

JEWISH IDENTITIES IN AMERICAN FEMINIST ART: GHOSTS OF ETHNICITY



Deborah Kass , "Gold Barbra" from the Jewish Jackie Series, 1992.

If we do not know our history, we are doomed to live it out as if it were our own private fate. --Hannah Arendt

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Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art (Routledge, 2006) is a study of Jewishness and U.S. feminist art practices aimed at understanding a past that continues to haunt the present with its assumptions and omissions. The book addresses the unacknowledged but powerful roles of assimilation and Jewish identity in U.S. feminist art, especially in light of renewed critical interest in these issues both within the U.S. and internationally.

This book is based on both historical research and oral interviews with artists, and traces the various ways in which Jewishness and feminism were marked in the 1970s to the present, both in various Southern Californian artistic communities and in urban centers such as New York and Chicago. Though many of the artists and critics I write about are of Eastern European descent, a wider range of artists is represented, highlighting the diversity of the Jewish diasporic art communities in the United States at the end of the twentieth century and noting the especially complicated status of more recent Jewish immigrants from Israel, or the Arab world, as well as those of mixed racial and ethnic ancestry. Throughout the book, U.S. Jewish feminist artists are considered within a multidimensional framework, with ongoing and complex internal class, generational, political, gender, racial, and sexual divisions and concerns.¹ For that reason, I want to emphasize that Jewishness in the context of this book stands for a cultural identity rather than a strictly defined religious one, and for a shifting set of historically diverse experiences rather than a unified and monolithic notion of Jewishness.

Jewish Identities claims that much feminist art practice and art criticism from the 1970s to the present, rather than expressing a fully successful integration of Jewish women into the U.S. cultural sphere, can be seen as elucidating an historically fractured experience that eloquently negotiated the contradictions of a post-Holocaust culture in which Jewish women possessed, in Karen Brodtkin's words, a "kind of double-

vision that comes from racial middleness.” According to Brodtkin, the author of *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (1998), this includes both “an experience of marginality vis-à-vis whiteness, and an experience of whiteness and belonging vis-à-vis blackness.”² Positioned in a mediating category as neither black nor white, Jewish women are, in Brodtkin’s view, unable to fit neatly within the class and ethnic orders of racialized identity politics in the United States. However, Brodtkin is also fully aware of the limits of the narrow black/white coding of racial difference and the ways that it favors Jews who became “white” in the postwar years. She puts emphasis on the ambivalent experience of Jews in the United States and how that ambivalence allows them to speak only uncertainly. Whereas her research is limited to a more homogeneous group of Jewish women of Eastern European background, the current study, particularly the later chapters on artistic practice in the 1990s and beyond, includes various aspects of Jewish-American feminist identity—abstractions that deal with the intersections of generation, class, gender, sexuality, religion, race, and the cultural reconstruction of identity. The fact that I end this book with a discussion of an Arab-American artist, Doris Bittar, is meant to underscore the importance of a comparative frame, and a trans-ethnic frame. Still, the issue of “in-betweenness” or “racial middleness” – marginality vis a vis whiteness was an issue for some of the Eastern European Jewish women in my book working in the 1970s, and this position of “in-betweenness” is the ghost that I am referencing in the title for them. More recently this issue of “racial middleness” applies more directly to the women in my book who are Black Jews or Iraqi Jews, though as Beverley Naidus, an Eastern European feminist Jewish artist in my book, points out in her work the problem of racial middleness remained an issue in terms of the reception of her work in the 1990s.

I initially undertook the research for this book in order to make sense of how changing notions about what it means to be a Jewish man or woman in the United States could result in generational tensions among artists, critics, and art historians. Such concerns led me to revisit the issue of Jewish identity and how it became one of the fault lines at the heart of the conflict between second-wave feminists in the arts, who were tied to the women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s, and third-wave feminists of the 1980s and 1990s, who differentiate themselves from the post-feminist label. It is a fault line that has been treated with great circumspection, if discussed at all. Moreover, it quickly became apparent to me that wider historical issues behind the reticence on this topic required my looking back much further than the 1970s. Therefore, part of the book is devoted to accounting for the role played by certain prominent Jewish art critics, notably Clement Greenberg, from the late 1930s onward in omitting consideration of any specific Jewish experience from the content of art history and art criticism.³ Such an inquiry draws on substantial recent scholarship in the fields of art history, art criticism, Jewish studies, and women's studies on the intersections of art history, race, gender, and ethnicity, a topic that I focused on in my anthology: *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* and in a more recent article titled “Barbie’s Jewish Roots: Jewish Women’s Bodies and Feminist Art” in ed., Nathan Abrams, *Jews and Sex* (2008).⁴

It is important to point out that *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art* is not intended to be a survey of Jewish feminist artists in the United States.⁵ Instead, I have tried to present a small group of artists whose work, I believe, best embodies some of the questions faced by Jewish feminist artists during this period, throwing the complex

