

ROSEMARY MAYER
1971 JOURNAL EXCERPTS
INTRODUCTION BY SARAH COWAN

IN 1971, the artist Rosemary Mayer was 28 years old and living in an apartment on Broome Street, a borough away from her birthplace of Ridgewood, New York. She shared the apartment with her husband, Vito Acconci, and after they separated she decided to stay there alone. On August 27, Mayer wrote in her diary that her nature was “Baroque I think.” In just three words, doubt commits subtle sabotage to grandeur, and the surrounding passages likewise convey a woman’s artistic ambition thwarted by physical reality. Her worries about her weight, sleeplessness, love, and money are ordinary enough but compelling in their symbiosis with the apartment itself, with its sputtering shower, cats wreaking havoc, street noise, and extreme cold and heat. Her snapshots of the apartment look like ones Pierre Bonnard might make: filled with exquisite clutter.

Mayer’s diary entries offer a refreshingly unromanticized account of downtown New York in the 1970s, with her art practice forced to fit uncomfortably within a larger to-do list. A typical sequence reads: “The last of the T paper. I thought abt. the drawings I want to do.” She used those drawings to plan her fabric sculptures, wielding that doubted grandeur to complicated ends: the sculptures float (but not without being lifted) and cascade (but not without bearing weight). Just a year later, Mayer would become one of the founding members of the all-female cooperative A.I.R. Gallery, a milestone her diary hints at when Lucy Lippard stops by for a stressful studio visit. But in 1971, Mayer had yet to find her community. Her social and intellectual life was confined to close friends, and she often set up an internal fight between confidence in her work and the egotism of wanting to become famous.

We now know she never did become famous. The reason is partly the precarity of being an artist and a woman, which Mayer appears to have known and felt already. She warily judged the feminist meetings she attended by the same measure as her artwork: for signs of progress, purpose, and meaning. Having gone to a women’s march on August 26, she wrote, “No euphoria just lots of women,” which struck me 46 years later as the exact experience I had in Washington, DC, the day after Trump’s inauguration.

Mayer published a diary in 1979, but not her own. Her academic interest in classics led her to translate the diary of Pontormo, the Italian Mannerist painter (who, interestingly, was a predecessor of the Baroque). Four hundred years separate their respective daily notes, and yet Pontormo’s diary also listed anxieties, maladies, food eaten, and fragmented details of his artistic progress. In her publication of his diary, Mayer interrupted Pontormo’s minutiae with her own italicized notes, adding some poetic grandeur to the myopic limitations of a narrated present. One of her notes defended the diaristic—that just by taking us from day to day, the act of writing becomes a feat of personal survival: “When the news every day seems less credible than the day before, when there is no ground under the involutions of individuals or institutions, you make a refuge, find separate ways to function.”



Mayer’s own diary was not public until this year, when her niece, Marie Warsh, edited a book excerpting the 1971 entries. Warsh recalls her aunt keeping the bound journals on display in her apartment, as if they were encyclopedias to be consulted.

The following are selections from *Excerpts from the 1971 Journal of Rosemary Mayer*, edited by Marie Warsh and published by Object Relations and SOUTHFIRST Gallery on the occasion of “Rosemary Mayer: Conceptual Works & Early Fabric Sculptures, 1969–1973” at SOUTHFIRST Gallery, Brooklyn, NY, October 21–December 11, 2016.

THURS. JANUARY 7, 1971

It’s freezing. Cookie cooking. Hazy-headed either fr. Thursday collapse or maybe it’s too much V. & K.—
Look what the cat’s done. New cat—Leibinity—all those monads stretching in the morning sunshine.

Drying hair in Rdgwd backyard.

Pecan-Apple-Fennel Cookies—but they taste dull.

I took the slides to Bykert & Curtis says he will be there in Mar. to look.* They are at Paula Cooper’s now. The Cultural Center is still up in the air.

I made a diagonal piece an almost square rectangle turned on the diagonal & I will make more rectangular pieces turned diagonally—w. string for folds & the paint—it looks so much like sails—bec. it’s loose. Paint almost horizontal—a little off—I like it that way.

