

AMELIA JONES

Body Art Performing the  
subject

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## INTRODUCTION

We abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind, which will become the theater of the action. *A direct communication will be re-established between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator*, from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it.

—ANTONIN ARTAUD<sup>1</sup>



As Artaud realized in 1938, the radicalization of cultural expression would most dramatically take place in this century through a direct theatrical enactment of subjects in relation to one another, such that the hierarchy between actor and spectator would be dissolved and social relations would be profoundly politicized. In Artaud's "Theater of Cruelty," the performance of subjects in a "passionate and convulsive conception of life" would correspond "to the agitation and unrest characteristic of our epoch."<sup>2</sup> This book argues a similar relationship for body art practices, which enact subjects in "passionate and convulsive" relationships (often explicitly sexual) and thus exacerbate, perform, and/or negotiate the dislocating effects of social and private experience in the late capitalist, postcolonial Western world. Body art is viewed here as a set of performative practices that, through such intersubjective engagement, instantiate the dislocation or decentering of the Cartesian subject of modernism. This dislocation is, I believe, the most profound transformation constitutive of what we have come to call postmodernism.<sup>3</sup>

### CASE ONE: CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

In 1963 Carolee Schneemann stated the following in her personal notes:

That the body is in the eye; sensations received visually take hold on the total organism. That perception moves the total personality in excitation. . . . My visual dramas provide for an intensification



CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN, *EYE BODY*, 1963. PHOTOGRAPH BY ERRÓ. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

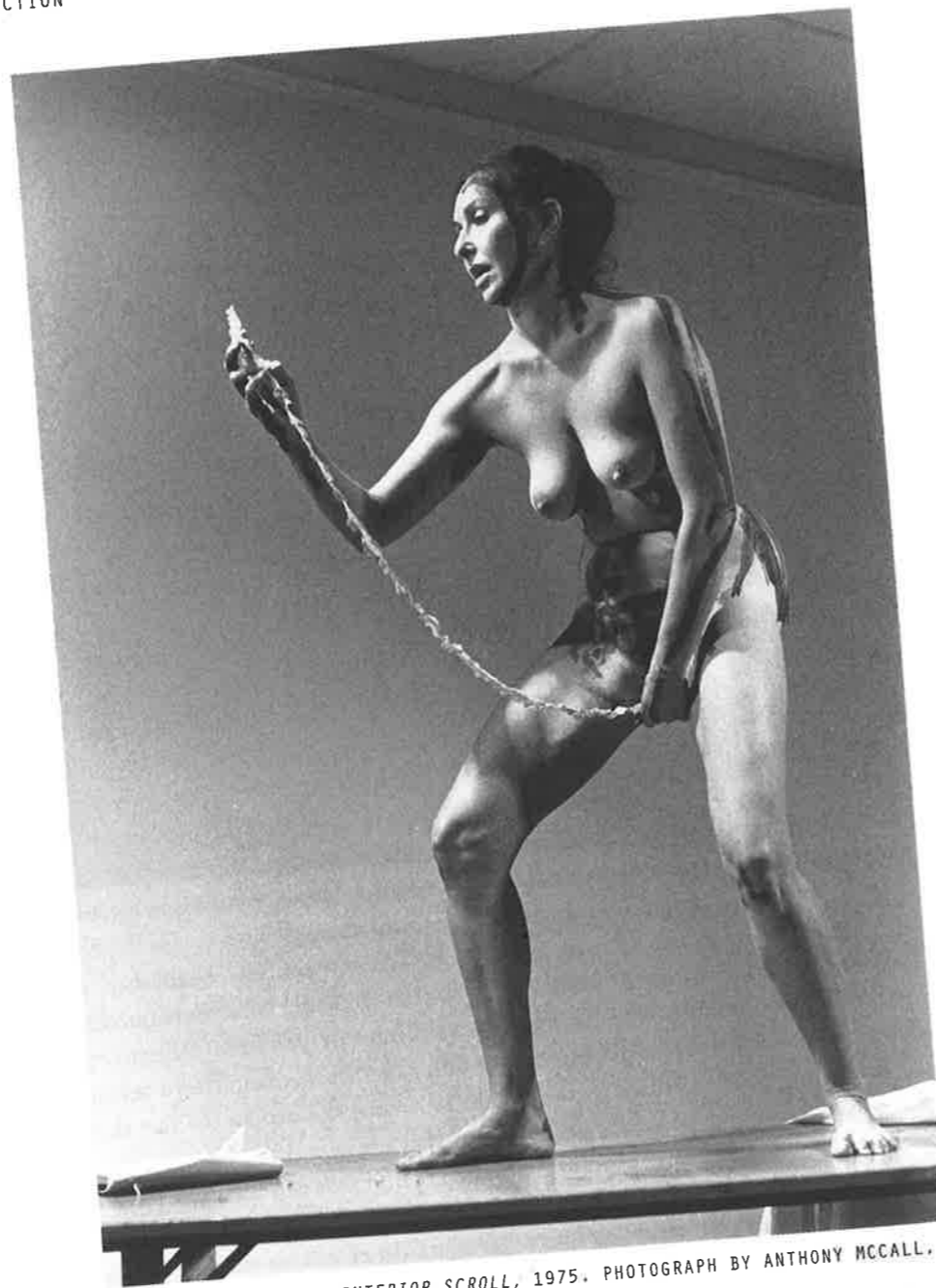
of all faculties simultaneously—apprehensions are called forth in wild juxtaposition. My eye creates, searches out expressive form in the materials I choose; such forms corresponding to a visual-kinaesthetic dimensionality; a visceral necessity drawn by the senses to the fingers of the eye . . . a mobile, tactile event into which the eye leads the body.<sup>4</sup>

