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The Sentimentality of Ree Morton's *Signs of Love*

Susan Richmond

Whatever happened to feeling?
—Ree Morton

Ree Morton (1936–1977) created *Signs of Love* (fig. 1) in the fall of 1976. Sprawling, colorful, and multidimensional, the installation consists of a handful of panel paintings, numerous sculpted wood and Celastic objects, and several words made of felt letters. Of the forty or so elements that make up *Signs of Love*, some bear more obvious connections than others to the theme evoked by the title: a pair of portraits positioned beneath a dark red swag, for instance, recalls the proverbial prince and princess of fairy-tale lore (fig. 2), while a painted panel featuring pink and blue swans alludes to other historical narratives of romance (fig. 3).¹ Various wood and Celastic objects attached to or propped against the walls—a pastel-colored landscape painting featuring a single blooming rose, a festooned pink sign bearing the title of the work, a set of garland-wrapped maypoles, and a profusion of jaunty flowers and fluttery bows—likewise strike a chord of sweetness, romance, and joy. Though other elements—notably the bright yellow ladders, the two floor-bound objects fashioned to look like overflowing laundry baskets, and the eight felt words positioned along the walls—prove more difficult to interpret so clearly in relation to the subject announced by the title, an initial impression of Morton's installation is one of an exuberant celebration of love.

Morton initiated *Signs of Love* not long after making a concerted decision to introduce a more personal, expressive tenor into her work. A solo exhibition in the winter of 1974–75 at John Doyle Gallery in Chicago publicized this move while also revealing its stakes. Several works in the show alluded to the themes of love, domesticity, childhood, and maternity. The responses to the exhibition, though not extensive, were ambivalent about some of Morton's choices. Summing up this perspective, one critic offered equivocally that one's position on art with such content “would partially depend on one's value of the personal in art as to whether it was seen as positive or negative.”² In point of fact, the mainstream art world at the time was not particularly receptive to art of an overly personal nature, or at least personal in the terms favored

1 Ree Morton, *Signs of Love*, 1976. Acrylic, oil, colored pencil, watercolor, and pastel on nitrocellulose-impregnated canvas, wood, and canvas with felt, dimensions variable. Installation view, *Singular Visions*, Whitney Museum of American Art, N.Y., 2011–12. Whitney Museum of American Art, N.Y., Gift of the Ree Morton Estate 90.2a–n © Estate of Ree Morton. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, N.Y. Photo: Sheldon C. Collins

by Morton. In looking back at these circumstances, the art historian Anna Chave notes that artists and critics at the time saw the refusal of artistic subjectivity as a radical gesture against narrowly conceived, biographical modes of inquiry, a perspective borne out by the ostensibly impersonal character of a lot of pop, minimalist, and conceptual practices of the 1960s and 1970s. Although Chave usefully demonstrates how this foreclosure on artistic subjectivity was only ever partially or unevenly applied by those who purported to uphold it, she contends it nonetheless remained especially problematic for women at the time who aspired to equal critical standing with their male peers, as they risked having their work branded “retrogressive” if it included the slightest hint of personal or expressive content.³

For her part, the critic Lucy Lippard believed the opposition to personalized content in the art of the 1970s reflected a stance, more broadly, against affective art. Openly trafficking in feelings at the time, the critic claimed in 1980, was seen to attract the wrong kind of audience for the wrong reasons: “the capacity actually to *move* an audience through real and specific feelings is denigrated as crude, sentimental and crowd-pleasing by that part of the art establishment that considers an emotionally affective audience as escaping art’s proper spheres of influence.”⁴ Although not directed to it as such, Lippard’s words proved prophetic of the critical reception that *Signs of Love* has inspired since its first public exhibition, a reception that continues today to question the propriety of Morton’s exuberant overtures. In what follows, I elucidate the stakes of Morton’s decision to bring more feeling into her work and, more specifically, draw on recent scholarship on sentimentality to propose a new reading of *Signs of Love*.

2,3 Ree Morton, *Signs of Love*
(details of left and right sides of
installation) in *Singular Visions*,
Whitney Museum of American
Art, N.Y., 2011–12

Cheap sentimentality—get on with it.

—Ree Morton

A relative latecomer to the art world, Morton earned an MFA in 1970 from the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia at the age of thirty-three. Having recently divorced her husband, a naval officer, she soon relocated to New York City, a move for which she also temporarily gave up custody of their three children in order to focus on her budding career. Over the next few years, Morton maintained a studio in New York and commuted to a teaching position at the Philadelphia College of Art. By 1975 her life had become increasingly peripatetic as she accepted a number of short-term positions around the country. Morton was living in Chicago in 1977, when she died from injuries sustained in an automobile accident.⁵

During the period 1970–74 Morton participated in a number of exhibitions with Gordon Matta-Clark, Scott Burton, Jacqueline Winsor, Bill Bollinger, and Barbara Zucker, to name just a few of the figures who formed her milieu early on. Along with Robert Morris, Lynda Benglis, and the late Eva Hesse, critics at the time deemed these artists important suc-

cessors to abstract minimalist practices of the 1960s.⁶ Retaining the minimalist interest in pared-down forms and repetition, they concomitantly eschewed its geometric austerity in favor of pliable materials and organic configurations. Morton experimented with a range of natural and man-made elements at this time. Increasingly, however, she favored tree branches and raw lumber, which she frequently combined with map-like drawings to create free-form wall and floor-bound installations (fig. 4). A sprinkling of quotations in the artist's sketchbooks from the early 1970s indicates that she was an avid reader of phenomenological and existential theories of space, which provided a conceptual framework for her interest in clarifying and concentrating her experiences and memories of places.⁷ While these qualities would continue to inform Morton's practice over the next few years, a prominent shift also occurred by the time of the artist's solo exhibition at John Doyle Gallery in early 1975.

The most notable changes in Morton's work around 1974–75 included the incorporation of words into her compositions as well as a turn to more overtly decorative motifs. For reasons I detail in greater length below, the artist's discovery in 1974 of the molding material Celastic occurred in tandem with these shifts.⁸ Whereas her previous work only hinted at personal narratives, Morton's Celastic sculptures of 1974–75 appeared to invoke content reflective of the artist's desire to explore more emotional states of mind. Indicative of this shift, *Solitary, or Rarely 2* (fig. 5) is a wall relief fashioned from Celastic into the form of a wrinkled yellow drape with a bright blue underside and trim, its title words roughly embossed and be-glittered across its surface in red and black paint. Morton also affixed two bare lightbulbs to its front, their electric cords running awkwardly along and down the side of the work. *Solitary, or Rarely 2* strikes a maudlin

and slightly tawdry tone, an effect imparted as much by the artist's formal and material choices as by the wording of the title, the latter conjuring up overwrought themes of romantic solitude, the transience of youth, or love gone awry. Lifted from a vintage field guide on wildflowers, the title phrase "solitary, or rarely 2" functioned as a ready-made element that enabled Morton to "get at oneself," as she noted at the time in one of her sketchbooks.⁹ This strategy of drawing on cultural or public sources to illuminate private states of mind is one the artist would exploit over the next couple of years.

