A Conversation with OCTOBER

THE V-GIRLS

Martha Baer: I'm sorry. Before we begin, if we could just sit . . .

Erin Cramer: Oh yes, like this . . .

Baer: Yes, longways. That's much better. I'm sorry, you see, we prefer to sit longways. Over the years, having participated in, or shall we say, frankly, simulated, or more frankly really, concocted, trumped up, a number of panel discussions, we've found that the panel format, as you see here, as you trace the sweeping, authoritative gesture of my hand with your eyes—the panel format is an ideal one for our speech as a group.

October: As a group you've done considerable research and writing about the academic panel discussion.

Baer: Marianne, for one, has written extensively on the history and uses of the panel format. I believe it was she who wrote—correct me if I'm wrong—that "the term panel discussion first appeared in 1938, only one year after the development of the panel truck but lagging ten years behind the invention of panel heating." Jessica? Andrea? Are you comfortable down there?

Jessica Chalmers: Yes.

Andrea Fraser: Lovely.

Baer: I myself, incidently, have written on the subject of the structure and value of the panel. In a paper entitled "Missing Floorboards: Surfacing Panels in Nineteenth-Century Children's Literature," I called the panel discussion, if

1. The interviewers were not present at this interview.
2. From "Academia in the Alps: In Search of the Swiss Mis(s)," developed for "The Politics of Comparison" conference at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1987.
I remember correctly, "the scene in which dialogue and pedagogue are one." I think that's quite apt, don't you?

_October:_ That was in your panel on Johanna Spyri's _Heidi_, "Academia in the Alps: In Search of the Swiss Mis(s)."

_Baer:_ Right. Later, in our panel "The Question of Manet's _Olympia:_ Posed and Skirted," I wrote, "The panel is an ideal pedagogical vehicle, which effectively counters the usual signifiers of individual expertise and demands a long table.

_Marianne Weems:_ You see, we're most comfortable along this side of the table, comfortable theoretically that is, or comfortable with theory, talking about it. Positioned here, we are at once commissioned to speak, to be heard, we are _specified_ as speakers, and yet we are generalized as a group, a group of speakers all with the same status, the same location, the same orientations or frontage, if you will, the same color hair . . .

_Chalmers:_ Right, Marianne, although I might point out at this point, this juncture, we are not at present sitting on a panel, but rather being interviewed.

_All:_ Ahaaa.
Baer: And why not then consider for a moment, not the panel, which takes place elsewhere, but this interview itself—its precedents, for example, its expectations or requirements, its, can we say, more directly, desire, its historicity, and perhaps, to begin with its existence or ontology, or better, its taxonomy, that is to say its positivity, its mutability (?), in short, its legibility or legibilities, that which despite all its invisibility, makes it possible.

All: Yes.

October: Right.

Baer: Historically, we have been interviewed quite regularly over the years. In the '70s, for example, we were interviewed twice by a remarkable little New York journal, Too Many Paroles, which has since folded. That was a bimonthly, I believe, modeled after the famous German review of the 1950s, Culture, Knowledge, Capitalism, Order, Art, and Spontaneity. That magazine, if I am not becoming confused, had, instead of page numbers, different words in the upper right-hand corner of each page, yes. A few years back, we were interviewed in a magazine that had a similar format.

Fraser: In fact it was called Format. Or was it Schema?

Chalmers: Topos?

Baer: In any case, in any case, I think what we've come to here, after rethinking our history as subjects of such a range of interviews, is that we like the format of October, the odd size, the breadth, the clarity. In general, I think I speak for all of us when I say that we feel, we feel, we feel . . .

Weems: . . . pleased . . .

Baer: . . . yes, we feel pleased to be here. Now, as you were saying.

October: We were talking about your research on the panel discussion. You have also done original work on the holiday season.

Cramer: He must be referring to my paper "Why Mrs. Claus Stays Home" for our first panel, "Sex and Your Holiday Season," in which I discussed a question that has been raised in recent years about the status of Mrs. Claus and why, in the twentieth century, we have seen the eclipse of Mrs. Claus as a figure of value by her husband Santa. A distinct shift in Mrs. Claus's status can be seen in the North Pole at the end of the nineteenth century, one that corresponds to the shift in the locus of production from the home to the
factory. In that paper I argued that to evaluate why Mrs. Claus stays home, we must examine this historical shift and ask why Mrs. Claus did not accompany production in its move out of the home and into the private sector, as Santa did.

It seems inevitable that, as the wife of the Western world's largest producer of consumer goods, Mrs. Claus should have been subject to this shift in status. Indeed, Engles argues that the shift in the locus of production and the status of women occurred first in the North Pole and was only later felt in the European and North American communities.

Feminist historians argue that while Mrs. Claus has diminished as a figure of value in the public eye, she, like other women in the home, has channeled her energies into the development of a complex cosmology for the home, rich in symbolism.

Fraser: Fascinating.

