

Arsachne

A timorous child, she seemed forever hiding, vanishing behind her mother when the doorbell rang, retreating under the coffee table as fear-inspiring visitors appeared. She preferred the world of her own invention, with fictional characters under her control.



*Living with
Cobwebs*

Myrel Chernick

JULY 22-AUGUST 12, 1995

PLUG IN INC.

EXHIBITED AT

VIDEO POOL STUDIO

WINNIPEG, CANADA

Untitled
1976



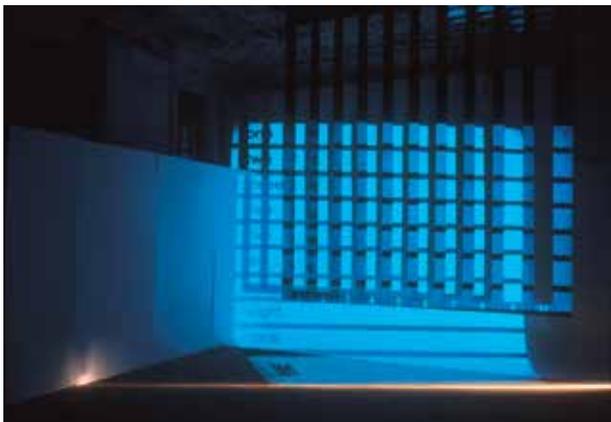
Untitled
1977

Photograph
by David Arky



The Blue Grotto
PS1, Queens,
NY
1977

Photograph by



Light Years

William Zimmer

Myrel Chernick's early installations were theatrical. They used light as a sculptural element, demanding a darkened encounter. Characteristically she filled all the space allotted her, though not all of the elements were solid. Ephemeral light and later words and images cast by projectors were major attractions. Theatrical with Chernick does not constitute histrionics (although some of the written phrases she has used in pieces have been quite exclamatory). Chernick's art is distinguished by a clarity and calm sense of purpose. I have always considered viewing one of her pieces as entering a special place conducive to meditation.

Chernick's work has its art historical roots in the strong shapes of Russian Constructivism. Her forte in the 1970s was setting the stage for original meetings of disparate, industrial elements—always set off by light that itself assumed firm shapes. One of her earliest pieces consisted of resin-coated rods, but it was the shadows cast by these rods that became primarily important. It is usual for Chernick to present us with familiar elements, but she presents them in fresh, unfamiliar, even mysterious ways. In 1977 I christened one of her installations *The Blue Grotto* because much of the magic resulted from the lighting.

The late 1970s saw a sea change as Chernick modified her mostly abstract way of working, giving primacy to language, both written and spoken on tape, and projected images. Phrases resonating with women's lives and projected images of ordinary women became indispensable elements. And the tone inevitably became French, as her history of involvement with that culture drew her to contemporary French thought. During that period she especially admired film directors such as Jean-Luc Godard (in fact her intense use of color is like his) and writers Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet. She would pay homage to them with frisson-producing phrases such as "She felt chills up and down her spine. She turned, only too late to notice the sliver of light that had appeared

on the opposite wall.” Often, when projected, a piece would be visually split, adding further ambiguity to the narrative. Chernick’s narratives may be cryptic, but they are always direct and clear in their constituent parts. Therefore they are alluring.

Over the years the work has grown greatly in its scope, although its boundaries are reassuring. Chernick continues to use readily accessible media such as projected slides and video monitors. She concentrates on commonplace situations. She brought together “a roomful of women” and encouraged them to have random conversation. The gathering was shown on a continuous film while projected over it were isolated gestures from famous paintings and sculptures of women. Chernick has been working on a simple film about two people crossing a street.

The range of her work has been stretched by a pair of accessible props, her usually willing ten-year-old twins. Recent work has ineluctably been about motherhood. It goes without saying that Chernick’s work is inherently feminist; most of the images are women and most of the dialogue is spoken by women.

