

Mary Kelly

Klaus Ottmann: How do you see your work in relation to that of other artists working predominantly with text?

Mary Kelly: In the genre of conceptual work, including, say, Lawrence Weiner's propositions, Jenny Holzer's aphorisms, or even Richard Prince's jokes, text takes a form that is not essentially narrative. The textual material can be recycled in a lot of different media, but the overall "look" remains the same. What I want is a specific relation between the meaning of the text, its materiality, and the site. You could say I'm interested in the narrative organization of space. Each project negotiates this differently.

KO: Could you say more about what you mean by "project" and how the theorization of your work relates to its visualization?

MK: I believe that all the strategies used to get away from composition—like the ready-made, the overall, systems, series, or even certain concepts—extended the limits of the formalist paradigm but

did not necessarily break with it. I feel that one way of structuring the work, which is anti-compositional and also anti-formalist, is to emphasize the project nature of it: the *ideas*. It's not about style. I want the visual effect to be cumulative, a delayed but significant insight rather than the instant recognition of forms.

KO: Your latest project, GLORIA PATRI, seems to be as much a continuity of questions raised in your previous works as a departure from them.

MK: Well, I see it as a departure in some respects; for example, as an installation, it's much more integrated. I thought of it as a complete piece, whereas the previous projects consisted of a number of different sections. The way the work looks has also changed, the unification of materials, that kind of consolidation, visually, was important for me.

But, yes, as far as continuity is concerned, there's probably even more I could talk about because all of the works do seem to emerge from a certain form of questioning. For example, in *POST PARTUM DOCUMENT*, I was looking at the intricacies of maternal desire, but I found at the end of it, I had to ask: what happens at another moment in a woman's life? How would femininity be constructed for her outside that privileged relation? This was what I tried to deal with in the next project, *INTERIM*. Then, when I was finishing its last section, "Potestas," which concerns the problem of difference and power, I began to think about the inadequacy of certain kinds of theorization of, say, the masquerade, the objectification of the woman, images of women. The whole question of power seemed to involve thinking about the construction of masculinity rather than femininity, for

the woman. I also felt it had been altogether too easy to say that men have a less difficult role in the oedipal scenario. I mean, it might also be appropriate to think about the man's relation to the feminine term. So this was on the agenda when I started working on GLORIA PATRI. But then it was really put in place by the events of the Persian Gulf war. This is what I think of as the ethnographic material; events observed and recorded—not literally recorded—but noted in my sketchbook for about two or three years before I even start a project. So during the war, it was mostly what I heard on television. There was a very interesting but eerie kind of distance involved in watching that spectacle... watching the commentators, watching the soldiers making their comments on it. I just kept track of those comments and thought about it. Now I can see the pathological structuring of masculinity that this specific condition—the Gulf war—provoked.

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KO: What I found interesting in that particular piece is that it's about the failure of masculinity and its authority, while, at the same time, there is, particularly in this country, a resurgence of cultural conservatism and masculine ideals.

MK: Yes, there is this facade of militarism, which I find particularly ludicrous, given the tendency towards demilitarization in the world generally, but maybe this is also a moment when you can see the production of masculinity as parody. During the war the troops were encouraged to take up this kind of macho identity, yet there was something very transparent about it, a sense of being overwhelmed by the technological spectacle.

The way individual soldiers had to negotiate this identity was very revealing. Some of their

statements, like "Not enough gees and gollies to describe it," don't exactly project the image of someone who is in control. When I wrote the stories, which appear on the five shields, I didn't want to refer to the war itself, nothing that obvious, just the everyday, to see how fragile yet persistent the fantasy of mastery can be. Even though the narrative is parodic, to a certain extent, it's also empathetic; you understand how difficult it is to assume this position, how it is eroded by the social and economic order of things. This may seem like a big leap, but I had in mind a painting by Gericault that depicts an officer in Napoleon's army who seems as though he's about to fall from his horse. Norman Bryson has referred to it as an image of failed masculinity. It shows the scene of panic and interestingly, perhaps a crisis of national identity and imperial power not unlike our own. I wanted to capture this precarious moment of falling. So, in the installation, at a distance, you see this facade of polished aluminum, but when you get up close, in the space of reading, the spectacle is dispersed. Theoretically, I don't think this is about the masquerade but about the notion of "display."

