34 H. Nitsch, unpublished lecture, University of Vienna, 1987.
35 The pathologization of Actionism represses the highly professional structure of their work. See, for example, Günter Berghaus: 'The masochistic element employed in these performances became increasingly dangerous. [. . .] Brus came so close to self-destruction that he was forced to abandon all further performance work.' G. Berghaus, 'Happenings in Europe', in M. Sandford (ed.), *Happenings and Other Acts*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 366.
36 Gorsen, *Der Wiener Aktionismus* (see note 2), p. 147.
37 Ibid., pp. 148-9. Gorsen's distrust for 'academic play' echoes, I would argue, the *fin de siècle* distrust of 'French wit'.
38 Originally the artists had planned to occupy the Viennese Burgtheater and thus to follow the model of the students of Paris who, in May 1968, had not only occupied the Sorbonne, but also the theatre. But the socialist student activists refused to support the artists' plan.
39 Gorsen, *Der Wiener Aktionismus* (see note 2), p. 150.
40 Ibid., p. 149.
41 W. Hofmann, 'Die Wiener Aktionisten', (see note 5, p. 642). Hofmann's blindness concerning *Art and Revolution* is a perfect example of the ambivalent ideological legacy of affirmative culture. In his book *Gustav Klimt und die Wiener Jahrhundertwende*, Salzburg, Verlag Galerie Welz 1970, he mentions Klimt's *Fakultätsbilder* and concludes: 'Only the work of art [. . .] is capable of enabling the blind to see' (p. 22). Hofmann, founding director of the Viennese Museum des 20 Jahrhunderts and instrumental in (re)connecting the Viennese art world to the international mainstream, organised, in September 1968, an exhibition of press photography covering the Paris student revolution of May 1968. The institutional protection of the realm of high art could not be made clearer.
42 Twenty years earlier, I should add, than Fredric Jameson's idea of the dissolution of an 'autonomous sphere of culture' as the price for the 'explosion' of the cultural sphere. See F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1991, p. 48.
43 G. Brus, 'Notes on the Action: Zerreissprobe' (1971), in *Aktionsraum I oder 57 Blindenhunde*, Munich, Aktionsraum, 1971; reprinted in an extended version in *Die Schastrommel*, 8c, 1972, p. 161; reprinted in Stiles and Selz (eds), *Theories and Documents on Contemporary Art* (see note 33) p. 754.
44 J. Derrida, 'Signature événement contexte', in *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1972, pp. 365–93.

10

CONTESTS FOR MEANING IN BODY POLITICS AND FEMINIST CONCEPTUAL ART

Revisioning the 1970s through the work of Eleanor Antin

Lisa Bloom

Why, after so many years of relative neglect, write on questions of gender, assimilation, geographies, nationalisms, and jewish identities[1] in the 1970s California art world? What provides the privileged ground of the 'return' of an interest in 1970s feminist performance art practices along such lines now in the 1990s? To what extent does the legacy of that moment in feminist activity continue to inflect artistic practice and historical writing?[2]

In order to trace the intersection of questions of identities with 1970s artistic practice, it may be helpful to consider a major publication edited by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard in 1994 titled *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact.*[3] The anthology presents a wide array of works from this period including the work of Adrian Piper, Faith Ringgold, Ana Mendieta, and other women of color who were active at the time. The anthology is also the first in recent years to begin to bring back to scholarly attention the work of many jewish artists from the period – such as Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Carolee Schneemann, Joyce Kozloff, and others who have otherwise been neglected. Strong and refreshing a revisionist history as this collection represents, I will argue that it is nonetheless structured by the terms of exclusion that still presuppose a feminist sisterhood that cannot account for racial and white ethnic differences. I will point out how the relative invisibility of ethnicity as a category in the book, and of jewishness in particular, over and against the visibility of African-Americans and Latina artists (identified as 'women of color'), is quite striking and points to the limits of this kind of revisionist project. While the book attempts new inclusions, it thus also reinstates longstanding values (visibilities and invisibilities) dating from the very period it chooses to study.

The difficulties current feminist art historians have confronted in dealing with racial, ethnic, and generational differences from the 1970s has led me to revisit the work of Eleanor Antin, who stands out as one of the few artists who has actually foregrounded in her work these intractable differences. Providing a critical account of the different kinds of ethnically marked practices in Antin's work is part of a larger book project that I am currently working on. Entitled *Ghosts of Ethnicity: Rethinking the Relation between*

Ethnicity, Nationalism and Feminist Art Practices in the U.S., the book looks at a range of US feminist artists to consider the contested history and meanings of artistic practices from the 1970s in a different light from the way that the authors of *The Power of Feminist Art* themselves conceived of the project.[4] In this book I aim to give a more complex portrait of 1970s white ethnic feminist artistic practices in the United States.[5] This is an important topic since many well-known feminist artists, poets, and critics who were prominent during that period in California, such as Eleanor Antin, Kathy Acker, Martha Rosler, Judy Chicago, Joyce Kozloff, Lynn Hershman, Miriam Schapiro, among others, emerged out of households in communities in New York and Chicago which were heavily marked in ethnic, racial, religious, and class terms before they made the move to California (some permanently, others temporarily) in the 1960s.

Since spectators are also ethnically, racially, and generationally constituted, such a study is significant also in that it attests to the difference and diversity among feminists along these axes of identification. A younger feminist community shaped by feminist visual cultural studies, post-colonial discourse, queer theory, postmodernism, and the burgeoning field of jewish cultural studies within the academy might be especially alert to certain ethnic references in Antin's work, especially given the recent studies by theorists such as Sander Gilman, Richard Dyer, and Ann Pellegrini, among others – studies that examine how ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and race have signified different relations between the body and society at various historical moments. [6]

Another generational change in the last twenty-five years has been a redefinition of priorities around identities and a reconceptualization of feminism informed by the shift in consciousness prompted in part by recent poststructuralist philosophies and theories of representation as well as the shift in feminist art practices prompted by the concerns of lesbian women, women of color, and white women.[7] How I situate myself as a feminist has been in part shaped by such debates. Though I am of a younger generation than the women artist I write about here, my own jewish family's trajectory – immigration to the United States from eastern Europe and Russia, and then from New York to California, and finally (in my case) from California to Japan – shapes the contingencies of how I perceive myself in relation to American culture. In rethinking Antin's work along such lines I am interested in setting up a different historical trajectory of feminist work from the 1970s – one that allows space for other divergent and competing histories of jewish immigration which both inflected and were shaped by the models and life-styles that influenced the norms of a dominant southern Californian feminism of the period.

