

Ruptures of Vulnerability: Linda Stein's *Knight Series*

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Drawing on the work of Monique Wittig, this article understands Linda Stein's Knight Series as a lacunary writing communicating both her challenges to come to representation and her creative registration of subjectivity. The argument is grounded in an exploration of the rich interplay of power and vulnerability across the series as against the discourse of escapist fashion. Specifically, Stein's critical contradictions of inside and outside, conflated temporality, disjunctions between decoration and abstraction, and fluidity of sex and gender are examined. The discussion is elaborated through consideration of the work of Julia Kristeva, Elizabeth Grosz, and Hayao Miyazaki.

KEYWORDS *lesbians, sculpture, fashion, gender, sexuality, 9–11*

A recent exhibition of male and female superhero fashion at The Metropolitan Museum of Art highlights blind spots in thinking about women's bodies in fashion. Although the show gave a nod to issues of women's objectification and domestication by the fashion system, and although it rightly described fashion's possibility for staging and enabling the liberation of desire, the exhibition failed to offer a nuanced view involving questions of agency and victimization for women through fashion. Installed with inviting potential as a fun-house hall of mirrors off the gorgeously sacrosanct galleries for Greek and Roman art, the get-ups were showcased for their kitschy titillation and athletic designer power. Yet in presenting the works without consideration for the meanings made by wearers and particular audiences, the show's space of criticality was challenging to locate, whether in Thierry Mugler's playfully all-but-suffocating yet breast-baring "armor" for women, or in Bob Ringwood and Mary Vogt's *Catwoman* costume worn by Michelle Pfeiffer. Emphasizing the transcendence of the everyday by fashion and the

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superhero, the exhibition elided material realities informing the dynamics of visual consumption of the buffet of spectacular superhero fare.

A series begun in the aftermath of 9/11 by New York-based sculptor Linda Stein offers an interesting corrective view. While on its website the Metropolitan hails the superhero as the “ultimate metaphor for fashion and its ability to empower and transform the human body” (<http://www.metmuseum.org/>), Stein’s *Knight Series*, of which I include several examples (Figures 1–9), probes fundamental questions about where power and heroism are located and their desirability. Inscribing a fraught



FIGURE 1 *Power 581*, 2007. Wood, metal, stone. 48" × 16" × 8". (Reprinted with permission.)



FIGURE 2 (*K*)*Night Figure 470*, 2004. Wood, metal, leather, fiber, stone. 49" × 19" × 7". Rodman Collection. (Reprinted with permission.)

position surrounding fashion and embodiment, the series is a meditation on the politics of representation, as I shall argue. Stein writes:

With this sculpture series, I gradually reinvented the notion of the knight as a strong figure—not in the service of war, not even male; but, rather, an armed and armored female presence with antithetical attributes; a creation steeled in defensive garb yet partially naked; a bodyguard and protective spirit which cannot or will not completely disclaim its vulnerability. (Cited in Emin, 37)¹

What Stein (n.p.) understands as a “scrambling [of] expectations (male/female, power/vulnerability, warrior/peacemaker)” is for her a mode of interrogation and activism; yet at the same time, within (and through) that uncertain terrain, she seeks a stabilizing presence: “With a combination of fused wood, metal, stone and fiber, I arrive at a form that makes me feel safe” (Stein, n.p.). However, in a poignant articulation of what “safety” might mean



FIGURE 3 *Knight of Plenty 553*, 2006. Wood, metal, stone. 47" × 16" × 6.5". (Reprinted with permission.)

in a post-9/11 world for a white, female, middle-class, lesbian subject, Stein writes a crisis of representation. Thus she asks herself of her figures: "How could I create them as warriors when I felt they were symbols of pacifism? How, I wondered could they be fighters in battle when they represented to me everything that cried out for peace?" (*The Power to Protect*, 34).

Stein's anxiety and uncertainty beg the question of what the options are for a formal language in service of her safety and sense of self. Here it is instructive to bring in the ideas of French feminist theorist and activist



FIGURE 4 *Knight of Appreciation 559*, 2006. Wood, metal, stone, leather. 49" × 17" × 8". (Reprinted with permission.)