Among recent pieces is a sculpture intended to upset. *On the Couch* is comprised of an old psychoanalyst’s couch with a rip up its center; on it a television set giving off constant static. The piece, based on Susan Smith’s drowning of her children, also has cobwebs and written ephemera drawn in silver. Chernick, who is dedicated to drawing meaning out of commonplace events and chance occurrences, was struck by the media’s attention to this tragedy. This led her to an expanded study of mothers who murder their children, incorporated into a subsequent piece, *On the Table*. But on the heels of *On the Table* appears a lovingly-produced videotape of her roots in Winnipeg, Canada. *She and I* has a cast of ordinary people who, given Chernick’s characteristic illumination, attain great significance.

Myrel Chernick is absorbed with the famous query of Freud’s: “What does a woman want?” From the position of having contemplated her art across a couple of decades, I sense that with her, although the answer might be elusive, provided it’s sufficiently illuminated, it’s near at hand.

New York City, April 1996

*A Roomful
of Women*
Baskerville
+ Watson
Gallery, 1987



On the Couch
Carriage House
Projects, Islip
Art Museum,
1996



Video still
She and I
1995





Untitled

1975



Chills

1978

Photograph by David Arky

Transition and Trajectory: the Art of Myrel Chernick

Cliff Eyland

A simple version of Myrel Chernick's story goes like this: she began as a sculptor of delicate porcelain works which, when installed in galleries, make a wavy tracery of thin solid shapes—3D drawings, really. Chernick has moved by stages since the early seventies toward multi-media installations using slide projectors, theatrical spotlights, lasers, film and video.

When she moved to New York in 1976, Chernick experienced a renewed interest in French literature, and made a conscious decision to include language in the work.

Slides from the mid-1970s onward show the development in her use of text: at first she used cryptic words as if they were primarily graphic material in a sculptural composition; then the texts got longer until, today, they can be read as short works of fiction.

An abbreviated history of the use of text by visual artists over the last twenty-five years more or less matches Chernick's own evolution as an artist/writer. Such a history could begin in the 1960s and 1970s with artists who used text in conceptual art as declarative bursts, formal visual elements, or as some formula or literal description. As conceptual artists expanded their texts into longer works, into "story art" and other forms, texts began almost to stand on their own, as if the visual art were the vehicle for the words and not the other way round—contemplation of literary meanings seemed more and more warranted. Chernick's recent writings can be appreciated either as meditations in their own right, or objects which (still) straddle a poetic zone between art and literature.

Chernick is a good writer, and her talent for writing enriches her art. Literary writing fits uneasily into the culture of contemporary art. Text within a work of art is often still received as if it were a form of documentation or appropriation. Although there are many badly-written texts in contemporary art, one is reminded by art like Chernick's that some artists are literate and even literary.

There are autobiographical elements to some of Chernick's recent slide-projected texts, but they are, according to the artist—and there is no

reason to doubt this—hybrids of fact and fiction. Chernick's 1984 book, *Women I Have Known* is a series of stories about women. The reader's speculative fancy of the stories' fact or fiction within their reception as works of art is anticipated by Chernick.

In her 1995 multi-media exhibition at Video Pool, co-sponsored by Plug In Inc., Chernick presented: a series of photographs of spider webs with text written on them; a video tape about a mother and children and their stories; and a slide show. Most of the texts are about motherhood and gender. The slide show texts and the character-generated texts, which run across the bottom of the video tape in this installation, display a wry and worldly feminism. In the video tape, a little girl makes up a story, a boy makes up a story, and a mother reads a children's story, all in voices which seem utterly quotidian and unscripted.

The slide show texts were projected split-screen on pink and blue grounds. Some of the texts are French, and quotations amongst them are credited to French theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, as well as to Virginia Woolf and Marguerite Duras. The appropriated texts in Chernick's installation are turned into a form of feminist fiction.

In a conversation with Chernick, I mentioned Mary Kelly's work in reference to Chernick's own focus on motherhood. Kelly is perhaps the foremost feminist artist to have made mixed-media works about the mother-child relationship. Chernick became aware of her work in the early eighties. In a famous piece called *Post-Partum Document*, Kelly refers to the psychoanalytical texts of Jacques Lacan, an icon of French feminism. Despite the (French) Lacanian references in Kelly's work, the clinical austerity of its museological presentation bespeaks an "Anglo-American" rather than a "Continental" sensibility, at least to me.

