

ELEANOR ANTIN'S SUBVERSIVE FEMINIST ART
Lisa E. Bloom



"Before the Revolution", 1976-78

Despite the critical acclaim Eleanor Antin has received over the decades, her work has often existed in an ambivalent space within feminist art history. Feminist artists who emerged after the 1970s engaged in a complex relationship with the feminist art of that decade—at once indebted to its innovations and eager to move beyond its perceived essentialisms. Antin's practice resists the simplifications and binaries of conventional 1970s identity politics while simultaneously rejecting the notion that we are “beyond” identity—a claim that risks overlooking the continued structural violence enacted upon individuals based on visible markers and the stereotypes attached to them. Rather than aligning herself with essentialist feminist aesthetics, Antin consistently explored themes of identity, autobiography, masquerade, and the construction of history with an often-subversive sense of humor.¹ Her work resists fixed categories, foregrounding the complexities of identity, particularly in relation to Jewishness, diaspora and the intersections of race, class and gender.²

When I began writing about Antin's work in the mid-1990s, discussions of Jewishness in feminist and performance art were still limited, despite a growing interest in intersectionality. The New York art world, shaped by a white, heterosexual male power structure, often sidelined these conversations. As historian Sander Gilman has noted, anti-Semitic discourses historically cast Jewishness as pathological, contributing to anxieties among secular Jewish artists about engaging openly with their heritage. These tensions, heightened in the post-Shoah period, shaped how Antin's work was understood at the time. My approach, like that of many contemporary thinkers such as Judith Butler and Rachel Garfield, amongst others, does not seek to recover an essentialist or celebratory vision of Jewish identity. Rather, it engages with identity as a continually negotiated articulation of lived relations, emphasizing the constructed nature of subjectivity and the broader social conditions that shape it.³ Jewishness in this context should not be conflated with Judaism or Zionism, nor should it be understood solely through a framework of victimhood.

Unlike in many European contexts, where Jewish identity is often framed primarily through religion or Holocaust memory, in the US, identity is largely shaped by the dominant narrative of hyphenated ethnicity—such as African-American, Italian-American, or Irish-American—which assumes both assimilation and an enduring connection to origin. Yet the ability of Jewish Americans to be fully integrated into whiteness has been historically unstable. As historian Matthew Fye Jacobson has shown, Jews were gradually incorporated into whiteness in the postwar era, but this process was neither uniform nor complete. The legacies of slavery and the racial exclusion of the Jim Crow era continue to this day with Trump's election, such that Jews now appear white, but only conditionally so, as they are threatened once again by the same far-right white nationalist violence that threatens other minorities. All this illustrates how whiteness for Jews continues to be contested and a shifting category rather than a fixed racial status.⁴ This instability was not merely theoretical; it also shaped Antin's lived experience and her artistic practice in profound ways.

¹ On camp as an aesthetic strategy, see Susan Sonntag's "Notes on Camp" (1964). Sonntag's definition of camp enriches Antin's use of humor, exaggeration and incongruity to critique societal norms.

² Eleanor Antin's participation in *From the Inside Out: Eight Contemporary Artists*, curated by Susan T. Goodman at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1993, helped secure her position within the discourse of Jewish contemporary art in the US during the 1990s. This exhibition was among the first major efforts to align Jewish artistic identity with other contemporary identity-based practices. As Goodman noted, the museum's contemporary art program aimed to articulate a distinctively Jewish response to the era's "rising ethnic consciousness". For further discussions on the curatorial framing of Jewish identity in contemporary art, see Susan T. Goodman, *From the Inside Out: Eight Contemporary Artists*, which included Antin's *Vine Night*. Also, see Norman Kleeblatt's ground-breaking exhibition *Foo Jewish! Challenging Traditional Identities* at the Jewish Museum in 1996. The field of Jewish contemporary art has since expanded, spurred in part by Goodman's and Kleeblatt's catalogues and exhibitions. For more context on the development of Jewish art history, see Samantha Bakshind and Larry Silver, "Art History", in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Jewish Culture*, Laurence Roth and Nadia Vainan, eds., New York and London: Routledge, 2014, pp. 95-107.

³ Judith Butler has argued that our sense of self is not fixed or stable but instead shaped by the social and cultural norms around us. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler introduced the concept of performativity, suggesting that identity is not something we inherently possess but something we continuously perform and reshape through our actions and interactions with the world. Also see Rachel Garfield, "Playing with History: Jewish Subjectivity in Contemporary Lens-Based Art", in Roth and Vainan, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Jewish Culture*, pp. 200-212. Garfield examines how Jewish artists in the UK use lens-based media to navigate historical narratives and cultural identity, a perspective that resonates with Antin's interrogation of diaspora, memory and selfhood in works like *100 Boots* and her constructed persona. For a broader exploration of the intersection of Jewishness, femininity and art in the UK, see *Raise and Rebel: Jewish Female Identity in Contemporary British Art*, Monica Bohm-Duchen and Vera Grodzinski, eds., London: Lund Humphries, 1996. This edited volume highlights the complexities of modern and postmodern Jewish identities, particularly their entanglement with themes of diaspora, and the instability of fixed meanings.

4 Jewish identity in the US has been shaped by shifting definitions of whiteness. While postwar narratives emphasized Jewish assimilation, Matthew Frye Jacobson has shown that Jews were not always considered “fully white.” See Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigration and the Alchemy of Race*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.

5 This article builds from my earlier writings on Antin, including Bloom, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2006, 2009, and 2024.

