

elizabeth stephens
photos
sculpture
installations
1994 - 2000

ELIZABETH STEPHENS

lives in San Francisco. She produces photo, video and electronic sculptural installations that address technology, desire and notions of community. Currently Stephens is an assistant professor of art at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

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SCULPTURE

INSTALLATIONS

PHOTOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

I've been following the work of the multi-media artist Elizabeth Stephens for about seven years now. While she was at Rutgers, she invited a small group of us to a screening at DCTV in lower Manhattan. The work she showed was hard-edged and fashionable. I liked watching it. Certainly one of the points of her video was the invisibility of female desire. I couldn't help but admire her skill in making that homily real. I trusted her work. I also liked the experience of meeting this short, tough-looking young woman with (I guessed) working-class roots. There was a playful awkwardness in her approach to materials and subject matter that was similar to *Go Fish*, the lesbian super-8 film that went around the world, or maybe a better comparison is Sadie Benning's pixel-vision films of that time (the early '90s). But I felt Elizabeth Stephens was clearly bending video towards another purpose, a multi-media use, because what she showed us felt like "material"—sculptural material, like a critical freeway zipping around similar territory to the other works, rather than being a solo vehicle that wanted to express itself. She was after something different than that.

So it was with great pleasure that I caught up with Stephens' work a few years later; she had taken a big leap aesthetically, in terms of economy and force of vision, while staying true to that original impulse ("to show women"). In a San Francisco gallery I saw her "Pleasure Wheel," a ferris wheel festooned with monitors that flickered eyeballs at the viewer. Then the eyeballs turned to mirrors showing other rides, a universe of marvels kept unfolding, and the dream finally dissolved, euphorically. Maybe "spectacle" is a better word to use for her kind of multi-media, and I felt a certain pride of tribe upon seeing a woman working so lyrically in metal. The art world we're all familiar with is quick to groan with pleasure when Mike Kelley employs soft materials: Catholic banners, kooky hand-me-downs. It's sentimental and smart. It's "whatever art," excitedly dubbed a new movement. They call it "pathetic masculinity."

Rather than merely reinscribing Stephens' metal work onto the history of feminism (and closing the hatch, yawn) I think it's worth a moment to realize that female artists now are also telling another story. While Beck and the guys sing "I'm a loser, baby," women truly like power and winning. And frequently adopt heroism as a conceit. I think of LA artist Millie Wilson's "Museum of Lesbian Desire," with its coy inventory of female prizes, and I definitely place Elizabeth Stephens within that history of utopian sculptors and

body-artists which also includes Carolee Scheeman's outrageous actions, and the wealth of joyous communal art "Happenings," the ritual dissolution of the "fourth wall" by the Living Theater. Though Judy Chicago is the immediate inspiration for Stephens' "Dinner for Two," it was earlier than Chicago, in the libertine '60s—understood now as a masculine moment of liberation—that one's seat might begin to shake, and genitals could be viewed in performance art, if not on the canvas. The difference today is that the artist is a woman. Elizabeth's work presents a messy feminism, a female body shaping its own ideal. The ironies of her work bombard the notion of a single-minded and oppressive version of feminism. Twenty years ago I saw the work of the conceptual artist and sculptor Alice Aycock who translated her artist's notebook into a gallery installation. Her wooden dream works evoked the memory houses of the past, but also memorialized her love. The female desire that constantly flickers in Stephens' work erects a home, one conceived with a consciousness of threat, yet standing with all the conviction of a dream state, a nation. It's what the giddiness, the hard materials and talking rocking chairs add up to in my mind. Elizabeth Stephens' work reminds me that the most discussed work of the late '80s, early '90s—Karen Finley's screams or Bob Flannagan's outrageous appetite for pain were created in the anticipation of a culture that held them firmly despite their loud presence. Sadly, America let the kid go splattering on the floor. I see the environmental sculptures Stephens erects as things capable, even "about" the capacity to hold themselves upright and apart, proud to be the figure, a pounding high heel, or the world racing cinematically between a pair of spread thighs. This artist forges an object to rock a subject, or a subjectivity. It's new in the world. Each piece is its own institution, free-standing, a frothy government. It's a country that many of us would be proud and able to live in. Because she makes it big, she makes it funny and she's making it strong.

Eileen Myles, New York, 2000

Eileen Myles is a poet and art critic whose first novel, *Cool for You*, was published in 2000. She's a regular contributor to *The Nation*, *Bookforum*, *Art in America*, *Nest* and *The Stranger*.

INTERMEDIA SCULPTURE



My sculptural intermedia work is a material investigation of the space created by the interaction between various technologies, objects and physical sites. The pieces I produce combine steel fabrication, mechanical devices, electrical and electronic components, and video to produce kinetic works that occupy a hybrid space between sculpture and installation. I use sculpture as a metaphorical extension of the body; that is, these are structures that could potentially interact with or be substituted for the body. These structures include objects such as high-heeled shoes, gym equipment, gynecological instruments and furniture. The juxtapositions of various technologies such as electric motors, video, and computer chips within sculptural forms introduce an element of body-less-ness to the work. Indeed, much of my work makes use of technological representations (such as video or kinetic elements) in sites that physical bodies once occupied or could potentially occupy. This aspect in particular suggests the uncanny ability these technologies possess to construct, survey, ignore or empower various identity positions, particularly those of women.

