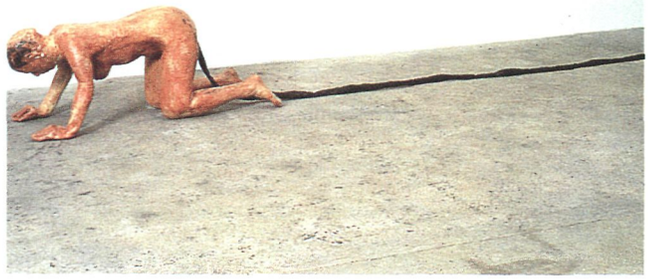


Kiki Smith, *Tale*, 1992.

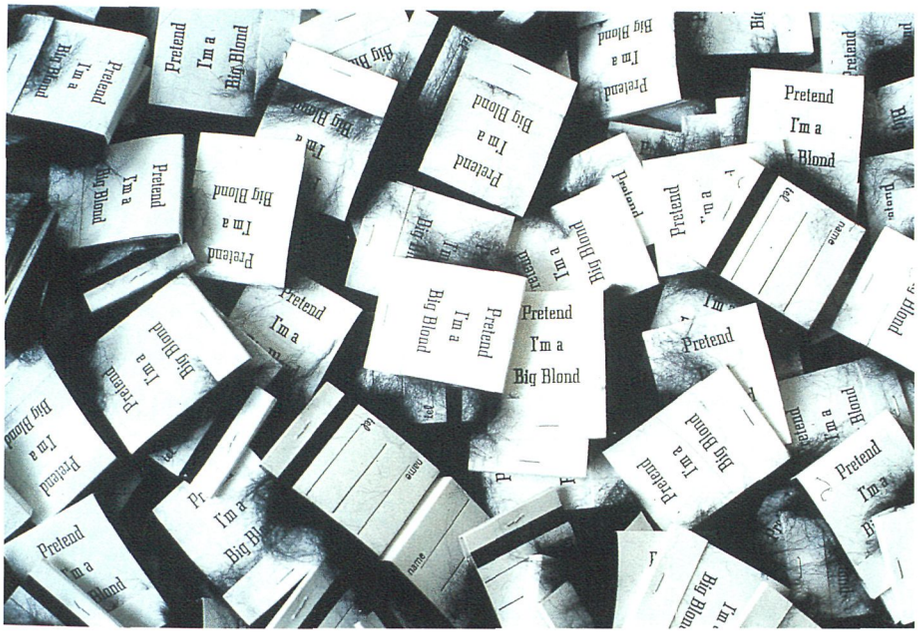
If it's just a symbol then hell with it: FEMINIST POLITICS AND ART

BY LAURA COTTINGHAM

Even an artist as committed to bourgeois beauty as Matisse admitted that it is impossible that there could be any cultural expression which doesn't exist, however uneasily or even unwillingly, within the political and ethical parameters of its time, that "whether we want to or not, we belong to our time and we share in its opinions, its feelings, even its delusions" [1]. But today, post-modernity, the assumption behind the "we" of statements such as Matisse's has been revealed and destroyed: Whose culture is it anyway? The break-down of a sense of a universally shared reality which is the primary crisis presented by the idea of postmodernism, is an inevitable stage in the development of a pluralistic and supposedly democratic society (such as the United States). The most fundamental challenges to the Euro-derivative tradition that informs American society are (still) being led by the ongoing legacies of the post-war movements for social change that emerged during the '60s: Black Power, Women's Liberation, and Gay Rights. Twenty years after their explosive origins in riots and street protests, the demands for social re-organization demanded by these three movements are still fighting their way into the social fabric through a variety of means, including education, electoral politics, legal reform, and, even, fine art.

