

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

to look at death, to see someone dying and not turn away, I am a young girl living in a moment of transgression. I am a witness. To be intimate with my body I must like to be close to death. I must be willing to tell what I've seen. I must bear witness. I must transgress.

The discourses of death and dying, unlike the discourse of sexuality, do not lay claim to the word *transgress*. Though never spoken, death is the silent witness, waiting to see if any of us want to live fully, want to be so fiercely alive that we will not deny death. To refuse denial is to transgress. The politics of denial, like the culture of shame, keeps us in our place. Without fear of exposure, transgression might become an everyday action. Every moment someone might be willing to change something about themselves, the world they live in, if they were not so afraid of loss, of being confined to states of ongoing aloneness, states of nonrecognition. To recognize is to transgress. Withholding recognition strips us of our power to interrogate, to intervene on, to act. We are afraid of not being seen. We do not know the truth that to be seen and not known is the ultimate abandonment. We refuse to know each other. In pain there is also the possibility of connection. It is easy to dominate that which you see and never know. To want to know is to transgress.

Knowing my body and its limits, I am able to sacrifice belonging. If the fear of death is all that keeps us away from one another, then I willingly embrace death to reach you, to stand by your side. If you see me dying then you too are a witness. You have crossed the boundary. You transgress. In transgression is the possibility of pleasure and danger, of redemption and violation. To transgress is to claim the right to choose. There is no one to blame, no need to regret. I am moving against to move toward. Your body lying next to mine cannot remain silent. We speak to desire together—letting out the secrets and lies that keep us within fixed boundaries. Your body inside me violates the limits of flesh. We cannot go any further. The only pleasure beyond this moment where the self can be lost in another is death. Some-

one, anybody, must remain alive to be the witness. To tell the truth is to transgress.

I WRITE these passages for a book in which each critical thinker who was asked to contribute chose a word that moved them. I chose the word *transgress*. To me these passages speak about the body. They say nothing about the image—about representation. Reading them, I hear in these words a will to transgress—the longing to move across boundaries, against the norm. That commitment is challenged when I am invited to let my body be the subject of art: Writing about art, making art, is not the same as being the subject of art.

When Shu Lea Cheang asked me to participate in the installation *Those Fluttering Objects of Desire*, I was willing. My task was to be a disembodied voice on the phone speaking about desire, saying whatever I wanted to say, whatever was on my heart. I journey to New York to read a love letter I have written to the young black man who is my lover at the time. I arrive in New York confident that I will have no trouble participating in this work of art, being part of its subject. Yet when I stand alone in the studio reading this letter, knowing that it will be taped and later heard on red telephones whenever unknown heads dial 1-900-DESIRE, I am suddenly vulnerable, feel naked—exposed. I cannot disguise the trembling of my voice, the sadness that brings tears. I am suddenly ashamed that strangers will hear my passion. That the people I do not know who are taping this session can see me this way, can hear the way I was then.

Suddenly all my desire to transgress the boundaries of public and private is lost. Even though he agreed to the sharing of these intimate words in a world beyond us, would he withhold agreement if he were hearing, feeling them now in this public place? I am not ready to share these feelings without shame. I am not ready to cross the boundaries of public and private. I fear no one will understand these words. We stop the taping. We begin again. I want to resist this self-imposed shame. It is not natural. It is the product of public and private pain—the outcome of separation.

I begin to read again, surrendering myself to the intimacy of the words. Months later I will stand before the red phones, unable to dial 1-900-DESIRE even after I am told again and again that the intimacy of this disembodied voice touches the listeners, speaks to them heart to heart. A man called me wanting a copy of the poem he thought I was

reading as he listened on the red phone. I had to repeat over and over again before he heard: It was not a poem. It was a letter I wrote to my lover. I was hurting at the time. He never called back. Writing about art, making art, is not the same as being the subject of art.

When I went to do a series of lectures at Cal Arts, there were signs about video classes on a wall in bold letters: "Open your heart and expose." I use this as the heading for my class. In that class I meet a young black male photographer, Lyle Ashton Harris. We talk theory, desire, transgression. He shows me slides of a show that contains many images of his body naked. Sometimes he is alone in the pictures, sometimes he is with his male lover. He has no shame.

Later, when we are together at the San Francisco Art Institute, he stays in my tiny one-room apartment with me. When I awaken in the morning, he has camera in hand, he is taking photos of me. Writing about art, making art is not the same as being the subject of art. At this moment the camera pushes against my boundaries, transgresses, violates. I make a fuss. I am sick. My body is in pain. I ache all over. I did not sleep well. *No*, I tell Lyle. *No pictures. I do not feel well.* I resist the camera because *I do not want to see myself this way.* I do not want to be seen trapped in a body that is letting me down again and again. Trapped. The camera traps me. I hear in my saying *no* the fear of confronting an image of a sick body, a body in pain. He shoots again and again. I let the camera take aim against the shame that invades me, against my fear of not being perfect.

Lyle says these snapshots will not be shown without my consent; I never see the images he produces. More than a year later, on the Friday night before his show "The Good Life" opens at a SoHo gallery, Lyle calls to tell me I am in the show. He hangs a picture of me that I have not seen. I want to know if I have my clothes on. He does not respond truthfully. I am disturbed by the secrecy, by the absence of consent. Writing about art, making art, is not the same as being the subject of art.

