The Name of the Game

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I had my first taste of cooption late in the seventies, when I heard a critic call Chris Burden, the West Coast performance artist known for his acts of bravado and daring, a "political artist." Now, Burden is a fine artist in many respects, but political he's not—at least in terms of the vocabulary that described the conscious intentionality of feminists, Marxists, and community artists who had come of age in that decade.

In 1969 at Fresno State College in California, the artist Judy Chicago began her experiment in educating women in the arts with what was probably the first feminist art program.[1] During that year and the subsequent two at California Institute of the Arts, where Chicago joined forces with the painter Miriam Schapiro to create an expanded feminist art-educational program, students explored the nature of being female. As part of that West Coast moment, I can tell you that we were very busy: unearthing scholarship on obscure women artists, probing hidden self-information through consciousness raising, developing artistic form language to express personal experience, critically examining women's artwork for its underlying impulses and premises, and trying to reconcile the rapidly growing body of feminist political theory with our art making.

I think this last point is worth noting. In 1969, when the New York painter Faith Wilding and I put out an open call for a women's meeting in Fresno (and were astounded when almost forty women appeared), very little feminist theory was available; Betty Friedan, Caroline Bird, and Simone de Beauvoir were the exceptions.[2] That changed rapidly in the next few years, and as soon as material became accessible in the newly formed women's bookstore in Fresno, we jumped on it. We discussed it with each other and compared it to our own experience. We measured our political, and later our art, practices against these early writings. We also combed related fields for information pertaining to our condition as women. As a psychology graduate student, I was criticizing Freud, drawing on Irving Goffman's work on the arrangement of visual symbols to signify power relationships, George Gerbner's activist media theory, and Saul Alinsky's community-organizing techniques. Others, from different backgrounds, similarly looked with a changed eye to the body of writing in their own professions. Such literature fueled but did not exclusively comprise the most basic project: understanding who we were, what we wanted, and how we were positioned as women in this and other cultures. This feminist project was made up of research, personal introspection, and activism, in changing proportions. Theory grew out of all three.[3]

Much early American feminist theory of the sixties and seventies was based on political activism. (Valeria Solana *first* shot Andy Warhol, *then* wrote her book from jail.) The reconciliation of feminist theory and (for some) leftist and community-organizing theories with art making informed the next several years of West Coast education. At the feminist art programs at the California Institute of the Arts, and later at the Feminist Studio Workshop of the Woman's Building, we began to develop a political art that was participatory, egalitarian, and reflective of both the personal and collective truth of women's experiences.[4] We wanted art that made changes, either in its maker or its audience. It was well understood that, in order to create an art of action, one must see as clearly as possible the present nature of things; so it followed, of course, that analysis was a part of our practice.

Below are some of the ideas (which were not necessarily exclusive to women artists) we used in formulating what we were doing and analyzing why we did it:

1. Art is a potential link across differences. It can be constructed as a bridge among people, communities, even countries. The space of art is a neutral one in many people's experience, making it an unthreatening meeting ground. Attempts at interracial "crossovers" were common in mid-seventies feminist art, though the insights needed for cooperation and inclusion among women of differences had not yet been developed. In fact, some of the early artworks that attempted to deal with race may have contributed to developing necessary skills. As a result of seeing art as a bridge, collaboration became a highly valued attribute of the work process, and its practice was much more complex than the sharing of work by two equal partners. Collaboration was explored as a concept that explained communication, effort, and exchange between two or more differing entities.

2. The body is a primary site for works of art. This fit well into the feminist interest in personal exploration and collective redefinition.[5] Not only was the body a site, it was an important source of information. Notions of the art process's connection to healing grew out of this and were elaborated. Martha Rosler's "Statistics of a Citizen Simply Obtained," a performance in which a "scientist" read off measurements of Rosler's body as he took them, and some of

Nancy Buchanan's and my early performance work were characteristic of the simultaneous inhabiting and objectification of the body site. Others worked much more subjectively within the site; an example is Barbara Smith's performance "Feed Me," a controversial exploration of female receptivity. Linda Montano, Hanna Wilke, and Carolee Schneemann, New York–based conceptual and performance artists, explored physical and sensate interiority at that time.

