

## **Unusual Suspects: *Global Feminisms* and *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution***

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Imagine a blockbuster feminist art exhibition. Probably you can readily visualize galleries of works by artists crucial to feminist – if not mainstream – art history. And this, argue the curators of two forthcoming feminist survey exhibitions, is the problem. Few major exhibitions have focused on the women's art movement, so audiences lack the familiarity with feminist art that regular viewing enables. Consequently, knowledge of the field has ossified around a limited list of projects and ideas. Maura Reilly, curator at the Brooklyn Museum, feels that, ‘for a long time Western feminism has been at a standstill because it hasn’t looked beyond its own familiar conceptual theoretical, and geographical borders’. In *Global Feminisms*, the exhibition that she is organizing with Linda Nochlin for the Brooklyn Museum next year, she wants to push feminist curating in a new direction, by radically expanding its borders and definitions.

### **Excavating Feminism**

*Global Feminisms* coincides with another ambitious feminist exhibition curated by Connie Butler for LA MOCA, *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*. Butler’s show also rethinks feminist aesthetics and the feminist canon. Featuring over 120 artists who emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, plus a few senior figures like Louise Bourgeois and Alice Neel who made important feminist work during the period, *WACK!* also draws more than 50% of its artists from outside the US. When Butler proposed the idea to LA MOCA, ‘as one of the only post-war art movements yet to be surveyed’, she planned to focus on feminist art from the US. ‘But I soon realized’, she says, ‘that the project would only interest me if I broadened it beyond the usual suspects and made it international’.

One of the first people Butler called when she started to work on the show was the curator Catherine de Zegher, whose poetic treatment of women's art in *Inside the Visible* (1996) Butler especially respected. Although she declined de Zegher’s advice to include men, noting ‘I

considered it, but felt that the story from women's points of view needed to be told first,' Butler admired *Inside the Visible*'s thoughtful approach to time, space, and national identity (what the exhibition framed as 'an elliptical traverse of twentieth century art') and she is grouping and organizing works in her show around themes, rather than by lineage or geography. Her fifteen sections range from practice-based categories like Abstraction, Photography, and Collectivity to subjects like Family Mythology, Art History, Self-Representation, and the Goddess – a term that Butler admits finding especially problematic, at one point renaming it 'Spirituality' before retaining 'Goddess' as more accurately reflecting second wave feminist culture.

*WACK!* juxtaposes iconic projects from feminist art history – many rarely exhibited – with works not usually considered within this tradition. Key projects by Mary Kelly and Adrian Piper, for instance, appear alongside those by artists who worked at some distance from the feminist movement's centre [in America], like Sanja Ivekovic in Zagreb, Monica Mayer in Mexico, or Ursula Reuter Christensen in rural Denmark. At the same time the show highlights regional hubs – like Chicago, Rio de Janeiro, Chile and New Zealand - where women worked closely, and sometimes collectively, in a rhizomatic model of creative exchange. In contrast to art history's tendency to single out individual artists, *WACK!* advances a sense of artists operating as part of a feminist continuum. For example, it shows the impact of the photo-conceptualist Suzy Lake on Cindy Sherman, featuring work from Lake's *Co-Ed* series that Sherman invited her to exhibit at Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center in 1975 and that influenced Sherman's *Self Portraits A - E* (1975) and *Untitled Film Stills* (1977 - 80).

Though she acknowledges the validity of a feminist canon, Butler is no servant to art history – feminist or otherwise – seeing inclusiveness as antithetical to strong curating. 'Why does a feminist art show have to be inherently democratic?' she asks. 'I am far more concerned with making the strongest exhibition with the best possible work'. Consequently, the show excludes numerous artists who we might expect to see from the period, including prominent figures like Betsy Damon, Monica Sjoo, and May Stevens, and projects like *Feministo*.

