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TO MOVE, TO DRESS, TO WORK, TO ACT
PLAYING GENDER AND RACE IN 1970S CALIFORNIA ART
Julia Bryan-Wilson
TO MOVE

To wander the streets in California in the early 1970s was to court some curious encounters. In San Francisco, Hibiscus, the charismatic central figure of the fabled drag troupe the Cockettes, might glide past with glitter in his beard, full makeup, and a theatrical outfit from another time and place (see fig. 3.1, overleaf, and fig. 3.4). Or artist Linda Mary Montano could traipse by in a blue prom dress, tap shoes, and an elaborate chicken-feather headdress. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, the Chicano collective Asco could be spotted marching down Whittier Boulevard in their Walking Mural (fig. 3.2). Costumed as absurdly vivified icons, the group portrayed caricatures of typical mural imagery—including the Virgin of the Guadalupe and an inverted Christmas tree, which was actually the artist Gronk in tiered vintage chiffon skirts.

Man/woman, woman/bird, human/tree: What sorts of creatures are these? And should we consider these gestures performance art? Theater? Guerrilla protest? Or some altogether new combination? Each has been historicized in somewhat distinct realms: Hibiscus and the Cockettes are largely understood within the rubric of West Coast countercultural life, Montano is central to feminist art history, and Asco is heralded as a pioneering moment for Chicano art and Conceptualism. Seen together in the context of the exhibition State of Mind, however, these street interventions clearly also had significant commonalities—separate snapshots within a much larger photo album of costumed California practices. The three examples above employ cast-off, used, or found clothing (indicating thrift due to lack of resources as well as a keen-eyed scavenger aesthetic), and all three are engaged in an exaggerated or unraveled version of masculinity and femininity, from Hibiscus’s queer Madame Butterfly to Montano’s embodiment of woman-as-egg-bearer to Gronk’s flouncing neck ruff. All three also deploy whitened faces—though to quite different effects—which raises questions about race and how formations of race, gender, and sexuality are complexly intertwined. Indeed, this essay asserts that California in the early 1970s fostered a unique flowering of diverse practices that used dress and play to upend or trouble conventional codes of race, gender, and sexuality. It is organized episodically, focusing on a series of action verbs—taking off on Richard Serra’s famed Verb List Compilation: Actions to Relate to Oneself (1967–68)—in order to point
Fig. 3.2 Linda Mary Montana, *Chicken Dance:* The Streets of San Francisco, 1972. Performance documentation.

Fig. 3.3 Asco (Glugio “Gronk” Nicandro, Patssi Valdez, Willie Herrón Ill, and Harry Gamboa Jr.), *Walking Mural,* 1972. Performance documentation (left to right: Valdez, Herrón, and Gronk).
Fig. 3.4 Cockettes, Madame Butterfly at Sonoma State College, 1970. Performance documentation. Photo: Fayette Hauser.
toward the vitality and animating force of bodies in space. Whether gussying up or stripping down, dancing or walking, artists’ gestures contested notions of cultural identity.

Such bodies in motion were intimately (if sometimes obliquely) connected to other kinds of movements—namely, social movements. In the early 1970s, many artists were swept up in the tide of transformative upheavals and revolutions within the United States as the civil rights movement, feminism, and gay liberation challenged how race, gender, and sexuality were defined and embodied. Peter Selz has argued that California art since 1945 was shaped by the particular regional formations and political agitations specific to the West Coast. The conjunction of alternative cultures and experimentation in art led to a rare openness toward Conceptualism and performance, and the blossoming of feminism and queer lifestyles in California infused such work with a special awareness of bodily politics.

