



JENNIFER DOYLE

HOLD IT AGAINST ME

difficulty and emotion in contemporary art

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THREE CASE STUDIES IN DIFFICULTY AND THE PROBLEM OF AFFECT

A Blank: Aliza Shvarts, *Untitled* (2008)

A friend, a deeply committed feminist scholar, asks me what I am working on. “Abortion,” I email her. “Yuck,” she writes back. She was kidding—but only partly. I know what she means. I am tired of the topic before I start. If I found myself put off by the idea of writing about abortion before I’d even written a word it was because I’d given myself over to the deadening effects of the rhetoric that polices and contains our relationships to the topic. This is a very specific form of difficulty: certain subjects are completely overdetermined as sites of intense conflict in public discourse. Artists who dare to engage them risk not only the critical flattening of their work (in which discussion of the work itself is subsumed by willful misreading guided by the well-worn grooves of discourse on the subject) but censorship and worse. In the United States (but not only there), abortion is easily one of those subjects. It is in fact hard to think of a more difficult subject in American art than abortion. (And this only gets more true as time goes by.) Today American artists broach the topic rarely and carefully.¹

In 2008 a Yale University art student ventured into this territory and wound up the subject of international headlines. Hers is an unusual case. Aliza Shvarts’s work provoked a very intense emotional reaction from both

mass media and art critics, but the work itself completely withholds from us any access to the artist’s feelings. And that fact lies at the heart of its scandal. From the start, the controversy orbited around a perceived problem in her affect, although no one, really, had any access to it. Once the student thesis project became a scandal, the artist refused to make any public statement about the work.

Jeannie Ludlow observes that there is a hierarchy within feminist discourse about abortion, with a premium placed on “trauma-tized” abortion stories, in which the ordinariness of abortion is eclipsed by politically expedient narratives about unwanted pregnancies brought on by sexual violence and abuse. The implicit demand that “abortion be the exception, and not a normal part of women’s lives” pushes the extreme suffering of victims of rape and abuse into the public sphere and throws a blanket of silence, shame, and anxiety over nearly every other kind of unwanted pregnancy as they become stigmatized as personal failures. “Because they are presented so frequently, these circumstances [rape and abuse, medically dangerous pregnancies] have become reinscribed as the ‘appropriate reasons’ to have an abortion, and they render all other reasons for aborting questionable at best, and frivolous at worst.”² One of the many nasty effects of this form of narrative policing is the stigmatization of the agency of the vast majority of women who choose to have abortions; the choice becomes a disorder of will and desire. Ironically, we become more comfortable with abortion stories in which the pregnant woman is herself more like a child than an adult, a helpless victim of circumstance.³

In 2007–8, for her thesis project as a fine arts student, Shvarts set out on a “yearlong performance of repeated self-induced miscarriages.” She artificially inseminated herself over the course of nine months and took herbal abortifacients at the same point in her menstrual cycle in order to facilitate menstruation or miscarriage (in the case she successfully impregnated herself; there is no documentation of this). Her expressed plan had been to produce a narrative about the experience as well as an installation of documentation of the performance.⁴ An element of uncertainty figures in her conceptualization and enactment of the process. Because she never took a pregnancy test, there is no record of her having successfully fertilized an egg, of having been pregnant, or of having aborted an embryo. The biological possibility of pregnancy was left open in order to foreground the ideological investments in legal and medical management of the female artist’s body as the most reliable framework for reading the truth of the piece.⁵ (For reasons that will become clear later in the chapter, there is no proof that any of the events she describes

ever took place.) The truth of the piece resides in how one chooses to interpret Shvarts's account of what she did; this quickly becomes identical to how one *feels* about what she did.⁶ In an essay on the controversy provoked by the work, Shvarts writes, "To miscarry, to carry wrongly—that is what I did. Indeed, the entire work was configured to create a physical act so ambiguous and inconclusive that the language applied to it could never be completely felicitous, drawing attention to the force of language itself: the reality of the pregnancy, both for myself and for the audience, was always a matter of reading."⁷ *The Drudge Report* picked up a *Yale Daily News* article about her ongoing project. Soon afterward, it became a national controversy. The story was broadcast on U.S. national networks and made headlines in the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*. Daily scandal sheets in London plugged the story into their roundup of attention-grabbing headlines. Several Facebook sites were devoted to hate campaigns against Shvarts; newspapers across the country received scores of letters and emails responding to their coverage of the story; the artist received untold amounts of hate email; and in the art world it became an occasion to grandstand about the state of performance art. Few cultural critics even came close to standing up for the work.⁸

