

Females in white-supremacist patriarchal society are most often socialized to consume in an unmindful manner. We are encouraged to value goods, especially luxury goods, over our well-being and safety. Many women remain in domestic situations where we are being hurt and even abused by sexist men because of an attachment to material wealth and privilege. While there are many poor women who remain in abusive households because they plainly lack the economic means to leave, there are also some women who remain in such settings because they fear leaving behind material abundance. This kind of thinking is life-threatening and must be challenged.

Beauty can be and is present in our lives irrespective of our class status. Learning to see and appreciate the presence of beauty is an act of resistance in a culture of domination that recognizes the production of a pervasive feeling of lack, both material and spiritual, as a useful colonizing strategy. Individuals who feel constant lack will consume more, will submit more readily. As feminist thinkers construct feminist theory and practice to guide us into a revolutionary, revitalized feminist future, we need to place aesthetics on our agenda. We need to theorize the meaning of beauty in our lives so that we can educate for critical consciousness, talking through the issues: how we acquire and spend money, how we feel about beauty, what the place of beauty is in our lives when we lack material privilege and even basic resources for living, the meaning and significance of luxury, and the politics of envy. Interrogating these issues will enable feminist thinkers to share certain strategies of resistance that will illuminate the ways we can create a balanced, harmonious life where we know the joy of collective, progressive struggle, where the presence of beauty uplifts and renews the spirit.

Women Artists: The Creative Process

I AM a girl who dreams of leisure, always have. Reverie has always been necessary to my existence. I have needed long hours where I am stretched out, wearing silks, satins, and cashmeres, just alone with myself, embraced by the beauty around me. I have always been a girl for fibers, for textiles, and for the feel of comforting cloth against my skin. When I have adorned myself just so, I am ready for the awesome task of just lingering, spending uninterrupted time with my thoughts, dreams, and intense yearnings, often the kind that, like unrequited love, go unfulfilled. Lately, in the midst of that solitude, I find myself writing, spinning words together in my head so as not to lose or forget the insights, the sharp moments of clarity that come during this quiet time, that surface amid the luxurious smells of expensive French lemon verbena soap and fruity perfume, a book in my hand.

More often than not I end up breaking the reverie to reach for pen and paper, to write. Writing for me is never a moment of reverie; it's always work. Writing is my passion. But it is not an easy passion. It does not shelter or comfort me. Words try me—work me as though I am caught in a moment of spirit possession where forces beyond my control inhabit and take me, sometimes against my will, to places, landscapes of thoughts and ideas, I never wanted to journey to or see. I have never been a girl for travel. Always one wedded to the couch, the back porch, the swing, I want to see the world standing still. My thoughts are movements, my ideas, my adventures. If I travel somewhere, it is often just too much; I feel bombarded, too many sensations, overloaded, I break down. "Girl," I tell my sweetest friend, who often worries about how much time I spend shut away, confined, in the midst of solitude, "I understand Emily [Dickinson]: she stayed home to collect her thoughts—to work undisturbed."

I think often and deeply about women and work, about what it means to have the luxury of time—time spent collecting one's thoughts, time

to work undisturbed. This time is space for contemplation and reverie. It enhances our capacity to create. Work for women artists is never just the moment when we write, or do other art, like painting, photography, paste-up, or mixed media. In the fullest sense, it is also the time spent in contemplation and preparation. This solitary space is sometimes a place where dreams and visions enter and sometimes a place where nothing happens. Yet it is as necessary to active work as water is to growing things. It is this stillness, this quietude, needed for the continued nurturance of any devotion to artistic practice—to one's work—that remains a space women (irrespective of race, class, nationality, etc.) struggle to find in our lives. Our need for this uninterrupted, undisturbed space is often far more threatening to those who watch us enter it than is that space which is a moment of concrete production (for the writer, that moment when she is putting the words on paper, or, for the painter, that moment when she takes material in hand). We have yet to create a culture so utterly transformed by feminist practice that it would be common sense that the nurturance of brilliance or the creation of a sustained body of work fundamentally requires such undisturbed hours. In such a world it would make perfect sense for women who devote themselves to artistic practice to rightfully claim such space.

