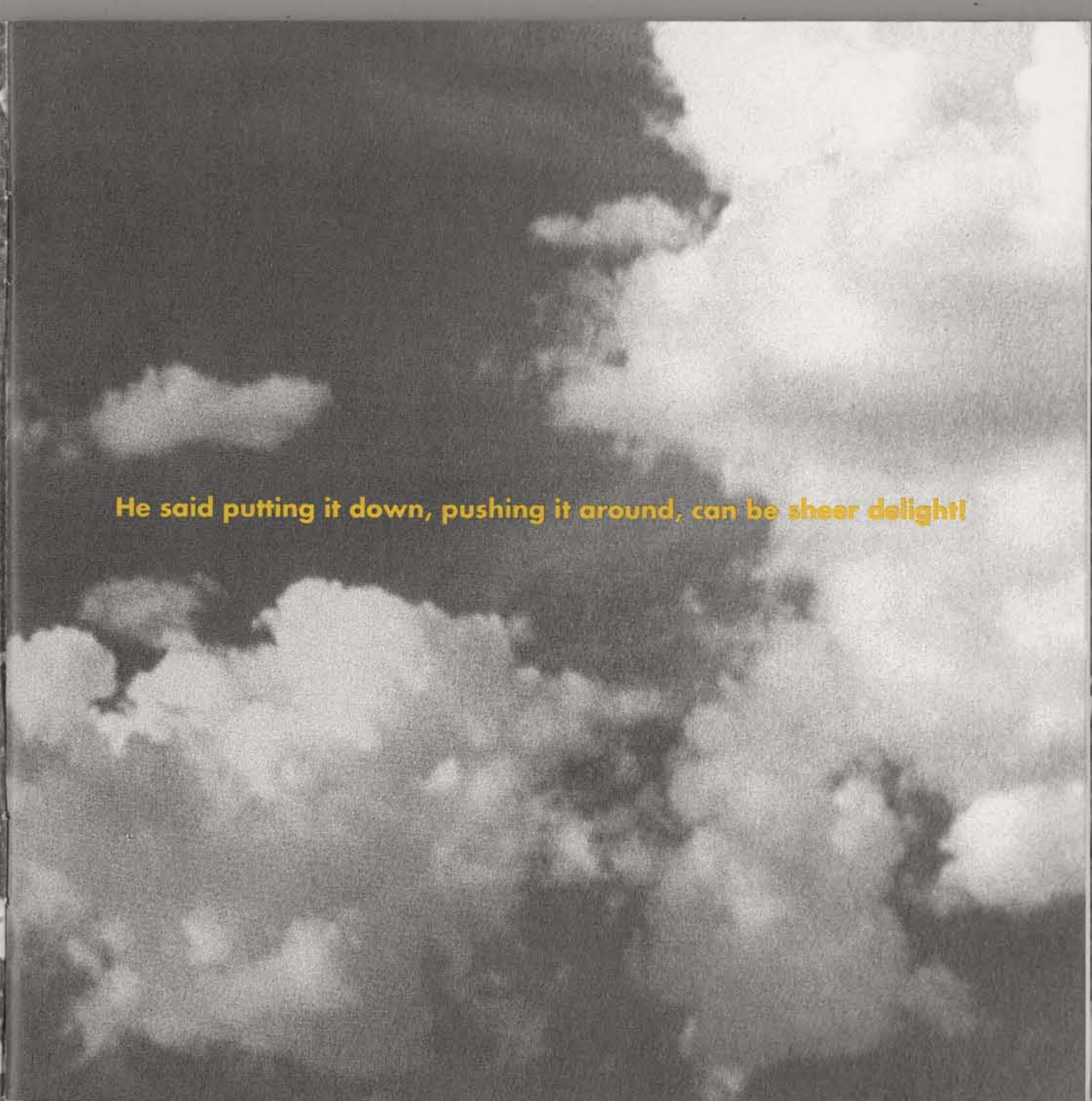


Traces of a City in the Spaces Between Some People

Allyson Clay



He said putting it down, pushing it around, can be sheer delight!

