

**The Feminism and  
Visual Culture Reader**

Second edition

Edited by

**Amelia Jones**



## CONNIE BUTLER, AMELIA JONES, AND MAURA REILLY

### FEMINIST CURATING AND THE “RETURN” OF FEMINIST ART

A dialogue among three curators of feminist exhibitions, which took place between January 25 and June 4, 2009, by e-mail; the responses were initiated by questions posed by Jones and the dialogue was edited by Jones.

**Amelia Jones** Curator of *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*; UCLA Armand Hammer Museum, 1996.

**Maura Reilly** Founding Curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum; curator of *Global Feminisms*; Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2007.

**Connie Butler** Curator of *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2007.

**Amelia Jones:** I'm personally fascinated by the shift from the height of the feminist activist movement, including the feminist art movement, in the 1970s, into the 1980s when feminist art became institutionalized to some degree (Mary Boone taking on Barbara Kruger, etc.)—then into “bad girls” and “postfeminism” in 1990s, and now this huge shift back to taking feminism seriously. Do either of you have thoughts on this?

In relation to this can you discuss the recent quite explosive resurgence of interest in histories of feminist art, which has been particularly noticeable in venues across Europe and the United States and has included a number of exhibitions, special issues of art magazines, conferences and public events.<sup>1</sup> To what do you attribute this interest?

**Maura Reilly:** While I agree wholeheartedly that there has been an enormous resurgence of interest in feminist art over the past several years—as is manifest in multiple international exhibitions, symposia, publications, and so forth—I must say that I question whether it truly represents “a huge shift back to taking feminism seriously”? I'm not so certain. Or perhaps I would say that I'm cautiously optimistic. I guess I wonder *who* is it that is taking feminism seriously? Is it that the baby-boomer feminists—who, as they age, and fearing they will be forgotten—have finally gotten around to an insistence on it, collectively joining together to secure their place in history? Or is it a younger generation of third-wave feminists who are making this fire, desiring to carry the baton of the feminist foremothers, albeit in ways that perhaps shock their predecessors. Or, is it perhaps that feminist curators (e.g. Connie, Simon Taylor, Xabier Arakistain, Rosa Martinez) have finally infiltrated the bastions of power where we can actually *choose* content? (However, it needs to be said that such program “moves” are most often a one-shot deal, often never to be repeated.)

I think I'll agree that feminism is being taken “seriously” only when the effects begin to trickle down into real systemic, widespread changes visible throughout the art world—in the



art market, museum exhibition and collecting policies, in gallery representation, press coverage, survey textbook coverage, and so forth. We are all aware that institutionalized sexism has yet to be eradicated, and until "greatness" itself can be redefined as something other than white, western, heterosexual and unmistakably male, we still have quite a battle ahead of us. It is the discipline of art history itself and all of its apparatus—museums, catalogue *raisonnés*, and so on—that must be transformed before feminist art—or even women artists, in general—can be taken *seriously*.

**Connie Butler:** I'm personally fascinated by the shift. . . This is the question I'm most often asked, about the return of feminist art and the renewed attention of the market and the critical community. And it's the one question I can't really answer and don't really trust. I don't trust the market's ability to absorb and process all of this material which has recently come to light. For me, it has to do with where a younger generation of artists leads us in terms of moments of rupture in art history—movements and impulses that they find significant and generative for their work.

The "postfeminist" moment in the early 1990s (and I have huge problems with this term but use it only as a convenience here) was ushered in by a generation of artists, both male and female and primarily in the United States, whose interest and practices mined 1970s feminist art in all kinds of ways. I'm thinking here of artists I was involved with such as Janine Antoni, Andrea Zittel, Sowon Kwon, Polly Apfelbaum, Doug Ischar, Rita McBride, Aki Fujiohi, Simon Leung but also Mike Kelly, Robert Gober, Matthew Barney, Félix González-Torres and others who looked at the construction of identity from a position heavily informed by gender and queer theory among other things. I think this is why this early 1990s moment of return happens in the United States and not in other places, like the United Kingdom where a generation of younger artists is only now interested in acknowledging the influence and network of ideas that comes directly out of feminist practice in the 1970s. These women were their teachers after all. For me it always comes out of the work I'm seeing and trying to understand its trajectory.

**Amelia Jones:** Connie, it's worth noting that the "bad girls" phenomenon was not just in the United States. There was a *Bad Girls* exhibition first in the United Kingdom (1993–94), sponsored by the Institute of Contemporary Art, London and the Contemporary Arts Centre, Glasgow; two US shows by the same exact name were organized by Marcia Tucker and Marcia Tanner in New York and Los Angeles.<sup>2</sup> There were a number of other 1990s feminist shows, as well, such as the *Division of Labor: "Women's Work" in Contemporary Art* exhibition at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 1995, which was quite influential and very smart in connecting historical feminist art from the 1970s with more recent feminist practices.<sup>3</sup> But perhaps you can say more about the shows in the past five years, as opposed to these rather unusual and rare exhibitions addressing feminism in the 1990s.

