

Évasion (unpublished talk, 2012)

Mark Harris

If the question to answer is “What strategies enable artists’ (women artists’) self-determination today?” I want to start my response with Marcia Hafif, an older New York artist who has mostly painted single-colour works, monochromes. Last summer I wrote a catalogue essay on her work that she didn’t like at all. I’m an advocate for Hafif’s work and I’ve known her for almost thirty years, but my writing was an unpaid offer to the gallery and taken by me as an opportunity to experiment with different interpretative positions.

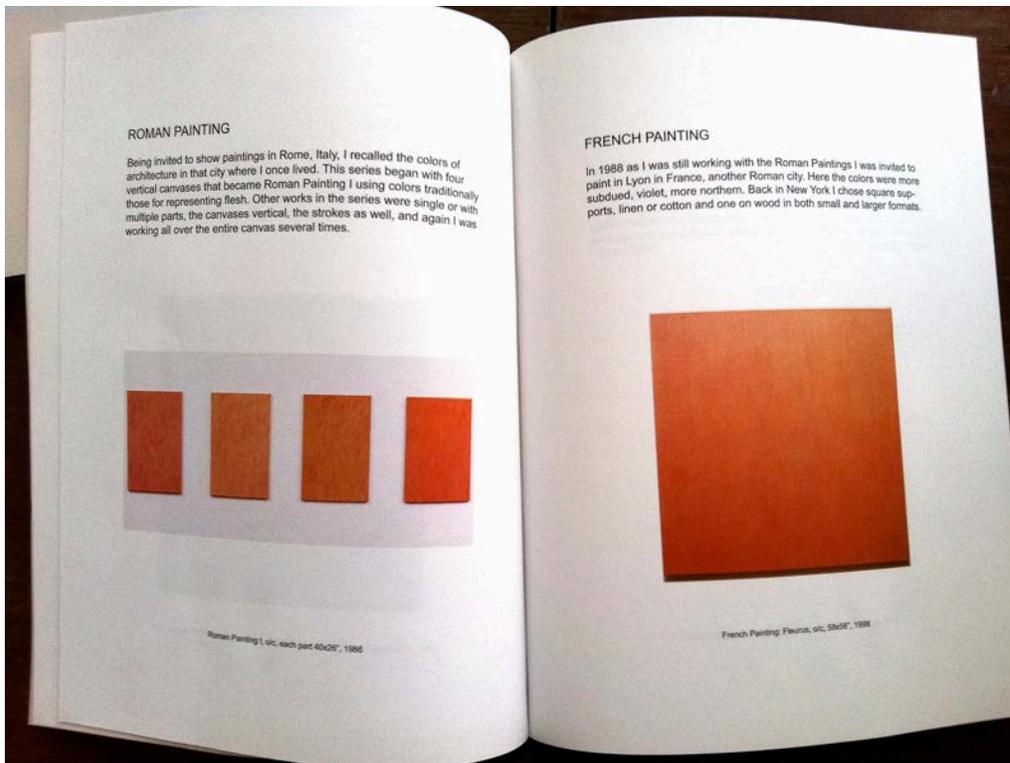


Marcia Hafif, U-Turn Gallery, Cincinnati, 2011

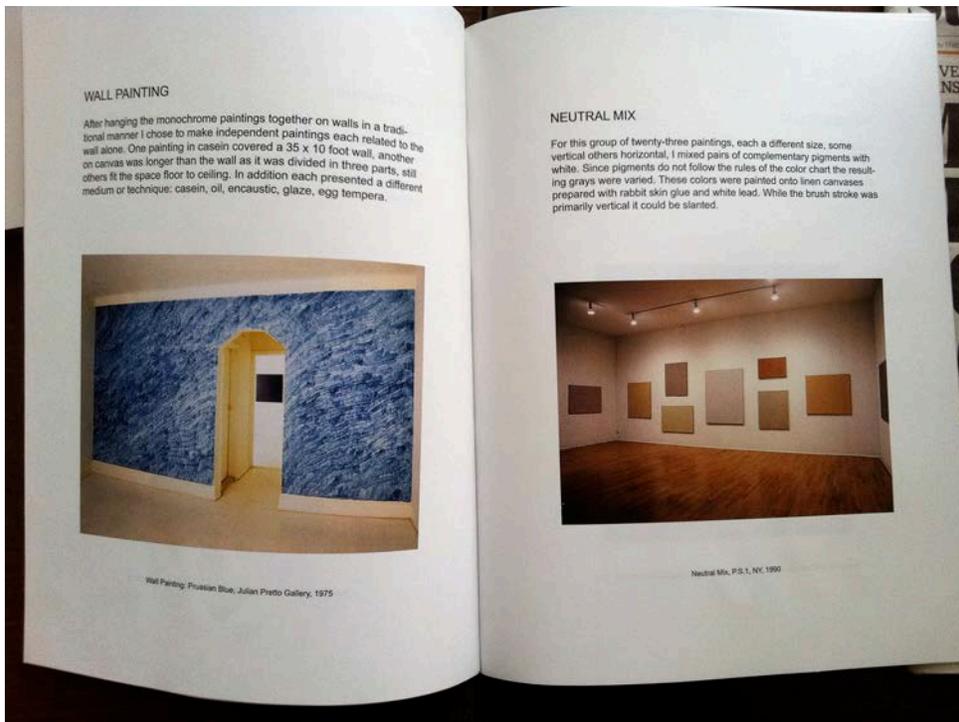
There wasn’t time to give Marcia a chance to review the essay before publication and to be honest I didn’t want to take that risk. Besides, I thought, is anyone really going to care about an essay coming out of a small artist-run gallery in the Midwest? But Marcia made a list of some of the figurative metaphors and literary references she found distasteful and wrote to me:

“I think it is the pervasive irony and contempt for the work and the installation that disturbs me the most. I would try to respond to all the offensive phrases and sentences but there are too many and I don’t have the time”.

I fought back pretty hard saying that she was wrong in her interpretation of my piece and that she was lucky to have someone bring new scholarship and ideas to the work. Since then we’ve had a lengthy and cordial email exchange and reached some kind of middle ground accepting our differences. The other week Hafif sent me a self-produced pamphlet called *The Inventory: Painting* which does what it says on its cover by methodically listing all the forms of painting that she has made from 1972 to the present.



