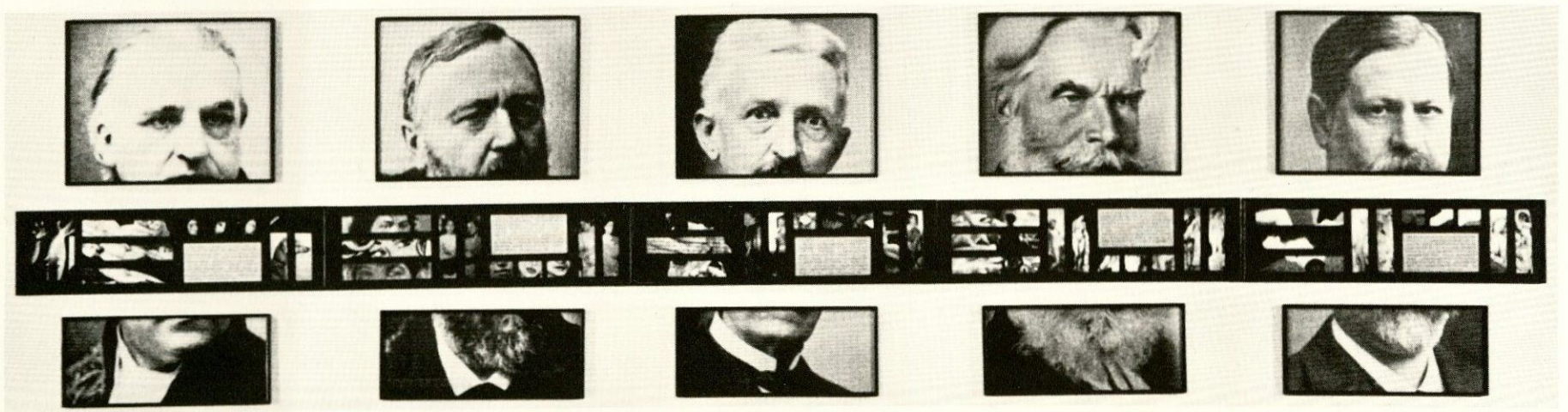


Mary Klein

---

## Engendered Art



Mary Klein

---

# Engendered Art

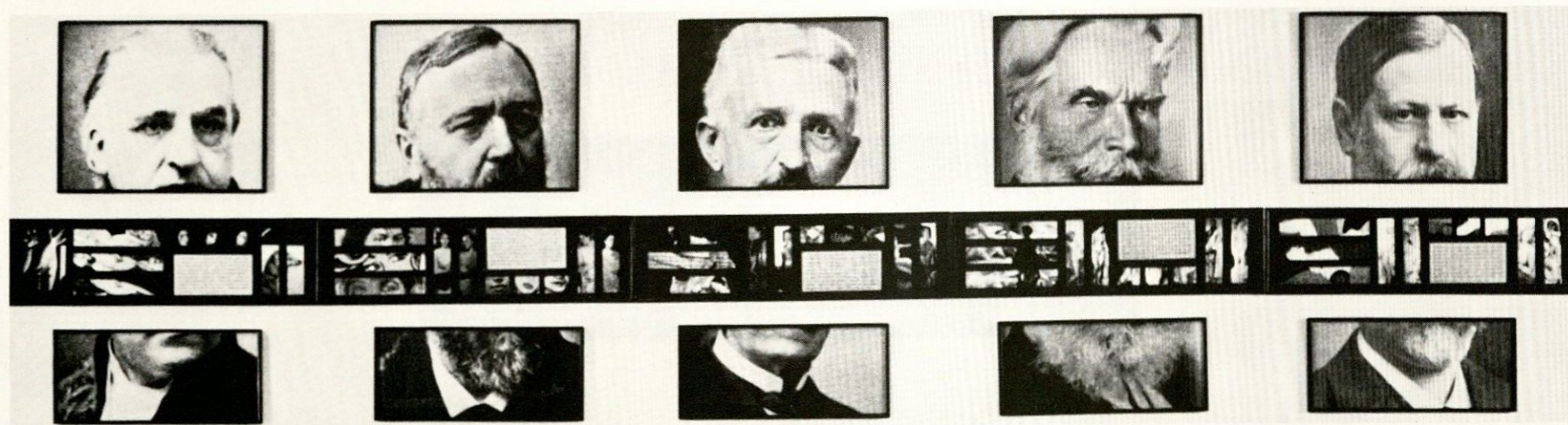
*Essay by Eunice Lipton*

Binghamton University Art Museum  
State University of New York





Detail of *Inverted Logic*



Invited by the 1912, eikachrome photographs & embossed p. exiglass, 3 x 11 ft.



# Engendered Art

*Eunice Lipton*

Could we Americans be living in more bewildering and contradictory times? On the one hand, we have a right-wing Congress in the thrall of the religious right searching for ways to install school prayer, teach creationism, and banish feminism and homosexuality and where possible people of color and Jews. We have a Supreme Court in the process of dismantling affirmative action, women's right to abortion, and death-row prisoners' access to appeal. Under the rubric of balancing the budget, the aged, the poor and the disabled will be refused welfare, deprived of basic health coverage, and probably have their Social Security benefits reduced. All this is not to mention the probable elimination of federal support for the arts.

On the other hand, two women and one black man sit on the Supreme Court. There are three out gay representatives in the House. Queer theory and gay and lesbian centers are finding niches in universities alongside African-American Studies, Women's Studies, Jewish Studies, and Puerto Rican Studies. Jews, gays, blacks, and women are entering public life and culture in ever increasing numbers, and as Jews, gays, blacks, and women.

And, I am writing this piece on the work of the lesbian artist Mary Klein and about the very difference that probably unhinges the religious right the most—sexual difference. Or the lack thereof. It is surely a time to ponder and a time to take sides.

Mary Klein's work confronts the viewer in very cool and controlled forms with two undeniable facts: (1) how easy it is to slip from so-called masculinity to so-called femininity in one's behavior and appearance, and (2) how furious, even murderous, is the reaction of many Americans to that fluidity. A premise of Klein's work is that masculinity and femininity are socially constructed phenomena regardless of whatever role biology plays in the formation of identity. The power of her work lies in its common sense and its quiet call to human decency. What person, however prejudiced, who also thinks of herself or himself as a humanist or a Christian or a Jew or a Buddhist would pronounce a death sentence on a sweet, respectful woman who prefers male attire and the company of other women? That is one question—among others—that a viewer will take away from Klein's installations.





