Discovering the Contemporary

In 1968, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York displayed *F-111* (1964–65) by James Rosenquist (b. 1933) in the company of works by European masters of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries (fig. 1.1). The painting is a monumental expression of U.S. Pop art, a full-scale image of an F-111 military aircraft overlaid with overlapping images drawn from U.S. culture, mixing the innocuous—a girl getting her hair done, cake, spaghetti—with the destructive and horrific—a mushroom cloud and the plane itself. The imposing size of the piece and its ominous juxtapositions were intended by the artist to express the sense of fear he felt in the face of nuclear proliferation. He also created it to serve as a rebuttal to the idea that Pop art was a thing of the past and that contemporary Pop art “had the face of nuclear proliferation. He also created it to serve

Within a few years of Rosenquist’s Metropolitan Museum debut, all of the other institutions of high culture in New York had begun to embrace contemporary art. Every prominent American Pop artist was given a major museum retrospective, despite the fact that their careers were less than a decade old. Paintings such as Roy Lichtenstein’s (1923–97) *Golf Ball* (fig. 1.2), which in 1962 had inspired his dealer, Leo Castelli, to exclaim enthusiastically, “Look at that picture! There is not an idea in it,” were being compared to the work of David and Monticello. Not everyone was pleased. “Pop Art at the Met? Sire, this is no longer the revolution,” stated the critic Sidney Tillim, comparing the event marked a change in the perception of contemporary art. The curators and directors of the Metropolitan Museum pronounced the work a commentary on the omni-presence of the military in American society and hung it on the walls of the Met. In fact, the Met lay in large part in the Pop artist’s style. He disliked Rosenquist’s use of montage, which involved layering independent graphic elements and thus resisting the custom of advertising imagery and disruptive juxtapositions of scale and color in *F-111* can be read as a deliberate rejection of the compositional devices of traditional painting. This style also rebutted the expectation that art should make order out of the world rather than repeat its chaos. Four years later, in 1972, when Rosenquist was given a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the discord and disjunction of his paintings was interpreted as a metaphor for contemporary experience.

In effect, the contemporary was perceived as those experiences, in art and life that were being dislodged from narratives either of progress or of formalism. The Met’s exhibition of *F-111* was being transformed in these years into a means of discovering content. Leo Steinberg described Rauschenberg’s work as “flattened painting,” one of the lasting critical metaphors invented in response to the art of the immediate post-World War II period. The collisions across the surface of Rosenquist’s painting and the collection of materials on Rauschenberg’s surfaces were being viewed as models for a new form of realism, one that captured the relationships between people and things in the world outside the studio. The lesson that formal analysis could lead back into, rather than away from, content, often with very specific social significance, would be central to the creation and reception of late-twentieth-century art.

New Movements and New Metaphors

Artists all over the world shared U.S. Pop artists’ interest in creating new metaphors from the appearances and experiences of everyday life. The international artists’ group Fluxus directed its attention to the artistic potential of the everyday. From the Latin term for “flow,” Fluxus was a loose grouping of progressive international artists who worked in diverse media. “Why does everything I see that’s beautiful like cups and bowls and things in the world outside the studio. The lesson that formal analysis could lead back into, rather than away from, content, often with very specific social significance, would be central to the creation and reception of late-twentieth-century art.

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help threading in a projector—so that the viewer watches an imageless movie made of just the physical film itself. Meanwhile, the Japanese collective Hi Red Center marked off a section of the Ginza financial district of Tokyo and, dressed as surgeons, began the absurd task of sterilizing it. Changing Events ([Campaign to Promote Cleanliness and Order in the Metropolitan Area]) (1964) (fig. 1.4), announced with a sign reading “Be Clean!” in English and “Soji-chu” (“Cleaning Now”) in Japanese, used ordinary, even official-looking actions in a real place to direct viewers’ attention toward larger political events: in particular, the Japanese government’s attempt to brighten its image in advance of the forthcoming summer Olympics.

While artists such as Rosenquist, Paik, and Hi Red Center utilized the products of contemporary society, isolating and examining its component parts, other groups, specifically Minimalist and Process artists, carried out investigations into the processes of art making and explored the properties of new non-traditional art materials. Such artists represented a rather traditional art-historical endeavor. Behind Judd’s review hints at the emotional, even mystical, quality of Judd’s work. The boxes are often optically complex sculptures that convey unpredictable effects through their knowable form. Robert Morris’s (b. 1931) work resists this visual pleasure and transcendental potential in favor of a more physical brand of Minimalism. Morris’s work of the mid-1960s is characterized by boxes that are as simple as Judd’s, but they are made of wood and painted gray. The simplicity of the work and its lack of surface interest forces the viewer to pay less attention to the object itself and more to the relationship between it, the viewer, and the context—usually a gallery, sometimes a stage. Morris’s sculptures...
were closely related to his interest in dance, particularly the choreography of Anna Halprin and Merce Cunningham, who were both interested in generating dance from ordinary movements. Installations such as that at the Green Gallery in 1964 (Fig. 1.6) produce situations in which the viewer is made aware of his or her physical presence in the environment. Morris's objects exert themselves in the room, forcing the visitor to navigate through, under, and around the objects and any other people in the space. Morris explained his interests, noting that the “better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer’s field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic.” This is a Minimalism to be experienced, not merely observed.

Neo-Concrete Art

The Minimalists' interest in geometric compositions and the occupation of real space was shared by a variety of artists. Brazilian Neo-Concrete artists, of whom Lygia Clark (1920–88) and Hélio Oiticica (1937–80) were chief representatives, offer a particularly dynamic view of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic. This is a Minimalism to be experienced, not merely observed.

**Concrete Artists**

Concrete artists studied the relationships between materials, form (often but not exclusively geometric shapes), and the environment. For Clark, geometry was a means toward the creation of spaces and incidents that inspired free movement and participation. Her early works, called Counter Reliefs and dating to the late 1950s, are quite modest: simple compositions built of panels of black, geometric shapes hinging flat on the wall but forested so they extend, like Judd's “specific objects” a few years later, into the space of the viewer. From the Counter Reliefs, Clark and soon after Oiticica pushed geometric forms into the rooms and even the streets, assembling boxes and hinged assemblages (Fig. 1.7) that are intended to be handled by the viewer, who in so doing activates the object and the space around it.

In 1967, Oiticica created *Tropicalia* (Fig. 1.8) in Rio de Janeiro (and in 1969 created similar installations in London), in which viewers were invited into the art rather than asked to manipulate it with their hands as Clark had done. His inspiration was the spaces of the favelas, the slums of Brazil, which exemplified the integration of aesthetic form and social content. In the gallery, Oiticica constructed a series of small rooms, boxes opening up into each other and occasional interstitial spaces, some with floors of sand or straw, and one set up like a small pond. The walls were adorned, and in places constructed, using brightly colored and patterned fabrics. Tropical plants and birds populated the installation. The different spaces, all of which were open to the visitor, were inspired by different features of the favelas. Exhibition-goers were invited to take off their shoes and wade in the water, walk across the sand, and lie in the straw. There were books to read and music to hear. In *Tropicalia*, the NeoConcrete desire to “begin with geometry” and end with “an organic space” was realized by adopting details from the real spaces of Brazilian daily life and culture.

