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FEMINISM, INCORPORATED

Reading "postfeminism" in an anti-feminist age

WE LIVE IN A PARTICULAR CULTURAL and historical moment of highly charged sexual politics. Within the last year, supporters of women's rights have seen a number of disturbing public displays of these politics: the ridicule of a well-educated African American female lawyer by an all-white, male Senate commission for her exposure of sexual harassment by an African American male candidate for the Supreme Court; the media-fed rise of Camille Paglia, whose obscenely self-serving, pseudo-intellectual and anti-feminist pronouncements have established her as the Phyllis Schlafly of gender studies. We have consoled ourselves as women candidates for national and local offices emerge in large numbers; but this increase has been paralleled by spectacles of overt bigotry, sexism, and heterosexism such as the 1992 Republican convention. We have seen women professionals, both fictional and actual, become targets for reactionary rhetoric about "family values" and the "cultural elite." And we have become aware that freedom of choice for women is hanging by a judicial thread that the President's appointed hatchet men on the Supreme Court threaten to sever at any moment.

Intimately related to these epochal events in the history of American sexual politics is the onslaught of anti-feminist discourses that veil their agendas by proclaiming the demise of feminism through the supposedly inevitable development of "postfeminism." In the last ten years, as Susan Faludi points out in her book on the anti-feminist "backlash," feminism has become a dirty word.¹ I would like to explore the discursive means by which the death of feminism (its status as "post") has been promoted through photography and written texts, examining what is at stake – politically, culturally, and economically – in this promotion. Tracing various constructions of postfeminism, I analyze it on several different levels, each of which corresponds to a socio-cultural configuration of oppression against women that must be excavated in order to promote an effective understanding of postfeminist politics. I begin by introducing some examples of how feminism has been reduced to a unitary concept, then discursively and photographically executed (in both senses of the word) as postfeminist in the popular press in the last few years, and I follow this by tracing some of the ways in which discourses of postfeminism have permeated art criticism; and I ask, finally, what the constitution of postfeminism may mean for artists and art critics conscious of sexual and other differences.² As a coda to this critique I suggest ways of rethinking the dangerous double binds that threaten to destroy feminism both from within and from without by introducing several contemporary photographic practices that I interpret as providing sexually empowered constructions of female subjectivity.

I focus particularly on the photographic in tracing these effects because it is the photographic that, through its claims to truth, has most obediently served the consumerist, patriarchal, and heterosexist directives of the postfeminist logic at work in news magazine essays and advertisements. By opening this essay with examples of the construction of a so-called postfeminist subject in popular culture texts and images I want to emphasize the insidious and ideologically motivated role of representation in reinforcing, producing, and/or reproducing particular cultural ideologies. And, as many photography historians – from John Tagg to Abigail Solomon-Godeau – have pointed out, it is the photographic in western capitalist culture that is most often called upon to play this ideological role; the photographic functions centrally in the construction of bourgeois identities, determining norms of western subjectivity that subordinate people along the lines of gender, class, sexual, and racial difference.

Solomon-Godeau has persuasively argued, in particular, that photography has developed a special relationship to both the commodity and the feminine since its inception around 1840.³ Photographs of women's bodies, which, since the nineteenth century, have comprised a large proportion of both art and advertising photography, instantiate a triple state of fetishism, or the "confluence of three fetishisms": "the psychic fetishism of patriarchy grounded in the specificity of the corporeal body; the commodity fetishism of capitalism . . . and the fetishizing properties of the photograph – a commemorative trace of an absent object . . ."⁴ Through the photographic image, femininity is constructed as locus of male desire and pleasure, embedded in the photographed and commodified female body via a system of fetishistic visual codes. The photographed female body operates as an object of exchange; in Luce Irigaray's terms: "The production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men . . . wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men . . . [the sexuality of men] is played out through the bodies of women, matter, or sign."⁵ The woman, under this photographically reinforced system, can be a subject only by acting as a consumer, alienated from herself in her desire for commodities.

Notably, precisely because of its collusive role in reinforcing patriarchal structures of gender and sexual identity, the photographic has also been the primary site of feminist intervention in the postmodernist art practices that rely on strategies of appropriation of the last 15 years. In "feminist postmodernism" the insidiously objectifying, class- and race-bound effects of photographic images of women in both popular and so-called high art contexts are undermined through avant-gardist, Brechtian strategies that aim to disrupt the appropriated imagery through parody or textual intervention. The production of such imagery has come to be called, in much postmodernist critical discourse, "postfeminism."

What is behind these diverse applications of the term postfeminism? Do the apparently different contexts for its usage indicate distinct ideological positions, or do they belie a similar rhetoric, a similar purpose? What purpose does the rhetorical mobilization of postfeminism serve in each instance?

The enemies of the postfeminist backlash in the popular press are professional women in general, and feminism and its avatars in particular: especially those self-defined feminists who confuse and transgress previously accepted codes of domesticated femininity. The fantasized feminist enemy is a unitary figure – visually and textually coded as a professionally powerful and often excessively sexual woman. She is also limited to a specific race and class, not to mention sexual orientation; any identity deviating from the upper-class, anglo, straight imaginary of the American subconscious must be made unimaginable – must be transformed or homogenized into compliance with the normative American subject within this system of representation.

This symbolically limited yet still highly threatening feminist enemy of the status quo was recently exemplified by the fictional character Murphy Brown, whose repeated invocation and excoriation by the conservative right signals the strength of threat this contemporary feminist figure poses. By naming Murphy Brown the enemy of American "family values" because of her independence from men, the namer both denies the existence of single mothers who aren't as picturesque to the dominant mythos of femininity as Brown and hopes to negate the dramatic social and political shifts in American culture that undermine the paternalist ideology of the ideal family. The recent resuscitation of this patriarchal fantasy by the right – under the guise of "family values" – is a symptom of the massive anxiety of the patriarchal system, a reaction formation against the threatening incursion of women into the work force and, more recently, the political arena.⁶ As innocuous (and fictional) as she may seem to those of us on the "radical" feminist edge and/or from the "cultural elite," the discursive category "Murphy Brown" can be read as functioning for the right as a means to diffuse their paranoid anxiety dream involving the rise of the self-sufficient, and potentially non-anglo, non-upper middle-class, female subject of the 1990s.