My own intellectual history and choice of subject matter is influenced by having grown up in West Virginia during the mining industry's last great coal boom there. The further we move from an industrialized society towards an increasingly digital/electronic one, the more nostalgic we become for the past and the more we tend to fetishize it. My use of machines, electronic technologies and even of objects themselves in works such as "Workout" or "No Regrets, Imelda" refer to moments in our social and cultural development that we are both leaving behind and gravitating towards. My work draws on this sense of nostalgia, while investigating the fetishistic tendencies that nostalgia and technology engender.

THE PLEASURE WHEEL OF SYSIPHUS' SISTER



1994–96. Steel, video monitors, video, motor; 11'x9'x9'.

The steel wheel slowly and continuously turns. The images on the monitors are a series of poetic vignettes depicting discrete pleasures. These pleasures meld into one another. For instance a flower being depetalled becomes a mouthful of pearls or a long kiss turns into water running through hands. A single staring eye separates each coupling of pleasure. The eye appears over and over again as it stares directly at the viewer. This work explores both physical and virtual sites of pleasure.



video stills

NO REGRETS, IMELDA



1996. Bronze, steel, video monitors, video camera and motor; 5'x13"x12".

As the viewer approaches this work one bronze high heel begins tapping against the top of the piece. Inside the steel pedestal are two video monitors. The monitor on the left displays the viewer's own feet as he or she views the video, the monitor on the right plays footage of various forms of foot and shoe worship. This footage includes scenes of Dorothy from the "Wizard of Oz," neon signs from the Tenderloin in San Francisco as well as some real time foot worship. The shoe continues to tap as the viewer watches the videos.





video stills



detail of video spy holes

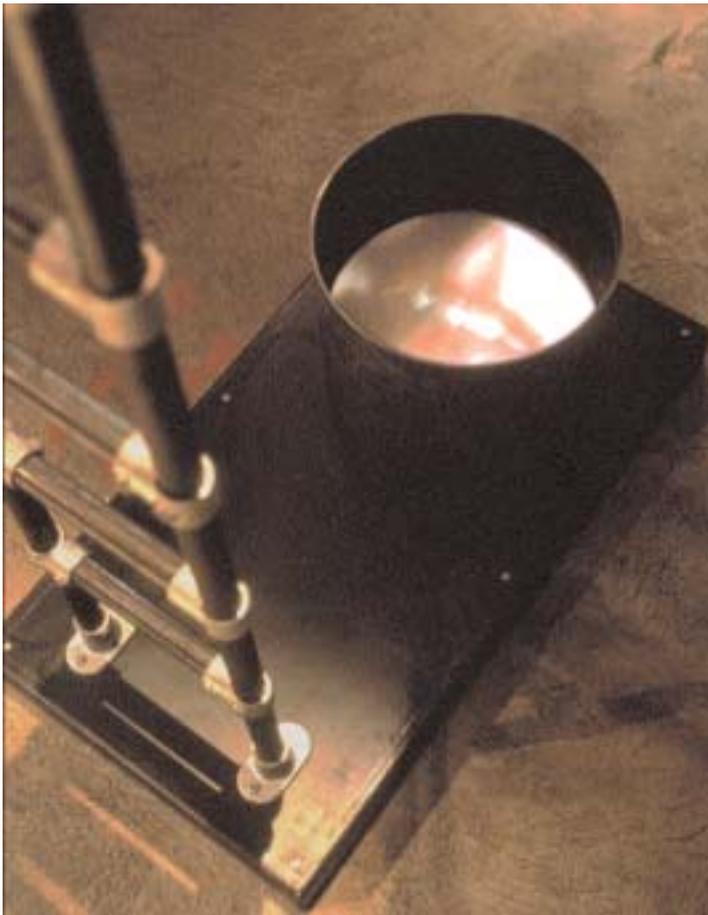


JUMP

1998. Steel, water, video projection, sound;
14'x4'x2'.

A tall steel ladder looms over a bucket of water. A video projection of the lips of several women reading plays in the bucket. The text dares the viewer to jump. This work was inspired by cartoon characters who would leap from a tall ladder into a small bucket of water, defying fear and logic, only to emerge unscathed from a seemingly impossible situation.





You look worried.
What are you afraid of?
Why are you sweating?
It's not that far down.

What are you going to do
if you don't jump?
Crawl back down the ladder?
Come on, I don't have all day

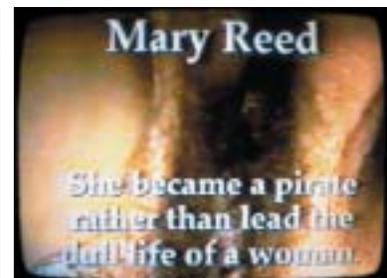
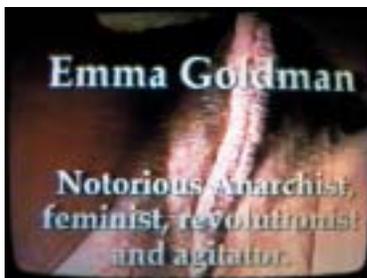
You're shaking
Why are you looking at me that way
You're not nervous are you?
Don't be afraid

Trust me
I'm your friend
I wouldn't lead you into anything
you couldn't get out of.
There is plenty of water in the bucket
It's deep.
You know what you have to do.

