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Laura Alice Page

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

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at

Lindenwood University

Laura Page _____
Author

Professor Kelly Scheffer _____
Committee Chair

Dr. Melissa Elmes _____
Committee Member

Dr. Jonathan Walz _____
Committee Member

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ABSTRACT

BLOOD, BODIES, AND FLUIDS AS RESISTANCE IN FEMINIST ART

Laura Alice Page, Master of Art History and Visual Culture, 2021.

Thesis Directed by: Prof. Kelly Scheffer, MA.

This thesis looks at examples of women's bodies and their fluids being used as both subject and media in performance art. These selected works of art are analyzed for how the inclusion of these images and issues creates resistance through visibility in a society that seeks to sanitize and commodify women's bodies. This thesis will focus on women's bodies as a medium in performance art. It will also describe menstrual blood as a medium and how this seeks to highlight and make visible and normal this important and natural bodily function. It also looks at the use of other bodily fluids such as breast milk and how the inclusion of these fluids in feminist art creates a space for discussion of these topics. Feminist artists have used these media as an act of resistance in a patriarchal society and art world. Women were historically excluded from the art world and did not have the same access to training and exposure to money, materials, and publicity as male artists. The second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s and all the changes these activists sought to accomplish bled into the art world and helped artists create a space for women's bodies, art, and ideas not just in the art world, but in society as a whole. Feminist artists have used these media as an act of resistance in a patriarchal society and art world.

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Introduction

Women have consistently been left out of the overall, grand narrative of art. There are centuries worth of art made by women that we have little to no knowledge of. The negative impact of this trend is obvious; however, the positive is that women artists have been able to break with traditional ideas about art in various ways at various points of history because they have not always been formally recognized within established schools of thought and criticism. This is particularly apparent in the feminist art movement which began in the 1970s as an offshoot of the political movement which sought equality for women under the law with a variety of legislative actions. This movement also sought to bring to light the ways men and women were raised differently and interrogate and expand the social roles that were prescribed to each. Feminist artists have incorporated various media, including their body fluids into their art. This is just one way these artists were able to break down the traditional narratives about what we consider art as well as what is expected of a woman's body in a patriarchal society. By using their bodies and body fluids—such as menstrual blood and breast milk--as media, these artists are creating an activist space in their art by questioning the Eurocentric patriarchal traditions that came before them.[1]

[1] This thesis posits that women's bodies are different than men's bodies while still rejecting an essentialist notions of gender and sex. Also, because of the topic and length of the paper I will not be discussing trans bodies directly, however, discussion of trans bodies in art serves to further complicate the traditional ideas of gender that are centered in a binary notion of gender and a fixed relationship between sex and gender and this would be a great topic for future investigation. The term "menstruating bodies" is also a more inclusive term as it includes all bodies that menstruate, not just cisgender women. I am not using this terminology in my thesis because the artists I am discussing identify as cisgender unless otherwise noted. I also understand that not all cisgender women menstruate and the discussion at hand is in no way meant to invalidate these women's experiences. Therefore, for the remainder of this thesis when I use the term "women" I am referring to the bodies of cisgender women.

The Second-wave of feminism in the U.S. happened during the 1970s. The main goal of the movement was to gain equality for women under the law, in cases such as Roe vs. Wade and the Equal Rights Amendment. Second-wave feminists tended to focus on what made women similar to men to gain this equality, but they also looked at what made women different from men and sought to find pleasure in this, as a way to reclaim their female power. Feminist art in the 1970s showed women and their bodies as they had never been seen before. For much of art history, especially in the West, women's place in art was as an idealized reclining nude, made to scintillate and accommodate the male gaze. Feminist artists of the 1970s wanted to change this, reclaim the gaze, and show women's bodies more realistically, with all their flaws and fluids. Gail Levin notes that, "The more we study female art history, the more we see the obscured heritage of women artists. They've been wiped out of the history books…Famous women painters have been completely swallowed up with no remains."[2] When discussing the history of art in a broad and general sense women artists are often completely left out of the conversation or one or two very famous women artists are discussed. Even then they are often discussed in relation to male artists as opposed to their own artistic merits.

Feminist artists sought to make art about women, for women, often in female-centered spaces. As Barbra Kutis succinctly states, "Feminist politics aimed to dismantle the patriarchal system of society, and feminist art, or art influenced by feminism, is no different."[3] It is impossible to separate the work of feminist artists from the work of the feminist movement. As

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[2] Levin, Gail. "Beyond the Abstract: Womanhouse" in *Becoming Judy Chicago: A Biography of -the Artist.* University of California Press, pp 175.

[3] Kutis, Barbara. "The Contemporary Art of Menstruation: Embracing Taboos, Breaking Boundaries, and Making Art." *In Menstruation Now: What Does Blood Perform?*. Edited by Berkeley Katie. Bradford: Demeter Press, 2019, pp. 113.

the second-wave saying goes, "the personal is political," and there is little more personal than how women experience their monthly cycle, exist in their body in a patriarchal society, and breastfeed to name a few of the examples that will be touched upon.

The feminist history of art is not a monolith, however, "The art historians identify a first-generation, in which 'woman was a fixed category,' …and a second-generation, associated with a postmodern shift more broadly, in which, 'woman is an unfixed category constantly in process.'"[4] Throughout this paper I will be using "women" with a nod to this second generation. I argue that the feminist artists mentioned in this paper are interrogating the term and both aware of, and rejecting a singular, limiting definition of what it means to be a woman. The feminist history of art has worked to include women artists after they had been left out for so long. Feminist artists were and are working towards a future of art where the prefix "woman" is no longer a necessity, a future where women's inclusion in the art world is no longer a rarity, or something to be dwelled upon as an oddity because women's place in the art world has been fully historicized and accepted.

The feminist artists discussed below have carved out a space of resistance within the art world. These artists worked, or are working, to create a more inclusive art world. By opening up the types of media and subjects that are acceptable in art, these artists begin a dialogue about how women's bodies and their various fluids are treated, marginalized, or just ignored in society. For change to happen we must first become aware. By including menstrual blood, breast milk, and other body fluids as media and subjects in their art, these artists are resisting what has traditionally been accepted, not just in the art world, but for women's bodies more generally.

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[4] Mondlock, Kate. "The Difference Problem: Art History and the Critical Legacy of 1980s Theoretical Feminism. *Art Journal* 72, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 18-31.

Literature Review/Background

Looking at feminist art that includes body fluids as either/both subject and media as a means of resistance requires some understanding and discussion of feminist theorist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's groundbreaking notion of the abject, which is referenced by many of the sources in this research. The abject is the idea of boundary-pushing through a sense of seeing things that "should not" be seen, leading to an initial feeling of revulsion, which can bring about change the more we look and feel. Kristeva writes, "The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of desire for meaning, which as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is abject on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses."[5] She goes on to say, "It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. That does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."[6] In this sense, feminist performance art is very much working within Kristeva's idea of the abject. The purpose of this art is to disrupt the patriarchal system and order of the art world. By doing so this art exists in an in-between space because what exists beyond the patriarchy? We can only imagine a world without it to such a degree because we exist within it, and therefore, all our ideas are formed within it, making complete freedom impossible.

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[5] Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1-2.

[6] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

In their *Abject Visons: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture,* Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare look specifically at the abject in art and provide a great discussion of Kristeva's work that makes it more accessible,

> Overall, Kristeva regards abjection as our human responses of revulsion and horror to the breakdown of meaning caused by the disintegration of distinction between subject and object, self and other. The kind of examples she provided include food, filth, waste or dung that induces spasms and vomit, most famously the skin that forms on the surface of milk.[7]

Specifically, "abjection is thus valuable to art for two reasons: it signifies the critical disruption of rules and prohibitions, whilst art can in turn purify abjection, thereby enacting a positive force for cultural intervention and social change."[8] This point is key to this paper-- the idea that art can subvert what is considered natural, proper, and traditional in favor of a more inclusive and representative art. Judith Butler takes this idea even further when she, "calls for a reworking of abjection as a force for political agency and resignification;" this, "resonates with Kristeva's opinion that 'abjection is eminently productive of cultures. Its symptom is the rejection and reconstruction of languages."[9] Butler's idea of the abject as a political force is another crucial aspect of this argument. When this art is viewed it creates a feeling, then a dialogue, and this is what can lead to change. This feminist theory is put into practice by feminist performance artists; whether they are aware of the abject, Butler, or Kristeva, these artists create the lived reality of this theory and help to envision a productive, inclusive art world that is not phallocentric. Using

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[7] Arya, Rina and Nicholas Chare, ed. *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 31.

[8] Arya, *Abject Visions,* 35.

[9] Arya, *Abject Visions,* 37.

their bodies and fluids, these artists are bringing the abject to the public and their work has the potential to create social and political change.

Feminist performance art has become a space for such work for a variety of reasons. The feminist movement of the 1970s sought to create a space for women in a patriarchal society. This was just as evident in the art world; therefore, it is no surprise that women tried to create a space for themselves there, and even less surprising that they used their bodies to do so. It is important to note that, "not all art by women is feminist art, nor do all women consider themselves feminists, nor, for that matter does make art from a feminine point of view necessarily result in feminist art."[1] This thesis will focus on artists who have explicitly referred to their art as feminist.

Cindy Sherman's Sherman's *Untitled #177* (fig. 14) is an image that shows the horror of abjection in a very real way. The image is of the artist's buttocks which are covered in what looks like boils or pimples that are about to pop, which would release a pus-filled fluid. This is in complete contradiction to the smooth and supple skin that the viewer is accustomed to seeing in images of women in the media. The image reeks of disease and because of the part of the body being shown, it is difficult not to think about venereal disease. Again, these are issues that are typically hidden, as a society we prefer flawless images of women. The reaction to seeing this piece is almost visceral, the viewer feels both disgust and undeniable sense that what they are looking at is something that should not be seen in public. This perfectly aligns with Kristeva's concept of abjection.

Another artist who works with body fluids and abjection is Paula Santiago, a mixed media artist who incorporates her own blood and hair into her work. Her work, *Septum* (Fig 2), shows a wax model of bones inlaid with her blood. Her work "can be more specifically situated

in two specialized categories of art that have developed over the past forty years: feminist contributions of representations of the body and visualization of the psychoanalytic category of abjection."[10] Santiago's work is outstanding because she uses parts of her body to make the work. She is using her body in the most literal sense. Jamie Ratliff writes, "Although Santiago does not represent her body, she is nevertheless materially present in her sculptures utilizing the inclusion of her own blood and hair."[11] Her work is exceptional because the artist can embody "both the presence and absence of human corporeality."[12] Santiago can comment on and use her body in such a way that her actual body is hidden even though she is using parts of her body in her creations.

Santiago has been, "Advised by her doctors to discontinue painting with own blood for the purposes of self-preservation, Santiago has since ceased drawing new samples, which had made her work created before this time incredibly valuable and very difficult to procure as if they are endowed with a certain aura lacking in her works created after this time."[13] There is a fleeting and extraordinary nature to Santiago's work due to the materials she uses. Her work is also a valuable commodity due to these mediums. She is using her body to create art and parts of her body as the medium. This is an unsustainable way to make art, and from a Marxist

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[10] Ratliff, Jamie. "Border Control: The Intersection of Feminism and Abjection in the Work of Paula Santiago." *Southeastern College Art Conference Review* 15, no. 4 (December 2009): 456.

[11] Ratliff, "Border Control," 456.

[12] Ratliff, "Border Control," 456.

[13] Ratliff, "Border Control," 456.

perspective, is capitalism taken to the extreme. Santiago is quite literally commodifying her own actual body, not just fluids, or waste.

There has also been much discussion in the literature about referring to women artists as a monolith. It is contradictory to assume that all women share the same experience-based, merely on their womanhood, when there are so many other factors that can impact a person and their identity and lived reality. In this thesis, women will be referred to as a group with the understanding that they are the other. This is important because, "rather than a condition that must be transcended in order to attain a self-determined subjectivity, otherness can be a position of difference and critical distance from which to scrutinize the norms, values, and practices of the (patriarchal) Symbolic Order."[14] What the artists discussed in this paper share, and I would argue all feminist performance artists share, is the label of "other" and this vantage point and the scrutiny it creates is the heart of the argument in this paper.