In the same year Schneemann performed her eroticized body in a performance called *Eye Body*. "Covered in paint, grease, chalk, ropes, plastic," she has written, "I establish[ed] my body as visual territory," marking it as "an integral material" within a dramatic environmental construction of mirrors, painted panels, moving umbrellas, and motorized parts.<sup>5</sup> As early as 1963, then, several years before the development of a cohesive feminist movement in the visual arts, Schneemann deployed her sexualized body in and as her work within

the language of abstract expressionism but against the grain of its masculinist assumptions. Describing this piece in her book *More Than Meat Joy*, Schneemann is clear about her motivations: "In 1963 to use my body as an extension of my painting-constructions was to challenge and threaten the psychic territorial power lines by which women were admitted to the Art Stud Club."<sup>6</sup>

In *Interior Scroll*, originally performed in 1975, Schneemann extended her sexualized negotiation of the normative (masculine) subjectivity authorizing the modernist artist, performing herself in an erotically charged narrative of pleasure that challenges the fetishistic and scopophilic "male gaze."<sup>7</sup> Her face and body covered in strokes of paint, Schneemann pulled a long, thin coil of paper from her vagina ("like a ticker tape . . . plumb line . . . the umbilicus and tongue"), unrolling it to read a narrative text to the audience. Part of this text read as follows: "I met a happy man, / a structuralist filmmaker . . . he said we are fond of you / you are charming / but don't ask us / to look at your films / . . . we cannot look at / *the personal clutter / the persistence of feelings / the hand-touch sensibility*."<sup>8</sup> Through the action, which extends "exquisite sensation in motion" and "originates with . . . the fragile persistence of line moving into space," Schneemann integrated the occluded *interior* of the female body (with the vagina as "a translucent chamber") with its *mobile*, and apparently eminently readable (obviously "female") exterior.<sup>9</sup> Schneemann projects herself as fully embodied subject, who is also (but not only) object in relation to the audience (her "others"). The female subject is not simply a "picture" in Schneemann's scenario, but a deeply constituted (and never fully coherent) subjectivity in the phenomenological sense, dialectically articulated in relation to others in a continually negotiated exchange of desires and identifications.<sup>10</sup>

Through works such as *Interior Scroll* Schneemann has established a "passionate and convulsive" relationship to her audience that dynamically enacts the dislocation of the conventional structures of gendered subjectivity characteristic of this explosive period. Not only does Schneemann clearly refuse the fetishizing process, which requires that the woman not expose the fact that she is *not* lacking but possesses genitals (and they are nonmale), she also thus activates a mode of artistic production and reception that is dramatically *inter-subjective* and opens up the masculinist and racist ideology of individualism shoring up modernist formalism. This reigning model of artistic analysis (dominated by Clement Greenberg's then hegemonic formalist ideas) protected the authority of the (usually male, almost always white) critic or historian by veiling his investments, proposing a Kantian mode of "disinterested" analysis whereby the interpreter presumably determined the inherent meaning and value of the work through objective criteria.<sup>11</sup>



CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN, *INTERIOR SCROLL*, 1975. PHOTOGRAPH BY ANTHONY MCCALL.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

Body art is specifically antiformalist in impulse, opening up the circuits of desire informing artistic production and reception. Works that involve the artist's enactment of her or his body in all of its sexual, racial, and other particularities and overtly solicit spectatorial desires unhinge the very deep structures and assumptions embedded in the formalist model of art evaluation. Schneemann's self-enactment and engagement with the audience seriously compromise the myth of a "disinterested" art history or art criticism. The performative body, as Schneemann argues, "has a value that static depiction . . . representation won't carry"; she is concerned with breaking down the distancing effect of modernist practice: "my work has to do with cutting through the idealized (mostly male) mythology of the 'abstracted self' or the 'invented self'—i.e., work . . . [where the male artist] retain[s] power and distancing over the situation."<sup>12</sup>

Schneemann's work thus points to what I will argue in this book to be the particular potential of body art to destabilize the structures of conventional art history and criticism. In addition, *Interior Scroll* opens up the issue of the potentially heightened effects of *feminist* body art, as well as body-oriented projects by otherwise nonnormative artists who *particularize* their bodies/selves in order to expose and challenge the masculinism embedded in the assumption of "disinterestedness" behind conventional art history and criticism. As I will argue at length, it is such work that has the potential to eroticize the interpretive relation to radical ends by insisting on the *intersubjectivity* of all artistic production and reception. By surfacing the effects of the body as an integral component (a material enactment) of the self, the body artist strategically unveils the dynamic through which the artistic body is occluded (to ensure its phallic privilege) in conventional art history and criticism. By exaggeratedly performing the sexual, gender, ethnic, or other particularities of this body/self, the feminist or otherwise nonnormative body artist even more aggressively explodes the myths of disinterestedness and universality that authorize these conventional modes of evaluation.

