

art journal

Published by the College Art Association
Winter 1991 Vol. 50 No. 4



art journal

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Art Journal (ISSN 0004-3249) is published quarterly by College Art Association, Inc., 275 Seventh Ave., New York, NY 10001. Copyright © 1991, College Art Association, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of the contents may be reproduced without the written permission of the publisher. Second-class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Printed by Waverly Press, Easton, Maryland.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Art Journal*, 275 Seventh Ave., New York, NY 10001.

Art Journal is available as a benefit of membership in the College Art Association. Subscriptions for nonmembers, \$30 per year (foreign postage add \$6); single issues, \$8. For membership and subscription information, call or write CAA, 275 Seventh Ave., New York, NY 10001; 212/691-1051.

Correspondence for *Art Journal* should be addressed to the Executive Editor at the College Art Association. Because each issue of *Art Journal* is organized thematically under the editorial direction of a designated guest editor, unsolicited manuscripts cannot be accepted. Letters to the editor will be considered for publication, provided they are 500 words or less.

Advertising information and rates are available from the CAA office, 212/691-1051.

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A Plague of Polemics

MIRA SCHOR

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The American artist today is faced with a moral, political, and aesthetic dilemma: the undermining of humanist values and progressive notions of history coming both from deconstruction and simulation theories and from the application of fundamentalist Christian ideology and of anticommunism redirected at the art world. These renewed pressures force the artist to stake out a position in the political and aesthetic spectrum. The more sophisticated an artist's understanding of modernism and postmodernism, the more sophisticated his or her analysis of art as an arena and a language for political intervention and social change, the more difficult it may be to know how best to act on one's political convictions. I paint breasts and penises, and I often write about gender and sexual representation, so this is not merely a sociological problem, but a personal debate. In this spirit and from this place, I would like to present some comments critical of art-world reactions to censorship.

Two trends are emerging in the art world. On the one hand, it seems that we may be in for a body of overdetermined, illustrative, highly polemical political art, ultimately conventional in its visual formulations. Artwork will be made with the specific intent of making Senator Helms unhappy in ways he can best understand—artwork that hews to the most stereotypical concept of what political art is and looks like. On the other hand, if recent articles in the *New York Times* by Michael Brenson and Andy Grundberg, and recent exhibitions with titles such as "The New Metaphysical Art" are any indication, we are also in for a period of retrenchment into equally conventional new *neos*—neospiritualism, neoabstraction, neointegrity, neomodernism. This is how the art-history machine marches on.¹

The controversy over Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, and Karen Finley brings to light the immense gap between certain art-world values (change, novelty, scandal, sexual and formal iconoclasm) and so-called traditional views of art as entertainment, inspiration, and decoration. Because of this breach in the definition of art's purpose, the innocuous, classical, naïve, or politically questionable aspects of these avant-garde artists' work may not be grasped by the political right. Meanwhile everyone on the left is understandably manning the torpedoes. Therefore few on the left will draw attention to the problematic nature of some of

the works they feel politically and morally obligated to defend. And few will admit to their own past and present exclusionary practices. For the purposes of this essay only, when I refer to the left I mean everyone politically more liberal than Attila the Helm, but more specifically, the art avant-garde and its several critical establishments.

