

**Ms.**

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# beauty and the breast

## SILICONE IMPLANTS

### We're still being kept in the dark

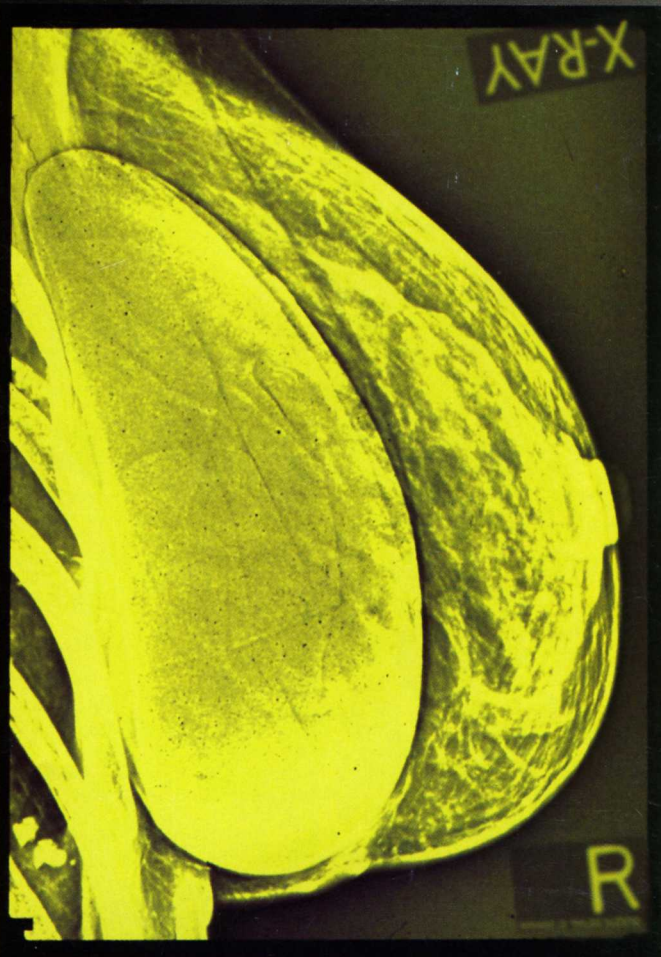
**Ms. exposes the  
cover-up**

**PLUS!**

**Susan Faludi Reports  
On a Women's  
Revolution**

**Pat Schroeder Says  
Good-bye to All That ...**

**Frank Talk About  
Unsafe Sex**



# Waiting for the Big Show

By Mira Schor

If I were to take a giant piece of paper and begin to map out women's art since 1970, it would rapidly become crowded with hundreds of names, dozens of arrows and circles. The challenge posed by art historian Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" has been answered by a rich, complex, and influential feminist art movement—clearing the way for the obvious next questions: Why aren't there any major museum exhibitions presenting the work of this movement? And what would a feminist show look like?

Several recent exhibitions have begun to chart some of the territory. Among these were *Bad Girls*, a series of shows in London, New York, and Los Angeles that featured younger artists dealing with sexuality and gender; *In the Lineage of Eva Hesse*, at the Aldrich Museum in

Work" in *Contemporary Art*, at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, which surveyed the influence of "domestic arts" on works created by women and men. In addition, *The Power of Feminist Art*, a coffee-table-sized survey, was published in 1994. Yet even the most ambitious of these have been only partial studies. Even *The Power of Feminist Art* has been criticized for representing only one set of views and for leaving out many artists. And ironically, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., perhaps because of its misguided premise—a separate museum for women artists—and the conservatism of its board and administration, has played no discernible role in the development of a feminist revision of art history or in the promotion of cutting-edge contemporary art by women.

But the most obvious reason that a

menting the sexism and racism in that world. Women have made gains since then, but the tongue-in-cheek questions posed in the group's best-known posters are still

timely—like the image of a naked odalisque, wearing a gorilla mask,

with the question "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" emblazoned on it. Actions like those of the Guerrilla Girls, together with the active pursuit by women artists of a "female aesthetic," have led to the increased visibility of women in the art world. In fact, the feminist movement's political activities played a major role in creating support for women artists of color, as well as lesbian and gay artists. But progress is limited and slippage is a constant danger.

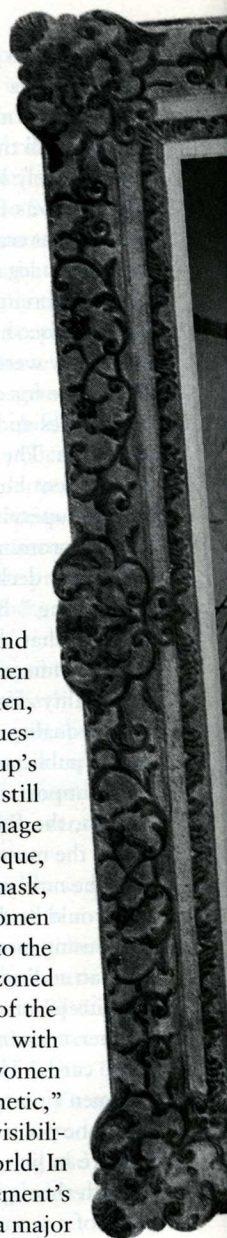
Just scan any art world document and add up the figures: the proportion of exhibitions devoted to women or feminism is lamentable—which isn't to say that women haven't been trying to remedy the situation. Critic Laura Cottingham, who is working on a video history, *Not for Sale: A Story of the Feminist Art Movement in the U. S., 1970–79*, was turned down by two major museums when she proposed an exhibition connected to her research. According to Cottingham, she had been in discussion for a while with the Whitney Museum in New York City