6 Nick Mirzoeff, *Dispersed and Visual Culture Representing/Thems and Us*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, explores how diasporic identities disrupt and redefine traditional cultural narratives. Mirzoeff argues that diaspora is not just a condition of displacement but also a lens through which cultural identity is constructed and contested. His discussion of Jewish identity as a paradigm of modernity and postmodernity resonates with Antin’s interrogation of displacement, assimilation and the unstable meanings of identity in her work.

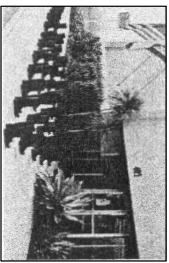


Figure 1. *100 Boots* (1971–73)

7 Henry Swyre, “Introduction,” in Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots*, New York: Running Press, 1999, p. 1–7. Swyre highlights the subversive humor and conceptual rigor of *100 Boots*, emphasizing how Antin’s use of ordinary objects critiques suburban conformity, consumer culture, and the militarization of the American landscape during the Vietnam War era. His analysis situates the work within broader trends of 1970s conceptual art while underscoring the feminist and anti-war underpinnings.

By the late 1970s, shifts within feminism, especially those driven by the exclusion of minoritarian feminists from majoritarian feminist practice, further enabled Antin to focus her art on dynamically layered experiences of identity. In Southern California, where racially restrictive housing covenants had excluded Jews, Mexicans, Asian and Black people from living in the university town of La Jolla until 1968, such barriers shaped Antin’s awareness of social exclusion and the interconnectedness of racial discrimination. These restrictions persisted informally well into the 1970s, despite being legally outlawed by the Fair Housing Act of 1968. As professors at the University of California, San Diego, Antin and her husband, poet David Antin, navigated these dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, which became central to her artistic practices.

My book *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* (2006) explored these complexities, with Antin’s work playing a central role.⁵ The title’s reference to “ghosts” underscores the unspoken issues and silences embedded in feminist art history. Many Jewish feminist artists of the 1970s—among them Antin, Kathy Acker, Judy Chicago, Joyce Kozloff, Lynn Hershman Leason, Martha Rosler and Miriam Schapiro—came from urban communities deeply marked by ethnicity, religion, race and class. Their migration to California in the 1960s brought these inflections into an emerging feminist art scene, shaping the movement in ways that remain underexamined.

For Antin, the condition of diaspora—the perpetual negotiation of identity and belonging—became a central framework for her art.⁶ Her exploration of migration, borders and exclusion is not only personal but political, critiquing broader structures of racial and cultural belonging in America. As the daughter of a former Yiddish theatre actress and a communist father, she explored themes of displacement and assimilation, while also challenging the moral triumphalism of Cold War Americanism with a deep skepticism about the nation’s ideological narratives.

This critical stance is particularly evident in *100 Boots* (1971–73), one of Antin’s most well-known works [See figure 1, p. XXI].⁷ A conceptual mail-art piece, *100 Boots* follows the journey of a group of empty rubber boots as they traverse suburban Southern California landscapes before making their way to New York’s Museum of Modern Art. While humorously mimicking the visual tropes of an all-American road trip, the work simultaneously offers a feminist and anti-war critique. Created at the height of the Vietnam War, *100 Boots* engages with the anxieties of the era, using the boots as anonymous stand-ins for both faceless soldiers and the displaced. The imagery evokes a mass exodus, an invisible march of those uprooted by war and political violence, implicitly connecting US militarism abroad with structural exclusion and marginalization at home. The boots’ final arrival at MoMA—the bastion of institutional artistic legitimacy—marks both an infiltration and an ironic commentary on the art world’s detachment from pressing political realities, reinforcing Antin’s broader interrogation of power, identity and historical myth-making.

Antin’s work stands as a rare example of a Jewish feminist artist who, rather than simply inserting herself into dominant historical frameworks, interrogates and destabilizes the very

structures that produce and sustain them. Through an interplay of humor, masquerade and conceptual rigor, she exposes the tensions between personal and collective memory, challenging rigid narratives of identity, history and belonging. By subverting established artistic and social conventions, Antin expands the boundaries of feminist and conceptual art, positioning herself as one of the more incisive and innovative artists of her generation.

Revisiting Carving Through an Intersectional Lens

Like many progressive feminist performance artists of diverse backgrounds—including Lorraine O’Grady, Adrian Piper, Cindy Sherman, Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke—Antin uses her own body and personal experiences as the foundation for much of her work. Antin’s *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) remains one of her most iconic pieces. For this work, Antin photographed herself every morning over a thirty-six-day period, documenting her body’s transformation during a rigorous dieting regime [see figure 2, p. XXI]. Arranged as a horizontal grid of 148 black-and-white photographs, *Carving* has often been interpreted as a critique of the oppressive beauty standards imposed on women by both classical art and contemporary society. Scholar Joanna Frueh emphasizes this point, stating, “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, and competitiveness with other women.”⁸

However, viewing *Carving* solely as a feminist critique of beauty standards overlooks its engagement with white ethnicity and visibility. Antin’s self-portraits present not a “universal” or generic female body but depict an attractive, short Jewish woman who deviates from this norm.⁹ In this sense, *Carving* challenges the racial and ethnic assumptions underpinning Kenneth Clark’s influential study *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*.¹⁰ Antin herself acknowledged her engagement with Clark’s framework, particularly his distinction between the “naked” and the “nude.” In *Carving*, she reverses Clark’s hierarchy, elevating the “naked” as a site of resistance and identity. Her work critiques the idealized classical nude—rooted in Western, white, male aesthetics—while reclaiming the marginalized and racialized body as a source of power and self-definition.

