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Paper III: WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution.

The Declaration of Sentiments was a document ushering in the first wave of Feminism in 1848. It was worded in the language of The Declaration of Independence and written for the first Women's Rights Convention by Elizabeth Cady Stanton along with a small group of Quaker and abolitionist women. They formally demanded legal, political and personal freedoms at a time when basic human rights for women were denied. The Declaration of Sentiments states, "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal...the history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her." Equality for women is generally agreed upon and initiates this discussion of Feminism and art.

Feminism is a constellation of beliefs based on the radical idea of equality. Feminists believe in self-determination, social awareness and evolving personal consciousness. All women have unalienable rights, related to the freedoms associated with how they live their lives. Feminist artists express ideas coalescing around laws that govern women's physical bodies (Roe VS Wade), financial independence and value (equal pay for equal work), intellectual freedom, choices in relationships (Gay rights and same sex marriage), roles and the struggle for personal identity and political rights. Social and cultural behavioral patterns, expectations, perception and traditional roles were the themes explored in WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution. Psychological and emotional consequences circle back to issues concerning women's physical health and wellbeing and are reflected the artwork produced thirty years ago.

The WACK exhibition is arranged thematically in the areas mentioned and individual female artists response to oppressive stereotypes, prevalent in the 70's. Artwork is an expression of consciousness and women seemed to be more outraged then, than today. The use of women's bodies as art materials had high shock value. Carol Scheeman's *Interior Scroll*, Valie Exports *Tap and Touch Theater* and Ana Mendieta *Blood Sign* video, used their physical bodies in extreme ways, both as media and message. The bodies of women are where the drama of sexism plays out. How women chose to portray themselves, their experiences and who they are as women, are revealed in over four hundred works on display in this exhibition.

Symptoms of oppression in women manifest as fear (intimidation), anger (rage) and grief (pain). Sexist attitudes inflict emotional wounding and suffering. Violence toward women in the 70's media-sex complex was particularly blatant. Articles, TV and ads showed and sanctified treatment of women as sexual objects (for men), victims, abuse (emotional and physical), humiliated, objectified, raped and murdered, This was the most disturbing part of the exhibition. These attitudes must be changed and the damaged done, healed in order to move forward. Artist expression was used as a way to communicate feminists' issues.

To identify and express the conditions where oppression occurs is another way to heal the harmful effects of those experiences. Bringing these issues into public consciousness is necessary for both the oppressor and oppressed. <sup>2</sup>"Every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power with the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change". By bringing these values out in the open, the power inherent in the hidden becomes available to women.

Artists in the WACK show demonstrate their resistance to inequality through their artwork in what is considered the second wave of feminism. <sup>3</sup>Catherine Lord series of paintings, *Their Memory is Playing Tricks on Her: Notes toward a Calligraphy of Rage* show palpable rage in the calligraphic gestures and violent brushwork, spelling out "Angry Gertrude, Angry Marilyn, Angry Sue" etc. Joan Synder's paintings are described as "drenched with personal pain, stammered with rage" with the canvas functioning as an extension of the artist's experience. I am familiar with this visual language and use it in my work. I refuse to accept I have no power; it goes against my experience of myself. I have learned only I can give away my power. In addition, the act of creating artwork, places me in direct contact with my source of power. This was true of the artwork in the exhibition.

Most of the artwork visually explodes traditional cultural taboos placed upon women. Identity, aesthetics, representation, genitals, pornography, sexuality, objectification and male violence toward women were expressed through signifiers of the larger problem of oppression. I observed throughout the exhibition, women working through rage, fear and pain. They seemed to turn their anger into intense focus and passion that was of benefit to the creation of their artwork.

A piece that particularly stood out for me was a photograph, showing a porno still (cheesy depiction of male/female copulation) in juxtaposition to a second photograph of a bloodied Vietnamese mother and child in physical suffering (casualty of war...sic). A typographic caption as part of the work read; "Which one (of these images) is Pornography?" Good question and good example of a 70's political and ethical "consciousness-raising".

Feminist discourse in art looks at how women artists make art, how we are perceived as artists, and how our work is judged and deemed of lesser value than men's. Control, choice and freedom are about power. Power is at the heart of Feminist discourse. An imbalance of power creates conditions for oppression. The reality is men hold a disproportionate amount of power because they are men and women are excluded from having power because they are women. This has not changed significantly in the last thirty years. We still live in a society where masculine qualities are valued and feminine qualities are not. This arbitrary social construct negatively affects both men and women.<sup>4</sup> Further, repressive attitudes, and standards for behavior take their toll dramatically early in puberty when young women begin to form their identity as women.

