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Overviews

INTRODUCTION

Section 1: Gender in/of Culture

The first chapter, 'Overviews', provides two sets of texts that provide evidence of debate and differences of opinion from within similar contexts. The texts in this first section, 'Gender in/of Culture', were all published in the US between 1968 and 1973 and address in highly divergent ways the structures of gender in culture. Between them they disrupt, from the start of the book, the notion that there is any singular feminist position within a particular country. The assumption that early feminist thinking in the US was all single-issue, and that it was predominantly essentialist in approach, is shown not to be the case through these four texts, each of which have had great resonance and impact.

Valerie Solanas's sustained, queer *SCUM Manifesto* lays into the excesses of misogyny and of patriarchal culture with equally fantastical rhetoric. The passage cited here as the opening text of this collection also shows how the *Manifesto* is a funny and trenchant tract on gender roles and cultural production. Solanas turns masculine and feminine roles upside down, suggesting that male artists are weak individuals and thus have feminine roles¹ and that women are heroic and creative. 'The true artist is every self-confident, healthy female, and in a female society the only Art, the only Culture, will be conceited, kookie females grooving on each other and on everything else in the universe,' she writes, betraying the date of her writing and providing a utopian rallying call.

The Canadian Shulamith Firestone moved to the US to study at the Art Institute of Chicago, graduating in 1967. That year she was the subject of a documentary, *Shulie*,

which focused on her daily life as a politically active art student. This was remade, shot for shot, by artist Elisabeth Subrin in 1997 (see chapter 4 for Subrin's essay on this). While in Chicago, Firestone engaged with Marxist political thinking and activism, and co-founded a women's liberation group. Upon moving to New York she co-founded one of its first feminist groups, New York Radical Women (1967), followed by Redstockings, and New York Radical Feminists (both 1969). In the chapter '(Male) Culture' (edited down here) from her 1970 book *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone indicates and analyses the lack of women artists. Women who are artists 'have had to compete as men, in a male game' – our culture has no room for a female viewpoint to be accorded respect. Those who endeavour this 'must achieve and be rated by standards of a tradition she had no part in making'. These standards are biased: a woman's viewpoint is no less limited than a man's viewpoint and until women's voices are accorded their proper place we should not speak of our culture as universal.

Sherry Ortner's paper 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' argues the necessity for a rigorous methodology when defining terms and determining the questions to be asked: 'we must be absolutely clear about what we are trying to explain, before explaining it.' Coming from an anthropological background, she defines culture as 'human consciousness and its products'. She then develops her theory that if every known society both accords women certain cultural roles but devalues them overall, then the issue is not that women are nature, but that 'women are seen "merely" as being closer to nature than men'. The reasons for this subtlety are argued through the complex cultural structuring of activities such as child rearing and cooking.

Carolee Schneemann used the text reproduced here for both her super-8 film *Kitch's Last Meal* (1973–5) and for two performances titled *Interior Scroll* (1975 and 1977). Photographs by Anthony McCall documenting this latter performance are much in circulation in histories of performance art and of feminist art, and have also been commodified on the art market as if the photographs themselves were the artworks.² The moments represented are those at the end of the performance when Schneemann stands naked, body smeared with 'expressionist' brush marks, and has extracted a scroll from her vagina from which she is reading out loud the text reproduced here. In her own collected writings, Schneemann was careful to supply a number of photographs juxtaposed with the full text:³ one still image alone can reinforce the issue she addresses in the text as a problem – how women and their work are represented as artists and as art. We end up seeing the image primarily as a 'nude' rather than Schneemann as a dynamic performer determining the interaction of movement, physical elements, and words. Even now, when this text is read alongside the images, they take on a very different meaning. Without them, it can become a different work, with an emphasis upon the body rather than upon the constructions of femininity and of the woman artist.

Section 2: Curating Feminisms

Between 2005 and 2012 many national and regionally important museums hosted exhibitions of feminist art or of art by women. The second section of this chapter, 'Curating Feminisms', presents texts from the curator's catalogue essay for three of

these exhibitions. They have been selected as exhibitions which all purported to be international surveys of feminist art, and all included work from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Two of the three included work made up to the time of the exhibition; but the shared focus of all upon the decade of the 1970s, crucial for feminism in the West, provides a useful thread through which to contrast curatorial approaches. What is clear is that each curator is working from a different standpoint vis-à-vis institutional politics and the politics of feminism, and thus the distinctiveness of intent for each exhibition can emerge with clarity.

Cornelia Butler was the curator for 'WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution'.⁴ The title of the exhibition implies that not all of the art in the exhibition is necessarily feminist, but rather that it is to be seen through the lens of its relationship with feminism. Thus she states that through 'a proposed dismantling of the received canon of feminist art, the exhibition and accompanying publication consciously re-enact feminism's legacy of inclusivity and its interrogation of cultural hierarchies of all kinds to suggest a more complicated history of simultaneous feminisms'. She regards feminism as a movement that 'coexisted' with other liberatory movements; however, for her, feminism is defined quite explicitly within the parameters of the art world. This is how she describes her own interest in feminist practice, how she has structured the 18 themes within the exhibition, how she outlines the exclusion of artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye, and therefore how we are to read the 'dismantling of the received canon' for which she is aiming. This is primarily an exhibition concerned with categorizing and archiving for Art History. In contrast, Xabier Arakistain takes a far more activist approach. 'Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism', the exhibition he curated, opened just three months after 'WACK!', on a different continent.⁵ For him, 'art and feminism' means art that is explicitly influenced by feminist thinking, while for Butler, it is a relationship that she considers only within the art world, but which is not necessarily the impulse for the artwork itself. The five themes Arakistain outlines for the exhibition are clearly, as he states, 'areas that are central for the Feminist movement' – that is, informed by the broader political movement of feminism, rather than being museological or Art Historical categories. He finishes his essay with consideration of the art market's lack of interest in this work and a cautious hope that there are signs of active change within the museum sector.

Mirjam Westen was the curator of 'Rebelle: Art and Feminism 1969–2009', which opened in the Netherlands two years after 'WACK!' and 'Kiss Kiss Bang Bang'.⁶ This exhibition was more loosely constructed than the other two exhibitions. Its five themes are more politically informed than those of 'WACK!' and less activist than those of 'Kiss Kiss Bang Bang'. While constructing a broad survey of work, Westen also provided two areas of added geographic focus running through her themes: artists from the Netherlands, and artists from Africa and the Middle East/West Asia. This allowed for an exploration on the one hand of how an internationally experienced women's movement was – and continues to be – articulated in local culture; and on the other hand how the emergence of artists from a whole continent into a Western-dominated international art world challenges that world's assumptions about what constitutes feminist art practices, aesthetics, and concerns. Westen includes her own institutional history in the essay. Not only had she worked with feminist groups, but

also her employment since the 1980s by the museum where 'Rebelle' was shown, with its feminist director, policies, and reputation, is incorporated into the productive context for the exhibition. She exposes processes that are a demonstration of an institutional environment that has feminist ways of working.

Notes

- 1 A thread later taken up by June Wayne in a more orthodox manner in 'The Male Artist as a Stereotypical Female', *Art Journal*, 32 (4) (1973): 414–16.
- 2 See Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press 1998), pp. 36–7 and passim, on the problematic of documenting performance.
- 3 Carolee Schneemann, *More than Meat Joy: Performance Works and Selected Writings* (New Paltz, NY: Documentext, 1979; 2nd edn 1997).
- 4 Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 4 March–16 July 2007; toured to National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC, 21 September–16 December 2007; PS1, New York, 17 February–12 May 2008; Vancouver Art Gallery, 4 October 2008–11 January 2009.
- 5 'Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism', Museo de Bellas Artes, Bilbao, 11 June–9 September 2007.
- 6 Museum voor Moderne Kunst Arnhem, Netherlands, 30 May–23 August 2009.

1.1 Gender in/of Culture

Valerie Solanas, 'Scum Manifesto' (1968)

From *Scum Manifesto* (London: Matriarchy Study Group, 1983), pp. 23–6.
First published by Olympia Press, 1968.

[...] 'Great Art' and 'Culture': The male 'artist' attempts to solve his dilemma of not being able to live, of not being female, by constructing a highly artificial world in which the male is heroized, that is, displays female traits, and the female is reduced to highly limited, insipid subordinate roles, that is, to being male.

The male 'artistic' aim being, not to communicate (having nothing inside him, he has nothing to say), but to disguise his animalism, he resorts to symbolism and obscurity ('deep' stuff). The vast majority of people, particularly the 'educated' ones, lacking faith in their own judgement, humble, respectful of authority ('Daddy knows best' is translated into adult language as 'Critic knows best', 'Writer knows best', 'PhD knows best'), are easily conned into believing that obscurity, evasiveness, incomprehensibility, indirectness, ambiguity and boredom are marks of depth and brilliance.

'Great Art' proves that men are superior to women, that men are women, being labelled 'Great Art', almost all of which, as the anti-feminists are fond of reminding us, was created by men. We know that 'Great Art' is great because male authorities have told us so, and we can't claim otherwise, as only those with exquisite sensitivities far superior to ours can perceive and appreciate the greatness, the proof of their superior sensitivity being that they appreciate the slop that they appreciate.

Appreciating is the sole diversion of the 'cultivated': passive and incompetent, lacking imagination and wit, they must try to make do with that; unable to create their own diversions, to create a little world of their own, to affect in the smallest way their

environments; they must accept what's given: unable to create or relate, they spectate. Absorbing 'culture' is a desperate, frantic attempt to groove in an ungroovy world, escape the horror of a sterile, mindless existence. 'Culture' provides a sop to the egos of the incompetent, a means of rationalizing passive spectating; they can pride themselves on their ability to appreciate the 'finer' things, to see a jewel where there is only a turd (they want to be admired for admiring). Lacking faith in their ability to change anything, resigned to the status quo, they *have* to see beauty in turds because, so far as they can see, turds are all they'll ever have.

The veneration of 'Art' and 'Culture' – besides leading many women into boring, passive activity that distracts from more important and rewarding activities, from cultivating active abilities and leads to the constant intrusion on our sensibilities of pompous dissertations on the deep beauty of this and that turd. This allows the 'artist' to be set up as one possessing superior feelings, perceptions, insights and judgements, thereby undermining the faith of insecure women in the value and validity of their own feelings, perceptions, insights and judgements.

The male, having a very limited range of feelings and, consequently, very limited perceptions, insights and judgements, needs the 'artist' to guide him, to tell him what life is all about. But the male 'artist', being totally sexual, unable to relate to anything beyond his own physical sensations, having nothing to express beyond the insight that for the male life is meaningless and absurd, cannot be an artist. How can he who is not capable of life tell us what life is all about? A 'male artist' is a contradiction in terms. A degenerate can only produce degenerate 'art'. The true artist is every self-confident, healthy female, and in a female society the only Art, the only Culture, will be conceited, kookie, funky females grooving on each other and on everything else in the universe. [...]

