

# The MoMA's Hot Mamas

By Carol Duncan

The theme of this issue of *Art Journal* is Images of Rule. The objects that my essay discusses, well-known works of art, are not images of rule in any literal sense—they do not depict a ruling power. They are, nevertheless, effective and impressive *artifacts* of rule. Rather than directly picturing power or its symbols, they invite viewers to an experience that dramatizes and confirms the social superiority of male over female identity. This function, however, is obscured and even denied by the environments that surround the works, the physical environment of the museum and the verbal environment of art history. In what follows, I try to uncover this hidden function.

When The Museum of Modern Art opened its newly installed and much-enlarged permanent collection in 1984, critics were struck with how little things had changed. In the new installation, as in the old,<sup>1</sup> modern art is once again a progression of formally distinct styles. As before, certain moments in this progression are given greater importance than others: Cézanne, the first painter one sees, announces modern art's beginnings. Picasso's dramatically installed *Demoiselles d'Avignon* signifies the coming of Cubism—the first giant step twentieth-century art took and the one from which much of the history of modern art proceeds. From Cubism unfolds the other notable avant-garde movements: German Expressionism, Futurism, and so on, through Dada-Surrealism. Finally come the American Abstract Expressionists. After purifying their work of a residue of Surrealist representation, they made the final breakthrough into the realm of absolute spirit, manifested as absolute formal and nonrepresentational purity. It is in reference to their achievement that, according to the MoMA (in its large, new, final gallery), all later significant art in one way or another continues to

measure its ambitions and scale.

Probably more than any other institution, the MoMA has promoted this "mainstream modernism," greatly augmenting its authority and prestige through acquisitions, exhibitions, and publications. To be sure, the MoMA's managers did not independently invent the museum's strictly linear and highly formalist art-historical narrative; but they have embraced it tenaciously, and it is no accident that one can retrace that history in its galleries better and more fully than in any other collection. For some, the museum's retrospective character is a regrettable turnaround from its original role as champion of the new. But the MoMA remains enormously important for the role it plays in maintaining in the present a particular version of the art-historical past. Indeed, for much of the academic world as for the larger art public, the kind of art history it narrates still constitutes the definitive history of modern art.

Yet, in the MoMA's permanent collection, more meets the eye than this history admits to. According to the established narrative, the history of art is made up of a progression of styles and unfolds along certain irreversible lines: from style to style, it gradually emancipates itself from the imperative to represent convincingly or coherently a natural, presumably objective world. Integral to this narrative is a model of moral action, exemplified by individual artists. As they become liberated from traditional representation, they achieve greater subjectivity and hence greater artistic freedom and autonomy of spirit. As the literature of modern art portrays it, their progressive renunciation of representation, repeatedly and minutely documented in monographs, catalogues, and critical journals, is often achieved through painful or self-sacrificing searching or courageous risk-taking. The disruption of space, the denial of

volume, the overthrow of traditional compositional schemes, the discovery of painting as an autonomous surface, the emancipation of color, line, or texture, the occasional transgressions and reaffirmations of the boundaries of art (as in the adaptation of junk or non-high art materials), and so on through the liberation of painting from frame and stretcher and thence from the wall itself—all of these advances translate into moments of moral as well as artistic choice. As a consequence of his spiritual struggle, the artist finds a new realm of energy and truth beyond the material, visible world that once preoccupied art—as in Cubism's reconstruction of the "fourth dimension," as Apollinaire called the power of thought itself; Mondrian's or Kandinsky's visual analogues of abstract, universal forces; Robert Delaunay's discovery of cosmic energy; or Miró's recreations of a limitless and potent psychic field. Ideally and to the extent to which they have assimilated this history, museum visitors reenact these artistic—and hence spiritual—struggles. In this way they ritually perform a drama of enlightenment in which freedom is won by repeatedly overcoming and moving beyond the visible, material world.

And yet, despite the meaning and value given to such transcendent realms, the history of modern art, as it is written and as it is seen in the MoMA and elsewhere, is positively crowded with images—and most of them are of women. Despite their numbers, their variety is remarkably small. Most often they are simply female bodies, or parts of bodies, with no identity beyond their female anatomy—those ever-present "Women" or "Seated Women" or "Reclining Nudes." Or, they are tarts, prostitutes, artist's models, or low-life entertainers—highly identifiable socially, but at the bottom of the social scale. In the MoMA's authoritative collection, Picas-

so's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Léger's *Grand Déjeuner*, Kirchner's scenes of street walkers, Duchamp's *Bride*, Severini's *Bal Tabarin* dancer, de Kooning's *Woman I*, and many other works are often monumental in scale and conspicuously placed. Most critical and art-historical writing give them comparable importance.