The term feminist, particularly when referring to second-wave feminism, is often fraught with problems as the movement was often exclusionary of lower-class women and women of Color. Charlotte Canning discusses these inconsistencies, and has perfectly articulated these problems, especially as it relates to women and performance:

> For these feminists, a disavowal of history released them from being inhibited by the past's oppressive and discriminatory traditions and slowed them to create new forms of knowledge and new practices emerging out of women's experiences. The paradox within this antagonism was that feminism also turned to the very past it was rejecting for precedent and inspiration. Feminists wanted to create everything anew, but they also wanted to demonstrate that these creations had legitimacy by justifying them through appeals to the past. As feminism has grown and changed since those heady days of the

[14] Wark, Jayne. *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006, 76.

> late 1960s into the 1970s, it has retained this vexed relationship with history—embracing it while simultaneously troubling it.[15]

This history is so important, especially when looking at critiques of feminist performance art, which is often said to draw too much on essentializing ideas about women.

Even the body is a contentious term within the literature. Feminist performance artists can't focus too much on the female body and its difference from the male body because that is essentializing, but the very nature of performance art means that there must be a focus on the body. Here, "The term 'performance art' usually refers to art that incorporates the "body as an object" to subvert cultural norms and explore social issues; a time-based medium, performance art's most potent, electrifying, and lasting challenge is its radical evaporation of the distinction between art object and artist, blurring the lines 'between action, performance, and work of art.'"[16] The body is the key here. These artists use their bodies, despite the many cultural norms and societal expectations inscribed on the body, to create a space where the body can be free of these expectations.

The idea of autobiography as feminist performance art is also something that comes up frequently in the literature. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson discuss this at length, along with the idea that this performance of autobiography lends itself to an increased notion of subjectivity. "Sometimes in performance art, voice and body register heterogeneous or dispersed autobiographical subjectivity. In contemporary self-presentations, women have expanded the concept of the self-portrait once considered the mode of visual autobiography. The modes of

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[15] Canning, Charlotte. "Feminist Performance as Feminist Historiography." *Theatre Survey* 45, no. 2 (2004): 228.

[16] McMillan, Uri. *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 3.

self-reference now include visual, textual, voiced and material imprints of self-reference."[17] And sometimes, in the case of certain performance art spaces, all of these at one time. This gives these artists so many avenues in which to create their idea of what the body signifies in their art.

There is something about the performance space that gives artists more freedom than more traditional media. Not surprisingly, there is a lot of discussion in the literature about what draws women to the performance space. What is it about performance that creates a space which allows more freedom for feminist artists to explore the issues that are so important? Also, not surprisingly, and perhaps because of this, performance is often deemed a lesser art form. Those traditional art forms are at the top of the hierarchy, having excluded women from their ranks for centuries. Stefka Mihaylova touches on this when she writes, "the perception that, as an embodied form, performance, compared to text, is a lesser medium of knowledge."[18] She goes on to make it clear that she sees the, "fleshly gendered body not as a deterrent to critical thinking, but as its enabling condition and of performance as a critical discourse in its own right."[19]

Jayne Wark notes that there are many different reasons posited as the reason for what drew feminist artists to performance art, and she notes that, "It is often said that performance art's status as an innovative mode provided new spaces from which to speak and thus to challenge the dominant narratives and canonical values of current cultural space."[20] Because it had less of a history than traditional art mediums, such as painting and sculpture, this meant there

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[17] Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 5.

[18] Mihaylova, Stefka. "Whose Performance is it Anyway? Performed Criticism as Feminist Strategy: NTQ." *New Theatre Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (2009): 256

[19] Mihaylova, "Whose Performance," 256.

[20] Wark, *Radical Gestures,* 29.

was less history from which to draw and, therefore, to compare; this gave feminist artists more of a blank slate on which to draw. Performance art had no masters, so these feminist artists could create and imagine their own.

Performance art offers a unique space for feminist artists to create, as they can imagine a world in which gender constructs and constraints have different or no effect on the performance. "This is when the energy of the revolutionary impulse is put to work, when the upending of all normal ceases—is compromised, some might say—to create a new social order."[21] This revolutionary aspect of performance art is what this paper focuses on--Feminist performance art and its "consciousness-raising functions to empower women by cognitively unveiling their systematic oppression; merging with performance practice, consciousness-raising then incites participants to enact local changes within sites of culture and embodiment."[22] This is taken even further, "by using performance to interrogate our culturally regulated identities, we can break and remake the social constructions that constitute our gendered selves."[23] This is what makes performance art so subversive; the embodiment of the artists creates real change, and this change can have consequences outside of the art world.

Women's bodies have been treated with varying degrees of fear and revulsion throughout history. From various laws governing women's bodies to repressed sexuality to the witch hunts, there have been many attempts to regulate and dictate what women can do with their bodies,

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[21] Wilson, Siona. *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance (*Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xiv.

[22] Woodhouse, Diana, Lindsay Greer, and Olivia Perez-Langley. "The Leaky Architecture of Beehives and Boxes: Feminist Consciousness-Raising as Performance Methodology." *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 11, no. 2 (2015): 2.

[23] Woodhouse, "The Leaky Architecture," 2.

arguments that still prosper in today's political climate. There is something about women's bodies that inspires fear, Loren Erdrich writes, "historically in the West there exists an undeniable propensity to treat areas of ambiguity and the indefinity with fear."[24] These particularities of women's bodies: the ability to create life, bleed without dying, to feed life; is seen as both a miracle and a burden. Women are expected to only discuss and even live, these issues in private, they are not for public view.

This discussion about the public versus private sphere was instrumental in second-wave feminist theory. The distinction between the public and private sphere was discussed in terms of women's place in the workforce and domestic work. This argument can also be applied to body fluids. We know that, "In customs related to the body in various cultures, female secretions are mostly considered to remain within (or private) whereas male body fluids are supposed to go outward and are more readily tolerated in public."[25] There has always been the expectation that women should keep their body fluids private, and not discuss them. Menstrual blood should be taken care of discreetly and not talked about, breastfeeding should take place in private, so as not to disturb anyone in public.

The constantly changing nature of women's bodies has inspired this fear, and an element of awe, which feminist artists sought to interrogate. Erdrich writes, "Yet, as women's bodies are innately transformative, i.e., menstrual discharge, the ability to bear another life within their own body, and the capability to change shape during pregnancy, many theorists have sought more

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[24] Erdrich, Loren. "I am a Monster: The Indefinite and the Malleable in Contemporary Female Self-Portraiture. *Circa Art Magazine* no. 121 (2007): 45.

[25] Human, Suzanne De Villiers. "Explosions in Visual Art, Literature and Music / Prskanja U Likovnim Umjetnostima, Književnosti I Glazbi." *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 36, no. 1 (2005): 192.

constructive means of addressing this inherent capacity for metamorphosis."[26] This metamorphosis allowed feminist artists to use their bodies and their changing fluids are a canvas and medium for various artistic undertakings from performance art to painting.

Although the cultural landscape changed, and the exposure of bodies and fluids is somewhat more socially acceptable, there are still some things that people would prefer not to see. Erdrich posits that, "Despite the barrage of explicit corporeal information, certain substances remain firmly unacceptable to mainstream tastes. The direct representation of semen, vomit, bile, and menstrual blood, despite our purportedly uninhabited cultural frankness, are subjects that publicly at least we prefer to ignore."[27] The artists discussed in this paper take these substances and make them so that we cannot ignore them. Body fluids are brought to the forefront of their art and we are forced to confront these images and our feelings about the art and women's bodies, but also the fluids themselves. Our society is "hell-bent on sanitizing, digitizing and deconstructing the visceral messiness of the body into a more palatable packaging,"[28] However, these artists do not prescribe to this notion. Their art is not about making bodies more palatable or acceptable, it is about confrontation and hopefully, change.

The inclusion of body fluids by women artists as both a medium and subject is particularly important because it breaks down the traditional gendered roles that are expected of women. Suzanne De Villiers Human writes, "The association of female body fluids with the idea of has a long history and in recent decades many feminist artists have exploited this association

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[26] Erdrich, "I am a Monster," 45.

[27] Human, "Explosions in Visual Art," 179.

[28] Safe, Emma. "Fluid: Wolverhampton Art Gallery." *Art Monthly* no. 251 (2001).

with subversive intent."[29] Women cannot do anything about the ever-changing aspects of their body that inspires so much fear and regulation, so the only way to create change is to highlight the impressive nature of women's bodies and reclaim the aspects that were once thought to be harmful and frightening.

Much feminist analysis has been done on women's bodies and their various fluids, this thesis specifically applies this focus to feminist art and looks particularly at the idea that, "Body fluids have distinct qualities which render them particularly appropriate as metaphors of subversion."[30] The very idea of using bodily fluids in art is subversive, but when paired with a feminist analysis, this art can disrupt what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society. David Harradine writes about this disruptive nature of bodily fluids, "…the margins of the body--the skin and its orifices, dark places, crevices, cracks and holes--are particularly representative of the fragility of any bounded system, and the traversing of the margins by body fluid and excreta foregrounds the vulnerability of these systems and their ultimate incapacity to maintain themselves as such."[31] This is what makes these images and the inclusion of body fluids as a medium or subject of art so important, they are able to push up against these boundaries that determine what is socially acceptable. The mere inclusion of bodily fluids is disruptive to what we consider art, it is a non traditional media that creates a discussion. The fact that women's bodily fluids, particularly menstrual blood, have been so maligned, creates even more discourse

[29] Human, "Explosions in Visual Art," 180.

[30] Human, "Explosions in Visual Art," 180.

[31] Harradine, David. "Abject Identities and Fluid Performances: Theorizing the Leaking Body." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 10, no. 3 (October 2000): 74.

and forces the viewer to consider what it is about this media that is so disgusting to them. This creates fragility in the viewer as Harradine suggests and this relates to the idea of the abject.[32]

The feminist anthropologist Mary Douglass writes that, "because of its orifices which are boundaries dividing the self and that which is external to it, the human body stands as a metaphor for social structures. According to this position, the passage of bodily fluids over the outer bodily margins to the outside, has the potential to signify cultural anxiety and disgust."[33] This argument applies perfectly to the discussion of body fluids in feminist artwork. It also applies to women's history in art more generally. Women artists have been excluded from the canon of Western art. Women were only seen when they were the titillating subject or a haggard moral tale. We can see this cultural anxiety when we look at reactions to this art. One example would be the culture wars of the 1980s which sought to censor artwork, particularly work that showed this passage of bodily fluids like Andre Serrano's *Piss Christ*. By showing this passage of bodily fluids to the outside world, these artists are trying to change the social structures that are in place by opening up the boundaries of what is acceptable while also creating a dialogue about the contents of their work. Serrano's piece was not well-liked, but, it did garner a great deal of attention. In fact, due to this publicity, *Piss Christ*, is perhaps far more recognizable to the general public than it would have been without the negative press coverage. So even when we are looking at regularly excluded types of art, works by men remain more visible. Kristeva discusses Douglass' work in

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[32] However, there is still some critique of this idea of abjection, "Emphasis on resistance as a mode of subverting dominant norms, however, has also been roundly critiqued by anthropologists such as Lila Abu-Lughod, who claims that the term has been highly romanticized and does not attend to the ways in which subordinated groups work both with and against power and powerful institutions and people."[32] This deserves much more space, but is not the subject of my paper. We must find ways to make these terms more inclusive, and the art more inclusive of all races and ethnicities.

[33] Human, "Explosions in Visual Art," 179.

Powers of Horror, her quintessential work on abjection, and disagrees with the anthropologist's rejection of Freudian premises. From Douglass' work, Kristeva asks questions that are pertinent to this paper and the discussion of women's bodies and body fluids in art.[34]

Kristeva writes, "On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what is social-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject."[35] This speaks to the power of exposing and dismantling of these systems through constant exposure to that which is seen as abject, bodily fluids being a prime example, and shows that this art could transform societal thinking through this exposure. These moments of abjection in art cause a breakdown in the patriarchal systems that hold art and women's bodies in a particular and limiting regard.

Much like Douglass, David Harradine argues that, "the body itself, as a bounded system, standings synecdochically for the social systems that produce it, and want to examine how the radical performance of abjection can allegorise the ultimate impossibly of maintaining these typically exclusive and heteronormative systems as such."[36] This definition of abjection speaks to the transformative power that this art can hold, which is instrumental to the discussion of the artists below.

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[34] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 65-67.

[35] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 207.

[36] Harradine, "Abject Identities," 69.

Art as Resistance

The idea of art being a space where resistance and change can happen is not a new one. The arts have always been a place where boundaries could be pushed up against. Gender has been one aspect of society that has been constantly in flux in art. Artists, musicians, and performers have always been at the forefront of bending and reimagining the boundaries of gender expression and socially acceptable behavior.

