

Re-presenting the Asian Woman:  
Patty Chang's Performance Art of the Late 1990s

Born in San Francisco in 1972 to ethnically Chinese parents, American artist Patty Chang has produced a body of performance and video work since the late 1990s that exploits her gendered, racialized body and pushes it to the limits of pleasure and exhaustion. She has had her face sprayed with water from balloons (*Hand to Mouth*, 2000), shaved her genitals in public (*Shaved (At a Loss)*, 1998), and lapped water from a mirror lying face down on the floor (*Fountain*, 1999). Her work can thus be seen as a successor to a type of performance art originating in the 1970s when artists such as Adrian Piper, Vito Acconci, Marina Abramovic, and Carolee Schneeman made the artist's body the site of exploration of gender and representation.<sup>1</sup>

Early feminist scholars writing in the 1970s such as Griselda Pollock and Laura Mulvey advised against using the naked female body in art because it could not escape the objectifying, masculine gaze.<sup>2</sup> In other words, despite even the most feminist intentions, exposing the body risked re-appropriation of it in an offensive, sexist way. At the same time, modernist critics assailed these works for being at best sensationalistic and at worst vulgar,

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<sup>1</sup> While Chang works in both performance and video, I place Chang in a trajectory of performance artists because of her origins in performance. Her early pieces (prior to 1999) were conceived of as performances and only later made into videos. She reports that she did not even own a camera for many years although she was performing live (Patty Chang, telephone interview with the author, 6 December 2005). In addition, these pieces were "removed from context, not about their surroundings," and not conceived of as interactions with the audience (ibid.). She only began to produce videos when she had her first gallery exhibition and was required to create works to "hang" in the gallery and to be bought and sold (ibid.). In any case, the videos of her performances are modest, single channel works in which the performer remains in the center of the screen as if it were a stage, the camera is fixed with no zooms or pans, and the installation of the work does not involve any elaborate staging such as multiple screens, feedback loops, and projections. Although she does begin to experiment with the medium of video and its installation in more recent works (2000 and beyond), I focus on pieces in which the medium-specific aspects of video are minimal.

Related to my understanding of her work as primarily performative is my reliance on literature about performance art rather than video art. Performance art scholars were the ones who addressed my interest in obscene female body, and writing on body-oriented video itself refers back to performance art (see Michael Rush, "Video and the Conceptual Body," chap. 2 in *Video Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 63-123).

<sup>2</sup> Griselda Pollock, "What's Wrong with Using Women's Images?," orig appeared in *Screen Education*, no. 24 (1977): 25-33 and reprinted in Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement, 1970-85* (London and New York, NY: Pandora Press and Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987). Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).

and in any case unworthy of serious critical attention. But most scholars in the 1990s are more optimistic and admiring of this body-based performance art, including art historian Amelia Jones in her book *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (1998), and performance studies theorist Rebecca Schneider in her volume *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997).<sup>3</sup> Both read a feminist and political efficacy into this work, thereby legitimizing it as “serious” art despite its obscene content. They insist that art can be both erotic and political, that its explicitness does not imply that it bows down before patriarchy to reproduce feminine images for the masculine gaze.<sup>4</sup> As with all interpretations of artwork, these texts reveal the author’s bias, which in this case is her investment in art and criticism that disrupts the patriarchal order.

My analysis of Chang’s oeuvre participates in this feminist, and necessarily partial approach, allowing me to see Chang’s eroticized work as resistant to objectifications of women. Furthermore, I append an anti-racist agenda to the endeavor. Racial identity has not been fully explored in earlier studies of artists of color nor of white artists whose race has been white-ed-out or naturalized.<sup>5</sup> Thus, inheriting a tradition of politicized scholarship, offered by Jones and Schneider, I bring the historical discussion to the present by focusing

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<sup>3</sup> Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> In an essay written prior to her full-length book *Body Art*, Jones argues against “The maintenance of critical authority in art discourse [which] demands the rigorous separation of embodied pleasure from so-called theory; [for] within this cultural policing, the possibility of a work of art that is both sensual and conceptual, both corporeal and theoretical, both eroticized and politically critical is disallowed.” (Amelia Jones, “Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures, and Embodied Theories of Art,” in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, ed. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven (New York, NY: IconEditions, 1994). 27).