Surprisingly, given its support of the distribution of "the morning-after pill" without a prescription and the facilitation of abortion on demand for the students who rely on its health services (though you won't find the word *abortion* anywhere on its website), Yale University did not stand behind Shvarts's work. Campus officials responded by distancing themselves. They reframed the entire action as "fictional." The student was, in their view, "never pregnant" and had "never miscarried." University publicists claimed, "The entire project is an art piece, a creative fiction designed to draw attention to the ambiguity surrounding form and function of a woman's body." According to them, the artist's statements to the contrary were also fictional and part of the performance. "Had these acts been real," explained the university spokesperson Helena Klasky, "they would have violated basic ethical standards and raised serious mental and physical health concerns." Campus administrators then took a very unusual step and threatened to prevent the work's display unless the artist would "confess in writing that the exhibition is a work of fiction."⁹ Robert Storr, the director of the 2007 Venice Biennale and dean of Yale's art school, reiterated the institution's representation of Shvarts as unbalanced: "If I had known about this, I would not have permitted it to go forward. This is not an acceptable project in a community where the consequences go beyond the individual who initiates the project and may even endanger that individual."¹⁰ Shvarts refused to sign a disclaimer about her

descriptions of the action and was barred from presenting any aspect of it in the final thesis show. The project remains untitled and unexhibited; it exists only in the stories told about it, including this one. Shvarts decided to remain silent throughout the controversy and approaches the project as ongoing; the content of the performance has expanded to include nearly all reaction to it.¹¹

At the height of the controversy, "Was Aliza Shvarts ever pregnant?" became the central question. The project's most virulent critics (who were offended by the idea of abortion, or by the idea that the whole thing was a hoax, or by both) were obsessed with it. Newspapers consulted fertility doctors to get the odds on the effectiveness of the self-insemination process she described. The question theatricalized a defining part of the lives of heterosexually active women students who do not use contraception (or who experience failure): the monthly uncertainty, conversations with roommates about parsley and sage tea, the search for signs of pregnancy or period, and the circumstances that produce a sense of relief, a feeling of escape, twinges of regret or shame, or a sense of loss. For Shvarts, the question of whether or not she was ever pregnant was not the work's point: the point was to explore the discursive field surrounding sex and reproduction—and, in particular, to draw attention to the strange status of the female body. On this point, the work returns to old issues within feminist theory and art-making, to the entanglement of authorship with reproductive discourse, the assertion of patriarchal authority as a means of disabling epistemological models grounded in feminine forms of relationality (including the artist's experience of her own body), and the hysteria produced when a woman throws a wrench into the gear works of reproductive discourse.¹²

Shvarts provoked a moralizing disgust grounded in a collective sense of ownership over the artist's body. People responded to the scandal as though the artist had mutinied: anti-abortionists condemned her as a reproductive citizen who willfully turned biology against destiny; feminists were made uneasy by her realization of the right wing's claims that abortion on demand leads to women aborting at will, recklessly, pointlessly, and for fun. A spokesperson for NARAL Pro-Choice America, for example, described the project as "offensive and insensitive to women who have suffered the heartbreak of miscarriage."¹³ The feminist website Jezebel tagged her an "avant-garde asshole."

On its face, Shvarts's project explores the discursive field through which the female body is produced and read as a reproductive body. She hardly needed to exhibit in the student thesis show to realize the full impact of this dimension of the project. In fact the interruption of the project by Yale's

interdiction brings the work to its most compelling formal conclusion. The project raises a more interesting issue, however, when it draws attention to the fact that access to abortion is an effect of entitlement; a college student attending one of the most expensive universities on earth can afford to toy with this, because as long as she is a member of that community she has access to a significant amount of resources supporting the decision to abort. Indeed it would be far more scandalous for a Yale undergraduate student to see a pregnancy through and have a baby than it would be for her to have an abortion. None of *that* was raised in the moral panic produced by the idea of this performance—or rather, it was, insofar as blogs, editorials, and comments posted in response to stories about the action dismissed Shvarts as a “spoiled brat.”

It is as a conceptual exploration of sexual entitlement that Shvarts’s work takes on its most powerful political charge. Grandstanding about her project, dismissing it as the work of an overprivileged art student masks much more complex and darker social truths about gender, class, and reproduction. From the indignation of right-wing pundits (who accuse her of subordinating potential life to the pursuit of an idea—or worse, her own career) to the paternalistic self-righteousness of Yale’s administration (who worry about the artist’s mental and physical health) and liberals (who condemn the action as a “bad” representation of the issue), we bear witness to the political difficulty of identifying abortion as necessary to the practice of sexual freedom.