Though the concerns and passions that shape Norma Broude and Mary Garrard's history are different from my own, their project alerted me to some of the specific directions and priorities of their generation. In the introduction to the anthology, they provocatively write:

> How then do we situate the Feminist Art Movement on the broader stage, conceptually and historically? Is it merely another phase of avant-garde? Or is it not, rather, to borrow a phrase that has been used to describe the cultural climate of the 1960s, 'one of those deep-seated shifts of sensibilities that alter the whole terrain?' The feminist critic Lucy R. Lippard argued persuasively in 1980 that feminist art was 'neither a style nor a movement,' but instead 'a value system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life,' like Dada and Surrealism and other nonstyles that have 'continued to pervade all movements and styles ever since.' What was

> revolutionary in feminist art, Lippard explained, was not its form but its content. Feminist artists' insistence on prioritizing experience and meaning over form and style was itself a challenge to the modernist valorization of 'progress' and style development. [8]

Because women of my generation no longer face the same kinds of highly structured resistances from patriarchal institutions, it is easy to forget the force that feminism had at that moment when women were engaged in activist movements and aimed to alter dramatically their personal lives as well as their art practices and teaching. The feminist commitment to revolutionary socialist ideals was an important part of the idealism of the 1970s.

If we are to have a greater understanding of generational differences within feminism now, some of these older histories and antagonisms in the past need to be re-encountered, revisited, and rethought. Given the paramount importance in the last twenty-five years of work theorizing differences, it seems that one of the key strategies in revisiting this period would be to examine how race and ethnicity have operated within the US feminist art movement. Responding to such a concern, Moira Roth and Yolanda M. López, in *The Power of Feminist Art*, write:

> There is a dramatic inequality of information on women of color as opposed to Euro-American women. The feminist art movement .... suggests an identity prioritized by gender not race. For women artists of color – despite their concern with women's issues – ethnicity more than gender has shaped their primary identities, loyalties, and often the content of their art. Also from the start the women's art movement has been dominated by Euro-American leadership. [9]

López and Roth's critique is a significant intervention in the book, since their essay, 'Social Protest: Racism and Sexism,' provides a way to describe the larger cultural issues that have conditioned the development of North American feminist art up to our current historical moment. Their emphasis on the need for a complex understanding of the way in which the categories of gender and ethnicity are interarticulated is important, but I would extend their categories to include not only women of color but white ethnic women who might have also had an uneasy allegiance to a feminism that would erase a consideration of other differences beyond gender. Thus, there still remains a great need for an examination of how different jewish women's identities are tied to other social identities and mediated through institutional discourses of art history and modernism. Furthermore, it would be a mistake to believe that ethnicities could be understood in isolation, without considering the ways in which they are part of a complex matrix of differences among women.

Eleanor Antin's work is particularly suggestive for such purposes since it highlights the inadequacy of a unitary history of US feminism in which gender is the sole emphasis. For example, her photo-piece *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) was seen at the time and continues to be interpreted as the work of a white woman making an ironic comment on how the ideal of the generic nude is gendered in the history of art (Plate 10.1). Emphasizing its feminist importance, a 1975 essay by art critic Cindy Nemser claims that *Carving* is about 'how women are always concerned with the need to improve their bodies.'[10] Here Nemser is referencing all women and focusing on how female desire in general is courted with the promise of future perfection through the lure of the feminine

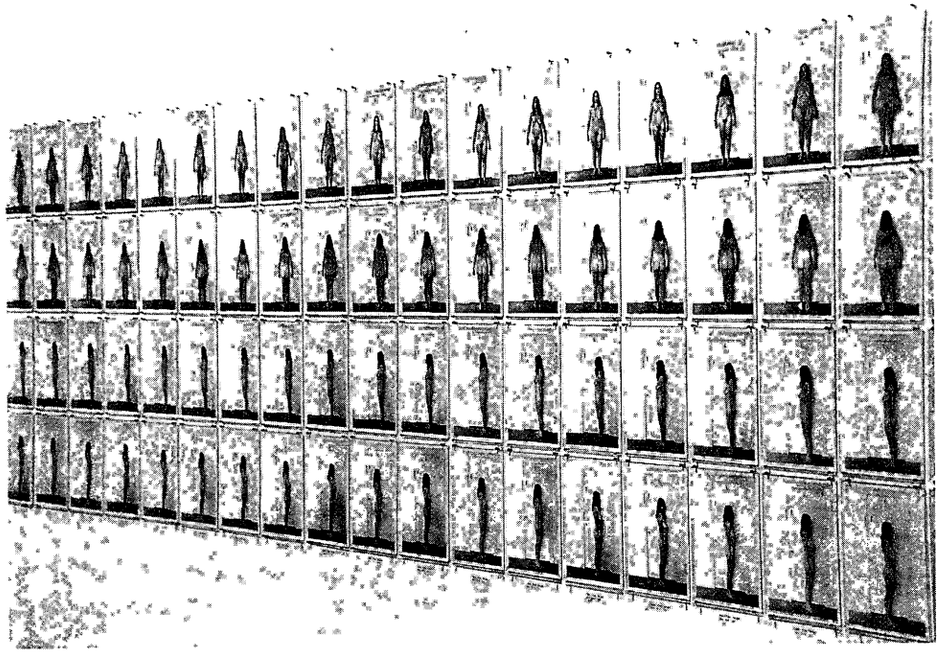

Plate 10.1 Eleanor Antin, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, 1972. One hundred and forty-four photographs depicting weight loss over 36 days. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

ideal – whether it be that of the Greek nude or that of a thin female body, achieved through dieting. According to Nemser, Antin shows that the ideals on offer don't actually exist for women, not even as the end product of photographic techniques. Similarly, Joanna Frueh writes on *Carving* in the *Power of Feminist Art* that, 'just as the Classical Greek nude occludes women's bodies in this kind of aesthetically rigid form, so the socially correct beautiful body disciplines and punishes women, through frustration, guilt, anxiety, and competitiveness with other women.'[11]

