

CHAPTER II. THE PUKED-UPON WHORE SPEAKS:

ANGRY ESSENTIALISM AND THE AVANT-GARDE

One characteristic of the avant-garde is that, in the course of entering new terrain, it violates entrenched rules; it seems to descend from “false premises” or “heretical assumption.” Another characteristic is that it is initially hard to comprehend, not because it is intrinsically inscrutable, but because it challenges the perceptual systems of artistically educated people. . . . A third, closely related characteristic is that it usually offends people, especially artists, before it persuades.

—Richard Kostelanetz (339)

Angry Essentialism’s combination of anger and abjection is more than a means of representing the damage done to women’s bodies; it is also a movement aimed at liberating women from the constraints of Ideal Womanhood imposed by feminism and patriarchal culture alike. In order to combat these forces and transcend paralyzing constructions of Woman, Angry Essentialism has looked (consciously or not) outside of feminist practice to the methods and traditions of men’s experimental performance and Romanticism. In particular, Angry Essentialism draws upon the ancient Dionysian and Shamanic ritual traditions as interpreted through the 19th-century romantic figure of the poete maudit . . . as reinterpreted by 1960s experimental performance art. The punk movement of the 1970s has also had a significant impact on Angry Essentialism. Ironically, these “male” traditions turn out to be rooted in female traditions that have been appropriated for male purposes, so the question is whether women artists can reclaim them effectively for feminist purposes.

Much of 1960s experimental performance art championed the natural, unsocialized self, the id, as superior to the arbitrary and false self constructed by

culture. This ideology was extremely powerful in the 1960s when, as Ronald Sukenick observes in Down and In, “Freud heretic Wilhelm Reich [redefined] madness as a form of sanity” (32). Where the id must be contained at all costs for proper socialization according to Freud’s theory, Reich’s model suggests that civilization is decaying because humanity’s natural instincts are smothered by arbitrary social rules. I believe Reich’s legacy is the basis of Angry Essentialism’s validation in feminist criticism.

Since the late 1950s, performance artists have been appropriating Dionysian and Shamanic ritual practices, shattering taboos and transgressing boundaries in order to liberate humanity, body and soul, and to expand spiritual and material possibilities closed off by the repressive operations of “civilization.” In early 1960s Vienna, for example, Hermann Nitsch offered a series of performances called “Orgies Mysteries Theater,” or “OM,” in which performers disemboweled bulls or lambs and covered themselves with the blood and entrails (McEvelley 87). Thomas McEvelley explains that these performances were “essentially revivals of Dionysian ritual,” and were “communion rite[s] in which the partaker abandoned his or her individual identity to enter the ego-darkened paths of the unconscious and emerged, having eaten and incorporated the god, redesignated as divine” (87). For similar reasons, performance artists have appropriated the ancient robes of the shaman since at least the 1960s. For example, Kim Jones, in 1981, “appeared naked except for a mask made of a woman’s pantyhose, covered himself with mud, . . . and lay naked on the fire escape to accumulate energy”; he then “smeared himself with [his own shit],

embraced members of the audience while covered in it, and finally burned sticks and green plants till the smoke drove the remaining audience from the gallery” (91). Physical abjection is a central image in these performances, and their legacy can be seen in the performances of Karen Finley and Holly Hughes. Finley’s works typically include rituals in which she smears food on her nude body, and Hughes uses blood, meat, and animal imagery in most of her work. The aim of such “abject” performances in the 1960s was to produce, in an ideal scenario, a sense of liberation and catharsis in the performer, spectator, or both: the performer transgresses societal taboo and employs bodily abjection to subvert dominant ideologies and achieve transcendence, and I believe the goal in Finley’s and Hughes’s works is similar.

The contemporary appeal of abject performance is rooted in 1960s avant-garde ideals and 19th-century Romanticism. C. W. E. Bigsby points out that theater of the 1960s “sought to liberate instincts, to destroy repression and revert to that stage of erotic and sensual spontaneity which is characteristic of childhood in the individual, and primitive and largely pre-literate in the race” (68). Likewise, Michael Vanden Heuvel argues that avant-garde performance in the 1960s “formed a potent base from which to undermine the authority of the implicitly Cartesian nature of Western thought, perception, and culture as a whole” (32). Theater at this time became concerned with destroying the mind/body dualism and forging anew an intimate connection between art and life (Kultermann 137).

Poet Arthur Rimbaud had begun this project almost a century earlier,

along with Nietzsche, Blake, and Baudelaire (Ahearn 104). While all of these writers are part of a larger Romantic tradition, Rimbaud and Baudelaire exemplify the poete maudit tradition, which has been an especially powerful influence on twentieth-century artists and is central to Angry Essentialism. The poete maudit tradition valorizes chthonian nature as a positive, creative force which, when tapped, allows the artist to break through the illusions imposed by society and to envision a new reality. Rimbaud was obsessed by the need “to change man and bring him into direct contact with existence” (Raymond 5), and he believed that “if a man can slough off human egoism and human personality and learn to use his faculties, then he can illuminate the darkness with light and seize possession of the treasures of the universe” (Starkie 107). In his battle against Western rationalism, Rimbaud studied Baudelaire, as well as alchemy and magic (Starkie 159-62; Ahearn 105), arriving finally at his theory of the visionary artist.

Rimbaud describes his "program" for becoming a visionary in his famous lettre du voyant, a letter to Paul Demeny dated 13 May 1871:

The first task of the man who wants to be a poet is to study his own awareness of himself, in its entirety; he seeks out his soul, he inspects it, he tests it, he learns it. As soon as he knows it, he must cultivate it! . . . —But the problem is to make the soul into a monster, like the comprachicos, you know? Think of a man grafting warts onto his face and growing them there.

I say you have to be a visionary, make yourself a visionary.

A Poet makes himself a visionary through a long, boundless, and systematized disorganization of all the senses. All forms of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he exhausts within himself all poisons and preserves their quintessences. Unspeakable torment, where he will need the greatest faith, a superhuman strength, where he becomes among all men the great invalid, the great criminal, the great accursed—and the Supreme Scientist! (Rimbaud 102)

The idea is that artistic "vision" requires the destruction of rationality by reducing

the body to its "basest" form, and here Rimbaud's influence on Angry Essentialism becomes clearest.