Shvarts’s story produces the interruption of fertilization and pregnancy as not the negation of sexuality but as part of the practice of a sexual life. The story moves abortion into exactly the domain aggressively silenced by the liberal discourse that suppresses the ordinariness of interrupted pregnancies in favor of the traumatic unwanted pregnancy. This was borne out not only in the reception of Shvarts’s project by mainstream media journalism but within the arts community. In an admissions interview with a highly regarded art school (noted for both its theoretical sophistication and the support of experimental work), faculty pressed Shvarts on the “Yale project,” asking her if she “felt sorry [for] what [she’d] done to Yale,” if she had regrets, and what she felt about the project and why she’d done it. Shvarts recalls feeling that the admissions committee kept returning to this set of questions as if she “would eventually feel the appropriate things.”¹⁴ She also suspected that the campus wanted reassurance that she would not undertake such a project again. Given that the project involved nothing more than the production of the *idea* that she *might* have been pregnant at some point during a nine-month period, it is hard to imagine how an artist might go about making such a guarantee.

The controversy provoked by the idea of her project surfaces the production of sex as an affective disciplining of the reproductive body. This is where the controversial nature of the work intersects with its difficulty, for abortion discourse is shaped by both a guideline regarding how one is supposed to feel about the topic and a disavowal of the incoherence within our notions of the body and the subject. At the heart of this project is the complexity of the reproductive body as an object of juridical, medical, and political discourse. In her analysis of ways that nation-states reproduce power, authority, and their borders in and through the regulation of family, Jacqueline Stevens writes, “It is not that some people give birth and others do not that leads directly to gender roles. Rather, gender is what occurs through very specific rules a political society develops as it reproduces itself. The marked mother, subject to the institution of men taking her for the purpose of having children (matrimony), affects all who grow up as potential mothers. Perhaps these effects are what we perceive as sex.”¹⁵

The attempt to free the body from this discursive regime can thus appear as criminal, queer, and, in fact, as an attack on sex itself. This makes Shvarts’s removal of sex from her project particularly provocative and, I would argue, disturbing for both her anti-abortion and pro-choice critics. Shvarts evacuated all traces of romance, love, and desire from the work. In doing so, she centered the work in her body and its processes; furthermore she asserted full control over the representation of those processes. This brought the project into direct conflict with the thornier issues in abortion discourse.

As Penelope Deutschler has argued in her work on legal discourse about abortion, the liberalization of access to abortion in the 1970s in countries like France, the United States, England, and Australia reflects not a decriminalization of abortion but an “affirmation of abortion’s illegality except in certain circumstances.”¹⁶ The criminalization of abortion, Deutschler points out, is embedded in the very wording of *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court case that opened up access to abortion in the United States: “A woman’s right to terminate her pregnancy is not absolute, and may to some extent be limited by the state’s legitimate interests in safeguarding women’s health, in maintaining proper medical standards, and in protecting potential human life.”¹⁷ Legislation and regulation of access through obligatory parental consent, counseling about alternatives (such as adoption), and state-mandated bureaucratic approval (requiring medical confirmation that the pregnancy is damaging to the woman’s mental health, for example) confirm this strange truth. Legally and conceptually, abortion remains in a category of criminalized acts for which the law makes (fewer and fewer) exceptions. In this discursive universe,

it is always a source of shame and apology. The scandal produced by Shvarts's conceptual project underscores the fact that within contemporary discourse on abortion it is always in some sense "wrong"; it is always bad, and even in liberal settings women may abort only when given permission by the apparatus and are spared condemnation only when they manifest the proper degree of shame and regret.¹⁸ That institutions are deeply invested in the reproductive body isn't news. The organization of that policing of not the only body but the "idea," the presentation, the context and affect is worth examining more closely, however, for it is here that we see the political dimensions of Shvarts's project most clearly.