However, despite the considerable critical attention given to *Carving*, much of what makes it a specific work that doesn't conform to such a generic feminist reading is the ethnic subtext to the project – the fact that her photographic self-portrait depicts an attractive, but short/jewish woman; readings of *Carving* have largely ignored this subtext. It is significant that Antin's body is not the generic body of any woman. Antin's use of her own body as the subject thus reveals that she starts from the notion of what it means to be both an embodied female and ethnic subject. In this regard Antin's attempt to exert formal control over her own body in order to achieve the aesthetic ideal required has also a great deal to do with societal constructions built upon body differences, a legacy not only of art history but also the physiognomically based racial theories of the last century. It is significant in this respect that *Carving* references police or medical photographic and cinematic practices of the early twentieth century in which discourses of physiognomy, photographic science, and aesthetics coincided and overlapped.

This connection between her work and earlier medical and scientific photographic and cinematic discourse is established through Antin's use of a sequence of photo-

graphs that appear almost as film stills: the stills present her isolated body, which changes slightly from frame to frame, standing in four different poses against a stark white background. It is in this sense that we can view Antin as playing off of these early traditions in order to mark herself as jewish. The cultural critic Sander Gilman writes on the difference of the jewish body in relation to medical theories of the nineteenth century, and explains how these theories included a theory of adaptability: 'one form of that difference was their [jews'] uncanny ability to look like everyone else (that is, to look like the idealization of those who wanted to see themselves as different from the Jew).'[12] In this sense Antin's project can also be seen in terms of her willful 'failure' to adapt to the 'ideal' feminist subject and thus to assimilate as an unmarked subject. In this regard, Antin doesn't offer an easy solution to the dilemma of being both jewish and female. Rather, she points to the limits of fitting in, by presenting a series of anti-aesthetic photographic self-portraits that refuse to offer a neutral and non-disturbing aesthetic experience.

Though less well-known than *Carving*, Antin's 1971 *Domestic Peace: An Exhibition of Drawings* (Plate 10.2) operates in a similar way, offering no easy closure to the problem of marked identities. Moreover, unlike other renowned works from the period, such as Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1979), which frames women within the normative spaces of dominant cultural aesthetic practices and its religious Christian iconography, *Domestic Peace* allows Antin to explore the equally taboo subject of conflict in mother-daughter relations within the context of her own jewish family. Given its unusual focus and the fact that art historical discourses tend to privilege references to the history of art and high culture over the popular and the everyday, it is not surprising that the project has received little attention by both the art world and the feminist community in comparison to the other works discussed so far. According to Cindy Nemser, 'the art world did not like it because it disrupted the whole romantic myth of the artist as someone who doesn't have the same everyday family connections as everyone else.'[13]

If avant-garde artists felt uneasy with it at the time because it dealt with the taboo topic of what was seen as bourgeois jewish familial relations, feminists also kept their distance because the piece was at odds at that time with accepted white feminist notions of the mother–daughter bond as a non-contested category. In relation to this conceptual work, Antin's description of her mother is significant in that it highlights the fact that generational differences between jewish women are not so conflict-free and, indeed, that the kind of independence that feminism offers women artists can become a divisive force separating certain mothers and daughters:

> I live in California and from Nov. 29–Dec. 15, 1971 – a period of 17 days – I planned to visit NYC with my husband and small child. It would serve our economic and domestic convenience but was also an opportunity for me to discharge familial obligations. However, though my mother insists upon her claim to the familial she is not at all interested in my actual life but rather in what she considers an appropriate life. No matter what kind of life a person leads he can always, by careful selection, produce an image corresponding to anyone else's view of appropriateness. By madly ransacking my life for all the details that suited my mother's theory of appropriateness and by carefully suppressing almost all the others, I was able to offer her an image of myself that produced in her 'a feeling of closeness.' It should be kept in mind that this 'closeness' was a 'closeness' to her

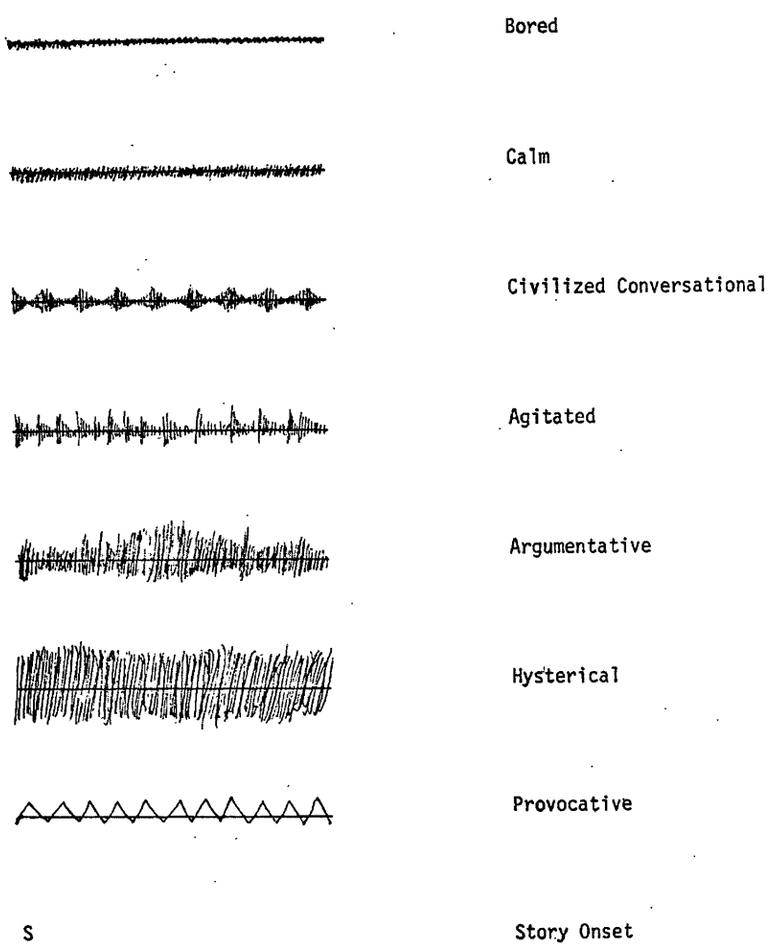

Plate 10.2 Eleanor Antin, *Domestic Peace: An Exhibition of Drawings*, 1971. Collection of the artist

theory rather than to her life but appeal to her didacticism was the only way to give her sufficient satisfaction to ensure the domestic peace necessary to free me for my own affairs. I planned a daily set of conversational openers consisting of carefully chosen stories. Several of these stories contained a slightly abrasive element which might be expected to mitigate peace. I considered these to be alternates for use only on 'good' days. For those hectic times when I would be forced to remain in the apartment for fairly long periods, I kept a set of reserves I could throw in to hold the line. Hopefully, these stories would act as gambits leading to natural and friendly conversation. [14]