During the second wave of feminism, there was a great deal of hope surrounding the possibilities for change in gender expression and social roles through the production and marketing of art. During this time, "In the numerous artists with feminist leanings dared to imagine that female artists producing authentically, radically different art might undo the prevailing visual regime, derailing the business as usually of art-world institutions."[37] The hope was that the changes in the androcentric, patriarchal art world would spread into the rest of society. I would argue that since feminism is more of a political stance than an artistic one, that any changes in the art world brought about by feminist art pieces cannot help but leak out into the world. During the early feminist art movement, "These feminists envisioned the advent of an authentically different art, marked by women's experience. In 1969, [Artist] Lee Lozano argued that there could be no "art revolution that is separate from a political revolution…[or] sex revolution."[38] We must first confront that which makes us uncomfortable, that which society tries to hide, to move forward from these outdated notions and limitations placed on bodies because of gendered expectations.

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[37] Chave, Anna C. "The Guerrilla Girls' Reckoning. *Art Journal* 70, no. 2 (Summer 2011); 103.

[38] Chave, Anna C. "I Object: Hannah Wike's Feminsm." *Art in America* (March 2009):104-109.

Ultimately, "The goal is to sustain a rigorous process of asking difficult questions. Not to find answers, but to have questions about questions that produce confusion as a precondition to radical thought."[39] We must ask questions and question to move forward. The power of art lies in the ability to imagine a better, more inclusive future, "…there's something about acts of the imagination that can resist the current hegemonies and effect change…It comes from other artists, from looking at artworks that have the potential to speak directly to individuals to effect change. It comes from imagining something different than what I see around me. It comes from being hopeful."[40] It is this hope that change is possible that breeds more imagination and change. It is, "through the repetition of deviant practices by multiple individuals' new identities, communities, and politics are created and a space emerges where seemingly deviant, unconnected behavior might evolve into conscious acts of resistance that serve as the basis for a mobilized politics of deviance."[41] This is the essence of the possibilities for change. By bringing issues, bodies, and fluids out into public, the feminist artists discussed are creating these acts and spaces of resistance. The next step is political change.

More practically, even if the viewer does not have the words, they know they are looking at something that would be considered abject, they will still experience a reaction. This is the power of the art and artists, their art leaves an impression on the viewer. It is impossible to look at any of these pieces without having questions. The art makes you think which leads to conversation. Whether it was their intention or not, these artists have opened a conversation about women, gender roles, body fluids, and social acceptance.

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[39] Tyburczy: Jennifer. "Queer Resistance." *QED: A Journal of LGBTW Worldmaking* 4, no.2 (Summer 2017): 51-55.

[40] Tyburczy, "Queer Resistance." 52.

[41] Tyburczy, "Queer Resistance," 52.

Methodology

This thesis employs a qualitative research methodology. The thesis consists of a literature review, examining how others have interpreted these various feminist art pieces and used to back up the statement that, when women use their bodies and their body fluids as a medium in their art, they are knowingly acting against traditional ideas about gender to disrupt the gender binary and call its authenticity and importance into question and that this creates a space for resistance and change more broadly. Feminism is often informed by other schools of thought, and I include a Marxist critique as I examine the commodification of women's bodies and how these artists reject it. Julia Kristeva's definition of the abject is also central to my thesis, and her work is informed by, and in response to, psychoanalytic theory from a feminist standpoint.

One problem I wish to acknowledge with a feminist methodology is that it is sometimes difficult to define exactly what is meant by a feminist approach. Some critics have written, "Despite feminist historians' profound critical engagement with the discursive structures of the discipline, it is difficult to define a singular feminist approach since feminism is not fixed as a particular methodology; rather, it is a strategically adopted political position from which to write."[42] This criticism of feminism suggests, correctly, that feminism has a history of excluding marginalized voices. The way to work through this is to always attempt an intersectional approach that includes discussions of race, class, and sexualities. A feminist methodology is often informed by other modes of thought, but the end goal of feminist methodology is to write from the stance of creating a liberated space for women (and some would argue, everyone) outside of stifling gender binaries, societal expectations, and exclusion in all its various forms.

[42] Horne, Victoria and Amy Tobin. "an unfinished revolution in art historiography, or how to write a feminist art history." *Feminist Review* n. 107 (2004): 76.

Results

CHAPTER ONE: BODIES: FEMINIST PERFORMANCE ART AS RESISTANCE

Performance art has become a space for feminist artists to explore important issues, such as the gendered expectations of women's bodies and women's place in the art world. Beginning in the 1970s, feminist artists began using their bodies as a medium in their art. The body became both the subject, the ground on which the art took place and the medium used. By using their bodies in such a way, these artists were able to call into question the expectation that women's bodies exist in a certain way (clean, quiet, palatable) and for a certain purpose (the male gaze). Feminist performance artists used their bodies to disrupt and subvert gender roles and expectations and create a space for women's bodies to exist and create in new, less encumbered, ways.

The inclusion of vaginal and vulval imagery in much of the art that follows shows that "Tacitly at issue for all these women was a drive to redress the fact that, as Lynne Segal put it, 'The vagina has served as a condensed symbol of all that is secret, shameful and unspeakable in our culture.' The aim, too, was to displace the enduring paradigm of the 'bachelor machine' with a new mode of creative production: that of a female creator whose bona fides are somehow attested to by her reproductive capacity."[43]

Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (Fig. 3) is a well-known and exemplary example of feminist performance art. Schneemann, "standing with her legs apart, [she] started unfolding a paper scroll from her vagina. The text on the scroll described the difficulties encountered by the

[43] Chave, "I Object," 106.

female artist in a masculine-biased art world."[44] The artist used her body as a vessel to contain actual paper, but her body is already a vessel that contains the difficulties that she is describing. She is using her body as a literal space holder for all the problems that she encounters when trying to make art and be taken seriously in the art world. This piece of art creates a visceral reaction in the viewer. We are not used to seeing women pulling anything from their vaginas, if anything people are more accustomed to seeing things go into women's vaginas. Seeing a woman have full agency over her body and what she does to it is breaking with traditional ideas about women's bodies. Typically, if something is seen coming out of a woman's body it is during childbirth, here Schneemann is birthing her art and challenging ideas about women's bodies and lived experiences.

The feminist performance artists of the 1970s worked in a unique space where, like the second-wave feminist slogan states, the personal is political. As, "Schneemann's observations make it clear that if women were going to participate in art practice on their own terms, they were going to have to challenge aesthetic assumptions that art was neutral or disinterested."[45] Feminist artists could not disentangle their bodies, their art, their performance from the cultural narratives and changes that were going on around them. Therefore, their art became as political as it was personal, just by the very nature of who was creating the art and the cultural climate in which it was being created.

This created an interesting situation where these artists' bodies were becoming the site of political and cultural discourse. For example, Schneemann, "sought a 'vulvic space in *Interior*

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[44] Mihaylova, "Whose Performance," 255.

[45] Wark, *Radical Gestures,* 38.

Scroll: a representational approach countering the 'traditionally "phallic" symbolism' of western art. To develop this approach, she thought of the vagina as 'a sculptural form [and] architectural referent'."[46] This relates to performance art being a younger medium without the same history as more traditional mediums. This gave Schneemann the space to imagine what art could look like without referencing the Eurocentric, phallocentric history of traditional art mediums. Other writers have noted that, "interiors are seen in women's literature as prisons *and* sanctuaries. In the visual arts, women's images of enclosed space convey either confinement, or else freedom, within confinement."[47] Schneemann's "vulvic space" does just this. Schneemann's body is a prison and a sanctuary. She is working within a patriarchal space but using her body to create a space outside of this at the same time. Her body is the prison and the sanctuary simultaneously.

Some critics have argued that Schneemann presents a feminist, but still essentialized, idea of the female body. However, it is impossible to offer a critique of the patriarchal forces that have kept women's bodies out without first acknowledging these differences. This is, ultimately, the goal of second-wave feminism. Differences exist between men and women, and they must first be acknowledged and normalized before they can be ignored or deemed unimportant on a larger, political and social scale. Artists during this time had to show the "otherness" of women's bodies for the bodies even to be recognized to exist in traditionally male-centered and masculine spaces. Gender has to be acknowledged to exist (even if constructed) before the work of deconstruction and rebuilding of identities can begin.

The idea of the male gaze is also important to the discussion of feminist performance art. These artists are aware of the male gaze and its power, but by being aware, they are taking the

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[46] Mihaylova, "Whose Performance," 265

[47] Woodhouse, "The Leaky Architecture," 4.

power away from this gaze, attempting to exist outside of it. Woodhouse, et al. quote Laura Mulvey, who, "identifies the male gaze as a standard optic structuring numerous artifacts of visual culture. This gendered gaze, Mulvey argues, casts women as passive objects to be looked at and men as active subjects who do the looking."[48] Feminist artists seek to disrupt the male gaze. Merely being aware of the male gaze can serve as a disruption. However, I would argue that feminist art is not made for men, by definition, and is therefore exempt from the male gaze in the traditional sense. This art is made by women, for women, in an attempt to create a space that exists outside of the patriarchal norms, and, therefore, is exempt from the male gaze.

Shigeko Kubota's *Vagina Painting (1965)* (Fig. 4) is another, more aggressive piece of feminist performance art that highlighted menstruation, which was a topic that was not discussed in public at this point. This piece was interpreted as, "openly aggressive toward the gendered presumptions of artist creativity still dominant in the art world at the time."[49] Kubota squatted over a piece of paper and made drippy, gestural marks with bright, blood-red paint, with a paintbrush that was attached to her underwear. This was also clearly a reference to Pollock's Abstract Expressionism.[50] Kubota's piece is so important because it was so aggressive for the time and allowed her to "expose what had been concealed within this gendered construct of creativity."[51] Kubota asked the art world why Pollock's art was so lauded, and hers, marginalized. Kubota was able to "assert herself as both the agent of bodily display and the agent of artistic creativity in a gesture of "binary terrorism" as flamboyant and uncompromising as

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[48] Woodhouse, "The Leaky Architecture," 5.

[49] Wark, *Radical Gestures,* 46.

[50] Wark, *Radical Gestures,* 46.

[51] Wark, *Radical Gestures,* 48.

Schneemann's."[52] Feminist performance artists asked the art world to examine what made their bodies and their art less important than art made by men.

Ana Mendieta was a Cuban-born American artist who had a huge impact on the art world in her short life. She was able to use her body to make art in such a way that took her power back and created a space for women, especially marginalized women in the Eurocentric, patriarchal art world. Mendieta began as a painter but changed to performance art when she realized its power; "my paintings were not real enough for what I wanted the images to convey, and by real I am I wanted my images to have power, to be magic."[53] Mendieta is so important to the discussion of feminist performance art because she brings a multi-cultural, postcolonial critique to feminism and the art world. Mendieta is "othered" by her womanhood and her Cuban identity, therefore bringing an extra level of intersectional critique to the art world with her use of her body as a medium in her art.

Mendieta's work has been criticized because it is seen as adhering to essentializing notions of womanhood. This goes back to some critiques of Schneemann's work, and the same disputation stands. Women artists must show and reclaim these essentialized notions of womanhood to move forward from them. Wark notes that, "Many viewers have regarded Mendieta's earth/body works as manifestations of the timeless connection between the female body, the female creative spirit, and the early itself."[54] However, others have noted that Mendieta also complicates these ideas, both embracing and rejecting these essentialized notions of womanhood that exist in her art and body, " Mendieta's earth/body sculptures are not

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[52] Wark, *Radical Gestures,*48.

[53] Wark, *Radical Gestures,* 69.

[54] Wark, *Radical Gestures,* 71.

authentication of presence or origins, but rather, a problematizing of the longing and desire for such authentication."[55]

Mendieta also made some interesting and timely critiques of American feminism; such critiques would become the backbone of third-wave feminism, which sought to carve out a place for all women within the feminist movement, rejecting the idea that feminism was a white upper-middle-class movement. The artist is even quoted as saying, "American Feminism as it stands is basically a white middle class movement."[56] This is another reason that Mendieta's work is so powerful. She exists both inside and outside this feminist art world and is, therefore, able to use it to her advantage and critique the movement from her vantage point outside.

