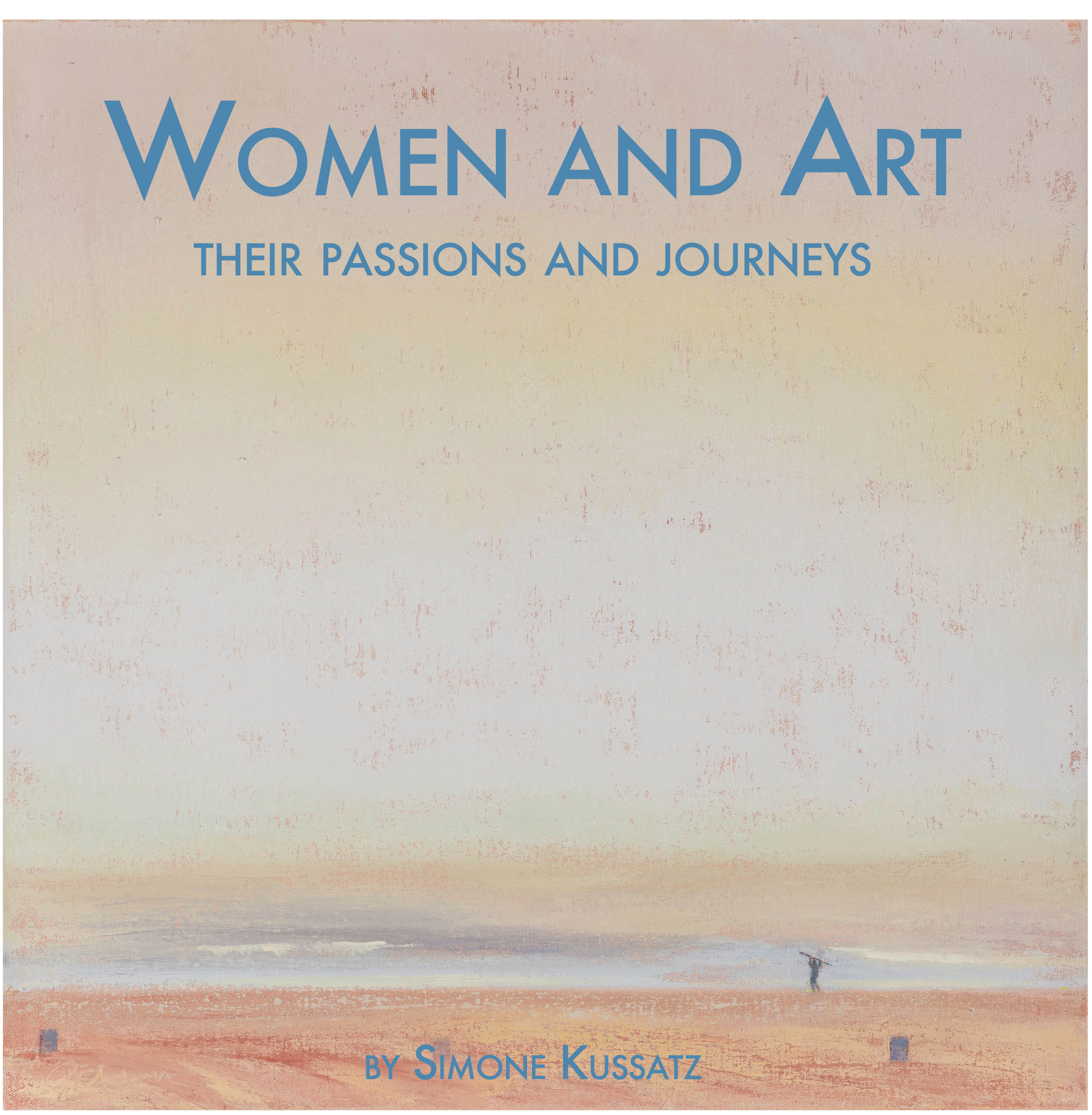
Women and Art

THEIR PASSIONS AND JOURNEYS



BY SIMONE KUSSATZ

HEIDE HATRY

A Life Between Heidelberg and New York; A Life Between Literature and Art

Heide Hatry is a German-born artist, curator and editor based in New York. Some of us might be fast in trying to pigeonhole her, calling her a sensationalist or shock artist. However, this would completely undermine her ideas, but also her attempts to make a change in society, which I believe is the main purpose in her works. Therefore, I took some to time to get acquainted with her oeuvre that employs animal flesh and organs, which makes me now rather think of her as a female rebel with the power of an Angela Davis or Soujourner Truth, or an animal or woman's rights activist in disguise, addressing these subject matters in a unique manner that, with no doubt, can be repulsive at first sight, but not less effective. Heide Hatry was brought to my attention by art critic Peter Frank, who thought that she'd be a great addition to my book. I've never met her in person, but I hope to be able to do so in the near future.

