

# 1980s & 90s in Postmodern Art

Last week we looked at Graffiti, a movement that brought together many directions we've been following this class.

As we move into the 1980s and 90s, a different social and political reality evolves. As America becomes more conservative, art pushes back.

The ideas of Feminism, the Civil Rights Movement, Counter-Culture wars, Gay Rights, along with the ideas of multiculturalism, colonialism, dualism, postmodernism and the historic reality that many individuals outside the 'mainstream' were marginalized or invisible in both art and society brought a new wave in art.



Barbara Kruger,  
Untitled: I  
shop  
therefore I  
am, 1987



And  
Untitled: We  
have  
received  
orders not to  
move, 1982

# 1980s & 90s in Postmodern Art

We have already discussed how the events of the 70s deflated the idealist dreams of post WWII Americans.

In this lesson we look at artists who are using Photography, a medium originally thought to document reality, as a way to question reality.

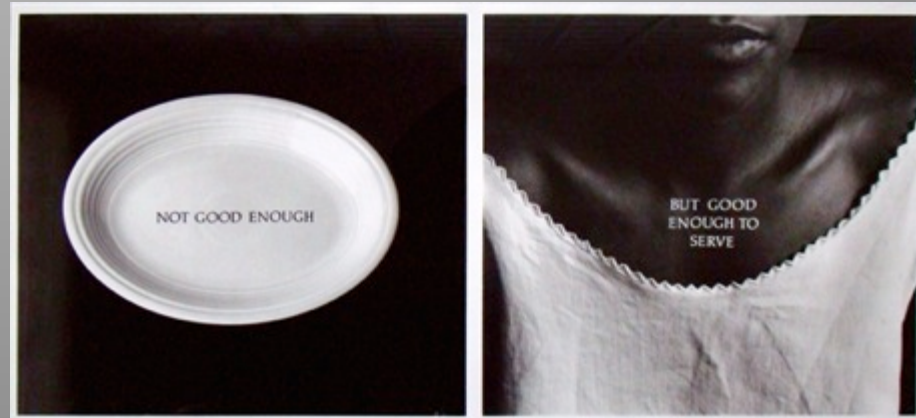
This is an important point— the viability (or trust) of the photographic image.

These ideas were being challenged:

- Photography documents reality?
- The idea of the 'original' or the concept of 'originality'?
- Who is allowed a voice and what do they get to say about themselves?



Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still and Lorna Simpson, C-rations, 1991



# Identity: Race, Gender, Ethnicity, Class, Sexuality

In the 1980s and 90s the US experienced a period of cultural tension including the AIDS crisis, conservative social and economic policies, increased gentrification, and as a result, increased urban crime.

Identity Politics – the political debates around certain shared characteristics such as race, class, and religion became a way for artists, politicians and the public began to address these issues (in very different ways).

The history of art and of the West has been dominated by White Heterosexual Men.

Now, many feminist artists, artists of color and those of various (non-western) nationalities, gay and lesbian artists, including those looking at class, suggest many of the problems facing society are a result of forms of discrimination against these 'different' social groups.

And their artwork is about this--- Identity Politics

# Photography & Identity

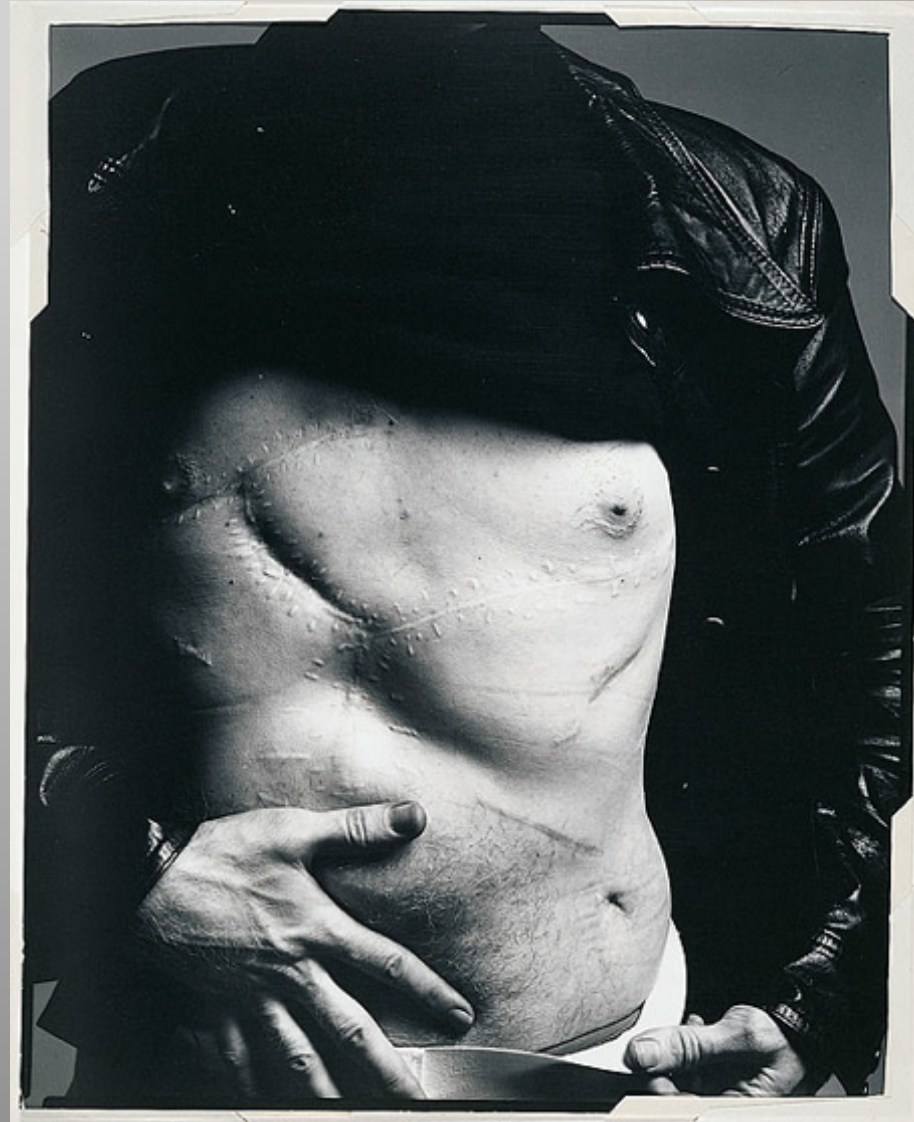
Andy Warhol died in 1987. The photo of Warhol by Richard Avedon showed his bullet scars after being shot by Valerie Solanas attempt to take his life.

