



## BODIES OF DESIRE

WORKS ON PAPER BY WILLEM DE KOONING  
AND CHLOE PIENE

CURATED BY KLAUS OTTMANN

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**F**or me there are no whores. For me, a girl who let herself be kissed by anyone, who let herself be kissed no matter how, is not a whore. For me there are no whores, that's all. You can suck anyone, you can let yourself be kissed by anyone, you are not a whore . . . The woman who is married and happy and dreams to be kissed by I do not know who, by her husband's boss, or by some shitty actor, or by her cheese seller or her plumber . . . Is she a whore? There are no whores. There are only cunts . . . And I let myself be kissed by anyone, and I get kissed and I get a kick out of it . . . I have been deflowered recently, at the age of twenty. Nineteen, twenty. Which is recently. And afterwards, I took a maximum of lovers. And I let myself be kissed. And I am perhaps a chronic patient . . . suffering from chronic kissing disease . . . And I am not drunk . . . if I cry . . . I cry over my past life, my past sexual life, which is so short. Five years of sexual life, that's very short . . . So many men have kissed me. They desired me because I have a large bottom, which can be desirable. I have very pretty breasts, which are very desirable. My mouth is not bad either. When my eyes are made up, they are not bad either.

— excerpt from Véronika's monologue in the film *La maman et la putain* (1973) by Jean Eustache



Chloe Piene  
*Passing*, 2006  
charcoal on vellum  
56 1/2 x 36 inches

In the mid-1950s, the American “abstract-expressionist” painter Willem de Kooning surprised the artists and critics of his time by single-handedly resurrecting the female form, which had been largely abandoned by his peers. From 1951 to 1953 he created a series of paintings and works on paper depicting only women, which by some were compared to goddesses and by others, to whores. The women in these works are naked, either depicted singly or in pairs, usually standing or seated and facing the viewer, presented unashamedly sexual, with grossly enlarged mouths, eyes, breasts, and vaginas. De Kooning began by cutting out images from advertisements: “I cut out a lot of mouths. First of all, I thought everything ought to have a mouth. Maybe it was like a pun. Maybe it’s sexual. But whatever it is, I used to cut out a lot of mouths and then I painted these figures and then I put the mouth more or less in the place where it was supposed to be.” He said later about these works: “Certain artists and critics attacked me for painting the Women, but I felt that this was their problem, not mine . . . I have to follow my desires.”

In her influential 1975 essay on the relationship between sexuality and language, "The Laugh of the Medusa," the feminist writer and literary critic Hélène Cixous writes of the impossibility of "defining" a feminine practice of writing because it can never be theorized. She then declares that "woman must write woman. And man, man," and concludes that if there are male writers whose works contain inscriptions of femininity, it is up to them to say wherein their masculinity and femininity lies. According to Cixous, "most readers, critics, and writers of both sexes hesitate to admit or deny outright the possibility or the pertinence of a distinction between feminine and masculine writing. It will usually be said . . . either that all writing . . . is feminine; or, inversely . . . that the act of writing is equivalent to masculine masturbation . . . ; or that writing is bisexual, hence neuter."

Responding to those who questioned his depiction of women as ferociously aggressive or repulsive in appearance, de Kooning was compelled to defend "his masculinity." In a conversation with the critic Selden Rodman in 1957, he explains, "Maybe . . . in that earlier phase I was painting the woman in me. Art isn't a wholly masculine occupation, you know. I'm aware that some critics would take this to be an admission of latent homosexuality . . . If I painted beautiful women, would that make me a non-homosexual? I like beautiful women. In the flesh; even the models in magazines. Women irritate me some times. I painted that irritation in the 'Woman' series. That's all."

In 1966 de Kooning created a second series of Women drawings, this time drawing them with his eyes closed. In these works, the women are less confrontational and more seductive, but just as brazenly sexual.

What makes de Kooning's Women pervasively feminine in their significance (and may have made them so scandalous at the time), is that, despite their stereotypical depiction, they seem less like (sex) objects and more like subjects that embody not simply the artist's desire but a desire of their own. They recall the famous dictum by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan that desire is always the desire of the Other.

The young, Brooklyn-based artist Chloe Piene has been making diaphanous charcoal drawings of naked figures on paper and vellum based mostly on photographs of herself and, occasionally, other people



Willem de Kooning  
*Untitled*, 1962  
charcoal on paper  
17 3/4 x 23 3/4 inches

since the late 1990s. The frenzied yet controlled energy of the lines in her drawings is evidence of their performative character. They are executed rapidly, or in Piene's words, "it comes out in one shot." Piene's agitated style of drawing is a strangely alluring complement to her unsettling imagery, which often imbues its autoeroticism with Vanitas-type morbidity. Piene sees her work as riding the line "between the erotic and the forensic." Unlike de Kooning's drawings, which relocate the Self in the Other, Piene's inscribe the Other in the Self. Her drawings are of her own body. Their delicate rawness and nakedness exude a wide array of emotions ranging from anguish to ecstasy. Unlike de Kooning's, the sexuality in Piene's drawings is less explicit. Anatomical details are veiled by the energy of her lines, while the erotic is being shifted from specific body parts to the lines themselves.



Willem de Kooning  
*Woman*, 1966  
oil on paper mounted on board  
40 1/2 x 29 inches

right:  
Chloe Piene  
*Mmasturbator*, 2003  
charcoal on paper  
40 x 46 inches

Piene is only one in a new generation of both male and female artists (Cecily Brown, Sue Williams, Kiki Smith, Matthew Barney, Jonathan Meese, to name but a few) whose works redefine art in terms of the body and take a closer look at the nature or shape of sexuality and gender.

More than any other art form, drawings can point to the inexpressible, the subconscious realm of the *Abject*, which the psychoanalyst and linguist Julia Kristeva believes to be a lingering memory of the state that existed prior to the formation of the *Self* and the differentiation into *Subject* and *Object*, masculine and feminine: "There is nothing either objective or objectal to the abject." Thus the *Abject* is the *Nonrepresentable*, the "radically excluded," a place "where meaning collapses." The philosopher Jacques Derrida has compared drawing to a state or condition of being blind: the very lines of a drawing, lacking an unam-

back:  
Chloe Piene  
*Signal 02*, 2006  
charcoal on vellum  
53 x 35 inches



biguous identity, obscure the visual experience as they exist only as tenuous gestures of memory and anticipation.

Both de Kooning's *Women* and Piene's charcoal drawings are expressions of this beseeching Abject, of the desire of the Other — a desire that is not yet articulated into a subject and an object but is released as a pre-symbolic libidinous force.

Klaus Ottmann, 2007

*Bodies of Desire is curated by Klaus Ottmann, an independent curator and scholar based in New York. Mr. Ottmann most recently curated the sixth international SITE Santa Fe Biennial and has been appointed as the curator for the 2007 Open ev+a exhibition in Limerick, Ireland. The exhibition continues the Locks Gallery's Curator's Choice exhibitions. Previous curators include Barry Schwabsky, Richard Torchia, and David Cohen.*

front:  
Willem de Kooning  
*Study for Marilyn Monroe*, 1953  
pencil on paper  
15 x 14 3/4 inches



January 16 – February 24, 2007

Reception

Friday, February 2, 5:30–7:30 pm



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