**Process Art**

In his 1968 essay “Anti-Form,” Morris argued that the problem with Minimalism was that, although it had pointed to the need to interrogate the assumptions that inform artistic production and reception, and compelled artists to focus directly on the specific properties of the object, much Minimalist art ended up indifferent to its own material specificity. Morris's own blocks, for instance, could have been made of anything—there was nothing in the way he presented or even shaped his Green Gallery exhibition that responded directly to the materials with which he had chosen to work. The piece hanging from the ceiling even seemed to defy its own materiality. Much had been learned about the relationships with and beyond the work, but what about the object itself? In response, Morris and others began to look closely at their materials to provide both the form and content of the work, letting the process of making rather than the finished object take priority. Sculptor Lynda Benglis (b. 1941) described how these artists created what would be termed Process art: “When I learned what the material could do, then I could control it, allowing it to do so much within the parameters that were set up. So the material could and would dictate its own form, in essence.”
For *Quartered Meteor* (1969) (fig. 1.9), Benglis poured pigmented polyurethane foam into the corner of a room. The amorphous fluidity of the foam hardened into an object with both organic shape and a hard edge as it dried in mid-cascade. Benglis then cast the form in lead for the work we see here. Morris cut, hung, and dropped pieces of felt to create works such as *Untitled* (1967) (fig. 1.10), in which gravity and the qualities of the fabric determined the composition. Richard Serra (b. 1939) created a text piece (1962–68) consisting of a handwritten list of verbs that might serve as instructions for Process art: “To roll/ to crease/ to fold/ … to crumple/ to shave/ to tear/ to chip/ to split/ to cut/ to sever/ …”13 The shock of Serra’s sculpture lay in his single-minded application of such actions to materials and his commitment to letting the process define the product. Splitting, cutting, suspending, or forcing lead, steel, rubber, and timber resulted in evocative, often poetic, even frightening results, such as his sculptures in which massive sheets of metal are supported without fixings by gravity alone (fig. 1.11). By deeply experimenting with a wide variety of materials, often foreign to the art museum, Process artists created work that could not be readily integrated into existing modes of thinking about and displaying art.

Alternative Logics: Spiral Jetty and Conceptual Art

One of the most radical Process art proposals was made by Robert Smithson during the creation of *Spiral Jetty* (1970) (fig. 1.12), an enormous spiral constructed in Great Salt Lake, Utah, from rock, earth, and salt crystals. As the artist walked toward the still red water of the lake, he said that the stability of the deserted mining operations that flanked the water and the hot desert that surrounded everything seemed to give way to a spinning movement that inspired the winding form of the spiral that he eventually realized there. “No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence … It was as if the mainland oscillated with waves and pulsations, and the lake remained rock still.”14 In Smithson’s film documenting the project, geological and historical time intersect in the basements of natural-history museums, maps blowing across the desert, and toy dinosaurs marching through dioramas of the Paleolithic era. Footage of massive earth-moving vehicles is spliced with scenes showing crystal growth, sunspots, and Smithson’s editing table. The loss of dialectical distance between past and present, history and actuality, enacted by *Spiral Jetty* would become an increasingly important theme throughout the 1970s.

In 1972, two years after *Spiral Jetty* was completed, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925–95) and psychotherapist Pierre-Félix Guattari (1930–92) published *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, the most far-reaching statement of the anti-dialectical trend. Deleuze and Guattari were interested in erotic desire and the unconscious as creative forces. They saw the key to understanding the psyche not...
Chapter 1  Discovering the Contemporary

New Movements and New Metaphors

Photographs and drawings (131 (20.3 cm) square. Framed and hung on the wall. In the end, LeWitt depicted a repeated performance in which press and guests were invited to discuss politics with them as they lay in bed in their hotel room.

Relinquishing history and logic, however, did not always require that one lose oneself in the desert or the bedroom. As Smithson was moving earth in Utah, Sol LeWitt (1938–2007) was composing texts on Conceptual art that initiated a new form of secular mysticism. In his 1969 writing “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” he pronounced: “Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.” That leap depended on following a consistent “rational” choice through to its completion.

LeWitt’s conceptual processes, like those of Judd, are generally quite simple. The point of the object is to communicate the operations that produced it. Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes (1974) is an example (fig. 1.14). The title provides a description of the idea that has generated the work. The minimum requirement for a visual description of an open cube is three lines, one each along the axes of height, width, and depth. As the title does not specify how the variations are to be presented, LeWitt produced two- and three-dimensional renderings. On the floor are sculptures of every possible combination, from the three three-piece models to the single eleven-piece one. Images of the open cubes are framed and hung on the wall. In the end, LeWitt depicted the concept in three ways, through words, objects, and images, thus diagramming both the geometrical concept and the threefold manner in which artists typically communicate their ideas.

LeWitt’s art would always include a physical component, but this was not the case for every Conceptualist. Many utilized text to suggest an idea that would become the work of art as the viewer contemplated the words. Robert Barry’s (b. 1936) All the Things I Know But Am Not Now Thinking (1969), consisting of the title written across a white canvas, or Yoko Ono’s Breath Piece (1966), for which the artist circulated a card among spectators with the word “Breathe” written on it, were such works, initiated by text and completed by the viewer’s mind and body.

On the Social Meaning of Form

At Cornell University in 1970, the artist, writer, and curator Willoughby Sharp (1936–2008) presented an exhibition titled “Earth Art” that celebrated the examination and manipulation of non-organic, non-art forms of organic matter. Sharp listed the materials used in alphabetical order, from “air, alcohol, ashes,” through “felt, fire, flares,” all the way to “twigs, tree, water and was.” Sharp presented the actions to which the materials had been subjected in a similarly ordered list, beginning with “bent, broken, curled” and ending with “spread and sprinkled.”

While clearly drawing on Morris’s notion of “Anti-Form” and the Abstract Expressionist drip paintings of Jackson Pollock (1912–56), he suggested that his show had wider implications. Audiences were to understand that art was engaged with the outside world; the exhibition consequently included pieces that could be found in the woods and rivers around the Cornell campus.

The artist and critic Allan Kaprow (1927–2006), who created performances that drew both on the ritualistic process of Abstract Expressionism, as exemplified by Pollock, and on the materials and spaces of the real world, shared Sharp’s expansive vision. Happenings, the name Kaprow gave to his performances, were engaged in activities ranging from rearranging furniture in Push Pull (1965) and piling-up tires for Yard (1964), to more complex scenarios including building towers and bonfires, and spreading strawberry jam on a Volkswagen Beetle and licking it off in Houseful (1964). As he explained in his landmark essay “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” (1958), artists had learned that if they wanted to evoke sensations from the real world, they need not imitate them in paint. If the artist wants to suggest something hot or sweet, a bonfire and jam are more suitable materials. Kaprow went as far as asserting that the only significant art was that which rejected the geometric, sanctioned spaces of the gallery. He claimed that prepostero anti-aesthetic work, such as Process art, by situating itself in galleries and museums, actually reinforced conventional Western views of art, including the “conventional division of the stable versus the unstable, the closed versus the open, the regular versus the organic, the ideal versus the real and so on.” For example, we may find interest in dropped felt, but it looks interestingly chaotic only in relation to the square room in which it is installed. Worse than that, its value depends on the importance assigned to it by the owners of that room. The concern with exploding conventional binaries such as order/chaos became more urgent as artists, especially feminist artists, moved away from formal issues to address social ones.

