

What does a human need to feel whole and autonomous? Do these needs change as gender enters the picture? The attributes of a respected person: scepter and orb, crown and respectful distance, are these things to be reached for or things granted?

When they are granted to one, gendered female, these gifts seem bestowed ephemerally. Or, if earned and won, often are wrapped in a bag of salt. The attributes, handed down from sources to which one cannot apply for grant, are both necessary and elusive for the gender-challenged to move through the world as a person who has permission to feel autonomous. Are these bestowed allowances the things that give us agency, and if granted only through bestowal, are they not something other than agency after all?

And what follows once agency is earned, won, or granted? If granted, I would argue these are not agency but band-aids in the masquerade on the road to self-worth. Perhaps they are badges of honor won once worth has been granted by the Self, rather than by society? If we allow ourselves worth outside of officially recognized lauded ceremony,¹ how does society then know it afterwards, so they do not mistake us each for one who is without?

¹ We gather here today to acknowledge that though many cannot, she can, has and does, or did this one time, and though we generally avert our eyes, in this instance, though a woman, with this caveat, we allow her...



Where exactly does one procure this worth, and how does one keep it stuck, like a diploma on the wall, without having to push it in front of them as they walk down the street?

A woman struggles with an enormous mobile billboard through the deserted streets of Manhattan, her professional resume on one side, her “life’s accomplishments” on the other. She wrestles and wrangles it over curbs and down alleys, across broken sidewalks and wedges a

wheel against the curb in front of the bodega. She needs milk; they’ve run out.

The billboard doesn’t fit through the doors; its inconvenient chains slither through the portal, rasping. Marley is no help here, she trips over herself, almost

deftly negotiating the links as they wrap around the hanging banana stand. She accepts her change along with the look from the cashier. Clanging, she escapes as unnoticed as possible back to the street. Her billboard has been altered in her momentary absence... someone has erased part of one side and spray-painted

 *Bitch* 

on the other. She should know better than to leave the house with her worth.

No one likes a braggart. Another solution then.

This is the female problematic, first located by art historian Linda Nochlin: the canon of Art History has always seen the “Great Artist” as “Genius,” and history grants the attribute of “Genius” only to men. Artist as Genius in and of itself is an inherently problematic construct. Follow the antiquated gendered thinking and we have the Female Problematic, for women are (historically) of nature, not of mind. The history of art and of the world it represents, ladies and gentlemen, was written by the latter.

This concept was first launched into the art world’s consciousness by Linda Nochlin in her canon-challenging essay published in 1971, “Why Are There No Great Women Artists?” in *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, and later retitled as “Why Have There Been no Great Women Artists?” and published in *ArtNews* (Nochlin 1971). This essay launched the field of feminist art history, and sparked the first ever re-examining of the art history canon, potentially changing the landscape of both the history and future of women in art forever.

Nochlin and the scholars who followed and expanded upon her work exposed some fundamental issues which underpin her thesis: there simply are no female equivalents to Michelangelo, Reubens, or Titian because women artists were denied the same access to education, disallowed to study from the nude model, were charged three times as much for a third of the attention when they were permitted to study, and most often had careers spanning not more than twenty years due to the common affliction of marriage and child rearing as career disruptors, and so did not produce as much work or have as much time for their work to mature. This was true in 1400 and remains, to some extent, true today.

It rapidly becomes clear that the issue is not one of talent, skill, ability to acquire skill, of cognitive ability, but simply societal expectation and edict, as old as the patriarchy itself which disallows, even today, women to have a voice as powerful as men in their art.



And here is the problematic, and it is not one of art, but one of society: as soon as the word *patriarchy* is mentioned, or gender equality, or women's rights, bias is engaged. Since the rise of Abrahamic religion, women have been chattel to men, and women who challenge this notion are cast out of the only possibility for participation they have: the boys club. To belong to the boy's club, one must first acknowledge that it is a club for boys. To belong, one must don the mantle of benevolent sexism, effectively performing a type of self-castration consisting of either hyper-feminization or de-feminization – walking a tightrope wearing a construction boot on the one foot and a stiletto on the other.

Indeed, the problematic from the perspective of the art world lies in the “woman artist's” very need for self-worth, agency, and autonomy, a cry, as the act of self-examination in the absence of societal examination of the merits and rights of equality has become, at least for female artists, seen as self-indulgent, man-hating, diaristic, and hysteric.²

“I don't know why I should write this.

I don't want to.

I don't feel able.

And I know John would think it absurd. But I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!



But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief.

Half the time now I am awfully lazy, and lie down ever so much.” (Gilman 1892)

² Hysteric: Origin: Greek “hustera” (womb) > Greek “husterikos” (of the womb) > Latin “hysteric”
(see <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3480686/> for a hystorie of hysteria)