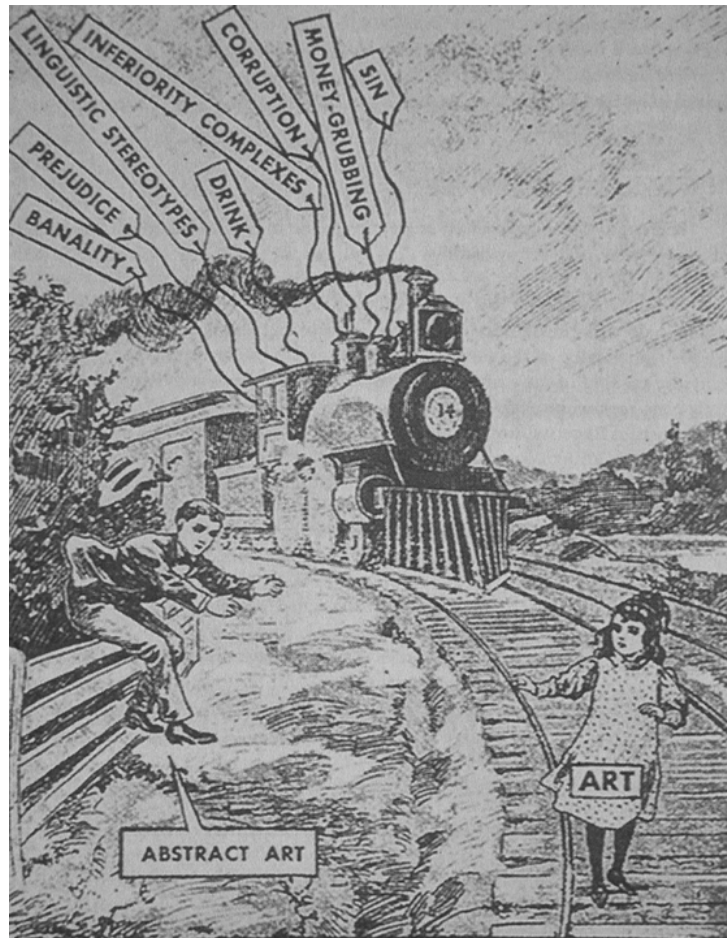
issues of feminism, assimilation, identity, and geographical displacement into relief generationally. The book's chapters are premised on interrelated preoccupations shared by these artists and are intended to give a critical account of various kinds of ethnically marked feminist practices coming out at different historical moments.

Though I look at ethnicity as a social construct, the book does not fully subscribe to the more sweeping post-ethnic label proposed by historian David A. Hollinger.⁶ The implications of the terms post-ethnic, post-black or post-feminist are too far reaching and problematic to be taken lightly, given that the same sexism, racism and anti-semitism remain fixed in place in the U.S. despite the use of these new labels that suggest we have moved beyond these real world problems.⁷ That said, the book is not meant to be a celebratory book either, hence the emphasis on ghosts – in terms of all the unspoken issues and other levels of what is hidden – from the silence within certain families about Jewish relatives killed during World War II to questioning what stories people are willing to own in a culture that is sometimes long on myth and short on documentation.

Generational Fault Lines

Issues of aesthetics shift from one generation to the next. The generation of Clement Greenberg held art aloof from the concerns of the physical world and politics. For writers such as Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, the other leading voice of mid-century art criticism, the realities of fascism, the destruction of war, and the devastation of the Holocaust led them to believe that art was incapable of representing social or political problems. This recalls Theodor Adorno's oft-quoted remark about the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz, which references the paradoxical nature of an event such as the Holocaust and how it defies representation.⁸ For many artists of Greenberg's and Rosenberg's generation, abstraction or a stringent form of visual asceticism was a more appealing way to express the intellectually unanswerable questions of their day and to express their modernist skepticism. Moreover, the affinity between fascism, consumer culture, and show business that was seen as underlying the "aestheticization" of politics—already critical to the philosophy of Walter Benjamin and to Greenberg's distrust of kitsch in his 1939 essay "Avant-garde and Kitsch" (where Rhonda Lieberman claims that Greenberg lays out his laws of aesthetic kosherness)—led many artists to turn away from the visual pleasure and seduction of the more socially engaged realist art that was popular before the war.

A good example of this aesthetic shift, is represented in this rather ironic collage made in 1946 by Ad Reinhardt, a young girl standing helplessly on the railroad tracks is equated with "art" and is rescued just in time from "sin, money grubbing, corruption, inferiority complexes, drink, linguistic stereotypes, prejudice, and banality" by her male suitor and hero, who is likened to "abstract art."



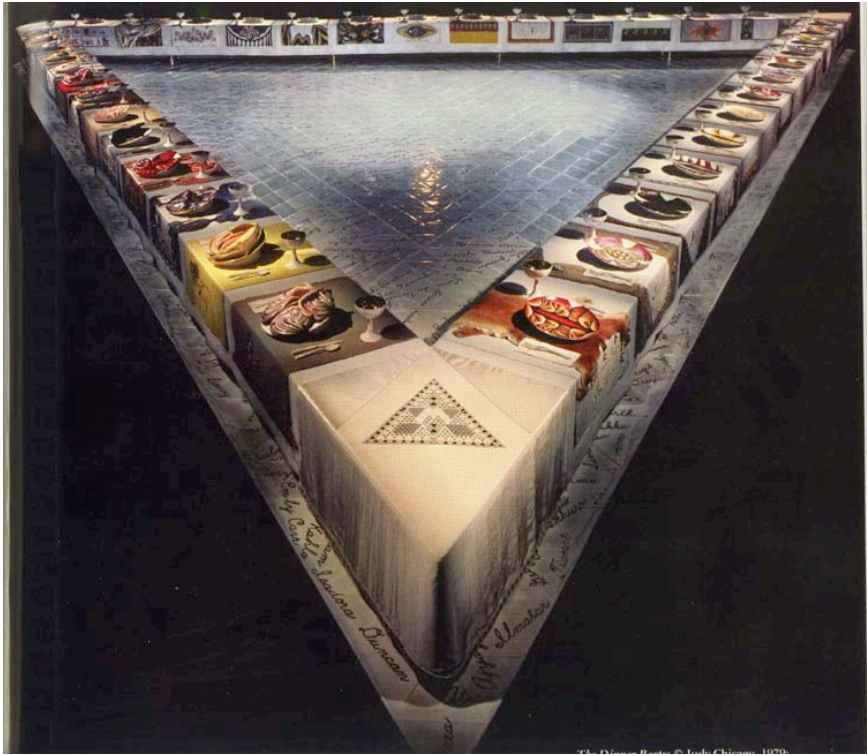
Ad Reinhardt, The Rescue of Art, collage drawing, 1946

