

Punkademics

The basement show in the ivory tower



Edited by Zack Furness

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ISBN 978-1-57027-229-5

<http://punkademics.com>

Interior design by Margaret Killjoy

Cover design by Haduhi Szukis

Cover images by Rubén Ortiz-Torres & Haduhi Szukis

Released by Minor Compositions

Wivenhoe / Brooklyn / Port Watson

Minor Compositions is a series of interventions & provocations drawing from autonomous politics, avant-garde aesthetics, and the revolutions of everyday life.

Minor Compositions is an imprint of Autonomedia

www.minorcompositions.info | minorcompositions@gmail.com

Distributed by Autonomedia

PO Box 568 Williamsburgh Station

Brooklyn, NY 11211

www.autonomedia.org

info@autonomedia.org

MARIA ELENA BUSZEK

HER LIFE WAS SAVED BY ROCK AND ROLL: TOWARD A FEMINIST PUNK ETHIC/ AESTHETIC

MY WORK TO date as scholar of contemporary art has largely revolved around attempts to historicize feminist uses of pop culture toward political ends – and the trouble with which these efforts have consistently been met, in relation to generational, intellectual, and class issues. From Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Alice Paul to Gloria Steinem to *BUST* magazine, when young feminists have held up their pop-cultural savvy as an expressive or recruiting tool for their era, they have also had to wait at least a generation for this approach to be considered with any seriousness by established thinkers both within and outside of the feminist movement. (At which point, inevitably, the media begins salivating over the impending catfights they might exploit between this generation of leaders and the inevitably-painted overly-optimistic, over-sexed, under-appreciative behavior of the generation coming up behind them.) So, what begins – with popular imagery, music, fashions, languages, or media employed toward reaching out to new audiences – as a gesture of inclusion becomes divisive. The persistence of this phenomenon, I argue, reveals the short-term, or at the very least selective, memory of feminist history.

But, the problem is a much bigger one in my field. Too frequently feminism is viewed in my particular discipline of art history as an *interpretive tool* rather than an *activist movement*. And art historians, regardless of age, specialization, or political engagement, are generally a library-dwelling species: so much so that those who write about contemporary art are often viewed by our colleagues with suspicion for what

is perceived as the insufficiently “scholarly,” and often social quality of our field. I work on – and thus research, write about, and deign speak to...even, perhaps, form friendships with – living artists responding to a living, constantly evolving culture. Because this culture is engaged in a dialogue with the popular as well as scholarly sources these artists reference means that critics of contemporary art must be as willing to track their artists’ references to the street as to the studio, where these references are not as neatly confined and, thus, classified. Art historians’ frequent mistrust of contemporary art in general, and pop culture in particular also speaks more broadly to the academy’s fear of the personal, the phenomenological, the physical as somehow existing in opposition to the objective, the empirical, the intellectual. Time and again, I am blindsided by the responses of my colleagues for whom the pop-cultural influences I discuss alongside contemporary feminist art – many times, work with which they are familiar – are viewed as a shocking discovery or questionable diversion.

Such responses are disheartening, if only because it is in the realm of pop culture that one arguably finds the most visible, vibrant, and persuasive reflections of emerging feminist art today. Contemporary independent music in particular is loaded with examples of out-and-proud feminist artists, most of whom actually have direct ties to the international art world, such as Le Tigre, Tracy + The Plastics, and Peaches. All of these artists create cutting-edge music inspired by punk, metal, and hip-hop, and do so with overtly feminist lyrics and consciousness – but fly almost completely under the radar of feminist art criticism, regardless of the fact that these same women have been included in exhibitions at such highly visible venues as Deitch Projects, the Whitney Biennial, and the Venice Biennale. Yet arts professionals whose attention to the media rarely strays from established, mainstream print magazines, newspapers and academic journals are under the mistaken impression that young women championing feminist issues and demonstrating a deep familiarity with feminist history do not exist, because they are rarely reported upon, much less given opportunities to speak for themselves – or when given the chance (from the 1998 *Time* magazine cover on “Ally McBeal feminism” to Susan Faludi’s November 2010 *Harper’s* cover story on young women’s “ritual matricide” of feminist mentors), young women are overwhelmingly and sensationistically portrayed as rejecting feminism.¹