Antin’s deliberate invocation of early-twentieth-century police and medical photographic practices further complicates *Carving*’s critique. These practices, often used to catalogue racial and ethnic “others,” rendered marginalized bodies hypervisible yet dehumanized. By employing a similar visual grammar, Antin foregrounds the vulnerability and resilience of her body as it undergoes transformation. The repetitive, film-strip-like arrangement of her photographs underscores the relentlessness of societal pressures while confronting viewers with the constructed nature of ideal body types.

As historian Sander Gilman observes, nineteenth-century medical theories frequently emphasized the adaptability of Jewish bodies, portraying Jews as simultaneously assimilable and

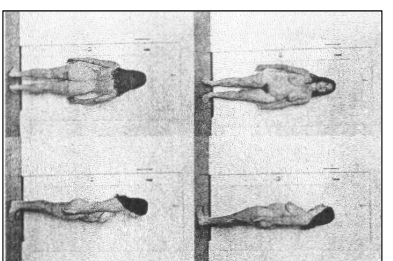


Figure 2. *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972)

8 Joanna Frueh, “The Body Through Women’s Eyes,” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds., New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995, highlights the disciplining of women’s bodies in art history as a central theme in Antin’s *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*. Also see how Antin’s use of her body in works like *Carving* exemplifies the feminist critique of identity and the self as explored in Amelia Jones’s *Body Art/Feminist Subject*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

9 Sander Gilman, *The Jew’s Body*, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, explores racialized Jewish identity relevant to Antin’s interrogation of ethnic invisibility.

10 Kenneth Clark’s *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, 1956; reprinted Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972, discusses Western ideals of the nude, which Antin subverts in *Carving*, particularly its racial and aesthetic assumptions.

¹² For an exploration of the “cultural turn” in Jewish studies and its implications for the arts, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Bodies,” in Ruth and Yehnam, eds., *The Bodying/Thing-ing of Contemporary Jewish Culture*, pp. 172–182. This “corporeal turn” extends beyond the focus on gender and sexuality, embracing the broader cultural turn within literary and cultural studies in the US and UK, the incorporation of visual culture as a central theme in contemporary Jewish scholarship.

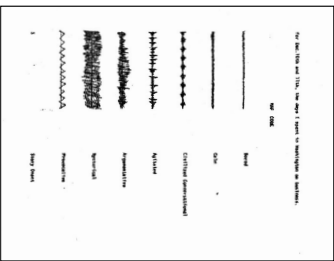


Figure 3. *Domestic Peace* (1971–72)

¹³ See Cindy Nemser, “Eleanor Antin,” in *Art Talk*, New York: Scribner, 1975, p. 281. Nemser provides an early and significant perspective on Antin’s work.

¹⁴ Text from the artist’s archives.

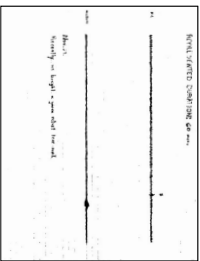


Figure 4. *Domestic Peace* (1971–72)

perpetually distinct.¹¹ Antin’s project, in contrast, resists such adaptability. By foregrounding her outsiderness and rejecting the “neutrality” of the classical nude, she defies both assimilationist pressures and the homogenizing gaze of art history. Through *Carving*, Antin invites us to reconsider how bodies—particularly racialized and gendered bodies—are both inscribed by and resist the constraints of cultural narratives.¹²

The Humor and Subversion of *Domestic Peace*

Antin’s *Domestic Peace* (1971–72), similarly interrogates identity, albeit through the lens of family dynamics. This lesser-known work consists of a written record documenting Antin’s week-long visit with her mother, complete with oscillating graphs that chart their interactions (see figure 3, p. XXI). While *Domestic Peace* lacks the visual immediacy of *Carving*, it wields humor and conceptual rigor to challenge idealized narratives surrounding mother-daughter relationships, particularly within Jewish families. In contrast to works that situate women solely within dominant aesthetic and cultural frameworks, *Domestic Peace* exposes the conflicts and hypocrisies embedded in the domestic sphere. Antin’s pseudo-scientific approach—meticulously documenting arguments and silences—both satirizes and humanizes the fraught terrain of familial relationships. Cindy Nemser captured this tension when she observed, “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

For avant-garde artists of the time, *Domestic Peace* was unsettling not only because it addressed the taboo of an artist’s family life but also because it highlighted the ways feminism could complicate, rather than harmonize, these relationships. Antin portrays her mother as a formidable presence, embodying generational tensions and unspoken cultural expectations. The independence feminism offered to women artists, Antin suggests, often came at the cost of intergenerational understanding. Reflecting on this dynamic, Antin later wrote that while staying with her mother in New York, she carefully curated their conversations, offering stories designed to produce in her mother “a feeling of closeness.” Yet, she noted wryly, “this closeness was a closeness to her theory rather than to her life.”¹⁴ Carefully strategizing her conversational “gambits,” she aimed to “ensure the domestic peace necessary to free me for my own affairs.”¹⁴ By framing familial interactions as an act of performance, Antin reveals the tensions between self-presentation and authenticity, complicating idealized notions of mother-daughter bonds.

Through staged conversations about seemingly innocuous topics—such as the purchase of a green velvet loveseat—Antin reveals the performative nature of domestic harmony (see figure 4, p. XXI). These conversations were short and peaceful in comparison with others that deviated from her mother’s notion of middle-class success. The latter type is exemplified by an agitated seven-hour interaction between mother and daughter: Antin discourages her mother from shopping at Goodwill stores because the “stuff is low class. Trying to gain her mother’s acceptance, she

ventures, “Even if they had bargains you wouldn’t want them.” The conversations that incite the strongest disagreements between mother and daughter, however, explore ideological conflicts in the workplace between middle-class Eastern European Jews and African Americans or delve into class and even racial tensions within the Jewish community (see figures 4 and 5, pp. XX and XXI).

