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Cracking the domestic collaborations among women artists

Judith Batalion

Collaboration as a feminist issue

The Dinner Party and *The Guerrilla Girls* stand out in the feminist litany of artists as notable examples of women's artistic collaborations from the 1970s and 1980s. Can these early feminist works relate to and inform discussion of current women's collaborations? In my recent research, I found out about and examined nearly forty female collaborations that have produced artworks in the USA, the UK and Canada from 1970 through to 2003. Many of these artworks, including contemporary ones, involve representations of domesticity. But do collaborations in the late 1990s/early 2000s share the same domesticities and characteristics as the earlier projects? Are hierarchies invoked? Is labour divided? This article sets out to investigate some current female collaborations in terms of how they work and what they make.

There is little critical apparatus for the study of collaborative creativity. Writing on collaboration can often be laudatory and nostalgic.[1] Further, while psychoanalytic criticism does address creativity and gender, it tends to focus on issues of autonomy and examples of solo creativity. For instance, Classic Freudian theory posits that men's creativity emerges from (and as a working out of) their ambivalent love/hate relationships with their male teachers and fathers. Gaining autonomy and independence from the father, as well as the mother, is seen as crucial to the development of a strong ego and an ego is considered essential for any notion of creativity. Freudian theory rarely considers how women might gain autonomy, be creative, or relate one to the other as artistic collaborators.[2]

A number of psychoanalytic writers and practitioners, who we might loosely group as American object relations theorists, have studied female inter-relationships and focus on the mother-daughter interaction. These theorists generally suggest that women have "***false***" relationships built from the girl's continual identification with, and inability to separate from, her mother.3 Because of this, the girl learns to experience empathy and connection, and perceives herself only as possessing worth within relationships. This "***relational***" subjectivity follows women into adult life, where they continue to experience the self only through relationships, and fail to gain autonomy, the patriarchal norm. At adolescence, then, many women lose self-

confidence and become very self-critical. Further, without a language for self-expression or positive and diverse cultural representations of womanhood, women are alienated from their own experience, and in turn, from others. In this model, women, alienated in this way, are not really "***in***" their relationships although they conceive their identities as relational, so ending relationships is seen as extremely threatening. Thus, women tend to maintain "***false***" relations and withhold anger, aggression and criticism. The consensus of these socio-psychoanalytical accounts might suggest that if women work together, it is out of compliance and not for greater self-expression. By focusing on women's lack of autonomy (even if this lack is valued) these theorists ultimately uphold the Freudian autonomy/relational distinction, and cast negatively any real potential for creativity amongst women.

Jessica Benjamin's work on intersubjectivity and Juliet Mitchell's on hysteria began to open up new questions for my investigation.[4] For Benjamin, the (ideal) intersubjective realm is a '**third position**' in discourse, created between two subjects who identify with and differentiate from each other, ultimately recognising each other's subjectivity in both creativity and communication. As they do not relate as object-subject, the created third space is beyond either one's control, and is a shared and explorative space. This work opened up the question for me of how women might exchange in an intersubjective way, acknowledging both themselves and their partners, not as sexual objects, but as subjects.

Juliet Mitchell's recent writings on hysteria also moved away from the parental (and thus the inherently hierarchical mother-daughter) question to a critique of sibling – or '**lateral**' – relations. Mitchell emphasizes that laterals threaten each other, as they share desires and compete for the same parents/things. Siblings represent a '**narcissistic catastrophe**' and are the ultimate reminders of an individual's lack of uniqueness. For Mitchell, hysteria results when the love-hate ambiguity of, and dislocation urged by, the sibling relationship remains unresolved. Hysteria manifests itself in non-sibling lateral relations as competition, a desire for attention, and over-compensatory performance of uniqueness. Could collaborations between women catalyze a similar catastrophe of identity or might they help to repair the fundamental one produced by the mother-daughter relationship, or even by a sibling one? How might a collaboration help enhance self-confidence at the same time that it diminishes uniqueness?

My hope is that examining collaborations – where the creative process is drawn-out through social conversation and art objects – can elucidate aspects of creativity. Does the practice of collaboration offer a creative alternative to the "***autonomous***" or "***lone genius***" model, even one that could then be applied to solo creativity? Must one be autonomous before collaborating and/or creating, or can one collaborate and/or create from a relational stance? I cannot assess whether individual artists are "***autonomous***" or "***relational***", or relate in an "***autonomous***" or "***relational***" way, but I will use some of these theoretical considerations in my analysis of female collaborations and their artworks.

Three models for collaboration

A number of women's collaborative projects created, recreated or represented a domestic space. As several feminist architectural theorists have noted, the house can signify the self, or subjectivity. Thus, the artistic recreation of a house might be some sort of *construction féminine* – a building or renovation of an interior self.[5] Following Benjamin, the house might also be considered a site of intersubjectivity, where relations are played out between dwellers and even with the house. Again, its recreation might suggest at a renegotiation of relations. I mention these domestic connotations as I have found that many female collaborators' social dynamics appear to parallel their attendant sites. Different forms of female creative relationships resulted in and effected the different types of architectural spaces being created or utilised. In my analysis of collaborations, I have looked at the formal aspects of spaces (wall position, ornament, objects), as well as social dynamics (how the project/relationship was initiated, the amount of time that the collaborators spent together, how they managed trust, conflict and criticism), and have developed three models of female co-creativity.

Barefoot, catsuited and in the kitchen
A Self-Aware Model

Some collaborations begin as planned events, sometimes planned externally, by a "***matchmaker***". Such collaborations can produce artwork that is self-conscious. This self-consciousness might literally be the self-consciousness felt by an artist working with an arranged partner, but it also reflects the abstract factor of estrangement in any relationship. The artists in these pre-arranged situations appear to feel anxious and disoriented, and to question their creative autonomy within the pair. Similarly, their co-created domestic sites call into question the rigidity of boundaries, and are de-localised (without a recognisable location) and even dis-oriented. The

Tomie Arai, Millie Chen *Kitchen* (1997) detail of installation at Art in General, New York. Courtesy of Artists.

unstable relations this kind of commission produces seem to make the artists very aware of their own "***object relations***" and competing interests; the works, which seem defensive, centre on questions about watching and looking.

