

## **Autobiographical Fantasy and the Feminist Archive**

**By Lucy Bradnock, University of Nottingham**

For five weeks in January and February 1976, the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA) staged a group exhibition entitled *Autobiographical Fantasies*.<sup>1</sup> Curated by Marcia Traylor, it included work by eight artists based in Southern California: Eleanor Antin, Carole Caroompas, Jennifer Griffiths, Barry Markowitz, Ilene Segalove, Allan Sekula, Alexis Smith, and John White (whose performance entitled *Autobiographical Fantasies* staged at LAICA the previous year may well have inspired Traylor's exhibition title).<sup>2</sup> Their works were loosely united under the category of conceptual self-portraiture, one that seemed to belie the apparently objective documentary emphasis of conceptual art via its integration with subjective narratives of personal discovery. Indeed, the looping cursive font deployed on the exhibition's publicity materials self-consciously signaled its distance from the conceptual aesthetic of bureaucratic administration in favor of a romantic or narrative bent more akin to the epic productions of old Hollywood (fig. 1).

*Autobiographical Fantasies* epitomized the approach of a number of Los Angeles artists who, working in a post-conceptual vein in the early to mid-1970s, produced work that took a playful sideswipe at documentary, history, and confessional life narrative. Other examples included Lowell Darling's multi-part project *This Is Your Life* (1973-76) and Antin's *The Angel of Mercy* (1977, restaged at LAICA in 1981), both of which, like the LAICA exhibition, presented life stories as conceptual art and merged fiction and reality. In each case, autobiography was deployed to trouble the idea of the artist as social chronicler, the status of life stories as political activism, and the assumptions of authenticity attached to the conceptual presentation of documentation as art. In these terms, the artists included in the exhibition have often been linked to the post-studio practices of John Baldessari (who served

on LAICA's Board of Directors) as well as to the proximate Hollywood entertainment industry, with its emphasis on celebrity, artifice, and spectacular image production. In their critical approach to visual representation and their appropriation of forms of image projection and dissemination, the works in *Autobiographical Fantasies* anticipated Douglas Crimp's landmark *Pictures* exhibition, which would travel to LAICA from Artists Space in New York in the spring of 1978.<sup>3</sup>

Such contexts are crucial for understanding the context of *Autobiographical Fantasies*, but they have the potential to foreclose other significant aspects of the works: their concern with material documents, their links to feminist art and politics in 1970s Los Angeles, and the way in which these discourses coalesced in works that implicated viewers in the space of the exhibition and subsequently in the archive. The works in *Autobiographical Fantasies*, like those of Antin and Darling, focused attention on the physical stuff of life stories, presenting autobiography as a process of archival accretion that activated a continuous telling, and in which material and conceptual gaps, slippage, or confusion might offer the opportunity for a critically imaginative or performative encounter. Approaching such practices through feminist and queer reading in the archive permits an understanding of them as proposing a critical performance of the self and the archive alike. It raises questions about how we encounter and retrieve performative works via their archival traces, with material, ethical, and ontological implications for the practice of archival research.

<insert section break>

The *Autobiographical Fantasy* artists merged self-portraiture and life narrative with fiction of various forms, including invention, fantasy, recreation, entertainment, and reenactment. They did so with a good dose of conceptual humor, embracing the subjective and affective over the objective and clinical. Such approaches were not atypical of 1970s

performance-related work that, in the assessment of Christopher Grobe, combined “sincerity and irony, confession and parody, commitment and camp,” often with a post-conceptual return to storytelling as a central imperative.<sup>4</sup> *Autobiographical Fantasies* included works in collage, photography, installation, live performance, or combinations thereof. A number of the works on display mined personal recollection and self-mythology, merging these with history, historical reenactment and dramatization, fiction, and popular culture. Antin, for example, deployed one of her historical alter-egos, a “rather seedy 17<sup>th</sup>-century cavalier” based loosely on King Charles I of England, though named by Antin The King of Solana Beach, after the Southern California coastal city (fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> In the photographic series *Close But No Cigar* (fig. 3), Segalove posed as Louis Daguerre, Isaac Newton, Joan of Arc, and Barbie. In another work, she explored her relationship with her father as symbolized by their eating Roquefort together. Smith’s thirteen-part collage installation *The Red Shoes* presented materials relating to the Hollywood star whose name the artist had adopted in college, including a vintage *TIME* magazine cover on which the more famous Alexis Smith was pictured high-kicking exuberantly in the high heels alluded to in the work’s title.<sup>6</sup> Griffiths’ *Animation Madness* (fig. 4) represented her life via vintage movie stills and blueprinted images of animated cartoon characters taken from the television screen, suggesting that it might be possible to discern her as a conglomerate of the popular culture she consumed. In White’s installation of diagrams, photographs, and objects, entitled *Twenty Years (Part I)*, *Acme John and the Mystery of the Fence*, a real figure from the artist’s past (a local down-and-out whom the young White mocked) took on the role of dreaded protagonist of his nightmares and the ensuing therapy that resolved the artist’s guilt complex (fig. 5). In all cases, the construction of the self and its display in the setting of the gallery were played out as fantasy via identification, ventriloquism, role play, or as *Los Angeles Times* critic William

