CLAIMING SPACE
Some American Feminist Originators
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Curated by Norma Broude & Mary D. Garrard
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Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard

We know about all the women that Janson forgot — that they painted small still lives or portraits, sometimes miniatures … and all of this, not to take up space. Women must not make waves, must not be immodest, and must not challenge habits which are men's habits.

So I thought that like Angelica Kauffman, I would do a larger painting to announce the comfort that a woman has with “territory.”

I hoped that other women would be secure after me in this way. Indeed they have been.


For the women artists of the Feminist Art movement of the 1970s, claiming physical space was a politically empowering act, a metaphor for the assertion of political and social as well as aesthetic and cultural identity. Reversing stereotypes about women's work, they made objects that were large and politically confrontational, not delicate and self-effacing. Claiming Space: Some American Feminist Originators speaks to a critical moment in American art history and sets out to refocus attention on that moment, both from the viewpoint of the founders' intentions and from a longer art-historical perspective. By emphasizing large-scale objects and installations, we reiterate the original feminist initiative, which was to claim space for women in an art world that had given them little space, and in a society that had traditionally allotted them a smaller place, outside of the public arena. In different ways and to varying degrees, women artists still face similar challenges today.

Originating feminist artists represented in this exhibition offered many models of claiming space. They claimed public space through the performance art of Betsy Damon and Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz. They claimed museum space through enormous mixed-media installations such as Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party, Miriam Schapiro's Anatomy of a Kimono, and Joyce Kozloff's An Interior Decorated. They claimed the symbolism of interior space through the metaphoric reclaiming of the female body, in the work of Carolee Schneemann, Nancy Fried, and Hannah Wilke, and in the central core imagery of Chicago and Schapiro, challenging social constructions of the female and male body, celebrating devalued aspects of the “feminine,” and wielding a female “gaze.” They claimed political space through the critique of patriarchal systems in the work of Faith Ringgold, Mary Stevens, and Judith Bernstein. They claimed both political and theological space through the goddess and nature imagery of Mary Beth Edelson, Cynthia Mailman, and Yolanda López. And in an era of minimalist abstraction, they claimed aesthetic space, redefining visual pleasure and reclaiming female traditions of craft and decorative patterning in the art of Valerie Jaudon, Jane Kaufman, Joyce Kozloff, Howardena Pindell, Faith Ringgold, and Miriam Schapiro.

This exhibition joins other national celebrations of feminism that have appeared from 2006 to 2008 under the umbrella of the Feminist Art Project. Early 2007 saw the permanent installation of Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, and the exhibition Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art, curated by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin. In spring 2007, the large exhibition, WACK!: Women Artists and the Feminist Revolution, curated by Cornelia Butler, opened at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, and is seen now in fall 2007 at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC, running concurrently with Claiming Space.

In the critical dialogue generated by and within these events, the question “what is ‘feminist art’?” is frequently asked. Answers tend to begin with agonies over the words “feminism” and “feminist” and then break down in failures to produce agreed-upon definitions. There has emerged, moreover, a

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1 Pamphlet statement written for the exhibition of Anatomy of a Kimono at the FOB Gallery, Reed College, Portland Oregon, April 1-30, 1978. "The women that Janson forgot” refers to the popular art history survey textbook by H.W. Janson, which then did not include the work or the name of a single woman artist.

2 Consider the updated (but alas unimproved) statistics provided by the Guerrilla Girls for a 2005 poster that asked, “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” as well as their recent comments on the woefully inadequate representation of women artists in the museums and Biennales of Venice (2005), the Museum of Modern Art in New York (2007), and the national museums on the mall in Washington, DC (2007). (In 1989, fewer than 5% of artists in the modern art sections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art had been women; in 2005 that number declined to fewer than 3%) www.guerrillagirls.com/posters.
clear generational divide. For younger generations of women in the past two decades, “feminism” has meant a theoretically problematized past, while for 1970s feminists, it represented – and still represents – an uncharted, bright new future.

Recently offered as a “serviceable definition” of feminism from the WACK! catalogue is this: “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 favors men over women.”3 We find this astounding, for that value-neutral description would better define patriarchy than feminism! Feminism is not value-neutral; it is not a “category” or a “pattern,” but the spirit and instrument of change. It advocates equal rights for women and more, for it involves challenging masculinist political and cultural hegemony. Feminist art, similarly, challenges and rewrites the visual language through which gendered identity has been psychically inscribed and the oppression of women has been culturally institutionalized, and it aims to construct a new visual vocabulary for female empowerment and gender equality.

