

HELENA ALMEIDA
EMMA AMOS
SONIA ANDRADE
ELEANOR ANTIN
ANNEKE BARGER
ANNE BEAN
LYNDA BENGLIS
MIRELLA BENTIVOGLIO
JUDITH BERNSTEIN
RENATE BERTLMANN
TOMASO BINGA
DARA BIRNBAUM
TERESA BURGA
MARCELLA CAMPAGNANO
ELIZABETH CATLETT
JUDY CHICAGO
LINDA CHRISTANELL
VERONIKA DREIER
ORSHI DROZDIK
LILI DUJOURIE
MARY BETH EDELSON
RENATE EISENEGGER
ROSE ENGLISH
VALIE EXPORT
GERDA FASSEL
ESTHER FERRER
MARISA GONZÁLEZ
EULÀLIA GRAU
BARBARA HAMMER
MARGARET HARRISON

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON
ALEXIS HUNTER
MAKO IDEMITSU
SANJA IVEKOVIĆ
ANNE MARIE JEHL
BIRGIT JÜRGENSSEN
KIRSTEN JUSTESEN
AUGUSTE KRONHEIM
ANNA KUTERA
KETTY LA ROCCA
LESLIE LABOWITZ
SUZANNE LACY
KATALIN LADIK
SUZY LAKE
BRIGITTE LANG
NATALIA LL
LEA LUBLIN
KARIN MACK
DINDGA McCANNON
ANA MENDIETA
ANNETTE MESSENGER
ANITA MÜNZ
RITA MYERS
SENGA NENGUDI
LORRAINE O'GRADY
ORLAN
FLORENTINA PAKOSTA
GINA PANE
LETÍCIA PARENTE
EWA PARTUM

FRIEDERIKE PEZOLD
MARGOT PILZ
HOWARDENA PINDELL
MARIA PINIŃSKA-BEREŚ
INGEBORG G. PLUHAR
LOTTE PROFOHS
ÀNGELS RIBÉ
ULRIKE ROSENBAACH
MARTHA ROSLER
BRIGITTE ALOISE ROTH
VICTORIA SANTA CRUZ
SUZANNE SANTORO
CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN
LYDIA SCHOUTEN
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PENNY SLINGER
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ANITA STECKEL
GABRIELE STÖTZER
BETTY TOMPKINS
REGINA VATER
MARIANNE WEX
HANNAH WILKE
MARTHA WILSON
FRANCESCA WOODMAN
NIL YALTER
JANA ŽELIBSKÁ

This book is dedicated to all the women artists whose œuvres still await discovery.

FEMINIST AVANT-GARDE

Art of the 1970s
VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna

Edited by
GABRIELE SCHOR

Prestel
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PREFACES



RENATE BERTLMANN, *Zärtliche Berührungen [Tender Touches]*, 1976
Color photograph © Renate Bertlmann / Bildrecht, Vienna 2021

The major museums have been slow—far too slow!—to recognize that they have blind spots, or actually black holes, in their holdings. Works by women artists are few and far between. This is true of collections of medieval, Renaissance, baroque, and 19th-century art, and it is no less true of modernist collections. Not until around the turn of the millennium did museum officials begin to become sensitive to the glaring gender imbalance in their collections and exhibition programs. And the process is far from complete; even when it comes to art being produced today, women artists are still at a discernible, albeit less lopsided, disadvantage. And the change in attitudes has been slower when it comes to the past: the further back in history you look, the fewer women artists you find in the collections. While these gaps will be difficult to fill retrospectively, this should motivate us to seize every opportunity for change rather than serve as an excuse for dwelling on the difficulties and not even trying.

Twenty years ago, the VERBUND COLLECTION chose to dedicate itself to this mission with unwavering resolve. Its focus is on collecting works by women artists, and rather than picking up isolated pieces by prominent names for bragging rights, it assembles bodies of work that capture the outline of an oeuvre.

In just two decades, it has gathered an extensive collection of astounding quality. Taken as a whole, it is an impressive statement, and the bodies of work, positions, and thematic fields also present powerful themes. Many phenomena only came into view thanks to the determination with which Gabriele Schor and her team pursued their objective. We applaud Schor's bold decision—which at the time made her a party of one—to build a collection with this profile. Her vision won over the board of the Austrian energy company VERBUND, and as founding director of the VERBUND COLLECTION, she guided its growth and led it to international renown. It was also she who coined and popularized the concept of the "feminist avant-garde." This success was made possible not only by ongoing acquisitions, but also through the work of sharing the art with audiences through exhibitions, publications, and a variety of accompanying programs. Many museums have already benefited from this excellent work. We consider ourselves extraordinarily fortunate to now be able to invite the spirit of the feminist avant-garde into our spaces in Stuttgart, Hannover, and Lucerne. The 1970s were a key decade for the shift toward gender equality, and this exhibition provides inspiration for a thorough re-evaluation of our museums' collections and how to add to them.

At the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, the period of the student revolts and concurrent movements in art such as Fluxus and the Happening are well represented through the Sohm Archive, which we are happy to say also includes the scene's women protagonists. These holdings enabled us to pay tribute to Alison Knowles, marking her 90th birthday with a solo show in THE GALLERY. This space within our museum, which is set aside for photography, will also host the VERBUND COLLECTION, hence the emphasis on this medium in the works selected for presentation in Stuttgart.

The Sprengel Museum Hannover has an extensive assortment of works by Niki de Saint Phalle, so we would be remiss not to use this excellent opportunity to showcase her together with other women artists of the time. We hope that the VERBUND COLLECTION will bring fresh impetus and encourage an expansion of our collections in this direction.

At the Kunstmuseum Luzern, we have cultivated the tradition of the avant-garde ever since Jean-Christophe Ammann, the museum director in the 1970s, went out on a limb to present experimental positions. Thanks to his programming, works from that decade by Joseph Beuys, Michael Buthe, James Lee Byars, Joseph Kosuth, Giuseppe Penone, Paul Thek, and others are now a cornerstone of our collection. However, the museum did not exhibit or collect women artists at the time. Only in the past few years were we able to close some gaps with works by artists like Marion Baruch, Heidi Bucher, Ana Mendieta, and Vivian Suter. The VERBUND COLLECTION is a perfect complement for our focus on the 1970s and highlights how ignorant the collection-building strategy of those responsible at the time was.

Our thanks for the excellent collaboration on this joint project go first and foremost to Gabriele Schor and her team: with their expertise and enthusiasm, she, Eva Haberfellner, and Sophie Rueger made this exhibition what it is. Their dedication proved infectious. In Stuttgart, we are grateful to our curator Sandra-Kristin Diefenthaler, who realized the project with support from our research trainee Linda Kirschev and the entire team at the Staatsgalerie. In Hannover, Inka Schube and Katharina Herrmann took the lead; in Lucerne, Fanni Fetzer and Eveline Suter oversaw the exhibition.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to everyone involved in the project, and we hope that many visitors will take this opportunity to discover an entirely new chapter in the art of the 1970s.

CHRISTIANE LANGE

Director, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart

REINHARD SPIELER

Director, Sprengel Museum Hannover

FANNI FETZER

Director, Kunstmuseum Luzern

The Feminist Avant-Garde exhibition of the VERBUND COLLECTION at the Museum of Contemporary Art, University of São Paulo (MAC USP) presents around 100 works by women artists including VALIE EXPORT, Birgit Jürgenssen, Renate Bertlmann, and Gina Pane. Many of these pieces are being shown in Brazil for the first time. The exhibition also showcases works by women artists from MAC USP's own holdings to complement those from the VERBUND COLLECTION. This synergy is made possible thanks to MAC USP's artistic direction and history, as well as its commitment to exploring new approaches in the history, criticism, and theory of visual art.

Founded in 1963, MAC USP has one of the most significant collections of visual art produced in Brazil in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and the museum was a pioneer in acquiring video art, performance, photography, and other conceptual practices. In the 1970s, it became a center for artistic exchange and a research laboratory, nurturing the careers of many prominent Brazilian women artists.

The VERBUND COLLECTION's exhibition at MAC USP dovetails with the new presentation of art from the museum's collection titled "Fractured Times," which spotlights the presence of women artists—a major area of research for the curatorial team. The exhibition of the feminist avant-garde provides an opportunity to foster dialogue and raise the visibility of women artists in São Paulo from fresh perspectives.

ANA GONÇALVES MAGALHÃES

Full professor and curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, University of São Paulo (MAC USP)

ON THE IDENTITY OF THE VERBUND COLLECTION, VIENNA

"It's a bible!", a curator once exclaimed with enthusiasm as she paged through our book *Feminist Avant-Garde*. Sometimes you feel the value of the work you have done more fully thanks to others' feedback. My aspiration was to put together a reference work: about an artistic movement in Europe, Latin America, and North America that, primarily in the 1970s, collectively created an utterly new "image of woman" from a female perspective. A major art movement had been overlooked by art historians and museums for far too long. That is why it seemed important to me to find a word that would pinpoint that these women artists had created something novel, something without precedent in the history of art. And what term could express this more aptly than "avant-garde"? It is a concept that is as time-honored as it is progressive, that gets people's attention and signals at once: these women artists were pioneers.

The Feminist Avant-Garde's specific features emerged at the conjunction of several emancipatory movements: the civil rights, student, and women's movements. Insisting that the "private" needed to be recognized to be public and political, women artists made feminist work that reflected their avant-gardist ambition to impel political changes in a capitalist and patriarchal society. Many of their—provocative and radical, poetic and ironic—works are gathered in the present volume. The artists question one-dimensional roles assigned to women such as the mother, the homemaker, and the wife. They refuse to conceive depictions of their—in many instances, naked—bodies as sexual objects, instead employing them as works of art in performative acts. They debunk the prevailing rigid beauty ideal and break down the wall of silence that surrounds violence against women. And they engage in roleplay to unfold a rich diversity of female identities. What all their works have in common is that they were born of existential necessity, and so some evince similar aesthetic strategies even though the artists who made them knew nothing of one another. Producing drawings and objects and harnessing the new media of expression of the time, photography, film, video, action, and performance, they challenged the hegemony of painting.

The philosopher Walter Benjamin argued that collection-building as mere accumulation will always be a sterile undertaking. A critical awareness of the present and its social conditions is required to transform collecting into a cultural technique, a practice that lets a culture understand itself and that becomes visible and recognizable in society. The VERBUND COLLECTION's

mission was to play a pioneering role and, in placing its emphasis on the "Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s," to expand the canon of art history.

The VERBUND COLLECTION was established in Vienna in 2004 by the board of directors of VERBUND, Austria's leading electricity supplier and a major producer of hydroelectric and renewable power in Europe. The collection's program is organized around three foci that span three generations of artists: "Perceptions of Spaces and Places," "Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s," and "Gender, Identities, and Diversity." After presentations of art from our collection at the Museum of Applied Arts (MAK) in Vienna (2007) and at İstanbul Modern (2008), the Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna, Rome, in 2010 hosted our first thematic exhibition *DONNA. Avanguardia Femminista negli anni '70*. It showcased around two hundred works by seventeen artists; the catalogue of the same title was brought out by the Italian publisher Electa. The show's next stops were Madrid (2013), Brussels, and Halmstad (2014). For the presentation at Hamburger Kunsthalle in 2015, Prestel released the first German-language edition of our book *Feministische Avantgarde*, which was followed in 2016 by the second and enlarged German and the first English editions to accompany the presentations in London (2016), Vienna (2017), Karlsruhe (2018), Barcelona (2018), and Linz (2021). *Les Rencontres de la Photographie d'Arles* worked with the publisher delpire & co, Paris, to produce a French-language catalogue in conjunction with our exhibition in 2022.

Now we present the third German and second English editions on the occasion of the new tour scheduled for 2025 and 2026. In their preface, the four hosting museums' directors eloquently express their understanding of the outstanding significance of the feminist art movement. I am grateful to the following individuals for their commitment and the especially pleasant collaboration: Christiane Lange, director, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, with her curator Sandra-Kristin Diefenthaler, former curator Alessandra Nappo, and research trainee Linda Kirsche; Reinhard Spieler, director, Sprengel Museum Hannover, with his curator Inka Schube, supported by Katharina Herrmann; and Fanni Fetzer, director, Kunstmuseum Luzern, supported by Eveline Suter. Ana Gonçalves Magalhães, university professor and curator at MAC USP in São Paulo, made it possible for many of the artists' works to be shown in Latin America for the first time.

The feminist focus of the collection has grown to six hundred works by eighty-eight artists, and the present publication has been substantially enlarged. With a view to a range of geographical, national, and ethnic backgrounds, we have striven to diversify the selection of artists; in particular, we have added works by Black Eastern European artists. Their social and political circumstances illustrate that feminism must be conceived in an intersectional framework. As my introductory essay underscores, various feminist movements articulated quite different concerns. BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ artists, in particular, faced and still face the multiple discriminations of racism, classism, sexism, and colonialism.

I would like to thank all the authors for their illuminating contributions on individual artists. Katharina Haderer, program director at Prestel Verlag, has my gratitude for her diligence in overseeing the production of this book over the years; the graphic designer Maria-Anna Friedl, for the thoughtful designs she has created for all our books. The cover shows Ulrike Rosenbach's empowerment pose from the photographic performance *Art is a criminal action* (1969–1970); Lorraine O'Grady's haunting performance *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* (1980–1983) graces the back cover.

I am grateful to my advisory board for numerous pointers that helped me make acquisition decisions: Philipp Kaiser, Jessica Morgan, Camille Morineau, Sean Rainbird, Marc-Olivier Wahler, and the current advisory board, Jamillah James and Catherine Wood. My gratitude also goes to all galleries and their staff; it has been a pleasure working with them. Eva Haberfellner and Sophie Rueger, my wonderful team at the VERBUND COLLECTION, have shown extraordinary commitment, unflagging good spirits, and passionate enthusiasm for art, and I cannot thank them enough. As always, my son Adrian has been very patient with me.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Michael Strugl, chairman of the board of VERBUND, and his fellow board members CFO Peter F. Kollmann, CRO Susanna Zapreva, and COO Achim Kaspar, whose open-mindedness and appreciation for the concerns of art have made this publication, surely an unusual one for a corporate collection, possible.