To be sure, modern artists have often chosen to make "big" philosophical or artistic statements via the nude. If the MoMA exaggerates this tradition or overstates some aspects of it, it is nevertheless an exaggeration or overstatement of something pervasive in modern art history—as it is represented and illustrated in the literature. Why then has art history not accounted for this intense preoccupation with socially and sexually available female bodies? What, if anything, do nudes and whores have to do with modern art's heroic renunciation of representation? And why is this imagery accorded such prestige and authority within art history—why is it associated with the highest artistic ambition?

In theory, museums are public spaces dedicated to the spiritual enhancement of all who visit there. In practice, however, museums are prestigious and powerful engines of ideology. They are modern ritual settings in which visitors enact complex and often deep psychic dramas about identity—dramas that the museum's stated, consciously intended programs do not and cannot acknowledge overtly. Like all great museums, the MoMA's ritual transmits a complex ideological signal. My concern here is with only a portion of that signal—the portion that addresses sexual identity. I shall argue that the collection's recurrent images of sexualized female bodies actively masculinize the museum as a social environment. Silently and surreptitiously, they specify the museum's ritual of spiritual quest as a male quest, just as they mark the larger project of modern art as primarily a male endeavor.

If we understand the modern-art museum as a ritual of male transcendence, if we see it as organized around male fears, fantasies, and desires, then the quest for spiritual transcendence on the one hand and the obsession with a sexualized female body on the other, rather than appearing unrelated or contradictory, can be seen as parts of a larger, psychologically integrated whole.

How very often images of women in modern art speak of male fears. Many of the works I just mentioned feature distorted or dangerous-looking creatures,

potentially overpowering, devouring, or castrating. Indeed, the MoMA's collection of monstrous, threatening females is exceptional: Picasso's *Demoiselles* and *Seated Bather* (the latter a giant praying mantis), the frozen, metallic odalisques in Léger's *Grand Déjeuner*, several early female figures by Giacometti, sculpture by Gonzales and Lipschitz, and Baziotes's *Dwarf*, a mean-looking creature with saw teeth, a single large eye, and a prominent, visible uterus—to name only some. (One could easily expand the category to include works by Kirchner, Severini, Rouault, and others who depicted decadent, corrupt—and therefore *morally* monstrous—women.) In different ways, each of these works testifies to a pervasive fear of and ambivalence about woman. Openly expressed on the plane of culture, it seems to me that this fear and ambivalence makes the central moral of modern art more intelligible—whether or not it tells us anything about the individual psyches of those who produced these works.

Even work that eschews such imagery and gives itself entirely to the drive for abstract, transcendent truth may also speak of these fears in the very act of fleeing the realm of matter (*mater*) and biological need that is woman's traditional domain. How often modern masters have sought to make their work speak of *higher* realms—of air, light, the mind, the cosmos—realms that exist above a female, biological earth. Cubism, Kandinsky, Mondrian, the Futurists, Miró, the Abstract Expressionists—all drew artistic life from some nonmaterial energy of the self or the universe. (Léger's ideal of a rational, mechanical order can also be understood as opposed to—and a defense against—the unruly world of nature that it seeks to control.) The peculiar iconoclasm of much modern art, its renunciation of representation and the material world behind it, seems at least in part based in an impulse, common among modern males, to escape not the mother in any literal sense, but a psychic image of woman and her earthly domain that seems rooted in infant or childish notions of the mother. Philip Slater noted an "unusual emphasis on mobility and flight as attributes of the hero who struggles against the menacing mother."<sup>2</sup> In the museum's ritual, the recurrent image of a menacing woman adds urgency to such flights to "higher" realms. Hence also the frequent appearance in written art history of monstrous or threatening women or, what is their obverse, powerless or vanquished women. Whether man-killer or murder victim, whether Picasso's deadly *Seated*

*Bather* or Giacometti's *Woman with Her Throat Cut*, their presence both in the museum ritual and in the written (and illustrated) mythology is necessary. In both contexts, they provide the reason for the spiritual and mental flight. Confrontation and escape from them constitutes the ordeal's dark center, a darkness that gives meaning and motive to the quest for enlightenment.

Since the heroes of this ordeal are generically men, the presence of women artists in this mythology can be only an anomaly. Women artists, especially if they exceed the standard token number, tend to degender the ritual ordeal. Accordingly, in the MoMA and other museums, their numbers are kept well below the point where they might effectively dilute its masculinity. The female presence is necessary only in the form of imagery. Of course, men, too, are occasionally represented. But unlike women, who are seen primarily as sexually accessible bodies, men are portrayed as physically and mentally active beings who creatively shape their world and ponder its meanings. They make music and art, they stride, work, build cities, conquer the air through flight, think, and engage in sports (Cézanne, Rodin, Picasso, Matisse, Léger, La Fresnaye, Boccioni). When male sexuality is broached, it is often presented as the experience of highly self-conscious, psychologically complex beings whose sexual feelings are leavened with poetic pain, poignant frustration, heroic fear, protective irony, or the drive to make art (Picasso, De Chirico, Duchamp, Balthus, Delvaux, Bacon, Lindner).

