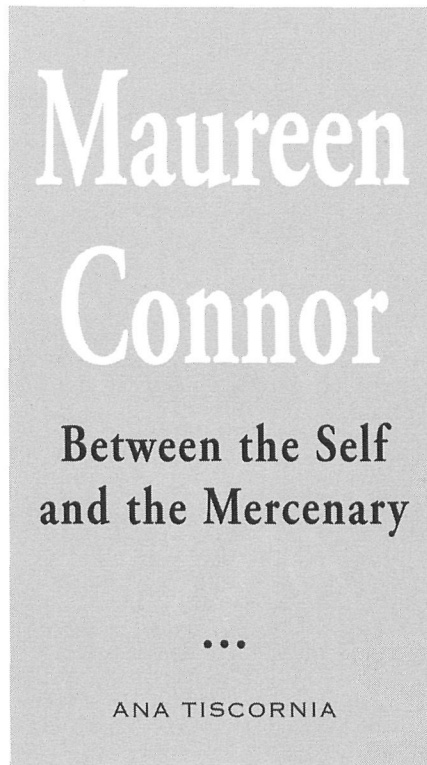


During the last three and a half decades the development of the feminist movement has stimulated transformative practices and critical reflections in previously unexplored areas. Within this framework, art, as a symbolic production, became one of the territories of action and interrogation.

In Maureen Connor the more or less complex web that has been developing in this field, it is possible to visualize two problems which often get confused. The first refers to the hypothesis that the feminine gender defines its own aesthetic. The second asks about the existence of an aesthetic that represents and presents an ideology—the feminist ideology.

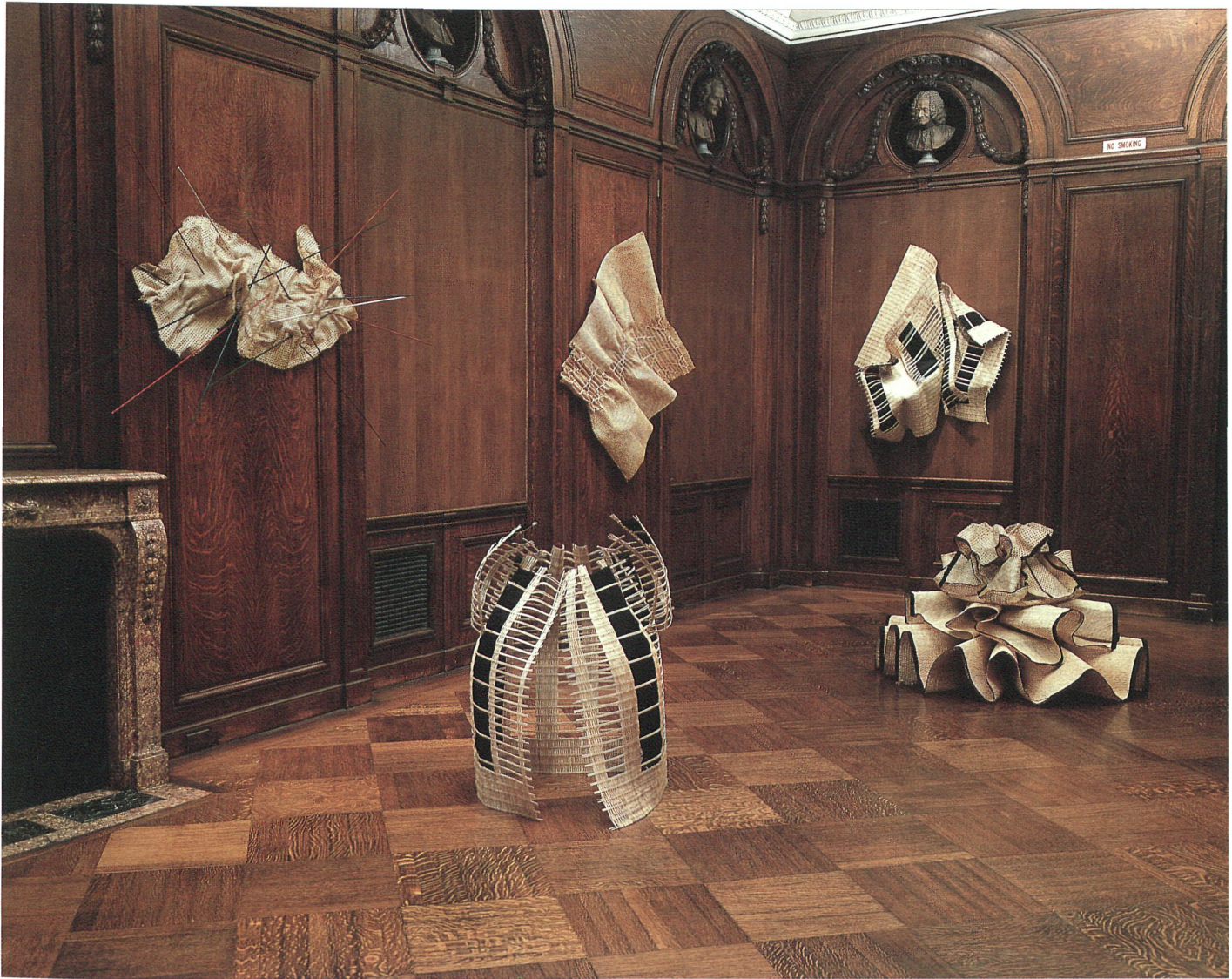
In strictly theoretical terms, it does not seem possible at this time to “adjectivise” aesthetics as feminine or feminist. That does not mean that aesthetics has no sex. Any theoretical speculation involves cultural assumptions on the part of those who make the speculation; speculation feeds itself along the ins and outs of the debate and upon the evidence leading up to analysis. Aesthetics as a theory of sensorial perception or, as Kant would have said, a “doctrine of the faculty of knowing” has been almost totally invented by men, developed by men, debated by men and it is about an iconographic production that is immeasurably masculine.



