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## Stepping out of the Beaten Path: Reassessing the Feminist Art Movement

**T**he feminist art movement, a constellation of artists, curators, critics, and art historians, emerged on the art scene in the early 1970s in various cities around the world.<sup>1</sup> Assessments of the feminist art movement's contributions to art and to social change have varied markedly. Most mainstream art history texts, including surveys of twentieth-century art, tend to ignore or dismiss the feminist art movement. *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (Foster et al. 2004), for example, devotes barely half a page to the feminist art movement, describing it as a momentary phenomenon with no lasting impact. H. W. Janson, author of the best-selling art history textbook, *History of Art* (1962), was often quoted as saying that a survey necessarily included only the high points of Western art and that no women artists met that standard. The seventh edition (Davies et al. 2006) does include women artists but barely mentions the feminist art movement and does not acknowledge that it had any significant intellectual or aesthetic impact.

Feminist art historians, many of whom played a key role in the feminist art movement, have been more generous in their assessments, exploring how feminist artists devised innovative representational strategies to challenge phallogentrism and the male gaze, illuminate female sexuality and eroticism, critique visual economies that limit women to heterosexual and maternal identities, and celebrate modes of existence that transcend patriarchy and white supremacy.<sup>2</sup> By devoting sustained and serious attention to the complexities and nuances of feminist art, these critics make im-

<sup>1</sup> Harriet Hosmer (1830–1908), internationally recognized neoclassical sculptor, was reported to have said: “I honor every woman who has the strength enough to step out of the beaten path when she feels that walk lies in another” (McCarthy 1991, 15).

<sup>2</sup> Nochlin 1973; Chicago 1975; Lippard 1976; Parker and Pollock 1981, 1987; Gouma-Peterson and Mathews 1987; Pollock 1988; Raven, Langer, and Frueh 1988; Frueh, Langer, and Raven 1994; Hammond 1994, 2000; Fusco 1995; Broude and Garrard 2005.

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portant contributions, particularly by situating the feminist art movement in relation to the transformative goals of feminism. However, the contributions of the feminist art movement to the art world more generally may be occluded in focusing on feminist art in relation to feminism.

Our goal in this essay is to provide a radical reassessment of the transformations inaugurated by the feminist art movement. Toward that end we begin with a bold claim: the feminist art movement pioneered postmodernism. Although it is common to trace the origins of postmodernism to architecture (Huyssen 1984), the term has come to apply to the whole of contemporary art practice. We suggest that any thorough investigation of postmodernism must recognize the formative contributions of feminist cultural production.<sup>3</sup> Feminist artists, curators, critics, and art historians shaped art practice and art writing after 1975. Their innovations have become so thoroughly embedded in contemporary perspectives that their role in introducing these ideas is in danger of being erased. Rather than allow the feminist art movement to suffer the fate of so many women artists over the centuries whose work was expunged from the record or misattributed to men (Tufts 1974; Harris and Nochlin 1976), we will briefly map distinctive features of the feminist art movement that anticipated practices now hailed as postmodern. To support our argument concerning the pathbreaking role of feminist art, we provide visual evidence drawn from the works of several feminist artists involved in the movement.<sup>4</sup>

In the early 1970s feminist artists developed multiple innovations in style and content that are now associated with definitions of postmodern artistic practice. In this essay, we provide graphic evidence of feminist art's contributions to a revolution in modes of representation; the use of specific events, personal experience, and narratives drawn from daily life to challenge abstract expressionism; the use of pleasure and play to protest the oppressions of the status quo; art inspired by and responsive to social, cultural, scientific, and political conditions rather than art for art's sake; the development of embodied narratives tied to the temporalities of daily life rather than art linked to notions of transcendent form; art that plays with scale, foregrounding the human through ludic proportions; complex forms of art making such as installation, site-specific art, video, photography, and books

<sup>3</sup> We are not the first to argue that feminist artists presaged the postmodern. In "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism" Craig Owens (1983) advanced a similar claim. By designating feminist artists as "others," however, Owens inadvertently undercut full acknowledgment of the impact of feminist art on the mainstream.

<sup>4</sup> Although the feminist art movement is a global phenomenon, because of limitations of space, in this essay we focus on the movement in the United States. Other essays in this issue trace the contributions of feminist artists in other parts of the world.



**Figure 1** Joan Semmel, *Antonio and I* (1974), oil on canvas, 48 × 78 inches. © Joan Semmel. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

rather than traditional painting and sculpture; art as collaborative practice rather than the product of individual male genius; and art that blurs the boundaries between craft, popular culture, and high art.<sup>5</sup>

#### **A revolution in representation**

As Joan Semmel's *Antonio and I* (fig. 1) graphically depicts, feminist artists subverted representational practices long established in art. Using her own body to create a new iconography around the female nude, Semmel paints from the figure's own perspective. Upending the passive female nude under the lustful eye of the male painter, Semmel puts the viewer into the image and does away with conventional objectifications of women, while introducing an erotic but nonobjectified male nude. Playing with skin tones in the yellows and reddish browns, she challenges the epidermalization of race as well as racist codes that proscribe miscegenation.