<sup>5</sup> Although Jones discusses non-white people as having “nonnormative” bodies that do the same work as feminist artists in disturbing the modernist gaze, race is only a marginal part of her study, and the concept of whiteness figures only when she is talking about Adrian Piper, a black artist (Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*. 5,8,9, 162-164). While I will not take on the study of whiteness in this paper, it would be a valuable project to look back at these feminist artists as both gendered and racialized subjects and to see how that changes the meaning produced by their work.

There is a body of literature on “ethnic” (non-dominant white, Anglo) performance, but it mostly focuses on the performing arts, especially theater, and is written from an Asian-American studies and history viewpoint rather than an art historical one. One exception is theater professor Meiling Cheng’s book *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art*, which includes discussions of performance artists such as Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Suzanne Lacy, but these works also share the limelight with full-length plays performed in theaters. My approach in this paper is to situate Chang’s work into art history and criticism, linking it to other art rather than to other (performing) art forms. Meiling Cheng, *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), Dorinne K. Kondo, *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997), Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2002).

on Chang's work from the mid-1990s to 2000. I argue that Chang re-plays stereotypical images of Asian women and exposes her genitalia in a way that does not merely reinscribe sexism or racism, but actually resists dominant, white, masculinist objectifications of Asian women. Moreover, I maintain, following Jones, that explicit performance art elicits our lascivious gaze and reminds us of our own corporeality, thereby underscoring the inseparability of mind and body. Jones further insists that body-based performance unseats a modernist and masculinist gaze that claims to be detached and pure. Jones considers this gaze masculine because women, "have no access to the myth of Cartesian coherence," have never been able to separate themselves from their bodies, and have always been forced to see themselves as articulated in relation to the other.<sup>6</sup>

One of Chang's works that illustrates this idea of embodiedness is *Contortion* (2000-2001) (fig. 1), which takes up the elasticity and flexibility of the body as its subject. In this work, of which there were multiple video versions and which was also performed live once in 2003, Chang is a vision in red, sporting a glittery tank top and silk pants imprinted with a gold medallion pattern. She cycles through a series of acrobatic poses including one in which she lies on her stomach while folding her legs over her back so that her feet touch her head. The gymnastic poses amaze the viewer through their extraordinariness, and in fact, we soon realize that they are not so incredible because they are created by two people pretending to be one, with the second body hidden behind a curtain. Jones argues that the "nonnormative" performance artist, meaning different from the white heterosexual male norm, has the power to unhinge modernist (masculinist) notions embedded in supposedly disinterested art history and criticism.<sup>7</sup> I see the artist's body in *Contortion* as nonnormativity

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<sup>6</sup> Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*. 149.

<sup>7</sup> Because of the artist's difference from the conventional male artistic subject, we are made aware of the normally invisible conventions of who has artistic privilege (Ibid. 9).

in its most literal, physical sense. It is a body that fails to conform, not only because of her different race and gender, but because it is not a real, coherent body.

To view an unconventional body avowing its subjectivity and its sexuality is to recognize one's own attachment with the subject and one's own embodiedness. While Jones maintains that the condition of embodiedness is the condition of women, I expand her formulation: the embodied condition is, too, the condition of people of color. As black theorists from the early twentieth century such as W.E.B. DuBois, James Baldwin and Frantz Fanon have reminded us, and as later scholars have extended to all minoritarian subjects, to be colored in the West is to be always marked as different (from the dominant white norm).<sup>8</sup> These marked subjects do not have the luxury of being able to forget their embodiedness, and therefore have never been able to conceive of themselves as pure intellect. I maintain that the modernist, Cartesian separation between mind and body that Jones ascribes to men should be further refined to refer specifically to whites, for the ability to distill one's subjectivity from one's body ensues from a position of male privilege, but also one of white privilege.<sup>9</sup>