Let's compare the scope of this controversy to another scandal related to body art, performance, and pedagogy. On its surface, Shvarts's project and the uproar left in its wake bear a striking similarity to problems created several years earlier by Joseph Deutch, an MFA student at the University of California, Los Angeles. In a course on extreme performance taught by Ron Athey in 2006, Deutch brought what looked like a real gun to the class, told students that it was loaded, and then—amazingly—appeared to play Russian roulette with himself.¹⁹ No one was hurt, but, understandably, some students in the class became very upset, and Deutch had to answer to an angry campus administration that reprimanded him for not thinking about the consequences of his action on fellow students, on the course instructor, and on the department itself. Regardless of what one thinks about *that* piece, one must marvel at the nearly identical positions adopted by both programs, which have long been associated with the vanguard of contemporary art: UCLA stated that the student's action was, again, fictional, that the gun was not real, and that it was never loaded. (The gun was not produced for the university, and we don't actually know whether it was real or fake, but the students in the seminar believed that it was real.) University administrators also worried about the student's mental health and recommended counseling. Unlike Yale's administration, however, at no point did UCLA insist that the student's performance be excluded from material used to evaluate his work in the seminar. In fact Chris Burden—infamous for having shot himself, crawled through glass, and nailed himself to a Volkswagen in early performances—then head of the Art Department, resigned at least partly in protest of the university's generosity toward the student, who was allowed to continue his studies.²⁰ Incredibly, at the UCLA student conduct hearing regarding the incident, Deutch's defense team grilled Athey about the Minneapolis controversy and tried to suggest that his performance history (which has never involved guns) was somehow to blame for the incident. While the story eventually made its way into the

media and generated very heated debates within the department, it did not create a scandal of nearly the order induced by Shvarts's piece. At no point was Deutch the focal point of Facebook hate campaigns (such as they are).

I do not have an easy answer as to why this is. The different degrees of scandal partly reflect the different structures of the universities. Yale, as a private institution, can act more unpredictably and secretly than can the University of California, which is public. Normally, private universities will work hard to keep their students out of the headlines. Yale served up its student on a silver platter, disavowing any relationship to her work by preventing her from submitting it. Whether or not one believes Shvarts's story, and whether or not she was ever pregnant, she broke no rules, laws, or Yale's code of student conduct. The controversy surrounding her untitled, unfinished, and unexhibited project and the university's need to assert some disciplinary control over her reveal the absolute difficulty of integrating abortion into the field of art, even if the artist does so only discursively. In the intensity of the controversy provoked by artists who work with sex and against the reproductive matrix, we see the particular limits of art discourse when it comes to thinking intelligently about the hard feelings that are produced when artists call us out on our sex politics.

Part of the problem here is the literalism of much phobic response to feminist and queer body art. As Jane Blocker explains in her book on this subject, artists who work with the sexual body—and especially artists who reference flesh and blood in their work—are subjected to a literal interpretation that functions as "an effective strategy of marginalization." Examining critical reception of the feminist project *Womanhouse* (1972) and Judy Chicago's installation *Menstruation Bathroom* (1972), a white bathroom stocked with toiletries and bloodied sanitary napkins and tampons overflowing from a large waste bucket, Blocker explains that such work complicates the distinctions between the figurative and the literal and the tendency to represent the former as "more noble": "What troubles [critics] most is the prospect that [such] work could be both 'literal' and 'a statement' at the same time." She suggests that "the female and the queer" are both defined against and precluded from the figurative "because they are not seen to be performing at all."²¹ Moral panic about queer art practices are almost universally shaped by this—thus the attempt to censor Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs for fear that looking at them might make viewers gay, and the willful misrepresentation of Ron Athey's performances as exposing audience members to HIV. We see this, Blocker reminds us, in the categorical resistance to feminist art that works with flesh—to the reactions of critics who see in feminist art the

literal body, who see a metonymical intrusion of the artist's flesh into their critical space. That reaction, though, misses the ways such artists deploy the literal body against the trope of the metaphorical to politicize processes of figuration, the dynamics of representation itself. This perfectly describes the reception of Shvarts's conceptual performance as the conversation devolved into discussions of the likelihood that she would have gotten pregnant by using the methods she described.

The difficulty of integrating (for example) piercing, sadomasochistic gestures, and the abortive into art discourse does not seem surprising—until we consider the things that we *do* accept in art: Santiago Sierra's exploitative use of day laborers to perform menial tasks, Vanessa Beecroft's regressive displays of nude women, Andreas Serrano's and Teresa Margolles's work with the bodies of the dead, Zhang Huan's use of human ashes. All of these practices are controversial, but they also have extensive exhibition histories and significant places in critical discourse about the politics of art. All are, in fact, blue chip gallery artists with very successful careers. The difficulty of talking about Shvarts's project reveals not only the discursive field surrounding the reproductive body (this is its most obvious element) but the deep policing from every corner of narrative and affect when it comes to the representation of abortion as an ordinary aspect of sexual life. Mirroring the ideology that requires that sex be defined through reproduction, art engaged with the topic of abortion is supposed to be *productive*. As critics, we are more prepared to defend feminist art projects that educate people about abortion or that help women gain access to abortion. The abortive body, in other words, is easiest to handle when configured as a helpless woman. Staging a conversation about the reproductiveness of the female artist's body is an entirely different matter.