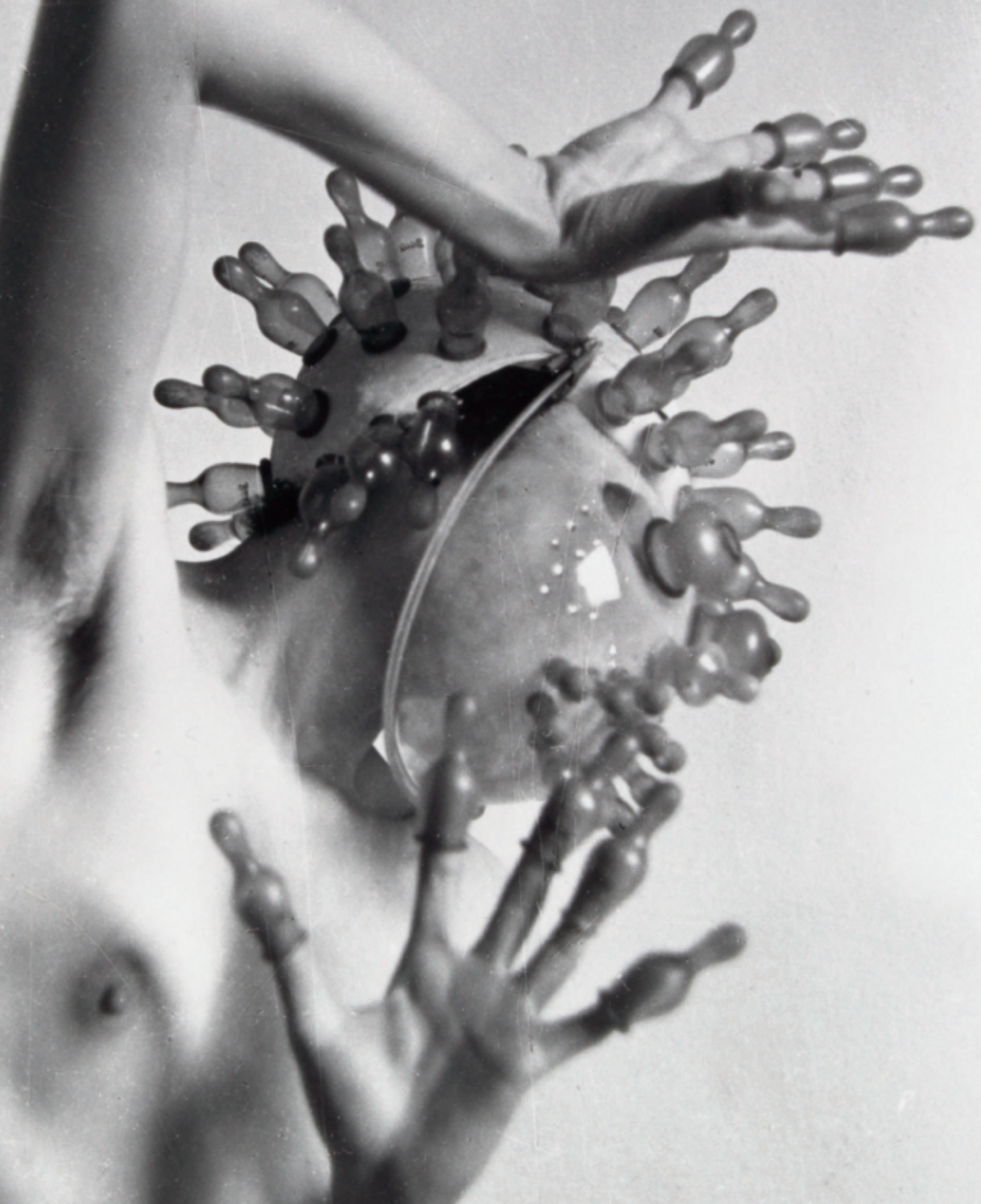
With this compendium, we at the VERBUND COLLECTION hope to leave an unforgettable mark on our cultural memory.

GABRIELE SCHOR

Founding director, VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna



HANNAH WILKE, S.O.S. Starification Object Series. One of 36 playing cards from mastication box, 1975, SV_171_2007 (p. 528)



GABRIELE SCHOR

THE FEMINIST AVANT-GARDE

A RADICAL REVALUATION OF VALUES

"Of course art has no gender, but artists do."²

Lucy R. Lippard, 1973

"Where the European woman complains of being doubly oppressed, the Black woman of Africa suffers a threefold oppression: by virtue of her sex, [...] her class, [...] her race."³

Awa Thiam, 1978

"Feminist art is the most powerful theoretical movement of modern art, but much remains to be discovered."⁴

Alexis Hunter, 2013

RENATE BERTLMANN, Zärtliche Pantomimen.

Pantomime Schnuller-Tanz, 1976

B/W photograph

© Renate Bertlmann / Bildrecht, Vienna, 2025

1 The following is an expanded version of two earlier essays of the same title.

2 Lucy R. Lippard, "The Women Artists' Movement—What Next?", in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, New York, 1976, p. 139.

3 Awa Thiam, *La Parole aux négresses*, Paris, 1978, p. 113; translated as *Speak Out, Black Sisters: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa*, London, 1986, p. 118.

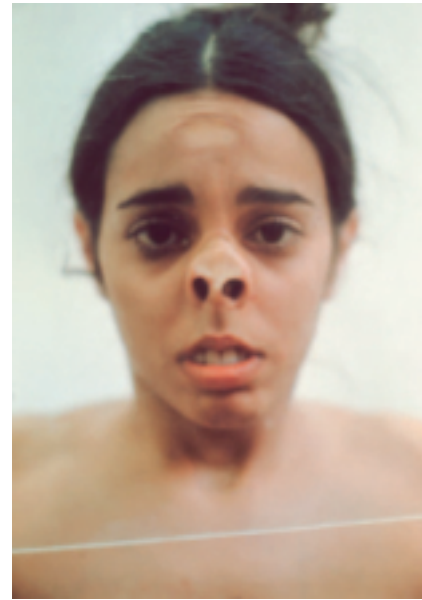
4 Alexis Hunter in a conversation with the author at the opening of the exhibition *MUJER: La vanguardia feminista de los años 70. Obras de la SAMMLUNG VERBUND*, Viena at the Círculo de Bellas Artes, Madrid, June 2, 2013. Hunter died in London in 2014. Our exhibition gave her an opportunity to see her work in an international context, which meant a great deal to her.

5 See, e. g., *Amazons of the Avant-Garde*, eds. John E. Bowlt and Matthew Drutt, exh. cat., Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin and Royal Academy of Arts, London, Berlin, 1999–2000; Christina Kiaer, "The Short Life of the Equal Woman: Remembering the Work of Russian Female Artists under Stalin in the 1930s," in *Tate Etc.*, October 20, 2017, London, (accessed October 19, 2024).

The term "avant-garde" designates pioneering tendencies in modernist art such as constructivism, cubism, dadaism, futurism, and, later, surrealism. The historiography of modern art has been overly faithful as a matter of principle to the paradigm of male artistic genius, and as a result, the oeuvres of many women avant-gardists have been overlooked. As scholarship, publications, and exhibitions over the past several decades have demonstrated, women artists indeed played significant parts in the classical avant-gardes, making signal contributions to constructivism,⁵ surrealism, and other movements.⁶ Their protagonists, men as well as women, were united by the urge to break with tradition and deconstruct traditional aesthetic ideas and the aspiration to win society's acceptance for a new art. They produced their manifestos, pamphlets, and works of art during the first third of the twentieth century, until fascism and Stalinism crushed their endeavors in Europe. In 1974, the cultural sociologist Peter Bürger's widely-read study *Theory of the Avant-Garde* declared that the avant-gardes had failed,⁷ an assessment that the Berlin-based cultural scholar Karin Hirdina has disputed, arguing that the demise of the avant-gardes was due to political oppression rather than endogenous "failure": "Those representatives of the avant-garde who survived fascism, exile, and Stalinist repression could not simply pick up where they had left off in the 1920s."⁸ One prominent example is the aesthetic discontinuity in the oeuvre of the Russian-Polish artist Katarzyna Kobro, who created visionary abstract Unist sculptures in the 1920s and 1930s but after the war—she died in 1951—was unable to resume her avant-garde practice.⁹



KATALIN LADIK, POEMIM (Series A),
Novi Sad, 1978, Detail of SV_647_1-6_2015
(pp. 298–299)



ANA MENDIETA, Untitled
(Glass on Body Imprints), 1972/1997
Detail of SV_237_1-6_2008 (pp. 328–329)

- 6 See, e. g. Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, New York, 1985; Patricia Allmer, *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*, exh. cat. Manchester Art Gallery, Munich/New York, 2009; *The Other Side of the Moon: Women Artists of the Avant-Garde*, ed. Susanne Meyer-Büser, exh. cat. Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 2012; Patricia Allmer, *Intersections. Women Artists/Surrealism/Modernism*, Manchester, 2016; *Fantastic Women: Surreal Worlds from Meret Oppenheim to Frida Kahlo*, curated by Ingrid Pfeiffer, exh. cat. Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, 2020; Patricia Allmer, *The Traumatic Surreal: Germanophone Women Artists and Surrealism after the Second World War*, Manchester, 2022.
- 7 See also *Theorie der Avantgarde: Antworten auf Peter Bürgers Bestimmung von Kunst und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft*, ed. Martin W. Lüdke, Frankfurt am Main, 1976, as well as Benjamin Buchloh, "Theorizing the Avant-Garde," in *Art in America*, no. 72 (November 1984), pp. 19–21.
- 8 Karin Hirdina, "Avantgarde," in *Metzler Lexikon Ästhetik*, ed. Achim Trebeß, Stuttgart/Weimar, 2006, pp. 57–60, here p. 60.
- 9 Yve-Alain Bois has argued that this discontinuity was due to reasons immanent to theory; see his "Strzemiński and Kobro: In Search of Motivation," in *Painting as Model*, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, pp. 123–55. See also Gabriele Schor, "Zur Finalität des Toten Punktes: Über das Ende der Unistischen Theorie bei Katarzyna Kobro und Władysław Strzemiński," in *Wille zur Form. Ungegenständliche Kunst 1910–1938 in Österreich, Polen, Tschechoslowakei und Ungarn*, ed. Jürgen Schilling, Vienna, 1993, pp. 101–6.
- 10 See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avant-garde> (accessed November 19, 2024).
- 11 See "Avantgarde," in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe: Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*, ed. Karlheinz Barck, vol. 1, Stuttgart/Weimar, 2000, pp. 544–77; Hubert van den Berg and Walter Fähnders, "Die künstlerische Avantgarde im 20. Jahrhundert–Einleitung," in *Metzler Lexikon Avantgarde*, eds. Hubert van den Berg and Walter Fähnders, Stuttgart/Weimar, 2009, pp. 1–19.

After the Second World War, the baton of the historic avant-gardes was taken up by the neo-avantgardes, including action art, abstract expressionism, minimal art, pop art, situationism, Fluxus, the happening, conceptual art, and Viennese Actionism. These are some of the movements listed in the Wikipedia article under the headword "avant-garde";¹⁰ the feminist movement, however, is not included as of 2024. How can it be that one of the most important tendencies in the art of the second half of the twentieth century is not associated with the label "avant-garde"? The reference books produced by the publishing house Metzler, which are widely used in the German-speaking world, likewise never so much as mention the feminist art movement in entries on the "avant-garde" or even in any of the 220 articles in the dedicated guide to the avant-garde that came out in 2009.¹¹ In another influential reference work, the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, the "avant-garde" does not merit its own entry, but at least Donald B. Kuspit's article on "art criticism" mentions the emergence of feminist criticism and art history in the 1970s, spearheaded by Lucy R. Lippard, Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and others. As he observes, "the new wave of art criticism could also take on a political quality. In the 1970s, at the height of the feminist movement, American critic Lucy Lippard advocated women's art, helping to bring this movement [...] to the centre of social concern."¹² The art critic Lawrence Alloway got it right as early as 1976 in an essay on "Women's Art in the '70s": "The women's movement in art can be considered as an avant-garde because its members are united by a desire to change the existing social forms of the art world."¹³ Alloway's encouragingly apt and visionary diagnosis that the feminist movement in the art of the 1970s deserves the label "avant-garde" would remain a singular position for decades.



CLAUDE CAHUN, Self-portrait (in cupboard), approx. 1932

© Jersey Heritage Collections



SANDY ORGEL, Line Closet, 1972
Installation, Womanhouse, Los Angeles

© Sandy Orgel / The Power of Feminist Art. The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact, eds. Norma Broude, Mary Garrard, 1994 / Photo: Lloyd Hamrol



FRANCESCA WOODMAN, Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975–1978/1997; SV_221_2008 (p. 553)

The catalogue published on the occasion of the inaugural presentation of art from our collection in 2007 provided me with an opportunity to publicize the conjunction of the two terms “feminism” and “avant-garde”.¹⁴ It was followed in 2010 by our first thematic exhibition *Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s: Works from the VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna*, which is still touring Europe.¹⁵ Despite the accompanying publications released in 2010, 2015, and 2016, our efforts to place the term “feminist avant-garde” in Wikipedia were fruitless for years, until the artist Myriam Thyges drew on her editorial expertise to come up with a smart stratagem. Rather than arguing for the inclusion of the “feminist avant-garde” in the encyclopedia on the basis of the foundational works that had been published on the subject, she wrote an article on the exhibition tour that had been going on for almost a decade; the entry went online in July 2019.¹⁶ After decades during which the academic discourse stubbornly ignored this major art movement, it is important to show presence on multiple levels, including online. The protagonists of the feminist avant-garde wrote manifestos and pamphlets, established numerous women artists’ associations and journals, articulated a critique of art institutions, and organized their own exhibitions. Their work was groundbreaking in terms of form as well as content; they sought to fuse art with life and agitated for social and political change. In short, their activities manifested all the characteristics of an avant-garde.

Over the course of the past few decades, in particular, a growing number of well-researched publications and major exhibitions have undertaken a thorough review of the history of feminist art movements. One milestone achievement in this regard was the exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, a presentation of five hundred works by 119 women artists that toured the United States between 2007 and 2009 and resonated strongly with audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, spurring renewed interest in feminist art both in the U.S.¹⁷

- 12 Donald B. Kuspit, “Art Criticism,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com> (accessed July 12, 2016).
- 13 Lawrence Alloway, “Women’s Art in the ‘70s,” in *Art in America*, 64, no. 3 (May–June 1976), pp. 64–72.
- 14 *HELD TOGETHER WITH WATER: Art from the Sammlung Verbund*, ed. Gabriele Schor, exh. cat. MAK, Ostfildern, 2007, p. 17.
- 15 For a list of the venues that have showcased the *Feminist Avant-Garde*, see this book’s publishing information.
- 16 I would like to thank Myriam Thyges for her extraordinary dedication to placing the term “feminist avant-garde” in Wikipedia. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_avantgarde (accessed October 20, 2024).
- 17 See, e. g., *Global Feminism: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, Brooklyn Museum, 2007; *Agents of Change: Women, Art and Intellect*, Ceres Gallery, 2007; *Femme brut(e)*, Lyman Allyn Art Museum, New London, 2007; *Role Play: Feminist Art Revisited 1960–1980*, Galerie Lelong, New York, 2007; *Multiple Vantage Points: Southern California Women Artists, 1980–2006*, Municipal Art Gallery, Los Angeles, 2007.



HANNAH WILKE, *Super-T-Art*, 1974
Detail of SV_161_1-20_2007 (pp. 530–531)



FRANCESCA WOODMAN, *Untitled*, Rome, Italy, 1977–1978
SV_214_2008 (p. 572)

and in Europe.¹⁸ As the curator Connie Butler underscored, “feminism’s impact on art of the 1970s constitutes the most influential international ‘movement’ of any during the postwar period.”¹⁹ Reviewing *WACK!* in the *New York Times*, Holland Cotter noted that “curators and critics have increasingly come to see that feminism has generated the most influential art impulses of the late 20th and early 21st century. There is almost no new work that has not in some way been shaped by it. [...] One thing is certain: Feminist art [...] is the formative art of the last four decades [...] Much of what we call postmodern art has feminist art at its source.”²⁰

What made *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* crucial to the growing recognition of the significance of feminist art was that the exhibition was shown at prominent institutions committed to the art-historical canon, including Los Angeles’s Museum of Contemporary Art and New York’s Museum of Modern Art, P.S.1. I heard early on that Connie Butler was working on *WACK!*, and what I learned came as a welcome endorsement of my work as a curator and fledgling head of a collection and encouraged me to continue my research.

