

HOW MIGHT WE ASSESS FEMINISM'S INITIAL IMPACTS ON ART, ITS SUBSEQUENT HISTORICIZATION, AND ITS CONTINUING INFLUENCE? *ARTFORUM* ASKED [LINDA NOCHLIN](#), [ANDREA FRASER](#), [AMELIA JONES](#), [DAN CAMERON](#), [COLLIER SCHORR](#), [JAN AVGIKOS](#), [CATHERINE DE ZEGHER](#), [ADRIAN PIPER](#), AND [PEGGY PHELAN](#) TO CONSIDER THIS QUESTION IN AN ONLINE ROUNDTABLE ASSEMBLED IN AUGUST. THEIR RESPONSES—REFINED BY THE PARTICIPANTS AND PRESENTED IN THE FOLLOWING PAGES—SUGGEST THAT FEMINISM AND FEMINIST DISCOURSES AS THEY HAVE FOUND EXPRESSION IN CONTEMPORARY ART ARE AMBIVALENT (“IN THE FULLEST SENSE OF THAT TERM,” AS PHELAN PUTS IT), MULTIFACETED, AND EVER EVOLVING.



# FEMINISM & ART [9 VIEWS]

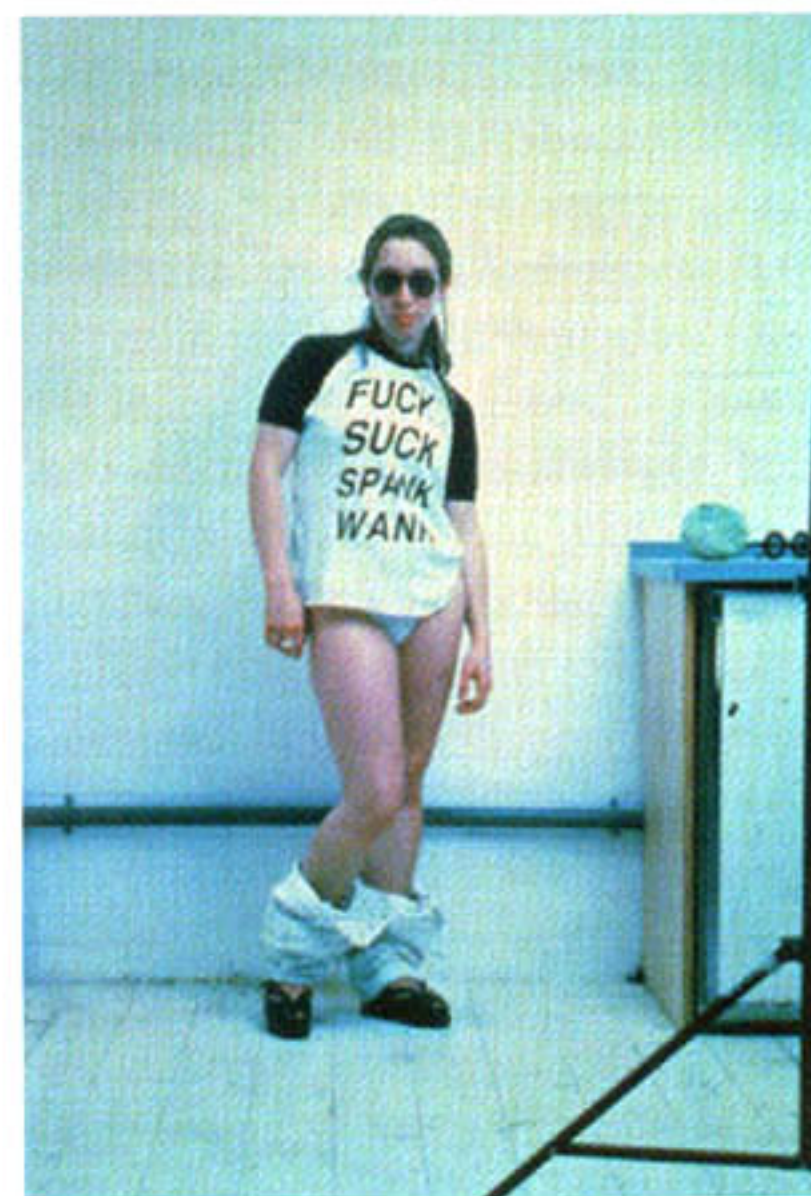
LINDA NOCHLIN

Contemporary art and art criticism are unimaginable without feminism.

As a participant in the women's art movement of the late '60s and early '70s, I have decidedly mixed feelings about the historicization of feminism. It is difficult to see lived experience transformed into historical text. Things that seemed open and dynamic are now pinned down and displayed like butterflies in a case. Of course, there is also the tendency to idealize the past, to see the women's art movement as totally united. This was not the case: Although all of us were for justice, equity, and a fair shake for women artists, critics, and academics, our views were extremely varied, and we were often at odds with one another. I, for instance, disagreed with the perhaps unconscious essentialism of those who propagated Central Imagery as a compositional characteristic of women's art, or believed in Great Goddesses, or saw women as victims.

Today, it seems to me that the fundamental differences within feminism exist between those artists and critics who think of "woman" as a fixed category and those who think of it as something more fluid, constructed, and variable. There is also a difference between those who think of feminist art and art history as critical practices and those who think that pure, "positive" images of woman are possible—that there is some essence of femininity out there to be captured. Perhaps '70s feminism, powerful and necessary though it was, is now outmoded; feminism has transformed and is itself transformed in contemporary practice. Feminist politics today is far more multivalent and self-aware; the battle lines are less clearly drawn. The binaries—oppressor/victim, good woman/bad man, pure/impure, beautiful/ugly, active/passive—are not the point of feminist art anymore. Ambiguity, androgyny, and self-consciousness, both formal and psychic, are de rigueur in challenging thought and practice. But there is no point in asking how relevant feminism is to art practice, history, and criticism today, since feminist consciousness is pervasive even when unacknowledged or demeaned. Feminism is not only overtly present but has over the past thirty years irrevocably changed the way we think about art, the body, the relationship between the viewer and the artwork, and the standing of the various media.

Despite its import, there remains a general lack of interest in feminism in American museums, which is unfortunate, to say the least—but which is only part of a more general refusal by museums to deal with anything controversial. (The Brooklyn Museum, which is opening an important center for feminist art with a regular exhibition program, is a rare exception.) It is hard to imagine an American museum putting on a show like Louvre curator Régis Michel's "Possess and Destroy: Sexual Strategies in Western Art" (2000), which demonstrated that much of the great drawing of the past is based on cruelty toward the female body. The show included



Renaissance artists, continued through the nineteenth century with Ingres and Degas, and ended with Picasso. Of course, most of their pieces, drawn from the Louvre collection, were beautiful. Michel's show and catalogue essay made you think about this strange, contradictory relationship—between morality, as it were, and aesthetics—which has long marked the high and low cultures of our civilization.