Shvarts has shed no light on her feelings about the project or the controversy it generated. Her deliberate silence mirrors the erasure of the female body from representations of abortion; the photographs of the fetus in utero, for example, treat the pregnant woman as an amorphous background. The relationship between the pregnant woman and the fetus has been increasingly depicted as an antagonistic war of conflicting interests. "Fetal personhood," writes Carol Stabile in an essay on fetal imaging, "depend[s] upon the erasure of female bodies and the reduction of women to passive, reproductive machines." She points out that even the term *fetal imaging* renders the woman's body invisible in the service of a larger discourse on reproduction that renders her disposable. Humanism here is a zero-sum game. Stabile explains,

"Whatever rights 'women' may have had within the legal system . . . are dramatically being reversed in the so-called interests of an amorphous subject: the fetus, or as advocates of IVF (*in vitro* fertilization) technologies as well as anti-abortion factions put it, 'the early human being.'"²² Valerie Hartouni writes, "For a genuine and complex story of abortion to be heard, the speech that would render women speechless must be interrupted. . . . This entails . . . interrupting 'the visual discourse of fetal autonomy'—reembodying the disembodied fetal form or resituating the gestating fetus in a uterus and the uterus in a body, thereby re-membering what is otherwise dis-membered and, as such, truly in a perilous state."²³

In the United States, the law takes action against what is increasingly represented as the hostile environment of the pregnant woman's body, in which fetal interests are at war with the mother's desires, with her appetites, with her illnesses, with her vices. In fact the anti-abortion movement has started borrowing from the language of abolition in making its case, casting the mother's body as a slaveholding state from which the fetal person must be liberated. The rhetorical violence of abortion politics nearly always hinges on the personification of the fetus and the depersonification of the body of which the fetus is a part. The idea of the fetus as "a future person" divorces the future embodied by the fetus from the present embodied by the woman; her present is recast as the future's abject past. Within mainstream discourse on reproduction, in other words, the body standing in the way of reproduction, futurity, and life itself is quite specifically that of the abortive woman. Liberal feminist discourse on abortion has done little better to address the "problem" posed by the abortive subject—and there is a good reason for this. Anchoring a pro-choice political position without grounding that argument in a notion of individual rights is hard. But the stakes are high, for, where pregnancy is concerned, the legal maneuvers around who has what rights over what body have become increasingly bizarre in their erasure of the pregnant women's voice. This is not to drift from the question of art. Parental rights have come to be articulated in the courtroom as questions of authorship, as in the resolution of one U.S. court case in which a surrogate mother sued for parental rights over the child she carried to term, and lost; the court found that the "idea" for the child belonged to the genetic parents who had hired her to carry the baby.²⁴ Here concepts like life, personhood, and family are grounded not in the gestating body but in the acquisitive desires and material privilege of the domestic subjects empowered enough to engineer the transformation of that idea into a pregnancy. In this case, the pregnant woman becomes little more than a hothouse with an inconvenient sense of attachment.

Mary Poovey, in her polemic "The Abortion Question and the Death of Man," identifies "coherence" as a crucial problem in discourse on abortion: the more we insist on the difference between the mother and the fetus, the more we give in to this zero-sum logic. She argues that the subject of abortion intervenes in humanist discourse because the very state of pregnancy defies the demand to cohere in the form of a unitary subject. Drawing from Judith Butler's writing on the regulatory practices of gender, Poovey writes, "Coherence . . . is a property that belongs to our ideas about gender and to many of the institutionalizations of those ideas. [It is] *not* a property of the human subject."²⁵ Coherence develops according to one's cooperation with those institutions, according to one's successful interpellation by those ideological systems. Subjective coherence is a discursive effect. (To oversimplify this point: the more I write "I" and write as if this described a stable persona, and the more I resist the urge to contradict myself, the more you take this use of the first-person pronoun to refer to the author of this book. This collaboration creates the conditions of possibility for the production of authorial coherence.) The fictive nature of subjective coherence, of the idea that we are bounded, autonomous individuals whose liberty is expressed independent of other people and our environment, is belied by pregnancy and abortion. For you actually can't have it both ways: you can't treat the fetus and the mother as persons in this way without making pregnancy itself into a war of position. "In the mouths of antiabortionists," Poovey writes, "'choice,' 'privacy,' and 'rights' invert effortlessly into their opposites, precisely because, regardless of who uses them, these terms belong to a single set of metaphysical assumptions." The metaphysics of substance that currently underwrites legal advocacy for the liberalization of access to abortion is, Poovey argues, "an inadequate basis for all the arguments thus far advanced for the right to legal abortions." She explains, "The individualism implied by the metaphysics of substance is a dead end appeal for supporting abortion on demand for two reasons: first, because the appeal to individual rights *in the absence of* an interrogation of the metaphysical assumptions behind the idea of rights leads almost inevitably to a proliferation of those considered to have rights—in other words, to a defense of fetal personhood; second, because appeals to this metaphysics obscures that both the metaphysics and legal persons are always imbricated in the system of social relations, which, given the existence of social differences, are also inevitably politicized."²⁶

