

PART 4. Leaving Art: After 2000



Introduction

At the beginning of the first decade of the new millennium, I returned to Los Angeles, the site of my formative years and the geographic backdrop for essays in part 1 of this collection. With the surge of international interest in feminist artists of my generation, I reflected on similarities and differences between the decade when I began working and this postmillennial one.¹ Some political conditions that provided context for our work then are still resonant today: a pointless war in a foreign country, attacks on abortion rights and the environment, an erosion of civil liberties, a lack of trust in the government, and so on. But vast differences between political and social practices by artists in the seventies and today—most notably in the sophisticated “culture of display” practiced by successful artists who use advertising and production technologies available as never before—call for more complicated reflection.

These last essays, written between 2000 and 2007, stress case studies drawn from my own practice—what I have “left” behind through my work—and diversify the sources and referential framework for public practices, leaving the field of art to bring new insights back to it. More than one artist I know has made a conscious decision to leave the profession with its galleries, museums, magazines, and marketplace, to live productive and happy lives elsewhere. At the very least, the question of whether or not to leave art offers a metaphoric option that continues to raise the issue, what is art now?

We are still stuck with a problem of aesthetic interpretation of socially situated work. In my own work, as David Antin put it in a recent conversation, the image is the “visual arts opener,” but the substance is the conversation—a combination of literary, temporal, and haptic sensibilities that I feel as much as think about. Having exhausted many questions, I’m no longer sure whether this one is answerable: do transient social communities, set in motion through aesthetic strategies, change the way people experience the world? I think they do, though to what extent I cannot say. At any rate, I am sure of one thing, that there is an experience of beauty that arises under certain conditions—set-apart, self-effacing, and story-producing moments wherein we focus deeply on another’s experience. When that moment arises I am not sure whether it is an experience of art or of relationship.