Feminism Unbound

"WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution" revisits a tumultuous and enormously productive era, presenting a wealth of artwork made by women in the late 1960s and '70s.

By Nancy Princenthal

One big question raised by the tsunami of exhibitions, symposia and books that have made 2007 a banner year for feminism in the visual arts is, why now? While it is, stunningly, true that the Speaker of the House, the Secretary of State and the front-running Democratic candidate for President are all women, it's hard to find equal cause for jubilation in the art world, whatever institutional support and market share women have gained there; certainly gender parity remains a distant goal in both culture and politics. But reasons for cheer abound in "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution," a gloriously profuse exhibition of work made by 120 women during roughly a decade starting in the late '60s. Its curator, Cornelia Butler, spent eight years working on the show, and admits that chance plays a role in the timing of its opening. But she believes that the "conservative and very scary moment we find ourselves in partly explains the nostalgia for a time when radical statesmanship were possible." She also says that a new generation of younger artists, men as well as women, are hungry to see work to which they feel deeply, if obscurely, indebted.

If they come to "WACK!" looking for indocile art served raw, its energy unalloyed by time or by audience-placing wall texts, they won't be disappointed. As the exhibition itself (despite its subtitle) makes clear, feminism is a political term for the period in question. The campaign waged in the 1960s, at least, was more popularly and provocatively dedicated to Women's Liberation, one kind of emancipation struggle among many in the civil rights era and not the last. Women's liberation was widely perceived as aggressive, brash, shameless, persistent—in short, unacceptable; the decision to "feministize" was a defensive semantic maneuver, like the coinage "pro-choice." To generalize a little recklessly, both Beat and hippie cultures tended to regard women as insipid waffles. It would be hard to exaggerate the sense of exclusion women artists felt, and the defensive maneuvering it produced. Indeed, Butler says she had a mix of tough conversations with artists still resistant to inclusion in a show devoted to feminism—and also moments of great satisfaction in seeing women "own that label, women who had had to put it aside for career purposes."

The point of a big proportion of the work shown was, then, simply to say, look, we're here, full grown and with all our wits about us. And one thing the exhibition makes abundantly clear is how often the pursuit of exposure was undertaken literally. Among the probably dozens of women represented naked are Marina Abramovic, Eleanor Antin, Cynda Benglis, Judy Chicago, Valie Export, Joan Jonas, Kristen Jensen, Yoko Ono, Ada Piper, Martha Rosler, Carolee Schneemann, Barbara T. Smith, Antigna Solivan, Hannah Wilke and Francesca Woodman. (It's hard to do a precise count because the exhibition includes enough...)

video work, much of it transferred from film, to keep a diligent Viewer busy for days. But the cover of the “WAG!” catalogue, an endless sea of naked bodies composed by Mark Border from print-media images, gives you the idea. Whether holding a torch aloft (Judy Chicago) or passively impersonating oneself with a small mirror (Joan Jonas, in a performance that

recalls a practice recommended as a revolutionary form of self-knowledge by bibles of the time like Our Bodies, Our Selves), these artists demonstrated that simple self-affirmation was the first order of business in establishing artistic identity. In retrospect, there is some irony in this. (The Guerrilla Girls, in a poster from the ’90s, challenged exhuasted women where women appeared mostly as the nude subjects of men’s art by asking, “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?”) And even if some of these self-revelations still look strikingly courageous, they also seem curiously quaint, apparently, there is period style even in nudity, expressed most simply in hair but also in posture, body shape and, notably, relationship to the camera. (the women of Vanessa Beecroft’s videos these are not. If one lesson offered is that being naked involves superhuman judgment, another is how much we’ve forgotten about not caring, and about resistance to the dictates—the expense, on several levels—of fashion. More pointed and, even today, provocative, was the introduction in this period of self-injury as a form of life or documentary performance. Abramovic (here shown, in photos, stabbing a knife between her fingers) and Gina Pane (clinging a knife-laden ladder) have, perhaps, gotten the most attention for going to the furthest lengths. But they have barely been alone. Art work under a brush diet as a form of body sculpting, and documenting her aggressive weight loss in photographs. Orlan and Export, as seen in mixed medium installations, limited men on the street to grope and/ or kiss them (in later work not included here, Orlan has more famously subjected herself to several courses of unconventional and rather stomach-turning cosmetic surgery. That this kind of work is still thriving was made clear by “Global Feminism” (see article this issue, in which documentation of a naked woman writhing a barbed-wire bollard loop around her waist in one example among many. As with nudity, these practices are productive only if the subject says so—and even then not reliably. Catherine and more comically, such forms of self-harm are symptoms of a difficult adolescence and unfortunately widespread among different types. Perhaps more interesting than the comparison with troubled teens is when men pursuing related experiments in the 60s and early 70s, notably Chris Burden (e.g., by having himself shot), Vito Acconci (various small acts of masochism) and Ronald SchDMAller (considerably bigger ones). Equally self-directed through their actions were, the men tended to be seen, I think, as engaging specific with the women as dramatizing its consequences.