In a 1970 article on an exhibition of Minimalist, Process, Conceptual, and Earth art called “Spaces” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the artist and critic Gregory Battcock (1937–80) extended the line of critique presented by Kaprow, proposing that it was one’s moral responsibility to examine the context of contemporary art when interpreting its content. “One characteristic of modern man and of his art is his new awareness of the regressive function of boundar-"es,” he announced. “There are sexual boundaries, familial, administrative, governmental, geographical, and social boundaries and they all diminish man’s desire for freedom and subsequently reduce the chances for authentic social change.” Battcock identified certain forces that influenced the way work was shown and viewed in “Spaces,” including the corporations that had funded the exhibition and individual works within it: General Electric, Kimberly-Clark, RCA, and Sylvania to name a few. These “[i]ndustrial and research giants, electronic and data-oriented companies,” wrote Battcock, “encouraged … artists to incorporate their discoveries into art works. Instead of contributing to the church, 1.13 John Lennon and Yoko Ono, “War Is Over! If You Want It,” 1969. Billboard, New York. Photo by Yoko Ono © Yoko Ono.

1.14 Sol LeWitt, Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes, 1974. Wood sculptures with white paint (122 pieces), each piece 8’ (20.3 cm) square, framed photographs and drawings (131 pieces), each piece 26 x 14” (66 x 35.6 cm), each 12 x 12 x 216” (30.5 x 304.8 x 548.6 cm). Courtesy the Saatchi Gallery.
they contributed to artists, and it all had the same effect. The corporate conscience was appealed.20 His charge was not unlike that MoMA provided industry with public-relations opportunities, but that certain artists were also masking the nature of their corporate production. In contrast to the convictions expressed by Process artists, the properties of the materials and inventions that are donated by the companies are not exploited for their unique and peculiar effects. Rather these properties are sublimated.21 To illustrate this point, Battcock cited Robert Morris’s use of trees provided by Kimberly-Clark which suggested that forest care, rather than paper-making, was the company’s business. He further noted that one (unnamed) artist had solicited one of the Defense Department’s largest suppliers for his materials, thus presenting the public with arms dealers in the guise of art suppliers. Such art concealed the social significance of its materials and inventions that are donated by the companies.22

Joseph Beuys
One of the loudest voices demanding that artists respond to the entirety of human experience rather than to exclusively aesthetic questions was Joseph Beuys (1921–85), who left Fluxus in 1965 because, as he put it, “they held a mirror up to people without indicating how to change things.”23 Artists were obliged to participate, not simply to observe, he argued. His art was rooted in his experiences as a German air-force pilot in World War II and the personal crisis that he had subsequently undergone. In 1944, according to his account, his airplane was shot down over the Crimea and he was left stranded in the snow. Discovered barely alive by a group of local people called Tatars, he was kept warm with felt blankets (fig. 1.15), in which he set fire to a rectangular plot of jasmine flowers outside the University Art Museum, Berkeley, California. To get the garden to burn he used agent orange, a defoliant then in daily use in the Vietnam War (1959–75). In this case, Fox was able to invest what resembled a piece of Minimalist and Earth art with poignant political content. Beuys himself liked to watch fires. It made a beautiful roaring sound. But at a certain point people realized what was going on—the landscape was being violated. Suddenly everyone was quiet. One woman cried for twenty minutes.24

Beuys’s theory of art depended, he famously announced, “on the fact that every human being is an artist,”25 a claim that celebrated the potential for creativity in all human beings. He explained that his audience must be intellectually and politically active, since art produced through thoughtful action required an equally engaged response from its recipients. Although Beuys is best known for his use of fat and felt, the materials for which he advocated most strongly were actually “Thinking Forms” and “Spoken Forms,” which produce “Social Structure.”26 By “sculpting” with thought, speech, and human relationships, artists could reshape society and history. This formulation suggested a radical extension of the artist’s role into a combination of activist, teacher, sculptor, painter, performer, and politician. One manifestation of Beuys’s expanded concept of art was the Organization for Direct Democracy, which he founded in Düsseldorf in 1970. This group agitated Europe with a single electorate. In place of representative legislatures and political parties, the organization promoted direct democracy as a means of governance that treated everyone as fully active social beings. After the crises of fascism and the hubris of contemporary democracies, the Organization for Direct Democracy insisted that citizens be able to represent themselves in the political arena. The Organization also offered free education, to provide an informed and active electorate.

Beuys’s political activities were integral to his artistic production, providing a context in which the viewer was accorded agency and creative power, serving as a collaborator with the artist to generate significance for his sculptures, to turn the fragmentary objects he created into tools for the viewer.27 Beuys’s theory of art depended, he famously announced, “on the fact that every human being is an artist,”28 a claim that celebrated the potential for creativity in all human beings. He explained that his audience must be intellectually and politically active, since art produced through thoughtful action required an equally engaged response from its recipients. Although Beuys is best known for his use of fat and felt, the materials for which he advocated most strongly were actually “Thinking Forms” and “Spoken Forms,” which produce “Social Structure.”29 By “sculpting” with thought, speech, and human relationships, artists could reshape society and history. This formulation suggested a radical extension of the artist’s role into a combination of activist, teacher, sculptor, painter, performer, and politician. One manifestation of Beuys’s expanded concept of art was the Organization for Direct Democracy, which he founded in Düsseldorf in 1970. This group agitated Europe with a single electorate. In place of representative legislatures and political parties, the organization promoted direct democracy as a means of governance that treated everyone as fully active social beings. After the crises of fascism and the hubris of contemporary democracies, the Organization for Direct Democracy insisted that citizens be able to represent themselves in the political arena. The Organization also offered free education, to provide an informed and active electorate.