The fact that he lived made him seem immortal but of course, **he wasn't.**

In Art, questions about the nature of representation, the role of art and the museum, and divisions between artists who resisted market forces and those who embraced them is evident.

**The photograph, as a document of reality was being questioned.**

Of course now, with Photoshop, we know that photographs are not the truth. But this was being addressed by artists in the 1980s.





# Photography & Identity

Consumerism, identity (race, gender and sexuality), systems of power (including that of art history) are all being addressed.

Digital images, Photoshop, retouching, including photo theory, made photography a potent new way of addressing various issues of interest in the postmodern era.

The photograph, as a document of reality was being questioned, and at the same time, being used to question what people accepted as the 'norm.'

Lyle Ashton Harris, *Miss America*, 1987





**Sherry Levine's** work grew out of the feminism of the 1970s, questioning the historic domination of artworks by men. She questions the notions of 'originality' and creativity by reproducing—almost exactly— famous artworks made by men.

This photo, (hers is in the left) is made to look like the photo of the famous photographer, Walker Evans.

**Sherry Levine**, After Walker Evens (left) On the right is Walker Evans, Mae Burroughs, from the 1930s



A worker looks at 'Fountain' by Marcel Duchamp (R) and 'Fountain (Buddha)' by Sherrie Levine at the Whitechapel gallery in London. She made one that looked very similar to Duchamp's. It's ironic because even Duchamp was questioning the notion of the 'original' in art back in 1917.

**Levine's** work questions authority, originality, and male dominance in art.





**Jeff Wall** made many large-scale photos based on previously famous works from art history. This one is based on Hokusai's famous woodblock print from the 1900s.

Jeff Wall, *Sudden Gust of Wind*, after the Japanese woodblock print by Hokusai.







This large scale image is a staged and constructed photograph that appears to be real document. Displayed as a backlit transparency (like seen in advertisements), the image resembles earlier history painting and war photography. However, in this series of images, the men appear to come back to life, because he completely staged it.

**Jeff Wall, *Dead Troops Talk* ( A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter, 1986)**



This shows the scale of **Wall's** photos.

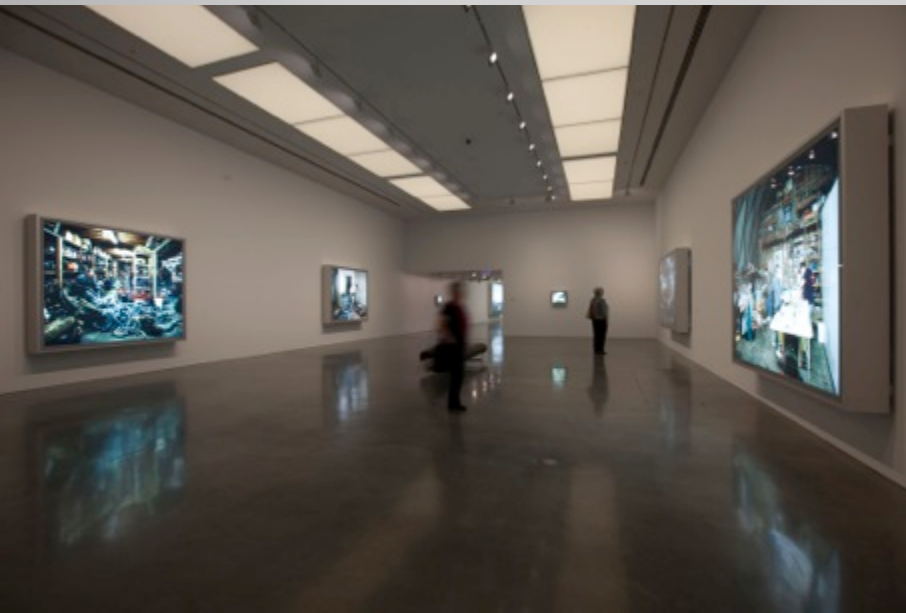
Susan Sontag called this photo the 'opposite of a document.'  
Wall's image is a fundamental critique of male violence and the destructive energy and senselessness of war.





**Jeff Wall, After 'Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue 1999-2000**

This photo is based on Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. The book centers on a black man who, during a street riot, falls into a forgotten room in the cellar of a large apartment building in New York and decides to stay there, living hidden away.



**Jeff Wall**, large scale photos making use of Photoshop, back lit transparencies and high resolution images to reference art history and the philosophical problems with representation.

Much of his work critiques earlier images in Art History.

Picture for Women, 1979 is based on a painting by Edward Manet, A Bar at the Folies-Bergere, 1882







**Andreas Gursky** is drawn to large, anonymous, man-made spaces—high-rise facades at night, office lobbies, stock exchanges, the interiors of big box retailer. In a 2001 retrospective, New York's Museum of Modern Art called the artist's work, "a sophisticated art of unembellished observation'.

Gursky, *99 Cents*, 1999





**Andreas Gursky** – His elevated viewpoint and enormous scale give the viewer as feeling of seeing something they are familiar with while at the same time something completely new. Again, these are very large digital images

Gursky, *99 Cents*,





**Vic Muniz**—creates photos out of garbage and other non-traditional materials. In this project, working with individuals living in the garbage dump in Rio de Janeiro.

See the trailer for the documentary here:

<http://www.wastelandmovie.com/vik-muniz.html>



**Vic Muniz**—in Rio at the trash dump and a shot of his studio in Rio, a piece in progress. Notice the people in the corner.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNlwh8vT2NU>





# Identity-- reminder

The examination of Identity in art arose from the postmodern attention to diversity.

Recognizing that historically, art had been mostly dominated by white men, many artists were using art, in these cases photography, to bring attention to issues of race, gender, class and sexuality (or sexual orientation).

