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The emergence of American radical feminism in the late 1960s brought forward a tidal wave of concepts on how to transform and revolutionize public and private life. This historic entanglement of feminist ideology and radicalism rubbed up against the other “women’s lib” of the day, espoused by emergent groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW). Radical feminists had goals in mind beyond equal pay and representation; they wanted to systematically break apart and overthrow the patriarchal order and put in motion a sweeping reordering of society. Shulamith Firestone, then in her twenties, became well known within these reformist sister circles for her writings — beginning with *Notes from the First Year*, a magazine she founded in 1968, and then for her infamous book *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970). She begins by claiming:

Sex class is so deep as to be invisible. Or it may appear as a superficial inequality, one that can be solved by merely a few reforms, or perhaps by the full integration of women into the labor force. But the reaction of the common man, woman, and child — ‘That? Why you can’t change that! You must be out of your mind!’ — is the closest to the truth. We are talking about something every bit as deep as that.<sup>1</sup>

The consequences of this class system based on sex were, and are, everywhere. Straying from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Firestone’s shrewd — and to some, simplified — observation of women and men constituting separate classes, wherein women are oppressed based on their unique biological ability to reproduce, stood alone at that point in feminist scholarship. Throughout the *Dialectic*, she demonstrates how as a social and political economy, sex class lies at the root of the oppression of women, the gendered division of labor, and social reproduction — the daily and generational social practices that take place outside of markets. But it doesn’t end there. For Firestone, sex class also underwrites racism, colonialism, eco-terrorism, and more.

Forty-five years later, several of Firestone’s chief ideas are being looked at anew. For some this has been a surprising comeback because her version of radical feminism has been critiqued heavily as too reductive in its focus on dualisms and the biological — she always discusses sex not *gender*.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, when I was an undergraduate and graduate student —

in the wake of Judith Butler’s poststructuralist theories on gender — Firestone’s constant attention to biological difference and binary terms was very uncool.) But what’s interesting about her current revival is how her focus on the body now allures, even as the technological reinvention of gender and biological reproduction are *au courant*. For instance, a January 2015 online exhibition curated by Leah Schrager and Jennifer Chan titled “Body Anxiety,” featured works by artists — including Ann Hirsch, Andrea Crespo, Hannah Black, and Marie Karlberg — who, in a grab bag of approaches, by turns critical, cynical, and seemingly sincere, “examine gendered embodiment, performance, and representation on the internet.”<sup>2</sup> What caught my eye first and foremost here was a quote in the middle of the show’s landing page from the *Dialectic*’s introduction: “This is painful: No matter how many levels of consciousness one reaches, the problem always goes deeper. It is everywhere.”



Faith Holland, *Lick Suck Screen 2*, 2014. Online digital video, color, sound, 1 minute 11 seconds. From “Body Anxiety.”

The “problem” investigated by the exhibition is linked to the internet, porn culture, and the appropriation of images of women therein — see, for example, Faith Holland’s *Lick Suck Screen 2*, 2014, a video made for a porn-sharing site, that shows her doing basically what the title denotes. Yet the fundamental issue for Firestone is much more basic. Her prime interest is women’s distinctive role in biological reproduction and the specificity of their bodies. Early in the book she argues that women must “seize control” of reproduction to eliminate the “sex distinction itself.” She is particularly concerned with the dangers of new technologies for biological reproduction, which

1 Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 1.

2 See Johanna Fateman, “Women on the Verge: Art, Feminism, and Social Media,” *Artforum* 53.8 (April 2015): 218–224, and Aria Dean, “Closing the Loop,” *The New Inquiry*, March 1, 2016: <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/closing-the-loop>.



Karl Lagerfeld's 2014 runway show. ElleUSA Instagram, 2015

are especially significant now given contemporary critical debates on global commercial surrogacy, including the November 2015 ban in India, and the February 2015 ban in Thailand, regarding expropriated reproductive labor, or “wombs for rent” at so-called “baby factories.” (The ban in Thailand followed two high-profile court cases — one involving an abandoned baby with Down syndrome and the other investigating a Japanese man who had fathered sixteen children in the country.)

With a less extensive approach, we can also examine contemporary cultural examples from the *Dialectic's* era as well: though the connection between Firestone's work and contemporary art from the late 1960s and early 70s and beyond has been little explored, her focus on the body as a site of economic production is crucial and opens up to a broad scope of artistic practices. (Here I am using *economic* in a Marxist sense, as a sphere of activity produced through labor.) Moreover, her feminist methodology and focus on biological reproduction leads, if only theoretically, to questions about different kinds of bodily reproduction, namely in body art.

