



*Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, exh. cat. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985).

# Feminist Time: A Conversation

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*In the United States, 2007 has been called “the year of feminism” in art. In the first few months alone numerous conferences, journal issues, and exhibitions focused on the topic of art and feminism or, more accurately, feminisms. The most widely publicized events were a conference at the Museum of Modern Art titled “The Feminist Future” and two large surveys, Global Feminisms at the Brooklyn Museum in New York and WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. At a time when art history, including leftist art history, continues to marginalize feminism; when feminism’s social agenda, including for example, reproductive rights, is under attack; when triumphalist modes of encountering and “settling” differences are causing enormous suffering and costing hundreds of thousands of lives; and when, despite such catastrophes, some are declaring that we live in a period of “post-feminism,” understood not as the full absorption of feminist discourses but as the end of feminism, renewed attention to feminism is certainly welcome. Aruna D’Souza and Rosalyn Deutsche invited artists, theorists, and historians Miwon Kwon, Ulrike Müller, Mignon Nixon, and Senam Okudzeto to participate in a discussion about current events. The conversation took place electronically in late May and early June of 2007.*

## Difference

**Rosalyn Deutsche:** The events that make up “the year of feminism” are engaged, among other activities, in writing the history of feminism and, especially, of art’s relation to feminism since the 1960s. Among the issues for our discussion is the nature of their historicizations. How is the past of feminism and art being recollected? We’ve had an opportunity to view interesting and innovative paintings, sculptures, photographs, videos, performances, and installations. However, as Peter Bürger points out, individual works of art aren’t received as single entities but within frameworks that largely determine their meaning. The frames—the exhibitions, panels, conferences, and journals—are writing history, and, as frames, they, like all enclosing structures, are constructed through gestures of exclusion. An obvious exclusion in both *Global*

*Feminisms* and *WACK!* is art by men, an omission that risks confusing work by women with work informed by feminism and of valorizing a gender-exclusive feminism that locates oppression in male persons rather than in masculinist positions of social authority, positions with which women can identify. Historically, there have been good reasons to mount all-women shows but what does it mean to continue this practice?

Another exclusion is the erasure from various lists of precedents for the current feminist exhibitions of *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, curated by Kate Linker and Jane Weinstock at the New Museum in New York in 1984–1985. This might seem an accidental rather than a structural omission, one occasioned merely by the necessity of coping with large amounts of material. However, *Difference* was different from other feminist exhibitions of its day: it was a manifesto show that drew together the work of artists engaged in a politics of representation associated with psychoanalytic and poststructuralist discourses on subjectivity in visual representation, and whatever one’s assessment of this work or these discourses, their appearance represented a certain division or conflict within the field of feminism and art. I wonder whether the neglect of *Difference* during a year of feminism that wants to highlight diversity and celebrate difference stands for a tendency to suppress a particular difference, a specificity, that might be placed under the rubric “the eighties”—if we think of the eighties not as a literal decade but as a formation of ideas and practices that transgresses chronological boundaries. If so, suppression of “the eighties” goes along with another tendency: to look back on the women’s art movement as a time of “raw” vitality and “messiness” that was dampened by the so-called academicization of feminism in the 1980s. In her essay in the *WACK!* catalogue, Abigail Solomon-Godeau calls *Difference* “a benchmark, indicating the emergence of a particular theoretical configuration that implicitly distinguished itself from feminist art-making of the previous ten to fifteen years.” Yet, she concludes that “postmodern articulations of feminism” didn’t really depart from but were rather anticipated by earlier ideas about art and feminism. No doubt similarities exist among different kinds of feminism, but minimizing difference, in the sense of democratic antagonism, and substituting continuity reproduces phallocentrism.

**Aruna D’Souza:** Quite literally, there’s an erasure of the 1980s in this year’s major exhibitions. *WACK!* ends in 1980, and *Global Feminisms* begins in the 1990s, so we have two exhibitions that supposedly frame feminism’s relation to art in which a certain core (Sherrie Levine, Silvia Kolbowski, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, etc.) is missing. The issue is not what made it into the shows and what didn’t—thanks to the peri-

odization of *WACK!* Mary Kelly and Cindy Sherman are included, even though they are associated with postmodern feminism. Rather, you're asking us to consider whether, in its curatorial choices, *WACK!* writes a history of feminist art that lays the groundwork for what happened in the 1980s or effectively erases what came next. And the same would go for *Global Feminisms*. Does this show of post-1990s art ignore that the 1980s happened?

**RD:** The problem isn't simply neglect of the eighties but its corollary: the repression of democratic debate and conflict.

**Miwon Kwon:** Upon my first few visits, I found *WACK!* thrilling. (I taught a graduate seminar around the exhibition this spring, so I went to the show about five times, but I still don't feel that I have seen all that I want to—it's a huge exhibition.) Even though a seeming convergence of activities makes this a "feminism year," we should be careful about making generalizations that collapse distinctly different projects. I don't have a problem with the exclusion of male artists from *WACK!* because adequate acknowledgment of the accomplishments of women artists in museums and the academy continues to be a historical and political necessity. Some might argue, as I have in other contexts, that an identity-exclusive exhibition entrenches the dominant understanding of identity as a fixed social category rather than explodes it as a dynamic and uncertain process of relations. But something powerful happens in *WACK!* because of the exclusion of men. You don't miss them, either as proof that they're engaged with feminism or as a reference point showing that women artists have been as busy as their male counterparts. *WACK!* doesn't come off as a "women artists" show even though it is; it refracts art history in an illuminating way. Saying this might get me into trouble, but I want to insist that not all exclusions are bad. They're not only inevitable, but they're also necessary in order to define positions that can then legitimately engage in discourse. Only when the terms of exclusions are hidden or naturalized do they become a problem.

**RD:** Of course exclusions are necessary, but precisely because they're meaningful it's important that they enter the terrain of contestation. The decision to include only women is problematic not because we miss or don't miss men but because their absence is a major element in the shows' construction of feminism. To map a historical perspective onto feminism and include only women conflates feminism and women. Representation of women in the art world is only one feminist issue. Another, particularly important in the current world situation, is constructing less violent ways of encountering others. I'm concerned about

a correlative effect of the all-woman feminist show—the conflation of men and masculinism—because it’s important to think about the possibility of nonphallic masculinities.

**Ulrike Müller:** From my perspective, the exclusion of men, especially gay and trans men and queer politics, from *Global Feminisms* is very troublesome. The show claims to represent the state of feminism today, but I felt personally offended by its essentialist collapsing of feminism and “woman,” by its neglect of collective and queer efforts, and by its lack of radical sexual politics. Together with K8 Hardy, Ginger Brooks Takahashi, and Emily Roysdon, I edit the annual queer feminist art journal *LTTR*, and I’m part of a vital scene of queer artists here in New York. In a show like *Global Feminisms*, I would have liked to learn about different feminist politics in other countries, but I didn’t, and I didn’t recognize my own approach to queer activism in the show either.

Current accounts of feminism often seem to employ a generational model of history, which was apparent at the “Feminist Future” conference and in Carol Armstrong’s *Artforum* review of *Global Feminism* and *WACK!* This seems to create unproductive categories, a situation in which I find myself cast as the “young feminist.” In my own fraught relationship with identity, I’ve learned a lot about roles. Rather than take a defensive position, I say “yes” to all assumptions about my identity and continue doing what I do, hoping to produce productive queer inconsistencies. There’s not much power in defense, so I agree to perform the “young feminist.” But I also hope that there are feminist ways to think about our movement’s herstories other than in terms of generations, ways to think in simultaneities and continuities. I like to think that I live in a feminist continuum that goes back to feminists groups and radical sexual politics in the 1970s and beyond. The 1970s are not only the starting point for many debates that shaped our current thinking and artistic strategies; they were politically similar to the present—a war overseas and the worst American president ever. The 1970s isn’t a glorious past; it was a terrible time. So the question is: What can we glean from earlier feminisms for our current moment?

**RD:** I, too, have been thinking about the time of feminism. Recently, I characterized feminism as an “event.” For Alain Badiou, an event is something that happens in a situation, something that supplements and reveals the void of the order within which the event takes place—for example, the political order. That seemed right for feminism, and, although Badiou isn’t a feminist, his ethics of “fidelity to the event” seemed important in light of current dismissals of feminism. In part, feminism was an event because it disrupted the phallogentrism of



traditional left political projects, which ground themselves in the authority of solid foundations such as economic relations and struggle, to which all other emancipatory struggles must be subordinated. Feminism introduced a more

democratic form of politics, one capable of continuous transformation as it articulates with other political aims and objects. Joan Scott and Drucilla Cornell have suggested that feminist history takes place in the tense of the future anterior, an order of time that lacks closure because in it the past is conditional on an inconclusive future.<sup>1</sup> The past isn't simply there to be recovered. Rather, past actions gain meaning—they are what will have happened—as feminism mutates into something other. With regard to analogies between feminist history and psychoanalytic models, Lacan has called the future anterior the time of personal history.

**MK:** My *WACK!* seminar read your essay on Kelly.<sup>2</sup> We couldn't agree on whether the "event" should be understood as a historical phenomenon or some sort of intersubjective reckoning. Is the "event" an occurrence of punctuality and locatedness exceeding individual experiences or a psychological process involving a subject's encounter with particular historical, social, or political situations?

