

INTRODUCTION

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Given the increasingly dominant role that women play as administrators, directors, curators, and gallerists within the contemporary art world, it might be difficult to envision with any precision, in 2010, the ongoing and persistent malady of sexism and gender inequity. The question, no longer, is what is feminism? The more appropriate question is twofold: Who is a feminist, and is she, or he, on my side?

For many years, feminist artists were sidelined, decidedly unpopular both in terms of their content, and their biting social critique: using the body, and the family as a site of inquiry, exploration and protest. Feminists were willing to go where other artists dared not tread: sexual violence, abortion, motherhood. We could say, then, that feminists altered the terms of engagement with regard to formality: injecting narrative content into an era—the early 1970s, that was still in love with the shapely blasé of minimalism. But this is not a story of him versus her: form versus content. But that is an old, and very boring dialectic, since artists of both genders have proven their simultaneous existence. Still, the comparison persists.

Eventually a younger generation absorbed some of these lessons, deciding that domesticity and the psychology of home was generative and provocative: Rachel Whiteread, Gregor Schneider, Tracey Emin. Where did they learn these lessons? Certainly not from the museums, which have still failed to collect works by now-middle aged women artists. Rather, they learned these lessons at art school, from these same feminist artists: for example, Cindy Sherman was preceded in her gender performance by her teacher at Buffalo State University, a Canadian named Suzy Lake, who performed semi-narrative tableaux using make-up and wigs, then documented the performance photographically. A now very belatedly retrospective, curated by Carla Garnet, is currently circulating Canada, since no American museum wanted it.

Janine Antoni is another example of an artist instructed by a second-wave feminist. During the 1970s, the kitchen became the iconic site of women's universal oppression. Food preparation was a central topic in early feminist art production. But even closer to Antoni's famed performative sculpture, *Gnaw*, in which she carved a six hundred block of chocolate and a 600 pound block of lard with her teeth. Antoni most certainly was influenced by her little-known teacher at the Rhode Island School of design, Pat Lasch, who used cake decorating as a performative trope in her work.

But perhaps tenure is really all we can claim as feminism's art world legacy. But adding to these questions of identity lay a profound discursive difficulty. Different national or regional strains of feminism (if we can even classify them as strains) engage very different issues. Given their academic training,

most artists attentive to gender are influenced by a group of concerns loosely grounded in Western modernism—realism, credibility and sincerity, spectacle, and psychology, to name a few. And for one short year, 2007, to be a feminist over the age of fifty-five was briefly sexy, when a proliferation of feminist-themed group exhibitions finally, finally paid homage to a generation of long-ignored practitioners. But, then, poof, the year of the woman came to end, and along with it, the magic of seeing socially engaged art everywhere: because feminism didn't just perform an intensive navel-gazing, but instead, pioneered an activist practice. Feminist body-based artists stopped taking their clothes off, and pioneered what is known, sometimes derisively, as public art. Women began engaging with community groups, and social groups, and environmental activists. Women like Mierele Laderman Ukeles, with her *Touch Sanitation* performances, where she shook the hands of thousands of New York City sanitation workers, never stopped this important work of awareness, continuing iterations of it into the 1990s. Or Martha Rosler's 1989 installation, *If You Lived Here*, which provided an ad-hoc community center which became a forum for engaging the egregious homelessness along New York City's Bowery. Such a show provided a foundation for an artist like Zoe Leonard to become empowered to document the networks of exploitation and poverty in her Lower East Side neighborhood in the early 2000s, nearly two decades after Rosler's work.

But now, feminism has undergone a transformation, from a politically charged inquiry, spiked with bitter wit, to a highly synthetic production whose vocabulary has been absorbed, synthesized, digested, and reused to a new conceptual and formal end: quite simply, the market has taken over. Any woman artist these days is assumed to be working through a feminist vocabulary. I'd like to point to the recent Pipilotti Rist installation at MOMA, organized by Klaus Biesenbach. The show achieved an extraordinary amount of popular and critical success, becoming a stand-alone draw for a great number of visitors.