Monique Wittig (1935–2003), whose articulation of challenges in and imaginative strategies surrounding coming to representation, engagement with female warrior violence, and emphasis on the body as cultural signifier are resonant for Stein, even as her formative early writings emerged in the different context of 2nd-wave feminism and the events of May 1968 (in particular her 1969 novel *Les Guérillères*). When Wittig began her text *The Lesbian Body* (1973), she explains that she found herself in “a double blank”—the writer’s blank in initiating her endeavor, and, as she puts it, “the nonexistence of



FIGURE 5 *Power 581* with Honor Guard from Arlington National Cemetery, 2007. Wood, metal, stone. 48" × 16" × 8". (Reprinted with permission.)

such a book till then" (*On Monique Wittig*, 44). For the sake of clarity in illustrating Wittig's position, I quote from her at length:

The fascination for writing the never previously written and the fascination for the unattained body proceed from the same desire. The desire



FIGURE 6 *Vulnerability/Power 593*, 2007. Wood, metal, stone/printing on vinyl. 48" × 40" × 8". (Reprinted with permission.)

to bring the real body violently to life in the words of the book. . . , the desire to do violence by writing to the language which *I [j/e]* can enter only by force. "I" [*je*] as a generic feminine subject can *only* enter by force into a language which is foreign to it, for all that is human (masculine) is foreign to it, the human not being feminine grammatically speaking but he [*il*] or they [*ils*]. "I" [*je*] obliterates the fact that *elle* or *elles* are submerged in *il* or *ils*, i.e., that all the feminine persons are complementary to the masculine persons. . . . The "I" [*je*] who writes is alien to her own writing at every word because this "I" [*je*] uses a language alien to her; this "I" [*je*] experiences what is alien to her since this "I" [*je*] cannot be *'un écrivain*. (*The Lesbian Body*, 1975, 10)

Wittig gives primacy to textual violence as a means to dismantling confining, outworn linguistic form (Wittig, *On Monique Wittig*, 45). Harnessing



FIGURE 7 *Knight of Winged Words 524*, 2005. Wood, metal, stone. 46" × 14" × 5". Falik Collection. (Reprinted with permission.)

what she perceives as a deeply ironic coupling of terms in the title *The Lesbian Body* due to the masculine gender of the word “body” in the French, which she then qualifies as lesbian, Wittig is able to interrogate the classical body, “little by little as one describes an armor. First the helmet, then the shoulders, then the breastpiece, etc.” (Wittig, *On Monique Wittig*, 46). In *Les Guérillères* Wittig battles the linguistic order through the pronominal female plural “elles,” which she seeks to establish in the text as a universal position; through the creation of new feminized forms such as “quelqu’une” (someone female), “parleuses” (speakeresses), and “chasseuses” (huntresses); syntactical creativity (examples include passages in which there is a dispensation



FIGURE 8 *Vestment 628*, 2008. Wood, metal. 52" × 18" × 6" (12" lucite extensions). (Reprinted with permission.)

of punctuation, repetition, and parataxis); and discursive heterogeneity (for instance, juxtapositions of beauty and stench; multi-sensory, even synaesthetic, description; and interweavings of myth, fairy tale, incantation, and everyday narrative). Within this heterogeneity, and of particular relevance to the present discussion as I shall show, is Wittig's "lacunary writing" (Wittig, *On Monique Wittig*, 38), a weapon in service of upheaval.² Her radical interrogation of language and of the heterosexual system fosters a space for new subjectivity. As she explains: "The bar in my j/e is a sign of excess. A sign that helps to imagine an excess of 'I,' an 'I' exalted in its lesbian passion, an 'I' so powerful that it can attack the order of heterosexuality in texts and lesbianize the heroes of love, lesbianize the symbols" (Wittig, *On Monique Wittig*, 47).

Stein does not frame her project in terms of lesbianization, which for Wittig relates to a goal of overthrowing the heterosexual system and militating against patriarchal domination, but the violence of Stein's representation of the "real body," to take up Wittig's expression, written through deep-seated contradiction as I shall explain, enables a new, if problematic, registration of subjectivity. A primary contradiction structuring *Knight Series* involves a confusion of inside and outside. Examples include *Power 581* (2007; Figure 1) and *(K)Night Figure 470* (2004; Figure 2), among others. In their evocative discussion of Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject for Stein and the other artists in the recent *ECcentric Bodies* exhibition in which she was included, Judith Brodsky and Ferris Olin explain that "[t]he skin contains the abject. The skin is the barrier between the abject and the outer world, the site of the interaction between the inner body and its social and physical environment" (*ECcentric Bodies*, 9). Yet they argue that the skin "is armored to hold in the

