadow" or an analogue to the Grid which eventually hung as a curtain (illustration nos. 48-50). Thus, this first photography project became very different from the intended memory image. It became an artwork in its own right.

At this point, I took stock of my activities: I was making soft, flexible, sewn sculptures whose repeated modules could be analogous to a quilt, especially in the more two-dimensional state as photo-prints on cotton. At the same time, the sculptures related, as previously mentioned, not only to post-minimalism in form, but to the tradition of minimalism in their seriality and their repeated units which, although alike, were different by virtue of their being hand-made. There was also the aspect of process and ritual which was to reappear later.

¹Alloway, "Women's Art in the '70s", p.70.

The first project wholly realized in a photographic medium was conceived as a calendar (illustration no. 51). The images in the photographs were of my unmade bed for thirty-six mornings. The visual form of the calendar was analogous to the serial art context of the photographs of the bed, which were taken from the same viewpoint every morning. The bed covering was a red and white geometric quilt. The contact sheet, and later the calendar was informed by the minimalist grid, and, like the sewn cotton modules, each module (in this case, photo), was alike but slightly different from the others due to the fact that the position and configuration of the quilt changed every night as an indicator of human activity and a tracer of human gesture. At this time, I was open to the consideration of Eve Hesse's serial sculptures, especially Sans 11 (illustration no. 52), which I had seen in the basement of the Whitney Museum in New York. I was intrigued with the notion of the heterogeneous within the homogeneous, the changes acting on each unit.¹ Like Hesse's repeated units, my photographs of my unmade bed were basically alike, enough for us to say they are all the same, but each is just as clearly unique and each looks unique -- the variable of similar forms.² In terms of content I was pretty close to "home". My intention in this work was to make a statement regarding the repetitive and banal nature of the routine tasks confronting the housewife -- the traditional "female" activities.

Most people who viewed the two versions of the calendar misread its meaning. They understood the photographs of the beds as

¹ Bruce Boice, "Eve Hesse", Artforum 11 (March 1973):91.

² Ibid.

signifiers of sexual activity in the recent past, rather than indicators of an intended activity in the near future -- that of my task of making-up this bed. I rectified this by my decision to put myself in the picture performing this chore. This was done in the form of a series of colored photographs and cyanotypes entitled Le Rite Matinal (1977), (illustration no. 53), and a videotape, Houseworks (1976), (illustration no. 54), in which I make my bed every morning for a week, thus incorporating the earlier reference to a calendar. The tape is twenty minutes in duration and its sheer monotony forces one to share the reality of this tedious chore over a period of time.

In this work, subject and form were mutually reinforcing. Housework is a monotonous, repetitive work which never issues any lasting, let alone important achievement. Its repetitive, ritualistic nature is analogous to the serial and narrative context in which I place the photographs. On a formal level, the photographs refer to my background in painting. The slow shutter speed of the camera is used to record images of time and motion of my body, and the sweep of the quilt crossing the bed alludes to the painterly gesture on canvas. I use my recorded movements here as brush strokes on the film emulsion -- a reference to "action" painting.

But, most importantly, I regard this body of work as a feminist ideological construct and not merely a series of art objects or photographs. The intention was to attempt to unite the private, domestic and personal concerns of myself, a woman, a mother, and a housewife with art concerns. Art can be changed so that it can encompass this kind of material; woman's occupations and preoccupations can be

validated as art. Like Dadaism and Surrealism this material challenges conventional notions of what is proper in art. As with Duchamp's readymades, "the wresting of an object or activity out of its normal context and its placement in an art context obliges us to consider it anew; its meaning has been altered".¹ Le Rite Matinal and Houseworks concretize and flaunt my situation as a domestic worker and turn it into art. The precedents for these overstatements are the rooms at Womanhouse at Cal. Arts and Martha Rosler's videotape, Semiotics of the Kitchen, (of which I became aware only last year).

In The Shape of a Gesture (1977-78), (originally entitled Domestic Activity as Painterly Gesture), I am photographed cleaning a window in my house. In this more formal work the window pane is analogous to the picture plane of a canvas and the slow shutter speed of the camera records the movement of the colored rags across the window as a "painterly gesture" (illustration no. 55). Thus, this highly autobiographical work incorporates my life as a housewife and as a visual artist.

In trying to unite the private, personal and domestic concerns with art concerns, I deliberately pose amidst household furnishings, yet I use the techniques of contemporary aesthetics to infringe on the documentary nature of these tasks. In other words, I transform autobiographical and social issues into formal abstract issues.

While preparing this paper I was sparked by Sylvia Sleight's thesis of the reversal of gender roles in art, and its political implications.² It was at this time that I started the project

¹Nemiroff, "Suzy Lake and Sorel Cohen", p.59.

²See above, pp. 9-11.

After Bacon/Muybridge (1978-79), (illustration no. 56). From a formal point of view this work enabled me to further augment my exploration of the aesthetics of painting through color photography. I became aware of the fact that the English painter, Francis Bacon had used Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of wrestlers as image sources for his paintings of coupled male figures from 1953 to the present. The classical symbolism identified with athletes equated their physical well-being with virtuousness. In a similar fashion, Bacon sensed a high degree of muscular eroticism beneath the Neo-Platonism of Michelangelo's nudes. And Bacon's transformations of Muybridge's scientific studies are an affirmation of male voluptuousness and imply a homosexual content. The feminist theme here is the reversal of the artist-model motif. I am the looking, active female observer of these creatures of beauty and desire, reversing the traditional roles of male/artist, female/model. However, unlike the classical female nudes of Ingres, Titian and Goya, I leave the humanity, energy and activeness of my models intact. They remain more than masses of passive flesh for the pleasure of the clothed viewer. They retain their identities as athletes, yet at the same time they evoke an aura of ambiguity in terms of their mysterious gestures and frayed bodies. The explicit images of Muybridge become the evasive images of Bacon as seen through my camera. I ask the same question as Bacon: are they wrestlers or lovers? Does it matter? They are erotic in their, at least potential potency and dash, but most important it is a woman who recognizes their ambiguity and creates an image based on a woman's view of male sexuality.

On another level, the apprehension on my part of these male coupled figures as homosexuals puts them in a position akin to that of

the female in society: they are the women in straight male society, and, as such, ^{feminist} objects of contempt on the part of both men and women, but for this reason they are the recipients of the empathy on the part of women with highly-raised consciousness. Homosexuals have assumed the position of women: the Other in a male-dominated society.

It would appear from my perception of my own work that in my most recent piece I have been attempting to integrate the two aspects of self -- the woman and the artist -- that is at the core of most feminist art.

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1. Sylvia Sleigh: Phillip Golub Reclining, 1972.



2. Sylvia Sleigh: The Turkish Bath, 1973.



3. Sylvia Sleight: Paul Reclining, 1974.



4. Joan Semmel: Untitled, 1973.



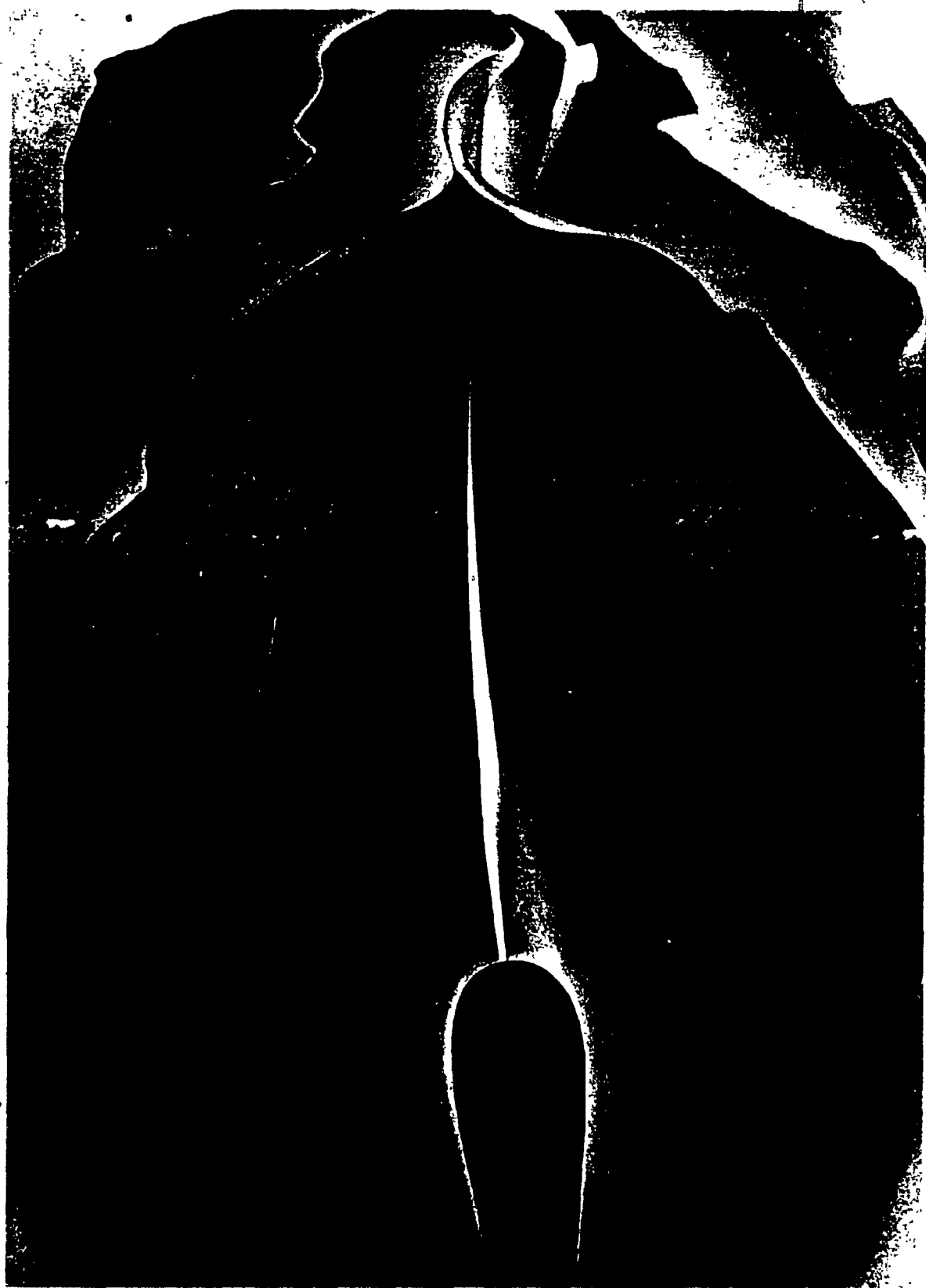
5. Joan Semmel: Untitled, 1973.