Wilson put it, with a nod both to the performative and ludic nature of such works and to their radical potential, “acting out.”<sup>7</sup>

The press release for *Autobiographical Fantasies* situated the maneuvers that such works performed in relation to the cultural and political landscape of the United States in the 1970s, declaring that “the women’s movement, the war in Vietnam, political upheaval etc. have created an environment of reevaluation by the individual of his or her own identity and the identity of our society as a whole.”<sup>8</sup> Although not explicitly framed as a feminist exhibition, *Autobiographical Fantasies* had been conceived as such, inspired by Traylor’s involvement with and interest in the women’s movement.<sup>9</sup> The exhibition was originally intended to comprise work by women artists only; although men were ultimately included in its roster, the exhibition nonetheless recalled to Wilson an earlier display at the Los Angeles Woman’s Building, which had opened the year before LAICA, in 1973.<sup>10</sup> Some of the artists participating in *Autobiographical Fantasies* had been involved with the Woman’s Building and its predecessor Womanspace. LAICA’s institutional ethos and horizontal organizational structure, which aimed at creating “a new atmosphere of communication and cooperation,” paralleled that of feminist cultural spaces of production and display in Los Angeles and beyond.<sup>11</sup>

Several critical reviews of *Autobiographical Fantasies* followed the gallery’s contextualizing steer, comparing the procedures used by the exhibiting artists to the consciousness-raising strategies widely adopted by second-wave feminist groups, and to a concurrent rise in cod-psychology and populist self-discovery.<sup>12</sup> That rhetoric was frequently also deployed to describe the work of several of the participating artists. According to the art critic Sandy Ballatore, they encapsulated “the ‘right now’ introspection mania characteristic of this culture and this decade.”<sup>13</sup> Segalove, in a radio interview during the first week of the exhibition, described her practice as a means to work through familial relationships.<sup>14</sup> Her

sentiments would be echoed in a 1979 article on Antin published in the feminist periodical *Chrysalis*, in which Arlene Raven and Deborah Marrow argued that “Her narratives provide a travelogue of the journey toward the self, revealing the essential transformational nature of the self as she travels. [...] The performance itself becomes a journey from fragmentation to wholeness through the artistic creation of the expanded self.”<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, curator Barbara Haskell, in a 1975 essay, framed the work of Smith in relation to dream analysis and spontaneous association, implying that the work accessed the space of interior desires via recourse to a surrealist kind of imaginary.<sup>16</sup> But she also likened Smith’s approach to detective novels, suggesting an altogether more playful, intriguing approach to story-telling, and one that might have an unexpected twist.

Certainly, most of the works on display at LAICA were characterized by their exploration of the interface between the self and society, and the mode of personal narrative as a means by which to negotiate this—what Antin called “the self getting a grip on itself.”<sup>17</sup> Writing in a 1974 article entitled “An Autobiography of the Artist as Autobiographer,” published in LAICA’s house journal, Antin pointed to the recent trend of life narrative in post-conceptual American art. In January 1975, *Art in America* published the “Portrait Issue,” with Andy Warhol’s quadruple portrait of his mother on the cover; the issue included Barbara Rose’s essay “Self-Portraiture: Theme with A Thousand Faces,” Nancy Princenthal’s “The Self in Parts,” and Amy Goldin’s “The Post-Perceptual Portrait,” which Ballatore cited in her review of *Autobiographical Fantasies*.<sup>18</sup> That winter, Jeffrey Deitch’s large exhibition *Lives: Artists Who Deal with Peoples’ Lives (Including Their Own) as The Subject and/or the Medium of Their Work*, opened at the Fine Arts Building, New York, with Antin’s work among that on display. Although Deitch’s deadpan designation suggested a straightforward focus on personal biography, his later suggestion that “persona art” served as an apt title for this category suggests something more self-consciously theatrical.<sup>19</sup> Certainly such

exhibitions and events were also received against the backdrop of identity politics and second wave feminism.

The mutual influences of feminism and autobiography are well charted both within and beyond art history, in part since personal histories, letters, and other autobiographical documents promised the feminist potential to bring to light previously silenced voices.<sup>20</sup> It is possible to view some of the works in *Autobiographical Fantasies* in this way, as uncovering previously overlooked, outnumbered, marginalized, or exploited persons: the destitute man feared by local children, the Hollywood starlet subjected to the male gaze, the daughter afraid to admit to her father that she does not like French cheese. Conversely, Antin has framed her persona of The King in feminist terms, as the adoption of an ostensibly privileged male position (though one that she also explains with typical bathos as “politically helpless”).<sup>21</sup> Beyond autobiography’s capacity to bring to light minor or oppressed histories, however, its critical reappraisal also hinged on the manner in which it could enact a model of subject-construction that is partial, contingent, and unstable, making autobiography fruitful for those seeking to disrupt models of selfhood that prioritized the masculinist model of self-definition. Thus artists working in an autobiographical vein used the mode to explore the multiple facets of personal identity. These included articulating the ways in which personal identity intersects with social, political, economic, and other collective politics, and the means by which it is embodied in material traces and records.

