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## *The Body Is Power*

*positive, liberated, material body*

The early Sixties artworks are rife with impudent bodily images. Robert Whitman's sensuous Happenings, Tom Wesselmann's Great American Nude series, Claes Oldenburg's bulging soft sculptures, the Baudelairean cinema, the physicalized drama of the Living Theater and the Open Theater, the concretions of Fluxus, performance poetry, and, above all, the dance pieces by choreographers, composers, and visual artists asserted the concreteness, intimacy, and messiness of the human body as not only acceptable, but beautiful. Robert Whitman wrote of his Happenings, "I intend my works to be stories of physical experience." For Joseph Chaikin, the mainstream theater—and indeed, he insisted, mainstream society—had neglected the body; in the Open Theater one tried to "bring one's

body into [the work]."<sup>1</sup> Claes Oldenburg had written in an early statement that his view of art was firmly rooted in human anatomy:

I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself. . . .

I am for art that is put on and taken off, like pants, which develops holes, like socks, which is eaten, like a piece of pie, or abandoned with great contempt, like a piece of shit. . . .

I am for art covered with bandages. I am for art that limps and rolls and runs and jumps. . . .

I am for art that coils and grunts like a wrestler. I am for art that sheds hair.

I am for art you can sit on. I am for art you can pick your nose with or scrub your toes on.

I am for art from a pocket, from deep channels of the ear, from the edge of a knife, from the corners of the mouth, struck in the eye or worn on the wrist. . . .

I am for the art of sweat that develops between crossed legs. . . .

I am for an art that is combed down, that is hung from each ear, that is laid on the lips and under the eyes, that is shaved from the legs, that is brushed on the teeth, that is fixed on the thighs, that is slipped on the foot.<sup>2</sup>

The Oldenburgian body—and art—is comfortable, sloppy, erotic, and unpretentious.

By the late Sixties Yvonne Rainer summed up her choreographic investigations this way:

If my rage at the impoverishment of ideas, narcissism, and disguised sexual exhibitionism of most dancing can be considered puritan moralizing, it is also true that I love the body—its actual weight, mass, and unenhanced physicality. It is my overall concern to reveal people as they are engaged in various kinds of activities—alone, with each other, with objects—and to weight the quality of the human body toward that of objects and away from the superstylization of the dancer. Interaction and cooperation on the one hand; substantiality and inertia on the other.<sup>3</sup>

For Rainer, as for Oldenburg, the "actual," unidealized body had been for-gotten in art. Even dance, the art of the body, had been engaged in masking

human materiality, which Rainer was committed to installing center stage.

The way to the exaltation of the body (and the alternative that the physical body offered to the primacy of the verbal) had been pointed to earlier by artist/theorists such as Paul Goodman, who wrote, about his 1955 play *The Young Disciple*: "I have tried in this play to lay great emphasis on the pre-verbal elements of theatre, trembling, beating, breathing hard and ranting. I am well aware that the actors we have are quite unable both by character and training to open their throats to such sounds or loosen their limbs to such motions."<sup>4</sup> The poet Charles Olson's seminal 1950 essay "Projective Verse" spoke of the poem as originating in the breath and celebrated "the *kinetics* of the thing."<sup>5</sup> But the Sixties artists took the knowledge and power of the body to new extremes. Their insistence on a festive, liberated, material body took many forms.

In a period when the body was becoming ever freer of social restrictions in such general American cultural domains as sexual activity, social dancing, and fashion, the artists took a vanguard position in stressing the primacy of bodily experience. They pushed artistic representations of the body to their symbolic and material limits. An array of potent bodily meanings was produced, meanings that were interrelated in their indulgence in every aspect of the human form and their imaginative oxymoronic reconceptions of the human form as a set of opposites. The effervescent body—with its emphasis on the material strata of digestion, excretion, procreation, and death—coexists in these artworks with the object-body, the technological body, and the botanic or vegetative body. The avant-garde artists dealt in various ways with the social classification of the body along racial and gender lines. They opened up new arenas of sexual expression. And their utopian project of organic unity also created a vision of the "conscious body," in which mind and body were no longer split but harmoniously integrated. The simultaneous affirmation of the body's substance and the metaphoric refiguring of it as a series of contraries, added to the wide-ranging exploration of its social meanings and possibilities, signal the extraordinary confidence and power that Sixties artists invested in the body. In their hands it became an effervescent body that exuded what they saw as the amazing grace of fleshly reality.

### *The Effervescent Body*

In Alison Knowles's *Proposition*, performed at several Fluxus concerts, the artist made a salad for everyone in the audience. In a 1963 exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery, Jim Dine showed collage paintings with actual bath-

room fixtures as central elements. Allan Kaprow's *A Spring Happening* was a ritual of rebirth, with overtones of death. In Stan Brakhage's film *Window Water Baby Moving*, the filmmaker recorded the birth of his first child.

These works—concerned with food, eating, the digestive process, excretion, and the decay and birth of the human body—are exceedingly carnal. They detonate polite discourse with their gross references to the lower stratum of human existence. Knowledge's act of feeding is a generous one, but it is also intimate. It overflows the boundaries of the stage and the performer's conventional physical isolation from the spectator. And it comments a human relationship between the performer and spectator with a gesture of alimentary incorporation, opening the spectator's body to the performer.<sup>6</sup>

This openness of the physical form is an important element of what, borrowing concepts from the British anthropologist Mary Douglas and the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, I call the effervescent, grotesque body.<sup>7</sup> The effervescent, grotesque body is seen as literally open to the world, blending easily with animals, objects, and other bodies. Its boundaries are permeable; its parts are surprisingly autonomous; it is everywhere open to the world. It freely indulges in excessive eating, drinking, sexual activity, and every other imaginable sort of licentious behavior. And it is precisely by means of the image of this grotesque body of misrule that unofficial culture has poked holes in the decorum and hegemony of official culture.<sup>8</sup>

Like Duchamp's *Fountain* before them, Dine's bathroom fixtures install in the artwork references to the most private of actions, whose representation is ordinarily taboo in polite society and whose actual performance is hidden even from one's intimates. Here, Dine deliberately soiled the rhetoric of the beautiful and the sublime, not merely with humble images of the mundane, but with what is conventionally considered filth (whether it is the kind to be flushed away or the kind to be washed away). Furthermore, not only is there reference to the activities of the body's lower strata; despite the fixtures' cold, hard textures of metal and porcelain, there is in Dine's fixtures an unsettling physical resemblance between the plumbing—with its holes, bulges, and tubes—and the orifices and protruberances of the human body itself.<sup>9</sup>

In Kaprow's *Happening*, birth and death are viewed as intermingled, and both are seen unflinchingly as part of life. The audience was seated in a dark, claustrophobic tunnel. Through small slits in the side of their crowded "cattleca," the spectators witnessed mysterious, often noisy events: metal barrels crashed through the outside space; machines rumbled; matches

flamed, hissed, and went out; two men jostled with wooden branches; a nude woman sprouted greens from her mouth, then was suddenly covered by a blanket. The critic Jill Johnston described the piece as taking place in "an ingenious womb," or perhaps a tomb. This happening, she remarked, was "like our ancestral rituals . . . [a] fertility rite" in its terrifying creative force.<sup>10</sup> Kaprow's imagery is connected to one of the important aspects of Bakhtin's grotesque conception of the body: it "degrades" the human form in a positive way. That is, bringing its subjects down to earth, it recombodies what official culture had disembodied, or etherialized.<sup>11</sup>

In our culture the act of birthing has been sanitized and denatured. Made part of the medical regime, rather than part of ordinary life, it is a private, almost secret event that takes place in the sanctum of the hospital's maternity ward. Although in recent years the maternity ward has opened up to fathers and immediate families, in the early Sixties, birthing was a private act, attended only by the mother, her obstetrician, and his nurses and other assistants. In Brakhage's film, this private act of birthing emerges publicly in all of its bloody detail, animal instinct, and human pain and excitement. It also is reclaimed as private not in the sense of secret medical knowledge, but private in the sense of domestic—something shared by the husband and father. Brakhage's film emphasizes the image of two bodies in one—in the pregnant belly and in the baby emerging from its mother's womb. The mother's body is no longer private, but literally open, sharing, becoming, and emerging. It is generous and generative, swollen to immense proportions and sowing new life in the world. It is a social and historical body, not an individual one, for it contains and continues the family and the community.<sup>12</sup>

Given the predilection of Sixties artists for the styles as well as the political import of folk and popular genres, it is easy to see why the image of the Bakhtinian grotesque body is central to their work. This body is a dialectical one that, always in the process of becoming, includes within it dual states—animal and vegetable, death and birth, childhood and old age. It is, moreover, an anticlassical body that, rooted in folk humor, "uncrowns and renews" all of official culture.<sup>13</sup> Above all, these forms not only emphasize "the material bodily principle" but harness it to a utopian conception where the disparate strata of cosmos, society, and body are unified. Thus, the effervescent body is a profoundly political symbol. It is the medium for a cluster of artistic genres that challenge elitist classical representation with their unbridled bodily images. But it is first and foremost a body of carnivalesque performance.<sup>14</sup>

Through the framework of the medieval festival, the folk constructed

an alternative world. Contrary to the official ecclesiastical or state feasts—which upheld the status quo, symbolically reinforcing hierarchies, values, prohibitions, and official histories—folk festivals, according to Bakhtin, “were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.”<sup>15</sup> In the realm of carnival, these social values are vitally connected with play, with the fusing of life and death, and with the urgency of the visceral body. This multileveled connection of the body’s power with the carnival and the subversion of official culture is the reason why, Bakhtin tells us, “the material bodily principle is a triumphant, festive principle, it is a ‘banquet for all the world.’”<sup>16</sup>

When it becomes effervescent, the body constructed by the rules of polite conduct is turned inside out—by emphasizing food, digestion, excretion, and procreation—and upside down—by stressing the lower stratum (sex and excretion) over the upper stratum (the head and all that it implies). And, importantly, the effervescent, grotesque body challenges the “new bodily canon”—the closed, private, psychologized, and singular body—of the modern, post-Renaissance world of individual self-sufficiency. For it speaks of the body as a historical as well as a collective entity. “The grotesque conception of the body is interwoven not only with the cosmic but also with the social, utopian, and historic theme, and above all with the theme of the change of epochs and the renewal of culture.”<sup>17</sup>

### *The Gustatory Body*

Two exemplary works from 1963–64 powerfully illustrate a crucial set of effervescent or grotesque bodily images: the gaping mouth and the act of swallowing. Not only do these images symbolize the abundance of the festive banquet; they also lead through the passageways of the body from the head to the lower stratum. Both Allan Kaprow and Andy Warhol made works in 1963–64 entitled *Eat*. Warhol’s was his film, black and white, and silent, in which the Pop artist Robert Indiana eats a mushroom for forty-five minutes. The camera does not move, nor does Indiana, much. Like Steve Paxton’s dance for Robert Dunn’s composition class in which he simply ate a sandwich, Warhol’s *Eat* invited its audience to watch an aspect of daily life not usually singled out for attention in polite social intercourse. That is, usually we eat *with* others, and we are supposed to make it a social, not a physical event; we notice what they say, not how they put their food in their mouth. Moreover, unless they are children we are feeding, or lovers we are erotically engaging, it is usually considered rude to examine others

as they eat. To watch others eat is to claim intimacy with them, if not power over them. Certainly in Warhol’s film the sense of the camera as a voyeuristic witness to this solitary, slow, sensuous activity—Indiana’s fingers in his mouth look positively masturbatory—conflates eating with sexuality.

