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This study examines contemporary American artist Deborah Kass’s (b. 1952) series entitled *The Warhol Project* (1992-2000) in which she draws formal inspiration and stylistic cues from Pop artist and icon Andy Warhol (1928-1987) and creates portraits of Jewish women who had an affect on Kass directly. The main subject of the project is Barbra Streisand (b. 1942), an individual who Kass identified with and idolized. Kass’s work is directly linked to both her experience growing up Jewish, and her identity as a lesbian. Her varied and ultimately minority point of view enables her to question orthodox standards of beauty and subjective normalcy. She creates stark contradictions within emphatic popular imagery by depicting strong, independent Jewish women centrally positioned as iconic symbols, who replace typical Pop icons championed by Warhol. Thus, Kass attempts to open the discourse of painting and make it serve as a means of representing herself.
I am extremely grateful to my entire thesis committee; Dr. Mikiko Hirayama, Dr. Gila Safran-Naveh, and especially my committee chair, Dr. Kimberly Paice. They each brought something special to the discussion, and I feel that this work grew out of the classes I was fortunate enough to take with all of them. I especially appreciate Kim’s willingness to consider all of my ideas, no matter how crazy they seemed (male figure skating costumes come to mind). Her help in working through and fleshing out my ideas was so beneficial, and she always made herself available and gave me a thorough and thoughtful critique, regardless of her busy schedule. Credit is also due to Deborah Kass for taking the time to answer my questions and provide me with invaluable, previously unpublished, material, and her own personal insight.
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Introduction

Let Us Now Praise Famous Women:

In my thesis I examine how the American artist Deborah Kass (b. 1952) confronts and challenges cultural stereotypes forced on ethnic identities due to the patriarchal nature of the world of art with a series entitled *The Warhol Project* (1992-2000). The *Project* features Warhol-inspired portraits primarily of prominent Jewish women (and a few men) who had an affect on Kass directly. Kass has rendered portraits of Barbra Streisand (b. 1942), Linda Nochlin (b. 1931), Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), and even her own grandmother. While she draws formal inspiration and stylistic cues from Pop artist and icon Andy Warhol (1928-1987) with images in *The Warhol Project* directly modeled on Warhol’s pop-art silk screens, Kass does not glorify the cult of celebrity the same way Warhol did in his work. Instead, she features her own personal cultural heroines, relying heavily on her experiences as a gay Jewish woman.

After receiving her undergraduate degree from Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh in 1974, Kass moved to New York City and subsequently came out, openly identifying herself as a lesbian to friends and colleagues. On the experience, she wrote, “When I came back to New York in 1975… it was the height of second-wave feminism. For me, at age 23 and right out of school, it was extremely encouraging.”¹ Later in her life Kass wrote about her admiration for Streisand, observing that, “She was really in touch with her difference as an attribute. It was fantastic. For me it was as if she was saying: ‘I’m me; I’m not changing my nose… I’m not

changing my ethnicity…’ I figured if she could do it, so could I.”

Comments such as these hint at the ways that Kass’ work is directly linked to both her experience growing up Jewish, and her identity as a lesbian. Her varied and ultimately minority point of view enables her to question orthodox standards of beauty and subjective normalcy as well as anti-Semitism in American culture. In the current study of Kass’s work, I consider the ways in which art and culture can challenge female stereotypes. Kass creates stark contradictions within emphatic popular imagery by depicting strong, independent Jewish women centrally positioned as iconic symbols who replace typical Pop icons. Thus, Kass signals cultural change and offers lessons about the construction of identity and meaningful individual art.

In 1972, prior to receiving her undergraduate degree from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Kass was a student in the Whitney Museum Independent Studies Program (New York, NY) and earlier, from 1968-70, she studied at the Art Students League, also in New York City. Her work can be found in collections of the Cincinnati Art Museum (Cincinnati, OH), The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York, NY), The Jewish Museum (New York, NY), The Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY), The Whitney Museum of American Art (New York, NY), and the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, MA) as well as several private collections. Vincent Fremont and the Paul Kasmin Gallery, both in New York City, currently represent Kass.

In order to understand Kass’ work within a larger context of art and cultural history, I look to information from a variety of area studies, namely interdisciplinary texts dealing with Jewish identity, feminist art theory, Jewish feminism, gender politics, modern and contemporary

art, and of course biographical information not only pertaining to Kass, but also to Streisand and Warhol. It was particularly beneficial to consider sources in which Kass directly discusses her art or sources that contain interviews with the artist. Two extremely useful texts that provide first-hand information on Kass are Patricia Cronin’s “A Conversation on Lesbian Subjectivity and Painting with Deborah Kass,” in *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* (U.S.A.) (1993), and “Art After Stonewall: 12 Artists Interviewed,” by Holland Cotter, in *Art in America* (1994). Cronin’s interview with Kass examines the ways in which being a woman, and more specifically, a lesbian directly affect the artist’s work. Cotter’s article is particularly informative and includes the artist’s coming out story, the tale of her fascination with Streisand, as well as her reasons for being so interested in Warhol. Discussing her early interest in Pop art by Warhol, Kass stated that, “The *Before-and-After* nose job painting [Warhol] did in the ‘60s was such an experience for me as a Jewish girl… it had such a different resonance in my community than it did to Andy in his community.” Warhol’s painting *Before and After* (1960) shows two side-by-side images of two different noses, one pretty and gentile, the other hooked, and in Kass’ eyes, decidedly Jewish. Statements such as this one by Kass not only provide insight into her early life, but also touch on the concept of idealized beauty in the Jewish community, a cultural concern that had significant bearing on her creation of *The Warhol Project*.

The book *too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities* (1996) was published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name that was held at the Jewish Museum in New York City. Edited by Norman L. Kleeblatt, this collection of essays is one of the most comprehensive resources with regard to Jewish identity in the world of contemporary art from the early 1980s to the late 1990s. Kleeblatt’s essay, “‘Passing’ into Multiculturalism,”

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4 Cronin herself is also an artist and Deborah Kass’s life partner.
5 Cotter, 57.
conceptually situates the exhibition works, including several pieces by Kass, within a larger context of Jewish identity and ethnicity as what is missing in the discourse on diversity and difference in contemporary art. Although somewhat brief in his examinations, Kleeblatt presents a compelling survey of art and artists in relation to Jewish identity since the early 1980s. Another text that provides an excellent survey of Jewish identity in art is *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History* (1996), edited by Catherine M. Soussloff. Essays in that book examine artists’ works from the nineteenth century to the 1980s. Lisa Bloom’s essay, “Ethnic Notions and Feminist Strategies of the 1970s: Some Work by Judy Chicago and Eleanor Antin,” considers the context of Kass’ well-known contemporaries, Chicago (b. 1939) and Antin (b. 1935), who, like Kass, were exploring issues regarding women, feminism, “Jewishness,” and identity.

As indicated above, the concept of beauty as it pertains to American women is something that Kass is attracted to in Warhol’s work, which is to say it resonated with her desire to appropriate and use his style and strategies in her own art focusing specifically on *Jewish* American women. Thus, exploring “beauty” will lead me to consider the insights of a leading scholar in the field of Jewish studies, Sander L. Gilman, who has done extensive research on the scientific and historic theories of Jewish “otherness.” Gilman’s work, notably, his *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (1990) and *The Jew’s Body* (1991), focuses primarily on the supposed physical differences between Jews and Gentiles. In *The Jew’s Body*, for example, Gilman explores the Jewish voice, the Jewish nose, and even the Jewish murderer, relying on historical facts to expose how common the physical and psychological portrayal of the Jew as “other” has been. On the contrary, Riv-Ellen Prell explores Jewish gender-specific stereotypes and differences. In the essay “Why Jewish Princesses Don’t Sweat: Desire and Consumption in Postwar American Jewish Culture,” (1996) Prell focuses on
representations of the Jewish woman, wife, and mother using source material as varied as song lyrics and standup comedy. What these authors offer me is a set of well-constructed cultural studies that pertain specifically to Jewishness and iconography as mutual, cultural constructions.

Perhaps the most helpful information came from *The Warhol Project* (1999) edited by Michael Plante. Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name at the Newcomb Art Gallery at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, the catalogue features essays by Linda Nochlin, Robert Rosenblum, Maurice Berger, Mary Anne Staniszewski, and Plante himself. Additionally, regarding primary research, I was in contact with Kass directly through email and received insight from the artist herself. In addition to answering my questions, Kass also provided me with the transcript to a talk given at the National Academy of Design as part of a panel discussion moderated by Katy Siegel on the occasion of “The High Times, Hard Times: Painting in New York 1967-1975,” entitled “That 70s Show.” This discussion provides many insights into Kass’s thoughts on coming into her own artistic being in the 1970s.

I employ an interdisciplinary approach in this study, looking at source materials from various area studies, as indicated above, on such themes as humor, literature, film, and popular culture. I contextualize the concept of Jewish identity in Kass’ work by pulling from this varied body of scholarship to emphasize both iconographic and socio-historical methods of image analysis. My scholarship also benefits from Judaic studies, feminist and queer theory, and art history, theory, and criticism.

In Chapter 1, “Revisionist Art History: The Early Work of Deborah Kass,” I introduce biographical information about Kass and provide a survey of her work and career until *The Warhol Project*, specifically focusing on *The Art History Series* (1989-1991). I make the case that throughout her career Kass uses recurring themes, and her previous work sets the stage for
her exploration of identity and Jewish culture in *The Warhol Project*. I also briefly examine the ways in which the Jewish woman’s body is viewed, and how these views have led to Jewish stereotypes such as the “Jewish American Princess.” 6 While I provide an overview of *The Art History Series* in general terms, I also turn to specific works to support my claim that Kass challenges stereotypes and traditional notions of beauty and identity concerning Jewish women. I also briefly introduce *The Warhol Project*, which is examined more thoroughly in Chapter 2.

In Chapter 2, “Rewriting Language: Deconstructing Andy Warhol Through *The Warhol Project*,” I further explore *The Warhol Project* in an effort to explain how and why Kass turned to Warhol in an effort to convey her message. The artist’s interest in Warhol stems from her lack of identification with high modernism and a love for post-painterly abstraction that began with Frank Stella (b. 1936). I make the case that while Kass is a self-proclaimed fan of Warhol’s work, her appropriations offer a critique of his work as they present what is lacking in Warhol’s portraits: ethnicity and otherness. Kass informs a new reading of Warhol’s work as she replaces his mode of desire with her own gaze and addresses things that she can identify with, namely the notion of Jewishness and her responsibility in the art world as a lesbian. This chapter relies heavily on Kass’s personal beliefs.