6. Joan Semmel: Triangular Tunnels, 1976.



7. Joan Semmel: Intimacy-Autonomy, 1974.



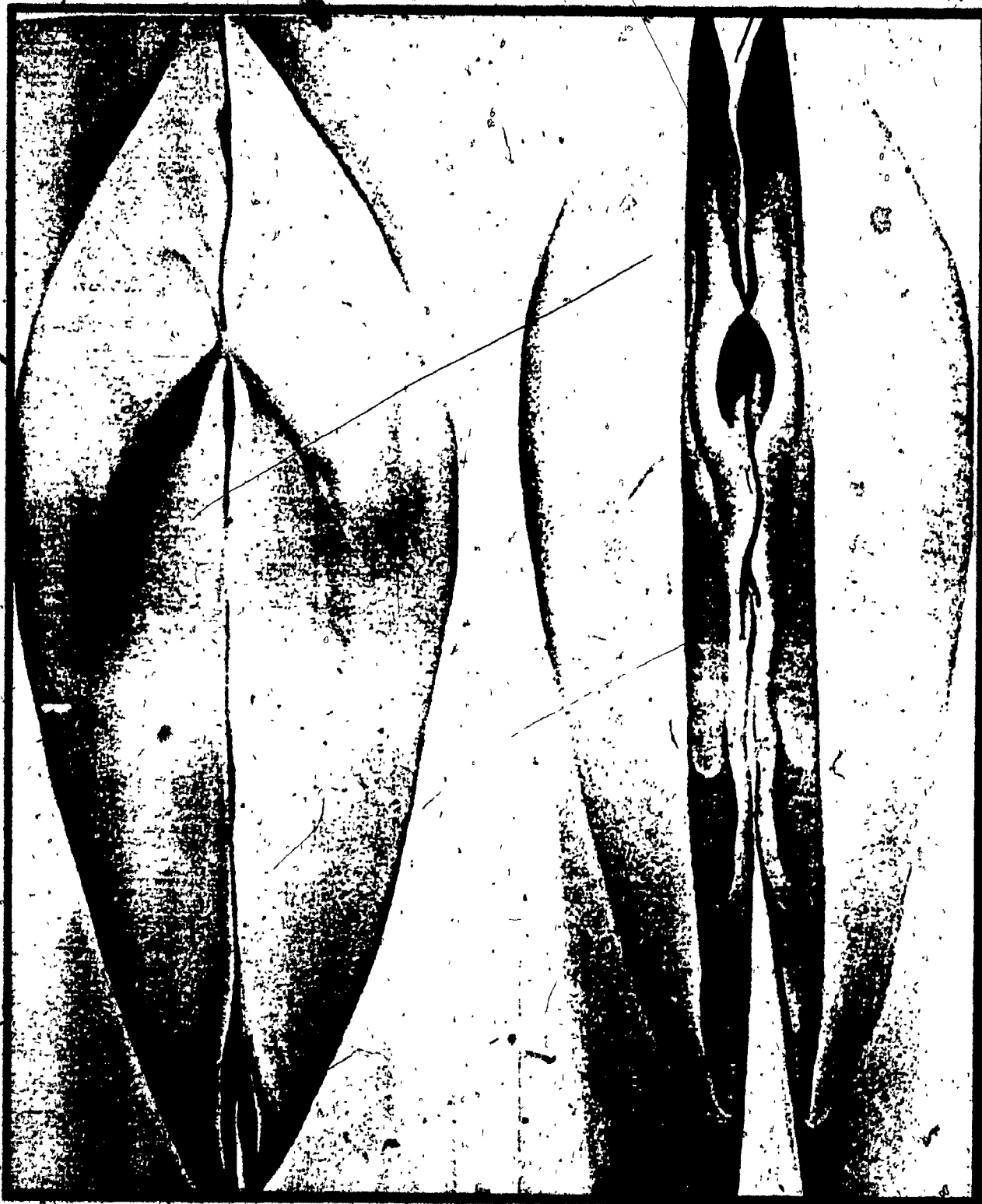
8. Georgia O'Keefe: Jack-in-the-Pulpit no. 4, 1930.



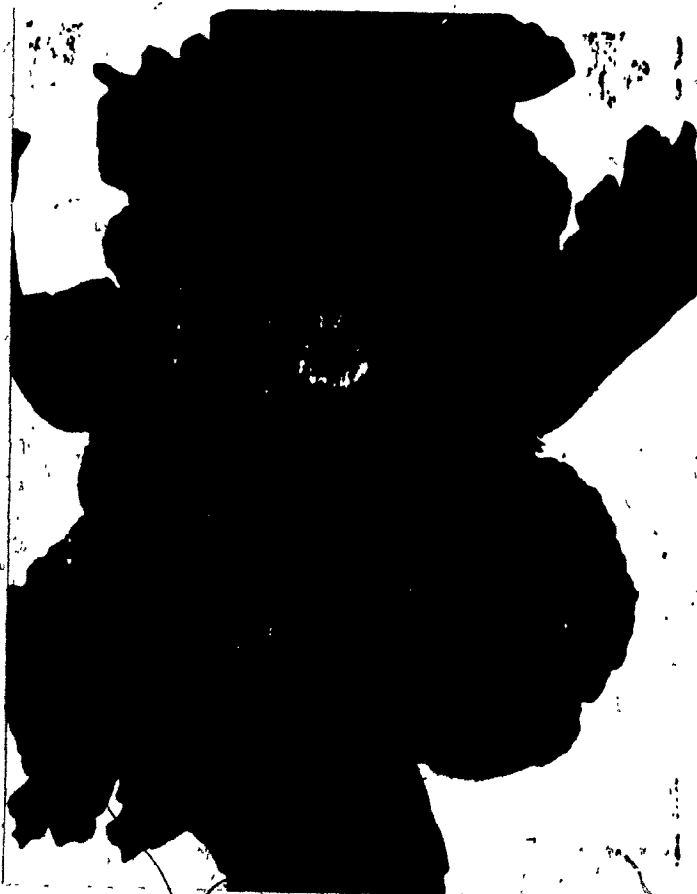
9. Georgia O'Keeffe: Grey Line With Black, Blue and Yellow, 1923.



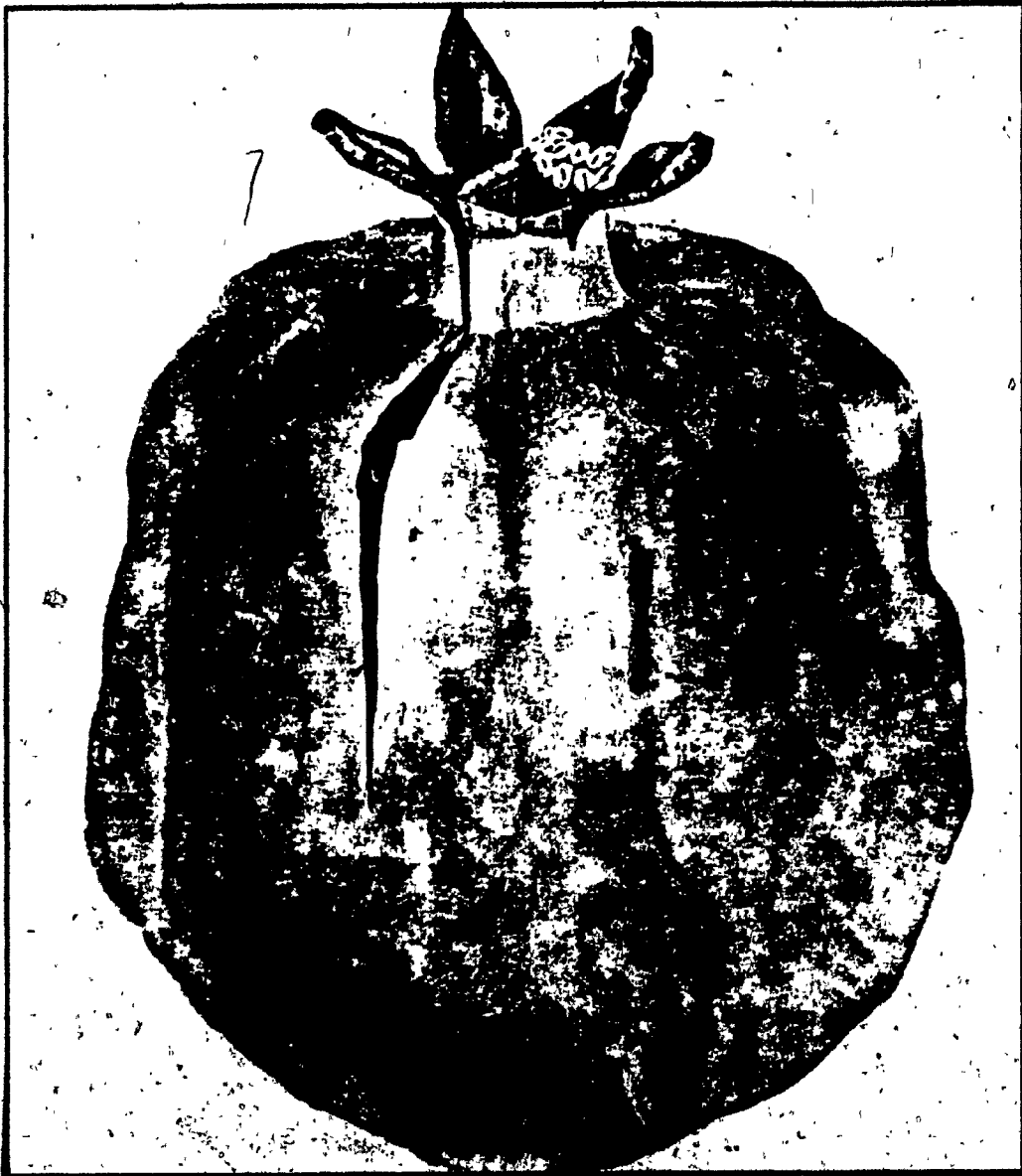
10. Georgia O'Keeffe: Black Iris, 1926.



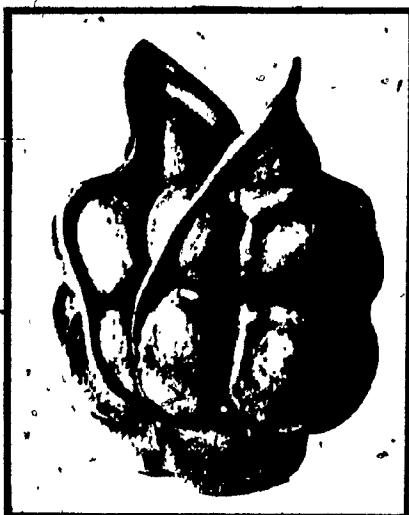
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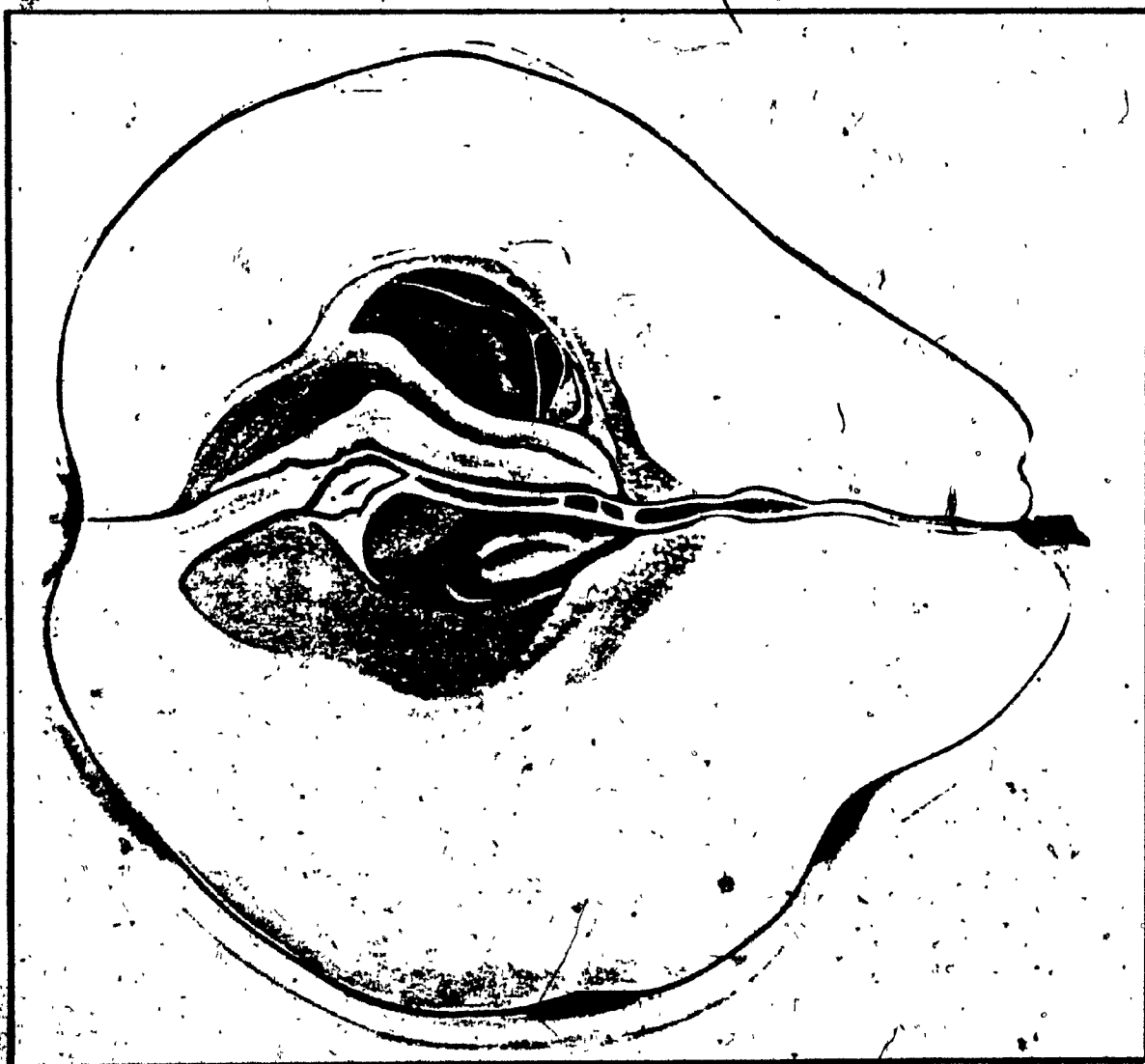
12. Ruth Gray: Midnight Flower, 1972.



