

*feminist
art:*

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Issues & Agendas

part ONE of TWO

by Caterina Pizanias

With few exceptions, women in most cultures have remained outside the art world's core of power and centre of influence. Women's art traditionally has been assigned to a separate intellectual category, that of the "feminine," and organizationally to a rather subordinate position in the negotiation of the governing standards, discourses and directions of the art world.¹ But the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s and 70s disrupted this age-old tradition. Many women artists joined the movement and although the movement in general and the artists in particular borrowed from materialist theoretical sources such as Marxism and the Frankfurt School, the movement was primarily focussed on practice: protests, consciousness-raising, anti-institutional action. Feminist artists addressed in their work questions of power and ideology, introduced a personal voice and autobiographical elements by including their own bodies as part of their "art," made clear to themselves and others that in art all actions are political, and announced to the art establishment that women's marginalization had come to an end.

In 1973, Linda Nochlin therefore asked of the emerging women's movement and feminist art historians and theorists an obvious question: "Why have there been no great women artists?" Since then a growing amount of research about female art and artists has been initiated and interesting results have been reported in the feminist literature.² However, before women artists and feminist scholars could locate a feminine or feminist site to articulate a new theoretical perspective, postmodernism arrived on the intellectual scene vigorously announcing the end of authors, avant-gardes, autonomous discourses, and differentiation of all sorts.³ It is remarkable that during such a short period of time—a dozen or so years—postmodernism has managed to become not only the new avant-garde but also the new orthodoxy, installing itself in the scholarly discourse and the art world in such a way that no conference, reading list, publication and/or simple academic exchange can be taken seriously without the requisite authors and the new concepts of polyvocality, indeterminacy, fragmenta-

tion, pastiche, etc. becoming the order of the moment. Postmodernism's skeptical indifference to the Enlightenment's grand narratives opened up a wide range of alternative visions/choices, which, despite the euphoria they generated amongst the members of the art world, seem to have failed to provide a successful "passage" for women artists from the margins of the art world to the centre.⁴ How are we then to interpret feminist artists' attraction to postmodern discourses, despite the latter's apparent lack of purchase in the contemporary art world's market of ideas and objects alike? The literature about feminism, postmodernism and visual art is already more than twenty years old. Although the discussions emanate from different disciplines, they exhibit some commonalities: they mostly focus on literature and film, they privilege aspects of gender and textuality, and they have mostly remained embedded within academic scholarship. Despite the immense number of books and articles on postmodernity, we still do not know how coherent and/or useful its terms are for feminist cultural politics since postmodern/feminist discourse and theory has been constructed without taking account of the contingent social factors and local pressures which forms women artists and which affect the happenings within the art world.

Postmodern society, postmodern discourse, and postmodern aesthetics have all been discussed in numerous publications, and even though the writings continue to increase, we are no clearer in our understanding as to periodization, definitions, or coherence. "Postmodernism" in its many manifestations is a complex and problematic phenomenon; it is defined in opposition to modernism's grand, unifying, and coherent narratives, favouring instead polyseme, plurality and fragmentation. Within ten years of Linda Nochlin's pioneering articles, Craig Owen's essay on "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism"⁵ both warranted the changes that had already taken place with feminist art and powerfully affected the course of action for the next decade or so: a turn towards theory and focus on the images of art and their meaning. The course of action

shifted from institutional changes in art making to the institutionalization of "feminist aesthetics" within the academy; almost all energies were turned towards criticism and theory—the directions had been turned upside down, theoretical competence took over collective action against repressive attitudes. How then is an artist to choose a course of action amidst the heterotopic postmodernist space? Art historians define their postmodernism in opposition to formalist art; literary critics define it in opposition to modernist literature; social and cultural theorists define it in opposition to the mass media or post-industrial society. It seems that everyone has or can have her/his postmodernism—the space is fragmented enough that each can draw her or his own boundaries; postmodernism is self-exemplifying. But at what price to feminist cultural politics is this heteroglossia and heterotopia of postmodernism?

During the last twenty years, feminist theory was explored extensively in a proliferation of publications, most of which failed to recognize their own embeddedness within the academic community. Because feminist analyses, like those of postmodernism, are textually based, it took some time to incorporate into the theorizing the fact that not all women are feminists and, whether feminists or not, their lives are shaped by conflicting interests stemming from other potent affiliations/locations such as those of class, race, religion, nationality and sexual preference. Puzzling questions still remain: What does the privileging of text and/or gender have to do with gender positions and ideologies in society? And how can one evaluate the political implications of postmodernism for feminist cultural politics? Could it be that what at first appeared as emancipatory theory is increasingly converted into a largely empty rhetoric, a variation—albeit polysemic and indeterminately interesting—on the same old narrative of giving priority to theory over practical experience?

