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The Lost Voices of Women in Poverty and Feminist Discourse

By
Anna Maria Tucker

A thesis presented to
The Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts
At Washington University in St. Louis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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Table of Contents

1. Abstract.....	3
2. Introduction.....	4
3. I Am but One of Thousands Lost.....	6
4. My works and Feminism.....	16
5. Conclusion.....	31
6. Notes.....	32
7. Illustrations.....	33
8. Bibliography.....	40
9. Illustration Citations.....	41

Abstract

My statement is that women in poverty are now, as in the past, in circumstances of exclusion within the feminist struggle. This exclusion is mirrored in various cultural movements and milieus. I see my performance work as a vehicle to express the emotions of women in class struggle. This has taken center stage with the return of the political (Trump, etc.). My work gives emotion and lived experience primacy to assert the unique subjectivity of working-class and poor women. This pays homage to the women who were relegated to the backdrop of modernist art.

I will compare my lived experience with academic art movements that inform my art making and performance work. It is through the legacy of artist such as Carolee Schneemann and Ana Mendieta that personal narrative has become a tool in my work. My lived experience from underground punk culture embraces shock and the grotesque. My study of feminist and body art movements has brought validity to my performances and my statements concerning lower class women living in poverty. I believe in hope and with the healing properties of emotion our stereotypes will be dismantled.

Introduction

I am daunted by my mistakes/failures. I was told mistakes/failures were part of the process of learning; but for many we are born failures. Those of us who exist marginally don't begin by choosing our definitions, our definitions are our identities. These identities are usually shaped by what society has led us to believe about ourselves. I came to a private academic research institution after such trauma. The work that I made while attending Washington University focuses on representing identity, feminine archetypes and stereotypes in poverty and the art world.

Performance art became my medium. Perhaps it was the poetics of the medium; its ability to transfer emotion instantly to the viewer. But in choosing performance art I still defended painting. In the performances, *Perceptions of the Eyed Persephone*, *Lady Mule Skinner* and *Fates*, each makes a unique statement about class, identity, and feminine archetypes/stereotypes. I believe women in poverty are now, as in the past, in circumstances of exclusion within the feminist struggle. Class is a major marker as to how much freedom and feminist liberation a woman is granted. My work carries with it a rebellion against these cultural stereotypes; not a rebellion against feminism.

In the past five years the political climate has changed. Ferguson changed St. Louis and the Trump presidency has changed America. I see my work as a vehicle to express the emotions of woman in class struggle. My work is centered on identity, as woman artists are called to simultaneously challenge family structure, consumerism, and gender politics, along with our internal class differences. There are varied opinions as to what politics make one a feminist. At the core of feminism is a belief in equal rights for woman. A more radical view of feminism

would include challenges to normative culture. To what degree we are able to enjoy feminism is often determined by our class.

Being a single mother surviving on state funded housing, food stamps and other social programs brings life experience to my body of work. Being the person I am, my identity is why I create emotional works. I celebrate emotion. Our society is asleep, numb, apathetic—unable to feel. Emotion is at the core of our humanity. I believe emotion is radical.

I use mixed media painting and sculpture as a cohesive whole in immersive space. Through the lens of performance my installations become paintings. My subjectivity portrays homage to the women who were backdrops to modernist art. Upon entering graduate school, the content of my work was expressed as lived experience. Through research, I found validity in my life experiences, removing the work from victimhood. My work becomes a voice to repair.

Some may see this as an old argument. But with Donald Trump as our president we are seeing a shift in the paradigm, the belief that progress is linear is being challenged. We are again chanting old feminist and civil rights slogans of protest.

I Am But One of Thousands Lost

My earliest exposure to feminism was through Riot Girl zines and underground punk rock culture with Kathleen Hannah of the band Bikini Kill as an influence. While I was a teenager I was part of this outsider music and art culture. My first attempts with art making were self-taught and represented in my own fanzine.

The book *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, written by Sara Marcus, documents the Riot Grrrl movement through Kathleen Hanna activism and leadership. Marcus begins the book by stating:

This book tells Riot Grrrls story through the lives of a few central figures, musicians and non-musicians alike, young women who were around at the movement's beginnings or whose involvement was particularly intense or long lasting. But there were thousands upon thousands of others whose stories are only hinted at here, and whose lives were indelibly shaped in the '90s by the ascendancy of Riot Grrrl. Many of the movement's core values, I've come to realize, are as necessary now as they were then. What I *had* lost, a little bit, was the feeling I'd had in my teens that what my friends and pen pals and I were working on was beautiful and vital; the consciousness that many of our emotional challenges (self-doubt, confusion, sadness resulted not from personal failing but from political and social forces, and that we could do battle with them as such; the belief that we could and would, as one of the movement's manifestos had put it, change the world for real.¹

I was one of those thousands. Today I am creating work that could had been made then dealing with content of rape culture, abortion, poverty and identity. The Riot Grrrl movement and punk culture holds influences in my art as lived experience. I wrote, read zines, and traded tapes with Riot Grrrls and other people from the subcultures of the 90's. One of my zines from this time is archived at the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection at the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture at Duke University in "box 6". It sits there beside countless other zines made by women from 1974-2000.

I also watched people make major life choices believing they were part of a “revolution” only to be sucker-punched like a forgotten soldier. Some feminists became professors others become homeless prostitutes. Aside from the Riot Grrl movement I cannot ignore my lived experience and the influence of the nihilism of gutter punk culture of the 1990s. I dropped out and traveled from city to city across the United States with this subgenre of punks. This gutter punk and squat culture was best documented by Penelope Spheeris in her 1998 release, *The Decline of Western Civilization Part III*.² I was associated, and had friendships with many of the people who were the subjects of this film. In the film she documents traveling homeless punk rock youth living in Los Angeles. Spheeris captures the “grotesque” nature and self-inflicted exploitations of a subgenre of punks who spent their childhood in poverty stricken families during the Reagan era. This experience is a part of my personal narrative. I believe it is how I acquired my performance sensibilities and its influence surfaces in the bodily subjectivity and objectivity in my work.