Simone Kussatz: You used to be an antiquarian bookseller in Germany for many years, dealing with books with beautiful illustrations and various ornate writings; a love for an object you were able to integrate in your art work. You treated texts of Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, Lydia Davis, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Friedrich Hölderlin, John Keats, among many others, recalling the works of Sol LeWitt in "Brick Wall", Wolfgang Vostell's "Einbetoniertes Buch" or George Brecht's "Water Yam". In which way does your work differ from this generation of artists or the artists' book genre?

Heide Hatry: I approach the book as an art medium in a number of different ways and employ various strategies in making artist's books, but only rarely with the intention of addressing "the question of the book," as these and other conceptual and minimalist book works tend to do. For me the book has never really presented itself as a question, as a problematic cultural entity, or as a vehicle for repression, standardization, or regimentation. I have also never seen the book as anything but a field for interaction or collaboration between creator and audience, so for me,

thematizing this fact about the book is not necessarily an urgent matter either. I think it is self-evidently the most socially egalitarian medium for individual development and the greatest force for collective enlightenment that we have – of course it does demand some effort from its user, and most people never manage to find any meaningful book at all, much less the one that is going to change their lives. My book work tends to be more of a celebration of the book than an inquisition or an attempt to re-define it. It is, therefore, often more in the way of response to texts I have found meaningful or of showing what it is in them that has affected me so profoundly. I do sometimes alter existing texts through literary or visual means, but this, too, typically reflects my own meditative engagement with the work rather than a desire to undermine it or to wrench it from its own context. If Vostell's concrete book is telling me that the book is a prison for thought or that it turns experience into something dead, I can only say that the reading experience is among the most powerful, singular, and liberating of all. I suppose it could well appear to be a solid, unarticulated, standardized thing from the perspective of the illiterate or the abject or even the subaltern, but it is in fact the key to freedom and the realm in which life is most conscientiously engaged. If his work wants to say that the vitality of the book is what the powers that be find offensive about it, and therefore want to turn them (and us) into blocks of impersonal concrete, then of course I'm in his camp. Since I generally find his work insightful, I imagine that there is an understanding of "Einbetoniertes Buch" with which I am in accord. While I like a great deal of Fluxus art, I'm not especially moved by most aleatory strategies, nor by work that makes explicit what I think is always at play in the creator/audience relationship, so the Brecht strikes me as a game I might take out on a rainy day, and probably enjoy, but not something that resonates very deeply with my own experience of the world or of art. As to LeWitt, I've never felt very attracted to his work as a general matter, though I'm impressed by the enormous patience it exemplifies: with some striking exceptions it seems more in the way of glorified doodling or design than what I want out of art.

Kussatz: In your artist statement you mentioned Kafka and used a quote by him "A book must be an ice-axe to break the frozen seas of our souls". How did you apply his thought in your artwork?

Hatry: I have always felt that the most meaningful art grabs its viewer and shakes him until he has reckoned with what it has to say. I feel literally accosted by the work that I find meaningful, whether literary, visual, or musical. The work wants to move us, but we are frozen in our habits and received and unexamined thoughts and opinions, stuck at some stage of intellectual, moral, and emotional development. Lived experience can do the same thing, though it rarely does: we tend to discover ways of conserving our habits and opinions even in the face of powerful new information. The field in which art operates, however, is one in which we understand that we are to expect to confront extraordinary situations and to have our beliefs challenged. We accept this contract with the work in much the same way that ancient and medieval kings accepted the honesty of the fool as a relief from the constant toadying of the court or that communities have always accepted the carnival or the orgy as a respite from and, in fact, a fundamental rejection of the drudgery of habit. We always know that the order of society or of interpersonal relations is impure, and beneath its ice we always feel the frustrated but not completely suppressed movement of our souls. Art is one of the ways, maybe the crucial way, in which we can break through the stasis and breathe. Of course, art, too, rarely manages to be what it is capable of being, and sometimes even once-great art eventually spins off to the bottom of the sea, inert. Although I do not have a formula for making my art be of the kind that forces us to open our eyes, I do try to make it be like the art that has impressed me with its honesty, intelligence, and power. My art is one of ideas, but I realize that in order to make the ideas live and work on the souls of its viewers, it must first engage them visually, long and powerfully enough to open them to what it contains.