French feminist theory celebrates Rimbaud's model of the visionary artist, and male avant-garde practices in general, as relevant to feminist aims. According to Marianne DeKoven, Hélène Cixous, concerned primarily with "inscribing the feminine" in written culture, finds that Jean Genet's work is a rare example of writing that "inscribes femininity" (72). Also, Rachel DuPlessis and Workshop 9 note the affinity between women's writing and the avant-garde in that the avant-garde, like feminism, represents a marginal position which seeks to dismantle oppressive social/literary systems. Feminist women writers have appropriated what is best about the avant-garde to suit their purposes (DeKoven 73). Similarly, DeKoven asserts, Julia Kristeva actually conflates the feminine and avant-garde so that "écriture féminine is the male avant-garde" (72). Most significantly, Simone de Beauvoir, in The Second Sex, identifies Rimbaud as friendly to feminism, quoting "Rimbaud's prophecy" (Marks & Courtivron 233), the "female Prometheus" passage of his lettre du voyant:

When the eternal slavery of Women is destroyed, when she lives for herself and through herself, when man—up till now abominable—will have set her free, she will be a poet as well! Woman will discover the unknown! Will her world of ideas differ from ours? She will discover strange things, unfathomable, repulsive, delightful; we will accept and understand them. (Rimbaud 103)

This "female Prometheus" passage appears just a few paragraphs below Rimbaud's description of his program for becoming a visionary, quoted earlier. I wonder, when de Beauvoir cites the "female Prometheus" passage, does she condone the "program" that the liberated "female Prometheus" would have to

follow to be a Poet?

Doris T. Wight hints at the implications of Rimbaud's "female Prometheus" in her book Seeking the Promethean Woman in the New Poetry, pointing out that "Rimbaud assumes that women might be able to touch baser, more repulsive depths than men." She then asks, "Is he implying that females are in closer association with evil than males?" (11). Unfortunately, she dodges the question, but I think it requires further scrutiny. The question is not whether females are more closely associated with evil than males, for binaries like "good and evil" are part of what Rimbaud (as well as the Surrealists and artists involved in other avant-garde movements) attempts to demolish. The question is whether females are more closely associated with nature, and in Rimbaud's model they are. Rimbaud's primary source of inspiration was nature, and in order to write about it he had to follow his program of decadence, uncovering his "true," "inner" self, in order to liberate his vision. The baseness of Nature is not evil to Rimbaud; on the contrary, it is superior to the false restrictions imposed by civilization, and the artist must destroy the trappings of civilization and discover his basest, most "natural" self in order to achieve an authentic artistic vision.

The problem is that Rimbaud's model avoids one set of binaries and falls into another because it is based upon binary oppositions of mind/body, society/nature, male/female. The poete maudit corrupts his body in order to release his visionary mind, embraces nature so as to liberate himself from society's artificial constraints, and becomes female-irrational so that he (and his audience) can break free from the masculine-rational. Put another way, the

poete maudit's program requires that he enter the abject Other position traditionally allocated to Woman. Even so, just as Rimbaud's visionary artist disorganizes his senses in order to break free of all social and moral constraints and liberate his "inner self," Angry Essentialism invokes the image of abject, angry, unruly Female Nature as a means to transcend the patriarchal construction of Woman as passive, contained, and objectified. This use of poete maudit values has a history in feminist performance.

Reclaiming the Muse: Early Feminist Performance

Carolee Schneemann, who began working as an artist before the feminist movement gathered force in the second half of the 1960s, was a trailblazer in the sexual revolution, endeavoring to express female desire and sexuality in her performances, paintings, films, and assemblages. In the beginning, she did not have an extensive "feminist" tradition to draw upon, yet she created Eye Body (1963) and Meat Joy (1964), both of which are now viewed as profoundly feminist works. Eye Body, for example, challenges the passive, objectified position of the female body in traditional depictions of the nude. As Dan Cameron notes, Eye Body

features the artist nude, displaying a keen erotic imagination as she interacts with various studio materials, using her own painting constructions as the tableau's setting. The direct projection of the artist's sexual energy towards the viewer marks it as a turnabout on the voyeuristic angle of Duchamp's Étant Donnés, as well as one of a turbulent decade's most significant transgressions in the accepted canons of modern art. (11)

Similarly, Schneemann's Meat Joy (1964) is one of the earliest performance works acknowledging female desire. In this performance, men and women

engaged in a sort of orgy amongst carcasses of chickens, fish, and chunks of beef, smearing themselves with blood, and tearing raw meat with their hands.

While these works are unquestionably feminist in retrospect, they weren't necessarily conceived within a feminist context. Schneemann told Andrea Juno, "When I started really developing my work such as 'Eye Body' (1963) and 'Meat Joy' (1964), the impetus came from a combination of the writings of Wilhelm Reich, Antonin Artaud, and Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex." Schneemann describes Eye Body as "a kind of shamanic ritual," saying, "Only later did I realize the affinity of [my imagery] to the famous statue of a Cretan goddess whose body is decorated with serpents" (68-69). As demonstrated by her performance Enter . . . Vulva, presented at the November 1997 "Arts Now" conference in New Paltz, New York, over the past several years Schneemann has been constructing, retroactively, feminist credentials for her early works by researching feminist archaeological findings. Displaying photographic stills of her performances alongside almost identical images of ancient goddesses, Schneemann's Enter . . . Vulva taps into thousands of years of female power. Enter . . . Vulva testifies to the origins of avant-garde ideals in ancient goddess traditions, but it also highlights the fact that, before feminist archaeology revealed evidence of goddess traditions, feminist art had to base itself in male avant-garde ideals and practices.

Schneemann acknowledges that the "feminist" validation of her imagery in Goddess feminism came after the fact. Significantly, when I asked her about Eye Body and Meat Joy while talking with her at her New Museum retrospective in

January 1997, she commented on both performances' emphasis on transcendence, in the tradition of avant-garde performance of the early 1960s, and she did not see this as conflicting with her feminist aims. Likewise, when I spoke to Suzanne Lacy about her work in September 1996, she remarked that she and other feminist artists working in the early 1970s enthusiastically asserted the influence of male avant-gardists on their work. For the artists themselves, the "male" avant-garde influence on feminist performance is a fact, and not a conflict. The feminist claim on "abject" performances such as Schneemann's has been a backwards process, in a way, because although the feminist artists of the 1960s and early 1970s drew their inspiration from what I am now referring to as "male avant-garde" or "experimental" traditions, these traditions were revealed by feminist archaeologists in the 1970s to be male appropriations of ancient female traditions.

