

A conversation with Ann Chamberlain and Stephanie Johnson, artists

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

Ann Chamberlain and Stephanie Johnson were among the artists included in *Mirror, Mirror*, a large two-part exhibition—at Oliver Art Center in Oakland and San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art—that focuses upon current issues of beauty and identity. Chamberlain's *Common Story* evolved from a residency in which the artist worked with women in an intensive recovery

interior quality "real beauty." She'd say that inner beauty is the most important kind.

AC It's form that expresses a meaning which is not just imposed. That's a problem with art right now. A lot of art is about an idea that's been venerated onto the object. The art world is in a double bind because we're involved with an economy and language of appearances. This question goes beyond social questions of

rate work with dreadlocks, for example. My piece, *Mirror, Mirror...*, is against that imposed value system, against the blond beauty aesthetic in American culture.

AC In the higher levels of fashion, Afros and dreadlocks have become exoticized.

SJ Coopted. I hate it. There's a level on which we all find the Other to be exotic and interesting, but because of the toxicity of racism and sexism it

back to where you came from.

AW Would you say the issue becomes the projection of an image with personal meaning, rather than striving after an image which is approved by the culture?

SJ There's also the question of who has the privilege of being able to choose their own image or deviate from the normal image. It's dictated by economic constraints. Working-class people can't afford to deviate. Rich people can do whatever they want because they don't need the job.

AC Styles in *Vogue* versus the styles in a working person's magazine visualize radically different ideas of the norm. The idea of norm and the idea of beauty are very interesting to compare. Beauty becomes what is normal. It's not individual or specific, it's homogenized. It's a tool of control and power.

Between individuals, there is a dance that takes place, back and forth, that's been called scopophilia, pleasure in looking and pleasure in being looked at. My piece involved women who were used to being on the street, being very sexually active, being displayed. Their story, although it's extreme, reflects a lot of issues about women socially and how we negotiate relationships with men. That's always been the problem for women in relationship to this issue of beauty. Do you become this image or do you determine who you are?

SJ Again it goes back to privilege, having the time to think.

AC That's something that bell hooks has talked about, that men artists have always been privileged with time for reflection and deliberation, respect for male genius, whereas for women, this has been seen as a very suspect time. When you're up against the wall you don't have any resources to reflect on the values that are coming in on you. If you have the time to reflect, you have the resources to resist a lot of that.

AW In your experience, then, is the idea of beauty connected with sacrificing self rather than expressing self?

SJ When I used to get my hair pressed with the hot comb, my mother would say that you have to suffer to be beautiful. I think that was the standard line of the time, because if you didn't sit still, those ears would get burnt.

AC I remember wanting to straighten my hair. Nothing fits the ideal. You're never



Ann Chamberlain
(Photo: Brenda Hutchinson.)

good enough.

