

Re-writing His Story: Feminist Art Practices Since the 1970s

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In the 1970s there was a questioning of the discipline of Art History. Art History defines who and what an artist is. Historically, this has relied on the myth of artistic genius - a free, individual creative spirit. The creativity of this 'genius' is recorded almost exclusively in a biographical or autobiographical mode in monographs, catalogues raisonné and retrospective exhibitions. Historically, this definition has been gender specific, exclusively masculine. The language of Art History uses terms such as 'masterpiece' and 'old master painting' - devised by men to apply to men. With the dominance of Modernism being called into question, Enlightenment notions of progress, the independent subject, truth and the external world were dethroned. It was no longer possible to imagine that history takes a single course, or that the viewer is not an essential component of any text, or that our sense of self is not deeply implicated in relationships of power and authority. Possible alternatives to Modernism began to be sought and the Women's Liberation movement of the late 1960s was to provide a model for some.

In 1971, the Art historian and pioneer of feminist art theory Linda Nochlin asked, "Why have there been no great women artists?" In her groundbreaking essay, she refuted the statement: "There are no great women artists because women are incapable of greatness." Nochlin suggested that the reason why there were no women artists in the mould of Michelangelo or Manet, was because of male-dominated educational and institutional structures that suppressed women's talents. Historical conditions made being an artist exceedingly difficult for most women. During the Renaissance, women were excluded from artists' workshops and from conventional forms of training.

Art historians Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock identified that the great majority of women artists in the 16th and 17th-centuries came from families of painters in which the absence of sons or the availability of materials and free teaching gave daughters an entry to an artistic career that would otherwise have been far less accessible to them. Anglica Kauffmann, trained by her father, was one of two female founding members (with Mary Moser) of the Royal Academy in 1772 - almost unbelievably, the only women admitted to this institution until 1922. It is clear that women have always produced art. It had simply been overlooked, unrecognised or misattributed to male artists. Nochlin called on historians and artists, "... to dig up examples of worthy or insufficiently appreciated women artists throughout history;...to posit a different kind of 'greatness' for women's art than that for men's...[and] to create a world in which equal achievement will be not only made possible but actively encouraged by social institutions."

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Feminist artists on the West Coast of America were among the first to take up the challenge. Judy Chicago found that her experiences of art school bore no relation to her actual experience of life. During her training at the University of California, she studied art history, but found the male teachers didn't teach any female painters. The studio classes were overly competitive and personal expression or sharing amongst class members was not encouraged. Chicago went on to organise the first feminist art course at Fresno State College in 1970, which had studios restricted to women only. She encouraged her students to share and create works related to their own experiences of being women in a patriarchal society. She later moved the art course to California Institute of the Arts and a collaborative exhibition arising out of this programme was *Womanhouse* (1972). The group rented an abandoned Hollywood mansion and altered its interior through décor, creating installations including a 'menstruation bathroom' and a 'bridal staircase'. A performance by Sandra Orgel, *Ironing*, consisted of the artist simply ironing for five hours in front of the audience. *Womanhouse* was opened to the public for one month only, yet was viewed by nearly ten thousand people (having been advertised by word of mouth). It was important in its assertion that women's domestic lives and concerns had validity as artistic subject matter.

How could women begin to create a female art? How to describe an experience that is fundamentally different? Several artists during the 1970s used the imagery of the body in their work, as a site of difference. Sylvia Sleigh painted male nudes in the traditional pose reserved for the female (as model and muse). She implied that women could be consumers of visual imagery, just as men had been throughout history.

The Swedish-born, Bristol based Monica Sjöö drew on Pre-Columbian representations of female divinities in her painting *God Giving Birth*. Inspired by the home birth of her second son, an event which she describes as her first mystical experience of the power of the Great Mother, it depicts a woman of indeterminate race giving birth to the world, whilst asserting that God is a woman. Banned from an arts festival in St Ives a few years previously, this painting became an icon of feminist art when it was exhibited at *Exhibition on Womanpower: Women's Art*, at Swiss Cottage library in 1973. It aroused intense controversy, accusations of sacrilege, complaints of blasphemy and obscenity and a visit from the porn squad, but ultimately no prosecution. By taking place in a library, the show attracted perhaps a broader public than it might have in a gallery.

