Essay by Debra Wacks

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**SMIRK: women, art, and humor**

Humor is not resigned; it is rebellious

–– Sigmund Freud[1]

The result of humor is not always laugh-out-loud funny. Rather, humor is rebellious, it is a strategy that can be used to bring attention to significant ideas, to promote change, and to alter power-structures. The artists represented in "SMIRK" each use humor in a different way, but all of them demonstrate that humor can be an effective weapon in the hands of an "unruly" woman. "SMIRK" brings together many unruly women artists from multiple generations and creates a sense of carnival –– a place where humor offers a popular, yet serious means for women to transgress conventional boundaries.

The November 1973 cover of *Ms.* magazine directly confronts the commonly held presumption that feminists lack humor.[2] The cover, designed by Marie Severin, depicts a man and a woman represented in a comic-strip style. A bubble over the man's head reads: "Do you know the women's movement has no sense of humor?" To which the woman replies: "No. . . But hum a few bars and I'll fake it!" With these swift lines, Severin playfully mocks and thereby challenges popular stereotypes about politically involved women. Her gesture succeeds specifically because humor becomes the vehicle by which the message is articulated. "SMIRK: women, art, and humor" builds upon the trajectory embraced by the *Ms.* cover: serious women not only have a sense of humor, but they also use it as a tool in their art.

According to theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, a populace uses humor to rebel against established norms and authorities, especially during festivals known as "carnival."[3] At such events, social hierarchies are inverted, humor reigns supreme, and the grotesque body acts transgressively. The

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[1] Sigmund Freud, "Humor," *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987) 113. The theoretical foundation of "SMIRK" stems from my dissertation, "Subversive Humor: The Performance Art of Hannah Wilke, Eleanor Antin, and Adrian Piper," which I am writing at the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

[2] For discussions concerning the stereotype of humorless women, see: Regina Barreca's introduction to *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. Regina Barreca (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1988) and Nancy A. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

[3] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). Here, Bakhtin examines festival culture in relation to the irreverent carnivalesque humor that pervades the writing of François Rabelais (c. 1483-1553).

ideological starting point of "SMIRK" is linked to the Women's Movement in the United States because it fostered "carnivalesque" moments when groups of women sought political and social change. Like carnival participants, members of the Women's Movement attempted to topple hierarchies and to transgress established limits. And also like carnival, often the most successful actions were those accomplished through humor. The same is true of the art produced. Although anger provided a catalyst for much of the socio-political art of the late 1960s-1970s, there were complex notions of humor operating at the same time. "SMIRK" emphasizes the humor at play in art and explores the way work from the 70s influences later generations of artists.[4]

### Strategies of Humor

Humor offers a savvy, non-didactic way to get a point across. It also imbues one with a sense of power: the one who tells the joke, the one who laughs, even the one who throws the pie, has the power. The women in "SMIRK" throw the punch-lines via language, actions, images, shape, and voice in painting, photography, sculpture, drawing, mass-produced representations, and performance. There are many different kinds of humor, just as there are many different types of art, artists, and interests. This exhibit takes a brief look at some of the variations resulting from such interconnections.

The following discussion of "SMIRK" is divided into four sections, each one dedicated to a distinct strategy of humor and the artists who employ it: the Grotesque, Parody/Satire, Irony, and the Risqué. This is not meant as an exhaustive list of humor types nor of the artists using them. Rather, this essay, like the accompanying exhibition, is a subjective examination of several generations of artists' work and the way humor can be used to a subversive end.

### The Grotesque

The absurd, the ridiculous, the shocking, and the abject, are all connected to the rebelliousness of carnival through Bakhtin's ideas on the unsettling qualities of the "grotesque." In its constant state of process, the grotesque body rejects the status quo. It is disorderly as "a figural and symbolic resource for parodic exaggeration and inversion."[5] Author Kathleen Rowe suggests that because the female body is associated with unruly boundlessness, women have special access

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[4] Art created by women post-1980 has more readily been acknowledged for its use of humor. In 1994, the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York presented the "Bad Girls" show, which displayed "humorous" works of art dating from the 1980s and 90s. See, Marcia Tucker, *Bad Girls* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994). The 1970s is mostly avoided in Jo Anna Isaak's, *Feminism & Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (London: Routledge, 1996) and in the exhibition catalogue, *No Laughing Matter* (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1991).