Although, now, some women have produced aesthetic theory and criticism, that fact should not let us forget determinants like the codes from which the analysis is made. Research methodologies, paradigms of reference to identify the relevance of an artistic construction— all these have been drawn by men, hegemonically, from their ways of seeing, their ways of doing and interpreting, and from within a culture that marginalises women as intellectuals. Women have slowly penetrated art criticism, but they are still far from reformulating it, in light of gender. Furthermore, women have had little input into the conceptualization of “Art” as it is presently understood, nor have they questioned its essence.

Precisely because the strictly theoretical is mediated by the continuous production of art objects and ideologies, the answers to the two questions above could be various, especially when one considers transformative practices where denunciation and the fight for change emerge jointly as theoretical production to be rehearsed in reality. In this framework it is possible to find artistic productions with feminist intent which express themselves alternately in the content and/or in the form. But the configuration of the work also implies a conceptual speculation that has to do with language itself. Here is where most of the confusion in feminist artistic production lies. How can we formulate an independent discourse which is not regulated by institutionalized aesthetics but which occurs and is legitimized within the institutional space? How can we do that without getting into a simulacrum that disqualifies itself as a feminist construction? Despite the difficulty, some art works do become subversive agents and do activate thinking processes in surprising directions. For example, the case of Maureen Connor.

Connor, a North American artist, second-generation feminist, emerged in the mid seventies. Her work conjugates numerous concerns that alert us to the possible implications of visual discourse,



Maureen Connor. Installation. Photograph by Steve Sloman, 1982.

that clearly show her ideology and position her work in the context of feminist preoccupations.

A 20-year survey, which includes sculpture, installations and multimedia work, reveals a conceptual body of work that develops and becomes more and more complex as Connor acquires an increasing awareness of her own direction.

Woman as bio-psycho-social construction is the leitmotif that travels through and structures her work:

woman as protagonist, as intermediary of other issues, or as reflected image in the intersection and simultaneity of socio-cultural events.

