



**BODIES
THAT
MATTER**

**ON THE
DISCURSIVE
LIMITS
OF
"SEX"**

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students at UC-Berkeley. As a senior fellow at the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University in the fall of 1991, I gained invaluable commentary on the project from faculty and students alike. I thank Jonathan Culler for supporting my research in various ways, including his invitation to the Humanities Research Institute at the University of California at Irvine in April of 1992.

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This book is written in the memory of those friends and family I have lost in recent years: my father, Dan Butler; my grandmother, Helen Greenberger Lefkovich; my friends, Linda Singer and Kathy Natanson. And it is written for the company of colleagues who inform, sustain, and receive this labor, such as it is.

PREFACE

I began writing this book by trying to consider the materiality of the body only to find that the thought of materiality invariably moved me into other domains. I tried to discipline myself to stay on the subject, but found that I could not fix bodies as simple objects of thought. Not only did bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies "are." I kept losing track of the subject. I proved resistant to discipline. Inevitably, I began to consider that perhaps this resistance to fixing the subject was essential to the matter at hand.

Still doubtful, though, I reflected that this wavering might be the vocational difficulty of those trained in philosophy, always at some distance from corporeal matters, who try in that disembodied way to demarcate bodily terrains: they invariably miss the body or, worse, write against it. Sometimes they forget that "the" body comes in genders. But perhaps there is now another difficulty after a generation of feminist writing which tried, with varying degrees of success, to bring the feminine body into writing, to write the feminine proximately or directly, sometimes without even the hint of a preposition or marker of linguistic distance between the writing and the written. It may be only a question of learning how to read those troubled translations, but some of us nevertheless found ourselves returning to pillage the Logos for its useful remains.

Theorizing from the ruins of the Logos invites the following question: "What about the materiality of the body?" Actually, in the recent past, the question was repeatedly formulated to me this way: "What about the materiality of the body, *Judy*?" I took it that the addition of "Judy" was an effort to dislodge me from the more formal "Judith" and to recall me to a bodily life that could not be theorized away. There was a certain exasperation in the delivery of that final diminutive, a certain patronizing quality which (re)constituted me as an unruly child, one who needed to be brought to task, restored to that bodily being which is, after all, considered to be most

real, most pressing, most undeniable. Perhaps this was an effort to recall me to an apparently evacuated femininity, the one that was constituted at that moment in the mid-'50s when the figure of Judy Garland inadvertently produced a string of "Judys" whose later appropriations and derailments could not have been predicted. Or perhaps someone forgot to teach me "the facts of life"? Was I lost to my own imaginary musings as that vital conversation was taking place? And if I persisted in this notion that bodies were in some way *constructed*, perhaps I really thought that words alone had the power to craft bodies from their own linguistic substance?

Couldn't someone simply take me aside?

Matters have been made even worse, if not more remote, by the questions raised by the notion of gender performativity introduced in *Gender Trouble*.¹ For if I were to argue that genders are performative, that could mean that I thought that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night. Such a willful and instrumental subject, one who decides *on* its gender, is clearly not its gender from the start and fails to realize that its existence is already decided *by* gender. Certainly, such a theory would restore a figure of a choosing subject—humanist—at the center of a project whose emphasis on construction seems to be quite opposed to such a notion.

But if there is no subject who decides on its gender, and if, on the contrary, gender is part of what decides the subject, how might one formulate a project that preserves gender practices as sites of critical agency? If gender is constructed through relations of power and, specifically, normative constraints that not only produce but also regulate various bodily beings, how might agency be derived from this notion of gender as the effect of productive constraint? If gender is not an artifice to be taken on or taken off at will and, hence, not an effect of choice, how are we to understand the constitutive and compelling status of gender norms without falling into the trap of cultural determinism? How precisely are we to understand the ritualized repetition by which such norms produce and stabilize not only the effects of gender but the materiality of sex? And can this repetition, this rearticulation, also constitute the occasion for a critical reworking of apparently constitutive gender norms?

To claim that the materiality of sex is constructed through a ritualized repetition of norms is hardly a self-evident claim. Indeed, our customary

notions of "construction" seem to get in the way of understanding such a claim. For surely bodies live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence; and these "facts," one might skeptically proclaim, cannot be dismissed as mere construction. Surely there must be some kind of necessity that accompanies these primary and irrefutable experiences. And surely there is. But their irrefutability in no way implies what it might mean to affirm them and through what discursive means. Moreover, why is it that what is constructed is understood as an artificial and dispensable character? What are we to make of constructions without which we would not be able to think, to live, to make sense at all, those which have acquired for us a kind of necessity? Are certain constructions of the body constitutive in this sense: that we could not operate without them, that without them there would be no "I," no "we"? Thinking the body as constructed demands a rethinking of the meaning of construction itself. And if certain constructions appear constitutive, that is, have this character of being that "without which" we could not think at all, we might suggest that bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas.

Given this understanding of construction as constitutive constraint, is it still possible to raise the critical question of how such constraints not only produce the domain of intelligible bodies, but produce as well a domain of unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies? This latter domain is not the opposite of the former, for oppositions are, after all, part of intelligibility; the latter is the excluded and illegible domain that haunts the former domain as the spectre of its own impossibility, the very limit to intelligibility, its constitutive outside. How, then, might one alter the very terms that constitute the "necessary" domain of bodies through rendering unthinkable and unlivable another domain of bodies, those that do not matter in the same way.

