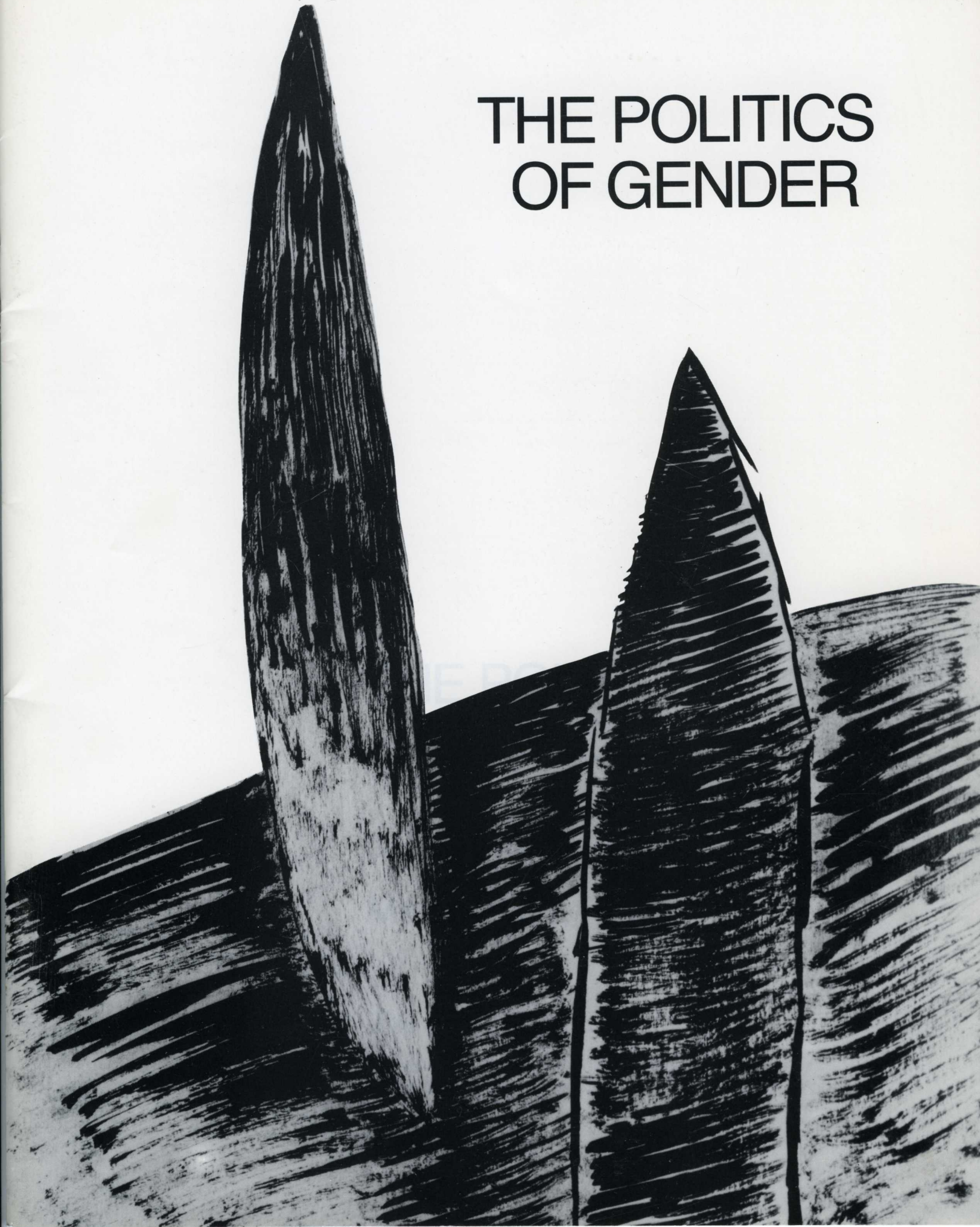


THE POLITICS OF GENDER



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Curated by Lenore Malen

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The Politics of Gender

"Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality."

