

within, and remakes a Jewish household. Indeed, Rosler's piece provides a rare example of a white woman dealing with questions of gender, assimilation, and Jewishness during the 1970s to remind us not only of the heterogeneity of identities among Jews but also that the shift that took place toward Jewish assimilation in the United States was anything but uniform.

5 Contemporary feminist art practices in New York

This chapter is partially inspired by a panel I moderated in November 2002 at the Jewish Museum in New York entitled "Is Anything All Right? Three Generations of Jewish Women Artists in Postwar America," which included the artists Danielle Abrams, Rhonda Lieberman, and Elaine Reichek. The title comes from a Jewish joke which reads as an accusation hurled at Jewish women by Jewish men and was intended as a provocation to consider why there has been so little scholarship on Jewish women artists. The joke is about three Jewish women who go into a restaurant. The waiter, in order to preempt any criticism from what he perceives to be three possibly critical clients asks, "Is anything all right?" before the women have time to complain. By referencing a joke that plays on stereotypes of "difficult" Jewish women who are too demanding and impossible to please, I was perversely performing the very problem that I was claiming to identify. However, I also used it to gesture toward some of the continuing difficulties that Jewish women artists must negotiate if they choose to self-identify as Jewish women artists as opposed to simply white or mainstream ones.

It is worth noting that, until the 1990s, public discussions of Jewishness in the New York art world were very rare. To expose both the erasure of Jews in the art world and their own participation in that erasure, artists Rhonda Lieberman and Cary Leibowitz put together a landmark exhibition titled *Fear of a Jewish Planet: Let My People Show!* at Four Walls Gallery in Brooklyn, New York, in 1991.¹ Part of what made the exhibition so important was that it touched on the issue of how Jews historically were trying to pass as non-Jews not only in the art world but also for each other. The absurdity of such a situation over time prompted an interrogation of whom this performance might be for and a discussion of just how vulnerable Jews really are in the art world.

In 1996, curator Norman Kleebblatt returned to the issues raised in the Four Walls exhibition and put together a major ground-breaking exhibition and catalogue appropriately titled *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities*, presented at the Jewish Museum in New York. Much of the work in the exhibition was developed precisely around prevailing self-censorship of artwork that might be

perceived as “too Jewish” to show even at the Jewish Museum. In his preface, Kleeblatt introduced the difficulty of such a notion:

Why was I embarrassed by these works with their “too Jewish” subject matter and style? I tried to think of ways in which they might be made more palatable – more genteel – for me and for what I perceived to be the tastes of recent art. I wanted them to be just as powerful but “less Jewish” even though their energy arose from their cultural brashness . . . Ultimately, I realized that my twinge of discomfort reflected the undeniable mindset of an assimilated Jew, even one who is a curator at The Jewish Museum. Indeed, my past exhibitions reflected that ideology, one on which I and so many American Jews had been raised.²

Kleeblatt goes on to explain how the exhibition evolved from his own questioning of why he and other Jews have participated in the erasure of their own Jewish identity in terms of the artwork they exhibit or make. The project also served to examine the significance of publicly discussing these issues through art, both within a Jewish organization and community as well as outside. In what follows, I extend the discussion that Lieberman and Kleeblatt raised in the 1990s to address the unacknowledged role of Jewish identity and assimilation in contemporary US feminist art.

The Greenbergian legacy: the rabbi of “high art”

As I argue in Chapter 1, Clement Greenberg was troubled by what he perceived to be Jewish middle-class culture’s indiscriminate embrace of American popular culture. Such Jews were even active producers of it (think Hollywood and Broadway), thus contributing to what Greenberg saw as a moral divide between educated and what he thought of as backwards, non-educated middle-class Jews. In his view, the only acceptable rite of passage for the serious artist or critic was to establish an alienated distance from dominant culture as a state of mind. For the artist, this meant making abstract art. The best art, according to Greenberg, is always “homeless.” Artists must leave their middle-class “home” in order to see or feel differently. That is why for Greenberg the best Jewish artists are always in exile both from their presumably working-class or middle-class backgrounds and from American popular culture at large. However, as a sign of how widespread these beliefs were, it wasn’t only Jewish male intellectuals who felt uneasy about their relationship to the everyday and to their own material Jewish families. As feminist Melanie Kantrowitz writes,

I wanted to belong to the sensitive few. I could not bear to be identified with where I came from: Brooklyn, the clothing store my father and aunt owned

where the whole family, including me, worked vacations and summers. Sensitive souls did not live in Brooklyn, nor did their families sell ladies’ sportswear and lingerie.³

Kantrowitz is responding here to Greenberg’s contempt for the everyday and the way he specifically targeted Jewish business culture and its materialism. What comes through most clearly in Greenberg’s writing is his allegiance to an elitist-tinged socialism and to cosmopolitan values over and above his ethnicity, equating the latter with conventional notions of identity and narrow bourgeois values. This passage, quoted in Chapter 1, is worth rereading here:

Jewish life has become, for reasons of security, so solidly, so rigidly, restrictively and suffocatingly middle-class . . . No people on earth are more correct, more staid, more provincial, more commonplace, more inexperienced; none observe more strictly the letter of every code that is respectable; no people do so completely and habitually what is expected of them.⁴

Greenberg’s idea that there was a kind of precious elitist activity that had to be defended from kitsch would distance him from other Jews who embraced popular culture and either moved to Hollywood or were attracted specifically to Hollywood cinema.

Many of the Jewish women and the lesbian artists discussed in this chapter are dealing with this particular aspect of Greenberg’s legacy. Though he chastised business culture for being “too Jewish,” for him, Jewish women and gay men were the most conspicuously Jewish in their materialism and middle-classness. His 1939 essay on “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” established fault lines among US Jews, and even today kitsch is often associated with not only US Jewish women but also gay men.

Over the years, Greenberg’s modernist influence waned in certain respects. With the advent of Pop art and assemblage, the high art of the 1940s and 1950s gave way to the dreaded aesthetics of camp and kitsch. This trend of opening art to the world outside the frame that had so strongly contained and defined Greenberg’s theories continued in the aftermath of Pop, when the aesthetics of appropriation and simulation began to characterize a significant body of art in the 1980s and 1990s. It was also during this period that a generation of Jewish feminist and gay appropriation artists specifically embraced representations from “low-brow” culture, television, fashion, and Hollywood cinema and took on Greenberg directly in their refusal to shed their ethnic particularism for a more cosmopolitan identity. These artists are dealing at once with kitsch, assimilation, materialism, and the confusion of Jewishness and Americanness, as well as how the positionality of being a Jewish woman or a gay man puts them in a doubly disadvantaged place. Much of this work is infused with a terrifically campy character that locates theater and theatrical performance front and center in order

to question the presumptive heterosexuality and racist sentiments of an older modernist culture.