#### CASE TWO: YAYOI KUSAMA

The particularization of the subject took an especially charged turn in the performative self-imagining of Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama. In a collage from the mid-1960s Kusama enacted herself as pinup on one of her vertiginous landscapes of phallic knobs, here a couch cradling Kusama as odalisque; this phallic/feminine image of Kusama embedded in her own work is glued above a strip of decidedly unerotic macaroni with a labyrinthine maze of one of her *Infinity Net* paintings covering the surface behind her. Here, naked and heavily made up in



YAYOI KUSAMA. *SEX OBSESSION FOOD OBSESSION MACARONI INFINITY NETS & KUSAMA*, 1962. PHOTOGRAPH BY HAL REIFF. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

the style of the 1960s, Kusama sports high heels, long black hair, and polka dots covering her bare flesh: all surfaces are activated in a screen of decoration, merging the body of the artist with her created universe of phallic, patterned hyperbole. I am especially interested in the role such images, as performative documents, play in enacting the artist as a public figure.<sup>13</sup> As Kris Kuramitsu has argued, this photograph "is only one of many that highlight [Kusama's] naked, Asian female body. These photographs, and the persona that cultivated/was cultivated by them is what engenders the usual terse assessment [in art discourse] of Kusama as 'problematic.'"<sup>14</sup> Or, in the words of J. F. Rodenbeck, "Priestess of Nudity, Psychotic Artist, the Polka-Dot Girl, Obsessional Artist, publicity hound: in the 1960s Yayoi Kusama was the target of a number of

epithets, some of them self-inflicted, all of them a part of an exhibitionist's notoriety."<sup>15</sup>

Working in New York at the time she was producing these performative images, Kusama played on what Kuramitsu calls her "doubled otherness"<sup>16</sup> vis-à-vis American culture: she is racially and sexually at odds with the normative conception of the artist as Euro-American male. Rather than veil her differences (which are seemingly irrefutably confirmed by the visible evidence of her "exotic" body), Kusama exacerbates them through self-display in a series of such flamboyant images. In this posed collage, she performs herself in a private setting for the public-making eye of the camera. But Kusama enacts her "exoticism" on a public register as well, executing other performances (including at least seventy-five performative events between 1967 and 1970)<sup>17</sup> and posing in more public situations. In a portrait of artists participating in the 1965 exhibition of the Nul group at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam,<sup>18</sup> Kusama sticks out like a sore thumb: there she stands, front and center—among a predictably bourgeois group of white, almost all male Euro-Americans (dressed in suits)—her tiny body swathed in a glowing white silk kimono.<sup>19</sup>

The pictures of Kusama are inextricably embedded in the discursive structure of ideas informing her work; viewers are forced to engage deeply with this particularized subject who so dramatically stages her work and/as her self. Too, in the collage images of Kusama such as the one discussed here, her body/self is literally absorbed into her work and indeed becomes it: "I was always standing at the center of the obsession over the passionate accretion and repetition inside me."<sup>20</sup> As Schneemann did in *Interior Scroll*, Kusama enacts her body in a reversibility of inside and out, the work of art/the environment is an enactment of Kusama and vice versa.

In her large-scale mirrored installations, such as *Kusama's Peep Show—Endless Love Show* (at Castellane Gallery in 1966), she forced the viewer into a similarly reversible relation.<sup>21</sup> Here, while listening to a loop of Beatles music, visitors poked their heads through openings in the wall of a closed, mirrored hexagonal room to see infinitely regressing reflections of themselves, illuminated by flashes of colored lights. A vertiginous sense of dislocation rocketed the visitor out of the complacent position of voyeurism conventionally staged and assumed vis-à-vis works of art. With such works, the spectator is locked into an exaggerated self-reflexivity that implies an erotic bond (an "endless love show")—one that is both completely narcissistic and necessarily complicitous with Kusama's (here absent) body/self.

In all of these works, Kusama refuses the artificial division—that which enables a "disinterested" criticism to take place—conventionally staged between

viewer and work of art. Folding the work of art into the artist (and vice versa), Kusama also sucks the viewer into a vortex of erotically charged repulsions and attractions (identifications) that ultimately intertwine viewer, artwork, and artist (as artwork). Kusama constructs obsessional scenes both to stage her particularized body/self and to express it externally—to spread it over the surrounding environment while simultaneously incorporating the environment into her own psychically enacted body/self: everything becomes a kind of extended flesh. But these scenes never fully contain Kusama, who performs herself well beyond the controlling mechanisms of art historical and critical analysis (hence her disturbance to the critical discourse, noted by Kuramitsu).