I am not an historian or a theorist. I am an artist who expresses the world around her. I am simply expressing emotions with my work, my only profit thus far being my own personal growth and wisdom. My performance influences did not come from within academia but from observing Kathleen Hanna and other punk rock heroines (such as Lydia Lunch, Wendy-O-Williams, Exene Cervenka, and Poly-Styrene X). This underground influence is part of my identity, my lived experience and arguably my class.

Through this experience my work became synonymous with early feminist performance artists such as Carolee Schneeman and Ana Mendieta. These artists tell personal narratives in performance art; and use the documentation of performance to create their narratives as artists. In

the following comparisons to my own work I will raise the question of how performance functions in the interpretation of narrative and personal struggle.



Carolee Schneemann, *Interior scroll/The Cave*, 1975-1995

The first performance of *Interior Scroll* was at the “Women Here and Now” show in East Hampton, Long Island in 1975. Schneeman stood on the stage, undressed and painted large strokes of paint onto her body and face. She gently pulled a scroll from her vagina and assumed “action poses” intended for life models in drawing and painting courses while reading a love letter. The second performance at the Telluride Festival in Colorado the organizers named Schneemann’s section of the show *The Erotic Woman* Schneeman felt that passive viewing was

unpermittable. Schneemann resolved that she would step on the stage and cover her body with mud from a nearby river instead of paint.¹

While viewing the performance *Interior Scroll--The Cave* we see the paper rolling out of Schneemann's vagina as legible script. It comes in the form of a fragmented love letter between two artists. It confronts the subjectivity and objectivity of the female artist in a male driven market. The text reads from the scroll in a repetitive mantra, "We can be friends equally though we can't be artists equally".²

My performance *Disparity Seeds the Garden* is an endurance performance that encompasses journey, entrance and disappearance. I subjected myself to the discomfort of walking for 45 minutes, in the snow, in 23 degree weather, with nothing but a canvas wrapped around my body. The performance confronts not only struggle but the lack of gaze and coldness in the interactions of race and economic classes within society.

The journey, is the walk to the St Louis Art Museum. I began my walk on the corner of Debelivire and Enright Avenue in St. Louis Missouri, close to an area known as the Great Divide. Oddly this performance was done on the day of Nelson Mandela's death.

The entrance, begins when I enter Forest Park. When I opened the door of the St. Louis Art Museum, the camera became consumed by an ephemeral fog making the museum a place of illusion and mysticism. During the experience I came into the museum with delirium from the

¹ Sayre, Henry, M. *The Object of Performance: The American Avant Garde Since 1970*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press, 1989, Print.

² Sayre, Henry, M. *The Object of Performance: The American Avant Garde Since 1970*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press, 1989, Print.

cold, I began to interpret the works of art. I was experienced a connection to a small piece of wood in an Anselm Kiefer work which had a faded flower painted on it on.

Disappearance, ends the piece as I appear to descend down a hill only to immerse myself into water. I wore a draped canvas to represent the classical body of painting and to show how art brings struggle to the forefront of society. I found inspiration in a quote from Krzysztof Wodiczko, “

...to prevent bloody conflict we must sustain a certain kind of adversarial life where we are struggling with our problems in public.³



Ana Mendita, *Glass on Body Imprints/Face*, 1972

Ana Mendita's *Glass on Body Imprints/Face* was made in 1972. This work was produced while she attended her second MFA in the intermedia and cross disciplinary program at the University of Iowa. *Glass on Body/Face* was documented in black and white photography. Mendita used a sheet of glass that she aggressively pressed against herself to objectify her body

³ Wodzyco, Krzysztof. Art:21 *Peace*.2010 <https://art21.org/watch/exclusive/krzysztof-wodiczko-peace-short/>

while questioning her identity. In 1972-1973 Mendieta made works dealing with sexual and domestic violence. *Glass on Body/face* marks the beginning of Mendieta using her body as a sculptural tool and ends her fascination with violence as a political and aesthetic choice.⁴

In Mendieta's *Glass on Body/Face*, we see her confront identity in a grotesque way. Using the body as a malleable substance *Glass on Body/Face* speaks of the identity and exoticism of women of color. During the time when *Glass on Body—Face* was made Mendieta had a fascination with Mircea Eliade's book, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*.⁵ She used Eliade's arguments about decolonization to speak about her personal narrative and was influenced by the readings to begin a new path that focused more on the transformative than the grotesque.⁶

Glass on Body/Face approaches domestic and sexual violence by imagery. The glass mimics the blow of the fist against flesh. The agony and disgust in her facial gesture eludes to the general denial and acceptance of abuse the victim rationalizes. The imagery also makes us

⁴ Baum, Kelly. Shapely Shaplessness: Ana Mendieta's "Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints: Face)", 1972. Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University, Vol 67, More than One: Photographs in Sequence (2008), pp. 80-93. Princeton University Art Museum.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20442638>

24-04-2015

⁵ Blocker, Jane. Where Is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity and Exile. London: Duke University Press.1999. Print

⁶ Baum, Kelly. Shapely Shaplessness: Ana Mendieta's "Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints: Face)", 1972. Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University, Vol 67, More than One: Photographs in Sequence (2008), pp. 80-93. Princeton University Art Museum. 81

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20442638>

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question the western worlds' perversion and sexualized perception of women from native cultures.⁷

Mendieta rarely performed in public. In *Glass on Body/Face*, it's the documentation that confronts her identity.⁸ We read the documentation of *Glass on Body/Face* as a political narrative of a Cuban woman transforming herself to a western standard of beauty. Her violent struggle of identity becomes even more apparent when we see the contortions of her face. Her face and body are causing violence to themselves because of her displacement in the American landscape and politics. *Glass on Body/Face* retrospectively speaks of Mendieta's personal narrative with decolonization and domestic abuse⁹.

