AESTHETICS AND IDEOLOGY
Edited by Judith Stoddart

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FEMINIST ART AND THE ESSENTIALISM CONTROVERSY

By Mary D. Garrard

THE YEAR 1994 Marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the beginning of the modern feminist movement—a time for celebration and reflection. It has not been a simple uphill journey, in fact the road has been quite rocky at times, and many feminists have been discouraged to see more backlash than progress. Even so, a quarter-century retrospective look affords us a glimpse of both the peaks and the valleys. Today, I will discuss with you an issue that has seriously divided feminists, the problem of essentialism, which I present as a problem but will define as a non-problem and, indeed, as a distortion of feminism's most progressive creative phase.

"Essentialism," a word taken from the vocabulary of philosophy, means "that which is necessary and unchanging about a concept or thing." Within feminist criticism, the term has come to mean the belief that woman has an essence, inborn attributes that define her as an unchanging being across all time and cultures. And an "essentialist" is said to be one for whom the biological female body is the essence of feminism.

Exhibit A of essentialism in art is Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party, one of the most celebrated icons of the feminist movement in art. Created in 1976, The Dinner Party consists of an imaginary gathering of great women that masculinist history forgot—from Boadicea and Hypatia to Mary Wollstonecraft and Sojourner Truth—a celebration of women's history in the form of a lifesize triangular table, whose thirty-nine guests are symbolized in individual placesettings. The Dinner Party rapidly became a symbol of first-generation feminism's values and aspirations.¹

Yet at the present moment, the work is scorned by feminists and anti-feminists alike. In 1990, congressmen voted down an effort to acquire The Dinner Party by the University of the District of Columbia, on the grounds that the work was obscene and pornographic. These congressmen (noted as a group for their refinement in sexual matters) reacted in horror to the ceramic plates symbolizing the historical women, which were painted with abstract images, some clearly labial in form. Meanwhile, from the other side of the political spectrum, about a year ago the announcement of a forthcoming exhibition of The Dinner Party in

Los Angeles was met with pickets from women’s groups. Some contemporary feminists are offended by the implication that women such as Sappho or Virginia Woolf, intellectual and creative women, should be represented by images whose primary signification is anatomical—reduced, critics claim, to clitoris and labia. And, thus, Chicago’s work is held up as a glaring example of “essentialist” art.

In their perception that Chicago has unacceptably limited feminism to the female body, these critics sustain the most powerful position within the feminist discourse of the 1980s, that of anti-essentialism. It is a position recently described by Naomi Schor as “the prime idiom of intellectual terrorism,” which holds the power to “reduce to silence, to excommunicate, to consign to oblivion.” The argument against so-called essentialism may be traced back to the dawn of modern feminism, and it comes from several quarters. First, I will briefly outline that argument, and then I will return to consider its application to the visual arts, and the ways in which it has indeed operated on a level of dogmatic insistence that has had a crippling and divisive effect.

We owe to Simone de Beauvoir the defining insight that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” De Beauvoir’s realization that femininity is not natural but, rather, the cultural construction of an oppressive patriarchy has been claimed as the first so-called “constructionist” critique of an essentialism promoted by men, in which female traits (everything from passivity to nurturing) were believed to be natural and eternal. De Beauvoir recognized that essentialism supported the patriarchal order by legitimating women’s social and political disempowerment, yet her solution for women effectively accepted masculinist values for she urged women to share in that universality previously claimed by men. Luce Irigaray, one of the earliest feminist writers to enter a position on what would later be called essentialism, argued to the contrary in 1974. She proposed that women must become speaking subjects in their own right, yet without merging into gender neutrality and without, as she put it, “speaking universal.” Irigaray proposed, controversially, that there was an essential female (un femme) within socially defined Woman, “Beneath all these/her appearances, beneath all these/her borrowings and artifices,” and she suggested that women had some primal relationship with fluids that was unmediated by patriarchy. Irigaray’s more extreme essentialist claims have been much criticized, yet it is important to remember that she would later take a variety of other positions. Her approach was characteristic of early 1970s feminism in being experimental, trying out possibilities, taking a broad view of what was possible that in fact embraced many contradictions.

Other critiques of essentialism also came from France in the 1970s. Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan maintained that there can be no access to the body outside language, which blocks our senses from having any perception that is not already embedded in culture. In this linguistic critique, essentialists are those who do not understand that man’s entry into language brought the loss of direct contact with physical nature unmediated by the verbal and symbolic. Further, Lacan propounded, because the symbolic order is centered on the phallus, the “transcendental signifier,” which is posited as eternal, “there is no such thing as Woman.” You will notice that the transcendent phallus has miraculously escaped the essentialist trap that afflicts mere Woman—afflicted even when non-existent—and in fact Jacques Derrida noticed that too, and accused Lacan of phallocentrism.

Yet Derrida had his own way of problematizing essentialism. His claim, widely disseminated by feminist Derrideans such as Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, was that Woman has always been the subordinated term within a binary opposition. In this perspective, essentialism, by asserting an eternal gender difference, reinforces the binary opposition of man/woman, thus perpetuating (masculinist) Western metaphysics of failure to “acknowledge the play of difference in language,” as well as the multiple differences that play across endlessly diverse bodies. Derrida postulated that woman, who has always been outside the discourse, might be a source of resistance. But only if she avoids logocentrism, for the only way woman can subvert the structure is to assert total difference, to be, in Linda Alcoff’s précis, “that which cannot be pinned down or subjugated within a dichotomous hierarchy.”

