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Josie Roland Hodson

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Jean Ma

Pamela M. Lee

Jane Weinstock

Emily Apter

Natalia Brizuela and Julia  
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## On Burnout

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JANE WEINSTOCK

If we wanted to screen Suzanne Bocanegra's memories, we could project them on a screen, or multiple screens. Or we might cite memories of the silver screen that made a lasting impression on her. Or we could think of another type of screen, one without projections, one that conceals, in which case the screen would screen out memories, or present them selectively. We could imagine the screen of a confession booth, which affords visual privacy while the confessor reveals her unholy thoughts. Or we might think of screen memories, seemingly insignificant but vivid childhood memories that hide potent unconscious fantasies.

Perhaps I am associating too freely, but the restrained exuberance and breadth of Bocanegra's work make the straightforward inadequate. Bocanegra writes, directs, and co-stars in feature-length "artist talks." She makes complex video installations. She designs costumes for dance and theater. She creates experimental orchestral pieces derived from seemingly arbitrary formulas. She engages with music, dance, opera, ballet, literature, theater, architecture, and painting, as well as fashion, utopianism, Catholicism, advertising, television, and Hollywood. And that's not including pregnancy, Alzheimer's, pioneers, prostitution, food, farming, flatware, and family. You could say she has no boundaries. And it's all in the service of her unique, feminist perspective.

Bocanegra developed her approach, which is often collaborative, while working in installation, dance, and experimental theater. But it wasn't until 2010 that she came upon the method that led to her best-known works, her artist talks. Bocanegra describes her state of mind at the time: "My head always felt heavy . . . I couldn't sort out my ideas and build something with them. One day I wrote down every single thing I was interested in . . . on its own index card. A card catalog of myself."<sup>1</sup>

Bocanegra continued to put her thoughts on index cards and to supplement them with her own research: "I start circling around a subject and gathering

1. Hal Foster, "Suzanne Bocanegra and Hal Foster in Conversation," in *Suzanne Bocanegra: Poorly Watched Girls* (Philadelphia: MW Editions/The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 2019), p. 15.

images and ideas. I go to libraries and walk down all the aisles and find books that have some sort of resonance with what I'm thinking about. Sometimes this process takes years."<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after beginning her archive, Bocanegra was invited by the Museum of Modern Art to do a slide presentation, or artist talk. Rather than just presenting her previous works, she came up with a clever alternative, one that subverted the expectation that the artist must talk. The person speaking here, Bocanegra's stand-in, was to be a man, Paul Lazar of the Wooster Group. It turns out that this Brechtian device, casting a man for a woman, brings humor and dissonance to the performance as well as moments of analytic distance. It is a maneuver that Bocanegra would refine in her subsequent, less Brechtian artist lectures, where the stand-in is a woman.

This first performance is called *When a Priest Marries a Witch, an Artist Lecture by Suzanne Bocanegra Starring Paul Lazar* (2010), and it takes the form of a droll, digressive slide presentation, which includes film and TV clips. The "lecture" is fed to Lazar by way of a prerecorded voice-over, which is intentionally perceptible to the audience and which is spoken by Bocanegra.<sup>3</sup> This structure came about because Lazar didn't have time to learn his lines, but it proved a generative solution for Bocanegra. With this voice-over, which is repeated by Lazar practically word for word, Bocanegra occupies an indeterminate position: She is both present and absent, onstage and offstage. As a result, Lazar is never able to fully play Bocanegra; her absent presence keeps reminding the viewer that Lazar is not who he says he is. This configuration proved a consequential step for Bocanegra as it anticipated other, more complex strategies for complicating viewers' identifications.

For the material of *When a Priest Marries a Witch*, Bocanegra dug into her wide-ranging research and came up with a story involving a formative moment in her childhood: When she was eight years old, she learned of her parish priest's unorthodox decision to hire a local artist, an abstract painter, to decorate the church. "It made me want to be an artist," said Bocanegra.<sup>4</sup> According to her performances, she also wanted at various times to be a priest, a nun, a ballerina, a pioneer, and an actress.