Am I an object? Am I a subject? Kusama performed these questions from the 1960s on, enacting herself ambivalently as celebrity (object of our desires) or artist (master of intentionality). Either way, Kusama opens herself (performatively) to the projections and desires of her audience (American, Japanese, European), enacting herself *as representation* (pace Warhol, she's on to the role of documentation in securing the position of the artist as beloved object of the art world's desires).<sup>22</sup> Kusama's gesture, which plays specifically with the intertwined tropes of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity (as well as those of artistic subjectivity in general), comprehends the particular resonance of such performative posing for women and those outside the Western tradition, subjects whose nonnormative bodies/selves would necessarily rupture embedded conceptions of artistic genius. It is Kusama's exaggeration of her otherness that seals this disturbance, building it into the effect of the work rather than veiling it to promote a formalist reading.<sup>23</sup>

Kusama's artistic strategies were inextricable from her identity politics and social politics; her work makes explicit the connections I trace throughout this book among social and identity politics and the deep interrogation of subjectivity characterizing this period. Kusama activated her always already marginalized body/self in a classically 1960s protest against bourgeois prudery, imperialism, racism, and sexism. Many of her public events were posed as demonstrations against the Vietnam War, and her strategic use of self-exposure was intimately linked to the openness urged by the sexual revolution: like Schneemann's body art works, Kusama's are both enactments and effects of the sexual revolution and antiwar movements as well as the women's movement.<sup>24</sup>

In its radical narcissism, where the distances between artist and artwork, artist and spectator are definitively collapsed, such body art practices profoundly challenge the reigning ideology of disinterested criticism. As I have already suggested, when the body in performance is female, obviously queer, nonwhite, exaggeratedly (hyper)masculine, or otherwise enacted against the grain

of the normative subject (the straight, white, upper-middle-class, male subject coincident with the category "artist" in Western culture), the hidden logic of exclusionism underlying modernist art history and criticism is exposed. The more exaggeratedly narcissistic and particularized this body is—that is, the more it surfaces and even exaggerates its nonuniversality in relation to its audience—the more strongly it has the potential to challenge the assumption of normativity built into modernist models of artistic evaluation, which rely on the body of the artist (embodied as male) yet veil this body to ensure the claim that the artist/genius "transcends" his body through creative production. As I will explore at greater length in chapter four, the narcissistic, particularized body both unveils the artist (as body/self necessarily implicated in the work of art as a situated, social act), turning her inside out, and strategically insists upon the contingency of this body/self on that of the viewer or interpreter of the work. As the artist is marked as contingent, so is the interpreter, who can no longer (without certain contradictions being put into play) claim disinterestedness in relation to this work of art (in this case, the body/self of the artist).

#### BODILY ENGAGEMENTS: A THEORETICAL PROJECT THAT IS DEEPLY HISTORICAL

It is important to emphasize that I argue that such body art works have the *potential* to achieve certain radically dislocating effects: it is one of the goals of this book to enact just the kind of engagement that I argue these works open up. That is, if I were to insist that Schneemann's and Kusama's practices *necessarily* destroy the structures of interpretation in art history and criticism, I would be denying the very notion of interpretation-as-exchange that this book attempts to argue through body art. I would also be hard put to explain why these structures are still so firmly in place so much of the time if this work I discuss has really been so destructive of them; and, finally, I would be catching myself in a fundamental hermeneutic dilemma, since I would be defining works that supposedly will not allow definitive interpretation (and suggesting that I am somehow "outside of" the structures and assumptions of conventional interpretive models). To this end, all of the projects highlighted in this book are described and interpreted through a model of *engagement* that allows for and indeed frequently foregrounds my own investment in reading them in particular ways. These are strategic readings meant to highlight specific aspects of postmodern subjectivity and specific art historical questions. At the same time, I have tried throughout to stay close enough to the documentation and other critical discourses that have framed the works historically so as not to provide readings that are pure fantasy.<sup>25</sup> I am fully responsible for these readings, which are highly invested and meant to be provocative.

Again, I stress the notion of *engagement* and *exchange*: I engage with what I experience as these works in relation to contemporaneous theories of subjectivity and aesthetics; I consider my readings to be a dialogue with the bodies/selves articulated in these important practices. This project thus attempts to enact the "paradoxical performative" that art historian Thierry de Duve has located as constitutive of postmodernism: it proclaims body art projects as radically postmodern even as it makes them so—it *performs* their postmodernism.<sup>26</sup> My readings themselves are offered as "performances," as suggestive, open-ended engagements rather than definitive answers to the question of what and how body art means in contemporary culture.<sup>27</sup> But a fundamental dilemma is built into this project: while I argue that these works in various ways challenge the framing apparatuses of modernist criticism and art history and reconceive the subject, in so doing I inevitably reframe them through my own invested point of view and refix the works as having particular meanings. I have generally tried to avoid sinking too deeply into the mire of this contradiction by reading the works as enactments of subjects (bodies/selves) whose meanings are contingent on the *process* of enactment rather than attributing motives to the authors as individuals or origins of consciousness and intentionality; in the cases where I know the artists personally, this is inevitably a fraught enterprise and I simply try to surface the particularities of these relationships.<sup>28</sup>