The only possible feminism here is negative, again in Alcoff’s phrase “deconstructing everything and refusing to construct anything,” a position also taken by Julia Kristeva, who asserted in 1981: “a woman cannot be; it is something which does not even belong in the order of being.” In this poststructuralist view, the category “woman” is a fiction, and feminism’s task is to attempt to dismantle the whole system of thought that has imposed the tyranny of the binaries.

Maybe so. Yet one can’t help noticing that the Derridean exhortation to women to slip out of the nets of the binaries and never get caught cleverly keeps men in the boats with the nets, leaving women with no place to live, or even to be. For postmodern theory’s curious insistence
that, while as an essentialist category “Woman” does not exist, femininity as a social construction is not a stable reality either, leaves wide open the ontological question of what is real. And why should the category “Man” not come under similar microscopic scrutiny? But such questions were not raised, and meanwhile the term “Man” has continued to embrace, universally, the human race.

An influential counterpart to the French poststructuralists was British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, who in 1973 offered a theory of visual representation that postulated the unchanging supremacy of the “male gaze.” Mulvey was one of the first to articulate the powerful “subject” position held by male viewers of artistic images, and their domination and control of the female “objects” who are always depicted. Her theory shaped feminist art criticism, which by around 1980 had begun to identify feminist art focused on the female body with a wrongheaded belief in a “female essence residing somewhere in the body of woman,” a heresy refuted by the idea that gender traits were socially constructed. This position received support in the anthropological evidence against the biological innateness of gender difference.

In 1981, British art historians Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, took up where Mulvey left off. In a book on women artists, they advanced the idea that “femininity,” a male-constructed cultural topos that inferiorized women, should be avoided by women artists and art historians alike. Faulting in particular Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* for its dangerous dallying in the stereotypically feminine, Parker and Pollock challenged cultural definitions “of woman as body, as sexual, as nature . . . the antithesis of mind, culture and . . . power.” “What kind of work begins to rupture these ideologies?” they asked. In strict adherence to Lacan, they argued that

“women’s sense of self . . . is determined by the structures of the unconscious . . . language is symbolic of the patriarchal culture in which the phallus is its signifier of power. Both in fantasy and language, woman . . . is not present, except as the cipher of male dominance, . . . Therefore, within the present . . . patriarchal culture, there is no possibility of simply conjuring up and asserting a positive and alternative set of meanings for women. The work to be done is that of deconstruction.”

This strategy was pursued by deconstructive feminist artists of the 1980s. Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holtzer, for example, conspicuously avoided directly representing the female body in their text-based, photographically collaged images. Instead, the female object is repositioned as the speaking subject, the voice of the text, who challenges the male viewer, confronting him with his patriarchalism. In this way, she resists the male gaze by deconstructing, exposing, its mechanisms of control.

Feminist artists of the 1980s embraced other postmodern strategies, such as Brecht’s idea of “distanciation”: that the postmodern spectator should not experience an artwork naively, simply enjoying it aesthetically or accepting its message, but should instead be self-consciously aware of experiencing it as a text. This requires “resistance to pleasure.” First Laura Mulvey and then Griselda Pollock argued that because visual pleasure in art is inextricable from the dominant power of the male gaze, the feminist should refuse and resist visual pleasure. By the 1980s, the orthodox position for postmodern feminism rested on three incredibly negative tenets: (1) the notion of Woman is not real; woman exists only as a cipher of male dominance; (2) no possibility exists within a patriarchal social structure of a positive or empowered image of woman in art; and (3) the only possible move for women artists is to resist visual pleasure and expose the patriarchal system through deconstruction.

However, a decade before the widespread acceptance in America of the poststructuralist dictum that a “positive and alternative set of meanings for women” was not possible, the first generation of feminist artists had set forth exactly that. They presented these alternatives in forms that directly challenged, deconstructed, and undermined the authority and superiority of the male position. And their deconstructive implementations included some rather powerful tools, effective in their time—such as the construction of a positive female self-image, humor, and seductive visual pleasure. Norma Broude and I argue that the critique of “essentialism” that has been leveled at the feminist art of the 1970s is not only a-historical, but also theoretically incomplete, because it fails to take into account the cultural dynamic within which that so-called essentialism successfully operated.

**At the beginning of the 1970s, feminist artists in California conducted what was perhaps the most radical educational experiment of modern art. In 1970, a Chicago-born artist named Judy Gerowitz, who had replaced her patriarchal name with that of her native city, took a**
teaching position at Fresno State College and started an art program for women students only. Chicago believed that women could only make authentic art out of their own experience. She wanted to encourage young women art students to challenge the kind of art school training that encouraged females to study art, not to be the "serious" artists who made history.

Chicago then met Miriam Schapiro, a well-known artist from New York, and the two painters began to share ideas. It was Schapiro who brought Chicago's experimental project to the California Institute of the Arts, where her husband Paul Brach had recently become dean. Together, at Cal Arts, Chicago and Schapiro created the Feminist Art Program. In its first year, their highly unorthodox program drew twenty-two students. Along with artmaking, they practiced consciousness-raising. Sitting in a circle and telling their life stories, the students examined their personal histories in the larger perspective of the general oppression of women, directly applying the principle that was the unofficial slogan of the women's movement: "the personal is the political." Under the leadership of Chicago and Schapiro, the students were encouraged to question and abandon traditional sex roles, to challenge male hierarchies in art. Together, the teachers and students explored ways to create imagery to represent their insights.

In its first year, the program focused on a project that would prove profoundly influential for feminist art. Project Womanhouse, created by the twenty-two students under the direction of Schapiro and Chicago, examined the home as a female sphere, to consider how the domestic ideal functioned to shape and control young women. In opening up this topic for analysis, the students read and discussed the explosive new texts and ideas of the developing feminist movement: Very rapidly they gained a radical critical perspective. What would later be called "deconstruction" was in 1971 known as the "click" of consciousness that could instantly transform a passive female zombie into a radical feminist.

