Derek Conrad Murray and Soraya Murray

Uneasy Bedfellows: Canonical Art Theory and the Politics of Identity

Since the mid-1990s, a contentious debate has stirred both the art academy and the international art world. The emergence of visual-studies departments around the United States and abroad—with their insistence upon a greater diversity in both subjectivities studied and objects contemplated—has been a divisive force to say the least. Orthodox art history and theory have been criticized as too stringently Eurocentric in their emphasis, elitist, ethnically and racially essentialist, politically conservative, and naive about the non-West. Conversely, some consider visual-culture studies too hybrid, rudimentary, global, and too theoretically scatterbrained to be intellectually effective. Because visual-culture studies draws from an array of disciplines ranging from art history and postcolonial theory to queer theory and cultural criticism, the field is often characterized as methodologically rudderless. Nevertheless, visual studies has been instrumental in reasserting the imperative of pedagogical inclusiveness and intellectual rigor many feel is lacking within orthodox art history. Despite the presence of visual-culture studies in the humanities, activist forms of historical revisionism and institutional critique have become requisite within the academy, forcing humanities practitioners to employ a broader range of objects and methodologies.

Considering these challenges, how will such disciplinary changes impact canon formation in the visual arts? What objects, cultures, artists, and methods will be contemplated? How will the influence of academic identity politics, shifting demographics, multinational capitalism, and globalization alter the valuing of contemporary art and visual culture? While the field of art history is certainly not as stringent and intolerant as the criticisms levied against it may suggest, the study of identity (sexual, gender, ethnic, racial, class) is crucial for the discipline to progress. This essay represents an attempt to address these questions, while simultaneously making sense of the many challenges facing the study of visual art and culture in the twenty-first century.

The deep-seated tensions between art history and visual-culture studies were unpacked by art historian and cultural critic Mieke Bal in her 2003 essay "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture."[1] Moving from the problematic terms *visual* and *culture* as linguistically inadequate to describe what the field of visual culture truly is, her essay methodically outlines how these words embody the very quandary of the discipline. How can visual-culture studies call itself such, when clearly it is not exclusively visual in nature and when the term "culture" is so highly contestable? What is the "object domain" of visual studies; that is, what are the objects and the objectives of its study?[2] This deconstructionist approach argues that art history bears a strict metanarrative that is fully capable of naming its defined object. Visual culture, on the other hand, lacks definition and therefore currently exists in a state of interdisciplinarity.

Bal further suggests that the discipline of traditional art history is grounded in the object, but more significantly in the objectification of reality that relies upon "perceptible material properties" of that object.[3] The reference to materiality as the basis of the study of art objects seems to make a veiled reference to canonical discourses whose roots—as she claims—lie in nineteenth-century positivism, binarisms, and concerns with purity. Though it is a short leap from discussions of purity within disciplines to issues of identity (meaning race, gender, and sexuality),

Cindy Sherman, Untitled #338, 1999, black-and-white photograph, 38½ x 25½ in. (97.8 x 64.8 cm) (artwork © Cindy Sherman; photograph provided by Metro Pictures, New York)

1. Mieke Bal, "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 1 (April 2003): 5–32.
2. Ibid., 6.
3. Ibid., 8.

Bal draws no conclusions about what a loss of purity might specifically mean. But even her term "visual essentialism," used throughout her essay, bears a component that clearly engages postmodern discourses of margin and center.

The response to Bal's methodical argument regarding the creation and maintenance of disciplinary boundaries was both swift and vehement. Of the many published respondents, two of the most notable were James Elkins and Griselda Pollock. Because these two scholars occupy opposite ends of this debate, it is fruitful to read their responses against the original essay. Elkins is an advocate of traditional art history and its methods. Certainly not a champion of the multidisciplinarity of postmodernism, he asserts that the inclusion of alternative discourses in the field constitutes a "de-skilling that so often accompanies the relaxation of disciplinary boundaries."[4] Elkins argues that pure texts (in the sense of being wholly free of the influence of other disciplines and intervening voices) are indeed necessary for any resistance to be formulated. Referring to the multidisciplinary as "acid," he implies that his own discipline should be protected from the potential corrosive influences of postmodern discourses:

> I would just add that there is also good reason to mend the fences between neighbors: the existence of borders, and the *competencies* they enclose, are what give sense to our peregrine scholarship.[5]

Conversely, Griselda Pollock writes of her own long-standing dedication to scholarship that problematizes notions of difference and subjectivity.[6] Pollock indicates that she has always occupied a hybrid scholarly position that straddles disciplines. In fact, she has built an impressive career on the very "de-skilling" that Elkins resists. Further, Pollock is wary of the proscriptive rigidity of art history's formalism and its seeming indifference to the politics of identity. Subsequently, the search for external disciplinary approaches (historically revisionist, identity-based, theoretical, etc.) that can be used in tandem with or independently of art history becomes indispensable in an effort to make meaningful historical and theoretical contributions to a study of visuality.

