

Uncanny Signs of History: The Unstable Subject

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with artwork by SUSAN EVE JAHODA

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As I was reading the catalogue of the exhibition *This Is My Body, This Is My Blood*, (Hynes, Jahoda, and Stevens 1992, 1) that accompanied the conference "Marxism in the New World Order: Crises and Possibilities" (November, 1992), the editors' words called out eloquently and touched me:

The continuing crises of the body have their metaphoric and real expressions in the sexual division of labor. . . . The body has been part of a personal sphere associated with women who care intimately for the bodies of their family members. This caring labor is complex. It is intertwined, among other things, with love and the constructions of all that is personal and private. The labor involved in and the knowledge concerned with maintaining human bodies are the most unrecognized and unappreciated aspects of female domestic labor. As Marxists we recognize that the crisis of the body often manifests itself as a denial of the body and the labor that maintains it, thus keeping us blind to the domain of household exploitation. This denial enables cheap sentimentality to substitute for the long overdue celebration of the profound human learning achieved by women as they have confronted their own and other's bodies inside and outside the household.

The editors' promising proclamation ushers in much more, however, than a "long overdue celebration." Their acknowledgment of women's silent labor—a labor that is by no means naturally restricted to women

or the home—implies a radical shift in a Marxist conception of history. It recognizes that the assigning of "proper places" is not a neutral activity, but a process deeply embedded in political, economic, and psychic patriarchal structures. We are working here on an ideological register vastly removed from Kaplan's (1992) representation of Marx as a man who forgot his mother and, by implication, a Marxism that blithely ignores and categorizes women's work.¹ The editors' move to recognize women's intimate spheres both as loving places and as sites where violence often occurs and political redress is justified, has long been ushered in by the variously inflected and often conflicting aspects of feminist thinking. In the crucial thinking that informed *This Is My Body, This Is My Blood*, the metaphor and the reality of the wounded body is explicit. Catalogue essayist Robert Blake writes that the artists' transgression of silence "charts wounds, differences, openings, breaks, refusals, recollections, collective and individual sites of resistance" (Hynes et al. 1992, 19).

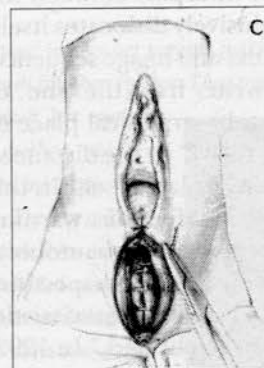
Tantamount to any breach with history and its attendant legal binds is a feminist understanding of the political microlevel of the private that is not restricted to women's lives alone. In this sense, a reconfigured Marxist approach to the body recognizes the monumental task of redressing the debilitating effects caused by whitewashing the embedded connections between the intimate and the public spheres. Feminist psychotherapist Laura S. Brown proposes a revolutionary way of rethinking the silenced everyday realm and its intersection with history by upturning the conventional definition of trauma. Defined by the American Psychiatric Association as "an event that is outside the range of human experience" (Brown 1991, 121), trauma has been used as a recourse to represent clients who encounter damage in wars or natural disasters. Brown (1991, 121) points out that victims of such events are rarely blamed for what befalls them. She adds, "Nor do those who wage war or go down to the sea in ships that sink come under the sort of scrutiny we find given to battered women, or survivors of rape or incest." Brown recounts the familiar litany in the courts in which legal defendants working against her clients perversely frame the definition of trauma in order to argue that rape and incest occur too frequently and are thus too normal to be considered "outside the range of human experience." She (1991, 122 and 132) directs challenges to her own profession in an effort to redirect the discourse and its damaging effects:

We must ask questions about how we have understood that which constitutes a traumatic event, and how some experiences have been excluded and turned inward upon their victims. . . . Do we, as did Freud a century ago, betray the truth of what we know of the immediacy and frequency of traumatic events in daily life; or do we follow the radical potential of psycho-

analysis which opened the doors to the unconscious and the irrational, to the next stage in which we re-tell the lost truths of pain among us?

