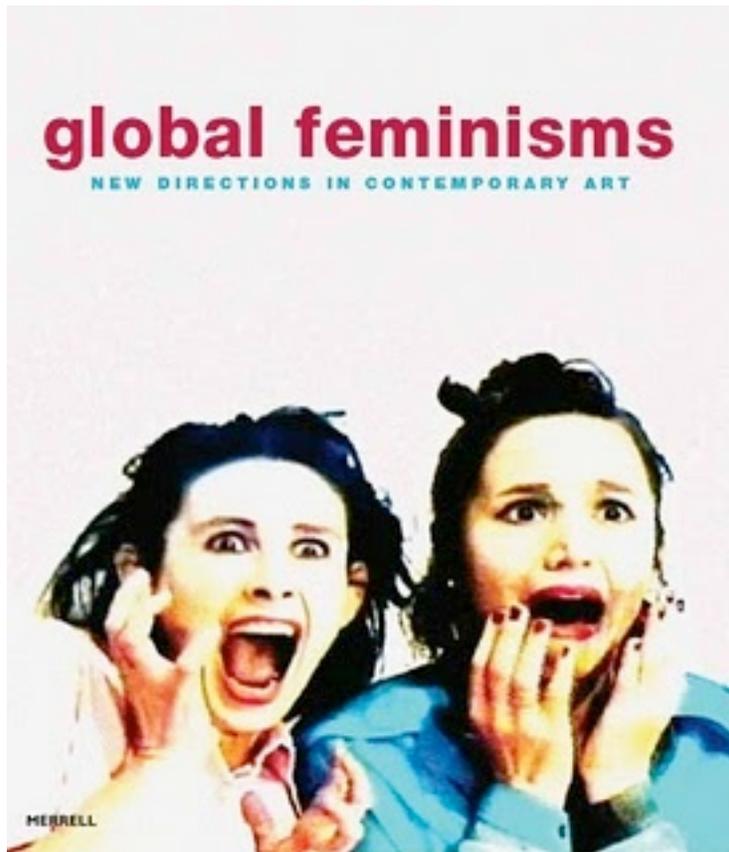


Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin, "Curators' Preface," *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, pp. 10–13.





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Curators' Preface

Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin

This exhibition is the joint enterprise of two women, one younger, Maura Reilly, Curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum; and the other older, Linda Nochlin, Lila Acheson Wallace Professor of Modern Art at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. Our relationship is secured not only by our co-curatorship of the show *Global Feminisms*, but by our long personal history of common intellectual passions and feminist pursuits. Dr. Reilly was the doctoral student of Professor Nochlin, and as is so often the case, the teacher learned much from her student, especially about new, more complex attitudes toward feminism itself, and about a younger generation of artists who embodied these attitudes. The show, then, is the product of what one might call intergenerational feminist approaches. We both were convinced that only a major exhibition of women artists was appropriate for the opening of the Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, the only such exhibition space in any American museum. We wanted to signal the pioneering enterprise of the Center by focusing its first show around younger women artists and work done since 1990, thereby looking to the present and future rather than the past; and we wanted, above all, to make the show a transnational one in the fullest sense of the word, rather than emphasizing the contribution of American and European artists.

The aim of our show is suggested by its title, *Global Feminisms*. Although there have been shows of women artists and, indeed, feminist shows before, there have not been such shows with the ambition to include art from all areas of the world, not just the West. By making feminism a plural noun, we mean to imply that there is not a single, unitary feminism any more than there is a timeless, universal "woman," but rather, that there are varied, multiple, unstable constructions of female subjects and their predicaments and situations.

The concept of difference lies at the heart of our project as a positive factor—not just the difference between men and women, but even more, the differences

among women themselves: differences between women from non-Western cultures and European and American women; and, just as interesting and important, differences among women artists within and between cultures, races, ethnicities, classes, and so forth. We did not expect women from Bolivia or Pakistan to exhibit specific ethnic traits in their art, any more than we expected the same from an artist from the U.S.; to do so would have been naïve and patronizing. Yet we were open to, and very interested in, the varying and innovative ways that women from diverse parts of the world self-consciously deployed the visual culture they had inherited to create new, often critical visual expressions.

We were anxious to explore the range of differences among women artists within a specific age group: younger artists, women born since 1960. At the same time, we sought out the profound differences in formal structure created by the use of new media, or by approaching old media in a new way. Hence the exhibition contains a great many examples of photography, of video, of installation, of performance art as well as painting and sculpture. So differences of class, race, age, nationality, and media are illuminated by being presented together, so that viewers, comparing and contrasting, will be provoked into asking themselves and each other hard questions about their usual assumptions about contemporary art. Difference also implies the differences existing between the feminist art of today and that of the past: these younger, cosmopolitan women artists may or may not be overt in their critique of patriarchy and the subordination of women by national policies or religious traditions. Our understanding of feminist art is more flexible and open than that of the past. The binaries—oppressor/victim, good woman/bad man, pure/impure, beautiful/ugly, active/passive—are not the point of feminist art today, as this exhibition reveals. Ambiguity, androgyny, self-consciousness, both formal and psychic, are necessary in the challenge to thought and practice that constitutes feminist art production.