Chang recognizes that her racial and gendered identities are indelibly inscribed on her body and she knowingly plays up her exotic Chinese-ness and her femininity. In a recent interview, she commented, "The fact that I am in almost all the pieces makes it very difficult not to reference Asian female identity, either as fitting within the confines of Asian female representation or else consciously rejecting that identity.....I am always doing an Asian

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<sup>8</sup> Film scholar Marina Heung, for example, writes: "Although it is apparent that Asians, like people of color in general, are marginalized and rendered invisible in the mass media, Asian women are, through representation, 'embodied' in a distinctive and at times literalized way." (Marina Heung, "Representing Ourselves: Films and Videos by Asian American/Canadian Women," in *Feminism, Multiculturalism, and the Media: Global Diversities*, ed. Angharad N. Valdivia (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1995). 90).

<sup>9</sup> The idea that all white men have no sense of their embodiedness is a gross simplification, but it serves as a useful generalization to allow me to advance my argument.

woman.”<sup>10</sup> In *Contortion*, she wears Chinese fabrics in red, a lucky color in Chinese culture, and emphasizes her femininity by tucking a flower behind each ear and offering coy, pursed-lipped smiles. Her character has been compared by more than one critic to Mona Lisa, the paradigmatic (Western) beauty,<sup>11</sup> but as an exotic, Asian body, she can never actually attain the status of the authentic, white one and remains enigmatically different. Like the Mona Lisa, however, Chang’s contortionist is intended to be desirable, and the emphasis on the extreme flexibility of the Asian female body suggests its ultimate sexual compliability.

The notion of the Asian female body as an exotic, erotic type brings me to another aspect of her work worth highlighting, that is, her references to images of Asian women in American mass media and other cultural forms such as film, television, theater, literature and pornography.<sup>12</sup> While the literature on (stereotypical) portrayals of Asians in the media, particularly in Hollywood film, is substantial,<sup>13</sup> I provide a brief summary of the history of depictions of women. In early film from the 1910s through the 1950s, Asian female characters were split into two types, either “lotus blossoms” who were dutiful, diligent and submissive, or “Dragon Ladies,” who were immoral, evil and duplicitous.<sup>14</sup> The binary

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<sup>10</sup> Eve Oishi, “Interview with Patty Chang,” *Camera Obscura* 54, vol. 18, no. 13 (2003): 127.

<sup>11</sup> Lilly Wei, “Patty Chang at Jack Tilton/Anna Kustera,” *Art in America*, vol. 9, no. 6 (June 2002): 121; Hitomi Iwasaki, “Patty Chang: Ferocious,” *NY Arts* (February 2002): 40.

<sup>12</sup> Given the enormity of the pornography trade, which produces ten to eleven thousand films each year to Hollywood’s four hundred, and earns ten to fourteen billions dollars in annual revenue, as well as its ubiquity in bookstores, hotel in-room rentals and the internet, it can be argued that it is a form of mass media that clearly enters into the mainstream American psyche (Linda Williams, “Porn Studies: Proliferating Pornographies on/Scene: An Introduction,” in *Porn studies* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2004).1-2).

<sup>13</sup> Peter X Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), Peter X. Feng, *Screening Asian Americans*, Rutgers Depth of Field Series (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu, *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*, Asian American History and Culture (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), Jun Xing, *Asian America through the Lens: History, Representations, and Identity*, Critical Perspectives on Asian Pacific Americans Series V.3 (Walnut Creek, Calif. and London: AltaMira Press, 1998). This “literature” also includes a sixty-minute video titled *Slaying the Dragon* (1988) produced, which ably assembles and analyzes media footage from American film and television throughout the twentieth century (Deborah Gee and others, *Slaying the Dragon* (San Francisco: CrossCurrent Media: Distributed by National Asian American Telecommunications Association), videorecording. The criticism itself has developed through different phases, initially focusing on identifying and dismantling Asian stereotypes, and later becoming interventionary into the network of significations and reassigning meaning (Cynthia Liu, “When Dragon Ladies Die, Do They Come Back as Butterflies? Re-Imagining Anna May Wong,” in *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*, ed. Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Peter X. Feng, “Introduction,” in *Screening Asian Americans* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002). 3. These stereotypes shifted with time and according the American foreign relations, so that when Americans were at war with