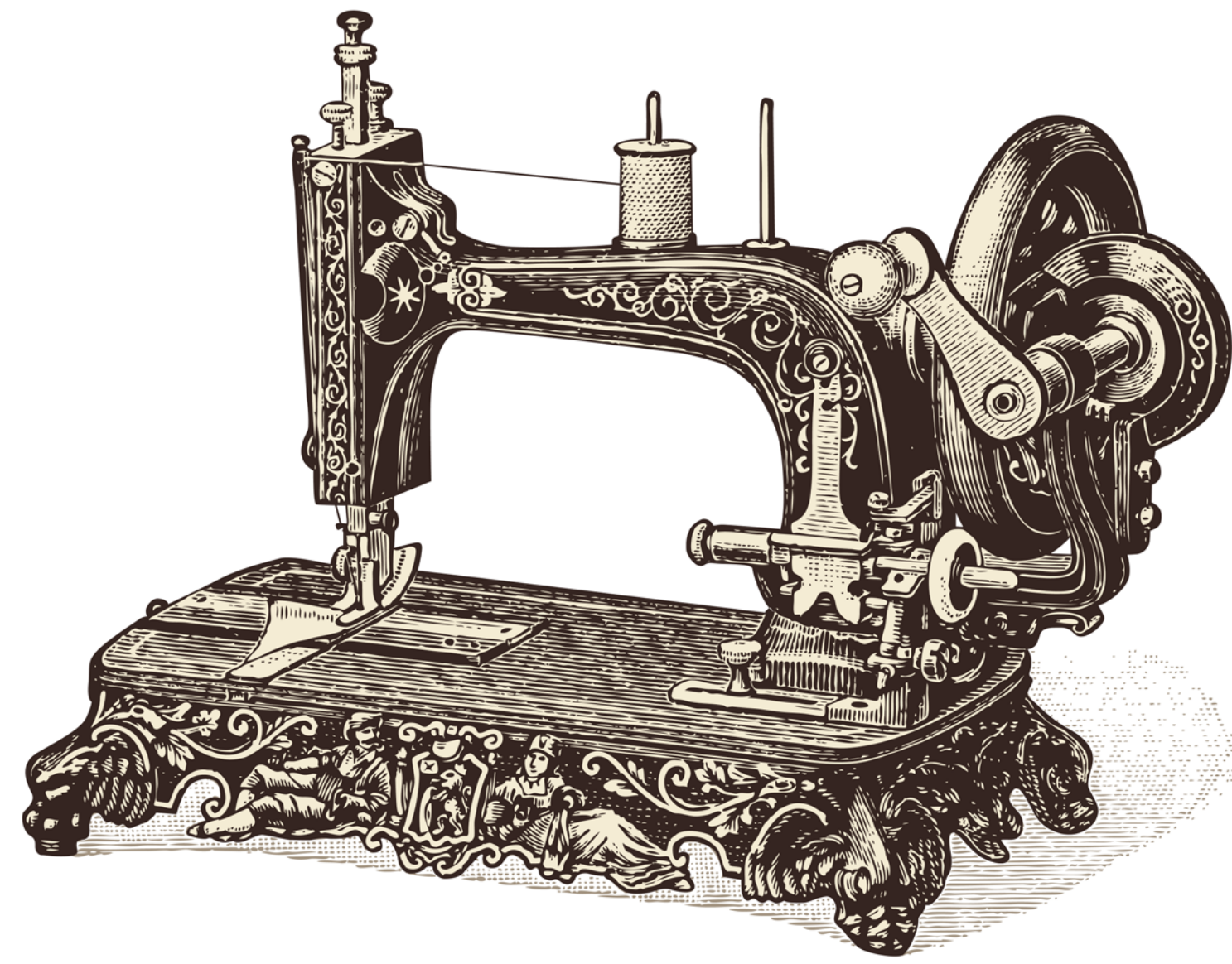
If to search for worth from within our gender is to speak to both the search for 'self' while educating Others of the existence of the violent denial of the right to possess 'self' by the Self herself, rather than by the Other,³ only the transcendent shall slip through, and those by playing the game skillfully. In other words, the game must be played, though the playing of the game is used in evidence against us.

She is, by nature, manipulative. Her beauty so dangerous, he sank his teeth right into her crisp apple, spraying juice across his chin. Thus, there are two choices as a woman, artist or no: virgin/mother or whore, full stop. The original sinner, the temptress, the untrustworthy seductress or the chaste a-sexual nurturer. Neither of these, by the way, will gain you entry into the club. It is only through the mastery of gender fluidity, and an intrinsic need to overcome the burden of her gender in order to participate in whatever activity it is he holds the key to, that she can slip in and out, sometimes unnoticed (she thinks) up the creaking clubhouse stairs.



³ The theft in brazen daylight of the right to speak in search of Self, when one is possessed of a vagina leaves artists endowed with such accessories an outlet of only screaming into a pillow, or making art for others, similarly burdened, while the phallically endowed shake their heads

She sews the mantle of benevolent sexism to her labia, laboriously stitching some inside joke with scarlet thread carefully around the clitoris. Hers is an exception to the rule, she will seem to say, a toothless vagina, one that will not consume your power to gain her own, but a warm and inviting sleeve to be granted easily to the right applicant, on terms. One that can sit quite comfortably, if she can get the stitching right, next to the proudest phallus without compunction. And, in sitting well, adds power, girth, virility to the foundation of righteousness rising skyward, and thereby gains leave for temporary worth. She will lodge the papers with the home office for endorsement, shortly.



“Afterwards, Richard turned to me and said, ‘Linda, I would love to show women artists, but I can’t find any good ones. Why are there no great women artists?’ He actually asked me that question. I went home and thought about this issue for days. It haunted me. It made me think, because, first of all, it implied that there were no great women artists. **Second, because it assumed this was a natural condition.** It just lit up my mind. [It] stimulated me to do a great deal of further research in a variety of fields in order to ‘answer’ the question and its implications.”

– Linda Nochlin (Purje 2014)



Is self-worth attainable in a world that grants that status based on certain arbitrary measures, for instance, gender? Would not the acceptance of such - the granting of permission for identification of Self and its accompanying worth⁴ - necessarily include either total denial of the existence of, or complacency for the societal structures in place, either act effectively stripping that self-same Self of its worth, like varnish spilled on a table top: eroding over time until it is outright peeled, laid bare, worthless and false.