Her earliest works are sculptures constructed by using clothing from her own family, and in some cases made by her grandmother. Though Connor says that in this period her intention is “more celebratory than critical” (1), the truth is that in these early works rests the vital core of those that follow.

To dress oneself is a ceremony of

representation in distinct, simultaneous stages. First it is the expression of the taboo against nakedness, the state in which the body reveals its substances and its needs. Clothes correct the nakedness and because of that, they are extensions of the body; but they are also a defense, a frontier, a hymen and, at the same time, a costume. In all these dimensions they are also signs to be read. From these activities to their sexual function and their social expression, clothes describe the

individual, in her/his circumstances, if not in her/his essence. Thus, levels of representation overlap, clothe the body as much as the garments themselves do, both defining and masking its identity.

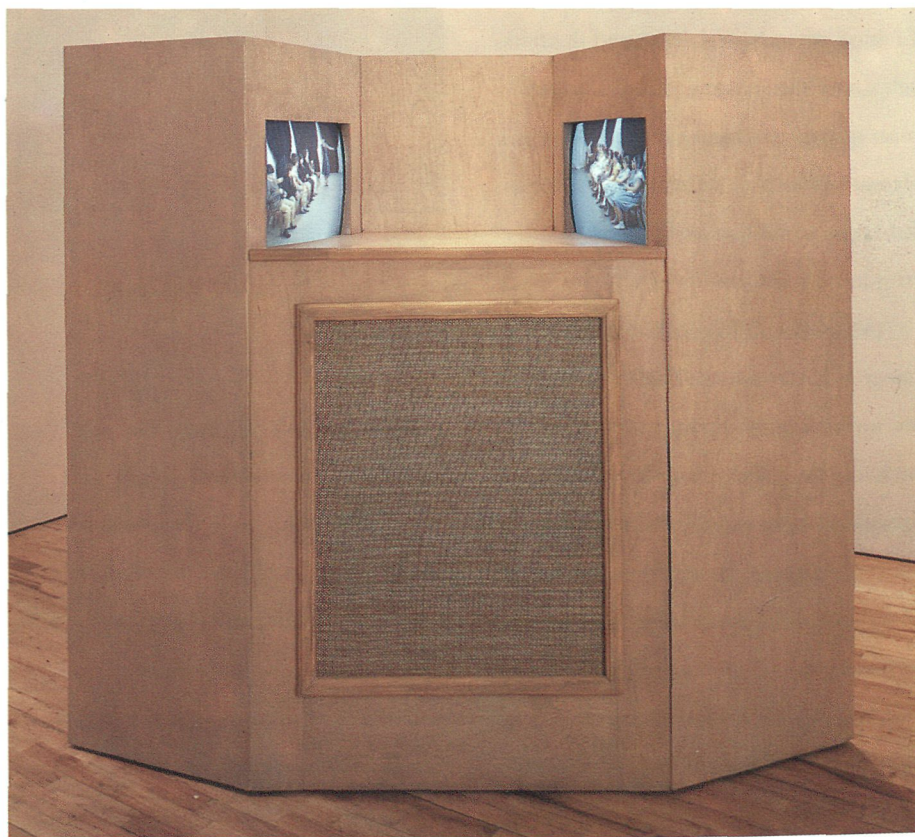
At the same time, other rituals appear in the legacy of family patterns which Connor shows in "Wedding dress" (1976): "1114 Hampton Garth" (1977) –two of her mother's dresses, one black, the other gold, taken apart at the seams, intertwined and pinned to the wall– and "Little Lambs Eat Ivy" (1978) –six girl's smocked dresses, overlapping sequentially, that show differences in order to emphasise similarities. Those are the rituals of the woman who designs and sews, the woman who articulates a language by following the model that constructs the identificatory sign of herself. In this autobiographical gesture, Connor celebrates the woman and the ritual, but at the same time she violates the dress (a result of the ritual) in what could be an exorcism of a family pattern that perpetuates itself.