In Chapter 3, “The Way She Is: The Significance of Barbra Streisand,” I explore not only the story of *Yentl* (a tale of a young woman who must masquerade in drag to study Jewish law first written by Isaac Bashevis Singer in 1962, and twenty-one years later turned into a movie by Streisand herself) and Streisand’s role as the transgender protagonist, but also the role that Streisand plays in the Jewish community in order to contextualize Kass’ deliberate choice to

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6 In the essay “Why Jewish Princesses Don’t’ Sweat: Desire and Consumption in Postwar American Jewish Culture,” (in *too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities*, 74) Riv Ellen-Prell notes that a study of Jewish culture must include serious consideration of gender, the body, and sexuality.
feature the actress in subdivisions of *The Warhol Project*, the *Jewish Jackie* and *My Elvis Series*. I will set Streisand as Kass’ projected ideal and the most important figure in *The Warhol Project*.

This proposed study develops from various source materials. Its purpose is to show how Kass explores the ways that art and culture can challenge Jewish American female stereotypes specifically in *The Warhol Project*, where the artist usurps the gaze of a gay man fascinated with beautiful and famous women with that of a Jewish feminist lesbian. By appropriating the work of Warhol and relying heavily on her varied life experiences, Kass does not just question notions of conventional beauty; she presents a new symbol of beauty.
Chapter 1

Revisionist Art History:
The Early Work of Deborah Kass

I used art history the way other painters used light, color and form. I used it as a given, a ground.\(^7\)

In 1960, an eight-year-old Deborah Kass had what was her self-described first major “art moment” in the presence of Pablo Picasso’s (1881-1973) portrait of feminist icon and writer, Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) [Figure 1]. Born in Malagá, Spain, Picasso had moved to Paris in 1904 where he became friends with fellow artists and writers and played a key role in the development of new artistic styles. Stein was one of the first Americans to respond positively to the burgeoning art scene in Europe and became an early patron and lifelong friend of Picasso. The artist began his monumental portrait of Stein in 1905, at the end of his Harlequin Period. The portrait depicts Stein sitting in an armchair wearing a brown overcoat and skirt. Picasso was influenced by Iberian art, and the dramatic results of this striking portrait are well known in artistic and literary circles alike. Discussing the life-changing moment of experiencing this stunning portrait Kass wrote:

There was an instant identification…there was something about this portrait and this person that mesmerized me. And I figured out later, going to the Met and MOMA, that Picasso never painted another woman like that, who looked like that, with that kind of presence, who wasn’t a thing! … I don’t know whether it was because Gertrude Stein was an artist or because she was a Jewish woman or because she was a dyke\(^8\), but I’m convinced that at eight I got a lot of this information subliminally.\(^9\)


\(^8\) Originally the term “dyke” was a derogatory marker for a masculine or butch woman. The description has, however, been reappropriated and reclaimed by Kass and others as a positive
Stein was an accomplished individual in her own right, and very different from the harlequins, saltimbanques, sex workers, beggars and circus performers that Picasso employed as models throughout his career. Kass was drawn to Picasso’s portrayal of a consummate and powerful self-possessed woman, and it in the presence of this portrait the artist’s artistic consciousness is born. Kass’s work from thereon out evinces her predilection for fellow Jewish women and like Picasso’s portrait of Stein, aims to challenge the traditional discourse of painting by introducing unusual icons that represent what has remained missing from the canon of figurative painting.

In 1972, twelve years after her artistic awakening in the presence of Stein, by means of Picasso, Kass began her foray into introducing new representations to the canon of art history with the erotic image La Dee Doo Da (In the Field) (1972) [Figure 2]. The image is a thickly painted self-portrait featuring the artist naked with her legs spread from one side of the image to another. In the lower left corner of the canvas, just under the pale bare leg of Kass, is a predominant “1972” rendered in blue. In the lower right corner of the canvas is the artist’s signature “D.KASS” depicted in the same block style and bright blue color. The body of the figure appears slumped forward and both breasts fall down towards her thighs. The oversized bright red lips of her mouth echo the lips of her vagina and the tongue poking out of Kass’s mouth resonates the red mountainous mass of paint behind the figure. Kass’s curls cascade over her shoulders and above her head is a caricature of a man with a bulbous nose, wearing an orange shirt and blue skullcap, operating a propeller plane that leaves a trail of billowing smoke behind it. A mass of multi-colored circular forms, originating behind the figure’s head, stretches term of self-description and identification. Michel Foucault discusses reclaimed words as a form of “reverse discourse” in History of Sexuality: Volume I.

across the picture plane, and framing the upper portion of the paint is the phrase, “LA DEE DOO DA,” illustrated in yellow block letters.

In an interview with Mary Anne Staniszewski, Kass spoke of her intentions with La Dee Doo Da saying, “I’m putting myself in the field, in the field of painting, in the field of vision.” Her intention is signified in the parenthetical reference included in the title, “In the Field.” This image is imperative because it represents one of Kass’s earliest attempts to introduce “herself” into the field of painting as figure and ground, genre, and medium. However, Kass represents more than just herself. She symbolizes an entire group of people that is underrepresented in art. Three years after completing La Dee Doo Da, Kass came out, openly identifying herself as a lesbian to friends and colleagues. On the experience, she wrote, “When I came back to New York in 1975… it was the height of second-wave feminism. For me, at age 23 and right out of school, it was extremely encouraging.”

La Dee Doo Da is but one of Kass’s early attempts to open the discourse of painting and make it serve as a means of representing “herself,” a Jewish lesbian. Admitting the lacunae that exists in art, the artist once said, “It’s a big subject representing me and my absence in representation… a white, Jewish, lesbian.” This idea of representation and henceforth identity, in terms of exploration for lesbian and Jewish visibility, thematically dominates her early work. Kass regularly employed appropriation as a method, most frequently from old male masters. In this chapter I will explain that the artist’s early works, theoretically and formally, set the stage for the subsequent works in her The Warhol Project (1992-2000). I will also introduce The

10 Kass as quoted Staniszewski, 23.
12 Staniszewski, 30.
Warhol Project, which will be explored further in Chapter Two, and begin exploring a
connection between Kass’s early work and the ideas explored in her best-known project.

To begin, it is important to differentiate the term “appropriation” from its traditional
definitions. While the term carries negative connotations, especially in literary circles, I employ
the term in a positive way and will define it in terms of “détournement” and “parody.” The term
détournement originated with the Situationist International (SI), a group that grew out of the
Lettrist movement in Paris in the early 1950s. The SI was officially formed in 1957 and
disbanded in 1972. A Marxist and surrealist perspective on aesthetics and politics typified the
group’s beliefs. In 1959 the group defined détournement as:

The reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble… The two
fundamental laws of détournement are the loss of importance of each detourned
autonomous element — which may go so far as to completely lose its original
sense — and at the same time the organization of another meaningful ensemble
that confers on each element its new scope and effect.13

In the sense of this definition, Kass absolutely reuses preexisting artistic elements into a new
body of work. While she does not necessarily strip Warhol’s work of its original reading, Kass
does encourage a re-reading of the work.

In addition, Kass’s images ultimately parody well-established artists and their creations.
It has been noted that parody is the post-modern strategy, and those who are marginalized by a
dominant ideology have turned it into their mode of critique.14 As a result, the Other has seized
parody, trying to respond, critically and creatively, to the still predominantly white, heterosexual,
male culture in which they exist. Linda Hutcheon was one of the first scholars to declare that
post-modern artists work through parody. She defines parody as “a repetition with critical

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14 Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (London and New
York: Routledge, 1992), 35.
distance, which marks difference rather than similarity,” and it is to be viewed as a new form that develops from the old without actually destroying it as well as allowing one to speak to a discourse from within it without being totally recuperated by it.\(^\text{15}\) However, while Kass’s work can be read as a reminder of Western visual archives, it also reminds the viewer that parody, in order to be recognized, needs that archive as its fundamental prerequisite.\(^\text{16}\) Therefore, the canon of art history plays as large a role in Kass’s work as the artist’s own intentions.

Beginning in her early career Kass followed in the tradition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century masters and painted in the style of those who preceded her, which is fitting for someone who had ambitions to participate in the discipline of painting on a full scale.\(^\text{17}\) During the 1970s and 1980s Kass created exact reproductions of works by Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), Marsden Hartley (1877-1943), and Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) to name a few artists, deliberately to transform their artistic language into her own. While Kass was creating these imitations she was living and working in New York City, where a severely polarized art world has brought many challenges to female painters. As Linda Nochlin wrote in her 1972 landmark essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women artists,” painting had come to represent the language of patriarchy, and this sentiment was still prevalent in the 1980s. The most celebrated artists were all men; Francesco Clemente (b. 1952), Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945), and Julian Schnabel (b. 1951) were all breaking auction records. However, the work of these men was also heavily criticized for being “politically and aesthetically conservative neo-expressionism,” and their work was seen in direct opposition to the conceptually challenging

\(^\text{15}\) Hutcheon, 35.
\(^\text{17}\) Staniszewski, 24.
work of female artists like Barbara Kruger (b. 1945), Sherrie Levine (b. 1947), and Cindy Sherman (b. 1954).  

In addition, Lisa E. Bloom notes that until the 1990s public discussions of Jewishness in the New York art world were very rare. To combat the invisibility of Jews in the art world Rhonda Lieberman and Cary Leibowitz (b. 1963) put together a milestone exhibition titled Fear of a Jewish Planet: Let My People Show! At the Four Walls Gallery in Brooklyn, New York, in 1991. Bloom asserts that part of what made the show so monumental was that it explored the idea that Jews were not only trying to pass as non-Jews in the art world, they were also trying to hide their identities from other Jews as well. Despite the Jewish void in a male-dominated field, Kass remained dedicated to the medium and representing her identity. She endeavored to make herself an expert in her chosen field, while continually remaining sincerely committed to feminism.