The three aforementioned positions encapsulate critical arguments in an institutional dispute regarding the proper functions of art history and visual studies. While these discussions deal with the question of whether or not visual studies should be an object-based discipline, they also draw attention to art history's methodological shortcomings as rooted in a largely object-based materiality. Bal's discussion reopens a dialogue that was featured in a 1996 issue of the art theory journal *October*. Entitled "Visual Culture Questionnaire," the primary feature story was dedicated to invited critical responses on the art history–visual culture debate.[7] In recent years, art history has created stringent criteria by which to determine quality, which—in combination with a rarefied language—has made it impossible for many to have access to the discourse. Bal's essay remains in the abstract, and she seems resistant to define concrete terms or implicate specific discourses. Our project is, conversely, about making a direct effort to promote critical practices that consider identity and subjectivity within dominant discourses—while at the same time moving beyond outmoded binaries of high and low culture. Nevertheless, her important citing of this institutional debate speaks to greater challenges facing the canon.

The modern-day collapse of the aesthetic object and the commodity object

4. James Elkins, "Responses to Mieke Bal's 'Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,'" *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 2 (August 2003): 235.
5. Ibid., 236, emphasis added.
6. Griselda Pollock, "Visual Culture and Its Discontents: Joining in the Debate," *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 2 (August 2003): 253–60.
7. "Visual Culture Questionnaire," *October* 77 (Summer 1996): 25–70.

decisively influences the art history–visual studies debate. Elkins locates the roots of the art history–visual culture discussion in the Frankfurt school, specifically in the writings of Theodor Adorno, who was a strident advocate for high art and a harsh critic of the culture industry.[8] This anticapitalist position is the most enduring critique of visual culture. The second position, as Elkins suggests, is a self-defined stance taken by intellectuals in cultural theory, film, and media studies, whereby the modernist high-low dichotomy has been entirely abandoned. Adorno's formulation suggests that the culture industry melds the high and low together, which ultimately annihilates the possibility of a pure and elevated expression. In this theorization, the profit motive supersedes a work of art's innate formal language—its material properties. Detractors of visual-culture studies generally fall in line with this reasoning, either as a means to counteract the effects of capitalism on visual art or to maintain a clear division between those who *appreciate* high art and those who *consume* low art. What is most important here is the shift away from high and low art specifically, toward a fixation on high and low *people*—which is essentially a class demarcation with far-reaching methodological implications. On a disciplinary level, this separation also draws a line in the sand between minority and normative practitioners, their histories and criticalities.

Seminal anticapitalist theorizations related to artistic production are numerous, with the clear standouts being Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and Clement Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"—both of which have roots in early Marxist writings on commodity fetishism.[9] However, in recent years, scholarship has emerged that complicates a purely Marxist, anticapitalist reading of contemporary visual culture. Fredric Jameson asserts with trepidation that high and low art are inseparable, thus signaling the victory of commodification.[10] As a retort to Jameson's cautionary embrace of this phenomenon, Elkins suggests that visual culture "is [wrongly] predicated on the assumption that contemporary culture has already mixed the elite and the popular, the fine and the vulgar, modernism and kitsch, to the point where it is no longer sensible to treat them separately."[11] According to this reading, Jameson epitomizes this viewpoint—a stance that claims that both high and low art are collapsed into objects of commodity culture. But what is really at stake within this debate? Elkins reluctantly identifies the politics of identity as the core tension—a problematic traditionally excised from discussions related to artistic formalism and materiality.

Theorists Nicholas Mirzoeff and Stuart Hall, both proponents of visual-culture studies, unabashedly advocate the study of identity—acknowledging both its clear visual concerns and its systematic neglect by orthodox art history. Mirzoeff's writings often consider the irresolvable tension enacted by visual studies' displacement of the white, male subject that has dominated Western thought.[12] Among the enduring points of criticism directed toward visual-culture studies and its proponents is the effort on the part of many practitioners to remove the Eurocentric canon, replacing it with non-Western imperatives and subjectivities. While this motive may be the case with specific scholars, on an institutional or disciplinary level, visual studies has not been conceptualized in such a manner. Visual-studies concentrations at major institutions have not made such aggressive strides. In fact, these efforts have more actively promoted an

8. See Theodor Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. Jay Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001).
9. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Schocken Books, 1968); Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (Fall 1939): 34–39.
10. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1991), 1–54.
11. James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 50.
12. Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Subject of Visual Culture," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 1998), 16.

academic culture of interdisciplinarity, rather than emphasizing the politics of identity. In this regard, visual-culture studies has not necessarily created a politically oppositional space. What is important to note, however, is that despite visual studies' methodological trepidation around issues of alterity (and the academic pluralism it necessitates), the problem of identity emerges as the primary preoccupation and challenge once methodological debates ensue. The ongoing struggle of visual studies—as Bal brought to the fore—is the field's seeming inability to define its object of study. However, the necessity to move beyond shyness toward identity politics, characterized by art history and other conservative disciplines, remains imperative.

The subaltern subject's emergence in the late-twentieth-century era of identity politics as *the* "subject of history" has had a destabilizing impact on traditional art-historical praxis. And needless to say, the self-conscious embrace of global capitalism by this new avant-garde exacerbates the tensions brought to bear by this shift. Theorists such as Gayatri Spivak analyze how the current moment of globalized hypercapitalism is largely enacted on the subaltern body. But many minority visual artists, whom we term "commodity fetish/ethnographer/author/capitalists," have begun to embrace the economic, political, and social currency that market success potentially holds. If the labor of global capitalism is enacted upon the bodies of socially defined minorities, how might the visual image of that same subjectivity hold up as a commodity? Judging by the success of postcolonial and minority artists in recent years, one must assume that it holds up extremely well. However, this relatively new artistic producer poses difficult questions related to capitalism, visual art, and authorship. These questions challenge the traditional ways of thinking about how art and artists function, especially considering our media-saturated consumer culture.

