... AS WE WERE SAYING

Art and Identity in the Age of “Post”

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On May 30th, 2014, the National Park Service announced that it was commissioning a study to discover sites of importance to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender heritage. Sally Jewell, the Secretary of the Interior, made the announcement outside the Stonewall Inn (which is on the Register of Historic Places). Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this announcement was how unremarkable it was. It barely warranted front-page coverage, if any, in most newspapers. And yet the initiation to begin historicizing queer culture and politics is a significant turning point, representing a shift from a struggle for equality to a need to remember that struggle.

I came across this news while doing background research on this exhibition, an inquiry into what relevance identity politics continues to have to art being made today. There has been speculation on the term's obsolescence at least since the mid-to-late nineties. Fourteen years ago, in an issue of *New Literary History* dedicated to the topic of "life after identity politics," scholar Grant Farred asked, "what happens when ethnic, racial, or sexual difference is no longer so different?"[1]

This exhibition aims to answer that very question. Since the mid-nineties, when interest in identity-centric issues began to wane, traditional categories based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation have been in question. Identities are now considered relational and fluid rather than inherent and fixed. Terms like *multiculturalism* or *identity politics* are frequently preceded by "in the wake of" or "after," and critics assert that we have definitively entered the age of *post*, an age of commemoration and remembrance, with passive retrospection replacing active debate. Today, everything is post, from criticism to race to AIDS. "The post-critical condition is supposed to release us from our straitjackets (historical, theoretical, and political)," Hal Foster recently wrote, "yet for the most part it has abetted a relativism that has little to do with pluralism."[2] The closing of the inpatient AIDS service at New York's Bellevue Hospital in 2012 prompted some to adopt the moniker "post-AIDS."[3] Jayson Musson, who uses his YouTube alter ego Hennessy Youngman to make trenchant, scabrous commentary on the art world, released a video in 2010 titled "How to Be a Successful Black Artist," that offers perhaps the most vehement protest against the label "post":

> Honestly I don't know what the fuck that means, 'cause it means, like, after-black, and niggas is still niggas, so I don't know . . . is it like someone in the future come back with that term, and niggas is, like, pink in the future?[4]

The politics of identity—and the need to debate issues of marginalization and bias—have not gone away, although the tenor and nature of the discussion feels less urgent and widespread than that of the eighties and early nineties (and certainly far less so than that of the civil-rights era, the forerunner of identity politics). Over this past year, at least two major art works have poked holes in the airily optimistic notion that we live in a "post-racial" society. Kara Walker's monumental sculpture in the Domino Sugar Factory, which combined the exaggerated nineteenth-century racial stereotype of the "Mammy" figure with the Egyptian sphinx, was a complicated testimonial to the unfathomable resilience and strength of the oppressed. In this year's Whitney Biennial, artist Joe Scanlan staged a performance utilizing a fictional character, Donelle Woolford, who was played by a young African-American woman. This gesture was sufficiently controversial to cause one other Biennial participant, the artists' group known as the Yams Collective, to withdraw from the show. Artist and writer Coco Fusco, a key figure in the identity politics discussion some twenty years ago, defended the Yams Collective's decision in an article for *The Brooklyn Rail*. She focused on Scanlan's role as a prominent professor of the visual arts, and also noted that, as art schools began admitting more students of color over the past decade, a tacit understanding emerged, that artistic talent supersedes politics. Recalling her own tenure at Yale as a visiting critic, Fusco writes: "The message being driven home was that for artists of color to succeed they had to avoid talking about racial politics and concede that their presence at the school was sufficient evidence of a post-racial art world."[5]

Yet it would be senseless to argue that the socio-political climate of the art world is not markedly different from that of twenty and thirty years ago, when debate surrounding issues of identity was at its height. The turmoil and passion swirling around art and politics during the eighties and nineties has no contemporary equivalent. "More than any other twentieth-century decade, the 1980s enacts most fully the ramifications for art, theory, and politics," Helen Molesworth wrote in her catalogue essay for the exhibition she curated, *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s*.[6] The specific causes that galvanized American artists to unite in protest and solidarity, the AIDS crisis and the culture wars, have been more or less "resolved." "Nineteen eighty-four through 1985 was a horrible, horrible time," recalled playwright Tony Kushner. "It really seemed like the maniacs had won for good."[7] Filmmaker and artist Jason Simon has remarked on the impact AIDS activism had on art: ". . . ACT UP and AIDS video was changing the landscape of film and video culture in general: you couldn't stand on the sidelines of the culture wars, and AIDS video was suddenly the prime shifter of media art culture."[8] There are no longer such looming, all-encompassing crises spurring similar activism, and art work that explicitly addresses political issues relating to ethnicity, gender, or class is rarely on view in major institutions or commercial galleries.

