

# 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 statements were possible." She also says that a 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 indecorous art served raw, its energy undiminished by time or by audience-placating wall texts, they won't be disappointed. As the exhibition itself (despite its subtitle) makes clear, "feminism" is a polite term for the period in question. The campaign women waged in the '60s was, at first, more popularly and provocatively dedicated to Women's Liberation, one kind of emancipation struggle among many in the civil rights era and not the best loved. Women's libbers were widely perceived as aggressive,



View of "WACK!" showing, in foreground, Miriam Schapiro's *Big Ox, No. 2*, 1968, acrylic on canvas, with works by Joan Snyder and Lynda Benglis, left to right in rear. Benglis work licensed by VAGA, New York.

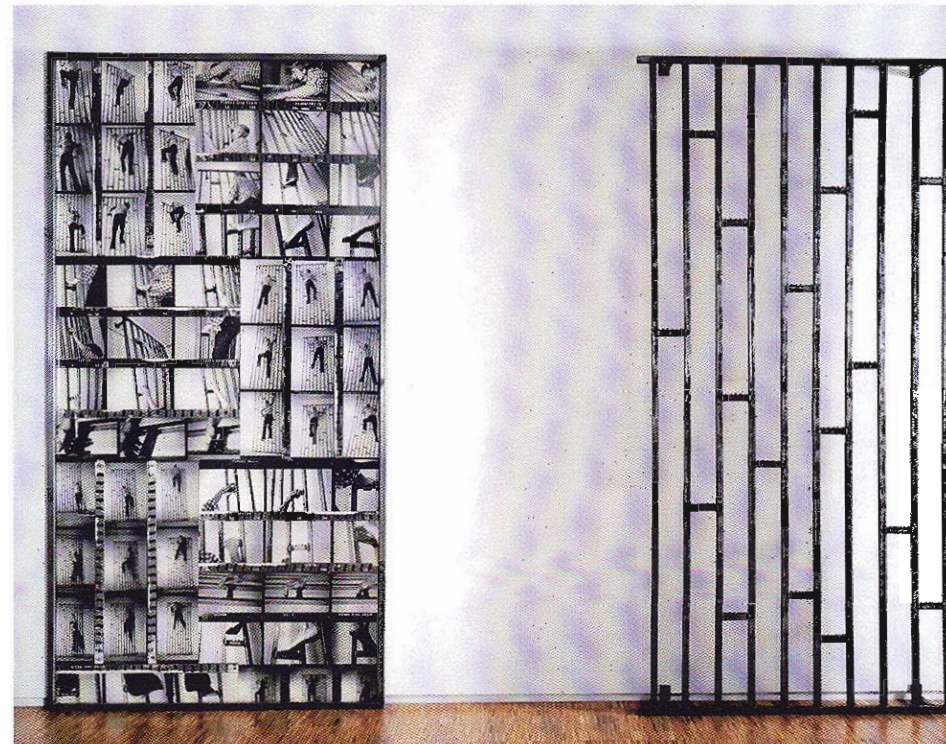
"WACK!" installation photos this article Brian Forrest, courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles



Left, collages from Martha Rosler's series *"Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain,"* 1966-72, and, right, Faith Wilding's *Waiting*, 1972, photo and text.

blunt, shameless, persistent—in short, masculine; the decisive turn to "feminism" 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 ingenuous waifs. It would be hard to exaggerate the sense of exclusion women artists felt, and the defensive maneuvering it produced. Indeed, Butler says she had lots 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 Abramović, Eleanor Antin, Lynda Benglis, Judy Chicago, Valie Export, Joan Jonas, Kirsten Justesen, Friedl Kubelka, Ana Mendieta, Yoko Ono, Orlan, Adrian Piper, Martha Rosler, Carolee Schneemann, Barbara T. Smith, Annegret Soltau, Hannah Wilke and Francesca Woodman. (It's hard to do a precise count because the exhibition includes enough



Gina Pane: *Non-anaesthetized Climbing*, 1971, photos on wood panels, steel structure, each approx. 10 1/2 feet high. Centre Pompidou, Paris. Photo Philippe Migeat, courtesy CNAC/MNAM/Art Resource, New York. © Artists Rights Society, New York. (Not in MOCA show, but photo grid on left scheduled for subsequent venues.)





Rebecca Horn: Touching the Walls with Both Hands Simultaneously, 1974-75, video still from performance. © ARS.



Nancy Grossman: No Name, 1968, mixed-medium assemblage, 15 by 7 by 10 inches. Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York.

video work, much of it transferred from film, to keep a diligent viewer busy for days. But the cover of the "WACK!" catalogue, an endless sea of naked bodies collaged by Marth Rosler from print-media images, gives you the idea.) Whether holding a torch aloft (Judy Chicago) or patiently inspecting 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 '80s, challenged museums 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 invites superficial 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 live or documented performance. Abramović (here shown, in photos, stabbing a knife between her fingers) and Gina Pane (climbing a knife-bladed ladder) have, perhaps, gotten the most attention for going to the furthest lengths. But they have hardly been alone. Antin undertook a crash diet as a form of body sculpting, and documented her progressive weight loss in photographs. Orlan Export, as seen in mixed-medium installations,

**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.**

invited 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 Feminisms" [see article this issue], in which documentation of a naked woman swinging a barbed-wire hula hoop around her waist is one example among many. As with nudity, these practices are productive only if the subject says so—and even then not reliably. Otherwise and more commonly, such forms of self-harm are symptoms of a difficult adolescence and unfortunately widespread among affluent girls. Perhaps more interesting than the comparison with troubled teens is with men pursuing related experiments in the late '60s and early '70s, notably Chris Burden (e.g., by having himself shot), Vito Acconci (various small acts of masochism) and Rudolf Schwarzkogler (considerably bigger ones). Equally self-directed though their actions were, the men tended to be seen, I think, as enacting aggression, the women as dramatizing its consequences.