Allan Kaprow’s *Eat*, a Happening, took place in a cave in the Bronx that had been used by the Ebling Brewery. As Michael Kirby describes it, the cave exuded a sense of decay. In it, Kaprow built an environment out of charred beams, wooden platforms and towers, and ladders, in which, at different stations, the visitors were offered wine, apples, fried and raw bananas, jam sandwiches, and salted potatoes. It is striking that Kaprow’s map of the floor plan for *Eat* resembles a diagram of a uterus; Peter Moore’s photographs show a wet, dark place with curved walls and ceilings. There is a distinctly organic sensibility in *Eat*, as if the participants themselves were inside a body. In fact, there are two movements of ingestion in the performance, as the cave “swallows up” the visitors and as they themselves eat what is offered to them inside the “body” of the cave.

Adding to this body symbolism is Kaprow’s suggestive description of the work as “a semi-eucharistic ritual.” Thus, the food itself—although not the prescribed wafer of the Catholic Eucharist—could be thought of as a body. And the wine—although it was both red and white—could be thought of as blood. Just as eating and sexuality are conflated in Warhol’s film, here the imagery in the cave is an amalgam of digestive and reproductive functions—made even more extreme by the inside-out corporeal quality. That women served the wine to the visitors (unlike in a Catholic Eucharist where in the early Sixties a priest would usually perform the ministrations) and that women served much of the food adds to the iconography of reproductivity. Like mothers, who not only reproduce the species in the sense of procreation, but also by feeding and nurturing men and children, these women fed and cared for the visitors in this subterranean belly—somewhere between a stomach and a womb.<sup>18</sup>

For Peter Schumann, the sacramental aspect of food became inextricable from his concept of theater in the early Sixties. Naming his group Bread and Puppet Theater in 1963 directly addressed the issue of theater as both basic to human life and as something that should be as simple and nourishing as the staff of life. His homiletic folk theater style, with its sources in medieval diableries, delighted in the materiality of the body. Here, bread was the symbol of the simplicity and holiness of ordinary people’s lives. It restored a substantial body to the theater, which Schumann criticized as too often concerned with surfaces rather than depths. Offering bread and

theater to audience members, Schumann has written, was meant to reach deeply into both body and soul:

We sometimes give you a piece of bread along with the puppet show because bread and theatre belong together. For a long time the theatre arts have been separated from the stomach. Theatre was entertainment. Entertainment was meant for the skin. Bread was meant for the stomach. The old rites of baking, and eating, and offering bread were forgotten. The bread decayed and became mush. We would like you to take your shoes off when you come to our puppet show or we would like to bless you with the fiddle bow. The bread shall remind you of the sacrament of eating. We want you to understand that theatre is not yet an established form, not the place of commence that you think it is, where you pay and get something. Theatre is different. It is more like bread, more like a necessity.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, George Segal's *The Dinner Table* yokes food to spiritual communion. In this sculpture, four plaster figures sit contemplatively at a large round table, while two more figures stand over them. Two of the figures were modeled on the artist and his wife: Segal pours coffee, while his wife stands near the wall looking over the scene. The autobiographical incorporation of the artist's family heightens the intimacy of the sculpture. The act of eating here is drawing to a close. Dining has been a domestic occasion, a communal act of sharing that is peaceful and fulfilling. The gustatory body here—as in Kenneth Anger's film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, with its rituals of gift-giving and ingestion (see chapter 7)—creates community, forming bonds by rites of (literal) incorporation.

In the Happening *Mouth*, Whitman turned the primary emblem of the effervescent, grotesque body—the gaping mouth—into an entire landscape, in which detached body parts took on lives of their own. The setting itself resembled a large mouth (built of chicken wire, papier-mâché, and scrims, with a red “tongue” floor shading off to flesh color near the walls, and white chairs standing for teeth, upon which the spectators sat). Two women rode through in a cardboard car, disembarked, and had a picnic. They were joined by two fantastic animals and three sprites dressed in leaves, aluminum foil, and fur. When one of the picnickers left, the other lay down and went to sleep in this enchanted body forest. Red pieces of cloth fell to cover her, a woman dressed in water joined the other sprite creatures, and the four sprites began to dance and collide, while the animals silently watched. A large, white, tooth-shaped pendulum glowed red

and blue, three tubes marched through, and the pendulum opened to reveal a woman. Here, one is reminded of Rabelais's scene in which the author Alcofribas journeys into Pantagruel's mouth and discovers there an entire ancient universe—“a buccal underground,” as Bakhtin puts it—surviving on the food that Pantagruel eats. The goings-on in Whitman's gaping *Mouth* turned the topography of the body into a microcosmic, mythic world.<sup>20</sup>

In early Sixties iconography the gustatory body symbolizes both spiritual and fleshly communion, and it is linked to the sexual body in various ways. One is the notion, raised by Kaprow's *Eat*, that eating is a “reproductive” activity. Another, raised by Warhol's *Eat*, is that eating itself, when framed as an intimate physical activity, is an erotic act. Further, as we shall see, food as an object serves as a metaphor for body parts that, when seen as autonomous, take on an erotic life of their own.

The gustatory body often seems to bring with it the figure of the nourishing woman. Robert Indiana said about his various paintings of the early Sixties that spell *Eat*: “The word ‘eat’ is reassuring, it means not only food, but life. When a mother feeds her children, the process makes her indulgent, a giver of life, of love, of kindness.”<sup>21</sup> Such imagery has complex political significance. It seems today to be a clear example of sexist essentialism, but in this context it signals an affirmation of the value of nurturing over a macho worldview.

In Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy*, a performance she once described as “flesh jubilation,” the figure of a nourishing woman appears. She is the Serving Maid, who toward the end of the piece carries in a tray of fish, raw chickens, and hot dogs and strews them over a pile of wriggling, half-naked performers. She unites the nourishing and sexual functions, for by bringing in raw food, she enables the erotic life of the performers to blossom. In Schneemann's *Looseleaf*, the aproned artist seated two men at a table and repeatedly served them small, sticky cakes. At first, they ate politely with knives and forks, but gradually their table manners broke down until not only had silverware been discarded in favor of fingers, but, like children at the table, they began to play with their food and smear it over one another's faces. The sound accompaniment included Schneemann talking about the body, perception, and her own artistic process as she moved from painting to performance.<sup>22</sup> Schneemann may be the nourishing figure here, but she is simultaneously an agent, rather than the object, in the artwork. She shows in her reflexive use of the body that the act of feeding has transformed her children/men into materials for her act of making art.

There is a fine line between the figure of nourishing womanhood and the sexist image of the erotic woman in Sixties art, however. The instructions for Ben Patterson's *Lick Piece*, for example, read:

cover shapely female with whipped cream  
lick

...

topping of chopped nuts and cherries is optional.<sup>23</sup>

The woman, that is, offers food to eat but in the man's act of licking and swallowing, his erotic pleasure predominates over nutrition for two reasons: the whipped cream is spread over the surface of the body, requiring intimate contact for its consumption, and, as is well-known, whipped cream has little nutritive value, but instead symbolizes the luxurious pleasures of the senses.

In Rosalyn Drexler's irreverent play *Home Monies*, the sanctity of church and home is unfrocked. One of Drexler's strategies for this uncovering is the double entendre. And one of her favorite themes in the double entendre is the mixing of food and sex. Mrs. Verdun offers Peter, her husband's gay lover, some fruit as they sit on a bed. In doing so, she changes from a hostess to a seductress, for her offer is not the mother figure's replenishment, but the invocation of food as standing for body parts.

*Mrs. Verdun.* I think fruit is so nice in the summer, don't you?

*Peter.* Oh yes, I adore fruit in the summer.

*Mrs. Verdun.* So refreshing.

*Peter.* Succulent.

*Mrs. Verdun.* Ripe.

*Peter.* Juicy!

*Mrs. Verdun.* Dripping.

*Peter.* Ever so wet.

*Mrs. Verdun.* Would you care for a fruit?

*Peter.* But your bowl is so delightful to look at, I wouldn't dream of disturbing the arrangement. If, of course, you have more in the kitchen . . . I prefer peaches.

*Mrs. Verdun.* As soon as my maid is free, she'll serve us.

*Peter.* No hurry. I like waiting for my pleasures. Often, you know, the expectation is better than the realization. Although, when you have one in the hand, why wait for two in the bush?

Later, when Mr. Verdun returns, he makes the comparison between fruit and human flesh even more explicit when he warns Charles the intellectual,

who has been chasing the Verduns' daughter Vivienne around the stage farce-style, in the song "Don't Bruise the Fruit."

Do not bruise the fruit.  
Do not bruise the fruit.  
Do not bruise the fruit.  
That my wife bore and I planted.

Do not expose the pit of that overripe production, or it will dry and become seer. [*Singing*]

It is the pit that holds the bitter almond.

The pit that keeps within it the true soft pit. Do not expose its surface to the breath you exhale and the teeth you dig with. . . . [*Singing*]

Let it lie!

Let it lie!

Let it be half-hard, underripe, green, and about to be. [*Singing*]

Don't feel how soft it is.

Don't bruise the fruit.

Don't bruise the fruit!

Smell it if you must, [*Singing*]

But don't lay your nose on it.<sup>24</sup>

The food imagery in Pop Art also shows food as festively interchangeable with bodies and body parts. For instance, in James Rosenquist's painting *Lamini*, the front grill of an upside-down car intersects a plate of glistening peach halves (probably fresh from a Del Monte can) on the left side of the canvas, while the car's rear end rests on the haunches of a woman in the White Rock advertising pose, kneeling at the edge of a swimming pool. The woman's face is hidden by the narrow blue panel at the right end of the painting, on which, Magritte-like, a half of a pencil hovers. We almost automatically identify the peaches with the curves of the woman's body, all the more so because the peaches are closer to flesh tone than the unnatural pink grisaille of the panel containing the woman. Also, the car formally links them. And the erect pencil confirms the interpretation. In another Rosenquist painting, *The Lines Were Deeply Etched on the Map of Her Face*, a hot dog with a stripe of mustard seems to penetrate the edge of the painting on the upper right; it appears both to point to and stand for the lower half of a man's body just below it on the canvas. Given the unidentifiable but clearly fleshy expanse against which these two items are placed (along with a giant checker and a fragment of a typewriter keyboard), again the phallic image seems an appropriate response. Marjorie Strider's *Diagonal Red* joins together imagery of the reproductive body, the erotic body, and



the food-body. In this painting, a lush red tomato—embodying the slang for a sexy woman—literalizes fruitfulness. It seems to give birth to itself, becoming three-dimensional as it emerges from the canvas.

Of course, not all alimentary art is sexual. For instance, in Ron Rice's film *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*, Taylor Mead's orality is infantile rather than adult. All-consuming, he tries out every object he encounters by putting it in his mouth first—whether it is food or food packaging, human body parts, or furniture.

Moreover, in Sixties iconography the gustatory body often has an economic meaning: it is symptomatic of material abundance. Pop Art canvases and sculptures proliferate images of food—often in packaged form—as the seeming products of an affluent culture of consumption. Lichtenstein's *Roto Broil* and *Kitchen Range* are two appliances stuffed with food, and his *Refrigerator*, whose image is taken from a packaging insert, shows a smiling woman cleaning her empty refrigerator. She is happy, we infer, at the thought of all the food that the expectant refrigerator is waiting to contain. The groaning board in Wesselman's *Still Life #17* offers a range of foodstuffs, from Beefeater gin and Heineken beer to Horn and Hardart coffee, Del Monte tomato sauce, and a plate with a hot dog, hamburger, and potato chips. Behind those items stands the smiling figure of the omnipresent mother, the queen of Madison Avenue in the early Sixties, beckoning the spectator to partake of the feast. From Alex Hay's breakfast paintings to Robert Watts's chrome-plated lead hot dogs; from Andy Warhol's Campbell soup cans to Claes Oldenburg's manmoth BLT, hamburgers, slices of cake, and ice cream cones, these are images of food, but of a particular kind of food—food as an article of mass consumption. These are items in the burgeoning cornucopia of provisions sold by chain restaurants, processed by mass media, and fed to us by advertising's idealized mothers. They are images of gigantism, abundance, and effervescence, and if they are presented in an ironic tone, nevertheless their sensuous textures, vibrant colors, and monumental scale festively celebrate their ubiquity.