My ambition for the publications and the touring exhibition *Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s: Works from the SAMMLUNG VERBUND, Vienna* is to emphasize the connection between the concepts of “feminism” and “avant-garde” in order to highlight the pioneering achievements of these artists. The term “avant-garde” comes from French military language, where it designates a group of vanguard fighters who reconnoiter the enemy. In the twentieth century, it was repurposed for artistic movements that were guided by the idea of progress, repudiated prevailing aesthetic standards, and brought something new into the world. The titles of feminist exhibitions often include the attribute “radical” and the term “revolution.” Both words apply: the feminist art movement was the first to subject the “image of woman” to a “radical” revision, one that went “to the root,”

- 18 See, e.g., *Vote for Women*, Haus der Sparkasse, Merano, 2008; *Matrix*, Museum auf Abruf (MUSA), Vienna, 2008; *REBELLE. Art & Feminism 1969–2009*, Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem, 2009; *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*, Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna, 2009/2010.
- 19 Cornelia Butler, “Art and Feminism: An Ideology of Shifting Criteria,” in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, eds. Cornelia Butler and Lisa Gabrielle Mark, exh. cat. The Museum of Contemporary Art, National Museum of Women in the Arts, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Vancouver Art Gallery, Cambridge/London, 2007.
- 20 Holland Cotter, “Feminist Art Finally Takes Center Stage,” in *New York Times*, March 12, 2007.



FRANCESCA WOODMAN, *Face, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1976* SV_118_2006 (p. 555)



RENATE BERTLMANN, *Zärtliche Pantomime, 1976*
Detail of SV_566_2014 (pp. 114-115)

remaking it from women's own perspective and "revolutionizing," which is to say, overthrowing the established stereotypical representation of "woman in art." If I insist on using the label "avant-garde," it is because that is an art-historical term. By grouping the feminist art movement under an art-historical category that enjoys a privileged reputation in the historiography of art, I hope to expand the existing (largely male-dominated) canon of the avant-gardes and enshrine this radical and revolutionary art movement in the place in the history of art it merits.

In the course of my research, I came to the realization that many feminist artists and oeuvres of the period still awaited discovery. Even today, we only have biographies for a woefully small number of these artists. A gripping account of the eventful life and oeuvre of Margot Pilz, for example, was released by the art historian and curator Nina Schedlmayer in 2021. I have often been asked how I found out about our artists, and in particular about those who were as yet largely unknown, who had no websites, no publications to their names, and no galleries representing their oeuvres. In some instances, other artists drew my attention to colleagues they knew back in the day; in others, I came across them browsing catalogues from the 1970s, when these artists exhibited their work and critics wrote about them. Unfortunately, their art faded from view after the mid-1980s; there was no market at the time for these feminist works, and art historians, too, largely ignored them. That is why research and documentation on the output of many feminist artists is either nonexistent or fragmentary. Scholars will need to catalogue estates, examine archives, interview artists to compile oral histories, draw up lists of their contributions to exhibitions and writings, and study their ideas and concerns. With respect to individual oeuvres, these require analysis of their formal aspects as well as their content, accompanied by studies comparing them to other works of their time.

Many curators have undertaken this arduous yet rewarding labor. In *Female Trouble* (Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, 2008), Inka Graeve-Ingelmann focused on the photographic staging of femininity from the nineteenth century onward. Camille Morineau's *elles@centrepompidou*, meanwhile, showed works by women artists from the collection of the Musée national d'art moderne in Paris (Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2011). When the curator proposed the exhibition project she felt passionately about to the museum's director at the time, he replied with an incredulous question: "Do we even have enough?"²¹ He had a point: most museums have passed up on opportunities to acquire art from the period in question. The Paris show proved a success; it was extended several times with a series of changes to the presentation, and many works by women artists were added to the collection.

The scope of research into the feminist art movements is steadily expanding, reflecting diverse geographical, national, ethnic, and cultural contexts. Where *WACK!* in 2007 largely focused on North American artists, the following years brought a slew of dedicated research projects surveying the feminist art of African-American, Latin American, and Eastern European artists. The exhibition *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965–85*, curated by Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley, opened at the Brooklyn Museum in 2017 and subsequently traveled to four other institutions. *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, curated by Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta, was shown at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, in 2018 and then went to the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, Brazil. In 2019, *The Medea Insurrection: Radical Women Artists behind the Iron Curtain*, an exhibition curated by Susanne Altmann at the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, provided insight into the specific qualities of art actions and works produced in the so-called Eastern Bloc between 1961 and 1989. It is gratifying to see specific research and thorough reviews at the national level such as the curator Linsey Young's exhibition *Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970–1990*, produced by Tate Britain, London, which will be on view at the National Galleries of Scotland: Modern, Edinburgh, and The Whitworth, The University of Manchester in 2025.

The majority of the works in our ongoing exhibition tour *Feminist Avant-Garde* are by European artists, although the show also features artists from Latin America and the U.S. Since its first stop at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome in 2010, which gathered two hundred works by seventeen artists, our collection has grown steadily; by the time this book goes into print in 2025, it will encompass around six hundred works by eighty-seven artists. Over the years it was important to me to include works by African-American, Latin American, and Eastern European artists, including photographs by Lorraine O'Grady, Senga Nengudi, Ana Mendieta, and Regina Vater, videos by Howardena Pindell, Sonia Andrade, Leticia Parente, and Victoria Santa Cruz, lithographs by Elizabeth Catlett, drawings by Emma Amos and Teresa Burga, and photographs by Anna Kuter, Katalin Ladik, Natalia LL, Orshi Drozdik, Jana Želibská, and the artist Gabriele Stötzer, who grew up in East Germany. The diverse geographical, national, ethnic, social, and political circumstances in which these artists worked illustrate that feminism must be approached in intersectional terms. The following chapters will shed light on how various feminist movements articulated different demands. BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ artists, in particular, faced and still face the multiple discriminations of racism, classism, sexism, and colonialism.

- 21 Camille Morineau in conversation with the author, summer 2014.
- 22 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, London, 2010, p. 451.
- 23 Birgit Jürgenssen in conversation with Doris Linda Psenicnik, Vienna, December 21, 1998.
- 24 De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 283.
- 25 Judith Butler prominently elaborated on this view in her book *Gender Trouble*, New York, 1990.
- 26 Intersectionality puts the focus on individuals who concurrently experience overlapping forms of oppression based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. See also p. 27 in this volume.
- 27 "Nineteenth century black women were more aware of sexist oppression than any other female group in American society has ever been. Not only were they the female group most victimized by sexist discrimination and sexist oppression, their powerlessness was such that resistance on their part could rarely take the form of organized collective action," as bell hooks explains in her essay "black women and feminism," in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, Boston, 1981, p. 161.

EMANCIPATION—FEMINISMS

This book gathers women artists who experienced the 1950s and their political and social aftermath in Europe, Latin America, and the U.S. as children or teenagers. It was the era of the Cold War, of anticommunism, racism, racial segregation, and puritanical public morality. Women leading independent and self-determined lives were the exception, and when they wished to leave their parents' homes, finding a husband was often the only viable alternative: marriage as a kind of escape. In 1949, the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir published her seminal book *Le deuxième sexe*, which was soon translated into numerous languages and widely read across Europe and the U.S. and beyond. In it she wrote: "The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage."²² It was a preconception many women artists confronted. For example, the aspiring artist Birgit Jürgenssen, who studied at Vienna's University of Applied Arts between 1967 and 1971, later recalled working on lithographs when a sympathetic assistant asked her why she would trouble herself with carrying around heavy limestone plates: after all, he remarked, she would soon be married anyway.²³ Summing up her analysis of women's cultural and social history, de Beauvoir concluded: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman."²⁴ The oppression of women is not a "natural fact" but determined by factors of history, society, and politics and the hierarchical logic of patriarchy. That our conception of what makes a woman a woman is a social and discursive construct was a key insight for an entire generation of women with feminist beliefs.²⁵

The 1960s witnessed the emergence of a fundamental critique of the capitalist and imperialist economic system and the formation of numerous movements: the civil rights movement and the Black power movement, which in turn spawned the Black women's movement, the antiwar movement, the student movement, the gay liberation movement, and the *white* women's movement. The two women's movements were separated by readily apparent class divisions, but the key difference was grounded in racism. *White* women regarded their feminism as "universal" and overlooked the fact that Black women confronted the multiple discriminations of racism, sexism, and classism, whence the close association of the Black women's movement with intersectionality.²⁶ Its beginnings can be traced back to the enslaved freedom fighter Sojourner Truth and her historic speech "And Ain't I a Woman?" at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in 1851. Other leading representatives were Anna Julia Cooper, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Akasha Gloria Hull, bell hooks, and Ida B. Wells, to name only a few.²⁷ The history of the *white* women's movement, meanwhile, goes back to the suffragettes of the early twentieth century, primarily a middle-and-upper-class movement in the UK and the U.S. that agitated for the universal right to vote to be extended to women.



BIRGIT JÜRGENSSEN, *Emanzipation*, 1973
Pencil, colored pencil on handmade paper
© Estate Birgit Jürgenssen / Bildrecht, Vienna 2025



Book cover, AWA THIAM, *Die Stimme der schwarzen Frau*, 1981 [Speak Out, Black Sisters: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa, 1986]

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In non-Western countries and cultures, too, feminists fought to build awareness of the mechanisms of oppression to which women are exposed. One of the best-known campaigners for women's rights in the Middle East was the Egyptian activist Nawal El Saadawi. In a nonfiction book on women and sexuality she published in 1969, she grappled with the assaults on the female body in an Arabic-Islamic society. The Senegalese activist Awa Thiam's 1978 book *La Parole aux négresses*, published in English translation in 1986 as *Black Sisters, Speak Out: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa*, which is regarded as the founding document of Francophone African feminism, identifies the three fields that are responsible for the oppression of African women: sexism, racism, and traditionalism.

The growing availability of birth control with oral contraceptives in the 1970s, the sexual revolution, antiauthoritarian childrearing practices, the critique of the establishment and traditional values—these developments filled above all a white generation with confidence that conservative-to-reactionary norms were amenable to change. In this atmosphere of political optimism, feminist movements in Europe, Latin America, and the Anglosphere coalesced that advocated equality between women and men in private and social contexts, demanded equal pay for equal work and bodily autonomy for women (the decriminalization of abortion), and fought against racism and violence against women.

The Austrian artist Birgit Jürgenssen's drawing *Emanzipation* (Emancipation; p. 19) shows a woman's arm, the hand clenched into a fist; the male biceps has been replaced with an emblematically female body part (a breast). It is a clear challenge: the artist is determined to confront the patriarchal system. VALIE EXPORT calls on women to become involved in societal decision-making processes as necessary for emancipation "in order to achieve a self-defined image of ourselves and thus a different view of the social function of women. we women must participate in the construction of reality via the building stones of media communication. this will not happen spontaneously or without resistance, therefore we must fight!"²⁸

28 VALIE EXPORT, "Women's Art: A Manifesto" [March 1972], in *Feminist Art Manifestos: An Anthology*, ed. Katy Deepwell, London, 2014, n.p. [The punctuation in the quotation is as in the source text.]

29 Nicole Dubreuil-Blondin has highlighted this series of superlatives; see her "Number One: Towards the Construction of a Model," in *Jackson Pollock: Questions*, exh. cat. Musée d'Art Contemporain, Montréal, 1979, p. 48, quoted in Ellen G. Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, New York, 1989, p. 264.

30 Gabriele Schor, "Lapislazuli: Das Schwarz der Abstrakten Expressionisten," in *Die Farben Schwarz*, ed. Thomas Zaunschirm, exh. cat. Landesmuseum Joanneum Graz, Vienna, 1999, pp. 97–120.

AGAINST THE CULT OF GENIUS AND THE MEN'S CLUB



The logic of the equation “man=artist=genius,” echoes of which persisted well into the age of postmodernism, was only one obstacle with which women artists had to contend. The doyen of art criticism Clement Greenberg positively lavished praise on Jackson Pollock, his chosen favorite, in an ascending series of heroic attributes, beginning, in 1943, with his characterization of Pollock as “the first,” advancing to “the best,” “the greatest,” “the most original,” “the most powerful,” and culminating, in 1947, in “the demiurgic genius.”²⁹ Coming from a formalist critic, those are rather effusive terms. The media picked up on Greenberg’s panegyrics as well. In August 1949, *LIFE* magazine dedicated a dramatic homage to Pollock; a photograph showed the thirty-seven-year-old artist posing nonchalantly in front of one of his pictures, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. The caption asked: “Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?” Could anyone imagine a similar headline for a Black or white—female artist? Pollock’s style was apostrophized as fierce, violent, impetuous, undisciplined, proletarian, brawny, primal, and explosive—a register in which no woman could hope to compete, as these characteristics and this habitus were solely reserved for men at the time.³⁰ Patriarchal structures were pervasive in the arts scene, and well-defined mechanisms were in place to bar many entrants, as the art historian Ann Eden Gibson notes: “No women, straight or

LYNDA BENGLIS, "Fling, Dribble and Dip" in LIFE 68, no 7 (February 27, 1970), pp. 62-63
© Dotdash Meredith

lesbian, no gay men, and no people of color were considered “major.” This hierarchy was not explained or excused; the artists were simply excluded.”³¹

Yet Blacks were not safe from exclusion within their own community, where sexism was prevalent, as the artist Emma Amos learned. On July 5, 1963, Romare Bearden, Charles Alston, Norman Lewis, and Hale Woodruff founded the artists’ collective *Spiral*, which met on a weekly basis until 1965 to discuss the role of African-American artists in politics and the civil rights movement as well as the art world. In the spring of 1965, they put together the exhibition *Spiral: First Group Showing: Works in Black and White* at the Christopher Street Gallery in New York. Amos (p. 71) was the group’s only female member, and she later recalled that she “sort of got the idea that [...] they weren’t comfortable with women artists as colleagues”.³² She also felt that she was somehow less of a threat to the group than older women artists like Camille Billops, Vivian E. Browne, and Faith Ringgold who were more widely known in art circles. Amos soon understood that the New York art world was “a man’s scene, black or white.”³³

In the 1970s, a younger generation of women artists began driving cracks into modernism’s intractable patriarchal structures. In February 1970, *LIFE* magazine ran a photo feature on Lynda Benglis illustrating the new painting style she dubbed “fling, dribble, and dip” (p. 21). Like Pollock before her, she was photographed in action, pouring paint onto a horizontal surface. The artist’s painterly-performative gesture inserts itself into a male-coded myth, deftly deconstructing it. The magazine spread includes a small black-and-white photograph of Pollock as a point of reference; Benglis, meanwhile, is featured in several large color pictures.

As a student at London’s Courtauld Institute of Art ca. 1970, Griselda Pollock was a member of—as she herself described it—a competitive group of ambitious future art historians: “One week we had a slide test which we all passed with nine correct answers out of ten. One image defeated us. We could date it, define it as a post-Impressionist work produced in Paris, etc., etc. We were completely unable to name its author, Suzanne Valadon, because it never occurred to us to search our extensive art-historical databases for a woman’s name.”³⁴ The experience was characteristic of the time. The artist, revered as an old master or acclaimed as a contemporary public figure, was symbolically male. Pollock’s anecdote illustrates what the art historian Linda Nochlin documented in her groundbreaking 1971 study “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”. The essay highlights the mechanisms of exclusion that banished women from art-making and from art history.³⁵ Nochlin wrote: “The fault [...] lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education. [...] One would like [...] to study in greater detail the role played by Picasso’s art-professor father in the pictorial precocity of his son. What if Picasso had been born a girl? Would Señor Ruiz have paid as much attention or stimulated as much ambition for achievement in a little

31 Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, New Haven/London, 1997, pp. x–xi.

32 Emma Amos, in “Emma Amos in Conversation with Courtney J. Martin,” in *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 30 (Spring 2012), p. 107, quoted in Connie H. Choi, “Spiral, the Black Arts Movement, and ‘Where We At’: Black Women Artists,” in *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965–85. A Sourcebook*, eds. Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley, Brooklyn, N.Y.: Brooklyn Museum, 2017, pp. 27–28.

