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Defining Experiences: feminist exhibitions in the 1990s

What is your most memorable experience of a feminist/ women's art exhibition in the past 10 years and why? Did it challenge or change your understanding of feminism?

(Please name the title of the show, the venue, and the date.

Please feel free to write about shows you may have curated yourself.)

Yoshiko Shimada (artist, Japan)

The most memorable show in the last 10 years is: *Gender-Beyond Memory* at Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography in September 1996 curated by Michiko Kasahara. I was the only Japanese artist in the show. Other artists included were Carry MaeWeems, Trinh T. Min-ha. I consider it as the first “feminist” show in Japan. Before that, there were “women artists” shows, but they focused on the supposed “feminine” quality of their art. It attracted over 30,000 people as an audience, which is quite large considering the size of the museum. It received mostly good reviews at the time, but later, some male art critics targeted this show as “politically correct” and a “foreign concept” show. According to them, feminism is a non-Japanese concept and the show had no validity in Japan. There has been warm support to my work from some men and women here in Japan, but most art people think feminist art is “passe”- one of those buzz words which come and go from foreign countries. The curator, Ms. Kasahara, has been working on women-related issues and curating great shows. It is a pity that ultra-nationalist populist Shintaro Ishihara became the governor of Tokyo and is now putting a lot of pressure to Tokyo curators to do more of “Jap-pop”, “anime”, “manga” shows which will attract larger audiences. This reaction to the gender show suggests that in Japan, feminism is not a gender issue, but it is a political one. The most anti-feminist art people are very often nationalistic

men. They want to keep Japanese art “unique” from Western influence and at the same time have a deep inferiority complex against the Western art. Their strategy and that of the Japanese cultural and foreign offices’ strategy is to grab cultural hegemony in Asia through Japanese popular culture. (September 2000)

Irina Aktuganova (Director, Cyber-Femin-Club, St Petersburg, Russia)

Our best and most memorable event was the international conference ‘Cyberfeminism in the East and in the West’ in St. Petersburg in 1998. For more information on go to www.cfc.spb.ru/archive

Emanuela de Cecco (critic, Italy)

The most memorable experience for me of a women's art exhibition was *Division of Labour: Women's Work in Contemporary Art*. The venue was The Bronx Museum of Contemporary Art in New York (17 February-11 June 1995) and the curator and catalogue coordinator was Lydia Lee. It was for me the first occasion to see works and documents of the *Womanhouse* experience and it was the first show in which I saw a “different” idea of work related to personal histories, domestic places, and to discover that an ancient tradition could be re-interpreted and find a strong place in contemporary culture. It was also very important to see a show in which art was considered as an instrument of the cultural debate and not only connected to the art world.

Lynn Hershman (artist, USA)

I think my most memorable experience will happen in October 2000 when I am given a retrospective at feminale in Cologne, or possibly at *crossfemale* in Berlin in September. I'm sure it will change my ideas and bring forward some of the younger thinking that derived from ideas we were struggling with 30 years ago.

Judy Chicago (artist, USA)

As to a reply, the question put me in somewhat of a quandry because the feminist exhibition I liked the best was Amelia Jones’ 1996 show *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* at the UCLA Armand Hammer Museum; but I felt embarrassed to state that because it seemed so self-serving.

However, my reason for liking it so much really did not have to do with its focus on *The Dinner Party* but rather, because the exhibition included work by 55 other feminist artists and brought that work into both a museum and historic context. When I made *The Dinner Party*, it was with the hope that it might act as a wedge into mainstream culture, bringing with it both women's history and women's culture. The premiere of the work in 1979, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, stimulated a wide variety of related exhibitions, performances and lectures at the museum and in the Bay Area generally. It was very exciting to see feminist culture in the museum, filling the museum, in fact. The backlash that followed stunned both me and everyone else involved with *The Dinner Party* - and it took 25 years before there was once again (at least on the West Coast) a major exhibition at a museum focusing on feminist art. Moreover, the 1996 exhibition of *The Dinner Party* did serve to expose many people to feminist art as there were 55,000 visitors to the show, many of whom came only to see *The Dinner Party* but ended up learning about the richness of our culture. Also, I loved seeing some of the work - together - not one or two works by feminist artists fighting to be understood in the white male context and modernist narrative that dominates so many contemporary museums around the world.

Betsy Damon (artist, USA)

I have not participated in a women's show in the past 10 years. Although I can answer from 30 years ago!

