

# *Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s*

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By now most people—not just feminist people—will acknowledge that feminism has made a contribution to the avant-garde and/or modernist arts of the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> What exactly that contribution is and how important it has been is not so easily established. This is a difficult subject for a feminist to tackle because it seems unavoidably entangled in the art world's linear I-did-it-firstism, which radical feminists have rejected (not to mention our own, necessarily biased inside view). If one says—and one can—that around 1970 women artists introduced an element of real emotion and autobiographical content to performance, body art, video, and artists' books; or that they have brought over into high art the use of "low" traditional art forms such as embroidery, sewing, and china painting; or that they have changed the face of central imagery and pattern painting, of layering, fragmentation, and collage—someone will inevitably and perhaps justifiably holler the names of various male artists. But these are simply *surface* phenomena. Feminism's major contribution has been too complex, subversive, and fundamentally *political* to lend itself to such inter-necine, hand-to-hand stylistic combat. I am, therefore, not going to mention names, but shall try instead to make my claims sweeping enough to clear the decks.

Feminism's greatest contribution to the future of art has probably been precisely its *lack* of contribution to modernism. Feminist methods and theories have instead offered a socially concerned alternative to the increasingly mechanical "evolution" of art about art. The 1970s might not have been "pluralist" at all if women artists had not emerged during

that decade to introduce the multicolored threads of female experience into the male fabric of modern art. Or, to collage my metaphors—the feminist insistence that the personal (and thereby art itself) is political has, like a serious flood, interrupted the mainstream's flow, sending it off into hundreds of tributaries.

It is useless to try to pin down a specific formal contribution made by feminism because feminist and/or women's art is neither a style nor a movement, much as this may distress those who would like to see it safely ensconced in the categories and chronology of the past. It consists of many styles and individual expressions and for the most part succeeds in bypassing the star system. At its most provocative and constructive, feminism questions all the precepts of art as we know it. (It is no accident that "revisionist" art history also emerged around 1970, with feminists sharing its front line.) In this sense, then, focusing on feminism's contribution to 1970s art is a red herring. The goal of feminism is *to change the character of art*. "What has prevented women from being really great artists is the fact that we have been unable to transform our circumstances into our subject matter. . . . to use them to reveal the whole nature of the human condition."<sup>2</sup> Thus, if our only contribution is to be the incorporation on a broader scale of women's traditions of crafts, autobiography, narrative, overall collage, or any other technical or stylistic innovation—then we shall have failed.

Feminism is an ideology, a value system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life.<sup>3</sup> (And for me it is inseparable from socialism, although neither all Marxists

nor all feminists agree on this.) Therefore, feminist *art* is, of necessity, already a hybrid. It is far from fully realized, but we envision for it the same intensity that characterizes the women's movement at its best. Here, for example, are some descriptions of feminist art: "Feminist art raises consciousness, invites dialogue, and transforms culture."<sup>4</sup> "If one is a feminist, then one must be a feminist artist—that is, one must make art that reflects a political consciousness of what it means to be a woman in patriarchal culture. The visual form this consciousness takes varies from artist to artist. Thus art and feminism are not totally separate, nor are they the same thing."<sup>5</sup> "The problem is not with people's taste (often called 'kitsch' by superior minds) but with defining art as one thing only. Art is that which functions as aesthetic experience for you. If a certain art works that way for enough people, there is consensus; that becomes art. . . . That which we feel is worth devoting one's life to and whose value cannot be proven, that is art."<sup>6</sup> Feminist art "is a political position, a set of ideas about the future of the world, which includes information about the history of women and our struggles and recognition of women as a class. It is also developing new forms and a new sense of audience."<sup>7</sup>

The conventional art world response to these statements will be *what* new forms? And to hell with the rest of it. Descriptions like the above do not sound like definitions of art precisely because they are not, and because they exist in an atmosphere of outreach virtually abandoned by modernism. For years now, we have been told that male modernist art is

superior because it is "self-critical." But from such a view self-criticism is in fact a narrow, highly mystified, and often egotistical *monologue*. The element of dialogue can be entirely lacking (though ironically it is *feminist* art that is accused of narcissism). Self-criticism that does not take place within or pass on out to its audience simply reinforces our culture's view of art as an absolutely isolated activity. Artists (like women) stay home (in self and studio) and pay for this "freedom" by having their products manipulated and undervalued by those who control the outside world.