Like both Schneemann and Mendieta I tend to assert an aspect of the grotesque, derived from my personal experiences. Our performances intend to make work that is auto-biographical, but is also a way of purging struggle through personal narrative. The personal is political slogans and feminist and body art movements transformed the trauma of personal narratives to an art—in

⁷ Baum, Kelly. *Shapely Shaplessness: Ana Mendieta's "Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints: Face)", 1972*. Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University, Vol 67, *More than One: Photographs in Sequence* (2008), pp. 80-93. Princeton University Art Museum. 87
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24-04-2015

⁸ Baum, Kelly. *Shapely Shaplessness: Ana Mendieta's "Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints: Face)", 1972*. Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University, Vol 67, *More than One: Photographs in Sequence* (2008), pp. 80-93. Princeton University Art Museum. 81
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⁹ Baum, Kelly. *Shapely Shaplessness: Ana Mendieta's "Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints: Face)", 1972*. Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University, Vol 67, *More than One: Photographs in Sequence* (2008), pp. 80-93. Princeton University Art Museum. 87
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20442638>
24-04-2015

the form of performance and documentation. These movements evoke emotion from the viewer. The gestures in these performances contain the act of struggle by way of movement.

These personal traumas are related to politics, class, and gender or as in Mendieta's case race. Through the performance and documentation a story telling takes place. They create a space where viewers can experience the emotional content of the performance. The gestures and emotions of the artists are preserved by the documentation. The viewer becomes empathetic to the artist's struggles and the social position of the artist. An artist's ability to use documentation to draw empathy from the viewer makes the work a political statement. I see my work reacting in such a way and continuing to refine itself through the study and understanding of feminist theory performance art and studio practices.

In Lady Mule Skinner I objectified my body much like early feminist performance artists and body art movements. I place my body in humiliating and violent gestures with art objects. I also am challenging the way an artist can use documentation within the gallery setting. The artifacts of my performance set against the edited video raises the questions; what form of documentation is more truthful—the edited video or the artifacts that were made. This ritualistic tension between my objectivity and the art objects finds influence with Ana Mendieta's *Glass on Body* imprints and Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*. I believe the only way to show the humiliation of poverty is to embrace the grotesque. I revisited feminist arguments against male dominated art movements like modernism. I believe this domination still exists and is not limited to just women artists but artist from poor working-class backgrounds, and artist of color.

My use of the carrot on the stick and the term “Mule Skinner” was intended. I wanted to reiterate the class struggle that persists in the arts by using metaphors that lower class Americans would understand. The materials and the artifacts of the performance spoke about labor and the mass production of the materials. I was working at art supply retail store at the time and saw a duality of exploitation between labor and academia. The artifacts of the performance *Lady Mule Skinner* holds the “personal is political” through imagery.



Fig 2. Post performance, Lady Mule Skinner, Performance, strecher bar, honey, carrot, canvas, gesso, plaster, artist body, 2015

In the image *Post Performance*, from *Lady Mule Skinner*, radical influence, struggle, and lived experience is shown. *Lady Mule Skinner* is a performance documented with video. The

black and white video expresses a sensual tension that builds between my body and a carrot that dangles above my mouth. The carrot represents all of the things I aspire to: love, success, and recognition of my work. The materials define the performance as a painting.

I utilize my body as a symbol of the classical female subject amidst a modernist background. The personal and professional conflict in *Lady Mule Skinner* only intensifies the reality of the struggle and hardships that have granted me resiliency. Most notably *Lady Mule Skinner* relates to the hardships that all women face in pursuing their professional, personal, and artistic endeavors. The install, in conjunction with the performance, speaks of the struggle of women (women in poverty, women in professional environments and women in the art world). At the end of the performance I bite off the carrot. We are left with the question: How much of the carrot did I actually take. Was it worth the struggle?

My Works and Feminism

I believe feminism in art and academia has long been incomplete on the inclusion of woman from lower and working class environments. I will use research from feminist theorists Jessica Crispin, Alice L. Walker, and Simone De Beauvoir to offer insight and evidence that feminism has always divided itself between the radical and the liberal. I believe those divisions parallel social class. My work represents women from low income backgrounds through my lived experience and participation in art and academia.

De Beauvoir, defined and changed a segment of the female population's views on motherhood, and sexual promiscuity. Her work makes statements about feminist politics, class divisions and identity formation.

Simone De Beauvoir is a pillar of liberal feminism. She briefly records differences in class expectations for woman regarding their servitude to men in *The Second Sex*.³ It was first published in 1949 and since we have seen a slow general progress for liberation and opportunities for women. Much of the chapter "Prostitutes and Herterias" establishes an historical perspective on the maiden/whore myth that I believe is still alive today for women who are part of America's lower-class. De Beauvoir expresses:

As long as middle-class people surround the sexual act and especially virginity—with strong taboos, just so long as they will seem a matter of indifference in many peasant and working-class environments.¹⁰

¹⁰ Beauvoir, Simone de. "*The second sex*" A.A. Knopf, New York. 1978. Pg. 525

De Beauvoir talks about the differences that define the prostitute and hetaira. She begins the chapter by claiming that marriage is a form of prostitution.¹¹ She argues the problem is an historical one spanning from the kings of Persia to the Southern United States. A woman's worth depended on if she was born into a caste of "honest woman" or "shameless woman". The wife agrees to upkeep the dignity of the home while the mistress becomes the scapegoat.¹²

Female domestication and male authority are still taught to young girls living in poverty. The hetaira of adventure earns respect and freedoms because of her class. But even in this she sacrifices her human needs for love and pleasure.¹³ This conundrum is still felt today among career driven middle-class women. While young girls in poverty and lower-class backgrounds are perpetuating social problems without support emotionally or financially from their broken families and communities.

