

VOICING

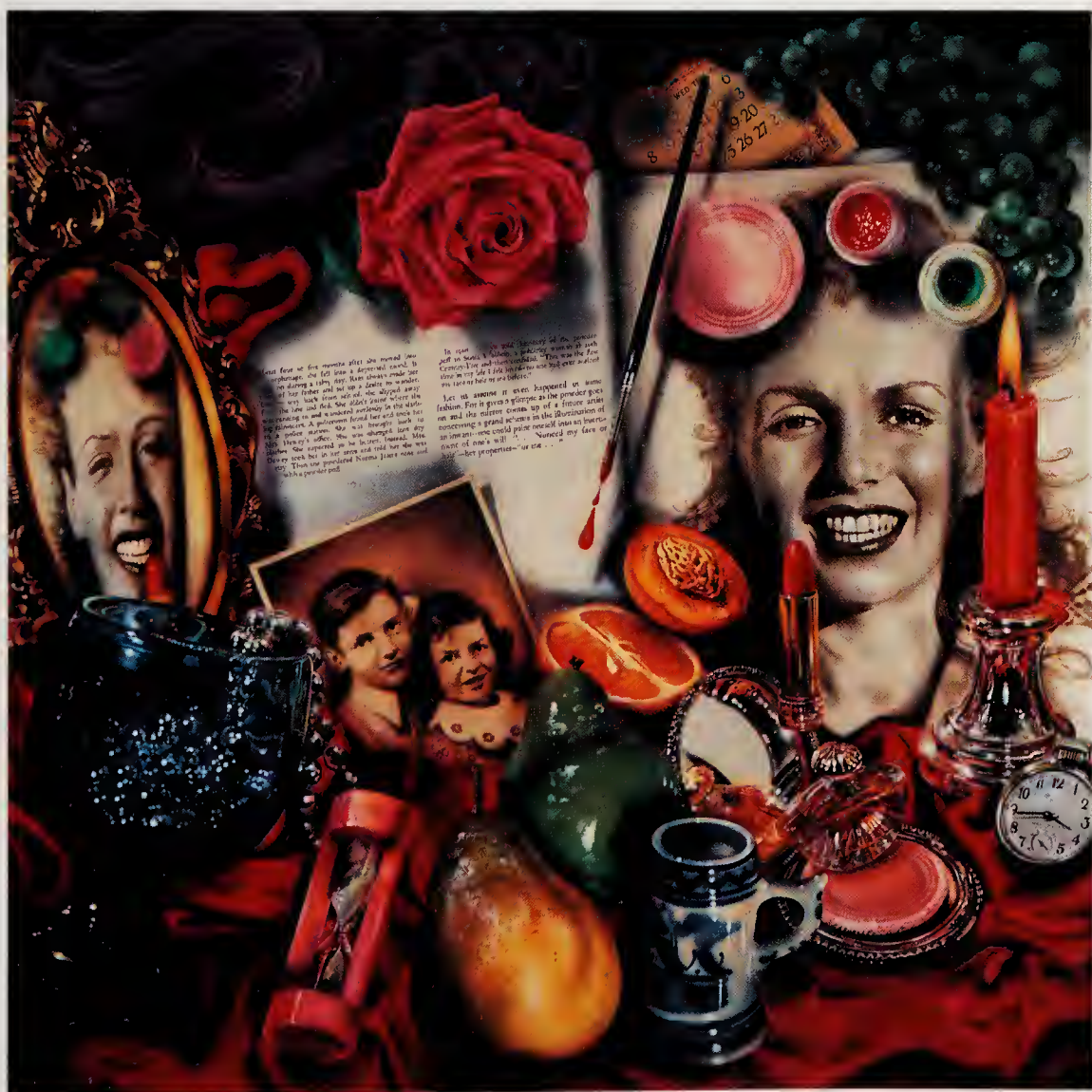
writings by

TODAY'S

contemporary

VISIONS

women artists



edited by Mara R. Witzling

FRONT COVER

Audrey Flack, *Marilyn (Vanitas)*, 1977
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 96 x 96 in.
Courtesy Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York

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*Dedicated to all the artists included herein
who so generously shared
their voices and visions*

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INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK IS CONCEIVED as a sequel to *Voicing Our Visions: Writings By Women Artists* (Universe, 1991).¹ That earlier volume made visible a heritage that was heretofore hidden, by bringing together the previously inaccessible letters, diaries, poems, and essays of twenty nineteenth- and twentieth-century women artists in an attempt to facilitate the process of "hearing women's words."²

The introduction to *Voicing Our Visions* established the necessity of attending to the voices of women artists as expressed in their writing, in order to more effectively evaluate their artistic production.³ Although all artists' writings are important primary sources for analyzing the art they have produced, those by women artists have had special significance. While artists of both genders ask similar questions in their writings (such as What is an artist? Am I an artist?), women artists have often had another level to negotiate. Isolated from other artists, other women artists, and from the concept of artist itself, women artists have used their writings to articulate their deepest, most heartfelt sentiments concerning their artistic activities. Personal writings have also provided women artists a forum in which they could work out issues related to gender, particularly concerning the male-oriented assumptions in the societal definition of an artist. Perhaps most significantly, women artists' writings have provided them a safe space in which to pursue the process of validating their vocational commitment and legitimacy. The question Can a woman be an

artist? further refined as How can a woman be an artist? and finally focused to Can *I* be an artist? is asked—and answered—by many artists in numerous ways: to confidants in their letters, to themselves in their diaries, to the public in autobiographies.

Despite numerous cultural changes that have taken place over the past few decades, writing still continues to be an important practice for women artists today. Like their forebears, many contemporary women artists feel disenfranchised. Writing still provides a much-needed medium through which their voices can be heard and they can attend to their own articulations. On reading *Voicing Our Visions*, Monica Sjöö (whose work is included here) wrote, “I was delighted to find that I was not the only woman artist who has written a lot, who has felt a need to express thoughts and visions also in words.”⁴ An important part of the current volume’s agenda is to compare how women wrote then with how they are writing now. Does writing still fill the same needs that it did for earlier women artists? To what extent do contemporary women artists still find that “woman” and “artist” are mutually exclusive terms, and do they, as did their predecessors, need to negotiate an extra level, through their writings, to claim their artistic vocations?

The complexity of working with contemporary art has posed unique challenges to the editor in selecting and researching the artists included herein. One goal has been to prevent the book from appearing dated, but, denied the security of historical perspective, determining which artists will appear important ten, or even five, years from now has proved difficult. A collection of writings by contemporary artists cannot help but be constructed around critical assessments that are current at the time of publication. The artists selected for inclusion have already achieved some professional stature, while those who could best be described as “emerging” have been excluded. Most were born in the 1930s or 1940s; full critical appreciation of those who are older came later in their lives. An attempt has also been made to achieve a balance among artists who work in diverse artistic styles, media, and written genres.

Despite their established critical reputations, it has been extremely challenging to obtain information about many of these artists. Much of that written about them was not generally available; some has been culled from such ephemeral sources as catalogues, alternative periodicals, and broadsheets, in several instances generously supplied by the artists themselves. To some extent, the lack of available information is directly related to the gender, and in some cases the ethnicity, of the artists; it has been a goal here to refrain from perpetuating the silencing, or what Howardena Pindell refers to as the “enforced censorship,” of artists of color.⁵ Furthermore, many of the artists have not been considered in monographs or other extensive scholarly publications. Thus, the appropriate critical vocabulary with which to discuss their work is still in the process of evolving; the discussions here should be seen as a contribution to that process. The contemporaneity of the project has also had an impact on the genres of writings available for inclusion. The diaries, letters, and other private writings of living artists are usually not accessible for obvi-

ous reasons related to privacy. While these types of writings constituted a major portion of *Voicing Our Visions*, they are represented here in just a few instances.

Each of the fourteen contemporary women artists represented here is introduced by a brief biographical sketch in which her goals and achievements are assessed and her place in the history of art is examined. Major themes in both her artwork and her writings are identified and discussed. In selecting the writings, lengthier extracts have been favored over shorter ones, to allow the works to speak for themselves and to enable readers to make their own connections. As in its predecessor volume, each artist selected for inclusion in *Voicing Today's Visions* is a writer as well as a visual artist. The process of verbalizing has had more than a passing importance for each, and their writing—neither casual nor occasional—has been sustained over time.



WOMEN ARTISTS: SOCIAL CHANGE AND CANON RECONSTRUCTION

In our postmodern, supposedly post-feminist culture, it might seem as if gender no longer imposed the same obstacles to women's creativity as it did in earlier years. Indeed, many of the cultural and institutional barriers that faced women pursuing careers in art in the past are no longer operational.⁶ It has been almost a century, for example, since women were denied access to the nude model. Rather than being an oddity, women art students are currently at least as common, if not more so, as their male counterparts.⁷ In fact, the greater proportion of women art students could actually reflect the "feminization" of art study, in that our consumer- and product-oriented society grants young women permission to pursue such "extraneous" subjects as art more easily than it does young men.⁸ General cultural restrictions on women's movement, dress, and ownership of property have long been obsolete, while knowledge of effective means to control childbearing has been widely disseminated. Thus a woman artist now has greater freedom of both mobility and choice than she would have had a century ago. Furthermore, the feminist movement has called into question some aspects of the tradition of patriarchal dominance and privilege, creating an environment that allegedly discourages discriminatory practices and establishing a political structure that is nominally committed to preserving women's equal status under the law. However far today's society has to go toward achieving true "equality," there can be no doubt that many barriers encountered in the past by women attempting to pursue artistic careers have been eliminated.

It remains to be seen, however, whether there are still other conditions in the current culture that will have a negative impact on women artists' abilities to claim their artistic vocations. Although there are many more women artists than in the past, far fewer women than men achieve positions of power in the artistic community, either as artists or as sponsors of the arts. Women artists

are under-represented by galleries, and their works command lower prices than those by male artists. For example, in 1985 the percentage of solo exhibitions by women artists at select galleries in four American cities was 19%, up from its low of 10% in 1973 and down from its peak of 26% in 1983.⁹ Works by women artists constituted only 8% of the art sold at auction by Sotheby's and Christie's in 1985, and works by women artists represent only a fraction of the holdings of corporate art collections.¹⁰ The situation is far worse for women artists of color as attested to by Howardena Pindell's statistical analysis in the mid-1980s.¹¹ The complacent illusion that many of the "equalizing" changes have been achieved reinforces the status quo and may actually serve to hinder further progress toward the goal of a world beyond gender (and racial) discrimination, and an art world based on artistic excellence alone.

