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View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

title:

The V-Girls: Feminism and the Authentic Subject after Post-structuralism

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source:

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 15 (2017)

URL:

<https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2016/15-theatricality/the-v-girls-feminism-and-the-authentic-subject>

publisher:

Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture

affiliation:

Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw

The Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences

The V-Girls: Feminism and the Authentic Subject after Post-structuralism

A 1989 video still (fig. 1) captures the V-Girls' performance of "Manet's *Olympia*: Posed and Skirted." Marianne Weems delivers her satirical paper "Manet's Best Friend: The Paw Print Unseen," which addressed a subject that had purportedly "hounded the psychoanalytic institution": "the gaze of the dog."¹ The verticality of the image is severe. Weems, seated at the center of a long table, leans into a microphone. A raking light brightens her face, collared shirt, and nametag. Like the other women seated at the table, she sports what the critic C. Carr called the V-Girls' "prim-suited-fresh-from-the-Sorbonne" look.² The tablecloth—otherwise gray, crinkled and prosaic—pours forth before her, briefly transformed into a beacon of white. If the wannabe regal fount of cloth suggests Weems' importance, so too does her separation from the other group members, who are shrouded in darkness. Because the image's oblique angle reinforces psychological distance by frustrating any attempt to see Weems face-on, the viewer is as separate from the speaker as her fellow performers. Furthermore, the diagonal of the table and the tenebristic lighting imbue the scene with drama, a quality reinforced by not only the dynamic angle of the oversized screen looming above Weems' head, but also the farcical content of the image projected there: a studio shot of a black-and-white pup.

The V-Girls, a feminist performance troupe composed of



Fig. 1. V-Girls: The Question of Manet's *Olympia* Posed and Skirted, performance, MATRIX/Berkeley 123, February 16 and 17, 1989. Image courtesy University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

Marianne Weems, Martha Baer, Jessica Chalmers, Erin Cramer, and Andrea Fraser, produced three performances: "Academia in the Alps: In Search of Swiss Mis(s)" (1988–92), "Manet's *Olympia*" (1989–92), and "Daughters of the ReVolution" (1993–96). Their works satirize academic egotism and critical theory, with special attention to deconstructionist, psychoanalytic, post-structuralist, and feminist thought. "Academia in the Alps" plays on Johanna Spyri's children's book *Heidi* as a "pretext for talking about issues relating to women in academe."³ Also a spoof academic panel, "Manet's *Olympia*" continues the focus on women in the academe but also homes in on art history. The V-Girls presented "Manet's *Olympia*" more frequently than their other works, performing it some fourteen times at various art-world and academic institutions in the U.S. and U.K., including the College Art Association in San Francisco (1989) and London's Institute of Contemporary Art (1990). The group's last performance, "The V-Girls: Daughters of the ReVolution" (1993–96), is a scripted consciousness-raising session that examines generational conflicts between the second and third-waves of feminism while also critiquing post-structuralist theory for its tendency to bolster individual alienation rather than encourage group collaboration.

Martha Baer joked that the V-Girls preferred to "sit longways" during their panels, allowing the audience member to "trace the sweeping, authoritative gesture of [a V-Girl's] hand with their eyes...."⁴ The 1989 video still capturing Weems is suggestive of the group's concern with, and critique of, the notion of the autonomous subject. Indeed, the V-Girls used humor to both reveal and interrogate each group member's status as a discrete subject throughout the performance of "Manet's *Olympia*." If, however, "Manet's *Olympia*" presents the idea of the autonomous individual as a tool aimed at attaining mastery over the group, "Daughters" presents the same idea with much more ambivalence. In "Daughters," the autonomous individual

continues to be represented as a mythical, unattainable ideal loaded with political baggage, yet the work also stages the individual as a tool for working together in order to commit to one's convictions and fully participate in collective political action.