Many contemporary theorists prefer to use the plural word “identities,” as opposed to ‘identity,’ emphasizing that identity is fluid and shifts throughout one’s life. Identity usually refers to race, gender, class, culture and sexuality.

As we continue examining artists working in the postmodern time, issues of identity become important.

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled film still*, 1979





**Cindy Sherman** is the subject in all her photographs. By changing her clothing and makeup she photographs herself in different roles. These early works are designed to make us question the limited expectations for females in film and society.

CINDY SHERMAN, *Untitled Film Still #35*, 1979. Black-and-white photograph, Color photograph, 10" x 8". Metro Pictures, New York.



Cindy Sherman (American, b. 1954)

Throughout her career, Sherman has presented a exploration of the construction of contemporary identity and the nature of representation, drawn from the unlimited supply of images from movies, TV, magazines, the Internet, and art history.

Working as her own model for more than 30 years, she has captured herself in a range of guises and personas which are sometimes amusing and sometimes disturbing, distasteful and affecting. To create her photographs, she assumes multiple roles of photographer, model, makeup artist, hairdresser, stylist, and wardrobe mistress. With an arsenal of wigs, costumes, makeup, prosthetics, and props, Sherman has deftly altered her physique and surroundings to create a myriad of intriguing tableaux and characters, from screen siren to clown to aging socialite.

This text taken from the MoMA website.



In one series Sherman used makeup, costumes and prosthetics to make herself into women represented in famous paintings from art history.



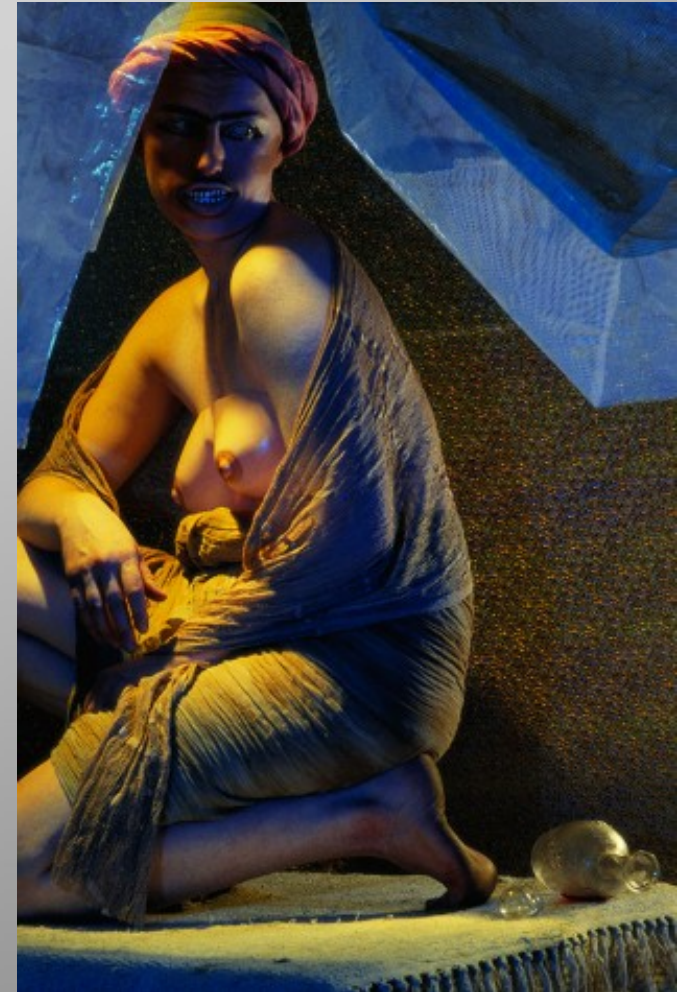


This early photo-booth series shows **Sherman** experimenting with subtle shifts in make-up, hairstyles and clothes to transform herself from the first photo to the last. This series might make you think of how people use social media, or 'selfies' today. Sherman did this series in 1975.

Cindy Sherman. *Untitled #479, 1975*



With an arsenal of wigs, costumes, makeup, prosthetics, and props, Sherman has deftly altered her physique and surroundings to create a myriad of intriguing tableaux and characters, from screen siren to clown to aging socialite.



## Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman. Untitled #466. 2008. Chromogenic color print, 8' 1 1/8 x 63 15/16"  
& Untitled #466



Installation shot of the recent retrospective of **Sherman's** work at MoMA.





Sexual desire and domination, the fashioning of self identity as mass deception, these are among the unsettling subjects lying behind Sherman's extensive series of self-portraiture in various guises. Sherman's work is central in the era of intense consumerism and image proliferation at the close of the 20th century.