For Project Womanhouse the women acquired for temporary use an old Victorian house in Los Angeles that was slated for demolition. Literally, they remodelled it, redesigning it as the archetypal house, symbol of female definition and confinement. Each room or area of the house was assigned to one or more of the students to make over as they wished. The result was a room-by-room commentary on women's assigned and assumed domestic roles. At the center was the Bridal

Staircase, created by Kathy Huberland. Every little girl's dream is here both indulged and subtly satirized. The bride in all her regalia is clearly a mannequin, lifeless and impassive—portrayed "as an offering." Her train descends the stairs, its color changing from white to blue, and finally to gray at the bottom—a symbolic commentary on the life that is to come. This was a very early challenge to the myth of "happily ever after"—perhaps the first such challenge to be expressed in the visual arts.

Leah's Room was conceived as a performance piece by Karen LeCoq and Nancy Youdelman. Replicating the "suffocating oppression" of the room of Leah, the courtesan in a story by Colette, whose "beauty was her life," the artists created an environment of richly textured fabrics, veils, soft lighting, and the "pungent smell of magnolias." As in Colette's story, women's culturally obsessive need to preserve their beauty is represented by a woman who does battle with its inevitable loss. The performance consisted of a woman who incessantly applied and took off makeup. The artists wrote, "We wanted to deal with the way women are intimidated by the culture to constantly maintain their beauty and the feeling of desperation and helplessness once this beauty is lost."

The Womanhouse experiment was the first time that so clear an understanding of women's cultural intimidation had ever been expressed in visual art. Observe, by contrast, the nineteenth-century female painter Lilly Martin Spencer, who, in a work called We Both Must Fade, uncritically rehearses society's equation between female beauty and fading flowers. LeCoq and Youdelman do not overtly satirize this idea, but they do initiate the process of taking it apart by exposing and dramatizing the obsession. By opening up this subject for analysis in 1971, the Womanhouse artists paved the way for the theoretical tenet later articulated by Kristeva, Mulvey, Parker, and Pollock: that "femininity" is not natural and inherent, but is in fact socially imposed on women.

In a room of her own design, Judy Chicago aggressively challenged convention by imaging the subject of women's menstruation—probably for the first time in Western art since the Old Stone Age. The Menstruation Bathroom was the most shocking room of Womanhouse. At the center of a pristine white interior, visible through a sheet of gauze, was a white wastebasket overflowing with crimson red (i.e., dirty) Kotexes—thick fat, clumsy 1970s models. Now, how do you feel about seeing this image? Do you feel it is vulgar and shameful? Chicago wrote: "However we feel about our own menstruation is how we feel
about seeing its image in front of us.” Women hide their menstruation, describe it in negative words (“the curse”), internalizing the cross-cultural view that menstruating women are unclean and to be avoided. By openly displaying the stigmatized objects, Chicago inverts the prevailing value structure: women’s blood as an expression not of shame, but of power.

Breaking social taboos, Chicago also broke new ground in art. The Menstruation Bathroom asserted the priority of the real life of the female body over acculturated attitudes and language. Menstruation, after all, is not a social construct. But kotexes and tampons are, and for female viewers the room offered a kind of Rorschach test for exploring cultural attitudes about menstruation. Yet the Menstruation Bathroom’s most provocative challenge was to the patriarchal norm. Heretofore, it had been men who decided what aspects of women’s lives should be seen in art. By imaging menstrual blood, Chicago took possession of the female body as subject, claiming female sexuality as something about which women have a prior right to speak, using the female body not for men’s narrative but for women’s. **It was a deeply subversive act.**

In the kitchen created by Vicki Hodgetts, Robin Weltsch, and Wanda Westcoast, woman’s heavily mystified role as nurturor and provider was represented in comically literal terms. A warm light filters through vacu-formed plastic curtains—it is a kitsch kitchen. The overall color is pink, suggestive of flesh, skin, mother-nurture. Plastic fried eggs are mounted on the ceiling. As the eggs come down the walls, they sag and begin to resemble breasts, only to reassume the form of eggs when they reach the skillet. Here, the mother’s multiple procreative and nurturing roles come together—breastfeeder, chicken-that-lays-the-egg—that-must-be-cooked-daily. When the artists who made this room first started, they were stuck for images. Miriam Schapiro suggested a consciousness-raising session, to probe their feelings about kitchens. This led to talk about mothers. The students had mixed feelings, recalling the warmth of maternal care, but also struggles between mothers and daughters for psychological power, embodied in the giving and receiving of food.

Like Chicago’s Menstruation Bathroom, the Kitchen deals with aspects of female experience that are primal—not mediated by phallic power except to the extent that Daddy’s power shrinks Mama’s. But for girls growing up, mother-daughter relations are complex, bewildering, frightening, in ways to which fathers are often irrelevant. The force of this installation—and its difference from orthodox theory—is its engagement of women with women, and not with men.

In Chicago’s “Cock and Cunt” play performed at Womanhouse by Faith Wilding and Janice Lester, two characters named “He” and “She” sport giant cloth penis and vagina appendages, conspicuously attached to their natural bodies as foreign materials. When He tells She that “A cunt means you wash the dishes,” she looks at her appendage and says, “I don’t see where it says that on my cunt.” With the subversive power of humor, Chicago and the students ridiculed the reading of gender roles in human anatomy, and they mocked the social definitions of what belongs “naturally” to the sphere of the female. In that pre-theoretical moment, first generation feminists reexamined what “female” meant, not in an effort to limit it to a biological essence, but, rather, to test the culturally constructed definitions of the “feminine” that they knew.