Things to think about—illusion—does it still happen w. o. a flat surface? It seems I’ve solved all the problems I set out to—
– getting my idiosyncratic choices out of there, taste and arrangement
– making something that makes itself—letting things be themselves—
– finding a way that gives room to let colors play—
– the process makes the art—but now maybe it’s fine to take this so far and go further—the diagonal rectangle—will allow the fabric to drape whc. I’ve always wanted to have happen but would never see my way to letting happen—there never seemed to be justification

With stain (long oblong shape) horizontal—they will look like water—definitely very liquid—& placid & natural as opposed to the very unplacid diagonal—whc. reminds me of sails and the string helps that connotation.

!Imagine that!

-----> A piece that’s 2 pieces of fabric—2 dif. fabrics -----

Macy’s tom. for fabric

Have to think up some way of putting down a lot of close colors all next to one another—water colors and gouache.

Narrow minded bastards who think objects are only decoration—automatically assuming that bec. a thing is attractive or interesting to look at it’s: not anything else. Real visual art has to continue—it’s a human need—to see



challenging beautiful things—& beauty is in the nature of materials as equally as it is in thoughts, process, structures, activities, reactions.

Beauty—Taste? Compare art & architecture—No one would want a Rauschenberg building—Robert Morris’ stuff looks like buildings—old rect. bldg.

Paint drips, tin cans, rust, tires, old junk—pitted beams—that’s a sensibility—the means & there’s a message all that J.J. shit about frontality & the plane & flatness & painterliness—paint flat stuff w. chiaroscuro strokes—the artist’s elegant marks—

In Oldenberg’s *[sic]* drawings too—elegant marks. Amazing Rothko & Newman are dead—there’s an elegance—but not so personalized as to show the hand, the brush—but the way w. paint—

Things are down to the basics now w. me—no, they were with the canvas & orange paint pieces—they’re going on now to new stuffs—new fabrics—the paint’s still the same—more play w. colors now.

*Bykert Gallery was an important contemporary art gallery on the Upper East Side from 1966 until 1975. Curtis refers to the art dealer Klaus Kertess, the co-founder and director. (Originally footnote 2 in Warsh’s publication.)

I need a bigger space to work in...

I’m so fucking tired. I (didn’t) sleep at Johns last nite to avoid the cold. But I couldn’t sleep. A bath was great & clean clothes—John’s red undershirt—undershirts are great ideas.

John Perreault event was terrible.** Hannah said it was events beginning w. each letter of the alphabet. She took me out to dinner tonite. I’d called her & invited her down to see what I did w. her tricot. She liked it.