There is something subtle and perverse in the apparent calm of those sculptures and their simple, effective compositions. They are deliberately pictorial but position themselves as alternatives to painting. At the same time they do not concede to the Minimalism of their time, but rather submerge themselves in socio-cultural and economic concerns, at a moment when such subjects are devalued for art. They were figurative and autobiographical during a period that

privileged abstraction and impersonality. Those works, antecedents of a trend in the 90's of art made with clothes, are also the tactical expression of a feminist who plays with the weapons of "the feminine". Within the domestic, traditionally "female" sphere, the woman has had assigned to her certain territories of activity where she is considered "particularly talented, naturally prepared" or where she is accepted graciously. Among those spaces are the home and its aesthetics –crafts, color coordination and the design of strictly delimited areas. One day we will know if centuries of practice determine genetic memory, but certainly, manipulation and apprenticeship since childhood develop skills that become institutionalised as systems of doing,

perceiving and feeling. In this framework, women have articulated particular codes and have sensitised themselves to recognizing and manipulating them.

These skills, for which men have not been educated and whose cultural weight they discredit, create a symbolic universe that can be identified as a culturally constructed feminine aesthetic. When that universe moves to the production of "art objects", things begin to become complicated. In the first place, this is because the moment art becomes self-referential rather than "merely" functional or ornamental, it must be legitimised by theory which, (as stated previously) begins with and is elaborated by the masculine world view and its paradigms. If men have left the



Maureen Connor. *Dancing Lessons*, 1995.

aesthetic of the home in the hands of women it is only because they minimise the extent and impact of that cultural space. When the subject is about “the faculty of knowledge” of interpretation and synthesis, when it is about “ART”, they discredit women as possible makers. In the discourse of art the categories of the substantive and the adjective are always already defined and receive gender.

Connor is then problematising instituted art categories, confronting them with craft and creating doubt in such hierarchical relations. Continuing in this direction, she created another series of works originating in the magazines of the last century that instructed women in various handicrafts. Based on napkin folding techniques, Connor developed a group of sculptures of folded organdy and organised them in such a way that it seemed that she was emphasizing structural capacity over referential function. In reality, Connor is enabling a technique and shaping attitudes to reinforce her discourse.

Besides a shift in context, a scale change helps to convert these sculptures into works freighted with meaning. On one hand these sculptures show a capability for formal abstraction in the domestic world of the last century when “institutionalised art” of the time was far from supporting. It is precisely this observation, that made Connor choose the technique of napkin folding. On the other hand, the drive to “push the limits of the fabric – how far can I push

without anything supporting it?”, connotes the tension, the challenge of reaching a limit where stability is challenged not only in the physical sense but also in all of its metaphorical alternatives, particularly the sexual ones.

The subtle body references implied in these works became evident in pieces



Maureen Connor. *Lung Rack I*, 1988.

made of rattan. Inspired by old corsets that Connor sees as “wearable sculptures”, those pieces suggest associations with bone structure, which, in turn, help us to read the organdy works as other organic fragments which often allude to genitalia. Both elements will reappear in a series at the end of the 80s, but already by the mid 70s, Connor is explicitly working in body territories, searching for their possible

borders and their definitions. Dresses turn inside out, shapes show their concavity in search of interior sensation, showing the dialogue/confrontation of negative space. They allude to the remains of a difficult negotiation.