The scandal that ensued regarding the local artist, who filled the working-class Catholic church with his Abstract Expressionist art, provided a rich jumping-off point for Bocanegra's audiovisual ruminations on such issues as modern art, the KKK, NASA, and Vatican II. Over the course of almost an hour, the audience encounters a kind of history lesson in which Bocanegra's personal memories (some of which may be fantasies) are intercut with the life-changing events of the

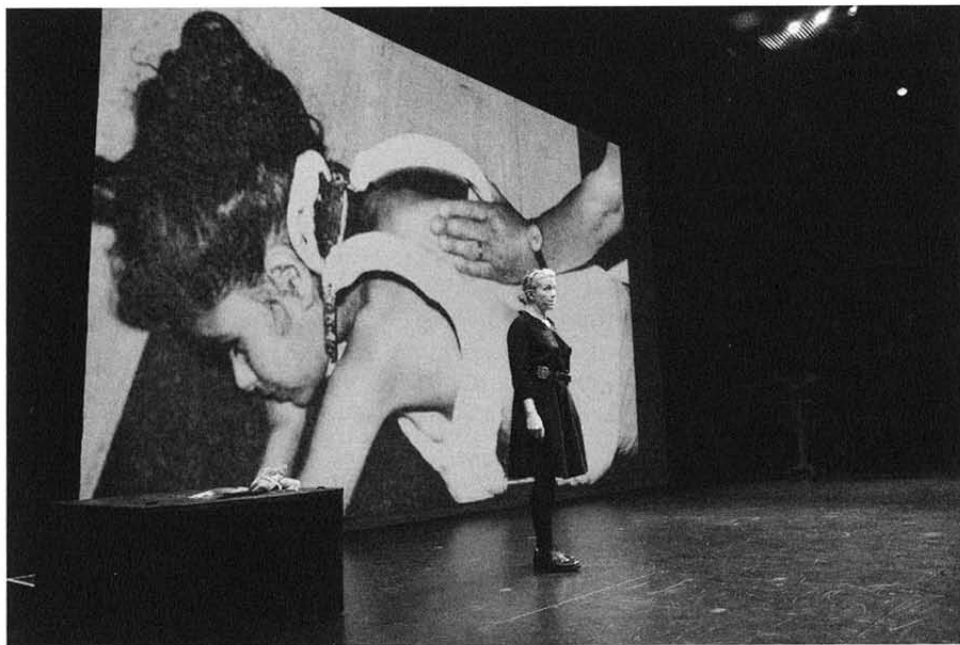
2. Ibid.

3. "It became clear that some people ... were confused by the structure. Now, at the top of the show I (we) explain what's going on. The actor puts on an ear mic in front of the audience and explains that I'm speaking into the mic and the actor receives the info in his ear." From my correspondence with Bocanegra.

4. John Haskell, "Suzanne Bocanegra by John Haskell," *Bomb*, September 26, 2017, p. 3.

1960s. Jumping freely from the war in Vietnam and the civil rights movement to reminiscences of nuns' habits, both sartorial and everyday, Bocanegra engages in a kind of critical free association that asks the audience to analyze and fantasize at the same time. At times Brechtian, ironic, satirical, and experimental but also emotional, obsessive, and confessional, Bocanegra already, in this first performance, could not be pinned down. She may have taken a page from the Wooster Group and Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater, but she was also influenced by such feminists as Yvonne Rainer and Joan Jonas as well by classical operas and ballets (especially those involving nuns).

With *Bodycast, an Artist Lecture by Suzanne Bocanegra Starring Frances McDormand* (2013), Bocanegra's next artist lecture, she cast as her stand-in one of the few actors working today in both mainstream film and experimental theater. In this work, as in her subsequent *Farmhouse/Whorehouse, an Artist Lecture by Suzanne Bocanegra Starring Lili Taylor* (2017), the woman's body takes center stage. First, Bocanegra is being played by another woman, who inhabits her so completely that one could forget she wasn't Bocanegra . . . if Bocanegra herself had not been right there. In *Bodycast*, Bocanegra is standing unobtrusively but visibly at a standard lecture podium on the edge of the stage. Her words are no longer prerecorded; she whispers her text into a small mic connected to a receiver in McDormand's ear. Bocanegra begins the performance speaking directly to the audience, but as soon as McDormand takes over for her (which happens very quickly), her voice



*Suzanne Bocanegra. Bodycast, An Artist Lecture by Suzanne Bocanegra Starring Frances McDormand. 2013.*

becomes a whisper, audible only to McDormand and the audience in the front few rows. This time she is literally present, but absented by McDormand's absorbing performance. Still, her presence on the edge of the stage provides a subtle challenge to the assumptions of conventional acting and the structures of identification on which they rely.