If in these works food took part in a carnivalesque confusion with sex, reproduction, and body parts, food also led to images of digestion and excretion as well as decay and death. For instance, in *Home Movies*, after Peter and Mrs. Verdun have discussed the charms of fruit in sexual terms, they

go on to sing about its by-products.

*Peter* . . . Once eaten, [fruits] are gone forever, and the gas pains they cause flutter and fuss inside like wings.

*Mrs. Verdun drags Peter downstairs, where they sing.*

*Mrs. Verdun.*

Like wings aloft,

Caught in an intestinal updraft.

*Peter.*

Like wings aloft,

Caught in an intestinal updraft.

*Mrs. Verdun.*

It's true, dear,

That if something else

Is caught in the whirl

Of something else entirely,

It just can't help itself,

But must continue

In the powerful current

Of that particular thing.

*Peter.*

Yes, we just can't help it;

The route we go,

A power stronger than will. . . .

Till the explosion, then BOOM! Everything gives way and falls into small portions. Sometimes I think the good Lord created everything by chance, set off the cherry bomb and waited for the shapes to crack.<sup>25</sup>

If flatulence can be the subject of a romantic song, in early Sixties discourse it can be, as well, a metaphor for holy cosmogony. Again, the grotesque image of digestion and the body's lower stratum degrades what is lofty in a positive, festive key, uniting physical and cosmic experience.

In 1963 Steve Paxton began to use large plastic inflatables. In *Music for Word Words* a twelve-foot square plastic room was deflated with a vacuum cleaner to become a body-sized costume, a second skin. By 1965, with *The Deposits*, and 1966, with *Physical Things*, the plastic had reached tunnel proportions. As in Kaprow's *Eat*, as members of the audience passed through this organic-seeming tunnel, it distinctly began to resemble a digestive tract. In *Physical Things*, inside and outside were further confused by the sod, fake trees, and architectural embellishments inside the enormous tunnel, which turned the body's insides into a grassy landscape. Also in *Physical Things*, the transformation of the spectator into a participant in-

tensified the physical experience of the work. The bodily imagery is related, as well, to dances in the late Sixties that underlined Paxton's candor about the body by referring to medical imagery.

The Fluxus movement was particularly fascinated by bodily processes, from ingestion to excretion. The name Fluxus itself, as the Fluxus manifesto reminds us, comes from the word "flux"—whose primary meaning is "a) a flowing or fluid discharge from the bowels or other part . . . b) the matter thus discharged." Dick Higgins instructs the performer in his *Danger Music No. 15* to "Work with eggs and butter for a time." Despite his reference to himself as "hung up on the fantastic element in cookery," Higgins's interest in food has to do with a Fluxian insistence on art as part of everyday life in what he calls the Schweikian mode. About the work of Fluxus members, he wrote (as we have seen in another context):

We like quite ordinary, workaday, nonproductive things and activities. . . . While Rome burns, I work with butter and eggs for a while, George Brecht calls for:

\*at least one egg  
and Alison Knowles makes an egg salad.<sup>26</sup>

Besides making salads of various kinds, Knowles also specialized in bean pieces. In 1964 Maciunas published multiples of her *Bean Rolls*, a tea tin containing a set of dried beans (and sometimes chickpeas or split peas) and small paper scrolls with information about beans. "Direct from the Gardens," the label read. "A minute study of the mundane," Jon Hendricks later called it, "a latter-day study of Monet haystacks." Two of the rolls read as follows:

Bean: To commit suicide; Jan. 3, 1925, Flynn's Henry Leverage; extant not much used. Perhaps orig. and strictly, to shoot oneself through the bean, s. for head.

Bean town: throughout the Under World, Chicago is Known by its nickname, "Chi," Kansas City, "Kay Sec" and Boston as bean town.

The rolls also included botanical descriptions of different kinds of bean plants, ads from I. L. Bean, and other bean ephemera. The *Bean Rolls* could be read at home or used as performance scores; Knowles's *Simultaneous Bean Reading* instructs a group of performers to read aloud from the *Bean Rolls*, inviting the audience to join in, while one person cuts up the scrolls being read.<sup>27</sup> The earthy bean, so rich with cultural and gastronomic reso-

nance, has continued to provide Knowles with material for her drily witty performances, graphic works, and writing up to the present.<sup>28</sup>

By the late Sixties, Flux Food events and Flux Feasts had become regular occasions for collective works. These included items both edible and inedible, from George Maciunas's distilled drinks and transparent food (colorless liquids and Jell-O, these had the smell and taste of tea, coffee, tomato juice, onions, beef, butter, ice cream, etc.), to emptied egg shells filled with surprising items (shaving cream, Jell-O, coffee, a dead bug), to color-coordinated or international banquets.<sup>29</sup>

Wolf Vostell's performances often involved feeding the audience food—or objects served as food. Vostell specialized in what he called "décollages." As Dick Higgins described them, "These are the opposite of collages. They involve ripping off or erasing, they suggest dying and metamorphosis." Vostell contributed a piece to an exhibition by several Fluxus members in Cologne that was a food version of a décollage. Unlike his television décollages, in which objects were actively wrecked and mauled, in this piece the food was destroyed by decomposition during the exhibition. Dick Higgins remembers it: "Vostell hung fish and suggestive items and toys in front of white canvases, and lungs and chickens in front of two pieces. These last, naturally décollaged themselves, so that the gallery stank and could not allow the usual publicity activities, let alone any prolonged viewing and savoring of the show."<sup>30</sup>

The gustatory body for Fluxus easily became the excretory body. For instance, Nam June Paik proposed as a piece of "physical music" his *Fluxus Champion Contest*, "in which the longest-pissing-time-recordholder is honored with his national hymn." (The first champion, he noted, was "F. Trowbridge. U.S.A. 59.7 seconds.")<sup>31</sup> Ken Friedman writes about this important facet of Fluxus:

Emmett Williams made a fine contribution to piss art in 1964. The piece was a concrete poem, a poem set in concrete. It was made of a child's play alphabet, each letter sunk down into the concrete slab that held the piece. Each letter was an animal or a symbol or a form of a word beginning with the letter itself. The letter "P," however, was a plastic sack marked: SYNTHETIC URINE. NOT FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION. Synthetic urine is used for dyes and for treating medicine. Emmett had a friend whose girlfriend sold synthetic urine. She supplied Emmett's Fluxpiss. . . .

Not all Fluxus artists are big on piss. Yoshi Wada prefers farting.



George Maciunas and Geoff Hendricks favored shit. . . . There are also those of us who can't quite decide, such as Iceland's Dieter Roth. Roth favors piss and shit in equal measure. He sometimes even binds sheets of plastic filled with them into his books.

Some day, you might ask about the time we exhibited Dieter Roth books filled with piss, shit and ripe cheese at the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association in Boston.<sup>32</sup>

The gusto with which Fluxus, in particular, and the early Sixties avant-garde, in general, approached the digestive body ranges from the recent—for instance, in allusions to the Eucharist and other ritual ingestions—to the utterly outrageous, as in the plethora of scatological references. In these works, symbols of incorporation—focusing on food consumption and often coupled with sexual gratification—nourish the spiritual body as well as the physical body. In addition, oral incorporation ritually constructs bonds of community. In early Sixties artworks, the gustatory body is seen as permeable, sensuous, and collective. Feeding serves as a locus for the body festively and transgressively to be turned inside out and upside down. The private is made public. And the concrete facts of bodily life are made food for thought.

### *The Racial Body*

The effervescent, grotesque image of the body festively confuses biological categories, mixing animal, vegetable, and mineral, as well as outside and inside. It also ignores the boundaries of sociobiological classifications, mixing races and genders.

American culture in general was undergoing a radical shift toward Africanization in the early Sixties. American vernacular music and dances were deeply rooted in African American traditions, although often it took translation and appropriation by white performers—such as Elvis Presley or the dancing teenagers on Dick Clark's "American Bandstand" on TV—to make black style acceptable for mass consumption. While schools may still have been segregated, white schoolchildren were being initiated into one of the fundamental practices of the African American movement repertoire, learning to separate hips from upper torso with the help of "hula hoops."<sup>33</sup> White teenagers—and even the First Lady—danced the Twist, a new incarnation of a venerable black dance known by other names in other generations. If parents criticized the dance as lascivious, it was because they recognized in it—however unconsciously—a bodily practice that chal-

lenged Euro-American culture by rejecting its dancing conventions. But white youth culture found in black music and black dancing a subcultural channel in which they could express their own aspirations toward independence. Moreover, in sports, in the movies, on television, and indeed, in every part of popular culture, African Americans were visible, vibrant, and articulate. Entrance to professional domains other than entertainment and sports was still restricted, and access to much of white society blocked at every turn, even for black professionals. And African Americans, and many whites with them, rightly chafed at those inequities, while the civil rights movement sought to correct them. But still, it was undeniable that, given the broad spread of black skills and styles throughout the realm of popular culture, American society was in many ways becoming more "Africanized" than ever before.<sup>34</sup>

Discourse on race, culture, and bodies was as complex and difficult in the early Sixties as it remains today, although not in the same ways. If today we stress roots and differences, in the early Sixties many liberals (both black and white) wanted to deny racial and cultural differences altogether in their fervor to gain equality for African Americans, assimilating blacks and whites into a homogeneous melting pot. But oddly enough, radical antiracist rhetoric departed from liberal homogenization in ways that were not always so far removed from racist talk. Blacks were mythologized as "closer to nature" or "bodies free of inhibitions" by those who emulated black culture as well as by those who hated and feared it. These differences from the etherealized bodies of Euro-American culture were seen as salutary by radical avant-gardists, for they meshed well with the avant-garde project of appreciating the body's concreteness. The aesthetic and social values of African American dance—its bent elbows and knees, its compartmented torso, its contrapuntal polyrhythms, its gravity-bound weight, and its sexual frankness—may have been considered awkward and salacious by Euro-American standards. The values of African American music—its repetitions, its improvisatory structure, its oral transmission, its emphasis on rhythm over melody, and its emphasis on the body as an instrument (both vocal and percussive)—may have been considered boring and unrigorous by Euro-American standards. Yet these different cultural values were embraced by the white avant-garde—and here, of course, they parted ways with racists who found nothing of value in black culture. Often the white artists adopted such values and techniques partly as a result of their own association with black artists, especially those in the jazz avant-garde. Beyond social connections, white artists studied and sometimes performed

jazz—both white musicians (like La Monte Young, Philip Corner, James Tenney, and Malcolm Goldstein) and white artists in other fields (like Larry Rivers and Michael Snow).

That there is an element of what might be called "essentialist positive primitivism" cannot be overlooked in examining the early Sixties avant-garde's attitude toward black artists and black culture. This was an aspect of modernism that was carried over into the early postmodernism of the Sixties. For example, Dick Higgins, someone indignant against prejudice, wrote in *Postface* (published in 1964) that he suspected even before he met Fluxus artist Ben Patterson that Patterson was black.

