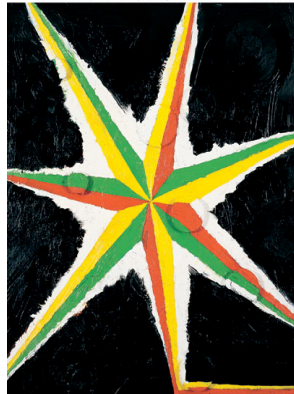


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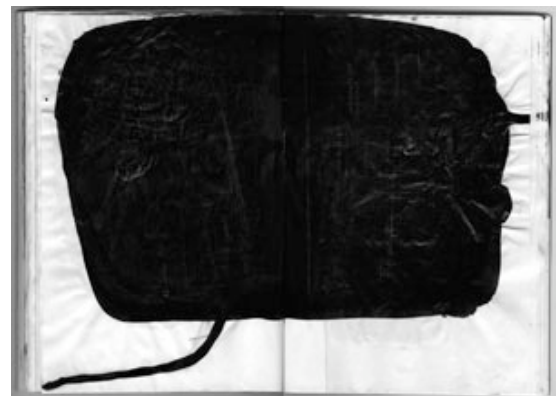
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"I am not now nor have I ever been..."

by Mira Schor

I am not a feminist artist.

Now I've got your attention. I am following a time-honored tradition and taking a page out of Marina Abramovic's playbook. At the MoMA symposium "The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts" at the end of January 2007, she introduced herself that way (as she does at every *feminist* art



Mira Schor, "Summer Thought Balloon," (2007). Ink and graphite on paper. 12 1/4" x 9 1/2 in.

event to which she is invited) to an audience that included Harmony Hammond, Ida Applebroog, Carolee Schneemann, Mary Beth Edelson, Faith Wilding, and dozens of other major women artists who have identified themselves with the feminist movement, who were not invited to the podium, and whose presence in the room was like a barely acknowledged 300-lb. GUERRILLA GIRL.

As the Wizard makes perfectly clear at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, in a spectacle society, you are something only if you are given some visible symbolic proof: the Tin Man gets his heart through an official testimonial. So by the rules of the spectacle, I am not a feminist artist because I am not included in *WACK! Art and The Feminist Revolution* (opening February 17th at P.S.1) or last year's *Global Feminisms* at the Brooklyn Museum. But before you dismiss my argument as sour grapes, please take note that I'm in great company: most of *my entire generation* has been eliminated from the history of feminist art by the two major museum shows devoted to the subject in 2007-2008. In determining the composition of *WACK!* Cornelia Butler concentrated on what might be termed the pioneer generation: since this was part of "Second-Wave Feminism," let's call it "Generation 2." In the case of *Global Feminisms*, Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin selected women born

after 1960, Generation 3. So a chronological ditch was created into which fell most of the artists born after 1945 but before 1960.

Call it Generation 2.5: the first generation whose members were able to embrace feminism as a path in their youth. The generation who really developed most of the tropes we think of as feminist art, often inventing and building them at the same time as their pioneer mentors. Women such as Maureen Connor, Judith Shea, Rona Pondick, Robin Mitchell, Shirley Kaneda, Suzanne Joelson, Joan Waltemath, Zoe Leonard, Rochelle Feinstein, Abigail Child, Deb Kass, Leslie Labowitz, Vanalyne Green, Barbara Kruger, Erika Rothenberg, Nancy Bowen, Pat Ward Williams, Peggy Ahwesh, Beverly Naidus, Terri Berkowitz, Shu Lea Cheang, Nancy Fried, Elise Siegel, Shelly Silver, Valerie Jaudon, Susan Bee, Laurie Simmons, The Guerrilla Girls, Sophie Calle, Jana Sterbak, Johanna Drucker, Lenore Malen, Kiki Smith, Susanna Heller, Elena Sisto, Bailey Doogan, Perry Bard, Lisa Hoke, Elissa D'Arrigo, Elana Herzog, Xenobia Bailey, Nancy Davidson, Faith Wilding, among many others. Not all of these artists make—BIG SCARE QUOTES—“*Political Art*,”—more on that in a minute—but they form a politically conscious cohort.

By the way, among the women artists left out of the two exhibitions, one can make a distinction between Generation 2.5 and Generation 2.75, women who in some cases were born after 1960 but who were also not included in *Global Feminisms* because they were seen as established artists who had been showing since the early 90s. These include Nicole Eisenman, Kara Walker, Judie Bamber, Janine Antoni, Renée Cox, Liz Larner, Ingrid Calame, Coco Fusco, Jeanne Dunning, Gillian Wearing, Renée Green, Mona Hatoum, Andrea Fraser, Rachel Lachowicz, Portia Munson, Patricia Cronin, Carrie Moyers, Sheila Pepe, Andrea Zittel, Lorna Simpson, Collier Schorr, and Rachel Whiteread.