It was in the 1980s and 1990s that Kass figured out what she wanted to communicate through her art. The void in traditional art historical discourse had become apparent to the artist. She was not represented. People like her were not represented. Her generation was not being represented, and Kass was ready to tackle the missing account. “Since we hadn’t been adequately represented in the culture in any way… I wanted to see us,” Kass said, “the way I did this was by taking my adopted language of modernism and postwar painting and making these languages represent me.” In the late 1980s and early 1990s Kass addressed this need for representation in the Art History Series (1989-1991), a collection of genre pieces that relied heavily on the history

18 Staniszewski, 24.
20 Staniszewski, 24.
21 Ibid., 25.
of painting. However, the Art History works were markedly different than Kass’s earlier replicas of works by Cézanne and other comparable artists, as she began combining well-known images from art history with popular culture and mass media in her images. That which had been previously unclear in Kass’s struggle to make the masculine tradition of painting speak for her (and to her), now became a deliberate goal to convey gender in her work.22

One of the first works in the series of paintings is Emissions Control (1980) [Figure 3]. The image is divided into five vertical panels that are read from left to right. The first panel is separated into two shapes. A square is shaded red-orange with black sketch marks emerging from the upper left corner and features an empty white cartoon-style speech outlined in black. Below, a blue rectangle contains a thick black outline of an erect penis. The next panel, an appropriation of Jackson Pollock’s style, consists of a black background with diagonal white drip formations. In this reuse of Pollock’s method, Kass is making style into something that can be appropriated. The successive image is taken from one of Kass’s landscapes and features waves crashing against geometric rock formations. A mauve panel follows, and the final scene includes a journalistic photograph of the Challenger disaster of 1986. A line of white clouds sweeps across a blue sky, and “THE END” is written in the lower left corner of the panel over a patch of painted red earth. Kass uses this image as a criticism of so called “masterpieces,” and “pokes fun at the overblown mythologies of [art], virility and genius common to the histories and histrionics of art.” in this image.23 Positioned as semen above the penis depicted in the first panel, and empty carton speech bubble suggests that, male (male artists’) emissions (works) are devoid of the supremacy they are normally shown. Furthermore, the combination of these six different

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22 Staniszewski, 25.
23 Ibid.
images encourages the viewer to question the mythologies of masculine power in various walks of life including anatomy, painting, and everyday life.

The search for representation in a male-dominated field is again visited in another work predating *The Warhol Project* entitled *How Do I Look* (1991) [Figure 4], also from the *Art History Series*. In *How Do I Look* Kass incorporates Picasso’s image of Stein with which she felt such a connection with at a young age with works of two so-called male masters, Gustave Courbet’s (1819-1877) *Les Dormeuses*, which is described as “floating in a field of pink flesh,” (1886) [Figure 5], and Jasper Johns’ (b. 1930) *The Critic Sees*, (1961) [Figure 6].

Courbet depicts an intimate scene of two nude women embracing passionately. Courbet’s oeuvre is heavily populated with erotic images of women, and such imagery caters to a larger collective of male fantasies. The thought of lesbian lovers “appeals to the heterosexual male… in that no other man is portrayed to challenge or threaten the role of the observer… the female lovers are sensual objects that excite the viewer. Their sexual activity arouses, even invites the participation of the voyeur.” Therefore “within the conventions governing bourgeois propriety and representations of the nude in the nineteenth century, the lesbian body is elided with the body of the prostitute or courtesan, a dual site of fascination.”

The *Critic Sees* is a small sculpmetal relief featuring a carved pair of glasses. In place of eyes behind the lens, Johns has fashioned two mouths frozen in a moment of speech. Rosalind Krauss recalls the incident that prompted Johns to create the surreal cast: “He decided to make it after witnessing a critic spend under a minute ‘looking’ at

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26 Lubar, 65-66.
the paintings in one of his shows.”27 By incorporating Johns’ work, “Kass plays on the
contradiction of the critic who sees, but refuses to speak, and conversely, the critic who speaks
his discourse from a position of blindness.”28

Consequently, Kass suggests that the lesbian subject has traditionally been repressed,
underrepresented, and otherwise denied representation all together, or fetishistically “inserted
into a sexual economy that belongs to an(other).”29 The pairing of Courbet, Johns, Stein, and
Picasso with Kass’s artistic intentions creates a poignant dynamic. Kass once said that the
painting is about “Gertrude Stein, Picasso’s reading of Gertrude, my reading of Picasso’s
reading… of Gertrude herself now, and when I first saw the painting at the Met as a kid.”30 She
continues in saying:

It is also about Courbet and his fantasies of women together, these two
nineteenth-century guys [Courbet and Picasso] looking at one real person and two
fantasy girls, and seeing, naming, and consuming. And identifying with all these
positions as a reading of painting, a painter, a Jewish woman, and as a dyke,
searching for representation.31

Robert S. Lubar notes that Les Dormeuses and The Critic Sees are two images that “signify the
predicament of lesbian visibility.”32 Kass believes that the retrieval of the lesbian subject in art
and history has broad political ramifications for normative constructions of gender and sexuality
in Western culture. Her grouping of visual sources and historical references underscore the
extent to which the task of recovering a unitary lesbian sensibility (through history) must be
exposed to a critique of modern categories of sex, gender, and sexuality – in essence it is

28 Ibid., 66.
29 Krauss, 66.
31 Ibid.
32 Lubar, 65-66.
necessary to consider how individual women experienced their sexuality in relation to the traditional boundaries of the aforementioned categories. Kass, then, explores sexuality in relation to the traditional beliefs seen in *Les Dormeuses* and reconciles that with *The Critic Sees* commenting on individuals who “see” lesbianism but do not understand it.

In addition to confronting the male-dominated field of art history and its lack of lesbian visibility, Kass’s work predating *The Warhol Project* also reconciles the idea of Jewishness, specifically the idea of the Jew’s body and how it acquiesces with beauty. One such image that addresses the Jewish body and incorporates Kass’s predisposition for appropriation is the hand-painted *Before and Happily Ever After* (1991) [Figure 7], modeled after Andy Warhol’s (1928-1987) *Before and After 3* (1962) [Figure 8]. Warhol’s image is one of several creations by the artist based on plastic surgery advertisements. Typical of Pop Art in its expressionless reflection of American culture, *Before and After* is characterized by severe outlines and flat areas of black and white. The image features two juxtaposed faces in profile view from the lip to the forehead. The most apparent difference between the two figures is the nose; one is hooked and stereotypically Jewish (before), the other, pretty and gentile (after). However, the altered nose also leads to a perkier pout and larger eyes, all traits routinely thought of as beautiful. For Warhol, acquiring a nose job was just one more step towards a formulaic Hollywood-based beauty. Kass places this image above an animation still from Disney’s animated film *Cinderella* (1950) illustrating the moment with the Prince places the glass slipper on Cinderella’s foot. The still is cropped to feature only the Prince’s hands, the glass slipper, and Cinderella’s foot, emphasizing the moment as opposed to the individuals. By pairing these two images Kass is

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critiquing the concept of the Jewish American Princess, who, only after obtaining a nose job, can transform into a beautiful commodity worth of marriage.

Stereotypes have constructed Jews as having larger hooked noses, and as Sander L. Gilman notes in *The Jew’s Body*, rhinoplasty as a form of cosmetic surgery has been particularly popular among Jews since the late nineteenth century. Viewed as a cure for the prominent “Jewish” nose, the surgery was especially prevalent in postwar America as a way to conform to the Gentile, Anglo-Saxon standards of beauty. Because noses have historically been a defining difference between Jews and Gentiles, obtaining a nose job is something that resonates in the Jewish community. This surgical procedure has come to typify the behavior the Jewish American Princess. Brenda Patimkin, the lead character in Philip Roth’s (b. 1933) foray into the literary world, the 1959 novella, *Goodbye, Columbus*, exemplifies one of the first postwar examples of this stereotype. Speaking of her distain for playing tennis Brenda acknowledges that she is afraid that she will be susceptible to being hit in the face and does not want to hurt her “bobbed” nose. She admits to having a nose job and says, “I was pretty. Now I’m prettier.”

The Jewish American Princess is spoiled, prudish (yet knows how to use her body and looks to her benefit), excessively concerned with looks, and dangerously anti-Semitic and misogynistic. Stereotyping a woman as a Jewish American Princess “is an insult, an injury, and violence that is done to Jewish women,” and when Jews use the term, it is a form of internalized anti-Semitism and self-hatred; when non-Jews use it is a form of anti-Semitism and racism.

The Jewish American Princess is manipulative, and as Evelyn Torton Beck writes, she is

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particularly manipulative “of the men in her life, her husband, her boyfriend, her father. And what does she want? Their money! In addition, she’s lazy – she doesn’t work inside or outside the home.” 37 Along with behavioral characteristics there are physical stereotypes as well: “the Jew with the big hook nose, thick lips and frizzy hair. The Jewish American Princess has had a nose job and her hair has been straightened, but she too has large lips (an image we immediately recognize as racist).” 38 These stereotypes began in middle- to upper- class young Jewish women as an attempt to assimilate into white America, however, since the inception of the “Jewish American Princess” the idea has not remained isolated in Jewish culture.

This stereotype has become a widespread pandemic. The phrase has crossed cultural lines; non-Jews can be called a “Jewish American Princess,” which only reinforces its anti-Semitic nature. Janice L. Booker believes, if you do not have to be Jewish to be a “Jewish American Princess,” “but the word ‘Jewish’ is a necessary part of the description, then that makes it even more isolated as a Jewish characteristic,” and puts even more of a negative connotation on the word “Jewish.” 39 On the contrary, Miriam Stone believes that the phrase “Jewish American Princess,” relies on the last word: princess. “Although calling someone a WASP – a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant – has come to connote something similarly negative, the actual words are simply descriptive; they contain no inherent bias,” Stone writes, “Yet JAP is an entirely different beast, and it all hinges on the last word: Princess. Princess – a daddy’s girl, a member of the nouveau riche, an extravagant spender who doesn’t deserve it.” 40 Regardless of what word the phrase “hinges” on, it is still destructive, anti-Semitic, and misogynistic.

37 Beck, 164.
38 Ibid., 165.
Anti-Semitism and misogyny directed towards the “Jewish American Princess” resulted in several outrageous events at Cornell University. At a Cornell college fair, signs that read, “Make her prove she’s not a JAP, make her swallow” were posted at various booths. This is in sync with the stereotype that the Jewish American Princess is sexually reserved, and not inclined to perform any sexual acts, in this case fellatio, unless it is to her advantage. Again at Cornell University, a student newspaper printed a cartoon (created by a Jewish man) that presented its readers with advice on how to “exterminate” “JAPs.” The cartoon suggested that one should set up a truck that offered “bargains.” This would catch the attention of “JAPs” (due to stereotype that the Jewish American Princess is materialistic and loves to shop). Once the “JAPs” were in the truck, they would be caught and then dumped off a cliff. Although the word “Jew” or “Jewish” was never directly mentioned, the similarities between the cartoon and the “rounding up” of Jews in World War II to be taken their death at concentration camps cannot be overlooked.