A basic and painful conflict is set up when an artist wants to make art and at the same time wants to participate more broadly in the culture, even wants to integrate aesthetic and social activities. Artists who work with groups, as do so many feminists, always seem to be looking wistfully over their shoulders at the studio. "I've got to get back to my own work" is a familiar refrain, because, as it stands now, art and life always seem to be in competition. And this situation produces an unusually schizophrenic artist. One of the feminist goals is to reintegrate the aesthetic self and the social self and to make it possible for both to function without guilt or frustration. In the process, we have begun to see art as something subtly but significantly different from what it is in the dominant culture.

This is not said in a self-congratulatory tone. It remains to be seen whether different is indeed better. Success and failure in such unmapped enterprises are often blurred. Various feminists have already fallen into various traps along the way, among them: the adoption of certain clichés in images (fruit and shell, mirror and mound), materials (fabrics and papers), approaches ("non-elitist"), and emotions (non-transformative pain, rage, and mother-love); a certain naïveté (also carrying with it a certain strength) that comes from the wholesale rejection of all other art, especially abstraction and painting; a dependence on "political correctness" that can lead to exclusivity and snobbism; and, at the other extreme, an unthinking acceptance of literally anything done by a woman. Beneath these pitfalls is a need for language—visual and verbal—that will express the ways our art and ideas are developing without being sappy and without denying the powers of the individual within collective dialogue.

Nevertheless, feminist values have permeated the 1970s and are ready to flower in the 1980s, if militarism and socio-economic backlash don't overwhelm us all. Often accepted unconsciously, these values support the opening up and out of eyes, mouths, minds, and doors—and

sometimes the smashing of windows. They include collaboration, dialogue, a constant questioning of aesthetic and social assumptions, and a new respect for audience. Feminism's contribution to the evolution of art reveals itself not in shapes but in structures. Only new structures bear the possibility of changing the vehicle itself, the meaning of art in society.

New? I hesitate to use the word in this context, since it too has been so distorted in the name of modernism: new reality, new realism, new abstraction, and similarly, all the rigid posts: post-modernism, post-Minimalism, and post-beyond-postness. Feminism is new only in the sense that it isn't post-anything. Its formal precepts are not new at all. They are simply distributed differently from those entrenched since around 1950. Much or even most of the best art by women has turned its back on the "new," preferring to go deeper into visual forms that have been "done before" (mostly by men). When I began to write extensively about women's art, I was accused by friends and enemies of becoming a "retrograde" critic. And so long as I remained attached to the conditioning of my own art education, received primarily at the Museum of Modern Art and on 10th and 57th Streets, I too was afraid of that stigma. However, the more women's work I saw, the more my respect grew for those artists who, having been forcibly cut off from the mainstream, persevered in exploring their own social realities, even—or especially—when such exploration did not coincide with the current fashions.

The more illuminating dialogues I had within the women's movement, the clearer it became to me that the express towards the "true nature of art" had whisked us past any number of fertile valleys, paths to elsewhere, revelations, personal and social confrontations that might forever have been missed had it not been for such stubbornly "retrograde" artists who insisted on taking the local. During this time I was constantly being told that some woman's work was derived from some far better known man's work. In fact, such similarities were usually demonstrably superficial, but the experience of searching for the differences proved invaluable because it undermined and finally invalidated that notion of "progress" so dear to the heart of the art market.

In endlessly different ways, the best women artists have resisted the treadmill to progress by simply disregarding a history that was not theirs. There *is* a difference, though not always an obvious one, between the real but superficial innovations of a feminist or woman's art that has dissolved into mainstream concerns and the application of these same innovations

to another set of values, where they may be seen as less "original." It was suggested several years ago that feminist art offered a new "vernacular" reality opposed to the "historical" reality that has informed modern art to date.<sup>8</sup> Given its air of condescension, "vernacular" may not be the right word (and certainly we don't want to be "hidden from history" again), but it is the right idea. The 1970s have, I hope, seen the last of the "movements" that have traipsed, like elephants trunk-to-tail, through the last century.

