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National College of Art and Design

INTERVENTION:  
AN ENQUIRY INTO CURRENT TRENDS  
IN THE FEMINIST ART MOVEMENT

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## INTRODUCTION

This essay is an investigation into various approaches to feminist art practice. The object of the essay is to define a feminist art practice which succeeds in communicating to mainstream culture the reality of gender injustice. It has been titled *Intervention*, because this is what feminist art practice seeks to do: to intervene in cultural discourses and reveal the biases which exist within the framework of those discourses.

There are a number of assumptions made for the purpose of this investigation which it is important to outline.

Firstly, it is beyond the scope of this essay to engage in a defence of feminism as a political/philosophical theory. Therefore, its validity is assumed in order to engage in the object of this enquiry, a discussion of the application of feminism as a political theory to art practice.

Secondly, feminist art practice is assumed throughout this essay to be art practice which bears the message of feminism to as wide an audience as possible. Therefore, it is assumed not to be art for feminists, but rather feminist art aimed at an anti-feminist (or at best ambivalent) audience.

The third assumption relates to the issue of meaning construction in art practice.

Is the feminism of a piece of work there because of the attributes of the author (cultural interventions by women) because of certain attributes of the work itself (feminist cultural interventions) or because of the way it is 'read'?

The assumption made for the purpose of this enquiry is one of compromise; meaning construction is seen to be the result of the author's intention in creating a piece, and the decoding of that piece by the viewer through the medium of the cultural context. To quote Sarah McCarthy:

The meaning of an image always exists both as a production of the image and beyond the image in the viewer's culturally constructed interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

There is a move in the established art world toward a greater acceptance of feminist artists, and an acceptance of women artists in general. The



despite the efforts of a good many innovative artists, it is within this system that art audiences still lie. Therefore it is in this context that feminist art practice must be analysed in its attempts to undermine the cultural values, and thus bring about cultural change.

The essay has been divided into three separate chapters.

Chapter One constitutes a preparatory chapter in three sections, outlining the historic and cultural context in which feminist art practice functions as cultural intervention .

In Part One strict definitions are made of the terminology to be used in the course of the analysis which follows.

Part Two deals with the nature of political art work in general, and how political art functions - and malfunctions - as intervention in the dominant value system.

Part Three of Chapter One looks briefly at the history of the Revolutionary in Western culture and the system by which the avant-garde has effectively been neutered as an instrument of communication for new ideas.

Chapter Two outlines five separate strands of contemporary feminist theory in terms of the different emphases placed on various areas of women's lives as important examples of gender injustice in the culture.

Chapter Three then looks at the application of these five trends to art practice by drawing on the work of various artists who ascribe to each of the represented trends.

The result of this analysis is an insight into what constitutes a feminist art practice by which intervention in the culture is successfully achieved. What are the elements of an artwork where the meanings of the work are not lost or misconstrued, but neither are they propagandist and thus ineffectual?

Of course, this conclusion is a highly subjective one and cannot be interpreted as a prescription for 'politically correct' art practice. It is merely a guideline whereby we may assess the efficacy of certain strategies of feminist art practice, relative to the expressed goal of successful intervention in the dominant culture.

No-one can definitively state how any piece of art will be, or should be read. Equally, no-one can definitively state what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' art, but merely try to analyse the possible reaction to a particular

piece, relative to the reaction desired by the artist. It is to this end that the following enquiry is directed.

I believe it important that the current proliferation of feminist aesthetic styles and practices continues, and that feminists sustain a great variety in their choice of message and medium, so that the feminist art movement remains a dynamic force in the art world.

What is feminist art? There is no such entity; no homogenous movement defined by characteristic style, favoured media or typical subject matter. There are instead feminist artistic practices which cannot be comprehended by the standard procedures and protocols of Modernist art history and criticism which depend upon isolating aesthetic considerations such as style and medium.<sup>6</sup>

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## 1. FEMINISM AND POLITICAL ART

### Terminology and Political Interpretation

Before discussing the issues of feminist art practice in any depth, it is necessary to define closely the terminology to be used. The three main terms in contention are *feminism*, *culture* and *art*.