Shulamith Firestone, '(Male) Culture' (1970)

From *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (London: Women's Press, 1979), pp. 148–60. First published 1970.

Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.

Simone de Beauvoir

The relation of women to culture has been indirect. We have discussed how the present psychical organization of the two sexes dictates that most women spend their emotional energy on men, whereas men 'sublimate' theirs into work. In this way women's love becomes raw fuel for the cultural machine. (Not to mention the Great Ideas born rather more directly from early-morning boudoir discussions.)

In addition to providing its emotional support, women had another important indirect relation to culture: they inspired it. The Muse is female. Men of culture were

emotionally warped by the sublimation process; they converted life to art, thus could not live it. But women, and those men who were excluded from culture, remained in direct contact with their experience – fit subject matter.

That women were intrinsic in the very content of culture is borne out by an example from the history of art: men are erotically stimulated by the opposite sex; painting was male; the nude became a *female* nude. Where the art of the male nude reached high levels, either in the work of an individual artist, e.g. Michelangelo, or in a whole artistic period, such as that of classical Greece, men were homosexual.

The subject matter of art, when there is any, is today even more largely inspired by women. Imagine the elimination of women characters from popular films and novels, even from the work of ‘highbrow’ directors – Antonioni, Bergman, or Godard; there wouldn’t be much left. For in the last few centuries, particularly in popular culture – perhaps related to the problematic position of women in society – women have been the main subject of art. In fact, in scanning blurbs of even one month’s cultural production, one might believe that women were all anyone ever thought about.

But what about the women who have contributed directly to culture? There aren’t many. And in those cases where individual women have participated in male culture, they have had to do so on male terms. And it shows. Because they have had to compete *as men*, in a male game – while still being pressured to prove themselves in their old female roles, a role at odds with their self-appointed ambitions – it is not surprising that they are seldom as skilled as men at the game of culture.

And it is not just a question of being as competent, it is also a question of being *authentic*. We have seen in the context of love how modern women have imitated male psychology, confusing it with health, and have thereby ended up even worse off than men themselves: they were not even being true to home-grown sicknesses. And there are even more complex layers to this question of authenticity: women have no means of coming to an understanding of what their experience *is*, or even that it is different from male experience. The tool for representing, for objectifying one’s experience in order to deal with it, culture, is so saturated with male bias that women almost never have a chance to see themselves culturally through their own eyes. So that finally, signals from their direct experience that conflict with the prevailing (male) culture are denied and repressed.

Thus because cultural dicta are set by men, presenting only the male view – and now in a super-barrage – women are kept from achieving an authentic picture of their reality. Why do women, for example, get aroused by a pornography of female bodies? In their ordinary experience of female nudity, say in a gym locker room, the sight of other nude females might be interesting (though probably only in so far as they rate by male sexual standards), but not directly erotic. Cultural distortion of sexuality explains also how female sexuality gets twisted into narcissism: women make love to themselves vicariously through the man, rather than directly making love to him. At times this cultural barrage of man/subject, women/object desensitizes women to male forms to such a degree that they are orgasmically affected.¹

There are other examples of the distorting effects on female vision of an exclusively male culture. Let us go back to the history of figurative painting once again: we have seen how in the tradition of the nude, male heterosexual inclinations came to emphasize the female rather than the male as the more aesthetic and pleasing form. Such a predilection for either one over the other, of course, is based on a sexuality which is

in itself artificial, culturally created. But at least one might then expect the opposite bias to prevail in the view of women painters still involved in the tradition of the nude. This is not the case. In any art school in the country one sees classrooms full of girls working diligently from the female model, accepting that the male model is somehow less aesthetic, at best perhaps novel, and certainly never questioning why the male model wears a jock strap when the female model wouldn't dream of appearing in so much as a G-string.

Again, looking at the work of well-known women painters associated with the Impressionist School of the nineteenth century, Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, one wonders at their obsessive preoccupation with traditionally female subject matter: women, children, female nudes, interiors, etc. This is partially explained by political conditions of that period: women painters were lucky to be allowed to paint anything at all, let alone male models. And yet it is more than that. These women, for all their superb draughtsmanship and compositional skill, remained minor painters because they had 'lifted' a set of traditions and a view of the world that was inauthentic for them. They worked within the limits of what had been defined as female by a *male* tradition: they saw women through male eyes, painted a male's idea of female. And they carried it to an extreme, for they were attempting to outdo men at their own game; they had fallen for a (lovely) line. And thus the falseness that corrupts their work, making it 'feminine', i.e. sentimental, light.

It would take a denial of all cultural tradition for women to produce even a true 'female' art. For a woman who participates in (male) culture must achieve and be rated by standards of a tradition she had no part in making – and certainly there is no room in that tradition for a female view, even if she *could* discover what it was. In those cases where a woman, tired of losing at a male game, has attempted to participate in culture *in a female way*, she has been put down and misunderstood, named by the (male) cultural establishment 'Lady Artist', i.e. trivial, inferior. And even where it must be (grudgingly) admitted she is 'good', it is fashionable – a cheap way to indicate one's own 'seriousness' and refinement of taste – to insinuate that she is good but irrelevant.

Perhaps it is true that a presentation of only the female side of things – which tends to be one long protest and complaint rather than the portrayal of a full and substantive existence – is limited. But an equally relevant question, one much less frequently asked, is: Is it any more limited than the prevailing male view of things, which – when not taken as absolute truth – is at least seen as 'serious', relevant, and important? Is Mary McCarthy in *The Group* really so much worse a writer than Norman Mailer in *The American Dream*? Or is she perhaps describing a reality that men, the controllers and critics of the Cultural Establishment, can't tune in on?

[...]

And what about women artists? We have seen that it has only been in the last several centuries that women have been permitted to participate – and then only on an individual basis, and on male terms – in the making of culture. And even so their vision had become inauthentic: they were denied the use of the cultural mirror.

And there are many *negative* reasons that women have entered art: affluence always creates female diletantism, e.g. the Victorian 'young lady' with her accomplishments, or the arts of the Japanese geisha – for, in addition to serving as a symbol of male luxury, women's increasing idleness under advancing industrialism presents a practical problem: female discontent has to be eased to keep it from igniting. Or women may

be entering art as a refuge. Women today are still excluded from the vital power centres of human activity; and art is one of the last self-determining occupations left – often done in solitude. But in this sense women are like a petty bourgeoisie trying to open up shop in the age of corporate capitalism.

For the higher percentages of women in art lately may tell us more about the state of art than about the state of women. Are we to feel cheered that women have taken over in a capacity soon to be automated out? (Like 95 percent Black at the Post Office, this is no sign of integration; on the contrary, undesirables are being shoved into the least desirable positions – Here, now get in and keep your mouth shut!) That art is no longer a vital centre that attracts the best men of our generation may also be a product of the male/female division [...] But the animation of women and homosexuals in the arts today may signify only the scurrying of rats near a dying body.²

But if it has not yet created great women artists, women's new literacy has certainly created a female audience. Just as male audiences have always demanded, and received, male art to reinforce their particular view of reality, so a female audience demands a 'female' art to reinforce the female reality. Thus the birth of the crude feminine novel in the nineteenth century, leading to the love story of our own day, so ever-present in popular culture ('soap opera'); the women's magazine trade; *Valley of the Dolls*. These may be crude beginnings. Most of this art is as yet primitive, clumsy, poor. But occasionally the female reality is documented as clearly as the male reality has always been, as, for example, in the work of Anne Sexton.

Eventually, out of this ferment – perhaps very soon – we may see the emergence of an authentic female art. But the development of 'female' art is not to be viewed as reactionary, like its counterpart, the male School of Virility. Rather it is progressive: an exploration of the strictly female reality is a necessary step to correct the warp in a sexually biased culture. It is only after we have integrated the dark side of the moon into our world view that we can begin to talk seriously of universal culture.

[...]

Only a feminist revolution can eliminate entirely the sex schism causing these cultural distortions. Until then 'pure art' is a delusion – a delusion responsible both for the inauthentic art women have produced until now, as well as for the corruption of (male) culture at large. The incorporation of the neglected half of human experience – the female experience – into the body of culture, to create an all-encompassing culture, is only the first step, a precondition; but the schism of reality itself must be overthrown before there can be a true cultural revolution.

Notes

- 1 Female inability to focus on sexual imagery has been found to be a major cause of female frigidity. Masters and Johnson, Albert Ellis, and others have stressed the importance of 'sexual focusing' in teaching frigid women to achieve orgasm. Hilda O'Hare in *International Journal of Sexology* correctly attributes this problem to the absence in our society of a female counterpart for the countless stimulants of the male sexual urge.
- 2 However, women's presence in the arts and humanities is still viciously fought by the few males remaining, in proportion to the insecurity of their own position – particularly precarious in traditional, humanist schools, such as figurative painting.

**Sherry B. Ortner, 'Is Female to Male as Nature
is to Culture?' (1972)**

From Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds), *Women, Culture, and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974). First published in *Feminist Studies*, 1 (2) (1972): 5–31.

Much of the creativity of anthropology derives from the tension between two sets of demands: that we explain human universals, and that we explain cultural particulars. By this canon, woman provides us with one of the more challenging problems to be dealt with. The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact. Yet within that universal fact, the specific cultural conceptions and symbolizations of woman are extraordinarily diverse and even mutually contradictory. Further, the actual treatment of women and their relative power and contribution vary enormously from culture to culture, and over different periods in the history of particular cultural traditions. Both of these points – the universal fact and the cultural variation – constitute problems to be explained.

My interest in the problem is of course more than academic: I wish to see genuine change come about, the emergence of a social and cultural order in which as much of the range of human potential is open to women as is open to men. The universality of female subordination, the fact that it exists within every type of social and economic arrangement and in societies of every degree of complexity, indicates to me that we are up against something very profound, very stubborn, something we cannot rout out simply by rearranging a few tasks and roles in the social system, or even by reordering the whole economic structure. In this paper I try to expose the underlying logic of cultural thinking that assumes the inferiority of women; I try to show the highly persuasive nature of the logic, for if it were not so persuasive, people would not keep subscribing to it. But I also try to show the social and cultural sources of that logic, to indicate wherein lies the potential for change.

It is important to sort out the levels of the problem. The confusion can be staggering. For example, depending on which aspect of Chinese culture we look at, we might extrapolate any of several entirely different guesses concerning the status of women in China. In the ideology of Taoism, *yin*, the female principle, and *yang*, the male principle, are given equal weight; 'the opposition, alternation, and interaction of these two forces give rise to all phenomena in the universe.'¹ Hence we might guess that maleness and femaleness are equally valued in the general ideology of Chinese culture.² Looking at the social structure, however, we see the strongly emphasized patrilineal descent principle, the importance of sons, and the absolute authority of the father in the family. Thus we might conclude that China is the archetypal patriarchal society. Next, looking at the actual roles played, power and influence wielded, and material contributions made by women in Chinese society – all of which are, upon observation, quite substantial – we would have to say that women are allotted a great deal of (unspoken) status in the system. Or again, we might focus on the fact that a goddess, Kuan Yin, is the central (most worshiped, most depicted) deity in Chinese Buddhism,

and we might be tempted to say, as many have tried to say about goddess-worshipping cultures in prehistoric and early historical societies, that China is actually a sort of matriarchy. In short, we must be absolutely clear about *what* we are trying to explain before explaining it.