Yet the show promises to be a visual treat, encompassing a range of formal approaches. The film/video selection ranges from little-known innovators like Sonia Andrade and Lili du Jourie to celebrated ones like Chantal Akerman and Joan Jonas. Painting, which many 1970s feminists avoided, is well represented. Abstract painters such as Louise Fishman, Mary Heilmann, and Sylvia Plimack Mangold balance realists like Audrey Flack and Sylvia Sleigh. With its lack of

figuration or easily legible narratives, this strong abstract work stretches feminist aesthetics in potentially suggestive ways. Rather than showing what feminist art looks like, it asks how feminists look at art. Where feminist critics like Lucy Lippard read Mangold's abstract depictions of her studio floor in a feminist context, and Fishman's participation in exhibitions like *A Lesbian Show* (1978) alerted viewers to her gender politics, Heilmann has rarely – if ever – been discussed within feminist terms. 'I always suspected that part of what I loved about Heilmann's work was its gendered approach to colour and architectural form', says Butler. 'So it was with a certain thrill and relief to discover that my instincts about the work's implicit feminism echoed Heilmann's aims'. Other figures not usually read as feminist include Mary Hilde Ruth Bauermeister, a central figure in Germany's post-war avant-garde, and Rita Donagh, whose delicate adaptations of newspaper images suggest to Butler a gendered (if not overtly feminist) response to public events.

Of course, feminism far exceeds aesthetic concerns. For many feminists, community-building was central to their artistic practice. Butler highlights activist projects like the African-American collective and exhibition *Where We At*, and the archival and performance-oriented *Lesbian Art Project*. She emphasizes the pedagogic work of Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville in California, and the far-flung critical and curatorial activities of Lucy Lippard, tracking Lippard's transformation from formalist critic to her advocacy of feminists and artists of colour. Casements of ephemera will feature examples of the curatorial, publishing, and community projects that women spearheaded as alternatives to, and critiques of, mainstream cultural spaces.

Challenging 1970s feminism's image as stridently prescriptive, the show foregrounds artists who query the very act of speaking and making art within patriarchy. These include Ketty La Rocca, whose intimate photo-text collages, born from her lack of visibility in the art world, question self, other, and their mutual reliance; Helena Almeida who, in her *Inhabited Paintings*, seems to paint from inside the canvas, pigment sometimes blotting out her face; and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, whose books, films, and performances imagine nation and body as linguistically structured, and therefore divided at the root.

### **Going Global**

Where *WACK!* attempts to outline – and redefine – a movement in its heyday, the task for Reilly and Linda Nochlin in *Global Feminisms* is, in some ways, harder. They strive to renew

feminism's urgency in a "*postfeminist*" period in which mainstream culture has absorbed, and diluted, many feminist – principles. Even more than Butler does, the curators seek inspiration outside familiar terrain. 'I tend to be critical of exhibitions that call themselves "*international*" because they always assume that the West is the centre and all else is the periphery', explains Reilly:

To me, international exhibitions generally present not a multiplicity of voices, but rather a larger sampling of Western European and American artists with a limited number of non-Western ones – as is often the case with most Biennales, *Documenta*, and *Manifesta*. Linda and I attempted a different approach as curators of *Global Feminisms*. We started by identifying artists from non-Western countries, and settled on the US and Western European artists last. We accompanied this postcolonial curatorial strategy – influenced by precedents like *Magiciens de la terre* and *Documenta 11* - by re-examining feminism through the writing of postcolonial feminists like Gayatri Spivak Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ella Shohat, and countless others, who for decades have urged a more inclusive, broader examination of feminism between cultures and beyond Euroamerican borders. I call this feminism's "*global imperative*".

Yet when she sat down with Nochlin to brainstorm the show, Reilly was struck by how little they knew about feminists working outside Euroamerican contexts:

Here we were, experts hired for our knowledge of feminist practice, but we could not say what feminist art looks like in Sao Paolo or Jakarta, what it means to perform gender in Nigeria, or to be a lesbian in Pakistan. We realized that we had to push ourselves to not be afraid of the unfamiliar, but to keep rethinking what it means to be a feminist in radically different socio-cultural, political, racial, and class situations. Our exhibition, therefore, offers an expanded definition of feminist artistic production, one that acknowledges incalculable differences among women globally, and that recognizes feminism itself as an always already situated practice without a universal or fixed definition.