**Connie Butler:** There was also Lynn Zelevansky's *Sense and Sensibility* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (New York, 1994) looking at a contemporary, gendered minimalism or many smaller but noteworthy projects such as *Empty Dress*, curated by Nina Felshin, which travelled around the United States (in 1993). I do think the 1990s examples you name come from a different cultural consensus around gender and a desire to examine such thematics as humor, identity, the body, and its relationship to fashion and beauty. These are some of the issues most common to 1990s exhibitions that engaged feminism. They were certainly important and in some ways laid the groundwork for the more historically or globally ambitious shows that have happened more recently. But the elephant in the room, it seems to me, was Feminist Art, whatever that meant, and those profoundly influential 1970s artists many of whom were nearly invisible even a decade ago.



**Maura Reilly:** I'd like to add here that I think this renewed interest in feminism, at least in the United States, actually dates from 2002 onward, as marked by critical exhibitions like *Personal and Political: The Women's Art Movement, 1969–1975*, *Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art in the 1970s*, *Regarding Gloria*, and the 2002 exhibition of *The Dinner Party* at the Brooklyn Museum, followed a few years later by the remarkable 2005 Venice Biennale, the first to be curated by feminists.<sup>4</sup> I can't help but wonder also if the public announcement in 2002 that there was to be an exhibition space dedicated exclusively to feminist art in a major US museum—for the very first time in history—didn't contribute to a lot of the hype, as well. It certainly precipitated the founding of The Feminist Art Project (TFAP) in 2006, of which I'm a founding member (along with Arlene Raven, Judy Chicago, Dena Muller, Judy Brodsky, Ferris Olin, and Susan Fisher Sterling), which sought to capitalize on this groundbreaking museological development by sparking new initiatives throughout the country that would build on the momentum started by the announcement of the Sackler Center. We conceptualized TFAP as a conscious effort to jumpstart a new movement through the grassroots promotion of feminist art exhibitions, events, education, and publications. (The Web site, developed and administered by the Institute for Women and Art at Rutgers, lists and archives all of these diverse feminist art activities.) The Project, then, is really a strategic intervention against the ongoing erasure of women from the cultural record, and is one that continues today. Indeed, each year at CAA there is an entire day programmed by TFAP that is dedicated exclusively to feminist art. It's been an enormously rewarding project to be involved with and heartening to think that, if it continues the way it is now, with regional groups rapidly developing and international networking in place, then perhaps some of those necessary systemic changes will/can take place in the future—first and foremost (since it is primarily an academic-based project) via the dismantling and restructuring of art-historical curriculums.

**Connie Butler:** Again, I am a little mystified by the phenomenon of the recent shows. I know Maura partially attributes it to the rise of a certain generation of female curators to positions of power in institutions and I wish I believed that this were the answer. I guess I think it's partially true but probably as much to our feminist male colleagues, who also educated a generation of women artists and teachers, who are now our colleagues and can lend a necessary critical mass to the decisions about whose work gets shown, written about, and purchased. Certainly I am interested in a group of us who emerged, again in the United States, from formative training in alternative exhibition spaces and how the politics of those kinds of institutions—many of them formed in reaction against the mainstream art world and the canons it has historically represented—have informed our practices as curators.

**Amelia Jones:** Given these complex histories, Maura, as its first director, can you discuss your thoughts about how and why the Sackler Center was set up when it was, in 2002? This seems a crucial moment in marking a new institutional investment in feminist art. I am interested in what this was about that it took until this point for a major (albeit "peripheral" to the dominant Manhattan scene, with Brooklyn across the river!) art museum to "take on" feminism . . . And in the particular way it was taken on, via a wealthy (feminist and female) collector.

**Maura Reilly:** The Center is the brainchild of art philanthropist and public historian Elizabeth A. Sackler. In 2001, she purchased *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago (an artist whose work she had collected for several years), and gifted it to the Brooklyn Museum, on whose board Sackler sits. In 2002, it was presented as a special exhibition to enormous crowds estimated at 80,000 people over the course of four months. It was during the special exhibition that discussions between Sackler and Brooklyn Museum Director Arnold Lehman commenced about establishing not only a *permanent* installation for Chicago's iconic work, but also an exhibition



space devoted exclusively to feminist art. Much discussion went into whether the space should be called a Center for "women's art" or "feminist art" before the Museum settled on the latter, recognizing that feminism has had a profound impact on post-1960s cultural production. The establishment of the first exhibition space in the United States dedicated exclusively to the display of feminist art is not only a landmark in the history of museums, but in the history of art itself.<sup>5</sup> It is truly extraordinary. My hope is that other museums will follow suit, or at least take on major initiatives to support the work of women and/or feminist artists, or work toward promoting diversity, in general, in more concerted ways. I hope Brooklyn won't stand alone in this endeavour.

**Amelia Jones:** Now the nitty-gritty politics . . . What are/were the aims of the Sackler Center as these were put to you when you were hired? Did you agree with these? What was it like working in that capacity? I assume you had to navigate a number of intense and creatively driven personalities (including Judy Chicago and Sackler). What about the foregrounding of Chicago's *Dinner Party*? I got so much flak for supposedly putting it at the center of *Sexual Politics* I can only imagine how fraught this might have been for the Sackler Center . . .

**Maura Reilly:** Here is the mission statement as it was put to me when hired in 2003:

As the first public space of its kind, the Center's mission is to raise awareness of feminism's artistic contributions; to maintain a dynamic and welcoming space; and to make feminism approachable and relevant to a diverse audience of all ages. By offering extensive educational and public programming, as well as interactive web components, and a dynamic exhibition schedule, the Center's programs aim to inspire and educate current and future generations about the living legacy of feminist art and ideas.