I begin the book by focusing on Clement Greenberg, the New York art world's foremost Jewish critic during the post war period, for the purposes of bringing to the surface the unacknowledged role of Jews and their negotiations of their place in the history of American art, the "New York art world" and art criticism. In the context of my book, Greenberg serves as a place holder for naming a set of problems around the whitening of Jewish immigrants and immigrant culture in the United States, a process that indeed established a monolithic and flattened idea of Jewishness in the 1940s. The mechanisms through which the American art establishment banished specificity with claims to the universal, most notably through the writings of Greenberg, promoted art world dogmas and aesthetic norms (Abstract Expressionism, the myth of the individual genius, New York as the center of the art world) that silenced Jewish specificity and Jewish identity, just as Jews ironically were becoming, for the first time, a strong visible presence in the arts.

The anxiety about making Jewishness visible was felt keenly among secular Jews in the second half of the twentieth century, and continues to create a fault line generationally among Jewish artists and critics (both men and women). For a number of the artists I write about in this book, Greenberg was a force they have had to contend with in the production and reception of their work. Greenberg stands out in my account because his art criticism became far more influential than that of his left-wing Jewish counterparts, due in part to his drift in his career from the left to the right of the political spectrum during the McCarthy period, when his writing maintained a greater separation between art and politics. Throughout his career, he was nevertheless consistent in not wanting any notion of identity to be articulated primarily or purely through visual signifiers. Thus none of his writings on Jewishness are linked to his art criticism or specific artists. Telling such a history today about Greenberg or the absence of this discussion in art history circles, however, is complicated by the fact that many Jewish artists, critics, and historians from the 1940s played a crucial role in expunging Jewishness from the content of this art history and were more comfortable with an approach that glossed over these questions. In her anthology *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, Catherine Soussloff argues that there has been an understandable reluctance on the part of art historians to study this history from such a perspective. She notes how “this avoidance over many years and several generations has produced an aporia at the very heart of the project of art history, a space of doubt brought about by the suppression of the history of the discipline and its effects on discourse.”⁹

The Unadmitted Role of Jewishness in Feminist Art

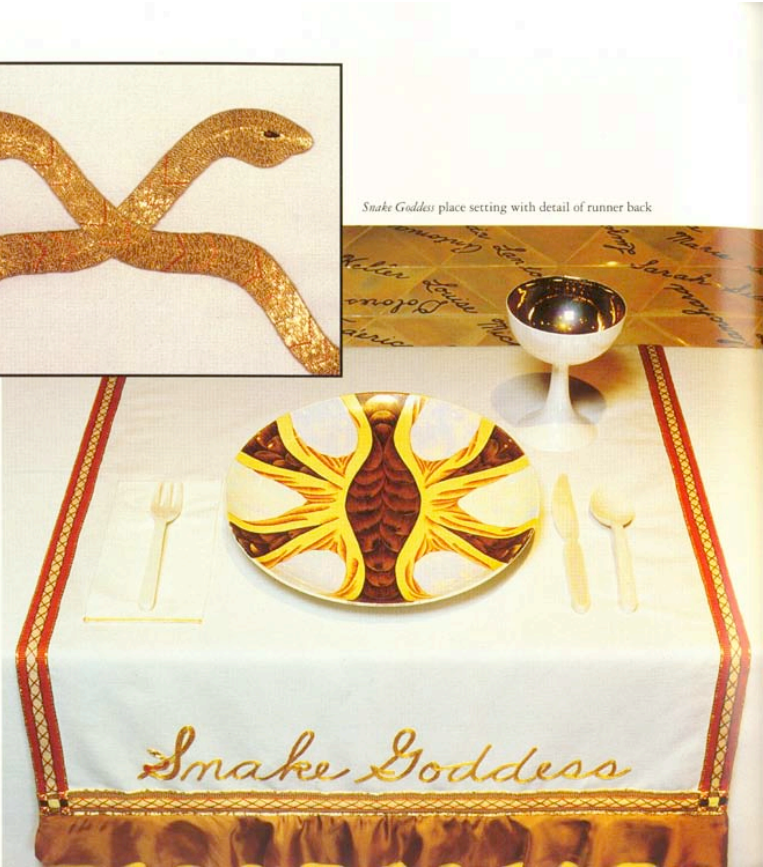
Prominent postwar critics from the 1940s and art historians were not the only ones to drop from their accounts any meaningful reference to Jewishness; so too did some well-known U.S. Jewish feminist artists of the 1970s. The second chapter begins with an examination of Judy Chicago’s influential book *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (1975) as well as her artwork from this period. Though Chicago’s work has already garnered much attention, most critics have not examined the fact of Chicago’s Jewishness. This oversight is due in part to Chicago herself, who gained visibility in the 1970s as an artist by emphasizing her gender and sexuality exclusively. Yet I argue that ethnicity played a central role in her self-construction as both a feminist and an artist. The chapter follows how Judy Chicago, a leading U.S. feminist Jewish artist, used the image of the vagina as a universal symbol of femaleness in her iconic work the Dinner Party to evoke female solidarity. One of the threads of my narrative is how the focus on explicitly sexual imagery during the height of the feminist art movement in the US became a way to celebrate the sexuality of all women, and disavow internal ethnic, racial, sexual, and class differences. This erasure of difference was not just an issue in Judy Chicago’s work of this period, but feminism itself, especially in its more liberal and bourgeois forms, has been roundly criticized for its own indifference to issues or analyses of different subjectivities arising from race, class, ethnic or lesbian/homosexual perspectives.



Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1979



Snake Goddess place setting with detail of runner back



Judy Chicago, *Snake Goddess* place setting detail with runner-back, from *the Dinner Party*, 1979

The US artist, Judy Chicago, that did the most to use vulvar forms as a universal symbol of femaleness in her art, was herself Jewish and used her art to move her feminist voice to the center but relegated her Jewishness to the periphery. This process of how she scripted herself into the art world involved Chicago backgrounding her Jewishness, but not fully erasing it, as Gail Levin points out in her biography on Judy Chicago titled, *Becoming Judy Chicago* (2007).



Judy Chicago, Sojourner Truth Plate, in *The Dinner Party*, 1979

The Dinner Party, a room-sized sculpture was celebrated as the icon of 1970s feminist art when first exhibited. The dinner party plates themselves all feature a butterfly or flower-like sculpture, representing a woman's vagina. These vulvar forms are meant to be emblematic of feminist heroines throughout history. This sculpture was seen as quite groundbreaking at the time, in part because of its radical aesthetics that broke down this hierarchy between high and low, the fine arts and the crafts. Also, it validated the traditional activities of women, and connected the four hundred women working on the project with women who were important historically. The enormous artwork was a grand gesture to acknowledge these significant women and to honor them. However, the form this acknowledgment took, in putting emphasis on the women's sexuality, was anything but ordinary or conventional at that time.

Her elevation of craft aesthetics including porcelain dinner plates as fine art went against the Greenbergian legacy with its emphasis on high art. Indeed, throughout the history of modernism, the decorative and domestic handicrafts have been regarded as "women's work," a form of "low art"

from which "high art" has striven to separate itself. By embracing the decorative and domestic handicrafts in a transgressive way, Chicago's (and Schapiro's) work at that time was seen as a breakthrough and a significant contribution to the woman's art movement. More recently, both Chicago's biographer, Gail Levin, and Chicago herself have focused more on Chicago's Jewishness. Indeed, Chicago's more recent work turns to the Holocaust to define her identity.

This section in the book also looks at Mierle Laderman Ukeles's work and how she negotiated her dual careers as an artist and a feminist in New York in the 1970s through her "maintenance art." Ukeles' work takes a different trajectory from Chicago's since she foregrounds her Jewishness, defined through orthodox religion, while engaging in a more radical aesthetics deriving from garbage, labor, bodily pollution, and social issues. Ukeles highlighted these concerns in a series of four performance works in July 1973 at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. For *Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object*, Ukeles selected an artifact -- a female mummy housed in a glass case -- from the museum's permanent collection in order to call attention to the invisible labor of the janitor whose job it was to keep the case clean.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Cleaning Female Mummy Housed in Glass Case*, part of *Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object*, 1973-74, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Photograph of performance.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside*, 1973

Ukeles cleaned the case herself and made a “dust painting” from the dirt. By naming the cleaning “art” rather than “maintenance,” she called attention to the value of this kind of labor to museum professionals. Another performance involved her washing the floors of the museum and the outdoor steps on her hands and knees, in full view of museum visitors, for a span of eight hours. This dual performance, titled *Washing/ Tracks/Maintenance: Outside and Inside*, also elevated the hard menial tasks and domestic drudgery often performed by women to the public realm of the museum, suggesting that the maintenance of museums is much like the maintenance of homes. In both cases, the labor (often feminized) is mostly unacknowledged and underappreciated yet critical for sustaining the daily existence of our lives. In the context of the museum, the work of janitors and cleaning women is done mostly by working-class laborers. The performance is meant to call attention to this labor force that ensures the smooth functioning of countless institutions in our communities but remains mostly hidden from view.

Considerable critical attention has been given to Ukeles’ Maintenance Art. Yet much of what makes it unusual work for the period is its ethnic subtext, which has been largely ignored, as well as how it deals explicitly with a kind of Jewishness, defined by orthodox religion and its gendered practices. For Ukeles, questioning how you get “clean” and who’s responsible for everyone else’s cleanliness in the family are central subjects in the heart of Jewish ritual and Jewish law, which make a strict separation between profane and holy activities. Within this equation, maintenance work usually relegated to women is seen as the embodiment of profane activity. Ukeles’s art is aimed at disrupting this opposition in order to demonstrate that the work of maintenance is an important realm of human activity that serves to bind the profane and the sacred together. In doing so, her radical aesthetic also introduces a radical element within orthodox religious practices.

The book also focuses on the work of Eleanor Antin and provides a rare example of a white woman dealing with questions of feminism, assimilation, and the legacy of Yiddishkeit culture from the 1970s to the present through both conceptual art, film, and performance art. Though her art has received widespread praise, it has been singled out mostly for its rejection of formalism or for Antin’s use of autobiography in her performance work—with its attention on the self and everyday life as a form of innovative subject matter—rather than for how it reinvents a new tradition of Jewish feminist art out of in part her nostalgia for a world that has swept up her people in the past and a kind of Jewish cosmopolitanism with its European and Eastern European roots that continues to influence Jewish intellectuals and artists today. *The Man without a World* looks at the rich shtetl life of from pre-World War II Eastern European shtetl communities in Poland in a satirical way, a strategy that is linked to the presentation of the heterogeneity of identities among women in her earlier projects. In the film, however, Antin emphasizes the diversity of identities among Jews as well as the tensions they face living in a world of interlocking oppression, both from within and outside the Jewish community. The film reimagines the lives of Jews in Eastern Europe from a contemporary perspective, emphasizing the conflicts they face between Jewish tradition and assimilation. By preserving the problems -- the limited choices for Jews overall and the especially confining roles for Jewish women as either virgins, mothers, or whores -- Antin resists romanticizing an older Jewish culture, a so-called vanishing world. At the same time she presents the women as playful and insolent and not always confined or controlled by such limits, even in the most traditional scenes, such as the

bride being fitted for her wedding dress or being anointed in the mikvah, and this extends to the more unlikely scenes, such as a Jewish woman tormenting a fat pig with sticks.