Rhonda Lieberman: popular culture as a therapeutic ally

My mother's milk was pasteurized with Pop: (I started each day with a Danish Go-Round, at nite we'd have the Coca Cola Chicken . . .). Being alienated from Pop was not the first step toward cosmopolitan grace – as it was for Greenberg's generation – but became for me, increasingly, an alienation from myself, from my authentic suburban experience. Years later . . . [instead] of feeling persecuted by kitsch, I began to see it as a therapeutic ally.⁵

(Rhonda Lieberman, 2002)

In the above passage, artist Rhonda Lieberman writes about her love/hate relationship with popular culture by parodying Greenberg's statement that "a quality of Jewishness is present in every word I write . . . transmitted like mother's milk."⁶ What is noteworthy is how she interrupts Greenberg's discourse with her own Pop cultural discourse, which derives from a completely different generational and gendered perspective than that of Greenberg or even of Kantrowitz. Whereas Greenberg considered alienation from Pop as enabling, Lieberman presents herself as simultaneously caught and seduced by the restrictive injunctions set up by Greenberg's generation.

By the 1970s, these laws of aesthetic kosherness were so pervasive they trickled down to me, a pretentious teenager in Rockland County. Like many before me, Culture (with a capital C) beckoned as an escape from banality and tackiness, existential dread, familial dread, icky gender roles, whatever bothered me.⁷

When Lieberman was a teenager, Greenberg's writings constituted an invitation of escape from a suburban Jewishness in all its banality. But as an adult, she sees such an escape more in terms of a loss that distances her from particular objects of desire from her childhood. I cite Lieberman at length because her writing, in its cutting humor, acknowledges how Greenberg's theories served as both an escape and a stigma in the earlier part of her life, which is important to her subsequent explanation of how Pop culture and Jewishness were transformed into "therapeutic allies" and became sources of affirmative reclamation in her writing and art.

Lieberman, like Greenberg, scripts herself very much in terms of her Jewish identity. The Jewish values set forth in her parents' home were intensely secular and liberal but, as she puts it, "It was okay to be a 'person of the book' as long as you made a good living!" When she entered a Ph.D. program at Yale University, she deviated from familial expectations since a career as an academic was not

considered lucrative enough. Only in adulthood was the shame of being, as she puts it, "Veblen's conspicuous consumer" (referring to the economist who coined the phrase "conspicuous consumption"), which was "infected with the JAP fantasy I'd internalized and disavowed," able to coexist with the critical consciousness she had developed. While the split might have been unbridgeable at an earlier moment in her life, she is able now to negotiate between the two different parts in her artwork:

What I'm trying to do is open up the conflicted space between "reading" and "consumer culture," depth and shallowness, subject and object – that swirl around "Jewish expression" for me. It's not about finding a lost site of Jewish "authenticity" I never had, but rather, about fully expressing an implicit, even funny and moving, alienation that I do recognize as my own "Jewish" experience . . . (a simultaneity of depth and utter shallowness, that is neither wholly one or the other).⁸

What is significant about her artwork and writing is the way her work consciously keeps the tension of what she refers to as this "conflicted space" alive, and how she refers to it as an integral part of her "Jewish experience."

This tension is then presented visually in her provocatively titled *Chanel Hanukkah* from 1991 (Figure 5.1), which she did for the *Fake Chanel* show with

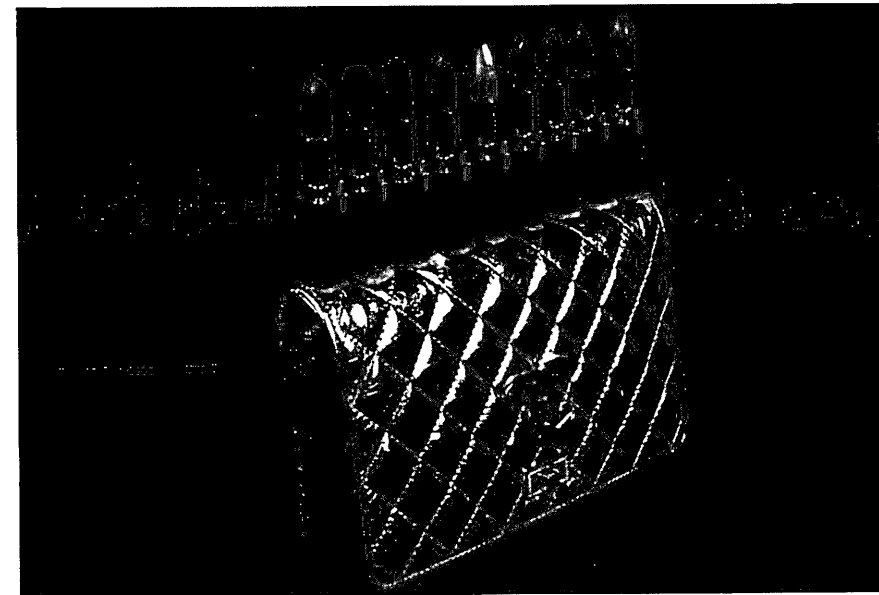


Figure 5.1 Rhonda Lieberman and Cary Leibowitz, *Chanel Hanukkah*, mixed media, 1991. Courtesy of the artist.

artist Cary Leibowitz. In this work, the artists teamed up to take on the constructed image of Jewish women and gay men as the embodiments of a vulgar Jewish materialistic identity and to parody this stereotype by using overt Jewish content as well as designer products as part of their strategy. Using a fake Chanel bag, they fashioned a Hanukkah menorah from it using nine designer lipsticks as substitutes for candlesticks. The force of the work comes from its subversion of the sacredness of the Jewish holiday by eroticizing the menorah through material consumer objects that are associated with fashion rather than religion. In addition, there is a tension between critical distance and humor in the work. The artists express how they are caught between self-identifying as secular Jews and feeling entrapped by derogatory stereotypes of secular Jews as materialistic. Indeed, in this artwork Lieberman and Liebowitz are trying to open up another space of Jewishness outside of the religion from which they can throw stereotypes of being "conspicuous consumers" back at the audience, at the same time expressing a more ironical Jewish identity through this kind of public gesture.

Self-conscious exposure, substitution, and humor are central to Lieberman's work, especially as they relate to hidden assumptions around stereotypical representations of Jewish women who have been transformed into Jewish American Princesses by way of the modern American emphasis on commodity consumption as a way of life. Since Lieberman knows that no amount of affirmative reclamation can succeed in totally subverting and dispelling JAP stereotypes applied to Jewish women or stereotypes of Jewish men as queens, it is significant that her work suggests a convergence of Jewishness and American materialism; and to make this convergence acceptable, her work relies on the transformative force of humor. Such is also the case with her *Barbra Bush* (Figure 5.2), which was commissioned, ironically, for Barney's Christmas storefront windows in 1994. Here, Lieberman plays with the way that American Jews try to preserve some elements of Christmas in their celebration of Hanukkah by replacing the Christmas tree with the Hanukkah bush. To emphasize the way that the Hanukkah bush serves to Americanize Jewish traditions, Lieberman mimics aspects of the Christian tradition and also appropriates the name of the then First Lady of the United States, but replaces her with the other Barbra – the outlandish Jewish one, Barbra Streisand, whose face appears on six-pointed "Jewish" stars. The piece conveys a wry statement about how even Barbra – the female performer who most publicly affirms her Jewish identity – still on occasion participates in the erasure of her Jewishness, as in "Christmas Album" of 1967.