For Reilly, the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennale, curated by Rosa Martinez and Maria de Corral, 'with its presentation of transnational feminisms in the plural', provided an inspiring and refreshing precedent. The non-Western bias and international Platforms of Okui Enwezor's *Documenta 11* was another valuable model, which even though it included an unprecedented 37% of female artists, less than 10% lived outside Europe or America, regardless of their country of origin. By

consulting local critics and curators in regions beyond the art world's traditional orbit, and making extensive studio visits, Reilly avoids the tendency for curators to select artists who have already been rubber stamped by the international arts community. Of *Global Feminisms*' more than one hundred artists, at least 50% are from non-Western countries. Although slightly more artists live in the US than elsewhere (followed by the UK), strong selections from Asia, the Middle East, South America, East and Western Europe, and Australasia create an intriguing mix. Even more potentially exciting, most aren't represented by US or UK galleries, many have not exhibited in North America, and – although some have appeared in the Venice Biennale and other important exhibitions – few are international art stars. The catalogue reflects this international outlook. Excluding Reilly and Nochlin, all the writers – including N'Goné Fall, Geeta Kapur, Elisabeth Lebovici, Kasahara Michiko, and Virginia Pérez-Ratton – come from outside the US.

*Global Feminisms* focuses on work from 1990 to the present by artists mainly under the age of forty. Like *WACK!*, it eschews genealogy or geography for themes: Life Cycles, Emotions, Identities, and Politics. But if *WACK!* shifts the emphasis away from female bodies, *Global Feminisms* places embodiment at centre of its curatorial frame. The hyperbolic repetition of identity what Nochlin, in her catalogue essay, calls "*self othering*" is a defining trope. In her karaoke performances, Hsia-Fei Chang's enacts a kind of sexual and ethnic drag, playing herself playing herself as a hot Asian chick. Pilar Albarracín parodies *clichés* of Spanish womanhood, from the popular singer to the flamenco dancer, the contented peasant to the prostitute. Tania Bruguera channels the persona of the African icon. Nkisi-Nkonde in works that grapple with collective responsibility and guilt. Playing close combat with the stereotypes that threaten to define them, these women deftly sidestep exoticism's traps.

Also drawing on performance traditions, several artists act as witnesses or conduits to traumatic events. Regina José Galindo, who received the Golden Lion at the 2005 Venice Biennale as the most promising younger artist, shaved her body and walked naked through the streets, leaving a trail of bloody footprints behind her, in protest at the murder of Guatemalan women. Peggy Phelan has suggested that the theatrical impulse in such work 'might be understood as an attempt to make this pain something to be shared. Theatre exists for a witness. In returning to the agony of trauma, art might provide a means to approach its often radical unknowability'.<sup>1</sup> Other artists tackle painful histories with less overtly visceral means. Parastou Forouhar, whose parents were assassinated in her family home in Teheran, calligraphed the rooms of an abandoned house with

free floating Farsi script. The piece evoked a longing for motherland and mother tongue unfettered by fundamentalist interpretations of language.

Juxtaposing the work of artists from diverse backgrounds, *Global Feminisms* sets up "common differences" between them. It explores the theme of motherhood, for instance, in works including the lesbian artist Catherine Opie's portraits of her son nursing at her breast, Dayanita Singh's pictures of the eunuch Mona Ahmed and her adopted child, Hiroko Okada's photographic series, *Delivery By Male*, of men who appear to be heavily pregnant, Oreet Ashery's images of herself dressed as a Hassidic Jew while handling her naked breast, and Patricia Piccinini's whimsical imaginings of genetically-engineered offspring.

Like so many native informers, artists offer insights into the cultures they know best, critiquing vernacular tropes even as they appropriate them. Shahzia Sikander improvises on the Persian miniature. Sarah Lucas harnesses the casual sexism of British jokes. Kate Beynon's *Calligraffiti* combines iconography from Chinese script, graffiti, comic books, and tattoos. Carey Young inserts herself into the corporate world to decode training and public speaking methods.

