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Documenting a Feminist Past

Art World Critique

Documenting a Feminist Past: Art World Critique

January 25–March 27, 2007

The Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Education and Research Building

Introduction

This exhibition of material from The Museum of Modern Art Library, the Museum Archives, and the collection documents feminist critique of art institutions from 1969 to the present. Artists bring a particular sensibility to activism; as these documents show, feminist artists of the late twentieth century mobilized intellect, principle, material skills and, often, considerable wit to create powerful public communications, from printed matter to videos to Happenings. The diverse documentation is organized to reflect the movement's focus in five areas—theory and debate, art-historical revisionism, publishing, exhibiting, and actions and interventions—with the broader goal of situating the feminist future in the context of the feminist past.

Organized by Jennifer Tobias, Librarian, Collection Development, The Museum of Modern Art Library.

Support is provided by The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art.

Theory and Debate

Feminist critique of art institutions began in the late 1960s and early 1970s as part of the larger women's rights movement and a period of intense interest in art theory and Conceptual art. These documents show interconnections between the two, and reveal the internal debate behind the movement's carefully crafted public statements.

Position Papers, Leaflets, Letters, Notes. 1969–80

These diverse statements detail the formulation, debate, and dissemination of activist art groups'

core ideals. Manuscripts and notes reflect internal discussion, while leaflets and a printer's markup represent refined public messages.

Circa. 17 July–August 1984

Critic and historian Lucy Lippard wrote the cover story about activist art in this issue of *Circa*. Her activism included founding the group Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) in 1979. Many works in this exhibition are drawn from the PAD/D Archive, now held in the MoMA Library.

NO (Department of Cultural Affairs) n.d.

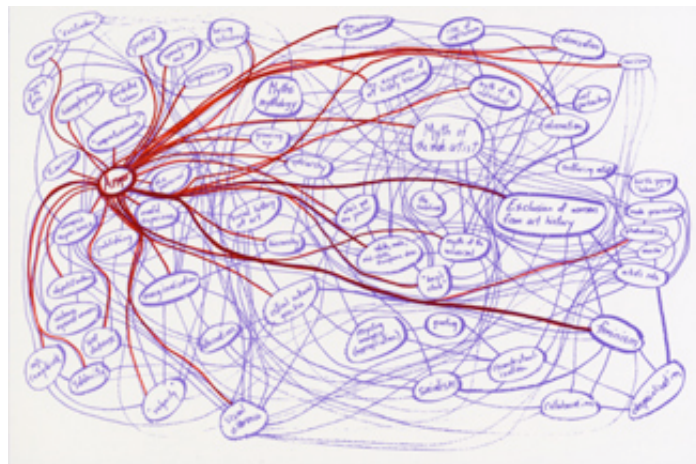
This anonymous work says "NO" to the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, appropriating a presumably official chart to reject the city's art establishment.

Ingrid Koenig

Web Chart-Contextualization in Rap on the Sublime. 1984

Artist's book

In this dynamic graphic Koenig charts a whirlwind of potential obstacles to a woman artist's success. One among many feminist appropriations of art-historical touchstones, Koenig's diagram evokes MoMA founding director Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s 1936 chart tracing the development of modern art.



What Ever Happened to the Women Artists' Movement? in *Womanart* Winter/Spring. 1977

As early as 1977 the past and future of feminist art was already under debate.

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Revising History

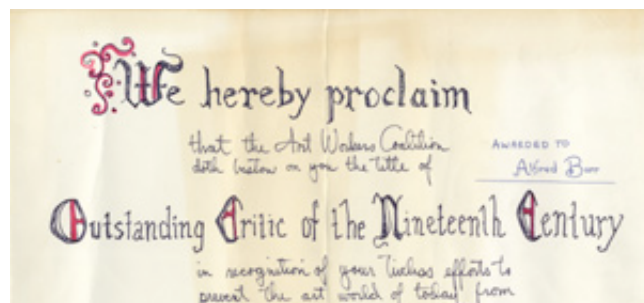
Changing traditional attitudes towards art by women involved questioning art-historical assumptions about gender. Historians, theoreticians, and artists argued for a more inclusive history, in part to raise awareness of gender bias in contemporary art criticism.