Hence the Cockettes were a defiant San Francisco phenomenon, an outgrowth of its famed gay and lesbian scene. And Montano has stated that the local artistic community nurtured her early actions, especially its permissive and accepting gender dynamics, declaring the early 1970s in the Bay Area “performance ecstasy time.” The late 1960s and early 1970s were also a time in which California took the lead as a key site of civil rights resistance, with the formation of the Black Panther Party in Oakland in 1966, the organization of farm workers in the Central Valley, the occupation of Alcatraz Island by activists in the American Indian Movement, and the flowering of the Brown Power movement in Southern California. Asco on the move down Whittier Boulevard had direct connections to East Los Angeles-based Chicano liberation strategies of creative protest. With its queer blendings—Gronk camping it up as a decorative Christmas symbol—Walking Mural further “suggested how nationalism occluded issues of gender and sexuality within the Chicano movement,” as Chon A. Noriega writes.  

Why might this kind of gender play have been so prevalent within California art at this moment? And what does "playing gender" mean? It was a phrase in circulation in the era, as is evidenced by the following: “He is playing masculine because she is playing feminine. She is playing feminine because he is playing masculine. . . . She is stifling under the triviality of her femininity. The world is groaning beneath the terrors of his masculinity. . . . How do we call off the game?” So begins the preface to Masculine/Feminine, a collection of texts related to the burgeoning women’s liberation movement, published in 1969. Coedited by husband and wife Theodore and Betty Roszak, this foreword lays out some of the stakes of radical gender critique in this moment. Though thinkers such as philosopher Judith Butler would later refine and theorize the idea of gender as a systematized, repetitive series of gestures over time, the Roszaks use the theatrical notion of “playing” to point out that the roles of male and female are not fixed and stable but rather a “game” of relational, ever-shifting identities implicated in power.
TO DRESS

Montano’s *Chicken Dance: The Streets of San Francisco* was performed in 1972 in nine different public spaces in the city, including “museums, galleries, and the Golden Gate Bridge”—at this last location, Montano was picked up by the suicide prevention squad for holding up traffic. In a photograph taken outside the Hotel Regent, she spreads her wings wide while a prim older woman, complete with gloves and handbag, pauses to take her in. The spectator’s white hat formally echoes the flamboyant bird cap worn by the artist, and this parallel underscores how both the older woman’s “normal” clothing and the artist’s eccentric get-up are charged with carrying social norms about comportment and sartorial choice. Both outfits take the measure of gender identity—in the case of Montano, the proper ball gown is undone by both its unusual accessories and its spatial and temporal displacement. Instead of being worn inside a dance hall of long ago, the dress is twirled and swooped on the street alone in bright daylight.

Other feminist artists in California at this moment, including well-known artists Lynn Hershman and Eleanor Antin, used costumes, uniforms, and other forms of dress to comment on gender roles. Lesser-known figures were similarly engaged in questioning the importance of dress as a form of social identification. Bonnie Sherk, for instance,
commenced a series in which she worked temporarily in a number of service jobs and decided to consciously reframe these roles as performance pieces. Uniforms are often required for such positions, and Sherk donned various outfits as she “played the part” of her employment. As a waitress she wore the requisite black-and-white nylon dress with a plaid apron; a bouffant wig completed her stereotypical look. Sherk’s intervention here might be termed hushed or inverted drag, for though she passes, undetectable, as “normal,” she in fact draws attention to the strangeness of so-called ordinary work clothes like those of waitresses and cooks. Sherk was especially interested in how our “cultural costumes” are implicated in the wider theatricalization of society, laden with custom and ritual.

Susan Mogul’s wry video Dressing Up (fig. 3.6) from 1973 likewise highlights that garments are always freighted as markers not only of gender and sexuality but also as signifiers of status, money, and class. In this short piece, the naked artist faces the camera and slowly gets dressed while discussing the purchase of each item that she puts on. Clothes tell stories; they register certain familial patterns and habits about spending and saving. “My mother brought me up on sales—never buy anything full price,” she recounts as she matter-of-factly chomps CornNuts. Dressing Up was made under the auspices of the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts); as such, it emphasizes the West Coast as an especially fertile ground for feminist thought. Institutions such as CalArts (with faculty Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro) and UC San Diego (with artists such as Martha Rosler) alongside initiatives like Redstockings West, the Berkeley-based Women’s History Research Project (started by Laura X in 1968 as the first feminist archive in the country), the Women’s Building in Los Angeles (which opened in 1973), and the Los Angeles Women’s Liberation Center (founded in 1970) created loose affiliations between feminist artists and activists. What is more, though the gender revolution was palpable across the country, much attention