De Kooning's *Woman I* and Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* are two of art history's most important female images. They are also key objects in the MoMA's collection and highly effective in maintaining the museum's masculinized environment.

The museum has always hung these works with precise attention to their strategic roles in the story of modern art. Both before and after the 1984 expansion, de Kooning's *Woman I* hung at the threshold to the spaces containing the big Abstract Expressionist "break-throughs"—the New York School's final collective leap into absolutely pure, abstract, nonreferential transcendence: Pollock's artistic and psychic free flights, Rothko's sojourns in the luminous depths of a universal self, Newman's heroic confrontations with the sublime, Still's lonely journeys into the back beyond of culture and consciousness, Reinhardt's solemn and sardonic negations of all that is not Art, and so on. And always seated at the doorway to



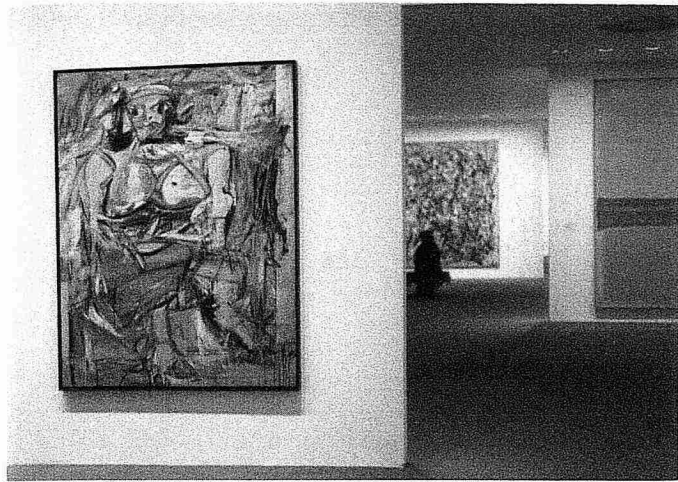


Fig. 1 Willem de Kooning, *Woman I*, 1952, oil on canvas, 76 x 58", as presently installed in The Museum of Modern Art.



Fig. 2 Willem de Kooning, *Woman II*, 1952, oil on canvas, 59 x 48", as temporarily installed in The Museum of Modern Art in 1978.



Fig. 3 De Kooning, *Woman I*.

these moments of ultimate freedom and purity and literally helping to frame them has been *Woman I* (Fig. 1). So

important is her presence just there, that when she has to go on loan, *Woman II* appears to take her place (Fig. 2). With

good reason. De Kooning's *Women* are exceptionally successful ritual artifacts and masculinize the museum's space with great efficiency.

The woman figure had been emerging gradually in de Kooning's work in the course of the 1940s. By 1951–52, it fully revealed itself in *Woman I* (Fig. 3) as a big, bad mama—vulgar, sexual, and dangerous. De Kooning imagines her facing us with iconic frontality, large, bulging eyes, open, toothy mouth, massive breasts. The suggestive pose is just a knee movement away from open-thighed display of the vagina, the self-exposing gesture of mainstream pornography.

These features are not unique in the history of art. They appear in ancient and tribal cultures as well as in modern pornography and graffiti. Together, they constitute a well-known figure type.<sup>3</sup> The Gorgon of ancient Greek art (Fig. 4), an instance of that type, bears a striking resemblance to de Kooning's *Woman I*, and, like her, simultaneously suggests and avoids the explicit act of sexual self-display that elsewhere characterizes the type. An Etruscan example (Fig. 5) states more of its essential components as they appeared in a wide range of archaic and tribal cultures—not only the display of genitals, but also the flanking animals that point to her origins as a fertility or mother goddess.<sup>4</sup> Obviously, the configuration, with or without animals, carries complex symbolic possibilities and can convey many-sided, contradictory, and layered meanings. In her guise as the Gorgon witch, however, the terrible aspect of the mother goddess, her lust for blood and her deadly gaze, is emphasized. Especially today, when the myths and rituals that may have suggested other meanings have been lost—and when modern psy-

choanalytic ideas are likely to color any interpretation—the figure appears especially intended to conjure up infantile feelings of powerlessness before the mother and the dread of castration: in the open jaw can be read the *vagina dentata*—the idea of a dangerous, devouring vagina, too horrible to depict, and hence transposed to the toothy mouth.

Feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability before mature women are common (if not always salient) phenomena in male psychic development. Such myths as the story of Perseus and such visual images as the Gorgon can play a role in mediating that development by extending and re-creating on the cultural plane its core psychic experience and accompanying defenses.<sup>5</sup> Thus objectified and communally shared in imagery, myth, and ritual, such individual fears and

looked for Medusa in the mirroring shield, he must study her flat, reflected image every inch of the way.”<sup>7</sup>

But then again, the image type is so ubiquitous, we needn't try to assign de Kooning's *Woman I* to any particular source in ancient or primitive art. *Woman I* can call up the Medusa as easily as the other way around. Whatever he knew or sensed about the Gorgon's meanings, and however much or little he took from it, the image type is decidedly present in his work. Suffice it to say that de Kooning was aware, indeed, explicitly claimed, that his *Women* could be assimilated to the long history of goddess imagery.<sup>8</sup> By choosing to place such figures at the center of his most ambitious artistic efforts, he secured for his work an aura of ancient mystery and authority.

The *Woman* is not only monumental

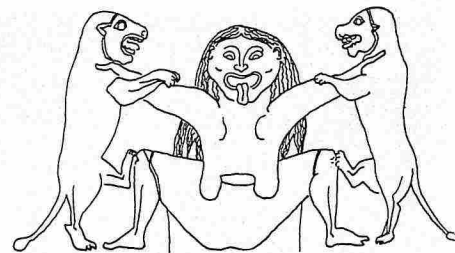


Fig. 5 Etruscan Gorgon, drawing after a bronze carriage-front. Munich, Museum antiker Kleinkunst.

her as simultaneously frightening and ludicrous.<sup>9</sup> The ambiguity of the figure, its power to resemble an awesome mother goddess as well as a modern burlesque queen, provides a fine cultural, psychological, and artistic field in which to enact the modern myth of the artist-hero—the hero whose spiritual ordeal becomes the stuff of ritual in the



Fig. 4 Gorgon, clay relief. Syracuse, National Museum.

desires may achieve the status of higher, universal truth. In this sense, the presence of Gorgons on Greek temples—important houses of cult worship (they also appeared on Christian church walls)<sup>6</sup>—is paralleled by *Woman I*'s presence in a high-cultural house of the modern world.

The head of de Kooning's *Woman I* is so like the archaic Gorgon that the reference could well be intentional, especially since the artist and his friends placed great store in ancient myths and primitive images and likened themselves to archaic and tribal shamans. Writing about de Kooning's *Women*, Thomas Hess echoed this claim in a passage comparing de Kooning's artistic ordeal to that of Perseus, slayer of the Gorgon. Hess is arguing that de Kooning's *Women* grasp an elusive, dangerous truth "by the throat": "And truth can be touched only by complications, ambiguities and paradox, so, like the hero who



Fig. 6 Robert Heineken, *Invitation to Metamorphosis*, 1975, emulsion on canvas and pastel chalk, 42 × 42".

and iconic. In high-heeled shoes and brassiere, she is also lewd, her pose indecently teasing. De Kooning acknowledged her oscillating character, claiming for her a likeness not only to serious art—ancient icons and high-art nudes—but also to pinups and girlie pictures of the vulgar present. He saw

public space of the museum. As a powerful and threatening woman, it is she who must be confronted and transcended—gotten past—on the way to enlightenment. At the same time, her vulgarity, her "girlie" side—de Kooning called it her "silliness"<sup>10</sup>—renders her harmless (or is it contemptible?) and denies the





Fig. 7 Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)*, 1907, oil on canvas, 96 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 92 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". The Museum of Modern Art.

terror and dread of her Medusa features. The ambiguity of the image thus gives the artist (and the viewer) both the experience of danger and a feeling of overcoming it. Meanwhile, the suggestion of pornographic self-display—more explicit in his later work but certainly present here—specifically addresses itself to the male viewer. With it, de Kooning knowingly and assertively exercises his patriarchal privilege of objectifying male sexual fantasy as high culture.

An interesting drawing-photomontage by the California artist Robert Heineken, *Invitation to Metamorphosis* (Fig. 6), similarly explores the ambiguities of a Gorgon-girlie image. Here the effect of ambiguity is achieved by the use of masks and by combining and superimposing separate negatives. Heineken's version of the self-displaying woman is a composite consisting of a conventional pornographic nude and a Hollywood movie-type monster. A well-qualified Gorgon, her attributes include an open, toothy mouth, carnivorous animal jaws, huge bulging eyes, large breasts, exposed genitals, and one very nasty-looking claw. Her body is simulta-

neously naked and draped, enticing and repulsive, and the second head, to the left of the Gorgon head—the one with the seductive smile—also wears a mask. Like the de Kooning, Heineken's *Invitation* sets up a psychologically unstable atmosphere fraught with deception, allure, danger, and wit. The image's various components continually disappear into and reappear out of one another. Behaving something like de Kooning's layered paint surfaces, they invite ever-shifting, multiple readings. In both works, what is covered becomes exposed, what is opaque becomes transparent, and what is revealed conceals something else. Both works fuse the terrible killer-witch with the willing and exhibitionist whore. Both fear and seek danger in desire, and both kid the danger.