Kussatz: I find myself going back and forth between feeling completely repulsed and being absolutely fascinated by your oeuvre. I appreciate the depth in your works and admire the ideas behind them. I also find your presentations courageous, because of the controversy they ignite. I see a great level of sensitivity in them, for example in “Imagine it Thick in your own Hair”, where you raise awareness of the impact of the BP oil spill on animals. However, I’m sometimes concerned that the showing of graphic images or brutal procedures as in your “Skin Room” and “Heads and Tales” series may numb us even more to the things we are actually supposed to be sensitized to. The reason I’m saying this comes from the experience, where I had to watch a lot

of Holocaust footage during my studies and noticed that the more I had seen, the less shocking I found them to be. What are your thoughts about that?

Hatry: My work is always steeped in ideas, so I'm not so concerned about contributing to the problem, though, once the problem exists, it's not easy to do much to counteract it, and there is no question that a significant strain in the art of recent decades has largely been about pushing the envelope of what we can bear to view, and always upping the ante. I certainly don't think of my work as offering disturbing images for their own sake, even though I also do not reject that as a legitimate concern of art. I'm essentially using visual ideas to create dialogue with my viewers. Of course, not everyone is able to stay with the work long enough to do much more than react viscerally, but I also doubt that there are so many who can just look and say, "oh, some more horrific shit; what's next?" In fact, the differential experience of art audiences alone will pretty much insure that difficult work will always be difficult for the vast majority of viewers, and the relatively low art image saturation in most people's lives is probably enough to protect the image from their cynicism and them from the cynicism of the image. The essence, and the intention, of my work, is to do exactly the opposite, as I've said already: I want my images to express the horrific, the immoral, the unjust, and the simply problematic in ways that make it clear that these are the enemy and that we have the power to change them – that we certainly have the power, and the imperative, to think about them and not to simply accept them as the way things are. I would hate to think of my work as just a bunch of images that so fail to penetrate the minds of their viewers that they can be added to the interminable list of things I've seen today without having launched a process of reflection. I'm well aware of the specific phenomenon to which you refer. Susan Sontag recalled pretty much exactly the same thing you're describing, but for me that is a quite specific reaction to something that is actually just too painful to view and against which our psychic defense system raises this barrier of indifference. It's not so dissimilar to the way we "forget" extremely traumatic episodes in our lives, including the pain of giving birth. It would seem that there is a threshold beyond which we cannot apply the categories of normal thought, and at which thought, and emotion, just shut down. I think that Bataille's fascination with the utterly horrific images of lingchi torture that he discusses in The Tears of Eros, in which he is compelled to locate something different than the overt content of the photographs (namely a highly questionable "ecstasy"), or the way that most of us cannot bear to read more than a small dose of Sade, suggest that we never come to terms with the most

horrifying imagery as simply imagery. In recently discovering the work of Boris Lurie, who has integrated concentration camp photos into his powerfully socially critical art, I can see that for most of us, coming upon such images only rarely and in isolation, they never lose their terrible power. His Railway Car Collage from about 1960 is something that almost everyone would find just as disturbing to look at today as when he made it.

Kussatz: There were so many topics that immediately popped up in my mind, when I viewed your work: the loss of virginity, when I saw you in a white long dress covered with blood, Xenotransplantation when I read about your use of pig eyes for your sculptures, plastic surgery when I viewed your female clay sculptures that are covered with untreated pig skin, the psychological aspect of the abused turning into an abuser (you were exposed to the slaughtering of pigs as a child and now let us go through that same experience only that we're older), the degradation of women in pornography, vitro fertilization, when you demonstrate in a video giving birth and show an egg outside of your body, but also America's serial killers, such as Edward Gein that served as an inspiration of the character Norman Bates in Hitchcock's "Psycho" or Buffalo Bill in "Silence of the Lambs" and even the Nazis' use of human skin for lampshades and the list goes on. On top of that idioms with eggs and references of women as chicks came to my mind, including "to lay an egg", or to "have an egg on your face". Did you have any of these ideas in mind, when you created your work or finalized your concept?