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By the 1970s, Beuys had created an identity for himself that was equal parts shaman (mystical healer), politician, and art professor. His mission was to develop forms of engagement with the world rather than to add more things to it. His work was intended to lead viewers from ideas to actions, any “art objects” as such were no more than by-products: “I am not a teacher who tells his students only to think. I say: Act, do something. I ask for a result. It may take different forms.”26 In Beuys’s case, these included evocative non-art objects and alchemical combinations of fat and felt, sticks, stuffed animals, wires, toys, cars, bicycles, chalkboards, and himself, dressed almost invariably in a hunting vest and felt hat. As in Process art and Arte Povera (the Italian movement based in Turin that made use of “poor” materials from nature and industry, as opposed to traditional fine-art ones), these materials, which he selected on the basis of their relative determinacy (including iron, tin, and wood) or indeterminacy (fat, honey, gelatin, watercolor, and blood), communicated first through their physical properties. Beuys’s materials quite often degrade before the viewer’s eyes, and evoke complex associations with organic and geometric forms, ideas of creation and decomposition, and biographical and biological elements. Beuys’s work, from his suits and stacks of felt (fig. 1.16) to his performances with live and dead animals, pointed to a dimension beyond rational materialism.
Leon Golub

Beuys’s Organization for Direct Democracy shared its distrust of representation with much art of the 1960s, from Minimalism to Process. The clearly political and social nature of Beuys’s Organization is useful for calling attention to the political connotations of this suspicion. Not everyone, however, had given up on representation. U.S. painter Leon Golub (1922–2004) embraced representational painting as a means, he said, to “get at the real.” In *Vuonna II* (1972) (fig. 1.17), he cut away parts of the painting, inviting real space into the carefully rendered images of contemporary warfare. Nailed to the wall like a tarpaulin, the image of bodies in violent confrontation appears damaged by gashes that the eye falls into, moving through the skin of the canvas as though each cut were a wound or a fissure between the realms of art and life. Golub’s work made reference to existing figurative traditions and mass-media imagery, including photographs from newspapers and popular military magazines such as *Soldier of Fortune*. Bodies, often askewishly posed and imperfectly formed, act out scenes of military aggression and almost inhuman malaise. Soldiers pause between killing and smoking to look out at the viewer. Their expressions, suggesting a range of emotions from self-satisfaction to sadistic pleasure, seem to seek out the camera’s attention. As such, Golub insists that viewers consider their own act of observation as well as the acts they observe.

Some of the most striking works of the 1970s were texts and images presented in art magazines, particularly *Artforum* and *Art in America*. In the U.S., Sol LeWitt’s “Sentences on Contemporary Art” discussed above was published in the British journal *The Fox* as well as the U.S. *Artforum*. The German periodical *Interfuscation* will be discussed in Chapter 3 for providing a similar platform for German conceptualism. Golub took advantage of this medium, writing essays addressing the relationship between art and society, and criticizing the dissociation from real-world concerns that had generally defined avant-garde art throughout the twentieth century. Golub argued that claims for the freedom of art were in fact a means to neutralize its revolutionary potential. He also argued, like Rattock, that disengaging one’s art from society through claims to artistic freedom allowed the human and ecological costs of capitalism to remain hidden. Giving expression to his anger with the regimes that controlled both current political events and art history, Golub showed how art could resist by representing the human cost of political choices and highlighting its own role in the mechanisms of political control.

### Institutional Critique

“Institutional critique” is the name given to art designed to examine the conditions of its own existence, from the museums that show it to the groups of people that value it. One of the most suggestive examples of such art appeared in Sharp’s “Earth Art” exhibition at Cornell University. This was a pile of dirt deposited by the German artist Hans Haacke (b. 1936) in the center of one of the galleries. The mound, titled *Grass Grows* (1969), was seeded and watered, and by the end of the exhibition had become a small grassy hill—an indoor landscape. To see the work through to its completion, Haacke relied on what he called the “systems” that connected his materials to their environment. The museum, with its staff of curators, educators, administrators, and custodians, constituted the system that supported art. However, the particular requirements of *Grass Grows*—water, light, consistent temperature, and fresh air—collided with those of display and security that museums are generally designed to meet. As curators became gardeners, the contrast between cultural and natural systems became apparent. Soon after *Grass Grows*, Haacke shifted his attention away from issues of nature and culture to investigate increasingly complex social systems.

Haacke’s most notorious investigation, *Shapolsky et al., Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1972* (fig. 1.18), caused his scheduled 1971 Guggenheim Museum exhibition to be canceled. The piece included publicly available information about poorly maintained apartment buildings owned by Harry J. Shapolsky and his associates. When housed in their original archives, the photographs and records Haacke assembled were seen only by the few lawyers who might look through them in the course of their work. Presented on the wall of the museum, however, they became public displays of economic injustice. As one writer explained, “At a gut level Haacke is asking this question: is there really any difference between the power of money to control the direction of art and the power of money to keep rotten slums in existence?”

The photographs and records Haacke assembled were seen by an even wider audience. In the spring of 1972, Haacke’s investigation was exhibited at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Haacke upset the Guggenheim, which suddenly found itself a flashpoint for the real-world social politics of real-estate speculation and tenants’ rights in New York City. As Haacke said of the role of an artist whose practice is informed by politics: “One’s responsibilities increase; however, this also gives the satisfaction of being taken as a bit more than a court-jester, with the danger of not being forgiven.”

Haacke was not alone in his concern with creating politically engaged art. For a 1974 show at the Claire Copley...
placed alternating 3/4-inch-wide bands of white and another color in, out of, and between spaces where art was displayed, including gallery walls and windows, art magazines, and out in the streets. Art objects, Buren argued, take their place in the museum as signs of value based on economic, political, and social factors as well as aesthetic and mystical considerations. By eliminating the individuality of the image, giving the viewer no form or content within the work to contemplate, attention is shifted to the context around it instead, those external features that define certain objects as art.

In works such as *Photo-souvenir: Within and Beyond the Frame* (fig. 1.19), Buren’s stripes drew attention to non-artistic sources of value, much as Piper’s “meta-art” required. This installation inside, on, and outside the Weber Gallery in New York was set up in 1973 and then re-created for the gallery in a new location in 1978 as *Change of Scenery*, thus pulling the viewer’s eye and mind not only through the art gallery and out into the street but also through time. Like Haacke, Buren had trouble with the Guggenheim Museum in 1971, when he suspended a banner of stripes down the center of the museum. Waving gaily in Frank Lloyd Wright’s rotunda, Buren’s work implicate the space of the building in processes of cultural politics, connecting the museum to other contexts to which Buren’s stripes had previously drawn attention, to galleries that sell art and the neighborhoods that surround them. Buren’s work was removed by the museum authorities after just a day on the premise that it blocked views of other works—a somewhat perplexing argument considering that the sightlines are already obstructed by the spiraling architecture of the museum.

In the 1970s, voices drawing attention to the connections between art and politics were becoming increasingly forceful. In 1971, protesters marched in front of MoMA in New York to urge Picasso to remove his painting Guernica from the city. The artist had entrusted his 1937 memorial to the victims of fascism in Spain to the United States for safekeeping until a republican government was re-established in Spain and the painting could be returned, which it was in 1981. However, the protesters argued that the American bombing of civilians during the war in Vietnam had rendered prominent U.S. artists during the war in Vietnam had rendered prominent U.S. republicans government was re-established in Spain and the painting could be returned, which it was in 1981. However, the protesters argued that the American bombing of civilians during the war in Vietnam had rendered prominent U.S. institutions such as MoMA inappropriate caretakers for a painting expressing the artist’s anger at similar actions by the Spanish fascists.