#### **From abstraction to specificity**

In marked contrast to idealized images of the female nude, fragmented renderings of cubism's women, and abstract expressionism's retreat from the body altogether, Martha Rosler's video *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (fig. 2)

<sup>5</sup> The following images are drawn from a show that we curated, *How American Women Artists Invented Postmodernism, 1970–1975*, in the galleries of the Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University, December 15, 2005–January 27, 2006.



**Figure 2** Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), still from video performance piece. © Martha Rosler. Reprinted with permission.

satirizes the social construction of women as homemakers. Donning a ruffled apron, Rosler engages the absurdity of housewifery by presenting kitchen tools to the viewer in alphabetical order, naming each implement—“egg beater,” “knife,” “spoon”—and pantomiming how each is used in a way that emphasizes her underlying rage and potential for violence. Challenging notions of art as sublime, Rosler introduces performance art and video as media to illuminate oppressive social relations embedded in daily life in order to trigger transformations of consciousness.

### **The ludic**

If postmodernism is associated with a shift in art’s emotional register from the sublime to the playful and ironic, feminist art in the early 1970s was certainly protopostmodern. Devising new spectrums of visual pleasure as a means of protest against exclusionary, marginalizing, and oppressive practices, feminist artists took a decidedly ludic turn. Consider, for example, May Stevens’s *Top Man* (fig. 3), which satirizes male au-



**Figure 3** May Stevens, *Top Man* (1975), acrylic on canvas, 60 × 40 inches. © May Stevens. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

thority figures while providing a trenchant critique of U.S. imperial pretensions. Her male authority figure is bald with a bullet-shaped (or phallic) head and pig eyes. He sits frontally in the style of a medieval icon with his potbelly prominently displayed and holding a menacing bulldog. Stevens uses his smug smile and complacent corpulence to embody and lampoon American hegemony.

#### **Political engagement**

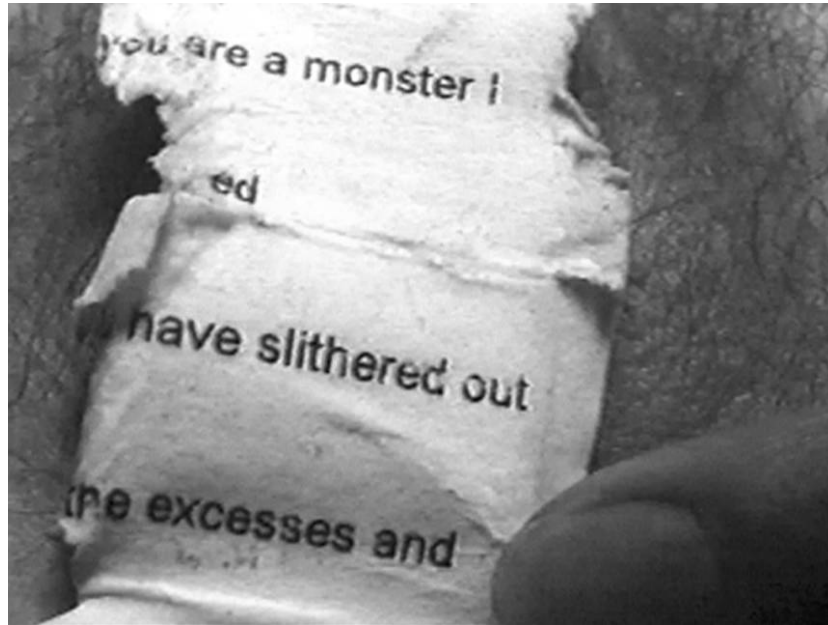
In contrast to prevailing standards in minimalist and conceptual art of the late 1960s, Betye Saar's *Victory of Gentleness (for Rosa Parks)* (fig. 4) is explicitly political, simultaneously contesting racial apartheid, racism, and sexist notions of effective leadership and social change tactics. Saar produced a mixed-media assemblage linking the material practices of slavery



**Figure 4** Betye Saar, *Victory of Gentleness (for Rosa Parks)* (1975), mixed media assemblage, 13 3/8 × 11 1/8 × 1 inches. © Betye Saar. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

to continuing modes of racial discrimination and the unsung heroism of enslaved women to the practices of nonviolent resistance. Anticipating postmodernism's blurring of boundaries, the assemblage is both bounded and open, fusing surface and depths, while merging iconographies of the altar, the window, and the dressing table.