Susan Hinnun (artist, Denmark)

In May 1993, I was visiting New York together with my fellow students from the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. A few of us went to the gallery Exit Art and saw the exhibition *1920*, and honestly it was a shock. My first reaction was to burst into laughter as there was so many works with blood! But later, I must admit, the show made me think a lot. Mainly because, the way this show was displaying the issue of feminism, which was total strange to me as an European. To put it mildly I was challenged by what I saw, specially because at that time and I knew nothing of the history of feminist art in Denmark. Somehow the history of the feminist art movement in Denmark seemed at that time to have been totally forgotten. Frankly I didn't think there had been any! Over the next years I put a lot of effort in study what had happened in the 1960s and 1970s in Denmark. Five years later in 1998, I, together with Malene Landgreen and Sanne Kofod Olsen put up the exhibition *Boomerang* in Copenhagen showing only female artists (see *Inserts:67 Women Artists in Denmark*).

Today I think the idea for this exhibition was established mainly as an effect from my visit at Exit Art. So, the answer to your question is therefore: for me, the most memorable show in the 1990s has to be without discussion 1920 at Exit Art in New York in 1993.

Gayatri Sinha (critic/curator, India)

Regarding your question. Even if this sounds like immodesty, the exhibition *The Self and the World*, curated by myself for Gallery espace, a gallery run by a woman, Renu Modi, at India's premier space the National Gallery of Modern Art made an abiding impression. (National Gallery of Modern Art, *The Self and the World*, April, 1997). We used the work of 15 women artists, (the same artists discussed in the book *Expressions and Evocations*) and we presented each artist chronologically and in the larger context of women's art. The degree of application to being Indian and feminine, the implicit modernity of each artists' self expression, and the powerful emotional engagement with the body, and gender concerns in a largely patriarchal structure made the exhibition an extremely powerful statement. It also emerged through that exhibition that some of the most significant work in painting, graphics and sculpture in India has been accomplished by women.

Anne Kirker (curator, Australia)

The most memorable feminist art exhibition I visited in the past decade was the two-part *Bad Girls* and *Bad Girls West* held in New York and Los Angeles in 1994. As a fairly serious-minded curator and author of the book *New Zealand Women Artists: A survey of 150 years* (updated in 1993), I wish that I had been braver about bringing humour into the text, and generally being shamelessly outrageous. I bought the *Bad Girls* T-shirt and wore it until it "died" and then devoured Jo Anna Isaak's book *Feminism & Contemporary Art: The revolutionary power of women's laughter* (1996).

Linda Montano (artist, USA)

Last month, Pauline Oliveros, the composer, presented *The Lunar Opera* at Lincoln Center Outdoors for a day. Why was it a feminist , memorable event? You have to have been there really. It was so circular and continuous and multi-focused and collaborative and visual and sonic and magnanimous and full bodied and outrageously incorrect in its process and comment on the paradigm of doing the right thing that the place will never be the same. Part of its brilliance was the back-

to-back interweaving of Tibetan Monks in full traditional chanting mode exchanging energy and the “stage” with same costumed improvisers making sounds that celebrate the ‘One Source’. It was excellent and brave and Pauline has always managed to address the solution and not the “problem” of difference. Check her website.

Lorna Green (artist, UK)

In June 1992 I took part, along with 70 women artists at a month’s notice, in *MISS-ING* at Augustrasse 4, curated by Beatrice Stammer and Gabriele Horn, of the Staatliche Kunsthalle Berlin, within *37 Raume - exhibitions by 37 curators* throughout Berlin. *MISS-ING* was linked to *Documenta 9* as a way to counteract the lack of women it had included, 25 women artists and 165 male artists. The exhibition took place in the Scheunenviertel, once the flourishing Jewish Quarter with its famous domed synagogue and close the the Nazi headquarters, both in Oranienburgerstrasse, and by then a developing artists area. We were asked to consider the history of the area in the brief described as a ‘former Jewish district which today may be run down and falling apart but which, in the long run, will belong to the government district of an emerging capital with modern architecture.’ My sculpture, Hope, made of bricks, whole and smashed, and cactus forms of the prickly pear or sabra was sprayed with gold metallic paint to symbolise the hope for peace and prosperity in the future. The exhibition which included Helen Chadwick from Great Britain, Nancy Spero and Yoko Ono from the USA, Valie Export from Austria, Helen Escobedo from Mexico and Ana Lupas from Romania was an incredible experience. And it realised the commitment of women prepared to become involved at such short notice in this protest! I wrote a full account of this: ‘Another Documenta’ *Womens Art Journal* No 48 Sept/Oct 1992, p.24.

Susan Platt (critic/academic, USA)

Inside the Visible. Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. January 30 to May 12, 1996.

This show was by far the most imaginative construction of feminism that I have seen in the last ten years. Its non linear organization, its provocative mix of artists, its emphasis on artists like Charlotte Salomon, Veira da Silva, Natalie Hervieux, Gego, Ellen Gallagher and other departures from the predictable, all made the show both visually and intellectually provocative. Its international emphasis was a welcome change from the usual American and British obsession with their own histories and the same old artists.