**Womanhouse** was created in six weeks and opened to the public in February, 1972, for one month. It was then destroyed, as planned, by the city. But it was seen by thousands, and it created a tremendous stir in California. Women couldn’t stay away. **Womanhouse** was radical, exciting, the visual counterpart to what was happening socially across the country. Feminist art and feminist activism were jointly fueled by the political issues of the day. The Art Strike of 1970, for example, protested the US invasion of Cambodia, the Kent State killings, and racial violence in the South. This led directly to the creation of organizations such as Women Artists in Revolution, or WSABAL (Women, Students, and Artists for Black Liberation), groups that worked to transform the sexist and racist art worlds through pressure on institutions such as the Whitney Museum in New York.

As the national feminist movement got underway, actions, conferences, performances and debate transformed art professional organizations. Much of feminist art was generated in the new climate of protest and change. For example, performance art developed in the 1970s as a new artistic medium and was used by early feminist artists to explore gender and identity. Eleanor Antin, casting herself as a King, or alternatively, as a Ballerina, posed an early critique of the fixed categories of gender identity. And Suzanne Lacy carried performance to a consummate level of political expression. A public media event staged in Los Angeles in 1977 by Lacy and four other women, **Three Weeks in May**, dramatized the frequency of sexual violence against women. In
another performance, In Mourning and in Rage, Lacy and Leslie Labowitz protested the sensationalized media coverage of a serial killer who was still at large. This is art in the service of social action, protesting, not accepting, the culturally essentialist mistreatment of women.

Perhaps most central to the feminist enterprise of the 1970s was what art historian Lisa Tickner has called “the decolonizing of the female body.”16 In a performance of 1975 called Interior Scroll, artist Carolee Schneeman appeared naked on the stage and drew a long scroll from within her vagina, unrolling it to read a text to the audience. Dramatically confronting and defying the male gaze, Schneeman transforms the female body from passive object to speaking agent. She described this work as “giving our bodies back to ourselves,”17 in other words, denying through disruption the conventions that have shaped the female nude in history, rejecting its essentialized position, in favor of female agency expressed through the body.

Feminist artists also deconstructed the male body. Paintings by Judith Bernstein represented the male body as a large, hairy screw, a negative cultural signifier that defined the phallus as a sign of power long before Lacan’s theories were known in the United States. Art historian Linda Nochlin examined the binary hierarchies of male and female, and the impossibility of universality through role exchange, in a now-famous photograph of a naked male model holding a tray of bananas at knee-level, an image constructed for a conference paper in 1971 that became a classic article on the female as sex object.18 Seventies art was full of iconoclastic humor, attacking time-honored gender conventions irreverently and mirthfully. At the age of eighty, Alice Neel painted a nude self-portrait, breaking the taboo that keeps older women under wraps, and exploding the masculinist myth that the nude female body is a transcendent, value-neutral category.

And then there was the “Pattern and Decoration” movement, as opposite as anything could be to the notion of “resisting visual pleasure.” The so-called “P & D Artists”—among them Miriam Schapiro, Joyce Kozloff, Valerie Jaudon, Kim MacConnel, and Robert Kushner—luxuriated in visual pleasure, displacing the concept from its historical tie with fixation upon the female body, and relocating it to a realm that had traditionally pleased women. Schapiro led the way in discovering and affirming the beauty of women’s traditional, non-high art forms—embroidery and quilts, for example—and incorporating those sensibilities in her own fabric collages. Now, in the early 1970s, to celebrate merely decorative patterns and fabrics, especially for an artist like Schapiro, who was trained in modernist formalism, was a particularly transgressive, and therefore liberating, act. Schapiro created richly decorative all-over patterns contained within shapes traditionally associated with woman’s sphere, and thus traditionally devalued as sentimental and trivial, such as the fan, the heart, and the house. Such art boldly challenged a canonical tenet of modernism: that ornament and decoration, explicitly gendered as female, were inferior to formal abstraction, which was cast as a masculine idiom.

Although there were men as well as women in the “P & D” movement of the 1980s, it was feminism that created its theoretical basis. This was perhaps the first time in history that women led a mainstream movement. Joyce Kozloff has been a leader in taking these ideas into the creation of art for public spaces, such as her vestibule of the Amtrak Station in Wilmington, Delaware, spaces she has sought to humanize with the infusion of a sensibility of pleasure and visual delight.

To many feminist artists of the 1970s, a common thread of “women’s sensibility” seemed to run through the great diversity of their art forms. However, this notion began to backfire in the 1980s, when critics singled out feminist art’s fledgling experiments and proclaimed them to be “essentialist.” It was a criticism that emerged, in different language, from within the feminist movement at the very beginning. Writing in 1972, artist Patricia Mainardi disclaimed the notion of a “feminine sensibility” in art, because it implicitly restricted women’s art, leaving men the wider range of universal expression. Mainardi spoke of a “right wing of the women artists’ movement” that was “codifying a so-called ‘female aesthetic.’”19 Around the same time, art writer Cindy Nemser reported that Judy Chicago was putting forth a theory of “Cunt Art” (in Nemser’s description), “an intrinsic female imagery created out of round, pulsating, “womb-like” forms.”20 Nemser denounced this theory, as others would do, citing the variety among contemporary women artists and cautioning against a too narrowly defined aesthetic for women’s art.