Female representation and feminist art are useful areas in which to begin to examine contradictory practices by the left. As it rallies around Karen Finley, we should recall, first, that relatively few critical voices dared or bothered to counter the reactionary subject matter of many Neoexpressionist paintings. Critics such as Donald Kuspit, Peter Schjeldahl, and Carter Ratcliff often raised problematic issues in work by artists such as David Salle or Eric Fischl only to excuse them perhaps too readily. On the other hand, the left, as represented by *October* magazine, for example, abdicated responsibility by focusing on the methodological or historicist incorrectness of these works. Essays by Douglas Crimp and Benjamin Buchloh, among others, suggested that the problem was that these were figurative paintings that harkened back to the earlier betrayal of modernism by Picasso and other vanguard artists, without considering, in this regard, figurative political works by such artists as Nancy Spero, Leon Golub, Sue Coe, or Ida Applebroog. Further, they mourned the fact that these were paintings at all, thereby representing the betrayal of the post-studio education some of the artists had received. Thus, for example, the misogynist content of David Salle's work was not a suitable subject for critical inquiry because his true error was to be *painting* these images, instead of using more postmodern representational techniques. Works that clearly contained elements Helms would find obscene—Roberto Clemente's shit- and pussy-eating self-portraits come to mind—were not analyzed critically by the left for their sexual politics (although many women artists commented throughout the 1980s that were a woman to do pastel self-portraits with such essentialist, biologically determined content, she would get strictly nowhere). And, needless to say, these artists will not be touched by the right either, since they don't need grants to survive and museums must own works by such artists in order accurately to represent a historical era.

Bad Boy was the title of Eric Fischl's 1981 career-

making painting of a woman exposing her vagina to a boy stealing something out of the dark hole of her purse, and during the 1980s there were women artists who used ideologically related techniques to achieve similar, although not always quite so lucrative, notoriety. Typically, these women used assaultive or flamboyant behavior, or “transgressed” via their appropriation of pornography, often by the exploitation of their own bodies. Whether these were “bad girls,” rewriting patriarchal representation of Woman, and recuperating it with subversive feminist intent, or just “bad boys” with estrogen, replicating age-old exploitation of the female body, is a question deserving more attention by postmodernist critics. For example, Cindy Sherman’s self-portraits in a clinging T-shirt (*Untitled #86*, 1981) and low-cut camisole (*Untitled #103*, 1982) can easily be returned to the category of traditional sexploitation, despite her supposedly ironic, distanced stance, particularly when seen alone in a collector’s home, separated from the oeuvre, without the theoretical enhancement of an exhibition. Similarly, the self-portraits in which she is dressed in ironically recreated plastic tits may be too close to a pin-up for political comfort.

I would also call attention, in this regard, to the ambivalence that I suspect some feminists have felt about past performance works by Karen Finley. The frightening conviction she brought to her invocation of a rapist hinted at a genuine, rather than simulated, hatred of women. One might note in these works the emphasis on the contingency of the female body, the embodiment of decay, death, and castration in woman that is basic to the narrative of patriarchy. The amount of art-press attention Finley has received, even before becoming the focus of very real persecution by the right, is in striking contrast to the anonymity reserved for such performance artists as Angelika Festa. Festa’s private performances, in which she binds or blindfolds herself in silence, or her public performances, in which she silently and mysteriously transgresses public spaces—standing for days at a SoHo subway stop in a red rabbit headdress, proffering two small loaves of bread to passersby she in no way acknowledges—offer indications of other means of transgression and subversion than the loud, violent, and profane ones best recognized by patriarchy, from Helms to the avant-garde.

