

THE RECKONING



THE RECKONING WOMEN ARTISTS OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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INTRODUCTION



IN THE UNITED STATES, 2007 was hailed as the year of feminism in art. This surprising celebration took place at a time when the women's movement was widely regarded as outmoded, even irrelevant, and feminism was considered a dirty word. The year was marked by a number of significant events designed to applaud and assess women's achievements in the visual arts, including the opening of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, featuring an inaugural exhibition on *Global Feminisms*; another large international survey titled *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, which toured North America; and a two-day symposium called "The Feminist Future" held at New York's Museum of Modern Art, an institution not generally noted for its support of art by women.

In his review of *WACK!*, art critic Holland Cotter offered a bold assessment of the state of art and feminism in the pages of *The New York Times*. He declared, "One thing is certain: Feminist art, which emerged in the 1960s with the women's movement, is the formative art of the last four decades. Scan the most innovative work, by both men and women, done during that time, and you'll find feminism's activist, expansionist, pluralistic trace. Without it identity-based art, crafts-derived art, performance art and much political art would not exist in the form it does, if it existed at all. Much of what we call postmodern art has feminist art at its source."^[1] It seems that while the art establishment was attending to business as usual, feminists—male as well as female—had passed them by.

Our contribution to the year of art and feminism was a book titled *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art*. Focusing on a dozen exemplary artists, we described the strides they and their colleagues had made since the advent of the feminist movement in the 1960s, and noted the changes that took place in their critical reception, commercial appeal, and level of institutional support. In her foreword to this volume, the distinguished art historian Linda Nochlin observed, "After the revolution comes the reckoning," and asked, "Exactly what has been accomplished, what changed?" *The Reckoning: Women Artists of the New Millennium* is an attempt to address Nochlin's pointed question. We decided to turn our attention to a generation of women artists born post-1960 who have benefited from ground-breaking efforts of their predecessors, and to cast a wider geographical net, reflecting the globalization of the contemporary art world as well as the inroads made by feminism worldwide. The twenty-five women artists selected for

[1] Holland Cotter, "The Art of Feminism as It First Took Shape," *New York Times*, March 9, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/09/arts/design/ogwack.html?pagewanted=all>.

inclusion in this new survey work in a wide variety of media and across a broad range of subjects. With gradually increasing opportunity and growing popular and critical acclaim, these artists, and their peers, are now positioned to reshape visual culture.

Rather than attempting an encyclopedic survey, we have organized *The Reckoning* around four themes that, we feel, capture significant impulses in artwork by younger women. “Bad Girls” presents artists who exploit “politically incorrect” and sexually explicit material to challenge the patriarchal image regime. “Spellbound” focuses on women’s embrace of the irrational, the subjective, and the surreal. “Domestic Disturbances” takes on women’s conflicted relationship to home, family, and security. “History Lessons” addresses women artists’ engagement with political and social concerns. Each theme is linked to a groundbreaking work by what we came to think of as our artists’ foremothers. These landmark works, which demonstrate the continuity between generations, also helped us think through how younger artists differ from their predecessors—how changing circumstances in the world and the role of women within it have subtly inflected longstanding concerns.

We readily acknowledge that many important artists do not fit comfortably within these categories. However, we feel they allowed us to map out a revealing set of relationships among women, culture, and world. The four themes might be thought of as a four-pointed net thrown over our subject. Two of the points involve subjective and individual aspects of women’s experience: “Bad Girls” explores the body’s role in forging our identity and considers how we are in turn shaped by the other’s gaze. “Spellbound” comes at the question of identity from the opposite perspective, examining interior realities shaped by fantasy, subconscious desires, subliminal memories, and dreams. Because both categories deal with the construction of a sense of self, artists in these sections share certain overlapping concerns, among them the uses and abuses of pornography, the role of fantasy in the creation of identity, and the varieties of female pleasure.

The other two points of our net are more social, exploring women’s relationship to the larger institutions that make up our world. “Domestic Disturbances” highlights the conflicts that often exist between individuals and family, construed in the widest sense. Dilemmas here include the struggle to balance communal identity and individuality; personal freedom and group responsibility. “History Lessons” pulls back to look at the self in relation to an even larger sphere,

namely the artist's role in the world. Here questions of political power, social responsibility, and national identity come to the fore. Again, there are overlapping concerns between these two more collective categories, among them questions of activism, politics, and communal action.