Art Workers Coalition

Outstanding Critic of the Nineteenth Century. 1969

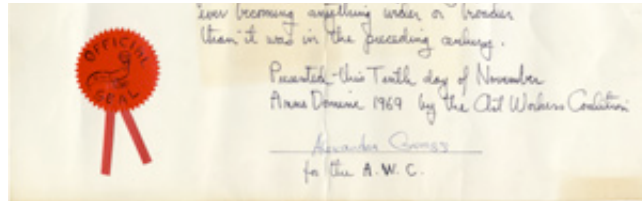
Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, 10.D.1. The Museum of Modern Art Archives

In this handmade parody of a civic award, the activist Art Workers Coalition critiqued



MoMA founding director Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s approach to modern art.

Jacqueline Skiles and Janet McDevitt
A Documentary HerStoRY of Women Artists in Revolution. 1971



Newspaper and journal articles accompany an essay documenting the efforts of Women Artists in Revolution (WAR), a subcommittee of the Art Workers Coalition.

Carolee Schneemann
Cézanne: She Was a Great Painter. c. 1975
Artist's book

In this early artist's book, Schneemann, a self-described painter best known for performance art, writes, "Around twelve years old I knew a few names of 'great artists.' . . . I decided a painter named 'Cézanne' would be my mascot; I would assume Cézanne was unquestionably a woman." The cover drawing, by the artist at age four, shows her-or Cézanne-looking in a mirror, or possibly painting. In this context the artist reflects on herself, Cézanne, and art history. In her well-known performance *Interior Scroll*, first enacted in 1975, Schneemann read aloud from this text.

India Hikson
Identity Yourself (I Thought Joan Miro was a Woman). c. 1992
Plastic boxes with inserts

This cryptic set of boxes reflects Hikson's assumption about Miró's gender, perhaps a childhood misunderstanding. The transparent boxes may be intended to evoke children's blocks, suggesting a desire for the ostensible "innocent eye" of childhood, or perhaps a call for historical transparency.

Carolee Schneemann
A B C-We Print Anything-In the Cards. c.1977
Artist's book

Schneemann's work is a well-known milestone in the artist's book movement. Using a stack of printed cards, alternating text with image, the artist conveys the quasi-autobiographical intimacies and tensions of an art-world couple's relationship. On this card the reader discovers that one narrator is a historian, hurrying, she writes, to "unify my research on feminist art history" at a university, and making sly reference to "men who take up all the space and events."

Heresies Collective
What's Wrong With This Picture? in *Heresies* 19. 1985

The editors alter an advertisement for an art school, juxtaposing a photo of its all-male faculty with the university's anti-discrimination policy.

Virginia Maksymowicz
The History of Art in *Heresies* 24. 1989



Maksymowicz creates molds of her torso embellished with canonical artworks, literally placing art-historical weight on the female body. The page was designed by the artist for *Heresies*. The journal regularly featured "page art," creating a space for art outside the gallery setting.



Guerrilla Girls

The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art. 1998

"Forget the stale, male, pale, Yale textbooks, this is Art Herstory 101!" So begins this alternative history, which modeled the form and distribution mechanism of traditional mass-market art books.

Cynthia Smith

Beautiful Dolls. 1984

Artist's book

Women's magazine advertisements are juxtaposed with fairy-tale excerpts in this artist's book. Here the tag line "We make history" is invested with irony: "We" refers to the collective authors of fairy tales and advertisements, and it is also a call for women to remake history by questioning images and texts such as these.

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Publishing

Rapid developments in feminist art engendered numerous publishing efforts, from journals to exhibition catalogues to artist's books. Journals included *Chrysalis*, *Heresies*, and *Women Artists News*, among many others. Meanwhile the new genre of artist's books presented opportunities for art beyond the gallery context.

Valerie Solanas

S.C.U.M. Manifesto. 1968

Solanas, founder and sole member of Society for Cutting Up Men (SCUM), famously shot Andy Warhol in 1968. Her motives-and her state of mind-are articulated in her 1967 *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*, in which her opinions about art are intertwined with her extreme attitude toward men: "Almost all ['Great Art'], as the anti-feminists are fond of reminding us, was created by men. We know that 'Great Art' is great because male authorities have told us so, and we [women] can't claim otherwise, as only those with exquisite sensitivities far superior to ours can perceive and appreciate the slop they appreciated."

Womanspace

February/March 1973

The dynamic cover typography of the first issue of the journal *Womanspace* reflects the spirited nexus of feminist art in Los Angeles, including the eponymous publisher, a gallery devoted to women artists.

Artists Meeting for Cultural Change

Anti-Catalog. 1977

Reacting to a bicentennial survey of American art at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City with few works by women or minority artists, a group of critics, art historians, and artists produced this "anti-catalog," which offers alternative, critical views of American art and collecting.