13. Buffie Johnson: Pomegranata, 1972.



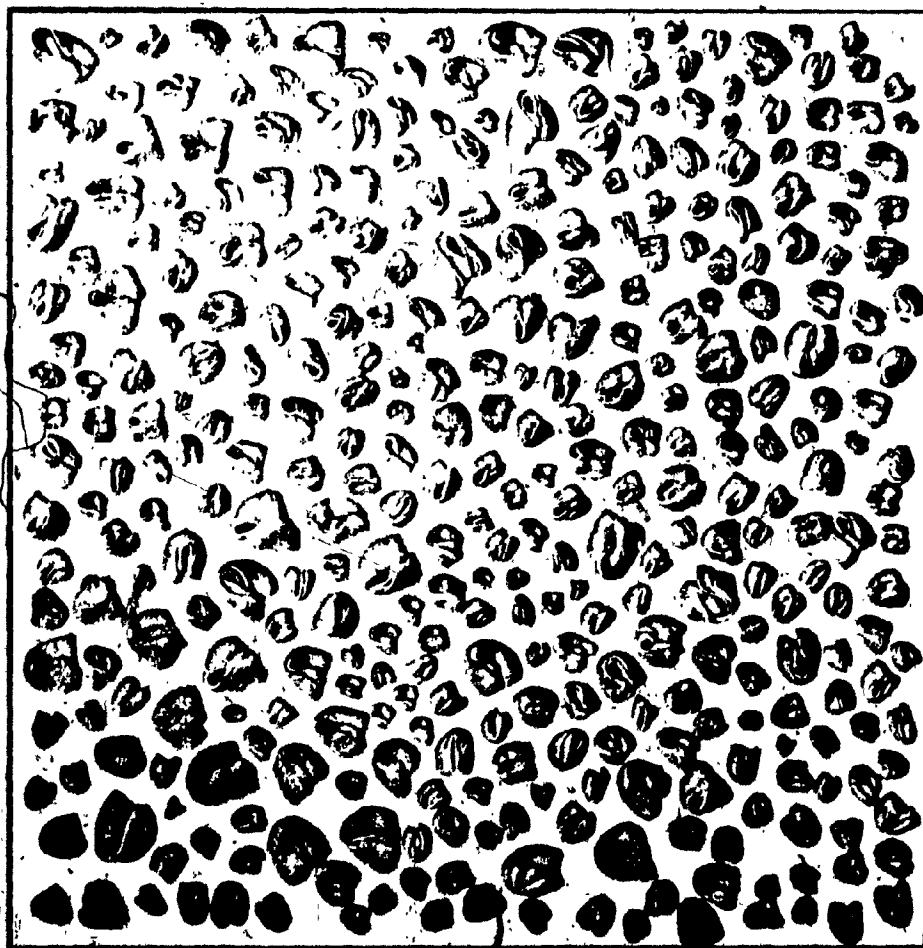
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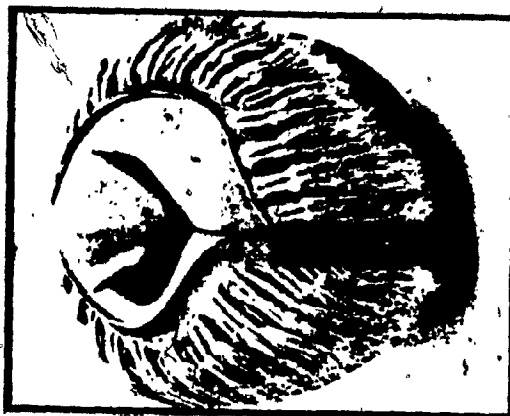
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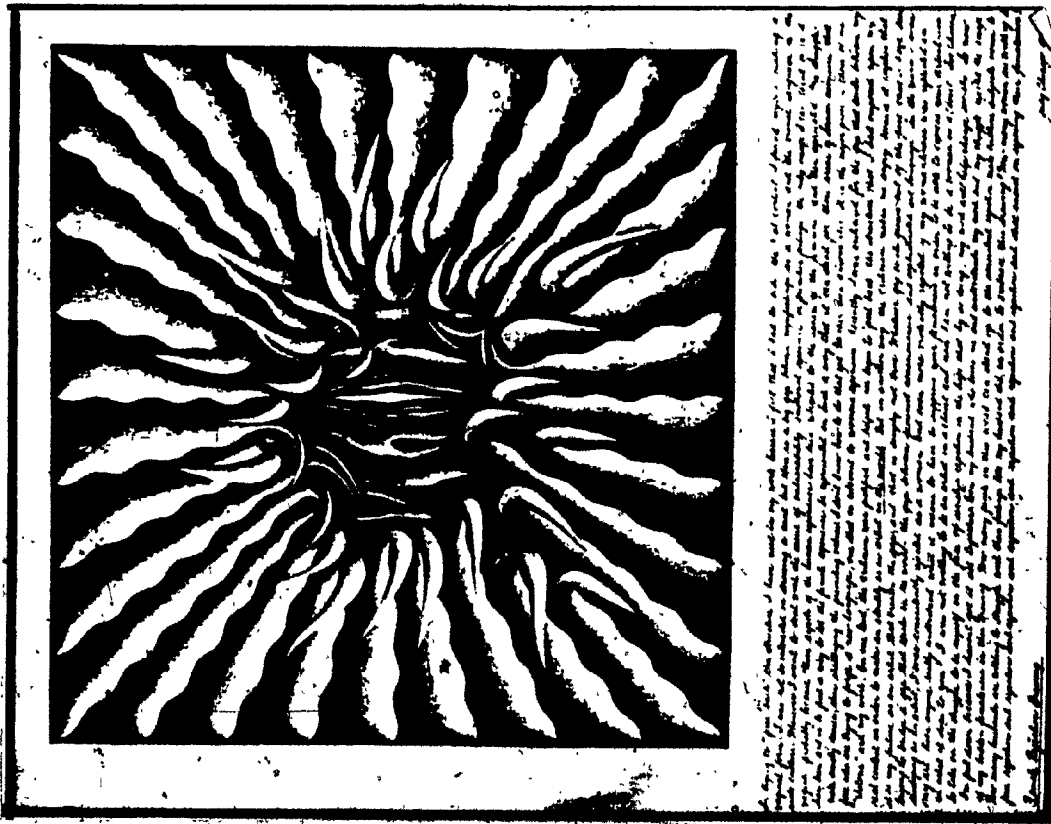
16. Hannah Wilke: Of Radishes and Flowers, 1972.



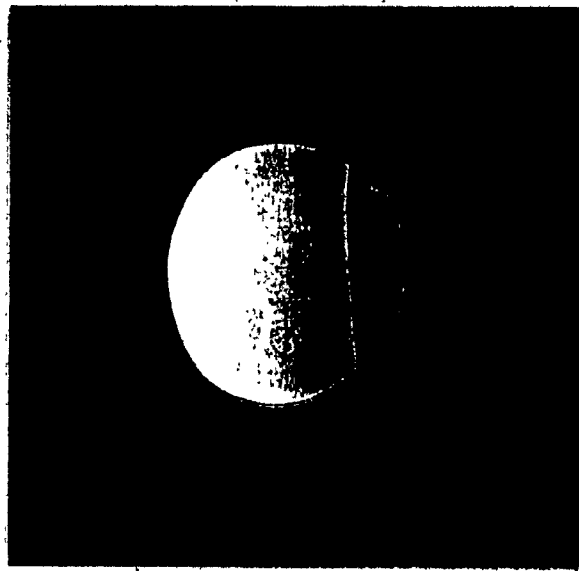
17. : Hannah Wilke: Untitled, 1974.



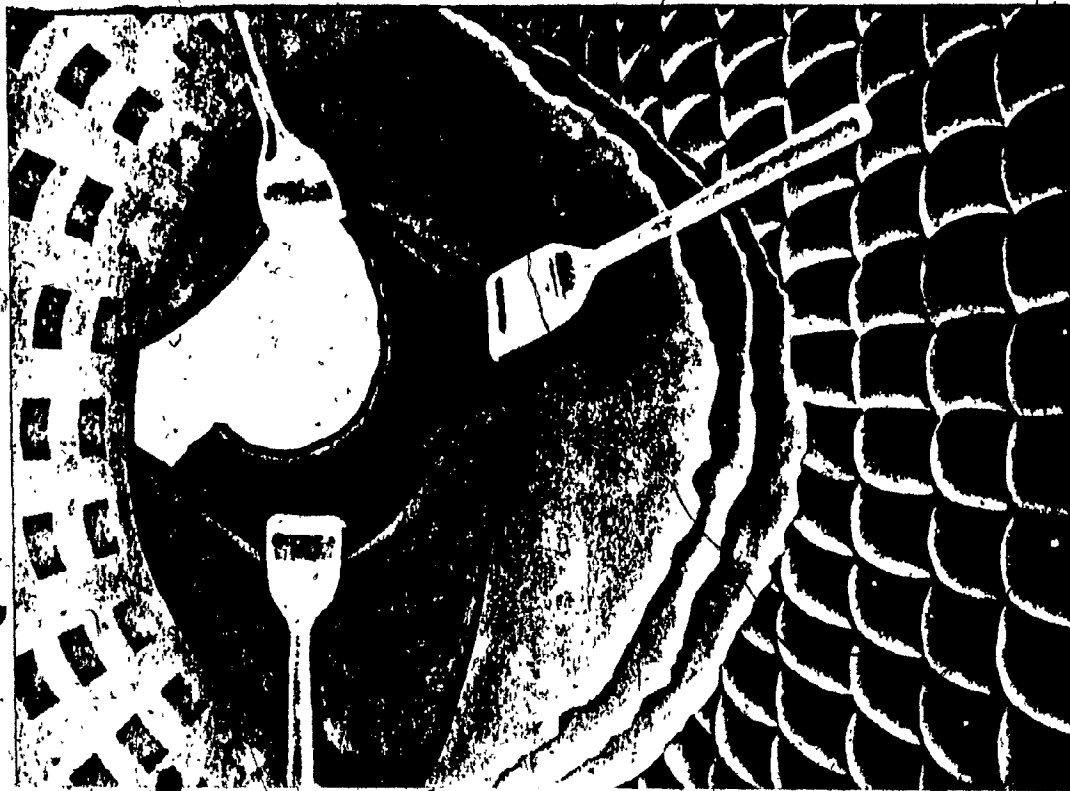
18. Marjorie Abramson: Lillian.