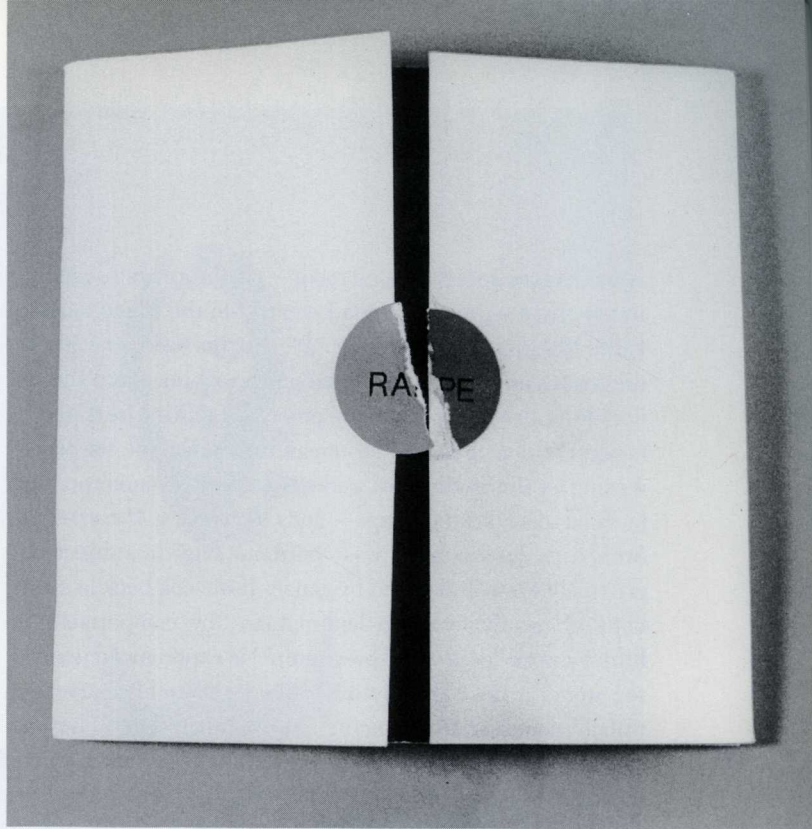


FIG. 1 Suzanne Lacy, *Rape Is . . .*, artist's book, printed by the author at the California Institute of the Arts, 1972.

A Woman's Life Isn't Worth Much, Finley's recent installation of wall drawings and writings at Franklin Furnace, is an example of the kind of political art and anesthetized criticism I fear may overwhelm political and aesthetic discourse.² While laudable in the deeply felt feminist pain of the words written on the walls, the piece surrendered to political aims one of the most basic and useful elements of visual (or indeed of any) art: metaphor, the ability of material and form to carry meaning. “I want a female Goddess, a lesbian Goddess” are the two phrases I recorded in my notes on a text composed of fiery, but somewhat flat-footed, statements of feminist wishes and simple howls of feminist rage. These words were accompanied by drawings illustrating patriarchy’s dos and don’ts for women’s appearance. They were primitive in style and stereotypical of what people may think early-1970s feminist art looked like: see Jane with a bra—see Jane without a bra—see Jane burn a bra.

Yet while this work *seemed* to have the feel of early feminist art, a cursory look at documentation from the period between 1970 and 1973 reveals a much more varied and sophisticated assault on patriarchy, from raw and bloody performances on “woman’s bondage, abuse, rape, fertility, cleansing and healing in a potent, excruciating sequence” to Suzanne Lacy’s chillingly economical *Rape Is . . .* (fig. 1), in which the reader must break the seal of a coolly corporate looking book and rape the art object in order to read its contents.³ The *Womanhouse* project of the CalArts Feminist Art Program (1972) encompassed a wide variety of art practice from “pure” abstract painting—Robin Mitchell’s Ab-

stract Expressionist painted room—to performance, ranging in tone from agitprop to broad comedy to the tragic tones of Faith Wilding's *Waiting* (fig. 2). In this work the artist, dressed as an old woman, keening in a rocking chair, relived her life as an endlessly passive process of waiting for things to happen to her body and for others to live her life for her, of waiting for life. Individual works contained a counterpoint of hot and cool art language—Judy Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom*, for example, was confrontational in subject but pristinely white and veiled by gauze. If we look back at a vast body of mostly forgotten feminist art, by comparison, in Finley's work “*deja vu all over again*”⁴ is experienced doubly: she works a field already once tilled and richly harvested without necessarily advancing either content or form beyond her predecessors', and she is proverbially forced to repeat this history because it has been so rapidly unlearned. Can responsible criticism afford to see Finley's work as *sui generis*?

A *Woman's Life* calls to mind Nancy Spero's *Torture of Women* (1974–76) and recent paintings by Ida Applebroog that also catalogue the abuse and oppression of women, throughout time and in our time. However, Spero's work juxtaposes factual accounts from Amnesty International (so that no charge can be made of feminist shrillness or female hysteria) with images from myth and from the newspapers, and the delicacy of her manufacture is in effective, subversive counterpoint to her horrific subject matter. Her use of materials is metaphoric, in contrast to the factuality of her text. Applebroog orchestrates the depiction of women abused by domesticity, medicine, and art within complex paintings in which the gelatinous viscosity of paint, the colors of blood, piss, and shit (not the substances themselves in a literal fashion, but their transubstantiation in art) express a profound rage against, and a rebellious rewriting of, traditional patriarchal and art-historical narratives.

