

LUCID GESTURES

An Exhibition of Barnard Alumnae



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McCagg Gallery, Diana Center 4th Floor
Barnard College, New York

Curated by Vanessa Thill and Eunice Yooni Kim
for Barnard College's 125th Anniversary

Introduction

Vanessa Thill

Bobbing in the sand with its concrete buoys, a floating rectangle appeared in my dream. It was Kate Ryan's *Waikiki Screen*, entirely grey, like an old war photograph, pitching tent or sailing out to sea. A past and future screen on a beach, with thin cables tethered to heavy chunks—the frame could swivel and square up with our frame: the edges of the photograph. Ryan has pulled back and to the side, giving us a view of the structure, becoming a metaphor for itself and how it exists.

Ryan's frame reminds me that no architecture is weightless, no being survives without networks of support. I am a graduate of 2013, and I've spent the past year trying to transition to a different system, perplexed at the idea of integrating creative production into a working life. At first I thought it would be easy. I got a great job working in a brand new gallery and I decided to rent a dedicated studio space. But while doing PR for commercial exhibitions and without anywhere to show my own work, I soon realized I wanted to create non-commercial exhibition opportunities for myself and other young artists. So I did a series of shows in a now defunct multi-purpose arts space and helped with a few pop-up shows. In May, the gallery closed, and my old friend and classmate Eunice Kim and I thought of investigating what other alumnae were doing in the arts, and how they got to the various impressive professional levels they had achieved. We began thinking more abstractly about methodology, the study of how things occur.

Scientific models have been useful for shaping our discussions, partly as a way to distance ourselves from overly rhetorical art speak. The idea of the case study became a motivating concept for this exhibition because a language of concrete examples reveals human concerns and can indicate features of a larger landscape. I pictured zooming in and then stepping back, knowing that this project itself, bringing together disparate elements, is one small example in a multitude of even more heterogeneous practices. In an arena of such tremendous scale, focus is not just essential but practical. What we landed on in this experiment is an investigation of paradigms—models that we use to navigate expanses of the unknown and unknowable, ways to make sense of large impersonal forces. Science historian Thomas Kuhn initiated this meaning of paradigm when he referred to “universally recognized scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions for a community of practitioners.” His ideas caused controversy by asserting that the notion of scientific truth fluctuates and is defined by consensus rather than by pure objectivity.

A paradigm literally refers to a set of exemplary scientific experiments, leading to

¹ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 10.

the formation of shared preconceptions. These models of knowledge condition the future collection of evidence. In scientific as in cultural fields, evidence accumulates to create historical narratives structured by growing layers of presumptions. Paradigms become problematic when they are regarded as absolutes. The belief in women's inferiority, for instance, is a false representation of reality on which much of the world's organization is based. As female cultural producers, we may bump up against worldviews that obstruct us. For "well-integrated" members of a discipline or society, its paradigms are so convincing as to be considered crisp truth, obscuring any alternative imageries. But as was the case for the geocentric model, paradigms shift. A drastic perceptual change occurs when an alternative suddenly becomes visible. The world requires a major paradigm shift in its treatment of women, in the workplace, streets, home, creative spaces, media, and global humanitarian efforts.

Feminism is often about doubt. It is the struggle to overcome persistent doubt in women's abilities. I'm still trying to figure out where and how this fight is being waged. It is not a given that women are audible and credible in societies around the world, and this has devastating effects for women's internal belief in themselves. Women are fighting on two fronts, as Rebecca Solnit writes in her essay "Men Explain Things to Me," when they are "told that they are not reliable witnesses to their own lives, that the truth is not their property."¹ But they are the *only* reliable witnesses to their own lives, and truth is no one's property.

Our lives are our case studies, and our activities—our work—will be our research. After all, meaning is built up from the ground until it becomes bigger than the eye can see. We found an impetus in Chris Kraus' lucid writing style of incisive observations drawn from her lived experience. "'I want to own everything that happens to me now,' I told you. 'Because if the only material we have to work with in America is our own lives, shouldn't we be making case studies?'"³ You'll find an excerpt from Kraus' book, *I Love Dick*. Kraus overturns the padded-room parameters of the personal. As Eileen Myles writes in her introduction, "*I Love Dick* boldly suggests that Chris Kraus' unswervingly attempted and felt female life is a total work" *and* she went on living.⁴

