Introduction *Crossing the Theory/Practice Rubicon*

THIS IS A COLLECTION of critical essays and scripts for videotapes written over the last decade. Although it becomes evident in juxtaposing the two that actually what I've been doing is dealing with much the same issues in two different media and within two disciplines, I've sometimes had the impression that there's an element of the talking horse about the theory-wielding artist. If you're a product of art schools, as I am, your image of an artist, even though Conceptual Art may have hit the fan by the time you became a student, was still, at least in part, someone like Jackson Pollock, for whom theory consisted of simply burping in people's faces at the Cedar Bar. (And in my formative art school years the gendered aspect of these images wasn't particularly a question on the table.) Whoever thinks the Romantic image of the artist is dead obviously doesn't circulate through the art world much, and part of its legacy is the residual and unspoken postulate that too much thinking leads straight to bad art.

On the other side of the great theory/practice divide, as an occasional visitor to the world of academic theory one can feel like something of a mascot, invited for your entertainment value and never quite sure if you're really getting it. (Are people laughing behind your back?) Crossing over between two worlds at least has the benefit of allowing an ungenerous critical distance on both—or a sort of *unheimlich*-ness in two homes—which this work must certainly reflect. My approach to cultural theory is very much from the point of view of someone also engaged in producing representations, and one of the main reasons I've kept on writing cultural theory is the sense of profound irritation I've felt at the various critical and feminist theories of representation in circulation. My feeling was that, generally, theorists had little considered the implications of their particular theories for *aesthetic practice*, yet theory was having distinct implications in terms of how audiences received my work. One constantly has the experience, traveling around and screening your work, of being confronted with the most au courant theory of representation and your own deviations from it. I've been berated for having too much closure and thus trafficking in master-narratives; for having too little closure, thereby not enforcing political critique; for not having positive images of women; for not having utopian moments; for constructing fixed identities for my audience; for my work being *too* pleasurable rather than deferring pleasure until after the revolution; for being both overly psychoanalytic and hostile to psychoanalysis; for representing the female body and thus eliciting the dreaded male gaze; for challenging dominant conventions and thus being elitist; and any number of other theory-driven complaints. Sometimes I just cackle silently to myself as I imagine theorists behind the camera, stymied as to what sort of an image their particular master-theory would allow them to produce—or, once produced, who they could possibly compel to watch them.

So to some extent I started writing theory as a defense, in order not to be mute object for someone *else's* theory. But at the same time it was a historically overdetermined move. More than anything, what these scripts and essays reflect is the overwhelming influence of theory on artists and the art world throughout the last fifteen years. When I started art school in San Francisco in 1975, structuralism and semiotics were just starting to have an impact on local artists, particularly in the area of photography. Arriving at art school as a figurative painter, I had, the first semester, a required modern art history class with a charismatic Freudian-Marxist body builder (widely reputed to be heavily into S & M on the side). Whatever the exact nature of this early influence I'm not capable of saying (I should add that I was too intimidated to ever actually speak to this instructor); all I can say is that this particular constellation of concerns—Marx, Freud, the body—were to become, and still remain, the primary concerns of my work. The course itself was an immersion in the radical art of the time—Conceptual Art, Body Art, Performance Art—people who shot and crucified themselves and called it art, Europeans who cut off their penises and claimed it was art, Vito Acconci masturbating in an art gallery for art—I shortly became convinced that painting was an archaic form and groped around with other media. At the same time West Coast feminist artists were strewing art galleries with bloody Tampax and rage, and there were certain imperatives for a woman artist to situate herself in relation to gender and its effects. In the Whitney Museum studio program in New York and at Nova Scotia College of Art where I went to graduate school, Marxism and later poststructuralism were both heavily influential. Mary Kelly, my graduate adviser, and visitors like Claire Johnston, among others, brought psychoanalytic theory and the issues British feminists had been working through to bear on questions of gender. (And perhaps I should add that my own entry to the growing body of feminist theory wasn't through writers like Adrienne Rich or Mary Daly, as it seems to have been for women of my generation who came out of the humanities, but through feminist art history and, later, Marxist-feminist theory.)