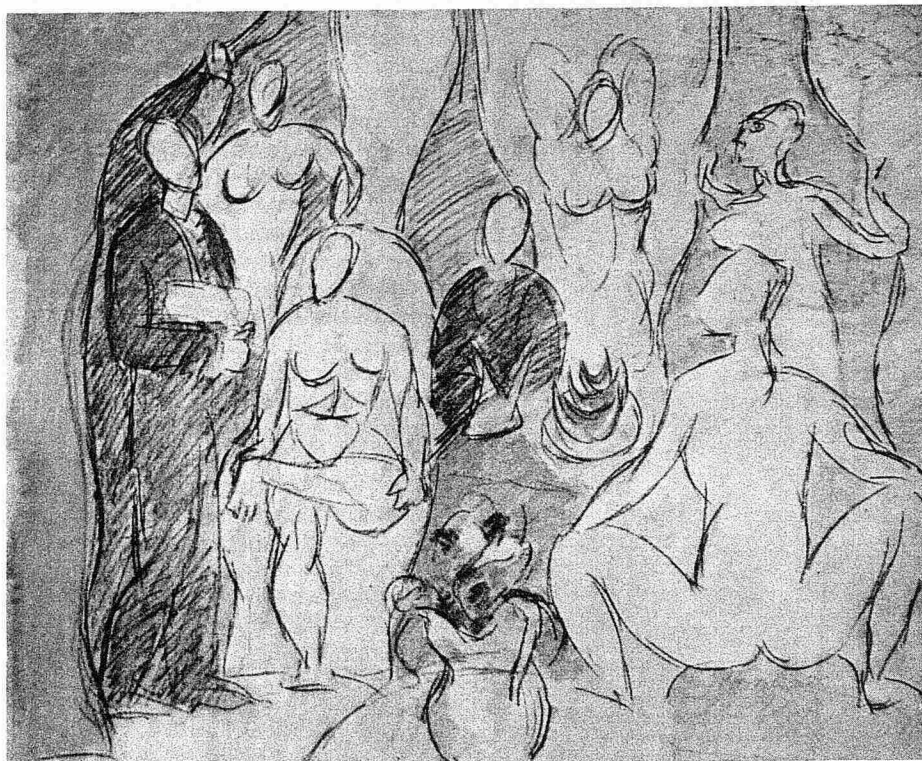
Of course before de Kooning or Heineken created ambiguous self-displaying women, there was Picasso's *Femmes d'Alger* of 1907 (Fig. 7). The work was conceived as an extraordinarily ambitious statement—it aspires to revelation—about the meaning of Woman. In it, all women belong to a

universal category of being existing across time and place. Picasso used ancient and tribal art to reveal her universal mystery: Egyptian and Iberian sculpture on the left and African art on the right. The figure on the lower right (Fig. 8) looks as if it were directly inspired by some primitive or archaic deity. Picasso would have known such figures from his visits to the ethnographic art collections in the Trocadero. A study for the work in the Musée Picasso in Paris (Fig. 9) closely follows the type's symmetrical, self-displaying pose. Significantly, Picasso wanted her to be prominent—she is the nearest and largest of all the figures. At this stage, Picasso also planned to include a male student on the left and, in the axial center of the composition, a sailor—a figure of horniness incarnate. The self-displaying woman was to have faced him, her display of genitals turned away from the viewer.

In the finished work, the male presence has been removed from the image and relocated in the viewing space before it. What began as a depicted male-female confrontation thus became a confrontation between viewer and image. The relocation has pulled the lower right-hand figure completely around so that her stare and her sexually inciting act, although not detailed and less symmetrical than before, are now directed outward. Picasso thus isolated and monumentalized the ultimate men-only situation. As restructured, the work forcefully asserts to both men and women the privileged status of male viewers—they alone are intended to experience the full impact of this most



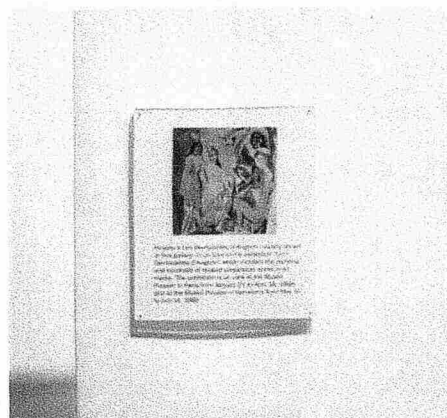
Fig. 8 Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, detail.



