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Fetishism and Visual Seduction in Mary Kelly's *Interim*

EMILY APTER

"How is a radical, critical and pleasurable positioning of the woman as spectator to be accomplished?"[1] This question, posed by Mary Kelly in an essay in 1984 and echoed by Griselda Pollock in her *Vision and Difference* of 1988, remains as vexing as ever in the 1990s. As before, the theorization of female spectatorship hinges on the old binaries: male subject, female object; masculine observer, feminine representation; active, sadistic look versus passive, masochistic stare; and so on. Seeking to circumvent these monotonous dyads, Pollock and others have looked for a reconfigured gaze in the work of paintings by and of women. Commenting on Mary Cassatt's *Woman Bathing* of 1891, Pollock wrote:

> The maid's simple washing stand allows a space in which women outside the bourgeoisie can be represented both intimately and as working women without forcing them into the sexualized category of the fallen woman. The body of woman can be pictured as classed but not subject to sexual commodification.[2]

Implicit in Pollock's sympathetic reading of Cassatt is the premise that the body of a woman that *has* been subject to sexual commodification is a body necessarily mediated by a male gaze. The fetishized, feminine Imago, conforming to a commercialized ideal of what seduces the eye, is thus barred to the female spectator. In this picture, there are no female fetishists.

Of course there are many reasons why feminist theorists have been inclined to distrust the seductive power of the image, particularly when that image historically attracts and pleasures the gaze by catering to a masculine viewer. The scopophilic look that fetishizes the female body through cutting, decortication, and hyperfocalization (all in an effort to thwart castration anxiety by

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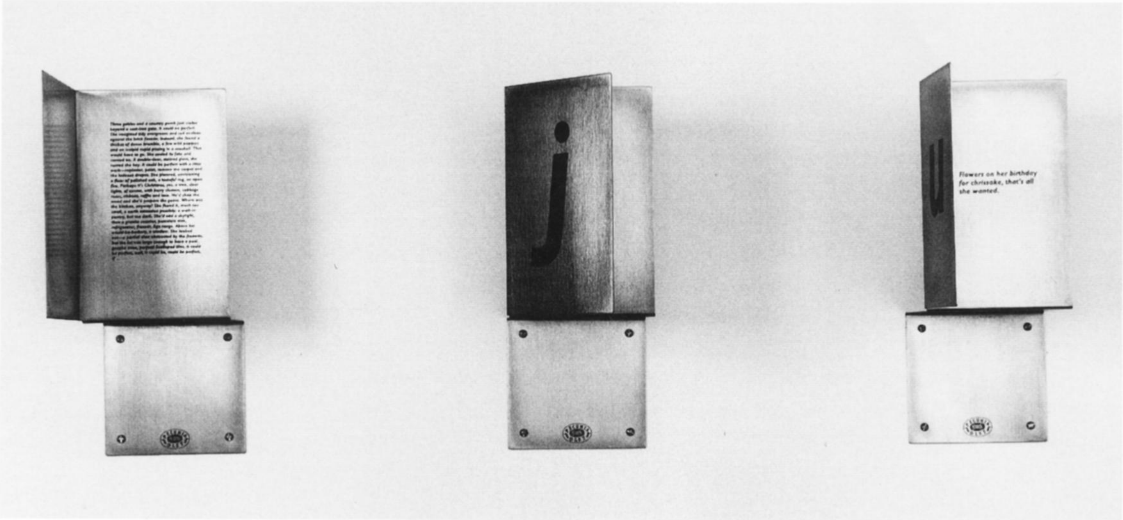
[1] Mary Kelly, "Desiring Images/Imaging Desire," *Wedge* 6 (1984), p. 9.

[2] Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 88–89.



Mary Kelly. Interim—Pecunia. *1989.*

placing in view a displaceable prosthesis intended to stand in for the missing female phallus) inevitably impersonalizes its object, rendering subjectivity expendable. Feminism has sought to constitute a theoretical ontology of the feminine subject just as it has sought to challenge the poststructuralist "death of the subject."

More recently, however, psychoanalytic feminism has pursued a slightly different course: rather than use the notion of fetishism to rehash the evidence of visual exploitation of women by men, it has sought to revise the androcentric bias within the perversions themselves. Fetishism, with its implicit valorization of phallic potency, has, in this sense, been altered from within, but the politics of gendered looking, scopic seduction, and commodity fetishism remain far from being resolved.