It should be clear by now that this book is not a history of performance or body art but a study, through the intensive exploration of particular practices, of the ways in which body art radically negotiates the structures of interpretation that inform our understanding of visual culture. It is also an exploration of body art as an instantiation of the profound shift in the conception and experience of subjectivity that has occurred over the past three decades. Schneemann's and Kusama's performative self-exposures, their enactments of themselves as both author and object, dramatize this shift: these projects insistently pose the subject as *intersubjective* (contingent on the other) rather than complete within itself (the Cartesian subject who is centered and fully self-knowing in his cognition). These projects make clear that the Cartesian "I think therefore I am," the logic powering modernist art theory and practice wherein the body (privileged as male) is transcended through pure thought or creation, is no longer viable in the decentering regime of postmodernism (if it ever was).

The issues addressed in this book, then, are deeply theorized in terms of models of subjectivity, artistic meaning, and identity formation, but they are also implicitly and explicitly historical. I suggest—reading through body art—that the very poststructuralist model of the subject as decentered is itself a

broadly historical idea, corresponding to the complex interrelationships and transformations in recent intellectual history as well as shifts within the political, social, and cultural arenas. Frustrated with what I view as an increasingly narrow, instrumental conception of postmodernism in the visual arts (as characterized by formal techniques such as montage and allegory or avant-gardist strategies such as Brechtian distancing), as well as by the frequent use of reductive Lacanian models that reduce art reception to purely visual models, I turn strategically to body art and to a phenomenologically inflected feminist poststructuralism (particularly the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as read through Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and others) to *re-embody* the subjects of making and viewing art.<sup>29</sup> Informed and driven by the vicissitudes of body art itself, I attempt to provide a more complex model for understanding postmodernism.

In this book, theory and practice are viewed as mutually constitutive. Thus, I do not view poststructuralism (or even economic or social shifts or body art itself) as having "caused" the death of the centered subject; nor do I view any of these as, strictly speaking, effects of the decentering of the Cartesian subject. I view poststructuralism (in its feminist and phenomenological dimensions) as one of the most dynamic modes of the speaking of a new experience of subjectivity, as the philosophical version of what body art enacts in the realm of culture. While body art is surely not the *only* type of cultural production to instantiate the dispersal of the modernist subject (a fair amount of the discourse surrounding feminist art has pivoted around claims that various practices exemplify this dispersal), I argue here that it is one of the most dramatic and thorough to do so *if it is engaged with on the deepest levels of its production*, precisely because of its entailment of the subject as embodied in all of its particularities of race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on.

At the same time, social, political, and cultural context is crucial to this analysis of what body art (and, for that matter, poststructuralism, feminism, and theories of postmodernism) can tell us about our current experience of subjectivity. I address throughout the book issues such as the suppressed crisis of masculinity in the 1950s and the rise of activism in the 1950s and into the 1960s and 1970s (including the rights movements, which began insistently to foreground the particularization of subjectivity that the most powerful body art projects address); the obvious impact of the Vietnam War and its attendant protests on, especially, Americans' conception of their relationship to the state is a subtextual but also crucial context in the shift to an unveiled, activist artistic body, as are the free love and drug cultures so active during this period (they promoted an atmosphere of experimentation to which body art is intimately

connected).<sup>30</sup> The multinationalization of economies and the proliferation of increasingly advanced technologies of representation and communication are discussed as deeply implicated in articulations of the body in more recent work.

It is important to stress again that neither poststructuralism nor these other social events and processes are to be viewed as "causes" of body art, nor is body art seen to be their motivating "origin." Rather, body art—like these other elements—is examined as an *instantiation* (both an articulation and a reflection) of profound shifts in the notion and experience of subjectivity over the past thirty to forty years. The key question I address through my engagement with body art is the question that initially motivated my interest in this topic: why, climaxing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, did the implicitly masculine, modernist artistic subject (who had been largely veiled under the rhetoric of "disinterestedness" in art criticism and art history) come increasingly into question through a performative conception of the artist/self as in process, commodifiable as art object (*viz.* Kusama), and intersubjectively related to the audience/interpreter?<sup>31</sup>

#### BODY ART VERSUS PERFORMANCE

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a disassociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration.  
—MICHEL FOUCAULT<sup>32</sup>

The body is at once the most solid, the most elusive, illusory, concrete, metaphorical, ever present and ever distant thing—a site, an instrument, an environment, a singularity and a multiplicity. The body is the most proximate and immediate feature of my social self, a necessary feature of my social location and of my personal enselfment and at the same time an aspect of my personal alienation in the natural environment.  
—BRYAN TURNER<sup>33</sup>