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With its tagline as “the missing link between Marx and Freud,” the *Dialectic* went on to become a landmark feminist text. In a search for origins, Firestone develops a “materialist view of history based on sex itself.”<sup>3</sup> The family structure of “male/female/infant” is of primary concern for her, this “biological family is an inherently unequal power distribution.” She writes, “The need for power leading to the development of classes arises from the psychosexual formation of each individual according to this basic

imbalance.”<sup>4</sup> A few pages later, Firestone presents her solution, and (foreseeably) connects her theory of history as based in biology to exploitation as a parasite: “For unless revolution uproots the basic social organization, the biological family — the vinculum through which the psychology of power can always be smuggled — the tapeworm of exploitation will never be annihilated.”<sup>5</sup>



Janine Antoni, *Inhabit*, 2009. Digital C-print, 1 of 3+2 APs, 116 1/2 x 72 in. (295.9 x 182.8 cm)

It's crucial that Firestone set her focus on the roots of inequality as one different from Marx and Engels's general concepts about class in *The German Ideology*. She claims they failed to perceive “the sexual substratum of the historical dialectic.” Contra Engels's later writings on women specifically, Firestone argues that the oppression of women is not economically based but biologically based. She maintains that this system existed ages before the institution of private property, monogamy, and the patriarchal family (which was produced, in turn, by private property). Further, Firestone sees male domination as a pre-given institutional system and not as a shifting, complex set of social relations — though the latter would be a more fruitful level of analysis at which to pick apart subject formation. Yet many of her views tend toward essentialist

4 Ibid, 8.

5 Ibid, 12.

3 Ibid, 5.



Cheryl Donegan, *Kiss My Royal Irish Ass (K.M.R.I.A.)*, 1993.  
Video still of performance, 5:47 min, color, sound

reductions: “Unlike economic class,” she writes, “sex class sprang directly from biological reality: men and women were created different, and not equally privileged.”<sup>6</sup> And many of Firestone’s ideas are simplistic (“Pregnancy is barbaric,” and so on). Yet sometimes her thoughts are also fantastic. In a concluding section of the *Dialectic* titled “Alternatives,” Firestone offers a sci-fi model of the future, following the eradication of the biological family. She notes that this model is “sketchy” and is meant “to stimulate thinking in fresh areas rather than to dictate the action.”<sup>7</sup>

Prefiguring later cyberfeminism, Firestone visualizes a utopian future or a “cybernation” in which women are liberated by artificial reproduction outside the womb; collectives take the place of families; and children are granted “the right of immediate transfer” from abusive adults. Though she does not make exact predictions about how children would be raised once they are no longer born from women only, she evocatively suggests that there will be a variety of “child-rearing social units” that preclude traditional forms of marriage. These include couples cohabitating and households who contract to remain together long enough to provide a home for children until they are ready to enter the world. (And she assumes that children will do this at a much earlier age than was considered normal in the late 1960s.) In any case, it is clear that this era of social relations altered through a “cybernetic” computer revolution has come — and is going. Though you’d think that with it more would have changed for women — that the “system” would have a few more dents in it.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 227.

Throughout the *Dialectic*, Firestone accepts and inverts the base and superstructure of Marxist cultural theory, the notion that the organization of society’s productive forces influences the shape of its politics and culture, and vice versa. She presents an explosive fusion of historical-materialist analysis but treats sex class and procreation as the economic base on which ideologies of gender difference denigrate women and privilege men. In doing so, she hastily eliminates distinctions between different kinds of feminism — a move some scholars have criticized.

Still, Firestone’s specific attention to the body and the biological, and her focus on what is natural and what is not remains of interest. There is of course a political edge to her utopian imagination that electrifies, still. But to read her book today is sadly to perceive how little has changed politically and economically since it was published — and here I am thinking of income inequality, abortion rights, and access to childcare, amid other everyday threats to women — despite feminism’s hard work and recent gusts into pop culture (such as Beyoncé’s performance before a screen trumpeting the word *feminist* on the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards and Karl Lagerfeld’s runway show that same year for Chanel, in which supermodels carried feminist protests signs with slogans touting “Women’s Rights Are More Than Alright!,” among others).

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Around the same time the *Dialectic* was published, many artists — including Eleanor Antin, Yoko Ono, Adrian Piper, VALIE EXPORT, Joan Jonas, and Carolee Schneemann, among other women — were making Conceptual, task-oriented, and performative works that, in various ways that can’t be condensed, often took on the very status of the patriarchy and women as an uniquely oppressed class. They frequently reproduced their bodies through photography and film, as well as other new forms of media, such as video. Of course, many male artists — such as Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman — were also producing similar pieces, but I’d argue that women played a crucial role in these years by aiming to underscore a (not always explicit) feminist outlook that assimilated an edged critique of social, political, and economic issues. Often this work of the late 1960s and early 70s is classified as body art by historians and critics,