Long after the contemporary feminist movement stirred up questions about great art and female genius, compelling folks to rethink the nature of gender and artistic practice, to look at women's art with respect and full recognition, we still must confront the issues of gender and work with respect to the politics of making space and finding time to do what we women artists do. Most artistic women I know feel utterly overextended. We are working to make money (since we have all long abandoned the notion that men would support us while we make art—if we ever thought that—or that patrons would recognize the inequities of history and make reparations granting us time and material support), to take care of ourselves and our nonpatriarchal families. We spend inordinate amounts of time doing the political work (both theoretical and practical) to keep in place those changes brought about by the feminist movement that are enabling more women than ever before to do artistic work. And we spend much time trying to figure out how to use our time wisely. We worry about not giving enough of our care and personhood to loved ones. Many of us still labor with the underlying fear that if we care

too much about art, we will be companionless, alone. And some of us who have companions or children make sure that when we come home there are no visible signs of our artistic selves present. Many women artists clear workspace, do not display work, so as to erase all signs of their passion for something so transcendental as art. Despite feminist thinking and practice, women continue to feel conflicted about the allocation of time, energy, engagement, and passion. Though important, it is not overly reassuring that some of us have managed to fit everything into the schedule. Because of this, we now know that making everything fit is no guarantee that we will mature as artists and thinkers. Some of us fear that all of this tightly controlled scheduling is also constricting and limiting our imaginations, shutting down our dreams and visions, so that we enter a different psychic imprisonment. No longer bound by sexist, racist, or class constraints that tell us we cannot be artists, cannot create great and compelling work, we remain bound by limitations on our imaginations.

It has not been my experience that I can dream, think, and create my best when weary, overworked, and stressed out. Many years ago I decided that if I wanted to know the conditions and circumstances that led men to greatness I should study their lives and compare them with the lives of women. I read the biographies of men across race, class, and nationality whom our culture has declared great or significant creative thinkers and artists. I found that folks in these men's lives (parents, friends, lovers, etc.) both expected and accepted that they would need space and time apart for the workings of the everyday to blossom, for them to engage in necessary renewal of spirit. For the most part, their biographies and autobiographies revealed that these men did not have to spend an inordinate number of hours justifying their need for contemplation, for time to be alone, to revel in quietude, to work undisturbed. Adrienne Rich comments on the need for this time in her compelling book *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, and she emphasizes that such time is often "guiltily seized." She continues: "Most, if not all, of the names we know in North American poetry are the names of people who have had some access to freedom in time—that privilege of some which is actually a necessity for all. The struggle to limit the working day is a sacred struggle for the worker's freedom in time . . . Yet every work generation has to reclaim that freedom in time, and many are brutally thwarted in the effort. Capitalism

is based on the abridgement of that freedom." Most women artists, including myself, are also salaried workers in areas not directly related to their art. I still dream of the day when I can stop teaching and devote time to writing and making art. Most women artists are still struggling to find time. Even though the feminist movement led to the opening of class opportunities that have enabled individual successful women to claim this time, these opportunities are still rare. These lone individuals were and are often well situated by their class, race, upbringing, education, or milieu to receive the benefits of these opportunities.

I grew up in a large working-class Southern black patriarchal family, with many sisters and one brother, and my experience of emerging from that context as a potentially gifted artist/creator has always served as the groundwork of my consistent consideration of the impact of class, race, and gender on female creativity and artistic production. Most women I encounter (with the exception of a privileged few) feel that we are still struggling against enormous odds to transform both this culture and our everyday lives so that our creativity can be nurtured in a sustained manner. Respect for the intensity of that struggle must lead us to continue to make a public context for discussion, debate, theorizing, and for the institutionalization of strategies and practices that continue to critically interrogate female creativity and artistic production from a feminist standpoint. These days I am often asked by women, particularly women of color, how it is I find the time to write so much. I find time by sacrificing other involvements and engagements. Living alone without children helps makes that sacrifice possible. Like many women who have been passionately devoted to artistic practice, I find that devotion is often seen by others as "suspect," as though the very fact of writing so much must mean that I am really a monstrous self, hiding some horrible disaffection for life, for human contact. Sexism generates this response to women who are passionately devoted to work. We are all impressed by men who devote their lives to artistic practice. I recall the wonder with which I first took the male German poet Rilke to be one of my artistic spiritual mentors and guides. His confessional writing made solitude seem like a necessary ritual for artistic self-actualization. When I read writing about him, literary criticism, biography, the thoughts of other writers whom his work had inspired, no one seemed to find his devotion suspect. It was seen as a sign of his genius, essential to the cultivation of brilliance. His devotion

to artistic practice was never viewed as suspect or monstrous, but simply, as essential to his growth and development.