Mary Kelly figures strongly among the critics (Naomi Schor, Elizabeth Grosz, Teresa de Lauretis) who have challenged the status of the male fetishist gaze by attempting to posit a female fetishism where none existed within classical psychoanalysis. Often their more experimental formulations have led away from simplistic equations between fetishism and visual fixation and toward more nuanced understandings of what fetishism might come to mean in art and feminist theory. Certainly art, in its depiction of the female body, comes off historically as an essentially fetishistic enterprise, for it freezes into a prosthetic sham the so-called "natural" body of its subjects (particularly when this subject is female and nude). Against this, and explicitly anti-fetishistic in its rejection of painterly artifice, Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1976)—a museal gathering of intimate artifacts—nonetheless supplies a female fetishism that challenges Freudian psychoanalysis in its critical rereading of maternal cathexis.[3] Unlike many of her contemporaries who had used fetishism against itself (Ana

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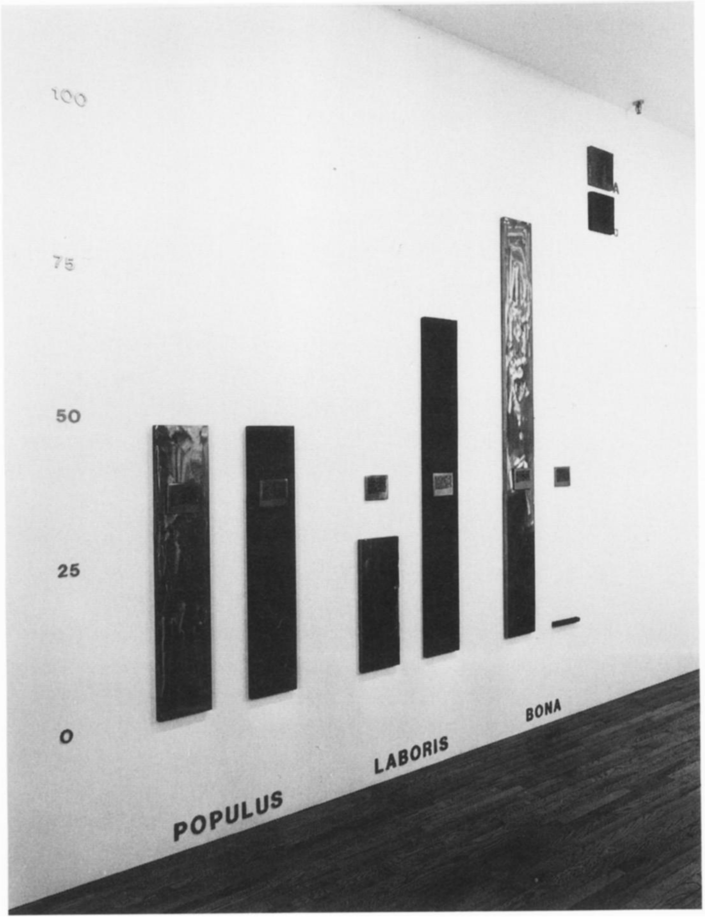
[3] Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983).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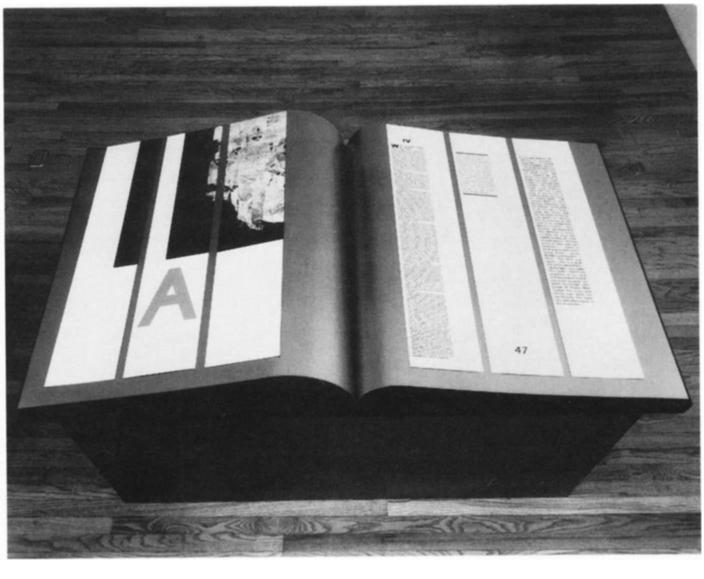
POPULUS
LABORIS
BONA