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KO: It was Freud, by the way, who first recognized the relationship between the male war neurosis of World War I (commonly referred to as "shell shock" or "combat fatigue") and female hysteria.

MK: Well, that gives a different dimension to the notion of "trauma," one that is not just sexual in origin but could be based on a social event or catastrophe that has traumatic significance, that hystericizes the subject in a collective sense. Do you see that as an observable consequence of this war?

KO: I think what took place in the Gulf war, more than

in any other war, was a total eclipse of the hero, an absence of the heroic ideal. It was a high-tech war with no human participants and almost no human sacrifice (at least on the side of the Allies)—only computers, lasers, and missiles. No more opportunities to play out the masculine ideal. I would be surprised if the pilots flying those high-tech fighter planes had a much different experience from the person sitting at home watching them hit their targets on CNN. It's just like a computer simulation. That is, I guess, the key word—simulation.

MK: Yes, and with this comes the loss of memory, which is, of course, also a hysteric symptom. But in terms of being able to bring back the event, there's no event to bring back. You're as removed from reality as that. So I suppose it's doubly tragic. I mean, with the loss of historical memory, there's nothing to base the collective analysis or understanding of the symptom on.

KO: I was surprised that your definition of masquerade is synonymous with the feminine because, in my understanding, masquerade has always had more to do with men attempting to enter the realm of femininity, as in Japan or in the Greek Dionysian cult—in the prepatriarchal periods the only way for men to enter the feminine realm of birth and rebirth was to dress up as women. Your notion of masquerade seems to refer more to a feminist definition of the social role women are forced to play in a patriarchal society.

MK: In psychoanalytic theory the concept originated with Joan Rivière's famous article, "Womanliness as Masquerade." When I use the term masculine/feminine, I'm thinking more of a psychic structure along these lines rather than the anthropological notion of "roles." It doesn't have to do with biological gender but with a kind of position-

ing of the subject in relation to, I suppose, the object of desire. When I call it feminine, I just mean that the masquerade functions in that position psychically, in the space of passivity and silence assigned to the object of the look. I don't mean this just in the literal sense of spectacle or how you make yourself visible. At the level of the unconscious, masquerade can refer to a gesture, a symptom, or something like masochism that, according to [Michele] Montrelay, underpins the pathology of precocious femininity. But I do think there are implications at another level too, in terms of conscious acting out or mimicry. I'm thinking of the Punk movement in the late seventies and the early eighties in England, and about how you mark the body with signifiers of otherness, make yourself visible and in some sense, transgressively so. Maybe this applies to the whole question of national identity as well. The one who wears the costume is visibly marked as other, a kind of inscription of ethnicity as masquerade. And, returning to your comment on men entering the realm of femininity, what does this mean in terms of art? If you take the Surrealists, for example, the man as an artist assumes the masquerade in the sense that he identifies creative subjectivity with the feminine, even personifying the unconscious as the *femme enfant*, or the hysteric—Breton said she was the greatest discovery of the twentieth century.

So this means that, in a way, the whole field of art is overdetermined by this assumption of transgressive femininity. You certainly don't need a woman artist. To be signified as such is like a double negative.

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problem of femininity, as I have in previous work, that is, at a certain pathology that needed to be understood and distanced, I now feel we haven't thought at all about what it means to go through this trajectory, this critique of essentialism, and come out the other end upholding, at least unconsciously, the masculine ideal. We still haven't looked at the psychic structure of masculinity for the woman. So first of all, there's the question of understanding what the display means in relation to a social and psychic structure that defines men, and then, there's the way women mimic that structure.

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