

# ON THE NEW MUSEUM

New Work Gallery • **Girls Night Out (Femininity as Masquerade)**

WorkSpace • **Installation by Félix González-Torres**

September 16—November 20, 1988

## GIRLS NIGHT OUT (FEMININITY AS MASQUERADE)

*What is... [the little girl]? The conception of womanliness as a mask, behind which man suspects some hidden danger, throws a little light on the enigma.*

—JOAN RIVIERE

What constitutes feminine identity? "Girls Night Out" is an inquiry into the theme of femininity as it informs recent practices in the visual arts. Thinking about femininity as it intersects with art involves theorizing about femininity. "Girls Night Out" engages with theory insofar as my own thinking is concerned; the exhibition, however, is less solicitous of the interests of theory than it is engaged with the attributes of femininity—with what can be construed to be a feminine discourse, a feminine operation.

The topic of femininity has been charted in large part by the discourse of psychoanalysis, which took as its founding object of study, the discourse of women themselves. Freud's theories, however, have seemed none too "friendly," as Freud himself forecasted. "That is all I had to say to you about femininity," he wrote in his final essay on the issue. "It is certainly incomplete and fragmentary and does not always sound friendly. . . . If you want to know more about femininity, enquire from your own experiences of life. . . ." As reread and redeployed by the controversial analyst Jacques Lacan (whose return to Freud's texts involves a reinterpretation of psychoanalytic theory through modern linguistics), Freud's theory of

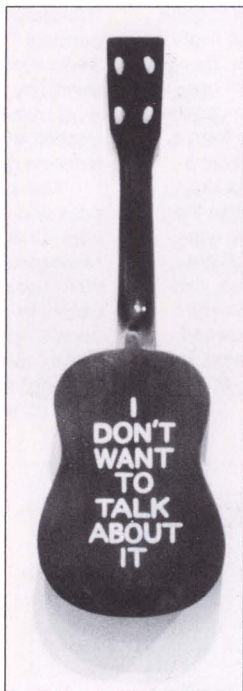
femininity seems to have grown less friendly yet. Lacan's imperiousness, particularly with women, is legendary. But what a response from women these writings have received!

"To designate Lacan at his most stimulating and forceful is to call him something more than just phallogocentric. He is also phallo-eccentric. Or, in more pointed language, he is a prick," writes Jane Gallop.<sup>2</sup>

One of Lacan's most sensitive readers, Gallop has been at pains to point out the eccentricity of his stance, its theatricality. Flaunting his desire, Lacan subverts the authority of the patriarchal position and aligns himself instead, peculiarly enough, through the theatricality with the feminine.

Psychoanalysis has given rise to an array of discourses of women. Clamorous, vociferous, or lyrical theorizing; acid denunciations; theoretically inflected film and art—all are part of the body of feminine discourses generated in response to the writing of Lacan. One of this dialogue's most interesting lessons has been that femininity is not a thing, like a tree, or a species, like willow or ash, but a set of gestures, an effect of our constitution and mobilization in language, an operation that is always shifting in the field of sexual difference. Perhaps it is this, the process of coming to an understanding of femininity on these terms, which has

loosened the tongues of so many women in their diverse responses to Lacanian theory, and is loosening them in the course of the ensuing and on-going dialogue. "Girls Night Out" takes its cue from this dialogue, from a particularly incendiary issue that lies at the heart of the discourses on/of femininity: the masquerade.



Meg Cranston, *I don't want to talk about it*, 1987, oil paint and wood, 32" x 9" x 3"

Suggested in 1929 by the analyst Joan Riviere, the notion of femininity as masquerade was subsequently taken up by Lacan and has received a range of responses. The masquerade draws inferences from Freud's texts as to the difficulty of femininity: the precariousness of sexuality itself, which is to say of "identity" as formed in the child's itinerary through bisexuality to sexual difference, is carried over onto the feminine position. Riviere's thesis is stated in the text "Womanliness as a Masquerade": "The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing." There is no genuine womanliness, or femininity, but only "masquerading in a feminine guise."<sup>3</sup>