Strange tastes and emotions of the mother, which show themselves in the patient by the impulse to steal and the reversal of the sexual instinct ... any touch is accompanied by spasms in the genital area ... nervous breakdowns that seem related to hysteria ... she refused many marriage proposals ... alternating periods of happiness and depression ... related to a much deeper pathological state ... intellectual imbalance, but incredibly intelligent ... she was overcome by fury ... in the first few years of life, preferred boys' games ... treatment used is hydro-therapy ... *"Inversion Sens Genital,"* 1882



*Engendered Art* focuses on Brandon Teena (1972-1993) and Lucy Ann Lobdell (1829-1912), two women whose lives were destroyed because they preferred the companionship of women. *Inverted Hat (for Brandon)* evokes the tragic but daring life of the naively sweet Brandon Teena, a slim young woman who felt more comfortable passing as a boy than behaving as a girl. She left her hometown of Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1993 because she had been physically threatened for dating girls. She moved to Humboldt, a town of 1,100 inhabitants in the same state. No one knew her there. She thought she could more easily pass as a boy. She made friends; girls in particular loved to be around her. A few months later, she was beaten and raped by two men. The following week she was dead, stabbed and shot twice in the head.

Klein tells Brandon's story deadpan. We are confronted with a low-relief copper sculpture—*Inverted Hat (for Brandon)*—in the form of a Stetson hat measuring 3 x 6.5 feet. Like a puzzle, the hat is made of pieces that fit neatly together, although the pieces are not meant to “fit.” On each piece Klein offers the viewer written information that one can do with as one pleases. She is never manipulative. It is a point of principle, and a strategy. The viewer is left to her own devices, autonomy assumed. The written fragments are Klein's observations, based on reading about Brandon and interviewing people in Humboldt as well as on other people's statements to her and to the press.