Together these four points provide a way to make sense of the bewilderingly varied nature of female experience in the contemporary world. They also help explain the increasing diversity in our understanding of the term "feminism." One thing that became apparent to us in considering this generation of women artists is that its notion of identity—sexual, cultural, personal—is strikingly fluid. And while feminism continues to be a drive that transcends individuality (it is meaningless otherwise), it is itself increasingly plural. The ways in which the artists in this book speak about feminism vary enormously (and it should be noted that a few choose not to speak of it at all). For some—Sharon Hayes, for instance—it is a cause their work is organized to promote. Others—among them Tracey Emin and Lisa Yuskavage, two of the artists gathered under the category "Bad Girls"—take feminism as a term of lively contestation. Their work kicks against the traces of earlier activist positions, arguing for a new way of conceiving women's desires and ambitions.

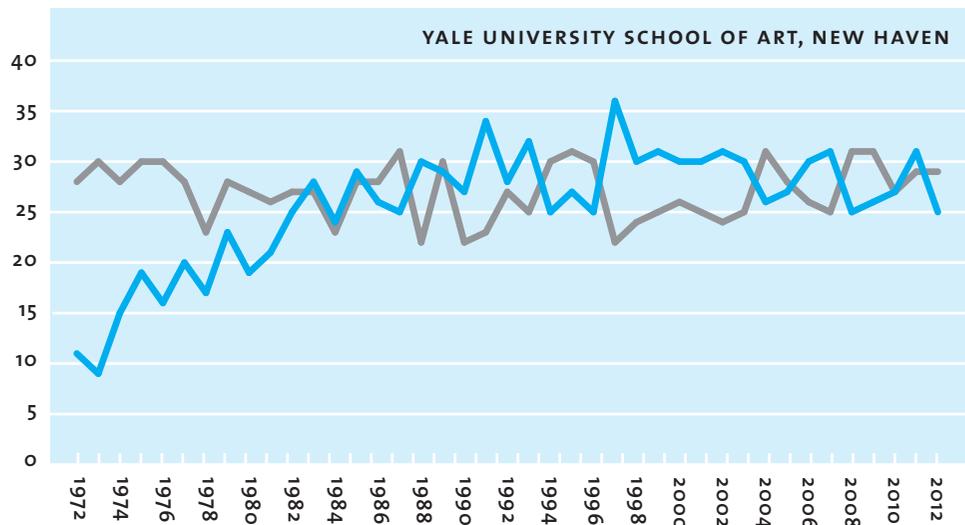
At the same time, the artists considered here generally share the belief that gender identity, on which feminism is after all founded, is itself no longer unitary. *Taking control* (for a long time this was the working title for our book) of the way their sexuality is pictured is a driving force for much of this work, from Catherine Opie's richly formal but highly confrontational portraits of cross-dressing leather dykes, to Kara Walker's blistering depictions of interracial sexual violence. Determined to fashion their own sexual identities, younger women tend to be acutely sensitive to the ways in which commercial visual culture confines their choices. They embrace the realization that it is impossible, and undesirable, to divide gender into a simple binary of straight and gay, or male and female.

Just as the positions sketched out by these women for personal identity are deliberately loose, their modes of work unsettle traditional notions of how art is produced. Many have chosen to work in collaboration; Liza Lou's work with craftswomen in South Africa is one example; Jane and Louise Wilson, and Nathalie Djurberg (who works with musician Hans Berg), are among the many women included in this book who have chosen, often or always, to work in partnerships. One result of this decentered authorship is the possibility of compounded inventiveness.

Crafting new modes of domesticity, of romantic and professional partnership, these artists are creating lives that mirror those pictured in their work, and vice versa. Many live deep in a matrix within which the authentic is nearly impossible to disentangle from the constructed, the individual from the collective. From Cao Fei’s online animated world at one extreme, to the quasi-utopian, real-life community of Andrea Zittel’s High Desert Test Sites at another, the work these women do aims some heavy blows at already weakened barriers between art and everything else.