I suspect that this formation isn't unusual, and that many artists who came out of similar institutions at the same time felt these same sorts of influences, although they may have taken different forms in their work. I don't want to suggest, however, that theoreticist art or artists are the dominant breed in our time. At professional art gatherings, for example the Society for Photographic Education conferences, the influx of theory generates outraged howls of pain and antitheory guer-

rilla actions. It's not an uncontested terrain. In any case, and for many reasons—perhaps something to do with the Freudian-Marxist body builder—the kind of transferential relation that I've had with theory may have been stronger than that of other artists with similar formations, but this is work, I think, very much *of* a particular time and place—which I'll be designating throughout the book as postmodernism—rather than some sort of individual inspiration. The pressure that I felt to come to grips with and to master theory, to be able to traffic in a critical as well as an aesthetic vocabulary, was, I think, widely felt.

These video scripts largely concern the attempt to develop an aesthetic language—and a language for video—that deals with the politics of everyday life. In her acknowledgments to her book *Purity and Danger*, after citing an array of professors and anthropologists, Mary Douglas thanks her husband for inspiring her work: "In matters of cleanness his threshold of tolerance is so much lower than my own that he more than anyone else has forced me into taking a stand on the relativity of dirt."[1] This acknowledgment delights me because it sums up something about the way I, too, work, which is primarily out of vexation, or being uncomfortable or bothered. To put it in more theoretical language, what I've worked to develop is a political-aesthetic practice whose inception is the points of tension and contradiction of everyday life. I can offer a sort of origin tale as an example. The genesis of one of my earliest tapes, *Your Money or Your Life* (1982), came when I was walking home through dark Chicago streets at about 3:00 A.M. from a cocktail waitressing job in a jazz club. I suddenly realized that, as on every night I walked home—because I didn't want to squander my tips on a taxi—I was completely terrified. This particular night I simultaneously realized two additional things—first, that this condition of terror, which I was accustomed to taking for granted, was not necessarily a natural condition. The second was that the faces I imagined jumping out of bushes ready to steal my night's tips belonged to black men. This horrified me—my head was full of racist images, which I refused to believe were authored by me, but which somehow had become my lived experience: there they were. After about a year spent working through and scripting this interior imagery, the resulting tape analyzed the current discourse on urban crime as a primary site for the reproduction of racist ideologies, through the suppression of economic motives for crime, and through the hysterical rhetoric and coded speech and images of popular media. One section of the tape simulated a TV game show called "Textual Analysis" in which contestants were asked to analyze a *Time* magazine cover story on urban crime that consistently emphasized the racial aspect of crime while offering absolutely no information on, for example, unemployment among the group—young black men—it singled out as responsible for the urban crime wave. Contestants were also asked to analyze the graphics and rhetoric of the article, which consistently typified black men in language that emphasized jungles and crazed animals—certainly nothing discernibly human. The general theme of the tape was that the rampant individualism, profit motive, and even the violence of urban street crime aren't so very different from the ethos of American Big Business, but that members of the underclass have few opportunities for white-collar crime. Crime is spread across all social classes, but only one class bears the brunt of criminalization.

This tape formulated an aesthetic position I'd follow in subsequent tapes—an essayistic form, a mélange of dramatic and documentary sequences, and an appropriation of forms and idioms of popular culture (there was also a rap song in the tape sung by the mugger about the ways that consumerist ideologies work on the underclass). In ways that are not always so direct or easy to relate, the subsequent tapes too arose from moments of discomfort, *frisson*, pain—moments that I assume are social experiences, rather than completely individual. So, in that I take these sorts of moments as, to varying degrees, typifying a social and historical lived experience at the intersections of social contradictions—racial, sexual, economic, gendered, national, and bodily—this work describes the role of the artist as a bearer, an effect, of those contradictions, whose task is to read and report on them. The discourse of the tapes—their intellectual work—is to produce theories about the ways in which what seems, subjectively, most private and freely chosen is structural, economic, and political, and actually chooses us.

One thing that I can say clearly chose me was a postmodern aesthetics, and reading the essays against the scripts will make clear—as it becomes clear to me in retrospect—that what both are engaged in is staking out and producing a left postmodernism in theory and aesthetics. What postmodernism has meant to me is the possibility of a popular political art, and the first essay, "Repossessing Popular Culture," was written to outline in more general and theoretical terms the aesthetic position of *Your Money or Your Life*. To a large extent this aesthetic was also a reaction against the political art of the time, which tended to be, I thought, self-righteous, humorless, and pietistic. While I don't intend to hold these tapes up as examples of a successful solution to the problem of a popular political aesthetic (my fascination with theory has definitely limited the audiences for my tapes), each, in different ways, grapples with the problem of how to be popular and *critical*, popular without, at the same time, being simpleminded. What I've worked to resist, in each case, are what I believe have been simplistic politicized aesthetic

practices—positive images (whether of women or labor or minorities), correct images, humorless didacticism (I suppose I've tried for funny didacticism instead), ridiculing the stupidity of political enemies (well, usually), political piety, and the elitist antipopular tactics of the avant-garde. This work takes the position that there's no place to speak from *outside* dominant forms and ideologies: from outside commodification, from the natural body, or from the vanguard. And on the contentious subject of positive images, we should note that this is now a favored representational mode of a self-congratulatory and socially obfuscating liberal entertainment industry. There are probably more African-American women judges in one week of prime-time television than in the entire American judiciary—a simulacrum of racial equality absent the demand to actually achieve it.

