Unmarked
The Politics of Performance

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[B]elief is in itself the image: both arise out of the same procedures and through the same terms: memory, sight, and love.

(Julia Kristeva⁴)

The question of belief always enters critical writing and perhaps never more urgently than when one’s subject resists vision and may not be “really there” at all. Like the fantasy of erotic desire which frames love, the distortions of forgetting which infect memories, and the blind spots laced through the visual field, a believable image is the product of a negotiation with an unverifiable real. As a representation of the real the image is always, partially, phantasmatic. In doubting the authenticity of the image, one questions as well the veracity of she who makes and describes it. To doubt the subject seized by the eye is to doubt the subjectivity of the seeing “I.” These words work both to overcome and to deepen the provocation of that doubt.

As Jacques Lacan repeatedly argued, doubt is a defense against the real.² And as basketball players know, sometimes the most effective offense is a good defense. Doubt can be temporarily overcome by belief, that old and slightly arthritic leap of faith. Like Jacob’s struggle with the Angel who will not give him a proper name, Unmarked attempts to find a theory of value for that which is not “really” there, that which cannot be surveyed within the boundaries of the putative real.

By locating a subject in what cannot be reproduced within the ideology of the visible, I am attempting to revalue a belief in subjectivity and identity which is not visibly representable. This is not the same thing as calling for greater visibility of the hitherto unseen. Unmarked examines the implicit assumptions about the connections between representational visibility and political power which have been a dominant force in cultural theory in the last ten years. Among the challenges this poses is how to retain the power of the unmarked by surveying it within a theoretical frame. By exposing the blind spot within the theoretical frame itself, it may be possible to construct a way of knowing which
does not take surveillance of the object, visible or otherwise, as its chief aim.

Employing psychoanalysis and feminist theories of representation, I am concerned with marking the limit of the image in the political field of the sexual and racial other. I take as axiomatic the link between the image and the word, that what one can see is in every way related to what one can say. In framing more and more images of the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name, and thus to arrest and fix, the image of that other. Representation follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing. The "excess" meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that makes multiple and resistant readings possible. Despite this excess, representation produces ruptures and gaps; it fails to reproduce the real exactly. Precisely because of representation's supplemental excess and its failure to be totalizing, close readings of the logic of representation can produce psychic resistance and, possibly, political change. (Although rarely in the linear cause-effect way cultural critics on the Left and Right often assume.)

Currently, however, there is a dismaying similarity in the beliefs generated about the political efficacy of visible representation. The dangerous complicity between progressives dedicated to visibility politics and conservatives patrolling the borders of museums, movie houses, and mainstream broadcasting is based on their mutual belief that representations can be treated as "real truths" and guarded or championed accordingly. Both sides believe that greater visibility of the hitherto under-represented leads to enhanced political power. The progressives want to share this power with "others"; conservatives want to reserve this power for themselves. Insufficient understanding of the relationship between visibility, power, identity, and liberation has led both groups to mistake the relation between the real and the representational.

As Judith Butler points out, the confusion between the real and the representational occurs because "the real is positioned both before and after its representation; and representation becomes a moment of the reproduction and consolidation of the real" ("Force of Fantasy": 106). The real is read through representation, and representation is read through the real.

Each representation relies on and reproduces a specific logic of the real; this logical real promotes its own representation. The real partakes of and generates different imagistic and discursive paradigms. There is, for example, a legal real in which concepts such as "the image" and "the claimant" are defended and decided through recourse to pre-established legal concepts such as copyright, trademark, property, the contract, and individual rights. Within the physical universe, the real of the quantum

is established through a negotiation with the limitations of the representational possibilities of measuring time and space. To measure motion that is not predictable requires that one consider the uncertainty of both the means of measurement and the energy that one wants to measure. Within the history of theatre the real is what theatre defines itself against, even while reduplicating its effects. Within Lacanian psychoanalysis the Real is full Being itself. Freud's mapping of the unconscious, as Lacan consistently insisted, makes the Real forever impossible to realize (to make real) within the frame of the Symbolic. Within the diverse genre of autobiography the real is considered the motivation for self-representation. Each of these concepts of the real contains within it a meta-text of exclusionary power. Each real believes itself to be the Real-real. The discourse of Western science, law, theatrical realism, autobiography, and psychoanalysis are alike in believing their own terms to be the most comprehensive, the most basic, the most fundamental route to establishing or unsettling the stability of the real. By employing each of them in Unmarked I hope to demonstrate that the very proliferation of discourses can only disable the possibility of a Real-real.

I know this sounds oh-so-familiar to the ears of weary poststructuralists. But what is less familiar is the way in which the visible itself is woven into each of these discourses as an unmarked conspirator in the maintenance of each discursive real. I want to expose the ways in which the visible real is employed as a truth-effect for the establishment of these discursive and representational notions of the real. Moreover, I want to suggest that by seeing the blind spot within the visible real we might see a way to redesign the representational real. If the visible real is itself unable to constitute a reliable representational real its use-value must lie elsewhere.

The pleasure of resemblance and repetition produces both psychic assurance and political fetishization. Representation reproduces the Other as the Same. Performance, insofar as it can be defined as representation without reproduction, can be seen as a model for another representational economy, one in which the reproduction of the Other as the Same is not assured.

The relationship between the real and the representational, between the looker and the given to be seen, is a version of the relation between self and other. Cultural theory has thus far left unexamined the connection between the psychic theory of the relationship between self and other and the political and epistemological contours of that encounter. This relationship between self and other is a marked one, which is to say it is unequal. It is alluring and violent because it touches the paradoxical nature of psychic desire; the always already unequal encounter nonetheless summons the hope of reciprocity and equality; the failure of this
hope then produces violence, aggressivity, dissent. The combination of psychic hope and political-historical inequality makes the contemporary encounter between self and other a meeting of profound romance and deep violence. While cultural theorists of the colonial subject and revisionary meta-anthropologists have thrown welcome light on the historical pattern of the violence of this encounter, we still have relatively little knowledge of the romance nestled within it.

*Unmarked* concerns the relationship between the self and the other as it is represented in photographs, paintings, films, theatre, political protests, and performance art. While the notion of the potential reciprocal gaze has been considered part of the “unique” province of live performance, the desire to be seen is also activated by looking at inanimate art. Examining the politics of the exchange of gaze across these diverse representational mediums leads to an extended definition of the field of performance. The “politics” of the imagined and actual exchange of gaze are most clearly exposed in relation to sexual difference. At once an attempt to stabilize “difference” and an attempt to repress the “sexual” itself, cultural representation seeks both to conceal and reveal a real that will “prove” that sexual difference is a real difference.

I

Psychoanalysis imagines a primal scene that is profoundly formative for the subject. The fundamental power of this primal scene is not mitigated by the difference between actually witnessing the scene or “only” imagining it. An imagined history and a history of a real ocular experience have similarly weighted consequences for the psychic subject. Given this concept of psychic history, the familiar argument that psychoanalysis is ahistorical can be seen as a mis-taking of the notion of history which psychoanalysis employs. A noncontinuous psychic subject *cannot* be adequately reflected in a continuous historiography. In refusing to believe that the empirical real is more impressive than the imagined or fantasized (a belief fundamental to Western historiography), psychoanalysis is incompatible with histories that seek to demonstrate the “weight of empirical evidence,” if that which is labeled empirical excludes that which is immaterial and phantasmatic.\(^8\)

The primal scene is remembered and (re)visited through the dream and the symptom – through the imaginative attempt of the unconscious to replay the (past) scene on the stage of the present. Self-identity needs to be continually reproduced and reassured precisely because it fails to secure belief. It fails because it cannot rely on a verifiably continuous history. One’s own origin is both real and imagined. The formation of the “I” cannot be witnessed by the “eye.” The primal scene itself is (probably) a screen memory for the always-lost moment of one’s own conception. Moreover, within the logic of psychic displacement, the memory of the primal scene also functions as a rehearsal for one’s own death. The primal scene is a psychic revisiting and anticipation of the world without oneself. This vision is devastating and liberating; but it cannot be endured very long. One prefers instead to see oneself more or less securely situated. The process of self-identity is a leap into a narrative that employs seeing as a way of knowing. Mimetic correspondence has a psychic appeal because one seeks a self-image within the representational frame. Mimetic representation requires that the writer/speaker employs pronouns, invents characters, records conversations, examines the words and images of others, so that the spectator can secure a coherent belief in self-authority, assurance, presence.\(^9\)

Memory. Sight. Love. All require a witness, imagined or real.