Marcia Hafif, *The Inventory: Painting*



Marcia Hafif, *The Inventory: Painting*

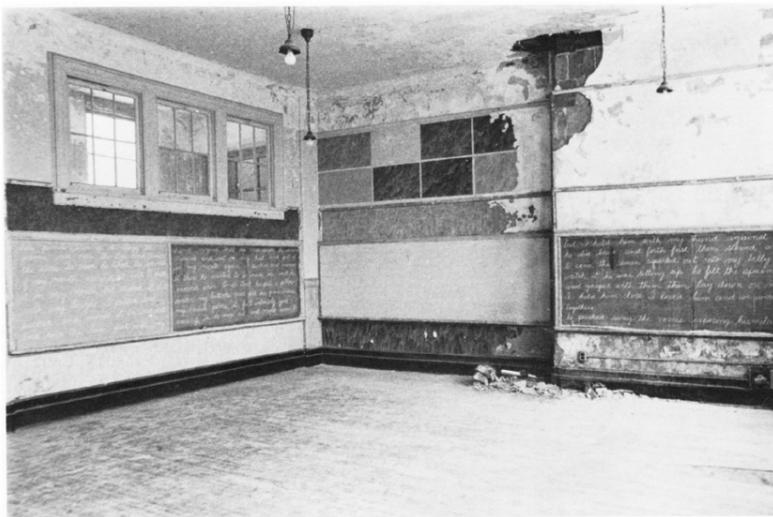
Perhaps this is one example then of what a contemporary artist can do to preserve self-determination. There's the aspect of fighting for your art long after its been made, if necessary arguing with writers who go out on a limb and appear to misrepresent your work. More specifically however, you might agree that Hafif gains self-determination by sticking

with her method and ignoring other tempting procedural avenues and opportunities at self-commodification. Of course you might disagree, seeing this instead as forcibly induced consistency that preserves a sense of integrity at a cost of innovation and engagement with the world.

In 1976 somewhere between *Wall Painting* and *Neutral Mix*, Hafif made an aberrant untitled work for the inauguration of New York's PS1. She tells me she has no photos of this work, but it can be found reproduced in the PS1 catalogue as well as in Rosalind Krauss's early book *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths*.

Stuart's rubbings are relocated across the facing planes of a hallway. The Matta-Clark cut involves the viewer in a sequence of floors. The "text" that accompanies the work is, then, the unfolding of the building's space which the successive parts of the works in question articulate into a kind of cinematic narrative; and that narrative in turn becomes an explanatory supplement to the works.