This oversight leads us to the critical perception of not just young women, but youth itself by the academic institutions from which much feminist art scholarship is generated. Ever since the very notion of a “popular culture” emerged with Industrial Revolution technologies and

economies, the perception has been that pop culture, and especially popular music, is a young person's game. And, of course, youth culture has consistently been perceived, like youth itself, as both temporary and oversexed: so completely and unabashedly pandering to its audience's intemperate pursuit of pleasure that even the most detached and objective scholar risks becoming personally implicated in the orgy. Unless it is firmly embedded in a study of the past (and, better still, used solely to illuminate one's understanding of an "important" historical painting, sculpture, or print by a blue-chip artist), popular culture is kept at arm's length for fear of what it reflects upon the scholar who dares analyze it.

Which brings us to the class issues surrounding the discipline of art history, from which most scholars come. For decades now, art scholars, curators, and critics alike have generally been expected to pursue or possess a PhD, of late a degree only valuable when derived from one of about a dozen, mostly private institutions valorized by art history programs around the globe (themselves, increasingly populated solely by faculty from these same dozen institutions). And – consciously or unconsciously – art criticism and scholarship seems to increasingly share the academy's obsession with the (blue) bloodlines of these exclusive institutions. Indeed, universities and museums alike still often rely upon the assumption that its art historians will have the means to supplement low salaries or unpaid internships with independent wealth. Even when engaged with issues of class (through Marxist, postcolonial and, yes, feminist methodologies), art history has yet to meaningfully confront the elitism at the very foundation of the discipline's history, methods, and professional practices.² And so, the idea of studying popular culture – which, for many populations throughout the world represents "culture," period – remains, like the working class and underprivileged populations to whom it is directed, largely outside of the purview of art-historical inquiry.

Personally? I think that art history – and especially feminist art history – needs its own Lester Bangs.

I spent the first several months of my job at the used record store where I worked during my high school and undergraduate studies, engaged in the thankless task of sorting and pricing a solid, floor-to-ceiling-full room of music magazines that had piled up over the course of nearly two decades. It was here, a lone girl in the dusty stacks of Dirt Cheap Records (frankly, doing more reading than working), that I discovered Bangs' writing. From his earliest reviews in *Rolling Stone* and *Creem* in the late 1960s until his death from an accidental overdose in 1982, Bangs wrote some of the twentieth century's most informed and innovative criticism of popular music. Bangs gleefully skipped from rock history

(such as his persuasive efforts to recuperate novelty acts like The Count Five and the Mysterians) to defenses of both the avant-garde (Kraftwerk and The Clash) and guilty pleasures (in particular, the Swedish pop of ABBA), to political commentary (his “White Noise Supremacists” arguably remains the punk era’s most responsible insider analysis of the scene’s sexism and racism), in a style that never buried the pleasure at the root of his partisan positions – positions that constantly shifted as the years went on. He unapologetically acknowledged and analyzed his revisions in a manner that readers granted him because of the deeply personal place from which all his criticism came.³

Reading Bangs’ work for the first time, still in my teens, I was surprised to find parallels between his simultaneously joyful, critical, and insistently embodied approach to pop culture and my own. Having grown up in Midwestern communities where the closest thing to a “library” in my neighborhood was my musician father’s enormous record collection, I began collecting records myself at around age 9 and learned to bond with my father by instigating what eventually became deep and frequently contentious debates about music history. The stacks in which I dug, shopped, and eventually worked were my first education in the “archive,” where I learned and loved the same sort of information safaris that I later applied to my earliest research in art history. Coming up in this informal but informed, as well as overwhelmingly male-dominated culture of record collecting also nurtured my feminism, as I grew up well aware of the phenomenon whereby I needed to be twice as demonstrably knowledgeable as my male counterparts to be considered half as smart. My burgeoning feminist voice found inspiration in Bangs’ unique, self-aware style; as his critical practice developed, he grew quicker to point out the frequency with which the “ironic embrace of the totems of bigotry crosses over into the real poison” in the same pop culture that simultaneously fueled and frustrated us both. Bangs offered that the growing sense of responsibility that emerged in his later music criticism came about “not because you want to think rock and roll can save the world but because since rock and roll is bound to stay in your life you would hope to see it reach some point where it might not add to the cruelty and exploitation already in the world.”⁴

But, this was where Lester and I differed: I believed, and still believe, that rock and roll *can* change the world. It certainly changed mine.

