social identity, proves that in an art world increasingly dominated by the capitalist market, authentically critical content can still be monumentally celebrated. This is work that would once have been called "avant-garde," a specter that these women rebelled overtly against when they realized that its group structures, purportedly so critical of the mainstream society, profoundly internalized everyday sexism. I raise this specter of the revolutionary avant-gardes of the early twentieth century to observe that, as the exhibition's title signals, this work belongs in that canon, even if or perhaps because the classic avant-garde Oedipal drama of the young artist symbolically killing her artistic and political fathers might be a fresh and productive way to acknowledge the profound radicality of this impulse, and raise new questions about where it has led us today.

In the catalogue, Butler lays out the main goal of the exhibition, to foreground the central role of feminist art in pioneering techniques and media fundamental to the work of contemporary artists; those explicitly drawing on feminist art history, like Janine Antoni and Andrea Zittel, and those more spectacularly "successful" ones whose debt to it has gone unacknowledged, like Matthew Barney. The catalogue opens with hundreds of color plates, grouped thematically and documenting works by more than 120 artists. A biographical section in the center of the catalogue, with entries on each artist, makes a strong feminist statement in itself, insisting literally on the centrality of personal stories in a professional context. The texts provide detailed information and references on many artists for whom little is available in English. The final catalogue essay, "The Feminist Nomad: The All-Woman Group Show," by Jenni Sorkin, provides a critical overview of the all-women exhibitions and periodicals produced worldwide as organs of feminist activism, and a useful discussion of the cultural/radical split within feminism. The catalogue closes with an equally valuable chronology of all-women group exhibitions from 1943–83, a sort of art-activist checklist preceding the exhibition checklist itself.

Ten more catalogue essays investigate particular aspects of feminist art in a
broad range of perspectives. Marsha Meskimmon’s “Chronology Through Cartography: Mapping 1970s Feminist Art Globally” makes an admirable attempt at a “conceptual decolonization” (325) of the standard imperialist story of feminism as an Anglo-American initiative only subsequently taken up or waiting to be taken up in non-western contexts. Meskimmon’s arguments are sound for examining feminist interventions spatially in the context of global cultures rather than in a temporal framework maintaining the old center-periphery or pioneer/influence models. Her examples, however, require greater detail to flesh out these observations. The juxtaposition of Anglophone feminist projects from the U.S., Britain, and Australia—Martha Rosler’s Bringing the War Back Home collage series (1967–72) placed in relation to Rita Donagh’s Evening Papers (Ulster 1974) (1974) and Joan Brassell’s Can It Be that the Everlasting Is Everchanging (1978)—does not explain the works in any depth or their necessary connections. The Brassil piece, which refers to indigenous Australian cosmological beliefs in a gallery installation, also operates in primitivist terms, seemingly within the very colonialist paradigm that Meskimmon argues so powerfully against. Her discussion of works dealing with sexuality and the body connects the more explicitly conceptually related work of Sonja Ijevovic, Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneemann, Rebecca Horn, and Senga Nengudi, all key artists with work prominently displayed in the exhibition. Yet the new terms she mobilizes to frame these works, “an embodied female sexuality and an ‘enworlded’ sexual subjectivity” (331) seem unchallenged except in theoretical jargon from the very Anglo-American concepts of sexuality and the body which she aims to decenter. The essay struggles to fully incorporate the artistic implications of such necessary rewritings of the relationship between feminism and colonialism.

Abigail Solomon Godeau writes of early feminist artists and photographic self-portraiture in “The Woman Who Never Was: Self-Representation, Photography, and First-Wave Feminist Art.” She provides a valuable reminder of the real complexity of feminist practices in the 1970s, arguing that women artists like Hannah Wilke and Friedel Kubelka who investigated their own image by means of conceptual and body art practices conducted systematic interrogations of the complex operations of identification, rather than re-playing the essentialist notion of identity subsequently attributed to them. Peggy Phelan provides a concise but substantial account of feminist performance art and the politics of touch in “The Returns of Touch: Feminist Performances, 1960–80,” which highlights work by primarily non-American artists, from Atsuko Tanaka’s Electric Dress (1956) to Valie Export’s Tapp und Tastkino (1968). Richard Meyer’s essay, “Hard Targets: Male Bodies, Feminist Art, and the Force of Censorship in the 1970s,” expands the definition of feminist art by addressing artists and issues not foregrounded in the exhibition, all relating to depictions of the male body by a gaze that is female, heterosexual, and feminist. Artists like Joan Semmel, Linda Nochlin, Eunice Golden, Sylvia Sleigh, Hannah Wilke, and Anita Steckel, herself founder in 1973 of the Eight Censorship group of women activist-artists, established the feminist view of the explicit male body as sexual and political object, a subject censored and marginalized in both mainstream art and accounts of feminism. Meyer’s article revisits a little-known chapter in the history of early 1970s feminist art. His eloquent account of the censorship of artworks actively reclaiming phallic imagery for feminist desire and critique provides a much-needed counter to the dominance of central-core imagery during those years.