Further, it has only recently become possible for feminists to focus on the female body as a site of pleasure. This new freedom is evident in Enter . . . Vulva, in which Schneemann emphasizes her ongoing concern with the representation of the pleased body. Today, she considers the pleased body to be extremely privileged and hopes to find a way to represent it beyond the constructions of pornography and excess. In 1964, when she did Meat Joy, however, it was nearly impossible for her to represent sexuality at all. I think it is vital to note that in looking at work like Schneemann's, I am approaching it as one who has first seen it in the 1990s. When I first read about and saw photographs of Meat Joy in Juno and Vale's Angry Women, and while I was

reading numerous reviews and commentaries about it, I imagined a wild orgy with slabs of meat hurling through the air. This image of Meat Joy was, in fact, an initial inspiration for my dissertation. But in January 1997, I watched a film of Meat Joy at Schneemann's New Museum installation, and I also talked with her about it. Meat Joy is not a wild orgy. I had imagined the action in the performance as frenzied and violent, but in reality it was slow and stately. Meat Joy challenges the ancient association of sexuality with "meat" and "carnal desires" not by disputing the association but by valorizing it. Meat Joy says that sexuality is animalistic and meat-based, but it is also sensual and beautiful; it is superior to rationalism when it comes to human affairs. This performance happened when mainstream ideology constructed sexuality as ugly and violent; the Dionysian tradition provided an alternate context for representing sexuality as positive.

The Dionysian tradition challenges the status quo by celebrating sensuality and elevating the oppressed, and in this respect, Holly Hughes carries on the Dionysian tradition. Like Schneemann, Hughes's main concern is to depict desire and physical pleasure in a positive light, but if Schneemann has faced sexism when presenting her work, Hughes has also faced homophobia when exhibiting hers. When Hughes uses abject imagery, she uses it with full awareness that a "straight" audience thinks of lesbians as vampires preying upon hapless victims. Her "meat" imagery taps into this stereotype, drawing power from an eons-old belief that female desire (lesbian or not) is fatal. As I will discuss in more detail in my concluding chapter, the amazing thing is that, like

Schneemann, Hughes subverts the stereotypes surrounding her. The accomplishment is impressive because the Dionysian model Hughes and Schneemann are working from is one that oppresses women despite its “feminist” roots.

Dionysian Ritual and Abject Feminist Performance

The cult of Dionysos originated with the Minoans on the Greek island of Knossos. The ruins on Knossos (circa 2000 to 1600 BC) suggest that the Minoans' primary gods were female, and the religion seems to have been based on earth deities. There is no evidence that the inhabitants worshipped sky gods (Evans 40). However, the Minoan culture, which appears to have been far-reaching and highly developed, was conquered by sky-god-worshipping, patriarchal invaders. The result was a two-tiered society in which the upper class, the conquerors, spoke an ancient form of Greek and followed a religion reflected in Homer, and the lower class, the original inhabitants of Knossos, worked the land and continued their own religious traditions. This two-tiered culture was known as Mycenaean society (Evans 40). During the Mycenaean era, Dionysos emerged as a major deity during the transition period following the Greeks' overthrow of the Minoans. Dionysos became a multi-cultural god: originally a minor deity in the Greek pantheon, he was closely associated with the offspring of a Minoan goddess. Because he “most resembled certain male deities from the Minoan era,” he appealed to the conquered lower classes, whose own goddess-based religion had been vanquished (41-42).

Over time, the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations were completely

destroyed by increasingly ferocious conquerors. Arthur Evans notes, “A dark age ensued until about 800 B.C., when classical Greek civilization as we know it first began to emerge” (41). At this time, Dionysos came to prominence because of an ideological shift. In Greek society, “the dominant classes were losing touch with the earth, with animals, and with the great cycles of nature. Their concept of what it meant to be human was changing, as were their concepts about gods and animals” (42). By the fifth century, Charles Segal argues, “The general tendency in the arts, literature, and philosophy [was] to assert man’s independence from nature, a tendency since then stamped on all of Western thought” (qtd. in Evans 42). “Not only was there a sharp distinction between animal, human, and god, but the human experience itself was becoming fragmented,” Evans believes. “The ‘nobler’ or ‘better’ or ‘higher’ part of human beings was increasingly identified with reason, or rather with abstract, discursive reason. Feelings and passions, especially sexual passions, tended to be associated with animal behavior, that is, with a type of being now considered distinct from and inferior to humans” (50). Further, “Qualities popularly associated with women—softness, tenderness, physical receptivity in the sex act—were looked down upon, whereas qualities associated with men, especially men in war, were praised—aggressiveness, competitiveness, insensitivity to suffering, the active role in the sex act “ (52).

In response to this masculinizing ideological shift, “The religion of Dionysos, with its historical connection to the old, conquered populations and their world-view, with its emphasis on natural feeling, became enormously

popular among slaves and women, who in fact also happened to constitute the majority of the Athenian population.” Dionysian rituals “were one of the few religious events in which slaves were allowed to participate, and they were one of the few occasions when women could assemble in groups and act in unity” (52). Women, who were denied citizenship and normally confined to the inner chambers of their homes, were allowed free reign when it came to the observation of Dionysian holidays because Greek men did not want to insult the god Dionysos by opposing his festivities (54). What is remarkable is that Dionysos, the god of the conquered and powerless, became a source of empowerment for his devotees (52).

Although the image of Dionysos degenerated into a tipsy wine god after the decline of classical Greek civilization (60), Dionysian myths and rituals retained his “feeling for the living continuities of nature and a concept of the human personality as an organism deeply rooted in the nonrational forces of the cosmos. “ He embodied the “spiritual needs of Greece’s underclass [and] became the god that the patriarchal establishment could neither accept nor eliminate.” Dionysos was dangerous because he represented “the return of the repressed,” the “return of the religious needs of the lower classes, return of the demands of the nonrational part of the self, and return of the Minoan feeling for the living unity of nature” (61).

The worshippers of Dionysos were called Maenads, or “mad women,” and according to legend, they ran into the woods and engaged in ecstatic orgies (54). An important part of their festivities was the rite of omophagia, which entailed the

eating of raw meat. Evans points out, “Not only did this act completely bypass the ritual sacrifice of the established religion, it required humans to act like beasts of prey in the wild. In effect, it abolished ‘the frontiers between men and beasts.’” Dionysian rituals certainly were not humdrum, everyday stuff for the Greeks. As Evans observes,

to eat raw flesh in a Greek religious ceremony was a shocking affront to established values because the whole politico-religious system was sanctified by ritual sacrifice—that is, by the act of slaying an animal, burning part of it as an offering to the gods, and cooking and eating the rest. . . . Indeed, in an important religious sense, the community could be defined as those who shared and participated in such sacrifice.
(54)

As might be expected, men were curious about what went on at these festivals, and Euripides’s play The Bacchae is especially relevant in exhibiting this curiosity. In The Bacchae, the tragic hero Pentheus sneaks into a Dionysian ritual disguised as a Maenad because he wants to know what is going on; unfortunately, mistaken for the sacrificial victim, he is torn apart and eaten. Pentheus is sort of a model for the later development of the Dionysian cult. When men entered the cult, they endured a ritual called the taurobolium, in which they were “placed naked in a pit over which, atop a lattice of branches, a bull, representing the god [Dionysos], was slain and disemboweled. When the initiate emerged covered with the bull’s blood and entrails, he was hailed as the reborn god emerging from the earth womb” (McEvilley 88). I have seen no evidence that female followers of Dionysos underwent such rituals. But the male initiate, in order to prove himself a devotee of Dionysos, had to become a Maenad, and in order to become a Maenad, he had to become abject. But unlike the Maenads,

the male initiate emerged as a god.