The notion that art neatly progresses has been under attack from all sides for years now; its absurdity became increasingly obvious with post-modernism in the early 1960s. By 1975, a not-always-delightful chaos of conceptual art, performance, photo-realism, "new images," and what-have-you prevailed. The 1970s pluralism, decried for different reasons by both left and right, has at least produced a kind of compost heap where artists can sort out what is fertile and what is sterile. Bag ladies picking around in this heap find forms, colors, shapes, and materials that have been discarded by the folks on the hill. They take them home and recycle them, thriftily finding new uses for worn-out concepts, changing not only the buttons and the trim but the functions as well. A literal example of this metaphor is the Chilean *arpillera*, or patchwork picture. Made by anonymous women and smuggled out into the world as images of political protest, social deprivation, crushed ideas and hopes, the *arpilleras* are the only valid indigenous Chilean art—now that the murals have been painted over, the poets and singers murdered and imprisoned.

You will have noticed by now that feminism (and by extension feminist art) is hugely ambitious.<sup>9</sup> A developed feminist consciousness brings with it an altered concept of reality and morality that is crucial to the art being made and to the lives lived with that art. We take for granted that making art is not simply "expressing oneself" but is a far broader and more important task—expressing oneself as a member of a larger unity, or comm/unity, so that in speaking for oneself one is also speaking for those who cannot speak. A populist definition of quality in art might be "that element that *moves* the viewer." A man probably can't decide what that is for a woman, nor a white for a person of color, nor an educated for an uneducated person, and so forth, which is where "taste" comes in. This in turn may explain why the "experts" have never been able to agree on which artists have this elusive "quality." Only when there are real channels of communication can artist and audience both change and mutually exchange their notions of art.

Feminists are asking themselves, as certain artists and critics and historians have asked themselves for generations, "Is this particular painting, sculpture, performance, text, photograph moving to me? If so, why? If not, why not? In this intuitive/analytical task, the social conditioning we have undergone as women, as nurturers of children, men, homes, and customs, has its advantages. We are not bolstered by the conviction that whatever we do will be accepted by those in power. This can be psychologically detrimental, but it also carries with it an increased sensitivity to the needs of others which accounts to some extent for the roles that the audience, and communication, play in feminist art.

Similarly, because women's traditional arts have always been considered utilitarian, feminists are more willing than others to accept the notion that art can be aesthetically *and* socially effective at the same time. Not that it's easy. The parameters for "good art" have been set; the illusion of stretching those boundaries that prevails in the avant-garde is more exactly a restless thrashing around within the walls. Overtly feminist artists are always being accused of being "bad artists" simply by definition. That's not something I'm interested in responding to here, but it should be mentioned in the context of changing the character of art. Given the history of the avant-garde, what on earth does "bad art" mean these days? But of course if someone isn't there to say what "good art" is—then art itself gets out of institutional hand.

Perhaps the single aspect of feminist art that makes it most foreign to the mainstream notion of art is that it is impossible to discuss it without referring to the social structures that support and often inspire it. These structures are grounded in the interaction techniques adapted (and feminized) from revolutionary socialist practice—techniques on which the women's movement itself is based: consciousness-raising, going around the circle with equal time for all speakers, and criticism/self-criticism. From the resulting structures have evolved the models feminism offers for art. These models, I repeat, are not new ways of handling the picture plane, or new ways of rearranging space, nor new ways of making figures, objects, or landscapes live; they are inclusive structures or social collages.