between good and bad Asian women gave way to a character type in which self-sacrificing and deceptive qualities were combined into one. In the film *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), directed by Richard Quine,<sup>15</sup> the female lead Suzie Wong (played by Nancy Kwan) engages in corrupt prostitution and attempts to lure the white American male protagonist through deception, yet she is also the consummate servile, sexual plaything who is ultimately saved from her vile habits by the man (a painter who uses her as his model). While this film was made in the 1960, the Suzie Wong image continues to haunt Asian American women today.<sup>16</sup> Depictions of women do not differ much from polar stereotypes that divide *all* women into the binary of respectable and disreputable. “Good,” respectable women are characterized by their “ordered libido,” and their roles in the normative family as wives, mothers and daughters, versus the “bad,” disreputable women who are “infinitely sexually compliant,” and unattached to a family or any men to protect them.<sup>17</sup> But with Asians, the characterizations tend to be exaggerated, such that “good” Asian women are more passive, more devoted, and even more feminine than the average American white woman, while “bad” Asians were more sex-crazed and more deceptive than whites.

The spectator’s readings of works in which Chang performs with her racialized and gendered body are necessarily conditioned by these media images. Recognizing the ability of her body to elicit these associations, the artist draws on the familiarity of Asian types in the American imagination and the supposed desirability of those types to seduce us. As Rebecca Schneider remarks about feminist body artists, “these performers mimic their mimesis, mimic the ways they have been mimed by patriarchal representation – doubling back over

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Japan during the Second World War, all Japanese were villainized as kamikaze devils, but once the war ended, and we entered into the Korean War, Japanese women became fair game to use as pampering “lotus blossoms” fit to be partners to white servicemen on leave in Japan (Gee). These early films portrayed not Asians in America, but Asians in Asia but these two peoples are confounded in most Americans.

<sup>15</sup> The film was adapted from a novel by Richard Mason (1957) and also made into Broadway play by Paul Osborn (1958).

<sup>16</sup> Asian-American women recall their experiences being hailed as “Suzie Wong” by strangers in *Slaying the Dragon* and I can attest to this not so rare occurrence in my own personal experience (Gee).

<sup>17</sup> Borrowed from discussion in Elinor Fuchs, “Staging the Obscene Body,” *TDR* 33, no. 1 (1989). 51

the historical mimesis of their sex in a kind of counter-mimicry.”<sup>18</sup> Schneider refers to the fact that women have already been “mimed” or objectified into types by “patriarchal representation” and that performance artists often re-play that representation against the original intention. Extending this idea to Asians, we can say artists like Chang counter-mimic a racist and sexist representation of Asians as well as sexist portrayals of women.

In *Alter Ego – Candies* (1997) (fig. 2)<sup>19</sup>, Chang counter-mimics another familiar Asian figure. In this performance, Chang stands still in a grey skirt suit with her sleeves sewn to her sides and the two legs of her pantyhose stitched together. Her mouth is crammed with peppermint candies and held open by a dental clamp attached to a nearby wall, a contraption that results in drool leaking out of the side of her mouth and forming a trail of candy-colored saliva down her starched white shirt and wool jacket. Immobilized, Chang cannot close her mouth or move her hand to wipe her face.

Chang wears a conservative suit to reference the obedient Japanese office girl, a secretarial worker who performs administrative tasks for her male superiors. For Chang, the suit is type of uniform that signifies a recognizable role, the secretary.<sup>20</sup> The artist maintains that although it is an emblem of power for men, when worn by women, the suit becomes a symbol of powerlessness.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in *Candies*, her character’s unease in her outfit illustrates how suits somehow constrain women through their masculine codes, and represents women’s vain attempts to conform to and advance in a man’s world. Our interpretation of this work is not only shaped by the state of women and work in the United States, but it also incorporates our ideas about the business worlds in Asian countries, which are understood

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<sup>18</sup> Schneider. 134.