Weems: Wasn't that the panel in which Martha examined the early feminist response to Christmas?

Baer: Yes. That was my paper about Phyllis Weiner, one of the first of a number of early Feminists, a little-known fringe of the suffrage movement, to address the question of Christmas. It was called, "The Santa Does Not Exist."

"I shun the bearded, the jolly, the masculine figure disguised as my patron, as I shun, from this day on, any man," wrote Phyllis. Later, however, in the last years of her life at Emery Lord's Women's Prison at Brighton, she reneged on these statements. In a confessional letter to an aunt on the Renfield side whom she had long held in contempt, Phyllis wrote, "Yes, I too have loved him, always, waited up half the night, listening for bells. I too have envisioned, bleary-eyed, each December, the great sacks and packages of the burly phantom I adored." It was due to the exposure of this note that in her last months Phyllis was renounced publicly in London Women for the Vote, one of the most respected mouthpieces of the movement at that time.

October: Feminism has been of critical importance in all of your panel discussions.

Chalmers: You must be referring to my paper from "The Question of Manet's Olympia: Posed and Skirted." The argument: that in 1865, prostitutes were,

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3. Yes, that's what they call me, that's really what they call me.
4. No, not again! Leave my father out of this. It's Martha, please, it's Martha.
5. Oh, please feel free to call me Jessica.
as it were, absolutely everywhere. Well, let's say that a man might know his wife, certainly, but the pedigree of Madame or Mademoiselle Quelqu-chose would always remain in question. Therefore, for the nineteenth-century viewer, it was unclear whether Olympia was a nude or a prude, a femme honnête or a fille publique, a consort or a courtesan, a Madonna or an Olivia Newton-John.

Now obviously the problematic here turns on, we may say, revolves around or palpitates upon the problem of “the nude”: my problem with appearing nude at that panel, and the epistemological distinctions between the state of being nude, and the states of being unclothed, stripped, or in the raw . . .

Fraser:6 That paper, as I recall, also appeared in The Women's Review of Books.


October: All three panel discussions you've done thus far have used parody to challenge the pretensions of academic discourse and form. But, at the same time, you parody theoretical insights coming from feminism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, etc., that have been very useful to women and that have occasionally completely transformed the field in which they first made their entrances. Isn't there a danger of leveling, or of simply making everything the butt of a joke?—and an old joke that is most generally told at the expense of women?

Marianne: When people go to a panel, nothing they hear in one hour will make them reconsider what they fundamentally believe. But we do hope to cut through the sometimes unnecessarily exclusive and pretentious discourses that have come to surround the very necessary politics inherent in those theoretical concerns. Allow me to quote myself. “Manet’s Best Friend, The Paw Print Unseen”: “I would like briefly to address a subject that has hounded the psychoanalytic institution, namely, the gaze that is trained upon us as we roam the fields and streets, the one that ubiquitously follows. Yes, the gaze of the dog is one of devotion, of dedication.

“But let us not shy away from the question of desire. Just as the man, strolling through the nineteenth-century Salon seize(s) the form of Olympia, so the canine subject at his heels casts his desiring gaze toward the cat. They look the picture of contentment; indeed, knowing that they look and

6. Well, yes. But on the other hand, my mother's name is de Monteflores. That wasn't her maiden name though. It was my mother's psychotic older brother who came up with that name. He thought he was the Count de Monteflores. That's where they were born. Sometimes I like to call myself Jane, Jane Castleton—it's a village in England, north of Derbyshire. Of course, I wasn't born in England, but, this is getting complicated . . . Maybe we can just leave it at Andrea.
that they are looked at is to say that they are, in fact, a picture (perhaps a hunting scene).

"Dog or man is no longer at the level of demand, but of desire, of the desire of the Other. He lays down his gaze, like a bone, before the painting, a painting dompte-regarde before the lure which is given to his mute, sorrowful, doggy eyes.

"This lure, the lure of the cat, is the dialectic between carnivorous eye and hungry gaze; the embodiment of dogged desire, drooling yet dissatisfied, fur yet paint, the promise of chase and conquest—all are pictured here."

Andrea: But this is our fundamental question—a question that I posed again and again in "Academia in the Alps . . .": What is the place of pedagogy? the landscape, or rather, the locus, in the Lacanian sense, of learning? What is the terrain of teaching, the topology or topos, as we can say, after Aristotle, of the transference of the techne or even of theoria? What is the chora, as Kristeva writes, of the college? What, as Foucault has asked, is the field of deployment, of the distributions, of dianoia? What is the mise-en-scène of savoir? the cartouches, for Derrida, the cartouches of connaissance? What is the, what is the urszene, urszene, writes Freud, what is the urszene of understanding: Wo Es war soll Ich werden . . . but where? Where!? Where will I be, where . . . What is the . . .