The project of assembling a book about women artists inevitably raises questions about whether sexual parity hasn’t made arguments on behalf of women artists unnecessary. The statistics we’ve assembled for both our first book and our second show that while significant progress has been made, there is still work to be done. In *After the Revolution* we looked at the percentage of women artists given solo exhibitions in galleries and museums and featured in monographs to assess progress in achieving professional parity with male artists (see Appendix figures 1 and 2 in this volume). In each case, the numbers have risen from dismally low proportions in the 1970s to between 25% and 30%. While working on *The Reckoning*, we realized these particular statistics were just beginning the conversation. This led us to wonder: how do artists become known and who are the gatekeepers to a successful career?

FIGURE 1
Number of MFA graduates
by gender.



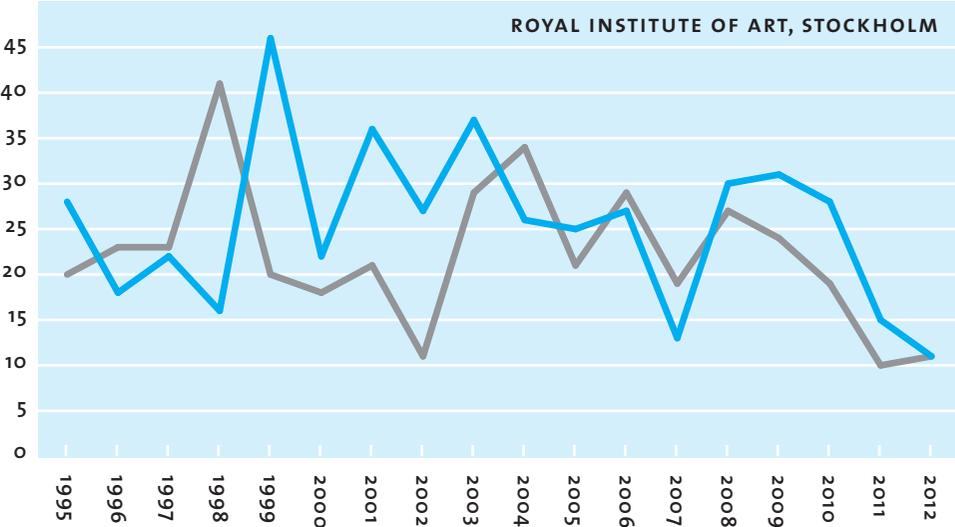
Looking at leading MFA programs across the United States, we found a consistent upward trajectory of women earning MFAs, equaling or surpassing the number of male graduates over the past forty years. This wasn't always the case. At Yale University, the oldest program surveyed, 11 women and 28 men graduated with MFAs in 1972 (fig. 1). By 1983, more women graduated than men (28:27), and over the last decade, the numbers were almost even year to year. Since the early '80s, both the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and UCLA have typically graduated more women than men (see figs. A3 and A4).

In MFA programs in Sweden, England, and Israel, the ratio of graduates is either equal or favors women. For example, the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm graduated more women than men in two-thirds of the years surveyed (fig. 2), and we see the same proportion at Goldsmiths, University of London (see fig. A5). The relatively young program at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, which opened in 2003, typically graduates an equal number of men and women (see fig. A6).

It is striking to move from the academy to the commercial realm, where women remain far behind in terms of gallery representation. In our survey of prominent New York galleries, women artists represented 25%, at the very best, of recent solo shows. Why is this? The answer may be that many younger women—like their feminist progenitors—work in performance and video, which inarguably has

FIGURE 2
Number of MFA graduates
by gender.

— FEMALE
— MALE



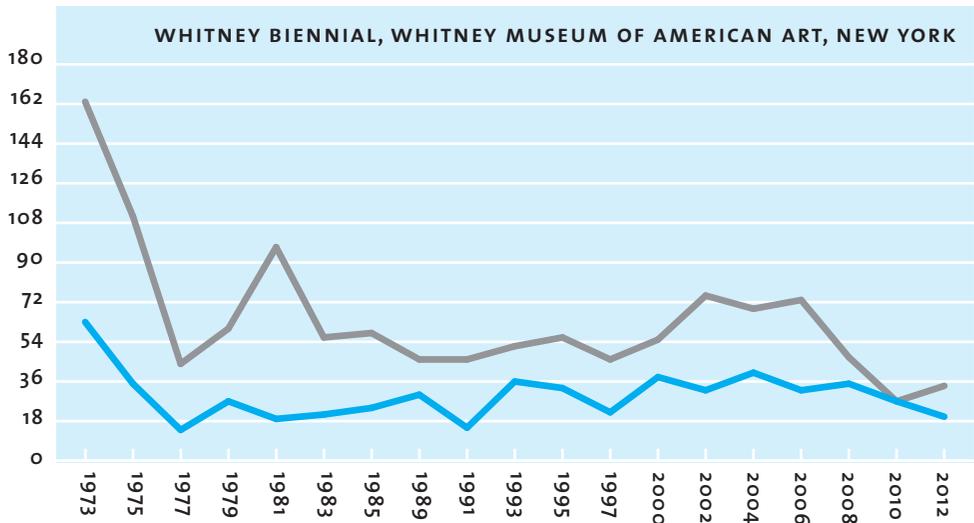
less market appeal than the more traditional forms of art making. It is also worth noting that while several of the artists featured in this book lack gallery representation at this time, four have received the prestigious and lucrative MacArthur Award.