De Beauvoir belongs to a small but important cohort of women who explored social boundaries. Their promiscuity and authority is justified by their "genuine practice" and how their influence shapes public opinion.¹⁴ This power as artists, poets, writers and philosophers sets them apart from middle and working class prostitutes and hetairas.¹⁵

¹¹ Beauvoir, Simone de. *"The second sex"* A.A. Knopf, New York. 1978. Pg. 533

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Beauvoir, Simone de. *"The second sex"* A.A. Knopf, New York. 1978. Pg 540

¹⁴ Beauvoir, Simone de. *"The second sex"* A.A. Knopf, New York. 1978. Pg 533

¹⁵ Beauvoir, Simone de. *"The second sex"* A.A. Knopf, New York. 1978. Pg 540

In the newly published book, *Why I am Not A Feminist: A Feminist Manifesto*, Jessica Crispin shows concern for the exclusion of working-class women in past and current feminist dialog. Crispin claims that “choice feminism” and “white feminism” are middle class concerns and that how we deal with the “true radical is by cognitive dissonance”.¹⁶ She holds a certain disdain for the typical middle class white feminist and is writes in a “to them, from us” perspective.

Crispin herself, a white woman who appears to be middle class, explains to other white middle class women that feminism is not a lifestyle. She overstates that the personal victories of one segment of the population is not a political victory.¹⁷

The actual obstacles and inequalities that women face are mostly obstacles only for the poor—middle-class women and above can now buy their access to power and equality. The issues most pressing for lower income women, like affordable abortions, childcare, health insurance and healthcare, public housing and so on, have slipped off the feminist radar.¹⁸

What she is proposing is an end to apathy in the feminist movement. She proceeds with a pep talk about taking charge of our decisions on a daily basis and being accountable for the political ramifications of those decisions.

In the book, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and The Foundations of A Movement*, by Alice L. Walker she states:

In Fact, during the latter twentieth century, there were numerous debates about how to define the category of “Woman.” There were numerous struggles over who got included and who was excluded from that category. And these struggles, I Think, are key to understanding why there was some measure of resistance from women of color, and also poor and working-class white women, to identify with the

¹⁶ Crispin, Jessica. “Why I Am Not A Feminist: A Feminist Manifesto” Melville House Publishing. 2017. Pg 47

¹⁷ Ibid Pg. 50

¹⁸ Ibid pg. 50

emergent feminist movement. Many of us considered that movement at the time to be too white and especially too middle class, too bourgeois.

And in some senses the struggle for woman's rights was ideological defined as a struggle for white middle-class women's rights, pushing out working-class and poor women, pushing out Black woman, Latinas, and other women of color from the discursive field covered by the category "woman." The many contestations over this category helped to produce what we came to call "radical women-of-color feminist theories and practices."⁴

I believe we are divided by our communities in public forums, our focus of the goals of feminism and whom they benefit become regulated by our class. I believe my work represents a personal narrative that low income woman can relate to—thus engaging an active dialogue between those not normally, regularly or currently represented in feminist discussions. I stand by my statement that women in poverty are now, as in the past, in circumstances of exclusion within the feminist struggle

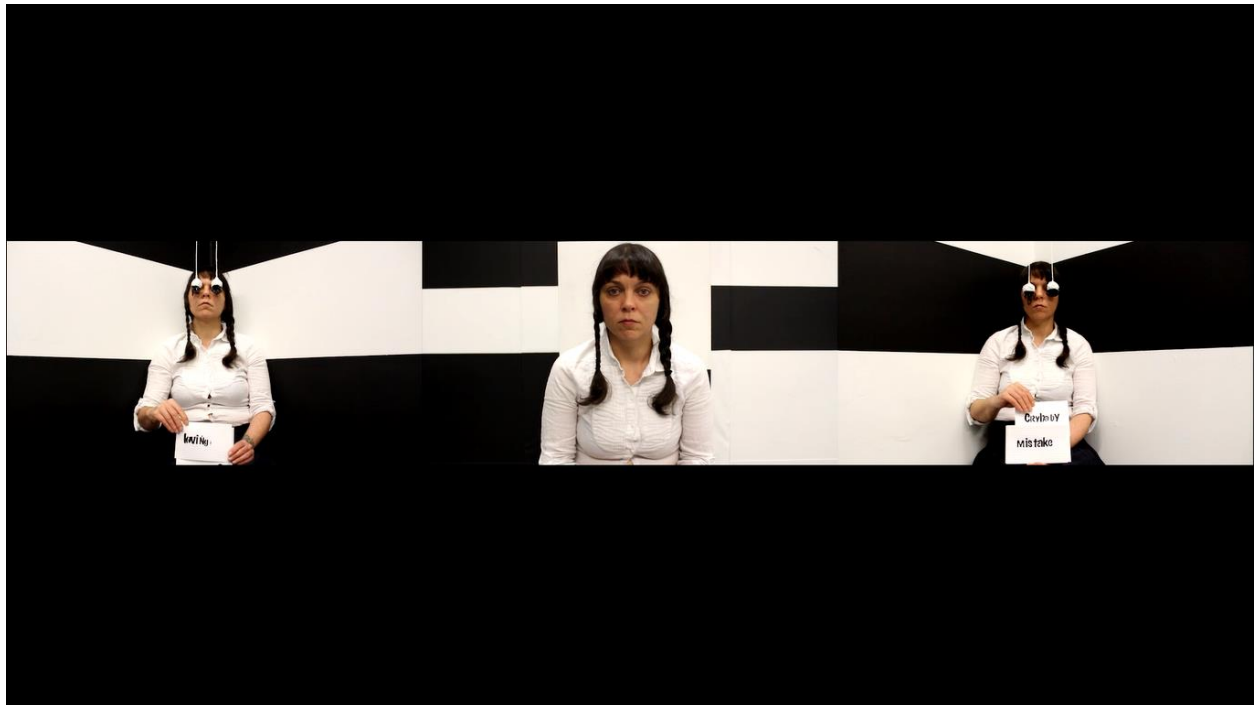


Fig 1. Perceptions of the eyed Persephone, performance photo stills, 10.39 duration, 2016

Making art in my domestic environment and raising my three children encourages the depth of my practice. My natural patterns of sleep and daily rituals are centered on creation. I thrive as an artist as I carry about domestic diligence for my family. Although this all sounds very idealistic it has never been easy for me to be both an artist and mother. The struggle between the facets of my personal identity and economic instability have become the subject of my work.