In her *Death of a Chicken* (Fig. 5) performance, Mendieta explores gender roles in the Hispanic community and, "is keen on dissociating the woman's body from male desire, which constructs it as 'other' and encodes it with a series of meanings that are male-centered, that is, that belongs to the male's sexual experience and to the way the male has traditionally constructed his identity."[57] Here, Mendieta is actively working against the male gaze, creating a space that is absent of men, that wants to exist outside of the patriarchal confines of her culture and the culture of the art world as a whole.

In this work, Mendieta stands naked and sacrifices a white chicken. The chicken's blood leaks onto its own feathers and Mendieta's body. White, of course, is a color that is traditionally associated with purity and virginity. In this piece, "Mendieta's aim is, indeed, to keep the destiny

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[55] Wark, *Radical Gestures,* 71.

[56] Wark, *Radical Gestures,* 71.

[57] Agusti, Escoda Clara. "'I Carve Myself into my Hands' The Body Experiences from Within in Ana Mendieta's Work and Migdalia Cruz's Miriam's Flowers." Hispanic Review (Summer 2007): 293.

of her body in her own hands and to experience a different approximation to sexuality from the one she received as natural from her community."[58] Sex is something that is traditionally described as being done to women, thus removing their agency. A woman's virginity is seen as something tangible that is taken or given away in the traditional discourse about sexuality. Here, Mendieta is disrupting this narrative by doing the "taking" herself.

Mendieta is also referring to Santeria, which is a, "group of religious systems from Afro-Cuban communities that, during slavery, slaves had used as a way to maintain cohesion, while also creating a space of liberation from the roles imposed by slaveholders."[59] Here, we see the intersectionality of Mendieta's various identities and how they play on the body and her art. This act of killing the chicken also relates to the abject. "Mendieta's sacrifice…becomes an initiation ritual through which she invokes abject forces but hybridizes them with herself to bring about a new experience of identity and sexuality, on that is removed from traditional cultural representations."[60] Mendieta is using her art to create a space that she wants to see exist in the real world. She imagines a space where women have more agency over their bodies, particularly with regards to sex, and she can create this space during her performance, where she has full control over her body and her environment, even if just for a short time.

Howardena Pindell's *Free, White, and 21*, (Fig. 6) speaks to many of the ideas discussed. Wark addresses this, "Although the feminist movement in North America had always claimed it was committed to eliminating both sexism and racism, by 1980s many feminists, like the African American Howardena Pindell, who had been one of the founders of Artists in Residence, Inc

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[58] Agusti, "I Carve Myself into my Hands," 294.

[59] Agusti, "I Carve Myself into my Hands," 294.

[60] Agusti, "I Carve Myself into my Hands," 295.

(AIR), had become disenchanted with its persistent racism."[61] The artist, a black woman, is trying to navigate a world made for white men. She is speaking out about her experiences to create change. Her body is particularly vulnerable to the effects of speaking out. Pindell had worked as a curator at MOMA, giving her an opportunity to see the inner workings of the art world before creating her own art in response to this and the various injustices that were happening to the Black community and women at this time. Pindell allows us to see intersectionality at work in her art.

Pindell's *Free, White, and 21* is, "a video art piece in which Pindell—playing all parts—staged a dialogue between plaintive reincarnations of herself and a caricature of a white feminist who callously debunks the veracity of her experiences."[62] Pindell's art gives us a look into how her Black body was not included in both the feminist art movement nor the art world at large, showing that Black women were at a greater disadvantage during this time due to the systemic racism in both the feminist movement and the art world.

There is clearly a performative aspect to Pindell's autobiographical piece. We can see, "In these scenes, Pindell's body enables us to witness not Pindell per se, but rather her avatars…her autobiographical encounters are spoken through performed *versions* of herself."[63] This gives the artist more freedom to create. She can create past versions of herself as well as the white feminist character. Her body is her medium. Pindell is using this medium to make clear the discrimination she has faced, or at least attempting to, "It is through her cohabitation of a white feminist and other, more recognizable, versions of herself that Pindell staged a dialogue manqué:

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[61] Wark, *Radical Gestures,* 72.

[62] McMillan, *Embodied Avatars,* 17.

[63] McMillan, *Embodied Avatars,* 171.

a conversation between white feminists and feminists of color, one that is unfulfilling and disappointing because the former refuses to empathize with (or believe) the experiences of the latter."[64] Even when using her own body, Pindell isn't believed, because she is Black. Pindell's work perfectly illustrates the many issues of race and the body that are deeply engrained in feminism and art.

The re.act.feminism exhibition is an important exhibition in the history of feminist performance art. The exhibit ran from December 2008 to February 2009 in Berlin. The curators wanted to create a space to include feminist and queer performance artists. Their website is also a comprehensive list of feminist performance art, past and present. This exhibit and the information from the curators ask and answer a lot of questions about the importance of feminist performance art and its power to create change.

The curators wanted to look at, "The different practices of controlling the body—ranging from state oppression by authoritarian regimes and the surveillance of free movement and migration to sexualized and internalized violence-and the practices of resistance involved in re-claiming (public) space are the main themes in works."[65] These themes show that re.act.feminism was an exhibit that sought to be intercontinental and inclusive, learning from the mistakes of previous feminist movements. The curators also included transgender performance artists, again showing their deep understanding of the need to be inclusive and critical of gender in all its forms.

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[64] McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 173.

[65] Deepwell, Katy. "Re.Act.Feminism: Feminist, Gender-Critical and Trans-Gender Performance Art." *N.Paradoxa: The Only International Feminist Art Journal* 30 (July 2012): 81.

The curators discuss the inspiration and problems behind their exhibit, and these issues are not uncommon in the performance art world, as a whole. They said, "We were especially interested to present the diversity and complexity of performance strategies and practices and extend the perspective beyond the canon of what was known and familiar."[66] This verbiage is so important because even the mention of a "canon" of feminist and gender-critical performance art shows just how much the genre has grown and changed over the decades. The feminist performance art of the 1960s and 1970s existed without a canon to reference, and this is one of the reasons the movement was so important. Now, however, feminist and gender-critical performance artists have a whole "canon" of work that they can reference, critique, remake, and rework.

Feminist performance artists have succeeded in creating a space in which they can push, ignore, and reimagine the confines of gender in their lives. These artists have used their bodies, not just as a function of creating art, but as the very medium of the creation. Using their bodies as a medium has allowed these women to show the many ways in which gender has been written on and prescribed to women's bodies throughout history. Feminist performance art serves an important function, as the art is inherently political. These artists are not just making art, they are making social commentary. The goal of feminist performance art is to create change beyond the art world. These women use their bodies to make art and take a stand in the hopes that the laws, social norms, and religious norms that govern women's bodies can cease to exist, given these artists, and all women, the freedom to use their bodies however they choose. Another group of artists with these same goals are discussed next, these artists take on the much-maligned, ignored, and vilified subject of menstruation.

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[66] Deepwell, "Re.Act.Feminism," 78.

CHAPTER TWO: BLOOD: MENSTRUATION AS RESISTANCE

Throughout history, women's bodies have been deemed unclean and been subject to constant policing and regulation because they differ from men's bodies in one very key aspect: menstruation. Historically, the beginning of menstruation has signaled that a girl has become a woman and was ready to procreate. Various religions have stigmatized the menstruating body and relegated women to huts, etc., during their menses so as not to contaminate the rest of the community. Menstruation is a normal biological process that most women, and some trans men, and non-binary people experience. Feminists have sought to demystify and then reclaim menstruation as a source of empowerment, rather than a source of stigma and relegation.

Beginning with the second wave of feminism in the 1970s some feminist artists sought to make menstruation visible. Visibility was a way to initiate conversations about menstruation and begin the process of discussing and normalizing this monthly process. Third and fourth-wave feminists then began reclaiming their monthly cycle as a source of power and demanding better care for those who menstruate. Feminist artists from the 1970s onward have used menstrual blood as a subject and medium of their artwork as a way to disrupt traditional standards of decorum and femininity in a patriarchal society that seeks to make these things invisible.

What is universal and therefore political is the fact that people are taught to hate and hide this monthly process. As Janice Delany wrote in her groundbreaking history, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation*, "Women writers and artists are bringing menstruation itself out of the water closet and using it as an emblem of celebration, not shame."[67] Providing

[67] Delaney, Judith, et al. *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation*. Chicago, Mentor, 1977.

visibility helps to negate shame as it becomes more and more apparent that women are experiencing the same ignominy and discomfit around menstruation because that is what existing in a patriarchal society has taught them. Feminist artists sought to make art about women, for women, often in female-centered spaces.

Second-wave feminists began to voice the various ways in which women and their experience and existence in society was marginalized. It should be noted that a major criticism of the second wave is that it excluded Black women and other women of color as well as working-class women. The artists mentioned in this paper do little to refute that, however, the work done by these white women is still an important step for all women. Another criticism is that the second wave was too focused on essentialist notions of women. That is the biology of women. However, as "Art historian Amelia Johns point's out that the dismissal of 1970s feminism as essentialist has had a damaging effect on our understanding of what feminism meant in the context of the movement."[68] Feminists of the present have, for the most part, learned from and righted these issues by including the voices and experiences of BIPOC, trans and gender-nonconforming people, and people from various social classes.

Judy Chicago could be considered the grandmother of the menstrual art movement in the United States Chicago's *Red Flag* (Fig. 7) is a black, white, and red lithograph showing a close-up of a woman pulling a tampon out of her vagina. There has been much discussion and analysis of this particular piece of menstrual art, more so than any other art in this paper. One of the main reasons that this work has received so much attention is that as Chicago stated she appropriated

[68] Nelson, Jennifer. "Historicizing Body Knowledge: Women's Liberation, Self-Help, and Menstrual Representation in the 1970s.*" Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2019): p. 40.

the conventions of "high art" to make her statement. Camilla Mork Røstivik writes that, "In order to overcome her own and others squeamishness about menstruation, Chicago guessed that the high art medium would lend some weight, prestige, and seriousness to the topic."[69] This is an important point. Often art associated with women has been relegated to the realm of arts and crafts, and to be taken more seriously, women have had to co-opt the tools of the patriarchy to seem legitimate in a male-dominated art world. Chicago understood that in order to make such a controversial image at least something about the piece would need to be recognizable in the art world, and "Overall, the visual choices made by Chicago would, in turn, become part of the work's success: its colours, framing, figuration, and symbols all played a part in making the image iconic."[70] This piece is easily the most famous and recognizable piece of menstrual art discussed in this paper and one of the more famous pieces of 1970s feminist art, generally.

What is particularly striking about the image is that, although most menstruating individuals have performed the task of pulling a tampon out of their body, few have seen it done. Even though we might immediately recognize what we are seeing, we are still seeing something new.[71] And for some, the image takes a while to process, and the viewer is left wondering what exactly they are looking at. This shows just how hidden and individual the everyday act of dealing with menstruation is. For a woman to have experienced her period for so long yet have no recollection of ever seeing another woman perform this act, is strange to think about. Even in advertisements for menstrual products, there is no real allusion to how the products are used and

[69] Røstvik, Camilla Mørk. "Blood Works: Judy Chicago and Menstrual Art Since 1970." *Oxford Art Journal* 42, no. 3 (January 2019): 344.

[70] Røstivik, 342.

[71] Delaney, 2.

the instructions on tampon boxes only show disembodied drawings of the vaginal canal. The disembodied nature of Chicago's image is a reference to this, but instead of minimizing women's experience, like in the instructions, it serves to accentuate the experience.

The color red is often associated with revolution which Røstivik discusses briefly in her article, "The red flag was a symbol that permeated Chicago's childhood as she grew up during McCarthyism when the U.S. was obsessed with the idea of Communism taking over the country. However, in modern history, a reg flag itself had signaled left-wing revolution or action, and its depiction as such in the art historical canon is frequent, for example in Soviet propaganda posters. Chicago's reference of red thus ties the work to the history of revolution."[72] Chicago would have been aware of this and could easily have made the image entirely black and white, but the blood had to be red to make the image so show-stopping and iconic. We could have known there was blood on the tampon without the color red, but actually showing red blood coming out of a woman's vagina is what makes the image striking. Even in advertisements for pads, menstrual blood is usually shown as a thin blue fluid, again hiding the realities of menstruation, alluding to the shame and secrecy that should allegedly accompany this monthly process. As Gail Levin states, "The significance of *Red Flag*, according to Arelene Raven, was that 'the title, hidden language for menstruation and revolution, would also be 'hidden' information to most men and even some women. Nevertheless, the directness and strength of the visual image elicit immediate, powerful reactions."[73] The piece itself is revolutionary and

[72] Røstovik, 345.

