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What Is Feminist Art?

(a) An interesting chapter in art history, now closed. (b) Special pleading for mediocre artists. (c) A souvenir left behind by 1960s counterculture. (d) The most important artistic movement since World War II.

By Blake Gopnik
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The correct answer is *d*.

Others agree:

Feminist creativity has brought about "the most far-reaching transformations in both artmaking and art writing over the past four decades," says Stanford scholar Peggy Phelan.

Feminist art of the 1970s was "the most influential international movement of any during the postwar period," declares Jeremy Strick, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

It helped make possible "the very terms of current artistic practice," says Cornelia Butler, chief curator of drawings at the Museum of Modern Art.

The best American artists of the last 30 years "are as interesting as they are in part because of the feminist art movement of the early 1970s. It changed everything," writes New York Times art critic Holland Cotter.

More than any other 20th-century movement, feminism pushed back against the art-for-art's-sake attitudes of modernist abstraction. It pushed instead for work that talked about crucial issues in the world outside. Ever since feminism, in all areas of artmaking, the message has mattered as much as the medium.

One simple way to gauge the influence of vintage feminist art: By how much it's on our minds today.

In January, a symposium on the subject was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in front of an overflow crowd.

Last month, a blowout show of feminist art of the 1960s and '70s launched in Los Angeles, and the Brooklyn Museum opened its lavish new Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art.

On Friday, the National Museum of Women in the Arts celebrated the institution's 20th anniversary, its galleries filled with an important exhibition of female painters from Renaissance Italy. (Come September, it will be hosting "Wack!," as the L.A. show is called.)

There's a reason all this women's work has come together now -- it's the 30th anniversary of "Women Artists: 1550-1950," the first major museum survey of the subject. But feminists haven't planned a strategic, unified effort to celebrate that moment. Classic feminist art is all around us now simply because it is a perfect fit for what's up in today's art world.

Take "Wack!" The most striking thing about it is how *current* its art feels, though it's all decades old.

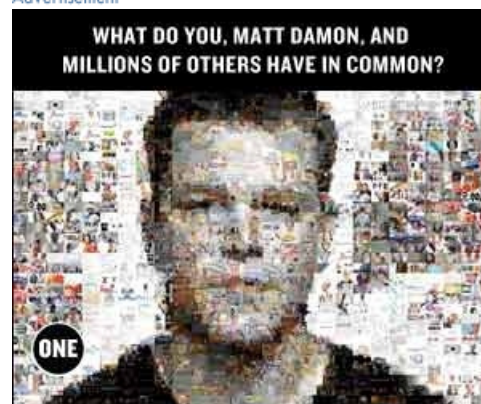
"Wack!" has the same mix of media you'd find in any contemporary biennial: Lots of video; installations of all kinds, ranging from a feminist "clubhouse" built from mattresses to a room-size sculpture made of sand-filled pantyhose; plenty of photography, staged as well as documentary; detritus and documents left over from performances and conceptual projects; a smattering of idea-driven painting.

And the show has the same political charge and drive as a lot of very recent work in those media. Even some of the most innovative experiments of the 1960s, such as the conceptual abstraction of Sol LeWitt or the radical video and film works of Bruce Nauman and Michael Snow, had centered on asking questions about the nature of *art*.

The feminists cared less for art than for the important things it can be used to talk about.

And because gender affects just about every aspect of human experience, feminist artists found occasion to talk about almost everything. They dealt with topics that leading artists have been broaching ever since: bodies, class, race, consumerism, the art market, colonialism, political and cultural power.

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Even when they borrowed approaches dreamed up by men, the feminists gave them new political heft. At first glance, Eleanor Antin's 144 black-and-white shots of a female body, arranged in a 4-by-36 grid, look like plain-Jane conceptual art, perhaps addressing issues such as photography and form. In fact, Antin's grid represents four daily shots of the artist herself, trimming her nude body down to a more "ideal" size through 36 days of dieting. It's called "Carving: A Traditional Sculpture," riffing on the ancient Greek idea of the male artist who whittles away at gross matter to find the ideal beauty -- usually slender, female beauty -- hidden deep inside.

The feminists used all kinds of art toward a single end: digging out from under centuries of maledom. The best work in "Wack!" takes on that task with a commitment and aggression that most of today's art never manages. Even after four decades, the show's most whacked-out pieces still push you off balance.

To get into the show, you have to brush past a 12-foot-tall, blood-red vulva suspended from the ceiling, woven from sisal in the gnarly style of a classic hippie hanging. It's so supremely brash it makes you laugh and squirm at the same time. Many of the female and feminist themes in this show, as well as the simple concentration of them in one place, can leave even fans feeling vaguely squirmy. We're clearly not used to an exhibition that's all woman, all the time, even though we seem to have no trouble with other shows drenched in testosterone -- which would be almost every exhibition that we've ever seen, judging by the warriors and courtesans and macho brushstrokes in their works, and by the males who crafted them.