Deborah Kass: Barbra and Gertrude as anti-Warhol female icons

Deborah Kass is an appropriation artist who, along with Lieberman, was a key participant in the Jewish Museum's *Too Jewish* show. Kass shares with Lieberman a



Figure 5.2 Rhonda Lieberman, *Barbra Bush, Hanukkah/Christmas*, mixed media, 1994. Courtesy of the artist.

certain sensibility about Pop culture and Jewishness, but she extends it to critique some of the assumptions implicit in the cool Pop aesthetic of the 1960s and its legacy, particularly in terms of Andy Warhol's work. Warhol made art about commodity culture that rendered women such as Marilyn Monroe, Liz Taylor, and Jackie Kennedy as cultural icons. He would start with an iconic and glamorous photographic image and then print multiple versions of it in a colorful grid. Kass questions the very context of Warhol's work. She asks: for whom are these images iconic and for whom are they not? She also questions why Warhol left out equally iconic female stars from his period who did not conform to his notion of American feminine beauty. Kass imitates the format of Warhol's celebrity portraits to make us see what most artists and critics have failed to notice about his work: that he excluded from his 1960s cosmopolitan Hollywood register the one major female star whom he frequently cites in his diaries as the embodiment of bad taste, in Warhol's words, "a nouvelle riche" – Barbra Streisand. Kass's rendition of Barbra in her ironically titled *The Jewish Jackie Series* (Figures 5.3 and 5.4) not only is meant to point out Warhol's refusal to engage with ethnicity in his work but also pays homage to a cultural figure that had a particular resonance for Kass (as well as for Lieberman) growing up as a Jewish girl on Long Island:



Figure 5.3 Deborah Kass, detail of *Four Barbras, 48 Times*, from *The Jewish Jackie Series*, silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas, 1992. Courtesy of the artist.

She [Barbra] was really in touch with her difference as an attribute. It was fantastic. For me it was as if she was saying: I'm me; I'm not changing my nose; I'm not changing my name; I'm not changing my ethnicity. I know how glamorous that can be. No one had done that. Because I was so into old movies, I knew she was the only one to do that, to look like that; and I figured if she could do it, so could I.⁹

What Kass meant was that Barbra's understanding of the power of her difference, combined with her talent and chutzpah, made her a new kind of star that she could relate to. For Kass, the emphasis is less on Barbra's looks than on her own understanding of her appearance, talent and brains – in other words, her understanding of her own cultural power. As Kass wrote: "It was Barbra's cultural power that attracted me. For the first time that power seemed accessible to me, because for the first time there was a star who looked like me and everyone I knew."¹⁰ Because Kass identifies with Barbra as someone who publicly presented herself in a way that shifted the norms of female beauty during the period when Kass was growing up, her "appropriation" is an ironic commentary on her relation,

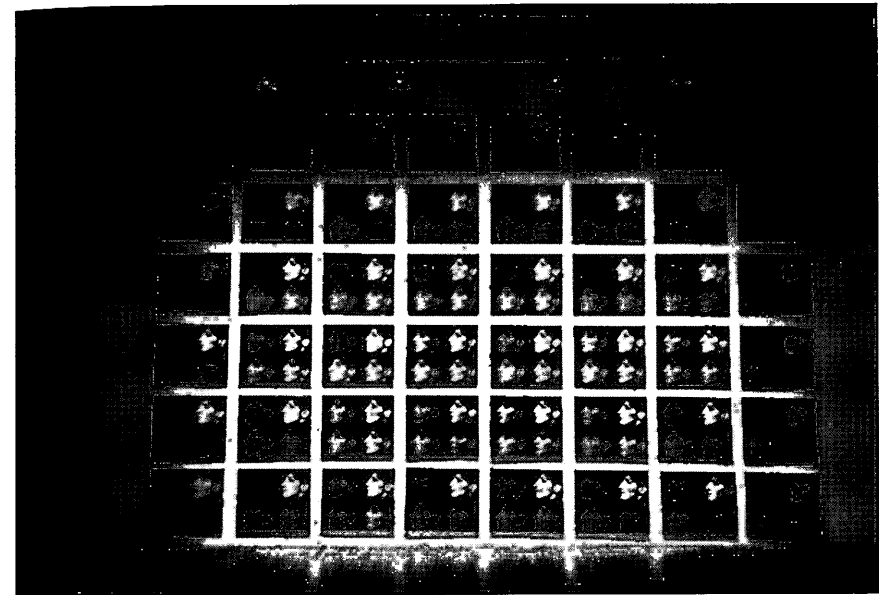


Figure 5.4 Deborah Kass, *Four Barbras*, from *The Jewish Jackie Series*, silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas, 20 × 24 in., 1993. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

as an artist, to the legacy of Pop art and Warhol as it relates to Jewishness and dominant norms of acceptable femininity.

Kass's 1993 *Chairman Mao* – a Jewish feminist surrogate for Warhol's *Chairman Mao* – is her homage to Gertrude Stein, a lesbian, an artist, and a Jew, as well as an important champion of the modernist enterprise (Figure 5.5). Kass merges Stein's Jewish identity with her lesbian identity.¹¹ *Chairman Mao* puts into question the tyranny of a certain unstated Jewish heterosexuality in the arts and reflects how that attitude begins to shift in the 1990s. In Jewish culture, being a lesbian can be seen as an even greater rejection of Jewishness than feminism since it runs up against the deep patriarchal and heterosexual foundation of Jewish culture. Kass's departure from Jewishness becomes more radical through her lesbianism since it puts the politics of gender, community, and sexuality at odds. Like her *Barbra* series, Kass's homage to Stein complicates Warhol's original project by replacing his ethnically neutral personalities and icons with the culturally specific celebrities of her own private and public world. Kass's representation of Stein is meant to acknowledge her importance and to remedy the ethnic amnesia not of Stein's generation, but of Warhol's. Warhol had lived through the women's movement and disagreed with its premises and he therefore barely acknowledged it in his work.



Figure 5.5 Deborah Kass, *Chairman Ma*, silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas, 46 × 42 in., 1993. Courtesy of the artist.