Some of the resistance to Bal's essay treated it as a redundant rehashing of a dead debate. But the stakes at play in the earlier *October* discussion have only heightened in the wake of the increasing significance and resilience of visual studies. As Pollock clearly indicates, there is an inherent problem with a debate that grounds itself in a binary-based form of negation that posits two essential elements in opposition to each other. Pollock argues that the object-vs.-subjectivity debate is a useless one. She suggests that any study of images that does not theoretically consider race, gender, and sexuality—not to mention *all* historical contributions—is merely a mythology, a pleasing fiction that will fall prey to future criticality. Indeed, all forms of image production overlap with identity, whether or not the makers occupy a "normative" position, and whether or not identity is foregrounded in the work itself.

The impact of identity politics within the discipline of art history is clearly linked to the relationship between identity formation and canon formation, between antihegemonic work and activism. These issues have also been unpacked within the journal *October*. Hal Foster, one of the most prominent members of this discourse, positions himself on the Left, a position that he understands to be resistant to reactionary, right-wing cultural politics. Configuring Hilton Kramer as an intellectual antipode, Foster distances himself from the conservative critic's prohibitive stance of intolerance and antipostmodernist sentiments.[13] Curiously, his critical efforts have been viewed as concomitant with conservative fundamentalism within the canon. Foster has expressed concern in regard to

Cindy Sherman, Untitled #175, 1987, color photograph, 47½ x 71½ in. (120.7 x 181.6 cm) (artwork © Cindy Sherman; photograph provided by Metro Pictures, New York)

overtly political art and art from the so-called periphery, suggesting it is a continuation of an outmoded dialectic: a Hegelian binary fixation that is naive to the postmodern notion that modern power is exercised from multiple positions and localities. This view intimates that identity art has a fundamentally moral base—an instructive, didactic intentionality from which it must turn away. Political art (or identity art or personal-narrative art) is what the theorist calls a "trauma discourse"—a form of narcissism that pits an inherent alterity against an inherent victimizer. This narcissism is described as self-othering as self-absorption—or (in relation to the global diasporic artist) "ethnographic self-fashioning."[14]

In order to fully appreciate the impact of this theoretical discourse, it is necessary to unpack its function relative to analysis of the art object. For example, Foster analyzes the photography of Cindy Sherman using Julia Kristeva's construct of abjection, paying particular attention to those works that engage the obscene, the excretory, and the grotesque. This aspect of Sherman's work is embraced, in that it is a literal manifestation of abjection. Depicted are visceral demonstrations of the fragmentation of the body, as well as filth, offal, decaying flesh, and base physiological functions. However, the feminist underpinnings within Sherman's images are alluded to in terms of the gaze: the subject under the gaze or the subject as picture. The preponderance of identity-based counter-discourses, such as the feminist dimensions of Sherman's critique, is seen as lacking an aesthetically oriented engagement with the art object:

> There are dangers with this siting of truth as well, such as the restriction of our political imagination to two camps, the abjector and the abjected, and the assumption that in order not to be counted among sexists and racists, one must become the phobic object of such subjects.[15]

This presumes that these "trauma discourses" are based on an outmoded binary of abjector and abjected, and that the artwork of the abjected functions as a testimonial against an oppressive power. In this particular case, feminism is seen as an articulation of a victimized state resultant of a patriarchal society.

13. Hal Foster, "Whatever Happened to Postmodernism?" in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 205.
14. Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real*, 180.
15. Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," *October* 78 (Fall 1996): 123.

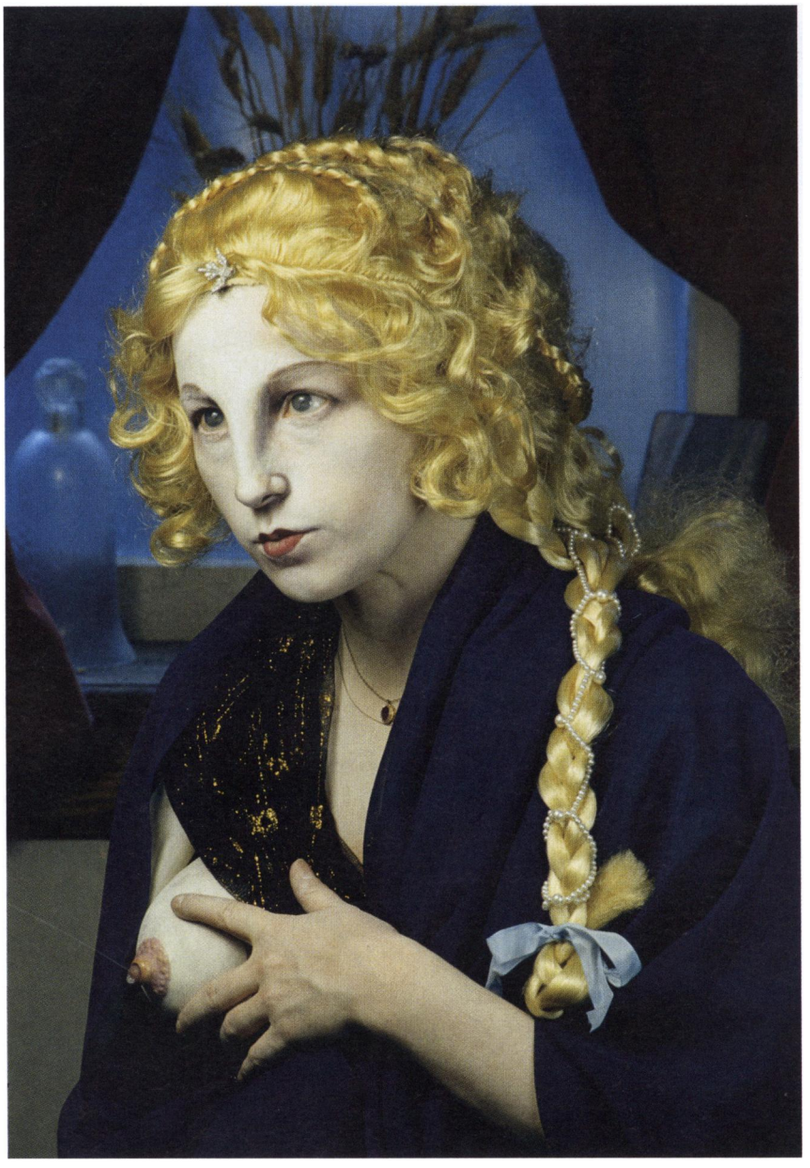
Cindy Sherman, Untitled #92, 1981, color photograph, 24 x 48 in. (61 x 121.9 cm) (artwork © Cindy Sherman; photograph provided by Metro Pictures, New York)