Is it unfair to pick on Finley's gallery installation when she is primarily a performance artist? Must a feminist critic hold her tongue when Finley is under attack by the right? Not only is Finley given an opportunity to show her work because of her pre- and post-NEA notoriety, but this work has received critical validation via association with important male figures, which other feminist artists are often denied. A review of the Franklin Furnace exhibition immediately links her to the proper fathers:

*Mixing furturist aggression, Brechtian political performance strategies, Artaud's sensualism, and Allen Ginsberg's hypnotic zeitgeist-attuned chanting, Karen Finley's work has always elicited impassioned response.*⁵

This patrilineage neatly excludes from Finley's feminist heritage the eerie chanting of Wilding's *Waiting* or the visual ventriloquy in Spero's *Codex Artaud* (1969). This patrilineage also follows in the path of postmodern feminist criticism of the 1980s.⁶ Griselda Pollock, for example, promoted the use of Brechtian strategies of distanciation and montage to expose conventions of representation⁷. Pollock, Craig Owens, Hal Foster, and Kate Linker, among others, accompanied these prescriptions with proscriptions against so-called essentialist feminism, which they perceive in efforts to present newly created images of femininity rather than re-presenting images from culture. This in turn led to proscriptions against traditional methods of artistic production such as painting. Painting itself became essentialized, despite the commercial success of Neoexpressionist painting which is, in fact, used by these critics as an object lesson in the political unsuitability of painting. In the process, they contributed to the burial of early feminist art. Now Finley's clearly essentialist work must be defended . . . by the very same critical system that ignored Spero and Applebroog, even when their work demonstrated the very Brechtian strategies being promoted.

If artists lose their trust in the metaphoric capability of materials, forms, and spatial interventions, leading to the reduction of political art to illustrative polemic—which has always been at the heart of the political-art problem—it is still impossible for overdetermined content at the expense of visual ingenuity to insure that the image produced will hold the viewer's attention. Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno's doctrine of “unintentional truth” warns that the truth of an artwork cannot be intentionally determined: “The socioeconomic structure mediate[s] all *geistige* production and hence expresse[s] itself with cultural artifacts alongside (and often in contradiction to) the subjective intention of their creators.”⁸ Cultural objects become “a medium for the unconscious history-writing of society.”⁹

The futility of *intending* the political content of any individual artwork was evident in the much publicized exhibition *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, at Artists Space in New York in 1989. The NEA's withdrawal of funding for the exhibition catalogue because of a few comments in David Wojnarowicz's statement represented a major battle in the censorship war. But when the excitement of a crowd of artists filling the night street of TriBeCa, carrying signs, and yelling slogans (my favorite was the baldly factual “Jesse Helms Has No Taste”) was over, among the mostly figurative or photographic records of illness and death, only one work remained in my memory—an upholstered armchair on a hanger (fig. 3). While much of the figurative work, which intended to



FIG. 2 Faith Wilding, still from *Waiting*, 1972, performance at Womanhouse, Los Angeles.

illustrate the specificity of a plague, seemed in the end generic, this chair, with its hollow dark interior and attenuated seat offered a haunting metaphor for lost comfort and pleasure. Many of the other works depicted profoundly upsetting stories, but my memory refused to be politically correct.

The more recent "Queer" show (New York, Wessel O'Connor Gallery, 1990), seemed oriented toward using the male body as a metonymic device to represent the whole of AIDS, censorship, and prejudice. Even for a group show, there was an unusually refreshing range of style, tone, and political acuity. Yet, in another example of contradictory practices by the left, although the show was described as containing art by "queer women and men,"¹⁰ images of male bodies, and representations of and references to gay male sex

acts predominated, indicating that the curators could not shed their own patriarchal values, even under the sign of excluded sexuality.