Murphy Brown is defined by the right as feminist and so antithetical to their postfeminist agenda. The contemporary female subject in the advertisements and news magazines I discuss here who is produced as "postfeminist" is still safely subordinate to the commodity system and to the circulation of normative, heterosexual male desire. The photographic images of the postfeminist woman perform particular forms of ideological work. With the cultural authority of anglo masculinity becoming increasingly bankrupt as gay, feminist, and non-white cultures insistently articulate counter-identifies to this imaginary norm, the patriarchal commodity system urgently seeks to reinforce predictable stereotypes of femininity.

The upper middle-class, white, postfeminist woman is produced to bolster a masculinist economy of social relations. For example, the images of Barbara Bush in a recent issue of the traditionalist magazine *Women's Day* produce an image of national womanhood that reinforces the death of the feminist subject [Figure 36.1]. Standing next to her well-known surrogate, Millie the dog, Barbara displays an eager subordination to patriarchal domesticity that is confirmed by her assertion, superimposed over the image, that "Women's Lib made me feel inadequate and useless."⁷ The properly postfeminist woman shores up the crumbling infrastructure of conservative American ideology during a time of economic crisis and confirms the "rightness" of Republicanism, with its moralizing intervention in personal relations and destruction of the civil rights of women, lesbians, gays, blacks, and others. Barbara, smirking complacently within the presidential home funded by an ostensibly democratic tax system, and adorned in the pseudo-populist outfit of a string of pearls and silk dress, provides the assurance that nothing has changed: that in the 1990s it is still perfectly acceptable for men like George Bush [senior] to legislate for all American women. We know this is right because Barbara, nominally a woman although admittedly an anti-feminist, tells us it is; and, as the press insists, everyone loves Barbara.

Exemplifying the explosion of media interest in the volatile and changing nature of contemporary feminine identities, at least five issues of *Time* magazine have been devoted to this problem in the last three years.⁸ Drawing on the powerful ideological effects of photography and text juxtapositions, each issue fabricates models of gender relations based on statistical information that Susan Faludi shows in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991) to be at best limited in application, and at worst entirely inaccurate; they manipulate popular conceptions of feminism through these spurious statistics and define feminism as "post" in advance of their analysis.

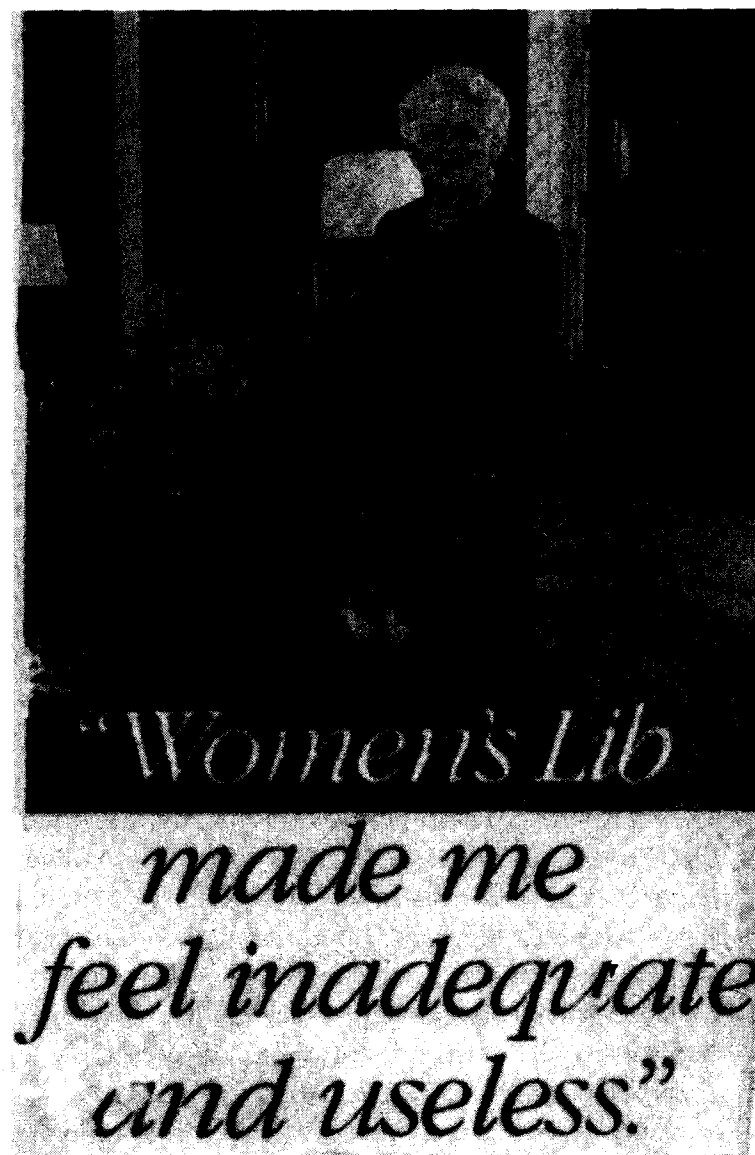


Figure 36.1 "Women's Lib made me feel inadequate and useless," Barbara Bush posing in *Women's Day*, 30 October 1990.

Two advertisements for the fall 1990 special issue of *Time* entitled "Women: The Road Ahead," for example, set the stage of this issue's overall anti-feminist orientation, juxtaposing cartoon images of women with the texts: "You've Come the Wrong Way, Maybe," and "Who says you *can* have it all?" [Figure 36.2]. Not surprisingly, the title page of the issue itself labels our current period unequivocally as "the postfeminist era." And, while containing several articles covering a variety of subjects, the special issue is sprinkled with postfeminist ads for its sponsor Sears; these work blatantly to reinforce profit-driven notions of "proper" femininity.⁹ With photographs of glamorous, almost exclusively white women absorbed in frivolous, consumerist activities, the advertisements rely on texts to finalize their constructions of contemporary (post)femininity: "I don't like to go shopping, I like to go buying," and "I'm a senior partner in a very successful enterprise, my family," are two examples. The economic stakes and class implications subtending postfeminist ideologies are evident in these


advertisements: it is clearly the independently wealthy, stay-at-home postfeminist who makes the better consumer than the working feminist. The advertisements thus construct an unequivocal image of contemporary women as rich, white, non-professional, narcissistic, and profoundly materialistic. Along with the ambiguous but ultimately postfeminist contents of the issue itself, they work, in Althusserian terms, to interpellate a postfeminist subject.¹⁰

The cover story of *Time* from December 4, 1989 is unabashedly anti-feminist in tone and content.¹¹ In bold yellow letters, the cover text reads, "Women Face the '90s," continuing, less favorably: "In the '80s they tried to have it all. Now they've just plain had it. Is there a future for feminism?" The cover image, which features a crudely carved wooden sculpture of a woman in a business suit clutching a baby and a briefcase, created for *Time* by the feminist artist Marisol, can be read as a further warning sign of the insidious effects of postfeminist politics. *Time* here purchases the skills of an artist whose work is usually identified as exemplary of early 1970s' feminist art, with its reconfiguring of the traditionally devalued, feminine crafts media into art objects, to undermine modernist notions of purity; the magazine recontextualizes her piece into an icon of postfeminism by reproducing it under the aegis of illustrating the "news" of the death of feminism. Marisol's figure is made to signify not the empowering potential of having both career and family but the supposedly no-win dilemma of being a woman in the '90s (that is, once again, a white, upper middle-class woman).