In the first part of this essay I suggested that the index must be seen as something that shapes the sensibility of a large number of contemporary artists; that whether they are conscious of it or not, many of them assimilate their work (in part if not wholly) to the logic of the index. So, for example, at P. S. 1 Marcia Hafif used one of the former classrooms as an arena in which to juxtapose painting and writing. On the walls above the original blackboards Hafif executed abstract paintings of repetitive colored strokes while on the writing surfaces themselves she chalked a detailed, first-person account of sexual intercourse. Insofar as the narrative did not stand in relation to the images as an explanation, this text by Hafif was not a true caption. But its visual and formal effect was that of captioning; of bowing to the implied necessity to add a surfeit of written information to the depleted power of the painted sign.



Marcia Hafif, Untitled, 1976. Paint and chalk on walls and blackboards.

In the installation Hafif painted some upper sections of the walls in brushy colour but used the blackboards for a hardcore text that her friends understood to be an account of sex with boyfriend Robert Morris; in effect a (feminist?) objection to his serial affairs. That's interesting, some of you might be thinking, if you remember Fiona Banner's porn text painting in the 2002 Turner prize. In view of our question regarding self-determination in what ways should we take this text, given Hafif's rather unforthcoming commentary on its status?

“The installation too was not directly about sex though the text was quite explicit. Because of the wrecked and dilapidated nature of the room when I was given it I chose colors that might have been used at Pompei for the painted sections and the text seemed appropriate remembering that when I visited Pompei (1961) there were rooms women were not allowed into, and I had to ask myself, ‘what was there?’”

On the one hand it’s an instance of local interests (this narrative of one sex act with Robert Morris, someone known to Hafif’s friends and colleagues) colliding with more global directives (reductive painting, color and facture, a PSI commission, addressing the community of emerging international artists also commissioned to engage with the building). Looked at differently this narrative becomes a fairly early occurrence of a woman taking possession of the discourse of pornography and redirecting it. In that sense a personal occurrence given political dimensions. Or am I wrong, and is it instead a political misstep with Hafif capitulating to narratives of sex over which she can never have control since that narrative form has invariably catered to male delectation rather than to women’s pleasure? What kind of voice would Hafif have had to have used for us to agree that hers was a position of self-determination, one that turned a narrative genre around to show her perspective, her pleasure, her purpose? In a ‘post-feminist’ milieu, does that question impose a moral imperative on a woman’s artwork that does not apply to a man doing the same thing? If we could read Hafif’s text we might find it easier to decide. Or perhaps if we could interview some of the men and women who attended the exhibition we could draw conclusions based on their reactions at the time. Do the qualities of a work like this change over time? Would assessment of *our* reactions here today count as a judgement of its appropriateness or effectiveness?

Even though we can’t read what Hafif wrote, we can judge the concept. It’s unlikely that a male artist would have done something as explicit as this at the time without attracting a fair amount of concern. He will not have been found to have acted inappropriately for the sexual explicitness nor for the sexism of the work so much as for bringing personal narratives into an art context from which they had been effectively marginalized. He will have been judged to have betrayed an idiom. And yet it will have been acceptable enough for men at the time to be open about their sexual relationships and to talk freely to other men about sex. I have a New York friend who in the 70s kept six girlfriends on the go at any one time and felt there was nothing unusual about that. There were other women artists who critically addressed this kind of sexual privilege. It seems that Hafif’s concept is at least in part to work in this entitlement gap as a political gesture. There is another play of contexts going on here for Hafif had been a schoolteacher before becoming an artist. Underlying the aesthetic and narrative effrontery is a humorous transgression of responsible teaching. “Bad Teacher” indeed.

Back to Fiona Banner’s Turner Prize for a moment. In November that year Guardian journalist Emma Brockes had the bright idea to take the porn star turned director, Ben Dover, to see Banner’s show. He found Banner’s large printed text work titled *Arsewoman In Wonderland* clever for the publicity (rather than libidinous thoughts) it might arouse, but ultimately it failed for him by remaining no more than a literal transcript of a typical porn film. Far better, he reflected, would have been for Banner to act in one of *his* films as a way to generate her artwork, or to have someone read her transcript over a replay of the original film—“It could be quite funny. Especially if you got someone like Jim Broadbent to do it. Or maybe Liz Hurley or Joanna Lumley could do it as a talking book. I’d listen to that”, he said.