I pay particular attention to the second-wave critique of the post-structuralist master-individual in order to argue for the following position: the notion that one's beliefs are not one's own is altogether disempowering. Building on the V-Girls' commentary in "Daughters," I suggest that the relationship between second-wave feminism—which insisted that introspection and mass political action *must* proceed hand-in-hand—and the humanist ideal of the autonomous self is not as neatly antagonistic as is often assumed. Thus my claim runs counter to a familiar account of feminism's relation to the autonomous subject presented in texts such as Jo Anna Isaak's *The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, a 1996 study that is particularly topical to the V-Girls' synthesis of feminist commentary and satire. Women's laughter contributes to "dismantling 'the prison house of language' through play,"⁵ Isaak suggests, pointing to a number of women artists whose cultural production exhibits an "understanding of how all signifying systems operate." Following Roland Barthes' well-known assertion that cultural artifacts have "no other origin than language itself,"⁶ Isaak celebrates the death of the author as autonomous individual and "most of the old verities associated with the confident bourgeois belief in individualism and absolute property rights." Because women "never held this privileged position," she suggests, the death of the author was an occasion for celebration rather than nostalgic mourning.⁷ Yet the last performance by the V-Girls utilizes humor and play to suggest that the passing of just this individual may not strictly indicate the passing of the "bourgeois belief in individualism"—it may also indicate the passing of authentic self-identification, conviction,

and group-action.⁸

An audio-recording of a 1992 performance of "Manet's *Olympia*," performed at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, begins with Baer apologizing: "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... Before we begin this evening, I'm going to introduce our panelists individually."⁹ Baer insists on each V-Girl's status as an individual and a competitor from the start of the performance. She reinforces this status a minute later, introducing Weems as "our next contender—I'm sorry, panelist." Just as her introduction of Weems emphasizes one-upmanship, her introduction of Fraser is also imbued with a competitive sentiment. What matters about Fraser's papers and lectures is not their content, but their quantity: "Andrea has sat on many panels, lectured at museums and universities and written numerous articles." This comment was adapted from the Vs' first performance, "Swiss Mis(s)," which began with an introduction of Fraser as "a critic and performer" who "has spoken on many panels, lectured at various universities, written numerous articles, served on juries, and preached to the common man."¹⁰

A more substantive exploration of the individual-as-power-hungry ego comes when the V-Girls interrogate the structure of a sexist joke in "Manet's *Olympia*." Erin Cramer presents the joke, claiming that it has "been going around the department." It centers on a prolific professor who has been asked to sit on a panel. "So, he gets there," Cramer explains,

sits down, and when it's time for him to deliver his paper, he stands up and pulls out his dick. Well, it's not very big. In fact, it's very, very small, and as soon as he takes it out, everyone starts laughing. So he says... Oh, wait a second. I can't tell this joke. Some of the men in your audience might get offended, you know, the real serious ones who don't have

a sense of humor. This is a great joke, though. If any of you gals want to hear it, drop me a line. I promise you, you'll piss yourself laughing. Oh, and if any of you guys out there think you can take it, feel free to write, too. Like I said, if you can take it, it's a great joke. Trust me.¹¹

Here, a tired joke (about penis size) is complicated by a second joke that is evoked but not told. Cramer's jab at the "real serious men" who "might get offended" refers to feminists routinely attacked for not being able to brush off sexism. Audience members are left in a quandary, for if they laugh, they must laugh all at once at two jokes in which Weems' status is quite different. In one joke, the professor and "men-in-general" are the butt, while the joke's teller (identified as a feminist and a woman) and its object (emasculated men) are quite separate. In the evoked joke, however, the un-pliable, unpleasant feminist who just won't relax is the object—and so is Weems, because she is the butt of what the V-Girls would later describe as "an old joke that is most generally told at the expense of women."¹² The distinction between the joke's teller and object is elided, and the audience must laugh both with and at Weems.