As to whether or not I agreed with it? Well, at the time I did and worked very hard to bring the mission to light for the Museum. And, why not? It was quite exhilarating, at first. As its founding Curator and Director, I was given the role of conceiving all of its myriad components, from exhibition and public programming, Web content, and didactics to the reinstallation of *The Dinner Party*. But my role was simultaneously paralyzing. Imagine the pressure of being the first Curator of Feminist Art in the world and the historical import of that role! Daily I felt the weight of my "feminist foremothers" on my shoulders as I sought to lay the foundations at the Center correctly, strategically, and intelligently so that future curators in my position could have a strong base from which to build. (Incidentally, my sense of responsibility to feminist art was furthered by the (somewhat unfortunate) treatment of myself as "savior" by second-generation feminist artists, who saw me as the only curator who could correct all the wrongs that had precipitated since the 1960s, and from which they had suffered. I know that Connie dealt with this, as well.)

While initially I felt quite exhilarated, even if paralyzed, by the daunting task at hand, those feelings quickly dissipated when I realized the internal battles that I would face from within the institution. In other words, despite the Museum's publicly announced initiative to support feminist art, it was in fact quite unprepared for its new declaration. From the outset, the Museum itself was particularly challenged by the concept of feminism and feminist art, and its staff struggled enormously with the implications of housing a dedicated space for feminist art, perceived by many as separatist (versus integrative), despite my efforts to the contrary (e.g., I co-curated two exhibitions with colleagues in the Egyptian and Ancient Near Eastern departments in an effort to work collaboratively and to demonstrate how feminist methodological approaches can be utilized in other historical periods).<sup>6</sup>



What *was* feminist art, the staff challenged, over and over again? What does it look like? I explained, repeatedly, that feminism is a subjective, context-related term, and that what is feminist to one is not necessarily feminist to another, often using Madonna as an example. Feminist art should not be perceived as a threat, I would argue, and the mission of the Center would be to enact a new institutional emphasis on equality, which I believed might be simple for everyone to grasp—the Museum staff and our public alike. I emphasized the word “feminisms” in the plural as my curatorial mission in the hopes that all would understand that feminist art was a term that was irreducible to one definition, and that it came in many guises. However, as we know, feminist art is not an easy concept to digest for the majority of people. My challenge was to present it in such a way that the institution itself would, at the very least, support my short-term efforts to launch the Center in 2007. Once it opened, I knew that I would have a separate battle on my hands, principally because feminist art would then be on display in all its glory, and not necessarily as non-threatening and “lite” as they had perhaps hoped. How to sustain continued support from within the institution from that point onward would be a new challenge, along with the task of presenting feminism to the public at large.

**Amelia Jones:** Following on this history and outlining of the tensions in relation to the Sackler Center, where do each of you see your respective exhibitions fitting in the above-mentioned shift in feminist histories? In relation to, say, the historical feminist shows in Europe/US in the 1990s (my *Sexual Politics* show and *Inside the Visible*, both in 1996, being the most obvious examples, as they were probably the largest shows).

**Connie Butler:** I see *Wack!* as part of a larger history of curatorial projects, starting in the early 1990s, which began to rewrite postwar art histories from an international perspective. Those two exhibitions were important touchstones for me curatorially. *Sexual Politics* brought Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* to greater relevance through contemporary women artists. What impacted me deeply was seeing it at the opening, for the first time, with my own mother and understanding the power it still has cross-generationally. *Inside the Visible* was an inspiration in its structure—what curator Catherine de Zegher called an “elliptical traverse” across the century, again a way of seeing the historical through the contemporary, an intervention in history. These are feminist ideas. One of the things I think was influential about *Wack!* was how fresh the work looked and how relevant to all kinds of viewers.

**Maura Reilly:** While Linda Nochlin and I found inspiration in large group shows dedicated to feminist artistic production, like *Sexual Politics* and *Bad Girls*, the past exhibitions that we looked to for inspiration were ones more concerned with notions of “intersectionality, difference, identity politics, postcolonialism, and transnationalism. Thus we turned to *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (1990), *Magiciens de la terre* (1989), the Whitney Biennial of 1993, *Documenta 11* (Kassel 2002), and the Venice Biennale of 2005.<sup>8</sup> Thus our curatorial mission was different from Connie’s. I see *Wack!* more in the lineage of landmark exhibitions like Ann Sutherland-Harris and Nochlin’s *Women Artists, 1550–1950* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976), and *Personal and Political: The Women’s Art Movement 1969–1971* (noted above)—ones that highlighted the masculinism of the art historical canon and its underlying sexism. Like them, it was an exhibition that expanded the Western canon to include what it had hitherto excluded, women and feminists. Ours was a curatorial project that sought to address sexism, as well, but also racism and Euro-American-centrism simultaneously.

**Amelia Jones:** Maura, can you say more about the concept of the global so crucial to you in organizing *Global Feminisms*? Was it your idea? . . . Can you, with this question, relate the relevance of feminist visual culture studies to broader social shifts? (I know you can, as the entire catalogue is a brilliant insistence on this relationship.)