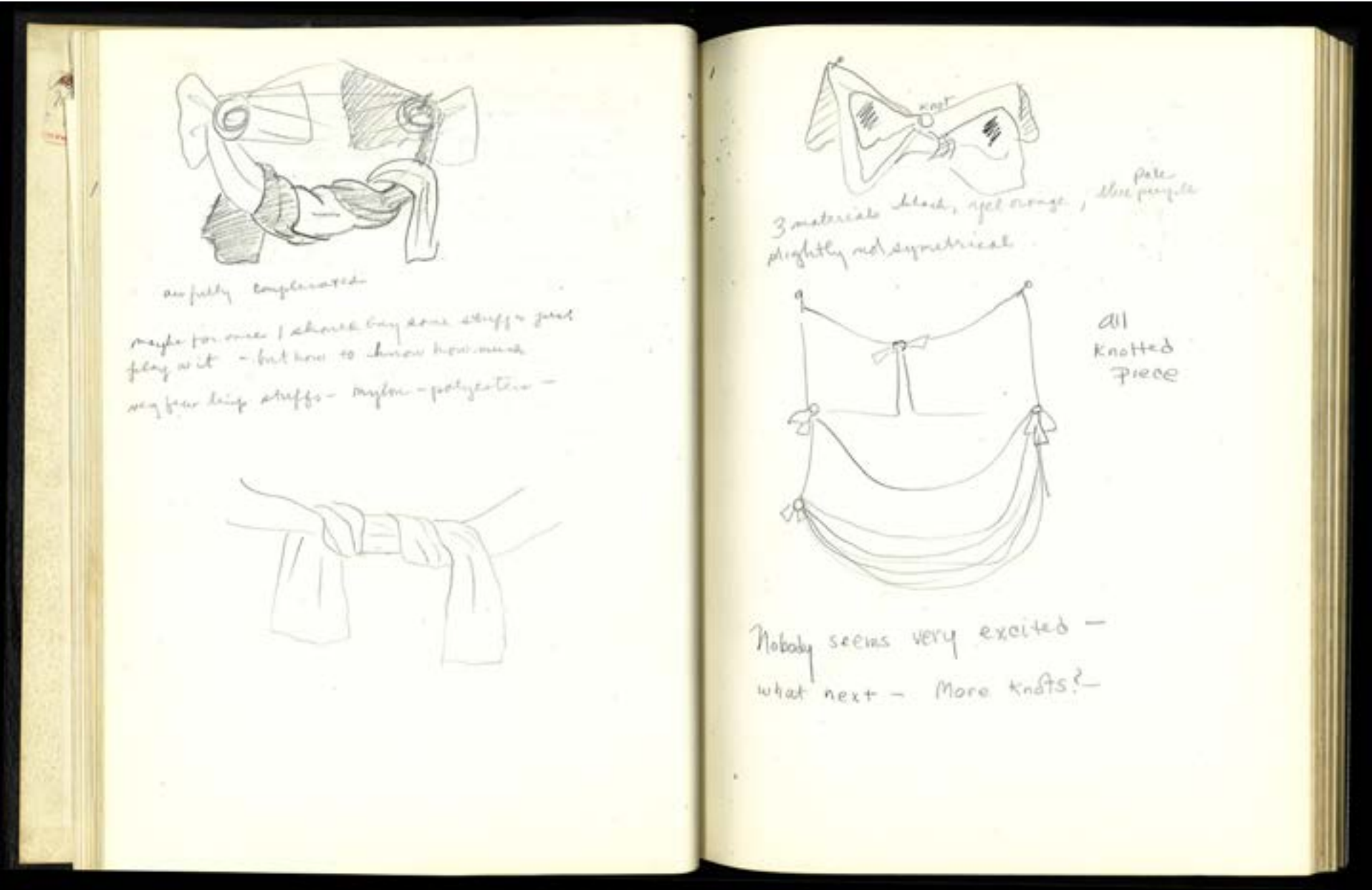
Philip Glass’ concert last nite was terrific. Nobody could clap after it. His music is my favorite. Then last nite at John’s I heard the Cage prepared piano music—another kind of great thing to hear.

John’s going to read Silence. Good talks will follow.

Sunday was in a terrible mood—over \$ & being alone. Monday dead tired bec. of Lucy Lippard at 9:15 AM. Couldn’t tell what she thought. Today exhausted. And mad at the cats—they broke the TV aerial & the iron—quite a toll for 1 day.

Despite the cold, being tired & depressed I thought up a few new pieces today at work. One is really fine. A second is pretty good too. It’s weird how ideas come.

Tonight Hannah & I talked abt. the being famous thing—how its not that simple—part of it is a need to have your self recognized for what you are—a creative artist—hmmm—before it sounded better & dif.—now it just sounds like ego gratification again...whc. I guess is nice. Is it just Catholicism that makes it seem wrong to want to be famous—that’s not it though to be famous—it’s to be surer of myself & my work—I’m beginning to be one of those people who lives & breathes art.