There's only one way down.
Go ahead.
Jump.

detail looking into bucket

DINNER PARTY FOR TWO



**1997. Table with video monitors,
chairs with vibrators and text; 3'x5'x2'.**

This piece is both an homage and a contemporary criticism of Judy Chicago's, famous "Dinner Party" installation. The place settings are composed of two video monitors beneath red Plexiglas. These monitors display female genitalia overlaid with scrolling text that locates various women that Judy Chicago neglected to invite to her own dinner party. The seats contain built-in vibrators that are activated when the viewer is seated. "Dinner Party for Two," gently parodies the innocence of the feminist vaginal imagery that Chicago used as a motif on her dinner plates in the 1970s.



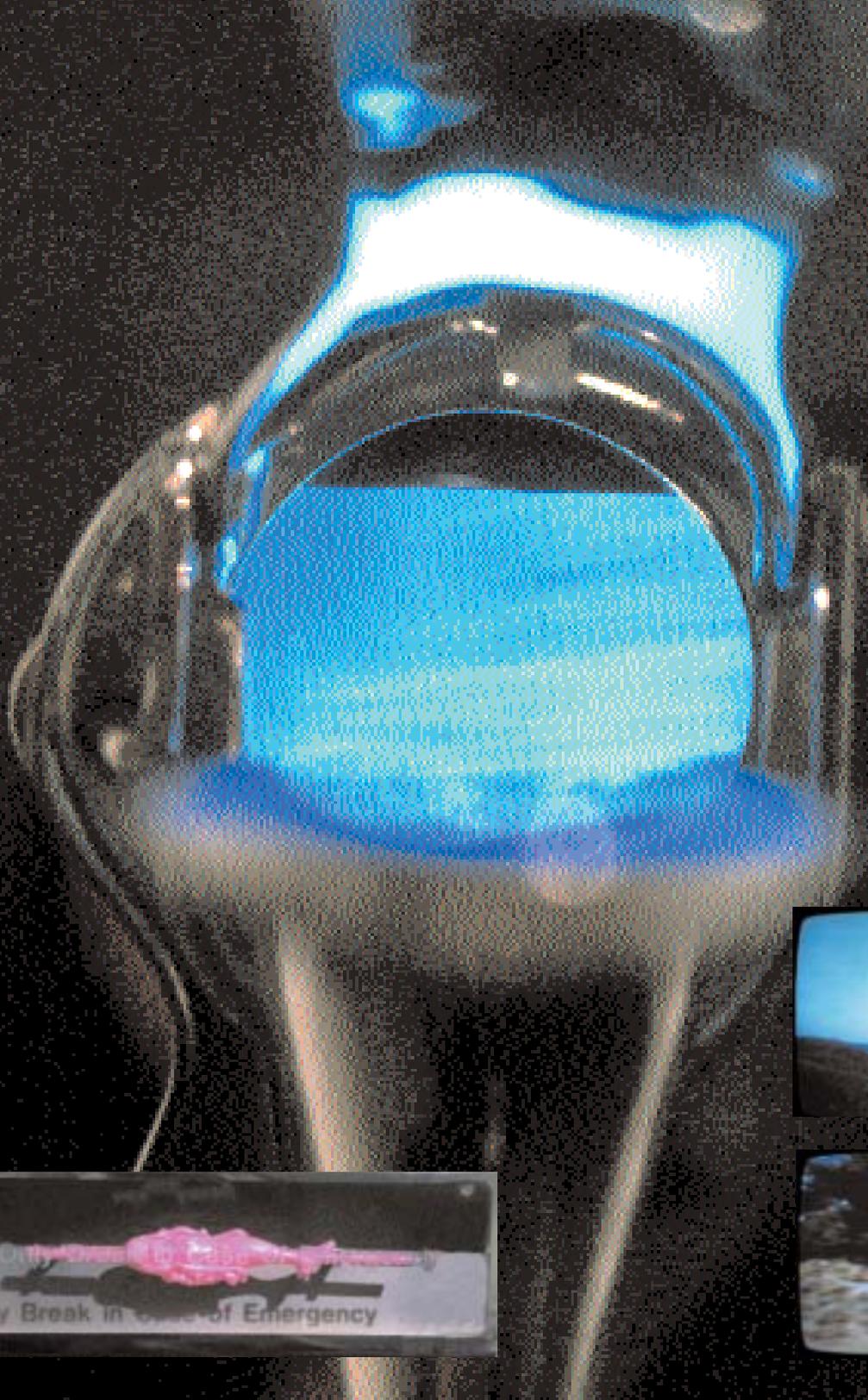
detail of table top

ON THE ROAD



1997. Steel, glass, speculum, straw,
video; 2'x10".

This piece is composed of two boxes. The box above contains a pink mermaid drinking straw that is encased behind the warning, "Only Break in Case of Emergency." The box below bears a speculum. As viewers gaze into its lips they see video footage of the California coastline. The relationship between the boxes is a whimsical one concerning travel, thirst and possible views into the body.