It is unusual to come across a contemporary American artist of Chernick's generation who loves the French culture and language as she does. Chernick's work displays the lack of closure which I identify not necessarily with a knowing reference to Lacan, but rather with a play of ambiguities highlighted in French feminist theory which can be linked to a cultural "Frenchness." What is fascinating about Chernick's work is that it resists certain received ideas about "French," "American" and even "Canadian" sensibilities in art.



Living with Cobwebs

Video Pool Studio 1995
Photograph by Larry Glawson



Mommy Mommy
Video Pool Studio
1995

Photograph by
Larry Glawson



Woman Mystery/Femme Mystère

Hayden Gallery, MIT, 1982



Her Hands Are Tied

White Columns, New York, 1987

Chernick became an artist as many feminisms were emerging in contemporary art for the first time. Many woman artists who were born in the 1940s and 1950s have approached art making and art history in unprecedented ways. Their experience is unique: artists younger than Chernick and her contemporaries have benefited from feminist advances in the art world which have changed the conditions of art and the reception for women artists; women more than a generation older than Chernick can only, with exceptions, be the objects of historical recovery. The successes and failures of feminists of this transitional generation mark their art as transitional. Attempting to construct retrospective exhibitions and texts about such artists must account for a larger unfinished social project. Some feminist practices have exposed the museum as a patriarchal institution, and so no wonder that many artists and curators have ambivalent attitudes to retrospective views, which can be constructed as: a feminist victory; a capitulation to traditional historiography; or even an appropriation by museums of feminist work. It depends on one's point of view. Feminist issues are still warmly debated in the art world, and so the issue of the reception of feminist projects in the larger society continues to bear on the legitimacy of the museum's take on this or that feminist-influenced art. An attempt to give Chernick's work its due is complicated by one's sense of where feminism stands now. Is Chernick's work part of the victory or the defeat of feminism in contemporary life?

Too, Chernick has been making art long enough to see critical shifts in critical emphases in the art world. *Woman Mystery/Femme Mystère* (1982-84) (for example) presents a complex analogy between the construction of formalist art and the construction of female identity. This work would be indecipherable outside of a certain high art debate which no longer exists. The everyday content of Chernick's recent work, for example *Living with Cobwebs*, has more to do with anthropological models of art than this century's high art paradigms. (See *Dirt and Domesticity* for an interpretation of Chernick through the ideas of anthropologist Mary Douglas.) However, a neat parallel between Chernick's progress through formal play toward socially-engaged art and the move by Russian

Constructivists earlier this century away from formalism toward social activism can re-embed her work within a vision of art history which the anthropologists would not accept. Because of her education and awareness of precedent, not only of the story of Russian art, but also critiques of the story of such art historical stories, Chernick's production—and also the art of many of her colleagues—may have been a conscious construction of a progress from the austerities of formal art toward the complexities of social life which we have seen before, in Russian art and later in American art.

When, in conversation, Chernick says, "I came of age during minimalism and was deeply affected by the idea of stripping down to the core, removing the extrinsic. But my work has always been visually rich, beauty (that politically incorrect word) being something I can never get away from, those foolish ideas about the transcendence of art embedded in my psyche," and when she characterizes formalist art as a (masculine) gendered language, the enrichment of the vocabulary of formalist art is not on her mind. Instead, minimalism becomes a reference (see *Woman Mystery/Femme Mystère*) which characterizes minimalism as one gendered language which is supplemented by another—verbal—language). Chernick is not interested in expanding minimalism's (or formalism's) range and complexity but rather in distancing herself from it by characterizing such work as being of a period, worked out, somewhat dead, or at least so familiar as to be a cliché.

Chernick's impulses to play with form, colour and graphic design are now subsumed in the careful production of books and video tapes, and in the careful choosing of installation and video elements such as the second-hand video monitor that is just right for *Mommy Mommy*, or the tattered psychoanalyst's couch that figures in the more recent work *On the Couch*.

