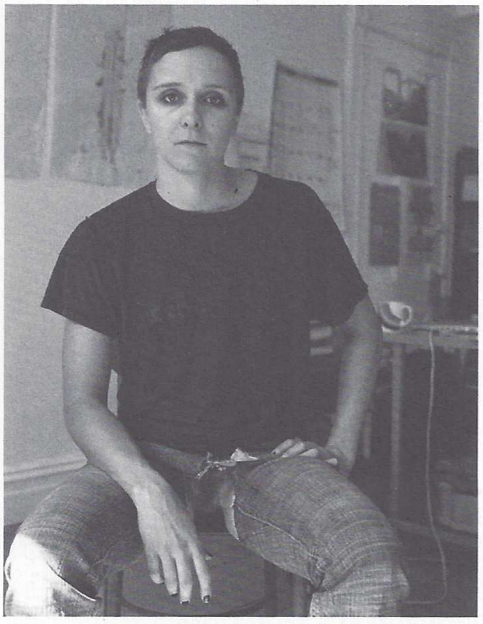
Biological determinism is still dear to the social order; a lot is staked on a logic that flows from the crotch. When Austrian artist VALIE EXPORT exposed hers in 1968, weaponizing a pair of jeans with a simple excision and strutting through a movie theatre audience with her pubic triangle bared, she exploded the material and symbolic conventions of film — and of gender relations in general. In this guerilla performance *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, the most iconic work of her Expanded Cinema practice, the female body wasn't a passive object projected onto the screen, nor was it a passive screen for the projection of patriarchal fantasy. Be careful what you wish for, EXPORT seemed to warn as she moved through the aisles, wielding her unmediated crotch like a camera or a gun. In a subsequent, related series of black and white photos shot the next year, the artist *does* hold a gun.



Eve Fowler, *Untitled (K8 with Crotchless Pants)*, circa 2005. 40 × 30 in. (101.6 × 76.2 cm) Edition 3/3

With teased hair, wearing her triumphantly obscene action pants, she brandishes an automatic rifle, depicting the revolutionary guerilla fighter of the era's global counterculture anew, her militant vagina usurping phallic firepower. A cyborg feminist *avant la lettre*, a woman born in 1940 under Nazi rule, EXPORT's oeuvre shows the sexed body to be a hybrid and unstable entity, not just an organism, but a product and an instrument of an ever-evolving mass-media and surveillance technocracy — as well as a site of resistance.

EXPORT's American contemporary Carolee Schneemann, who also famously combined performance and film in confrontational works beginning in the 1960s, recounts a passionate meeting of the minds with her in London in 1971. Schneemann poetically describes their shared concerns ("fervid issues of the body to be put at risk, in action"); their urgent aim ("to pull the female body off the art historical walls, out of suppressive idealations of muse and model"); and the great personal cost of their experiments. "We told each other how we were at risk of losing everything but our art vision," writes Schneemann. "The Austrian government had taken VALIE's child from her, as an unfit mother, and considered her unemployable."[1] Genital panic is real, even — or especially — at the level of the state.

Fast forward: In Eve Fowler's color photograph *Untitled (K8 with Crotchless Pants)*, circa 2005, artist K8 Hardy poses in her own action pants (blue denim with a jagged window), no gun. Seated with her legs parted, she gazes directly into the camera. Confrontational but relaxed, her close-cropped hair, inside out black t-shirt and dispassionate butch stance infuse an iconic feminist art-historical reference with lesbian eroticism. In the original image, EXPORT disrupts the cultural projection of docile femininity onto her fore-fronted genital sex with a menacing image of female aggression; in Fowler's image, Hardy derails the same thing, rather casually, with queer bedroom eyes.

On a visit to Hardy's Bushwick studio, we talk about EXPORT's influence. Mentioning her ingenious boobs-in-a-box street action, *TAP and TOUCH Cinema* (1968), in which EXPORT invited passersby to reach through a small curtain and cop a feel, Hardy paraphrases the message, "You're going to objectify me regardless, so I'm going to let you do it, but I'm going to set the terms."[2] Her own practice has been guided by an impulse to "set the terms," to wrest her image from the objectifying visual economies of art history, pornography, and fashion; and, more recently, the corporate framing, censorship and monetization of user content on social media platforms. "Preemptive" and "proactive" are words Hardy uses to describe her diffuse strategy for combatting — or harnessing — ubiquitous forces of commodification.