Along with social changes in the status of women in general and of women artists in particular, in recent years the position of women artists in relation to the art historical tradition has been reassessed. The achievements of such artists as Artemisia Gentileschi, Angelica Kauffman, and Judith Leyster have been studied more closely and precisely.¹² Likewise, many modern movements have been scrutinized and the contributions of such women artists as Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot to Impressionism, of Gabriele Münter and Marianne Werefkin to Expressionism, and of Frida Kahlo, Leonora Carrington, and Remedios Varo to Surrealism have been acknowledged.¹³ Recent scholarship that has uncovered information regarding various historical precedents could make it possible that contemporary women artists will be less likely than their forebears to suffer from what literary critics Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert defined as "anxiety of authorship," the feeling that by reason of gender, one cannot have an impact on a monolithic tradition.¹⁴ Such a change presumes, however, that the knowledge gained by the research described above has been integrated into the art historical canon and become generally available. In fact, this has just begun to occur; many texts and courses still recount only the history of male artists.

The feminist critique of art history is situated within a more extensive project in which art and its production are being reevaluated. New critical approaches have begun to rebuild a history of art whose very construction worked against the inclusion of many women artists of the past.¹⁵ In both their writings and artworks, many women artists have themselves contributed to the process of revision, in which the exclusionary canon has been destabilized and the traditional hierarchical boundaries between high art and popular culture have been challenged. Among those included here, Howardena Pindell has criticized the art world's de facto racism, Mary Kelly and Barbara Kruger have presented critiques of institutionalized scopophilia, Harmony Hammond has discussed the possibilities for lesbian self-representation, and Monica Sjöö has shown how her lived experience of the Goddess has been an antidote to patriarchal oppression.

Significant change occurring in the art historical canon is corroborated by the recent suggestion that contemporary women artists are no longer working

on the margins of art like their predecessors, but have finally moved into its mainstream. “Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream,” an exhibition of works by American women artists between 1970 and 1985, provided a good example of this point of view.¹⁶ Artists represented in this book whose works were featured in that show include Audrey Flack, Eva Hesse, Barbara Kruger, and Howardena Pindell. In his review of the exhibition, the critic Arthur Danto asserted that not only would “at least half of the artists” turn up as a matter of course in any exhibition entitled “The American Mainstream, 1970-85,” but that also, were he “asked to select the most innovative artists to represent this particular period . . . most of them would probably be women.”¹⁷ In other words, according to Danto, in the past two decades, women artists have been the leaders—rather than the followers—of the artistic avant-garde. The positioning of women artists as leaders of mainstream art movements offers a liberating and refreshing antidote to the traditional marginalization in the art historical canon of works by women practitioners.¹⁸ But the very fact that feminist art practice is sometimes considered synonymous with other aspects of contemporary challenges to the canon raises doubts about the extent to which the polarity between marginal and mainstream continues to remain a valid critical construct.

The preceding comments should not suggest that our culture has reached a state of enlightenment with all of our problems solved. There are certainly major contrasts between current societal conditions and those of past centuries, even with those of the early twentieth century. On the other hand, while gender now has a different impact on women artists and their writing than it did in the past, one reason that contemporary women artists still write is that, in one way or another, they have felt disenfranchised by the patriarchal hegemony.



THE GENDERED SUBJECT

The assumption that men are the possessors of a controlling gaze, and its corollary, that women are its object, have been strongly challenged in recent years. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger first posited the idea of the “surveyor” and the “surveyed,” the concept that “men act and women appear.” According to Berger, within this economy (and not because of any essential “difference” between men and women) “the ‘ideal’ spectator is assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him.”¹⁹ Subsequent writers have further expanded on Berger’s thesis. In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey explores the problematic position of the woman viewer in confronting images designed to fulfill male scopophilic pleasure, which assume that women are the object of the “determining male gaze.” She concludes that, in its voyeuristic use, women’s image has “continually been stolen.”²⁰ Although Mulvey was referring specifically to cinematography, her

concept has proven relevant to critics of other aspects of visual culture. Lisa Tickner, for example, applied Mulvey's theory to the western art historical tradition, in which the female body is (in Tickner's words) "occupied territory," colonized by being the object of art produced by "a male artist for a masculine audience."²¹ Whitney Chadwick has discussed the "serious challenges" posed by a woman's presumed position of object "to the woman artist who wishes to assume the role of speaking subject."²² Yet, according to Tickner, the best antidote to this state is for women artists to reclaim that "stolen" territory from masculine fantasy by making art that effectively expresses the truths about their lives, through authentic images of actual female body experience.²³

The dictum that women artists and writers can (and should) decolonize the image of woman, that is, transform "her" from "a mediating sign for the male" into "the expression of female experience"²⁴ has been echoed by other critics. Susan Suleiman conceptualizes the woman writer as a "speaking subject," a "laughing mother" who through her position rewrites the patriarchal script.²⁵ In her concept of the laughing mother, Suleiman expands upon Hélène Cixous's essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," which Suleiman calls "a trope for women's autonomous subjectivity and for the necessary irreverence of women's writing—and re-writing." She explains that Cixous's revision of Freud's reading of Medusa's decapitated head as a symbol for the Mother's castrated genitals "consists in imagining a female spectator who finds the very notion of women's castration laughable; and who, looking at her body through her own eyes rather than the man's, finds all of it beautiful."²⁶ Margaret Miles relates this idea specifically to the production of visual images when she says that although women artists are "visually trained in patriarchal societies to see ourselves and other women as objects . . . we can alter our visual practices by learning to see and read the female body as the intimate reflection and articulation of women's subjective experience."²⁷

The works of many women artists of the past century show how "simply the act of 'looking as women' . . . means bringing a different kind of experience to the making and reading of images."²⁸ According to both Margaret Miles and Rosemary Betterton, this difference is exemplified in Suzanne Valadon's images of the female nude, described by Miles as "effectively challeng[ing] the patriarchal identification of 'woman' with female flesh" and, as such, "repossess[ing] the female body for a woman's subjectivity."²⁹ Valadon was not a political feminist and, as Betterton points out, she "cannot be assumed to have 'seen' differently from her male contemporaries." However, "the particular force of her experience produced work which was differently placed within the dominant forms of representations of her period," especially in light of the fact that she herself had been a model.³⁰ This concept of position dependence can be seen in operation in works by such other turn-of-the-century women artists as Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot. By force of their positions as bourgeois women, these two Impressionists focused on the intimacies of the domestic interior in their depiction of the actualities of contemporary life, while their

male counterparts, with access to the Parisian demimonde, produced few such images.³¹

More recently, *Jolie Madame* (1972) by Audrey Flack illustrates how the different societal placement of a woman artist can produce different work. In this work, Flack was not attempting deliberately to express a “feminine” point of view; rather, she wanted to “capture the elusive non-color of glass and reflective surfaces and textures.”³² But unlike her male photo-realist counterparts who depicted the shiny metallic surfaces of cars, trucks, and store windows, Flack focused on imagery that is traditionally identified as “feminine,” such as perfume, jewelry, and knickknacks that she had gathered from her own house, objects that would typically adorn a woman’s bureau. According to Flack’s description, the work created an uproar, decried for its representation of “greed.” Flack correctly identifies the cause of the hostility to her work. “As a woman,” she writes, “I had instinctively chosen props that a woman would use. By merely being true to my nature . . . I had broken a silent code. These objects were not to be painted or taken seriously.”³³ Despite their “inappropriateness” as artistic subjects, these objects had relevance to Flack because of her cultural position as a woman.

Women artists have also made works that have deliberately confronted and challenged the dominant artistic codes of iconographic and stylistic acceptability. As Rosemary Betterton has discussed, “‘looking as women’ also demands a conscious attempt to transform the conditions under which such images are produced, seen and understood.”³⁴ In this light, it is interesting that in a subsequent still life (*Chanel*, 1974), Flack deliberately focused on what was considered “inappropriate” content: trays, mirrors, rouge, lipsticks, and other items from department store makeup counters. Other contemporary women artists have followed this latter approach, making the exploration of gendered stereotypes and the deconstruction of their “codes and symbols” (Betterton’s phrase) the overt subject and central focus of their art. In her autobiography, *Through the Flower*, Judy Chicago offers an excellent analysis of how she was able to resolve through her work the struggle she experienced between being a woman and being an artist.³⁵ For Chicago that meant the evolution of a new formal vocabulary, her much-discussed and little understood vaginal iconography. While not all women artists would claim to espouse Chicago’s method of struggle or her solution, in fact, many have grappled with the dichotomy engendered when “woman equals object and artist equals man,” but the woman is an artist. Harmony Hammond writes of a similar crisis: like Chicago she felt that she had to hide the content of her art in order to make art that was “acceptable,” at that time, hard-edged abstractions. She wrote, “I knew that if I wanted to be taken seriously as an artist, I had to paint what the boys painted, and I had to do it bigger and better. I proceeded to do just that. Slowly, but consciously, I painted myself out of my work.”³⁶ Like Chicago, Hammond was able to resolve through artistic practice the disjunction she perceived in her position as an active, creative woman in a cultural context in which women were considered as objects. It is especially significant that it was through her

work, once she had found a way of expressing her own vision, that Hammond became aware of her sexual orientation as a lesbian.