Many commentators noted with dismay or bemusement the sheer volume of images of mothers, breasts, raped and brutalized naked female bodies represented in *Global Feminisms*. Viewers were asking, Do these works represent a dominant vein of imagery? Is this what younger women self-selected as feminists consider feminist art, or is this a reflection of the views of the curators? What was problematic was not the imagery—many of these works were quite powerful and add to the impressive lexicon of feminist art. It was the lack of political or theoretical discourse on the profusion of such imagery.

Here the issue of denial of feminism comes into play. “I am not a feminist/feminist artist” is the surprising mantra of all feminist exhibitions,

symposia and journal forums since the late '80s. Read carefully the catalogue biographies of the artists included in *WACK!* and you will see that in each case the curators tacitly seek to justify the inclusion of the artist in a show of feminist art by citing some indication of her public or private identification as a feminist. This proves untenable, however, as further reading reveals that a significant portion of the show's 119 individual artists and artists' collectives are described as having little or no public relationship with feminism, or as denying the identification outright. It is quite interesting to track how many of the women included in *WACK!* were not, are not feminists in any active sense, even if you take into account the differing geo-political contexts and/or the age of the artist in relation to the benchmark dates of Second Wave Feminism, and even if you agree that the value of an artist's work to a feminist analysis of representation and form is not dependent on her private politics or intentionality (the age-old struggles between individual creativity and public politics notwithstanding). “Many of [Marina] Abramovic's best-known performances from the 1970s stand, in part, as critiques of the traditional role of women in the arts...Despite this, the artist has distanced herself from the feminist movement: ‘I have never had anything to do with feminism.’” (*WACK!* p. 210); “[Louise] Bourgeois's relationship to feminism is complex...‘There is no feminist aesthetic. Absolutely not!’” (220); “[Theresa Hak Kyung] Cha's work is not overtly feminist but...” (223); “Perhaps indicative of her lifelong antipathy to categories, [Jay DeFeo] did not identify herself as a feminist” (226); “Although [Rita] Donagh was not intimately engaged with the burgeoning feminist discourse in 1970s England...” (229); “While [Lili] Dujourie has recalled feeling marginalized by her primarily male colleagues and acknowledged a debt to feminist film theory...she has also rejected a specifically feminist reading her of her work.” (231); [Louise] Fishman too was struggling to resist a movement that had supported her and through which she was able to develop her identity as an artist.” (236); “Although [Catalina] Parra does not identify herself as a feminist artist...” (280); “Although [Katharina] Sieverding does not explicitly ally herself with feminism...” (299).

This politics of denial is familiar: for example, under the covers, as it were, of the qualifiedly triumphant 1997 *ARTNews* cover headline “We've come a long way...MAYBE” were a number of statements by women artists, many of whom articulated the kind of deferral, demurral, anxiety of identification with feminism of the “I'm a feminist *but*” variety: “On the flip side, when it comes to feminism, I'm kind of, Ick, I don't want to talk about it. It's such a scary yucky subject—like any ‘ism’” (Nicole Eisenman); “I wouldn't say that my work is ‘feminist’ in the sense that I have it as a mandate or a goal” (Kiki Smith). In each full statement the woman artist both aligns herself with some aspect of what she thinks feminism is but separates her work from feminism.

So, indeed, how far *have* we come?

All artists reject limited readings of their work. But when the work clearly deals with gender and gendered power relations, when it deals with femininity, when it explores female sexuality and the female body, when the work uses the vocabulary of gendered tropes developed by the first generations of the feminist art movement – the ones in *WACK!* and the ones left out of the history proposed by *WACK!*—how is it not feminist art? Why is it still such a problem?

Clearly, it is. These denials are a troubling indication that feminism continues to be perceived as a controversial and dangerous identification. Women still don't want to be seen as feminist artists because that would limit them to being seen as women artists and no one wants to be seen as a woman artist. “Woman” still denotes second-class status within a (still male after all these years) universal. That this should be, or should be perceived to be, the case only proves that feminism is still a necessary political analysis of society and a powerful tool for mobilizing the production of art that engages with the question of gender and injustice on all levels.