Elaine Reichek: folk art and *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*

Like Rhonda Lieberman and Deborah Kass, Elaine Reichek deploys irony and parody, in her case to remind us how common the practice of “passing” was for Jews in the United States and how this erasing of ethnic marks of difference filtered down to one’s very choice of clothing and household furniture. In her 1994 installation *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* (Figure 5.6), Reichek re-creates her bedroom in her parents’ house, emphasizing their purchase of the American dream through the colonial-style trappings signifying American culture:

The re-creation of my childhood bedroom explores the idea of decor as a means of Americanizing, of “passing” and of connecting people to a past they wish was their own.¹²

Reichek was able to reorder all her childhood furniture from the Ethan Allen 1776 collection, which is surprisingly still in stock. The room was dimly lit, and the furniture was altered slightly to make the room feel dark and off-kilter. The olive gray walls were lined with the artist’s own embroideries based on American samplers but devoid of the usual Christian homilies associated with this genre of

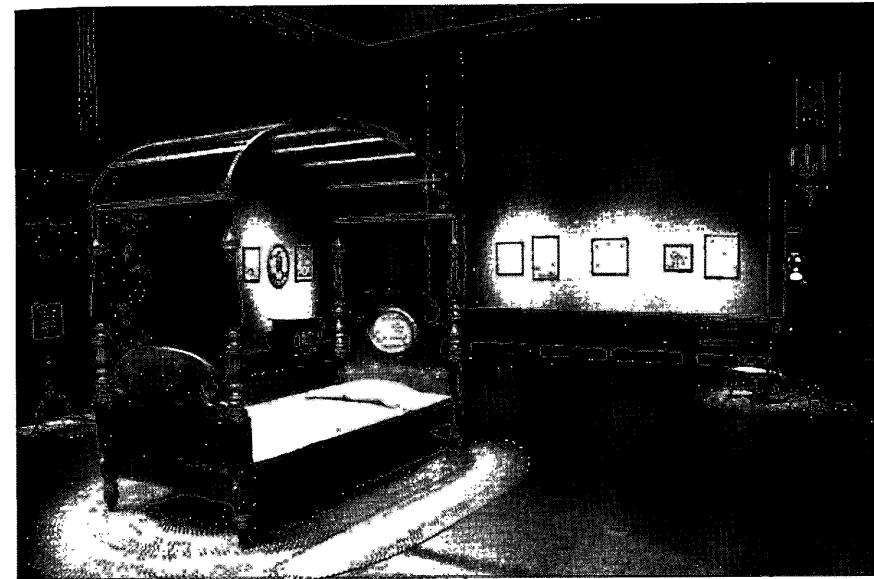


Figure 5.6 Elaine Reichek, *A Postcolonial Kinderhood, Bed with George Washington Headboard*, 1994, mixed media installation. Photo: John Parnell. Courtesy of the Jewish Museum/ Art Resource, New York

folk art. Instead, she altered the sampler format to include quotes gathered from Jewish family members (Figures 5.7 and 5.8):

From Mom: “Don’t be loud. Don’t be pushy. Don’t talk with your hands.”

From my brother-in-law John: “In my first days at Yale, my Midwestern roommates asked if I would handle negotiations with an upperclassman for some used furniture. Jew him down! they encouraged, delighted with their newfound resource.”

And from my other brother-in-law: “I never think about being Jewish until I leave New York.”¹³

Rather than dealing with what by an earlier generation might have been seen as a “tragedy of assimilation,” which these quotes might otherwise suggest, Reichek inflects her work with parody to dispel the moral seriousness of the topic. This comes through best in some of the self-ridiculing statements she has embroidered on the samplers such as: “The parents of Jewish boys always love me. I’m the closest thing to a shiksa without being one.” Reichek thus conflates the fear in the 1950s of Jews identifying openly as such with one that brings out the ironies of Jews “passing” so successfully. Indeed, Reichek points out here just how obsessed

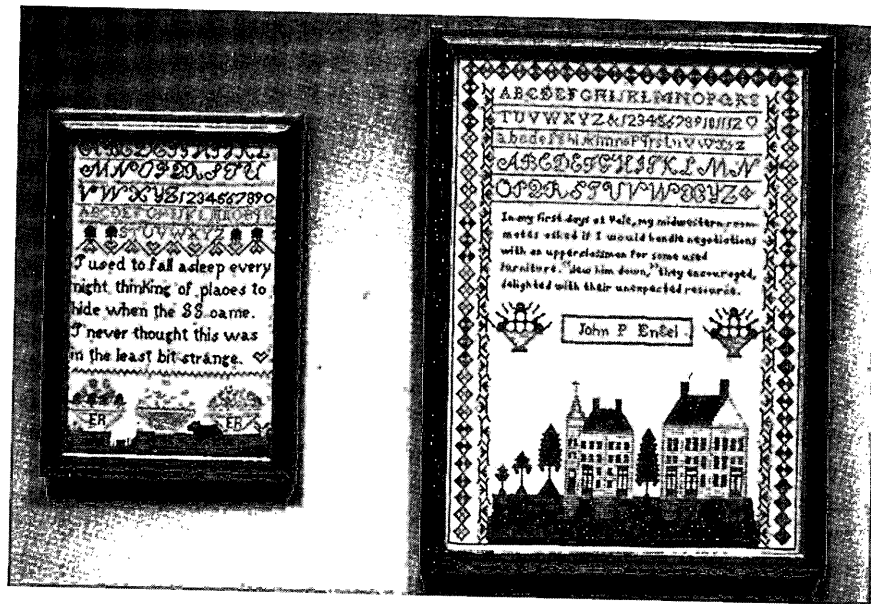


Figure 5.7 Elaine Reichek, *A Postcolonial Kinderhood, Samplers*, 1994, needlepoint samplers. Photo: John Parnell. Courtesy of the Jewish Museum/Art Resources, New York.



Figure 5.8 Elaine Reichek, *A Postcolonial Kinderhood, Samplers*, 1994, needlepoint samplers. Photo: John Parnell. Courtesy of the Jewish Museum/Art Resource, New York.

Jews were with passing, going so far as to be concerned about passing at home, in private, to each other.

Her installation addresses directly the way in which an older generation of Jews felt they had to downplay their Jewishness both in public and in private, and this desire to belong to mainstream American culture takes a dark turn, into an obsession with passing that permeates all corners of life. Though Reichek mocks this gesture, her work does raise the question of what it means for Jews to internalize this need to pass to such a degree that it extends to intimate private concerns, including even what counts as suitable décor for a child's bedroom.

Sherry Millner: *Unruly Fan / Unruly Star*

How many Jewish women's bodies do we get in popular culture like Roseanne's? That's what I am interested in . . . and that notion of excess.¹⁴

(Sherry Millner, 1999)

If the figure of Streisand with her verbal and physical excess did not fit within Warhol's notion of Pop coolness or within the media concepts of acceptable female middle-class American beauty, then certainly the figure of Roseanne Barr, who deliberately fashioned her Domestic Goddess persona out of those clichés in US culture about the fat, noisy, and vulgar working-class housewife, would have been seen as even more lacking in "class" or "taste" than Barbra. Roseanne signals her Jewishness both through her autobiography, in which she identifies herself as a working-class Jewish woman who grew up in one of the few Jewish families in Mormon Country – Utah – and through the cultivated vulgarity of her comedic style.