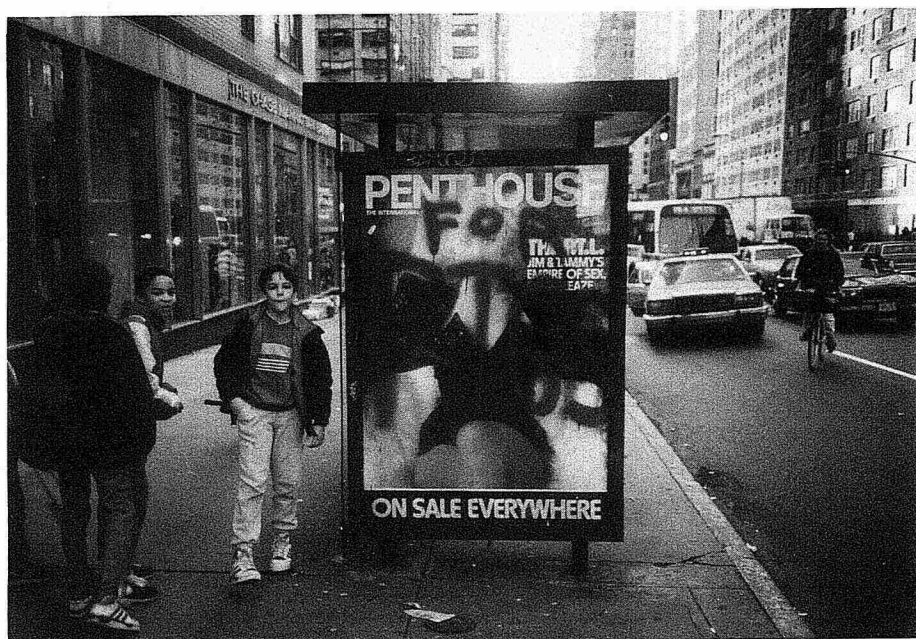
**Fig. 9** Pablo Picasso, *Study for "Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O),"* 1911-12, charcoal and pastel, 18½ × 24½". Paris, Musée Picasso.

revelatory moment.<sup>11</sup> It also assigns women to a visitors' gallery where they may watch but not enter the central arena of high culture.

Finally, the mystery that Picasso unveils about women is also an art-historical lesson. In the finished work, the women have become stylistically differentiated so that one looks not only at present-tense whores but also back down into the ancient and primitive past, with the art of "darkest Africa" and works representing the beginnings of Western Culture (Egyptian and Iberian idols) placed on a single spectrum. Thus does Picasso use art history to argue his thesis: that the awesome goddess, the terrible witch, and the lewd whore are but



**Fig. 10** Wall label, The Museum of Modern Art, with photograph of the missing *Demoiselles*, 1988.



**Fig. 11** Bus shelter on 57th Street, New York City, with advertisement for *Penthouse* magazine, 1988.

facets of a single many-sided creature, in turn threatening and seductive, imposing and self-abasing, dominating and powerless—and always the psychic property of a male imagination. Picasso also implies that truly great, powerful, and revelatory art has always been and must be built upon such exclusively male property.

The museum's installation amplifies the already powerful meanings of the

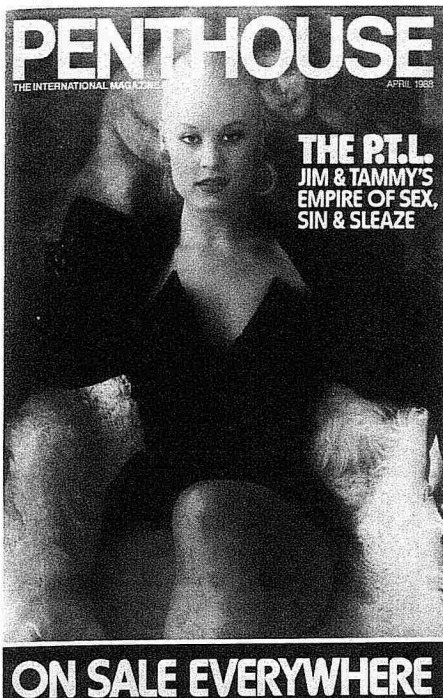
work. Mounted on a free-standing wall in the center of the first Cubist gallery, it seizes your attention the moment you turn into the room—the placement of the doorway makes it appear suddenly and dramatically. Physically dominating this intimately scaled gallery, its installation dramatizes its role as progenitor of the surrounding Cubism and its subsequent art-historical issue. So central is the work to the structure of MoMA's program that recently, when it was on loan, the museum felt compelled to post a notice on its wall explaining its absence—but also invoking its presence. In a gesture unusual for the MoMA, the notice was illustrated by a tiny color reproduction of the missing monument (**Fig. 10**).