In the fall of 1975 Morton relocated to San Diego for a one-year visiting position at the University of California. In the spring of 1976 she also had a studio space and exhibition at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, a feminist environment that likely fostered her willingness to explore progressively more decorative, more exuberant formal choices and personal content.¹⁰ Morton's interest in phenomenological concepts of space did not lessen by this juncture, but it was increasingly steeped in more overt, feminine associations, including a seemingly unapologetic engagement with romantic themes. *Signs of Love* was the culmination of this trajectory.

Over the years since its inception, curators have consistently remarked on the effusive tone of *Signs of Love*. On the occasion of its installation in 1978 at UC Berkeley's

University Art Museum, Michael Auping pronounced the work "like a poetic valentine brought to stage-set proportion."¹¹ Of its inclusion in 1980 in a retrospective of Morton's career at the New Museum, Allan Schwartzman and Kathleen Thomas likewise deemed the artist's project "an emotional reckoning" and "a joyous celebration . . . almost saccharine in its sentimentality."¹² In a similar vein, when the Whitney Museum of American Art acquired *Signs of Love* in 1990, curator Lisa Phillips called the work a "melodramatic ode to the romantic and fleeting aspects of love," but only after admitting that its bold aesthetic and affective character shocked some viewers when it was first exhibited at the Whitney, in its Biennial of 1977.¹³

As Morton's last large-scale sculptural installation, the work has not suffered from curatorial neglect, but neither has it inspired much acclaim on the handful of occasions on which it has been on public view. For instance, of its most recent display as part of *Singular Visions*, an exhibition of 2010–12 at the Whitney, a *New York Times* critic proposed that *Signs of Love* "look[ed] depressingly like a Hallmark valentine."¹⁴ A glance backward finds similar critical valuations. For his part, Hilton Kramer declared its presence in the 1977 Biennial "a great hit with the schoolchildren who are marched through the Whitney for the purposes of cultural enlightenment," a backhanded compliment equating *Signs of Love* with childish tastes.¹⁵ Likewise, its inclusion in the traveling exhibition *Immaterial Objects*,

- 4 Ree Morton, *Untitled*, 1973. Watercolor, pencil, and crayon on canvas with wood blocks, 96 x 68 ½ in. Installation view, Generali Foundation, Vienna, 2008 © Estate of Ree Morton. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, N.Y. Photo: Markus Wörgötter

- 5 Ree Morton, *Solitary, or Rarely 2*, 1974. Enamel and glitter on wood and Celastic, lightbulbs, 15 x 41 x 2 in. Installation view, Generali Foundation, Vienna, 2008
© Estate of Ree Morton. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, N.Y. Photo: Markus Wörgötter

organized by the Whitney Museum in 1989, led William Zimmer to conclude that Morton's installation was "too saccharine in the company of the tough stuff." As part of a group of works indicative of a period of sculptural practices (primarily the 1960s and 1970s) marked by radical material experimentation and production, *Signs of Love* simply did "not hold up" for the critic.¹⁶

For Lisa Liebmann, in a lengthy and insightful review of Morton's retrospective in 1980 at the New Museum, the "sweet romanticism" of *Signs of Love* also marked an unwelcome turn for an artist who had established her reputation on more enigmatic abstract configurations and spatial explorations.¹⁷ While the critic does locate a dark element in Morton's Celastic works, which she calls a form of "gallows humor," ultimately Liebmann deems the direction of *Signs of Love* ill-fated. In noting how the installation "confront[ed] 'femaleness,'" the critic concludes: "Engaging though this voice is, the choice was perhaps unfortunate. By having so identified and aligned herself, Morton ultimately made 'a woman artist' a term that fits her more conclusively than she would have perhaps liked."¹⁸ Here, the critic implies, *Signs of Love* seemed specifically, and negatively, gendered, and thus cause for some concern.

Whether stated explicitly or not, what these reviewers have taken issue with over the years is the sentimentality in Morton's work, which, as Liebmann infers, carried certain perils, not least of which was its alignment with a gendered sensibility. This critical resistance, in turn, reflects a broader modern tradition of denigrating sentimentalism and the (principally female) audiences attracted to it, a situation Lippard's quotation above pertinently captures. Though not always regarded with suspicion, since about the mid-nineteenth century sentimentalism has been routinely subject to aesthetic and ethical condemnation.¹⁹ Despite shifting historical and cultural contexts, certain qualities of sentimentalism are understood to endure: one of its greatest flaws, critics propose, lies in its perceived use of disingenuous emotions to manipulate audience responses. The audience, for its part, fails or, perhaps, refuses to see the deception, instead embracing the sentimental for the uncomplicated view of the world it promotes. As the psychologist Andrew Winston posits, sentimentality is a "mode of thinking characterized by idealization and simplification, with an emphasis on themes of sweetness, goodness, dearness, blamelessness, nobility, and vulnerability of the object."²⁰ In this regard, sentimentality softens the rough edges of reality through reductive or conventionalized plots. For its detractors, it inspires in audiences a willful affirmation of

the simply positive and a blind refusal to deal directly with the cognitive complexities of actual life circumstances.

Another equally powerful stigma attached to modern expressions of sentimentality concerns an overidentification with women's activities and interests. Though not the exclusive province of women, modern sentimentality is frequently regarded as such. This gendered reading is largely the consequence of the modern correlation of emotionality with the private and the feminine, which in turn leads to a conflation of the sentimental with, more specifically, white middle-class domesticity.²¹ For critics, this alignment with women and the home proves reason enough for dismissing sentimentality and the audiences drawn to it.

In more recent years, however, a number of scholars have proffered alternative assessments of the cultural value of women's sentimental texts. Joanne Dobson, for instance, proposes that nineteenth-century sentimental literature provided its readers a form of "human connection, both personal and communal" that enabled them to deal more effectively with the emotions inspired by personal losses and larger cultural tragedies.²² As such, this function of sentimentalism justified a reliance on hackneyed or conventional story lines, which, as Dobson suggests, were "intended to communicate meaning with minimal impediment."²³ Though her assessment is historically specific, Dobson isolates characteristics other scholars have identified in more contemporary contexts.

Notably, in her book of 2008, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, Lauren Berlant tracks the abiding popularity of sentimentality across women's popular culture in the twentieth century, arguing that the sentimental mode of address continues to offer audiences a means to compensate for the inevitability of life's failures, losses, and disappointments. Like Dobson, Berlant does not attempt to divest sentimentality of its association with women, middlebrow domesticity, and female emotionality but, instead, to determine why audiences remain wedded to the conventionality of the sentimental plot. To that end, she submits that sentimental texts generate a shared fantasy of a "better good life" through the production of an "intimate public." A public is intimate, she writes, "when it foregrounds affective and emotional attachments located in fantasies of the common, the everyday, and a sense of ordinariness, a space where the social world is rich with anonymity and local recognitions, and where challenging and banal conditions of life take place in proximity to the attentions of power but also squarely in the radar of a recognition that can be provided by other humans."²⁴ Sentimentalism gives audiences proximity to a communal sense of well-being and belonging, however temporary, generic, or mediated such proximity proves to be in actuality. In fact, and not unlike Dobson, Berlant is especially interested in how the intimate public of sentimental texts provides a mode of survival and improvisation for the socially disenfranchised.