Feminist political arguments for abortion must, Poovey argues, move away from a discourse of individual rights and from the notions of privacy and embodied personhood that currently ground liberal and conservative

stands on abortion. Such a politics "would emphasize not the ways in which subjects are isolatable, autonomous, centered individuals, but the ways in which each person has conflicting interests and complex ties to other, apparently autonomous individuals with similar (and different) needs and interests."²⁷ Some of the most powerful critiques of liberal humanism come from this area of feminist scholarship.

It may feel like I've drifted far from Shvarts's project, but this rehearsal of the complexity of the topic of abortion is necessary to understanding the work. If we do not look beyond the feelings people have about the work, we miss the very concrete challenge that pregnancy, reproduction, and the decision not to reproduce pose to our ways of thinking about the self and others. That is Shvarts's topic, and it is the best context for understanding her refusal to speak about the performance. By withdrawing her personal story from the public, she created a situation that forced into view an ideological alignment between those who appear to be political opposites, and she also exposed the investments of a range of institutional systems in her body as both a creative and a reproductive organism. Shvarts's work is hard because her project cannot be understood by critical tactics seeking to gain mastery over the text by learning, once and for all, what "really" happened and how she felt about it.

In withdrawing herself so totally from public discourse on the work, she also raises the possibility that she felt nothing. And this makes the rest of us do all the feeling instead.

Theater of Cruelty: Thomas Eakins, *The Gross Clinic* (1875)

Although this book is centered on contemporary art, the dynamics I am describing, in which the challenge of certain works is entwined with their emotional economy, is not exclusive to the present. In turning to the past we gain some traction on how the difficulty of some works has been managed, revalued, and absorbed into art history. Thomas Eakins's *The Gross Clinic* (1875) is perhaps the most unlikely candidate in the whole of American art history to emerge as an emblem of civic pride (fig. 8). It is large, dark, and gory. The painting's dramatic effects are generated by the horrifying juxtaposition of the patient's body—naked, vulnerable, sliced open—against the calm, reasoned, patriarchal authority displayed by Dr. Gross. Blood glistens on his scalpel. His assistants pry open the flesh of the nameless person on the table. The wound yawns open, like a mouth. The surgical theater is crowded; the surgical table is surrounded. The atmosphere is claustrophobic, nightmarish. At the center of the drama, Dr. Gross and his students use their surgical

such criticism is of course grounded in disciplinary discourse organized around the exclusion of popular culture and the methodologies developed around its analysis (e.g., cultural studies, sociology, ethnography). Noise figures in Suarez's work as a representational subject, as a thing figured within artworks. I am using *noisy* as a term to describe the disruptive, antisciplinary nature of certain artworks themselves.

- 33 McClarey, "The Politics of Silence and Sound," 157.
- 34 In fact when I told curators and art historians that I was writing a book about difficulty and contemporary art, they universally assumed that I was writing about minimalism. Minimalist sculpture can be notoriously hard to get, but it has nevertheless inspired a wide range of terrific writing and enjoys much support from art institutions. Art historians, in fact, love minimalism's difficulty. The challenges it poses seem to be good for us: it makes us think about "objectness" and space. It can make us feel questions of scale in our bodies and consider form qua form. It must be understood in relation to the history of genre and in the context of the critical debates that have unfolded around it.
- 35 Julie Tolentino, personal correspondence with the author, September 2011.
- 36 In Athey's words, "I feel differently about how the show went in Minneapolis from how I read it in print—I still feel like it was a good show, it was well received, and included a better than excellent post-performance discussion. I've been told that [the performance, not the controversy] was something that 'was waiting to happen'" (Steger, interview, 8).
- 37 Ron Athey, "Artist's Commentary," performance program, Patrick's Cabaret, Minneapolis, 5 March 1994.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Writing by people who have attended performances by Athey and his company abounds with descriptions of people fainting, but those accounts also marvel at the fact that many of those people stay with the performance when they come to. The performance studies scholar John Edward McGrath described his own fainting spell as "like that of a religious possession" ("Trusting in Rubber," 37).