The works I have discussed by de Kooning and Heineken, along with similar works by many other modern artists, benefit from and reinforce the status won by the *Demoiselles*. They also develop its theme, drawing out different emphases. One of the elements they develop more explicitly than Picasso is the element of pornography. By way of exploring how that porno-

graphic element works in the museum context, I want to look first at how it works outside the museum.

Last year, an advertisement for *Penthouse* magazine appeared on New York City bus shelters (**Fig. 11**). New York City bus shelters are often decorated with near-naked women and sometimes men advertising everything from underwear to real estate. But this





**Fig. 12** Advertisement for *Penthouse*, using a photograph by Bob Guccione, April 1988.

was an ad for pornographic images as such; that is, images designed not to sell perfume or bathing suits but to stimulate erotic desire, primarily in men. Given its provocative intent, the image generates very different and—I think for almost everyone—more charged meanings than the ads for underwear. At least one passerby had already recorded in red spray-paint a terse, but coherent response: “For Pigs.”

Having a camera with me, I decided to take a shot of it. But as I set about focusing, I began to feel uncomfortable and self-conscious. As I realized only later, I was experiencing some prohibition in my own conditioning, activated not simply by the nature of the ad, but by the act of photographing such an ad in public. Even though the anonymous inscription had made it socially safer to photograph—it placed it in a conscious and critical discourse about gender—to photograph it was still to appropriate openly a kind of image that middle-class morality says I’m not supposed to look at or have. But before I could sort that out, a group of boys jumped into the frame. Plainly, they intended to intervene. Did I know what I was doing?, one asked me with an air I can only call stern, while another admonished me that I was photographing a *Penthouse* ad—as if I would not knowingly do such a thing.

Apparently, the same culture that had conditioned me to feel uneasy about what I was doing also made *them* uneasy about it. Boys this age know very well what’s in *Penthouse*. Knowing what’s in



**Fig. 13** Willem de Kooning, *The Visit*, 1966–67, oil on canvas, 60 × 48”. London, The Tate Gallery.

*Penthouse* is knowing something meant for men to know; therefore, knowing *Penthouse* is a way of knowing oneself to be a man, or at least a man-to-be, at precisely an age when one needs all the help one can get. I think these boys were trying to protect the capacity of the ad to empower them as men by preventing me from appropriating an image of it. For them, as for many men, the chief (if not the only) value and use of pornography is this power to confirm gender identity and, with that, gender superiority. Pornography affirms their manliness to themselves and to others and proclaims the greater social power of men. Like some ancient and primitive objects forbidden to the female gaze, the ability of pornography to give its users a feeling of superior male status depends on its being owned or controlled by men and forbidden to, shunned by, or hidden from women. In other words, in certain

situations a female gaze can *pollute* pornography. These boys, already imprinted with the rudimentary gender codes of the culture, knew an infringement when they saw one. (Perhaps they suspected me of defacing the ad.) Their harassment of me constituted an attempt at gender policing, something adult men routinely do to women on city streets.

Not so long ago, such magazines were sold only in sleazy porn stores. Today ads for them can decorate midtown thoroughfares. Of course, the ad, as well as the magazine cover, cannot itself be pornography and still be legal (in practice, that tends to mean it can’t show genitals), but to work as an ad it must *suggest* it. For different reasons, works of art like de Kooning’s *Woman I* or Heineken’s *Invitation* also refer to without actually being pornography—they depend on the viewer “getting” the

reference but must stop there. Given these requirements, it shouldn't surprise us that the artists' visual strategies have parallels in the ad (*Fig. 12*). *Woman I* shares a number of features with the ad. Both present frontal, iconic, massive figures seen close up—they fill, even overflow, the picture surface. The photograph's low camera angle and the painting's scale and composition monumentalize and elevate the figures, literally or imaginatively dwarfing the viewer. Painting and photograph alike concentrate attention on head, breasts, and torso. Arms serve to frame the body, while legs are either cropped or, in the de Kooning, undersized and feeble. The figures thus appear powerful and powerless at the same time, with massive bodies made to rest on unstable, weakly rendered, tentatively placed legs. And with both, the viewer is positioned to see it all should the thighs open. And of course, on *Penthouse* pages, thighs do little else but open. But de Kooning's hot mama has a very different purpose and cultural status from a *Penthouse* "pet."