The mutually supportive text and image construction of postfeminism continues inside the magazine. On the title page, a photograph of pro-choice advocates on the mall in Washington, D.C., trapped behind a chain link fence so that their banners and raised fists appear ineffectual, is captioned, "The superwomen are weary, the young are complacent. Is there a future for feminism?" and continues in smaller type, ". . . some look back wistfully at the simpler times before women's liberation. But very few would really like to turn back the clock . . ." We must read to this last sentence in the smaller type to realize that perhaps the end of feminism – its lack of a "future" – is not as conclusive as the textual and visual codes suggest. The text resolves what is seemingly being questioned by prefacing its acknowledgment of the continuing relevance of feminism with the "weary" and "complacent" attitude of today's women. Furthermore, the assumption that the "pre-" feminist era was "simpler" goes unspecified and is doubly insidious by its casual placement.

Accompanied by a range of images of protesting feminists and feminist symbols on a time line (including a cartoon of a woman saying "I can't believe it. I forgot to have children," labeled explicitly by the magazine as postfeminist), the cover article, Claudia Wallis's "Onward Women," employs the term postfeminist in describing the rejection of feminism by younger generations of women as result of their realization that women can't have it all (as if "having it all" were the primary goal of the women's movement in the first place).¹² To make this rejection seem both natural and logical, the article confirms for us that "motherhood is back," explaining that younger women are turned off by feminism because, after all, "hairy legs haunt the feminist movement, as do images of being strident and lesbian. Feminine clothing is back; breasts are back . . . [and] the movement that loudly rejected female stereotypes seems hopelessly dated."¹³ While the article appears to "ask" innocently if there is "a future for feminism," it effectively precludes any consideration of this future by using the term "postfeminist," inexorably linking feminism to the highly charged image of "being strident and lesbian," a state of "being" that is implicitly undesirable.

The *Time* article is one among innumerable examples of the popular construction of feminism as a unified attack on the mythologized American family. In order to ensure a return



Who says you can have it all?

 In the 1980s, everyone did. And now that they're finding out how difficult "having it all" can be, women are seeking new definitions of success and fulfillment.

Now a *TIME* special issue explores the choices facing today's women. From Nation and World to Show Business and Medicine, every department in this special issue will chart the toughest challenges that women confront in the 1990s.

Too busy to read it? That's why you should.

Women: A *TIME* Special Issue
On Sale: October 29 through November

TIME

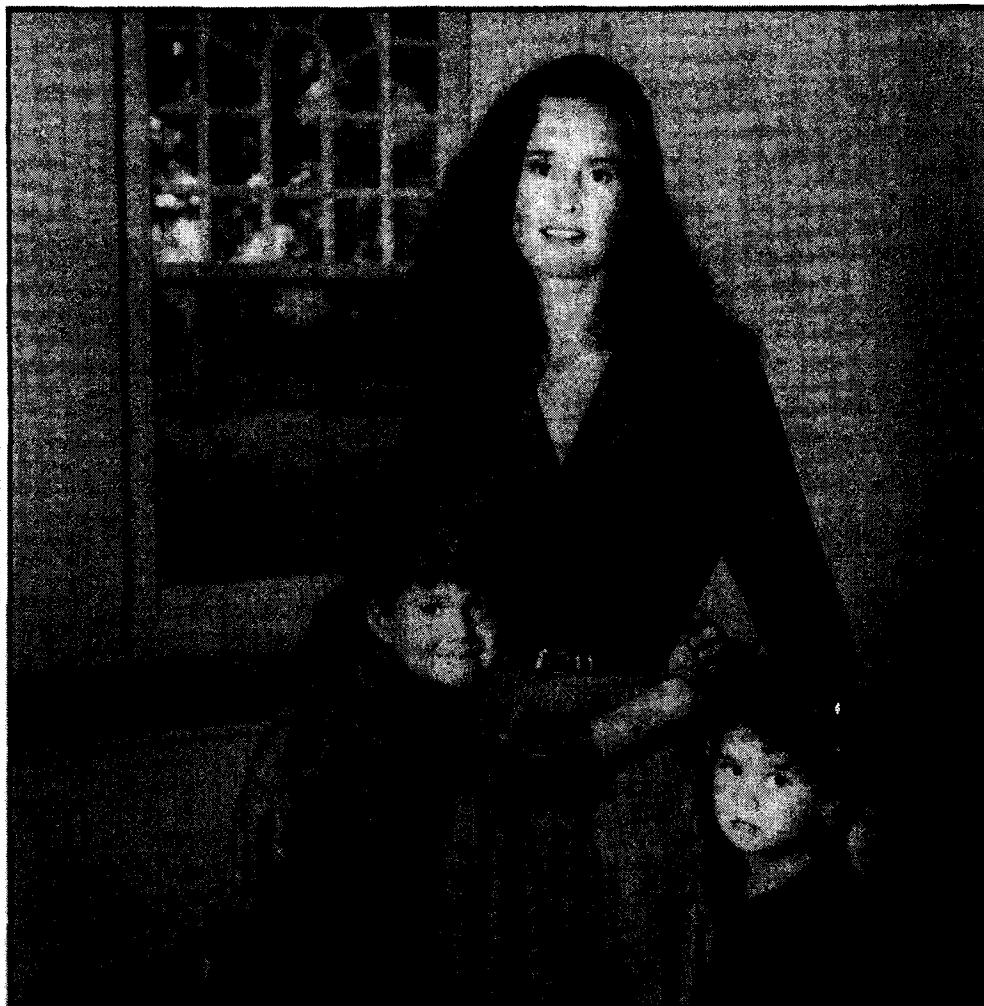
Figure 36.2 "Who says you can have it all?," advertisement from *Time*, 29 October 1990, for *Time* special issue on women.

to the ostensibly "simpler" family values of yore, this view of feminism, in turn, legitimates and in fact necessitates its obliteration. The image of the woman's responsibility to the family is most blatantly reinforced in the infamous *Good Housekeeping* "New Traditionalist" advertisements that have been displayed prominently at bus stops and in upscale magazines such as the *New York Times Magazine* in the last few years. In these ads, bold texts such as "she started a revolution – with some not-so-revolutionary ideals" and "more and more women have come to realize that having a contemporary lifestyle doesn't mean that you have to abandon the things that make life worthwhile – family, home, community, the timeless, enduring values" are accompanied by images of a beaming, yuppie mother in a sparkling domestic setting with one or two cherubic children [Figure 36.3].