Mary Kelly. Interim—Potestas. *1989.*



Mary Kelly. Interim—Historia. *1989.*

Godel and Alexis Hunter, for example, deployed images of women's feet in high-heeled shoes to emphasize the dependency of male arousal on the shackling and bondage of, as Jean Fisher put it, "that part of a woman's body furthest removed from the head and therefore the personality"), Kelly's subversive move consisted in undermining and converting patriarchal psychoanalytical dogmas.[4]

In Kelly's later installation entitled *Interim* (1985–1990), female fetishism was returned in the assemblage of monumentalized greeting cards (*Pecunia*), bar charts of statistics on career women (*Potestas*), and plates commemorating historic turning-points in the women's movement (*Historia*). At the same time, the woman as consumer—a continuing motor of the commodity fetishism of late capitalism—was also placed in view. Meal plans, beauty secrets, shopping lists, and materialist fantasies formed a narrative counterpoint to *Corpus*'s striking series of photographed garments. In *Corpus*, sartorial ghosts were captured in Plexiglas boxes, their moody, feminine silhouettes—shoes in bondage, nighties and jackets anxiously tied up in knots—offering a chilling, masochistic beauty. *Corpus*'s riveting icons of femininity without face, of female bodies without breath, had the effect of bringing the allegorical representation of feminine seduction to crisis, to, as Parveen Adams noted, "the brink of visuality."[5] By absenting the lifelike female subject from the subject of femininity (just as she had occluded the photographic image of the child in the maternal reliquary of *Post-Partum Document*), Kelly made all the more visible the reifying regime of scopic masculinism.

Insofar as the "feminine" has been identified in western painting with sartorial objectification, nonheroic or nonepic historical attitude, period costume, ornamental or domestic detailism, and so on, *Corpus*'s apparitional vestments constitute a hermeneutical perplex, for in refusing the female figure they retain that extraordinary power of image historically ascribed to the female body in painting. The lone, dumpy handbag, fixed in its case like an entomological specimen, in no way forfeits its plaintive call to the eye. Commenting on the spellbinding effect of these dressed-up fetishes, Laura Mulvey noted that Kelly "seems to have transcended the seventies paranoia about visual pleasure." This work, she wrote when *Corpus* was first exhibited in Britain in 1986, is "unashamedly beautiful and satisfying to the spectator."[6]

Yet has this "seventies paranoia" been truly eroded? The debates currently surrounding the reception of work by Mary Kelly raise this question directly,

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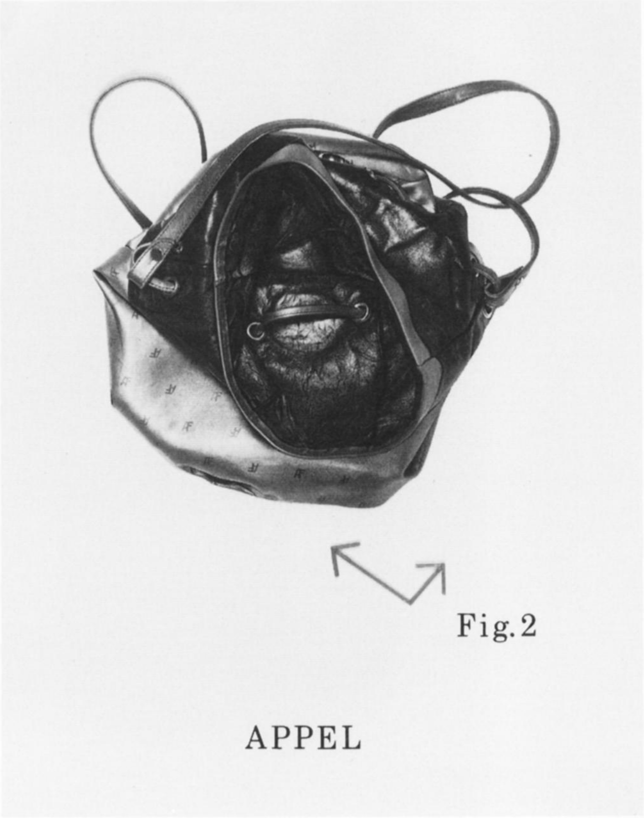
[4] Parveen Adams, "The Art of Analysis: Mary Kelly's *Interim* and the Discourse of the Analyst," in this issue of *October*.