The theory under attack was formulated by Chicago and Schapiro in an article they co-authored in 1972. “What does it feel like to be a woman?” they asked. “To be formed around a central core and have a secret place which can be entered and which is also a passageway from which life emerges? What kind of imagery does this state of feeling engender?”21 Schapiro and Chicago went on to point to some of the
"many women artists [who] have defined a central orifice whose formal organization is often a metaphor for a woman's body": Georgia O'Keeffe, whose "haunting mysterious passage through the black portal of an iris" was "the first recognized step into the darkness of female identity"; and Lee Bontecou, whose images of vaginal central cavities present female identity as both active and passive. They spoke of Schapiro's own "centralized hollows," and Chicago's "central core images."

What the critics saw as limiting women to their biological identity, Schapiro and Chicago saw as a means of liberating women from negativizing attitudes about the female body. They cautioned, in fact, that the "visual symbology" they described should not be seen simplistically as "vaginal or womb art," but rather as the framework for an imagery that would reverse the loathing and devaluation of female anatomy in patriarchal culture. The woman artist could, they said, take "that very mark of her otherness and [assert] it as the hallmark of her iconography." It was in this spirit that Schapiro and Chicago embraced the derogatory term "cunt," traditionally used by men to alienate women from their own sexuality. Their goal was to reclaim a negative female descriptor and transform it into a celebratory term.

In seeking to instill a positive view of femaleness through the frank celebration of the female body and its biological powers, Chicago and Schapiro anticipated the approaches of certain feminist writers of the period who also came to be denounced as essentialist, especially Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich. Daly claimed that "female energy is essentially biophilic," while Rich noted what Chicago and Schapiro had earlier observed: "Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny."

In part, the emphasis on sexuality in early feminist art probably resulted from the severe repression of women's sexuality in the 1950s and 1960s, when women's bodies were defined exclusively by and for men. Young women were taught to value their bodies only as a trophy to give or withhold in response to male desire, and female sexual pleasure was framed and mediated by constructs of "good girl vs. bad girl," chastity vs. shame. Not surprisingly, early feminist artists took their first rebellious step by challenging the most repressive category—the sexual. Openly celebrating the female body from an experiential point of view, they renounced socially constructed definitions of it, and they
chose female sexual organs as *reclaimed* forms—metaphoric emblems of women's independent power and freedom from male dominance.

In their theory of "cunt imagery," Schapiro and Chicago had suggested that women's art might have universally recurrent characteristics, such as centralized or open forms. When this thesis was taken up by feminist critic Lucy Lippard in 1973, critical reaction escalated, and charges of what would later be called essentialism began to be heard everywhere, especially from women artists. In fact, Lippard herself entertained the hypothesis that women artists have particular formal tendencies only in a tentative and exploratory way, noting that she had observed in recent women's art certain recurrent preoccupations, such as "a uniform density, or overall texture... the preponderance of circular forms and central focus... a new fondness for the pinks and pastels. . ." 23

But by 1973, what Lippard had observed in women's studios could no longer be regarded as a pure product of the female unconscious unmediated by feminist theory. The choice of pinks and pastels, fruit and vaginal imagery, eggs and breasts, on the part of women artists connected to each other through the women's movement was a *political* act, a defiance of conventions that had made it death for earlier women artists to associate themselves with stereotypically and pejoratively deemed "feminine" images. Feminine iconography was now reclaimed by politicized women artists for the cause of feminism. And thus, paradoxically, while the raging debate within feminism in the early 1970s was about whether or not women's art could be defined in absolute and universal terms, emerging feminist consciousness in an ever-broadening spectrum of artists was making it impossible to identify a "pure" woman artist who could be said to have a female essence untouched by feminist ideas. Increasingly, women's art was distinguished both by the use of female-identified forms in a self-conscious way and by resistance to the idea that women should use such forms.

In retrospect, it seems clear that the 1970s debate about women's art was consistently misdirected to the question of "whether" rather than "how" women used certain forms. For example, critics of essentialist theory correctly pointed out that both men and women have used biomorphic or centralized imagery—Barbara Hepworth but also Henry Moore, Georgia O'Keefe but also Arthur Dove. Indeed, the centralized-core form has assumed an archetypal status in art, Jungian or otherwise, that has recurred in Neolithic stone circles, medieval manu-

scripts, Gothic rose windows, and Renaissance central-plan churches. This recurrent archetypal structure seems to be deeply embedded in the human psyche. However, each age provides a different theoretical justification for its use: it was theology for Gothic builders, psychology for Freudian Surrealists, and feminism for Chicago and Schapiro. Similarly, although both male and female artists in the 1960s and 1970s used central form imagery, the question to be posed is not whether the form language is essentially female or male, but rather, what is *signified* through that form language when used by women or men. In 1974, Judy Chicago observed, "I'd say the difference between [my] *Pasadena Lifesavers* and a [Kenneth] Noland target is the fact that there is a body identification between me and those forms, and not between Noland and the target. I really think that differentiates women's art from men's." 24 Whether or not we agree with Chicago that women's art in general, like her own, proceeds from body identification, we can say that under the influence of feminist theory in the 1970s, many women were drawn to use centralized imagery with the understanding that it is about the body, a theoretical position not taken by men as a group. And it was, in fact, politically advantageous for women in the 1970s to identify themselves as a group in order to solidify their opposition to sex discrimination.

Today, the founders of feminist art do not renounce or deny their characterization as essentialist, and it is perhaps more useful to further articulate the term than to resist it. In the introduction to our new book, Norma Broude and I suggest that we would do well to replace the term "biological essentialism" (which no known feminist has ever championed) with two other terms—*cultural essentialism* and *political essentialism*—which represent two developmental stages. Cultural essentialism, roughly equivalent to what is today called socially constructed femininity, is society's gender-stereotyped conditioning of women's self-image and experience. It is very difficult for women to escape this conditioning, for we are all contaminated by past meaning. Moreover, if femininity is a social construction, then women have had a role in constructing it, simply by our gradual, ever-self-implicating acceptance and perpetuation of its terms.

