



HELEN MOLESWORTH

OPEN QUESTIONS

THIRTY YEARS
OF WRITING
ABOUT ART

PHAIDON

Lisa Yuskavage: Meissen v. Hummel

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Sometime early in the twenty-first century I saw an exhibition of Lisa Yuskavage's paintings at the ICA Philadelphia. I had just given up my tenure-track academic job for a museum position, and for the first time in my life the paycheck was real. The money and the title "curator" made me feel an enormous responsibility to see as many exhibitions as I could, and because I had enough cash to buy exhibition catalogues, I had the lofty idea of building a library. One of the first things I bought under this new regime was the modest, saddle bound book from Yuskavage's exhibition.

When I arrived home, I placed the catalogue on the coffee table of my girlfriend's house. Even though I had purchased it, I had no idea what to make of the pictures it contained. Girlish figures with impossibly huge tits, perfect nipples (erect, pink, practically leaning forward, arching toward your mouth), pubic hair that looked like it had been backlit by a golden setting sun, juicy asses (round, smooth, dimpled), thighs that spread easily, small waists, rounded bellies, lips parted, lips puckered, mouths open, veritable tendrils of hair. These were pictures about perpetual availability. Time stilled. Time infinite. Paint become flesh in domestic interiors and landscapes rendered in a foam of sea green, sunrise periwinkle, and lemon cream. The figures were girls with women's bodies. They were women with girl's faces. They were a teenage dream: posters on a bedroom wall. They possessed a slight charge of adrenaline, as if part of their thrill emanated from memories of shoplifting scented lip gloss at the mall. They were the shock of the first time I saw pubic hair, on my older friend in the locker room at camp in Maine.

I'm not sure I'd ever been so embarrassed in my life—embarrassed by a picture. Embarrassed by the feeling between my legs when I looked at these pictures. Pictures that any reasonable post-ACT UP, abortion rights-supporting, self-regarding feminist with a PhD in art history and a decent job should rightly dismiss out of hand. This parade of sex dolls, an endless supply of white women, each with three holes, open and wet. "It's like Kara Walker for white girls" drifted through my cerebral cortex, after which I could not find it in myself to "critique" the work. I could not bring my inherited baby-boomer feminism about body positivity and self-actualization down upon these pictures. Nor could I muster the "proper" Marxist antagonism

to images that were clearly meant to be bought and sold on the open market, pictures meant to be hung, winkingly, above the bed in master bedrooms with en suite bathrooms, where the his-and-her closets were larger than the childhood bedroom I shared with my brother.

I knew enough to know that my embarrassment in the face of this work was worth holding on to. Indeed, I wondered if my aversion to it might be structurally similar to the denunciations of Walker's images made in the mid-1990s by numerous African American artists and scholars. Looking at Yuskavage's work, I started to understand the mortification Walker's ante-bellum psychosexual tableaux may have caused them. I now had a bird's-eye view of the rage they may have felt, an insight into their fears about how pernicious and uncontrollable such images might be in the "wrong" hands. I intuited how troubling it may have been to be implicated in someone else's twisted fantasy. I confess that at the time I found their protestations problematic. But I strongly suspect that if a white man of a certain age had been the first to show me Yuskavage's work, I would have rejected it immediately.

If Walker mined the violent, traumatic tragedy of slavery and found in the deepest reaches of her mind a montage of sexualized fantasies that she could no longer repress while retaining her sanity, then Yuskavage's bravery came from her refusal to clean up the nettlesome Venn diagram comprising sexuality, the act of looking, and the act of being an artist. Her soft-core paintings were an exegesis of white American lower-middle-class girlhood. My discomfort was profound. My feelings of exposure were real. Nevertheless, I hadn't yet discovered just how deep my embarrassment actually ran. My girlfriend's house was extremely tidy, and the house was kept clean by a white lesbian housekeeper named Barb. I didn't know Barb well, but I knew she was working-class. She had a Baltimore accent and bad teeth (I have a New York accent and bad teeth). Hiring her felt like keeping money in the family, so to speak. The mornings when she was scheduled to come and clean, once every fortnight, I took the Yuskavage catalogue off the coffee table and put it on a bookshelf. When I returned from work to find the house dusted and polished to a shine, I took the book off the shelf and put it back on the coffee table.