[5] Jean Fisher, "Object of Fetishism," in *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970–1985,* ed. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (London: Pandora Press, Routledge, and Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 323.

[6] Laura Mulvey, "Impending Time: Mary Kelly's *Corpus,*" in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 149.



Mary Kelly. Interim—Corpus (Appel). *1984–85.*

along with other more tangled theoretical issues arising from the relationship between what I am calling feminist antifetishism (a kind of puritanism of the eye translatable as *photophobia,* Karl Abraham's nomenclature for "avoidance of light" or the excessive "love of veiling" in a female patient) and visual seduction.[7] What I want to do is to move this debate away from certain rehearsed assumptions—namely, that visual seduction, in its complicity with male fetishism, necessarily makes for bad feminism—and to consider the problem in terms of the more complex relations between feminist politics and the aesthetics of femininity. I want to argue that there exists an optical sexuality deployed in certain works of art that unmasks masculinist ways of looking while keeping visual seduction alive and well. I want to argue for a recuperation of the seductive image (often flush with the image of female seduction) that escapes the brutalities of a commodifying fetishism, that successfully recirculates feminine glamour and desirability for the female viewer, and that "plays up" to the

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7. Karl Abraham, "Restrictions and Transformations of Scopophilia in Psycho-Neurotics; with Remarks on Analogous Phenomena in Folk-Psychology" (1913), in *Selected Papers of Karl Abraham,* trans. Douglas Bryan and Alix Strachey (London: H. Karnac Ltd., 1979), pp. 169–233.

scopophilic hunger of the gaze without necessarily compromising female subjectivity.[8]

Interim catalyzes these dilemmas by asking the question: can one seduce through an abstracted visual femininity while derealizing the female body in art? Many remain skeptical; indeed, at the crux of feminist antifetishism is the fear of what happens when the female corpus is left out. Reviewing Kelly's show, for example, Mira Schor faulted the work for its misguided response to the "traps of visuality." By criticizing ageism without actually showing aged female bodies, by "refusing to present the viewer with a seductive self-image" yet at the same time sustaining elegance of manufacture in the objects themselves, *Interim,* Schor claims, becomes mired in "inherent contradictions."[9] I think it safe to say, in response, that these contradictions are there for a reason. Kelly does indeed want to avoid any culturally fixated construction of feminine "self-image" (just as she would want to avoid what many feminists ask for, namely a "role model"). The seduction of image is left intact, but the seductiveness of feminine "self-image" (ironized through frozen poses and memorialized clothing) is subversively put into question. Placing "self" and "image" out of sync while keeping femininity and scopophilia in step seems to be one of the more interesting ways in which Kelly destabilizes a social gaze conditioned by essentialist codifications of gender, race, class, and age.[10]

It is in this context that one might situate Mary Kelly's presentation of object *a.* The algorithms, anamorphoses, and elliptical rhetorical conceits by which Lacan himself pictured the "cause of desire" or object small *a* are paradoxically corporealized in *Interim.* In *Potestas* the letters of the Other, big *A* and small *a,* are raised up; they are embossed on the wall above the vertical bars of the career woman's narrative. The latter, alternately qualified as a "lack-in-being" (*manque à être*), or deficit of desire, is, strictly speaking, unrepresentable. By placing small *a* transparently on the wall, Mary Kelly has, in a sense, made an object out of a pure sign. Small *a* "*fait signe,*" or "shows itself," but, of course, in principle it is never supposed to do this quite so visibly. Small *a* usually passes unnoticed, is "misrecognized," or is caught out in the barest flash "at the limit of the image," as Parveen Adams has observed—that is, in a tear, rift, crinkle, *Spaltung,* or bar. "I am in the picture . . . I see myself seeing myself" says the subject. But it is precisely this narcissistic illusion of an ego ideal that Lacanian theory punctures on the screen through the punctiforms or little "no's" of object

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[8] Jane Gaines seems to be making a similar argument in her "Introduction: Fabricating the Female Body," in *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body,* ed. Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 1–27.

