

"Because we are denied knowledge of our history, we are deprived of standing upon each other's shoulders and building upon each other's hard earned accomplishments. Instead we are condemned to repeat what others have done before us and thus we continually reinvent the wheel."

Judy Chicago

Synopsis

The Feminist art movement emerged in the late 1960s amidst the fervor of anti-war demonstrations as well as civil and queer rights movements. Harkening back to the utopian ideals of early twentieth-century modernist movements, Feminist artists sought to change the world around them through their art, focusing on intervening in the established art world, the art historical canon, as well as everyday social interactions. As artist Suzanne Lacy declared, the goal of Feminist art was to "influence cultural attitudes and transform stereotypes." There is no singular medium or style that unites Feminist artists, as they often combined aspects

from various movements and media, including Conceptual art, Body art, and Video art into works that presented a message about women's experience and the need for gender equality. Feminist art created opportunities and spaces that previously did not exist for women and minority artists, as well as paved the path for the identity art and activist art of the 1980s.

Key Points

Feminist artists sought to create a dialogue between the viewer and the artwork through the inclusion of women's perspective. Art was not merely an object for aesthetic admiration, but could also incite the viewer to question the social and political landscape, and through this questioning, possibly affect the world and incite change toward equality.

Before feminism, the majority of women artists were denied exhibitions and gallery representation based on the sole fact of their gender. Feminist artists created alternative venues as well as worked to change established institutions' policies to promote women artists' visibility within the art world.

Feminist artists often embraced alternative media, incorporating fabric, fiber, performance, and video as these materials did not have the same historically male-dominated precedent that painting and sculpture carried. By using these non-traditional media, they sought to expand the definition of fine arts to include a wider variety of media and artistic perspectives.

Beginnings

Feminist art production began in the late 1960s, during the "second-wave" of feminism in the United States and England, but was preceded by a long history of feminist activism. The "first wave" of feminism began in the mid-nineteenth century with the women's suffrage movements and continued until women received the vote, shortly after the end of World War I. No feminist art was produced during this early period, but it laid the groundwork for the activism, and thus the art, of the 1960s and 1970s. Feminist organizing effectively ceased between 1920 and the late 1960s, but women's concern about their role in society remained. Some artists expressed this in their work and have been posthumously identified as proto-feminist. For example, Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois created works in that theme because much of their artwork contained imagery that dealt with the female body, personal experience, and ideas of domesticity, even if the artists did not explicitly identify with feminism. These subjects were later embraced by the Feminist art movement that began producing work during resurgence of the larger women's movement in the late 1960s, also referred to as the "second-wave" of feminism. The Feminist artists of the "second-wave" expanded on the themes of the proto-feminist artists by linking their artwork explicitly to the fight for gender equality and including a wider visual vocabulary to help describe their goals.

The 1970s



In New York City, which had a firmly established gallery and museum system, women artists were largely concerned with equal representation in art institutions. They formed a variety of women's art organizations, like Women Artists in Revolution (WAR) and the AIR Gallery, to specifically address feminist artists' rights and concerns in the art community. These organizations protested museums like MoMA and the Whitney Museum, which exhibited few, if any, women artists. Protests of the Whitney Annual led to a rise in the number of women artists, from ten percent in 1969 to twenty-three percent in 1970. In California, women artists focused on creating a new and separate space for women's art, rather than fighting an established system. Prime examples are the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW) and the Woman's Building. In 1973, artist Judy Chicago, graphic designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, and art historian Arlene Raven created the FSW - a two year program for women in the arts that covered feminist studio practice as well as theory and criticism. The FSW was a part of the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, which was created by Feminist artists as an inclusive space for all women in the community, and contained gallery space, a cafe, a bookstore, and offices for a feminist magazine, among other resources.

Art critics also played a large role in the 1970s Feminist art movement, calling attention to the fact that women artists had been completely omitted from the canon of Western art and seeking to re-write male-established criteria of art criticism and aesthetics. In 1971 *ARTnews* published Linda Nochlin's provocatively titled essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" The essay critically examined the category of "greatness" (as it had largely been defined in male-dominated terms) and initiated the Feminist revision of art history that led to the inclusion of more women artists in art history books. In England art critics Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock founded the Women's Art History Collective in 1973 to further address the omission of women from the Western art historical canon.