Therefore, it naturally follows that the feminist subtext present in the work of Sherman would be undermined in favor of focusing on formal concerns. More directly, this line of logic suggests that identity-based artists are intentionally locked in their bodies because they idealize and ultimately make spectacles of their identities:

> This idealization of otherness tends to follow a temporal line in which one group is privileged as the new subject of history, only to be displaced by another, a chronology that may collapse not only different differences (social, ethnic, sexual, and so on) but also different positions within each difference.[16]

The above quote conveys a sense of foreboding about the commodification of difference—a strategy that results in "a politics that may *consume* its historical subjects before they become historically effective."[17] Indeed, much trepidation surrounds the fashionable interchangeability of identities for the sake of financial success in the global marketplace. In this theorization, peripheral cultural producers disingenuously proffer a highly visualized "*lingua trauma*" to satisfy the demands of the art market.[18] Viewed under the rubric of this critical effort, it becomes clear how—in the case of Sherman's prodigious output—the political intentions of such art could be regarded as injurious if the work essentializes gender inequities at the expense of other oppressions. Simultaneously, if it fetishizes (and makes a spectacle of) the suffering of a particular constituency

16. Hal Foster, "Whatever Happened to Postmodernism?" 179.
17. Ibid.
18. Foster uses the term in "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," 123.



Cindy Sherman, Untitled #225, 1990, color photograph, 48 x 33 in. (121.9 x 83.8 cm) (artwork © Cindy Sherman; photograph provided by Metro Pictures, New York)

for financial gain, it ultimately will trivialize the reality of a hegemonic set of power relations in contemporary society.

This understanding of identity art holds the potential for misuse in that it flattens the discursive practices and critical methodologies of marginalized artists, despite the desire of many to fight oppressive structures. A contingent of minority artists indicts society's fixation with corporeality as a means of demarcation by utilizing—in many instances—their own bodies. Making use of one's ideologically *raced* or *sexed* body, as a mise-en-scène to interrogate identity-based forms of oppression, is not necessarily complicit with the psychologically powerful manifestations of these tactics exhibited throughout history. Much has been written about the visual seductiveness of a fascist aesthetic and the concerted

effort to make the body a *raced* spectacle. Such wariness of identity art appears to stem from an awareness of the well-documented violence arising from such historical phenomena. This seems politically apropos on the surface; still, in utilizing a model that is unique to particular historical circumstances, there is a danger that—in less-well-intentioned hands—such notions could be misused in the service of a type of dogmatism that would exclude certain artists.

The base materialism of abjection, rooted in Georges Bataille's unfinished writings, has been widely appropriated as a useful construction for discussing materiality in mainstream art discourses. Texts such as Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss's *Formless*—an *October* publication—appropriate Bataille's abjection and base materialism as a ground to centralize *form*.[19] Bataille—as well as Kristeva—locates abjection symbolically in the body. But to discuss the body is to discuss identity, so texts such as *Formless* truncate Bataille's fixation with scatology and bodily excess into a theorization that entertains art primarily in terms of its objectness. In fact, Kristeva's writings on abjection in *Powers of Horror* have proven useful in discussions of various forms of identity such as race, gender, and sexuality.[20] Abjection, according to Kristeva, operates on a base, primordial level and serves to highlight epistemological oppositions. Bodily waste, dung, sewage, and muck are utilized symbolically as that Other we cast out or expel: that in opposition to which we construct our identities.