Henri Bergson relays a narrative that captures the us-and-them social dynamic that can accompany humor: "A man who was once asked why he did not weep at a sermon when everybody else was shedding tears replied: 'I do not belong to the parish!' What that man thought of tears would be still more true of laughter."¹³ Here, Bergson makes explicit the experience of bonding and exclusion common to many jokes, but this experience is complicated by Cramer. The audience members of "Manet's *Olympia*" are neither members of the parish nor outsiders—they are confused. Weems' status is also confused, for she is both subject (the joke's teller) and object (the butt of the joke). Indeed, the emphasis for Cramer is less on the mechanisms of bonding and exclusion, and more on the dissolution of discrete categories themselves—on social groups such as parishioners and non-

parishioners, or men and women, audience members and butts of jokes, objects and subjects. Weems' joke, which deconstructs the category of the self and the group by dismantling and scrambling the constituent parts of each, adds up to an equivocal position that makes her both "us" and "them." By complicating the distinction between subject/object, oppressor/oppressed, and male/female, she becomes an impersonal abstraction.

This is not to say that the joke is terribly successful. It is coarse and lacks the mostly gentle and non-threatening pedestrianism that the V-Girls frequently used to deflate the academic ego (as in the story of how the "gaze of the dog has hounded the psychoanalytic institution"). Still, the joke is of interest because it distills the V-Girls' worry that post-structuralist theory and academic egotism were a volatile mix that threatened the egalitarian spirit of feminism. The group took up the issue explicitly in a fictionalized interview with the editors of the journal *October*, published in 1989. Speaking for the editors, the V-Girls asked themselves a hard question: "Isn't there a danger of leveling, or of simply making everything the butt of a joke?—and an old joke that is most generally told at the expense of women?" Was there not a worry that by parodying "theoretical insights coming from feminism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, etc., that have been very useful to women," the V-Girls' performances were in fact disempowering to women as a whole?¹⁴

While it is true that the joke risks the "danger of leveling" the categorical identifications it presents, I would contend that it is not so much the joke itself as it is the technique of deconstruction that ends up being laid bare for critique. Insofar as Cramer scrambles categories to tell a joke in which there is no such thing as a right or wrong response—laughing somehow counts as *both* trans-valuating an old sexist joke and condoning an old sexist joke—she actually ensures her own position of mastery. Thus it is not that by "parodying deconstruction" they have leveled a tool that has been "very useful to women." Rather, the joke

inadvertently reveals that deconstruction can operate as an effective tool for leveling everything *but* your own analytic capacities—where analysis here simply refers to breaking down categories so as to reveal their incoherence.

Later in the performance of “Manet’s *Olympia*,” the V-Girls focus on the critique of the self as a discrete category when they administer a “Visual Literacy Test.” The test, which was later reproduced in “The V-Girls: A Conversation with *October*,” asks that audience members make their own drawing of *Olympia* and answer bogus multiple-choice questions. “Another Manet painting is called ... a) Guernica, b) Madame Bovary, or c) Sympathy for the Devil,” reads one.¹⁵ Designed to humiliate audience members, it parodies the taste-making function of art-world elites and institutions: “here at the museum we are proud... that our test has several times helped and is still helping the police to detect the criminally uncultivated, purveyors of aesthetic scandal, and nerds,” Chalmers explains.¹⁶ Just after the test has been passed out, Martha Baer launches into a paranoid outburst that evokes the death of authorship and the associated notion that language itself, and not a discrete individual, produces texts. Addressing the audience, she complains:

Hold on, hold on just one minute here. I want to get something straight. Are you laughing at me, or are you laughing at what I’m saying? I mean, maybe we ought to stop here and consider the issue of slippage in the production of laughter. I am not the butt of my jokes. Or maybe you haven’t read Kristeva on Bakhtin. Look, this is about language. This is not about me, and I am not me, and if you don’t understand that, I suggest you should listen more closely.¹⁷

Eve Meltzer’s study of the structuralist turn—a turn she argues was radicalized by conceptual artists in the 1960s and is, in many ways, continuous with post-structuralism itself—provides a diagnostic tool for thinking through the connections

between the post-structuralist thought here loosely signified by Baer's reference to "Kristeva on Bakhtin," by the broad academic fixation with language, and by the death of the subject that Baer describes: "This is not about me, and I am not me, and if you don't understand...". For Meltzer, both the original structuralist thinkers, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Jacques Lacan, as well as figures that served as the V-Girls' more immediate intellectual influences, such as Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault,