My own path to becoming a feminist, art historian, and educator was forged not by my formal education, but from my immersion in the popular culture with which I grew up – in the first wave of hip-hop, the second wave of punk, and the third wave of feminism that emerged in

the tumultuous 1980s – amid the postmodern theory, AIDS crisis, “Sex Wars” and, most importantly, voices of queer activists and feminists of color that would name these “new waves” of popular and protest culture. While my mother’s generation may have looked to heroic feminist literary predecessors like Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, and activist contemporaries from Gloria Steinem to Angela Davis for inspiration, my generation enjoyed the luxury of looking to models a little more earth-bound and a lot more diverse, fashioning themselves after the models that best resembled young women’s cursory, and highly individualized ideas about the women’s movement: Poly Styrene, Lydia Lunch, Pat Benatar, Grace Jones, Siouxsie Sioux, Joan Jett.⁵ I was able to take its teachings for granted not just in the literature and legislation for which the movement fought, but in unsanctioned and even critical reflections of feminism in youth culture.

As cultural historians Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley have argued, unlike previous generations, for whom there had always been an “outside world” that those inside the feminist movement were invested in challenging and infiltrating, those growing up in its third wave “never had a clear sense of, or investment in, the idea of an ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ of feminism:” feminism could be, and often was, just about everywhere.⁶ This constellation of pop-culture icons would later merge with the culture of our feminist predecessors in what would become the most visible organized movement of the third wave, Riot Grrrl. This international movement first coalesced on the high school and college campuses of the United States in the late 1980s at a point when feminist thought – both overtly and covertly – was becoming a regular part of most students’ curricula. Riot Grrrl was the brainchild of young women who, like me, strove to pair up and analyze their twin interests in pop culture and feminist thought in ways that the culture surrounding each often didn’t realize was possible.⁷

Riot Grrrl activists joined veteran feminists in organizing reproductive-rights marches, volunteering at Planned Parenthood and rape-crisis centers, and creating alternative art and performance spaces, but they also argued for the activist potential of founding their own bands, ‘zines, record labels, festivals, and eventually websites to spread the word of this generation’s continued resistance to constraining gender expectations – expectations that many young women often argued had been as narrowly defined by feminist predecessors as their sexist antagonists. They also spoke directly to the need for diversity in the movement, incorporating an awareness of feminism’s historical heterosexism, classism, and white privilege into its discourse and action, and insisting that male

and genderqueer feminists had roles in the movement alongside biological women.

In the twenty years since the birth of Riot Grrrl, its growth on many different levels is apparent in the evolving work of movement leaders like Kathleen Hanna: where her pioneering band Bikini Kill analyzed feminist issues through songs dedicated to the intimate, personal details of girls' lives in hard-driving punk singles and Xeroxed and stapled 'zines, today her scope and media have broadened; and her current band Le Tigre communicates through its website, which includes links to Judy Chicago's and Laurie Anderson's homepages, sites offering support for transgender activism and domestic violence victims, and an entire section dedicated to how you can make, record, and distribute your own music using inexpensive or free gear, and songs like the band's instant-dance-classic "Hot Topic" name-check figures from Modernist poet Gertrude Stein to transgender artist Vaginal Davis, to a sampled vintage-R&B backbeat, accompanied online and in live performances by a similarly-sampled, digital-collage video by artist Wynne Greenwood.

Greenwood's own, one-woman-band Tracy + the Plastics is another excellent example of Riot Grrrl's ongoing influence and evolution in the contemporary art world. Greenwood similarly uses popular music as a vehicle for self-expression and community-building, and treats the growing accessibility of digital media as an important evolution in feminism – as much for how these media are shifting young peoples' perceptions of reality as their ability to communicate. Greenwood argues that new media like digital recording and technological developments like Web 2.0 encourage "deliberate edits to reconstruct an empowered representation of reality. One that not only allows for but demands inquiry, challenge, talk-back, yelling, waiting, and joyful understanding between the 'viewing' individual and at least one other person, possibly a lot more, and maybe even the media makers."⁸ The "members" of Tracy + the Plastics – slightly bossy front woman Tracy, contentious keyboardist Nikki, and spaced-out percussionist Cola, who "play all the instruments and sing" on the band's albums – appear in live performances as Greenwood performing as Tracy onstage, who interacts with Nikki and Cola as pre-recorded video projections.