The particular relationship between feminism and art is especially curious, because the national awakening of Women's Liberation that took place in the United States around 1970 ignited, almost immediately, a concomitant art movement. Women artists rushed in to make art "for their movement" as rapidly as Malevich and the other Russian artists who supported the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 had hurried in to do the same for theirs. The anti-patriarchal aims of the Feminist Art Movement that occurred in the U.S. during the '70s, like the anti-bourgeois aims of the Supremacists and the Constructivists in Soviet pre-Stalin art, were inspired by an altered consciousness that encouraged a sense of visionary utopianism. Significantly, the Feminist Art Movement, unlike the Soviet program, was never supported either ideologically or financially by the state. But because of the partial enfranchisement of some adherents, many of whom were white, educated and middle-class, feminists in the U.S. during the '70s established an extensive, though ultimately unstable, alternative network for fine art, just as they set up similar "shadow" communities for women's music, religion, politics and other proto-feminist and feminist investigation.

A feminist art movement, that both ran parallel and intersected dominant (male) art practices, flourished in the U.S., especially on the coasts, during the '70s. It included the active participation of thousands of women artists, the emergence of hundreds of all-woman galleries, dozens of publications and even the creation of a few fleeting

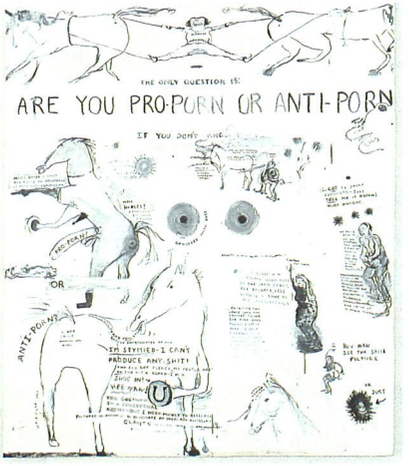


Marlene McCarty. *Campfire*. 1992. Courtesy Linda Cathcart Gallery. Santa Monica.

institutions, including the Feminist Art Program at Cal Arts and the Feminist Art Institute in Soho. Despite the eventual mainstream success of some of its early participants, the movement was never fully or permanently integrated into traditional institutions or art history, and the few feminist-inspired art projects that still remain, such as the A.I.R. Gallery in New York, the first all-woman cooperative gallery in the U.S., are as marginalized by the "art world" now as they were then [2]. A critique of Modernism, a reliance on autobiography, an appreciation of non-Western visual traditions, a willingness to prioritize visual genres previously denigrated as "craft", these were among the central concerns of the American Feminist Art Movement. Now, in the '90s, they are among the central concerns of contemporary American aesthetics and cultural politics, under new banners called "Post-Modernity", "Identity Politics" and "Multiculturalism"; but their nascent origins in early feminist investigations are seldom referred to. Instead, the entire movement is consistently dismissed as "essentialist",and critics, curators and artists seldom refer to it in any but the most disparaging of terms [3].

What feminism does, or could have to do with art, is especially complicated because the relationship is still in progress. And like any people engaged in social revolution, feminists disagree as to how to make change happen. Precisely because it is a process, "feminism" cannot be defined with any absolute accuracy; it is not something that already is. Although its history, and therefore its definition, can be said to comprise certain books, lectures, political actions, public events, advocates, cultural products, changes in legislation, and even alteration in individual and collective consciousness, the arguments between feminists and, in a different way, against feminism, have always been and will continue to be what, ultimately, defines feminism. Feminism is a movement. It must necessarily move toward a definition of itself because it is only in defining itself, that is, in articulating what constitutes women's subjugation and what could constitute our freedom, that it can accomplish itself [+].

Feminism is primarily a movement against rather than for something; and it is possibly feminism' positions as a reactive movement that most clearly explains the particular development of both feminist theory and feminist art practice in the U.S. during the last twenty years. Feminist art making in the '70s began with a utopian search for "woman": '80s feminist art practices suggested that there is no idea or reality of woman that is separate from that of



Sue Williams. *Are You Pro-Porn or Anti-Porn*. 1992. Acrylic on canvas.

man: and '90s feminist art practice. so far. is attempting to reconcile the difficulty of isolating a distinct female experience out of a decidedly masculine-imposed psychological. social and political terrain.