Martha: There are several points to be made here in answer to your question about the critical approach we take to theories and positions that one would, for many reasons, want to protect. Firstly, it's important to notice that we use many styles of presentation in our panels, parody being only one function, one echo, in some papers, Marianne's paper, for example, on her mother and Chardin, "Paucity and Plenitude in the French Still Life," or Erin's paper on Olympia as the phallus, which investigates horizontality and prostitution. The jokes in our panels are really produced in lots of different ways, and they in turn produce lots of different kinds of laughter. There is the joke/hysteria of Andrea's paper on Olympia the model, and there's the joke/anxiety of much of the material on race. And, you're absolutely right, there is the real overturning or disturbance of certain notions, Marianne's paper about the gaze of the dog, for instance. Finally, there are many instances in our panels when we simply don't make jokes at all.

You see, even while you can hear people laughing at what we say, you can't necessarily hear the kind of laughing they're doing, and you definitely can't hear the laughing they're not doing when certain feminist, deconstructionist, or psychoanalytic ideas—the ones we cherish, the ones that take our breath away—are raised.

Secondly, I think this simultaneity, this polyphony, if you will . . .
Jessica: Yes, that’s really interesting, Martha. Pardon me, just for one second, just one second . . .

Martha: Yes?

Jessica: There’s something . . .

Martha: Yes?

Jessica: Your tag . . . in the back here . . . it’s sticking out . . . okay, go on . . .

Martha: What was I saying?

October: Well, we were inquiring about the risks involved in targeting certain very useful theoretical insights. Isn’t there a danger of making everything the butt of a joke—and an old joke that is most generally told at the expense of women?

Marianne: Expense? Expense of women? Look, I don’t think this is the appropriate time to discuss our fee. Suffice it to say that it’s gone up.

Martha: Which brings me directly to my third point. If you’re concerned about appropriate parody, about the butt of our jokes, remember, we are women, five women, five feminists, interested in psychoanalysis, informed about deconstruction, and we are seated behind that table. Just look for us at the head of the room. You’ll see. You can’t miss us. We’ll be the ones everyone is listening to. Any joke you hear in our panels will be contingent upon this fundamental, concrete, and not-especially-funny arrangement.

Andrea: When we convene at a university, in our suits, in front of a large audience, we become at that moment by proxy the university’s very visible representatives. Our bodies are the proxies—and no less because they are female. With our position in the room we invest in and are invested by the authority of the university.

We have all been on the other side of that table, straining to hear every word, interpreting; bursting into peremptory laughter at every sign of a joke, identifying; making ourselves their ideal audience.

Such identification is always at the expense of one’s particular history, experiences, wants, interests, etc.

Erin: Oh, that reminds me of a joke that’s been going around the department. O.K., there’s this professor who’s really prolific and he’s been asked to sit
on a panel. So, he gets there, sits down, and when it's time for him to deliver his paper, he stands up and pulls out his dick. Well, it's not very big. In fact, it's very, very small, and as soon as he takes it out, everyone starts laughing. So, he says . . .

Oh, wait a second. I can't tell this joke. Some of the men in your audience might get offended, you know, the real serious ones who don’t have a sense of humor. This is a great joke, though. If any of you gals want to hear it, drop me a line. I promise you, you’ll piss yourselves laughing. Oh, and if any of you guys out there think you can take it, feel free to write, too. Like I said, if you can take it, it's a great joke. Trust me.

Andrea: Right, Erin. Even when jokes accomplish the identification of teller and listener at the expense of women as their common object, it remains the entire structure that needs to be problematized, not just the particular second term. Within a traditional joke structure, the object of the jokes on our panels would be “the other academic.” In laughing at our jokes, the audience would be identifying with us at the expense of another academic, like Stanley Fish in Martha’s paper “Is There a Panel in This Text,” in “Academia in the Alps.” Martha and the audience would be laughing together at the expense of Stanley Fish. But it doesn’t work so simply, because Martha is not laughing. She’s impersonating Stanley Fish, and it’s a particularly extreme impersonation that is nevertheless concretized by her position on the panel. The ambivalence at work there makes it less a joke in the traditional sense than a grotesque representation that provokes instead a crisis of identification.

Martha: Instead of the first person and the third person, it’s the teller and the object who are identified, albeit formally. That immediately problematizes the position of the listener.

Erin: The dick joke from the Olympia panel functions in a similar way. It’s supposed to be a corollary to the jokes a male professor might tell about his female colleagues, but the reversal of gender doesn’t function. In order to make any sense of the joke I’m telling, the listener must evoke the joke I’m not telling, a joke in which I would be the object. I think the audience doesn’t know whether to identify with me as the teller of this joke or as the object of the joke that’s not being told.

Jessica: But there’s a real charge here that we are making everything the butt of a joke. I think that we really have to address that directly, and not just as a formal problem.

7. I know, just like a guy.
Martha: Well, are there specific things we can think of that we do on the panels that aim at feminism, or psychoanalysis and deconstruction, or Marxism?

Jessica: If there are, I think we should apologize.