I found that I couldn't laugh off my behavior as a form of residual prudery. Given that Barb was a dyke, I was hard-pressed to see my behavior as a vestige of the closet. I felt too much solidarity with Barb, in terms of our shared sexuality, for that. And laughter, the mechanism that attends embarrassment, like batteries with a new toy, was not really forthcoming. It wasn't an "accident" that I had this book filled with lurid pictures. And I had too much pride about having bought the damn thing for this to be guilt. Now that I was someone who did research on artists, having the catalogue was protected under the wheelhouse of "work." Ruling out embarrassment, guilt, and accident, all of which I could have apologized for, I was left with shame. I had to admit that I was worried what Barb would think of me, that she would judge me not for my lesbian desire—I assumed she had plenty of that herself—but for my taste. This put her, for the first and only time, in the



Cover of exhibition catalogue for Lisa Yuskavage, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, December 2, 2000–February 9, 2001

same mental pantheon as my dissertation advisors. I couldn't imagine admitting to them, either, how much I liked Yuskavage's work. At least with them I could have martialled an argument about how Yuskavage's paintings "stage the problem of female desire." I could have manufactured some connective tissue between Cindy Sherman and the image as the "site of sexuality." I could have spun theoretical tales and sidestepped the problem of "taste" with the putatively "objective" language of theory. But in the face of Barb

I was silent, wordless. I turned away from the encounter. I couldn't even face the idea that she would see the thing in my absence.

For years I narrated my shame to myself as being "something about class." But, to be honest, I couldn't drill down and figure it all out. I never attempted to buy one of Yuskavage's paintings for a museum. Nor could I imagine proposing a show of her work. Both felt tantamount to announcing in a staff meeting that my father had had a stash of *Playboy* magazines in his study and that I would sneak in when he was away and look at all those dreamy pictures and rub my prepubescent vulva on one of my dolls because it felt really, really good to do *that*. And even if I had had the temerity to say that, it still wouldn't have gotten to the heart of the matter. I knew tons of dykes who'd had their first sexual awakening in the midst of their father's soft-core porn. Yuskavage talks about her dad's pile of 1970s *Penthouses* in almost every published interview. She's not hiding that; with pictures like hers, how could she?

No, what I was worried about with Barb was the problem of class taste. I thought Barb would think I was crazy for needing/wanting my porn to be all fancy. I imagined her saying something akin to "Dude, you know you can just get that in a porno mag, right?" Basically, I couldn't leave the catalogue out because I didn't want the housekeeper to think I was some kind of snob who likes/needs her porn to be a *painting*. When the fact was that was exactly who I was: I was someone who liked my porn in painted form. I was like one of those stupid yuppies who enjoys high-end comfort food. Sweet Jesus. My shame seemed to emanate not from my sexuality as such but from the fact that in this context I could accurately be perceived as a snob. And to complicate matters, my very same attraction to the very same paintings could, if made public, lead me to be seen by my grad-school cohort of teachers and friends, by some amorphous thing called "the critically inflected art world," as a feminist with suspect politics, a lesbian who had lost her stripes. At either end of the class/taste spectrum I realized that to be forthcoming about my fascination with Yuskavage's paintings was to incur judgment about my capacity for judgment.