My first example is Tomie Arai and Millie Chen's *Kitchen* (1997), initiated by the curator Holly Block and produced for Art in General's space in Manhattan. The artists, who were of different cultural backgrounds (Chen is Chinese-Canadian, and Arai, Japanese-American) and who were strangers before beginning the project, were asked to explore notions of hospitality. They ended up creating a neat and seemingly ownerless parody of an Asian-American kitchen, including mock tea containers, noodles, and packaged goods. The artists distorted the processes of preparing and offering food, as this was a project about friendliness toward strangers who are in unfamiliar spaces, delocalised, constantly aware and slightly awkward.

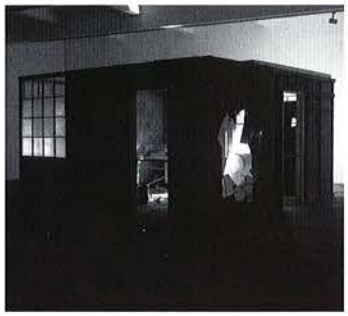
Kitchen's architecture was as self-aware as the basis of the collaboration. The room was built with partitioned walls within the gallery walls: a contained container. The elements of parody within the project consisted in neatly replacing the "***exotic***" Asian women on much of the packaging – meant for consumers to stare at in desire – with self-portraits. The artists glued cut-out photos of each of their faces (and sometimes their "***real***" bodies - including pregnant bellies) on all the packaging; further, they silkscreened images of themselves engaged in banal activities (ironing, brushing each other's hair) all over the modern chinoiserie-type wallpaper. The kitchen's objects were plastered with the artists watching, their eyes peering into the domestic space, and the kitchen's surfaces surveyed. While the artists were co-engaged in activities on the ironic wallpaper, on the labels, the artists were never in the same photo together – they were represented as if watching each other, emphasizing again their self-conscious relation.

A second example of this "***matchmade***" collaboration – again with a kitchen – was made by twins, a potential case study for Mitchell's discussion of uncertain autonomy within a threatening lateral relation. Jane and Louise Wilson, known for their video installations, have worked together and shared an oeuvre since art school. In many published interviews, their responses appear as if they come from one speaker, and their partnership is a singular entity. Certainly, there is deep identification in their relationship, but this relationship was not chosen for unity and support. The artists were not forced to collaborate; but having been introduced at conception, they did not actively seek each other out.

Though there are self-conscious references to their twinship throughout their oeuvre, including doubling motifs, explicit graphic references to partnership, as well as mirror reflections and video-spliced body parts making it hard to discern who is who, they generally dismiss their twinship as being incidental and secondary to their art. The twins are "***cool***" about their relationship, only referring to it as a formal strategy.[6]

The Wilsons' use of architecture is similarly self-aware. The artists inhabit abandoned buildings – ranging from nursing homes to secret police headquarters – by videoing, capturing, and reframing them. They have represented buildings in human scale, in movement, and on multiple screens, juxtaposing walls and internal and external areas of the buildings, all together creating a sense of instability and dislocation.

Normapaths (1995) is structured like a parody of an action film. Set in an abandoned brewery, four women in catsuits (including the twins) fight, jump, and run aflame in unconnected shots. The installation includes a constructed abandoned kitchen, self-consciously dilapidated, and lined with debris – mysterious, dysfunctional and seemingly hazardous



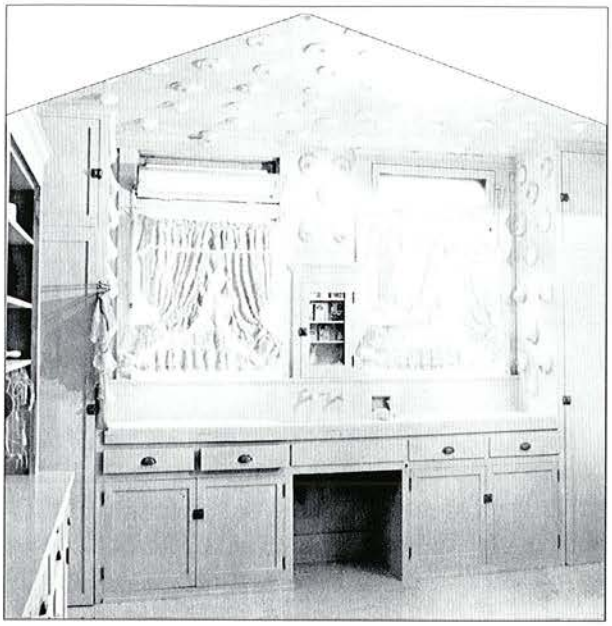
Jane & Louise Wilson *Normapaths* (1995) Above: 16mm film (2 U-matic, 3 mins 40 secs, loop) projection of 335 x 427 cm. Above Left: details of film set/gallery installation: 244 x 488 x 488 cm. Left below: C-type prints on perspex 183 x 152.5 cm. Courtesy: Lisson Gallery and Artists.

architectural elements are balanced or perched between slats of wood that hold on by the last hinge. Though the kitchen has three doors, the women karate kick and smash through walls: as one twin kicks through the kitchen wall, immediately in its place is the brewery wall. The punctures in the structure make visible the self-conscious and purposeful aggression and anxiety, and allude to the self-conscious movement of the actual kitchen set, which went from being a prop in the film to being set in the gallery as part of the installation alongside footage of the same kitchen that appeared as a projection on the gallery wall. Walls in walls, walls on walls, and walls in walls on walls – the use of the kitchen, as both prop and installation, suggests layers of self-conscious framing and doubling. Indeed, the artists built walls and then gestured at breaking them down, but never eradicated them completely, keeping boundaries ambivalent and uncomfortable. Some video shots peer into the room via the wall-hole, as if it was a peephole. The camera's perspective is simultaneously outside the abandoned kitchen and inside the abandoned brewery – this kitchen's very walls are the sites of watching.