For those of us who grew up in the eighties and nineties, it is hard not to be a little nostalgic for the crystalline clarity of that political landscape—though of course no one desires a revival of the NEA battles or a new strain of AIDS. (Romanticizing the past is a dangerous pitfall; as Nietzsche said, "every past is worth condemning."[9]) Identity politics continues to be so overwhelmingly influential in the arts that most art being made today is informed by it in some way (even if it is reactionary, ala Scanlan); for many artists in their thirties and forties, it was foundational. (Much of what is now considered "social practice" art is indebted to identity politics.) But the forces that determine political and institutional power are increasingly nebulous, making obstructions to progress difficult to pinpoint (to put it broadly, Kushner's "maniacs" have been replaced by slick,

Not Your Usual Show-and-Tell Material

Probably the first book I can remember really forcing me to confront my identity as a woman living in a patriarchy would be a children's book called *The Secret Soldier*, the Story of Deborah Sampson by Ann McGovern. I loved this book when I was about seven or eight and I remember taking it to school for a show-and-tell. As I recall it, Deborah Sampson disguised her gender to fight in the Revolutionary War, going so far as to cut a bullet out of her leg with her own pen-knife when she was shot so that she wouldn't be taken to the medic and her identity uncovered. Bracing stuff...

(A)

Binders Full of Women Writers

Virginia Woolf was the only name on the chalkboard that sounded like a woman. T.S. Eliot, maybe, but after reading a few lines I knew this was not a woman. We were in the Advanced Placement class and so we could select an author of our own choosing from a preselected pool of authors from which to write our final papers. I can't remember his name, but our teacher was slightly balding on top with neck hair poking out from under his neckline. I once saw him in a suit with his wife and two daughters at a fancy hotel brunch and I immediately thought about his covered neck hair. In class, Neck Hair slowly went down the list of names: T.S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, J.D. Salinger, and Virginia Woolf. Nobody in our West End Edmonton Catholic high school class had thought to ask where were all the writers of colour, but Neck Hair sort of choke snorted when somebody in the class asked where were all the women writers. With a toothy grin, he said, historically, there just weren't many *good* women writers.

(B)

You Stay in My Heart

Sundresses. Brunch, or something like it. Spinster sisters, not-quite-twins in not-quite-twinned chapeaux. (These with especial clarity, the hats, this memory-fragment being the first-fruits of what would become a lifelong gender-bent fascination.) Color, kaleidoscopically pastel; form, feminine but '90s-feminine, boxy yet and padded of shoulder; and, of course, sound: song: Julia Roberts, Cameron Diaz, poor typecastrated Rupert Everett, Dermot fergodsake Mulroney—joined in supplication, invoking together and all as one Dionne the divine.

I was ten when the theatrical trailer for *My Best Friend's Wedding* brought a sutra of this sublimely discomfiting "Little Prayer" to my suburban living room—too young by years to recognize it as ripped from the high-camp hymnal, but old enough by lifetimes to recognize in it other qualities: yearning; and proscription; and myself. It would never be explicitly forbidden, in the manner of my toe-to-heel stiletto stride, my wanderingly elevated pinkie finger, or the break, in my wrists, of a fine trouser, but only because it would never need to be. I knew not knowing why that to betray this desire would be to betray my self, to surrender to the gender gendarmes, to have taken from me something I'd only just realized I had: a place; a home.

When once adulthood supervenes, suppressing the child's cravings and ambivalences, it becomes easy to see identity in its proper etymological light: as an experience of being-same. Ah, but underneath! Forever and for always, we build our samenesses from the stuff of difference.

(C)

double-speaking politicians often working hand-in-hand with incomprehensibly powerful corporations). These irrevocable changes are the result of many factors, including the rise of neoliberalism and globalization. Art historian Jonathan Crary responded to the impact of a global consumer society in his recent book, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*:

> A generalized sameness is inevitably the result of the global scale of the markets in question . . . through the reduction or elimination of differences . . . Thus, above a relatively low economic stratum, a new blandness flourishes almost everywhere that accelerated consumption has become normalized—not just in certain professional strata, social groups, or age groups . . . To be bland is a becoming "smooth," as distinct from the idea of a mold that the word "conformity" often implies . . . This has been most evident over the last decade or so in the disappearance or domestication of what once constituted a much wider range of the markers of cultural marginality or outsider status.[10]

With the onset of "a new blandness," and the erasure of difference, communities begin to splinter and disintegrate, prompting many theories about why identity-based communities are vanishing. The reasons are not solely due to external or economic circumstances. Writer Alexis Clements is making a documentary about the demise of "queer space," and speculated in a recent article that, aside from the economic recession (some ninety feminist bookstores have closed in the United States over the past twenty years), a younger generation may have different needs than the older LGBT community, for whom "marriage wasn't a goal and blending in was never something they wanted:"

> A more complicated change appears to be happening at a generational level. For some people, many of whom are under 40, there's been a shift toward queer identities and politics that are born of a belief that gender and sexuality operate on a spectrum that doesn't necessarily fit into male/female or straight/gay/bi paradigms.[11]

As safe places for collective engagement—gay and lesbian bars, avant-garde video stores and cinemas, and independent bookstores—are shuttered due to lack of business or interest, the only place to "meet" likeminded people is online, which often seems an ill substitute for immediate, real-life encounters and relationships. What is the effect on culture when these communities fade? Potentially fatal. In a documentary about Fran Lebowitz by Martin Scorsese, the writer reflected with characteristic candor on the AIDS epidemic, saying: "An audience with a high level of connoisseurship is as important to the culture as artists. That audience died in five minutes."[12]

Many factors contributed to discouraging audiences who were willing to engage with identity-inflected art. Critical reception was often scathing or dismissive. In an essay recalling the fallout from the 1993 Whitney Biennial, now widely known as the "Identity Politics Biennial," curator Elizabeth Sussman remembered the prevailing outcry. "The negative buzzwords became 'p.c.' (politically correct), 'multiculturalism,' 'theory,' and 'academic,'" Sussman recalled in 2005. "This type of critical attack often came from those witnessing a change that they didn't want to endorse, a change that they had only jargon words to describe or only words that were an inadequate shorthand for major issues."[13]