**RD:** The event is related to both personal and collective history; it exceeds but also inhabits the subject who is "seized by" it and thereby opened to the otherness of history.

**Senam Okudzeto:** Although, historically, feminism is predominantly a women's movement, it's irresponsible to erase the participation of men. That's like saying that civil rights were most urgent for people of color and presenting a history of civil rights that only includes the actions of people of color. To steer the conversation away from America and Europe, we might consider as an example the work of the South African male queer theorist and activist Zackie Achmat, who has participated in anti-apartheid movements, AIDS activism, and women's rights campaigns. His writings highlight the intertwined nature of struggles for queer and women's rights, and he has brought attention to unknown queer groups such as GALZ in Zimbabwe, who were at times the sole activists fighting against the rape of teenage girls.

While American and European feminism was a point of departure for many non-Western feminists, feminism is now a transnational, transgenerational movement. Perhaps that's why it's so urgent to take



stock of it: it's grown far beyond our ability to comprehend its meaning. Yet I wouldn't be confident about defining contemporary feminism. In 2005, a series of weeklong conferences and exhibitions called *[prologue] new feminism/new Europe* was held in Slovenia, Austria, and the United Kingdom; it aimed to assess the state of feminism in Europe. There was a forced air of solidarity and sisterhood, and many of us restrained ourselves from articulating the fact that although we were all feminists we were sometimes working at cross-purposes. This unspoken schism was most stark in the difference between, on the one hand, the presentations of Eastern European feminists, who felt oppressed by, first, Communism and then the Catholic Church and were desperate for the capitalist opportunities of the European Union states; and, on the other hand, Western feminists, who worked within a Marxist framework and were against capitalist structures of labor and consumerism.

**RD:** You're reminding us that we need to think in terms of feminisms and multiple, sometimes conflicting, feminist projects.

**SO:** Yes, and because of that I'd like to see feminist shows that expand the popular understanding of what feminism might be in more radical directions, because it continues to be an important site for social change across the globe.

**AD:** Perhaps the point is that a truly feminist writing of history might in fact look radically unlike a "feminist art" show. Helen Molesworth's *Part Object, Part Sculpture*, at the Wexner Center in 2005, is an example: the exhibition wasn't limited to artists who define themselves as feminists or to women artists; it didn't define "feminist art"; it didn't have explicitly feminist content. But it reoriented the history of modernist sculpture according to terms that, at their core, destabilize definitions of masculinity, femininity, hetero- and homosexuality, and so on. Or it rewrote that history according to "the problem of cross-identification . . . where masculine/feminine break down, where they cohabit and intersect, where they lose their discreteness."<sup>3</sup> Most exciting was both the possibility of claiming artists such as Duchamp for a feminist rewriting of history—whatever their political or gender identifications—and the demonstration that destabilizing these categories leads to a different writing of history.

Installation view of *Part Object*,  
*Part Sculpture*, Wexner Center  
for the Arts, Ohio State  
University, 30 October 2005  
through 26 February 2006.  
Photo: Sven Kahns.

**Mignon Nixon:** I live in London, so have not had much direct experience of the Year of Feminism (it's not being celebrated here), but I did recently see *WACK!* I was particularly struck by its presentation: the sheer scale contests the supposed marginality of this history. "Stranding" (rather than weaving) seemed to operate as a self-conscious curatorial strategy. Apart from identifying labels for the works themselves, there is no wall text. The show does not aim, indeed declines, to educate the viewer about the history of the women's movement. Nor is there, or could there be, given the scope, an intensive visual argument of the kind Aruna has highlighted in *Part Object/Part Sculpture*. So this is not a "manifesto" show like the *Difference* exhibition, and it's not an "argument" show like *Part Object/Part Sculpture*. I experienced it as a kind of archival show: it gathers an enormous range of work, much of it neglected, and constructs tentative narratives (juxtaposing, for example, Mary Kelly and Ree Morton) that unsettle existing categories of critical and historical reception. But it also seems, in its refusal of argumentation, to expose and dramatize the historical exclusion of many of the works, even as it accords them space—a great big space—they have long been denied. An implication of the show is that one agent of this denial has been feminist scholarship itself. I often hear from "younger" critics and historians about the importance of showing and writing about the work that was omitted from consideration, even written off, by so-called theoretical feminism in their graduate seminars. To that extent, *WACK!* offers a kind of counternarrative to *Difference* and its reception—an alternative archive—but the elision of *Difference* and the critical discourses it stimulated also perhaps prevents arguments, in Rosalyn's sense, from taking shape.

**RD:** Yet *WACK!* doesn't present itself as a counternarrative because it ends in 1979, and therefore its story appears to be chronologically determined.

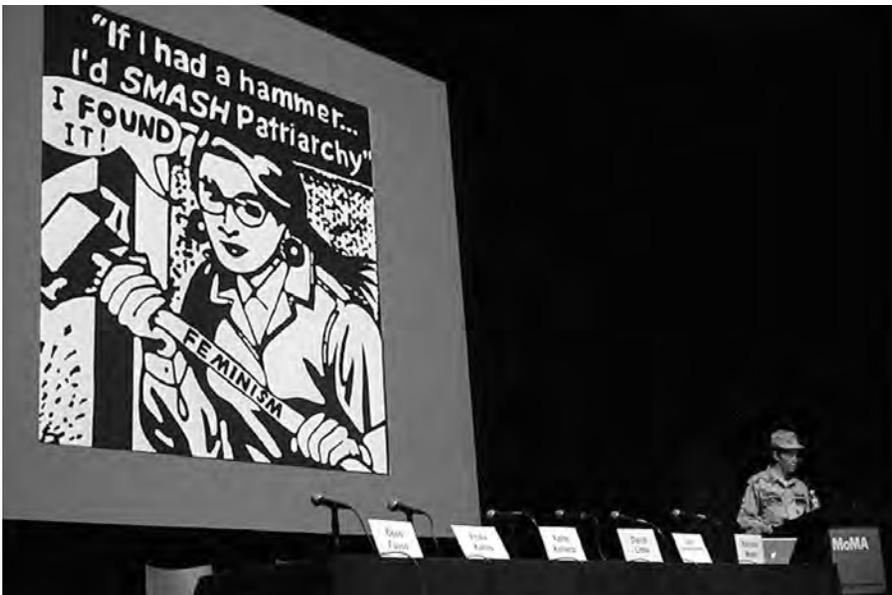
**MN:** Point taken. But if the temporal framing of *WACK!* precludes the possibility of a counternarrative, what it does instead is to contest a narrative that has been seen to ignore work of the 1970s. The implication of this might be to correct the priority assigned to the 1980s in previous histories (by ignoring *that* moment). Alternatively, the *WACK!* effect might be to open up a space of rethinking the 1970s both extensively and intensively, with the aim of prompting new reflections, which in turn might inform different narratives. One shortcoming of this strategy, I would agree, is to defer the writing of integrated histories of art and feminism. But perhaps we're still working through the splitting of these moments. In *Art Journal's* 1999 roundtable on "Contemporary

Feminism,” Helen Molesworth observed, “Feminism in the art world is currently marked by a jagged split between the various practices that comprised 1970s and 1980s feminism. Each accuses the other of unspeakable things: essentialism versus elitism; a naïve view of the body versus no ability to image the body; a recourse to experience versus a recourse to language.”<sup>4</sup> Are we beyond this divide?

**RD:** Surely we can argue about, say, the problem of essentialism and vaginal iconology or the difference between “positive images” and “woman as image” without accusing each other of “unspeakable things.”

**MN:** Speculating about how transference comes into play here might be useful. When feminism became the stuff of university seminars, it became subject to the dynamics of the pedagogic situation, which, being a scene of mastery, is structurally ambivalent. You referred earlier to the perceived academicization of feminism in the 1980s, which is in part an effect of the academic institutionalization of feminism. Although many feminist teachers, both artists and academics, deployed psychoanalytic theory in their work and in their pedagogy to expose questions of authority and mastery, still, transference to a figure “presumed to know,” as Lacan put it, is structural to the pedagogic dynamic and perhaps even to the dynamic of viewing certain kinds of art. This happens even if the artist or teacher disavows the position of mastery—even if that is the explicit aim of the artwork, or the theory, or the seminar. One way to consider the ambivalence and even antagonism that developed toward feminist discourse of the 1980s might be as a response to a perceived authority. The phrase “jagged split” evokes splitting as a defense, a rejection of one model of feminism as bad and the embrace of another as good. My sense is that feminist debates have moved on from such splitting, but transference is still underacknowledged in feminist discourse.

**AD:** I’m struck by the idea of “stranding” as a curatorial approach in *WACK!*—the idea of presenting work within a context of open-ended links to other practices without definitively “weaving” it into a fully articulated historical narrative. But another kind of “stranding,” which Molesworth alluded to in her talk at the 2007 Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) conference, is the condition of women’s art “being stranded” in the museum as a consequence of the fact that the museum as an institution is predicated on its very exclusion.<sup>5</sup> At the very least, we can say that (unfortunately) 1970s and 1980s feminisms share this experience.