In my performance *Perceptions of the Eyed Persephone* I document my life story through negative and positive affirmations that are printed on notecards. As I shift through my different labels and personality traits I am dressed in a school uniform while sitting in a vintage school chair. The personality traits and cultural affiliations that I expose in *Perceptions of the Eyed Persephone* clearly call attention to my own self-perception and the experiences those perceptions led too. The tryptic time based-video is a visual statement which expresses those experiences and the trauma that never leaves us but is carried from one life phase to the next.

Through my own lived experiences and art making I am documenting and interjecting the voices of women in poverty to academic galleries. By placing my work in the gallery I am participating in a voyeuristic culture. Those who my work speaks on behalf of (living working class nightmares on government subsidiaries such as welfare checks or food stamps) may rarely see my work.

I choose to make a highly personal piece of performance art, but never once did it occur to me to add the word “feminist”. Because of my personal struggles of domestic violence, pregnancy, abandonment, and generational poverty I have always been conflicted about using the

word feminist. I had not sought to embody the concerns of feminism in my own life. I wasn't moonlighting analyzing movement manifestos. How could I call myself a feminist? I added political connotations with words like "comrade" but why not "feminist". My work does not specifically tackle social problems. I offer no solutions. Simply put, my work is a window. I am not a political artist. My struggle is my lived experience and my work becomes symbiotic to political struggle.

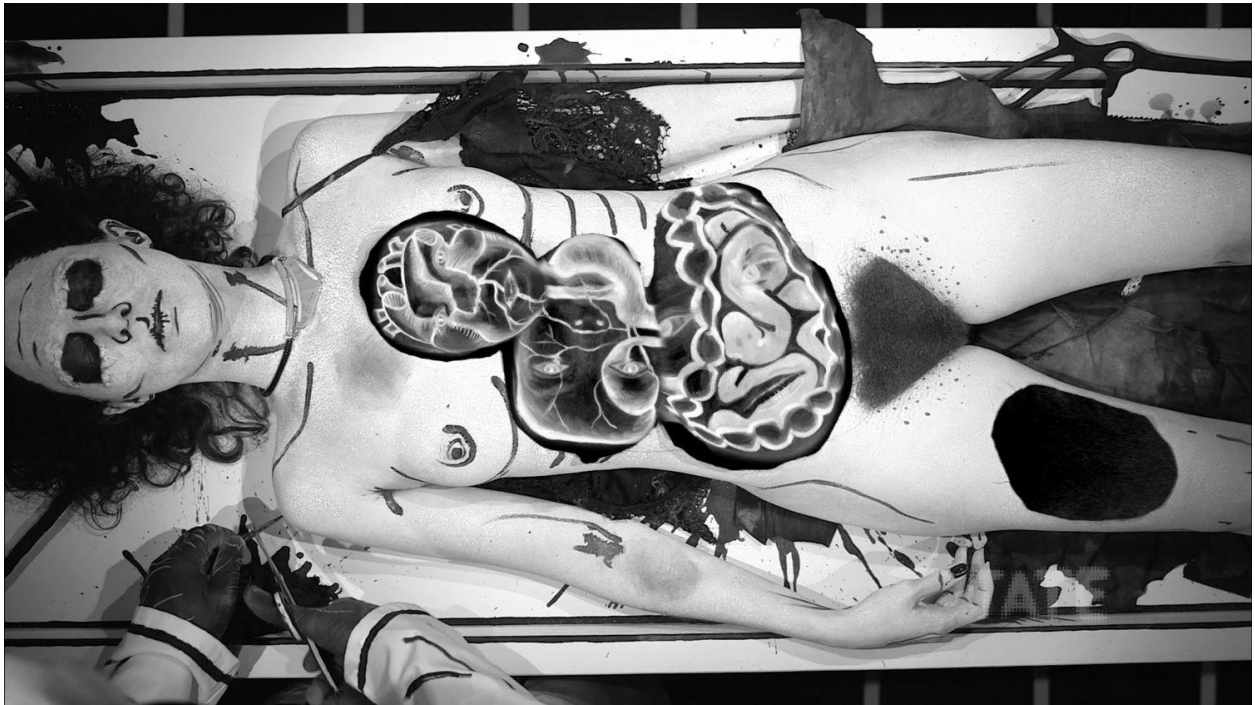


Fig 3. Mary Kelly Reid. *This is Offal* Tate Performance Room. November 19, 2015.

I will contrast *Lady Mule Skinner* with the current artist Mary Kelly Reid and her work *This is Offal*, featured in the Tate Museum's live broadcast of *Tate's Performance Room*.⁵

Her creative process aesthetic and how she speaks of studio challenges resonate with me. We both use painting and performance to make statements about the struggles of working class women. In our differences Mary Reid Kelly uses literary works, she has a partnership with her cinematographer, Patrick Kelly and their child is the art they make. This is where I see the visual

and contextual differences of class and lived experience within the current feminine performance art spectrum.⁶



Fig 4. Anna Maria Tucker. Lady Mule Skinner. Performance, photostill, 10:39. 2015

I see Mary Kelly Reid's work as being visually similar to mine; we have similar values and ways of working in the studio. However, the differences are clearly seen in narrative and class. My performances rely on motion and lack of narrative. Though I have used text and words, the narrative is not linear and uses motions of the body to produce time. My work sees the installation space as constituting the art work. My performances give meaning to the art objects and validate their being and existence.



Fig 6. Anna Maria Tucker. *Perceptions of the Eyed Persephone*. 2016

Fig 5. Mary Kelly Reid. *This is Offal Tate Performance Room*. November 19, 2015.

Mary Kelly Reid has a more refined set of influences. *This is Offal* uses both Camus's philosophy of the absurd and the Thomas Hood's poem "The Bridge of Sighs." In Hood's poem the narrator tells the story of a young woman who committed suicide as he pulls her body out the Thames River. Mary Reid Kelly explains the content.⁷

The poem is by Thomas Hood and he wrote it in 1848 at the end of his life. He was friends with Charles Dickens and like Dickens he was very interested in using art, writing, and fiction to think about social problems that were relevant to the day. Dickens' subject matter is children working in factories. In Hood's poem the bridge of Sighs, Hood's subject is suicide especially the numerous suicides of working class women throwing themselves off bridges in London.⁸



Fig.7 Anna Maria Tucker, *Lady Mule Skinner* (2015). Performance photostills, 10:39. 2015.