Here is a sampling<sup>1</sup>:

“... the girls were always hanging all over him.”

“I heard rumors that he was a woman throughout our whole relationship, and the more I heard them, the more I blocked them out.”

“He was every woman's dream guy. He didn't push anything, he always gave.”

“She considered herself to be a man. She didn't want to date lesbians. I offered to introduce her to some.”

“Sheriff Laux says, ‘What kind of a person was she? The first few times we arrested her she was putting herself off as a guy. . . .’”

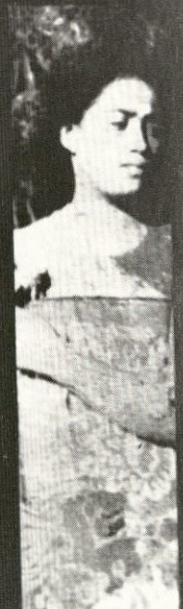
Hats are so charming, so evocative. A Stetson vibrates with mythological magic, conjuring the Men who Made the West, the vast blue skies of northwestern America, the Great Plains. But this hat is huge, an evident symbol. It is not meant to evoke nostalgic reverie. On the terrain of this hat, simple facts and truths become proof-positive of why this twenty-one-year-old was brutally murdered. Its clean, confident, matter-of-fact appearance makes the story it tells all the more disturbing. One senses the rage and pain beneath this all-too-cleaned-up surface.

In *Inverted Hat (for Lucy)* we are told about Lucy Ann Lobdell, whose adventurous life included being a well-known hunter in upper New York state in the mid-nineteenth century, a dance instructor, a marvelous singer, a writer, a vagrant, and finally an inmate in an insane asylum in Binghamton, New York, for 32 of her 82 years. Klein's conceit again is a traditionally





Frequently female servants are the seducers, or lady friends with perverse sexual inclinations ... it was likely that she was addicted to masturbation ... she loved to read novels, was of neuropathic constitution and very sensitive to changes in temperature ... pelvis decidedly feminine, but arms and legs large, and of pronounced masculine type ... genitals quite normal ... she said she had always been indifferent toward men; in fact, she avoided balls ... she was taken to the asylum in a state of eroto-maniacal excitement; she became a decent, sexually at least, neutral person ... "Psychopathia Sexualis," 1886



Detail of *Inverted Logic*



male hat, this time a stovepipe. From the statements inscribed we learn of a woman of appetite<sup>2</sup>:

*"Lucy Ann, disguised as a dance professor, arrived in Wayne County, PA, in 1854. This slim, agile, good-looking gentleman, with his buckskin gloves and stovepipe hat, was warmly welcomed."*  
*"A county attorney accused Lucy of 'falsely impersonating a man, to the great scandal of the community, and against the peace and dignity of the state.'"*

*"She wrote a book detailing her adventures in the woods. . . ."*  
*"The reasons given for declaring Lucy Ann insane were: 'She is uncontrollable, indecent and immoral, and insists on wearing male attire, calling herself a huntress.'"*

The "she's" and "he's" tumble willy-nilly from the hats. Nobody can say who Lobdell and Teena are or what gender they are, because they act in contradictory ways—contradictory insofar as "masculine" and "feminine" in our culture are located on opposite poles separated by an untraversable divide rather than as points on a continuum of behavioral possibilities.