In a brilliant 2003 essay detailing the rise and defense of "beauty" in criticism during the late nineties, Suzanne Hudson writes that "beauty too often serves to placate an anxious public, operating in the service of the maintenance of the status quo."[14] In an effort to prove that beauty needn't be toothless, she compares works by two different artists, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Nayland Blake. Both pieces involve wall clocks; Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1991, in which two adjacent, synchronized clocks tick off the hours, minutes, and seconds, and Nayland Blake's *Every 12 Minutes*, also from 1991, consisting of a clock featuring the text "One AIDS Death/STOP IT." Hudson argues that the "abstraction and poetics" of Gonzalez-Torres's work more easily infiltrates and circulates in the art world than Blake's work, with its "blatant desire for propagandistic transgressiveness."[15] Hudson's comparison is legitimate—certainly Blake's pointed commentary would require explanation in an exhibition setting today, while Gonzalez-Torres's masterfully simple and metaphorical piece readily adapts to multiple readings—but in terms of documenting a particular moment, one could argue that Blake's piece more effectively communicates the anger and fear felt by many during a *specific moment* in history. "Timeless" is a frequent ancillary to the adjective "beautiful," and the connotation is that an object that transcends time is somehow more worthy than an object that could later seem dated. So it is that many art works made in the eighties and nineties in response to identity politics appear not to have "aged well," and the attendant issues on which they are predicated are often also presumed to be "out of date." In addition to questioning the criteria of beauty, it may be worth asking why academia and institutions generally favor "timeless" art over that which is timely.

The artists in this exhibition make work that is explicitly timely, and wrestle with the question of what identity and difference mean today. (Some have been addressing this question since the nineties—Suzanne McClelland's work appeared in the 1993 Whitney Biennial.) This is not a polemical group, with the possible exception of Jen Kennedy and Liz Linden, who with their project, *The New York Times Feminist Reading Group*, propose revisiting a more essentialist take on identity, and organize regular meetings inviting the public to join them in annotating copies of the *Times*, marking passages that either promote or prohibit feminism. The group considers how media—specifically the *New York Times*—shapes our understanding and perception of women. Jason Simon's recent work has underscored the way that a strengthening art market chips away at opportunities to freely share avant-garde films and videos, and, as mentioned earlier, expanding rather than constricting audiences is crucial to keeping the avant-garde alive. His 2009 print, *Sublation Services*, is a record of his emails to colleagues who he thinks might be interested in participating in a project to translate various avant-garde videos into different languages, and thus make

Slogans

When I was in high school in the early nineties, I had a t-shirt emblazoned with the words "A Woman's Place is in the House... and Senate." The soft cotton was navy blue, the words printed in red capital letters, shades of Barbara Krueger whose work I knew through the postcards I liked to buy at museum gift shops and put up on my bulletin board and tape to the inside of my locker. I wore this shirt often: to school and anywhere else I wanted my "politics" to be known immediately, but also obliquely, maybe even humorously. After years of graduate school, I could talk about the shirt's semiotics, about the performative act of wearing it, but I'll spare you.

I'm not sure what happened to my shirt: it might have disintegrated in college when it was joined by a host of other garments-with-causes, or I might have discarded it sometime after graduation when I needed to get a job and, more importantly, wearing one's politics on one's sleeve fell out of fashion. Now I wear a button made by Jimmie Durham and gifted to me by a curator who I worked for briefly. It reads, "I intend to be a civilized & mature intellectual."

(D)

YA Feminism

I read Francesca Lia Block's collection of short stories *Girl Goddess #9* when I was thirteen. It was my first semester at high school after having spent my elementary school years in a class with the same twenty-five kids and I felt unprepared, frightened, and different. I can't remember if it was Hannah or Mia who introduced me to the book. Either way, it is admittedly wrapped up in friendships that also changed the way I look at and experience the world. Reading *Girl Goddess #9* wasn't the moment that I first thought about feminism, but it did radically expand the scope of what I thought feminism meant and who it is for. The stories show so many ways of living and being and loving, and as many ways of expressing feminism. Long before I knew the word intersectionality, this book gave me an (imperfect) understanding of its meaning.

(E)

Cross Cultural Exchange

I read "Wonderbread" (1988) by Luis Camnitzer about a decade after its original publication. In this influential essay, Camnitzer explores "Spanglish" art, which, as you may surmise, is an invented term that combines the words Spanish and English. For Camnitzer, Spanglish art conceptually departed from one culture but was formally experienced, and to a large extent created, in and for another culture. He used this term as a tool for understanding work by Hispanic artists in the US that over-characterizes its subject position, addressing the explicit visual language in artworks that either marked their relation to the margin of mainstream culture or that aimed to gently ease themselves in its flow.

Many years have gone by since "Wonderbread" first made an impression, but it continues to linger on my mind. Camnitzer, who was raised in Montevideo but developed his artistic trajectory in New York, wrote his essay at a very particular time in the USA, a period characterized by the Culture Wars. It was a defining moment for articulating and framing multiculturalism. Things in the art field have certainly changed since.