In 1992, just one year after Before and Happily Ever After Kass began a large-scale plan of reassessing, revitalizing, as well as deconstructing Warhol’s work, an individual who remains arguably one of the most well-known and recognizable male artists in the field. The aptly titled Warhol Project features Warhol-inspired portraits of prominent Jewish figures who had an affect on Kass directly. And, while the artist draws formal inspiration and stylistic cues from Warhol, she does not glorify the cult of celebrity the same way Warhol did in his work. Instead, Kass features her personal cultural heroines, relying heavily on her experiences as a gay Jewish woman. Revisiting concepts explored in works predating The Warhol Project, Kass employed Warhol’s pop art as a cultural language that she could amend to reflect her own politics and

41 Beck, 166.
identity. She continued her quest to subvert the language of patriarchy in painting, but moved beyond individual paintings to large-scale exhibit installations. *The Warhol Project* was “more complex in its relation to subjectivity through overt references not only to gender but to sexuality and ethnicity”.  

*The Warhol Project* consists of various series. The first series aptly titled the *Jewish Jackie Series* features Barbra Streisand (b. 1942) taking the place of Warhol’s iconic images of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis (1929-1994), prompting the viewers to question pop art and pop culture’s relationship with gender, beauty, ethnicity, and sexuality. Streisand appears again in Kass’s *My Elvis Series*, taking the place of Elvis (1935-1977) in Warhol’s silkscreens. This series was a sharp attempt to turn the tables on the male-dominated art world (Warhol included).  

In 1992 Kass returned to Stein with the *Chairman Ma Series*, appropriating Warhol’s Chairman Mao images. In the mid 1990s Kass produced several self-portraits, based on the countless self-portraits by Warhol. The most recent additions to *The Warhol Project* are the *Celebrity* portraits and *America’s Most Wanted*. Kass’s celebrities are, however, very different than Warhol’s. Kass looks to pioneering feminist art historian Linda Nochlin, choreographer Elizabeth Streb, and even her own grandmother, Jeanne Kaufax, for “celebrity,” while Warhol turned to actresses like Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962) for *his* celebrity. And finally, with *America’s Most Wanted*, Kass subverts Warhol’s most wanteds from the sexy Italian criminal to key curatorial players in the art world, Thelma Golden and Robert Storr. Michael Plante notes, “As curators/outlaws, they risk the wrath of critics and the public with each exhibition, and yet assume the position of desirable object for working artists anxious to gain their attentions.”  

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42 Staniszewski, 30.
43 Plante, 36.
44 Ibid., 37.
addition, although Kass’s paintings depend upon Warhol’s compositional formats, as the 1990s progressed, the syntax of Kass’s images seems to increasingly belong to Kass as opposed to Warhol.45

*The Warhol Project* relies heavily both thematically and formally on Kass’s early work (before 1992). Even with her first major pieces, Kass attempted to alter the discourse of painting and make it serve as a means for representing herself and people like her. She does so by employing the mode of appropriation in terms of détournement and parody and turning to well-known images in the Western canon of art. As a result of this method Kass is able to enter the discourse while simultaneously introducing new icons that she can identify with. This idea of increasing the visibility in regards to what Kass sees as an underrepresented group in the world of art and the search for representation in terms of a lesbian and Jewish identity remains a constant theme throughout her various series, projects, and solitary works of art.

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45 Plante, 37.
Chapter 2
Rewriting Language:
Deconstructing Andy Warhol Through The Warhol Project

We are all looking for reflections of ourselves in images and ideas.46

Warhol’s brilliance had been to break the class barrier with middle class artifacts transformed into high art… Such Jewish artists as Kass… use Warhol-esque appropriation to break ethnic barriers.47

Since the 1980s, artists from marginalized positions have created art relating to their own personal concerns. These artists are, in part, responsible for replacing modernism’s universal notion of “style” with politicized versions of postmodernism’s alternative, “subject matter,” and authorship.48 Such artists were empowered and exhibited their self-representational art within the margins of a traditionally, formally white, male-dominated system, and at the same time they challenged the canon of Western art history and the status quo.49 Critics have discussed this watershed breakthrough in art making in relation to multiculturalism.50 As part of this larger group of multicultural artists, Jewish artists, rediscovered the broad spectrum of Jewish identity and reconsidered the “ethnic” body.51 Correspondingly, throughout the 1970s and 80s, Deborah Kass endeavored to challenge the traditional practice of the medium of painting so that it could

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48 Ibid., 3.
49 Ibid.
51 Kleeblatt, 3.
serve as a means of representing “herself,” a Jewish lesbian; and she did this with the works in her *Art History Series* (1989-1991).

Then, in 1992, Kass began work on *The Warhol Project* (1992-2000). Appropriating some of Andy Warhol’s most recognizable of his silk-screened Pop works, *The Warhol Project* is inextricably linked to Kass’s Jewish roots, her self-identification as a lesbian, and perhaps most obviously, to the practice of Warhol. Thus, Kass not only challenges the long-standing male-dominated field of art history, she also increases lesbian visibility, and ultimately, I believe, deconstructs Warhol’s work by replacing his ethnically-neutral personalities and deliberately dispassionate handlings of themes with culturally specific, Jewish ones. In doing so, Kass defies stereotypes and presents a new reading of the patriarchal history of art. Furthermore, unlike Warhol's portraits of celebrities and wealthy patrons that were commissioned in the fashion of a standard business deal, Kass's portraits acknowledge her own personal heroes who exist outside the cult of celebrity that so preoccupied Warhol. In turn, Kass's “celebrities” stand in for Warhol's vision of American beauty and status, and question cultural standards that revolve around beauty, sexuality, and ethnicity.

Kass is very open about her adulation of Warhol, and once said that she has loved him from the start.52 This admission signals that the iconic artist had a profound effect on Kass, even when she was a burgeoning young student and artist. Furthermore, in March of 1995 Kass created an imaginary retrospective exhibition installation, entitled, *My Andy: A Retrospective*. According to Kass, “The whole project is a big homage, no question.”53 Kass imitates his work so exactly that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between her work and Warhol’s. She even

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meticulously recreates his screening techniques, down to the “over-inked, skuzzy areas.” The fact that Warhol was a gay man was intriguing to Kass, but she focused on using his language for her own cultural agenda. Kass once said, ‘I’m using [Warhol] as a cultural text, a ‘readymade.’ I’m saying this person’s work, this person’s oeuvre is so ensconced in culture, it functions as language. I can use this language to talk about me, and my concerns.’ And, what concerns Kass is the lack of visibility of the Other.

Therefore, by employing Warhol as a conduit for her messages about absences, Kass actually deconstructs his work, and brings attention to that which is missing and thereby significantly framed and opened onto by his oeuvre. She displaces Warhol’s favored celebrities with her own cultural, and more importantly personal, heroines and heroes thereby creating an effective commentary on the art world’s disregard for gender, ethnicity, sexual identity, and portrayal of the Other America. Kass’s work also critiques the cool Pop aesthetic of the 1960s, questioning, for whom are Warhol’s iconic images for, and for whom are they not? Although Kass was a fan of Warhol, his work was not for her. She could not relate to the repetitive images of Marilyn Monroe or Elizabeth Taylor. Kass’s work also brings attention to the equally iconic people, such as Barbra Streisand, who Warhol failed to include in his work, perhaps surprisingly. In contrast, by deliberately focusing, even obsessing, on Jewish representations, Kass seeks to expose the unequivocal role of Jewish artists and the basic resistance to Jewish subjects (and identity) within an art world that seems to champion other minorities.

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55 Ibid., 41-42.
56 Kass’s representations of Streisand will be explored in further detail in Chapter 3.
57 Kleeblatt, 21.
According to Kass, the surge in multiculturalist art in the 1990s increased the visibility of gay men, but not lesbian women. Kass believes that the art world is not homophobic, it is lesbophobic.

[The art world] is riddled with fags. They support, buy and show one another. Art is traditionally where fags go to make a living. It’s very culturally, historically sanctioned… this is where we expect “feyegeles” [Yiddish for faggots] to be. No one expects lesbians. We’re expected to be in literature or libraries, not do visual art. There is no culturally sanctioned place that has any fame, money or glory attached to it, where lesbians are supposed to go. Unless it’s the tennis circuit and even that’s controversial.58

In an interview with Patricia Cronin Kass said, “Collectors may have to take their bitter pill at the multicultural moment… in order to be politically correct in the 1990s, so they’ll buy something queer. But, it better be a boy and it is better if it is a white boy.”59 To which Cronin responded, “And this just adds to your invisibility,” and quoting Barbara Kruger, Kass replied, “You make history when you do business.”60 Because white gay men were seen as the least threatening minority they were, therefore, accepted into the world of art history (albeit with a bitter pill), while simultaneously contributing to the invisibility of lesbian artists.

Postwar American scholarship on art has largely been written by white American men and women with the, perhaps unintentional but nonetheless pertinent, result of preserving white American male power. Therefore, in order to (re)claim art history or perhaps more importantly, keep their history alive, marginalized people must seek to represent themselves. Kass’s way of doing this is by turning to the language of art history, and more specifically Warhol. She once said:

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59 Cronin, 80.
60 Ibid.
You can’t exist in the world without being aware of the world you’re existing in, which is one reason why I use art history [in her work]… Either there is room for a multiplicity of subjectivities in…painting… or it is as dead as has been claimed for the last ninety years and deservedly so. Like any language, it is dependent on the voice of the colonized and marginalized to keep it alive. And, like any language, it will die without it.61

Furthermore, multiculturalist-historian Maurice Berger has noted, “By stealing Warhol’s style, Kass is also appropriating his *cachet*—the seductive power of celebrity most often denied women in the history of modern art.”62 Such an action aggressively challenges the notion that there is a patriarchal foundation upon which society and the art world is based.