Berlant's reading points to some ways in which to reconsider Morton's recourse in *Signs of Love* to overtly sentimental clichés. A broader glance at her practice suggests that sentimentalism suited Morton's intention to bring a strongly personal and affective element to her work, and to have it convey the artist's sense of connecting to something larger than herself—whether to an intimate partner, a family, a community, an audience, or the world at large. At the same time, however, her engagement with sentimentality vacillates between earnestness and irony, transparency and inscrutability, a series of movements that indicates the artist wanted to use it, but critically.²⁵ Liebmann's reference to Morton's "gallows humor" implies as much, insofar as it locates some irony in the artist's use of the sentimental. The grim undertones implied by the term, however, are not entirely sufficient to account for the tonality of *Signs of Love*, which retains more joy and optimism than "gallows humor" might allow.

6 Ree Morton, page from "May 74–June 75 Large Black Hardbound Sketchbook." Felt-tip pen on paper, 14 x 10 3/4 in. Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc., N.Y. © Estate of Ree Morton. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, N.Y.

Morton knew the risks of using sentimental tropes, not least because of their pejorative associations with "bad art."²⁶ A sketchbook entry of 1973–74, for instance, finds the artist ruminating on her recent choice of floral motifs: "It is impossible not to be dealing with cliché when drawing flowers. How to do it and let that show?"²⁷ Another entry from a year or so later includes the line "Cheap sentimentality—get on with it," the latter portion of the phrase circled for emphasis (fig. 6).²⁸ A work such as *Solitary, or Rarely 2*, though not concerned specifically with flowers, is nonetheless in kind with Morton's musings: its billowy form, saturated colors, glittery surfaces, and built-in lighting system are steeped in the formal language of kitsch or "bad art." Despite her awareness of the negative connotations that they harbored, at some point by 1974 Morton became committed to dealing with sentimental tropes in her work.²⁹

Other entries in the artist's sketchbooks from this period give some indication of why Morton may have found sentimentality appealing. For instance, in reaction to what she felt were less than enthusiastic responses to the personal and emotion-laden nature of the work in her solo exhibition at John Doyle Gallery, Morton asked in a typed note, "Am I really naïve?," before going on to proclaim more optimistically that an artist needed to "be free, and wile [*sic*] in that freedom, to look, and to see while looking, and to feel, and to respond while feeling, and to be romantic, and to love the romance."³⁰ Likewise, on seeing what other artists

were producing at the time, Morton queried in her notebook: "Whatever happened to feeling?" She went on to offer: "The absence of sentiment is what bothers me about so much work around."³¹ Morton understood the dangers of infusing her work with more feeling at a time when the art world appeared opposed to such gestures.

Other notebooks from this time are dense with ruminations of an even more personal nature.³² Diaristic in tenor, Morton's entries cast light on the artist's feelings about her intimate relationships. The stylistic language she employs in this context, in her desire to mull over her feelings about her personal life, is noteworthy. Importantly, it is not the specific, or specifically intimate, details of her relationships that are significant but, rather, Morton's reliance on popular romantic tropes. As such, sentimentality appeared to be the means through which Morton frequently made sense of some of her own life circumstances; at a certain level, the artist appreciated how these circumstances were highly normative.

Thus, in one instance, Morton writes of a particularly happy day and evening spent in good company, noting: "I still maintain it would be a boring movie for someone else to watch, but such a wonder to have been in."³³ Less than a year later, by contrast, her situation had changed: "What's true for me is that I would like to be involved in a relationship—clearly not one that needs to be worked at; but one that makes me feel good. I don't want to suffer over men anymore, and pine away for them, and sit around trying to do black magic so that they'll call and want me."³⁴ While the inflection here is difficult to decipher conclusively, the reference to "black magic" suggests that Morton penned the entry tongue-in-cheek, as does the inclusion of the emphatic "clearly." And while the entry is arguably striking for its honesty, it also reads as highly

ironic in its unabashed expression for uncomplicated and desire-driven love; in turn, the details of Morton's lament sound familiar because they so openly trade in fantasy and frustration, which, as the artist herself wryly implies, form the generic stuff of movies.

Morton's characterization of an ideal romance—"I don't want to suffer over men anymore"—gets to the heart of what Berlant identifies as the paradigmatic expression of femininity in sentimental love plots, namely "the female complaint." As the scholar writes, "Everyone knows what the female complaint is: women live for love and love is the gift that keeps on taking."³⁵ In repeatedly returning to the female complaint, Berlant suggests, sentimental romances reinforce an association with normative femininity, even as they create a space in which women's emotions become legitimized and coping strategies are proffered. Through her identification with the complaint, Berlant claims, a reader is able "to rework the details of her history to become a vague or simpler version of herself."³⁶ The actual social inequities contributing to the female complaint are rarely vanquished, yet their harsh edges are nonetheless blunted when a reader establishes a sense of solidarity with others who equally want to believe in the conventional fantasy of love. In her analysis of various women's novels and film melodramas, Berlant refers to this participation as a form of consolation or "bargaining" that keeps readers close to the scene of love and to the community that holds out for a similarly redemptive ending. For Berlant, understanding the "bargaining" process goes a long way to demonstrating the profound hold of the sentimental narrative on its audiences. Nonetheless, she cautions that the sense of collectivity fostered by the consumption of sentimental texts allows for a shift in feeling if not in one's circumstances, for in "a sentimental worldview, people's 'interests' are less in changing the world than in not being defeated by it."³⁷

In not wanting "to suffer" anymore, Morton professed her own investment in—her own "bargaining" with—the sentimental love plot. The language she employed in her sketchbooks indicates a conscious move to inhabit the conventionality of the sentimental, but to do so as a means to unravel its compensatory mechanisms. *Signs of Love* suggests something similar: with this work, Morton unpacked the clichés through which women are encouraged to identify with the female complaint at the core of the sentimental nar-

rative. As much as Morton liked the romance—to recall her own words—she ultimately brought a tongue-in-cheek perspective to her own brand of sentimentalism; in wanting to rehabilitate feeling in her artistic practice, the artist did not entirely quell the utopian fantasy of love but, rather, productively managed its tropes.

Not bad, for a girl.

—Ree Morton

There is no evidence that Morton left clear instructions for *Signs of Love* to follow a set configuration. Her sketchbooks are dotted with numerous drawings and notations about the work while it was in process (fig. 7). The artist worked through different

- 7 Ree Morton, page from "76–77 Artist Sketchbook." Pencil on paper, 8 3/4 x 11 in. Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc., N.Y. © Estate of Ree Morton. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, N.Y.