The latest wave of the Women's Movement began in the 1960s and it is at this point that the word *feminism* came into usage. However, exactly what feminism involves, and exactly what constitutes a feminist is a subject of much debate. The concept has had many extraordinary definitions applied to it both by those who see themselves as within its ranks of supporters and those who consider themselves its opponents. It has been assumed to carry with it a certain left-wing political ideology, a particular style of dress, and even in some cases a particular sexual orientation. It has been assumed that feminism has a very clear idea of what is wrong with our culture, whose fault it is, and how it can be put right. Yet there are many different strands of feminist thought and feminist activism, some of which are highly critical of its perceived model, some of which wish it were more extreme. I shall return to these different strands later.

Feminist theory, in all its permutations, is nevertheless based on a single premise; that *women suffer from systematic injustice because of their gender*. Anyone who accepts this premise must count as a feminist, regardless of any subsequent deductions from this primary belief.'

If it is accepted that the systematic injustice on the basis of gender is the basic premise of feminism, then we can say that the primary aim of feminism is to eradicate this injustice. Despite radically different approaches as to how best go about this task, all feminist groups stem from this one recognition of injustice and wish for its eradication.

The second concept to be clarified is the word *culture*. During this essay the concept of culture as a medium recurs quite often. This definition conceives of culture as that set of value-judgements and meanings which are prevalent in the world we inhabit. When we come to an image we fit it into our cultural experience and 'decode' it in terms of



that experience. Culture in this sense ascribes meaning to images and words by fitting them into the value system which has evolved within our society through the centuries, and which we as members of that society have internalised.

Culture is also defined as a constantly changing phenomenon. The etymology of the word implies growth and development, where the activities of artists, musicians, writers etc. provide a process of enculturation in the community. It is this process of enculturation with which feminist art practice concerns itself; the transformation of culture and cultural values by means of culture itself.

Feminist art represents an attempt to break with the dominant notions of art as personal expression, instead connecting it with the social and the political and placing the artist as producer in a new situation of responsibility for her images.<sup>2</sup>

Definitions of art are always inadequate. In this case it is necessary to produce some guidelines which will be followed during the course of this essay.

Art practice is here defined as the *representation through the medium of culture of a subjective reality*. The 'reality' thus represented may be an aesthetic experience, a thought, an emotion or a combination of any of these factors.

In expressing this reality through the culture, it is here assumed that the cultural experience of the author is relevant in the piece, with possible exceptions where we can define an experience as being universal and surpassing all cultural boundaries. The assumption implies that a representation by a white man from London will differ in its cultural expression from the same concept as expressed by a Black woman from Birmingham. Although both have ostensibly been exposed to the same culture, their experience of that culture is different.

Having thus outlined the use of the terms *feminism*, *art* and *culture* as dictated by this essay, the three may now be fused in the concept of a feminist art practice.

Given the above definitions, whereby feminism is a movement to rid women of gender-based injustice, and art constitutes a culturally-based representation of a subjective reality, feminist art must then logically be the representation of this gender-based injustice in some fashion through the medium of the culture.

Assuming all representation to be culturally based, the representation of feminism must also be so described.

But the culture is the carrier of precisely the injustice of which we wish to rid ourselves. Therefore a conflict is set up between the medium, the culture-defined and culture-specific art medium, and the message, the enculturating wish to rid the community of gender injustice.

The female image in all its variations is the mythic consequence of womens exclusion from the *making* of art. It is arguable that, despite her ubiquitous presence, woman as such is largely absent from art. We are dealing with the sign 'woman' emptied of its original content and filled with masculine desires and anxieties ... Yet paradoxically, the tool for objectifying ... experience is culture, is the process which already distorts it and which is not itself value-free.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay, current strategies in the field of feminist art will be studied for their impact as an enculturating phenomenon with reference to this paradox between culture and the process of enculturation.

### 'Art and Politics Don't Mix'

All art can be placed somewhere along the political spectrum, supporting one set of class interests above another, actively or passively, at the very least supporting existing conditions by ignoring other possibilities, silence giving consent.<sup>4</sup>

There is a phrase used by those who don't believe in the political element of art production, which suggests:

If you want to send a message, call Western Union,  
but don't make art!<sup>5</sup>

This is a school of thought which posits art as a phenomenon outside of political, social and geographic considerations, claiming that as a 'pure' pursuit, art should not be 'cheapened' by political content. As Michelle Barrett put it:

We have inherited a conception of art as something removed from all other realms of social activity ... the antithesis of work ... mythologised as an oasis of creativity in the desert of alienated and mass production capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

The assumption of this essay is to the contrary. Art sends messages all of the time, and must have a political content by virtue of the fact that it is produced in the context of a dominant culture or ideology, that is to say, all art is produced in a community where specific political assumptions are made. And more than this; art is inextricably linked to all other areas of human activity, and cannot exist in a vacuum untouched by capitalism, mass production and alienation.