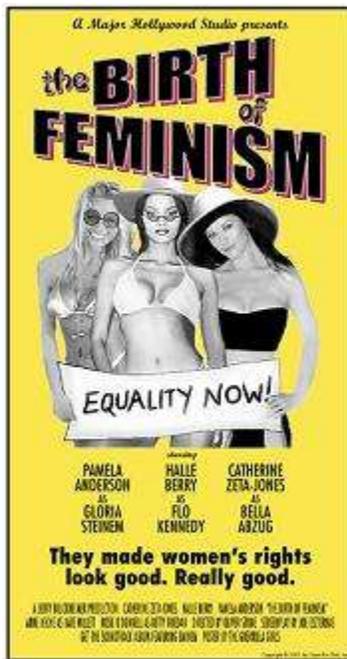
The 1980s

With the end of the 1970s, an era of radical idealism in the arts came to a close with the new conservatism of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations. The feminist artists of the 1980s focused more on psychoanalysis and Postmodern theory, which examined the body in a more intellectually removed manner than the embodied female experience that dominated the art of

the 1970s. Artists continued to expand the definition of feminist art and although they were not always aligned with a coherent social movement, their works still expressed the need for women's equality. The Feminist artists of the 1970s made many advances, but women were still not close to equal representation. This continued discrepancy spawned the Guerrilla Girls, a group formed in 1985, best known for fighting against sexism and racism in the art world by protesting, speaking, and performing at various venues while wearing gorilla masks and adopting pseudonyms to hide their identity to avoid real-world repercussions for speaking out against powerful institutions. The Guerrilla Girls took Feminist art in a new direction by plastering posters all over New York and eventually buying advertising space for their images. Their posters used humor and clean design to express their pointed political message. Other 1980s Feminist artists such as Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger also focused on mass communication that drew on the visual vocabulary of advertising in both use of graphics and the distillation of complex political statements into catchy slogans. These artists sought the destruction of male-dominant social precepts, and focused less on the differences between men and women associated with 1970s Feminist art.

Concepts and Styles

Feminism and Performance Art



Feminist art and Performance art often crossed paths during the 1970s and beyond, as performance was a direct way for women artists to communicate a physical, visceral message. It had the impact of being face-to-face with the viewer which made it more difficult to disregard. Performance kept the work on a highly personal level, as there was no separation between the artists and the work itself. For example, Mierle Laderman Ukeles explored the idea of domestic work with her *Maintenance Work* series: she eliminated the separation between art and life by performing typical household chores within the museum. Viewers had to walk around her while she cleaned the steps of the entrance, and maintenance

work was made into art that could not be ignored. Carolee Schneemann and Yoko Ono created performance pieces during their careers to narrate personal messages.

Feminism and Body Art

Body art was another medium that was conducive to Feminist artistic concerns, as it provided a means to convey an immediate message to the viewer that was unequivocally connected to the personal space of the artist. Often Body and Performance art overlapped in Feminist art. Lucy Lippard stated, "When women use their own bodies in their art work, they are using their *selves*; a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject." Artists often distorted images of their bodies, changed their bodies with other materials or performed self-mutilation not only to shock, but to convey a deeply felt experience in the most visceral manner. Artist Ana Mendieta used blood and her own body in her performances, creating a primal, but not violent, connection between the artist's body, blood, and the audience. Mendieta and many other Feminist artists saw blood as an important symbol of life and fertility directly connected to women's bodies.

Feminism and Video Art

Video art emerged in the art world just a few years before Feminist art, and provided a medium, unlike painting or sculpture, that did not have a historic precedent set by male artists. Video was viewed as a catalyst that could initiate a media-revolution, placing the tools for television broadcasting in the hands of the public, and thus providing the Feminist art movement with vast potential to reach a broader audience. Artists like Dara Birnbaum used it to deconstruct women's representation in mass-media by appropriating images from television broadcasts into her video-collages, re-presenting them in a new context. Martha Rosler also used video to explore women's relation to mass-media as well as the various facets of female and domestic life. The Woman's Building housed the Los Angeles Women's Video Center (LAWVC), which provided women artists with unprecedented access to the expensive new equipment required for making video art.