T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*

One of the disappointing aspects of postmodernism has been its inability to deal with anything that approaches the intimate. Arguably, the single exception to this can be seen in the recent work of women artists. Women's historical position outside of culture may be what has enabled them to treat the kinds of intimate themes that are usually considered taboo. And for many women artists the taboo has assumed a politically subversive edge.

This exhibition draws together the work of thirteen artists who have certain interests in common. All of them are at least familiar with the writings of the French structural linguists and psychoanalysts, who in part have demystified cultural attitudes about both femininity and masculinity. The way women appear to themselves, the way men look at women, the way women are pictured in the media, the way men look at themselves, the way male sexuality becomes fetishism, the criteria for physical beauty—most of these are cultural representations and therefore not immutable but conditioned. Such representations are an inextricable part of language, and language is hardly a neutral vehicle for expressing meaning. Consider the simple binaries passive/active, nature/culture, organic/geometric, emotional/intellectual, and how each juxtaposition implies female/male even now in 1988.

What is a woman if she is not defined by culture? Another phrasing of the question is: What is a woman if she is not defined as the object of a man's desire? If we look at the images of women made by female artists who matured in the 1960s and '70s, what we see repeatedly is the "archaic maternal imago," the primitive mother associated with matriarchal law. This chthonic figure possesses inborn sexuality, inborn desire, and inborn power. She symbolizes the triumph of will and the recovery for women of their inherent power. Her wellspring is undeniably an artist's primary source of creativity.

To restore to the maternal figure her rightful power means to accept the potency of the pre-Oedipal instinctual drives. Our earliest longings are the ones that we repress the most deeply: orality, anality, fusion with the mother—and anger and cannibalistic impulses triggered by such dependency. Feelings as-

sociated with the instinctual drives are so terrifying that we are in a constant flight from them. Of all areas of human experience, these feelings are perhaps the most difficult to depict in art.

At first glance, Louise Bourgeois's small bronze sculpture *Spiral Woman* appears to represent a faceless female enveloped by a coil or a snake. The repeated turning of the coil around itself suggests a baroque energized mass. But something more is going on. Limp, as if dead, the woman looks part fecal and part phallic. Bourgeois has given us a form that is polymorphously perverse, embodying early sexual desire before the differentiation between pleasures exists. Bourgeois often presents this primary sensual world in her work, and she reminds us that it poses a threat of mutilation or even annihilation. She makes what is frightening and nearly ugly into an object of art. Ugly usually corresponds to what is damaged, fragmented, and lacking in wholeness or harmony. But both the ugly and the beautiful are essential aspects of an aesthetic experience. A world devoid of the qualities we might call ugly would not be beautiful but merely pretty.

If Bourgeois presents the fear of mutilation as *it is*, then Nancy Fried overcomes it by aesthetic reparation. *The Hand Mirror* evokes the unbearable anguish of the removal of a breast. But this anguish is almost immediately relieved because the work has entered the luxuriant world of art. Smooth, rounded, and small in scale, it has an inviting tactility, as if wanting to be caressed. *The Hand Mirror* has the look of a fragment of an antique statue, pre-Columbian or, because of the classical element of the hand mirror, ancient Greek. It brings to mind the myth of the Amazons, who practiced intentional mutilation—removal of a breast—for purposes of warfare. While the scar on the left side suggests amputation, its sharp diagonal line could also be seen as an Amazonian arrow or bow.

The fragmentation of body forms in Nancy Bowen's sculpture does not have quite the same sense of internalized fear or anxiety. In works like *Recoil*, body parts or hair are simplified to the point that they become organic abstractions. In *Sisters* the intimacy between two women is transformed into an object: Their full, braided hair, which they share as if they were Siamese twins, is the conduit of their thoughts. In other works body parts are lopped off in what appear to be acts of enormous brutality perpetrated from without.

In Nancy Spero's works on paper one senses that intimacy is associated with an almost murderous rage: Female selfhood is founded on masochism, and that masochism is turned into sadism. The running and gesticulating naked female bodies and fragments of bodies are, in some cases, taken from ancient Greek sources, but there is never a sense of a classical whole.