On the flip side, contemporary biennials are more supportive of women, perhaps due to their embrace of video and performance work. In the 1973 Whitney Biennial, curated by Marcia Tucker, 27% of participants were women (fig. 3). The infamous boundary-breaking 1993 biennial curated by Elizabeth Sussman (with Thelma Golden, Lisa Phillips, and John Hanhardt) was 40% female. Almost twenty years later, that number is about that same—37% of the 2012 biennial participants were female. The 2010 biennial, curated by two men, should not go unmentioned; it had the same number—27 each—of men and women. The Istanbul Biennial went from 23% participation by women in 1987 to 50% in 2011. The first Documenta, in Kassel, Germany, held in 1955, had 7 women of the 148 participants, or just fewer than 5% (fig. 4). The 1982 Documenta, which showed only one video artist (Dara Birnbaum), saw only 13% participation by women. In 2007, 41% of those chosen were female, dipping slightly to 37% in 2012. (For both these years, at least one of the curators was female.) Manifesta, a relative newcomer which began in 1996, consistently includes upwards of 30% female participants (see fig. A7). These data clearly attest to the progress women have made over time in the international surveys.

Compare all of these statistics to the progress of women in society at

FIGURE 3
Number of featured artists
by gender.

FEMALE
MALE



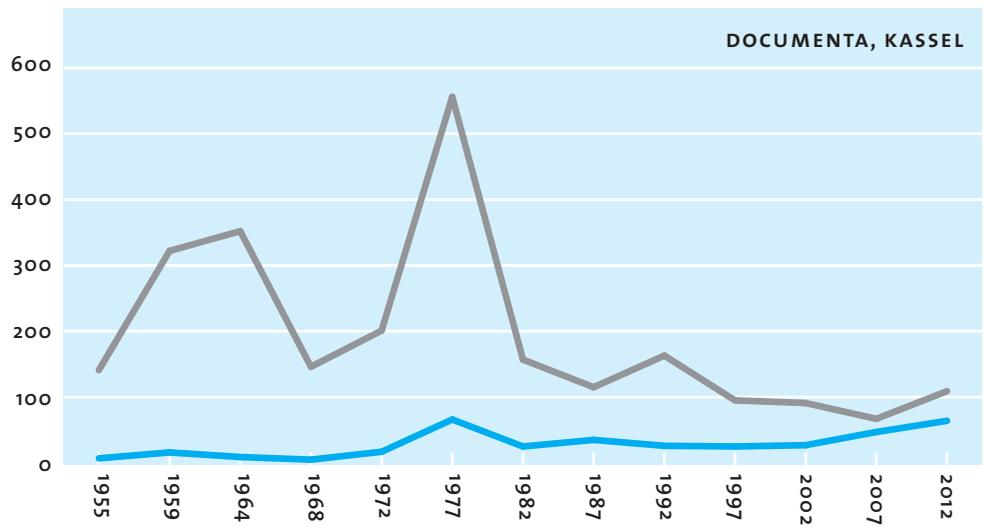
large. The US election of 2012 will be heralded as historic for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the unprecedented election of 20 female senators. Still, that represents only 20% of the senate. A 2012 *New York Times* article entitled “The Myth of Male Decline” discusses and debunks the lingering misconception that women dominate the workplace. [2] Although more women graduate from college than men (60%) and today make up 40% of management, they still earn 73% of what their male colleagues earn. Thus in government and business—as in the art world—women are making impressive strides toward equality but they have not yet reached the goal.