At present, Camnitzer's proposition of Spanglish art has helped me in identifying two instances that expressly manifest a sense of timeliness in the art field, a sensation somewhat close to a feeling of urgency. One of these instances is the cultural paradigms emerging from national uprootedness as discussed in the 1980s and 1990s; the other is the recuperation project, whether through artworks or exhibitions, resulting from historical revisionism in the last decade. While the first hoped to create access to the mainstream, the second intended to make insertions in the art historical canon.

My interest in these two particular instances is because they involved new aesthetic and curatorial strategies, creating in the process new languages in the visual arts and a new grammar for experiencing contemporary art altogether. But as I mentioned earlier, things have changed. The twenty-first century presents other cultural challenges to the visual arts. One such is that the very notion of "identity" appears to be atomized, perceived more often as a matter of profile than representation, of being instead of subject. This condition also seems to have fissured collective struggles, which not only impacts social wellbeing, but also, possibly, art.

My mind is now tuned in to locating the distinctions between those two instances of uprootedness and recuperation, and of cultural resistance in the twenty-first century. Honing in on identity is key to identifying the new languages giving meaning to our present.

(F)

them more internationally accessible. A similar sense of expansiveness, and quest to represent diverse voices, was the driving motivation behind Shelly Silver's 2008 video, *In Complete World*. Made shortly before Barack Obama was elected president, various New Yorkers weigh in on all manner of subjects, from existentialism to economics. Together the multiple voices craft a narrative about modern life in New York, foreshadowing many of today's arguments revolving around class and income inequality. Rather than be influenced by media, these New Yorkers have a chance to use media to present their own views.

Media and its effect on community is an underlying conceit of Ignacio Lang's ongoing series of photo-magazine collages. Lang overlays black-and-white photographs taken in 1968 by his father, who fought in the Vietnam War, on magazines from that same year. The collision of private documentation of a major historical event with public artifacts offers a sense of the disconnect between American troops in Vietnam and life in the United States. By using materials on the verge of extinction—analogue photography and print—Lang taps into a universal desire for a deeper, more direct connection with history.

The differences between history and memory figure prominently in works by Josh Faught and A.K. Burns and Katherine Hubbard. Faught's large-scale tapestry, *It Takes a Lifetime to Get Exactly Where You Are*, 2012, includes a recreation of a section of the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Faught, who is a textile artist, uses this popular commemorative object to comment on its ambivalent and controversial position in queer history. An attempt to make mourning over AIDS and HIV-related deaths publicly acceptable, the AIDS Quilt was also viewed negatively by activists as a form of acquiescence to homophobic sentiment. The title of Faught's work alludes to continuing discord over how to mourn victims of AIDS, and the trauma resulting from the epidemic, shared by many but acknowledged by few. Burns and Hubbard resist closure through the use of abject, found materials to create sculptures based on memory jugs, a type of American folk art used to record and trigger memories through the encrustation of objects onto a vessel. Rather than concentrate on a specific moment or event, they embrace the "spirit" of past moments when identity was in flux, aiming to capture its essence or sensibility. The messy exteriority of the sculptures opposes ideas of order, interiority, or closetedness.

Fluid interpretations of history make up *The Filmballad of MamaDada*, a 2013 film that was directed by Lily Benson and Cassandra Guan and compiles contributions from several filmmakers.[16] The film is a lyrical, often personal response to the life of Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, a key figure in the New York Dada movement, whose dismissal of to strict representations of gender remains surprisingly radical and influential. Guan also contributes a series of related drawings called *Women's Times*, an archive of feminist, alternative views of temporality, based on her findings in the Lesbian Herstory Archive in Brooklyn.

The subjective, physical body materializes in a new series of photogravure prints by Nikita Gale, featuring a typewritten text that has been annotated with markings written in hand by the artist. The text begins, "I _____, and I am aware that some people have a problem with this." and goes on to state that this is the sole instance in which the writer will directly address this situation in his or her work. Titled *Moving On*, it gently protests the seemingly inevitable pigeonholing that often plagues artists of color. The contrast between mechanical reproduction and the intimate handwritten notation reflects the difference between involuntary, imposed categories and the unique individual.

Identity as construct, or the body as perceived by others, is integral to works by Josh Kline, Simone Leigh, and Suzanne McClelland. Kline interviewed blue-collar workers, such as a FedEx delivery person, and made casts of the parts of their body that serve as tools of their trade (for the FedEx worker, for example, this includes a hand holding a device that records the date and time of each delivery). Kline uses figuration to address the delicate issue of class and social hierarchy. Because the body parts are digitally printed, the work grimly hints at a future where the worker (already subject to alienation) is subsumed or displaced by technology. The fragmented body is a motif of McClelland's large-scale installation made up of drawings, prints, found Internet photographs and newspaper clippings. Titled *Furtive Gesture*, 2013, it was inspired by the "stop and frisk" debate over whether New York City police officers were using racial profiling to target supposed criminals. As McClelland put it in an interview, "one of the conditions for stopping someone and frisking them is if the person displays a 'furtive gesture' or is 'fleeing.' This is a very subjective practice. What kind of physical movements are considered normal, and which ones are expressive in a way that raises suspicion? Gestures have qualities that are read and misread all the time."[17] Simone Leigh, who works primarily in ceramics, contributes a porcelain bust with no facial features, though the area of the face is wreathed in blossoms. This stark and haunting sculpture defies explicit representation while also indulging in figuration, as though quietly declaring, "Here I am, and I don't need your approval or recognition."