Gail Bourgeois (curator, Montreal)

Earlier memories are often displaced by what is currently relevant to us, therefore I have chosen to speak about a three-woman show presented in a Montreal gallery, La Centrale, in 1996-97. *(ce) corps in vulnérable* was an exhibition conceived around questions posed by our own ageing female bodies. Janet Logan, the artist/curator, Monique Régimbald-Zeiber and I met a few times after starting to prepare new work for the exhibition. It was in these meetings that we could find comfort and even pleasure in sharing our aches and fears. More importantly for me, contact with these intelligent and sensitive women reinforced the healing elements of my art practice through sharing stories about dwindling energies being replaced with fervent commitments to life's processes. Thusly, my most memorable experience of a feminist art exhibition was through my piece, *I am at that awkward age*, which used notions of physical and emotional changes, accepted as normal in adolescents, to speak about equivalent changes in the female bodily experience of menopause. I enjoyed the exhibition's irreverence for culturally imposed readings of the post-reproductive woman. *(ce) corps in vulnérable*, La Centrale, November 30, 1996 - January 26, 1997.

Alina Tortosa (curator, Buenos Aires)

I am afraid I have not seen many feminist shows in Buenos Aires, except perhaps for the one I am curating now at the BAC - British Arts Centre, Ana Gallardo's exhibition *INSTRUMENTAL* (6-22 September 2000), which is feminist in that it is concerned with the physical and psychological well being of women. Ana Gallardo has always worked with being a woman in mind, a woman as a biological individual who can become pregnant and give birth, later her concerns related to a woman having to fill domestic and erotic roles at the same time. Three years ago she painted a series of canvases reproducing different contraception methods as jewel like objects. In a macho society many men, particularly the older generations, and those that who come from less educated milieus, want to have sex without safety controls, for they feel that anything that comes between their penis and the vagina lessens their pleasure, and some achieve their purposes violently, even within close relationships. The three installations now at the BAC discuss the situation of women who cannot afford to prevent pregnancies through contraception methods and who resort, again through lack of means or ignorance, to domestic abortions or to abortions in non scientific pseudo-hospitals.

Ana Gallardo trabaja desde el sentido de precariedad y de desprotección en el que siente que transcurre la vida de muchas mujeres. Por eso eligió armar su proyecto para el BAC con elementos sencillos, de fácil acceso: agujas de tejer, bolsas de

polietileno, cinta de embalar y tubos de ensayo. Elementos modestos que ilustran la carencia como condición instalada en gran parte de la población. Sus trabajos señalan el delicado equilibrio entre la vida y la muerte. Ante la fragilidad de la vida, la muerte acecha inquieta. Está ahí enhebrada en lo precario, en la ignorancia, en la falta de oportunidades reales. Está implícita en los amores violentos, en la falta de ternura, en las relaciones permisivas, en los excesos. Está implícita en la falta de reacción de la misma mujer ante el manipuleo y la injusticia, y en la necesidad de ser querida a cualquier precio.

Nancy Azara (artist, USA)

In order to write about my experience of a feminist/woman's art exhibition in the 1990s, a Meret Oppenheim retrospective (Guggenheim, New York, 26 June-10 September 1996), I would like to go back to the seventies when it first became possible to see women's art, when the door opened and on the other side was fireworks, the kind I had never seen before, a whole new world was open with this art. It became possible to conceive of myself as someone who was following a tradition previously locked away. That tradition flowered in the eighties with exhibitions of works by such artists as Louise Bourgeois, Madelena Abakanowicz, Lenore Tawney, Agnes Martin, among so many others. Meret Oppenheim's fine work slipped through the cracks here in NYC, so it wasn't until the nineties that there was a definitive exhibition of her art. I had known of her famous tea cup (*Le Déjeuner en Fourrure/Luncheon in Fur*, 1936); but not her other work. It was unfortunate that a small space was allotted for it and the work was both poorly lit and hung without much creativity. Nevertheless its strong personality held its own: in the illusions and charades, riddles in vision, a female self in drag, and many contradictions expressed in living. Striking and energetic, it is diverse in color and form. There were paintings, sculptures and many mixed media works at the Guggenheim. Some of the titles will give you an idea of the exhibit (in keeping with her fur on a tea cup saucer and spoon theme): *The Origin of the Fig Leaf*, *Star Circled by Twelve Plants*, *Crowned Animal in Adoration*, *Man in Fog*, and the enigmatic *Word Wrapped in Poisonous Letters (become transparent)*. It is very personal work and as I studied it, I could sense her inner experience and journey into her process. Because her vision spoke to me and I felt such an affinity to it, it inspired and excited me, reinforced my conviction to continue on my own path with my sculpture, so it didn't challenge or change for me my own perceptions, but rather it encouraged them.

Anne Marsh (Lecturer, School of Literary, Visual and Performance Studies at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia)

The most memorable and challenging feminist exhibition I saw in the 1990s was a one off performance by the Australian artist Linda Sproul.