When I go to the show I walk past posed family portraits, the stylized images of Lyle and his friend Ike, images of Lyle naked with his brother, and find myself. I am naked. It is the image of my body in pain. I am anointing it with oil after washing. My morning ritual. The image is so mundane. It is out of place on the gallery wall, in this show of fancy posed figures. My trust has been violated. The red walls on which the images hang are an inner sanctuary where transgression is sanctioned. Violation is

a transgression. Betrayal can make a boundary where there has been none.

I would not have offered this image to anyone, not even to myself. The image I see is no longer familiar to me. Since this photo was taken, my body has been opened up—parts of it removed. Life-threatening illness violates the limits of flesh. I am no longer my body. In the face of death, I long for life. I am without shame. To see this image here in public, away from private sorrow and grief, I transgress—move against the boundaries of shame. Will they look beyond this naked flesh and see pain there, impending sorrow? Will they see the vulnerability, the fear of loss?

Shame about the body that is not perfect, that is not well, that is full of disease is a boundary I want to transgress. I want to move past this shame to embrace flesh on its own terms—to let the body fall into various states of sickness and decay without regret. We are all strangers here. None of us knows how to keep death away, how to make ourselves be well always and forever.

To be naked without intimacy, without privacy, without consent calls out memories of violation, of lying in rooms without the will to say *no*. When I go under the knife that will wound and violate me, I am hearing lyrics from *Porgy and Bess*. Lines that say, "Don't let them touch me—don't let them handle me with their hot hands." I will be touched anyway. I will be touched against my will. And I will not remember. I will wake up slowly and feel the coldness of coming close to death and coming back to life. My body will be changed forever.

Before this moment in the unfamiliar gallery room with Lyle and his art, there was no image—no record—of my uncut body. Pushing past my shame, I embrace the documentary image—my naked body uncut, without wound or scar. That is the body I will not see again. It is by now already unfamiliar flesh. On this red wall hangs the image. It does not speak. It has no story to tell. It does not shout out to those who stand staring, *Don't look at me this way. No pictures.* This image has its own destiny. My flesh moves in a history of its own making.

I am without shame. This image cannot wound or hurt me. Violation is an act of betrayal. There is no picture of this moment—no way to articulate separation, loss. To transgress one boundary and make another leaves us nowhere, unable to move forward. There is no way to take a picture of this moment. To tell the truth is to transgress. Writing about art, making art, is not the same as being the subject of art.

## Workers for Artistic Freedom

IN A democratic society art should be the location where everyone can witness the joy, pleasure, and power that emerges when there is freedom of expression, even when a work created evokes pain, outrage, sorrow, or shame. Art should be, then, a place where boundaries can be transgressed, where visionary insights can be revealed within the context of the everyday, the familiar, the mundane. Art is and remains such an uninhibited, unrestrained, cultural terrain only if *all* artists see their work as inherently challenging to those institutionalized systems of domination (imperialism, racism, sexism, class elitism, etc.) that seek to limit, coopt, exploit, or shut down possibilities for individual creative self-actualization. Regardless of subject matter, form, or content, whether art is overtly political or not, artistic work that emerges from an unfettered imagination affirms the primacy of art as that space of cultural production where we can find the deepest, most intimate understanding of what it means to be free.

In the cultural marketplace, art is never simply a site for freedom of expression but, rather, an arena in which opportunistic forces interact to promote a dynamic of competition that makes art a place where these institutionalized systems of domination are mirrored in art practices on every level, whether it is through the development of canonical works that allow the formation and representation of starring lineups made up of teams of white males; through the dismissal of overtly political work, especially when created by individuals from marginalized groups (particularly people of color or folks from poor backgrounds); in funding choices; in the production and dissemination of art criticism; or even in the seemingly "innocent" clinging to a fixed, static, overdetermined notion of "great" art.

Ironically, those individuals who are most mired in perpetuating coercive hierarchies often see themselves as the sole champions of artistic freedom. To truly champion artistic freedom we must be committed to

creating and sustaining an aesthetic culture where diverse artistic practices, standpoints, identities, and locations are nurtured, find support, affirmation, and regard; where the belief that individual artists must have the right to create as the spirit moves—freely, openly, provocatively—prevails. Fundamentally, artists who work individually or collectively bear witness to this truth with the art we make and with our habits of being. Until this expansive vision of the role of the artist in society is embraced as the necessary aesthetic groundwork for *all* artistic practices, freedom of expression will be continually undermined, its meaning and value lost.

Were this progressive vision of artistic practice shaping the nature of funding, funders would need to be ever mindful that we must work to create diverse contexts for the public, across class, and must be educated about the importance of art, about aesthetics. This education must take place on a national and community-based level. Ideally, in a wealthy democratic society, government would recognize the importance of art and form the cultural offices necessary both to stimulate awareness about art, its meaning and significance (this would mean funding programs in elementary schools, making sure really great artists have residencies in schools) and to support artists on all levels. While all of us who celebrate the importance of art in the making of culture must continue to lobby to create a government that responds fully to these needs, we must also work to garner the support of funders.

It might be possible for grant givers to support more art education in the schools, to buy, barter, and, when possible, donate spots on television, or invent any number of cultural strategies that would seek to share with everyone the lived understanding that art enriches life. Concurrently, gifted children, especially those from underprivileged marginalized groups, need to be supported while they are young, when their talent is first emerging. For too long in this society it has been assumed, most often by those classes of folks who are materially privileged, that nonprivileged folks who are gifted will somehow prove their mettle by how well they manage to triumph over limiting hardships and deprivations and still remain committed to doing art. Such thinking is the kind of false consciousness that seeks to cover up informed understanding about the conditions under which any artist works freely. As long as these sentiments prevail we will never see an abundance of truly significant art