

GLOBAL FEMINISMS: New Directions in Contemporary Art. Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin, eds. New York: Merrell, Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2007; 304 pp

and

WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution. Cornelia Butler, curator Lisa Gabrielle Mark, ed. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2007; 512 pp.

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In the fall of 2008, the Vancouver Art Gallery hosted WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution, the only opportunity this decade for Canadian viewers to scrutinize one of two acclaimed feminist art exhibitions originating from and touring the United States. Curated by Cornelia Butler, WACK! opened early in March 2007 at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, just weeks ahead of Linda Nochlin and Maura Reilly's launch of *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* at the Brooklyn Museum. Organized to honour the ground-breaking relationship between the feminist movement and art making since the late 1960s and the early 1970s, Cornelia Butler revisits the transformative effect of feminism as a social and political movement on the visual art production of feminists and women artists who despite producing work that shares in the project of innovation and intervention generated by this dynamic relation are not self-proclaimed feminists. Put simply, these women artists, and so many others not discussed here, revised the canon (Pollock), and changed the production of visual art knowledge and the art critical discourses associated with this revolutionary movement.

The dynamic body of work that WACK! signals remains far "less understood and appreciated" than the social impact of the feminist movement (p. 7). Butler intends this exhibition, and its accompanying catalogue text, to redress that balance by documenting the profound paradigm shift in contemporary visual discourse in the United States that began with the advent of feminist activism. Here 119 artists represent 21 different countries. The exhibition title "WACK!" gestures to activist groups and political communities beginning in the 1970s whose activities focused on women's issues and cultural production. Carrying violent and sexual associations, "wack" reinforces the mandate of feminism's affront to the patriarchal system and suggests the corrective effect of a schoolteacher's ruler or the resounding impact of a judge's gavel. Citing bell hooks' proposal to reconnect (the) "feminist movement" to the verb "to move" - "with all the restless possibility that word connotes" (hooks, 2000, pp. 111-113), Butler shows that "feminism often coexisted with political engagement on other fronts such as race, class, and sexual orientation, which at times superseded feminism as the dominant discourse within which these artists preferred to situate their work" (p. 16). She astutely notes how the feminist activism of women artists evolved out of "collective art-making" and "a deep engagement with the civil rights movements" (p. 17).

*Global Feminisms*, on the other hand, defined itself from the beginning in counterpoint and as an update to an exhibition curated 30 years earlier by Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris, *Women Artists: 1550-1950* (1976). Although the 1976 exhibition, *Women Artists* was historically specific to the 1970s, Nochlin's co-editor Maura Reilly suggests that, "The two exhibitions can serve as conceptual bookends separated by thirty years of feminist artistic practice and theory" (Nochlin and Reilly, 2007, p. 15).

If WACK! surveys the remarkable body of work that emerged from the dynamic relationship between art and feminism in and around the 1970s, then *Global Feminisms* aims to show the interconnectedness and the diversity of women's histories, experiences, and struggles within the

aesthetic and historical parameters of the narrative of (feminist) art history. Organized thematically, not geographically, the curatorial project of Global Feminisms presents a collection of voices that Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests, "tell alternate stories of difference, culture, power, and agency," whereas, WACK! engages the political and social dynamics of activist work carried out by feminist artists, whose visual practices contribute so much to contemporary feminist discourse (Mohanty, 2003, p. 244).

Both WACK! and Global Feminisms may be seen as rupturing (Kristeva) or displacing (Spivak) systems of visual and institutional practices that follow an andro-centric, hierarchical canon, each employing a different critical framework to negotiate the impact of the feminist movement on the contemporary visual arts scene. Both of these texts construct different narratives of the feminist movement in the United States that aim to trace and account for transformations in the contemporary visual arts scene that have occurred due to the impact of third- wave feminism. Each speaks to the interface of feminism with visual art practice: for Butler, structurally through the meaning-making possibilities introduced in the dynamic relation of viewer (seer) and work; and, for Nochlin and Reilly, representation-wise in terms of who makes the work and the relation between the maker and what is produced. Butler's collection of diverse essays, edited by Lisa Gabrielle Mark, documents the activist work of artists, as contributors to the dynamic political and social discourse of the feminist movement. In contrast, Nochlin and Reilly trace the narrative of feminist art produced in this context in terms of its subjects and subject matter - who represents and what gets represented - and how these issues of representation affect and revise the master narrative (Lorde) of the art-historical canon.

Both of these projects exhibit a desire for greater global inclusion of women artists with Linda Nochlin and Maura Reilly attempting to tie the disparate threads of the feminist art they investigate into neat, tight narratives, written from distinctly American-centred perspectives.

Global Feminisms includes only one Canadian artist, Rebecca Belmore. No explanatory text accompanies her work despite the use of a large-scale visual documentation detail of Belmore's installation *The Named and the Unnamed* (2002) in the frontispiece. WACK! includes three Canadians: Suzy Lake, Lisa Steele and Colette Whiten, all English speaking, all more than 60 years old, with substantial and active careers, and all teach in university visual arts programs in the vicinity of Toronto. Certainly, these artists deserve recognition for their work but there are many other Canadian artists that merit equal attention - for example, I can mention Vera Frenkel, Jamelie Hassan, Jana Sterbak, and Nina Levitt among many others. Both Nochlin and Reilly 's and Butler's pieces also do not include any traces of Québécois feminist visual artists although they do cite publications from Montreal's La Centrale (Galerie Powerhouse) in their bibliographies. Contemporary Québécois artists like Geneviève Cadieux and Nicole Jolicoeur are completely absent from their curatorial scopes. This absence would be unimaginable in any conversation about the intersection of feminism and contemporary visual art practice in Canada as such a conversation would consider the impact of French Feminism on visual art practice and the corresponding effect on feminist discourse.

#### References

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