Surprise, surprise, a lot of people in the art world are not feminists and a lot of people who have power in the art world prefer to deal with people who do not threaten a gendered power system. Feminists are inconvenient so mainstream success often seems to be at the price of denying a feminist identity. This denial insures that these women artists are more likely to be incorporated into a variety of art histories. It is part of the cost of their ticket of admission into the art market and art history. The feminist art movement did make it possible for *women* artists to achieve big careers in the art world, but not necessarily for *feminists* to achieve such success.

In fact one sub-theme expressed in Butler, Reilly, and Nochlin's catalogue writings is that perhaps it is actually better if the artist is not intentionally making feminist art, rearticulating the long-held belief that works done by artists with a conscious political agenda will not have the formal interest *nor even the political power* of artworks done in a more personal and individualistic engagement with form and self-expression. That is the oldest canard in the canon of supposedly neutral high modernist style, the age-old criticism of political art, as if feminism had not helped make clear that these more “universal” aspirations always have a gendered political dimension.

There is a basic misunderstanding about what political art means. Being a feminist doesn't mean your art has to represent cunts and lace. You may not find many obvious markers of a feminist art work in terms of representation of

the sexualized or gendered body in the current art made by many of the women artists who do not deny feminism, but the sedimented subtext remains feminist (in contradistinction to the kind of representation in photography and video installations that dominated *Global Feminisms*, a show that included little abstraction or painting but lots of lacerated women's bodies).

One way to get around the paradox of embarrassment with feminism as a political position is to dilute the meaning of feminism. The word is as inconvenient as the people who don't apologize for it. If only one could get rid of it and keep the societal advantages it won for women. Meanwhile let's make it palatable by taking “the political” out of the old feminist slogan, “the personal is the political.” To say that feminist art is not anything that a woman artist makes, but that it emerges from a political analysis of power and its representations, is just too, well, too political.

Think for a minute about the social structure that supports the art market: is it going to support artists who don't pull their punches when it comes to patriarchy? No, and that's where the notion that political artists don't make as good art comes in so handy.

If you say you're not a feminist then you're not a feminist. But then why would you want to be in exhibitions that have the word in the title?

It really isn't that hard to say you are a feminist: it is a political interpretation of power structures in society. Your work doesn't have to be illustrative of previous tropes. But if you say you are not a feminist artist, don't pretend that you are not engaging in a political act. “I am not a feminist artist” is political speech, with serious effects.

The inclusive, extensive feminist artist community I have lived among was suggested by the Guerrilla Girls' 1989 poster, *Guerrilla Girls Identities Exposed*. For this poster, which played with the widespread curiosity about who they really were, the Guerrilla Girls simply wrote to or called up as many women artists, art writers, art historians, and curators as they could think of and asked them if it was OK to use their names: would they accept the public designation Guerrilla Girl? Feminist? Among the 500 women on the list, in addition to people I have already named, were artists Suzanne Anker, Emma Amos, Polly Apfelbaum, Andre Belag, Andrea Blum, Jackie Brookner, Ellen Brooks, Emily Cheng, Petah Coyne, Betsy Damon, Leslie Dill, Ellen Driscoll, Nancy Dwyer, Ilona Granet, Lauren Ewing, Heide Fasnacht, Angelika Festa, Nancy Fried, Cheryl Gaulke, Kathy Grove, Mary Hambleton, Jane Hammond, Janet Henry, Rebecca Howland, Nene Humphrey, Silvia

Kolbowski, Catherine Lord, Mary Lucier, Ann McCoy, Judy Pfaff, Christy Rupp, Alison Saar, Amy Sillman, Jude Tallichet, Robin Tewes, Gwenn Thomas, Sarah Wells, Millie Wilson, Nina Yankowitz, Jerilea Zempel, Barbara Zucker, and, as the list concludes, “AND MANY MORE.”

This list was no more arbitrary than some of the choices in any of the more carefully curated museum exhibitions. It represents through its very ‘arbitrariness’ or unscientific contingency a real network of women artists at a particular moment in time. It is exactly the nature of that network that this document begins to reveal: the community of women artists and art professionals who sustained feminism through thick and thin, its winter soldiers.

But we are not feminist artists.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mira Schor is a painter and writer. Her work was recently featured in “Air Kissing: Contemporary Art About the Art World,” at Momenta Art, in Brooklyn, N.Y. She co-edited with Susan Bee the forum “Feminist Art: A Reassessment” on *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* Online at <http://writing.upenn.edu/pepc/meaning/>. She is completing work on a new collection of her essays from Duke University Press and on editing *The Extreme of the Middle: The Writings of Jack Tworkov*, for Yale University Press, both in 2009. Schor teaches in the MFA in Fine Arts Program at Parsons The New School for Design.