33 Lisa E. Farrington, “Emma Amos: Art as Legacy,” *Women’s Art Journal* 28, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2007), p. 4, quoted *ibid.*, p. 30.

34 Griselda Pollock, “The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories,” in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock, London/New York, 1996, p. 11.

35 Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” [1971], in *Feminism—Art—Theory: An Anthology, 1968–2014*, ed. Hilary Robinson, 2nd ed., Malden, Mass./Oxford, 2015, pp. 137–40.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 137, 140.

37 Meret Oppenheim, “Nobody Will Give You Freedom, You Have to Take It: Acceptance Speech for the 1974 Art Award of the City of Basle, 16 January 1975,” in *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, ed. Penelope Rosemont, London, 1998, p. 377.

Pablita?"³⁶ Meret Oppenheim likewise discussed the need for women to pay more heed to themselves. In January 1975, the surrealist artist noted in an award acceptance speech: "I think it is the duty of a woman to lead a life that expresses her disbelief in the validity of the taboos that have been imposed upon her kind for thousands of years. Nobody will give you freedom; you have to take it."³⁷ The African-American artist Faith Ringgold put the challenge in similarly blunt terms in her often-quoted credo: "You can't sit around and wait for somebody to say who you are. You need to write it and paint it and do it."

PROTEST—CLAIMING TERRITORY— "WHERE WE AT"

With the rise of the second women's movement in the 1970s, women artists started conquering more and more ground in the art world. They set up action committees, held protests in the streets and picketed museums, organized festivals, symposia, and exhibitions, founded their own galleries, wrote manifestos, pamphlets, books, brochures, and catalogues, and launched publishing ventures and journals. An extensive discussion of that eventful decade would exceed the space allotted to me for this survey. The present book contains a detailed chronology of the years 1968–1980 (pp. 647–669); in the following pages, I will limit myself to pinpointing a few key events.

Protests were often sparked by exhibition organizers' decisions to bar women artists from participation. In 1970, the African-American artist and activist Faith Ringgold and her daughters Michele and Barbara Wallace founded the *Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation* (WSABAL) to provide the African-American art movement with an organizational basis. That same year, WSABAL was joined by the *Women Artists in Revolution* (WAR) and the *Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee* in a demonstration outside the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, whose annual exhibition featured a mere five percent women artists. They forcefully demanded equal representation of women and men and called for the inclusion of the African-American artists Betye Saar and Barbara Chase-Riboud. As a result of the feminists' pressure campaign, the share of women artists went up to twenty-two percent in the next Whitney Annual.



Art Workers Coalition Protest in front of the Whitney Museum, Faith Ringgold (right) and Michele Wallace (middle), 1971 / Photo: Jan van Raay
© Jan van Raay / Courtesy Jan van Raay, Portland, OR



Exhibition poster "Cookin' and Smokin': Where We At. Black Women Artists", 1972
Weusi-Nyumba Ya Sanaa Gallery
© Swann Galleries, New York



Where We At. Black Women Artists, f.l.t.r.: Carol Blank, Pat Davis, Victoria Lucas, Crystal McKenzie, Dindga McCannon, Kay Brown, Modu Tanzania, Jeanne Downer, Priscilla Taylor, Emma Zuwadi, Akweke Singho, Linda Hiwot and Saeeda Stanley, 1980 / Photo: Pat Davis
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In the summer of 1971, six artists—Kay Brown, Jerrolyn Crooks, Pat Davis, Mai Mai Leabua, Dindga McCannon, and Faith Ringgold—gathered to make plans for the first-ever group show of African-American women artists. Interest in participation was strong, and so "WHERE WE AT": BLACK WOMEN ARTISTS took place at the Acts of Art Gallery in Greenwich Village. The opening was a media event and the show turned out to be a success. In 1972, Kay Brown explained in the *Feminist Art Journal*: "The title depicted the significant role of the Black woman artist and showed the community that we did exist—in numbers. Heretofore, the viewing public appeared to believe that the Black artist was synonymous with the Black male artist."³⁸ Brown concludes her article by calling on the Brooklyn Museum to mount "A Black Women's Exhibition." The group's membership soon swelled.³⁹ Brown also explained why their organization was so important: "The WHERE WE AT—BLACK WOMEN ARTISTS is a real 'coming together' of creative and talented Black women, unique in its philosophy of mutual support of Black women artists in the creative endeavor. The group is relevant to today's African-American women and is vital to the Black Community."⁴⁰

The exclusion of women artists from group exhibitions and utter disregard for their output was par for the course in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1976, the Museum of Modern Art in New York organized the exhibition *Drawing Now*. Nancy Spero and Joanna Stamerra of the group *Ad Hoc Protest Committee* had the words *ERASE SEXISM AT MOMA* (p. 661) stamped on erasers, which they placed on the frames around the works of art during the opening to draw attention to the low percentage of women in the show. In Vienna, a women's group rallied in 1975 when an all-male jury was appointed to select the artists for a scheduled exhibition of *Austrian Contemporary Women Artists*. Forty-six artists subsequently canceled their participation. The episode led to the creation of the *Internationale Aktionsgemeinschaft Bildender Künstlerinnen* (International Women Artists' Action Committee, *IntAkt*; p. 664) in Vienna. Its stated goals included "improvement of women artists' social situation and working conditions."⁴¹

38 Kay Brown, "'Where We At': Black Women Artists," in *Feminist Art Journal*, April 1972, p. 25, quoted in Morris and Hockley, *We Wanted a Revolution*, pp. 62–64.

39 Also among the members were Carol Blank, Vivian Browne, Carole Byard, Gylbert Coker, Iris Crump, Doris Kane, Onnie Millar, Charlotte Richardson, Akweke Singho, Ann Tanksley, and Jean Taylor.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 264.

41 *Identitätsbilder: IntAkt—Jahrbuch 1984*, exh. cat. Secession, Vienna, 1984, n.p.

42 See *From Conceptualism to Feminism: Lucy Lippard's Numbers Shows 1969–74*, ed. Connie Butler, London, 2012, p. 223.

43 Verband Bildender Künstler der DDR (VBK), *Bildende Kunst*, no. 5, Berlin, 1989, quoted in Angelika Richter, *Das Gesetz der Szene: Genderkritik, Performance Art und zweite Öffentlichkeit in der späten DDR*, Bielefeld, 2019, p. 44.



In 1972, the artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro set up the temporary exhibition venue *Womanhouse* (p. 670) in Los Angeles, which hosted site-specific installations (including a menstruation room) as well as performances, discussions, and workshops. In 1970, Margaret Harrison and other artists had founded the *London Women's Liberation Art Group*. Also established in 1972, the A.I.R. Gallery (Artists in Residence) was the first nonprofit gallery run by and for women. Susan Williams, Barbara Zucker, Dotty Attie, Maude Boltz, Mary Grigoriadis, Nancy Spero, and fourteen other artists opened the gallery at 97 Wooster Street in New York. It was followed, in 1974, by Linda Goode Bryant's Just Above Midtown Gallery, also in Manhattan, which focused on providing a platform for BIPOC artists. Both non-profit artists' spaces offered both Black and *white* (women) artists vital opportunities to exhibit their work.

The pioneering feminist curator, activist, and art critic Lucy Lippard organized the exhibition *c. 7,500*, which consisted exclusively of work by women; first displayed at the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, in 1973, it toured the U.S. until 1974. The catalogue (p. 671) consisted of index cards to emphasize the show's conceptual quality.⁴² Works by three artists who contributed to *c. 7,500*—Ulrike Rosenbach (p. 423), Rita Myers (p. 341), and Martha Wilson (p. 534)—are now among the holdings of VERBUND COLLECTION in Vienna.

The artist Angela Hampel addressed the gender-specific disparagement and structural marginalization that women artists experienced in East Germany: "When women make bad art, they call it 'girly stuff.' The same label is slapped on men who make bad art: they're making women's art. In that instant, gender is tied to the work. When women make good art, they become neuters; then the fact that they did it as women is overlooked. Then art is art."⁴³ The Croatian artist Sanja Iveković recalled the conflict between women who were loyal to the regime and more critical colleagues. "The congress 'The Question of Woman' was held in the student cultural center in Belgrade in 1978. It was the first international

Exhibition view *c. 7,500*, curated by LUCY R. LIPPARD in the Gallery A-402, California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), Valencia, 1973. The works from left to right: ATHENA TACHA, *Hands* (two versions 1970–1972); ULRIKE ROSENBACH, *Hauben für eine verheiratete Frau* (1970); RENEE NAHUM, *In Uniform and Out of Uniform* (1973); RITA MYERS, *Slow Squeeze 1* (1973), *Tilt 1* (1973) and *Body Halves* (1971)

© California Institute of the Arts, Valencia

Exhibition view *MAGNA. Feminismus: Kunst und Kreativität*, curated by VALIE EXPORT at the Galerie nächst St. Stephan, Wien, 1975, with works by BIRGIT JÜRGENSSEN, from left to right: *Die Pflichten einer Ehefrau* (1974), *Bodenschrubben* (1975), *Fensterputzen* (1975), unknown work, *Wir zergliedern Insekten* (1974), *Fehlende Glieder* (1974)

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feminist conference in a socialist country and brought together women from Zagreb, Ljubljana, and other places. These women drew harsh criticism from the official women's organizations, which maintained that feminism was a bourgeois import from the West and that the socialist revolution had already resolved the question of woman [...] The meetings and lectures by women scholars were a strong influence on me, and I [...] was one of the few women artists who openly identified as feminists."⁴⁴

In 1975, the United Nations proclaimed the "International Women's Year," and numerous events, conferences, and exhibitions on women's equality were held around the world. Romana Loda curated the show *Magma: rassegna internazionale di donne artiste*, which toured Italy. VALIE EXPORT's *MAGNA. Feminismus: Kunst und Kreativität* (p. 671) looked beyond Austria's borders; among the domestic contributors were Renate Bertlmann, Birgit Jürgenssen, Maria Lassnig, and Friederike Pezold. In 1977, a team of women curators defied protests to compile the exhibition *Künstlerinnen international 1877–1977* (p. 672), which presented works by 189 artists at Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin. All of these initiatives faced stiff resistance. Sarah Schumann, one of the curators of the centennial exhibition, later observed: "There are countless exhibitions showing art works made almost exclusively by men. And when a show comes along including only work by women, all of a sudden there's an outcry."⁴⁵

Art magazines were vital media, disseminating current demands of the women's movement and raising the readership's feminist consciousness. The radical feminist magazine *off our backs* was launched in Washington in 1970, followed by *The Feminist Art Journal* in New York and *Die Hexenpresse* (S. 675) in Wiesbaden (Germany) in 1972 and *AUF—Eine Frauenzeitschrift* in Vienna in 1974. 1977 brought the inaugural issues of *Chrysalis* (p. 675), out of Los Angeles, and *HERESIES* (p. 675) from New York. *COURAGE* was published in West Berlin from 1976 until 1984, and in 1977, Alice Schwarzer (p. 662) founded the magazine *EMMA* (p. 675), which still exists.

44 Sanja Iveković in conversation with Georg Schöllhammer, in *Moments: Eine Geschichte der Performance in 10 Akten*, eds. Sigrid Gareis, Georg Schöllhammer, and Peter Weibel, exh. cat. ZKM | Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe, Cologne, 2013, pp. 156–57.

45 See "Künstlerinnen International," interview with Sarah Schumann, Silvia Bovenschen, and Michaela Melián, in *Frieze d/e*, no. 9 (April–May 2013), <http://frieze-magazin.de/archiv/features/kuenstlerinnen-international> (accessed November 26, 2024).

46 The group's name refers to the Combahee River, where, in 1863, 750 escaped slaves were ferried to safety in the Northern United States or Canada.

47 Combahee River Collective, quoted in: Morris and Hockley, *We Wanted a Revolution*, p. 189.

48 Ibid.

49 Lesbian Issue Collective, quoted ibid.

50 Catherine Morris, "Struggling for Diversity in *Heresies*," in Morris and Hockley, *We Wanted a Revolution*, p. 186.

51 Lowery Stokes Sims, "Third World Women Speak," in Morris and Hockley, *We Wanted a Revolution*, p. 190.

WOMEN OF COLOR— INTERSECTIONAL POLITICS

Thanks to the dedicated efforts of Barbara and Beverly Smith and Demita Frazier, the American activist group *Combahee River Collective* came together in Boston in 1974.⁴⁶ In 1977, the issue on *Lesbian Art and Artists* of the magazine *HERESIES* prompted a letter to the editors in which eighteen members of the group criticized the exclusion of women of color: "We appreciate all of the work the *Lesbian Arts and Artists* issue of *HERESIES* represents. We find it appalling, however, that a hundred years from now it will be possible for women to conclude that in 1977 there were no practicing BLACK and other Third World lesbian artists."⁴⁷ The letter urged *white* feminist organizations to review their "inadequate efforts to promote inclusion and accurately capture the lived experience of women of color."⁴⁸ The all-white editorial collective found itself confronting the charge of racist ignorance toward other ethnic groups. It published the letter and conceded that it had participated in "a kind of passive exclusion" of women of color: "By not making a concerted effort to contact Third World Lesbian artists we became an only too typical all-white group operating in a racist society."⁴⁹

The public criticism of the *Combahee* collective prompted wide-ranging debates and a number of exhibitions that were also instrumental in putting the term "Third World women" on the map. The "Third World," the curator Catherine Morris writes, designates "a loosely related group of countries emerging from colonial control and struggling with attendant economic disadvantages. Artists of color from the Third World were continually denied the visibility, economic stability, and support systems of the Western art world."⁵⁰ In 1978, the SOHO20 Gallery, an alternative space, hosted the panel discussion *Third World Women Artists*. The Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta also used the term in the title of the exhibition *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States* (p. 674) she curated at the A.I.R. Gallery in New York in 1980. *HERESIES* itself gathered the critical voices of numerous artists who weighed in on the matter in the issue "Third World Women—The Politics of Being Other," released in 1979. The art historian Lowery Stokes Sims has summed up the debate as follows: "As artists, non-white women have had not only to defy expectations in role patterns, but to overcome the stunted creativity of colonized peoples whose indigenous culture has been disparaged and denied by the power class for 500 years. While white (Anglo-European) women have had some access to art training and advancement [...] and some expansion of opportunity in a highly technological society, non-white women have had to confront residual 'traditional' roles."⁵¹

The consciousness-raising process and the discussions initiated by the *Combahee River Collective* indicate its pioneering role: it anticipated today's discourse around diversity, inclusion, and intersectionality. The writer Aruna D'Souza argues that activist groups championed an early form of intersectional feminist



Cover of The Third World Women's Alliance,
Vol. 1 No. 1, 1971

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Northampton, Massachusetts



FAITH RINGGOLD, *For the Women's House*, 1971, oil on canvas

© Faith Ringgold / Courtesy of NYC Department of Correction, L2022.1. / Bildrecht, Vienna 2025

- 52 Intersectionality refers to the experience of discrimination based on multiple factors, such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.
- 53 Aruna D'Souza, "Early Intersections: The Work of Third World Feminism," in Morris and Hockley, *We Wanted a Revolution*, pp. 74–95, here p. 76.
- 54 Barbara Smith, lecture at the National Women's Studies Association Conference, May 1979, published as "Racism and Women's Studies," in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 5, no. 1, 1980, quoted in Aruna D'Souza, "Early Intersections."
- 55 Faith Ringgold, in: "For the Women's House: Interview with Faith Ringgold by Michele Wallace," in: Morris and Hockley, *We Wanted a Revolution*, pp. 104–13, here p. 105.
- 56 Mechtild Widrich, "The Fourth Wall Turns Pensive: Feminist Experiments with the Camera," in *Feminist Avant-Garde: Art of the 1970s. The SAMMLUNG VERBUND*, ed. Gabriele Schor, Munich, 2016, pp. 73–77.
- 57 Merle Radtke, "Presence and Absence: On the Legacy of 1970s Performance Art," *ibid.*, pp. 79–83.
- 58 Renate Eisenecker in conversation with the author, August 21, 2014.
- 59 Gabriele Schor, *Cindy Sherman: The Early Works 1975–1977. Catalogue raisonné*, Ostfildern, 2012.
- 60 See "Interview VALIE EXPORT," in *Medien. Kunst. Passagen*, eds. Thomas Feuerstein and Romana Schuler, no. 2, Vienna, 1994, pp. 47–56, here p. 47.
- 61 See *sixpackfilm*, (accessed November 27, 2022).
- 62 Ulrike Rosenbach in conversation with the author, May 17, 2017.
- 63 Ulrike Rosenbach in conversation with the author, March 8, 2022.

politics long before the American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality"⁵² in 1989. "By theorizing the existence of the Third World [...], they were able to critique the class and race privilege of Western feminism and frame their understanding of oppression and inequality as a continued legacy of colonialism and its multiple forms of violence."⁵³ A statement given by the *Combahee* cofounder Barbara Smith in 1979 likewise outlines a feminism that evinces an inclusive understanding of different ethnic and cultural groups: "Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women, as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement."⁵⁴

Another early instance of intersectional activism may arguably be found in the design of the mural *For the Women's House* that Faith Ringgold realized on the façade of the women's prison on Riker's Island in 1971 in consultation with the inmates. The large wall painting, which is now at the Brooklyn Museum, shows women of different ages and from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Although eighty-five percent of the prison's population were Black or Puerto Rican, they decided not to exclude depictions of *white* women. Ringgold recalls: "There was a kind of universality expressed by their feelings."⁵⁵ She accordingly decided to make a feminist mural that would articulate the idea of "women being equal."