Ironically, *Domestic Peace* demonstrates that harmony, when achieved, often demands silence and conformity. Antin’s comedic framing, with its pseudo-scientific graphs and meticulous record-keeping, lightens the emotional weight of the subject matter while emphasizing its underlying tension. In doing so, Antin critiques both the romanticization of familial unity and the broader societal pressures that demand women “keep the peace” at the expense of their own voices.

Antin’s Sculptural Series: *Eight New York Women* (1970)

Eight New York Women (1970), a sculptural series combining text and objects to construct biographies of eight New Yorkers, addresses the profound tension in women’s relationships with one another: the complications that arise when a woman artist uses other women as subjects of portraiture. Antin examines how women’s identities are shaped by conflicting allegiances and societal expectations. To engage meaningfully with feminism, she argues, women artists must adopt transformative modes of representation. At the same time, Antin navigated the male-dominated New York art world of the 1970s, which shaped both the opportunities and constraints of her practice.

When *Eight New York Women* was first exhibited in 1971, Antin explained her artistic intentions: She deliberately avoided narratives of sisterhood grounded solely in shared oppression. Instead, she explored the multifaceted activities and individual choices that shaped women’s lives. She wrote:

I am determined to present women without pathos or helplessness. My women had all chosen lifestyles independent of men’s. It is true that some lifestyles proved more successful in practice than others, but they were all interesting and complex enough to be worth the try. Finally, I deliberately chose styles whose linguistic structure were ambiguous, because a puzzle is harder to love than a fact.¹⁵

In the same issue of *Artnews* that featured Linda Nochlin’s groundbreaking essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” Antin aligned herself with Nochlin’s critique of patriarchal art history. She stated:

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. Just now I consider myself something of an authority on the position of women as subject matter, having just mounted a show of biographies called *Eight New York Women*. It has been part of woman’s glamour as an artistic subject that she was seen as pathetic, passive, in short—the superb victim.¹⁶

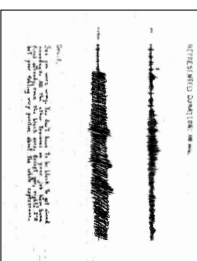


Figure 5. *Domestic Peace* (1971–72)

¹⁵ For Antin’s own words on her approach to portraying women, see Eleanor Antin, “Women without Pathos,” *Artnews*, January 1971, pp. 3–4; reprinted in T. Hess and E. Baker, eds., *Art and Social Politics: Women’s Liberation, Women Artists, and Art History*, New York: Macmillan, 1973, pp. 86–87.

¹⁶ Antin, “Women without Pathos,” pp. 3–4.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

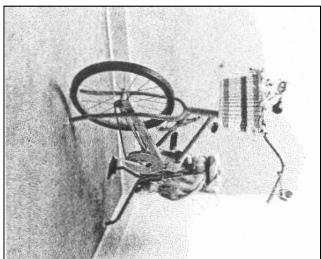


Figure 6 *Eight New York Women* (1970)

Like many women artists of her time, Antin grappled with the challenge of disrupting conventional representations of women in art. What distinguished her approach, however, was her refusal to depict women as passive or pitiable. Her insistence on portraying women “without pathos or helplessness” marked a radical departure from prevailing artistic norms.

In *Eight New York Women*, Antin sought to tell a different story about women in the 1970s—artists, dancers and writers—one that directly addressed the influence of American media on questions of assimilation, glamour, Americanness, and middle-class ideals of femininity. Eschewing traditional portraits, she constructed representations of these women through assemblages of “manufactured proxies.” Antin explained her method:

I deliberately chose expensive, shiny, glamorous objects. 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!¹⁷

Antin's reference to Marilyn Monroe highlights the ethnic dimensions of her project. Monroe, the quintessential American sex symbol of the 1950s, is juxtaposed with the more marginal, predominantly non-middle-class and white ethnic women Antin portrayed. By using carefully selected consumer goods—such as an exercise bicycle or elegant home furnishings—Antin critiqued the postwar marketing of middle-class values, assimilation and gender roles through consumer culture.¹⁸

The series underscores how mundane objects like toiletries and furniture can serve as signifiers of national identity, femininity and middle-class belonging. While the women depicted in *Eight New York Women* were single, urban, white, non-middle-class women pursuing artistic careers and living in modest conditions, Antin used these consumer surrogates to evoke the complexity of their lives. Her portrait of Yvonne Rainer—a renowned post-modern choreographer with Judson Dance Theater—features a chrome exercise bicycle (see figure 6, p. XXI). This object, typically associated with suburban domesticity, takes on a different resonance when linked to Rainer, who was known for breaking down traditional modern dance vocabularies using everyday movements. The bicycle becomes a symbol of the tension between the mundane and the revolutionary.