[73] Levin, 183.

harkens back to previous history of revolutionary imagery, but this time appropriated for feminist gains.

Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom* (fig. 8), again sought to make menstruation more visible. Part of the feminist art showpiece, *Womanhouse*, the stark white bathroom showed the realities of monthly bleeding. The bathroom was fully stocked with feminine hygiene products and the trashcan overflowed with used tampons and sanitary napkins. The products are strewn, seemingly discarded in various states of use. Some of the items are soaked in what looks like blood, while others look stark and white in contrast. This is so startling because this is not something you would ever see in a bathroom. Typically trash cans containing used feminine hygiene products are constantly emptied and every effort is made to make sure that there is no sign of blood; pads are rolled and wrapped in toilet paper for example in order to hide their contents. Interestingly, *Menstruation Bathroom* came about because Chicago notes "the absence of menstrual themes in the almost finished *Womanhouse* exhibition."[74] Strangely, *Womanhous*e was near completion before anyone noticed the absence of a reference to menstruation, but again, this just highlights the fact the menstruation was to be made invisible and not even be discussed, even among women, feminists, and artists.

Another iconic piece of feminist art, Emily Culpepper's film, *Period Piece* (fig. 8), shows, amongst other things, "a woman changing her tampon and then showing Culpepper herself doing a self-examination, with speculum and mirror, of her bloody cervix."[75]This act itself was revolutionary, as learning how women's bodies worked, on their own terms, was an

[74] Røstivik, 346.

[75] Lander, Louise. *Images of Bleeding: Menstruation as Ideology*. New York, Orlando Press, 1988, pp. 123.

important part of the second wave of feminism. Women had to see and understand how their bodies worked to advocate for themselves. Lander goes on to clarify, "menstrual fluid becomes itself a medium of art, the artist, a menstruating woman, creating blood rings by squatting on paper, scooting around to produce varying effects"[76] Culpepper made this piece for her thesis at Harvard Divinity School and she wanted to focus on the "intersections of religious and cultural attitudes toward women's sexuality."[77] Sexuality is tied to menstruation because they are seen as complete opposites. According to many religious and societal conventions women cannot and should not be sexual during this shameful and dirty time of the month. Instead of hiding menstruation, Culpepper wanted to normalize and make visible the experience of different menstruating women. Importantly, Culpepper includes the voice and experience of a Native American woman. This is particularly important because the second-wave feminist movement is often charged with only uplifting the voices of middle-class white women. Here we see Culpepper engaging in intersectionality before the term was coined by Kimberlee Crenshaw in 1989. Above all, Culpepper wanted to convey the matter-of-factness of menstruating bodies, thus disrupting the patriarchal narrative that it was something dirty or shameful that needed to be hidden.[78] Menstruating bodies have to deal with their cycle and hiding it and feeling shame are other layers that makes bleeding more difficult. By showing how this is just something that menstruators must deal with, it helps to destigmatize the experience for all.

Culpepper's work is also so powerful because it actively subverts the male gaze. The film by nature," disrupts the exclusive prerogative of heterosexual men to look at and represent

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[76] Lander, *Images of Bleeding*, 123.

[77] Nelson, "Historicizing Body Knowledge," 50.

[78] Nelson, "Historicizing Body Knowledge," 51.

women's objectified and sexualize bodies."[79] This is so important as for most of art history women's bodies were only shown as idealized nudes that were objects of the male gaze. By removing the male gaze from the equation, Culpepper's work becomes overly feminist and is then inherently subversive. Culpepper said that, "To the extent possible, we did not want to pose or perform. We did not want the camera to be an outside observer, 'capturing' images. We began calling the camera she had referred to as her friend who was inside our larger circle of exploration. Our sister, the camera. And it worked."[80] Culpepper even refers to the camera as she, because everyone involved in the filming was a woman. The male gaze is completely taken out of the equation here. Culpepper discusses at great length about how she was acutely aware of how the piece could have seemed pornographic in nature and was very aware of trying to subvert the male gaze while filming and how this was a vital component of the film being read as a feminist text.

Feminist artist Carolee Schneemann writes, in her article "The Obscene Body/Politic," about the importance of women artists using their body and their lived experience in their art. "Projection deforms perception of the female body...For many of us, the layers of implicit and explicit censorship constructing our social history combine with contemporary contradictions to force our radicalization."[81] So, given women's place in society throughout history, it was only a matter of time before we claimed our unique experiences and made them public as a way to contest the rigid rules we have been forced to adopt. Her piece, *Blood Work Diary* (fig 9) is a

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[79] Nelson, "Historicizing Body Knowledge," 53.

[80] Culpepper, Emily Erwin. "Positively Breaking Taboos: Why and How I Made the Film Period Piece." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion,* vol. 22, no. (Fall 2006): 136.

[81] Schneemann, Carolee. "The Obscene Body/Politic." *Art Journal,* vol. 50, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 28.

grid of four by five tissue squares with menstrual blood on them stuck in the gird with egg yolk. Each square is labeled with the day and time that the sample was created.[82] Kutis notes that,

> In terms of form, the grid-like repetition of the work engages the conventions and practices of conceptual art...arranged in a series and repetitious manner, the designation of the work as a diary places the work within the realm of feminism, as conceptual art is frequently considered and intellectual, esoteric exercise of the male mind. The diaristic on the other hand, is the personal and the feminine, and thus, inferior.[83]

Like Chicago, Schneemann uses and appropriates the visual, artist language of the patriarchal art world to make a feminist and subversive piece of art. This piece also serves an educational purpose which was important during the second wave. Given the secrecy and shame surrounding menstruation women and the fact that women did not have access to as much information as they do today, a piece like *Blood Work Diary*, shows the differences that occur during a woman's monthly cycle.

More recently feminists have sought, not just to make menstruation visible, but to make it normal, and even a celebration. As Kutis points out, "Whether they take photographs of menstrual stains, paint bloody stains on women's clothing, or use the fluid as the medium, women artists in the new millennium have renewed the second-wave feminists' efforts to bring menstruation into the cultural conversation and to normalize women's experiences of their own bodies."[84] The fact that we are still having the conversation shows that there is still a lot of work to be done before menstruation is seen as just another bodily process and isn't associated with shame, invisibility, and discomfort. She goes on to note that "these works of menstrual art

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[82] Kutis, 116.

[83] Kutis, 116.

[84] Kutis, 109.

participate in the broader cultural menstrual activist movement, which aims to show using menstrual blood as positive, subversive, and as Marissa Vigneault claims, riotous."[85] Using menstrual blood in art either as the subject or medium is still subversive, still a conversation starter, and still a work of activism for all those who menstruate.

Mixed media artist Vanessa Tiegs coined the word "Menstrala" to represent a collection of 88 paintings that she completed over three years. The artist asserts that this collection" affirms the hidden, forbidden, bright red renewal cycle and embraces the wonders of womanhood."[86] This argument is similar to those made by second-wave feminists, we must make menstruation visible before we can take it a step further. Tiegs goes on to say, "I have chosen to address menstruation visually. It's too easy to joke about menstruation because it's hidden. I wanted to do something visually creative about this part of life we chose to forget. So I created these images of and about menstrual blood."[87] This is a great point—things that are not made visible, not talked about, are often forgotten, especially by those who don't experience them. Visibility is the opposite of forgetting. Tiegs was inspired to create this art because she had found so few visual images of menstruation itself. Doherty states that by "Using her own menstrual blood as the medium, she expresses herself, her moods, and her sexuality through art. She intends to create positive, affirmative visuals of menstruation, as well as to connect with her own body."[88] Again, this idea of connecting with one's body goes back to the second-wave feminists. Tiegs

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[85] Kutis, 111.

[86] Tiegs, Vanessa. "Artist's Statement:La Curvia." *Women's Studies* 40, no. 2 (2011): 222.

[87] Tiegs, "Artist's Statement," 222.

[88] Doherty, Shannon. "Smear it on Your Face, Rub it on Your Body, It's Time to Start a Menstrual Party." *Critical Theory and Social Justice Journal of Undergraduate Research Occidental College,* vol. 1, (2010).

saw a need for a certain kind of art, art that she herself wanted to see and would affirm her, and in its absence, created her own.

Her work, *Galaxy Crossing* (Fig. 10) from her *Menstrala* series, looks like a phoenix rising from the ashes. The blood smear is vibrant and shows a great deal of movement with the way the smear works across the surface. The value across the figure is made from differing saturation of blood on the page. Given the medium, the artist is able to create vivid and detailed pictures that give the viewer a lot to think about and dwell on, not just in the subjects and titles, but the medium itself.

Jen Lewis, another contemporary artist, also uses her own menstrual blood in her art. In a series titled, *Beauty in Blood* (fig. 12), she photographs the shapes and colors the blood makes when she pours the contents of her menstrual cup into the toilet. Lewis then "selects images for their aesthetic quality, which suggests there is a beauty contained within the so-called shameful menstrual blood."[89] She then names the photographs based on what images the shapes resemble. Lewis states that she utilizes her own menstrual blood to "challenge the notion that menstruation is 'gross,' 'vulgar,' or 'unrefined.'"[90] Even just the title of these works is transgressive in the sense that "beauty" is not a word usually associated with menstruation, or even any type of blood. By titling her works as such, Lewis is asking the viewer to see the beauty in something that is normally not just hidden but vilified. Menstruation is hardly ever viewed as a positive thing, so this artwork and its title forces us to see menstruation differently. "By focusing on the fluid rather than the body from which it came, Lewis's images really could come from

[89] Kutis, 128.

[90] Kutis, 127.

'wherever,' but she insists on linking her abstract shapes to menstrual bleeding."[91] Removing the body also helps to draw the viewer in and make them ask questions about what it is they are seeing. This is a radical act as the viewer sees the image and likes it and upon discovering what it is made from has to question why their feelings may have changed about the piece. Making the viewer question their views about menstrual blood is an important step in the evolution of menstrual art. There is also a power in the words that Lewis uses to describe her images, *Cobra* for example, gives connotations of power and fear.

In Ingrid Berthon Moine's portraits (Fig 13), the women stare into the camera with blood-stained lips. The blood could easily be mistaken for lipstick, however, "a second look reveals the blood-clotted traces of menstrual blood...She literally brings menstruation to the mouth of women. In the photograph above, with blood boldly on her lips, the woman's silent stare represents the silence that surrounds menstrual blood."[92] These portraits make menstruation completely visible and literally and figuratively, "in your face." Again, we see the evolution of menstrual art from visibility and conversation about social acceptance to making the viewer question their feelings about the use of menstrual blood in the images.

Fahs and others have noted that "blood gets infused with a variety of cultural interpretations, including violence, a symbol of passion or sexuality, the marker of life, and the evidence of chaos, but these representations most often work in relation to classic depictions of blood: blood as red, viscous, gooey, oozing, runny; blood that is, in short, alive within us."[93]

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[91] Kutis, 129.

[92] Doherty, "Smear it on Your Face," 22.

[93] Fahs, Breanne. *Out For Blood: Essays on Menstruation and Resistance*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2016, pp. 34.

What makes menstrual blood so terrifying is that it exists outside our body. Blood is also associated with lineage and patriarchy, but again this is the blood in our veins. Menstrual blood is oddly associated with life and death simultaneously. Menstrual blood is there because there is no baby. Menstrual blood represents the fact that a woman isn't upholding one of her most important societal roles, to be a mother. By celebrating menstrual blood, women are celebrating this fact, which is also subversive and goes against the limiting list of roles that are acceptable for women in a patriarchal society. As Fahs notes, "The menstrual stain is the femme fatale, a reminder of the death that women will meet but also, however irrationally perceived, the death that women will usher in and invite for men as well."[94] This is a fantastic point, as the role of women as femme fatale has been reproduced in art for centuries. By reclaiming the menstrual stain in art, these artists are reclaiming the power associated with the femme fatale and directing it inward.

This idea helps to situate menstrual art as a subversive initiative of activism in a society that still seeks to clean up and sanitize women's bodies. Fahs also discusses Kristeva, "Writing about abjection creates space for the hope that such catharsis will protect us from the horror itself, but such writing is merely, 'an impure process that projects from the abject only by dint of being immersed in it.'"[95] So, art would have an even greater effect given that it is in some ways more immersive than writing in that it draws on more of our senses and perhaps relies less on imagination because the image is laid out for us. Kristeva called art "that catharsis par excellence."[96] Art is the space where the boundaries between "public/private, self/other, and

[94] Fahs, 35.