Antin's desired 'domestic peace' could never be on her own terms nor could it ever conform to nostalgic feminist notions of harmony between mothers and daughters. Neither does it follow the more conservative, mythic script of the gifted (male) artist who does not need 'domestic peace' since he is seen as separate from economic, social, familial, sexual, and social relations. Antin casts mother–daughter relationships as the private sites of warfare, in which female conflict is expected as the norm. Thus, in order to achieve 'peace' during the periods in which she was forced to remain in the house for long periods of time, Antin would stage a set of conversations that would best coincide with 'what her mother considered revealing of an appropriate middle-class life,' such as a sixty-minute discussion of the artist's purchase of a green velvet love-seat.

These conversations specifying a white jewish ethnicity situated in middle-class affluence were short and peaceful by comparison to others that posited the possibility of enjoying a different form of consumption deviating from her mother's notion of middle-class success. The latter type of conversation is exemplified by a seven-hour agitated interaction between mother and daughter; they were most likely engaged in this interaction while doing other things around the house. The story included in the piece is a half-hour of calm from that longer conversation in which Antin discourages her mother from shopping at Good Will stores in California because the 'stuff is low-class.' In trying to gain her mother's acceptance, she says 'even if they had bargains you wouldn't want them.' Those conversations that explored ideological conflicts in the workplace between middle-class eastern European jews and African-Americans (her mother was working as a clerk in a state office at the time) and delved into class and even racial tensions within the jewish community created the strongest disagreements and conflicts between mother and daughter, as evidenced by the way that Antin satirizes her mother's hypocritical racial politics in one of the charts in the piece (Plate 10.3).

What is so suggestive about *Domestic Peace* is the way it reveals how harmony and calm between mother and daughter come only at the price of the artist's own silence. Yet, the parodic form of the project – the exaggerated way it meticulously records in a pseudo-scientific manner the reactions to various conversations – enables Antin to lighten the oppressiveness of these relations, since the satirical mode of discourse renders explicit the points of tension. In this respect, *Domestic Peace* has a lot in common with her *4 Transactions* (1972–5) *Encounter and Withdrawal* pieces, which also deal with the problematic bonds between women but in a setting that ordinarily would not allow much space for the examination of their differences – a feminist group of working women artists in San Diego in 1972 and 1975. The performances consisted of four declarations that were officially signed and stamped in advance of the meeting by a notary. *Encounter # 1* (Plate 10.4) provides an example:

> At the February 20th meeting, I shall take on the job of ombudsman. This will necessitate my pointing out to each member of the group, and in any manner I choose, a particular failing she displays in relation to the others. These may be of an ephemeral sort such as personal bugginess taken out on someone else or of a more serious nature like, say, a rip-off of the entire group. I must always keep in mind that my statements are intended to bring about more satisfactory behavior from the others and are never used for egotistical purposes of my own. I must complete these 8 tasks before the group normally disperses, otherwise I must keep the session going by whatever means I can until I do complete them.[15]

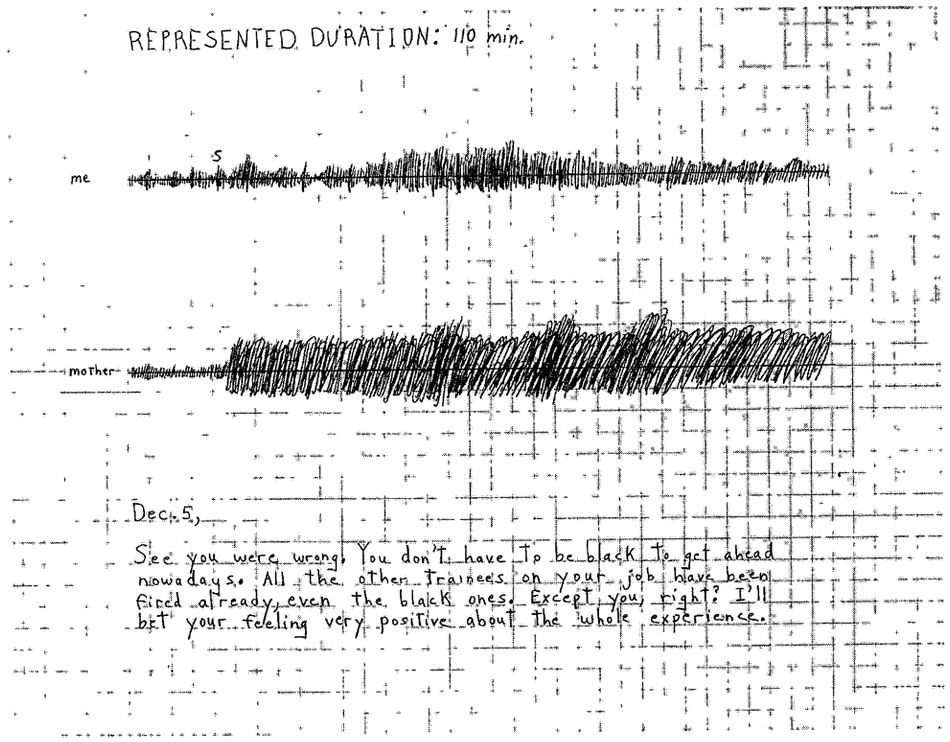

Plate 10.3 Eleanor Antin, *Domestic Peace: An Exhibition of Drawings*, 1971. Collection of the artist