Yet, as historian of performance art Marvin Carlson has noted, the works in the LAICA exhibition took a different approach from contemporaneous autobiographical works of feminist performance, such as Yvonne Rainer’s *This Is A Story About A Woman Who...* (1972), Faith Wilding’s *Waiting* (1972), and Linda Montano’s *The Story of My Life* (1973), all of which fit more comfortably into the mode of empowered interior exploration that critics discerned in the LAICA exhibition.<sup>22</sup> While the rhetoric of earnest self-discovery

pervaded some critical responses to the exhibition, others were quick to note that any autobiographical content on view was far from testimonial or confessional; if anything, the works on display obscured the notion of “true” identity rather than revealed it.<sup>23</sup>

As its title implied, *Autobiographical Fantasies* was no straightforward truth-telling project, nor one that took the task of personal narrative too seriously. Traylor’s understanding of fantasy seems to have been rooted more in entertainment and play than psychoanalysis. For Segalove, fantasy stood in opposition to her father’s insistence on scientific fact as a means of apprehending the world, and offered a way of describing the world of Hollywood artifice to which she was exposed growing up.<sup>24</sup> In the primacy it gave to imaginative negotiation of the world, fantasy also intersected with contemporaneous work by feminist groups in Southern California and elsewhere. Whilst the exhibition’s emphasis on fantasy might appear to belie the claims for consciousness raising’s deployment of personal truth in the service of group empowerment, feminist strategies also included the articulation of the fantasies and stereotypes that shaped gendered experience, as well as identification with historical or mythical figures of power. In the context of feminist exploration of subject construction, fantasy permitted the transgression of subject boundaries and the destabilizing of a unitary (patriarchal) subject.

That the title of the LAICA exhibition described the works on display as *autobiography* rather than *self-portraiture* staged them as belonging to a literary tradition rather than an art-historical one, explicitly highlighting their value as historical texts, even as they complicated that concept. If personas were the subject *Autobiographical Fantasies*, then they were produced via the material remnants of lives, semi-fictional archives that disrupted a visitor’s assumptions about the neutrality of conceptual documentation. This approach clearly carried feminist implications given the works’ creation within the space of the gallery of an intimate public shaped by the exchange of specific stories, and the link they implied between

the personal and the political. It also aligns with Tania Modleski's and Peggy Phelan's accounts of feminist critical writing as performative, meaning that it enacts events rather than merely describing them.<sup>25</sup> Thus, according to Phelan, the performative is distinguished by the way in which it enfolds signifier and referent into one another. In the case of the works in *Autobiographical Fantasies*, the imagery and documentation on display refer to the autobiographical subject and constitute it at the same time. This status has important implications for both the viewer in the exhibition and the researcher in the archive.

<insert section break>

For many *Autobiographical Fantasies* artists, the public sphere of entertainment, celebrity, and television provided inspiration for an examination of selfhood and its public projection. This sense of autobiography as performative also informed the work of Lowell Darling's project *This Is Your Life*, which developed concurrently with *Autobiographical Fantasies*, culminating in a book, painting, assemblage, a suite of drawings, a set of rubber stamps, and several collages. It was named for the long-running television program that narrated the biographies of celebrity guests, and presented them with a physical manifestation of their life story in the form of a book. The show, which ran on NBC from 1952 to 1961, was briefly revived in 1971-72. Darling's project linked the artist's own biography to that of the show via the exterior signage of the television studio in which it was filmed, located a few blocks from Darling's home. The remit of the program raised questions about whose life is notable and whose forgotten, as well as the role of biography to assert cultural hierarchy. Darling recalled that "the TIYL site it was like a shrine to me, a place of power and iconic cultural meaning. Including the graffiti on the door beneath the sign, the message read 'This is your life. Fuck You.' My sentiments exactly."<sup>26</sup> In addition to posing for photographs outside the studio stage door (fig. 6), Darling created a "This Is Your Life" rubber stamp,



which he used to sign letters. It would be the first in a series of three depictions (in photographs, stamps, and collage) of the sign: the second iteration responded to vandalism of the sign, which is depicted broken in several works from 1974; the third phase of the project records its complete absence following the sale of the studio and bricking up of its stage door (fig. 7).

The objects and images that emerged from Darling's *This Is Your Life* (TIYL) project comprise material collections of objects, words, and artifacts across various formats. Their meaning revolves around the presence and absence of the titular phrase, and its function as a performative speech act—an utterance that enacts rather than merely describes (like the more commonly cited example “I now pronounce you man and wife”). On the television program, the phrase at once indicated the performance of biography via invited guests with intimate knowledge and the object of the book that took on a status as active archive. In the context of Lowell's visual output, the phrase is also self-reflexive: his project conveys the life story of the sign itself as much as it does Darling's own development or his art's.