Still from Patty Chang, *Melons (At A Loss)*, 1998. Video

or as a subcategory of performance art — wherein the artist typically goes to great lengths, whether in public or private, to push their body to particular extremes. Art historian Pamela M. Lee has fruitfully drawn attention to the work of Schneemann, EXPORT, and Jonas, emphasizing how they also often used the most experimental forms of new media at the time — projections, feedback systems, video monitors, and other technologies — that “seemed to confirm the will that self-representation is commonly understood as a benchmark of feminist art.”<sup>8</sup> However, Lee complicates this notion by calling into question the association of this work with body art:

Although we can hardly dismiss the notion of “body art” as a descriptive, this category may prove a red herring for examining the practice of Schneemann, EXPORT, and Jonas as media artists: artists whose films, videos and projections are inseparable from

their performances. The cruelty of women’s historical oppression brooks no contradiction; the ways in which the body has been considered in the art historical record demand revisiting. For the body organized by media — and in turn the body wrested from technology — is far from the flesh and blood, “organic” thing. While this body might well indeed be recalcitrant and material, these works of these artists, decidedly feminist in disposition, share little with the essentialized corpus of a particular feminist aesthetic.<sup>9</sup>

Lee moreover muddies body art by unpacking the crucial distinction between a feminist take on the *screened body* and the *body screened* — that is, between the brutally abstracted, mediated body circulated and commodified in images and “the body’s own proactive screening,” as taken up by artists.<sup>10</sup> Distinctly aware of how “the reproduction of sexualized subjects was (and continues to be) coextensive with its reproducibility both in and as media,” Lee’s

8 Pamela M. Lee, “Bare Lives,” in Matthias Michalka, ed., *X-Screen: Film Installations and Actions in the 1960s and 1970s*. Cologne: Walter Koenig, 2004: 70.

9 Ibid, 71.

10 Ibid, 70.

argument furthermore revolves around the “radical convergence” she finds in both the screened body and the body screened as both collapse into biopolitics. She claims, “The oeuvres of Schneemann, EXPORT, and Jonas are each distinct meditations on the emergent biopolitics attending 1960s media culture and the claims to transparency — the politics of illusionism — that culture would make.”<sup>11</sup>

I would argue more broadly as well that by seizing the representation of the body from the media, and by making the body itself the work, these artists spotlighted an expanded notion of their bodies as sites of economic production and reproduction. (As EXPORT noted, “Technologies of reproduction pose the question about the body, and above all, the female body, most radically.”<sup>12</sup>) Schneemann, EXPORT, and Jonas’s works extended her radical ideas in their confrontation of the body screened. In turn, the profound impact of their output went on to inspire later generations of artists, and we can look to examples of such later pieces in the Marielouise Hessel Collection of Contemporary Art, in which again women are seen directing themselves and pushing at the limits and fictions of self-representation.

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One such work is *Kiss My Royal Irish Ass (K.M.R.I.A.)*, 1993, a short early video by Cheryl Donegan that prefigures recent YouTube and Vine performances and provides a provocative commentary on the rise of identity politics in the early 90s. In this tart, nearly six-minute work, which was shot during a performance at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York, Donegan employs her body as a tool to make art, to poke fun at stereotypical markers of an Irish heritage, and to send up conventional notions of femininity. Dressed in an emerald bra, thong panties, and black motorcycle boots, she begins by pouring a can of green paint on the floor, squatting her rear end on it, and then imprinting a sheet of paper two or three times. By next adding a sweep of green as a stem, she completes the shamrock and then stands up to pin it to a wall. Near the end of the work, a man walks into the scene and pours the artist a pint of Guinness, and she sits there drinking, admiring her work with a wry smile.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>12</sup> VALIE EXPORT, “The Real and its Double: The Body,” *Discourse* 11 (Fall-Winter 1988-89): 5 and 7. Quoted in Lee, pg. 77.

Upending the cliché of the “woman painter” fussing over small details (probably in pastel) in her studio as well as the grand, bodily, AbEx gesture (famously also associated with drinking), Donegan here confronts persistent sexism and the reproduction of a “woman’s place” through an irreverent and ironic eroticism — a continuing hallmark of her visionary, unsettling, and often inflammatory work.

Taking a more surreal tack, Patty Chang’s 1998 video *Melons (At a Loss)* likewise plays with sensational imagery by using her body as a medium of expression, and indeed as a site of production to confront gender subordination. Facing the camera, she begins by narrating a story about a commemorative plate featuring an image of her aunt, who had passed away. “It was the kind of plate with a color photo printed on it in a poisonous ink, that you couldn’t eat, or else you’d die too,” she says. Keeping her posture upright, balancing such a plate on top of her head, and while telling the story of her aunt, Chang performs another action: slicing open her white bra to expose a cantaloupe, which she then deseeds with her hands and eats with a spoon as she addresses the viewer. This self-mutilation of her prosthetic breast, an uncanny form of cannibalism, becomes the central focus of the work, while related tales about the plate lose their interest.