But what would it take to value the immaterial within a culture structured around the equation “material equals value”? As critical theories of cultural reproduction become increasingly dedicated to a consideration of the “material conditions” that influence, if not completely determine, social, racial, sexual, and psychic identities, questions about the immaterial construction of identities – those processes of belief which summon memory, sight, and love – fade from the eye/I.\(^10\)

Pitched against this fading, the words I have lined up here attempt to (re)develop the negative, not in order to produce a clearer print, but rather to see what it would mean to use the negative itself as a way of securing belief in one’s self-image.

II

As Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction have demonstrated, the epistemological, psychic, and political binaries of Western metaphysics create distinctions and evaluations across two terms. One term of the binary is marked with value, the other is unmarked. The male is marked with value; the female is unmarked, lacking measured value and meaning. Within this psycho-philosophical frame, cultural reproduction takes she who is unmarked and re-marks her, rhetorically and imagistically, while he who is marked with value is left unmarked, in discursive paradigms and visual fields. He is the norm and therefore unremarkable; as the Other, it is she whom he marks.

The reproduction of the cultural unconscious proceeds, as Lacan has argued, by taking two terms and forming one: the one they become is gendered male. Sexual difference in this way remains hidden and cultural (re)production remains *homo-sexual*.*\(^11\)* Unable to bear (sexual) difference, the psychic subject transforms this difference into the Same,
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and converts the Other into the familiar grammar of the linguistic, visual, and physical body of the Same. This process of conversion is what Freud called fetishization. Lacan calls it the function of metaphor.

For Lacan: "The sexual relation cannot be written. Everything that is written is based on the fact that it will forever impossible to write the sexual relation as such. This gives way to a certain effect of discourse called écriture" (in Reynaud: 31). Writing re-marks the hole in the signifier, the inability of words to convey meaning exactly. The intimacy of the language of speech and the language of vision extends to their mutual impossibilities. The failure to represent sexual difference within visual representation gives way to a certain effect of the positive/negative, the seen and the unseen, which frames the visual perception of the Woman, and leads to her conversion into, more often than not, a fetish – a phallic substitute. This fetishization of the image is the risk of representational visibility for women. It secures the gap between the real and the representational and marks her as Other.12

Within the realm of the visible, that is both the realm of the signifier and the image, women are seen always as Other; thus, The Woman cannot be seen. Yet, like a ubiquitous ghost, she continues to haunt the images we believe in, the ones we remember seeing and loving. Unmarked is part of this ghost story – the story of the woman as immaterial ghost. It takes place within the haunted house of the cultural unconscious and it shakes the graves of the restless spirits of psychoanalysis, Freud and Lacan, and follows their feminist familiar – Luce Irigaray, Jacqueline Rose, Juliet MacCannell, and Joan Copjec. Attentive to the political field in which the real and the representational are the reproductive couple par excellence, I want to see which of their offspring are draped and which are raped by the psychic and discursive terms of the visible.

The current contradiction between “identity politics” with its accent on visibility, and the psychoanalytic/deconstructionist mistrust of visibility as the source of unity or wholeness needs to be refigured, if not resolved.13 As the Left dedicates ever more energy to visibility politics, I am increasingly troubled by the forgetting of the problems of visibility so successfully articulated by feminist film theorists in the 1970s and 1980s. I am not suggesting that continued invisibility is the “proper” political agenda for the disenfranchised, but rather that the binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility is falsifying. There is real power in remaining unmarked; and there are serious limitations to visual representation as a political goal.

Visibility is a trap (“In this matter of the visible, everything is a trap”: Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts: 93); it summons voyeurism and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession. Yet it retains a certain political appeal. Visibility politics have practical consequences; a line can be drawn between a practice (getting someone seen or read) and a theory (if you are seen it is harder for “them” to ignore you, to construct a punitive canon); the two can be reproductive. While there is a deeply ethical appeal in the desire for a more inclusive representational landscape – and certainly under-represented communities can be empowered by an enhanced visibility, the terms of this visibility often enervate the putative power of these identities. A much more nuanced relationship to the power of visibility needs to be pursued than the Left currently engages.14

Arguing that communities of the hitherto under-represented will be made stronger if representational economies reflect and see them, progressive cultural activists have staked a huge amount on increasing and expanding the visibility of racial, ethnic, and sexual “others.” It is assumed that disenfranchised communities who see their members within the representational field will feel greater pride in being part of such a community and those who are not in such a community will increase their understanding of the diversity and strength of such communities. Implicit within this argument are several presumptions which bear further scrutiny:

1 Identities are visibly marked so the resemblance between the African-American on the television and the African-American on the street helps the observer see they are members of the same community. Reading physical resemblance is a way of identifying community.
2 The relationship between representation and identity is linear and smoothly mimetic. What one sees is who one is.
3 If one’s mimetic likeness is not represented, one is not addressed.
4 Increased visibility equals increased power.

Each presumption reflects the ideology of the visible, an ideology which erases the power of the unmarked, unspoken, and unseen.

Adrian Piper, the visual artist and philosopher, has demonstrated that part of the meaning of race resides in the perpetual choice to acknowledge or ignore its often invisible markings. In the United States the history of slavery, and its relation to reproduction and rape, has meant that a “pure” match between race and skin color is relatively rare. In her potent video Cornered (Figure 1), Piper addresses the “white” spectator and through a slow but increasingly pointed set of questions and propositions gradually overturns the binary of “black” and “white” so fundamental to the performance of racist ideology in the United States.15 Since race is thought to be “carried” by blood and the history of slavery for African-American women is also the history of rape, the belief that one is “purely” white or black is difficult to sustain. Piper, dressed in blue and draped in pearls, calmly constructs a decision tree for her “white” spectator. First she demonstrates that the statistical
probability that the spectator is actually black is extremely high. Then she asks how that knowledge will change, or not change, one's identifications. (Will you tell some of your friends? Will you tell your boss? Will you keep it a secret?) Gradually, as the trellis gets more and more intricate, the logic it is upholding begins to slip. What is the distinction between "blackness" and "whiteness" based on? If "racial identification" is a choice, what motivates it? Who gets to make that choice? In unhooking racial identity from the realm of the visible and making it a matter of "choice," Piper exposes the enormous consequences of racial difference while exposing the utter insignificance of the ground which legislates these differences — gene arrangement, the odd biology of blood.

Installed in "The Windows on Broadway," at The New Museum in New York, Piper's video spilled out onto the street and captivated a whole range of "non-traditional" museum-goers. The video monitor was installed against the rear wall of the window; in the foreground of the window was a large, upended and overturned brown table. On the side wall, birth certificates with the word "race" highlighted were displayed. Within the video frame, Piper herself sat behind a table very much like the one overturned in the window. A series then of mimetic frames opens up as one tries to "locate" the event. The window replicates the video screen: on video, Piper sits at a table; in the window, the video monitor (placed on another similar table) represents her image from behind an overturned table, calmly speaking. The double framing, the marked reproduction of the real production via the return of the tables, make the notion of apprehending the elusive, invisible properties of "race-blood" seem absurd. Piper's representational frame-up corners the spectator and disables the habitual notion that race is visibly marked on skin.