Patterson married and went [from Germany] to France, as he had gone from the U.S. before, where he did not want to be a "negro artist" but just one Hell of a good one and, among other things, a negro. Only James Baldwin and Benjamin Patterson have ever attained that proportion. Actually Patterson's way of using periodic repeats and the blues feeling that this produced being so ingrained and natural struck me so much that when he first sent me a copy of methods and processes I wrote to him and guessed he was a negro.<sup>35</sup>

That is, essentialist positive primitivism assumed that there are favorable qualities engendered by race itself, qualities that are linked with creativity, energy, sexuality, and harmony with nature—in short, with the anti-Enlightenment triumph of the body over rationality.

Thus, the actor Roberts Blossom, in writing about his own experiments with theatrical "language," compared his break with theatrical convention to the difference between white and black body language and vocal style in what can only seem to us today a far-fetched metaphor based on this kind of primitivism. Blossom's romantic notion was that white culture—in particular American culture—suffocates expressivity, while African American and other ethnic cultures may retain humanity's true and "natural," unsocialized language, sounds, and gestures.

As we grow older our voices grow more strangled, professional, machine-gunny, or deliberately slowed, our gestures indicative of gesture rather than live. As though to say, "Well, we drowned when we were twenty, but we must pretend it wasn't so." Why?

America is an accumulation of the histories of man . . . and their transference into: American. This means that everything—the whole history of the world—has been translated into: American pseudo-English. . . .

But Blossom acknowledged that there has been subcultural resistance to the homogenizing melting pot by African Americans, whose marginal status protected cultural difference. "Out of the freedom-in-isolation of certain Negro groups came bop talk and then, watered down, beatnikism. Freedom from what? The American whirlpool. . . . The melting pot is our souls, and it is boiling. ('Cool it, man,')"

For Blossom, it was specifically the rigidity and repression of the body that leads to "a denial of one's earliest push. . . anxiety. . . group schizophrenia."

What's wrong? Our hearing-seeing-gesture-speaking. And so our feelings. And so. And so. How do we right it? What did the other languages have that we haven't? Ease. A recognition that the gesture is for the eye, the word-sound for the ear. This is precisely where our bridges to each other have become congested. . . . Necks became difficult to bend. Spines became rigid. Gestures became like telegrams in code instead of counterpoint to vocal melody. And vocal melody? Well, Negroes have it because they often remain untrained in the self-strangulation that is the custom among white people here.

For Blossom, what was urgently necessary was to invent a new "language," one that he proposed he might be inventing in his mixed-media theater. And although his theater had nothing to do with African American performance traditions, he proposed it as a theatrical language that would approach the freedom, concreteness, and relaxed, full-bodied quality he perceived in the exemplary spirit of black culture.<sup>36</sup>

Other works uphold the romantic view of African Americans as possessing an uninhibited physical grace, in tune with nature, unavailable to whites. Jonas Mekas's *Guns of the Trees* is an antiwar film in which a young white woman commits suicide in a desperate gesture against what she perceives as the insufferably militaristic American society of the late Fifties. In the film, two Beat couples are friends. The black couple represent easy intimacy, fertility, and peace—values the white couple have difficulty finding. Unlike Adolfas and the suicide Frances, with their Euro-American anxieties, the African Americans Ben and Argus laugh, enjoy sharing their spaghetti dinner and cheap wine with their friends (despite Ben's unemployment), and make love among the plants fruitfully, for Argus is pregnant.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, in Ron Rice's *Queen of Sheba* the eponymous odalisque, played by the black actress Winifred Bryant, is above all represented as a generous body—exceedingly fleshy (and often undressed), a heavy drinker,

a sound sleeper, pantherlike in her movements, and moodily enigmatic. David James calls her an "African Queen" and refers to her "massive bulk and voracious appetites," in high contrast to the diminutive, sexually ambivalent Atom Man played by Taylor Mead.<sup>38</sup>

I want to stress that although they participate in the discourse of positive primitivism, the works I have singled out here were not racist in intention. On the contrary, these artists admired and often emulated the qualities they saw in African American culture. Like many African Americans who in the Sixties and Seventies turned away from the integrationist notion that blacks could and should assimilate into white culture, these artists appreciated the uniqueness and differences produced by African roots and tempered by the syncretism of African and European cultures. These overtones of positive primitivism were perhaps the inevitable by-product of white artists contesting not only the racist society they lived in, but their own traces of prejudice. The acute consciousness of racial difference advocated by the Black Power movement of the later Sixties, the search for roots in the Seventies, and more recent analyses of diverse multicultural formations has changed immensely the way in which we think about representations of "race" today. I do not mean here to charge these avant-gardists—whose embrace of black culture was radical in its time—with racism; I only want to say that they were willy-nilly products of their era, even as they divorced themselves from it and changed the world around them. And although these appropriations may now carry for some the taint of rip-off culture, for the Sixties avant-garde it signaled cultural respect, even envy. If the envy was there for the wrong reasons, and expressed in what now seems inappropriate ways, the respect was undeniable.

In 1957 Norman Mailer published his prophetic essay "The White Negro," outlining in sociological and political terms the attraction that the white avant-garde, in the form of Beat culture, had to African American culture, to jazz in particular, and to the sexual freedom associated with it.

It is no accident that the source of Hip is the Negro for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries. But the presence of Hip as a working philosophy in the sub-worlds of American life is probably due to jazz. . . .

In this wedding of the white and the black it was the Negro who brought the cultural dowry. Any Negro who wishes to live must live with danger from his first day, and no experience can ever be casual to him, no Negro can saunter down a street with any real certainty that violence will not visit him on his walk. . . . The Negro has the sim-

plest of alternatives: live a life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger.

But for Mailer, too, the estimable wisdom of the African American is romantically associated with "primitive" passions. And primitive passions are above all focused on the body. Antiracism begins to sound peculiarly like racist rhetoric. Mailer continues:

In such a pass where paranoia is as vital to survival as blood, the Negro has stayed alive and begun to grow by following the need of his body where he could. Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream, and despair of his orgasm. For jazz is orgasm, it is the music of orgasm, good orgasm and bad, and so it spoke across a nation. . . . It was indeed a communication by art, because it said, "I feel this, and now you do too."<sup>39</sup>

For Mailer, as for so many white Americans, the African American body is the dancing body, the jazz body, the emotional body, and, inevitably, the sexual body.

LeRoi Jones, in his important book on the history of African American music, *Blues People* (published in 1963), supports Mailer's point (though not stating it as romantically) that the avant-garde was attracted to black culture because it shared an antiburgeois stance. In fact, in Jones's view the attraction was mutual.

It was a lateral and reciprocal identification the young white American intellectual, artist, and Bohemian of the forties and fifties made with the Negro, attempting, with varying degrees of success, to reap some emotional benefit from the similarity of their positions in American society. In many aspects, this attempt was made even more natural and informal because the Negro music of the forties and again of the sixties (though there has been an unending general identification through both decades) was among the most expressive art to come out of America. . . .

But the reciprocity of this relationship became actively decisive dur-

ing the fifties when scores of young Negroes and, of course, young Negro musicians began to address themselves to the formal canons of Western nonconformity, as formally understood refusals of the holowness of American life, especially in its address to the Negro. The young Negro intellectuals and artists in most cases are fleeing the same "classic" bourgeois situations as their white counterparts. (231)

For Jones, even African American music in the form of jazz had to be questioned and renewed from a black avant-garde perspective.

The jazz of the late fifties and sixties, though it has been given impetus and direction by a diversity of influences, is taking shape in the same areas of nonconformity as the other contemporary American arts. In Greenwich Village, for instance, a place generally associated with "artistic and social freedom," based on willing (though sometimes affected) estrangement from the narrow tenets of American social prescription, young Negro musicians now live as integral parts of that anonymous society to which the artist generally aspires. Their music, along with the products of other young American artists seriously involved with the revelation of contemporary truths, will help define that society, and by contrast, the nature of the American society out of which these Americans have removed themselves. (233)

Furthermore, Jones, like Mailer, emphasizes the bodily aspect of the African American arts as central to their point of difference from Euro-American culture. He argues that "Negro music is *always* radical in the context of formal American culture" exactly because it is based on a "kinetic philosophy."<sup>40</sup>

Jones insisted that improvisation was key to African musical art and the early history of African American music, but it had been truly restored to jazz only by the avant-gardists of the Sixties. Writing about Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor as the important innovators of their generation, he noted:

What these musicians have done, basically, is to restore to jazz its valid separation from, and anarchic disregard of, Western popular forms. They have used the music of the forties with its jagged, exciting rhythms as an initial reference and have restored the hegemony of blues as the most important basic form in Afro-American music. They have also restored improvisation to its traditional role of invalid-

able significance, again removing jazz from the hands of the less than gifted arranger and the fashionable diluter. (225)

According to Jones, the freedom of the contemporary jazz musician in the improvisatory moment was fundamental to this transformation.<sup>41</sup>

Improvisation as an artistic technique, not only in jazz but in the other arts, was prized by the Sixties avant-garde for two reasons. It symbolized (perhaps even embodied) freedom. But it also relied on the wisdom of the body—on the heat of kinetic intuition in the moment—in contrast to predetermined, rational decision-making. This bodily knowledge stressed spontaneity, valuing rather than discarding the human imperfections of impromptu creation; it also underscored the importance of group interaction. This was one of the valuable legacies that white avant-gardists inherited from African and African American performance modes.

The choreographer Trisha Brown later wrote about her own involvement with improvisation as simultaneously liberating and socially and artistically responsible:

If you stand back and think about what you are going to do before you do it, there is likely to be a strenuous editing process that stymies the action. On the other hand, if you set yourself loose in an improvisational form, you have to make solutions very quickly and you learn how. That is the excitement of improvisation. If, however, you just turn the lights out and go gān-gān in circles, that would be therapy or catharsis or your happy hour, but if in the beginning you set a structure and decide to deal with X, Y, and Z materials in a certain way, nail it down even further and say you can only walk forward, you cannot use your voice or you have to do 195 gestures before you hit the wall at the other end of the room, that is an improvisation within set boundaries. That is the principle, for example, behind jazz. The musicians may improvise, but they have a limitation in the structure.<sup>42</sup>

If improvisation allowed for freedom of choice and action, nevertheless it was anything but anarchic. Brown saw improvisation not as an intuitive surrender to the body's impulses, but as a rational plan for generating action in a cohesive community.

The composer Philip Corner began to think of music in a physicalized way as a result both of working with the dancers at the Judson Church and a fascination with jazz. For instance, in *Keyboard Dances*, he played the piano with his feet. In *Big Trombone*, Corner explains: "I was just playing

the trombone in a vigorous, physical way, organically related to the music itself. There were no gratuitous theatrics. I thought new music, in terms of a harmonic and rhythmic language, lacked a dimension jazz had—that is, a certain rawness. I wanted to create in my own terms something that had an unimpeded, uninhibited rush of physical energy.” Both jazz and rock and roll had something the white avant-garde did not, Corner felt. It had a beat. And a beat, of course, connects art directly to the pulsing body.<sup>43</sup>

In the avant-garde, as in the rest of American culture in the early Sixties, the racial body was a political battleground. In some instances it was the goal of avant-garde culture literally to mix black and white bodies, as integrated casts on stage and on film became a desideratum of the civil rights movement. In other cases the goal was to value the aspects of African American bodies that had been devalued by mainstream society. But metaphorically speaking, the diverse bodies were already amalgamated culturally. Whites and blacks across the various social strata continued to participate willy-nilly in the two-way street of cultural borrowing that had made both Euro-America and African America syncretic processes for centuries. And that process was intensified with the meteoric rise of the mass media, especially television, after World War II. But the early Sixties avant-garde consciously participated in this fusion. In particular, white artists endorsed the special authority and knowledge that black culture has traditionally conferred on bodies. If the high arts of Euro-American culture for the most part etherialized the body, the high arts of African American culture—many of whose values had long since permeated the Euro-American popular culture that now inspired much avant-garde art—invested it with weight, power, and significance. And the avant-garde put its faith in the power of the body.