The visual studies of the sign and its demise that remain among Darling's papers at the Archives of American Art suggest that he was as enthralled by its material and linguistic disintegration as by its more pristine state. In 1974, finding the sign vandalized, Darling salvaged and reassembled what pieces he could (fig. 8). Pencil sketches suggest a careful transcription of its cracks and gaps (fig. 9). One fragment he held back, affixing it to a torn page of the Los Angeles phone book that he claimed to have found the same day as the broken sign. The resultant collage (fig. 10) he sent to his lawyer Monroe Price, who successfully persuaded the IRS of Darling's artist status.<sup>27</sup> A few years later, in 1976, Darling produced a painting of the damaged sign, complete with white canvas voids indicating where parts had been lost. For Darling, the holes in the material surface of the sign permitted imaginative reorientation on the part of artist and viewer, according to which “Your Life”

contains the potential to be reframed as “our Life,” bringing together the material object, the artist, and the viewer/reader in one narrative. The *This Is Your Life* series thus represent the production by accretion of an iterative material archive that enacts the biography of the biographical show, even after the show itself ceased to broadcast. At the same time, Darling presented his own autobiography via the surrogate of the material object.

Reading TIYL as an act of archive constitution – the gathering, assembling, and reorganizing of fragments – emphasizes the feminist potential of such a project on two (related) counts: first, its insistence on the archive as performative, and second, the way in which it highlights and inhabits gaps and absences in the face of claims for a whole and coherent subject, proposing (auto-)biography instead as a space of contestation and negotiation. For Jo Melvin, any archive is characterized by the gap between the desire for substantiation and the absence of such confirmation brought about by a lack of material. In place of substantiating evidence, she argues, the archive offers anecdote, gossip, and overlooked ephemera.<sup>28</sup> The alternative TIYL archive that Darling produced from the show’s material fragments represents the self-conscious performance of this status; in doing so, it articulates the impossibility at the heart of the show’s and artwork’s title, *This Is Your Life*. The fixity suggested by the phrase and the television show’s format is undone by the subjective process of archiving. The project, and Darling’s papers that refer to it, operate tautologically: his TIYL project is the biography of *This Is Your Life*, in a manner that is echoed in Eleanor Antin’s article, “The Autobiography of the Artist as Autobiographer.” The photographs and sketches in the Darling Papers enact the biography of the project and thus produce a biographical *mise en abyme* that continues to enact the performative premise of the work—that is, the presentation and performance of a life.

<insert section break>

The merging of fact and (entertainment, literary, or historical) fiction via the procedure of life narrative and the material stuff of the archive also structured Antin's subsequent solo exhibition *The Angel of Mercy*, first realized in 1977 and shown at LAICA in 1981, where it was recorded on video (fig. 11).<sup>29</sup> In the work, which comprised performances, photographs and life-sized cardboard cut-outs, "Eleanor projects herself as the Great Nurse who invented the Nursing profession in the 1850s during the Crimean War, and whose career shows a marked resemblance to that of Florence Nightingale."<sup>30</sup> The press release for the exhibition at LAICA is remarkable for the manner in which it at once establishes and undercuts the fiction at the heart of the work. Adopting the tenor and vocabulary of the historical collection or finding aid, the text enumerates the component parts of the exhibition via a plausible but invented archival history, cataloguing contents that include

one set of 40 photographs documenting Eleanor's tour of service in the Crimean War [...] These recently discovered photographs appear to have been shot during the 1850s, were probably printed during the 1860s and '70s, and are accompanied by Eleanor's personal observations and recollections. They therefore constitute an important historical document and contribute significant biographical material about this great figure.<sup>31</sup>

*The Angel of Mercy* is more than simple reenactment. The collection of materials presented in the gallery deliberately courts a visitor's expectations of a historical archive constituted of evidentiary material traces, here offered as proof of a history that did not happen. This rhetoric of evidence is confirmed by Antin herself, who, in Kim Levin's account of the work in its 1977 catalogue is quoted as declaring, "These pictures are proof that I was there."

Faced with the impressive collection of materials, Levin acquiesces to the fiction. “It is almost indisputable evidence,” she writes, ensuring that she is in on the joke, yet allowing just a small degree of prevarication.<sup>32</sup> The press release attributes the photography, albeit with a plausible note of historical uncertainty, to “Philip Steinmetz, Esq., a noted photographer from that period.” In fact, Steinmetz was a Los Angeles-based freelance photographer with whom Antin frequently collaborated. Thus the press release, like Antin’s installation and catalogue, treads the lines between fiction and (relatively easily verifiable) fact, between past and present. The exhibition, and the press release that simultaneously precedes and is part of it, thus operate in a mode that Carrie Lambert-Beatty has described, in relation to twenty-first century art, as “parafiction,” in which “real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived.”<sup>33</sup> Where the works that she describes present fictional figures as real, those that I have been discussing enact the reverse procedure, fictionalizing the lives of the artists themselves via the mode of fiction.