Nonetheless, most of our statistics give a clear basis for optimism. Our reckoning, then, concurs with Cotter’s assessment that feminist art is among the most innovative and influential work being made today. Furthermore, women are reaching parity in institutional support. There is, however, still room for improvement, both in representation in galleries and solo shows in museums. There is reason to hope that the market will eventually catch up with the critical and institutional success women artists have enjoyed. In any case, we feel strongly that the rich vitality of work by young women, sampled by the artists in this book, constitutes the best argument for the increased share of attention they deserve.

— ELEANOR HEARTNEY, HELAINE POSNER,
NANCY PRINCENTHAL, AND SUE SCOTT

FIGURE 4
Number of featured artists
by gender.

— FEMALE
— MALE



[2] Stephanie Coontz, “The Myth of Male Decline,” *New York Times*, September 29, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/30/opinion/sunday/the-myth-of-male-decline.html?pagewanted=all>.

BAD GIRLS

by Eleanor Heartney



OPPOSITE

The original SlutWalk demonstration, held on April 3, 2011 in Toronto. Photograph by Pamela Westoby.

BELOW

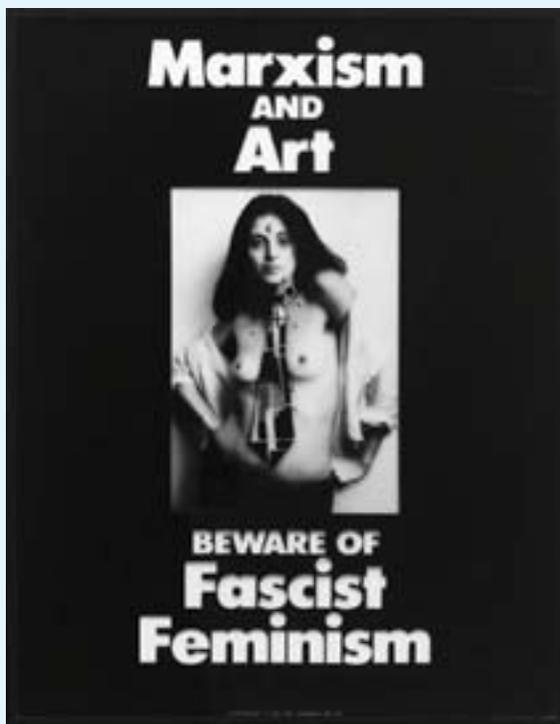
Lynda Benglis, *Artforum* advertisement, November 1974.

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AFTER Margaret Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in the United States, and fifty years after the onset of the so-called sexual revolution, questions about women's control over their bodies, sexual expression, and complicity with sexual violence remain deeply divisive and controversial. These became a political issue in the 2012 American election campaigns when Republican candidates quibbled about terms like "legitimate rape" versus "forcible rape" (as opposed to what, exactly?) and conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh dubbed a young law student a "slut" for her advocacy of contraception. This came a year after Canadian feminists, outraged by a Toronto police officer's remark that women could evade rape by not "dressing like sluts," instituted the "SlutWalk," a form of protest in which women dress provocatively while demonstrating against sexual violence (opposite).

So it is clear that, forty years after artist Lynda Benglis was excoriated by other feminists for posing for an ad in *Artforum* magazine wearing nothing but a pair of sporty sunglasses and a giant dildo (below), the debate over Bad Girls goes on. Questions about the power of images, the politics of sexual assertion, and the "proper" expression of female desire refuse to go away. Are women who play with sexually suggestive images liberating themselves or succumbing to patriarchal prejudices? Is pornography, as various feminist writers and artists have argued, a form of male violence against women or is it a potentially subversive tool which may be adapted for women's own purposes? Are phrases like slut, slag, dyke, and cunt to be embraced or rejected? What, exactly is a "Bad Girl" and is it good or bad to be one?