1 Carolee Schneemann, "VALIE," in *Imaging Her Erotics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 97.
2 K8 Hardy, in an in-person interview with the author, February 12, 2016.

VALIE EXPORT, *TOUCH and TAP Cinema*, 1968. Video, (black and white, sound) 1:08 min.

We met shortly before the New York premier of her non-narrative feature film *Outfitumentary,* 2016, and Hardy told me about her longstanding approach to self-styling and documentation, the diaristic video practice that generated material for the film. Shot with a Mini-DV camera over more than a decade, from 2001 to 2012, *Outfitumentary* is a chronological edit of Hardy's daily looks. She poses, sometimes dances, or speaks briefly to someone outside the frame. Always, at some point, she looks into the lens and captures her head-to-toe outfit with a frontal full-body shot. An index of thrift-store excess, subcultural styles, and gender fluidity, the film's power hinges on Hardy's commitment — to the project of taping, but also to her lifestyle of post-drag theatricality and embodied, embedded punk conceptualism. In *Outfitumentary*, Hardy is dressed to go to work, to parties and doctors' appointments, to protest another Iraq war.

Shooting this footage, she thought it would be archived, filed away for resurrection by future queers, but with the advent of social media, she sees her pre-selfie, non-networked practice bracketing an era, a not-so-distant past when one collected material instead of posting content. Hardy, as of this writing, boasts 11.2K Instagram followers on her haute selfie account, but she expresses ambivalence about the nature of such internet capital. Her audience's impulses often reflect regressive tastes, she notes, citing the Pavlovian flood of positive feedback for images of gender conformity ("If I have a skirt on, or make-up, I get twice the likes"). In contrast to the rapid consumption and judgment of her imagery on Instagram, *Outfitumentary* commands eighty-two minutes of quiet absorption.

Likewise, Hardy's *Fashion Fashion* series, a group of four color-photocopied zines produced from 2002 to 2006, can't get buried instantly in a feed,

and viewers don't get to vote yes/no by tapping a heart or scrolling past. Combining slap-dash post-riot grrrl production values and stream-of-consciousness text with art-world sophistication to put forward an insider's critique of fashion magazines (she sometimes worked in the industry), Hardy's offline micro-publishing print project was an underground hit among friends and friends of friends. Mostly shot while traveling with her point-and-shoot camera, Hardy would get someone to photograph her on location, modeling unbranded ensembles in novel or abject settings, pushing the faux transgressions of high-fashion editorial shoots into distinctly anti-commercial terrain.

In one provocative image from *Fashion Fashion (vol. 4B)*, Hardy bends backwards, hands and feet planted on the floor, meeting the viewer's gaze. She wears an orange hoodie and ineptly executed clown face-paint. Navy and white yarn fringe form something like a grass skirt, the strands parting to reveal her clit and a toothbrush protruding from below it. Her genitals are part of the outfit, an accessory that is, in turn, accessorized. The artist mocks the grandiose pornographic conventions of the big-dick penetration shot with her slender toothbrush, simultaneously perverting the instrument's hygienic purpose with her unfeminine pose.

Patty Chang's performance-based videos *Melons (At a Loss)* and *Shaved (At a Loss),* both from 1998, display a kindred confrontational ethos. In them, she subjects herself to gendered multitasking challenges of concentration and endurance, exhibiting an alarming harshness towards her own body. In "setting the terms" of her own objectification, she holds a mirror to the cruel cultural standards for feminine appearance and comportment, dramatizing the frenetic, interminable labor that such white-patriarchal edicts prompt in those who can, by definition, never measure up. Chang is a sophisticated torchbearer of EXPORT's feminist Actionism, but with a decidedly third-wave twist: She doesn't eschew visual pleasure as she puts her body on the line. The work is seductive and campy as well as disturbing.

In *Shaved*, she draws us in with a beautifully composed shot, evoking Courbet with her set — a dark background and crimson drapery in the fore. The video's action takes us quickly from a voluptuous studio portrait to the French realist's 1866 erotic close-up *The Origin of the World,* art history's most famous beaver shot. With a Victorian hairstyle, wearing a blindfold and a full skirt with a tulle petticoat, Chang enters the frame clumsily and sits. Fumbling with a small suitcase, she takes out a goblet and bottle of Perrier, pours herself a glass and takes a sip before hitching up her skirt to expose her legs and crotch. She lathers her pubic hair roughly, dipping a bar of soap into the hissing carbonated water, then shaves herself quickly. We cringe as she goes at it blindly, the razor scraping perilously over her labia.