But rather than choking over definitions, let us now move on to consider the Feminist Art movement in the same practical art-historical terms that we use for other art movements and to think of it contextually as a player in the world of art history. What kind of art movement was it? A key contention, most recently voiced by New York Times critic Roberta Smith, is that “feminism is not a style, or a formal approach. It is a philosophy, an attitude, and a political instrument…more important than Pop, Minimalism or Conceptual art because it is by its very nature bigger than they are, more far-reaching and life-affecting.”4 Smith echoes here the feminist critic Lucy Lippard’s contention in 1980 that feminist art was “neither a style nor a movement,” rather it was “a value system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life.”5 While we would agree in large part, we would nevertheless insist that the Feminist Art movement of the late 1960s through the mid-1980s was an identifiable historical movement. Like other recognized twentieth-century art movements such as Dada and Surrealism, the Feminist Art movement was not marked by any one style or visual language but has nevertheless had international and ongoing repercussions. And perhaps closest to Dada in this respect, its impact and identity revolved around a philosophy, a pervasive attitude that challenged – and continues to challenge – the norms and power politics of culture and morality in the larger world.

Another familiar art-historical construct is that significant art movements open doors and expand possibilities for those that follow. Major critical reviews of Global Feminisms and WACK! have emphasized that feminist art was the most important artistic movement of the late twentieth century, and that it made possible much of what came after it. “Without it,” wrote Holland Cotter, “identity-based art, crafts-derived art, performance art and much political art would not exist in the form it does, if it existed at all. Much of what we call postmodern art has feminist art at its source.”6 The inauguraing exhibition of the Feminist Art Project, mounted at Rutgers in early 2006, How American Women Artists Invented Postmodernism, 1970-1975, also emphasized this idea, which is in many important respects true.7 Where women are concerned, however, this construct flirts dangerously with a familiar interpretative pattern; for there is a long history of women artists being defined and dismissed, not as innovators, but as precursors and facilitators of the implicitly more significant art of men who followed.8 And, as we can now see, the critical linkages that were first forged in the 1980s between feminism and postmodernism functioned as an even more insidious strategy for diminishing the feminist critique of patriarchy by appropriating and subsuming it within a presumably larger enterprise, positioning it as but a single instance of the postmodern critique of modernist ideologies.9

Thus, we would ask, if recent critics are right about the importance of the Feminist Art movement of the 1970s, if feminist art is, as Cotter has written, “the formative art of the last four decades,” why is it still given only minimal attention and sometimes excluded entirely from recent modern and contemporary art history textbooks? And why is it that, when mentioned at all, it is still positioned only as a link to, or as a sub-category within, postmodernism?10 Why is it that the grand narrative of modernism, even now, must remain inviolate and cannot be made to accommodate a relationship to the Feminist Art movement?

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We would make a different art-historical case for the founding generation and want to propose here that the relationship of feminist art to modernism was as much one of continuity as rupture. The Feminist Art movement of the late 1960s and 1970s opened up new possibilities for activist and pluralistic art in the late twentieth century, but it also sustained a critical engagement with the longer art-historical discourses and issues of its century. Many of the seeds of the movement’s philosophy and social vision were embedded in basic tenets of modernist belief. With such otherwise masculinist movements and institutions as Futurism, Constructivism, De Stijl, and the Bauhaus, feminist artists of the late 1960s and 1970s shared a universalizing and utopian idealism, the dream of rebuilding and reforming an older social order, and a belief that art could change society.

The physical forms through which feminist artists chose to express that vision, however, were those that had been accorded a lesser position in the hierarchies of modernist practice. It was in such previously subordinated genres as film and photography, or the collaborative arts and crafts briefly fostered by the weaving and design workshops of the Bauhaus, that the vitality for the future would be found. And with the spotlight that 1970s feminism began to shine on the rediscovered and revalidated work of earlier twentieth-century women artists came the realization that, in fact, women’s art— and women’s values—had been there all along, submerged by the myth of a formalist modernism, devoid of any connection with society, which had succeeded in seizing the critical terrain and shutting out everything else.

That myth of a monolithic and reductivist formalist modernism has been just as actively promulgated and sustained in recent decades by the advocates of the postmodern as it ever had been by modernism’s earlier twentieth-century framers and supporters. For postmodernism depends for its definition and distinctive identity on an overlaid and manufactured distinction between itself and the modern, a distinction based on the erasure of all of the diversity that was always there but that modernism was loathe to acknowledge. The qualities usually ascribed to the postmodern—diversity, decenteredness, political content—are in fact embedded in the “modern” art of the first 70 years of the twentieth century, to be found even in the canonical collections of the Museum of Modern Art, where abstraction is joined by the decorativeness and domesticity of Matisse, Bonnard, Vuillard, the visual realism and political narratives of German Expressionism, the trenchant social commentary of Dada, and the personal inner proings of Surrealism.