Antin's approach diverged sharply from the dominant artistic trends of her time. Her portraits neither dwell on women's oppression nor idealize them as heroic figures. Instead, she highlights the everyday idiosyncrasies and vulnerabilities that define her subjects. In one striking portrait, lingerie designer and poet Hannah Weiner is represented by a meticulously arranged breakfast nook with striped upholstered chairs, and a teapot. However, a large hamper placed incongruously on the dainty breakfast table disrupts the idyllic scene, hinting at repressed anger and fragility beneath the surface (see figure 7, p. XXI).¹⁹

In certain ways, Antin's work reveals her interest in addressing the discourse of modernism, even if only to critique or occasionally reference it, as she does in her late-1970s-invented autobiography of Eleanora Antinova, a fictional Black ballerina in

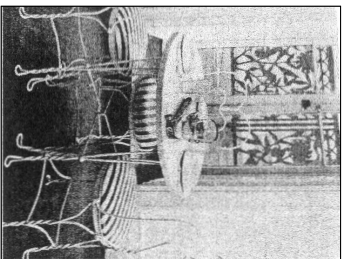


Figure 7 *Eight New York Women* (1970)

19 In some ways, Antin's project resembles Elaine Reichek's *Rationalized Knowledge*, displayed in 1994 as part of an exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York. Both works are ironic portraits that use consumer objects to deal simultaneously with questions of assimilation, domestic interiors, and Jewish women's lives. See Robin Cembales, “Museum Shows to Make You Think or Cry,” *Arts*, 22 August 2013, <https://www.artsnews.com/art-news/new-york-identity-remix-in-must-see-museum-shows-2592/>.

20 The anxiety about making Jewishness visible was widely felt among secular Jews in the second half of the twentieth century and continues to create a generational fault line among Jewish artists and critics. This tension was exacerbated by pressures to assimilate into American middle-class norms, which often coded Eastern European Jewish experiences—particularly in speech, gesture and domestic aesthetics—as excessive or unrefined. These anxieties played out in cultural and artistic discourse as well. For example, Clement Greenberg's emphasis on formalist abstraction and the universal in modernist art was often interpreted as a rejection of overly ethnic, narrative or figurative work. For more on the mechanisms through which the American art establishment privileged abstraction and banished specificity with claims to the universal, see discussions of Greenberg's influence, see “Clement Greenberg's Modernist Shadow,” the first chapter of my book *Partial Identity in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 14-31.

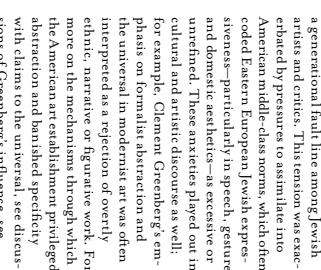


Figure 8 *The King of Solana Beach* (1974)

Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Moreover, there is a tendency in Antin's work to mine and parody whiteness, as in the brightly, perfectly immaculate but empty spaces of her portrait of Weiner. This tendency complicates the relationship between the universalizing discourses of feminism within modernism and postmodernism, discourses within which she is situated.²⁰

Sparseness and coolness in Antin's conceptual work distance it from the stereotypically cluttered interiors and expressive gestures often associated with Eastern European Jewish immigrant culture, particularly as represented in the theatre and popular visual culture. Conflict, anger and disagreement among women are literally mapped by codes and grapples or symbolized by perfectly staged interiors and objects.

Official documents and stereotypical domestic interiors stand in for the pressure to assimilate and adopt the relatively more controlled body language of urban Anglo-American and Northern European culture, which frequently stigmatized expressive gestures and clutter as signs of backwardness. Antin's projects satirize the dominant bourgeois codes of American etiquette, privacy, politeness and good manners, reducing these conventions to their hypocritical core. Her sharp wit and meticulous attention to visual detail reveal the tensions underlying these constructed ideals.

The Performance of Multiple Identities in Antin's Later Work

While Antin's earlier works explore gender and ethnicity indirectly, her later invented autobiographies delve deeply into the fluidity of identity, constructing characters that challenge fixed racial, ethnic, class and gendered boundaries. Among her most notable personae is the seventeenth-century English King Charles I, reimagined as the King of Solana Beach in 1974, referencing a beach community north of San Diego where Antin resided. In contrast to Anthony Van Dyck's depictions of Charles I as the epitome of whiteness, entitlement and aristocratic privilege, Antin's king is deliberately sexually ambiguous and unkempt. Her version wears a mix of facial hair and visible breasts and is dressed in a shabby costume that includes jeans typical of California popular culture, a cape, and a ruffled shirt—far removed from the regalia of wealth and power. Images of her performance depict the king sharing beers with commoners on park benches (see figure 8, p. XXI).

Antin does not aim to “pass” as Charles I but instead draws on camp as an aesthetic strategy, using humor, exaggeration and incongruity to critique societal norms. By employing drag, Antin exaggerates and parodies stereotypes, destabilizing assumed hierarchies and exposing their artificiality. Her performances rewrite historical scripts by juxtaposing and inverting signs and narratives, disrupting discriminatory and separatist status quos.

Antin further develops her interrogation of identity in her portrayal of Eleanora Antinova (1979), the fictional Black ballerina who choreographed and danced for the Ballets Russes in the 1920s. Antin described Antinova as “Black, glamorous, and of an uncertain but advanced age, [and] very much the grande dame.”



Figure 9 Eleanor Antinova at Russian Tea Room with Anna Campagn, New York City (October 1980)

22 See Eleanor Antin, *Eleanor Antinova Plays*, 1991.

23 On Antin's Antinova character and identity politics, see Christie Smith, *Embodying Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deane Smith*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011 p. 88. Smith critiques Antinova's portrayal, emphasizing the ethical complexities of embodying racialized identities while recognizing Antin's extensive research on Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. She also discusses at length how Antin is one of several Jewish performers who used the signs of blackness in the service of personal transformation and identity.



Figure 10 Antinova as *The Hebrew* (1980)

She writes: "What of me and Antinova? I borrow her dark skin, her reputation, her name which is very much like mine anyway. She borrowed the name from the Russians, from Diaghilev. I borrow her aspirations to be a classical ballerina... She will dance the white queen Marie-Antoinette. She invests the space between herself and the white queen with faith that they will come together. But who is Marie Antoinette...? What can the little Austrian give Antinova?²⁴ Antin slips from "she" to "I" to describe her and her character's interchange with themselves and the world. Sometimes this world is framed as a stage or art gallery to lend it context; at other times, Antin herself becomes an artwork that slips into the world as an experience.