Susan Eve Jahoda's contribution to *This Is My Body, This Is My Blood*, the video installation *The Unstable Subject*, participates fiercely and with subdued passion in the task of telling pain through the infinite dislodgements of her own identity formation under the oppressive family shadow of Holocaust traces. Her labors are indeed doubled. Doubled silences. Riddled mandates. To represent, to give form to, to give voice to, to hear and obscure an other's voice. Speaking and writing history are actions at the core of a feminist perspective on representation. Between the near-impossibility of telling and the trauma to remember, to ritualize, and to politicize, there are approaches. There must be.

In the space we have here I want to consider how *The Unstable Subject* negotiates the dilemmas of representing its subject matter through Jahoda's feminist autobiographical strategy and the interrelated status of representation itself in the work. The piece is based on nine "diaristic" texts, as the artist describes them, of which three are reproduced here. For me, these texts create an open-ended relay between document, fiction, and the uncanny precision of dream. They are the organizing matrix of the videotape, which is played on three monitors that can be viewed simultaneously. In the installation setting, the central monitor sits on a desk that is covered with an intricately embroidered tablecloth and a hospital sheet. The desk is further embellished with a tea set and papers that document various kinds of women's diseases. Two of the four filing cabinets in the installation double as pedestals for the other two monitors. The file drawers are labeled with designations such as Business Management and Industry, Concentration Camps and Domestic Economy, Needle Trades, Eating Disorders, and Fashion. Knitting needles, manila folders, dollhouse furniture, and family snapshots spill out of the drawers. The installation pointedly simulates a space that is at once bureaucratic, clinical, and domestic in order to analyze the social construct of false and debilitating categorizations. The videotape imagery insinuates the ways that mergings between the political and the intimate spheres always occur in the subtexts of women's lives. It highlights a woman carrying out familiar chores in the aura of ghostly unfamiliarity. Appearing in all the sequences, this woman prepares a cake, rips out the seams of a child's dress, pours milk into a stainless steel bowl, and watches herself in a mirror surgically applying makeup to one eye. These somber and eloquent sequences approach a state of being that could gingerly be called the real, especially in their juxtaposition with industrial advertising film clips from the 1950s to the 1980s that cruelly play on stereotypes of women's domestic roles.



I feel ill. My nerves are raw and I have pains in my groin. I sit with my head down. The shadows in the room are creating faces, intestines and petals. She is staring at me. An image on the wall. Pain(t)ed face—yellow, green, pink flesh.

I am aging. My body is changing shape. I crawl into myself, into my mother. If only I could sever the root. Starve the egg. Murder the connection.

Imago.

I saw my newly born daughter encased in a tall, transparent body. Half female. Half male.

She wandered out of her room, across the hallway and disappeared. I breathed a sigh of relief. A sharp pain traversed my chest. My breasts filled with salt water. I expressed it into a watering can. I fed it to a dying jade plant in the living room. My daughter re-appeared and asked me for some milk. I explained that I



to help you transform a tense, irritable, depressed patient into a woman who is receptive to your counsel and adjusted to her environment

didn't have any. I said it had turned to blood. I suggested she ask her father. I said he might be able to produce some.

We visited my parents last week. As I unpacked the children's clothing I suddenly remembered a remark the doctor made to my husband after the birth of our daughter. "Congratulations" he said "and oh, by the way, I put in an extra stitch for you."

Text and video stills from *The Unstable Subject*, S. E. Jahoda, 1992.