Fig. 3.5 Bonnie Sherk, Waitress in Well Liked and Learned Lawyers Win Cases, 1974. Performance documentation from Exhibit J2 Live, UC Davis Art Gallery, Davis, California. Image: Courtesy of the artist, San Francisco.
Fig. 3.6 Susan Mogul, Dressing Up, 1975. Video: black and white; sound; 7:06 min.
was focused on San Francisco as an historical hotbed of gay and lesbian community formation, which dovetailed with the alternative, fringe edges of the counterculture as exemplified by the wildly inventive Cockettes with their emphasis on gloriously excessive self-styling.

But the focus on clothes and appearance was not the exclusive realm of women or queer artists. Take, for instance, Chris Burden's piece I Became a Secret Hippy (1971; fig. 3.7). For this work, a friend hammered a biker's stud into Burden's chest and shaved his head; the artist then wore a dark suit (he referred to it as "FBI clothes") to cover up the hardware implanted in his sternum. Though he appears to be a regular man, he carries with him an undetectable element of rebellion, like an undercover agent whose long sleeves hide tattooed arms. Burden here is "playing masculine" as much as Sherk's waitress plays feminine. Unlike Sherk's inverted drag, Burden injects an element of physical pain and bodily injury to parody straight or "square" culture of male respectability, or what Andrew Perchuk and Helaine Posner have referred to as "masculine masquerade."9 Given that the FBI is clichéd as a province of white men, it is crucial to recognize that Burden's work is also about race—that is, about the powers and privileges of white skin. Whiteness in such performances should not be naturalized, taken as invisible, or cast as insignificant, for such racial marking never is; Hibiscus's appropriative, orientalizing Kabuki makeup and Montano's self-described "whiteface" make that clear.

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**Fig. 3.7** Chris Burden, I Became a Secret Hippy, 1971. Performance at Museum of Conceptual Art (MOCA), San Francisco, California.

**Fig. 3.8** Linda Montano, Home Nursing, 1972. Performance documentation.
HOME NURSING

I WILL NURSE YOU BACK TO HEALTH
WITH MASSAGE, CHICKEN SOUP, BEDSIDE
VISITS, TEMPERATURE TAKING, HAND
AND FOREHEAD HOLDING, ETC.

ROSE MOUNTAIN

A.K.A. CHICKEN CO. INC.
LINDA MONTANO
TO WORK

The adoption of alter egos of different professions was an important strategy in the Conceptual and performance practices of West Coast artists. For example, Sherk's decision to brand her workaday job as a waitress a piece of performance art was preceded by another such project, Short Order Cook. Over the course of nearly a year (June 1973–May 1974), Sherk worked the night shift every weekend at a donut shop in the Castro district of San Francisco. She wore jeans and a T-shirt that read “Florida,” topped with an apron and a chef’s hat. Though she garnered the typical cook's wage as she fried up eggs and buttered toast, she also labored under the rubric that such actions could be repositioned as art.