The Parody of Her Own Disguises

Joan Borsa

Traces of a City in the Spaces between some People

an exhibition of work by Allyson Clay

June 4 - July 12, 1992,

Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr College of Art & Design,
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, V6H 3R9.

Curated by Greg Bellerby

Catalogue designed by Allyson Clay and David MacWilliam

The Parody of Her Own Disguises

April 20, 1992

Studio visit at Allyson's. We started by talking about Canadian artist Rita McKeough's operatic production, *In bocca al lupo* (In the Mouth of the Wolf).¹ We had both seen it the night before. In the opera staged memories of violence against women cathartically released the labyrinth of pain their bodies had endured. The operatic format, built on theatrics, live music and a chorus of singing voices, allowed repressed and gendered speech to be made public and witnessed. The all-female cast, the public presentation and the combination of artistic voices lifted a layer of fear – I felt soothed and exhilarated. Allyson thought the angry women might be considered beautiful in the way they transgressed and destabilized women's muted social history. Without knowing it we had entered into a discussion of Allyson's work – women's attempts to speak in ways that allow a language of the body and their attempts to delineate territory where women's speech can be heard. "How can I be heard in semiotic territory that belongs to men?" asked Allyson. "When I speak myself why does it sound like babble?" These questions stayed with me.

April 29, 1992

I was reading a review of Allyson's work in a recent *Parachute* magazine. The writer, Gregory Salzman, ends the review in this way:

To judge from her earlier work, Clay is a colourist of ample talents, yet here colour assumes an ancillary role. It supports dramatic effects rather than pursuing some kind of constructive integrity and purity. What is hard to tell is whether in this new work Clay is in the process of developing a broader and deeper content for her art or whether a redeeming element of play is losing ground to a burdensome preoccupation with psychology and personality.² [my emphasis]

I was amused. Here was a concrete example of a supposedly "informed" viewer reading Allyson Clay's challenging and original speech as gendered babble. I was pleased to see that the reviewer had made his exclusionary, gendered remarks so public. He had recognized Allyson's difference but didn't know where to place it. In reading his review I was able to say that her difference is being noticed, and this in itself is meaningful.

However, the babble, in this context, comes from the reviewer. Not only is he positioned, as he puts it,

within a burdensome (in this case) modernist preoccupation with colour, form and universal meaning, he is unable to move beyond an oppositional framework. When he states, "What is hard to tell," he points to a key ingredient of complexity functioning within Allyson Clay's work – its willingness to engage with sites of contradiction and ambiguity and its resistance to reductive either/or constructs. While the reviewer senses Allyson's strategic use of ambiguity, he assumes that it is a mistake, an oversight on her part, something she still needs to resolve. Not only are the past two decades of contemporary art's engagement with site specific referents ignored in the reviewer's standardizing remarks, but Allyson's specific site of struggle is condoned as regressive, a lack. The artist "loses ground" with previous "redeeming elements" – a situation of her "burdensome preoccupation with psychology and personality." The possibility of speaking strategically outside the grand traditions, the once dominant European, gender-biased regime – or speaking *independently* within historically legitimized art boundaries (such as modernist painting) is not considered. In other words, had Gregory Salzman been able to develop the complexity of what he was seeing or account for his own confusion, his commentary would have registered quite a different tone.

Allyson Clay is involved in both of the areas G. Salzman equates as oppositional. That is, she is "a colourist of ample talents" but "colour assumes an ancillary role" only in that context and content are also active ingredients of her new work. Yes, her work is in the "process of developing a broader and deeper content" (obviously the reviewer agrees colour and form by itself, in the abstractionist sense, is a bit of a veil, a bit ancillary) but her involvement with psychology and personality (does the writer mean subjectivity, identity or psychoanalysis?) does not have to mean navel-gazing or narcissism. All subjects move within personal and familial territory that involves history, psychology and socio-economic/political realities. Bringing art discourse into dialogue with other knowledge bases and life experience itself does not mean sacrificing sacred terrain (art, painting, abstraction, perhaps genius?). What is difficult to unravel is why the reviewer finds explorations into what I would call the semiotic, psychoanalytic, subjective and social realms of art so reprehensible. What underlying assumptions or fears limit the reviewer to his zone of comfort, his dismissive and condescending assessment of the artist's *independent* speech?