As she has, artists younger than Chernick have inherited both minimalist art and feminist art, but not the transition from one to the other. The historical shift involved in the first transition (in the work of many artists, not just Chernick's) from the clean lines and ideology of minimalist art into dense webs of feminist social content cannot be repeated anymore than one can have one's first child twice. One can quote minimalist art now, but one cannot characterize it as a "gendered language" now without

accounting for its rhetorical transformation by artists such as Chernick.

Part of my sense of Chernick's generation being "transitional" has to do with the sense in the wider culture that boomer feminists are demographically the first people to age with feminist consciousness. When Chernick and her colleagues get pregnant, go through menopause and grow old, we continue to watch them to see how they deal with the next stage of their lives, because there are no precedents for their experiences. And so Chernick had children, and it affected her art.

Apropos of Chernick's *She Was, She Wasn't* (1992) Fraser Ward writes: "Here experience guarantees little: the conventional ground of domesticity, the relation between motherhood and femininity, is itself a complex, ongoing interplay of representations, a continuous process of intermingling. It's not a hybrid but a process of hybridization: in short, it's a mess. And just as well."

["Foreign and Familiar Bodies" in *Dirt and Domesticity*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art 1992 p.35]

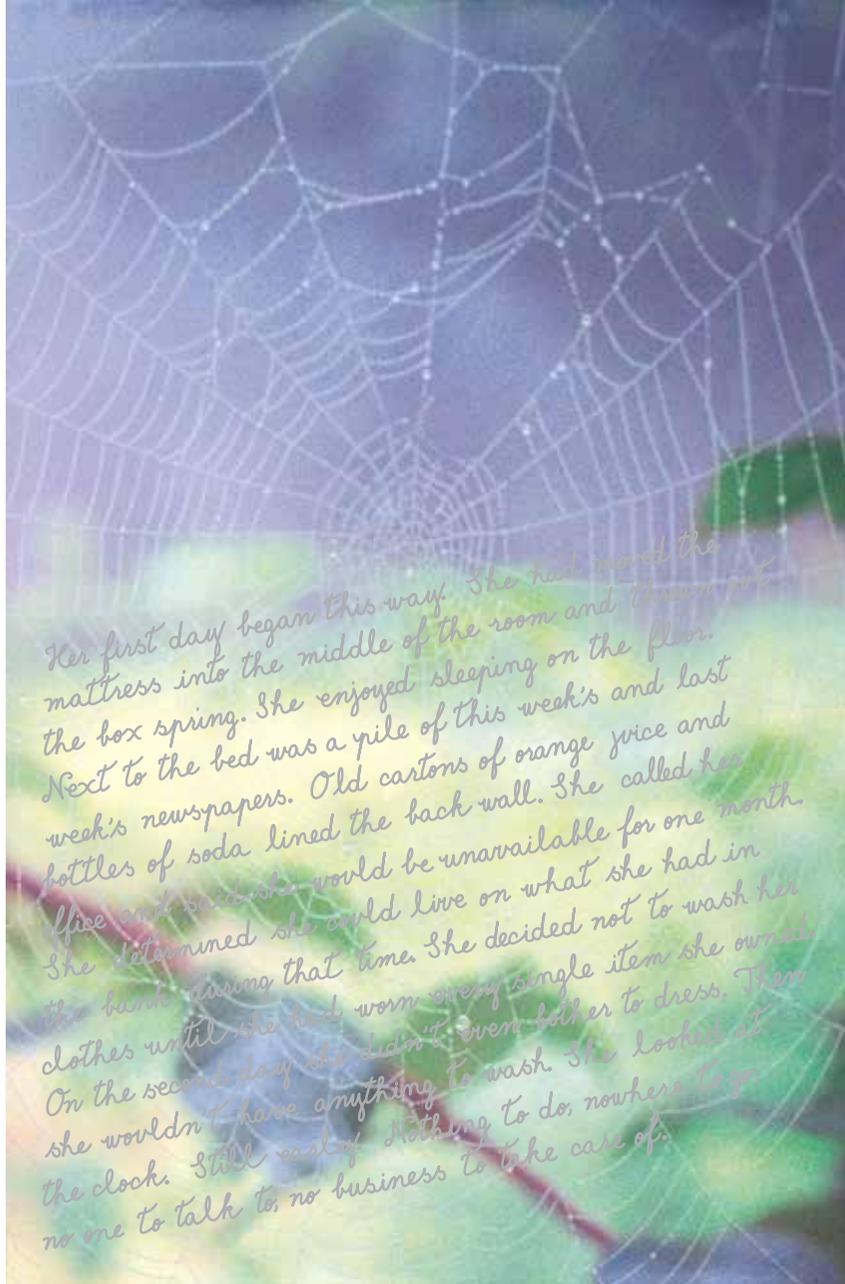
The clean lines of minimalism seem especially lost within such a life.