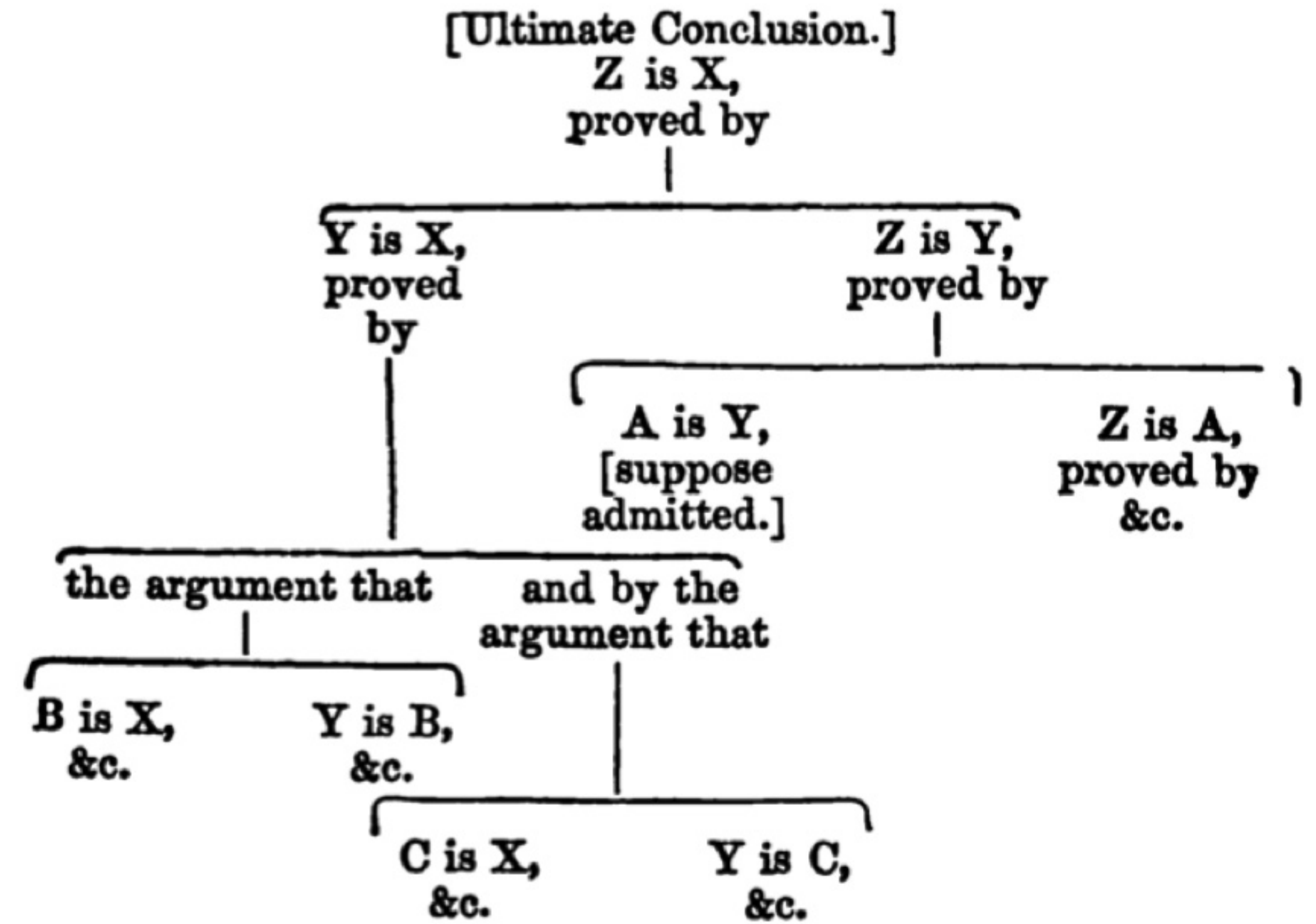
“The shed became like an attic: full of all kinds of things, your baggage but also things you don’t really want to give away. It could have anything in it, really, hair curlers, a garden rake...” (Parker 1991)

The secret Self, then. Blown apart, exploded view, exposing particulate matter down to dust caught in light in the corner and her step-father’s secret stash of incest porn, her own bruised abdomen, keys with no locks and locks that won’t unfreeze.