Hatry: Yes, of course some of these ideas were part of my psychological and conceptual mix when I made some of the work to which you refer, sometimes overtly, sometimes more subtly, often unconsciously, as I realized only later. Although I kind of like your formulation about the abused becoming an abuser in my work, at least as an idea in itself, I can't really say that that is part of my intention, or my experience, and it doesn't resonate in my conscience. If anything, as far as that sort of strategy is concerned, I'm trying more to portray my experience and the ways in which I've thought about my experience than to put others through something similar in my art; or maybe I realize that I know what it is to have terrifying experiences, and I want to be able to prevail upon that experience as an artist without wanting to inflict it on others – in fact I want to spare others what I have suffered. If I do like to startle them, I think of it as a tactical move to make them better people and better citizens of the world. The last thing I'd want from my art is

to traumatize others. I'm basically a happy person who loves to work; I would make art 24 hours a day if I could figure out how to stay awake all the time and not lose my concentration. I'm far more likely to see the humor or the poignancy, or even the simple human exigency, in most of what might be construed as abuse in my own life, and when I integrate elements of my experience into my work, it's not with fear or resentment. When I look back at some of the most horrifying things I've experienced, and see reflections of them in my art, I realize that, if anything, I've sometimes used art to exorcize their memory, and with very happy results – I've often found that traumatic memories were completely lifted once I'd thought them through in art, and I believe that a parallel experience is possible for my viewers. In general, I like it that imagery from my childhood and youth has come back to me in my work, but I don't in the least feel thrall to it: it's a pleasant thing to revisit for the most part, as an adult who understands herself and has integrated her experience in a healthy way – not necessarily through any merit of my own; as I said, I'm essentially a happy person.

Kussatz: When I first got acquainted with your oeuvre, I immediately thought of Gunther von Hagens's "Körperwelten", which caused a great media frenzy due to the ethical aspect of exhibiting plasticized corpses. How much and in which ways has von Hagens influenced you?

Hatry: I've known Gunther von Hagens for quite a long time. I was an antiquarian bookseller in Heidelberg, where he worked as an anatomist at the University of Heidelberg and founded his Institute for Plastination, and he was among our most interesting customers. He is a great student of the history of his field in addition to his obvious genius as an anatomist, bringing something radically new and utterly fascinating to an area of study that most people regarded as long since closed to new ideas. Seeing his plastinated corpses at his first exhibition in the Landesmuseum für Technik und Arbeit in Mannheim almost 20 years ago was one of the most powerful visual experiences of my life. I have always been extremely compelled by the historical effort to render the human body as if it were alive. As an artist, I myself have long been almost obsessed with portraying human skin in a life-like way, and I spent untold hours, and developed a number of unique processes, in my efforts to depict our flesh through painting and various modes of sculpture. When I began working with pigskin in my art, which I'd realized already as a child was almost indistinguishable from human skin, and started looking for

ways to perfect and preserve my results, I saw that his technique might offer a solution. I did, here and there, prevail upon it, and he was very generous in providing me with access to his lab and staff, where some of the materials I eventually used in the work in my Skin project, were processed.

Kussatz: Although, I understand that no animals were killed for your art, I was wondering, if organizations like "Tribe of Heart" or "RSPCA", or any other animal activists have reacted toward your work yet? If so what were their responses?

Hatry: PETA mounted a boycott of one of my shows in Boston, but after I had a chance to explain what it was that I was doing, partly in a public exchange, I believe they realized that our interests coincide. I somehow like it that my politics are not so self-evident that people whose work on behalf of animals I admire immediately champion my work, or that they cannot be mistaken for their opposite. As I've said, my interest is in making people think about subjects they don't want to think about, the human exploitation of the natural world being among the most important of them. In my most recent book project, Not a Rose, a number of voices for animal rights or for ethical food practices, including Peter Singer, Karen Duve, Rick Moody, Lucy Lippard, Donna Haraway, and Jonathan Safran Foer contributed essays. I found it extremely gratifying that people I regard as heroes recognized our common concern.