In theory, too, what ties these essays together is the position that the task of a politically engaged theory is to articulate the possibilities of a popular political resistance and contestation, taking one's direction from existing political movements and struggles. What these essays largely attempt to do is intervene in current theoretical debates to articulate the places where theory falls prey to antipopular moments, retrenchments, and displacements—where theory produces representations of a political terrain that work to defeat the possibilities of contestation: in the repeated tendency toward modernist aestheticism in both left and feminist theories of representation and aesthetic practices ("Repossessing Popular Culture," "Looks Good on Paper"); the tropes of misogyny in popular representations of postcolonialism ("Phantom Twitchings"); the coded traces of class interests and enforcement of bourgeois bodily norms in the feminist antipornography movement ("Reading *Hustler*"). What these essays also attempt to hold in the balance is that theory here means first-world theory. What I've attempted is a symptomatic reading of the tropes of first-world interest—the way first-world aesthetics and its foreign policy uncannily echo each other in "Aesthetics and Foreign Policy," the question of why psychoanalytic film theory limits its account of castration to the individual subject in "Phantom Twitchings"—and a symptomatic reading of the repetitions and preoccupations of current first-world theory. What does it mean to dwell so repeatedly on "the popular," "the subject," "the margin," representation, even "pornography," when these preoccupations can be read, symptomatically, as retrenchments against crises of power and authority in other spheres?

The theoretical movement of both the essays and the tapes is largely out of and through Marxism, toward an interplay of Marxism and feminism, and in the end, back to Marx himself—but Marx after feminism, after psychoanalysis, and after the collapse of Communism. These essays also arise from a kind of knee-jerk resistance to critical orthodoxies. As a feminist and a feminist artist, one of my aversions is the climate of orthodoxy and the litmus tests around issues of representation within feminism. Part of my orneriness about it comes from having been made an occasional target of it, particularly over my tape *A Man's Woman*, which attempts to raise the difficult question, "Why is the Right so popular with women while feminism's popularity declines rapidly?" When it was screened at the American Film Institute, it prompted a walkout by some offended feminists in the audience, and the lack of willingness to openly debate the issue was chilling. (I will say, as a loyal feminist and leftist, that one sometimes gets the uneasy feeling that when the Left and feminists do come to power, show trials of the heterodox will shortly follow.)

The influence of Foucault also puts into question for me the easy assumption of identities and identity politics. *Ecstasy Unlimited* looks at the way sexual identity gets produced in relation to forms of power and surveillance (this tape was written in 1983–84, before the impact of AIDS on sexual ideology was widespread). Issues around the status of identities and the critiques of essentialism have also put into question for me many of the assumptions of American feminism, and the political consequences of its focus on victimization. The essay on *Hustler* magazine, which I fear may be read as the complete abandonment of feminism, is for me anything but. In much the same way that *Your Money or Your Life* was an attempt to work through the way that racism becomes imbricated into private lived experience, the *Hustler* essay (along with "*Ecstasy Unlimited*") attempts to work through how sexuality is constructed and lived. Posing the question, "Why am I so disgusted and offended by *Hustler* magazine?" necessarily involved putting into question many of the tenets of American feminism—which both legitimate, and in fact, *demand* those responses of disgust and offense—by putting them into a historical and political context. My response to the porn debates is also conditioned by the fact that I also work at producing representations, and ones that aspire to political effects. If images *did* so simply and immediately lead directly to actions, as antiporn feminists claim, if reception of images *could* be guaranteed to have particular effects, the work of political artists would certainly be a lot easier. It's not at all clear to me why the pornography industry along with the consciousness captains of consumer capitalism are so much better at mobilizing fantasy than we are; I only know that I don't particularly want to be part of a movement that sees its task as crushing fantasy and patrolling desire.