The question then would seem to become: what is it that is masquerading in the guise of femininity? The answer is far from simple. To say "masculinity" or "a non-identity" is to frame the question of femininity in the terms "what is woman?," and thereby forget the lesson that femininity is not a thing, like a tree. The notion of identity must once more be subjected to an act of what might be called affirmative deconstruction, by way of which femininity becomes a set of gestures, an effect. The theory of the masquerade shifts the question of femininity from a search after identity to an inquiry about a given woman's discourse—what it is like, how it functions, where it stands within the field of history, language, and social relations. The works in "Girls Night Out" are engaged in a parallel project. That is, they speculate on the specificity of a feminine operation, whether or not this speculation manifests as a subject matter or theme, but only perhaps as a working method, or process, or style.



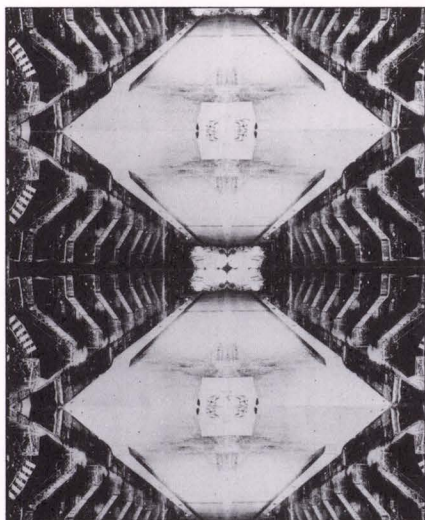
Rona Pondick, *Shoes* (detail), 1988, mixed media

Riviere's case study reveals a profound anxiety inhabiting femininity concerning the public display of speech, as if discourse were the rightful property of masculinity alone. Meg Cranston's *I don't want to talk about it* speaks volumes to this theme.

The work places itself in direct relation to the tradition of the female nude. By reference to the Cubist practice of using the guitar or cello to signify "female nude," Cranston's *I don't want to talk about it* puts its finger on a sticking point in modernism, a place where the signifier (here, guitar for "the tradition of the female nude") seems stuck to its referent. This sticking point, "sexual difference," is more specifically identified as "woman as the site of truth" (which Cranston's work makes clear). This place (woman as the site of truth) has a long and revered history, not restricted to the fine arts. Philosophy too partakes of this tradition, or even stalks this very ground for the foundation of its edifices. Patrolling the borderlines of this place (woman as the site of truth) is the law of genre, variant of the law of gender, which reads: "Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres," and translates into: "Genders are not to be mixed. I will not mix genders."<sup>4</sup> Cranston's *I don't want to talk about it* mixes genres and genders in one fell swoop by combining the written/spoken word, orthodox genre of the masculine gender, with the figure of the female nude, feminine genre *par excellence*.

Men paint, create, and write; women pose and inspire truth. This particular site of truth (Cranston's guitar) is engaging in a maneuver that refuses to play by the "site of truth" rules: turned to the wall, the guitar cannot be played; at the same time, of course, "she" emits a message—a message of "her" own. But this message is finally "nothing" (the guitar doesn't want to talk about it), the nothing of the stubborn sticking point of sexual difference, carried over onto the figure of woman. Ultimately, this mystery of woman is the mystery of language itself: there is "nothing" there, only insofar as I have put it there; there's nothing there except as it exists in an act of personification. I am giving voice to Meg Cranston's guitar. This requires a leap of faith. Only culture, the strata of tradition and representation, supports my finding this message there. The site of truth, flashing its status as a speaking subject, simultaneously flashing its opacity, pulls the rug out from under my reliance on "her" silence to uphold the truth of my interpretation: the site of truth falls back on me.





Tina Potter, *Patterns of Destruction #5* (detail), 1988, black and white photograph

Masquerading as a mute and effectively feminine object, Cranston's guitar in its mode of "speech" has the structure of a symptom whose articulation and elaboration is entrusted to the viewer. Similarly, the hysteric chokes up; her "meaning" is entrusted to the analyst; instead of speaking, she *symptomatizes*. Why?