The discourse of "construction" that has for the most part circulated in feminist theory is perhaps not quite adequate to the task at hand. It is not enough to argue that there is no prediscursive "sex" that acts as the stable point of reference on which, or in relation to which, the cultural construction of gender proceeds. To claim that sex is already gendered, already constructed, is not yet to explain in which way the "materiality" of sex is forcibly produced. What are the constraints by which bodies are materialized as "sexed," and how are we to understand the "matter" of sex,

and of bodies more generally, as the repeated and violent circumscription of cultural intelligibility? Which bodies come to matter—and why?

This text is offered, then, in part as a rethinking of some parts of *Gender Trouble* that have caused confusion, but also as an effort to think further about the workings of heterosexual hegemony in the crafting of matters sexual and political. As a critical rearticulation of various theoretical practices, including feminist and queer studies, this text is not intended to be programmatic. And yet, as an attempt to clarify my “intentions,” it appears destined to produce a new set of misapprehensions. I hope that they prove, at least, to be productive ones.

INTRODUCTION

Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?

—Donna Haraway, *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*

If one really thinks about the body as such, there is no possible outline of the body as such. There are thinkings of the systematicity of the body, there are value codings of the body. The body, as such, cannot be thought, and I certainly cannot approach it.

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “In a Word,”
interview with Ellen Rooney

There is no nature, only the effects of nature: denaturalization or naturalization.

—Jacques Derrida, *Donner le Temps*

Is there a way to link the question of the materiality of the body to the performativity of gender? And how does the category of “sex” figure within such a relationship? Consider first that sexual difference is often invoked as an issue of material differences. Sexual difference, however, is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices. Further, to claim that sexual differences are indissociable from discursive demarcations is not the same as claiming that discourse causes sexual difference. The category of “sex” is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a “regulatory ideal.” In this sense, then, “sex” not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls. Thus, “sex” is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, “sex” is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a

raphy and performance in her 1977 essay "Notes on the Index," in which she situates the two as different kinds of indexicality. As indexes, both labor to "substitute the registration of sheer physical presence for the more highly articulated language of aesthetic conventions."⁵⁴ And yet, I would stress, in their failure to "go beyond" the contingency of aesthetic codes, both performance and photography announce the supplementarity of the index itself (there is no original gesture toward which the index simply directs us). The presentation of the self—in performance, in the photograph, film, or video—calls out the mutual supplementarity of the body and the subject (the body, as material "object" in the world, seems to confirm the "presence" of the subject; the subject gives the body its significance as "human"), as well as of performance or body art and the photographic document. The body art event *needs* the photograph to confirm its having happened; the photograph *needs* the body art event as an ontological "anchor" of its indexicality.⁵⁵

THE ONTOLOGY OF THE SUBJECT: THROUGH THE BODY/AGAIN

I read body art as dissolving the metaphysical idealism and the Cartesian subject (the artist as heroic but disembodied genius, the transcendent "I" behind the work of art) embedded in the conception of modernism hegemonic in Europe and the United States in the postwar period. This Cartesian subject has had a long history in Western thought. René Descartes's dualistic conception of a consciousness or cogito (disembodied and transcendent) opposed to the brute object of the body dominated Enlightenment and then modernist (nineteenth- and twentieth-century) ways of conceiving the subject. Predicated on vision (the "I" of the subject was a disembodied "eye" turning all bodies into objects), Cartesianism had a special force within artistic modernism, which was first dominated by French artists and writers embedded in the Cartesian tradition, then borrowed by the United States from France after World War II. Descartes's dualism is highlighted in his famous comment, from the *Discourse on Method*, that "this *me*—that is, the soul by which I am what I am—is completely distinct from the body: and is even easier to know than is the body."⁵⁶ Art history and criticism have long taken their direction from this conception—with the eye/I of the artist closely paralleled by the eye/I of the art critic or historian, who takes her or his authority from a close identification with the transcendent "vision" of the original creator.

But, as intellectual historian Martin Jay has suggested, it was precisely this issue of the dualism of mind and body that motivated "twentieth-century phenomenological critics of Cartesian perspectivalism like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty [to] . . . challenge his version of sight, and feminists like Irigaray

[to] . . . condemn the gender bias of his philosophy."⁵⁷ I would like to suggest, then, that it was the same assumption in artistic modernism that, at least in part, motivated body artists who, often drawing on phenomenological models of subjectivity (not to mention feminism), began to enact their embodied subjectivities in relation to audiences with this intersubjective exchange constitutive of the work of art. Working in concert with the major shifts in philosophical thought and in the social realm, where the normative subject was being profoundly challenged by the various rights movements, body art dissolves the opposition informing the Cartesian conception of the self and, in so doing, assists in dissolving the modernist subject.