How can women ever escape from cultural essentialism? The first step, according to early feminists, was to identify its manifestations. The young artists at Womanhouse began by representing the icons of their own oppression—lingerie, dollhouses, women's clothing, makeup...
—familiar things that had helped to shape their identities. Mimicking the societally ordained forms of femininity was the first step of separation, of gaining critical distance from that which they mimicked. As Irigaray would later observe, when women lack a language of their own, mimicry is the only available form of critiquing patriarchal values, of exposing “by an effect of playful repetition” what had previously been hidden.

Cultural essentialism, although not then so named, was recognized in the early 1970s as the problem for which the solution was political essentialism: the revolutionary celebration of culturally essentialist forms. Schapiro and Chicago’s claim that women’s art might have common characteristics must be understood as, above all, a deeply political claim. Its purpose was not to establish a Procrustean identity for women’s art but, rather, to help balance gender values in society, by asserting the inherent validity of all things in women’s sphere—from vaginas to lipstick—as fit subject matter for art. Through art made by women, which would necessarily present such things differently from men, feminist artists believed they could, in Schapiro’s words, “redress the trivialization of women’s experience.”

Women’s experience was now to be equal in value to men’s experience. It was, you might say, the direct challenge to hierarchized binaries that Derrida recommended.

Equally political in intent, though misread as culturally essentialist, was the desire of many feminist artists to connect with a historical female ancestry: Chicago with the historical guests at the Dinner Party, Miriam Schapiro with nineteenth-century artist Mary Cassatt, and May Stevens with seventeenth-century painter Artemisia Gentileschi. Anti-essentialist critics argued that to glorify the “female” categories of art production was to “ghettoize” women’s art, perpetuating female stereotype. However, the modern feminist artists were not arguing that “female” categories should be perpetuated, but rather that women’s cultural contributions deserve attention. To pay homage to female ancestors was also to make political use of them in order to engage the dominant male culture dialectically, for, in reviving the art and rituals of their foremothers, feminist artists challenged the value system that had subordinated them. The feminist articulation of a body-based female aesthetic gained political credibility and power when coupled with a self-conscious definition and revival of a female tradition in art.

And so, while the idea of a categoric women’s art may be philosophically dubious, it was a valuable creative principle for the Feminist Art movement, which drew in its early stages upon a belief in the unitary reality of the category “female” as its source of artistic inspiration. The significance of the category “female” for early feminists was not biological but political, because feminism’s power, it was then believed, was the power of women as a group. In this sense, the scientific or philosophical accuracy of the essentialist belief is beside the point, since right or wrong, it was an enabling myth. Like other essentialist ideas in history (e.g., that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, or that utopian political states will bring peace and justice to Earth), feminist essentialism opened the way to political change in society, and a door of creativity and discovery in art.

Perhaps the most valid internal feminist critique of first-generation essentialism came from black, Chicana, lesbian, and third-world feminist thinkers. It is this critique that has most recently fragmented the movement, though many believe that it may offer a way out of our dilemmas of self-definition. This critique was not focused upon the body, but upon what has been called a “false universality.” For the universal category “Woman,” as Naomi Schor has put it, denies by its “majestic singularity” the “very real lived differences—sexual, ethnic, racial, national, cultural, economic, generational—that divide women from each other and from themselves.” Feminist anti-essentialism from this quarter thus wanted to replace the abstract and singular Woman, in opposition to Man, with a more articulated construct that would embrace the multiple differentiations among women.

One of the most impassioned critics of the false universality claimed by feminist theorists was bell hooks. Writing in 1984, hooks called Betty Friedan to task for being concerned only with college-educated white women. She charged that white women “who dominate feminist discourse, . . . make and articulate feminist theory” don’t recognize their own privileged “political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state,” and consequently, don’t “understand fully the inter-relatedness of sex, race, and class oppression.” Hooks spoke for many black women in claiming that “race and class differences take precedence over the common experience women share—differences which are rarely transcended.”

It is instructive to compare this position that was beginning to typify the 1980s with the more idealist and ecumenical vision shared by black and white feminist leaders of the 1970s. Around 1970, Faith Ringgold
was a prime mover in the founding of both feminist and black art movements, and she also spearheaded the antiwar movement in art. She was quick to remind white feminists that racial discrimination was as oppressive as gender bias. Yet race and gender were, for Ringgold, complementary not oppositional categories, and her art of the 1970s, such as her Family of Woman series, frequently connected the oppression of blacks and the oppression of women, while affirming a commitment to both her female and black heritage. Los Angeles black artist Betye Saar also came to women’s rights through civil rights. Focusing her through the series of 1972, Saar recast the essentialized image of the female black—as mammy and cook—converting her, through the addition of the black power salute and a rifle as handy as a broom, into an icon for a new and militant feminism for African Americans.

A similar path can be seen in the work of Chicana and Latina artists. In San Francisco in 1969, Yolanda Lopez joined in protesting the political persecution of seven young Latinos, Los Siete, who were accused of killing a policeman. She made a poster—an American flag whose stripes confine the seven boys—that was widely reproduced and distributed. Lopez began to recognize, as had Ringgold and others, that women’s oppression was a large part of racism and imperialism. Her increasing involvement in feminism led in 1978 to her Guadalupe triptych, in which a feminist Virgin of Guadalupe, an imaginary self-portrait, does battle with those multiple oppressions. Lopez is here characteristically seventies in that hers is a unitary image, in which issues of race and ethnicity are subsumed under the larger banner of feminism.