Feminism and Textile Art

Following from many Feminists' interest in gender and the domestic realm, many artists chose to adopt fiber and textiles in their art, intending to remove the division between "high art" and "craft." Miriam Schapiro coined the term "femmage" to describe works she began to make in the 1970s that combined fabric, paint, and other materials through "traditional women's techniques - sewing, piercing, hooking, cutting, appliqueing, cooking and the like..." to use "women's work" as a means to complicate the category of traditional "high art." Faith Wilding and Harmony Hammond, among many others, used fabric in their works to interrogate and eliminate this division in the arts.

Later Developments

Currently a new generation of women artists, like Kara Walker and Jennifer Linton, continue to speak directly about sexism in their works. However, building on the precedent of the 1980s, many women artists began to produce work that focused on their individual concerns and less on a general feminist message. Cindy Sherman, for instance, photographed herself in the roles of different iconic stereotypes portrayed in film and history and by doing so she reclaimed those stereotypes while at the same time questioning the male gaze so prevalent in cinematic theory and popular culture. Because of the progress made by previous generations of Feminist artists, many contemporary female artists no longer necessarily feel the responsibility to identify as "women artists" or to explicitly address the "women's perspective." (For example, while Cindy Sherman's work has developed within and is heavily informed by the context of the Feminist movement, her intention is not to make a primarily political feminist statement.) In the 1990s artists such as Tracey Emin showed the influence of Feminist art by focusing on personal narratives and using non-traditional materials, such as the famous piece *My Bed*, which consisted of her own slept-in bed strewn with used condoms and blood-stained underwear. These varied practices, even if not directly identified as feminist, grew from and are connected to the First and Second Generation Feminist artists and critics in the variety of materials, roles, and perspectives they exhibit.

Original content written by Tracy DiTolla

QUOTES

"...women's experiences are very different from men's. As we grow up socially, psychologically and every other way, our experiences are just different. Therefore, our art is going to be different."

- Joan Snyder

"For me, now, feminist art must show a consciousness of women's social and economic position in the world. I also believe it demonstrates forms and perceptions that are drawn from a sense of spiritual kinship between women."

- Suzanne Lacy

"A developed feminist consciousness brings with it an altered concept of reality that is crucial to the art being made and to the lives lived with that art."

- Lucy Lippard

ARTWORKS



Title: *Womanhouse* (1972)

Artist: Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro

Artwork Description & Analysis: *Womanhouse* was an installation that encompassed an entire house in residential Hollywood organized by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro as the culmination of the Feminist Art Program (FAP) at California Institute for the Arts in 1972. The twenty-one all-female students first renovated the house, which had been previously marked for demolition, then installed site-specific art environments within the interior spaces that ranged from the sculptural figure of a woman trapped within a linen closet to a kitchen where the walls and ceiling were covered with fried eggs that morphed into breasts. Many of the artists also created performances that took place within *Womanhouse* to further address the relationship between women and the home. The entire collaborative piece was about reclaiming domestic space and challenging traditional female roles. It gave women a new realm to express their views within a thoroughly integrated context of art and life.

Mixed media site installation



Title: *Anatomy of a Kimono* (1974)

Artist: Miriam Schapiro

Artwork Description & Analysis: *Anatomy of a Kimono* is one of many "femmages" Schapiro created, starting in the mid-1970s, and is based on the patterns of Japanese kimonos, fans, and robes. Schapiro used the term femmage to describe works that combined collage, painting, fabric, embroidery and other "high art" and "decorative art" techniques, simultaneously highlighting women's relation to those materials and processes. The artist collected donated handkerchiefs while touring the country and cobbled them together with other fabrics to form ten large panels filled with Japanese-inspired shapes. The work adopts the monumental scale of Abstract Expressionist canvases, but by using fabric instead of paint, Schapiro elevates a utilitarian and feminine material to the realm of "high art."