**D**e Kooning's *Woman I* conveys much more complex and emotionally ambivalent meanings. The work acknowledges more openly the fear of and flight from as well as a quest for the woman. Moreover de Kooning's *Woman I* is always upstaged by the artist's self-display as an artist. The manifest purpose of a *Penthouse* photo is, presumably, to arouse desire. If the de Kooning awakens desire in relation to the female body it does so in order to deflate or conquer its power of attraction and escape its danger. The viewer is invited to relive a struggle in which the realm of art provides escape from the female's degraded allure. As mediated by art criticism, de Kooning's work speaks ultimately not of male fear but of the triumph of art and a self-creating spirit. In the critical literature, the *Women* figures themselves become catalysts or structural supports for the work's more significant meanings: the artist's heroic self-searching, his existentialist courage, his pursuit of a new pictorial structure or some other artistic or transcendent end.<sup>12</sup>

The work's pornographic moment, now subsumed to its high-cultural import, may (unlike the *Penthouse* ad) do its ideological work with unchallenged prestige and authority. In building their works on a pornographic base and triggering in both men and women deep-seated feelings about gender identity and difference, de Kooning, Heineken, and other artists (most notoriously, David Salle) exercise a privilege that our society has traditionally con-

ferred upon men only. Through their imagery, they lay claim to public space as a realm under masculine control. Transformed into art and displayed in the public space of the museum, the self-displaying poses affirm to male viewers their membership in the more powerful gender group. They also remind women that their status as members of the community, their right to its public space, their share in the common, culturally defined identity, is not quite the same—is somehow less equal—than men's. But these signals must be covert, hidden under the myth of the transcendent artist-hero. Even de Kooning's later *Women* figures, which more openly invite comparison to pornographic photography and graffiti (*Fig. 13*), qualify the reference; the closer to pornography, the more overlaid they must be with unambiguously "artistic" gestures and philosophically significant impastos.

Nevertheless, what is true in the street may not be so untrue in the museum, even though different rules of decorum may make it seem so. Inside or outside, such images wield great authority, structuring and reinforcing the psychic codes that determine and differentiate the real possibilities of women and men.

#### Notes

1 For an analysis of the older MoMA, see: Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual," *Marxist Perspectives*, 4 (Winter 1978), pp. 28–51.

2 Philip Slater, *The Glory of Hera*, Boston, 1968, p. 321.

3 See: Douglas Fraser, "The Heraldic Woman: A Study in Diffusion," in *The Many Faces of Primitive Art*, ed. D. Fraser, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1966, pp. 36–99; Arthur Frothingham, "Medusa, Apollo, and the Great Mother," *American Journal of Archaeology*, 15 (1911), pp. 349–77; Roman Ghirshman, *Iran: From the Earliest Times to the Islamic Conquest*, Harmondsworth, 1954, pp. 340–43; Bernard Goldman, "The Asiatic Ancestry of the Greek Gorgon," *Berytus*, 14 (1961), pp. 1–22; Clark Hopkins, "Assyrian Elements in the Perseus-Gorgon Story," *American Journal of Archaeology*, 38 (1934), pp. 341–58, and "The Sunny Side of the Greek Gorgon," *Berytus*, 14 (1961), pp. 25–32; and Philip Slater (cited n. 3), pp. 16–21, and 318 ff.

4 More ancient than the devouring Gorgon of Greece and pointing to a root meaning of the image type, a famous Louvre bronze pin in the David Weill Collection honors an older, life-giving Mother Goddess. Flanked by animals sacred to her, she is shown giving birth to a child and holding out her breasts. Objects of this kind appear to have been the votive offerings of women; see: Ghirshman (cited n. 3), pp. 102–4.

5 See: Slater (cited n. 2), pp. 308–36, on the Perseus myth, and pp. 449 ff., on the similarities between ancient Greek and middle-class American males.

6 See: Fraser (cited n. 3).

7 Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning*, New York, 1959, p. 7. See also: Hess, *Willem de Kooning: Drawings*, New York and Greenwich, Conn., 1972, p. 27, on a de Kooning drawing of Elaine de Kooning (c. 1942), in which the writer finds the features of Medusa—a "menacing" stare, intricate, animated "Medusa hair."

8 As he once said, "The *Women* had to do with the female painted through all the ages. . . . Painting the *Woman* is a thing in art that has been done over and over—the idol, Venus, the nude." Quoted in *Willem de Kooning. The North Atlantic Light, 1960–1983*, exh. cat., Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, and the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1983. Sally Yard, "Willem de Kooning's *Women*," *Arts*, 53 (November 1975), pp. 96–101, argues several sources for the *Women* paintings, including Cycladic idols, Sumerian votive figures, Byzantine icons, and Picasso's *Demoiselles*.

9 *North Atlantic Light* (cited n. 8), p. 77. See also: Hess, *de Kooning* 1959 (cited n. 7), pp. 21 and 29.

10 *North Atlantic Light* (cited n. 8), p. 77.

11 See, for example: Leo Steinberg, "The Philosophical Brothel," *Art News*, September 1972, pp. 25–26. In Steinberg's ground-breaking reading, the act of looking at these female figures visually re-creates the act of sexually penetrating a woman. The implication is that women are anatomically unequipped to experience the work's full meaning.

12 Very little has been written about de Kooning that does not do this. For one of the most bombastic treatments, see: Harold Rosenberg, *De Kooning*, New York, 1974.

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