The history of the male avant-garde has been one of reverse (or perverse) response to society, with the artist seen as the opposition or as out-of-touch idealist. The feminist (and socialist) value system insists upon cultural workers supporting and responding to their constituencies. The three models of such interaction are: (1) group

and/or public ritual; (2) public consciousness-raising and interaction through visual images, environments, and performances; and (3) cooperative/collaborative/collective or anonymous artmaking. While it is true that they can more easily be applied to the mass-reproduced mediums such as posters, video, and publications, these models also appear as underlying aesthetics in paintings, sculptures, drawings, and prints. Of course, no single artist incorporates all the models I am idealizing here, and certainly individual male artists have contributed to these notions. But since male consciousness (or lack thereof) dominates the art world, and since with some exceptions male artists are slow to accept or to acknowledge the influence of women, these models are being passed into the mainstream slowly and subtly and often under masculine guise—one of the factors that makes the pinning down of feminism's contribution so difficult. Yet all these structures are in the most fundamental sense collective, like feminism itself. And these three models are all characterized by an element of outreach, a need for connections beyond process or product, an element of *inclusiveness* which also takes the form of responsiveness and responsibility for one's own ideas and images—the outward and inward facets of the same impulse.

The word ritual has been used in connection with art frequently and loosely in the last decade, but it has raised the important issue of the relationship of belief to the forms that convey it. The popularity of the notion of ritual indicates a nostalgia for times when art had daily significance. However, good ritual art is not a matter of wishful fantasy, of skimming a few alien cultures for an exotic set of images. Useful as they may be as talismans for self-development, these images are only containers. They become ritual in the true sense only when they are filled by a communal impulse that connects the past (the last time we performed this act) and the present (the ritual we are performing now) and the future (will we ever perform it again?). When a ritual doesn't work, it becomes a self-conscious act, an exclusive object involving only the performer. When it does work, it leaves the viewer with a need to do or to participate in this act, or in something similar, again. (Here ritual art becomes propaganda in the good sense—that of spreading the word.) Only in repetition does an isolated act become ritualized, and this is where community comes in. The feminist development of ritual art has been in response to real personal needs and also to a communal need for a new history and a broader framework within which

to make art.

Public consciousness-raising and interaction through visual images, environments, and performances also insist on an inclusive and expansive structure that is inherent in these forms. This is in a sense the logical expansion of a notion that has popped up through the history of the avant-garde—that of working "in the gap between art and life." Aside from an outreach branch of the "happening" aesthetic in the early 1960s, this notion has remained firmly on art's side of the gap. But by 1970, feminists, especially on the West coast, were closer to the edge of that gap than most artists; they were further from the power centers, and, out of desperation, more inclined to make the leap. Just as ritual art reaches out and gathers up archaeological, anthropological, and religious data, the more overtly political art of public strategies reaches out to psychology, sociology, and the life sciences. Its makers ("planners" might be a more accurate term) work in time as well as in images, moving closer to film, books, or mass media. Video and photography are often used not so much to stimulate a passive audience as to welcome an actively participating audience, to help people discover who they are, where their power lies, and how they can make their own exchanges between art and life.

Such work can take place in schools, streets, shopping malls, prisons, hospitals, or neighborhoods. Among its main precepts is that it does not reject any subject, audience, or context, and that it accepts the changes these may make in the art. To be more specific, a few examples: (1) A group of women of mixed nationalities living in Paris, who have done large documentary pieces including drawings, texts, photographs, and videotapes about women in prison and about Turkish and Portuguese workers at home and in economically imposed exile. (2) An Israeli woman trying to communicate to urban workers on the Tel Aviv waterfront the plight and beliefs of the Bedouin tribes through "Desert People" costume rituals in urban workplaces. (3) A New York woman who made her "Maintenance Art" first in the home, then in office buildings, and has spent the last two years identifying with the men in the city's Sanitation Department (the "women" of the city government), recognizing their maintenance work as art by shaking hands with every member of the department. (4) Two women in Los Angeles who make public pieces strategically designed to change the image and media coverage of feminist issues such as rape and violence against women. (5) A mixed-gender group, led by a San Francisco woman, that has built a "life frame" which is simultaneously

performance art, five acres of community outreach, and an experimental agriculture station, making connections between animals, plants, people, and art. (6) A group of women photographers in East London organizing child-care facilities and comparing pictures of real life with the mass media images of women. (7) A man in a small economically devastated New England milltown who uses photography as a vehicle of continuing awareness to acquaint the inhabitants with their environment, with each other, and with their possibilities. (8) Another man who mixes art and science and populism in a South Bronx storefront and calls it a "cultural concept."