The debate over Bad Girls goes to the heart of competing theories about the male gaze (or, as it is sometimes referred to in more theoretical circles, "the scopoc regime of the patriarchal order"). Since the 1970s, feminist art historians have been pointing out that Western art's traditional focus on the female nude underscores the male-dominated culture's assumptions about female passivity, sexual availability, and





Hannah Wilke, *Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism*, 1977. Screenprint on Plexiglas; composition and sheet: 35½ x 27¾ in. | 90 x 69.5 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York; General Print Fund, Riva Castleman Endowment Fund, Harvey S. Shipley Miller Fund, The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art, and partial gift of Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon, and Andrew Scharlatt, Hannah Wilke Collection and Archive, Los Angeles.

image in 1974 as a response to a hyper-masculinist image that had been created a few months earlier in promotion for an exhibition by her friend and fellow provocateur, the artist Robert Morris. For his poster, a half-naked Morris decked himself out with a Nazi-era army helmet, mirrored aviator glasses, steel manacles, and a spiked collar. Slicking down her toned naked body with oil, Benglis and her dildo struck a pose that outdid Morris's super-macho image. The response to Benglis was swift and, in retrospect, surprisingly fierce. Five of *Artforum's* regular contributors wrote an outraged letter to the editor, and two of them, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, resigned in order to start their own magazine, the resolutely theoretical and militantly iconoclastic journal *October*. Reaction outside the editorial circle was equally strong, as many readers canceled their subscriptions while others, many of them feminists, announced their support.

subordination. For feminist artists emerging in the 1970s and '80s, the power of such images posed a challenge: how does one best counter the pervasive presentation in art and popular culture of women as mere objects of male desire?

This led to a standoff in the early days of feminist art. In one camp were those who argued that women's traditional identification with nature, the body, procreation, and ancient goddess cults should be cultivated in opposition to masculine aggression. In the other were those who maintained that gender is a social construction designed to keep women in a subservient position, and that true feminists should avoid any use of female imagery that reinforces pernicious stereotypes. The second camp derided the first as "essentialists" and colluders, while the first camp characterized their critics as puritans, iconoclasts, and even, in the words of Hannah Wilke, one pioneering feminist, "fascist feminists" (left).

It was in this climate that the first feminist Bad Girls appeared, though they did not characterize themselves this way. The notorious Lynda Benglis ad cited above will serve as our introduction to their cheeky assault on propriety and political correctness. Benglis created this

BELOW LEFT

VALIE EXPORT, *Action Pants: Genital Panic (Actionshose: Genitalpanik)*, 1969, printed 2001. Black-and-white photograph on aluminum; 65 x 47¼ in. | 165 x 120 cm. Photograph by Peter Hassman.

BELOW RIGHT

Niki de Saint Phalle, *Hon*, 1965–66. Reclining walk-in figure made for the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, and installed from April–July 1966. Fabric on steel scaffolding; approx. 19 ft. 8¼ in. x 105 ft. x 32 ft. 9¾ in. | 6 x 23.5 x 10 m.

Reflecting back on the controversy thirty-five years later, Benglis placed the image in the context of other provocative self-portraits she was doing at the time, including one in which she is photographed from the back, looking over her shoulder, nude with her pants down around her ankles. Explaining her motivations in a 2009 interview, she remarked, “There seemed to be no pinups unless they were essentially the object of the male gaze, so to speak. So after having exhausted different possibilities, I thought to myself, “What if I was my own subject and my own object, looking back at the men and the viewer in general?” [1]

Despite the brouhaha, Benglis was hardly the first feminist artist to explore these kinds of questions; in fact, such sexual provocations already had a long history by the time she entered the fray. By usurping the role of the Bad Boy (a figure of sneaking approbation in the art world), [2] phallus and all, she was simply dramatizing one option available to the Bad Girl. But there were other possibilities, including the flaunting of one’s own sex, as undertaken by artists like VALIE EXPORT, who in 1968 exposed her crotch as she entered an art house movie theater brandishing a machine gun, or Niki de Saint Phalle, who even earlier, in 1965, created a huge sculpture of a female body which viewers could enter through the vagina (below). A third approach, undertaken by Carolee Schneemann in her famous 1964 performance



[1] Lynda Benglis, interview by Phong Bui, *Brooklyn Rail*, December 2009/ January 2010, <http://brooklynrail.org/2009/12/art/lynda-benglis-with-phong-bui>.

[2] In fact, it turns out that Krauss had taken the photograph of Morris that ignited the battle of images, suggesting her strong preference for Bad Boys over Bad Girls.

Meat Joy, in which nearly naked men and women rolled about amid plucked chickens, fish, and buckets of paint, was to embrace a polymorphous sexual freedom that blurred the distinctions between male and female.