*Global Feminisms* will inaugurate the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, named for the philanthropist and collector whose gift of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979) provides the wing's centerpiece. Reilly thinks that viewers who know the work only in reproduction (it has been in storage for the best part of three decades) will be impressed by its scale and intricacy, the banners that herald the work and echo the table's design, and the heritage tiles honouring women whose lives correlate with those in the plates. A series of exhibitions in the Biographical Gallery will examine women commemorated in the project, starting with Hapshepsut, the first female Pharaoh.

But, as Reilly surely knows, *The Dinner Party*'s centrality in the first feminist museum wing is bound to stir up controversy. Despite – or perhaps because of – its popular appeal, the work has been criticized for everything from its grandiose tone to its kitsch aesthetics, its Western outlook to its equation of women with vaginas. To Nochlin, *The Dinner Party* is 'more a religious work than it is a great art work. Certainly it's an icon of the first wave of consciously feminist art and as such it is a kind of shrine'.

By inviting Nochlin to co-curate, Reilly acknowledges her catalytic impact on feminist art. Nochlin's essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' (1971) refocused attention from individual figures to the institutional and ideological frames around them, signaling the start of self-consciously feminist art history. Moreover, *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, which Nochlin co-curated with Anne Sutherland Harris in 1976, was the first feminist museum survey in North America. This exhibition opened at the LA County Museum and culminated at the Brooklyn Museum. *Global Feminism* thus acts as a kind of a bookend to her career. As Nochlin (now in her mid-seventies and still on the faculty at New York University) puts it: her first show was at the Brooklyn Museum; her last will be too.

### **Framing Feminism**

Both exhibitions promise much. Together they present a vast amount of work from – and in – a feminist perspective that (while skipping the 1980s) conveys a powerful sense of the movement's sophistication, audacity, and continuing influence. Both pack theoretical and intellectual punch. They refuse to tart up, or dumb down, their feminism with goofy or sexy titles (a tendency that the blogger *Anonymous Female Artist*, A.K.A. Militant Art Bitch, laments, concluding, 'Do not agree to be in a show called Little Women. Ever. Even if you live to be 95 and you never get a goddamn show'. 2) Their supple definitions of feminism keep it open to expansion and question. The exhibitions promise to be timely too. *WACK!* unearths radical aesthetic gestures that – if the recent Whitney Biennial is anything to go by – excite younger artists. *Global Feminisms* presents gender-conscious perspectives on international issues that are rarely seen in media reports, let alone art exhibitions. Moreover, given the conservative political climate in the US, such militancy should strike a chord.

At the same time, it will be interesting to see, in the case of *WACK!*, if Butler's sensitivity to the latent feminism in some women's work can stretch the category without diluting its usefulness. After all, if we didn't know that Isa Genzken or Jay de Feo were women, what in their work would indicate a consciousness of gender, let alone feminism? I also wonder if the show's strident title, evoking the acronyms of radical groups, strikes the right tone, especially since so much work in the show is implicitly, rather than explicitly, feminist.

If *WACK!* risks diluting feminist politics, *Global Feminisms* might elevate feminist content above other aspects of its artists' work. The curators' conviction that non-Western perspectives can rekindle feminism puts artists from outside the West under intense focus. So it will be

interesting to see if these artists – who might seem to perform and comment on their national and cultural heritages more explicitly than those from Euroamerican countries – are valued as highly for their artistic talent as for their political insights when the exhibition opens. Yet the curators' selection of practitioners who draw attention to the third world in the first (like Mary Coble who has memorialized queer casualties of US hate crimes) and the first in the third (like Dayanita Singh who photographs upper class Indian homes) indicates that they also want to question, or minimize, this polarity.