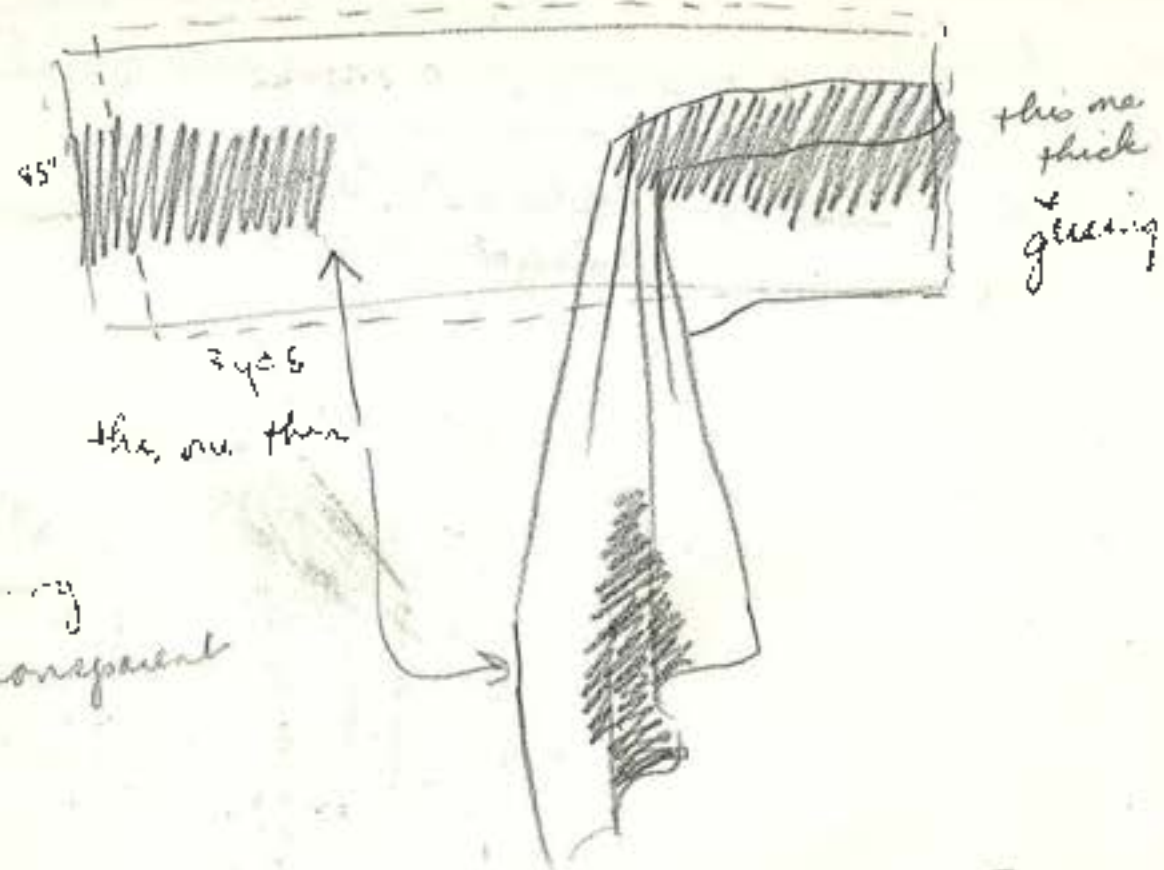
Another hot day. Dristan & moon rising. I would love to be able to record what these days are like. Not bec. I enjoy them, mostly I don’t, but bec. they have such a flavor—such a strong feeling...

I wake up first at 7:30 or 8:15. I hear the trucks so I put on the fan. It’s already hot & I’m perspiring as I look at the clock & remember it was 3 or 3:30 when I went to bed so I can sleep some more. I have long dreams that are interrupted by flies tickling me, mother cat nuzzling, kittens jumping around the bed. Once or twice a really loud truck will wake me up. I’ll rub mother cat’s stomach as I return to my dream. This AM I dreamt an end of civilization bec. of a bomb dream. V. & K. were in it & Dennis & Phyllis. We kept running out of things & figuring out substitutes. Then we dec. all the women had to keep having babies. At eleven was pretty much awake, realizing how hot it was, & wishing I was asleep when St. Joachim called abt. some form the Nursing Home needs. After that I lay back thinking abt. what would be the position of women if the world needed lots of babies. I was rubbing mother cat & thinking too of what shopping I had to do when the phone rang again. It was B. who called bec. she’s not coming in this week. So if I want to go up there it’s 2 fares plus they are busy all day so I’d be stuck at their house. I began to resent the inertia that makes me think it would be best to stay here. Esp. as \$ is so tight.