To Spero women are the *Untermensch*, and like the mythic figure of the artist, they stand outside of society, free to critique it without limitation.

The subject of Mira Schor's recent painting is the female as a somatic being. The gracefully elongated organic shapes in her works alternately suggest sinews and bones stretched on a rack, or generative seeds and pods. The paintings' dark red ground brings to mind blood or living tissue. While the works are stylized to the point of abstraction, one never quite loses touch with the fact that what is being depicted are a woman's viscera.

Joan Snyder's gentle painting *Love's Pale Grapes*, with its cluster of fruit spilling out of a V-shaped pod, is a celebration of fecundity. In another painting by Snyder, *I Felt Like a Virgin Again*, the gulf between nature and culture is embodied in the the archaic maternal imago. Arranged around the border of the work are geometric shapes of various sizes colored in deeply saturated yellow, green, and purple. They float with a rhythmic grace that emphatically declares them part of the world of art. In the center of the work is an image of a woman with breasts built up and genitalia exposed. This woman is saying, "Look at me, I am a female without being feminine." She is a powerful icon, complete unto herself, hence the title *I Felt Like a Virgin Again*.

De Kooning's notorious series *Women* may have been what Ida Applebroog had in mind in her series *Two Women*. In Applebroog's bleak narratives humankind has run amok and there is little difference between the ordinary and the bizarre. Violence in these works is invariably linked to sexuality. Males are pitted against females, but females can be perpetrators too. Susan Sontag's remarks about the play *Marat/Sade* apply to Applebroog's work: "While the cruelty... is not, ultimately, a moral issue, it is not an aesthetic one either. It is an ontological issue. While those who propose the aesthetic version of 'cruelty' interest themselves in the richness of the surface of life, the proponents of the ontological version of 'cruelty' want their art to act out the widest possible context for human action.... That wider context is what Sade calls 'nature' and what Artaud means when he says that 'everything that acts is a cruelty.'" (Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, Delta, 1979, p.171.)

The small and large humiliations of ordinary life are the subject of Clarissa Sligh's photographic collages. These autobiographical works describe the helplessness of a small girl coming of age in Arlington, Virginia. If you have no information about what is going on in them, old photographs almost always have an innocent charm. But Sligh recounts what really happened in her narratives: "Everybody said her uncle was a wonderful guy. One day he pulled a big fat thing out of his pants and said, 'Feel it,'" or "Whenever he took a piss in his dream she woke up soak-

ing wet," or "Junior, their daddy's favorite, could do no wrong. Sometimes he practiced her as a moving target for his bee bee gun."

The familial relationships in Kathleen Gilje's paintings are, at the very least, equivocal. The maternal figure who emerges from an inchoate ground appears to be in the act of turning away from the viewer. Not only do we witness the moment when her resignation turns into incipient rage, we wonder what relationship, if any, she has to the male figure floating sideways overhead. There is a timelessness, almost a classicism to this work, as if Gilje means to portray an inescapable aspect of the human condition.

The ink and xeroxed collage drawings shown by Miriam Schapiro were inspired by the poetry of Rochelle Owens and were intended as illustrations for a book. They were the first drawings of what has become an ongoing series. One of the earliest of these works is called *Measurements*. Measurement is the way in which the totality of all our acts is judged in relation to the larger scope of things. This drawing depicts a drafting table strewn with images, as if an artist in the act of creating took momentary leave. Bits and pieces of an unfinished work remain and one can plainly see by the fragments of photos of Georgia O'Keeffe that the artist has taken O'Keeffe as a muse. To Schapiro the enterprises of ordinary life are celebratory acts, and she pays homage to them in the various feminine collage fragments, such as the kimono, dancing figures, jewelry, and teapots. In its stark beauty the kimono symbolizes the aspirations of a woman, who poignantly shares prominence with the stag, rendered here as a small but extremely potent male force.