Sue Ellen Case points out that the Western tradition in theater dates “from the Athenian festivals of Dionysos in the sixth and fifth centuries BC.” She believes “Our notions of drama, acting, physical theatre space, costume, mask and the relation between actors and audience can be said to stem from these festivals, their rites and ceremonies.” Significantly, she notes, “In the sixth century, both women and men participated in” these rituals, “but during the fifth century, when the ceremonies were becoming what is known as theatre, women disappeared from the practice. No record has been found of any law forbidding women to participate in the songs and dances, nor is there any evidence for the precise date of the change” (Feminism 7). The Dionysian tradition in theater has remained almost exclusively male until the twentieth century. Hermann Nitsch’s “Orgies Mysteries Theater,” mentioned earlier in this chapter, is one example of contemporary performance art drawing upon Dionysian tradition, reenacting the ritual of taurobolium. In The Theory of Total Blame, Karen Finley’s character Irene, serving up raw meatloaf for her family, also seems to evoke the rite of omophagia. But given that men took over the religion of Dionysos for several thousand years, is Irene a Maenad, in the classical sense, or is she just a mad woman, as patriarchal culture has constructed the Maenad and her successors? Does Irene emerge transcendent, like Nitsch, or does she remain elbow-deep in raw meat, subservient to her god Dionysos and his godlike male disciples? Have contemporary interpretations of Dionysian tradition created a space that allows women artists to reclaim their birthright?

The Influence of Antonin Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty"

Experimental performance art in the late 1950s and 1960s drew extensively from the ancient Dionysian tradition, refined through Reich/Freud, Artaud, and Brecht. Reich's revisioning of Freud had reinterpreted the id as the precious but artificially suppressed nature of humanity, and Brecht had declared the need to shatter complacent adherence to ideology. According to Brecht, in "A Short Organum for the Theatre," traditional "Aristotelian" drama appeals to the emotions so that the spectator becomes a puppet manipulated by the machinery of the performance to believe that what has been presented is the most obvious thing in the world. The spectator achieves catharsis vicariously through the performers, but he or she never questions the reality presented on the stage; no avenues are left open for individual action. Thus, Brecht produced an "Epic Theatre" that creates an active spectator who is able to take action based on rational understanding. Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty," on the other hand, was based in the Romantic valorization of emotion and the unconscious mind as superior to and more authentic than intellect and rationality. To Artaud, the theater is a "contagious delirium" (26). "Like the plague," he says, "the theater is a call to the forces that impel the mind to the source of its conflicts" (30). Like the plague, theater recalls the spectator to his/her essential physical and psychic being, recovering "the notion of symbols and archetypes which act like silent blows, rests, leaps of the heart, summons of the lymph, inflammatory images thrust into our abruptly wakened heads" (29). "In the true theatre," Artaud writes, "a play disturbs the senses' repose, frees the repressed unconscious, incites a

kind of virtual revolt (which moreover can have its full effect only if it remains virtual), and imposes on the assembled collectivity an attitude that is both difficult and heroic” (28).

Artaud was “discovered” by avant-garde performance in 1958, and his influence on the theater of the 1960s is remarkable. As Michael Vanden Heuvel notes, “The notion that performance, by rejecting the closed codification and signifying systems of the text and its hierarchies, could present unmediated experience and therefore reclaim the lost source of old communitas . . . motivated a great deal of avant-garde theatre’s most provocative and moving works” (43). The adherents of the new theater

were not concerned with delineating the moral burdens implied by necessary sublimations but with liberating the individual and art from social and mimetic constraints. For them the theater was no longer to be a part of that system which placed the mind over the body, the reality principle over the pleasure principle. It was to be a revolutionary force returning man to a prelapsarian state of grace. It was not to be a reflection of life; it was to be life itself. (Biggsby 68)

Hence, while the new theater, like Brecht’s, sought to wake up the sleeping masses in the theater, it went about doing so in a manner contrary to Brechtian ideals. Because it saw rationalism as accomplice to oppressive social and political systems, the new theater privileged physical and emotional response as the means for political and personal transformation.

Avant-garde performance of the 1960s, in particular, drew upon Artaud’s theories to meet its ideals. Performance, Vanden Heuvel suggests, “often functioned as therapy (or plague, which to Artaud was one form of therapy) for the deeply ingrained and repressive oedipal urges [the artists] saw as

undermining the natural and instinctive life of man” (32-33). As with Nietzsche, Rimbaud, and the early avant-gardists, tapping into and liberating Authentic Humanity from society’s chains remained a central concern. “The therapeutic approach was, in each case, directed at subverting the rationalizing and psychologizing impulse sublimated into Western art and life and replacing it with new perceptual strategies,” Vanden Heuvel explains (33). And just as Nietzsche resurrected Dionysos and Rimbaud tapped the mysteries of the universe through experiments with drugs, dreams, and the occult, in 1960s performance, “enlightenment was to be discovered through the media of ritual, chance and the unconscious, and Dionysian body mysticism” (33). Further, like their forebears, actors in 1960s avant-garde performances “often objectified their bodies (sometimes in the nude), used scatological language or drugs, or asked spectators to help them escape their fictive role by accompanying them out of the theater—all in order to reveal ways of transcending the constraints imposed by an overly cerebralized and puritanical society” (36). Like Rimbaud, the 1960s avant-garde performer would consciously take on pain and abjection in order to break down all barriers and open himself up to the infinities of self and the universe. As Vanden Heuvel puts it, the actor “would transform his or her physical discomfort and body discipline, as well as the spiritual freedom that such a via negativa promises, into the aqueduct through which energies are channeled through the performer and then toward the audience” (36).