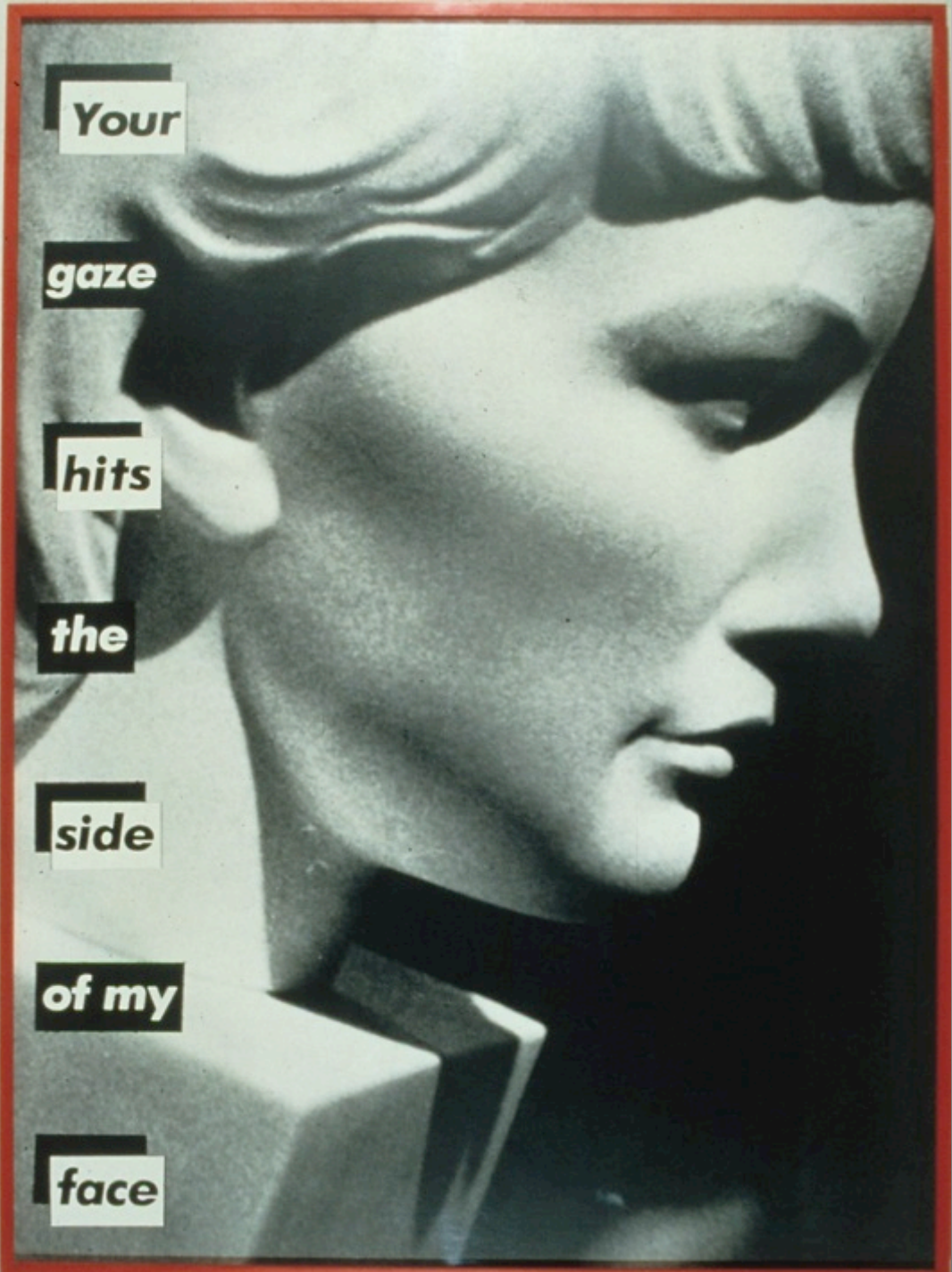
**Cindy Sherman**

All photos are titled, Untitled, with a number after. The one is Untitled, 474



Using images and tactics from advertising, **Barbara Kruger** created bold statements about female stereotypes and marketing techniques.

BARBARA KRUGER, *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)*, 1983. Photostat, red painted frame, 6' 1" x 4' 1". Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York.





**We don't need another hero**

**Carrie Mae Weems**, an African American female artist did this series of photos, *The Kitchen Table Series* in 1990.



Carrie Mae Weems is a socially motivated artist whose works invite contemplation of race, gender, and class. Increasingly, she has broadened her view to include global struggles for equality and justice.

This series show African American families doing the same things any family would do at the kitchen table. It breaks stereotypes of race.



## Carrie Mae Weems

employs a variety of means and addresses an array of issues, but an overarching commitment to better understanding the present by closely examining history and identity.

While African-Americans are typically her primary subjects, Weems wants “people of color to stand for the human multitudes” and for her art to resonate with audiences of all races.

Carrie Mae Weems. *Untitled (Man and mirror)* from *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990. Gelatin silver print, 27 1/4 x 27 1/4 in.



## Carrie Mae Weems

### **The ideas influencing her work:**

Identity is fluid.

Identity is constructed by society.

Identity is not fixed.

**In this piece she addresses her reality as a black women. She presented this photo with the text below. The piece is designed to bring attention to social 'norms' related to beauty.**

LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR, THE BLACK WOMAN ASKED, "MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL, WHO'S THE FINEST OF THEM ALL?"  
THE MIRROR SAYS, "SNOW WHITE, YOU BLACK BITCH, AND DON'T YOU FORGET IT!!! »