So while Banner's *Arsewoman In Wonderland* flaunts an indifference to its subject matter that is contemporarily savvy in a marketable fashion, what Ben Dover proposes would reconnect Banner's concept to Hafif's as a challenging advancement. Hafif's problematic act of self-objectification would now be viewed through the medium that both artists address, with Banner initiating what might have become a startling critique of art's engagement with pornography. It's worth mentioning that K.R. Buxey had been here already in various ways with her replay of Warhol's *Blow Job*, and her 2001 video *negrophilia – A ROMANCE* which proposed ways that a woman's perspective on sexual pleasure might be adequately represented. Buxey recited an erotic monologue over closeups of her and her boyfriend's intertwining bodies.



K.R. Buxey, *Blow Job*

At play in the self-objectification shown by Hafif and Buxey (and Banner had she been an equal participant in Ben Dover's imagined porn movie) is the category of *instrumentality* where each treats herself as a tool or object for her own purposes, in these cases aesthetic and political. Sometimes they also refer to being treated as objects by another person (by Bob Morris, or by Buxey's boyfriend). In a 1995 essay, called *Objectification*, that I've found helpful for thinking through some of these problems, Martha Nussbaum lists other categories of objectification like *denial of autonomy*, *violability*, *denial of subjectivity* that frequently characterize pornography while cautioning that where these are consensually enacted, and at no other person's expense, its unlikely harm will be done.

I've been puzzled by these issues since starting research into the visual languages of sexual imagery, something unfortunately, that I haven't had a chance to work on in the last five or so years. In 1999 I taught a seminar at Goldsmiths that was called Images of Sex, aka Art and Pornography. At that time the pro- and anti-censorship debates were still virulent. Diana Russell's critical collection of extreme porn images *Against Pornography* was in circulation, while civil rights lawyer Catharine MacKinnon was working, with significant success in Canada, to criminalize the distribution of certain kinds of sexual imagery that she classified as *de facto* discriminatory towards women. I remember concluding at the time, in light of other readings like Jane Juffer and Linda Williams that this pro-censorship activism was too

draconian and simplistic. The manner in which porn was viewed varied so widely (including housewives taking a break from chores and straight couples viewing gay porn) that perhaps if porn wasn't exactly having a measurably beneficial effect on viewers, at the same time it certainly wasn't corrupting all of them. If MacKinnon argued that porn was emblematic of male treatment of women then the direct evidence of violence triggered by consumption of porn was fairly rare and not sufficient from which to extrapolate a general rule.

I've tended to view attempts to generalize about the impact of porn as shortsighted (I've lived seven years in the conservative Ohio city Cincinnati where friendly parents at my son's school would talk to me about their participation in anti-porn family lobbies, and where my interview for a job at a Cleveland university was abruptly cut short by pro-MacKinnonites when I referred to BANK's work as celebrating inappropriateness, as a cultural rebuke of political correctness). Now I'm inclined to take MacKinnon's ideas as insightful and important, in the first place for their argument that the sex these images depict is the most blatant display of continuing practices repressive of women (the tip of the iceberg), and in the second place for showing that there exists a perpetual backdrop of abusive representations which, like a magician, the market works to obscure as it constantly advances in finding new ways to convince us that our sense of autonomy and entitlement is fulfilled as consumers of a totalizing sexualized life. Not just as consumers of pornography, but perhaps even in my case as an academic entrusted to teach a seminar on pornography that legitimizes itself by its objectivity and its relation to contemporary art. If we find this idea plausible we might say that one obvious part of this process is the continuing normalization of sexual images and narratives—think of Vincent Gallo's *Brown Bunny*, Michael Winterbottom's *9 Songs*, or most recently Steve McQueen's *Shame*, for example. If these are not so different from emerging sex narratives of the last few decades, perhaps they only refine in arthouse manner what was more baldly depicted in earlier examples. Perhaps this classy arthouse quality is itself a refined encroachment by commerce on our ability to think and feel independently, sexually or otherwise. The closest I've come to understanding Évasion's point is to imagine the prospect of an envelopment of sexualizing representations, so pervasive that it is mirrored in all our inflections, however opposing they may seem to us.