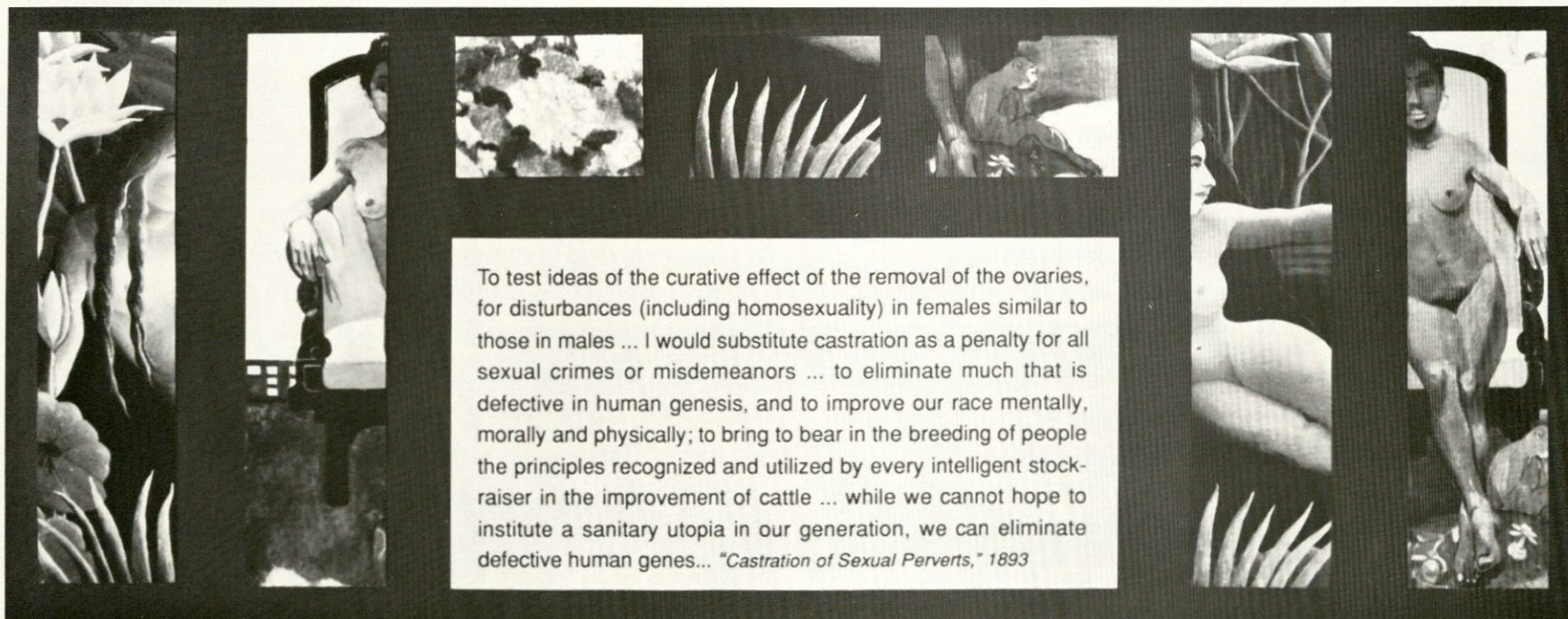
The smug certainties as well as the all-too-prosaic character of the Brandon and Lobdell tragedies are evoked by the stark wall piece, *Two Wise Men* (1880-1993). By juxtaposing the statements made by the sheriff of Humboldt after Brandon's murder with those of Lobdell's doctor at the Willard Asylum, Klein forces a confrontation with the arbitrariness and absurdity of these people's pronouncements as well as with the undeniable

and ultimate power wielded by the men who uttered them. Once again, coolly and deliberately, Klein brings her story home. The sheriff says: "Why didn't she go back to Lincoln if she didn't like our law enforcement?" And Dr. Wise: "It is reasonable to consider true sexual perversion [as] . . . a manifestation of insanity."

The nineteenth century is notorious for its tendency to compartmentalize. The dominant philosophy of positivism in France, Great Britain, and the United States was characterized by the construction of categories, the breakdown of wholes into rational, immutable, manageable parts—much like the social and economic forms of capitalism, a system also produced by that century. One person makes the top of a shoe, another the bottom, someone else sews it together, another attaches the heel, and so on. Divisions into smaller and smaller and neater and neater parts kept copious numbers of philosophers, pseudo-scientists, theoreticians, and alienists (psychologists of the day) in business. Tracts "scientifically" outlining the races of the world made their first appearance in large numbers at this time as well.<sup>3</sup> Small wonder then that the very terms *heterosexual* and *homosexual* were invented during that century.<sup>4</sup>

