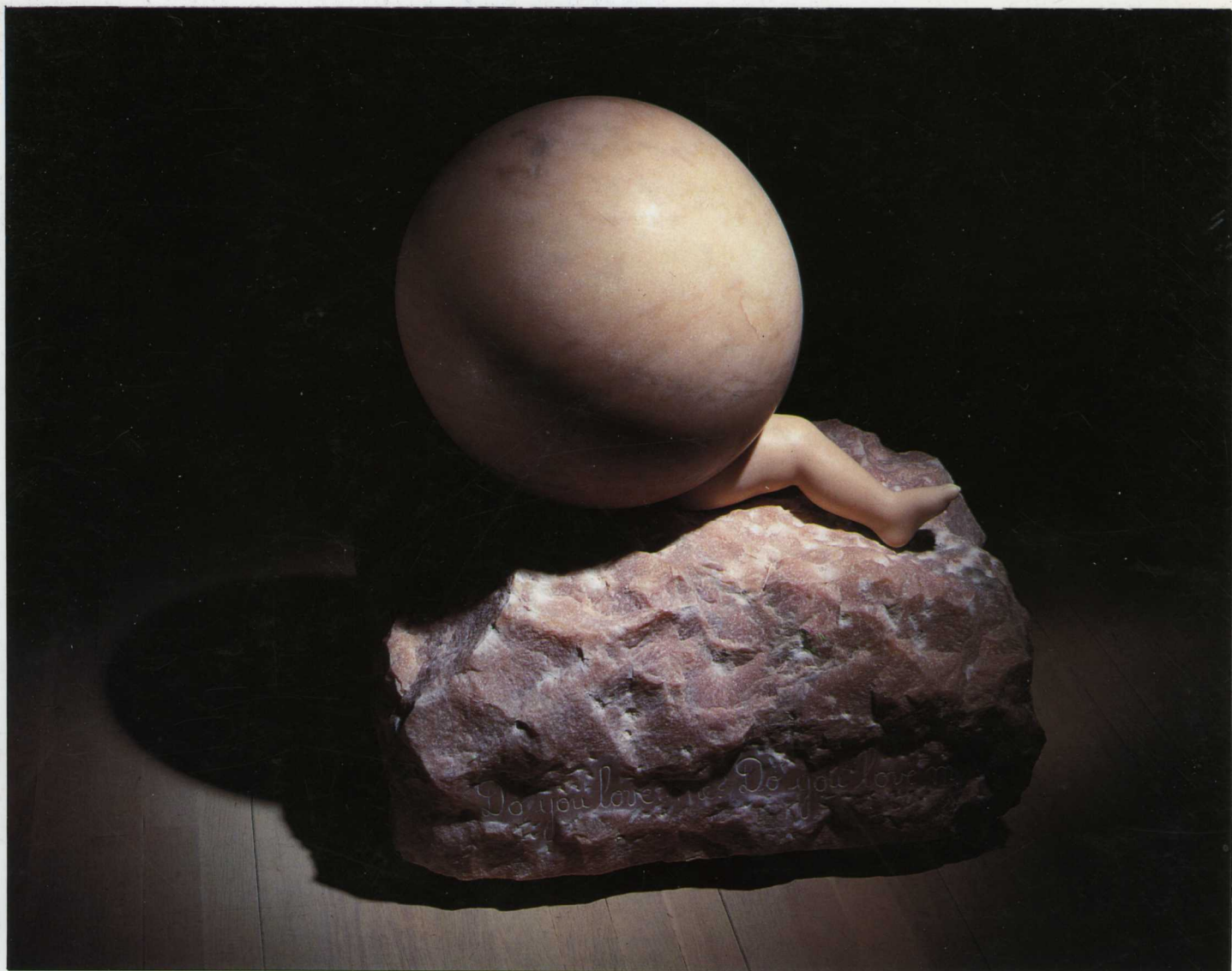


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LOUISE BOURGEOIS, UNTITLED (WITH FOOT), 1989. PINK MARBLE, 30x26x21 IN.