PHOTOGRAPHY, FILM, VIDEO, ACTION, PERFORMANCE

The emergence of new forms of creative expression in the 1970s put an end to the ascendancy of painting. Photography, film, video, and action and performance art especially appealed to women artists who wanted to make their mark in the art world outside the male-dominated medium of painting. More and more of them turned to photography, which was less burdened with historical baggage and allowed them to create spontaneously, at their ease, and with relatively simple means. Rather than obsess over perfect exposures, apertures, or development techniques, they primarily wanted to document their performative actions. Most of them developed their own photographs in improvised darkrooms. The Polaroid camera, which came on the market in the 1970s, provided a safe space for artists who were experimenting with depictions of their own naked bodies but did not want to use the services of a professional laboratory. They were free to decide whether to stage their performative acts before an audience or in the privacy of their studios. The photographic record of the studio performance enabled them to share the works with audiences at a later date through exhibitions or publications. Mechtild Widrich has described this use of the medium as a "fourth wall";⁵⁶ Merle Radtke has spoken of an "expanded audience."⁵⁷

An early example is Carolee Schneemann's 1963 performance *Eye Body* (pp. 442–447), which she enacted without an audience and produced specifically for the camera. The pioneers of the form sometimes found it difficult to get their photographs recognized as art. Renate Eisenegger remembers debates at the art school in Düsseldorf where she was a student over whether photography could be regarded as genuine art: its reproducibility offended those who clung to the idea of the unique work.⁵⁸ As a student in Buffalo, Cindy Sherman found that fine art photography was not taken seriously either in the art world or in photographers' circles, and so she was effectively caught in the middle.⁵⁹

VALIE EXPORT was interested in "scrutinizing film as a material."⁶⁰ For *Adjunct Dislocations* (1973), she mounted one Super 8 camera each on her chest and back, while a third 16mm film camera documented her actions in the room. "All three perspectives are projected side by side, so that the work renders a representation not only of the surroundings, but also of the recording process."⁶¹ In 1976, the video artist Ulrike Rosenbach likewise used multiple cameras during her performance *Glauben Sie nicht, dass ich eine Amazone bin* (Do Not Believe That I Am an Amazon; p. 421), which also involved superimpositions. German audiences responded enthusiastically to her early public productions with multiple cameras.⁶² Many women artists, including Rosenbach,⁶³ restaged their performances in their studios without an audience in order to focus entirely on the scenes as the camera was running. Another aspect of performance art that EXPORT raised is its social dimension: unlike with photography and film, she argued, the performance artist is physically present, and audiences can approach her after the presentation.



ULRIKE ROSENBACH, *Frauenkultur – Kontaktversuch*, 1978 Video-live performance, Stichting de Appel, Amsterdam
© Ulrike Rosenbach / Bildrecht, Vienna 2025 / Photo: Klaus vom Bruch, Berlin



RENAME EISENEGGER, Zelt, 1977 Performance for the exhibition *Künstlerinnen international 1877–1977* at Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin

© Renate Eisenegger

The Turkish-French artist Nil Yalter, who was born in Egypt and has lived in Paris since 1965, recalled: "Back then people didn't even know the word performance."⁶⁴ VALIE EXPORT, too, described her art as rooted in action: "In the 1970s, we didn't yet call it performance. What we were doing was then called Actionism; the word performance was added much later. An action is a somewhat shorter thing, and a bit more sparing also in its use of the material and structure. A performance is longer and has a sometimes recognizable dramaturgy while having integrated the entire creative process on which it is premised into its course."⁶⁵ Women artists' actions and performances were held at many venues including the Stichting de Appel (p. 673), Amsterdam; Galerie nächst St. Stephan (p. 671) and Galerie Grita Insam, Vienna; Galerie Krinzinger (p. 672), Innsbruck; and the Franklin Furnace Archive, New York, to name only a few.

An observation from the artist Angela Hampel illustrates that working with new media could put women artists at a disadvantage, as in East Germany: "Art by women often occupied a marginal position within the GDR's art system—the more so when they spurned the classic media of painting and graphic art and instead created performances, works on video, and installations."⁶⁶ The artist Gabriele Stötzer, then a member of the country's political opposition, founded East Germany's only feminist artist's group in Erfurt in 1984. Looking back, she recounts that the performances and films she created with her artist friends were motivated by an "existential" need. "We were all lonely, hopeless. There was nothing, nothing." Their art grew out of despair: "When we'd gone onstage, you wouldn't believe how happy we were!"⁶⁷

The use of novel means of expression such as photography, film, video, action, and performance resulted in a liberation and rapid expansion of the diversity of creative articulations in the feminist art of the 1960s and 1970s whose significance cannot be overstated. They were crucial in enabling artists to frame their radical and revolutionary themes. By capturing the attention of the media, the productions of the Viennese Actionists pushed the output of the women among them to the margins of art history, as the art critic and curator Brigitte Borchardt-Birbaumer's scholarship has demonstrated: "The men among the Viennese Actionists usually urged women into the role of the passive model and foregrounded the acting out of impulses and heroic gestures of self-expression [...] whereas the women Actionists broke new ground, exploring conceptual fields of the interrogation of feminine identity and vernacular symbolism they exposed with analytical and experimental strategies, linguistic games, and forms of role-play enlivened by a subtle sense of humor."⁶⁸ By Borchardt-Birbaumer's reckoning, the circle of women Actionists in Austria included Kiki Kogelnik, VALIE EXPORT, Renate Bertlmann, Linda Christanell, Margot Pilz, Rita Furrer, Ingrid Opitz, and others.

64 Nil Yalter in conversation with the author, September 14, 2013.

65 VALIE EXPORT, in: *Kunstforum International*, "Performance," vol. 24, no. 6, p. 59.

66 Marlen Hobrack, "Spät gewürdigt: Der Fall Angela Hampel zeigt, wie DDR-Kunst lang unsichtbar blieb," in *Berliner Zeitung*, June 8, 2022.

67 Gabriele Stötzer in conversation with the director Susanne Riegler in the film *Verwegen, mutig, radikal: Die Künstlerinnen der Feministischen Avantgarde*, premiere March 6, 2025, Vienna.

68 Brigitte Borchardt-Birbaumer, *Aktivistinnen*, exh. cat. Forum Frohner/Kunsthalle Krems, 2014, pp. 32–34. See also Brigitte Borchardt-Birbaumer, "Vienna's Female Actionists: Feminist Positions in Austria," in Schor, *Feminist Avant-Garde*, pp. 85–89.

69 Betsy Berne in conversation with the author, May 8, 2013, and in an email to the author, September 5, 2013. See Gabriele Schor, "Props as Metaphors—Arranged by Francesca Woodman," in *Francesca Woodman: Works from the SAMMLUNG VERBUND*, eds. Gabriele Schor and Elisabeth Bronfen, Cologne, 2014, pp. 33–49, here p. 40.

70 *Ewa Partum 1965–2001*, ed. Angelika Stepken, exh. cat. Badischer Kunstverein Karlsruhe, Berlin, 2001, p. 13.

71 Ulrike Rosenbach in an interview with Andrea Saemann and Chris Regn, in *Performance Saga, Interview 05: Ulrike Rosenbach*, DVD, recorded in Rösberg near Cologne, April 7 and 8, 2003, published in 2008.

THE FEMALE BODY AS INSTRUMENT



EWA PARTUM, *Selbstidentifikation*, 1980, b/w photograph on canvas, from the same 12-part series, action at the registry office in Warsaw

© Ewa Partum / Courtesy Ewa Partum and Galerie M + R Fricke, Berlin / Bildrecht, Vienna 2025

The new forms of expression, photography, video, film, action, and performance, empowered women to make art that presented their bodies from a female perspective. Most of these artists relied on their own bodies. For one, they could not afford to pay for models, the usual practice for painters' portrait sessions; and then their own body was the "tool" they were most familiar with, allowing for uncomplicated and spontaneous creativity. The New York writer Betsy Berne, a close friend of Francesca Woodman's remarked: "I always thought she used her body as another tool or another formal element to make her art."⁶⁹ In 1974, the Polish artist Ewa Partum displays her naked body in her performance *Change* (p. 381). In subsequent actions and performances such as *Selbstidentifikation* (Self-Identification) or *Frauen, die Ehe ist gegen Euch* (Women, Marriage Is Against You) (both 1980), she again appears naked in order to place the emphasis on "woman as a signifier." By making the self-determined decision to bare everything for her art, Partum defines the female body as neither "nature" nor a "sexual object" but a realization of autonomy in a work of art.⁷⁰ The media artist Ulrike Rosenbach wears deliberately neutral attire, a white bodysuit (p. 29), for her actions, conceiving of the use of her body as a "movable sculptural element," a "connective phenomenon" embedded in her installation-based and spatially transformative media performances.⁷¹



ORLAN, MeasuRAGE, 1974 Vatican, Rome, B/W photograph
© ORLAN



VALIE EXPORT, Körperkonfiguration, Ausprägung, 1976 SV_056_2006 (p. 188)

VALIE EXPORT and ORLAN—both spell their pseudonyms in capital letters—are presumptuous⁷² enough to mobilize the female body to challenge monumental architecture in the public urban sphere. The German word “vermessen” is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is a verb meaning “to measure”; on the other hand, it is an adjective meaning “bold, presumptuous; aspiring to more than one is allotted.” In VALIE EXPORT’s *Körperkonfigurationen* (Body Configurations) (1976; pp. 188–189), the female body turns toward or aligns itself with the imposing historic buildings along Vienna’s Ringstraße. ORLAN, on the other hand, uses the ORLAN body measure to survey the dimensions of an institution. The first such action takes place in the Vatican in Rome in 1974;⁷³ she stages a similar performance on December 2, 1977, at the inauguration of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. In the title *MesuRAGE* (MeasuRAGE), the word “RAGE” is in all-caps to suggest the emotional energy that is in play here. ORLAN refuses to accept the role that others impose on her. It is not the institution that objectifies her person; rather, the subject ORLAN objectifies the monumental building. The work also gestures toward Protagoras’s claim that “man is the measure of all things.”⁷⁴ After each action, ORLAN washes her dirty gown and holds up a small vessel filled with water. Posing as another Statue of Liberty, she demonstratively embodies the goddess Libertas as a physical female individual, contravening the tradition of representing goddesses as allegories, as anonymous women, while rulers were concrete male individuals.⁷⁵ In that sense, *MesuRAGE* is an audacious and indeed presumptuous action.

72 Translator’s note: the German original uses the word “vermessen” here for “presumptuous”.

73 ORLAN in conversation with the author, August 29, 2014. The action was improvised, and so ORLAN did not yet have the white dress-like gown she subsequently wore for all performances in the series.

74 Bart De Baere, “Measurement as Reflection and Action,” in *ORLAN, MeasuRAGES (1968–2012) Action: ORLAN-Body*, exh. cat. M HKA, Antwerp, 2012, pp. 4–15. See also “1963–2003 Chronophotologie” by Caroline Cros, Laurent Le Bon, Vivian Rehberg, in *ORLAN*, Paris, 2004.

75 Cf. *Allegorien und Geschlechterdifferenz*, eds. Sigrid Schade, Monika Wagner, and Sigrid Weigel, Vienna, 1985.

76 Lynda Benglis in: Susan Krane, *Lynda Benglis: Dual Natures*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, 1991, p. 26. Quoted in: Esther Adler, “Lynda Benglis,” in Butler and Mark, *WACK!*, pp. 217–18.

77 Lynda Benglis, eds. Franck Gautherot, Caroline Hancock, and Seungduk Kim, exh. cat. Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Le Consortium, centre d’art contemporain, Dijon, et al., Dijon, 2009, pp. 56–57.

78 Lynda Benglis, “Liquid Metal: Lynda Benglis and Seungduk Kim in Conversation,” *ibid.*, pp. 61–197.

79 *Ibid.*

80 Cindy Sherman, *ibid.*, p. 44.

81 See “Cindy Sherman talks to David Frankel,” *Artforum*, March 2003, pp. 54–55, 256–60, here pp. 54–55.

82 Schor, *Cindy Sherman: The Early Works*, p. 33.



LYNDA BENGLIS, Advert in *Artforum*, 1974
 © Lynda Benglis / Bildrecht, Vienna 2025 / VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna

In November 1974, Lynda Benglis deployed her own naked body as a provocation when *Artforum* ran her legendary self-portrait: naked except for a pair of sunglasses, her skin oiled, the artist demonstratively brandished a large double dildo sticking out from her pudenda. The ad, for which she had paid with her own money, provoked a storm of outrage. In retrospect, Benglis explains her intention: "Since all advertisement was about 'hype,' I wanted to do the ultimate 'hype.'"⁷⁶ The *Artforum* editorial disavowed Benglis's piece, arguing that it was vulgar and brutalizing, making "a shabby mockery of the aims" of the women's movement.⁷⁷ Yet Benglis's provocation trenchantly challenged the image of masculine habitus disseminated by the media. As she puts it, "what I was questioning from the beginning was the figure of an artist standing in front of their painting advertising themselves."⁷⁸ Many of her fellow artists, including Vito Acconci, Jennifer Bartlett, Nancy Wilson-Pajic, and Larry Bell, were thrilled by the work's subversive impulse.⁷⁹ Artists of the younger generation such as Cindy Sherman also found Benglis's provocation encouraging. "Seeing Lynda Benglis's ad in *Artforum* in 1974 was one of the most pivotal moments of my career. I was in college in Buffalo and even the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, which was one of the few local places to buy the magazine, [...] had ripped out that page in the issues they were selling (I must have bought mine in NYC). She kicked ass!"⁸⁰ Besides Benglis, the performative self-fashionings of Suzy Lake (pp. 302–305), Eleanor Antin (pp. 74–79), and Hannah Wilke (pp. 524–533) made a deep impression on Sherman, who saw them as paving the way for her own project: "Artists like that were very influential in terms of there being a female presence in the art world" and by using "their own selves in their work."⁸¹ Sherman adds: "Body art simply clicked for me."⁸²

THE PRIVATE IS POLITICAL



Capitalism Depends on Domestic Labour, 1975
© See Red Women's Workshop

The central concern of the second-wave Western middle-class *white* women's movements was to turn the spotlight on the conservative political division between the "public" and the "private" spheres and to urge a public debate on what was considered "private" but was actually political. In grassroots groups and political parties, women started reflecting on the defining experiences of their lives: marriage, pregnancy, birth, motherhood, abortion, the pressures of a merciless beauty ideal, childrearing, unpaid reproductive labor, divorce, and violence against women. The works of the feminist art movement reflect these fields of conflict. Additional themes are publicly articulated demands, including for better professional education for girls and equal pay for equal work, an issue pinpointed by Margot Pilz's photographic study *Arbeiterinnenaltar* (Women Workers' Altar; pp. 396–397) from 1981: the women workers of a coffee roastery earned far less than their male colleagues even though they performed the same labor and operated the same machines.