Throughout the century, too, women artists were always there, contributing to these movements even if unacknowledged, and they brought further diversity—a different voice—to the male-centered and male-defined movements in whose orbits they struggled to work. Feminist artists of the 1970s uncovered the female side of modernism that had been submerged by mainstream rhetoric. It is important, in our view, to insist at this juncture upon feminist art’s place at the modernist table, not only because it is presently and resolutely being set outside that mainstream “master narrative,” but also because it was feminist art that gave canonical modernism—which had finally hit the blank wall of minimalism—an enriched and expanded place to go.

In this exhibition, we focus on three major concerns of feminist artists in the United States during the 1970s: the expressive and cultural empowerment of the female body, feminist political intervention, and the visual pleasure of the feminist-led Pattern and Decoration movement. We have tried to foreground the perspectives and the passionate ambitions of the originators in 1970s America, to offer viewers a glimpse of what these looked and felt like before they were distorted by political backlash and subjected to reinterpretation by critical theory in subsequent decades. The exhibit is selective and it is focused. It showcases art that was the product of a particular time in a particular place, the work of American women artists whose ethnicities and socio-economic differences were put aside for a lengthy moment for a common cause, a cooperative whole that was never seamless but, for that moment, was greater than the sum of its parts. Their work was revelatory and it was foundational.

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9 The absorption of feminism into postmodernism, as a line of thought established in the 1980s by such writers as Craig Owens, Arthur Danto, and Andreas Huyssen, is exposed and cogently analyzed by Amelia Jones, "Post-feminism: A Remasculinization of Culture?", M/E/A/N/I/N/G 7 (1990), 29-40.
10 As one example among many, see Amy Dempsey's The Essential Encyclopedic Guide to Modern Art: Styles, Schools and Movements (Thames and Hudson, 2002), where Chicago’s Dinner Party and the work of Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger are mentioned as part of Postmodernism, and the Feminist Art movement of the 1970s is not identified.
GENDER AND POWER: THE EXPRESSIVE AND CULTURAL EMPOWERMENT OF THE FEMALE BODY

Seventies feminist art initiated a dialogue with art history by challenging the long history of the female body in art as the “object of the male gaze” in Laura Mulvey’s feminist formulation of 1975, which would be highly influential in 1980s and 1990s theory. The purpose and strategy of many early feminist artists was to liberate the female body from the prison of sexual objectification and give it agency in the fictive world of art. It was a matter of claiming power. But the 1970s approach to the body got turned around in the 1980s, as feminist artists began to see the difficulties of escaping objectification and avoided both positive representations of women and sensuous visual pleasure, lest these be received in masculinist terms, and as feminist writers became increasingly absorbed by the theoretical issues of the gaze, objecthood, and looked-at-ness. Seventies feminist artists had tried to re-visualize the female body and female sexuality from inside, from female perspectives. For this they were condemned by later critics for their essentialism. Yet it was, ironically, the theorists of the 1980s who re-essentialized the cultural construct of the “feminine,” in their preoccupation with the paralysis of being subjected to the gaze, and with the morass of objectification from which there was said to be no escape.11

The damning criticism of essentialism that has dogged 1970s feminism misses the point of first-generation feminist art, which did not simply repeat essentialist ideas, and certainly not mindlessly, but interrogated them, challenged them, and used them for new political and aesthetic ends. Womanhouse, the collaborative project of Chicago and Schapiro and their students in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts, which was the result of deeply analytical consciousness-raising, effectively exposed the gender stereotypes and social limitations that entrapped young women. Sandra Orgel’s Linen Closet and Chicago’s Cock and Cunt play challenged essentialism at its roots: women can escape domestic confinement; socially gendered roles are not inscribed on our anatomy. Produced at the moment of a culture crisis of gender, Womanhouse embraced conflicting viewpoints. There is a simultaneous critique and relishing of the apparatus of femininity – the sensuous pleasures of fabrics and make-up, the warm rituals of food in female-run households – and a shared fascination and horror with the way these things take over women’s lives as both enticement and trap.

It is a postmodern idea (Judith Butler) that gender identity is not stable in an essentialist sense, but in flux and to a large extent performative, and in the 1990s, the idea of identity as performance became a key tenet of critical theory. But, as the young artists of Womanhouse implicitly realized, people keep performing assigned social roles as if they were inevitable; individuals may escape patterns, but the patterns retain a stranglehold. Feminist artists of the 1970s were addressing the stranglehold of gender roles, challenging them, and mixing them up. Thus, in Womanhouse, Beth Bachenheimer’s overflowing Shoe Closet mocks women’s obsessions, as do the later body carving/weight loss documentations of Eleanor Antin and Martha Rosler – they all recognize and test the culturally-inscribed nature of female idiosyncrasies and gender rituals.