In *Inverted Logic* we can examine the ideological and discursive machinery that produced the Brandon/Lobdell tragedies, what made them outlaws rather than simply people with their own particular desires. Arrayed before us are the





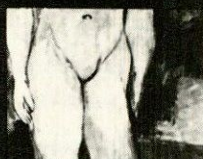
Detail of *Inverted Logic*





She shows nothing of that sexual shyness and engaging air of weakness and dependence which are an invitation to men ... homosexual practices have been found very common among seamstresses, lacemakers, etc., confined for long hours in close contact to one another in heated rooms ... the feminine tendency to delight in submission ... the modern movement of emancipation has involved an increase in feminine criminality and in feminine insanity; in connection with these, we can scarcely be surprised to find an increase in homosexuality ...

*"Sexual Inversion In Women," 1895*





earnest faces of the men who put sexual ideology on the map: Jean-Martin Charcot, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Ferdinand Daniel, Havelock Ellis, and Sigmund Freud. Where their mouths should be are instead representations of naked women in paintings. It is from pictures like these and their more modern derivatives in popular culture and advertising that girls learn who they are supposed to be: creatures with no appetites of their own, there for the satisfaction of male desire.

Klein coolly adumbrates the scientists' "truths": Charcot (from his 1882 study on homosexuality entitled, "Inversion du sens genital") describes a lesbian: "Strange tastes and emotions . . . reversal of the sexual instinct . . . any touch is accompanied by spasms in the genital area . . . she refused many marriage proposals . . . treatment used is hydro-therapy." Sigmund Freud (from his 1920 article, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Female Homosexuality"): "Really she was a feminist, she felt it to be unjust that girls should not enjoy the same freedom as boys and rebelled against the lot of women in general . . . a spirited and pugnacious girl, not at all prepared to be second to her slightly older brother . . . after inspecting his genital organs, developed a pronounced envy of penis . . ."

By her measured, notably rational approach in *Inverted Logic*, Klein co-opts the form and voice of science, and gives the lie to them. For, however discouraging our own times are, we do see lesbians—on TV, in the movies, on the covers of *Time* and

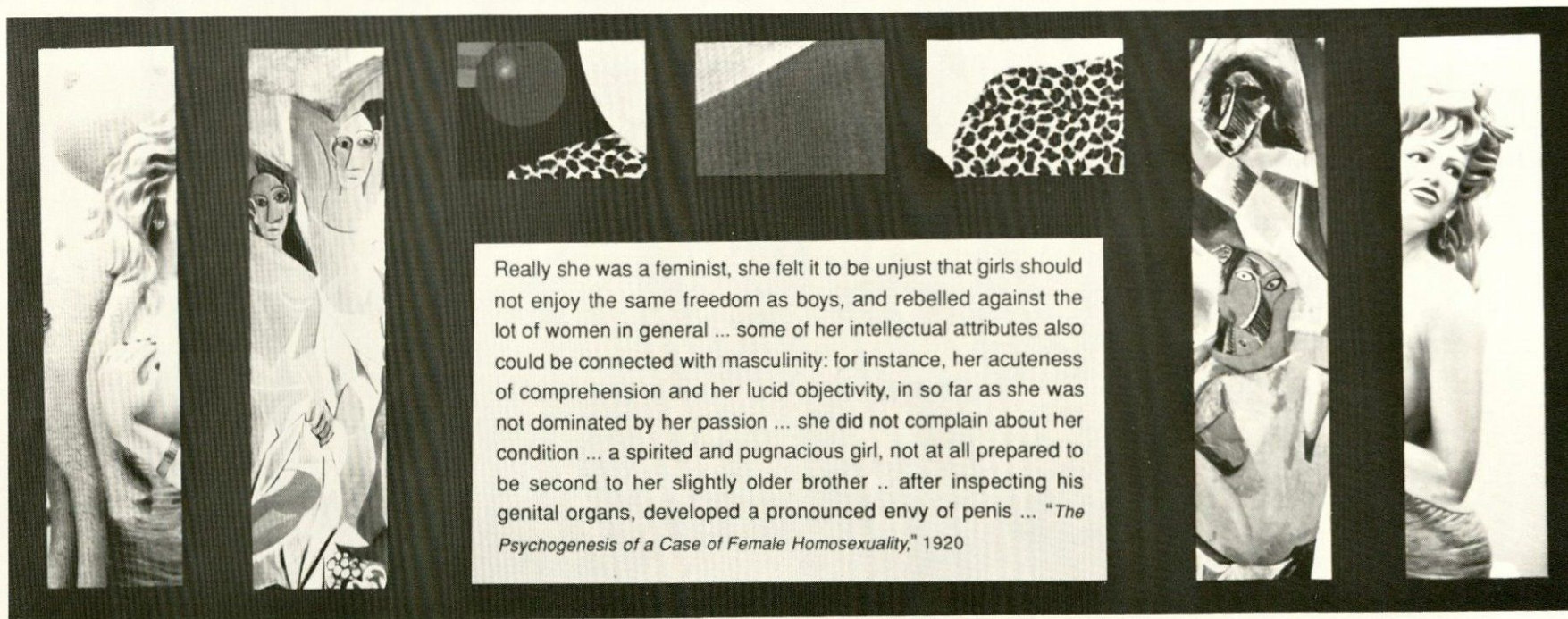
*Newsweek*—who desire good jobs, positions of power, space and money to write and make art, other women. The painted nudes of *Inverted Logic* as well as the influential words of Freud et al. look and sound like the politically dated pictures and concepts that they are.

