

## 6 California feminist art and postnationalist identities

Many Jewish feminist artists lost their culturally distinctive voice in the 1970s, owing to a number of factors: the generous conditions of assimilation in the United States, especially in California; the discourse of feminist art itself; and the formalist hegemony of postwar modernism. Though Judy Chicago draws attention in this book as a feminist artist, her work needs to be seen in the context of other successful Jewish artists who, having shed their very ethnic and cultural specificity in the 1970s, were admitted into the mainstream. This shedding of one's social context resonates with the paradox of how otherwise mutually hostile positions – Greenbergian formalist art and feminist art – both led to an erasure of Jewishness in the 1970s from many artists' work, even if for different reasons. These same forces – universalizing in their own ways – also erased the specific social context of California feminism, though there were notable exceptions to this in the work of Jewish artists such as Martha Rosler (*Tijuana Maid*), Eleanor Antin (her *King of Solana Beach*), and Helen and Newton Harrison (*The Lagoon Cycle*) among others.<sup>1</sup> In some cases, this might result merely in a colonial move at the expense of the local, whereas in other works cited the vision of California was more complex. So in this chapter, I turn to California as a space of culture. In particular, I am interested in how the representation of California changes for Jewish feminist artists in the late 1980s and 1990s and how recognizable markers of California culture appear and disappear in unexpected ways.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, American feminist art in California began to be fractured by the politics of racial and ethnic identity. At the same time, Middle Eastern politics and the Palestinian struggle in the Occupied Territories also began to impinge on certain feminist art practices. Thus, the subject of this work was defined not by state or national boundaries but rather by a postnationalist public sphere. While multicultural exhibitions were numerous during that period in California, there was little focus on Jewish or Arab artists, white ethnicity, or Jewish artistic subject matter that connected to transnational alliances. This chapter looks at Jewishness, feminism, and their relation to the visual arts in California as well as to the Middle East. Unlike the work that came out of an

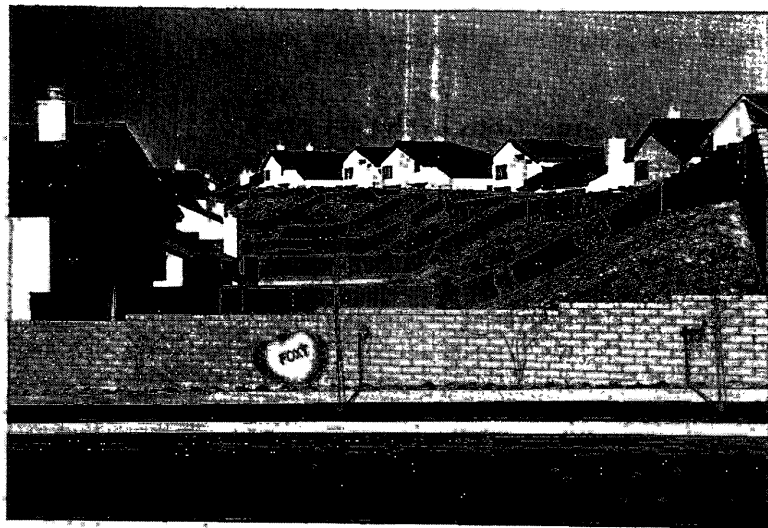
earlier moment, the focus here leans toward the articulation of heterogeneous identities that extend outside the nation-state, embracing a more complex understanding of what postnationalist identities might entail.

### Transnational connections in the art work of Ruth Wallen

The trajectory of Ruth Wallen's artwork suggests some of the ways whereby issues of Jewishness, identity, and place entered the feminist art discourse in the 1980s and 1990s in southern California. In dealing with the aesthetic trajectory of Wallen's work as a photographer and performance artist, it is worth stating that she often deals with overtly social content and combines form and content in interesting ways. Her earlier work focuses on the suburbs of San Diego, where, unlike La Jolla and other elite enclaves, Jews were not excluded. For Wallen, the problem lay not so much with the white Christian neighbors, but with the history of the suburbs themselves and how the land was developed with total disregard for the biological and cultural histories of the area.