In 1971, I wrote an essay titled "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" but I don't really believe that "greatness" is the issue at present. Women artists are recognized as among the most stimulating, provocative, and visually inventive of contemporary artmakers. Recently I have been particularly intrigued by the writings of Aby Warburg, and Georges Didi-Huberman's fascinating book about him, detailing the relation of the *Nachleben* (afterlife) of antique images to contemporary feminist art. For example, Pipilotti Rist's *Ever Is Over All*, 1997, a wonderful video of an energetic woman marching down a city street smashing car windows with a kind of iron flower, is vitalized by the "afterlife" of the antique maenad and her thyrsus—the female activist is even dressed in drapery of a sort! Or take Sam Taylor-Wood's poignant large-scale self-portrait *Fuck, Suck, Spank, Wank*, 1993, which brings up antique and Renaissance memories in the contrapposto pose, the escaping strands of hair, the trousers falling about the sitter's feet (displaced classical drapery)—it's Venus, transposed by Botticelli and made utterly new in the artist's studio, with a cabbage instead of a scallop shell. This photograph is as harmoniously composed as any Greek frieze, and much the richer for its references, however unusual, to the past. I am not talking about anything as academic as influence here nor anything as trendy as appropriation. I am speaking, quite literally, of the afterlife of elements of the Western tradition achieving new meaning in the work of women artists who use them as both continuity and critique in the representation of women. □

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## Feminism not only provided institutional critique with a critical object; it provided a practical methodology.

I consider myself a second-generation feminist—I don't mean historically, as in second wave, but biographically. My mother got involved in the women's movement in the early '70s and came out shortly thereafter. I spent the second half of my childhood in an all-woman, lesbian-feminist household. At thirteen, I cut school and took a bus to San Francisco to go to the unveiling of Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* at SF MOMA (a friend's mother worked on the project). When I moved to New York a few years later, I was confused to find that the feminist discourse I encountered in the art world constructed itself in opposition to the feminism I grew up with. I could appreciate critiques of the essentialist and normative aspects of '70s cultural feminism, but those critiques often seemed to dismiss the activism of radical feminism as well.

I see my work in the '80s as very much an effort to integrate the performative and interventional dimensions of feminist work from the '70s into an engagement with the construction of femininity and female subject positions within discourse, representation, and, above all, institutions. My attraction to institutional critique had everything to do with what Griselda Pollock has described as the gendered



myths, values, assumptions, silences, and prejudices that underlay the institutional inscription of artistic subjects and works. I understood institutional critique as a feminist practice, not only in terms of the politics of inclusion and exclusion, but in terms of the hierarchical systems of classification that mandate exclusion, and of the monopolies on definitions of legitimate culture and cultural legitimacy that empower exclusion.

Feminism not only provided institutional critique with a critical object. More important, it provided a practical methodology. In the context of paradigms of site-specificity defined by physical, urban, architectural, geographical, or geological spaces and places, the constitutive sites of feminist practice were above all the body and the political, social, sexual, and intersubjective relations in which that body exists: a kind of "relational specificity" that I see as fundamentally feminist. But what I found most radical about feminist site-specificity was less its substantive reformulation of "site" than the reflexivity demanded by its

From top: Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79. Installation view, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1979. Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talks*, 1989. Performance view, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1989. Photo: Kelly & Massa Photography. Andrea Fraser, *Official Welcome*, 2001. Performance views, MICA Foundation, New York, 2001. Photos: Sarah Kunstler. Andrea Fraser, *Official Welcome*, 2001, still from a color video.

relational turn. I understood "The personal is political" above all as a call for a relationally specific practice of critical self-reflexivity. And for me it mandated an institutional critique that engaged the body within institutions as a gendered body, and the subject of institutional discourse as a sexed subject, but a subject whose desires and fantasies and even whose body itself are constructed within that institution.

I continued to pursue a feminist institutional critique into the '90s, especially through the work of the V-Girls, a performance group in which I collaborated with Martha Baer, Jessica Chalmers, Erin Cramer, and Marianne Weems. In my own work in the course of the decade, however, the feminist site-specificity that informed my artistic strategies often seemed to lead me away from explicitly feminist content. The principles of that site-specificity demanded that I engage the most determining forces of the sites in which I worked. In the context of cultural institutions, the most determining forces seemed most often to work their effects through hierarchies of capital and competence—hierarchies that are often bound up, historically and institutionally, with gender but which also seemed able to traverse gender in increasingly agile ways. At the same time, my conception of institutional critique as an ethical rather than a political practice—a practice, that is, concerned not with the condition of being dominated so much as the condition of being dominant—also seemed to lead me away from explicitly feminist engagements. While that notion of an ethical practice was also deeply rooted in feminism—particularly in feminist critiques of expertise and mastery—it led me away from work through which I might engage my own experiences of gender-based domination or even determination. So while I continued to consider myself a feminist, it became more difficult for me to consider my work feminist.

Recently, however, that began to change. When I returned to performance a few years ago to engage the position of the artist, I was brought back to the very genderedness of institutional inscriptions of the artist's body and of the fantasies of freedom and satisfaction, recognition and reward, for which that body serves as a kind of screen. Returning to performance also meant returning to my own body as a primary site, to my own subjectivity, and also, reflexively, to my own (institutionally constituted) fantasies as objects of critique. What is ironic is that feminism itself made it possible for the female artist to serve as a site for the production and reproduction of such fantasies. That fact may be responsible for the fundamental ambivalence of what I consider a feminist institutional critique, an ambivalence that is for me, once again, rooted in my personal history as much as in the history of feminist practice. As I explain at the end of my recent performance *Official Welcome*, my mother was also an artist, a good one, who never got any recognition.

I don't feel any need to apologize for the feminist art practices of the '70s. The women's art movement was one of the most important of the twentieth century, above all because of the degree to which it was integrated into a political movement. It was a political movement that expanded the definition and scope of what we understand as political struggle to relations of power and domination in every domain and dimension of public and private life. One of the things that made the women's art movement so powerful was the way it overcame narrow definitions of aesthetic culture and of political struggle at the very same time, and did so within a project of integrating cultural, social, and subjective transformation into a single practice. The challenge for contemporary feminist art practice is to continue that project. However, in a context in which that historical relationship between cultural and political practice no longer exists, the danger posed for—and by—contemporary feminist art practice is the abstraction of "feminist art" from feminism. □

Andrea Fraser's midcareer retrospective is on view at the Hamburger Kunstverein through November 9.



