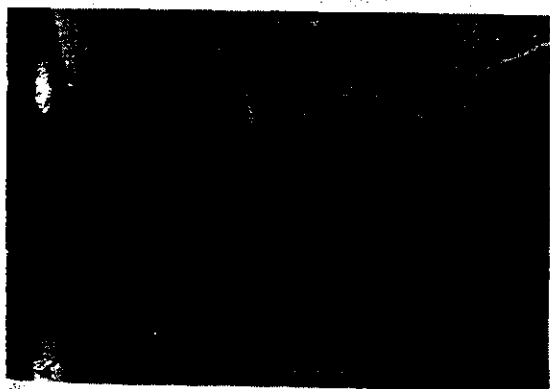


WEB



RUTH SCHEUING

13 MEN: a penelopean approach

1987

installation of altered men's suits
5 x 26 feet

Photo courtesy the artist

Ruth Scheuing

Or Gallery
Vancouver

Ruth Scheuing's exhibition at the Or Gallery engages ideological constructs that give authority and legitimation to the male subject, while also excluding women from access to the production of representative forms and cultural meaning. The exhibition, *13 MEN: a penelopean approach*, comprises thirteen suits hung on the gallery wall in an arrangement that mimics the figures in the painting,

The Last Supper. An ironic gesture, Scheuing's transference of this representation to the "last business meeting" challenges familiar symbolic iconography. These established values have become entrenched within capitalist production and exchange. Such religious iconography is saturated with a monotheism that has taken for granted the peculiar position of imagining God solely through one gender—male. Within this cultural bias, God is modelled after the patriarchal ruling-class that addresses a hierarchy of fathers and sons (real and imaginary). Women are connected to religious norms only through this mastery of representation.

Categorization of a not-so-different "spirit of capitalism" is summarized by Max Weber; ideologies of rationalizations and "de-magization" have eliminated all that is irrational, qualitative, sensuous, and unscientific from both interpretations of theory and the practices of the social relations of everyday life. It is these qualities, associated with the designation of women as Other, that perpetuate the codification of binary modes of hierarchical opposition, such as man/woman, active/passive, culture/nature.

Penelope of Scheuing's title is a mythic Greek heroine, described in Bulfinch's *Mythologies* as "one of those mythic heroines whose beauties were rather those of character and conduct than of person." Penelope was besieged by suitors after her husband, Ulysses, had been away fighting the Trojan War for twenty years. Pressured to remarry during his long absence, Penelope used her art to gain time and to distance herself from the suitors. One of her arts of disruption and delay was weaving; as she was pressured to marry when the work was finished, she unpicked during the night the work that had been completed by day. This is the infamous "Penelope's Web," the dictum for anything that is perpetually doing but never done. (Women's work, they say, is never done.)

Scheuing's suit(or)s have been unpicked, unraveled, to reveal the "intertextuality" of the system of their support. (Per)suits of deconstruction displace hegemonic patterns by defining a gap in the coded economy that is typically patriarchal—both in its libidinal and cultural forms—to resolve a space or gap for constructing the conceptual codification of the feminine. Scheuing reveals through this fabric(ation) an attempt to account for textual evidence, that is an "open space" specific to women, while also demonstrating a displacement of a signifying system organized around the oppositions of a gender-based bias.

Text (texte) means cloth, tissue. The word *texte* is derived from the Latin *textus*, meaning cloth (*tissue*), and from *texere*, to weave (*tisser*); in English we have the words *text* and *textile*, explains Alan Bass in his introduction to *Writing and Difference*. In Derrida's es-

says, the concept of deconstruction is explored in references to sewing, especially basting, as a type of quick, temporary stitching which does not bind or hold the textile firmly in place. The application of deconstruction, like Scheuing's suits, is not resolved within itself, but contains a patterned text(ile) which emphasizes the space between the most well-spun patriarchal web. The text here is not her own though, the text is a fabric woven and stitched from multiple texts, voices, both visible and invisible, dominant and silenced, which speak anonymously through a play of textures or surfaces.

In "The Suit and the Photograph," John Berger discusses the social and class-based significance of the suit. The hegemony of 20th-century class inequalities is preserved by the suit, which developed in Europe during the late 19th-century as a fashion of the expanding middle-class. As August Sander's photographs demonstrate, when the suit becomes worn by all classes it functions as a sign not so much to erase social class, as to underline and emphasize it. "Almost anonymous as a uniform," writes Berger, the suit became the first ruling-class costume to idealize "sedentary power." Scheuing's installation recognizes this semiotic reference as a paradoxical distinction between individual experience and socially-constructed representation. If the suit is positioned within this value-system, as both pattern of power and model of submission, that legitimizes and hierarchizes patriarchal interests, the presence of women is absent from privileged signifiers.

The mutations of Scheuing's suits displace the established codifications that Hélène Cixous has described as a "self-congratulatory phallocentrism." Scheuing, like Penelope, can only defer the systematic closures suggested by the metaphors of the suit(or)s, but Scheuing's unravelling has not only unpicked the text, it has also constructed a new pattern. If the pattern acts as a means to redefine representation, this definition occurs—as the representation of the suit(or)s does—only between the lines, or between the already-confirmed meanings. The process of removing threads is an affirmative methodology, but the work also demonstrates that as deconstruction works from within to inscribe metaphors of alternate meanings, women are still more often positioned from without.

In more practical terms, the deconstruction of the suit, as metaphor of power, signifies that women must change the style and meaning of power as they move with more prominence into the economic, religious and political world. This change in style stands against the entire hierarchy of values and authority—against the system suggested by the suit.

PETRA RIGBY WATSON