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Connecticut, which included women influenced by Hesse's postminimalist abstractions; *Object Lessons: Feminine Dialogues with the Surreal*, at the Massachusetts College of Art, inspired by Meret Oppenheim's fur-covered teacup; and *Division of Labor: "Women's*

more comprehensive show has not been presented by a major museum is, sadly but simply, the continuation of institutionalized sexism. In 1985 the Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous group of art activists self-styled as the "conscience of the art world," began publicly docu-

ART



BRONX MUSEUM OF THE ARTS (INSET)



A room from *Division of Labor* at New York City's Bronx Museum of the Arts

when “they suddenly came back to me and said, ‘Nobody wants to do a feminist show and nobody wants to do an all-woman show.’” Cottingham believes that the show would have been a crowd-pleaser; the problem, she says, is that 1970s feminist art “does not meet the demands of collectors who support American art museums.” In other words, too many shows are concerned with increasing the market value of the collections of museum board members—often men who own art created by other men.

Practical problems also come into play. Exhibitions often need funding for operating expenses, insurance, shipping, and catalogs. But *Division of Labor*, for example, was produced solely

through the Bronx Museum’s operating budget because its granting institutions were already committed to one “women-related” exhibition and would not fund a second. And major art institutions have sexism built into their pecking order. All the blockbuster exhibitions of recent years at the Met (including Lucien Freud and the Impressionists) and New York City’s Museum of Modern Art (Braque and Picasso, Bruce Nauman) have been curated by men at the top of the museums’ hierarchies. Female curators, who crowd the lower echelons, have few opportunities to create exhibitions (feminist or not), and are often given limited space and a less advantageous schedule. *Sense and Sensibility*, MoMA’s 1994 show of young women minimalist artists, curated

by Lynn Zelevansky, opened during the summer and was crammed into a rabbit warren of tiny rooms. Upstairs, a few (male) *Masterpieces from the David and Peggy Rockefeller Collection* received a grandly spacious installation.

**B**ut focusing on deeply ingrained sexism is not the most productive way of understanding why no American museum has undertaken a major survey exhibition of women artists from the past 25 years. For the ultimate realization of such a project, you have to pose another question: What would the exhibition look like? The very richness of the material produced in the past two decades raises many issues for a curator.

The first issue surrounds the word feminism itself. Since the inception of the

## The Ms. Hit List

**IT'S OSCAR SEASON AGAIN.** But forget about the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. What you've really been waiting for are the Ms. Picks and Pans for 1995.

So, we finally had the Year of the Woman—only one woman, of course, and a dead one: Jane Austen. But at least Hollywood finally figured out that women go to the movies, too.

Meanwhile, it *seemed* like the Year of the Lesbian, but think about it: last year, a lesbian onscreen either had no sex (*Boys on the Side*), slept with her sister (*Sister, My Sister*), killed her employer (*Sister, My Sister*), recruited a straight girl to be her lover (*The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love*; *When Night is Falling*), or appeared in the worst film of the year (*Bar Girls*).

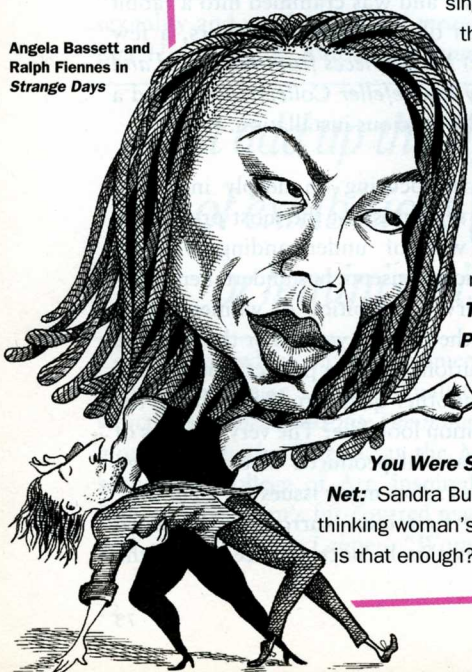
As for *Waiting to Exhale*, quit holding your breath. We've been so starved for nonstereotypical pictures about middle-class black women, we're ready to overlook some major flaws. It was a wonderful trashy novel that's been made into a big, splashy film—but where's the feminist sensibility?