...looked to systems and language for a revolution in signifying structures. Maintaining that human endeavors were inescapably governed by the structural order of the grid, structuralists argued that all social and cultural phenomena could be mastered through a "science" of the signifier. And it was by way of this claim that structuralism marked, once and for all, the end of the humanist understanding of the subject as in command of not only himself and a consciousness fully transparent to itself, but also the historical process. Perhaps more importantly, structuralism produced and made urgent the problem of the belatedness of subjectivity: the notion that the human subject is a mere *effect* of preexisting systems.¹⁸

That the very death of the subject relies on both an understanding of the self as an effect of discourse ("this is about language. This is not about me"), and that it similarly relies on a relatively standardized way of thinking that aims at mastery and "science" is confirmed by Baer's outburst. The outburst is, of course, catalyzed by the threat that her authority as a panelist "on the other side of a long table" might be undercut. That threat is addressed by beseeching the audience to become as expert as she is: you need to "read Kristeva on Bakhtin" and "listen more closely."

The V-Girls' last performance, "The V-Girls: Daughters of the

ReVolution" (1993-96), shows symptoms of the "critical malaise" that has followed from the structuralist approach. By staging a consciousness-raising session that highlights the distinctions between second-wave feminism and the more theoretically driven approach taken up by the third-wave, the performers attempt—and not without displaying a good bit of ambivalence—to harness consciousness-raising's spirit of female solidarity in order to turn away from deconstruction's inadvertent production of mastery and toward collectivity. They return to the controversial topic of essentialism, wondering if "women's experience" is a coherent concept that each V-Girl can be said to share. Thus the performance is structured by each V-Girls' attempt to respond to a question posed by Chalmers: "Why don't we talk about our past experiences with groups of women...?"¹⁹ The prompt often falls flat, with the performers proving themselves to be resistant to the prospect of self-revelation and group identification. Indeed, much of the humor of "Daughters" derives from the women's repeated refusal to make their group experiences congeal. Fittingly, the performance is structured by the rhythm of ironic disruption: when Fraser encourages the women to pursue consciousness of their authentic selves through group conversation, for example, Baer quips, "Can I just add that I feel so conscious already it's making me a little nauseous?"²⁰

While the difference between "Daughters" and the previous performances can easily be demonstrated by comparing close readings of the works, contextual evidence also corroborates my suggestion that "Daughters" stands apart from the V-Girls' other works by virtue of its critique of post-structuralism's distancing effects. In an essay titled "V-Notes on Laughter," Jessica Chalmers indicates that the group created the performance with this problem in mind. "The notion of parody seemed used up and the Vs were in the throes of what we viewed as a group

creative impasse," Chalmers writes, adding:

Privately we discussed our discomfort with the fact that laughter was provoked in the audience at someone else's expense—generally someone who, in all sincerity, aspired to say or do something. We considered the idea that our parodic distance from that sincerity meant that we aspired to nothing but distance. We also saw that we had aspired through parody to be special, but that, in spite of our up-to-date commitment to inauthenticity and performance, what we had wanted all along was actually a *better authenticity*.... What we wanted, we found, was after all really not that different from what the feminists of the 1960s and 1970s had wanted—we wanted not to be taken for *just any woman*.²¹

With "Daughters," the V-Girls left behind their gleeful exposure of the individual as an ideological farce, collaborating on a performance that documented their earnest struggle over parody's capacity to disable those who "aspire to do or say something." Now, the individual was no longer the object of their critique. Rather, the object of critique was *the critique itself*, with the V-Girls hinting that the very notion that the individual might be boiled down to nothing more than an illusion is disabling. Now, self-realization seemed necessary for political action and assertion. The V-Girls' last work mined the second-wave for a path to something beyond either naïve individualism or the annihilation of the subject. Rather, they reached for that "better authenticity" which results from embodying one's specific personality rather than being "taken for *just any woman*." This idealistic ambition—to be a "real" individual and not a false one—naturally failed. Certainly no such "pure" real exists. The V-Girls' struggle, however, was no less real for all that.