Institutional critique as practiced by Haacke, Buren, and others would be developed into a distinct genre in the subsequent decades. Artists discussed in later chapters including Group Material, Fred Wilson, Krzyzof Wodiczko, Santiago Sierra, and Alexander Bealer have created object-, image-, and text-based installations of a critical analysis to that even a Minimalist box communicated its meaning within a socially defined discourse, which ultimately had more influence on the nature of the art experience than properties such as color or form. Buren’s work consisted exclusively of selectively

### African-American Critiques

In the U.S., many African-American artists felt with particular urgency the need for engagement with daily life on the streets as well as artistic experimentation in the studio. By the late 1960s, artists such as Romare Bearden (1911–88) and Benny Andrews (1939–2006) in New York had already created a substantial body of work exploring intersections of abstraction and figuration in the context of racially focused subject matter (fig. 1.20). Few venues existed for them to show their work, however, and there was a clear divide between black and white art worlds. Mobilized by the disparity not only between black and white artists, but between the levels of racial consciousness, a course occurring every day in the streets and newspapers and the virtual silence on the same subject in museums, artists of color, with Andrews in a leading position, formed the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) in 1969 in direct response to the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition “Harlem on My Mind.” Presented as a commemoration of the New York borough and its celebrated arts scene,
it consisted exclusively of photographs of the neighborhood and showed no interest in Harlem artists themselves. Many painters and sculptors who had been working in Harlem since the 1920s and 1930s lived just a short walk from the museum, but were not included in the show. The BECC argued that, since the museum had no experts on black art on its staff and had failed to enlist any such specialists to help curate the exhibition, the only thing “Harlem on My Mind” revealed was institutionalized racism and a deep desire to keep the existing Met power structure intact. Bearden’s group Spiral took a less confrontational stance, but also criticized the exhibition, the only thing “Harlem on My Mind” would result.

When the “Survey of Black Art” opened in 1971, however, there was no guest curator and limited participation by the African-American arts community. Major figures, including painter Sam Gilliam (b. 1933) and sculptor Melvin Edwards (b. 1939), publicly boycotted the show on the grounds that it “negate[d] a coherent viewing and analysis of the works of African American artists.”34 Although the show’s themes selected subject matter that it would address collectively (the first such theme was the black family) and outlined aesthetic parameters for its output, such as the use of figurative composition, the inclusion of text, and the production of low-price prints that could be made available to a wide audience.

In the process of inventing appropriate means to match its message, the group’s message changed. It remained committed to a “shared collective concept” and a “black aesthetic,” but soon these concerns led members to look beyond their original local, distinctly U.S., setting.37 In 1969, COBRA thus became AfriCOBRA, the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists. With this new name came a new audience, defined not by where it lived but by its African heritage. Success was still judged on its ability to convey “to its viewer the challenges facing the black community at home in Chicago and nationally.”38 Those conditions were clearly expressed in the assertion that “all Black people, regardless of their land base, have the same problems, regardless of their land base, have the same problems, the control of their land and economics by Europeans or Euro-Americans.”39 The combined themes of race, class, and power produced imagery replete with the signs of the Black Power movement, such as raised, clenched fists, paraphernalia such as military garb, afros, portraits of Malcolm X, and revolutionary texts.
In Wadsworth Jarrell’s _Revolutionary_ (1971) (fig. 1.22), a portrait of African-American activist Angela Davis, the subject’s body, clothing, and the space around her vibrate with words: “BLACK,” “BEAUTIFUL,” “REVOLUTION,” “RESIST,” and long lines of “B”s and “R”s. Her loose-fitting blouse with facsimile ammunition belt projecting off the fabric is covered with the words: “I have given my life to...” In Wadsworth Jarrell’s _Revolutionary_ Suit, which integrated pan-African and paramilitary references in a skirt-suit design with real bullets affixed to the top. In the painting the fabric is covered with the words: “I have given my life to...” In 1972, she was tried and acquitted. Wadsworth Jarrell’s use of the hero’s words to represent her body in _Revolutionary_ reflected a political reality as well as a formal artistic solution. The impact of such politically volatile content was further amplified in _Revolutionary_ by Jarrell’s explosive use of “Cooledge Color” and “Shine,” terms employed in AfriCOBRA texts to discuss the aesthetic qualities of their art. Jeff Donaldson defined “Shine” as “a major quality, a major quality. We want the things to shine, to have the rich luster of a just-washed fro, of spit shined shoes, of de-ashened elbows and knees and noses.” The Shine who escaped the Titanic, the figure of the hero’s words to represent her body in _Revolutionary_ marks the spot where the real and the un-real, the objective and the non-objective, the plus and the minus meet. A point exactly between absolute abstractions and absolute naturalism. As in Photorealist work of the period, abstraction was enlisted as a means to produce naturalism. Chuck Close (b. 1940), the best-known Photorealist, began painting by taking a photograph, plotting a grid across it and a corresponding one across his canvas, then transcribing the image by copying it square by square. In 1969, his paintings closely resembled photographs; in the 1970s, the process itself became his subject matter as much as the actual appearance of his sitters. Though AfriCOBRA artists were less methodical, they also conceived of the canvas as a field of abstractions that coalesced to form clear images. As mentioned above, several members of AfriCOBRA marked a further contest between abstraction and representation by including text, often imitating the cadence of spoken words. In a painting such as _Revolutionary_, for instance, forms combine to produce images at the very point where letters and words join to deliver a message about the world.  

**Emory Douglas and the Black Panther Party**

Across the country, in Oakland, California, institutional critique of a very different sort could be found in the work of Emory Douglas, creator of the mediasavvy style and iconography of the Black Panther Party. Douglas’s training was in commercial art at City College, San Francisco, in the late 1960s. While using his talents to promote the City College Black Students’ Association, he met Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, who were then developing the Black Panther platform and strategy. Named minister of culture for the party, Douglas created a public image for the Panthers that would be imitated by liberation movements all over the world. The pages of the Black Panther newspaper provided a gallery of what Douglas called “revolutionary art,” that “enlightens the party to continue its vigorous attack on the enemy, as well as educate the masses of black people.” Addressing a community that Newton described as highly visual, Douglas integrated graphic design, portraiture, caricature, text, and photography to demonstrate “the Correct Handling of the Revolution.” Images in the newspaper revealed how the conditions of daily life demanded social upheaval and how black men, women, and children experienced the moral and physical strength to carry it out. By the early 1970s, the newspaper had a circulation of over 100,000 copies. Douglas designed the format of the newspaper to maximize its visual impact, including detachable posters that showed black Americans suffering garbage-filled streets and police brutality; and that could be used to spread the Black Panther message. In an image from April 1971 (fig. 1.23), this bulb-tipped photograph of a seventeen-year-old boy who was shot by Oakland police gives evidence of the need for community control of the police. By the mid-1970s, Douglas had introduced a more sensitive visual style which used line drawings that were nuanced in detail and soft in effect. Like his earlier collage aesthetic, the drawings demonstrate another face of revolutionary representation and the heterogeneity of both political art and black identity.
Feminist Statements