Judith Butler, in her seminal work *Bodies That Matter*, has appropriated Kristeva to interrogate the ideology of homophobia on the level of the unconscious.[21] In Butler's text, the casting out, the disgust and revulsion of abjection, is played out in the either-or, inside-outside opposition of hetero-homo. In other words, it is asserted that heterosexuality, as the normative ideological construct, casts out the *abject* (homosexuality) in an effort to legitimize its own existence. As articulated by Butler, the body is the site of abjection: a body that is symbolically neither subject nor object. This disembodied structure abjects itself, becoming fragmented: a notion that is crucial within the context of binaries such as black-white. Within this rubric, the disembodied form could symbolically represent a type of social body that was once whole, but has undergone the process of abjection; it has become ideologically fractured into dysfunctional twins, abjector and abjected. As a result of this ideological fragmentation, the abjected becomes repulsive, strange, improper, unclean, and repugnant, while the abjector emerges as normative. For both Bataille and Kristeva, abjection operates on the level of the symbolic. Bodily excess, piss, shit, vomit, saliva, and tears function to allegorize repression, shame, and the construction of otherness.

However, in the current materiality discourse, the identity aspect of abjection is de-emphasized, in favor of a "universal" discussion of formalism:

> If there is a subject of history for the culture of abjection at all, it is not the Worker, the Woman, or the Person of Color, but the Corpse. This is a politics of difference pushed beyond indifference, a politics pushed to nihility.[22]

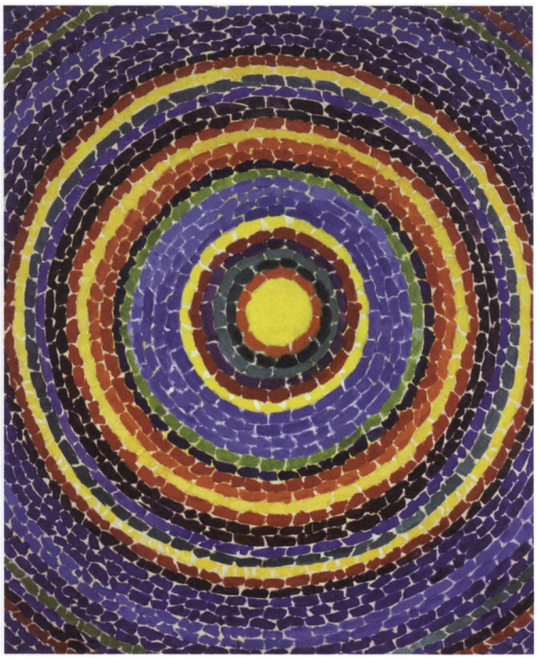
Sherman's work, for example, is elevated above the realm of trauma by concentrating on the objectness of her subject matter. Clearly, there is an undercurrent of identity politics and allegorized repression present in this artist's works; one could easily question the validity of any reading of Sherman that strictly barred a feminist interpretation.

19. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).
20. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay of Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
21. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
22. Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," 123.

Norman Lewis, *Twilight Sounds,* 1947, oil on masonite, 23¾ x 28½ (60 x 71.4 cm) collection of Billy E. Hodges (artwork © Estate of Norman Lewis; photograph provided by Bill Hodges Gallery, New York)

The tendency of key figures within *October*'s discourse toward a universalized interpretation of materiality—and their mobilization of that theorization—has contributed to a seminal discussion around formalist qualities of the art object. Still, within the framework of our larger discussion, we question the formation of a binary relationship between formal concerns and the politics of identity. Both theoretical engagements are essential to any understanding of artistic praxis. Further, one must ask whether beneath the surface of a discourse on aesthetic formlessness lies a historically rooted validation of a particular identity that is unproblematized. Despite the historical construction of formalism as an identity-free and universalizing space, minority artists engaged in abstraction have struggled for canonical acceptance within this genre. From Norman Lewis and Alma Thomas to Julie Mehretu and Louis Cameron, formalism does not enable African Diasporic artists to escape the compulsory "group belongingness" that Clement Greenberg vehemently theorized against in his advocacy of formalism. As a result, many identity-based artistic efforts (and the theoretical discussions they engage) are often indifferent to object-based concerns, or are intentionally anti-aesthetic as a strategy for countering hegemonic structures. Conversely, the objects produced often function as vehicles for a particular political agenda. Without an engagement with the aesthetic, such works preclude the possibility of formulating an additional dimension of meaning and expression through their objecthood. In either case, the very neglect or suppression of one aspect in favor of another constitutes a form of abjection in Kristeva's sense, resulting in a hierarchal fragmentation of discourse.

The foregoing analysis addresses the ideological interpretation of abject artifacts, but what of the so-called abject trauma narrator himself? Since the mid-1990s, there have been highly influential critical efforts to frame minority visual



Alma Thomas, *Splash Down Apollo 13*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 61⅛ x 52 in. (157.2 x 132 cm), private collection (artwork © Estate of Alma Thomas; photograph provided by Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, NY)

Alma Thomas, *Flowers in Spring*, 1971, acrylic on canvas, 22 x 36 in. (55.9 x 91.4 cm) (artwork © Estate of Alma Thomas; photograph provided by Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, NY)

artists as ethnographers. Built upon the artist's configuration of his or her own identification as an ethnographer of his or her own culture, the most significant of these theorizations draw parallels between the political power of alterity established by the worker (as Other) versus the bourgeoisie, and the peripheral artist versus the art-historical canon.[23] For both, the *political* transformation is located in an *aesthetic* transformation. In addition, both the locus of change and the empowerment for that change are understood as residing within the status of otherness. Alterity provides both the ideological righteousness from which the artist may garner power and the subject position from which to act. In this construction, the artist "other" is believed to have unique access to truth, to the real, and to the unconscious.