What all these works had in common was a flirtation with pornographic imagery, which put them in the center of a growing debate over the social, cultural, and political role of pornography. Already in the 1970s, divisions were appearing between “pro-sex” and “anti-porn” feminists. In the early 1980s feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon lobbied for strict anti-porn laws under the claim that pornography was simply the theory of which rape is the practice.^[3]

They were joined by theorists like Laura Mulvey, Robin Morgan, and Kate Linker, who insisted that genuine feminism required unequivocal opposition to images whose primary purpose is the titillation of male desire. Such arguments were somewhat muddled by the rise of an equally virulent opposition, especially in the US, to pornography from militant religious and political conservatives. Representatives of this group, which included quasi-religious organizations like American Family Association as well as senators and congressmen like Jesse Helms and Dick Armey, used similar arguments to denounce the social corruption they believed had been unleashed by feminism, the sexual revolution, the gay rights movement, and the permissive culture of contemporary art, which reflected all of these developments. One outcome of this battle was the culture war of the early 1990s, which revolved around efforts to shut down the US National Endowment for the Arts and to defund and even prosecute artists and curators who showed work that was deemed by conservative lawmakers to be sacrilegious, pornographic, or otherwise morally objectionable. Among those caught in this net were curator Dennis Barrie, indicted and eventually acquitted of obscenity charges for mounting a show of the work of Robert Mapplethorpe at the Cincinnati Center for Contemporary Art, and the “NEA Four,” consisting of Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes, four performance artists who fought all the way to the Supreme Court over the instatement of a “decency” requirement for art funded by the NEA.

In the other corner were pro-porn feminists who found themselves in the equally peculiar company of porn industry figures like Larry Flynt, publisher of *Hustler* magazine. Flynt argued that attempts to censor pornography were violations of free speech and civil rights. Taking a somewhat different tack, pro-porn feminist writers like Angela Carter, Joanna Frueh, Camille Paglia, and Paula Webster

[3] See Robin Morgan's 1974 essay "Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape," in *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist* (New York: Random House, 1978).

insisted on the inherently subversive nature of pornography, which after all has historically served to undermine rigid class, social, religious, and political regimes. Arguing that the censure of pornography amounted to a criminalization of the erotic, they suggested that the oppressive potential for sexualized images of women could be countered by images that celebrated female pleasures and desire. As Paula Webster put the case, “If we can switch our focus from men’s pleasure to our own, then we have the potential of creating a discourse that will challenge the values of ‘good girls’ (non-sexual women) and explore the bridge that connects and divides expression and repression.” [4]

It was into this quagmire that curators Marcia Tucker and Marcia Tanner waded in 1994 with a pair of exhibitions that introduced the Bad Girl label into contemporary art. The shows, which appeared simultaneously in New York at the New Museum and in Los Angeles at the UCLA Wight Gallery, recognized that a sea change was taking place in the realm of feminist art. After the theoretical stand-off of the 1970s and ’80s, a new generation of artists of both sexes was moving past the binary oppositions between masculine and feminine, domination and submission, good sex and bad sex, aggressor and victim, and body versus mind. Instead they turned their attention to multiplicity, the celebration of states of transgender, cross-gender, and sexual anarchy.

Tucker drew on the notion of the carnivalesque promulgated by Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin describing the medieval carnival as “a social space where suppressed appetites could be expressed and sated, where inversions of power and position were temporarily sanctioned, where sexual dimensions could be explored without reprisal. In short, it was an arena where pleasure reigned.” [5]

It was in a similar spirit, Tucker argued, that Bad Girl artists turned apparent reality upside down, using the tools of masquerade, humor, and play to undermine official culture. She described various empowering strategies practiced by Bad Girls (who might also, as in the case of Cary Lebowicz or Nayland Blake, be male). These included: “Talking out of both sides of your mouth,” “Speak for yourself,” and “Bad Girls are hysterical!” She went on to note, “The transgressive body not only mutates from old to young and back, but across genders, redefining itself in multiple ways, rejecting any fixed form.” [6]

The new Bad Girls resisted the either/or propositions of previous formulations of feminism. The Bad Girl shows included artists like Rachel Lachowicz,

[4] Paula Webster, “Pornography and Pleasure,” in *Caught Looking: Feminism, Pornography and Censorship*, ed. f.a.c.t. book committee (Caught Looking, Inc, 1985), 35.

[5] Marcia Tucker, “The Attack of the Giant Ninja Mutant Babies,” in *Bad Girls* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press; New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994), 23.