I remembered Simone de Beauvoir's comments on why women's voices are considered irritating, why women's speech is not listened to. She suggests it is because the chorus of irritating voices is getting bigger and louder and that it is feared they will not go away. In her chapter on the Independent Woman in her book *The Second Sex*, S. de Beauvoir quotes Rimbaud:

...Woman will find the unknown. Will her ideational worlds be different from ours? She will

*come upon strange, unfathomable, repellent, delightful things. We will take them. We shall comprehend them.*³

An Argument with Tradition

Another recent discussion of Allyson Clay's work offers a perspective much closer to the territory I believe the artist has delineated. In a discussion of paintings by Joanne Tod and Allyson Clay, writers Mark Cheetham and Linda Hutcheon refer to the artists' strategic memory of art's male modernist traditions:

*Both feel keenly the weight of inheritance. Exemplifying the possibilities of the complicity/critique predicament, however, Clay and Tod re-evaluate painting as a genre by remembering differently its unsavoury gender assumptions and exclusions.... Clay seems at once to be seduced ('lured') by the aura of abstraction and to feel a need to disrupt its normalities, to 'have an argument' with this tradition, as she puts it.*⁴

Allyson's reassessment of abstraction as a recently dominant painting genre is staged within and beside the tradition's most characteristic conventions. Small, obviously hand-painted canvases isolate portions of serene skyscapes, signalling 18th and 19th century European landscape traditions and the transcendental, apolitical states original oil painting was asked to solicit. Placed next to these painterly, visionary "skies" are other panels of equal size but of contradictory visual merit – colour fields reminiscent of decorative, mechanically-reproduced, painted and gilded surfaces, the kind one might expect to find in contemporary interior design complementing walls, columns, ceilings, and countertops in a variety of marbled, pebbled and grained finishes.

As a painting surface, as a ground for her own imaginings, this (double-sided) veneer of modernism, as generic and universal as the white of a canvas, offers a conceptual armature upon which her own more evocative textual patterns can be differentiated and developed. Within the highly legitimized, historically dominant, visual arena we recognize as abstract painting, Allyson's de-contextualized pairs of text and image panels, at first anaesthetizing in their agreeably aesthetic façade, soon register as incomplete, as extracts from fuller histories.

In underlining the illusionary or fictive potential of painting, and in questioning the validity of established hierarchies – the hand-textured sky paintings (original = man-made = high art) over the mass-produced decorative surfaces (popular culture = craft = non-art) – painting's authenticized past is also called into

question. Within the appearance of abstraction, Allyson's superimposed, personalized, silk-screened text, a floating rather than embedded narrative, disrupts the implied homogeneous spatial boundaries, while acknowledging her own involvement with this genre. As her narrative "I" or suspended subject traverses the assembled grid of abstraction, in this work identified as parallel to the grid of a city (the exhibition is titled *Traces of a City in the Spaces Between Some People*), we witness a series of cautious encounters within strange yet familiar territory. This not an unconditional acceptance of abstract terrain but an unsettled association with a space-in-process, the same space her narrative "she" inhabits. For example, in her piece entitled *A New City*, the following text quietly occupies the bottom corner of the hand-painted sky:

She walked around for days without a map. The strange city revealed itself to her as a series of familiar spaces. Each neighbourhood recalled experiences of somewhere else she had been before.

In another piece called *Good Advice* the floating narrative suggests another spatial/interpersonal encounter:

I sat on the bench ruminating over a list of pressing chores until the bus arrived. As I stood up to get on the lady next to me patted my hand and said she thought the change of location would do me some good.

And taking us into another aspect of her narrative, the "she" in *After a Long Time* explores much more personal, sexually differentiated boundaries:

She stood at the window looking out. The room smelled like oil paint and magnolia blossoms. Because it was quite late at night the street below was quiet. After a long time she turned around and said to him, it isn't what I wanted it to be.