What kind of "work" is this, and how did it function as "art" if it was imperceptible to her bosses and customers alike? Conceptual art often thwarts expectations of art's legibility, as ordinary objects or actions become art solely by virtue of nomination. In addition, in Short Order Cook and Waitress, Sherk questions the porous line between art making and other forms of work, drawing attention to how various forms of labor are differently valued and compensated, not least with respect to gender and class. If it is somehow less surprising to see her in a waitress outfit than executing duties typically associated with working-class men, it is no wonder—short-order cooks are one of the most male-dominated professions, and waitresses one of the most heavily feminized, in the gendered "occupational segregation" of the U.S. labor market.10

Montano, too, undertook wage labor as art. In her series Odd Jobs (1973), she printed up cards announcing her availability for "cleaning attics and cellars, interior painting, gardening, light hauling."11 For Montano, this was an attempt to integrate making money with an artistic sense of awareness, and she noted that she "liked what [she] was doing when [she] called it art, probably because [she] was in a state of wakefulness which [she] associated with the art-making process."12 Appropriate clothing became critical to Montano's ability to inhabit such roles; in her piece Home Nursing (1972; fig. 3.8), the artist bought a nurse's dress at a thrift store and told her friends she would make house calls when they were sick. Her attempt to achieve a more heightened existence through art-as-work, as well as her experiments with spiritual notions of fulfillment and purpose with regard to labor, were somewhat distinct to the West Coast.

While artists in California were performing gendered, classed work—literally inhabiting various occupations like housepainters and cooks—East Coast artists took up the issue of artistic labor quite differently. In 1969, artists in New York organized themselves into the Art Workers' Coalition, a short-lived but influential organization that came together to push for artists' rights. They began to identify themselves as "art workers," regardless of what kind of art they made (and many Conceptualists were in the ranks of the coalition). At the same time that they embraced the term "worker," they were ambivalent about their association with actual blue-collar laborers. Aside from Minimal artist Carl Andre, who consistently wore overalls, those in the Art Workers' Coalition did not generally use drag or utilize dress as a way to secure their somewhat fraught affiliation with the working class.13

Other approaches to representing work were taken up by California-based Conceptualist Allan Sekula, who employed documentary photography to depict the somewhat deadening managerial routines of labor. In Untitled Slide Sequence (figs. 3.9–3.12), from 1972, he photographed workers at an aerospace plant in San Diego as they left the factory at the end of the day shift. Taken during the Vietnam War, these images were snapped covertly over the space of about twenty minutes. Men in suits and ties jostle alongside those in more casual attire such as zippered sport coats, their security badges still pinned to their clothes. The sequence of images is poignant; the faces of some of the workers who stream toward the exit are weary from the efforts of the day, in an instance of what Sekula has described as the relentless disciplining of the working body.14 Yet some appear to visibly relax as they approach the top of the staircase. One image captures
two women with similar haircuts walking side by side, smiling with conspiratorial grins. Next to them, a man ascends the stairs, his jacket slung over his shoulders as an indication that the day is over. The demarcation between on and off the clock is often registered in these small adjustments in wardrobe, as personal comfort takes over from the regulatory force of workplace dress.

Just as defrocking signals the end of a shift, so too are outfits changed when certain forms of work begin. In Martha Rosler's video *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), she recites the alphabet in a deadpan parody of a cooking show; she begins by donning an apron, which stands for the letter A. With the apron, she suits up for the feminist lesson that commences, and her alphabet of kitchen implements and gestures grows violent in order to resist the naturalization of domestic labor as the sphere of women. Indeed, the early 1970s were a time in which feminists around the globe organized to raise awareness about the invisible, uncompensated, and undervalued labor of housework, the vast majority of which was done by women. Utilizing Marxist critiques about the gendered division of labor, theorists and activists advocated for such housework as childrearing, cooking, and cleaning to be fairly paid and, in 1972, founded the International Wages for Housework Campaign.¹⁵
Figs. 3.9-3.12 Allan Sekula, _United Slide Sequence_ (detail), 1972. Twenty-five black-and-white slides in slide carousel, dimensions variable.
Fig. 3.13 Suzanne Lacy, Map, 1973: a Happening with Allan Kaprow and California Institute of the Arts students that began in Valenci a and ended in the Vernon meatpacking district in Los Angeles. Photo: Susan Mogul, courtesy of the artist.
TO ACT