You'd think that after claiming my desire in terms of living out my sexuality—as complicated as both the claiming and the sexuality itself had been—saying what pictures I liked would have been easy. This is one of the vagaries of life in the art world. Each participant—from curator to dealer to collector to art historian—stakes a claim based on the work they support or critique. Your public approbation becomes a marker of what you stand for, of who you are. Liking everything is too pluralistic; the art world demands partisanship. The walls of the museum are not infinite. The high temples of art are arenas of competition, and who gets in, how they get in, and where they are installed all matter. The art world is a residual form of court culture in which your taste is not benign. Your taste is all you've got. And if you don't have money, your taste is *really* all you've got. It's ride or die. Saying what you *like*—always so much harder than saying what you don't

like—runs the risk of exposure, of vulnerability, of ridicule, suspicion, of being whatever fill-in-the-blank thing you don't want to be seen as, which, in this specific instance, would be a bourgeois snob, a bad feminist, or worse: a snobby bourgeois bad feminist. Hiding the book from Barb made me realize that what I was most ashamed of was my own fear in the face of how compelling I found Yuskavage's work to be. To advocate for it publicly would have been to make plain the carnal nature of my queerness. My interest in women was not political. My interest in women wasn't avant-garde. My interest in women wasn't theoretically rigorous. Exposure as a libertine pleasure seeker rather than a tough-as-nails super-smart curator—apparently that was more risk than I was up for.

Years later I went to work at a museum that owned a terrific Yuskavage painting called *Northview* (2000). Under the deep cover of a reinstallation of the permanent collection dedicated to upending the old-master narratives of post-1945 art, I decided to put the painting on view. It was one picture among hundreds. I was going to have my cake and eat it, too. In *Northview*, a young blonde woman appears in profile, backlit by a window, a voluminous drape pulled aside to let in the golden light. Next to the curtain is an imposing floor-to-ceiling bookshelf, and just to the right of the books we see the corner of a gilded picture frame. Of all the improbable soap-opera scenarios, we find ourselves in the library. The figure, sandwiched between a desk and a chair, places her long, thin fingers, one of which is graced with a wedding band, ever so gently on the desk. A red shawl falls off her body, exposing one perfect breast and her gravity-defying ass, both of which are housed in her flawless, golden-sun-kissed skin, with its perfect undertones of pink. A long strand of pearls falls behind her from her elegant neck. Compositionally, it forms a plumb line that heightens the impossibly exaggerated curve of the small of her back.

She is there for us to look at. Her gaze is occupied by a small statuette of a monkey. For sure it's an inside joke, a moment for rueful self-awareness built into the picture. Such a clever little monkey. Is it Meissen? Is it Hummel? What does it mean that I'm the kind of person who not only knows the difference but thinks the difference matters? That's the part of the picture that makes me laugh the hardest—the part that makes an issue of my taste. In this confectioners'-sugar sea of sexual desire, Yuskavage opens the trapdoor of class. All this talk of drapes and libraries and *statuettes* is the talk that attends a very particular kind of monied interior. The clever monkey registers that this space is fancy. And the fancy figurine is a classic site of displacement, a useful diversion from the T&A; thinking about the monkey is like buying *Playboy* for the articles. The monkey is a foil. It can act as a marker of my taste in the way the woman cannot, because my "taste" in women is not the soft-core fantasies designed by men for men. I had no interest in the copious bullshit that came with the fantasies of my parents' generation (all that dross about bringing home the bacon and never letting you forget you're a man). My queerness "freed" me from such banalities. But in the

face of these pictures I had to admit that what my queerness *didn't* liberate me from was the template for desire established when I was a child. If Freud was right and the logic of the unconscious is “and,” never “either/or,” then Yuskavage’s paintings showed me what it feels like when you admit that your field of desire is riddled with things you don’t think are cool, acceptable, or politically correct. Her paintings pulled back the curtain on my earliest yearnings, the ones formed in the back seat of someone’s car listening to love songs on AM radio, desires formed in the wake of someone’s older brother, or your dad’s best friend’s foxy new girlfriend. Yuskavage’s work opens up the rich minefield of desires formed when you didn’t have much agency over your life, when you weren’t in control of your own visual field, desires formed long before you had any language capable of describing them. And it’s not just that she showed them, like some kind of bloodless illustration—her work let me know, in no uncertain terms, that those desires were all still operative. They were all still online, so to speak. They were all still at play in the complexity of my current desiring self. I’d wager that Yuskavage is hard for feminists because her paintings make it clear that while politics is the sphere of “either/or,” desire is the realm of “and,” and in her case, in my case, that meant there was simply no getting rid of the sexual aesthetics of the 1970s.