Patty Chang, *Shaved (At A Loss)*, 1998. Video

The stakes feel even higher in *Melons*, another single-shot video, in which she pairs a highly personal monologue with a self-imposed physical trial. Wearing a retro-inspired long-line bra, Chang appears cropped at the waist. "When my aunt died, I got a plate, " she begins, raising a saucer to balance on her head, "with a photo of her printed on it in a poisonous ink that you couldn't eat or else you'd die, too." She performs the finishing-school exercise for the duration of the piece, continuing to recount her family's story of grief, and the intimate hierarchical politics at play in the distribution of the memorial dishware (because she was a little girl at the time, the artist got a littler, cheaper plate.) Chang uses a serrated knife to saw at her left breast — the titular melon, tucked against her body by the sturdy

lingerie. We're comforted that it's not real flesh, but her action is unsettling nevertheless, the exoticizing vulvar image of a split cantaloupe transposed onto her chest. It looks like a gruesome orifice. As she carves at the fruit with a spoon, discarding the stringy mess of seeds into her head-plate and then cannibalistically shoveling pulp into her mouth, she makes a brutal point about breasts. They're fetishized as sex organs on the one hand; feared as emblems of fatal disease on the other, surgically removed from the female patient when cancer strikes. Chang ends her angry-sad story with a note about a morbid rebellion of her childhood. When she was punished for not doing as she was told, she would take the photo-plate from its stand and lick her aunt's poisonous smile.

In work like Chang's and Hardy's, feminist self representation and self obliteration are twin impulses. The artists engage in a radical discrediting of essentialist and capitalist discourses vis-à-vis the gendered self through the rebellious deployment of their own apparently female bodies. Fleshed out with the emotional content and intriguing detail of lived experience, their conceptual projects are all the more compelling. Jo Spence belongs in this group as well, but she arrived at such strategies differently, conceiving of her artistic practice as therapeutic (aiding her recovery from trauma and disease) and politically useful within her grassroots socialist-feminist activism.

Spence was a British working-class artist who learned her craft on the job as an events photographer. She succumbed to leukemia in 1992, in her late 50s, after surviving breast cancer in the 1980s. I learned of her work in 2013, via a packed solo survey exhibition, and was blown away by the breadth and power of her earnest, funny, despairing, and unabashedly didactic work.[3] Laminated photo-collage posters detailed her health struggles and her dehumanizing experiences as she navigated conventional medical protocols for breast cancer, while she also shared her research and experiments with alternative treatments. In contrast to this expository approach, other works on view showed a more conceptually aloof aspect of her practice: Spence's stylized self-portraiture work emphasized symbolic props, pop-cultural references, and role-play, paralleling the aesthetics and representational concerns of the New York–based Pictures Generation artists, particularly the uncanny self-styling and appropriated poses of Cindy Sherman in her *History Portraits* and *Untitled Film Stills*. Spence's longtime collaborator Terry Dennett recalls their turn away from documentary-based work to unrealistic photography. In the black-and-white series *Remodeling Photo History*, 1981–82, which Spence and he produced together, they "leapt in new directions based on ideas from radical film and theater," he says, and innovated what they called "photo theater," a practice of "constructing and staging photographic tableaux for the purpose of social and political critique."[4]

Middle-aged, stocky, and flabby-breasted, Spence's appearance itself is an affront to nude portraiture norms. Unfiltered cellulite, that middle finger to dominant beauty ideals, is featured prominently in the foreground of a wonderful image of the *Remodeling* series. In *Industrialization,* 1982, a cropped view of Spence's body — her back is to us — fills a vertical half of the photograph. The expanse of her naked form, from upper thigh to shoulder, takes on a geological quality as she looks out into the distance — power lines and brushy grass racing to the horizon. In *Revisualization* she's lit like an angel, a Madonna breastfeeding a grown man; in *Colonization* she stands naked but for a towel around her waist, holding a broom imperiously in an entryway. With sly humor, she owns, mocks and discards female archetypes, stereotypes and art-historical tropes.