Part of the reason why Kass is so drawn to Warhol is because his work is in direct opposition to formalism, a style of art that she could not identify with in the 1970s. During her years in high school Kass also attended the Arts Students League on Saturdays in New York City. Every weekend she would visit the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) and contemplate the modern masters. “I studied with reverence,” Kass wrote, “But I couldn’t help but wonder: what in god’s name did any of this have to do with me?”63 It was not until a Frank Stella (b. 1936) show in 1970, Kass’s senior year of high school, that she thought that she could turn her love of art into a career. Following the show, Kass said, “Seeing Stella, and being able to follow his logic through each series to the next, meant to me that I could do this with my life… [his] work changed my life for good.”64 Despite her newfound desire to become an artist, Kass also acknowledges that the artistic climate in the 1970s was not very welcoming to new artists, painters in particular:

61 Cronin, 80-81.
64 Ibid.
Jack Burnham had announced the end of art. Clement Greenberg still held enormous sway, Michael Fried, [Donald] Judd, [Robert] Smithson were waging intellectual turf battles in my very dogged eared pages of and endlessly discussed *Artforum*, all of it bad for painting. It was part of the conventional wisdom of the time that it was impossible to do anything new in painting. To me it seemed as if painters in NY in the early 70’s were splitting formal hairs, dancing on the head of pins, or trying to psyche out whatever tiny spot might be left somewhere between Pollock and Stella. Or Pollock and anyone.  

Her attitude changed, however, when she attended Elizabeth Murray’s (1940-2007) show at Paula Cooper’s gallery (New York, New York) in 1974. Before this encounter, Kass admits that she had been entirely and erotically male identified, and feminism had no place in the New York School of paintings or formalism. Murray changed all of this for Kass. While Murray’s roots were in formalism, her paintings had a different point of view, spoke in a different voice, and the subject was female. On the experience, Kass said “I was seeing abstraction, turned upside down, inside out, deployed in a completely new way… what Murray had done was something very different: using formalism, a deeply impersonal language that was so familiar to me, taking this impersonal language and making it PERSONAL.” For the first time, Kass felt as though *she* was the intended audience. The work finally had something to do with her experience of the world, and this sense of identification echoes throughout her work today.

While Kass’s repeated references to the work of men might be seen as reinscribing male authority and centrality, she deliberately refers to these producers from whom she borrows as so-called “masters.” However, she treats their work as intermediaries for her own messages. According to Kass, “[lesbians] have no alternative but to use the available language of that culture even though this language, like the culture—its meanings, myths, and history have been produced by and for men. When a woman makes a painting she is… using a language that has

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65 Kass, “That 70s Show.”
66 Ibid.
denied her and been denied by her.”67 Therefore, by using this patriarchal language, Kass insists on her own subjectification, representation, and right to place herself within the language.68

Kass once said, “As dykes our responsibility is to be visible. The only way to combat stereotyping is to represent our complexity as clearly as we are able… It is our responsibility as cultural producers to try and represent ourselves.”69 She believes that lesbians are told who they are, how they should look, and what they are like, similar to all marginalized people. The hegemonic culture dictates and ascribes to them their subjectivity and identities. Yet, there is not an essentialist lesbian subject anymore than there is an overarching “woman” or “Jew.” According to Kass, her job as a lesbian and as a Jewish artist is to “explore and represent… overlapping, usually conflicted identities. Part of what is real to every marginalized life is the stress of trying to negotiate as individual in the culture-at-large in the face of these stereotypes.”70

In appropriating Warhol’s style and work, which includes some of the most familiar images in the canon of Western art, Kass is able to employ a direct, quick method of engagement. Similar to early feminist artists who favored performance art because it suited their urgent need to voice their concerns and engage the public with immediacy, she can directly engage her audience because they are presented with something recognizable. The common Western viewer, no matter how distant from the art world, is familiar with Warhol’s work. As a result, when Kass absorbs and transforms Warhol’s work into her own, the viewer is comfortable with the familiarity if it, while simultaneously questioning what they see. As Michael Plante

68 Hammond, 120.
69 Cronin, 81.
70 Ibid., 82.
notes, there is little detective work required to flesh out Kass’s references.\textsuperscript{71} This is significant because Pop art has been celebrated and panned, most notably by Clement Greenberg, for being accessible to a wide audience. Similarly, Kass’s images have been praised for their ability to appeal to a wide audience without alienating anyone. Robert Rosenblum writes that Kass’s work embraces a “public domain that runs the gamut from art-ignorant moviegoers who adore Barbra [Streisand] to theory-prone readers of \textit{October} who ponder the metaphysics of reproductive images.”\textsuperscript{72}

Despite praise from high-positioned male art historians, such as Rosenblum and Plante, Kass remains adamant that more women, and lesbians specifically, should be writing about her work. She does, however, recognize that most of the men who have addressed her work are gay with a strong queer theory background. Furthermore, most of the people who respond to her work are individuals with similar concerns as herself.\textsuperscript{73} This is exactly why, using Kass’s moniker for the group, white straight guys are not addressing her work. They want to see their reflections in everything, much like anyone else, and this is exactly where Kass is able to turn the tables on the patriarchal art historical discourse. As a young student it was Kass who could not identify with the art she would see in the major museums of New York. Now, the critics cannot identify with her.

Although Kass’s plays upon Warhol’s ethnically-neutral sitters, it is important to note that Warhol did produce a series of ten portraits of Jewish individuals, known as \textit{Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century} (1980). The series, later to be known only as Warhol’s “Jewish Geniuses,” is a collection of prominent Jewish figures featuring Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923),

\textsuperscript{71} Plante, 41.
\textsuperscript{73} Cronin, 85.
Louis Brandeis (1856-1941), Martin Buber (1878-1965), Albert Einstein (1897-1955), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), George Gershwin (1898-1937), Franz Kafka (1883-1924), the Marx Brothers Chico (1887-1961), Groucho (1890-1977), and Harpo (1888-1964), Golda Meir (1898-1978), and Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) [Figure 9]. Richard Meyer notes that unlike Warhol’s numerous portraits of socialites and celebrities from the same period, *Ten Portraits of Jews* featured sitters who were no longer alive.74 Each image in the series was based compositionally on an archival photograph of the individual, and in typical Warhol fashion, the image was enlarged, redrawn, and angular blocks of color were introduced in lieu of traditional modeling of volumes with tonality. As opposed to preserving the seamless surface of the original photograph, “Warhol fractured the visual field of each picture into uneven zones of color and traces of overdrawn silhouettes,” all of which overwhelm the coherence of the face.75

*Ten Portraits of Jews* was originally shown at the Jewish Museum in New York City, and the show was met with much aversion. In the *New York Times*, for example, chief art critic Hilton Kramer referred to the show as “vulgar” and continued, writing that “The way it exploits its Jewish subjects without showing the slightest grasp of their significance is offensive – or would be, anyway, if the artist had not already treated so many non-Jewish subjects in the same tawdry manner.”76 Carrie Rickey, an art critic reviewing the show for *Artforum*, was initially put off by the whole concept of the series. She saw it as “Jewploitation” and accused the show of pandering to the “synagogue circuit” of individuals, who, as patrons, would be willing to purchase anything by a famous artist so much as it signified Jewishness (no matter how

75 Ibid.
superficially). In addition, the very title, “Warhol’s Jews” suggests Warhol’s claim on the images and the individuals. All of the portraits in the series, and virtually all the portraits in the artist’s oeuvre, are more directly identifiable as “Warhol’s” than as “surrogates for their putative subjects.” Finally, Bluma Goldstein notes that there is no evidence that Warhol never had any intention of doing anything for the Jews, other than basking in their public accolades and relieving them of their money.

While there are examples of Jewish individuals in Warhol’s work, the treatment of such personas leaves much to be desired. *Ten Portraits of Jews* is representative of Warhol’s trademark “cool,” and disassociation from his subject matter that can been seen in various works throughout his career. For example, Richard Brilliant notes that in the famous Marilyn Monroe portrait, “Warhol seems to deprive the portrait of much of its deeper referential content in order to suggest both the artificial confection of her personality and the relative invisibility of the person behind the public image.” Brilliant’s statement echoes Kramer’s observation that Warhol treated his subjects in a tawdry manner. Monroe was therefore reduced to a visual object. Kass’s work, however, is a search for representation in a world that she sees as incredibly exclusionary. Her work is intensely personal and provides a foil to Warhol’s trademark cool, featuring people who mean something to the artist, not universal pop icons who are relegated

78 Meyer, 31.
simply as “visual objects.” From Warhol’s “cool,” Kass makes something hot, saturated with the warmth of genuine feeling. As feminist icon Linda Nochlin emphasizes:

I admire Kass and her works not only for their formal elegance and their pictorial wit, but for their bravery. It is hard in an era where irony rules, where ambiguity informs every attitude, where coolness is the reigning mode of sensibility to be warm about what one admires, to identify with people – sometimes women, sometimes specifically lesbians – who have actually done something admirable rather than simply functioning as pop idols… Never dull, never sentimental, wonderful to look at, always original and straight from the heart, Kass’s ‘appropriations’ are more original than many other artists’ so called unique inventions.

Kass’s image of Stein, “Chairman Ma,” from The Warhol Project (1993) [Figure 10] not only represents a Jewish feminist surrogate for Warhol’s Chairman Mao, “Mao,” (1972) [Figure 11], it also symbolizes an example of the warmth and genuine feeling discussed by Nochlin. The Chairman Ma Series began in 1993 and undoubtedly grew out of Kass’s love for the cultural figure. In the Chairman Ma Series, Stein is depicted staring back at the viewer. Her short hair, facial features, and striped vest are all rendered in blotchy black silkscreen ink. Expressive and colorful brushstrokes frame Stein’s head. The poet appears to have a downturned expression, yet her cultural prowess can still be felt, echoing the same feelings as Picasso’s portrait of Stein. However, despite Stein’s weighty presence, there is a visible tenderness to Kass’s treatment of the image, “a poignancy born of the delicacy of the… process and the melancholic express that Stein displays.” Metaphorically, Stein symbolizes the antithesis of the male gaze that focused on women's beauty, clearly evident in Warhol’s celebrity portraits.

The images included in the Warhol Project can also be read in terms of performative identity. First, in turning to the performative it is necessary to acknowledge Judith Butler’s

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82 Ibid., 11.
83 See Kass’s encounter with Picasso’s portrait of Stein as discussed in Chapter 1.
84 Plante, 49.
theory that bodies are produced in their particular form through the iteration of norms that (in)form categories such as sex and race, and such categories are not chosen but are actually performed. In the essay “Queers Are Like Jews, Aren’t They?” Janet Jakobson questions the notion that one must think of Jews as the stable ground for an identity, or could it, like queer, be something one does? Yes. She suggests that both “queer” and “Jewish” be understood as something that one does in complicated relation to the historical possibilities of who people are. In this sense, Kass queers a number of norms, namely art historical ones, by existing in a male dominated field. For example it can be read that an essential marker of Kass’s Jewishness, her artistic vision, is not simply an artistic characteristic but rather an action, and more specifically a refusal to yield to the white, male, heterosexual dominated field of art history.