What’s great about the category “queer” is that it’s like a grab bag; it can handle all the surprise, all the ambiguity, all the embarrassment, that attends sex and sexuality, and it does so, in part, by flipping all that awkwardness the bird. Queer says there’s no reason why a straight woman can’t make pictures of nubile girls in physical proximity to one another, who look at one another and themselves with awe and assurance, whom a bunch of women who are not heterosexual could find so devastatingly sexy that they might just wanna put their hands down their pants. Is this what Susan Sontag meant when she said that instead of a “hermeneutics of art” she wanted an “erotics of art”? Somehow I don’t think so, and yet . . . True to Sontag’s call, I have no desire to *interpret* Yuskavage’s painting. Instead, I want to revel in its rococo excess. I want to play out an erotics that is utterly nonmimetic, nondidactic, and non-radical. I want the space of fantasy to be just that—a dreamy, hazy space lit by magical light that I enter with all the ease of a finger sliding into a wet pussy. I want an open field that is made specifically for me. I want a picture that sees that a huge part of the specificity of “me” is the part of “me” that is a historical subject. I enjoy the feeling of having my specifically Gen-X subjectivity fed back to me in the form of an oil painting that hangs in a museum. (For those of you interested in continuity, I placed the Yuskavage painting in a room with an Andrea Fraser video called *Little Frank and His Carp* [2001], in which Fraser humps the walls of Frank Gehry’s Bilbao; Robert Gober’s out-sized sculpture of a cigar; some pictures by Matthew Barney of hunky guys in kilts; and an obscene Kaari Upton wall relief that resembles a huge vagina but is really a pink-rubber cast of a wall in her house.) I want to be in a public space and feel able, encouraged, even, to recall my 1970s haptic sexual awakening. I like remembering the velour, the corduroy, the velvet, the terry cloth,



Lisa Yuskavage, *Northview*, 2000, oil on linen, 70 x 54 in. (177.8 x 137.2 cm)

and the chenille. I like the complicated time warp *Northview* establishes: It is a painting of an adult memory of childhood sexuality. It’s an image of nascent desire remembered in such a way that the “turn-on” is not recalled ironically but happens in real time. It’s not a picture of what it felt like to be turned on in the past; it’s a picture about how all the desire we had in us before we had words for that desire is still flowing in the veins between our legs and our ears. That’s why Yuskavage had to make a painting. Because it’s not really about *Playboy* and *Penthouse*—it’s about the fantasy life of young

girls as imagined by an adult woman who is taking the fantasy life of prepubescent white girls *very* seriously. And Yuskavage takes the fantasy life of such girls, and its troubling and joyous, giggle- and wet-pussy-inducing persistence in adult women, so seriously that she makes paintings designed to hang in museums, paintings designed to hold their own against all those pictures made by men for men about *their* sexual fantasies.