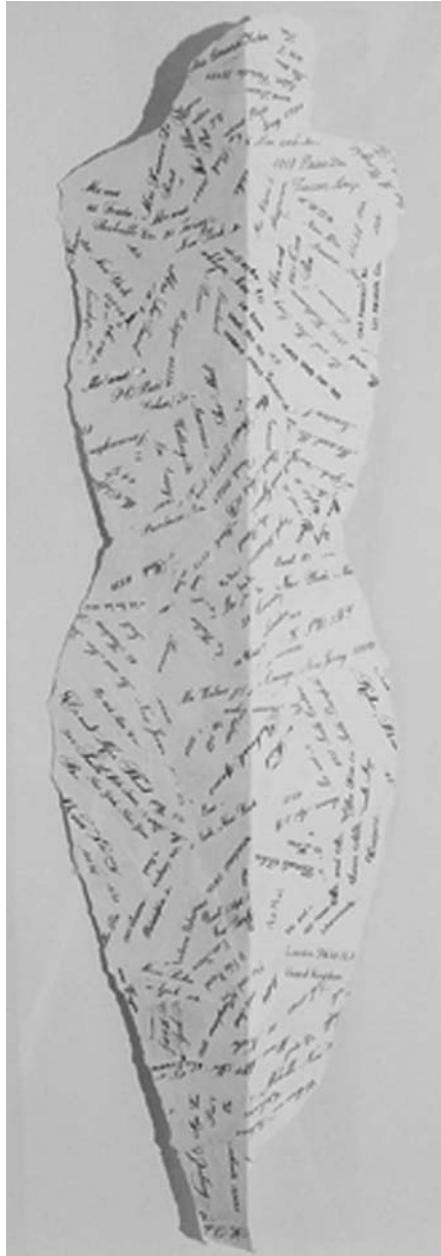


FIGURE 9 *Calligraphic Knight 546*, 2005. Collage/pen and ink on paper. 42" × 21" × 2.5". (Reprinted with permission.)

abject and prevent the incursions of the outer world in Stein's sculptures, but the skin remains intact; the abject may mark the skin, but it stays contained" (*ECcentric Bodies*, 9). A foregrounded strength of silhouette with hourglass features and a vertebral column mark many of Stein's *Knights*, such as *Knight*

of *Plenty 553* (2006; Figure 3), which thus may suggest a degree of containment; indeed the amalgamation of the heterogeneous materials consolidates the figure's mass. Yet in some of the works in the series, the torso appears to be sliced open, revealing the figure's entrails and bone structure, as in *Power 581* and *(K)Night Figure 470*, with spaces of ambiguity in orientation of front and back. The figures appear to be dissected and in rotational flux, qualities enhanced in *Knight of Appreciation 559* (2006; Figure 4) by the wrapping of the corsetry, the effect of torsion of the dynamic tilt of the midsection, and the value contrast of the truncated lower extremities, which creates an effect of indeterminate motion. In addition, the armor/clothing on the outside of this figure serves as the inside. Unzipping the borders of the body to image inside and outside together—co-mingling interior “plumbing” and bodily processes with dress and outer shell—and an obfuscated corporeal orientation, Stein figures Kristeva's abject in its dismantling of order and refusal to contain the boundaries of the (purified) subject (Kristeva, 1–7, 65, 71, and *passim*). If the container does not hold, what safety and power are possible in these representations of the abject? Is power on the “inside” or the “outside”? Stein's recent pairing of Figure 1 with an honor guard from Arlington National Cemetery (Figure 5) highlights the rich interplay of power and vulnerability in her work. In their ambiguities of inside and outside, of borders and of formal syntax, along with Stein's richly heterogeneous materials, her *Knights* constitute a lacunary writing that asserts itself in vulnerability into discourse.

By marking contradictions surrounding her discursive presence, Stein effects what Jeannette Gaudet characterizes in describing Wittig's work as a “poetics of rupture”:

Given that, by acceding to the symbolic, the female voice is already in a position of transgression, already an otherness—a difference vis-à-vis the language she speaks—it is important to examine how language is used. This is accomplished by capitalizing on the instability of code and searching for those moments of discursive slippage where new meanings are hinted at yet never entirely fixed, or, on the other hand, where silence breaks through. (15)

Through her critical blurring of inside and outside, Stein speaks the discursive absence of her safety and subjectivity to inscribe a politics of representation. In her essay “The Straight Mind,” Wittig refers to the “political significance of the impossibility that lesbians, feminists, and gay men face in the attempt to communicate in heterosexual society. . . . The . . . discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms” (1992, 24–25). And even today Jann Matlock points out that for all the recent explosion of interest in superheroes in the film and television sector, the power of female superheroes lags behind in contemporary

visual culture (572),³ a point reinforced in the Metropolitan's exhibition. In addition, capturing the context of 9/11 inflecting *Knight Series*,⁴ Ellison Walcott writes: "In a world where many people feel the ever-looming threat of terrorism and violence, Linda Stein has created sculptures that symbolize strength, but also represent the ongoing feeling of vulnerability" (25).