Given the time period in which I've been engaged in producing representation, and given that my work has often lifted (and "refunc-

tioned") the most suspect, most pleasurable elements of popular culture—narrative, porn images, stereotypes—one of the first objects of my critical ire as a theorist, was, of course, Laura Mulvey's visual pleasure essay, which probably more than any other single work has shaped the discourses I've worked within.[2] My objection to it was that its critique and its call to destroy the pleasures of narrative film leave open only the possibility of a modernist and elitist avant-garde countercinema as a political antidote to the power of the male gaze—it seems to suggest, as I say somewhere, luring the masses to *Riddles of the Sphinx* as the only permissible form of feminist representational politics.

The attempt to rethink some of Mulvey's positions informs most of these essays in one way or another—the suggestion of avant-garde practices as correctives, its ahistorical account of castration, and, in the later work—the *Hustler* essay and *Marx: The Video*—the foundational theory of the male gaze. It would be worth it, first of all, to situate Mulvey historically, to keep in mind that her theory of the gaze was in relation to a historically specific period of filmmaking, classical narrative cinema, and to a particular organization of the industry, and finally that it was anchored in a particular form of diegetic organization—the male hero who becomes the ego ideal for the male spectator. So it would be possible to detail changes in the industry—a greater number of women directors, producers, and writers and an increased number of independently made films, for example—as well as changes in narrative form and structure, the production of different sorts of plots and images, and the recent trend toward the sexualization of the male body, to put into question whether Mulvey's theory is still viable in relation to current cinema and aesthetic practices.

This seems to me an important project. Feminist film theory has produced many challenges to Mulvey within its own discipline—the thorny issue of the female spectator, along with, for instance, questions such as whether the male gaze is necessarily aligned with sadism or whether it may be, instead, masochism that's the structuring fantasy.[3] But outside film theory the term "male gaze" (along with its companion term "objectification") has filtered down through aesthetic theory and practice, through feminist art history and criticism, even to some extent into the culture at large, as omnipresent theoretical givens. One finds everywhere, even in feminists who are virulently antipsychoanalytic, the reliance on some version of "the male gaze" as a cornerstone of a feminist aesthetics; the male gaze seems also to have become imbricated in general theoretical usage with a Foucauldian theory of panoptic vision to produce a theoretical brick wall of a monolithic, determinate male gaze.

The question raised for me is whether this represents the field of male

power in such a way as to simply naturalize that power. To some extent, the gaze becomes monolithic because the dialectical basis of Mulvey's argument gets repressed in its common usage—what gets left behind, outside film theory, is castration. Whether you see that metaphorically or psychopolitically, or whether you're orthodox in your adherence to the Oedipal narrative, what has to be retained, I believe, is the dialectic of the gaze—that it doesn't originate in male power but in male fear, or repressed knowledge, of disempowerment and loss. So the male gaze isn't simply a triumphal exercise of power, it's compensatory; it is not simply masterful but also pathetic. Men may control the industry, but they don't *have* the phallus. Even Mulvey, while certainly not unpsychoanalytic, sometimes seems to conclude that the gaze actually accomplishes its mission—which would be to suppose that repression *can* be complete and successful. And this would be one place to hope that there *is* a political metaphor to psychoanalysis, to argue, with Freud, that repression can never completely succeed.

The widespread dissemination throughout feminism of gaze theory has had profound consequences in constructing aesthetic theories and corresponding practices based on the gaze as determinate of all meaning. So, for example, Janet Wolff in her book *Feminine Sentences* poses the question, "Can women's bodies be the site of feminist cultural politics?"—a question prompted by the theoretical assumption that women's bodies are inevitably appropriated as an object for the male gaze, whatever the intentions of the woman involved.[4] Wolff gives an example of a protest by a group of Dublin women over a particular swimming area, in which, to protest male domination of the beach, the women invaded the area, took off their bathing suits and swam nude. Wolff concludes that the protest was ineffectual because it invited male lechery, captured in a newspaper photograph of the action in which men and boys can be seen staring and laughing at the nude women. The conclusion that the protest was ineffectual is clearly theory-driven—derived from the theoretical premise that the male gaze is determinate of meaning. So the deployment of theory works here to foreclose the possibility of the popular struggle these women have engaged in. For Wolff, the leering men have won—a priori—and the women's challenge to them is written off as political naiveté, as if the job of the feminist theorist is to rebuke the naiveté of the nontheoretical classes.