There's a huge dose of discomfort in footage of a public performance first put on by Yoko Ono in Japan in 1964. For "Cut Piece," Ono sits onstage in an auditorium and invites audience members to climb up and clip her clothing off with scissors. Ono's role in the event invokes a pure, classically female vulnerability, while there's everything from worried tenderness to raw misogynist aggression in the reactions of the cutters. And of course there's also something empowering in Ono's refusal to react, whatever's done to her. She took the passive resistance of the civil rights movement and made it the medium of art.

The work of Danish artist Kirsten Justesen also seems to deal with victimhood, or helplessness at least: A 1968 piece called "Sculpture II" shows a young woman naked and in a fetal position, inside an open cardboard box. It seems to associate womanhood with the vulnerability of infants, but also with their unrealized potential.

A British feminist who called herself Cosey Fanni Tutti pushed more aggressively into problems of women, power and subjection. She addressed the complex issues of sex and pornography by becoming a real porn star, modeling for grossly low-end, hard-core rags and taking money for it. The room that documents her art, full of all kinds of ugly and degrading shots, is genuinely hard to take -- as it ought to be, given the subject it addresses.

Has Tutti retaken control of the female body, or does her project demonstrate its ongoing and inevitable degradation at the hands of men?

There's no easy answer, just an effort to ask the question as potently as possible. In Tutti's art, as in work by her more famous peers Cindy Sherman and Martha Rosler, there's also a crucial questioning of how images of women function in society. This is a crucial precedent for the broader questioning of images that artists, of all stripes and both genders, have been doing ever since. It may be feminism's greatest contribution to the history of art.

The funny thing is, classic feminism's shadow may loom so large over contemporary female artists that it's hard for them to crawl out from under it. The artists in "Global Feminisms," a group show of recent feminist art that inaugurates the Sackler Center in Brooklyn, address many of the same themes their foremothers did, using the same media and strategies. But they mostly manage to make their work feel stylish, rather than genuinely risky. It's as though the passionate engagement that led the earlier feminists to make the work they did has become a superficial artistic device.

Political engagement and the media and imagery associated with it -- in feminist art, but also in most other kinds of artistic activism -- have become components in a with-it *style*, on par with playful abstraction or hipster cartooning. Which makes today's activist-inflected art a very different thing from what feminism turned out in the 1960s. According to Lucy Lippard, a veteran feminist who got a standing ovation at the MoMA feminism conference -- before her talk had even started -- women's art in its first 1970s flowering was built around "a value system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life." It was "neither a style nor a movement."

* * *

I can hear them already: Pencils being sharpened as readers get ready to write in about some artistic medium or approach that seems typical of feminism, but that was in fact used by one or another male artist before the women got to it. There was video art before the feminists made any. Performance was already well underway when Yoko Ono started doing her stuff. Though staged photography may make Cindy Sherman one of the most impressive figures in "Wack!," there had been plenty of it before she came along.

All that, however, misses a crucial point: Feminist art wasn't about the "either/or" of traditional art *history*, where one preening artist -- almost always male -- tries to assert his way of making art as the "next big thing," in part by elbowing rival artists and approaches out of the way. Feminism was about "both/and," in the service of coming to grips with a massive issue that was more than any one artist, or way of making art, could ever deal with. Where men had always jockeyed for place, feminists believed in rewriting the rules of the horse race.

Many of the works in "Wack!" don't have a single author; lots don't have any artistic "product" in the normal sense, beyond a few tattered records of some long-lost agitation. Artistic collectives, sometimes doubling as rock bands, are an especially hot property on the art scene now, but it's worth recognizing that feminists were ganging together and acting up, and out, before most of today's art stars were even born, and before collaboration was any kind of selling point.

Butler, who organized the L.A. show and is now at MoMA, talks about "feminist art's lofty and romantic striving for nothing less than a complete reorganization of cultural hierarchies." That, she says, is why she wanted "Wack!" to offer more than a small "canon" of feminist luminaries or a clear ranking of feminism's many different approaches to artmaking. As she puts it, "something about the subject of feminist art inspires a healthy sense of expansiveness, resistance and subversion."

That may be the most crucial way in which the feminist art of the 1960s and 1970s foreshadows where we are today: Feminism can be thought of as the crucial movement of the recent past because it could act as an umbrella for any number of approaches to making art. On the surface at least, that evenhandedness resembles the way the entire art world now functions. It encourages a vast range of attitudes and media and forms, with each one valued, in theory, for whatever point it's most suited to making -- but maybe, more accurately, for whatever market niche it fills. The art world may be sales-obsessed and socially complacent, but in its ideal vision of itself, what a work of art is made from or looks like is supposed to matter less than what it is *about*.

Feminism helped put such notions into play.

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