As soon as I start down this path however, I worry at overestimating representations that surely can have no lasting power over us when compared to our day-to-day concrete experiences of others in the world. Doesn't the claim to the potency of images underestimate our ability to avoid or subvert them? I find fascinating the Borgesian postmodern narrative of reality displaced by its representation (as in 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius'), or Baudrillard's notion of the image as simulacrum that bears no relation to reality other than to supplant it totally. Yet aren't images really a second order of experience without the agency their makers would have us think they have? As a second order of experience aren't they primarily ephemeral as a distraction, an entertainment, with no lasting impact on us? I suggest that in MacKinnon's attack on images of sex lies a capitulation to hyperreality, to the idea that images have utterly supplanted a reality of what are in fact subtly calibrated intuitions and judgements that ensure our ability to effectively evaluate and reconfigure these representations.

I've been away in the States a long time, and I sometimes wonder what has happened to the healthy irreverence that marked London art of the late 90s? That attitudinizing emerged and was acclaimed as an antidote to the political seriousness and responsibility of early 90s art—think of the Elizabeth Sussman Whitney Biennial that introduced Coco Fusco, Glenn Ligon, Janine Antoni, Byron Kim, Renée Green, etc. to a large public. When I came back in '95 after ten years in New York I couldn't believe how unusually trashy British TV had become (remember Davina McCall's *Stand By Your Man* and the program *So Graham Norton*) and I

couldn't initially understand the art I was seeing in artist-run East End galleries. I started to write about it as an attempt to figure it out. Sometimes this yBa counter-reaction was seen as rejecting 'political correctness'. Where the right wing exaggerated (some might say created) the phenomenon of 'political correctness' as a way to ridicule liberalism, British artists (Tory and Labour supporters) found an opportunity to turn against a reflexive critique of the use of language, image and behaviour in a feverish, often sophomoric irreverence (not a bad thing). That reaction involved an ethical inversion where artistic responsibility was taken to lie in a form of transgression that took pointlessness, unlearning and wit as the best way to annihilate sanctioned academic practice. Perhaps the earlier responsibilities simply waited for the party to finish before resuming their place on the stage. If you compare the sensitivity shown towards building interiors by the installations that London group Space Explorations (Louis Nixon, Matthew Tickle, and others) made in the mid-90s with Simon Starling's carefully researched investigations into histories of nature and culture there does seem to be a return of the same.

I'll conclude with a quick look at some work involving representations of naked women recently shown in New York and for which I don't yet have a clear understanding or opinion. At Wallspace in September Kate Costello showed small prints of naked models posing in front of large psychedelic paper paintings. I'm glad I asked first because Costello replied to my questions by saying that her work makes no reference to 1960-70s soft porn, that instead the poses reference early 20th century figurative paintings. She's interested, she explains, in exploring the intricacies of the relationship between artist and muse, as she puts it, and that these are not about desire but about aspects of the body in relation to the history of fine art representations. Emphatically, she says, they do not sexualize the models.



Kate Costello

Lisa Yuscavage's September show at David Zwirner certainly sexualized her female subjects, as we've been familiar with for years. Some of these were on an epic scale, and felt like

history paintings of obscure, troubling desires translated into riveting kitsch of a Maxfield Parrish type. The fluid showy manner of paint handling was in this context erotically charged, in tune with the subject matter.



Lisa Yuscavage

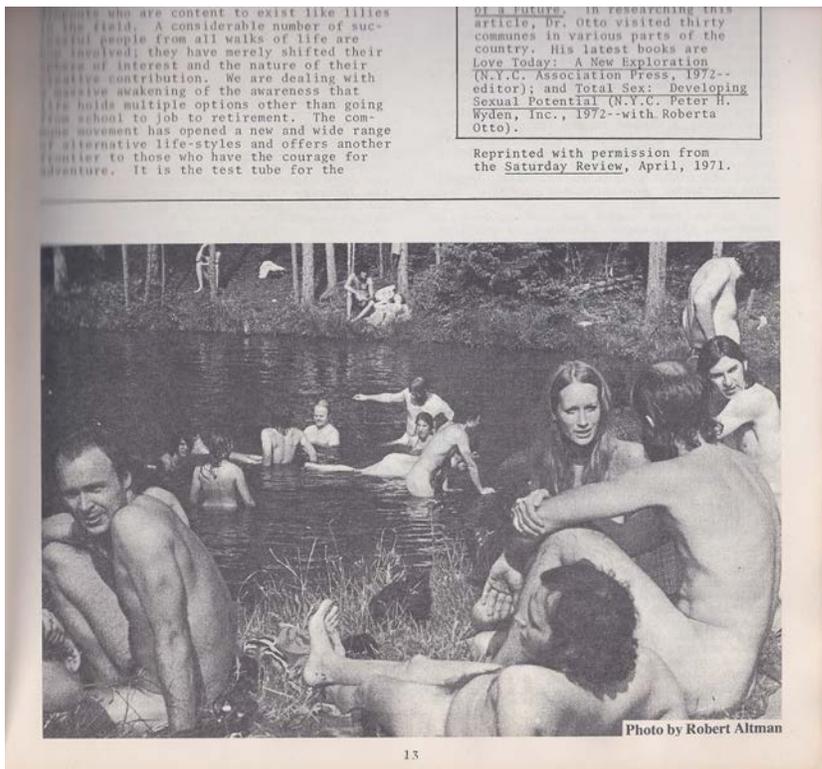
I didn't see Laurel Nakadate's MoMA PS1 show last summer but there's enough material online to get a pretty good idea of what she achieved there. She is adamantly a feminist (not post-feminist) yet considers the early videos where she dances with lonely men as most successful the more their exploitation appears uncertain. Is she exploiting these men or being exploited by them?