There is an important distinction between sex and gender.<sup>5</sup> Sex is used to describe a person's biological condition and is based on the physical body including chromosomes, hormones and reproductive capacity. Gender refers to the cultural meaning given to an individual's sex and is a social construct based on physical characteristics. Gender conventions have to do with the way most people in a particular group express their female or male gender traits.

Given this distinction, I prefer to discuss male energy principles and female energy principles as they relate to<sup>6</sup> polarity, not to genitalia. In the 70's women and men sought to balance their masculine and feminine energy as a means to right the wrong of sexism. Men grew their hair long and got in touch with their feminine side. Women gained financial freedom and got in touch with their masculine energy. In terms of social roles men and women were becoming similar. This is an improvement from male domination, but each of us possesses both male and female energy, independent of gender and sex. Male energy expressed is different than female energy, *it is not better; it's different!* While it may be politically correct to assume a 50/50 balance or "equality", it is not based in reality of how masculine and feminine energy interacts.

It was my observation that most of the artists in this show, created work in response to dominant male values. Miriam Shapiro's huge, hard-edged canvases reminded me of Frank Stella's work, with their sharp, crisp, intense foreshortened geometric forms. The feelings expressed in Annegret Soltau's series of photographs, *Selbst* showed taut string wrapped many times around the artists' head. These photographs communicate clearly the frustration of having no voice and being invisible. These are powerful works that reveal the truth of women's experiences. They are in response to and tied with the stereotypical ways in which women are treated. Women who internalize sexist values oppress themselves and others in much the same way as men do.

In studying Judy Chicago's original work in the show, original pieces are much more powerful than photographs. I found her work to be a genuine search for female identity and a female aesthetic. Feminine energy expressed through the search for a new visual language. It was a refreshing change from some of the other work, as it went beyond a reaction to sexism and oppression. I physically responded to Chicago's work with optical spiraling movements caused in part by viewing the painted forms peripherally while reading her handwritten text. *Through the Flower* reminded me of the form of a mandala or core image, representing a unique<sup>7</sup> feminine spiritual heritage. In most photographs of her work, the handwritten text is cropped out, and the focus is on the imagery. This misrepresents her work and does not carry visual/verbal messages that speak together in her pieces. Maybe text and image could be thought of as a metaphor for male and female modes of<sup>8</sup> perception? Interestingly, the words are left out and the image is considered as the work.

Questions have arisen for me, mainly by examining Chicago's work. Questions I thought I had answered. Is there a female aesthetic? What are the artistic principles by which we evaluate works created by women about women's experience for female audiences? Can a male artist create feminist works of art? Should a female artist seek to communicate in formal traditional masculine visual language in order to be heard or accepted as an artist? Is it possible to develop a genuine artistic voice, as a woman in a patriarchal repressive society?

I am female artist and a feminist. But, I am not a feminist artist per se. I am in the process of cultivating a self-identification as an artist in a sexist, racist, ageist, capitalist, classicist, and elitist polluted environment. My gender and age factor into judgments about the quality and value of my art production; that is the reality. I count on the quality of my work to transcend what I cannot control as sexism is a system set up for its survival, and survive it has. I will continue to create art with my irrational optimistic spirit and positive attitude. In this third wave of Feminism, women have a lot to teach men and men also have a lot to teach women. Like it or not, we all need each other. It's about time we get over the tyranny of our egos and genitals and start acting like decent human beings.

*"The best way to beat discrimination in art is by art. Excellence has no sex."* Eva Hesse.

1. *History of Women Suffrage*, "Declaration of Sentiments," Charles Mann, 1881  
Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda J. Gage
2. *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, Audre Lorde, Essay, 2004
3. *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Catalog, 2007
4. *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, Mary Piper, PhD, 1994
5. *A History of Gender in America*, Sylvia Hoffert, 2003
6. *Finding God through Sex: Awakening the One of Spirit Through the Two of Flesh*, David Deida, 2005
7. *The Feminine Face of God*, Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins, 1992
8. *The New Feminine Brain*, Dr. Mona Lisa Shultz, Christiane Northrup, 2005