Catalogue contributors Judith Russi Kirshner, Valerie Smith, and Nelly Richard also expand the discourse of feminism toward greater cosmopolitanism, writing about feminism in Italy, in African-American culture, and in the struggle against Chilean dictatorship, respectively. All three essays examine issues broader than the exhibition of historical women artists’ work. Kirshner’s text, “Voices and Images of Italian Feminism,” focuses on the work of three critics with varying relationships to feminist activism: Lea Vergine, Annemarie Sauzeau Boetti, and Carla Lonzi. Her essay raises significant questions about the role of female critics as advocates of feminist artists, the general shifts in the role of the art critic in the 1960s and 1970s, and the complex political identifications of feminists and women who sympathized with feminism in Italy. It identifies the restricted critical landscape developed as a result of male critics like Germano Celant and Achille Bonito Oliva marketing exclusive groups of male artists internationally as the greatest contributions of Italian contemporary art. Although the writing of the essay shares a certain lack of structural clarity with some of the writers which are its subjects, it makes significant steps toward piecing together international historical threads such as the parallels between Vergine’s groundbreaking retrospective catalogue of women artists in the European avant-garde and the efforts of critics like Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris in the U.S. or the impact of French feminist theory on understudied women artists like Carla Accardi or Gena Pane. In her brief essay “Abundant Evidence: Black Women Artists of the 1960s and ‘70s,” Valerie Smith situates the stories of prominent black women artists like Faith Ringgold and Howardena Pindell within the broader context of black feminist organizing. Nelly Richard’s article, “Fugitive Identities and Dissenting Code-Systems: Women Artists During the Military Dictatorship in Chile,” provides a similar account of several Chilean artists’ practices, from Virginia Errázuriz’s dispersed installations of everyday objects to Catalina Parra’s use of stitching and embroidery to signify the gaps and subtexts concealed by the pro-dictatorship jargon of the daily paper El Mercurio.

Helen Molesworth contributes a valuable discussion of the fraught possibilities of signifying feminist content in contemporary painting in “Painting with Ambivalence.” The essay is notable for its insights into the ways abstraction and feminism as apparently exclusive categories have occluded our understanding of these works, but also for the way it examines two white and one African-American artist in terms of comparative aspects of their work, rather than addressing the biographical commonalities of the artists’ social identities, as in the previous
three essays. Catherine Lord’s “Their Memory Is Playing Tricks on Her: Notes Toward a Calligraphy of Rage” discusses Louise Fishman’s series, the Angry Paintings (1973), reunited for the first time in the exhibition. Lord’s powerful prose opens the essay by declaring Carolee Schneemann’s Interior Scroll (1975) “expansively and stubbornly queer” (441) for its specifically vaginal rawness. The essay examines the impossibility of visualizing lesbianism in the public sphere, and describes Fishman’s radical exteriorization of volatile emotion in sloppily scribbled painted words, a profound epiphany and turning point in her work. When I saw them hanging in a room with Senga Nengudi’s stocking sculptures, paintings by Joan Snyder and Mary Heilmann, and a large Lynda Benglis latex floor piece from 1969, they looked less artistic than painfully literal in their violent emotional registerings, although Paula Cooper noted of the series in 1973, “They’re art, but I don’t know what else they are” (448). It was Lord’s eloquent text that enabled me to understand them as art (even if they were immediately contextualizable in visual terms as feminist foreshadowings of contemporary gallery-friendly bad-boy painting by artists like Josh Smith). Yet their challenge to my own aesthetic assumptions in the end was much more valuable than the canonization of safely pioneering works of “quality” feminist art—a problematic also directly addressed in Molesworth’s essay. The resistance of the Angry Paintings to art historical categorization and their radical heterogeneity from all the other objects in the show summarizes the historic and aesthetic contributions of the exhibition as a whole. As an erratic archive of lesbian personal and cultural connections driven equally by politics and desire, their presence was the revenge of a repressed subculture, one of many at last given their due in Wack!, from a twenty-first-century point of view at once experimental and retrospective.