[95] Fahs, 39

[96] Fahs, 38.

animal/human"[97] can be interrogated. What is vile and disgusting can become beautiful, what is invisible can become visible, and what is forgotten can be remembered. By questioning the idea that aspects of women's bodies are inherently abject, menstrual artists are changing what it means to be a person who menstruates in a patriarchal society.

It would be a disservice to a discussion on menstruation if there wasn't a discussion of the fact that women are not the only ones who menstruate. Although a rather essentialist discussion of menstruation and activism permeated the conversation during the second wave of feminism, however, recent feminists have been discussed how menstruation affects all menstruating bodies including those of trans men and non-binary folks. In her therapy practice, Breanne Fahs hopes to realize that "trans men's menstrual cycles can serve as powerful literal and metaphorical roles in challenging their ideas about masculinity, femininity, cycles and transitioning."[98] Menstrual art from trans and non-binary bodies would only serve to further the visibility and release from shame often surrounding these bodies more generally.

Menstrual blood as a medium and subject art seeks to make the invisible, visible. By bringing this normal, monthly process out into the open, feminist artists urged women to begin having a dialogue about how they were taught to hide their periods and feel shame about their bodies, creating a powerful tool of subjugation. Letting go of shame led to acceptance and even a sense of pleasure and pride about the process for some women. Later feminists have taken this even further and are advocating for better education, information, and access to menstrual products for women and others who menstruate. If some bodies must go through this every

[97] Fahs, 39.

[98] Fahs, 80.

month, there should be an open dialogue about the process and everything surrounding menstruation. Artists have been the impetus for this discussion at various points in the lineage of feminism. By making images that normalize menstruation artists have been able to bring a sense of relief and even honor to those who menstruate and open the discussion for better care and access—this is how activism works. Other feminist artists who will now be discussed, have taken these ideas of early feminist artists and incorporated other bodily fluids into their work. Their motivation is similar to that of the artists in this chapter: to break away from traditional ideas about femininity and women's bodies and create a dialogue around changing these limiting beliefs.

CHAPTER THREE: BREAST MILK AS RESISTANCE IN FEMINIST ART

Body fluids are interesting for a discussion generally, because there are such varied ideas about which fluids are socially acceptable and which are not. We are taught this while we are growing up, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly. Arya discusses this, "Bodily fluids cannot be homogenized in their 'disgust quotient' as certain fluids may cause a greater sense of unease because of their liability to be controlled and their polluting properties-mucus is more acrid and ghastly to think about that tears, which is largely because of the clearness and odorlessness of tears can be translated into poetic terms and seen as purifying without being polluting."[99] Those fluids that are more polluting or staining are more socially unacceptable, and those that come from areas of the body that we are supposed to hide, are the most unacceptable.

[99] Arya, Rina, *Abject Visions, 35.*

These ideas are deeply engrained in our society. We are rarely explicitly taught these things, however, most of us are acutely aware of these distinctions.

Using bodies and fluids in their art is a way for feminist artists to disrupt the traditional gendered expectations of women and their bodies. Breast milk is interesting because it would seem to be an essentialist for women. Women are expected to be mothers and mothers are expected to breastfeed but few, if any, accommodations are made for this to happen comfortably in public. Women are shamed for having their breasts even partially exposed when feeding, but often the only alternative public venue is a dirty bathroom stall. The history of breastfeeding is long and complicated. This chapter will focus particularly on examples of feminist artists using breast milk as a medium or main subject of their art. Breasts occupy a tenuous place in society. Breasts are for feeding children; however, they have been increasingly sexualized over the years, becoming an object of desire. These objects of desire are supposed to be hidden in public even when used for their intended purpose. New mothers are told that "breast is best," yet they are scolded if they breastfeed openly in public. The artists discussed in this paper bring up important questions about how society views breasts, and breastfeeding and how these views change along with standards about women's bodies and their changing roles outside the domestic sphere.[100]

However, "[f]or decades now, visual artists in the United States have taken on motherhood as an issue of social activism, protest inequality and discrimination, and granting visibility to the diversity of lived maternal experiences. In many instances, humor has featured as

[100] I will be using "breast feeding" rather than chest-feeding which is a newer, more trans inclusive term in this paper because "breast feeding" is the term that is used by both the artists and the scholars I will be discussing and using in my discussion.

an important tool to dismantle media-driven, patriarchal constructions of maternity."[101] When dealing with issues that (mostly) affect women's bodies, visibility is the first step to creating conversation, change, and support.

Images of a woman breastfeeding are not abnormal, or anything new, and not confined to contemporary art. However, in Western art, older images and paintings almost exclusively tend to be images of the Virgin Mary breastfeeding Jesus. These images of the Virgin Mary breastfeeding tended to serve a different purpose than the contemporary examples that I will discuss in this paper. I am providing an incredibly brief discussion of these images of Mary merely to help situate my discussion of contemporary art within a history of breastfeeding in art. This topic has had extensive and comprehensive research. Images of Mary breastfeeding, however, did change throughout the centuries. Some of these changes are discussed here, "Through the medieval and Renaissance eras, the meaning of Mary's milk moved from material to spiritual, from wisdom to mercy, until, Warner says, it came to "represent [Mary's] intercession on behalf of mankind."[102] Reeve also notes that, "Despite this decline in images linking nursing to Christian spirituality, humanity (at least in the West) has, over the last five centuries, grown steadily more squeamish about things associated with becoming and being a mother: puberty, menstruation, sex, female anatomy, birth, breast-feeding, soiled diapers, and so on."[103] This increased discomfort is what makes the art and artists discussed in this paper so

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[101] Buller, Rachel Epp. "Birthing the American Absurd Maternal Humor in Contemporary Art." *N.Paradoxia: International Feminist Art Journal*, 36 (July 2016): pp. 36.

[102] Reeve, Charles. "The Kindness of Human Milk: Jess Dobkin's Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar. *Gastronomica* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 70.

[103] Reeve, "The Kindness of Human Milk," 70.

interesting. They are aware of these changes and seek to change how breasts and breastmilk are viewed in society.

In Contemporary art, Cindy Sherman's *Untitled, #225* (Fig. 14) broaches the subject of breast milk. The artist uses breast milk in her art to subvert traditional ideas about women's bodies and the societal borders in which they are supposed to be confined. Her use of breast milk is particularly interesting because it is not real, she is using fake breast milk to make her point. This speaks to the artificiality and socially constructed nature of these borders. Interestingly, pictures of the Virgin Mary's breast shooting milk at St. Bernard are common throughout history, however, in her work Sherman takes out Bernard, the male component. Thus, Sherman takes back the power and the gaze rests solely on her. Sherman, "[b]y using her own body over and again in her art…re-directs attention to the de-carnalized female body not only in fine art, but also on the slick surfaces of the mass communication media with which her audience is familiar."[104] Sherman works within the accepted iconography of fine art to make her point, thus appropriating traditional art forms for a feminist and subversive usage. She is making breast milk historically accessible but giving it a feminist twist to create a conversation and dialogue about the absence of breastfeeding images both historically and in contemporary art, given that the act is imbued with so much cultural importance.

Another contemporary artist, Jill Miller, has taken on the various issues and problems surrounding women breastfeeding with her performance and activist piece, *Milk Truck (2011)* (Fig 14). Women are told to breastfeed exclusively, but given no support, and oftentimes face public harassment when trying to breastfeed. Miller's *Milk Truck* is an extended performance

[104] Human, "Explosions in Visual Art." 191.

and public art piece that "sends an emergency rescue vehicle to the aid of breastfeeding mothers who encountered resistant in public, and action that created a hyperbolic spectacle but more importantly aimed to defuse tense situations through humor."[105] Miller's work is part artistic endeavor, part activist work. The breastfeeding woman is given immediate support if she is being harassed while breastfeeding in public. The arrival of a large van with breasts on the top also creates a humorous moment, so instead of continuing to harass the breastfeeding mother, the perpetrators can think about their actions and the actual biological purpose of breasts.

Miller also states that she "viewed my work as a catalyst for conversation, not as a final product or discrete object…My art practice is centered on socially engaged public works, and I view my work as a shared experience when I open spaces for critical discourse and community connections."[106] This is a fundamental aspect of feminist art, no matter the media. Feminism is about creating social space and change for discussion and it is clear that Miller is aware of the political and artistic legacy of feminist art from whence she came.

Chris Reeve in his 2009 article, "The Kindness of Human Milk" writes, interestingly "if science should produce a baby formula with all the benefits of breast milk, as it is trying to do, then perhaps even the most enlightened among us will return to seeing nursing as unnecessary, embarrassing, and disgusting."[107] The more popular formula became, the less socially acceptable breastfeeding in public became. This is even though women are often shamed for not breastfeeding. Often scientific changes can take us further away from how our bodies are designed to operate, and further sanitize our bodily functions. How breastfeeding is viewed and

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[105] Buller, "Birthing the American Asburd," 50.

[106] Buller, "Birthing the American Absurd," 53.

[107] Reeve, "The Kindness of Human Milk," 72.

has been viewed has changed throughout history and surely will continue to change in the future. Ideas about breastfeeding and its necessity and appropriateness change along with ideas about women's role in society and how women's bodies are expected to operate based on these acceptable roles.

Contemporary artist Jess Dobkin's *Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* (fig. 15) is a great example of a feminist performance art piece that forces the audience and participants to really think about their reactions to women's bodies and their sometimes-corresponding fluids. This piece was first performed at the Ontario College of Art and Design in 2006. Participants/audience members were offered a sample of pasteurized breast milk that was provided by six new mothers.[108] The piece was set up like a wine tasting. The artist was inspired to create this performance piece because she faced her own struggles and inadequacies around being unable to breastfeed her daughter. Again, the problems surrounding the propaganda around breastfeeding and its importance in the U.S. is another paper, however, we can see here how art can be used to create conversations around important societal topics. Art can open up space for the general public to question how they feel about specific topics including women's bodies, blood, and breast milk.

Patty Chang's *Milk Debt* (fig. 16) is an interesting piece of performance art. The artist forces the audience to engage with an act that is usually done in private. The artist "explained that she was compiling these lists [of fears submitted by women] into one long script for a performer, who read out the text while pumping breast milk into a bottle in a live performance

[108] Springgay, Stephanie. "The Lactation Station and A Feminist Pedagogy of Touch." N.Paradoxa: *The Only International Feminist Art Journal* 26, (July 2010): 60.

that took place in June at Tai Kwun in Hong Kong."[109] The artist takes the private, solitary matter of breastfeeding and brings it into the public eye. This helps to break down barriers and stigma surrounding the topic of breastfeeding. There is also the potential for a more universal audience for the work, as the fears that the performers are reciting are submitted by women all over the world--and do not necessarily have anything to do with breastfeeding—but also the general fears of living in society and being perceived as a woman.

Chang's piece is like her other works in that the artist is always concerned about the issues that affect women's bodies and how these bodies and their acts and fluids are perceived in a public setting. In this sense, "*Milk Debt* unpacks many of Chang's recent concerns around grief, mortality, and the environment, yet also harkens back to her earliest works—which dissect the body and identify—developed during her provocative early years in New York beginning in the mid-1990s."[110] The provocative nature of this piece is what creates a space for conversation and change. Taking the issue of breastfeeding out of the closet, or bathroom stall helps to normalize this perfectly natural act. Desexualizing breasts and bringing the discussion back to their intended use and helps not just during this performance, but opens conversation around the topic more generally.

Chang's work is also informed by cultural forces and expectations that add a deeper layer of meaning to the work. Chang, a Chinese woman, brings a different ideology and cultural understanding to American audiences who view the work. In, "*Milk Debt* (2019-), which takes its title from the Chinese Buddhist idea that we can owe an unpayable debt—or a bond—to the

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[109] Cheung, Ysabelle. "Abject, Exposed and Potent Desires: Patty Chang." *ArtAsiaPacific* no. 114, (Jul 2019): 60-69

[110] Cheung, "Abject, Exposed and Potent,"

parents and forebears that gave us life…Chang once again focuses on the possibilities of the human body."[111] Chang's work gets at the importance of breastfeeding, and therefore the breast's primary purpose stripped away of sexualized understandings of the body. This idea of an unpayable debt can also be extended to how women have been excluded from the art world and the unpayable debt owed to them.