What makes this piece unusual is the way in which Antin perversely performs the problem that she claims to identify and to remedy. At first glance the use of the official rhetoric of the notary document itself, with its seal and signature, seems to suggest what might appear to be female authoritarian behavior since it references a legal discourse that opens the women in the group to unexpected scrutiny and observation. However, on closer inspection, Antin's use of such a device is performative in that it dislodges the women from the pretense of a safe Utopian environment and puts them back within a context that recreates the more complex pressures the art world and academia present for feminists such as Antin (a university professor at the time): hierarchy, competition, and distrust on the one hand, coalition, mentorship, and respect on the other. Moving beyond simple Utopian feminist art projects of the period, Antin's piece stages the complex relations of betrayal, knowledge, and power among women and reminds the viewer of the more unsightly side of feminism. The fact that the pieces were produced in secret and have never been publicly exhibited is important since it suggests that, even within a progressive social movement such as feminism, many issues were left at the time unexamined. Despite the rhetoric of openness that seemingly prevailed, problems and imbalances within the group were not addressed and thus the artist was not willing to risk being misunderstood or perceived as disloyal to the feminists in the group.

Antin's work called *Portraits of 8 New York Women* (1970), which consists of biographies of some well-known New York women involved in the arts at the time

ENCOUNTER #1

At the February 20th meeting, I shall take on the job of ombudsman. This will necessitate my pointing out to each member of the group, and in any manner I choose, a particular failing she displays in relation to the others. These may be of an ephemeral sort such as personal bugginess taken out on someone else or of a more serious nature like, say, a rip-off of the entire group. I must always keep in mind that my statements are intended to bring about more satisfactory behaviour from the others and are never to be used for egoistic purposes of my own. I must complete these 8 tasks before the group normally disperses otherwise I must keep the session going by whatever means I can until I do complete them.

Eleanor Antin

STATE OF CALIFORNIA, COUNTY OF San Diego } ss.

On this 19th day of February in the year one thousand nine hundred 72, before me, Frances R. Cornwell a Notary Public in and for the said County of San Diego, personally appeared Eleanor Antin

personally known to me to be the person whose name is subscribed to the within instrument, and s/he acknowledged to me that s/he executed the same.

In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and affixed my Official Seal, at my office in the said County of San Diego, the day and year in this certificate first above written. Frances R Cornwell

Notary Public in and for the County of San Diego, State of California.

OFFICIAL SEAL
FRANCES R. CORNWELL
NOTARY PUBLIC — CALIFORNIA
PRINCIPAL OFFICE IN
SAN DIEGO COUNTY
My Commission Expires Dec. 29, 1972

REALTY OFFICE SUPPLIES, SANTA CRUZ—FORM NO. 4

Plate 10.4 Eleanor Antin, *Encounter # 1*, from the series *4 Transactions*, 1972–5. Collection of the artist

(including Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, and Amy Goldin), also confronts one of the seemingly insoluble dilemmas presented by women's relations with other women: that is, how the ethical problems of using other women as the subject of portraiture itself can become a source of tension.[16] These portraits bring Antin directly up against the way in which women are confronted by dual, if not multiple, allegiances. On one hand, for women to take feminism seriously, they must be committed to a transformative politics of

representation. On the other hand, given the male-dominated New York art world, and the fact that Antin was teaching at the University of California, San Diego at the time, it is clear that Antin was obligated to please her mostly male reviewers and exhibition curators, even if her art projects to a certain extent entailed the transformation of those very institutions and galleries on which she depended for her success.

Writing on *Portraits of 8 New York Women* in *Art News* in 1971, Antin gives us some insight into her process. Antin does not insist on a sisterhood grounded in a common oppression; rather, her interest lies in the different and complex activities and functions generated out of women's lives:

> I am determined to present women without pathos or helplessness. Since a life style is the ability to recognize in the morning the same person who went to bed at night, it can be said to be a person's most important decision. My women had all chosen life styles independent of men's. It is true that some life styles proved more successful in practice than others, but they were all interesting and complex enough to be worth the try. [17]

Citing Linda Nochlin's path-breaking essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' (1971), written in the same year Antin wrote her own piece 'Women without Pathos' from which I just cited, Antin writes 'I agree with Linda Nochlin that the question "Why have there been no great women artists?" is a useless one and that there are very real questions to be considered about the relation of women to the arts.'[18] Though these questions include for Antin the ones that concerned most female artists of the period, such as how to present women differently so as to challenge their construction in canonical histories of art, what made her work especially unusual for the period was its ethnic inflection and insistence on presenting women 'without pathos or helplessness.' In her exhibit *8 New York Women* Antin wants to tell a different tale of women from that period, one that directly deals with the influence the US media had on issues of assimilation, glamour, Americanness, and ideals of female beauty. For this exhibit, she writes,

> I deliberately chose expensive, shiny, glamorous objects. I chose bright colors, reds, and pinks. And as much chrome as possible. I didn't want the viewer to come too close. We women have had enough love. Frank O'Hara said once that he loved Marilyn Monroe. Protect us from such love![19]

Antin's comment about Marilyn Monroe is significant because it also evokes the ethnic subtext of her project, and the ambiguous boundaries between Marilyn, the American sex symbol of the early 1960s, and the more marginal mostly jewish white women artists, gallery workers, and critics she mostly represents in the piece (Carolee Schneemann, Lynn Traiger, Hannah Weiner, Amy Goldin, and Yvonne Rainer). Building up images of these women from appropriately chosen 'brand new American manufactured goods,'[20] Antin also referenced the influence that the US mass media had had in its attempt to secure white, American middle-class values and traditional familial norms through its marketing of model homes and new consumer goods in the formative years of the post-Second World War era.