**Figure 5** Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll—The Cave* (1995). Still from group performance. Video by Maria Beatty and Carolee Schneemann. © Vesper Video. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

### **Embodied temporalities**

Breaking with the timelessness of abstract art, Carolee Schneemann's filmed performance *Interior Scroll* (fig. 5) celebrates the body in time. Envisioning new modes of feminist articulation and emergence embedded in natality, Schneemann uses her own body to enact the birthing of feminist texts. Challenging the Lacanian conflation of maleness, language, and the symbolic order, Schneemann films herself delivering a braided strip of stories by women from her birth canal, stories that take on new life as she proceeds to read them aloud.

### **Playing with human scale**

Modernist sculpture and public installations were very much in the tradition of the monumental—intended to be imposing, formal, and impressive. Nancy Azara playfully challenges the conventions of the colossal by cultivating a feminist iconography. Azara's *Widows' Tongues* (fig. 6) uses forms that are organic and suggestive of internal body parts rather than external appearance. The elements of the sculpture reach out into





**Figure 6** Nancy Azara, *Widows' Tongues* (1974), painted wood, 8 × 9 feet. © Nancy Azara. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

space rather than closing off their surroundings, interacting with the air around them much as human limbs actually do.

### **Challenging traditional notions of art**

In contrast to the pride of place accorded sculpture and painting in art museums, Harmony Hammond's *Collection of Fragments, Baskets, and Sandals* (fig. 7) employs a museum format to establish a historical narrative tracing women artists across time to the most ancient societies. Her faux archeological objects, replicas of archeological fragments and paintings, are displayed in vitrines similar to those found in ethnographic museums. Hammond's use of museum installation has had a profound impact on the art praxis of artists such as Fred Wilson.



**Figure 7** Harmony Hammond, *Collection of Fragments, Baskets, and Sandals* (1972–76), mixed media installation with fabricated clay shards, woven raffia and reed baskets, sandals, and display case (dimensions variable). © Harmony Hammond. Courtesy of the artist and Dwight Hackett projects. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

### **Collaborative practice**

Feminist artists challenged romantic constructions of the artist qua solitary genius, emphasizing collective dimensions of artistic production. Judy Baca pioneered artistic collaboration with the community through her Los Angeles murals project, which reached out to teenagers in impoverished neighborhoods, offering art as a potential livelihood. In *Dead Homeboy Killed by a Placa* (fig. 8), a poignant depiction of one of her community helpers killed by a gang member, Baca memorializes that collaboration while illuminating the dire alternatives available to young men of color. Baca's community projects were quickly copied by others, including Tim Rollins, who started the K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) in 1982. Kids of Survival has received a great deal of publicity and is widely known, whereas Baca and other women who established collectives among themselves or with the community are erased from the art historical record. The number of collaborative art groups has increased dramatically, to the point where the 2006 Whitney Biennial featured them as the significant artistic phenomenon of that year.

### **Expanding the dimensions of high art**

As the foregoing examples demonstrate, feminist artists used photography, video, film, assemblage, vitrines, murals, and performance to merge craft, popular culture, and high art. They also introduced fiber elements (decorative images from tiles and quilts, fabric, stitching, and embroidery) into painting. Through her use of repetitive decorative images in *Hidden*

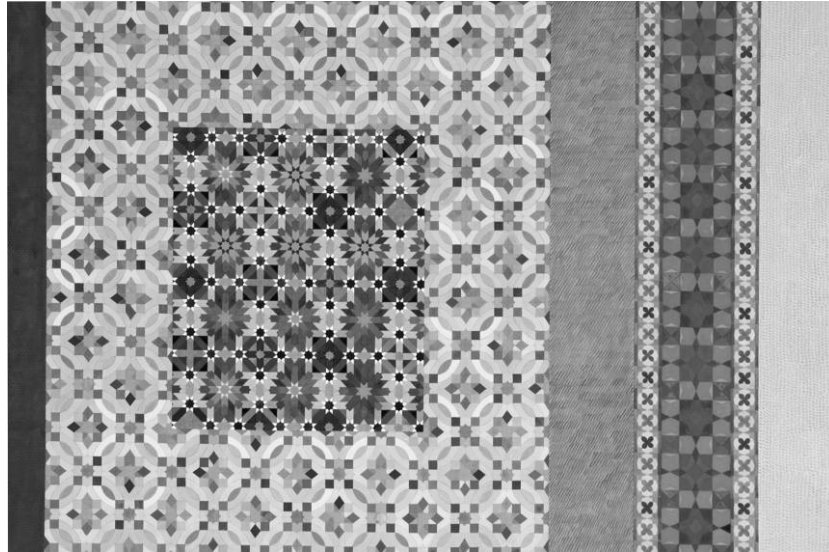


**Figure 8** Judy Baca, *Dead Homeboy Killed by a Placa* (1974), wood stain on paper, 32 × 42 inches. © Judy Baca. Courtesy of Patricia Correia Gallery, Santa Monica, CA. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