So changed is the cultural landscape today that these gestures have been defanged as critiques, misunderstood as thoughtless essentializing. We considered reconstructing the Bridal Staircase from Womanhouse for this exhibition, but rejected it for fear that it might be taken straight, and not recognized as a send-up of wedding ritual. The early feminist click of awareness that the so-called high point of a woman’s life, her wedding and the climactic moment of here-comes-the-bride, might be followed by disillusionment and a narrowing of personal opportunity was expressed in the graying of the bride’s train as it descended the stair. In society, this led to a number of things, including the demotion of marriage as the exclusive goal of a woman’s life. But after several decades of relentless re-indoctrination, we have now come full circle, and the paraphernalia of bridal gowns and trains are again fetishized and romanticized. The feminist critique of marriage ritual as a seductive trap for women is no less relevant today, but it has lost credibility as the culture has deemed these interests to be both socially and economically valid and has mobilized to maintain them.

Recreating a lost work from an earlier era inevitably raises the question of measuring the distance from then to now. Sandra Orgel Crooker's recreation for this exhibition of her *Linen Closet* from *Womanhouse* is as much reinterpretation as recreation, and comparison between photos of the lost piece from 1972 and the 2007 version is sociologically revealing. In the original version, the abstracted, sexually muted late 1960s mannequin that expressed women's emergence from domestic servitude, a cipher beginning to awaken, was still subordinated to its domestic framework, and issues of sexual identity and/or sexual servitude, though implicit, were not foregrounded. In the 2007 version, the newly empowered mannequin breaks out of the confinement of the closet with a confidence that speaks to Crooker's own maturity and her ongoing commitment to "woman transforming." (See her statement in this catalogue.) But this mannequin—which dates from c.1980—though still idealized and conventional, is physically more accurate and subtly sexualized, like the evolving Barbie doll. The reticence and discretion of c.1970 have disappeared. This change, putatively a gain of the sexual revolution, raises other interpretative possibilities for the dilemma of the boxed-in woman. Might it be that what was called "sexual liberation" turned out to be less an opportunity for women's self-realization than another essentialist trap, in a culture that has continued to promote a female identity dependent on self-objectification and narcissism?

No aspect of early feminist art has been so controversial within the feminist movement as the alleged essentialism of the "central core imagery" of Chicago and Schapiro and these two artists' provocative experiments with creating abstract vaginal imagery, or "cunt art," in Chicago's formulation. Feminist critics protested what seemed a reductive narrowing of women's range of expressive choice to women's bodies. Rather, it was a conscious effort to create new symbolic form, building upon archetypal icons for female and male—circle and square, void and solid, minus and plus—while assigning them new meanings. Within a visual culture filled with representations of women equated with their displayed bodies, a real essentializing that today on every newsstand, Chicago and Schapiro aimed to reclaim female body signs as gender metaphors, symbols of a power and strength comparable to the phallus. In *Five Panel Vertical*, Judith Bernstein similarly repositions a genital signifier in cultural discourse, presenting the phallus in enlarged multiple images, the better to undermine its mythic power through ridicule of masculinist posturing. We have called this strategy "political essentialism;" in another context, post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak called it "strategic essentialism."

Another current in the Feminist Art movement that sought an empowering essence in the female drew upon imagery of the prehistoric Great Goddess. In posing the radical possibility of female divinity, they opened a dialogue with history, cutting patriarchal theology down to size by sandwiching it between prehistory and the new feminist present. Like the Renaissance's revulsion of antiquity, the Goddess artists recreated a history that women needed, and which supported and strengthened the case for female equality. In the 1970s, informed especially by the archaeological investigations of Marija Gimbutas and the contemporary writing of Merlin Stone (*When God Was a Woman*, 1976), a large number of feminist artists, including Nancy Azara, Judy Baca, Betsy Damon, Mary Beth Edelson, Anne Healy, Cynthia Mailman, Donna Hennes, and Ana Mendieta, created imagery that drew upon ancient goddess imagery published in those books—the multi-breasted Diana of Ephesus, the Cretan and Minoan Goddess, Spider Woman, and more broadly, the Great Mother of nature and the earth. Other artists were empowered by identifying with a female deity within their own cultural traditions: Betye Saar tapped the power of the Black Goddess; Yolanda López, that of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

These artists practiced political essentialism most daringly in their assertion that "God" not only was but still is female, and also in claiming affiliation with the female deity of nature, putatively all-powerful in prehistory but in historical eras disparaged and set in opposition to the patriarchal God and masculine culture. Although she is not usually associated with goddess art, Carolee Schneemann has been deeply interested in, and her work informed by, ancient goddess culture. In *Interior Scroll*, Schneemann challenges the essentialist binaries of male culture vs. female nature, and of mind vs. body, by...

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12 Patricia Mainardi and Cindy Nemser were prominent among the early critics; see Power of Feminist Art, 23. (See note 8.)


15 See Gloria Feman Orenstein, "Recovering Her Story: Feminist Artists Reclaim the Great Goddess," in Power of Feminist Art, 174-189. (See note 8.)
performing a female body that issues and speaks a text from its genitalia. This startling performance confounded the “natural” categories (babies, not words, proceed from the uterus; texts are produced in the brain), while presenting a striking visual image of mind-body continuity.