WORKOUT

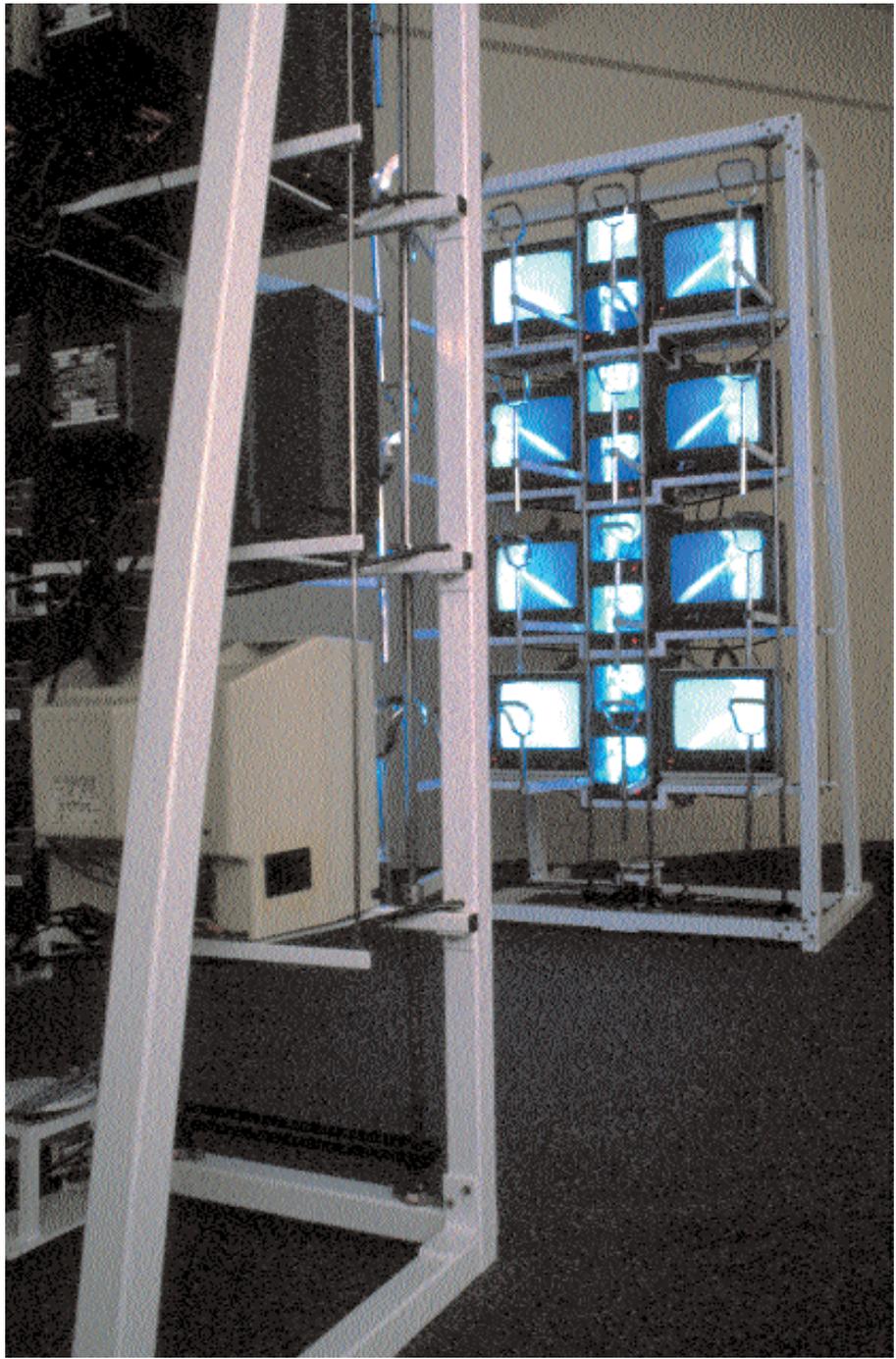
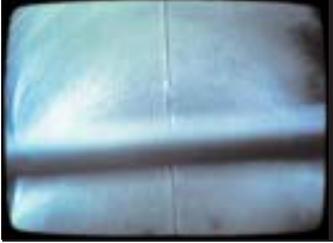
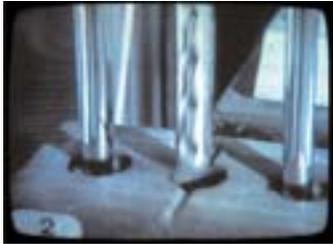


1997-99.
Two steel frames, each measuring 8'x4'x4' and sited approximately 5' apart. Steel, video monitors, gynecological stirrups, motor.