Linda Sproul Listen Linden Gallery, St Kilda, Victoria, Australia, 1993. Dressed in a suburban nightgown she appeared before her audience at the top of a staircase in a grand Victorian house. She stripped off the nightgown to reveal a severe beating across her back and buttocks. She put on a pair of high heel shoes and paraded before her spectators who were lined up on either side of the entrance hall. Bending over she handed people a rubber clad torch (a flashlight) and enticed them to touch her wounds, to prove the reality of the scars for themselves. She handed out small cards: on one side a photograph by Alfred Stieglitz of a small child, above which the words 'teeth, nails, knife, belt, cane, whip' were written. On the reverse the phrase 'love my memory' (a type of funeral card statement). When she got to the end of the queue she put on a cocktail dress, she opened the entrance doors, turned to the audience and thanked them for coming. She went back along the line of spectators shaking their hands, apologizing for the fact that there were not enough chairs. The dramatic change of mood was disruptive and unsettling as she denied her body and her wounds. Provocative, alarming and highly problematic in terms of any "correct" political line the performance stays in the memory as a resounding statement about the plight of women experiencing domestic violence. That's one side of the story. The other issue for Sproul at the time was the then current fashion of sado-masochism. Sproul argued that the difference between the then-current vogue for s/m fashion, s/m clubs and the real pain of physical abuse was linked with privilege and choice. She said: 'If you come from a safe place of power, of course it is incredibly thrilling to hand that power away. If you don't come from a safe place, how much is thrilling and how much is enactment?' Sproul went to *The House of Domination* to get her beating for the performance and was told by the mistress that her tolerance for pain was better than her regular clients. In interview Sproul pointed out that that was because her body had learnt to tolerate pain. She said: 'part of me is really fucked off by the current subcultural idea that the next political movement will be s/m rights and leather pride . . . part of me says, well hang on a minute there are people dying like flies all around the world from all sorts of things and they don't have any rights and now you think the next political movement is one which gives you the right to be fucking beaten: it's all about privileges.'

I found the performance challenged my understanding of feminism by presenting a juxtaposition between private and public, pleasure and pain. It complicated, and in some ways undermined, a "politically aware" feminist attitude to domestic violence by linking s/m practices to the home. This connection is a difficult one for feminism. It is as if Sproul is saying that women like being beaten. Yet the artist's experience

of pain is a reality for the audience – her own subjection to physical pain makes her capable of tolerating pain. This opens up a whole other dimension.

Joanna Frueh (writer/lecturer, USA)

On a visit of mine to New York in 1997 my friend Jeff suggested, Let's see the bunny show! He'd heard from friends about an exhibition at Jessica Fredericks in which the artist featured girls, bunnies, and wry humor. I use "girls" lovingly and with a little embarrassment: I identified with the bodies that artist Marnie Weber had culled from Japanese porno magazines and combined with various landscapes in her small collages. One series featured the heads of rabbit-toothed "Miss America" types. No identification there. No identification either with the fact that many of the female figures were bound or looked like the victims of brutalities. But I was taken by both the darkness and magic of fairytales and a delicate absurdity that Weber had embedded in her work. Most poignantly, the beautiful nudes formed a community of women. I've since written about Marnie's work and included it in two exhibitions that I've curated. It haunts me. So I bought one of her collages and it hangs on my living room wall: in a desert populated with chollas and pink clouds made from balloons, a kneeling nude with a pink bunny head and a book on her lap – her appearance makes some people ask, 'Is that you?' – becomes a wistful vision of erotic intellect and the intelligence of a sensually compelling body.

Amelia Jones (art historian, USA)

My "most memorable experience of a feminist/women's art exhibition in the past 10 years" would have to be my own somewhat harrowing but ultimately rewarding experience of organizing the perhaps overly ambitious show *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* for the UCLA/Armand Hammer Museum in 1996. I do not, however, consider this show the "best" or most successful one, as I clarify below.

This experience of organizing *Sexual Politics* both challenged and changed my understanding of feminism in that I received such hostile responses from many feminists before and after the show opened and catalogue was published. While I would have welcomed judicious criticism of the show itself, which was certainly flawed, these responses were generally (in the case where I heard from people before the show opened) from women who had not spoken to me or seen the checklist or, after the show had opened, had not seen the exhibition itself. In other words, the hostility was free-ranging and apparently had more to do with old histories (old antagonisms with Chicago herself, primarily) and rumor than with the ideas I was

attempting to explore.

The most disappointing part of this for me was the tendency to try to silence me: I was overtly told in several public fora that one was not allowed or supposed to take Chicago's work seriously, in any way. This negative evaluation (which apparently was by 1996 to be taken as fixed in stone) had already been decided, I was admonished, by the series of essays in the 1970s that panned her work as essentialist. To make a long story short, this experience disillusioned me vis-a-vis feminism, pointing to its limitations as a shared discourse of liberation and equality and the tendency (even, or perhaps especially?) for feminists to resort to the same rhetorical weapons of silencing and exclusion that I had thought we were joined in fighting against. We're only human after all. But we could be a little more self-aware!