### *The Sexual Body*

The ethos of liberation in the early Sixties found an important abode in the sexual body. Above all, the public representation of the body as erotic flesh in the avant-garde arts signified freedom from bourgeois conventions—both moral and artistic. For in genteel society, sexual activity is something private; in polite discourse, it is a taboo subject. It may be that in some ways the movement by the avant-garde toward erotic art reflected the sexual “revolution” that the entire country was beginning to experience (especially after the approval by the federal Food and Drug Administration of the birth control pill in 1960). And certainly erotic art was not unique to this generation; in invoking sex it was following an avant-garde tradition. But the representation of the sexual body in the early Sixties heterotopia

went beyond the simple reflection of changing social values or the repetition of a historical avant-garde shock technique. It anticipated and even contributed to the more enormous, radical sexual transformations yet to come. The transgressive step taken by the Sixties avant-garde was to make sex and sexuality brashly public, often even a communal affair. It created a space for a variety of sexual choices and experiences.

Andy Warhol's films—with their voyeuristic, unflinching, obsessive gaze, analogous to the multiple silk screens he favored in his visual artworks—put various subjects under scrutiny. From almost the very first, sexuality was one of those subjects. Like *Sleep, Eat, Haircut*, and *Empire*, Warhol's *Kiss*—his second film—is a case of monovision. At fifty minutes it is short compared to the six-hour-long *Sleep* or the eight-hour *Empire*. And, with kissing partners changing from one roll of film to the next, it has enormous variety compared to the single subject of those two films. But it is obsessive in its own way. Steven Koch described *Kiss*:

It is silent. There are no credits or titles. Without announcement, the screen lights into a highly contrasted black-and-white close-up: A man and a woman are—surprise!—kissing. The lips of both are full, sensuous, crawling on each other, melding in intense sexuality. Their tongues slide and probe; the woman keeps her eyes open, gazing almost frenetically at the man's closed eyes as the kiss continues. It continues for a *very* long time. Sitting out in the audience, we watch and wait. We are perhaps aroused, but also a bit perplexed. . . . And suddenly the intense black and white of the image seems to flicker and whiten, then falters and is obliterated in a “white-out” before the kiss itself ends. A ragged piece of film end seems to flash by, as though the short film roll in Warhol's camera had simply run out. We see only whiteness for a moment, and then, with spectral insistence, the screen darkens again with the image of a new, long kiss.<sup>44</sup>

Several of these fixed, close-shot kisses were screened weekly, in serial fashion, at the Film-Makers' Showcase in 1963, as the short subjects preceding the evening's “feature” presentations. The next logical step for Warhol was *Blow Job*, described succinctly by Mekas as “a sustained closeup of a boy's face as someone, out of camera range, performs fellatio on him.”<sup>45</sup> We never see the activity named in the title. Rather, the film is, as Koch put it, an “apothecosis of the ‘reaction shot.’” We view only the hero's changing facial expressions as they register various levels of pleasure, suspense, and ecstasy. The voyeuristic style created by Warhol's passively stationary, silent camera was itself suggestive of sex. The camera cast its subjects in an erotic

light not only in these overtly sexual films, but also in *Sleep* and even in *Empire*. "An eight-hour hard-on?" Warhol exclaimed as the shooting of the Empire State Building progressed.<sup>46</sup>

Although in *Blonde Cobra* Jack Smith proclaims that "sex is a pain in the ass," this is merely an occasion for a visual joke: the scene has been shot in film noir style, and now the camera closes in on a shot of a knife phallically caught between Smith's nether cheeks. The point, of course, is to suggest the pains and pleasures of homoeroticism. For Smith in *Flaming Creatures*, in contrast, sex is joyous, indiscriminate, regenerating. Susan Sontag compared *Flaming Creatures* to a Bosch painting—"a paradise and a hell of writhing, shameless, ingenious bodies." But unlike the figures in Bosch, these brazen bodies, and those who view them, have no hell awaiting them—only paradise on earth.

What all these films share is that sense of shamelessness—an utterly unmuzzled celebration of sexual discovery, and often of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or group sexual adventure. Moreover, the very meaning of a word like "shameless" was reclaimed from a moral space of wickedness and sin. In regard to Barbara Rubin's *Christmas on Earth* Mekas wrote a deliberately fallacious, tongue-in-cheek piece of logic:

A syllogism: Barbara Rubin has no shame; angels have no shame; Barbara Rubin is an angel.

Yes, Barbara Rubin has no shame because she has been kissed by the angel of Love.

The motion picture camera has been kissed by the angel of Love. From now on, camera shall know no shame.<sup>47</sup>

Not only were these films gloriously and unabashedly shameless; they went so far as to extol sexual transgression. To be "flaming," to be outrageous, to be absolutely unembarrassed about any aspect of the body and its experiences was seen as life-affirming in its liberation from puritanical repression.

Long before the gay rights movement erupted in the late Sixties and early Seventies, the assertion of homosexuality appeared in various works of the Baudelairean cinema—from *Flaming Creatures* to Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour*. Gay life appeared as subject at the Caffè Cino, too, not only thematically—in such plays as *The Madness of Lady Bright* and Robert Patrick's *The Haunted Host* (about a gay playwright living on Christopher Street in the Village)—but in the generally camp style of many of the productions. Pinpointing Caffè Cino as the first New York locus of gay theater,

William Hoffman (another gay playwright) writes about it in specifically libertarian terms.

It is symbolic that among the Cino's first productions were *The Importance of Being Earnest* and plays by [Tennessee] Williams.

Joe Cino became a play producer because many of his customers wanted to put on shows, and he and many of his customers were gay. Joe Cino did not have an obsession with homosexuality. He simply had an extraordinary largeness of spirit that allowed other people to explore, set other people aflame to express what they never had been allowed to before. . . .

Both gay plays and gay theater were pioneered at the Cino from the beginning. Early productions can only be described as homosexual in style: a vivid, sexy *Deathwatch* (Jean Genet) and *Philoctetes* (André Gide). But pretty soon such writers as Doric Wilson, Claris Nelson, and David Starkweather wrote about characters who were specifically gay, closet gay, or bisexual.<sup>48</sup>

Camp style also became a hallmark of the Judson musicals in the Sixties.

Besides being a symbol and site of liberation, the sexual body in its festive, grotesque mode—fertile and permeable—was a figure of abundance, signifying a bountiful culture of easily available, limitless pleasures and perpetual leisure time. Hence the yoking of sexual desire to banquet imagery. As we have seen, the gaping mouth was a potent emblem in early Sixties artworks. It stood for the orality of consumption in several spheres: the culinary and the infantile as well as the erotic.

In Rubin's generous *Christmas on Earth*, even the film projection itself seems to be engaged in a sexual act. Consisting of two reels of black-and-white images superimposed—one forming a smaller square within the other—its two pictures rub against one another rhythmically, like two intimate bodies, to the accompaniment of rock and roll from a "jive" radio. In the images themselves, there are at least four bodies, and the superimpositions multiply them. Thus, there is a seemingly endless array of breasts and penises, vulvas and exploring fingers—enough to belong to a crowd. Poked, prodded, handled; compared and contrasted; viewed and reviewed; engaging in heterosexual and homosexual partnering; all these interactive sexual parts appear as a living cornucopia, one that is not only seeming to begin with, but also engaged in the act of potentially proliferating even more humanity.

In *Home Movies*, each character is fairly bursting at the seams with sexual



desire—aimed at any and every nearby target. This is a French sex farce gone wild. Sexual desire here is assimilated, as we have seen, to food, to vegetative growth, and even to the explosive sensations of flatulence. It often causes people to erupt into song. And it respects the bounds neither of age, gender, race, nor church vows. As in *Christmas on Earth*, sexuality here is experienced as expansive and efflorescent.

Rainer's "love" duet in the "Play" section of *Terrain*, in which she and Bill Davis assumed erotic poses from Indian temple sculpture, also remarks on lovemaking as an activity of abundance—in two different ways. First of all, by assimilating this action to the other types of (more innocent) play in the dance, Rainer locates sex as part of leisure: pleasurable, playful, indulgent, and energizing. Second, by quoting a thesaurus of erotic postures from Indian temple sculpture, she notes the infinite inventiveness of the body in its sexual mode. Sex itself is seen as a kind of treasure chest that offers both satisfaction and imaginative variety. Moreover, Rainer here seems to offer an unemotional antidote to—and a dry comment on—the overeroticization of the *pas de deux* in ballet and Graham's modern dance.<sup>49</sup>

The apotheosis of libidinal plenitude in performance was Carolee Schneemann's ecstatic reveals of the flesh, *Meat Joy*. Even in describing her earliest inspirations to plan the piece, Schneemann refers to bodily effervescence and abundance: "My body streamed with currents of imagery. . . . I continually felt dissolved, exploded, permeated by objects, events, persons outside of the studio."<sup>50</sup> Like so many avant-garde films and performances of the period, *Meat Joy* was accompanied by a rock and roll score. And, as in *Christmas on Earth*, the songs—with their formulaic lyrics about adolescent love barely masking a deeply propulsive, sexy beat—often served as ironic counterpoint to the much more graphic imagery in the performance. The popular songs were overlaid with a tape of Paris street noise—traffic and the cries of marketplace vendors. As members of the audience entered, Schneemann's voice was heard reading her own notes for the making of the performance, interspersed with French vocabulary lessons. The French lessons made reference to parts of the body, to scents both pleasant and unpleasant, and to human and animal characteristics. As they were read aloud, Schneemann's preparatory notes often took on a slightly pornographic edge, as the disembodied voice described dream images, a film scenario, and other visions both possible and impossible to realize in the performance, leaving the spectator's imagination free to fill in the gaps.

To the beat of the rock and roll collage, men and women undressed one another, wrapped one another up in paper, rolled around on the floor, painted one another, and as a group formed kaleidoscopic patterns with

their bodies. They cavorted with the fish, chicken, and hot dogs, and generally indulged in making a mess with paper, paint, and other objects. The immersion in bodily sensations of all kinds, even the number of participants in these erotic rites, signify a sexuality of abundance and gratification.

Jill Johnston reviewed the performance, noting the primitivist imagery:

Miss Schneemann prefers culture in its rudimentary state before and after the refinements of pride and parlor. What comes after is the garbage, and some of the junk culture artists would glorify our despicable remains. What comes before is not so easy to say, since sex, for one thing, can be as juicy in the parlor as people think it probably is in the cave. . . .

The fish in "Meat Joy" could symbolize the watery matrix of our origins. It doesn't matter. The point of the meat and fish and paint was to demonstrate the sensual and scatological pleasure of slimy contact with materials that the culture consumes at a safe distance with knife and fork and several yards away in a gallery or a museum.<sup>51</sup>

The immersion in bodily sensations of all kinds, the enjoyment of flesh and other textures of all kinds, even the very number of participants in these erotic rites signify a sexuality of abundance and satiric.

In both *Meat Joy* and her film *Fuses*, Schneemann raises a third aspect of sexuality for the Sixties avant-garde. Not only does the sexual body stand for liberation and abundance; in its shamelessly public aspect it also is thought to create community (rather than the privacy of bourgeois sexuality). In *Meat Joy*, part of the point was the physical proximity of the audience. Performers might roll into them or join them momentarily, and they were constant witnesses to the erotic pleasures, the overwhelming smells, and the sensuous textures of the performance. Further, the sexual body here is part of a community exactly because it is free and abundant—that is, the eroticism is group, not couple, eroticism. This symbolizes a key Sixties ideal of community, one that by the late Sixties had been widely disseminated.