► The Question of Gender in Art

First Part

Texts by Jan Avgikos, Faye Hirsch, Patricia Collins,
Lois Neshitt, Andrea K. Scott, Jessica Stockholder,
Fiona Rae, Nancy Spector, Laurie Simmons
Sarah Charlesworth, Barbara Kruger, Mira
Schor, Suzanne Joelson, Catherine Lee, Cora
Cohen, Lydia Dona, Deborah Kass, and others

Amnesiac Return

The saying "what goes around comes around" is usually meant to reassure people who feel their ideas and work are out of fashion and neglected that eventually they will be vindicated by a return to cultural centrality. However, recent developments in art by women give the old saying a new and disturbing spin.

At a time when women nationwide are said to be mobilized into political action by public spectacles of misogynist patriarchal power such as the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings, women in the art world have also mobilized politically, as manifested by the rapid growth of WAC, the Women's Action Coalition. At the same time some artists are receiving attention for what critics feel is "angry" work. However, undercurrents within these movements and their critical reception make one wonder *what* exactly has come around in

this return of feminism.

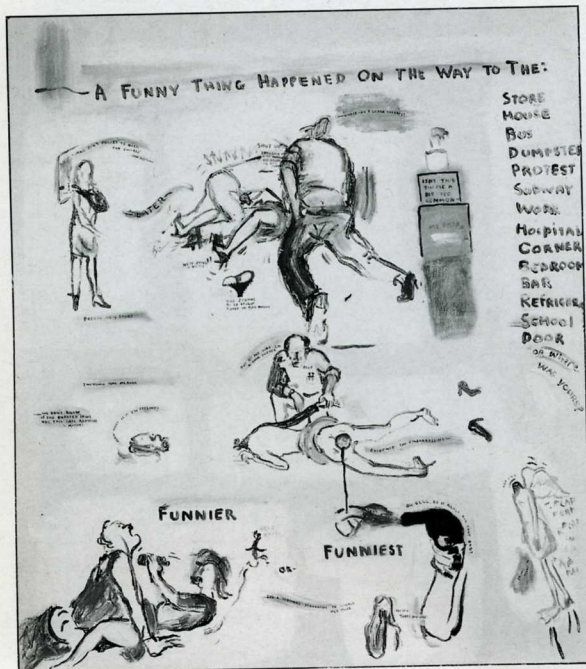
A brief rehearsal of the goals of the early feminist art movement of the late '60s and early '70s is called for. Feminist artists sought to displace the f/phallacy of the (male) universal, to inscribe other subjects into history, to reformulate what history could be. Women sought to find visual analogues for and give a voice to female subjectivity. While empowerment of women artists was a general social goal, representation of women was understood to be a crucial political field. The American approach was generally empirical and personal — the creation of new visual and textual representation; the British discursively problematized representation itself, relying on textuality. The differences between these approaches eventually led to a split between, on one hand, the articulation of social construction of

gender which, it was felt, best took place within photo/appropriation media, and on the other so-called essentialism, which was a term critically aimed at women who sought to create positive images of an immutable essence of Woman, but which became a blanket dismissal of women working in a less (rather than non-) appropriative manner and in more traditional media.

While this hierarchized dichotomy

was in some ways destructively divisive, it also kept women artists on their intellectual toes. Today, however, the anti-essentialist discourse as a critical system seems to have collapsed altogether, as women working in sculpture and painting, depicting women in a very essentialized victim position, are receiving a great deal of attention. Many women were struck by the simultaneity of Kiki Smith's prone featureless female creature dragging feces across one gallery floor with Sue Williams' abused, beaten, and branded female figure laid out on another. Not only are these works not analyzed for what they naturalize about women, but one suspects their popularity is partly based on the attractiveness to many of the female victim position. My comments here are not meant as criticism of the works, which I feel are strong, but as analysis of the relationship between individual works, their critical reception, and the manner in which certain ideas about women are produced and perpetuated.