Mary Klein, a former journalist, offers you the "facts" and makes you question them as you never have before: Whose facts? Toward what end? What's been omitted? And why? One cannot stroll this exhibit savoring beautiful objects separated from meaning.

Which side are you on?

Eunice Lipton, a writer and art historian, lives in New York City. Her books include *Alias Olympia: A Woman's Search for Manet's Notorious Model and Her Own Desire*, and *Looking Into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life*.





Really she was a feminist, she felt it to be unjust that girls should not enjoy the same freedom as boys, and rebelled against the lot of women in general ... some of her intellectual attributes also could be connected with masculinity: for instance, her acuteness of comprehension and her lucid objectivity, in so far as she was not dominated by her passion ... she did not complain about her condition ... a spirited and pugnacious girl, not at all prepared to be second to her slightly older brother .. after inspecting his genital organs, developed a pronounced envy of penis ... "*The Psychogenesis of a Case of Female Homosexuality*," 1920

Detail of *Inverted Logic*

## Notes

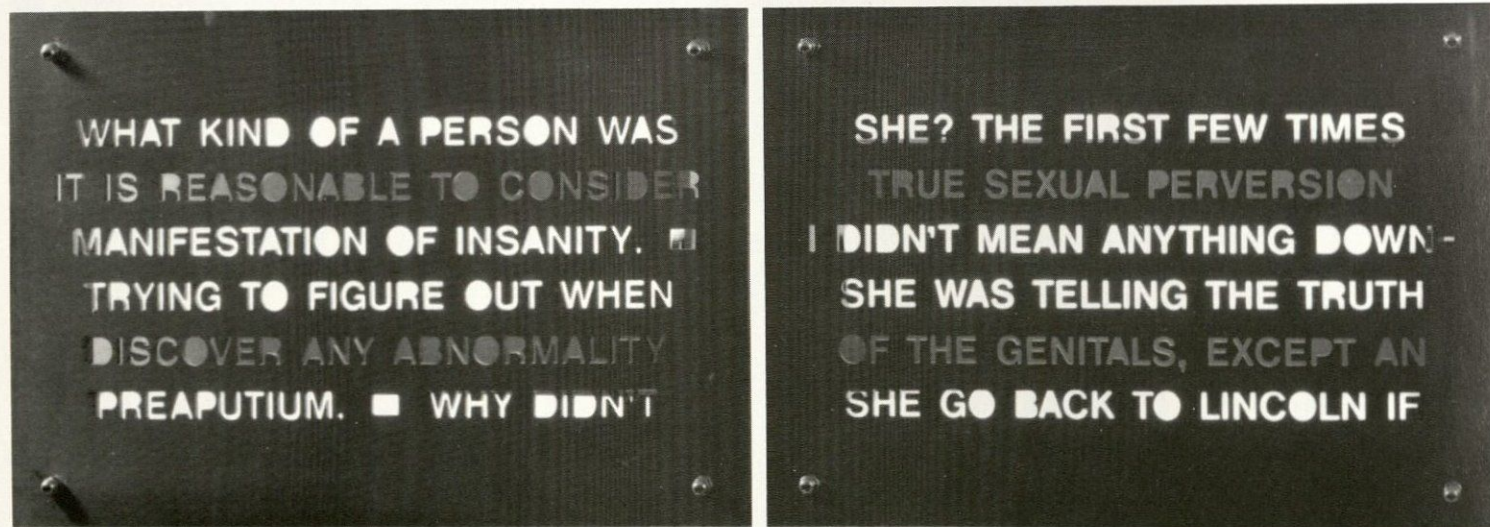
1. Comments in single quotes are Mary Klein's words, culled from general observations and research; double quotes indicate specific interview, media, or other research sources.
2. See above, footnote 1.
3. For one of the best examples of this terrible genre, see Joseph-Arthur, Le Comte de Gobineau, *Essai sur l'inegalite des races humaines* (*Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*) Paris: Librairie de Paris, 1854
4. See Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, New York: Dutton, 1995.





*Gender Outlaws*, 1994, cibachrome photographs, 3 x 6 ft.





*Two Wise Men (1880 & 1993), 1994, aluminum, acrylic, lights, 1.5 x 9.5 x 1/2 ft.*



WE ARRESTED HER SHE PUT  
AS ALWAYS A PATHOLOGICAL  
GRADING. I'M NOT PREJUDICED  