The decision to "identify" as an African-American or to "pass" as white — a question Piper poses for her "white" spectator in Cornered — is part of an ongoing performance of identity. The same physical features of a person's body may be read as "black" in England, "white" in Haiti, "colored" in South Africa, and "mulatto" in Brazil. More than indicating that racial markings are read differently cross-culturally, these variations underline the psychic, political, and philosophical impoverishment of linking the color of the physical body with the ideology of race. Race-identity involves recognizing something other than skin and physical inscriptions. One cannot simply "read" race as skin-color. The tendency to do so leads to the corollary proposition that all people with the same skin color believe the same thing, and that there is, for example, such a thing as a coherent African-American community. The fiery debate in 1991 over Clarence Thomas, President George Bush's nominee to the Supreme Court, makes plain the diversity of the African-American
community in the United States. The “visibility” of black skin is not, and cannot be, an accurate barometer for identifying a community of diverse political, economic, sexual, and artistic interests.

The focus on skin as the visible marker of race is itself a form of feminizing those races which are not white. Reading the body as the sign of identity is the way men regulate the bodies of women. Lorene Cary tells a West Indian folk tale in Black Ice. A woman drapes her skin across a chair in the bedroom she shares with her husband and slips out a window to enjoy the night. Night after night she leaves their bed. (Indigenous dream interpreters, as against Freudian ones, would say she is walking with The Invisible.) She is always careful to return before her husband wakes. She slips back into her skin and then back into their bed. But one night her husband wakes and sees her skin across the chair. He is distraught. He seeks the advice of “an old woman in the village.” She tells him to take some salt and rub the inside of the empty skin with it. A few nights later, the woman leaves again and the husband applies the salt to her skin. When she returns to her skin it will not yield: “Skin, skin, ya na know me?” she screams (Cary, Black Ice: 131). Caught between her body and her spirit, her insides keep her out. The husband who believes he has the right to the entrances and exits of her body can coat the inside of her skin with salt but he cannot keep her home. His failure to hold her in their bed prompts him to make her skin unable to house her spirit. Both exiled, her question hangs in the air: “Skin, skin, ya na know me?” The woman’s voice cannot reanimate her skin. And she remains lost to her own body because of his desire to mark it as his.

In conflating identity politics with visibility, cultural activists and some theorists have also assumed that “selves” can be adequately represented within the visual or linguistic field. The “hole in the signifier,” “the Real-impossible” which is unsayable, unseeable, and therefore resistant to representation, is ignored in the full fling forward into representation.16 The danger in staking all on representation is that one gains only re-presentation. Pense Baudrillard, the real continues to exert its allure and provoke our frustration despite the pervasiveness of “the precession of simulacra,” despite our inability to recover it independent of its representation.17

If representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture. The ubiquity of their image, however, has hardly brought them political or economic power. Recognizing this, those who advance the cause of visibility politics also usually call for “a change” in representational strategies. But so far these proposals are rather vague. What is required in order to advance a more ethical and psychically rewarding representational field, one that side-steps the usual traps of visibility: surveillance, fetishism, voyeurism, and sometimes, death? How are these traps more or less damning than benign neglect and utter ignorance? There is an important difference between willfully failing to appear and never being summoned.

Given capitalism’s continual degradation of women’s reproductive value – from the crude ideology of the familiar feminization of poverty which matter-of-factly turns up as a 59 to 63 cent wage differential in the U.S., to the failure to recognize human reproduction itself as labor, except in the case of surrogacy – that is, through the agency of the biological other and under the hood of capitalism’s fallow, the contract – it is imperative that those interested in women as subjects find other ways of thinking about the relation between representation and reproduction. This requires attention to that which eludes both reproduction and representation. It is not enough to dismiss “the negative status of what cannot be seen” (Sue-Ellen Case, “Introduction,” Performing Feminisms: 13) without considering what that negative negates.

Visibility politics are additive rather than transformational (to say nothing of revolutionary). They lead to the stultifying “me-ism” to which realist representation is always vulnerable. Unable to see oneself reflected in a corresponding image of the Same, the spectator can reject the representation as “not about me.” Or worse, the spectator can valorize the representation which fails to reflect her likeness, as one with “universal appeal” or “transcendent power.”

Visibility politics are compatible with capitalism’s relentless appetite for new markets and with the most self-satisfying ideologies of the United States: you are welcome here as long as you are productive. The production and reproduction of visibility are part of the labor of the reproduction of capitalism. I am trying here to remember the traps of the visible and to outline, however speculatively, a different way of thinking about the political and psychic relationship between self and other, subject and object, in cultural production. The psychoanalytic dimensions of the encounter between who one is and who one sees, an encounter most comprehensively explained by Lacan’s reading of Freud, can be employed as a departure point for a more emphatic accenting of the political dimensions of the encounter between self and other.

III

Oscar Wilde [...] gave us the added insight that criticism was the only civilized form of autobiography.18

For many years of my childhood in the heat of the summer my six brothers and sisters, two parents, the ghost of my dead sister and I drove from Long Island, New York to Carmel, Massachusetts in a green
station wagon with brown sideboards. We'd all be crowded in the car, perched on the green vinyl seats, sweating to Massachusetts. On the roof of the car, like a precariously large hat, were three suitcases stacked from bottom to top. We divided ourselves into three sets of three, arranged left to right. My father drove and my mother sat in the front with my eldest brother. My next oldest brother and my two older sisters sat in the middle, while my next oldest sister, myself, and my younger brother sat in the “way back” and faced the opposite direction of the rest of them and the way we were going.

When my mother couldn't stand us any longer she'd say, “Let's have a keep quiet contest.” Whoever could keep quiet the longest won a prize. I can't remember what the prize was, but I remember trying very hard to listen to the sound of the tires on the asphalt, the sound of my sister’s breath, the sound of the wind turning over as the car went through it. These contests had a strange tension for me, not so much because I was burning to speak, but because I thought my mother's weary sadness might infect us and render us all permanently mute. Eventually of course someone of us would break the silence. Sometimes one of my brothers would start tickling one of my sisters. Or my mother herself would speak to my father and we'd all yell with delight to see her undone by her own game. Sometimes she'd laugh at herself; sometimes she'd say it didn't count since she was the mother and the referee of the game, not a participant.

After years of this I realized that the games were meant to be lost at least as much as they were meant to be won. No one really expected nine people to drive six hours in silence. Part of “losing” the game meant winning a certain kind of relief. A relief from the potential grief we all knew waited at my mother's elbow ready to carry her far away from us. And knowing when to lose the game—how to break the silence in such a way that we would not break our mother's temper—required a very specific intelligence, one schooled in the subtle calibrations of a substantive and mobile silence. An intelligence whose very expression, utterance itself, was hedged in on all sides by doubt.

In the years since I've spent a lot of time trying to understand what a captivating presence my sister's ghost was and is. There were nine of us in that car, but it was the one who was not with us that we worried about, thought about, remembered. In the clarity of her absence, we redefined ourselves. The real was the absence of her; we were representations of that loss. The incorporeal presence of my sister mattered to us I think because we were so bounded by the strange body we were—not octagonal and no longer pentagonal we were a nine-headed creature with a distressing sameness to our features. We were living maps of one another's physical history and future. The younger ones recorded the older ones' past; the older ones showed the younger ones their future.

The girls showed the boys themselves as girls and the boys showed the girls themselves as boys. And no one, including our mother, got our names right. (My father evaded the whole thing by renaming us altogether.) The absolute break between the sign and the referent was a joke in our house, and the failure of the proper name to render an identity was an accepted fact. We recognized that distinct identities would not emerge from names which were so often misapplied, nor did we believe that within the tight resemblance of our physical bodies a singular image would tell us who we were. The similarity of our bodies, our uneasy sense of physical redundancy, made us especially conscious of my sister's swift escape from skin. And because we were so consciously caught up in the substitutional economy of the family (the string of wrong names that preceded your own address) she functioned as “a ghost that is the phantom of no flesh” (Derrida, “The Double Session”: 206). For while we were each reproducing one another's bodies across the unstable and always redoubled divide of time and gender, her non-corporeality reproduced our bodies as fleshless.