Within this surreal tale that investigates the interplay between the self, the family, and the state, the “I” of the self elusively dislocates itself. In fact, Jahoda’s use of the “I” occurs in only one text-and-image sequence, reproduced here, a sequence that distances the writer from the “she” of the teenage girl in the other sequences. The autobiographical place of the author’s presence, whether it is oscillating in the “I” or the distanced “she,” resists being situated as a singular, and thus isolated, self. In this sense, Jahoda’s work reiterates the 1960s’ and 1970s’ feminist warning that the personal is political. Thinking about women’s acts of autobiography in 1978, Cohen (1978, vi) wrote, “Subjectivity and introspection, which in the past were inappropriately labeled as shallow, narcissistic, or ‘feminine,’ have suddenly become valued, even celebrated.” In 1992, however, Jahoda is acutely aware of the past and current dangers of the female “I” being named, ostracized, and quarantined, literally and figuratively. Her autobiographical strategy both exposes and veils, without claiming a unilaterally personalized or victimized voice. *The Unstable Subject* works within a highly mediated field of cultural representations that intersect with the personal and the institutional. Jahoda’s location and dislocation of selves within the piece are in tune with the 1990s’ rethinkings of feminist representation. As Braidotti (1989, 97) has refigured the terms:

The “body” in question is the threshold of subjectivity: as such it is neither the sum of its organs—a fixed biological essence—nor the result of social conditioning—a historical entity. The “body” is rather to be thought of as the point of intersection, as the interface between the biological and the social, that is to say between the socio-political field of the microphysics of power and the subjective dimension.

The Unstable Subject overlaps the asymmetries between “the microphysics of power and the subjective dimension” through a series of pauses and passages in the videotape that invoke experience and the pathos of its representation.² It opens with the text, reproduced here, that begins “She used to hear her parents making love at night.” In the videotape, no images accompany this text. As it is read, the screen fills with potent darkness. The tone shifts soon after, and an “instructional film” takes the viewer carefully and cruelly through the reasons that “Margie” failed at her first attempt to make a chocolate cake for her new husband. Jahoda directs the ironic humor of the film to a more somber and analytic place through the juxtaposition of images she has created. The actress that passes between sequences throughout the tape appears in relation to the cake scene counting pills at a dining room table. She places the sedatives in a cooking bowl and proceeds to mash them with measuring spoons. Later in the videotape, Jahoda cuts in a sequence from the film *Dead*

She used to hear her parents making love at night. She imagined her father thrusting the memory of death into her mother. They were all born with a taste of torture. Once a teacher instructed her to wash her mouth her mother told her cessed into soap. Last over. The five of them together. Her parents She nibbled away at a mother had baked and had consumed the father often mentioned during the war. The eat was stale rye bread. family. He always grandchildren at the suspected she'd never any. She suspected her women. The youngest noticed a gold ring on her elder sister's finger. She asked if it was a present from someone. The response came hesitantly. "My friend Sonia paid for half of it and ..." "Does Sonia have one?" he interrupted before she had time to finish the sentence. That night when they were all in bed she heard her sister crying. She entered her room. She entered her bed. She held her in her arms, close to her body.



Text and video still from *The Unstable Subject*, S. E. Jahoda, 1992.

Ringers in which the gynecologist is chastised by his identical twin, also a gynecologist, for using the wrong tool on his patient. He replies, “There’s nothing the matter with the instrument, it’s the body. The woman’s body was all wrong.” By employing images and voices from mass-market films and instructional media, Jahoda is relieved of telling stories about women’s oppression solely through the personal voice. When her voice is audible through the spoken texts, it reaches us through an eerily disembodied address. In the spirit of warning and teaching, the stories document relationships with uncanny poetic precision. The author does not blame the viewer/reader; she asks him or her to be aware of how women respond to the contradictory cultural messages they receive.