Needless to say, there have been a lot of other great feminist shows: *Division of Labor* (Bronx Museum, 1995); *Sense and Sensibility* (MoMA, 1993?); and lots of one-person shows of feminist/women artists (Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, Annette Messager, Adrian Piper, Yayoi Kusama, Eleanor Antin, Hannah Hoch, etc., etc.). I wasn't so thrilled by *Inside the Visible* (I saw it at Boston's ICA in 1996), to which my show was often unfavorably compared. I felt it lacked any historical context (Rosler conflated with Cahun?) and failed to take a firm stand on feminism; its intellectual coyness (all that rhetoric about "visibility" and "in, of, and from the feminine") I found disingenuous, though it was surely that coyness which made it so popular across various audiences. To be sure, it was more "successful" than my show in that it struck a positive chord within established feminist art history and criticism. But I have to say I'm proud that I took a stand and did the historical work to reopen the question of "essentialism," as unpopular as that move might have been at the time. The catalogue of *Sexual Politics* I think has been quite influential and that pleases me a great deal.

Louise Parsons (Lecturer, School of Art, Bradford College, UK)

GIRL The New Gallery, Walsall, curated by Angela Kingston, Wimbeldon School of Art, May-June, 2000.

I'm sitting on my bed, I'm four or five; my stepmother has made me take an afternoon nap. Instead, disobedient, I get some sharp, grown-up scissors and start to cut out my Rosemary Clooney paper doll. But the scissors slip...' (Mikey Cuddily, extract from artist's statement *Girl* catalogue).

All the works on display in the *Girl* exhibition at the New Walsall Art Gallery remind me that art and storytelling can, in the blink of an eye, transport the reader into a world where the past exists in the present tense. Paintings, sculpture, installations, video and photography produced by twenty women were exhibited alongside rhymes, songs and observations from girls attending Butts Primary School

in Walsall. From the coveted treasure of bangles and beads to disquieting arrangements of rat skins, girlhood is mapped as daring, sensual, sexual, irreverent, dark, disquieting, blissful, funny, dreamy, sad, cruel, harsh, menacing and frightening. In these stories the geography of girlhood and the prospect of womanhood are explored by women who are now in their thirties, forties and fifties and, as such, they contribute towards an already established body of contemporary poems, novels, biographies and films that invite women to re-experience childhood as part of a collective legitimate discourse. This exhibition demonstrates the extent to which contemporary women artists are indebted to and are further developing the discursive frames of reference set in place by previous generations of women artists, writers and activists, particularly in relation to the development of a politics of difference.

Barbara Hammer (film and video artist, USA)

I think the last show I saw at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City, March 30 - July 2, 2000, was pretty challenging for a lot of people. It was called *Picturing the Modern Amazon* and was curated by Joanna Frueh, Laurie Fierstein, and Judith Stein. This exhibition which also resulted in a hard cover catalogue with essays of 176 pages focused on *HYPER MUSCULAR WOMEN*. I do not mean women who work out in gyms; I mean women whose goal in life is muscular development.

This show had historic components showing back to 800 AD icons found in Ireland of super muscular women, as well, as a historic comic book section. Why was this important? Because as feminists we are still “lookists” and not many of us can accept a terrifically built body that goes way beyond the norms considered acceptable for our gender. Who is to say what we should look like? These women take that decision into their own hands and spend their lifetime shaping their bodies the way they want, not the way society, husbands, lovers, girlfriends want. Even some of my most feminist of friends was shaking her head: I can understand a lot, but not this. Did it challenge or change your understanding of feminism? Well, no. I was a contributor to the show with 7 digital photographs called the *Charlene Atlas Series*. I took that old comic book drawing of the skinny guy at the beach who loses his girlfriend to the strapping muscle man and changed gender. The skinny gal takes Charlene Atlas classes and no longer does anyone get away with flipping sand in her face. Now, the girlfriend is content and the two walk off hand in hand.

Lisa Bloom (lecturer/writer, USA)

Dealing publically with the changing generational concerns and passions amongst feminist artists, art critics and art historians has been a difficult task both

in the U.S and Japan, two places where I have been active as a feminist art critic and university professor. This is in part due to different ways that feminist artists, critic, and historians in the late 1990s have been ghettoized and marginalized. In the U.S. it has taken the following form: venues for feminist exhibitions, and feminist and queer writings on the arts have narrowed in many ways due to the withdrawal of state and federal sponsorship of the arts, and as a consequence of the Culture Wars coming out of the late 1980s beginning with queer activist art related to the HIV pandemic. Universities for better or worse have turned into refuges of sorts for working women artists and critics, even more than before in the U.S. What little support art schools have had for feminist projects has now dwindled. The narrowing of these contexts has sometimes imposed a defensive posture and rhetoric that has further isolated women from each other and has left little room outside of a few protected university contexts for lively public discussions, exhibitions and debates.

