

A M E R I C A N
S H A M E

STIGMA AND THE BODY POLITIC

EDITED BY
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To Ernesto, for always believing in me.

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Dieting for the Sake of Art: Eleanor Antin, Rachel Rosenthal, and Faith Ringgold

Emily L. Newman

Oprah Winfrey graced the cover of *People* on January 14, 1991, with a headline proclaiming, "I'LL NEVER DIET AGAIN!" and the statement "Fed up with her 14-year fight for a model figure, OPRAH WINFREY is learning to love the robust shape she's in." Since the national syndication of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 1986, Winfrey's body had been a recurring topic of discussion in the media. This was the persona that Winfrey put forth, that she was now, after years of yo-yo dieting and struggling to lose weight—finally at peace with her larger form. But it was not to last. Nominated for a Daytime Emmy Award in 1992, Winfrey went to the ceremony hoping that she would not win and would not have to accept the award on stage. Journaling about that night, she described her feelings: "I felt so much like a loser, like I'd lost control of my life. And the weight was symbolic of how out of control I was. I was the fattest woman in the room."¹ Oprah's personal feelings about her body, her shame and disgust with her weight, conflicted with her public statements about self-acceptance.

As an important and powerful public figure, Oprah Winfrey represents a significant entry point into discussions of American female body image in the 1980s and 1990s. National success had prompted her to seek out weight loss, and in November of 1988 she walked onto the set of her show in her "skinny jeans" pulling sixty-seven pounds of animal fat in a wagon to celebrate her achievement. Winfrey had lost the weight and proclaimed success, but just fourteen months later, she was back to her original size. That her battles with weight resonated with the American public could be seen in the explosion of the U.S. diet and exercise industry evidenced by the success of *Weight Watchers* (founded in 1963) and *Nutrisystem Weight Loss Centers* (founded in 1972).² Following these successes, Americans embraced aerobic exercise in the 1980s, with programs such as *Jazzercise* adding to the many influences on the shaping of women's physiques.³ To strengthen their muscles, an estimated 25 million Americans enrolled in aerobic dance classes between 1981 and 1985.⁴

Health and fitness were the ultimate goals of these programs, but something alarming was affecting women instead. In 1984 it was estimated that 1 in every 200 to 250 women between the ages of thirteen and twenty-two was suffering from anorexia and as many as 33 percent of college women were controlling their weight through vomiting, diuretics, and laxatives.⁵ Around 90 to 95 percent of all anorexics are women, and many experts agree that this disease is closely linked to women's body issues.⁶ The extensive media coverage of Karen Carpenter's 1983 death, Gilda Radner's revelations about her struggles with eating disorders in her 1989 autobiography *It's Always Something*, and even Meredith Baxter Birney's turn in the television movie *Kate's Secret* (1986), in which she portrayed a successful lawyer and mother wrestling with bulimia, were among the many instances where the media attempted to deal with eating disorders.⁷ The plight of women with disordered eating became a strange fascination for a broader public.

In the 1970s and 1980s, women's bodies were being publicly examined in terms of shape and size, especially in America. In evaluating the work of Eleanor Antin, Rachel Rosenthal, and Faith Ringgold, we can begin to examine how these artists were attempting to challenge societal expectations of their physiques while simultaneously encouraging discussion of *their* bodies because they did *actually* desire to lose weight and become healthier and/or more attractive.⁸ It was not just body size that these artists were confronting; it was also society's judgment of women's bodies. Amy Erdman Farrell insightfully discusses this issue: "Fatness in the United States 'means' excess of desire, of bodily urges not controlled, of immoral, lazy, and sinful habits. Much more than a neutral description of a type of flesh, fatness carries with it such stigma that it propels us to take drastic, extreme measures to remove it."⁹ While drawing attention to the unfortunate and unfair ways that the U.S. media has always dissected the female form, these artists, for a variety of reasons, many including their own body shame, attempted to lose weight to conform to ideal body size. Their artworks were bound in contradiction because the artists wanted to critique the privileging of thin female bodies while appearing to simultaneously support this position by trying to make their bodies thinner.

Eleanor Antin

By consistently using her short body and dark brown hair in her work, Eleanor Antin (b. 1935) was countering the tall, blonde ideal of the moment. Born and raised in New York, Antin was enmeshed in the contemporary art scene of New York in the late 1960s, befriending Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, Robert Morris, Yvonne Rainer, and John Perrault, among others, who were interested in exploring the relationship of performance to art.¹⁰ Antin was profoundly influenced not only by the rise of performance art but by the development of conceptual art, which

privileged the idea and the process over the final object. In 1969, Antin and her husband David, a poet, moved to San Diego, which immediately affected Antin's work as she began reading feminist texts and eventually formed a women artists' group at the University of California, San Diego.¹¹

Inspired by these exposures to feminism, Antin created *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* in 1972. This piece is composed of 148 photographs of Antin's nude body taken from July 15 to August 21 as she followed a strict dieting regimen. Each morning for thirty-six days, Antin had her picture taken from the front, back, left, and right.¹² Viewed from left to right and from earliest to latest, the pictures chronicled the small changes in Antin's shape as she gradually lost eleven pounds.

There is a documentary aspect to the photos; arranged sequentially they seem like a police lineup or possibly Eadweard Muybridge's photographic experiments. The pseudo-clinical treatment of her body made the weight loss scientific in a way that distanced Antin the artist from Antin the person. As curator Howard Fox observed, "With great deadpan skill, the piece gently satirizes much of the humorless monotony, ponderously presented under a veneer of pseudoscience and alleged clinical objectivity that characterized much of the conceptual art of the day."¹³ The scientific documentation of Antin's body and weight loss clearly objectified her body. While the clinical treatment of the body and the scientific documentation of the diet distanced Antin the person from the photographs, the work's success depended on Antin's presence and the fact that she lost weight.¹⁴

Carving was originally created in response to an invitation to show in the Annual of the Whitney Museum of American Art, which was featuring sculpture that year.¹⁵ Antin explained: "I thought it was a sculptural Annual and since I figured the Whitney was academically oriented, I decided to make an academic sculpture. I got out a book on Greek sculpture, which is the most academic of all. (How could they refuse a Greek sculpture?)"¹⁶ Yet she did not choose to make a conventional three-dimensional object; rather, she treated her body as her medium. Melissa Thompson sees Antin as toying with gender in her use of the term *sculpture*, in recognizing that as a female "sculptress" she was an anomaly in the field. Thompson notes the continued return of artists to the ideal sculptural form epitomized by the female Venus de Milo. The fleshy female body must be constructed and trimmed. Antin's "fat" had to be lost through her dieting, in the process reinforcing the idea that she could become ideal and therefore an appropriate subject for conventionally male sculptors to depict.¹⁷