**MK:** To say that *WACK!* ignores the 1980s is a bit unfair. Besides the fact that several works dated from the early 1980s, the organization of the exhibition is informed if not determined by the entrenched discursive opposition between one type of feminism and another, as often defined by decades. This division seems to me to be a point of negative reference because many constellations of works in the show actively assert an opposition to it. The show does offer, in that sense, an important counternarrative to the one that I was given as a student, even if it isn't told as clearly or forcefully as one might like. Or, actually, I take that back. At various junctures, the show posits the *possibility* of counternarratives but doesn't offer one itself. To add coverage of the 1980s and early 1990s, for example, would mean that the show could no longer maintain the trope of mapping (or archiving?); it wouldn't be able to avoid telling some kind of historical narrative, making a statement, across generations. I think this is the challenge that *WACK!* chose not to take on, and I think it's okay that it didn't.

### **Globalism**

**AD:** At MoMA's *Feminist Future* symposium, one of the most urgent reactions on the part of the audience was to the relatively Eurocentric bias of the discussions taking place on the stage. Frustration was repeatedly expressed at the organizers' failure to take into account the challenges of postcolonial feminisms. Postcolonial theory does not simply ask that those who occupy the center allow voices from the margins to speak; rather, it requires that the questions spoken from the margins lead to a dislocation of the center, that the center asks different questions of itself. Just as postmodern feminism in the United States argued that simply adding a few women to an exhibition did not make it feminist, postcolonial feminism asks us to think beyond the insufficient act of merely including voices of non-Westerners. Brown faces do not make an event "global." This was painfully obvious at the symposium; Wangechi Mutu and Geeta Kapur courageously pointed out the difficulties of being asked to represent "diversity" at an event that otherwise failed to

interrogate ethnicity, race, and the postcolonial condition from a feminist point of view. Kapur questioned the predictability of the title of the session in which she spoke—"Body/Sexuality/Identity"—and suggested that not only had the conjunction of terms been worked through a decade earlier in Euro-American feminist discourse but it predetermined the political and historical positions from which to speak. She suggested that by introducing a new set of terms, such as "citizenship, language, and gender," we might open a space for race, ethnicity, and postcolonialism to speak to the project of feminism. The larger point is: Does the current institutionalization of feminism's impact on artistic practice since the 1970s take into account postcolonial challenges and opportunities? Is what we're seeing in the exhibitions and events currently on view "global" in a meaningful sense?

**RD:** The injunction to "go global" sometimes puzzles me because of its generality. While the injunction tends in a good direction, and one doesn't want to argue against it, what it means and how it accords with the ethicopolitical imperative to recognize the limits of our knowledge is not always clear. I felt this at *Global Feminisms* and during Griselda Pollock's talk at MoMA.<sup>6</sup> The question of citizenship would productively reorient the discussion, bringing together feminist inquiry with contemporary discourse about "cosmopolitics," understood as an alternative project to both nationalism and corporate globalization. Approaching questions about, say, transnational democracy and international justice, feminism could contribute to debates about human rights, asking, for example, once we've interrogated the universalist ground of traditional notions of human rights (and certain feminisms have been crucial to this interrogation), what is the basis for an international human rights policy? We have to think not only about the citizen but also the noncitizen and the refugee, whom Giorgio Agamben calls the political subject of our time.<sup>7</sup>

**SO:** Being a professional artist of any gender or cultural background is pretty much a global pursuit these days (given that every country in the world insists on having a biennial or an art fair). Artists who aren't represented "globally" aren't "successful." First we must decide who we aim to represent—an international elite of migrant artists or marginalized artists? The Brooklyn show chose artists who have a certain international cache.

**MK:** It's probably true that "white" still dominates. But what's fascinating in the globalization discussions is the emergence of what anthropologist Aihwa Ong calls the "flexible citizen,"<sup>8</sup> a new elite with the financial,



political, cultural, and linguistic resources not only to move across territories and institutions but to function in a new social order based on capacity for continuous mobility and translation. I can't help but think of the emergent class of international and biennial-circuit artists as such "flexible citizens."

**SO:** "Going global" might have a catchy, revolutionary ring, but it often represents the prejudices of global capital rather than cultural activity outside of Western centers. *Global Feminisms*, with its market consciousness, conservative choice of works, neutralizing installation and, more sad, patronizing treatment of participating artists, was marked by tokenism and hubris, to my mind. The South African artist Tracey Rose brought up an important issue at the Brooklyn Museum symposium, giving a performance entitled "The Cant Show"—meaning that the artist can't show under these conditions. The performance staged a dialogue between two glove puppets:

Ladies and Gentlemen what you are about to hear, are not necessarily the views of the artist.

Mmm . . . Mmmmm . . .

Did you say it . . . ?

I spoke it with you.

Did you hear why she said why she wouldn't show her work

— She said if she was a man she wouldn't have to be a tour guide and she said that she shows her work to be seen not to be explained by her.

— Oh.

— But there's lots of artists here

— Yes

— Adrian Piper's here.

— No, she's not

— Yes she is

— No she's not she's dead

— She's DEAD?

— Yes Barbara Kruger killed her

— Oh, I had no idea

— So what are we doing here?

— They needed some colour.

— And besides it was a movement for white women.

— They said they were fighting men.

— But they give birth to white men

- They marry them
- They fuck them.<sup>9</sup>

Rose's comment about being a tour guide alluded to the fact that while the museum made funds available for travel, artists received no fees or per diems and were required to give twenty-minute public talks in return. These demands may seem to apply to everyone equally, but they fall with disparate impact on artists from poor countries. The sting of Rose's intervention was diluted by dint of its being presented as a "performance" and therefore easily dismissed as a fictional construction commenting on the past. In fact it was a direct and angry response to immediate events.

**AD:** Most reactions to *Global Feminisms* have asked, "Is this what feminist art looks like today?" but little attention has been paid to the way in which the "global" of the show's title is used. The word seems to have a flattening effect. Maura Reilly says in her introduction to the catalog that her intention was to emphasize differences in the worldwide feminist project, but the works seemed little connected to local particularities.<sup>10</sup> The exhibition as it was installed did not make clear what differentiates South Asian feminist politics from South Korean, or West African from West German. The goal of demonstrating solidarity came at the expense of specificity, it seems. This is part of a broader problem in which museums, universities, and publications deploy the idea of "the global" to show interest in transnational networks and exchanges without recognizing the ways in which it often reproduces the negative social and political effects of economic globalization. *Global Feminisms* drew its works from international art fairs and biennials and is thus an *effect* of the economic globalization of the art world, a fact that went unacknowledged in the show itself.

We need to think about a different conception of global politics, one outside the fully interdependent terms of globalization and nationalism. I like Kapur's suggestion of citizenship, which allows for both Edward Said's notion of the exile as the representative subject of modernity and a site of critical speech and Agamben's notion of the refugee. Still, we need to ask what distinguishes feminist politics from other kinds of politics. In most of the world, including the United States, poverty, immigration and refugee status, and armed conflict are pressing feminist issues—if for no other reason than that their effects are felt most gravely by women. Yet they aren't generally seen as feminist spheres of operation in the same way as, say, reproductive rights, equality, rape, and domestic violence. If feminism defines its politics at these sites, does it risk losing its specific identity? And what would an exhibition



organized around these terms look like?

**RD:** Specifically feminist approaches to issues like war and immigration are available—approaches based, for example, on a critique of mastery,

with its violence toward others and otherness. Other examples include Virginia Woolf's exhortation to ridicule warlike, masculine attitudes in all areas of life, such as the professions, and Juliet Mitchell's psychoanalytic exploration of war and sexuality. At least some of the problems you've both brought up might be solved by organizing a global feminisms show around political categories—for example, rape, domestic violence, reproductive rights, citizen and refugee, AIDS, poverty, homophobia, and so on—instead of relegating politics to one category among others. An exhibition could focus on feminism and the *politics* of globalization. Of course that leaves the “art” part of the triangulated terrain untheorized, but such an exhibition might make the “global” part more meaningful.

**SO:** Aruna, your critique of the market-driven understanding of “global” in *Global Feminisms* is spot on. Many artists have made works related to specific feminist concerns in their countries of origins, but these works were overlooked.

**RD:** I saw Tracey Rose's performance at the Brooklyn symposium; it raised important questions, but the sting Senam refers to was diluted less by the ability to dismiss it as a fictional performance and more by its hostility and, to some extent, illegibility. People in the audience weren't necessarily aware, for instance, of what Rose meant by being a “tour guide.” I wasn't until you explained the conditions imposed on certain artists. Also, to say, even metaphorically, that Barbara Kruger “killed” Adrian Piper is incredibly polarizing. And what does it mean to suggest that white women's feminism is compromised by the fact that they give birth to white men? What was the function of such rhetorical strategies?