General Idea

S/HE. 1976

Artist's book

In this artist's book by the group General Idea, staged photographs of a woman and a man are featured on facing pages of each spread. Each spread bears the same caption, with only the pronouns changed. The artists show how gender inflection can change the reader's perception of ostensibly neutral words and images.

Sherrie Levine

Boy/Girl. 1977

Artist's book

By imitating an artist's publicity package, Levine suggests that journalists, gallery owners, and curators make powerful choices based, consciously or not, on gender.

Nichole Ferentz

Feminine Sensibilities in *Artforum*. May 1978

Artist's book

In this self-published parody of the well-known art magazine *Artforum*, Ferentz interrogates the language of art criticism, exposing underlying sexist bias. Her "article" is composed of words that tended to be used to describe art by women, perhaps drawn from *Artforum* itself. These include "vulnerable," "intuitive," and "antilogical." The article is accompanied by headshots of authoritative-looking white men, each bearing a provocative caption, such as, "We can't have a woman in the gallery, they're too difficult. Besides, collectors won't buy women's art."

Andrea Fraser

Woman I: Madonna and Child, 1506–1967. 1984

Artist's book

Fraser is well known for videos in which she poses as a museum docent or lecturer, interrogating assumptions about institutional neutrality. In this early work, an artist's book, Fraser blends reproductions and two accounts of artworks by Raphael (Italian, 1483–1520) and Willem de Kooning (American, 1904–1997), all works with female subjects. The superimposed images

resemble a technical glitch in the slide lectures familiar to art history students. On facing pages, texts by two prominent art historians overlap, making it difficult to distinguish which artist is being discussed, but making attitudes to the female subject all the more clear. In this way Fraser reveals that the "male gaze" extends beyond the depiction of women in art to their depiction by art historians.

Ida Applebroog

Ida Applebroog (Information Panic). c. 1990

Artist's book

Excerpted reviews of Applebroog's artwork are collaged together in this artist's book. By removing the texts from their original publications and authorship and reappropriating them into her own publication, the artist both reclaims and critiques art criticism itself.

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Exhibiting

Seeking alternatives to mainstream galleries and museums, in the early 1970s artists began to organize spaces for art by women, such as Artists In Residence, Inc. (AIR), in New York City. More recently, some mainstream institutions have offered to be the sites of feminist interventions, such as the New York Chamber of Commerce for Ida Applebroog's 1982 installation *Past Events*.

Feminist Art Program, California Institute of the Arts
Womanhouse. 1972

In this landmark exhibition, women artists turned an entire California house into an artwork, reinventing the homemaker as an active, critical artmaker.

Lucy Lippard

c. 7,500. 1973

Critic and historian Lucy Lippard organized this early show of women Conceptual artists.

A.I.R. Gallery n.d.

One of the first galleries organized by and for women artists was Artists In Residence, Inc. (AIR), founded in 1972 in SoHo in New York City. This brochure shows the facade as well as a photcollage of artist Howardena Pindell renovating the space.

Amy Sillman and Deep Six Pink Strip in *Heresies* 1. January 1977

Sillman illustrates plausible art-world conversations, satirizing extremes of both sexism and feminism.

Juan Chacon Gallery

In the Spirit of the Engaged Worker Artist. 1988

Reflecting the political activism of the 1980s, the Juan Chacon Gallery in San José, California solicited art outside the mainstream.

Ida Applebroog

Past Events. 1982

Installation photographs

Courtesy Creative Time

Applebroog's work often uses diverse media to explore institutional power. In this 1982 installation at the New York Chamber of Commerce, the artist made the walls "speak," telling an unpleasant story of patriarchy. The show proved controversial: it was removed twice in one month and eventually moved to a gallery. The artist's response: "What did they *think* a woman was going to do in that space?"

Alison Hawthorne Deming

Girls In The Jungle: What Does It Take For A Woman To Survive As An Artist? 1995

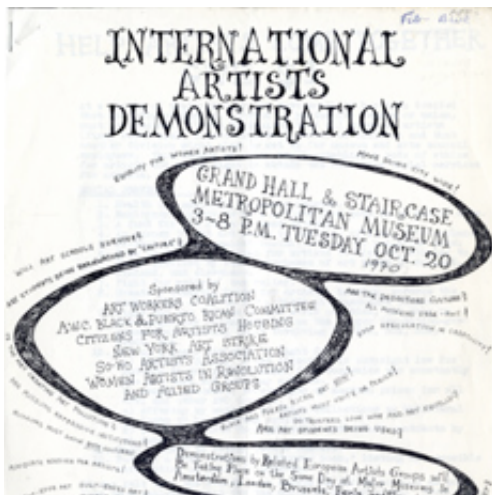
Artist's book

Deming's artist's book takes the form of a notebook, manual, or calendar. In ten numbered pages or steps, the artist declares, "Question everything" and "Take responsibility for your own education as an artist," among others calls to action. The work is intended to be hung on the wall; a nail is included.