The representation of the female figure in this artwork is video-self-portraiture, again a self-conscious move. Moreover, the self-portraiture is comic. Instead of slick, fierce and sexy catsuited women, the twins and their actor colleagues are 'real' women's bodies. One jets across the set, but drags a slew of handbags; one shoots into the sky and lands clumsily and slow-motion on an apparent trampoline. The twins mock the myth of the sexy Avenger by inserting awkward women (themselves) into the stunt suits. They self-consciously self-deprecate, displaying but controlling their clumsiness.[7]

Mitchell considers self-portraiture to be a "***hysterical***" over-compensatory attempt at uniqueness. In this case of twins, self-portraiture is ironic and confounding, as they share an appearance. The twins often appear in the same frame and in the same outfits; however, they do not look at each other but peer at right angles. They look but don't see, together but alienated, one but two, but how? The self-consciously diegetic plot, about female fighting, ends as the sisters make-up. Their affection is displayed when the sisters reach out – not helping hands – but helping feet. We focus on this less intimate body part, and again, the scene is awkward and alarming. Bodies are cut, spliced in with dissected walls and perverted architecture. In this cry for attention, all is merged, chaotic and anxious. The Wilsons present an awareness of relationality and lack of boundaries; they create and kick their own abandonment. In a video of spliced walls and perverted architecture, the domestic scene is awkward and unsettling.

Female groups have produced kitchens before. Both *Womanhouse* (1971-72), by Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro



Far Left: *Nurturant Kitchen* from *Womanhouse* © Judy Chicago 1972. Photo: Courtesy of Through the Flower Archives. Left: Sheet Closet from *Womanhouse* © Judy Chicago 1972. Photo: Courtesy of Through the Flower Archives.

and twenty-one students and set in an actual abandoned Hollywood mansion, and *A Woman's Place* (1974), constructed by the South London Women's Art Group in an abandoned Victorian house in Lambeth, included the said room. Like the 1990s projects, these groups were also contrived in that many members were selected by application, or self-selected by convenience, and generally out of political and intellectual convictions (and not necessarily social or emotional ones). Through parodying the heterosexist home, and sharing personal thoughts through activities like consciousness-raising, these artists attempted to reclaim woman's space and, perhaps, recycle the abandoned female psyches (as described by object relationists) while aiming to create a feminist art and woman's art network. However, though these projects included women artists who came together out of feminist convictions, the kitchen walls were not emphasized as sites of seeing (in a case of estrangement), but were instead, more explicit markers of division.

Division characterizes these projects socially and architecturally. Chicago has written about her utmost reliance on Schapiro as well as her fear of criticizing or disagreeing with her, and the students involved have written about their hostility toward the "***forceful and abrasive***" teachers. Chicago claimed that she was a scapegoat for the students' newly discovered hostilities, and overall, the interactions in the group and in consciousness-raising itself seemed to mirror accounts of convoluted and insecure mother-daughter relations.[8] Along these same lines, most of the artists maintained their own workspace and renovated a different room of the house in their own individual aesthetic. Further, the representations of women were not self-aware self-portraits, but displayed female bodies or body parts split and divided, resembling the separation between the artists. The "***renovated***" kitchen in *Womanhouse* was a neat orderly kitchen whose walls were plastered, not with eyes and peepholes, but with eggs and detached breasts. In *A Woman's Place*, the kitchen was filled with static layers of garbage made of milk cartons and kitchen refuse and a woman's body. The mannequin was wrapped, discrete and discreet, again alone (within a mess) and separated from the other elements in the room.

Overall, this division from the 1970s could suggest, on an abstract level, a lack of involvement with Otherness and an "***autonomous***" separation (these projects provided a context for confidence while granting women "***rooms of their own***" to come to and go from when they pleased). Or, the division could suggest an inability to acknowledge Otherness which might reflect a "***relational***" stance; perhaps the consciousness-raising of these projects was meant to promote a knowledge of self and other, to encourage a poking through the walls. (Intersubjectivity was the goal, but it was not yet realised.) The 1990s projects, on the other hand, were not based in feminist consciousness-raising, but instead displayed a hyper-consciousness. These later female projects might trace the experience of relational selves who are beginning to recognize the other, and are perhaps anxious and afraid of emerging as fully autonomous beings.

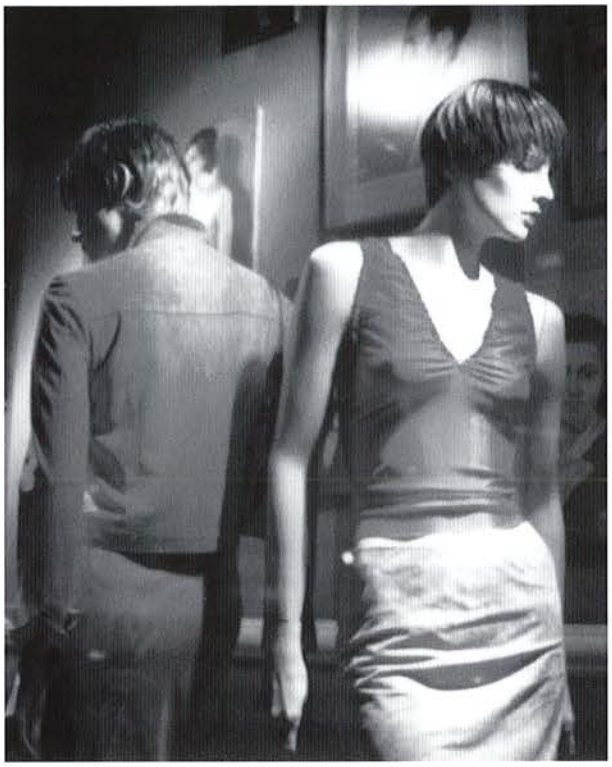
Love in first site: An All-involved Model