**SO:** I'm glad that you've raised the difficult issue of the language in Rose's work. She was basically stating that artists of color presented in the show were made to feel inferior and annexed to white women artists. Her crude language was a performative exaggeration of the feelings evoked by the collapsing of sisterhood into divisive categories of “them”

and "us." I'm not saying that Rose was employing some great Brechtian strategy, but I wonder how it felt for white women in the audience to hear accusations against them? Did it provoke a need to investigate? Or did the audience merely think that it was a performance referring to a now-defunct historical racial hierarchy? Also, once again, Rose transgressed the unspoken taboo against mentioning social and political divisions in feminist practice. As for the "they give birth to white men" stuff, I think the artist was simply saying that the Sackler Center had re-created the structures of mainstream, patriarchal institutions and therefore artists of color were fetishized and marginalized, as had happened a million times before.

**RD:** Your interpretation of "they give birth to white men" is helpful. Again, I don't think that the performance nature of the piece caused it to be dismissed and certainly not as a reference to merely historical problems. That Rose was attacking the event in which she was participating was crystal clear. In fact, her performance wasn't dismissed but was taken up by other panelists and members of the audience. Some people raised questions about the centrality of *The Dinner Party*, whose Eurocentrism they felt was not overcome by *Global Feminisms*. I'm sure that different white women in the audience felt differently. I felt both troubled and investigatory. I hadn't seen the show yet, and it alerted me to potential problems. I'm happy to see the taboo on mentioning divisions broken. But I continue to find the Barbara Kruger comment very troubling because Kruger has worked so hard to attack the monological voice of Western discourses.

**SO:** One of the main problems is a tendency to celebrate cultural difference by proving that we're all the same, which we're not. The overall effect is to provoke "tolerance" in audiences, meaning that the "global" in *Global Feminisms* and in other celebrations of "globalization" does away with difference. Categories of difference are cited but assimilated into a larger project that is really about sameness. Other sites for feminist activity appear as satellites of the central discourse, which makes the central placement of the Judy Chicago piece even more symbolic.

**MN:** It seems important that *WACK!* is also international in perspective. What does it mean to tell a "global" story of "art and the feminist revolution" in the 1970s? I expected feminist responses to the American-Vietnam War to play a more prominent role. Not only is the important question of artistic identity at stake in the "global," but so are interventions themselves.



**UM:** Questions around global alliances and growth have arisen in my work with *LTTR*, more so with its increased visibility and with our participation in film festivals and group shows abroad, most recently the Documenta journals

project. There are tensions between the “international art world” and the specific locus of our lived relationships, on which our practice is built. These relationships are not necessarily geographically local, but they are centered on North American cities and events, where friends live or gather, even if it’s just for one night. While the notion of an “international community of freaks” is a powerful fantasy, we had to realize that our project grows slowly, through aligning sensibilities and “recruiting” (in the Lesbian Avengers tradition). Decontextualization leads to misunderstandings. We have to think about how to transport ethics, to perform radical sexual politics outside of our community, to establish queer situations that are open for strangers to participate in.

Representation isn’t a primary function of *LTTR*. Our politics are more attuned to performance and to creating spaces with and for each other. I’m familiar with the problems of being an artist in an international setting and understand what Senam says, but working with *LTTR* has changed “my” art world in significant ways. Art institutions sometimes provide welcome support, but they aren’t fundamental to my art production or the exclusive spaces of its distribution.

**RD:** When you say that representation isn’t a primary function of *LTTR*, do you mean representation in the art world?

**UM:** Yes, but also that *LTTR*’s political model is not one of speaking for others, not a representational model in terms of representing a group and its interests and needs to a “broader public.”

**AD:** Going back to Tracey Rose: let’s talk about her interruption of the measured discussion of the symposium with something hostile, aggressive, and argumentative. Whether or not the critique of the show and of “white” feminism was valid, the introduction of anger into that discursive space seems important. Anger is argument and an insistence on the conflicts embedded in the contemporary project of feminism, right?

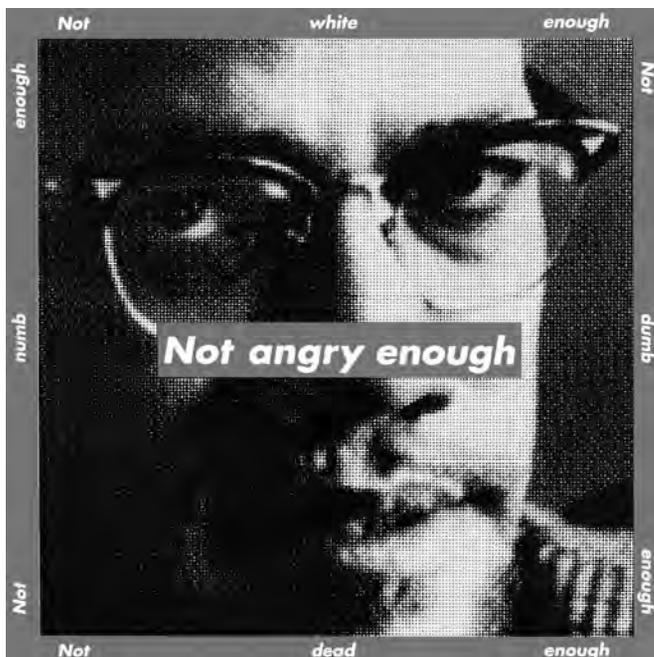
**MK:** Expressions of anger aren’t necessarily productive. Anger can be a great motivator, of course, but it’s an emotion, not an argument. Also at issue is the irrational “angry woman” stereotype, which one would not want to confirm. While I appreciate efforts to call out the terms of unfair

hierarchies, or outright racism even (I've certainly had my share of being on the receiving end of them), I wonder how productive the performance was in making the situation legible to people who weren't aware of it and in contributing to future change.

**AD:** But it was legible to *some* members of the audience: Many black feminists probably *do* think that

"Barbara Kruger killed Adrian Piper," meaning that an insistence on "difference" works in fact to negate the social realities of race and class. On the one hand, we can say, "but Lorna Simpson's work, for one, shows how understanding the operations of language and subjectivity doesn't work to exclude race." But I don't think that adequately addresses the deep alienation of a lot of black artists, because whatever the legitimacy of this point as an intellectual position, many basic issues of social and institutional bias have not been overcome. Senam makes reference to this problem when she discusses the deeply segregated nature of the art world and its failure to take into sufficient account issues of access, and in his review of *WACK!* Holland Cotter noted the relative lack of African-Americans in the show.<sup>11</sup>

**RD:** Surely it's important to be self-critical about whom we select as the objects of our anger. The idea that "Barbara Kruger killed Adrian Piper" polarizes two important artists and diverts attention from the real sources of racism in the art world. To say that Kruger's so-called insistence on difference is inimical to "reality" is especially unfair because Kruger has consistently aligned her work with concrete political struggles. The larger issue is that the target of such a statement isn't really Kruger but all "eighties" feminist work (again, understood not as a date but a configuration). I don't understand how "insistence on difference" negates social realities of race and class. Does work that challenges the blindness and deafness to others that constitute individual and collective narcissism, that questions aggression in the sense of the obliteration of others, and that asks us to account for ourselves have nothing to do, in a period of war, with social reality? To invoke "social reality" as though its boundaries are self-evident is to wield it as a powerful tool that forces into unreality those who want to expand reality to embrace language and the psychical and who want to refer to realities that can't be encountered from a position of full understanding. Does Kara Walker's



Barbara Kruger. *Untitled*  
(*Not angry enough*), 1999.  
Photographic silkscreen on  
vinyl, 109 x 109 in. Courtesy of  
Mary Boone Gallery, New York.

exploration of the psychic legacies of slavery negate the social reality of race? Different feminist struggles don't necessarily exist in a relationship of negation.

**AD:** You're right to point out that Kruger can't be held responsible for the continuing inequalities of the art world. But whatever the political potentialities of "eighties" feminist art, it largely failed to galvanize young women artists of color. This isn't a failure of young black artists to understand the implications of postmodern feminism but a condition of such artwork and its own role in constituting its audience.

**SO:** I would agree that black feminists haven't rejected Kruger (and 1980s feminism generally) because they misunderstand that work. Rather, I think they have a sense that such work fails to include them. There is a cultural conflict here between what Kruger, for example, was asking of her viewers is in conflict with what artists of color were willing to accommodate: black women were not about to give up what they had yet to receive. Imagine what it would have meant to install Kruger's *Shop 'Til You Drop* on 125th Street in Harlem—a neighborhood that until recently had been ignored by retailers, banks, and other providers of consumer services. I for one wish her work could travel across the cultural divide, but we simply aren't there yet.

There remains a great deal of unvoiced frustration among nonwhite artists, feminist or otherwise. The art world is behind the rest of society in resolving social issues, although it offers a great mouthpiece for voicing them, perhaps because it's accepted that avant-gardism means being in conflict with society. Social divisions remain stark, and a large number of commercially successful artists address them—Kara Walker, David Hammons, Fred Wilson, et al. But does a rich white collector buy a Kara Walker and then perform an act of social service in a minority community?

I and many of my black colleagues are aligned with the values of the commercial art world even though we feel excluded and critical of its structure. Why don't we simply turn our back on it and create our own networks, ones that reflect values closer to our own? Because the footprint of the civil rights movement fuels a drive toward assimilation. We are struggling for a validation that historically we didn't receive from institutions and which they now deliver in stingy portions. Black American history in part defines itself in dialogue with white America. I think that's why Rose had to do her performance. Coming from a post-apartheid society, she must have found the hypocrisy of the Sackler debacle insufferable, but the cultural legacy of civil rights meant that she couldn't turn her back on the institution that she fought so hard to get into, in spite of the fact that it was treating her badly. So anger

became the body of her work. She's dying for her anger to become productive. Because of the mythology that art opposes rigid, fixed structures, it's difficult for art to recognize its own racialized and gendered exclusions.