Kara Walker is another contemporary feminist artist whose work dives into the depths of various social issues including gender and race. Her work focuses on the intersection of various socially constructed identities and their lived realities. Although Walker does not use actual breast milk as a medium in her work, her inclusion and subsequent discussion of breastfeeding are vital to a discussion of breast milk in art. Walker's work looks at the historical issues that Black women have faced with regards to breastfeeding. The history of breastfeeding for Black women in the U.S is inextricably intertwined with the history of Slavery in the U.S. Walker's work takes on this racist history head-on, "The ubiquitous visual tropes of [her] work—race, sex, the gothic, the grotesque, violence, violation, abjection, obscenity, desire, death, excrement, and slavery—collide and crash violently and constantly with the racial and sexual registers of American history and culture."[112] Walker forces the viewer not just to confront their ideas about breastfeeding, but also about gender and race and the problematic history of the United States.

In Kara Walker's, "paper silhouette *Untitled (Milk and Bread)* (1998) (fig. 17), we're reminded that it was not only cotton futures that made the U.S. South affluent but also the milk of black women who, as wet-nurses, were converted from human beings into modes of

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[111] Cheung, Abject, Exposed and Potent,"

[112] Wall, David. "Transgressing, Excess, and the Violence of Looking in the Art of Kara Walker." *Oxford Art Journal* 33, no. 3 (2010): 281.

production."[113] Black women's bodies were commodified in multiple ways during slavery. They were used for physical labor in the homes and fields of the enslavers, but their bodies were also used to nourish, not only their own children but also the children of the women who enslaved them. These silhouettes of breastfeeding Black women confront the viewer with this complex history of the breastfeeding black woman. Breastfeeding created a paradox, where enslaved women were able to feed their own children, but these children were being reared to be enslaved.

> Walker's images insist that black women's lactation is an epic and overlooked source of colonial, and thus European-American, modernity. When the Middle Passage ended, when white or creole families reproduced, black women provided new children to serve them and the milky means to maintain them."[114]

So, the dialogue surrounding Walker's work is complicated and multilayered because, for the women Walker depicts, the history of breastfeeding is intrinsically linked with the history of enslavement and power in the United States. Walker's work forces the viewer to ask questions, and this is the beginning of an important conversation, which hopefully leads to change. "It is art in motion, a pulsating art, an art that moves outward and away from the center, that somehow breaks through its own borders.[115] It breaks through borders literally because the art is large and placed directly on the walls where it is displayed, rather than being confined to a frame. The subject is abject and breaks the borders of the body. This is the power of art, the viewer takes the work out into the general public and the hope is that these moments create conversation and ultimately change.

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[113] Yaegar, Patricia. "Circum-Atlantic Superabundance: Milk as World-Making in Alice Randall and Kara Walker. *American Literature* 78, no. 6 (Dec 2006): 775.

[114] Yaeger, "Circum-Atlantic Superabundance," 783.

[115] Yaeger, "Circum-Atlantic Superabundance,"775.

In another of Walker's works, "*Camptown Ladies* (1998) (fig. 18), a white woman feeds off the streams of bodily waste flowing from a plum putti-child: its body made piss-perfect by the milk of the black woman who holds it. Her breast also gives off liquid—milk, tears, or even a blacked-out balloon of speech—a comma, a black comedy…Walker…rescript[s] lactation as epic and world-making."[116] Here, Walker uses images that are historical and traditional in art, the putti, and uses it to make her point. The breasts and breast milk of Black women made the United States, and they did so against their will, with no thanks, either at the time, or centuries later.

Conclusion

The artists discussed above, although disparate in many ways, had a common goal, which was to make the invisible, visible. These artists all worked within a feminist framework to bring to light the experiences of women and how existing in a woman's body creates issues, experiences, and fluids that are not typically discussed, let alone put on a canvas. The exclusion of women's work from the canon of traditional art has created a space for women artists to break boundaries with their art as they are not indebted to the masculine traditions that came before them.

Feminist performance artists were able to use their bodies as media in such a way that disrupted many traditionally held beliefs about women's bodies. Women had been taught to cover up and be quiet, but these artists realized the power their bodies could have. By bringing their bodies into the forefront of their art these artists were able to create a new way of seeing and relating to women's bodies. There is a great deal of discussion about women's bodies in

[116] Yaeger, "Circum-Atlantic Superabundance," 788.

various media and social media applications. For example, there is a strong body-positive movement happening on Instagram and TikTok. Although most of the artists discussed have what is considered an ideal body type, showing women's real bodies, helped to start these ongoing conversations. Although there is still a lot of work to be done on what is considered socially acceptable for women's bodies, movements like the fat acceptance and body neutrality movements come from a long history of women being subjected to unrealistic beauty standards and attempting to change these narratives, just like the feminist performance artists discussed in this thesis.

Women have been dealing with issues of menstruation for centuries, however, they have mostly been dealing in a hidden silence. The artists that brought menstruation out into the open created a space where menstruation was no longer considered unclean or disgusting. These artists helped to create a cultural climate where menstruation is being discussed more openly, thus giving those who menstruate more options and information about these natural bodily processes.

Breast milk is nothing new in art, but by bringing it out of the bounds of religious art, the artists discussed were able to create a new dialogue surrounding the topic. Women are told that "breast is best" but are ridiculed and harassed for breastfeeding in public. By bringing images and even samples of breast milk out into the open, these artists created a space for discussion and change surrounding breastfeeding.

The use of body fluids in art by women serves to disrupt traditionally accepted ideas bout both art and women's bodies. By incorporating blood, bodies, and fluids in their work these women artists can break down barriers. These artists are leaning into Kristeva's notion of the abject and using it as a revolutionary force to disrupt standards of normalcy and acceptability. By taking that which is usually hidden and bringing it to the foreground viewers are forced to

confront their deeply held beliefs about women's bodies, societal standards, and what they deem acceptable. When art and politics meet, they can have transformative power.

Feminist art is alive and well within contemporary art. Although the issues, subjects, and mediums may change, the focus remains the same, to bring to the forefront the issues, subjects, relationships that are important to women and other marginalized bodies. Feminist art has been place for bringing about change surrounding how women's bodies are viewed and experienced in society.

There is little to no scholarship on how these artists have directly affected politics and society. However, anecdotal and pop-cultural examples abound. Society has become increasingly, if not hesitantly and reluctantly, more accepting of body fluids being shown on social media platforms for example. Although there is still a lot of pushback and disgust surrounding images of women's bodies existing freely on the internet, social media provides a place where women, artists, and cultural figures can curate a feed that shows them only the images they want to see. Conversely, those opposed to seeing images of a woman bleeding through her clothes, for example, can scroll by (although this rarely seems to be the course of action chosen).

Poet Rupi Kaur posted a series of photographs on her Instagram with her clothes stained with menstrual blood. After these images were removed by Instagram, citing community violations, , Kaur posted, "Help keep @instagram safe from periods. Their patriarchy is leaking. Their misogyny is showing. We won't be censored."[117] Kaur is also referencing the horror and discomfort that comes from seeing a leaking body. Although an Instagram image isn't

[117] Kutis, 125.

necessarily considered art, the impact these images can have is monumental. Instagram as an application has many widespread issues, particularly regarding the face tuning and photoshopping of the images that are published on the platform. Women's bodies are constantly shown as smooth, hairless, and perfect. So, an image like Kaur's is particularly important for its realness as well as its ability to create a conversation about how women's bodies are subject to unrealistic standards of beauty and cleanliness.[118] An image like Kaur's on social media is so important because of its wide reach. Unlike much of the art discussed in this thesis, social media posts have the potential to reach millions of people within a short time and reach those who might never step into an art gallery and see other works face to face. Again, as with the other works discussed, we cannot know of the lasting impact of this image, or the conversations it spurred, but the fact that the conversations happened in the first place is a great place to start.

In the essay, "Changing the Conversation about Menstruation from "Very Personally Yours to #ItsNotMyPeriod: A Discursive Analysis of Menstrual Products and Advertisements" Cayo Gamer discusses how the discourse around menstruation has changed, how girls and women are given more information and product choice. "Rather than referring to menstruation as a monthly crisis and calling for secrecy and discretion, today the conversations around menstruation humorously, creatively, and deftly address the need to speak openly about girls; and women's menstrual cycles, to dispel the notion that women behave differently when menstruating, and to find inventive solutions to the social and health issues that menstruating girls (and women) confront nationally and globally." Menstruation can cause girls to miss school in some countries, and not all people have access to sometimes expensive hygiene products. So destigmatizing issues surrounding menstruation have far-reaching consequences. So, "[W]hat all

[118] Kutis, 124.

these texts share is the desire to ensure that the menstruating body remains visibly by making it natural and necessary to talk about bodies that menstruate and by making sure that this discussion combats stigma, promotes menstrual health, and stays "vigorously in progress." Art is also constantly in progress and process, so it makes sense that art would engage with these subjects and create and help to create a cultural movement of acceptance and discussion.

I have attempted to show that the inclusion of bodies, blood, and other fluids in feminist art has helped to create change not just in the art world, but in society more generally. As the second wave saying goes, "the personal is political," therefore any issues that affect women's bodies on a personal level have political significance. These artists created spaces where the limits and challenges that have been attached to women's bodies could be looked at in a new light. Many of the issues such as menstruation are only issues because we live in a world that is not set up to make these things easier. These artists bring these issues to light and this develops a discourse and discussion around these topics. From this discussion, there can be change. Many of the topics discussed in this paper including menstruation and breastfeeding have become more open and socially acceptable to discuss.

Change takes time and requires many outlets to come to fruition. Art does not exist in a vacuum; it opens up conversations and ideas which then become part of the discussion of the larger society. The work of feminist artists has helped to create a new change and dialogue surrounding women's bodies and will continue to do so in the future.

Figures

Figure 1. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #177*, 1987, Cibachrome, 120 x 181 cm.

Figure 2. Paula Santiago, *Septum*, 2001, wax on rice paper, blood, crystal, 41 x 28 x 28 in.

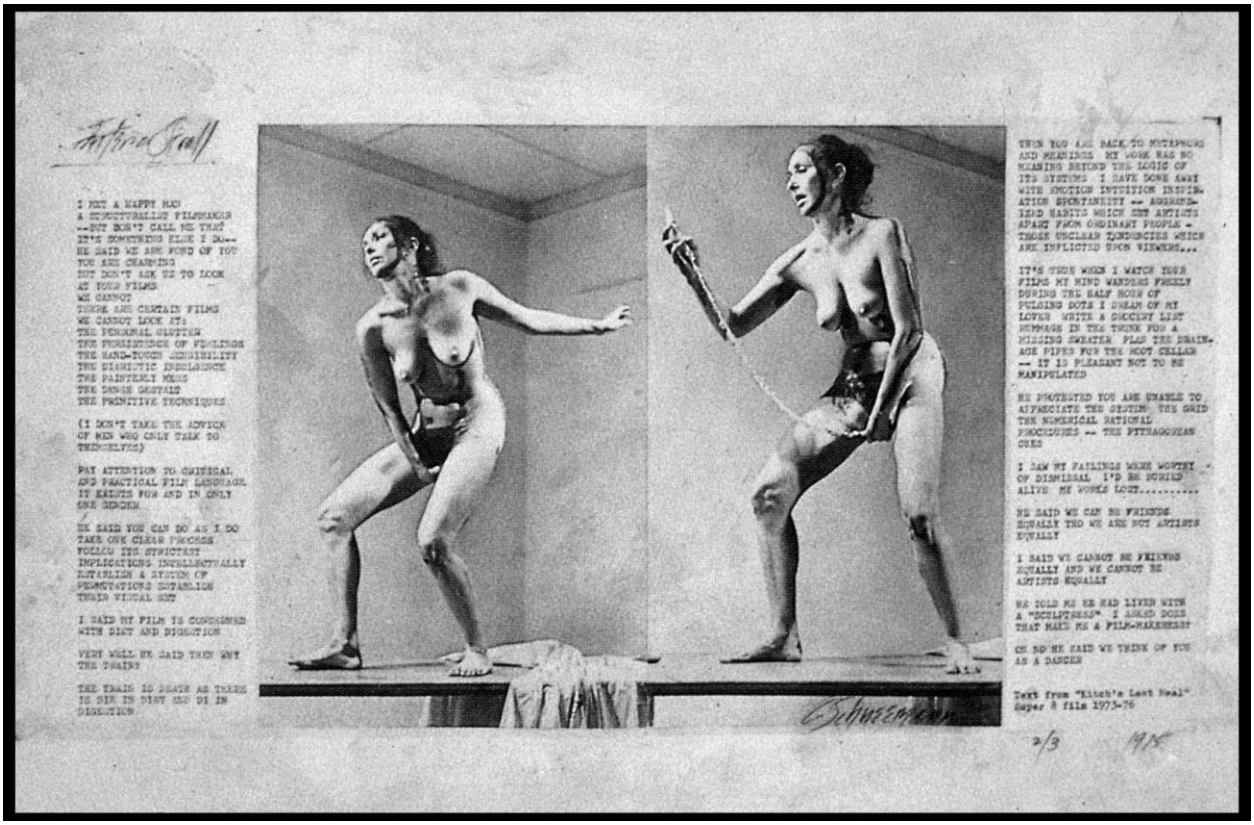

Figure 3. Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll, 1975,* Beet juice, urine and coffee on screenprint on paper, Image: 905 × 1830 mm, Tate, London.