Since Jahoda posits the subject as itself in flux, the dilemma of authenticity becomes all the more doubled as the mediated personal is recounted through the remnants of historical events. The sequence in the videotape where the Holocaust is brought to the surface underscores these dilemmas. There is an absence here of mediated imagery, and no attempt at cutting irony. A sequence opens without an image as we hear a woman's voice speaking Hebrew underneath the translator's English. She recounts how her family was shot before her eyes and her daughter was grabbed from her arms. The woman was shot, too, but did not feel anything while she lay beneath corpses.³ After we hear this woman's account, Jahoda reintroduces images: the eye watching, family snapshots of women sitting in a row, archival footage from the Lodz ghetto, plans of the Auschwitz crematorium and, then, more family photos showing a wedding and her father with two of his daughters. Working through the development of this sequence, Jahoda had at first relied too heavily on mediated images—excerpts from George Stevens' 1959 film, *The Story of Anne Frank*—and on too many Holocaust photographs that had been interspersed with family photographs. The intimate images had functioned as documents standing in for the artist's familial relationships and her unresolved sense of self-formation. Although seemingly unrelated to the archival images, the family photographs paradoxically and perversely returned a semblance of humanity to the otherwise nameless and faceless corpses that figure so prominently in the documentary photographs. Jahoda's use of the Holocaust photographs was an attempt to go beyond family dynamics and to invoke the irresolvable conditions and material surfaces of the most senseless dissolution and extermination of bodies and selves; but the photographs still functioned as obscene screens onto her own self-identity. Now, in the final version, allowing in both family imagery and a sparer use of documentary photography, Jahoda has found more effective ways to employ the material as obscured windows onto the realities. This is perhaps one of the most delicate and difficult sequences in the work because it represents a space where filtered autobiography is overwhelmed by history at the passage between self, family, and event. Rather than attempting to recount the complete horrific history, or account for it, Jahoda suggests detours from the concept of a comprehensible history and works in the realm of documentation and her own memories, suggesting that history and memory are active processes in the present. That is, the legacy of the Holocaust cannot be safely guarded, or safeguarded within the museologized boundaries of the past. Indeed, Benjamin (1980, 1242) warned against setting the past into a mold denuded of contemporary provocations. "The way in which the past is honored as 'heritage,'" he wrote, "is more disastrous than its simple disappearance could ever be."



After the shock-treatments he didn't recognize her. Her mother said it was because her skirt was too short. He was hospitalized for three weeks. She left school every day after lunch. She told her teachers she was having ultra-violet treatments for an acne condition on her back and shoulders. She changed out of her school uniform in the ladies-room at the bus station. She always took the number forty-two

bus. She considered it to be her lucky number. It was the year her grandparents were gassed at Auschwitz. She always went to the same place. The cafeteria in the basement of the Eye

Hospital. She'd been in for ten days when she had been fighting. Her a cupboard door shut. and fell into her was everywhere. She of milky tea and ate a cream biscuits before days after he returned skirts into triangles.



the children's room was six. Her parents mother had slammed The glass shattered right eye. Blood always drank one cup package of custard-going home. Two home he cut her She found them

