

I want to emphasize that there is no inherently “correct” feminist art and art criticism, but there are ways of using what feminism has taught us to produce art and criticism, which can take their place among the varied strategies through which we understand the production of meaning today.

Whitney Chadwick
'Negotiating the Feminist Divide'
Heresies vol. 6, no. 4, 1989, p. 23

A monolithic vision of shared female sexuality, rather than defeating phallogentrism as doctrine and practice, is more likely to blind us to our varied and immediate needs and to the specific struggles we must coordinate in order to meet them. What is the meaning of ‘two lips’ to heterosexual women who want men to recognise their clitoral pleasure – or to African or Middle Eastern women who, as a result of pharaonic clitoridectomies, have neither lips nor clitoris through which to jouir? Does a celebration of the Maternal versus the Patriarchal make the same kind of sense, or any sense, to white middle-class women who are fighting to maintain the right to abortion, to black and Third World women resisting enforced sterilization, to women in subsistence-farming economies where the livelihood of the family depends on the work of every child who is born and survives? ...

Ann Rosalind Jones 'Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of L'Écriture Feminine'
Feminist Studies vol. 7, no. 2, Summer 1981, p. 257

We do not want to simply posit a definition of “good women’s art”, for at this historical moment such a definition would foreclose the dialectical play of meaning that we are calling for; our intention is to be suggestive rather than prescriptive.

Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis
'The Politics of Art Making' *Feminist Art Criticism*
A. Raven, C. Langer and J. Freuth (eds)
UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1988

NIKKI MILLER

feminism art art history

What is it that women want?

*What if feminism meant something much more than growing up to be dean of a major art school, chief curator at the museum of your choice, famous girl artist at the best of galleries, or becoming as ubiquitous as Donald Kuspit?*¹

I want more than this.

The most famous psychoanalytic-marxist female art-historian Griselda Pollock claimed recently, “They want their own way”.²

We all have our own wants and ways.

There is no single unifying want of ‘feminists’. It is frequently claimed that because women have so long been spoken for, they are more aware of the dangers of speaking for others. Yet it is an inevitable part of our daily speech to generalise, essentialise and speak for others. It has been demonstrated that women have an estranged relationship to speech both socially and psychoanalytically.³ To what extent then is it possible to speak as-a-woman and look-as-a-woman? To what extent can we articulate our own wants and define our own ways? Exhibitions like this one are crucial in beginning to formulate a response to these questions, but who is asking and who is answering?

To pose the question “What do women want?” is to pose it already as an answer, as from a man who isn’t expecting any answer, because the answer is “She wants nothing.” ... “What does she want? ... Nothing!” Nothing because she is passive. The only thing man can do is offer the question “What could she want, she who wants nothing?” Or in other words: “Without me, what could she want?”⁴

Too frequently 'feminism' is portrayed monolithically as a tool for the self-interested. The convenience of the stereotype of the greedy woman remains – its iconography not differing much

from that used earlier this century by organisations like the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage in Britain.⁵ Out of sheer necessity English women became more militant until they were interrupted by the war. In 1917 some women were given voting rights but it was not until 1928 that the right to vote applied equally to women and men. The anti-suffragist accusatory gaze was reflected back, revealing the selfish, power-retaining interests of the anti-suffrage campaigners.

The motif of greed is reappearing in a range of contemporary articles on women. My concern is that today feminism is typically portrayed as the fight for personal recognition and 'success', rather than a fight for the transformation of society. The battles now appear to be over single equal opportunity issues rather than a great shaking of the ideological roots from which these issues stem. We must keep questioning and take care not to replicate the structures which have kept women unempowered. We must avoid the token gesture – we should not invite an Aboriginal woman to an exhibition or conference with *the expectation* that it will legitimise the white-womans majority voice – as men have tokenised us to legitimise their own speech.

There is no avoiding the fact that this exhibition is a liberal project, conceived as it was in the spirit of equal opportunity. That *Feminisms* 1992 is an establishment approved show, aligns it in many respects with the *Salon des Femmes*, held in Paris in the nineteenth century.⁶ These women-only exhibitions organised by the conservative *Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs*, received official sanction, were regularly housed in the *Palais de l'Industrie*, and its openings were attended by Government Ministers. Critical reviews of these French exhibitions demonstrated the impossible criteria against which the women's art work was measured. That is, that the work should tangibly represent femininity but should also conform to the male standards of good drawing, original composition ... How to display difference while conforming to the man-made rules of art?

Is it possible to make feminist art?

The *Salon des Femmes* rankled some of its misogynist critics but the artwork exhibited proved to be academic and conservative, staying well within the terms established in the tradition of male painting. Can we reject the patriarchal definitions of art and still produce art? We need new definitions, new conceptions.