Many contemporary women artists who endeavor to disrupt conventionally acceptable artistic constructions participate in the process of "redirecting the gaze." Thomas McEvilley has identified two seemingly opposite strategies that recent women artists have used to redefine the stereotypically gendered female image. He describes the first as "the redirection of attention to ages and cultures where women had not been subservient" and the second, as "the deconstruction of the communication codes by which unspoken assumptions of male supremacy have been held in place."⁵⁷ Chicago's use of vaginal iconography in which she attempts to reappropriate the meaning of "cunt," as in *The Dinner Party* in which female heroes from the past and present are celebrated, exemplifies the first approach. Several artists have specifically tried to "reclaim matristic iconography," to evoke in their work goddess-centered cultures in order to empower contemporary women.⁵⁸ Marybeth Edelson performed rituals at ancient goddess sites, Ana Mendieta etched her own silhouette into living rock, and Monica Sjöö draws upon ancient images of women's power in her paintings, complemented by her research into the history of goddess worship. For Sjöö, the Goddess is "THE cosmic creative energy" on which she bases her paintings, a living force "who speaks to us in visions and dreams," who can empower women to undo the destructiveness of patriarchal cultures.⁵⁹ Audrey Flack has also contributed to this reinterpretation in her most recent work, monumental sculptures of contemporary goddess figures, which she describes as representations of Jean Shinoda Bolen's concept of "goddesses in every-woman." Through these strong, positive female figures, Flack as well as Sjöö and Edelson have consciously sought a means of redefining the stereotyped and "colonized" image of woman as the passive object of the male gaze.

Other artists and critics, however, believe that because the female image is so overdetermined in western visual culture, all images of women cannot help but recreate the stereotypes that they attempt to replace. These artists have developed artistic strategies aimed at deconstructing the received visual system. For example, the photographer Barbara Kruger juxtaposes imagery appropriated from the popular media and gender-laden "slogans" with which she directly engages the viewer's position as either the possessor or the object of the controlling gaze. The relation between image and text is complex, forcing one to question the perpetuation of concepts related to both gender and power, "sometimes by reinforcement of the thrust of the image, sometimes by controversion of it, and sometimes by oblique wry comment."⁴⁰ Kruger achieves her effect through the use of "pronomial shifters"—"I," "you," "we"—which by their nature urge viewers to evaluate their position in relation to the hegemony. As Jane Weinstock asks, "What does she mean to you?"⁴¹ In other words, by forcing viewers to confront their own connection to the group identified in a particular work, Kruger compels them to actively question the status quo. In its considerations of the intersection of media, gender, and power, Kruger's work can be compared with that of other artists, such as Cindy

Sherman, Jenny Holzer, and Dara Birnbaum. Regardless of the differences in their specific works and intents, all these artists, along with Kruger, make the subject of their art the deconstruction of conventionalized, gendered ways of seeing.

Mary Kelly works from a similar position. In *Interim* (1984-89), her long-term project examining the aging female body, as in her earlier *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79), Kelly never presents a figural depiction of her subject. Her repudiation of the female figure was a deliberate strategy to represent women's subjectivity apart from what Emily Apter has called "the reifying regime of scopic masculinism."⁴² By offering a diverse array of visual and written materials, she forces the viewer to construct, or "picture," the subject, without having recourse to timeworn visual stereotypes of femininity. Although *Post-Partum Document*, for example, deals with the relationship between mother and child, she never offers a visual image of either of them. Presumably the viewer is able to bypass conventional associations that Kelly believes would inevitably be evoked by any figurations of the theme, and to hear complexities and ambiguities in the maternal voice that otherwise would be overlooked.

Although the proponents of the two strategies of subverting the dominance of the "scopophilic gaze" display "a disturbing tension between them," as McEvilley points out, "both strategies are necessary and their difference is more complementary than contradictory."⁴³ Both approaches are represented by artists included in the current volume.



TELLING STORIES: GENDER AND GENRE IN WRITINGS BY CONTEMPORARY WOMEN ARTISTS

Writing about her life is still a significant act for a woman artist. Although artists' texts can be interpreted simply as additional frames of reference, resources that enhance our understanding of the artists' visual works (which is indeed how they are usually considered), they also can be seen as the link between she who visualizes and she who verbalizes, rebellious and courageous acts in a culture that has discouraged both activities for women. As demonstrated in *Voicing Our Visions*, during the past century women artists have used the written word as a means of self-validation. Women artists are writing now because they still need to struggle to gain legitimate voice; they still feel compelled to rupture the cultural proscriptions against speaking their own truths in real words.

Women artists have voiced their visions in a variety of literary genres. While diaries and letters predominated in the first volume, there is only one journal writer represented here—Eva Hesse—not coincidentally the only artist who is deceased. Because letters and journals are private forms not written for public presentation, they have been especially reliable sources of their writers'

authentic thoughts and feelings.⁴⁴ They are therefore usually not available for perusal during the lifetime of the writer or her close associates.

Frank and eloquent autobiographical essays comprise the predominant genre in the current volume. In the past, formal autobiographies have usually followed a predictable pattern, telling the story of travel toward and achievement of an identifiable goal.⁴⁵ This format, adopted by several artists of the recent past such as Cecilia Beaux, has been identified as conforming to a “masculine” shape.⁴⁶ The autobiographical pieces included here, on the other hand, are open-ended meditations that attempt to clarify enigmatic and pivotal life experiences, often in relation to their impact on the art-making process. Audrey Flack has written on her use of color, on the symbolism of her paintings, and on formative experiences in her artistic development, such as her encounter with Jackson Pollock when she was an impressionable, recent graduate from Yale. Magdalena Abakanowicz has evoked the texture of her childhood experience of landscape, nature, and war, in a way that helps to clarify the source of her imagery. May Stevens has considered how her racist and sexist upbringing contributed to her subsequent tolerance and compassion, and Monica Sjöö discusses how she painfully gained acceptance of the Dark Mother, whose face she had resisted despite her respect for the Goddess, after the deaths of two sons within two years. Adrian Piper writes that the introductory essay to her larger work *Autobiography of an Art Object* “grew out of the fact that I could not explain to myself why I had felt compelled to overcome the impasse [in her work] in the way that I did. . . . I began writing this in order to clarify to myself what I was doing and why.”⁴⁷ The importance of these pieces to an artist’s process of self-clarification is exemplified by Howardena Pindell, who turned to autobiographical writing as one means of regaining her sense of self after the temporary loss of memory suffered in a car accident. This, in turn, led to a large painting project, her ongoing *Autobiography* series, in which she attempts to integrate the fragments of her experiences through both words and images.

This volume also contains selections of poetry. When encountering these literary works, it is helpful to consider the relationship between the artist’s visual and verbal images by asking such questions as, To what extent do they reinforce each other? How do they differ? and What does the artist express through each? Although Barbara Chase-Riboud has written several novels, her work is represented here only through poetry because of the particularly rich reciprocal relationship between her poems and sculpture: several poems and sculptures appear to be variations on the same theme, and her poetry, like her sculpture, is characterized by a melding of opposites, hard and soft, lyrical and violent. May Stevens’s poems, particularly the moving suite about her mother in old age, reinforce the themes embodied in her *Ordinary. Extraordinary* project. Stevens’s poem to her father, “Letters Home,” softens and humanizes the image presented in her “Big Daddy” series of paintings. Poems often provide their writers with another outlet for pondering and working through troubling

issues, as Monica Sjöö laments her sons' deaths and Dorothy Dehner contemplates the passage of her life.

The importance of writing to the artists in this volume is related to writing's privileged status in postmodernist artistic practice. Griselda Pollock has pointed out that, whereas words and writing are "taboo" in modernist works, they are a "characteristic presence" in many postmodern endeavors.⁴⁸ In his essay "The Discourse of Others," Craig Owens articulates the relationship between feminist artists' use of text and postmodernist writing practice, saying that "feminist artists often regard critical or theoretical writing as an important arena of strategic intervention . . . a crucial part of [their] activity as artists."⁴⁹ He goes on to explain the distinction between modernist and postmodernist artists' use of text by pointing out that while "many modernist artists produced texts about their own production . . . writing was almost always considered supplementary to their primary work, whereas the kind of simultaneous activity on multiple fronts that characterizes many feminist practices is a postmodern phenomenon."⁵⁰ In other words, for many postmodernist artists—as well as for feminist ones—the written word forms an intrinsic part of their artistic activity, not simply an extrinsic theoretical commentary.

Several different approaches that characterize postmodern writing practice and its relation to visual art are represented here. In some instances, written work might be included within an artist's endeavor, but it is not an inherent part of the visual art itself. For example, in her numerous critical essays on film and television, Barbara Kruger speaks to many of the same issues regarding the intersection of scopie and cultural power that she explores through her visual art. Sometimes artists use text to supplement their art-making practice. In her *Autobiography of an Art Object*, Adrian Piper documents her work *Catalysis*, in which she used her body as the object of art, expanding upon her belief that art's purpose is catalysis and explaining her lack of interest in the discrete art object.

The most typically "postmodern" textual practice, also well-represented in this volume, is the incorporation of text into the artwork itself. Textual elements can be limited to single phrases that are either legible, as in Barbara Kruger's photographs, or barely legible, as in the phrases that surface in Howardena Pindell's, Harmony Hammond's, and May Stevens's recent paintings; they can provide a visual background for the image, as in the essays that are part of Adrian Piper's *Political Self-Portraits*; or they can hold equal importance with the visual elements, as in the narratives in May Stevens's artist's book *Ordinary. Extraordinary.*

Mary Kelly's use of text in combination with many other elements provides an excellent example of postmodern feminist practice. As discussed above, Kelly creates her works out of "multiple representational modes" (Owens's phrase) combining text, artifacts, and natural fragments, presented as if on exhibition at an anthropological museum, in order to allow viewers to construct their own images. On the most basic level, Kelly's use of text typifies a postmodernist approach, in that the text comprises an essential element of her

work. That work is quintessentially postmodernist because Kelly does not use text to present a unified narrative. Rather, the texts that Kelly uses in *Interim*, for example, come from many sources and simultaneously express multiple perspectives. Thus, instead of representing “one narrative that can possibly account for all aspects of human experience,” Kelly’s use of “multiple representational systems” testifies, as she herself indicates, that “there’s no single theoretical discourse which is going to offer an explanation for all forms of social relations or for every mode of political practice.”⁵¹ Kelly’s use of textual elements in her work, then, contributes to the process of destabilizing the center of cultural analysis and of artistic endeavor.