While some collaborative projects are characterized by division or self-conscious estrangement, others seem to take on the opposite aesthetic of merger. In this second model, collaborators are not matchmade but instead "***fall in love at first sight***". These partners become creatively and emotionally entwined, and appear highly involved in each other's everyday lives – which begin also to merge with their artworks. Some partners work together for a decade at least and share a creative life. They create domestic representations, but also share a real domestic space, and as such, their work includes a complicated collapsing of realities and layering of interiorities. While the first case represented hyper-framing and walls on walls in walls, these domesticities are more like walls-within-walls, and their work is a continual palimpsest of private and public experiences.[9]

SPIR: Conceptual Photography was formed by María DeGuzmán and Jill Casid, who were involved domestically, intimately (romantically) and artistically from 1990-2003 (they began actual artwork production in 1991). Academics based in Cambridge and Chapel Hill, USA, they produced photo-tableaux in an attempt to explore theoretical concerns by merging the visual, the textual and the physical. They explicitly explored queer theory and promoted lesbian politics to parody patriarchal mythic scenes and tales like the story of Marat (whom they photographed as a gay man who has AIDS), and conversation pieces (they depicted a group of 'multicultural' academic women wearing eighteenth-century wigs).

SPIR's collaboration included others (friends, colleagues) who posed in the photos. In order to avoid using models as painters traditionally did, they signed elaborate contracts with their "***external***" collaborators, which outlined responsibilities and ownerships. The contracts are interesting for they highlight the layers within the collaboration; namely, the core unit (*SPIR*, with a shared name which comes from "***conspire***") and the others. It may have been important for them to maintain this distinction, as there were many overlaps between their art and their shared domestic life. For instance, the photos were staged in DeGuzmán's and Casid's shared flat. Their private domestic space (and indeed their bedroom) served as their workspace which was frequented by "***outsiders***", and was also costumed, photographed, and exhibited to the public. They publicized a version of their intimacy.

Layers of interiority (and questions about "***what's in***" and "***what's out***") are addressed in their works. In *Theft in the Dolls' House* (1999-2001), a fourteen image series of Polaroids



Jill Casid & María DeGuzmán, SPIR: Conceptual Photography *Shadow of Your Smile* (2000) from the series *Theft in the Dolls' House*. Courtesy of Artists.

– a domestic/process-oriented technology – they depicted mannequins in store windows. Store-window space is both "***outside***" and visible to anyone from the street, but then also extremely private as very few people have access to it. The mannequins themselves represent an ambiguous character. For the spectator the mannequins merge intensely private desires with an openly public gaze: they have no interior lives, but at the same time, are so void that they become the site onto which anyone's and everyone's interior fantasies can be projected. The photographs' dark aesthetic here adds an additional aura to the mannequin settings, and opens them up for such narrative and emotional interpretations. Though the Polaroids are fluid in colour and tone, the mannequins are often depicted "***cropped***" – not their entire figure is in the photo, and (emphasized by the disparate and serial nature of the series of photographs) reminiscent of the covered and chopped up mannequins in *Womanhouse* and *A Woman's Place*. However, in this series, the cropped mannequins are usually not alone: they alternate between holding hands and standing side by side, perhaps reflecting and projecting the collaboration, its own sense of layers of interiorities (what is me, what is us,

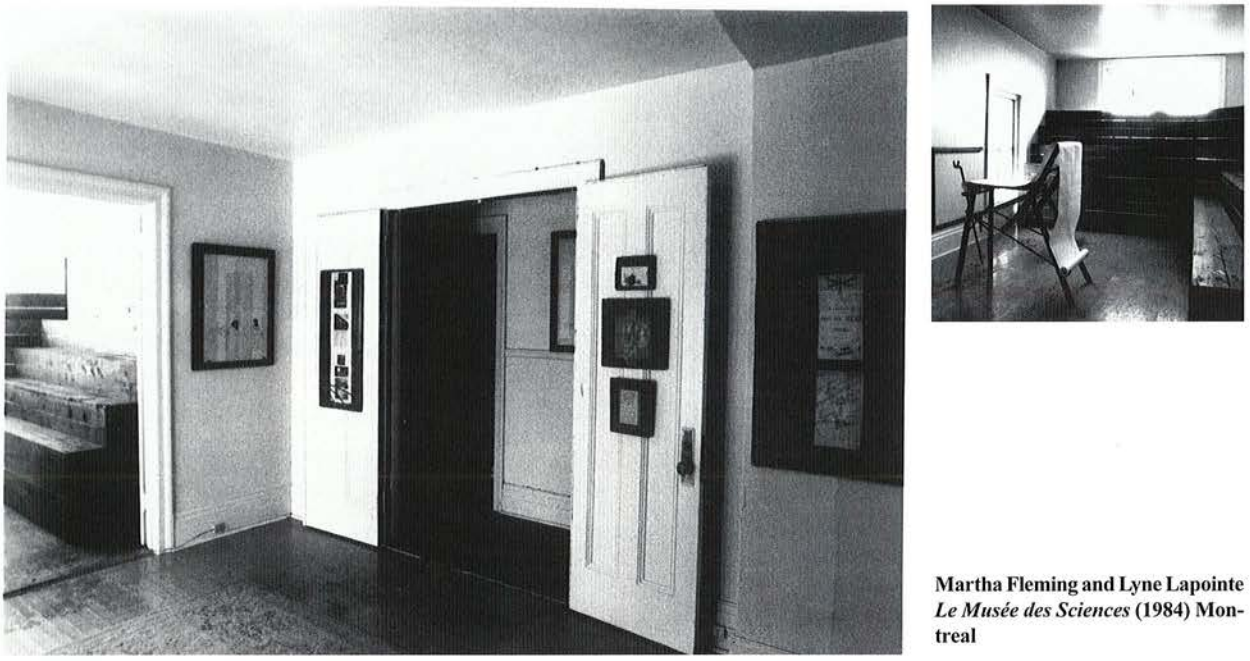
Above:Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan *Tableau Vivant: Eaton's Catalogue 1976* (1998). Photo by Deb Van Slet. Performers left to right Anne Borden, Shawna Dempsey, Annie Martin. Right: Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan *Arborite Housedress* (1993) Photo by Sheila Spence. Performer Shawna Dempsey. Courtesy of Artists.

what is art, what is our relationship). As with the kitchen projects, this art questions the boundary of self with other, but it emits less obvious anxiety, and instead, denotes a "***soft***" collapse of ego boundaries.