Masculine and feminine qualities continue to be assigned to a person's practice – their technique, subject and media. These descriptions, labels and categories form a biased hierarchy of the arts. Each of the following coupling of terms – male/female, active/passive, public/domestic, reason/sentiment, mind/body, subject/object, abstraction/decoration – has an inherent positive/negative bias in its relationship. It is becoming more widely recognised that the art/craft distinction continues to the disadvantage of women practitioners working outside of the painting tradition. There has been much published on this issue,⁷ yet the ambivalence with which textiles continues to be regarded by the art establishment remains a constant source of anxiety for some practitioners. It doesn't take a genius or a body with a penis⁸ to note that the most prestigious galleries in Perth – The Art Gallery of Western Australia, The Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, The Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery and various commercial galleries are the domain of the local male artist while the Craft Council of Western Australia or the Tresillian Community Centre are more likely to show work by women.

Women look at art

That viewing audiences have long been assumed to be male is no longer an invisible fact. Cinematic, media, painting techniques and devices have been deconstructed, demonstrating how they implicitly assume a male spectator.⁹ Since Laura Mulvey's formative essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' was published in 1975,¹⁰ women have begun the process of articulating gendered readings of "the gaze". It used to be argued that women must surreptitiously adopt the masculine position or masochistically view ourselves. Today there is a general recognition that the viewing process involves

psychic-bisexuality for male and female viewers. Pure male and female viewing positions exist only in theory. The scenario once described by Berger is now passe¹¹ and even more so as increasing numbers of women become producers of texts. Nevertheless whilst the bias towards the imagined male spectator exists in the majority of texts, it is important to recognise the possibility that:

*texts made by women can produce different positions within this sexual politics of looking*¹²

Through textual in(ter)vention women can begin to determine their own ways of seeing and representing.

The entire process of artmaking from the conditions of its construction to its consumption by the art-world is now open to questioning via feminist analysis. The structures underpinning the existing hierarchies are being revealed. There was a dearth of material on feminism and art, especially when compared to other disciplines, but this is no longer true.¹³ With these new texts the possibilities for feminist art practices have been revised and extended.

Is difference dissolving?

The old feminist debates between the positions of biological determinism (essentialism) and deconstruction are no longer hotly contested. There is more common ground, few theorists will adopt the extremes of either position. We can acknowledge the historical and cultural specificity of the categories of female and male, without entirely rejecting the notion that the body itself may not be a passive non-sexed agent. Lucy Lippard describes the current situation:

*A lot of differences between essentialism and deconstructivism today are found in methodology, context and language rather than in basic belief. **Nobody is arguing against the notion that women as sign is the site of our commodification.***¹⁴ [my emphasis]

With this common ground comes the recognition for the political need of alliance between women. The mystical belief in innate biological feelings of sisterhood is an unnecessary part of a modern feminist commitment.

Within patriarchy we are forced in our daily patriarchal routines to adopt a sexed subject position. A feminist exhibition by women artists, goes against the recent trend of exhibitions dealing with sex and gender issues which have included both male and female participants. I am convinced of the importance of these mixed exhibitions, but they must not undermine and subsume the voices of women. Many theorists have recognised the dangers of difference being subsumed under white-man's umbrella of postmodernism, Jeffner Allen for example:

Does difference enter the scene only to vanish in a time when women perform two-thirds of the world's work, receive five percent of the world's income, own less than one percent of the world land; when in the United States every seven minutes a woman is raped, every eighteen seconds a woman is battered; when women and children in female headed households are estimated to comprise almost all of the population in poverty by the year 2000? Does the promised inclusion of difference in the transformation of the text place difference at risk of the loss of her own writing and life experience? What has happened to difference?¹⁵

In the cacophony of postmodernism, it becomes even more important to retain a notion of affinity between women,¹⁶ to produce a diversified and strengthened feminist resolve rather than a fracturing or diluting of feminist concerns.

Deconstruction has proved a useful tool to critique phallogentric systems. Now the challenge for women is to reconstruct. As Lucy Lippard claimed in 1989;

The time has come for feminist artists and writers to take the risk of trying to reconstruct, even knowing that we risk building

Another partially false, interim edifice of female identity; even though we, as women with such a diversity of experiences and ideas, will no doubt contradict ourselves in identifying and representing each other. This new image of woman, then, may be a setup for renewed shattering, even as it is formed. But at least we won't be stuck forever with the increasingly smaller fragments of a mirror so splintered that we can no longer see ourselves as wholes.¹⁷

As subjects we are constructed as we are constructing. The aim is to be as active in this process as possible. To this end, art continues to play an important role in constructing and realising ourselves.

The choices for *Femínisms*

The brief which I set myself was to facilitate the exhibition of artworks by Perth-based women which challenge patriarchal representations of women and/or male painting traditions through form. The show is not intended to suggest a simple feminist doctrine but to present various *critical* feminist positions.