Winnipeg, September 1996



She Was, She Wasn't

Video Pool Studio 1995



Arachne

16 x20", 1995

Living with Cobwebs

Myrel Chernick

Spiders once frightened me. Their fat, neckless bodies and gangly stick legs, gossamer strands suspended between branches, entangled me in a soft secret noose as I passed. Or they appeared silently in front of my face, hanging by indiscernible threads. I developed a bloodcurdling shriek to announce one's presence, precipitating the appearance of family members, anxious, at my side. Once the spider was removed, I was gently chided for causing such disruption. I relished the drama.

This, of course, couldn't last. In late adolescence I observed an intruder gliding noiselessly across the wall, paused a moment before screaming and thought, this is silly and childish. I'll stop. Spiders became my silent companions. As a college student I traveled through the southwest and shared a concrete porch with a black widow. I was fascinated and repelled by her potential deadliness, sleek black body and red hourglass. She lived in a crack in the cement and I studied her from what I considered a safe distance. She never abandoned her web in my presence. I was told she would become dangerous when reproducing (the sheer number of black widow offspring was daunting) and so bought a can of exterminator and destroyed her.

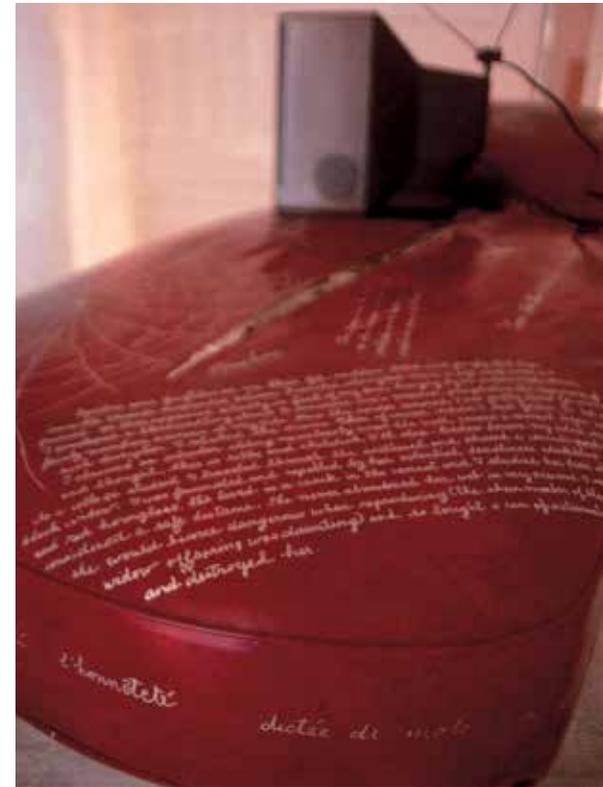
The couch was covered with cobwebs and empty boxes. I discovered it last summer in the ladies' room of the grocery store near my house, where I had gone to accompany my daughter to the bathroom. I couldn't get that couch out of my mind. I had been musing on a series of video sculptures, ready-mades, that incorporated domesticity. A retro daybed, with a broken adjustable headrest, the couch was covered in dingy maroon vinyl. The size and shape reminded me of a psychoanalyst's couch. Although it may have once been comfortable, it now boasted a convenient center slit which exposed springs and padding, rife with symbolism. As a former analysand, I had an intimate knowledge of the travails and turmoils of the couch. I intended to cover it with doodles,

jottings, headlines that caught my attention, the thoughts and fantasies of a fragmented artist/mother's existence. A TV set, tuned to static, facing the wall, and projecting an eerie, flickering light, would complete the installation. I lugged the couch home on top of my car, and eventually cleaned it over my son's protests, sucking spiders and egg sacs into the body of the vacuum cleaner. There it sat, in a corner of my studio, waiting for me to get to work.