The artworks in this exhibition can be seen as case studies in shifting paradigms. They are not simply the beautiful products of imaginative minds. These works challenge us. They challenge certainty about positionality and linear narrative, faith in signage and commodity, seeming coherence of photographic images and fixity of landscape, and the "appropriate" realms of women. Through their very existence, they provide examples of thoughtful creative work produced despite various odds. The goal of this project is recognition: of contingencies and contexts, of diverse experiences, and of women's real accomplishments through hard work, starting from the common ground we have as artists and writers, and as Barnard graduates. Once you see that something can be done, suddenly everything opens up. As curator Chus Martinez writes, "the futuring of the self need[s] strategies and certain aesthetics, as well as ways to represent these, to make them visible."⁵ This is where art becomes instrumental for instantiating the future, stroke by stroke.

² Rebecca Solnit. "Men Explain Things to Me." 2012.

³ Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), 155.

⁴ Eileen Myles, "What About Chris?" in *I Love Dick* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), 15.

⁵ Chus Martinez, "What is Art?" in *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, ed. Jens Hoffman (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2013), 49.

This exhibition is the product of many types of work. It may be long hours in the studio with a pencil or brush, a computer or camera. It may be physical scrubbing, in the case of Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Sara Grace Powell, creative research disguised as office work in the case of Christina Kelly, or devotion to an image like Lizzy DeVita's redheads. A great deal of work was done on the part of writers who contributed thoughtful new texts for this volume. This show is organized with attention to the way that an insistence on specificity also sets into motion a dramatization of macro-level paradigms. Ryan's photograph, for me an emblem of the show, indicates the fragility of the monolith and its hidden networks of support.

The artists' widely varying approaches to topics and materials have in common the determination to create and to interrogate their forms. Louise McCagg's piece, *Thousands of Years*, maps different elements across a gridded field punctuated by gaps, lines of text, photo fragments and shrunken cast figures. There was no art department when she attended Barnard, but that did not stop her from learning heavy duty metal casting and sculpture fabrication. A strong-willed approach to materials and production techniques is also characteristic of Lara Saget's sculpture. Her whitewashed train circles a bare track, lacking any markers of location or progress. The perpetual orbit of the train riffs on the ambivalence of hand production and technological progress, forming a small-scale metaphor of paradoxical perseverance. The loop is also central to Emily Weiner's paintings. Her paintings of a couples' gravestone and the wreath she wore at her sister's wedding were created nearly a year apart, yet their composition is resolutely similar, creating a cyclical history that is both personal and allegorical.

Erica Baum also challenges linear narrative in her *Naked Eye* series that looks in toward the spines of partially open books. It becomes apparent that the binding of a book is itself a paradigm, and the idea that the spine can hold together a multiplicity of knowledge in a singular order is exploded by Baum's piercing view. Books and maps are often presumed to present data in a true and unmediated form. The way modern subjects navigate space is itself a kind of reading, a movement that has a rhythm. This is a primary concern of Dahlia Elsayed, poet and painter who plotted lyrical moments of her day across imagined continents in *Start of the Pre-Season*, with language that is simultaneously abstract and unerringly specific.

Annabel Daou's accumulation of language occurred over a fixed period of two days, during which she inscribed every imaginable thing that could be for sale. The first item on the block in this epic poem of commodities is "women," setting a provocative tone for the maelstrom of things for sale that follow. Her other piece in this exhibition is another language-based experiment in which she asked people on the street "*which side are you on?*" The resulting audio records poignant moments of identification in downtown Manhattan during Occupy, amidst spatial-political upheaval. The question seems to presuppose a stark dichotomy yet the host of different answers reveals infinite positions. In her diptych called *Work*, Sarah Charlesworth also constructs a binary in order to break it. Formally resembling a photographic positive and negative, magic sits opposite of manual labor, emblemized by magazine clippings. Charlesworth's artistic labor in creating the piece reflects the third type of work, itself becoming a commodity as an art object.