I got up sneezing & realized I had to call Ridgewood. I dragged myself to the bathroom, weighed in at 143, washed my face, brushed my teeth, considered a shower but the water stopped (yest. I took 2—I’ll wash away). I feed the cats after sweeping up the dead roaches I’d sprayed last night & rinsing the floor. I realized I was very hungry. I took one Dristan & started some eggs boiling & put on water for coffee. I felt hot, dull & slow. I thought I might feel better if I dressed. While I put on shorts & a blouse & brushed my hair I dec. I needed cat litter & toilet paper. But also some protein. 2 dif. stores are too much especially when one is 15 blocks away. So it would have to be some supermarket impure protein bec. the others are real necessities. I was still sneezing & blowing my nose so w. my vitamins I took another Dristan. Almost immediately, just looking at the coffee, I had to go & shit. The last of the T paper. I thought abt. the drawings I want to do.

And how I’ll have to do yoga around 5, shower & eat to get to Randa’s at 7:30. Back to the kitchen to eat. A feeling of nausea after I’d finished the grapefruit & was almost finished the eggs. I ate them anyway. I called Ridgewood. I thought abt. calling Vito to get my stapler back—but it’s too hot for either one of us to walk to the other’s place. I dec. to write in the book, this book. I got matches to light a cigar, brought over an ash tray & the coffee & sat down to this.

*Alphabet, performed at the Emanuel YHMA on January 31. (Originally footnote 3 in Warsh’s publication.)



TONCE very depressed abt stuff - since Jan -
 of pieces - overlaps, abortions, pouring all
 terrible. Something is destroyed. That leads to
 in 5 months - and it's still the same ideas -
 PAINT AS GLUE - DRAPING - TRANSPARENT FABRICS
 TO SHOW PAINT UNDERNEATH -

I would forget into more **PAINT**

Letting stuff do what it will - Morris: Antiform article
 M. LOUIS
 J. POITREK

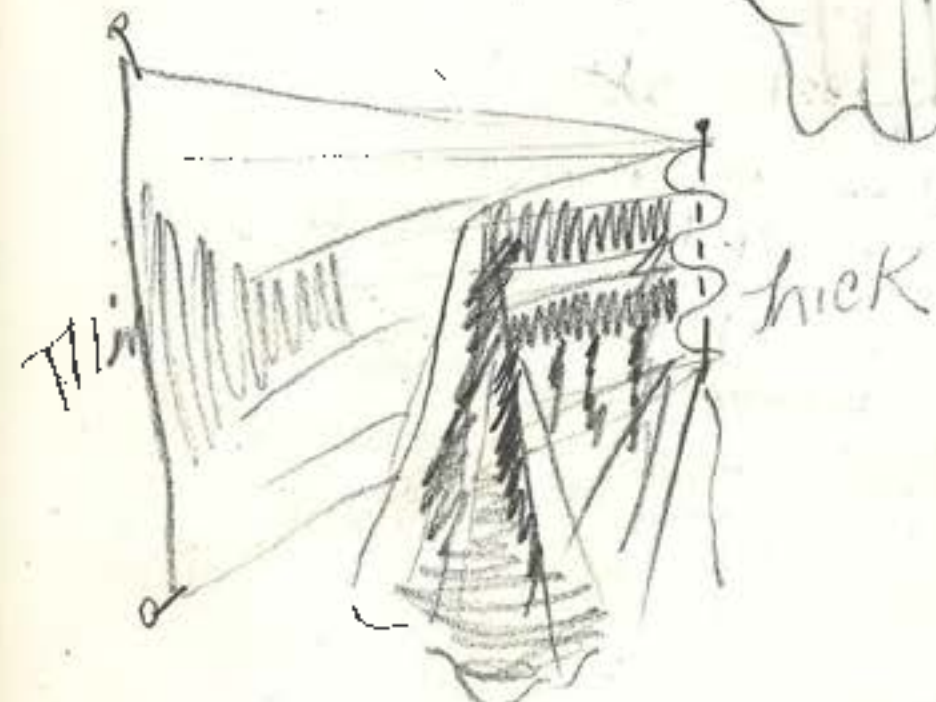
GRAVITY

Pouring -

I don't even feel like Dithering to do this
 one - but it doesn't seem that diff

PAINT is the point of reaching P. Morris' & if you
 piece - the way into illusion