Domestic layers appear again in the work of Winnipeg-based performance, costume and video artists Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan who have been sharing a creative life since 1989, though they do not work/live under a single name (but share a website, and an email address). Unlike Chen and Arai, their collaboration emerged from a friendship instead of initiating one, as when they became involved as lovers, they began '**freely stealing each others' ideas**' which led to an official collaboration. Though they ended their romantic relationship in 1992, they continued to share a domestic space until 2000, and are committed to sharing a creative life.

Like *SPIR*, Dempsey and Millan collaborate with others, and are explicit about wanting to treat them fairly. Further, their work also references layers of interiority, again, outlining the confusion between in and out, art and life, me and us. In 1998, they enacted *Tableau Vivant: Eaton's Catalogue 1976* (Eaton's was a Canadian department store) and their models, who stood vacant and still like mannequins, wore costumes that included plumbing pieces which emerged from their bodies. The equipment resembled bodily organs, referring to corporeal interiority. Further, a plumbing vessel carries liquids, and reminds the audience that each bodily organ has its own inner-tube, and its own interiority. The body, the self, and the art-life are presented as a palimpsest, a continual layering in which there is no one inside.

Similarly, in their *Dress Series* (1989-1996), performed under the banner *Under the Skirt*, Dempsey performs wearing different dresses. *Arborite Housedress* (1992) is a blasé stand-up comedy routine that, like *Womanhouse*, is a critique of housework and marriage but utilises the hard, geometrical, and planar aesthetic of the dress to layer meaning with formal jokes. The pink dress – barely fitted at the waist, and grossly oversized – sits on Dempsey awkwardly, and it seems that she is trapped inside the outfit as opposed to wearing it. It appears as if her body wears its own set of clothes under the dress, and her conversation and gesture allude to the under-layers as much as to the confusion about what's in and out. She claims: '**my underwear having evolved from lingerie to veritable architecture**', and '**truth – like words tattooed on my skin, show up on my complexion on bathroom walls.**' When she touches the dress, it looks as if she touches something foreign: '**me in between wallpaper, in between my desires.**' From inside a large geometrical pocket, sandwiched Dempsey pulls a superficial (outside) to-do list and a romance novel.



Martha Fleming and Lyne Lapointe ***Le Musée des Sciences*** **(1984) Montreal**

Dempsey's lined lips and formal hair – do resemble those of a mannequin – the site of a confused merger between public and private layers.

While the artists downplay the division of labour between them, in this work, Demspey is the performer while Millan films and watches – she is the "***outside eye***", another external layer. The video of the performance (a further layer of representation) begins with a shot panning through the audience (layer) and then onto the stage. The viewer is self-consciously reminded of the layers of performance, and especially comedic performance, which is both public and artificial in nature, but also "***honest***" in its claims and in the presence of its moment.

The merger of domestic life and domestic representation can be seen in some earlier 1980s collaborative projects, where the aesthetic is again about an all-out merger between artists and identities. Canadians Martha Fleming and Lyne Lapointe lived (romantically) and worked together for over a decade. Like Dempsey and Millan, their collaboration happened 'naturally' as a result of their conversation, once already involved. While the work came out of and was their conversation, they did divide tasks based on their experience (Fleming was a critic, Lapointe an artist). Their installations often involved taking over abandoned public buildings (as opposed to the private, residential ones used in the 1970s) and critiquing social institutions. In *Le Musée des Sciences* (Montreal, 1984), the artists re-inhabited an abandoned post-office, taking over both the public post-office and the private guard's apartment, and using the entire space as a scientific *salon de refusés*, displaying their versions of the experiments science had expunged. Like their life and their art, *Musée*'s architecture was conflated – there were drawings on the floor, lights on chairs, and kitchen utensils hung along walls with surgical tools and equipment from morgues, labs, and workshops, merging spheres of creativity. Unlike in the 1970s projects, *Musée* denied traditional division of rooms in a building and traditional room/furniture function, encouraged internal movement, and challenged a division between intellect and intimacy.

A similar conflation of architectural space can be identified in the space occupied temporarily by Sarah Lucas and Tracy Emin when they rented an abandoned doctor's office to create *The Shop* (1992). *The Shop*, where the two artists often slept, was a site of art-making, commerce, and social gatherings. Similarly, there were no defined rooms within the structure, and merchandise was hung on walls and doors. *Shop* had a mannequin – it wore a blazer, and on its back, scrawled in lipstick-like red was '**Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin**', a pre-adolescent friendship gesture. Some object relations theorists, including Carol Gilligan and Annie Rogers, refer to pre-adolescence as a time when females still have a coherent inner voice as they have not yet been socialized to misrepresent their experience.[10] This stage is characterized as one of close pair-friendship that enables women to relate and merge, serving as a substitute for the merger with the mother. Perhaps

Carothers/Wrbican *Tire/Fire* photodocumentation of mobile home entering Manhattan

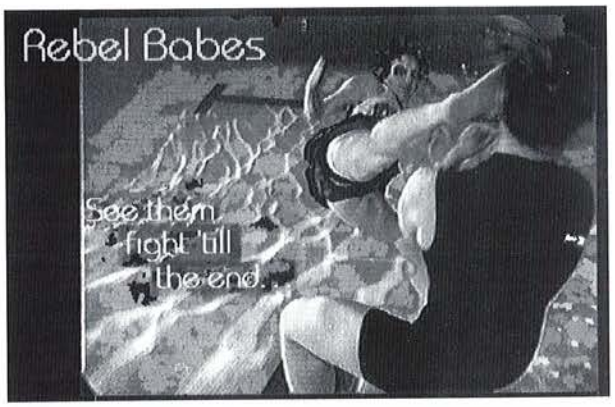
successful collaborations in women's adult lives are founded in women "***returning***" to their pre-teen state in order to re-experience a new coming of age in which they will be able to express their experiences.