19. Judy Chicago: Female Rejection Drawing, 1974.



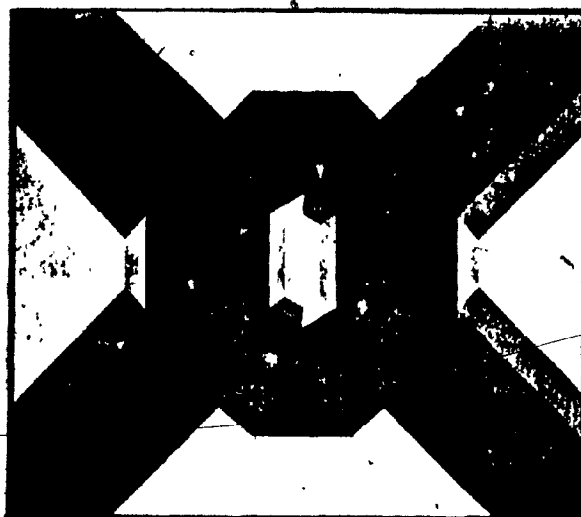
20. Deborah Remington: Gallatin, 1976.



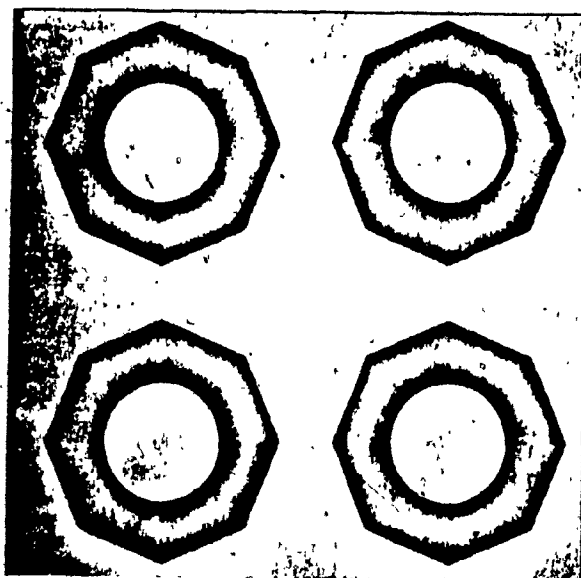
21. Cynthia Carlson: Untitled, 1970.



22. Judy Chicago: Let It All Hang Out, 1973.



23. Miriam Schapiro: Ox, 1968.



24. Judy Chicago: Pasadena Lifesavers, 1969.

IL ÉTAIT ENTRE ONZE HEURES ET MINUIT. LE RÉSULTAT EN A ÉTÉ
 POUR MOI UNE ANGOISSE DE MORT ET UN RAT QUI S'EST NICHE
 DANS UN MORCEAU DE PAIN QUE J'AVAIS À CÔTÉ DE MOI SUR UNE
 TABLE ET L'A DÉVORÉ DE L'INTÉRIEUR, COUVRANT MES LIVRES DE
 CROTTES DE RAT. UNE PARTIE DE CET ENVOUEMENT EST D'AILLEURS
 PARTIE D'UN PETIT GROUPE DE GENS ATTABLES AU DOMÉ, QUI CON-
 NAISSENT LA MESURE OCCULTE DE MON ENTRE-GENESSES À MON CERVEAU
 ET S'OFFRENT LE LUXE DE ME GOUTER DE LOIN AVEC LEUR LANGUE
 ET TOUTE LA LIPPUE LIBIDO DE LA GOURMANDISE D'ACCAPAREURS
 QU'ILS PEUVENT Y METTRE, DE ME GOUTER EN TASTANT, COMME LE
 FOETUS D'UN NOUVEAU-NÉ. POUR LUTTER CONTRE C'EST

CHIEN, MANGE SA LANGUE, MANGE, ETC.....

JUBLIN
 UES
 DIEU LE
 OBSCÈNE

ARTAUD

L O B S C E N E P E S A N -
 T E U R P H A L L I Q U E
 D U N E L A N G U E U U I
 P R I E

A R T A U D

L O B S C E N E
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A R T A U D

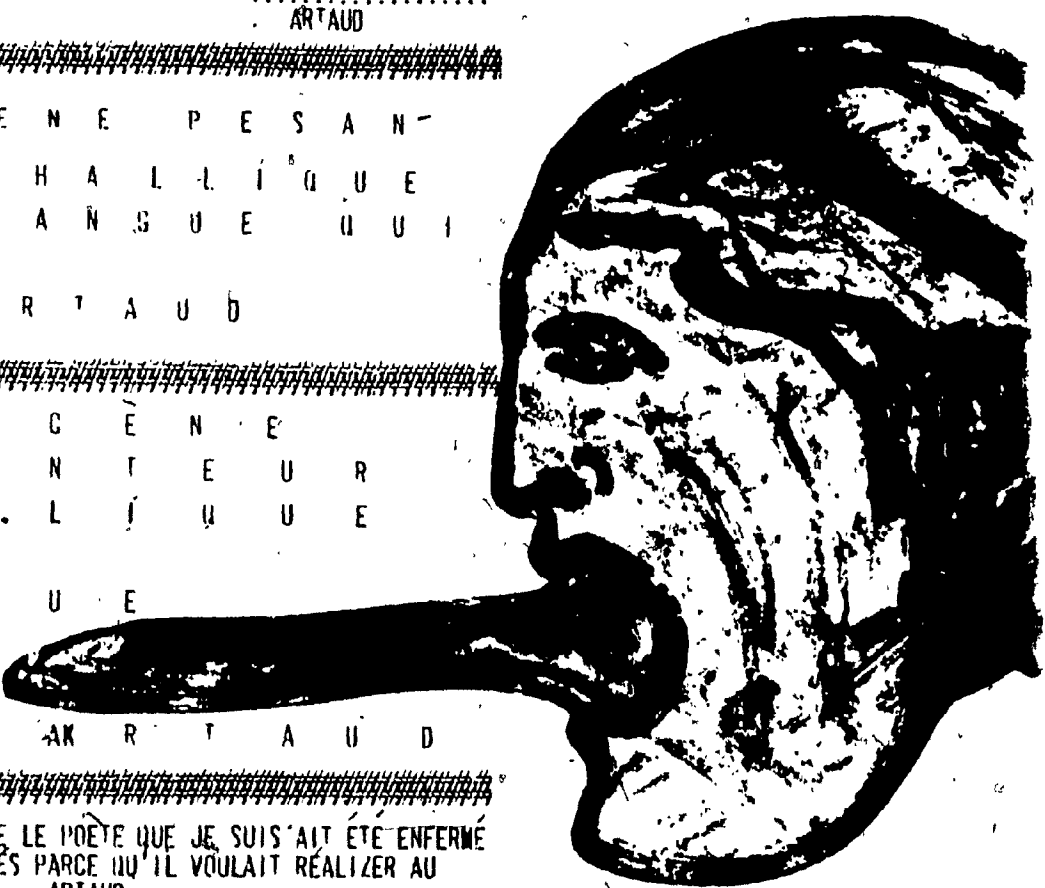
ET JE N'ADMETS PAS QUE LE POÈTE QUE JE SUIS AIT ÉTÉ ENFERMÉ
 DANS UN ASILE D'ALIÉNÉS PARCE QU'IL VOULAIT RÉALISER AU

ARTAUD

LE POÈTE QUE JE
 SUIS AIT ÉTÉ EN-
 FERMÉ DANS UN

ASILE D'ALIÉNÉS

A R T A U D



—Nancy Spero

NANCY SPERO

CHILE
MARTA NEIRA, a 29 year old model was arrested last dec. 9 in santiago by DINA, chile's brutal secret police. according to a prisoners' report smuggled out of the pirque women's prison, when marta was taken in side the quilen detention center on christmas eve 1974, her nose was broken and she had welts all over her. she had been subjected to electric shocks and to sexual abuse.

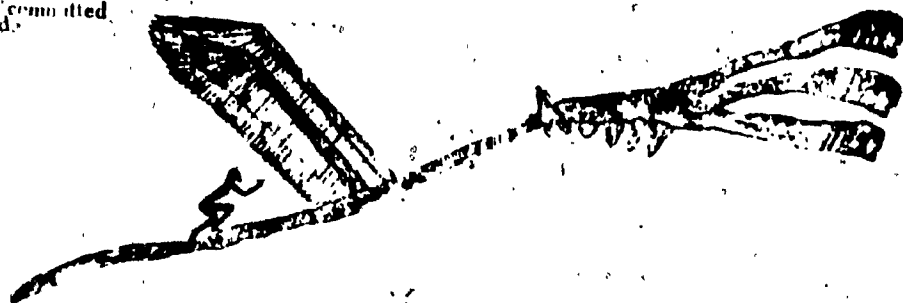
...his young victim of DINA is among at least 1,500
chileans who have disappeared since the military,
led by general augusto Pinochet Ugarte seized
power in sept. 1973.

[illegible]

MARDUK CAUGHT TIAMAT IN HIS NET, AND DROVE THE WINDS WHICH HE HAD WITH HIM INTO HER BODY, AND WHILST HER BELLY WAS THUS DISTENDED HE THRUST HIS SPEAR INTO HER, AND STABBED HER TO THE HEART, AND CUT THROUGH

RED SIGNALS ONLY
 29 12 1977
 at
 a 24 year old teacher
 arrested in
 October 1978.
 In 1979, taken
 to military
 government no. 5 de
 when
 she died after being
 subjected to dry
 submarine method
 of submersion
 of the body over
 the head, feet and
 the rest of the

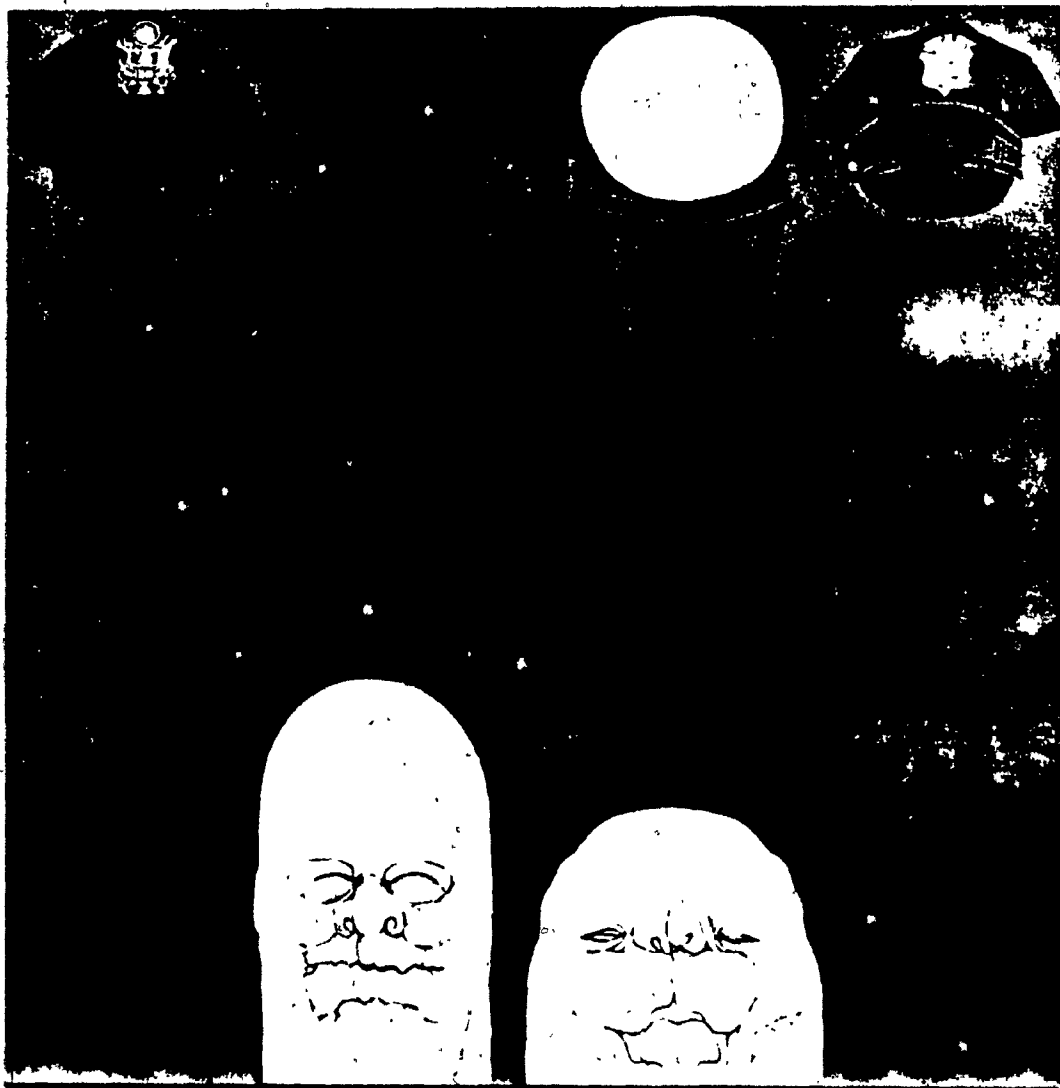
was in the
 had committed
 suicide.