All these examples overlap. So does the final one. Much of the work mentioned above is being executed by various combinations of artists or of artists and non-artists, often anonymously or under the rubric of a collective or network or project. Some women work cooperatively—helping an individual artist to realize her vision on a monumental scale and in the process both giving to her work and getting input for their own work. Others work collaboratively, perhaps according to their own special skills, needs, and concerns. And others work collectively in a more or less consciously structured manner aimed at equal participation, skill- and power-sharing. Each of these means helps to achieve an end result of breaking down the isolation of the artist's traditional work patterns. None precludes individual work. (I find from my own experience that the dialogue or critical/self-critical method stimulates new kinds of working methods and a new flexibility. By integrating feedback into the process, and not just as final response to the product, it also changes the individual work.)

The structures or patterns I've sketched out above are laid out on a grid of dialogue which is in turn related to the favorite feminist metaphor: the web, or network, or quilt as an image of connectiveness, *inclusiveness* and integration. The "collage aesthetic" named by the Surrealists, is a kind of dialectic exposing by juxtaposition the disguises of certain words and images and forms and thus also expressing the cultural and social myths on which they are based. The notion of connections is also a metaphor for the breakdown of race, class, and gender barriers, because it moves out from its center in every direction. Though men are its progenitors in art, collage seems to me to be a particularly female medium, not only because it offers a way of knitting the fragments of our lives together but also because it potentially leaves nothing out.

It is no accident that one ritual artist

calls herself Spider Woman and another group calls itself Ariadne. As I was writing this essay, I read an article about the Native American ethos of total interrelationship between all things and creatures which says: "Thus, nothing existed in isolation. The intricately interrelated threads of the spider's web was referred to . . . the world. . . . This is a profound 'symbol' when it is understood. The people obviously observed that the threads of the web were drawn out from within the spider's very being. They also recognized that the threads in concentric circles were sticky, whereas the threads leading to the center were smooth!"<sup>10</sup> The author remembers his mother saying that "in the Native American experience all things are possible and therefore all things are acceptable" and he goes on to hope that "our societal structures and attitudes become bold and large enough to affirm rather than to deny, to accept rather than to reject."

I quote this not only because it expresses very clearly a conviction that lies at the heart of feminism (and should lie at the heart of all art as well), but also because it comes from another subjugated culture to which some of us fleeing the potential disasters of Western capitalism are sentimentally attracted. However, the socialist feminist model does not stop at the point of escape or rejection as did the counterculture of the 1960s. To change the character of art is not to retreat from either society or art. This is the significance of the models I've outlined above. They do not shrink from social reality no matter how painful it is, nor do they shrink from the role art must play as fantasy, dream, and imagination. They contribute most to the avant-garde by slowing it down. They locate a network of minor roads that simply covers more territory than the so-called freeways. These roads are not, however, dead ends. They simply pass more people's houses. And are more likely to be invited in.

**End**

## Notes

- 1 Even the *New York Times* critic, though he fears it is "lowering the artistic standards."
- 2 Judy Chicago, *Artforum*, September 1974 (also reprinted in my *From the Center*, New York, 1976).
- 3 Surrealism was also self-described along these broad lines, and with Dada has proved that it too was never a movement or a style, since it has continued to pervade all movements and styles ever since.
- 4 Ruth Iskin, at a panel on feminist art and social change accompanying the opening of *The Dinner Party*, March 1979.
- 5 Harmony Hammond, "Horseblindness," *Heresies*, No. 9, 1980.
- 6 May Stevens, "Taking Art to the Revolution," *Heresies*, No. 9, 1980. Many of the ideas in this article are due to discussions with the collective that edited this issue and with Hammond and Stevens in particular.
- 7 Suzanne Lacy, panel accompanying *The Dinner Party* (see n. 4).
- 8 Jack Burnham in the *New Art Examiner*, 1978.
- 9 The distinction between ambition (doing one's best and taking one's art and ideas as far as possible without abandoning the feminist support system) and competition (walking all over everybody to accomplish this) is a much discussed topic in the women's movement.
- 10 Jemake Highwater, quoting Joseph Epes Brown, in an unpublished manuscript.