In the '70s. during the early heady days of the Movement. many women who sought to explore feminism in art tried to find "the feminine." These investigations took many forms and I don't intend. as others have already done. to trivialize through oversimplification: I hope that before the turn of the century someone will commit themself to the serious task of historicizing the movement. Nonetheless. some conciously "woman-identified" strategies dominated. including: the reclaiming of traditional women's crafts. such as quilting. needlwork. pottery. etc.: an emphasis on specifically-female experience in autobiographical work in all media: and an investigation for and production of "female forms". In many ways. the "search for the femenine" by feminist artists during the early '70s paralleled the "Black is beautiful" movement that had emerged among American Blacks just a few years before: both were attempts to restore value to individual and collective identities culturally demeaned through sexism and racism respectively. The narrative quilts of Faith Ringgold. an Afro-American artist who emerged in the late '60s. incorporates both aesthetic aims.
For feminist art. just as for feminist politics. the utopian vision of the eternal feminine ran up against a wall. not surprisingly. the same wall they had started with: male supremacy. In the gleeful rush to create something both female and valuable. early second wave feminism forgot. then witnessed again. that there is no such thing as "woman" independent of man as long as women

Milkcarton Project. Sponsored by Creative Time and Tuscan Dairy. Peggy Diggs. 1992.

are not independent of men. But the attempts to find. define. and value specifically female experience while naive. were not without profund consequence: '70s feminist art split open the Modernist myth of a universal art by exposing its masculinist-assumptions and thereby helped usher in the decenteredness of post-modernity.
But what is feminist art? Is there such a thing as "good" feminist art? Is there such a thing as "bad" art? Is there such a thing as "bad" feminist art? These questions asked now. in 1994. are different from how they were asked and they were asked when the practice of a self-consciously feminist art first emerged in the early '70s. And perhaps the answers. if there are answers. are different now too. although one aspect of conventional judgement hasn't altered. "Overtly feminist artists are always being accused of being "bad artists" simply by definition." noted Lucy R. Lippard. the primary critic and documentalist of the '70s feminist arts. Writing in 1980. Lippard challenged that observation with a still relevant "Given the history of the avant-garde. what on earth does "bad art" mean these days?" [5].

Because the male body. and male experience. is still assumed as the normative and universal experience of being human. all art that incorporates any specifically female experience is redered "minor" at least. Even after two successive decades of feminism. and despite the mainstream successes of the movement and the fact that it speaks from and for over half the population of the world. feminism is still relegated to the level of "special interest". both in politics and in art.

Many contemporary woman artists. both feminist and not. are impatient. They want to be accepted as artists not as members of a pejorative "subgroup". And who can blame them. Not unlike their foremothers. pre-feminist artists of

the '50s such as Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, and Helen Frankenthaler, many women artists aim to make art that is universal, that doesn't include any feminist or woman-identifiable content, and are then both surprised and disappointed when the art system tells them through lack of gallery representation, low or no sales, bad reviews or other forms of negative or poor attention that their work is not good. It is not by reason of "quality", although it is usually in the misname of, that even the most successful contemporary women artists earn less money than do their similarly placed male counterparts.

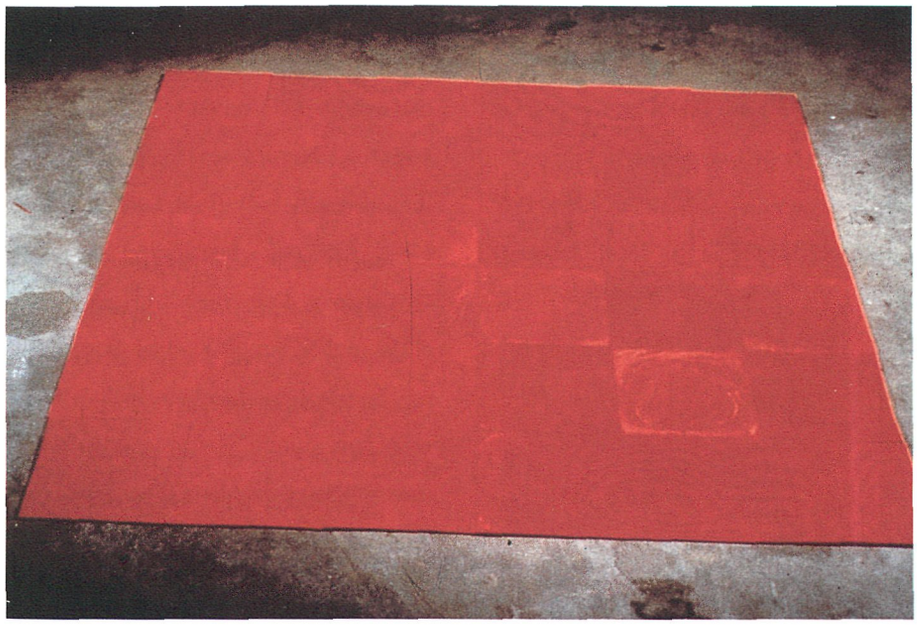
Not all women making art in the U.S. today are doing so according to a conscious sense of feminism, although every woman making art in the U.S. today is doing so in an environment made more advantageous, though still not without bias, because of feminism. In accordance with its location as process, feminist-inspired art continues to take various and even contradictory forms. Because of its peculiar position as both a mainstream and a marginal movement, women artists are frequently at odds with how they relate to feminism.