A woman artist’s use of the nude female body to interrogate the binaries – and in particular the exposure of her own nude body – is a tactic that can easily backfire and be received as purely erotic objectification. Hannah Wilke often deliberately skirted that line in her work. With considerable wit and panache, in her 1976 silent film, Through the Large Glass, Wilke claimed the discursive space of art history by reversing the terms of Marcel Duchamp’s construction of his female alter ego (Rrose Selavy). Appearing in understated drag, in a white suit and fedora hat, she removed her clothes to reveal her fully female self, as she performed behind, and was literally seen through, Duchamp’s The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors Even. Duchamp’s iconic gesture, interpreted by art historians as a conceptual self-portrait and as a bigendered interrogation of conventional dualistic concepts of sexuality, is humorously, but no less pointedly, skewered here by Wilke. For by introducing her real naked female body into the context of the abstruse and symbolic “Bride,” in which Duchamp had kept the male and female parts strictly separated from one another, Wilke successfully exposed the emptiness of Duchamp’s much vaunted assumption of his feminine side, a gesture that he had of course been able to make without relinquishing his male privilege to name and claim a “higher” symbolic order.

PATTERN AND DECORATION: REINVENTING BEAUTY AND VISUAL PLEASURE

In the early 1970s, feminist artists played leading conceptual and political roles in the emergence of what became known as “Pattern Painting” and the “Pattern and Decoration” movement. Artists such as Miriam Schapiro, Joyce Kozloff, Valerie Jaudon, and Jane Kaufman embraced the decorative and the ornamental in a positive and politically transgressive spirit. As feminists, they self-consciously set themselves to counter the systematic and gendered denigration of decorative beauty in mainstream modernism, where decorative and domestic handicrafts had long been regarded as “women’s work,” and as “low art” that lacked the “significant content” said to distinguish the “high art” tradition of modern abstraction. This essentialist interpretation of the decorative was deeply embedded in Western culture, which gendered ornament as female and hence inferior, not only because it was produced by women but also by those non-Western cultures that functioned conceptually as a feminized “other” to the virile, masculine West.

In both their art and their writing, Kozloff and Jaudon set out to expose the racist and sexist foundations of these binarized dichotomies and the power relationships that underpinned them in Western art.¹⁶ They turned for their inspiration to a variety of non-Western decorative art forms, among them Celtic, Islamic, and Hispano-Arabic traditions in which the decorative had been neither gendered nor taboo. And they moved away from the hierarchic and relational aspects of Western-style pictorial composition. Combining East and West, Jaudon created her own variations on Islamic and Celtic interlace patterns on impasted surfaces that suggest western-style illusionistic tensions between figure and ground. Kozloff used patterns derived from Islamic and Pre-Columbian ornament for her increasingly large canvases and was also inspired by the tiled façades of Mexican churches she had visited. But in the late seventies, with growing concern for the function of her art in the wider community and its potential to shape daily life experience, she quickly moved away from these still traditionally-oriented gallery productions to room sized installations of ceramic tiles and printed silks (known generically as An Interior Decorated) and from there into the realm of public art.

Also presented as challenges to essentialist hierarchies were the standing screens and hanging curtains produced by Jane Kaufman. In the late 1970s, Kaufman abandoned conventional painting and embraced a startling array of sumptuous materials and unconventional forms that included rhinestones

¹⁶ See Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff, “Art Hysterical
Notions of Progress and Culture,” Heresies: A Feminist
Three works in this exhibition by Miriam Schapiro from the early 1970s, *Big Ox, Lady Genji’s Maze,* and *Explode,* visually tell the story of her emergence from minimalism to pattern and decoration. Although she too found stimulus in such non-Western sources as Islamic miniatures and Japanese textiles, the primary impetus and inspiration for her politically-charged art of decoration came from the creative artifacts of women’s lives and experience—the embroidered handkerchiefs and samplers, aprons and quilts that she increasingly sought out and collected over the course of that decade. Schapiro aimed not only to push Western art beyond its exclusionary boundaries of gender, but also to retrieve and honor the unsung work of the women who had come before her, so that a space—an unprecedentedly large space—might be cleared for the changing values and visions of those women who would come after her.

Nowhere in her oeuvre are these aims better exemplified than in the monumental piece, *Anatomy of a Kimono,* a ten-panel, fifty-two-foot-long painting/femmage (Schapiro’s term for the female tradition of sewing, piecing, hooking, quilting, and appliquing that parallels and precedes the high-art activity of “collage”). Seen here for the first time in the United States since it was purchased and taken to Zurich in 1979 by Swiss dealer and collector Bruno Bischofberger, *Anatomy of a Kimono* is Schapiro’s major work of the 1970s. Though not as well-known as Judy Chicago’s iconic *Dinner Party,* it is Schapiro’s counterpart piece in terms of scale and ambition. Moreover, its message of gender balance and harmony, presented in formal terms, is more typical of Schapiro and differs from Chicago’s emphasis in the ’70s on women’s singular history.