Even as we named my mother's sadness “grief” and silently attributed it to the death of my sister, we also recognized, however dimly, the possibility that her silence had nothing at all to do with the loss of her child, but rather had to do with the enormous weight of her living children—or more distressing still, had nothing to do with any of us at all. Such thoughts could not be borne by us, so we did not try them out. Like our missing sister, they rested somewhere we could not often visit.

Identity cannot, then, reside in the name you can say or the body you can see—you own or your mother's. Identity emerges in the failure of the body to express being fully and the failure of the signifier to convey meaning exactly. Identity is perceptible only through a relation to an object—which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other. In that declaration of identity and identification, there is always loss, the loss of not-being the other and yet remaining dependent on that other for self-seeing, self-being.

IV

Taking the visual world in is a process of loss: learning to see is training careful blindness. To apprehend and recognize the visible is to eliminate as well as absorb visual data. Just as surely as representational technologies—the camera, the canvas, the theatrical frame, language itself—order visual apprehension to accord with a (constructed) notion of the real so too do human eyes. As Lacan puts it:

When you see a rainbow, you are seeing something purely subjec-
This power threatens to expose one's lack-in-being. In order to counter the physiological and psychic impoverishment of the eye/I, visual representation makes ever more elaborate promises to deliver a satisfying and substantial real. Representation appeals to deep psychic impulse to employ the image seen as a mirror for the seeing eye/I and to forget that it is also a screen which erases the subject's own blankness and blindness.

The position of the looker within Lacan's psychic economy is known in relation to the position of the image seen and vice versa. It is not accurate, therefore, to speak of "the gaze(r)" exclusively: the looker is always also regarded by the image seen and through this regard discovers and continually reaffirms that s/he is the one who looks. The positions which define the distinction between the subject and the object in the visual field are psycho-linguistic. Just as the sign within Saussure's linguistic field acquires meaning by its difference from its surrounding signs, so too does the image gain its status as object by its difference (and distance) from other objects in space and from the perceiving subject.

Sight then is both imagistic and discursive. Language expresses the position of the I as it sees the image. The image seen is a product of and a position within language; in apprehending the image the subject suffers the same mark of all Symbolic exchanges, castration. (One speaks and is spoken; one sees and is seen. This is the double drama of the Mirror Stage.) The eyes look out; one needs always the eye of the other to recognize (and name) oneself. In other words, the gaze guarantees the failure of self-seeing. ("I am unable to see myself from the place where the Other is looking at me": Lacan, Séricet: 120.) It is precisely the failure of the subject, as Copjec puts it, to "ever become[an] a fully observable being" that propels the desire to see the other – the external gaze is a compensatory way of returning a failed inward gaze ("Orthopsychic": 70). The supplement offered by words also compensates for the failure of self-seeing. (And the image compensates for what can't be said – eloquent "body" language supplementing "poor" speech.) But these compensations are inadequate. The given to be seen is always a deferral, a substitute, for what it is one wants to see. The history of Western painting faces and falls away from this failure.

Derrida notices that self-portraits are usually recognized by viewers through their titles, rather than through the content of the visual image:

It is not enough to simply see the work to decide what the subject is [...]. At the edge of the work, neither inside nor outside, readable rather than visible, the title is our only recourse. As for deciding the subject, the initiative is always left to words.

Without words, the self-portrait, the subject's "own" image, the one the
subject always fails to possess and must forever re-enact and re-present, cannot be recognized or named.

All seeing is hooded with loss – the loss of self-seeing. In looking at the other (animate or inanimate) the subject seeks to see itself. Seeing is an exchange of gazes between a mirror (the image seen which reflects the looker looking) and a screen (the laws of the Symbolic which define subject and object positions within language). Looking, then, both obscures and reveals the looker. For Lacan, seeing is fundamentally social because it relies on an exchange of gazes: one looks and one is seen. The potential for a responding eye, like the hunger for a responsive voice, informs the desire to see the self through the image of the other which all Western representation exploits.

While Lacan theorized a potential reciprocal gaze he also recognized that such an exchange took place within an unequal political, linguistic, and psychic field. In this field the signifier of sexual difference “sends forth its light into the shadow of incomplete significations” (Ecrits: 152). Positioned within the “incomplete signification” of a binary sexuality the subject’s relation to the signifier of sexual difference is never secure. Illustrating the signifier’s attempt to (over)compensate for this insecurity, Lacan’s rhetorical flourishes reveal the psychic hollowness of “sexual difference” which sociality and language always (re)cover and dress up. A young boy and girl, seated on a train, look out the window as the train pulls into the station. “Look,” says the boy, “we’re at Ladies!” To which the sister replies, “Idiot! Can’t you see we’re at Gentlemen.” Lacan’s gloss is worth quoting at length:

[O]nly someone who didn’t have his eyes in front of the holes (it’s the appropriate image here) could possibly confuse the place of the signifier and the signified in this story, or not see from what radiating centre the signifier sends forth its light into the shadow of incomplete significations.

(Ecrits: 152)

But of course our eyes are never allowed to rest “in front of the holes” and we do always fail to see the “radiating centre” precisely because, as Lacan himself demonstrated, such a centre cannot be seen or “possessed.” The arbitrariness of the signifier does not reproduce random referents – and that’s only the beginning of the problem. In his mock-epic style, Lacan continues to outline other consequences:

For this signifier will now carry a purely animal Dissension, destined for the usual oblivion of natural mists, to the unbridled power of ideological warfare, relentless for families, a torment to the Gods. For these children Ladies and Gentlemen will be henceforth two countries towards which each of their souls will strive on divergent wings, and between which a truce will be the more impossible since they are actually the same country and neither can compromise on its own superiority without detracting from the glory of the other.

(Ecrits: 152)

Since one sees oneself in the image of the other and sees the other in one’s image, the degradation of one necessitates the degradation of the other. But not all degradation is equal. Operating within the tight equations of heterosexualia, Lacan’s theory of sexual difference negates the female in order to create a theory of the psychic subject, one who (regardless of “sex”) can only “be” in the economy of the negative. To put it somewhat differently, the square root of nine can be satisfied by either positive three or negative three. But suppose only “positive” numbers represent and reproduce integers and negative numbers reproduce fractions. The split-subject of Lacan’s theory can only “be” (figured) within the economy of the negative.

The proposition that one sees oneself in terms of the other and the other in terms of oneself, is itself differently marked according for men and women. When the unmarked woman looks at the marked man she sees a man; but she sees herself as other, as negative-man. Within the frame of the phallic mark, she sees that which she is not. “It is through the phallic function that man takes up his inscription as all” (“A Love Letter,” in Mitchell and Rose, Feminine Sexuality: 150). She then can only be the not-all. “There is no such thing as The woman since of her essence [...] she is not all” (“God and the Jouissance of The Woman,” in ibid.: 144). But these unequal terms reproduce another series of material and psychic consequences. As “not all” her representation lends itself to “this belong to me aspect of representations, so reminiscent of property” (Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts: 81). The image of the woman is made to submit to the phallic function and is re-marked and revised as that which belongs to him.

Perhaps the best performative example of the phallic function is the theatre of drag. A man imitates an image of a woman in order to confirm that she belongs to him. It is necessary and desirable to perform her image externally and hyperbolically, however, because he wants to see himself in possession of her. Performing the image of what he is not allows him to dramatize himself as “all.” But the performance of drag does not and cannot reproduce “the woman.” It re-enacts instead the performance of the phallic function – marking her as his.