**Maura Reilly:** Deciding on the subject of the inaugural exhibition was difficult. I knew that it had to be a *major* exhibition that would make a significant statement about the current state of feminist art. I always knew that I would not do an historical exhibition, even before knowing that Connie was working on *Wack!* Why? Because it would have been too obvious, and I'm never one for that. It needed to say something new and, most importantly, hopefully something that could help push the discourse in a new direction.

Inviting Linda Nochlin to co-curate the inaugural exhibition seemed obvious. She had been my mentor when I was a graduate student at the Institute of Fine Arts in the 1990s, and the intergenerational examination of the current state of feminist art seemed irresistible. (There is a thirty-seven-year difference between us.) Besides, the very first museum survey dedicated to women artists (the *Women Artists 1550–1950* show noted above) had been curated by Nochlin (and Sutherland-Harris) in 1976 for Los Angeles County Museum of Art, but then traveled to the Brooklyn Museum in 1977, exactly thirty years prior to the Center's opening.

What could we learn if we were to place these two exhibitions as bookends, we asked? And, as is the inevitable question asked always in the presence of Linda Nochlin, how far have women artists come since she wrote her canonical essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists" in 1971?<sup>9</sup> What we concluded was this: Certainly, women have achieved greater recognition and visibility in the Western art world over the course of the last half of a century. However, it must be stated that the majority of those advances have been bestowed on women from and in the privileged centers. The conspicuous marginalization of large constituencies of women can no longer be ignored, and we insisted that an understanding of co-implicated histories and identities, as well as "common differences," is crucial to a rethinking of feminism and contemporary art in an age of increased globalization.

With this in mind, it was decided that the inaugural exhibition must take transnationalism and feminisms as its curatorial project—to acknowledge the major shifts in feminist theory and practice that have occurred over the last few decades with the introduction of post-colonial and antiracist ideas, shifts that resulted in feminism's global mandate. The fortuitous coincidence of the anniversary of the *Women Artists* exhibition was another inspiration because it highlighted those shifts within feminist discourse by pointing specifically to a switch in emphasis from the 1970s interest in challenging the masculinism of the art-historical canon and its exclusion of women artists to the more recent interest in the early 1990s, after decades of work by feminists of color in every discipline, in querying the white Euro-American-centrism of the always already masculinist canon.

Those versed in the visual culture of specific regions were invited to contribute to the catalogue because Linda and I believed that it was presumptuous of us to assume to understand what it means to "be a feminist" in Thailand or Kenya, or to even begin to analyze sociocultural or economic situations for women in countries outside our frame of reference. As such, the form and content of the catalogue followed that of the exhibition: it was dialogic and discursive. It was conceptualized as a polylogue (versus a monologue), as an interplay of voices—from Costa Rica, India, Japan, Czechoslovakia, Korea, France—that would (we hoped) enact a feminist intervention in the canon of contemporary art.

**Amelia Jones:** Connie, following on Maura's description of working at the Sackler Center and on *Global Feminisms*, can you discuss your experience of curating *Wack!*?

**Connie Butler:** The experience curating the exhibition was both easier and more complex than I had imagined. What I did not expect was that the research would be finite. I expected to "discover" an endless amount of material and artists who were virtually overlooked and unknown. The good news is that in their own communities these women have a group of



devoted friends, other artists, critics, a curator, or collector who have nurtured their work or kept it alive in the collective memory.

Other anecdotes come to mind, some hilarious and some very poignant. The very well known and arguably successful artist who said she had worked for years and come so far, why would she be in an exhibition with only women artists and "slide back"? I found this heartbreaking but emblematic of a fear common to many of the artists I spoke to—the history was so fresh for many of them they saw no way out of the pitfalls and politics which had surrounded their involvement in the movement the first time and did not understand how a historian of another generation, could possibly navigate them. What I argued for was claiming the territory they forged and owning it—that this could be empowering and a way to secure their place in one of the very important histories they represent.

Another artist, well known and associated more with the 1980s generation of feminist activity, questioned the word "revolution" in the exhibition's title. It was monolithic and male-identified, which is, of course, precisely the reason I chose it. But she argued that the revolution was not singular but that many revolutions occurred over time, relating to the vicissitudes of geographical location and affiliation. This artist was the only one who declined participation in the exhibition, which was amazing to me. I thought, given the resistance to the use of the word "feminist" in the title—the other most frequent conversation I had along the way—I expected more women to pull out. Another well known artist who has lived in France for many years tried hard to get me to change the title to something less explicit: something that was more poetic and less American, perhaps.

In the end I argued that you have to call it what it is and was. It was not only an exhibition of women artists. All of the work in the exhibition was in dialogue with feminist discourse in some way. It's true it was not an exhibition only of feminist art, and the title reflected that. One of the first questions many of the artists asked was whether the exhibition would include the work of their male colleagues. This sometimes functioned as an ice breaker—wary of me, they would start by aligning themselves with the men. But really I think that what many of them wanted as younger emerging artists was to be shown with their male colleagues. They felt at the time and still feel that to show with all women in the context of feminism is potentially ghettoizing. Of course, in the end, they all agreed to participate in the exhibition, recognizing that the time had come to historicize and contextualize their work in feminist terms.