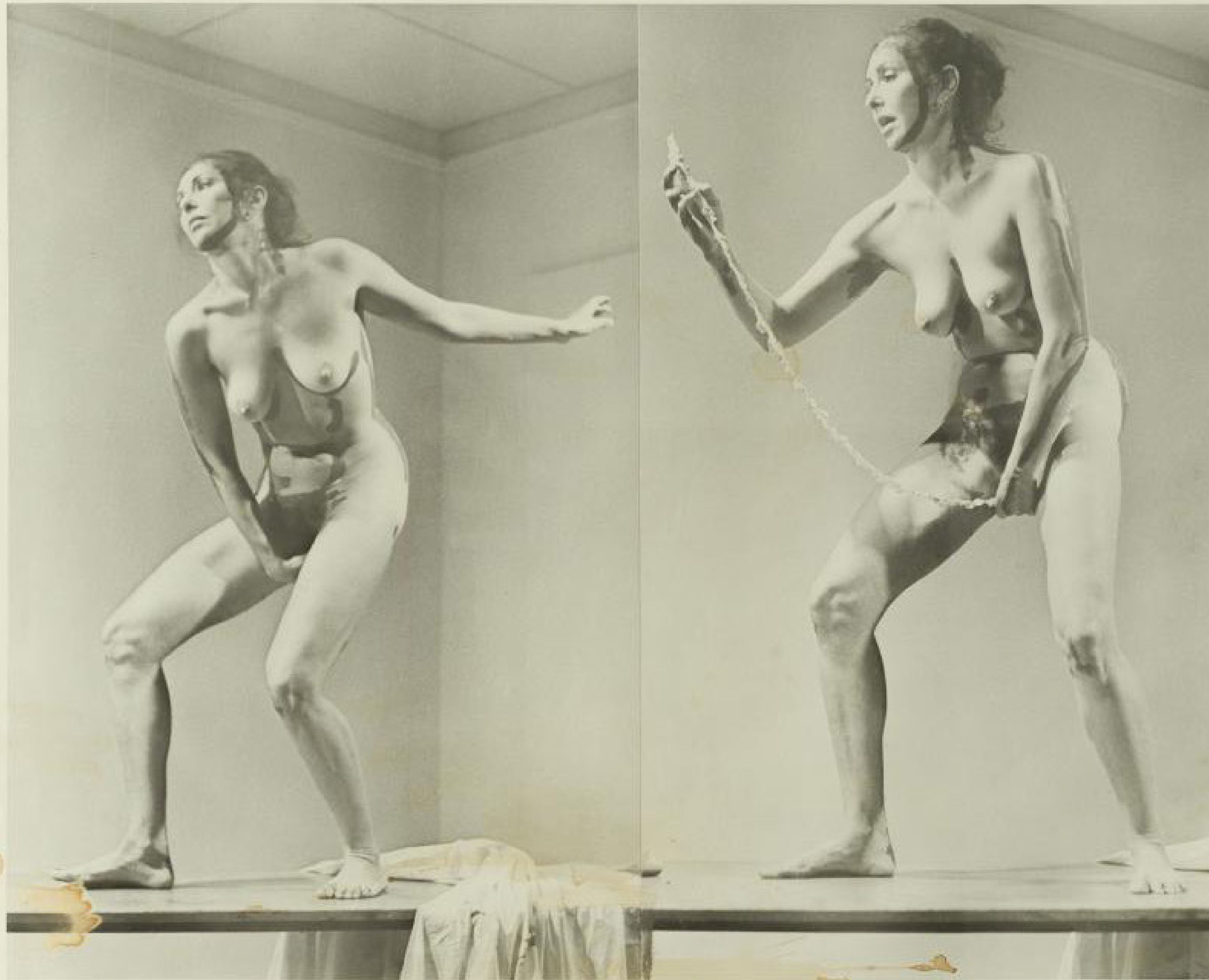
How then, knowing that gender is indeed the *problem* itself, can this become an argument?

“The structure of an argument is not a function of the syntactic and semantic features of the propositions that compose it. Rather, it is imposed on these propositions by the intentions of a reasoner to use some as support for one of them. Typically in presenting an argument, a reasoner will use expressions to flag the intended structural components of her argument. Typical premise indicators include: ‘because,’ ‘since,’ ‘for,’ and ‘as;’ typical conclusion indicators include ‘therefore,’ ‘thus,’ ‘hence,’ and ‘so.’ *Note well, these expressions do not always function in these ways, and so their mere use does not necessitate the presence of an argument.*” (McKeon n.d.) (emphasis added)

Because she is female, she is not male. Therefore, as she is not male, artworks and lifeworks, opinions expressed in general have less worth in the art market and less weight in societal discourse. Therefore, opinions, works, writings, and thinkings of this non-male person fail in their attempted implication of societal norms and biases and have less worth than the considerations regarding the societal roles of her male counterparts. Thus, should weight be granted, it should be denoted as *by female, and therefore appropriately categorized as permitted the floor, m’lord, but from a dubious source.



⁴ Still gendered, but allowed within reason.



time slip
rug pull
rapid cycling bi-polar
pussy march
non-sticky
erase
murder
erase
settle down; this is
disruptive