For a show that has been accused of being both didactic and chaotic, the exhibition foregrounded the visceral impact of the works to an extraordinary degree. With such an extensive catalogue at hand, I welcomed the lack of heavily didactic wall text that characterizes the exhibitions of PS.1’s Manhattan branch. The installation allowed works to hang partially in one room and partially in another, for example displaying Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s famous “Maintenance Art” manifesto in a white-box gallery while the photos of her doing the performances remained in the hall, thus connecting convoluted spaces to each other in a way that seemed overtly social. The sprawling exhibition, with its various sections flowing into each other across the network of rooms and hallways of the schoolhouse-museum, evoked a genuine space of experimentation and collective exploration, even learning, that characterized the work of these artists, some of whom were only marginally connected to the mainstream art world.

Feelings of invigoration and inspiration marked my experience of old favorites that I had never before seen in person. Joan Semmel’s bodily distortions were delightfully vivid, Audrey Flack’s iconic still-life Marilyn (Vanitas) of 1977 was powerful in its unexpected scale, and the two examples of Miriam Schapiro’s “Ox” paintings produced a graphic impact. Lorraine O’Grady’s glove dress for Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (1980; Fig. 1) was intriguing, shown in combination with the series of photos of the performance (usually represented by only one shot taken out of context). I was engrossed by Harmony Hammond’s pillow sculpture Huntertime (1979–80), fascinated by Rebecca Horn’s projected videos of herself performing in sculptural prosthetics (1970–73), and amazed by Judy Baca’s iconic mural Uprising of the Mujeres (1979).

The show did an excellent job of juxtaposing well-known feminist works with works by those notoriously excluded from mainstream discourses at the time, like the black women’s collective “Where We At,” represented by a series of historical posters (c. 1980), and artists working outside the U.S. whose work is little known here, like Maria Lassnig, Kirsten Justesen, and Sanja Ivekovic. The “Where We At” posters hung on the wall between Judy Baca’s mural and a set of mixed-media documents of Bonnie Sherk’s The Farm (1974–80), a multipurpose community garden and art space making use of several biis of unused land beneath a freeway overpass. Such juxtapositions effectively made visible the radical heterogeneity of approaches and media at the time. The exhibition also highlighted feminism’s conjunction of art and activism, giving weight to manifestos and documentation of work developed out of collective organizations, such as Suzanne Lacy’s Prostitution Notes (1974), alongside more monumental artworks.

The lack of consideration for film and video was a real loss in what was otherwise such a rich exhibition. Just a few moving image pieces were singled out for full-screen projection, and the rest were shown on small monitors throughout the gallery. It was difficult to see so many of these works in one visit. Including a DVD with a selection of these works in the catalogue could have improved the chances not only of seeing but also teaching this work.

“Wack!” had many puzzlements, some of which have been noted elsewhere. It included artists who were opposed or indifferent to feminism like, respectively, Jay DeFeo and Lygia Clark, and works that had no clear relationship to feminism such as Ketty La Rocca’s text piece Verbum, Parola, Mot, Word (1967). The exhibition also deliberately sidelined or reworked major themes of 1970s feminist art, namely Goddess imagery, femmage, and the ongoing question of eco-feminism. While I welcomed the redefinition of Goddess imagery to include works that were more critical and secular than mystical and celebratory, such as O’Grady’s Mlle Bourgeoise Noire performance artifacts and Ulrika Rosenbach’s video Don’t Believe I’m an Amazon (1975), the almost total omission of works related to the Pattern and Decoration movement of the late 1970s and Miriam Schapiro’s “femmage” seems like an oversight, particularly in a contemporary context rife with returns to decoration and craft. The absence of a deliberate investigation of eco-feminism, a term with critical implications today whose various definitions usually invoke the work of Anna Mendieta and Bonnie Sherk, both included in the show, seems equally unfortunate.