Carrie Mae Weems, *Ain't Jokin' series*,  
1987-88



## Carrie Mae Weems



BLUE



BLACK

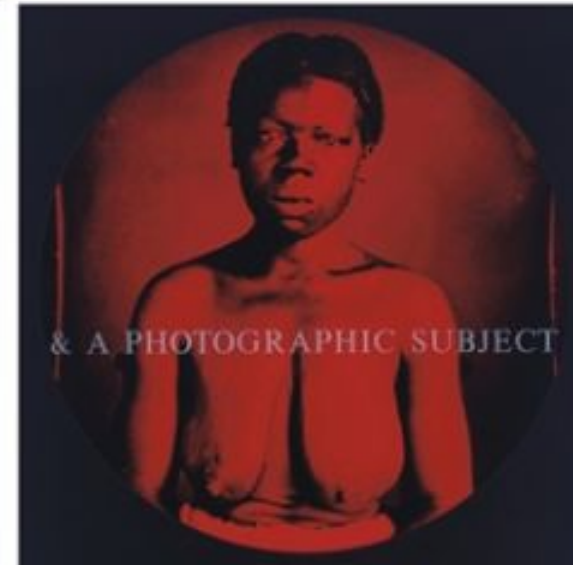
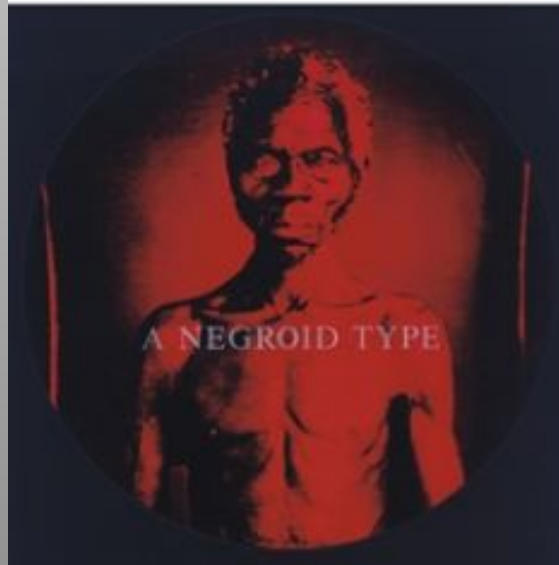
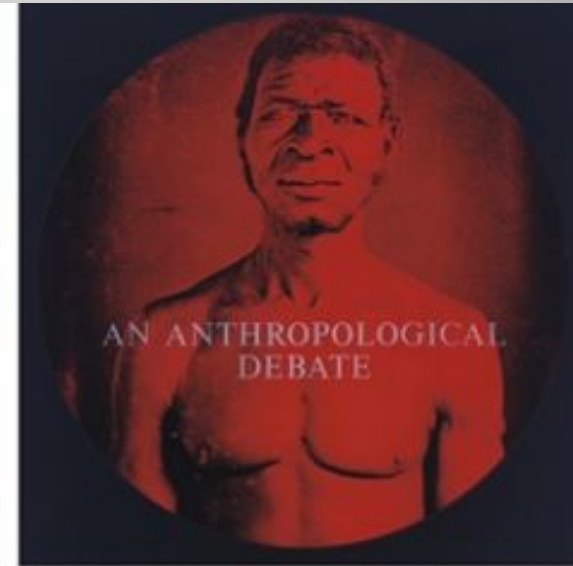
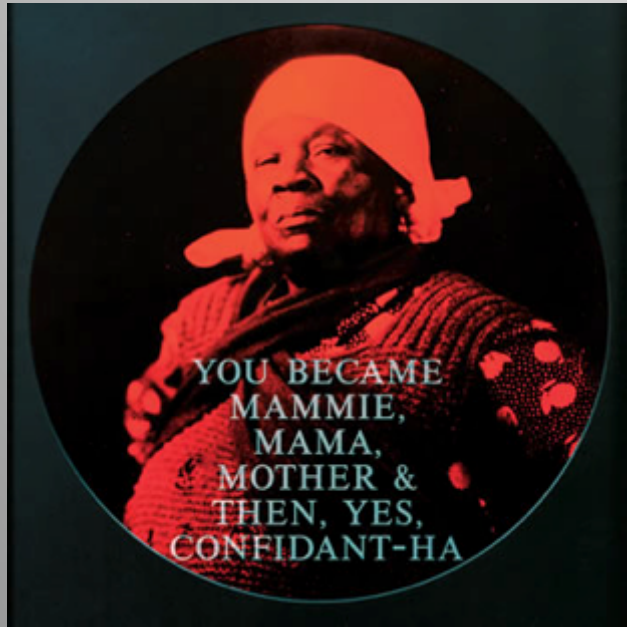


BOY

In this series, entitled, “Colored People” Weems creates a disconnect between image and text that raises an important question: What does color mean? These photographs are a poignant reminder of the fact that all of us see the world through culturally determined filters.

Carrie Mae Weems. *Blue Black Boy from Colored People*, 1989–90. Triptych, three toned gelatin silver prints with Prestype and frame, Overall: 16 x 48 in.; Images: 16 x 16 in. each. Whitney Museum of American Art

## Carrie Mae Weems

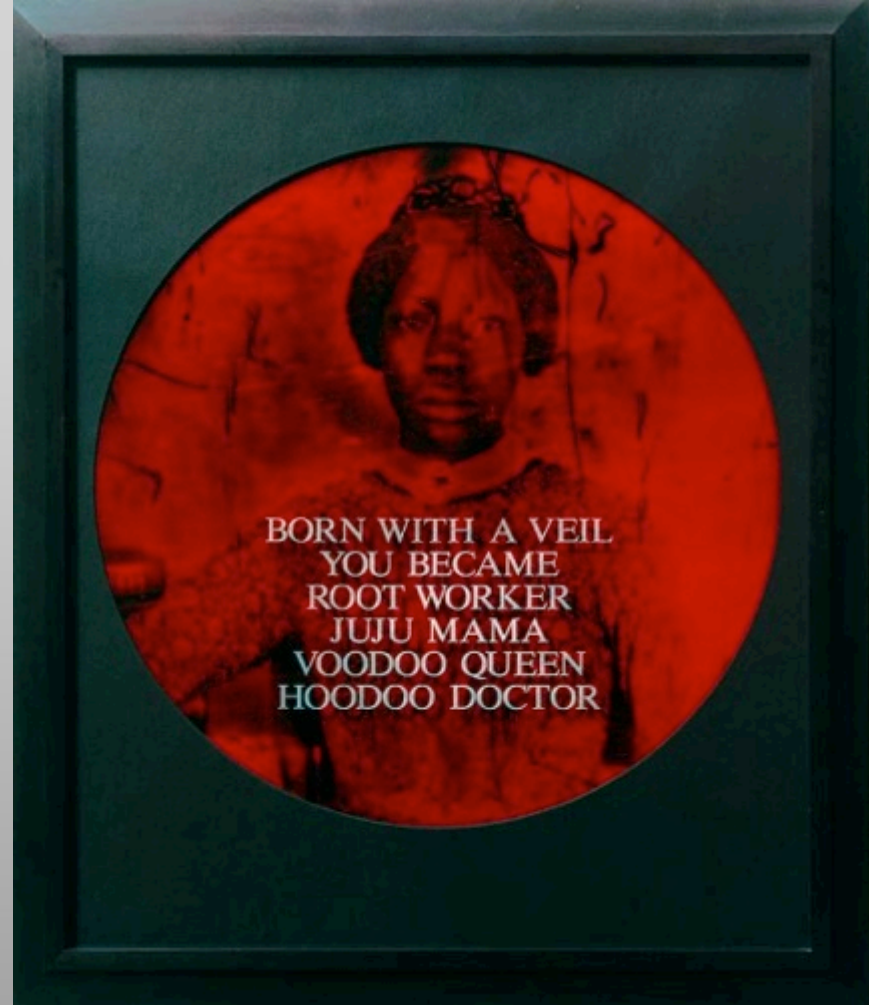
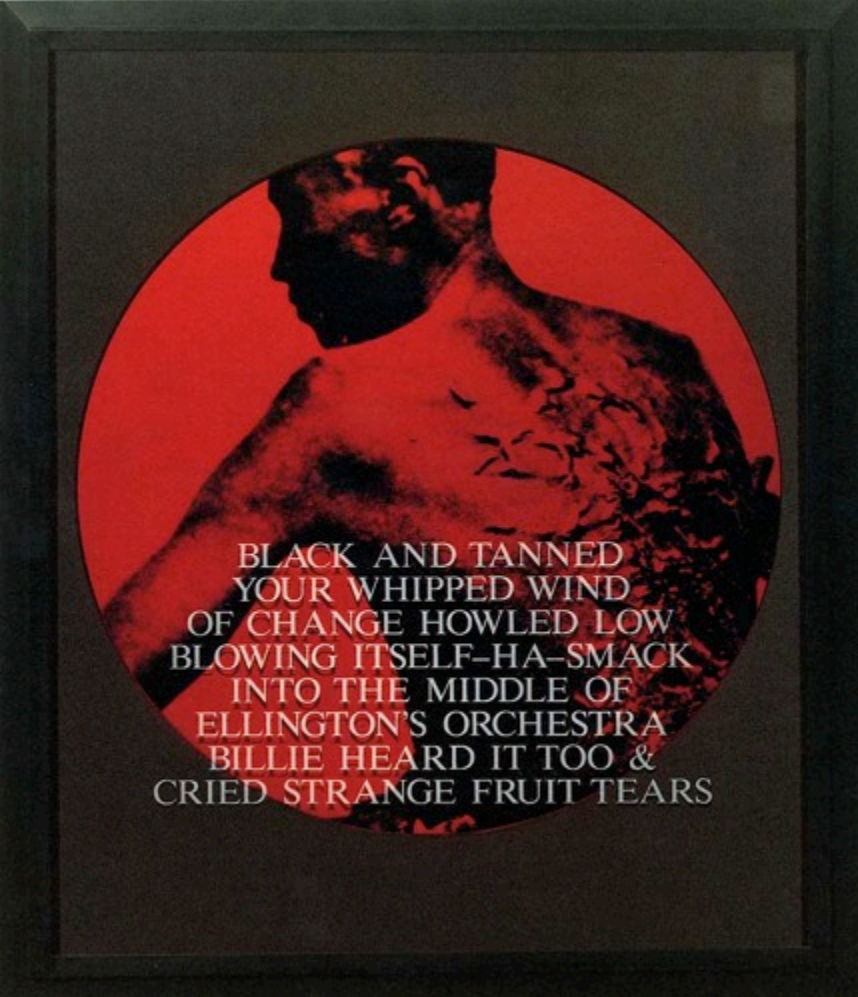