What is significant in Antin's piece is how she ironicizes the process through which a generic home and its shiny objects become accepted sites of national and familial identity as

well as of female beauty and proper behavior, a process through which dining rooms and bathroom materials alone are the stuff of dreams of assimilation, national belonging, and female desirability. Since most of the women in this project were single, urban white ethnic women pursuing independent careers in the arts at the time and living in mostly New York apartments with little room and often very few modern conveniences, it is particularly striking how Antin uses these consumer objects to signify the complex lives of women who pursued their own careers rather than supporting the careers of men. Though the kinds of consumer objects with which Antin identified these women might be similar to the ones most typically associated with more traditional women, Antin's interest is in showing how the women in her biographical portraits use these otherwise mute objects in unexpected ways. For example, though Antin chooses for her portrait of Yvonne Rainer a new chrome exercise bicycle that might otherwise exist in a traditional family suburban basement or garage, such a stationary object – especially one with a superfluous basket and horn – takes on a completely different meaning in its connection to Rainer, who was at the time a dancer with the Judson Dance Theater and was known for her early experiments with repetition as a means to breakdown the traditional vocabulary of classical modern dance.

Antin's portraits are unusual for the period also in that she renders the likenesses among women but does not necessarily propose their experiences or modes of living as identical, in kind or degree. Moreover, her portraits tend not to focus either on women's oppression or on women's heroic and exemplary qualities. Rather, they are more everyday. What distinguishes them are their differences: Antin does not generalize from one example to another. In several of the more disturbing portraits (of Hannah Weiner and Lynne Traiger) Antin presents women who are less armored against the difficulties connected with trying to create interesting independent lives for themselves. In one piece, Weiner, a publicist at the time for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is represented by a perfect little breakfast nook with striped upholstered chairs, a tea pot, and an elegant wrought-iron gate of flowers outside the window. Antin emphasizes Weiner's vulnerability and repressed anger by placing a large stylish hammer on the empty breakfast table, introducing a disturbing flaw in the otherwise perfectly appointed and spare interior.[21] By contrast, Antin's portrait of Naomi Dash, a gallery worker at Gain Ground, New York City's first alternative gallery space, is somewhat lighter than the Weiner portrait, in that it represents a less repressive and fraught subject but again a less than ideal interior – the objects selected by Antin suggest that Dash might have lived alone with her cat in a cold water New York flat (Plate 10.5).

In certain ways Antin's work reveals her interest in addressing the discourse of modernism, if only to critique and occasionally reference it as she does in the 1970s construction of an invented autobiography of the black ballerina Eleanora Antinova from Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Moreover, there is a tendency in Antin's work to mime and parody whiteness, as in the perfectly immaculate, bright but empty spaces of her portrait of Hannah Weiner in *Portraits of 8 New York Women* and, in this respect, her work complexifies the relations between the universalizing discourses of feminism and modernism within which she is in part situated.

Besides the content of Antin's conceptual pieces discussed so far, the spareness and coolness of her work is also extremely suggestive in the way that it formally suggests a distance from the typically cluttered interiors and traditional melodramatic theatrical gestures of an immigrant eastern European jewish culture and the presumed highly emotional content of jewish ethnic relationships. Conflict, anger, and disagreement between

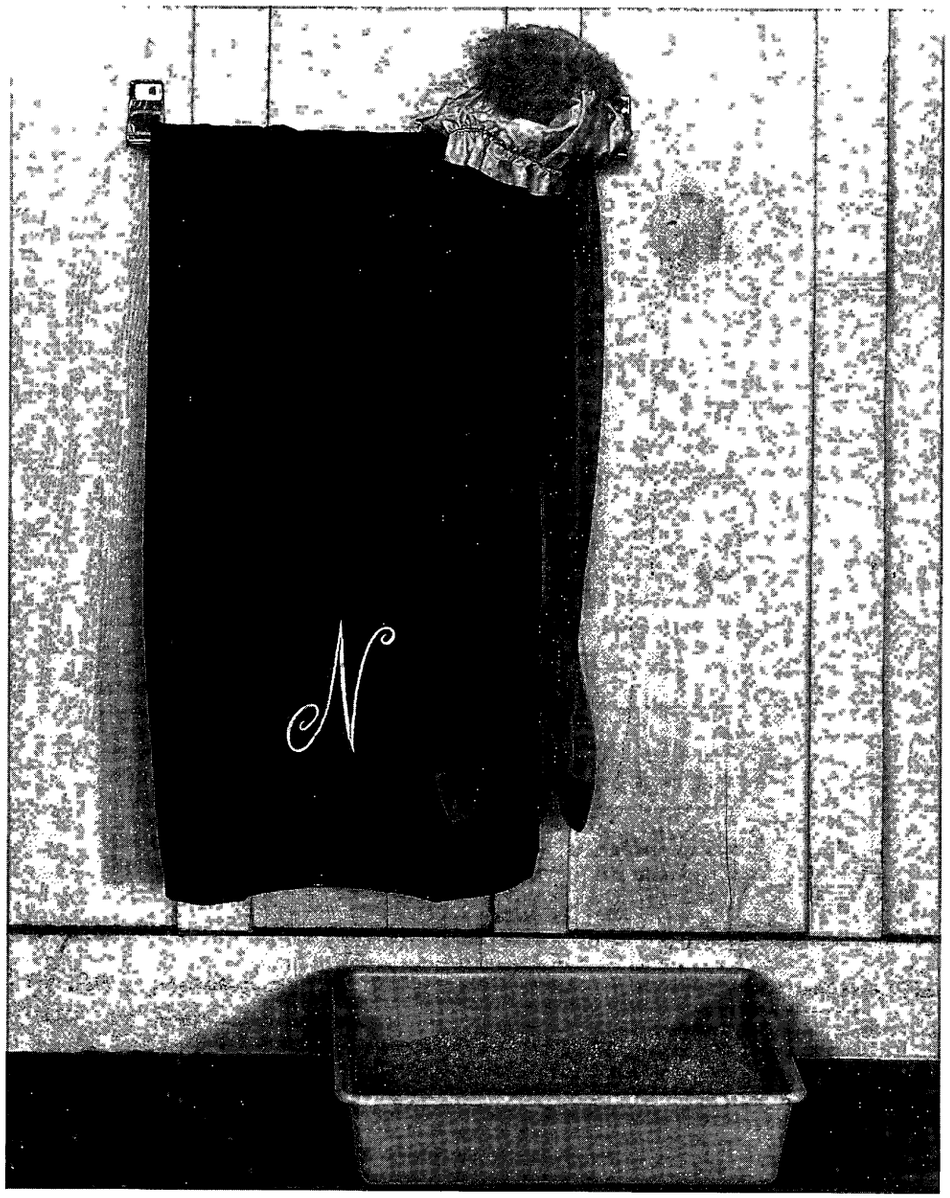

Plate 10.5 Eleanor Antin, *Naomi Dash*, from *Portraits of 8 New York Women*, 1971. Hotel Chelsea, New York. Collection of the artist