We may differentiate three levels of the problem:

- 1 The universal fact of culturally attributed second-class status of woman in every society. Two questions are important here. First, what do we mean by this; what is our evidence that this is a universal fact? And second, how are we to explain this fact, once having established it?
- 2 Specific ideologies, symbolizations, and socio-structural arrangements pertaining to women that vary widely from culture to culture. The problem at this level is to account for any particular cultural complex in terms of factors specific to that group – the standard level of anthropological analysis.
- 3 Observable on-the-ground details of women's activities, contributions, powers, influence, etc., often at variance with cultural ideology (although always constrained within the assumption that women may never be officially preeminent in the total system). This is the level of direct observation, often adopted now by feminist-oriented anthropologists.

This paper is primarily concerned with the first of these levels, the problem of the universal devaluation of women. The analysis thus depends not upon specific cultural data but rather upon an analysis of 'culture' taken generically as a special sort of process in the world. A discussion of the second level, the problem of cross-cultural variation in conceptions and relative valuations of women, will entail a great deal of cross-cultural research and must be postponed to another time. As for the third level, it will be obvious from my approach that I would consider it a misguided endeavor to focus only upon women's actual though culturally unrecognized and unvalued powers in any given society, without first understanding the overarching ideology and deeper assumptions of the culture that render such powers trivial.

The Universality of Female Subordination

What do I mean when I say that everywhere, in every known culture, women are considered in some degree inferior to men? First of all, I must stress that I am talking about *cultural* evaluations; I am saying that each culture, in its own way and on its own terms, makes this evaluation. But what would constitute evidence that a particular culture considers women inferior?

Three types of data would suffice: (1) elements of cultural ideology and informants' statements that *explicitly* devalue women, according them, their roles, their tasks, their products, and their social milieux less prestige than are accorded men and the male correlates; (2) symbolic devices, such as the attribution of defilement, which may be interpreted as *implicitly* making a statement of inferior valuation; and (3) social-structural arrangements that exclude women from participation in or contact with some realm in which the highest powers of the society are felt to reside.³ These three

types of data may all of course be interrelated in any particular system, though they need not necessarily be. Further, any one of them will usually be sufficient to make the point of female inferiority in a given culture. Certainly, female exclusion from the most sacred rite or the highest political council is sufficient evidence. Certainly, explicit cultural ideology devaluing women (and their tasks, roles, products, etc.) is sufficient evidence. Symbolic indicators such as defilement are usually sufficient, although in a few cases in which, say, men and women are equally polluting to one another, a further indicator is required – and is, as far as my investigations have ascertained, always available.

On any or all of these counts, then, I would flatly assert that we find women subordinated to men in every known society. The search for a genuinely egalitarian, let alone matriarchal, culture has proved fruitless. An example from one society that has traditionally been on the credit side of this ledger will suffice. Among the matrilineal Crow, as Lowie points out, ‘Women ... had highly honorific offices in the Sun Dance; they could become directors of the Tobacco Ceremony and played, if anything, a more conspicuous part in it than the men; they sometimes played the hostess in the Cooked Meat Festival; they were not debarred from sweating or doctoring or from seeking a vision.’ Nonetheless, ‘Women [during menstruation] formerly rode inferior horses and evidently this loomed as a source of contamination, for they were not allowed to approach either a wounded man or men starting on a war party. A taboo still lingers against their coming near sacred objects at these times.’ Further, just before enumerating women’s rights of participation in the various rituals noted above, Lowie mentions one particular Sun Dance Doll bundle that was not supposed to be unwrapped by a woman. Pursuing this trail we find: ‘According to all Lodge Grass informants and most others, the doll owned by Wrinkled-face took precedence not only of other dolls but of all other Crow medicines whatsoever. ... This particular doll was not supposed to be handled by a woman.’⁴

In sum, the Crow are probably a fairly typical case. Yes, women have certain powers and rights, in this case some that place them in fairly high positions. Yet ultimately the line is drawn: menstruation is a threat to warfare, one of the most valued institutions of the tribe, one that is central to their self-definition; and the most sacred object of the tribe is taboo to the direct sight and touch of women.

Similar examples could be multiplied ad infinitum, but I think the onus is no longer upon us to demonstrate that female subordination is a cultural universal; it is up to those who would argue against the point to bring forth counterexamples. I shall take the universal secondary status of women as a given, and proceed from there.

Nature and Culture⁵

How are we to explain the universal devaluation of women? We could of course rest the case on biological determinism. There is something genetically inherent in the male of the species, so the biological determinists would argue, that makes them the naturally dominant sex; that ‘something’ is lacking in females, and as a result women are not only naturally subordinate but in general quite satisfied with their position, since it affords them protection and the opportunity to maximize maternal pleasures,

which to them are the most satisfying experiences of life. Without going into a detailed refutation of this position, I think it fair to say that it has failed to be established to the satisfaction of almost anyone in academic anthropology. This is to say, not that biological facts are irrelevant, or that men and women are not different, but that these facts and differences only take on significance of superior/inferior within the framework of culturally defined value systems.

If we are unwilling to rest the case on genetic determinism, it seems to me that we have only one way to proceed. We must attempt to interpret female subordination in light of other universals, factors built into the structure of the most generalized situation in which all human beings, in whatever culture, find themselves. For example, every human being has a physical body and a sense of nonphysical mind, is part of a society of other individuals and an inheritor of a cultural tradition, and must engage in some relationship, however mediated, with 'nature,' or the nonhuman realm, in order to survive. Every human being is born (to a mother) and ultimately dies, all are assumed to have an interest in personal survival, and society/culture has its own interest in (or at least momentum toward) continuity and survival, which transcends the lives and deaths of particular individuals. And so forth. It is in the realm of such universals of the human condition that we must seek an explanation for the universal fact of female devaluation.

I translate the problem, in other words, into the following simple question. What could there be in the generalized structure and conditions of existence, common to every culture, that would lead every culture to place a lower value upon women? Specifically, my thesis is that woman is being identified with – or, if you will, seems to be a symbol of – something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being of a lower order of existence than itself. Now it seems that there is only one thing that would fit that description, and that is 'nature' in the most generalized sense. Every culture, or, generically, 'culture,' is engaged in the process of generating and sustaining systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artifacts, etc.) by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence, bends them to its purposes, controls them in its interest. We may thus broadly equate culture with the notion of human consciousness, or with the products of human consciousness (i.e., systems of thought and technology), by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature.

Now the categories of 'nature' and 'culture' are of course conceptual categories – one can find no boundary out in the actual world between the two states or realms of being. And there is no question that some cultures articulate a much stronger opposition between the two categories than others – it has even been argued that primitive peoples (some or all) do not see or intuit any distinction between the human cultural state and the state of nature at all. Yet I would maintain that the universality of ritual betokens an assertion in all human cultures of the specifically human ability to act upon and regulate, rather than passively move with and be moved by, the givens of natural existence. In ritual, the purposive manipulation of given forms toward regulating and sustaining order, every culture asserts that proper relations between human existence and natural forces depend upon culture's employing its special powers to regulate the overall processes of the world and life.

One realm of cultural thought in which these points are often articulated is that of concepts of purity and pollution. Virtually every culture has some such beliefs, which seem in large part (though not, of course, entirely) to be concerned with the relationship

between culture and nature.⁶ A well-known aspect of purity/pollution beliefs cross-culturally is that of the natural 'contagion' of pollution; left to its own devices, pollution (for these purposes grossly equated with the unregulated operation of natural energies) spreads and overpowers all that it comes in contact with. Thus a puzzle – if pollution is so strong, how can anything be purified? Why is the purifying agent not itself polluted? The answer, in keeping with the present line of argument, is that purification is effected in a ritual context; purification ritual, as a purposive activity that pits self-conscious (symbolic) action against natural energies, is more powerful than those energies.

In any case, my point is simply that every culture implicitly recognizes and asserts a distinction between the operation of nature and the operation of culture (human consciousness and its products); and further, that the distinctiveness of culture rests precisely on the fact that it can under most circumstances transcend natural conditions and turn them to its purposes. Thus culture (i.e. every culture) at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform – to 'socialize' and 'culturalize' – nature.

Returning now to the issue of women, their pan-cultural second-class status could be accounted for, quite simply, by postulating that women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture. Since it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if women were considered part of nature, then culture would find it 'natural' to subordinate, not to say oppress, them. Yet although this argument can be shown to have considerable force, it seems to oversimplify the case. The formulation I would like to defend and elaborate on in the following section, then, is that women are seen 'merely' as being *closer* to nature than men. That is, culture (still equated relatively unambiguously with men) recognizes that women are active participants in its special processes, but at the same time sees them as being more rooted in, or having more direct affinity with, nature.

The revision may seem minor or even trivial, but I think it is a more accurate rendering of cultural assumptions. Further, the argument cast in these terms has several analytic advantages over the simpler formulation; I shall discuss these later. It might simply be stressed here that the revised argument would still account for the pan-cultural devaluation of women, for even if women are not equated with nature, they are nonetheless seen as representing a lower order of being, as being less transcendental of nature than men are. The next task of the paper, then, is to consider why they might be viewed in that way.

Why Is Woman Seen as Closer to Nature?

It all begins of course with the body and the natural procreative functions specific to women alone. We can sort out for discussion three levels at which this absolute physiological fact has significance: (1) woman's *body and its functions*, more involved more of the time with 'species life,' seem to place her closer to nature, in contrast to man's physiology, which frees him more completely to take up the projects of culture; (2) woman's body and its functions place her in *social roles* that in turn are considered

to be at a lower order of the cultural process than man's; and (3) woman's traditional social roles, imposed because of her body and its functions, in turn give her a different *psychic structure*, which, like her physiological nature and her social roles, is seen as being closer to nature.

[...]

The Implications of Intermediacy

My primary purpose in this paper has been to attempt to explain the universal secondary status of women. Intellectually and personally, I felt strongly challenged by this problem; I felt compelled to deal with it before undertaking an analysis of woman's position in any particular society. Local variables of economy, ecology, history, political and social structure, values, and world view – these could explain variations within this universal, but they could not explain the universal itself. And if we were not to accept the ideology of biological determinism, then explanation, it seemed to me, could only proceed by reference to other universals of the human cultural situation. Thus the general outlines of the approach – although not of course the particular solution offered – were determined by the problem itself, and not by any predilection on my part for global abstract structural analysis.

