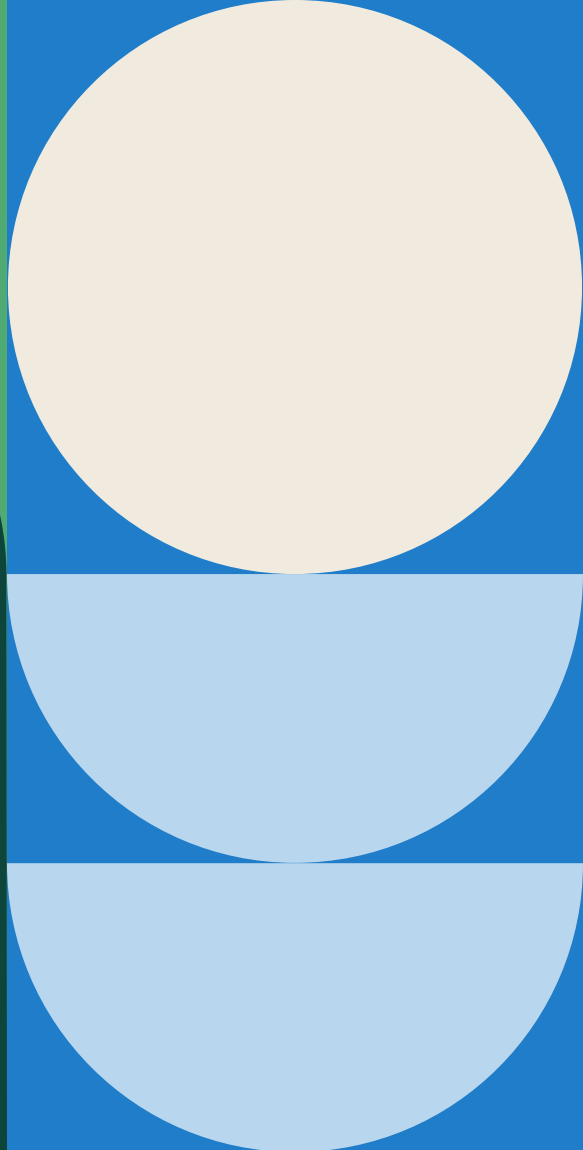
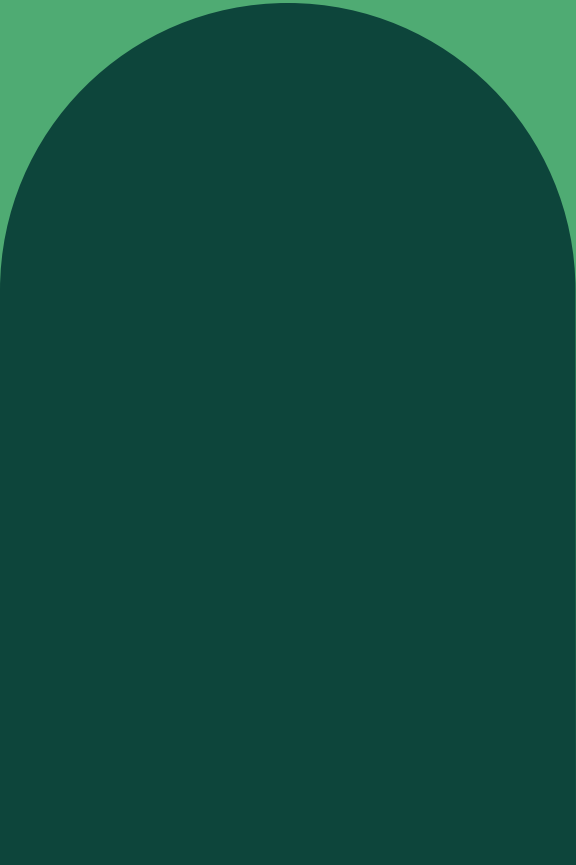