In Schneemann's film *Fuses*, sexuality is connected with domesticity. The film shows scene after scene of Schneemann and James Tenney joyously making love, intercut with flashing footage of the household cat. *Fuses* is related to Brakhage's films of domesticity and conjugal relations—including *Loving*, in which Schneemann and Tenney are the lovers; *Cat's Cradle*, which elides the figures of Schneemann and Tenney with the newlyweds Sean and Jane Brakhage; and *Wedlock House: An Interview*, in which Brakhage and his wife recorded one another arguing and themselves making

love. But domesticity in all of these films is turned inside out—made public—since the viewer becomes a participant in private moments. Moreover, the watchful eye of the cat in *Fuses* enhances the sense that the lovers are never engaged in a private act, although they are engaged in an intimate one. It is an act that is to be shared with viewers—both good to do and good to watch.

In 1964 Andy Warhol made *Couch*, a series of erotic encounters (including lovemaking, banana-eating, and talking) on a sofa by twenty or so visitors to The Factory, grouped in various permutations. Like *Kiss*, the film was a string of short takes, and also like *Kiss* the encounters were both heterosexual and homosexual, as well as interracial. But here the groupings were not all one-on-one. Moreover, the film suggested that this public, anonymous, and promiscuous eroticism went on regularly in The Factory even when the camera was not recording. *Couch*, that is, seemed to be an almost anthropological document of the sexual habits of life itself in the underground.

In Warhol's *Couch*, eroticism is made public by virtue of its exposure first of all to the camera's eye, but also to the onlookers who are part of the group scene. And in LeRoi Jones's *The Eighth Ditch* (see chapter 5) an audience of Boy Scouts inside the play itself ratifies the sexual union between the two boys, 46 and 64. In Al Hansen's *Hall Street Happening* two women made love. Of course, these voyeuristic formats might not look shocking to us now, but in the early Sixties, especially given the Hollywood practice of self-censorship, they were considered extraordinarily lascivious. The invitation to the audience to witness sex, especially group sex, prefigures the "Rite of Universal Intercourse" the Living Theater would perform in *Paradise Now* on its return to the United States in 1968, or the production of *Dionysus in 69* by the Performance Group. Both of these plays went even further by inviting the audience actually to participate in the erotic dance on stage.

One of the productions put on at the Caffe Cino in 1963 was Tom O'Horgan's "contemporary masque" *Love and Variations*. The subject matter of the play was described in a brief review by Michael Smith: "The theme of the work is stated by quick calculations based on a general orgasm incidence multiplied by the population of New York City reduced to a per-hour basis, a snap-of-fingers basis—etc." In this play, that is, nearly the entire city is seen to be engaging in sex simultaneously. "The variations," Smith advised, "undo one another in perversity, and the whole show skitters along the brink of appallingly bad taste." But he concluded that "the whole thing can be nicely described as lewdly charming."<sup>52</sup> O'Horgan was

later to gain fame as the director of *Hair*, the rock musical that brought "hippie" culture to the mainstream when it moved from the Public Theater downtown to Broadway in 1968, notorious above all for its nude party scene.

In fact, the party is an occasion in which social rules are suspended and anything is possible, suggesting sexual freedom and sexual liaisons of all kinds. *Meat Joy* itself is framed as a party, given the rock song accompaniment, as is *Christmas on Earth*. Kenneth Anger's film *Scorpio Rising* not only has a rock and roll sound track, but actually features a costume party scene—to the song "Party Lights"—that Anger refers to as Walpurgis Party,<sup>53</sup> and that is compared in the film, through editing, to the Last Supper. Scorpio's party is a raucous gathering, replete with bare asses, unveiled erections, and slightly sadomasochistic events. And Death—in the form of a partygoer in a skeleton disguise—looks on. Death, the party, and communal sex also are linked in the play *Homo Mortis*, where on the occasion of the father's putative death a gathering takes place that is meant to mourn, but ends up leavened with desire. And in this comedy, lust and life defeat death, bringing the father back alive.

Thus, the sexual body symbolized empowerment: the dominion of the visceral body itself, claiming primacy over rationality, was seen as the locus of liberation, abundance, and community. According to this ethos, sexual ecstasy itself seemed to be authoritative, for it tapped into an almost religious state of "natural truth" and intense experience in the moment. It appeared to be a direct line to an ideal, Blakean eternal energy—a visionary exultation in the erotic unity of the self. And, particularly for women artists, to explore and celebrate sexuality was to galvanize the performance situation, setting loose the forceful yet transgressive powers of desire.

*The Gendered Body* *modernist and postmodernist* *→* *Blurred*  
One of the borders the effervescent body subversively confuses is that of genders. But in the early Sixties avant-garde the arts were not united in this regard. Although many artists shared a project of responding to the popular iconography of the female body, their responses ranged along a spectrum, between bodies strictly compartmented according to mainstream gender codes and androgynous bodies blurring gender boundaries.

In Pop Art and Happenings, in particular, the predominantly male artists often seemed to adopt uncritically—even at times to salute—the dominant culture's representations of women both as a consumer and as a sexual object to be consumed. This was one end of the spectrum. Further along the spectrum were cases where such representations were made, but partly

in ironic tones. Another point along the spectrum—often in the works of women artists—was the figure of woman as essentially different from, and thus superior to, the male. And still further along were the images of women imprisoned by their culturally assigned roles as domestic creatures, fashion plates, or bodies bereft of minds.

But at the other end of the spectrum were the works by artists, predominantly women and gay men, who proposed equality between the sexes by transgressing the culture-bound question of gender divisions. They refused to draw deep distinctions between male and female bodies or actions, either by taking a unisex view of gender roles among bodies or by conflating and bending gender roles in individual bodies.

To us, living now in a culture that has been indelibly altered by more than two decades of feminist politics—although it is still a society where female bodies are embattled—it might be difficult to accept the idea that much of the art of the Sixties that was advanced in so many other ways could be sexist. Even the Archie Bunkers of the Seventies knew that women were capable of more than Hollywood and Madison Avenue were willing to grant them in the Fifties and early Sixties. Yet in certain arenas the images of the Sixties avant-garde were undeniably sexist. For the most part, even among the politically progressive (as the history of the New Left has shown) neither male nor female consciousness had yet been raised about the subtleties of female oppression.

Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963. Its ground-breaking research was limited to white middle-class female frustration. But this book was a first step that would eventually lead to the opening of a Pandora's box of political ferment, with far-reaching repercussions for all women—and all men. The permutations and cultural influence of the research and activism that began with Friedan's influential book have yet to unfold fully. But it is important in thinking about the early Sixties to remember that it was not until 1968 that a full-blown feminist movement emerged—the movement that has wrought such deep-seated social changes in the United States as affirmative action hiring for women, two-career families, and the entry of women into the mainstream of professional and political life.

Compared to African Americans whose suffering from low economic and social status, restricted educational and professional opportunities, and persistent discrimination in every sphere of daily life was incontestable and publicly well-documented, the "women's problem" was only beginning to surface, much less be unraveled, in the early Sixties. Thus, that there was any progressive representation at all of female bodies in 1963, by either

men or women, is all the more amazing. And that there were zones where either the notion of the gendered body was called into question altogether, or the female body was redefined, was revolutionary, given the gender consciousness of the time.<sup>54</sup>

On the other side of the coin, in retrospect the artworks celebrating women's "femininity" as superior to "male culture" may appear to us now as an essentialist view of women's bodily powers, part and parcel of the "positive primitivism" that also set black bodies apart in an alternate realm thought to be richer than white male rationalism. However, as with the white romantic view of African American culture, this view must be contextualized. In its time this was a dramatic and radical way of asserting difference. It was also a step—like Marx's point that in moving from feudalism to communism a culture has to pass through capitalism—that seems to have served a historically necessary role in making a political battleground of representations of women.

Since the Victorian era, the middle-class "cult of true womanhood" in both Europe and America had created distinct, gender-identified social realms. As Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse have succinctly put it in their essay on conduct literature, "the primary difference between 'masculine' and 'feminine' then creat[ed] the difference between public and private, work and leisure, economic and domestic, political and aesthetic."<sup>55</sup> This was the set of divisions that *The Feminine Mystique* called into question. And it was this set of divisions that the avant-garde both reflected and challenged.

So at one end of the spectrum of avant-garde representations, the female body was stereotyped as consumer and consumed in the many ways that the culture at large pictured it: domesticized and made exotic; the passive subject of the male gaze in the fine arts and a fashion item; a symbol of fecund, animal-vegetable nature and of human sexuality. All of these stereotypes were interwoven, for they relegated women's bodies to strata that were trivial, passive, unassertive, Other. But at the opposite end of the spectrum, these stereotypes were radically criticized. Women were seen as resistant to passive consumption, as equal to men in their strength and skills. The very entry of women into performance asserted the female body as a public figure, the agent rather than the subject of the artwork. And, particularly by gay artists, femininity was proposed as a cultural category not only accessible to women.

Compare these two representations of the domestic female body: Allan Kaprow's *Household*, which upholds gender stereotypes, and Lucinda Childs's *Carnation*, which challenges them. In Kaprow's *Happening*, per-

formed at a dump outside Ithaca, New York, in May 1964, there was no audience. The participants met with Kaprow to learn their parts, then gathered at the site to perform them. The group's activities were divided according to gender in blatantly symbolic ways. First, the men built a tower while the women built a nest and hung laundry on a clothesline. When a wrecked car arrived, the men rolled it into the dump and coated it with strawberry jam, while the women screamed in their nest. The women licked the jam off the car, while the men destroyed the nest "with shouts and cursing." The men chased the women away from the jam-covered car, put bread on top of the jam, and began to eat, while the women screamed "Bastards! Bastards!" (Meanwhile, an undifferentiated army of people advanced, banging on pots and blowing police whistles.) Now the women took their turn, destroying the men's tower. Kaprow's scenario reads:

VIII. Women go to heaps of smoking trash, call sweet-songy come-ons to men.

Men fan out, creep low to ambush women.

People advance, banging and whistling.

IX. Women jump men, rip off shirts and fling them into smoking trash, run to men's tower mound.

Men roll on ground laughing loud: "Hee! Hee! Hee! Haw! Haw!"

People advance, banging and whistling.

X. Women take off blouses, wave them overhead like hankies, each singing own Rock 'n' Roll tune and twisting dreamlike.

Men hurl red smoke flares into smoking trash heap.

People circle smoking jam-car, become silent, squat down, eat jam sandwiches.

XI. Men go to wreck, take sledge hammers from people, pick up battering log, begin to demolish car.

Women watch from a distance and cheer men for every smash.

People eat silently and watch.

XII. Men jack up car, remove wheels, set fire to it, sit down to watch, light up cigarettes.

People light up cigarettes, watch car burning.

Women run out of junkyard, waving blouses, gaily calling

"Bye! Bye! Bye! Bye!"

'Bye!' They get into cars, drive away with horns blaring steadily till out of earshot.

XIII. Everyone smokes silently and watches car until it's burned up. Then they leave quietly.<sup>56</sup>

Kaprow's *Happening*, like so many of his works, is cast as tongue-in-cheek primitivism, a war between the sexes conceived as a caveman satire of domesticity—the women do the laundry and seduce the men, while the men make fire and flex their muscles in a show of physical power. Yet it is clear that this satire has no ulterior agenda in mind; the gender roles may be exaggerated for comic effect, but nothing in the performance points to an alternative domestic arrangement. The gendered universe remains intact. And while the women do, in the end, leave the men, in this fictional universe the way they leave the men is reminiscent of a Flintstone cartoon, *Blondie and Dagwood* in the comic strip, or the TV family situation comedies of the period. It reassures us that if the performance had a next installment the women would be back—probably loaded down with packages brought home from a shopping spree.