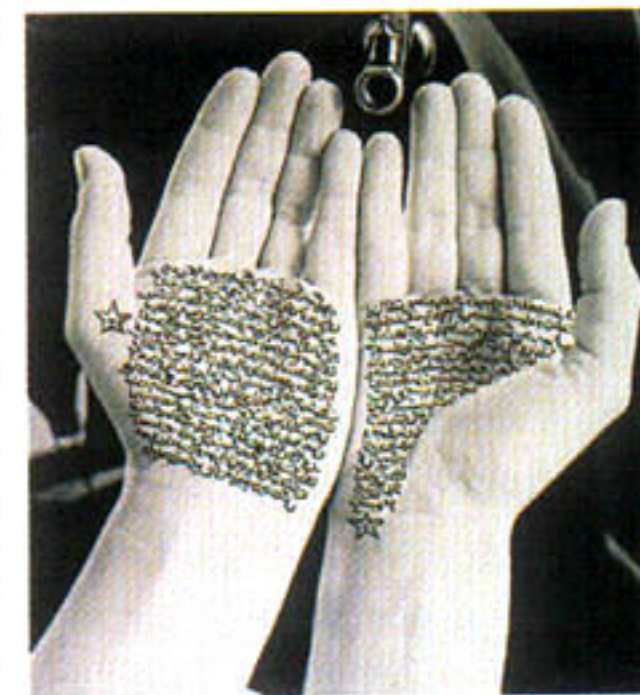
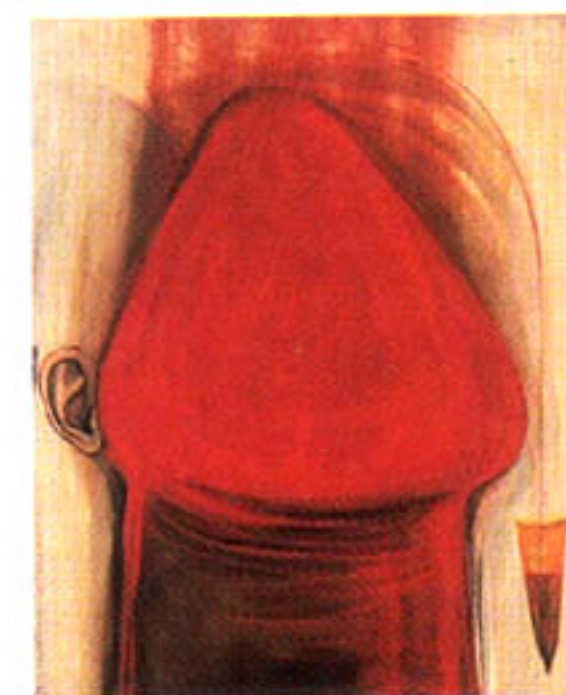
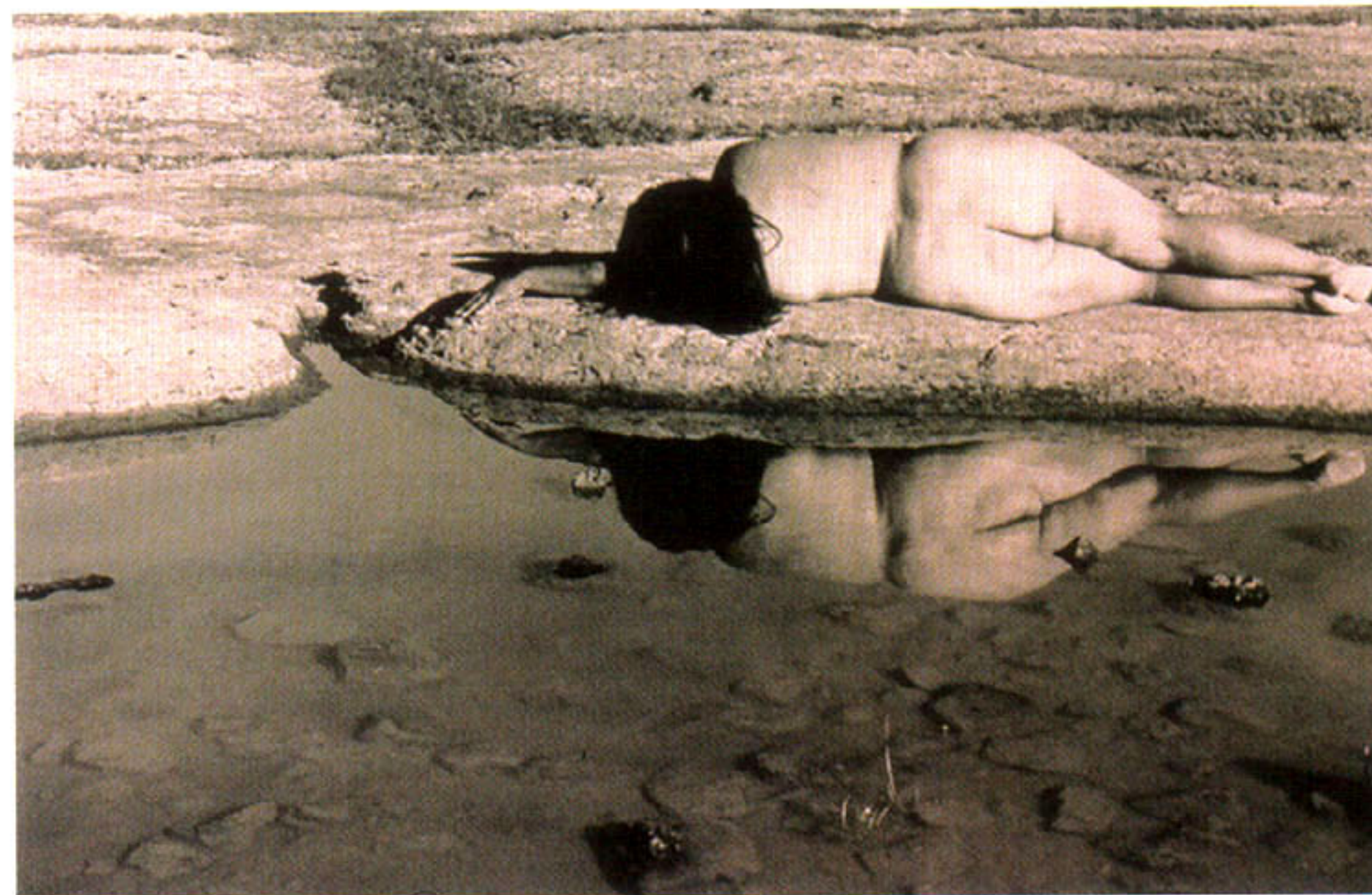
From top: **Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #10*, 1996**, black-and-white photograph, 16 x 20". **Portia Munson, *Pink Project*, 1994**. Installation view, "Bad Girls," New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1994. **Mira Schor, *Small Ear*, 1989**, oil on canvas, 20 x 16". **Shirin Neshat, *Guardians of Revolution*, 1994**, black-and-white photograph and ink, 40 1/4 x 37".

## Feminine identity is always imbricated in other aspects of our perceived and experienced identity.

I don't think feminism has moved beyond anything, nor do I think it's productive to bracket off the '70s as some primitive period of feminist theorizing that has been superseded. Each climactic moment of feminist art-history theorizing and artmaking has developed in complex relationship with other discourses and with the feminisms that preceded it. I think the all-too-common tendency in feminist art writing to legislate which feminisms are good—i.e., productive or theoretically sound—is less interesting than accounts exploring the historical complexities of why and when particular ideas in feminism were developed. After all, one person's "good" feminism is another person's "bad" feminism. And such judgments throw us right back into the abhorrent (to feminism, I think) role of legislating value. Today, I think feminisms need to address and theorize gendered identity so as to accommodate the *intersectionality* (per Kimberlé Crenshaw's valuable theorization in her essay on the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings) of how we position ourselves in the world and how we are understood by others. Women, if there is such a discrete category—Sandy Stone and others might argue otherwise—are never perceived simply or exclusively as women: Our feminine identity is always already imbricated in other aspects of our perceived and experienced identity. Every woman of color and every queer woman knows this because she has to. She has no choice.