<sup>19</sup> I have no documentation of the original performance. The image that is included in this paper is a photograph taken not during an actual performance, but during a separate photo shoot set up for the purpose of creating hang-able and saleable photographs of this piece (Chang, Interview).

<sup>20</sup> Chang, Interview. In our interview, Chang also mentioned that she wore a suit in a performance for the first time in *Candies* (1997). It becomes one of Chang’s preferred outfits for later works including *Leggs* (1998), *Losing Ground* (2000), and *Hand to Mouth* (2000).

<sup>21</sup> Chang, Interview.

to be even more patriarchal and masculine-dominated than ours. ***While Chang was born on American soil and is American by nationality, she plays on the common assumption that American-ness is white.***<sup>22</sup> The artist exploits the inability for non-Asian Americans to distinguish between Asians of a national origin in Asia versus Asians who are nationally (and culturally) American. She also comments on how people from different ethnic groups and countries in Asia are confused with each other.<sup>23</sup> Thus, despite her American citizenship and her Chinese ethnicity, Chang can easily assume a Japanese identity.

Gagged and fixed for the viewer's gaze, Chang's office girl suggests sexual fantasies involving the "nasty secretary" and other uniformed women in service-oriented jobs such as nurses and waitresses, both American and Japanese.<sup>24</sup> Like Suzie Wong, she combines the attributes of the dutiful servant with the sex-crazed whore. As critic Michael Cohen observed, "Chang re-tools the business suits and proper Asian manners which signify social obedience by turning them into props which generate life's darker pleasures."<sup>25</sup> She plays on the fact that Asian female bodies are considered sexually desirable (at least to straight American males), but does not let us fully take sensual pleasure in the work, for in addition to pleasure, *Candies* also introduces the idea of pain. A child's delightful experience of sucking on a candy is transformed into an agonizing experience by an instrument of childhood terror, the dental device. Her work, however, contrasts with that of Chris

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<sup>22</sup> Asian Americans have been often discussed as victims of the "perpetual foreigner" syndrome (See for example, Frank H. Wu, "Where Are You Really from? Asian Americans and the Perpetual Foreigner Syndrome," *Civil Rights Journal*, Vol. 6, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 14-23).

<sup>23</sup> The confusion of Asians and Asian Americans and is clear in two examples of hate crimes perpetrated in the 1980s. In 1982, Vincent Chin, mistaken for Japanese, was murdered by two white men in Detroit, Michigan, by two white men who were angry at the Japanese for "stealing" their jobs. In 1989, Jim Loo was murdered in North Carolina by white men who mistook him for a Vietnamese and blamed him for the Vietnam War. The inability for many Americans to distinguish among different Asians is also revealed by the need for certain Asians to assert their difference from attacked groups. Hence, during World War II and Japanese internment, some Chinese wore buttons declaring, "I am Chinese," in order to distance themselves from those declared not-to-be trusted enemies of the state. (Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).23, 134-155.

<sup>24</sup> The Japanese specificity of the character in *Candies* recalls infamous Japanese porn known for its brutal bondage scenes and fetishizing of females in uniforms.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Cohen, "The Love Mechanics: New Feminist Art," *Flash Art*, v.33, no.213 (Summer 2000): 93.



Burden, Gina Pane and Marina Abramovic/Ulay who according to art historian Kathy O'Dell, "opted for a dynamics of pain rather than pleasure, and severed (or at least problematized) the popular link between these two sensations."<sup>26</sup> For Chang is willing to combine pain with pleasure, not in the masochistic way in which administering or experiencing pain begets pleasure, but in the sense that she can make fun of painful events. Humorous and playful, her work is far from the deadpan aesthetic of Burden's photo-documentations or the serious self-injury of Pane.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, *Candies*, requiring an extreme level of endurance, is reminiscent of the work from the 1970s as is another of her performances, *Shaved (At a Loss)* (1998) (fig. 3).