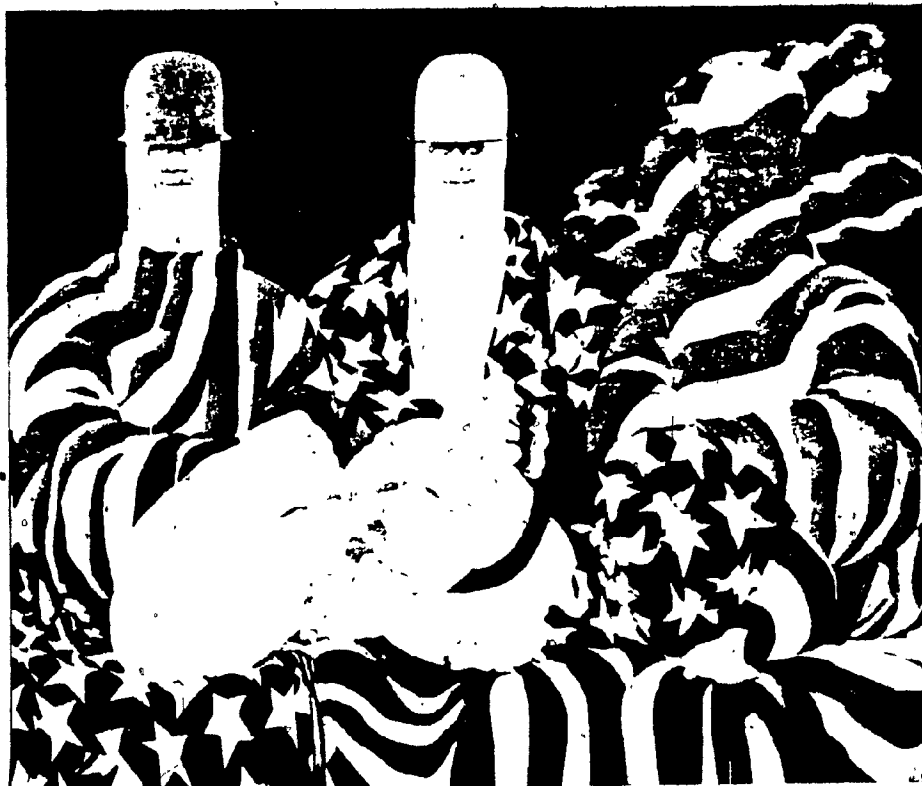
Torture today is essentially a
 state activity. ...the preconditi
 for torture make it almost the
 exclusive province of the state.
 Torture requires that the victim
 be kept under the physical control
 of the torturer.



HER BOWELS, AND CRUSHED HER SKULL WITH HIS CLUB.
 ON HER BODY HE TOOK HIS STAND, AND WITH HIS KNIFE
 HE SPLIT IT LIKE A FLAT FISH INTO TWO HALVES, AND
 OF ONE OF THESE HE MADE A COVERING FOR THE HEAVENS.



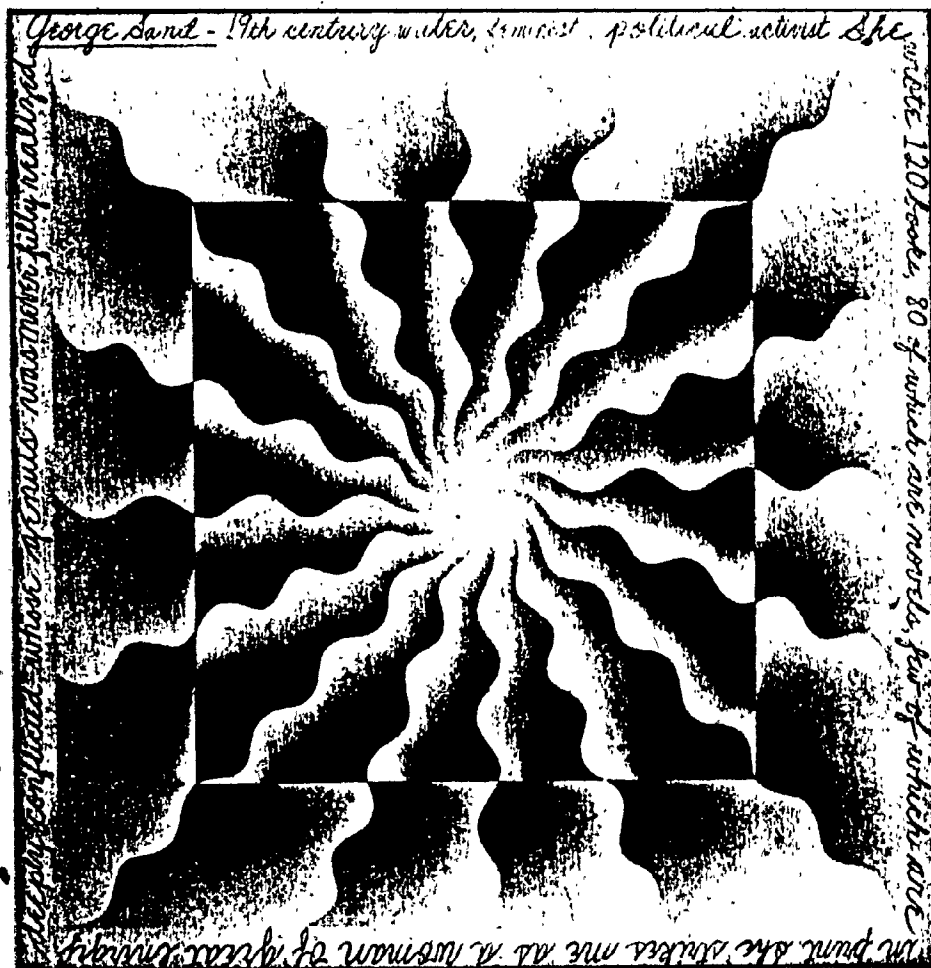
28. May Stevens: Hats Go By, 1971.



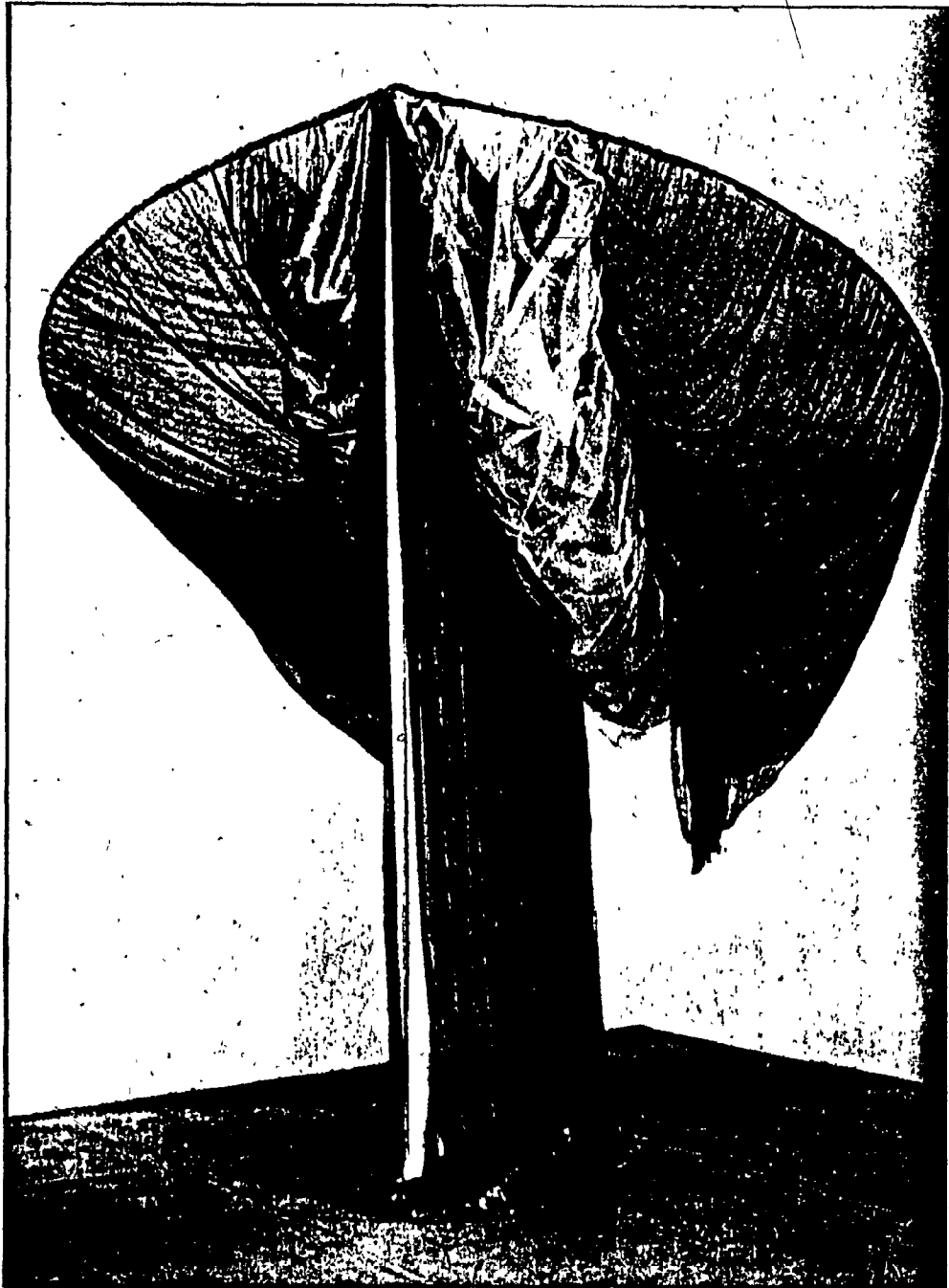
29. May Stevens: Big Three, 1975.