I see the most interesting artists instinctively or explicitly working through intersectional identifications, producing work that navigates the complexities of identity in the contemporary world of highly technologized global capitalism. All we have to do is think about the difference between how "American" (as an identity category) was understood on September 10, 2001, and how it is now understood today (after 9/11, in the midst of the Bush presidency) to understand why conceptions of gendered identity from the '70s, '80s, and even '90s (with its "Bad Girls" shows) must be rethought. A woman wearing a veil on a Manhattan subway reads very differently today from how she would have read before 9/11 (and before the current US administration suddenly noticed the misogyny of the Taliban). Given this situation, I find myself admiring and learning from Shirin Neshat, Mona Hatoum, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Kara Walker, Renée Cox, Susan Smith-Pinelo, and Laura Aguilar—artists whose work presses a feminist critique into, and along with, a critique of racial and ethnic identity, as these inflect sexual identifications of all kinds—and from artists such as Susan Silton, Mira Schor, and Catherine Opie who explore gendered experience through aspects of pleasure and sexual orientation or self-identified sexual positionalities.

I think the crux of the problem (if there is one) for feminist visual practice and analysis lies in how we approach identity, and how we theorize and *do* interpretation. I would like to see feminist art historians, critics, and theorists become more sensitive to the philosophical difficulties of attempting to break down authoritative modes of analysis (per the '70s and '80s models of feminist critical practice) while retaining a political and coalitional thrust in our practice. That is, we want to argue



for certain "ways of seeing" (as John Berger would have it) but without legislating these ways as the only ways. We want to be forceful, passionate, and politicized without sliding into prescriptions of what everyone else should or must do in order to be considered feminist. We might be more flexible, acknowledging when our models no longer work, rather than trying to hang on to them at the cost of blinding ourselves to new kinds of visual culture and critical practice. Part of this project, for me, has to do with being a historian. In my "Sexual Politics" show at the UCLA Hammer Museum in 1996, my goal was to look again at

artworks, such as those from the '60s and '70s by Hannah Wilke and Judy Chicago, that had been legislated out of dominant narratives of feminist art history, in order to understand the trajectory of debates surrounding feminist art. If we ignore works that

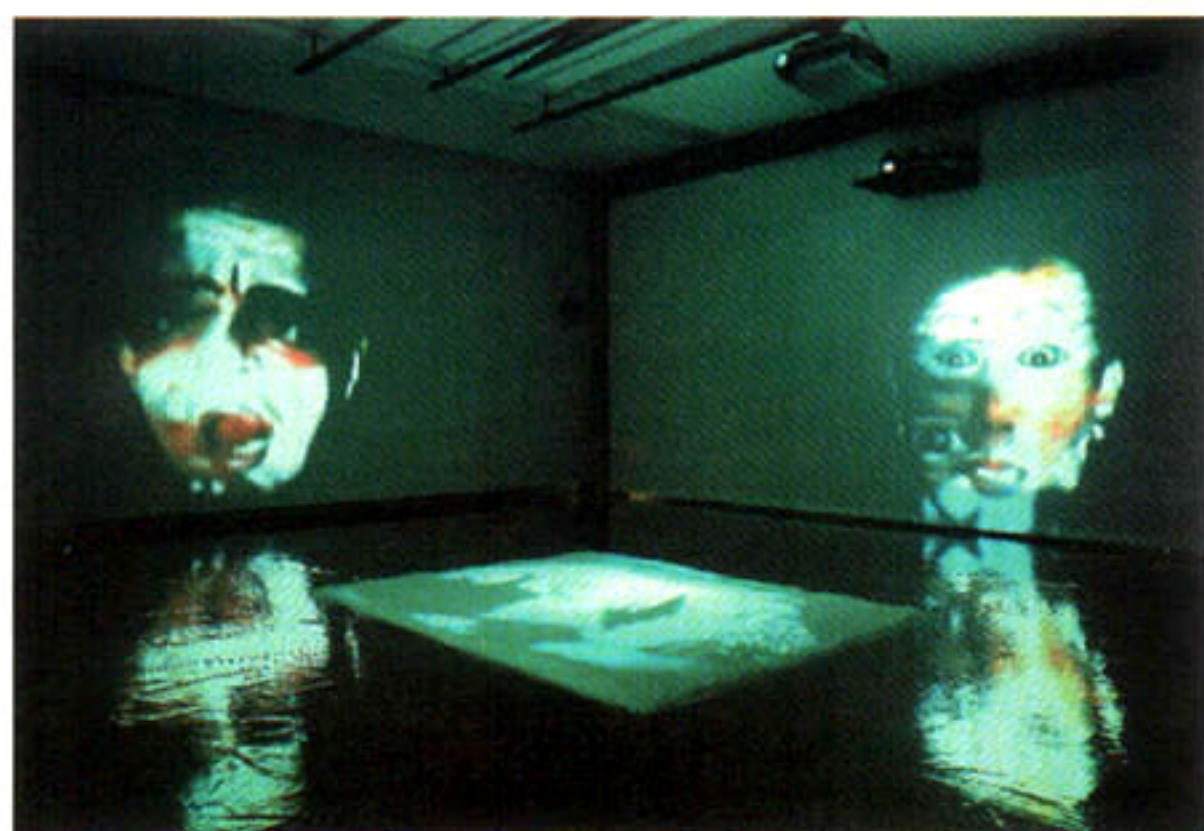
have been determined (by feminists) to exemplify "bad" feminist practices, then we are in danger of getting very confused about the complexity of past decades' feminist debates. □

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Clockwise from top left: Nalini Malani, *Hamletmachine*, 2000, video installation. Marlene McCarty, *Melinda Loveless, Toni Lawrence, Hope Rippey, Laurie Tackett, and Shanda Sharer—January 11, 1992. (1:52 am)*, 2000–2001, ballpoint and graphite on paper, 10' 4" x 13' 4". Milica Tomić, *I Am Milica Tomić*, 1998, stills from a color video.

## The women's movement of the past is a phenomenon of the present in less-industrialized countries.

In discussing feminism within the art world today, I have to confess to feeling somewhat estranged by a discourse that often seems distant from my experience of contemporary art and theory. Perhaps that is compounded by the fact that I am writing this from Turkey, where so many issues associated with the "heroic" phase of '70s feminism are at the forefront of current popular debate—precisely because the women's movement of the past is very much a phenomenon of the present here and in other less-industrialized countries. (My research over the past several years has taken me to countries like Brazil, South Africa, Thailand, and Turkey, where achievements that we take for granted—birth control, antirape laws, no-fault divorce—are sometimes a matter of women's life and death.) The women's movement has triggered broad cultural changes with extraordinary social and political repercussions, and therefore I believe that addressing contemporary feminism from a global perspective is of particular importance. Granted, no feminist has yet been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize or offered a retrospective by MOMA, but I would rather focus on the movement's ongoing accomplishments than on its underrecognition (or underestimation) within mainstream culture. I have always believed that it is semidelusional to seek reward from the very system you have set out to reform.



Sixteen years ago I published an article in *Flash Art* titled "Post-Feminism," proposing that the rise of neo-Conceptual photography as an explicitly feminist project signaled a shift that required a retooling of what was meant by feminist practice in the art world. As a curator and writer, I still cannot imagine feminism in the past tense; I experience it as a constantly evolving phenomenon, one that informs my responses to the ever-subtler shadings of value in contemporary art production. Since "Post-Feminism," I have tried to expand my own sense of feminism, so that not only are class, race, and sexual preference enmeshed in the discussion, but also war, poverty, and the environment. What worries me at times is what seems a tacit backing off from the prospect of radical practice, as if the future

of art were not completely dependent on the assimilation of today's most radical practices into tomorrow's mainstream.