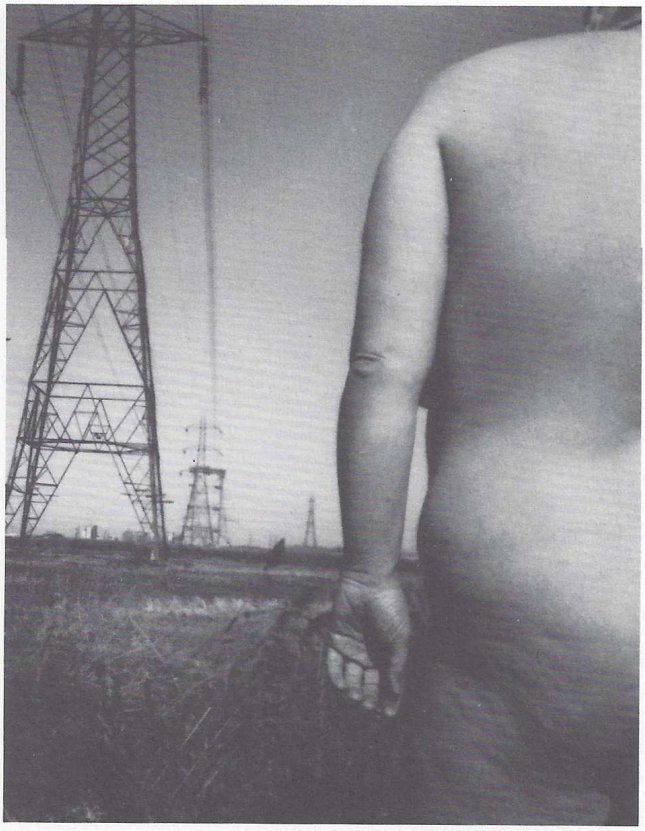
Spence worked right up until her death, forging a liberating visual language of photographic self-portraiture to process her own illness and mortality. For her, self-healing and survival were inextricable from her artwork and her radical analysis of the inhospitable culture she worked in and against. She left behind a remarkable oeuvre that illuminates the specific material conditions of her life, as well as the grand scheme of her suffering — the biopolitics of our recent past.

* * *

Walking at night through the streets of Vienna in the early 1970s, EXPORT imagined the city colonized by an invisible alien force that slipped into the bodies

3 "Jo Spence," White Columns Gallery, November 16–December 21, 2013. Exhibition description available online. https://whitecolumns.org/sections/exhibition.php?id=1298

4 Tina Takemoto, "Remembering Jo Spence: A Conversation With Terry Dennett." *Afterimage* 36, no. 5 (March–April 2009). http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/interviews/36980672/remembering-jo-spence-conversation-terry-dennett



Jo Spence, *Remodelling Photo History: Industrialisation*, 1981–1982. Black and white photograph, 9 15/16 × 7 15/16 in. (25.2 × 20.2 cm)

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled (#183)*, 1988. Color photograph, Edition 4/6, 44 7/8 × 30 1/2 × 2 in. (113.98 × 77.47 × 5.08 cm)

and controlled the minds of its citizens. "How would I defend myself," she wondered, "how would I even know about it or notice any changes?"[5] This dark speculation became the premise for her debut feature, the 1976 sci-fi horror film *Invisible Adversaries*. The central character, an artist and a canny sleuth, attempts to document the insidious foreign invaders. EXPORT names them for the Hyksos, an ancient people who conquered a portion of Egypt in the seventeenth century BCE and ruled for two hundred years until their expulsion. Despite their brief reign, the Hyksos left an indelible mark on Egyptian culture, having introduced transformative technologies — new art forms, new weapons, horses bred for warfare, and the chariot. Of course, at the time of EXPORT's walk, Vienna had been recently subjected to its own, real occupation: Hitler's annexation of Austria from 1938 to 1945. What did the Nazi's leave Vienna?

For one, a generation of war criminals living alongside their sympathizers and victims in half-secret shame, but free. EXPORT makes no great mystery of the metaphorical significance of the Hyksos, establishing it at the film's start with a lengthy alien's eye view, a supernatural peeping-tom perspective of a city under imperceptible siege. As the camera moves in the striking opening — a long crane shot that begins inside, with only a figure waking beneath bedcovers in the frame, then pulls slowly back to reveal an exterior window of an apartment building's top floor before dramatically panning across a swath of city rooftops — we hear a male radio-announcer's voice. In his broadcast, a fragmented explanation of the Hyksos's method of mental abduction and destructive aims is juxtaposed with realistic — or maybe real — news items pointing to persistence of Nazi elements in Austrian society.