Carving, then, can be viewed as a performance piece of her dieting with secondary photographic documentation.¹⁸ The work exists today as photographs and wall text, but for Antin in 1972 it was a thirty-six day performance endeavor that involved a strict system of dieting and documentation. She explained her actions in the label that she created to accompany the photographs: "This artist may have

a different aesthetic for the female body than Greek sculpture exhibited for the Korai but it should be kept in mind that two considerations determine the conclusion of a work: (1) the ideal image toward which the artist aspires, and (2) the limitations of the material." Antin then paraphrased Michelangelo: "Not even the greatest sculptor can make anything that isn't already inside the marble."¹⁹

Antin struggled against the increasing popularization of the ideal of the slender yet curvy body exemplified by models (and later actresses) Lauren Hutton (b. 1943), Marisa Berenson (b. 1947), and Cybill Shepherd (b. 1950). These tall, strikingly beautiful women obliquely functioned as the desired end result for Antin's dieting.²⁰ Naomi Wolf discusses the issues surrounding this ideal body in her seminal book *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (1991), articulating the issue that Antin was fighting against. Women are constantly bombarded with images of beautiful women whose putatively "ideal" yet heavily retouched bodies are unattainable. For Wolf, women's aspirations to these ideal standards force them into a battle over power with men:

"Beauty" is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West, it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves.²¹

Antin, then, was critiquing the way that women have been forced to focus their efforts on how they look instead of on advancing themselves intellectually or otherwise. By showing her body as it changed throughout the process of weight loss, she was not only drawing attention to the pressures that women face but also illustrating her dissatisfaction with her body. While Antin may not have been happy with her body, she repeatedly turned to its form as a starting place for much of her work.²²

What many historians do not take into account is the ordinariness of what Antin did: over the course of thirty-six days she put herself on an intensive diet. Anne Wagner hints at this in her review of the 1999 retrospective of Antin's work, where *Carving* functioned as a centerpiece in the show: "Yet from what I could tell, the message seemed to strike many viewers less as critical or ironic analysis than as realism pure and simple: testimony to the inevitable order of things. Of course women diet."²² Antin's use of dieting in *Carving* paralleled the burgeoning of the diet industry and the rise of the exercise movement in the early 1970s. The publishing of *Dr. Atkins' Diet Revolution* in 1972 made history when in just seven months it sold one million copies. In addition, the number of diet essays and books

published dramatically increased, with diet articles in *Reader's Guide* quadrupling over the course of the seventies.²⁴

Most important to this discussion is the flowering of diet groups such as Weight Watchers and Overeaters Anonymous in the early 1970s. In 1961, Jean Nidetch, who created Weight Watchers based on her own experiences in a weight loss support group, was described in a 1972 *Time* article as "a 214-lb. Queens housewife [transformed] into a trim 142-lb career woman."²⁵ At that time, Weight Watchers had 101 operations in 49 states and some foreign countries. Along with a bestselling cookbook, a magazine, and prepared foodstuffs, Weight Watchers succeeded as their revenues went from \$160,000 in 1964 to a whopping \$8 million in 1970.²⁶

Weight Watchers bears comparing to Antin's *Carving* because its increasing success and visibility corresponded to the development of her artwork, and the way Weight Watchers members were encouraged to lose weight can be related to the structure of Antin's piece. *Time's* aptly titled "Fortune from Fat," which reported that 3 million "fatties" paid to attend Weight Watcher meetings, described the program:

The unique mark of the Weight Watchers operation is the weekly class, which combines the atmospheres of a religious revival meeting and a high school pep rally. As they arrive, members weigh in; their weekly gains or losses are recorded on cards and later read off to the assemblage. Under the guidance of a trained lecturer, those who have taken off pounds are loudly applauded; backsliders are sympathetically counseled to show renewed dieting determination.²⁷

Members were held accountable by their fellow dieters, and their weight was recorded each week; menus and food diaries were distributed for the week ahead.

The public process and scrutiny Antin put her body through as displayed in *Carving* was not unlike how a Weight Watchers member confronted her weight publicly each week. The frequency and repetition of the weekly weigh-ins coupled with the encouragement to use food journals, demonstrates the program's dependence on documentation to keep its members aware of their weight. In addition, the public recounting of weight gain and loss could work toward shaming members into losing weight. Daniel Martin, a sociologist who studied the program through research and personal participation, explained how shame played a critical role in its effectiveness:

As a participating observer, I experienced the anxiety that members later recounted in interviews about "facing the scale," that is, weigh-ins. Because weigh-ins take place in semipublic space, it is possible that queuing members will learn of one's weight, increasing the anxiety

that is already present for some members. Having failed weigh-in several times by gaining weight, I was struck by the capacity for the ritual to evoke, simultaneously, feelings of dependency and embarrassment.²⁸

Because this “ritual” actually caused many people to leave the program, it was eventually dropped.²⁹

Similarly, through her system of documentation, Antin held herself accountable in much the same way that a Weight Watchers member does. Even in the text that accompanied the work, Antin felt compelled to emphasize the limitations of her body, “The work was originally intended to include a regimen of exercise also, but this proved unacceptable, in practice, to the artist who appears to have lost her skills at this technique.”³⁰ While this was intended as self-deprecating and humorous, it spoke to Antin’s challenges with changing her body. Although she was able to succeed at dieting, exercise was problematic. She was acknowledging that there was only so much she could do with her body, as if it were a pre-determined shape already formed in the marble. She was not the classical ideal and never would be. She could slightly alter her size, but she could not become a Korai. Antin did not discuss *Carving* in the context of feeling bad about her body or its size; rather, she saw it as an artistic endeavor.³¹ Simultaneously, by taking on a project with such scrupulous documentation of her physique where she was visibly trying to change her form to be more ideal, Antin was clearly expressing how her body did not meet societal norms and should be changed, even going so far as to express how she was never ideal enough. The Whitney Museum refused to show *Carving* in their sculptural annual, which can be seen as reinforcing Antin’s failed attempt at becoming the desirable thin body that society covets.

Rachel Rosenthal

Similarly, Rachel Rosenthal (b. 1926) also used photographs of her overweight body as compared to her newer, svelter figure in *The Death Show* (1978). Both Antin and Rosenthal used photographic illustrations of the fluctuations of their body size to simultaneously document their weight changes and become the subject of their art and performances. While Antin intended her photographs to demonstrate the “sculptural” changes to her body, Rosenthal’s performances entailed a personal revelation about her weight. Even so, both of their artworks were autobiographical, documenting the changes their bodies experienced—for their art, for their health, and/or for their appearance.

Rosenthal is nine years older than Antin, and her art emerged out of experimental theater. Born in France of Russian-Jewish blood, Rosenthal called herself a “DP”—a displaced person—because she shuffled between Paris, New York,

and Brazil throughout her early life.³² In 1955, Rosenthal moved to California and established Instant Theatre (1956–1966), which focused on a combination of improvisation and theater exercises. She did not, however, produce a project conceived of as performance art until the mid-1970s.