The question of the men really interests me and I did consider the inclusion of male artists until near the end of organizing the exhibition. In the end it's a numbers game. I felt the show had to stay a certain size for coherence and if you include a certain number of men, say fifteen out of 100, that's fifteen women you can't represent and I was not willing to give that up. But I did start to envision clusters where one might look at Lynda Benglis's use of the floor, for example with Carl Andre's. Or Claus Oldenburg's soft sculpture bumping up against Hannah Wilke's latex forms.

**Amelia Jones:** Interesting show that would be—although it's important to stress that Andre and Oldenburg are hardly feminists! On my part, I'm particularly interested in the fact that, Maura, you are slightly younger than myself and Connie. (I was born 1961, Barack Obama's birth year!) and that perhaps your approach for *Global Feminisms*, which seems like second nature to you, is at odds with the frameworks of some older-generation feminists who are understandably, given the politics of what they were fighting in the 1970s, invested in a binary and coalitional conception of gender as a singular and knowable attribute. Younger generation feminists who came of age in the 1980s and following, such as myself, are suspicious of this



concept of gender as singular and separable from other aspects of experience—in fact, speaking of Obama, the 2009 election, particularly the Democratic primary (Obama versus Hillary Clinton) and the main election after Sarah Palin was appointed John McCain's running mate, was testament to the imbrication of gender in race and class on all levels of understanding and experience.

Maura, in terms of generations, do generational shifts have anything to do with this sudden resurgence of interest in feminist art on the part of institutions in the United States, Europe, and even South Africa recently? How do you see your work at Sackler and the *Global Feminisms* show fitting into this (or not)? What is the role of feminist *curating* in this shift, as opposed to feminist art histories and feminist visual theory, both of which have been trundling along in academia since the 1970s (and in some cases are quite institutionalized)?

**Maura Reilly:** On generations—I'm forty years old (born in 1968), so I am a bit younger . . . and perhaps my global perspective does come as second nature because of that . . . But it could also be simply personal. I'm an individual who is deeply concerned with equality, and someone who dedicates herself to a curatorial activism that embraces strategies for presenting work by underrepresented artists—e.g., women, feminists, persons of color, non-Euro-Americans, and so on. To me, equality is a core value of feminism, in general, and should extend beyond sex/gender to include race, class, ethnicity, and any other marginalized positions.

**Connie Butler:** I don't think the global versus international perspectives of *Global Feminisms* and *Wack!*, respectively, have so much to do with the generations of the curators, though our five-year difference in age may indeed indicate a partial generational shift. I think, in fact, it has more to do with the historical time periods that our shows address, the 1970s and the present. *Wack!* was as global as it could have been for that moment. Political and cultural feminism simply did not occur in many places outside of the West in the 1970s. There were, for example, Japanese, Latin American, and Indian artists in *Wack!* but no Chinese, African, Soviet, etc. I think that more than a decade of global exhibition making, however, does deeply inform the curatorial reach of *Wack!*, such as it was.

There was a point, very early on, when I considered making a show of feminist art as it occurred in the United States. Very quickly I realized that this was not interesting to pursue either as a curator or viewer. After everything we now know about international cultural histories, isn't a more integrated and internationalized and complicated art history what we all want? This is how I came to the structure of an exhibition that would make the case for simultaneous feminisms. Amelia, your *Sexual Politics* show laid the groundwork for the American feminist survey but complicated that story through a chronology that incorporated practices from the 1970s to the present yet maintaining a foundation in Judy Chicago's conception of feminist art, central core imagery and so on. And that show was now more than a decade ago. With *Wack!* I really thought that the only show I wanted to do was an international one—and this reflected the much more diverse and transnational discourse that was feminist thought at the time. In the 1970s, artists were exhibiting, maybe not globally, but certainly in Europe, the United States, Latin America and the anglophone countries. It's so clear that it's not a singular history dominated by the United States and United Kingdom, for example, nor is gender a binary proposition. It wasn't in the 1970s either but that's a story that hasn't been fully explored.

**Amelia Jones:** Well, I do want to go on record about *Sexual Politics*, which had a very fraught reception at the time and has continued to be either erased or, at least in relation to my motivations, misunderstood—I take this as a sign of the show's failure to convey what I hoped to articulate, the very specific framework I lay out at length in my essays in the catalogue.



Rather than suggesting that all Euro-American feminist art was somehow pivoting around Chicago's *Dinner Party*, I took the mandate to exhibit the piece on the part of the UCLA/Hammer Art Gallery (which was the show's genesis) as an opportunity to look at the larger issues of central core imagery, collaboration, and authorship, and "kitsch" or "domestic" art-making strategies raised in criticism surrounding *Dinner Party* as a particularly charged and hotly debated example of feminist art—I hoped to do this by including the work of a range of other feminist artists. What I didn't realize was that complex justifications such as this are not apparent in the show itself—hence it was continually read and criticized as positing a history stemming from, or pivoting around, the *Dinner Party*. I've been frustrated by my failure to make my points clear ever since, but I can in retrospect see the problem and understand my failure more clearly.

On the question of curating and feminism, I'm interested in why the resurgence of interest in feminism over the five years since 2004 has, in fact, taken the form of curating/exhibitions first and foremost? Perhaps there is a particular mode of "activation" that is crucial right now? Or perhaps this is just related to the vicissitudes of who gets to be a curator, and when (as opposed to the presence or absence of feminist art historians in academia, for example).