### **Allergic to Feminism?**

So why have museums been so reluctant to acknowledge the feminist art movement? For Reilly:

Sexism is still so insidiously woven into the institutional fabric, language, and logic of the mainstream art world that it often goes undetected. It's quite alarming – and disheartening – how prevalent it remains. People say, 'women artists are doing great, we've come so far.' My answer to that is: Bullshit. Look at price differentials between male and female artists, ratios in museums, galleries, and within thematic and national exhibitions. For instance, look at the fourth and fifth floors of MOMA: only 4% of the works on view are by women – and that's after its 2004 reinstallation! For my *Global Feminisms* catalogue essay I researched the ratios of male/female artists shown and collected by contemporary art museums. The statistics are even worse than I had imagined. And those for artists of colour are worse still. It never ceases to amaze me that despite the decades of postcolonial, feminist, anti-racist, and queer activism and theorizing, the art world '*majority*' continues to be defined as white, Euroamerican, privileged and, above all, male. We still have quite a road ahead of us!

Butler concurs:

It's almost as if museum people are allergic to feminism. When I was in Paris recently I discussed my plans for WACK! with a male museum director whose main question was why I wasn't including men. It was as if he literally couldn't visualize a good exhibition with only female artists. I could sense his physical discomfort, embarrassment almost, about the subject.

This anecdote reminds us of the art world's resistance to explicit sexual content – especially in work by women. As longtime MOMA Curator William Rubin once commented on a work by Louise Bourgeois, 'When themes of sexuality are pressed too literally, a set of emotions interposes itself between the viewer and the work in a manner uncondusive to aesthetic contemplation.'<sup>3</sup> Butler thinks that this conflation of women's art and women's bodies has everything to do with the art world's aversion to feminism. 'I can't tell you how many times people asked me: 'What are you going to do with all that ugly art?' – by which I am sure they meant sexually explicit material.'

Despite curators' visible role in framing art these days, they often have less freedom than we imagine. In 2002 Simon Taylor was fired from Guild Hall in East Hampton after a fracas over Carolee Scheemann's *Interior Scroll*. Following a board member's objections, the museum's director removed artwork relating to the piece from *Personal and Political: The Women's Art Movement, 1969-1975* which Taylor co-curated. The irony of the situation was not lost on Schneemann – she had debuted *Interior Scroll* during the *Women Here & Now festival* at the same venue in 1975. Catherine de Zegher resigned amidst controversy this year as Director of the Drawing Center after explaining that the institution would never allow its programmes to be censored if it moved to a space at Ground Zero. Given the art world's fickleness regarding women's art (remember *Riot Grrrr!*? The early 1990s *Bad Girls?*) the Sackler's support of feminist practice is crucial and will, I hope, prompt other institutions to make explicit commitments to the field. It will also be interesting to see what a difference Butler makes to that bastion of male modernism MOMA which she recently joined as Curator of Drawings.

But where many fear that women have hit a glass ceiling in the arts, to Linda Nochlin, as she reviews more than thirty five years of feminist scholarship, teaching, and curating, we have – to coin a phrase – come a long way.

It's really hard to take ourselves back to pre-feminist days when the presence of a successful woman artist – or any other professional – was considered exceptional. But, blasphemous though it is, I think I am entitled to use the forbidden word Progress. Never before have women assumed such prominent positions in the visual arts as curators. Think of Rosa Martinez' and Maria de Corral's Venice Biennale. True, women artists' prices have not reached the level of men's. But we are not surprised when a figure like Eva Hesse has a major retrospective. And many other women artists are considered leaders.

Moreover, Nochlin notes,

Gender studies has penetrated all ways of looking at art. No matter how distorted or misunderstood, feminist protocol has made its way into the heart of the beast. Consciously or unconsciously people make work about sex and sexuality in ways that were impossible before feminism. Has there been support from this changing practice? Not much. Has society changed accordingly? In many ways, not at all – we still don't have adequate nursery facilities or pre-school, and poor women remain at the bottom of American society. But, nonetheless, I still see this as a moment of some achievement and celebration.