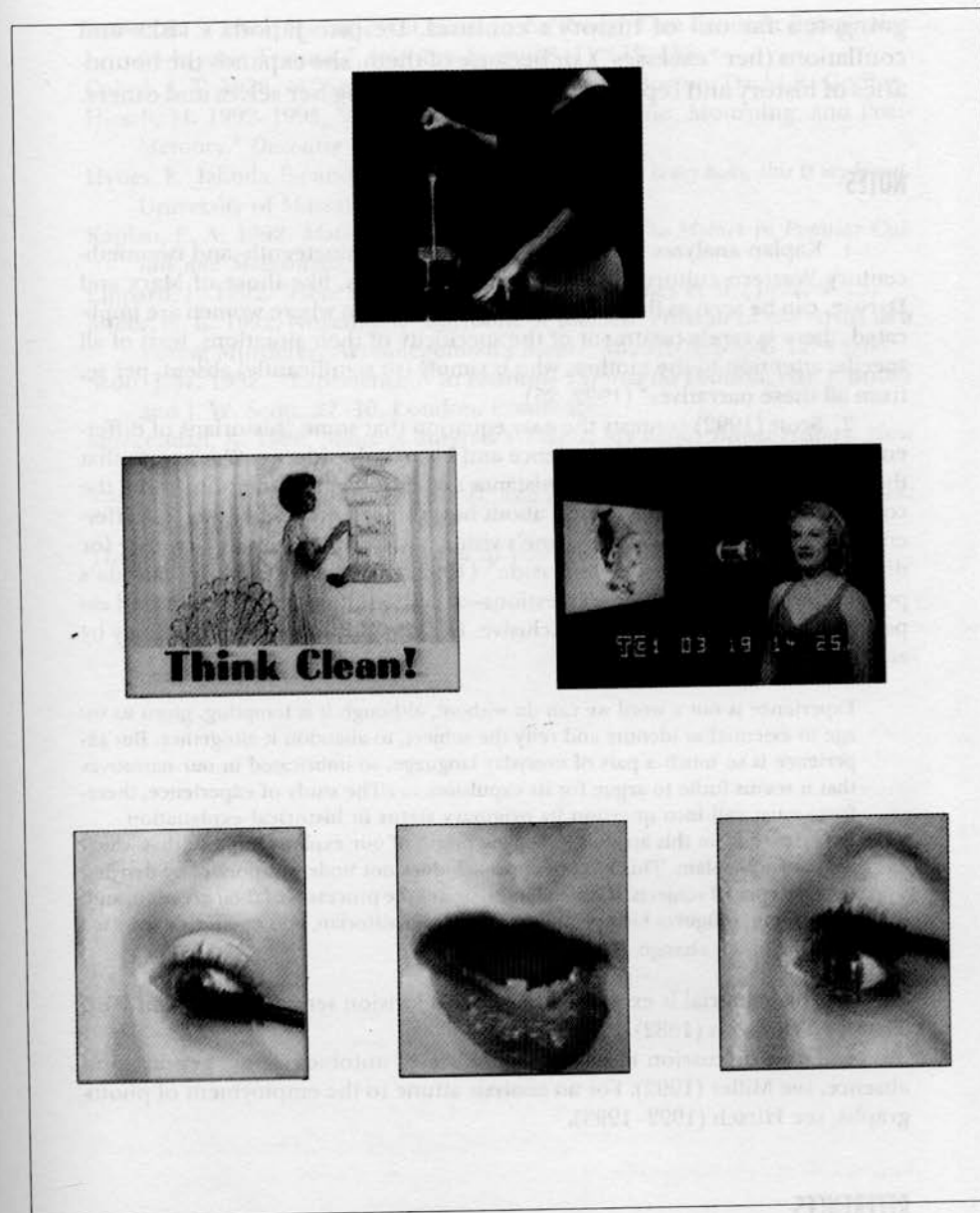
stuffed underneath her bed. She stopped going to the Eye Hospital. She stopped going to school. She rode the number forty-two bus for five hours every day. He waited for her to come home. He hated comings and goings. She could see his face pressed up against the window. It looked grey and distorted. He always assumed she'd had an accident. He always assumed they'd all had accidents. He was never specific. They were forbidden to take trains. Two weeks after he returned home he poured her perfumes down the toilet and smashed the bottles. She found her lipsticks and mascara in the kitchen trash. Her allowance stopped. He stopped shaving. He cut his pin-striped trousers off at the knees. He forbade her to go out at night. One night she defied him. He chased her down the street. He was sobbing. The next day he was hospitalized. He didn't recognize her after the shock-treatments. Her mother said it was because her skirt was too short.