30. May Stevens: Pax Americana, 1973.



31. Judy Chicago: Reincarnation Triptych (George Sand), 1973.



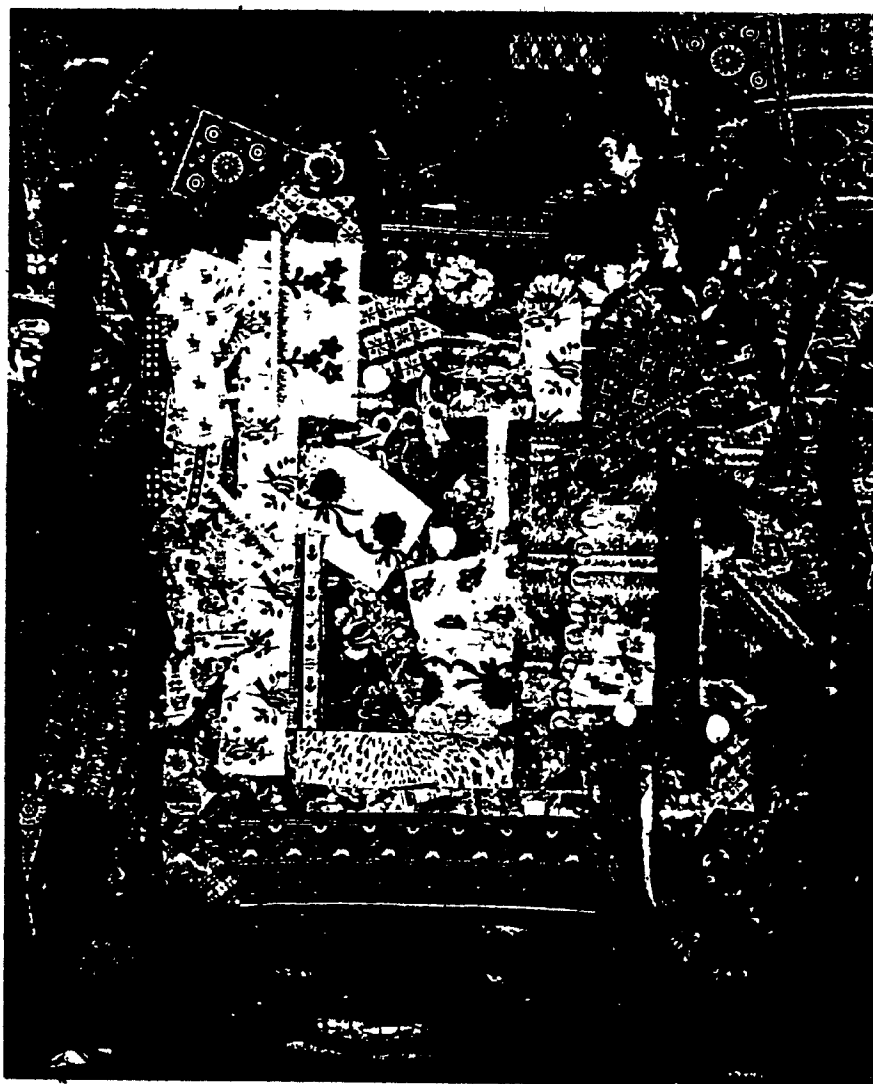
32. Rosemary Mayer: Galla Placidia, 1973.



33. Rosemary Mayer: The Catherines, 1973.



34. Rosemary Meyer: The Fifth Angel's Sleeve, 1973.



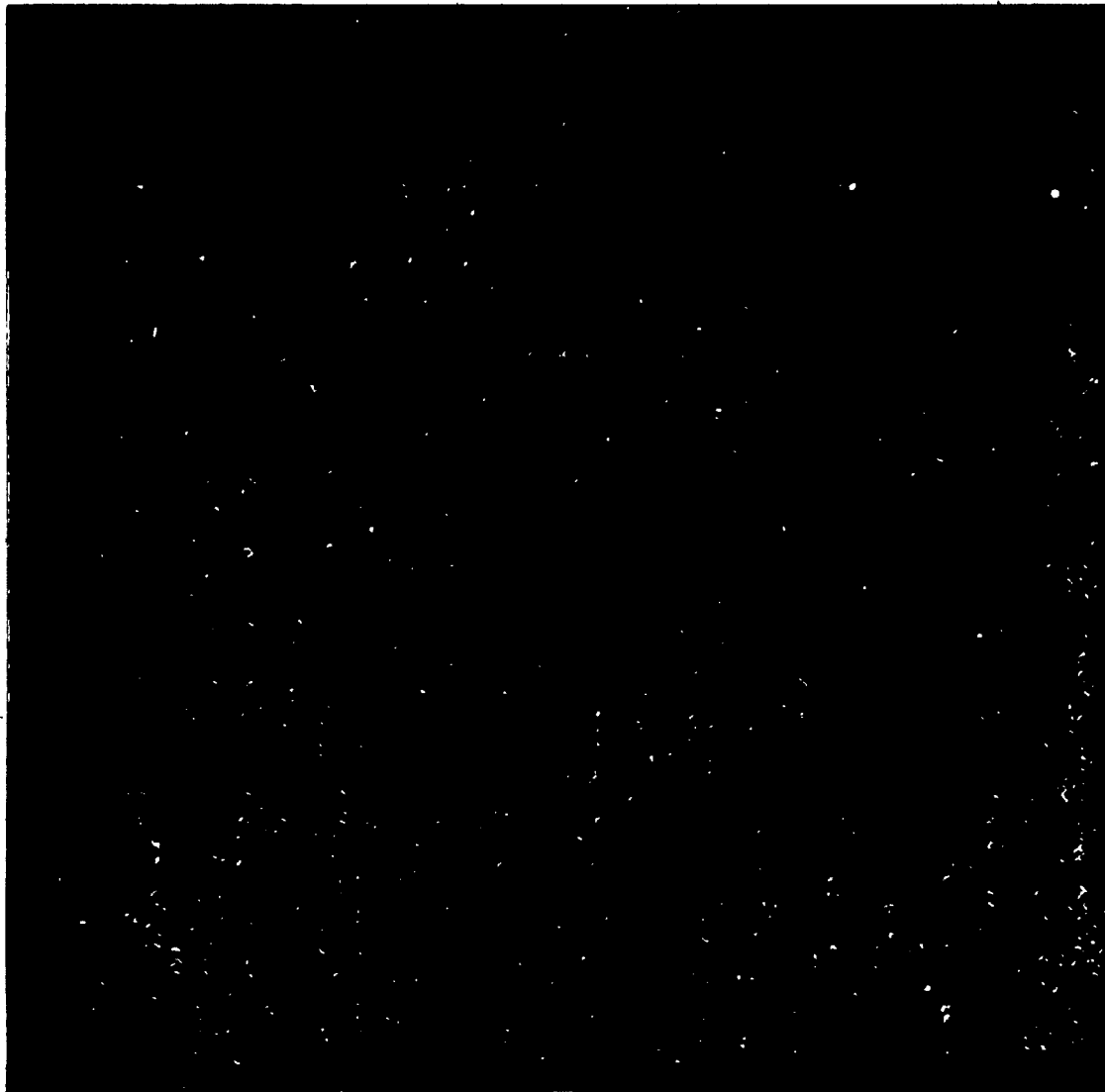
35. Miriam Schapiro: Window On Montana, 1972.



36. Miriam Schapiro: Anatomy of a Kimono, 1976.



37. Harmony Hammond: Presence IV, 1972.



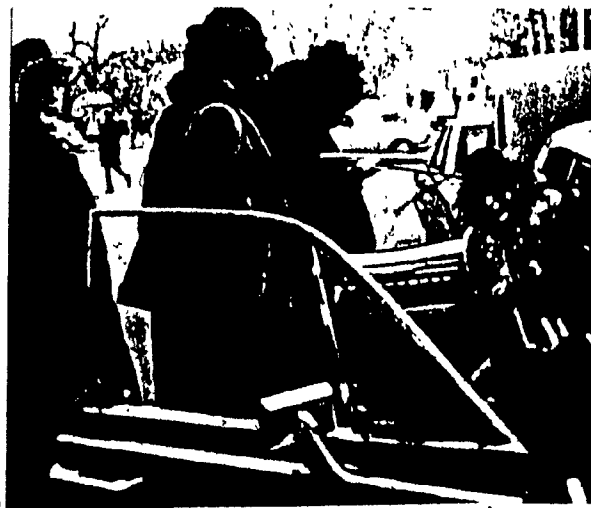
38. Harmony Hammond: Huichol 111, 1975.



39. Eleanor Antin: The King (performance), 1972.



40. Eleanor Antin: The Ballerina (performance), 1972.



41. Jackie Apple: Transformance (Claudia) (performance), 1973.



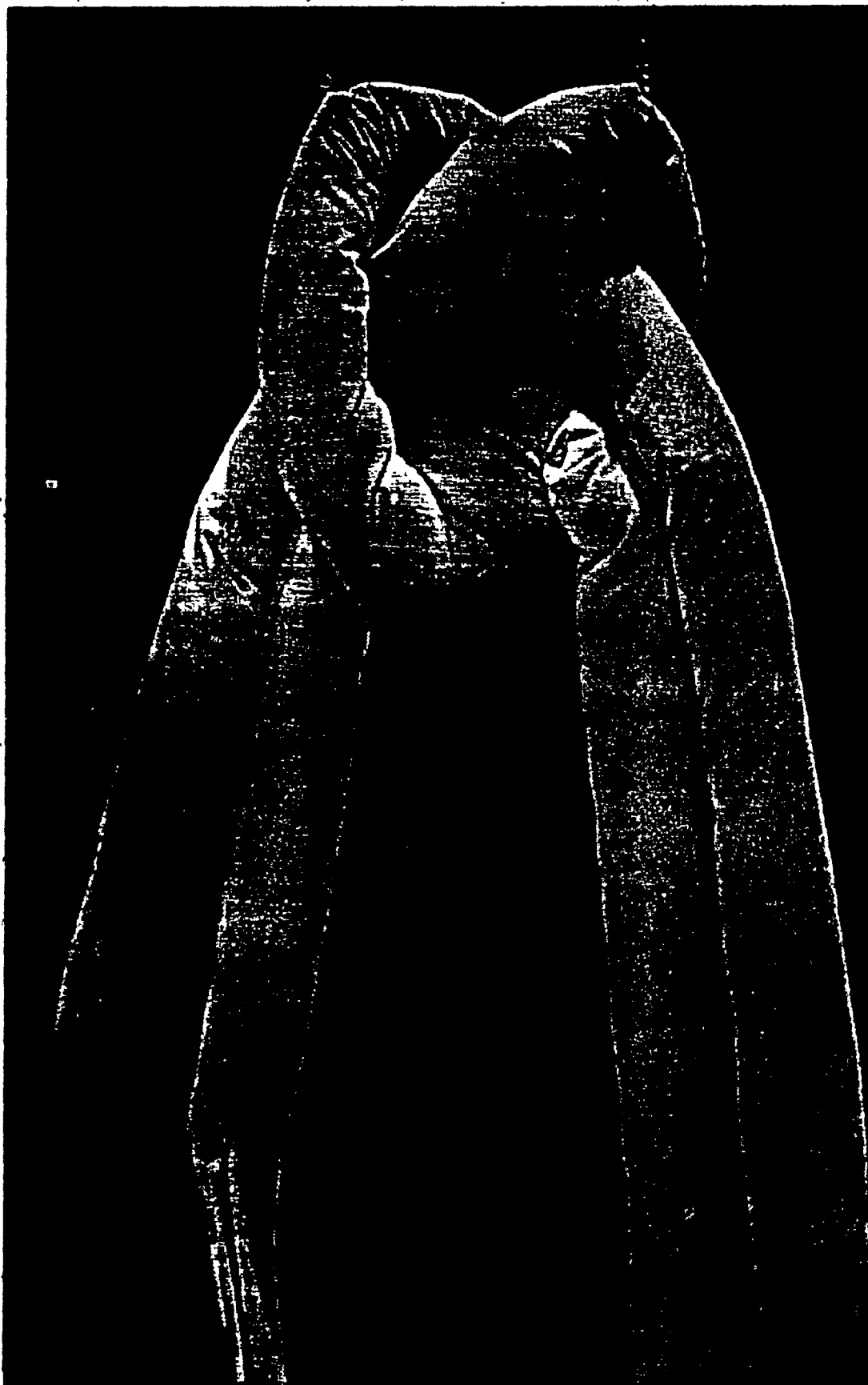
42. Jackie Apple: Transfer (performance), 1971.