The influence of Artaud and the Romantics is evident in these techniques and ideals, which are aimed at purging (through a male version of Dionysian

celebration—sickness, pain, and abjection) the false values and doctrines imposed by society and liberating the imprisoned Authentic Self. But enlightenment also required “the political concerns of the collective, and the Presence (or ‘aura,’ in Walter Benjamin’s sense) of the polymorphous performing body” (Vanden Heuvel 33). The avant-garde is, above all, an assault on traditional values and received ideologies, and its aims are unquestionably political. Ahearn points out that “Altered states of consciousness, ranging from dream, hallucination, and drug experiences to ecstasy and mystical glimpses of oneself with reality, are by definition subversive of accepted notions of self, body, and external world in modern Western culture” (105). Further, Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty extended the significance of this subversion beyond the physical limits and desires of the individual: the artist/performer “channeled” enlightenment through his or her mind and body to transform the spectator in a direct appeal to the emotions and physical senses.

Artaudian and cultural feminist performance work well together because both assume a binary opposition of nature and culture wherein Female Nature, which is superior to Male Culture, must be liberated. Likewise, just as avant-garde performance posits a realm wherein “real” human nature can be expressed, cultural feminist performance, as Dolan suggests, insists that the nude female body can exist “outside the system of representation that objectifies women, free of culture’s imposed constructs and constrictions” (Feminist Spectator 62). These ideas allowed Schneemann in the early 1960s to celebrate the natural female body free from the ugliness and anxieties imposed

upon it by culture, and they have given feminist critics a framework for celebrating the abject female body in performance as a source of empowerment and liberation for women. The Shamanic tradition in performance art, which also draws its appeal from Artaudian ideals, has likewise provided the credentials for Karen Finley's work among activist feminists.

Channeling Abjection: Karen Finley and Shamanism

Thomas McEvelley observes that

In societies where the shamanic profession is intact, shamans have been perhaps the most fully founded and powerful cultural figures in history. The poets, mythographers, visual artists, musicians, medical doctors, psychotherapists, scientists, sorcerers, undertakers, psychopomps, and priests of their tribal groups, they have been one-person cultural establishments. (92)

In Western culture, the rituals and traditions of Shamanism have been highly visible in performance art since the 1950s, and with the 1990 NEA scandal, Karen Finley became perhaps the most famous—or infamous—Shamanic performer of them all. As Andrea Juno remarks, Finley “function[s] as a shaman empowering people to better understand themselves—and that’s threatening” (Juno and Vale 49).

Finley views herself as a healer and “sees her own work as ‘a cleansing process’” (Ahlgren 34). She told Andrea Juno that she wants to show, in her performances, “the reality that: women (or gays or people of color) don’t have the same freedom as men to just walk down a dark street. . . .” Onstage, she embodies the terror and injustice heaped upon the oppressed of society, offering ablution and catharsis to her spectators, liberating them from fear and empowering them to act. “I’m angry,” she says, “but I feel like I’m doing

something about it—so it feels good. And that’s what a lot of my work is about: trying to get people angry so that they’ll do something about it” (49). Finley achieves her aims by employing Shamanistic practices in her performances. She told Andrea Juno: “I like to look at my work as a ritual or ceremony that’s more pagan—before the idea of the ‘One Male God’ emerged. In Brazil there’s an African/Indian religion where women dress in white, take on ‘evil spirits’ and ‘shake it out.’ I feel I sort of do that. In my performance I wish I could relieve the audience of its suffering . . .” (43).

The ritual or ceremonial nature of Finley’s work begins with a sort of channeling of psychic energies. She explains, “I do a lot of psychic work. Many times when people just walk by I can pick up energies or see or feel other things, like a medium” (43). Likewise, as Richard Schechner observes, her performances employ “surrealistic, automatic talking” and a “trancelike state,” in which she has a “blank look on [her] face, [and] a sing-song delivery of lines.” Finley elaborates on these practices, saying, “I put myself into a state . . . so that things come in and out of me, I’m almost like a vehicle. And so when I’m talking it’s just coming through me. And it’s very exhausting. . . . When performing I pick up the energies from people”(“Constant State” 154).

The channeling aspect of her performances locates Finley firmly within the Shamanic tradition. Mark Levy notes that the shaman’s role in “tribal society is to have visions in a trance state and record these visions in poetry, song and the visual arts for the spiritual and therapeutic benefit of the community” (54). He goes on to explain that, while “In a trance state induced by drumming, meditation

or ritual practice, the shaman leaves his or her body and ascends to the upperworld to gain information or healing from spiritual allies” (55). In order to achieve this transcendent state, the shaman must accumulate spiritual energy, and Finley achieves this through a rigorous regimen of meditation, isolation, and self-denial. In composing a performance text, she sequesters herself, opening up to whatever comes to her, and starts writing; she says, “sometimes I really believe I have other voices coming to me. So I open up to the voices.” She also fasts for 24 hours before the actual performance, she never rehearses, and she “doesn’t even like going to sound checks, because it interferes with spontaneity.” She says, “what makes the strongest performances is if I completely seclude myself, fast, and not take baths and stay in this certain state I get myself into.”

Just before the performance, she says, “I jitter, horrible smells come out of me, I smoke and I usually don’t” (Finley, “Constant State” 155). Her preparation process aims at breaking down all conscious control and opening herself up to spiritual energies. In this state, onstage, Finley “becomes a lightning rod for the spirits of [people] who seem almost to speak through her” (Holden). C. Carr, reviewing a 1988 performance at the Pyramid Club, observes that “in I’m an Ass Man, 1985, [Finley] becomes a man, a rapist, disgusted that his victim is having her period; in The Neighbor’s Cock, 1985, she’s the sexually abused girl who’s decided to ‘tell.’ In The Constant State of Desire, 1986, she’s (among other things) a sort of terrorist who coats stockbrokers’ balls with shit and sells them as candy.” According to Levy, “The ability to take on a different persona or personas while in an altered state of consciousness is typical of the shamanic

'shape shifting' of the trickster figure or sacred clown of tribal cultures" (60).

Further, Finley's ritual use of food and other substances, which she smears on her nude or semi-nude body, is a shamanistic practice as well. McEvilley points out that "The preparation of his or her own body as a magico-sculptural object . . . is a regular and essential part of the shaman's performance." For example, "An Australian may cover his body with mud (symbol of recent arrival from the netherworld) and decorate it with patterns of bird down fastened on with his own blood" (95). Likewise, Finley's food rituals are part of a highly spiritual, ritualized shamanic practice. First she disrobes, then she smears various food products on her body. She says, "in a sense, I wipe all the surface crap off myself—get rid of the decoration. Then I cover myself up in ways that I feel society covers up a woman" (Interview with Juno 48-49).