As Angela Davis notes, "Although the history of this state is often told as a story of renewal, hope, and utopian possibility, a parallel story of disaster and catastrophe—of a dystopia shaped by fires, earthquakes, war, and prisons—also informs the California imaginary." Many artists have confronted these darker edges of the Golden State: Fred Lonidier explored governmental repression and union activism, and Suzanne Lacy's feminist performances raised awareness about violence against women. Lacy in particular has been concerned about spectacles of violence; in the early seventies, she made her Monster Series that critically commented on various aspects of dehumanization and objectification. Maps (1973; fig. 3.13), which was produced for a class taught by Allan Kaprow at CalArts, involved an extended scavenger hunt for its participants in which they followed Lacy's maps to different destinations around Los Angeles, such as a hospital for the developmentally delayed and an abandoned slaughterhouse. For the final segment of the piece, the participants were given a meatpacker's gown to wear as they attempted to put lamb organs into a shape resembling a live animal. In this bloody work, it is not the artist's but the viewer's body that must costume itself and assume a potentially unfamiliar, even destabilizing or uncomfortable, role, as the gown interpolates its wearer into a butcher.

In his 1971 book The Performing Self, literary critic Richard Poirier argues that performance—which he defines as "any effort to find accommodation for human shapes or sounds"—is inevitably "an act that partakes of political meaning." Lacy's Maps partakes in play-acting, but it is also acting as activism: California Conceptual and performance artists circa 1970 illuminate how such seemingly simplistic gestures as walking and getting dressed ramify into wider issues, from gender identity to violence against animals. To walk is not only to propel the body simply through space but also, depending on the context, to join a major march—think of the historic civil rights "walks" through Alabama. And demonstrations with bodies on the street were a crucial aspect of 1960s and 1970s protest politics. On both the East and the West Coasts there was a wealth of activity by groups like the San Francisco Diggers, Bread and Puppet Theater, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and El Teatro Campesino that mixed theater with guerrilla street intervention. These groups catalyzed a wide variety of public interventions that were both improvisational and tightly scripted, from distributing free food to staging plays with elaborate sets and masks for political events, such as rallies for farm workers' rights or protests against racism and the Vietnam War. Though Bread and Puppet was founded in New York and then moved to Vermont, the troupe also traveled and performed in Northern California; they shared the bill with the mime troupe and Teatro Campesino at the 1968 Radical Theater Festival held at San Francisco State College.

Many California artists were in an explicit dialogue with the wider context of theatrical antiwar activity; Terry Fox, for example, performed his controversial Defoliation at Berkeley's University Art Museum in 1970 (see fig. 1.25, p. 39). For this piece, Fox employed a flamethrower (similar to the type used in Vietnam) to methodically and systematically burn a section of flowers planted on campus. This aggressive act, in which Fox performs the part of a military man in order to register his dissent against such policies, could be seen as another iteration of drag. "The world is groaning beneath the terrors of his masculinity," write the Roszaks; the war is "playing masculine" at its most imperialist and horrifying.

Feminist artists, too, were commenting on the gendered dynamic of war; in Rosler's Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful photomontages (1967–72; figs. 1.27, p. 41, and 3.14, p. 212), first published in an alternative newspaper, various well-coiffed women go about their household activities while the war rages outside their windows. Rosler's collages comment not only on female domestic labor—a woman vacuums drapes, oblivious to the soldiers behind her curtains—but also on the brutal racialization of the Vietnam War. Again insisting that gender and race are always mutually interpenetrating, it is significant that the models in the images are overwhelmingly
Fig. 3.14 Martha Rosler. *Cleaning the Drapes*, from the series *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful, 1967-72*. Photomontage; 20 × 24 in.

Fig. 3.15 Bernie Boston. *Flower Power*, 1967. Gelatin silver print. © Estate of Bernie Boston. Courtesy Rochester Institute of Technology Archive Collections.
white; this collage, featuring a potentially nonwhite woman, is a striking exception. There are several interiors in which the majority of furnishings, walls, floors, and surfaces are white as well. In Rosier’s works, whiteness is not a neutral background but a powerful organizing force and almost blinding visual field.