I became interested in examining a set of exhibitions which serve as opportunities to reassess feminist art of the 1970s and 1980s from the perspective of the present moment. This will be the topic of the panel I have organised at the College Art Association Conference that takes place in Chicago in late February of 2001, titled 'Re-Viewing 1970s and 1980s Feminist Art Practices in the 1990s: Three Major Exhibitions on Judy Chicago, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Rosler'. The speakers are myself, Alison Rowley, Lucy Soutter, Catherine Caesar, Ruth Wallen and Alexander Alberro. The session will examine the construction and reception of three major exhibitions in the US on feminist artists as examples: Eleanor Antin (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California 1999), Judy Chicago (Armand Hammer Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California, 1996), and Martha Rosler (New Museum and ICP, New York, 2000) to examine what opportunities these exhibits have created given the present US cultural climate.

Sonia Cabrera Ullon

Inside the Visible at Whitechapel. Still thinking about it.

Hilary Robinson (art historian, University of Ulster)

Great question, but one which immediately begs the questions: what is a feminist show? How is it different from a women's show? what makes it feminist? It seems these days we often lose sight of those crucial questions. For example, it was fantastic to see the Louise Bourgeois exhibition at the Serpentine gallery, see her big spider almost bursting from one of the rooms, and to think about that work - which concerned mothering - as a feminist: but was it a feminist exhibition? Maybe. Was it intended as such? Probably not. On the other hand, Tracy Emin's exhibition at the South London gallery a couple of years ago, which depended so much upon

aesthetics and content explored by feminist in the 1970s was depressingly anti-feminist. I liked *Inside the Visible* in parts - namely, the parts which let us see some key works and/or little-known artists. Some good feminist art; feminist aspects in the curating; some non-feminist recuperation. I really wish I'd seen Amelia Jones' exhibition of Judy Chicago's. Jenny Saville's final year BA show (I taught her in her final year in Glasgow, 1991-2) had many of the paintings that initially brought her to fame - it was great to see them in that particular context in that hugely masculinist art school. And on that note, without wishing to sound sentimental, I've seen some great work by some of my students in Belfast, most of whom might not be still working as artists a few years after their graduation, but work which articulates change and developmental thinking. For me, that's important.

Marsha Meskimmon (art historian, University of Loughborough)

I've been thinking about this for a few days and I think I have a show - though it wasn't feminist in an explicit sense. It's the Turner Prize show of a few years ago in which all four nominees were women - Cornelia Parker, Gillian Wearing, Christine Borland and Angela Bulloch. The reason this show springs to mind is that I was obliged, in both research and pedagogical roles, to address the sexual politics of the event on many occasions while the show was on. Students asked what I thought of having an all-woman cast for the prize, slightly aggressive audiences at public lectures turned to the topic and wanted some justification of the nominations (as if they were mine!) and so on. The negative elements of this barrage of debate are obvious, but I also found that it made me think long and hard about whether this was a feminist show or the death-knell of feminist art, given that these women were now so successful (the old post-feminist line). And, it also made me think of what feminism, in terms of ideas and aesthetics, had enabled women to produce in contemporary art - I thought most of that show was truly compelling and the work had much to do with a legacy of thought on gender, sexuality, bodies and materiality. In the end, it did make me consider feminism and contemporary art in ways I had not done before and I am pleased that it did.

Joy Mullet (DF9 Telemetry Format Ops Analyst, NASA)

Is This A Joke or What? (O'Kane Gallery, University of Houston, 1999) was an exhibit I helped organise a couple of years ago. We wanted an exploration of feminism, humour and contemporary art in Texas. And we got that. But women have a tough time laughing about these things, that's for sure. The associated programming included readings of the Guerrilla Girls' *Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art*; a master class for curious artists and the public 'Art Education in the Raw' and a website: <http://www.artwomenhouston.org/>

12_98jokefolder/jokefront.html.

Another exhibit, though, had a more unsettling impact. The exhibit featured very large canvases of female forms, heads protruding outside the frame. Large, sharply pointed star shapes approached the posteriors of the female forms. It looked to me like the artist was commenting about bodily pain, perhaps even her own physical pain. I felt some empathy. But then I was told that the artist was male. Boom. Everything changed for me. The paintings now looked menacing and dangerous. I was sure I wouldn't like the artist if I were to meet him.