While this self-imposed "othering" has advantages, some caution that it also treads too close to the potential for "self-absorption." That is, one may become forever eddied out into a continual reiteration of the traumas of that identity:

> For then as now self-othering can flip into self-absorption, in which the project of an "ethnographic self-fashioning" becomes the practice of a narcissistic self-refurbishing. To be sure, reflexivity can disturb automatic assumptions about subject-positions, but it can also promote a masquerade of this disturbance: a vogue for traumatic confessional in theory that is sometimes sensibility criticism come again, or a vogue for pseudo-ethnographic reports in art that are sometimes disguised travelogues from the world art market. Who in the academy or the art world has not witnessed these testimonies of the new empathetic intellectual or these *flâneries* of the new nomadic artist?[24]

Significantly, the use of terms like "ethnographer" and "other" locate the discussion of what is effectively identity art—the art of artists of color, feminists,

23. See Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer."
24. Ibid., 180.

Julie Mehretu, *Excerpt (Suprematist Evasion)*, 2003, ink and acrylic on canvas, 32 x 54 in. (81.3 x 137.2 cm), collection of Jeanne Greenberg (artwork © Julie Mehretu)

Louis Cameron, *Starburst 6* (detail), 2004–05, candy wrappers on paper, white frame 13¾ x 11¼ in. (34.9 x 28.6 cm) (artwork © Louis Cameron; photograph provided by I-20 Gallery, New York)

gays, and others—within terms and constructs that are of the anthropological order. Traditional ethnography involved utilizing an established set of norms to study a given test group, with the test results described in terms of their proximity to the control group. Of course, a hierarchy was established in which Western civilization predictably occupied the highest position.

Artists and institutions who engage in this construct are charged with effectively "having it both ways," that is, virtually ensuring the maintenance of social stature, while speaking from a moral high ground that cannot be undermined.[25] Meanwhile, the artist-ethnographers are said to achieve their success at the expense of the communities that they represent, and in the process reinscribe the hierarchical abjector-abjected relationship between mainstream and subaltern. In effect, their critique is empty, and ultimately they function as no more than ethnographic "probes" who pander to the interests of corporations and public relations: "In these cases the institution may shadow the work that it otherwise highlights: it becomes the spectacle, it collects the cultural capital, and the director-curator becomes the star."[26]

By locating the postmodern identity artist as engaged in anthropology rather than responding to a historical continuum of artistic practice, the art-historical discourse heaps the sins of anthropology upon the practice of artists who are not considered to occupy the normative position within traditional art history. This complex argument melds the self-idealizing, alienating idea of the other with the narcissism of the ethnographer who places himself at the normative center. As the authority of the ethnographer is inherently undermined by a past conceit that places Western culture at the center, this construct is reversed, insisting that identity artists engage in the same tactics against their own communities.

> As the artist stands *in* the identity of a sited community, he or she may be asked to stand *for* this identity, to represent it institutionally. In this case the artist is primitivized, indeed anthropologized, in turn: here is your community, the institution says in effect, embodied in your artist, now on display.[27]

The mischaracterization of these artists as native reporters is perhaps the most important, even though identity artists actually engage a broad range of strategies in their work. One must also consider the role of the art market in creating a demand for work that is ethnographic. Canonical arguments should not overlook the destabilizing of *all* subject-positions. When minority scholars and artists speak, they cannot inherently occupy a fictive, *normative* subject position. Therefore, subjectivity (or identity) becomes an issue from which intellectual legitimacy and universality can be assessed, valued, or devalued. This presents profound canonical barriers for minority artists like Kara Walker or William Pope.L., whose intellectually rich works become stigmatized by the perceived violation of the communities they represent. In fact, their theoretical underpinnings—for example, the link between Walker's cut-outs and Bataille's abjection—are always trumped by their perpetually "othered" bodies. On one level this preconception exists because society initially views the woman or the person of color as a raced or a sexed body. On a more significant level, it is absolutely essential to critically acknowledge the subject position from which one speaks.

25. Ibid., 196.
26. Ibid., 198.
27. Ibid.

It is important for scholars not to devalue or fail to consider the importance of this type of postmodernist self-criticality. The necessity stems from an unproblematized use of the term "Otherness," one that takes for granted the common overuse of the word and misrepresents identity discourses as well.