The politics of postfeminism takes a violent and explicit turn in the recent spate of films exploring the deviance and ultimate expendability of women who are sexually and/or professionally powerful; examples include the notorious *Fatal Attraction* (1987) by Adrian Lyne, *Presumed Innocent* (1990) by Alan J. Pakula, *Single White Female* (1992) by Barbet Schroeder, *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (1992) by Curtis Hanson, and the recent, virulently misogynist

THE NEW TRADITIONALIST.

SHE STARTED A REVOLUTION — WITH SOME NOT-SO
REVOLUTIONARY IDEALS.



She was searching for something to believe in — and look what she found. Her husband, her children, her home, herself.

She's the contemporary woman who has made a new commitment to the traditional values that some people thought were "old-fashioned." She wasn't following a trend.

She made her own choices. But when she looked over the fence she found that she wasn't alone.

In fact, market researchers are calling it the biggest social movement since the sixties.

The quality of life she has chosen is the embodiment of everything that Good Housekeeping has stood for —

the Magazine, the Seal, the Institute.

Who else can speak to the New Traditionalist with that kind of authority and trust?

Who is more committed to helping her live the life she has chosen?

That's why there has never been a better time for Good Housekeeping.

AMERICA IS COMING HOME TO GOOD HOUSEKEEPING



Figure 36.3 "She started a revolution — with some not-so-revolutionary ideals," *Good Housekeeping* advertisement from *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, December 1988.

and homophobic *Basic Instinct* (1992) by Paul Verhoeven, where the “strident lesbian”/bisexual becomes a man-killer with an ice pick/phallus.¹⁴ These narratives produce the necessity of annihilating the non-domesticated contemporary woman in bloody orgies of human destruction, or reinscribing her into the family structure. With the termination of the contemporary professional woman comes the termination of feminism and its threatening anti-patriarchal goals. Needless to say, the dangerous women in these films are always, like Murphy Brown, pretty and anglo: one assumes that the Hollywood machine doesn’t trust itself to contain successfully the exponentially greater threat posed to its system by working women of color (or, for that matter, lesbians or bisexual women who are feminists rather than psychopaths).

The other side of the postfeminist coin is the emergence of the so-called “men’s movement.” Inspired by Robert Bly’s book *Iron John* (1990) the men’s movement appropriates and perverts the rhetoric of feminism to urge the contemporary American male to “find a voice of [his] own” as a “Wild Man.”¹⁵ Bly laments the feminization of the American male at the hands of his female caretakers, and calls for the extirpation of this spineless femininity through primitivist histrionics and rituals of male bonding. The “Wild Man” immerses himself in mother nature and beats the appropriated drums of his “primitive” brothers with big sticks to prove to himself that, while he may be a “minority” – as one xenophobic *Time* article argues, referring to the competition for jobs from non-white, non-male workers in “Get Set: Here They Come! . . . White, U.S.-born males are a minority” – his ability to dominate is intact.¹⁶ As with the frantic declarations of the supposed death of the feminist subject, the fact that masculinity (again, aggressively heterosexual and almost exclusively anglo and upper middle-class) needs to be shored up proves again how intense is the threat that the vast numbers of working women of all sexual, racial, and class identities currently pose to the patriarchal system (not to mention the threat posed by the increasingly powerful identity politics of the non-heterosexual male). As Russell Ferguson has argued, the “need to enforce values which are at the same time alleged to be ‘natural’ demonstrates the insecurity of a center which could at one time take its own power much more for granted.”¹⁷

The popular deployment of the term “postfeminism” thus involves individually redefining and recuperating femininity, feminism, and even masculinity into revitalized racist, class-bound, and patriarchal models of gender and sexual identity. The use of the term postfeminism in discourses on contemporary art appears, in contrast, to involve a significantly different project. In my view, however, the postmodern version of postfeminism similarly plays itself out through appropriative techniques that ultimately generalize and defuse feminist agendas. While artists such as Mary Kelly and Barbara Kruger who speak and work from a feminist political perspective have sometimes been labeled “postfeminist” by art historians and critics in order to distinguish their work from earlier, supposedly essentialist feminist art practices (as in Laura Mulvey’s essay “Dialogue with Spectatorship: Barbara Kruger and Victor Burgin”), many critical texts on postmodernism have developed the concept of postfeminism toward ultimately anti-feminist ends.¹⁸ While more subtle than the popular media’s outright rejection of feminism as outmoded or expired, the discourses of postmodernism tend to address the relationship between feminism and postmodernism through modernist and ultimately masculinist models of interpretation – models that work to empower the postmodern critic through an “aesthetic terrorism” that hierarchizes art practices on the basis of avant-gardist categories of value, excluding those practices outside the boundaries they have determined for “radical” practice.¹⁹

The term postfeminism has been developed primarily within dominant discourses of postmodernism identified with New York City-based journals, art magazines, and institutions.²⁰ A central strategy within these discourses has been to claim radical value for postmodernism

in the visual arts by arrogating a certain kind of feminist practice and incorporating it into a universalist, "mainstream" postmodernism. Feminism is thus generalized as one radical strategy among many available to disrupt modernism's purities. Like the potentially problematic inclusion of women artists into the humanist canon, the incorporation of one particular kind of feminism into a broadly conceived, even universalizing radical project of postmodernist "cultural critique" accompanies the suppression of other kinds of, in this case, feminist practices and theories; it encourages the collapse of the specific claims of feminism into a "postfeminist" politics of supposed difference.