Black women, especially in the U.S., rightly pointed out that their socioeconomic circumstances were different from those of *white* middle-class women. One key difference was the fact that most of them worked for a living. At the time, the majority of Black women belonged to the socially disadvantaged classes. They often labored in *white* upper-middle-class homes, where their duties included cleaning, shopping, cooking, and childcare. The paternalism of a husband who did not give his wife permission to work was not part of the typical Black woman's experience. Still, there were challenges that both Black and *white* women contended with, especially when they were mothers and wanted to work as artists, as is exemplified in an article written by the artist Kay Brown in 1972. Writing for the *Feminist Art Journal* about the legendary exhibition "WHERE WE AT": *BLACK WOMEN ARTISTS*, she called on the Brooklyn Museum to provide daycare or children's workshops to enable Black women artists who were mothers to attend art classes. Those who needed to work during the day were to be supported with part-time (and even full-time) fellowships.⁸³

After our first exhibition of the *Feminist Avant-Garde*, we continued to acquire new works on an ongoing basis, and so, after a few years, we started grouping the abundance of our holdings in five thematic divisions. In the following pages, I will sketch this organization by briefly discussing each division in turn: the reduction to the role of "homemaker, wife, and mother"; the resulting feeling of being "locked up" and wanting to "break out"; the questioning of the "dictate of beauty" and the "representation of the female body"; "female sexuality"; and "identities and role-play." Depending on the specific social power relations in which women artists lived and worked, their creations articulated diverse concerns.

83 Brown, "Where We At," p. 25, quoted in: Morris and Hockley, *We Wanted a Revolution*, p. 64.



BETYE SAAR, *Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972
Mixed media assemblage
Collection of Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive,
Berkeley, California; purchased with the aid of funds from the
National Endowment for the Arts (selected by The Committee
for the Acquisition of Afro-American Art)
© Bettye Saar. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California
Photo: Benjamin Blackwell

As the following will show, some artists chose similar formal strategies without knowing of one another or having seen their colleagues' works. In particular, it is illuminating to see that women artists in both East and West addressed the challenges of balancing their aspirations and obligations as homemakers, mothers, wives, and creative artists. The individual works discussed below shed light on the distinctive social and political conditions and discriminations that BIPOC artists in the U.S. and Latin America confronted.

HOMEMAKER | WIFE | MOTHER



ELIZABETH CATLETT, *The Torture of Mothers*, 1970/2003
SV_827_2020 (p. 134)

The multiple discriminations, racism first and foremost among them, that Black women artists fought against are given especially moving expression in Elizabeth Catlett's color lithograph. In *The Torture of Mothers* (1970), the American-Mexican artist and activist conveys Black mothers' constant fear for their children and denounces the racist violence to which they were exposed.

Betye Saar rebelled against the discriminatory cliché of the servile Black maid working in the household of a *white* family in her work *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972; p. 35). The popular figure of the black "mammy" dates from the Jim Crow era, a period of violent repression and racial segregation that lasted into the 1960s. Saar's assemblage picks up on the stereotype of "Aunt Jemima,"⁸⁴ who was meant to be reminiscent of the "good old days" of slavery. She embodies the *white* Southern fantasy of the "happy slave," a plump, congenial, and loving woman, a rag wrapped around her hair, who is devoted to the plantation owner and his family. Her wide smile signals her obsequiousness and acceptance of the racial hierarchy.⁸⁵ Saar explained: "I wanted to put a rifle and a grenade under her skirts. I wanted to empower her. I wanted to make her a warrior."⁸⁶ The figure's right hand holds a broom as a token of the scope of her servant's duties; the other grips a rifle, a signifier of resistance and struggle. Splayed across her belly on what reads as an apron is another "Aunt Jemima," this one holding a *white* baby in her arm—he is crying, subverting the cliché of the caring "mammy." The Brazilian artist Letícia Parente addressed the differences of class and race between women within a *white* household. The video *Tarefa I* (Task I; p. 377) shows a Black woman in a dark uniform ironing a *white* mistress and her light dress. The writer Mirtes Marins de Oliveira translates: "*White* women are smartened up by Black women who occupy an inferior social and economic position."⁸⁷

In Europe and elsewhere, *white* women found the circumstances into which they were forced by hierarchical bourgeois family structures infantilizing and no longer tenable. The law still enshrined the husband's position as the "head of the family." His final say overrode his wife's and children's wishes. A husband could prohibit his wife from seeking employment outside the home. She needed his signature to obtain a driving license, put the children in a different school, or apply for passports for them. Marital rape did not become a criminal offense until the 1990s. The art of second-wave Western *white* feminists reflects the unequal distribution of socioeconomic power within the so-called private sphere.

Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (p. 429) and Birgit Jürgenssen's *Hausfrauen-Küchenschürze* (Housewife's Kitchen Apron; pp. 242–243), two seminal works of feminist art, were created only months apart, in 1975. Rosler's video performance walks the viewer through a lexicon of kitchen implements from A to Z. Starting with an apron, the New York-based artist brandishes a kitchen tool for each letter of the alphabet; her acting grows increasingly intense and takes on an aggressive and finally bizarre edge. Her Viennese colleague

84 The brand logo was developed by the Pearl Milling Co. around 1888 and used to advertise readymade pancake products.

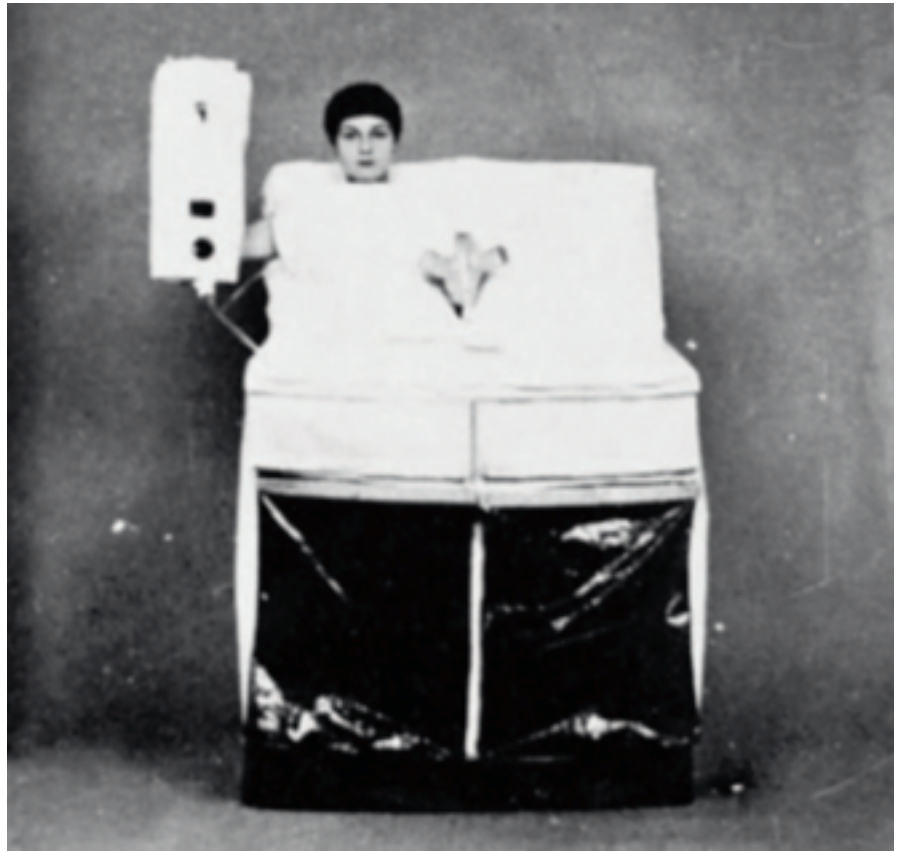
85 Sunanda K. Sanyal, "Betye Saar, *Liberation of Aunt Jemima*," in *Smarthistory*, January 3, 2022; (accessed October 13, 2024).

86 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betye_Saar (accessed October 13, 2024).

87 See Mirtes Marins de Oliveira's essay in the present volume, p. 373.



BIRGIT JÜRGENSSEN, Hausfrauen-Küchenschürze, 1975, Detail of SV_060_1-2_2006 (pp. 242–243)



HELEN CHADWICK, *In the Kitchen*, 1977 Performance
© The Estate of Helen Chadwick

Jürgenssen's photo performance shows her wearing a tin kitchen stove on her body as a kind of apron. A loaf of bread sticks out from the open oven door, both an allusion to the phrase "to have a bun in the oven," meaning "to be pregnant," and, when seen from the side, a mock phallus. Rosler's and Jürgenssen's works marshal the signifiers of domesticity, the ties that bind women to domestic reproductive labor. Both works evince the ironic undertone that is characteristic of feminist works from the period. For *In the Kitchen*, a performance she staged in London, Helen Chadwick constructed a kitchen-appliance object in which her body almost disappeared. The miniature kitchen, which still exists, bears a striking formal as well as thematic resemblance to Jürgenssen's stove object, although the two artists were likely unaware of each other's work. In both instances, the woman is effectively "dressed in" the kitchen; in Chadwick's piece, it becomes a "corset" that consumes and binds her, while Jürgenssen's stove symbolizes a heavy burden.



CHRIS RUSH, *Scrubbing*, 1972 Performance, *Womanhouse*, Los Angeles
 © Chris Rush / *The Power of Feminist Art. The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, eds. Norma Broude, Mary Garrard, 1994 / Photo: Lloyd Hamrol



LES NYAKES, Performance at the first Catalan Women's Conference, May, 27th 1976 Auditorium of the University of Barcelona
 © Les Nyakes / Courtesy of Pilar Aymerich / Photo: Pilar Aymerich

Unpaid reproductive labor, bearing sole responsibility for raising the children, the resulting conflict of having neither time nor the emotional resources to work on one's art: all these are reflected in several works. Mierle Laderman Ukeles's manifesto questions the division between the two spheres with their contrasting practices: "I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (Random order.) I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I 'do' Art. Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art."⁸⁸ For one of her earliest performances, *Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance (Outside)* (1973), she occupies a sidewalk, gets down on her knees, and starts scrubbing it (p. 39).

Domestic labor as a monotonous daily sequence of routine actions has informed women's role and conditioned their behavior. As part of the *Feminist Art Program* in California, Chris Rush stages the performance *Scrubbing*; in *Ironing*, Sandra Orgel irons the same linen cloth over and over. At the inaugural Catalan Women's Conference, held in Barcelona in May 1976, the women's group *Les Nyakes* performs a variety of domestic cleaning chores such as mopping the floor. Birgit Jürgenssen examines the homemaker's fate in several richly detailed drawings; as Peter Weibel writes, they "might be said to project the movie of a woman's life, from the happiness that seems to await the bride to the misery of the married woman's everyday life."⁸⁹ The drawing *Bodenschrubben* (Scrubbing the Floor; p. 237) uses sarcasm to dodge this fatal scenario: upon closer inspection, the washcloths turn out to be "little men" whom the women doing the cleaning are putting through the wringer. Elisabeth Bronfen has analyzed Jürgenssen's well-known penchant for subtle puns:⁹⁰ the German word for a washcloth, "Waschlappen," is also an idiomatic term for a "wimp," a man without courage or spine. In another drawing, *Hausfrau* (Housewife), the artist frames a dishcloth as a surrealist "picture within a picture." The homemaker grows stiff as a bust, caught beneath the cloth's grid pattern as an allegory of the rigid rules that govern her lifeworld and leave her without access to a fully lived individuality.⁹¹ In the drawing *Bügeln* (Ironing), Jürgenssen shows a bewildering symbiosis between

the housewife and the table, as though she were pressing herself along with the tablecloth. Renate Eisenegger, meanwhile, irons the (perfectly even) floor of a hallway in a high-rise building (p. 173) to highlight the oppressive absence of the slightest imaginative touch characteristic of such residential settings. The monotonous and, quite literally, pressing "act of ironing" may also be read as a metaphor for "smoothing things over"; a world in which conformism is normative has no room for a woman to make her individual dreams and wishes come true and "flattens" her desires. A "world of folds," by contrast, would be utopia: a place that accommodates the manifold aspects of women's fully developed personalities. The Viennese artist Karin Mack, on the other hand, interprets ironing as a contemplative practice that, while time-consuming, also allows her to let her imagination run free. The photographic series *Bügeltraum* (Ironing Dream; p. 316) is divided into four phases: concentration, effort, transport, and, finally, relaxation. In the final phase, Mack, dressed in black, reclines on the ironing board to stage an ironic "death of the homemaker": "time to let domestic chores be and set sail for new shores."⁹²

Each in her own way, the German artists Annegret Soltau and Ulrike Rosenbach reflect on motherhood. Soltau's video *Schwanger-Sein* (Being Pregnant; p. 40) articulates the anxieties and even desperation edged with aggression of a pregnant woman as she envisions her future doubly burdened life as a mother and artist. In the video *Einwicklung mit Julia* (Wrapping with Julia; p. 420), Rosenbach swathes her daughter's and her own body in gauze for an expression of the emotional connection as well as the bonds of dependency between them. In Renate Bertlmann's bizarrely ironic performance *Schwangere Braut im Rollstuhl* (Pregnant Bride in a Wheelchair; p. 116), the titular character is caught in a dead end. As long as someone from the audience pushes the bride, who appears to be about to deliver, through the room, a soft lullaby is heard, only to be drowned out by the wailing of a baby the moment the wheelchair stops moving.⁹³ The performance concludes with the bride giving birth to her baby; then she leaves the room, abandoning her child on the floor. Her desire for self-realization as an artist is incompatible with being a mother. She thus delegates responsibility for her baby's care to the society that essentially forces her to decide between art and motherhood.⁹⁴

In the countries of the socialist bloc, women and men were officially equal. Working was an unquestioned part of life for the great majority of women in East Germany. As the cultural scholar Angelika Richter has noted, the legal equality between the partners in marriage and family life amounted to a "markedly progressive departure from traditional gender patterns,"⁹⁵ especially when compared to the status of women's rights in West Germany and Austria. Still, few women rose to higher positions in politics, business, or the academy, and women's wages were on average one third below men's. "All domains of life were to be subordinated to work. Only full-time employment, it was said, would enable women to lead fulfilled lives. In the 1950s and 1960s, in particular,



MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES, Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance (Outside), 1973
Performance at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford
© Mierle Laderman Ukeles / Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

88 See "Manifesto for Maintenance Art," in *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Seven Work Ballets*, ed. Kari Conte, exh. cat. Kunstverein Amsterdam and Grazer Kunstverein, Berlin, 2015.