Thus a 19th century portrait of an English lord may reveal proudly that he owns large areas of land in Africa, or that he shot elephant, whereas to us today this may seem highly immoral and a subject of shame. The political assumptions of the piece (that colonialism is a worthy and glamorous occupation) become apparent by our distinctness from those assumptions. Similarly, to a feminist, art which expresses women's sexuality as passive and compliantly masochistic is seen to have a high



political content, since this view of women is one seen by feminism as part of the political subjugation of women which occurs in our culture. The fact that such an artwork might seem to another viewer to be the epitome of a-political art merely signifies that the viewer's assumptions and those made by the artist about what constitutes the 'normal' behaviour and attributes of a woman coincide, making the assumptions seem as though they are 'natural', indisputable and not at issue.

Meaning is socially created in the consumption of the work, ...  
[it is] ... impossible to separate the production of the work  
from its consumption.<sup>7</sup>

This sort of transparent cultural assuming is constantly in operation when we look at images; seeing black as a colour of evil and death, red as a colour of passion and so on, right through to recognition of quite complex cultural concepts like luxury, the occult and other abstractions. We could never draw meaning from images unless these cultural translations were available, giving us a standard meaning for a whole variety of shapes and colours, and including representations of things and people.

The question for image makers who want to disrupt this set of cultural assumptions (these are the artists whose work is *seen* as political, since it is not coincident with the dominant political ideology) then becomes a difficult task of revealing these biases without falling into the twin traps of having their work reduced to the same set of political assumptions and thus misunderstood, or of allowing their work drift so far from what is culturally comprehensible that it becomes impossible to 'read' the images.



Explicit political art which works against mainstream cultural assumptions often falls into the former trap, in that art which didactically imposes a new doctrine on the viewer is likely to be received with hostility as propaganda or dogma, unless the viewer is already aware or sensitive to the issues addressed. Even for those who are sensitive to the content, explicit work can seem shallow and lacking in resonance through its overly dogmatic stance. The difference between explicit political art and propaganda is sometimes difficult to define, and often depends more on the political outlook of the individual who defines than on any inherent quality in the work.

What is more (and worse for art), ideology is reassuring: ... when applied to artistic expression it is usually anti-revolutionary whenever it does not succeed in being *implied* in the very language since it directs all expressive research into the didactic and illustrative processes we all know (all the party and state forms of art).<sup>3</sup>

As May Stephens suggests above, a more effective strategy seems to be implicit political messages in artwork. The aim ought not to be to simply replace one set of assumptions blindly accepted with another set equally blindly accepted, assuming this is possible, but rather to destabilise current assumptions through artistic activity in such a way that the viewer is confronted by his or her own unspoken biases and is forced to reconsider them.

### The Avant Garde and the Romantic Revolutionary

The aesthetics of transgression is common to all avant-gardes, ensuring that strategies are always determined, through relations of symmetrical opposition, by the very (dominant) forms they claim to challenge.

... Thus the mythologies of modernism (art about art) and of an art history which reduces the meaning of all art to its place within the history of form/style - despite the often very politicised *intention* of many avant-garde movements.<sup>6</sup>

Repeatedly this century the avant-garde has sought to instigate change of as radical a kind as the protagonists could imagine, and repeatedly this change has become an atrophied part of the history of High Culture. As Althusser points out, the capitalist system can subvert any formal innovation into a commodity, thus neutralising its truly enculturating potential.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, there is a place set aside in the Western art tradition for the visionary revolutionary; the lonely, misunderstood intellectual seeking to change the course of history. As Margaret Gibney pointed out in an essay on the concept of romanticism, this stereotype is a complex social phenomenon which has occurred repeatedly over the past two hundred years; from Kirkegaard to the art student shuffling down the corridor all in black.<sup>11</sup>

This stereotype constitutes a facet of the ideology we are seeking to destabilise; the lonely individualist artist or philosopher in our culture is a figure of tragedy or comedy, but a figure without any power in the community; the role is very definitely one of misfit or crazy person, to whom no-one listens and whose ideas are discredited. This role is a real pitfall for the artist who wishes to create new cultural meanings, since association with such a stereotype renders effectively impotent any messages or ideas subsequently produced.