In her 1971 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” the art historian Linda Nochlin (b. 1931) concluded that the idea of “greatness” depended on a set of social practices that by definition excluded women. The institutions that conferred value on a work of art or enabled a young artist to gain skills were all structured in such a way as to make it difficult for women to succeed. Educational opportunities, the customs of workshops and studios, not to mention the venues for patronage, exhibition, and sales, were all shaped to suit men. The few women who did “make it” were exceptions whose success often relied on help from a male guide. The route to change, Nochlin suggested, was not to be more attentive to women within the existing system, but be corralled to work in line with, rather than against, prevailing power structures. Althusser interpreted power in this new working practice, Spero—like Leon Golub, to submission, while the “agents of exploitation and repression” learned mastery.46 In Althusser’s view, individuals do not structuralist thinker was the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose analysis of kinship relations led to his articulation of structures of familial and social relations that were seemingly repeated in communities across the spectrum of contemporary and historical humanity. By the 1960s, however, faith in the existence of such universal structures and in our ability to correctly discern and define them had faltered—hence the turn to Poststructuralist analyses. Drawing on their experience of the radicalism of the 1960s as well as on political theory, European historians and philosophers such as Foucault and Althusser examined the role of power in history. Foucault believed that categories organizing knowledge, from criminal codes to the methods and objects of historical study, functioned to maintain existing power relations; artistic greatness was one such category. By identifying certain practices—technical virtuosity, for instance—as the measure of artistic success, artists could be corralled to work in line with, rather than against, prevailing power structures. Althusser interpreted power in Western society through his theory of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), showing how the assumptions one made about society were largely ideological products reflecting the way society was organized. Social norms are thus not col- lective wisdom but ideological devices that enforce “subjugation to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its practice.” Whether one learned to be docile, as did most girls, or active, as did most boys, depended on one’s position in society. In addition, corresponding to feminist insights, Althusser’s analysis was explicitly Marxist. The labor force was taught to

Concern about gender difference in the production, reception, and definition of art can be seen in work made at various times and in different places: after World War II, women artists reflected postwar movements including Fluxus, Actionism, and Gutai with gender consciousness. In some cases the feminist politics were explicit. For example, in 1969, VALIE EXPORT (b. 1940), an artist associated with Austrian Actionism, whose participants experimented with ritualistic performances, created Genitalk Panze. For this aggressively confrontational piece, the artist forced viewers to consider the discrepancy between the real and represented worlds of sexuality by entering a cinema wearing crotchless pants and standing directly in front of the seated audience. Photographs taken later and titled Aktionshose: Genitalsex (Action Pants: Genital Panic) showed the artist wielding a machine gun. The gun makes explicit the connection, asserted by EXPORT’s performance, between issues of representation and issues of power. However, contrary to rumors that have grown up since, EXPORT denies having this weapon with her on the occasion of the original performance. Other works, such as Yoko Ono’s performance Cut Piece (1964) (fig. 1.24) or film Fly (1970) (fig. 1.25), demonstrate a more implicit feminist politics through their embrace of the Fluxus interest in simple acts: in this case, cutting clothes and watch- ing a fly. As the viewer realizes that the object on which these acts are being performed is a woman’s body, revealed slowly as her clothes are cut away or as the fly and the camera traverse the contours of her body, the content becomes more pointed and political. Throughout the 1970s, feminists would focus on the interplay between the social and the individual, and the represented and the real, to great effect. 

The Role of Theory

By the 1970s, political and social criticism had become as much a part of an artist’s practice as painting or sculpting. This expansion of the artist’s purview took place initially in the context of the debates over Minimalism and Process art in texts such as Morris’s “Anti-Form,” but was increasingly adopted by artists concerned with clarifying the political terrain that they considered relevant to an understanding of their work. Turning to French Poststruc- turalist theorists such as historians Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser, linguists Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, as well as different elements of feminist and socialist theory, artists and critics began a process of redefining artistic production as a significant strand of intel- lectual and political history. As a theory of culture and meaning, the earlier Structuralism had proposed that there were patterns within human societies and psyches that could be isolated and shown to repeat across history. The search for and creation of such unifying structures typified twentieth-century intel- lectual pursuits across the disciplines. The foremost
involved in—women’s issues. I wanted to investigate the more palpable realities of torture and pain.” After several years of research and production, Spero completed two series of works, Torture of Women (1974) and Notes in Time on Women (1979). For Torture of Women, she used blocks of text, drawing horrific abductions, tortures, and murders of women that she had culled from a variety of public and personal sources. Spero then hand-printed the narratives using a variety of typefaces, generating a formally inventive combination of highly legible and emotionally and morally excruciating content. In Notes in Time on Women (Fig. 1.26), Spero used imagery from a range of historical periods and cultures to expose past and present violence against women. She juxtaposed documentation of assaults on women with images of Greek and Aztec goddesses, fashion models, and cultures to expose past and present violence against women.

Spero’s desire to create a visual language for women’s experience of and resistance to societal oppression was shared by and explored in the work of a number of intellectuals and activists. The French literary critic and philosopher Hélène Cixous’s account of “women’s writing” in her 1975 manifesto “The Laugh of the Medusa” is a key text for intellectuals and activists.

Cixous explained that a woman’s manifesto “The Laugh of the Medusa” is a key text for intellectuals and activists. The French literary critic and philosopher shared by and explored in the work of a number of intellectuals and activists. The French literary critic and philosopher Cixous explained that a woman’s experience of and resistance to societal oppression was presented in a rhythm that fluctuates from athletic nudes. Words and bodies, letters, lines, and colors collide and caress each other in a rhythm that fluctuates from graceful to damaged.

Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.” Cixous’s writing, like Spero’s art, was based on women’s experiences to generate the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history.” Women’s textual insurgency required, Cixous argued, a new relationship to the body one that resisted translating sensuality into the limiting structures of existing language. She implored women: “Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.” Cixous’s writing, like Spero’s art, was based on women’s experiences to generate the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history.” Women’s textual insurgency required, Cixous argued, a new relationship to the body one that resisted translating sensuality into the limiting structures of existing language. She implored women: “Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.” The feminist Art Program

By the mid-1970s, U.S. feminist artists could be divided into two groups loosely based on their attitudes toward three issues: belief in a shared female artistic practice; relations with the existing art world; and the balance between social critique and personal expression. Opinion tended to divide along regional lines, with feminists on the West Coast advancing a distinctive female style, a separatist approach to the art world, and a personally expressive art, while their East Coast counterparts by and large argued the reverse. One major source of this dichotomy was the early and lasting success of the Feminist Art Program (FAP), begun in 1970 by Judy Chicago (b. 1939) at California State University Fresno, and then developed by Chicago and Miriam Schapiro (b. 1923) at the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, beginning in 1972. The FAP was a response to its founders’ (and many other women’s) experience of sexism in the art world. Women were making art in basements and bedrooms after coming home from work, cooking meals, and caring for husbands and children. Art schools, then as now, were full of female students, but galleries and museums showed almost no women’s art. The FAP’s mission was “to help women restructure their personalities to be more consistent with their desires to be artists and to help them build their art-making out of their experiences as women.” The concept of training women artists to value their experience and to base communities and artistic identities upon it contrasted with the highly individualistic and competitive approach of contemporary art schools. The FAP encompassed consciousness-raising sessions, performances, discussions, and opportunities to practice painting, sculpture, film, weaving, crafts, collage, assemblage, and installation. It developed a resource center containing a catalogue of images and projects initiated by women artists across the U.S. (Donaldson had set up a similar archive of African-American arts in Chicago.) To some—Judy Chicago in particular—the images in the FAP database revealed a female aesthetic to match the circumstances of female artists.