Also, by inhabiting Warhol’s gay male persona and, by extension, his place in the male history of painting, Kass plays with the territories of masculinity. Kass both does this literally and figuratively by employing Warhol’s style and by becoming Warhol in appropriated self-portraits. Therefore Kass’s images can be read as performative in the sense that they create and destabilize gender and sexuality simultaneously, and Kass performs the act of “becoming Andy.” In “Altered Image #2,” (1994-1995) [Figure 12] Kass not only employs the visual qualities of Warhol’s work, she performs as Warhol, appropriating a portrait of the artist by Christopher Makos (b. 1943) (1981) [Figure 13]. Makos photographed Warhol, posing as Marilyn Monroe (1928-1962), against a plain white studio background wearing women’s makeup and wigs. The project was inspired by Man Ray’s (1890-1976) portrait of Marcel

86 Ibid.
87 Plante, 50.
Duchamp (1887-1968) posing as his alter ego Rrose Sélavy and coincides with explorations of identity, gender, and role-playing. In the black and white photographic image, Kass (a woman) performs as Warhol (a man) performing as a woman in drag. She wears high-waisted jeans, a crisp white button-up shirt, and a tartan tie. Atop Kass’s head is a straight blonde wig, and quite apparent heavy make-up covers her face. Kass recreates the photograph of Warhol down to a tee, mastering the pose, even getting the length of the tie correct. By posing as Warhol posing as Monroe, Kass multiplies drag upon drag upon drag and performs and camps a complex series of layered appropriations that simultaneously displace and occupy a space of revisionist homage and self-portraiture.88

While Warhol played with binary distinctions along the lines of sexual male/female difference, Kass works beyond the male/female axis by including the convergence of ethnic and cultural boundaries. If Warhol’s white make-up refers to ideal femininity, in Kass’s image it signifies the implications of a gender(ed) identity within the social construction of ethnicity. The imperfection of Kass’s make-up that evokes a sense of masquerade, and femininity is a masquerade that conceals a non-identity.89 By performing as Warhol, Kass is also exploring the concept of drag, something also theorized by Butler. In her 1993 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity*, the author wrote:

*The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance* … In imitating gender, drag

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88 Hammond, 125.
89 This criticism was inspired by Kerstin Brandes’s reading of Yasumasa Morimura’s *Doublonnage (Marcel)* and Marcel Duchamp’s portrait as Rrose Sélavy in Brandes’s “Morimura/Duchamp: Image Recycling and Parody,” *Paragraph*, Vol. 26, Issue 1/2, 2003.
implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.\(^{90}\)

The circuitous character of Kass performing as a man performing as a woman destroys all definitional characters.\(^{91}\) This image also plays with the edge of camp, a defining sensibility of the queer, and Jay Prosser argues that camp is fundamental to any reading of *Gender Trouble*. He cites David Bergmann’s belief that Butler’s success comes from bringing a high theoretical tone to camp, and from bringing camp to high theory.\(^{92}\) The retrieval of camp during the late 1980s was a factor leading to the dominance of queer theory.\(^{93}\) By parodying Warhol's parody of women and the notion of predetermined gender and sexuality, Kass suggests that gender (both public and private expressions of it) is too often governed by cultural standards, and can be fractured, undone, and then redone at will.

Kass’s images included in *The Warhol Project* can be read as an autobiography expressed through various images of self-identification as well as a manifesto proclaiming that subjectivity is created from the representations of one’s culture.\(^{94}\) For example, Maurice Berger sees Kass’s images as idealized self-portraits. He believes that by allowing self-representation to exist outside of autobiography through displaced representations of the self, such work questions the very notion of a unified coherent identity.\(^{95}\) By splitting the self into ciphers (Kass as Warhol, Kass as Streisand), the artist refuses to see identity as something instantly apparent, and

\(^{90}\) Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 137. (emphasis is Butler’s)

\(^{91}\) Plante, 51.


\(^{93}\) Plante, 51.

\(^{94}\) Staniszewski, 30.

\(^{95}\) Berger, 20.
therefore, refutes stereotypes as well.96 Kass’s techniques of self-fashioning, appropriating, and splitting the self into ciphers turns her work into autofiction. Although the term autofiction originated as a literary method, it can be applied to the artistic world as another way of expressing the transformation of the self, the sculpting of the self, and self-fashioning.97 Autofiction embraces the idea that identity is not predetermined, but rather impressionable. It can be transformed and molded. It is possible to choose, acquire, or invent an identity, according to an ideal of creativity.98 Consequently, identity is a creation, and one can employ various techniques such as pseudonyms, alter egos, imaginary lives, fictitious self-portraits, even disguises, make-up, and clothing to create this new identity.99 Kass uses many of these different techniques to express herself and create her own autofiction. And, it is through this autofiction that Kass is able to establish her own identity and redefine her art.

Appropriating some of Warhol’s most identifiable works of art, The Warhol Project is inextricably linked to the appropriated artist, but also Kass’s individual persona—her Jewish roots and her self-identification as a lesbian. Accordingly, Kass challenges the long-standing male-dominated field of art history by deconstructing Warhol’s work and replacing his ethnically neutral sitters with her culturally specific ones and increasing lesbian visibility. Furthermore, Kass's portraits acknowledge her own personal heroes who exist outside the commodified cult of celebrity that so preoccupied Warhol. As Nochlin said, from Warhol’s cool, Kass makes something with warm genuine feeling. This genuine feeling and close personal relationship with the individuals featured in her work combined with her own search for, and creation of an,

96 Berger, 20.
98 Ibid., 2.
99 Ibid.
identity creates a self-portrait of the Kass, regardless of whether or not she is depicted in the image.
Chapter 3

The Way She Is:
The Significance of Barbra Streisand

Somewhere there is a place where identity meets identification. That place is so vulnerable, so personal, corny, embarrassing, revealing, and beautiful. Because, dare I say? it is so real.\(^\text{100}\)

Deborah Kass, 1998

Deborah Kass once stated that coming across Barbra Streisand as a teen was the most exhilarating moment of identification with an individual in her life. The artist’s admiration for the superstar continued from adolescence to adulthood and culminated in *The Warhol Project* (1992-2000). Streisand was the first subject that Kass selected for the project, and she would eventually come to dominate it. Kass first created a series of silkscreens titled the *Jewish Jackie Series*, featuring Streisand in stark profile shots stylized in the manner of Andy Warhol’s Jacqueline Kennedy images (c. 1964). In her next series, *My Elvis*, Kass presented Streisand in the guise of Yentl from the eponymous film (1983) in the style of Warhol’s silkscreens depicting Elvis in a publicity still for the 1960 film, *Flaming Star* (c. 1963). While Streisand fits into the same category of culturally specific, Jewish individuals who impacted Kass’ life as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, there are additional areas of concern that stand out in Kass’s work concerning Streisand. Featuring Streisand and Streisand as Yentl is not only important because the image of the actor acts as a powerful substitute for the idealized beauties of the 1960s, but also, and more importantly, Streisand is an individual with whom Kass can identify. In addition, Kass’ own identity represents what she views as missing from art-historical discourse: people like her.

Again, turning to a statement previously presented in Chapter 1, Kass once said, “It’s a big subject representing me and my absence in representation… a white, Jewish, lesbian.”

In this chapter I will primarily focus on the story of *Yentl*, first the original short story then 1983 film starring, directed, and produced by Streisand, Streisand’s role as the transgender protagonist in the film, and the role that Streisand plays in the Jewish community in order to contextualize Kass’ deliberate choice to feature the actress in the *Jewish Jackie* and *My Elvis Series*. I will examine works representative of both series in terms of not only formal analyses, but also how they relate to their Warhol predecessors. My intention is to support my claim that by portraying Streisand, Kass is actively subverting traditional concepts of beauty in portraying a powerful, successful, and “alternatively” beautiful Jewish woman.

To contextualize Streisand in Kass’ life and work adequately, it is important to stress that Streisand had an upbringing similar to many of her admirers, Kass included. Born Barbara Joan Streisand in Williamsburg, Brooklyn in 1942, Streisand’s parents were working-class Jews. Her father died when she was only fifteen months old, an event that ultimately strengthened her interest in the story of *Yentl*. After spending summers at Jewish camps, Streisand graduated from Erasmus High School in Brooklyn at the age of sixteen. Her mother encouraged her to become a typist in a school system and dissuaded her from being a performer, believing her daughter was not attractive enough. Streisand, however, had different aspirations. She moved to Manhattan, began singing in nightclubs, and by 1962 received a contract with Columbia Records. Her first album *The Barbra Streisand Album* (1963) earned the singer a Grammy for both album of the year and best female vocalist. To date, Streisand is the United States’ music industry’s number one selling female vocalist, and second in the world only to Elvis. She is the only artist to receive

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an Oscar, Tony, Emmy, Grammy, Golden Globe, Cable Ace, Peabody, and the American Film Institute's Life Achievement Award.

A young Streisand had frizzy hair and a big nose, and did not sing about tragedies. Rather, she sang about her own shortcomings and gaucherie, namely her appearance and ethnicity, all of which undoubtedly required of her a high level of vigor and self-confidence. Streisand was the girl whose “physical grotesqueness” was atoned by her voice. She capitalized on this image, “actively promoting herself as a lovable but ugly kook: perched atop a bench on the Ed Sullivan show wearing a goofy cap, she cracked self-deprecating jokes,” before beginning to sing and rendering the audience silent in awe of her talent.102 Similar to many other Jewish performers trying to break into the industry, Streisand was at first turned down by the theatre and performance business for being too Jewish. However, unlike the others before her such as Al Jolson née Asa Yoelson, Jerry Lewis née Joseph Levitch, Eddie Cantor née Edward Israel Iskowitz, even Fanny Brice née Fania Borach, who not only changed her name but also changed her nose, she did not try to hide her Jewishness after encountering rejection. In fact, in Streisand’s Oscar-winning film debut, *Funny Girl* (1968), she played comedian Fanny Brice (1891-1951), and it was this role that established the star’s “filmic alter ego… the wise-cracking, loud-mouthed Jewish—or sometimes unspecified New York ‘ethnic woman.’”103 Streisand appeared on screen with unapologetically Jewish features, an unchanged Jewish name,104 and unmistakable “Jewish” mannerisms.105 Not only was Streisand portraying a Jewish character and

104 Streisand actually dropped the second “a” in her first name early in her career. While this is in essence a name change, it is a change that accentuates her difference rather than concealing it.
105 Herman, 172.
pushing her own Jewishness to the forefront, she also won one of Hollywood’s highest accolades for doing so.