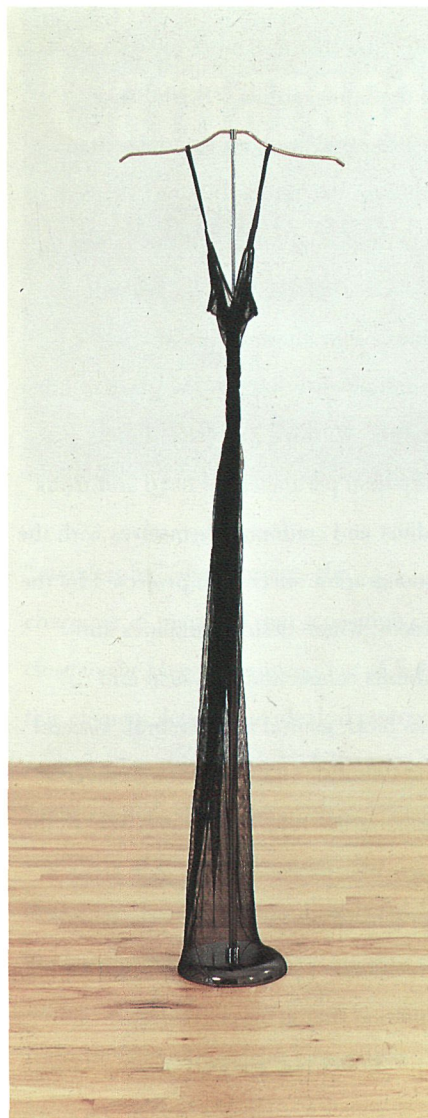
Although the body is referenced through metonymies and synecdoches, the discourse demands to be located at the point of interdependency between flesh and the psychological and emotional aspects of one’s body, on one hand, and socio-cultural requirements on the other –between the definition of individual identity and its frontier with the world. Connor is proposing a version of the body as geography –carnal location– permanently defined, a body that re-constitutes itself depending upon the movements of a conflict between Self and Other, a geography where part of the Self is also this Other and where the location of the frontier depends upon the contingencies of the colonization. This process of formal genesis is a recurrent presence in the series that follows. These are other body reconstructions/ deconstructions based on the skeleton and breath. They are Duchamp’s bottleracks translated into human scale into which have been inserted cast glass replicas of the lungs of sheep and human beings. Transparent, elastic black lingerie has been stretched over or inside some of these pieces. Connor is re-situating the border in an area both conceptual and carnal which does not relate to the external body perimeter; and for this reason, it returns us to the

body's interior. "The presence of organs is not a strategy to disgust"(2) but is a more subtle way of inducing the viewer farther under the skin, toward the organ that gives functionality, that sets the dictum and repeats visceral answers. Paraphrasing Amelia Jones when she quotes Merleau Ponty, we can say that it is about "flesh as support of the self".(3)

In these works, the deconstruction of the individual woman parallels another, that of the artistic discourse of Duchamp. Enlarging the bottleracks causes figurative references to emerge that create associations that are closer to Schlemmer dancers than to the self-referential and aesthetically neutral claims for the ready-made. The "humble" women –"inoffensive sheep"– connoted by the lungs, also adds its subversive part to this new exorcism of Connor's who, here, is being avant garde in redefining the official aesthetic discourse.

A significant anecdote about the difficulty of certain revisions (particularly when they question that established by the masculinist intelligentsia) is that while Connor believed herself to be "killing the father", the interpretation most often given was that those works were a homage to Duchamp. This "misunderstanding" made her move beyond the bottleracks and to create wire structures that support lingerie slimmed and stretched to almost impossible limits. Connor explores "the

desire to be desired". Fashion and the concept of elegance in their distorted dimensions become a torture which is taken on for fear of rejection and the wish for the desire of the other, without implying the projection of our wish for



Maureen Connor. *Thinner than you*, 1990.

other. In the light of these works, the sufferings generated by our societal body obsessions, can be partially seen as sadomasochistic acts inspired by the need for social approbation and sexual gratification.

Another time Connor explains her astonishment when confronting an inflatable doll she saw "that was only orifices". Since then, the theme of body as storage bin appears frequently. In the lingerie series, the characterisation of body as receptacle appears in "Thinner than You" (1990) or "Wishing Well" (1990) and in "Taste Two" (1992) which includes a video image of a woman compulsively eating; set in the window of a bathroom scale that makes unmistakable allusions to anorexia and bulimia.