Plenty of moments within "Daughters" demonstrate the Vs emphasis on struggle for both group-collaboration and authenticity. Often, their renewed interest in becoming authentic to themselves is coupled with their interrogation of "cultural

feminism," which is coexistent with the emergence of the third-wave and locates oppression at the level of representation rather than concrete political phenomena. Insofar as the V-Girls had begun to suspect that too much emphasis on "representation" resulted in their unhealthy distance from the messy work of becoming "real" political actors, cultural feminism was a fitting target for their questioning.

The V-Girls' worries concerning cultural feminism come up, for example, during an exchange between Erin Cramer and Chalmers. Cramer is suspicious that the V-Girls may be toying with a nostalgic fantasy when it comes to finding inner "authenticity":

Erin: What are we doing here? Are we acting out some kinky fantasy of wholeness? Do we really believe that consciousness-raising will restore us to some authentic self? All right, before we go any further, I want to ask you guys something: Does anybody here actually believe in the self? ...

Jessica: But consciousness-raising isn't ...a "kinky fantasy of wholeness," as you so, er, nicely put it. No. It's more like this: I come to the group, they are welcoming; I'm crying, they understand; I tell my story, they listen. Consciousness-raising is about letting go of oppressive identifications. It's about putting the self into a narrative of *transformation*. Liberation isn't kinky, Erin. It's textual.²²

The dialogue underscores the fragility and ambivalence with which the V-Girls approached the critique of the individual as illusion. Here, Freud's classic analysis of the fetish can help explicate why Cramer is critical of consciousness-raising as a "kinky fantasy of wholeness." In Freud's account, "a part of the body but little adapted for sexual purposes, such as the foot, or hair" is made to stand in for the desired object, no doubt explaining why a "fantasy of wholeness" might be derided as "kinky." "This substitution is not unjustly compared with the fetich

[sic] in which the savage sees the embodiment of his god," Freud remarks,²³ associating fetishism with the false belief that the V-Girls established as endemic to the notion of the individual in their early performances. "Does anybody here actually believe in the self?" Cramer asks, pointing to the very superstition of Freud's so-called "savage" and throwing the Vs back into the comfort of their earlier role as bubble-busters acting in the service of "critique." Yet when Chalmers returns consciousness-raising to the "textual," she does not intend to reveal its structure of false-belief but rather to move away from the counter-productive effects of constant critique. "Text" here connotes not the status of the subject as an effect of false belief in ideology (the ideology of the self as discrete and masterful, for example), but rather a release from precisely those "false identifications." The older sense of text as a "narrative of transformation," as a plot with a happy ending, is evoked, and Chalmers suggests that such progress is the product of cooperative social experience ("I come to the group, they are welcoming," etc.).

This exchange, with Cramer catching the Vs indulging their kinky fantasy of authentic self-hood and Chalmers defending such authenticity as the effect of committed social experience, is catalyzed by a description of a CR inspired conception of the autonomous. Quoting the Radicalesbians' 1970 manifesto, "The Woman Identified Woman," Fraser reads the following:

It is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other which is at the heart of women's liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution. Together we must find, reinforce, and validate our authentic selves. As we do this...we find receding the sense of alienation, of being cut off, of being behind a locked window, of being unable to get out what we know is inside. We feel a real-ness, feel at last we are coinciding with ourselves. With that real self, with that consciousness, we begin a revolution to end the imposition of

all coercive identifications, and to achieve maximum autonomy in human expression.²⁴