Antin’s Nurse Eleanor operates as both fictional archive, constituted of made-up records and mementoes, and as camp historical re-enactment. Catherine Grant, writing on reenactment in contemporary queer feminist performance, outlines this restaging of charged past sites and actions as operating at least in part in the realm of fantasy that activates the chronological past in the present moment.<sup>34</sup> Such procedures, Grant explains, enact what Elizabeth Freeman has termed “temporal drag,” in the sense that they haul together past and present, and in the performative drag performance that they deploy in this arena of theatricalized identity politics.<sup>35</sup> *The Angel of Mercy* reveals the constructed nature of the fiction that it presents even as it sets an audience up to go along with that fiction (for example, via the press release or the facsimile format of personal photo album). That the nurse in question and the archive presented are not to be taken at face value is suggested in the inclusion of Antin’s and Steinmetz’s actual names, in the explicit acknowledgment that

inspiration for Nurse Eleanor was drawn from the renowned historical figure of Florence Nightingale, and by means of the fact that the models for both cut-outs and photographs were contemporary artists and critics (including, in one photograph, Steinmetz himself) dressed in nineteenth-century costume, though easily recognizable to those in the know.<sup>36</sup> After all, LAICA's audiences were likely constituted of Los Angeles art world insiders rather than a more general public. Similarly, albums of sepia-toned gelatin silver prints of Antin in Victorian dress are captioned with the artist's own name, though with dates from the 1850s (fig. 12). The contemporary artist is explicitly located in the historical past, the historical nurse in the present.

In its intermingling of the actual life of the artist with that of a semi-fictional historical person, Antin's *The Angel of Mercy* recalls *Autobiographical Fantasies*' mingling of history, fantasy, life narrative, and celebrity (the last category already a curious mix of actuality and fantasy). While not precisely true, the works on show at LAICA were not definitely false either. In the case of *The Red Shoes*, for example, viewers encountered objects and materials relating to key episodes in the life of Alexis Smith. The dual nature of this subject—at once the artist and her more famous namesake, each unknown to the other—confounded the assumptions of autobiography and of identity alike, inviting viewers to interrogate each component to attempt to assign it to the “correct” Alexis Smith (an undertaking rendered all the more arbitrary given that the women were christened Patricia Anne Smith and Margaret Alexis Smith, respectively). Rather than read such endeavors in terms of pretense, it seems more appropriate to class this, Antin's, and Segalove's works as engaging in the practice of fantasy that is imagining oneself in the life or image of another person, and merging the idea of these two (or multiple) lives to destabilize the subject. Art historian Jonathan Crary described this process in terms borrowed from the psychoanalytic

theorist Julia Kristeva, writing of Antin that “There are no borders, no precise contours, no center. She is the autobiographer of a subject-in-process.”<sup>37</sup>

The potential ethical difficulty posed by the appropriation of another person’s identity notwithstanding, the manner in which this strategy deploys fiction and the fictive as a means of complicating identity had productive feminist potential.<sup>38</sup> Josephine Withers has observed that Antin’s writing moves regularly between different subject positions, switching between “she,” “I,” and “we.”<sup>39</sup> Such pronoun slippage frustrates the kind of empathetic identification upon which consciousness raising relied, instead coming closer to the kind of subject-object oscillation found in the work of Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Kruger, and other feminist artists. In the context of *Autobiographical Fantasies*, the manner in which Antin inhabits both herself and her alter egos finds a parallel in the examples of Alexis Smith, whose strategic adoption of a famous name operates beyond mere impersonation and whose work in the LAICA exhibition presented the artist and her namesake simultaneously, so that the identity of one is always bound to that of the other. In both cases, identity is presented not as absolute, but as contingent.

Whilst not exactly a lie, these works presented something that was obliquely true. They dealt, to use Lambert-Beatty’s terms, in “plausibility (as opposed to accuracy).”<sup>40</sup> Plausibility is a quality that is not inherent to an image, object, or document, but is located in the viewer’s or reader’s encounter with it. The notion of autobiographical fantasy is similarly intersubjective: though purporting to focus on the self-reflexive telling of a life story, the mode insists upon the audience encounter to complicate the material evidence deployed in life stories. That encounter was staged in the space of the gallery, with viewers invited to enact a close and often embodied engagement with photographs, albums, diagrams, and other forms of (purported) life remnants. One result of *Autobiographical Fantasies* may have been to cause audiences to reflect on the desire for emotional authenticity, and the manner in

which this perceived obligation was assigned in particular to women, as well as to artists and actors. This response may also have led them to question the somewhat disingenuous assertion in the exhibition's press release that "the traditional self-portrait reveals much about the artist" and its contention that the works on display "create intimate and personal statements."<sup>41</sup> A similar question might be posed of artists' archives.