**RD:** Your question about the rich white collector of Kara Walker brings up the issue of social change and of art's relation to social change; it also raises the question of the location of politics. I think we need to be wary of believing in the existence of a pure politics that exists apart from aesthetics, a politics to which art should aspire, thus cleansing itself of the aesthetic. Current discussions about art and politics often return to this belief, which worries me because recourse to a pure politics can result in attempts to achieve the political by doing away with it, if by the political we mean contest rather than certainty about the meaning of the social order. When the viewer of Walker's work examines her own implication in racism, isn't that a form of social change? I'd like to see feminism continue its tradition of problematizing politics—a tradition I think it shares with democratic movements—rather than return to politics in its authoritarian form or simply polemicize.

**AD:** Senam, how do the issues of globalization, transnational exchange, diasporic cultures, and the postcolonial condition translate into your own practice?

**SO:** My childhood experience as a culturally mixed political refugee informs my work. I encode biographical experiences and use my knowledge of displacement to convey the fluidity of identities and the ambiguous space between identity and identification. Recent works refer to commodity fetishism; they use material objects to criticize global capitalism through the lens of a transnational African subject. Because there's a lot of humor in my work, I sometimes think "African Dada" might be a good description. To deal with my frustration with the mainstream art world, but at the same time utilize the support it gives me, I recently formed an NGO in Ghana, called "Art in Social Structures," that provides university scholarships and funding for small businesses and social development projects. We're prejudiced toward the needs of women but don't serve them exclusively. We're funded solely by artists' donations, as we aim to show that artists can be both commercially successful and socially involved. I'm critical of the market and refuse to be





Opposite: Kara Walker. *Hysteria! Savagery! Passions!*, 2006. Gouache and paper collage on panel, 45.7 x 50.8 cm.

Left: Senam Okudzeto. *Portes-Oranges*, 2005–2007. Installation consisting of a video, seven metal fruit-sellers' stands and one thousand oranges. Photo: Matthew Septimus.

represented by a dealer. Art-world institutions are a limited place to realize social change.

That said, I continue to work with art institutions, hoping that I can realize projects on my own terms or at least start a critical dialogue. I recently showed a piece called *Portes Oranges* at PS1 that included a thousand oranges, seven metal sculptures, and a video. The video shows women

on a roadside in Ghana peeling oranges and displaying them for sale. The “sculptures” were actually handmade metal stands, which the Ghanaian women design and use to sell their products. The audience was invited to eat the oranges as they watched the video. The work documented a new women’s economy that is tied to African urbanization. The work’s subtext was the need for new images of Africa that are socially critical but don’t perpetuate the idea of Africa as a continent in a state of permanent crisis, be it war, famine, or disease. I was horrified when my work was vandalized five times by visitors. I insisted on repeatedly installing the work, which became a performance. What does it mean that an overtly feminist work presenting images of African women, without anger or accusation, became a site of violence by the audience? I’ve been infected with a sense of urgency ever since. Perhaps this explains my desire to discuss Rose’s performance.

## War

**UM:** Where does the current feminist wave come from? Why have feminism and feminist art been taken up by so many institutions and curators this year? Why is this history being written and rewritten now? I haven’t observed an equivalent explosion of grassroots feminist movements. What desires and needs inform this trend? Could it be a displacement of a desire for radical politics, especially for a radical antiwar politics, which we so urgently need? Has there been a turn to the 1960s and 1970s because those decades saw significant countercultural, antiwar, and civil rights movements? Is feminist art just easier to fit into museums than the politics that informs and surround it?

**MK:** It’s hard to avoid the sense that all of a sudden there’s widespread institutional interest in feminism. But shows on the scale of *WACK!* and *Global Feminisms* require years of preparation. So we might ask what in the past five to ten years prepared the grounds for the current moment. I think that the current enthusiasm for feminism reflects a desire to

forge some sense of agency in relation not only to authoritarianism and intense violence but to the scale and force of geopolitical and economic transformations that make us feel pretty small. I agree that the turn to feminism is part of a broader turn to the 1960s and 1970s for some hope, to find something we feel we lack today.

**AD:** That feeling of powerlessness is palpable. At the MoMA conference it appeared largely as nostalgia for the 1970s, but of course the problem with nostalgia is that it often paralyzes political possibilities in the present moment.

**MK:** Enthusiasm for feminism also relates to the globalized art market and the changed conditions of museum politics over the past ten years or so. Exhibitions of art and feminism on the spectacular scale of the Brooklyn and LAMOCA shows signal not only institutional legitimation (or containment) but also viability in the marketplace. Is this a problem or a sign of accomplishment? In *Art Incorporated* Julian Stallabrass says that the multiculturalist and identity politics of the late 1980s through the 1990s, while challenging the dominant ideologies of art institutions, also helped prepare the way for the globalized network of the art market today.<sup>12</sup>

**AD:** The market is crucial, not just in explaining the spectacular nature of the exhibitions but the choices within them. Both shows concentrate on the kind of work that is easily traded in the marketplace at the expense of more ephemeral practices, which again limits the kinds of feminist politics on display.

**MN:** In November 2001, at a conference entitled “Women Artists at the Millennium,” organized by Carol Armstrong, Linda Nochlin predicted that one response to the 9/11 attacks would be a revival of heroic masculinity. She urged the audience to rededicate itself to questions of feminism. My assumption is that *Global Feminisms* is in part Nochlin’s response to the political situation she foresaw. The exclusion of male artists might obscure one aim of such an exhibition, which is to examine, critique, and reimagine masculinity.

**RD:** Linda’s warning was prescient and has become even more urgent since the launching of the Iraq War. Masculinism has also been re-consolidated in some sectors of the left; that is, the pressing nature of the world situation is invoked to legitimate a return to leftist political analyses that refuse feminist theorizations of the political. For example, in a situation that cries out for critiques of triumphalism and the will to

mastery, at a time when the pursuit of security and the fantasy of invulnerability have become self-evident virtues, psychoanalytic feminism is treated as politically expendable. Silvia Kolbowski has expressed bafflement, which I share, at the way in which theoretical and journalistic discourses on the left dismiss the role played by the psychical dimension in accounting for torture, racism, nationalism, and the spectacle. I'm glad you mentioned Linda's comment because it provides a good answer to the question of "Why feminism now?" and shifts the question in a different direction: from "Why are we witnessing an interest in feminism?" to "Why is feminism necessary?" The comment makes the current "year of feminism" more important, even as it makes the various feminist events' suppression of psychoanalytic feminism more problematic.

**MN:** This year, I've been teaching a graduate seminar on "War" that takes a psychoanalytic-feminist perspective. One of the texts we read is Jacqueline Rose's *Why War?*—written partly as a reflection on the first Gulf War. You've quoted it in your own criticism, Rosalyn, highlighting its account of an "ethics of failure." "Hang on to failure," Rose advises, "if you want to avoid going to war."<sup>13</sup> Rose is echoing Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*, which offers a feminist reflection on war as arising from vanity, egotism, and megalomania. You've written about the ways in which Kolbowski, Kruger, and Lawler use failure, inadequacy, and humor as strategies to mark the place of the unconscious, and of memory, in the writing of history. Nochlin's prediction was a foreboding about a psychic-political trend; it seemed to suggest that the call to action might overcome words or representation, which is of course the very logic of war. One of the things we see now on the left is an almost frantic insistence on political "action." Yet the culture of war is precisely one of action privileged over—drowning out—speech. So perhaps one of most important things to do now is speak, to put language at stake.

**RD:** What do your remarks about speech and action imply about the need for protest against the Iraq War, which in standard activist rhetoric is often seen as "action" by contrast with, say, discourse or critique? Perhaps we need to rethink "activism" in the wake of the last two or three decades of interrogation—and expansion—of the meaning of the political, interrogation that calls into question assumptions about "action" and "goals," two key terms of activism and therefore of "activist art."

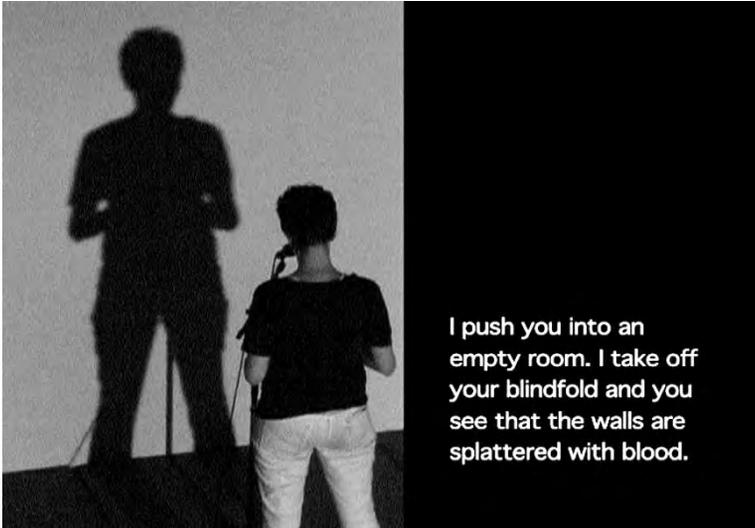
**MN:** You make a crucial point. Let's take the example of the Drawing Center and the stand that its former director, Catherine de Zegher, took

over censorship in her efforts to relocate the institution to the former World Trade Center site.<sup>14</sup> Here the issue was free speech. De Zegher asserted that no art institution could consent to a demand for self-censorship, or censorship by proxy, by excluding in advance works of art that might be perceived as critical of the government. It seems significant that it was criticism—even potential criticism—not activism, that instigated the objections of conservative critics. The “interrogation and expansion of the political” was certainly not lost on *them*.