AND WHEN SHE WASN'T. ■  
ENLARGED CLITORIS COVERED  
SHE DIDN'T LIKE OUR

HERSELF OFF AS A GUY. ■  
CONDITION AND A PECULIAR  
AGAINST HER. WE WERE JUST  
I HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO  
BY A LARGE RELAXED  
LAW ENFORCEMENT? ■












"Lucy Ann, disguised as a dance professor, arrived in Wayne County, PA, in 1854. This slim, agile, good-looking gentleman, with his buckskin gloves and stovepipe hat, was warmly welcomed."

The reasons given for declaring Lucy Ann insane were: "She is uncontrollable, indecent & immoral, & insists on wearing male attire, calling herself a huntress."  
She was 51 years old.

"I have been unable to discover any abnormality of her genitals, except an enlarged clitoris covered by a large relaxed praeputium," said Dr. P. M. Wise.

*Details of Inverted Hat (for Lucy)*





Brandon wore his favorite hat – a black cowboy hat – when he flirted with her at the convenience store.

"She would have been a gorgeous woman."

"He kept himself skinny so that his breasts wouldn't show."

"His voice was a man's voice, and his mind was a man's mind – he talked about cars and women."

Brandon filed rape charges. The arrest warrants were not issued for six days.

"Teena said the sheriff asked her why she preferred females when she reported the rape. Now, what the hell kind of question is that when you're the victim?"

*Details of Inverted Hat (for Brandon)*



## Biography

### Selected Exhibitions and Performances

1996

**Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle**  
*Gender, Fucked* (curators, Catherine Lord  
and Harmony Hammond)

**Diversity 4, New York City**  
Leslie Lohman Gay Art Foundation  
Group Show

1994

**Fischbach Gallery, New York City**  
*Absence, Activism, and the Body Politic*  
Invitational group show

**Brown/Carroll Studios, New York City**  
*Gender Outlaws*  
Solo Show

1993

**Washington Project for the Arts**  
Washington, D.C. (curators Don Russell  
and Angela Adams)  
1993, biennial Emerging Artists Exhibition