Growing up black, female, and working-class without the guidance of many well-meaning grown-ups, I chose my mentors from those individuals whose work touched my spirit. Naively unaware of the politics of gender in the world of culture, I felt I could be as faithful to the examples set for me by white male writers/artists as I was to those of Emily Dickinson, Lorraine Hansberry, or James Baldwin. My only longtime companion, whom I left years ago, continues to write and publish poetry. A professor of literature, he brought into my life an awareness of the importance of discipline and devotion. We were both poets, sharing a mutual fascination for works by white male poets of the Black Mountain School. We poured over the writings of Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams, and Robert Duncan. Through his research he developed a friendship with Robert Duncan. White, male, gay, Robert and his lover, Jess, represented for me an ideal relationship. They placed art at the center of life and structured a mutually satisfying relationship around it. I learned from their example. They gave themselves "time" to create and were supported by patrons and admirers. Jess, who still works alone in his studio, was my primary mentor. He was the one who often shut himself away from an interfering world, enclosed himself in a world of art. Seeing Jess gave me a courageous and constructive example. He never seemed to care what others thought of him or his work. Unlike Robert, who occasionally mocked my devotion to artistic practice in the typical sexist manner, Jess always reassured me that I could fashion for myself a world in which I could create.

Given the politics of race, gender, and class, it is not surprising that so many of the models of artistic discipline I drew upon to guide my work were white and male. I knew that I needed guidance because of the difficulty I had constructing a confident identity as an artist. In my younger years, I found myself struggling with an inability to see projects through to their end. I habitually abandoned art work before it was done, never quite finishing pieces I was writing. Discipline was an important issue. I had to find a way to break through the barriers that were leading me to abandon work, had to learn to complete it. I practiced discipline by following the example of chosen mentors. Long before Frieda Kahlo became the pop cultural icon that she is today, I was fascinated by her relationship

to painting—the way she continued to work even when she was in great physical pain. As is the case with contemporary artists such as the Afro-Caribbean American painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kahlo's relationship to art risks being submerged by the cannibalistic, voyeuristic obsession with her personal life, the details of her love affairs, and her abuse of alcohol and drugs. While I, too, am drawn to the hedonistic passion that colored her relationship to daily life, I remain most fascinated by her relationship to work, by the young woman who, after suffering intense surgery, could proudly declare, "I haven't died and I have something to live for: painting." Perhaps there will come a day when Kahlo's hedonistic lifestyle will be talked about as merely a constructed backdrop, a mask or persona she created to hide the intensity of a woman driven by love of art. Intuitively, and then later politically, she must have understood how monstrous and threatening she might have appeared to sexist cultures everywhere had she made it more evident that art was always the driving obsession, always the primary longing, the primal quest.

From the example of Kahlo, I saw the necessity for sustained work. Learning from artists from diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences, I was determined to create a world for myself where my creativity could be respected and sustained. It is a world still in the making. Yet each year of my life. I find myself with more undisturbed, uninterrupted time. When I decided to accept a smaller salary and teach part-time, it was to give myself more time. Again, this choice required sacrifice, a commitment to living simply. Yet these are the choices women artists must make if we want more time to contemplate, more time to work. Women artists cannot wait for ideal circumstances to be in place before we find the time to do the work we are called to do; we have to create oppositionally, work against the grain. Each of us must invent alternative strategies that enable us to move against and beyond the barriers that stand in our way. I often find that other women are among that group of people who see female devotion to work as suspect. Whether such women speak from positions of repressed rage or envy, it is clear that we need to do more feminist consciousness raising about the importance of women affirming one another in our efforts to construct uninterrupted undisturbed spaces wherein we can contemplate and work with passion and abandon.