The "story" of *Bodycast* is a highly personal one. From the age of thirteen to fifteen, Bocanegra was confined to a body cast for scoliosis. For an adolescent girl, whose body is already in a state of flux, this must have been traumatic, particularly because every time the cast was changed, Bocanegra was given a new body. In the fall it might be almost straight, like a prepubescent child's, and then in spring, Bocanegra would suddenly find herself with plaster breasts and an hourglass figure. The shape, which seemed to bear little relation to Bocanegra's, was totally at the whim of the technician. As Hal Foster has observed, Bocanegra was literally a "constructed subject."<sup>5</sup>

As in *When a Priest Marries a Witch*, the title story is only one of many anecdotes and observations in *Bodycast*. Bocanegra/McDormand speaks of other casts—casts of sculpture in her church, the casts Bocanegra made in art school, Frida Kahlo's casts. She also talks of discovering *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1970), of discarding razors and makeup in the name of feminism, of loving tartans and togas, and Balanchine. Dominating all this talk is the huge screen at the back of the theater at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where it was performed in December 2013. There McDormand/Bocanegra's narrative is enlarged upon with images, still and moving, some illustrative and others disjunctive or simply digressive. TV and movies had found their way into *When a Priest Marries a Witch: The Agony and the Ecstasy*, *The Singing Nun*, *The Flying Nun*. But here the images are so large that the performance itself approximates the movies, with its movie star (McDormand) and giant screen.

In the context of Bocanegra's musings on feminism and art, the cast female body could certainly be seen as a metaphor for the imprisonment of women. But it also brings to my mind the cinematic spectator. Unable to turn her head to the right or to the left for two years, Bocanegra was forced to look straight ahead, like a film viewer imprisoned by the conventions of mainstream cinema. But it is a female body that is constrained. Is *Bodycast* therefore addressing a female spectator? And what is her relationship to Bocanegra and McDormand? Is it voyeuristic, or does she identify with the women onstage? Or both? And where does that leave the male spectator?

Bocanegra's most recent "artist lecture," *Farmhouse/Whorehouse* (2017), invokes a film in its title, *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, which is described in the performance as "an unwatchable movie." The Broadway version was no better. Bocanegra's stand-in, Lili Taylor, opines:

It got bad reviews, has terrible songs, but was a success anyway. . . The best thing about *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* in my opinion is its

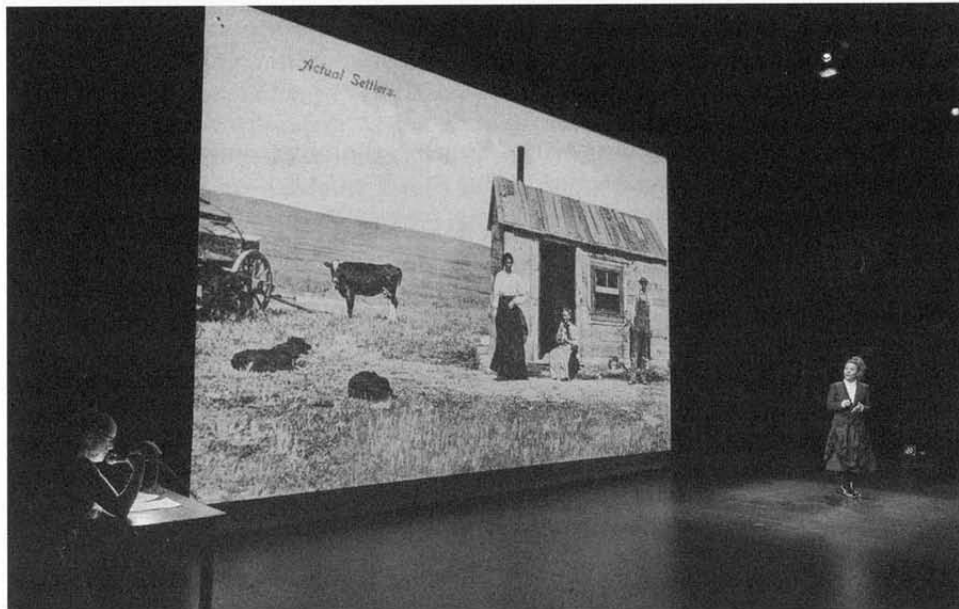
5. Foster, "Suzanne Bocanegra and Hal Foster in Conversation," p. 18.



title. The “best” leads you to believe it’s of the highest quality. “Little” makes the whorehouse kind of adorable, gives it a kind of boutique bed-and-breakfast feel. Everyone is titillated by “whorehouse”—I used it in the title of my piece for the same reason.