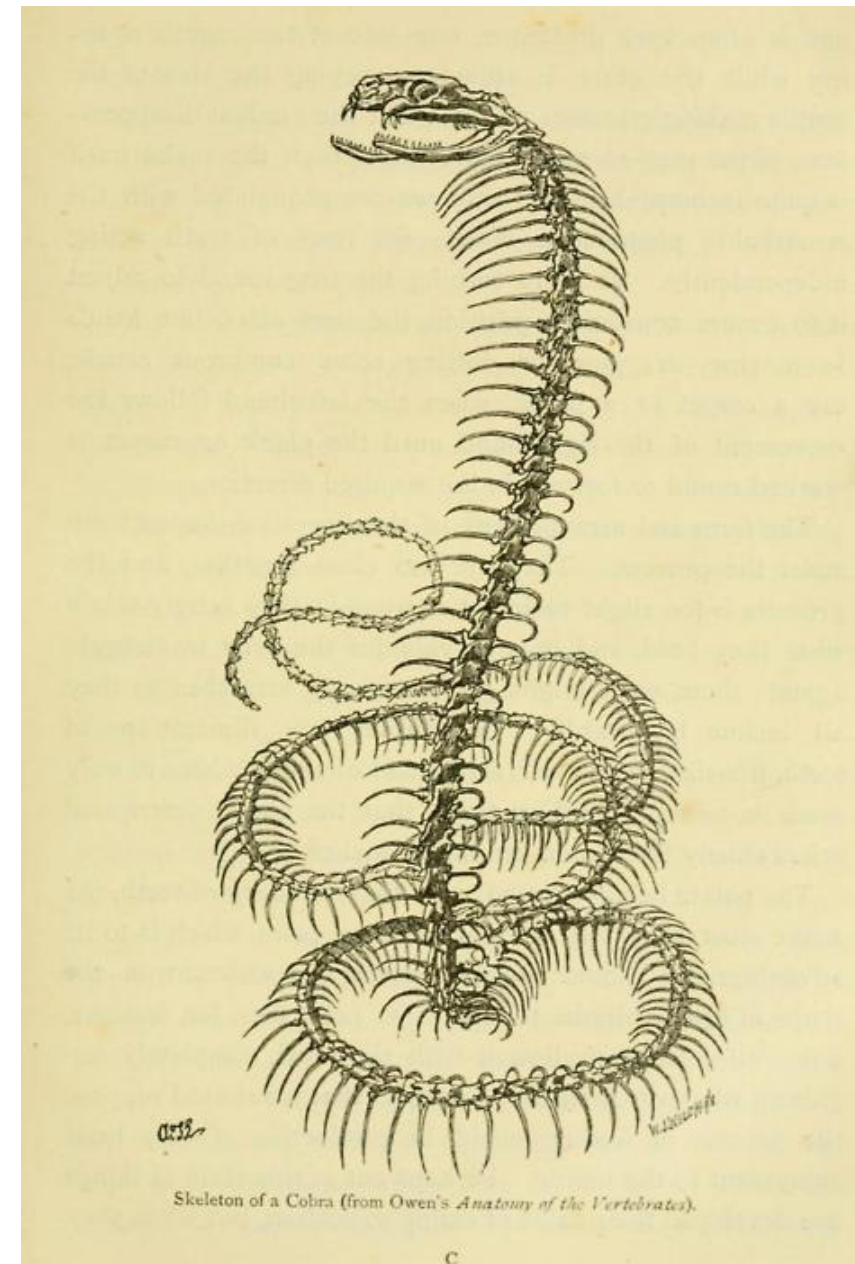
Non-orientable, like running furiously on a möbius strip down the tea-table we complete another impressively impossible cycle, all of us standing around congratulating ourselves that we've overcome some small obstacle, at least now, we can be heard without all being man-hating penis-envying carpet-munching dykes. Oh. Hillary's pantsuit. The slip was significant, the slide ran in reverse, the screams swallowed backward like hot vomit coming out of the toilet bowl and distending the stomach, which should be ripe, if possible. Fecundity lends to worth, even now.

“And when I finished it, the most important curator in Southern California at the time, Walter Hopps, came into my studio and I wanted him to see ‘Rainbow Picket,’ but he absolutely refused to look at it. And years later I had breakfast with him in Washington, and he tried to explain his behavior by saying, ‘Judy, you have to understand that at that time women in the art world were either groupies or artists’ wives. So what was I to do with the fact that you were making work that was stronger than the men’s? I had to avert my eyes.’” – Judy Chicago (Crawford 2019)

Sally Mann snaps photos of the idyllic nymph-like life she gave to her children in their protected home in California; rather than Ophelia, they become Lolita, and Mann an abusive pedophilic pornographer. There is evil in the world. No matter how we would shield our children from it, build an environment where expression of the Self reigns supreme, every toxic weed secretly dug out and tossed over the fence. Still, they will find the thing that bites them, that scares them, that raises boils on their skin even when mother, or sister, or Self, has been on the lookout.

*Even in **Eden**, one must watch for **snakes**.*

Perhaps to be truly independently wealthy helps us to rise above the rules, as Romaine Brooks: can she be seen as equally brilliant? Must she be transcendently luminescent breathtakingly beautifully clear in thought, pure in intention and mirthfully self-deprecating while maintaining the pretenses of the mindlessness of the heaps of hate and innuendo poured daily over her like milk baths to keep, once granted by the death of a father an insurmountable un-breachably castle of wealth?



No matter how they would like to, they can not scale her money, though from up here, humanity feels awfully far away, and they do try to throw things. So a leather skin, then, though wealth paves the way, one must have a good old leather suitcase as outerwear. And it must be carefully concealed by clothing, both masculine and feminine, to send the message, I am my own; or no clothing at all, to send the news, I dare you to try to pet me, I will bite you.

**A MESSAGE
A MESSAGE**

ALWAYS A MESSAGE INSIDE A MESSAGE:



Does this selection of artworks, happening to be only of females, by females⁵ therefore qualify as a feminist curation?

Does that label (not labial), perhaps unconsciously applied by the viewer (...this curation intended to find work which pushed the problematic of the intersection of gender and agency forward, not to discuss the merit of the female as artist, the end result being my shoulder leaving a rut in the yellow wallpaper) FEMALE: artists, subjects, and work relegate this project automatically to the averted eyes section of the worth-holders?

Oh, did I lose you for a moment? Even if you are a woman, did the drumbeat, steady on, lull you to sleep as the repeated situation began to smack less of the desperately in need of fixing and more of the desperately in need of a break from...

Does the collection bray a belabored point? If it has been heard before, but still the rights and privileges of equality, handed in a polished cookie tin with a ribbon on top in public, only crumbs to be found inside once opened, are not truly therefore conferred, does it not bear repeating?

⁵ I did not exclude male work on purpose, but in curating this collection around the subject of worth intersecting gender, found that those possessing of the problematic gendered identification create work which seems to expose, at least, if not the body, the root of the infinite looped problem.

SIGNIFICANCE

“The research suggests that perceived or actual differences in cognitive performance between males and females are most likely the result of social and cultural factors. For example, where girls and boys have differed on tests, researchers believe social context plays a significant role. Spelke believes that differences in career choices are due not to differing abilities but to cultural factors, such as subtle but pervasive gender expectations that kick in during high school and college.