**Franklin Furnace, New York City**  
*Blue Tongues*, solo multi-media  
performance  
1993 Emerging Artists Program

**Amo Enos Gallery, New York City**  
National Small Works Exhibition,  
(curator, Laura Trippi)

**A.I.R. Gallery, New York City**  
*DEFINITIONS Do Not Originate*  
in *Dictionaries*  
Solo show

**Alternative Museum, New York City**  
National Showcase  
Juried group show

**Maryland Art Place, Baltimore**  
*Queening Family Values*  
(curator, Robert Atkins)

1992

**Art in General, New York City**  
*Blue Tongues*, audio installation  
Juried show of art

**Brody Gallery, Washington, D.C.**  
Invitational group show by dealers

1991

**ARC Gallery, Chicago, IL.**  
*DEFINITIONS Do Not Originate*  
in *Dictionaries*  
Solo, invitational show

1990

**Dance Place, Washington, D.C.**  
Film/Performance, *Ajax & Other*  
*White Suds*  
Juried show of performance art

1988

**N.A.M.E. Gallery, Chicago, IL.**  
Juried show of photographs

**The Print Club, Philadelphia, PA.**  
64th Annual International Competition  
Juried show of photographs

## Bibliography

1994

**The Village Voice**  
Fischbach Gallery group exhibition review  
May 31, 1994

1993

**ARTFORUM (May 1993)**  
Yablonsky, Linda  
Exhibition of wall sculpture and solo  
performance review

**The Village Voice**  
"Voice Choices," sculpture mentioned  
as part of Alternative Museum group  
exhibition  
(August 10, 1993)

**Art in General, New York City**  
Annual catalog of artists' work exhibited at  
Art in General

**Catalog, Emerging Artists**  
**Exhibition, 1993**  
Washington Project for the Arts  
Washington, D.C.



1992

**New Art Examiner, (March 1992)**

Mesch, Claudia

Solo exhibition review

1989

**Art in America, 1989, Guide to Museums and Galleries.**

Photographs published by N.A.M.E. Gallery, Chicago, Alternative Spaces

## **Education**

1989

MFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago  
Concentration: Photography

1985

Corcoran School of Art

1976

BA, University of Minnesota

Concentration: Journalism

## **Grants and Awards**

1993

Emerging Performance Artist grant

Franklin Furnace, New York City

1992

Honorable Mention, Amos Eno Gallery

New York City, group show

(curator Laura Trippi)

1988

Award for one of best in show

Juried exhibition (curators, Hollis Sigler,

Judith Kirschner)

Artemisia Gallery, Chicago, IL

1987-89

Merit Scholarships

MFA Studies

School of the Art Institute of Chicago

## **Selected Conferences and Talks**

1994

Society for Photographic Educators

1994 Annual Conference, Chicago

Image Maker

1994

**Artists Talk on Art, New York City**

Curator's Choice

1993

**Barnard Conference on Feminist Art and Art**

History, New York City

"Queering Deconstruction, Deconstructing the Queer"

1993

**College Art Association, Seattle, WA**

"Lesbian Looks: Politics, Erotics and Art"



## Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Eunice Lipton for her invaluable encouragement and support over the years. I also thank Lynn Gamwell for inviting me to do a contemporary response to a case in an exhibition she curated, *Madness in America, Cultural and Medical Perceptions of Mental Illness Before 1914*. In connection with the *Gender Outlaws* body of work which commemorates the lives of Lucy Ann Lobdell and Brandon Teena, I am especially grateful to the friends and relatives of these two women. Susan Crawson Shields, Lobdell's great-great granddaughter, and her mother generously supplied information and photographs. The many friends of Brandon Teena, who wish not to be named, shared their memories of her and provided other invaluable information on the circumstances of her murder. Eric Giebler generously gave me permission to use the photographs he had taken of Brandon. I wish to extend my appreciation to the staff of the Binghamton University Art Museum and the New York Academy of Sciences for their assistance in the presentation of my work. I also thank the Brown/Carroll Studio for the use of its space when *Gender Outlaws* opened in New York City.

Mary Klein





Detail of *Inverted Logic*