The “whorehouse” in the title refers to the actual brothel that the play and movie were based on, which, it turns out, was located directly across the road from Bocanegra’s grandparents’ small farm. Every time she visited her grandparents, the young Bocanegra, the Girl Scout who longed to be a pioneer, would inquire about all the nighttime traffic, always to be told that there was a party down the road. When she turned eleven or twelve, a friend’s mother revealed the truth about the neighbors across the way, at which point Bocanegra became a fixture on the fence in front of the farm, studying the mostly working-class men as they turned into Miss Edna’s “chicken ranch.” A year or two later, she was in a body cast. Perhaps, in her unconscious, this was punishment for her voyeurism.

In *Farmhouse/Whorehouse*, Bocanegra, no longer at a podium, is seated at a desk at the side of the stage, not far from her stand-in, another celebrated actress. As she did with McDormand, Bocanegra murmurs her lines into a mic, which transmits her words into a receiver in Taylor’s ear. Unlike McDormand, who performed in a modest black dress, Taylor wears a nineteenth-century-like costume, made by Bocanegra and inspired by the Oneida utopian community in upstate New York. As we are told in *Farmhouse/Whorehouse*, Bocanegra is fascinated by



*Bocanegra. Farmhouse/Whorehouse, An Artist Lecture*  
By Suzanne Bocanegra Starring Lili Taylor. 2017.



*Bocanegra. Farmhouse/Whorehouse, An Artist Lecture*  
By Suzanne Bocanegra Starring Lili Taylor. 2017.

utopian visionaries, especially Charles Fourier, the nineteenth-century socialist who invented the word *feminism*.

I'm jealous of Fourier's extravagant imagination. And I'm in awe of his complete confidence in his ability to identify and cure the universal problems of humanity that have plagued us for centuries. And all this from the mind of an accountant in Lyon, who lived alone with his cats his entire life.

Fourier's is only one of many stories told in *Farmhouse/Whorehouse*. Bocanegra/Taylor glides from subject to subject, again as in the manner of free association, or of a Sunday confession, offering us a look at her life that feels structured by her unconscious. She remembers the kittens her grandparents drowned (could she have saved them?), Oneida flatware (the Oneida community sold knives and forks), the nuns at her Catholic school, and her mother's dresses, all the while incorporating her research into photography, painting, pregnancy, and more. But she always finds her way back to her grandparents' farm.

The farm takes on a new meaning for the adult Bocanegra/Taylor, whose perspective in this piece is that of a mother, pregnant with her third child. The female body of *Bodycast* has grown into an alienated body: "Your body becomes a sort of farm. It grows the baby and eventually, in nine months or thereabout, it will be self-harvested."

The farm has become a metaphor for all that is good and natural, and the narrator's desire for this innocence is palpable. Her almost childlike fascination with utopianism, with "the pastoral," with "all things pioneer," collides with her research on prostitution and depictions of prostitutes in nineteenth-century painting. Here the body and the mysteries of sex and female sexuality hover alongside her high-school photographs of her grandparents' hands, her mother's dresses, Millet's paintings. It is as if the farm is the screen memory that covers up, or displaces, the memory of Miss Edna's establishment across the street and all that it connotes. A powerful image, like all screen memories, the family farm distracts from the sexual knowledge that it attempts to hide. In the same way that Bocanegra's speech is displaced—her words are spoken by Taylor—so are her illicit thoughts. Similarly, Bocanegra's indelible image of the cast of *Bodycast* can be seen as a screen memory underneath which her newly sexualized body is hiding.<sup>6</sup> I do not mean this literally. A truly unconscious structure would lack the investigative and analytical aspects of Bocanegra's storytelling. But we could say that her method allows for a kind of nonlinear participation, on her part as well as for viewers, that evokes psychoanalysis and its essential technique, free association.