EXPORT comes out of an avant-garde feminism finding its feet in the wake of genocide and brutal authoritarianism; a post-WWII radicalism alert to fascism's life underground — its dormancy and domestication, its inscription in gender relations, and the unspectacular quality of normalized violence against women in times of so-called peace. It's no coincidence that her protagonist Anna's "paranoid" counter-surveillance of the invisible adversaries is woven into the tense sexual politics of her everyday life, the micro-political dischord she experiences with her lefty boyfriend. The aggressive, bullying tenor

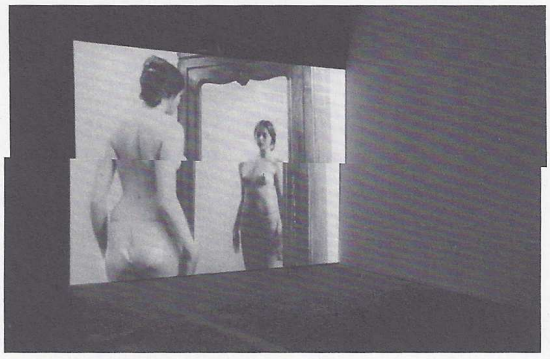
5 VALIE EXPORT and Yilmaz Dziewior, "Orderly Affair," in *VALIE EXPORT –ARCHIV*, ed. Yilmaz Dziewior (Bregenz: Kunsthaus Bregenz, 2012), 81.

of his philosophical blabbering negates his professed radicalism. He's obnoxious, boring, and helpless, unable to cook an egg for himself (Anna does it for him). She must speculate that he's a Hyksos (a Nazi), and, deep in the mindfuck of this relationship, and her culture, she must also wonder — as she looks in the mirror, her reflection no longer tracking the movements of her body — if she is, too.

Mirrors, symbols of narcissism, associated with women's vain or troubled self-regard, were used to great effect by women artists at the dawn of video. In Joan Jonas's work from late 1960s, for example, she used them for their distorting, space-folding, and illusionistic properties. These experiments anticipated her innovative adoption of live video feeds. In performance-video pieces like *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972), she used both a mirror and a monitor, orchestrating dueling closed circuits to master her own mediation. This is one way to resist. Another way, to return to a precept or hypothesis of EXPORT's Expanded Cinema guerilla-art actions, finds critical power in the absence of televisual technology. We've ingested the cinematic mechanisms of objectification, EXPORT proposes. Women's bodies are mediated even in the absence of "media." Thus the disruption of such invisible forces need not be particularly high-tech: mirrors, with their timeless capacity for self-surveillance, are evocative tools.

Chantal Akerman's *Dans le miroir* (*In the Mirror*, 1971), is a 16 mm, black-and-white film with a simple premise. A young woman stands before a mirror wearing only underpants, taking stock of her body. Shot from behind, we have a direct view of her backside and we see her front, as she does, in the mirror frame. Inversely panoptical, it's a 360-degree view of single person, an unnaturally privileged view of an intimate performance. The woman's comments range from neutral or approving, such as, "I have a long neck,"[6] and "I have freckles... and a good-looking mouth" to criticisms, peaking at the end with, "I have a big butt, a bit of cellulite... a sticking-out stomach." Her disinterested musings reflect prevailing cultural values regarding women's bodies, but her monologue preempts the viewer's voyeuristic script of judgments. Or perhaps it fails to. After all, the actor speaks softly, her presence is uncommanding, and, importantly, our view of her figure is more complete than her own; we have the upper hand.

6 Unpublished translation by Devorah Fischler (2016)



Chantal Akerman, Dans le miroir, 2007. 16 mm black and white, film installation transferred to video, sound, Edition 1/3