In this series she alludes to the inhumane practice of slavery via image and text. The photos are from daguerreotypes in the Harvard collection with text superimposed by Weems to convey hegemonic stereotypes about blacks.

Carrie Mae Weems. *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995-1996)

She uses color again as a reminder of this social construct.





Her series, “ And 22 Million Very Angry and Tired People,” exposes the conventions of the documentary style of Farm Security Administration photographers by adding textual interpretation to the images.

In “ From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried,” Weems questions the narrative found in traditional portraiture of daguerreotypes, tintypes and ambrotypes (early methods in photo).



**Lorna Simpson.** Simpson, an African American artist, began exploring ethnic divisions in the 1980s era of multiculturalism. Her most notable works combine words with photographs of anonymously cropped images of women and occasionally men.

While the pictures may appear straightforward, the text will often confront the viewer with the underlying racism still found in American culture.

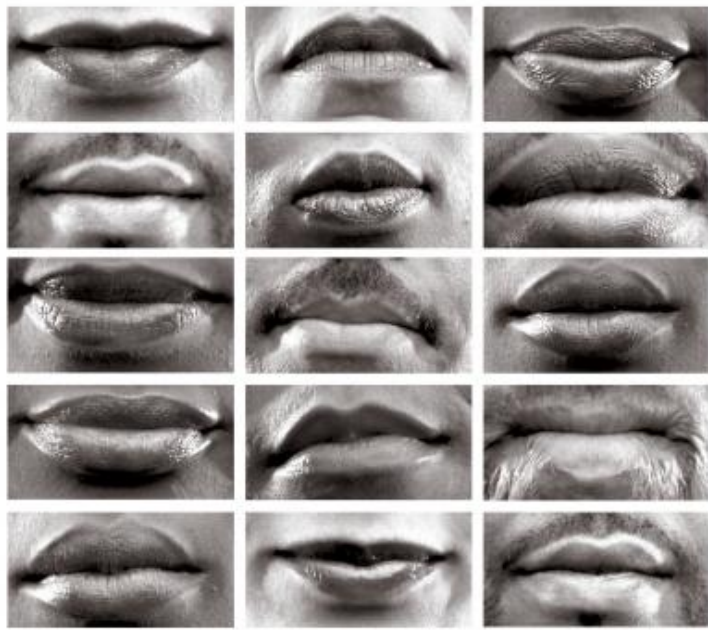




**Simpson** first came to prominence in the 1980s for her large-scale works that combined photography and text and defied traditional conceptions of gender, identity, race, culture, history, and memory.

Simpson's work often presents a fragmented or open-ended story, which the viewer is to complete based on his or her own expectations.

In this piece, hair is used to address issues of race and identity. What kind of hair is considered ideal? It is usually blond, straight— ethnically charged.



## Lorna Simpson

In "Easy to Remember," there are a series of fifteen competing male and female lips, in stillness and in motion.



Placing an emphasis on the social and political implications of African hairstyles and textures, her 1994 piece Wigs (Portfolio) presents an almost scientific study of hairpieces, aiming to underscore the wig as a tool of conformity and agent for physical transformation.