3. There is a discrepancy between what we see in social representations of women and the self-awareness generated from actual experience. This discrepancy provoked skepticism and critique.[6] In some instances, works of high humor resulted, as artists (particularly in painting, photography, and performance) demonstrated multiple personalities, experimented with real and illusory facades, and transformed themselves through self-portraits. Above all, they roundly parodied existing images of women: memorable are Eleanor Antin cavorting as a bearded king in a small Southern California beach town (the beginning of an extended performance oeuvre) and Judith Golden gracing front covers of major magazines with imaginative photomontages of various celebrities in her own image. In other instances, analysis was generated from the observation of problematic respresentation; this, in turn, fed the women's movement outside of the art world. Such an instance was the early analysis of violent imagery by Women against Violence against Women, founded by Julia London, a former organizer of farmworkers and performance student at the Feminist Studio Workshop.

4. "The personal is political." This axiom stimulated consideration of the nature and meaning of public and private, a debate that continues today under the double rubric of censorship issues and the role of public art. For example, Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photography was well known for years within the relative privacy of the New York gallery system, but increasing public scrutiny of funding of the arts made it controversial, furnishing material for a heated, highly reactive clash over the right to private expression versus the rights of the public.

The political nature of imagery, the power that comes with the right to name and describe, the "censorship" of people not allowed access to self-representation—these were the avenues of inquiry that led to overtly political artwork by mid-seventies feminists. However, by keeping the personal/political koan in mind, politically engaged artists were able to maintain the value of private experience and personal expression, which would otherwise have been lost to the equation. In this art you'll find many examples of the individual in the context of the collective. In my own performances, I frequently use the device of multiple intimate, "private" conversations held simultaneously in a public space, where both personal and social aspects of an issue are explored.

5. The study of power and its uses and abuses leads to a consideration of inside and outside. In the seventies "inside" was fine art as revealed through the glossy art magazines; "outside" was political art, feminist art, ethnic art. "Inside" was galleries and museums; "outside" was the streets, the community, the homes of the working class. Artists considering these ideas developed strategies for accessibility, desiring to reach various and different constituencies. They looked at the work of these communities in the context of high art, as did the collective Group Material in their exhibition of artifacts-as-art taken from the homes of neighbors in their ethnically and economically mixed Lower East Side neighborhood. Lucy Lippard, in "The Pink Glass Swan: Upward and Downward Mobility in the Art World,"[7] connected this reassessment of working-class aesthetics to a new view of traditional women's work, as did many artists working with quilts, such as Faith Ringgold and Pat Mainardi. We called it the democratization of art. Allan Kaprow's ideas—that art is a life practice, a process of observation, learning, and communication, outside the confines and history of "high art"—were influential among young feminist artists at the Women's Building. Kaprow was teaching at the California Institute of the Arts during the feminist art programs of Chicago and Schapiro, and worked directly with some of their students, including me. His developing theory, evolving from the sixties Pop and "happening" movements, when linked to feminist analysis of the inside/outside problem, provided a rationale for a host of conceptual artworks that explored the meaning and significance of daily life.

6. Audience response is an integral element in aesthetic analysis. Because of their activist base, early feminist artists were concerned with questions of effectiveness, stimulating what is today a fairly sophisticated conception of the nature of an expanded audience, and an understanding of how to reach it. This started quite simply. We felt the nature of women's private experience could be revealed through art, in order to influence cultural attitudes and transform stereotypes. Naïve as it sounds, change was our goal (though its directions were not clearly articulated). Since we'd already decided that the art world was elitist, we bypassed it and went beyond it, developing strategies to reach multiple audiences, support systems to carry them through sometimes difficult material, and methods to analyze our results.

One of the most intriguing of these activist artworks, the Incest Awareness Project, was produced by a team of women led by a conceptual artist, Leslie Labowitz, and a master's-degree candidate at the Feminist Studio Workshop, Nancy Angelo. The project was designed to tap large populist communities. The organizing artists gave careful consideration to the care of audiences voyaging through the painful and unexposed terrain of incest. In one particularly strong work in this series of exhibitions, lectures, and performances, Angelo videotaped five women individually, in direct, frontal framing, as they discussed their experience of incest. The video installation was viewed at performances where the audience was invited to sit in a circle of chairs, five of which were occupied by monitors installed at shoulder level. During

