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 Kleeblatt 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, restrictedly 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

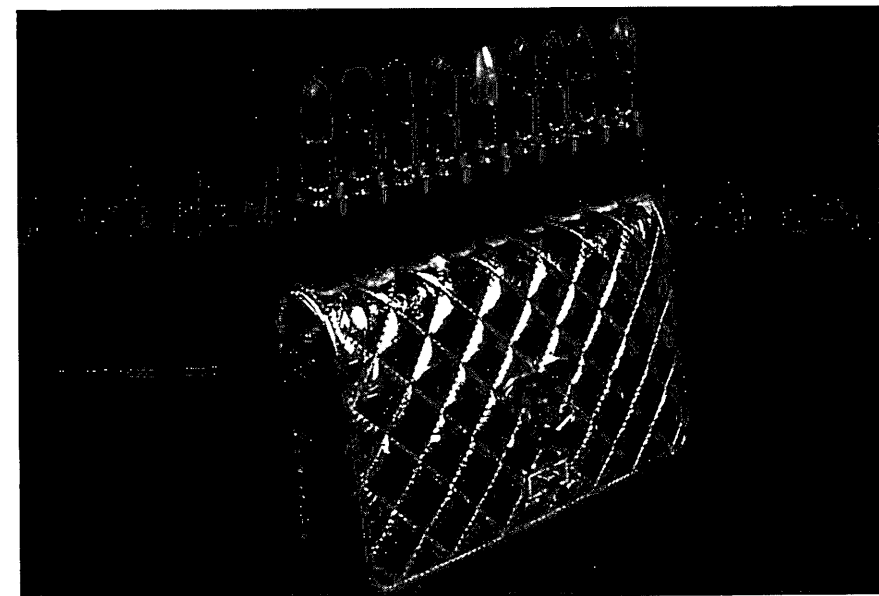

Figure 5.1 Rhonda Lieberman and Cary Leibowitz, *Chanel Hanukkah*, mixed media, 1991. Courtesy of the artist.