*Chambers* (fig. 9), Joyce Kozloff created paintings that celebrate women's craft and the traditional craft of other cultures. Kozloff, along with such artists as Robert Kushner, Ned Smythe, and Kim McConnel, is a member of the pattern and decoration movement inspired by Miriam Schapiro, who created "femmage," a new style of painting that incorporates fabrics and cloth trims into the surface of the painting. The influence of the pattern and decoration artists can be seen in the work of contemporary younger artists like Ghada Amer.

### Conclusion

In addition to its direct impact on artistic practice, the feminist art movement intentionally blurred the boundaries between the work of feminist artists, art critics, and art historians to create spaces for playful creativity and innovation, generating new relations between theory and artistic production. *Heresies*, for example, was a journal published by a collective of



**Figure 9** Joyce Kozloff, *Hidden Chambers* (1975), acrylic on canvas, 78 × 120 inches. © Joyce Kozloff. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

feminist artists, critics, and art historians, including Kozloff, Lucy Lippard, Schapiro, Mary Beth Edelson, Ellen Lanyon, Semmel, Nancy Spero, Stevens, Michelle Stuart, and Susanna Torre, among others. Like the *Feminist Art Journal* and *Chrysalis*, *Heresies* launched an attack on “the dominant modernist canon well before the mainstream periodicals dared, and suggested other aesthetic and political alternatives” (Rickey 1994, 120).<sup>6</sup> With each issue edited by a different cohort of the collective, *Heresies* drew upon feminist theory to probe essentialist and deconstructive tendencies within feminist art; explore the interconnections of patriarchy, heterosexuality, and racial discrimination; and analyze a new global aesthetic that embraced narrative and representation as well as new media.<sup>7</sup> Conceptualizing women’s cultural production as more capacious than art alone,

<sup>6</sup> The *Feminist Art Journal*, published from 1972 to 1977, was founded by Cindy Nemser, Pat Mainardi, and Irene Moss “1) to be the voice of women artists in the art world; 2) to improve the status of all women artists; 3) to expose sexist exploitation and discrimination” (Broude and Garrard 1994, 123). *Chrysalis*, which was dedicated to analysis of women’s culture, encompassing far more than the work of women artists, was published by Arlene Raven, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, Ruth Iskin, and Kirsten Grimstad until 1980.

<sup>7</sup> The radical impulse of these early feminist journals has been perpetuated in *n.paradoxa*, a publication founded in 1996 by Katy Deepwell, now head of research training at the Chelsea College of Art and Design, University of the Arts, London. Deepwell edits both online and print copy versions of *n.paradoxa*, which contain different material.

*Heresies* published issues on topics such as “Lesbian Art and Artists” (1977), “Women’s Traditional Arts: The Politics of Aesthetics” (1977–78), and “Third World Women: The Politics of Being Other” (1979). Long before postmodernism sanctioned such practices, the feminist art movement deployed lesbian and gay sexuality to disrupt the heteronormative constraints of patriarchal society, contested the male gaze and developed alternative representational practices, used art criticism and art history to engage social and political issues, embraced diversity, and broadened the field from fine art to visual culture.<sup>8</sup>

These few examples do not begin to exhaust the complex innovations in style and content associated with the feminist art movement of the early 1970s. They do demonstrate, however, how these feminist artists countered mid-twentieth-century modernist doctrines, transforming visual art practice and altering the cultural landscape. Infusing art with new content inspired by feminism—content that is inclusive, investigative, and democratic—the feminist art movement pioneered postmodern artistic praxis and deserves to have its rich legacies acknowledged in the popular imagination and in official art histories.<sup>9</sup>

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Rutgers University (Olin)*

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<sup>8</sup> Raven, Langer, and Frueh 1988; Chadwick 1990; Tesfagioris 1993; Robinson 2001; Armstrong and de Zegher 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Since this essay was written, the Feminist Art Project, a national campaign to celebrate the contributions of feminist artists, has been established with headquarters at Rutgers University, under our direction. The Feminist Art Project, our exhibition *How American Women Artists Invented Postmodernism*, and various exhibitions following it that focus on the history of the feminist art movement have begun to change the cultural record. The innovation and impact of the feminist art movement have been emphasized in reviews of two landmark exhibitions: *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, which opened at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in March 2007, and *Global Feminisms*, which opened at the newly established Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art in the Brooklyn Museum in March 2007, simultaneously with the permanent installation of Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* at the Sackler. Time will tell if this recognition becomes permanent.

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