Like Antin, Rosenthal had been fundamentally changed by the feminist movement; she was encouraged by fellow feminists to explore performance art and to incorporate in it her life experiences. She explained in 1989: “I was able to do in my performance work what I had never been able to do in my life, which is to reveal myself, to disclose, to air, to put out all this garbage and turn it around and make it into art, and in a sense reveal all the dark secrets that I had kept locked up all these years. It was redemption and exorcism.”³³ Rosenthal’s performance of *Charm* (1977) was a breakthrough for the artist; in it she began to address issues concerning her troubling childhood and its effect on her body.

Subtitled *A Sonata in Three Movements*, *Charm* was performed at Mount St. Mary’s College Art Gallery in Los Angeles on January 28, 1977.³⁴ The piece was structured in three movements around multiple definitions of “charm,” through which Rosenthal wove stories about her parents, her childhood, her first home in Paris, and her relationship with her servants. As the piece progressed, the pace quickened and the environment grew increasingly frantic. On an elevated platform, supporting cast members dressed in black, called “nightmare figures,” engaged in acts of sadism and sadomasochism at escalating speeds until they became a mesh of bodies. Meanwhile, on a lower platform, Rosenthal regaled the audience with tales of her aristocratic Parisian life. Throughout the piece, she became increasingly anxious and upset, shouting at intervals, “CAN YOU ALL SEE ME? CAN YOU ALL HEAR ME?”³⁵ As she spoke, a butler presented her with pastries, which Rosenthal ate rapidly, repeatedly asking for more. As the pastries piled up faster than she could devour them, she frantically shoveled them in her mouth. For the triumphant finish, the butler brought out a large chocolate cake, which Rosenthal plunged into face first.

As these events took place, Rosenthal tied the piece together by relating childhood stories and events. Speaking of how she was forced to go to bed early and was left under the watch of the servants, she noted that she had a particularly contentious relationship with her governess, who openly mocked the six-year old Rosenthal and put her on a diet. As she explained in the piece, “Downstairs I was adulated and loved. Everything I did was wonderful and pretty. Upstairs my hair was pulled, my face was slapped, I was told I was stupid, that I was an idiot and a show-off, and that people were only nice to me because my father was rich . . .”³⁶ Then Rosenthal rang a bell to alert the butler for more food, and her stories grew darker and darker, pushing her into a frantic state where she gorged on the sweet pastries.

Charm was the first piece Rosenthal performed where she addressed food, and it marked the first time she discussed her deep-seated self-consciousness about her body. In a 1975 letter to the artist Barbara T. Smith, she spoke of her desire to lose weight and change her body size. Rosenthal traced the origins of her overeating to the Cordon-Bleu chef who worked for her family.³⁷ She went on to explain how her body was physically hindering her work: "Barbara, needless to say, I am petrified. Here I am, almost fifty, having to have my knees operated on, overweight, ten years older, out of shape and training, trying to resume one of the most difficult and demanding forms art can take."³⁸ *Charm* was Rosenthal's attempt to come to terms with the issues surrounding her body and food, which she so specifically traced back to her childhood. In a later interview, she said, "My half-sister was obese and was getting a great deal of flack from my mother, so I associated being loved with being thin. That created a lifelong problem and an eating disorder. For example, I can never remain an even weight because it either goes way up or way down. I eat emotionally—and for all of the wrong reasons."³⁹ Rosenthal struggled with her weight constantly, and after the revelations discovered through the performance of *Charm*, she joined Overeaters Anonymous and successfully shed several pounds.⁴⁰

Rosenthal returned to performance art significantly thinner and healthier, which she addressed in *The Death Show* (1978),⁴¹ in which she recited a text about death, primarily three deaths that "stick out as prototypes of all the others": her beloved Teddy—a childhood toy taken away from her when the "grownups" felt she was too old for him, Defective Kitten—a cat Rosenthal mercy-killed when it was abandoned by its mother, and her treasured cat Dibidi, which she had for eighteen years and which for twelve of those was paraplegic and had to be constantly attended to and supervised.⁴² As she told these stories, it became clear that *The Death Show* was about Rosenthal exorcizing these demons of her past as she strove for redemption. Addressing this piece in 1979, Rosenthal explained, "Although our body knows death and stores this knowledge 'in our memory bank at the cellular level,' we must consciously rehearse for the 'Big One' by learning how to die the myriad deaths of our lives, letting go and shedding people, events, parts of ourselves. If this is not done, a 'monster emerges.'⁴³ While she dealt with the deaths of others, Rosenthal also had to shed a part of herself.

As part of *The Death Show*, Rosenthal revealed a picture on an easel, called the "Icon of the Fat Vampire." Mounted on plywood was a photograph of Rosenthal before the weight loss, near the time *Charm* was made, surrounded by a funeral wreath composed of pastries, cakes, and doughnuts spray-painted black. Explaining the icon to her audience, Rosenthal said, "The Fat Vampire is fat from the accumulation of countless botched-up deaths not allowed to die, fat from the unrecognized fear of the Big One, fat from the wrong substances ingested for life and sustenance, fat from opacity, the refusal to let in the rays of light. Fat from

blocked deaths."⁴⁴ Emphasizing that the Fat Vampire had taken over her life, she exorcized it by letting out a primal scream.

Then Rosenthal addressed how she rid her life completely of this monster. Initially, she resisted killing the Fat Vampire because she was afraid to let go and leave her comfort zone. Lighting candles at the front of the stage, she defined the "stations of the Fat Vampire" as moments when she could have killed it but was too afraid of dying. The stations began with a year, then a type of food, and then a statement about refusing a death (her virginity, her parents, her identity as an artist, etc.). For example: "6. 1972: Cheesecake. I refuse the death of my feminine role and resist the call to feminist arms. . . . 9. 1978: Häagen-Dazs Ice Cream. I refuse the death of the Fat Vampire, of my marriage, of 51 years of my life. The 10th Station is this performance."⁴⁵ The death of the Fat Vampire became an exorcism of all her "deaths," those demons that had haunted her and made her body fat and bloated. She continued, "I want to be a good suicide. I don't want to botch up my death. I want to bury the Fat Vampire, and with it, all my small and medium-sized deaths that were left to decompose without proper burial."⁴⁶ Rosenthal then approached the icon and repeatedly slashed it with a knife.