Postmodernism's provocation was taken up seriously by feminist scholars and artists alike. A number of artists began to experiment incorporating their bodies, many unconventional media, writing on themselves and

objects, all in an effort to self-consciously and critically explore women's subordination within patriarchal art worlds/societies. Women who painted realist pictures or abstract ones were seen with suspicion, as being somehow complicit with the patriarchal system of representation. Some artists, especially if their works were painterly or abstract in a straight forward manner, felt that they at least had to quote, on the border of the painting, excerpts from Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, or Jacques Lacan. But for all the declarations of emancipation from the yokes of patriarchy, the polyseme, the indeterminacy, the cryptic quotes, the results were merely stylistic changes on the "text," a text that still depended on modernism's art world for its reception and distribution. Nothing has changed institutionally. The art world's structures are still intact, the "stars" of the polyseme are male and the large prices along with the accolades go to the same group. Glancing back into the art world of the postmodern 1980s, one is tempted to say that postmodernism is a theory whose time has come for men but not for women. The nagging question remains: If we live in a postmodern world—at least a postmodern art world—how can feminist artists assess the implications of the *status quo* for feminist cultural politics?

Feminist artists, feminist academics and community activists need to create new coalitions for collective action—we need to bring the community to art and the art into the community.⁶ We need to re-examine our seduction into deconstructionism's call to destroy the Enlightenment' phallogocentric discourse, a discourse toward which we had never contributed or allowed to intervene; we need to re-think our easy adoption of deconstructionism's call to de-centre the "subject" and get away with the "author," when we had never stood in that centre, never allowed to claim its "authority"; we need to review why we gave so effortlessly priority to the "text" and allowed the "sign" to exert unlimited power so much so that we did not notice that this latter day call to polysemic theory came also from European white males, direct descendants and heirs apparent of the Enlightenment such as Lacan, Derrida, Barthes,

Baudrillard, and others? Why did we allow ourselves to be recognized/accepted as their "other," surrendering our unwritten histories, unspoken words, untheorized spaces for the occasion to take "ironic/parodic" jabs at their postmodernism without exposing the roots of its construction and maintenance? There is a lot more work to be done. We need a break from our obsession with aspects of theory, style and simulation in our continued efforts to unveil the evils of modernity we have succeeded in accomplishing this. Now, we need to provoke each other into examining our own grasp and/or complicity in perpetuating the habits of consumption and the political structures which sustain a decontextualized center, so efficiently portable, that keeps women artists from becoming the authors of our own work and from forming alliances with each other and locate sites that are not so slippery as those of postmodernity, i.e. everywhere and nowhere. ☸

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FOOTNOTES

1. Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran, eds., *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness* (New York: Basic Books, 1971); Thomas B. Hess and Elizabeth C. Baker, eds., *Art and Sexual Politics* (New York and London: Collier Books, 1973); Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976); Rozicka Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon, 1981); Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988); Janet Wolff, *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
2. Eleanor Tufts, *Our Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists* (London: Paddington Press Ltd., 1974); Elsa Honig Fine, *Women and Art: A History of Women Painters and Sculptors from the Renaissance to the Twentieth Century* (Montclair, N.J.: Allanheld and Schram, 1978); Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds., *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982); Chadwick, Whitney.
3. Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983); Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984); Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *i* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
4. Randy Rosen and Catherine C. Brawer, eds., *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989).
5. Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminism and Postmodernism" in Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, op.cit., pp. 57-82.
6. Pat Hoffie, "Phallogocentric Discourse" *Art Monthly*, Vol. 9, April, 1988: 23-25; Laura Cottingham, "The Feminine De-Mystique: Gender, Power, Irony and Aestheticized Feminism in 80's Art", *Flash Art*, Vol. 1989:91-95; Howard Risatti, "Some questions on Interventionist Art", *Journal of Art Papers*, January-February, 1990: 6-9; Linda S. Klinger, "Where is the Artist? Feminist Practice and Poststructural Theories of Authorship", *Art Journal*, Summer 1991:39-47; Carol Becker, "Subtle Subversion", *New Art Examiner*, March 1993:25-27.