I argued that the universal devaluation of women could be explained by postulating that women are seen as closer to nature than men, men being seen as more unequivocally occupying the high ground of culture. The culture/nature distinction is itself a product of culture, culture being minimally defined as the transcendence, by means of systems of thought and technology, of the natural givens of existence. This of course is an analytic definition, but I argued that at some level every culture incorporates this notion in one form or other, if only through the performance of ritual as an assertion of the human ability to manipulate those givens. In any case, the core of the paper was concerned with showing why women might tend to be assumed, over and over, in the most diverse sorts of world views and in cultures of every degree of complexity, to be closer to nature than men. Woman's physiology, more involved more of the time with 'species of life'; woman's association with the structurally subordinate domestic context, charged with the crucial function of transforming animal-like infants into cultured beings; 'woman's psyche,' appropriately molded to mothering functions by her own socialization and tending toward greater personalism and less mediated modes of relating – all these factors make woman appear to be rooted more directly and deeply in nature. At the same time, however, her 'membership' and fully necessary participation in culture are recognized by culture and cannot be denied. Thus she is seen to occupy an intermediate position between culture and nature.

This intermediacy has several implications for analysis, depending upon how it is interpreted. First, of course, it answers my primary question of why woman is everywhere seen as lower than man, for even if she is not seen as nature pure and simple, she is still seen as achieving less transcendence of nature than man. Here intermediate simply means 'middle status' on a hierarchy of being from culture to nature.

Second, intermediate may have the significance of 'mediating,' i.e. performing some sort of synthesizing or converting function between nature and culture, here

seen (by culture) not as two ends of a continuum but as two radically different sorts of processes in the world. The domestic unit – and hence woman, who in virtually every case appears as its primary representative – is one of culture's crucial agencies for the conversion of nature into culture, especially with reference to the socialization of children. Any culture's continued viability depends upon properly socialized individuals who will see the world in that culture's terms and adhere more or less unquestioningly to its moral precepts. The functions of the domestic unit must be closely controlled in order to ensure this outcome; the stability of the domestic unit as an institution must be placed as far as possible beyond question. (We see some aspects of the protection of the integrity and stability of the domestic group in the powerful taboos against incest, matricide, patricide, and fratricide.⁷) Insofar as woman is universally the primary agent of early socialization and is seen as virtually the embodiment of the functions of the domestic group, she will tend to come under the heavier restrictions and circumscriptions surrounding that unit. Her (culturally defined) intermediate position between nature and culture, here having the significance of her *mediation* (i.e. performing conversion functions) between nature and culture, would thus account not only for her lower status but for the greater restrictions placed upon her activities. In virtually every culture her permissible sexual activities are more closely circumscribed than man's, she is offered a much smaller range of role choices, and she is afforded direct access to a far more limited range of its social institutions. Further, she is almost universally socialized to have a narrower and generally more conservative set of attitudes and views than man, and the limited social contexts of her adult life reinforce this situation. This socially engendered conservatism and traditionalism of woman's thinking is another – perhaps the worst, certainly the most insidious – mode of social restriction, and would clearly be related to her traditional function of producing well-socialized members of the group.

Finally, woman's intermediate position may have the implication of greater symbolic ambiguity. Shifting our image of the culture/nature relationship once again, we may envision culture in this case as a small clearing within the forest of the larger natural system. From this point of view, that which is intermediate between culture and nature is located on the continuous periphery of culture's clearing; and though it may thus appear to stand both above and below (and beside) culture, it is simply outside and around it. We can begin to understand then how a single system of cultural thought can often assign to woman completely polarized and apparently contradictory meanings, since extremes, as we say, meet. That she often represents both life and death is only the simplest example one could mention.

For another perspective on the same point, it will be recalled that the psychic mode associated with women seems to stand at both the bottom and the top of the scale of human modes of relating. The tendency in that mode is to get involved more directly with people as individuals and not as representatives of one social category or another; this mode can be seen as either 'ignoring' (and thus subverting) or 'transcending' (and thus achieving a higher synthesis of) those social categories, depending upon the cultural view for any given purpose. Thus we can account easily for both the subversive feminine symbols (witches, evil eye, menstrual pollution, castrating mothers) and the feminine symbols of transcendence (mother goddesses, merciful dispensers of salvation, female symbols of justice, and the strong presence of feminine symbolism in the realms of art,

religion, ritual, and law). Feminine symbolism, far more often than masculine symbolism, manifests this propensity toward polarized ambiguity – sometimes utterly exalted, sometimes utterly debased, rarely within the normal range of human possibilities.

If woman's (culturally viewed) intermediacy between culture and nature has this implication of generalized ambiguity of meaning characteristic of marginal phenomena, then we are also in a better position to account for those cultural and historical 'inversions' in which women are in some way or other symbolically aligned with culture and men with nature. A number of cases come to mind: the Sirionó of Brazil, among whom, according to Ingham, 'nature, the raw, and maleness' are opposed to 'culture, the cooked, and femaleness';⁸ Nazi Germany, in which women were said to be the guardians of culture and morals; European courtly love, in which man considered himself the beast and woman the pristine exalted object – a pattern of thinking that persists, for example, among modern Spanish peasants.⁹ And there are no doubt other cases of this sort, including some aspects of our own culture's view of women. Each such instance of an alignment of women with culture rather than nature requires detailed analysis of specific historical and ethnographic data. But in indicating how nature in general, and the feminine mode of interpersonal relations in particular, can appear from certain points of view to stand both under and over (but really simply outside of) the sphere of culture's hegemony, we have at least laid the groundwork for such analyses.

In short, the postulate that woman is viewed as closer to nature than man has several implications for further analysis, and can be interpreted in several different ways. If it is viewed simply as a *middle* position on a scale from culture down to nature, then it is still seen as lower than culture and thus accounts for the pan-cultural assumption that woman is lower than man in the order of things. If it is read as a *mediating* element in the culture-nature relationship, then it may account in part for the cultural tendency not merely to devalue woman but to circumscribe and restrict her functions, since culture must maintain control over its (pragmatic and symbolic) mechanisms for the conversion of nature into culture. And if it is read as an *ambiguous* status between culture and nature, it may help account for the fact that, in specific cultural ideologies and symbolizations, woman can occasionally be aligned with culture, and in any event is often assigned polarized and contradictory meanings within a single symbolic system. Middle status, mediating functions, ambiguous meaning – all are different readings, for different contextual purposes, of woman's being seen as intermediate between nature and culture.

Conclusions

Ultimately, it must be stressed again that the whole scheme is a construct of culture rather than a fact of nature. Woman is not 'in reality' any closer to (or further from) nature than man – both have consciousness, both are mortal. But there are certainly reasons why she appears that way, which is what I have tried to show in this paper. The result is a (sadly) efficient feedback system: various aspects of woman's situation (physical, social, psychological) contribute to her being seen as closer to nature, while the view of her as closer to nature is in turn embodied in institutional forms that reproduce her situation. The implications for social change are similarly circular: a

different cultural view can only grow out of a different social actuality; a different social actuality can only grow out of a different cultural view.

It is clear, then, that the situation must be attacked from both sides. Efforts directed solely at changing the social institutions – through setting quotas on hiring, for example, or through passing equal-pay-for-equal-work laws – cannot have far-reaching effects if cultural language and imagery continue to purvey a relatively devalued view of women. But at the same time efforts directed solely at changing cultural assumptions – through male and female consciousness-raising groups, for example, or through revision of educational materials and mass-media imagery – cannot be successful unless the institutional base of the society is changed to support and reinforce the changed cultural view. Ultimately, both men and women can and must be equally involved in projects of creativity and transcendence. Only then will women be seen as aligned with culture, in culture's ongoing dialectic with nature.

Notes

The first version of this paper was presented in October 1972 as a lecture in the course 'Women: Myth and Reality' at Sarah Lawrence College. I received helpful comments from the students and from my co-teachers in the course: Joan Kelly Gadol, Eva Kollisch, and Gerda Lerner. A short account was delivered at the American Anthropological Association meetings in Toronto, November 1972. Meanwhile, I received excellent critical comments from Karen Blu, Robert Paul, Michelle Rosaldo, David Schneider, and Terence Turner, and the present version of the paper, in which the thrust of the argument has been rather significantly changed, was written in response to those comments. I, of course, retain responsibility for its final form. The paper is dedicated to Simone de Beauvoir, whose book *The Second Sex* (1953), first published in French in 1949, remains in my opinion the best single comprehensive understanding of 'the woman problem.'

- 1 R. G. H. Siu, *The Man of Many Qualities* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), p. 2.
- 2 It is true of course that *yin*, the female principle, has a negative valence. Nonetheless, there is an absolute complementarity of *yin* and *yang* in Taoism, a recognition that the world requires the equal operation and interaction of both principles for its survival.
- 3 Some anthropologists might consider this type of evidence (social-structural arrangements that exclude women, explicitly or de facto, from certain groups, roles, or statuses) to be a subtype of the second type of evidence (symbolic formulations of inferiority). I would not disagree with this view, although most social anthropologists would probably separate the two types.
- 4 Robert Lowie, *The Crow Indians* (New York: Rinehart, 1956), pp. 61, 44, 60, 229. While we are on the subject of injustices of various kinds, we might note that Lowie secretly bought this doll, the most sacred object in the tribal repertoire, from its custodian, the widow of Wrinkled-face. She asked \$400 for it, but this price was 'far beyond [Lowie's] means,' and he finally got it for \$80 (p. 300).
- 5 With all due respect to Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, ed. R Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969); *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); and *passim*.
- 6 Sherry B. Ortner, 'Sherpa Purity', *American Anthropologist*, 75 (1973): 49–63; and 'Purification Rites and Customs', in *New Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, 15th edn (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

- 7 Nobody seems to care much about soricide – a point that ought to be investigated.
- 8 John M. Ingham, 'Are the Sirionó Raw or Cooked?', *American Anthropologist*, 73 (1971): 1092–9. Ingham's discussion is rather ambiguous itself, since women are also associated with animals: 'The contrasts man/animal and man/woman are evidently similar ... hunting is the means of acquiring women as well as animals' (p. 1095). A careful reading of the data suggests that both women and animals are mediators between nature and culture in this tradition.
- 9 Julian Pitt Rivers, *People of the Sierra* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Michelle Z. Rosaldo, 'Women, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview', in M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (eds), *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 17–42.

Carolee Schneemann, 'From Tape no. 2 for *Kitch's Last Meal*' (1973)

Text used in super-8 film *Kitch's Last Meal* (1973–5) and performance *Interior Scroll* (1975, 1977), reproduced in *More than Meat Joy: Performance Works and Selected Writings*, 2nd edn (New Paltz, NY: Documentext, 1997).