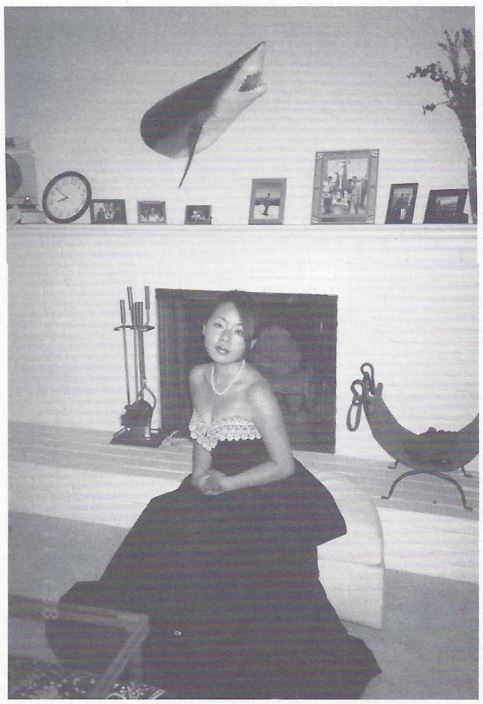
Akerman, born in Belgium a decade after EXPORT, to Polish-Jewish survivors of Auschwitz, was a brilliant filmmaker who pushed the long take, exploiting real time's potentials for uncomfortable beauty and immanent political critique in her depictions of women's unremarkable lives — and here, in *Dans le miroir*, their bare lives. This representation of the stripped and inspected body, seen in light of her family history (especially her close relationship to her traumatized mother, a figure who haunts her later work), is only tentatively hopeful, if optimistic at all. In the direct shadow of the Holocaust, skepticism inflects experiments in female sovereignty.

In contrast, a Google search for Korean artist Nikki S. Lee turns up, as a top result, a short web documentary provocatively titled "Photographer Nikki S. Lee Can Turn Into Anyone."[7] It's a catchy tagline, implying she possesses both artistic superpowers and total freedom. Her *Projects* series, 1997–2001, instigated as a graduate student at NYU, indeed demonstrates her virtuosic abilities to blend in to subcultural and demographic niches. There's an anthropological acuity to her chameleon-like appearances. In photos from *The Yuppie Project*, *The Ohio Project*, *The Exotic Dancers Project* and others, one has to look for her camouflaged presence — in "passing," she sometimes almost disappears. Her adoption of convincing outfits and her ability to enlist authentic representatives of each demographic in her vérité shots are crucial to the success of her assimilations; so is her choice of medium. Lee asked friends to photograph her, using an inexpensive point-and-shoot camera. The familiar image quality, one we associate withamateur documentation (personal, non-art photography), boosts the credibility of her work.

7 The Creators Project, "Photographer Nikki S. Lee Can Turn Into Anyone," YouTube Video, 6:47. http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/show/nikki-s-lee

It's not just that Lee looks "real," these are, in fact, real snapshots — the same evidence of social identity produced by everyone else. Her infiltrations occurred with a mass-media environment increasingly influenced by affordable consumer technology, particularly in its coding of "reality."

Nikki S. Lee, *The Exotic Dancer Project (23)*, 2000. C-print



Nikki S. Lee, *The Yuppie Project (2)*, 1998. Fujiflex print 2/5

Lee was an "alien" during this period, a foreign citizen among Americans, and her *Projects* depict — or satirize — a common project of assimilation. But she messes with this power dynamic, gaining entrance, at least for a moment, not to the dominant group, but to a (marginalized, usually,) subset of the population. The assimilation of immigrants is, paradoxically, both the demand and the fear of racist xenophobes. They want others to do things their way, but they don't want to be tricked, replaced, or diluted by invisible adversaries. In the face of such toxic ambivalence, Lee flaunts her remarkable mutability in service of a playfully nihilistic, rather than aspirational, endeavor. Just for fun, it seems, she refutes the essentialist logic that would exclude her.

* * *

It's March 2016, an election year in the United States, and the inevitable anomaly has materialized. A vicious zeitgeist has spit up an ugly avatar, and a mass-media feedback loop eggs him on. As of this writing, Donald Trump's nomination is not quite a sure thing; he's still battling it out with the others. Last week, the Republican primary's race to the bottom actually went there, to jokes about his apocryphal micro-penis, insinuations based on the size of his hectoring troll hands. It's poetic, isn't it, since, on the Right, the sex organs that are so vehemently debated and subject to legal regulation and medical discipline aren't male. Women, that reproductive category, are the traditional provocateurs of genital panic. The origin of the world is also its dreaded abortionist.

As we witness the rise of unabashed neofascism and its farcical play for legitimacy, what better time to consider the shrewd vigilantes laboring in the realm of art discourse. The feminist body need not be female or feminine, though in the posthuman experiments described here it tends to assume such appearances. These artists, working on the paths lit by EXPORT, exploit it as a living screen and a potent sign, a slippery denomination of a volatile global currency.

Shaved (At A Loss), 1998. Video
Fountain, 1999. Video