But for Lacan, because the phallus is the transcendental signifier which has no referent, the phallic function also re-marks castration and loss for all speaking subjects. If the phallus were secure, the phallic function would be redundant. If one already possesses the desired
object, it is unnecessary to spend one’s life reclaiming it. But the phallic cannot be had, so one does endlessly try to represent it. 27

“[W]hen any speaking subject whatever [that is, male, female, or “whatever”] lines up under the banner of women it is by being constituted as not all that they are placed within the phallic function” (Lacan, “God”: 144). In other words, the position of “woman” within language is open to “any speaking subject whatever” precisely because it is “not all.” This incompleteness is fundamental to speech, to psychic identity, and to the gaze itself. The psychic subject for Lacan, then, is the castrated subject — the subject Freud defined as female. Lacan’s revision of Freud’s project reorders sexual difference itself. In using Oedipus to plot the narrative of heterosexual desire, Freud committed himself to the development of a theory of the male psychic subject. In using language and the gaze as the foundational symbolic rules which govern desire, Lacan invented a theory of the castrated subject — “male, female or whatever.” But because men and women have a different relation to the phallic, Lacan also believed sexual difference entailed a different relation to these symbolic expressions. 28

These accents on castration and loss may sound a bit pessimistic, but it is exactly because the gaze is “not all” that empathy and symbolic identification are possible. Opening up the “not all” of vision requires patience with blanks, with blindness, and with the nonreproductive. To take the humility and blindness inscribed within the gaze seriously, one must accept the radical impotency of the gaze. This impotency underscores the broken and incomplete symmetry between the self and the image of the other.

Joan Copjec and Jacqueline Rose have suggested that the fertility of Lacanian psychoanalysis resides in this psychic paradox: one always locates one’s own image in an image of the other and, one always locates the other in one’s own image. 29 While Lacan was most interested in the implications of the latter on the development of the subject, I am concerned here with the political and aesthetic consequences of the different access certain people have to “the image of the other.” While there has been much written about the gaze, particularly by feminist film theorists and art historians, insufficient attention has been paid to the desire for a reciprocal gaze. The desire to see is a manifestation of the desire to be seen, in live performance as well as in the spectator’s relation to inanimate representation. 30

All vision doubts and hopes for a response. (William James: “[D]oubt and hope are sisters.”) To see is nothing if it is not replied to, confirmed by recourse to another image, and/or another’s eye. This confirmation is negotiated through representation — which is to say through distortion, and principally for this discussion, through the distortions produced by the desire for the real. “Saying the whole truth is materially impossible: words fail. Yet it’s through this very impossibility that truth holds onto the real” (Lacan, “Television’: 7). Relatively comfortable with this notion of the failing signifier, we can begin to extend this proposition to the visible itself. Inverting Lacan’s theorem about the signifier to the eye, one can say: “Seeing the real is materially impossible: eyes fail. Yet it’s through this very impossibility that the given to be seen holds onto the real.” Possibly, through the impossibility of saying a wholly material truth, we might see what the possibility of the immaterial is (which is perhaps to say how to say it). Lacan and Freud called this immateriality the unconscious; it speaks through the symptom. I am calling this immateriality the unmarked; it shows itself through the negative and through disappearance.

I am speaking here of an active vanishing, a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility. For the moment, active disappearance usually requires at least some recognition of what and who is not there to be effective. (In short, this has largely been a possibility for white middle- and upper-class women.)

A group of women artists and feminist theorists in New York call themselves the Guerrilla Girls. They make posters and signs underlining the everyday racist and sexist practices which constitute business as usual in the mainstream art market. They take the real facts of exhibition space, art market prices, and the sexist and racist policies which have influenced the collections of most galleries and museums, as the ground of their representational strategies. Much of this work is witty and wry. In their poster straightforwardly listing the ten advantages of being a woman artist, for example, one benefit is the relief of never having to worry about being labeled a genius. While their work has become increasingly lauded by both establishment and anti-establishment critics and art world commentators, the Guerrilla Girls continue to remain anonymous. When they do make appearances, they wear gorilla masks and mini-skirts. By refusing to participate in the visibility-is-currency economy which determines value in “the art world,” the members of the group resist the fetishization of their argument that many are, at the moment, quite ready to undertake. By resisting visible identities, the Guerrilla Girls mark the failure of the gaze to possess, and arrest, their work. Their posters go up with glue on temporary construction sites, on the sides of buildings, on the doors of closed galleries. They remain there until other messages, often advertisements, overtake them. Underneath the new representations, the racist and sexist “facts” of the Guerrilla Girls’ real continue to “exist,” while remaining obscured. Always failing to keep the real in view, representation papers it over and reproduces other representations.

It is in the light of the generative failure of the gaze that Lacan’s famous sardine-can allegory needs to be seen. Lacan is booting with
some fishermen; observing a can floating on the water, one of the sailors says to him: "Do you see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn’t see you!" (Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts: 95.) While the can does not "see" Lacan, insofar as it focuses his vision it places him in a particular position (the angle by which the light of the can converges into an object on the water) and therefore returns his I/eye, precisely by orientating that I/eye in relation to the can. In this returning regard, however, the subject sees where he is and recognizes himself as other-than-the-can.

Thus it is not enough to speak of the gaze in terms of the laws of optics and the result of the rules of spatial perspective. For spatial orientation provides a position from which to see the subject, but it cannot fully reflect or fully screen the subject. "I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometrical point from which perspective is grasped" (Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts: 96). In other words, the subject exceeds the can and fails to appear "within" the image of it. At the same time, however, the subject, precisely by looking at the visual field through the agency of the gaze, interrupts its unity. "[I]f I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen, which I earlier called the stain, the spot" (ibid.: 97). This "stain" is the gaze’s screen. This seeing cannot be fully explained by geometry and the rules of spatial perspective.

But nor can it be explained and tamed, as quantum theorists and anthropologists have suggested, through an explicit account of the weight or location of the observer’s gaze. Quantum physicists have attempted to measure the altering "energy" of the observer — and to transfer the desire for an epistemology of secure scientific facts to a more insecure epistemology of probabilities and uncertainties. And yet the particle continues to turn into a wave and a wave keeps becoming a particle. Anthropologists and ethnologists have attempted to use "reflexivity" as a new model for observing the other, but such attempts have done little to unsettle the fundamentally unequal relation which prevails in this mode of scholarship. The project is not to locate the observer but rather to see that the given to be seen — from the quantum to the "native" — is apprehended (and of interest) because of the failure of the perceiver to be seen.

"Light may travel in a straight line, but it is refracted, diffused, it floods, it fills — the eye is a sort of bowl — it flows over, too, it necessitates, around the ocular bowl, a whole series of organs, mechanisms, defenses" (Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts: 94). Desire itself activates this "whole series"; and desire shows itself through failure. Desire is recognizable because we are not in the image we seek. The failure to secure self-seeing leads again to the imagination of annihilation and castration. The scopic drive returns us to the failure of representation, the inability of the gaze to secure symmetry or reciprocity. Seeing

secures only the fact that "you never look at me from the place I see you" (ibid.: 91); and the (failed) desire for a reciprocal gaze keeps the looker looking.

Louise Bourgeois’ marble sculpture, Nature Study, Velvet Eyes (1984) can be seen profitably in relation to Lacan’s allegory of the sardine-can (Figure 2). Installed within the museum honoring the mobile eyes of the viewer, Bourgeois’ sculpture looks like a rather large and ordinary rock. Surprised by its apparent ordinariness, the viewer saunters over to it to get a better look and peering down, s/he sees nestled within the cavity of the rock a pair of all too human looking eyes staring back up. Startled by the hidden eyes, one sees how thoroughly blind one is to the eyes of images. But the feeling of shock soon fades and one feels oddly reassured. By giving the potential gaze (back) to the art object, Bourgeois makes visible the symmetrical drive of spectatorship: the desire to see always touches the desire to be seen. It is necessary then to speak of both the object of the gaze and the gaze of the object.