By the mid-1980s, however, the explosion of multiple differences—race, economic, cultural—resulted, as Teresa de Lauretis has put it, in “a shift from the earlier view of woman defined purely . . . in relation to man, to the more difficult and complex notion that the female subject is a site of differences . . . that are not only sexual or only racial, economic, or (sub)cultural, but all of these together, and often at odds with one another.” Cherrie Moraga has attempted to explain “what looks like betrayal between women on the basis of race,” in the behavior of Chicana women who “turn our backs on each other either to gain male approval or to avoid being sexually stigmatized” by men. Moraga pointed out that Chicanas’ negative self-perceptions were rooted in Mexican history and in “anglo imperialism.” Invoking the memory of the mythic Malinche, who fucked the white man, betraying her race, and bastardizing the indigenous culture, Moraga argued that this mythic betrayal, and the idea of the “inherent unreliability of women,” is carved into Mexican/Chicano collective psychology, buttressing its cultural practice of putting the male first and sanctifying [the] institution of the family. As a lesbian, Moraga takes a detached view of this, noting that lesbianism “challenges the very foundations of familia.” Yet lesbians are not free of these cultural attitudes, for they are seen by Chicano men as betraying the race by choosing a sexuality that excludes them. Moraga’s sophisticated, problematized recognition of the “simultaneity of oppressions” experienced by women of color leads her to conclude that “universalist conceptions of female . . . experiences and attributes are not plausible in the context of such a complex network of relations, and without an ability to universalize, the essentialist argument is difficult if not impossible to make.”

Meanwhile, the lesbian perspective has problematized in a different way the possibility of a female universal. Monique Wittig laid down a gauntlet in her assertion that “lesbians are not women.” Lesbians are not women, that is, for if the category “woman” is marked by the relation of dependency of its inhabitants upon men, then lesbians are a distinct and different category, whose very existence erodes any possibility that “woman” is a natural and in any way essentialist category. Now, at this point, the way was clear for an opening up of what Wittig called “the straight mind,” and for a redefinition of “woman” which might include both heterosexual and lesbian women, leaving men to figure out for themselves where they stood in relation to that. However, that is not where Wittig went from here, and not how other feminist theorists have addressed her argument. Instead, as Diana Fuss pointed out, Wittig considers lesbianism to be a stable, transcendent category, outside history (“a transcendentental signifier, . . . [like] the Lacanian phalus,” as Fuss put it). However, both Wittig and de Lauretis have effectively argued that the lesbian challenge to “the straight mind” is to call into question the idea of “man” and “woman” as the transcendent binary construct.

This leads us to the 1990s position, which is the questioning of the very notion of stable sexual identity. Judith Butler has examined the challenges presented to the dominant heterosexual model by gay and
lesbian dress and practice, cross-dressing, and transsexuality. Exploring
the ways that these practices and their replication in art forms have
subverted through parody what she called “heterosexual hegemony”—
an analysis that replicates Irigaray’s female/male dynamic—Butler went
on to consider the effectiveness of miming or parody actually to subvert
anything: “I . . . think for a copy to be subversive of heterosexual
hegemony, it has to both mime and displace its conventions. And not
all miming is displacing.”34 Butler asks us to consider instances of
miming that actually “reinvest the gender ideals . . . reidealize” them.

Some recent art by women offers instances to consider. Many femi-
nists today are disturbed by certain forms of so-called feminist art of
the 1980s and 1990s that seem to perpetuate masculinist constructs of
the female body. The photographic images of Cindy Sherman, for
example, are often said to ironize the theme of woman as sex object
and victim. By presenting her own image in photographs, posed vari-
ously as a film star, a housewife, or a corpse, Sherman, in good
postmodern fashion, presented the problematized “Woman” of unstable
identity. But, as Mira Schor argues in our book, what Sherman claimed
to be critiques of woman as victim or bimbo were indistinguishable
from direct expressions of that vision of woman. Viewers who enjoyed
seeing victimized women could enjoy these images. As Schor put it,
Sherman’s images were successful, “not because they threatened
phallocracy but because they reiterated and confirmed it.”35 Thus the
dangers of masquerade and mimicry, when artistic expression gets stuck
at that level.

But let us grant that each generation constructs a theory of gender
that is useful for its psychopolitical needs. Feminists of the early 1970s
needed a clear-cut “us vs. them” construct to unify and galvanize
women against the male establishment they had only just realized was
pitted against them. Women of the 1980s needed to resist what they
felt to be the restrictive and limiting dimensions of their feminist
legacy. In a sense, it is an extension of the feminist agenda to say that
you’re not constricted by biology, you can be anything you wish.

Yet the self-liberationist impulse was checked by a stronger urge to
stop and analyze, after a period of intense social change, to contemplate
one’s victimhood and assign blame. Masculinism was no longer the
enemy, for, shamed by feminism, men no longer openly argued that
woman’s biology was her nature and her destiny. The scapegoat for this
position became—“essentialist” women. And then, the anti-essentialist
position as well as the debate itself found tacit approval and support
in the larger culture, and so it joined forces with the so-called “back-
lash” of the 1980s, which was effectively a backlash against the
politically activist first generation of feminism. Where has this left us?
At a dangerous point for feminism, I think. Let me explain by posing
a few questions.