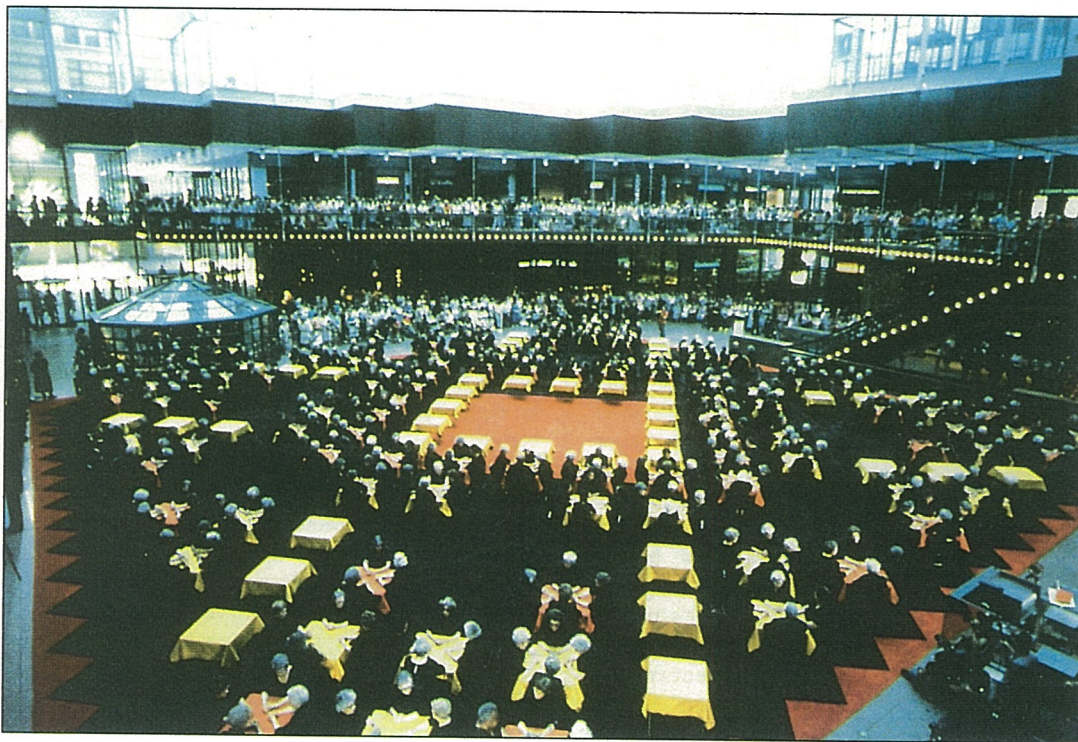
SJ I think it's a tactic of the dominant culture to keep us disarmed. What if we sat down one day and said we are enough right now, just like we are. If we stopped buying a bunch of bullshit, the whole damn system would fall down, literally and figuratively.

AW There's been a lot of discussion of the male gaze in art. What do you think a female gaze would be?

AC That's the big question right now. Do you turn around and use an objectifying gaze on men, or is there another way for women to figure their desire? Men are equally victimized by the ideal of beauty. It gets in the way of having a more direct relationship with another. I think we're a very lonely culture. It's hard to have contact, to have intimacy with someone, if you're looking for an image rather than a person.

A lot of the statements in the show are about what is *not* beauty—foot binding is not beauty, skinny people are not beauty. We're throwing off those things as projections of the male gaze. Maybe you have to define what it isn't in order to define what it is.

SJ I've tried to move from being reactive to proactive. I don't want to have work that says, "I'm sick of white men." My body of work is much more expansive, much more about my culture and myself and my experience of being here. And about what I can add to other people's experiences of being here.



Suzanne Lacy, *The Crystal Quilt*, 1987, interactive project of 430 women performing as 3,000 look on. (Photo: Ann Marsden.)

program; she combined their comments with a line of mirrored compacts to "return the male gaze." Johnson also used multiples of found objects and text to make her point, juxtaposing a row of blond ponytails with mirrors and advertisements for hair-straightening products. Like the exhibition itself, her installation is entitled *Mirror, Mirror* ...

Artweek How would you define beauty?

Ann Chamberlain In terms of identity, looking at other people, it can be all across the board. In terms of art, beauty is one of the ways in which we communicate as artists. This puts me in a traditional and formalist position, but I do expect a certain pleasure in the act of looking at the work. But beauty in art also has to do with the interior quality, *what* it means as well as *how* it means.

AW My mother would call that

gender. More and more it's become clear that there's no absolute beauty in any sense.

AW Stephanie, what do you think beauty is?

Stephanie Johnson Real beauty is knowing that you are exactly enough in this moment. Just as you are, without embellishment.

AC That sounds like a religious pursuit. You would have to meditate for years in order to feel like you are in the present and you are enough. Our culture is so driven into desiring. Those moments of beauty are few and far between. Not one of us is free of the system we're describing.

SJ Yes, we always have the effect of it. It is maddening to try to find your own core. Speaking from my own culture, hair is an obsession for African-American women. There's a caste and class and professional system to hair style. You won't see very many sisters in corpo-

becomes an unequal exchange. There's a power dynamic that throws it off. It's back to the paradigm of the slavery auction block.

AC It's almost like a tourism of cultural styles, in which you can appropriate a certain thing, take it with you, and then go



Stephanie Johnson
(Photo: Carl Posey.)