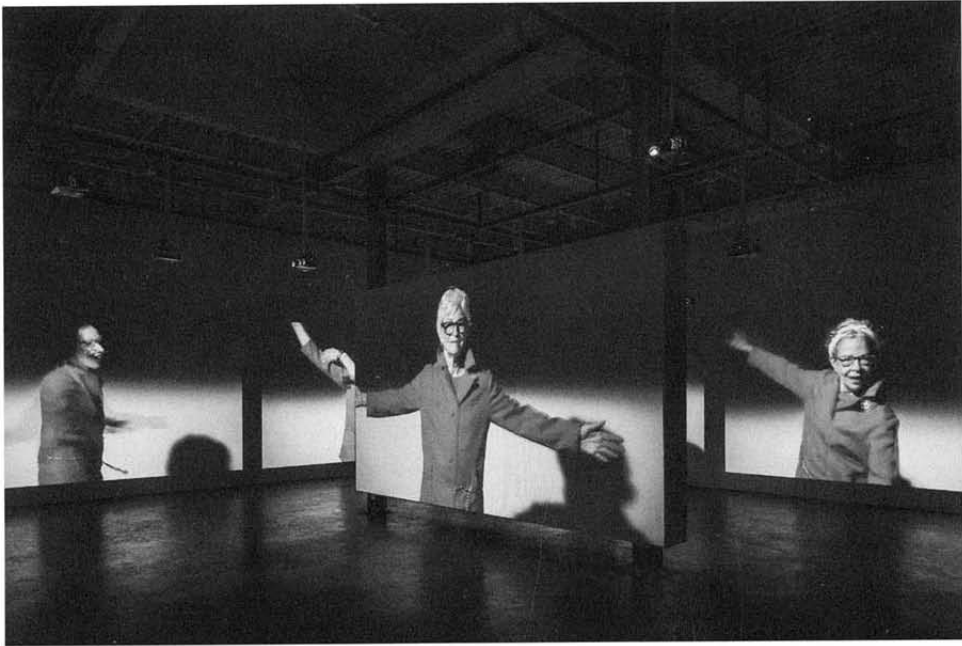
Bocanegra's most recent installation, *Valley* (2018), appropriates another kind of screen memory, a memory of the silver screen, of Judy Garland and her tragic life.<sup>7</sup> For this multichannel video, Bocanegra has unearthed Garland's wardrobe test for *Valley of the Dolls* (1967), another bad movie whose title Bocanegra has incorporated. At the time of the test, Garland had the part, but after three days in production, she was replaced by Susan Hayward (who, like Garland, received an Academy Award in the 1950s but was regarded as over the hill by the time of *Valley of the Dolls*). Garland kept the sequined pantsuit from the wardrobe test and wore it at her concerts until 1969, when, at age forty-seven, she died of an overdose of barbiturates.

For *Valley*, Bocanegra cast eight different women whose work involves performance to "play" the part of Judy in the screen test: the poet Anne Carson, the dancer and choreographer Deborah Hay, the artist Joan Jonas, the actor and singer Alicia Hall Moran, the actor and activist Tanya Selvaratnam, the Wooster Group actor Kate Valk, the artist Carrie Mae Weems, and the dancer Wendy

6. For more on "screen memories," see Freud's 1899 essay "Screen Memories," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 3, pp. 301–22. Also see Eugene Mahon's "Screen Memories: A Neglected Freudian Discovery?," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* (January 2016), pp. 59–88.

7. *Valley* was first installed at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia and more recently at Art Cake, an alternative space in Brooklyn. I am discussing the Art Cake installation.