Featuring the curvilinearity of the body in many *Knights*, as in the intimation of hips and buttocks, and positioning the figures in a truncated contrapposto, Stein's series nevertheless refutes ideals of delicate or glamorous feminine beauty to propose alternatives, some androgynous. This is clear for example in her montage of Marilyn Monroe beside her 2007 sculpture *Power 581 (Vulnerability/Power 593)*, Figure 6) and in the coupling of the same sculpture beside the Arlington National Cemetery honor guard (Figure 5); the combination of pairings illustrates the unraveling of distinctions between the biological and cultural, or between the sexed and gendered body. In other words, her *Power 581*, included in both figures, can be neither pigeonholed as "masculine" nor "feminine," just as casting it within a fixity of "female" or "male" is flawed; sex and gender are mutually inflecting. The series also refigures through the imaginative robustness of many of the works, such as *Knight of Winged Words 524* (2005; Figure 7), with its silhouette chiseled from rock and metal, the figure's cacophonous rough-hewn materials, and its subducted and oozing mixed-media armor. Stein is developing her own ideal of the body, one redolent of Wittig's "real body." Margaret Crosland points to the uniqueness of Wittig's adulation "with such freedom the whole of the body, its skin, bones, organs, muscles, nerves, secretions and exertions, everything that adds up to *life*" (introduction to Wittig 1975, 8). At various points throughout *The Lesbian Body* there is an incantatory ode to this body, as in this first passage: "THE LESBIAN BODY THE JUICE THE SPITTLE THE SALIVA THE SNOT THE SWEAT THE TEARS THE WAX THE URINE THE FAECES..." (1975, 28). In many passages of the text Wittig figures the abject body, as in "lids cut off your yellow smoking intestines spread in the hollow of your hands your tongue spat from your mouth long green strings of your bile flowing over your breasts..." (1975, 15). Stein's bodies are variously pocked, wrenched, worn, scarified, embellished, desiccated, amalgamated; viscera hang loose, and intimations of bone, muscle, and sinew are presented; yet these elements also appear to comprise the figure's costume. Flagging the ambiguity of the body and doing war on conventions of beauty, desire, and strength, Stein raises powerful questions about the bounds of the acceptable social body and of how the somatic is constituted. As Ted Polhemus reminds us:

Can we really assume that the limits and boundaries of the human body itself are obvious? Does "the body" end with the skin or should we include hair, nails?... What of bodily waste materials?... Surely the decorative body arts such as tattooing ... should be considered ... [and] it has been

shown that it is insignificant (if not inaccurate) to sharply differentiate between bodily decoration . . . and the clothing of the body. (Cited in Wilson, 2)

While the *Knights* image a “female presence with antithetical attributes,” they also recall female mannequins and corsets through their hipped silhouette and/or materials, both directly and indirectly (cf. *Knight of Appreciation* 559 and *Knight of Winged Words* 524). Stein mentions that part of (*K*)*Night Figure* 470 “reminds me of a sewing model before being draped with fabric by the tailor” (*The Power to Protect*, 40). In a recent extension of the series, Stein develops this idea by creating wearable torsos, such as *Vestment* 628 (2008; Figure 8). Unlike the apparel on view at The Metropolitan, the work invites the viewer to make their own meaning in relation to it—including a dose of back-talk to the fashion icons, as intimated by the overall sensation of armorizing heaviness of the ensemble with its laden encrustation, the intensely variegated texture inviting individual caress, and the demonstrativeness of Stein’s pose.⁵ Trying on *Vestment* myself proved initially to be a disorienting experience due to the disjunction between my body’s reinforcement within the columnar armor-costume and my inability to visually take in the front of the prosthesis. I soon found myself working to develop new bearings, however, through a slowed down and sensualizing haptic, or touch-centered, reading of the sculpture’s surface.⁶