In *Global Feminisms* we are trying to construct a definition of “feminist” that is as broad and flexible as possible. Openness, multiculturalism, and variety are the names of the game. By this we do not mean that “anything goes”; on the contrary. But we do not mean that we want to restrict our definition to work that has an overtly or simplistic “feminist” content. This is not to say that we have excluded such work from the exhibition. It is simply that we believe that there is a much broader range of work with feminist implications than a narrow definition would stipulate. Moreover, we believe it is necessary to have a wide-ranging, flexible, and broad interpretation in order to accommodate work by women from different cultures, ethnicities, classes, countries, and so on. What counts as “feminist” in one context may be understood differently in another. What we have in mind is that there are other modes of expression, other formal languages, other urgencies, engaged by feminist art, than those pursued by non-feminist production, and these include ethnic and national issues as well as “feminist” ones. It is the sense of work as critique, involving gender issues not necessarily overt but underlying, that marks nearly all of the art in this exhibition. Thus we have included artists with a more direct feminist agenda as well as ones who do not proclaim themselves as feminists but definitely raise feminist and gender issues in their work.

Global Feminisms is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of contemporary feminist art worldwide. To attempt to do so in a single exhibition would clearly be impossible. Despite our best efforts there are major gaps in representation. There are no artists, for instance, from Uzbekistan, the Dominican Republic, Nigeria, Iceland, Peru, Laos, and many other countries. The show should be seen rather as a compilation, serving to introduce to the public a select group of women artists—some established in the Western art market, others not, or less so—from every inhabited continent. In many ways, it seeks to introduce a new generation of women artists to a public unfamiliar with

work outside the elite spaces of Manhattan galleries. The fact that some of the women artists from non-Western countries in our exhibition show or have dealers in the art capitals of the Western world—Paris, New York, Berlin, London—is a sign that they are in the vanguard of their places of national origin. Far from “selling out,” they are moving in, changing the standards and values of the art world itself by bringing new visions and languages to bear on the problems of today. The issues confronted by these women, their styles of address, their relationship to feminism, their position in the art world, and the world in general, vary enormously. While the majority of the artists in the exhibition were born outside of North America and Europe, many of those have migrated from their homelands for various personal and political reasons to European or American locations, or they live as hybrid subjects in a liminal space between here and elsewhere.

The works we chose for the exhibition were informed by previous knowledge, extensive research, travel, and, above all, dialogue, between ourselves and with others. In an effort to work against the negative stereotype of the curator-as-explorer—or worse, neocolonialist—we sought instead to pursue our goal of mounting a global exhibition by positioning ourselves as “mediators of cultural exchange,” to use Gerardo Mosquera’s phrase. In other words, from the outset, we turned to specialists outside our areas of expertise and admitted our own limitations. When we initially sat down to brainstorm the show, for instance, we were struck by how little we knew about feminists working outside of the European and North American contexts. While our knowledge of international contemporary feminist art is extensive, there were large regions of the world with whose artistic production we were unfamiliar. As so-called experts in the field, we nevertheless could not say what feminist art looked like in Jakarta, Kinshasa, Guatemala City, or Santiago. Did the women identify themselves as feminists? Were there recurring issues that women were interested in transculturally? Were women in different countries at

varying stages of feminist consciousness, and were such differences reflected in their work?

To answer these and many other questions, we realized that we had to push ourselves not to be afraid of the unfamiliar and to keep rethinking what it must mean to be a woman in radically different socio-cultural, political, racial, and class situations. At the same time, we recognized that any attempt to provide a single, constrictive definition of feminism would be fatal to our project. The multiple meanings of feminism would arrive “in situation,” to borrow an existential locution, and indeed they have. With each individual work, each artist, we have provided the basis for exploring the term in context, not as some abstract, general concept.

We knew, too, from the outset, that we wanted to start first with those artists less known on the international art scene, and to decide on the European and American artists last. In order to learn about artists outside the purview of our prior knowledge, we sought the assistance and participation of numerous specialists and local advisors from around the world, including scholars, curators, artists, theorists, gallerists, museum directors, collectors, and graduate students, using the Internet as a primary mode of communication. The regional specialist’s understanding of the socio-economic-political contexts and local languages within which the works by the women artists were being produced proved invaluable and broadened the sample base of artists from which to choose, often before we traveled to the region for studio visits or to solicit proposals. The critical dialogue of exchange that ensued with these advisors added the necessary breadth to the project as a whole, and allowed for an ensemble of perspectives to emerge,

forcing us to see works anew when situated and contextualized culturally.

Our experience with these local-global advisors in turn inspired us to invite mostly non-Western authors to contribute to this catalogue, to assist in presenting a broader socio-cultural understanding of the works on view. In other words, we admitted that we were not professionally equipped to contextualize work by artists from across the globe—and so we turned again to the specialists. The result is a catalogue made up of a series of essays covering various geographic regions, from Central America to Africa, India, East and Southeast Asia, Japan, and Eastern and Western Europe. Like the exhibition itself, the catalogue does not pretend to be comprehensive but rather aims to offer what we hope are some of the first of many such regional overviews of contemporary feminist artistic production.

It is our wish that *Global Feminisms*, rather than being the end of a trajectory of recent feminist exhibitions (which began with *Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art in the 1970s* and *Personal and Political: The Women’s Art Movement, 1969–1975*, both in 2002), will, on the contrary, open the way for further projects and endeavors, providing a salutary precedent for future curatorial activism with a transnational focus. Above all, it is our profound hope that this show constitutes not merely a revelation of the creative energy of women and their art throughout the world, but equally, a reclamation of difference as a major positive force in the human situation, rather than a crippling predicament. It is only through the acceptance of difference and a distribution of its production that art, and society, can change.

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