In the very beginning of her 1971 article "Subject-Object Body Art," one of the major early discussions of body art, Cindy Nemser quotes Merleau-Ponty, substantiating the conceptual link between body art and phenomenology:

Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. It applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument, and when we wish to move about we do not move the body as we move an object. We transport it without instruments as if by magic, since it is ours and because through it we have direct access to space. For us the body is much more than an instrument or a means; it is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions. Even our most secret affective movements, those most deeply tied to the humoral infrastructure, help to shape our perception of things.⁵⁸

Body art, however, does not *illustrate* Merleau-Pontyan conceptions of the embodiment of the subject and theories of the decentered self that we are now familiar with from poststructuralist theory; rather, it *enacts* or *performs* or *instantiates* the embodiment and intertwining of self and other.⁵⁹ Body art is one of the many manifestations or articulations of this contingency or reciprocity of the subject that we now recognize as postmodern. The trajectory linking French theories of subjectivity and signification—with the phenomenological attack on Cartesianism leading into what we now call poststructuralism—to body art is complex, but worth examining here at least in part. These links confirm the usefulness of exploring body art through a phenomenological and feminist framework, as all three phenomena are interrelated in their compulsion to dissolve and/or interrogate the modernist subject.

In 1959 the U.S. sociologist Erving Goffman published a book entitled *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which discusses the self as a *performance* in relation to others, a negotiation involving complex intersubjective cues and behaviors. The self, Goffman argues,

does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action. . . . A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location . . . it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented.⁶⁰

Drawing from the work of sociologists, cultural theorists, and psychoanalysts, and from the existential phenomenological texts of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre (which Goffman “Americanizes” in the direction of a rather flat empiricism), Goffman’s book links together the theoretical exploration of the self and the performative bodies of body art (especially in its U.S. manifestations). In the 1960s, a number of artists in the United States read Goffman’s book, as well as some of the work of Merleau-Ponty. Goffman’s instrumentalized version of French existentialist phenomenology along with Merleau-Ponty’s own writings, among other texts, provided a model for younger-generation artists such as Vito Acconci who came of age after the heroic era of abstract expressionism, and within the explosive social changes in the 1960s.⁶¹ The philosophical notion of the self as an embodied performance (a notion informed by and conditioning the experience of shifts in the social and cultural realms) was expanded and developed through body art’s radical opening up of the structures of artistic production and reception. Body art enacted the activist, particularized body of the rights movements—the intersubjective, performative self of phenomenology—within the structures of art making and reception.

The performative self, whose meaning and significance is not inherent or transcendent but derived “from the whole scene of his action,” dramatically overturns the Cartesian self of modernism, which construes the body not as enacting the self but as a brute object or hollow vessel given meaning only through the animating force of the consciousness that presumably can thus transcend it.⁶² The lived body, Merleau-Ponty observed in his 1945 *Phenomenology of Perception*, is not discrete from the mind as vessel but is, in fact, the “expressive space” by which we experience the world. Unlike other objects in the world, the body cannot be thought as separate from the self, nor does it signify or “express the modalities of existence in the way that stripes indicate rank, or a house-number a house: the sign here does not only convey its significance, it is filled with it.”⁶³

Phenomenology interprets and produces the self as embodied, performative, and intersubjective—the critique of Cartesianism thus also involves a

Hegelian dimension as the French phenomenologists theorized a self that was both embodied but also articulated in relation to a self/other (master/slave) dialectic. Not incidentally, in fact, Alexandre Kojève had lectured on Hegel in a series of 1930s seminars in Paris to Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jacques Lacan.⁶⁴ This conception of an intersubjective, embodied subject contingent on her or his others (the master defining the slave and vice versa) has been expanded upon and radicalized by poststructuralism and feminism as well as, I am arguing, by body art. Thus, the intellectual trajectory of phenomenology (especially from France) and a feminist poststructuralism, both of which articulate an explicitly anti-Cartesian theory of the subject, underlies and informs my attempt to rethink body art and move it out of its consignment to essentialist oblivion.⁶⁵

In the 1940s and 1950s, it was Merleau-Ponty and Lacan who most vigorously began to theorize (through philosophy and psychoanalysis) the splitting or dissolving of the Cartesian subject. Merleau-Ponty's observations about the contingency and reciprocity of the self/other, and his emphatic critique of vision-oriented theories that polarize subject/object relations, seem to relate closely to Goffman's paradigm but go far beyond its instrumental—more Sartrean and rigidly oppositional—dimensions: "The behavior of another expresses a certain manner of existing before signifying a certain manner of thinking. And when this behavior is addressed to me, as may happen in dialogue, and seizes upon my thoughts in order to respond to them . . . I am then drawn into a *coexistence* of which I am not the unique constituent and which founds the phenomenon of social nature as perceptual experience founds that of physical nature."⁶⁶

Merleau-Ponty's antiempiricism and his insistence on the fully embodied nature of intersubjectivity enables him to conceptualize intersubjectivity as imbricated rather than oppositional—as in Sartre's existentialist model—as intersubjective and embedded rather than simplistically staged in a discrete social environment—per Goffman.⁶⁷ While Sartre sustains in his phenomenological work a more strictly Hegelian view of self/other relations as structured by conflict, Merleau-Ponty posits the self/other as reciprocal: not in the sense of oscillating positionalities but in terms of *simultaneous* subject/objectification—one is *always already both at the same time*. And Merleau-Ponty's insistence on embodiment and on going beyond vision-oriented models of self and other differentiate his work from Lacan's theories of self, at least as the latter have been popularized in contemporary cultural discourse in the United States—where, as noted, the subject is staged through a disembodied—if psychically invested—sense of vision that produces her/him as image.⁶⁸ Merleau-Ponty's writings

seem singularly interesting in relation to body art in that they articulate an understanding of intersubjectivity as dramatically *intercorporeal*: as embodied as well as contingent.