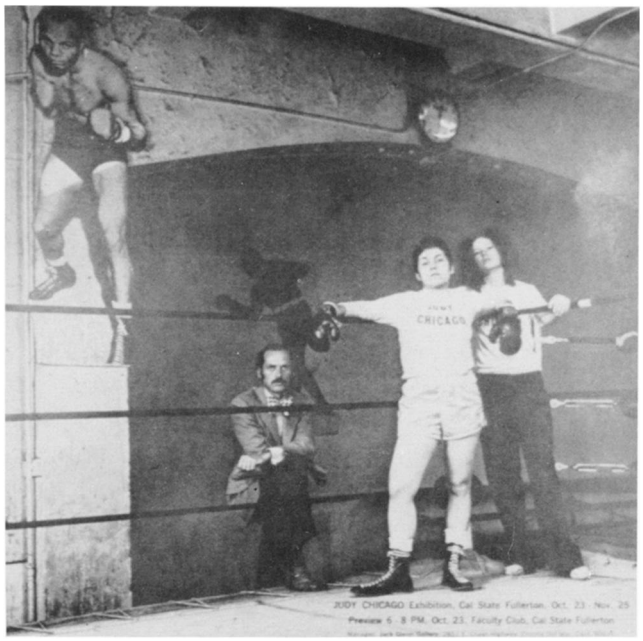

FIG. 1 Judy Chicago, exhibition advertisement in *Artforum*, 1971. Courtesy Jack Glenn Gallery, Corona Del Mar, California.

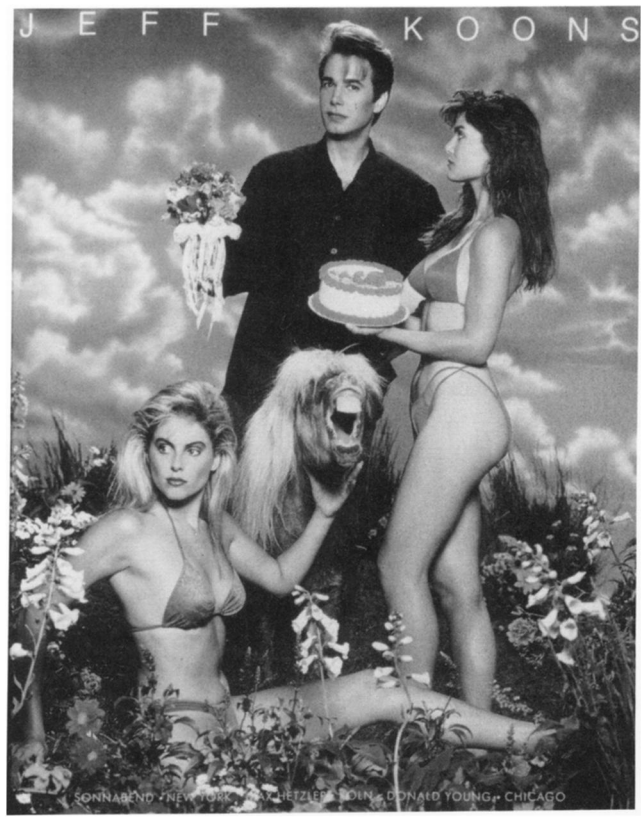

FIG. 2 Jeff Koons, exhibition advertisement in *Art in America*, November 1988. Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York.

the piece, the monitors "talked and listened" to each other, responding in such an appropriate and coordinated fashion that the audience soon forgot the technology and found themselves included in an intense and painfully honest group discussion. Angelo was aware that according to statistics, a sizeable percentage of her mixed male and female audience had probably experienced some form or degree of incest, so she provided for their safe journey by including a trained group facilitator to lead further discussions at the end of each performance.

This impulse to consider the nature of public response and incorporate it into the structure of the work paved the way for feminist public art, including mass-media art. Of course, both public and media sites were also venues for artists who were not feminists, but in many cases the originating impulse for their work, while political in that a media critique was intended, was not otherwise activist. Antfarm's *Media Burn* press-conference performance in Sacramento in 1975 featured a fictional John F. Kennedy delivering a speech on mass-media conventions as a Cadillac crashed through a wall of flaming television sets; Lowell Darling's extended, year-long campaign for the governorship of California in 1978 was played out in the arena of mass media with such success that he actually garnered sixty thousand votes in the primaries; these functioned as witty critiques of media within its own venue, but did not necessarily aim to bring about political change.

There were many other ideas upon which we built our art, and these are documented in various places (see note 3 below). Suffice to say we worked hard to define and live up to the label "political artist." It was quite apparent from criticism at the time that the art world could supply little, if any, framework to explain or expand upon what we were doing. It was even more apparent that political art was a "lower" form (or even a nonform) of art. So imagine my surprise when, in the late seventies, I heard Chris Burden labeled "political." Either his popularity was waning, or someone had changed the name of the game.