Much of Sherry Millner's 2000 video *Unruly Fan / Unruly Star* is about her own relationship to Roseanne, the persona, and it depicts how "she/Sherry" becomes an "unruly" subject by watching *Roseanne* (Figure 5.9). This transformation is achieved cinematically through cross-cutting, whereby sequences of parallel actions happen simultaneously across two separate spaces. In these sequences, Sherry's actions "at home with her family" follow Roseanne's actions on TV. Though Sherry's voice-overs are measured and controlled, her body movements are more extreme and are meant to imitate the way Roseanne sits in a chair, eats, or flops onto a couch. As Millner has said: "Most of my persona is excessive anyway, but it was also, in a way, how excessive she is, how she gave me certain permission to enact my own excessiveness that interested me."¹⁵ This was an excessiveness that would never have been tolerated in the melancholic and tranquil girl's bedroom of the Jewish middle-class that Reichek evokes in *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*.

Millner herself moves between presentations of her private and public selves. In the first part of the video, she appears through the voice-over as a cultural critic,



Figure 5.9 Sherry Millner, *Unruly Fan/Unruly Star*, 2000, video stills. Courtesy of the artist.

feminist, and artist; but she also shows excerpts from her private life and ironically relates her family's behavior to that of Roseanne's TV family. The second part of the video also shows Millner shifting roles between her professional self (interviewer of fans of Roseanne on Hollywood Boulevard) and her private self as a fan of Roseanne in her own right. Most of the people she interviews are women and black men, and for the most part their comments suggest a thorough appreciation of Roseanne's role in the TV show. What Millner didn't include in the tape, however, were the more aggressive and hostile reactions she received. According to Millner, these people:

hate her because she's working class, and because she's fat, and because she's Jewish. I think those three things go together – that notion of excess . . . There are certain people who wanted to discipline her. They say they liked her, but then they would launch into this whole thing about how she needs to improve herself and look better and think not of being so mouthy or working class . . . And people used that word “embarrassing” a lot.¹⁶

In *Unruly Fan/Unruly Star*, Millner functions as a transfer point of sorts, through which identifications between audience members and Roseanne are conducted. However, the interposition of Millner's body – its uncanny likeness to Roseanne's and its unlikeness – disturbs the smooth surface of that mirror in which the two are seen as one. Also, Millner is not afraid to take sides, and she pays homage to Roseanne, which perhaps explains why she left out the more unflattering comments from her interviews. In paying homage, she turns her appropriative strategy into something akin to what Deborah Kass does with Barbra and refuses the affectless form of appropriation more prevalent in postmodernist work of this period.

Joan Braderman's *Joan Does Dynasty*

Whereas Millner and Kass identify, respectively, with the Jewish public personas Roseanne and Barbra Streisand, Joan Braderman takes on the position of power and control of public space herself. In her 1986 videotape *Joan Does Dynasty* she takes as her subject of analysis the highly popular 1980s TV show *Dynasty* which followed the schemes and intrigues of a Texas oil-rich family. Braderman creates a performance piece/critique in which she literally inserts herself within the margins of the TV screen in order to comment on the gender, ethnic, and class dynamics of the television program (Figure 5.10). Her presence as an unruly “dark ethnic” woman alongside the characters onscreen radically alters how we perceive the TV show – an influence she acknowledges when she introduces herself at the beginning of the tape:

Hi. My name is Joan, and I'm American, like TV itself. I'm your local beatnik



Figure 5.10 Joan Braderman, *Joan Does Dynasty*, 1986, video still. Courtesy of the artist.

professor – as opposed to anchor-clone – unabashed – well a bit bashed – sixties throwback type doing stand-up theory as TV infiltrator, media counterspy, and image cop. These campy creatures have been interceding in my key personal relations for several years now. I assigned myself to watch the show, to see how the thing works. Why do a hundred million people in 78 countries welcome this department store of dressed-to-kill aliens in their homes every week.¹⁷

In Braderman's performance/video work we have a feminist performance artist, identified as a "sixties throwback type," who critiques other female TV figures even while identifying with their sexuality. This is a long way from an earlier form of feminism that was uncritically inclusive of all women. Yet, she is also drawn to the character played by Joan Collins – Alexis – and how she inverts the hierarchical relation between the sexes and unsettles the distinctions between traditional gender roles. Though Braderman might critique the ways that Alexis strategically deploys tropes of a traditional femininity as a means to obtain power that does not necessarily lead to anything beyond herself and her own narrow self-interests, the artist also identifies with Alexis as an example of an older woman who is sexual (something rare on network television), has younger boyfriends, and knows how to tell off the men:

What a swagger. What a walk. Look at that ass. This is Mr. Dex Dexter. Yes, that's his name. You saw him just now in the bathtub. He is Alexis's oil-rich, cowboy husband, roughly the same age as her various sons, and the current object of her lust . . . But Dex's main function here, besides looking excellent in blue jeans, is that he marks for us, the viewers, one of the pseudo progressive trajectories of this show: that, even if you're old and bitchy, if you have enough money, the right make-up man, and Nolan Miller to design your clothes, you can still get laid over 50, by a cowboy with great thighs, no less.¹⁸

As Braderman narrates this account of Dex Dexter, she appears on the screen moving suggestively and at moments is superimposed above him to suggest that the character is of sexual interest to her as well (Figure 5.11). The combination of her own sexual appetites and the excessiveness of her own speech implies a relation between the artist and Alexis as unruly women, though Braderman's excessiveness provides the framework from which we analyze these impulses.

It is noteworthy, however, that Braderman does not scrutinize the complicated notion of her Jewish heritage. Instead, her Jewishness is only obliquely alluded to when she refers to herself as a "member of a dark ethnic immigrant minority



Figure 5.11 Joan Braderman, *Joan Does Dynasty*, 1986, video still. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.12 Joan Braderman, *Joan Does Dynasty*, 1986, video still. Courtesy of the artist.

group” (and not as Jewish per se) in her introduction to the character “Krystal (Figure 5.12):

Meet Krystal, the saccharine lady, the devoted wife forever, the ex-stenographer of Blake, constantly annoying everybody with dumb clichés. This cunt is such a sticky sweet Pollyanna from morning until night that, what can I say? As a member of a dark ethnic immigrant minority group, this kind of hokey Americana good cheer makes me want to throw up . . . it's not likely that Krystal is going to get her milky little hands dirty dressed in this marvelous beige outfit. See her chat with the head slave of the plantation, cooing over chocolate mousse.¹⁹

Braderman presents herself as nonwhite, in contrast to Krystal's whiteness and it is significant that this whiteness is inflected with nationhood: she immediately connects Krystal's whiteness and goodness with a hokey Americanness. The artist, by contrast, in her ironical self-presentation has a more ambivalent connection to notions of nationhood. The issue of Jewish “inbetweenness” raised by Karen Brokdin, the author of *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America*, is important here since Braderman is expressing a “kind of double-vision that comes from racial middleness.”²⁰ This includes an experience of marginality

vis-à-vis how white femininity is presented and idealized regionally – for example in states such as Texas versus cities such as New York, where there is a larger white ethnic population who might not be seen as “white” from the perspective of the Texas middle class.