FEMINIST
ART COALITION



NOTES ON FEMINISMS

3

PEGGY
PHELAN

PEGGY PHELAN

Bodies to Come

Feminism today often feels bipolar. Focusing only on recent actions and reactions in the United States, it seems clear that, on the one hand, activist feminist movements such as MeToo and Time's Up have helped spark a revolution in awareness about sexual harassment, sexual assault, and the larger forces of misogyny that have been long central to the consolidation of white patriarchal power. During Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court confirmation hearings, Christine Blasey Ford's testimony about his alleged sexual assault of her in high school did not cancel his confirmation, but her testimony, broadcast live and in full, helped ignite more probing analyses of the ways in which (mainly white) men regulate and fail to regulate themselves with women in everyday life. Coming after Hillary Rodham Clinton's (apparent) loss to Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election and Chanel Miller's important publication of her "victim impact statement" in the Brock Turner rape trial, Blasey Ford's testimony tapped dormant rage about the ways in which (mainly white) men often feel entitled to the bodies of women. While some of this entitlement has been scrutinized in recent years, its connection to the aggressive rollback of women's reproductive rights has received little attention. The same logic that leads men to think they can impose their sexual desires on women leads them to decide when and how women can reproduce. Finally, it should not be forgotten that even while MeToo and Time's Up and other feminist activist groups have been effective in stopping some appalling behavior, the United States nonetheless elected a president who boasted to Billy Bush, on tape, that he "can do anything" he'd like with women's bodies:

Trump: I better use some Tic Tacs just in case I start kissing her. You know, I'm automatically attracted to beautiful—I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything.

Bush: Whatever you want.

Trump: Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything.¹

Statements such as these, as well as the testimony of so many women who have been prompted by the cultural opening forged by MeToo, make plain that we need to unravel more precisely the complex relationship between bodies, identities, and power. While it is great to see the ways in which so many people and institutions, particularly the mainstream media, have taken up the important work of calling attention to the urgency of the need to clarify what this central, albeit knotty, relationship to social life actually is, it has been dismaying to see how little of the insights and breakthroughs of feminist art have been taken up in the thicket of today's debates. Too often, commentators today seem so ill-equipped and uninformed about the fundamental questions at play in these revelations that some are already pushing back and cautioning about the dangers of "cancel culture." This caution never acknowledges the scores of women's lives canceled, distorted, and otherwise hollowed out by the near-total neglect and disinterest in their stories of abuse, assault, or rape. While it may be true that there have been some overzealous denunciations of some men, the very fury and speed of these repudiations signal the depth of the pent-up rage that attends criminal neglect and cultural repression. While I agree that pinning the future of feminism on "j'accuse" declarations seems unwise and unsustainable, the fierce refusal to accept business as usual is a liberating and powerful moment in feminism's long history.



At the core of the revelations sparked by MeToo is a fundamental question about who has access to whose body. And this question can only be posed once the relationship between body, identity, and power can be unraveled. Here, feminist body art has made enormous contributions to our understanding. Beginning with the recognition that bodies create visual images, feminist artists have explored how to have agency over those images, how to circulate them, alter them, and define when and how to circulate them. As images, bodies have a complex purchase on visual technologies, especially the camera, and on psyches, especially as we navigate our own always shifting images.

Between July 15 and August 21, 1972, the artist Eleanor Antin created *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*. Operating at the intersection of sculpture, photography, and body art, Antin's piece played on the traditional notion of sculpture as a stripping away of the inessential aspects of the material to uncover the true shape of the stone. This traditional understanding of sculpture presupposes a separation between the artist and the material he or she sculpts. But Antin collapsed that distance and laid claim to her own flesh as the material to be sculpted. Embarking

¹ "Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments about Women," *New York Times*, October 8, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>, accessed October 8, 2019.

on a five-week crash diet, Antin posed in front of the camera in the same four stances—forward, backward, and in right and left profile—each day she dieted. Exhibited as a series of 148 black-and-white photographs arranged chronologically documenting the artist's loss of about twelve pounds over five weeks, the visual record of *Carving* accumulates while the artist's own corporeal form (its weight and mass) diminishes. Unlike the carving caused by a plastic-surgeon's knife, for example, the pain and bruise of Antin's *Carving* comes from this reverse logic: the photographs gain in number (and art world value) as the artist's body shrinks.