By Rosenthal's account, the Fat Vampire had taken over her life, manifesting itself physically through the size of her body. She claimed to never have been fat but that the Vampire wrapped around her body and encased her: "As for me, I finally lost track of my real boundaries and, amnesiac of my true self, I too mistook this padded shroud for my own skin."⁴⁷ This concept of alien fat enveloping the true person resonates with Susie Orbach's arguments in *Fat Is a Feminist Issue* (1978). Published at the same time that Rosenthal was producing her work, Orbach's book pointed to fat as a tool that women use to avoid complex issues: "Fat is a social disease, and fat is a feminist issue. Fat is not about lack of self-control or lack of will power. Fat is about protection, sex, nurturance, strength, boundaries, mothering, substance, assertion and rage."⁴⁸ For Orbach, becoming fat could be a way of taking control of one's body and attempting to avoid objectification in the eyes of men. In contrast, Rosenthal claimed that the fat had overtaken her, shifting, shaping, and obscuring her true self. Both Orbach and Rosenthal, then, saw fat as an insidious entity separate from the individual, one that with hard work (dieting, exercising, etc.) could, and should, be exorcized.

As she recounted and demonstrated in *Charm*, Rosenthal was an overeater and specifically an emotional overeater.⁴⁹ Orbach constructed overeating as a deliberate act and choice to avoid becoming the ideal woman:

My fat says "screw you" to all who want me to be the perfect mom, sweetheart, maid and whore. Take me for who I am, not for who I'm supposed to be. . . . In this way, fat expresses a rebellion against the

powerlessness of the woman, against the pressure to look and act in a certain way and against being evaluated on her ability to create an image of herself.⁵⁰

Such ideas may have been evocative for Rosenthal, who was constantly moving from the ideal thin body that her mother wanted for her (her mother had told her often when she was little, "When you are fat, I don't love you") to an overweight body that delighted in consuming French pastries.⁵¹

Rosenthal's attempt to gain control of her weight in the late 1970s by joining Overeaters Anonymous, coupled with her own comments about her weight, emphasize that she was preoccupied with and shamed by her appearance. At the same time, she was concerned about her health and physical condition. In 1989 she was experiencing such serious health setbacks due to her weight that her art production was hindered. This was probably the period between *Charm* and *The Death Show*, when Rosenthal ceased performing:

There was a time in my life when if I'd looked the way I look now I would hide. I would not show myself. I would not perform. I would not go out. I would hide under the sheets and nobody would see me. And I knew, deep in my heart, that I could never be loved or appreciated or even considered as part of the human race if people could see me with these pounds overweight. And now I thank goodness have gotten past that. . . . But it is still a problem, because I know how good I look when I'm thin and I feel so much better too.⁵²

The Death Show became particularly powerful when it illustrated Rosenthal's exploration of her heaviness as a hindrance and a destructive force—one that provoked anger and violence. Rather than working to accept her figure at its current weight in the late 1970s, Rosenthal's health and shame pushed her to change her body significantly.

To reiterate, *The Death Show* showcased a picture of the larger Rosenthal in the Icon of the Fat Vampire. The pastries she devoured in *Charm* surrounded the face of the former, fat Rosenthal in *The Death Show*. The two pieces, in their demonstration of her weight loss and physical transformation, recall Antin's comparable, albeit smaller, change as documented in *Carving*. Antin photographed her body and recorded her weight as the changes happened, systematically evaluating the shape and size of her body as she dieted. Her clinical approach was far removed from the dramatic and psychological portrait that Rosenthal presented, yet both artists expressed dissatisfaction with their physiques. When discussed together, the two artists illustrate both the physical and mental experiences one has while undergoing weight loss.

Both also were responding to the ideal L.A. woman, who was generally viewed as healthy because she was thin (if not underweight) and active, participating in the California beach culture. In 1983, Dr. Peter Wood published *The California Diet and Exercise Program*, which postulated that Californians "played" more and ate healthier because most American healthy foods came from the fertile valleys of California.⁵³ An active lifestyle and beautiful weather permitted the wearing of skimpy bikinis, but also began to be reflected in artists' work in the late sixties and seventies. The icon of the beach-worthy body coupled with proximity to Hollywood led some women artists to incorporate the social anxieties that their location inspired into their artwork.⁵⁴

With regard to Antin, Lisa E. Bloom has argued that her Jewish identity precluded her attainment of the putative ideal: Here, Bloom discusses Antin's ethnicity in relation to *Carving*:

Antin's project can be seen as her inability to adapt to the ideal and thus to assimilate as an unmarked subject . . . Antin does not offer an easy solution to the dilemma of being both Jewish and female. Instead she points to the limits of fitting in, by presenting a series of anti-aesthetic photographic self-portraits that refuse to offer a neutral and undisturbing aesthetic experience.⁵⁵

The attempts of Jewish women to assimilate and change themselves to look "Whiter" has been well documented. As Melvin Konner articulates, "Hair was straightened and dyed blond, eyebrows trimmed and plucked, skin bleached, and ears tucked back closer to the skull in innovative surgical procedures. And, in the greatest step in the cosmetic surgery of the era, Jewish noses were straightened and 'bobbed'—cut short—to remove this most obvious and 'indestructible' Jewish stigma."⁵⁶ By tracing the history of rhinoplasty from its invention by the Jewish doctor Jacques (né Jakob) Joseph to its popularity with celebrities and teenage Jewish girls, Konner emphasizes the lengths Jewish men and women have gone to change their bodies to fit in.

More specifically, Jewish women, arguably including Antin and Rosenthal, have historically tried to resemble a particular figure type—one that is significantly less Jewish. Sander Gilman explores this idea: "The desire for invisibility, to 'look like everyone else,' still shaped the Jew's desire to alter his/her body. . . . The internalization of the negative image of the Jew is one model of response to the sense of being seen as 'too Jewish,' or, indeed, being seen as Jewish at all."⁵⁷ By documenting her body in a straightforward and scientific way, Antin drew attention to her Jewish nose and short stature and her differences from the California woman. Similarly, the Jewish refugee Rosenthal, a self-proclaimed displaced person, never felt she fit in with any group. Her body type, with her dark hair, larger frame, and

troubled knees, was certainly distinct from the figure of her erstwhile mentor, Barbara T. Smith, who was a quintessential blonde beauty. Changing their bodies and making themselves thinner could serve as a comfort for Antin and Rosenthal, making them more American and, as Gilman says, more “invisible.” Furthermore, as Thomas Rees asserts, “Everybody wanted to look like a shiksa.”⁵⁸

Derived from the Hebrew verb *shakaytz* (to abominate an unclean object), *shiksa* evolved into an epithet describing the gentile female, one who was desired by men but forbidden.⁵⁹ While the term does not necessarily imply a thin body, it does frequently suggest some attractiveness or appeal that the Jewish woman is lacking. Rosenthal and Antin strove to make their bodies look more like that of the shiksa and therefore more conventionally desirable.