Recalling work of the body art of the seventies, such as Vito Acconci's *Openings* (1970), a Super-8 film in which he plucks out the hair around his belly button to create a vaginal-like orifice, and *Conversions* (1970-71), another film in which he first burns off his chest hair, Chang undertakes the project of hair removal in *Shaved*. Blindfolded, she taps her way onto the staging area with a cane in one hand and a suitcase in the other. She settles herself into a chair, pulls out a glass and a bottle of mineral water from the suitcase, pours the water into the glass, and takes a swig. Next, with her legs spread apart, she hikes up her voluminous skirt revealing her nude pubic area. Removing a bar of soap from her suitcase, she wets it in the glass of mineral water, soaps up the area between her legs, grabs a razor from her bustier, wets it in the water, and proceeds to shave her pubic hair.

*Shaved* simultaneously seduces our desire and turns us off. On the one hand, Chang brazenly exposes her genitalia and titillates us by performing a personal hygiene act normally done in private. We are permitted to indulge in our voyeuristic and curious pleasure of

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<sup>26</sup> Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970's* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).7.

<sup>27</sup> O'Dell argues that these artists' conception of pain derives from the social situation of the Vietnam War and student movements, which were too traumatic to be pleasurable (O'Dell, 75-76). Perhaps the nineties represent a less tumultuous social situation that allows humor and pleasure to emerge more prominently.

examining a woman's private parts without having her see us doing so because she is blindfolded. Furthermore, we can watch without admitting our prurience because she shaves in a way that allows us to pretend that we are merely witnessing an everyday, mundane act, rather than an erotic one. But who are we deceiving? This is her sex and it is exciting. Chang rejects this pleasure, however, through the introduction of the physical discomfort caused by the blade. Not only is Chang blindfolded and unable to properly see what she is doing, but she has not used enough soap to lubricate this sensitive area and she is working much too fast to avoid pinching and cutting her flesh. There is no dialogue and the only sound we hear is that of the blade tugging against her hair and scraping against her skin.<sup>28</sup>

But like Chang's other works, this is not gruesome mutilation, and it is characterized by a playful dance with pain. *Candies*, for example, portrays an uncomfortable act, but the photograph documenting the performance plays up the quirky, awkwardness of the act rather than her suffering. Like many artists, Chang uses humor to cope with the pain. As critic Donald Kuspit remarked: "art treats the world as a comic idea despite feeling it to be a tragedy."<sup>29</sup> In other words, the artist negotiates the unpleasant realities of the world precisely through producing comical renditions, or counter-mimicries, of it. Thus *Hand to Mouth* (2000), perhaps Chang's funniest work, recognizes the degradation that women are often subjected to in pornography, but counter-mimics the portrayals in a comedic way.<sup>30</sup> In this piece, an assistant (cut off from the frame of the lens in the video version) takes a balloon filled with water and helium and expels the contents into Chang's mouth and over her face. Chang calls out continually, "More, more. You can do better than that," shrieking in a high-

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<sup>28</sup> The performance versions of this work did involve her reciting a text in which she described the situation of being in a hotel room and watching pornography (Chang, Interview).

<sup>29</sup> Donald Kuspit, "Tart Wit, Wise Humor," *Artforum International* v. 29 (1991). 95. See also Wendy Wick Reaves, "The Art in Humor, the Humor in Art," *American Art* 15, no. 2 (2001).

<sup>30</sup> This work was originally produced as a video, but Chang subsequently performed it live.

pitched, helium-induced voice, encouraging her accomplice, who continues to retrieve balloons and to spray Chang with the contents. By repetitively performing the balloon spraying to an excess (during what might appear to be a brief five-minute video, it feels as if the balloon-spraying will never end), the artist transforms an arousing act into a hilarious absurdity.