Even when not a part of a specifically postmodern agenda, many recent women artists have been drawn to storytelling “as a form of cultural criticism.”⁵² Brian Wallis connects this tendency to Walter Benjamin’s understanding of “storytelling as a form melding personal experience and political desire.”⁵³ Barbara Chase-Riboud, in several novels and an epic poem, speaks as a black woman re-envisioning the lives of “famous” women of African descent, such as Cleopatra and Sally Hemings, and of her own great-grandmother Anna, whose mother escaped slavery via the Underground Railroad to Canada. May Stevens, speaking as a working-class woman, tells her mother’s story—that of an “ordinary” woman silenced and made crazy by patriarchy—intertwined with that of Rosa Luxemburg, an “extraordinary” woman who was also silenced, for being too powerful. Monica Sjöö, a working-class self-educated artist, searches for the Goddess’s hidden history in essays and poetry; as she has said, she needed to find the stories to explain the source of her images to herself. These artists’ writings gain their power through their simultaneous marginality and authority.⁵⁴

The telling of stories provides “images of resistance and renewal”⁵⁵ that “challenge the pervasive ‘master narratives’ of the [bourgeois, western] culture, that would contain them.”⁵⁶ bell hooks has shown that a marginal position can be one of empowerment rather than of exclusion, and that “the politics of location” is necessary to “those of us who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice.”⁵⁷ hooks defines the margin as a site of resistance, “a location of radical openness and possibility.” It is a place that is “in the whole but outside the main body,” wherein one is empowered by a double vision that engenders a “decentralizing energy,” contrary to the hegemony of the center.⁵⁸ The world is defined as incomplete; it is polysemous, allowing differing perspectives without favoring a single one; it is polyphonic, multi-voiced rather than authoritative.

Such a world view radically challenges the traditional grand narrative of art history by allowing women artists, and other “others,” to represent their experience in their own terms, without implied devaluation. The power of the margin as simultaneously a site of difference and of authority is exemplified by Harmony Hammond’s concept of “border art,” whose “practices are based on multiplicity and understanding of both sides,” and in which there are “frequent crossings back and forth.”⁵⁹ Hammond is writing from her position as a lesbian

artist; however, as she says, “border art is any art that questions the hegemonic Western discourse.”⁶⁰ Thus her comments are relevant to work by many women artists, particularly to many women artists who transgress the accepted “norm” in aspects other than their gender. Faith Ringgold’s story quilts, all spoken by black female protagonists, and in which visual imagery and written text are pieced together in the same frame, epitomize this tendency on the part of women artists to tell stories that scatter the elements of the stereotypical “grand narrative.”

The need for women artists to tell stories provides a further disruption to the relationship of image and text in the western art historical tradition, where the interdiction regarding text-image pairing occurs not only in modernism, but in the entire post-Renaissance, heroic, artistic tradition. According to the Renaissance view, the visual image was expected to communicate a parallel world through the unity of time and place, and to be unsullied by intrusions that disturbed its perfect illusion. A similar separation is not found during the Middle Ages when, particularly in illuminated manuscripts, words and images functioned reciprocally. The Korean-American film theorist and performance artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha said, “Let the one who is *disease* . . . be found. Restore memory. The ink spills thickest before it runs dry before it stops writing at all.”⁶¹ And the Vietnamese-American writer and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha wrote that “the story never stops beginning or ending. It appears headless and bottomless for it is built on differences. . . . The story circulates like a gift; an empty gift which anybody can lay claim to by filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity.”⁶²

Carol Christ discusses the importance of telling women’s stories to “the expression of women’s spiritual quest.” “Women’s stories have not been told,” she writes. “And without stories there is no articulation of experience. . . . If women’s stories are not told, the depth of women’s souls will not be known.”⁶³ In the past, women’s “utterances” were considered irrelevant, often reproduced in little-valued media, and created in genres of lesser significance by people who did not fit the accepted artistic profile. The destabilizing canon now challenges the supremacy of easel painting, the dominance of strong individuals, and the private ownership of precious works of art. The artists in this volume engage these issues in both their artistic work and their writings. By telling their stories, through words and images, they have contributed to our ability to construct a richer, fuller understanding of what it is to be human.⁶⁴

NOTES

1. Mara R. Witzling, ed., *Voicing Our Visions: Writings by Women Artists* (New York: Universe, 1991).

2. Ibid., p. 1. The concept of voicing women’s previously unarticulated experience is discussed in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Hearing Women’s Words: A Feminist Reconstruction of History,” *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), pp. 11-52.

3. Ibid., pp. 3-15. In particular, I considered such critical questions as the impact of gender on artistic self-definition, the problem of finding a voice, the myth of the artist-hero, and the intersections of gender and genre.

4. Monica Sjöö, "Thoughts Inspired by Reading *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetic* by Christine Battersby and *Voicing Our Visions: Writings by Women Artists* edited by Mara R. Witzling," *From the Flames* 7 (Autumn 1992), p. 32.

5. See Howardena Pindell, "Breaking the Silence, Parts I and II," *New Art Examiner* (October 1990), pp. 18-23; (November 1990), pp. 23-29, 50-51.

6. Linda Nochlin, in "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Art News* 69 (January 1971), pp. 22-39, 67-71 [reprinted in Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), pp. 145-78], was the first to discuss the relationship between societal restrictions on women artists' education and the seeming lack of "great" women artists in history. In particular, she noted that women training to become artists did not have access to the nude model, a liability in an artistic culture in which making images that included humans in a variety of poses was considered (as in history or biblical painting) the most worthy form of artistic endeavor. This situation persisted well into the nineteenth century, when women students were documented as making life drawings from cows at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts as late as 1885 (Nochlin, *Women, Art and Power*, p. 162). Restrictive styles of dressing and the assumption that nice women did not move around unaccompanied created other limitations. Rosa Bonheur, for example, went to great extremes, including obtaining a *certificat de travestissement* from the police, in order to gain the freedom of movement afforded males. In a passage in Marie Bashkirtseff's diary, the late-nineteenth-century artist bemoans the inhibiting effect of having to get dressed up and secure a companion in order to make a visit to the Louvre to study art. (See Witzling, *Voicing Our Visions*, pp. 23, 119.)

7. See Charlotte Yeldham, *Women Artists in Nineteenth-Century England and France* (New York: Garland, 1984) for information regarding education, as well as exhibition records, of women artists.

8. See June Wayne's essay on "The Male Artist as a Stereotypical Female" in Judy Loeb, ed., *Feminist Collage: Educating Women in the Visual Arts* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1979) pp. 128-37, although Wayne's idea is certainly in conflict with macho myths about the artist that have persisted into the second half of the twentieth century, as well as with the economic facts of the art marketplace where far more men continue to show their work and make a profit.

9. Ferris Olin and Catherine C. Brawer, "Career Markers," in *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream 1970-85*, ed. Randy Rosen and Catherine C. Brawer (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), p. 207. The cities surveyed were New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Women artists fared somewhat better at alternative spaces in those same cities (pp. 208-10).

10. Ibid., pp. 219-21. For example, the Mellon Bank in Pittsburgh has a collection of 1,900 artworks; 205 of these are by 73 women artists. Olin and Brawer list the solo exhibitions of twentieth-century women artists in 24 American museums between 1970 and 1985; 248 artists were given a total of 321 exhibitions (pp. 211-15).

11. Howardena Pindell, "Art World Racism: A Documentation," *New Art Examiner* (March 1989), pp. 32-36. The essay is excerpted from a larger document presented by Pindell at the Agencies of Survival conference at Hunter College, New York, in June 1987, reprinted in its entirety in *Third Text* 3/4 (Spring/Summer 1988), pp. 157-90. Excerpts from the essay are included in the current volume, including the gallery statistics. At the Brooklyn Museum, for example, in the years between 1980 and 1988, two exhibits (3.92% of their total one-person exhibits and 1.8% of their total exhibits) were one-person shows by artists of color, both of whom were male.

12. These women were cited in Nochlin, "Why No Great Women Artists?" and their works were included in the germinal exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and accompanying catalogue by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists 1550-1950* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976). Gentileschi was the subject of a monograph by Mary Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque*

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Art (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), and there have been recent exhibitions of Kaufman's and Leyster's work with accompanying catalogues containing scholarly reassessments. See Wendy Wassing Roworth, ed., *Angelica Kaufman: A Continental Artist in Georgian England* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992) and *Judith Leyster: A Dutch Master and Her World* (Zwolle, Netherlands: Waanders Printers, 1993), published in connection with an exhibition held at Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, Netherlands, and Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Mass.

13. The position of women artists in such mainstream modern movements as Surrealism, Impressionism, and Abstract Expressionism has been clarified and revised in recent years. See Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1985); Shulamith Behr, *Women Expressionists* (New York, Rizzoli, 1988); Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1988); Norma Broude, *Impressionism: A Feminist Reading* (New York, Rizzoli, 1991); and Ann Wagner, "Lee Krasner as L.K.," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 425-36.

14. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 13. Gilbert and Gubar are using Harold Bloom's concept of "anxiety of influence" as their source for "anxiety of authorship."

15. In particular, see F. Francina et al., *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), one of a series of books published in conjunction with the Open University in London in which issues related to gender are treated within other considerations of the cultural construction of art and its making.

16. Rosen and Brawer, eds., *Making Their Mark*.

17. Arthur C. Danto, "Women Artists, 1970-85," *The Nation* (December 25, 1989), pp. 794-98.

18. As has been well substantiated, although many women artists established solid reputations during earlier art historical periods, few held acknowledged positions of leadership during their lifetimes, and most had been written out of the historical record only to be "rediscovered" in recent years. Likewise, although women participated in most mainstream modernist movements, it is only through the process of retrieval and redefinition that we are now recognizing their contributions to those movements.

19. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 46-47, 64.

20. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), particularly pp. 19, 25-26.

21. Lisa Tickner, "The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists Since 1970," in *Looking On*, ed. Rosemary Betteerton (London: Pandora Press, 1987), p. 239.

22. Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), p. 12.

23. Tickner, "The Body Politic," p. 239.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

25. Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 10: "To see things anew/Teach the daughter to play/Imagine the mother playing," and pp. 179-80: "If the mother were really recognized in our culture as an independent subject with desires of her own . . . it would change the way we in the West think about the constitution of human subjectivity."

26. *Ibid.*, p. 168. See Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1:4 (1976), pp. 875-93. See p. 885 where Cixous writes, "you only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing."

27. Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 184.

28. Rosemary Betterton, "How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon," in *Looking On*, ed. Betterton, p. 222.
29. Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, p. 184.
30. Betterton, "How Do Women Look?" pp. 222-23.
31. This is Griselda Pollock's thesis in "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in *Vision and Difference*.
32. Audrey Flack, *Art and Soul: Notes on Creating* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1986), pp. 48-49. Extract reprinted in this volume.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
34. Betterton, "How Do Women Look?" p. 233.
35. Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman and an Artist* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1974). Also see Witzling, *Voicing Our Visions*, pp. 368-82.
36. Harmony Hammond, "Creating Feminist Works," originally written in 1978, published in Harmony Hammond, *Wrappings: Essays On Feminism, Art and the Martial Arts* (New York: TSL Press, 1984), p. 12. Extract reprinted in this volume.
37. Thomas McEvelley, "Redirecting the Gaze," in *Making Their Mark*, ed. Rosen and Braver, pp. 191, 194.
38. In Gloria Feman Orenstein, *The Reflowering of the Goddess* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990), see Chap. 7, "Reclaiming and Remembering Matristic Iconography," particularly pp. 78-79.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 80. Also, unpublished broadsheet statement regarding Monica Sjöö's artistic intent.
40. McEvelley, "Redirecting the Gaze," p. 195.
41. Jane Weinstock, "What she means, to you," *Barbara Kruger: We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1985), pp. 12-16.
42. Emily Apter, "Fetishism and Visual Seduction in Mary Kelly's *Interim*," *October* 58 (Fall 1991), pp. 97-108.
43. McEvelley, "Redirecting the Gaze," p. 195.
44. See Witzling, *Voicing Our Visions*, pp.13-15, for a discussion of the importance of women artists' diaries and letters.
45. See Witzling, *Voicing Our Visions*, p. 12, for a discussion of the development of autobiography as a genre and its use by women artists. This approach to autobiography informs Mary Grimsley Mason and Carol Hurd Green, *Journeys: Autobiographical Writings by Women* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979). For women's autobiographical practice, also see Estelle Jelinek, *Women's Autobiography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); Shari Benstock, ed., *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); and Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
46. Witzling, *Voicing Our Visions*, p. 13. See pp. 94-107 for discussion of Cecilia Beaux and excerpts from her autobiography, *Background With Figures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930). According to Smith in *Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, p. 40, "autobiography is ultimately an assertion of arrival and embeddedness in the phallic order."
47. Adrian Piper, *Talking to Myself: The Autobiography of an Art Object* (Brussels: Hossmann Hamburg, 1974), p. 6. Excerpt reprinted in this volume.
48. Griselda Pollock, in *Mary Kelly: Interim*, exhibition catalogue (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), p. 49.
49. Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in *The Expanding Discourse*, ed. Broude and Garrard, p. 491.

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50. Ibid.

51. Mary Kelly, "No Essential Femininity: A Conversation between Mary Kelly and Paul Smith," *Parachute* 26 (Spring 1982), p. 33, as quoted in Owens, "Discourse of Others," p. 492.

52. The phrase is from Brian Wallis, "Telling Stories: A Fictional Approach to Artists' Writings," in *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists*, ed. B. Wallis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), p. xiii.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid., p. xvii.

56. Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), p. 57. Significantly, Lippard's chapter is titled "Telling."

57. bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Yearning: Race Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 145.

58. Ibid., p. 149. Smith makes a similar point, saying that "woman speaks to her culture from the margins" in "heretical" texts that negotiate "the stories of man and woman." She explains: "While margins have their limitations, they also have their advantages of vision. They are polyvocal, more distant from the centers of power and conventions of selfhood," (*Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, p. 176).

59. Harmony Hammond, "Mechanisms of Exclusion," *THE magazine* (April 1993), p. 43. Excerpt reprinted in this volume.

60. Ibid.

61. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée* (New York: Tanam Press, 1982), p. 133.

62. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 2.

63. Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on a Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), p. 1.

64. Several critics have commented on the power women gain by writing their own stories. Smith, in *Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, p. 42, writes that "despite the textual repression of woman that supports the phallic order, woman has chosen to write the story of her life, thereby wresting significance and . . . authority out of cultural silence." Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 82, writes: "To write, or more generally to represent, is to take power; it is to tell your own stories and draw your own lines, rather than succumb to the tales and images of others."



Crowd I, 1986-87. Burlap, resin; group of 50 standing figures, each 170 cm.
Photo: Artur Starewicz

MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ

B. 1930

HER CHILDHOOD interrupted by the destruction and brutality of the Second World War, Magdalena Abakanowicz is a survivor whose art speaks to both trauma and the possibility for redemption. A sculptor who has worked in diverse media—fabric, wood, and bronze—and on both large and small scales, Abakanowicz's art and her artistic development have not been conventional. Originally trained as a painter, she received her first acclaim as a weaver, although she subsequently pushed beyond the boundaries of that designation. Whatever their medium, Abakanowicz's works intensely express the ambivalence of the human condition, particularly as experienced in the late twentieth century. Abakanowicz is also a prolific writer, articulate about herself and her art. She has described how, as a child on her family's country estate in Poland, she sought refuge in the elements of the natural world abundant in the surrounding environment. Although she has emphasized that she does not "look for inspiration" in nature, it is clear that her internalized sensitivity to its rhythm, touch, and particularly to its processes of growth and decay, has informed her work through the years.

Born in Falenty, Poland, Abakanowicz spent her childhood at her family's estate, about 200 miles to the east. Both her parents came from the landed gentry: her father, who had fled to Poland from Russia during the Communist

Revolution, was a descendent of Genghis Khan. The second of two daughters, Abakanowicz recounts that she experienced a certain remoteness from her mother, which she later attributed to her mother's disappointment that she was not a boy. Abakanowicz experienced a lonely and isolated childhood, in close contact with the natural world to which she turned for solace. For her, nature was further animated with a magical dimension through the folklore transmitted by her family's servants, to whom she was strongly attached. In her autobiographical *Portrait x 20*, she paints an evocative picture of the intensity with which she explored and experienced the grass, water, rocks, and trees of the surrounding countryside.

Her life was radically transformed by the onslaught of World War II, beginning in 1939, when German tanks entered the premises of her family's estate. From then on, the house "exposed" the family and Abakanowicz gave up her forays into the forest, which was no longer safe. She has vividly described how, in 1943, drunken soldiers broke into the house and, before her eyes, shot off her mother's arm. By 1944, fleeing the advance of the Soviet army, the family abandoned their possessions and ended up in Warsaw (after having been separated for two months), where they were fearful of revealing their aristocratic origins. As a teenager during the war, Abakanowicz worked in a makeshift hospital caring for the wounded and, finally, completed her high school education.

Between 1950 and 1954, Abakanowicz attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. The Stalinist regime prescribed a repressive course of study and strict adherence to Social Realism. Abakanowicz wanted to be a sculptor because she had "always molded massive heads, carved animals in bark, and produced dolls of sticks," but she failed her admissions examination in that medium. In order to be accepted, she studied painting instead, continuously chafing against the restrictive atmosphere of the academy. After graduation she "began to satisfy [her] desires hidden for years," by painting a series of huge abstracted insects and plants. To implement these works, her "rain forest," she returned to the academy during the evening hours (having no work space of her own) and executed them on bed sheets that she had stitched together, the only available large painting surface. In 1956 she married Jan Kosmowski, a civil engineer who now manages her career. She had her first one-artist exhibit in 1960.

The direction of Abakanowicz's career took a major turn in the early sixties when she began to work with fiber. The catalyst for this change occurred in 1962, when her work was seen and appreciated by the professional weaver Maria Laskiewicz, who placed Abakanowicz's name on the list of candidates for the First International Biennale of Tapestry in Lausanne. Laskiewicz's work was rejected while Abakanowicz's was accepted, but Laskiewicz offered to help Abakanowicz (who admits to knowing nothing about weaving at the time) execute her piece. For the next seven years Abakanowicz worked in the "experimental studio of the Polish Artists' Association," a euphemism for Laskiewicz's "damp basement." At this time she was part of an international movement of weavers, who wanted to close the separation between the

painters who designed tapestries and the weavers who executed them. The Polish artists, in particular, sought a “new expression” in which fiber could participate in the aesthetic of “contemporary conceptualist sculpture and painting.” Abakanowicz says that for her, working with fiber was initially a struggle with both the materials and the discipline. Only after a time did she realize that she could “build a three-dimensional reality: soft, full of secrets,” one in which “the secrets of the rope resemble the secrets of the flower stems” in her earlier rain forest paintings.

It was during this time while she was experimenting with weaving rope, hemp, and thick wool, that she created her first real breakthrough, the series of hangings called *Abakans*. The *Abakan* pieces were monumental works, woven of coarse materials such as sisal, hemp, and horsehair; they were huge, suspended from the ceiling or standing on the floor rather than hanging tidily on the wall. Resembling sculpture more than traditional tapestries, they invited the viewer to enter their mysterious cavities, with an unmistakable corporeal, and in some instances vaginal, correspondence. Abakanowicz herself has spoken of their bodily (and feminine) analogy: “I knew I would feel safe in such a form, safe like in the belly of one’s mother.” Her installation of *Abakans* won her the gold medal at the São Paulo Bienal in 1965, and launched her international reputation. That same year she was appointed professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznan, Poland, a position that she held until 1990.

Over the next fifteen years, following the direction of the *Abakans*, her work moved farther and farther away from weaving, and ultimately from an exclusive use of fiber. As she later said, “I use [all] media in which I feel I can express myself.” In the years immediately following her success at São Paulo, Abakanowicz continued to produce *Abakans*, while expanding into a series of *Black Garments*, huge, hairy, humanoid shapes that reached from ceiling to floor. In the mid-seventies, as part of an extensive series called *Alterations*, Abakanowicz began to make large cycles of figurative and non-figurative sculptures from burlap. The use of a ready-made fabric, rather than one of her own creation, marks an important shift in the direction of Abakanowicz’s work, and in her artistic identity, from craftsperson to avant-garde *artiste*. However, her hand is quite visible in these works, for which she customized both the thread and material. *Alterations* comprised several different cycles of sculptures, all in some way evocative of the human body via the innovative use of fibrous materials. The first, *Heads* (1973-75), are three-foot ovoid shapes in which a tightly stretched outer layer sometimes contains and at other time yields to a bulgy stuffing that bursts through the seams, revealing what Abakanowicz has described as “the effects of artificial environment and unlimited stress.” In their shape and relationship of exterior to interior, skin to guts, they are precursors of several later series—such as *Embryology* (1978-81), eight hundred pods made from stuffed gauze, that the artist describes as being “like stones, like a kind of gray fruit, or big seeds or brains,” or the *Geminati*, made a decade later.