Seeing the other is a social form of self-reproduction. For in looking at/for the other, we seek to re-present ourselves to ourselves. As a social relation the exchange of gazes marks the failure of the subject to maintain the illusionary plenitude of the Imaginary. In the Imaginary there is no exchange of gaze precisely because there is no distinction between what one sees and who one is, and thus the economy of exchange so fundamental to speech and sight, is completely unnecessary. If the infant Mary watches Jane fall down, Mary thinking she is continuous with Jane, cries. Discovering oneself to be a singular bounded body within a physical frame marks the end of the Imaginary continuity between what one sees and who one is. Mary sees she is not connected to Jane and tries to re-establish their connection by speaking to her. If she is answered, the cut is deepened for Jane too recognizes and confirms their distance. If Mary is not answered, she is also cut because she has no other means of re-establishing that connection. (Sexual desire, as a speech act, relies on subject positions, and therefore disconnections and separations. The energy to overcome such separation is libidinal. It relies on the subject’s ability to remain blind to the impossibility of (re)joining.)

The exchange of gaze marks the split within the subject (the loss of the Specular I of the Imaginary) and between subjects (the entry into the Social I of the Symbolic). The “here/there” articulated with Lacan’s story of the sardine-can, and also elaborated in his commentary on Freud’s fort/da game, reflects the linguistic distinction between the positions of “I” and “it.” Just as that distinction casts speech as an inscription of suffering, so too does visual distance measure the eye’s rupture from the Imaginary. The impossibility of fulfilling the desire of the Specular I for
unity which inaugurates and maintains the Social I makes the desiring gaze and its return the guarantee of lack and loss.  

Unable to reverse her own gaze (the eyes obstinately look only outside the self), the subject is forced to detour through the other to see herself. In order to get the other to reflect her, she has to look for/at the other. (She sees herself through looking at the other.) And that other is forever looking for/at himself through looking at her. (Trying to hold that gaze, each looker makes himself into the image she believes the other wants to see.) “The subject presents itself as other than what it is, and what it is given to see is not what it wants to see” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*: 104). Operating within the realm of the substitute, the “original” exchange of gaze that marks the entry into the Symbolic is continually repeated and disguised.

One of the functions of the Symbolic is to turn back, to speak of “original moments.” Lacan’s Mirror Stage explains the Symbolic, but within the terms established by the Symbolic. (Insofar as the Imaginary is the Symbolic’s Other, this framing is inevitable.) The story of origin that Lacan tells must be understood not so much as an empirical moment in the subject’s “continuous” history, but more like the series of frames in Piper’s *Cornered*. The window which frames the video monitor, for example, doubles it so that the spectator can “forget” it and maintain the illusion that Piper is (or once was) there. *Fort. Da.* The Imaginary doubles the fantasy of the Symbolic and keeps the subject desiring its return. The substitutive economy of the Symbolic is itself a substitute for the relations which prevailed in the Imaginary.

Lacan’s story of origin begins with the primary identification the subject feels with the Symbolic Mother. To be valued by the Mother the child must offer that which the Mother desires: the phallus. Lacking it, the child decides the Mother must already contain it and cedes to her the authority of the phallus, transforming her into the subject supposed to know. Imputing to the Mother a unitary wholeness (bodily and psychically), the subject then implores her to return this unity so that the subject may feel as satisfied and complete as s/he imagines the Mother to be. But the Mother, who lacks the phallus, cannot return this wholeness. (No one can for the phallus cannot be had.) In other words, to the subject’s appeal for wholeness, an appeal that arises out of a recognition of lack, the Mother returns her own lack. Zero meets zero and what is confirmed is the endless substitution of deferred desire – which in the Symbolic is signaled by metaphor.

Everyone knows that if zero appears in the denominator the value of the fraction no longer has meaning, but assumes [. . .] infinite value. [. . .] In so far as the primary signifier [the phallus] is pure non-sense,
it becomes the bearer of the infinitisation of the value of the subject, not open to all meanings, but abolishing them all, which is different. (Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts: 252)

Different too is the distinction between the abolishment of meaning and the abolishment of value. For while metaphor can be understood as the erosion and loss of "original" or "singular" meaning it does not follow that this erosion negates value. On the contrary, metaphor makes value.36 And perhaps nowhere more meaningfully than in the metaphoric values of sexual difference. Again, this economy works both discursively and imagistically.

Just as language exists anterior to the subject's relation to it, so too does the marked visual field exist anterior to the subject. (And just as different languages employ different grammars, so too do visual fields, cross-culturally and across genres.) Lacan used the rules of linguistics to illuminate the unconscious - particularly as it became imaged in the transference - and the rules of perspective can illuminate the Western frame of vision - and particularly as it is enacted in its political register.

In the familiar story of the history of Western painting, the rules of perspective rely on a symmetrical relationship between the viewing point and the vanishing point. As Norman Bryson argues, this neat relationship establishes and maintains the centrality of a single perception and a coherent unified looker.37 Perspective is essentially a theory of relationships, an illustration of visual exchanges, from which Lacan elucidated psychic consequences.

In this elucidation, however, Lacan repeatedly asserted that perspective itself was an insufficient explanation for vision. In her essay "The Orthopsychic Subject," Copjec clarifies Lacan's impatience with the laws of optics:

Because it alone is capable of lending things sense, the signifier alone makes vision possible. There is and can be no brute vision, no vision totally devoid of sense. Painting, drawing, all forms of picture-making, then, are fundamentally graphic arts. And because signifiers are material, that is, because they are opaque rather than translucent, because they refer to other signifiers rather than directly to the signified, the field of vision is neither clear nor easily traversable. It is instead ambiguous and treacherous, full of traps.

("Orthopsychic": 68)

The trap of the visual field is that it seems to promise to show all, even while it fails to show the subject who looks, and thus fails to show what the looker most wants to see. The looker is the "not all" which is left out of the promise of visual plentitude. Seeing is a (false) assertion that the world can be mastered by the gaze and a recognition of the world without one self.

In Western art history the centrality of the single perception (the "perfect" viewpoint) is fortified through the experience of its loss, just as the endless process of establishing psychic identity is punctuated by its loss. The symmetrical relation between the viewpoint and the vanishing point means that the viewpoint will be reflected in the vanishing point; the looking eye sees itself as a vanishing emptiness, as a blank. The language of the [singular] eye re-marks the violence of this vanishing.

The history of optics, aesthetics, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and that curious hybrid Bataille's Story of the Eye, each speaks of the singular "eye." The other-eye is always already lanced in language. In the symmetry between the vanishing point and the viewpoint Western painting registers the loss of that other-eye. As Bryson argues in "The Gaze in the Expanded Field":

The viewpoint and the vanishing point are inseparable: there is no viewpoint without vanishing point, and no vanishing point without viewing point. The self-possession of the viewing subject has built into it, therefore, the principle of its own abolition: annihilation of the subject as center is a condition of the very moment of the look.

(Bryson, Vision and Visuality: 91)

The symmetry between the vanishing point and the viewing point reflects the other side of the promise of the plenitude of visual fulfillment - the imagination of annihilation and disappearance. In this sense the historical force of perspective in discussions of Western art history acquires something of an Oedipal character. For the installation of the symmetry between the vanishing point and the viewing point (a symmetry accented more strongly in the theory and history of painting than in the act of painting itself), reflects the notion that art is a mirror for the looker - and in fact, that all looking is an attempt to find a mirror. Such a notion of looking leads to the potential annihilation of the looker. Bryson calls this aspect of Lacan's argument a "paranoid" account of a "negative and terrorizing gaze" (Vision and Visuality: 104-5). But I think Bryson understates the productive power of facing the inevitability of annihilation, castration, misrecognition. For if one could face these features of psychic life, a different order of sociality might be possible.

As Copjec points out, the not-all of visual representation creates in the looker a sense that there is something "beyond" the picture (and the signifying system itself) that is not shown - that is, the subject her or himself. This belief maintains desire. But for Lacan, there is nothing there at all. It is that (internalized) absence that visual representation continually tries to re-cover.