Michael Wang's installation is a minimalist structure designed to host two types of rock pigeon: domestic birds who, after centuries of selective breeding, have developed physical traits such as elaborate crests and fan tails, and their feral urban kin, who are attracted to the structure by means of birdfeed placed on the ledge of the open window. In a text explaining the work, Wang writes:

> The distinction between the two populations draws attention to natural and cultural definitions of identity. While biological nomenclature defines both populations as one and the same species, human pressures have created highly distinct types. Today, advances in genetics and cellular biology have refined the potential to shape biological identity through technological means. Culture takes on a biological significance and vice versa.[18]

Wang complicates the often romanticized concept of hybridity, reminding us that difference is cultivated (or reduced) as a result of much larger systems that, until this century, evolved gradually and over a long period of time. Now, in the geological age of the Anthropocene, we are adjusting to the rapid changes wrought by human activity and intervention, and the way that affects our view of identity as something "natural" or "inherent."

Turnaround = fair play?

As a teen in the late nineties I got involved in AIDS to meet gay dudes. But by then they were no longer around. AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs), many run by women who had come of age as activists, were working to better serve women, trans folks, first-nation people, people of color, users of intravenous drugs, and sex workers. Feeling betrayed, many of the (white) gays and their funders left ASOs to start (white) gay-focused organizations. This intensified the ASO gay-brain-drain, a result of life-prolonging HIV/AIDS medication becoming accessible in 1996 and medical and social service systems—provoked by activism—better meeting gay needs. So rather than meeting gay people, I was the gay person, fast-tracked into action. Forcing/supporting me in this were the women leaders. They were the peers, mentors, foils, friends, and intimates I was searching for. It is frustrating then to see these women—and the communities they work for/with—being shut out of conversations in favor of men returning after a break, now that AIDS is a "concern" once again.

(G)

Mass Appeal

For a while, growing up in suburban San Francisco, I could have described my identity in an image. I wasn't Chinese American; I was a wintry, desolate New York street, a black Cadillac Esplanade double parked and throbbing with Gangstarr's "Mass Appeal," a track with a signature DJ Premier boom-bap pulse and Guru's braggadocio lyrics being spat out with his hoarse, musky voice. On the track, Guru rhymed, "Maybe your soul you'd sell to have mass appeal." It was an anthem about being true to who you are, not selling out for fame or finances, paying attention to your craft, and exemplary of Guru's lyrical superiority over "fakes." Maybe it was too righteous to ask any artist *not* to meet the market halfway, but anthems aren't about the finer points of an argument, they're about staking a position and making that position the only attractive, viable option.

(H)

When Words and Pictures Fail

(...) I find myself at the particular boundary of the everyday that borders the unspeakable, where language, like a needle infected with articulation, threatens to pierce some ultimate and final interiority.

— *Samuel Delaney "on the unspeakable"*

(...) and then, there was that time on the couch. I must have been in high school. It was well after midnight and long before the Internet. Trolling around late night public access shows, somewhere between Robin Byrd and Al Goldstein, I caught my first glimpse of a woman dressed in black, hair pulled back, mirrored shades and covered in blood. She had a gun and was pointing it right at me. She wasn't singing exactly, more like speaking in tongues. I had never seen anything like it before.

Mugged by Diamanda Galas on my living room couch.

I didn't know who she was until sometime in the nineties when I was taken to see her perform. Once again I found myself in a darkened room face to face with this same woman, only this time, it was in a black box theater at PS 122. Her performance was a litany, a song, split into 4 channels and flung around the room like an angry Greek chorus. Her voice was inarticulate and emotional but focused like a weapon and razor sharp. Here was a performance whose purpose was not to entertain or comfort, but to agitate. A direct line of communication was established and, for me, formed a blueprint of what a live action should be; a last resort when words and pictures fail and your back is against the wall.

I left with my ears ringing, stomach cramped like I had been punched, slightly nauseous and in love.

(I)

RECONSIDERING A STRUCTURALIST FEMINISM

It's difficult to recollect that an important formulation of feminist theory within the compass of structuralism anticipated the more famous debates of poststructuralist feminism. While theorists like Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak have become household names, how many people outside of gender-study departments remembers the work of cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin and her seminal 1975 essay "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex?" In this polemical tract, Rubin made the notable claim that "a 'sex/gender system' is the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied." The raw-and-the-cooked opposition between sex as biological material and gender as cultural construction is foundational to any anti-essentialist feminist discourse as well as enabling the advances of queer theory. At first encounter, contemporary readers may be startled by the text's sweeping scope. Beginning with a meditation on the origin and nature of patriarchal oppression, Rubin eventually outlines a grand feminist project for revolution in social kinship, resolution of the Oedipal crisis and abolition of gender as such. Borrowing Althusser's strategy from *Reading Capital*, she mines the theoretical terrains of psychoanalysis, structural anthropology, and Marxism for their repressed feminist insights. Her critique of these discourses seeks to construct a distinct theoretical register for the analysis of human sexuality and its social organization.