The language of Senator Helms's restrictive addendum to the NEA reauthorization bill forbade the depiction of sexual acts or "organs." It would be a pity if artists were impelled to respond to this red flag by painting a flood of sexual acts and organs; if, in effect, Helms were to succeed in dictating the imaging of dicks, blood, and come. I say this even though for the past three years I have been painting penises and breasts and other, more metaphorically sexual body parts in order to speak of power relationships in our society. Just as I do not relish being excluded from public funding and other career benefits, or being discriminated



FIG. 3 Janet Stein, *Queen B. Easy Chair Dress*, 1989, mixed media.

against because, for example, I'm a woman doing work about male sexuality, I will not continue this work beyond its relevant duration just to stick it to Helms.

On the other hand, the lively democracy of personal imagery evident in the *Queer Show* is threatened by the art-history-formation machine that seems to be making noises these days about quality, spirituality, and abstraction. In "Is 'Quality' an Idea Whose Time Has Gone?" Michael Brenson dances on the head of a pin over the issue of quality, which has been raised, for him at any rate, by the emergence of political and multicultural art. In this regard, Brenson recalls Clement Greenberg's arguments for "pure" art. His references to Greenberg are evidence of a general return of interest in Greenberg that, at this highly polemic moment, signals yet another resurgence of a depoliticized aesthetic.

Building on the permissions offered by Leon Trotsky for artists to retain their "subversive and critical element" while engaging in "avant-garde . . . pure and true independent art," Greenberg, as interpreted by Serge Guilbault in his

revisionist history of the development of Abstract Expressionism in America,

*carried Trotsky's defense of a critical art that remained "faithful to itself" one step further, maintaining that while the avant-garde did indeed do critical work, it was criticism directed within, toward the work of art itself, toward the very medium of art, and intended solely to guarantee the quality of the production.*¹¹

Again the specter of quality haunts the question of politically responsive and responsible art, and Brenson, while cognizant of all the implications, cannot come to a resolution:

Many people feel sympathy for both the rejection of the word quality and the reluctance to repudiate it. . . . Should the word quality be used? Probably not. If it is used negatively, to criticize an artist or a body of work, it should be done with

extreme care. . . . Should judgments be made and opinions made, even if the word is not used? Of course.¹²

In another recent *New York Times* article, Andy Grundberg notes a split between "political and . . . spiritual . . . art" similar to the one I am suggesting but with a subtly prescriptive difference. Announcing the "death" of postmodernism, Grundberg suggests the probable "split into polar camps representing the competing forces of spiritual and political art."¹³ He then states that "art that aspires to represent the higher ground of human existence will most likely be abstract, since abstraction is the obvious ally of the spiritual." Grundberg mourns the political acuity of postmodern art even as he lays the foundation for a neomodernism that will resolve the tricky problem of "quality" art versus "political" art.¹⁴

In the present political climate, mainstream art activity appears to operate well to the left of the censoring right wing. Nevertheless, groups such as the Guerrilla Girls, whose 1990 poster proclaimed "Relax, Senator Helms, the art world is your kind of place" (i.e., segregated and sexist), point to hypocrisy and unjust hierarchies within the art world. The art-history machine's predictable search for the correct position, as evidenced in Brenson's and Grundberg's articles, seems as ideologically overdetermined and oppressive as the censorship by the right, and as unrelated to actual artistic production. Given the limited political effect of most art and the unpredictability of "unintentional truth," why should an artist have to choose between political content and abstraction, between political responsibility and quality? How can the artist be sure which art form will have a political impact? And must the simple fact be noted that not all artists are aesthetically suited to make what has been *understood* to be political art, whatever their political convictions?