Andrea: There’s Marianne’s “Relations of Production and the Goat Taboo” from “Academia in the Alps.”

Erin: I feel guilty about my paper “Why Heidi Can’t Read,” where I argue that it is in Heidi that we find a precursor to the question that presses us today, namely, Why Female Academics Can’t Read Well Enough to Get Tenure.

Marianne: Well, if I were going to feel guilty about anything in relation to this question it would be that paper that makes fun of French feminism—which I tried to cut many times, I want you to know.

Martha: You mean, “She is she and no one else and yet no one to herself as well as to everybody around her, always Other yet (M)other, always fluid yet . . .”

Marianne: That’s the one.

Andrea: Well what about, in our Manet panel, Jessica’s paper “Man A, Woman B”?

Erin: And what about Jessica’s “The Femmy Ninny: My Mommy”?

Marianne: What about the Gay and Lesbian community? How do you think people feel about papers like “Myth and Merrymaking: The Lesbian Elf Community and the Social Text”?

Erin: And what about psychoanalytic theory? What about “Elf/Self”?

Marianne: “The Polyphonic (S)Elf.”

Jessica: Andrea, remember that paper of yours called “What I Want for Christmas”?

Andrea: You mean, “Dear Santa, I want some shit for Christmas, I want some money, I want a penis and a baby.”

Martha: “All the Others Called Him Names: Rudolph, a Case Study.”

Marianne: And “The Reindeer Man.”

Jessica: “The Subordinate Claus(e).”

Martha: “My Man Manet.”

October: It seems that the disruptions you introduce into many of the discourses you challenge arise from the fact that you have occupied or can occupy these various theoretical positions as speaking subjects. But what happens when you pose questions about “others”? For example, in the Manet panel, you ask disingenuously, “Is there a black person on this panel?” Or when you make the comment “Early studies have shown that Laura was, in fact, part of the wallpaper.”

Jessica: The implication of your question, I believe, is that it is somehow dangerous to speak about race and racism. There is a lot of fear these days in the Left intellectual community about offending or appearing incorrect politically. We were hesitant for just this reason to broach the question, until we realized that, since we were doing a panel on Edouard Manet’s Olympia, a painting that contains two figures, a black woman and a white woman, it would be even more problematic if we ignored race as a subject. Out of fear of doing the wrong thing, we would be replicating the very same “racism” that Martha satirizes in her paper.

Marianne: You mean when she says that it was only in 1983 that an art historian—M. R. Frank—first discovered that there actually was a black person in the painting?8

Jessica: Anyway, we’re not posing questions about “others,” really. We’re staying at home and scrutinizing the people we live with, as well as those parts of ourselves that are white, middle-class, and liable to be politically incorrect. That’s what I’m trying to do when I pose as the free-and-easy downtown artist type who really wishes that she could be black. Race is a complicated issue; it’s not a matter of good guys versus the bad guys.

October: But the above question is further complicated when the identity discussed is one that could be “true,” that might or might not be a role, as when, for example, Martha “comes out” as a lesbian.

Marianne: Pardon me, I just want to say that I don’t think this is very funny at all.

Jessica: What's not funny, Marianne?

Marianne: You know what I mean . . . I want to get my role clear here. Is this question directed at me? I mean, do you expect me to answer this question? Or am I just supposed to sit here and listen while everyone calmly alludes to me? Is this some kind of one-way mirror treatment? If you want me to answer, I'll answer. If you don't, then just leave me out of it.

Erin: Calm down, calm down. I don't think they want anything from you in particular.

Marianne: Yes they do, I think they do. Otherwise they wouldn't have mentioned me like that.

Martha: Can we please answer the question?

Marianne: Well, they're just not being straightforward about it. I mean, if they . . .

Andrea: Did someone say straight? Did I hear the word straight? Did someone say they're straight?

Martha: Can we please answer the question?

Andrea: All right. As I will discuss later, on page 132, the positions we occupy on the panel are not “theoretical” but structural and historical. The “identities” we speak are neither true nor false but operative, signifying in the particular moments of their articulation. When Martha comes out as a lesbian in Olympia, the meaning of the statement, its significance, is determined by the fact that it is being made on a panel, that is, at a particular location within a particular institutional framework that has a definite relation to an audience and a format with a history.

Is the question whether Martha really sleeps with women? How would the answer change the way the statement “I am a lesbian” functions on the panel?

Martha: Andrea, maybe I can help you out here. You're absolutely right that it's the statement “I am a lesbian” that functions on the panel and not my sleeping with women. That, the latter, would make for a different kind of show altogether, as we know. The question would then be whether that's the kind of show our audience wants and, if so, whether we should continue to perform at universities.
Jessica: I think a lot of these issues have been addressed in *October* before.⁹

Erin: Well, I don’t think we can fully address these questions until we first establish our relationship to the base/superstructure model. And, speaking of hysterical materialism, I’d like to get a plug in for our merchandizing line now.