In 1974 Abakanowicz began to use a technique to which she returned

throughout the next two decades, in which she formed figures by dipping burlap and string into resin which she then pressed into a plaster mold, sometimes a cast taken from the body of a friend. *Seated Figures* (1974-79) and *Backs* (1976-82) were the first series to use this procedure. The two series are similar in that they each depend on the same three elements for their dramatic impact: the human figure is truncated, the figures are hollow, and they are repetitious—there are eighteen *Seated Figures* and eighty *Backs*. All three elements, but especially the extent of the series, evoke the chilling effects of the dehumanization of life in the late twentieth century. In each case the same shape is repeated many times, but given an individualized texture and surface through the unique handling of materials. Various installations, of *Crowds* and numerous images of standing and seated (sometimes caged) figures made in the 1980s and 1990s, employ this same technique and yield a similar impression.

In response to several commissions that she received for permanent installations, in the 1980s Abakanowicz began to use materials that were more durable than fiber. The first such work was *Katarsis*, commissioned by the Giuliano Gori collection for an outdoor sculpture garden in Tuscany. She made thirty-three cast bronze figures, each eight-and-one-half feet tall and hollow like her burlap figures. They are characterized by expressively pock-marked surfaces that seem to reflect the ancient, gnarled, seemingly barren olive trees that abound in the surrounding landscape. Her sculpture for the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, *Negev* (1987), consists of seven large yellowish disks, carved from stone found in the desert, each measuring eight-and-one-half feet in diameter and weighing ten tons. Abakanowicz has related the symbolism of these wheels to ancient rituals of making water and wine. The concept of creating ritualistic, sacred space characterizes one impulse underpinning all her outdoor works. The idea of activating, even sanctifying, the environment through her work has always been meaningful to Abakanowicz. She has described how it is important to oversee the installation of her sculptures, and how she creates her “own reality of space” and “special places where ‘one has to take off one’s sandals for meditation.’” Like Joseph Beuys (also from central Europe and whom she cites as one of the few artists whom she admires), Abakanowicz believes that the artist is a shaman who can confront and heal cultural wounds. As a child, she responded to nature in a magical way. She believes that art, too, must have a “bewitching power” and be “charged with energy,” a characteristic that attracted her to the tribal art of New Guinea, where she lived for awhile. The title *Katarsis* refers in part to her conception of art as “catharsis, and a means to link man with powerful and mysterious forces.”

In her next major series, *War Games* (1987-93), Abakanowicz worked in a different medium, recycling the huge trunks of felled trees from the deep forest, trees that were logged and then abandoned because their shapes were too irregular to turn into lumber. Although these sculptures seem to represent a departure from her earlier works in both medium and subject, in fact, they

have an intrinsic place in her overall vision. Like the *Abakan* pieces, they are extremely large and they activate the space in which they are placed. Less literally referential to the human body than some earlier works, they hover between figurative and abstract, their trunks and branches evoking amputated pieces of the human form. The burlap dipped in resin that reads as “bandages” and the “caps” of metal that cover their extremities insinuate a sense of the fragmented body, one of Abakanowicz’s most frequently used motifs. While they are suggestive of the wounded corpus, they also seem to mutate into the very implements through which destruction is wrought. Each one is a ludicrous, yet menacing, war machine, its blades and wheels remarkably reminiscent of the mutating contraptions in Hieronymous Bosch’s depiction of Hell. The themes of war, destruction, and amputation persist throughout Abakanowicz’s working life.

Abakanowicz’s works in all media are characterized by compelling corporeal references, regardless of the extent to which they are figurative or abstract (and she has disclaimed thinking in those oppositional terms). One reason for the *Abakans*’ dramatic impact was their visceral quality and the extent to which they evoked skin, hair, folds, and fissures with an erotic tactility. On the other hand, for some viewers they were the body turned inside out. Although of a markedly different material and effect, the *War Games* images also suggest twisting and pulsating muscles and ligaments. All her works seem to depend on a tension between a layer of skin—the outer covering—and the viscera—the vessels, muscles, guts, and inner substance that is both revealed and concealed by the outer surface. One of the distinguishing variations among figures in all her burlap casts is found in the wrinkles of the skin, and the degree to which they imply underlying backbone, musculature, veins.

Abakanowicz’s figures are mostly androgynous, their primary and secondary sexual characteristics de-emphasized. Thus, although we know that the model for *Seated Figures* was male, we concentrate on the humanity of the figures, rather than on their masculinity. Her more abstract, germinating forms are also characterized by a certain gender ambiguity. While it is clear that works such as *Embryology*, *Pregnancy*, and *Geminati* refer to fertility and growth and have an egglike, and even womblike, quality, they also are provocatively phallic, much like many of Louise Bourgeois’s works that simultaneously evoke breasts and penises.

The fragmentary state of many of Abakanowicz’s works is especially significant; because they are not descriptively complete, they depend on expressive shape to communicate. Before making her *Alterations* series, Abakanowicz experimented with covering mannequins with burlap dyed black, but soon abandoned this idea as too “elegant” because it oversimplified the human body’s complexity. The series title *Alterations* implies a state of change and process that relates Abakanowicz’s work to that of several younger artists such as sculptor Kiki Smith, whose images deconstruct the human body as an example of perfection and harmony, the “measure of all things,” and focus instead on the tragedy of the body, the sad truth that human beings are

all "made of meat." In her writings Abakanowicz expands upon the theme of a living creature's sudden exposure, of its vulnerability: a rabbit, a frog, her own mother.

In her depiction of the body, the profound effect of surviving a war and living in a totalitarian state can be seen clearly. The repeated amputations express brutality and a sense of human expendability. Abakanowicz's understanding of the vulnerability of the human body, that it can be intact one minute, the connection between skin and vessels maintained, and a jagged, bloody mess the next, reflects her experiences of carnage during the war, especially by her witnessing her mother's arm being shot off. Her use of multiple figures, as in the *Crowd* series, effectively conveys the loss of individuality and the cheapening of individual life under a totalitarian regime or within a concentration camp. It could also be a metaphor for the loss of self in mass society where the individual will is so often without effect, where the individual is lost in the lonely crowd.

Yet Abakanowicz's vision, while stark and intense, is not wholly negative. Like the shaman in more ancient societies, she offers contemplative images for their cathartic effects. The pods are germinating, burgeoning with life. Likewise, the backs, while hunched over in submission, also suggest seed pods, waiting to explode. The bronzes in *Katarsis*, like the olive trees nearby, might look dead but they bear fruit. And the abandoned tree trunks in *War Games* have been born again as sculptures, their innards teeming with life, their shapes suggestive of mutating forms. Abakanowicz feels a visceral identification with nature's continual cycles that always make birth possible. In her art as well, her fecund imagination continuously renews itself.

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MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ—SELECTED WRITINGS



UNTITLED COMMENTARIES

ON HER METHOD OF CREATING, 1969

I like neither rules nor prescriptions, these enemies of imagination. I make use of the technique of weaving by adapting it to my own ideas. My art has always been a protest against what I have met with in weaving. I started to use rope, horsehair, metal, and fur because I needed these materials to give my vision expression and I did not care that they were not part of the tradition in this field. Moreover, tapestry, with its decorative function, has never interested me. I simply became extremely concerned with all that could be done through weaving. How one forms the surface reliefs, how the mobile markings of the horsehair will be put into place and, finally, how this constructed surface can swell and burst, showing a glimpse of mysterious depths through the cracks.

In 1966 I completed my first woven forms that are independent of the walls and exist in space. In creating them I did not want to relate to either tapestry or sculpture. Ultimately it is the total obliteration of the utilitarian function of tapestry that fascinates me. My particular aim is to create possibilities for complete communion with an object whose structure is complex and soft. Through cracks and openings I try to get the viewer to penetrate into the deepest reaches of the composition. I am interested in the scale of tensions that intervene between the woven form, rich and fleshy, and the surroundings.

I feel successful each time I reject my own experience. There are all too many fascinating problems to confine oneself to a single one. Repetition is contrary to the laws of the intellect in its progress onward, contrary to imagination.



ON IMAGINATION, 1974

In the unconscious of contemporary man, mythology is still buoyant. It belongs to a higher spiritual plane than his conscious life. The most superficial being is crowded with symbols and the most logical person lives through images. Symbols never disappear from the field of reality; they can change their guise, but their role remains unchanged.

Music or smell, a thoughtful pause, a casual word, a landscape, can release nostalgic images and dreams. They always express much more than the person who experiences them can in turn convey in words.

Most people do not know how to verbalize such mental experiences, not from lack of intelligence, but because they cannot give sufficient weight to analytical language. It seems to me that these images can bring people closer more effectively and in a more fundamental way than analytical language.

Contemporary man may make light of these mental images, which does not alter the fact that he lives with them and through them. They are a real and undeniable part of human nature—they constitute the imagination.

To have imagination and to be aware of it is to benefit from possessing an inner richness and a spontaneous and endless flood of images. It means to see the world in its entirety, since the point of the images is to show all that which escapes conceptualization.



ON FIBER, 1978

I see fiber as the basic element constructing the
organic world on our planet,
as the greatest mystery of our environment.
It is from fiber that all living organisms are built—
the tissues of plants, and ourselves.
Our nerves, our genetic code,
the canals of our veins, our muscles.

We are fibrous structures.
Our heart is surrounded by the coronary plexus,
the plexus of most vital threads.

Handling fiber, we handle mystery.
A dry leaf has a network reminiscent of a dry
mummy.

What can become of fiber guided by the artist's
hand and by his intuition?