Shift now to the mid-1980s. In Soho a political-art exhibition opens: its consists of the word (and *only* the word) *Hiroshima* blazoned across the wall of the gallery. In Texas, at the Society for Photographic Education conference, a critic discusses the iconography of the high heel in terms of its signification of female sexuality. Back in New York, in the Whitney Museum's 1989 exhibition "Image World," three photographs are displayed: Judy Chicago's pugilistic renaming of herself in a full-page *Artforum* ad, in which she is dressed as a boxer *(fig. 1)*; Lynda Benglis's pornographic shocker, her glistening nude body sporting a dildo; and, hung next to these without comment or contextualization, Jeff Koons's self-advertisement (from *Art in America*) as a man about town *(fig. 2)*. The Latino boom hits New York, a few years later than Los Angeles, and the art world dances to a salsa beat (a short beat, according to skeptical Latino artists, who remember the "Afro boom" of the mid-seventies).

The name of the game *has* changed, but have the ground rules? It is no longer out of vogue to be a "political" artist, but activism is still problematic, as evidenced by its lack of critical theory and support.[8] The feminist artists of

the seventies were somewhat utopian in their approach. They envisioned a new world, and their analysis of society included an imaginative revision of the status quo, one that included them. Feminist art of the eighties is marked by a deep and complicated observation of what is taken to be the structure of contemporary culture—a curiously centralized discourse on marginality.

There has been a definite increase in the inclusion of feminist, political, and ethnic ideology in the language and commerce of today's art world. In terms of feminism, one can safely say that, spurred by European film and literary theory, fundamental issues have been repositioned, shifted from the outside to the inside. It's great to see art on such subject matter as AIDS and the war in El Salvador commonly included in exhibitions. It may well be that, eventually, a broader ethnic consciousness will let a select few move into the ring of players, and will even influence mainstream taste in color, style, and rhythm. But there is a fundamental problem with our embrace (or is it a clutching?) of these ideas, people, and art forms. That problem is cooption: the acceptance of the surface without the substance; the divorce of style from meaning; the elimination of the history, theory, and values upon which the work is founded.

The Los Angeles muralist Judy Baca recently talked about the early pioneers of the Chicano art movimiento—Jose Montoya, Luis Valdez, and Rupert Garcia, among others—whose work was tied to indigenous communities and often rooted in Mexican aesthetics. The relationship of self-expression and identity to power was well understood. During the Latino boom, corporations and foundations joined with museums; the result was often (as in the case of the national traveling exhibition "Hispanic Art in the United States," organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and curated by Jane Livingston and John Beardsley) that the fundamental political analysis and the grass roots upon which the work was built were obscured or eliminated altogether. I haven't talked to a single Latino artist who is not well aware of the cooption under way, though each has different strategies for dealing with it.

Likewise with feminist art, rooted in activism and in a profound sense of female community. The debate between the academy and the arena of action in feminist criticism is valuable only if it is contextualized by the overall and ongoing embrace of a larger project called feminism. Debates about woman's "essential" versus her "constructed" nature seem, strangely, to divide rather than stimulate. Activism is pitted against analysis, with a clear-cut art-world bias toward the latter, oddly similar to the art world's condescension to political and community-based art during the 1970s.

Granted, the definition of feminism is different for each of us, but it often appears that a commitment to the whole—the whole body of women, of political struggle, of history (and that includes the history of feminism as well as of art)—is missing from contemporary debate. So we must ask, in whose interest is it that feminism be fragmented? Who gains if history is forgotten? If feminism in a new, theoretical, abstract stance is allowed into the academy, while those scruffy activists are left, once again, outside? If low-riders and zoot-suiters are in and muralists out? If merely to evoke the name of Hiroshima in a high-rent gallery is sufficient for the political conscience of the art world?

When theory is disconnected from activism it is robbed of its vitality—its life, some of us would say. Women artists have fallen into a trap of divisiveness. Each succeeding generation has bought the media's version of the previous one. A critic friend and I debate whether or not ecological and responsive art is "feminist." No, she tells me, because it is not angry, not centered on women getting a piece of the pie. But the feminism I know is as inclusive of healing as it is of anger; it reconfigures the pie in the service of equal power, or of nonpower. Why doesn't she know that? Why haven't we made the connections?