Praise for Streisand resonates throughout the Jewish community; people from orthodox Rabbis to radical feminists commend her cultural clout. Rabbi Chaim Seidler, longtime director of Hillel at University of California, Los Angeles, expressed his support for Streisand by saying, “Streisand was a Jew, is a Jew, and will always be a Jew. Her sense of self and commitment always drew on her essential Jewishness. Never was there an effort to deny it, and when opportunities arose to affirm, she pursued them.”106 In addition to Rabbi Seidler, numerous Jewish feminists have joined in the adoration of Streisand, praising not only the artist herself but also her characters for their strong-willed toughness and support of feminist principles. Letty Cottin Pogrebin believes the “Jewish Big Mouth” (first exhibited in Funny Girl) is Streisand’s most famous character archetype. She argues that it presents a positive image of a Jewish woman on screen: “The character of the clever, outspoken, Jewish girl has become a film convention that empowers every woman… Films portraying the Ugly Duckling who rises above her appearance have assured girls with big noses and frizzy hair that they too can invent their own kind of terrific.”107 Pogrebin is not alone in this view of Streisand. Marcy Sheiner wrote that as a teenager, Streisand acted as a needed reference point that validated her own, self-described, Jewish looks: “[B]y shoving a Jewish girl’s face in front of the cameras she was announcing, beneath all the self-deprecation, I’m here, I’m a bagel, 108 and you’re gonna learn to love me.”109

108 In the film Funny Girl, while acting as Fanny Brice, Streisand said the line, “I'm a bagel on a plate full of onion rolls,” a line that highlights her difference.
109 Sheiner, 12.

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However, Sheiner was not just enamored with Streisand’s looks, she was also drawn to her cultural presence and position. Sheiner wrote:

I identified with Barbra’s roles (strong, ambitious yet vulnerable women) and her songs—particularly declarations of female rebellion like "Never Will I Marry" and "Much More" ("I want much more than keeping house!"). Such feminist statements pre-dated the contemporary women’s movement by more than a few years.110

As a young girl in Long Island, Kass immediately picked up on Streisand’s acquiescence of difference, and expressed a similar sentiment to Sheiner:

She [Streisand] was really in touch with her difference as an attribute. It was fantastic. For me it was as if she was saying: I’m me; I’m not changing my nose; I’m not changing my name; I’m not changing my ethnicity. I know how glamorous that can be. No one had done that. Because I was so into old movies, I knew she was the only one to do that, to look like that; and I figured if she could do it, so could I.111

The power that Streisand had over her Otherness was appealing to Kass who also felt a similar sense of difference. However, Kass was more concerned with Streisand’s awareness of those differences, and the ability to control and employ them to create a sense of cultural power than simply the presence of such a difference. Instead of changing her appearance or persona, Streisand cultivated her guise and used it to her advantage. Because she was comfortable with her “difference,” other people would be comfortable as well. As Kass once wrote: “It was Barbra’s cultural power that attracted me. For the first time that power seemed accessible to me, because for the first time there was a star who looked like me and everyone I knew.”112 Kass was so invested in the history of Streisand as a cultural figure that The Warhol Project developed into a body of work completely invested with personal memories and feelings.

110 Sheiner, 11.
111 Ibid., 30.
The Warhol Project includes 12 Barbras (The Jewish Jackie Series) (1992) [Figure 14], a group of images in which Kass appropriates not only an image of Streisand from the 1960s, but also Warhol’s 16 Jackies (1964) [Figure 15]. In 12 Barbras, Streisand’s face is depicted in profile view sixteen times (three columns and four rows), and Kass employs Warhol’s recognizable grid format. The first row is black and white, the second blue and black, third black and white, the fourth blue and black, similar to the format of Warhol’s original. Kass views Streisand as one of the iconic beauties and celebrities coming into fame during the 1960s, similar to Jacqueline Kennedy, the subject of 16 Jackies, therefore Streisand is Kass’s “Jewish Jackie.” The stark profile view of Streisand highlights her most prominent “Jewish” feature; her nose, and acts an homage to the performer’s assertive Jewishness and refusal to assimilate into mainstream American culture.

Following the completion of the Jewish Jackie series Kass began work on another series involving Streisand. This time Kass rendered Streisand as the character of Yentl from the eponymous 1983 film in which the performer made her directorial debut. In addition to directing, Streisand also starred in and produced the film, and had owned the rights to it since 1968. The movie is based on Isaac Bashevis Singer’s (1902-1991) short story, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” (1962). Commanding creative control, Streisand altered the story and used it as a platform or “role-model allegory for the eighties, the story of a woman’s liberation from old world patriarchy.” In the original story, Singer is more concerned with the “quasi-mystical otherness of his nineteenth-century old world setting.” Nonetheless, in both renditions, Yentl is a tale of

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114 Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety (New York: Routledge, 1992), 77.
115 Ibid.
In Streisand’s adaptation, Yentl is more interested in studying Hebrew Scriptures than performing the domestic duties expected of a female. The Talmud, a collection of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, prohibits women from studying Scriptures and the Torah. Yentl’s mother died when she was young and her father raises her and goes against tradition—recognizing his daughter’s thirst for knowledge, he allows Yentl to study the Torah in secret. However, when he dies Yentl realizes that, without her father, the only way she can continue to study is to masquerade as male. She cuts off her hair, dresses as a male youth, changes her name to Anshel (the name of her brother who died in childhood), and leaves town in pursuit of the Yeshiva.116 Thus, the transgender protagonist is born.

At the Yeshiva Yentl meets Avigdor, a young man who becomes her study partner, and subsequently falls in love with him, while the subject of Avigdor’s admiration, Hadass (a woman), falls in love with Yentl. The union between Avigdor and Hadass is forbidden (a suicide in Avigdor’s family renders him undesirable for a partnership), therefore, he urges Yentl to marry Hadass. On the wedding night between the unsuspecting Hadass and Yentl, Yentl encourages the new bride not to rush into consummating the marriage. Marjorie Garber notes, “In an extraordinarily tender and erotic scene of instruction, the forbidden sexual energy is deflected into a mutual reading of the Talmud.”117 Rather than doing what was expected of newlyweds, Yentl encourages Hadass to study the Talmud. Yentl does not expect Hadass to perform the (only) role she thinks is expected of a wife. Similar to her father, and ultimately

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116 A Yeshiva is an educational institution unique to classical Judaism that allows the study of the Torah, Talmud, and other Rabbinic literature.
117 Garber, 78.
because she is a woman who recognizes the inequality between the roles of men and women, Yentl introduces Hadass to a world of education and equality she knew nothing of prior.

In the film’s climax, Yentl physically and emotionally exposes her true self to Avigdor; she unbuttons her blouse and displays her breasts. Cultural critic Maurice Berger notes that, “her gesture, the culmination of months of resisting her desire for the bookish yet rugged Avigdor, crystallizes into a metaphor for coming out. She is exposing her own displacement, revealing what lies under the drag of another sexuality.”118 Avigdor, at first, rejects the situation, but soon after professes his love for Yentl, and Yentl for Avigdor. In another act of defiance, Yentl declines to marry Avigdor—she would rather be a scholar than homemaker. The film ends with Yentl, now dressed as a woman, on a boat to America where she can live out her desire to study without needing to hide her gender identity.

Kass drew inspiration from the film, and in the image Single Red Yentl (My Elvis) (1992) [Figure 16] she presents Streisand as the character of Yentl. The larger-than-life size vertical silkscreen features a publicity photograph of Streisand as Yentl dressed in Yeshiva-boy drag, set against a deep red background. Streisand’s hair is so short that it barely peeks out from under the cap sitting atop her head. A pair of wire-frame glasses is barely recognizable, and a crisp white collar stretches up to Streisand’s chin. Typically male accoutrements (a tie, vest, overcoat, and slacks) cover the artist’s figure, while a pocket watch chain drapes across Streisand’s mid-section. The figure’s left hand is tucked away in a pocket, while the right hand cradles the Talmud. The featured Yentl in Single Red Yentl is modified to black and white and repeated three times in Triple Silver Yentl (My Elvis) (1993) [Figure 17]. Both images are directly

modeled after Warhol’s *Elvis* (1963) [Figure 18], and *Triple Elvis* (1963) [Figure 19], respectively.

While the *My Elvis Series* turns on all of the tropes of the *Jewish Jackie Series*, featuring Streisand in all her glory and introducing an ethnically specific figure into cultural discourse, it has reached a level of heightened excess, and Michael Plante notes that in the static image of Streisand cross-dressed as Yentl, “the metaphors accrete.” 119 *Yentl* symbolizes an example of a movie star performing a breeches-role. It has been noted that until Yentl, no one since Katharine Hepburn passed as a boy in *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935), has a lead female character donned drag so successfully. 120 If Streisand’s character is an unwilling transvestite in *Yentl*, she also becomes the object of pansexual eroticism as both the male and female leads fall in love with the main character. Therefore, the replacement of Elvis with Streisand speaks to the depiction of gender and sexual identification. 121 The sexually illusory image of Yentl adds a lesbian element to Kass’s earlier exploration of her feminist and Jewish identities. *Yentl* can be considered sexually illusory because the spectator sees a man; however, in reality one is looking at a woman passing as a man. For some individuals this may cause an element of confusion as they may believe they are attracted to a man, when in fact they are attracted to a woman dressed as a man—adding a lesbian element to the gaze in some situations. Using Kass as an example, the gaze is that of a lesbian. Thus by presenting Streisand as Yentl, Kass addresses the lack of lesbian visibility in not only Warhol’s work, but also contemporary discourse as a whole.

Not only visually appropriative, the series title, *My Elvis*, is also based on Warhol’s work. The title is significant to Kass’ body of work as it speaks directly to how the artist associates her

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119 Plante, 45.
120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
vision with that of Warhol’s. It has been noted that Warhol’s Elvis is the “object of homosexual desire.” Kass’ My Elvis Series is titled as such because Yentl is to Kass what Elvis was to Warhol; the ultimate cultural figure of homosexual desire. In a way Warhol desired to be Elvis, the pinnacle of masculinity and fame. Kass saw Streisand in a similar manner; she idealized the superstar and wanted to be her, if only because Streisand accepted her difference. In addition, The Jewish Jackie and My Elvis Series are not only meant to point out Warhol’s refusal to engage with ethnicity, but also pay homage to a cultural figure Kass looked up to. Kass saw signifiers in Streisand that helped her position the superstar in direct opposition to Warhol’s other stars: Jackie (the gentile beauty) and Streisand (the Jewish movie star, the film producer, the director, the political activist).

