

"Answering" Jameson and Reading *Murplen*: A Consideration of Postmodernist and  
Feminist Praxis Through the Work of Rachel bas-Cohain

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*Here, then we begin to see what is at stake in [the] so-called dispersal of the subject. For what is this subject that, threatened by loss, is so bemoaned? For some, for many, this may indeed be a great loss, a loss which leads to narcissistic laments and hysterical disavowals of the end of art, of culture, of the west. But for others, precisely for Others, it is no great loss at all.*

--Hal Foster<sup>1</sup>

*For most people, nostalgia for the lost narrative (le récit perdu) is a thing of the past.*

--Jean-François Lyotard<sup>2</sup>

In closing his well-known essay, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Fredric Jameson opens a line of inquiry, which he chooses not to follow.<sup>3</sup> Of postmodernist art as he defines it here—art characterized by "the transformation of reality into images" and "the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents"—he ponders, "Can anything of the [‘critical, negative, contestatory, subversive, oppositional’ function of modernism] be affirmed about postmodernism and its social moment?"<sup>4</sup> In the view of Ihab Hassan, "indeterminacy, or rather, indeterminacies . . . all manner of ambiguities, ruptures, and displacements affecting knowledge and society" are characteristic of postmodernism.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps postmodernism, "or rather postmodernisms," so "defined" by indeterminacies and pluralities, would reply in a

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1. Hal Foster, "(Post)Modern Polemics," in *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985), 136, quoted in Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Feminism and Postmodernism: A Question of Politics," in *The Post-modern Reader*, ed. Charles Jencks (London: Academy Editions and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 322.

2. Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne* (Paris: Minuit, 1979), 68, quoted in Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in *The Post-modern Reader*, ed. Charles Jencks (London: Academy Editions and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 339

3. At least Jameson chooses not to consider in this particular essay the questions with which he concludes it.

4. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. John Belton (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 202.

5. Ihab Hassan, "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective," in *The Post-modern Reader*, ed. Charles Jencks (London: Academy Editions and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 196.

less fixed manner than Jameson's binary-based (that is, "yes or no") question seems to require. Answers would seem to depend not only on "whose postmodernism" it is of which one speaks, but also whether or not that theory is deployed in a particular manner for particular ends and in what context, not to mention who is "reading" the work in question and what interests inform their evaluation of it. Susan Rubin Suleiman points out that even among those credited with limning postmodernism's parameters, this question is much contested; she states: "Where [Jean] Baudrillard saw the 'postmodern condition' . . . as the end of all possibility for (real) action, community, resistance, or change, Lyotard saw it as potentially a whole new game, whose possibilities remained open."<sup>6</sup> As noted above by Foster and Lyotard, postmodernism's proclamation of the "dispersal of the subject," the "end of art, of culture, of the west," and the "lost narrative" have been "no great loss at all" for those denied subjectivity and access and excluded from the "grand narrative" because of their race, gender, or socioeconomic status. Craig Owens contends that in contrast to modernist art, whose authoritative claim was based on the notion of a universal aesthetics accessible only to "the constitutive male subject . . . absolutely centred, unitary, masculine," postmodernist art "actively seeks to undermine all such [authoritative] claims."<sup>7</sup> Owens further states that although long ignored, "the presence of an insistent feminist voice" is among "the most salient aspects of postmodern culture."<sup>8</sup> The long overlooked artistic production of feminist artist Rachel bas-Cohain (1937-1982) deployed a range of postmodernist strategies in a critique of modernist notions such as the coherent subject, the grand narrative, and universality, as well as their masculinist underpinnings to which Owens alludes. A *Background That Supplies a Blackish Murplen-Type Scute* (figure 1) is one such work

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6. Suleiman, "Feminism and Postmodernism," 319.

7. Owens, "The Discourse of Others," 334.

8. Ibid., 336.

that engages Jameson's notion of schizophrenic language and draws attention to the precariousness of bas-Cohain's marginalized position within the art world and the corresponding tenuity of her artistic critique, which, as such, seems both to answer affirmatively Jameson's question (posed at the beginning of this paragraph) and *almost* to dissolve before it.