The most influential FAP production was Womanhouse: Nurturant Kitchen (1971–72), a Hollywood mansion converted into a stage, installation, workshop, and community space. Womanhouse was a showcase for the alternative processes and products created by self-identified “women artists,” and the rooms were turned into materialized fantasies and fantastic metamorphoses of their realities. In Womanhouse: Nurturant Kitchen of 1972 (Fig. 1.27), an installation designed for the house by FAP participants Vicki Hodgetts, Robin Weltsch, and Susan Frazier, the walls, ceilings, windows, and appliances glowed with warmth, enveloping shades of pink, while eggs appeared to have migrated from the stove top directly to the ceiling, where Hodgetts had sculpsted dozens of them hovering over the visitors. As the eggs reached the edge of the ceiling and headed down the walls, they turned into breasts, carrying the sensuality many in the group associated with the kitchen, but also the sense of exposure and danger. Though the piece, subtitled Eggs to Breasts, was attributed to Hodgetts, it was designed collaboratively, matching personal inspiration to group vision.

Integrating architecture with art was a common motif of the Womanhouse installations, as was the work’s ambivalent combination of sensual pleasure and social anxiety. Faith Wilding’s (b. 1945) Crocheted Environment (1972) enveloped audiences in “womb-shelters,” while Sandi Orgel’s Linen Closet (1972) featured a nude female mannequin walking through shelves of sheets and towels and out into the room. Womanhouse exemplified the type of alternative institution that feminist practice could generate. Audience members walked out of the building exhilarated and often quite upset as a result of experiencing the sensations of confinement, restriction, and liberation so dramatically visualized within. As such, Womanhouse politicized many of its visitors.

Judy Chicago

Critic Anne-Marie Sauzeau (b. 1958) argued that the key to representing femininity did not lie in using images drawn from reality to challenge stereotypes, since such a strategy...
allowed the existing order to define the terms of reference, “which means betraying the basis...”. Other women of women's experience.” Proposing a radical language of otherness, Sauzeau posited: “The actual creative project of [women]... involves betraying the expressive mechanisms of culture.” From 1974 to 1979, Judy Chicago worked with a team of women to create the monumental collaborative work Dinner Party (fig. 1.28) as both a real and a metaphorical attempt to bring women to the table and to wrest the expressive mechanisms of culture from the grip of men. The work consists of a triangular table with place settings for thirty-nine named female “guests of honor,” each with an individually designed plate in the form of a symbolic vagina. The names of a further 999 women are painted on the tiled floor around the table. Like Womanhouse before it, The Dinner Party laid claim to the empowering capacity of artistic expression on behalf of women. It replaced the exclusively male cast of traditional “Last Supper” paintings—Jesus flanked by his twelve disciples—with a celebration of vaginal power. Perhaps the most striking contemporary portrait of a mother and child, Post-Partum Document (1973–79), Kelly combined psychoanalytic explanations of identity formation with records of the growth of her own newborn son and her personal experience as a new mother. Kelly’s investigation drew on the work of Jacques Lacan, who developed Freud’s ideas in wide-ranging intellectual contexts including linguistics and philosophy. She also observed the stages of child-rearing with methodical rigor, including such things as notes on her child’s linguistic development, food intake, topics of conversation, drawing and writing, and even his soiled diapers. In the image shown here (fig. 1.29), we see how Kelly combined different elements from her analysis, insisting, for instance, that scientific observation is literally sullied by the physicality of child-rearing. As we read this and other sections of Post-Partum Document we come to know Kelly as the artist/mother who is both emotionally sensitive to the sudden changes in her son’s life and intellectually brilliant in her careful analysis and selective accumulation of data. Although Chicago’s hijacking of the expressive mechanisms of male-dominated culture also continued to be reflected in feminist practice, Kelly’s more distanced, analytical approach, with its concern for issues of psychoanalysis, identity, and representation, would prove to be more in tune with the critical art of the 1980s.

Martha Rosler
Almost immediately upon its creation, Womanhouse became a reference point by which feminists identified their own particular brands of feminism. To artist and critic Martha Rosler (b. 1945), the FAP appeared to practice Abstract Expressionism “by other means,” thus committing more to expressing the self than transforming society. When asked in 1973 about their relationship to Womanhouse, members of AIR (Artists in Residence), the New York women artists’ cooperative gallery co-founded by Nancy Spero, either rejected the comparison entirely or used it to draw distinctions between the East and West Coast projects. Agnes Denes (b. 1931) noted that work produced in California reminded women of their accomplishments and encouraged them to create art from their experiences. AIR, on the other hand, was “trying to get out, to go forward to do innovative art and art of any kind, not looking backwards to what we left.” While the FAP was raising feminist consciousness and creating new languages to express it, members of AIR were doing studio visits and opening a gallery. AIR responded more directly to practical problems facing working artists. As the critic Lucy Lippard (b. 1957), who had helped give a voice to Minimalist and Process art in the 1960s and to feminist art from the 1970s on, observed, women artists who began to show another work in the 1970s had often been artists for a long time. Because they had had few professional opportunities after art school, however, their careers had been shaped in the absence of the artistic, personal, and professional benefits that usually came with being part of the art community. The agenda of groups such as AIR, WAR (Women Artists in Revolt), and increasingly vocal groups of curators and historians was to provide a context for this work and to generate a dialogue about it in feminist terms.

In a 1977 essay on feminist art in California, Rosler argued that the most pressing issue for feminist and other contemporary artists was to set their work in a political context. She observed that art by women was shown and discussed only in contexts where the political challenge of the women’s movement could be neutralized. In such circumstances, said Rosler, feminist art could be presented as “valorizing, in the name of ‘women’s culture,’ [practices] developed under conditions oppressive to women” and might “wind up serving repressive ends.” As critics of Process and Earth art noted in the late 1960s, and as the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition found in the early 1970s, radical art often needed partisan writers to help prevent it from being presented in ways that merely served dealers, museums, and the status quo. Making art was up to the artists; making it dangerous required critics and historians. Rosler’s conclusion cut two ways. Not only was “wider attention to feminist theorizing” required, but also “new theory needs new practice.” Her Semiotics of the Kitchen (1975) (fig. 1.30) illustrates one form of this new practice. The six-minute film features Rosler wearing an apron and standing at a kitchen counter as though she were on the set of an advertisement or cooking show. From this stage, Rosler presents and demonstrates a series of kitchen utensils, beginning with her apron and proceeding alphabetically through the rest of the items around her. She raises the objects, pronounces their names, and demonstrates their use, giving physical expression to the dominance that tools of the kitchen exert over the woman who use them. As Rosler continues, the letters of the alphabet themselves make an appearance among these conventional kitchen instruments. When she reaches “U,” “V,” and “W,” Rosler holds her arms up, knife and fork in hand, to form the letters. She thus turns language into just one more object shaping and controlling women’s daily activities and even their bodies. As the demonstration progresses, however, the viewer becomes aware