Representation is almost always on the side of the one who looks and
almost never on the side of the one who is seen. As feminist film theorists have demonstrated, the fetishized image of the female star serves as a deeply revealing screen for the construction of men's desire. The image of the woman displays not the subjectivity of the woman who is seen, but rather the constituent forces of desire of the man who wants to see her.

Visibility and invisibility are crucially bound; invisibility polices visibility and in this specific sense functions as the ascendant term in the binary. Gaining visibility for the politically under-represented without scrutinizing the power of who is required to display what to whom is an impoverished political agenda.

Within the psychic and aesthetic economy of the Western gaze, the visible image of the other necessarily becomes a cipher for the looking self. To overturn these economies the failure of the inward gaze to produce self-seeing needs to be acknowledged. If one could confront the internal/external other as always already lost one would not have to rely so heavily on the image of the external other to produce what the looker lacks. This suggestion is not a refusal of multicultural diversity or of a more inclusive representational landscape. It is rather a way to isolate the impotency of the inward gaze as a fundamental aspect of representational economies.

Breaks in the reciprocity of visual exchange offer opportunities to disrupt the neat substitutions of the psychic economy of seeing. Until the image of the other can be other-than-a-cipher for a looking self, calling for greater visibility of the under-represented will do nothing to improve the quality of our political or psychic imaginations.

How to enrich them? Seeing the hollow blindness of our own eyes is dangerous because it risks both self-absorption (one sees nothing other than the self) and self-annihilation (one sees only the nothing of the self). But until one can accept one's internal other as lost, invisible, an unmarked blank to oneself and within the world, the external other will always bear the marks and scars of the looker's deadening gaze.

What is needed to challenge the pessimism of Lacan's belief that there is nothing beyond the gaze on the one hand, and the bleak poverty of our access to identity on the other, is a different relation between the looking subject and the image of the other. Arguing for ever more specific identity-quotients within the content of the image of the other will not upset representational economies. This new relation between the looker and the image of the other requires more attention to communicating nonvisible, rhetorically unmarked aspects of identity, and a greater willingness to accept the impotency of the inward gaze. If we could accept that impotency and loss, we would not have to press quite so hard on the visible configurations of the other. We might be able to give up—or at least to lessen our enthrallment with—the particular configurations of power and desire which inform and infect our external gaze.

V

Unmarked concentrates on the broken symmetry between the self and the other, and the possibilities this break affords for rehearsing the political consequences of an acknowledgment of a failed inward gaze. Precisely because the gaze is "not-all," representation cannot be totalizing. Representation always shows more than it means: in the supplement one can see ways to intervene in its meaning.

In writing the unmarked I mark it, inevitably. In seeing it I am marked by it. But because what I do not see and do not write is so much more vast than what I do it is impossible to "ruin" the unmarked. The unmarked is not the newest landscape vulnerable to tourists. The unmarked is not spatial; nor is it temporal; it is not metaphorical; nor is it literal. It is a configuration of subjectivity which exceeds, even while informing, both the gaze and language. In the riots of sound language produces, the unmarked can be heard as silence. In the plenitude of pleasure produced by photographic vision, the unmarked can be seen as a negative. In the analysis of the means of production, the unmarked signals the un(re)productive.

Having no particular home, no boundaries dictated by genre, the unmarked can be mapped across a wide terrain. The following chapters are concerned with the performative politics operative in photographs, paintings, films, theatre, political protest, and performance art. By suggesting that all these forms of representation participate in a performative exchange I hope to broaden current disciplinary boundaries which define the field of the gaze, the animate and the inanimate, and the seen and the unseen. Performance is the art form which most fully understands the generative possibilities of disappearance. Poised forever at the threshold of the present, performance enacts the productive appeal of the nonreproductive. Trying to suggest that the disappearance of the external other is the means by which self-assurance is achieved requires that one analyze the potential payoffs in such disappearance: performance exposes some of them.

The broad range of material considered here begins to hint at what "cultural reproduction" actually means, and suggests something of what it might take to interfere with its labor. Under the ever-growing shadow of the politically powerful New Right in the United States, I am writing against the perpetual fracturing of disciplines, specializations, and identities progressive political and critical theory has wrought. These fractures make us easy targets for a relatively unified Right. These chapters seek to establish a different idea of mutuality, sociality, and the
real than those currently offered by the false monotheism of the Right and the fractured identity politics of the Left. Resisting both the moral ideological assurance of the Right and their notion of social unity and coherence, and the concentrated effort to secure visibility for the underrepresented which galvanizes the Left, I hope to excavate the ruptures within visibility as deep, if always unmarked, graves – not graves to sleep a long sleep in, but graves that everywhere mine the representational field.

Chapter 2, "Developing the negative: Mapplethorpe, Schor, and Sherman," analyzes the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, Mira Schor, and Cindy Sherman. Portrait photography posits the photographer's subjectivity through recourse to the model of the other. Having access to the model of the visible other for (white) men allows contemplation of an other's body; for (white) women, access to the visible other is negotiated through the image of her own body. Mapplethorpe discovered his most revealing mirror/screen in the model of the African-American male nude. Sherman found her most potent mirror/screen in her own image, but this self-image is always already an image of the other. At once a plea for self-possession and a stark declaration of self-alienation, Sherman's photography focuses on the destructive force of visibility for white women in this culture. At first, this leads her to create images of annihilation, emptiness, and waste within the cultural landscape (films, advertisements, pornography). Eventually, however, it leads her to critique that great cemetery of female images, Western high art portrait painting. Mira Schor's work as a painter and theorist implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) critiques the projects of Mapplethorpe and Sherman. Focusing on the different reproductive claims of painting and photography, I consider the gender and sexual politics of representing the human body within these forms of representation. Exposing the negative has more than a technological application for photography.

Independent cinema has taken as one of its main projects the critique of the image articulated by Hollywood cinema; feminist independent cinema has been particularly astute at reimagining another way to represent the image of the woman. At the end of her 1985 film The Man Who Envi ed Women, Yvonne Rainer suggests that one direction for feminist representation might lie in "a-womanliness." Chapter 3, "Spatial envy: Yvonne Rainer's The Man Who Envi ed Women," considers what is often called "the negativity of feminist theory": the idea that since women in representation are always misrepresented it might be better to withhold the image of the woman altogether. In Rainer's film, Trisha, the female protagonist, is never imaged. The positive possibilities of registering filmic presence with no visible image are remarked at length. What Rainer's film provokes is a consideration of the usefulness of the term "woman" as a category for visible being.

While Rainer suggests the positive values of "what cannot be seen," Jennie Livingston's film Paris Is Burning documents the "appropriation" of the image of the woman by those who remain politically unseen. African-American and Latino gay men and transsexuals perform in balls in which they imitate the "other woman." Frequently she is the white woman celebrated throughout the history of Hollywood film and often disdained by progressive feminist theorists, many of whom are white. The political and sexual appropriation operative in the balls reveals a deep sympathy with the image of the [usually white] woman, and a recognition that in relation to the image of a Latino transsexual, her image is "valued." The complex questions of symbolic identification, capitalist appetite, and the hierarchy of race raised by Livingston's film are amplified, if not resolved, by considering the film in relation to the codes of the genre of the ethnographic documentary. Chapter 4, "The apple from: Jennie Livingston's Paris Is Burning," examines the paradox of staging costume balls and exhibiting one's appearance as a rehearsal for going unnoticed and looking unremarkable on the larger stage of "everyday life."