And as for the rest of Tinseltown's offerings, here's a quick, highly selective rundown. **Apollo 13:** singlehandedly put "Star Wars" back into the U.S. budget but, hey, it was fun. **Crumb:** draws you into the place in the human brain where creativity meets insanity meets sexism—and makes a movie like *Kids* look like a romp in the playground. **Pocahontas:** Disney's multi-culti version of the same old "mother is dead, handsome man will save me" theme. **Strange Days:** only in an action film made by a woman

single mother and the damsel in distress be Ralph Fiennes. **The Scarlet Letter:** adulterated adultery; somebody on that set should have read the book.

**The American President:** play it backward and it says, "Kill Hillary." **While You Were Sleeping** and **The Net:** Sandra Bullock may be the thinking woman's Julia Roberts—but is that enough?

Angela Bassett and Ralph Fiennes in *Strange Days*



movement, there has been vigorous debate over what constitutes feminist art. Is it enough for a work to be done by a woman, or does the woman have to identify herself as a feminist? What if she does, but her work isn't regarded as such by one faction or another? Is recognizable political content or figurative representation necessary? Can men create feminist art?

ing that the battles are over and we are in a utopian postgendered moment. Luckily, most women artists have understood that if they didn't work from some kind of gender consciousness, their work would fade in the public eye compared to work by male contemporaries.

**A**nother concern is the schism between seventies and eighties feminist art. Feminist art from the 1970s was stereotyped and vilified by 1980s feminist critics and artists as reducing "woman" to biological essentialism,

*Is it enough for a work to be done by a woman, or does the woman have to identify herself as a feminist?*

Many women artists championed as protofeminist or feminist have denied the association. Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings were often used to develop the feminist aesthetic category of "cunt imagery," an important precept of early seventies feminist art. But O'Keeffe resisted gendered interpretations of her work. Similarly, feminist critics have regarded Cindy Sherman's large-scale photographic representations of different images of women as a commentary on gender roles. But in interviews over the years—especially during the backlash era of the eighties when a successful woman calling herself a feminist would have been welcome—she seemed genuinely puzzled by feminism. Understandably, Sherman and O'Keeffe did not want their work ghettoized. Many younger artists, in turn, reject the feminist label, feel-

goddess-worship, and vaginal imagery—a prime example in their eyes being Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, porcelain plates of flesh-colored vaginal forms, each named for a famous woman artist or writer. At the same time, art of the 1980s was stereotyped by 1970s-identified feminists as not feminist. They saw it as coldly intellectual and compromised by its appropriation of sexist images from the media. A survey exhibition must be dispassionate enough to illuminate what separates or unites these decades.

Paradoxically, the most significant impediment to a truly comprehensive exhibition of feminist art is its diversity and breadth. How do you treat this material? Do you proceed chronologically or thematically or both? Do you highlight individual artists, thereby breaking up the logic of a continuous chronology? Just tracing the career of one artist, Hannah Wilke, involves several styles and relationships to other important artists of her time. Her work includes at least three phases: abstract, layered latex sculptures from the early 1970s with strong stylistic links to "cunt art" but also to postminimalism; later photographic self-portraits that connect to performance art and to photographic representations of gender (linking her to Vito Acconci and Carolee Schneemann, who used their own bodies to explore gender); and a final exam-

ination, in photographs exhibited posthumously in 1994, of the intersection between ideals of female beauty, narcissism, and the decay of the body (linking her to Sherman and Andres Serrano).

In addition to giving artists like Wilke enough space to represent the depth and progression of their work, it would be useful to map thematic links. For example, the subject of silencing and the acquisition of a voice appears in works as varied as Nancy Spero's watercolor of spitting tongues/ heads from her 1971–72 *Codex Artaud*; Maureen Connor's tongues and larynxes cast in lipstick from her installation piece *Ensemble for Three Female Voices* (accompanied by the sound of three generations of women laughing and crying), 1990–91; and Rona Pondick's floor installation of hundreds of bubble-gum-colored dentured lumps, also from 1990–91. And Pondick's pink tooth balls demand comparison with Eva Hesse's assembly of abstract balls in *Sequel*, 1967.

All of these works influence and are informed by the work of male artists. Yet there is a conflict of philosophy within the feminist art world about the inclusion of men in survey exhibitions. There are so few opportunities to show the work of the feminist art movement, and its ideas can so easily be co-opted, but the influence of feminism on men must be made evident.

The feminist movement has always included a critique of the notion that there is a linear progression in art history made up of works by individual godlike white male geniuses. A schema of feminism maps an amazingly rich web of interrelated though often wildly different works. The problem is not, as critics have implied, that there aren't any important women artists, but, rather, that there are so many, in so many areas of visual art, that a comprehensive exhibition of their work would fill more than one museum.

Although this project is still a dream, it is important to show that women's work—always at risk of being lost in a culture that values it less—is constantly being documented. And all the smaller exhibitions put on recently are necessary rehearsals for the big show someday. **MS.**

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