89 See Peter Weibel's essay in the present volume, p. 233–234.

90 Elisabeth Bronfen, "Self-Irony as an Autobiographical Strategy: Birgit Jürgenssen's Word Games," in *Birgit Jürgenssen*, eds. Gabriele Schor and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Ostfildern, 2009, pp. 79–95.

91 Jürgenssen here lends an anthropomorphic quality to the grid. Rosalind E. Krauss has outlined the grid's structural properties, including its "imperviousness to language [...]" The grid promotes this silence, expressing it moreover as a refusal of speech." See Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass., 1986, p. 158.

92 Karin Mack in conversation with the author, January 23, 2015.

93 A tape recorder was hidden inside the bride's belly that played the sound of a baby crying whenever the wheelchair stood still.

94 Renate Bertlmann in an email to the author, November 27, 2014.

95 Richter, *Das Gesetz der Szene*, p. 45.



ANNEGRET SOLTAU, *Schwanger-Sein I, in 4 Phasen*, 1977–1978, Video still

© Annegret Soltau / Video technology: Klaus M. Dumuschelt / Assistance: Inge Rumej / Bildrecht, Vienna 2025

women who chose a different path were pilloried by propaganda and ridiculed as 'wifey's' and 'freeloaders.'"⁹⁶ The artist Gabriele Stötzer—her works are discussed in the section on "female sexuality" below—recalls being the target of angry comments in East Germany: "You're a feminist!" The label was seen as derogatory because feminism was thought to be a capitalist phenomenon. Yet although women's careers secured their independence, they also had to shoulder the responsibilities for childrearing, shopping, cooking, and housekeeping. The result was an immense double burden, even if the state provided childcare services and all-day schools to support families. "Many women did not recognize the societal significance of the private. Most of them accordingly considered their feelings of being permanently overwhelmed and their failure to 'combine career and motherhood' to be not a social problem but a private inadequacy and personal challenge."⁹⁷

The difficulties of reconciling the demands of a career as an artist with the obligations of family life are exemplified by the performances of the Polish artists Anna Kutera and Maria Pinińska-Bereś. In 1973, Kutera sweeps a canvas spread out on the floor of her studio at the State College of Fine Arts in Wrocław with a broom whose bristles she has soaked in black paint. The performance, titled *Malarstwo feministyczne* (Feminist Painting; p. 280), visualizes the woman artist's role, her quotidian struggle with the dilemma of her existence as a homemaker. In 1980, Pinińska-Bereś, for her performance *Pranie I* (Washing I; p. 402), dons an apron and gets to work with a washtub and a washboard. The labor of washing is the performance's core element; she then hangs the laundry out to dry on a clothesline. Each garment is emblazoned with one letter of the word "feminizm" (feminism). The monotonous daily strain of sweeping, washing,



RENATE BERTLMANN, *Schwangere Braut im Rollstuhl*, 1978 Performance at the Galerie Modern Art österreichischer Kunstverein, Wien. The gallery owner Grita Insam pushing the wheelchair.

© Renate Bertlmann / Photo: Margot Pilz / Bildrecht, Vienna 2025

ironing, cleaning, shopping, cooking—those apparently ancillary chores—remained a women's domain in the East no less than in the West. Superadded to the unpaid labor in the family household was the work of caring for children, husband, parents, and relatives. As the art historian Friederike Sigler sums up, "the double burden of care work and wage labour has been treated critically in art in both the East *and* the West, and [...] promises of equality in both the East *and* the West were not fulfilled, or only to a limited extent. Care work, as presented in the selected works, was the task of women everywhere, ascribed to them on the basis of their biological characteristics in both capitalism and socialism; it was not considered work and thus contributed significantly to the gender-based inequalities that are still inherent in patriarchally structured economies today."⁹⁸

Besides this double burden, the left wing of the Western women's movement, which had a strong presence in Denmark, argued, there was the work of politics. In 1976, Kirsten Justesen calls on women to prepare for class struggle with an ironic photographic performance (p. 270). Turning her back on the kitchen and the children, she coolly smokes a cigarette while holding up a poster, as though to remind the viewer of the battle cry "No women's struggle without class struggle, no class struggle without women's struggle." The art historian Tania Ørum explains that the Danish "Redstocking Movement did not simply want equal rights under the current conditions; they wanted a far more extensive, revolutionary change of those conditions."⁹⁹ As Ørum reads the picture, the woman's immersion in her reading signals her disengagement from the domestic sphere and involvement in the social world out there.¹⁰⁰ So what happens when housewives join the class struggle? Does it mean the kitchen stays cold?

- 96 Anna Kaminsky, *Frauen in der DDR*, Berlin, 2017, p. 15.
- 97 Birgit Dahlke, *Papierboot: Autorinnen aus der DDR—inoffiziell publiziert*, Würzburg, 1997, p. 51, quoted in: Richter, *Das Gesetz der Szene*.
- 98 Friederike Sigler, "Double Shift: The Female Care Worker and Labourer between Assembly Line, Kitchen, and Art in East and West," in *Kochen. Putzen. Sorgen: Care-Arbeit in der Kunst seit 1960*, ed. Friederike Sigler, exh. cat. Josef Albers Museum, Quadrat Bottrop, Berlin, 2024, pp. 296–305, here p. 303.
- 99 Tania Ørum, "Klassenkampen/The Class Struggle 1976," in *Kirsten Justesen*, exh. cat. Re kollektion Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum, Aalborg, 1999, p. 28.
- 100 Ibid.; and see Birgitte Anderberg, *What's Happening?* exh. cat. Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, 2015.

LOCKED IN | BREAKING OUT



BIRGIT JÜRGENSSEN, *Hausfrau*, 1973
Detail of SV_258_2009 (p. 238)

An aesthetically commanding trope in the feminist art of the 1970s is the visualization of oppressive confinement and the need to break free from it. Several women artists used the metaphor of the cage to convey their sense of being locked up. In an inversion of the real proportions reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's classic *Alice in Wonderland*, Birgit Jürgenssen presents the housewife in the guise of a larger-than-life lioness (p. 238) desperately rattling the bars of her prison. The difficulty of escaping the one-dimensional role assigned to the bourgeois homemaker is equally manifest in a photographic performance in which Jürgenssen presses her face and hands up to a glass door on which she has written her plea for help *Ich möchte hier raus!* (I Want Out of Here!; p. 241). The Amsterdam-based artist Lydia Schouten, too, resorts to the metaphor of the cage. In her performance *Kooi* (Cage; p. 451), she moves in an enclosure with watercolor pencils attached to the bars. Dressed in a wet bodysuit, she rubs her body against the pencils. Over the course of the performance her movements grow rougher and the rubbing along the watercolor pencils becomes increasingly painful. As she later explained the intention behind the piece, "a woman is making herself beautiful for the outside world but doesn't take part in it."¹⁰¹

The artist Elaine Shemilt, who is living in Edinburgh at the time, laces her naked body up from head to toe (p. 452).¹⁰² She explains that the work "was made in response to a series of lectures given by Reginald Butler (then head of the sculpture department at the Slade School of Art in London) who stated in one of the lectures that a woman could not function as both an artist and a woman."¹⁰³



LYDIA SCHOUTEN, *Kooi*, 1978, performance, Galerie Alto, Rotterdam
Detail of SV_684_2016 (p. 451)



RENATE EISENEGGER,
Isolamento, 1972, Detail
of SV_602_1-8_2014
(pp. 176–177)



ANNEGRET SOLTAU,
Selbst, 1975, Detail of
SV_204_1_15_2008 (p. 505)



MARGOT PILZ, *Sekundenskulpturen*,
1977/1978, B/W photograph
© Margot Pilz, Wien / Bildrecht, Vienna 2025



ELAINE SHEMILT, *Constraint*, 1976
Detail of SV_742_2018 (p. 452)

As she recalls, “it was a sort of silent protest [...] the aim was to make the artwork timeless for all women to identify with for their own reasons. I know that at the time many young women were either infuriated or very depressed. I was friendly with Helen Chadwick in those days and we used to laugh about it and do our best to fight back.”¹⁰⁴ The artists Anneke Barger (pp. 80–83), Margot Pilz (pp. 386–397), and Kirsten Justesen (pp. 268–271) report similar experiences. Francesca Woodman, too, swathed her entire naked body in transparent plastic foil (p. 559); the synthetic material functions simultaneously as a shell, a marker of distance, and a second skin, a cocoon that is as debilitating as it is protective. She inscribes the photograph *my house*.¹⁰⁵

For the performance *ENCOCONNAGE* (Cocooning), staged in her studio in Paris, the French artist Françoise Janicot coils a thin rope around her face and body. The cocoon is intended to symbolize her isolation as a woman, mother, and artist.¹⁰⁶ In *Selbst* (Self; p. 505), Annegret Soltau spins black string around her head. Defying all difficulties, she finally extricates herself by cutting the strings with scissors: “I wanted to show that women can free themselves from the clutches of patriarchy.”¹⁰⁷ Renate Eisenegger’s *Isolamento* (Isolation; pp. 176–177) is formally similar to Soltau’s self-constriction action but sends a different message. In the course of the photographic series, her face is increasingly covered with bandages until she almost suffocates. Yet the act of breaking free that is existential in Soltau’s work never materializes in Eisenegger’s: “For me there is no liberation. We [the women’s movement] have yet to win this struggle.”¹⁰⁸

101 Lydia Schouten in an email to the author, December 26, 2014. The artist adds: “It’s important that the audience stands close to the cage, so as I move around in the cage, I have eye contact. Also in this performance it was important to get into a stage where my unconsciousness was taking over and where you get the feeling that you can go on and on.” The performance was first realized at Galerie Alto, Rotterdam, in 1978.

102 The Acme Gallery in Covent Garden used Shemilt’s photograph for the poster advertising its exhibition *New Contemporaries*, May 31–June 5, 1976.

103 Elaine Shemilt in an email to the author, December 15, 2014.

104 Elaine Shemilt in an email to the author, December 23, 2014.

105 See Schor, “Props as Metaphors – Arranged by Francesca Woodman”, in *Francesca Woodman. Works from the VERBUND COLLECTION*, Vienna, eds. Gabriele Schor and Elisabeth Bronfen, Cologne 2014, pp. 33–49.

106 See *re.act.feminism #2—a performing archive*, eds. Bettina Knaup and Beatrice Ellen Stammer, exh. cat. Centro Cultural Montehermoso Kulturunea, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Galerija Miroslav Kraljević, Zagreb, Instytut Sztuki Wyspa, Gdańsk, et al., Nuremberg/London, 2014. The complete archival project is accessible at <http://www.reactfeminism.org>.

107 Annegret Soltau in conversation with the author, January 14, 2015.

108 Renate Eisenegger in conversation with the author, August 20, 2014.

DICTATE OF BEAUTY | FEMALE BODY



MARTHA WILSON, *I Make Up the Image of My Perfection / I Make Up the Image of My Deformity*, 1974, (detail) color photograph

© Martha Wilson / Courtesy of the artist and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

The critique of the ideal of beauty propagated by the booming advertising industry of the postwar era and the pursuit of flawlessness it spurred is a defining subject of feminist art. Women had been expected to be pretty and neat before, but primarily on specific occasions such as dance socials, church attendance, and weddings. Starting in the 1950s, however, the pressure to be beautiful increasingly came to pervade their everyday lives. They were now supposed to look good in all situations of life—while doing domestic chores, working at the office, or going about leisure activities. In the United States, the *Miss America* and *Miss Universe* contests proved particular flashpoints for the critique of the “dictate of beauty” that haunted women from all walks of life like a shadow they could not shake off. Hundreds of women picketed these beauty pageants, which were also broadcast live on television. Beauty contests, the activist Jo Freeman argued, “declared that the most important thing about a woman is how she looks by parading women around like cattle to show off their physical attributes. All women were made to believe they were inferior because they couldn’t measure up to *Miss America* beauty standards.”¹⁰⁹ Renate Bertlmann’s drawing *Miss Universum 75* (*Miss Universe 75*; p. 106) captures the physical and emotional exploitation of young women. “They pay a high price,” the artist notes. “They fall into the trap of a false body image, and the constant competition drives them frantic.”¹¹⁰

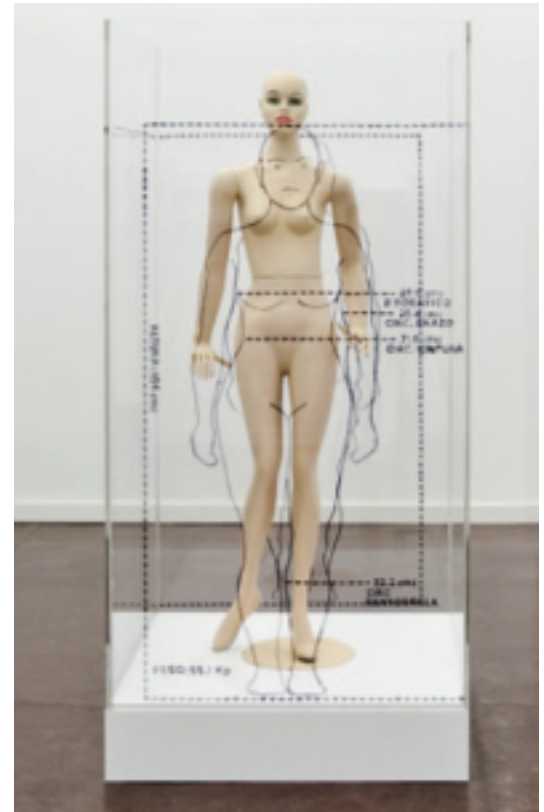
The super-slim figure popularized by the fashion model Twiggy was regarded as the ideal of feminine beauty, which girls absorbed from an early age thanks to their Barbie dolls. Advertisements put a salacious spin on women's sexual liberation, marketing it as sexual availability. Many women artists—only a few of them can be mentioned in these pages—undertook to expose this sexist model of femininity with irony and sarcasm. For her photomontages titled *Body Beautiful*,

- 109 Jo Freeman, "No More Miss America! (1968–1969)," <http://www.jofreeman.com/photos/MissAm1969.html> (accessed December 2, 2024); and see *Images von Gewicht: Soziale Bewegungen, Queer Theory und Kunst in den USA*, eds. Lutz Hieber and Paula-Irene Villa, Bielefeld, 2007, p. 99. An American swimsuit manufacturer launched the *Miss Universe* contest in 1952 as a rival event to the *Miss World* pageant.
- 110 Renate Bertlmann in an email to the author, December 12, 2014.
- 111 Jane Weinstock, "Interview with Martha Rosler," in *October*, no. 17 (Summer 1981), pp. 88, 91. See also Silvia Eiblmayr, "Martha Rosler's Characters," in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. Catherine de Zegher, ex. cat. Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, Institut d'Art Contemporain, Villeurbanne–Lyon, Generali Foundation, Vienna, Cambridge, Mass., 1999, pp. 153–65.
- 112 Cindy Sherman, in: Noriko Fuki, "A Woman of Parts," in *Art in America*, no. 6 (June 1997), pp. 74–81, here p. 80. See also Schor, *Cindy Sherman: The Early Works*, p. 11.

or *Beauty Knows No Pain*, Martha Rosler clips women's bodies from fashion magazines and pastes lips and breasts from porn magazines over them. As Rosler explains, the point is to uncover the "psychosocial and ideological" undercurrents in such imagery.¹¹¹ Sanja Iveković similarly explores media representations of femininity, as in the series *Dnevnik* (Diary); one entry for each day of the week brings an idealized image from a magazine face to face with the artist's used cotton pads. The video *Instrukcije br. 1* (Instructions no. 1) shows her painting her face with arrows—symbols for the exhortations the advertising machine broadcasts day after day—that eventually become a mass of smudges covering her skin. In another video, *MAKE UP—MAKE DOWN*, Iveković picks up coveted make-up accessories such as mascara and lipstick in slow and deliberate gestures and simulates their application, which contrasts with a central void: the face is blanked out—woman's identity eludes instrumentalization and commercialization.