[9] Mira Schor, "Troubleshooter," *Artforum* 28 (Summer 1990), pp. 17–18.

[10] That *Interim* succeeds in destabilizing this social gaze for the male viewer is attested to by Norman Bryson, who in his catalog essay for *Interim* characterized as "diffraction" Kelly's refusal of a neat fit between vision and gender. See Norman Bryson, "Interim and Identification," in Mary Kelly, *Interim* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), p. 26.

a. A figure of "radical subjective destitution" according to Slavoj Žižek, small *a* functions as a reminder that the subject will always be subject to primordial demand and doomed to perpetual separation from the object: whether breast, feces, phallus, or ego ideal.[11]

Corpus stages the uncanny "apparition" of this nonpresentified object *a* again and again in the creases of leather bags, in the striations of jackets in bondage, in the oleaginous lipstick traces of missed erotic encounters. Both *Corpus* and *Potestas* deal with the representation of object *a*. But where *Corpus,* in its erasure of the female body and scotomization of the commodified visual signs of desire, represents small *a* true to Lacanian form (that is, on the sly), *Potestas* in some sense breaks the rules by placing it too clearly in view.

Both *Potestas* and *Pecunia* put object *a* into play in a way that allows gender and the masculine pleasure of the image to be put into question. Drawing on an arsenal of psychoanalytic works by women, from Joan Riviere's pivotal 1929 essay "Womanliness as a Masquerade" to Catherine Millot's "The Feminine Superego," Kelly in a sense re-genders the Lacanian model of desire without returning to the body.[12] True to her disavowal of "woman's art" but critically feminist nonetheless, Kelly makes an art that doubles as Lacanian revisionism by unmasking the masquerade of femininity. For Lacan, as Jacqueline Rose has argued, "masquerade is the very definition of 'femininity' precisely because it is constructed with reference to a male sign."[13] *Interim* rigorously records and dissects the genuflecting of feminine subject-positions to the invisible force fields of a male gaze, but the scenarios are injected with a politicizing irony that undercuts implicit phallocentrism. And in the hushed exchange of confidences from woman to woman, desire is diversified: feminine speech acts are eroticized, encouraged to be polymorphously perverse, sprung loose from heterosexualist *doxa.*

Orality and visuality converge and ghost each other throughout *Interim.* Kelly's use of language is visual in itself: her cursive script registers the ghostly tracery of the author much like the shadows falling beneath the empty clothes mime, nostalgically, the contours of a lost East Village fashion plate. She also uses foreign languages mimetically to distance the viewer from immediate verbal meaning. Refusing to translate Charcot's terms for the passional attitudes of hysteria, she activates the memory of early psychoanalysis, grounded as she reminds us in the French visual method of pointing to hystericized body parts. Plaster casts of the *pied tors* and the *pied bot*—indicative malformations of the hysteric's anatomical extremities fashioned by Charcot's assistant Paul Richer—were typically complemented in the 1880s and '90s by scholarly treatises on the "hysterical breast" or the contracted "*pli fessier*" ("buttock fold"). The visual sign and its attendant verbal etiquette functioned, each for the other, as didactic pendants to the scopic regime of scientific method; and the hysteric's body, scrutinized in the textbook or on the amphitheater floor, took the *talion* punishment meted out by the male gaze in retribution for her overactive "masculinity complex."

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[11] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 116.

[12] See Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade" (1929), in *Formations of Fantasy,* ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 35–44, and Catherine Millot, "Le Surmoi féminin," *Ornicar?* 29 (Summer 1984); translated by Ben Brewster as "The Feminine Superego," in *The Women in Question,* ed. Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 294–314.