Fig. 8. Anna Maria Tucker, *Lady Mule Skinner*, Performance. Photostill, 10:39. 2015.

“Mule Skinner Blues” is an American folk song about poor laborers who drove cargo in the west in the 19th century. The term “Lady Mule Skinner” became well known when Dolly Parton sang her rendition of the song in 1970 (though it had been recorded many times before by men and women alike). Since the 1930s the lyrics have changed with each performer, from Odetta (folk) to Dolly Parton (country) and even Lux Interior of The Cramps (punk). More important the song makes statements about labor. The term “mule skinner” was often used in early America to refer to the laborer outwitting a person of power; and the term was used in the movie *Little Big Man*.⁹ I have clearly taken the narrative of *Lady Mule Skinner* from what could be called popular culture, whereas Mary Kelly Reid uses her literary experience.



Fig.9 Anna Maria Tucker. *Perceptions of the Eyed Persephone* (2016)

In *Perceptions of the Eyed Persephone* my gaze represents a battered female identity. The wax ball symbolizes an eye; perhaps an eye that has been bruised or made blind to the society it sees. Actions make up one's identity. These actions are taught by the community that surrounds them. Victimization becomes an automatic response for those living in less than ideal circumstances. Performance art brings the exploitation of the artists' identity into current discussions.

In the book, *Don't Hold it Against Me*, Jennifer Doyle announces the importance of emotion in art. She explains the tendency of the art world to shun artists working with emotionality. For the visions and works of the oppressed, emotionality should be recognized as

formal content. The emotional challenges and apathy of the viewer denote personal conflict and promote change within our cultures.¹⁰

In *Perceptions of the Eyed Persephone* I am grappling with these concerns. In *Lady Mule Skinner* I also bring up issues of class but am more focused on the subjectivity of woman artists and working class servitude; the idea of self-sufficiency being the success and reward of a good life. This good life, one without exploitation is granted to those who can afford it.

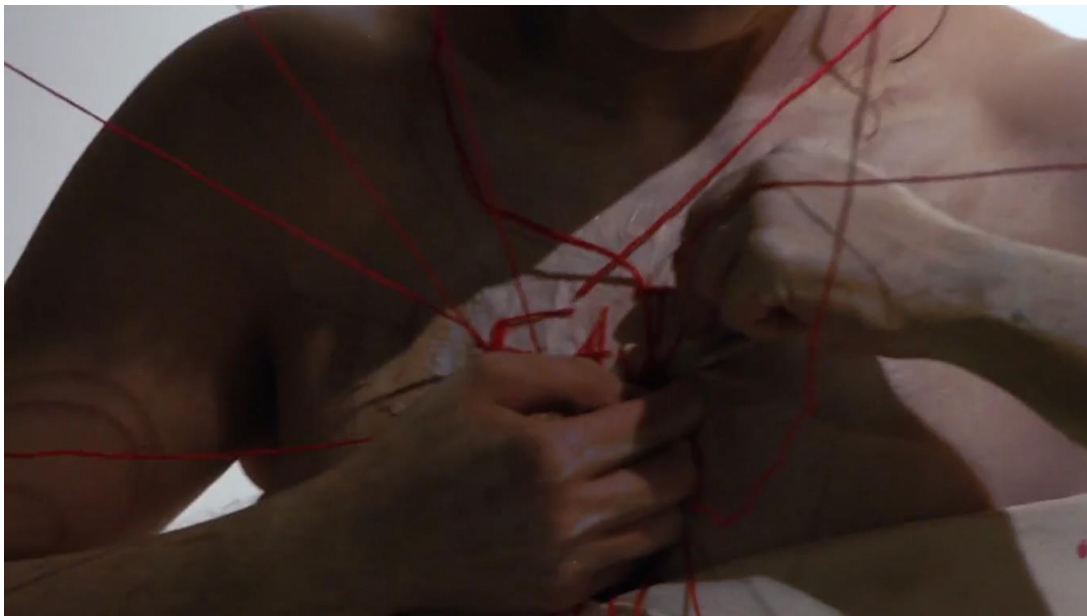


Figure 10. Anna Maria Tucker, *Fates* (2014). Performance photostills, 10:39

Fate is an idea that many of us accept. We are taught to accept our placement into the world as we are born in it. Some of us have better circumstances than others. Others come into

the world with disadvantage. Despite where our fates start, humanity must have hope. By looking into one's true self and following struggle we can overcome our fate.

The performance *Fates* has three parts. I use materials to represent the Fates: Clotho, the spindle of yarn, Lachesis, the red string, Atrops, the scissors.¹¹ This materiality alludes to femininity, craft, labor and social class. The Fates were believed to appear at one's birth and to determine one's path and length in life. The belief of predetermined fate is still very dominant today. Our religious and educational structures propagate this idea through their doctrine and design.

I see feminist politics as opposed to the belief of predetermined destiny. The struggles in these movements are rooted in the belief that we demand ownership of our bodies, labor and life. The performance *Fates* achieves a poetic gesture by its use of mythology. The performance is not outwardly political. I choose to be politically subdued so that I may confront the emotions of the viewer.

I documented the performance *Fate* in isolation in the gallery. I believe that isolating myself and the objects in the art space before public viewing cleanses the power structure from the gallery. The artist and object reclaim the space. The performance invites voyeurism by being documentation. The viewer becomes emotionally invested in the documentation. They are separated from the event but they are in the space where it happened. We as a culture have separated our emotions from images. Sensationalism in our media has desensitized our reactions. I intend to open humanity to hope by confronting the viewers' emotions.