At the Society for Photographic Education conference in Houston in 1988, I sat in the audience watching the high-heeled slide show and listening to the critic deconstruct pornography, and I remembered the early Women against Violence against Women slide shows, the similarly pointed and specific analysis (even down to such details as that spike heels are arranged to indicate penetration of the vagina). I remember that my own writings, based on analyses with Leslie Labowitz, demonstrated iconographic relationships between art and hard-core pornography.[9] And I wonder if the difference was that our articles and slide shows ended with calls to action?

At yet another exhibition I muse over Cindy Sherman's self-portraits of Everywoman *(fig. 3)*, and I can't rid myself of the disturbing feeling that I am witnessing in more sophisticated form an originating impulse toward feminism, one I have seen repeatedly in art students when they first encounter the discrepancy between interior and exterior definitions of women. In particular, I remember that, in 1969, in the Fresno feminist art program, we intuitively photographed ourselves dressed as stereotypical images of women. I study the slides left from these experiments—a woman in a bridal gown staring pensively *(fig. 4)*, a seductress beckoning, a kewpie doll, her head tilted naïvely and arms akimbo. These are perhaps less developed as a body of images, of course, but isn't there a connection?

The result of the disengagement of theory from action is loss of a sense of values. To what end do we analyze? For what reason do we act? One critic told me she thinks people are confused today, looking for a perspective to explain artists' relationship to the world. The questions feminist artists asked in the seventies are still pertinent today, most vividly in public art, and directly address values:

What is public, what is private, and what are the rights and responsibilities within these sectors?

FIG. 3 Cindy Sherman, untitled film still, 1980, black-and-white photograph, 10 × 8 inches. Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

FIG. 4 Shawnee Wollamen, *The Bride,* 1969, color photograph. Private collection.

What are the social and personal values expressed through an artist's work, and how are those values relevant to shaping culture?

How do you integrate a broader public into the process of making, viewing, evaluating art? How can we reach multiple and expanded audiences? Indeed, should we?

Is the market the measure of the value of art? If not, how is meaning to be evaluated? If not, how are artists to support themselves?

Is change intrinsic to the viewing of art? To its making? What is the nature of such change, and how can it be discussed? Can art change the world?

There are other questions out there, and many sources other than feminism contribute to this thinking. In this decade multiple voices and histories are surfacing; we are in an astoundingly vital moment, one with a difficult charge. It is not simply a historian's task to integrate the last twenty-five years of feminist, political, and ethnic art practice and theory. It is the task of all of us not to forget. Issues of feminist identity, ethnic cultures, ecology, community, and global consciousness are rooted in radical, spiritual, and theoretical practices. Out of the intricacies of their links to each other will grow a new and appropriate art: a game that matches its name. ■

Notes

1. This year-long program of art, history, and consciousness raising for women art students at Fresno State College is described in Judy Chicago's book *Through the Flower* (New York: Doubleday, 1973.)
2. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963); Caroline Bird, *Born Female* (McKay, 1968); Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1953).
3. Much of this early feminist art theory has been published by such writers as Lucy Lippard, Arlene Raven, Judy Chicago, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, Deena Metzger, and Miriam Schapiro.
4. The Woman's Building was founded in 1973 in the old Chouinard Art School building in Los Angeles. It originally consisted of three galleries, a bookstore, a press, a theater company, and the Feminist Studio Workshop. The Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW) was cofounded in 1972 by Sheila de Bretteville, Arlene Raven, and Judy Chicago, as a college-level educational program in the arts for women. One year later, in 1973, the faculty was joined by Helen Alm, Ruth Iskin, Edith Folb, Deena Metzger and me. It offered a comprehensive program for approximately forty students a year, in the areas of painting, printing, performance, sculpture, writing, literature, and graphics.
5. Body as site was a current concept in art explored by men as well. Allan Kaprow, Bruce Nauman, and Vito Acconci were among those artists who contributed significantly. An assessment of the differences and similarities between male and female artists' concern with the body is beyond the scope of this paper, save to say that one can draw parallels between feminist theory and consciousness raising at that time with the particular usage of body as site by West Coast women artists.
6. The dense theoretical language of the eighties analysis of social representation may give the impression that such observations are unique to this era, but of course they are not. Rather, these same observations, housed within a different theoretical context and expressed in a different language, can be seen in earlier explorations.
7. In *Get the Message?* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984), 89.
8. Some critics are working on reconciling notions of effectiveness with aesthetics; among these are Suzi Gablik, Arlene Raven, Patricia Phillips, and Lucy Lippard.
9. See Suzanne Lacy, "Learning to Look," *Exposure: Journal of the Society for Photographic Education* 19 (1981): 8–15.

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