Eleanor Antin, *The Man Without A World*, film still, "The Mikva," film still, 1991.



Eleanor Antin, *The Man Without a World*, film still, "Market Day," 1991

It is worth noting that Antin, the daughter of a former actress in the Yiddish theater in Poland (who was also a passionate communist) and a socialist, fiercely atheist father, is also referencing her own generational struggles as a nonreligious American Jew, a woman, an artist, and a filmmaker. Antin's work rethinks an older Jewish Eastern European world where women were not able to participate fully outside prescribed stereotypical feminine roles. Although Antin titles the film *The Man without a World* and presents it as a "recently rediscovered" film by a forgotten male Jewish film director, suspiciously named Yevgeny Antinov, the untraditional and sometimes irreverent way that the female characters are presented suggests a feminist point of view.

The section on the work of Martha Rosler in California begins to examine the issue of ethnicity within a wider feminist context. The chapter goes on to describe California feminism and to outline the difficulties that terms such as gender, Jewishness, U.S. nationalism, and assimilation pose for Rosler and how such difficulties are made evident in her work. For Martha Rosler in the mid 1970s, it was debatable to make assumptions about all women and their interests, despite the kind of universal theorizing at that moment that was privileged in the work of Judy Chicago, specifically in terms of her vaginal imagery. It is significant that Chicago's focus was on the body, and this meant for the most part an erasure of other differences. It is precisely these other differences that come up directly in Rosler's early California work which deals with concrete political and social relations in sites such as the kitchen, and brings up the complexity of these issues related to the social and political aspects of making food from the perspective of working-class women as well as Mexican women.



Martha Rosler, *Service: A Trilogy of Colonization*,
"Tijuana Maid," 1976, serial postcard novel



Martha Rosler, "Untitled," 1977, from the Series of Holiday Cards
From Our House to Your House

She also did a postcard series titled *Xmas* or *From Our House to Your House* (1974–78) where Rosler shows more directly her awkwardness – the otherness – she felt as a Jewish woman in a Christian-dominated society in Southern California. One of the other works that I examine includes a piece titled, *She Sees in Herself a New Woman Every Day*, dating from 1977. This work focuses explicitly on Jewish mother–daughter social relations told from the point of view of the daughter. The complex generational ambivalence is captured in the piece’s narrative structure. Different histories and different conceptions of what it means to be female and Jewish in the United States separate two generations of women of Jewish descent. In this photo-text piece, shoes are what express these differences between mother and daughter.

Martha Rosler’s *She Sees in Herself a New Woman Every Day*, 1977 dramatizes the pain in the mother–daughter relations, but doesn’t try to promote a one-dimensional notion of “authentic” Jewish mother–daughter relations either. Rather, it suggests the ways that public Christian culture at once intrudes upon, sets up tensions within, and remakes a Jewish household. Indeed, Rosler’s piece provides a rare example of a white woman dealing with questions of gender, assimilation, and Jewishness during the 1970s. However, it is a work that also suggests some of the tensions and many levels of silencing encountered within Jewish communities. In the case of Rosler’s piece – Jewish racism emerges out of these contradictions in terms of the intolerance of the mother’s generation as expressed in this work. The bind the mother in Rosler’s piece enacts is a refusal of assimilation, a refusal of negotiating a wider culture. The outcome of this can be a virulent racism. Part of the disciplining is how the mother in Rosler’s narrative, wants to keep the daughter within recognizable bounds. Thus, in this work we’re given some evidence as to why Jewish women left the Jewish community and why the trap of identity as transmitted to us by their parents is not only what Greenberg and his generation of high modernists were trying to get away from, but also applied to the generations of feminists from the 70s, but in different ways and for different reasons.



Martha Rosler, “She Sees in Herself a New Woman Every Day,” 1977

In a chapter on *Contemporary Feminist Art Practices in New York*, the book focuses on a few of the women artists who were involved in the 1996 *Too Jewish?* exhibition—Deborah Kass, Rhonda Lieberman, and Elaine Reichek—as well as other New York-based feminist artists such as Sherry Millner, Joan Braderman, and Danielle Abrams.



Elaine Reichek,
*A Postcolonial
Kinderhood,
Sampler, 1994,*
needlepoint
sampler

Reichek's installation addresses directly the way in which an older generation of Jews felt they had to downplay their Jewishness both in public and in private, and this desire to belong to mainstream American culture takes a dark turn, into an obsession with passing that permeates all corners of life. Though Reichek mocks this gesture, her work in which she recreates her childhood bedroom in her parent's house, does raise the question of what it means for Jews to internalize this need to pass to such a degree that it extends to intimate private concerns, including even what counts as suitable décor for a child's bedroom. In Reichek's installation the childhood room was dimly lit, and the furniture was altered slightly to make the room feel dark and off-kilter. The olive gray walls were lined with the artist's own embroideries based on American samplers but devoid of the usual Christian homilies associated with this genre of folk art. Instead, she altered the sampler format to include quotes gathered from Jewish family members.)

Significantly, *Too Jewish?* was one of the first exhibitions in the United States in which the Jewish-American arts community asserted itself socially and politically and constructed a Jewish-American identity from a secular position. Important to this

chapter, as well as to the book as a whole, are the questions raised by curator Norman Kleeblatt as to why Jews (both male and female) have participated historically in the erasure of their own Jewish identity in terms of the artwork they exhibit or make, or the art criticism or art history they write. Kleeblatt suggests that an equivalent blindness regarding race and ethnicity applies equally to Jewish male artists, curators, and historians and is not a problem exclusive to Jewish feminists.