Marianne: Erin, I hardly think this is the forum.

Erin: Think of it as a discursive strategy, if that will help.

Martha: Like the new V-Girls Glasses to Read Theory By. Can you tell us a little about that, Andrea?

Andrea: Well, readers, these glasses—imported straight from fashion showrooms in Paris—magnify the type.

Martha: It’s amazing. You can actually read the text better.

Erin: And, our perfume, “V,” is about to hit the stores.

Jessica: Tell *October* readers about the benefits of this new fragrance.

Erin: We get a big percentage. Also, it’s a fragrance with a message.

Jessica: Would you say it has a kind of political message?

Erin: Definitely. We think it smells like a Public Service Announcement.

Andrea: We’re all wearing it now. Different, isn’t it?

Erin: We’re also thinking of bringing out a V-Girls Text Highlighter.

Martha: In pink and blue.

*October*: Do those colors correspond to narrative codes?

Martha: They’re supposed to highlight them, yes. Do you think there’s a market? Our product director told us it was premature.

Jessica: I think she said obscure.

⁹ See, for example, *October* 11, 1987, the “March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.”
October: In your panels you assume a series of guises—personal, professional, hysterical, compassionate, sometimes even inaudible. Are you thereby asserting that women must use a fundamentally different language and logic to oppose authority, which, even in its analysis of knowledge/power, appears to assume only one guise within the academy?

Martha: Guys within the academy? We really have nothing against guys within the academy themselves, and we certainly aren’t interested in using our practice to support a simple guys/gals opposition whereby women are barred from legitimately sounding a single, consolidated voice of authority or deploying a particular form of expertise. We’re more interested in exposing, simply, that we, we as panelists, and we as gals, don’t occupy any unified position. We don’t, even though this is sometimes distressing.

But to answer your question a little more directly, I have to confess that, yes, there are some guys within the academy whose faces I’d like to bury in a bucket of rotten meat. You’re absolutely right—knowledge/power, law/desire, subject/other—it doesn’t matter what they talk about, these guys are unbearable. A guy can be the most progressive, insightful theorist in the world, but if all he can talk about when you meet him in the mail room is the cut of your blouse or the color of your hose, who needs him? That’s a language and logic I’ve had it up to here with.

Andrea: I think that there may be a misunderstanding here. I don’t think the question was about guys and gals. I think it was about Guys and Dolls, wasn’t it? Isn’t this a film journal?

Jessica: No, Andrea, the question was about whether women have to oppose authority with “a fundamentally different language and logic.”

Marianne: I think this question can be neatly disposed of through the application of a simple citation from Michelle Montrelay: “The fact that phallocentrism and concentricity may be equally constitutive of feminine sexuality does not prove that they make up a harmonious unit. It is my contention that on the contrary, they do exist as incompatible and that it is this incompatibility which is specific to the feminine unconscious. . . .”¹⁰

Andrea: Yes, we read that together.

Jessica: Unfortunately, Montrelay goes on to conclude that “the penis, its throb-bing, its cadence and the movements of lovemaking could be said to produce the purest and most elementary form of signifying articulation.”

Martha: She does clean up that mess in the end.

Marianne: That reminds me of another series of readings that we did. I would like to remind us all of James "Jimmy" Page's proposition: "Way down inside, woman, you need . . . gonna give you every inch of my love . . . gonna give you my love. Wanna whole lotta love. Wanna whole lotta love."\(^{11}\)

Erin: I'd just like to break in here and say that I really like it that you're thinking about us. Posing us questions, posing us as questions. We've always been ciphers. We're just coming into our own, really. Young girls, on the brink of something, maybe . . . It's lovely to be posed as a question, especially if there's a world to cradle you as an answer, envelope you in its arms, knowing at last who you are, finally, knowing, who.

   Maybe we'll displease you, and say the wrong thing, something ambiguous that will give you pause. You will wonder if we mean what we say, you will ask other people for their opinions of us. "What do they mean? Who are they, really? What's their take? Why are they laughing? Are they just mean girls? Can't they analyze the effects of speech?"

October: Practically speaking, how are your panels assembled? Do each of you write your own presentations? or are they written collectively?

Marianne: We decide on a specific focus all together—for example, Johanna Spyri's children's classic Heidi, and then we go off on our own to write the individual papers we read on the panel. For instance, I researched and wrote entirely on my own my paper, of which I'm very proud, entitled "Derrida and Dairy: Recovering the Balanced Meal in Heidi." If I may quote: "Many members of both the Hasidic and macrobiotic communities have objected to the insistent and, some would say, ideologically motivated presence of dairy products throughout the novel. Grandfather's unhealthy preoccupation with milk, milk, milk, as the main staple of their diet, accompanied almost exclusively by thick slices of cheese, has disturbed health officials and may have contributed to Heidi's unhealthy glow and dangerously high cholesterol level, not to mention the lugubrious, oversaturated tone of the writing itself. We may, however, see in Heidi something more than a merely uninformed nutritional community. Spyri here addresses the impossibility of experiencing the Other, the nondairy, the salad, the fiber, the broccoli."