As Levy points out, extreme behaviors and transgression of taboo are characteristic of shamans across cultures. For example, anthropologist Elsie Crews Parsons reports that the sacred clowns of the Pueblos have been seen "shouting obscenities; eating or drinking filth; drenching or being drenched with urine or water; simulating lust, fear, or anger," and so forth (Qtd. in Levy 60). Within the shamanic ritual, McEvilley explains, "deliberate inversions of social custom can transpire; acts repressed in the public morality may surface there, simultaneously set loose for their power to balance and complete the sense of life, and held safely in check by the shadow reality of the arena they occur in" (93). What is most relevant to Finley's works is that, in order to heal their communities, "The shaman, the yogic seeker of dishonor, and the ritual

scapegoat figure all [offer] themselves as targets for calamity, to draw it away from the communities they [serve]" (93-95).

As a shaman, Finley symbolically takes on oppression and pain in order to heal and liberate her audience. This works, as McEvelley and Levy agree, because taboo acts performed in public offer catharsis for the audience: the shaman serves as a kind of scapegoat figure who acts out the forbidden primal urges of the community. Likewise, Roland Barthes feels that the artist and the shaman "[concentrate] irregularity, the better to purge it from society as a whole." Both, he says are "cathartic phenomen[a], a kind of vaccine intended to inject a little subjectivity, a little freedom under the crust of bourgeois values: we feel better for having taken part—a declared but limited part—in the disease" (Qtd. in Levy 54).

Significantly, however, although the Shaman is usually male, the "disease" state he embodies in order to produce communal catharsis is distinctly female, and this suggests some problematic implications for Finley's Shamanism. McEvelley points out that "Male shamans and priests around the world, as well as tribal boys at their puberty initiations, adopt female dress to incorporate the female and her powers. In lineages as far apart as North Asian and Amerindian, shamans have worn women's clothing and ritually married other men" (92). The appropriation of "female power" is not limited to Shamanic cultures, either. McEvelley observes that "Akkadian priests of Ishtar dressed like their goddesses, as did Ramakrishna in nineteenth-century India. A Sanskrit text instructs the devotee to 'discard the male (purusa) in thee and become a woman (prakriti)'"

(92-93). This is not to say that the “female power” appropriated by men bears any relation to real women in these cultures, since the status of women is quite low. Rather, in these cultures, archetypal femaleness—irrational, abject, leaky, excessive, and chaotic—is viewed as the source of mystical powers which can be appropriated ritually for the benefit of the community.

The History and Male Appropriation of Female “Power”

For similar reasons, over the centuries, men in Western cultures have appropriated the image of the disorderly woman as the very symbol of transgression and revolutionary conflict. Natalie Zemon Davis points out that at German and Austrian carnivals, men typically dressed as women and ran jumping and leaping through the streets in ecstatic fertility rites (138). In England in 1631, men dressed as women “leveled fences against the king’s enclosure of their forests”; in 1718, “students followed ‘a virago, or man in woman’s habit, crowned with laurel’ to assault a Dissenting meeting house.” In 1650, men in drag tore down tollbooths and turnpikes. In 1812, transvestite males smashed steam looms and burned a factory at Stockport. In Wales, Scotland, and Ireland as well, similar events have taken place (148-49). Davis suggests that such behaviors can be explained in part by the fact that, by dressing as women, these men were freed of responsibility for their actions—after all, women were considered incapable of self-responsibility. In addition, Davis suggests, these men “drew upon the sexual power and energy of the unruly woman and on her license (which they had long assumed at carnival and games)—to promote fertility, to defend the community, its interests and standards, and to tell the truth

about unjust rule” (149-50).

The history of men appropriating femaleness for revolutionary and cathartic purposes suggests that women must possess a formidable strength which has merely been stifled by centuries of patriarchal oppression. Indeed, Flaherty remarks, “Eighteenth-century European thinkers” who first studied Shamanism “reasoned that women must have once had more power: Male transvestite shamans, they thought, had to be imitating shamankas so as to co-opt their boundless magic, and their fellow tribesmen accepted that because it served to keep that female magic under male control” (276). This is quite possibly true: anthropological and archaeological evidence suggests that male-centered religions may have appropriated ancient goddess-powers that preceded them. Given this potential fact, the idea that Shamanism and other female-appropriating activities reflect the primacy of female power is very appealing, as is Karen Finley’s re-appropriation of this boundless female magic in her Shamanistic performances. Finley is taking back the power men stole from women and she is using it to liberate the oppressed of society.

And yet what is this female “power” we are talking about? It is based on the equation of femaleness with abjection, chaos, insanity, and lack of control. The Shaman who embodies this “femaleness” in a tribal culture has most likely been chosen for the role because he is a physically or psychologically damaged person who is unable to “take on a normal role in tribal society” (Levy 54). Shamans are chosen young, and they are most often “delicate and effeminate children, or those who have epilepsy . . . and other convulsive seizures”; such

children are believed to be already possessed by spirits (Flaherty 264). Anthropologists don't call Shamanism the "sickness vocation" for nothing (McEvelley 92). Shamanism's magical femaleness is a disease state.

It is true, as C. Carr points out, that "Finley began to 'perform' as a teenager" by staging epileptic seizures or pretending to vomit in front of restaurants "to see whether or not people would keep eating," and that her performances continued in high school, where she and her friends created Happenings "aimed at interrupting the decorum of everyday life" ("Unspeakable Practices" 123-24). These facts further confirm her affiliation with traditional Shamanism. However, I would argue that Finley already possessed at birth the main quality required of a shaman: she is female, and therefore already defined by abjection, chaos, insanity, disfigurement, and lack of control. However, whereas the male shaman always has the benefit of "spirituality" on his side, much as male initiate in the cult of Dionysos emerges as a god, spirituality is an attribute denied women throughout the ages. While the male shaman appropriates the feminine in order to contain and control it, Woman herself, according to shamanism, is the thing being contained and controlled: she is chaotic, earthbound, biologically determined, susceptible to demonic possession, ruled by her biology and not by her own consciousness. Is Finley able to transcend that status? And more generally, is Shamanism a practice conducive to feminist aims?

Likewise, the poete maudit's appropriation of Woman's irrationality and base corporeality suggests something less than savory about the "power" that

has traditionally been attributed to Woman. The image of the disorderly woman as disruptive Other has, over the centuries, served as the very symbol of transgression and revolution. Describing the first of the French June Days of 1848, Victor Hugo highlights two young women, both “public whores,” who appear “beautiful, disheveled, terrifying,” at the crest of a barricade, hoisting their dresses above their waists and crying, “in that dreadful brothel language that one is always obliged to translate, ‘Cowards! Fire, if you dare, at the belly of a woman!’” (qtd. in Hertz 29). Neil Hertz observes, “What the revolution is said to be doing figuratively is precisely what—in a moment—each of the women will be doing literally, suddenly displaying monstrous and unknown forms to a horrified society” (29). In this instance, clearly, Woman is the emblem of revolutionary upheaval and chaos, and so she has been across cultures over the centuries; thus, it seems logical that she has been appropriated by men for transgressive purposes.