The corset-torso appears as a fetish in *Knights Series*; Stein herself asserts, “I am obsessed with this form” (cited in Emin, 37). Walcott likens Stein’s mode of working to the making of a signature style (25), and Stein herself explains, “I follow certain rules all the time when creating the armor. One leg is longer than the other. One leg is always at an angle. The shape of the head is always the same” (cited in Walcott, 25). Historicizing the multivalence of fetishism, Valerie Steele recalls that among other meanings (i.e., Freudian and Marxist), the fetish reads as erotic discourse and also is lodged within an anthropological/religious register to designate a magic charm (5). Both of these meanings are relevant for Stein as I shall describe presently. I am particularly interested for Stein in Steele’s broader discussion of corsetry as physically restrictive and socially oppressive as well as enabling on a psychic, erotic, and physical level (56–89). Bound together by the suturing of different metals—copper, brass, lead, steel, aluminum, zinc, and magnesium, for example—and other materials such as stone, wood, ceramic, fiber, and leather, the density of Stein’s armored figures is enhanced by the inclusion of objects from everyday life such as metal printing plates from her former calligraphy business, coins, keys, washers, jewelry, beads, pieces of window shutter, and metal piping from an air conditioner (*The Power to Protect*, 6–7 and 42). Although the figures’ hourglass shapes evoke their constriction and with it a physical and social repression, the silhouettes also connote the possibility of a liberating erotic power, freedom of gender transformation,

and an amalgamative strength. As such the corseting of the figures is a synopsis for the dynamic of vulnerability and power informing Stein's work.

Some of her materials have been reclaimed from her Tribeca neighborhood and from New York beaches; she also receives many of the objects she refashions for her sculpture as gifts or makes a find at a garage sale or at a scrap metal storehouse. Stein explains: "You know when you walk in the tar gutter? These are just all kinds of things that have been squashed into the sidewalks or tar gutters by cars and trucks in New York. I like that embedded feeling" ("Sculptor Linda Stein's Warrior Women," 65). Through this aesthetics of accumulation, Stein creates an encrusted "fabric" enacting a cohesive social function; indeed, she recalls the "story" and/or person behind each component. In keeping with their rich fusions of inside and outside, her sculpture is a metonym for the social body at the same time that it parries threats to and from her environment. In this uneasiness between individual and collectivity, her *Knights* overlap with a fundamental tension Georg Simmel ascribes to fashion of connection and differentiation, although he is differently focusing on fashion as a mechanism of class division ("The Philosophy of Fashion," 189). Drawing on Simmel's numerous writings on fashion, in her own insightful study Elizabeth Wilson points out that fashion often serves a compensatory function that, like an "armor against the world," will "ward off as well as . . . attract" (vii); in this sense fashion operates talismanically. Stein's *Knights* might be seen as talismanic in the traditional sense of harnessing planetary forces under which the objects were created (i.e., garnering the powers of Venus against those of Mars), and/or as charms to repulse evil. Similarly to fashion, Stein's figures enable a consolidation of selfhood under duress; as Simmel notes in a related discussion of adornment, the latter "gather[s] the personality's value and significance of radiation as if in a focal point, allow[s] the mere *having* of the person to become a visible quality of its *being*" ("Adornment," 207).

The spatial ambiguity of inside and outside I have described is complemented at the temporal level by the combination of the *Knights'* archaic and classical properties in terms of their pose and archeological cast as well as the transitory component linked to female fashion. As Simmel famously put it: "Fashion's question is not that of being, but rather it is simultaneously being and non-being; it always stands on the watershed of the past and the future and . . . conveys to us, at least while it is at its height, a stronger sense of the present than do most other phenomena" ("The Philosophy of Fashion," 192). This is not to imply Stein's wish for the transhistorical, for indeed, the works are rooted in the historical particularity of 9/11, the geography of New York and beyond, and the specificity of her challenges in coming to representation. Stein herself is cognizant of the temporal contradiction in her output: "On the one hand I want my work to be timeless, abstract, ancient, archetypal, and at the same time I'm using specific, time-bound elements from everyday life" (*The Power to Protect*, 42).