The V-Girls, I want to suggest, attempted to “achieve maximum autonomy” by way of precisely that experience of “real-ness” and concomitant feeling of being “with each other” that CR was said (by the Radicalesbians, at least) to proffer. The idea for “Daughters” was provoked by a teary CR session the V-Girls held to resolve the “sense of alienation” growing between group members. As Chalmers later explained, the original session “had ended weepily, with several of us interpreting our personal relation to the group in terms of our intimidation by post-structuralist theory. However, transcribed and reedited, the session became infused with the irony of performance...we altered the content, so that, in addition to sincerity...there was irony.”²⁵ As I have suggested, the V-Girls approached the critique of the individual as illusion with fragility and ambivalence. That the V-Girls never resolved their ambivalence and sense of intimidation provoked by post-structuralist theory is documented in the moments of irony later edited into the transcript. While “Daughters” does good work in clarifying the problems associated with post-structuralist thought, it by no means presents clear solutions.

The V-Girls’ re-evaluation of feminism’s second-wave in the wake of post-structuralism was hardly particular to them. Indeed, a look at the special 1995 issue of *October* in which the script for “Daughters” was printed provides a sense of the larger debate that surrounded them. Titled *Feminist Issue(S)*, the journal begins with a questionnaire written by the *October* editors. In question one, the editors posit that some “artists and writers continue to develop ideas, arguments and forms related to 1980s feminist theories focusing on psychoanalysis, a critique

of Marxist and related political theories, and poststructuralist theories of cultural identity, [while] others have forged a return to 1960s and 70s feminist practices...". The question barely hides its bias, noting that 1960s and 70s performative practices "did generate theoretical critiques of its... biological or physical essentialism."²⁶ This bias did not go over well with many of the twenty-five authors asked to evaluate the return to the more body-focused practices of the 1960s and 1970s. Yvonne Rainer, for example, complains bitterly over the "tired old dichotomies" that the question pits, citing the essentialist and the mediated. She concludes her piece with unapologetic sass, referring to herself in the third person: "She won't apologize for being so cranky. After all, she's closing in on age sixty and is minus a tit."²⁷

Rainer's biting reference to her abject body does not stand alone in the issue. In her visual and written response, Carolee Schneemann plays on the Lacanian diagram, transforming the image-screen into a vulva. The diagram, titled "How the Circle of Confusion is Caused," is accompanied by a text, organized in list-form, that narrates vulva's "education." "Vulva goes to school and discovers she doesn't exist," reads the first line. At times, the list registers Schneemann's dissatisfaction with particular lines of thought. The line "Vulva decodes Feminist Constructivist Semiotics and realizes she has no authentic feelings at all; even her erotic sensations are constructed by patriarchal projections, impositions, and conditioning,"²⁸ for example, suggests (like the Lacanian diagram) that what is valuable about embodiment—in this case, one's "feelings" and "erotic sensations"—is simply not captured when there is too much emphasis on the science of the sign. Expressing the very malaise that Meltzer aptly diagnoses, Schneemann questions experiencing subjectivity as an effect, such that "authentic feelings" and "erotic sensations" are constructions. On top of this, Schneemann's response also includes images that either suggest or depict the vulva that are blocked off and arranged into a (structuralist?) grid. The rigorous

and rational organization of the images, however, does not so much suffocate our capacity to see the vulvas. Instead, it acts an invisible vehicle that encourages the viewer to take notice of the similarities and differences of each body part. Schneemann's version of "structure" is thus a mere mechanism for a fuller experience of all that's delightful and even strange about the variety of vulvas that the world has to offer.

What is most curious about the V-Girls' struggle to move beyond the impasse they first presented in "Manet's *Olympia*" and tried to resolve in "Daughters" is the extent to which the goals of the Radicalesbians mimic the goals that Eve Meltzer refers to as "humanist." They appeal, for example, to achieving "maximum autonomy," synonymous with "the subject as in command of himself" (but with the important difference that such capacities are being expanded to women). They also call for freedom from "coercive identifications," suggesting the free and creative individual that Meltzer treats as synonymous with the humanist picture of the artist and antonym to the subject as "an effect of pre-existing systems." Indeed, Chalmers brings the similarity of these two claims to light when she explains that the V-Girls wanted what the feminists of the 1960s and 70s had wanted—not to better understand themselves as identities or social constructions but to move beyond such constructedness and not be "taken for *just any woman*." Furthermore, while the humanist subject is "a consciousness fully transparent to itself," the Radicalesbians' intention is to attain such consciousness for themselves despite their status as women. They demand self-transparency rather than "being behind a locked window, of being unable to get out what we know is inside." Seen in this light, the *October* editors' worry, expressed in the *Feminist Issue(S)* questionnaire, that second-wave feminist politics "employ[s] autobiographical strategies and conceptions of identity...that have been criticized for being insufficiently mediated"²⁹ can also double as a critique of the