For Jameson, "the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents,"<sup>9</sup> what he calls schizophrenia, is (along with his notion of pastiche) a "basic feature" of postmodernism.<sup>10</sup> Adopting Jacques Lacan's conception of this disorder as one of language and which results when an infant is unable "to accede fully into the realm of speech and language,"<sup>11</sup> Jameson discusses schizophrenia in structuralist terms as "the breakdown in the relationship between signifiers."<sup>12</sup> As he describes it, Lacan's model positions linguistic function, equated with the "Name-of-the-Father" or paternal authority, as an individual's "Oedipal rival" in a revision of the Freudian notion of the Oedipus complex.<sup>13</sup> "Failure to accede into the realm of speech and language" manifests in disjunction among linguistic elements: the "real" object—the referent or object of the sign—illusorily teeters on fictionality; its signifier, that which represents it, for example, textual script or its spoken name; its signified, that is, its meaning; and its sign are unhinged from their "real" object and, therefore, from reality itself.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Jameson notes that structuralism proposes a kind of failure of naming that denies a one-to-one correspondence between signifier and

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9. Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 202.

10. *Ibid.*, 194.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 195.

13. *Ibid.*, 194.

14. *Ibid.*, 195.

signified such that sentences “articulate” through the interrelationships of signifiers a “meaning-effect,” which, itself, may be a delusion.<sup>15</sup>

Not only is the collapse of signification critical to Jameson’s notion of schizophrenia, as read through Lacan, so also is a kind of failure of temporal continuity.<sup>16</sup> Jameson states that language, which is situated in time and in the form of sentences “moves in time,” should produce in an individual a sense of temporality.<sup>17</sup> However, the schizophrenic experience of both language and time is one of fragmentation, discontinuity, disruption, and disjunction. Because identity is contingent on an uninterrupted, abiding sense of “I” or “me”-ness, the schizophrenic, trapped in an incessant present, lacks such a sense of identity or perception of self.<sup>18</sup> Further, Jameson states, schizophrenic experience of a perpetual present is one of sharpened, lurid, hallucinatory intensity, which is marked by a sense of loss and “unreality.”<sup>19</sup> Likewise, schizophrenic language is expressed as a kind of stuttering, obsessive intensification in which words, as isolated signifiers drained of meaning, are materialized—literalized—as “hollow” images, disjoined from their signifieds.<sup>20</sup>

Formally and conceptually, bas-Cohain’s silk organza sculpture, *A Background That Supplies a Blackish Murplen-Type Scute* engages in such “schizophrenic speech.” Encased in a Plexiglas box, which is part of the sculpture and measures approximately 11 x 15 x 21 inches, *Murplen* communicates a certain psychological remove from the viewer and the world or reality of the viewer. Like the schizophrenic, this work is, in a sense, isolated from the surrounding reality of the

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15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 196.

20. Ibid., 196-197.

world—trapped in its own disconnect, in a kind of “unreality” that is literalized, materialized, concretized by and in the form of its translucent confinement. Further, *Murplen’s* separation and captivity suggest a loss of meaning—plucked from temporality and severed from context, which supplies the “syntactical” relationships that permit and “establish” the reading of a work, *Murplen* seems a kind of schizophrenic utterance proclaiming empty signification.

“Nonsensical” text, typed onto an almost immaterially fine layer of organza, forms the “back” of the encased sculpture of silken geometric forms, suspended puppet-like from string within another organza “box” that likewise precariously dangles from floss within its Plexiglas enclosure.<sup>21</sup> Decipherable phrases stutter, stammer in the midst of “meaningless” words and phrases that seem to approximate several languages—a ludic linguistic anarchy that suggests a jumble of Yiddish, French, Italian, and English—as here excerpted:

. . . I DECIDED AGAINST WRITING DIDACTIC PROSE, BUT I MIGHT HAVE FOUND A POEM THAT WOULD DO FOR MY PURPOSES. I JUST WANT THE WRITING. THE POEM WOULD BE ONE THAT HAS BEEN USED SO MANY TIMES THAT IT NO LONGER HAS ANY CONNECTION WITH THE HEART. WHAT I WANTED WAS JUST A BACKGROU BACKGROUNDTHAT WOULD SUPPLY A BLCKISH COLOR. I CHOSE TO USE TYPE. THE READING QUALITY IS IMPORTZANT BUT THE ‘REALNESS’ OF THE WORDS IS NOT. FOR INSTANCE: I DECIDED PRIPTY WRITING DIDSCHMEDLE PROSE. BUT ZEE KLIMPT FARBRENGEN ZID LENTY MANY TIMES FRED NO GREMDKE MUCH MEANING (LIKE THOSE WE SAY WE KNOW BY ‘HEART’ KRIVNE TON GREPEL THAT ORGAN). WHAT I VAMIERT A BACKGROUNDDDHAT WOULD SUPPLY A BLACKISH COLOR. JE GREKE MURPLEN TYPE SCUTE. THE HOMNESS READING FRANECHNE LASHENOURETTE MAT LE CREATNESCOPE BAR LE VORTNE FRU NOT BELEDSCOPL FOR INSTANCE: JE MESHMET PRIPTY MEZH DIDSCHMEDELE CREATIVO/ MAI LE TZIBBLE ZEE KLIMPT FAR- . . . ZID LENTY MANY TIMES FRED NO GRENDKE MUCH MEANING (LIKE THOSE WE SAY WE KNOW BY HEART KRIVNE DON GREPEL THAT ORGAN). WHAT I VAMIERT A GACKGROUND THAT WOUL SUPPLE A GREVKRIEFTE COLOR/.<sup>22</sup>

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21. As a sculpture in-the-round, *Murplen* may be viewed from all sides; however photodocumentation “privileges” the side opposite to the textual layer, which can only be read from the “front.” For these reasons, and because the text proclaims itself to be a background, I have identified the textual layer as the back of the work.

22. Rachel bas-Cohain, excerpt from the text of *A Background That Supplies a Blackish Murplen-Type Scute*, 1982, Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA.

In its fragmentation, indeterminacy, and dadaesque playfulness, such poetic-schizophrenic speech likewise pronounces a postmodern breakdown in signification. An “anti-narrative” of sorts, those decipherable portions of text seem severed from any sense of linear, temporal progression. Rather, as if schizophrenically fixed in a “perpetual present,” they “percussively” repeat and intensify the “explanation” for the presence of the text. However, in so doing, these passages also “unwrite” themselves in what Jameson calls an “obsessive,” “incomprehensible incantation”<sup>23</sup>—opening and emptying their own fractured narration—ironically and at once dissolving their meaning into the ethereality of their organza support while materializing them in a vacuous image, a notion echoed in the hollow forms that populate this otherwise empty organza box.

Amid the cacophonous febrility of the text, there emerge repeated references to “Fred,” bas-Cohain’s father.<sup>24</sup> In the context of Jameson’s notion of schizophrenic language, one might read this “name of the father” as a kind of representation of the “Name-of-the-Father,” perhaps here a figuration for the paternalistic or masculinist notions and practices that within the art world contemporary with bas-Cohain’s artistic production, resulted in widespread exclusion of women artists from representation and criticism and which she and her feminist artist colleagues resisted through their artistic production and activism.<sup>25</sup> By substituting her father for “the Father,” bas-Cohain’s text particularizes the latter and figuratively suggests the de-centering and splintering of the authority and “grand narratives” associated with it.

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23. Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 197.

24. Jennifer Cawley, “Rachel bas-Cohain, 1937-1982: ‘In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated,’” (honors thesis, Wellesley College, 2006), 10, 140.

25 Particularly in the 1970s, feminist artists formed coalitions and cooperative institutions for the purposes of garnering gallery and museum representation and critical attention for their work. A useful anthology that addresses the early history of the feminist art movement is *The Power of Feminist Art*, edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).