As the artist suggested during our studio visit, it is easier for a contemporary woman painter to see where she doesn't belong than to find or negotiate the space(s) she identifies with. Recollecting the writer Julia Kristeva, Allyson's narratives speak to abstraction and painting as uninhabitable spaces – yet rather than abandon either discourse (and her own trajectory and struggles across these expandable terrains), she cautiously and attentively moves within fabricated representations to see where, if at all, she feels at home. Kristeva observes:

*On a deeper level, however, a woman cannot 'be'; it is something which does not even belong in the order of being. It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say 'that's not it' and 'that's still not it.'*⁵

May 1-16, 1992

Subjects on Trial

Allyson Clay's dialogue ("argument") with the past, then, is not about the past as much as it is an exploration of the present. The spatial containment she proposes in the form of abstraction is not to be confused with paying tribute to or establishing artistic identity with. On the contrary, abstract painting is called in, metaphorically, as a zone of entanglement – a tangible site, characteristic of the barriers and codified language that many women feel outside of. For Allyson, an unravelling of the interplays between social and psychic spaces functioning within her critical relationship to the territory of abstract painting, will likely illuminate other areas of social and cultural life. As writer Carolyn Steedman suggests,

*We all return to memories and dreams like this, again and again; the story we tell of our own life is reshaped around them. But the point doesn't lie there, back in the past, back in the lost time when they happened; the only point lies in interpretation.*⁶

In the past five years, Allyson Clay's paintings have shifted from a direct engagement with a symbolic and more universal painterly language to a personalized and strategic system of evocative codes. As a grid that parallels her own development, *Traces of a City* proposes the remapping of once travelled, familiar territory from a much more distant, analytical (perhaps skeptical) vantage point. This shift from abstraction and symbolism to a consciously evolving engagement with a visual semiotic marks a significant aspect of Allyson's "argument" with abstraction's past and returns us to her desire to speak a language of the body.

When one does not have language but has ideas, impressions, experiences and desires, communication and articulation become absorbing concerns. When one has language but it does not extend into the areas of experience and desire one wishes to communicate, interventions, arguments and revisions gain momentum. When one cannot find "in" language sufficient evidence of one's own existence and experience, language will be reworked, stretched, opened up, until the fixed meanings and reference points have been disfigured, until a hybrid language with greater nuance, rhythm and sound has been created. This will not necessarily be an already known language, or a written language. More likely it will be an inflective, oral, perhaps visual, language – an interruptive, suggestive, phonic, full of sound, no longer quiet language. It will not be

official, it will not be universal, it will not be polite and contained – it will embody experience. In addressing the relationships between language, art and semiotics, British art historian Rosemary Betterton states:

*In a discussion of women's writing, Julia Kristeva suggests that the semiotic is charged with emotion: "an emotional force which does not signify as such but which remains latent in the phonic invocation or in the gesture of writing." ...Thus it is in poetry [or I would suggest in Rita McKeough's operatic production and Allyson Clay's textual overlays] with its use of association, metaphor, and musicality, that we experience the semiotic, a disruption of logical order.*⁷

Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic account of the function of the semiotic bears a strong resemblance to exploration in much contemporary feminist art. She suggests that a child's pre-verbal state marked by "sound images" or "babble" is a semiotic response to the immediate sensations, rhythms and information in her/his surroundings. In the pre-linguistic state the child is recognizing, naming and speaking "sound images" specific to her/his environment and experience. Until children pass into an agreed-upon symbolic domain where prescribed language has increased currency, they will not be easily understood. But unlike children, who have everything to gain through access to the symbolic order (language), women understand the loss of this gain – the gender of this space of references and privileges. Or, as British filmmaker and cultural theorist Laura Mulvey notes,

*The Lacanian 'symbolic order', ruled by the Name of the Father, defines the areas of circulation and exchange through which society expresses relations in conceptual, that is, symbolic, terms beyond the natural and the experiential. Language, the universal, most sophisticated means of symbolic articulation, seals this process.*⁸

From Creative Confrontation to Creativity

To choose to live completely outside the masculine symbolic order risks an endless cycle of omission. To live completely inside it risks an absorption and denial of all that is uniquely ours. To bridge both locations, while complicated and full of contradictions, allows a potential mixing, recycling, hybridization to occur which in itself is profoundly subversive, profoundly independent. About Pam Skelton, a painter living in England,⁹ I recently wrote that in some of her paintings, signs are quite formally staged, as if acutely aware of translating (representing) experience that the speaker or visual communicator is unaccustomed to openly bringing forward. The complexity of speaking about experience from a location that for whatever reason

has known some degree of censorship "makes the operator pay great attention to the materiality of language and the risks involved;" it makes the speaker or visual communicator "hypersensitive to the manoeuvring of signs."¹⁰