8 Ree Morton, *Symbols (Signs of Love)*, 1976. Oil on plywood, 13 ½ x 18 in. © Estate of Ree Morton. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, N.Y. Photo: Joerg Lohse

versions of some of its constituent elements, including two variations of the eight words, one consisting of the cutout felt letters, the other of painted panels the artist seemed to have abandoned after an initial installation of *Signs of Love* in 1976 at the Fine Arts Center, University of Rhode Island, Kingston (figs. 8, 9). A second small landscape painting also appeared in its arrangement in the New Museum retrospective of 1980; now in the collection of the Rhode Island School of Design Museum, this work—like the abandoned word paintings—is considered to be a related but not integral part of *Signs of Love*, again implying Morton may have intended for the work's configuration to remain flexible.³⁸

Despite the small changes that have occurred in the work over the years, installations of *Signs of Love* typically utilize two

adjacent walls, the elements arranged in an airy configuration from ceiling to floor. Though not fully three-dimensional, this organization creates for viewers a partially immersive tableau or proscenium. A combination of straight and curved compositional lines encourages movement in and around the individual elements. The Celastic swags, ribbons, and felt-lettered words bend and flow across the walls like bold gestural brushstrokes, while the ladders, maypoles, and rectilinear paintings establish an angular rhythm that integrates the walls and floor into the installation, softening but simultaneously reinforcing the architectural backdrop.

Morton's prince and princess portraits are the presumed inhabitants of *Signs of Love*: the perfect if so clearly fictive couple of popular heterosexual romance. More telling, the portraits are focal points through which Morton's viewers might imagine themselves enfolded in the work. The prince and princess portraits are softly rendered—their forms are barely legible against the bright colors around them—such that they read as ghostly placeholders in the installation, their partial absence a nod to the anticipated presence of viewers. In this way, Morton encourages identification with the sentimental tenor of her work through the romantic duo. This encouragement, in turn, registers as a sly maneuver on the artist's part, one that allows us, despite ourselves, to participate in the romance.³⁹

Signs of Love conjures up an elusive sense of time and place. Certain elements in Morton's work suggest a domestic setting. The bushel baskets fashioned to look like laundry hampers overflowing with clothes are the clearest elements in this regard; the Celastic drapery swags placed high on the walls and a single Celastic cushion adorned with a flower and edged in green also contribute to the homey feeling. A long, narrow landscape painting likewise adds to the impression that portions of the installation define an interior space, the inclusion of a Celastic drape around its frame implying it offers a view through a curtained clerestory window on to an adjacent rose garden. In contrast to the domestic allusions, elements such as the beribboned yellow ladders and the stylized maypoles invoke a verdant if indeterminate outdoor setting, one not unlike the fantastical playgrounds of rococo painters.

In all, *Signs of Love* calls up not one setting, but an amalgamation of places and times. The effect is comparable to a stage set: the visual components of Morton's

- 9 Ree Morton, *Signs of Love*, 1976. Installation view, Fine Arts Center, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, 1976 © Estate of Ree Morton. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, N.Y.

installation allude to different spaces and temporal moments, coming in and going out of focus in relation to the events, actions, memories, or thoughts enacted before them. The eight words displayed on the walls, which also include an oversize period, underscore this effect (see fig. 1). Forming a stripped-down sentence, or word poem, even, they suggest a series of potential cues or marginal notes in a dramatic script that help to flesh out the romantic theme of Morton's installation: "moments," "settings," "poses," "atmospheres," "objects," "pleasures," "gestures," and "symbols" call up both the tangible and intangible ingredients that animate *Signs of Love* and turn it into an immersive and affective performance.⁴⁰ Like the words themselves, the performance is loosely sketched but not presented in totality. Along with a heightened impression of color, texture, rhythm, and story line, *Signs of Love* offers no clearly defined spatiotemporal orientation, yet it does induce a prolonged sense of being in a constantly unfolding and pregnant present tense: a perpetual and open-ended theatrical production orchestrated around the theme of love.

From the beginning of her career, Morton was attracted to the theater and to theatrical effects.⁴¹ The fictive quality of a theatrical production, she believed, did not prevent it from successfully conveying the pathos of everyday life. The artist once expressed this premise in a sketchbook entry: "Theatricality, i.e. deliberate show is a work for the real—a poetically heightened artificiality."⁴² An emotion, for Morton, was no less profound or profoundly felt for being overtly dramatized. In an essay

- 10 Ree Morton, *Something in the Wind*, 1975. Approximately 100 flags; acrylic and felt-tip pen on nylon. South Street Seaport Museum, N.Y., 1975 © Estate of Ree Morton. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, N.Y.

penned in 1976 for *Journal: The Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art*, the artist humorously expressed this sentiment: “i watched the other day while the horizon line softened, and the ocean and sky turned the same pink. in almost no time at all this big orange ball fell back behind the water, courtesy of California Special Effects. who could have guessed the reason behind all those paintings catching The Moment, now i know.”⁴³ Inspired by her recent move to San Diego, Morton’s account of the sunset over the Pacific Ocean conveyed the artist’s delight in nature’s own dramatic “Moment,” its appeal for her stirred in part by the confirmation of its status as a popular (clichéd) subject of artistic and cultural representation, as much as its existence as a naturally occurring phenomenon.

With her growing attraction to sentimentality, Morton likely had a similar understanding about its transmission: it gives permission to feel, and to feel moved by its flowery stylizations. At some level, the artist appreciated how seemingly fake or conventionalized sentimental gestures do not preclude the existence of what may be experienced as genuine emotions. Importantly, the opposite is equally true: what a person experiences as a highly personal response is at the same time a deeply social one. June Howard’s findings on sentimentality are pertinent in this regard. She points out that the apparently insincere or false tone of the sentimental simply marks “moments when the discursive processes that construct emotions become visible.”⁴⁴ In other words, claims for the inauthenticity of a sentimental response simply fail to recognize the social and embodied nature of emotion in general. Sentimentality disarms

critics because its “packaged” emotional quality becomes a “distasteful reminder” of the intermingling of the public and the private at its very core.⁴⁵ For Morton, conversely, the connection between the genuine and the contrived demanded closer scrutiny, if only to better understand rather than simply deny the intertwining of the personal and the social. In her artistic practice, she used sentimentality to alternate productively between private symbolism and public convention.