Inspired by plates in a book on traditional Japanese costumes and fabrics, Schapiro created *Anatomy of a Kimono* in less than three months as an installation at the André Emmerich Gallery in 1976. In its ten-panel structure, the forms of the obi and kick flank the stylized form of a kimono in four repetitions, which Schapiro conceived, she said, as “a symphony” of color, moving from “pale” to “neutral” to “dark and sonorous, and finally the red crescendo” of the last triumphant kick, chosen to end the painting so that it “would walk or strut its way into the 1980s.”

The combination of personal identity and political statement in new decorative art forms that grow from the feminist affirmation of pattern and ornament is represented in this show as well by Faith Ringgold’s use of the pieced and sewn Tibetan tanka format for her *Slave Rape* series of 1973, Howardena Pindell’s references to African textiles in her untitled piece of 1979, and the Persian miniature qualities of Nancy Fried’s bread-dough reliefs. Though small in size, Fried’s tiny pieces claim huge vistas of feminist political space, validating through simple representation the intimate domestic life of lesbian women. Here, in relief sculptures made of flour, water, and salt, physically grounded nude women naturally, and sometimes inelegantly, act out the interplay of quotidian pleasure, sexual love, and intense emotional drama that is familiar to all domestic partnerships and marriages. In the imagery of lesbian lives, a direct and open expression of the personal is, inevitably, deeply political.

**POLITICAL INTERVENTION**

The idea that art is not merely aesthetic, but vitally related to life and politics, is an attitude and a legacy of the 1960s. Many American artists, female and male, were involved in civil rights activism and anti-Vietnam war protest, and by the late 60s, art had become an instrument of protest, as groups such as

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Artists and Writers Protest Against the War in Vietnam, Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, and Art Workers Coalition (AWC) were formed. In 1969, energized by the rising national Women's Liberation Movement, Women Artists in Revolution was formed to protest sex and gender discrimination in museums and galleries, soon followed by groups such as Women, Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation. Feminist art in America was born at an extraordinary time when revolution, political action, and demands for social justice were in the air.

Some feminist art is overtly political— for example, Faith Ringgold's civil rights-based Die and The Flag is Bleeding, and May Stevens' anti-patriarchal and anti-war Big Daddy paintings. In these works, Ringgold and Stevens combine abstract flattening with representational distortion and caricature to formulate biting indictments of social disorder, patriarchal authority, and militaristic imperialism. In the argot of the day, they spoke truth to power. Yet all feminist art is by definition political in that it defies societal norms, informed by values that become political when they hit the street. The unofficial slogan of the women's movement, "the personal is the political," was the result of a profound feminist insight: what women had believed were their private problems were really society's problems. The credo of Chicago and Schapiro's Feminist Art Program was that the personal histories of young women artists mattered in the larger world; the women encouraged each other to "take space," creating and presenting as "Art," imagery that built on their own experiences as women. Chicago and Schapiro intended, in their originating rationale, not just to help women artists find a new place in the art world, but to shake up the entire social order. A decade of feminist art later, Barbara Kruger aimed her highly public art at the corporate commodification of culture, and at power structures that are supported by gender stereotypes, as if to bring them down. The Guerrilla Girls took feminism's critique of the art world literally to the streets, beginning in Soho. It is, consequently, artificial to separate the political and aesthetic in feminist art: at its best, the aesthetic configuration draws both rationale and energy from political motivation, while giving sensate form to abstract ideas.

Nevertheless, critics of the WACK! and Global Feminisms exhibitions have complained that their political thrust outweighs the art. 18 This is a false dichotomy, disproportionately applied to women. The criticism of "too political" harbors a value judgment about the lesser importance of feminism itself. Nobody says that the work of Goya or David or Gericault or Picasso— or Botero's Abu Ghraib paintings, to cite our companion exhibition in the American University Museum— is too political to be successful as art. Chicago's The Dinner Party and Schapiro's Anatomy of a Kimono differ from the Raft of the Medusa or Guernica in that they address the gender-based oppression of women and the denigration of women's cultural contributions. One can only observe that the feminist goal of social and cultural justice for half the world's population is a rather more universally significant theme than a briefly scandalous French shipwreck or the bombing of one small town in a civil war.