In addition to these spatial and temporal contradictions, Stein's *Knights* frequently include important disjunctive handlings of decoration and abstraction. *Vestment 628* is one such example, as in the general contrast between the upper and lower registers. The costume includes various elongated polygonal forms, some heavily worked through an additive and subtractive process of applying paint and coloring agents, sanding and rubbing to remove aspects of these, and then repeating these steps and polishing the work to create a sense of facture upon the "raw" materials. Yet the sculpture is also composed of decorative motifs such as a carved copper bird with ornamental script and jewelry elements including an adapted brooch, piece of earring, and semi-precious stones set in bezels. During a studio visit Stein expressed her unease surrounding decoration because of what she called its associations with weakness, and she explained that in her practice she has become increasingly interested in veiling, even as she continues to include, such components. Due to the historic problematic surrounding the decorative, Stein's concern warrants further consideration. As Julie Johnson most recently explains it, though the category was acclaimed by certain artists such as the Fauves to mark their rhythmic modernist engagement, the decorative has subsequently frequently been denigrated or disavowed by male artists due to its association with femininity and its perception of a lack of essential qualities (37).⁷ By staging this fraught meeting of decorative and abstract, Stein queries her place within art-historical discourse. Moreover, as Matlock points out, Stein's *Knights* include "pieces of domestic life—keys, buttons, belt buckles, broom bristles" (573); *Vestment* for example features old brass laundry tickets and a section of a wooden salad fork. These components and others then are amalgamated by welding, carving, screwing, and the application of epoxy to pieces of steel and copper in the making of Stein's heroic sculptural protectors. As such, she introduces questions about the place for the everyday and domestic within heroic narrative.

"An armed and armored female presence with antithetical attributes": Stein's *Knight Series* breaks down boundaries between the female, male, feminine, and masculine, as I have begun to suggest. Just as Wittig sought in *Les Guérillères* with her radical use of the French "elles" to dismantle the categories of sex in language (Ostrovsky, 36), Stein resists logocentrism. While Wittig is contravening assumptions of gender by basing the genre of the epic around women in *Les Guérillères* (Ostrovsky, *On Monique Wittig*, 118), so too is Stein featuring a heroic, armored female protector presence that rethinks conceptual grammars (Figure 5). Speaking the obscured legibility of the textual fragments within her sculptures, and more fundamentally, her strategic intertextuality, Stein wonders aloud: "...maybe these letter forms or words or glyphs that I love incorporating into my sculpture invoke very powerful questions: How do we talk with people of other religions and traditions? How do we talk to terrorists? How do we talk to ourselves?" ("Linda Stein: Sculptor of the 'Warrior Woman,'" 30–31). The gaps and ambiguities in

Stein's registers of meaning—decorative and abstract; the refusal of spatial and temporal boundaries; of sex and gender—communicate her challenges to location as a self and an artist and to the establishment of collectivity in the wake of loss.

Stein's poetics of rupture entails a troubling violence, not least for the artist herself, as we have seen: "These are warriors. Why am I doing warriors? I'm a pacifist. When I jog, I jog around anthills" ("Sculptor Linda Stein's Warrior Women," 66). To what extent is Stein's hold out for warfare and heroic uplift justified or desirable, even as the impulse of *Knight Series* proclaims vulnerability? Is her search for a new kind of warrior a mode of giving in? To understand Stein's assertion—"My women warriors are not a symbol just for power, but power for good!" (cited in Kirpalani, 10S)—it is useful to consider her hailing of Hayao Miyazaki's Princess Mononoke as a role model, one of the few models in popular culture she has found compelling. (Another is Wonder Woman.) Stein characterizes the *anime* figure as "the young warrior impassioned to save the environment," and it is understandable why she is drawn to the young girl beyond her resonant audacity (*ECcentric Bodies*, 50). At a basic level, an attention to environmental issues undergirds Stein's mode of working in terms of the adaptive re-use of the series (Horner, 30). A figuration of a conflict between civilization and the forest gods, Miyazaki's film raises questions about power ("princess" turns out to be a less-than-flattering nickname, and Mononoke does not rule over anyone) and evil: as Dani Cavallaro explains, Miyazaki is not interested in a flattened representation of a "bad guy" ruining nature or a "monochromatic" environment (122–125). As Miyazaki puts it:

When you talk about plants, or an ecological system or forest, things are very easy if you decide that bad people ruined it. . . . It's not bad people who are destroying forests. . . . Hard-working people have been doing it. During the Edo era, many beautiful forests were raised, but that was because trees were planted to finance a *Han* (feudal domain). So if someone cut even one branch off, they cut his arm or head off. . . . Because of such terrible power, the forests were born. (Cited in Cavallaro, 124)

Within such a framework, Stein's role model Mononoke queries what counts as responsibility and power for good.