Since postfeminist discursive tactics in art writing often come from critics and scholars who position themselves on the left and are sympathetic to feminism, they are more difficult to recognize and negotiate than the overtly anti-feminist strategies of the popular media. However, it is crucial to recognize the stakes involved in incorporations of feminism as a useful tool for or subset of postmodernism. Within this strategic incorporation, for example, the two are merged via an exhausted political idealism, with feminism conflated with civil rights and other specific protests as merely a "jargon" or a pose taken up as a means of empowerment – such that a theorist of the postmodern such as Fredric Jameson can dismiss feminism as simply one among a number of examples of the "stupendous proliferation of social codes today into professional and disciplinary jargons, but also into the badges of ethnic, race, religious, and class-refraction adhesion."²¹

An instructive example of the subtle negation of the specificity of feminist politics is the sophisticated but still presumptuous appropriation of feminist theory as one postmodernist strategy among many in Craig Owens' important article "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism."²² Owens presents in a concise and polemical way some of the major issues confronting feminist theory, astutely calling for a recognition of feminist art as explicitly disrupting modernist configurations of sexual difference, and taking issue, as I do here, with writers who "assimilat[e feminism] to a whole string of liberation or self-determination movements."²³ And yet, Owens' discussion, which begins seemingly innocently by placing feminism and postmodernism in the same space, describing "women's insistence on incommensurability" as "not only compatible with, but also an *instance of* postmodern thought,"²⁴ ends up by collapsing feminism entirely into the "postmodernist critique of representation": "th[e] feminist position is also a postmodern condition."²⁵ Owens takes up the empowering critical position he believes to be offered by feminism, reading strategies of the latter as part of the postmodernist critique of "the tyranny of the signifier."²⁶ In attempting to claim a radical agenda for feminism, Owens, like Jameson, reduces the feminist politic to simply another of the "voices of the conquered," including "Third World nations" and the "revolt of nature," that challenge "the West's desire for ever-greater domination and control."²⁷

Owens' article, like many examples of texts discussing the intersection of feminism and postmodernism from the 1980s, ultimately references the potential of the "feminine" to disrupt modernist purity. Most marked in the work of French feminists such as Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous and in certain American and British cultural theories drawing from their work, the idealist conception of the disruptive potential of the "feminine" has a complex history. One tendency among writers on postmodernism such as Owens, then, has been to borrow from the philosophical and literary theories of French feminisms and to identify as radical precisely those art practices that undermine the phallogocentric unified subject that subtends modernist ideologies. Collapsing the feminine into feminism, they then pose postmodernism as a radical, feminist alternative to the phallic closures of Greenbergian modernism.²⁸ Ironically and notably, this construction relies on the very type of oppositional logic constitutive of Clement Greenberg's own cultural theory: the opposition of a "progressive" to a "regressive"

artistic practice and the use of essentialism – in this case, an essentialist notion of femininity – to develop an authoritative critical position.

As Tania Modleski points out in her book *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (1991), in this type of critical dynamic feminism is confused with feminization such that "feminist criticism [is] . . . becoming absorbed into the academy."²⁹ Interestingly, then, while the postfeminism of popular culture works to deny the continuing existence of feminisms and the sexually and professionally empowered female subject by constructing it as a threat that has been overcome, the postfeminism of academic criticism works to absorb feminist theory. As in Owens' article, postfeminism in art discourse is precisely this absorptive operation: the incorporation of feminism into postmodernism as post-feminism.

Exemplifying the effects of this incorporation, Dan Cameron employs postfeminism as the title of a recent article on postmodern art, using the term broadly to encompass all art by women in the 1980s that, in his terms, uses "structuralism to critique social patterns in terms of social domination."³⁰ Under the rubric of postfeminism, Cameron discusses women artists as diverse as Barbara Kruger and Susan Rothenberg, the latter of whom is not concerned in any direct way with feminist issues in her approach to object-making, while Kruger most certainly is. In fact, Cameron's "postfeminism" is increasingly confused as the article progresses. It appears any female can be (and, perhaps, necessarily is) "postfeminist" just by virtue of her sex. But Cameron also claims that "there is by no means a dearth of male artists working from [the] identical premises" of the female postfeminists.³¹ So men are able to appropriate feminist radicality easily – by simply acknowledging the contingency of art as language; feminism becomes useful to masculinist artists and critics as postfeminism.

Cameron also discounts the explicitly feminist agendas of artists such as Kruger and Laurie Simmons by placing these artists in a masculinist genealogy of avant-garde critique: "following on the heels of Pop," they then become the "sources" for male artists Jeff Koons, Peter Halley, and Philip Taaffe, whose works, Cameron admits, are "more vociferously" collected than those of their supposed (maternal?) mentors, the "postfeminists."³² We can hardly be surprised at this last discovery, given the modernist value systems and hierarchies still maintained even in Cameron's own ostensibly pro- but effectively anti-feminist argument.

It has, in fact, become quite common in art criticism to subsume feminist work under a broad framework of postmodernism. Kruger and Sherrie Levine, for example, are described by *New York Times Magazine* writer Richard Woodward in universalizing terms as simply using "photography conceptually to ask questions about the source and presentation of images in our culture."³³ Even the most explicitly feminist projects – such as Cindy Sherman's incisive critiques of the visual construction of the feminine – are submitted to this absorptive strategy. Sherman has posed herself as embodied object, photographically frozen within gendered positions of vulnerability in her "Untitled Film Stills" of the late 1970s, or as monstrously overblown in the very clichéd "darkness" of her sexual unknown, barely visible when covered with vomit or reflected in the lenses of sunglasses; in her most recent work, she has posed and photographed grotesque plastic female sex dolls, aggressively displaying their rigid female genitalia, dildos, and contorted artificial limbs. Sherman has been construed by Donald Kuspit as aiming toward the "universal" project of lamenting the condition of humanity:

Sherman's work has been interpreted as a feminist deconstruction of the variety of female roles – *the lack of fixity of female, or for that matter any, identity*, although instability seems to have been forced more on women than men . . . But this interpretation

is a very partial truth. *Sherman shows the disintegrative condition of the self as such, the self before it is firmly identified as male or female.* This is suggested by the *indeterminate gender* of many of the faces and figures that appear in these pictures, and the presence of male or *would-be male* figures in some of them. *Female attributes* – for example, the woman's clothes in one untitled work . . . are just that, dispensable attributes, *clothes that can be worn by anyone.* The question is what the condition of the self is that will put them on . . . [my emphases].³⁴

In this article – entitled, with disturbing and certainly unintentional irony, “Inside Cindy Sherman” – the stakes of postfeminist rhetoric are clear. Being “inside” Sherman, Kuspit constructs himself as knowing the artist better than she does herself. (How else could Kuspit “know” that what certainly do appear to be “female attributes” – women's clothing, a female authorial name, and even bloody women's underpants – are really things “that can be worn by anyone”?) Kuspit's fantasized penetration into this interior takes place via a probing set of metaphysical art historical tools such that Sherman's insistence on her otherness, as a “symptom” of masculinity's uncertainties about itself, is folded back into a narrative of (masculine) universality.

