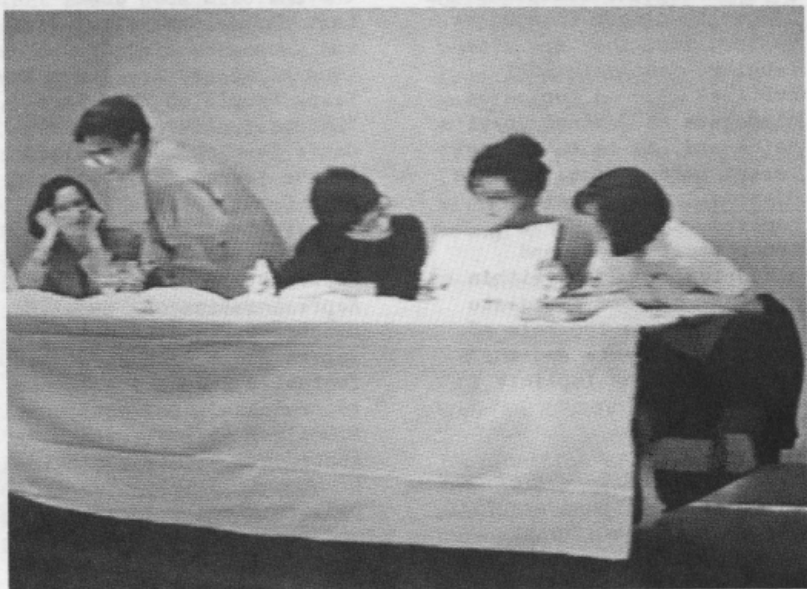


Academia in the Alps: In Search of the Swiss Mis(s), 1988



The five women of the New York-based performance group, The V-Girls, create humorous critiques of academic discourse. Their performances take the form of academic panels involving satirical analyses of works of art and literature. The various "papers" presented by the V-Girls draw freely, and sometimes chaotically, from a variety of contemporary methodologies, including psychoanalysis, feminism, and deconstruction. In subject matter, too, they are wide-ranging, casting a mock-critical gaze on topics as disparate as Johanna Spyri's Heidi and, as in their most recent performance, Manet's Olympia. The V-Girls, however, subsume these theoretical models and historical subjects within a critique of more immediate issues such as the role of women in academia and the power relations implicit in the transmission of knowledge.

The comic elusiveness of their presentations suggests the predicament of women who have been denied a position from which to speak within a phallogocentric language and society. Rather than demanding equal power, the V-Girls question the very nature of the power structures that underlie our institutions of learning. Wary of assuming the relation of mastery common to most pedagogy, the V-Girls disperse the authority of their position as "panel members" by introducing a spirit of play. In the course of their presentations, the V-Girls utilize various dramatic devices, including thematic props, choreographed gestures, and lapses into personal narrative. This

strategy breaks up the unitary and objective form of their "critical" discourse while also pointing to the element of theater and personal display inherent in any academic presentation.

In the panel presented for MATRIX, The Question of Manet's "Olympia": Posed and Skirted, the V-Girls read papers including "Manet's Olympia: The Beginning of the End of a Good Idea," "The Last Supper, the First Wine and Cheese Opening," "The Case of Laura: Are There Any Black People on This Panel?," "Le Boeuf, l'Oeuf and Pont Neuf: Paucity and Plenitude in the French Still Life," "The Female Body: My Mommy from 1928 to the Present," and "The Representation of Representation and the Representation of Representation." These papers range from serious, factually grounded analyses to truncated non sequiturs sometimes no longer than a sentence. Within a single presentation multiple positions may be expressed, underscoring the V-Girls' self-questioning attitude. On occasion the audience is addressed directly by the panelists; for example, the proceedings are interrupted at one point when the audience is asked to participate in a surprise "Visual Literacy Test" and at another point by a paranoid outburst by one of the panelists. Such devices suggest an ironic comment on the common frame-breaking and participatory strategies of avant-garde theater and performance.

Although virtually unique in its particular form, the V-Girls' performances are related to other contemporary art that comments critically

on social, cultural, or economic institutions from within, rather than from an external, objective position. Like the work of artists such as Barbara Kruger, Dennis Adams, and Jeff Koons, the V-Girls' irreverent and subversive performances are intentionally complicit with the very institutions they call into question. By performing in academic settings, the V-Girls affirm that these settings remain worthy, if problematic, arenas for the debate and development of ideas.

Martha Baer, "member of the faculty," received a B.A. from Barnard College, Columbia University, and an M.A. from The City College, City University of New York. Her fiction has been published in Between C + D, Fiction, and New Observations.

Jessica Chalmers, "affiliate," holds a B.A. from Barnard College, Columbia University. Her plays and stories have been presented at The Newfoundland Theater, Dixon Place Theater, and Poets House in New York City.

Erin Cramer, "visiting member," attended the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program and received a B.A. from Barnard College, Columbia University. She has written, performed in, and directed plays presented at La Ma Ma, etc., Yale Cabaret, BACA, Four Walls Gallery, and St. Mark's Poetry Project in New York City.

Andrea Fraser, "member of the board," studied at the School of Visual Arts, Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, and New York University. She has written

and appeared in performances at Barnard College, Artists Space, and The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City. Her writing has been published in Artpaper, New Observations, Afterimage, and Art in America.

Marianne Weems, "member," attended Reed College, Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, and received a B.A. from Barnard College, Columbia University. She is currently dramaturge with The Wooster Group and producer/director of the Merry Pit Bull Theater.

All members of the V-Girls live in New York City and all, they wish to report, are brunette.

Lawrence Rinder

Work in MATRIX:

The Question of Manet's "Olympia": Posed and Skirted, 1989, performed February 16, 1989, at the San Francisco Hilton in conjunction with the annual meeting of the College Art Association; and February 17, 1989, at the University Art Museum in conjunction with the Visiting Artists Lecture Series of the University of California at Berkeley.

Performances:

Four Walls Gallery, Hoboken,
NJ, Sex and Your Holiday
Season '87; Columbia
University, NYC, University
of Massachusetts at Amherst,
Deutsches Haus at New York
University, NYC, Independent
Study Program of the Whitney
Museum of American Art, NYC,
Academia in the Alps: In
Search of the Swiss Mis(s)
'88; California Institute of
the Arts, Valencia, CA, The
Question of Manet's
"Olympia": Posed and Skirted
'89.

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