Before undertaking *Signs of Love*, Morton executed two large-scale projects that have bearing on the direction the artist would take in the 1976 work. Presented in the summer of 1975, *Something in the Wind* took the form of a public art project intended by Morton to be a vivid expression of her appreciation for the people close to her. Composed of more than one hundred brightly colored, hand-sewn flags, it was installed along the mast riggings of a nineteenth-century schooner, the *Lettie G. Howard*, docked at the South Street Seaport Museum in New York City (fig. 10). Appliquéd on each flag was the name of an individual to whom Morton felt a strong personal tie, along with a painted image of an object symbolic of that person. The imagery was inspired by the artist’s fascination with heraldry of the medieval and early modern eras.⁴⁶ Though bearing little stylistic similarity to heraldic banners of the past, Morton’s individually designed flags nonetheless reflected a visual tradition of symbolizing what the artist dubbed “the picture-history of tribes, families, and nations.”⁴⁷

Morton would later note that the project was “a means of identifying and locating myself in the world by naming the persons who surround me.”⁴⁸ For her part, Morton’s friend Mary Delahoyd recollects that *Something in the Wind* was indeed “an enveloping network of human associations, visually articulated and interwoven by one among us. . . . we became a public paean to friendship.”⁴⁹ Tellingly, in her initial proposal for the project, Morton stressed the importance of its location in a public space, as it would openly affirm the personal connections represented in the work. Once the schooner was selected for the location of *Something in the Wind*, Morton created a sketch of the project that included the wordplay “relations-ship,” a notation indicative of the playful spirit of the work as a whole, as well as of the artist’s expansive affections for those around her (fig. 11).

With a title redolent of a romance novel or cinematic melodrama, *Something in the Wind* brought the personal and social together in spectacular fashion, its colorful array affirming Morton’s intent to reclaim feeling through a boldly sentimental gesture. At the same time, the artist’s stylistic and material choices pushed the project into a different tonal register. The imagery sewn and drawn on each of the fabric flags at times humorously visualizes Morton’s conception of her acquaintances. Roughly rendered in bright colors and crude shapes, the artist’s project shuttles between imagery lightly evocative of stock, clichéd motifs—seashells and butterflies, for

- 11 Ree Morton, “Red ‘Take Me Along’ Sketchbook,” ca. 1975. Ballpoint pen on paper, 5½ x 8½ in. © Estate of Ree Morton. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, N.Y.

- 12 Ree Morton, *Something in the Wind* (detail), 1975. Acrylic and felt-tip pen on nylon, 24½ x 31 in.
© Estate of Ree Morton. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, N.Y.

instance—and decidedly idiosyncratic choices, notably a preponderance of grimacing faces with lolling tongues (fig. 12). The disjuncture between Morton’s heartfelt, public display of her relationships and the resulting artistic choices she made with *Something in the Wind* is a strategy she employed the following year with *Signs of Love*.

In a second public art project, conceived in the summer of 1976 during a residency at Artpark in upstate New York, Morton pursued a less direct but no less significant inquiry into emotional connectedness. Titled *The Maid of the Mist*, it took the form of an outdoor performance. It began with a group of other artists-in-residence at Artpark carrying a large yellow Celastic ladder down a winding hillside trail to the Niagara River, where they lowered one end into the water along with a flower-festooned Celastic life preserver. Morton stood at the water’s edge with a second life preserver tied to her waist by a long length of rope (fig. 13). After throwing this preserver into the river current, the artist waited until the rope pulled taut, then cut the connection so it could float free.

Morton created *The Maid of the Mist* in response to a local Native American legend bearing the same title, which told how each year a maiden was sent in a fruit- and flower-filled canoe over Niagara Falls as a sacrificial bride of the river.⁵⁰ In performing the maiden’s symbolic rescue through the offering of the ladder and life preservers, Morton intervened in a narrative of female love and sacrifice familiar to consumers of sentimental dramas. Tellingly, the artist conceived of her Artpark project as a gesture “towards being female,” a characterization that might be understood in light of the female complaint at the heart of the sentimental romance—recalling Berlant’s quip that “women live for love and love is the gift that keeps on taking.”⁵¹ Morton’s performance complicates this conventional script, however. Instead of accepting the inevitability of love’s disappointments, Morton provides the means by which the fictional maiden—and, by extension, other women—might redirect affect to alternative ends.

13 Ree Morton, *The Maid of the Mist*, 1976. Artpark, Lewiston, N.Y. © Estate of Ree Morton. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, N.Y.

The function of the large Celastic ladder in Morton's Artpark performance casts some light on the inclusion of the smaller versions in *Signs of Love*. As in the Artpark project, the ladders may serve as symbolic means of rescue or escape from the sentiment of the work. Equally, however, the beribboned ladders could represent passageway into the narratives alluded to by the other elements of the installation: the promise of new romance engendered by the flowers, ribbons, swans, maypoles, and courtly portraits, or the comfort of the domestic routines represented by the baskets, the landscape paintings, and drapery swags. These objects map out plot lines that variously include romantic courtship, intimate cohabitation, and everything in between. A third possibility, however, sees the ladders as subtle comedic props: as objects that ascend to, or descend from, nowhere.⁵² Like the proverbial banana peel, they provide a humorous interruption to the sentimental plot, a gag inspiring a pratfall, a falling down on one's backside. An infusion of wit would not be amiss for Morton: while it seems at odds with what I have identified as her fruitful engagement with feminine sentimentality, the ambiguity of the ladders becomes a crucial element of the installation, making the artist's expression of sentimentality less coherent in its fidelity to the bargaining process, again to recall Berlant's characterization of the means by which women remain invested in the fantasy of love. *Signs of Love* accounts for the seductive pull of the sentimental plot, even as it provides a droll lifeline out of its murky currents.

Morton's material choices likewise go a long way to equivocating the tenor of *Signs of Love*. The artist first discovered Celastic, one of the main materials in

her installation, in 1974. Her sustained use of it over the next few years introduced a pronounced combination of craft and kitsch into her work. A nitrocellulose-impregnated cotton fabric, Celastic was first trademarked in the United States in the 1920s and was widely used in shoemaking. It was also marketed to the entertainment industry for the construction of props and stage sets. When softened with acetone or a comparable solvent, it can be manipulated into virtually any shape and, once dry, forms a receptive surface for paint and other decorative materials.⁵³ Morton was immediately attracted to the malleability of Celastic. In and of itself, it has no inherent quality other than its ability to replicate both the shape and appearance of other, more costly materials. Its flexible properties likely appealed to the artist's interest in mining the tensions between the actual and the fictive. Celastic was, ultimately, an ideal vehicle for her pursuit of "cheap sentimentality."

Morton's inclusion of the felt lettering in *Signs of Love* introduces another, albeit more understated, association with craft. Instead of fairgrounds and theaters, however, the felt elements invoke amateur crafting and hobby arts typically undertaken in the home or, even, the elementary school classroom. These types of crafts, still popular today, frequently entail the construction of inexpensive decorative objects replete with sentimentality: felt animals, bread dough figurines, papier-mâché crèches, and egg

14 Cynthia Carlson, *Triple Buldges*, 1975. Acrylic on woven canvas, 48 x 78 in. Private collection
©Cynthia Carlson

carton flowers, for instance, attest to the hobbyist's thrift, her impulse to beautify the home, and her attunement to seasonal trends. Understood as lowly or nonartistic forms of creativity, ones closer to kitsch than to traditional handicraft, hobby crafts have maintained a decidedly middlebrow association throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, for which the figure of the bored housewife looms large in popular perceptions of such pastimes.⁵⁴

The enormous popularity of hobby crafting as a leisure activity during the 1970s and the sheer ubiquity of instructional booklets and prefabricated materials on the market at the time form an important backdrop to Morton's material choices and to the subsequent critical reception of *Signs of Love*. It lends greater context, for instance, to Kramer's dismissive remark about the schoolchildren's presumed delight in seeing the artist's work in the Whitney Biennial, a hypothetical situation he may have surmised from both the sentimental content and the material configuration of Morton's work. Regardless of its source, the critic's insinuation about the popularity of *Signs of Love* with an undiscerning audience rhetorically calls into question the status of the installation as "high art."