In a 1999 study, Steven Spencer and colleagues explored gender differences among men and women who had a strong math background. They found that merely telling women that a math test had previously shown gender differences hurt their performance. The researchers gave a math test to men and women after telling half the women that the test had shown gender differences and telling the rest that it found none. Women who expected gender differences did significantly worse than men. Those who were told there was no gender disparity performed equal to men.” (American Psychological Association 2014)

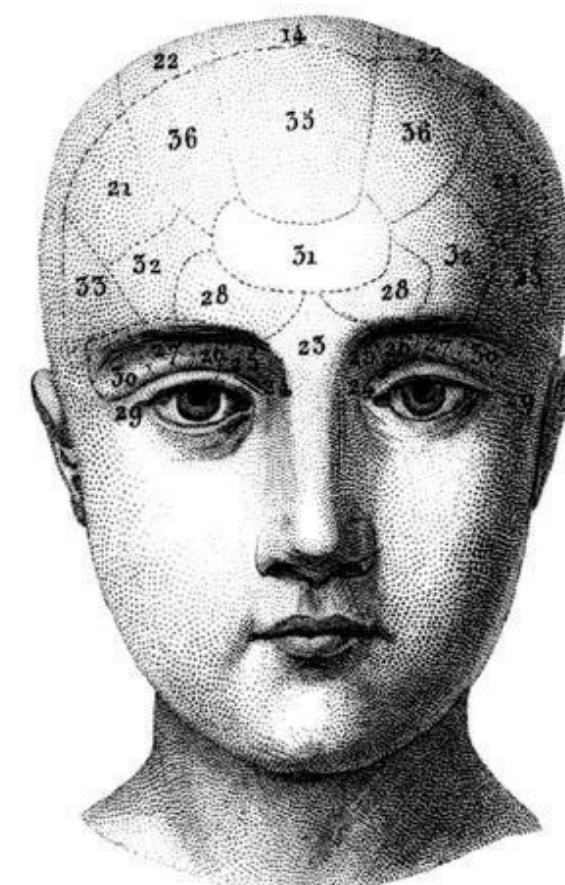


Fig. 18

Perhaps from another angle, as you would teach a stubborn child to tie his shoes. Over. And over. And over. With patience and compassion, so the learning of the lesson is not traumatic but one of straightforward skill acquisition. The child does not know why learning to tie shoes properly is an important life lesson, and it isn't important in the teaching of it that they know the why, only that their shoes should be tied.

Is the child trying to rape us while we teach him? Why otherwise would we teach him brutally? Is our patience, our compassion for learning to see and understand simply a new way of enabling the continual consumption of the fabric of the female soul? We know a good beating does nothing but reveal our harpies' wings, and being a compassionate lover turns us into a succubus.

However, if in the teaching of the proper tying of shoes, we leave out the underlying why, do we not lose the power of argument? What if we lay the why on the table and back off, letting the child examine the why on their own? Because they will get bored and leave it broken on the floor, or do it by rote, no meaning behind their action, or abandon the task altogether, weary of trying. And yes, one should tie one's shoes with purpose, if one is to do the job well.



My grandmother always cut the end of the ham off before putting it in the roasting pan on Easter. Her mother did the same. A few years ago, pregnant with my second son and still nursing my first, I dutifully sliced the last three inches off the ham before placing it in the roaster, the rest in the fridge to be fried up for breakfast later. My mother happened to be visiting.

Why do we do this, I asked her. She answered from the sink, without breaking stride, she had always known the answer: her mother had a small oven, and therefore a small roasting pan, and the ham would not fit.

I was repeating a habit that no longer had a purpose, other than to set aside some meat for the next morning as an accidental benefit. But my roasting pan was ample, as was my oven. If we fail to teach the why, does the import of the lesson ever stick? You should tie your shoes for a variety of reasons:

You are awarded more worth because you show that care about your appearance, and your things, and work to keep them tidy.

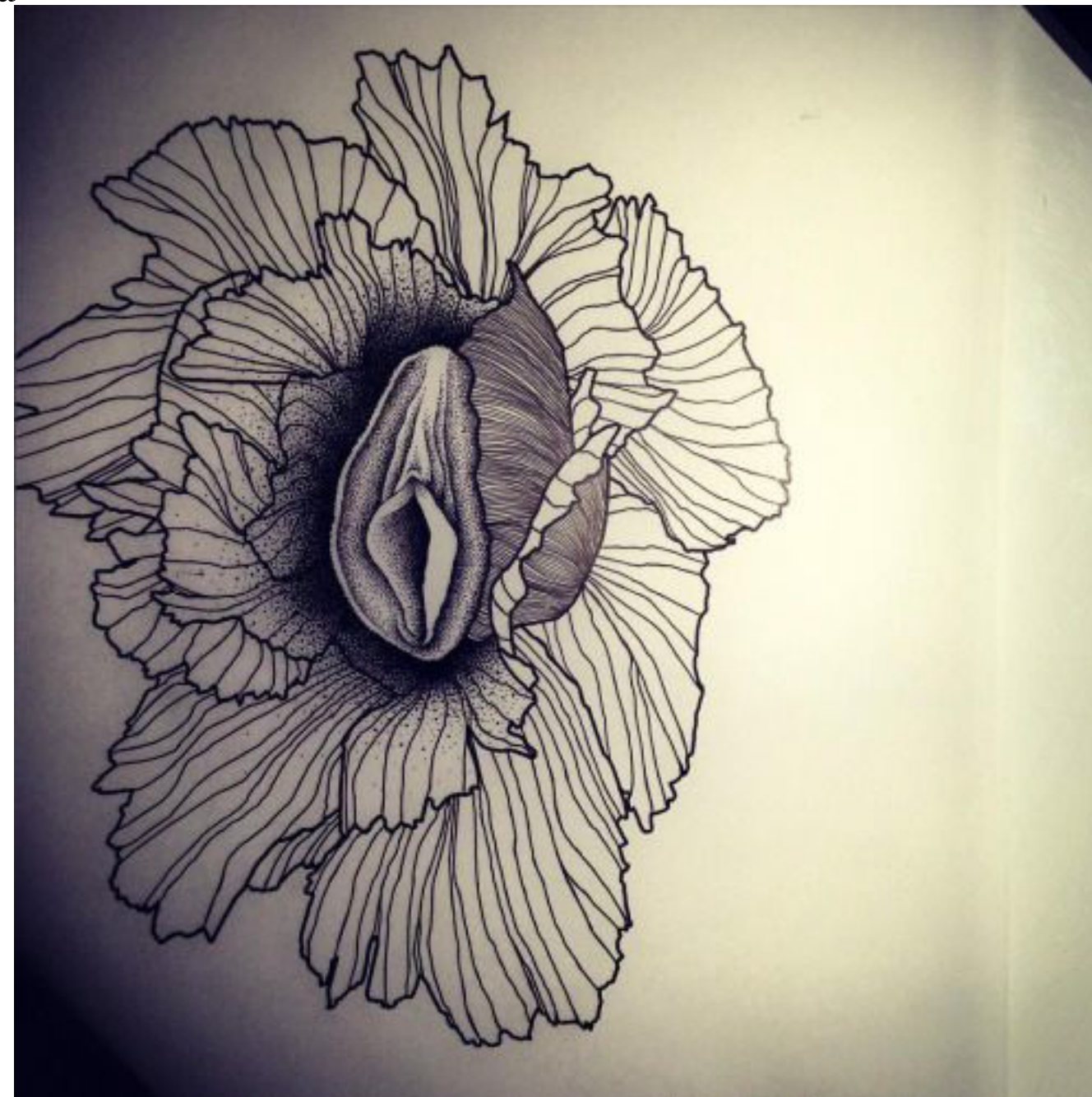
Why is tidy so important, aside from child-eating escalators?