**Connie Butler:** This is a question that raises interesting other issues like why certain academies or collecting patterns of major institutions have been so slow to consider feminist discourse, while this discourse has come first, this time around, in the form of exhibitions in mainstream institutions. I was so fascinated by the coverage of our shows and the "year" of feminist projects as it unfolded in the art magazines: who was first, who was last, and who clearly added it on because the magazine knew it had to be on board. I wondered if the *October* "roundtable" series, for example, would ever take on the feminist shows—but it was *Grey Room* that actually did the academic roundtable, which ended up being the among the first really serious critical considerations *Wack!* received.<sup>10</sup> I always loved the idea of the *Dinner Party* coming to roost at the Brooklyn Museum partly because it would put it in New York in the economic and intellectual center of the American art world because the academy could no longer ignore it and feminist art. And of course, the founding of the Sackler Center insured this.

**Maura Reilly:** It has always fascinated me how many people have paired me with Connie in articles, panels, etc., as the curators of *Global Feminisms* and *Wack!* retrospectively. It makes sense, in some regard, since they were the largest feminist art shows in 2007. However, I believe strongly that the historical import of the founding of the first center dedicated to the exhibition of feminist art at a major museum should never be equated with, or overshadowed by, an exhibition like *Global Feminisms* and/or *Wack!* (In the same way that I believe my many years of work there should not be reduced to one exhibition when I curated a total of six, including the critically acclaimed *Ghada Amer: Love Has No End* and *Burning Down the House: Building a Feminist Art Collection*, which showcased many of the works that I solicited as gifts to the Museum over the years.)

It interests me also that only a few critics truly understood the curatorial mission behind *Global Feminisms*. I knew that we were putting forth an innovative curatorial concept, but I had no idea how few people would grasp it, including some critics I admire. I suppose it has more to do with the complexity of the theoretical approach. *Global Feminisms* was not a feminist lite show! It was not a washed-down, consumable version of feminism, as with Catherine de Zegher's show [*Inside the Visible*]. Postcolonial feminisms is a theme that calls attention to the art world's inherent racist and sexist biases. Most people are not self-critical and are unable to open themselves up to new ways of thinking; instead they react angrily, disdainfully, or in a patronizing fashion. However, all of the exhibitions that I have admired in the past have met with a similar



maelstrom of criticism—the *Bad Girls* shows, *Black Male*, *The Decade Show*, and so forth.<sup>11</sup> And each of those is a benchmark exhibition that precipitated a major paradigm shift. Moreover, it took years before the impact of those shows was perceived. I think *Global Feminisms* will have a similar history. Its catalogue—and introductory essays—will live on as an archive of our curatorial mission.

This leads me to a question for Connie. The catalogue for *Wack!* is enormous and chockfull of fabulous essays by prominent scholars, but I'm curious as to why you chose not to write a lengthy, theoretical, historically grounded introduction that explained your curatorial strategy in detail? It seems it was an opportunity to completely redefine the history of 1970s feminism and yet you chose not to. I wonder why?

**Connie Butler:** The text I did not write, and that I hope to write at some point, would focus on the trajectory and influence of 1970s feminist practice. How did, for example, the activities of Lucy Lippard impact what we now find as common nomadic, collective, participatory impulses in current practice and international biennial making? What about the return of craft-based strategies for the early 1990s reworks of 1970s feminist art? I believe my introduction to the catalogue focuses specifically on the curatorial strategy underlying the show. Given the very contested nature of the subject, we (the catalogue editor Lisa Mark and I) felt it was important to anticipate and answer, as clearly as possible, questions about structure, research, our definition of feminist art versus art informed by feminism, and so on. I feel very good about the transparency of the text and it has served the exhibition well. I was also not interested in being definitive. There are questions laid out within the structure of the exhibition and posed by the works themselves and, while certain narratives might have been made more explicit, I am now interested in the logic of the archive that informs the show and its reception.

**Maura Reilly:** As to your earlier question, Amelia, regarding the prominent role of feminist curating at this specific historical moment, that's easy: curating is theory/history put into action. It's proactive versus passive, in my opinion.

**Amelia Jones:** I like the idea of curating as "theory/history put into action," but theory/history in my view also have their own place as proactive and activating, at their best. In what way are theory/history "passive"? I would have to disagree with that implication, though perhaps this opposition is not what you meant to imply. Isn't curating, particularly of a variety connected with an activist politics such as feminism, simply another mode of enacting theories and histories through a choreographing of works, a writing of new histories through display (and the catalogue, of course, which is a mode of scholarship, becomes a document of intellectual endeavor)? Maura, perhaps you could say more about the specific politics of feminism in the art world, as you see them, and how you feel curating best enacts this politics?

**Maura Reilly:** I'm not sure I meant to imply that theory/history are "passive" (though I do think we could get into a discussion about "his-story" as an inherently problematic term) . . . But I do mean to say, emphatically, that curating, when performed at its best, can be an activation of theory and political praxis. I think there are very few curators, however, who think of their practice as political, as activist, perhaps because most are working within/for the traditional (read white, Western, masculinist) market/canon as opposed to working against it.