One of Wallen's earliest site-oriented projects is a semi-autobiographical artist's book ironically titled *I Love Del Mar* (1987) that erases identity and place both literally and figuratively (Figure 6.1).<sup>2</sup> The book is about her ambivalent relationship to an ersatz suburban subdivision and foregrounds how powerful fantasies that have accrued around the seaside community Del Mar have been displaced onto this inland suburb known to developers as "Del Mar Highlands" or "Carmel Del Mar." Wallen details the unseemly history behind the tomato fields that preceded the building of the suburban tract homes in the area – how harmful pesticides destroyed both the tomato farms and the health of the rural residents and Mexican-American farmers and laborers – and she uncovers how this history became mythologized. *I Love Del Mar* juxtaposes place settings of lush red tomatoes and texts about commodification of tomatoes with images of the building of the new homes in order to mock the real estate developers who advertised this suburb as the epitome of the good life in southern California (Figure 6.2).

Although the issue of Jewishness is not foregrounded, it enters the work obliquely through a photograph of the artist as a child in a Purim outfit and through a personal familial narrative. The figure of her father is central to this narrative: he is a transportation engineer who builds roads in suburban communities in southern California but has other more global colonial dreams of selling trains to China and opening up new frontiers. On the one hand, he represents the colonialist, someone who helped to create Del Mar as an imagined place rather than as a real site of dispute as regards the accommodation of the local peoples. On the other hand, he is represented as a Jewish man from a poor background who wants to help the poor, a figure at the margins who will not be contained within the national culture and has fantasies of exiting. But Wallen also



*Tell me about your boyfriend.*

Figure 6.1 Ruth Wallen, *I Love Del Mar*, 1987, photograph from installation and artist's book. Courtesy of the artist.

emphasizes another unseemly side of her father in the part of her narrative that addresses familial abuse written from an autobiographical perspective. In these other sequences, Wallen chooses to present herself in the narrative in a compromised position (as a child who was sexually abused by her father) and as caught between two ideals, two lifestyles. She is situated at the center of the contradiction between her seemingly perfect upwardly mobile assimilated Jewish family living out the American dream and the sexual, conflictual, and abusive nature of her own family life and the difficulties of coming into her own while carrying an uncommunicable secret. Just as she uses a series of story lines that relate to each other through multivariant metaphors in her text, Wallen also uses images such as generic candy hearts, lush red tomatoes, and chocolate-covered tomatoes in a visually compelling way to convey through deadpan black humor the underside of suburban life in southern California, conflating the good life with consumer culture – its temptations, inappropriate desires, and abuses.

Wallen's later work in the late 1980s and early 1990s continues her interest in questions of Jewishness, place, and identity, more explicitly in relation to her position as a border artist who worked collaboratively with Las Comadres, a multinational women's collective of artists, educators, and critics practicing in the San Diego–Tijuana region from 1988 to 1992.<sup>3</sup> The work of Las Comadres was

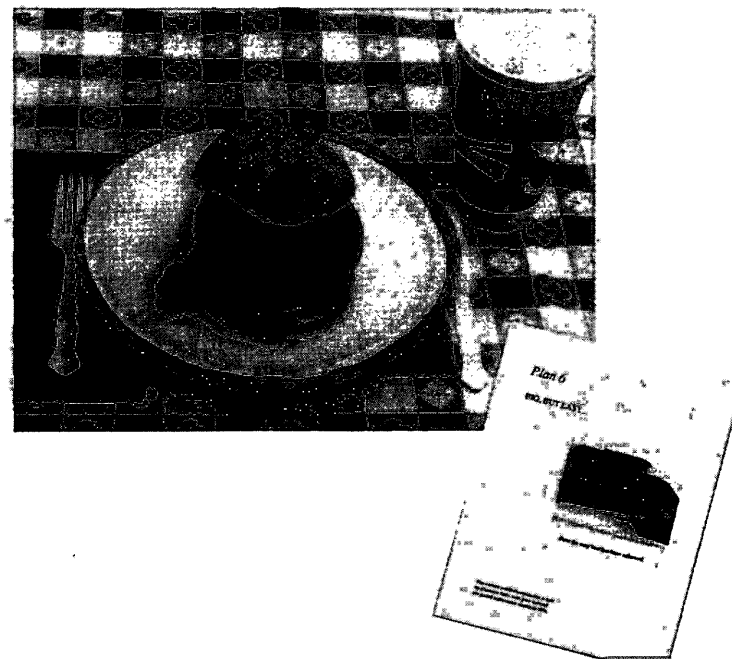


Figure 6.2 Ruth Wallen, *I Love Del Mar*, 1987, photograph from installation and artist's book. Courtesy of the artist.

groundbreaking at the time and became something of a model for artists' collectives elsewhere in terms of dealing with questions of globalization and feminism. Wallen collaborated with the group on a series of projects in response to a number of political events in California that led to increased violence against undocumented Mexican laborers along the San Diego–Tijuana border. In this work Wallen points out the various overlapping histories of Californians, including Americans, Mexicans, and Latinos of diverse racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds (both Jewish and Catholic). Wallen's work with Las Comadres suggests a shift from an older historical moment when middle-class suburbs could not accommodate the presence of a Mexicana or a non-Spanish-speaking Chicana who wasn't a domestic or a gardener. It foregrounds how habitual attachments to place of previous generations suppressed local difference (in memory, in longing) in favor of global ones; this informed their sense of identity, but could only partially inform the artist's.