She closes and opens her eyes, lifts and lowers her chin, and moans and laughs in this jubilatory manner that does not read as orgasmic, but more as childlike delight, like a blind and mute Helen Keller reveling in her ability to identify and name water for the first time. Chang's infantilization is reiterated in her ecstatic, gushing, repetitive monologue. Her unrelenting calls for "more," her exaggerated facial gestures, and having water sprayed over her face contribute to this tenor of fun and fantasy rather than oppressiveness and depravity. Indeed, *Hand to Mouth* operates as a celebratory parody of pornography. The pale-colored balloons resemble condoms and the contents are reminiscent of penile ejaculate. The scenario as a whole alludes to the "pearl necklace" and "facial" scene in pornography which show the woman sporting a ring of "cum" on her face or body. In addition, balloons and other inflatable toys are fetish items and exist as a categorizing label for pornography.<sup>31</sup> This work further references the enormous archive of sexual material organized around race, with Asian women (and men) being no exception.<sup>32</sup> Because the person is reduced to her corporeality, the racial part of her "identity" that can be immediately read on her body becomes the most salient.

By alluding to sex into her art, the artist, in Jones's words, "destabilize[s] the very project of aesthetic judgment, since the obscene body functions as the debased 'other' of the

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<sup>31</sup> An "adults only" website called "Ballooons.com" touts its "exclusive inflatable sex contents" ([www.ballooons.com](http://www.ballooons.com))

<sup>32</sup> Various pornographic websites organize their wares along categories such as "interracial," "blonde," "Asian," "ebony," etc.

high art nude and must remain outside the frame of the aesthetic (as ‘pornography’)”<sup>33</sup>

Chang’s performance breaks down the division between art and pornography. We cannot watch *Hand to Mouth* without becoming somewhat aroused, or at the very least, without reflecting on our own desires; indeed, Chang reports that during the performances of the work, spectators “get really into it” and cheer her on.<sup>34</sup> This arousal thus infects the supposedly dispassionate way in which we are accustomed to viewing art and upsets the modernist, masculinist, critical gaze. Because sexual mores instruct respectable women to suppress their libido, the mere fact that Chang shows herself publicly experiencing sexual delight can be seen as subversive and liberating. At the same time, other feminists caution that these types of imagery merely reinscribe the patriarchal system, which limits the role of the female to a sexual accessory to the male, and whose joy derives from being pleased by men. But perhaps the final scene in the piece offers the possibility of redemption for Chang. Here, the artist grabs a balloon from the hands of her assistant and sprays herself in a masturbatory gesture. Her forceful seizing control of her own pleasure frees her from the shackles of subjugation under the phallus. It also makes the work conclude on a note of narcissism: in pleasuring herself, she dispenses with the need for others, potentially denying the would-be white male spectator of the gratification of being the source of her pleasure.<sup>35</sup>

Not only does our society prohibit respectable women from voicing their pleasure, but there is also a critical suppression of writing about humor in art. Associated with entertainment and understood to be a “low” form of expression, humor is a topic that art historians have traditionally avoided.<sup>36</sup> It is as if, like anything erotic, the breaching of the subject alone seems to be enough to taint the seriousness of a critic’s analysis. Echoing

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<sup>33</sup> Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*. 190.

<sup>34</sup> Chang, Interview.

<sup>35</sup> Of course there is no stopping a man from taking pleasure in her masturbatory gesture.

<sup>36</sup> The idea of art historical avoidance of humor discussion is confirmed by Reaves.

Jones's argument about the erotic, that is, that criticism attempts to be more legitimate, more serious, more high-minded by denying its existence, Kuspit argues: "[art's] revelation that disruptive sexuality and aggression can never be transcended...subverts the bourgeois pretension to pure, unperturbed, godlike selfhood."<sup>37</sup> Kuspit's conception of the "bourgeois" viewer who has pretensions to affect a pure subject is very close to Jones's formulation of the modernist critic. He insists that life's "low" truths, sexuality and aggression, are insuppressible and that they will unseat the viewer/critic.<sup>38</sup> By combining comedy and sex, *Hand to Mouth* doubly disrupts the stability of the theoretically pure, disembodied subject, reminding him that he is not above being entertained or aroused.

All of the strategies of destabilization deployed throughout Chang's oeuvre – race, sex, pain, and humor – come together in a performance called *Melons (At a Loss)* (1998) (fig. 4). In this piece, Chang sits in a chair while narrating a story about a commemorative plate she received on the occasion of her aunt's death. Stripped down to a white bra, she brandishes a large knife and saws through her bra to her breast, which is revealed to be a cantaloupe melon. After cutting away a slice of the melon, she casts the knife aside, and feasts on the fleshy fruit.