I met a happy man
 a structuralist filmmaker
 – but don't call me that it's something else I do –
 he said we are fond of you
 you are charming
 but don't ask us to look at your films
 we cannot
 there are certain films we cannot look at:
 the personal clutter
 the persistence of feelings
 the hand-touch sensibility
 the diaristic indulgence
 the painterly mess
 the dense gestalt
 the primitive techniques

(I don't take the advice of men
 they only talk to themselves)

PAY ATTENTION TO CRITICAL AND PRACTICAL FILM LANGUAGE
 IT EXISTS FOR AND IN ONLY ONE GENDER

even if you are older than me you are a monster
 I spawned you have slithered out of the excesses and
 vitality of the '60s

he said you can do as I do
take one clear process
follow its strictest implications
intellectually establish a system of permutations
establish their visual set

I said my film is concerned with
DIET AND DIGESTION

very well he said then why the train?

the train is DEATH as there is die in diet
and di in digestion

then you are back to metaphors and meanings
my work has no meaning beyond the logic of its systems
I have done away with emotion intuition inspiration –
those aggrandized habits which set artists apart from
ordinary people – those unclear tendencies which are
inflicted upon viewers ...

it's true I said when I watch your films
my mind wanders freely during the half hour
of pulsing dots I compose letters
dream of my lover
write a grocery list
rummage in the trunk for a missing sweater
plan the drainage pipes for the root cellar
– it is pleasant not to be manipulated

he protested
you are unable to understand and appreciate
the system the grid the numerical and rational procedures
the Pythagorean cues –

I saw my failings were worthy of dismissal
I'd be buried alive
my works lost ...

he said we can be friends equally
tho' we are not artists equally

I said we cannot be friends equally
and we cannot be artists equally

he told me he had lived with a 'sculptress'
I asked does that make me a 'film-makeress'?

Oh no he said we think of you as a dancer.

1.2 Curating Feminisms

Cornelia Butler, 'Art and Feminism: An Ideology of Shifting Criteria' (2007)

From Lisa Gabrielle Mark (ed.), *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 14–23.

During the late 1960s and early 70s, feminism fundamentally changed contemporary art practice, critiquing its assumptions and radically altering its structures and methodologies. But what exactly is feminism? And, following that, what is feminist art? Peggy Phelan has offered what seems to be the most serviceable definition of feminism: 'the conviction that gender has been, and continues to be, a fundamental category for the organization of culture. Moreover, the pattern of that organization usually favours men over women.'¹ 'WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution' is predicated on the notion that gender was and remains fundamental to culture and that a contemporary understanding of the feminist in art must necessarily look to the late 1960s and 70s. The exclamatory title of the exhibition is intended to recall the bold idealism that characterized the feminist movement during that period. Like the transformative power of Pop art memorably chronicled in Barbara Haskell's 1984 exhibition 'BLAM! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism and Performance, 1958–1964' at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, the impact of feminist art has yet to be fully theorized and accepted by academic and museum institutions. Though 'WACK' is not an acronym, it gestures to those of many activist groups and political communities beginning in the 1970s whose activities focused on women's issues and cultural production – including the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC); Women Artists in

Revolution (WAR); Women's Action Coalition (WAC); Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH); Women's Caucus for Art (WCA); and Women, Students, and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL). The violent and sexual connotations of 'WACK' serve to reinforce feminism's affront to the patriarchal system, while the exhibition's conjoined subtitle is intended to acknowledge the intersection of feminism and art that is this exhibition's *raison d'être* and the source of its revolutionary potential.

My ambition for 'WACK!' is to make the case that feminism's impact on art of the 1970s constitutes the most influential international 'movement' of any during the postwar period – in spite or perhaps because of the fact that it seldom cohered, formally or critically, into a movement the way Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, or even Fluxus did. For that reason, I want to invoke bell hooks's proposal to resignify the term 'feminist movement,' to deliver it from its nomenclatorial fixity and reconnect it to the verb 'to move' – with all the restless possibility that word connotes.² Moreover, I want to assert that feminism constitutes an ideology of shifting criteria, one influenced and mediated by myriad other factors. Whereas art movements traditionally defined by charismatic individuals tended to be explicated and debated through manifestos and other writings, feminism is a relatively open-ended system that has, throughout its history of engagement with visual art, sustained an unprecedented degree of internal critique and contained wildly divergent political ideologies and practices. Many of the artists in 'WACK!' do not necessarily identify themselves or their work as feminist. Nonetheless, to quote Susan Hiller, 'art practice with no overt political content may, nevertheless, be able to sensitize us politically.'³ It is my contention that – whether unintentionally or lacking the language or cultural context to support a feminist idiom – the artists in this exhibition contributed to the movement and development of feminism in art, if only by reinforcing two central tenets: the personal is political, and all representation is political. Through a proposed dismantling of the received canon of feminist art, the exhibition and accompanying publication consciously reenact feminism's legacy of inclusivity and its interrogation of cultural hierarchies of all kinds to suggest a more complicated history of simultaneous feminisms. While the American feminist art movement is embedded from within, this international exhibition of 119 artists, activists, filmmakers, writers, teachers, and thinkers necessarily moves beyond the familiar list of American feminist artists to include women of other geographies, formal approaches, sociopolitical alliances, and critical and theoretical positions.

There is considerable debate over the origins of feminist art; however, it is not my project here to write the narrative of its inception. Rather, I prefer to gesture to the proliferation of practices that revolutionized the practice and discourse of art and whose impact was felt globally. Certainly, during the late 1960s and 70s, the United States (New York and Los Angeles, in particular) and Britain were centers for feminist art and activism – thanks in part to the ground-breaking work of critics including Lucy R. Lippard, Linda Nochlin, Rozsika Parker, Griselda Pollock, Arlene Raven, and film theorist Laura Mulvey. However, as Marsha Meskimmon adroitly argues in her essay elsewhere in this book, asserting that feminism in art emanated from these centers through a kind of global 'ripple effect' merely replicates a colonialist model (ironically reinforcing the notion of a master narrative) and does not acknowledge the

importance of artists working in their own communities and/or in dialogue with other artists elsewhere. The globalized spatial model Meskimon puts forth as an alternative recognizes that while individual practices may have initially occurred in a condition of relative isolation, they often coalesced through discourse, affinity, and relationship.

Myriad connections characterize the proliferation of feminist activity in art of the late 1960s and 70s – the *movement* of the movement that hooks elucidated. For example, John Baldessari invited Ulrike Rosenbach and Gina Pane to perform and teach at California Institute of the Arts and Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, respectively, though neither artist was hosted by the Feminist Art Program. Elsewhere, contemporaries and friends Zarina and Nasreen Mohamedi were equally radical as women artists working out of the hegemonic and repressive context of India; while Zarina emphasized the resistance against cultural traditions of representation by incorporating very specific references to transculturalism, Mohamedi manifested her urban architectonic vision through photographs and subtle abstract drawings. Within the framework of this exhibition, the practices of these two artists, who worked abstractly and from different cultural contexts, can be considered in relation to feminism, though they did not engage in the same critical terms as their Western counterparts.

For many of the artists in 'WACK!,' feminism often coexisted with political engagement on other fronts such as race, class, and sexual orientation, which at times superseded feminism as the dominant discourse within which they preferred to situate their work. Here in the United States, this is particularly evident with regard to women artists whose feminism evolved out of a deep engagement with the civil rights movement, such as Faith Ringgold and members of 'Where We At' Black Women Artists, whose collective activity emerged from their involvement with Black Power and the Black Arts Movement, with whom they remained closely affiliated. On the West Coast, the hegemonic orientation of the Chicano movement inspired women such as Judith F. Baca in Los Angeles to invent hybridized practices and generate expanded notions of community and audience. Spiderwoman Theater, the first Native American feminist performance group, found ample material in the histories of subjugation embedded within native women's lives. Another test of feminism's relevance and resiliency occurs with artists who did not participate in, and whose work did not circulate through, the mainstream (read: white) art world. Emily Kame Kngwarreye, for example, was an Australian aboriginal artist who, during the 1970s, made textiles as part of the Utopia Women's Batik Group. Their collective art-making activities became a form of social mobilization with the goal of reinstating their land rights, as the batiks were offered for sale through local vendors, raising both money and awareness of the plight of their people. Though Kngwarreye later gained recognition for her abstract paintings, which were shown in galleries during the 1980s, she is not represented in 'WACK!' because the economy in which the Utopia Group's early production circulated did not favor institutional collections and archives.

As a curator, my own interest in 1970s feminist art arose not as a participant or peer but from observing its impact on contemporary practice in the early 1990s. I concur with Holland Cotter's assertion that 'most of the interesting American artists of the last thirty years are as interesting as they are in part because of the feminist art movement of the early 1970s. It changed everything.'⁴ Unlike the current generation of twenty-something women coming out of graduate programs and into the

professional world, for me the nomenclature of feminism has never been an issue or a problem. I attended a woman's college at the height of the Reagan era and was brainwashed by the 1980s propaganda of the career-track woman who can have it all – work, family, sexual liberation, and political autonomy. Equally profound was the impact of early 1990s cultural conservatism that represented a backlash against the freedoms women had gained during the 1970s and 80s. Working as a curator in New York at that time, I was involved with artists such as Janine Antoni, Xenobia Bailey, Sowon Kwon, Rita McBride, Beverly Semmes, and Andrea Zittel, and engaged in the discourses coming out of the Whitney Independent Study Program around the subjects of gender and cultural difference.

For me, the watershed moment was the formulation of the Women's Action Coalition (WAC) in the wake of two meta-cultural moments in New York. The first involved the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas debacle and the conflation of media sexism and racism that surrounded those proceedings. The second occurred around the panel discussion 'Representation and Value: What Role Will the Language of Feminism Play in the Art World of the '90s?' organized at Cooper Union. An opportunity for dialogue on the subject of feminism in art criticism, the event was effectively hijacked by the meteoric ascension of Matthew Barney – a truly unique voice whose practice is deeply imprinted by feminist art. His breakthrough show at Barbara Gladstone Gallery in 1991 had virtually eclipsed several other simultaneous exhibitions featuring women artists. During the panel, all critical discussion around issues of gender and sexuality seemed to coalesce around Barney's work and ignored the women artists who were exhibiting at the time. In my recollection, this sparked a community-wide sense of inequity and frustration.

[...]

There are two issues I rethought constantly during the organization of 'WACK!' The first was whether or not to include male artists. Early in the show's development, I met with de Zegher, who said without hesitation that her only regret in organizing 'Inside the Visible' was not including men in her show. Her contention was that most women artists want to have their work seen in an equitable situation where history is evaluated by criteria other than the socio-political or gender-based mandates of 'the all-women group show.' I fielded this with many of the artists in 'WACK!' as a way to start a conversation about their works' relationship to feminism; thanks to several tough discussions with Lili Dujourie, Hiller, Sturtevant, and others (many of whom agreed that an integrated history is the next step), I have chosen to stand by the 'women-only' model. I decided – and the artists overwhelmingly agreed – that, as a major institutional survey, the essential story of 'WACK!' must be told in terms of the women who pioneered the movement and those who struggled to make work either within the dictates of a feminist language or in reaction and relationship to it.