<insert section break>

According to Rebecca Schneider, performance presents an ontological challenge to the logic of the archive, which asserts that it "cannot reside in its material traces," and thus occupies a status as that which does not remain.<sup>42</sup> As such, performance (and the assertion might be extended to temporary exhibition installations) "appears to challenge object status and seems to refuse the archive its privileged 'savable' original."<sup>43</sup> The works I have discussed in this essay are not performance per se, but they deal in presence, absence, and the material trace, and are thus invested in troubling the archival logic that Schneider describes. They have in common the challenge they present to the assumption of stable identity and the reliability of (auto)biography to ascertain a coherent subject. In different ways, they issue this challenge via the creation of personal, subjective, or misleading archives that encourage imaginative links between apparently unconnected subjects (Smith, Darling) or different historical moments (Segalove, Antin), or that hyperbolize the relation between art-making and personal therapy (Segalove, White). Such practices navigated the politics of confessional narrative, minor history, and the fragmented self, in which material remnants carry conceptual implications rooted in identity politics. In refuting any clearly delineated boundaries between historical narrative and imaginative fiction, the artworks I have outlined also complicated assumed ontological distinctions between fantasy prop and archival document. The practice of autobiographical fantasy insists upon the archive's creative

function rather than adhering to the teleological promise of reconstruction. As they did for their 1970s audience, these practices present challenges to contemporary historians working in archives, raising questions about the status and function of material traces and the critical potential of archival practice. Approaching the archive as a performative space activated by personal intimacy, fiction, and fantasy permits a feminist archival practice that resists the patriarchal logic according to which the archive has traditionally been structured.

In a short statement entitled “Notes on Transformation,” published in 1974, Antin articulated this challenge as a rejection of the apparent objectivity of conceptual art, writing that, “The early conceptualists were primitives. Contrary to their belief, documentation is not a neutral list of facts. It is a conceptual creation of events after they are over.”<sup>44</sup> Antin’s interest in debunking the procedures of history plays with assumptions about the truth value of photography, testimony, and other apparently archival traces, which participate in her hands in rendering a narrative that is not so much false as fantastical. “My claim to be Charles I comes up against that previous claim of a short egotistical guy who had his head chopped off, or a portrait by Van Dyck,” Antin stated in a 1975 interview with Cindy Nemser. “But that’s all history. I come as Charles I with video, photography (everybody knows photography can’t lie), this whole personal presence as Charles.”<sup>45</sup> Elsewhere, she elaborated on this idea, asking, “Is not this new, more recent report, bearing the weight of visual testimony (such as photography, video, personal presence) more powerful than the gossip of history?”<sup>46</sup> Consigning history to the status of gossip relegates it to the level of triviality, though it also makes its procedures available to everyone. As in the work of Segalove, and Smith, Antin’s position raises questions about the ontological status of the archive itself and its role in rendering autobiography as, in the words of Ruth McElroy, “a process of contradiction,” that resists the legitimizing imperatives of official history.<sup>47</sup> For Raven and Marrow, in Antin’s hands, “the autobiography of a human life [...] can be



constructed just like a literary life: that is, made up out of whatever elements seem suitable and meaningful.”<sup>48</sup> The slipperiness of these categories poses familiar questions about the manner in which artist’s lives might be constructed by archival choices. They also address the contingent nature of archival encounters, in line with models that emphasize the archive’s status as, in the words of Hal Foster, “recalcitrantly material, fragmentary rather than fungible,” or those that set the performative practice of archival research within a feminist or queer praxis, as do José Esteban Muñoz or Rebecca Schneider.<sup>49</sup>

In its critical focus on the procedures and performance of autobiography via material traces and visual signs, *Autobiographical Fantasies* echoed the self-reflexivity suggested in the tautological title of Antin’s essay, “An Autobiography of the Artist as an Autobiographer,” in which Antin describes autobiography not as a reciprocal process of “transformation in which the subject chooses a specific, as yet inarticulate image and proceeds to progressively define his self.”<sup>50</sup> For Antin, such transformation is “inextricably bound up with the nature of the documentation process itself,” in that the self is inseparable from public reports of that self. Beyond holding straightforward value in terms of explicating Antin’s practice, her essay arguably functions as a conceptual work in its own right. Linguistic ticks and slippages—the misspelling of Kosuth, the citation of Michelangelo in Italian, the insistent use of the masculine pronoun—puncture the text, causing a reader to pause and question the extent to which it is genuine.

If *Autobiographical Fantasies*, *This Is Your Life*, and *The Angel of Mercy* all deployed the stuff of archives to disrupt assumptions about identity formation, then they also disrupted assumptions about the archive itself. Furthermore, this strategy did not start and end in the space of the gallery or publication. Rather, the discursive apparatus that framed these projects before and after the event might all also be perceived to belong to the archive that is the work of art: Darling’s written account his three TIYL stamps (fig. 13) represents yet another

iteration of the project's biography presented in easily digestible format; Antin's leading press release and Victorian-style catalogue (fig. 14), with cursive script that recalls the aesthetic of the *Autobiographical Fantasies* invitation, participate in the historical fiction presented within the space of the gallery itself; Segalove's reiteration of familial stories in radio interviews and oral history enacts rather than describes the familial tensions and episodes that are at the center of her work.