2. Three Case Studies

- 1 In the past, Karen Finley has taken on abortion and reproductive rights across a range of her performances and installations, as in the twinned installation *Memento Mori* (1992–94). The "Women's Room" portion of that exhibit featured controversial works like *The Virgin Mary Is Pro-Choice* and positioned the fight for reproductive freedom as parallel with the fight against AIDS. In general, recent scholarship about abortion and art focuses on feminist artists who trouble the distinctions drawn between art and activism by raising awareness, distributing educational information, and even facilitating women's access to abortion. *Woman on the Waves*, for example, is a Dutch activist organization that sends a small ship to locations around the world to offer abortion services to women in

countries that severely restrict their access to birth control and pregnancy termination. Their work bears a strong resemblance to AIDS activist projects that used the creative expertise of members to both raise awareness about homophobia and HIV/AIDS and to educate and offer services to the local communities; as these artists did so, they used visual and performance-based actions to imagine other possibilities to the world within which they worked. As Carrie Lambert Beatty explains in her essay on the group, *Woman on the Waves* "tacks between art and politics in much the same way it moves between actual human rights mission and media-political campaign, legality and piracy, fact and myth" ("Twelve Miles," 316). It is a cutting-edge example of the most visible way that feminist artists engage abortion through activism and consciousness-raising. Without taking away from either the material opposition to their project or the interestingness of such work as a practice that breaks down boundaries between art and political action and that embodies the ethos of collaborative and relational art practices within art criticism, it is also perhaps one of the most socially sanctioned ways an artist might take up this particular topic. We know how to talk about this kind of work, as a form of activism, as a form of participation within specific communities. See also Crimp, *AIDS Demo Graphics*, for a comprehensive map of the political actions staged by *Gran Fury* and other AIDS art activist groups. The book invites readers to adopt the strategies they used and to reproduce the images included in the book.

2 Ludlow, "The Things We Cannot Say," 32, 33.

3 So, for example, in a pro-abortion film like *Four Months, Three Weeks, and Two Days* (Cristian Mungiu, 2007) the pregnant woman seeking an illegal abortion (Gabriela) is represented as a helpless baby, even as the film makes clear that in Romania during this period the most basic forms of contraception had been criminalized. Gabriela's pregnancy is presented as the result of her passive relation to the world. The protagonist of the film is not the pregnant woman, but Otilia, the highly competent, savvy friend who takes care of Gabriela (and is raped by the abortionist for her troubles). The pregnant woman is thus represented as a child-like screw-up. The moral center is anchored in the friend's mothering of the abortive woman. These protocols regarding representations of unwanted pregnancy articulate themselves largely around the policing of affect—a mandate that the offending woman produce the proper amount of regret, incompetence, and apology. Motherhood is recovered symbolically in a story about how a woman takes care of her friends.

4 Details of Shvarts's project are from her statement about the project cited in Martine Powers, "For Senior, Abortion a Medium for Art, Political Discourse," *Yale Daily News*, 18 April 2008. Shvarts has also written about this performance in "Figuration and Failure, Pedagogy and Performance."

5 Email discussion with the artist, June 2008.

6 The deployment of ambiguity as a means of denaturalizing reproductive ideology and its hold on the body is not unheard of in visual work about abortion. In

her analysis of Aline Mare's experimental video *S'Aline's Solution* (1991), for example, Valerie Hartouni traces how the artist asks if "what are, in effect, pro-life representations, meanings, and practices [can] be (re)deployed and oppositionally infected to tell precisely the kind of story their deployment has otherwise worked to silence" ("Fetal Exposure," 199). Mare poses this question in a surprising way: her video layers the soundtrack of a female voice repeating "I choose, I chose, I have chosen" and images that make us feel that we are "spectators to an apparent real-time [saline] abortion from what we are encouraged to view as the unmediated view of the victim" (202). The video's opening sequence sets the framework through which we read the rest of the video—a poetic meditation on loss, birth, and motherhood. That first image sequence, however, is a cinematic record not of the biospace of a saline abortion but of male ejaculation; learning this forces an interrogation of "what images 'are,' and what they 'mean'" (210). Hartouni explains: "What permits us to read ejaculation as a violent, traumatic, distinctly unnatural rupture of natural processes is not only our general illiteracy with respect to the functioning of bodies—this is to be expected. It is our illiteracy coupled with powerful, prior notions and anxieties themselves shaped by a larger public discourse and culture of abortion about what the practice is, means, and entails" (208).