A wry critique of the relationship between white femininity and thinness, *Carving* also suggests the relentlessness of the scopic regime. The repetition of the four poses over thirty-seven days reminds us that young white women live in a state of continual surveillance and often gain or lose power in relation to their function as an object to be seen. (Physical deviations from the standard aesthetic of white femininity—thin, blonde, nubile—devalued women who could not or chose not to strive for physical adherence to this stereotype of beauty.) Antin's *Carving* dramatizes the effort required to conform to the mandate to be thin. While the piece can be seen as Antin's acquiescence to white heterosexuality, the painstaking documentation of her effort to lose ten pounds also refuses to ignore what it costs women. Arranged vertically, the photographs are a kind of filmic ledger, a mode of book-keeping that asks about the value of the labor spent on this look-keeping.

In 2010–11, the trans artist Cassils returned to Antin's *Carving* and replicated its structure of four daily photographs as documents in a process of transformation. Whereas Antin was interested in exposing the pressure to cultivate a thin and shapely feminine body, Cassils's *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* documented their effort to gain twenty-three pounds of muscle over twenty-eight weeks. While Antin's crash diet was intended to slim her body down, to "carve" away "excess" flesh, Cassils wanted to bulk up. Instead of dieting, Cassils ate the caloric intake recommended for a large man each day; they lifted weights for five hours a day; and going further still, they also took steroids. Cassils later explained: "My decision to take (illegal) steroids was to enact an alternative tampering with the endocrine system, which when combined with intense physical training and massive caloric intake facilitated transformation into a muscle bound 'cut' physique without the use of testosterone." While initially thinking that the piece would be an empowering rehearsal for a new masculine identity, it instead revealed something much less pleasant. Cassils later reflected: "It was alarming for me [. . .] to all of a sudden grow this new flesh, which also grew these new nerve endings. I felt disoriented by it—I needed to learn to use this new body so quickly."²

² See Artsy Editors, "Bodybuilder Artist Heather Cassils Channels Lynda Benglis and Eleanor Antin," *Artsy.net*, October 14, 2013, <https://www.artsy.net/article/editorial-bodybuilder-artist-heather-cassils-channels-lynda-benglis>, accessed September 30, 2019.

Cassils's *Cuts* makes clear that bodies may be remade, reoriented, re-gendered, but that these transformations also provoke other refashionings. The image of the body may or may not be aligned with the psychic or biochemical composition of the body. To "cut" into these aspects of embodiment is to do rather more than change the surface image of the body. Antin's and Cassils's sculptures underscore the connection between the mutability of the physical body—with or without steroids it constantly moves, expanding and shrinking in an ongoing dance of vitality and retreat—and the instability of the relationship between our morphing bodies and our own identities. The scopic regime works to suture an all-too-illusory coherence between how one looks and who one is. Were this a secure proprietary relationship, we would not need such elaborate ways of ensuring it.



As early as 1989, Kimberlie Crenshaw called for the creation of a critical method that kept the intersectionality of identity at the center of our analyses of representation, but all too often race continues to be something of an add-on to white feminism.³ The black artist Simone Leigh, for example, has recently alleged that white critics lack the knowledge to recognize the range of references in her work.⁴ Leigh's potent 2019 exhibition *Loophole of Retreat* at the Guggenheim borrows its title from a chapter in Harriet Jacobs's remarkable account of her life, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (originally serialized beginning in 1861). Jacobs's memoir recounts her experience as a slave who was raped, repeatedly, by her owner, who witnessed seven of her eleven children being sold into slavery, and who spent seven years hiding in her grandmother's attic (the loophole of retreat) before gaining her freedom. Addressed primarily to white women, Jacobs's account demands that we acknowledge what is usually repressed in historical accounts of slavery—the white slaveowners' assumption that they were entitled to "grab 'em by the pussy." Jacobs's rapist, Dr. James Norcom, began harassing her when she was twelve and continually impregnated her. Jacobs's domestic space then traverses the paradox of being enslaved and bound at Norcom's large plantation and free in the tight coil of her grandmother's small attic.