43. Suzy Lake: A Genuine Simulation of..., 1974.



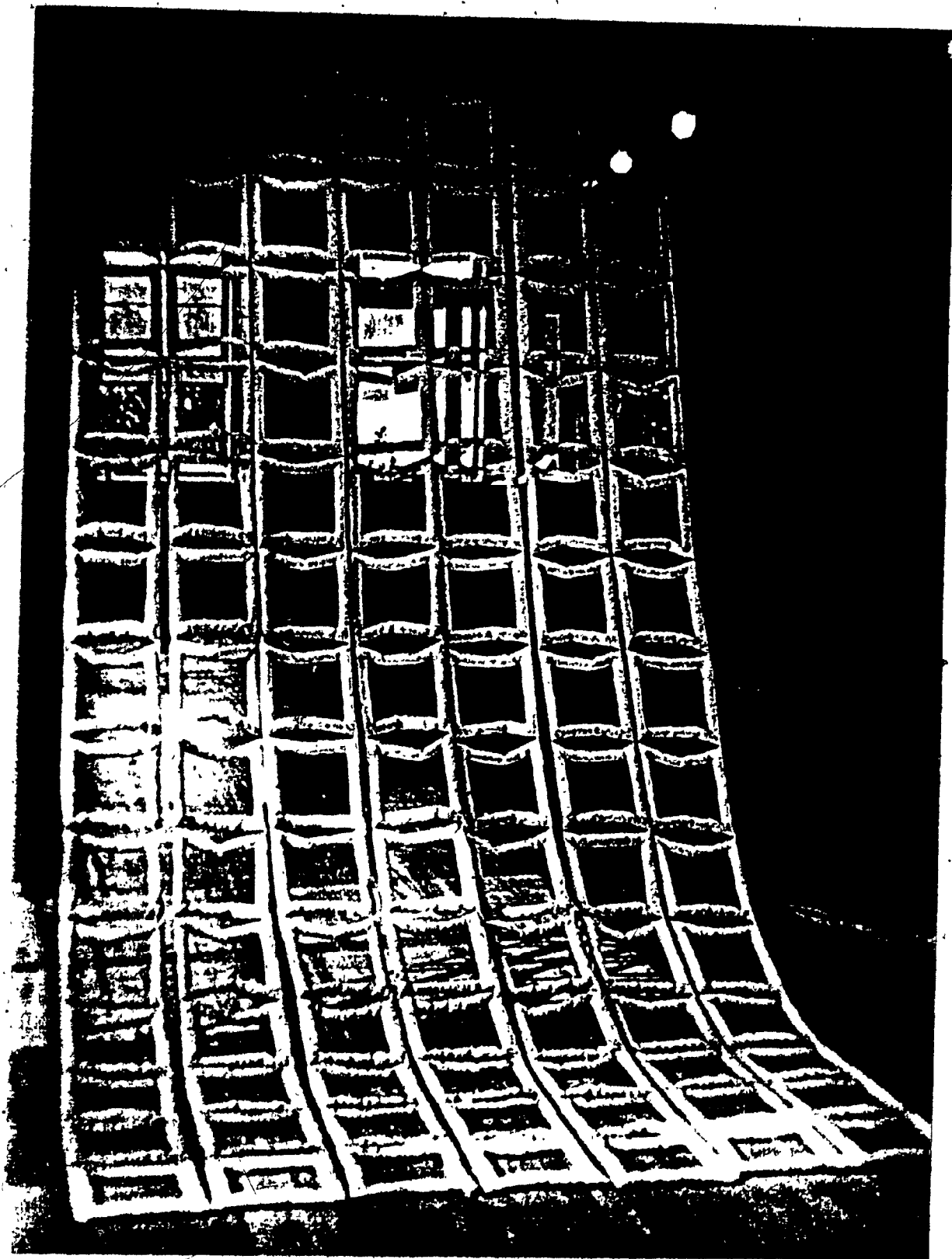
45. Penny Slinger: Sugar Bride.



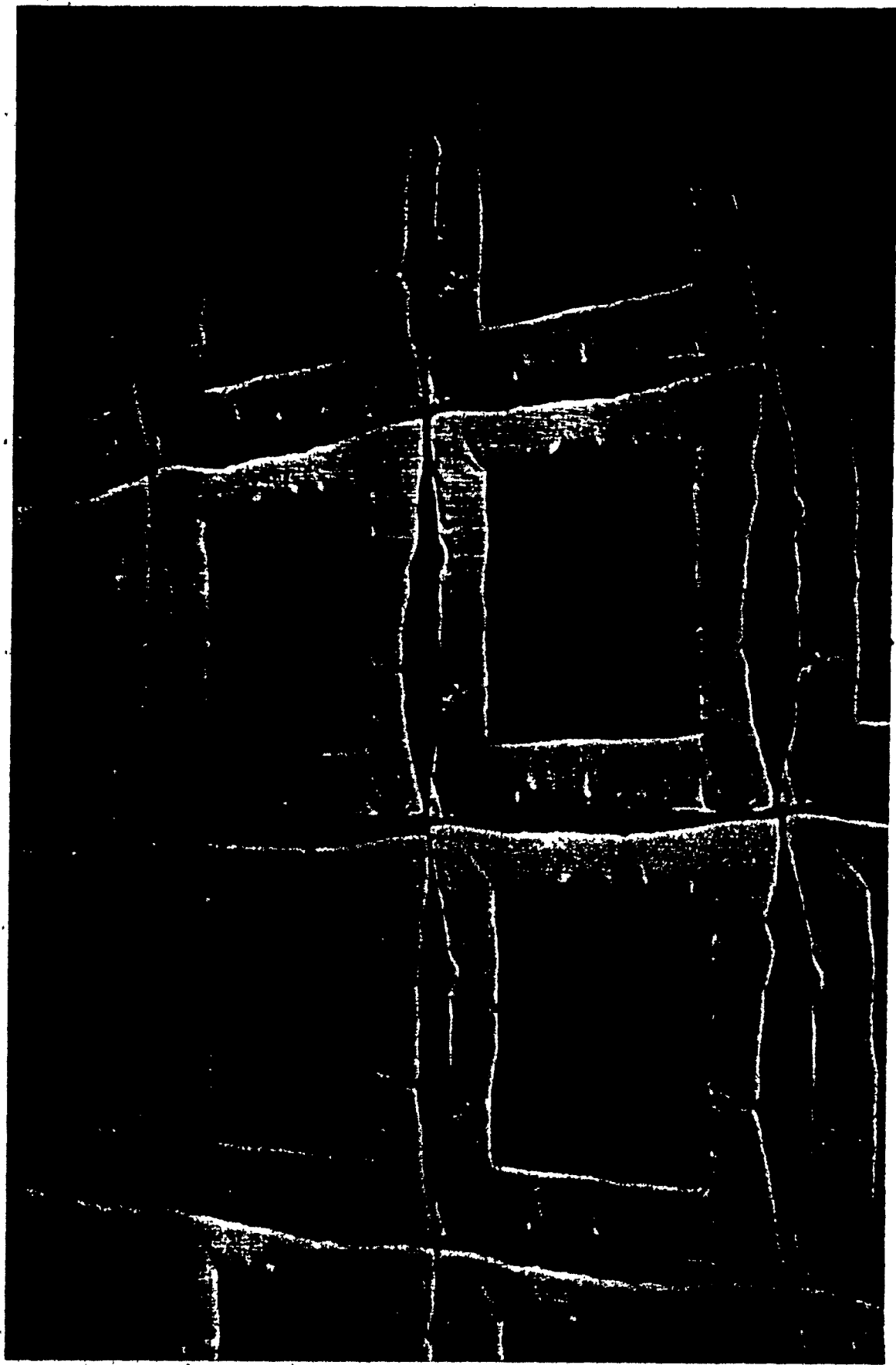
46. Sorel Cohen: Square Knot, 1975.



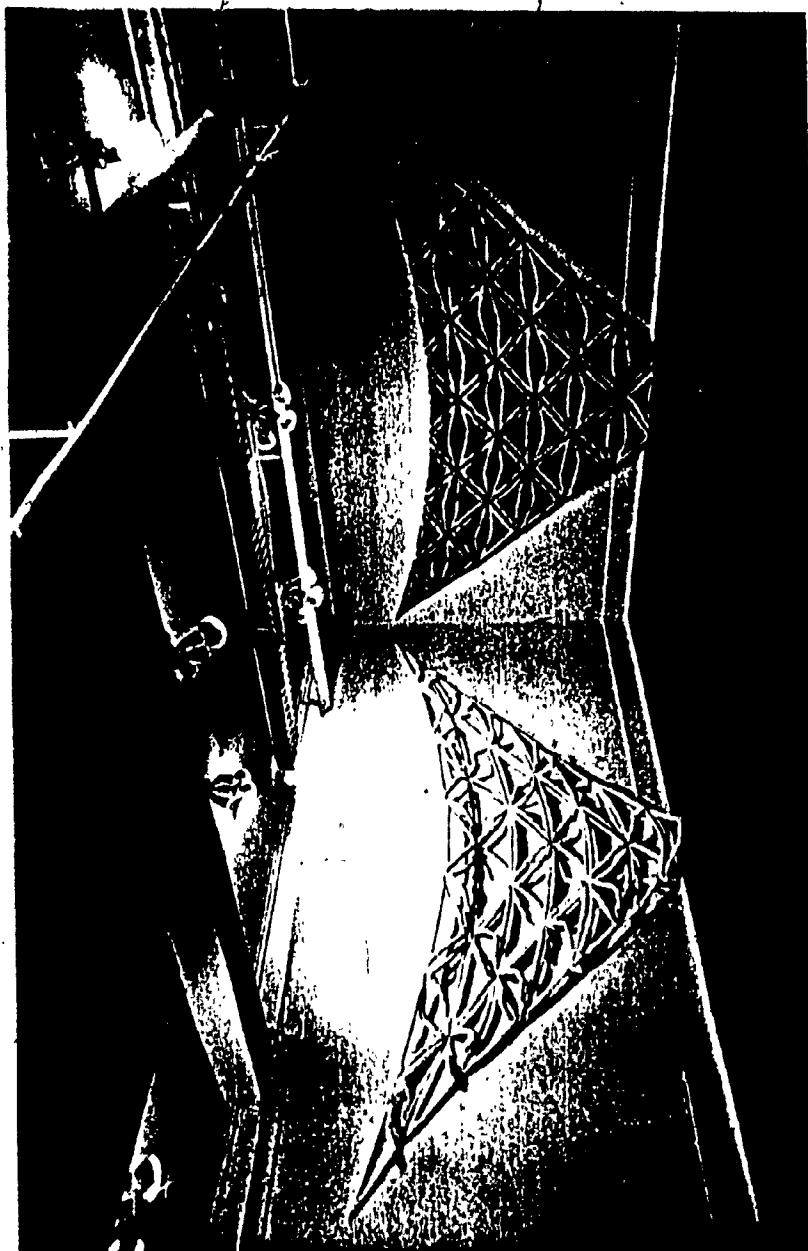
47. Sorel Cohen: Grid #1, 1975.