Furthermore, although he views sexuality as a universal phenomenon rather than one with asymmetrical effects, Merleau-Ponty understands the fully sexual nature of the body/subject: its saturation with an eroticism that instantiates the merging of the active, cognitive being with the sexual body. A body is perceived (and perceives itself through its relationship to others) as sexual through and through. Merleau-Ponty's theory of intersubjectivity becomes even less instrumental in his later work, moving away from the lingering idealism of *Phenomenology of Perception* (which posits an eroticism existing a priori to the subject)⁶⁹ to theorize a *chiasmic* intertwining of self and other. His "The Chiasm—The Intertwining," published posthumously in 1964, is especially rich in relation to body art. In this text, Merleau-Ponty embeds vision in touch, touch in vision, and their chiasmic crossing is the flesh of the world/the body itself: differentiating modes of vision (color and visibles) is a *tissue* that is "not a thing but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things." The chiasmus is the "doubled and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible," and the *flesh of the visible* indicates the carnal being—at once subjective and objectified.⁷⁰ There is a "reciprocal insertion and intertwining" of the seeing body in the visible body: we are both subject and object simultaneously, and our "flesh" merges with the flesh that is the world. There is no limit or boundary between the body and the world since the *world is flesh*.⁷¹ (Mendieta's *Siluetas* pieces, which turn the earth itself into flesh and vice versa, seem to instantiate Merleau-Ponty's observation.)

The relation to the self, the relation to the world, the relation to the other: all are constituted through a *reversibility* of seeing and being seen, perceiving and being perceived, and this entails a reciprocity and contingency for the subject(s) in the world (with Mendieta's body made reversible in two directions: back to its cultural and personal siting, through Santería and goddess rituals; and forward to our situation, through our embodied experience and conceptual incorporation of it). The body/self is simultaneously both subject and object; in the experience of dialogue (or, in our case, the production and reception of works of art), the two subjects involved (art maker, art interpreter) "are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity."⁷²

Through the notion of flesh—a hinge or two-sided boundary (that is also part of the things it separates) marking "being's reversibility"⁷³—Merleau-Ponty theorizes the interrelatedness of both mind and body (the embodiedness of the self) and the reciprocity and contingency of the body/self on the other.

This is what Lacan, in a formulation that derives its theoretical force from linguistics and Freudian psychoanalysis but also, as is often not recognized in U.S. art discourse, from phenomenology, describes as the *phenomenology of the transference* by which the self is located in the other: "What I seek in speech is the response of the other. What constitutes me as subject is my question. . . . I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object."⁷⁴ Lacan redeploys Hegel's master/slave in terms of a metaphoric of desire, as articulated through language; in Kojève's words, "all human, anthropogenetic Desire—the Desire that generates Self-Consciousness, the human reality—is, finally, a function of the desire for 'recognition'" by an other, marking the contingency of self-consciousness, of the "master" on the "slave." In Lacan's terms, "it is in seeing a whole chain come into play at the level of the desire of the Other that the subject's desire is constituted."⁷⁵

But, while the body/self is inexorably sexual in Merleau-Ponty's formulation, and while he acknowledges (with a distant glance toward the master/slave dialectic) the asymmetry of the reversibility of perception, like Lacan he theorizes the sexual subject/object from an implicitly masculine point of view. A number of feminist philosophers have reworked Merleau-Ponty's formulation through the lens of sexual difference, acknowledging the *gendered* configuration of the asymmetrical master/slave aspect of the subject/object relations in Western patriarchy.⁷⁶ Thus, Judith Butler pinpoints Merleau-Ponty's tendency, in the earlier work, to theorize self/other relations in terms that implicate without theorizing gender asymmetry.⁷⁷ And Luce Irigaray plays against Merleau-Ponty's blindness to gender by inserting the "maternal-feminine" into his language: the flesh is feminized as "a maternal, maternalizing flesh, reproduction . . . placental tissue."⁷⁸

But it is Simone de Beauvoir, friend and colleague of Merleau-Ponty, lover of Sartre, who was the first to expose the gendered specificity of the self/other relation in her 1949 opus *The Second Sex*.⁷⁹ Beauvoir's book was the first to expand the general critique of the Cartesian subject of modernism and to interrogate it as having an exclusionary, masculinist dimension. Beauvoir's book begins a radical particularization of the phenomenological theory of a subject still (in the 1940s) largely assumed to be "universal." Here, the dialectic between the self and other outlined by Sartre (and more subtly transformed by Merleau-Ponty and Lacan) is reworked with an awareness of the mapping of power through gender in patriarchy. Sartre's existentialist argument, in *Being and Nothingness*, that the subject has the capacity to project himself into transcendence (the *pour-soi*) out of the fundamental immanence of the *en-soi*, is reread by Beauvoir as a privileged potentiality open only to male subjects in patriarchy.