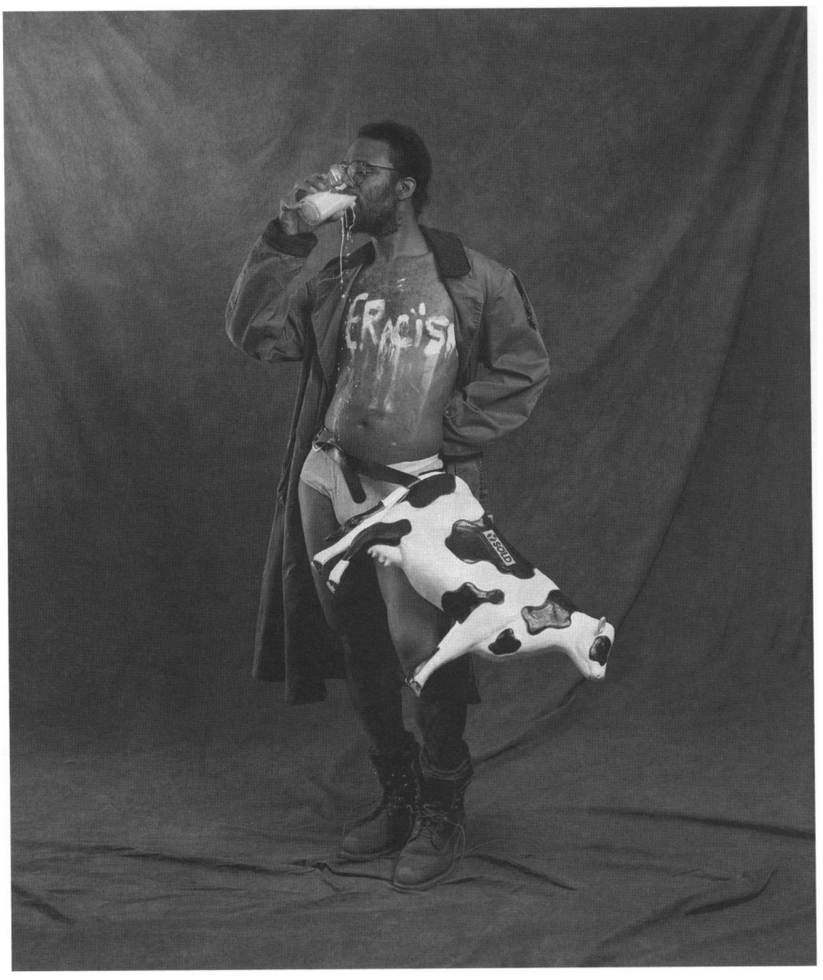
The Other is not a construct that is, in fact, specifically related to race. Conversely, in Kristeva's sense it relates to a part of the self that is abjected and becomes coded as the separate. In Lacanian terminology, it occupies the space of that which is so foreign that it cannot be assimilated into the self (the big Other). However, this is not a construction of the Other that is often engaged. Hence, the result is the abjection of a dimension of the discourse of art history—closing it off from that which appears strange and profoundly foreign to the traditional consensus of what art history is. Scholars who exist in the mythical position of being part of the so-called Eurocentric mainstream (within this type of debate) reenact their own otherness, in the sense that the black, the gay, the feminist, and the person with AIDS have differences so profound that they cannot be assimilated into this discourse.

Linking the conception of anthropology as fundamentally rooted in time and temporal relations, identity art is characterized as synchronic or located within comparisons between two entities in a horizontal descriptive and reflexive fashion.[28] This position stands apart from the diachronic tradition of art history that progresses in time along a continuum of effects and countereffects. It effectively configures identity art as not factoring into the historical continuum of mainstream art history.

The ethnographer paradigm can only find currency in a consensus that identifies minority artists as subjects who are inherently acted upon by capitalism—and who therefore fundamentally lack agency. Under the current model, the unproblematized linkage of alterity and capitalism within art-historical discourse constitutes an act of disenfranchisement—despite its good intentions. In this construct, minority artists are viewed as pawns of a capitalistic and economically rapacious art market that exploits them. Under the rubric of art history, the relationship between the art object as a conductor of aura and the individual agency (or autonomous genius) of the artist is key. Aura is therefore about agency, but also about who is deemed fit to wield aura. Stripped of agency, the cultural production of the minority artist is little more than a fetish object.

Examining these constructs of "ethnographic self-fashioning" and "racial insiderism" through the contested space of contemporary curatorial praxis is illuminating, especially when utilizing an example grounded in the iconic strategies of identity-based artists. The 1993 Whitney Biennial (cocurated by Elizabeth Sussman, Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt, and Lisa Phillips) was the first of its kind to dedicate its full institutional attention to the issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Predictably, the Biennial met a firestorm of negative criticism. In response to the critical discourse evoked by it, the editors of *October* generated a round-table discussion devoted to the politics of the signifier. Framed as a forum in which to "explore some of the problems that appear to confront art, theory, and politics with a special urgency in this country," the pilot round-table discussion was formulated around the Whitney Biennial as emblematic of a larger theoretical shift.[29] It was the first in a series of dialogues, and it included a discussion of Kristeva's concept of abjection.

28. Ibid., 177.
29. Hal Foster et al., "The Politics of the Signifier," *October* 66 (Fall 1993): 3.



William Pope.L, *eRacism*, 2003, performance (artwork © William Pope.L; photograph provided by Projectile, New York)

Among the critiques of the Biennial was the notion that the artists displayed a disregard for (or an ignorance of) the dominant and existing critical and historical dialogues; this view suggested that the work exhibited operated *outside* the accepted critical and historical parameters. This a-historical quality was articulated as resultant of the inclusion of intellectual debates viewed as extraneous to the materiality of art, discourses such as queer theory, postcolonial studies, and critical race theory. This was apparent in the dialogue, specifically in that the curatorial methodology and its critical language were never engaged. Thus, based on the information presented, a reader who had not seen the exhibition would be unable to get a sense of its context,.