Greenwood has written of the band's underlying goal: "A Tracy and the Plastics performance attempts to destroy the hierarchical dynamics of mass media's say/see spaces by placing as much importance on the video images (the plastics) as the live performer (tracy)."⁹ And, between the awkward, silence-laden on-stage "banter" of Greenwood in her various permutations and the pointedly open stage set-up, wherein

the performance occupies a space that bleeds out into the seating, this “hierarchy-destroying” approach extends to artist-audience dynamics as the viewers are similarly encouraged to blur the line between who is there to “say” and who is there to “see.” As Greenwood explained at a recent performance at The Kitchen in New York, Tracy + the Plastics explore feminism through an exploration of inhabited space, asking: “What does it mean for me, a feminist lesbian artist, to take up room?”¹⁰ At this three-night engagement, “the band” performed in an elaborate living-room setting (right down to the beige pile carpeting ubiquitous in homes built or remodeled in the 1980s or ‘90s) that pointedly blurred the distinctions between the audience, performer/s, and projected imagery.

More recently, Greenwood has collaborated with the LTTR collective, through which she has furthered her experiments with the line between artist and audience, self and community. Originally founded as “Lesbians To The Rescue” in 2001 – a collaborative print and web ‘zine of writing, artwork, and new media – the group has since annually changed its acronym (to such evocative names as “Lacan Teaches to Repeat,” “Let’s Take the Role,” “Listen Translate Translate Record”) and evolved into a sprawling collective of individual contributors and curators putting together installations, exhibitions, screenings, protests, music, and workshops, (most recently, alongside the traveling blockbuster exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, and in the work of several individual members included in the current Whitney Biennial).¹¹ Greenwood has articulated the appeal of the collective (saying): “LTTR can be seen as a body, a person, an ‘individual’ and expresses the idea that our community can stand next to us, the individual, the one person,” which I hope to relate to the sensibility that LTTR co-founder, artist and curator Emily Roysdon recently coined “ecstatic resistance.”¹² Art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson – the lone scholarly voice who has approached the group’s work – has approvingly defined LTTR’s political practice as “critical promiscuity” generating unexpected connections across genres and media as well as the generational, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities of the artists who contribute them.¹³

While Greenwood and LTTR explore the feminist possibilities of critical promiscuity, Peaches...well, I suppose she’s just plain exploring the feminist possibilities of promiscuity. While Peaches is a legend in the electronic music scene, members of the contemporary art community may recognize Peaches from Sophie Calle’s sprawling installation at the 2007 Venice Biennale’s French Pavilion, *Take Care of Yourself*. In this powerful, hilarious piece Calle turns a statement of rejection – a break-up e-mail from a long-term boyfriend – into a statement of affirmation, using 107 other

women's voices and experience to re-read, reinterpret, and recover from the message. It seemed significant to me that Peaches was chosen by Calle as the last reader/interpreter of the letter considering the ecstatic, if silly sexuality of Peaches' music. Peaches is the final woman in Calle's *Take Care of Yourself* with a song she composed and sings using fragments of the letter's text. Unlike the largely vindictive or dismissive readings of the rest of the participants – proof-readers, editors, artists, actresses, psychoanalysts, schoolgirls, a judge, a clown, a clairvoyant – Peaches' confident, abstract, musical take ends on an elliptical, but optimistic, even edifying note, with an (utterly transformed) phrase from the email: "I will always love..."¹⁴

Born Merrill Nisker in North York, Canada, after a decade in the Toronto lesbian-folk scene and teaching preschool-aged children music and theater, Peaches invented her outrageous on-stage persona – named after one of the "Four Women" in Nina Simone's haunting song of the same name – and began collaborating with (the now, chart-making) singer-songwriter Feist, composing music and experimenting with hip-hop beats toward what would eventually become her groundbreaking album *The Teaches of Peaches* in 2000 – a showcase for Peaches' wild musical and performative mash-up: comedic, over-the-top-sexual braggadocio in the tradition of R&B diva Millie Jackson; tinny, old-school hip-hop beats and rhymes; and fuzzy, glam-rock riffs and get-ups, all (in her words) "made, mixed, and mutilated" by this androgynous former folkie one reporter described as "aggressively unpretty."¹⁵