Two large gym-like frames face each other. Each frame has eight sets of gynecological stirrups that slowly open and close in front of a bank of video monitors. The surveillance monitors in the center of the video bank play footage of bodies in exercise and the machines that they employ. On one frame, the larger outside monitors display a mouth expelling babies, houses, money and milk. The images in the outside monitors mirror each other. In the other steel frame, a complimentary mouth is consuming the very things that first mouth spits out. The shots are close-up, repetitive and slow. This piece is an investigation of aspects of the American consumer dream fetishized through the lenses of medical surveillance, bodybuilding and voyeurism.

video stills





SQUIRT



1999. Speculum, lab coat, electronics; 4'x4'x4'.

As the viewer passes by, the speculum slowly moves its beak back and forth, intermittently spitting a thin stream of blue ink onto the lab coat. Over time the coat becomes bluer and bluer, while the pan below the piece fills with excess liquid. Originally this work was intended to be a commentary on the horrific tactics Dr. Sims used when he invented the speculum. "Squirt" developed into an ongoing sculptural series observing writing, painting and the power of marking.



"Squirt," lab coat



detail of speculum shooting ink



2000. Two squirting speculums, one talking speculum, lab coats, electronics, flag and ink; approximately 4'x10'x6'.

In "Presidential" a series of events occur sequentially. First, one speculum squirts blue ink onto a white lab coat, then the other speculum squirts red ink onto the other lab coat, then the speculum in front of the American flag slowly says, "I'm sorry." This piece is loosely based on the presidential fiasco between Monica Lewinsky and President Clinton. It studies the absurdity of a presidential apology while acting out the pleasure of critiquing power.

SITE SPECIFIC INSTALLATIONS/PUBLIC ART



This work addresses social and historical issues that affect the local cultural environments associated with the sites. For instance in 1997 my collaborator and I presented "Before and After" in Lancaster, England for the international feminist conference "Transformations." This project involved various art interventions in conference activities. Some of these interventions included covertly stamping text on the opening banquet napkins, inserting Before and After slides in plenary talks and placing magnetic theoretical buzz words on the bathroom stall doors for the participants to play with during bathroom interludes. I consider "Before and After" an example of crossing the boundaries between art and academic worlds: as one of the plenary speakers commented, "The work you did at the conference produced an atmosphere of serious and rigorous play around the topos of transformation." This succinctly describes the intended effect of much of my installation work.



ROCKING RED ROCKING



rear-view slide projection in the window



1995. Installation on the front porch of the Women's Center at the University of California, Santa Cruz; in collaboration with E.G. Crichton.

This multi-media installation incorporated motorized rocking chairs, recorded voices and rear slide projection. While the chairs rocked mechanically, continuous audiotapes of women discussing their hopes, fears and desires during the era of Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America" softly played. In the evenings slides projected through the windows of the house. The images ranged from women's bodies, to historical photos of suffragettes, to burning flames. During the day people would often sit on the porch and listen to the voices or talk among themselves.



detail of poetry burned into rocking chair



night-time slide projections in the windows



1-800-TELL-ALL

1997. A First Night public interactive installation in downtown Santa Cruz. In collaboration with E.G. Crichton and Scott Brookie.

We invited viewers to enter a phone booth erected in the main shopping district of Santa Cruz. The phone booth (an almost nostalgic form of private/public space) became a vehicle for both shelter and exposure as the interface to three prominent second story windows. A voice mail system presented participants with a menu of personal questions while a surveillance video camera captured their image. Upstairs, four computers, three projectors, and a crew of volunteers created a feedback system in which people and their words were randomly projected onto the windows to be viewed from the street. This piece turned into a kind of public confessional wishing well, communicating something about the collective consciousness of Santa Cruz.



DYSPHORIAS: TROUBLE IN TOYLAND



1998. Mounted wood cutouts, lighting, sound track, video, shaped rugs; in collaboration with E.G. Crichton and Mary Tsiongas. Dimensions variable.

"Trouble in Toyland" used the trope of toys to investigate the dysphoria of gender. Large shadows and sound permeated the gallery, evoking a skewed landscape. Toy silhouettes snaked around the walls of the gallery following a boy to girl gender line, illuminated by color lights. Recognizable toy silhouettes and the sounds and sayings that they make initially evoked comforting memories. However, the piece grew more ominous as viewers gradually realized just how much sexism is contained in the utterances that toys make. Elements of sound and shadow mimicked both the anxiety of fixed gender expectations and the restlessness of those shadow areas where genders mix, overlap, and become decidedly unclear. In the other room, viewers could sit on toy-shaped rugs to watch t.v. The television played slowly dissolving abstract colors. Occasionally these colors were interrupted by a quick subliminal image flash of a toy of one gender (for instance Barbie) accompanied by the conflicting sound of a toy from another (GI Joe).