Throughout his entire career, Warhol never included Streisand in his oeuvre. The performer did not fit into his idealized cult of beauty and celebrity. However, Kass believes that the lack of Streisand in Warhol’s work is due to the fact that the two artists were too similar. Streisand made him feel uncomfortable about his own looks and image. “Andy the Red-Nosed Warhola” had a nose job and spotty skin, and was often teased and bullied as a child. In his diaries, Warhol frequently referred to Streisand as the “embodiment of bad taste, a nouvelle riche.” According to Kass:

He didn’t do Barbra because she was just like Andy, an outsider because of her ethnicity, as he was because of his queerness. They were in the same position, culturally, and he wasn’t looking for his own reflection; he was looking for his glorified reflection, the reflection of a perfect American butchness [Elvis], a perfect American glamour [Jackie Kennedy], as defined basically by Hollywood,

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123 Plante, 42.
a glamour that he was incapable of attaining because of his gayness, his
immigrant family, and his looks.125

Warhol did not paint Streisand because she didn’t have the class of Jackie Kennedy or the
Hollywood glamour of Marilyn Monroe. Kass, however, presents a powerful depiction of
Streisand and confronts the collective opinion of beauty that grew from Warhol’s images. Kass
presents Streisand as beautiful, inviting the viewer to question their belief of what makes an
individual aesthetically appealing—a traditionally Gentile appearance. The image forces the
viewer to think about Pop art’s and pop culture’s relationship to gender, ethnicity, and sexuality.
Warhol was instrumental in creating the cult of celebrity in the 1960s, and much of this had to do
with the visual appearance of the individuals who the artist chose to feature. Even though Warhol
painted Monroe in the early 1960s after her death, he selected as his model publicity stills of her
from the early and mid-1950s when she reached the height of her career in the role of the Blonde
Bomb-shell.126 In Warhol’s repetitive images of Monroe, she is presented as her own stereotype,
as Marilyn, not Norma Jean. Created just after her death, she is depicted with her curly platinum-
blonde hair, dark arched brows, parted full lips, and her trademark beauty mark. The Jewish
Jackie Series was a witty attempt to turn the table on Warhol and the male-dominated art world,
including art historians, while suggesting an active model for the female gaze or even the lesbian
gaze.127 Additionally, by combining issues of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality in these images,
“Kass complicates Warhol’s original project and underlines how easily Warhol’s images

125 Plante, 42.
127 Plante, 36.
boomeranged from popular culture to high art and back again with nary a word from art historians or critics.”128

Kass’s depictions of Streisand also call attention to the performer’s status as a gay icon. In “The Way She Was,” Camille Paglia notes that half of the audience at Streisand performance at Madison Square Garden in New York City was comprised of gay men, Streisand’s “original hard-core fans.”129 Streisand has long been an advocate for gay rights, proclaiming that they are not “special” rights, but simply civil rights that the gay community should be able to enjoy just as the hetero community. Additionally, Streisand’s choice to embrace her ethnic difference rather than hide it, her determined rise from a young girl in Brooklyn to a world-wide superstar, and the way in which she challenges the limited standards of beauty for the celebrity community makes her an attractive persona for the gay community.130 Streisand’s difference, ambition, and success in using that difference were sites for the production of queer feelings and identity, and Kass’s accomplishment rests in her ability to intersect this queered image with Jewishness, feminism, and other discourses.131

The notion that Kass aggressively challenges Jewish American female behavioral stereotypes is especially prevalent in featuring Streisand. As exhibited in comments by Rabbi Seidler, Pogrebin, Sheiner, and Kass herself, Streisand represents the antithesis to the J.A.P—her difference, ambition, and success in using that difference were sites for the production of queer (in the true sense of the word, “different”) feelings and identity.132 Kass proudly presents the physical stereotype of Jewish female ethnicity, and confronts the problem of representing Jewish

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128 Ibid., 43.
131 Plante. 43.
132 Ibid.
bodies in American popular culture, given “Streisand’s unWASPY looks, a big nose, and a reputation for business shrewdness read in the ethnic stereotype of ‘pushy.’”\textsuperscript{133} The somewhat ironic use of Streisand’s image as a contrast to Warhol’s, and ultimately the Gentile culture’s celebrated beauties, indicates that she has come to embody an alternative to female beauty and identity. Streisand’s physical presence challenges cultural normative cultural standards of beauty and femininity, replacing them with a proudly assertive, kooky, “lovable, but ugly” Jewish body.\textsuperscript{134} Because Kass identifies with Streisand as an individual who publicly and vigorously portrayed herself in such a way that shifted the norms of female beauty when the artist was growing up, her images of the performer serve as a personal commentary on Streisand’s relation to her and the prevailing models of Jewishness, femininity, and beauty.

Kass’s depictions of Streisand have, however, been met with criticism. In \textit{Artforum}, critic A.M. Holmes wrote that the substitution of Streisand for Kennedy or Monroe was an insubstantial gesture, noting that “one Barbra does not equal a Jackie O.”\textsuperscript{135} In addition, Holmes writes that the significance of substituting Elvis with Streisand is diminished by the fact that the film \textit{Yentl} is “hardly considered the feminist cinematic statement of our time.”\textsuperscript{136} Holmes is perpetuating the essentialist view that Kass is trying to address—the very idea that Streisand is not able to exist on the same level as someone like Kennedy. In rebuttal to Holmes’s views, Plante notes that the critic has severely missed the point of Kass’s work.\textsuperscript{137} From the beginning of her career, Streisand was not \textit{graced} with power, such as Kennedy, but rather she \textit{seized} it,

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\textsuperscript{133} Garber, 79.  \\
\textsuperscript{135} A.M. Holmes, “Deborah Kass. (exhibit at the Fiction/Nonfiction, New York, New York) (Review),” \textit{Artforum} 31, no. 7 (March 1993): 95.  \\
\textsuperscript{136} Holmes, 95.  \\
\textsuperscript{137} Plante. 39.
\end{flushleft}
becoming the most powerful woman Hollywood had seen in decades as she produced her work while retaining artistic control and building a fortune. Streisand, an activist, uses her celebrity, or in other words, “power,” to bring attention to social and political causes, and Kass gains some of this power in using Streisand’s image. It is Streisand’s refusal of silence that compels Kass’s boldness and social criticism as an artist, especially a Jewish feminist artist.

While Streisand has remained a pillar in the Jewish community, she is also incredibly well known throughout other circles as well. Kass’s deliberate choice to feature her in The Warhol Project by means of the Jewish Jackie and My Elvis Series challenges cultural conditions surrounding beauty, especially those that grew out of Warhol’s work. In depicting Streisand, Kass both points out the lack of Jewish idols in American culture, she also suggests one. Streisand, despite her refusal of her ethnicity has entered the vernacular of American (pop) culture. The same can be said for Kass. Both are strong, independent, creative Jewish women. As rather than concealing their identity in order to succeed in their respective fields, both women acknowledged it, and also celebrated it. Such an admission of the self inspires others to be proud of their heritage, ethnicity, and even body.

138 Ibid.
139 Plante, 39.
Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to shed light on Deborah Kass and the ways in which she subverts the patriarchy found in art historical discourse, specifically with her appropriations of Andy Warhol’s work found in *The Warhol Project* (1992-2000). Employing Warhol’s artistic language to speak as her own, Kass subverts his vision and creates art that represents herself and people like her. Beginning with the *Art History Series* (1989-1991), Kass began inserting herself into the field of painting as figure, ground, genre, medium, and perhaps most importantly, as artist. It was early in her career that she began to explore the notion of representation and henceforth identity in terms of lesbian and Jewish visibility. However, in challenging art historical discourse to represent herself, Kass has come to represent so much more than just herself: she symbolizes an entire group of people that is underrepresented in art.

The *Art History Series* led to *The Warhol Project*, and thirty years after Warhol completed his first silkscreened images, Kass substituted herself and her own personal and cultural heroines for Warhol’s subjects. By introducing a range of female subjects into Warhol’s format, Kass engages in a complex strategy that forces a reconsideration of Warhol’s work and simultaneously provides an alternative view with a new cast of characters. Kass saw Warhol’s art as a cultural language that she could use to reflect herself, her politics, and her identity. Her work encourages the viewer to question the patriarchal canon of art history as well as notions and constructions regarding identity.

Kass's new work, the series, “Feel Good Paintings for Bad Times,” places post War painting in a new context, juxtaposing art history with popular culture. These recent text-based

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141 Ibid.
paintings and works on paper allude to the male-dominated art world with titles drawn from Broadway plays, movies, Yiddish, and music and appropriates style from artists such Kenneth Noland (b. 1924), Robert Indiana (b. 1928), Frank Stella (b. 1936), Damien Hirst (b. 1965), and Philip Guston (1913-1980). These images provide insight into what life was like in the middle of the last century. Similar to *The Art History Series* and *The Warhol Project*, “Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times” intersects the self, popular culture, modern and contemporary art, and art history. Stylistically, Kass revisits the graphic nature of Pop art, featuring bold colors, shapes, and fonts. Just as she used Warhol’s artistic vocabulary to speak for herself, in regards to her new work Kass asserts, “I’m trying to feel as entitled as I can to every vocabulary I know and love. Musical, visual, and emotional.” Edward Leffingwel believes that these works display that Kass’s art remains “absolutely on point, with as much attention to painterly, historical and stylistic issues as to content.”

Kass’s work functions as a reminder of Western visual archives through the eyes of the Other. She confronts ideas about sociocultural constructs, gender and sexuality, celebrity, and ethnicity while creating an oeuvre that deconstructs conventional notions of all these categories. Her work is able to provide input towards a new art historical discourse that includes the questions of its own construction and interrogates its conditions and boundaries. By inserting herself into the canon of art history, Kass invites the viewer to examine what kind of affect this has on the reading of not only her work, but also Warhol’s and any other male “master” she

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142 For an example of this new work please see Figure 20.
appropriates. In this sense, Kass’s work can be used as a method of encouraging one to challenge the categories and confinements of social constructs.
Deborah Kass, *La Dee Doo Da (In the Field)*, 1972. Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 60 in.
Figure 5

Deborah Kass, *Chairman Ma (Gertrude Stein #1)*, 1993. Silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas, 46 x 42 in.
Figure 11

Figure 17

Deborah Kass, *Nobody Puts Baby in the Corner*, 2006. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 in.
Bibliography

Books


**Journal Articles**


**Newspaper Articles**


**Films**