For a later generation of artists in the *Too Jewish?* exhibition that is much more removed from the Holocaust, subject matter dealing with suburban consumer culture, middle-class values, and an ironic emotional engagement with kitsch and strident politics becomes much more acceptable as a representational norm. As artist and writer, Rhonda Lieberman puts it “Being alienated from Pop was not the first step toward cosmopolitan grace – as it was for Greenberg’s generation – but became for me, increasingly, an alienation from myself, from my authentic suburban experience. Years later ... (instead) of feeling persecuted by kitsch, I began to see it as a therapeutic ally.” For artists such as Rhonda Lieberman and Deborah Kass, the increasingly blurred boundaries of art and commodity culture in the 1990s enabled them to promote a different kind of undertaking with art inspired in part by Pop art from the 1960s but now foregrounding the ethnic and the cultural to speak ironically about a certain unacknowledged Jewishness.



Rhonda Lieberman and Cary Leibowitz, *Chanel Hanukkah*, mixed media, 1991



Rhonda Lieberman, *Barbra Bush*, Hanukkah/Christmas, mixed media, 1994



Deborah Kass, *Barbras, 48 Times*, from *The Jewish Jackie Series*, silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas, 1992.

Kass imitates the format of Warhol's celebrity portraits to make us see what most artists and critics have failed to notice about his work: that he excluded from his 1960s cosmopolitan Hollywood register the one major female star whom he frequently cites in his diaries as the embodiment of bad taste, in Warhol's words, "a nouvelle riche" -- Barbra Streisand. Kass's rendition of Barbra in her ironically titled, *The Jewish Jackie Series* and in the cover image not only is meant to point out Warhol's refusal to engage with ethnicity in his work (except in his well-known controversial work *Ten Portraits of the Twentieth Century*) but also pays homage to a cultural figure that had a particular resonance for Kass (as well as for Lieberman) growing up as a Jewish girl on Long Island. Kass identifies with Barbra as someone who publicly presented herself in a way that shifted the norms of female beauty during the period when Kass was growing up -- her "appropriation" is an ironic commentary on her relation, as an artist, to the legacy of Pop art and Warhol as it relates to Jewishness and dominant norms of acceptable femininity.



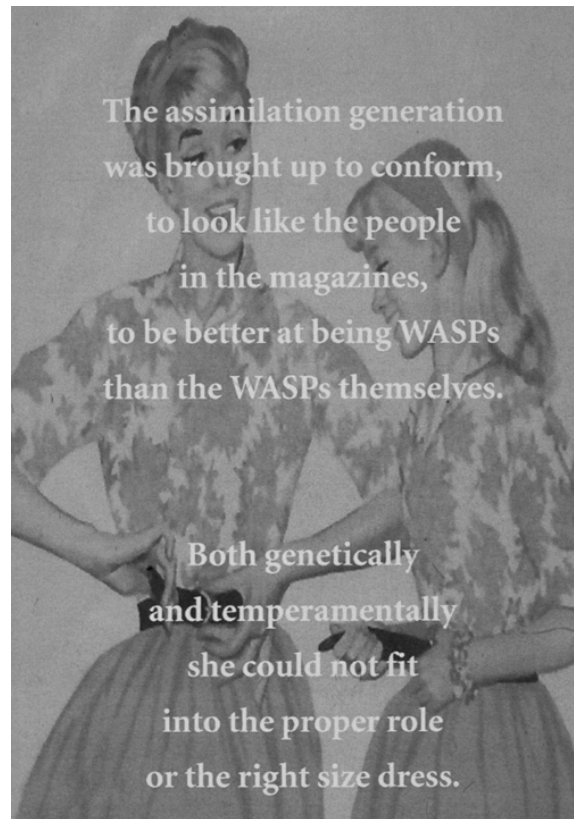
Deborah Kass, detail of 6 Barbras, from *The Jewish Jackie Series*, silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas, 1993

The generational divide among feminist artists, critics, and art historians in the United States was caused in part by the great shift of multiculturalism that forced a generation of Jewish artists and critics to rethink their place in society. In this book, I understand the issue of Jewishness to be one of the fault lines in the conflict between second-wave and third-wave feminists because it was so rarely discussed or taken seriously. This is surprising, considering that the price of admission into feminist circles in the 1970s seems to have been high for Jewish feminist artists and art historians, who had to erase their Jewish identity to be at the center of a movement in which gender overrode all other kinds of identities. The contradictions of Jewish

identities within U.S. culture are exacerbated in those cases in which secular Jews find themselves in positions of considerable power but are also denied acceptance as secular Jews. By the time the third wave of feminists came along in the 1980s and 1990s, Jewishness became translated into privilege since it presumably put one on the wrong side of the culture wars, as it was often lumped with dominant white culture and its intolerance of cultural difference. This is referenced in the work of Beverly Naidus, which examines her distance from the assimilationist and class narrative that have enabled a generation of Jewish-American artists to disidentify themselves from American class and racial struggles.



Above, Beverly Naidus, *Neat, Blond Wife*, 2001, laser print on paper and mixed media