Like a number of other 1980s conceptualists Silvia Kolbowski has substituted the image of woman as a disembodied artifact for the biological image of woman. This tactic has advantages. Portraying woman as an artifact so closely reflects the unsubstantiality of contemporary culture that it readily allows for a critique of culture. Kolbowski has thus been able to draw connections between our sexual lives and our cultural institutions that are inescapable. Her format mimics the cool design layouts of mass media. She appropriates photographic reproductions of fashion models and subverts them with text, as in *Model Pleasure* which calls attention to the way the female is made into a fetishistic sexual object. Freud knew that looking is a source of pleasure, just as being looked at is pleasurable. But for men the pleasure of looking at a woman brings fear, because her body can be viewed as a castrating object. Turning woman into a fetish is a defense against the threat of castration. In a recent article on Kolbowski, Therese Lichtenstein asks: "In the title *Model Pleasure*, whose pleasure is it? Is it the model's narcissistic ple-

asure in the reflection of her own image or the pleasure she receives by producing pleasure in the 'male' viewer? Is it the pleasure of satisfying the male viewer's scopic drive or the female viewer's identification with culturally sanctioned images of beauty?" (Therese Lichtenstein, *Arts Magazine*, June 1985.)

To Lorna Simpson the state of being female and the state of being black are inextricably intertwined. At a glance her screens are mystifying, and styleless and transparent. They are about time, about place, about color, about class, and about sex. They show us how much we know and are known by the things we wear or do not wear.

Like Kolbowski, Dena Shottenkirk has rejected a literal expression of female sexuality for symbols of sexuality, both male and female. The painting *The Freudian Interpretation* is a sexual allegory. A small section of a work by Giotto is reduced into a simple line drawing and motifs within it separated and repeated twice, once above the painting on small plaques. The image contains a phallic shape, a reference to the fact that both culture and history are implicated in the patriarchal hegemony.

In 1965 Eva Hesse wrote the following remarks to a friend:

I wonder if we are unique, I mean the minority we exemplify. The female struggle, not in generalities, but our specific struggles. To me insurmountable to achieve an ultimate expression, requires the complete dedication seemingly only a man can attain. A singleness of purpose no obstructions allowed seems a man's prerogative. His domain. A woman is sidetracked by all her feminine roles from menstrual periods to cleaning house to remaining pretty and "young" and having babies. If she refuses to stop there she yet must cope with them.... There are handfuls that succeed, but less when one separates the women from the women that assumed the masculine role.... (Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, New York University Press, 1976, p. 205.)

It would be extremely unlikely that Eva Hesse would make these remarks today. We have known for a long time that women have the same "singleness of purpose" as men. On the other hand, it is still debated as to whether women artists need to assume a masculine identification for success.

The critique of gender that has emerged as an urgent theme in recent art has as its goal the restoration of women's legitimate power, within the individual and in the larger world. This critique has a political thrust because redefining what is masculine and what is feminine calls into question culture's dominant ideology. Like so many political movements, this one has not yet reached its goal. Despite whatever gains have been made—and there have been many—women are still largely positioned on the other side of culture, as Simone de Beauvoir's *Other*. Yet this position has had the ironic effect of allowing women to produce some of the most powerful radical art of our time.