First, what is at stake in the desire to refute that “Woman” exists and
the insistence that nothing about the female body can be “natural”?
Answer: female agency. For women separated from their bodies cannot
act upon the world. The Cartesian dichotomy between body and mind
has been replayed on the corpse of “woman,” with the anti-essentialists
now taking men’s place in insisting upon the social construction of all
known aspects of female identity, and in rejecting early feminism’s
claim of agency and power for the female self. This crippling definition,
which effectively denies the possibility of the wholeness of a woman’s
being, reinforces the cultural repression of women and, not incidentally,
discourages social action.

It’s also useful to ask, as Mira Schor does, whose interests are served
by a schism among women? Indeed, who benefits from the theoretical
preoccupation with difference? The multiple political antagonisms of
multiple Others mean, from the viewpoint of each group, no progress
in the larger war. And thus a collective denial that there is a larger war,
when the vectors of sex, gender, race, and class are vectors with equal
claims, forever intersecting and fragmenting each others’ beams, each
preventing the other from making a claim for dominant importance.
Ultimately, the clash of cultural Others supports the status quo, which
is the still-privileged position of the white male.

Finally, I would ask, what psychopolitical need is being served by
this endless assault on the essentialists-that-never-were? Let us
acknowledge openly what many writers are beginning to point out:
“Essentialism” is the invention of “anti-essentialists,” who have needed
an Other to define their own position. It is analogous to the term
“witches,” a negativized construct most real to—and in fact created
by—the witch-hunting clergy of the Renaissance church. Diana Fuss
has pointed out that anti-essentialism, or Constructionism, “really
operates as a more sophisticated form of essentialism,” since “it is
fundamentally dependent upon essentialism in order to do its work.”36
Naomi Schor adds that, in casting essentialism as an absolute, a mono-
lithic position, anti-essentialism is itself essentializing.37
As a historian, I would further argue that the critique of first-generation feminists as essentialist is fundamentally a-historical, because it fails to recognize the dynamic of liberationist movements. Such movements tend to begin with both a critical scrutiny of the group's identity traits and a provisional acceptance of some of those traits for the sake of offsetting their negative cultural valuation: "I am woman, hear me roar," "black is beautiful," "gay pride." The naïve, essentialist chants may embarrass us in retrospect, but they were the necessary first step toward the next stage, the discovery and definition of the ways that negative aspects of the group's identity had been socially constructed.

But the stage after that, I submit, is the realization that one is the sum of these contradictory definitions, or rather, one inherits and inhabits a specific and complex cultural identity, which every individual may also freely work to recreate. We are not boxed in by theory unless we choose to be. We can act against or within essentializing definitions, and our individual personal solutions inevitably contribute to the ongoing and ever-changing redefinition and recombining of the categories of gender, race, sex, and class.

Norma Broude and I have therefore argued for a historical view of the feminist enterprise, one that takes into account both changing social experience and the changing signification of individual artistic positions. For the past quarter century, a dynamic has existed between anti-essentialism and so-called essentialism that has in some ways been productive, through its politicization of the issue of women's nature. The essentialists used the construct of a universal female identity to consolidate anti-patriarchal power of women as a group, while the anti-essentialists offered the corrective that it is dangerous to define women by biology. But it is now time to move on, for we have dwelt too long in self-perpetuated negativity. The long-term goals of feminism would be well served by the allowance of a more progressive feminist self-imaging, which must begin with a truce among factions.

NOTES
13Parker and Pollock, Old Mistresses 132-33.
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25 Luce Irigaray, Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un (Paris: Minuit, 1977) 74.  
27 Naomi Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One” 42.  
29 bell hooks, Feminist Theory 4.  
33 Diana Fuss, Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference (New York: Routledge, 1989) 8; for her analysis of Wittig, see ch. 3: “Monique Wittig’s Anti-essentialist Materialism.”  
36 Diana Fuss, Essentially Speaking 4.  
37 Naomi Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One” 40-41.

POSTMODERN PASTICHE: A CRITICAL AESTHETIC

By Ingeborg Hoesterey

Aesthetic postmodernism has revived a genre of artistic expression that through the centuries was regarded as both elusive and notorious: the pastiche or pasticcio. Today highly engaging redefinitions of the concept can be found in a variety of artistic practices, in architecture and design, painting, sculpture/installation, in literature, and in performance types ranging from operatic to rock event as well as in supposedly trivial discourses such as fashion.

To be sure, aesthetic “postmodernism” can hardly be regarded as a unified discourse formation. By pointing to pastiche styles as a conspicuous presence in current artistic practices, we may, however, regard this contemporary stylistic evolution as constituting one of the few markers of aesthetic postmodernism shared by various interpretive communities that participate in the making of cultural consciousness.

Although “pastiche” has been a buzzword for many discussions on the postmodern arts in the last decade, nothing has been written about it from a genre-historical and genre-theoretical point of view. Most users of the term are at least vaguely familiar with the change in cultural status “pastiche” has undergone, namely from that of a rather lowly commodity to one of humanistic relevance. To situate the current use of the genre mineur in artistic production, it is necessary to briefly trace its history of changing valorization.

Historical survey

The term “pastiche” first occurs at the end of the seventeenth century in French Beaux Arts discourse, a borrowing from the Italian “pasticcio.” Literally, “pasticcio” denoted a pâté of various ingredients—a hodgepodge of meat, vegetables, eggs, and a host of other variable additions. Figuratively, “pasticcio” assumed the status of a genre of painting of the lowest order in Italian art circles in the wake of the Renaissance and denoted the product of a “pittore ecletto che dipinge con tecniche e stili diversi,” of an eclectic painter who drew upon diverse techniques and styles. A pasticcio was highly imitative painting that synthesized—“stirred together”—the styles of major artists, apparently often