Clearly the image of the unruly woman supports the notion of “femaleness” as an ancient and powerful force. It is important to note that in some cultures women have, in fact, served as shamankas (female shamans) and medicine women, and women have participated meaningfully in religious rituals. However, in each case I have discussed, real women have possessed no power of their own. In “civilized” societies and tribal cultures alike, the social status of women has been low, and yet mystical powers have been attributed to them. “Femaleness,” generally, has been an archetype signifying the terrible powers of mystery, chaos, and abjection in Nature. In other words, women, historically,

have been assumed to possess powers dangerous to men and to civilization. The important thing is that just as man has harnessed electricity, deadly in its natural state, so have men appropriated female “power,” tapping its energy while keeping it safely under male control.

Angry Essentialism’s Re-appropriation of Female “Power”:

Patti Smith and “Punk” Aesthetics

In a sense, Angry Essentialism has re-appropriated this female “power” created and appropriated by men centuries ago. This re-appropriation can be seen most clearly in poet and punk rock star Patti Smith, a 1970s forerunner to the Angry Essentialists. Reynolds and Press describe her as “the genuine article, a shaman from the Amazon, tripping madly on hallucinogenic tree-bark. She gnashes and drools, chokes and gasps strangulated incantations” (358). In 1978, Paul Rambali wrote, “In the dark ages she’d have been burned at the stake. Now she’s a rock and roll witch” (qtd. In Reynolds and Press 281); Reynolds and Press comment, “The witch is a female equivalent of the Dionysian shaman that has served as a prototype for a lineage of male rock rebels (Jim Morrison/Hendrix/Nick Cave etc.). With her magical powers, her transcendence/transgression of social norms, her flight-y independence, the witch is a model for rock she-rebels” (281).

Given that thousands of women were executed as witches over several centuries for such “flight-y independence,” I want to emphasize the important fact that, in order to be valid, the archetypal transgressive female had first to be appropriated by men and transformed; its re-appropriation by women was the

next logical step. The only problem is that what was “reappropriated” was a masculine-patriarchal construction of femaleness. Patti Smith cites Rimbaud and William S. Burroughs as her primary influences (she dedicates her book Witt to them, for example), and Rimbaud's aesthetic is evident in her work. Following in the footsteps of Rimbaud, Smith declares herself a “rock n' roll nigger” and plans to transform shit into gold—decadence into art, ugliness into beauty. As Reynolds and Press point out, Smith looked for inspiration to a Romantic tradition composed exclusively of male artists who “believed they were in touch with the feminine within. From Rimbaud to Jim Morrison, these artists had set a premium on flow, flux, the chaos of the unconscious.” Thus, Smith felt that, “By identifying with these male avant-gardists and Romantics, [she had] found a way to reclaim women’s own wildness” (356).

Further, Smith's emergence as a performer occurred within the context of 1970s punk rock, and I believe punk has played an important role in producing *Angry Essentialism* as well. Larry McCaffery (following Dick Hebdige’s lead) traces the roots of punk to the Decadent and Dadaist tradition(s) of Whitman, Warhol, de Sade, Rimbaud, Genet, Burroughs, Bukowski, Bataille, and Artaud (220). McCaffery suggests that the punk aesthetic reveals “a perverse optimism: a hope in the potentially liberating effect of the perverse or shocking gesture.” Thus the “physical repulsiveness” of punk, the “spitting, vomiting, . . . chewing broken glass and then spitting bloody remarks at the audience,” allows “the artist and audience [to] achieve a brief moment of transcendence, where we are transported to a sacred place beyond dull rationality and blind adherence” (221).

McCaffery argues that Smith and other women "artists of hell" (specifically, Kathy Acker) have appropriated the marginal stance of the avant-garde and the violent rebellion of male-dominated seventies punk rock because women artists "need to become literary 'criminals,' break the literary laws and reinvent their own, because the established laws prevent women from presenting the reality of their lives" (218). Like Holly Hughes, Patti Smith, in order to position herself as autonomous and to represent herself as a desiring, sexual subject, rebelled against prevailing notions of femaleness and presented herself and her identity as "criminal." By the same token, Karen Finley refuses to represent her body as beautiful so that she may express some aspects of the reality of oppression in women's lives and open up a possibility for the transcendence of pain.

Susan Rubin Suleiman suggests that "the place of women, and of the avant-garde movements, has traditionally been situated away from the center, 'on the fringe,' in the margins." However, the relationship between women and the avant-garde is not as ideal as it might appear. As Suleiman points out, a crucial difference between the marginal positions of women and the avant-garde is that "avant-garde movements have willfully chosen their marginal position, the better to launch attacks at the center, whereas women have more often than not been relegated to the margins . . ." (14). Thus, rather than saying women artists appropriate aspects of the avant-garde, it might be more accurate to say they are reclaiming the territory they have been forced into—a territory appropriated and transformed by the male avant-garde. Unfortunately, however, as with most

colonized spaces, that territory has been shaped in the image of the colonizer and retains his marks.

Perhaps this is why the connection between feminism and the avant-garde has been minimized. As I discuss in my next chapter, feminist performance theory and criticism leaves unanalyzed the features of Angry Essentialist work derived from avant-garde theories and practices, and refuses to grant validity to any critical response reeking of the avant-garde. The hostility of feminism to the avant-garde is considerable, and Marianne DeKoven's article, "Male Signature, Female Aesthetics: The Gender Politics of Experimental Writing," speculates on the reasons why. DeKoven comments on the "substantive historical link" between the (male) avant-garde and feminine (feminine, feminist, female, women's) traditions (72), questioning the lack of mutual recognition between the two traditions. French feminist theorists such as Cixous and Kristeva acknowledged the association long ago, but their identification of avant-garde as feminine is based on essentialist conceptions of écriture féminine. Anglo-American feminists, on the other hand, being grounded more in materialist practices or assuming (as in cultural feminism) that feminine art must come from a female person, have refused any alliance with the avant-garde. Laura Mulvey occupies a middle stance, suggesting that feminist filmmakers have adapted avant-garde practices, yet she stops short of "theorizing a historical relationship between the two." DeKoven suggests that Mulvey wants to avoid subordinating "feminist film to a male-dominated avant-garde" (74). At the extreme end of the continuum, Mary Jacobus entirely rejects "an alliance of écriture féminine with

the avant-garde" because such an alliance would make women artists "the silenced woman out of whose mouth the male avant-garde speaks" (77).