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Actions and Interventions

Feminist critique of the art world encompasses museums, galleries, collectors, historians, and critics. Beginning in the late 1960s, flowering in the 1970s, and continuing in some forms to the present, activists have directed open letters, demonstrations, interventions, and Happenings toward art institutions. Actions in the 1960s and 1970s were part of a broader climate of social unrest, while the activism of the 1980s and 1990s tended to be more focused on the art world itself. Throughout, artists arguably have brought a particular sensibility to activism. As these works show, protest can involve creative, biting uses of performance, installation, multimedia, writing, and graphic design.



Art Workers Coalition

International Artists Demonstration, 1970

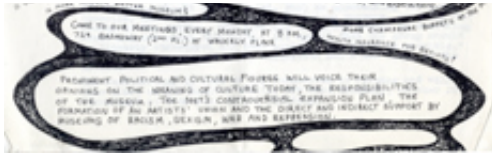
This leaflet announces a demonstration at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Sponsors included the Art Workers Coalition subcommittee Women Artists in Revolution (WAR).

Whitney Museum of American Art

Bicentennial Exhibitions 1976 –77. 1976

Artists Meeting for Cultural Change

Boycott This Show. 1976



Art Workers Coalition

One Blood Dollar. c. 1976

The Whitney Museum's bicentennial survey of American art, drawn from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller III, became the focus of an extended series of protests, called Counterweight, intended to draw attention to the under-representation of women and minority artists. Through *One Blood Dollar* the Art Workers Coalition charged that museum trustees exercised undue economic and editorial power; the dollar is "only valid for established works of art" and "not valid for black, Puerto Rican or female artists." Even the image on a promotional sign on the Whitney's facade became an unintended lightning rod for criticism: Robert Venturi's over-scaled reproduction of the sculpture *The Greek Slave* (c. 1843), by Hiram Powers (American, 1805–1873), was perceived as a symbol of oppression.



Joanne Stamerra

Erasing Sexism from MoMA in Womanart, Summer 1976

During a 1976 demonstration protesting the marginalization of women artists, Stamerra placed stamped erasers throughout the Museum.

Lorraine O'Grady

Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Goes to the New Museum to Remedy Being Omitted from the Nine-White-Personae Show in Heresies 14, 1982

As Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, performance artist Lorraine O'Grady protests the marginalization of women and people of color in major art institutions. The work on the facing page, *A Photo Collage*, is by Dolores Neuman.

The Museum of Modern Art

The Museum of Modern Art Opens 1984

Women Artists Visibility Event

The Museum of Modern Art Opens But Not To Women Artists.
c. 1984



Protesting under-representation of women artists in the Museum collection, demonstrators parodied an official pin announcing the completion of the Museum's 1984 expansion. The opening exhibition, *An International Survey of Painting and Sculpture*, drew particular criticism and helped to inspire the formation of the Guerrilla Girls.

Guerrilla Girls

What's New and Happening at the Guggenheim for the Discriminating Art Lover? c. 1990

The Guerrilla Girls offer an invitation to "put this on and join us." The paper-bag mask symbolizes the unwelcome anonymity of many women artists.

Julie Harvey

Shafrazi (Thought we wouldn't remember? Any questions . . .). 2001

Gagosian (Has the biggest gallery in New York City. Does size matter?). 2001

Saatchi (He's a sensation! Or, is it just hype?). 2002

In this series of paintings, printed and mailed as cards bearing provocative captions, Harvey depicts powerful art dealers naked. Three images are covered with a sheet of translucent paper; the veil is drawn to expose the dealers as mere (male) mortals. By representing the dealers this way, Harvey attempts to visually reduce their power over the art market, power that arguably perpetuates a male-dominated status quo. The caption for Shafrazi's card, "Thought we wouldn't remember?" refers to the publicity generated by his 1974 vandalization of Picasso's painting *Guernica* (1937), then at MoMA, in protest against the Vietnam War

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Videos from the Museum collection

Selections and commentary by Sally Berger, Assistant Curator, Department of Film and Media

Martha Rosler

American

Semiotics of the Kitchen. 1975

Video, black and white, sound

6 min.