### **Far Away and So Close**

While it might seem perverse for feminists to seek validation from a system they've so thoroughly critiqued, museums' financial and psychological support shouldn't be overestimated. As Carolee Schneemann points out, 'Although my work has an enormous presence through the efforts of art historians and cultural thinkers, it's only in two American collections. It's a form of economic censorship – cultural capital but not much actual capital. Sometimes I feel like I live in a fur-lined teacup.' 4

Of course, a feminist show does not guarantee feminist support, as Amelia Jones discovered when she centered her survey of North American feminist work on *The Dinner Party*. Or as Kate Bush and Emma Dexter, the curators of *Bad Girls* at London's ICA, experienced when Laura Cottingham lambasted them for their show's premise and title in her exhibition catalogue essay.<sup>5</sup>

The hubbub around these shows correlates directly to the hopes that audiences have for them. Minority groups rarely see themselves, or their concerns, reflected by mainstream institutions. Because feminist exhibitions are so rare, Butler, Nochlin, and Reilly carry an unusually heavy burden to represent the movement. Their exhibitions offer audiences the unusual opportunity to see art by and as feminists. Unlike the experience of being positioned as a female consumer, being hailed as a feminist viewer is unusual (and might explain why women's studies conferences can be so surprisingly libidinal). Therefore, for a feminist viewer, the 'correct distance' 6 from which Hal Foster suggests art should be viewed might not exist. In her work on

gender and the aesthetics of proximity, Mary Ann Doane argues that women cannot create the gap between themselves and the image needed to be good voyeurs. Quoting from Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One*, she writes: 'Nearness, however, is not foreign to woman, a nearness so close that any identification of one or the other, and therefore any form of property, is impossible. Woman enjoys a closeness with the other that is so near she cannot possess it any more than she can possess herself'.<sup>7</sup> Far from finding Foster's 'correct distance', the feminist is therefore improperly close to, invested in, and identified with, the objects and artefacts of the women's movement.<sup>8</sup>

When recounting their efforts to broaden feminist aesthetics, Butler, Nochlin, and Reilly all spoke of trusting their instincts when assessing work that had not already been presented in this frame. The need for such suppleness leads Griselda Pollock to imagine feminism as a 'movement across the fields of discourse and its institutional bases, across the texts of culture and its psychic foundations ... the play on the word 'movement' allows us to keep in mind the political collectivity in which feminist work must be founded and, at the same time, it enables us to refuse containment in a category called feminism.'<sup>9</sup> In the spirit of Pollock's proposal, these exhibitions see feminist movement as a verb not a noun – a shifting, searching, reflexive activity that takes all society as its subject and resists easy definition. Imagine a blockbuster feminist art exhibition. Now think again.

## **Bio**

Helena Reckitt is a critic and curator, based in Toronto. She edited *Art and Feminism* (London, Phaidon Press, 2001) and co-edited *Acting on AIDS: Sex, drugs and politics* (London, Serpent's Tail, 1998). She was Senior Director of Education and Exhibitions at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center in Atlanta, Georgia (2002-2005), organized talks at London's ICA (1990-1997) and was a commissioning editor at Routledge in the late 1980s. *Paul Shambroom: Picturing Power*, curated by Reckitt with Diane Mullin and Chris Scoates, will tour throughout the US in 2008.

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## Notes

1. Peggy Phelan 'Survey' in Helena Reckitt (ed) *Art and Feminism* (London, Phaidon Press, 2001) p.45
2. <http://anonymousfemaleartist.blogspot.com>
3. William Rubin quoted by Helen Molesworth in 'Bathrooms and Kitchens: Cleaning House with Duchamp' in Nadir Lahiji (ed.) *Plumbing: Sounding Modern Architecture* (Princeton, Princeton Architectural Press, 1997) p. 45
4. Telephone interview with the author, May 2006
5. Laura Cottingham 'What's So Bad About 'Em?' in Kate Bush and Emma Dexter (eds./curators) *Bad Girls* (London, ICA, 1993)
6. Hal Foster 'Whatever Happened to Postmodernism?' in *The Return of the Real*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, MIT Press, 1996)
7. Mary Ann Doane 'Film and the Masquerade' (1991) reprinted in Amelia Jones (ed) *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London, Routledge, 2003) p.63-64
8. As a precedent see, Griselda Pollock *Vision and Difference: femininity, feminism, and histories of art* (Routledge, London and New York, 1988)
9. Griselda Pollock 'Differencing: feminism's encounter with the canon' in *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art Histories* (London and New York, Routledge, 1999) p.26