In 1981, Antin staged a twenty-day performance in New York City, during which she lived as Antinova, embodying her through vintage dresses, flowing shirts, high-heeled shoes, long painted nails, and dramatic makeup that darkened her skin. The performance was later documented in *Being Antinova* (1983), a book that gathers Antin's reflections on inhabiting this identity, along with staged 'publicity' shots and drawings of Antinova and other dancers in ballet poses (see figure 9, p. xi).²²

Antinova's invented persona critiques European cultural history, particularly the Ballets Russes of the 1920s, which Antin called a "white machine." Historically, a Black ballerina and choreographer could not have existed within Diaghilev's company, where the ballerina symbolized whiteness, ethereality and virtue, even though Black performers and dancers like Josephine Baker were well-known and popular in Paris. By embodying Antinova, Antin highlights the racial exclusivity of European high culture while also drawing parallels to the marginalization of Jews in Eastern Europe. Her use of blackface forces a confrontation with these overlapping dynamic histories of exclusion, as well as the regrettable legacy of Jewish performers engaging in blackface in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American theatre and early cinema.²³

Antinova's "memoirs," written by Antin, parody the exoticized roles imposed on Jewish, Black and Native American performers in European modernist traditions. Antinova's repertoire includes playing a stationary slave girl, Pochonata, the dancer of 'The Hebrews', and Marie Antoinette masquerading as a Black shepherdess which she sees as a transformative act that allows her to enter the consciousness of the performer (see figures 10 and 11, p. XX and XXI). These satirical roles expose the mechanisms of cultural and racial othering that pervade these artistic traditions, reducing marginalized identities to stereotypes.

Through Antinova, Antin interrogates not only the racial and class hierarchies that define high culture but also the broader systems that perpetuate exclusion. The Antinova persona becomes a vehicle for examining the intersections of identity, performance and power, highlighting how artistic traditions both reflect and reinforce societal inequities. By juxtaposing historical exclusion with her performance possibilities, Antin invites us to reconsider the limits of representation and the constructed nature of identity itself.

The Vanishing Sheet: Theatricality, Memory and Feminist Subversion in *Vilna Nights* and *The Man Without a World*

Antin's work is deeply rooted in personal and historical memory, navigating the intricate interplay of identity across generations.²⁴ Her upbringing shaped her unique artistic approach, which frequently displaces itself, referencing both Southern California's cultural milieu and the vanishing worlds of earlier generations of Jewish immigrants. This theme of relocation—both geographical and cultural—underpins her examination of what is lost, transformed or reimaged in these transitions, becoming a central motif in her later works.

Antin's exploration of Jewish heritage reaches a compelling apex in *Vilna Nights* (1993) and *The Man Without a World* (1991).²⁵ The latter, a meticulously constructed simulation of a silent-era Yiddish film, revisits her Jewish heritage and the vibrancy of shtetl life in Poland.²⁶ However, rather than romanticizing this so-called 'vanishing world,' Antin uses satire to critique its limitations, particularly for women, while interrogating the commodification of Jewish nostalgia. She directly targets the diasporic nostalgia market, which often obscures the annihilation of the real world and people it seeks to memorialize.

In *The Man Without a World*, archetypal roles such as the virgin, mother, and whore are destabilized through playful and irreverent portrayals of female characters. Conventional scenes, such as a bride being fitted for her wedding dress or undergoing a ritual mikvah cleansing, are juxtaposed with unexpected moments—like a Jewish woman tormenting a pig with sticks in a bustling marketplace—amplifying the tension between tradition and subversion. The sheet itself becomes an artwork, as do all its elements, from the bags in the opening scene to the pig—an animal that would never be seen there (see figure 12, p. xi).²⁷ Similarly, Antin subverts the mikvah ritual by depicting the lead female character rising from purification, only to have her head shaved bald—a practice rarely required even in the most orthodox Hasidic sects (see figure 13, p. xi).

Antin frames the film as a lost masterpiece by a fictional male Jewish director, Yevgey Antinov, a supposed Russian avant-garde filmmaker of the early Stalinist period. According to Antin, Antinov was commissioned by American businessmen to create a nostalgic film about shtetl life for Jewish audiences in the diaspora. Frustrated by their insistence on reinforcing sentimental stereotypes, Antinov instead produced a critique of these values. The backers ultimately rejected the film, refusing to distribute it, while Antinov was driven out of Russia by Stalin's totalitarian regime. Through this fictional framing, Antin plays with the blurred boundaries between history and myth, exposing the mechanisms that dictate which narratives are preserved and which are erased.

Her work functions as a layered critique—of nostalgic fabrications of shtetl life, of totalitarianism in art and politics and of the power structures that distort history. By presenting *The Man Without a World* as the 'last remaining print' of Antinov's suppressed masterpiece, Antin metaphorically rescues it from obscurity while dismantling its clichés. The film's conclusion, in

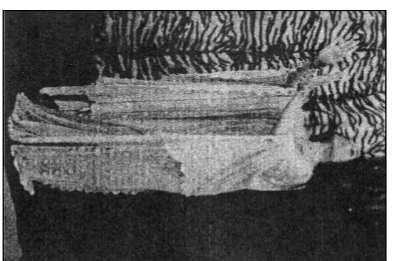


Figure 11 Antinova as *L'Éclaire* (1980)

24 On generational memory and Jewish identity, see Mariamne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997. Though not specific to Antin, Hirsch's concept of postmemory clarifies how second-generation Jewish artists address themes of displacement and loss.