Quite different in meaning is Childs's *Carnation*. Here, the choreographer was, so to speak, assaulted by household objects. As she sat at her table handling familiar household items, got up to do a handstand, folded a sheet, and was threatened by a plastic garbage bag that would not behave, domestic routine was completely subverted. Like the Fifties horror movies in which one's entire family was transformed into aliens, here normal suburban housewifely activities suddenly took on strange proportions. Childs's body was imprisoned, reshaped, and sometimes invaded by sponges, hair curlers, a colander, a pillowcase, a sheet, and a garbage bag. She did the right things—stacking objects neatly, putting them together and taking them apart, folding them methodically. Nevertheless, the objects revolted.

As in Kaprow's *Household*, the images in *Carnation* often were comic, although here the comedy was rooted in the absurd independent life of objects. At times, too, the imagery became oddly and grotesquely beautiful—as when Childs, sitting at her table, her gaping, stretched mouth so full of sponges that the planes of her profile were entirely altered, began uncannily to resemble a cubist head in the manner of Picasso. But also, the dance was shot through with tragedy. For it made devastatingly clear the politics of gender in the Sixties: that women as domestic bodies are not the makers of culture. In this case, they seem not even assertive enough to be the consumers of culture. Rather, in *Carnation* women are pictured as living at the mercy of the domestic objects that actually consume them in the grind of daily life. Yet, finally, Childs seems to triumph. In her surrealistic work the female body ultimately identifies the tyranny of housekeeping and resists the demands of domesticity.

The liberatory eroticism of Barbara Rubin's extraordinary film *Christ-*

*mas on Earth* has been discussed. Here I want to point to another aspect of its imagery—the celebration of femininity as a powerful and alluring Other. A film that projects a fantastical, Orientalist sexual space where a woman is surrounded by her “harem” of men, *Christmas on Earth* produces an unusually exotic representation of the female body. The “heroine” of the black-and-white silent film—which is accompanied by a radio tuned, according to the director’s instructions, to any rock music station—is a white woman recast as a woman of color. That is, nude and painted with dark body paint and decorated with geometrical designs, the woman seems to be a non-Western body. Moreover, she is sexually available in a way that white women are not supposed to be. She freely gives the gift, as the title suggests, of her sexual favors. But, liberated from sexual guilt, she also takes sexual gifts in return. The men attending to her are also painted, but they are represented as white. As well as transposing the woman’s body racially, the body paint suggests a cultural transposition, for it seems reminiscent of the ritual body ornamentation of non-Western cultures. That is, while not a specifically recognizable pattern from an identifiable foreign country, the body paint suggests Middle Eastern or African practices—the exotic Other. At the same time that she seems to be a dark, “primitively” exotic female body, as she dances the woman’s body also becomes configured as an abstraction of a face—her breasts become eyes, her pubis a mouth. Her body itself has oxymoronically become a mask, even as her nakedness and the camera unmask her most private body parts.

The female body as the subject (or theme) of the work of visual art is a time-honored tradition that has recently undergone extensive feminist scrutiny. Feminist analysis pays special attention to the way in visual art that the female body has traditionally been arrayed as an item of visual consumption for the spectator, assumed to be male.<sup>57</sup> Of course, no such analysis was in place in the Sixties. In fact, the feminist critique that arose in the Seventies and Eighties may be in part a response not only to the nudes of art history but to the work of the early Sixties visual artists who, abandoning abstraction and returning to figurative art, reinstalled the female figure in their artwork in ways that were not always positive. The (predominantly male) visual artists of the early Sixties cast the human figure in a new, postmodern light—making representations, so to speak, of the representations already in the culture. But along with appropriating images from Madison Avenue, they invoked the art-historical tradition of portraying the female figure. This took place in a number of ways along the spectrum of representation, from the elaboration of traditional versions of the idealized female nude, to complexly ironic explorations of the classic

figure, to the rejection of the female figure as the passive subject of the artist’s gaze altogether.

For example, Tom Wesselmann’s Great American Nude series mixed female imagery from Matisse, Modigliani, and other modern European painters. Vibrant colors and richly textured patterns surround his odalisques, with their strongly outlined flat forms and their acrobatic reclining poses. But what makes these nudes insistently American and postmodern is the unmistakably up-to-date environments they inhabit. *Bathtub Collage* No. 3 features representations of a bright blue bathtub and yellow walls, adorned by a real plastic orange shower curtain, blue bath mat, and yellow towel, while another collage-painting, *Great American Nude* no. 44, has a red wall telephone and framed Renoir print attached to the canvas. The most salient characteristic of Wesselmann’s nudes is that they have no features but mouth, nipples, and hair. That is, with no eyes or nose these women are shorn of individuality, seeming to be reduced to only oral and sexual parts. In this way, too, they are not simply art-historical nudes but resemble pinup girls in their emphasis on sexual characteristics.

Also quoting art history, George Segal’s *Woman Shaving her Leg* brings Degas’s workaday nudes to mind. But—unlike the idealized, lithe, and cartoonishly flat bodies of Wesselmann’s decorative nudes—Segal’s woman is squat and heavy-set. She is concretely there. Moreover, she is seen behind the scenes, so to speak—not smooth, hairless, and prepped for the male gaze, but in the awkward pose and unattractive act of hair removal. Even more so than Degas’s women performing their ablutions, this is an uncomfortable representation of a physical body, with its unidealized surfaces and textures, occupying real space in fleshy proportions.

Robert Morris took the quotation of the art-historical female nude to an apotheosis when he created a living tableau of Manet’s painting *Olympia* onstage in his dance *Site*, in which Carolee Schneemann posed as the naked Maja. Here the contrast between gender roles was underscored. The painting *Olympia*, of course, is anything but an idealized nude. In Manet’s time the painting caused a scandal, for instead of classicizing the figure by generalizing her features, removing her body hair, and surrounding her with the obligatory draperies that—like the curtains on a proscenium stage—removed her from the spectator’s world, the artist portrayed her as a contemporary working-class prostitute, shamelessly gazing from the picture frame.

In *Site*, this image was “constructed” onstage, as the artist/laborer (in the person of the choreographer) manipulated objects, eventually revealing the perfectly ordered live composition that quoted the famous painting.



Thus, another layer of meaning, in terms of gender roles, was added to the image: a woman as an item of sexual consumption, re-represented as an item of visual consumption, was shown as created full cloth by the male artist. The dance posed a contrast between women's and men's work. Traditionally, women's work takes place in the private, sexual sphere, whether as wives or prostitutes (although, ironically, the work time of the prostitute and the leisure time of her client coincide). Man's work, however, Morris's dance suggested, takes place in the economic sphere. In fact, as if to counter the charge that men who work in the world of art, culturally marked as feminine, are unmasculine, Morris compared his (and Manet's) work with that of manual laborers. *Sitz* recuperated the male artist's activity as safely masculine. The artist was shown as a construction worker. And what he constructed was the image of the sexual woman.<sup>58</sup>

It is perhaps fitting that Schneemann, the woman who played Olympia in Morris's *Sitz*, made artworks that challenged the assertive masculinity which Morris imputed to artmaking. Contrasting with these artworks by men that place women in the role of yet another object to be consumed, visually or otherwise, Schneemann's *Eye Body* was an attempt by a woman artist to use her physicality as an active part of the artwork. Schneemann describes the genesis of the work:

In 1962 I began a loft environment built of large panels interlocked by rhythmic color units, broken mirrors and glass, lights, moving umbrellas and motorized parts. I worked with my whole body—the scale of the panels incorporating my own physical scale. I then decided I wanted my actual body to be combined with the work as an integral material. . . .

Covered in paint, grease, chalk, ropes, plastic, I establish my body as visual territory. Not only am I an image maker, but I explore the image values of flesh as material I choose to work with. The body may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring but it is as well voice: marked, written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will.

There was a social as well as aesthetic determination here, for Schneemann writes that she also meant to challenge what she saw as a closed male society of visual artists and critics. They created, she felt, an ostensibly neutral "male aesthetic" in which even the few women artists of the time were expected to participate. "In 1963 to use my body as an extension of my painting-constructions was to challenge and threaten the psychic territo-

rial power lines by which women were admitted to the Art Sturd Club, so long as they behaved *enough* like the men, did work clearly in the traditions and pathways hacked out by the men." Yet women artists were in a double bind since, if they did make masculine art, they were seen as not fulfilling the social and artistic expectations for their own gender. "For years my most audacious works were viewed as if someone else inhabiting me had created them—they were considered 'masculine' when seen as aggressive, bold. As if I were inhabited by a stray male principle; which would be an interesting possibility—except in the early sixties this notion was used to blot out, denigrate, deflect the coherence, necessity and personal integrity of what I made and how it was made."

Among other images in Ero's photographs of *Eye Body*, one sees Schneemann lying naked on a plastic covering on the floor, her face bisected by a vertical line of dark paint and her body—oriented frontally toward the camera—covered not only with way lines of paint, but also with two snakes. She reclines comfortably, arms tucked behind the pillow that raises her head slightly. Though her eyelids are somewhat lowered, the angle of her head allows her to gaze directly at the spectator, and a slight smile hovers at her mouth. In another image, she stands, again naked, festooned with rope and rags. Here, her eye makeup has been exaggerated and her pouting mouth is outlined to the point where her features seem like creations traced on a neutral face. In yet another photograph, a long shot that allows one to discern little detail, Schneemann lies on her back on what looks like a fur rug, her legs raised in the air in a bicycling position. The view this time is from the side. While she crooks one arm behind her head, she holds the arm closest to the camera out from her body in such a way that her underarm cavity and the curve of her breast are open to the viewer—indeed they are emphasized, rhyming with the curve of her buttock. In all of these tableaux, Schneemann adopts the standard iconography of the chesecake photograph—the pout, the embarrassed gaze, the open postures, and the gestures that indicate where the viewer should direct his gaze—but she subverts them for another purpose.

Schneemann wanted to distinguish between the way she saw the female body represented as an object in Happenings and visual art and the way she tried to represent the female body as subject. Her view of the female subject was an essentialist one that placed women in the realm of primal nature. "I was using the nude as myself—the artist—and as a primal, archaic force which could unify energies I discovered as visual information. I felt compelled to 'conceive' of my body in manifold aspects which had



eluded the culture around me. Eight years later the implications of the body images I had explored would be clarified when studying sacred Earth Goddess artifacts of 4,000 years ago."<sup>59</sup>

But artists not only appropriated fine art models for representations of women. They also explored popular iconography of the female body, from fashion advertisements to comic books. Rosenquist's canvases show fragments of smooth, perfectly proportioned legs or manicured hands. Mannequinlike, these are body parts that could have escaped from the Fifth Avenue window displays that Rosenquist, Warhol, Rauschenberg, and Johns used to arrange. In Roy Lichtenstein's *Hopeless* we see a woman lying on her pillow with tears welling in her eyes as the bubble over her head shows her thinking, "That's the way—it *should* have *begun*! But it's hopeless!" This woman, and her sisters in other Lichtenstein works, have the enormous eyes and mouth, the diminutive noses, the even-toned (beach-day) peachy skin, and the lush wavy hair of comic-book heroines. Like those heroines, they also have mental lives ruled by their desiring bodies—waiting for the telephone to ring, the boyfriend to show up, or the latest wave of emotion to dissipate.