To be sure, the *Knights*, like the characters in *Princess Mononoke*, are embedded within dominant economic and political agendas: Stein's corset-bodies are created by the infrastructure of New York and the geography of nation; they reference, even as they critique, the global-capitalist matrix: as Wilson puts it, "Fashion *speaks* capitalism" (14). Moreover, the phrase "power for good" is not of course without its dangers. As Madeleine Albright noted in a 2006 opinion piece for the *Los Angeles Times* discussing the

Bush administration's approach to Iran, the dualism of good versus evil "is more tragedy than strategy." A policy with any chance of working, Albright suggests, would require consultation of Iran regarding issues in the region as well as an attentiveness to the shifting complexities of what she sees as "fairly ruthless power politics" between particular groups in the Middle East (B-11).

The power for good of the *Knights* seems to respond to the sweeping "axis of evil" perception of the world by offering in its place a force of interrogation, denaturalization, imaginative refashioning, and a call to accountability.⁸ Grounding what she calls the "female presence" of her *Knights* in the body, Stein nevertheless denaturalizes varied ascriptions of woman as body within pervasive dichotomous frameworks of mind/body.⁹ Structured primarily around the silhouette of bust and hips, the figures are headless and immobile. Stein goes so far as to accentuate the vulnerability of that position through her encrustation of objects as a palliative. Often reclaiming cast-away items for her sculpture, she would seem to assert that vulnerability, but as an aggregate the works serve as a potent metaphor for revisioned community. Stein's figures are neither mute nor dissociated, for her inclusion of calligraphic plates and accoutrements of fashion and decoration construct the body as a site of knowledge, history, and social affiliation. As such, her *Knights* relate to the work of Elizabeth Grosz, with its challenge to dualisms of mind and body as well as the disavowal of nature written into its equation with terms of stasis. Grosz's writings resonantly seek to reposition nature as the enabling ground for culture, with both in ongoing dynamic relation (*Time Travels*, 43–44, 49, and *passim*). As she writes in *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*: "I have been fascinated . . . with the body's capacity for prosthetic extension, its capacity to link with objects in ways never conceived before, to incorporate objects into its bodily operations, to become social and historical in the most fundamental sense." Fueling a re-examination of the borders of nature and culture, and of the body's inside and outside, the prosthetic object, Grosz argues, is not simply an index of the lacking body in its existing state, but may also be understood as a marker of reconfiguration and new possibility (145–148 and 152).

Stein's commitment to the body as both a resonant site of knowing and also of conformity is demonstrated by her figuration of language as a molding force, as in *Calligraphic Knight 546* (2005; Figure 9) and in other works. As Wittig notes, "... the effects of oppression on the body—giving it its form, its gestures, its movement, its motoricity, and even its muscles—have their origin in the abstract domain of concepts, through the words that formalize them" (1992, xv).¹⁰ Indeed, the collaged text of *Calligraphic Knight* serves as its skin or dress; in addition, its silhouette reads as the paper's deckled edge and the vertebral column as fold. Thus Matlock rightly asserts that the composition of the *Knights* through textual components such as vestiges of weddings and baby showers serves itself to feminize them (570). Yet in its enablement of critical awareness, this signposting opens up the potential for

new genderings. Radically refusing the divide between nature and culture and of self and other in its porosity of inside and outside, Stein's *Knight Series* foregrounds processes of dismantlement and reassembly, even as the work showcases the vulnerability of the body in its gendered organization and organic composition.

In her discussion of ecofeminist standpoint theory in "Toward an Ecofeminist Standpoint Theory: Bodies as Grounds," Deborah Slicer explains that "the physical imposes certain limits to malleability *and* . . . the physical is a 'player,' has its own agency, in relation to social construction. For example, I can imagine a woman's second toe being socially fetishized as a highly erotic and thus pleasurable site. But she cannot produce sperm" (*Ecofeminist Literary Criticism*, 60). Recognizing the constraints and possibilities of the physical and social body within the template form for her *Knights*, Stein admits spaces of individual desire as she asks a reflexivity and accountability of her viewers. Returning for example to her *Knight* juxtaposed beside Marilyn Monroe in *Vulnerability/Power 593*, the figure is hefty rather than lithe; s/he is colorless and of indeterminate age. The open question of eroticism of the *Knight's* body and its processes spars with and parodies Monroe's billowing skirt, which reassures through revealing concealment; yet ultimately vulnerability and power oscillate between the figures and in their combination. As such, Stein undermines dominant heterosexual and sexist discourse.¹¹ Understanding her sculpture in the series as "a female Knight, a Warrior Woman that defines anew the concept of strength and power" (Stein, *ECcentric Bodies*, 50), Stein's is thus a very different position from Giorgio Armani's in the "Sponsor's Statement" for the superhero fashion show: "Fashion, like the superhero, allows you to dream and escape into a world of unfettered imagination" (*Superheroes*, 6). Fettering her figures in their embodiment, Stein's *Knight Series* protects its viewers from the limitations of that escapist perspective.