**RD:** What other texts are you using in your course on war?

**MN:** We’re looking at the history of psychoanalysis as itself shaped by the cultural situation of war, so we read Freud, Klein, Lacan, and Franco Fornari, but we also consider more recent psychoanalytic writings, such as Juliet Mitchell’s study *Mad Men and Medusas*, which considers the persistent coupling of sexual violence and war violence.<sup>15</sup> In art, Nancy Spero made that disturbing conjuncture the focus of her *War Series*, on the American-Vietnam War, and it’s interesting to consider Mitchell and Spero together in that both concentrate on the hysterical logic of war—in which agents are stimulated to act out fantasies of destruction. Mitchell’s book came out in 2000 but could be a primer for understanding Abu Ghraib, particularly in its construction of “war sexuality” as a form of “hysterical sexuality” in which something violent is sexualized (and not only in men, of course, as we’ve seen at Abu Ghraib and as Spero’s *War Series* made explicit).

**UM:** I’ve been thinking about Freud’s emphasis on the heightened and altered status of “life” in times of war. Could a connection be made between the Vietnam War and the phenomenological focus in art in the 1960s and 1970s? Do we feel our bodies more, or in a different way, when we know that people are killing and being killed? My performance and video piece *LOVE/TORTURE*, in which I use the media language around Abu Ghraib and language from S/M literature, addresses these questions. *LOVE/TORTURE* is written in the first person singular, and I perform it with my back to the audience, with a shadow projected on the wall, so I’m physically present but not inhabiting the first person vis-à-vis the audience. The text moves in short paragraphs and long moments of silence along a pain/pleasure continuum; it suspends the question about consent that ultimately distinguishes between a sexual act and an act of torture. It was important to me to shift the attention and identify with the role of the perpetrator rather than the victim. On a personal level, this is also a reaction to my being Austrian and to the way in which the Nazi past was dealt with in my upbringing. There



Ulrike Müller. *LOVE/TORTURE*, 2005. Performance-based video.

I push you into an empty room. I take off your blindfold and you see that the walls are splattered with blood.

wasn't a reflection on what it meant to be part of the perpetrators' culture; it was easier to feel sorry for and deplore the victims.

**MN:** When the Abu Ghraib photographs were released,

Slavoj Žižek wrote that these images, in particular the one of the hooded figure with outstretched arms connected to wires, could almost be mistaken for a document of performance art.<sup>16</sup> A staged scenario of torture that is constructed to be photographed—a performance still—is a blatant example of the intersection between war sexuality and hysterical sexuality. That this coupling is pervasive in wartime was confirmed by the fact that the pictures had limited shock value in Washington, by comparison with the frenzy stirred, at the height of the culture wars, by photographs and performance stills in which “perverse” sexual gestures *not* involving torture were represented. Your performance video seems to reflect on a set of connections—war sexuality and hysterical sexuality, torture and perversity—that have been assimilated with seeming ease by many so-called cultural conservatives in this war, as was also the case in the Vietnam era.

### Generations

**RD:** I'd like to return to the question of generations, because it's central to the activity of historicization and is also present in our discussion, which has made me acutely aware that I'm an “older” feminist, though I don't look back on the 1970s as a golden age. What Ulrike referred to as the continuum of feminist practice is important, though probably because I'm such a Benjaminian I prefer the term “ongoing process,” because it seems more able to take account of conflicts and ruptures. Whichever term we use, however, doesn't it imply something transgenerational, some way of thinking about how identification with feminism takes place across time even if we recognize that generations are not internally homogeneous?

**UM:** The generational model can't account for the way subjectivities change. Change happens at different moments in different locations, socially and geographically. Even, or perhaps even *more*, in our global world social change requires locally specific attention. And the generational model is related to anxieties and cultural pressures around age and aging. I wish for a different feminist way of thinking about history and of relating to each other.

**MK:** The underlying premise of the generational model is reductive in its presumption of unidirectional progress, and by extension promotes a linear conception of time. We know the devastating impact of such thinking in, for instance, colonialist and imperialist discourses, which position “the other” as the past of the West. So I share the view that such models need to be deconstructed and rethought. But we still have to attend to the simple fact that certain things happen before other things, certain people have lived before other people, certain thoughts have been formulated prior to other thoughts, certain things are possible today that weren’t possible in the past. Synchronic mapping of shared sensibilities, affinities, or alliances—simultaneities and continuities as Ulrike mentioned—doesn’t adequately overcome the generational model. Often such efforts, which privilege lateral models of association/relations/coexistence/networks, mistake withdrawal from or rejection of the diachronic as critical work on history. But it isn’t. The burden to *really* rethink specific historical processes is simply avoided. I don’t think the generational model is to be thrown out but rather theorized differently.

**RD:** Yes, we should put “generation” in quotation marks, problematizing rather than erasing it. As an older feminist, I think I relate differently to the current feminist events because it’s my past that’s being written as history, and that’s somewhat alarming. Of course, less literally, it’s also the past of “younger” feminists, but don’t they face different problems—for example, that of claiming a relationship to events in which they didn’t participate? I think of a work like Sharon Hayes’s *In the Near Future*, in which the artist went out in public holding up signs with slogans from earlier protest movements—“I am a man,” “Ratify the E.R.A.,” and so on. Hayes’s work seems to pose the problem of retroactive, transgenerational identification. Another area in which generations matter is teaching, where I have to think about passing on feminisms. This doesn’t simply mean transmitting information, because, as Rancière suggests, we’re always teaching what we don’t know as students receive information in ways other than we give it. Therefore we’re always, one hopes, fostering the growth of something unknown.

Ulrike, couldn’t your plea to build relationships that relinquish the notion of self-identity hold for the relationship between generations? If we think of generations not as entities but as relations, we can move away from causal linearity toward multidirectional models of history. If, as in the future anterior order of time, earlier generations are defined as “what they will have been for what they are in the act of becoming” and if the same is true for earlier feminism, then we avoid idealizing the past or remaining attached to frozen political analyses and demanding



in a paternal, perhaps even maternal, manner that younger feminists identify with some supposedly true feminism.

**UM:** The thought of generations as relationships is inspiring and responds to a desire I have about history and its agents, those whose histories are written and especially those who struggle to write their own against the big simple time-lines. As Ginger Brooks Takahashi points out in an editorial in *LTTR*, the question of how we pass on knowledge is especially important in a community “that does not reproduce.”<sup>17</sup> Thinking of generations as relationships seems a productive way to make a place for personal interactions without abstracting the personal as purely individual; it acknowledges collectively shaped and changing beliefs, emotions, and subjectivities, without reducing us to mere representatives of our moment in history, members of “our generation.” Again, a double move: How can we relate to these terms and retain agency toward and within them?

*LTTR* has always considered archive building part of our practice. We put out open calls for submissions and edit artwork into an annual journal that we present to contributors, friends, and anyone who wants to come out, often in performance events. While we’re concerned with the contemporary moment, there’s also a historical impulse and a desire to be on record as a creative social force. We learned to always put a year on posters and flyers for our events. There is an awareness of the (future) value of ephemera and of the historicity of what we’re organizing.

**MN:** Lisa Tickner has written about the “mother-daughter plot” in art and art history, quoting Woolf’s famous line, “we think back through our mothers if we are women.”<sup>18</sup> Feminism analyzes and contests patterns of affiliation that are defined, in patriarchy, by oedipal rivalry between father and sons. Your comment, Ulrike, about the inspiration you find in models of intergenerational relating that exceed reproduction brings into play other fantasies—arising, for instance, from sisterhood, from kinship or kindred feeling in a wider social sense. That old feminist slogan, “Sisterhood is powerful” sounds nostalgic and naively affirmative now. Yet, “sisterhood,” understood not as an essential female identity but as a gender positioning that intersects “the mother-daughter plot,” seems a potentially useful resource for feminism at a moment when feminist discourse seems to be stuck on questions of transmission, reception, and legacy, betraying, perhaps, a rather oedipal anxiety about feminism’s future.

**RD:** At *The Feminist Future*, Griselda Pollock spoke, in the name of sexual difference, about what she called “the structural futurity” of feminism.

She said that “femininity” stands for the giving of life to others who will outlive me. I don’t especially like the equation of femininity with maternity, but do you think she was asserting a generational model that differs from the oedipal one? Or was she betraying what you call an oedipal anxiety about the future?