Chang commented that certain non-Asian audience members would assume that making a plate to commemorate a lost one was a custom "of [her] people."<sup>39</sup> Whereas in works such as *Candies*, it makes more sense that her voiceless Asian body is more easily elided with a foreign continent, Chang speaks in unaccented standard American English throughout this piece. She is nevertheless, at least for a few members of the audience, seen

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<sup>37</sup> I have extracted Kuspit's quotations from passages about avant-garde art (Expressionism, Surrealism) rather than all art (Kuspit, 96)

<sup>38</sup> "calling attention to 'low' truths about it, realities it has kept hidden even from itself, such as the aggression that underlies its seriousness and the sexuality it fears will undo it." (Ibid.)

<sup>39</sup> Chang commented in an interview that "this is often understood by audiences as a Chinese custom, whereas it's really a made-up story to fill a lapse in emotional memory" (Oishi, 127) but when I asked her how they knew she was Chinese, she revised her statement to say that they considered it a custom "of my people" (Chang, Interview).

as foreign with different customs. Given that this was done in an artistic context (a gallery) while she performed the absurd act of slicing through her fake breasts, the obvious reading would be that the entire scenario is a fiction. If a white person (someone who seemed fully American) were the performer, no one would have assumed it was an ethnic custom (because of dominance of whiteness that makes it invisible), but because of her Asian-ness, an ethnic reading is made. Chang attributes this interpretation to a desire for some kind of authenticity, as in the spectators wanted the story to be an accurate representation of her life.<sup>40</sup> But I maintain that they were also seeking a kind of authentic racial and cultural story. The viewers reverted to what literary theorist Laura Hyun Yi Kang identifies as a phenomenon that often occurs with works by minority authors: the story narrator is conflated with the actual author and thus a fictional work is assumed to be autobiography, and the work is read as ethnography rather than as an aesthetic undertaking.<sup>41</sup>

Slashing her chest constitutes a type of auto-sexual assault, and thus employs a blend of would-be violence and sex to attract our attention. But again, in contrast to earlier artists who engaged in sadistic self-mutilation such as Chris Burden, Gina Pane, and the Viennese Actionists, Chang fakes it, and makes her charade fully visible to the audience. Any uneasy tension created when she begins sawing into her bra is quickly replaced with laughter when we discover that a fleshy cantaloupe masquerades as her breast. Tempting us with the possibility of a “tit shot,” arousing our voyeuristic desire, she denies us the pleasure with a “falsie.” She cites a long tradition of the association of female breasts and genitalia with fruit, amusing us with the literal enactment of this tradition in her voluptuous “melons.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Laura Hyun Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2002). 33.

<sup>42</sup> Griselda Pollock, "What's Wrong with Images of Women?," in *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement, 1970-85*, ed. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (London and New York, NY: Pandora Press and Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987). 137.

Developing out of the notion that the raced and gendered body is always embedded within the social, I argue in this essay that Chang's oeuvre must always negotiate the existing conceptions of Asian women – from perpetual foreigner to compliant sex kitten – in the American imagination. The artist exploits her doubly marked body to solicit our lustful desire for her flesh and our empathy for her pain, reminding us that we cannot just think our bodies away. In forcing us to relate to her as a subject, her performances cast us into a gendered and racialized marked position, that is, in a position of awareness of the always embodied mind or the necessarily mindful body.<sup>43</sup> Her assertion of artistic subjectivity through playful counter-mimicry can also be seen as a call to minoritarian subjects to take their identities into their own hands and to use humor to overturn imposed stereotypes. Perhaps my reading of Chang's work will also begin to define and put into circulation a new type of Asian woman, the comic.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> I borrow these phrases from Cheng, who uses it to describe Suzanne Lacy's conception of subjectivity in which the body subsumes the mind, but I use them to mean something different, that is, the inextricability of mind and body (Cheng, 115).

<sup>44</sup> Comic Margaret Cho is the exception.

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