Questions of Jewishness enter into Las Comadres' *Border Boda* (Border wedding), a 1990 performance piece presented as part of an installation work

titled *La Vecindad* (The neighborhood), through the work of Wallen and other Mexican and Chicano group members who were part Jewish.<sup>4</sup> The performance takes as its focus familial relations as well as institutional sites of identification shaping the subjectivities of group members. In works both biographical and autobiographical, the emphasis is on the kind of dialogue or debate that ensues when one identity is positioned against another, whether amongst friends of different ethnic, religious, or racial backgrounds or within the same family and the same gender. This is accomplished through two elements that shape the performance: matriarchal and private stories, and patriarchal and political narratives. The patriarchal narratives often disrupt the matriarchal ones through the presentation of political discussions and even a mock wedding. Both spaces, however, problematize the "idealization" of family while also interrogating family relations, which in both spaces are not always harmonious or homogeneous. The performers deliberately mix up the two spaces, and cross over from one space to another. For example, Wallen and fellow artist Emily Hicks present grandmother stories but also ironical political commentary (Figure 6.3). The performance incorporates oral histories of various members' grandmothers, including Wallen's Jewish grandmother, who immigrated to California from Russia. As Wallen comments:

With Las Comadres, my identity as a Jew became more formative . . . Las Comadres was composed of multicultural and multinational artists so everyone was forced to look at their own identities . . . One of the most powerful



Figure 6.3 Ruth Wallen, *Border Boda*, 1990, video still of Eloisa de Leon, Ruth Wallen, and Rocio Weiss, from multi-media installation and performance. Courtesy of the artist.

moments as a group was telling the stories of our grandmothers. For many of the women in the group, these were Jewish stories and created a further bond between us.<sup>5</sup>

The differences between matriarchal and patriarchal spaces, as a parallel to written/oral histories, serve as a backdrop to the *Border Boda* performance, which revolves around the figure of a Chicana granddaughter and the multiple realities she faces as she negotiates the contradictions and ambiguities of life on the border, both within the confines of her own home and in various public and institutional spaces. Much of the performance takes place in the domestic space of the kitchen, where the Chicana granddaughter, who has recently announced that she will be getting married, is being given advice about her future by her grandmother and her mute aunt, who communicates by singing Mexican folk songs that idealize the family's Mexican past. The extended family is represented by members of Las Comadres, who share stories about their own grandmothers and their life experiences. These stories are about loss and limits, but none of these women is presented as helpless victim. For example, in Wallen's story, her grandmother moves to the United States to receive the education forbidden to her in Russia and becomes involved in the labor movement within the Chicana community in east Los Angeles. These stories work to offer an alternative and more complex conception of the members' shared histories as well as a more heterogeneous set of signs than those by an individual's own biological relatives.

If the kitchen in *Border Boda* is seen as a nurturing space populated by friends and family, the public space, by contrast, is presented as a conflict room, where the young Chicana is educated about the contradictions and inconsistencies of the political realm and how they impinge on women's lives. This part of the piece includes critical commentary by her feminist friends about the polarized political discussions surrounding the border and includes prerecorded news coverage as well as live reenactments of activist events staged by Las Comadres along the border. Linear, nationalistic modes associated with more traditional claims of citizenship are juxtaposed with discussions that try to reimagine citizenship along the border in a more fluid way, one that takes into account the reciprocity and interrelatedness of its people. The entire performance verges on the pedagogical in its demand that the young Chicana learn to analyze how the border works as a neighborhood with multiple levels of organization and meaning. The performance enacts the collective's hope that women who are border citizens can act as translators for each other and use complexity and clarity of judgment to imagine a future beyond that based simply on the dead end of ethnic/racial identity politics or the limited traditional narratives of women's roles within their own biological family, the home, and the nation.

This version of feminist solidarity differs markedly from that practiced by Judy Chicago and her collective in the 1970s. It is no longer enough simply to share