Such hard-hitting protests against the Vietnam War might seem disconnected from the somewhat more fanciful image of Hibiscus playing dress-up in full drag. Yet there are surprising continuities between antiwar organizing and the countercultural, queer, and feminist refusal to live by traditional gender roles: both modes of protest insist upon remaking a broken and damaging system by imagining a world of other possibilities, whether it be whimsical dances or deadly serious defoliations. One of the most iconic photographs of the Vietnam War era is of a young man tenderly inserting a flower into the barrel of a National Guardsman’s gun at a demonstration at the Pentagon in 1967—that young man is Hibiscus (then George Harris, Jr.), a few years before the founding of the Cockettes. This action was organized by Michael Bowen, who brought two hundred pounds of daisies to the Pentagon in what could be called a mass performance-art protest event. (Bowen also organized the first “human be-in,” in 1967.) The photograph depicts bodies: acting, moving, confronting each other, but also held back in tense confrontation. Harris’s tousled wisps of blonde hair and the almost sculptural swooping lines of his cowl-necked pullover stand out against
the sharply defined helmets and uniforms of the National Guardsmen, indicating a corporeal freedom unbounded by the strict, masculine military dress code.

Forty years later, the work of these West Coast artists, activists, and countercultural figures continues to echo in contemporary art, especially for artists who grapple with issues of race, gender, and sexuality. For instance, Los Angeles–based Carlee Fernandez looks to the legacies of both Asco’s costumes and Montano’s interspecial drag in her Bear Studies (fig. 3.16) series from 2004, in which she partially dressed herself as an animal and practiced for two months wearing parts of a bear hide as preparation for a series of photographs. Gender inversion, body modification, and fantastical cross-dressing along the lines of the Cockettes continue to be a significant strategy for artists throughout the United States who explore queer issues, including as diverse figures as Kalup Linzy and Ryan Trecartin. Taking the opposite tactic—inhabiting the purported “normal” as Sherk and Burden did—is also an idea that has traction for current practice. Harking back to Sherk’s works in the early 1970s, Oakland–based Sean A. Fletcher worked for several years as a life-insurance agent as a performance piece.

In addition, the potential parallels (and disjunctions) between the Vietnam War era and our own political moment, in which the United States is engaged in an intractable war overseas, is widely addressed by contemporary artists. To end with one final example, in Sharon Hayes’s ongoing series In the Near Future (begun in 2005), she stands in public holding protest posters, many of which are citations from late 1960s and early 1970s demonstrations. Hayes, who received her MFA at UCLA and hence is indebted to the history of California Conceptualism, pointedly does not dress up in period garb as she wields her carefully replicated signs. Her slogans are drawn from civil rights, women’s liberation, queer rights, and antiwar activism; in one performance, she held the “I Am a Man” sign made famous during the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike. The performance does more than address the instability of histor-ical memory—for a queer white woman to stand alone with this sign (originally held by black sanitation workers) also brings issues of the readability or alleged transparency of sexuality, gender, race, and class to the foreground. Unlike Harris with his daisy at the Pentagon protest of 1967, Hayes, in this work, has no cadre of supporters or a hostile swarm of military men in front of her—just her own body and signs that point back to a time when bodies acted in the street, both to create new forms of art and to try to create a new society.

NOTES
7 There is a wealth of such work, and I can glance at only a few examples here; one good compendium of performances from this era is Moira Roth, ed., The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970–1980 (Los Angeles: Astro Arzt, 1983).
11 Montano, unpaginated.
12 Montano, unpaginated.
15 For one signature text on this issue, see Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community (Bristol, UK: Falling Water Press, 1972).
19 For more on how anxious masculinity also shapes how Americans have commemorated the Vietnam War, see Marita Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).