The firs three years of the '90s have been marked by a re-energized occupation with decidedly feminist aesthetics. Trial Balloon, an all-woman gallery with a lesbian preference, opened

Paula Hayes. *Within the Icy Fruit*, 1992. Mixed media installation.

in Soho in 1991: it is perhaps the first all-woman gallery to open in the U.S. since the '70s. The major groups shows organized in New York during 1991 all of which traveled elsewhere, demonstrated at least three different permutations of feminism into art. Held at the Simon Watson Gallery and Artists Space, a collaboration beween artists Chrysanne Stathacos and Kathy Bukhardt was organized around the primary legal achievement of '70s feminist activism: abortion. "The Abortion Project" included the work of over 30 women artists, most of whom produced new work specifically for the exhibition, including pieces by Holly Morse, Marilyn Minter, Maura Sheehan, Maura Rosenberg, Susan Spencer Crowe, Kiki Smith, and even a few artists from the '70s such as Adrian Piper, Nancy Spero and Sue Coe. Another ambitious 1991 all-woman show, "Fantastic Plastic Lover", was curated by critic Catherine Liu and presented work by Europeans alongside Americans such as Polly Apfelbaum, Paula Hayes, Karen Kilimnick, Rachel Lachowicz, Liz Larner, Patty Matori, Rona Pondick, Beverly Semmes and Jessica Stockholder. Predominantly sculptural, the show succeeded most in its illustration of a kind of poetic formalism, with only the slightest suggestion of politics. "Painting Culture", organized by the artist Deborah Kass for the Fiction Nonfiction Gallery, and presented paintings by Kass, Burkhardt, Sue Williams, Jane Hammon, Mary Wetherford and Julia Wachtel all of whom are engaged with figurative elements drawn from art history and popular culture.

Appropriation, one of the most visible strategies that emerged in New York during the '80s, first appeared, in Sherrie Levine's re-photographs and re-renderings of recognizable male art works, within a feminist framework. Many women artists have continued to develop upon Levine's formulation because it so clearly establishes the social, emotional, and (art) historical position women find themselves in relation to men and male power; i.e., that the male legal and cultural system takes a stand against us and we must respond. Levine's re-photohraphs have been followed by Kass's critical appropriations of David Salle, William's



Rachel Lachowicz. *Homage to Carl Andre*, 1991. Lipstick and wax.

sarcastic re-inscriptions of Richard Prince, and an onslaught of art works aimed at or against the minimalist Carl Andre, who was aquitted on charges of murdering his wife, the feminist artist Anna Mendietta.