Kuspit concludes with the following argument: “It is this artistic use – her wish to excel with a certain aesthetic purity as well as to represent inventively – that reveals her wish to heal a more fundamental wound of selfhood than that which is inflicted on her by being a woman.”³⁵ For Kuspit, the “true” meaning of this art is not feminist but moves beyond the narrow strictures that he perceives as delimiting feminism in the wide yet phallogocentrically organized expanse of the universal, with its “fundamental wounds” and intrinsic “aesthetic purity.” Whose “wishes” are being voiced here, anyway?

These incorporative disempowerments of feminist critiques are crucial to art criticism's maintenance of certain modernist and ultimately authoritative and masculinist models of artistic value even under the guise of postmodernism. As suggested earlier, these models draw from avant-gardist ideologies to construct oppositional categories of “progressive” versus “regressive” postmodern art practices – as in Hal Foster's argument in the article “(Post)modern Polemics,” where he opposes “neoconservative” postmodernism to a radically avant-garde “poststructuralist” postmodernism.³⁶ Painting is doomed as always already “neoconservative” within this notion of properly radical postmodern practice. Photographic practices, particularly of an appropriative sort, are often assumed to be inherently deconstructive, which in turn implies that they have been wielded through an “intention” directed toward resisting the “male gaze” of visual pleasure.³⁷ Within currently dominant conceptions of postmodernism in the visual arts, then, contemporary art practices are either “good” or “bad,” either “radical” and critical of all the now negatively viewed metaphysical elements of Greenbergian modernism, or “reactionary” – meaning, in this context, still modernist.

Underlying this dominant postmodern value system is the stipulation that the progressive art practice must follow Brechtian strategies of distanciation – working to displace and provoke the spectator to preclude his/her identification with the illusionary and ideological functions of representation. Brechtian distanciation requires, above all, a resistance to bourgeois pleasure – a prohibition of the object's seduction of the spectator as an embodied and desiring subject. In dominant conceptions of postmodernism, which tend to perpetuate modernism's hierarchies of taste disguised under terms of political rather than formal radicality, art that refuses visual pleasure is valued over more overtly seductive, sensual, or “decorative” work. The “dis-identificatory” or Brechtian practice is privileged for its

erosion of the dominant structures of cultural consumption which . . . are classically fetishistic . . . In the fetishistic regime the viewer is at once separated from what he/she is seeing but enthralled into identification with an imaginary world in which threatening knowledge is allayed by beautiful images. Brechtian distanciation aims to make the spectator an agent in cultural production and activate him or her as an agent in the world.³⁸

The call for critical distance has also played an important role in the development of feminist theories of art practice and spectatorship. This is most strikingly evidenced in Laura Mulvey's call for a destruction of visual pleasure in her ubiquitous and formulative 1975 article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey states her well-known polemic as follows: "It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this essay."³⁹ According to Mulvey's argument, the construction of woman as objectified 'other through visual representation is inevitable, and feminists must work to refuse this objectification. Woman, Mulvey argues, stands "in patriarchal culture . . . as bearer . . . not maker of meaning," becoming object of scopophilic and inexorably male desire or the fetishizing male gaze, serving to palliate the male viewer's fear of lack.

The strategy of refusing male visual pleasure developed in Mulvey's article has been a central motivating force in the development of feminist cultural theory and of feminist art practices for the last two decades, including those practices now canonically inscribed as "feminist postmodernism" or "postfeminism" (from the works of Kruger and Sherman to those of Mary Kelly). The so-called postfeminists have operated within the Freudian terms of Mulvey's paradigm, working through psychoanalytic models of sexual difference to deconstruct the modernist conception of subjectivity as masculine and empowered through vision (the "male gaze"). In working to deconstruct modernism's reliance on the subject/object dichotomy, manipulating photographic imagery of the female body (or, in Kelly's case, working around or avoiding it) precisely in order to intervene in its propagandistic and psychically objectifying effects, these artists continue to work polemically within the terms of oppositional models of sexual difference.

While Mulvey's polemic has provided a space for the development of a feminist post-modernist practice, in view of its insistence on the refusal of pleasure (a pleasure that she defines as exclusively male and exclusively visual) it can also be seen to be aligned with art criticism's masculinist models of privileging bodily control. Central to the maintenance of masculinist critical models is the insistence on the impossibility of a work of art that is both sensual and conceptual, both corporeal and theoretical, both eroticized and politically critical at the same time. As sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has written of the psychic stakes of this refusal of pleasure in discourses of "high" culture,

the object which "insists on being enjoyed" . . . neutralizes both ethical resistance and anaesthetic neutralization; it annihilates the distancing power of representation, the essentially human power of suspending immediate, animal attachment to the sensible and refusing submission to the pure affect . . . Pure pleasure – ascetic, empty pleasure which implies the renunciation of pleasure, pleasure purified of pleasure – is predisposed to become a symbol of moral excellence and the work of art a test of ethical superiority, an indisputable measure of the capacity for sublimation.⁴⁰

According to Bourdieu, the aesthete's "disgust" toward the impure pleasures is the means by which he or she ensures "ethical superiority," performing his or her distance from the chaos of human corporeality and the stench of fully embodied desire: "disgust is the ambivalent

experience of the horrible seduction of the disgusting and of enjoyment, which performs a sort of reduction to animality, corporeality, the belly and sex”⁴¹ The resistance to pleasure is above all a resistance to corporeal engagement motivated by a desire to control chaotic and unpredictable pleasure of the erotically engaged body. Only a pleasure purified or eroticism can elevate the aesthete or critic above the masses (which are, as scholars such as Tania Modleski, Andreas Huyssen, and Klaus Theweleit have pointed out, inexorably identified with the threat of femininity).⁴² Within the hierarchical and eminently masculinist logic of criticism, the critic fears a collapse of the very hierarchizing boundaries of difference that enable the “male gaze.”