Yes, I do agree that theory (again, not so sure about "history") can be proactive and activating. I think here of the ways in which postcolonial and critical race theory jumpstarted and continually activated the entire *Global Feminisms* project, from start to finish. Politically driven curatorial practices can be an enactment or performance of theory using artworks in an exhibition space as visual examples. (I'm thinking here of Marcia Tucker's *Bad*



*Girls* exhibition at the New Museum in New York, which enacted Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of the carnivalesque, or *Global Feminisms*, which tried to perform a postcolonial feminist approach.)

As for your question about how curating might best enact the politics of feminism in the art world: I guess I believe that curating allows for a presentation of (politically engaged) works to a large audience (or larger than, say, a classroom), over an extended period of time (with a tour, at times), with the possibility of public programming, press (if at a major venue and a critical show), and a publication (the show's "afterlife"). If such exhibitions take place in major cities, then the combination of all of these things reaches a larger and specifically more diverse audience than a book, article, or symposium on the same subject. I guess for me I always return to the question of audience. Who is receiving the information? Are they the "converted"?

**Connie Butler:** I like what Maura says about curating being theory/history put into action. This goes back to bell hooks' idea of "feminist movement," which I understand to inspire an active or activist model of curating. I take this as a call to action—to the understanding of history and histories as malleable, porous, and to the understanding of one's practice as a curator to be framed by a healthy ambivalence and interrogation of power and the structures that create art history. Richard Shiff's essay on what he calls "Doubt" is really the framing of one's own practice as interrogative and self-critical.<sup>12</sup> I find this to be an incredibly productive idea and comfortable place to situate myself. Theory is never passive, it seems to me. It is a text (many texts) that are available not to fix a position but rather to use freely and variously as needed.

I have been thinking in response to the other most asked question—is there such a thing as a feminist curatorial practice?—that there is now a generation of male and female curators whose work is deeply imprinted by feminist ideas and whose work within institutions is self-critical and political within these contexts in potentially transformative ways. Lucy Lippard, in particular, comes to mind as a writer and curator without whose history much of the activist and collective work of the late 1980s and early 1990s would not have been possible. It is this kind of antihierarchical, deeply critical, and even intentionally destabilized voice I am interested in. I suppose too that the conservative moment we have just passed through in terms of the market's interests has generated an equal but opposing interest in the kind of objects associated with conceptual art and feminist practice. When the market begins to collapse under its own weight, more speculative practices and artists are able to emerge . . .

**Amelia Jones:** Connie, can you say more about why you chose to do a historical show—why in 2007 was this an imperative?

**Connie Butler:** My initial interest in making a historical show really came from the artists I was looking at in the early 1990s moment which I have characterized above as a full-circle one in terms of an interest in the 1970s. There is always the twenty-to-thirty-year lag in terms of a mining of historical moments by art historians and my generation of historians was just turning to this period. Thinking about what art-historical territory, postwar, had not been examined, the feminist 1970s seemed a glaring omission. It was a show that had to be done and that no one seemed to be stepping up to do though very important projects like your own *Sexual Politics*, *Inside the Visible*, and others had taken on major pieces of this history. Not that I intended to be comprehensive or even believe in that possibility. But it just seemed like this show had to happen before other smaller, more local, more integrated male and female, exhibitions could happen.

**Amelia Jones:** Can you also discuss briefly the trajectory of *Wack!*—when did you conceive the show? Why did it take so long to bring to fruition?



**Connie Butler:** The trajectory of *Wack!* . . . I think 1996 was the year the idea was hatched, which I remember because it was part of a mid-career reassessment of things I wanted to accomplish before I was forty. This did not happen, as life intervened, which is always part of the story. Ironically, when I told people I wanted to organize a blockbuster on the subject of feminist art I was told that it was career suicide, yet I persisted in believing that feminist art could be made accessible, historical, and yet relevant to a younger generation. I had emerged in my own career with a generation of artists with whom I shared a lack of knowledge about this material that clearly we all found so generative and vital. At that time, the process of recuperating the 1970s had really just begun, with exhibitions like *Sexual Politics* and even earlier the *Difference* exhibition of 1984. So it was partly out of a sheer craving for more access to the art itself.

I received one of the first Getty curatorial research grants, which lent institutional validation to the whole enterprise early in the process. I had relocated to the west coast, to Los Angeles, where there is a strong history of feminist activity and also a relationship to history that is different than on the east coast. The west coast is always in a process of rewriting itself into history, so originating a project on feminist art histories in Los Angeles made sense in all kinds of ways. And I don't think this show would have happened in New York ten years ago.

It took so long partly because one never works on a single project at a time. I am a person who produces and thinks through the making of projects, so I always have more than one, and often very different, curatorial project going at once. The arc of one's career is weird to the extent you can control it, which is not very much. Mierle Ukeles e-mailed me recently saying that someone had asked her if she felt overdetermined as a feminist after this recent period of exhibitions and excavation of feminist material. I don't feel overdetermined as a feminist but I may feel overdetermined as a feminist curator or as a curator of feminist art.

The issue of timing of exhibitions I find fascinating as it's so critical yet so elusive. It did seem that by the time the show was postponed a few times because of funding and scheduling issues, once it was clear it would fall during a second Bush administration, that this timing would make it more urgent and the issues fresher than ever. It was a time when the audience and artists were craving strategies and a moment when real change seemed possible and radical work could make an impact. The incredible and still ongoing nostalgia for the 1960s and 1970s certainly worked in our favor as well, though by the time Hillary Clinton was running against Barack Obama I felt funny being aligned with second-generation feminist strategies when it was clearly so much cooler and more inspiring to imagine new political models. I'm oversimplifying but there's some truth to this in terms of how the show played out.