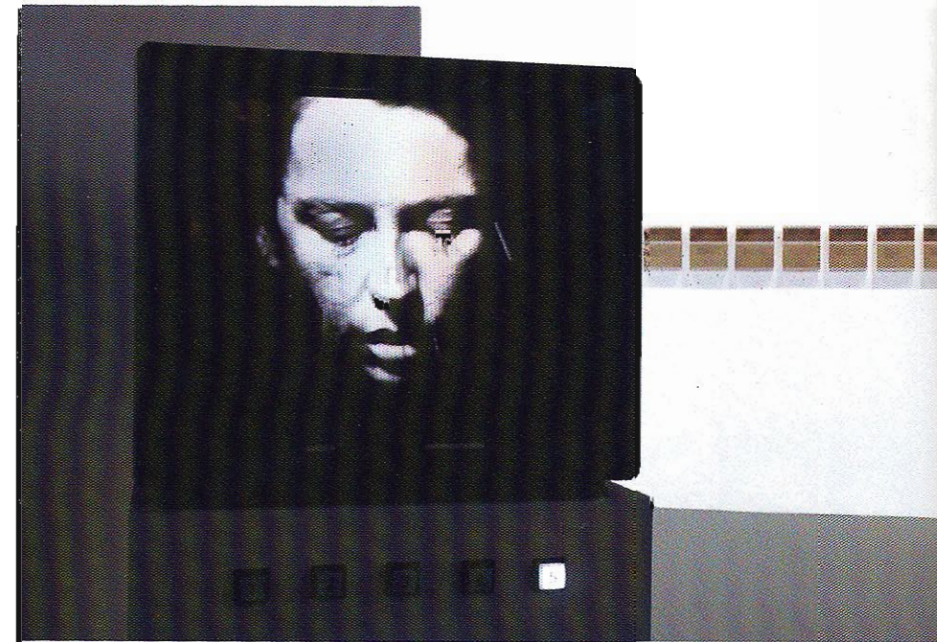
This comparison is one of several thought experiments that "WACK!" neither stages nor inhibits; after much soul-searching, as related in a January symposium at MOMA and in the exhibition catalogue's introduction, Butler decided not to include men. Regardless of whether it's important to honor the contributions men have made to feminism, or—perhaps more to the point—the lessons they've learned from it (Robert Gober and Matthew Barney are next-generation poster children for feminist-influenced male artists), there is the question of whether "WACK!" 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 very unboundedness, and in the space that the single-sex option clears for a maximally inclusive representation of women, the exhibition feels both historically accurate and, by current curatorial standards, commendably open-minded.

**Art addressing wage labor and unpaid domestic work together are a reminder that socialism was once an ideal guiding large parts of the art world, and solidarity with "workers" a widespread commitment.**

In any case, it's safe to say that whether practiced by men or women, self-inflicted harm was in large part a response—proactively homeopathic? helplessly imitative?—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—9/11 being the glaring, isolated exception—the conditions in which women (and men) in the U.S. have lately lived and worked are generally much safer, and not just because sexism is less overt. For the most part, "WACK!" recalls the era's simmering dangers obliquely, by evoking its inclination to the carnivalesque, its unsteady tipping between euphoria and frank despair.

Thus one conjunction among the show's dozen-plus themed clusters places photocollages by Rosler and by Annette Messager, in which submission 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 1976 scroll-like image/text collage detailing abuse of (female) prisoners that only grows more harrowing with time; at the moment, it is almost too painful to read. Like Spero, Cecilia Vicuña took up the very real business of state terrorism, but from a closer perspective, with a series of heartbreaking little one-a-day booklets made in 1973, after the rise of the murderous military regime in her native Chile; her work is part of the same cluster. Shown nearby (in Los Angeles; some of these juxtapositions may change as the show travels) is a series of photo-text works by Adrian Piper at her angriest and best, recalling childhood emotional injuries tied to race. Betye Saar's iconic assemblage *Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972), with broom and shotgun, was also close at hand.

Mixing up violence as theater, as social oppression and as brutal physical injury is a very dicey thing to do. Similarly, bringing broadly international art together under a shared rubric (Butler says that more than half the work in the show comes from outside the U.S.) risks flattening distinctions among works made under radically different conditions and toward different ends. (This, too, is a big issue



Foreground, Linda Montano's video Mitchell's Death, 1978, and, rear, section of Mary Kelley's Post-Partum Document, 1975.



Berwick Street Film Collective: Nightcleaners, 1970-75, 16mm film transferred to DVD, 90 minutes. Courtesy Lux, London.

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 challengingly, art addressing wage labor and uncompensated domestic work is grouped together in one particularly powerful section, though each topic crops up in other places as well. Cumulatively, 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 theme's strongest expressions is the Berwick Street Film Collective's *Nightcleaners* (1970-75), a 90-minute black-and-white film shown as a big, looped projection, in which mostly middle-aged British women talk about holding down physically demanding night-shift jobs while raising