What could have been a novelty act, however, evolved over Peaches' next several albums, where the gender-bending, queer sensibility that pervaded her first evolved into a more clearly feminist one – what began as foul-mouthed effort to freak out the squares seemed to take on more explicit political connotations in subsequent albums, videos, and performances, and in venues such as the Toronto Biennial and ArtBasel Miami as well as rock clubs. Acting out the most spectacular, shock-rock clichés – metallic outfits with matching platforms, straddling guitar necks with attendant crotch thrusts, "on the left/on the right" sing-a-longs – Peaches simultaneously embraces the stupid fun of a rock show and dismantles the notion that only straight men could pull it off admirably. Indeed, her metal-inspired song and video for "Boys Wanna Be Her," sampling AC/DC's anthemic "Dirty Deeds," addresses the subject head-on. Peaches has spoken of what inspired the piece in an interview (saying): "I was thinking how men seem to find it really difficult to look at a powerful woman and say, 'Wow! I wish I was you.' The inspiration might have been [...] any of those songs where it's like 'The boy comes to town! Lock up your daughters!' I mean, why is it a guy who gets to play the Antichrist?"¹⁶

So, my question is: where in art scholarship has there been room for the feminist potential of the Antichrist? Or, at least the shock-rockers? Calle's brilliant, surprising use of Peaches as the transcendent end to the journey of *Take Care of Yourself* seems to happily suggest a place at the table. But, queer activist, filmmaker and critic Bruce LaBruce is the only arts writer to date to tackle the subject, writing: "In pop cultural terms, the intelligent, quirky, female icons of the '70s (Karen Black, Sissy Spacek, and, well, for better or for worse, Helen Reddy), with normal bodies and obvious flaws, have been replaced by the likes of Britney Spears, Jessica Simpson and Pamela Anderson, the shaved and plucked, air-brushed, plastic blow-up doll triumvirate that we know and hate today. Peaches takes up where the kind of militant, subversive, and sexy feminism of the '70s left off."¹⁷

But, really? Helen Reddy? Well, for better or for worse...Reddy's feminist-lite anthem "I am Woman" surely helped more women in the 1970s consider the acceptability of feminism in the wake of the popular backlash against the second wave than purchased the works of Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millet, and Robin Morgan combined in that same decade. But, in a decade that *also* introduced the world to the *truly* "militant, subversive, and sexy feminism" of Lydia Lunch, Cosey Fanni Tutti, Martha Wilson and DISBAND, and Linder Sterling – just to name a few women directly tapped into both the music and art worlds of that very decade – LaBruce's slight demonstrates the limited scope of even the best-intentioned art criticism, brought about in large part because of the narrow histories and subtle prejudices by which scholars so frequently confine themselves, and which my next book will attempt to redress.

How many members of the feminist community know about the rock criticism of artist Lorraine O'Grady, director Mary Harron, or journalist and Redstockings co-founder Ellen Willis? Willis wrote deliciously of her own juxtaposition of rock and feminist rebellion in the 1960s and '70s, in a way that perpetually inspires me: "Music that boldly and aggressively laid out what the singer wanted, loved, hated – as good rock'n'roll did – challenged me to do the same, and so even when the content was anti-woman, antisexual, in a sense antihuman, the form encouraged my struggle for liberation."¹⁸ It is striking to me that the album that led Willis to this revelation in her essay "Beginning to See the Light" was the Sex Pistols' album *God Save the Queen*, which she had fought hard not to like – for the same racism, sexism, and fascist imagery that riled Bangs – even as she ultimately submitted to what she called the "extremity of its disgust" as both a catalyst to and a strategy for action.¹⁹

That feminism expresses itself these days perhaps most tangibly on the dance floor seems relevant to me as a feminist art historian, as it is a profound reflection of what it means for feminist thought to have evolved into a generation of emerging artists without “the idea of an ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ of feminism.” And such popular expressions of feminism also reiterate the pressing need for feminist scholars to address the power of pleasure, joy, and embodiment as activist strategies. A politics of pleasure has emerged in the work of feminist artists choosing to engage with popular culture – one that, more than ever, deserves a feminist art criticism to recognize, broadcast, and analyze its goals. And this work, these women deserve feminist scholars willing to both historicize these strategies and use them as a model for their own. Not just because contemporary feminist interventions in popular music and performance are an education in the ever-evolving nature of the women’s movement, but because they also resemble those, largely unsung, by predecessors like Willis in the second wave of the women’s movement. I certainly have Helen Reddy in my record collection – but wonder how many others who do *also* own CDs by Le Tigre or Peaches...not to mention what thrilling new forms feminist discourse might take if this was the case.