And what do we find in this idyllic space of soft light and soft women? Yuskavage gives us a space where tactility reigns, both in the creaminess of her paint and the sumptuousness of her surfaces. The distinction between the skin of bodies and the skin of paint rides along a knife's edge. Her universe is a continuation of the Rococo, a made-up world of adornment, flirtation, and play. Penetration is not the point. Her pictures aren't the straightforward heterosexual fantasy of fucking as a form of conquest. I think her pictures are about the time between your first fuck and the next one—the warm space when anticipation has stalled and assured flirtation reigns. Yuskavage is keenly attuned to the fact that, for women, flirting is impossible without self-regard. Her pictures are filled with women who look at themselves. They gaze down on their bellies, they glance across their hairless legs and arms, they behold their own nipples. They do so with pleasure. They do so with shame. They know the two things are intertwined. I always get the feeling, looking at a Yuskavage painting, that the figures in the picture look at themselves gently. I feel that Yuskavage looks at them gently, too. But she is no sentimentalist; her empathetic eye has no mercy in it. Because she is an adult in an adult woman's body, she knows exactly what will happen to the bodies of her fictional characters when the harsh reality of life inevitably befalls them. She knows that the breasts will droop, the bellies will spread, the asses will sag. Her pictures forestall entropy and gravity with great tenderness. In a Yuskavage painting, a passing sensation is rendered as infinite. She knows that some of her viewers still know all the words to songs by Bread and Hall & Oates. She knows they can remember sitting in the back of the camp bus singing along to Jackson Browne, and she knows they're going to give all that up for Black Flag and the Wu-Tang Clan. But if Bob Dylan is right and "inside the museums, infinity goes up on trial," then a Yuskavage painting asks: Can you hang with this? Can you stay in this space? Can you observe all its coordinates? Can you, as women have always been asked to do under the hegemony of patriarchy, engage in an ongoing act of self-regard? Can you look at yourself? Can you look at an image that exaggerates what your desire feels like?

Part of what I find so amazing about Yuskavage's project is the way it allows me the difficult privilege of seeing my sexuality, to the extent that it's mine, as part of something larger than I am. Another thing that's shameful in "liking" this work is the way it suggests that neither she nor we, her viewers, can outrun the ways in which we are indelibly shaped by the world, even those of us who discovered the loophole called "queer" (maybe especially those of us who live in that loophole).

But I've skirted the problem of the monkey. I've avoided the problem of the monkey with an exegesis of Yuskavage's paintings that squares my once-nascent sexuality with my adult one. And while I'm generally OK with that, what Yuskavage's work really makes me wonder is whether there is a class corollary to "queer." Which is a way of asking if it matters if the monkey is Meissen or Hummel. Which is a way for me *not* to say that the Hummel part of Yuskavage is more embarrassing than the *Playboy* part. I won't judge your or my sexual desires. I won't play cop to anyone's fantasy, and I bar cops from my own fantasy life. But when it comes to matters of décor, the decorative, and decorum, I am ruthless. And just as I'm not interested in mimetic porn, I'm not interested in any "ironic" assessment of taste. I have no way out of the monkey cul-de-sac. Camp and irony—the tools of the generation antecedent to mine—aren't going to do it. I'm gonna have to own up to my resistance, my snobbery, my complicated class formation. I'm just not going to have to do it around, over, and against the body of a woman. I'm going to have to do it in the space of taste. I'm determined to ride the meniscus of Yuskavage's twisted oeuvre without recourse to kitsch, sentimentality, or irony, without, that is, the loopholes that let people out of the profundity of their class markers, without reveling in her painterly virtuosity (though Lord knows it's there), without making recourse to art historical erudition (neither mine nor hers). Instead, I'm going to continue to be troubled and elated by her color palette. Almost all of me loathes it, as in I can't imagine those colors in my home or on my person. As much as I'm interested in the continuity of my preadolescent desire into the space of my adulthood, it turns out I cannot abide these creamy pastels with an edge of acid to them used in what I find to be an overly sentimental and saccharine way. How crazy is *that*? That's what I mean about how clever the monkey is; it's as if Yuskavage is determined to flirt with every possible way to make her expertly painted paintings into some form of a bad object.

If I'm drawn in by the imagery, seduced by the expert facture, and humorously bewildered by the palette, then I'm leveled by Yuskavage's commitment to painting different versions of the same painting over and over again. It's clear that she has made an issue of painting the same type of body, and often within individual series of works she deploys the same composition numerous times. This practice is clearly intentional, as on her website each picture is cross-referenced with all the other pictures like it. When we look at *Northview*, for instance, we see that she has made seven other pictures with the same composition, which share the same model, in the same pose, with different degrees of finish, one with flowers, one without, and so on. This iterative staging and restaging is part of the game of viewership; the works are similar enough that it shouldn't "matter," and yet I can't help but choose the "best" one. In one single lapsarian gesture Yuskavage has collapsed my two registers of looking at her work: first, there is the libidinal, which image is sexier, more voluptuous, which one offers the fantasy that best secures pleasure. That this is basically a description of masturbating

is not lost on me—which of the generally repetitive fantasies will get you off today?