Jessica: Thank you, Marianne. Working on our own is the most difficult part. Sometimes I am overcome with doubt when I’m home alone, trying to write papers for a panel. I doubt my ability to write, so I can't write. And sometimes I feel like all the other V-Girls are smarter than I am, like they are lovely, precocious maidens on a glorious voyage, and I am just a fish at the bottom of the boat.

Erin: Our use of the Insecure\(^\text{12}\) has always been one of our most important creative tools. For example, Jessica’s work on uncertainty and child development. Jessica?

Jessica: “My Most Embarrassing Moment”: My most embarrassing moment took place in my kindergarten class. We were all sitting quietly coloring when the teacher pulled down his pants in front of the whole class! No, I mean, I mean, what really happened was that by mistake I drew a huge breast on the blackboard; I don’t know why I did it. I can’t tell you what really happened. All right, something came out of my mouth, no, you’re right, it was from farther down. Don’t make me tell, I . . .”\(^\text{13}\)

Erin: After we’ve finished writing on our own, we come together and edit the pieces collectively, trying to fit what we have into some kind of sequential order, an overall shape.

Marianne: Then each of us basically presents her own material.

Martha: Yes, but I think it is only fair to point out that what I am saying right now was scripted by someone else.

Andrea: Actually, I think that we’re finally beginning to move away from such fetishism of authorship and the proper name entirely. We’re really beginning to develop our critique of presence, of logocentrism, into a practice—as this conversation demonstrates. For example, the interviewers are not in fact present. Further, as “Martha” has just pointed out, we are not actually speaking.

Rather than perpetuate the originary myth of the selfsame, we are abandoning ourselves to the graphein (of which our V is the cipher), to the essential and irremediable impropriety produced in the very moment of being named (that is, “girls”). In our consciousness or exhibition of this improper name we have already placed our individual proper names—those


\(^{13}\) “Academia in the Alps . . .,” see footnote 2.
unique appellations reserved for the presences of unique beings—under erasure. And I for one think it’s time to dispense with them altogether . . .

_Herb Rorhback:_ Oh, that feels much better.

_Werner Sanchez:_ I think you’ve made a very good point there, Gwen.

_Pip Winthrop:_ But I think in fact that we’ve gone too far, we’ve skipped over the more immediate, the more concrete, functions of the name to designate the subject of speech as not just the author but also the owner of her individual articulations. In that sense the originary expropriation at issue here is not our inscription within a system of linguistico-social difference, but our inscription within the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

© _MIT Press:_ Exactly.

© _MIT Press:_ In order effectively to conceal the reduction of qualitative differences to . . .

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© _MIT Press:_ Some of you appear to adopt fairly consistent characters, while others shift from one character to another—on the Manet panel Jessica is presented as French professor, as museum educator, as disarmingly herself,¹⁴ as opera buff, etc. . . .

_Martha:_ It’s funny you should say that because we’ve noticed the same thing about you too. I don’t know. It’s weird. Jessica was _sure_ you were a product of the ’60s . . . I guess people can be pretty confusing.

_Andrea:_ Consistent or shifting characters? Oh, you must be referring to our use of Lacan’s algorithms for metaphor and metonymy:

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¹⁴. I would just like to go on record with the fact that I take issue with the assumption that I am ever myself. I may be many things, but please, let’s just leave me out of this.—JC.
We V-Girls have integrated the two models in our diagram illustrating the panel discussion:

Here you see that while the sequence of characters S1 through S5 functions in the diachronic dimension of metonymic consistency and continuity, the position of the characters "behind the table" separating signifier and signified introduces the synchronic dimension and allows for the emergence of meaning in the audience through the mechanism of substitution and metaphor.

Of course, as our second diagram illustrates, this synchronic dimension disappears when we perform with a courtesy cloth:

**Erin:** Andrea, I think the question was about theatrical characters, you know, playing roles, acting ...  

**Andrea:** Oh. I thought October had put the idea of that kind of character to rest. After Yvonne Rainer's "Looking Myself in the Mouth . . ." The concept of character only proposes and protects a conception of the subject as fixed and autonomous, evoking, in opposition to the artifice of the constructed character, the authenticity of a nonconstructed individual on which it leans. The artifice of our performances instead consists in our attempts to commandeer our own construction in the positions of panelists—a construction that finally is not artistic but institutional.

Funny noses and French accents not withstanding, we V-Girls are not characters on our panels. Nor are we individuals being interviewed here off-stage where . . .

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15. A courtesy cloth is a pleated cloth, usually cotton, customarily hung from the panel table in order to shield the panelists' lower halves from view. E.g., *Early that morning the Marriott attendants draped the courtesy cloths in preparation for the day's events.*
Martha: Hold on, hold on a minute, Andrea. I mean, how do you know the rest of us aren't characters? Look, look over there at Jessica.