[T]he body itself . . . is both biological and psychical. This understanding of the body as a hinge or threshold between nature and culture makes the limitations of a genetic, or purely anatomical or physiological, account of bodies explicit.  
—ELIZABETH GROSZ<sup>34</sup>

These evocative descriptions of the body open up the problematic of body art and lead me to clarify why I use the term "body art" rather than the perhaps more obvious "performance art" rubric. I use "body art" rather than "perfor-

mance art" for a number of interrelated reasons. First, linking back to the descriptions of the body I have mentioned (all exemplary of a poststructuralist theory of embodied subjectivity), I want to highlight the position of the *body*—as locus of a "disintegrated" or dispersed "self," as elusive marker of the subject's place in the social, as "hinge" between nature and culture—in the practices I address here. The term "body art" thus emphasizes the implication of the body (or what I call the "body/self," with all of its apparent racial, sexual, gender, class, and other apparent or unconscious identifications) in the work. It also highlights both the artistic and the philosophical aspects of this project— aspects that, I am arguing, are deeply intertwined and mutually implicated in the profound shift in the conception of subjectivity that I am "performing" here (through body art) as constitutive of the condition of postmodernism.

Second, while I tangentially make note of the broader history of "performance" in the visual arts, I focus in this book on a particular moment in which the body emerged into the visual artwork in a particularly charged and dramatically sexualized and gendered way. The work that emerged during this period—from the 1960s to the mid 1970s—was labeled "body art" or "body-works" by several contemporaneous writers who wished to differentiate it from a conception of "performance art" that was at once broader (in that it reached back to dada and encompassed any kind of theatricalized production on the part of a visual artist) and narrower (in that it implied that a performance must actually take place in front of an audience, most often in an explicitly theatrical, proscenium-based setting).<sup>35</sup> I am interested in work that may or may not initially have taken place in front of an audience: in works—such as those by Kusama, Schneemann, Vito Acconci, Yves Klein, and Hannah Wilke—that *take place through an enactment of the artist's body*, whether it be in a "performance" setting or in the relative privacy of the studio, *that is then documented such that it can be experienced subsequently through photography, film, video, and/or text*. In this way, I see body art as a complex extension of portraiture in general (as will emerge in chapter 2) as well as an obvious negotiation of the trajectory of performance art that emerged from the early-twentieth-century European avant-gardes.<sup>36</sup>

Performance art has typically been defined as motivated by a "redemptive belief in the capacity of art to transform human life," as a vehicle for social change, and as a radical merging of life and art.<sup>37</sup> As I explore it here, body art is both far more and far less than this. Articulated by artists such as Schneemann, Kusama, Vito Acconci, and Hannah Wilke, body art does not strive toward a utopian redemption but, rather, places the body/self within the realm of the aesthetic as a *political domain* (articulated through the aestheticization of the particularized body/self, itself embedded in the social) and so unveils the



hidden body that secured the authority of modernism.<sup>38</sup> Again, in this regard body art is *not* "inherently" critical, as many have claimed,<sup>39</sup> nor (as we will see others have argued) inherently reactionary, but rather—in its opening up of the interpretive relation and its active solicitation of spectatorial desire—provides the *possibility* for radical engagements that can transform the way we think about meaning and subjectivity (both the artist's and our own). In its activation of intersubjectivity, body art, in fact, demonstrates that meaning is an exchange and points to the impossibility of any practice being "inherently" positive or negative in cultural value.

As François Pluchart melodramatically warned in 1974, body art "is not a new artistic recipe meant to be recorded tranquilly in an history of art which is bankrupt,"<sup>40</sup> particularly in its shifting of the very parameters by which this history is constructed. Body art—which projects the body of the artist into the work as a particularized subject, revising, as Ira Licht argued in 1975, "the relationship among artist, subject and public"—encourages us to rethink the very methods by which we fabricate histories of art and to rethink the ways in which we understand meaning to take place.<sup>41</sup> Thus, we will see that it is *body art* rather than performance art that specifically opens out the closed circuits by which the art object was determined to have significance within modernist criticism. Body art proposes the art "object" as a site where reception and production come together: a site of intersubjectivity.<sup>42</sup> Body art confirms what phenomenology and psychoanalysis have taught us: that the subject "means" always in relationship to others and the locus of identity is always elsewhere.

As I view body art here, it does two potentially radical things. By surfacing the desires informing interpretation, it encourages a "performance of theory" that aims "to replot the relation between perceiver and object, between self and other,"<sup>43</sup> illustrating what is at stake in such claims by encouraging acts of interpretation that themselves are performative. And it opens out subjectivity *as* performative, contingent, and always particularized rather than universal, implicating the interpreter (with all of her investedness, biases, and desires) within the meanings and cultural values ascribed to the work of art.