The second issue I went back and forth on was that of structure. My earliest impulse was to abandon traditional installation models for survey exhibitions, which tend to highlight certain artists in depth, creating constellations around them. However, during a fruitful conversation, Kelly questioned why women artists should not benefit from the same kinds of selection criteria as their male counterparts. In other words, why can't women artists be represented in greater depth as the work – and the contribution to issues of the exhibition's themes and narrative – demands. She was entirely right to pose this question, leading me to the potentially radical strategy of 'reshuffling the deck' – of presenting an exhibition in which constellations of artists are in

dialogue across social, political, geographic, and chronological boundaries. In order to accomplish this, I created a structure in which themes were conceived as propositions rather than definitive categories (i.e., can a work exist in dialogue with those of other international contexts and parallel concerns?). If an artist's work appears radically singular in nature, solitary and unresponsive to a group context, what might this mean in terms of constructing counterarguments within the exhibition? Are there categories and practices that resist the feminist art movement in productive ways? It is my hope that the themes will serve to multiply the possibilities for entry into the work. While some artists are present in greater depth and in multiple themes – as befitting their contribution to feminist discourse – I have attempted to present a narrative that is open-ended, elliptical, and discursive in its consideration of a diverse and powerful range of practices. The only intended hierarchies are those that indicate levels of achievement and commitment in relationship to feminism and art.

Though I initially used the themes as an internal device to think about the installation, they eventually became a conceptual framework around which to structure both the exhibition and the publication. I imagined them working in different ways. Some themes – including Family Stories, Knowledge as Power, Silence and Noise, and Social Intervention – function historically to highlight the work of artists who were attempting to articulate a distinctly feminist/activist aesthetic, while Making Art History and Speaking in Public represent strategies to subvert established art history and social conventions in the service of political commentary. Collective Impulse, Labor, and Social Sculpture group artists who explored collaborative projects as a way to decentralize authorship, experience collaborative activity as a microcosm of the larger society, and generate new non-hierarchical models of organization and production. Also concerned with the articulation of a feminine aesthetic, Abstraction, Gendered Space, and Female Sensibility attempt to carve out a space for female subjectivity within a phenomenological framework. The body is represented in Body Trauma, Body as Medium, Gender Performance, and Goddess as the *prima materia* for explorations of physical, psychological, and spiritual experience, as well as sexual identity. While the works in Pattern and Assemblage share certain formal strategies – including color, texture, and ornament – they are also connected to Body Trauma in suggesting the psychological effect of layering and fragmentation. The artists in Taped and Measured and Autophotography used formal devices such as seriality to investigate the dynamics of picturing oneself and their experience of objectification.

[...]

Notes

- 1 Peggy Phelan, 'Survey,' in Helena Rickett and Phelan, eds., *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 18.
- 2 bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 2000).
- 3 Susan Hiller, in 'Anthropology into Art: Susan Hiller Interviewed by Sarah Kent and Jacqueline Morreau,' in *Women's Images of Men* (London: Pandora Press, 1990), 151.
- 4 Holland Cotter, 'Two Nods to Feminism, Long Snubbed by Curators,' *The New York Times*, 11 October 2002.

**Xabier Arakistain, 'Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 86 Steps
in 45 Years of Art and Feminism' (2007)**

From *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 años de arte y feminismo* (Bilbao: Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao, 2007), pp. 241–4.

Since the end of the 1960s Feminism has had an enormous impact on the visual arts. This has been true, both in terms of the artistic praxis of some women artists, and of the creation of texts that are witness to the difficult position that has traditionally been the lot of western female artists and their works in the pages of the history of art. Since the mid-1970s, different publications, on both sides of the Atlantic, have exposed the andro and ethnocentric bias structured by art history as taught in schools and universities and have critically examined notions such as 'genius', 'artist' and 'work' of art. Some publications went even further than that, compiling the works of women artists who felt drawn by the propositions of theoretical and political Feminism, thus constructing a corpus of works that has been termed 'Feminist art' and is currently considered to be the vanguard of the 20th century that most deeply revolutionised what we commonly understand as Art in capital letters. This is because this body of work calls into question the hegemonic socio-sexual codes, as well as those of Art, placing the problematic of representation right in the foreground. This means asking oneself who represents whom, from what point of view and how, keeping constant tabs on the different systems of representation that continue to construct and transmit stereotypes of sex, gender, 'race' and sexuality that contribute to maintaining inequality at the very heart of humankind.

For the design of *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang. 45 Years of Art and Feminism*, our starting points were the different stages travelled by the Feminist movement in the West, from its origins in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, to the present day. The breadth of Feminist struggles that, in different historical periods, found their expression in demands around political and civil rights, materialised, at the end of the 1960s, in calls for social justice for women. It was the first time that such themes began to manifest themselves in art, giving rise to a whole set of work in which the sexed body, in the sense of a cultural artefact packed with social meanings, would be present. In fact, 'Feminist art' would increasingly concentrate on the body as a metaphor for the socio-political agenda that continues to be business unfinished. These works made it manifest that sex, gender, sexuality and 'race' do not constitute 'natural' products, but social constructions that structure – and gain their sustenance from – hegemonic sexual and racial ideologies. Attracted by the heat of Feminist fightback, certain women artists, through their productions, began to denounce the asymmetrical relations between the sexes and to point to Femininity (and masculinity) as cultural artefacts that must be analysed, since they convey and uphold stereotypes of sex, gender, sexuality and 'race'. Such representations contribute to perpetuating the oppression of women and of other historical subjects that are minoritised on lines of sex, 'race' or sexual practice.

Like any exhibition, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* is the final result of a series of options, of a route, a way of recomposing and ordering a sensitive universe through logics of exclusion and inclusion. All shows are imperfect, and you cannot always show everything. In consequence, although the impact Feminism has had since the sixties on the visual arts enormously exceeds the practical production of women artists, and its shock waves have reached male artists too, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* only exhibits work by female artists. So it meshes in with the two big exhibitions that kicked off in 2007 in the Los Angeles MOCA (Museum of Contemporary Art) and in the Brooklyn Museum, New York, with an emphasis on political questions in Feminist art, paying tribute to the pioneers and their successors who have, uncomfortably for them at times, been labelled as Feminist artists. This is not to ignore or belittle male artists who have sensed the pull or attraction of Feminism. But, like my colleagues Connie Butler, the curator of *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, and Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin, who curated *Global Feminisms. New Directions in Contemporary Art*, I have preferred to focus on a series of women artists who took on the risk of opening up and pursuing untrodden paths, and to leave for the future the organisation of an exhibition around, for instance, the work of male artists influenced by 'Feminist art'.

The idea behind *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* is to show, within the space of Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, works produced over the last forty five years by Feminist artists from different countries. As a reaction against the predominant tradition in art history, which isolates works and artists from their social and political contexts, the journey of discovery this exhibition offers will enable visitors to see for themselves the feedback between artistic praxis, Feminist theorising and Feminist struggles and demands. For a better presentation and understanding of the social, political, theoretical and artistic areas that *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* covers, we have chosen a thematic approach.

The works and artists chosen, therefore, follow five subject areas that are central for the Feminist movement:

- 1 *The fight for the civil and political rights of women* and the political and artistic implications of the maxim 'the personal is political', revealing the political nature of the private sphere, without excluding categories of class and race.
- 2 *The cultural construction of sex, gender and sexuality* and denunciation of sexist stereotypes.
- 3 Struggles relating to *the liberalisation of women's bodies*.
- 4 Condemnation of *violence against women*.
- 5 *Feminist practice to make women visible and include them in the history of humankind*, to write a true history that does not leave more than fifty percent of the population out of the story.

So the show is divided into five spaces that, just like the themes contained in them, are mutually interconnected. Each space, with its theme, is headed by quotes from various authors or by maxims from the Feminist movement and gathers together the work of artists, theoretical expositions by women academics, and documentation of actions of relevance in the political and social fight. Meanwhile, the title of the exhibition, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, sums up the contradictions and tensions between the stereotypes that have been created around women in patriarchal societies and the reality of a collective that

has fought unceasingly to refute them. So the traditional idea of femininity that presents woman as the warrior's rest, her transformation into a sexual object in culture – *Kiss Kiss* – is brought face to face with the other reality, woman as an active enterprising subject and tireless fighter determined to gain the status of first class citizen – *Bang Bang*.

In 1971 Linda Nochlin pioneered the inauguration of a Feminist perspective within the discipline of Art History with her emblematic article 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', arguing that the cause was social inequality between the sexes. In 2007 we are able to verify that there certainly are great women artists, but it is essential we do so at the top of our voices and do not tire of the effort. When I began preparations for *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, only five years ago, it was somewhat amazing to realise that many of the key pieces that I have managed to collect for this show still belonged to the authors themselves. Although their prestige was unquestionable, and even legendary within different artistic circles, and they were already catalogued in specialised publications and surrounded by a certain 'aura', they had never been valued by the market and their authors had not managed to secure their position within the art market. As these five years went by, a number of the works did get sold, and I have no doubt that their inclusion and ascent within said market was powered by the exhibitions and recent events I have alluded to (as well as by many others I have omitted). The repercussions that these kinds of events/exhibitions tend to have on the market is another of the reasons that leads me to think they are truly necessary. In this connection, it would seem, and I say this with the greatest caution, that some initiatives that have taken place this year on the international art scene appear to be significant. In January 2007, the New York MOMA organised the symposium 'The Feminist Future', which was presented as the start of another series of measures that would be developed in the future. In the same city, the Brooklyn Museum went substantially further, with the inauguration, in March, of the Elisabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. And, in parallel, the Stockholm Moderna Museet and London's Tate Modern have announced that they are putting right the deficit of work by women artists in their collections. These are all examples that absolutely must be followed and filled out with imagination, without forgetting, however, that we must be on maximum alert, so that they do not lose momentum and, above all, so that they take root. The position women artists hold in art institutions and in the art market is of crucial importance for the consolidation of the transformations proposed by Feminism in art and in the social sphere.

Mirjam Westen, 'rebelle: Introduction' (2009)

From Mirjam Westen (ed.), *rebelle: Art and Feminism 1969–2009* (Arnhem: Museum voor Moderne Kunst Arnhem, 2009), pp. 5–20.

The exhibition *rebelle. Art and Feminism, 1969–2009* [rebelle. Kunst en feminisme 1969–2009] was held in the Arnhem Museum for Modern Art [Museum voor Moderne Kunst Arnhem, MMKA] in the summer of 2009. Bringing together

hundreds of works by 88 female artists, this exhibition shed light on the influence of feminism on art across a period of forty years. The main title '*rebelle*', taken from the installation 'Mots de mur' by French artist Gina Pane¹, perfectly expressed, in my opinion, that which the work of female artists has seemed to radiate for several generations: self-awareness, non-conformism, transgressiveness and a critical attitude.