Dismissal by false dichotomy also operates in a criticism that has been leveled at both the Los Angeles and Brooklyn exhibitions, that video/film, performance art, and a "documentary slant" rule at the expense of painting and sculpture. 19 The prominence of video and performance in a feminist art exhibit is entirely appropriate, since the introduction of these new media into the art world was a feminist breakthrough— media that lend themselves to the foregrounding of content without ignoring form. In the case of performance art such as Labowitz and Lacy's In Mourning and in Rage, the edgy near-erasure of the lines between art and media, media and life, was what gave that performance an expressive power that resonated in both the art and social worlds, and helped to connect them. But as the Claiming Space exhibition shows, with its proportions of video/performance and painting/sculpture reversed, 1970s feminist art carried an expressive, content-loaded edge, whatever the medium. Given that the forging of connections and continuities is a feminist value, as is a preference for both-and over either-or, it seems perverse to dwell on such questions as whether painting is unfairly subordinated to photography, or whether women's art can be both political and aesthetic.

Another false dichotomy is involved in the polarizing of gender and race as competing political constituencies. The tendency of one liberation move-

18 Roberta Smith (see note 4) says of Global Feminisms that it is "more about information, politics and the struggle for equality than it is about art in any very concentrated or satisfying sense." Peter Schjeldahl, "Women's Work: Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum," The New Yorker, April 9, 2007, 73-74, asserts that the Brooklyn show's "strongest suit is lumpen journalism documenting or, in an op-ed spirit, caricaturing worldly situations," which he differentiates from the "arts of imagination, chiefly painting," to set up a binary of "politics versus taste, virtue versus pleasure."

19 Roberta Smith (see note 4) described the show as "nearly devoid of significant painting and sculpture and thoroughly dominated by photography and video, with a documentary slant to many of its better works." See other reviews on the WACK! website: http://www.moca.org/wack.

ment to spark another is a familiar chain reaction: civil rights activism inspired feminism, and feminists inspired gay rights activists. Since these groups shared a marginalized position in the power structure, the power lock held by white men and white patriarchy could create new alliances. Faith Ringgold has been an outspoken advocate of both Black Power and feminism, yet she has always been reluctant to choose between her minorities. "When there is a group for blacks and there is a group for women, where do I go?" For one brief moment, the double affiliations and double minority status of black women formed a unified package; soon after, it fell apart. Howardena Pindell's impatience with the myth of universal sisterhood led her to parody and expose the racial blind spots of white feminists in Free, White, and 21, just as her refusal to limit her art to stereotypical black-art expectations led her in the abstract (yet no less content-infused) direction of the work represented in Claiming Space.

It is unfortunate that the tensions that emerged in the 1970s between feminist women of different races, real and significant as they were, have in recent decades been discussed more than the fragile gender solidarity of the early feminist movement, because that solidarity held, and holds, the only real political potential for women's equality. A power block of 51% can achieve anything; as divided constituencies, women of color and white women perpetually risk political marginalization. The cultural desire to set gender and race in competition was demonstrated recently after Don Imus's widely publicized insult to the Rutgers basketball players. A reporter asked one of the players if she had been more insulted as a black person or as a woman. Faced with a Hobson's choice, she answered, "as a woman." Yet a truer answer would probably be "both." She might accurately have said to a white male offender, "Your power and my victimhood are indivisible into race and gender, for that conceals the larger problem, which is you."

Perhaps the most destructive false dichotomy of all is one created by feminists themselves: the idea that American feminist art of the 1970s was an embarrassing first draft, to be deconstructed by 'modern' feminist artists because (1) it was essentialist and untheorized, (2) it presented a monolithic concept of woman and belief in universal sisterhood, and (3) in a non-feminist spirit, certain artists have been "canonized," to the unfair exclusion of others. In an essay in the WACK! catalogue, Marsha Meskimmon advocates the deconstruction of that "alternative canon," and a challenging of the clichéd concepts of early feminist art, replacing its Anglo-American conceptual paradigms with one based on a less solipsist and more sophisticated global awareness, marked by "multilayered spatial connections" of international feminist art. (Meskimmon comes close to equating the American feminist artists with Anglo-American cultural imperialism.) Indeed, new paradigms are called for as the world changes and our horizons expand, but hindsight is 20/20. It is historically opaque and unfair to depict 1970s American feminists as naively "implicated by the Anglphone frame" for not understanding that the Vietnam War was a minor moment in the larger perspective of global decolonization, or for not knowing that other and different forms of feminist art might exist in the world.

In the Global Feminisms catalogue, Maura Reilly similarly dismisses the idea of women's "sameness," implicitly identified with the perspective of 1970s feminist artists, as insensitive to the very different kinds of struggles women experience in the global context. She speaks disapprovingly of "definitions that assume a sameness in the forms of women's oppression, regardless of local circumstances." But which is more important - the fact that women suffer oppression everywhere, or the fact that it comes in different forms and flavors? The oppression of women is a single planetary evil; to give it a variety of local names can obscure that global reality. Similarly, to insist that there are feminisms and not a unitary feminism may be accurate, but it underestimates the power of an ideal. It takes some historical perspective to understand what the idea of a "sisterhood of women" meant to the generation of 1970 (an analogy might be what "the brotherhood of men" meant to the generation of 1789). There's a difference between "sameness" as a Procrustean theoretical construct and "feminism" as a liberating universal dream, an ideal that can be drawn upon by women in a variety of specific cultural dilemmas of gender, to lift them out, encourage them to imagine, and seek to realize the dream of gender equality - of which there may be culturally specific individual versions, but no conceptual variants.