Fig.11 Anna Maria Tucker, *Fates* (2014). Performance photostills, 10:39

I began the performance by tying a piece of canvas around my body. By wrapping my body in canvas I am once again referencing painting. On my body the canvas works like a costume and places my identity in the context of art history as a goddess. The lighting of the objects and performance creates heavy shadows that allude to German expressionism in both painting and film. The documentation and centered framing of the camera mimics early feminist performance art. The documentation becomes both theatrical and political by its historical references.

The performance is also theatrical because of how I used latex makeup. I become unified with the art object by using a spindle of yarn, red string, and latex makeup to sew the word fate onto my chest during the performance. After the sewing of each letter I placed the needles onto the canvas except one needle that punctured through my skin on my back. By puncturing both synthetic and physical skin I am quietly confronting the viewers' emotions. What is synthetic becomes more shocking than reality.

We are makers of our fates weaving our circumstances into the struggle of finding our trueselves. The performance *Fate* approaches this struggle through the materials of craft and the labor of making

Conclusion

I see my work continuing within my domestic space and being inspired through my lived experience. My involvement with performance based media is a direct statement of my economic class. The art objects that I create as backdrops for my performances are made in the gesture of painting. When they are exposed in the gallery setting aside the videos I believe them to become relics of the performances. The creation of these relics bring me joy while I am making them. The performances are the struggle and purging of the concerns of women living in poverty.

I hope with my works maturity that they will manifest something unifying for society, universities, and artistic communities. I will continue to use my artistic sensibilities in all aspects of my life. My personal tragedies of my life in poverty exposed will hold value. Its value being fostered though academia and the study of other women artist in crisis and art movements that are in the legacy of struggle such as Ana Mendita, Carolee Schneeman, and art body movements.

My work has developed from what has been personal to me I am influenced by my own struggle. I intuitively make works that add voice to the “Personal is Political” slogans of feminism. The wet paint on my body makes use of the symbols of gallery driven art. In *Lady Mule Skinner* I subject my body against minimalist male backdrops like other feminist performance artist who preceded me.

All of my performances created for this thesis *Lady Mule Skinner*, *Fates*, *Perceptions of the Eyed Persephone*, and *Disparity Seeds the Garden* confront stereotypes and struggles of women in poverty. They follow a narrative based on Greek myths and use the environment of academia and the gallery to draw parallels of voyeurism in high culture. I believe my works

become a source of emotion for the viewer and can create apathy. I believe that emotion is radical and compassion is the tool to change obstacles for women in poverty.

¹ Marcus, Sara. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*. HarperCollins e-books.2010.79

² Spheeris, Penelope. *The Decline of Western Civilization Part III*. Spheeris Films Incorporated. 1998

³ Wodzyco, Krzysztof. *Art:21 Peace*.2010 <https://art21.org/watch/exclusive/krzysztof-wodiczko-peace-short/>

⁴ Davis, Y. Angela. *"Freedom Is A Constant Struggle: Palestine, And The Foundations Of A Movement"* Haymarket Books. Chicago. 2016. Pg. 95

⁵ Kelly, Reid Mary. *Performance Room*, BMW Tate Live. November 19, 2015.
<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/performance-and-music/bmw-tate-live-performance-room-mary-reid-kelley>

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid

⁸ Kelly, Reid Mary. *Performance Room*, BMW Tate Live. November 19, 2015.
<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/performance-and-music/bmw-tate-live-performance-room-mary-reid-kelley>

⁹ Little Big Man Quotes,IMBD. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0065988/quotes>

¹⁰ Doyle Jennifer. *Don't hold it against me: difficulty and emotion in contemporary art*" Duke University Press Durham and London. 2013

¹¹ Mavromataki, Maria. *Greek Mythology and Religion: Cosmogony, The Gods, Religious Customs, The Heroes*. Editions: Hailis.1997. 101-105

Beauvoir, Simone de. *"The Second Sex"* A.A. Knopf, New York. 1978. Conclusion

Illustrations



Figure 1

Anna Maria Tucker, *Perceptions of the Eyed Persephone* (2016), performance photostills, 10:39



Figure 2

Post Performance, Lady Mule Skinner, Photo. strecher bar, honey, carrot, canvas, gesso, plaster, artist body, 2015

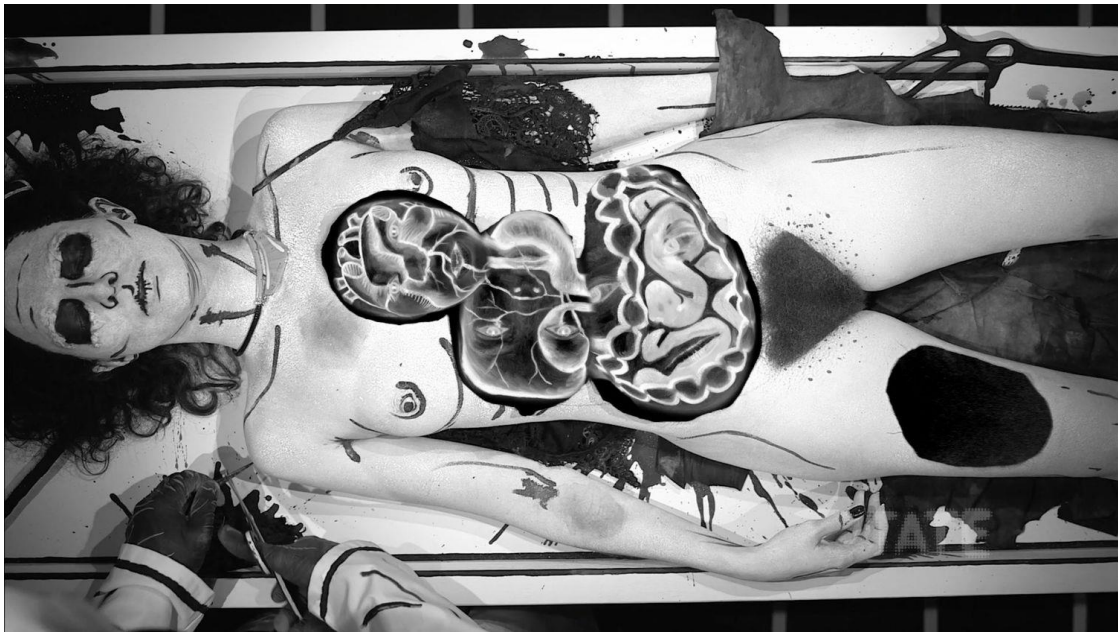


Figure 3

Mary Kelly Reid. *This is Offal* Tate Performance Room. November 19, 2015.
<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/performance-and-music/bmw-tate-live-performance-room-mary-reid-kelley>



Figure 4

Anna Maria Tucker, *Lady Mule Skinner* (2015). performance photostills, 10:39



Figure 5

Mary Kelly Reid. *This is Offal Tate Performance Room*. November 19, 2015.



