

‘The Essentialist is Misogyny’ by Margaret Morgan,
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Margaret Morgan

The Essentialist is Misogyny:
In reply to *Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics and the Anthropocene*

Human-things

...[T]he otherwise important topic of subjectivity ... gets short shrift so that I may focus on the task of developing a vocabulary and syntax for, and thus a better discernment of, *the active powers issuing from non-subjects* (my emphasis).¹

I’d like to introduce a little *plumpe danken* into current debates about the new materialism:

Women, communities of color, mothers, the poor, the colonized and marginalized, occupy non-subject positions: economically, politically, historically, culturally, subjectively. We disappear. We are not counted. We don’t have access. We are ignored. We don’t have a say. We don’t get a hearing. As Zadie Smith puts it, it is a matter of whether one can “feel like a person.”² We have to fight for the vote, for justice, to be free from harassment, free from violence, to drink from the fountain, to sit on the bus, to use the bathroom, to openly love how and whom we please, to get a loan, to rent a house, to go to school, to practice our beliefs, to eat, to breathe, to live, to be. And fight we do. Well we know the company with whom we co-habit – the men, the white people, the straight people, the cis-gendered people, the able-bodied, the colonizers, the upper

¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter, A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, p ix

² Zadie Smith, *Swing Time*, New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2016, p 428

castes, the uber-rich – though they hardly know we exist. Certainly not as subjects. Our bodies are things for their use and titillation and which sustain *their* status as subjects.

If Copernicus put a wrench in our earth-centric world-view, new materialism puts a wrench in the anthropocentric view of ontology, emphasizing the ontic and *things* as actants outside the human. In this laudable enterprise, however, Bennett, while acknowledging the importance of the question of the human subject, sets it aside *tout court*³. I would like to take up the question the subject, or rather those humans whose status as legal subjects is at best tenuous; those people who are objectified to varying degrees and whose bodily identity disallows them in the privileged zone of subjectivity; those humans whose bodies are already relegated to the place of ‘thing.’ The Thing. We are monstrous. If we weren’t ‘things’ the unspeakable crimes against us could not have been committed. And like other ‘things’ under new materialism, these provisional human non-subjects, for all their subjectlessness, statelessness, lawlessness, they/we occupy space, need sustenance, and are volatile, unpredictable. It is here for me that the discourses around human justice intersect with, in Bennett’s words, *the active powers issuing from non-subjects*.⁴ Non-subjects in Bennett’s terms, are things like rocks, a dead rat, a film of debris on drain water. These things have a kind of agency. Given that so many human beings of the 7.4 billion on earth (as of August 2016), occupy a social and political place in which they are treated as if things, the new materialism suggests a way of understanding the agency of all people, non-subject and legal subject alike. This makes for extremely interesting revisions of the liberatory discourses around human rights, which then speak to the agency of those without rights on a continuum with the rights of the inanimate, an expanded field of the active powers of non-subjects. Imagine that instead of seeking to become subjects the disenfranchised embrace their thingness and the concomitant agency of things. Imagine understanding the body politic when acknowledging that the non-subject has agency, has affect. No matter what subjects may do.

³ Jane Bennett, op. cit.

⁴ Jane Bennett, op. cit.

Body-things

“[I]t’s the body. The woman’s body is all wrong!”⁵

When women are viewed as bodies, we occupy the thing place. In the nineteen eighties, advanced feminist art in the Anglophone world critiqued uses of the image of woman by feminist artists as ‘essentialist.’ We didn’t want to be things; we wanted to be subjects. We wanted to move beyond woman-as-body, beyond the scopophilic consumption of our embodied look. We read de Beauvoir, Berger, Mulvey, Kristeva. Women making images of themselves were critiqued for participating in the spectacle of woman’s objectification and the reduction of her identity to a body for the male gaze. In the grand project of acquiring selfhood, constructionist-feminists, and I count myself among them, eschewed other feminists whose practice, it seemed back then, was still mired in the question of the body. This question—are women only, essentially, definitionally, their bodies: breasts, vaginas, wombs—becomes a non-sequitur if we understand the agency and multivalence of that position. Allow us a discussion of a number of artists, championed now but whose projects were tainted by the label essentialist:

Artist Judy Chicago was castigated by nineteen eighties constructionist feminists because her most well-known work, *The Dinner Party*, was a sculptural installation with ceramics and needlework that celebrated great female artists and thinkers by giving each a place at the table, her charger decorated with a personalized vaginal form made of fired clay⁶. Today Chicago’s oeuvre is understood more fully, including her abstract painting, installations of colored gases, and performance, and *the*

⁵ Spoken by the character, Beverly Mantle, played by Jeremy Irons, *Dead Ringers*, feature film, director, David Cronenberg, Morgan Creek Productions, Téléfilm Canada & Mantle Clinic II, 1988

⁶ Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, catalogue, Garden City, NY: Anchor Press Editions, 1979

Dinner Party itself is understood in more nuanced ways.⁷ Nancy Spero too was subject to the critique of invoking ancient matriphile cultures, re-inscribing traditional gendered roles and for making visible the woman's body. Constructionist feminists of the art-world, were highly critical of these representational strategies, skeptical of their motivations and dubious of the effectivity.⁸

Artists like Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke, who began working in the nineteen sixties and seventies, and who were conventionally good looking, were always going to be viewed through that lens – by the male dominated art-world and later by their sisters, the constructionist feminists. As artists, they had little choice but to address the actuality of their appearance and the objectifying lens through which they were viewed, as things in themselves, to be harnessed to other ends. Thus, Wilke's gum works, in which she photographed her naked form with multiple masticated vaginal forms⁹ or her late work in which she continued to document her naked body, even as wracked with cancer and the medical procedures that failed to save her life, her nakedness revealing the shock of the medicalized body, the sick body, indeed the body as thing¹⁰. In the case of Schneemann, the given fact of her beauty was problematized in performances in which she swung naked in a void, like a living compass, the weight of her corporeal self the tool with which to draw¹¹; or in which she and multiple partners performed a choreographed semi-naked bacchanal of lust and flesh, the human body on a continuum with cuts of dead meat and fish¹²; or in which her sexually explicit film was censored precisely

⁷ eds. Amelia Jones and Laura Cottingham, *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, Los Angeles, CA: UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art, 1996

⁸ Teresa de Lauretis, 'Upping the Ante (Sic) in Feminist Theory' (1990) in eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997

⁹ Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*, 1974

¹⁰ Hannah Wilke, *Intravenous*, 1991

¹¹ Carolee Schneemann, *Up to And Including Her Limits*, 1973-76

¹² Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy*, 1964

because it was too confrontational and not politely, comfortably, pornographic.¹³ She did not instrumentalize her thing-ness, as much as let the thing-ness of her embodiment be and do as it would.

Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock argued,

The work of feminist artists [became] a matter of dismantling Woman as Image by using the potential of performance to constitute different relations between woman and audience¹⁴.

Using ‘Thing Theory’ we can say that the woman as image was not so much dismantled as allowed to play out as a thing with agency: the performance artist is at once *thing*, *agent*, and *thing-as-agent*. If we allow for this way of thinking about artists who were objectified for their physical beauty, we can understand them as affective agents whose very objectification had an effect on their audience and we can more fully understand the complexity of the reception of them as artists.

Conversely, the work of artist Mary Kelly, a feminist voice for the nineteen seventies-nineteen eighties anti-essentialist position coming out of conceptual art, eschewed the image of woman as a political stance.¹⁵ It was for example about two decades before Kelly widely exhibited *Primapara, Bathing Series* (1974)¹⁶, a series of documentary photographs of her and her infant, and this precisely because the image of mother and child was considered essentializing and over-determined.¹⁷ Yet, while Mary Kelly has eschewed images of women/ the mother since *Post Partum Document* (1972 – 78), Kelly’s entire oeuvre, from the perspective of almost half a century’s practice, can

¹³ Carolee Schneemann, *Fuses* (1965) in Aviva Rahmani, ‘A Conversation on Censorship with Carolee Schneemann (1989)’, ed. Hilary Robinson, *Feminism-Art-Theory, An Anthology, 1968-2000*, pp 147-152

¹⁴ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Framing Feminism, Art and the Women’s Movement, 1970-1985*, London, UK: Pandora Press (Routledge), 1987, 40

¹⁵ Mary Kelly, *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*, Bradford, Ontario, Canada: Demeter Press, 2011