What is fabric?
We weave it, sew it, we shape it into forms.
When the biology of our body breaks down,
the skin has to be cut so as to give access to the
inside,
later it has to be sewn, like fabric.

Fabric is our covering and our attire. Made with our
hands, it is a record of our souls.



ON MARK-MAKING, 1981

I did not yet know how to write. I drew in the earth with a stick. The marks were deeply etched. Then the rain erased them until they disappeared.

I loved to look at the lines scratched in the clay as they dried in the sun, splitting into cracks with irregular edges. The sand closed behind the finger as it drew—fine, quick—until only a wrinkle remained on the surface.

I no longer remember when I received my first paper. I drew kneeling on the floor. The lines escaped from the sheet, running along the floorboards, losing themselves in the shadows of the furniture. The drawing could be charged with secret power.

The village women inscribed on their doors signs and letters with consecrated chalk or charcoal. This warded off evil. I wished to know the spells but they were inaccessible to me. Only their presence could divide places into those which were safe and those open to all sorts of forces.

Now, when I draw, areas of those unguarded spaces appear on the sheet.



FROM "PORTRAIT X 20," 1978-80

INTRODUCTION

When I learned to use things, a pocketknife became my inseparable companion. Bark and twigs were full of mysteries; and later so was clay. I molded objects whose meaning was known only to me. They fulfilled functions in performances and rituals which I created for myself alone.

I was born in the country and spent my childhood there. I had no companions of my own age. I had to fill the enormously long and empty days, alone, minutely exploring everything in the environment. Learning about all that was alive—watching, touching, and discovering—was accomplished in solitude. Time was capacious, roomy: leaves grew slowly, and slowly changed their shape and color. Everything was immensely important. All was at one with me.

The country was full of strange powers. Apparitions and inexplicable forces had their laws and spaces. I remember *Południce* [female ghosts who were said to appear on hot days at noon] and *Zytnie Baby* [rye hags]. Whether I had ever seen them, I cannot say; in the hamlet, peasant women talked about them. There were also some who knew how to bring about illness or induce elflock.

At home, these superstitions were not treated seriously. Yet they existed as an important part of my surroundings.

Imagination collected all that was impenetrable and uncertain, hoarding secrets that expanded into worlds. In anticipation, perhaps, that this font of truths accumulated without control, direction, or pattern would one day be of great use.



BEFORE

At the very beginning, women took care of me. There were several of them. They carried me in their arms, bathed, and fed me. I remember their cheerful faces. They played with me as a baby, and later, as an infant still unable to stand properly and uttering those first words incomprehensible even to myself. I knew that the women were there, would always be there, and that their merry and happy world was my place. But I also knew, and this was painful, that none of them was my mother.

Mother appeared rarely. She was beautiful. Tall with long hair piled up at the back of her head. Fragrant. She brought unease to my entire world: the women grew silent, I became timid, almost frightened. I wanted to please her, to deserve her attention.

Some years later, I learned and came to understand: she had passionately wanted a son. My birth was a terrible disappointment to her.



ENCOUNTER

Between the ponds and the pine grove was a fallow field. Sandy, white, overgrown with clumps of dry, stiff grass. It looked strange. The tips of each clump converged, forming a kind of tent. The whole wide area looked as if it were covered by minute bristling cones. No one ever changed anything there. Everyone knew it should be left alone. "They" live in the grass, it was said.

Only once did I see . . .

While prodding a clump of grass with my hands, he ran out. A tiny man, perhaps a little bigger than an acorn.

The sun was hot. It was time to go home. The bell was ringing for lunch.



SECRETS

That Place was in the very corner of a dark hall where, on the wall, there was a painted knight in armor with four horses. When silence and tranquility evoked an atmosphere of safety, I would bring over my objects, carefully selected among the grasses and the scrub. They wanted this from me. Slowly

they came to life. Slowly they began to communicate with one another, and with me. They were moving independently, approaching one another, approaching me, retreating, again and again. This took time. It grew slowly, then faster, until it turned into a dance. I was inside it, taken over by the movement and the changing image. Obedient to the rhythm, united with them. Overcome by anticipation of what might happen with these living stones and branches.

A large tree by the road was split lengthwise—black inside, burnt. By lightning, maybe. The interior was as strange as any darkness in which anything could happen. I was afraid to stand by the trunk. I felt that from some crevice something might creep out that I dare not name. A transparent, large *Południca* was shimmering in the sun, in that terribly hot air in which it seems impossible to breathe. One could think about her, imagine her, but one must not look. With the whole body one felt the danger of being in the open fields at high noon. Something would happen above the earth in which we cannot take part and which we dare not disturb.

In the evening, women knelt in the road before the Holy Virgin that hung on a poplar tree not far from the gate. They sang litanies. On the eve of feast days they plaited long wreaths of oak leaves and spruce twigs. They adorned with them the whole poplar tree and on the picture of the Virgin they stuck flowers and ribbons of colored tissue paper.



CHRISTMAS TREE

Growing, I was conscious of being a failure. I felt it. I knew it. In prayers, loudly repeating the words kneeling at the side of the bed, I was silently saying: make me become a boy.

Long before Christmas, the first gingerbread cookies were baked. Highly spiced, they had to be stored in a cool larder for weeks. Mother asked: What do you want from Santa Claus? Embarrassed, cornered, I whispered into her ear: I want him to make me a boy.

On Christmas Eve, excited, desperately worried, confused, I looked through the window as he was arriving. The light of a lantern could be seen approaching from the forest. Tall man with a white beard—Santa Claus. He entered brushing the snow off his boots, enormous, in a long coat with a hood. The kitchen maids giggled. I shook, unable to utter a word.

He brought toys, beautiful, unexpected. Then disappeared.

Father was never present then. He arrived later. He sat with us at the table.



EDUCATION

When I was six, I was given a teacher. A stranger. I was used to seeing strangers only from a distance. They made me uneasy.

He asked many questions. I was so frightened that I hardly replied at all, and the little I said did not make sense.

He told me to draw a sunset. I could not do this either. Mother asked him what he thought; he shrugged his shoulders.

After some time, a woman teacher appeared in the house and stayed. Everything she disclosed to me was alien and hostile. It refused to become a habit.

Like my prayers, I repeated formulas and facts, distasteful and daunting. I cried. I was so nervous when answering questions, that everything became confused. I wept, helpless in my own inadequacy, conscious of my shortcomings. I went to see mother. She consoled me: you will not have to take any exams or go to university.

I escaped outside.

With a long pole, I pushed a wooden canoe into the reeds. Without a thought I became one with the murmurs of the time of day and with this whole world of movement and stillness, growth and decay. There I belonged. With concentration, for hours I looked at the grass and the water. I wanted to subordinate myself to them, so that I might understand the mysteries which separated me from them.



NECESSITY

The urge to have around me, to touch, to hoard—twigs, stones, shards, bark—continued. They embodied stories with which I wanted to live. Later, I carved out faces with a knife. I wanted them to resemble people. They did not. I watched mud settle after treading in it with a bare foot, rising between my toes, greasy, soft. I squeezed clay—too obedient in the face of my lack of decision. Near the avenue of chestnuts, by the pond, in a yellow pit, there was a lot of it. I stood there, checking my desire: I was not allowed to get dirty, yet I needed to fill my hands with it. The heads I molded dried, cracked, and disintegrated. Father once brought me from town some plasticine. I molded faces, placing one next to another. All were in profile. But no one liked them—profiles did not look like this. I continued to mold and to carve although sometimes everything had to be thrown away when the nursery was being cleaned. I went to the rubbish heap to look for what could be retrieved. Began anew.



WAR

I was nine. It was autumn. On the very edge of the park, a road led from the mill to the avenue of alders. German tanks were coming. We stood on the terrace, taken by surprise, watching. They were looking at us, standing as if on parade. I saw them for the first time, faces, uniforms.

I did not know how to hate. I did not believe it. I could not understand why they should hate the four of us on the terrace.

They fired, aiming, probably on purpose, at a wall.

I stood fearless, suddenly humiliated by their violence, helpless in the face of injustice and the impotence of my parents.

Some years later, father taught me to shoot. To clean and assemble weapons.

At night, partisans would come. Poles, Russians, very often the same people known to us and friendly. Later, more and more frequently, just robbers. Germans by day. The house exposed us, it ceased to be a shelter. The forest also became alien. I no longer went there to talk to it as before.



KILLING

I remember, once upon a time. I was then still tiny. I sat near mother on the steps of the terrace. She was playing with my sister and I wanted to join in, clumsily, jealously interfering. Pushing me away, mother said mockingly: "I bought you from a Jew." I felt as if my insides had turned to stone, suddenly without the certainty of my situation, a stranger to myself, filled with the panic of doubt.

Moshe had a small shop in the village. His wife wore a yellowish wig. He delivered groceries to our house and bought things from us. He looked timidly around, bowed many times, his cap held awkwardly in both hands. In the autumn, he leased part of our orchard. With his son he lived in a makeshift shed. The boy had black curly hair, a flat nose. I was allowed neither to play with him, nor with other children who, wild and dirty, might carry lice. I longed for friendship but achieved it only in daydreams. I imagined myself, with excitement and clarity, walking with somebody across an immense plain, understood, sharing confidences.

It was several years later, on the day when it was already known that the Germans were going to deport all the Jews to their death, I was with father in the village. Almost stunned, I did not listen to what Moshe was saying to him. His face seemed to be smiling, but from nearby I saw that his skin was shaking and twisting.

To reach our sawmill, it took over an hour to walk through the forest.

Foresters lived with their families in wooden houses and, since the outbreak of war, other men had joined them. Allegedly they worked in the sawmill or helped father in other jobs and only father knew who they really were.

One day, after this conversation in the village, I saw Moshe's son carrying some timber between the houses in the forest. My father thought that there he would be safe. This lasted for about a month. Then he was killed by a man from the village called Bolek. It was said that he spied for the Germans. He did not get very far. Soon after, he was killed by our men who had seen him shoot the Jewish boy from behind. I went to the spot where Moshe's son died. There I found a small piece of flat bone. I picked it up. There were many similar bones scattered in the bushes near our outbuildings. I had seen farm animals being killed. I had not thought of it as death, and with human beings it was the same.