Andrea: Where?

Martha: There by the bonfire. How can you say she's not a gypsy, with that shawl and those hoop earrings? You think those men with the guitars just wandered in here by accident? You think they're not her real brothers?

Jessica: Raul, your “C” is flat.

October: There's no smoking in here, please.

Raul: Sorry.

October: Within all of your panel discussions you interject the “private”—personal memories, thoughts, fantasies . . .

Jessica: Yes, I agree, I think we all agree, and speaking of agreement and disagreement, I think it might be useful here to take a look at our February 1989 tour of California, where we did experience a fair amount of, well . . .

Andrea: Differance?

Jessica: As I recall, it happened in a parking lot in Los Angeles. Marianne, who is the author of several books, including her most recent one, spoke in tones that were far from compassionate or inaudible.

Marianne: Excuse me, Jessica, but I'd just like to stop you for a minute in order to interrogate the transparency of your apparent . . . discourse. I'd like to suggest that a) the unconscious is structured like a language, b) what we are speaking here is language, and 3) I'd like to knock you unconscious.

Erin: V-Girls, V-Girls!
Jessica: Ladies and gentlemen, this evening I am going to be administering the Visual Literacy Test. Although I know many of you here did not expect to be tested this evening, this simple exam should not be cause for any . . . undue alarm. Indeed, before we start, I'd like to reassure you that the museum has been administering this test, in conjunction with several eminent mental health institutions, since the early 1960s, when it received a sizable grant from the RJR Nabisco Corporation. The grant, targeted at xeroxing expenditures, was established with the intention of finding out who really knows what about great art.

All right. Now, if you don't have a number two pencil, or a number three pencil or a number four pencil, you can just go ahead and use your hands. During the exam it is especially important that everybody remain in their seats. We also ask you please not to bend, fold, or mutilate your neighbor. Here at the museum we discourage all forms of behavior, and though we don't have the power to actually punish you, there will be embarrassing kinds of social control awaiting the offender.

All right, everyone. I'll distribute the exams now, and when you receive yours, please put your name in the upper right-hand corner where it's marked "Name." . . . You'll see what I mean in a moment. Does everybody have one? How about you in the back? Good.

Now, as you can see from this sample test, you are to try to draw Olympia—All of you, I know, are familiar with the painting. Don't worry about accuracy.

After you have done this, there are two questions to answer here below. And remember, don't hold back. We require your sincerity so that we can correctly evaluate the exams.

All right. Let's begin. Slide please. (Olympia slide) You may now begin. (Ten seconds.) Thank you. Please discard your papers.
VISUAL LITERACY TEST

Name _____Sample_____

A. TEST YOUR AESTHETIC RESPONSE!

1. Observe the painting, *Olympia* by Édouard Manet!
2. Draw what you see, *to the best of your abilities*, in the box provided below!

![Image of Olympia by Édouard Manet](image.png)

B. ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS!
(Put the letter of the correct answer in the space provided)

1. Another painting by Manet is called: _a_
   a. Guernica
   b. Madame Bovary
   c. Sympathy for the Devil

2. While I was drawing *Olympia*, I was thinking about: _c_
   a. sex
   b. Harry
   c. Other: Mommy
Jessica: Okay, everybody, I want to announce that the results of the Visual Literacy Test are back, and I want to thank you all for your participation in the study.

First I'd like to say that here at the museum we are proud of the Visual Literacy Test, and we are proud that our test has several times helped and is still helping the police to detect the criminally uncultivated, purveyors of aesthetic scandal, and nerds. Of course, for our purposes here at the museum, it has been more useful to view the results as indications of a more general sickness that is sweeping the nation, or more general sicknesses. But before we draw conclusions, let us review a sampling of the results of the test taken just a short while ago here in this room.

All right. Pictures of Olympia drawn by heterosexual white men from the ages of 3 to 85 typically neglected to include the head in the picture.

In this example, drawn by a mail-order tycoon of considerable social standing, one notes the exacting attention paid to the detail of the hand, the traditional loss of the head, as well as several other creative dismemberments. Interestingly, he neglects to include the black woman in the picture.

The next test group was comprised of artists of middle-class origins who attend B.F.A. or M.F.A. programs at various colleges and universities around the country.
We received this sample from a 35-year-old artist attending the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

And this from a 19-year-old taking drawing classes at Andover prep.
And this from a 50-year-old who is now finishing her M.F.A. at Indiana State. Evidently only one of these people managed to include the black woman in the picture.

Now, it was found that, when asked to draw Olympia, young Caucasian girls from middle-class families between the ages of 4 and 7 tended to overemphasize Olympia's head.

Let's take a look at this example, which shows the drawing of a 6-year-old child. As you can see, this girl exhibits a curious lack of attention to detail; she has, for example, omitted the nose entirely, and the black woman is completely out of the picture. Also notable is the elongation of the cat-form and the interesting way the shoes are at one with the feet.
Young boys of the same age and background, however, were quite a different story.