Stating clearly her allegiance to an "existentialist ethics," Beauvoir goes on to specify its different applications for women subjects:

Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out toward other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, there is a degradation of existence into the *en-soi*—the brutish life of subjection to given conditions—and of liberty into constraint and contingency. . . . Every individual concerned to justify his existence feels that his existence involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects. . . . Now, what peculiarly signals the situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilize her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego . . . which is essential and sovereign.⁸⁰

As Judith Butler has noted, Beauvoir's paradigm accounts for the masculine project of *disembodiment* by which men transcend their bodies by projecting their otherness (their immanence, their contingent corporeality) onto women.⁸¹ Ultimately, Beauvoir's argument, especially as extended by feminist poststructuralists such as Butler, extends phenomenology's critique of Cartesianism but also interrogates its sex-blind models of self/other (as well as the male-centered paradigm of Lacan's model of sexual difference)⁸² by exposing such projections as *failed* attempts to secure coherent selfhood on the part of male subjects in patriarchy. As Butler argues, the fact that the "Other" is, in fact, his alienated self "establishes the essential interdependence of the disembodied 'man' and the corporeally determined 'woman.' His disembodiment is only possible on the condition that women occupy their bodies as their essential and enslaving identities."⁸³

Luce Irigaray, a one-time student and subsequent intellectual adversary of Lacan's, explores this dynamic at great length in her 1974 book *Speculum of the Other Woman*, in which she remarks that "man" exiles himself "ever further (toward) where the greatest power lies . . . [becoming] the 'sun' if it is around him that things turn. . . . Meanwhile . . . 'she' [as Mother Earth] also turns upon herself . . . [knowing] how to re-turn (upon herself) but not how to seek outside for identity within the other."⁸⁴ The immanence of women is, as Mendieta's



ANA MENDIETA. UNTITLED FROM *SILUETA* SERIES, 1979; GUNPOWDER SILHOUETTE, EXECUTED IN IOWA. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY GALERIE LELONG.

work enacts, their conflation with the static, unchanging "earth," which can only revolve around the "transcendent" sun/man/God. This ideological structure is necessary for the maintenance of the idea that the subject as self (a masculine prerogative) is coherent and beyond "earthly" intervention or reproach. Mendieta's *Siluetas* pieces, like Irigaray's subtle, poetic arguments, expose the fact that, precisely because of this *projection* of immanence upon the female, the (masculine) subject (Mendieta's interpreter?) is always/already earthbound, implicated in that which he attempts to survey through his distanced, "transcendent" gaze.

To this end, in her book on the split subject of postmodernism, Carolyn Dean argues that the model of the decentered self that U.S. scholars know primarily from Lacan is, in fact, a description of the fragmentation of the *male* subject in late capitalism. Lacan's model of the self situates it as constructed through a misrecognition, through the mirrored reflection of the self-as-coherent, of "the truth about the real fragmentation, helplessness, and lack that defines human identity."⁸⁵ Dean suggests that it was out of a specific crisis in male authority in the post-World War I period that such a model of lost coherence was constructed: it was only the male subject, after all—as Beauvoir pointed out—who had ever had access to this mythical coherence in the first place.

Dean's observation would translate interestingly to the crisis of masculinity during the post-World War II period, with the general cultural anxiety about conformity and the growing recognition that the (implicitly male) subject was not full-within-himself but, indeed, articulated in relation to others on whom he may or may not be able to depend for reinforcing his appearance of "coherent" masculinity.⁸⁶ As Barbara Ehrenreich has pointed out, David Riesman's influential sociological study, published in 1950 as *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, describes a shift in masculine subjectivity away from the self-contained, authoritative "inner-directed" man (relatively "immune to the . . . nudgings of peers") toward an "other-directed" character, who, rather than standing tall against social pressures, finds himself adapting his tastes and behavior to those of the people around him. The "other-directed" man is the ultimate conformist, and, as Ehrenreich notes, Riesman's book "reinforced the average gray flannel rebel's gnawing perception that conformity, notwithstanding the psychologists' prescriptions, meant a kind of emasculation."⁸⁷ Ehrenreich's observations highlight the way in which philosophical explorations have a political and social dimension (the phenomenological and nascent poststructuralist critiques of the Cartesian subject dovetailing with the collapse of this [masculine] subject as identified in negative terms by intellectuals such as Riesman). As I will explore in chapter 2, this confluence of discourses certainly marks an exacerbation of the crisis in masculinity noted by Dean as having occurred after World War I and in the post-World War II period.

The (masculine) subject thus became increasingly decentered and "other-directed" from the 1950s into the 1960s, when this dislocation became far more dramatic and often even self-consciously performed (as in body art projects or Andy Warhol's flamboyant self-construction on the stage of public life). Part of this decentering, as Riesman inadvertently highlights and as Lacan and Merleau-Ponty explicitly outline without fully opening up its gendered implications, entailed a rethinking of the (masculine) self as both other-directed and also fundamentally narcissistic (feminized and/or homosexualized). Thus, for Lacan as well as Merleau-Ponty, the (implicitly male) subject attempts to cohere himself in the eyes of the other, but in this move paradoxically enacts the subject in terms of himself: in Merleau-Ponty's terms, "since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision."⁸⁸ Lacan's now well known model of the mirror stage—in which the subject "coheres" in relation to a misrecognized image of his own unity as body/image/self—situating him always already as an "other" to himself—coincides with Merleau-Ponty's observations (as well as with Beauvoir's) in its

acknowledgment of the simultaneous contingency of self on other and the fundamental narcissism of this relation. It is the image (of the self-as-other through which the subject seeks to know herself or himself but fails, succumbing to self-alienation ("the total form of the body . . . is given to him only . . . in an exteriority"), and through which the subject attempts to cohere itself but can only do so at the price of becoming *other*.⁸⁹ Subjectivity—as we understand it in the postmodern condition—is performed in relation to an other yet is paradoxically entirely narcissistic. In its "other-directedness," it opens itself dangerously to the other, but always in an attempt to rethink itself.