Consciousness-raising groups, gatherings, and public meetings need to become a central aspect of feminist practice again. Women need spaces

where we can explore intimately and deeply all aspects of female experience, including our relationship to artistic production. Even though most feminists these days are aware of issues of race, class, and sexual practices, of our differences, we tend to confront these issues only superficially. Women have yet to create the context, both politically and socially, where our understanding of the politics of difference not only transforms our individual lives (and we have yet to really speak about those transformations) but also alters how we work with others in public, in institutions, in galleries, etc. For example: When will white female art historians and cultural critics who structure their careers focusing on work by women and men of color share how this cultural practice changes who they are in the world in a way that extends beyond the making of individual professional success? When will they speak and write about how this work changes how they interact with people of color? When will all of us interrogate issues of race and racism in relation to our notions of artistic excellence, looking at the ways we think about color, how we use images in works? How many artists truly politicize difference by interrogating their choices? Working alone in her studio, the African-American painter Emma Amos strives to critically interrogate the way in which race, racism, and white supremacy actually determine what colors we choose to use in paintings, the colors we make human bodies. Issues of class are raised by works such as Eunice Lipton's *Alias, Olympia*. To what extent does her privileged class and nationality affect how she interprets the life and history of a white working-class woman? These are the types of discussion that must emerge if we are to understand the complexity of our differences, if are to create a cultural context where meaningful solidarity between women artists can be strengthened. When such strengthening occurs, the art world in which we work will expand and become more affirming.

Many folks assume that feminism has already changed the social context in which women artists produce work. They mistake greater involvement in the marketplace with the formation of a liberatory space where women can create meaningful, compelling, "great" art and have that art be fully recognized. The "commodification" of difference often leads to the false assumption that works by people of color and marginalized white women are "hot" right now and able to garner a measure of recognition and reward that they may or may not deserve. The impact such thinking has on our work is that it often encourages marginalized artists

to feel we must do our work quickly, strike while the iron is hot, or risk being ignored forever. If we write, we are encouraged to write in the same manner as those who have made the big money and achieved the big success. If, say, we take photographs, we are encouraged to keep producing the image that folks most want to see and buy. This commodification for an undiscerning marketplace seeks to confine, limit, and even destroy our artistic freedom and practice. We must be wary of seduction by the superficial and rare possibility of gaining immediate recognition and regard that may grant us some measure of attention in a manner that continues to marginalize us and set us apart. Women must dare to remain vigilant, preserving the integrity of self and of the work.

As women artists expressing solidarity across differences, we must forge ahead, creating spaces where our work can be seen and evaluated according to standards that reflect our sense of artistic merit. As we strive to enter the mainstream art world, we must feel empowered to vigilantly guard the representation of the woman as artist so that it is never again devalued. Fundamentally, we must create the space for feminist intervention without surrendering our primary concern, which is a devotion to making art, a devotion intense and rewarding enough that it is the path leading to our freedom and fulfillment.

Being the Subject of Art

To transgress I must move past boundaries, I must push against to go forward. Nothing changes in the world if no one is willing to make this movement. Everyone I know talks about border crossing these days, as though it were a simple matter not to stay in one's place, not to stand still. All this talk does nothing to change the reality that there are so many barriers blocking the paths that would lead us to any space of fulfillment that it is impossible to go forward if one lacks the will to transgress. And yet most of us seem to carry this will. It comes to us early in life, when we are really little beings and just learning a relationship to space. And we are taught over and over again that the only way to remain safe is to stay within fixed boundaries. Most often it's the boundary of family, community, nation. Before we face even these boundaries, it is the body that is the first site of limitation. The body is the boundary most of us are unable to move against to recover the dimensions of self lost in the process by which we are made to behold to fixed locations, by which we are bound in conformity against our will in many facets of our daily lives. The fact that the word *transgress* appears most often in discussions of the sexual is an indication that the body is the fundamental boundary of self. To transgress we must return to the body.

To return to my body I must be willing to face indeterminacy, contingency, the reality of dying. The body has its limits. To know death is to transgress. It is to violate the taboo understanding that death is the subject we cannot speak of, the closeted possibility, that which is shut away and not remembered—the location of one's desire. When I learn