The exhibition, which proved a huge challenge for the MMKA due to its large scale and tremendous organizational demands, brought together several disciplines from many parts of the world. As probably holds true for any thematically-organised exhibition, exhibiting so many works of art from so many different backgrounds under a single heading carries with it the risk of urging the visitor to interpret each work in just one way, while the strength of visual art lies precisely in its potential for conceptualising and generating multiple ambiguous, and sometimes even contradictory, meanings. Tying the ideologically-charged concept of 'feminism' to 'art' might suggest, even, that the artist was specifically and only informed by this particular perspective, while a whole range of motives often underlie a work of art. Indeed, the practice of interrogating gender differences in art is often intricately linked with the critical examination of other forms of inequality, injustice and unequal power relations and, thus, with issues such as racism, colonialism, class differences, warfare, civil rights and poverty, all of which are embedded in historical and contemporary social, geographical and cultural contexts. In *rebelle*, I strove to bring all these highly different, highly particular concerns and positions together. Not, as one critic put it, to emphasize the 'universality of female experience'², but to specify its multiplicity, highlighting both its differences and its similarities.

While many in the art world pride themselves on possessing a certain degree of 'rebelliousness' – a desirable characteristic in a world which favours the progressive and idealises the practice of breaking with established traditions (which, for centuries, has been the basic principle underlying progress-oriented modes of thought and the adage of 'innovation' in art) – the concept of 'feminism' is often regarded ambivalently.³ This is probably the case for every system of thought which undermines existing societal relations. When pioneering feminist Mary Wollstonecraft first published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, she was called a 'hyena in petticoats'; today, negative attitudes towards feminism persist. Feminist perspectives and actions have called up re-actions and antagonism at all times, in all places – mostly from outside, but sometimes from within the movement itself. After causing many significant ruptures in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, from the nineteen-eighties onwards, in the United States and Europe, feminism became increasingly viewed as an anachronism; as outdated, old-fashioned and, frequently, dogmatic. In the media, feminists were dismissed with stereotypical labels such as 'man-haters' and 'lesbians'.⁴ Feminist theory, moreover, was thought not to extend beyond a simplistic type of oppositional thinking built around dichotomies such as '(male) offender versus (female) victim'. For that reason, some women started to use the term 'post-feminism', a term which first appeared in a 1982 article based on interviews with women who agreed with the goals of feminism, yet did not advertise themselves as 'feminists'.⁵ The prefix 'post' implied that a period 'following' feminism had begun, seemed to place that which had gone before at a safe distance and suggested feminism to be 'over'. Even more, the concept of 'post-feminism' suggested that this was a more sophisticated, more

intellectual, more contemporary concept, more capable of self-reflection, humour and relativism than 'feminism' had been. With the increasingly widespread use of this new concept, the multiplicity and diversity of 'feminism' were lost sight of, and it was repudiated as a closed-off, dogmatic and monolithic construct. At the beginning of the nineties, for example, the young female artists whose work was exhibited in the *Bad Girls* exhibitions were portrayed as part of a rebellious, outspoken, self-aware generation, who simply ignored the 'male hegemony' of the art world.⁶ Although their work was closely linked to that of their predecessors, as was extensively demonstrated in the accompanying catalogues, the reviews of these exhibitions mainly stressed the *differences* between the two generations, their sense of humour and emphasis on parody causing the 'Bad Girls' to be favourably compared with their 'militant' and brooding feminist predecessors. Another example is provided by a 2009 interview with Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu, now living in the United States. 'Do you not mind your work being presented within a feminist context?' Mutu was asked by a Dutch art critic. However, she did not mind her work being included in *rebelle* at all. 'All of you bury your heads in the sand when it comes to this issue. You are in denial. You think it is no longer necessary, that women's rights have been taken care of. This may be the case in your country, but I come from a country where this hasn't been achieved by any means. In Kenya the men possess all the rights. Women exist in a subordinated position. You display the same denial when it comes to race problems. That's another area in which you are determined to shut your eyes to reality. Such matters are often far more sensitive than you might think,' she replied, with slight irritation.⁷

Feminism is not a homogeneous movement, and never has been. Instead, it provides a critical political, cultural, sociological and philosophical mode of thought that is sensitive to contemporary societal developments and shifting conceptions, and infiltrates all domains. As art historian Marlite Halbertsma writes in the 1979 exhibition catalogue of *Feministische kunst internationaal*, 'Feminism does not offer a fixed set of theories that complement each other. It is a collection of ideas that vary according to the time and place in which they are uttered and are narrowly linked with the position of the woman formulating them.'⁸ Feminist ideology is based on the assumption that the category of 'gender' structures society, our thinking and our actions in fundamental ways. It acknowledges the existence of hierarchical gender differences, which it considers to be expressed in unequal power relations, and strives, primarily, to undermine these unequal power relations. As bell hooks puts it, feminism is 'a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression'. In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, feminist discussions on the differences between the sexes made use of terms such as 'inequality' and 'the discrimination of women'. Now, in the twenty-first century, this difference has come to be described, among other things, as a function of 'a system which privileges men over women'.⁹ This certainly sounds more appealing, but whichever way you call it: you cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

It goes without saying that each decade has its particular 'hot' topics, which never fail to evoke dogmatic opinions. Differences in opinion on topics, such as pornography, prostitution and beauty, have frequently led to heated debates about and among women. A striking example is provided by the wide range of positions which were taken with regard to the sensual, lustful images of women produced by Dutch lesbian duo Diana Blok and Marlo Broekmans around 1980. Blok and Broekmans did

not consider themselves to be feminists, and, above all, were not interested in producing 'whiny' art, but fresh, innovative and positive images. Their aesthetic photographs of female nudes wrapped around each other or wound around with cord were refused by a number of women's bookshops due to the associations they conjured with sadomasochism. Their 1981 exhibition in a gallery in Cardiff was censored after the gallery owner had called the police vice unit, fearing the confiscation of the photographs. After this, the gallery attracted four times as many visitors as usual. Finally, the use of one of their photographs on a poster advertising a women's festival in Amsterdam elicited a critical reaction from one of the festival's visitors, who was of the opinion that the poster reaffirmed society's ideals about women. 'Woman as physical sex object, in the eyes of her sisters now, too,' she stated indignantly, 'Are we being urged to become masculine on this point?' Despite the criticism their art evoked, however, postcards and posters with reproductions of the erotic 'still lifes' produced by the artist duo sold in large numbers at women's festivals and women's bookshops across Europe for years.

Besides sharp criticism, nudity in feminist art has also been known to elicit aggression, as an audience reaction to Belgian artist Ria Pacquée's 1982 performance *On A Grey Sunday Afternoon* demonstrates. This performance involved the artist lying nude on the floor of a closed-off cellar wearing only a mask, with her legs spread and surrounded by little paper dolls. One female visitor – a feminist, according to the artist – became extremely angry on seeing the performance, and destroyed the paper dolls by stepping on them.

The multiplicity of feminism allows feminist thought to continually grow and develop. For example, the recognition of the differences existing between women and between feminist standpoints led to the insight – already articulated in the nineteen-seventies – that it was impossible to speak from within one single, universal female perspective. While Judy Chicago's icon of feminist art *The Dinner Party* (1979) was intended as a celebration of women in history – to take a case in point – critics pointed out that mainly straight, white women had been invited to Chicago's 'party'. Critical studies conducted in the eighties led to the insight that not only sex, but race, sexual preference and class were at least as important, if not more important, for many, in the articulation of positions, identities and differences.¹⁰ Debates taking place within Black feminism and within the gay and lesbian movements were crucial for gaining such insights. Such debates confirmed, moreover, what black female artists such as Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, Valerie Maynard and Adrian Piper had been articulating in their art from the end of the sixties. The complex inter-wovenness of gender, race, (colonial) history, migration and memory is now being thematized by artists from the younger generations, such as South-African artists Berni Searle and Tracey Rose. Similarly, the theme of lesbian desire and lesbian identity, which was explicitly and implicitly explored in the drawings of Tee Corinne, the neon sculptures of Lili Lakich and the photographs of previously-mentioned artist duo Blok and Broekmans in the nineteen-seventies, is now being dealt with in the portraits of Risk Hazekamp and Zanele Muholi.

Art historian Peggy Phelan considers the great diversity of visions and perspectives contained within feminism as its fundamental strength. Indeed, according to Phelan, we should embrace the ambiguous meanings and multiple significations produced by

feminism in order to counteract current political and religious fundamentalism. As she puts it, 'Feminism makes ambivalence a necessary worldview.'¹¹ Acknowledging the diversity of 'feminisms', however, does not prevent some much-debated issues from remaining on the agenda, as is evident in the Netherlands, where ultra right-wing parties booked large successes in the recent local elections.¹²

[...]

As feminist thought is extremely diverse, the art it produces is equally varied. Indeed, as Lippard wrote in 1980, feminism's contribution to art was too complex and too subversive to produce a clearly-defined, univocal style. She defined feminism as 'an ideology, a value system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life,' which, like Dada and Surrealism, 'pervade[s] all movements and styles'.¹³ Moreover, in Lippard's view, the influence of feminism did not extend only to art itself, but also to discussions about the role of art in society, as more and more artists were striving to bridge the gap between art and life. For Lippard, feminist art meant art that was engaged in society, as 'art can be aesthetically and socially effective at the same time'.

My interest in this type of art was sparked when I visited the two-part exhibition *Feministische kunst internationaal* (1978, 1979). I was deeply impressed by the vitality, humour and expressive power the exhibited works of art radiated and was inspired by the degree of involvement of the female artists in their performances. Besides that, I admired the women who had put together the exhibition for being daring enough to take such a strong stand, electing to engage with topics such as stereotypical gender roles and female sexuality and choosing to exhibit works from the 'low arts' as well as works by female pioneers and female collectives. The catalogues accompanying these exhibitions firmly emphasize that there was not just one type of feminist art: 'Feminist art may formulate ideas and opinions, but may also express nuances and doubts'. It was not until much later that I would truly understand the significance of these exhibitions. The initiators had chosen to display the works of female artists who had chosen 'gender' as their point of departure – something which had not been looked upon very favourably in Dutch art up to that time. Besides that, the initiators had gotten to know a number of the exhibiting artists via a remarkable survey conducted among female artists by the SVBK. One of these artists was Schouten, who had written that she considered most art to be too far removed from her own frame of reference. To counter this, she wanted to produce works that would 'open people's eyes and show them what is wrong with the position of women in society'.

At the start of the eighties, I was active in several divisions of the SVBK and regularly published in their art magazine *Ruimte* as well as in feminist journals *Lover* and *Opzij*. Finally, after occupying various teaching positions at the universities of Amsterdam and Utrecht, I started working at the museum in Arnhem. As I considered all museums to be 'patriarchal fortresses', I had not expected ever to work in one – but the museum in Arnhem was different. Its director, Brandt Corstius, regularly pleaded for the improvement of the socioeconomic position of female artists in the media, and indefatigably dedicated herself to collecting and exhibiting the work of female artists as well as forms of engaged art in general. Her policy choices had given the museum the epithet of 'women's museum' in the nineteen-eighties, and in the press and the media it became known as a pioneering institution which made bold, unconventional choices.