The very project that lent Rubin's polemic its urgency—to assimilate the dominant socio-philosophical models into feminist theory—also gave rise to some interesting difficulties. As Rubin cursorily acknowledges in a footnote, the movement between Marxism, psychoanalysis, and structuralism involves a clash of epistemologies. There is most notably a contradiction between Marx's dialectical account of history and the universal structural systems of Lacan and Lévi Strauss. Rubin by and large repressed these discrepancies in her writing, prompted no doubt by a pragmatic desire to unify the lo-cal discourses of feminism under a general theoretical umbrella. The confusion, however, led to a set of contradictory claims regarding the concept of the sex/gender system. According to Rubin, the sex/gender system is the deep structure that governs the organization of human sexuality in its myriad forms, whose cardinal features are the establishment of gender identity, obligatory heterosexuality and the constraint of female sexuality. Because she arrived at this concept through the deductive methods of structural anthropology, Rubin could neither account for its origin, especially since she sought to isolate the domain of gender and sexuality from the sphere of material production, nor could she logically theorize its overcoming. To articulate the latter, which is, after all, the objective of a feminist politics, Rubin resorted to claiming, without much conviction, that the sex/gender system has lost its "traditional function" and is ripe for abolition. Her final proposal for a Marxian critique of sexual systems feels compensatory, almost apologetic. While recognizing that a general system of human sexuality cannot be studied in isolation, Rubin has no way of historicizing its evolution let alone revolutionary overthrow. In hindsight, the tenuous reconciliation of Marxism, structuralism, and psychoanalysis in "The Traffic in Women" presaged the immanent schisms within feminist theory and politics. Its strained pragmatism would give way to fierce partisanship within the ranks, along often discursive lines. By the end of the seventies, the presumably unified women's movement Rubin took for granted in "The Traffic in Women" would fracture from the pressure of race, class and sexual practice differences.

To a generation that came of age under the rarefied intellectual climate of postmodernism, the demand for a structural account of sexual institutions throughout history can feel particularly remote. However, the resurgence of Neo-Marxian discourses in response to recent crisis in global capitalism calls for a reworking of its relationship with feminism and other identity-based politics. For this purpose, we should recall Rubin's 1975 polemical critique as an important primal scene. Hopefully, under altogether different historical circumstances, we can return to the unresolved conflicts of structuralist feminism and acquire from it insights for our own times.

(J)

Though these artists all have very different strategies and styles, each of them share a sense of responsibility to the past and the legacy of identity politics. If "the work of the past [is] incomplete," as Walter Benjamin wrote in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, then, instead of blithely accepting the perturbingly neat category of "post," the artists in this exhibition continue a conversation begun some thirty years ago. History is the official record of the past, created and maintained by scholars, archivists, and curators. The burden of memory, as many have noted, falls to the individual. "When memory is no longer everywhere," wrote French historian Pierre Nora, "it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to recapture it through individual means."[19]

It is not unreasonable to be relieved that some of the more strident aspects of identity politics have subsided, such as the muzzling of voices that genuinely aspired to promote social justice but were accused of falsely representing the "other," including documentary and fictional accounts of marginalized groups. But deprived of opportunities and venues for debate, the resulting cultural climate feels subdued, if not even anesthetized. The onset of what Crary has termed the "new blandness" means there are few chances to acknowledge difference among individuals, and it is only through seeing and recognizing difference that one cultivates empathy. *New York Times* Op-Ed columnist Charles Blow recently wrote that while legislation prohibits segregation, "we are self-sorting, not only along racial lines but also along educational and income ones, particularly in our big cities." He cites studies that find that self-segregation has increased over the past thirty years, and, more distressing, that "students are more racially segregated in schools today than they were in the late 1960s and prior to the enforcement of court-ordered desegregation in school districts across the country."[20]

These statistics fly with ballistic force in the face of the "post-racial" concept. The surge in self-segregation undermines a general presumption that we live in a world that has moved beyond ethnic, racial, class, or sexual difference. How this translates to the New York art world is tricky. I cautiously submit that the new blandness has infiltrated our museums and galleries. We are burdened by a system that supports "super stars" to the detriment of all—audiences, artists, cultural producers. In the long term, a super star economy—dependent on a few key figures, and forcing many others into obscurity—and the inequality that results is not sustainable.[21] Nor is it interesting. Though many artists seem to be pushing against the facile "post" label, their work often seems to fly under the radar or be evaluated in strictly formal terms, stimulating little debate or action. After all the heated discussion about identity in the eighties and nineties, what happened? There were many times I wanted to abandon this show—too difficult, too familiar, or, worse: too self-righteous, too smug. My conviction often wavered—did New York really need this show, now? But in the end my curiosity about the topic exceeded my doubt. Why does identity seem, once again, to be a "thing"? And why are so few venues unwilling to approach identity as a subject, as though the "politically correct" charge made it permanently taboo? I had to curate the show I wanted to see in order to begin to discern answers to these questions, however thorny they may be.