Certainly, all such discursive apparatus participates to a certain extent in mythic and mythologizing procedures. As Schneider reminds us, oral history is a form of performance and is "always decidedly repeated, always incomplete, never in thrall to the singular or self-same origin that buttresses *archontic* lineage. In performance *as* memory, the pristine sameness of an 'original,' so valued by the archive, is rendered impossible—or, if you will, mythic."<sup>51</sup> Where the performance of (auto)biography is a central artistic practice as in the case of Segalove, Smith, Darling, White, and Antin, oral history and other paratexts assume a particularly fraught status. Thus Smith's recollections of growing up on the grounds of a psychiatric institute, or Antin's of the family legacy of her parents' immigration to the US, become embroiled in the fictional and other lives inhabited by those artists, difficult to separate from the lives of the actress Alexis Smith, or Antin's King and Nurse.<sup>52</sup> These narratives are also performed as self-consciously artistic: as Smith remarks of her childhood home, "it has that kind of colorful artist's background quality."<sup>53</sup> But they also require a reader to sift intuitively for those details that feel "suitable and meaningful," and to participate in a process of research that, in the feminist terms deployed by Phelan, is performative rather than constative.

Housed today at the Archives, the personal archives of artists who practiced autobiographical fantasy permit a similar kind of temporal slippage as enacted in the works themselves, raising the possibility that the historian might continue the fantasy rather than

retrospectively observing it. The materials associated with the projects I have examined ask whether the archive itself can operate as a space of fantasy, one that necessitates a performative mode of engagement and also permits a researcher to undertake the critical and feminist strategy of archival “acting out.”

---

I should like to thank the Terra Foundation of American Art, who generously funded a trip to the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, in September 2018. My thanks also to Tanya Sheehan, to the anonymous readers who provided generous and constructive feedback on this article, and to Ilene Segalove.

<sup>1</sup> *Autobiographical Fantasies*, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, January 13 - February 20, 1976.

<sup>2</sup> Pat Trimble, “John White – Performance – LAICA May 25, 1975,” *Journal (Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art)* 7 (August/September 1975): 45-47.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Crimp, *Pictures* (New York: Artists Space, 1977). See also Jane McFadden, “Here, Here, or There: On the Whereabouts of Art in the Seventies,” in Rebecca Peabody et al., *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art, 1945-1980* (Los Angeles: Getty, 2011), 296.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Grobe, *The Art of Confession: The Performance of Self from Robert Lowell to Reality TV* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 97.

<sup>5</sup> William Wilson, “The Inner Artist: A Glossy View,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 26 1976, E5.

<sup>6</sup> The issue in question was dated May 3, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> William Wilson, “The Inner Artist: A Glossy View,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 26 1976, E5.

<sup>8</sup> *Autobiographical Fantasies* press release, 1976, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art Records, Box 3, Folder 53, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter

---

LAICA Records), and Ilene Segalove Papers, Box 1, Folder 19, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. A nearly identical text appeared under the title, "Catalog: Autobiographical Fantasies," in *Journal (Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art)* 10 (March/April 1976): 32-37.

<sup>9</sup> Marcia Traylor interviewed on KPFK radio, January 27, 1976. My thanks to Ilene Segalove for sharing her recording of this broadcast.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson does not name the exhibition of which he is thinking, nor is it clear from Gallery Programs records contained in the Woman's Building Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>11</sup> Bob Smith, "Evolution of the Institute," *Journal (Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art)* 1 (1974): 26.

<sup>12</sup> See Eva S. Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust: America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 218-244.

<sup>13</sup> Sandy Ballatore, "Autobiographical Fantasies," *Art Week* 7, no. 7 (February 14, 1976), LAICA Records, Box 3, Folder 53, and Ilene Segalove Papers, Box 1, Folder 19, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>14</sup> Ilene Segalove interviewed on KPFK radio, January 27 1976.

<sup>15</sup> Arlene Raven and Deborah Marrow, "Eleanor Antin: What's Your Story?," *Chrysalis* 8 (Spring 1979): 44, 51.

<sup>16</sup> Barbara Haskell, *Alexis Smith* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1975), unpaginated.

<sup>17</sup> Eleanor Antin, "An Autobiography of the Artist as an Autobiographer," *Journal (The Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art)* 2 (October 1974): 18.

<sup>18</sup> *Art in America* 63, no. 1 (January/February 1975).

---

<sup>19</sup> Oral history interview with Jeffrey Deitch, May 15, 2006, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Leslie Satin & Judith Jerome (eds), "Performing Autobiography," special issue of *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 10, no.1-2 (1999); Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield (eds), *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* (London: Routledge, 2000); Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Oral history interview with Eleanor Antin, May 8-9, 2009, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>22</sup> Marvin Carlson, "Performing the Self," *Modern Drama* 39, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 600-602.