Faith Ringgold

Interweaving questions of Jewishness into the struggle about weight certainly complicates Antin’s and Rosenthal’s relationships with their bodies. Even so, there is something universal about their struggle to fit in as their attempts to change their bodies paralleled the plight of the “average” woman, who was constantly trying to conform to a thin ideal. Faith Ringgold (b. 1930) went through a similar struggle with her weight, and after twenty years of focusing on her career and creating successful work, the African-American artist decided that she, much like Rosenthal, needed to make a change in her body and in 1986 lost one hundred pounds.

Ringgold’s art career began in earnest in the 1960s, when she painted large works that confronted issues of race. In the 1980s, she began working in fabric, creating story quilts that used a combination of painting and text to present activist arguments, historical narratives, personal events, and recollections. To celebrate her new, healthier body, she created the first of a series of three quilts, all titled *Change: Faith Ringgold’s Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*. The quilts included both photographic and painted portraits of the artist, showing all versions of herself—from young to old and skinny to fat. To make the first and second of these quilts she used a combination of photo etchings on fabric, painted portraits and texts, which were then pieced onto the quilt by assistants whom she had hired. In particular, this first quilt focuses on anecdotes and personal feelings regarding Ringgold’s weight by incorporating parts of a text she had been writing for a then unpublished autobiography organized by the decades of Ringgold’s life.⁶⁰

The central section is the exception as “January 1, 1986” told of Ringgold’s current relationship with her body and her weight-loss goals. Shifting from the first to the second person, the tone of her writing also moved from autobiographical to motivational: “In this year, 1986, I will lose 128 pounds. By January 1, 1987 I will weigh 130 pounds, or I’ll eat your hat. Mine I’ve already eaten. Faith, you have

been trying to lose weight since the sixties. For the last twenty, twenty-five years you’ve been putting yourself on diets, charting your lack of progress and gaining weight.”⁶¹ Thus, the quilt became not just a history of her life through photos and text but also an attempt to encourage herself to lose more weight. Ringgold admitted that she wanted to lose weight, not just to become healthier and to increase her agility when working and performing but to look better.⁶² Moira Roth astutely articulates the way that Ringgold used her quilt to express her emotional state:

With this quilt Ringgold visually records the progressive transformation of a woman from what she is expected to be to what she wants to be. The weight gain is part of that struggle and a response to the stress and pressures of conflicting demands and expectations. It becomes a protective shield in Ringgold’s denial of her stereotyped image as a sex object (the Black temptress).⁶³

Ringgold was articulating the desire to claim her body for herself, but by emphasizing weight loss she was also calling attention to the pressure put on women. Roth claims that Ringgold used her excess weight so that her body would not become a sexual object, an idea that recalls Orbach: “Just as many women first become fat in an attempt to avoid being made into sexual objects at the beginning of their adult lives, so many women remain fat as a way of neutralizing their sexual identity in the eyes of others who are important to them as their life progresses.”⁶⁴ Ringgold echoed Orbach in the 1970–1979 section of the quilt: “You used to say your husband Burdette made you eat so that no one else would look at you. And then you didn’t look at you either.”⁶⁵ Throughout the narrative, Ringgold vacillated between taking responsibility for her own weight gain (listing all the types of food that tempted her) and blaming others who encouraged her bad habits.

The text was laced with humorous and perceptive moments. For example, the section for 1980–1985 began with this insight: “By the 1980s you had finally eaten yourself into a corner. The only way out was cold turkey without dressing.”⁶⁶ She went on to tell the story of a political benefit she attended: “You posed with her [the candidate], not realizing you held a greasy bag of nuts. She slapped you on your hand and ordered you to ‘put that away’ . . . You could have made the front page and the Nightly News that day, ‘Fat Woman Goes Nuts,’ but you smiled, wiped your mouth, and put your nuts out of sight.”⁶⁷ Humor, however, could not disguise the hurt that Ringgold was feeling as she chronicled painful moments in her life—the binging, the divorces, even the loss of self-control when faced with good wine or chocolate. The quilt’s text was an honest account of one woman’s experience, her battle with food, her embarrassments, and her determination to overcome her struggles with weight.

After completing the quilt and losing her one hundred pounds, Ringgold incorporated the ideas and anecdotes of the quilt into a performance piece that she presented when the quilt was shown in exhibitions. Through song, dance, and spoken word, she narrated her life and her struggles with weight. At the end of the performance, she removed an oversized jacket that had the same photographs and text as the quilt to show off her new, thinner body. Additionally, throughout the performance she repeatedly attempted to pull twenty, two-liter soda bottles filled with water and stuffed into two large garbage bags. Collectively symbolizing the weight that she had lost, the bottles did not budge easily; this was a blatant metaphor for the burden of the extra pounds she carried and the difficulty of shedding them.⁶⁸ She invited the audience to get up and pull the “weight,” to experience firsthand the weight of one hundred pounds. In an act anticipating Oprah Winfrey’s wagon of fat two years later, Ringgold needed to tangibly represent her lost pounds as a way to visualize the changes to her figure. In her performance, Ringgold repeatedly acknowledged her past weight-loss failures: the fad diets, the doctors’ advice, even the pills.⁶⁹ In contrast, the separation of the extra fat (as represented by Ringgold’s bottles) and her body emphasized her triumphs. Throughout her piece Ringgold repeated the phrase “I can change. I can do it. I can do it. I can CHANGE, I can CHANGE. Now.” In an attempt to further motivate herself to lose more pounds as well as to inspire others to join in her quest, she encouraged the audience to chant with her, repeating “CHANGE” over and over.

The quilt itself had a performative element. The last panel recorded the date of its completion as an update to Ringgold’s progress since the first panel of January 1, 1986: “It is September 27, 1986, and though I have 40 pounds yet to lose I have lost 88 pounds. Today I am thinner than I have been in the last twenty years. I eat fresh fruit and vegetables instead of pasta and pork chops, and I exercise almost every day. I am out to prove something right here and now.”⁷⁰ What exactly did she prove? The numbers on the scale had changed, and she admitted that her diet had also become healthier—but this change was not enough. Ringgold’s quilt articulated her feelings of insecurity and disappointment tinged with hopefulness. The stories expressed in the quilt repeatedly emphasized her anxieties regarding her body. This omnipresent discomfort led Ringgold to keep the series going as she continued to lose weight and attempted to come to terms with her physical presence.

A second quilt dealing with her weight loss, *Change 2: Faith Ringgold’s Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Quilt* (1988), was originally intended as a celebration of losing another thirty pounds,⁷¹ but, as she noted in her 2005 autobiography, “I must admit I failed to do that, but I was still fortunate because I didn’t gain back the weight I lost.”⁷² The focal point of this quilt was a painting in the center panel that depicted Ringgold’s ideal svelte figure in a simple bathing suit. Behind the

figure was the larger shadow of her current, imperfect self. Again, Ringgold had created a performance that matched the quilt in which she wore a costume that worked to accentuate her waist and her successful maintenance of her 100-pound weight loss. Rather than recite the stories of the first quilt, for the second performance piece Ringgold sang the *Change Song*, which included motivational lyrics like the text in the first quilt: “I just got to change / I just got to change / I can’t stand the pain / It’s like a fire in my brain / Everyday it’s the same Never mind who’s to blame / It’s me that’s got to change / Eatin’ all that food is so insane / I just got to change / I just got to change.”⁷³ Ringgold made very clear that she was dissatisfied with her body and that its size caused both physical and emotional pain.