video viewing room



toy silhouettes



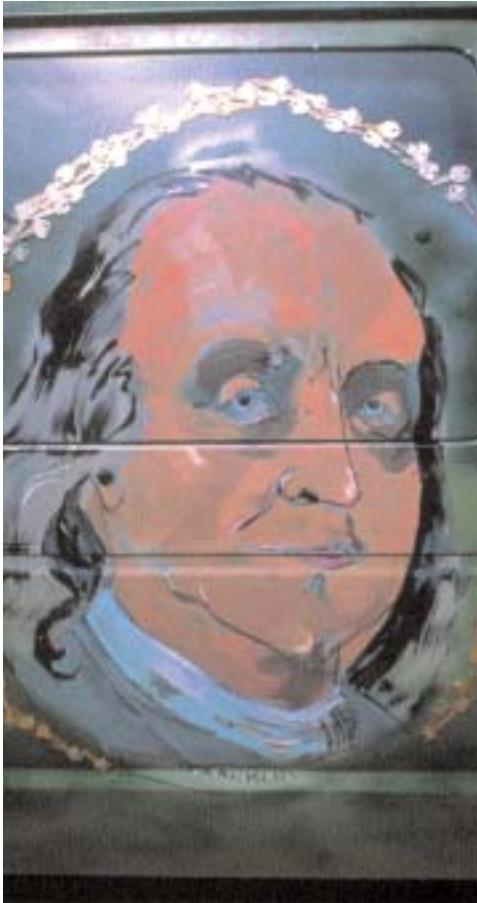
AUTO-BIOGRAPHY

1998. Van outfitted with mixed media, welded lightning rods, spectacles, LED signs, megaphone, slide projector; in collaboration with E.G. Crichton.

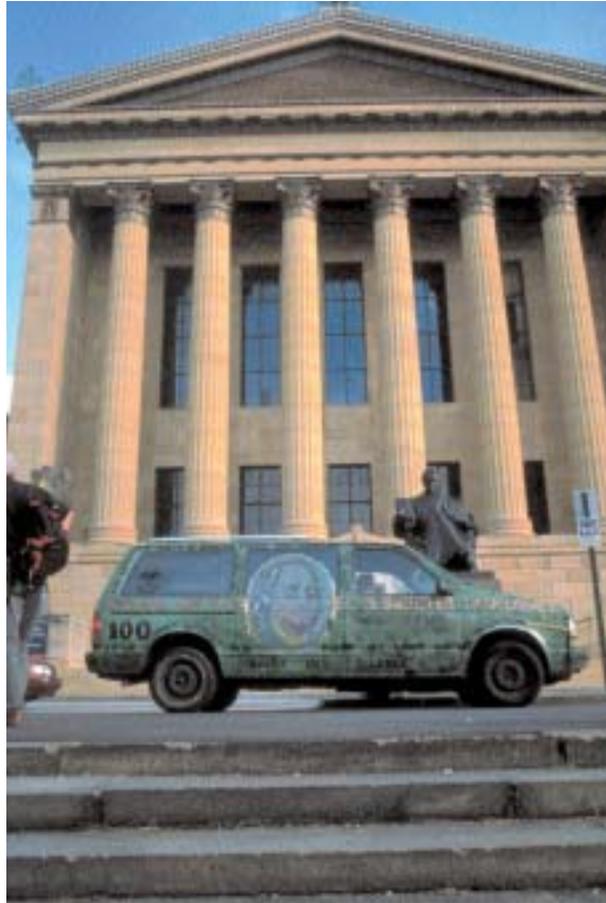
"Auto-Biography" was a roving vehicle performance that evolved over the course of the week-long Philadelphia Fringe Festival. Having decided "this is what Ben would drive were he alive today," we re-configured a used Plymouth Voyager as the "Ben-Mobile," complete with his hundred-dollar-bill portrait on the sides, lightening bolts, spectacles, Ben Franklin quotes in paint, pennies, and keys, LED signs, a megaphone, and a slide projection system. For a period each day, we drove the Ben-Mobile around Old City, reading a portion of his autobiography through a megaphone. Sometimes others joined us and would take turns reading. At night, we turned on LED signs (scrolling Ben's aphorisms) and projected quotes and statistics onto passing buildings.



reading Ben Franklin's autobiography



detail, Franklin's head on the side of the Ben-Mobile



Ben-Mobile at the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Arts

PARTIAL RECALL





1998. Mounted mirror plaques with etched text, stenciled statistics made with enriched white flour; in collaboration with E.G. Crichton.

"Partial Recall" juxtaposed Ben Franklin's words of wisdom with statistics about contemporary Philadelphia life to explore how Ben's positivist aphorisms are surviving today. We placed our own historical plaques throughout Old Town Philadelphia. Each one was a mirror etched with the text of a Franklin aphorism, some of the words are missing as though erased by time. Below each mirror, we stenciled a statistic with enriched white flour consisting of a certain fact, stable for an hour or a day or a week. The flour statistics were constantly shifting with wind and foot traffic. In this piece, we question whether statistics have become the anchor for today's social decisions, the modern-day "words to the wise" that can lead to informed social action.