For *Body Halves* (p. 340), Rita Myers takes frontal and rear-view photographs of her naked body, cuts the negatives in half, and recomposes them to create a symmetrical body, a simple artistic intervention that deftly debunks the quest for physical perfection. In *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, Eleanor Antin subjects herself to a thirty-six-day diet and captures the ways her body changes in nude photographs. The austere aesthetic of the photographic series highlights the oppressive rigor of weight-loss programs promising to mold the body after an ideal vision of beauty. The silent video *Representational Painting* (p. 79) shows Antin making up her face with the slow and carefully considered movements of a painter working on a piece of art. Like the artist pondering her creation, she studies the representation of herself in the mirror: Do the eye shadow and mascara flatter her? Is the lipstick the right shade? The act of putting on make-up, surely a moment rich in creeping doubts and moments of irony, is interrogated for its underlying meanings. The video ends with Antin removing her bra to extricate herself from an instrument of physical discipline. Martha Wilson's photographic work *I Make Up the Image of My Perfection / I Make Up the Image of My Deformity* (p. 44) presents two versions of her face, one made up to look pretty, the other pointedly ugly. In an irritating mise-en-scène of deviation from the norm, it turns our notion of beauty on its head. Cindy Sherman recalls ambivalent feelings: "Even though I've never actively thought of my work as feminist [...], certainly everything in it was drawn from my observations as a woman in this culture. And a part of that is a love-hate thing—being infatuated with make-up and glamour and detesting it at the same time. It comes from trying to look like a proper young lady or look as sexy or as beautiful as you can make yourself, and also feeling like a prisoner of that structure."¹¹²

Annette Messager critiques the procedures women undergo in order to be beautiful in her series *Les tortures volontaires* (The Voluntary Tortures).¹¹³ Breasts are lifted into suction cups (p. 33), thighs, legs, and even entire bodies are strapped into electrical-stimulation contraptions from hell, in keeping with the credo: "No pain, no gain." For her performance *I Tried Everything* (1972),



TERESA BURGA, *Perfil de la Mujer Peruana / Objeto-Estructura-Informe Antropométrico*, 1980 Glass cube, mannequin, of the project *Perfil de la Mujer Peruana*, in cooperation with Marie-France Cathelat
© Teresa Burga / Courtesy Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin



ALEXIS HUNTER, *Approach to Fear: Voyeurism* (maquette), 1973, detail of SV_418_2011 (p. 219)



KATALIN LADIK, *BLACKSHAVE POEM*, Zagreb, 1978, detail of SV_646_1-9_2015 (pp. 300-301)

Nancy Youdelman voluntarily submits to one such torture in a fourteen-day trial of a hormone cream advertised as a breast-enlargement supplement. Day after day, she records measurements of her breasts, performs the prescribed strength exercises, notes any changes, and documents the process in photographs.¹¹⁴ Her daily impressions of the procedure alternate between skepticism concerning the product's effectiveness and hope that it might work after all, an emotional roller-coaster ride that exemplifies the psychological stress women endure. Martha Wilson's *Breast Forms Permutated* (pp. 49, 534), a conceptual work combining photographs and text in which the breasts of nine women are assembled in a diagram, similarly articulates doubts about the idea of physical standards and deviations. As the artist explains the array of different shapes (flat-chested, spherical, conical, pendulous, full, etc.), the theoretical "perfect set" may be found in the central image. In *Brustwerk* (Breast-Work; p. 49), Friederike Pezold, a pioneer of video art in Austria, likewise fragments the female body. Comparison between the two works reveals similarities as well as differences: both artists choose a serial formal structure and frame the same physical detail in a diagrammatic arrangement. Yet where Wilson takes an analytical approach, Pezold puts her own body into action and resorts to the gesture of deformation.

Teresa Burga's *Perfil de la mujer peruana* (Profile of the Peruvian Woman; p. 45)¹¹⁵ studies the imperialist importation of Western beauty ideals, comparing the average Peruvian woman's figure to the idealized measurements of the tall and slender North American mannequins that confront local women from shop windows. The differences between this idealization and the natural body make psychological conflicts inevitable.¹¹⁶

Society treats youth and beauty as synonymous; the same, conversely, goes for age and ugliness. In *Change* (p. 381), a performance she stages in the Polish city of Łódź, Ewa Partum confronts these clichés. She hires professional make-up artists to paint one half of her face—for a later performance, half of her entire body—to look old. As they work on her, Partum involves the audience in a conversation about cosmetic surgery and the sexual objectification of women. The made-up half of her twenty-nine-year-old body is old, unappealing, even ugly; the unpainted half, young, beautiful, and sexy. The aging and decline of the female body also figures prominently in the oeuvre of Hannah Wilke, who continues to expose her vulnerable and frail self to the audience's eyes when illness begins to ravage her body (p. 50).

Remarkably, artists frame similar aesthetic and thematic statements without knowing of one another or being familiar with their colleagues' output. To sketch only one example, the Serbian-Hungarian artist Katalin Ladik's photographic series *POEMIM (Series A)* (1978; pp. 298-299) shows her pressing her face against a glass pane, a disfiguring image that signals her rejection of conventional notions of beauty. The Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta, too, squeezed her face against a glass pane for her photographs *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)* (1972). Originally made as a slide series for presentation in a class she was taking, Mendieta's color photographs were not published by her estate until 1997, after her death (pp. 328-329), so Ladik cannot have been aware of Mendieta's work.

FEMALE SEXUALITY

One central objective of the Western feminist movement was women's sexual liberation, a concern the broad public regarded with incomprehension. The introduction of oral contraception made birth control available to Western women and enabled them to lead self-determined sexual lives without regard for religious morality. Women artists strenuously objected to the widespread reduction of women to objects of others' pleasure, pornography, and a male voyeuristic gaze that had dominated the representation of the female nude in art for centuries. They countered a phallogentric worldview with irony, explored subjects including lesbian love, desires, and bodily needs from a female perspective, and staged public actions to protest sexualized violence against women.

A seminal early work in this strand is VALIE EXPORT's legendary *Tapp- und Tastkino* (Tap and Touch Cinema; p. 183), one of the first film actions with a female protagonist. Together with Peter Weibel, EXPORT, a pioneer of "Expanded Cinema," encouraged passersby in the street to reach into an auditorium she wore over her upper body (the world's smallest cinema) and grope her breasts. During the action, the artist fixed her counterparts with a confident gaze, exposing their voyeuristic desire. The Dutch artist Lydia Schouten likewise denounced the discriminatory practice of treating women as passive objects of desire with her performance *Sex Object*, staged before a wall on which she had written the phrase *how does it feel to be a sexobject* (p. 450) in black ink. ORLAN grappled with the same question in her performance *Le Baiser de l'Artiste* (The Artist's Kiss; p. 350) at the 1977 Paris art fair, where she offered to kiss visitors for a fee of five francs. The work caused a scandal that cost the artist her teaching position at the private art school Les Trois Soleils in Lyon.

The feminist art movement critiqued the objectification of women and encouraged them to seek out sexual pleasures on their own terms. For *ICU, Eye Sea You, I See You* (p. 488), the artist Penny Slinger, born in England, poses, naked and laughing, inside a wedding cake. An eye collaged over her vulva transforms it into a *seeing* eye possessed of commanding power. Female sexuality, which was typically reduced to passivity, to being exposed, emerges as an agent in its own right. As Slinger notes, "by combining both roles, that of the artist making the picture and that of the person being depicted, I broke through the old subject-object relation and put myself at the center of my own art and my own sexuality. I avoided reducing myself to a stimulant and escaped the objectifying male gaze."¹¹⁷ In an interview with the curator Angela Stief, Slinger explains: "To be honest, there was virtually no appreciation of the fact that women can enjoy sex. People thought that women should defer and submit to men, along the lines of 'Close your eyes and think of England!'"¹¹⁸ Visiting the German artist Annegret Soltau in her studio in Darmstadt, I was very surprised to discover a work similar to Slinger's *ICU, Eye Sea You, I See You*. Soltau is known for ripping selected parts of women's bodies from her photographs. In 1978, she sewed a large eye over her vulva in her photograph *Vagina I* (p. 507); not unlike Slinger,



PENNY SLINGER, *ICU, Eye Sea You, I See You*, 1973
SV_552_2013 (p. 488)

- 113 Annette Messenger, *Les tortures volontaires*, Ostfildern, 2013. Messenger recently discovered the photographic prints from 1972 in her archive.
- 114 The performance *I Tried Everything* (1972) was first conceived by Suzanne Lacy and realized in collaboration with Dori Atlantis, Jan Lester, and Nancy Youdelman. See Laura Meyer, *A Studio of Their Own: The Legacy of the Fresno Feminist Experiment*, Fresno, Calif., Fresno, 2009, pp. 14–15.
- 115 Teresa Burga created this project in collaboration with the psychologist Marie-France Cathelat; see *Teresa Burga: Informes, Esquemas, Intervalos 17.9.10*, eds. Miguel A. López and Emilio Tarazona, exh. cat. Galería ICPNA San Miguel, Lima; Galería ICPNA Miraflores, Lima; and Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, Lima, 2010.
- 116 In Latin American cultures, mannequins reflect a beauty ideal of oversized breasts, long legs, and slender hips, which women pursue through plastic surgery. See William Neuman, "Mannequins Give Shape to a Venezuelan Fantasy," *The New York Times*, November 6, 2013.
- 117 "Penny Slinger: Eine somnambule Kunst des Exorzierens: Ein Gespräch mit Angela Stief," in *Kunstforum International. Obsessionen I*, eds. Oliver Zybok and Angela Stief, vol. 225 (March–April 2014), p. 141.
- 118 Ibid.



ANITA STECKEL, New York Skyline series, 1970–1980
Color photograph
© Estate Anita Steckel

she explained to me, she wanted to “visualize female sexuality as an active force.”¹¹⁹ Asked why she had titled her photograph “vagina” rather than “vulva,” Soltau observed: “There was no nuanced discourse about female sexual organs at the time.”¹²⁰

The repression of female sexuality manifests itself on the linguistic level as well. As the journalist Gloria Steinem, who helped launch the feminist magazine *Ms.* in the 1970s, explains, she was a member of the “down there” generation: “Those were the words [...] that the women in my family used to refer to all female genitalia, internal or external.”¹²¹ The vulva is the invisible sex, surrounded by an aura of mystery and secrecy; it is not spoken of, as the cultural scholar Mithu M. Sanyal has pointed out.¹²² And when it is spoken of, then in relation to the male sexual organ. The vulva, in this telling, is merely a “hole for the man to stick his genital into, or to extend the metaphor”—in German, the word for vagina can also mean “sheath”—“the scabbard for his sword.”¹²³ Gabriele Stötzer puts her thumb and index finger together to form a circle she holds in front of the various orifices of her naked body. By giving her photographic performance the title *loch* (hole), she pinpoints the contempt and misogyny implicit in a word widely used to designate the vagina.

In her 1978 performance *Blackshave Poem* (pp. 300–301), the artist Katalin Ladik, who was born in Novi Sad and lives in Budapest, defies the pressure to be seductive by staging a kind of anti-striptease. She does gradually take off all her clothes, but a black bodysuit she is wearing underneath shields her naked body against the audience’s prurience. The artist Alexis Hunter, a native of New Zealand who died in London, subjected the norms governing sexualization, objectification, and seduction to radical interrogation. In *Approach to Fear: Voyeurism* (1973; p. 218), she initially hints at a striptease, only to dash the (male) voyeur’s expectations. The primary objective of the video artist Natalia LL’s film *Consumer Art* (p. 312) is to send up the budding Polish consumerism of the 1970s. Women suggestively lick bananas, sausages, and corn cobs and sensually touch their tongues to their lips. Sexuality was invisible in public life in 1970s Poland, and so the artist primarily attracted attention in the West, where her art was interpreted in a feminist perspective as an expression of female sexual self-empowerment.

The American artist Lynda Benglis’s film *Female Sensibility* (1973; p. 88) shows two women fondling and kissing each other. Their sensual caresses are mute but accompanied by a soundtrack composed of material including bawdy lines from talk show hosts, which fail to distract the women from their mutual erotic attraction. Also created in 1973, Barbara Hammer’s surreal 16mm film *I Was/I Am* (p. 206) examines her coming-out as a lesbian woman. Hammer (then still known under her husband’s last name, Ward), who would go on to become a pioneer of queer cinema, tells a story of transformation, breakthrough, and passage toward a new sexual identity.



MARTHA WILSON, *Breast Forms Permutated*, 1972
SV_619_2014 (p. 534)



FRIEDERIKE PEZOLD, *Brustwerk*, 1973, b/w photographs
© Estate Friederike Pezold / Courtesy Bank Austria Kunstsammlung, Vienna

Depending on the geopolitical situation in which women lived, their feminist struggle for sexual self-determination took very different forms, as examples from several African countries illustrate. Practicing as a doctor in Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s, the women's rights activist Nawal El Saadawi was struck by how very little women and girls knew about their own bodies. This prompted her to write a book about women's sexuality in which she described the rituals to which the female body was subjected in an Arab-Islamic society. First published in 1969, the book decried the mutilation of the clitoris, a procedure the author herself had suffered through, in the presence of her mother, when she was six. The Senegalese writer Awa Thiam's book *Speak Out, Black Sisters: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa* likewise condemned the painful, violent, and life-threatening practice of genital mutilation, which had deep roots in African cultures and was performed on girls at an early age: "The operation consists of making preliminary gashes in the labia majora and then suturing them together with acacia thorns, the labia minora having been removed at the time of the excision."¹²⁴ The mutilation, Thiam explains, serves to "prevent girls from 'taking certain liberties' before they are married [...] If a girl who gets married for the first time is not a virgin, the honour of the whole family is at stake."¹²⁵ As El Saadawi sums it up trenchantly: everything depends on "the very fine membrane called 'honour.'"¹²⁶

Some artists reflected on the experience of sexual discrimination by turning their attention to the phallus. Renate Bertlmann explains: "I was never interested in the penis; my concern was with the phallus as an instrument of patriarchal power, the phallus as a weapon. So the first part of the trilogy, *Pornography*, was about the war of the sexes, of perpetrators and victims, of male aggression.

119 Annegret Soltau in conversation with the author, Darmstadt, January 18, 2018.

120 Ibid.

121 Gloria Steinem, "Foreword," in Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues: 20th Anniversary Edition*, New York, 2001, p. ix.

122 Mithu M. Sanyal, *Vulva: Die Enthüllung des unsichtbaren Geschlechts*, Berlin, 2009, p. 23.

123 Ibid., pp. 13–14.

124 Thiam, *Speak Out, Black Sisters*, p. 72.

125 Ibid., pp. 70–71.

126 Nawal el Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, trans. Sherif Hetata, London/New York, 2007, p. 38.