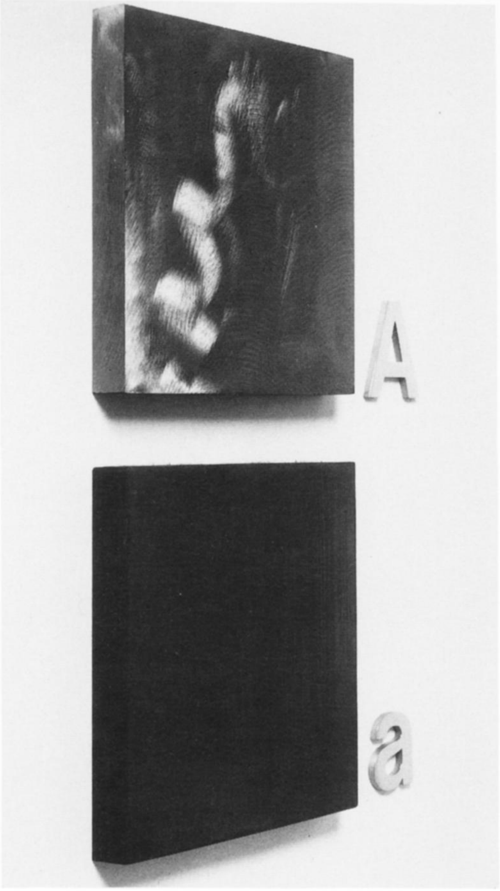
[13] Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso Books, 1986), p. 67.

Menacé, Appel, Supplication, Erotisme, Extase, these frozen signifiers also emerge as so many tropes, figures of speech that act out their lexical origins in Greek. Many tropes derive etymologically from roots designating specific physical attitudes; moments within the chorus, histrionic moves on stage. Insofar as these tropes refer to the gesticulations of female performers, we can read this hysterical talking *Corpus* as a model lexicon, replying to the demand of French feminists such as Luce Irigaray or Monique Wittig for a utopian, foundational, gynocentric language of her own.

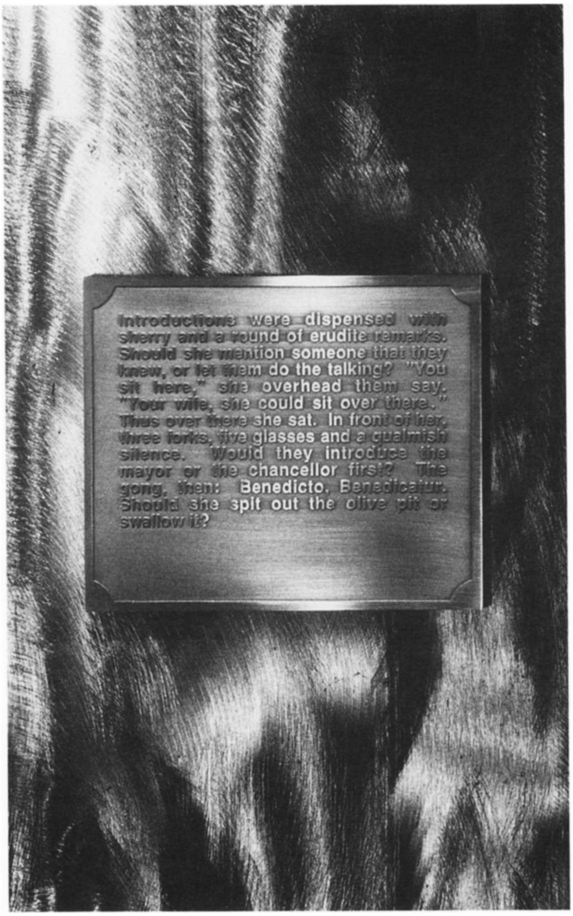
The Latin inscriptions of *Pecunia* and *Potestas*—*Pecunia olet* (money smells) or *Populis, Laboris, Bona* (Population, Labor, Wealth)—also return us to the patriarchal language of Roman law: like institutional facades inscribed with hortatory sententiae or classical maxims, Kelly's gallery walls approximate a frieze of dead paternal letters. Coming from a feminist artist, the effect is counter-monumental, a spoof on the name of the Father, a joke on Moses's tablets.

Finally, Mary Kelly uses the verbal medium to literalize allegories of feminine "interiority" and what Julia Kristeva has termed "women's time." When one of the speakers in *Corpus* says "the image grates," the trope is literalized in the little red grid or grating that surfaces on the shoulder of the leather jacket. As another female voice laments over (what bourgeois society sees as) the unsightliness of pregnancy in middle age with the phrase "It's not becoming to come," the image of woman trying "to be come," that is, "to be" *jouissance* ("awesome, silent, and apparitional" as Parveen Adams says) flashes referentially before our eyes. When we see the word *Soror,* it reads like a homonym of "sorrow" or a rebus in which the signifying "S" of the fragile feminine subject hovers over a figure of undecidability: "or . . . or"—like the French "*ni ni*" of denegated repression and the Kierkegaardian "either/or" of ironical self-doubt. Even the signature *mk* subliminally sounds out the dominant consonants of the word "*m*aso*ch*ism"—that perversion which is not a perversion in women, according to classic psychoanalysis, but a symptom of woman's generically "passive nature."