Which leads me to feminism's historicization and the corresponding implication that the art history of the '60s and '70s has already been written. The quagmire might be hypersimplified as the Carolee Schneemann/Matthew Barney question: If Schneemann is a clear historical forerunner of Barney, why is her work marginalized by every major art institution and historian, while he is held up as the embodiment (pun intended) of great art in our time? My answer is simple: The historian in each of us knows that we are all, at best, only contributing to a history that will be written long after we are gone. Yes, as curator of Schneemann's 1996 retrospective at the New Museum, I was quite content with having momentarily pushed that argument to the forefront of critical discourse, just as I was dismayed by the inflated rhetoric surrounding Barney's recent survey at the Guggenheim. But if I sincerely believe that Schneemann's contribution will be seen as having far surpassed that of Barney's a hundred years from now, why should I grant much importance to what big museums do today? To paraphrase one of the most hoary clichés of the counterculture, they are part of the problem, not the solution.

One other compelling point concerns the broadening influence of feminist principles, including the increased artistic investigation into the global epidemic of violence. I am thinking of Colombian artist Doris Salcedo's exploration of the more pernicious effects of mass murder on an entire culture; of Serbian artist Milica Tomić's gripping video of herself suffering the visible marks of invisibly inflicted wounds as she calmly repeats in several languages, "I am Milica Tomić"; of Indian artist Nalini Malani's lonely campaign against anti-Muslim violence within her home state of Gujarat (the heart of Hindu nationalism). These examples, while perhaps seemingly peripheral to the concerns of American or Western European artists—one exception is New York artist Marlene McCarty, whose terrifying drawings viscerally explore violence against women—deserve consideration with regard to a culture that methodically exports real and simulated violence on an unprecedented scale. Hence, they might also be thought of as representing a further extension, and a replenishment, of feminist art from the roots of its development thirty years ago.

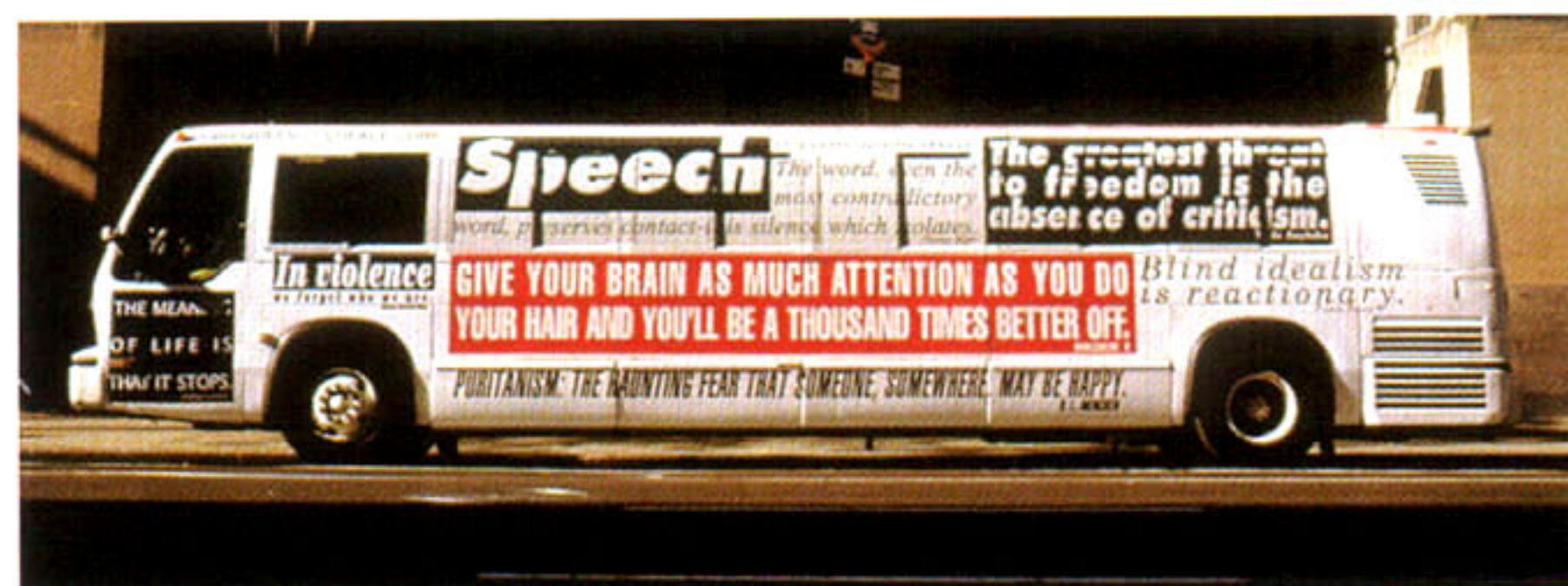
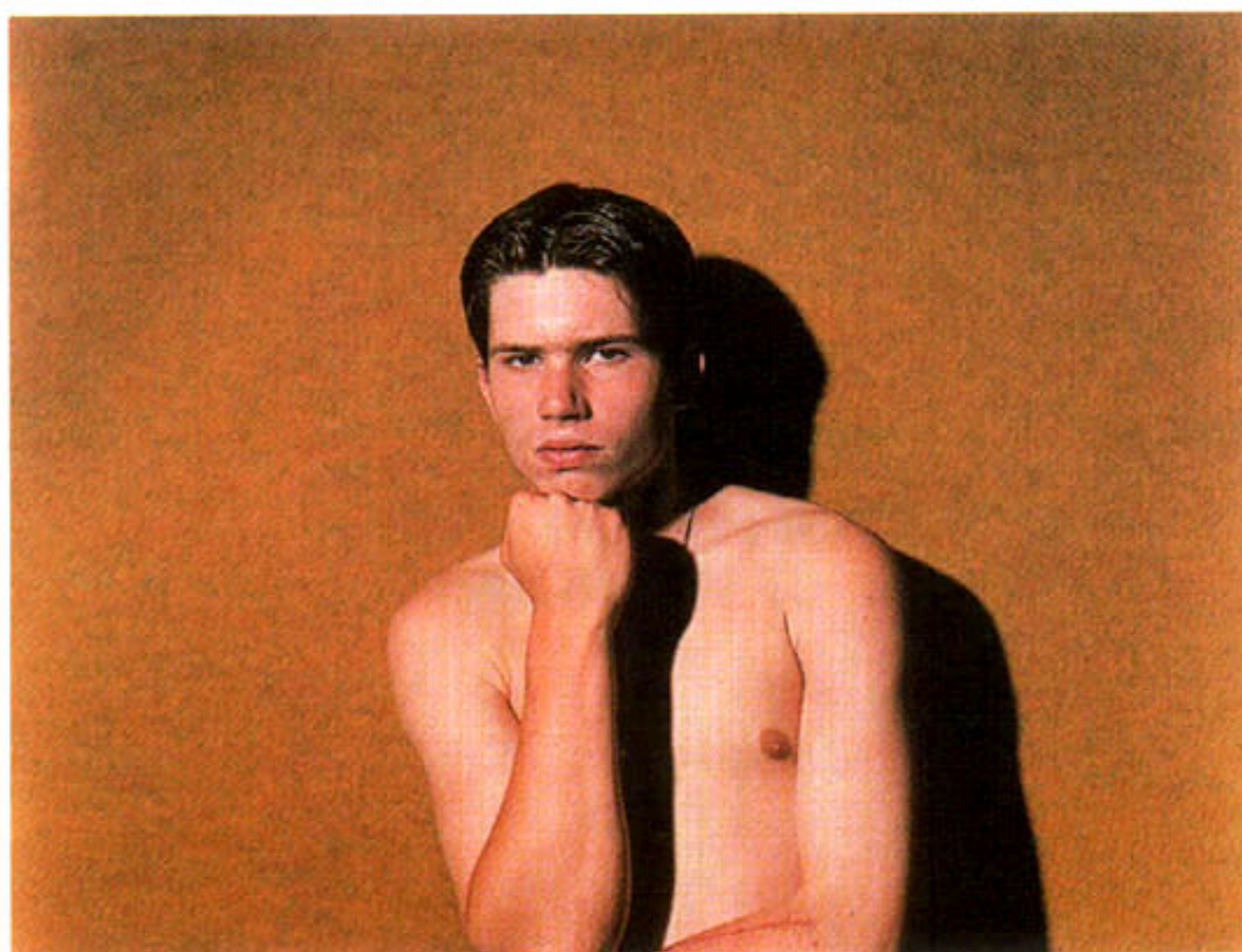
In conclusion, it might make sense to speak to how a growing hunger for spiritual fulfillment in a spiritually degraded society is leading people to feminist art (or, I could add, any other idealistic art practice). I recall the New Museum's experience hosting the Adrian Piper retrospective a couple of years ago: Having thought of Piper as a bit of a cult figure, we were unprepared for the hordes of twenty-somethings who, filling our galleries, seemed entirely comfortable with what they were experiencing. At the time, I reflected that most art skips a generation before finding its audience and that a generation raised on the Internet no longer questions the precepts of Conceptual art. Now I'm happy to expand that thought to propose that feminism, as a phenomenon, must seem refreshingly radical to a generation raised on *Baywatch*. Or, to put it more generously, this generation, facing a previously unimagined set of challenges, assumptions, and possibilities, can now experience feminism as something its founders never could: a historical continuity, flowing from one generation to the next, always adaptable to the needs and strengths of a new wave of the curious and the bold. □