Audience participation was critical in Ringgold’s *Change* performances because a communal spirit was said to emerge as people sang and danced alongside her, bonding over their commonalities of weight loss, body image, and general insecurities concerning body size. Indeed, the audience, in its support of Ringgold and her project, did not challenge their assigned role in Ringgold’s weight loss. Rather, Ringgold used her viewers as a support structure to help her maintain her lower weight. Their complicity also reinforced the need for change in Ringgold’s body and perhaps in their own weight loss.

Ringgold’s performances captured the desire she felt to fit in and to find others who were experiencing the same challenges. Even Winfrey, reaching out to her audience, sought solace by sharing her experiences. Echoing the strategy used successfully in *Weight Watchers* and *Overeaters Anonymous*, Ringgold, Rosenthal, and Winfrey found support through group participation, which recognizes that the struggle with weight or to be comfortable with body size is something that many, many women are working through.

By trying to achieve a putatively ideal body, Ringgold and Winfrey could also be said, in effect, to have tried to achieve the ideal *White* body, as Sidonie Smith argues:

“Faith’s” identity as a subject of disordered eating and disordered self-restraint is a social identity, one manifesting the psychic formations of her specific history as an African American woman. The ironic self-analysis of the narrative points to a profound psychic wound, the internalization of the phantasm of the idealized “feminine” body, raced as “white,” and the degraded African American female body stereotyped as unconstrained and excessive.⁷⁴

Traditionally, African Americans have been more accepting than other ethnic groups of a heavier body type.⁷⁵ Since the 1980s, however, the African American magazines *Ebony* and *Jet* have shown a marked increase in attention to diet, exercise, and body image issues. According to Becky W. Thompson, only in the last

two decades have Black women been able to communicate their struggles with weight, breaking from the mammy stereotype (large, desexualized Black women) that has haunted them.⁷⁶ Winfrey's and Ringgold's open discussions about their weight drew attention to the fact that, like Whites, people of color could have issues with their bodies and even struggle with eating disorders.⁷⁷ The desire for slenderness so associated with Western White women is no longer specific to them as women of other ethnic groups have generally come to adhere to the same ideals. On some level, Ringgold's and Winfrey's battles with weight demonstrate that their Black bodies could not fit into society the way they were—they had to be modified, slimmed down, to be accepted. Furthermore, their desire to be thin points to something frequently missing in the literature on anorexia, bulimia, and weight issues: the Black body.

Ringgold had started to put weight back on by the time she began making *Change 3: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Quilt* (1991). Weight gain is not uncommon after dieting. Both Ringgold and Winfrey used a liquid diet, specifically Optifast, to quickly lose pounds. Originally Ringgold lost 100 pounds and kept them off in part through the exercise entailed in the performances and dancing for the first *Change* and for *Change 2*. A trip to France and a pause from her performances prompted a weight gain of about twenty-five pounds.⁷⁸ Basically, as soon as Winfrey and Ringgold began to eat solid food, the weight returned. Neither woman was alone, however: more than 95 percent of women reportedly cannot maintain their weight loss after a diet.⁷⁹

For Ringgold, this weight gain served as the impetus to create her *Change 3* quilt, which "contain[ed] no photographs but rather a painted 'group' self-portrait in the nude, showing me at my various different weights over the years—a testament to the continuing struggle I have had with food. The text for this quilt is about the eating habits of different 'women' (all of them, of course, are just me) who are portrayed on this quilt."⁸⁰ These nude Ringgolds, while of varying sizes, were much closer to a thin woman than to the heavier woman she once was and could become again.

Because the third quilt did not contain pictures or anecdotes from Ringgold's life, it relied on a fictional event and painted (often idealized) portraits of the artist. Creating this image of her world allowed Ringgold to express these alter egos, some of whom were past versions of herself and others were fictitious. There were the skinny and the overweight Ringgolds, the emotional eaters, and the ones who starved. Ringgold's point was that all of these people were in her and probably in most people. Nonetheless, the text made clear that she was clinging to the idea that one day she could be as thin as the skinniest women in the quilt. For Ringgold at the time of *Change 3*, the goal was still to lose more weight.

The text panel in *Change 3* is illuminating, explaining the central image—a party where everyone invited was actually various versions of Ringgold. "At my party everyone invited is actually me and therefore knows me so there is no need to posture and pretend. . . . The extreme manifestations of me showed up at the party uninvited, and were snubbed. One was eating a fried pork chop sandwich from a greasy bag. When she left in a huff, she got stuck in the door."⁸¹ The text made clear that, as much as Ringgold wanted to be open to all versions of her body, she was not able to accept them and remained uncomfortable with her fat self.

The brief text on the quilt ended with the note that two larger women had showed up at the party, eaten all the appetizers, and then invited Ringgold for "coffee-cake and ice cream after dinner. Really?" Ringgold questioned these two women, perhaps because she identified with them. Sweets were among her weaknesses, and it was as if these two women were perpetuating Ringgold's bigger body. She didn't want to go out with them, but instead wanted to associate with the thinner women, who either show restraint or have disordered eating habits. With those women, her body was safer and more desirable in society.

What had begun as a celebration of her weight loss morphed into a hopeful wish of what her body could be and ended with a reluctant acceptance of her fluctuating weight. The *Change* series tracked her mindset regarding body image, but also provided for the hope that maybe one day she could achieve her desired weight while reinforcing the inadequacy of her current figure. Susan Bordo has argued that the slender body becomes a symbol of the "correct attitude . . . it means that one 'cares' about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to shape your life."⁸² A fat person can thus be seen as weak because fatness can "be seen as reflecting moral or personal inadequacy, or lack of will."⁸³

Conclusion

Antin's, Rosenthal's, and Ringgold's pieces were ostensibly for creating art, and yet they are intimately personal, reflecting each maker's potentially unsettling dissatisfaction with her body. Discussing Americans' preoccupation with body image, W. Charisse Goodman states:

Possessed by countless images of perfection always beyond her reach, forever measured and compared with other bodies, trapped in a world where only one size fits in, she is truly haunted by our society's grand obsession. Even when she is acutely aware of the political and social coercion involved in weight prejudice, she nevertheless finds herself apologizing for her "less-than-perfect" figure.⁸⁴

The artists' relationships with their bodies all reinforce the belief that the size of one's body can determine the way one is perceived by society. There is something universal about the struggles of these women to fit in—their attempts to change their bodies paralleling the plight of the “average” woman who is constantly trying to conform to a thin ideal that has the potential to bring about a happier, more fulfilling, and more successful life.