¹⁶ <http://foundation.generali.at/en/collection/artist/kelly-mary/artwork/primapara-bathing-series.html#.V9bfcPMrKu4>

¹⁷ Kelly, *ibid*

now be understood as having a very primary relationship to the maternal: From *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79) to *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi* (2001) to *Love Songs* (2005-7) to *Dicere* (2014), the relations of women to their children, of teachers to their students, of one generation's image in the minds of the next, each art project focuses upon and interrogates the maternal, and its place as a core value in social justice work and in critical analysis.¹⁸ Of course this model of maternity is not situated in the body of the mother, but through her speech, her memories, and through those who occupy the place of the mother, be they mothers, fathers, figures from war, elders, teachers, caregivers, activists: yet all can be situated on the side of care and hospitality, those qualities bound up with the maternal, qualities that philosopher Julie Stephens argues are otherwise being lost under neo-liberal capital.¹⁹ This maternity, this ethic of care, is, if you will, an essential aspect of Kelly's entire oeuvre and is bound to experiences in a real world that is also occupied by her essentialist sisters. If mothers occupy a contingent place as subjects in the world, Kelly's work articulates how this thingness, this material lot affects cultures, wars, gendered difference, labor.

In the nineteen nineties, feminist discourse aligned with queer-theory, post-colonialism and post-humanism to engage these complications of the question of the body and the subject. Truly perversely, the voices of antisex/anti-porn feminists such as Andrea Dworkin harnessed this newer critical culture to a body phobic, anti-sex agenda and to such a degree that Dworkin's particular feminist politics came in line with the ultra-right, anti-artist/anti-sex/homophobic ideologies of Jesse Helms.²⁰ Strange bedfellows in the consolidation of the anti-image critiques of feminist use of her body-herself-her thing. At the same time, AIDS activism, queer theory and postcolonial theory became imbricated with sex-positive feminist discourses and these critical developments inserted, so to speak, the body of an, at best, provisional subject. One thinks of artist and

¹⁸ Kelly, op. cit. <http://www.marykellyartist.com/dicere.html>

¹⁹ Julie Stephens, *Confronting Post Maternal Thinking: Feminism, Memory, and Care*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012

²⁰ Carol S. Vance, 'Feminist Fundamentalism: Women Against Images' (1993), ed. Zoya Kocur & Simon Leung, *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, London, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp 132-140

AIDS activist, David Wojnarowicz demanding his body be not buried but dropped on the steps of the White House²¹. Thing indeed.

In the new century, a wide range of artistic strategies including queer performance deploys bodily tropes in ways that are neither essentialist, nor anti-essentialist. A growing sense of sexual identification existing on a continuum and gender fluidity being the norm, at least anecdotally from the teenagers I know in the cities of Los Angeles and New York, have taken the heat out of the old feminist arguments about essentialism. Even conservative US Congressmen have to address the question of trans children in high school bathrooms. They may not like it, but they can't pretend trans people don't exist. In my own practice, the use of human breast milk guarantees no authentic maternal subject but speaks to the liminal relations between a mother and child. Questions of whether to use the body as an artistic trope no longer concern the notion of the subject: the subject is contingent, multivalent, labile. The non-subject as understood through the new materialism is affective and has agency.

In the meantime, consciousness of a new essentialist has arisen: If in the past, the critique of patriarchy seemed rather blunt – too totalizing, too generalized – globalized access to social media has meant that feminists around the world are acutely aware of patriarchal violence against women: a rape on a bus in New Delhi²²; a Pakistani teen shot by the Taliban for wanting education for girls²³; the institutionalized tolerance of rape of soldiers, male and female, by their male peers in the US military²⁴; the abduction of teenagers held hostage and abused for a decade in Cleveland²⁵; the strange beliefs of

²¹ Cynthia Carr, 'Fire in the Belly,' on David Wojnarowicz, NY: The New York Times, July 19, 2012

²² <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/india-gang-rape-women-violence-bus-bareilly-daughter-baby-killed-a6925371.html>;

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Delhi_gang_rape

²³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malala_Yousafzai

²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexual_assault_in_the_United_States_military

²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_Castro_kidnappings

elected officials in the evangelical Tea Party wing of the US Republican Party²⁶. As we know, such things are not new. What is new is the height of a long rising wave of feminist protest, the refusal of these acts of misogyny and multigenerational feminist art practice: collaborative, eco-feminist, and with solidarity across classes and ethnicities.