I looked for a diversity of approaches, materials and forms and tried to focus on artist who could loosely be referred to as 'emerging'. Nevertheless, there is a great range in the comparative amount of public exposure each artist in *Femínisms* has received in the past. The show is not a survey of work by local women artists as the specific nature of the theme excluded many significant artists and artworks. Also the timing of the show caused obvious limitations for artists busy with other commitments.

That it remains a rare privilege for a woman to have the freedom of making art her first priority became glaringly obvious.

Femínisms is another beginning.

(Foreword : Noel Sheridan, Director, PICA)¹⁸

- ¹ Maureen Sherlock 'A Dangerous Age: The Mid-life Crisis of Postmodern Feminism' *Arts Magazine* Vol. 65, September 1990, p. 72.
- ² See Griselda Pollock's essay 'The Gaze and the Look: Women with Binoculars-A Question of Difference' in *Dealing with Degas*, Richard Kendall & Griselda Pollock (eds), Pandora, , 1992, p.126 and see also endnote no. 42.
- ³ See Ann Rosalind Jones 'Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of L'écriture Feminine' *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 2, Summer 1981, p. 259
- ⁴ Helene Cixious 'Castration or Decapitation' in *Out There: Marginalisation and Contemporary Cultures* Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cornel West (eds), New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1990, p. 348
- ⁵ See Lisa Tickner's excellent book *The Spectacle of Women/Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-14*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1987.
- ⁶ See Tamar Garb "L'Art Feminin" : The Formation of A Critical Category in late Nineteenth-Century France' *Art History*, vol. 12, no. 1, March 1989, pp. 39-65.
- ⁷ Refer to the bibliography at the end of this catalogue.
- ⁸ Note too, the implicit gender bias in the term 'genius'. See Christine Battersby *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetic* The Women's Press, London, 1989.
- ⁹ There are too many examples to list here. Three publications are:
Rosemary Betterton (ed.) *Looking On Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, Pandora, London, 1987.
Mary Ann Doane *The Desire to Desire : The Woman's Film of the 1940s*, Macmillan Press, London, 1987.
Griselda Pollock *Vision and Difference* Routledge, London, 1988.
- ¹⁰ Laura Mulvey 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' *Visual and Other Pleasures* Macmillan, London, 1989. Written in 1973 and first published in 1975 in *Screen*.
- ¹¹ John Berger *Ways of Seeing* British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, London, 1972.
- One might simplify this by saying : *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.
- ¹² Griselda Pollock *Vision and Difference* Routledge, London, 1988, p. 83
- ¹³ Refer to the bibliography at the end of this catalogue which lists only texts written by women specific to the conjunction of feminism and art history, art practice and criticism. There is a large amount of recently-published feminist material I have not been able to include which provides more specialised writings on various artists, art-periods, and subjects.
- ¹⁴ Lucy R. Lippard 'Both Sides Now [A Reprise]' *Heresies* vol. 6, no. 4, 1989, p. 29.
- ¹⁵ Quoted from Jeffner Allen 'Women Who Beget Women Must Thwart Major Sophisms' *Women, Knowledge and Reality* A. Garry & M. Pearsall (eds), Unwin Hyman, Boston, 1989.
- ¹⁶ I am thinking here of the notion of 'affinity' as developed in Donna Haraway's 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980's' *Socialist Review* 80, 1985, pp. 65-107.
- ¹⁷ Lucy R. Lippard 'Both Sides Now [A Reprise]' *Heresies* vol. 6, no. 4, 1989, p. 34.

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The Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts welcomes the opportunity to produce a focused survey of feminist work by women that will allow for a coherent review to complement other survey exhibitions PICA has presented such as education and Western Australia sculptors.

Having agreed that Nikki Miller would curate this exhibition it was further agreed that the entire operation of the project: production, marketing, design, etc be managed by women. Belinda Carrigan and Lynne Mitchell worked with Nikki to plan a performance program to run in tandem with the visual arts exhibition.

At a time when administration seems to dominate cultural activities, setting strange delphic criteria, it was an immense pleasure to know that a group of people were forging ahead, unconfused, solving problems at speed, animated by a set of beliefs that drove this project forward with joy and energy.

PICA thanks Nikki Miller, and the many women who have worked on this show.

Noel Sheridan
Director of PICA

Feminisms : An Exhibition by Twenty-seven Women Artists
Curated by Nikki Miller, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art 1-28 November,
1992

Artists: Sally Andrysz, Aadge Bruce, Lesley Duxbury, Barbara Bolt, Connie Burgos, Naomi Cornock, Helen Ross, Julie Crockett, Carmela Corvaia, Jamie Bernadette Cooper, Helen Taylor, Sue Latter, Annette Seeman, Lana Halpin, Linda Banazis, Jennifer Freeman, Kiya Murman, Trish Little, Virginia Ward, Sally Stoneman, Moira Doropoulos, Melissa McDougall, Cathy Gordon, Jo Darbyshire, Leanne Timms, Michele Elliot, Alison Rowley.

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