As it does so, bas-Cohain's text also subtly invokes the 1970s feminist mantra: "The personal is political."<sup>26</sup> Linda Hutcheon argues that this feminist reconsideration of the boundary between the private and the public is also a postmodern "de-naturaliz[ation of] the traditional historiographic separation of [the two]."<sup>27</sup> Further, by representing that which modernism has deemed "unrepresentable," feminist and other artists expose and, arguably, defy the limits of representation.<sup>28</sup>

In engaging in the exposure of the limits of representation, bas-Cohain also draws attention to her own relative lack of visibility as a feminist artist who exhibited her work primarily in the reputable, albeit marginalized, SoHo feminist cooperative, A.I.R. Gallery. Her deployment of schizophrenic language may be read as a registration of the persistence of exclusionary, modernist, masculinist narratives in the art world contemporary with bas-Cohain's work,<sup>29</sup> the failure of that art world to permit her work and that of most feminists artists to "signify" within it, as well as the loss—to viewers, to artists, to the art world itself—that results from such a miscarriage. Its voice confined in its Plexiglas enclosure, *Murplen's* silence "echoes" that of its producer as well as those excluded others to whom Foster alludes. In

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26. In my thesis noted above, I also mention bas-Cohain's invocation of her father through *Murplen* and the applicability of this second wave feminist aphorism. See Cawley, "Rachel bas-Cohain, 1937-1982," 142.

27. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 142.

28. Here my argument follows Owens, who contends that women's historical "exteriority to Western representation exposes its limits." See Owens, "The Discourse of Others," 334-335.

29. As noted above, Owens discusses the masculinist underpinnings of modernism in art. See note seven. Linda Hutcheon also alludes to the "maleness" of modernism. See Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 152. And I elaborate further on bas-Cohain's feminist praxis with respect to the masculinism of modernist art and criticism in my thesis. See Cawley, "Rachel bas-Cohain, 1937-1982," especially 79-122.

doing so, *Murplen* also “speaks” of the limitations of grand narratives, of their “impoverishment.”

In addition, *Murplen* also communicates something of what Owens calls the “sensory impoverishment” of our culture, which privileges vision over other senses.<sup>30</sup> Luce Irigaray notes that it is through vision that “the eye objectifies and masters.”<sup>31</sup> And it has been largely through the vision of men that women have been represented, constructed, and often objectified (notably in art but also through mass media). Owens also notes that it is through sight that boys discover and deny (through fetishization) sexual difference and so realize their own “sexual privilege” and phallic power.<sup>32</sup> Whether Freud’s claim is “true” or not, such notions are yet embedded in western perceptions of sexuality, and, as Owens states, “feminist critique . . . links the privileging of vision with sexual privilege.”<sup>33</sup> Bas-Cohain’s engagement with and implicit critique of vision—in *Murplen* and certain other “participatory” works that explore the limits and expose the contingency of perception—may bear something of such a feminist critique, which is arguably present in bas-Cohain’s work more generally.<sup>34</sup> By inviting the viewer to focus his/her gaze selectively on the rear organza panel in order to begin to decipher its text, *Murplen* also requires that to do so, the viewer divert his/her gaze from other aspects of the work. Through such “exercises,” as she called them, bas-Cohain

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30. Owens, “The Discourse of Others,” 342.

31. Luce Irigaray, quoted in Interview with Luce Irigaray, in *Les Femmes, La Pornographie, L’Erotisme*, eds. M-F. Hans and G. Lapouge, 50 (Paris, 1978), quoted in Owens, “The Discourse of Others,” 342.

32. Owens, “The Discourse of Other,” 342.

33. Ibid.

34. For a broader consideration of bas-Cohain’s feminist praxis, see Cawley, “Rachel bas-Cohain, 1937-1982.”

intended to expose to viewers the interested-ness of their own looking.<sup>35</sup> In deconstructing the experience of seeing, such works reveal that sight is “constructed,” hint at the socially conditioned “nature” of vision, and also suggest that the failure to see, either through oversight or refusal, is mediated by the interests of the viewer. In this way, *Murplen* and works related to it implicitly confront the contemporary art world’s general failure and refusal to deconstruct its own vision, interests, and delusions.