It is thus significant for Braderman that the blonde Krystal (and not Alexis, the brunette and the more sexually uninhibited woman) is granted a positional superiority in the TV show. Krystal, in her wardrobe and bearing, displays the signs of the social group to which she is bonded in heterosexuality, class, and race. She is often presented as the pure vessel for reproduction, as well as the virtuous “good” woman who is the civilizing center of the show, and in this regard is the marked bearer of the show's discourse on sexuality and “whiteness.” It is the Krystal character that provides the normative imagery of white women's sexuality and as such provides a foil to the excessiveness of Alexis, who is presented as a woman out of control and consequently more transgressive of sexual norms.

Joan Does Dynasty takes advantage of its humor and its interrogation of white civility in terms of sexuality to address topics that might otherwise have been considered inappropriate for public discussion by the dominant feminist culture in the 1980s. This piece might not work so well today since in it Braderman presents an earlier version of subjectivity, which posited a more monolithic notion of identity, as if members of any one of the various dark ethnic immigrant groups were identical to the others. Since Laura Mulvey wrote in 1975 her famous article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” feminists have pondered whether women can also possess the gaze. How are female characters' desires represented? These discourses gradually focused more on the visual pleasure of female spectators, but rarely foregrounded ethnicity, class, and sexuality as prominent factors in such identification. Although Braderman doesn't illuminate the difference between her New York Jewish self-representation and the self-representation of various other racial, ethnic, and marginalized cultural groups, what is significant about *Joan Does Dynasty* is how it provocatively interrogates issues of whiteness, social class, and sexuality as represented by a TV image of Texas from the viewpoint of a minoritarian feminist gaze that is situated specifically in New York City.

Danielle Abrams: reenacting the self in *Quadroon*

Since the 1980s, US feminist art and visual culture in general have become concerned with autobiography and biography. There have been different approaches to this work. One has been to emphasize women “important” enough to be subject to biographical critique or analysis. Through video and visual cultural studies this has been extended to popular culture and the study of “stars.” In that view, Barbra Streisand, Roseanne Barr, and a well-known literary figure such as Gertrude Stein are all equally fitting subjects of analysis.

Another facet of this interest in autobiography and biography extends to family photography and video. Part of this impulse has been, on the one hand, to make visible the previously invisible – those aspects of everyday familial and community life that photographic convention refused to see (the trivial, the repetitious) – or, on the other hand, to politicize what has already been seen. Much of this work has been concerned with overturning the conventions and codes that influence photographic representation of regular (unfamous) women, specifically the dominant convention in family photography and video that permits only an idealized portrayal as racial and gendered stereotypes and usually removed from everyday life.

Danielle Abrams's 1998 installation piece *Quadroon* uses self-portraiture and family portraiture to acknowledge that identity is constructed in complicated and critical ways. In it, she performs four different familial roles on video to suggest how her own identity is fractured into discrete parts.²¹ The four characters she presents are: Janie Bell (Abrams's paternal grandmother, who is African-American) (Figure 5.13); Dew Drop Lady (Abrams's maternal grandmother, who is Jewish) (Figure 5.14); Butch in the Kitchen (the artist as a biracial "butch") (Figure 5.15); and Dee (the artist as a high school girl self-identified as heterosexual and Greek) (Figure 5.16). Traditionally, portraiture relies on representing the sitter by showing aspects of one essential "character" or "identity." Abrams



Figure 5.13 Danielle Abrams, *Quadroon*, 1998, video still of Janie Bell. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.14 Danielle Abrams, *Quadroon*, 1998, video still of Dew Drop Lady. Courtesy of the artist.

instead tries to find new ways of perceiving the self, as well as changing attitudes, by splitting herself into four parts and displaying these "selves" to the camera. In this way, she refuses to present one single self that might represent a single ethnicity, race, or sexuality. Her many fragmented selves vie for conscious expression, though some are never fully acknowledged. In the version of the piece I saw, at the Jewish Museum in the fall of 2002, Abrams used a four-channel display in order to have her four selves speak separately as well as simultaneously, suggesting that these distinct identities symbiotically inform the form and the content of one another.

Abrams's selves in *Quadroon* straddle multiple communities and generations. Dee, the youngest character, is presumably straight but confused about her identity as a biracial Jewish/black teenager. In her Astoria-based household, the young Abrams (Dee) identifies herself surprisingly as "Greek-American" as she tries to "pass" into the Greek-American world of her four best girlfriends. She is part of a world that is Jewish, black, and Greek. However, the fault lines between these communities appear when Dee can no longer pass in that world and her Greek boyfriend's mother refuses to allow Dee into her home, calling her a *Mavro* (which is black in Greek) and a "Christ Killer" (Jew). The older Abrams is represented in the character Butch in the Kitchen, a biracial lesbian who finds herself broke,



Figure 5.15 Danielle Abrams, *Quadroon*, 1998, video still of Butch in the Kitchen. Courtesy of the artist.

unemployed, and needing food stamps to survive. She is a light-skinned black as well as a dark-skinned Jew in a predominantly white gay and lesbian community and thus straddles multiple social and racial groups.

In the characters of her two grandmothers, Abrams presents the complicated trajectory of identities that existed for first-generation American Jews and for African-Americans who migrated to New York from the South. Dew Drop Lady literally cannot remember the name she was born with ("It could've been Myrtle or Estelle or Beatrice or Doris. Whatever it was, I'm sure it was a nice name"), and is therefore renamed by her friends, after her favorite ride at Coney Island, the old parachute jump called the Dew Drop Ride. She speaks constantly of having come from the "Old Country," which also has no name, and of her experiences as an immigrant in Brooklyn, New York. She feels at home in the security offered by the United States, but she has never been able to shake off the feeling of imminent catastrophe. In much of her narrative, fear comes across as a part of her everyday life. Her home reminds her of the Old Country because it has the same lack of privacy and literally the same noisy neighbors – the Poviches. One of her trips to Coney Island evokes earlier experiences of anti-Semitism in the Old Country when the ticket collector (for one of the rides) asks her for a special



Figure 5.16 Danielle Abrams, *Quadroon*, video still of Dee, 1998. Courtesy of the artist.

ticket with a "star" on it. Befriended by a kind man who offers her protection, the story ends on a happy note. Safety, here, is to be found in unexpected friendships and favorite places, such as the beach, where she is filmed speaking.