Feminist art of the early 1970s was undermined by the popular conception of an overproduction of simplistic, easily ridiculed cunt art. One clichéd image of a cored apple too many, and the process of marginalization was able to proceed with fresh vigor. The credo of early feminism, "the personal is political," did not, in fact, automatically lead to strong art, but it did expand the definition of politics. A great deal of artwork was produced in a plurality of styles that itself had political ramifications in the art world, if one is to judge by the way pluralism was quickly condemned in the 1980s. In many visual-art languages artists as different as Suzanne Lacy and Elizabeth Murray spoke of female sexuality and subjectivity. Some works did *look* like political art, but all had a powerful political presence—if "political art" is seen not only as the illustrative servicing of temporal conflicts but as empowerment and the liberation of possibility. If a wave of obvious, reactive, political-looking art is now produced and defended by the left without self-criticality, and foregoing the memory of the earlier political art that it itself helped to repress, then a sort of reverse censorship will be in effect and

the right will be more totally victorious over art than just by diminished funding to selected artists and institutions.

At the risk of appearing nostalgic for art for art's sake, and speaking as a painter committed to a political program (to bring my personal experience of living in a female body and my gendered understanding of art history into art in as intact a condition as possible, without concessions to anyone's comfort, including my own), I resent the burden of constant polemics. It is as much an imposition as overt censorship. I distrust the literal kind of work that may result from this fracas. I also distrust the machinations of the art world. I long to be able just to *work*, in the hope that metaphor and the transformative and inherent qualities of my materials will contain my political message.

The right sees the *artist* plain and simple—not especially the homosexual, the feminist, or the black artist—as threatening because, however socially conditioned and imprisoned by ideology, the artist produces something with insecure market value, something that speaks in a coded language that can be decoded in an unpredictable, uncontrollable variety of ways, limited only by the size of the audience. It is this code of visual language, it is the superfluity of artistic expression that must be preserved in this stressful time. Artists must not let the right or the left set their aesthetic agenda, and they must maintain self-criticality in the face of a monstrous assault.

Notes

1. The exhibition "Reconciling the Unverified: The New Metaphysical Art" was held at Amy Lipton Gallery, New York, September 15–October 13, 1990.
2. The exhibition at Franklin Furnace, New York, ran from May 18 to June 16, 1990.
3. Faith Wilding, *By Our Own Hands: The Woman Artist's Movement, Southern California 1970–1976* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Double X, 1977), 34. See also Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, eds., *Framing Feminism—Art and the Women's Movement 1970–1985* (London: Pandora Press, 1987), and Hilary Robinson, ed., *Visibly Female—Feminism and Art Today, An Anthology*, (New York: Universe Books, 1988).
4. Attributed to Yogi Berra.
5. Melissa Harris, "Karen Finley at the Kitchen and Franklin Furnace," *Artforum* (September 1990): 159.
6. I have examined this critical mechanism in "Patrilineage," *Art Journal* 50 (Summer 1991), 58–63.
7. Griselda Pollock, "Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice—A Brechtian Perspective," *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), 163–65.
8. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt School* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 79.
9. Theodor Adorno, quoted by Buck-Morss, in *Origins*, 79, with reference to 131, 246.
10. Press release for "Queer," Wessel O'Connor Gallery, New York, August 17, 1990.
11. Serge Guilbault, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 30, 35.
12. Michael Brenson, "Is 'Quality' an Idea Whose Time Has Gone?," *New York Times*, July 22, 1990, sec. 2, 1, 27.
13. Andy Grundberg, "As It Must to All, Death Comes to Post-Modernism," *New York Times*, September 16, 1990, sec. 2, 47.
14. Meanwhile, postmodernist strategies and techniques such as irony and photo-montage seem to resist such obituaries. In a later article, "Art under Attack: Who Dares Say That It's No Good?" (*New York Times*, November 25, 1990, sec. 2, 1), Grundberg does note some of the problematic results of censorship, particularly the protective, uncritical reaction-formation of art critics.

MIRA SCHOR is a painter living in New York. She is co-editor of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, a journal of contemporary art issues, and occasionally writes for *Artforum*.