Purchase

In this performance Rosler takes on the role of an apron-clad housewife and parodies the television cooking demonstrations popularized by Julia Child in the 1960s. Standing in a kitchen, surrounded by refrigerator, table, and stove, she moves through the alphabet from A to Z, assigning a letter to the various tools found in this domestic space. Wielding knives, a nutcracker, and a rolling pin, she warms to her task, her gestures sharply punctuating the rage and frustration of oppressive women's roles. Rosler said of this work, "I was concerned with something like the



notion of 'language speaking the subject,' and with the transformation of the woman herself into a sign in a system of signs that represent a system of food production, a system of harnessed subjectivity."

Hermine Freed

American, born 1940

Art Herstory. 1974

Video, black and white, sound

22 min.

Purchase

Freed re-creates on video a series of historical paintings, mostly portraits of women, by placing herself in the role of the central figure. She blends her image with the original portrait then breaks out of character, speaking as if she were the subject of the painting or joking with the other actors participating in the scene. She disrupts the accuracy of the re-created mise-en-scènes by wielding a video camera. Time and history are flexible; she plays with her image and identity as something of the past, the present, and the future. Throughout the work Freed poses a series of questions about the institutional role of art history, while observing changes in her own perspective. She asks, "What do these images say as the immediacy of time is past?"

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Posters

Feminist Art Workers

We Are the Feminist Art Workers, n.d.

Offset lithograph

23 x 17.5" (58.5 x 44.5 cm)

This brochure-poster makes a broad appeal to all women involved in the arts. The program offered a lively mix of classes, art spaces, and political advocacy.

Earthworks Poster Collective

Still Life with Overtones, n.d.

Silkscreen

29 7/8 x 22" (75.8 x 55.9 cm)

In this work a still life represents inertia and silence in the face of social injustice, including "male against female." Here, "in art, as in life, neutrality perpetuates the status quo."

Linda Weins

Still Life in the Inner Circle, 1979

Offset lithograph

19 x 25" (48.2 x 63.5 cm)

This send-up conveys both the dynamism and the pitfalls of artist collectives, emphasizing a

woman's point of view. The use of the film still satirizes romantic notions of the activist as hero.

Guerrilla Girls

Guerrilla Girls' Identities Exposed!, 1990

Offset lithograph

22 x 17" (55.9 x 43.1 cm)

The Guerrilla Girls' sharply satirical posters are key examples of feminist art-world critique. This poster demonstrates that the group's anonymous, gorilla-masked leaders speak for a much larger group of contemporary women artists.

Barbara Hall and Jan McKay

Women's Art Registry, 1976

Silkscreen on paper

32 7/8 x 20 7/8" (83.5 x 53 cm)

In feminist critique of the art world, canonical artworks are often repurposed as rhetorical arguments for a more inclusive history. Here *Nameless and Friendless* (1857), by the British artist Emily Mary Osborn (1834–1913), is a reminder of the longstanding difficulties women have experienced in the art marketplace. In this appropriation, the artist's eyes are modestly downcast but her thoughts suggest a coming storm.

Heresies Collective

Women's Pages Spark Riot, 1982

Silkscreen on paper

15 3/4" x 18 7/8" (40 x 48 cm)

A pathbreaking journal dedicated to feminist art and politics, *Heresies* (1977–1993) questioned cultural and scholarly assumptions about women's role in art history. This poster reproduces the cover of issue 14, devoted to "page art," in which individual artists had free reign over a given page. For examples see pages by Dolores Neuman and Lorraine O'Grady in the *Actions and Interventions* display case in this exhibition.

Northern Arts Gallery

Untitled, 1975

Silkscreen on paper

19 7/8 x 29 7/8" (55 x 76 cm)

By rendering pithy quotes in elegant typography and enticing colors, this gallery poster indirectly expresses support for women artists.

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Pictured above, top to bottom:

Ingrid Koenig. Web Chart-Contextualization in Rap on the Sublime. 1984

Art Workers Coalition. Outstanding Critic of the Nineteenth Century. 1969

Virginia Maksymowicz. The History of Art in Heresies 24. 1989

Art Workers Coalition. International Artists Demonstration. 1970

Art Workers Coalition. One Blood Dollar c. 1976

Women Artists Visibility Event. The Museum of Modern Art Opens But Not To Women Artists c. 1984

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