

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

ARTFORUM

## Ashton Cooper on Mary Kelly



Mary Kelly, *Interim, Part I: Corpus* (detail), 1984–85, thirty panels, laminated photo positive, acrylic, and silk screen on Plexiglas, each 48 × 36 × 2”.

### Mary Kelly

Vielmetter Los Angeles

In the opening essay of filmmaker Nora Ephron’s 2006 book *I Feel Bad About My Neck, and Other Thoughts on Being a Woman*, she reflects on the experience of getting older in her signature, cleverly confessional style: “That’s another thing about being a certain age that I’ve noticed: I try as much as possible not to look in the mirror. If I pass a mirror, I avert my eyes. If I must look into it, I begin by squinting, so that if anything really bad is looking back at me, I am already halfway to closing my eyes to ward off the sight.” Few would disagree that Ephron, as a perfecter of the rom-com and the personal essay, is as sharp-eyed an observer of women’s experiences as they come. But rarely has her name been invoked in relation to feminist art of the 1980s, with its emphasis on deconstructing “woman as image.” Nevertheless, as I was walking through Mary Kelly’s show at Vielmetter—an installation of her work *Interim, Part I: Corpus*, 1984–85—the comedienne, to my own surprise, immediately came to mind.

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Corpus is composed of thirty framed panels that measure four feet high and three feet wide. The suite is divided into five parts, each marked with a French word—EXTASE, MENACÉ, SUPPLICATION, ÉROTISME, and APPEL—taken from the captions of nineteenth-century neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot’s famous photographs depicting “female hysteria.” Within each section are a trio of panels that feature an item of clothing or an accessory (a leather jacket, a pair of boots, a silky negligee) alongside three more that present handwritten accounts of a woman coming to terms with aging. Despite the reference to hysterics, the work is serialistic and coolly conceptual. The artist created each individual piece by adhering an image to Plexiglas in such a way that its shadow impassively falls on the mounting board behind it. Walking into Kelly’s show and knowing the work’s premise, I began at first to slot Corpus into the art-historical genealogy that I’d been taught, wherein she is the actual textbook example of the postmodernist feminist artist. I considered this position in relation to her shrewd theoretical writing, her elegant takedowns of modernism, her creation of a feminist art devoted to deconstructing essentialist ideas about women. Admittedly, I have always connected more to Kelly’s texts than to her art itself. Her most famous piece, *Post-Partum Document, 1973–79*, a highly conceptual project about the birth of her son, is full of complex charts and graphs that have long stymied me—but I also knew that refusing the viewer’s pleasure was part of the plan.

What I wasn’t expecting, then, was to be pleurably absorbed by the narrative in Kelly’s fifteen confessional texts, full of familiar experiences and humor, several of which offer up stories on women troubled by mirrors. Recounted in the first person, Kelly’s tales are partially based on real events, and part fiction. In one scene, a pair of friends try on bathing suits: ‘IT WAS NEVER THIS DIFFICULT WHEN WE WERE YOUNGER,’ I COMPLAIN, ‘EVERYTHING JUST SEEMED TO LOOK GOOD, I DON’T UNDERSTAND IT, NOTHING IS RIGHT.’ WE ARE LOOKING IN THE MIRROR. I BLAME THE ANGLE OF REFLECTION, LIGHTING, ANYTHING, BUT CAN’T ACCEPT THAT THAT IS ME. Even though they are framed by her theorizations of woman as construction, the texts read like Ephron’s writing. Is it blasphemous to compare the two, I wondered? (I imagined feminist art historian Griselda Pollock rolling her eyes at me.) Still, a quick Google search revealed that both women were born in 1941, and that *When Harry Met Sally*—for which Ephron wrote the screenplay—was released in July 1989, a mere seven months before Kelly’s *Corpus* made its debut at the New Museum in Manhattan. Ephron was beloved for her ability to capture something about female life that felt, above all, relatable. And *Corpus* added a dimension of relatability to my understanding of Kelly’s practice. Even if viewers didn’t know anything about Charcot, Jacques Lacan, or the ins and outs of poststructuralism, they could still connect with Kelly’s descriptions of being socialized as a woman. Seeing this older piece installed anew gave me a fresh perspective on the artist’s work. In addition to being rigorous and intellectual, it also poignantly got inside the emotions, chaos, and conflicts of inhabiting a body marked as “woman.”

-- Ashton Cooper