It’s hard to know what to make of Chang’s surreal gesture — is it “post-feminist” as critic Roberta Smith has claimed?<sup>13</sup> Or does it rather take up the reins of an earlier generation of feminist artists and make the risks of reproducing the female body visible and uncomfortable? Like Donegan’s work, the video connects heritage with a non-normative study of gender and consumption (namely, the breast as the first and primary source of food). And similarly, the video ends with a sly sort of rebellion: Chang removes the plate from her head and smashes it on the floor. She concludes: “I remember when I was punished for not doing something I was told to... I would gently take that plate off its redwood display stand and lick that puppy until her smile was erased.”

Furthering associations between the obstinately bodily and the symbolic is Janine Antoni’s *Inhabit*, 2009. In this photograph, the artist is seen suspended in her daughter’s bedroom. Her torso is supported by a harness, which is anchored to the walls and furniture in the room, with ropes that extend from her body

<sup>13</sup> Roberta Smith, “Art in Review: Patty Chang,” *The New York Times*, April 16, 1999. <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/16/arts/art-in-review-patty-chang.html>.

as if it were a star shooting rays of light. Below the harness, her lower half is sheathed in a dollhouse that opens up to expose her legs inside the structure. Meanwhile, Antoni's visage recalls medieval and Renaissance Christian paintings of the risen Christ and saints — particularly the ambivalent compassion one finds in images of the Virgin Mary gazing down at her child. And yet, Antoni's offspring is not present here. Instead, the artist is seen paralyzed by the room and the dollhouse, and hovering in a sacrificial maternal mode.



Bruce Nauman, *Good Boy, Bad Boy*, 1985.  
Two-channel video installation, Edition 31/40

Within this scene, a link between issues of reproductive labor and gender oppression are emphasized. Antoni's piece ultimately mocks the humility and benevolence stereotypically expected of women performing unpaid affective labor or "care work," namely their duties to keep their dollhouses in order, and enjoy it. In accentuating such banal and yet ubiquitous assumptions of gender roles, Antoni's photograph, like Chang and Donegan's works, offers a distinct, often tragicomic, slant on the continuing war on women's rights under contemporary global capitalism.

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To back up a bit and conclude: What kinds of critiques of capitalism can feminism assert in terms of reclaiming the body? And what are the stakes? The latter question, if we follow Firestone, is not difficult to answer. Until artificial reproduction outside the womb is possible, women will bear the burden of reproduction as a handicap and they will be oppressed. But is this too one-dimensional? While the overthrow and revolutionizing of society that Firestone (and others) envisioned seems to



Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy*, 1964. 16mm film transferred to video, 6 min., color, sound.

be only possible with this normalization of artificial wombs, the ethical implications of such baby factories may be seen as immense and largely negative. Thus, and per thinkers such as Nancy Fraser, feminists might begin to think about renegotiating boundaries and not the whole picture. (For instance, we could ask ethical questions regarding our self-understanding — such as what *kind* of society sells wombs? And more crucially, how is this connected to domination and inequality?) Reorganizing particular boundaries could amount to more radical rearrangements in the political realm, and this is just one political tactic of concrete demands that feminists (and artists!) can utilize to enact a transformative activism. More broadly, an effective critique of capitalism will need to be as profound, and indeed as inflammatory as radical feminism (and Firestone) wanted, and it will also work towards correcting political and economic misrecognition and maldistribution. It cannot focus on one extreme end of the spectrum, nor should it celebrate the mainstreaming social structure of "empowerment," underwritten by capitalism, in which a bias is formed against less privileged women who are not able, for instance, to follow Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's recommendation to "lean in" and climb the corporate ladder while sitting on or breaking the backs of other women. Likewise, the recent pop culture interest in a commercial and fleeting hash-tag feminist activism (via Lagerfeld) speaks more to a corporate and market-oriented view of equality (a passing seasonal trend for the 1 percent!), and not the radical and judicial politics we ultimately and urgently need, and which feminists have long fought for.

As a transformative movement for reimagining society so that it becomes more beneficial for everyone, feminists must work with other emancipatory

groups to expose how power imbalances stemming from capitalism underpins all oppression. Through this work, we can see how the social organization of issues such as — and perhaps above all — reproductive labor belong not only to women and nuclear families but also to all of society. And it's this kind of mainstreaming — a feminism for *all* — that delivers the best way to evade sex class invisibility.

PATTY CHANG



*Untitled (Eels)*, 2001. Video  
*Melons (At A Loss)*, 1998. Video