Keeping the sewing, but abandoning the mantle, she uses a seam ripper to pull the stitching, and replaces benevolent sexism with a delicate row of silver bells, an adornment, one hanging right from the hood of her pleasure, a small, pleasant sound, not the braying clang of cow-bell testicles, but a silver tinkle of a distant wind chime, saying simply “I am female.”



“If we all had them,” she thinks, “we’d be a melodious river of sound, and we could find each other, protect each other, and they might accept us by their side as we are no longer frightening.” She smiles, thinking she’s found the solution, and through the gauge and loop offers another small bell to each breast, these are mild, they are not violent, they will not dispossess you of your gendered worth. And her bells turn to bloody pearls, and in doing so, the beasts hear the sound, and slowly the circle tightens. Only the one with the stolen cowbell, standing on the shoulders of those who hate but need her, can drive the beasts off, Aurora, until the next time-slip and Joan of Arc, a virgin or a monster, is born again as this generation’s AOC, a political reincarnation of Judy Chicago.



Frayed edges sucking turpentine like a baby teething on a frozen washcloth

Greedy the color climbs up the strands

The quicker picker upper

Blooming

Staining

Stain and soak

That's how you get blood out of a skirt

Between action and field

something new, sensual, spreading, organic

floating

Something with a mind of its own and a hand suggesting

Follow this, then

“Pouring liquid pigment onto bare canvas spread out on the floor, Frankenthaler created breathing landscapes of shifting, almost transparent, color zones. These atmospheric color washes, actually embedded in the cotton fibers, achieve an optical sense of depth while avoiding perspectival illusionism and maintaining the flatness of the canvas...

...While many of her colleagues were following in the footsteps of Willem de Kooning, Frankenthaler broke from the group, sensing ‘more possibilities in the Pollock vocabulary.’ ‘You could become a de Kooning disciple,’ she believed, ‘but you could depart from Pollock.’” (Guggenheim Bilbao n.d.)



There have always been these romantic ideas around what it is to be a painter or a model. I know a lesbian who is enraptured with the idea: a painter, caught by her beauty, takes her to his attic studio in Paris, time winds backward and it's 1890 again, and she is his muse. Her alabaster skin and long Australian limbs arranged in breathless perfection, he begins, then, to paint her.

And she thinks, perhaps in her fantasy, that this might also be a woman, painting her, because, let's be honest, that's a better fantasy for a lesbian. But she's told me it's hard to keep that fantasy intact, in her mind, the artist is a man, he morphs into a woman by the end.

Why is this, I ask her?

Because artists are usually men, or great artists are, and they can be overcome by the desire they feel for the model while making their art, and in turn, this must be played out in carnal delight.

In this daydream, the model/muse is indispensable to the creation of art, it is from her beauty that the inspiration for the painting flows to the "great genius" who paints it. The painting is not possible, in her fluttering heart, without the inspiration which she embodies.

Here are two alternate scenarios: in one, she's a model and the artist, male or female, is using her body as reference so they can get the forms just so. The artist may or may not have sex with the model, should she prove seducible, but this is the same as conflating a massage therapist with a sex worker - a massage therapist is a person who therapeutically works the body



for its health and healing; a prostitute is someone who has sex with people for money. It's easy to confuse the two.

And from the romantic lacy bedroom curtains, two young girls grow up: one determined to be a painter, to throw and splash and yell and emote and perform and explode, only to arrive at school and discover that painting is dead, the figure is dead, and the mark of the brush is now invalid as it has been commodified. (Thanks, Lucent Technologies et.al.) The other grows up with the breathless hope that she will be seen and discovered and found indispensable to the heart and the work of an artist through feeding the sexual appetite of this mythic genius, purportedly searching her whole life for the irresistible muse who can bring her art to brilliance, only to find that this entire fantasy is a myth perpetrated by artists who hired prostitutes for models because they were inexpensive and came with side benefits.