Mary Kelly
In England, the work of the American-born artist Mary Kelly (b. 1941) represented a very different approach to making art about experience, arriving at emotion and politics through a highly conceptual and analytic practice. In her striking contemporary portrait of a mother and child, Post-Partum Document (1973–79), Kelly combined psychoanalytic explanations of identity formation with records of the growth of her own newborn son and her personal experience as a new mother. Kelly’s investigation drew on the work of Jacques Lacan, who developed Freud’s ideas in wide-ranging intellectual contexts including linguistics and philosophy. She also observed the stages of child-rearing with methodical rigor, including such things as notes on her child’s linguistic development, food intake, topics of conversation, drawing and writing, and even his soiled diapers. In the image shown here (fig. 1.29), we see how Kelly combined different elements from her analysis, insisting, for instance, that scientific observation is literally sullied by the physicality of child-rearing. As we read this and other sections of Post-Partum Document we come to know Kelly as the artist/mother who is both emotionally sensitive to the sudden changes in her son’s life and intellectually brilliant in her careful analysis and selective accumulation of data. Although Chicago’s hijacking of the expressive mechanisms of male-dominated culture also continued to be reflected in feminist practice, Kelly’s more distanced, analytical approach, with its concern for issues of psychoanalysis, identity, and representation, would prove to be more in tune with the critical art of the 1980s.

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of an uneasy relationship between the tools and the woman. Some objects—the hamburger press and juicer, for instance—reveal their expected kitchen functions. Others, however, such as the knife, fork, and icepick—are presented like weapons. These momentary glimpses of possible violent disruption in the otherwise peaceful routine of a woman’s life are quite different from the cathartic expressions of Womanhouse. There is no drama and no personal expression—potential action is simply pointed to, before the rhythm of the alphabet resumes, and the presentation and the presenter are both kept in order. Semiotics of the Kitchen points to the collusion between language and sex but it also demonstrates resistance and humor. Often, Rosler turns very utilitarian gestures, such as serving or stirring, into slapstick comedy, as when she pretends to throw the contents of a ladle or spoon off-camera. Such humor lightens but also emphasizes the seriousness of the project. In a spirit akin to the social protest movements of the 1950s and 1960s, Rosler’s film suggests that the first step toward changing power relations is to make them visible, while her threatening gestures with sharp objects indicate the urgency of the matter.

Suzanne Lacy

The challenge facing artists seeking to reveal the political nature of daily experience was that, as Beuys said in relation to Fluxus, presenting reality was not enough. Injustice is not always self-evident; it must be labeled as well as shown. Without visible and political self-consciousness, art risks leaving the viewer unsure how to interpret what he or she sees. Institutions and labels, however, reveal an artist’s point of view and thus tend to run counter to the expectations that most viewers have for art. The work of West Coast artist Suzanne Lacy (b. 1945) and East Coast-based Hannah Wilke (1940–95) demonstrate different options for a critical feminist representation.

Lacy’s integration of performance, installation, and community outreach is on vivid display in works such as Three Weeks in May (1977), which typifies the practice she has continued to develop since the 1970s. Each day of the three-week project, Lacy went to the central office of the Los Angeles Police Department to gather information about the number and locations of rapes reported the previous day. In a gallery space, she then assembled the police reports in a systematic manner, repeating a format used in work such as Haecke’s Ships by Ships. A second public venue was created at City Hall, where Lacy presented a large map of Los Angeles County with markers to indicate where each rape had taken place. Around each location was a ring of smaller notations signifying the number of rapes that go unreported for every call made to the police. These visual components were accompanied by demonstrations, educational and political activities, and performances including dramatic productions as well as rituals of catharsis and healing. The events added the emotive and personal features of West Coast feminism to the analytical, intellectual quality typical of East Coast work. In 2012, Lacy reinvented the piece as Three Weeks in January (Fig. 1.31), again creating a map of violence against women and facilitating a series of public events. Lacy collaborated with Los Angeles organizations including Code Pink and Peace over Violence, and held press conferences, vigils, panels, and performances. The comparison with the epidemic of violence in the late 1970s was significant: 2,387 sexual assaults were reported in 1977; in 2011, there were fewer than half that number, with a higher percentage of the crimes being reported. Lacy’s strategy of making art about political issues by utilizing means often associated with organizing and protest has been termed “public practice” and constitutes the focus of the graduate program that she now runs at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles. Lacy’s program and projects such as Three Weeks in January demonstrate the continued urgency with which contemporary artists are creating socially engaged art.

Hannah Wilke

On the East Coast, Hannah Wilke used a mix of performance and sculpture to reflect social, personal, and aesthetic concerns. As described in 1975 by critic Cindy Nemser, Wilke’s work sounds as though it would be at home in Womanhouse. “Hannah Wilke … currently produces vaginal forms out of pastel-tinted latex, pink pigmented terra cotta, multi-colored lint, and grey-toned kneaded erasers.” Despite at first appearing personal and emotive, however, these small sculptures became more ambivalent when viewers were invited to survey the large series, choose their favorite vagina, pay for it, and take it home. The impact of the work rested on its identity as a carefully sculpted form and an individually priced commodity, a comment on the commercialization of art as much as the objectification of women. The feminism of Wilke’s work became more apparent in S.O.S. (Starification Object Series) (1974–82) (Fig. 1.32), for which Wilke presented the vaginal forms in a variety of ways: presented in frames, displayed as cases, and, most memorably, made out of gum and applied like three-dimensional tattoos to the artist’s face, neck, and torso. The vagina in these works is both star and scar, a label for the sexualized sexuality that empowers women as sexual beings and the brand that defines them as sex objects. Wilke’s sculptures explore the process of objectification in an awkward yet alluring way. On the one hand, the forms epimize rejection: They are chewed up and spat out. On the other, they are produced by the action of lips, tongue, fingers, and saliva, and so allude to physical intimacy. In photographs of the work, Wilke strikes fashion-model poses with the vaginal objects thus combining pop-culture and conventional norms of beauty, which Wilke satisfies, with more complex issues of objectification, repulsion, and desire, as well as those of politics, feminism, and representation.

By the end of the 1970s, hotly contested questions of the social dimensions of artistic production and the politics of representation remained unresolved. The following chapters address the response to the appeal made by Rosler, Sauzeau and others for new art and new theory. Chapter 2 examines appropriation art, while Chapter 3 looks at the more visceral productions of Neo-Expressionism. Although the decades that had shaped art in the 1960s and 1970s continued into the following decade, their tenor changed. The activist politics of the Vietnam years and the social movements that developed in their wake lost ground to the political and social conservatism of the Reagan/Thatcher era. In addition, a boom in the art market introduced the topic of price. Radicalism in contemporary art remained but, as will be discussed, politics looked different in the 1980s than it had in the 1970s.