Do I really want to investigate that?



Colors
 stuff
 size

REMEMBER - THICK THREAD

A pouring rain day.

It had better stop raining so hard. The roof upstairs is leaking & so is the upstairs fireplace. Muddy water has started coming through my fireplace...2 of my nice jars are sacrificed to catching leaks in the upstairs fireplace. Would it do any good to complain...I hate those guys so.

Last nite the woman’s march. Very straight & concerned w. getting into politics. No euphoria just lots of women.

I’ve been making a lot of drawings—of impossible pieces—I like them bec. it’s a chance to play w. colors & all the possibilities of draping, tying, sewing, etc...w. o. \$ & they can be unfettered by space & size...what they do is actualize in real materials—paintings—relations of colors & shapes & space. Donna said they were Baroque... whc. is true—they are complex & dramatic. I like them but they seem not to go far enough...I think I’ll make some simpler ones whc. show a few things more clearly...though simpler ones go against my nature whc. is Baroque I think...last night we looked at Colin Greenly’s work...glassy plastic crystal things—man - size decorations...are mine very different? Mine are more concerned w. the stuff they use...their forms come from what materials do... & what I can do to them...there’s color too...



I really like the new piece...though I don’t know what to do to it next. Weds. nite I made 2 drawings of it...whc. I don’t like now... but the piece just seems like a jumble /jungle of possibilities though of course I’m worried abt. what to do next...

Abt. J.C.—effects—went to a clothes store & tried things on. I’ve painted my nails again. I borrowed shoes from D. I bought new mascara & a new brush (whc. I’ve been thinking of doing for abt. 8 mos. now)

I spent too much time thinking abt. something to wear—I’m annoyed at myself for that...

But it’s fun to think of myself as a decorable thing...& to feel desired...whc. gives a point to the decorating.

I was also thinking of the great pleasure I find in gracefully performing some very old love actions...like rec. flowers... or offering food...of kissing or caressing...on this: 1) it’s decadent... though I don’t think in any way evil...bec. it is concerned w. forms...not the substance, actuality, of myself or the other person, but concerned w. the elegance in watching or being watched...& doing...the pleasure comes not fr. the action itself but from the stored up associations, images, mostly ones I’ve read...& from repeating beautifully this ancient pattern...

The danger is that one could easily, when one is me & I’m w. someone else who enjoyed these patterns, not really see the other or enjoy him—just be enjoying the patterns...if one could do both...it would be fine...

But not doing these things...& closing my mind to the multiple pleasures they offer...is like getting dressed carelessly & purposefully looking sloppy...it’s a pointless omissive action to convince me & others I’m avant-garde...when really I’m just cutting off a possible source of great pleasure for myself & others...

Also I think my mood is really changing...I think J. C. has something to do w. it...but it’s been a while coming...

Anyway whatever it is...it’s connected to my new way of being able to work without all the actions being set out in my head ahead of time...



IMAGE INDEX

Veils IV, Spring 1971. Voile, nylon, and enamel paint, 11 ft x 45 in.
Note: This caption is transcribed from Mayer’s notations on 35 mm slide documentation. The sculpture no longer exists.
Still Life, 383 Broome Street, 1970.
Rosemary’s Notebook, 1967–1971.
Rosemary’s Notebook, 1967–1971.
Work Space, 383 Broome Street, 1970.
Untitled, 8.26.71. Colored pencil and colored marker on paper, 12 x 9 in.

RIOT OF PERFUME



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