Overall, the 1980s and early 1990s projects discussed here involved sharing lives and through this "***opening up***" or creating open internal spaces. This openness and lack of boundary could be seen as being a true or intersubjective sharing (you lose self because you have one to lose). It might also be characterized as an "***over-involvement***" in which female artists seek identity, acceptance, and confidence exclusively through their partner, and in this way, generally mirror the "***dysfunctional***" mother-daughter relation to provide quick fixes of confidence. (The interiors often remained abandoned; the female figures in *Musée* possessed empty contours, *The Shop* mannequin had no face.) On the other hand, the 1990s projects, which in this case are also explicit feminist social critiques, are not characterized by one large interior, but instead, a hyper-interiority. They are overly clothed, and if anything, emptiness is ironically expressed through excessive layers.

Nomads and monads: A Promiscuous Model

In the first model, artists were brought together and their self-conscious domestic sites highlighted walls as frames. In the second model, artists were involved emotionally and creatively, and their representations of domesticity emphasized walls-within-walls. A final way that women work together is "***professionally***", where collaboration becomes a type of creative practice; this model takes the wall for a ride. Such projects are nomadic, with domestic life itself being transported by the artists on foot or in a car. These roving domestic spaces address a spatial placement in and through geographical locations, and explore domesticity as a wandering through place and time. In these examples, the artists – who generally each have well-established solo practices – collaborate with one primary partner, but also participate in a wide range collaborations, professionally traveling and carrying their creative strategies into many other relationships.

Americans Mary Carothers and Sue Wrbican have, alongside their individual practices, been working together for seven years, primarily on their project *Tire Fire*. They met at graduate art school, where together they would escape the campus and travel home for holidays. The artists began to realize that could "***let go***" and experiment with each other, and *Tire Fire* stems from these escapades. In the work, both artists travel in a mobile home (originally a 1973 truck) through the USA and also across the USA-Canada border. The mobile home is adorned on the outside walls with video screens which they use to project videos that they find en route (mainly porn) as well as a poem written by Wrbican that self-consciously narrates the tale of an artist and her friend taking a journey. There is a self-consciousness here, but it is different from that of the kitchen projects, as it is held on the outside of the walls of the home, and is constantly in movement. The work itself constantly evolves, as the artists drive to each exhibition site and their installation comprises elements collected on that specific journey – lawn sprinklers, wet towels, video footage, etc. Domesticity moves through time and place, shifting yet propelled forward by their travels – at least, as far forward as the next gallery. The movement is not endless and random,



Sandi Somers and Brigitte Dajczer *Rebel Babes* (1998) videostills from video

but contained by the art world trajectory.

Aspects of the work also reflect a curbed and contained movement. The "***promiscuous***" artists, who met as professionals, explicitly explore aspects of collaborative dynamics – like trust, and in this case, anger and aggression. Carothers and Wrbican use their disasters and fights in their work, videoing the causes, or artfully decorating their traces (for instance, painting over a dent made by accident and transforming it into a motif that carried along the vehicle). The poem describes the potential explosion of the truck at a petrol station. *Tire Fire* itself refers to reckless driving (they describe their car as **'a 1973 Airstream Trade Wind 23-foot trailer and 1985 Suburban with a 454 bad-ass engine'**). Finally, set to the mantra '**surrender the comfort zone**', part of the project involves the eerie burning of couches in outdoor spaces across America, implying a violent destruction of domestic stability. Aggression is not stuck between walls but is linked to the artists' fugitive movement and impetus. Or to a point. The repeated burning of couches and the acting out of the poem attest to an internal circularity and containment.

By contrast, not set on fire, but set in water – a medium that is boundariless, transparent yet opaque, comfortable yet dangerous, and redolent with associations of the domestic and a womb – is the collaborative video *Rebel Babes* (1998) by Canadians Sandi Somers and Brigitte Dajczer. Not primary collaborators, they completed one project together in which they produced videos of female aggression, explicitly exploring our culture's spread of violence among women. In *Rebel Babes*, a video game is the object of their parody, and the artists play rival characters who fight. In the water, they wear swimsuits and combine synchronized swim movements with beating each other up. Both athletes, the artists genuinely fight; but mitigated by the liquid, they mix punches with graceful choreography. Somers told me she felt that their collaborative relationship, in spite of the depiction of this aggression, was almost always genuine and open. Furthermore, both artists contributed their own skills to the project: Dacjzer taught Somers to synchronize swim, and Somers taught Dacjzer to box. However, Somers realized retrospectively that in making some pieces, when she knew she had the material/technical advantage (ie. they were working in a medium more familiar to her) she would hold back in order to repress her assertiveness and maintain "***fairness***". Again, the all-over and aggressive movement is contained by relational parameters, and by the limits of the swimming pool.

Millie Chen and Evelyn Von Michalofski *Yurtopia* (1995). Left *"museum outfits"*. Above: *Yurt* Southern Alberta Gallery

parameters, and by the limits of the swimming pool.