Figure 4. Shigeko Kubota, *Vagina Painting*, 1965, performed during *Perpetual Fluxfest*, Cinematheque, New York, July 4, 1965, Gelatin silver print, MoMA, NYC.

Figure 5. Ana Mendieta, *Death of a Chicken,*1972, 35-mm color slide. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC.

Figure 6. Howardina Pindell, *Free, White, and 21*, 1980, 1980. Video (color, sound), 12:15 min, MOMA, NYC.

Figure 7. Judy Chicago, *Red Flag*, 1971, photo-lithograph, 20x24, Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

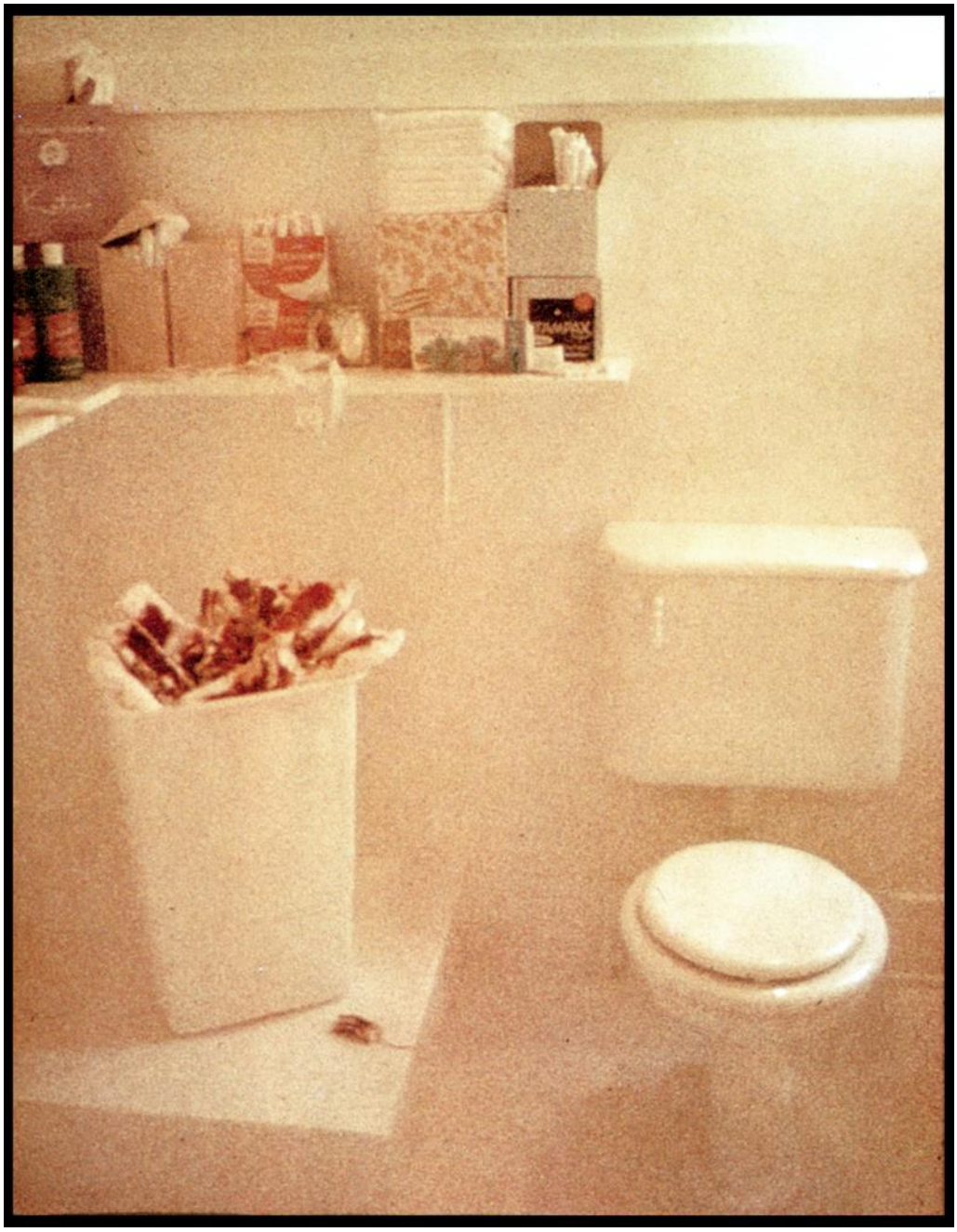

Figure 8. Judy Chicago, *Menstruation Bathroom*, 1972, printed 1972, Judy Chicago/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

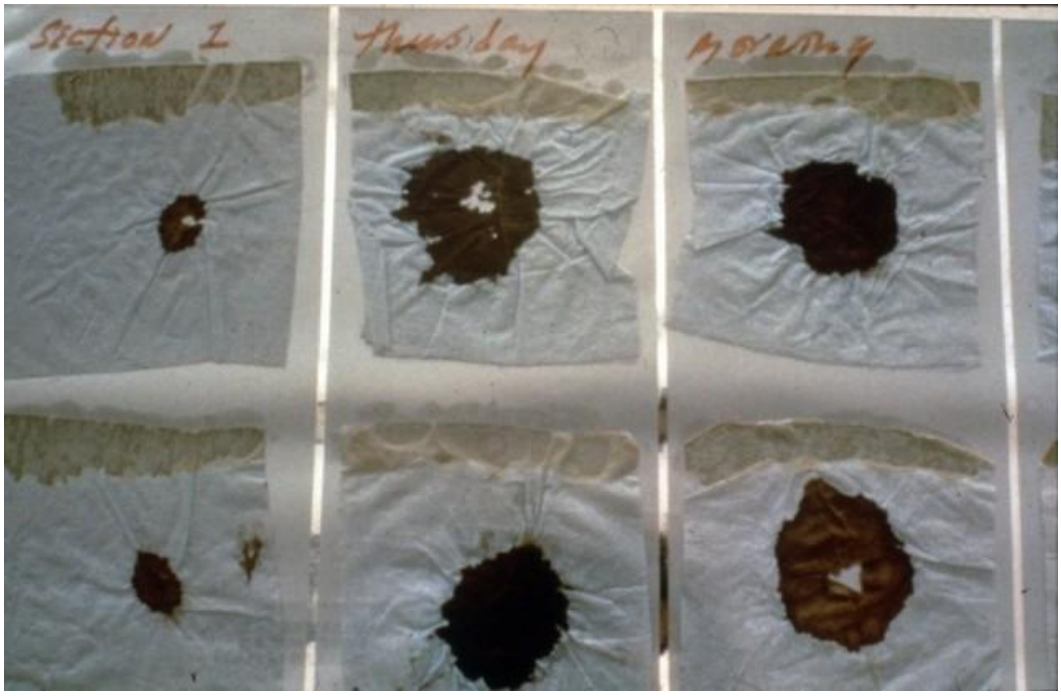

Figure 9. Carolee Schneemann, *Blood Work Diary*, 1971, blood on tissue with egg yolk, photo courtesy of the artist, Fisher Fine Arts Library Image Collection PU.

Figure 10. Vanessa Tiegs, *Galaxy Crossing*, from *Menstrala*, 2000, blood on paper, Artist's website.

Figure 11. Jen Lewis, *Cobra*, from *Beauty in Blood*, 2015, photograph, 24x18 inches. Artist's website.

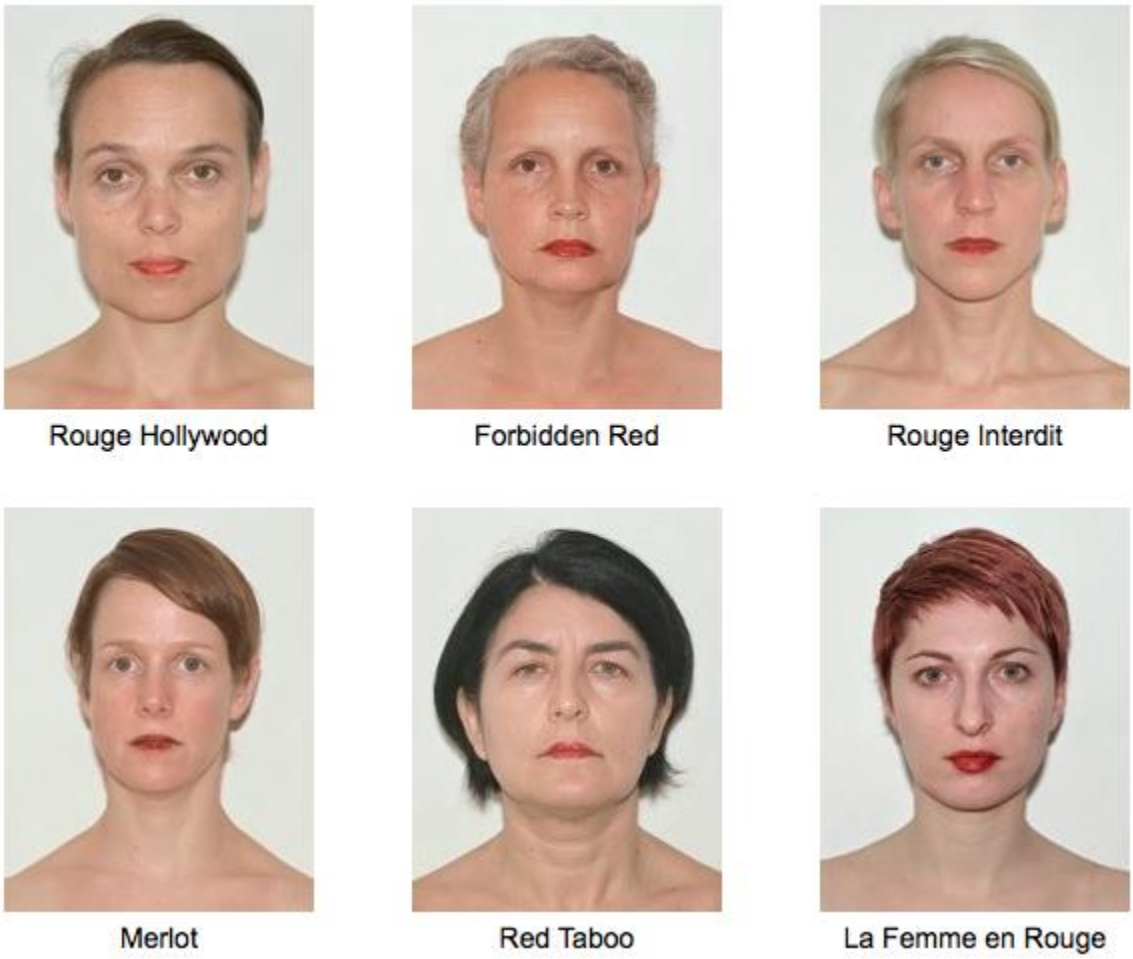

Figure 12. Ingrid Berthon, *Red is the Color*, 2009, photographs as of women using menstrual blood as lipstick, Series of 12 C-Type prints – 24 x 30cm.

Figure 13, Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #225,*1990, chromogenic color print, 48 x 33 in, The Broad Art Foundation, Los Angeles, CA.

Figure 14, Jess Miller, *Milk Truck*, 2011-12.

Figure 15, Jess Dobkin, *The Lactation Station*, OCAD Professional Gallery, Usine C, FAB Gallery 2006, 2012, 2016, Artist's Website.

Figure 16. Patty Chang, *Milk Debt*, 2019

Figure 17. Kara Walker, *Untitled (Milk and Bread)*, 1998, Cut Paper and adhesive on wall, 3x3.6m.

Figure 18**,** Kara Walker, *Camptown Ladies,* 1998, Paper and adhesive on wall, 97 1/2 x 666 in.

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