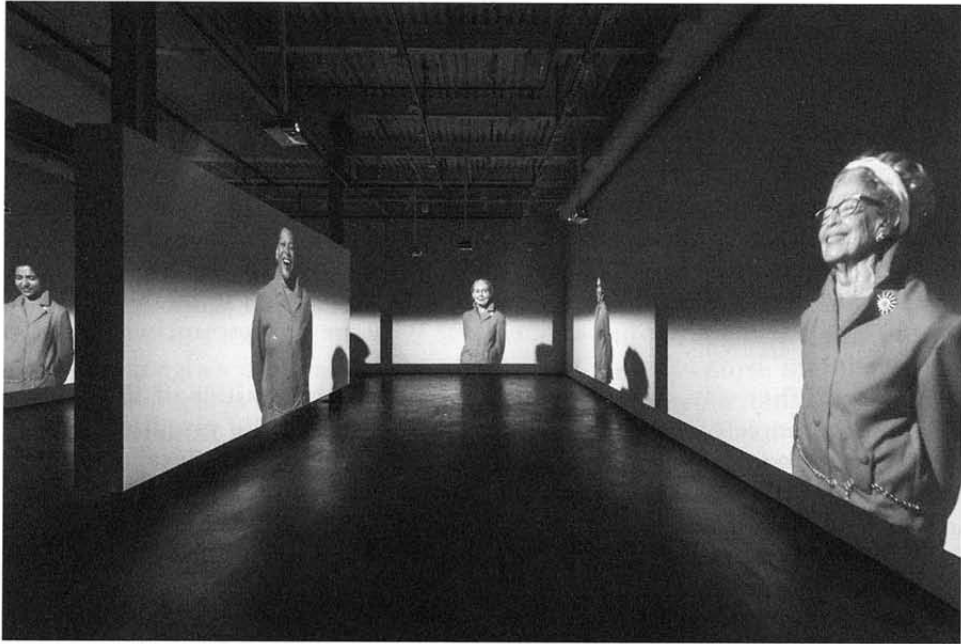
*Bocanegra. Valley. 2019.*

Whelan. The women range in age from their forties to eighties. Five of them are white and three are women of color. All are women whom Bocanegra admires, and, paradoxically, all appear to be powerful women, despite the fact that they are reenacting a performance by an extremely fragile Judy Garland.

These Judys, each one on a separate ten-foot screen, perform Garland's four-and-a-half-minute wardrobe test in unison, word for word, gesture for gesture. There is no sound in two of the sequences, and in the other two, we hear a dialogue between the mostly unseen director, Bocanegra, and each of the eight Judys. Bocanegra orders each of them to move in specific ways for the camera, echoing the 1967 test in which the director of *Valley of the Dolls*, Mark Robson, directs Garland, mostly from offscreen. Bocanegra also gives the cameraperson technical instructions, most notably telling her when to zoom in on the women, again following Robson.

All the Judys are wearing approximations of the clothing Garland wore: a red skirt suit, a 1960s caftan, a white, dropped-waist gown, and a copper-sequined pantsuit. All are lit to cast a single, hard shadow on the wall behind them. All stand on a patterned rug that is painted to resemble the one Garland walked on. As in the source material, all are preceded by a '60s-style film slate containing the name of the film (*Valley*), the director (Bocanegra), and the actor (whichever woman is on that screen).<sup>8</sup>

8. The actors were filmed separately, following a movement coach with dialogue piped into their ears. The costumes were sewn at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia, the previous venue of the show.



*Bocanegra. Valley. 2019.*

The installation of *Valley* is notable for its economy. With a simple architectural detail, a freestanding wall that bisects the space and floats above the floor, Bocanegra creates two connected rooms in which the viewer confronts, or is surrounded by, at least four women at a time. If one stands at a certain point near the entrance, one might see as many as seven, but she must move through the space in order to take in all eight screens.

The now mobile spectator also has a choice of how to engage with the work. She can stand very close to the women who tower over her, or she can step back several feet, but never as far as a cinematic spectator. For at every turn, there is always another giant woman either in front of or behind her. You could say that Bocanegra has abandoned the body cast of the film viewer, freeing the unbound spectator to find her own way through the ubiquitous images.

She has alternatives. She might glance from woman to woman until she feels like she's in a hall of mirrors, reflecting slight differences at every turn. Or she might decide to make her way slowly through the installation, watching each complete performance, one at a time. She could be attracted initially to Wendy Whelan's balletic Judy or to Kate Valk's uncanny impersonation. Or she could choose Alicia Hall Moran's dramatic rendition or Anne Carson's deadpan depiction. Or she could follow the route she habitually takes when she goes to an art show, whether that be from right to left or left to right.