25 On Antin's film *The Man Without a World*, see the transcript of the screenplay published by Green Integer, Los Angeles, 2002. For a review, see Jeffrey Skolter, "The Shadows of Catastrophe: Eleanor Antin's *The Man without a World*," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 2, Fall 1995, pp. 28–32. Also see Elean Zweg, "Construction Loss: Film and Presence in the Work of Eleanor Antin," *Millemum Film Journal*, Vol. 29, Fall 1996, pp. 34–41.

26 *The Man Without a World*, directed by Eleanor Antin (Milestone Films, 1991), 00:33.



Figure 12 *The Man Without a World* (1991)

27 For more on the interpretation of the anomalies in sheet life in Antin's *A Man without a World*, see Harris Lenowitz, "The Pig in the Market, the Bird in the Mikvah: What's wrong with this Picture?", *Vision*, Spring 1993, pp. 38–39.



Figure 13. *The Man Without a World* (1991)

²⁸ *Vilna Nights* was commissioned by the Jewish Museum for the 1993 exhibition *From the Inside Out: Eight Contemporary Artists* to triangulate the museum's new exhibition space. The mixed media installation appears as a ruined shell with a bombed-out courtyard. Antin quoted in Goodman, "From the Inside Out: Eight Contemporary Artists," p. 24.



Figure 14. *Vilna Nights* (1993)

²⁹ For a more detailed description of *Vilna Nights*, see Maurice Berger, et al. *Mastersworks of the Jewish Museum*. New York: The Jewish Museum, 2004, pp. 76–77.

³⁰ Antin quoted in Goodman, "From the Inside Out: Eight Contemporary Artists," p. 24.

³¹ Antin quoted in "A Dialogue with Antin," in Fox, ed., *Eleanor Antin*, p. 222.

³² Howard Fox, "Desire and Destiny in the Art of Eleanor Antin," in *Eleanor Antin*, Howard Fox, ed., exhibition catalogue, Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999, p. 145.

which anarchists destroy the shell, serves as both a literal and symbolic obliteration of reductive narratives, making way for a more critical engagement with history.

Antin's sustained engagement with Yiddish theatre and shell culture highlights her personal and artistic ties to second-generation Jewish immigrant narratives. Drawing on her mother's experience as a Yiddish theatre actress, she reimagines these histories through a lens of irony, humor and feminist critique. Rather than indulging in nostalgia, her work exposes the oppressive limitations within these cultural traditions, particularly for women.

In *Vilna Nights*, Antin extends her exploration of Jewish history through a theatrical lens. She describes the piece as "a life-size stage set," foregrounding the collapse of what was once a major center of Jewish culture and learning in Vilna (now Vilnius, Lithuania).²⁸ Since its founding in the tenth century, Vilna has been one of the most contested and devastated cities in Europe. Before World War II, it was home to the largest Jewish population in Europe, but during the war, it suffered severe destruction under German occupation, and its Jewish community was almost entirely exterminated.

Unlike traditional romanticized shell imagery, Antin presents a world in ruins: walls in decay, an open courtyard filled with rubble, making physical entry impossible (see figure 14, p. XXI). Three films, projected onto the installation's windows, construct a fictionalized community suffused with loss and sorrow. Each of the three vignettes is a fragment of shell life captured within a private interior. In one scene, a woman throws all her love letters into a stove; in another, a tailor cries as he mends children's clothes. The final window reveals two children huddling together, sharing a crust of bread. In this third scene, the young boy and girl, presumably siblings, appear cold and hungry as they share a small piece of bread. Magically, a lit menorah appears in mid-air, followed by chairs and a table set with food and drink. The children, overcome with joy, sit down to enjoy the unexpected feast. However, just as they are about to begin eating, the magical objects disappear one by one, leaving them once again alone and hungry, as they first began. This moment of ephemeral abundance heightens the poignancy of their suffering, evoking both the fragility of hope and the cruel, recurring cycles of loss.²⁹

The haunting soundtrack intensifies the installation's ghostly presence, filled with "screaming trains" and "whistling winds."³⁰ Antin describes the figures in her film as "vanishing," yet their fate remains ambiguous.³¹ Rather than presenting a linear narrative of destruction, she resists closure. As she writes of *The Man Without a World*, the piece is "about people on the edge, a world on the edge about to go under, but still inhabited by living, cranky, unhappy, amusing, aspiring, passionate, sexy people."³²

As Howard Fox wrote in the catalogue for the 1999 retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), *Vilna Nights* affirms "the demise of a culture, a way of life, and the millions who had lived it."³³ Yet Antin's approach is not merely an elegy. Rather, she uses theatrically as a tool not only to mourn but also to interrogate history—both the circumstances of these lives' endings and the vibrancy of their lived experiences before catastrophe.

Both *Vilna Nights* and *The Man Without a World* grapple with the precarious balance between historical accuracy and imaginative invention. By employing theatricality as both a theme and a method, Antin examines how Jewish histories are remembered, performed and distorted. Her feminist critique adds another layer of complexity, challenging the gendered hierarchies embedded within these cultural traditions. Though firmly rooted in Jewish history, these works transcend their immediate context to address broader questions about how identities are preserved, erased or transformed through cultural memory.

Antin's theatrical approach to historical constructs invites viewers to question the boundaries between history and fiction. By framing her narratives through the lens of feminist performance, she reclaims silenced histories while exposing the exclusions and biases inherent in dominant cultural narratives. Situated at the intersection of personal memory, collective history, and feminist critique, her work offers a powerful meditation on the politics of identity and representation.