Laurel Nakadate

With these three artists, in spite of the clever image construction, the empowered models, the stare back at camera or spectator, the virtuoso paint handling, the risky encounters with desiring strangers, does the work really do more than continue a capitulation to an economy constantly requiring new representations of female nakedness offering themselves for delectation?

As a reflection on the mutability of images across history, my final picture ends on a somewhat gloomy note. In the late 60s the commune movement radicalized thousands of young Americans who moved to the remote countryside as a way to escape conventional professional expectations and dependence on commodities. They set up new family structures, pioneered organic farming, experimented with living off the grid, and initiated open land policies. Recent scholarship has proposed that we consider communes like Drop City as artworks in their own right, the perfect sublation of art into life. You might have expected a radicalization of gender relations to emerge from this revolution, but by and large it did not. Some strong feminist writing and all-women establishments come out of the communes simply because women got such a rough deal. They felt obliged to take on a ridiculous share of housework and child-minding responsibilities while being expected to welcome multiple sexual partners. Photographs from the time that represent this loosening of conventional living structures appeared in alternative magazines as a celebration of the achievements of the counterculture. An image of a large number of hippies skinny dipping is perhaps relatively neutral,



but you might agree with me that this second one showing topless women (and a man on the left) making bread that starts life as a representation of freedom has, over the intervening timespan, inverted to one that represents servitude and sexualized spectacle.

One hour a day is a low estimate of the amount of time one has to spend 'keeping' oneself. By foisting this off on others, man has seven hours a week -- one working day -- more to play with his mind and not his human needs. Over the course of generations it is easy to see whence evolved the horrifying abstractions of modern life.

6. With the death of each form of oppression, life changes and new forms evolve. English aristocrats at the turn of the century were horrified at the idea of enfranchising working men, were sure that it signalled the death of civilization and a return to barbarism. Some working men even fell for this line. Similarly with the minimum wage, abolition of slavery, and female suffrage. Life changes but it goes on -- don't fall for any crap about the death of everything if men take a turn at the dishes. They will imply that you are holding back the Revolution (their Revolution). But you are advancing it.

7. Keep checking up. Periodically consider who's actually doing the jobs. These things have a way of backsliding so that a year later once again the woman is doing everything. Use timesheets if necessary. Also bear in mind what the worst jobs are, namely the ones that have to be done every day or several times a day. Also the ones that are dirty -- it's more pleasant to pick up

books, newspapers, etc., than to wash dishes. Alternate the bad jobs. It's the daily grind that gets you down. Also make sure that you don't have the responsibility for the housework with occasional help from him. 'I'll cook dinner for you tonight' implies that it's really your job and isn't he a nice guy to do some of it for you.

8. Most men had a bachelor life during which they did not starve or become encrusted with crud or buried under the litter. There is a taboo that says that women mustn't strain themselves in the presence of men -- we haul around fifty pounds of groceries if we have to, but aren't allowed to open a jar if there is someone around to do it for us. The reverse side of the coin is that men aren't supposed to be able to take care of themselves without a woman. Both are excuses for making women do the housework.

9. Beware of the double whammy. He won't do the little things he always did because you're now a 'Liberated Woman', right? Of course, he won't do anything else either....

I was just finishing this when my husband came in and asked what I was doing. Writing a paper on housework. "Housework?" he said. "Housework? Oh my god how trivial can you get. A paper on housework."

--Spectator, UPS - vol. 10, #8