Marilyn Minter's *Mattress (Sleep)* and *Tasks #3* are concerned with that place between anatomy and destiny where sexual roles are encoded. *Mattress (Sleep)* spells out the operation at work in the artist's pink-and-blue gender-coded canvases. Minter is explicitly playing with the Lacanian diagram of twin doors labeled "Ladies" and "Gentlemen," that depicts sexual difference as the imperative to take up a position on one or the other side of the sexual dividing line. This division is instituted by "castration," and is conceived in spatial terms. "It does not divide itself into places, it divides the places — institutes them."<sup>5</sup> The object depicted (here, the mattresses) has a different name ("Queen" or "King") depending on where you stand; the sexed subject only sees the other side. In either case the image represents the lost object of desire.

Where *Mattress (Sleep)* portrays the positionality of sexual difference, *Tasks #3* demonstrates the distortions that inevitably inhabit such a skewed gaze. If "pink" names a place in space (here, the driveway of domesticity), that place is also defined by the attribute of "not having," which is to say no attribute at all. If the aim of the masquerade is, in the words of Michèle Montrelay, "to say nothing. Absolutely *nothing*," it is the means by which a woman takes up a position on the "pink" side of the divide—a way for the attribute "not having" to fashion a signifier of its own.<sup>6</sup>

Two works in "Girls Night Out" explicitly address the theme of castration. In her *Body and Soul*, Cranston again takes up an ordinary object, a barber pole, endowed by tradition with the value of sexual difference. Through her choice of colors, Cranston gives the privileged sign of anatomical difference a sickening spin. It is a deliriously melancholic object (placed near the men's room at the artist's request) that incessantly asks the question, "Where is your phallus?" *Lose anything?* Or is the phallus always out of reach?

With Alison Saar's *Salome* and Rona Pondick's *Velvet Bed* and *he,he,he*, the viewer's engagement with the artwork shifts toward the dimension of the imaginary, of the phantasmatic, of the dream. Dreams, according to Freud, are made up of the day's residue of images, filched by the working process of the dream (dreamwork) and invested with an unconscious content. Traces of the dreamwork at work always remain: opaque places and odd locutions evident, for example, in Saar's use of found materials and in Pondick's jarring juxtapositions of form, materials, and content indivisibly bound up as one. This fusion of form and content in an opaque figure is the substance of the dream. The dream ultimately is to go on dreaming. Beneath the mask, then, of the day's residues lies only more dreamwork at work, the desire for a desire (to go on dreaming). This desire to have a desire has been designated by Lacan as the fundamental condition of femininity.

It is into this highly charged, theatrical, and ambivalent dimension of deep dreamwork, or the imaginary, that Aimee Rankin's assemblage boxes beguile the viewer. The perspectival anchor has been hauled up, and the viewer loses herself, caught up and sent on endless rounds, riding the excess of information as it unfolds in the circular sweep of her gaze. Digital clocks placed incrementally around the scenes exert, as if directly onto the body, the rhythm of a pulse. Rankin's work maps out an area of intense concentration and controversy in the discourses on/of femininity, that of the feminine engagement, or even entanglement, with the maternal body, or *corps*.

*The Game* and *The Embrace*, both from the "Atrocities" series, function as a pair — the first depicting the incursion of a dark sexuality (that is, as if from outside), the second positing pleasure in its mystical guise. Each on its own, however, also binds together defilement with the mesmerizing, which articulates a pleasure or *jouissance*, that is no longer pure, but operates (one might say) beyond the pleasure principle.

Tina Potter's series of works *Patterns of Destruction* also traverses the regions of an impure *jouissance*, but in a radically different register from that of Rankin. Instead of a

boundless bodily sensorium (woman's confusion with the maternal *corps*), pleasure in Potter's work taps the interests of chaos and destruction. Potter's photographs of photo collages composed of reproductions of small sections of found photographs seem to press on that opaque place of the dream-work where the figural fusion of form and content gives way to utter uncertainty. In the play between the beauty of abstraction (the works as seen from a distance) and the gruesomeness or eeriness of the depicted scenes (the works as legible up close), the viewer is caught in a free fall of suspended sense. The patterns act as stitches exerting coherence against the abyss of uncertainty, indicating the site of a trauma, the violent incursion of, and capitulation into, history.