Feminist engagement in this context was interpreted as a transformation of the space of the museum from a container of objects into an active zone of production that is less performative than entertainment-driven. Seen here, *Pour Your Body Out*, (2009), takes, as its centerpiece—a circle, at once communal, and entirely recycled, a form with direct links to the solidarity and circularity of the 1970s version of feminist theory: the consciousness-raising group.

Consciousness-raising, also known, more colloquially, as C-R, was a central ideology within second-wave feminism, employing lived experience as a barometer of widespread injustice toward women. Often described as embodying the "personal is political" credo, which is what the title of this panel seeks

to reverse, C-R was a group-directed exploration in the verbalization of individual experience, using an equal power structure to foster a unique and immediate intimacy in order to emphasize the ways in which the private dimensions of women's lives could be used a tool of social control and repression.

However, the problem with *Pour Your Body Out* is that it pretends to invoke such a community. The exhibition was praised for feminizing the space of the Museum of Modern Art. However, Rist invokes the community of passivity, of lounging, hanging out, texting, within the atrium of the museum. Why is this? Plain and simple: the tropes for feminism are all in place: a video projection of fleshy bodies and nature scenes, a glowing pink womb room, with a circle set in the middle, providing a platform for a discourse of equality.

The New York critic Jerry Saltz wrote glowingly—and foolishly, I might add, “The atrium of this bastion of masculinism becomes a womb, and the museum itself a woman. In an abstract way, Rist makes the institution ovulate.”

But Rist's work is an imposter—it looks feminist, in that slick ad campaign sort of way, as though we are being sold pink bubble bath—it even *feels* feminist, in its false sense of a safe space, a place to gather and express oneself fully. But this is a trap, and it is not even Rist's fault. Her piece fails because she doesn't know the history of what came before she began making this work, because, as an artist, 1970s feminism is still not a part of the canon. Her response to history is passive, and completely incapable of activism in the way that women artists of the 1970s took the streets, the airwaves, the steps of city hall, and fought for the kind of attention that still embarrasses many people today—because that is not how women should behave. Two New York artists, Cheryl Donegan and Kim Rosenfield, were also bothered by the passivity of Rist's space, and their solution was to hold an impromptu yoga class—seen here, called MOMA Yoga. As Saltz gleefully described it, “It took audience participation to a new level: doing nothing, absolutely together... there was a mellowness that overtook the space.” Thus, the installation in fully transformed into an oasis of complacency.

Yet, on the other hand, Rist, like many women artists of her generation is what we could call a “context provider”—in this piece she has created a temporary community by building a quasi-democratized feminine space. But feminine is not the same as feminist. Feminism is still viewed as a cultural Other: a variant that does not naturally belong or fit comfortably within the realm of the museum. In this field of reference, an entire category of people: that is, politicized and activist women artists, are not welcomed within the space of the museum, unless it is they who are performing cultural labor which, as I pointed out earlier, is the primary laboring class within the art world.

Rist's work is just one instance of a much larger trend in what is often misperceived as a socially engaged art practice. Many other artists, men and women, work in an even more anthropological vein, embedding themselves in communities, where they proceed to collect stories, solicit opinions on politics and social justice, and sometimes even engage in conflict resolution. Hal Foster charted this phenomenon in his 1996 essay, “Artist as Ethnographer,” in which he observed, the ethnographic mapping of a given institution of related community is a primary art-form that site-specific art now assumes... it is important to remember that these pseudoethnographic critiques are very often commissioned, and indeed franchised.”

So, in closing, I will ask of our panelists: What are the parameters for a socially engaged art practice? Do artists overstep their boundaries as producers when they perform the role of the anthropologist, archivist, or auteur? Is this a radical exploration, or an amateurization of an outside field? If the goal of a feminist-influenced praxis is to facilitate self-empowerment across social, cultural, and economic boundaries, what is the role of self-representation, and how carefully must it be conceived? ●