Dan Cameron is senior curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, and curator of the 2003 Istanbul Biennial, which remains on view through November 16.

## Is feminism a celebration of the "feminine" or of freedom and optimal choice? Clearly, the two are not always the same.

It is interesting that the "destruction of pleasure" is sometimes cited in relation to earlier feminisms. I never thought that women in the '70s movements were rejecting pleasure—rather, they were claiming authorship of it. Of course, this is the perspective of someone who grew up reading her mother's copies of *Ms.* magazine. I think we often overlook the fact that bra burning was actually sexy and that women's sexuality had to—if only momentarily and symbolically—extricate itself from the masculine domain in order to write itself into the script. For me, feminism has often been the by-product of a heterosexual constitution. As excited as I was by late-'80s and early-'90s postfeminism and French theory, as applied to the work of Barbara Kruger and Laurie Simmons and others, these arguments were situated in a dialogue with men. At that point, you began to see a schism between the goals of a more homogeneous feminism and the ideologies of queer theory. In fact, queer theory, which includes the possibility of changing one's gender through grammar (i.e., a woman sees herself as a man, so she calls herself a man, a "he"), could hardly be seen as celebratory of femininity when it offers a clear desire for masculine privilege. In that sense, contemporary queer theory actually almost becomes reactive conservatism: The same woman—who may sleep with other women—adopts a different gender and simultaneously opts out of homosexuality. The advent of this nonsurgical sex change has all the uncomfortable baggage of racial "passing" and creates, in its most political sense, an erasure of early feminism. But then we must ask: Is feminism a celebration of the "feminine" or of freedom and optimal choice? Clearly, the two are not always the same.

The potency of '70s feminist art existed in its direct correlation to the advent of the women's movement. Performative gestures, avant-garde film techniques, and non-traditional materials were used by artists in immediate contact with the emotional and political concerns of women. Their work was in no way ambiguous, suggestive, or reflective, as much art of the later '90s and present may be. (The same case can be made for work by David Wojnarowicz, or the Silence=Death projects, which specifically engaged a contemporaneous political struggle.) Such artwork, made at the epicenter of activism but now seen without the backdrop of a particular crisis, may be considered illustrative. Yet I think there remains a correlation between how disenfranchised women feel and how women artists represent women. For example, why is Cindy Sherman's work so continually relevant to young artists and to collectors, while Kruger seems banished to a world of book bags and bumper stickers? With Sherman, an artist I have always admired, we have a body of work that exudes criticality from every adroit gaze; she remasters feminine cinematic clichés. But is the work so successful in the art world and among the general population because it challenges the mainstays of patriarchal society or because the narcissism and presentation of the solitary, longing, or trashed-out woman is a crowd pleaser? And is it that very flexibility that attracts younger photographers? Sherman's work is successful because it retains illustrative powers while simultaneously serving as a celebration of every feminine stereotype. In fact, still



truly disturbing photograph gave me the opportunity to examine my own desirous gaze. Was it different from the author's because of gender differences, or was it similar because we both were attracted to women? Are men and women different? I can't remember if *Ms.* magazine answered that question for me or not. □

Collier Schorr will have simultaneous shows of new work at 303 Gallery, New York, and Modern Art, London, in January 2004.

It turns out the questions once posed by women, for women are of critical import to everyone.

Twenty years or so ago, during my student days in the South, I found my way into feminist art and theorizing more or less on my own—that is, the subject wasn't offered in my school's art-history curriculum, even though historical anthologies of women artists had begun to be published and revisionism was already well under way. The almighty canon's flaws had been revealed, a spotlight had been shone on biases and practices that remained white male-centric—and yet it seemed that nothing had changed. It was just lip service—all talk and no action. Today, of course, things are different. The influences that derive from feminist art are so pervasive as to be immeasurable, and it turns out the questions once posed by women, for women are of critical import to everyone. (Remember Lutz Bacher's Vargas pinup images shown at Pat Hearn in the early '90s? In the politicized climate of those times, the works achieved meaning on the basis of who was presenting them—a woman, not a man. Today we have Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin both painting voluptuous blond women, and their paintings are often discussed in the same breath. Clearly something has changed.)

What was feminist art then? What is it now? Today we point with ease to the virtues and attributes of feminist models of fragmentation, pluralism, diversity, subjectivity, activism—all leitmotifs of postmodernity. We recognize that with respect to the twenty-first-century forces of technology, mass culture, and globalization we (as individuals) are all "feminized" subjects. But when it comes to talking specifically

Clockwise from top left: Lutz Bacher, "Playboys" *Gentlemen Callers*, 1993, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 44". Catalogue for "Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art of the 1970s," White Columns, New York, 2002. Roni Horn, *Becoming a Landscape*, 1999–2001. Installation view, "Roni Horn, Part II," Dia Center for the Arts, New York, 2002. Photo: Oren Slor.