Cranston's *Inconsolable* and Susan Silas' *Lolita's classmates: he knew them by heart*, each in a very different way, speak to and commemorate the site of an implied trauma. *Inconsolable* seems haunted by an almost forgotten femininity, tightly woven and worn away: a melancholy placed in the past. *Lolita's classmates* considers femininity in terms of its wholly fictional status. Where is Lolita, how does she come to stand? Who is Lolita? A figure of language. The feminine operation here forgets femininity "in itself." Posing as a flagrantly *fake* femininity, it functions as nothing other than "a desire to have a desire."

Femininity takes up its position in language with reference to castration, but it is an ambivalent and perhaps altogether artful relation — a masquerade. In Susan Silas' *Mantelpiece*, for example, there is a play between the word ("mantel") and the thing (antlers) that, thanks to the linguistic prehistory of the term "mantelpiece," links antlers to the act of a covering up. The antlers take on the function of a mask, and the value of, well, of a cod piece. But is it a masculine or a feminine "thing"? Is it a fetish? If it is a fetish, is it one which articulates a feminine specificity, enabling the feminine function to take its stand? This question of a feminine fetish remains an area requiring further research. Pondick's work also situates itself here, in a peculiar reworking of the fetishizing function, which, inverting itself, emerges as the operation of the masquerade.

Be that as it may, and wherever one ultimately comes down on the issue of "castration," there can be no doubt that the Lacanian dialogue has encouraged the emergence of a host of practices and discourses of femininity. These discourses, specifically feminine, intentionally *other* in their inflection, address themselves to what Gayatri Spivak has termed "the re-inscription of the Imaginary."<sup>7</sup> In the words of Catherine Clément, "that is precisely what the feminist project is

all about: to change the imaginary in order to be able to act on the real, to change the very forms of language which by its structure and history has been subject to a law that is patrilinear, therefore masculine."<sup>8</sup> Epitomizing the feminine operation, the masquerade poses a particularly interesting conundrum in the field of the visual arts: to be for a feminist practice that would *refuse the refusal* of the "feminine," of the figural and the tactile, that has been (and continues to be) an important device in gaining distance on masculinist structures of engagement and presentation. To be for femininity on these terms flaunts the law of sexual difference which in one form reads: "Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres." In mixing theory with art, the real risk will be to question theory's presumption of priority, in which case the site of truth falls back onto the practices promulgated by you and me.

### Laura Trippi

Assistant Curator

### NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, "Femininity," *New Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1965), p. 119.
2. Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), p. 36.
3. Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 10 (1929); reprinted in *Formations of Fantasy*, Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan, editors (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 38.
4. See Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," *Glyph 7* (Baltimore: The Johns University Press, 1980): pp. 176-232.
5. Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Le Titre de la lettre* (Paris: Galilée, 1973), p. 46.
6. Michèle Montrelay, "Inquiry into Femininity," translated by Parveen Adams, *m/f*, no. 1 (1978), pp. 83-101; reprinted in *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*, Toril Moi, editor (London and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 239.



7. Gayatri Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame," *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuan, 1987), p. 145.

8. Catherine Clément, quoted in Spivak, *ibid.*

## ARTISTS AND WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

### MEG CRANSTON

lives in California.

*I don't want to talk about it*, 1987

Oil paint, wood

32" x 9" x 3"

*Inconsolable*, 1988

Satin, acrylic, canvas

19" x 15"

*Body and Soul*, 1988

Electronic barber pole, acrylic, glass

28" x 6" x 8"

### MARILYN MINTER

lives in New York City.

*Mattress (Sleep)*, 1987

Enamel on canvas

17" x 36"

*Tasks #3*, 1988

Enamel on canvas

triptych: each 27 1/2" x 39 1/2"

### RONA PONDICK

lives in New York City.

*Velvet Bed*, 1988

Wood, bronze, pillow

26" x 36" x 118"

*he, he, he*, 1988

Mixed media

13 1/2" x 12" x 86"

### TINA POTTER

lives in New York City.

*Patterns of Destruction #5*, 1988

Black-and-white photograph

41 1/2" x 32"

*Patterns of Destruction #8*, 1988

Black-and-white photograph

43" x 44"

### AIMEE RANKIN

lives in New York City.