[5] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) 9.

to the carnivalesque via the grotesque body.[6] At its most excessive, the female body becomes exceptionally grotesque (it shocks, crosses boundaries, attacks the senses, *etc.*), affording art that concerns women's bodies many opportunities for disruption.

**Martha Rosler**

In her early collage, *Untitled* (Small Wonder), c. 1972, from the "Body Beautiful or Beauty Knows No Pain" series (1965-1974), Rosler arrives at the grotesque through the shock of juxtaposition. The classically feminine body of a lingerie model is made strange and excessively sexual when Rosler collages images of breasts onto the model's bra and an image of grinning, red lips on the front of her girdle. The grotesque dis-placement of the unruly breasts onto the outside of their binding brassiere transgressively turns the inside out. The unbridled grin suggests a modern-day *vagina dentata* –– but these lips appear to be relaxed –– content in a pleasure usually kept hidden. The model in Rosler's piece is aggressively hyper-sexualized, which belies the original passivity of the ad. The absurdity of the work forces one to reconsider the myth of femininity and the mass-produced imagery that supports it.

As a political activist, Rosler has championed feminist concerns and has investigated many socio-economic inequalities and issues throughout her career. In *Untitled* (Oil Slick), c. 1973, another collage from the "Body Beautiful or Beauty Knows No Pain" series, Rosler again employs a strategy of the grotesque. In this case, the juxtaposition is between natural beauty and natural disasters: the upper body of a beautiful, nude woman gracefully reclines in a retched oil slick. The model's sexy body becomes abject as she lays waiting in poison. Rosler uses the disruptive technique of collage in combination with disturbing, grotesque humor to warn viewers of environmental dangers.

**Carol Myers**

Frankenstein's monster is recreated in Myers' drawing *Vagina Dentata* (1985), but with an obvious twist. This almost androgynous creature is identified as female by asymmetrical breasts and two toothy smiles. The first smile is thin-lipped and framed by a severe, squared jaw, while the other grins widely and is placed smack in the pubic area. The broad shoulders, narrow hips, and short, spiky hair of the automatic drawing could read masculine, but the devious lower orifice says

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[6] Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas, 1995). Fundamental to Rowe's analysis are Natalie Zemon Davis' essay "Women on Top," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), and Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," in Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

otherwise. This is a smiling, yet subversive vagina. The paradox engenders the kind of laugher Bakhtin associates with the hierarchical inversion of high/low: the mouth travels from the top of the head to the rebellious, and inherently humorous, bottom of the lower bodily stratum.[7]

Myers uses humor as a means to overcome a difficult early history. Yet her personal experiences immediately assume political ramifications.[8] As a Louisiana-born girl raised within a family that privileged her four younger brothers, Myers often deals with racial identity and sex privilege.[9] In *Grid* (1999) both concerns surface. Imperfect black and white rectangles form a symbolic chessboard-like backdrop on which each "square" is an abstracted *vagina dentata*. The forms are unique in shape, but always red, black, gray, and white in color. Some sport sharp teeth, some look like bizarre dart-boards, while others resemble almond-shaped eyes complete with eyelashes. This is not a passive acceptance of woman's inner core, but rather, an examination of the socio-political relevances of sex and race. The non-geometric, irregular, rhythm of the piece refutes the title "Grid." The repetition of the shapes serves to accentuate their individual differences, which are excessive, even menacing, as the psychoanalytic terror of the uncontrolled vagina is multiplied and made grotesque.

**Nancy Davidson**

Davidson is best known for her overblown witty balloon sculptures of bulbous, feminine forms. But in *Rubyjuby* (1998) Davidson imagines a giant; a humongous woman with great strength and will. This kind of representation bucks stereotypical ideas of femininity in a way that recalls "the Dog Woman," Jeanette Winterson's huge protagonist in *Sexing the Cherry*, who is compared to a mountain range and can hold twelve oranges in her mouth at once.[10] She attacks her political enemies and yet, the Dog Woman expresses sensitivities that any average-sized woman could feel. This is the type of paradoxical being who might accessorize with the bound pink and burgundy-colored bowling balls seen in *Rubyjuby*. It is as if this giant just removed her heavy bracelets and placed them on the ground until next they were needed. They are her trace, suggesting the absence of her exaggerated physical body.