Kussatz: In your work "Expectations" one can see a video of you in two versions. Once you slowly move through some bushes at night giving birth, the other time you are dressed in business attire and squeeze out an egg from your vagina and throw it at the viewer/camera. There is a comical, but also an angry feel to them. It made me think of a child that was fed with spinach against its will and throwing it up in his mother's face. How much of your work is an expression of your personal experience as a woman/artist in society and how much is it a reaction toward the portrayal of women in the media?

Hatry: The mother you speak of is in fact the father, in the sense that, over many centuries, women have internalized the values of the ruling patriarchy. We're sick of being the compulsory purveyors of spinach, at least spinach that has been boiled down to an unappetizing green pulp.

Fortunately, the real woman has never been, and cannot be, eradicated by even the most extreme inimical socialization. And, I dare say, they need us more than we need them. We are a unique and irreducible force, and the possibility of re-asserting ourselves comes into being again with the birth of every woman and persists through threat and trauma, even if in a state of dormancy. The experience of a woman artist is, as a general matter, a disappointing one. We have this indomitable drive to create and to affect the world with the things we make, but the entrenched politics of the art world, which in this aspect are probably more just a special branch of the world at large, are there at every step to make sure that that doesn't happen. I like to think that this is as much because women are more intent on insisting on unpopular truths in their work as simply because they are women. The art world has pretty much never had an interest in shaking the status quo, and when it occasionally did, it did it so subtly that you had to be in on the secret to get it. Look at people like Ana Mendieta, Dolores Salcedo, Carolee Schneemann, Teresa Margolles, Choreh Feyzdjou, Ann Hamilton, Lil Picard, and May Wilson, or even Dorothea Tanning, Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Nancy Spero, Hannah Wilke, or Francesca Woodmann: is their work less interesting, powerful, thoughtful, meaningful, or beautiful than that of the ten most famous artists in the world (naturally all of them male)? Would anyone know who Yoko Ono is if she hadn't been married to John Lennon? Of course I subscribe to the Guerilla Girls' The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist, but I'm also not so paranoid as not to recognize that the "art world" has very little interest in art with an agenda other than beauty, or fun, at least until the artists are dead. And because of women's "special experience" as artists, they tend to make work that is outspoken, defiant, and controversial. For me, just about anything that a hundred thousand people would go to see cannot be interesting. At least not where we live.

I don't really care that much about the portrayal of women in the media. It's harmful to the unformed minds of our children, no question about that, but it's our duty as parents to prevent that as well as we can and to counteract the brainwashing – and mind numbing. When I use media-style imagery it's just to set a tone or to create a "typical" atmosphere on the basis of which I can undermine the facile thoughts and expectations of passive consumers of images (and other industrial products), which almost all of us are to some extent.

Kussatz: In your series "Heads and Tales" you asked 27 writers to select one of your sculptures made of clay, covered with pig skin, to write a story about them. It seemed like you were creating space for the souls of these sculptures or fictitious lives as Judy Chicago created space in "The Dinner Table" for the souls of real women that played an important part in history. What do you think is the biggest dilemma that women face today and what is your wish for them?

Hatry: When I made the sculptures for Heads and Tales, I was so struck by how life-like they looked that I had the idea of saying just who they were, of turning these anonymous women into people with lives and histories and their own suffering and triumphs. And since I love to collaborate with writers, I thought I'd take the opportunity to look over their shoulders as they gave souls to my women. Of course the notion that throughout history women have essentially been anonymous was a big part of my motivation, as was the feeling that the experience of even a more or less anonymous person has its meaning and dignity. There's definitely a related motivation that I probably never would have noticed if you hadn't made the comparison with Judy Chicago.

I think that the biggest dilemma women face today is no different than the one they have faced for a long time: whether to accept complicity with the disturbing world into which they've been born, embracing the blandishments it offers them as mothers, homemakers, sexual utilities, etc., or to actively resist and try to alter it. Of course, we do have the advantage of educating the young under that system, which means that it is constantly in danger of breeding revolution in its own homes. I started out to say that our great dilemma is whether or not to engage our glorious physiological prerogative to reproduce, but, on the one hand, I want to believe that the world has not quite come to the point where its most thoughtful inhabitants must really entertain that question, and, on the other, I think it is sufficiently implied already in my less instantaneous response.