In her work, each artist walked a fine line, wanting to articulate the problematic view of women's bodies in society but also reinforcing the need to have a body that meets an “acceptable” standard. In the process of creating their works or on reflection afterward, the artists expressed a certain discontent or disappointment with their bodies. By making works that forcefully confronted viewers with the size of women's bodies and the physical effects of dieting, they also pushed viewers to consider their own complicity in the shaming of women's bodies. It becomes impossible not to look at these works and think of popular magazine covers and advertisements that “instruct” women on ways to look. The strength of the pieces is in the contradiction they depict. While showing that the dieting industry and the media have effectively determined the way women's figures should look, the artists attempted to challenge these ideas but also succumb to them.

The artists' persistent practices of incorporating their bodies in ways central to their projects demonstrate that their work in the 1970s and 1980s did not resolve any of the issues concerning their weight. The decision to showcase their bodies allowed their work to prompt further examination of body size and its role in art and society by future generations of artists.⁸⁵ Professionally, they did not incorporate their weight issues or insecurities concerning their bodies in their art again. This is not to say that dissatisfaction with their bodies dissipated; rather, it persisted but did not continue as a subject for their art.⁸⁶ In an interview in 1998, discussing her work and her desire for change, Eleanor Antin explained one of the key reasons that she moved away from her dissatisfaction with her body: because nothing could really be done about it. “But can you really win? Have you ever seen a revolution that didn't swallow itself? Isn't defeat built into the world, as basic as carbon? Aren't we all doomed? We got out in the morning and we're going to be defeated at night. If we have really bad luck, we'll be defeated by noon.”⁸⁷

Notes

1. Quoted in Ella Howard, “From Fasting toward Self-Acceptance: Oprah Winfrey and Weight Loss in American Culture,” in *The Oprah Phenomenon*, ed. Jennifer Harris and Elwood Watson (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 110.

2. Roberta Pollack Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with Their Bodies* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1989), 167.

3. Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 235.

4. Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 236.

5. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1994; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 140.

6. Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 15.

7. Gilda Radner discussed how she lost weight through dieting, attributing her success to sugarless chewing gum and throwing up after meals; see Cherie Burns, “Radner's Ready,” *People*, December 5, 1977, 92–99. On Karen Carpenter, see Randy L. Schmidt, *Little Girl Blue: The Life of Karen Carpenter* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010).

8. In this essay, I address the artists' work and biography because the two are intimately intertwined during this period. I do recognize that historically women and people of color who are artists are often discussed in connection with their biography, in part because their work is discussed *only* in the context of their gender or race. Regarding the work of Antin and Rosenthal in the 1970s and Ringgold in the 1980s, the biographies of these artists *must* be discussed because of the nature of their projects. Additionally, the importance of including their experiences recalls the arguments of Anna Chave, “‘Normal Ills’: On Embodiment, Victimization and the Origins of Feminist Art,” in *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, ed. Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 132–157.

9. Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 10.

10. Howard Fox, *Eleanor Antin* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999), 16–24.

11. *Ibid.*, 204–207.

12. Technically, the project took place over a thirty-seven-day period because she missed photographing herself on a morning that she was not at home in San Diego. Eleanor Antin, personal communication, June 28, 2009.

13. Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 44.

14. For a more detailed analysis of the conceptual nature of *Carving*, see Jayne Wark, “Conceptual Art and Feminism: Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Wilson,” *Woman's Art Journal* 22, no. 1 (2001): 44–50; and Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 20–46.

15. The Whitney Museum requested a piece from Antin, expecting something in line with her *100 Boots*. When Antin sent them *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, which was composed of photographs and text, the museum rejected it, only to show it twenty-five years later in “The American Century: Art and Culture, 1900–2000.” Antin, personal communication.

16. Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with Fifteen Women Artists*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 243.

17. See Melissa C. Thompson, “Size on Display”: The Dynamics of Female Fat in Contemporary Performance Art” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2006), 44–46.

18. Ellen Zweig provides one example of this type of reading: “The performance, of course, was the actual dieting, but the artwork was the row upon row of photographs, attesting to the fact that Antin could at least strive to ‘carve’ the perfect sculptural form of

her own body." Zweig, "Constructing Loss: Film and Presence in the Work of Eleanor Antin," *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 29 (Fall 1996): 36.

19. Eleanor Antin, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, black-and-white photographs and text panel (; Art Institute of Chicago, 1972). In her text panel, Antin quoted Carl Blumel, *Greek Sculptors at Work* (London: Phaidon Press, 1969), 12.

20. The feminist reading is proposed by Howard Fox, who sees Antin as comparing her body to popular models of the day. See Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 44. For example, Twiggy, one of the most popular models of her time, emerged on the scene in 1967, standing at five feet, seven inches and weighing only ninety-one pounds; see Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 148–149.

21. Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used against Women* (1991; repr., New York: Perennial, 2002), 12.

22. Antin has written more about the use of her body in her artistic creations in the often cited "Autobiography of the Artist as Autobiographer," *LAICA Journal*, no. 2 (October 1974): 18–20.

23. Anne Wagner, "Eleanor Antin," *Artforum* 38, no. 2 (1999): 141.

24. Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 166.

25. "Fortune from Fat," *Time*, February 21, 1972.

26. *Ibid.*; Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 138.

27. "Fortune from Fat."

28. Daniel Martin, "Organizational Approaches to Shame: Avowal, Management, and Contestation," *Sociological Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2000): 129.

29. That being said, the organization continues to recognize members in the meetings who have reached a milestone in their weight loss. See Martin, "Organizational Approaches to Shame," 138–139.

30. Antin, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*.

31. Antin said in an interview, "When I was smoking I couldn't [sing]. So I stopped. For art you see. For art I could lose weight. For art I could do anything." See Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists*, rev. ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), 417.

32. "Oral History Interview with Rachel Rosenthal," Los Angeles, September 2–3, 1989, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

33. Quoted in Moira Roth, *Rachel Rosenthal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 14, originally discussed in "Oral History Interview with Rachel Rosenthal."

34. The full script and stage explanations for *Charm* and *The Death Show* have been printed in Una Chaudhuri, ed., *Rachel's Brain and Other Storms—Rachel Rosenthal: Performance Texts* (London: Continuum, 2001). Rosenthal also performed and recorded *Charm* for "Soundings" on KPFC Pacifica Radio almost ten years after its original production, although the performance was strictly aural and performed with a full cast. The piece was also altered for the radio, including more music as well as a performer who wrote and performed new selections that functioned as the voices in Rosenthal's head. See Rosenthal, *Charm: KPFC Pacifica Radio* (Los Angeles: High Performance Audio, 1987), audiocassette.