After co-organizing the historical exhibition '*Elck zijn waerom*'. *Vrouwelijke kunstenaars in Noord- en Zuid Nederland 1550–1950* [Everyone has their own reasons. Female Artists in the North and South of the Netherlands, 1550–1950], which had been initiated by Katlijne van der Stighelen and the Koninklijke Museum voor Schone Kunsten [Royal Museum for the Fine Arts] in Antwerp (1999–2000) and coincided with the retirement of Brandt Corstius, I became more and more interested in organizing an overview exhibition of art and feminism, that so-called 'damned anachronism'. I was surprised to learn, through conducting oral examinations with young art academy students and visiting the galleries of artists whose work seemed to be influenced by feminism, how little actually seemed to be known about feminist art, and became irritated, moreover, at the way in which feminism, 'gender' and their critical implications were systematically kept at a distance in the Dutch art world.

rebel more concretely started taking shape in 2004, when the *Jaarboek voor Vrouwenge-schiedenis* journal [Yearbook of Women's History] requested me to write a piece for their special issue, 'Reflections on 25 Years of Women's History'. The year 2009 offered the perfect moment for a retrospective look at important feminist events such as the 1979 exhibition of *Feministische kunst internationaal* and the foundation of 'Dolle Mina' in 1969. But, of course, it cannot be denied that these particular landmark years also functioned as convenient devices for 'marketing' the exhibition. Indeed, from the end of the nineteen-fifties onwards, *every year* has seen several events which are highly interesting to look at in retrospect and may be connected with contemporary feminism.

In setting up the exhibition, I was primarily motivated by the desire to see all the well-known works from the sixties and seventies, which I had been reading about for years and which are so often alluded to, but rarely exhibited in galleries or museums, up close. I wanted to connect these works to the works that had been produced around the year 1990 and in more recent years, wished to situate the work of Dutch female artists within an international context, and wanted to show the work of female artists with non-Western geographical and cultural backgrounds to be connected with that of European and American female artists. I wanted, moreover, to explore the connections that existed between the works of pioneering feminist artists and, at the same time, to show what motivated the work of younger generations of artists and to zoom in on the specific, and on the particularities of each individual artist. Social engagement, intersections between the personal and the political, the public and the private, the body, identity, cultural diversity and the relationship between art, audience and society have been key concepts figuring in art and art criticism since the nineties. In this exhibition, I wished to show to what extent these issues and debates have been shaped by feminist art.

The exhibition I had in mind could have filled five large museums, but I only had one museum to work with. I refrained from using the term 'waves' in order to avoid the pitfalls of oppositional and linear historical thinking. In organizing the exhibition, I was particularly inspired by the exhibition *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and From the Feminine* (1996), which juxtaposed the work of female artists from different periods of the twentieth century in order to reveal meaningful connections, which 'do not need to displace the other in order to be'. I was stimulated, moreover, by the lecture of philosopher Iris van der Tuin, in which she

introduced the concept of ‘jumping generations’ – a way of thinking which enables differences in distinct points-of-view and categories to be bridged, and encourages sensitivity towards possible areas of overlap, rather than focusing on oppositions and irreconcilabilities.¹⁴

In 1975, Schneemann painted a compelling, idealistic vision of the future in her contribution to the catalogue accompanying the *Magna* exhibition, which was organized by Valie Export. Schneemann had no doubt about it: in the year 2000, young generations of female artists would not be thwarted as she had been or suffer the restrictions she had encountered. They would be taught by mainly female teachers; during their studies, they would learn about pioneering female artists and the ways in which female creativity had developed over the course of the centuries; being women, they would no longer be exceptions in the art world; and besides reading merely on ‘man and his symbols’, they would read books on ‘the matriarchal origins of art’. As it turns out, Schneemann was not far off the mark with the prophetic final sentence ending her idealistic text: ‘the only negative thing about all this, is that these future young women who will have acquired all this knowledge, will never believe that our pioneering work immobilized and isolated us; that the belief in the importance of a female art history was despised and dismissed as heretical and false [...]’.¹⁵

The exhibition *rebelle* is part of a development which, in reviews of the recent American travelling exhibitions *WACK!* and *Global Feminisms* (2007), has playfully been called ‘the feminaissance’ – a term signifying the current resurgence of interest in art with feminist themes.¹⁶ In Europe, this surge of interest has inspired exhibitions such as *It’s Time for Action (There’s No Option) About Feminism* (2006), *Cooling Out – On the Paradox of Feminism* (2006–2007), the CGAC’s *Gender Battle* (2007), *Perspective* (2008), *Female Trouble* (2008), *Gender Check* (2009) and *Re.act.feminism* (2008–2009).¹⁷ In the Netherlands, the foundation ‘If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution’ has been organizing so-called ‘interventions’ since the year 2006 – that is, exhibitions and symposiums which explore the influence of feminism on the work of contemporary female and male artists.

This interest in feminist art is not new, however, and we should not forget that it has produced many exhibitions and art publications over the past decades. Notable examples include *Andere Avantgarde* [Other Avantgarde] (1983), *Kunst mit Eigensinn* [Unruly Art] (1985), *Oh boy, it’s a girl!* (1994) and the previously-mentioned *Inside the Visible* (1996).

The current ‘feminaissance’, though, differs from preceding developments in one important respect. Feminist art now no longer receives a prominent position only in the temporary exhibitions of art institutions and galleries and major recurring exhibitions such as the *Venice Biennial* and *Documenta*. Like Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (1979), which became part of the permanent exhibition of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art in 2007, feminist art is now becoming incorporated in permanent public art collections. While institutions, such as the Frac Lorraine in Metz, the Generali Foundation and the Erste Bank Foundation in Vienna, had started acquiring feminist art relatively early on, now, major art museums are starting to do so as well. For example, while it had refused to house the extensive legacy left by pioneering artist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) in the nineteen-sixties, at the start of 2008 the Moderna Museet in Stockholm launched the ‘Second Museum of our Wishes’

effort, in order to subject their art collection containing works from the first half of the twentieth century to thorough 'revision informed by a gender perspective'.¹⁸ Similarly, when the American exhibition *WACK!* proved too costly for the Centre Pompidou in Paris to acquire on loan, it decided to put together its own, semi-permanent equivalent – *elles@pompidou* – incorporating works from its own collection. Over the past three or four years, remaining gaps in this collection have been filled through the acquisition of important icons in feminist art.

I cannot stress the significance of this development enough: indeed, the new policies of many major art museums ensure that many feminist works will be made accessible to a larger audience. Their appearing in new contexts, moreover, will generate new interpretative possibilities, which will be infinitely more rich and complex. The work of philosopher Sara Ahmed may prove useful as we approach this new situation. Ahmed writes about the importance of being generous towards and engaging with past forms of feminism. Instead of isolating the past from one's thinking, she argues, the past should be transformed into a productive field for new generations. 'Perhaps when we think about the question of feminist futures,' Ahmed writes, 'we need to attend to the legacies of feminist pasts, in order to think through the very question of what it would mean to have a world where feminism, as a politics of transformation, is no longer necessary.'¹⁹

The MMKA occupies a unique position in the history of this development. Indeed, it had already begun to lay the foundations for a broad permanent collection of works by female artists (and jewellery designers) whose work connected the personal with the political in the early eighties. [...]

Notes

- 1 Besides the word '*rebelle*', the four-part wall installation *Mots de mur* (1984–1985) contains the words '*scalpel*', '*colere*' [anger] and '*chocolat*' [chocolate].
- 2 Clare Butcher, *Metropolis M*, no.3 (2009)
- 3 Many people advised me not to use the word 'feminism' in the exhibition title. As one of the participants in the discussion sessions which were held before the start of *rebelle* said, 'I'm not interested in feminism because I've been able to go to university and don't feel I have anything standing in my way.' Since the year 2002, the MMKA has held discussion sessions on future exhibitions and events with special target groups.
- 4 See: Toril Moi, "I Am Not a Feminist, but...": How Feminism Became the F-Word,' in S. Schaschl, B. Steinbrügge and R. Zechlin (eds), *Cooling Out*. Zürich: JRP Ringier 2008, 48–55.
- 5 Susan Bolotin, 'Voices of the Post-Feminist Generation,' *New York Times*, 1982.
- 6 *Bad Girls*. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art 1994.
- 7 Rob Perrée, 'Een ontmoeting met Wangechi Mutu. *Femme vileine*' [An Encounter with Wangechi Mutu, *Femme Vileine*] *Africa Magazine ZAM* 13, no.2 (2009): 64.
- 8 Marlite Halbertsma, 'Feministische kunst – een verkennende inleiding' [Feminist art – an exploratory introduction] in cat. *Feministische kunst internationaal*. (Den Haag 1979), 5.
- 9 Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan, *Art and Feminism*. London: Phaidon 2001, 18; bell hooks, *Feminism is for everybody: passionate politics*. London: Pluto press 2000, viii
- 10 Within the field of sociology, the concept of 'intersectionality' is used to describe the way in which 'socially and culturally constructed categories of discrimination interact on

multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to systematic social inequality. Intersectionality holds that the classical models of oppression within society, such as those based on race/ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, class, or disability do not act independently of one another; instead, these forms of oppression interrelate creating a system of oppression that reflects the 'intersection' of multiple forms of discrimination.'

- 11 *Artforum*, October 2003: 149.
- 12 In the Netherlands, discussion topics include the glass ceiling, combining motherhood and paid work, the extension of the 'reflection period' before an abortion, whether or not the pill should be covered by health insurance, honour-related violence, forced marriages and the head scarves worn by Muslim women.
- 13 Lucy Lippard, 'Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s,' *Art Journal* Fall-Winter 1980. Also see: Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, (eds), *The Power of Feminist Art. Emergence, Impact and Triumph of the American Feminist Art Movement*. New York: Harry Abrams 1994, 10.
- 14 Iris van der Tuin, 'Jumping Generations': On Second- and Third-Wave Feminist Epistemology.' *Australian Feminist Studies* 24, no. 59 (2009): 17–31.
- 15 Carole Schneemann, 'Die Frau im Jahre 2000,' in *Magna. Feminismus: Kunst und Kreativität*. Wenen 1975, 12.
- 16 Viv Groskop, 'All hail the feminaissance,' *The Guardian*, May 11 2007.
- 17 For a complete list of feminist art exhibitions, see the website of the *n.paradoxa* art journal.
- 18 The title refers to the *Museum of our Wishes* exhibition, which was held in 1963 to celebrate the museum's five-year anniversary. The museum received five million Swedish crowns from the state to lay the basis for its collection. At the time, no works by female artists were acquired. To set this right, the museum later requested another five million crowns.
- 19 Sara Ahmed, 'Feminist Futures,' in Mary Eagleton (ed.), *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*. Malden, MA: Blackwell 2003, 236–54.