As French feminists such as Irigaray have pointed out, the refusal of pleasure intersects with the prohibition of female agency and thus has ideological, and explicitly anti-feminist effects. Within the psychoanalytic map of bourgeois, western subjectivity, “woman has to remain a body without organs The geography of feminine pleasure is not worth listening to. Women are not worth listening to, especially when they try to speak of their pleasure.”⁴³ While it is the female body that elicits most directly the “disgusting” (clearly heterosexual and male) pleasure of which Bourdieu writes, and thus requires objectification as a means of controlling its potential threat, this very same body is conventionally refused to the female viewer as a locus of pleasure: “The fetishized feminine Imago, conforming to a commercialized ideal of what seduces the eye, is thus barred to the female spectator.”⁴⁴

There is no female pleasure in viewing under the Freudian (nor arguably, the Lacanian) system. In the Mulveyan “feminist anti-fetishism” or “Puritanism of the eye,” where visual seduction is seen to be necessarily complicitous with male fetishism, female pleasure is simply ignored.⁴⁵ In this way, Mulvey’s theoretical negation of female pleasure seems complicitous with its denial by patriarchy, the disempowering effects of which are described so vividly by Irigaray. Ironically, in overlooking the question of female pleasure, critical texts that privilege feminist appropriation art for its refusal of the desiring “male gaze” have maintained the boundaries of masculinist critical and viewing authority even as they have worked to celebrate practices that critique it. The postfeminist program, as it has been defined in postmodern art discourses, is complicit with both modernism’s general refusal of pleasure, and with the Mulveyan focus on male pleasure (and its prohibition) at the expense of accounting for the possibility of a desiring female spectator.

[. . .]

One way of resisting the masculinist seduction that produces feminists as “post,” or constructs feminism as subsumed within a critical postmodernist or ostensibly genderless and “universal” cultural project is to refuse what Jane Gallop calls “the prick” of patriarchy, which operates to remasculinize culture by reducing all subjectivity to the ostensibly “neutral subject . . . [itself] actually a desexualized, sublimated guise for the masculine sexed being.”⁴⁶ The refusal of “the prick” of patriarchy can take place through recognizing and playing out the polymorphous female pleasures in feminist theory and artistic practice, through exacerbating the tenuousness of the boundaries between desire and repulsion. Flamboyantly asserting the [. . . disturbing effects of the female sex] at its most overtly indexical moment, [feminist photographic practices by artists such as Judie Bamber and Jeanne Dunning] perform what Freud describes as an uncanny effacing of “the distinction between imagination and reality,”⁴⁷ forcing fantasy to take responsibility for its ideological (in this case fetishizing) effects. The ideology of the falsely unifying claims of postfeminist discourses can be exposed through works like this – works that tread the borderlines between pleasure and disgust in the *representation* of female subjectivity, and through correlatively playful and overtly desiring interpretive texts that enact, rather than repress, the pleasure they take in images.

Notes

- 1 Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991). Faludi's book is journalistic and anecdotal, but extremely useful for its polemical stance and the amount of information it marshals to debunk statistical "evidence" supporting anti-feminists in their determination of the death of feminism.
- 2 Some of the examples from popular culture that I examine in the following part of this essay initially appeared in a different form in my article "Post-Feminism – A Remasculinization of Culture?" *MEANING* 7 (1990), pp. 29–40. See also Laura Kipnis, "Feminism: The Political Conscience of Postmodernism?," *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism*, Andrew Ross, ed., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 164.
- 3 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Legs of the Countess," *October* 39 (Winter 1986), pp. 65–107.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 67–68.
- 5 Luce Irigaray, "Women on the Market," *This Sex Which is Not One*, Catherine Porter, trans., (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 172.
- 6 See Ruth Rosen's editorial "Column Left / 'Family Values' is a GOP Code for Meanness," *Los Angeles Times* (April 21, 1992), p. B7.
- 7 Cover, *Women's Day* (October 30, 1990).
- 8 *Time* ran the following issues: "Women Face the '90s. In the '80s they tried to have it all. Now they've just plain had it. Is there a future for feminism?" (December 4, 1989); "Special Issue, Women: The Road Ahead" (Fall 1990); "Why Are Men and Women Different? If it isn't just upbringing. New studies show they are born that way" (January 20, 1992); "Why Roe V. Wade is Already Moot" (May 4, 1992). For a slightly more pro-feminist note, see "Fighting the Backlash Against Feminism: Susan Faludi and Gloria Steinem sound the call to arms" (March 9, 1992); even here, the contents page tempers the seeming pro-feminist slant of this issue by asking, "Are women unhappy because feminism succeeded – or because it stalled?" Other popular press examples abound, as Faludi's book attests. A few recent local texts I have run across include Sally Quinn's editorial, "Feminists Have Killed Feminism," which is subtitled "For years, they shamed the majority who loved men, babies, family ties. Now their confessions reveal their hypocrisy," *Los Angeles Times* (January 23, 1992), p. B7; and Nina J. Easton's cover story, "I'm Not a Feminist but . . .," *Los Angeles Times Magazine* (February 2, 1992).
- 9 The issue includes a critical examination of 1980s' anti-feminism by Barbara Ehrenreich, "Sorry, Sisters, This Is Not the Revolution," p. 15. In fact, the more pro-feminist slant of some of the articles indicates a split between the editorial staff (presumably responsible for the material on the cover and table of contents page, as well as the overall editorial slant of this issue), and some of the better-known feminist intellectuals, such as Ehrenreich, they commissioned to write articles.
- 10 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy*, B. Brewster, trans., (London and New York: New Left Books, 1971), pp. 127–186.
- 11 The "Special Issue" is far broader, carrying articles on women from other countries, including non-western ones, and addressing issues of race and class while discussing the role of women in the work place. In addition to these examinations of women's issues it also includes an essay by Sam Allis entitled, "What do Men Really Want?," with the byline, "Stoic and sensitive have been cast aside, leaving postfeminist males confused, angry and desperately seeking manhood."
- 12 Claudia Wallis, "Onward, Women," *Time* (December 4, 1989), pp. 80–82, 85–86, 89.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 14 I discuss the remasculinizing operations of recent Hollywood films in these terms in my article "She was bad news': Male Paranoia and the Contemporary New Woman," *Camera Obscura* 25–26 (January/May 1991), pp. 297–320.
- 15 Popular press examinations of the "postfeminist male" include *Newsweek's* June 24, 1991 issue "Drums, Sweat and Tears: What Do Men Really Want? Now They Have a Movement of Their Own," with Jerry Adler, Anthony Duignan-Cabrera, and Jeanne Gordon's "Heading the Call of the Drums: All over America, the ancient, primal art of drumming is helping men find a voice of their own," pp. 52–53; *Esquire's* October 1991 Special Issue entitled, "Wild Men and Wimps," and Elizabeth Mehren's, "Now It's the Men's Turn," *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (September 1, 1991), p. 9.
- 16 Janice Castro, "Get Set: Here They Come! The 21st century work force is taking shape now. And guess what? White, U.S.-born men are a minority. . . .," *Time* "Special Issue, Women: The Road Ahead" (Fall 1990), pp. 50–51. At least in the case of the "men's movement," the popular news magazines show appropriate sarcasm when "objectively" reporting this phenomenon (although such