Figure 6

Anna Maria Tucker. *Perceptions of the Eyed Persephone*. 2016



Figure 7

Anna Maria Tucker, *Lady Mule Skinner* (2015). performance photostills, 10:39



Figure 8

Anna Maria Tucker, *Lady Mule Skinner* (2015). performance photostills, 10:39



Figure 9

Anna Maria Tucker. *Perceptions of the Eyed Persephone* (2016)

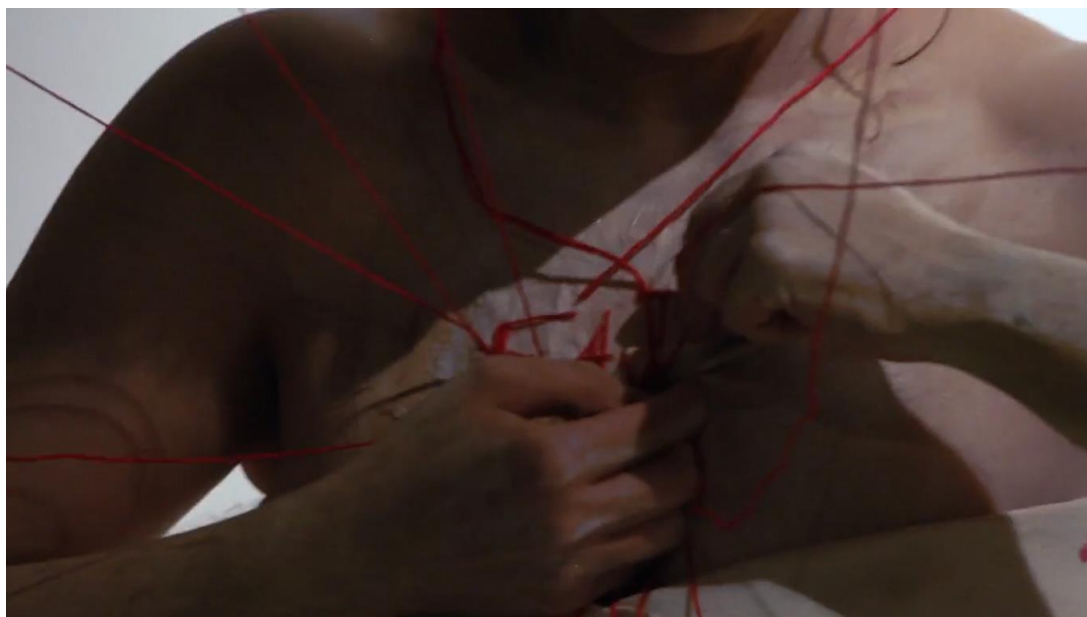


Figure 10

Anna Maria Tucker, *Fates* (2014). performance photostills, 10:39

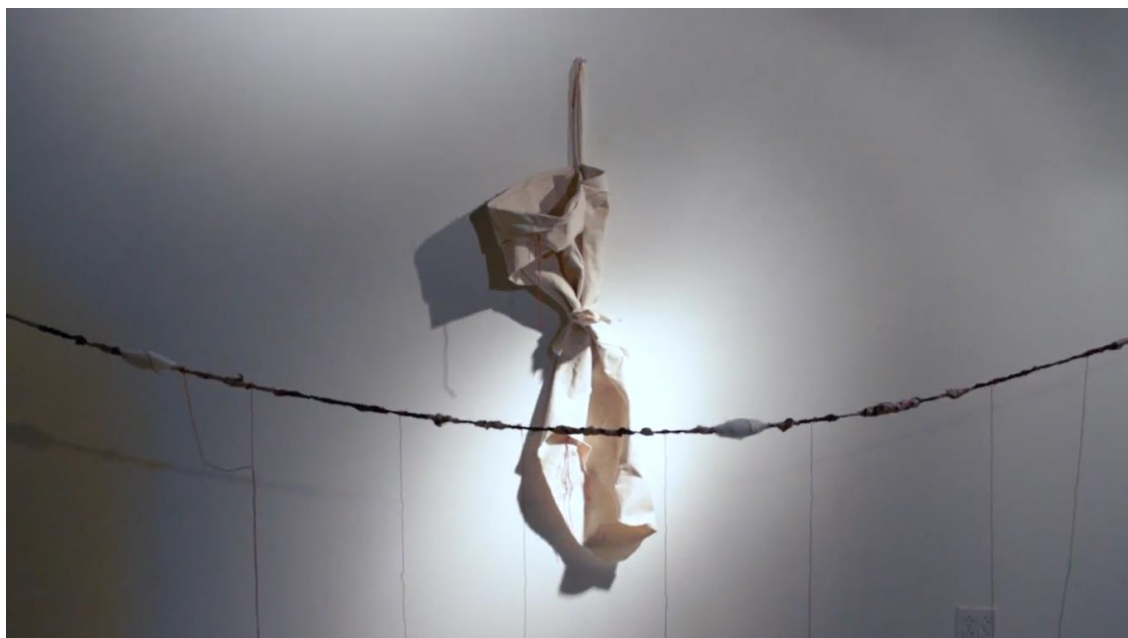


Figure 11

Anna Maria Tucker, *Fates* (2014). performance photostills, 10:39

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