Throughout my adult life I have been a builder of cupboards. Plagued by a lack of storage space in various abodes, and hampered by middling carpentry skills, I have used discarded building materials to construct closets, makeshift shelves and cabinets. My personal environment is cluttered. Works of art, equipment and memorabilia accumulate, collecting dust. Cobwebs abound. And so I crave order. Then I notice an unused corner in which to build something new.

Artist time is limited. Family and freelance work preoccupy me. Creative energy tends to come in spurts, and doesn't always coincide with its allotted hour. I find myself pausing on street corners, making notes. Or I wake at 3 AM with an idea, jot it down, and find it scrawled on a scrap of paper, illegible, the next morning. A functioning home generates interminable chores. Somehow it's easier during limited time to clean and straighten with immediate and visible results, and the brief satisfactions of domesticity (I'm doing this for them) than make art, which requires intense concentration and unpredictable outcome. Often I have so much to do I don't know where to turn next. I find myself flitting from project to project, aspiring to hide things away. Cupboards and drawers keep out dust and cobwebs. The other day, as I hung the door on the new linen closet for the third and final time, I thought how setting impossible goals of order could easily prevent me from finishing anything.

Arachne and her ceaseless weaving tantalize me. The cobwebs I vacuumed last week have reappeared. Today, the new cupboard completed, sheets and towels neatly arranged, I'll go into my studio and shut the door behind me. But I just had a great storage idea for the children's room....



On the Couch Carriage House Project Space, Islip, New York 1996



Mommy Mommy video still 1994

EDUCATION

Whitney Museum Independent Study Program 1976
MFA The School of the Art Institute of Chicago 1976
BA Rutgers University 1974
Rhode Island School of Design 1970-72

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS AND SCREENINGS

1998 *mothersmotherotherlover*, Hanes Art Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC
Relics and Remembrance, The Bristol Art Museum, Bristol, RI
BIG ART in small places, El Bohio Cultural Center, New York, NY

1997 *Giftland VI*, Printed Matter, New York, NY
Generations, A.I.R. Gallery, New York, NY
BIG ART in small places, Judson Memorial Church, New York, NY

1996 *Projects*, Islip Art Museum, East Islip, NY

1995 *Living with Cobwebs*, one person exhibition, Video Pool Studio, Winnipeg, Canada

1994 *Informationsdienst/Information Service*, Goethe House, New York, NY

1993 *Under Contract*, Randolph St. Gallery, Chicago, IL

1992 *Dirt and Domesticity: The Construction of the Feminine*, Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center, New York, NY.

1991 *Collage: New Applications*, Lehman College Art Gallery, Bronx, NY

1990 Washington Square Windows, Grey Art Gallery, New York, NY

1988 *Messages to the Public*, Spectacolor Lightboard, Times Square, NY
Sculpture Space, Utica, NY

1987 *Heavenly Embrace*, Baskerville + Watson Gallery, New York, NY
Staircase Installation, White Columns Gallery, New York, NY

1985 *Thought Objects*, Cash Newhouse Gallery, New York, NY

1984 *New Work, New York/Outside New York*, The New Museum, New York, NY

1983 *Extra-Critical Role*, Gabrielle Bryers Gallery, New York, NY
Film as Installation, The Clocktower, New York, NY

1982 *Mediums of Language*, Hayden Gallery, MIT, Cambridge, MA
Drie Installaties, International Cultural Center, Antwerp, Belgium

1981 Artists Space, New York, NY

1979 *4 Installations*, The Alternative Museum, New York, NY
SHOW, 515 Broadway, New York, NY

1978 *Spaces II*, S.U.N.Y. College at Old Westbury, Old Westbury, NY

1977 Special Project, P.S. 1, Queens, NY

FELLOWSHIPS

1995 National Endowment for the Arts United States/Canada Creative Artists' Residency
1989-90 National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artists' Fellowship
1986 RAW Residency, Hartford, Connecticut
1980 CAPS Fellowship, New York State Council on the Arts