Further, the history of two preceding decades of work is being erased even as these new women are being touted. Roberta Smith's *New York Times* feature on Sue Williams ("An Angry Young Woman Draws a Bead on Men," May 24, 1992) provides an interesting example of such an erasure. Smith places Williams at CalArts at the same time as male art stars such as David Salle, Eric Fischl, Ross Bleckner. Neither Smith nor Williams mentions that there was a ground-breaking and influential Feminist Art Program at CalArts at that time. It makes me sad, as



Sue Williams, *A Funny Thing Happened*, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 48x42 in. 303 Gallery, New York.

a member of that Program and as a feminist educator since then in many male-dominated art schools without such programs, that Williams wasn't able to avail herself of the personal support and empowering influence of this important educational experience but remembers the school as "a man's world then." This omission is galling to women who find her present work reminiscent of early Feminist Program class assignments emerging out of consciousness raising, and to gay male artists who feel the Program gave them permission to deal with sexuality in new, non-Greenbergian, forms.

The erasure of the CalArts Feminist Program was well underway as early as 1981 when a ten year alumni show, curated by Helene Winer, included only two women artists and no one from the Program, but many of the aforementioned male art stars on whom the art world was building an investment. Thus, one artist's or one critic's work is not at fault or at issue here, rather a particular process of career construction and its effect. The persistence of the patrilineal validation system — in this case rubbing Williams' name up against the names of famous men while leaving out more relevant historical information — and the participation in this process of women who do not wish to be associated with feminism, do not serve the textual and formal development of art by women. The early '70s saw the production of a much wider range of work than is usually credited, from raw, angry personal narrative to sophisticated abstraction. Later theory offered a useful and bracing expansion from the personal, even when it began to threaten visual pleasure for and by women artists. If "what goes around comes around" it would seem logical that what would come around after the critique



Shirley Irons, *Arcadia*, 1992, oil, wax, carbon, blood and glue on canvas, 44x70 in.

of visual pleasure elaborated by such social constructionists as Griselda Pollock, Mary Kelly, and Barbara Kruger, would be a new theorization of visual pleasure as an important feminist intervention in the visual arts. But this is not the case today.

This patrilineal unwriting of feminist art practice in the guise of support of some current women artists takes place as but one figure on a broader ground of ironic contradiction. WAC, for example, has engaged in timely and effective political actions and given its members a sense of community, purpose, and impact. But its rhetoric includes pride in the fact that WAC doesn't get involved in consciousness raising, "explains one feminist who's happy to have left that behind" ("WAC Attack," *The Village Voice*, June 9, 1992). CR might not be practical for a crowd, and yet without it young women may not gain all the tools necessary to understand how patriarchy affects their deepest beliefs and fears. Picketing a sexist judge is great but it may be easier than realizing that the personal is political, and that the political may have to extend to personal life and to art. In past interviews of some WAC artist members, feminists were "them." Women are saying this is a moment of crisis

but it is so partly because in the '80s many women, including even some present WAC members, turned their back on feminism in their own world.

If women are denied access to their own past they always occur in history as exceptions, that is to say as freaks (Williams' "self-destructive" personal history is useful to this type of myth-making), and are forced to rediscover the same wheel over and over, always already losing their place in the growth of culture. Also if women themselves deny association with feminism they are likely to be subsumed into male history no matter how exceptional they are. Comments by individual women working in the new abstract painting suggest a distrust of any word beginning with FEM, rejecting the marginalization FEM might entail but, by the same token, rejecting the specificity of political/personal experience that might enliven their work and prevent its absorption into yet another "universalist," that is to say male, movement. Meanwhile, patriarchy has a lot invested in the notion of universality. It is such an alluring cover for business as usual. It will always be a man's world unless one seeks out and values the women in it. □