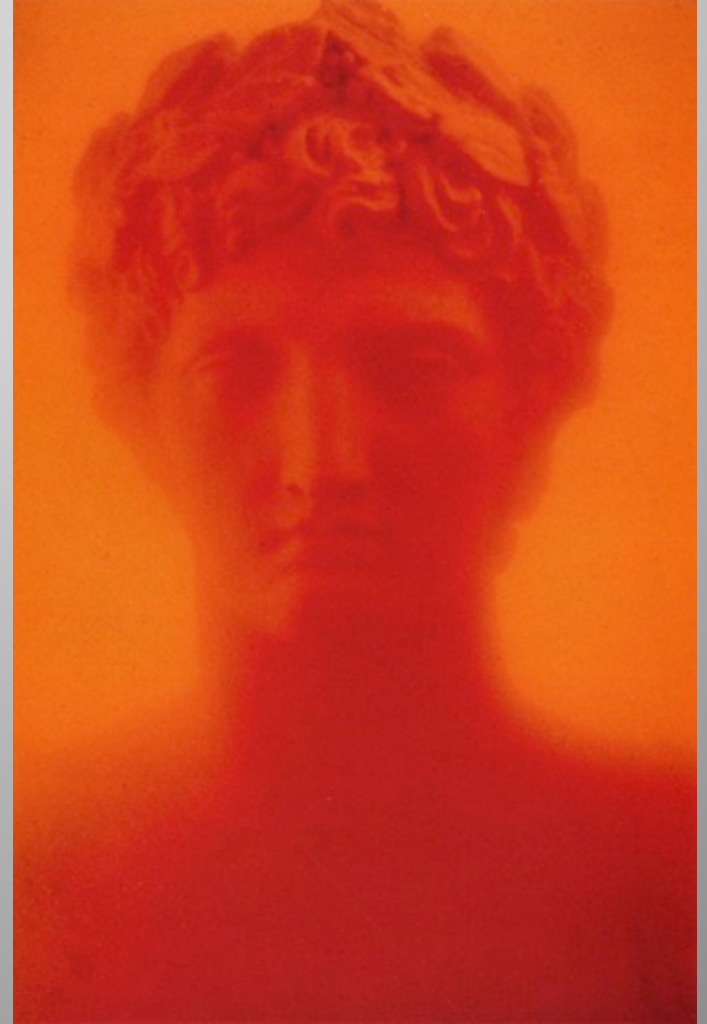
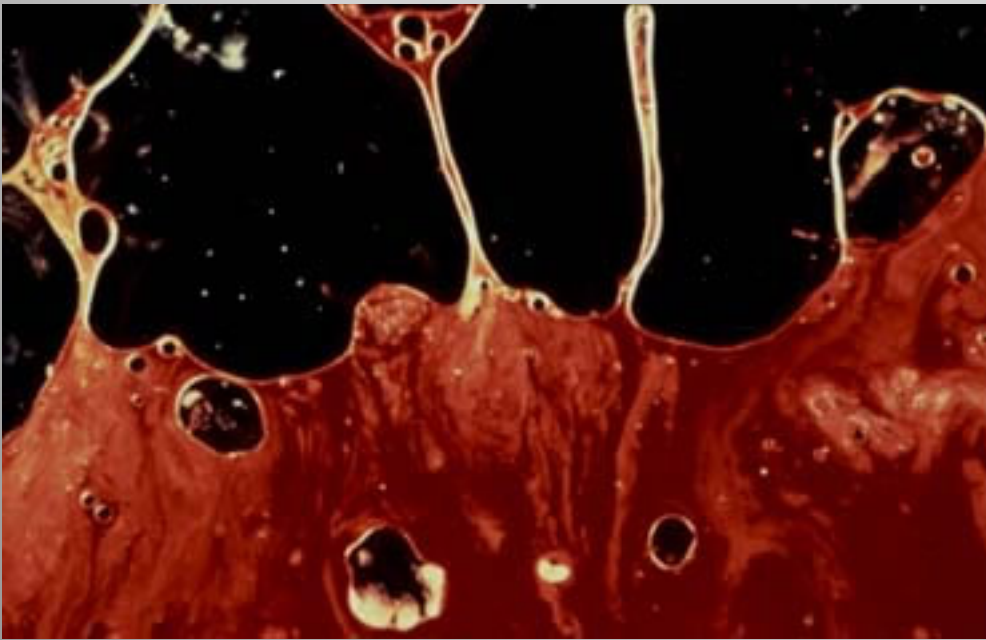




**Andres Serrano**, *Piss Christ*, large scale color photographs.

Serrano juxtaposed his own bodily fluids with symbols of his genuine religious devotion. Born in NYC with Honduran and Afro-Cuban heritage, his work addresses religions and cultures he inherited from Western colonizers.

Vehement censorship battles were fought in the U.S. courts and Presidents Reagan and Bush (senior) attempted to dismantle the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities as a way of winning the approval of the religious right and silencing dissent in America.



**Andres Serrano** often photographed bodily fluids as formally beautiful.

Submerging images from history in his own fluids, he personalized the history that was not his.





**Serrano** also did portraits of homeless people he found living near his NY studio.

Using studio lighting and awareness of how lighting can create dramatic, heroic and impression of importance in art.