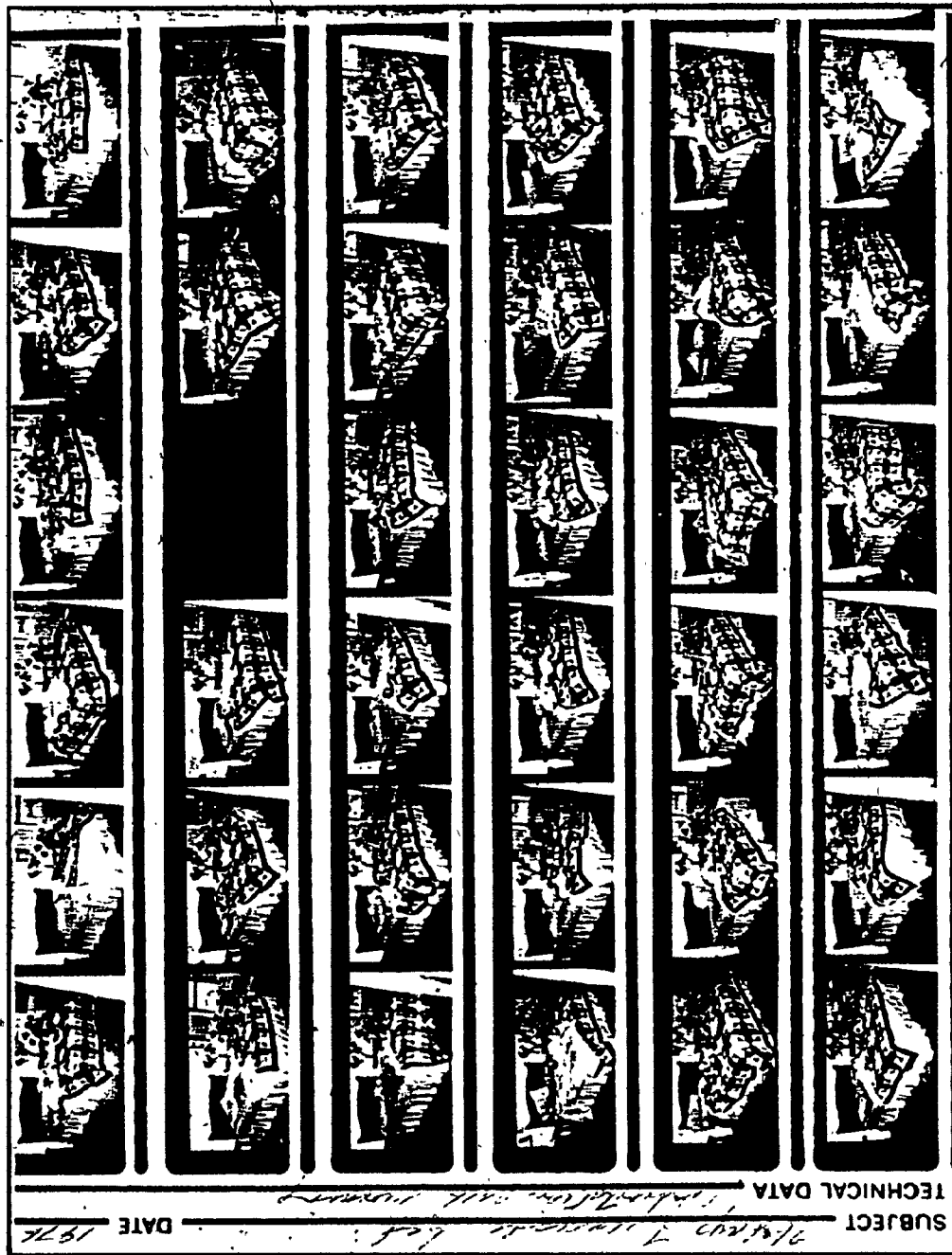
48. Sorel Cohen: Grid #2, 1975-76.



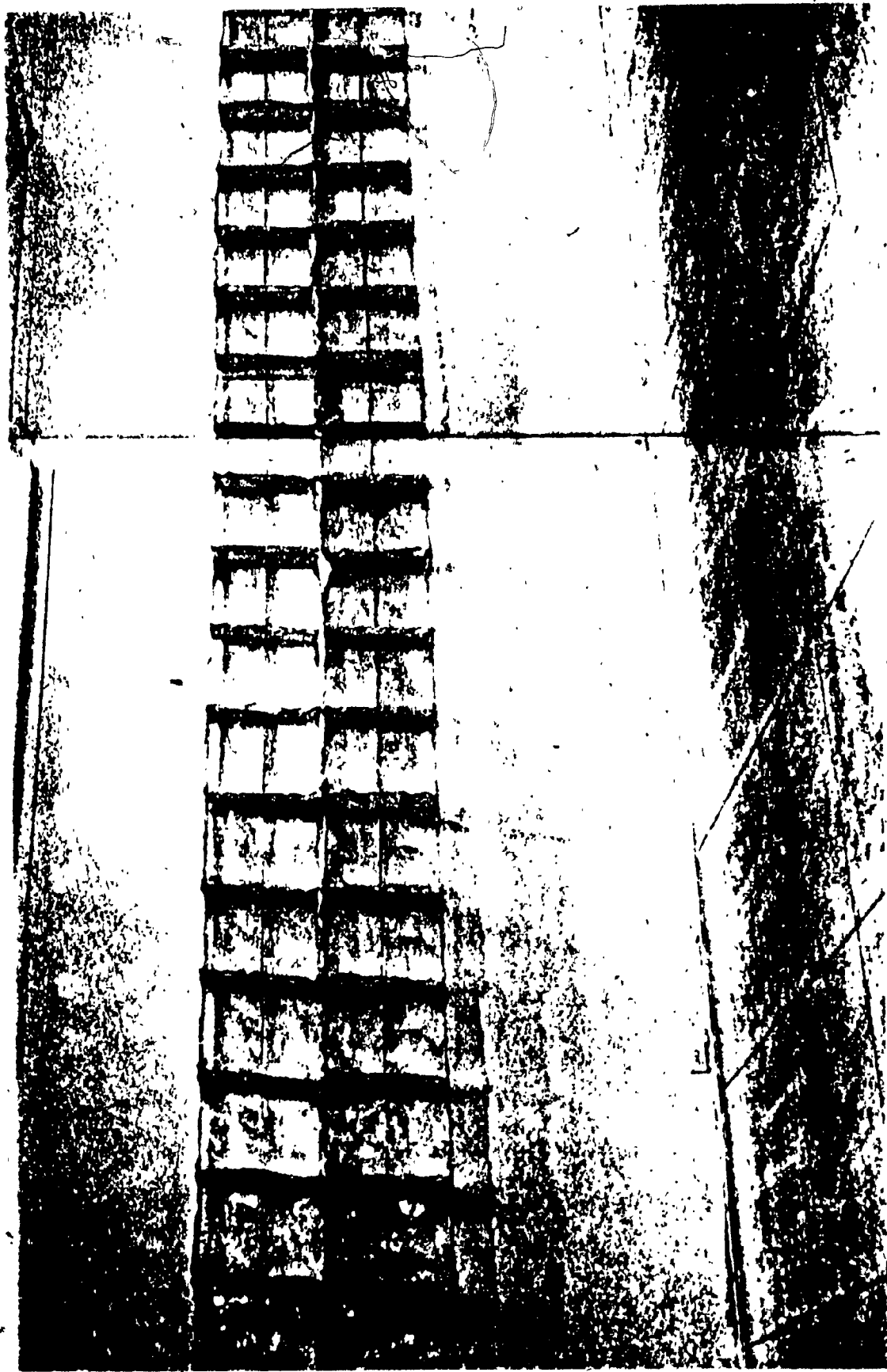
49. Sorel Cohen: Cyanotype Grid, 1974-75.



50. Sorel Cohen: Triangular Grid and Van Dyke Brown Print, 1976-77. :



51. Sorel Cohen: Calendar, 1976.



52. Eva Hesse: Sans II, 1968.



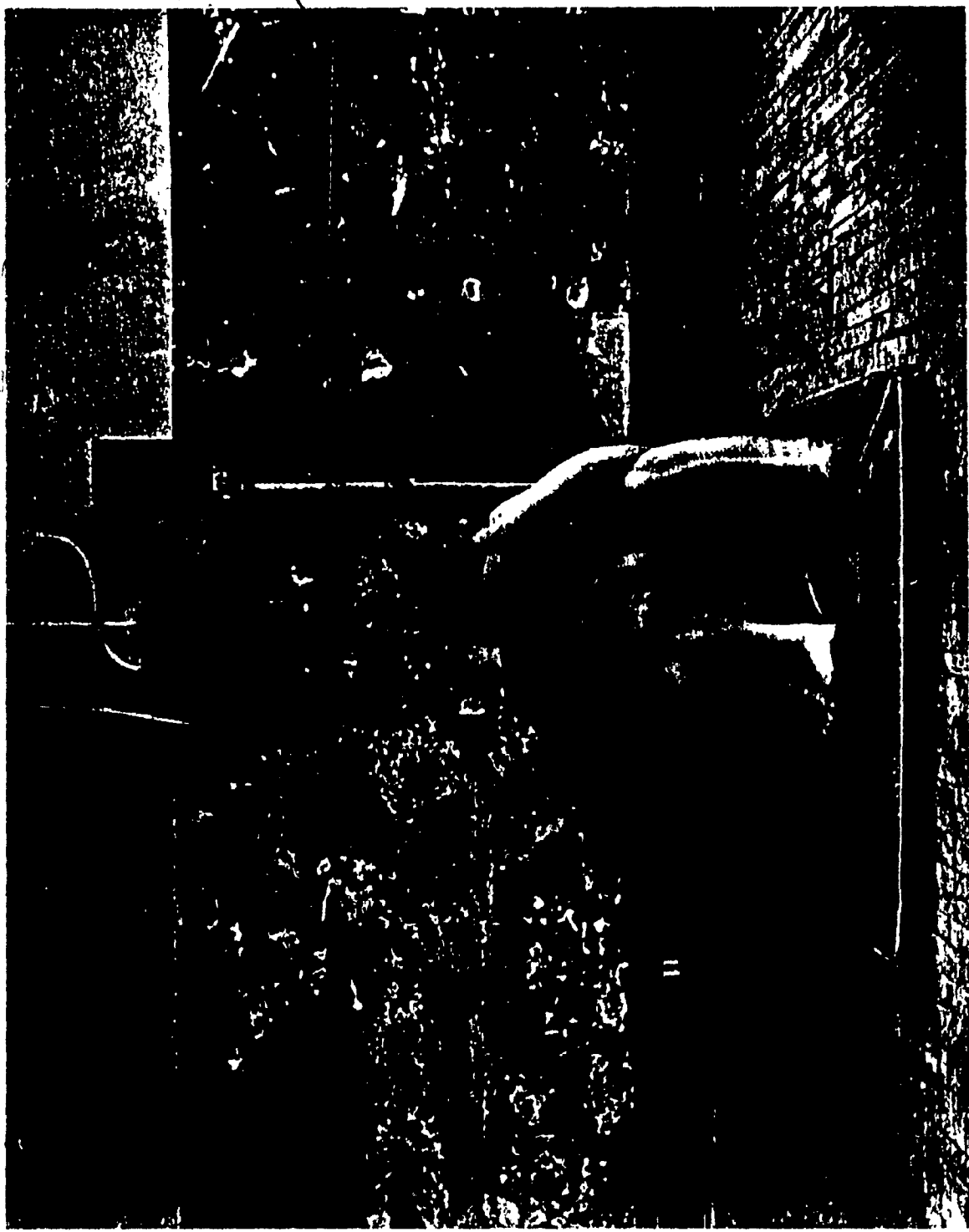
53. Sorel Cohen: Le Rite Matinal, 1977.



54. Sorel Cohen: Houseworks (video), 1976-77.



55. Sorel Cohen: The Shape of a Gesture, 1978.



56. Sorel Cohen: After Bacon/Muybridge, 1979.