Once I wanted to have a frog's skeleton. The way to get this was to place a dead frog on an anthill. So I threw stones at a frog for a long time, yet it refused to die. I suffered with it most terribly until, at last, covered with sweat, I ran away.



MOTHER

They came at night, in 1943, drunk. They bashed at the door. Mother rushed to open it. One opened it to everybody. She did not make it: they began to fire. A dum dum bullet tore her right elbow. It severed her arm from the shoulder, wounded her left hand. The capable, wise hand suddenly became a piece of meat, separate. I looked at it with amazement. I had seen dead bodies, but they somehow had always preserved their completeness in front of others.

We had to wait until the morning to go by carriage to the small town where there was a doctor.

She survived in spite of a terrible loss of blood and excruciating pain.

When she returned from the hospital, maimed, I attempted to replace for her the hand she had lost. I never left her alone. It was thought at the time that I would become a nurse, yet I only wanted to make up to her for the great disappointment of my gender. I wanted to be both needed and loved, if only now, to attract her attention, and perhaps even praise.



"SOFT," 1979

ONCE UPON A TIME

I was a small child, crouching over a swampy pond, watching tadpoles. Enormous, soon to become frogs, they swarmed the bank. Through the thin membrane covering their distended bellies, the tangle of intestines was clearly

visible. Heavy with the process of transformation, sluggish, they provoked one to reach for them. Pulled out onto shore with a stick, touched carelessly, the swollen bellies burst. The contents leaked out in a confusion of knots. Soon they were beset by flies. I sat there, heart beating fast, shaken by what had happened. The destruction of soft life and the boundless mystery of the content of softness. It was just the same as confronting a broken stem with sap flowing out, provoked by an inexplicable inner process, a force only apparently understood. The never fully explored mystery of the interior, soft and perishable.

Many years later, that which was soft with a complex tissue became the material of my work. It gives me a feeling of closeness to and affinity with the world that I do not wish to explore other than by touching, feeling, and connecting with that part of myself which lies deepest.



BECOMING

Between myself and the material with which I create, no tool intervenes. I select it with my hands. I shape it with my hands. My hands transmit my energy to it. In translating idea into form, they always pass on to it something that eludes conceptualization. They reveal the unconscious.



INTERIOR

The shapes that I build are soft. They conceal within themselves the reasons for the softness. They conceal everything that I leave to the imagination. Neither through the eye nor the fingertips nor palm that informs the brain can this be explained. The inside has the same importance as the outer shell. Each time shaped as a consequence of the interior, or exterior as a consequence of the inside. Only together do they form a whole. The invisible interior which can only be guessed at is as important as when it opens for everyone, allowing physical penetration.



MEDITATION

To make something more durable than myself would add to the imperishable rubbish heaps of human ambitions, crowding the environment. If my thoughts and my imaginings, just as I, will turn to earth, so will the forms that I create and this is good. There is so little room.



COEXISTENCE

My forms are like successive layers of skin that I shed to mark the stages along my road. In each case they belong to me as intimately as I belong to them, so that we cannot be apart. I watch over their existence. Soft, they contain within an infinite quantity of possible shapes from which I choose only one as the right, meaningful form.

In the exhibition rooms I create spaces for them in which they radiate the energy I have imbued them with. They exist together with me, dependent on me, I dependent on them. Coexisting, we continually create each other. Veiling my face, they are my face. Without me—like scattered parts of the body separated from the trunk—they are meaningless.



CONFESSION

Impermanence is a necessity of all that lives. It is a truth contained in a soft organism. How to give vent to this innate defeat of life other than by turning a lasting thought into perishable material?

Thought—a monument. Thought—a defense against disappearance. Timeless thought. A perverse product of the soft tissue that will disintegrate, that one day will cease to connect. Expressed in material whose durability is related to the matter from which it came, it begins to really live—mortally.



CONTACT

I touch and find out the temperature. I learn about roughness and smoothness of things. Is the object dry or moist? Moist from warmth or from cold? Pulsating or still? Yielding to the finger or protected by its surface? What is it really like? Not having touched, I do not know.



EMBRYOLOGY

Carried for a long time in the imagination, shapes ripen. When out of pent-up tension, they have to be discharged, I become one with the object created. My body grows ugly, exhausted by bringing forth an image. My body gets rid of something that had been a part of it, from the imagination to the

skin. The effort of discharge makes it hideous.

In my belly life was never conceived. My hands shape forms, seeking confirmation of each individual specimen in quantity. As in a flock subordinating an individual, as in the profusion of leaves produced by a tree.



REMINISCENCE

But, at the very beginning, when I started to weave and to use soft material, it was from a need to protest. From a wish to question all the rules and habits connected with this material. Soft is comfortable and useful. It is obedient, wrapping our body. It deadens the sound of footsteps. It covers walls, decoratively and warmly. It is easy on the eyes. It is practical. Accompanying our civilization from its very beginnings, it has its roles, a definable range of tasks governed by our needs and habits. It has its own system of classifications.

That is why I found the struggle with these acquired habits so fascinating. That is why it has been so fascinating to reveal and disclose the organic quality of fabric, of softness. To show the qualities overlooked through the blindness of habits. The autonomous qualities. To show all that this material could be as a liberated carrier of its own organic nature. And later, the showing of objects which contradict the former functions of this material, broadening man's awareness of the matter which surrounds him, the objects which surround him, the world which surrounds him.



SOFTNESS

I touch my body. It still obeys me. It fulfills orders efficiently, without resistance. The muscles move wisely. When needed, they raise my hand, move my fingers. When needed, I lower and raise my eyelids. I move my tongue. Under the skin the flesh is precisely shaped. Springy. Everywhere, in the wholly enclosed, porous skin-covering-pulsation. All uniformly heated, saturated with moisture, with thick red juice, white mucus, jellylike secretion. All stretched on bones. Inside them—canals, intertwined with nets and thread, soft and fragile. Hot, greasy. It belongs to me. It is me. It causes me to be.



"K A T A R S I S," 1981

INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning man has created myths out of his longing for the lost state of balance, for the prehistoric existence called paradise which was a state without consciousness.

He tried to find in religion the explanation of himself, to compensate his defects by its commandments, to justify the sufferings of life by giving them purpose as does Christianity. In the practice of tantra and yoga, man attempted to gain control over his instincts.

This struggle of man with himself for control over his own nature, a struggle with a lack of internal norms of behavior, is reflected in the whole mythology, and ultimately in the vision of man seeking balance and perfection from the remotest time of the Assyrian poem "Gilgamesh" to the circular shape described by Plato of the first human being, to Balzac's book about Serafit—the only one of Balzac's works not based on reality but on his dreams—or in Goethe's considerations about the Demon as the creator of life in his poem "Faust." While reading about the structure and functioning of the human brain, which is formed of interdependent parts, but originating in different periods of evolution, I discovered how contradictory the factors determining our behavior are, how deeply rooted are the sources of permanent struggle.

To all the most ancient fears of men I add my own.

These can perhaps be glimpsed in my art as a story of the same fears and pains which have accompanied human existence as well as mine.



"QUANTITY - IRREPEATABILITY," 1985

I once observed mosquitoes swarming.

In gray masses.

Host upon host.

Little creatures in a slew of other little creatures.

In incessant motion.

Each preoccupied with its own spoor.

Each different, distinct in details of shape.

A horde emitting a common sound.

Were they mosquitoes or people?

I feel over-awed by quantity where counting no longer makes sense. By irrepeatability within such a quantity.

By creatures of nature gathered in herds, droves, species

in which each individual while subservient to the mass retains some distinguishing features.

A crowd of people or birds, insects or leaves is a mysterious assemblage of variants of certain prototype.

A riddle of nature's abhorrence of exact repetition or inability to produce it. Just as a human hand cannot repeat its own gesture.

I invoke this disturbing law, switching my own immobile herds into that rhythm.



"WAR GAMES," 1989

For a long time I couldn't use wood. I saw it as an entity finished in itself. Some years ago, suddenly, I discovered inside an old trunk its core as if a spine entwined by channels of juices and nerves. I found out the carnality of another trunk with limbs cut off, like amputated.

As a little girl I once caught a rabbit. It breathed. Its ribs and chest moved just like mine. Its eyelids fluttered just like mine. Otherwise it was different which justified killing it for human needs.

There are strange similarities between different creatures of nature; they concern us also. The imagination of nature seems to be limited. As if not having enough freedom, nature uses for building its creatures not only fragments of existing ones but also their expressions.

Fascinated by the corporeality of trunks I decided to bring them into my domain. I started to work on their personality. Doing so, I felt encouraged by strange similarities between us, by a kind of relationship.

I bring out the features which struck me. I draw them out until I see no longer the wood but an object of many meanings; an object which carries similarities unknown to the imagination of nature.



"ABOUT LIFE," 1990

I was destined to live during times which were extraordinary for their various forms of collective hate and collective adulation. As a small girl I even envied those youngsters in brown shirts from the neighboring country who so worshipped their leader and so firmly believed in his ideals. When they marched in to kill us, everything turned to hate, until the killers themselves were defeated and killed.

Then other enthusiastic marchers appeared, worshipping new ideals that would last for ever and another leader, great and good. However, at these parades, carried on high, were huge caricatures of those who were now to be

hated and eradicated. I looked on, frightened, burdened with what was now a sin: descent from an old land-owning family which has just been dispossessed of its estate.

When it was noticed that the beloved leader was a mass-murderer, a succession of lesser lights from the followers of the founding philosophers sprang up to replace him. Parades continued marching to celebrate visions that would bring happiness to all.

With the enthusiasm of youth, I believed. With all my energy and dedication I tried to put into practice this radiant and wonderful ideal. I understood soon enough: the country whose model was imposed on us, deprived us of identity. Hating each other, we simulated fraternity.

The reality that followed was unreal. Thoughts and words diverged. Actions followed an alien liturgy and an alien ritual. Love and hate were enforced.

Finally, the common abhorrence of daily lies and a craving for truth prevailed. Those that were hated were made to yield to new leaders. Totalitarian oppression gave way to liberty.

Within it, now grasping ambitions have already started to hatch. Hand-to-hand fighting has begun, each against each, zealously trying to drag everything toward a private nest.