*The Game*, 1988

from the "Atrocities" series

Mixed media assemblage with lights, motor, and sound

22 1/2" x 22 1/2" x 22 1/2"

*The Embrace*, 1988

from the "Atrocities" series

Mixed media assemblage with lights, motor, and sound

22 1/2" x 22 1/2" x 22 1/2"

### ALISON SAAR

lives in New York City.

*Salome*, 1988

Wood, copper, stone, paint

72" x 30" x 24"

### SUSAN SILAS

lives in New York City.

*Lolita's classmates: he knew them by heart*,

1988

Enamel on steel

8' x 4'

*Mantelpiece*, 1988

Oil, antlers, lead, wood

15 1/4" x 40 1/4" x 3 1/2"

with relief of 14"

### Acknowledgements:

The On View program is made possible, in part, through a generous grant from the Jerome Foundation, and by gifts to the Arthur Sahn Memorial Fund.

The individual views expressed in the exhibitions and publications are not necessarily those of the Museum.

Just Say No 1984 Just Say No 1985 Just  
Say No 1986 Just Say No 1987 Just Say No

Félix González-Torres *Just Say No* 1987  
acetate, wooden frame with glass, 11" x 14"

## INSTALLATION BY FÉLIX GONZÁLEZ-TORRES

*"A son brings in a large straw coaster woven with the black, red, green and white of the Palestinian flag. Under an Israeli military order, it is illegal on the West Bank to possess any object with these colors in proximity."*

—U.P.I. NEWS RELEASE

The work of Félix González-Torres is unassuming, to say the very least. Its unwillingness to occupy the gallery is everywhere present. Combining text panels, monochrome canvasses, and altered appropriated photographs of crowds, González-Torres' installation startles the viewer by its reticence, its utter lack of interest in the occupation of space.

What is the viewer to make of artwork that refuses to occupy the space of its own installation, in which she meets it head on, looking for the art? (How can she meet it head on when it's barely there?) Is this lack of occupation a device? The text panels, for example, refuse to occupy with images even the eye and mind of the beholder. There is blank space. There is a caption. For the rest, the viewer is on her own, left to her own devices. The device, then, is to leave the viewer to her own devices.

But she is not alone. If art is lurking in the installation's clock, it is barely visible. And yet it is there. The words and dates that seem to caption nothing at all harbor images, ideas, messages, indictments, interdictions, atrocities, whole histories. Prowling in the very letters themselves, and then in their

contiguity, their state of adjacency, are techniques and tools of persuasion whose exercise usually passes unremarked in the ease with which "meaning" is conveyed. In *Forbidden Colors*, the monochrome canvasses hung like laundry in a line, shift their frame of reference away from the art world. In the context of the occupied territories of the West Bank, these colors in proximity take on the syntax of a temporary tenancy in the extreme.

González-Torres' work is about occupation and

insinuation, about domination, about how meaning is effaced and made. In its refusal to occupy space in the sense of domination, it accomplishes two tasks. First, it quietly calls the space in question into question, setting up a situation in which the viewer becomes sensitized to occupation: the occupation of her mind by the media, of her body and mind by the urban environment (its techniques and spaces), of her being by daydreams, fantasies, expectations, and other foreign agents. (Of course, they are not foreign at all.) Facing the texts, she is confronted with a question mark and forced to fork over her meaning and memories, embarrassingly fragmentary and banal as they may be.

The caption reads "Center for Disease Control 1981 Streakers 1972 Go Go Boots 1965": repressive tolerance as far as she can see. The viewer squirms. Is this an interrogation? Is that a grainy, faded newsprint photo of a crowd? Or is it a diagram of HIV?

Occupation, insinuation, infiltration. The second task accomplished by this artwork is to encourage intervention in the production of culture at a very basic level. If occupation operates by infiltration, to be startled into seeing is to be asked to act. Through its reticence, González-Torres' art points up the discursive maneuvers at work in the fine art of occupation. How can she meet it head on when it's barely there? Yes, it is a grainy newsprint photo of a crowd, but also a diagram of HIV. There is finally a terrible and tender fear lurking in this work which will not go away.

**Laura Trippi**  
Assistant Curator

**FÉLIX GONZÁLEZ-TORRES**  
lives in New York City.