The questions then arise: How is she watching? Is she looking from woman to woman, comparing their performances? Does her watching change when the actresses and the director are silent? What does it even mean to watch? Are these performers still objects of the camera's voyeuristic gaze, as Garland was, or is this gaze, for women viewers at least, more complicated? *Valley* certainly offers images of strong women, but they're playing a declining movie star who was exploited and then discarded. Does this tarnish their image, or are they reclaiming Judy as a heroine? And if so, is she a heroine because of her vulnerability or in spite of it? Apart from Judy, what is our relationship with these women? Do we know their work? Do we admire them? Do we desire them? Do we want to be them? Do we want to look like them? Or just try them on? What are our unconscious thoughts about them?

Put another way, *Valley* is a study in "the complexities of the gaze."<sup>9</sup> Disarmingly simple on one level, the installation quotes the voyeuristic sadism implicit in the original wardrobe test and then turns it around.<sup>10</sup> Bocanegra's neutral but respectful voice-over couldn't be more different from Mark Robson's infantilizing direction. Similarly, when Bocanegra asks the cameraperson to zoom in on each of the women, the move feels more curious than invasive.

Bocanegra's challenge to monolithic theories of voyeurism extends to the spectator as well. *Valley* differentiates the spectator in terms of sexual difference, asking, Do men necessarily have a different relationship to the work? Can they take on the "feminine" positions it sets up?

*Valley* also speaks to race and sexual identity. How do our identifications change when "Judy" is a person of color? How does the installation work for non-white spectators? And what if they are also queer? Does Garland's history as a queer icon come into play? And what about disidentification?<sup>11</sup> How does that work for queer and minority viewers? In other words, the implicit spectator posited by *Valley* is no longer singular, no longer always a straight, white male.

As a white, cisgender feminist filmmaker and critic, I see from a particular perspective when I look at Bocanegra's work. But maybe you see something else?

9. Elizabeth Cowie has made a compelling case for feminist work that addresses "the complexities of the gaze." In these artworks, the woman pictured complicates "how we can make her the object of our gaze, of our desire to know her, to fix her identity, or to be or to have her." See Elizabeth Cowie, "The Difference in Figuring Women Now," *MIRAJ: Moving Image Review and Art Journal* 4, nos. 1–2 (December 2015), p. 52.

10. The original wardrobe test is available on YouTube.

11. Rosalyn Deutsche suggested mentioning "disidentification" here. A concept popular in queer theory, "disidentification brings together a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social. . . . To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying subject." From José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999). Although Freud did not use the term, some recent psychoanalytic writings cite "disidentification" as the child's partial failure to identify with the parent of the same sex. Muñoz's use of the term is not strictly Freudian.

You could see *Valley* as a study in different methods of acting and performance, or as an exploration of gesture. Or you could analyze it in relationship to the history of experimental theater. Or you might focus on Bocanegra's use of textiles and costumes as "texts"<sup>12</sup> and her relationship to craftivism.<sup>13</sup> Or you might read *Valley* as a cultural essay that excavates a particular moment in history.<sup>14</sup> Or you could look at Bocanegra's work in relation to that of other artists, like Kerry Tribe, Stan Douglas, or Sharon Hayes, all of whom appropriate preexisting material. Or compare it to Warhol's screen tests. Or you could consider how (or if) Bocanegra's work engages with smaller screens.

Which brings me back to where I started. After all, *When a Priest Marries a Witch*, *Bodycast*, *Farmhouse/Whorehouse*, and *Valley* are all fertile sites for projection—Bocanegra's projections and her viewers', and of course the film projector's projections. When I think about these works, I see an engagement with complex feminist ideas, many relating to film, all explored with great subtlety and humor. I see extraordinary work, not quite like anyone else's. I see a relationship to psychoanalysis that may not be intentional but is undeniable. But then I, too, could be projecting.<sup>15</sup>

12. Foster, "Suzanne Bocanegra and Hal Foster in Conversation," pp. 20–21.

13. Craftivism is a form of activism that through anti-capitalism, environmentalism, and/or feminism focuses on craft. See Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). See also Helen Shaw, "Close Stitching," *Art in America* (March 2019), pp. 29–32.

14. Foster, "Suzanne Bocanegra and Hal Foster in Conversation," p. 20.

15. Bocanegra is currently working on *Honor*, a performance based on a sixteenth-century tapestry at the Metropolitan Museum, where it will be performed.