This circular-nomadic practice is also evident in the work of Millie Chen, who has considered herself to be a '**collaboration addict**'. Chen has worked with several collaborators other than Arai, including her primary partner, Toronto-based Evelyn Von Michalofski. Since the early 1990s, the artists have been co-creating installations that deal with the senses and utilise clothing and travel, even though they do not drive but walk. In *Yurtopia* (1995) the artists created a *yurt* or domestic tent-like structure which served as a nomadic museum set within the Southern Alberta Gallery. *Yurtopia* also consisted of two pocket-lined "***museum outfits***" which were different in style and size and were worn by the artists upon wandering around the neighbourhood as '**portable museums**.' The objects and anecdotes collected in this "***nomadic museum***", such as the residual fibres of Albertan grains, horse hair, dryer lint, old parkas, and moth wings, as well as personal texts, were"***native to Alberta***", and they told stories about a variety of local communities and individuals. (While in the second model, clothing represented covering and layers from which superficial books and lists were pulled, in this case, clothing is for and about movement and things are collected within.) Here, the story of a domestic place is a moving and sweaty narrative with overlapping perspectives, geographical positions, historical periods, memories and values. Space is fluctuating and capricious; in this same way, the addictive collaborator is a creative nomad, participating in a multitude of projects while collecting insights and strategies from each. Again, of course, each foray returns to the gallery, just as the primary partners return to each other.

These "***professional***" collaborations have a parallel in the work of Louise Lawler and Sherrie Levine who collaborated in 1981-1982 on *A Picture is No Substitute for Anything*. In this project, which came out of explicitly feminist aims at a time when women artists were protesting against their poor visibility in New York galleries. Levine and Lawler created their own galleries and one-night shows at roving locations through the city. Also, these appropriation artists together "***appropriated***" arts venues. For instance, they formally invited people to their shows in (of) studios of dead artists, and overall, practiced a nomadism, conceptually wandering (their art) through the city.

While this earlier project zipped and zig-zagged through the city creating its own galleries, the 1990s/2000s domestic trajectories are more of a round-about wandering, often contained by galleries. The "***domestic movement***" is circular and similarly, raises questions about the trajectory of their articulated emotions. Aggression is expressed explicitly in the work, and I wonder if the work serves as a site around which there can be productive ambivalence, or if the emotional responses are displaced onto the work site and not handled socially.

This last group can suggest several abstract possibilities about the nature of group creativity. In Mitchell's terms, these collaborations might be considered "***hysterical***" in that the artists are constantly seeking new partners with whom to play out the sibling catastrophe (and through this they try to reposition themselves) and it is only in this that they experience their subjective self. On a very different note, these artists are productive collectors of relations, perhaps illustrating the relational model of the self (and demonstrating that autonomy is not a prerequisite for creativity?). Finally, these relationships might indicate that there are women artists who are self-contained and "***classically autonomous***", can enter and exit relationships, taking and giving, and then going solo. Again, I cannot discern if these are relational or autonomous interactions, which might also suggest that this distinction is not as black-and-white as maybe we would like.

A history

I have presented a series of late twentieth century female collaborative projects which do not only allude to the domestic, but destabilize it. However, while the earlier models destabilize the domestic space with a degree of clarity (walls are erected,

domesticities – some of which declare themselves as feminist, and most of which don't – appear to do so in a more convoluted way. Whether in the first model of looking-without-seeing, in the second of hide-and-seek-layering, or in the third of circular-wandering, the domestic sites themselves are elusive. I initially proposed that, in these collaborations, the domesticities parallel social relations; but, domesticity also evidently has a wide range of metaphorical values. The house can symbolize self and inter-self, but it is also the ambivalent site of, on the one hand, captivation and isolation, and on the other, comfort and creativity. The domestic has resonance as both a prison and a productive space; as does "***tradition***". While the earlier collaborations had a clear target, ie. they were political efforts against and parodies of the patriarchal home, patriarchal science, the patriarchal art world, and patriarchal tradition, the current projects embrace and react to a more convoluted lineage that includes a feminist one. The current artists (consciously or not) are taking on board a domestic site that has been somewhat "***feminist-ized***." Perhaps these elusive domesticities, which also all turn inward (the self-conscious peering, the hyper-interiority, the enclosed wandering), reflect a moment of reconsideration within feminist tradition as well, as they contemplate how and if women now inhabit the home (the self, feminism). Perhaps these are domestic moments of ambivalence and repositioning.

The home resonates a prison and a feminist site for revolution, but its role might even be more confusing than that given the dominant cultural trends towards re-examining domesticity. For instance, the home was a major topic of debate for feminist sociologists and artists in the 1970s and 1980s, but seems to have subsequently entered the realm of "***cool***" masculine and gay-masculine design.[11] It appears almost as if feminists began to clean out the traditional heterosexist house, but then others moved in. Moving-in and moving-on bespeaks success, but the amnesia about the feminist contribution can be disturbing. This amnesia runs through current studies of domesticity and about collaboration itself, which is currently considered a neo-socialist, cyber, suburban, rock music or postmodern practice.[12] Perhaps the elusive domestic experiences contained in the current female collaborations involve a response to the history of attempts to break-out of the home, which has been, confusingly, followed by a sense of exclusion from it. Women's collaborative domesticities may have made their way from abandoned sites into art galleries, but are they now locked out of the house?

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Notes

1. Some discussions of collaboration, for instance Renée Riese Hubert *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism and Partnership* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), analyse the co-creative process. Often, however, studies of collaboration include valuable historical material, but present collaborative art in an idealistic or nostalgic light. See for instance, Luis Jacob *Golden Streams: Artists' Collaboration and Exchange in the 1970s* exhibition catalogue (Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Missussauga, 2002).

2. See for instance: Sigmund Freud 'Some Reflections on Schoolboy Psychology' *The Standard Edition* XIII (1913-1914) trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955) pp. 241-244; Sigmund Freud 'The Dynamics of Transference' *The Standard Edition XII* (1911-1913) trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1958) pp. 97-108.