While there are no finger holes in these baubles, they replicate the pearly surfaces of fancier bowling balls. The sculpture's outrageous absurdity is offset by the steel padlocks that connect the balls to one another. The locks point to the need for security or secrecy. They serve as reminders of danger –– especially for one who is different –– like a giant who enjoys wearing pink

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7 Bakhtin, *Rabelais in His World*, especially his chapter "Images of the Material Bodily Lower Stratum," 368-436.

8 This thinking reflects the feminist mantra from the 1970s: "the personal is the political."

9 See Myers' statement on her website, www.swamp-girl.com.

10 Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (New York: Grove Press, 1989) 20, 21. Davidson mentioned Winterson in a conversation with the author on December 15, 2000.

or an excessively powerful woman. The title, "Rubyjuby" comes from James Joyce's *Finnigans Wake*, while the spirit of the piece echoes Antoine Rabelais' fiction.[11] Like the latter's colossal character, Gargantua, Davidson's gigantic beads point to the carnivalesque transgressions of established norms and the social ramifications that encompass such acts.

**Ruth Marten**

Once recognized as "New York City's best known lady tattooist," Marten is also a well-published illustrator and a Surrealist artist. Her slightly disturbing images are both grotesque and curiously humorous. For instance, the painting *Ample* depicts an exaggeratedly fat-laden, pink leg that is wearing a tiny, delicate red shoe. As if amputated from the rest of its body, the leg stands alone, like a fetish object, against a moss-colored background. The hanging lumps of fat, however, look less like a leg and more like relocated body parts: reminiscent of shoulder-blades, love-handles, and buttocks. It seems as if an entire body has been stuffed into the minute, feminine shoe, echoing the kind of violent ambiguity found in Surrealist Hans Bellmer's eerie bio-morphic sculpture *The Top* (1938).

Marten's diptych, *Ines* (1999), plays with the beauty and abjectness of hair. On the upper part of the piece, Marten paints a cropped cross-section of a woman's body. Only fragments of her upper arms and a perfectly shaped pair of breasts can be seen. But dangling from the three-dimensional nipples and nipple-rings are long strands of thick, dark human hair. No doubt, once considered sensual, the hair is now grotesque in its displacement. The sexuality of the breasts is mocked as the abundantly hairy chest no longer meets standards of western beauty. Femininity has gone awry in Marten's work. Whether it is the voluptuous curves of a woman, her sexy shoes, or her beautiful hair, Marten points to the absurdity of feminine attributes by simply misplacing them –– directing viewers to look at them in a different way.

**Parody/Satire**

In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin cites parody as a key component of carnival unruliness and political transformation.[12] Linda Hutcheon broadly defines parody as "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity."[13] The key to a successful parody is in its distance and difference from the "original." While parody, according to Hutcheon, is by definition

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[11] François Rabelais, *Gargantua*, first book published 1532.

[12] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 5.

[13] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985) 6. See also Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 125-33.

"intramural" (the repetition occurs between two kinds of texts or works), satire is "extramural" (social, moral) "in its ameliorative aim to hold up to ridicule the vices and follies of mankind, with an eye to their correction."[14] Satire enables an artist to produce parodic work that enters the realm of the social.

**Eleanor Antin**

Throughout the 1970s, Antin explored identity by masquerading as four alternating personae: The King, The Nurse, The Ballerina, and, for a little while, The Black Movie Star. She dressed-up in costumes and assumed the personality associated with the corresponding role. This resulted in humorous performances where, clad in fake beard and makeshift crown, she might address her "loyal subjects" on the street. Antin did not "pass" as any of her personae, but rather underscores her co-option of these roles and her ability to put them on and off at will.[15] By parodying another gender, class, profession or race, Antin defined identity as ambiguous, contradictory, constructed, and intrinsically linked to issues of power.

In *Eleanora Antinova's Great Roles* (1981), Antin creates layers of narratives and identities. She combines autobiographical stories with both artificial and "true" historical moments in her adoption of the character, Eleanora Antinova, the great Black ballerina of Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russes. In the five photographs and five accompanying texts she "documents" some of her most significant performances in: "The Prisoner of Persia," "Before the Revolution," "Pocohantes," "The Hebrews," and "L'Esclave" (the slave). Of course, Antin is not a famous dancer, but this does not prevent her from discussing Antinova's experiences in first person. Photography, like autobiography, is often assumed to be reflective of the "truth," but Antin dismisses these presumptions. In, for example, the photograph of "Before the Revolution," Antin assumes the identity of Eleanora Antinova who plays the role of Marie Antoinette who pretends to be a shepherdess. She appears in aristocratic wig and handmaiden's dress, comically pulling a fake lamb from behind her. Her right arm gracefully gestures upwards, maintaining an air of elegance. Antin's role-playing transgresses social boundaries as it produces a parodical mockery of the once monolithic constructions of identity, history, and truth.