Ulrike Bergermann (Hamburg/University of Paderborn, Germany)

Thank you for the offer to join the 'Defining Experiences: Feminist Exhibitions in the 1990s'. I want to give you a hint to a feminist gallery and its opening exhibition that was extremely interesting and delightful: namely, the *MARS patent* - a virtual/online gallery with roots in Hamburg, Germany, MARS, and, in particular the work Strickliesl by Ellen Nonnenmacher (an artist based in Berlin, Germany). What is the MARS patent? Is it a feminist project? Why did the Strickliesl change my understanding of feminist theory (at least, a part of it: the widely spread metaphor of weaving)?

The MARS patent calls itself an interplanetarian exhibition space on planet mars, and was founded by Helene von Oldenburg and Claudia Reiche. Whatever doesn't fit into earthly schemes, they say ("You'll know it, if your work is ready to transgress Earth's limitations"), could be transmitted to the *Mars Exhibition Site*, MES by means of the HRM_1.on (High Reality Engine). The HRM_1.on transforms the vision of a viable martian place for your objects into reality and the mode of global sharing say Reiche/von Oldenburg. That means: completing the online formula and sending the object of art to the MARS patent, your work will be presented: a. on mars/the MES, b. on the *MARS patent* website, c. in the 24 hours live video report from MES (though most permanently down). But the *MARS patent* is not committed to exhibitions of male artists - more precisely: only works of people registering under a female name will be shown (and there is no such thing as a RL-contol: The HRM_1.on is not able to control the biological identity. It's your commitment that counts). Even aliens are not excluded: If they come up with a real e-mail address, they can always try. With a female first name we encourage every alien to participate. This is the adequate reaction to gender theory and its ideas about sex, body, and culture, and it reminds of the way the cyberfeminist Old Boys Network describes to whom their work is addressed: to each intelligent lifeform which calls itself a woman. (This comes as no surprise, as Reiche and von Oldenburg are members of the core group of OBN.) So this seems to me a state-of-the-cyberart project, as well as a state-of-theory-enterprise. It makes you think about representation, globalism, distances, and the virtuality of art business and of exhibited works ...

In October 1999, the first transmission to MES was celebrated in public: *MARS patent* invited Ellen Nonnenmacher and friends to a small gallery room in Hamburg, Germany, where (on a ruby red floor) the *Strickliesl*, usually the name of a wooden toy painted as female puppet and designed to produce knitted woollen rolls, was transmitted; people could watch, knit in RL, comment, or make cyberplans of their own. (In January, 2000, Slovenian artist and theorist Marina Grzinic beamed up her *Spectralisation in Space*.) Now what is so special about *Strickliesl*? The animated operating scheme shows the mars sandstorms as a motor for the movements of the turning strickliesl, the crotchet hook lifting the thread over one of four hooks producing a stitch, which adds up to the Strickwurst (knitted sausage). A description shows the adaption of the mechanism to mars conditions (gravity, and so on), and the aim of producing strickwuerste is to make life on mars more comfortable. Besides, as Nonnenmacher argues, 'Strickwuerste stimulate human creativity'. It is to be expected, that the first settlers on mars are surrounded by merely functional things. Strickwuerste can be used to give these things a friendly, biological, more human look. Settlers may use their free time to create beautiful things out of the already available Strickwuerste. It is for example really simple to create nice cussions out of Strickwuerste. Now that seems to me like quite a different option on the female qualities of knitting, weaving, sewing and so on from those that were to be read from some cyberfeminists in the 1990s. Most famous are the texts by Sadie Plant; especially her zeros and ones embodied a hypertextual mode of writing (or: weaving) bits of text (etymologically: what is woven) together, but sticked to old ideas about femininity (I discussed that in a german text, 'Weben und Kleben'. Nonnenmacher's discussions, on the other hand, comment as lovingly as ironically on this concept and exhibit it as a nice - mechanism. Both *MARS patent* and *Strickliesl* are as simple as elaborate - and charming. *MARS patent* not only works in and about the digital media including digital art in their own media specific means, but also on the connotations of cyberspace (concerning space, distance, materiality, reality...). *Strickliesl* proved to me that knitting not necessarily occurs in contexts that want to foster certain kinds of female characteristics - or if so, these are as mechanical as the cultural tools around them. There are many many more implications on the area of "reality", "art", "gender" and their metaphors to be follwed here... to make it short, I just want to give a very warm recommendation of the MARS patent and its subprojects.

Benny Alba (artist, Oakland, CA)

Several chapters of the Women's Caucus for the Arts (I was on a local board) held an open show of books at Mills College in Oakland, Ca. in the early 1990s. The walls presented quotes diligently searched out on shelves painted white and attached like ledges to the walls. An all inclusive media policy meant a stunning exhibition. People

came during off hours (when the gallery was locked) to "see it again" with friends, according to a guard who didn't know me.