Margaret Lee's warped furniture collaboration with Michele Abeles derides phony home décor marketed to women. *The World is Not Your Oyster (Lemons and Lime Table)* falls in between sculpture and image, real and fake, hand-crafted and digitally manipulated. Ubiquitously kitschy fake fruit are realistically hand-rendered in plaster, disobediently domestic as they prop up a slanting tabletop that buckles under the image's impossible weight. Beyond her studio practice, Lee directs the gallery, 47 Canal, which speaks to her ability to

skillfully maneuver different roles. Christina Kelly reflects on working life and the creative process in her self-reflexive *Field Guide to Office Plants*, a book that tells the story of a woman working in an office who becomes intrigued by the Sansevieria plant. Interwoven with the narrative are Kelly's historical findings in the form of drawings and notes, research she worked on at her own office job. Another study of work and its societal ramifications comes in the form of Anna Liang's audio diptych. Liang's recorded fragments of herself performing superficial and stereotypically female conversation mimic the exaggerated style of a reality TV show. In contrast, male voices candidly expound on their opinions of privilege as Liang listens quietly. The layers of learned social behaviors heard here raise questions of class and aspirations for recognition, bringing the discussion of human concerns to a wider scope.

Interrogating creative labor has proved important to many of the artists and writers in the exhibition. Mierle Laderman Ukeles' performance series from 1973 may be familiar to Barnard alumnae from art history lectures: she mopped the steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum, scrubbed the floors, dusted the vitrines, locked and unlocked doors. On view in the gallery is a never-before exhibited image from *Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside*, in which her husband and child can be seen in the background. Her performance of banal maintenance activities boldly demonstrates the structural connection between the public and private. She writes, "I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (Random order). I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I 'do' Art. Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art."⁶

Sara Grace Powell's video documents a performance inspired by Ukeles' washing of the museum, taking this gesture directly to painting's rarefied surface. Grounded by a highly skeptical approach to humanism, Powell set out to investigate the absurdity of purity in art through this performance of relentless scrubbing. Her installation makes use of the same canvas she was unable to keep eternally clean. The temporal heft of Lizzy DeVita's drawings of a mysterious redheaded girl becomes apparent when they gather on the wall, bound together in space, their slight variations indicating the artist's hours and hours of labor. Indeed this work is equally a performance and a series of drawings, the production of this image en masse maps the artist's activities across time through dozens of not-quite-identical copies.

Marina Zurkow takes experiential focus to an expanded field. Her temporal-spatial delimitation is one year in Wink, Texas, where an ever-growing sinkhole in the oilfields is depicted as a digitally simulated ecosystem. Mysterious grey steam rises from the water and HazMat-suited figures crawl around the rocks in this ever-recombining animated enclosure, a fast-forwarding apocalyptic world. Ada Potter's *Ice Field* derives from a creative commons image of an iceberg, the quintessential symbol of anxiety. Here, environmental anxiety of rapid degradation is coupled with apprehension of the uncontrollable high-speed circulation of imagery. She confronts the viewer with interdiction by fragmenting the image. Her personal investment in this representation is made opaque—all that the viewer sees are intimate sections that halt symbolic meaning and necessitate a slower gaze.

The texts contained in this catalog, with the exception of the Kraus excerpt and the interview between Melanie Kress and Joan Snitzer, were all generated specifically for

⁶ Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Maintenance Art Manifesto," 1969.

this show. It should come as no surprise that Barnard alumnae are strong writers, whether or not they pursue studio art, many are engaged in art writing and curating. We asked 10 writers to use first person perspective in their essays, and to think about paradigms or accepted notions that they confront in their lives, and what networks give them agency. Many of the writers used personal narratives to critically examine their own relationships to institutions of power. Without knowing it, the writers hit on very similar themes; taken as a whole, a strong argument is made, urging us to reconsider our notions of creative work and its implications for identity categories and corporeal lives. Chloe Wyma, Melanie Kress, Andrea Metz, and Julia Caston suggest contingencies and redefinitions of creative labor in their own lives and in social structures around them that produce value. Ashton Cooper critiques the way women artists are described in the media and urges the recognition of material realities that produce and reproduce inequality. Insightful observations about motherhood, working life, feminism, creative projects, and new definitions of success are peppered throughout this publication from many different points of view.

We asked these artists and writers to confront their own structures and to consider their work as vastly important for each other as a community of practitioners. As Germaine Greer has said, “confrontation is political awareness.”⁷ My goal for this exhibition, and for all exhibitions I produce, is to create a meaningful encounter between individuals. I have been astounded by the talents and accomplishments of the women involved in this exhibition. It is all the more promising that their works and their ways of working—the specificities of their lives and practices—differ dramatically. So many inspiring examples demonstrate what I should have suspected all along: that there is no singular way to do things, that conviction and hard work give rise to possibilities in countless configurations.

⁷ Germaine Greer, *The Madwoman's Underclothes* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990), 28.