The visual pun is particularly prevalent in *Potestas,* where it contains, I think, a specific reference to theories of the masquerade. At the top right of the installation Lacan's big *A* and small *a* appear as a key coded to the vertical "bars" in rusted or polished steel below. The polished panels corresponding to



Mary Kelly. Interim—Potestas. *1989.*


Introductions were dispensed with sherry and a round of erudite remarks. Should she mention someone that they knew, or let them do the talking? "You sit here," she overhead them say. "Your wife, she could sit over there." Thus over there she sat. In front of her, three forks, five glasses and a qualmish silence. Would they introduce the mayor or the chancellor first? The gong, then: Benedicto. Benedicatur. Should she spit out the olive pit or swallow it?

Mary Kelly. Interim—Potestas (Populus). *1989.*

big *A* sport brass plaques featuring narratives of women identified with masculine superegos: A female world leader, "a darling of third world democracy" (Benazir? Cory?), contemplates the spectacle of her presidency "thrust upon her." A faculty wife at high table wonders whether she should "spit out the olive pit or swallow it?" Big *A,* blessed with the appanages and insignia of power, seems to "be" the phallus, or at least to pass as a credible facsimile once she is armed with the dildo-like accoutrements of power and money. She resembles Joan Riviere's female masquerader defensively compensating for being phallic by impersonating a masculine ideal of the feminine ("She regards herself as a man who passes for a woman," according to Catherine Millot). Projecting her "femininity" as a camouflage, flirting with her male audience when she speaks at conferences, big *A* lives in fear of retaliation for impersonating a feminine superego, if such a thing were to exist (she apes nothing, but as we all know, "nothing" is "something").

In another plaque coded to *A,* the career woman avows that she is unsure of her license to play the role of the father. She says: "The proof was her receipt, but did she have a Driver's License?" Here, even the artist's poetic license is not enough; the female speaker can't seem to make good on the paternalist loan, even though she has repaid in full. And when she "presses her lips into a narrow line," this narrow line, visually reiterated in the brass bar below, doubles as a rebus of the "barred" feminine superego. The same narratrice also makes a revealing slip of the tongue. As she describes how she "looked at them as if they were . . . she was . . . her father had . . . her friends or someone would . . . tell them who was who," we hear not only the profoundly subjunctive tense of the female subject-position, but also the classically repressed utterance of the female masquerader: "She was . . . her father . . ."

Here big *A*'s story interlocks with that of small *a*. The texts on the rust-colored panels suggest that *a* has a regressive tendency to return to an Imago of the pre-Oedipal mother. As Catherine Millot has argued:

> Identification with the father has as a corollary the fact that the paternal Other is reduced, precisely by that identification, to the status of a little other, while the mother is restored to the place of the big Other. Henceforth, the girl, identified with her father, will replay with her partners and with her own real mother, the history of her pre-Oedipal relations.[14]

We can see *a* enacting this desire to regress in "Pecunia," where, as Mary Kelly has said, the woman's "archaizing of the drives," her coprophilic attraction to objects that smell, render her insensitive to the attractions of odorless capital.

In *Potestas* small *a*'s struggle against maternal identification through "virile display" similarly breaks down. An academic lecturer attempts to strap on a phallic image—"How do you get your curriculum vitae, vitalis, vitabilis to look that long?" The woman at a board meeting, failing to insist when her male colleagues dismiss her attempt to enforce affirmative action, "remembers Guatemalan money: on the bills, the women were bare-breasted." It is as if the stain of mother's milk has left its compromising blot on the "clean" medium of exchange represented by the banknote. In this image of the culturally displaced bare breast, we have a particularly apparent instance of Kelly's revisionist approach to Lacanianism: the gender-neutral figuration of object *a*—that "stand-in" for desire's value—is soldered to a critique of female disempowerment in the global financial market. Capitalist speculation and the specular inflation of masculinity within femininity are thus thematically fused in *Potestas*.