#### THE BODY OF THE TEXT

The chapter following this introduction seeks to provide a firm historical and theoretical basis for the book by aligning body art with the philosophical (phenomenological, feminist, poststructuralist) theories of subjectivity that it both amplifies and takes radical value from. Following an examination of the tendency to downplay or ignore body art in art discourse from the mid 1970s onward, which locates the politics of this omission in relation to the fixation on

avant-gardist theories of cultural production and narrowly visual models of the "gaze," I trace a particular intellectual history in the United States and France from the 1950s onward. I foreground Ana Mendieta's performative artistic project as exemplary of the problematics of presence and absence brought to the surface by body art, exploring the ontology of body art projects and addressing the specificity of their multiplicitous existence as "live" performances, photographic, textual, film, and/or video documentations.

This history highlights the repressed phenomenological dimension of the French poststructuralist theories that have so deeply informed dominant discourses about postmodern art, stressing the *embodiment* of subjectivity over what has come to be a reigning model of pure visibility. In order to understand the way in which body art (which I discuss largely as a U.S. and European phenomenon, foregrounding U.S. practices) inflects and is inflected by the poststructuralist conception of the dispersed or decentered subject, I thus trace an intellectual history through the phenomenological arguments of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, linking his radical critique of the Cartesian subject to Simone de Beauvoir's specifically *feminist* rethinking of the existentialist and phenomenological theory of the social subject in *The Second Sex* and then to phenomenologically inflected, feminist poststructuralist models of performative subjectivity.

Through this renewed attention to a phenomenology updated through poststructuralist and feminist thought, I set the stage for a new understanding of the ways in which body art, in particular, can radicalize our understanding of postmodernism as not only a new mode of visual production but also a dramatically revised paradigm of the subject and of how meaning and value are determined in relation to works of art. The chapter thus suggests that engaging deeply with the contradictions and insights regarding the subjects of making and viewing put into play in body art projects can develop a new (implicitly feminist) reading praxis that is suspicious of the assumptions and privileges embedded in and veiled by conventional, masculinist models of artistic interpretation.<sup>44</sup>

Chapter 2 is an extended exploration of Jackson Pollock, who has functioned in art discourse as a kind of hinge or pivot between the modernist genius and the performative subject of postmodernism. Pollock (as perceived and interpreted through the well-known series of photographs of him painting by Hans Namuth and others taken around 1950) is a figure who was first, in de Duve's paradoxical performative, *spoken* as the quintessential modernist genius: Pollock's body is veiled and his transcendence averred by enthusiastic supporters such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, whose image of Pollock as "action painter" celebrates his existentialist triumph over the mute

canvas.<sup>45</sup> Pollock is then *rearticulated* as a crucial origin for the performative artistic subject of postmodernism by younger artists such as Allan Kaprow (who, in his formative 1958 essay "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," reworks Rosenberg's action painting existentialist Pollock into an aggressively performative one).<sup>46</sup> Pollock is thus engaged with and opened out as a *performative author function* (Michel Foucault's useful term for the "plurality of egos" put into play by the cultural text.)<sup>47</sup> This focus on Pollock clarifies my approach to the "author" (the body/self) of the body art project as a "function" of my engagement with its multivalent "texts" (photographs, "live" performance, etc.). Stressing its performative dimension, I call this particular author function the "Pollockian performative."

Examining at some length the historical contexts for what I term Pollock's "equivocal masculinity" (with Pollock enacted both as a quintessential centered subject of *modernism* and then as feminized/homosexualized and proto-postmodern subject/object of spectatorial engagement in his theatrical photographic display), I address 1950s U.S. culture and its celebration of the "individual" (which itself relates to the Cartesian subject addressed by French theory). The chapter thus reviews the critical reception of Pollock through a feminist and phenomenological grid that emphasizes the transferential, intersubjective dimension of how, on the one hand, an artist and her or his works come to mean in relation to her or his publicly articulated body/self; and, on the other, of how performativity is not simply "adopted" by a younger generation of artists spontaneously in the 1960s but, rather, was always already a part of modernism (again, this relates to the paradoxical performative that appropriates and exaggeratedly rearticulates particular modernist practices as postmodern).

Chapters 3 and 4 take on specific case studies in order to delve more deeply into the dramatic shifts I identify in relation to body art. Chapter 3 deals with Vito Acconci's body art practices from the late 1960s and early 1970s, which I read in relation to the then still powerful Pollock myth. I view Acconci's performance and video-oriented works through poststructuralist, feminist, and phenomenologically oriented theories of subjectivity to argue that he both stages the heterosexual masculine norm of subjectivity and, by overtly theatricalizing himself in relation to his own eroticism and the desires of female subjects (often within the pieces themselves), potentially destabilizes its link to cultural privilege. As I engage with his work, Acconci opens himself to the other and makes his heterosexual, white masculinity extremely vulnerable to the penetratory gazes of spectatorial desire (both female and male).