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Monica Sjöö, God Giving Birth, 1969, oil on hardboard (collection of Museum Skelleftea, Sweden, reproduced courtesy of the artist)

The largest, most ambitious work of feminist art during this time was Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1974) a celebration of sexual difference and affirmation of woman's otherness (to men). *The Dinner Party* was both a reclamation of and a tribute to women's historical, political and cultural contributions. A triangular table of 48 feet on each side denied a hierarchical seating arrangement; its 39 place settings commemorated women from all periods and walks of life - early goddesses to Eleanor of Aquitaine, Mary Wollstonecraft to Georgia O'Keeffe. An additional 999 names of significant women in history covered the floor under the table. Techniques of ceramic painting, tapestry, needlework - all traditionally associated with women's hobbies or pastimes and historically barred from consideration as fine art, were employed by teams of workers to create each place setting. The use of vaginal imagery (seen in the plates) was a way to combat the patriarchal obsession with phallic forms throughout history and a celebration of something recognisably and distinctively female. Ultimately, however, *The Dinner Party* probably raised more questions than it answered. Should women adopt the men's cult of individual

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heroes? Was it demeaning or courageously subversive that Virginia Woolf be represented with vaginal imagery? Its problematic status is indicated by the fact that the work, having travelled for nearly a decade, was put into storage until 2002, when it finally acquired a permanent home at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, 25 years after its creation.

Also in the 1970s, John Berger's BBC series and book *Ways of Seeing*, postulated that femininity is formed in part from the reflected or mirror images against which women are taught to measure themselves. The fact that woman must continually watch herself being looked at has implications for visual art.

Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80), a series of sixty-nine photographs, draw on stereotypes found in television, films and the press - which supplies a constant stream of images of how we are now and the ways in which we might appear, might dress and behave. They portray the artist in a series of roles defined within specific but unknown narratives, which we can only guess at.

Cornelia Parker's exhibition, *The Maybe* (1995) at the Serpentine Gallery consisted of actress Tilda Swinton sleeping in a glass case, eight hours a day for seven days. Imprisoned in and protected by her glass 'coffin', the sleeping figure existed as an object to be gazed upon as well as the subject of her own narrative. Also during the 1990s, Jo Spence set out to investigate how photography and the media operated, particularly in the sphere of women's identity. Her series of photographs document her own battle with cancer and feelings of powerlessness at the hands of the medical establishment - they were also a means of reclaiming her body and rediscovering her sense of self.

The YBAs (young British artists) of the 1990s were largely male dominated, but Tracey Emin has remained one of the most prominent of the handful of Brit-art gals. Emin presents us with her raw and unedited personal history and life experiences in *Everyone I have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* (1995), a tent appliquéd with the names of everyone she has shared a bed with. This airing of private and personal details subverts traditional notions of acceptable feminine behaviour. In her highly self-confessional style, Emin manages to tell us something about what it was to be a young woman growing up in the latter half of the 20th-century.

Women and artists of colour are greatly under-represented in the artworld even though they constitute a great proportion of working artists. For example, over 50% of graduates from art schools in America are female, but somewhere along the line they disappear. The Guerrilla Girls are an American group of women artists, writers, performers and filmmakers, established in 1985, who remain anonymous by wearing gorilla masks. They have declared themselves feminist counterparts to the mostly male tradition of anonymous 'do-gooders' like Robin Hood, Batman, and the Lone Ranger. Calling themselves "the conscience of the art world", they use humour to convey information, provoke discussion and fight discrimination. In 17 years, they have produced over 80 posters, printed projects and actions that expose sexism and racism in politics, the art world and culture at large. Of the work reproduced here,

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The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist, they say, "This is our all-time favorite, which we did to encourage female artists to look on the sunny side. Women all over the world, not just artists, identified with it. One sent us \$1,000 to run it as an ad in *Artforum*, a top U.S. art magazine."

Art historian Alicia Foster recently pointed out that currently under 11% of artists in the Tate collection are women, so it looks like there is some way to go yet.

Guerrilla Girls poster, 1988 (courtesy of www.guerrillagirls.com)

THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING A WOMAN ARTIST:

Working without the pressure of success.
Not having to be in shows with men.
Having an escape from the art world in your 4 free-lance jobs.
Knowing your career might pick up after you're eighty.
Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be labeled feminine.
Not being stuck in a tenured teaching position.
Seeing your ideas live on in the work of others.
Having the opportunity to choose between career and motherhood.
Not having to choke on those big cigars or paint in Italian suits.
Having more time to work when your mate dumps you for someone younger.
Being included in revised versions of art history.
Not having to undergo the embarrassment of being called a genius.
Getting your picture in the art magazines wearing a gorilla suit.

A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE FROM **GUERRILLA GIRLS** CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD
532 LOGUARDIA PLACE, #237, NY, NY 10012
www.guerrillagirls.com

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