**Carmelita Tropicana**

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[14] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 43.

[15] Luce Irigaray recommends the strategic use of parody when she calls for the active use of feminine mimicry, the conscious citation of male discourse. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 76.

"The Decade Show Performance" was a live, one-time-only piece given by Carmelita Tropicana at the Studio Museum of Harlem in 1990. The video is an unedited document of that event, which was part of the extensive art exhibition entitled "The Decade Show."[16] The performance begins in darkness. Only Tropicana's voice is heard as she speaks of her childhood move from Cuba to the United States. Memory and its transitory, yet quirky, qualities is a subject of the work. She even sings a few lines from Barbra Streisand's famous song: "Memories from the corners of my mind. . ."[17] Tropicana finds humor in what had to be very painful experiences. For instance, she condenses the difficulty of adjusting to a new culture into learning to like peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches, when she really wanted tunafish and jelly.

The divergent perceptions of the past and its retelling are communicated by Tropicana. She combines personal memories with fabricated narratives when she parodies a Cuban-born woman who reminisces about her life in the early 1950s. Wrapped in a boa made of plastic fruit, Tropicana covers many subjects, like her run-in with gangsters at a night-club or her romance with a Jewish woman. Tropicana demonstrates the ironic collision of cultures through a medley of nationalistic songs and excitedly relates her latest inspiration: a Japanese-Cuban café called "Casa Hiroshima," where the specialty of the house would be chicken sushi.

**Danielle Abrams**

In association with "SMIRK," Abrams will give a live performance of her work "Quadroon," in which she adopts four characters: "the Dew Drop Lady," "Butch in the Kitchen," "Janie Bell," and "Dee." Like Antin and Tropicana, Abrams uses autobiography and parody to impart an intimate understanding of each personality. As she alters her appearance and manner of speaking, Abrams explores the interconnections of cultural, racial, religious, and sexual identities. The result is the development of four sweet, yet eccentric, individuals that have ultimately influenced the complex identification of Abrams herself.

**Karen Heagle**

Pop culture melds with European art, Midwestern nostalgia, and lesbian desire in Heagle's *Master of Callisto in a Cornfield* (1999). Both medieval painting and television are parodied to create an icon out of the vengefully evil Callisto, a character on the television show "Xena: Warrior

[16] "The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s" was a collaborative exhibition between the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, and The Studio Museum in Harlem.
[17] "The Way We Were," written by Marvin Hamlisch, Alan Bergman and Marilyn Bergman, 1974.

Princess."[18] The campy series often features Callisto, Xena's nemesis, which makes for some classic girl-on-girl fight scenes.

As a child, Heagle idolized television's heroines and as a former security guard at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, she studied early Byzantine painting on a regular basis.[19] Her parody bridges these experiences via Callisto who is removed from her vague mythological local and placed within the cornfields of Heagle's childhood Wisconsin. But Heagle's use of parody goes beyond recontextualization when it highlights the lesbian gaze. The thick paint is heavily worked in a process and product that is pleasurable. Callisto is dressed in black leather, like an S & M dominatrix. Although always scantily clad, Callisto is imbued with a potent sexuality not seen on the television show. In the painting, Callisto raises a large staff-like weapon and aggressively bears her teeth. Her bold stance, concentrated stare, and muscled stomach burst forth from the canvas, while her bright yellow hair and phallic, hip-swinging knife defy the black boarders of the painting. In the end, the iconic status of this near goddess is immortalized with the gold-leaf background from which she stands.

**Nancy Chunn**

Chunn embraces mass media. In 1996 she appropriated and visually satirized the daily front pages of *The New York Times*. The series encourages one to chart which stories were considered most important and how those stories were told over the year. Although Chunn critiques these decisions, she welcomes the mass appeal of a newspaper. In *Hello Dolly* (1998) Chunn again turns to *The New York Times*, but here she analyzes the successful cloning of a sheep named Dolly. The middle three pages of the five-sectioned piece consists of Chunn's ink and pastel drawings on an article proclaiming to be a step-by-step instruction of how "Dolly was Conceived and Born." Besides the coloring of various black and white illustrations and diagrams, Chunn creates her own iconography. Purple curtains part for the sheep who poses atop a round stage. Spotlights shine on Dolly's tiara-crowned head as one hoof clutches a bouquet of roses. Additional flowers shower the stage while antique cameras take her photograph. Above, two of the sheets of paper combine to bear the words "Hello Dolly." Like an extravagant Broadway musical, this is the spectacle of scientific experiment.[20] The show must go on whether the ethics are questionable or not. Chunn's satiric images make clear her social concerns, especially through the added text: "It's

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[18] For more on "Xena," see Sherrie A. Inness, *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

[19] See Heagle's interview in studio-visit.com.