Fabric and acrylic on canvas



Title: *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975)

Artist: Martha Rosler

Artwork Description & Analysis: Now one of the canonical works of feminist video art, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* examines women's relationship to the home through the trope of the televised cooking show. Rosler describes the video stating, "an anti-Julia Child replaces the domesticated 'meaning' of tools with a lexicon of rage and frustration." Rosler parodically adopted the role of the "host," and runs through an alphabetical index of kitchen utensils, illustrating their use and action

with pantomime. The woman and her implements disrupt the familiar system of everyday meanings - the safely understood signs of food production erupt into anger and violence. In list of kitchen implements, states Rosler, "when the woman speaks, she names her own oppression." She, like many feminist artists of the 1970s, wished to interrupt and change the preconceived notions about women's roles within the home, and how these were represented in the mass media.

Black and white video with sound - Electronic Arts Intermix



Title: *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979)

Artist: Judy Chicago

Artwork Description & Analysis: *The Dinner Party* is one of the most well-known pieces of Feminist art in existence and is permanently housed at the Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. The installation consists of a large banquet table with place settings for thirty-nine notable women from history and mythology. The settings have gold ceramic chalices and porcelain plates painted with butterfly- and vulva-inspired designs. In addition to the thirty-nine settings, there are the names of 999 other women painted on the tiles below the triangular table. *The Dinner Party* participates in the feminist revision of history, initiated during the 1970s, in which feminists worked to re-discover lost role models for women, re-writing the past that had previously only included male voices. In the combination of intricately wrought textiles, tile, and porcelain, Chicago reclaimed the realm of "high art" to include what had traditionally been relegated to the lower status of "women's work."

Painted porcelain plates, silverware, chalices, fabric, tiles - Brooklyn Museum



Title: *Three Weeks in May* (1977)

Artist: Suzanne Lacy

Artwork Description & Analysis: *Three Weeks in May* was a three-week-long extended artwork. Lacy wanted to bring attention to how frequently women were assaulted, sexually or otherwise, on the streets of Los Angeles. The piece consisted of performances, public drawings, and installations. In this image, Lacy is marking the site where two women were raped by proclaiming it in large red lettering on the sidewalk and then drawing an outline of a body similar to the chalk outlines of murder victims used by the police. Speaking about *Three Weeks in May*, Lacy stated, "It was used as both [an] organizing device to bring people from different anti-violence organizations and different political perspectives together on the same programs - and as a way to create public dialogue on rape and women's solutions for it." The piece engages with many facets of Feminist art through its message of social awareness,

expression of women's social and personal perspectives, and the use of performance and installation as opposed to traditional media like sculpture or painting.

Performance



Title: *Untitled (I shop therefore I am)* (1987)

Artist: Barbara Kruger

Artwork Description & Analysis: This piece is characteristic of Kruger's early work, depicting a phrase placed over a photographic image from a newspaper or magazine. Kruger first worked in magazine advertising, and used her graphic design expertise in her art. The slogan in this work refers to images of women in the media, specifically product advertisements designed for women, which are usually created by men. It is a reminder that most of the media that is geared toward women is based on men's assumptions about women's desires, lives, and ideals, interrogating the belief that women only need material objects to feel happy and that men can keep them under their control by those means. Kruger's work is accessible and direct, and was incredibly influential among the artists of the 1980s.

Photographic Silkscreen/Vinyl



Title: *THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING A WOMAN ARTIST* (1989)

Artist: The Guerrilla Girls

Artwork Description & Analysis: This is one of the Guerrilla Girls' early posters, and exemplifies their strategy of using humor to defuse and break down discrimination and prejudice within the art world. Adopting a tongue-in-cheek tone, they list the "advantages" that still faced women artists in the late 1980s, like "Knowing your career might pick up after you're eighty." Guerrilla Girl "Lee Krasner" stated, "The world of High Art, the kind that gets into museums and history books, is run by a very small group of people. Our posters have proved over and over again that these people, no matter how smart or good-intentioned, have been biased against women and artists of color." This poster reflects how pervasive that bias was in 1989, despite almost two decades of feminist activism. The fact that the Guerrilla Girls are still making posters and appearing globally implies that this problem still persists today.

Poster