This comparison is one of several thought experiments that “WAG!” neither stages nor includes: after much soul-searching, as related in a January symposium at MOMA and in the exhibition catalogue’s introduction, Burden decided not to include men. Regardless of whether it’s important to honor the contributions men have made to feminism, or—perhaps more to the point—the lessons they’ve learned from it (Robert Gober and Matthew Barney are contemporary generation parent children for feminist-influenced male artists, there is the question of whether “WAG!” is about a gender-based struggle or, more broadly, a historical era—a brief, shining, and largely mythical moment when culture and politics nearly merged. Either way, there is a fair amount here that doesn’t comfortably belong except in the limited sense that it was made by women at that time. But in its unboundedness, and in the space that text and image cleave for a maximally inclusive representation of women, the exhibition feels both historically relevant and formally unsettling, commendably open-minded.

Whether holding a torch aloft or inspecting her body with a small mirror, one woman after another showed how important simple self-affirmation was in establishing artistic identity.

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In any case, it’s sad to say that whether practiced by men or women, self-inflicted harm was in large part a response—proactively hematopohic? helplessly impulsive?—to a time when violence (political assassination, war, civic unrest, urban crime) seemed to be everywhere. The global distribution of violence has shifted significantly since the late 60s, and by 1971 being the glaring, isolated exception—the conditions in which women (and men) in the U.S. have lived and worked are generally much safer, and not just because sexism is less overt. For the most part, “WAG!” recalls the era’s simpering dangers obliquely, by evoking its inclination to the carnivalsque, its unstated tipping between exploitation and self-exposure.

Thus one compunction among the show’s dozen-plus themed clusters places photographers by Borden and Danielle Meitzen, in which substraction to the cosmetics and lingerie industries is likened to self-mutilation, in proximity to Nancy Spero’s indictment of torture, in the form of a 1975 scroll-like image/text collage depicting abuse of (female) prisoners that only grows more horrifying with time; at the moment, it is almost too painful to read. Like Spero, Celia Ricca took up the very real business of state terrorism, but from a closer perspective, with a series of heart-breaking little three-day diaries made in 1973, after the rise of the murderous military regime in her native Chile; her work is part of the same cluster Storm nearby (in Los Angeles, some of these juxtapositions may change as the show travels) is a series of photocollage texts to feminist-identified male artists, there is the question of whether “WAG!” is about a gender-based struggle or, more narrowly, a historical era—a brief, shining, and largely mythic moment when culture and politics nearly merged. Either way, there is a fair amount here that doesn’t comfortably belong except in the limited sense that it was made by women at that time. But in its unboundedness, and in the space that text and image cleave for a maximally inclusive representation of women, the exhibition feels both historically relevant and formally unsettling, commendably open-minded.

In “Global Feminisms.” But, again, however debatable these choices—and the debate is itself a virtue—it is hard to argue with the inclination to look beyond the U.S. for seminal feminist art. Only a little less challenging, art addressing wage labor and uncompensated domestic work is grouped together in one particularly powerful section, though even this topic crops up in other places as well. Osmusically, this work is a reminder that socialism was once a living ideal guiding considerable segments of the art world, and solidarity with “workers” a widespread commitment. One of the themes strongest expressions in the Brooklyn Street Film Collective’s Nihilism (1970-75), a 90-minute black-and-white film shown as a big looped projection, in which mostlymiddle-aged, mostly women about holding down physically demanding night-shift jobs while raising


Berkovitz Street Film Collective: Nihilism. 1970-75, 90 minute film transferred to video; 30 minutes. Courtesy Nancy Wilder.

Rebecca Horn: Touching the Walls with Both Hands Simultaneously, 1975-75, video still from performance. © ART.

Foreground, Linda Montano’s video Michelle’s Death, 1976, end, rear, sections of Mary Koloğlu’s Past Participle Distances, 1975.