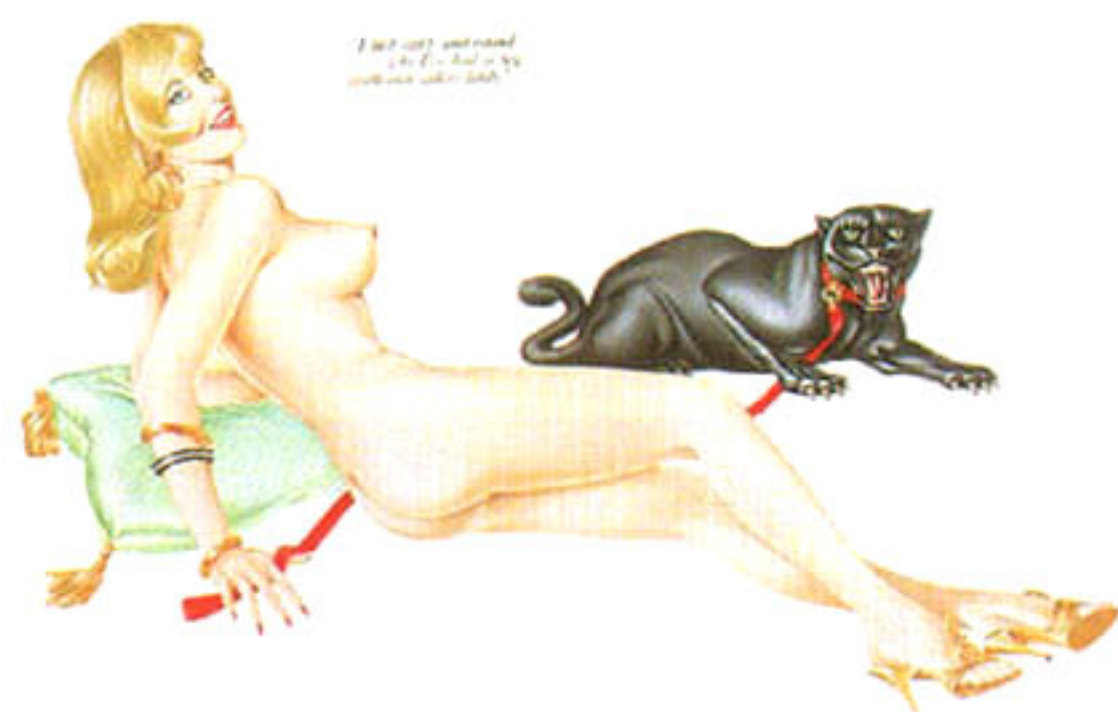
about contemporary feminist art, we quickly discover that there is little consensus. It's important that we acknowledge this disarray and fluidity, that we not commit ourselves to histories that write out the "problems" that feminine models embody (and disembody)—the unofficial, the marginal, the in-between, the idiosyncratic, the elusive, the impossible to represent.

And so, having learned that in writing history, it's impossible to get it right—to be sufficiently comprehensive and "objective"—I want to introduce a few very basic questions about how feminism plays today in contemporary art. For example, if feminist art is so important, why is it still perennially neglected and relegated to a relatively minor note? Why haven't there been major museum shows, one right after the other? Are we to believe that the jury is still out on the subject of feminist art or, worse yet, permanently hung? Why is a show such as "Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art of the 1970s," presented at the venerable nonprofit White Columns last fall, viewed as a "major achievement"? It was a very nice curatorial effort, and flat-out fabulous to see the visual and material icons of feminist art, but those two tiny, crammed galleries and the low-budget feel of the exhibition reeked of marginality. It was a "boutique" event. And chronic neglect doesn't simply manifest at the level of zero big shows. We lack the sorts of visual intimacy with the objects and artifacts of feminist art that are sustained by repeated encounters.

Here's another dispiriting example taken from the logs of daily life. I'm thinking about a lecture I gave last year on Roni Horn's work during her exhibition at Dia. Looking at a wide range of her art, from the first trip to Iceland to the clowns, and working directly with her drawings, photographs, sculptures, and book works, I explored many subjectivities in her art—personal, psychological, sexual, and, I posited, lesbian. Several of her collectors attended the lecture, and one called the artist the next day, joking that she didn't know she was a collector of "lesbian art." (Yuk, yuk.) The connotation was that any such content in Horn's work was put there by (my own) whimsy and could easily be erased, as one would remove dust from the surface of a sculpture. Meanwhile, Horn's market is well established and can easily tolerate such "aberrant" readings of the art. No one loses, and everybody has a nice day. Feminism in art is something that interests scholars and artists but that dealers, museums, and most other people often politely tolerate or assiduously avoid.

More generally, how relevant is feminism to art practice, history, and criticism today? Many models have mobilized from feminism, and feminism has been contaminated a million times over. There's room for that to happen. The more complexities, the more freight we acknowledge, the more relevant the work. Whether desired forms of recognition occur today or tomorrow, one thing is a given: Historical feminist art is poised to be the next big thing—in part because we increasingly need it to describe contemporary practice and how we got where we are, but also because much feminist art (particularly of the vintage varieties) is affiliated with the search for authenticity. I'm wondering if a near-future, fuller cultural embrace of feminist thought and practice in art might not catalyze when "spiritual America"—what I call this widespread, mainstream craving for authenticity—discovers the emotional reservoirs in feminist art. (I think of Madonna sponsoring MOMA's 1997 exhibition of Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills" as an example of this phenomenon.) It seems possible, looking down the road, that these "spiritual Americans" could discover feminist art and—seeing their own image in the art—fall in love. □

Jan Avgikos is a contributing editor of *Artforum*.



# CATHERINE DE ZEGHER

## The twenty-first century may well develop an aesthetics of relation and reciprocity.

Today, younger artists are clearly inspired by the legacy of feminist practice and theory, and at the core of their work is the intersection of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Mona Hatoum and Ellen Gallagher come to mind, for example: Transgressing the racial, ethnic, and gender dictates of society, their work asks us to consider the ambiguous boundary between the self and otherness not as an occasion for horror and fear but as an opening into a new form of identity construction. The daughter of Palestinian exiles in Lebanon and herself now an exile in London, Hatoum has had to reconceive herself as “subject matter out of place” and so has inventively mapped reality at the fringes of vision, reforming female imagery. Similarly, Gallagher’s work resists the intelligible invocation of identity as it operates through the stylized repetition of bodily gestures and movements. For Gallagher, the possibility for transformation is found in the interruption of such repetition—or in a parodic repetition that, in the words of Judith Butler, “exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction.”

Indeed, in the second half of the twentieth century, many artists have challenged the phallic paradigm of binary thinking—rejection or assimilation, aggression or identification—that shapes everything from how art is viewed to how societies treat immigrants. Against this restrictive, modernist axis, they posed questions of audience and distribution, of participation and the “feminine”—making art imbued with thoughtful reciprocity between artist and viewer. New possibilities for connections in the shared (exhibition) space between work, maker, and beholder emerged. In this context, feminism, often employing semiotics and psychoanalysis, enabled us to see what formerly was (or still is) eclipsed: what does not align with that which is considered important at the moment, or which has different conditions of perceptibility.

These artists have included many feminist women—Hannah Höch, Carol Rama, Louise Bourgeois, Lygia Clark, Nancy Spero, Adrian Piper, Martha Rosler, Anna Maria Maiolino, and Joelle Tuerlinckx, for example—but also men such as Hélio Oiticica, Paul Thek, Cildo Meireles, Richard Tuttle, Craigie Horsfield, Giuseppe Penone, and Yun-Fei Ji. All these figures recognized the great potential for notions of relation and connectivity to provide a larger understanding of what art could be. Consider Clark, who—using terms like “matrix,” “pregnancy,” and “relational objects” to describe her projects—is only lately being recognized. In her last works, she called herself a therapist, interpreting the experiences of the “patients” who entered into her artistic “sessions,” creating the possibility of a permanent change in a person’s sense and structure of self and the world. While neither critics nor psychoanalysts valued this turn in her work, Clark bridged the separation between artistic domain and psychotherapy—the latter having provided her with the only theoretical structure available in the ’60s and ’70s to apprehend her practice.