NOTES

- 1 I address the problem and history of such media portrayals extensively in Maria Elena Buszak, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 325-364.
- 2 While the subject of classism in the discipline of art history is one far too complex, contentious, and undocumented to possibly be given its due here, I would guide readers to the succinct, excellent analysis of the problem of elitism in the professional practices of art and academic institutions in David Graeber, “Army of Altruists: On the alienated right to do good,” *Harper’s Magazine*, January, 2007, pp. 31-38.
- 3 Much of Bangs’ writing remains in print, available in anthologies such as (Ed.) Greil Marcus, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2001); and (Ed.) John Morthland, *Main Lines, Blood Feasts, and Bad Taste: A Lester Bangs Reader* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003). Many thanks to Raphael Rubinstein, whose visit to the Kansas City Art Institute campus in 2005 instigated a conversation on the subject of Bangs that I relish the opportunity to follow through upon here.
- 4 Lester Bangs, “The White Noise Supremacists,” *Village Voice*, December 17, 1979, reprinted in *Psychotic Reactions*, pp. 275 and 282.
- 5 For a more detailed account of my misspent youth, see Maria Elena

- Buszek, "Oh! Dogma (Up Yours!):' Surfing the Third Wave," *thirdspace: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Culture*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (July 2001). Online at <http://www.thirdspace.ca/articles/buszek.htm>
- 6 Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley, "The Meanings of Popular Feminism," in (Eds.) Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley, *Feminism in Popular Culture* (London: Berg, 2006), 2.
- 7 I discuss the history of feminism's third wave from an art historical perspective in chapters 7 and 8 of my book *Pin-Up Grrrls*, which is itself indebted to Astrid Henry's excellent, book-length study of the subject from a literary and activist position, *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 2004).
- 8 Tracy + The Plastics, "TRACY by Wynne," from the liner notes to *Culture for Pigeon* (Troubleman Unlimited, 2004), CD.
- 9 Tracy + the Plastics, liner notes to *Forever Sucks EP* (Chainsaw Records, 2002), CD.
- 10 Gallery materials quoted in Leigh Anne Miller, "Tracy + The Plastics with Fawn Krieger at The Kitchen (New York), *Art in America*, Vol. 93, No. 6 (2005): 180.
- 11 See <http://www.ltrr.org>.
- 12 Greenwood quoted in Amy Mackie, "Hot Topic Curatorial Statement" (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Bard College, 2006). Online at <http://www.bard.edu/ccs/exhibitions/student/2006/theses/hottopic/>. Also see Emily Roysdon, "Ecstatic Resistance," (2009). Online at <http://www.emilyroysdon.com/index.php?/hidden-text/er-text/>
- 13 Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Repetition and Difference," *Artforum*, Vol. 44, no. 10 (2006): 109.
- 14 See the documentation and films from this piece in the book/DVDs from Sophie Calle, *Take Care of Yourself* (Arles, FR: Actes Sud, 2007).
- 15 Credit line derived from *The Teaches of Peaches* (Kitty, Yo Records, 2000); Caroline Sullivan, "Filthy and Fury: For Peaches, the famously X-rated rapper, the personal just got political," *The Guardian*, July 24, 2006, p. 23.
- 16 James McNair, "A Decidedly Fruity Lady: Peaches dresses like a porn superhero and has a lot to say about gender politics," *The Independent (London)*, July 21, 2006, p. 15.
- 17 Bruce LaBruce, "Peaches: Word to the Fatherfucker," *C:International Contemporary Art*, March 22, 2004, pp. 16-18.
- 18 Ellen Willis, *Beginning to See the Light: Sex, Hope, and Rock and Roll* (New York: Knopf, 1981), p. 99.
- 19 Willis, *Beginning to See The Light*, p. 99.