[20] Chunn is clearly playing with "Hello Dolly," the Broadway show and Hollywood movie.

Not Nice to Fool Mother Nature." The tag-line, co-opted from an old margarine commercial, not only points to the frightening artificiality of cloning, but also to its commercial viability.

The monstrous characteristics of the scientific procedure are made emphatic on a third page with a drawing of poor Dolly strapped to a stark operating table as tubes entangle her body and electric bolts escape from overhead. A couple of Chunn's rubber-stamps mark the scene with small red texts that read: "HELP ME." Two more pages actually begin and end the critical satire. Chunn covers the newspaper sheets with two pair of sheep set on a background of yellow and black diagonal stripes –– signaling to the viewer to yield –– there's danger ahead.

**Annu Palakunnathu Matthew**

The city of Bombay (now Mumbai) produces more commercial movies than any other, which explains its "Bollywood" nickname. Matthew satirizes the typically light-hearted musicals to stress some of the serious problems found in India. She begins with a mass-produced Indian movie poster and digitally alters it to deal with specific issues. For example, in *Bollywood Satirized: Dowry Death* (2000), a wealthy Indian man is seen standing in front of a blaze of fire. A pair of woman's eyes and bindi dramatically emerge from the flames. Matthew supplies her own gripping title: "Dowry Death –– The story of many women's lives." Above the eyes and surrounded by fire, appear Matthew's words "She died accidentally.....They called it a cooking accident." Her text raises consciousness about the epidemic proportions by which wives are murdered by their husbands for their dowries. An additional text indicates: "India had 6,917 registered dowry deaths in 1998." The horrific facts suggest that many women are essentially sold into arranged marriages and then violently disposed of. The words above the man's head hauntingly read: "Now find me another bride with a really big dowry."

Another image, *Bollywood Satirized: Fair & Lovely* (1998), depicts variously posed young women and girls. The youngest girls play against a dark black background and one of the women lays in a man's arms as he kisses her cheek. Beneath the amorous scene is Matthew's title: "Fair & Lovely," while a serpentine subtext reads: "Don't play in the sun.......you'll get dark and no one will marry you." Because Matthew works from personal experiences, such phobic racist warnings were perhaps offered to her as a child.[21] Her use of satire act as a vehicle towards transformation. Matthew has shown her prints internationally, and they will soon be seen in India, where their subversive intent will be most threatening.

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[21] In Matthew's unpublished description of her series, "Bollywood Satirized," she writes: "I re-interpret the images of Indian movie posters to make satirical social commentary based on my experiences."

### Irony

Irony is a trickier kind of humor, which may not foster a popular comic response. Instead, irony requires a sense of distance, a non-literal understanding of what is being said. Language and irony come together so that a work of art can be "read" to encourage the complexity of an artist's message. General definitions of irony include "a method of humorous or subtly sarcastic expression in which the intended meaning of the words used is the direct opposite of their usual sense."[22] According to Linda Hutcheon, the importance of irony is its "edge." She writes of irony: "While it may come into being through the semantic playing off of the stated against the unstated, irony is a 'weighted' mode of discourse in the sense that it is asymmetrical, unbalanced in favor of the silent and the unsaid. The tipping of the balance occurs in part through what is implied. . ."[23] That space between the said and unsaid is irony's cutting edge. One must teeter on that edge in order to comprehend fully a work that uses ironic strategy.

### Guerrilla Girls

The Guerrilla Girls is an anonymous group of women who use humor as a means to confront sexism and racism in the art world. They combine ironic wit and indisputable statistics to expose publicly the appalling underrepresentation of women and artists of color in art exhibitions, funding, and collections.[24] In 1985, the original members of the group came together after realizing there was more diversity in the art world in the 1970s. There had since been a feminist backlash and they decided to pick up where 70s feminism had left off. The identity of each member remains hidden in order to focus on the issues, but also to avoid any institutional repercussions. During public appearances, the Guerrilla Girls maintain their anonymity by wearing fierce gorilla masks that pun with their guerrilla warfare aimed at the art world. They have, however, adopted pseudonyms that give voice to the names of great women artists from the past.