**AD:** And how does the psychoanalytic model of relationships operate when the relationships are not simply between genders but between classes, between races/ethnicities, between colonial conditions, and so on?

**MN:** In her recent book *Siblings: Sex and Violence*, Juliet Mitchell draws on anthropological studies of kinship to address this limitation of psychoanalysis: what might be called its oedipal fixation. The vertical model of oedipal relations, Mitchell contends, is privileged in psychoanalysis to the detriment of rigorous analysis of lateral relationships, as between siblings and cousins or, in social terms, peers (citizens, equals). So one might say that where the family opens onto the social, in psychoanalysis this is constructed as an intergenerational/oedipal event, but it could also be treated as an intragenerational event in which relationships of what Mitchell calls “minimal difference” (as compared to “maximal difference”) are also considered.<sup>19</sup> This rereading of psychoanalysis for its omissions of the sibling nexus seems to me potentially very useful for feminism. Yet, I think Pollock is right to restate the significance of sexual difference in debates around the futurity of feminism, even though I have reservations about the preeminence of the maternal in that description. For of course it’s not a contest between sexual difference and gender difference but an interaction that needs to be articulated.

**RD:** It’s important to stress that Mitchell doesn’t advocate replacing the vertical, generational model with the lateral, sibling model but, rather, thinking them together. And her ideas about the competitive nature of unconscious sibling relations are a far cry from an idealized notion of sisterhood that disavows and defends against aggression.

**AD:** At *The Feminist Future*, “mother-daughter” relationships were being wielded like great big oedipal/patriarchal clubs . . .

**MN:** I wasn’t able to attend *The Feminist Future*, but that title suggests to my ear some anxiety about whether feminism has a future and whether the future is in good hands. A generational paradigm risks privileging some originary, or at least primary, moment of feminism.

**RD:** Must generational paradigms always privilege an originary moment? What if we treat all moments of feminism in a Nietzschean, genealogical manner, as sites of division and struggle rather than wholeness and purity, and, as you suggest, attend to the imaginary investments that constitute all moments?

**UM:** In her presentation at *The Feminist Future*, Helen Molesworth also used “sisterhood” as a way to think feminist relations. In response to the widespread use of the term *sisterhood* in the 1970s, bell hooks warns of its potential to erase difference under the banner of common oppression of all women regardless of race and class. She points out that sisterhood is only viable as bonding based on shared strength and resources.<sup>20</sup> This difference seems crucial when returning to the term. But I’m also trying to understand how this model can include temporary and promiscuous modes of affiliation.

**AD:** Ironically, given the title, the overarching ethos of *The Feminist Future* seemed to be anxiety (on the part of MoMA and the audience, more than the speakers themselves) about the inscription of feminism as a historical past as opposed to a current or future practice. The conference was an overdetermined event for the audience, which was filled with artists, critics, and curators active in the early 1970s, and the question periods were filled by women asserting their roles in that history. There was nostalgia, yes, but also hostility toward a “younger” generation of feminists, a recurring claim that we (I include myself) were not adequately taking up the feminist banner. This, too, is ironic given the work that younger curators and artists like those in *LTTR* are doing to recover lost-to-history practices from that historical moment.

### **Femininities and Masculinities**

**UM:** I’m interested in what Rosalyn says about the possibility of non-phallic masculinities. It’s not enough to simply bemoan the exclusion of men from accounts of feminism. The problem lies with constructions of feminism that assume a purely feminine woman (or purely masculine man). A major contribution to current feminist politics comes from genderqueer and transgender positions, from the embodied everyday refusal to conform to binary norms, from a lived desire to destabilize patriarchy that radically affects bodies and language, sexualities and language. Genderqueer subjectivities deeply affect the use of language, casting doubt on the stability of categories like “women” or “lesbians.” *Shared Women*—a group show at LACE in Los Angeles that coincided with *WACK!*—and *LTTR* both use this strategy. *LTTR* is a changing acronym that in the first issue stood for “Lesbians to the Rescue.” These

titles refer to identities but in a way that exceeds “identity politics.” They understand the necessity for group action but also the violent aspects of identity—race, class, and gender. Understanding that nobody is identical to their identity doesn’t do away with identity categories, but it fundamentally changes their status and allows us to gain new agencies. And we’re confronted with the need for a contemporary feminist ethic, the need to build different relationships that are not based on the notion of self-identity, either for me or for the other.

**RD:** With regard to a feminist politico-ethic, democratic practice in the public sphere, especially in a time of war, includes overcoming apathy and responding to the suffering of others.

**AD:** Given our remarks about masculinity and other genders, it might be preferable if we called what happened in the 1970s “the women’s art movement.” In this way, we’d avoid equating a historically specific moment with all of feminism in art. That’s why I don’t object to the exclusion of men in *WACK!* while I do object to it in *Global Feminisms*. The historical boundedness of *WACK!* seems to justify that exclusion because it’s not trying to define what feminism was or is but what this specific moment of art production was. But in a show on contemporary feminism, the exclusion of men is more problematic, or at least the equation of feminism and woman seems to be unduly limiting, because it leaves out more fluid constructions of gender and sexuality.

**RD:** But *WACK!*—by virtue of its subtitle—claims to be about art and all of feminism, at least the second wave—*the* feminist revolution—not a historically specific moment.

**UM:** I haven’t had a chance to see *WACK!* in Los Angeles, but I have been enjoying reading the catalog. It seems significant that there is a real recognition of the formal struggles and accomplishments within feminist art. Finally one can be a serious painter *and* be invested in progressive sexual politics, a feminist *and* an excellent artist, not just a “feminist artist” in opposition to some implicit “male” norm. This has been encouraging for my own drawing and painting practice. In my studio, I am not working on any art projects “about” anything at this point. Like many of my peers, I feel the need for a different kind of process. I’m interested in images that don’t pass through language (as in “I’m going to make a picture of this”). I’m visually exploring queer sexualities and emotions, using suggestive abstract forms. I’m interested in direct, visceral images, in the experience of physically feeling a painting before understanding its visual strategies or its art-historical lineage.

**AD:** I understand the problem Ulrike alluded to, which is why I'm so fascinated by "Part Object, Part Sculpture": it moves attention away from the gender or political identification of artists and toward aesthetic procedures that deconstruct the categories that support patriarchal or masculinist culture. Whether or not the artists are feminist, the curatorial strategy is feminist. Does either of the current shows display a feminist model of curatorship?

**RD:** The category "feminist art"—which continues to go largely unquestioned—and its current institutionalization, exemplified by the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art, is an instrument of containment. That's why I use the phrase "art informed by feminism," cumbersome though it may be. "Feminist art" implies that other art, art per se, is innocent of sexual politics. Like the phrase "political art," the phrase "feminist art" also implies that politics—sexual or otherwise—is exerted from outside the aesthetic image, whereas one of the most important contributions of art informed by feminism has been the way it holds the image itself accountable for maintaining oppressive social norms.

**AD:** This is why such labels are problematic: what's interesting to me is not only what an artist learns from feminism but what feminism can learn from art.

**RD:** I'm glad, Aruna, that you've brought up what might be called "the art question in feminism." In using this term, I'm paraphrasing Sandra Harding's *The Science Question in Feminism*, a book that reformulated the relationship between feminism and science,<sup>21</sup> which had been expressed as "the woman question in science." Similarly, instead of (or while still) asking about the situation of women in art, feminists have questioned how art can be used to emancipatory ends. This meant interrogating and intervening in the authority of art not only by introducing women into existing art history but by challenging Western culture's idealist assumptions about art's autonomy, purity and neutrality. *WACK!* seems to have quite successfully displayed this challenge, though in this regard, too, it would have been better to have extended the show to cover the 1980s, because idealist aesthetics were radically questioned by feminist critiques that used psychoanalysis to explore the ways in which vision—looking at images—is always mediated by sexuality, fantasy, and desire. Lately, however, some feminists have been speculating about the possibility that art's status as a zone of special freedom can be politically useful. In a wonderful talk delivered at the MoMA conference, Carrie Lambert-Beatty both used and posed



questions to the category of “activist art,” which, she said, rests on the belief that the aesthetic is not a retreat from social reality but part of it. She gave various examples of hybrid works that, as she put it, “trade on the fact that

art’s special status leaves it less regulated.”<sup>22</sup> I’m also reading an article by Judith Barry in which, addressing questions about the politics of the local and the global, she asks, “What does (and can) art bring to this discussion?”<sup>23</sup> Her question could be productively posed to feminism: What does (and can) art bring to *this* discussion? This question leads to another, the question of *form*, for example, how an artwork addresses and positions its viewer. Barry describes art as something that “makes a space” for a hitherto unthought configuration of reality. In this way art is distinct from daily life but not autonomous.

**AD:** I suppose, too, that this might be the moment to broach the subject of Jacques Rancière, who is so central in art discourse at the moment. He argues for a reconception of the political through the field of the aesthetic rather than imagining that all art should function merely as a site of political “consciousness raising.” Practices such as those employed by *LTTR* seem to operate on this assumption.