[6] *Ibid.*, 34.

who recreated mini-copies of Duchamp's famous urinals out of lipstick and Deborah Kass, who channeled Warhol's portraits of Jackie and Marilyn in her depictions of Barbra Streisand, a personal heroine who mixed genders for her portrayal of a Yentl, a Jewish woman who cross dressed as a man in order to receive a Talmudic education (below). The attitude of Zoe Leonard, who placed close-up photos of female genitalia in Kassel's Neue Galerie in 1992, was typical of the new Bad Girls. She remarked, "I wasn't interested in re-examining the male gaze; I wanted to understand my own gaze."^[7]

With the turn of the twenty-first century, the politics of sexuality have shifted again. On one hand, women artists in the United States and Europe are less fearful of creating work that sates the appetites of the straight male viewer. And gender identity itself has become far more fluid with the growing social acceptance

of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights. Instead of being defined as a state rooted in nature (as per the essentialists) or society (the deconstructionists), gender was now seen as something that might, in the words of curator Johanna Burton, be "exhibited, acquired, acknowledged, and fed back to subjects as they move and interact in the world."^[8]

On the other hand, the advances of feminism, both in the West and globally, seem endangered by larger social forces. In the United States, political and religious conservatives appear intent on turning back the clock to the "good old days" of pre-feminist subservience, defining femininity in terms of motherhood and sexual attractiveness (this despite the emergence of female standard bearers like Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann, who pursue ambitious political careers while espousing conservative positions on social

Deborah Kass, *Double Ultra Blue Yentl*, 1993–2012. Silkscreen and acrylic on canvas; 72 x 72 in. | 182.9 x 182.9 cm.



[7] Quoted in *Secession: Zoe Leonard* (Vienna: Wiener Secession, 1997), 16.

[8] Johanna Burton, "Cindy Sherman: Abstraction and Empathy," in *Cindy Sherman*, ed. Eve Respini (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 65.

issues). Meanwhile, popular culture promotes a “post feminist” vision of women as either sexually liberated but emotionally dependent sex objects or controlling, sexless harridans (we might see this as the opposition between the paradigms of *Desperate Housewives* versus *The Devil Wears Prada*), sending younger women decidedly mixed messages about sexuality, power, and identity. The return to such reductive stereotypes occurs at a moment when the pornography industry, abetted by the easy access of the Internet, has ballooned, reportedly outstripping the revenues of Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo, Apple, and Netflix combined.^[9] Internationally, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, driven by renewed fears of the disruptive nature of sexuality, manifests itself in calls for draconian restrictions of women’s freedom. In countries where radical Islamists have gained significant power, this has rendered female challenges to the male gaze literally life threatening.

Even within the feminist community, mixed messages prevail, and there is often a split between older women whose mission has been to undermine degrading stereotypes and younger women who seem to embrace them. The Slut-Walks mentioned above are one example of the latter phenomenon. So is the emergence of Riot Grrrl, an underground feminist punk rock movement that emerged in the US in the 1990s to address the pervasive objectification of women inside and outside the music world through aggressive and highly sexualized performances. (The Russian feminist punk band/performance collective Pussy Riot, three of whose members were convicted in 2012 of blasphemy and sentenced to two years hard labor in a Russian prison camp, cite the movement as an inspiration).^[10] In this climate, today’s Bad Girl artists become part of a larger debate over the relationship between female power and sexuality.

The so-called Bad Girls featured in these pages adopt and adapt “politically incorrect” images for subversive purposes. Their work makes reference to the tropes of pornography, romance novels and pulp fiction, which undermine rigid social conventions and shed light on social values, sexual mores, and the essential nature of desire and pleasure. For instance, Ghada Amer plays against the Islamic iconoclasm of her native Egypt in canvases embroidered so as to partially conceal pornographic images beneath twisting threads that feminize the ejaculatory drips of Abstract Expressionism. She has remarked, “Pornography is the starting point of the image, then it becomes something else.”^[11] The British artist Cecily Brown’s gestural paintings similarly mix gestural abstraction with transgressive sexual imagery

[9] Internet Pornography Statistics, <http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics.html>.

[11] Ghada Amer, interview by Roxana Marcoci, in *Threads of Vision: Toward a New Feminine Poetics*, ed. Larry Gilman (Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 2001), 23–24.

[10] Sergey Chernov, “Female Fury,” *St. Petersburg Times*, February 1, 2012, 1693 (4).