In 1989, the Guerrilla Girls co-opted Ingres' image of a reclining nude, *Grande Odalisque* (1814), and reproduced her on one of their posters entitled *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?*. The idealized nude is seen from behind, but her classically beautiful profile has been abruptly replaced by a large, teeth-bearing gorilla mask. She is accompanied by the consciousness raising text: "Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female." The Guerrilla Girls use the sarcasm of the question "do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" to attack the exhibition policy of the Metropolitan

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[22] Partial definition of "irony" given in *Webster's NewWorld Dictionary*, second edition (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1986).

[23] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1995) 37.

[24] See, *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls: How a Bunch of Masked Avengers Fight Sexism & Racism in the Art World with Facts, Humor and Fake Fur*, by the Guerrilla Girls with an Essay by Whitney Chadwick (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995).

Museum of Art in New York City. As Guerrilla Girl "Käthe Kollwitz" states: "We're the disloyal opposition that bangs people over the head and reminds them that the art world's not this great liberal bastion of aesthetic quality, that it's subject to the same forces as everyone else and every other institution in society."[25]

**Mira Schor**

As an MFA student at CalArts, Schor participated in its groundbreaking Feminist Art Program and contributed to the Womanhouse project.[26] From the early 1970s on, Schor explains that her agenda was: "to bring my experience of living inside a female body –– with a mind –– into high art. . ."[27] This means bridging the seemingly antithetical realms of feminism and formalism. She accomplishes this in her critical writings as well as in her oil paintings, as seen in her small canvas *Oo* (1997). Here, formal issues of paint are brought together with language and the body. The letters "o o" are handwritten in blackish-blue paint onto a deep red background. Red may be the color of romance, but it's the color of blood. The first "o" is larger and filled with a transparent milky-white pigment. The second "o" is made solid with dark paint and hangs like a little sac from the connecting lines. "Oo" is a sexual word. Its pronunciation lingers on one's puckered lips, but it also connotes the body in all its gooey abjectness.

Language is further made visible in Schor's paintings, *Delicate Oops* (1998) and *Joyous Oops* (1997), in which she fills each canvas with the handwritten word "oops." The terms are represented similarly, yet Schor assigns them different characteristics: one is "delicate," the other "joyous." As such, Schor points to the almost arbitrary way in which art may be described or manipulated to fit a critic's need. At the same time, one cannot help but think of the funny expression aurally: "oops" is seen and heard. The spontaneity of "oops" suggests something physical; something has happened by mistake. That is the joke –– the accidental nature of the word ironically contradicts the careful, painterly quality of the works themselves.

**Simone Leigh**

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[25] Guerrilla Girl, Käthe Kollwitz, *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls*, 10.

[26] For a month in 1972, twenty-one students transformed an abandoned house in Southern California to address the everyday domestic lives of American women. See Arlene Raven, "Womanhouse," *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1994).

[27] Mira Schor, "Artist's Statement," in *Feminist Directions: 1970/1996, Robin Mitchell, Mira Schor, Faith Wilding, and Nancy Youdelman*, curated by Amelia Jones and Laura Meyer at the Sweeney Art
Gallery (Riverside: University of California at Riverside, 1996) 8.

The title *Tar Baby* (1999) is jarring. Like Toni Morrison's book of the same name, Leigh's piece forces her viewers to think twice.[28] The sculpture consists of a found baby's crib, which is then filled with close to thirty yam-shaped and colored ceramic pieces. Their forms are reminiscent of full breasts or Constantin Brancusi's small, heart-wrenching *Newborn* sculptures (begun 1915). The upper third of each ceramic, however, has been dipped into black, molten tar, which, once cooled, creates bubbly, imperfect surfaces. The curved forms are packed in rows within the crib, but they still wobble into various directions, contrasting with the straight, white bars of the crib. The biting sting of Leigh's irony is profound in its references to the repulsive mob act of tar and feathering African-Americans, the innocence of childhood, and a racist epithet. The literalizing of "tar babies" leads viewers to consider the often silent racist history behind the words if they are to understand the embedded meanings within the sculpture.