and among women get mapped literally by codes, graphs, a notarized document, or by the perfectly cool interiors and objects in *8 New York Women*. Official documents and stereotypical domestic interiors stand in for the pressure to assimilate and adopt the relatively more controlled body-language of Anglo-American northern European culture,

which has stigmatized expressive gestures and clutter as signs of backward and uncultivated societies. What is also striking about all of Antin's projects is how each satirizes bourgeois codes of American etiquette, of privacy, politeness, and good manners in a way that reduces these codes to their hypocritical core. Even the US women's movement does not escape Antin's critical scrutiny in this regard.

The intersections of race, ethnicity and culture not surprisingly do not yet appear in the projects of Antin's discussed so far, since even in *Encounter # 1* Antin speaks about differences between women in a feminist space occupied exclusively by white ethnic, Euro-American, middle-class women. It is only in her invented autobiographies, each of which experientially recreates a character and a history, that she deals directly with other kinds of difference – though she mostly references other models of difference in Europe and Russia instead of in the United States. In many of Antin's performances she deliberately situates herself in the margins and plays British or European roles – The Seventeenth-Century French King, Eleanor Nightingale, or in the case of the piece that I will discuss, a black Russian prima ballerina from the Ballets Russes, Eleanora Antinova. Before dealing with the specifics of Antin's blackface, however, it worth citing Richard Dyer's description of the ballerina as the epitome of whiteness in his book *White*:

> The white woman as angel was . . . both the symbol of white virtuousness and the last word in the claim that [what] made whites special as a race was their non-physical, spiritual, indeed ethereal qualities. It held up an image of [what] white women should be, could be [,] essentially were, an image that had attractions and drawbacks for actual white people...
>
> The ambiguity of the image is caught in the figure of the ballerina in the Romantic ballet (and the related genres of féerie, pantomime, and burlesque), where the soft, flaring gaslight caught and was diffused up by the fluffed up, multiple layers of the tutu, introduced in the mid-nineteenth century. Together with scenarios about sprites and the use of pointe work (ballerinas seeming to dance on the tips of their toes and thus to be weightless), the Romantic ballet constructed a translucent, incorporeal image. [22]

What is striking is how Dyer connects nineteenth-century representations of the ballerina to notions of femininity, virtuousness, whiteness, and disembodiment. Antin seems to be working out of similar assumptions, making connections between representations of ballet as a 'white machine' but then attempting to translate herself across racial boundaries by constructing herself as 'black' in order not to conform to an image of what an unmarked white woman performer should be:

> I have a curved spine, my breasts are too large, my legs too short, my feet are weak, they bleed after *pointe* work, my skin is too dark to be a ballerina. Ballet is, after all, a white machine. There's very little room for life in it. I was a black face in a snow bank.'[23]

By presenting herself as 'black' – rather than simply as white and jewish – Antin seems to suggest that jews like herself who have assimilated to the point that they are now indistinguishable in appearance from dominant white Americans could not be imagined as having parents or grandparents who were seen in terms of arbitrary racialist distinctions.

Thus Antin dresses up in 'blackface' to treat stereotypes of, and discrimination against, jews as ideologically akin to such treatment of blacks.

Though Antin's black ballerina, Antinova, is from Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, she descends from both the world of modernist dance as well as a whole tradition of US vaudeville and theatre in which jewish women as well as black women were seen as exotic and erotic spectacles. Antin both references and disrupts such spectacles in her work. Thus, Antin's affinity with Antinova goes beyond an interest in producing her merely as spectacle; Antinova's memoirs, penned by Antin, present a complex commentary on the marginalization of both jewish women and black women in exoticized modernist dance and performance productions, such as those Diaghilev's Russian ballet company helped shape and create. In this respect the piece shares affinities with her earlier piece *Encounter # 1* in its perverse performance of the racial and ethnic stereotypes she claims to identify and to remedy. For example, each dance Antin creates for Antinova is a parody of the kinds of dance an African-American or European jewish ballerina might have been forced to perform by a European dance company: Antinova as a slave girl in a ballet where she doesn't move her feet; or as Pocahontas; or as choreographer of *The Hebrews* (Plate 10.6). These dances thus comment on the exoticization of jews and blacks within European modernist ballet. Yet Antin's critique also challenges whiteness itself and its class system as defining a set of normative high cultural practices against which all are measured and into which all are expected to fit. For example, her parodic performance as Marie Antoinette, the shepherdess (the queen dressed as working-class Other), ironicizes an older form of appropriating otherness and thus disrupts any notion of a transcendent position of whiteness that can be easily occupied.

If the power of the works by Antin that I have shown seems somewhat contingent on their ethnic, racial, and gendered subtext, it is important to note that Antin is currently constructing herself more self-consciously as white and jewish in her recent work, such as her wonderful 1991 film *The Man without a World*, a simulation of a silent era Yiddish film.[24] However, in this more recent project there is a certain consistency with some of her earlier works; Antin returns to the rich cultural *schtetl* life in Poland in a satirical way and this strategy is linked to that of presenting the heterogeneity of identities among women in her earlier projects on women. Here, she emphasizes the heterogeneity of identities among jews to reveal that the shift that has taken place in the United States towards jewish assimilation has been anything but uniformly even.

It is significant that the situation now, which has shifted towards questions of immigration, is quite different from that earlier situation referenced in Antin's work. Indeed, Antin's work provides a rare example of a white woman dealing with questions of feminism, assimilation, and jewishness during the 1970s. Through her use of performativity as a critical strategy, one of the recurring pleasures of her work is the way in which she turns what otherwise might be considered demeaning roles and complicated relationships into resistant performances. At the same time, her notion of the performative also highlights the open-endedness of questions connected to identities, since it acknowledges her ambivalence at positioning herself or others in terms of fixed, stable identities that can be fully knowable or controlled.