**RD:** Rancière’s ideas are relevant to any contemporary discussion about the emancipatory potential of art, particularly his notion of both the aesthetic and the political as disruptions of the system of divisions and boundaries that determine what and who is visible and audible—of what he calls “the distribution of the sensible.”<sup>24</sup> Equally pertinent is his idea that art can give to projects of emancipation only what it has in common with them: bodily positions and movements and functions of speech as well as the parceling out of the visible and invisible, audible and inaudible. This offers one answer to the question of what art can bring to the feminist discussion. However, when I mentioned the art question in feminism, I was thinking about the significance of formal strategies developed within art practice itself; for example, institutional critique, direct address, site-specificity, video installation, performance, minimalism, conceptual art. Art informed by feminism has turned toward the subject, ruptured the visual field and the subject that develops in front of totalizing images, and provoked self-questioning about the individual and collective positions we take up and how we position others. Through various formal strategies, this art has challenged the fixed viewpoint, totalizing vision, the abstract body, and the monological voice that silences others.

Women on Waves with Joep van Lieshout. Photograph of ship transporting *A-Portable*, 2000. Shipping container transformed into a mobile gynecological clinic.

As I've already suggested, we also need to interrogate the category "activist art," which, far from self-evident, is itself a political construction. As such, it's produced by the force of exclusion, by placing something in the realm of quietism. What is activist art if we no longer endow the political with a proper meaning and fixed location? And in light of Senam's comment that feminism is a force for social change, we need to think about the ways in which feminism has challenged traditional models of social change. One way is that it has stressed the necessity of psychic and subjective, as well as material, transformation. The question of the relation between the psychic and the social may be difficult to assimilate to conventional notions of activism, but that doesn't make it quietist. We shouldn't dismiss it because it's politically inconvenient.

**UM:** *LTTR* is invested in building a sustainable activist model. We are, however, not engaged in a politics of protest; our actions are not primarily geared outward toward changing state policies. I'm interested in the distinction between "action" and "protest" made by Henry Abelow in regards to queer politics. We're invested in a different, more performative model of politics, the motivating question being what we can do for each other now, in the space and time we share. This kind of politics can be traced back to earlier feminist groups but also was essential for the work of ACT UP. I'm interested in performance more than representation, which poses different formal questions. How we do things and how we do things together is always already a question of forms. We're actively building feminist (nonpatriarchal) relationships, having fun, negotiating conflicts, sharing pleasure, and shaping queer spaces. My *LTTR* co-editor Emily Roysdon has put this beautifully: "We are not protesting what we don't want, we are performing what we want."<sup>25</sup>

### Archives

**AD:** I want to go back to the idea of *WACK!* as an archival show and to the sentiment of young feminists, which Mignon alluded to, that we need to make visible an almost forgotten (or hitherto invisible) range of feminist work from the 1970s. My first response is "To what end?" Building an archive should be predicated on a certain picture of the present moment; archives are established to make sense of the now. The mother of all archival shows, Nochlin and Sutherland Harris's *Women Artists 1550–1970*, created an archive of "women artists" that was pressing for many feminists at the time. Does the insistent open-endedness of *WACK!*—expressed in its refusal to speak any historical narrative, either through explanatory materials for viewers (wall texts or brochures) or through the catalog, which is a series of independent

essays and lacks a synthetic historical overview—speak to the current feminist art moment? Is *WACK!* an argument, say, for a more mobile notion of politics, which seems to characterize contemporary feminism? Or does it throw its hands up in frustration at what seems like a directionless, inchoate, undefined, and conflicted feminist present? Does creating an archive without writing a history (in the strong sense) treat archive-building as something we do when we have no idea where feminism is going, or does this show operate according to principles of what feminism is now? In other words, what is the *present* that *WACK!* constructs?

**MN:** Your comments ask us, appropriately, to reflect further on the archive as a theoretical construction. *WACK!* incorporates the archive as a strategy, through works such as Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, and for me the show's very emphasis on the logic of the archive in the work of artists such as Kelly, Piper, Spero, Rosler, and Messager, to name only a few, was what prompted me to think about it as an archival proposition—an archive of archives. Your comparison of *WACK!* with *Women Artists 1550–1970* and your criteria for evaluating an archival show are illuminating for me, but the archive has a different resonance now and a strong presence in contemporary art through what Hal Foster has termed the “archival impulse.” The archive as leftover and anachronism informs, perhaps, some of the interest in 1970s work by younger historians in a moment when contemporary art and critical discourse are bound up with the archive as a structure of loss and longing. Along this line, an “obsolescent” feminism, presented through self-consciously archival works and via an oblique or elliptical narrative might meaningfully address present concerns, and this mediating effect of contemporary art on the show might help explain why the absence of an explicit historicization has not been widely perceived as a limitation. Maybe, and this is totally speculative, contemporary art viewers are so comfortable with found archives and open-ended narratives and so accustomed to thinking about history through such partial narratives that the show is designed to exploit that habit of looking.

**AD:** If I understand correctly, you're proposing that *WACK!* is informed by a contemporary interest in the archive as remainder, obsolescence, and melancholic structure but that it also challenges this notion by presenting works that operate according to different definitions or conceptions of the archive. (The archive as a form of witnessing seems a particularly strong idea among the works that you cite.) The engagement with an “archival impulse” may explain why so much of our conversation has been marked by a sort of disappointment, a feeling that



the current celebration may actually be a wake. But melancholy may be a consequence of the way this history is being represented.

**MK:** The current moment is both celebration *and* wake, and that's what makes it so complicated. No doubt it's most fraught, emotionally and politically, for the artists who are being archived (or being left out of the archive, again!). Isn't facing ambivalence toward institutional recognition or containment within official histories really about confronting mortality? Mignon's observation that *WACK!*

follows an archival impulse is compelling, although I don't know if I share that assessment. I didn't find the show nostalgic or melancholic. Quite the reverse.

## Notes

1. See Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia, 1988); and Drucilla Cornell, "Rethinking the Time of Feminism," in Seyla Benhabib et al., *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995). See also Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
2. Rosalyn Deutsch, "Not-Forgetting: Mary Kelly's *Love Songs*," *Grey Room* 24 (Summer 2006): 26–37.
3. Pheng Cheah and Elizabeth Grosz, "The Future of Sexual Difference: An Interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell," *Diacritics* 28, no. 1: 19–42.
4. Mira Schor, "Contemporary Feminism: Art Practice, Theory and Activism—An Intergenerational Perspective," *Art Journal* 58, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 20.
5. Helen Molesworth, lecture presented at "The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts," Museum of Modern Art, New York City, January 2007. This talk, as well as others from conference referred to in the course of this conversation, can be accessed as downloadable podcasts online at [http://moma.org/visit\\_moma/audio/2007/pub\\_prog/downloadAAPAA\\_2007.html](http://moma.org/visit_moma/audio/2007/pub_prog/downloadAAPAA_2007.html).
6. Griselda Pollock, lecture presented at "The Feminist Future" (MoMA).
7. Giorgio Agamben, "Beyond Human Rights," in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 159.
8. Aiwha Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).
9. Tracey Rose, "Tits&AssPage1," from *The Cunt Show*, 2006. Courtesy Tracey Rose. Nonstandard punctuation in the original. The piece was presented as "The Cant Show" when performed at the Brooklyn Museum in 2007.
10. Maura Reilly, "Introduction: Toward Transnational Feminisms," in *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, ed. Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin (London and New York: Merrell, 2007): 15–46, *passim*.
11. Holland Cotter, "The Art of Feminism as It First Took Shape," *New York Times*, 9 March 2007.
12. Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
13. Jacqueline Rose, *Why War? Psychoanalysis, Politics and the Return to Melanie Klein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).
14. For a summary of the case, see James Westcott, "Clashes beyond Ground Zero," *Art on Paper* (May/June 2006). See also Carol Armstrong, "Back to the Drawing Board," *Artforum* (Summer 2006); and Judith Butler, "Commemoration and/or Critique: Catherine de Zegher and the Drawing Center," *Texte zur Kunst* 62 (July 2006).
15. Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
16. See Slavoj Žižek, "What Rumsfeld Doesn't Know That He Knows about Abu Ghraib," *In These Times*, 21 May 2004.
17. Ginger Brooks Takahashi, Editorial Statement, *LTTR V: Positively Nasty* (Brooklyn, NY: Capricious, 2006), 45.
18. Lisa Tickner. "Mediating Generation: the Mother-Daughter Plot." *Art History* 25 (Feb. 2002): 23–46.
19. See Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical Reassessment of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

20. bell hooks, "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women," *Feminist Review* 23 (Summer 1986): 125–138.
21. Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).
22. Carrie Lambert-Beatty, lecture presented at "The Feminist Future" (MoMA). This lecture has since been published as Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Twelve Miles: Boundaries of the New Art/Activism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33, no. 2 (2008).
23. Judith Barry, "The Space that Art Makes," in *A Dynamic Equilibrium: In Pursuit of Public Terrain*, ed. Sally Yard (San Diego: Installation Gallery, 2007), 42–61.
24. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, afterword by Slavoj Žižek (London: Continuum, 2004).
25. Emily Roydson, in "Be a bossy bottom!," interview with Eva Egermann and Katharina Morawk in *Malmoe* (Austria), 9 July 2007; available online at <http://www.malmoe.org/artikel/tanzen/1445>.