Though it remains unclear to what degree Morton intentionally utilized felt for its lowly hobby craft status, there is no question that, as a whole, she set out with *Signs of Love* to compromise hierarchical distinctions. As such, her strategies aligned with those of a number of female artists during this period, including, among others, Harmony Hammond, Judy Chicago, Cynthia Carlson (fig. 14), and Miriam Schapiro. The reclamation of craft and decoration by these women in the 1970s exerted tremendous pressure on art world hierarchies, and Morton's own, somewhat idiosyncratic material choices form another component of this picture. In most instances, the attempt by these artists to legitimize feminine forms of craft and decoration went hand in hand with a determination to bring personal content into the artwork and to have that content invoke spaces and identities typically excluded from the art establishment.⁵⁵

While some female artists in the 1970s strategically embraced craft as an intrinsic or authentic form of female creativity and identity, this was not the case for Morton.⁵⁶ Her sculptural treatment of Celastic is telling in this respect: the artist's slapdash approach, its conspicuous imprecision and awkwardness, reveals how she fashioned each form with just

15 Ree Morton, *Signs of Love* (detail). Installation view, New Museum, N.Y., 1980 © Estate of Ree Morton. Courtesy New Museum, N.Y. Photo: New Museum

as sentimentality opened up an affective space in which the artist could maneuver, so too did Celastic allow for a space of play, one that Morton affectionately embraced.⁵⁹

Though she never overtly politicized her artistic practice, Morton recognized that her work remained marked by gender as well as by class. A single notebook entry from 1975 succinctly and tellingly sums up the artist's self-awareness of this latter aspect of her identity: "I am a middleclass person."⁶⁰ While this phrase is unremarkable in and of itself, when situated in relation to the artist's exploration of sweet sentimentality, kitsch, and hobby craft, it tacitly identifies an alignment with a devalued position within the art world, one ascribed to middle-class femininity and, as such, seen as emblematic of dilettantism, bad taste, a lowering of standards of artistic quality, and an unwelcome intrusion of affect.⁶¹ In acknowledging this cultural alignment, Morton established a critical conversation with it, posing the very question of what it might look like to inhabit, differently, the very stereotypes imposed from without. The associations with craft, and notably amateur craft, serve this end, allowing the artist to amplify but also subvert the terms on which the art establishment persistently elided female labor (both emotional and material) during Morton's lifetime.

Around the same time she was working on *Signs of Love*, Morton penned an application for a Guggenheim fellowship. In a draft of this application, under the section headed "Previous accomplishments," she made a point of detailing her life as a wife and mother before joining the art world as well as her artistic achievements. Employing a voice comparable to the one she used in the pages of her private notebooks—one that comes across as wryly earnest—the artist offered that her life's trajectory exemplified "the feminist classic, 'Out of the Kitchen and into the Studio.'"⁶² Morton likely appreciated the literalness of this phrase, having spent her student years working on her art in makeshift domestic spaces before establishing a more professional workspace outside the home.⁶³ Moreover, the particular ordering of her achievements—marriage and family first, career second—was fairly common for women of her generation, and hence amounted to a cultural cliché that no doubt resonated for the artist on a personal level.

Nonetheless, for Morton as no doubt for other women, the neatness of the phrase "out of the kitchen and into the studio" was anything but, the certainty of its logistical shift from personal familial routine to public artistic career functioning more rhetorically

enough detail and applied each saturated color with just enough coverage to render the object descriptive and legible from a distance, but also intentionally crafted up close (fig. 15).⁵⁷ The result is somewhat burlesque: Morton's handicraft falls just short of a complete fidelity to form. As Helen Molesworth usefully observes, the artist manages to "align affect and representation, even as she allows for enormous space to move in between them."⁵⁸ Thus, the very craftedness of *Signs of Love* materializes Morton's feeling but at the same time subtly undercuts the clichés in which it presumes to traffic. This craftedness, moreover, may also be read as a sign of another instance of Morton's expression of love: in this case, for the material process and act of making art, itself. Just

than not. Professional successes aside, the cliché guaranteed neither a neat division between family and work, or home and studio, nor between the gendered subjectivities implicated therein. In other words, the notion that one's "arrival" in the art world entailed leaving behind not only a cramped working space but also the intimacies, sensibilities, and handicrafts associated with the ostensibly private sphere was, for Morton, increasingly something she wanted to address rather than ignore.

In the conclusion to the "previous accomplishments" section of the Guggenheim application, Morton offered her artistic achievements of the past few years: "I did some good work, got some shows, and some reviews. *Not bad, for a girl.*"⁶⁴ This choice to self-identify as a "girl" gives pause: on the one hand, it seems a facetious acknowledgment of Morton's successes in the face of the types of obstacles—family obligations, indifferent curators, hostile critics—that the artist does not name in this particular context, but that she understood frequently derailed a woman's professional career in the 1970s.⁶⁵ On the other hand, and however wryly it may have been intended, Morton's reference to herself as a "girl" suggests her "classic" tale of professional achievements remained gendered insofar as it did not discount (leave in the "kitchen") connotations of femininity, emotionality, sentimentality, or domesticity. Through this self-identification as a "girl," the artist might have been indicating her resolution *not* to shy away from such associations in her art if only better to investigate their personal and cultural connotations, their attractions and their pitfalls. *Signs of Love* suggests a similar position.

Ultimately, Morton's decision to embrace "cheap sentimentality" was not undertaken lightly or without regard for potential criticisms. As Lisa Liebmann maintained in her review of 1980, the artist may not have successfully corralled the sweetness of *Signs of Love*, but that seems to be exactly the point. If Morton had occasion to question the artistic value of sentimental expression, she still chose to "get on with it." In finding that an absence of feeling no longer worked for her, the artist deemed sentimentality a useful alternative, but one that she wanted to approach as an open-ended proposition rather than a preordained destination. Morton's scrutiny of the semantics of feminine sentimentality proved subtle, perhaps too subtle for critics who continue to deem *Signs of Love* embarrassingly naïve, conceptually vacuous, or problematically gendered. Looking more closely at this installation, however, indicates otherwise. Morton's work allows that the expression of strong feelings does not have to partake of business as usual: one has permission to love the art and to love the sentiment to which it gestures.