21 On April 4, 2007, radio host Don Imus called the Rutgers University women's basketball players "nappy-headed hos" on a nationally syndicated program, a gaffe that led to a public apology and many interviews with the players.
One would like to see less emphasis on the limitations of the 1970s generation and a more generous acknowledgement of their extraordinary legacy to subsequent generations of feminists, praise for the doors they opened rather than blame for the ones they missed. It is wonderful to see so many artists from around the world showcased in WACK! and Global Feminisms, but their emergence should not depend on or require the suppression and denigration of their American feminist contemporaries and predecessors. The masculinist Freudian model of achieving agency by killing the father is one that women surely do not have to follow. It is absurd to see second and third generation feminists creating a new Other in their own foremothers, faulting for their canonicity women who have never experienced parity in the art world, much less hegemony over anything. It bespeaks the desperation of a perpetually underprivileged cohort that can think of nothing to do but chew off its own leg to survive. Even masculinist art history doesn’t throw away its heroes: Cezanne isn’t forgotten because Picasso followed.

We close with an exhortation to young art historians to write the history of feminist art in terms of connections and continuities between the generations. In structure, that history might resemble a spider web (to borrow an early feminist metaphor), in the building of a larger and larger universe from a center that is privileged only as the temporal and local point of origin, a structure whose glory and strength depend upon the steady expansion and complexity of its design. As the WACK! and Global Feminisms exhibitions reveal, there have been many individual manifestations of feminism in art around the globe in the past four decades, artists in dialogue with each other (sometimes only in theory) across geographic borders. But all this was made possible, and given a conceptual framework, by the original big bang, that collective awakening that erupted into a broad political movement, and into a politically self-conscious and collaborative art movement, whose participants were fired by the ideal of feminism. It is not neo-imperialist, but historically accurate, to observe that this was primarily (though not exclusively) an Anglo-American phenomenon of the late 1960s and 1970s.

And its strategies continue to reverberate throughout the world. To cite one example, in Breaking the Silence: French Women’s Voices from the Ghetto, author Fadela Amara describes her experience as a French-born daughter of Algerian parents in a France increasingly populated by Muslim fundamentalists. With colleagues, she actively opposed violence against women, organizing a march across France to protest the murder of a young woman for “ostensibly un-Muslim behavior,” in a spirit that Eunice Lipton, reviewing the book, described as “a call to action, seventies-feminist style.” Although Amara claims identity in the France of the Enlightenment and of Marianne, the activist manifestations staged by the women in her French Muslim group, protesting violence against women in their own social context, can also be said to resonate with the spirit of Lacy and Labowitz’s In Mourning and in Rage.

The United States has long been in the business of exporting political and cultural values, such as the current administration’s imperative to “spread democracy,” which are not always welcomed by their intended recipients. The term “feminist” is equally suspect in many non-Western countries (and in the West as well), yet the ideal of what we call feminism is perpetually being reborn: in Enlightenment texts (Olympe de Gouges, Mary Wollstonecraft), in the suffragist movements of nineteenth and early twentieth century England and America, in the writings of mid-twentieth century feminists (Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan), in the widespread second-wave movement of the 1970s, and in the Islamic world and Africa today. Like democracy, feminism cannot be packaged for export, for only the flame, not the candle, will be relevant to diverse cultural and political situations. Yet feminist ideals are spontaneously being brought to many different kinds of fruition by women around the world today. Claiming space for themselves is often the first step.

24 The WACK! and Global Feminisms exhibitions have initiated the tracking of feminist activism and art around the world, which should lead to a deepening understanding of feminism in a global perspective. Other feminist “unmarked centers” (Meskimmon’s term) of the 1970s include Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa; future scholars will no doubt learn and write of others, as well as analyze their relationships with activism in North America in terms that do not sustain a master narrative. Our concern here is less geographic than temporal; in emphasizing the originality and importance of the American founders of feminist art, we want to offer a corrective to the tendencies here described to ignore or disavow their achievements and the historical priority of their actions as a movement.

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Pioneering feminist scholars Broude and Garrard are co-editors and contributors to the influential anthology Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany (1982), its sequel The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History (1992); The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact (1994); and Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism (2005). For their collaborative and individual bodies of work, they were joint recipients in 2000 of the Art History Recognition Award conferred by the Committee on Women of the College Art Association.