- sarcasm also allows them to have their men's movement and their ironic superiority, too). Postfeminist issues are taken much more seriously and discussed as "news," legitimating the determination of the death of feminism as a "fact."
- 17 Russell Ferguson, "Introduction: Invisible Center," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cornel West, eds. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1990), p. 10.
 - 18 Laura Mulvey, "Dialogue with Spectatorship: Barbara Kruger and Victor Burgin," *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 134.
 - 19 Mira Schor introduces this notion of "aesthetic terrorism" in her article "Figure/Ground," *MEANING* 6 (1989), p. 18.
 - 20 I discuss this hegemonic postmodernism and its attendant modes of exclusionism and cultural domination at length in my book, *Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
 - 21 Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 46 (July–August 1984), p. 65. See also Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman," and "Mapping the Postmodern," *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 61, 220.
 - 22 Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Hal Foster, ed. (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 57–82.
 - 23 *Ibid.*, p. 62.
 - 24 *Ibid.*
 - 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 64.
 - 26 *Ibid.*, p. 59. There are feminist cultural theorists who examine the feminism/postmodernism intersection in ways that are more sensitive to the specificities of feminist theory. See Janet Lee, "Care to Join Me in an Upwardly Mobile Tango? Postmodernism and the 'New Woman'," *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*, Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, eds., (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1989), p. 172; Linda Hutcheon, "Postmodernism and Feminisms," *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 142, 152; Shelagh Young, "Feminism and the Politics of Power: Whose Gaze is it Anyway," *The Female Gaze*, pp. 173–188; Susan Suleiman, "Feminism and Postmodernism: In Lieu of an Ending," *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 181–205; Laura Kipnis, "Feminism: The Political Conscience of Postmodernism?"; the essays collected in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Linda Nicholson, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990); Barbara Creed, "From Here to Modernity: Feminism and Postmodernism," *Screen* 28, no. 2 (Spring 1987), pp. 47–67; Meaghan Morris, *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism* (London and New York: Verso, 1988); and Elizabeth Wright, "Thoroughly postmodern feminist criticism," *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Teresa Brennan, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 141–152.
 - 27 Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others," p. 67.
 - 28 Homi Bhabha has succinctly pinpointed the problematic nature of the privileging of a previously excluded other by contemporary theory. While Bhabha discusses this dynamic in relation to the ethnic and cultural other, his observations apply to the appropriation of the feminist other as well. See "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," *Out There: Marginalization in Contemporary Cultures*, p. 73.
 - 29 Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 3.
 - 30 Dan Cameron, "Post-feminism," *FlashArt*, no. 132 (February/March, 1987), pp. 80–83.
 - 31 *Ibid.*, p. 80.
 - 32 *Ibid.*, p. 80, 82.
 - 33 Richard B. Woodward, "It's Art, But is it Photography?" *New York Times Magazine* (October 9, 1988), p. 31.
 - 34 Donald Kuspit, "Inside Cindy Sherman," *The New Subjectivism: Art in the 1980s* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1988), p. 395.
 - 35 *Ibid.*, p. 396.
 - 36 Hal Foster, "(Post)Modern Polemics," *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985), pp. 121–138.
 - 37 Thus, in Douglas Crimp's influential essay on the "Pictures" group of appropriation artists, including Sherrie Levine, Sherman, Robert Longo, and Jack Goldstein, he celebrates their work as radically post-modern (due to their "predominant sensibility" aimed toward "radical innovation"), while he rejects

- "New Image Painting" as complicitous "with that art which strains to preserve the modernist aesthetic categories which museums themselves have institutionalized." In "Pictures," *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, Brian Wallis, ed. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Boston: David R. Godine, 1984), pp. 175, 187. Benjamin Buchloh's essay in this same anthology, "Figures of Authority, Cyphers of Regression," constructs a similar argument, linking contemporary European painting to the "inherent authoritarian tendency" of 1920s' artistic ideologies mythologizing a "new classicism," p. 111.
- 38 This is Griselda Pollock's description in her essay tracing the historical development of "Brechtian" strategies and their use for feminist art, "Screening the seventies: sexuality and representation in feminist practice – a Brechtian perspective," *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 163. [Chapter 13 in this volume.]
- 39 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Art after Modernism*, p. 363. [Chapter 9 in this volume.]
- 40 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Richard Nice, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 489, 490, 491.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 489.
- 42 See Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York and London: Methuen, 1984); Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman," *After the Great Divide*, pp. 44–62; and Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vols. 1 and 2, Erica Carter, Chris Turner, Stephen Conway, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997 and 1989). See also Bourdieu's discussion of the intersection of class and gender in *Distinction*, p. 107.
- 43 Luce Irigaray, "Cosi Fan Tutti," *The Sex Which is Not One* (1977), Catherine Porter, trans. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 90. See also Johanna Drucker's "Visual Pleasure: A Feminist Perspective," *MEANING* 11 (May 1992), pp. 3–11.
- 44 Emily Apter, "Fetishism and Visual Seduction in Mary Kelly's *Interim*," *October* 58 (Fall 1991), p. 97.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- 46 Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 36, 58.
- 47 Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 17, James Strachey, trans. (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), p. 244.

Chapter 37

LYNN SPIGEL

THE SUBURBAN HOME COMPANION

Television and the neighborhood ideal in postwar America

IN DECEMBER 1949, THE POPULAR RADIO comedy *Easy Aces* made its television debut on the DuMont network. The episode was comprised entirely of Goodman Ace and his wife Jane sitting in their living room, watching TV. The interest stemmed solely from the couple's witty commentary on the program they watched. Aside from that, there was no plot. This was television, pure and simple. It was just the sense of being with the