Notes

- 1 The history of swan symbolism is too extensive to note here, though Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake* comes to mind as a popular reference. Further, Morton may have read about swans and chivalric romances in her study of European heraldry. See note 46 below.
- 2 Carol Squires, "Ree Morton: 'Antidotes for Madness,'" *New Art Examiner* 2, no. 4 (January 1975): 4.
- 3 Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and Biography," *Art Bulletin* 82, no. 1 (March 2000): 151. Also see Eve Meltzer, *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2013), and Susan Best, *Visualizing Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant-Garde* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011) for thoughtful reassessments of the role of affect in abstract and conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s. For another reading of Morton's work in relation to the art world rejection of "feeling," see Manuela Ammer, "From *Silly Stellas* to *Signs of Love*: Ree Morton's Take on Form, Feeling, and Fake," in *Ree Morton: Be a Place, Place an Image, Imagine a Poem*, ed. Sabine Folie and Ilse Lafer (Madrid: Museo Reina Sofia, 2015), 138–54.
- 4 Lucy R. Lippard, "Judy Chicago's Dinner Party," *Art in America* 68, no. 4 (April 1980): 119. Writing about the initial reception of Chicago's installation, Lippard's characterization also accounts for the doggedness of the position against sentiment within segments of the contemporary art world.

- 5 For fuller accounts of Morton's biography and work, see Folie and Lafer, *Ree Morton: Be a Place, Imagine a Place, Imagine a Poem*; Allan Schwartzman and Kathleen Thomas, *Ree Morton: Retrospective, 1971–1977* (New York: New Museum, 1980); and Sabine Folie, ed., *Ree Morton: Works, 1971–1977* (Vienna: Generali Foundation; Nuremberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2009).
- 6 For an overview of the contributions female artists including Morton made to postminimalist tendencies, see Susan L. Stoops, ed., *More than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70s* (Waltham, Mass.: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis Univ., 1996).
- 7 In particular, Morton repeatedly cited Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* (1964) and Christian Norberg-Schulz's *Existence, Space and Architecture* (1971).
- 8 Helen Molesworth examines these material and emotive shifts in Morton's work in some depth in "Sentiment and Sentimentality: Ree Morton and Installation Art," in Folie, *Ree Morton: Works, 1971–1977*, 12–21. Molesworth does not address *Signs of Love* (it was not included in the retrospective), but her insights inform my thinking on the subject.
- 9 Ree Morton, "1975 Black Sketchbook," Ree Morton Database. When possible, I rely on the titles provided in the Ree Morton Database, courtesy of Franklin Furnace, Inc., formerly available online at http://database.franklinfurnace.org/~admin/ree_morton/description.html (accessed August 30, 2015), now at http://franklinfurnace.org/ree_morton_sketchbooks/index.php. Morton drew the title for this and other Celastic works of 1974–75 from Neltje Blanchan's *Wild Flowers Worth Knowing* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1917), a field guide that also attributes human personalities and morals to flower families.
- 10 Established in 1973, the Woman's Building was a dedicated space for women artists. For more information on its history, see the two-volume set by Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton, eds., *From Site to Vision: The Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture and Doin' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building* (Los Angeles: Otis College of Art and Design, 2011).
- 11 Michael Auping, in *Matrix/Berkeley 2* (Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1978), n.p.
- 12 Allan Schwartzman and Kathleen Thomas, "Ree Morton: A Critical Overview," in Schwartzman and Thomas, *Ree Morton: Retrospective, 1971–1977*, 65.
- 13 Lisa Phillips, *A New Acquisition: "Signs of Love"* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990), n.p.
- 14 Karen Rosenberg, "A Haunting Tour, One Room at a Time," *New York Times*, January 21, 2011, C31.
- 15 Hilton Kramer, "This Whitney Biennial Is as Boring as Ever," *New York Times*, February 27, 1977, 77.
- 16 William Zimmer, "Whitney Museum in Stamford Offers Iconoclastic Objects," *New York Times*, March 29, 1992, Connecticut Weekly, 22.
- 17 Lisa Liebmann, "Innocence and Irony: The Art of Ree Morton," *Art in America* 69, no. 1 (January 1981): 93.
- 18 Ibid., 94. The critic may have been correct in assuming the artist would have rejected the label "woman artist." During her lifetime Morton expressed reservations about using such terms as "feminist art" or "women's art." For instance, in a letter to Marcia Tucker, Morton called "the categorizing nature of [feminist art] . . . negative," and any attempt to formulate "general factors common to women's art . . . offensive." Morton to Tucker, 1975, reprinted in *The Mating Habits of Lines: Sketchbooks and Notebooks of Ree Morton* (Burlington, Vt.: Robert Hull Fleming Museum, Univ. of Vermont, 2000), 38. Nonetheless, and as I discuss below, the artist also self-identified with certain qualities of sentimentality that she understood to be gendered.
- 19 June Howard summarizes this shift in "What Is Sentimentality?," *American Literary History* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 71.
- 20 Andrew S. Winston, "Sweetness and Light: Psychological Aesthetics and Sentimental Art," in *Emerging Visions of the Aesthetic Process: Psychology, Semiology, and Philosophy*, ed. Gerald C. Cupchik and János László (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), 120.
- 21 Howard, "What Is Sentimentality?," 73.
- 22 Joanne Dobson, "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature," *American Literature* 69, no. 2 (June 1997): 266. Also see Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985).
- 23 Dobson, "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature," 268.
- 24 Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2008), 1, 10. Berlant's text is part of a growing, multidisciplinary body of literature on affect theory, too extensive to cite here. However, some recent studies in art history include Best, *Visualizing Feeling*; Meltzer, *Systems We Have Loved*; Jill Bennett, *Practical Aesthetics: Events*,