In relation to Hannah Wilke's work I explore at length the way in which the female subject who displays her body/self is always forced to negotiate what

Craig Owens astutely termed the "rhetoric of the pose."<sup>48</sup> Wilke's work, which insistently articulates what I call the radical narcissism typical of much feminist body art from this period (already noted in relation to Kusama), flamboyantly objectifies the (her) female body but also simultaneously performs her body/self as subject. At the same time, a usually ignored dimension of Wilke's work traces the intersection between her woundedness as an objectified female in Western culture and her "scars" from the anti-Semitic prejudices that externally condition her relationship, as a Jewish female, to dominant Western culture. In this way, I argue that Wilke's radical narcissism (which perverts the simplistic conception of self-other relations by pulling the viewer/other inexorably into Wilke's interpersonal structures of viewing and self-display) also politicizes white feminism by particularizing her femininity in terms of her ethnicity.

The final chapter explores the return to the body in recent work after a decade or so of antipathy in art discourse toward any artwork negotiating, representing, or otherwise addressing subjectivity in terms of the body. Again, I use several practices as case studies to explore in some depth the ways in which recent body-oriented practices articulate even more aggressively the dispersal of the subject traced in poststructuralism and earlier body art. The performative installation work of Maureen Connor and the large-scale technoperformances and CD-ROM project of Laurie Anderson facilitate a discussion of what I call the "technophenomenological body," allowing a preliminary reworking of phenomenology through these technologically based rearticulations of the gender-particularized subject. Lyle Ashton Harris's dramatic extension of a feminizing narcissism and Laura Aguilar's highly charged articulation of a personalized and particularized subjectivity—both enacted through the technological gaze of the photographic image—exemplify the ways in which the effects of new technologies and the transformations wrought by 1970s identity politics have informed a powerful new approach to identities and explorations of subjectivity. Thus Aguilar uses her body in her work, mediated through technologies of representation, to enact a subject that is simultaneously particularized (Latina, lesbian, artist, dyslexic) and dispersed (engaging with the audience, she defines the viewer as the "self" that has designated her elusive "otherness"). Aguilar enacts just the dynamic of intersubjectivity that I argue is constitutive of the most powerful effects of recent body-oriented practices: she solicits her viewers to *make us responsible* for the effects of our own perceptions and interpretive judgments.

Finally, I examine the work of artists Orlan and Bob Flanagan, both of whom (for very different reasons) have had their bodies mutilated, turning them *inside out* and thus deeply interrogating what it means to be a body/self in

this hypercommodified end of the millennium. Orlan's now notorious facial surgeries, choreographed and publicly documented in performances that aim to transform her either into an amalgam of ideal feminine features from art historical images or into a grotesque parody of "perfect" femininity, and Flanagan's humorous approach to having his body parts lacerated in sadomasochistic performances bring to the surface basic taboos informing our ongoing desire to transcend our bodies through fantasy, technology, or (in Cartesian terms) "pure" thought. Their projects, I argue, also end up reinforcing the inexorability of our embodiment, of the body as "meat," and thus reconfirm the importance of maintaining an embodied theory of postmodern art and subjectivity that accounts for rather than suppresses the contradictions, difficulties, and traumatic engagements involved in our relationship to the world.

Often using high tech modes of presentation—such as digitized imagery projected in installation formats—artists in the 1990s construct fragmented, dispersed, and explicitly particularized subjects that encourage the spectator's committed engagement. These works are not only insistently intersubjective, they are also what Vivian Sobchack terms *interobjective*: they clarify the subject's interrelatedness with the world (of others as well as things).<sup>49</sup> Such an insistence on the interrelatedness of subjects and objects, our inevitable simultaneous existence as subject and object, and our interdependence with our environments asserts the necessary responsibility of the multiplicitous and dispersed, but fully embodied, social and political subject.

Thus, while I am arguing that postmodernism is, indeed, characterized by the splitting, decentering, dislocation, or fragmentation of the self that is either celebrated or lamented in so much contemporary cultural theory, this dispersal is played out here, through recent body-oriented practices, as having potentially radically progressive and inevitably political effects. It is in these recent projects, which extend the intersubjective dimension of 1960s and 1970s body art as well as exaggerating the dispersal and particularization of the subject enacted in poststructuralist theory, that the postmodern "cyborg" subject so popular in much recent technothory is most dramatically enacted in all of its complexities. The profound shifts in our experience of ourselves and the world occasioned by new bio-, communications, and travel technologies are both performed by and reflected in recent body-oriented practices, which can thus tell us a great deal about the philosophical and political implications of this rethought paradigm of the condition of postmodernism.

Finally, then, this book *uses* body art (including here the body-oriented practices of recent years) to move beyond the rather reified conceptions of postmodernism dominating contemporary art discourse. When it is engaged

with through a phenomenologically informed feminism, body art can open up the entire domain of art interpretation, encouraging the development of a new reading praxis that acknowledges the masculinist, racist, homophobic, and classist assumptions underlying the disciplines of art history and criticism and their rhetoric of "disinterested" aesthetic judgment and historical narration. Body art practices surface our embeddedness in the determinations of meaning and value. Body art practices *perform* the gradual but dramatic shift that has occurred over this past half century in the very articulation of the subject within the social domain.