**Amelia Jones:** Yes, I've argued elsewhere that one aspect of the retrieval of feminist art in the 2000s is the search for models of radical practice and theory in the Bush era—particularly after 9/11, when the reactionism of the United States (and to a lesser extent of the United Kingdom) dominated the world stage.<sup>13</sup>

**Connie Butler:** One very basic issue that stays with me is the responsibility we have to artists as much as to art history. I don't know how you or Maura feel but I have a daily beat, just an internalized mandate to keep this work on the table in terms of acquisition, exhibition, just keeping the discourse present in the institution. This is the feminist future, if there is one. **Amelia Jones:** That's a lovely ending! Here's to a feminist future, in this institutional sense, but also in the intersectional sense noted by Maura earlier.



## Notes

- 1 Jones explores this resurgence of interest at length, and notes numerous exhibitions, conferences, and art magazine issues to bolster this point, in her essay "The Return of Feminism(s) and the Visual Arts 1970/2009," in *Feminisms: Historiography and Curatorial Practice*, ed. Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe and Malin Hedlin Hayden (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, forthcoming), a revised and expanded version of "1970/2007: The Legacy of Feminist Art," *Gender Battle*, ed. Juan Vicente Aliaga (Santiago de Compostela, Spain: Contemporary Art Centre of Galicia, 2007).
- 2 The UK *Bad Girls* show (curator unknown) was apparently organized completely independently of the US versions, which were conceived as sister shows. *Bad Girls* took place in 1994 at the New Museum in New York, curated by Marcia Tucker, and (as *Bad Girls West*) at the Wight Art Gallery (UCLA), curated by Marcia Tanner.
- 3 *Division of Labor* was curated by Lydia Yee.
- 4 [*Personal and Political* took place in 2002 at the Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, Long Island; *Gloria and Regarding Gloria* (a follow-up show including work by younger women artists) were held at White Columns Gallery in New York City, 2002–03.—Ed.]
- 5 [In her forthcoming 2008 catalogue essay "Notes from the Inside: Building a Center for Feminist Art," Reilly adds: "The Center's mission is simply to raise awareness of feminism's artistic contributions; to maintain a dynamic and welcoming Center; and to make feminism approachable and relevant to a diverse audience of all ages. By offering extensive educational and public programming, as well as interactive Web components, and a dynamic exhibition schedule, the Center's programs aim to inspire and educate current and future generations about the living legacy of feminist art and ideas." Reilly's essay will be published in *La mirada iracunda* (The Furious Gaze), eds. Xabier Arakistain and Maura Reilly (Vitoria-Gasteiz: Centro Cultural Montehermoso de Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2009).—Ed.]
- 6 *Pharaohs, Queens, and Goddesses*, co-curated with Edward Bleiberg (February 3, 2007–February 3, 2008) and *The Fertile Goddess*, co-curated with Madeleine Cody (December 19, 2008–May 31, 2009).
- 7 [The full title of the exhibition was *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine*; see the catalogue by this title, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).—Ed.]
- 8 [*The Decade Show*, 1990, was a joint venture among the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Studio Museum Harlem, and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, New York; *Magiciens de la terre* took place at the Pompidou Center in Paris.—Ed.]
- 9 [Reprinted numerous times, including in Nochlin's *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).—Ed.]
- 10 [Rosalyn Deutsche, Aruna D'Souza, Miwon Kwon, Ulrike Müller, Mignon Nixon, Senam Okudzeto "Feminist Time: A Conversation," *Grey Room* 31 (spring 2008): 32–67.—Ed.]
- 11 [The *Bad Girls* and *Decade Show* are noted above; *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, curated by Thelma Golden, was organized for the Whitney Museum, New York in 1994–95.—Ed.]
- 12 Richard Schiff, *Doubt*, from the series *Theories of Modernism and Postmodernism in the Visual Arts*, Vol. III (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).
- 13 See Jones, "The Return of Feminism(s) and the Visual Arts, 1970/2009."

**[Editor's Note:** A coda: after this book went to press, the Centre Pompidou in Paris opened a major show of work by women artists drawn from its own permanent collection entitled *elles@centrepompidou*—the first exhibition organized by a major art gallery in France of art by women. Organized by Pompidou curator Camille Morineau, the exhibition was accompanied by a large catalogue in French and English versions: *elles@centrepompidou: Women Artists in the Collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre de Création Industrielle* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2009). Morineau apparently spent years proposing a thematic feminist exhibition at the Pompidou and was only in the end able to organize a show that is only surreptitiously feminist (all of the work in the show made after 1960 is deeply informed by feminism, if not explicitly in all cases feminist); I am grateful to Morineau for discussing the genesis of the show with me in Paris, 1 October, 2009. The anxiety over feminism is indicated in the Preface to the catalogue by Alfred Pacquement, Director of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, who notes that the plethora of important works by women in their permanent collections signals "a possible development of a history of art in the feminine," only to backtrack schizophrenically: "it is [now] possible to unfold a full and entire history of art with 'elles.' A history about which there is nothing feminine at all" (13).]