<sup>23</sup> Nancy Marmer in *Artforum*, April 1976, LAICA Records, Box 3, Folder 53. Useful in this context is Cosslett, Lury, and Summerfield's exploration of the conceptual and ethical distinctions between testimony, confession, and autobiography in the introduction to their edited volume *Feminism and Autobiography*, see especially 9-11.

<sup>24</sup> Ilene Segalove, telephone conversation with the author, August 2, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Peggy Phelan, "Reciting the Citation of Others, or A Second Introduction," in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, ed. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 16. Phelan cites Tania Modleski, "Some Functions of Feminist Criticism, or the Scandal of the Mute Body," *October* 49 (Summer 1989): 3-24.

<sup>26</sup> Lowell Darling, "The Story of Three Rubber Stamps: This Is Your Life, a Triptych," Lowell Darling Papers, Box 3, Folder 14, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>27</sup> See Monica Steinberg, "The Letter of the Law: Lowell Darling and Uncivil Obedience," *American Art* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2020):

---

<sup>28</sup> Jo Melvin, "Holes in the Archive – To Fill or To Leave, That Is The Question," *Bright Light* 2 (2015): 66.

<sup>29</sup> The exhibition was shown at the M. L. D'Arc Gallery, New York, and the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, California.

<sup>30</sup> *Eleanor Antin: The Angel of Mercy* press release, 1981, LAICA Records, Box 6, Folder 64.

<sup>31</sup> *Eleanor Antin: The Angel of Mercy* press release, 1981, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Kim Levin, "Eleanor Antin: *The Angel of Mercy* and the Fiction of History," typescript in Eleanor Munro Papers, Box 27, Folder 4, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Published in *The Angel of Mercy* (La Jolla: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1977); reprinted in Kim Levin, *Beyond Modernism: Essays on Art from the '70s and '80s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 108-109.

<sup>33</sup> Carrie Lambert Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October* 129 (Summer 2009): 54.

<sup>34</sup> Catherine Grant, "A Time of One's Own," *Oxford Art Journal* 39, no.3 (2016): 357-76.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), cited in Grant, "A Time of One's Own," 362. See also Catherine Grant, "Fans of Feminism: Re-writing Histories of Second-wave Feminism in Contemporary Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 34, no. 2 (2011): 274.

<sup>36</sup> Among others who took part were David Antin, Helen Harrison, Newton Harrison, Fred Lonidier, Pauline Oliveros, John Perreault, Martha Rosler, and Jerome Rothenberg. See LAICA Records, box 6, folder 64.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Crary, "Eleanor Antin: A Post Modern Itinerary," in *The Angel of Mercy* (La Jolla: La Jolla Museum of Art, 1977), not paginated.

<sup>38</sup> The unease that this appropriation invites is highlighted by Carlson, "Performing the Self," 602.

- 
- <sup>39</sup> Josephine Withers, "Eleanor Antin: Allegory of the Soul," *Feminist Studies* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 119.
- <sup>40</sup> Lambert Beatty, "Make-Believe," 72.
- <sup>41</sup> *Autobiographical Fantasies* press release, 1.
- <sup>42</sup> Rebecca Schneider, "Performance Remains," *Performance Research* 6, no. 2 (2001): 101.
- <sup>43</sup> Schneider, "Performance Remains," 101.
- <sup>44</sup> Eleanor Antin, "Notes on Transformation," [1974] cited in Kim Levin, "Eleanor Antin: *The Angel of Mercy* and the Fiction of History" [1977], in *Beyond Modernism: Essays on Art from the '70s and '80s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 107-108.
- <sup>45</sup> Eleanor Antin in Cindy Nemser, "Conversations with Eleanor Antin," *Art Talk* (New York: Scribner's, 1975), 282-83.
- <sup>46</sup> Antin, "An Autobiography of the Artist as an Autobiographer," 20.
- <sup>47</sup> Ruth McElroy, "Bringing It Home: Autobiography and Contradiction," in *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, 252.
- <sup>48</sup> Raven and Marrow, "Eleanor Antin: What's Your Story?," 44.
- <sup>49</sup> Hal Foster, "The Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Autumn 2004): 5; José Esteban Muñoz, 'Ephemera's Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,' *Women and Performance: Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no.2 (1996): 5-16; and Rebecca Schneider, 'Performance Remains,' *Performance Research* 6, no. 2 (2001): 100-108.
- <sup>50</sup> Antin, "An Autobiography of the Artist as an Autobiographer," 18-20.
- <sup>51</sup> Schneider, "Performance Remains," 102.
- <sup>52</sup> Oral history interview with Alexis Smith, January 24-April 14, 2014, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; and oral history interview with Eleanor Antin, May 8-9, 2009.
- <sup>53</sup> Oral history interview with Alexis Smith, January 24-April 14, 2014.