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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 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 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 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-

Just add up the figures: the proportion of exhibitions devoted to women or feminism is still lamentable.
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.

But 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. Curb: 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-ethnic 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 would the muscle man be an African American 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?

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?

Another 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,

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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, feeling 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.

Ms. MARCH/APRIL 1996
ination, in photographs exhibited posthu-
mously in 1994, of the intersection be-
tween 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 ex-
ample, the subject of silencing and the ac-
quisation of a voice appears in works as var-
ied 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 in-
formed 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 in-
cluded 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 interrelat-
ed though often wildly different works.
The problem is not, as critics have im-
plied, 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. AS
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