REVIEWS/TEXTS

"New York/Winnipeg, Winnipeg/New York," article by the artist, *Poolside*, Fall 1998
Cliff Eyland, "Transition and Trajectory: the Art of Myrel Chernick," *ibid*, Fall 1997
"M/E/A/N/I/N/G from A to Z: A Visual Forum," *M/E/A/N/I/N/G # 19/20*, May 1996.
Reproduction
Helen Harrison, "Projects," *The New York Times*, August 18, 1996
Phyllis Rosser, "There's No Place Like Home," *New Feminist Criticism*, HarperCollins, New York, 1994
David McKracken, "Under Contract," *The Chicago Tribune*, February 12, 1993
"Forum: on Motherhood, Art and Apple Pie," *M/E/A/N/I/N/G # 12*, November 1992.
Jonas Kover, "Lending a Helping Hand," *The Sunday Observer-Dispatch*, Utica, New York, January 17, 1988
Klaus Ottman, "Heavenly Embrace," *Flash Art*, October 1987
Andy Grundberg, "Photography: Heavenly Embrace," *The New York Times*, May 22, 1987
Women I Have Known, self-published, 1985. Artist's book
Robert Taylor, "Mediums of Language," *The Boston Globe*, December 19, 1982
"Vorm, verf, lign en film," *De Nieuwe Gazet*, Antwerp, September 16, 1982
"Antwerpen," *De Standaard*, Antwerp, September 11-12, 1982
"Cinematographie en grafiek in het ICC," *De Morgen*, Gent, September 10, 1982
William Zimmer, "Group Show," *The Soho Weekly News*, February 18, 1981
_____ "Art Pick," October 11, 1979
_____ "Group Show," February 1, 1979
_____ "Myrel Chernick," October 6, 1977

CATALOGUES

Projects, Islip Art Museum, 1996. Essay by Cathy Valenza
In Three Dimensions: Women Sculptors of the '90s, Catalogue of Women Sculptors, The Snug Harbor Cultural Center, 1995
Dirt and Domesticity: The Construction of the Feminine, The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992. Essay by Frazer Ward.
New Work, New York/Outside New York, The New Museum, 1984. Essay by Lynn Gumpert
Film as Installation, The Clocktower, 1983. Text by the artist.
Mediums of Language, Hayden Gallery, MIT, 1982. Interview by Katy Kline.
Drie Installaties, International Cultural Center, Antwerp, 1982. Essay by Hilde Van Leuven.
Text by the artist
4 Installations, The Alternative Museum, 1979. Essay by Robert Browning

MULTIMEDIA INSTALLATIONS

1998	<i>The Women in His Life</i>
1998	<i>From the Inside/Out</i>
1995-96	<i>On the Table</i>
1993-94	<i>Mommy Mommy</i>
1995	<i>On the Couch</i>
1990-93	<i>She Was, She Wasn't</i>
1888-89	<i>Your Hands Are Tied</i>
1985-87	<i>The Woman Lesson</i>
1982-84	<i>Woman Mystery/Femme Mystère</i>
1981	<i>Don't Make Waves</i>
1979-80	<i>Parts of Speech I and II</i>

VIDEOTAPES

1995	<i>She and I</i>
(in progress)	<i>Dangling Participles</i>
	<i>4 Corners</i>

I gratefully acknowledge those who have contributed so generously to this project: the writers, Cliff Eyland and William Zimmer; Val Klassen at Video Pool; and Anne and Jack Chernick, whose continuous support enabled not only the publication of this book, but the execution of many of the works within.

Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are by the artist.

Copyright © 1998 by Myrel Chernick

For information concerning this book, please contact:

Myrel Chernick, 7 Mercer Street, New York, NY 10013

Produced at the Print Center, Inc., 225 Varick St.,
New York, NY 10014, a non-profit facility for literary
and arts-related publications. (212) 206-8465

Arsachne

A timorous child, she seemed forever hiding, vanishing behind her mother when the doorbell rang, retreating under the coffee table as fear-inspiring visitors appeared. She preferred the world of her own invention, with fictional characters under her control.