Although a minority of them appeared to be preoccupied with the sexual characteristics of Olympia, as you can see in this picture, they tended to ignore the assigned subject matter altogether.

Children who have been given an overabundance of tests that involved drawing in some way tended to believe that they recognized our test. These overttested children—usually children who have come from broken homes—these children often assigned personalities to each figure in the painting.

This boy, for example, has here depicted the state of affairs at home, imagining a scene in which his mother, standing in for the black woman in the background, attends his sick bed while his father, as cat, pukes on the floor.

Thank you. Now, these people, ladies and gentlemen, as you may have already guessed, are Visual Illiterates to one degree or another. But they are not alone in their plight. Here at the museum we have come to the conclusion that visual illiteracy is . . . a problem. And that it’s a big problem. But what is a museum to do? Ladies and gentlemen, we have questions to which we need to know answers. What is art? Who are you? Are you sick? Answer and serve.
October: We understand that your work together as panelists had its genesis in a reading group devoted largely to the writings of Jacques Lacan. Could you tell us how you decided to become a performance group and why you chose the name V-Girls.

Erin: To answer your question I feel compelled to say that this particular group of women has always had a problem with acting out.

Andrea: I'd like to strike that from the record. I do not have a problem with acting out.

Martha: You do so.

Andrea: Do not.

Erin: We can barely read a line of Lacan without somebody playing the split subject.

Marianne: I remember the time we read Moustafa Safouan aloud—I hope your tape recorder captures the quality of my voice: haunting, piercing—I looked up from the page and the V-Girls were a bunch of symptoms on the carpet.

Jessica: Are you saying that the text has bodily effects for us?

Martha: Listen, the text does nothing for me. It leaves me cold.

Marianne: I seem to remember your enacting some impossible, unspeakable moments as l’objet a . . .

Martha:

Andrea: I think she’s enacting one now.

Martha:

Marianne: I didn’t know this text would have that effect on her.

Jessica: Snap out of it! It’s this very interstice of reading and playing, word and symptom, where we bicker about interpretation.

Martha: For instance, why the subject of the enunciation and the enunciation of
the subject cannot both be played by Martha! See? Philosophically, it’s no problem!

Erin: But technically, it’s a stretch.

Jessica: I guess that’s a role we all dream of playing some day.

October: And the name the V-Girls?

Martha: It’s an inverted Lacan citation: The Phallus Girls of Venusburg. We were giving a New Year’s Eve party together, and we thought it would be funny for the invitation. We’ve always had a sense of fun.

Erin: Then we got embarrassed about being the Venus Girls, so . . . we chopped off the “enus”—if you know what I mean.

Jessica: Don’t say that. People will get the wrong idea.

Marianne: Today, V-Girls stands for five girls, but we still privilege a phonic rather than a numeric reading, foregrounding the mutability of the signifier, and revealing that something cryptic may actually be quite simple, that things are not always what they seem.

Jessica: Like the phallus.

Martha: Sure, Jessica.

Jessica: You know, I thought the “V” stood for Vaginal.

Martha: Jessica, was that why you wanted to join?

Erin: We called ourselves the Venus Girls first, but then we were told that there was already a “Venus Girls” group in existence—a small but powerful group of New Critics living on farmland somewhere in the midwest. You know: no personal possessions allowed, up at 6 AM, well-wrought urns. Always the text. Nothing but. We couldn’t live that way.

For me, a V-Girl has something special, a shine, something that says, “Hi, I laugh at professors.” You know, like, “Hi, I’m a theory clown.”

Martha: A V-Girl is a woman of the ’90s. She’s a brunette with brains, beauty, and the metabolism of a hummingbird. Any young woman now in college, thinking of making her career as a V-Girl, should look at herself hard in the
mirror, and if she likes what she sees, if she finds that certain gleam in her eye, she should feel free to call us to find out what classes we'd recommend she enroll in.

Erin: Actually, what comes after the "V" is our mantra, and we're not allowed to say it.

Martha: We found a line in Lacan about not saying our mantra to anybody, so now we don't.

October: Where does he say that?

Jessica: Well, he infers it really. It's in The Four Fundamental . . .

Erin: Excuse me, I know I agreed to be interviewed, but I hate this sort of thing. I'm actually an intensely private person. I don't play publicity games. My private life is my own, and who I share it with is . . . Well, you've read what they say about me at the check-out counter. That I slept with professors. It isn't true. It's made me very bitter, and it's hurt the woman I'm with. She's stood by me though. And a lot of the songs on the album are dedicated to her. Oh, would you be sure to mention that?

Martha: Erin, this is for October.

Erin: Oh, God. I'm sorry. What week is this? I came all prepared to talk about my lifestyle. Listen, find a way to talk about the loft, O.K.? Artie needs some work.
SPECTACLE(S)

BY

The V-Girls