1— Grant Farred, "Endgame Identity: Mapping the New Left Roots of Identity Politics," *New Literary History* 31 (Autumn 2000): 632.
2— Hal Foster, "Post-Critical," *October* 139 (Winter 2012): 3.
3— Danielle Ofri, "Imagine a World Without AIDS," *The New York Times*, July 28, 2012, accessed August 27, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/28/opinion/imagine-a-world-without-aids.html.
4— Hennessy Youngman, *ART THOUGHTZ: How to be a Successful Black Artist*, 2010, accessed August 27, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3L_NnX8oj-g.
5— Coco Fusco, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? Thoughts about the Donelle Woolford Debate," *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 6th, 2014, accessed on July 10, 2014, brooklynrail.org/2014/05/art/one-step-forward-two-steps-back-thoughts-about-the-donelle-woolford-debate.
6— Helen Molesworth, *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s* (Chicago and New Haven: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago/Yale University Press, 2012), 16.
7— Quoted in Ken Nielsen, *Tony Kushner's "Angels in America"* (London: Continuum, 2008 [Kindle edition]), 4.
8— Jacob King and Jason Simon, "Before and After UbuWeb: A conversation about artists' film and video distribution," *Rhizome*, February 20th, 2014, accessed on February 20th, 2014, rhizome.org/editorial/2014/feb/20/and-after-ubuweb-distributing-artists-film-and-vid.
9— Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York: Liberal Arts, 1957), 21.
10— Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso Books, 2013), 56–58. Though this exhibition is focused on American art, and that of New York in particular, the issues it underscores are hardly regional. As Katherine Boo recently noted about Mumbai: ". . . in the twenty-first-century city, fewer people joined up to take their disputes to the streets. As group identities based on caste, ethnicity, and religion gradually attenuated, anger and hope were being privatized, like so much else in Mumbai." Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (New York: Random House, 2012), 20.
11— Alexis Clements, "The Vanishing," *Curve Magazine*, June 8, 2014, accessed on July 29, 2014: http://www.curvemag.com/Culture/The-Vanishing.
12— Martin Scorsese, *Public Speaking*, HBO Films, 2010.
13— Elizabeth Sussman, "Then and Now: Whitney Biennial 1993," *Art Journal* 64 (Spring 2005): 74–79.
14— Suzanne Perling Hudson, "Beauty and the Status of Contemporary Criticism," *October*, Vol. 104 (Spring 2003), 118.
15— Hudson, 129.
16— Contributing Artists to *The Filmballad of MamaDaDa*: Leslie Allison, Animals, Raoul Anchondo, Mauricio Arango, Doug Ashford, Harold Batista, Gregory Benson, Lily Benson, Caitlin Berrigan, Clara Carter, Lea Cetera, Joanne K. Cheung, Abigail Child, Abigail Collins, Katy Cool, Cecilia Corrigan, Alex DeCarli, EASTER, Chitra Ganesh, Alex Golden, Cassandra Guan, Jorun Jonasson, Prudence Katze, Simone Krug, Joyce Lainé, William Lehman, Alexandra Lerman, Ming Lin, Thomas Love, Rob Lowe, Kirby Mages, Markues, Mores McWreath, Erin Jane Nelson, Anne Marte Overaa, Michala Paludan, Leah Pires, Sunita Prasad, Joanna Quigley, Will Rahilly, Amy Reid, Isaac Richard, Doron Sadja, Saki Sato, Frances Scholz, Dash Shaw, Sydney Shen, Beau Sievers, Shelly Silver, Ursula Sommer, Jim Strong, Aaron Vinton, and James N. Kienitz Wilkins. For more information: www.mamadada.info.
17— Suzanne McClelland, interview with Kate Gilmore, *Suzanne McClelland: Furtive Gesture_CEDEpart2*, exhibition brochure, University Art Museum, University at Albany, October 18–December 14, 2013.
18— Michael Wang, unpublished text emailed to the author July 1, 2014.
19— Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 16.
20— Charles Blow, "The Self-Sort," *The New York Times*, April 11, 2014, retrieved on July 29, 2014: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/12/opinion/blow-the-self-sort.html.
21— For more on this, see Alan B. Krueger, Chairman, Council of Economic Advisers, "Land of Hope and Dreams: Rock and Roll, Economics, and Rebuilding the Middle Class," remarks on income inequality and rebuilding the middle class delivered at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, June 12, 2013, accessed on August 14, 2014, http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/06/12/rock-and-roll-economics-and-rebuilding-middle-class.

Exhibition Checklist

Lily Benson and Cassandra Guan (Directors)
The Filmballad of Mamadada, 2013
HD Video, 16mm film, super8 film and animation.
80 minutes
List of contributing artists at www.efanyc.org/as-we-were-saying/
Courtesy of the directors.

A.K. Burns and Katherine Hubbard
In spirit of (the new misandry), 2014
Tire, bones, wooden beads, oyster shells, bolts, cardboard egg crates, rubber bungee cords, cement rock, enamel, t-shirt.
34 ½ × 36 × 12 inches.

In spirit of (rub her plane), 2014
Sheet rubber, plaid plastic shopping bag, sponges, insoles, cubic zirconia earrings, rubber ring, elastic bands, enamel.
2 ½ × 36 ½ × 36 ½ inches.

In spirit of (a major in women's studies), 2014
Mesh waste basket, leather studded belt, florescent light bulb, coat hangers, rose made of feathers, ruler, triangle, bottle of goo gone, electrical power strip, plastic clam shell, straws, plastic wrappers, plastic snakes, plastic lettuce, bic razors, confetti, peanuts, pukka shells, snail shells, and enamel.
38 ½ × 12 × 12 inches.

Courtesy of the artists.