- Affect and Art after 9/11* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012); and Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012). Also see the essays collected under “Commentaries,” *American Art* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 2–19.
- 25 Faye Halpern’s assessment of different ways of reading sentimental texts is useful in this regard; Halpern, “Unmasking Criticism: The Problem with Being a Good Reader of Sentimental Rhetoric,” *Narrative* 19, no. 1 (January 2011): 51–71.
 - 26 To the question “What is sentimental art?,” Rebecca Bedell finds that since at least the early twentieth century, critics have categorized it as “shallow, popular, emotionally manipulative, feminine, and commercial, the stuff of Hallmark greeting cards, Thomas Kinkade prints, and, in its more elevated forms, the domestic genre scenes of such artists as Lilly Martin Spencer.” Bedell concludes that for such critics, “sentimental art is bad art, or at least not very good art”; Bedell, “What Is Sentimental Art?,” *American Art* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 9. Winston argues (“Sweetness and Light,” 121–27) that while certain subject matter lends itself more readily to sentimental readings, it is typically when such qualities as innocence, purity, naïveté, and goodness are stressed through a combination of content and technique that these readings arise. Finally, and as a vocal critic of sentimentality, Ann Douglas simply claims a sentimental text is easy to identify because its language has “gone bad”; Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 255.
 - 27 Morton, “73–74 Small Black Sketchbook,” Ree Morton Database.
 - 28 Morton, “May 74–June 75 Large Black Hardbound Sketchbook,” Ree Morton Database.
 - 29 Confirming this, Cynthia Carlson, a longtime friend and colleague of Morton, recalls the latter was “extremely conscious” of her decision to use sentiment; Carlson, “Reminiscences,” in Schwartzman and Thomas, *Ree Morton: Retrospective, 1971–1977*, 76.
 - 30 Morton, typed page dated February 1975, reprinted in *Mating Habits of Lines*, 52.
 - 31 Morton, “JAN 1975 Record Notebook,” Ree Morton Database.
 - 32 Anne Middleton Wagner addresses the potential dangers of relying on an artist’s private notations in her assessment of Eva Hesse’s journals. She suggests the writings be seen less as documents of some truth about the art or self, but rather as “the product of acts of representation,” a claim I believe is applicable to Morton’s notebooks and to the artist’s use of sentimental language. Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O’Keeffe* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996), 203.
 - 33 Morton, “JAN 1975 Record Notebook,” Ree Morton Database.
 - 34 Morton, “1975 Record Notebook (black + maroon),” Ree Morton Database.
 - 35 Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 1.
 - 36 Ibid., 7.
 - 37 Ibid., 16, 27. Berlant (ibid., 150) does propose that an acknowledgment of feeling is political insofar as it claims emotional attachments as necessarily foundational, and in contrast to what politics “as usual seems to offer—a space of aversive intensities, increased risk, shame, vulnerability, exploitation, and, paradoxically, irrelevance.”
 - 38 Throughout her career, Morton tended to rearrange and reuse objects and materials from one work to the next.
 - 39 Berlant usefully accounts (*Female Complaint*) for the push-and-pull appeal of sentimentality, as does Halpern, who posits answers to her own question, “But why is it also seductive?,” in “Unmasking Criticism,” 63.
 - 40 Morton left no account of how she selected these eight words, or of her choice to include a period. I can only surmise they are products of the artist’s wide-ranging reading and research interests, as noted in her sketchbooks, the most suggestive of which may be Gertrude Stein’s poetry and Erving Goffman’s sociological study *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974).
 - 41 Schwartzman and Thomas (“Ree Morton: A Critical Overview,” 37–40) discuss Morton’s interest in theater at length; also see Sabine Folie, “Ree Morton’s Topographies of Memory,” in Folie, *Ree Morton: Works, 1971–1977*, 37.
 - 42 The phrase appears twice in Morton, “1975 Black Sketchbook” and may be an unattributed quotation.
 - 43 Ree Morton, “Places: Ree Morton,” *Journal: The Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art*, no. 10 (March–April 1976): 20.
 - 44 Howard, “What Is Sentimentality?,” 69.
 - 45 Ibid., 73.

- 46 Fellow artist and friend Rosemarie Mayer recalls that in the summer of 1974 Morton borrowed Jiri Louda's *European Civic Coats of Arms* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1966), and the two had several conversations about heraldic symbolism. This interest in heraldry also illuminates Morton's stylistic choices with the prince and princess portraits in *Signs of Love*. Mayer, cited in Folie, *Ree Morton: Works, 1971–1977*, 184.
- 47 Morton, proposal for *Something in the Wind*, 1974, reproduced in Folie, *Ree Morton: Works, 1971–1977*, 135.
- 48 Morton, statement in *Attitudes towards Space: Environmental Art* (Los Angeles: Mount St. Mary's College Art Gallery, 1977), quoted in Schwartzman and Thomas, "Ree Morton: A Critical Overview," 51.
- 49 Mary Delahoyd, "Ree Morton," *Artforum* 18, no. 9 (May 1980): 60.
- 50 There are several published and anecdotal variations of the "Maid of the Mist" myth. It is unclear which one Morton knew. Robinder Kaur Sehdev determines the legend was in fact fabricated by white settlers in the Niagara region and bears no connection to any indigenous stories; Sehdev, "Beyond the Brink: Indigenous Women's Agency and the Colonisation of Knowledge in the Maid of the Mist," *Cultural Studies Review* 18, no. 3 (December 2012): 240–62.
- 51 Morton, statement in *Attitudes towards Space*, quoted in Schwartzman and Thomas, "Ree Morton: A Critical Overview," 62. Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 1.
- 52 Morton included the phrase "ladders to no-where" in a sketch that is likely related to *Signs of Love*, in "1975 Black Sketchbook."
- 53 "Fantastic Celastic: You've Never Seen Anything Quite Like It," *Design* 56, no. 1 (September–October 1954): 30. Morton describes her experience with the material to Barbara Schwartz in "Methods and Materials: New and Old," *Craft Horizons* 35, no. 6 (December 1975): 48.
- 54 Lucy R. Lippard, "Making Something from Nothing (Toward a Definition of Women's 'Hobby Art')," *Heresies* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1978): 62–65.
- 55 Elissa Auther's *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010) provides a comprehensive account of the hierarchy of art, craft, and decoration in American art of the 1960s and 1970s.
- 56 For instance, see Lippard, "Making Something from Nothing"; and Harmony Hammond, "Feminist Abstract Art: A Political Viewpoint," *Heresies* 1, no. 1 (January 1977), reprinted in *Wrappings: Essays on Feminism, Art and the Martial Arts* (New York: TSL Press, 1984), 19–28.
- 57 I am grateful to Lane Relyea for sharing his research on Morton's use of Celastic, in his unpublished paper "A Picture of Ree Morton, Almost."
- 58 Molesworth, "Sentiment and Sentimentality: Ree Morton and Installation Art," 18.
- 59 I am indebted to Abigail Shapiro for sharing her insights about Morton's expansive conception of "love" with me, and for encouraging me to think about it in relation to the artist's engagement with both her artistic sources and her material processes.
- 60 Morton, "1975 Record Notebook (black + maroon)."
- 61 For an overview of the modern association of middle-class femininity with bad taste, see Susan Richmond, *Lynda Benglis: Beyond Process* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 113–23.
- 62 Morton, Guggenheim draft, reprinted in Schwartzman and Thomas, "Ree Morton: A Critical Overview," 64.
- 63 A close friend of the artist, Marcia Tucker notes that before she moved to New York in 1972, Morton "was working literally behind the washer/dryer in the basement" of her home. Quoted in Schwartzman and Thomas, "Ree Morton: A Critical Overview," 10. Likewise, Janis Porter, a friend and fellow military wife, recalls that in 1964 Morton used an unfinished bathroom as her studio, in "Reminiscences," in Schwartzman and Thomas, *Ree Morton: Retrospective, 1971–1977*, 81.
- 64 Morton, Guggenheim draft, in Schwartzman and Thomas, "Ree Morton: A Critical Overview," 64 (emphasis added).
- 65 On Morton's familiarity with the topic of women artists and the obstacles they faced because of gender biases, see excerpts from a lecture the artist delivered at the Midwest Women Artists' Conference in Oxbow, Michigan, in 1975, titled "Women Artists in New York City," in *Mating Habits of Lines*, 58.