

3. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority," p.132, and Foster, "Modernism and Media," p.41.
4. Foster, "Against Pluralism," p. 24
5. "From Trivial Pursuit to the Art of the Ideal: Art Making in the Eighties," *The Decade Show; Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, New York, 1990, p.64.
6. There is widespread anxiety about this position across several disciplines. For a clear statement of the issue for feminists, see Nancy K. Miller, "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader," in Teresa de Lauretis, ed. *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986, pp. 102-120.
7. Foster, "Against Pluralism," and "For a Concept of the Political in Contemporary Art," in *Recodings*, pp. 139-156.
8. Richard Bernstein, "The Arts catches up with a Society in Disarray," *The New York Times*, Sunday, September 9, 1990, Section 2, pp. 1ff.
9. For a thorough discussion of this dilemma among literary scholars, see Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, eds., *Men in Feminism* (New York, Methuen, Inc., 1987), and in particular, Jardine's lucid comments in "Men in Feminism: Odor di Uomo or Compagnons de Route," pp. 54-61.

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## ***Post-Boys & Girls: Men & Women?***

*by Michael S. Kimmel*

The title of this exhibition, *Post-Boys & Girls*, suggests several possible interpretations. It could mean that we're beyond our childhoods, grown men and women, taking on the adult responsibilities of producing adult art. Or it could refer to some new "post" movement, as if we are the post-modern, post-structuralist post-boys and post-girls.

I'm struck by another meaning of the phrase. To declare the exhibition "Post-Boys & Girls" is to suggest a way of seeing ourselves that goes beyond thinking that who we are is stamped indelibly on us the moment some doctor announces "it's a boy" or "it's a girl." Our personalities, our experiences and our interactions with one another have more to do with the cultural meanings attached to our reproductive biology than with that biological equipment itself. It's as though these artists are claiming that we must see beyond boys and girls, beyond male and female, to those creatures whose lives are shaped by the cultures in which they live. Let's call them men and women.

Gender is one of the central axes around which our social life revolves. Not "sex," the biological given, but "gender," the set of meanings that cultures give to those biological facts. Gender is as critical in establishing and expressing our identities as class or race, a foundation upon which individual personalities are built.

What's more, our gender identities, our experience of masculinity and femininity proceeds not from biological imperatives — boys will be boys — but from those cultural expectations. Gender is socially constructed. "One is not born a woman," claimed Simone de Beauvoir. "One *becomes* a woman." And we become women and men by learning the culturally prescribed roles that women and men are assigned in our culture.

It's not a unitary process, of course, and there isn't just one version of masculinity and femininity that everyone embraces. One version—white, middle class, heterosexual—is set up as the standard against which all other masculinities and femininities are measured, and the power of this hegemonic version marginalizes others, and makes them appear “deviant” or “problematic.” Engendering is thus about power — about the power of men over women, and the power of some versions of masculinity or femininity over other versions.

Which means that gender is political. If gender is socially constructed, it means that we are not simply the passive objects upon which some abstraction called “society” inscribes its gender codes. We actively participate in the process, modifying the script, challenging it, transforming it. The enormous vitality of both the feminist and the gay and lesbian movements comes in part from the thrill of revolt against prescribed roles. If our masculinity and femininity are socially constructed, they can also be *deconstructed* — taken apart, re-examined and *reconstructed*.

The process of deconstruction, of disassembly, is serious business and exhilarating fun. Many of the works in this exhibition provide thoughtful meditation on the centrality of gender in our lives, and offer angry retorts to the ways in which gender-as-power is deployed against some of us. Nancy Davidson's rubbings of everyday items in women's lives—the ironing board, the oval rug — extracts surprising textures from ordinary objects, reminding us that even surfaces have depth. Margo Machida exposes the mechanisms of male intrusiveness in women's experience, either by surveillance, direct intervention, or distortion. Lee Gordon's version of masculinity and male sexuality is rendered even more menacing by concealing its human face; behind these black leather masks, clown faces, and white hoods lurk danger and terror. Even in his self-portrait, where he appropriates femininity as a badge of vulnerability, he conceals and

distorts his own features. This is a dark, frightening work, a chilling and visceral portrayal of men's capacity for violence.

Other artists expose the contradictions of gender by toying with them. There's a glee to our collective giggling at these works, solidarity cemented by shared laughter at the ridiculousness of the conventions which have been forced down our throats, recognition of common resistance. Take, for example, Greg Drasler's hilarious paintings of men so laden down with the tools of their trade that they could not possibly perform the roles that are suggested by their equipment. Or Greg Davidek's playful depiction of the male tendency to compartmentalize, to separate head from body. Or Ken Aptekar's brilliant painting of a standoff between two faceless armored medieval soldiers — two genuinely empty suits. By juxtaposing contemporary language Aptekar reveals the time-less insanity of that gendered discourse.

The works in *Post-Boys&Girls* hold the mirrors of gender up to us — some stark and honest, even brutal, others impishly distorted as in a fun house. And they invite us to explore the extraordinary hold that gender exerts in our lives, to deconstruct what it has meant to be boys and girls, so that we may reconstruct ourselves as responsible and caring women and men.

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