In the "Hottentot Venus Series" (1995-2000), Leigh uses the form of an African water pot to explore western ideas of sexuality, beauty, and deviancy and their location in what she sees as the iconic black female body –– the Hottentot Venus.[29] In the early 19th century, Saartje Baartman was brought from the Quena tribe of Southern Africa (pejoratively referred to as Hottentot) to Europe, where she was paraded as the "essential African female."[30] In her short life she became notorious because of the "scientific" interest in her large buttocks, vaginal flap, and breasts. Leigh explains that her series on Baartman, the so-called "Hottentot Venus," is "a way of exploring the meaning of my life as a woman of African descent, and my own personal humiliations." She creates a group of ceramic vessels to parallel, in her words, "the idea of the 'essential' female body as vessel. . . how this container/pot/body describes identity." Each piece is different, but they all focus on the female body. For instance, *Untitled #3, "Hottentot Venus Series*," is a great and rounded container covered with protruding phallic breasts. Like a fertility goddess, Baartman's abused body parts have multiplied to excess –– their objectified passivity obtains strength in grotesque repetition. Therein lies one of the ironic edges. What began as an act of disempowerment is recuperated, inverted, and made beautiful.

**The Risqué**

Intolerance (sexism, racism, homophobia) often stems from ill conceived notions associated with the body. Yet the body is also a site where desires are acted out and upon. Art that

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28 Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (New York: Signet, 1981). According to Leigh, her piece also refers to the tales of Brer Rabbit, in which the fox gets caught in a trap — a "tar baby." The fox thinks it is food — a baby — and pounces on it. Tar is a sticky mess. The more one tangles with a tar baby, the more one becomes entangled; e-mail letter from the artist, January 14, 2001.

29 Leigh's unpublished "Artist's Statement," all of her quotes are taken from here.

30 See Marilyn Jiménez, "Naked Scene/Seen Naked: Performing the Hott-En-Tot," *Looking Forward Looking Black*, ed. Jo Anna Isaak (Geneva, New York: Hobart and William Smith Colleges Press, 1999).

employs the explicit body often disentangles and analyses this nexus of prejudices and pleasures while embracing the potency of the naked body. When women artists turn to either their own bodies or to the representation of a sexual female body, they challenge stereotypical presumptions of the passivity of the female body. Risqué humor works in tandem with the body and its pleasures to rebelliously shock viewers out of complacency.

### Hannah Wilke

The way in which Wilke strategically used the/her nude body continues to influence subversive art practices today. *Venus Envy* (1980) is comprised of three Polaroid photographs depicting Wilke with her former lover, Richard Hamilton. The images are focused closely so that only Hamilton's head is seen poking out from between Wilke's naked legs and pubic mound –– mimicking the birth process. With tongue in cheek, the word "venus" creates a pun by replacing "penis." Bakhtin believed that puns contribute to the carnivalesque inversion of hierarchies by transgressing grammatical order "to reveal erotic and obscene or merely materially satisfying counter-meaning."[31] Similarly, Wilke uses a pun to mock Freud's notion of woman's universal penis envy. She refutes the psychoanalytic concept of vagina as lack and links the/her vagina to the goddess of love and beauty, as well as to the distant solar system (a heavenly body, indeed).[32]

The female body is further represented in Wilke's vintage postcard series, which includes *Inspiration Point* (1974) and *U.S.S. Missouri* (1977). In this series, Wilke creates little, gray, vaginal sculptures out of kneaded erasures and places them onto seemingly nostalgic postcards. The vaginas appear to invade the pictured spaces or objects, producing an overt feminine/feminist presence. Wilke transforms "low," kitschy materials into art, while poignantly inverting the misogynist erasure of women's contribution to culture in general.

Wilke continued to meld feminism, biting wordplay, and the/her body even when she became ill with lymphoma. With the help of her husband, Donald Goddard, she produced *Intra-Venus* (1992), which simultaneously puns on beauty, love, and hospitalization. The tragic series of photographic performance-related self-portraits and mixed-media documents the shocking effects of the terminal illness on her deteriorated, nude body.

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31 Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 10. Susan Rubin Suleiman discusses the transgressive potential of feminist word-play in *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). Hélène Cixous relates word-play to feminine laughter and pleasure in "Laugh of the Medusa," *New French Feminisms*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).

32 "Venus" also taps into a renewed feminist interest in the female goddess during the 1970s.