If we move both toward and away from Benjamin's warning, we must add the caveat that the Holocaust as past is a complex of events that can hardly be embraced as heritage, but remains as a devastating and sometimes inspiring legacy. In the absence—or rather, in the passing—of survivors and direct witnesses we are confronted with the inevitable dilemma about who can legitimately voice and recount the events. The dilemmas of legitimacy and the transference of memory are, indeed, the very problems that underlie the formation of the discipline of history. We hear today urgent and understandable concern about the impropriety of anyone speaking for the events beyond the voices of direct witnesses. Yet adherence to this modernist obsession with authenticity resigns the telling of the events to yet another realm of silence.

With *The Unstable Subject*, however, the question becomes "Whose memories?" In a related project, the allegorical comic book tales of Art Spiegelman (1986 and 1991), *Maus I* and *Maus II*, we may remember that the artist's translation of the Holocaust through his father/witness is simultaneously an attempt to retrieve his mother's lost body through her diaries and photographs.⁴ As a boy, his story recounts, Art imagined saving his mother rather than his father from the ovens. *Maus* relives this psychic performance and thus buries the artist's father alive through his vain search for Anja's memories. As Miller (1992, 43) points out, if women's autobiographies have been traditionally characterized by the presence of another "by way of alterity," *Maus* would figure into the genre and at the same time would redefine the gendered polarization of autobiographical representation. However, if Jahoda's investment in alterity is not as nameable as that employed by Spiegelman, this should not usher in a postfeminist backlash that returns us to earlier brandings of women's autobiography as "narcissistic" (Cohen 1978). In *The Unstable Subject* Jahoda is primarily concerned with retrieving women's bodies in their multiple senses. The artist's stories cannot be neatly separated from the "heritage" of the Holocaust; they unevenly conflate with her father's history and pathology. She tries to find spaces to think through the dilemmas in order to represent how the monstrous events have reached her and have become her legacy through localized family relations.

The subjective activity in *The Unstable Subject* overwhelmingly exceeds the privatized notion of self. Its mediated multiple voices are never in one place. They are dispersed, somehow never touchable. Lippard (1992, 11) writes, "Jahoda's subject is variously personalized and depersonalized, enabled and disabled." Jahoda's feminist deconstructive mode of approach often becomes disembodied as a mediation between the autobiographical, the palpable spaces of women's lives, and institutionalized bodies. Any artist breaching the imminently fragile territory of someone else's trauma and its doubling in their own lives may risk



Video stills from *The Unstable Subject*, S. E. Jahoda, 1992.

going too far out of history's confines. Despite Jahoda's risks and confections (her "excesses"), or because of them, she expands the boundaries of history and representation by confronting her selves and others.

NOTES

1. Kaplan analyzes motherhood discourses in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western culture. She writes, "Freud's ideas, like those of Marx and Darwin, can be seen as themselves phallogocentric: even where women are implicated, there is rarely treatment of the specificity of their situations, least of all specific attention to the mother, who is simply (so significantly) absent, per se, from all these narratives" (1992, 25).

2. Scott (1992) contests the easy equation that some "historians of difference" make between lived experience and historical evidence. She argues that these historians decontextualize resistance and difference: "Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history—are left aside" (1992, 25). I am struck by Jahoda's postmodern handling of these questions—a methodology that does not find experience and analysis mutually exclusive. In fact, Scott concludes her essay by acknowledging,

Experience is not a word we can do without, although it is tempting, given its usage to essentialize identity and reify the subject, to abandon it altogether. But experience is so much a part of everyday language, so imbricated in our narratives that it seems futile to argue for its expulsion. . . . The study of experience, therefore, must call into question its originary status in historical explanation. . . . Experience is, in this approach, not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain. This kind of approach does not undercut politics by denying the existence of subjects, it instead interrogates the processes of their creation, and, in so doing, refigures history and the role of the historian, and opens new ways for thinking about change. (1992, 37-38)

3. This material is excerpted from the television series *The World at War*, Thames Television (1982).

4. For a discussion attentive to the use of autobiography, gender, and absence, see Miller (1992). For an analysis attune to the employment of photographs, see Hirsch (1992-1993).

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