Rosalind E. Krauss, among others, remarked on the ahistorical quality perceived in the artists' works, commenting that she didn't "know that that historical dimension, which is to say, historiographic consciousness, is really an issue for these artists."[30] The art historian indicated that there was a reading room at the exhibition with critical texts, not necessarily strictly art-historical texts, but nevertheless presented by the curators as seminal to an informed understanding of the exhibition. During the round table, Krauss, in recounting her experience

30. Ibid., 11.

with the exhibition, described the presentation of didactic support materials as "arrogant" and suggested that issues related to blackness are not necessarily theoretically rigorous:

> Do you think it is such difficult material? Is the idea of black rage more difficult than what I described as my experience—not having read any statement but simply looking at the work? Which is more theoretical?[31]

The importance of this dialogue lies in the clear struggle to deal with the new institutional legitimacy that identity has found within the museum space. To be sure, the comments were emblematic of the sentiments of many art viewers who felt bludgeoned and overwhelmed by the political immediacy that emanated from many of the works exhibited. The Biennial represented a paradigm shift; however, it also introduced new methodologies for the contemplation of artistic production that are intently working against the canon. In this instance, the traditional methodologies were not sufficient to illuminate the work presented.

In her catalogue essay for the Biennial, "What's White . . . ?", curator Golden explicitly states that these artists are in direct confrontation with the hegemonic tenets of the existing historical apparatus, that they are critiquing a stringent historiography with which they are well acquainted. Further, Golden suggests that they are seeking to create a new methodology, because the existing model is exclusionary:

> Many of the artists in the "1993 Biennial Exhibition" work consciously to deconstruct and de-center the politically constructed site of whiteness and its relation to the ever-changing definition of Americanness. The strategies they use to enter this discourse differ greatly. The body provides an immediate site for discussions of cultural, gender, class, and sexual specificity. It allows traditional practice to be *infected* with transgressive ideas.[32]

Key is Golden's use of the term *infected*, which suggests an acknowledgment or awareness that this critical intervention (as an abject presence) will be viewed as a type of pollution, as a virus that needs to be excised from the canonical discourse.

To suggest that these artists exist outside the structure of dominant scholarship is problematic, because the artists are in fact products of the same institutions from which the canon issues. The majority of the artists presented in the Biennial were educated in the finest American institutions; they were trained in the aesthetic, philosophical, theoretical, and art-historical discourses respected by those institutions. These professional artists are *not* outside entities, but elements existing within the Western canon.

The troubling misrecognition of these artists is rooted in an inside-outside, or binary-based construction of the relationship between identity-based art (minority, noncanonical) and mainstream (normative, canonical) production. Specifically, this construction can be located in the notion that there exists a "social art" and a "social art history" that operate externally to traditional output, which is indifferent to such concerns. Using the markers "social" or "activist" to describe these intellectual and artistic efforts is misleading, in that they place minority engagements in an inherently peripheral position. Simultaneously, it suggests that the politics of identity is somehow not practiced from

31. Rosalind Krauss, in "The Politics of the Signifier," 7.
32. Thelma Golden, "What's White . . . ?" in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 27–28, emphasis added.

Kara Walker, *Cut*, 1998, cut paper and adhesive on wall, 7 ft. 4 in. x 4 ft. 6 in. (223.5 x 137.2 cm) (artwork © Kara Walker; photograph provided by Sikkema Jenkins & Co.)

within the mainstream. As a counterpoint, we assert that there is no such thing as one art-historical or critical methodology that is engaged in identity politics and another that is not. There are only those social identities that are seeking recognition, and those that speak from a fictive normative position. The critique of revisionist efforts from the mainstream is essentially an effort to preserve one's identity politics (the histories and power relations they construct) from the political efforts of the Other.

Both conservative and neoconservative leftist art discourses place the contemporary minority producer in a precarious position. Stuck between capitalism and ethnography, the identity artist is coded as ahistorical and thus irrelevant to both the formal progression and the intellectual evolution of the art object. Despite this trend, the identity artist—as the "commodity fetish/ethnographer/author/capitalist"—continues to thrive in the face of enduring hostilities. Institutionalized multiculturalism and Western desire have always produced and demanded a primitivist form of identity-based art. In recent years, however, minority artists have begun to capitalize on the exotic and stereotypical representations that they once resisted virulently. This development has stretched the limits of the canon. And while it has resulted in theoretical divisiveness thus far, the very life of a discipline may depend on the embrace of an unflinching self-criticality.

The separation of the art-historical from the ahistorical is essentially the fracturing of a preexisting grouping into smaller subcultures that are demarcated along the lines of race, sex, and gender politics. In acknowledging the link between canon formation and the existing sociopolitical order, revisionism becomes crucial to the institutional vitality of art history and visual-culture studies. Revisionist scholars tend to view canon formation as an exclusionary process that prohibits minorities from gaining access to power. In this regard, revisionist historiography is both recuperative and pluralist. However, problems emerge when socially defined minorities become inherently synonymous with the *political*. Put another way, activist and oppositional efforts run the danger of localizing the political and wedding it to peripheral subjectivities. As evidenced by current debates within the visual arts, there is a problem when the self-affirming production of minority visual artists becomes a mere articulation of historical trauma and social ills. In this regard, self-affirmation—as an oppositional gesture—becomes too closely linked with deprivation. If institutional art discourse is to avoid obsolescence, it must resolve its relationship with the commodity object and its restrictive stance toward the *canonical* presence of the Other.

Soraya Murray, a doctoral candidate in art history at Cornell University, specializes in new-media art and its relationship to canonical art history, theory and criticism, and globalization. Murray's writings have been published in *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, *Flash Art*, and *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*.

Derek Conrad Murray completed a PhD in art history at Cornell University and is currently a postdoctoral fellow and visiting lecturer in the Department of History of Art at the University of California, Berkeley (2005–07).