Continuing Legacies: Eleanor Antin and the Evolving Discourse of Identity

Antin's body of work offers a profound examination of identity through the intersecting lenses of feminism, ethnicity and history. By foregrounding Jewishness alongside other markers of identity, Antin challenges assumptions of neutrality within feminist art and interrogates the exclusions embedded in dominant art historical narratives. Her work not only expands the boundaries of conceptual and performance art but also exemplifies the ways in which art can critique societal structures while remaining deeply personal.

Through her multifaceted works, Antin dismantles boundaries between the personal and the political, humor and critique, and history and myth. Whether reimagining herself as a Jewish woman navigating assimilation or as a fictional Black ballerina critiquing whiteness in high culture, Antin's performances and narratives serve as incisive critiques of power, privilege, and representation. Her ability to inhabit shifting identities—through historical reconstructions, invented autobiographies, and conceptual masquerades—foregrounds the fluidity of selfhood and its negotiation within dominant cultural frameworks.

Antin's engagement with humor, camp and performance creates a space for examining identity as fluid, multifaceted and often contradictory. Her method of using humor as a critical tool not only disrupts but also exposes the limits of identity categories. Her work bridges historical displacement and contemporary struggles, offering a platform for marginalized voices and histories. By embodying characters such as Eleanor Antinova or the King of Solana Beach, Antin interrogates the ways in which identity is constructed, performed and constrained by societal expectations.

Her legacy also reminds us of the transformative potential of feminist activism in the 1970s, particularly in California, where feminist artists sought to merge art and activism to address personal and political struggles. Antin's pioneering explorations of identity, diaspora and feminist critique have helped shape the

³³ The evolving field of Jewish feminist art since the late 1990s has been taken up by a wide range of international scholars, including Samantha Baskind, Paula Birmingham, Alla Efremova, Tamara Gorb, Rachel Garfield, Merrilee Hirsch, Norman Kleeblatt, Laura Kravitz, Cassandra Langer, Gail Levin, Laura Levitt, Eunice Lipson, Richard Meyer, Margaret Olin, Mor Prestido, Griselda Pollock, Lisa Saltzman, Efram Sinker, Catherine Soussi-Joff, David Sperber, Roni Tzoref, Edward Van Volzen, Diane Wolfthal, and Tanya Zion-Waldoks, among others.

³⁴ For more on Judith Hersko's performance work, see Lisa E. Bloom, "Jewish 'Ghosts': Judith Hersko and Susan Hilder and the Feminist Intersectional Art of Post-Holocaust Memory," *Arts*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2024, p. 50. Available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0752/13/2/50>.

³⁵ It is noteworthy that the subject of Eleanor Antin's legacy, particularly her place within a longer lineage of Jewish women artists interrogating identity, will be addressed in a panel at the College Art Association conference in New York City, February 12–15, 2025. Titled "The Slippery Nature of the Self: Gender, Masquerade, Counterfactual History, and Jewish Women Artists," the panel explores works by Jewish women artists who use persona to challenge and destabilize conventional identity frameworks. Presentations include Rachel Garfield, Jewishness Under Erasure: Person Work in the UK (Royal College of Art); Beni Mahl, "Rosalyn Drexler and the Flatness of Self" (University of Fribourg); *Phlomena Epps*, "Take a Motion Picture, Like a Living Dance: Person and Performativity" in Hannah Wilke's *50 Help Me Hannah* (1978–85) (University College London); and Paula Burleigh, "Lynn Hershan Leeson: A Posthuman Feminist Counterarrative" (Allegheny College). The panel is chaired by Susan Felteman, University of South Carolina.

evolving field of Jewish feminist art—a rich and interdisciplinary area that continues to be explored by a wide range of international scholars.³³ While her work has been widely recognized within feminist art history and conceptual art, it remains underexamined in discussions of Jewish identity and performance, despite its significant contributions to both fields.

Antin's influence continues to resonate with contemporary Jewish feminist artists such as Judith Hersko, who similarly employs fictional narratives to critique historical exclusion.³⁴ In her performance *Pages from the Book of the Unknown Explorer* (2008–17), Hersko imagines a Jewish woman who poses as a man to join an Antarctic scientific exploration during the Second World War to escape persecution from the Nazis. Hersko's narrative reflects on the speculative histories of women's contributions to polar exploration and science, drawing attention to the intersections of imagination, identity and exclusion. Like Antin, Hersko challenges the limits of historical narratives and questions whose stories are recorded and whose are erased. By situating figures like the "Unknown Explorer" in improbable historical scenarios, Hersko's work, inspired by Antin, opens new possibilities for rethinking cultural memory and representation.

Moreover, Antin is part of a longer lineage of Jewish women artists in the US and the UK who have interrogated identity through invented histories and alternate personae. From Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore to Danielle Abrams, Oreet Ashery, Anne Bean, Zoe Belfoff, Candice Breitz, Rosalyn Drexler, Lynn Hershan Leeson, Suzanne Treister, and Hannah Wilke, among others, these artists have engaged with themes of performance, masquerade and critique, employing humor and irony to disrupt conventional narratives. Their practices share Antin's commitment to breaking traditional barriers of identity and representation, underscoring her enduring relevance within the broader discourse of feminist and conceptual art.³⁵

Antin's work, though rooted in the historical context of the 1970s, resonates with contemporary debates around representation, marginalization and identity. By engaging deeply with themes of exclusion and transformation, she reclaims silenced histories and voices, affirming her legacy as a visionary artist whose influence continues to inspire across generations. Her work remains a critical intervention in how history is constructed, remembered and performed—one that insists on the importance of revisiting the past to understand the present. Her art invites us to consider how personal memory and collective history intersect, offering a powerful meditation on identity's complexities in a constantly shifting cultural landscape.