Critique of this work as essentializing becomes moot: Every time a misogynist perpetrates violence against a woman, he essentializes her. Every time an artist's work is dismissed because it is by a woman, the artist is essentialized. Feminists don't need to argue the point: women are already essentialized and misogyny is the essentialist.

I have tried to argue that under new materialism, the feminist art questions of the subject and essentialism are moot. What of the new maternalism? Going forward what practices can artists follow? These are the questions I hope to pursue in conversation with artist and collaborator, Myrel Chernick.

The Holocene that most narrow of geological slithers, is the glorious period of warming weather after the last ice age – a mere twelve-thousand-year span – those happy days in which species burst forth and multiplied in a burgeoning of life. The anthropocene is the term for the narrowest slither of that slither, a few seconds on the geological clock, and is still a contested term, under consideration by geologists to be adopted as an official geologic era in and of itself. Which is to say, the anthropocene would be the first geologically distinct epoch in which human action, measured by strata of chicken bones, plastic bottles, carbon and radioactive isotopes, is altering the face and depth and very being of the planet. It would also constitute the first geological labeling that identifies a process, not that has gone before, but which is currently underway. Whether of course the anthropocene will become measurable in thousands and millions of years is yet to be determined. It may well be short-lived, shorter than the era of the dinosaurs, a mere blip of geological time, after which the actions of things, non-human, will again have their day. Or this moment of chicken bones laid down all over the ground

²⁶ <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/OTUS/akins-rape-remark-draws-tea-party-pressure-quit/story?id=17041857>

may be the beginning of a reign of millions of years, the domestic bird bones covered, compressed, heated, cooled, uplifted, fossilized, to be revealed to none other than our latter-day selves. That depends on many things including whether a new maternalism can take hold in which care and custodianship, nurturance and forbearance, love of the nonhuman and the human alike, can take hold, an era in which feminism – and including feminist art – doesn't argue with itself but gets on with the urgent questions of restoring the rights of the environment and the agency of non-subjects. Legal subjects have had it their way for long enough.

Bodies are porous, hybrid, medicalized, mechanized, virtualized. We are 70% water and 90% microbes. We are hosts. We fantasize about our ubiquity and our dominance over the earth, yet we are endlessly subject to its vagaries, its weather, its quakes, its nourishment, its species, its minerals. They act upon us at least as much as the reverse, these things that humans have considered as ours to use, affect us in ways not in our control.

The Thingness of all Things

We are only particles of change, I know, I know, orbiting around our sun.²⁷

Shake your thang, owwww

Do what you wanna do

I can't tell you how to catch a groove

It's your thang (It's your thing)

Do what you wanna do

I won't tell you who to sock it to²⁸

²⁷ Joni Mitchell, *Hejira*, 1976

²⁸ Salt 'N' Pepa, 'Shake Your Thang,' *A Salt With a Deadly Pepa*, LP, 1988, <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/saltnpepa/shakeyourthang.html>

“When I put my hands on your body on your flesh I feel the history of that body. Not just the beginning of its forming in that distant lake but all the way beyond its ending. I feel the warmth and texture and simultaneously I see the flesh unwrap from the layers of fat and disappear. I see the fat disappear from the muscle. I see the muscle disappearing from around the organs and detaching itself from the bones. I see the organs gradually fade into transparency leaving a gleaming skeleton gleaming like ivory that slowly resolves until it becomes dust. I am consumed in the sense of your weight the way your flesh occupies momentary space the fullness of it beneath my palms. I am amazed at how perfectly your body fits to the curves of my hands. If I could attach our blood vessels so we could become each other I would. If I could attach our blood vessels in order to anchor you to the earth to this present time I would. If I could open up your body and slip inside your skin and look out your eyes and forever have my lips fused with yours I would. It makes me weep to feel the history of your flesh beneath my hands in a time of so much loss. It makes me weep to feel the movement of your flesh beneath my palms as you twist and turn over to one side to create a series of gestures to reach up around my neck to draw me nearer. All these memories will be lost in time like tears in the rain.”²⁹

²⁹ David Wojnarowicz,
https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/20664.David_Wojnarowicz