Given this sort of deployment of the theory of the gaze I'd argue that one of its effects has been to deprive feminists, and women who pay attention to feminist theory, *of* a possible critical aesthetics of the body; what we've been deprived of is a theory of female resistance—a way of theorizing the cracks, fissures, the *failures* of the male gaze. Wolff, in her conclusion to the essay, does suggest one possibility for a critical

feminist politics of the body—modern dance. I don't think it's only because I'm severely bored by modern dance that this seems to me an ineffective solution. If academic feminist critics invariably turn to the most rarefied forms of high culture as political correctives, where does that leave the majority of women? And I'd add that the assumption of the gaze as determinate and all-powerful has contributed to the lack of attention to class in feminist theory (discussed at length in chapter 8, "Reading *Hustler*," which attempts a reading of pornography not anchored in a theory of the male gaze). Treating the male gaze monolithically neglects the fact that not all men do have equal social power. In much the same way, looking to high culture for a feminist aesthetics seems designed to protect feminism as a preserve of the academic elite.

A number of women artists and performers—both in the art world and in popular culture—*are*, in practice, creating a resistant politics of the body that ignores feminist dicta around the issue of the gaze, risking the stereotypical identification of woman and body to counter the grip of misogyny over bodily meaning. There are two categories of work I find interesting in this context. The first produces an excess of visibility around the body rather than attempting to veil it, subvert the gaze, or deny pleasure—this is work by women who, at the same time, refuse any position of subjection. I'm thinking of, say, performance artist Annie Sprinkle, part of whose repertoire includes lying spread-eagled on the stage and inviting the audience to look into her vagina using a speculum. Karen Finley's work, more confrontational than Sprinkle's, also uses similar tactics of inviting looking rather than coyly refusing it. Neither of these women assume that the male power to look is such a determinate power as to dictate the meaning and reception of their work. Rather, I think their position is that through engaging with the male gaze and through producing excess rather than prohibition they can throw a wrench into any sort of comfort zone that scopophilic looking affords, and that male looking, in itself, isn't the final word on anything. To engage the male gaze is not automatically to be annihilated or subjected by it.

But I think that some of the most interesting examples of a politics of the body are in popular culture, by women who in one way or another say "fuck you" to both the male gaze and its theoreticians. Madonna gets raised in this context, but I'm thinking more of female comediennes like Judy Tenuta or Roseanne Arnold. Both fall into a category feminist academics have lately ventured into—the possibility of an aesthetics of the female grotesque.[5] But feminist academics too often seem to look to high culture for their examples. Both Tenuta and Arnold are full of rage against men, both turn conventions of the proper on their head, both use parodic techniques to indict and invert hierarchies of gender, and both are enormously popular, which—I suppose it's graceless to say—is more than can be said about feminist theory these days.

Female rage and discontent are more and more pervasive in the culture at the same time that feminism has lost its popular audience. These elements are up for grabs politically, open to articulation by the Left, the Right, and the ultra-Right. There's some evidence that they're being most effectively articulated by consumerism, deploying psychographically based market research techniques. *American Demographics* reports that when the McCann-Ericson ad agency wanted to find out why Raid roach spray outsold Combat insecticide disks in certain markets, their research revealed that, not surprisingly, female consumers see roaches as men. "A lot of their feelings about the roach were very similar to the feelings that they had about the men in their lives," says marketing executive Paula Drillman. The article explains: "The act of spraying roaches and seeing them die was satisfying to this frustrated, powerless group. Setting out Combat disks may have been less trouble, but it just didn't give them the same feeling. 'These women wanted control,' Drillman says. 'They used the spray because it allowed them to participate in the kill.' "[6]

It's a long way from modern dance to roach spray, and it's the task of a popular feminist aesthetics to bridge the gap. If we don't, someone else will. The squeamishness about consumer culture, popular representation, popular sex, and the body leaves the field open for guys in suits: the Right and the businessmen. This tendency to turn to high culture and high theory for political answers ignores what's going on in front of us. Roseanne scratching her crotch while singing the national anthem at a San Diego Padres game, a parodic gesture that invited presidential excoriation by George Bush—isn't this a female politics of the body that refuses the name of feminism? It's interesting that both Roseanne Arnold and Karen Finley have attracted governmental condemnation, as has *Hustler* publisher Larry Flynt on any number of occasions—all on "taste" issues. Something *is* at stake in these debates over representation, something *is* at stake in enforcing bourgeois bodily norms and conventions—and in developing contestatory aesthetic practices and strategies that work from the popular but, unlike current popular culture, work toward resistance of the dominant.