Janie Bell presents herself at the end of her life when she is dying of tuberculosis. Abrams's narrative of "Janie Bell" is a story of migration from the South to the North. We learn that she grew up in Ashland, Virginia, and was a transplant first to Flushing and then to Harlem, and died on Welfare Island. We learn that her mother was very light skinned, that her father was a bootlegger who was friendly toward whites, and that she was one of seven children. Aside from these brief descriptions of her parents, race recedes as an issue, and the primary focus of her narrative, is migration and kinship ties.

Karen Brodtkin's notion that Jewish women have a "double vision that comes from racial middleness," referenced earlier, is important to understanding Abrams's work as well. This notion was extended by Toi Derricotte to encompass a relation between multiple communities, an experience of "many consciousnesses within":

W. E. B. Du Bois speaks of "double consciousness." For me, it isn't double, but many, many consciousnesses within . . . I was watching this world as if I

were looking through the eyes of the most vicious racist, but I was also looking through the eyes of white . . . critics, black . . . critics, of light-skinned black women and dark-skinned black women, of middle class and poor. I was looking through the eyes of my mother, cousins, and aunts. I had to find a way, not only to go around competing and repressing voices, but to address them, to listen and record, to disarm them and bring them to another perspective, to resolve conflicting aims.²²

Abrams's four characters bring together sharply contrasting cultural and ideological worlds that include her light-skinned black grandmother and her white-skinned poor Jewish grandmother. It is significant that the four characters never fully merge into a uniform voice. Instead, as Abrams points out, "they intersect, overlap, co-join, and talk over one another."²³ In this way she complicates reductionist understanding of what a Jewish/black/lesbian identity might be. Such a strategy allows her to assert the diversity and complexity of US Jewish/black/queer identities while at the same time refusing a celebratory stance in which all the tensions between these multiple identities are easily resolved.

Greenberg's art theories exemplified the traditional way of framing discussions about modernist literature and art, in which the modernism/kitsch dichotomy was highly gendered. The articulation of any kind of historically specific subjectivity on the part of an artist was highly problematic in Greenberg's eyes, and that legacy continued through Pop art, even as the distinction between fine art and popular culture was consistently blurred in the work of Warhol and others. Even though "kitsch" took on a special value for Warhol precisely because it evoked "bad" taste for Greenberg and his generation, some "kitsch" did not fit the bill for being redeemed into high art. Indeed, the absence of Barbra from Warhol's oeuvre is not surprising, since art by ethnic minorities as well as their representations are scarce in Pop art, and the ones that do exist are no more than clichéd stereotypes – for example, the mammy from Warhol's 1981 *Myth Series*, or his portraits of a Native American from his 1976 *American Indian Series*. The modernist aesthetic intent on distancing itself from everyday life runs counter to feminist and other minoritarian attempts that work from embodied perspectives to produce what Donna Haraway calls "situated knowledges."²⁴ Indeed, a US discourse of formalist art criticism even today makes gender, race, ethnicity, and Americanness the most limiting of subject positions to occupy since they are often seen as lapsing into subjectivity or kitsch. Thus, much of the work discussed here could be seen from this perspective as forms of kitsch that are "too Jewish" or "too American." Indeed, for feminist visual cultural critics like myself who do not want to use an older and more conservative discourse of art history – such as the "artist-genius," which has been an essential discourse of assimilation in the arts – the problem of how to conceptualize US Jewish women artists as visual

producers remains unresolved. By complicating essentialist notions around Jewish feminist art and identities, we can question the limits of a normative feminist art culture, and better examine how the categories of gender and ethnicity are interarticulated. Ethnicities cannot be understood in isolation, without considering the ways in which they are part of a complex matrix of differences among women.

- 3 I. Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*, edited and with an introduction by T. Deutscher, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1968, 26.
- 4 M. Rosler, unpublished interview with the author, December 1997.
- 5 N. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*, New York: Routledge, 1991, 96.
- 6 Laura Levitt also analyzes Nancy Miller's response to a women's studies conference to raise questions about the academic field of feminist studies and whether it can provide a home for Jewish academics such as herself; see L. Levitt, *Jews and Feminism: The Ambivalent Search for Home*, New York: Routledge, 1997, 107–31.
- 7 Quoted in Miller, *Getting Personal*, 103.
- 8 See Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, New York: Routledge, 1991; *Inscribing the Other*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991; *Smart Jews: The Construction of the Image of Jewish Superior Intelligence*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996; "The Jew's Body: Thoughts on Jewish Physical Difference," in Kleeblatt (ed.), *Too Jewish?*; Laurence J. Silberstein, *The Postzionism Debates: Knowledge and Power in Israeli Culture*, New York and London: Routledge, 1999; Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London: Verso, 2004; Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt (eds), *Judaism since Gender*, New York: Routledge, 1997; Jon Stratton, *Coming Out Jewish*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, among others.
- 9 D. Biale, M. Galchinsky, and S. Heschel, "The Dialectic of Jewish Enlightenment," in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 11.
- 10 M. Rosler, unpublished interview with the author, December 1997.
- 11 Chicago, *Beyond the Flower*, 5.
- 12 M. Rosler, unpublished interview with the author, December 1997.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 M. Rosler, unpublished interview with the author, August 1999.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 M. Rosler, unpublished interview with the author, February 2000.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 C. Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in H. Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983, 55–77.
- 22 A. Taubin, "And What Is a Fact Anyway?" *Millennium Film Journal* 5, Summer/Fall 1979, 59–64.
- 23 L. Cottingham, "Crossing Borders," *Frieze Magazine*, London, November–December 1993, 54.
- 24 M. Rosler, "The Private and the Public: Feminist Art in California," *Artforum*, September 1977, 68.
- 25 The book consists of three novels and one translation; in their original form, the novels were sent through the mail as postcard series, one card every five to seven days.
- 26 M. Rosler, unpublished interview with the author, 18 August 1999.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 The transcript of the full text from this work appears in M. Rosler, "She Sees in Herself a New Woman Every Day," *Heresies* 1, no. 2, May 1977, 90–1. One of the only reviews of this work is by Abigail Solomon-Godeau, from her exhibition catalogue,

Sexual Difference: Both Sides of the Camera, New York: Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, March 1988.

- 29 Rosler, "She Sees in Herself a New Woman Every Day," 90.
- 30 Ibid.