BEFORE /AFTER



projection



labeled stalls



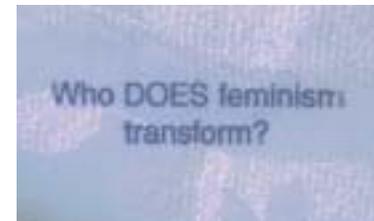
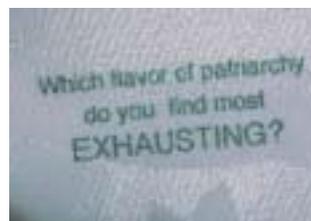
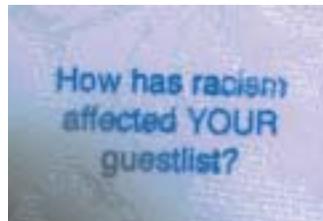
magnetic buzzwords

1997. A public art intervention. Posters, slide projections, magnetic words, stamped questions on napkins; in collaboration with E.G. Crichton.

"Before/After," a public art intervention, took place at the international feminist conference "Transformations," held at Lancaster University in England. Using the old advertising trick of before and after images, we solicited pictures in advance from people depicting "Before and After your encounter with feminism." These images, paired with words, became both posters and projections in the central hall. We also created magnetic word labels for the bathroom stalls - 122 theoretical buzz words that people could arrange and rearrange into complex and often humorous identity labels. For a formal banquet, we secretly stamped provocative questions on the underside of the napkins at each table. These questions were discovered table by table at the beginning of the banquet.



stamped napkins



PHOTOGRAPHY



Photography is the most traditional form I use to investigate my relationship to visual representation. The photographs are forays into the cultural realms of pornography and its supposed relationship to exploitation and identity-based representations of desire. Whereas in the sculptural intermedia installations I investigate actual machines juxtaposed with electronic representations of bodies, in the photographs I am juxtaposing actual bodies with machines to construct identity specific representations of desire. I also question the use and circulation of signs adopted from one class by another and the ways that gender and sexuality complicate this potentially exploitative appropriation. The alleged abilities of visual signs in various media to harm, or on the other hand, satisfy and even elevate one's experience is an area that is continuously under debate. These photographs explore photography's ability to interpret and influence experience as well as its power to represent identity.

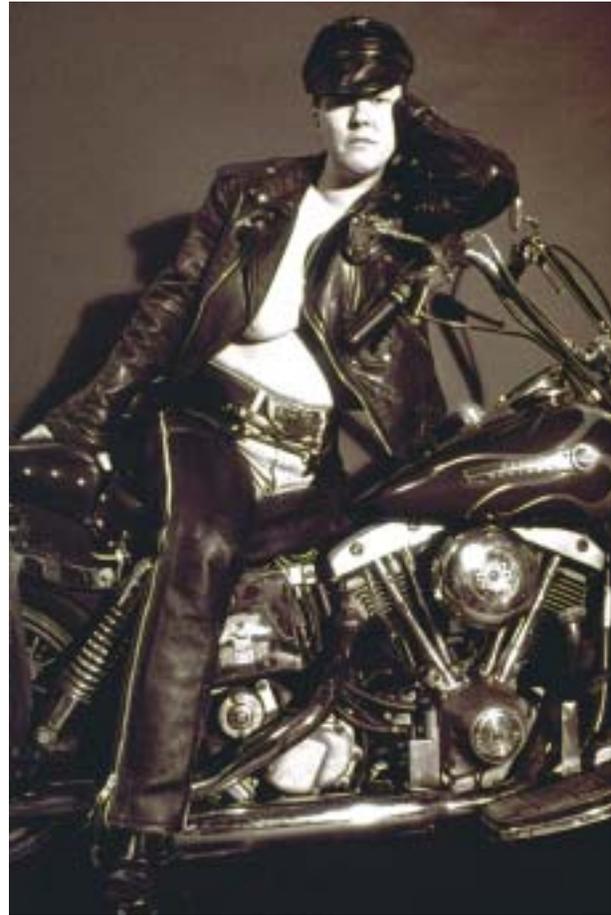
TITILLATION SERIES



1995/96. "Titillation Series," black and white photographs; 20"x24".

The Titillation Series explores the construction of biker chicks and their relationships to stereotypes of working-class and gender outlaws. Many of these photographs appear in my article "Dykes on Bikes Cruisin' Calendar Girls" which was published in *The Passionate Camera; photography and bodies of desire*.







ELIZABETH STEPHENS

Education

- 1992 **Master of Fine Arts:** Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ
1986 **Diploma:** School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
Bachelor of Fine Arts: Tufts University, Medford, MA

Solo Exhibitions

- 1999 **Examinations,** Hartnett Gallery, University of Rochester, Rochester, NY
1997 **Electro-Mechanical Ballet,** Faculty Art Gallery, University of California, Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA,
Toast (Performance), Cerro Cosa College, Ridgecrest, CA
1996 **The Dedication Project; A Tribute to Ed Mock,**
Site Specific Video Installation, 1000 Market Street, San Francisco, CA
Post Proper, (two person exhibition) The Luggage Store Gallery, San Francisco, CA
1992 **Lessons in Photography; Who's Zoomin' Who?** Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ

Collaborative Site Specific Installations

- 1998 **Partial Recall/Auto-Biography,** Visual Fringe Festival, Philadelphia PA
Dysphorias, University of the Pacific, Stockton, CA
1997 **Transformations** University of Lancaster, Lancaster, England
1-800-Tell-All, Site-Specific Video/Computer Installation for First Night Santa Cruz
1995 **Rocking Red Rocking,** Site-Specific Public Installation, Women's Center,
University of California, Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2000 **Achieving Failure: Gym Culture 2000,** Threadwaxing Space, New York, NY
Achieving Failure: Gym Culture 2000, Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, Cleveland, OH
The Future of the Body, Richmond Art Center, Richmond, CA
1999 **30/30 Vision,** Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ
Unzipped, The Luggage Store Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Faculty Works: UCSC Art Faculty, Sesnon Art Gallery, University of California, Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA
1998 **Elbowroom,** Tredje Sparet, Stockholm, Sweden
Context, Nexus Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
1997 **shrink,** Southern Exposure, San Francisco, CA
Chik Tek, Art Tec Gallery, San Jose, CA
Figure, Betty Rymer Gallery, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
I Can't Put My Finger on It, The Luggage Store Gallery, San Francisco, CA

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- 1996 **Post Proper**, The Luggage Store Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Urban Cowgirls, Artists Television Access, San Francisco, CA
UCSC Ladder Faculty Exhibition, Sesnon Art Gallery, Santa Cruz, CA
The New Jersey State Council Arts Fellowship Exhibition, The Noyes Museum, Oceanville, NJ
- 1995 **Works in Progress**, Sculpture Space, Inc., Utica, NY
- 1994 **Stonewall**, White Columns, New York, NY
Making Evidence, The Police Building, New York, NY
- 1993 **Fulton-Empire Ferry Outdoor Sculpture Exhibit**, Brooklyn, NY
Frameline International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, San Francisco, CA
Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema, International House, Philadelphia, PA
- 1992 **The Art Mall; Safe Sex Latex Express**, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY
Alumnae Traveling Scholarship Exhibition, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
Masters of Fine Arts Exhibition, 1992, The Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, NJ
The Body Political, Test Site, Brooklyn, NY
Lookout! 1992 Gay and Lesbian Video Festival, DCTV, New York, NY
Shave (performance) Amos Eno Gallery, New York, NY
SCAN: Science, Consequence and NonSciense Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ

Published Writing

“Looking Class Heroes: Dykes on Bikes Cruisin’ Calendar Girls,” in *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*. Ed. Deborah Bright. New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 276-287

Grants, Awards

- 1997 **Creative Programming Award**, National First Night Committee
First Night Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA
Santa Cruz Cultural Council, Project Grant; Santa Cruz, CA
- 1996 **Kjarvalsstadir**, The Reykjavik Municipal Art Museum, Reykjavik, Iceland
- 1995 **Sculpture Space Inc. Fellowship**, Utica, NY
- 1993 **Experimental Media Fellowship**, New Jersey State Council on the Arts, Trenton, NJ
Mid Atlantic/National Endowment for the Arts Regional Fellowship (Sculpture)
Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation, Baltimore, MD
- 1992 **Alumni/ae Traveling Scholarship**, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
New Forms Regional Grant, The Painted Bride Art Center, Philadelphia, PA

Reviews, Reproductions

Harmony Hammond, *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History*. (New York: Rizzoli Press, 2000) p.119

Jillian St. Jaques, "Flying Bullets or Flying Circus?," afterimage: The Journal of Arts and Cultural Criticism, Volume 27, Number 4 (January/February 2000)

Mariam Seidel, "City Focus, Local Heroes" Art News, photo reproduction (November 1998)

Ann Powers, "On Dangerous Art" Photo Reproductions, Metro Santa Cruz, Volume 4, Number 2 (Nov. 1997)

Marlow De Ville, "Art Beat: Strictly Academic," Metro Santa Cruz, (November 1996)

H.Roche, "Critic's Choice; Ed Mock," San Francisco Bay Guardian, Vol. 31, Num. 5 (Oct. 30-Nov. 5,1996)

San Francisco Bay Times, Photo Reproduction, Volume 17, Number 14 (May 2, 1996)

NJ State Council on the Arts, Fellowship Exhibition, 1994 and 1995. Noyes Museum. Exhibition Catalog

Deborah Bright, "Sex Wars: Photography on the Front Lines," Exposure, Vol. 29, Numbers 2/3 (Winter 1994)

Bruno Fazzolari, "Post Proper, at the Luggage Store," Artweek, Volume 27, Number 7 (July 1996)

H. Roche, "Critic's Choice; Post Proper," San Francisco Bay Guardian, Vol. 30, Num. 35 (May 29-June 4,1996)

Patricia Cronin, "Representing Lesbian Subjectivities," Art Papers, Vol. 18, Number 6 (Nov./December 1994)

the guide, A Digest of Art Exhibitions in Northern California, (December 1994), Photo Reproduction

C. Clarke, " 'Out' Outside the Classroom: The Co-Curricular Challenge," Radical Teacher, (Winter 1994)

Robert Atkins, "Queer for You," Village Voice, (June 28, 1994)

Kim Levin, "Art in Brief," Village Voice, (March 1, 1994)

Q. Sakamaki, "Art With AIDS," ShINC, Volume 13, (September, 1992)

Video Stills, Long Shot, Volume 13

Christine Temin, "Perspectives," The Boston Globe, (June 3, 1992)

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