Josh Faught
It Takes a Lifetime to Get Exactly Where You Are, 2012
Hand woven sequin trim, hand woven hemp, cedar blocks, cotton, polyester, wool, cochineal dye (made from ground up bugs), straw hat with lace, toilet paper, paper towels, scrap-booking letters, Jacquard woven reproduction of a panel from the AIDS quilt, silk handkerchief, indigo, political pins, disaster blanket, gourd, gold leaf, plaster cat, and nail polish.
96 × 240 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Lisa Cooley, New York

Nikita Gale
Untitled, 2014
Four works; Photogravure, monoprint, ink on paper
16 × 20 inches each
Courtesy of the artist

Cassandra Guan
Women's Times, 2014
Drawings and prints
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Jen Kennedy and Liz Linden
The New York Times Feminist Reading Group, 2009–present
Performance with newspapers, participants
Courtesy of the artistsJosh Kline

Josh Kline
Cost of Living (Aleyda), 2014
3D-printed sculptures in plaster, ink-jet ink and cyanoacrylate; janitor cart, LED Lights
Dimensions variable

Cost of Living (Aleyda), 2014
3D-printed sculptures in plaster, ink-jet ink and cyanoacrylate; janitor cart, LED Lights
Dimensions variable

Cost of Living (Aleyda), 2014
3D-printed sculptures in plaster, ink-jet ink and cyanoacrylate; janitor cart, LED Lights
Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist.

Ignacio Lang
1968 (Enero, Febrero, Marzo, Abril, Mayo, Junio, Julio, Agosto, Septiembre, Octubre, Noviembre, Diciembre), 2014
Series of twelve C-prints (Vietnam 1968) with *Playboy*, *Life*, *Holiday*, *Ideals*, *Car and Driver*, and *National Geographic* magazines.
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Simone Leigh
Blue Black, 2014
Porcelain, terracotta and graphite.
18 × 12 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Tilton Gallery, New York.

Suzanne McClelland
Furtive Gesture, 2013
Mixed media drawings, prints, and photographs on various papers
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist, Team (gallery, inc.), and Shane Campbell Gallery

Shelly Silver
In Complete World, 2008
Video
53 minutes
Courtesy of the artist

Jason Simon
Sublation Services, 2009–2014
Hannemuhle photo rag
36 × 54 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York

Michael Wang
Captives (Rock Pigeons), 2014
Feral pigeons, fancy pigeons, steel enclosures
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Foxy Production, New York

Key

(A) — Liz Linden
(B) — Amy Fung
(C) — Daniel Shannon
(D) — Megan Heuer
(E) — Jen Kennedy
(F) — Based on the essay "On Art and Wonder" by Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, originally published in 2012 by Artes Mundi, UK.
(G) — Theodore Kerr
(H) — Herb Tam
(I) — Adam Putnam
(J) — Cassandra Guan
(K) — A.K. Burns & Katherine Hubbard

Summer Read

A vacation. There was a pond taking the place of a shower and blueberry bushes demanding our attention. Naked bodies resting on shore. Stoned. Activity. Short story. Sounds like a good idea and out comes the yellowed weathered pages of an anthology of short stories written by women and published in the seventies. A gift. It came as a quintessential trash pick from the bowels of some Park Slope home, probably left on the street in a neat stack with a note reading "free to a good home" or "Free from a clean home." It was late summer, 2009. We opened to a text by Gertrude Stein, "Miss Furr and Miss Skeene," written in 1911. Fur and skin. Evoking a mammal-like impression. Mammals being a type of animal that have hair or fur covering most of its skin and possessing mammary glands. Mammal from *Mamma*, the Latin root meaning breast. Mama is from 1707, mum 1823, mummy 1839, mommy 1844, momma 1852, and mom 1867.

In the case of reading this text the act of reading was becoming a less-rote engagement with each word and more like a labor. A labor first for the mind, to structure words in such a sequence and with such specificity and presentness of being. A labor second for the muscles of the mouth. To contort and slowly grind with the mind in order to resist blurting out a word that might follow a logical order. Question being, whose logic? An attempted override of predictive order demands slowing down the mind. Slowing down the muscles of the jaw and trusting the logic of the text. A logic of repetition and fissure more akin to the immediacy of thinking. Being in an ever-present that compresses the past and potential happenings into a continuum of nowness.

What Miss Furr and Miss Skeene represented is what they shared. Cohabitation and cultivation. They live in relation and the life that they live is gay. "They were then being gay being quite regular in being gay." A shared commitment in the creation of pleasure. These two spend their time "cultivating their voices." But as women, as second-class citizens, how would they gain this privilege of voice? Stein repeats over and over, "by being a gay one, a regularly gay one." Here playfulness and happiness are inseparably conjoined with the ability to cultivate, to create, to know, and to experience a life of one's own choosing. It's a liberating text. Historically, it's unclear when the common term *gay* slipped from one meaning to another, but it is clear that Stein has scripted a narrative to celebrate the possibility of creating new meaning.

(K)

Designed by Kloepfer–Ramsey–Kwon

Michelle Levy, Director
Lauren Bierly, Assistant Director
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EFA Project Space, a program of the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, is a collaborative cross-disciplinary arts venue founded on the belief that art is directly connected to the individuals who produce it, the communities that arise because of it, and to everyday life, and that by providing an arena for exploring these connections, we empower artists to forge new partnerships and encourage the expansion of ideas.

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EFA Project Space is supported in part by public funds from the NewYork City Department of Cultural Affairs in Partnership with the City Council. Private funding for the program has been received from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and Foundation for Contemporary Arts.

Foundation for Contemporary Arts

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

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