She dreams of being ravished, and I may dream of ravishing her, but none of that has anything to do with painting. Unless it does.

The problem is not really that she has this fantasy, or that I did. Romantic ideas are important for day dreaming. One day, I'd like to grow up to be ravishing, to feel that level of desire, sure. Who doesn't like a good thrill, the teenage heart-throb, the erotic fantasy? The problem is not the fantasy of desire, the problem is the fantasy of "great genius" (ie god given talent) being endowed by an

unseen hand upon a person who, because of their anointment, may eat at the buffet of humanity as he sees fit. And why would even a strong, independent feminist grow up hoping to be chewed up and spit out by these fallacies?

Unknowing, born labillic

Toddles into the world on sturdy stems

Before Lolita's hair skirt, she is a ray, a beauty unless Mann captures her and then

Pouting parted delectable desert of white cotton panties

Or Epstein, or Weinstein, or Rathman, or Long, or any of them

To be in this ecstatic state, female: created, creatable, creationist herself, is to be a problem.

problematic

hysterical causing

fear of castration

of loss of power

of becoming powerlessly emasculated

of becoming feminine, not female

Fear of never gaining power

Enough to stand on my own and not be a taker

But a maker

Not of other bodies

But of something out of me worth understanding through the viewing of

In spite of my gender

Or regardless of my gender



See me

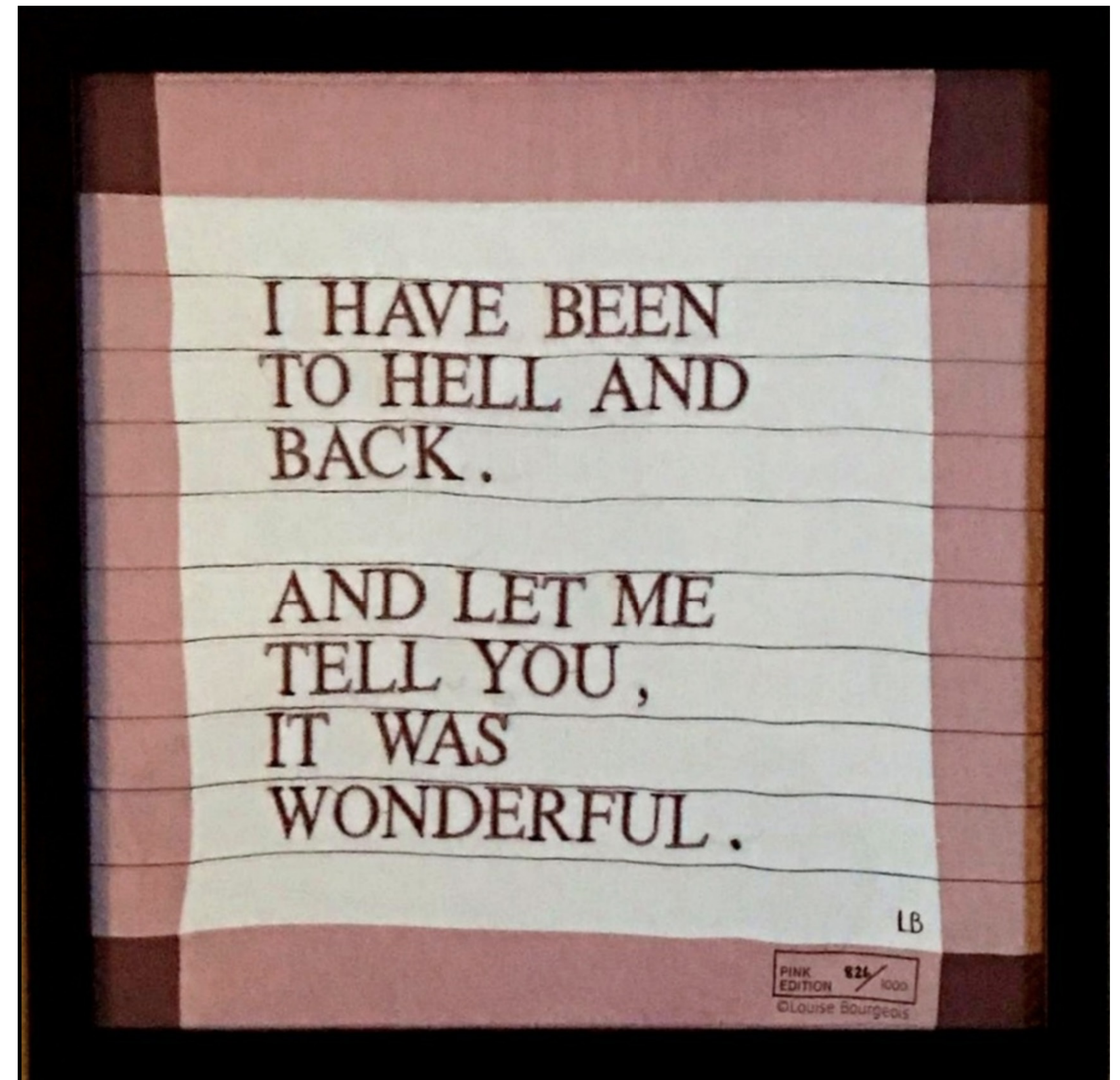
Feel me

Touch me

Heal me

- The Who, 1969

But these are words of longing from a son to his mother. Who then heals the mother, the motherless woman, the girl child? Who steals from her the “problem” and just leaves her the -“ic”?⁶



⁶ Suffix. -ic. Used to form adjectives from nouns with the meaning “of or pertaining to.” of or pertaining to her/him/their/mySelf

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