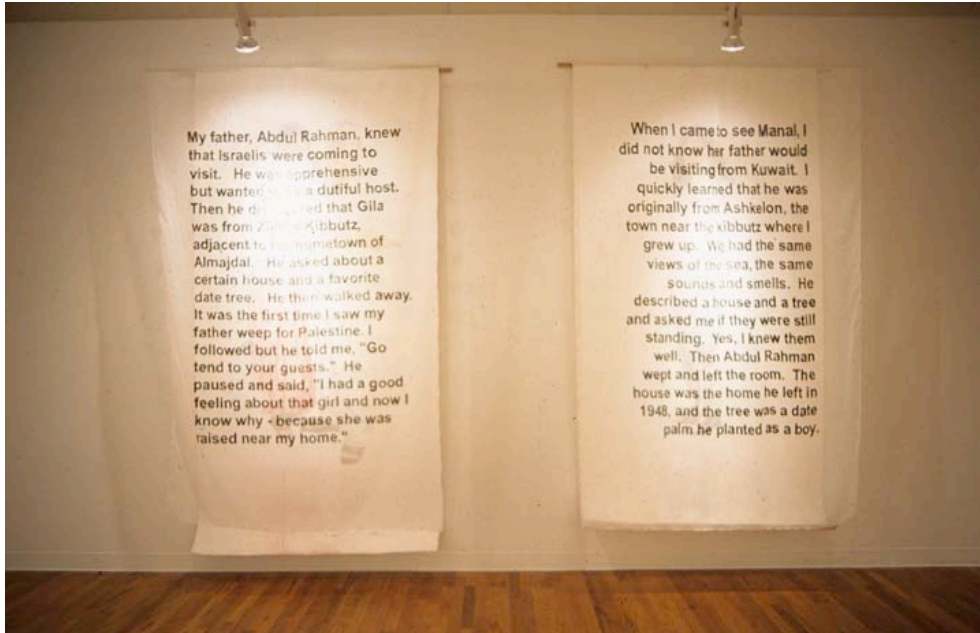
Beverly Naidus, *Neat, Blond Wife*, 1995

Again, an erasure of Jewishness was the price some women paid for their strong presence in the fields of art, art history, and women's studies. However, the debates around Jewish identity in the 1990s changed some of this and enabled women to come together on a different basis, a basis from which Jewish identities, among others, were able to be worked out publicly, for example in Ruth Wallen's participation in the U.S.-Mexico border group Las Comadres and Wallen's and Bittar's respective collaborations with Jewish-Palestinian dialogue groups.

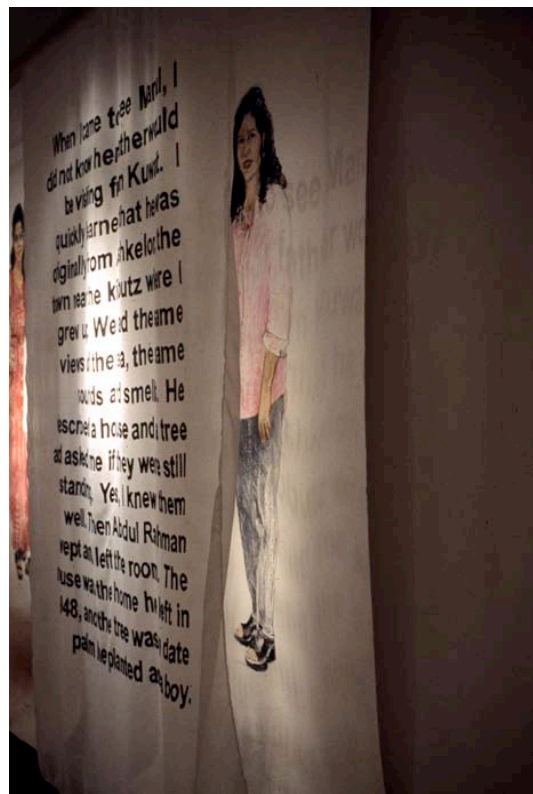


Ruth Wallen, *Border Boda*, 1990, video still of Ruth Wallen and Emily Hicks, from multi-media installation and performance

Questions of Jewishness enter into Las Comadres' *Border Boda* (Border wedding), a 1990 performance piece presented as part of an installation work titled *La Vecindad* (the neighborhood), through the work of Wallen and Mexican and Chicano group members who were part Jewish.¹⁰ The performance incorporates oral histories of various members' grandmothers, including Wallen's Jewish grandmother, who immigrated to California from Russia. Excerpts from *Palestinian-Jewish Dialogue*, one of Wallen's recent works builds on the impact of telling stories, this time revealing the cross-linkages among members of a Jewish-Palestinian group in San Diego. Doris Bittar, *Semites: Dialogue 2*, Manal Gila, and Abdul Rahim) Doris Bittar's *Semites*, from 2001–4, features large portraits of Jews and Arabs, living mostly in Southern California, but who emigrated from the Middle East. Many of the portraits are members of the Jewish/Arab dialogue group that Bittar co-founded with her Jewish husband, James Rauch. *Semites* consists of austere-looking life-size pastel portraits covered in veils imprinted with words taken from the subjects' own personal stories. Rather than using veils as a shroud or as a cover to conceal, Bittar uses them to animate these vivid portraits through the words inscribed on them. In a certain way, the veils also bestow a kind of anonymity on the subjects and suggest that the individual identities of the speakers are less significant than the nature of the stories they tell—stories of loss and exile as of shared histories between Jews and Arabs.



Doris Bittar, *Semites: Dialogue 1, Manal and Sitto*, 2002, 86 x 54 in., pastel drawing and veil with text



Doris Bittar, *Semites: Dialogue 1, Manal and Gila*, 2003, pastel drawing and veil with text

Significantly, many of the artists I just discussed submit their art to several displacements back to the cultures they or their families left behind. Therefore, the social context they reference in their work isn't simply that of Southern California, and the displacement isn't simply from New York or the Midwest.

**Danielle Abrams,
Quadroon, 1998,
video still of Butch
in the Kitchen**



The question of what gets erased in such relocations is what impinges on certain more recent feminist practices. For some of the younger Jewish feminists in this book, this takes several forms. For Danielle Abrams and Beverly Naidus, hybridity captures the material contradictions among Jewish-Americans who are not white or who, as in Naidus's case, are unable to "pass" as white.