³ See Crenshaw's original call for intersectionality in relation to antiracist and feminist analyses in Kimberlie Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, issue 1, article 8, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf>, accessed October 2, 2019.

⁴ For a good summary of Leigh's remarks and the wider climate of white critical commentary on art, see Elizabeth Méndez Berry and Chi-hui Yang, "The Dominance of the White Male Critic," *New York Times*, July 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/05/opinion/we-need-more-critics-of-color.html>, accessed October 3, 2019.

Leigh's sculptures capture both the weight of Jacobs's pain and the fierceness of her quest for freedom. Several of Leigh's sculptures, especially those cast in bronze, deny the assumption of reciprocity, both visual and political, often built into art-looking. Directly declaring that she makes her art for black women, Leigh's meditation on Jacobs's seven years of confinement before her freedom is at once an intimate act of witnessing and a rejection of a too easy comprehension of "the struggle." Leigh's bronze female figures, often nude, are not given eyes. They deny the white viewer the political myth of equal exchange, often a cover for abuse and assault, and the beholder instead must meditate on steel, stone, bronze, terra-cotta, and raffia. While Antin and Cassils took up their own living flesh as their sculptural material, Leigh offers a kind of densely coiled armor and a "do not trespass" wariness.

Saidiya Hartman's central text in the broadside for Leigh's exhibition, "The Anarchy of Colored Girls Associated in a Riotous Manner," is excerpted from her recent book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*.⁵ Elsewhere in that book, Hartman remarks that "Beauty is not a luxury; rather it is a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure, a radical art of subsistence . . . a transfiguration of the given."⁶ Leigh's sculptures, which often evoke domestic objects such as pitchers, or spoons, transform these everyday objects into revenants, solidly embodied ghosts of pasts still to be recovered.

If Antin's and Cassils's "traditional sculptures" were performances aimed to interfere with the "given to be seen" that has undergirded white femininity, Leigh's weighty iron and stone sculptures testify to the effort to escape the stone and the stories that have braided black women, all too often, to a kind of mute performance of resistance, often mistaken for stoicism. In Hartman's view, Leigh's primary sculptural achievement is the solidity of her quest for freedom. For Hartman, this quest moves Leigh's work into a conversation with black women such as Harriet Jacobs and Esther Brown, who have similarly focused their lives on this project. Tellingly, this historical account does not place Leigh in dialogue with, say, Constantin Brancusi or Louise Bourgeois, associations that might spring to the minds of those trained in Western canonical art history. Hartman's commentary, and the lives of black women she brings to bear on Leigh's, calls for a way of thinking that mimics the loop first named by Jacobs, and unties rather than yokes the history of black women's creative expression as a performance toward freedom. Together, Hartman and Leigh, Jacobs and Brown create a coalescing material that bonds and oozes amid the mute, missing, sacrificed, aborted, and distorted lives we cannot

⁵ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).

⁶ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 33.

recover (in the sense of historiography as a healing art) until we can reimagine them. Leigh's sculptures are "traditional" in the sense that they carry the force of African ritual objects and seek to do the arduous work of healing. They are poised, however, to sanctify rites, races, sexes, identities, and bodies to come.

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Feminist Art Coalition (FAC) is a platform for art projects informed by feminisms. FAC fosters collaborations between arts institutions that aim to make public their commitment to social justice and structural change. It seeks to generate cultural awareness of feminist thought, experience, and action.

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