And the second register is taste: Which image—with its ever so slight adjustments of lighting, color scheme, decorative arrangement in the *mise-en-scène*—is the “best”? Which picture offers the satisfactory “click” of all the elements falling into their ineffable places? Here is where Yuskavage the painter shows us her hand as Yuskavage the conceptual artist. She could decide only to release the “best” picture. But instead she’s committed to the complexity of the situation. The run of pictures shows us how we come to understand our taste through negation—not this one but that one. Both sexual fantasy and taste require temporary resolution: you orgasm, and you decide where the picture looks best, and you don’t do either of those things just once. You do them both again and again.

Repetition in Yuskavage’s work is a simple statement of fact. She is an artist who works in series. She is an artist who has committed to a certain palette, paint application, and type of figure. But because she traffics in deeply embodied memory, I think she needs the repetition to get it “right.” I also think she needs to let us see how hard she’s worked to get it right. Because that’s what working-class white girls from Philly are asked to do—prove themselves over and over again. And that’s what feminism has to do—insist over and over again that the concerns and fantasies, ideas and pleasures of women are worth pursuing. I mean, how could you make just one picture of the feedback loop that “explains” how it came to be that there was a time when young working-class girls, girls from whom nothing special was expected, found the porn that liberated their fathers and experienced its igniting of their sense of themselves as both desirable and desiring?

And because this particular girl grew up in an era dominated by pictures, she found herself wanting to be an artist. And because that girl grew up in Philly, she found herself, in addition to pawing through stacks of someone else’s porn mags, roaming the halls of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (where maybe, just maybe, she saw *Étant donnés*). And then that girl conjured a fantastical world populated almost exclusively by women. She made pictures about women looking at themselves, of women looking at other women. And all these images had the DNA of six centuries’ worth of paintings made by men for men of means that were about looking at women, that were designed to be looked at in well-appointed rooms like libraries and museum galleries. DNA’s a bitch—there are only forty-six chromosomes, after all. There are only so many combinations.

So, when our girl grew up and became a painter, she made her pictures over and over and over again. Because she knew her viewers were going to need more than one shot at quieting the white male dude in their heads who tells them that pictures like these aren’t serious. And after she labored intensely, learning painterly techniques from the Renaissance, and made sumptuous, creamy paintings that simulate the warmth of apricot-hued bodies and the honeyed aura of intimacy, after she made those pictures in the

sanctity of her private studio, where she decided she could act in the name of freedom rather than politics, she thought it best to let them out into the world to be seen in public. She sent them to the galleries and museums, to the spaces that cater to the visual fetishists among us, but especially to those of us who like our porn in a painting. These paintings are for those of us who are entranced by the intricate ways our fantasies, desires, and memories are both personal and public. And hence we marvel at how Yuskavage’s paintings possess the capacity for transmitting the feelings that course in the veins between our ears and our legs, allowing us to understand, more beautifully, the connection between the two.

Postscript

This essay was written during my transition from being a full-time member of the institutional/museum affiliated art world to someone who functioned "independently." Writing it reignited my lifelong dream of identifying myself as a writer first, and as someone who arranges pictures second. It is telling that it is one of the most explicitly queer texts I've ever written. In addition to being about queerness in general, it is written from a specifically lesbian point of view. It is no small irony that writing about Lisa Yuskavage's work engendered my first explicitly lesbian text. I am keenly aware that I was only able to write this text, which is marbled with terrifying vulnerability, because I had lost my job. In this new space of economic and professional precarity, I no longer represented anything other than myself. And since being a lesbian was part of why I was fired (never underestimate the implicit hostility of heterosexual patriarchy toward the women who are structurally uninterested in its privileged subjects, either libidinally or intellectually), it seemed all the more important to write explicitly as a lesbian.