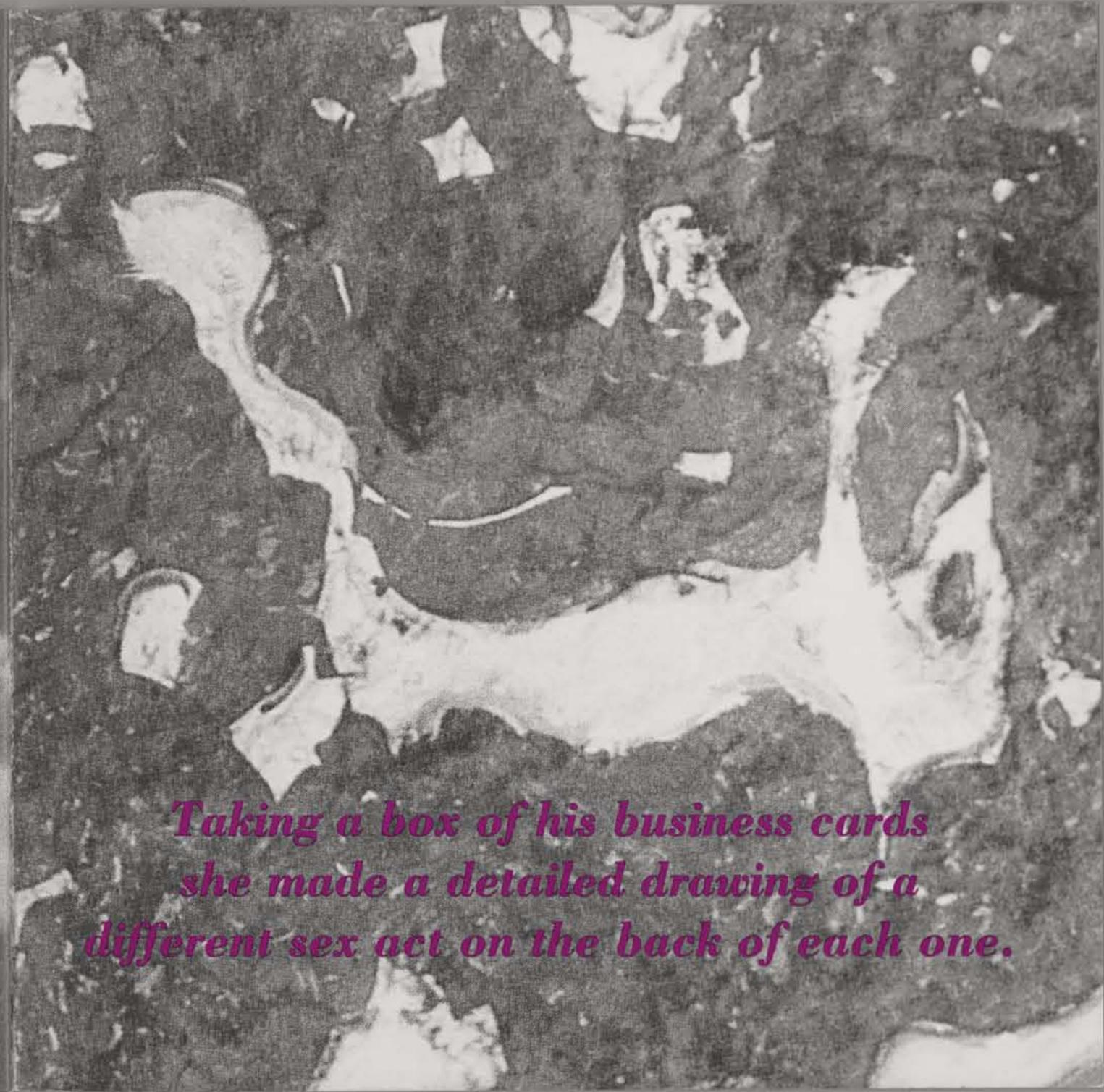
I went on to cite Chilean art critic Nellie Richard's theorizing of artists' relationship to production, to language and to speech. She emphasizes that, particularly in contexts in which some form of censorship has occurred, the speaker (visual artist) may become extremely adept at masking the full potency of their critical understanding, articulation or resistance. But it is just as likely that the artist is aware of a tension or conflict but does not fully comprehend the implications. In the practice and process of articulation and representation, the "unsaid assumes the form of an investigation sorting through all the hidden signs of its meaning."¹¹