NOTES

1. In a poem-statement, Stein also writes: "A Figure/Naked albeit/Vested in Finery/Defenseless Armored/Vulnerable Invincible./A Monument/ Sewing Template/ Gesture of/Life's Tease/Random Precise./A Warrior/ Still yet/Commanding/Thrust into Battle/Strength Fragility" (*The Power to Protect: Sculpture of Linda Stein* [New York: Flomenhaft Gallery, exhibition catalogue, November 2–December 20, 2006], 40).

2. *Les Guérillères* also begins: "GOLDEN SPACES LACUNAE" (5).

3. Matlock also points to the "heroic masculinity that surged in the wake of the creation of 9/11 of what cultural theorist Diana Taylor has called 'a giant hole . . . in the U.S. imaginary': in the aftermath of the attacks, the 'language of lack' resulted in a 'feminization of loss' and a 'masculinist rush to save the day'" ("Vestiges of New Battles: Linda Stein's Sculpture after 9/11," in *Feminist Studies* 33.3 [Fall 2007]: 569–590, 575).

4. In a telephone conversation of July 30, 2008, Stein explained the relationship for her of *Knight Series* to the events of 9/11. She had had a recurrent nightmare of running from a persecutor as a child; then, on September 11, she was evacuated from her Tribeca studio and forced to run north. Gradually these two episodes of flight became conflated for her. She had been unable to make sculpture for eight

months, and when she returned to what previously had been an abstract practice, her work's verticality and figurative components began to assert themselves. Three years later she began to recognize her sculpture as warrior-knights and as totems of protection.

5. Stein's short video "Body Swapping" also showcases a catalog of viewer response to her wearable *Knights*.

6. For more detail on the role of the haptic for Stein, see Matlock, "Vestiges of New Battles," 586–587. For an overview of the concept, consult Laura U. Marks, "Video Haptics and Erotics," in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 1–20. Marks notes for example: "Haptic *perception* is usually defined as the combination of tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies. In haptic *visuality*, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch" (2). The emphasis in Marks's haptic on embodied sense experience, active exploration of surface, lack of mastery, and what she describes as the viewer's "dissolution of] . . . subjectivity in the close and bodily contact with the image" aptly characterizes my engagement with *Vestment 628*. In addition, her understanding of the haptic as a feminist visual strategy rather than as a feminine form is well-reasoned and appropriate for Stein's haptic representation (see for example 2–3, 6–7, 10, 13, and 20).

7. See also Jenny Anger, *Paul Klee and the Decorative in Modern Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

8. In a discussion of her usage of "power for good" by telephone on February 4, 2009, Stein cited the example of (pre-1947) Wonder Woman due to her sense of compassion and justice importantly tempered by her unwillingness to kill. At the same time, though, Stein recognized what she called the "mixed bag" of the Wonder Woman character due to her embeddedness in discourses of sexism and racism as well as the ubiquitous "short little outfit."

9. For a sketch of these frameworks, see for example Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 16; and Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff, "Issues in Studying Women's Diaries: A Theoretical and Critical Introduction," in *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries*, eds. Bunkers and Huff (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 1–20: 5.

10. Wittig is drawing here on the work of Sande Zeig. As Grosz puts it in her deep-seated interrogation of dualistic systems: "I will deny that there is the 'real,' material body on one hand and its various cultural and historical representations on the other. It is my claim . . . that these representations and cultural inscriptions quite literally constitute bodies and help to produce them as such" (*Volatile Bodies*, x).

11. As Matlock puts it: "Salvaging debris, as if from wrecked buildings, Stein creates female shapes that protect other dreams than the ones the mass media have been relaying" ("Vestiges of New Battles," 573).

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