Shvarts works in similar territory when she scrambles biopolitical narratives about the female body in a deliberate refusal of "the contemporary grammar and culture of abortion" (Hartouni, "Fetal Exposure," 209). Where Mare makes her critique of that grammar by underscoring "the conspicuous absence of . . . the gestating body in contemporary renderings" of abortion (209), Shvarts insists on placing the body back in the story in order to explore its disruptive effects. The attempt to stage this conversation about the artist's body proved controversial.

- 7 Shvarts, "Figuration and Failure, Pedagogy and Performance."
- 8 Charlie Finch does in his short article "Mission Aborted," *Artnet*, 18 May 2008.
- 9 Klasky's statement as well as my description of the administration's negotiations with Shvarts are taken from Zachary Abrahamson, Thomas Kaplan, and Martine Powers, "Shvarts, Yale, Clash over Project," *Yale Daily News*, 18 April 2008. There is ambiguity in the public record of the project over whether Shvarts actually went through the process she describes, in part because the project was interrupted, and so we do not even know how Shvarts might have presented documentation of the performance. We have perhaps a discursive version of Haley Newman's series of "Performance Photographs" which document performances that never happened (and indeed hide this fact from the viewer). But Newman's own statement anchors our understanding of those photographs as fictional. No such ground is given here. I choose to bypass the question of what really happened to focus on what *did* happen: the near universal condemnation of the whole enterprise.
- 10 Cited in Catherine Donaldson-Evans, "Yale to Cancel Controversial 'Abortion Art' Exhibit Unless Student Admits It's Fiction," 21 April 2008, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,351984,00.html>.

- 11 Shvarts has since written a scholarly essay on the controversy: "Figuration and Failure, Pedagogy and Performance."
- 12 The performance compares nicely, for example, with Leslie Labowitz's *Menstruation Wait* (1971). She describes the performance as follows: "I wrote on a poster that I was waiting for my period, and if anyone wanted to come talk to me, I'd be in my studio." She was almost kicked out of the master's program at Otis for this piece. "They had a meeting with me—all men, of course—there was no woman on the faculty." Cited in Phelan, *Live Art in LA*, 84–85.
- 13 Cited in Samantha Broussard-Wilson, "Reaction to Shvarts: Outrage, Shock, Disgust," *Yale Daily News*, 18 April 2008. Nearly one in four pregnancies end in miscarriage; the obfuscation of this fact reproduces the affective protocols that require all interruptions of pregnancy to be emotional disasters.
- 14 Personal correspondence with Aliza Shvarts, December 2010.
- 15 Stevens, *Reproducing the State*, 210.
- 16 Deutschler, "The Inversions of Exceptionality," 63. See also Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice*.
- 17 Cited in Deutschler, "The Inversions of Exceptionality," 63.
- 18 For scholarship that steps outside the regulation of narratives of abortion to consider how women narrate their own experiences with abortion, see Alvaros, "Hindsight and the Abortion Experience." Expanding feminist sociological work on this topic, Alvaros explores the fluidity and complexity with which women narrate their experience of abortion and how those narratives shift for some women over time. Those narratives can be read as divided by the narrator's identification with what abortion makes possible or what it negates. Much feminist art about abortion navigates this narrative tension between past, present, and future.
- 19 Some of the details regarding this incident are taken from conversations with the instructor, Ron Athey, November 2006.
- 20 Kastner, "Gun Shy."
- 21 Blocker, *What the Body Cost*, 113, 108, 113.
- 22 Stabile, "Shooting the Mother," 172, 173.
- 23 Hartouni, "Fetal Exposures," 213.
- 24 Rose, "Mothers and Authors." See also Wiegman, "Intimate Publics," which discusses a similar case with important complications (the surrogacy was unintentional and cross-racial).
- 25 Poovey, "The Abortion Question and the Death of Man," 242.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 249.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 252.
- 28 Doyle, *Sex Objects* and "Sex, Scandal, and Thomas Eakins's *Gross Clinic*."
- 29 See Fried, *Realism, Writing, and Disfiguration* for a discussion of this woman's symbolic role as one figure for castration among many offered by this painting.
- 30 In the words of one *New York Tribune* critic, "It is a picture that even strong men find it difficult to look at long, if they can look at it at all; as for people with nerves and stomachs, the scene is so real that they might as well go to a dissecting