In historicizing the position and perspective of Antin's work in terms of gender and ethnicity, I have attempted here to come to a better understanding of the work as well as the struggles of an older jewish feminist artist who is part of a generation that created the fields and markets that have allowed my generation of feminists to flourish. To my mind,

Plate 10.6 Eleanor Antinova, *The Hebrews*, from *Recollections of My Life with Diaghilev*, 1970s. Courtesy of the Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

women working and writing on the arts today should continue to re-examine and rethink our relationship to previous generations of feminists and to challenge the increasingly entrenched perception of generational differences. Generational affinities as well as conflicts need to be further theorized now; such a dialogue is crucial for our collective feminist futures.

NOTES

1 The term 'jewish' is in lower case to emphasize the changing set of historically diverse experiences rather than a unified and monolithic notion of jewishness. Even though this paper focuses exclusively on a jewish-American woman of eastern European descent, it is important to emphasize the diversity of the jewish diasporic community, especially the marked differences between the German and eastern European jews (many of whom did not speak English in the mid 1940s), or, say, the complicated status of a jewish Iraqi in the United States today.

2 For an example of how one recent excellent anthology on the topic of 1970s art practice (in particular the work of Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*) sets up a trajectory for contemporary feminist art practice in Los Angeles now rooted in feminist debates around the representation of the female body and pleasure, see Amelia Jones (ed.), *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's* Dinner Party *in Feminist Art History*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1996.

3 Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (eds), *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, New York, Abrams, 1994.

4 Works related to this project include: *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender Politics in Visual Culture*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming (1999); 'Ghosts of Ethnicity: Rethinking Art Discourses of the 1940s and 1980s,' *Socialist Review*, Winter/Spring, 1995, vol. 94, nos. 1–2, pp. 129–64; 'Ethnic Notions and Feminist Strategies of the 1970s: The Work of Eleanor Antin and Judy Chicago,' in Catherine Soussloff (ed.), *Jewish Identity and Art History*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1999; 'Gender, Jewish Identity and Representation: US Photographer and Feminist Martha Rosler Reconsidered,' *The Bulletin of the Graduate School of Josai International University*, Chiba-ken, Japan, 1998, no. 2, pp. 31–44; 'Rewriting the Script: Eleanor Antin's Feminist Art,' Howard Becker (ed.), *Eleanor Antin*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999.

5 This includes historical research on the different ways in which jewishness and feminism were marked at that time in various northern and southern Californian artistic communities versus urban centers such as New York and Chicago, and the wider impact of anti-Semitic policies on the way that jewishness distinguished itself from a more assimilated notion of Americanness during that period. The project includes, among other things, oral interviews with artists from that period as well as historical research on both official and tacit convenants that prevented jews from owning land in affluent areas in southern California (La Jolla, for example) or from sitting on the board of trustees of California museums, such as the Pasadena Art Museum. For an analysis of how deeply entrenched anti-Semitic policies were at the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Museum), see the Walter Hopps oral history transcript at the Department of Special Collections, University Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

6 See Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, New York and London, Routledge, 1991; A. Pelligrini, *Performance Anxieties*, New York and London, Routledge, 1997; and Richard Dyer, *White*, New York and London, Routledge, 1997.

7 For further discussions on this generational shift in feminist art history, see: Griselda Pollock (ed.), *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996; Griselda Pollock, 'The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies: Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories,' *Genders*, Fall 1993, no. 17 ; Janet Wolff, 'The Artist, the Critic and the Academic: Feminism's problematic relationship with "Theory",' in Katy Deepwell (ed.), *New Feminist Art Criticism*, New York: Manchester University Press, 1995, pp. 14–19; Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, 'The Feminist Critique of Art History,' *Art Bulletin* 69, September 1987, pp. 326–57; and Amelia

Jones, 'Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures, and Embodied Theories of Art,' in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, Joanna Frueh, Cassandra Langer, and Arlene Raven (eds), New York, Harper Collins, 1994, pp. 25–9.

8 Broude and Garrard, 'Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth Century,' *The Power of Feminist Art*, p. 10.

9 Yolanda M. López and Moira Roth, 'Social Protest: Racism and Sexism,' *The Power of Feminist Art*, p. 140.

10 Cindy Nemser, 'Eleanor Antin,' *Art Talk*, New York, Scribners, 1975, p. 281.

11 Joanna Frueh, 'The Body through Women's Eyes,' *The Power of Feminist Art*, p. 195.

12 Sander Gilman, 'The Jew's Body: Thoughts on Jewish Physical Difference,' in Norman Kleeblatt (ed.), *Too Jewish: Challenging Traditional Identities*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1996, p. 70.

13 Nemser, 'Eleanor Antin,' p. 282.

14 Text from artist's archives.

15 This series by Eleanor Antin has never been exhibited or published; collection of the artist.

16 The portraits of Naomi Dash, Yvonne Rainer, and Carolee Schneemann from *Portraits of 8 New York Women* are reprinted in the exhibition catalogue, *Ghosts*, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, 1996. The original exhibition was represented in its entirety at the Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York, May, 1998.

17 Eleanor Antin, 'Women without Pathos,' *Art News*, January 1971, nos. 3–4; reprinted in Thomas Hess and Elizabeth Baker (ed.), *Art and Sexual Politics*, New York, Collier Books, 1973, pp. 86–7.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 In many ways, this project recalls the recent work of Elaine Reichek's *Post-colonial Kinderhood* from 1993, displayed at the Jewish Museum, New York City; both are ironical portraits that deal simultaneously with questions of ethnic assimilation, domestic interiors, and white ethnic female lives.

22 Dyer, *White*, pp. 130–31.

23 Cited by Henry Sayre in 'Introduction,' *Eleanora Antinova Plays*, Los Angeles, Sun and Moon Press, 1994, p. 13.

24 For an excellent review of the film, see Jeffrey Skoller, 'The Shadows of Catastrophe: Eleanor Antin's *The Man Without a World*,' *Film Quarterly*, Fall 1995, vol. 49, no. 1, pp. 28–32; Ellen Zweig, 'Constructing Loss: Film and Presence in the Work of Eleanor Antin,' *Millennium Film Journal*, Fall 1996, vol. 29, pp. 34–41.