In this way, while Riesman's other-directed man is viewed with some trepidation because he is open to the other, he is also described and examined entirely in relation to *himself* (and is thus necessarily viewed as horrifyingly emasculated).⁹⁰ The potentially felicitous effects of his openness to the other are never explored in terms of what it might mean for women or other "others." While the other-directed subject and the narcissistic (by definition, self-oriented) one may seem opposed, in fact they are different ways of defining the same—and specifically, in the eyes of 1950s culture, emasculated—subject. Calling the subject narcissistic might thus be another way of opening out how body art works in terms of a phenomenological conception of subjectivity as "other-directed" (reciprocal and intertwined with the other).

BODY ART AND THE "CULTURE OF NARCISSISM"

Not incidentally, body art, especially in its feminist varieties, has frequently been condemned (and occasionally exalted) for its *narcissism*. I discuss the particular alignment of narcissism with feminist body art in chapter 4. Here, rather than accepting the conventional negative connotations that accrue to this term, I want to open up this narcissism as manifested in body art (through a fixation on performing the self) for its potentially radical implications. As I have suggested, narcissism—the exploration of and fixation on the self—inexorably leads to an exploration of and implication in the other: the self turns itself inside out, as it were, projecting its internal structures of identification and desire outward. Thus, narcissism interconnects the internal and external self as well as the self and the other.

Narcissism intersects with the politicization of personal life that was so empowering to feminists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For the majority of feminists from this period, for whom the clarion call was "the personal is political" and for whom activism was often a central part of their agenda, it was crucial to *embody* the female subject publicly in order to politicize her personal experiences. The enacted body/self is explicitly political and social in that it

opens out onto otherness and the world in general; in phenomenological terms, this body/self performs itself through its own particular social situation. Women's particular social situation entailed narcissism. Since women are always already interpellated in patriarchal culture as embodied objects who are, paradoxically, at the same time narcissistic (i.e., self-involved or *subjectified*), the overt expression of women's fully embodied, desiring experiences and (narcissistic) self-involvement was seen as the surest way to repudiate the objectification of women and to politicize personal experience. Women began to act narcissistically (that is, began to speak their personal concerns in the public domain) in order to proclaim their needs and particularities as subjects.⁹¹

Lea Vergine, ecstatic supporter of body art, explores the fundamental relationship between body art and narcissism in her important 1974 catalog *Il corpo come linguaggio (La 'body-art' e storie simili)*:

Narcissus projects himself outside of himself in order to be able to love what is inside of himself. . . . Projection expels an internal menace that has been created by the pressure of an intolerable impulse and thus it is transformed into an external menace that can be more easily handled. The artists shift their problem from the subject to the object, or from the inside to the outside. . . . The consensus of the spectator is essential if the artist is to find 'confirmation' in his work. The work is the artist and his narcissism [is] no longer invested in an art object but allowed to explode within his own body.⁹²

The narcissism enacted by body artists is fundamentally intersubjective and highlights the psychic dynamic by which self/artist/artwork is constituted in relation to other/interpreter (and vice versa). Licht, in the *Bodyworks* catalog, also focused on the narcissistic dimension of body art, arguing that "bodyworks" are linked to the "tradition of the cult of the self" in art.⁹³

But why would artists turn to themselves at precisely the moment when the fundamental fragmentation of these "selves" was becoming increasingly manifest (a fragmentation particularly dramatic in relation to the increasing challenges leveled at the normative male subject through the various rights movements and economic and geopolitical shifts)? Different subjects have had different relationships to this fragmentation of the subject, and body art projects can be seen variously as *enacting* and so exacerbating the fragmentation of the normative subject of modernism (the "transcendent" white male who projects his immanence onto women, people of color, the colonized, the poor) or, in some cases and contexts, as attempting to reverse the effects of this fragmen-

tation.⁹⁴ As I will explore in the chapters on Acconci and Wilke, precisely because of the asymmetry of their relationship to the coherent, Cartesian subject of modernism (the modernist artistic genius), we tend to view the men and the women body artists from the 1960s and 1970s as having approached the problematic of intersubjectivity from vastly different positions. For feminists (especially white feminists),⁹⁵ who were far more daring than were the men in exposing their narcissism (in particular through their unveiled and explicitly sexualized bodies), there was much to be gained in the exacerbation of the breakdown of the "inner-directed" (male) subject, the opening of the self to the other. Male body artists often produced works that equivocated the opening of their bodies/selves to otherness (Acconci is unusual in his narcissistic self-exposure to the other); far more commonly, they refused to acknowledge their "other-directed" narcissism, either through irony or authoritativeness reinforcing the veiling of the male artist that has conventionally ensured his alignment with the "phallus" of artistic authority.⁹⁶