The title was also notoriously anomalous. “Wack!” implies a nonexistent acronym, which makes an ambiguous statement about the wealth of feminist organizations formed in the 1970s and 1980s and their relative dearth today. Its
male sexual connotations are provocative in conjunction with the cover image of Martha Rosler’s 1966-72 collage *Hot House, or Harem, from the Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* series, a paper collage of variously tanned and artificially posed 1960s *Playboy* models multiplied to a grotesque and ridiculouslyuctive profession of female bodies. More puzzling, the title appropriates a negative slang term (if I said “*Wack!* wasn’t wack!” would you roll your eyes?). The controversy over the catalogue cover art was warranted. A catalogue cover inevitably becomes iconic. To choose such an overt pastiche—a notoriously elusive, deliberately imitative but satirical poetic form—for this significant role becomes a confusing statement precisely because of the sophisticated subtext of the artwork. A work that depicts the female body as an active agent or as grotesque, a video still by Lynda Benglis or Anna Maria Maiolino, for example, would have made an unequivocal cover statement, rejecting the female body as spectacle. Rosler’s collage, while part of a critical series of early works by the artist, is less effective as an advertisement for the show than many other works in the exhibition. Mary Beth Edelson’s response, a second version of the collage with the faces of famous women artists (including Rosler) plastered onto the *Playboy* bodies, was a droll souvenir available in the PS.1 giftshop, but could not make up for a missed opportunity.

Overall, the *Wack!* exhibition was a landmark event and the catalogue an invaluable resource for its scholarly examinations, biographical information, and wealth of visual material. It allows for a broader and more complex understanding of the relationship between feminism and art than previously possible. Its critical perspectives provide a welcome complement to the first-person artist perspectives often foregrounded in discussions of feminism. Perhaps most importantly, the catalogue firmly situates feminism in the plural, as a cross-cultural debate entwined with parallel struggles for the rights of lesbians, minorities, children, sex workers, mothers, immigrants, and other marginalized identities, which may or may not include artists. The rich range of feminist material production appears as alternately exciting and challenging today as it did thirty years ago. It is a sign of renewed engagement with the ongoing feminist struggles to which this art continues to speak.

**Karen Kurczynski** is a Visiting Assistant Professor of contemporary art and critical theory at Massachusetts College of Art, and co-president of the Radical Art Caucus of the College Art Association.

**NOTES**


---

**Blaze, Discourse on Art, Women and Feminism**


Reviewed by Pamela H. Simpson

This impressive collection of thirty-two essays, first presented as part of the Women’s Caucus for Art (WCA) national meeting in Boston in 2006, is an excellent introduction to contemporary second- and third-wave feminist artists’, critics’, and historians’ points of view. The hardbound, 417 page book, edited by two of the meeting co-chairs, includes an index, biographies of contributors, and eighteen black and white illustrations. Its wide-ranging topics and perspectives are divided into four sections: Leadership, Criticism, Collaboration, and The Work. Each includes essays on the subject history and on practices and issues currently being debated among feminists.

The first section, Leadership, includes several fascinating essays on the history of the WCA (founded 1972), on the recipients of its Lifetime Achievement Awards (with a useful list in the appendix), and even a history of feminist art journals that includes the WJ (the only survivor) written by current co-editor Joan Marter. The essays in Criticism, the second section, critique such things as the institutional exclusion of Latina and Chicana artists, the appearance and disappearance of the nude, public art, and blogs as sites for feminist activities. Next, Collaboration offers discussions of the various ways women have collaborated on art projects, how they have mentored each other, and even mother-daughter art making. The final section deals with specific works of art from both the artists’ and the critics’ perspective.

The editors invited all of the writers to think about where their evolving work fits into the history of feminism. This is an issue most clearly stated in two essays—Dena Muller’s “The Burden of Inclusivity: Second-Wave Feminism and the Third-Wave Era,” and Maria Elena Buszek’s “Perma-Wave: Bridging Feminism’s Generation Gap.” The “discourse” in the title of the book seems to be most clearly played out in the reflections offered by these two younger feminists. Muller was part of a panel discussion in 2003 that was sponsored by Veteran Feminists of America. As the director of the A. I. R. Gallery, Muller had looked forward to meeting some of the superstars she had learned about in her women’s studies classes. But as one of the few women under forty in attendance, she grew dispirited by repeated references to the “lack of interest, involvement, knowledge, and respect” supposedly evident in younger women (103). Finally, the panel’s organizer called on Muller to speak to the issue. She says she decided to play with...
COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: [Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution]
SOURCE: Woman’s Art J 29 no2 Fall/Wint 2008

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.