In another WCA show, this time in San Francisco at Fort Mason in the early 1990s, I filled in by gallery sitting for long hours. This venue attracts tourists from all over the world. My favourite piece became so due to the incredible responses... It was titled *So Many Bras, So Little Time*. I'm so sorry that I don't recall the artist's name. About 100 b. & w. polaroid photos of a woman's upper torso were hand embellished with various colours, glue ons, etc. I saw mothers take their children to point out the different photos. One set of Christians were highly offended and complained loudly to me. What surprised me was that some men studied it quietly and moved on while others rushed by.... Certainly many people energetically talked between themselves after viewing it, having often looked at it a second time on their way back out of the gallery. Both shows made me proud to be on that Board.

Kirsten Justesen (artist, Denmark)

Since 1975 when Valie Export invited a number of international woman artists, myself included, to a exhibition in Galerie Nächst St. Stephan in Vienna with the title of *Magna Feminismus: Kunst und Kreativität - Ein Überblick über die weibliche Sensibilität, Imagination, Projektion und Problematik, suggeriert durch ein Tableau von Bildern, Objekten, Fotos, Vorträgen, Diskussionen, Lesungen, Filmen, Videobändern und Aktionen* - the conversation has been going on: What does a feminist piece of work look like ?

The established exhibition halls now and then pick up and show works which might address these loose ends and vulnerable minefields. Feminist exhibitions have been visible in Europe and USA (in USA including mainly US artists though) as events, which have rapidly changed everybody's ideas about women, their surrounding contexts and their art. In 1991 Valie Export and I continued our own conversation. A conversation, based on our own body-actions within and between different media and different positions. As a result of the conversation, came the invitation to be curators of a show about the body in 1996. (*Body as Membrane*, Kunsthallen Brandts Klædefabrik, Odense DK, January 12-March 17 1996 and Nifca, Helsinki, Finland June 13-July 30, 1996. Catalogue: *Body as Membrane* ISBN 87-7766-046-3).

The purpose of this exhibition was to present the glance of women in a new direction, and to visualise for us further conversations on this subject. We tried to present a screen, the Membrane, through which women's bodies might appear and we presented this idea for ourselves as well as for the audience. And this is why it made such a great exhibition !

"MEMBRANE means a border-flake between the cell and its surrounding. It is

also a very small sensitive, smooth piece of skin- flake - transformer (convert)inside the body. The membrane is one of the body's vital organs; it functions as a filter as well as screen of reception and a screen for reproduction. The membrane transports and spreads all possible information. We see the body as a MEMBRANE - as well as we see body-works as MEMBRANES. THE MEMBRANE-BODY is constant floating. A MEMBRANE-BODY is moving between media. So we see the body as a constant reflection AND THIS WE LIKE TO GIVE FORM in this exhibition as we see it: ONE MATERIAL IS A MEMBRANE FOR ALL THE MEMBRANES."

We chose a number of artists, with whom we have co-operated and who have crossed eachothers tracks over the years together with a few young artists, who have taken their first steps in the same kind of investigations and developed themes and scores of their own. What we had in common is that all of us, over the years have used our own bodies as artistic tools in various contexts and different media. The body in electronic media was also present in a number of ways, the earliest works were made in Super 8 substandard film. The exhibition was not about what the body means - it is about what the body is, what the body is capable of in its own terms. The body surpasses words, literally talking. Talking forms one kind of space. Language forms another space, as if it were a reality. Language is useful for explanation and descriptions. If it can find itself. It does not mean anything on its own. The invited artists all used their own bodies, in a way connected to themselves as an available material something they are literally holding in their own hands: Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Finland - René Cox, USA - Joan Jonas, USA - Mary Kelly, USA - Alison Knowles, USA - Elke Krystofek, Austria - Natalia LL, Poland - Orlan, France - Jayne Parker, UK - Heli Rekula, Finland - Carolee Schneemann, USA - Annie Sprinkle, USA, as well as ourselves. The exhibition also shows series by the three dead artists: Ana Mendieta, Cuba - Gina Pane, France - Hannah Wilke, USA, as well as we ourselves were included in the exhibition.

A debate about the show and issues arising took place in the magazine *Siksi* over several issues from December 1996 with Katy Deepwell, Kristine Stiles, Tania Orum and Laura Cottingham. The debate in the *Nordic Art Magazine* was in many ways sad. But indeed, because of the show a feminist debate surprisingly appeared in a *Nordic Art Magazine*! It did not change my understanding of feminism, but it made these feminist issues very human and expanded them, through a bright and bitchy discussion !

I would also like to mention another show, my own *ReKollection* (Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum, Aalborg DK 1999). This was not a retrospective show, but a presentation of my body works during 30 years. All the works appeared with a new format, scanned and then digital printed in one-woman-size + 10%. This was just fun, and made in a way so that it became also a tale about a woman's body. It is mine all right, but I always saw it just as a tool, a form, a surface which one can use for investigations, explorations and impossible, superfluous contributions, feminist

question marks included. See the catalogue: Kirsten Justesen *ReKollection* (Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum, 1999. ISBN 87-88307-41-7).

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