**Danielle Abrams,
Quadroon, 1998, video
still of Dee**

Danielle Abrams's work *Quadroon*, 1997, uses self-portraiture and family portraiture to acknowledge that identity is constructed in complicated and critical ways. In it, she performs four different familiar roles on video to suggest how her own identity is fractured into discrete parts. In one of the characters, for example, Butch in the Kitchen, Abrams is a light-skinned black as well as a dark-skinned Jew in a predominantly white gay and lesbian community and thus straddles multiple social and racial groups. (Abrams, *Butch in the Kitchen*). For Lidia Shaddow, Beverly Naidus, Ruth Wallen, and Doris Bittar, the extraterritorial interaction between the Jewish-American community and the Middle East, including the Palestinian struggle in the Occupied Territories, is of central concern. (Doris Bittar, *Semites: Dialogue 1, Lidia and Rachmin*) Their work suggests a need for an expanded view of feminist art's geographical scope, emphasizing a transnational frame that enables us to better understand the ways that flows of people, capital, and goods between nations and continents have shaped the Jewish-American and Arab-American experience.

The book taken as a whole, illustrates some of the possibilities and problems currently haunting the area of Jewish participation in the making and the history of feminist art in the United States. It is my hope that those who read it will approach these issues in a critical manner, one that draws directly on their own experiences and histories, and that acknowledges that Jewish identity and feminist contemporary art come in many and varied forms. The book is by no means a definitive statement on the complexity and range of issues raised by this kind of art; nor is it a moralizing discourse on the type of Jewish identity one ought to have. It is important to acknowledge at the outset that no single book can capture the diversity of artistic practices that constitute Jewish-American feminist communities today. In a way, the book only begins to raise some of the concerns, which may not have clear and definitive answers, regarding the perilous and circuitous roots of Jewish identity and feminist contemporary art. In certain respects, some of the artists and critics discussed in this book, particularly those from the 1970s, were expected, often in ambiguous ways, to assimilate into the homogenizing culture of the United States, and thus their contributions were understood as more ethnically neutral than my account suggests. Their greatest successes—legitimacy in the art world and the academy, recognition by feminists internationally—seemed to have come at an enormous cost, which might have distanced us even further from filling in this history that continues to haunt us. Nonetheless, as this line of inquiry is extended to include more contemporary work and as additional documentation and research unfold about Jewish artists, critics, and curators (male and female, from the United States and abroad), we can hope to puzzle out the silences and confusions that haunt this topic. Though ghosts will probably always remain, it is important that the conversations begin.

Notes

Permission was granted by Routledge, London, to reprint excerpts from *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* (Routledge, 2006).

¹ Many of the artists I have interviewed have welcomed my approach as an opportunity to rethink their earlier work from such a fresh perspective.

² K. Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*, London: Routledge, 1998, 1-2.

³ See L. Bloom, "Ghosts of Ethnicity: Rethinking American Art Discourses of the 1950s and 1980s," *Socialist Review* 94, nos. 1-2, 1995.

⁴ See, for example, B. Collins, "Le Pessimisme Politique et 'La Haine de Soi' Juive: les origines de l'esthétique puriste de Greenberg" (Political pessimism, Jewish "self-hatred" and the Origins of Greenberg's Purist Aesthetics). *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, Fall/Winter 1993, 61-83; S. Barron (ed.) *Exiles and Emigrés: the Flight of European Artists from Hitler*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997; and C. Sousloff, *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

⁵ Though I have limited the topic to a discussion of U.S. Jewish artists, the veiled role that Jewishness plays in feminist art in other countries is an urgently relevant question. For further writing on this topic, see Griselda Pollock, "Gleaning in History," in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1996), 266-88, and Griselda Pollock, "Painting as a Backward Glance that Does Not Kill," in *Fascist Aesthetics*, ed. Greg Hainge, special edition of *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 42 (2000): 116-44. Also see Amelia Jones "The Undecidability of Difference: The Work of Rachel Garfield," in *Rachel Garfield: You'd Think So, Wouldn't You?*, University of Hertfordshire Galleries, Hatfield, U.K., 2005, 17-32, and Nicolas Mirzoeff, *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews*. London: Routledge, 1999. For further writing on artwork specifically on the Holocaust, see: Shelley Hornstein, Laura Levitt, Laurence Silberstein (eds.), *Impossible Images: Contemporary Art after the Holocaust* (New York: New York University Press, 2003)

⁶ See D. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*, BasicBooks, 1995.

⁷Thelma Golden described her 2001 exhibition "Freestyle" at the Studio Museum in Harlem as a showcase of "postblack art" by a new generation of artists who approach racial identity as something to be experimented with, or even left alone, but not as the only central feature of the artists' work. Though the postblack label was not initially meant as an anti-multiculturalism label it has been circulating in the art world as such according to Holland Cotter, "Beyond Multiculturalism, Freedom?" *New York Times*, 29 July 2005. For a discussion of the problematic emergence of postfeminism in the arts, see Amelia Jones, "'Post-feminism': A Remasculinization of Culture? (1990) in Hilary Robinson (ed.), *Feminism-Art Theory-An Anthology 1968-2000*, Oxford, England: Blackwell, 2001. For an excellent comprehensive overview of feminist art theory, see Hilary Robinson (ed.), *Feminism-Art Theory-An Anthology 1968-2000*, Oxford, England: Blackwell, 2001. Also see Amelia Jones (ed.), *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, London, England: Routledge, 2003, and Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska (eds.), *Feminist Visual Culture*, New York: Routledge, 2001.

⁸Adorno wrote, "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." Original quote from "An Essay on Cultural Criticism and Society" *Prisms*, Cambridge: Mass.: MIT Press, 1955, 34.

⁹ Sousloff, *Jewish Identity*, 2.

¹⁰ *La Vendad* was originally installed at the Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego, in 1990, and subsequently shown at the Bridge Gallery for Contemporary Art in El Paso, Texas, in 1991. In 1993, a new version of the library was included in a large traveling exhibition titled *La Frontera/ The Border: Art about the Mexico-United States Border Experience*, co-organized by the Centro Cultural de la Raza and the Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla.