3. See for instance: Teresa Bernardez 'Conflicts with Anger and Power in Women's Groups' in Betsy DeChant (ed.) *Women and Group Psychotherapy: Theory and Practice* (London: The Guildford Press, 1996) pp. 176-199; Nancy Chodorow *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: UCLA Press, 1978); Barbara Cohn 'Narcissism in Women in Groups: The Emerging Female Self' in Betsy DeChant (ed) *Women and Group Psychotherapy: Theory and Practice* (London: The Guildford Press, 1996) pp. 157-175; Carol Gilligan *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1982); Carol Gilligan, 'Women's Psychological Development: Implications for Psychotherapy' in Carol Gilligan et al (eds) *Women, Girls and sychotherapy: Reframing Resistance* (Binghamton: Haworth Press, 1991) pp. 5-32; Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum *Bittersweet: Facing Up to Feelings of Love, Envy and Competition in Women's Friendships* (London: Century, 1987); Rozsika Parker *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence* (London: Virago, 1995); Annie Rogers 'A Feminist Poetics of Psychotherapy' in Carol Gilligan et al (eds) *Women, Girls and Psychotherapy: Reframing Resistance*, (Binghamton: Haworth Press, 1991) pp. 33-54.

4. Jessica Benjamin *The Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Juliet Mitchell *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria and the Effects of Sibling Relations on the Human Condition* (London: Penguin, 2000).

5. For discussion of the home as a site of subjectivity, see for instance the articles published in Diana Agrest (ed) *The Sex of Architecture* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1996) and Beatriz Colomina (ed.), *Sexuality and Space* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992).

6. The Wilsons repeatedly dismiss their twinship, and avoid discussing it in

favour of their work. '**J/LW: In the early works we weren't consciously presenting ourselves as twins, but it became interesting to explore this as a formal device such as doubling or mirroring of images, or when we played with the synchronizing of visuals and sound. But it has never been the *raison d'être* of the work.** Lisa Corrin 'Jane and Louise Wilson: In Stereoscopic Vision' in *Jane and Louise Wilson* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1999) p.14. Further, Louise Wilson states: '**I also think that, although our relationship with each other or our situation obviously informs what we do to an extent, ultimately we are left with the work. That is there as a document, as a separate entity in its own right**.' Letty Mooring 'Sisteract' in *Women's Art Magazine* no 56 Jan-Feb (1994) p. 10.

7. For discussion of self-deprecation as an expression of self-awareness and a means of control and solidarity, see for instance, Gillian Elinor 'Woman as Joker' *Women and Humour* (London: Women Artists Slide Library, 1987) p.14; Sigmund Freud *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Penguin Freud Library vol. 6, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1991, orig. 1905) pp.260-261; Frances Gray *Women and Laughter* (London: Macmillan, 1994) pp.137-138; Nancy Walker, 'Toward Solidarity: Women's Humour and Group Identity' in Nancy Walker and Zita Dresner (eds) *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Literary Humour from Colonial Times to the 1980s* (Jackson, University of Mississippi, 1988); Naomi Weissenstein 'Why We Aren't Laughing…Anymore' (1973) Linda A Morris (ed.) *American Women Humorists: Critical Essays* (New York: Garland, 1994).

8. Norma Broude and Mary D Garrard, 'Conversations With Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro' in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds) *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970's, History and Impact* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1994); see also Arlene Raven 'Womanhouse' and Faith Wilding, 'The Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and Cal Arts, 1970-75' in same volume; Judy Chicago *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (New York: Doubleday, 1977).

9. Catherine Ingraham offers a discussion of the wall as – not only a divider of space – but a space in and of itself, with its own interiority. See Catherine Ingraham 'Initial Properties: Architecture and the Space of the Line' Beatriz Colomina (ed.) *Sexuality and Space* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992).

10. Nancy Chodorow *The Reproduction of Mothering* pp.133-138; Carol Gilligan, 'Women's Psychological Development: Implications for Psychotherapy' in Carol Gilligan et al. *Women, Girls and Psychotherapy: Reframing Resistance* pp.5-32; and Annie Rogers 'A Feminist Poetics of Psychotherapy' *Women, Girls and Psychotherapy: Reframing Resistance* pp.33-53.

11. In Melissa Benn's lecture 'The Long March Toward Domestic Democracy' given at the Women's Library on 23 November 2002, she mentioned that '**housework**' was a major topic addressed by feminist writers from 1970-1989, but is rarely addressed in the 1990s. She also mentioned that the home was becoming a site for male celebrity chefs, and other media figures.

12. Ten years ago, some discussions of collaboration focused on gender and feminist art history (for instance, Hubert's book mentioned in note 1, and Judith E. Stein's 'Collaboration' in *The Power of Feminist Art* (1994). Since then the mention of gender and women's history has appeared secondarily in Susan Bee and Mira Schor eds, Issue on Collaborations, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* online journal 2003 (www.artkrush.com), 2003, and *Unlimited Partnerships* exhibition, CEPA Gallery, Buffalo, 2001. Otherwise, collaborative work tends to be considered a postmodern, neo-socialist type practice, as in: Wayne Baerwaldt and Joseph R Wolin curators of *The Royal Art Lodge: Ask the Dust* New York, The Drawing Center, 2003; Holland Cotter 'Doing Their Own Thing, Making Art Together' *The New York Times*, 19 January 2003; André Louis Paré 'Duo in Art: Why Two Artists?' Part 1, trans. Janet Logan, *Espace* 45 (Fall 1998) pp. 6-10 and Part 2, trans. Janet Logan, *Espace* 46 (Winter 1998-99) pp. 5-15; Susan Sollins and Nina Castelli Sundell curators *Team Spirit* traveling exhibition, Independent Curators Incorporated, 1991-92; *Managing Partners* exhibition, National Portrait Gallery, London, 2002.

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