DeKoven argues more persuasively that feminism has avoided subordinating itself to the male avant-garde tradition by (re)appropriating what is useful from the avant-garde, calling it the female aesthetic, rounding up women artists to form a tradition or canon, denying any connection to the avant-garde, and claiming that the female aesthetic is an entirely new practice (77). I believe much postmodern feminist performance theory takes this position and suffers for it. The concept of a woman artist bringing about transformation through abjection is an avant-garde standard that postmodern feminist theory holds especially dear. The problem with feminism claiming it is that it involves incorporating a whole lot of misogynist baggage and, since the avant-garde influence is not being acknowledged, the baggage goes unanalyzed.

Angry Essentialism recognizes the anti-patriarchal (if not feminist) potential of the avant-garde, and I believe it is true that avant-garde practices seek to shatter the oppressive patriarchal hierarchy in many ways. Still, avant-garde is not necessarily feminist. At the end of her article, DeKoven asks why avant-garde writing is so anti-patriarchal when it is "so excessively dominated by men," and wonders, "Why is it men who disrupt the hierarchical Sentence, in Barthes's formulation—who write *écriture féminine* . . . ?" (78). As I have been arguing, not only is the avant-garde's marginal position gendered female/feminine, but the female/feminine position appropriated by the avant-garde is entirely a male construction. The "female" or "feminine" is the dead

matter a male avant-gardist takes onto himself and transforms in order to disrupt and transcend gender binaries, power hierarchies, stable epistemologies. This formulation never questions the construction of women as dead matter requiring transformation. Thus, I must ask: since this avant-garde female/feminine position is, for the most part, a misogynist male construction of Female Nature, can it be anti-patriarchal in a feminist sense?

The male artist employing Shamanic, Dionysian, and poete maudit images and practices in his work has the benefit of “spirituality” on his side: he appropriates the feminine in order to control it for artistic or religious purposes. However, it doesn’t work the same way for the woman artist: she is Woman, and she can only be Woman—earthbound, ruled by her biology and not by her own consciousness. The fact is, the female “power” Angry Essentialism reclaims is a masculine construction of Woman: she is the unruly, abject, leaky woman as Woman who has functioned for 2,000 years as a symbol of chaos, darkness, mystery, and terror. Rather than being a symbol of power, she is “out of control”: she must be subjugated to her superiors (men), and her “powers” must be appropriated and contained by men. Given this historical construction of Woman, when a “real woman” (as opposed to a man appropriating the “female”) employs Dionysian/Shamanic/poete maudit ritual and practice in her work, she risks confirming the abject/excessive/out-of-control stereotype that already defines her. Even worse, rather than subverting dominant ideologies and shattering phallogocentric discourse as the male artist does, she may end up reinforcing the conception of the “feminine” as dark, angry, irrational, and so on.

Thus, even though Angry Essentialism is a powerful and exciting vision of power for women, I hope the potential dangers are quite evident. It is Angry Essentialism's lack of awareness of its history that concerns me most, because I believe the image of the Unruly Woman might be used constructively for feminist purposes if the women who invoke her fully understand her nature and history. Angry Essentialists understand well enough that, "Within the discourses of patriarchy, woman is defined as either nothing more than brute beast, something to be owned, broken, used as a breeder; or she is aestheticised as the passive, ethereal Madonna," as Carla Oleska observes; "She is the object of scorn and/or the object of distant observation. In either case she is assigned no power to speak, and she is an object . . ." (27). At its most basic level, the goal of Angry Essentialism is to liberate women from the constraints of the Madonna and breeder images and give women the power to speak. But before it can do this, Angry Essentialism must first recognize that the Unruly Woman is not in itself a means of defeating the equation of Woman with passive, nurturing Female Nature. The Nurturing Mother and Devouring Mother are mirror doubles, two sides of the same dualistic coin. Second, Angry Essentialism must recognize the Unruly Woman as a negative, male construction of femaleness as chaos, insanity, and death, and that, as such, she is something men have always sought to conquer, destroy, or at least transform so that she can be controlled. Finally and most importantly, while the Unruly Woman has traditionally represented a source of transformation and transcendence, Angry Essentialism needs to acknowledge that in this formulation, the Unruly woman is the compost heap out

of which beautiful (male) flowers grow. It is the responsibility of both the performers and feminist critics to bring this history to light.

What Happens When the Puked-Up Whore Speaks?

Arthur Rimbaud's visionary theory helps illuminate some of the obstacles Angry Essentialism must overcome. Specifically, Rimbaud's elevation of women depends upon the Madonna idea, and yet it directly contradicts Rimbaud's actual feelings about women. Starkie observes that Rimbaud's first sexual experience with a woman in 1871 caused him to turn "against the whole sex with disgust, and [he] vowed that he despised them all." Starkie continues, "Most of his poems at this time express a disgusted obsession with women, a morbid horror of all that is woman" (89). The problem, apparently, was that prior to this experience, "He [had] imagined that his love would ultimately be directed towards some woman, like those of whom he had read in the poets he admired . . . a woman with the sexlessness of a Greek statue" (87-88). But after he experienced the real thing, "All that is a woman's physical life seemed an insult and an outrage to man" (89).

This is precisely the problem Angry Essentialists needs to confront. Since the Enlightenment, the Madonna image of Woman has been the official ideal, enforced with much work on the part of men and women alike, but the abject, unruly, corporeal other Woman is always threatening to undo her; she is always on the verge of being "found out." In this regard, "My Little Lovelies," a poem Rimbaud includes in his lettre du voyant shortly before the female Prometheus passage, is particularly significant to Angry Essentialism. One stanza reads:

One night you made me a poet,
Ugly blond whore.
Get between my legs,
I'll whip you. (Rimbaud 73)

As it happens, Rimbaud's "muse" is not a "Madonna" but a whore (several of them, actually), whom he subjects to various degradations ("I puked up your greasy hair") and angrily rejects: "And it was for you hunks of meat / I wrote my rhymes! / My love was sticky self-deceit / And dirty games!" His "love" for the whore is the poison Rimbaud takes in and transforms: while the whore herself remains in abjection, Rimbaud becomes a poet. But if the abject woman represents the poison to be transformed by Rimbaud's program, what happens when the puked-upon whore speaks for herself?

The greatest potential of Angry Essentialism is that it can open up a space for the puked-upon whore to speak, but it is up to feminist critics to theorize this space and feminist performers to actualize it. We must learn the history of the abject, leaky, excessive woman and devise techniques for deconstructing and transforming her. Meanwhile, feminist artists and critics alike must more thoroughly examine the images of women they choose to hold up as positive or liberating, questioning whether these images represent the decadent state—the abject body—as "real," or whether the images reveal and mimic the constructs imposed upon women. The abject, leaky, excessive woman must be historicized and revealed as a cultural construct.