These examples of the body responding to social inquisition and becoming matter for judgement, for persecution, for adversity, convert the body into a battleground whose result is a kingdom of losses and conquests, whose concepts/meanings are not uniquely linguistic or logistic. Bulimia and anorexia, are, in Connor's words, "a way to reject that control that must be seen from the point of view of the senses being socialized".(4)

THE APPRENTICESHIP, A REGIMEN OF THE SENSES

The theme of apprenticeship as adaptation to a norm or as a restriction within consensus, is explored in a group of installations. In five booths, Connor visits "The Senses"(1992): "how to hear, how to see, how to smell", or restrictions upon what to feel, particularly restrictions upon all sensorial faculties. Defined by white

curtains that pose themselves as frontiers to be crossed by the viewer (“a way to force the viewer to perpetrate penetrative policies” Amelia Jones would say (5)), the pieces appeal to an “emotional answer”(6). The balance between asepsis and sensuality that characterises this group of works secures the meaning of that persistent relationship, wish-fear, emerging from the work.

Three tongues with their respective larynxes, cast in lipstick, appear to emit the voices of three females –a baby, the artist herself and an old woman– all of whom unite in sobs and laughter. It is “Ensemble for Three Female Voices”, the re-signification of a sound field in opposition to that of a word field (a space men keep for themselves). Silence talks back.

A wire through which alternating current passes –announced by igneous red and the sound of an electrical charge– connect two steel display stands. This is “Don’t touch”, an installation where the tactile mediates sex and pain. The object of desire has the stigma of danger.

In “Taste”, two video screens replace the dishes of a table setting. On one of them, many different kind of food appear to be fed to the camera/viewer while on the other many mouths gesticulate, taste and kiss. Pleasure and frustration are evoked in this installation, recreating the uneasiness of an imprecise frontier between the intimate and the public, the individual

and the shared, the accepted and the repressed.

“Limited Vision” appeals through a reflective, impenetrable surface that distorts its image into a confrontation with a self that sometimes plays the role of the mercenary.

Another and more complex version of the same conflict, “Sixth Sense” (1992-1993) isolates the codes that build up the “limited vision” through superimposing images of the viewer in two video-mirrors which also emit images that alternatively or simultaneously occupy the place of other images. Within a red velvet booth, the corporeal perimeters of head and trunk adjust and confound themselves with the iconographic succession projected by the videos, where desire stimulates and inhibits connection. Physical and psychical, genital and cerebral, visceral and cultural, all move through diverse imaginaries, returning imprecisely to no particular location. “The sixth sense is the senses’ censor”(7); it is the censor which makes power and pleasure an equation that is never resolved.

In her last works, Connor focuses on women’s sexual experiences, on their initiation into pleasure and the frustrations of their fantasies due to society’s moral requirements. “How we manage to find pleasure in the middle of such conditions”, and how we develop as a result of our early sexual experiences, are some of the questions that these works try to represent. Connor has borrowed her images from dance,

because its obvious sexual connotations make it an ideal metaphor for her purposes. Her last installation “Dancing Lessons” (1995), alternates images of young people initiating themselves into dance with classical dance scenes from various movies. Thus, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers succeed and are succeeded by other examples of more or less carnal fantasy as well as by a group of adolescents in a fusion of sometimes very funny images. The two screens, arranged to resemble walls of a stage set, recall the 50s, already quoted by the young people’s clothes and emphasized by a sort of television table and dance stage.

Thus, Connor continues battling against myths and socio-cultural demands at the same time that she recovers her confessed autobiographical and celebratory beginnings.

NOTES

- (1) Maureen Connor. Interview with Kathleen Cullen. *Journal of Contemporary Art*. Winter 94.
- (2) M. Connor. Lecture. *Alternative Museum*.
- (3) Amelia Jones. Catalogue “Discreet Objects”. *Alternative Museum*.
- (4) M. Connor. Interview with Josefina Ayerza. *Lacanian Ink*. Spring 94.
- (5) Amelia Jones. Catalogue “Discreet Objects”. *Alternative Museum*.
- (6) and (7) M. Connor. Interview with Kathleen Cullen. *Journal of Contemporary Art*. Winter 94.

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