Mary Kelly's unmasking of the masquerader mirrors, furthermore, her own refusal to adopt the "mistress" position of the "woman artist." Her invisible female subject denies the spectator a "positive image," or "feminine ego ideal." This abdication of the mistress position may be interpreted positively insofar as it foils the construction of facile feminism. Kelly's "thick descriptions" of loss, like her histories of feminism's lost illusions, are difficult, but this difficulty is part of the analytic process, part of the work's layered hermeneutic.

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[14] See Millot, "The Feminine Superego," p. 304.

Loss and lack commingle in *Interim*'s mysterious materialization of object *a*. The effect is one of what Lacan calls "retroversion"—a turning back to go forward. Parveen Adams describes this effect when she speaks of how "desire, which is always desire of the Other, misrecognizes the object because when it pursues the object, it fails to recognize that the object is not in front of desire, but *before* it."[15] One could say, perhaps, that *Interim* gives us retroversion as "retrovision"—a revisionist looking backwards, a proleptic retroactivity ultimately leading up to death. In a late novel by Guy de Maupassant, *Fort comme la mort,* an aging mother experiences terror at having her face compared by her lover to its younger replica on the body of her daughter. *Corpus*'s sartorial ghosts may be seen as metonymies of just such a face; the creases in the empty clothes record the fault lines into which the youthful visage has disappeared. These wrinkles are a shorthand for the death of youth and a prediction of the grand death to come. They spell out a "little death"—*la petite mort,* that male postcoital melancholia which, when gender transposed, refers, as Adams has intimated, to the loss of *jouissance. Interim's* object small *a* thus foretells *objet petite mort,* what Mary Kelly has designated, quite frighteningly, by the letter X.

In focusing our attention on the status of Lacanianism in the work of art, Kelly's *Interim* raises larger issues pertaining to the merging of psychoanalysis, feminism, and art practice. How do women as artists and spectators provide a critique of the historic gender bias of psychoanalytic theory without resorting to the essentializing frames of "femininity" or "women's art?" How does one dislodge the scopic domination of women in the clinic or on the couch through an archive of images themselves placed "under the gaze?" How does one perform gender or "send up" masculinity and femininity so as to unfix, ironically, the reified codes of sexual identity while at the same time preserving the pathos and sorrow of a "different" female body growing older? How does one seduce visually without fetishizing the female body?

As if in response to such questions, *Interim* undermines feminism's more paranoid reading of the masculine super-gaze (if it is everywhere, then, by implication, *we* are *it*) by replacing the figuration of the female body with a scopic target which attracts; showing itself through history as "being seen," a figuration that opens onto the strictly nonfigural. Red lozenges, red circles, red grids, red check marks, red arrows, and red X's direct the scopic drive to fixed points on *Corpus*'s numbed but eloquent sartorial subjects. These points—images of *béance,* vertiginous disclosures of that gaping chasm opening onto "what you want and cannot have"—remind me of the power to arouse ascribed by

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[15] See Parveen Adams, "The Art of Analysis."

René Laforgue (Freud's French disciple and rival) to *scotomization* (from the Greek *skotos,* a "darkness" linked by Freud and Laforgue to visual castration). Unlike fetishism, which expresses desire through the verbal disavowal of lack, scotomization proposes a *reticulated* affirmation of lack, an image that manifests sex appeal by calling out to the sex in the gaze. By this means, lack no longer need be read as synonymous with deficiency.

Kelly's red markers, launched by the image and lobbed at the retina, may be read as so many techniques of seductive affirmation set out to rhyme with the unconscious visual after-echo of red words. Reappropriating scotomization (from male psychoanalysis) for feminist purposes, transforming the visual cut into an eye-catching visual object, Kelly produces an alternative to those traditional aesthetics of the feminine subject that depend on the "photophobic," veil-enveloped masquerade. No longer do we find "woman" presented as a shadowy after-image of the masked Lacanian phallus; in these photo-positive Plexiglas panels slashed in red, female fetishism or scotomization is actively employed as a "cutting-edge" probe of critical vision rather than passively inscribed as a masochistic ploy. Kelly's speaking sartorial fetishes work through psychoanalytic conundrums that scopically ensnare while challenging the commodity fetishism of figural female bodies. In its shattering beauty, *Interim* constructs a nonrepresentational picture of the optical sexuality of women. And though the object of visual desire adopts no fixed or permanent guise, its strategies of visual seduction figure, *in absentia,* the glamour of a feminine subject.