Later, in the ’90s, artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger developed the groundbreaking theory of the “matrixial”: a relational and fluid space of



Clockwise from left: Anna Maria Maiolino, *Aqui Estão (Here they are)*, 1999. Installation view, Açude Museum, Tijuca Forest, Rio de Janeiro, 1999. Craigie Horsfield, *El Hierro Conversation*, 2002. Installation view, Documenta 11, Kassel, Germany, 2002. Ellen Gallagher, *Skinatural*, 2003, cutouts, paint, and Vaseline on color photograph, 13 x 10".

co-emergence involving not only an altered perception of art but also a redefinition of the “feminine.” She used a metaphorically loaded image—of mother and unborn child in the latest stages of pregnancy—to conceptualize an archaic experience of several unknown partial subjects co-emerging and co-affecting and to generate a symbol for an intersubjective encounter radically different from the historically predominant (phallic) model. The naming is most important, as it allows the feminine to become legible in works of art—radically extending and reshaping our understanding of some artistic practices and their temporary eclipse. As Griselda Pollock argues: “If we allow ourselves to introduce into culture another symbolic signifier to stand beside the phallus (signifier of difference and division in terms of absence and loss orchestrating these either/or models), could we not be on the way to allowing the invisible feminine bodily specificity to enter and realign aspects of our consciousness and unconsciousness? . . . This feminist theorization is not an alternative in opposition to the phallus; rather, the opening up of the symbolic field to extended possibilities which, in a nonphallic logic, do not need to displace the other in order to be.”

The work of Oiticica and Rosler (most recently in this year’s Venice Biennale) and Horsfield (in Documentas 10 and 11) has often included large-scale collaborative and social projects, another significant relational model, and their extensive writings have clarified this sociopolitical attitude. For Horsfield, the artwork is only realized in togetherness, conversation, and communality—questioning, in effect, the validity of modernist notions of alienation and separation in the formation of art. Another current example is the Royal Art Lodge, whose young artists



similarly overturn modernist formulations of artistic solitude and negativity, but only while appearing to pursue no particular aim other than to spend time together and share domestic jokes and concerns. Many other collectives and collaborations appeared in Lawrence Rinder’s Whitney

Biennial and also in Okwui Enwezor’s Documenta 11, whose curatorial project I consider feminist, despite it not having been defined as such.

Considering all these artists’ practices, I am hopeful that it will be possible to “degender” and “deracialize” difference and to think of it in positive, nonreifying terms. If modernism’s radical and inventive strategies were dependent on alienation, separation, negativity, violence, and de(con)struction, the twenty-first century may well develop an aesthetics of relation and reciprocity defined by reconstruction, inclusion, connectivity, binding impulses, and even by healing attitudes. □

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Opposite page: **Laura Cottingham, *Not for Sale: Feminism and Art in the USA During the 1970s, 1998***, stills from a color video, 90 minutes. (Mimi Smith, *Knit Baby* from "Knit Baby Kit," 1968, and Howardena Pindell, *Free, White and 21*, 1980.) This page, clockwise from left: **Ana Mendieta, *Untitled*, 1977**, snow and ice. Installation view, Iowa. From the "Silueta Series," 1973–80. **Hannah Wilke, *Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism*, 1974–77**, lithograph, 11 1/2 x 9". **Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy*, 1964**. Performance view, Paris. Photo: Al Giese.

While it is more or less accurate to credit Darwin, Marx, Engels, and Freud with the basic discoveries that spurred evolutionism, socialism, and psychoanalysis, crediting one or two people with the origin of feminism is much more fraught. Many historians of feminism note the influence of Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, but these acknowledgments almost always come with a heavy sense of apology for establishing an almost arbitrary beginning point. (Registering the force of belatedness in feminist history, most scholars frequently refer to the feminism of the '60s and '70s as "second wave.") Feminism's anxiety about its origins is one reason why many feminist artists in the '70s tried to revise art history, recovering long-ignored work of women. Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" was the call that revolutionized art history. Artists began to "redo" masterpieces, insisting that the historical imagination of the past include women as more than objects of what Laura Mulvey aptly dubbed "the male gaze." One consequence of this art-historical revision was an acknowledgment that the history of women's lives, experiences, and intellectual and artistic contributions was simply too vast to recover. This loss propelled a political grief that was rehearsed again in the '80s and '90s as AIDS and breast cancer began killing more young people.

The recognition of ignorance at the heart of the historical enterprise prior to feminism has had an enormous influence on poststructuralist philosophy, with its emphasis on the "undecidability" of textual meaning and on antiracist and anticolonialist theory—work often animated by the aspiration to recover a history centered on the experiences of slaves and the disenfranchised. Taken together, these aspirations have changed how history is written, what counts as evidence, who can serve as witness, and who can serve as judge. This role of feminism in historiography illuminates the broader story of feminism's revolutionary achievements. Feminist thinking required more than "filling in" missing content: It insisted on revising the fundamental questions that defined the disciplines. It also made clear how quickly insights from the present will be themselves a product of both blindness and insight. For example, just as feminists of the '70s were pained to see what dominant history had been long blind to, so too did feminists of the '80s and '90s regret and critique the previous generation's blindness to differences of race, class, and sexuality.

With art history as practice and method in mind, it is worth revisiting the question frequently posed to feminists today: "Is feminism passé?" (It is useful to note that this same question also haunts Marxism and psychoanalysis—and the question about evolution is more severe: Does it exist? The *New York Times* recently reported that Americans are three times more likely to believe in the Virgin Birth.) The structure of the question is designed to elicit either a yes or no, or something along the lines of "'70s feminism is passé, but. . . ." A more generative way to approach political and historical continuity is to consider which questions exposed

by feminism in the '60s and '70s still persist and what forms these questions take so far removed from their initial exposure. AIDS and global capital, for example, have radically transformed the persistent question of women's sexual freedom. For women in South Africa or South Central Los Angeles, sexual freedom is deeply connected to earlier feminist conversations, but now refracted through medical biology as well as differing local economies and cultural politics. The zigzagging successes and failures of feminism throughout the world today—women are routinely prime ministers in some places, and routinely maimed or killed for alleged sexual infidelity in those and other places—are symptoms of the ambivalence that still haunts feminism as an intellectual revolution. Yet that ambivalent zigzag is one of the most radical consequences of feminism as thought practice and, I believe, anticipates the likely trajectory of the next great intellectual revolution, the biogenetic one. Uneven distribution, economic access, and the larger forces of what we might call medical capital will similarly compromise it.

Today, intellectual revolutions cannot but be greeted with ambivalence. In this, feminism's history and future are writ large. Thus feminism remains for me the richest intellectual vantage point for surveying the history of thought over the past 150 years. It leaves nothing untouched in the past or the future, and it infuses our present with both its dismaying failures and its astonishing achievements on the world stage. Feminism makes ambivalence a necessary worldview. In these days of hideous fundamentalism, the capacity to acknowledge ambivalence is revolutionary. □

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