Narcissism, enacted through body art, turns the subject inexorably and paradoxically outward. For understanding the vicissitudes of narcissism in relation to body art, it is useful to explore the way in which narcissism opens out the intersubjective dynamic. Narcissism can be understood as endemic to late capitalist commodity culture, which requires the "manufacture" of desire and the simultaneous turning outward of the self toward commodities and obsessive self-absorption, in a "disturbance" of the oedipal structures by which subjects (and male subjects in particular) have long attempted to project themselves into coherent selfhood in Western patriarchy.⁹⁷ On the one hand, this disturbance has been viewed in a positive light by feminists and other theorists interested in decomposing the structure of the nuclear family, with its attendant privileging of the normative (white, male) subject as sign of transcendence (keeper of the law). Lacan mapped this "disturbance" on a theoretical register by shifting the paternal law away from the actual father, who had anchored Freud's formulation of the post-oedipal subject, to the social order (to the *law of the father*); other leftist critics of modern patriarchy, such as French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, have explicitly privileged the "decoding" of the oedipal structure as a potentially revolutionary freeing of desire.⁹⁸

On the other hand, and not surprisingly, conservative critics have viewed this disturbance with alarm, as a marker of the anarchic dissolution of the nuclear family and the authority and coherence of (masculine) subjectivity in late capitalist Western culture. Consistently with Riesman's formulation, Christopher Lasch's best-selling 1979 book *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* extrapolates from the individual to the social,

labeling the contemporary U.S. subject (who is implicitly male) in terms that align him negatively with immanence and emasculation. The narcissistic subject of late capitalism demands immediate gratification and, like Riesman's "other-directed" man, depends on others to validate his self-esteem (thus Lasch labels as negative a quality that I am situating as positive in its radical effects: the narcissist's overt dependence on the *other* to negotiate his subjectivity in the world). "The narcissist," Lasch writes, drawing on the work of Goffman, "cannot identify with someone else without seeing the other as an extension of himself" — without, he continues, "obliterating the other's identity." Lasch makes this argument on the basis of his assumption that the other has a stable identity that is thus being obliterated by the narcissist's specifically *performative*, but ultimately stabilizing, projections.⁹⁹ I am suggesting here, through Merleau-Ponty, that such projection of the self is, rather, a marker of the *instability* of both self and other (of their chiasmic intertwining) and that this, from the point of view of those who have every stake in dislocating the mythological, transcendent self of modernism, is a positive thing.

Affirming the social activism of the rights movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, the critique of what Audre Lorde has called the "mythical norm" of Western subjectivity ("white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure"), body art *plays out* the narcissism that Lasch identifies negatively with the postwar, late capitalist dissolution of paternal authority and the nuclear family.¹⁰⁰ Body art, following Judith Butler's recent formulation, proposes a performativity of subjectivity that situates the sexual self through a "reiteration of norms or set of norms": particularly through the *reiteration of the narcissistic relation* through which the subject, in Lasch's psychoanalytic terms, projects itself into its own image as other.¹⁰¹ Through this narcissistic self conception (which thus always entails the other), as Rosalind Krauss has argued, "[i]dentity . . . is primally fused with identifications (a felt connection to someone else)."¹⁰² The fundamentally narcissistic imaginary by which the subject constitutes itself, paradoxically in relation to others through a fixation on itself, *turns the subject inside out* (via a relation of reversibility), producing the body/*imago* as the image of the other (hence its threat to conservative culture theorists such as Lasch).¹⁰³

Butler further theorizes that the reiteration of norms, which compels the subject to sustain itself in relation to particular bodily standards through specific identifications, also thus opens up the possibility for *disidentifications*. Thus, while the heterosexual imperative that still works to structure self/other relations in Western late capitalism enables certain sexed identifications and disavows others, a reiterative narcissism, which exaggerates the structures by which

the self attempts (and fails) to coalesce in the oedipal regime, may access the domain of *abject* beings who otherwise form the outside to the domain of the subject.¹⁰¹ It is this domain of abject beings that I believe the most interesting body art projects to be enacting: women as (provisional) subjects, men who are openly ambivalent in their relationship to the phallus and particular in spite of their privileged masculinity, subjects who are otherwise not normative.

Through the citation or reiteration of heterosexual and sexist codings of men and women subjects, the narcissistic body artist instantiates what Butler identifies as the always *derivative* aspect of performativity: marking the fact that the subject is never fully coherent in her or his intentionality. This lack of certainty in the projection of intentionality is, of course, what enables my critical interventions in these practices in terms of a 1990s dislocation of the very conception of gender that underlies such work. Through the reiteration of norms (such as Mendieta's reiteration of the link between nature and the bodies of women and "primitive," "Third World" subjects), Butler argues, "sex is both produced and destabilized."¹⁰² The sexed, raced, classed bodies of body art performers figure into this narcissistic regime in complicated and provocative ways; especially for feminist body artists, the narcissistic reiteration of the nude or partially nude female body exacerbates to the point of absurdity the Western fixation on the female body as object of a masculine "gaze" (it is the very narcissism of such performances that take this body back from such alignments and link it to the contingent but active subjectivity of the woman artist).