What is significant to me in recycling these comments is the degree to which contradiction and ambiguity have been selected as a site for Allyson Clay's recent production. While intensely feminist in its search for meaning and its articulation of sexually differentiated spatial boundaries (art, cities, relationships) her work does not assume any 'authentic' feminist position. That is, she is not proposing a more truthful or purer relationship to meaning, nor, is she promoting an allegiance to any already defined feminist methodology. Rather than breaking away from any of the artistic, philosophical or theoretical domains she has inherited, she is conscious of maintaining a *critical* distance. As artist Mary Kelly has suggested, to see critically or independently requires that one "be neither too close nor too far away."¹² And so while autobiography is suggested in the narrative units of her text-image panels, certainly there is nothing to confirm that it is the artist's experience or the artist's subjectivity that is being transmitted. It could be mine, yours and any of ours. The shifts in Allyson's narrative "I" simultaneously suggest and deny, leaving us with fictive identities, conflicting structures and, more importantly, broken logical form. In the same way that Virginia Woolf falsifies, fictionalizes and transgresses fixed notions of identity in her novel *To the Lighthouse*,¹³ Allyson Clay is politically committed to reorganizing, in her work if not in her life, the spatial and structural containments she has known. Just as Woolf rejects fixed identities because "she has seen them for what they are,"¹⁴ Allyson Clay understands that the free-floating subject which now occupies the structural grid of her paintings is not lost, but strategically located while reassessing the parodies, and pleasures, of her own disguises.

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Footnotes

1. In Vancouver this production was sponsored by Presentation House and Western Front, April 19 & 20, 1992.
2. Gregory Salzman in *Parachute* 62 (Avril/Mai/Juin 1991), 41.
3. Written by Rimbaud in May 1871 and quoted in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (London: Pan Books, 1988), first published 1949, 723.
4. Mark A. Cheetham and Linda Hutcheon, *Remembering Postmodernism: Trends In Recent Canadian Art* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1991), 30.
5. In Trinh T. Minh-ha's book *Woman Native Other* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 102, this quotation is discussed and elaborated on. The original version can be found in Julia Kristeva, "Woman Can Never Be Defined," *New French Feminisms*, ed. E. Marks and I. DeCourtivon (Amherst: University of Mass. Press, 1980), 137.
6. Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape For a Good Woman* (London: Virago, 1986), 5.
7. In an exhibition catalogue recently produced in England, *Groundplans: Pam Skelton* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 1989), 4, feminist art historian Rosemary Betterton discusses aspects of Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic account of the operation of the semiotic. She refers specifically to Julia Kristeva, "Talking about Polylogue" in Toril Moi (ed.) *French Feminist Thought* (Basil: Blackwell, 1987).
8. Laura Mulvey, "Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience," *History Workshop* 23 (Spring 1987), 7.
9. In 1989 I wrote an essay entitled "Spaces of Transition" on painter Pam Skelton; see footnote 7.
10. I refer to Nellie Richard's remarks in "Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile since 1973," *Art and Text* 21 (Special Issue, Melbourne 1988), 30.
11. see Nellie Richard, 30-31.
12. Mary Kelly, "Desiring Images/Imaging Desire," *Wedge* No. 6 (New York: Wedge Press Inc., Winter 1984), 9.
13. In Toril Moi *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988), 1-18, a discussion of Woolf's feminist strategies detail her resistance to fixed identity.
14. Toril Moi, 13.



Taking a box of his business cards she made a detailed drawing of a different sex act on the back of each one.