**Suzanne Wright**

Drawing from obese lesbian-porn internet sites, Wright produces a group of little sculptures of large, nude women with wonderful names. There is *Technicolor Gloria* (2000), who sits on the ground with legs out-stretched, arching her back to melt with the sun. Her abundant flesh ripples like thick, home-made frosting. From a distance, her skin looks gray, but with closer contact, one sees she is permeated with multicolored flecks of glitter, making Gloria look like a new flavor of gumdrop. It is, however, her broad face that reveals the utter delight of this piece. Gloria's eyes are closed, but they unabashedly squint with joy as her mouth grins with ease. She exudes a sexuality that is surprising and enjoyable. The excessively big body ignores western standards of beauty as her sensual confidence mocks the billion-dollar diet industry. Gloria is radically content.

Pleasure is doubled in the small, voluptuous sculpture *Chardoni & Ambrosia* (2000). Popular culture would have one think that happiness and a skinny body go together. But Wright negates this presumption with "Chardoni" and "Ambrosia": two fat, happy women who convey a kind of satisfaction that is sexual, yet tender. Cast in colored resin, the figures look like sucking candies: blue flows into green, which blends into yellow. Gently touching one another, the smiling blue-headed, naked women lounge against a bar of butter ready to burst into laughter at any moment. Wright's humor becomes bawdy in her resin sculpture, *Chabli #1* (2000). Here, a very rotund red ass and two relatively scrawny legs hang on the wall, just above eye-level. The carnivalesque gesture is hilarious in its base "butt humor" –– Rabelais, himself, could not help but laugh.

**Patty Chang, Kelly Hashimoto, Kimberly Tomes**

The tightly edited videotape *Angel Falls* (2000) takes its name from the highest waterfall in the world. It puns on the fact that the three artists take turns performing in a stream of water while on the 91st floor of one of the World Trade Towers. They wear bikinis as they sensually, yet playfully, dance in front of the breathtaking city view. Working as a team, one artist holds the camera and one directs the water hose, while the third one struts her stuff. Yet, the raucous laughter of all three rings simultaneously. Their laughter epitomizes the carnivalesque happening as they joyously contradict the conservative, patriarchal culture typical of business operations at the Twin Towers.

Unlike the music videos they parody, the sexy bodies depicted in *Angel Falls* do not belong to random nameless models, but rather to the artists themselves. They circumvent the hierarchical artist/model dichotomy by conflating the categories. By controlling their own representations and using themselves, they automatically refer to a personal history of which they are the subject.[33]

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[33] Lucy Lippard explains that, "when women use their own bodies in their art work, they are using their *selves*; a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject."

Similar to Wilke in her performances of *S.O.S. –– Starification Object Series* (1974-82), Chang, Hashimoto, and Tomes deliberately demonstrate their power to (re)create cliché images of femininity in order to thwart them. It is precisely their ability to suggest the ideal female fantasy for the camera that enables them to subvert it.[34]

Chang, Hashimoto, and Tomes reject passivity and celebrate the pleasure of their sexuality –– they relish in the spectacle that they are creating.[35] Kathleen Rowe observes that although women have traditionally been objectified and rendered powerless by the gaze, "in a postmodern culture of the image and the simulacra power also lies in possession and control *of* the visible."[36] This affords the artists the power of aggressive visibility, in contrast to passive objectivity. A woman who controls her own spectacle is empowered, even socially threatening. When humor is involved she becomes even more unruly. Chang, Hashimoto, and Tomes are loud and goofy, risqué and subversive –– they are no angels, and they're enjoying the fall.

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Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art," reprinted in *From the Center* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976) 124.

[34] Eleanor Heartney argues that explicit art production ultimately attacks the hegemonic status quo: "During the '70s a surprising number of women artists and writers adopted a quasi-pornographic content or form in order to assert the claims of female desire and sexuality as part of the women's movement's general challenge to patriarchy." Eleanor Heartney, "A Necessary Transgression," *New Art Examiner* (November 1988): 21. See also Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997).

[35] To Irigaray, the expression of feminine pleasure suggests a means for radical social disruption, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 77. See also Amelia Jones, "Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures, and Embodied Theories of Art," *New Feminist Criticism: Art-Identity-Action*, eds. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven (New York: IconEditions, 1994).

[36] Rowe, 12. Rowe argues against Laura Mulvey's conclusion that the male gaze automatically renders a woman powerless. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.