But if bas-Cohain’s works engage in confrontation, critique, exposure, even resistance, that is, the sort of oppositionality to which Jameson refers, to what degree and in what manner do they succeed? Although her work was regularly reviewed, and both she and it are remembered by many of her New York art world colleagues, bas-Cohain and her feminist postmodernist artistic production remain outside mainstream criticism of the art of the 1970s and early 1980s, the height of her artistic career.<sup>36</sup> And although her work is included in the collections of well-known institutions, including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, The Jewish Museum (New York), and the Indianapolis Museum of Art, only rarely is it exhibited, and it has received but little critical attention since its accession into these and other collections. So, with little audience, as at the time of its production, at present, bas-Cohain’s work and the critique articulated through it remain nearly mute.

But what can we learn from bas-Cohain’s nearly inaudible oppositionality? Suleiman, who contends that “avant-garde art movements [and artistic production] . . . are always, in the end, ‘domesticated,’” poses the query, “Can art which claims an

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35. Rachel bas-Cohain, quoted in Sarah McFadden, “Critical Notes,” in *Rachel bas-Cohain, 1937-1982: Selected Works*, exh. cat. (New York: A.I.R. Gallery, 1984), 8.

36. For a discussion of possible reasons for bas-Cohain’s artistic marginalization, see Cawley, “Rachel bas-Cohain, 1937-1982,” 1-9.

oppositional edge take the risk of entering a museum?" A consideration of bas-Cohain's work suggests that some such work must, if its oppositionality is ever to be recognized, if a revision of the history from which it was "written out" is ever undertaken. In the case of bas-Cohain's work, for it to remain altogether outside the artistic establishment would not only ensure it present silence, but also forfeit the potential for its future speech. Further, neither artists nor their artistic production are "innocent." They—we—and their—our—work are "always already" marked by interests constructed in the context of and conditioned by late capitalist, economically globalized existence. As we are so enmeshed and therefore implicated in global capitalism, our opposition is "always already" relativized and partial. To propose that "oppositional" art remain outside the art establishment seems almost to presume that there is a sort of "pure," utopic space in which to work and dwell "disinterestedly." In a sense, the dichotomy on which Suleiman's inquiry is framed is false—if there ever was one, the boundary between the "inside" and the "outside" has been erased or perhaps become too porous to function as one.

In closing his essay, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Jameson articulates an additional, more formidable question: "[Is there also a way in which [postmodernism] resists [the logic of consumer capitalism]?"<sup>37</sup> For Jameson, postmodernism is tied to, perhaps even implicated in, "late, consumer or multinational capitalism" or globalization,<sup>38</sup> and in "Globalization as a Philosophical Issue," he argues persuasively that in the grip of transnational globalization, resistance in any sort of profoundly effective manner seems nearly impossible (74-75). I do not disagree. Yet I do, to some degree, "resist the logic" of his questions, or, more specifically, Jameson's seemingly circumscribed view of postmodernism,

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37. Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 202.

38. Ibid., 201. See also Jameson, "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue," in *The Cultures of Globalization*, eds. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 60.

which seems to overlook or perhaps deemphasize the positive change that has occurred through the strategic use of postmodernist practices.<sup>39</sup> For those excluded from western grand narratives, there remains something to celebrate in the postmodern dispersal of the subject and deconstruction of western grand narratives as well as the leverage, however small, gained from their social re-positioning—even if most of the excluded remain so. More of those “at the margins” in terms of gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status have come and are coming “to the center.” There is little dispute that both feminist and postmodernist practices and those wielding them have altered and opened the fields of art and culture. Even in with regard to the nearly silenced artistic production of Rachel bas-Cohain, there remains yet a possibility for speech. The potential for her critique to be recognized and heard in retrospect would likely not exist were it not for postmodernism’s deconstructive activities. Although her critique seems “*almost to dissolve,*” it yet resists dispersal and registers the assertion that, indeed, something “of the [‘critical, negative, contestatory, subversive, oppositional’ function of modernism] be affirmed about postmodernism and its social moment.”

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39. My own view of Jameson is, however, rather circumscribed, that is, limited to the two essays cited in this discussion.



Figure 1. Rachel bas-Cohain, detail of *A Background That Supplies a Blackish Murplen-Type Scute*, 1982. Plexiglas, silk organza, thread, powdered pigment, ink, glue, 11 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 15 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 21 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches. Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA.

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