35. She did this four times throughout the performance, becoming increasingly agitated and louder; see Chaudhuri, *Rachel's Brain*, 20, 23, 24, 30.

36. *Ibid.*, 28.

37. This exchange with Barbara T. Smith, from the summer of 1975, took place when Rosenthal bought "times" in Smith's auction, *A Week in the Life of . . .*, one of which included a correspondence exchange. She admired Smith's performances and looked up to her as a mentor. See Roth, *Rachel Rosenthal*, 158.

38. *Ibid.*, 166.

39. Linda Montano, *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 198.

40. Overeaters Anonymous was founded by Rozanne S. in Los Angeles in 1960 and was modeled after a Gamblers Anonymous meeting she had attended with a friend the previous year. Following a twelve-step program like that of Alcoholics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous, the group provides members with a safe place to come together and share not only their struggles with overeating but also coping mechanisms. For a fuller history, see: Overeaters Anonymous, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams: A History of Overeaters Anonymous as Seen by a Cofounder* (Rio Rancho, NM: Overeaters Anonymous, 1996).

41. Performed only once at Space Gallery in Los Angeles on October 21, 1978, *The Death Show* was part of a larger performance and exhibition event, *Thanatopsis: Contemplations on Death*, which involved a variety of media and thirty-two artists.

42. Chaudhuri, *Rachel's Brain*, 34–35.

43. Rachel Rosenthal, "The Death Show," *High Performance* 2, no. 5 (1979): 44.

44. Chaudhuri, *Rachel's Brain*, 36.

45. *Ibid.*, 38–39.

46. Here, Rosenthal first refers to the "Bardo of the Fat Vampire"; the bardo is defined as the position of the soul between life and death. Chaudhuri, *Rachel's Brain*, 39.

47. *Ibid.*, 36.

48. Susie Orbach, *Fat Is a Feminist Issue* (New York: Berkley Books, 1978), 6.

49. "Oral History Interview with Rachel Rosenthal."

50. Orbach, *Fat Is a Feminist Issue*, 9.

51. Rachel Rosenthal, personal communication, Los Angeles, May 29, 2009.

52. "Oral History Interview with Rachel Rosenthal."

53. Peter Wood, *The California Diet and Exercise Program* (Mountain View, CA: Anderson World Books, 1983), 33.

54. Joanna Frueh, "The Body through Women's Eyes" (1994), in *Power of Feminist Art*, ed. Mary D. Garrard and Norma Broude (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 190.

55. Lisa E. Bloom, "Ethnic Notions and Feminist Strategies of the 1970s: Some Work by Judy Chicago and Eleanor Antin," in *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, ed. Catherine M. Soussloff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 150.

56. Marvin Konner, *The Jewish Body* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), 170.

57. Sander Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 193. These ideas are also explored in Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

58. Quoted in Jane Gross, "As Ethnic Pride Rises, Rhinoplasty Takes a Nose Dive," *New York Times*, January 3, 1999.

59. Christine Benvenuto, *Shiksa: The Gentile Woman in the Jewish World* (New York: St. Martin's, 2004), xii–xiii.
60. Michele Wallace, "Soul Pictures: Mid 1940s through Early 1950s," *Soul Pictures: Black Feminist Generations* blog, <http://mjsoulpictures.blogspot.com/>.
61. Faith Ringgold, *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, photo etching on silk, 1986 (private collection).
62. Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Boston: Bulfinch, 1995), 241–250; and Ringgold, personal communication, Englewood, NJ, November 1, 2009.
63. Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, *Faith Ringgold: Change: Painted Story Quilts* (New York: Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, 1987), 15.
64. Orbach, *Fat Is a Feminist Issue*, 13.
65. Faith Ringgold, "1970–1979," in *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, photo etching on silk, 1986 (private collection).
66. Faith Ringgold, "1980–1985," in *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, photo etching on silk, 1986 (private collection).
67. Faith Ringgold, "1970–1979," in *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, photo etching on silk, 1986 (private collection).
68. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 249.
69. Lori Ann Beaudoin read the materials in this performance as particularly feminine because the shapes of the two-liter bottles might be reminiscent of Ringgold's curvy form. "Since Ringgold has expressed her frustration with her weight, she may be articulating the pressures of the 'American dream' to be thin, and therefore, feminine. By enclosing the bottles in opaque garbage bags, Ringgold may be in fact denouncing the feminine practice and ideal by covering the hour-glass shape of the bottle-female form. Despite the cultural demands to be thin and Ringgold's struggle with her eating problem, the performance signifies a positive change towards self-acceptance. Moreover, securing the bags with heavy cord connotes the notion of the umbilical cord, and that there is no escaping from your body, yourself, and who you are in the world." See Beaudoin, "A Cultural Illness: Women, Identity, and Eating Problems in Faith Ringgold's Change Series" (master's thesis, Concordia University, Montreal, 1999), 41.
70. Faith Ringgold, "January–October 1986," in *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, photo etching on silk, 1986 (private collection).
71. Like the first quilt, *Change 2* included lithographed photographs: five recent photos of Ringgold posing in front of her first *Change* quilt and other works (each photo appears twice for a total of ten); they are accompanied by eight text panels that provide the lyrics to her *Change Song*.
72. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 247.
73. Faith Ringgold, *Change Song*, in *Change 2: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, photo etching on silk, 1988 (artist's collection).
74. Sidonie Smith, "Bodies of Evidence: Jenny Saville, Faith Ringgold, and Janine Antoni Weigh In," in *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 145.
75. Meg Lovejoy, "Disturbances in the Social Body: Differences in Body Image and Eating Problems among African American and White Women," *Gender and Society* 15, no. 2 (2001): 240.
76. Becky W. Thompson, *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 109–111.
77. Doris Witt, "What (N)ever Happened to Aunt Jemima: Eating Disorders, Fetal Rights, and Black Female Appetite in Contemporary American Culture," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 99–127.
78. Osteoarthritic knees also contributed to her weight gain by discouraging her from exercising. Eventually she underwent knee surgery, which improved her mobility and her ability to exercise; See Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 248.
79. F. Kramer et al., "Long-Term Follow-up of Behavioral Treatment for Obesity: Patterns of Weight Regain Among Men and Women," *International Journal of Obesity* 13, no. 2 (1989): 123–126.
80. Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 248.
81. Faith Ringgold, *Change 3: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, photo etching on silk, 1991 (artist's collection).
82. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 195.
83. *Ibid.*, 192.
84. W. Charisse Goodman, *The Invisible Woman: Confronting Weight Prejudice in America* (Carlsbad, CA: Gürze Books, 1995), 12.
85. Other artists inspired by their example include Vanalyne Green (b. 1948) and Faith Ringgold (b. 1930).
86. Rosenthal, personal communication; Antin, personal communication.
87. Quoted in Fox, *Eleanor Antin*, 219.