There was no better subject on which to do this than Yuskavage's remarkable oeuvre. In taking it up, I tried to write a text that met her work head-on, by which I mean I wanted to write with the same amount of bravery she paints with. I know it's wrong to play favorites, but this essay is one of my favorites, as it signifies the beginning of a different way of thinking and writing about art. It is both a culmination of all I knew up to that point—about paintings, Yuskavage, and lesbian desire—and a new beginning, marked by a dawning pleasure and expansiveness of how to write about the feelings and ideas that reside closest to the bone.

- Trump, Donald, 143, 176, 195, 203, 204
 Tubman, Harriet, 176
 Tuymans, Luc, 121, 211–23
 Albert Speer, 222
 At Random, 223
 Blacklight, 216
 Chalk, 218
 Demolition, 214
 Der Architekt series, 222
 Die Blaue Eiche (The Blue Oak), 216–17
 Diorama, 214
 Embitterment, 223
 Gaskamer (Gas Chamber), 219–20, 219
 Heritage, The, 223
 Insomnia, 218
 Lamproom, 217–18
 Leopard, 222
 Mwana Kitoko: Beautiful White Man, 212, 222
 Patrice Lumumba, 222
 Perfect Table Setting, The, 222
 Peter, 222
 Pillows, 218
 Proper, 222, 223
 Recherches (Investigations), 222
 Reconstruction, 222
 Suspicion, 223
 Twombly, Cy, 23
- U**
- Ukeles, Mierle Laderman, 88, 92–97, 99–105
 Keeping of the Keys, The, 94, 99
 “Maintenance Art Manifesto,” 92–94
 Maintenance Art performances, 92, 93, 94,
 99–100, 102, 103
 Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object, 94,
 99–100
 Washing / Tracks / Maintenance: Inside, 94
 Washing / Tracks / Maintenance: Outside, 93, 94
 Underground Museum, 86–87, 182, 269
 United Order of Tents, 174, 175, 176, 180
 Upson, Kaari, 262
USA Today (exhibition), 120
- V**
- van Eyck, Jan, 216
 Vasari, Giorgio, 209
 Velvet Underground, 43
 Venice Biennale, 222
 Venturi, Robert, 177, 247
 Vermeer, Johannes, 29
 View of Delft, 205
 Viso, Olga, 170
- W**
- WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution* (exhibition),
 108, 121
 Wadsworth Atheneum, 94, 103
 Wagner, Anne, 107
 Wagner, Robert, 51
 Walker, Kara, 257, 258
 Wall, Jeff, 144
 Wanamaker, John, 65, 72
 W.A.R., 108
 Ward, Frazer, 98, 105
 Warhol, Andy, 27, 37, 50, 110, 114, 115, 135, 136, 214, 215
 Washington, George, 183–84
 Wayne, John, 235
 Weil, Susan, 23
 Weschler, Lawrence, 205
 Wessel, Henry, 203
What Is Painting? (exhibition), 118
 Whiteread, Rachel, 164, 166
 Whitman, Walt, 33
 Wilding, Faith, 89, 105
 Wilson, Edmund, 28
Winged Victory, 140
 Wojnarowicz, David, 154
Womanhouse, 89, 122, 166, 247, 249–51, 253, 256.
 See also Chicago, Judy
Women's Wear, 65
 Wood, Beatrice, 62–63, 71–72
 Woolf, Virginia, 149
 Three Guineas, 138–39, 140
Work Ethic (exhibition), 41, 42, 57
- Y**
- Young, Neil, 132, 137
 Yuskavage, Lisa, 257–68
 Lisa Yuskavage (exhibition), 259
 Northview, 261, 263–64, 263, 265
- Z**
- Zaretsky, Eli, 118
 Zeuxis, 231
 Zukin, Sharon, 51

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