humanist subject that, to borrow Metlzer's phrase again, is "in command" of a "consciousness fully transparent to itself."

A skeptic might counter that a central subject of the second-wave is the "identity" that we call "woman." What starker sign of the always-already interpellated could be asked for? Yet the V-Girls nonetheless suggest that the second-wave aimed for recovery of a "real" self that is autonomous and exists on the other side of a "locked window" (to quote the Radicalesbians' passage above). The reference to the window is harmonious with the humanist subject that Meltzer claims strives for a "consciousness fully transparent to itself," suggesting that the second-wave and humanist picture of the subject valued the struggle to move beyond mediation into authentic self-hood.

The consequences of the claim that the V-Girls understood the second-wave as entailing a revival of the humanist model of the individual are naturally limited. After all, I am presenting a reading of the V-Girls' works, not a historical analysis of feminism's second-wave. Just because one group of performers presented one performance that suggests (at least according to this author) that the second-wave's notion of the individual is humanist, does not mean that the second-wave's notion of the individual was humanist. That idea would require extensive historical research to affirm.³⁰ Instead, the V-Girls use the provocative and loosely organized form of performative dialogue to advance a picture of the second-wave that need not rely on research or the strict conventions of academic argument. Thus we might say that they advance a picture of something like a "humanist feminist individual" that awaits further study if it is to be treated as a historical argument. That further study is called for because it would significantly revise our current picture of feminism as a reaction to (rather than a building up of) humanist principles.

What would the consequences of such a revision mean for our understanding of the second-wave? It would require altering the

received wisdom that second-wave feminism is synonymous with the standard critique of the humanist, Enlightenment ideal which holds that “the more separate the self is from others, the more fully-developed that self is.” Further, it would not require the total replacement of that ideal for the notion that “the more connected the self is to others, the better the self is.”³¹ Instead, the brief passage from the Radicalesbians shows a more dialectical picture, wherein the separate self that achieves “maximum autonomy in human expression” is necessarily complimented by a picture of the self as communal woman, of “women relating to women.” The idea, put in the simplest terms, seems to be that the two come together, and that you cannot have one without the other. What the V-Girls identify and struggle to resuscitate in “Daughters of the ReVolution” is the repressed, humanist underbelly of second-wave feminism—and with it the view that the authentic self is not a myth but rather a pre-requisite for conviction and political action.

The risks of a return to humanist-inspired thought, of course, are many. Contemporary readers may find the optimism of the Radicalesbians’ manifesto naïve. Furthermore, the figure of the communal woman comes along with essentialism’s historical baggage. Feminist art historians know well that Judy Chicago, for example, unified thirty-eight of the thirty-nine women honored in her epic installation, *The Dinner Party*, with the repeated image of the vulva, but neglected to depict the vulva on the only non-white woman with a place-setting, Sojourner Truth. Further, the structure of disruption in “Daughters,” wherein the Vs attempt to identify with one another is constantly deferred, suggests that the V-Girls were ultimately unable to resolve their misgivings about essentialism.