The last three chapters of the book, "Theatre and its mother: Tom Stoppard's Har goud," "White men and pregnancy: discovering the body to be rescued," and "The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction," consider frames of "live" bodies in relation to a political and aesthetic field. I consider Tom Stoppard's play Har goud in terms of the phantom which haunts the theatrical past, the previous performance. Investigating the claims of quantum physics as a metaphor for understanding theatrical spectatorship, Chapter 5 outlines the relationship between metathat and metaphysics proposed by Stoppard. Grounded in the character of "Mother," Stoppard's play suggests that the "double" haunts all our observations. The chapter concludes with a brief speculation on the possible sympathy between the Belgian physicist Ilya Prigogine's "dissipative structures" and the asymmetrical relations which adhere in the psycho-political concept of the Mother as enacted by Stoppard's titular character.

Uncomfortable with the asymmetrical legal, biological, and psychical relations between men and women around pregnancy, Operation Rescue, the anti-abortion group, has staged a series of demonstrations in which the image of the pregnant woman is erased and the independent image of the fetus becomes the focus for political action. Chapter 6, "White men and pregnancy: discovering the body to be rescued," argues that in making a visual displacement from the pregnant woman to the fetus, Operation Rescue unwittingly makes visible the consequences of the psychic and legal shift from the invisibility of paternity to its visibility. The political and legal ramifications of that shift are unsettling for both the Left and the Right, for those who are "pro-choice"
and those who are "pro-life." The demonstrations and counter-demonstrations may be read as performative exchanges which formulate a new relation to paternal visibility for both groups.

The (Symbolic) Mother will never be the "proper" subject of psychoanalysis and will always be a problematic subject for Western art because as an image who potentially contains the other within one continuous body, she wreaks havoc with the notion of symmetry and reciprocity fundamental to understanding the exchange of gaze operative in both. As an image which contains simultaneously the I and the not-I, the visibly pregnant woman's body contains two sets of eyes/I. In place of the split subject and the drama of lack, the Mother raises the spectacle of a double-subject and the drama of overwhelming presence. The pregnant woman, in other words, enacts and makes Real the Imaginary unity between subject and other. As a continuous double-body, the pregnant woman extends the Imaginary into the Symbolic and overwhelms it. Lest this sound overly romantic or "essentialist," I should stress that the visibility of pregnancy is never absolute. Due to this non-absolute visibility, almost all women are seen as potential mothers.

Classical psychoanalysis cannot adequately "see" the woman-mother because she threatens to make visible the real repression of psychoanalytic theory, the limit of the reciprocal gaze. The Symbolic Mother does internalize the eyes of the other; men cannot repeat or imitate that internalization; nor can they bear its return. Operation Rescue attempts to remove the skin of the pregnant woman to reveal the eyes of her internal other, the "independent" fetus. By displaying the fetus as the single image within the triangulation of reproduction, Operation Rescue attempts to ignore the dilemma of the pregnant woman entirely and to leave unmarked the freedom of (invisible) paternity. As paternity moves more clearly into the domain of the visible, the drama around abortion and reproductive control intensifies.

While the members of Operation Rescue are extreme in their methods, they merely make manifest a persistent and pervasive desire to employ visibility to control women's bodies. Increasingly, such control extends to both the inside and the outside image of our bodies. This fascination motivates Cary's retelling of the West Indian folk tale in which the husband rubs salt on the inside of his wife's skin, and also provokes the brilliant collapse of the cinematic and gynecological gaze in David Cronenberg's Dead Ringers. In excessively marking the boundaries of the woman's body, in order to make it thoroughly visible, patriarchal culture subjects it to legal, artistic, and psychic surveillance. This, in turn, reinforces the idea that she is her body.

Just as law cannot conceive of a pregnant body as a continuous body and searches endlessly for the exact moment in which a fetus is "independent," neither can Freudian psychoanalysis -- and the (male) psychic subject constructed there -- tolerate a gaze which does not include him. Insofar as women's bodies contain the symbolic potential of reproducing another set of eyes, eyes that look only at the inside of their bodies and not at him, he will long to tear their bodies open, to spread their legs wider, to make their "insides" visible to his eyes.

In my final chapter, "The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction," I consider the ontological claims of live performance art as a means of resisting the reproductive ideology of visible representations. Defined by its ephemeral nature, performance art cannot be documented (when it is, it turns into that document -- a photograph, a stage design, a video tape -- and ceases to be performance art).

In this sense, performance art is the least marked of all the texts I consider here. In the work of Angelika Festa, a so-called "ordeal artist," staging disappearance becomes a signature expression of women's subjectivity within phallocentric representation. The price of that disappearance is difficult to calculate. However, part of its summarizing force comes from the enactment of a nonreproductive performing female body. Feminist theorists concerned with reconceiving the associative links between women and reproduction would do well to take seriously what this art work suggests about the possibilities and limits of that project.

This particular cultural moment exerts an urgent pressure to account for what cannot be reproduced. As those artists who have dedicated themselves to performance continually disappear and leave "not a rack behind" it becomes increasingly imperative to find a way to remember the undocumentable, unremovable art they made. The paradox is that in writing a testimony to the power of the undocumentable and nonproductive I engage the document of the written reproducible text itself.

This is the paradox of Lacan's Real, the Real-impossible toward which we aspire and whose failure to realize is utterly assured. In the fulsome guarantee of this failure, writing records the memory of the image of the future that will not be -- the one I will never see. (They are dying and they have taken that future with them.) I am writing in that blank about that disappearance.

The impossible tense and tension of this time are always already written. A fragment then from Rilke, who saw the generative power of nostalgia for a future that will never become past.

On nights like this my little sister rises.
She was born and died before me. Very small.

On nights like this she combs her hair. They watch
the moon afraid to move. I watch her choose her dress, her shoes.

There have been other nights. Mostly long ago.
She is so beautiful now. Tomorrow, the hopeful will call.42

(After Rilke’s “A Stormy Night,” Part VIII)

VI

The work of theory, under current economic conditions can only be, for most of us, a labor of love. Insofar as love is a labor, a trying, an essay, it, like theory, cannot be anything but an offering, a giving of what one does not have, a description and transcription of what one cannot see or prove with visible evidence. Shoshana Felman has suggested that in this giving of what one does not have the speaking body perpetrates a “scandal”:

The scandal [of the speech act] is always in a certain way the scandal of the promise of love, the scandal of the untenable, that is, still and always, the scandal [...] of the promising animal, incapable of keeping his promise, incapable of not making it, powerless both to fulfill the commitment and to avoid committing himself.

(original emphases; The Literary Speech Act: 150)

But if this scandal “is always,” “that is, still and always” present, what makes us (mis)recognize it as scandalous? Perhaps the failure of the promise, like the failure of erotic love, is not so much scandalous as the constituent force of the banal and normative theatre of the everyday. In the deep hope of that promise and the repeated enactment of its failure, the lover, like the lover, desires another revision of memory, sight, and love.

The scenario of the erotic is framed between the promise and the failure of this revision. The repetition of failure is the ground from which memory, sight, love, and their theories are re-experienced. “Failure, to be sure, pervades every performance, including that of theory, which in turn becomes erotic for being nothing but a failed act, or an act of failing” (my emphases; Felman, The Literary Speech Act: 111). The eroticism of the failure of writing, like the eroticism of love’s failing, is the energy necessary to maintain the belief in a blind eye.

With every mark, the unmarked summons the other eye to see what the mark is blind to – what the given to be seen fails to show, what the other cannot offer. The dramas of concealment, disguise, secrets, lies, are endemic to visual representation, exactly because visual representation is “not all.” The myth of Oedipus is a central psychoanalytic myth because it makes knowledge itself productive of blindness. Oedipus' self-blinding is less a symptom of his regretful desire, and more a marking of the impossible desire to see oneself. By declaring our eyes blind and impotent we may be able to resist the smooth reproduction of the self-same. We may begin to be able to inhabit the blank without forcing the other to fill it.

At the limit of the physical body, at the limit of the blind eye, at the limit of the signifier, one sees both the knowledge of failure and the performance of belief propped up on all sides by serious and comic doubt. Certain of failure, I inscribe, again, my hope for blind (and forgiving) eyes.