Other such female figures populate canvases, Happenings, and films. Warhol's various Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy multiples are like monotype machines, setting standards for feminine beauty. The characters that Pat Oldenburg played in Claes Oldenburg's performances, like the Street Chick, the City Waif, and the Bride, replicate the feminine stereotypes of American popular mythology. The beves of pinup girls in Bruce Conner's films and collages are like catalogs of the culture's displays of gender differentiation; moreover, they are erotically implicated in anxieties of nuclear destruction (as in *A Movie* and *Cosmic Ray*), political disaster (*Report*), and psychosexual fetishism. In these works, as in Lichtenstein's portraits of comic-book women, the imagery is stylized, exaggerated, repetitive—to our eyes, outlandish. And yet nothing else in the works contravenes the standard social meanings of "the female." These are typical emblems of feminine helplessness, wiliness, and sexiness, only made more gigantic. Reproducing the iconography of mainstream culture, these transferences of female images leave gender codes intact.

The female body, then, was often represented as the subject or theme—the raw material—of artworks, both fine and commercial. Women's bodies also were viewed as "raw" in another, Lévi-Straussian sense, for they were represented as part of nature.<sup>60</sup> In Robert Whitman's *Flower* the human body was reconceived as partly botanic. A filmed image showed a woman tossing about in her bed linens, like a seed about to germinate. Later, four

women, in satin dresses and high heels, paced around the room. Manipulating their elegant dresses—which were layered like petals in white, red, blue, and gold—so that they constantly changed color, they seemed half fashion plate, half flower blossom. Throughout, images of birth mixed with images of vegetable fecundity.<sup>61</sup> A different aspect of nature was plumbed when female bodies mingled with raw animal parts in Vostell's *Tow*, as Lette Eisenhauer, bouncing on a trampoline among beef lungs, became increasingly blood-smeared.

In Stan Brakhage's film *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular*, the camera focuses on his wife Jane's face and vulva from a low angle shot near her feet. At first, the view seems a pornographic one, as unidentified hands probe her private parts. But then her pubic hair is shaved and she begins to birth a baby. What had been viewed at first as a controlled sex performance now becomes represented as a "natural," unpredictable, almost animal event.<sup>62</sup> Larry Rivers's *Pregnancy Drawing* is similarly fascinated with the fecund female body: partly taken from a medical textbook, and partly a portrait of his own pregnant wife, the drawing shows a fully developed fetus inside a transparent belly, and, in the manner of his *Vocabulary Lessons*, it labels parts of the body—the cervix, the uterine wall.<sup>63</sup> In Kaprow's *Countryard*, a woman lies atop a mountain and seems to become a human sacrifice for nature's sake, as another mountain, upside down, descends from the sky to join the first mountain and swallows up the female figure.<sup>64</sup> In all of these works, gender divides the world into zones of specialty. Male equals culture; female equals nature.

But gender articulation is confused or challenged in many other works of the period, particularly in dance and film. Whitman's soft-textured metaphor for women's bodies in *Flower* stands in contrast to Paxton's *Afternoon*, where both men and women were compared to strong trees, as the costumes served to unify all of the performers—both human and arboreal—rather than divide them according to gender or species. As opposed to Vostell's *Tow*, in Schneemann's *Meat Joy* raw animal parts were assimilated to both male and female bodies, as couples cavorted among sausages, plucked chickens, and raw fish.

In Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton's collaborative dance *Word Words* the choreographers, dressed in the minimum costume allowed by law (G-strings for both, plus pasties for Rainer), performed an abstract sequence of movement in the structure suggested by the title. First, each did the phrase solo; then they performed it simultaneously as a duet. Although their nearly naked bodies may at first have drawn the audience's attention to the gender contrast between the two dancing bodies, the fact that they did

identical movements, with identical physical exertion, served as a refusal to differentiate. In the standard classical ballet pas de deux a similar formal structure is followed. First each dancer does a solo "variation," and then the couple dances together. But there the similarity ends. In ballet, the woman in her delicate tutu and satin toe shoes and the man with his bulging tights dance movements tailored to what in the genre's traditional technical vocabulary has become the "essence" of their genders: she has small, neat footwork and moves her arms gracefully, while he takes wide, powerful leaps and barrel turns and carries her around the stage. Her movement is restricted, while his signifies freedom. In modern dance, too—particularly in the Graham tradition—the genders were strongly bifurcated in terms of movement style and content. In contrast, with its straightforward postures uncoded by stereotypical gender trappings and performed identically by both dancers, *Word Works* used its minimal costumes not to reveal the body as separately gendered, but to strip both bodies down until they were seen as equal.

Similarly, in many Judson dances men and women were given equal work to do. In Trisha Brown's *Lightfall* she and Paxton both struck various sports-derived poses, perched on one another's backs, or jostled each other. Both were pictured as being equally capable of supporting the weight of another person and as having equal access to the vocabulary of sports movement; neither the movements nor the powers of the performers' bodies were classified according to gender.

In Rainer's *Terrain*, female-gendered movement was satirized in the "Duet" section, where Rainer did a women's ballet variation and Brown combined bump-and-grind routines with classical ballet arm movements—both dressed in black tights and black Hollywood Vassarotte push-up bras. In the "love" subsection of *Terrain*'s "Play" section, in which Rainer and Bill Davis assumed erotic poses from Indian sculpture, the postures were also gender-coded. But these were in dialectical contrast to the rest of the dance where the dancers' genders were inconsequential. All were dressed in black leotards or shirts and tights, and different ones were temporarily singled out as "stars" with white tops in different sections. Moreover, the dancers' movements, in some sections bound by rules or shaped by game activities, were often exchangeable, done in unison, repeated, or in other ways impossible to code according to gender. Paxton's *Pray* included a moment in which a woman lifted a man—an assertion of equal strength unheard of on the dance stage at the time.

Thus, one way to refuse gender coding is to treat the sexes identically. Many of the women choreographers—and some of the men—at the Jud-

son Dance Theater staked out in their particular art form an arena where women and men were represented as equally capable of physical action. That is, in this corner of the early Sixties avant-garde artworld, where women outnumbered men as creative artists, affirmative action in both job fulfillment and the representation of gender imagery foreshadowed the demands of the women's movement later in the decade.

However, another way of confusing genders is to mix or trade codes. For instance, the refined striptease that Valda Setterfield performed in *Random Breakfast*, which accentuated her femininity, was offset later in the piece by David Gordon's travestied Spanish dance—a hairy Carmen Miranda imitation in the manner of Milton Berle—and again by his version of Judy Garland singing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow."

Lanford Wilson explored the gender-bending role-playing of the homosexual transvestite world in his first important play, *The Madness of Lady Bright*, which opened at Caffè Cino in May 1964 and had an unprecedentedly long run. The play is a monologue by the character Leslie Bright—whom the stage directions describe as "a screaming preening queen, rapidly losing a long-kept 'beauty'"—punctuated by the interventions of a Girl and a Boy, who function as a chorus representing voices from the hero's past as well as his emotional states. Like a fading belle from a Tennessee Williams play, Leslie Bright is surrounded by keepsakes, mementoes, and memories; his bedroom is that of a woman, cluttered with nail polish bottles and lipsticks and featuring a bed with pink silk sheets. In the tradition of gay slang, he adopts feminine gender codings, referring to himself as "she," and addressing himself as "girl." And like a Williams heroine, he is slowly losing his mind over the impossibility of finding love. Alone and lonely, he desperately makes phone calls that are never answered. In between his unsuccessful attempts to make human contact, he imagines himself as Venus, Giselle, Miss America, and Judy Garland. But he also remembers the real lovers who left their autographs on his walls. "Lady Bright" may have been freed from his culturally assigned male gender role by choosing to cross the line to another one, but ultimately it seems he has simply traded one gender prison for another.<sup>65</sup>

The gender-bending of the Baudelairean cinema, however—exemplified by *Flaming Creatures*—is positively reinforced transgression. Here the confusion of gender roles is festively comic, liberatory, and pleasurable. Above all else, the "creatures" populating this film are outrageously androgynous, ironically never more so than when men travesty the female body. This was the revolutionary revision of gender about which Susan Sontag wrote: "The important fact about the figures in Smith's film is that one cannot

easily tell which are men and which are women. These are 'creatures,' flaming out in intersexual, polymorphous joy. The film is built out of a complex web of ambiguities and ambivalences, whose primary image is the confusion of male and female flesh. The shaken breast and the shaken penis become interchangeable with each other."<sup>66</sup>

Not only the sexual organs but, importantly, the grotesque aperture of the mouth looms large in Smith's iconography. As Stefan Brecht put it, the actions of the "creatures" involves:

Lip-gymnastics, a mock-sensuality derived from the pout, demonstrating the lips' flexibility, humifiability and suction-power, a visual pacan to cocksucking, grand rivalry for the cock of mouth with cunt, culminating in the second of the movie's grand Scenes, a universal elaborate putting on of lipstick, dark and glistening, the extreme close-ups revealing the grainy skin, stubble, bad teeth, epidermal pouches of these not-so-young queens: to the accompaniment of a woman's commercial recorded lecture on why and how to put on lipstick.<sup>67</sup>

The emphasis on orality, the festive androgyny, and the ecstatic group dancing in *Flaming Creatures* all point to the body as a site of simultaneous pleasure, community, and liberation. The film argues that when sexual pleasure is liberated from gender, the body becomes a space where anything is possible.

The body in the Fifties and early Sixties mainstream culture was almost always controlled and covered up. For an extreme instance, in the Hollywood film *That Touch of Mink* the Doris Day character breaks into hives at the very suggestion of premarital sex. The avant-garde arts produced a new image—unruly, festively promiscuous, candid, and confident—that by the late Sixties had become the cultural norm. In the Sixties the body generally was viewed—both by mainstream culture and the avant-garde—as invulnerable and immortal. Like Taylor Mead as the Atom Man, people were willing to ingest, inject, and in any other way incorporate anything into their bodies, from cigarettes, alcohol, illicit drugs, and reducing diets to plastic surgery and anti-wrinkle hormones. Now, in the Eighties and Nineties, we are seeing a backlash to this effervescent body that was invented in the early Sixties and spread to the mass counterculture by the late Sixties. Newspapers these days daily announce the dangers of every old-fashioned bodily pleasure—from food to alcohol to cigarettes to sex. Through safe sex, regimented exercise, "power dressing," healthy diets, and styled hair we find innumerable methods of keeping our bodies under strict control. And recently we have seen Congress and the National Endow-

ment for the Arts attempting to regulate even the ways in which bodies may be represented in art. In the context of the present mainstream mania for bodily control, when we look back at the Sixties, the ways in which those bodies produced by the avant-garde were allowed to run rampant all through the culture seem to us incredible, even impossible. But certainly a fascination with body discourse persists.

Clearly, both the works and the language of the early Sixties avant-garde point to an ideal of effervescence. They betoken an overflowing consciousness, a sense that the body's boundaries dissolve as it is permeated by images as well as by other bodies. That liberating ideal was taken up by the culture at large in the later Sixties, but in the Eighties and Nineties, for all sorts of political and economic reasons, effervescence is seen as a threat, not as a desideratum.

The confidence of post-World War II America created an intrepid social body in the Sixties. It also created an oppositional avant-garde, proposing even more outrageous bodies, reveling in an increased somatic consciousness of the here and now. In its expansive confidence, Pax Americana produced high expectations, rising faster than they could be fulfilled. Thus, the excessive and subversive avant-garde body was in part a product and a reflection of the very culture it criticized. But the effervescent body so far outstripped even the confident body of the dominant culture that it actually helped produce a new culture, overflowing into an alternative space of cultural imaginings made concrete. And the pressure of the effervescent body created a route into that space large enough for a mass counterculture to follow.