5 Contemporary feminist art practices in New York

- 1 The title was inspired by the Public Enemy album *Fear of a Black Planet*. The announcements for the exhibition were in bar-mitzvah-like script, inviting people to share in this joyful occasion. The exhibition included the installation of a range of artifacts: *Artforum* ads, art postcards, art catalogues, and books. Stamped on each artifact was either Honorary Jew, Jew Wannabe, Jew-Lover, or plain Jew. By having the audience choose a stamp or combination of stamps with the above monikers, the exhibition was toying with the inadequacy of such labels. The opening included an Oprah-like talk-show event, where the participating artists discussed Jewish presence and/or absence in the art world in an attempt to dispel the shame that is attached to being too Jewish in the contemporary art world.
- 2 Kleeblatt, *Too Jewish?*, ix.
- 3 M. K. Kantrowitz, *My Jewish Name and Other Stories*, San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute Book Company, 1990, 26.
- 4 Greenberg, "Self-Hatred and Jewish Chauvinism," reprinted in *Collected Essays*, vol. 3, 178–9.
- 5 R. Lieberman, presentation at the Jewish Museum, 6 November 2002.
- 6 Greenberg, *Collected Essays*, vol. 3, 78–9.
- 7 Lieberman, presentation at the Jewish Museum, 6 November 2002.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 M. Plante (ed.), *Deborah Kass: The Warhol Project*, New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1999, 30.
- 10 D. Kass, correspondence, with the author, 4 July 2004.
- 11 Janet Malcolm, in a *New Yorker* essay on Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas and their years in occupied France, develops the theme that Stein never overtly addressed her Jewish heritage or dealt with lesbian culture except in an oblique way. See J. Malcolm, "Gertrude Stein's War," *The New Yorker*, 2 June 2003, 58–81.
- 12 E. Reichek, presentation at the Jewish Museum, 6 November 2002. Unpublished text.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Interview with Sherry Millner, June 1999, unpublished text.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 J. Braderman, *Joan Does Dynasty*, New York: Women Make Movies, 1986; text from a transcript of the video reprinted in J. Braderman, "Joan Does Dynasty: A Neopagan, Postsituationist, Socialist/Anarcho/Feminist Exposé," *Independent*, August/September, 1986, 14–19.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 2.
- 21 The work was initially presented in 1998 at the Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine. The installation consisted of four monitors, one in each of the four corners of the gallery. Each monitor was surrounded by a metal cage giving the impression that the characters were trapped in the roles the artist created for them.

Each monitor appeared at eye level, with the characters onscreen appearing as life-size but cut off at the neck. Each tape ran for ten minutes, and was followed by a song. For example, "Fiddler on the Roof" followed the video of Dew Drop Lady, "Ain't No Sunshine" followed that of Janie Bell, etc. The tapes played simultaneously on all four monitors.

- 22 T. Derricotte, *The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997, 20.
- 23 D. Abrams, presentation at the Jewish Museum, 6 November 2002, unpublished text.
- 24 D. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 188.

6 California feminist art and postnationalist identities

- 1 The last fifty years in southern California have seen a dramatic shift from a largely citrus-based agricultural landscape to a residential sprawl of urban and suburban housing, shopping malls, and freeways. Helen and Newton Harrison's *The Lagoon Cycle*, dating from 1972, deals with this shift in the physical environment of southern California. Their project addresses this transformation through the dialogue between two mythological alter-egos: the Lagoonmaker and the witness (Helen Harrison).
- 2 *I Love Del Mar* was an installation at Franklin Furnace, New York, 1988.
- 3 For a more thorough discussion of Las Comadres, see R. Wallen, M. Waller, and A. Mancillas, "Making Art, Making Citizens: Las Comadres and the Post-National Aesthetic," in Bloom (ed.), *With Other Eyes*, 107–32, and J. Berelowitz, "A Feminist Collective Negotiates a New Paradigm for Women at the U.S./Mexico Border," *Genders* 28, 1998. The members of Las Comadres were Kirsten Aaboe, Yareli Arizmendi, Maria Kristina Dybbro-Augirre, Anna O'Cain, Carmela Castrejón, Frances Charteris, Maria Eraña, Laura Esparaza, Emily Hicks, Berta Jottar, Eloisa de Leon, Graciela Ovejero, Lynn Susholtz, Ruth Wallen, Marguerite Waller, Rocio Weiss, and Cindy Zimmerman.
- 4 *La Vecindad* was originally installed at the Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego, in 1990, and subsequently shown at the Bridge Gallery for Contemporary Art in El Paso, Texas, in 1991. In 1993, a new version of the library was included in a large traveling exhibition titled *La Frontera/The Border: Art about the Mexico–United States Border Experience*, co-organized by the Centro Cultural de la Raza and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego.
- 5 R. Wallen, unpublished interview with the author, 6 November 2003.
- 6 To view *Family Stories* online, see www.sdpalestinianjewishdialogue.org.
- 7 Wallen interview, 6 November 2003.
- 8 See Wallen's website: <http://communication.ucsd.edu/rwallen/dialogue/ruth.html>.
- 9 See *ibid.*
- 10 B. Naidus, "Teaching Art as a Subversive Activity," in M. Powell and V. Speiser (eds), *The Arts, Education, and Social Change*, Cambridge, Mass.: Lesley University and Peter Lang Publishers, 2004, 169–83.
- 11 For an overview of Beverly Naidus's work, see her website: <http://faculty.washington.edu/bnaidus/>.
- 12 Naidus has two artist's books in print: *One Size Does Not Fit All*, Littleton, Colo.: Aigis, 1992, and *What Kinda Name Is That?* Northampton, Mass.: Kinkos, 1995–6.
- 13 B. Naidus, text from *Right Dress Size*, in *What Kinda Name Is That?*
- 14 B. Naidus, text from *Neat, Blonde Wife*, 2001.
- 15 B. Naidus, text from *You're Greek, Aren't You?* 1995.

- 16 B. Naidus, text from *An Anglo?* 1995.
- 17 B. Naidus, text from *Wrong Kind of Jew*, 1995.
- 18 B. Naidus, text from *Occupied Territory*, 2001.
- 19 L. Shaddow, unpublished interview with the author, 30 September 2003.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Double Self-Portrait in the Kitchen* was commissioned by the Arad Arts Project in Israel's Negev Desert in 1999.
- 23 Shaddow interview, 30 September 2003.
- 24 For an overview of Doris Bittar's work, see her website: <http://visarts.ucsd.edu/~dbittar>. For writings on Bittar's work, see J. Saidi, "Art Shows Arabs, Jews Reaching Out," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 February 2003, B6; and R. Pincus, "Doris Bittar at David Zapf," *Art in America*, April 2001, 148–9. For selected writings by Bittar herself, see "Oasis of Storytelling: Narrative as a Tool for Change in Jewish–Palestinian Dialogue" (review of *Oasis of Dreams*, by Grace Feuerverger and interview with the author), *Al Jadid*, Spring 2002, 27–8; "Where Jews and Palestinians Seek Understanding," *San Diego Union Tribune*, 22 August 2001, B5.
- 25 D. Bittar, unpublished interview with the author, 26 October 2003.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 D. Bittar, text from *Semites: Dialogue 1, Manal and Gila*, 2003.
- 28 D. Bittar, text from *Semites: Manal and Sitto*, 2002.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 D. Bittar, text from *Semites: Dialogue 2, Lidia and Rachmin*, 2003.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 D. Bittar, unpublished interview with the author, 30 January 2004.