Like their '70s predecessors, many '90s artists engaged with the idea of feminism and woman utilize cultural artifacts that signify femininity. Rachel Lachowicz works with lipstick to construct sculptural forms. Ava Gerber favors pre-feminist and feminized props such as hat boxes and kitchen aprons, and in her spoof on Carl Andre, *Floor Scale*, 1991 exhibited in Exit Art the first world's "Fever Show" larger room-size piece of the same objects. Anneta Kapon presented a floor grid of bathroom scales. While pointed comments against sexist by men abounds, it has also never been more apparent than in the present that American woman artists are engaged in at least a partially-independent art historical development, at least in attitude, if not always in form, that both refers to and utilizes and sometimes critiques prior works done by women. It is perhaps the first time that contemporary art is not completely patrilineal: because it is the first time that women are making art within an acknowledged history of previous female contributions. Many first-time solo shows of women from the past few years were direct encounters with the reality of female artistic legacy: Marlene McCarty's debut at Metro Pictures called forth Jenny Holzer; Laurent Szold's show at 303 Gallery evoked early Lynda Benglis; and Linda Matalon's exhibition at the Yorshi Gallery indicated a conscious debut to an even earlier past when they restaged Meret Oppenheim's 1959 "Banquet" at the Thread Maxing Space; this time substituting a nude male body where Oppenheim had presented a female one.

Investigations of the female body remain a central concern for the current

Annetta Kapon. *Floor Scale*, 1991. Courtesy Exit Art/The First World.

generation of women artist, with many continuing to work with both autobiographical and cultural narratives; although the early search for an "essential" female has been broken up. While most of Sue William's work refers to women's abused experience, some of her paintings, such as *Are You Pro-Porn or Anti-Porn*, 1992, and *After the Revolution*, 1992, directly address not "woman's experience", but the "feminist experience" including its disagreements. Artists such as Renée Green and Lorna Simpson are involved with how racism and sexism intersect. A newly visible and disparate group of artists, including Zoe Leonard, Millie Wilson, and Collier Schorr are developing a vocabulary around a lesbian identity. The legal and social issues that circumscribe women are provocative subjects especially if sex-related. In 1991, Robin Kahn exhibited a series of embroidered wall fabrics which were commercially distributed by Tuscan Dairy for a month in 1992, that provided the telephone number of an organization dedicated to helping women who are victims of domestic violence. How masochism is inscribed on the female body is a subject in Janine Antoni, whose first solo show at the Sandra Gering Gallery in 1992 included

The Abortion Project, Raw.

an enormous block of chocolate the artist had gnawed. Antoni's performative use of her body differed strategically from a thematically related work produced by Susan Silas in 1990: Silas had exhibited a thin table whose top enclosed a bar of bittersweet chocolate inscribed with part of the book jacket blurb to the masochist classic, Story of O. The quoted text raised the question of the authorship of O, which is written in a female voice, has been sold as "the voice or a woman", but was probably, nonetheless penned by a man. While Antoni's chocolate piece suggests the participation of woman in her own masochism, Silas's chocolate suggests that "participation" may not ultimately rest on women's own agency.

Women's situation in culture, as one divided between self-propelling agency on the one hand and patriarchal restrictions on the other, will continue to inform art produced by women. Its explorations and its contradictions constitute what is now, what was, and what will be, the process that is a feminist aesthetic.

NOTES

[1] From Matisse's *Notes of a Painter*, quoted in Charles Harrison, "Mattise at the Moderm", frieze, Jan.-Feb. 1993 10-15

[2] To describe the art world as inclusive of all individuals making and showing and viewing art would be to identify the hierarchy we all recognize; so, by "art world" here, I am referring to the system of museums, galleries, magazines, collectors and artists who participate at the high end of the financial exchange of art. That the "real art world" is defined by its (privileged) relationship to money is consistent with the system of valuation which governs social life in the U.S., i.e.: money defines worth.

[3] The term "essentialist" has, in its consistent mis-use, become the buzzword of antifeminists and pseudo-feminists. The history of feminist art is continually miserably mis-writen according to what artist and critic Mira Scho has aptly referred to as the "patrilineal unwriting of feminist art practice".

[4] That feminism, as theory and as practice, is a movement (forward) in an active and literal sense is acknowledged, as its title suggests, in Catherine A. Mackinnon's *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, Massachussetts: Harvard University Press. 1989).

[5] Lucy R. Lippard, "Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s", Art Journal, Fall / Winter 1980, p. 362-365