Andres Serrano, Homeless and Clansmen series, large scale color photographs

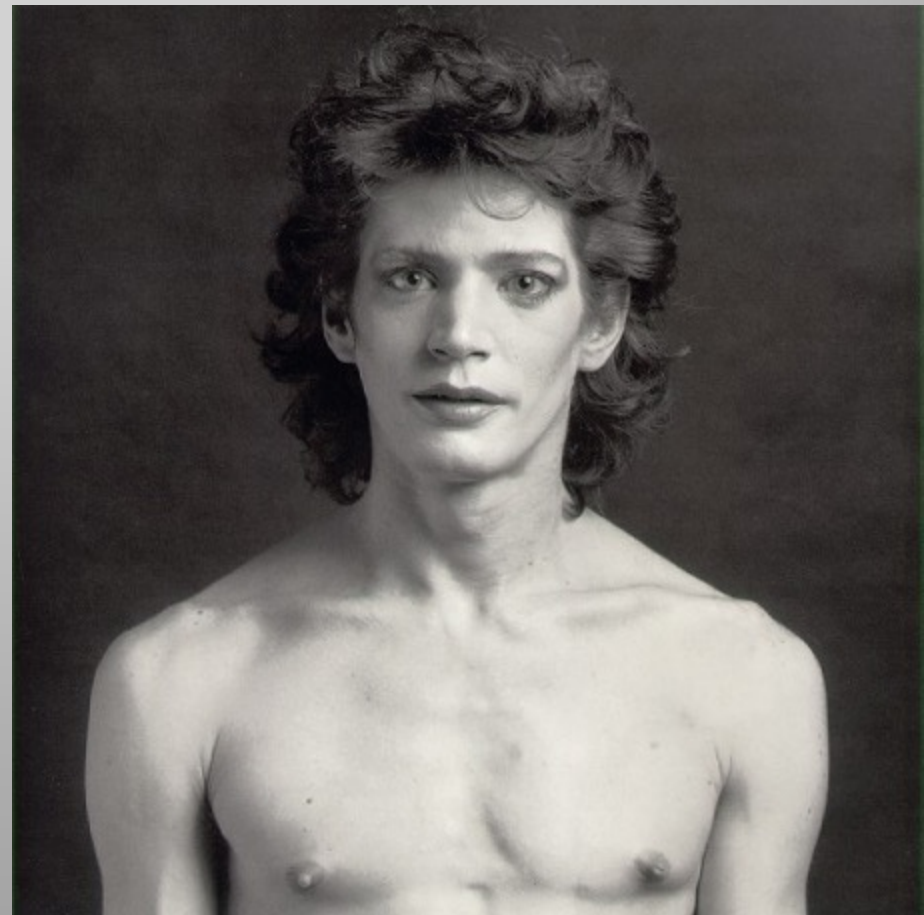


**Robert Mapplethorpe**—his work featured an array of subjects including celebrity portraits, still-life images of flowers and a controversial body of work around the variety erotic practices. In each case, the black & white images focus on the iconic and sensuality in photographed images.



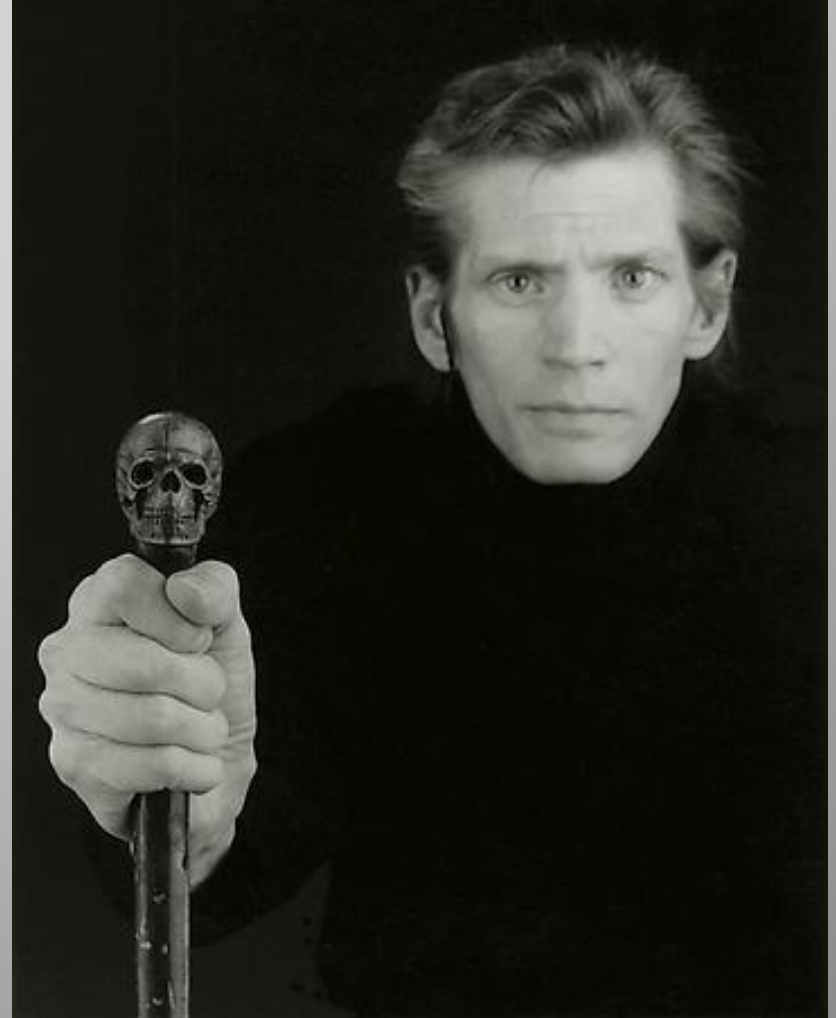


**Robert Mapplethorpe**—Mapplethorpe and Patti Smith were friends and room mates for years, living at the Chelsea Hotel. He took many photos of her including this androgynous one used on the cover of her album, *Horses*.



**Robert Mapplethorpe**—A series of self-portraits depict him in various stages of his life, revealing aspects of his personality. As variously costumed characters, Mapplethorpe researches his own identity, capturing his complex and contradictory nature. Whether depicting himself in a playful, fierce, or vulnerable state, the artist's explorations are intensely personal and self-reflexive.





**Robert Mapplethorpe**—It was not until after his diagnosis with AIDS in 1986 that Mapplethorpe vulnerably reveals himself in his portraits. Taken only months before his passing, for *Self Portrait (with cane)*, the artist is no longer playing a role. Mapplethorpe faces the camera directly, as if he were looking death in the face. The skull-headed cane that he holds in his right hand acts as a memento mori, foreshadowing his inevitable fate. (from the press release Skarstedt Gallery.)



**Robert Mapplethorpe**— his most controversial imagery were those with blatant homoerotic content.

The most direct, creating censorship battles over moral and pornographic issues in art.



Once we entered the postmodern era, somewhere in the late 1960s/early 70s, artists were exploring all kinds of techniques, sites, media and subjects.

In particular, the issues of diversity, identity and globalism became of importance with many artists questioning the market system.

In the past few weeks we have reviewed artists who were looking outside the gallery and museum system, outside the established market system, for ways to communicate ideas.

This week we looked at artists who are using photography to address issues of identity and the history of representation—especially those who were not traditionally represented in history.

What you might be noticing from reading the book, there are just more and more artists doing more and more different kinds of things.

Next week we explore some artists using video and film to address various issues related to gender, race, culture and the nature of representation— in and outside the gallery and museum.