LENORE MALEN

Mira Schor

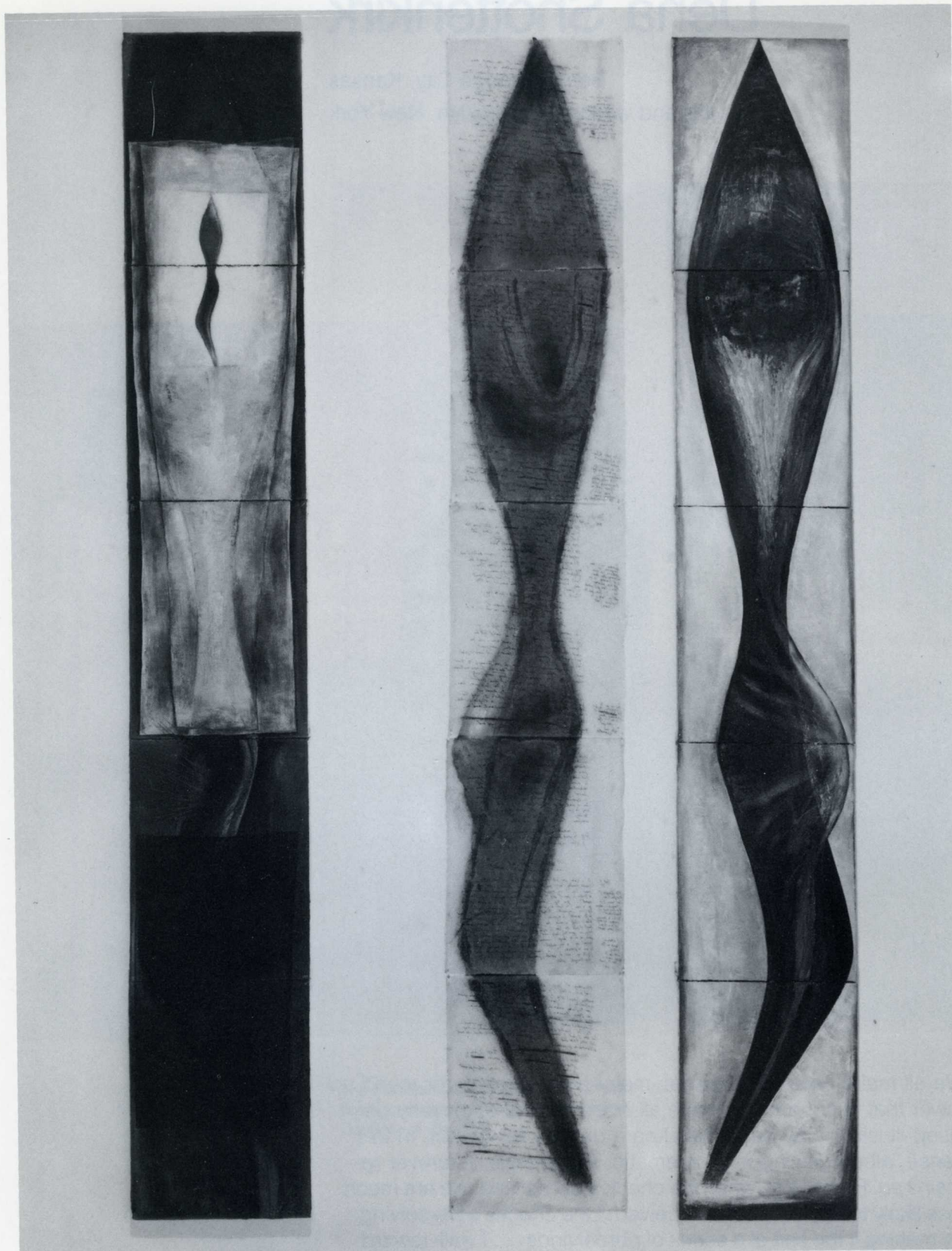
Born in New York City
Living and working in New York City



SARAH WELLS

And, there ["behind the door of the house"] almost nothing happens except the (re)production of the child. And the flow of some shameful liquid. Horrible to see: bloody. *Fluid* has to remain that secret *remainder* of the one. Blood, but also milk, sperm, lymph, saliva, spit, tears, humors, gas, waves, airs, fire . . . light. All threaten to deform, propagate, evaporate, consume him, to flow out of him and into another who cannot be easily held on to. The "subject" identifies himself with/in an almost material consistency that finds everything flowing abhorrent.

Luce Irigaray



1. **Self Image**, July 1987, oil on canvas, 80 x 20 inches
(five canvases, each 16 x 20 inches)
Courtesy of the artist.
2. **Tracings of Caul of Self**, September 1987, mixed media on rice paper,
80 x 20 inches (five canvases, each 16 x 20 inches)
Courtesy of the artist.
3. **Caul of Self**, July 1987, oil on canvas, 80 x 20 inches
(five canvases, each 16 x 20 inches)
Courtesy of the artist.