Their discomfort is reinforced by a photograph of “Daughters” (fig. 2), captured during a performance at the Generali Foundation in Vienna in 1996. The group, sitting on matching stools arranged in a semi-circle formation, are connected by their backdrop—an ambiguous expanse of black that creates the illusion of a horizon. Kissing the top of each of the performer’s seat, it links each of the sitters. If the circular seating arrangement and the photograph’s horizontality suggest the group’s spirit of cooperation and the equality of its members, the women’s matching black cardigans, white skin, and brown hair suggest a less palatable social relation. Their sameness suggests not collaboration but generic uniformity, and much of the dialogue in “Daughters” explores what happens when group identification becomes coercive and debilitating. It is telling that the performance ends with an exchange between Baer and Fraser that captures the V-Girls’ resistance not only to social identification, but also to the broader specter of returning to the sixties and seventies. Baer asks, “And how is it? How is it done?”. Fraser, however, neglects to answer the question, instead rephrasing it as a statement: “You know, figuring out how to be a woman,” she says.³² The unresolved concluding remarks of “Daughters of the ReVolution” and the V-Girls’ career suggests that the old topic of essentialism still needs “figuring out.”



Fig. 2. Andrea Fraser, Jessica Chalmers, Marianne Weems, Erin Cramer, Martha Baer, “The V-Girls: Daughters of the ReVolution.” 1995. Drawing Center, New York, Collection of the artists.

1 Portions of the script of “Manet’s *Olympia*” are reproduced in Martha Baer et al., “The V-Girls: A Conversation with “October,” *October* 51 (Winter 1989), 119.

- 2 Cynthia Carr, "Revisions of Excess: The V-Girls, Blue Man Group," in *On Edge: Performance at the end of the Twentieth Century* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 177.
- 3 Jessica Peri Chalmers, "The V-Girls," last modified March 10, 2014, <http://thev-girls.tumblr.com/post/79136636918/the-v-girls-are-andrea-fraser-jessica-peri>.
- 4 Baer et al., "The V-Girls," 115.
- 5 Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (London: Routledge, 1996), 2.
- 6 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (London: Routledge, 2011), 522.
- 7 Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art*, 2.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 The performance was hosted by the School's Visiting Artist Program and occurred at the same time as the College Art Association conference, which met in Chicago that year. Martha Baer et al., "The Question of Manet's *Olympia*: Posed and Skirted," recorded February 12, 1992.
- 10 Martha Baer et al., "Academia in the Alps: In Search of Swiss Mis(s)" (Character Generators/ Video), video, 56:58, from a performance filmed by Mark Robison on January 5, 1991 at Franklin Furnace/Judson Church, New York, <http://thev-girls.tumblr.com>.
- 11 See cassette recording of "Manet's *Olympia*," February 12, 1992, School of the Art Institute of Chicago.
- 12 Baer et al., "The V-Girls," 119.
- 13 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), 3.
- 14 Baer et al., "The V-Girls," 119.
- 15 Ibid., 135.
- 16 Ibid., 136.
- 17 See cassette recording of "Manet's *Olympia*," February 12, 1992, School of the Art

- Institute of Chicago.
- 18 Eve Meltzer, *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 9.
 - 19 Martha Baer et al., "The V-Girls: Daughters of the ReVolution," *October 71* (Winter 1995), 122.
 - 20 Ibid., 126.
 - 21 Jessica Chalmers, "V-Notes on Parody" in *Black Sphinx: On the Comedic in Modern Art*, ed. John C. Welchman (Zurich: JRP | Ringier, 2010), 215–216.
 - 22 Ibid., 127.
 - 23 Sigmund Freud, *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*, trans. A.A. Brill (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001).
 - 24 Baer et al., "Daughters," 126.
 - 25 Chalmers, "V-Notes," 219
 - 26 Ayisha Abraham et al., "Questions of Feminism: 25 Responses," *October 71* (Winter 1995), 5.
 - 27 Ibid., 37.
 - 28 Ibid., 41.
 - 29 Ayisha Abraham et al., "Questions of Feminism: 25 Responses," 5.
 - 30 The same could likewise be said for "post-structuralism." A reading of the V-Girls' satire is not a reading of the works of Foucault, for example, or any other individual author.
 - 31 Rosemarie Tong and Nancy Williams, "Feminist Ethics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/feminism-ethics>.
 - 32 Baer et al., "Daughters," 140.