Rather than Brechtian distancing, body art proposes *proximity*: as a critique exploring rather than repudiating the seductions of late capitalism through specific bodies that force the spectator's own narcissistic self-containment to account (through its reversibility) for the "other" of the artist as the artist accounts for her or his interpreters by performing specific bodies that force the interpreter to acknowledge her or his implication in determining the meanings of the artist/work of art. This proximity, the loss of distance between self and other that feminists such as Mary Kelly and Griselda Pollock have argued has served patriarchal modernism (and modernist art history) so well, also parallels and exacerbates the collapse of the distinction between public (the male realm of exchange values) and private (the female domain of use values) that characterizes late capitalism, and the collapse of the distinction between self and other that Riesman and Lasch lament.¹⁰³ As I suggest here via Mendieta and explore in relation to Hannah Wilke's work in chapter 4, it is no accident, then, that feminist body artists and artists of color—with their explicitly sexualized and specifically encultured performances of their embodied subjectivities—are perhaps the most obviously successful in engaging narcissism to radical ends: in

the terms I have laid out here, even as they collapse the distinction between subject and object in a way that is anathema to Brechtian-oriented feminists such as Kelly and Pollock.

Feminists have had much to gain from the narcissistic collapse of the boundaries between self and other, the distinctions between the public and the private, the difference between the signifier and signified itself. Through the narcissistic constitution of the self, as Lacan maps it in "The Mirror Stage," we can see how the *alienation* that many have identified as constitutive of the postmodern condition is marked as fundamental to the human condition such that, as Krauss states in "Notes on the Index, Part 1," "identity = self-definition = primarily fused with identifications = a felt connection to someone else." Such a recognition has the potential of overthrowing the paternal function, with its stake in maintaining the illusion of an untouchable transcendence rather than a fantasy forever bound up in the corporeal immanence of the other. In this way, Schneemann's, Kusama's, and Mendieta's narcissistic, corporeal displays can be seen as claiming the immanence and intersubjective contingency of *all* subjects (as well as the particular oppressive history of women's bodies/subjects) in white, Western patriarchy.

Because of body art's *exposure* of the contingency of the performing self, the narcissistic focus on the self by body artists—including the male artists—hardly confirms in any simple way the heroic genius (and "transcendence") of the artistic subject; nor does it align with the rather simplistic, loosely Freudian usages of the notion of narcissism as a regressive inability to go beyond self-relations to object-relations (an inability to attain "normal" adulthood, which Freud first identified with the "pathology" of homosexuality).¹⁰⁷ Body art splinters rather than coheres the self; far from assuring some presocial coherence of the self, body art enacts narcissism as contingency. Schneemann's, Kusama's, and Mendieta's externalization of their "lack" both exposes the masculinism and Anglocentrism of the coherent self and ironizes the immanence projected onto women in patriarchy. While they might well be accused, per the Brechtian antiessentialism of 1980s feminist art discourse, of narcissistically projecting their body/self through an assumed, idealist conception of the female body as conveying the truth of female experience, they might just as well be seen as radically opening that experience to the multiplicity of intersubjectivity through their performance of the *flesh* of the world.

The poststructuralist and feminist discussion of the destabilization of the subject in postmodernism, the contingency of the self on the other, the interconnectedness of body/self, and the materiality of the body as subject can be seen as describing a set of conditions that both *explain* retroactively and

motivate precede the effects of body art. Such formulations *make evident* what modernism has labored to conceal: the fundamental narcissism of the self and the contingency of this narcissistic self on its others. Within art discourse, the goal has been to align the art historian or critic with the artist as ostensibly reflected in the work of art and to cohere the art historian's sense of authority and sense of self through identification with the creative other, whose identity must be decorporealized—made transcendental—and fixed through masculinized and heterosexualized (not to mention imperialist and Anglo) tropes of genius and mastery. The mediated nature of the narcissistic body/self recognized by poststructuralism and feminism and played out in body art projects complicates this goal, pointing not only to the dissolution of the nuclear family, state authority, and the general authority of the paternal function (or Lorde's "mythical norm" of subjectivity) in late capitalism but also to the dissolution of epistemological certainty within disciplines such as art history.

Attending to the body of the artist (the body as enactment of the self)—as the body artists encourage us to do—is a way of pointing out the ahistorical nature of the framing enterprise of conventional aesthetic interpretation, which works to eliminate that body in any but its most reduced, objectified forms.¹⁰⁸ Once the body in representation is returned to the body in production and linked—through interpretive desire—to the bodies of reception, history and sociality return. The enactment of the artistic body (particularly that of the usually objectified female artist) enables the circulation of desire among subjects of making and viewing. This circulation of desire is historically and socially specific: while the subject of making is situated within particular relations of production that inform her or his products in various ways, each subject of viewing interprets the body art work in a manner specific to her or his particular desires, which in turn have developed in relation to her or his psychic and social contexts. Two embodied socialities and subjectivities come into contact (in phenomenological terms, into "being") through the body art work.

As I will explore in the following chapter, the body/self Jackson Pollock provides a pivotal point of contact for both modernists and postmodernists, serving as an ambivalent figure of both regimes. While modernists such as Clement Greenberg veil Pollock's narcissism (and their own) to confirm him as a unified source of divinely inspired intentionality, incipient postmodernists such as Happenings performer and theorist Allan Kaprow claim Pollock's performativity openly, emphasizing his *body* in its public display as central to the transformation of the art project into an open-ended process rather than a set of "mute" products that can be made to speak their true meanings only by privileged specialists through authoritative structures of interpretation.