It is important to differentiate between this traditional radicalism and the sort of art practice which is here proposed.

Since about 1955 virtually any avant-garde manifestation was almost instantly recovered by the establishment (museum, market etc.). They can swallow up any dissension, any aberration from prevailing norms, however eccentric, outrageous and impossible they seem.<sup>12</sup>

The emphasis on the formal qualities as carrier of the political element, or as an important signifier of the political element, means that the *formal* innovation can be brought to the forefront in critical analysis, thus defusing the challenge to assumptions by perceiving the work on a purely aesthetic level. This neatly sidesteps the necessity to face the intellectual challenge of the work, and consigns the innovation, as Angela Partington suggests in the quote at the beginning of this section, to the neutered version of contemporary art history, where style and form are the qualities most noted in art practice. In order to break out of this system, then, and have an art practice where the message is most visible, perhaps we should consider reworking existing forms of artistic language and subverting them, if necessary, into bearers of a feminist challenge. As Anne-Marie Sauzeau-Boetti put it, feminists seeking an art practice that reflects their politics should investigate:

not an avant-garde subversion, but a process of differentiation.<sup>13</sup>



## 2. FIVE FEMINISMS

### Feminist Disparities

As was mentioned earlier, feminists are not a cohesive and homogenous group of people working in utter unison toward the destruction of gender injustice.

Feminism is a disparate and wildly fluctuating movement within which many different strands of thought are current, from the passionate separatist element which bases its thought on Mary Daly or Robin Morgan to the more logical pragmatic approach of Simone de Beauvoire and Janet Radcliffe Richards, to deconstructionist theorists like Julia Kristeva and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

This wide disparity is evident in representations of feminist politics in art practice over the last eighteen years. The various trends of feminist thought may be recognised in the wide variety of ways in which different feminist artists have approached the problem of cultural representation.

Feminist art ... cannot be posed in terms of cultural categories typologies, or even certain insular forms of textual analysis, precisely because it entails assessment of political interventions, campaigns and commitments as well as artistic strategies.<sup>1</sup>

As a structure for this essay the feminist movement has been divided into five separate strands, each of which constitutes a consistent and coherent philosophy unto itself, but which places emphasis on a different section of feminist thought.<sup>2</sup>

Firstly let us examine the theoretical emphasis involved in each case.



### 1. The Essentialist Feminist

In this school of feminist thought the attributes of men and women as described by the dominant culture remain essentially unchallenged. The answer to the problem of gender injustice, according to this school, is the redefinition of what constitutes culturally desirable attributes, so that women's essential nature is not seen as second to men's.

Women are accepted as being illogical, intuitive, mysterious, ruled by emotion. Instead of challenging these cultural assumptions, this group seeks to re-define the value system by which these attributes are currently deemed to be bad. Those things which are culturally viewed as unacceptable become the most highly prized attributes in this system.

Similarly, attributes or skills esteemed by the culture, predominantly those associated with masculinity such as precision, logic and individualism become unattractive in this feminist philosophy.

Along with this reversal of the prevailing value system goes a renewed interest in the symbolism of woman in European history. Much reference to witches, broomsticks, cats or hares is typical of this school.

The language of this group tends to be emotive and passionate, since logical argument is not deemed a valuable skill.

An interest in prehistoric sites, believed by these feminists to be the remains of prehistoric matriarchally organised communities also constitutes an important element of this viewpoint. This theory is based on early Greek records and on the shape and form of many monuments dating from prehistory. The shape of monuments such as that at Newgrange here in Ireland are claimed to refer to the womb and birth canal of the female reproductive organs, thus implying that the community which built the monument held the female in high esteem. There is a strong emphasis on the body as signifier in this trend; analogies are often made between the earth and a woman's body, or woman's body as the reflection of the goddess, as magical and mysterious.

## 2. The History-Orientated Feminist

The celebration of women's achievements in the face of adversity is the main thrust of the ideas in this grouping. The group recognises that men and women have had very different experiences of culture, work and family. However it also recognises the fact that only the experience of men has been validated in the culture. Therefore this group sets out to explore the cultural experience of women.

It is important to note that there is such a thing as feminine knowledge, a specific feminine experience of the world, and that therefore culture is not ungendered.<sup>3</sup>

Recognising the fact that women have been oppressed by rigid role models, these feminists then seek to investigate how women live with these constricting roles. Interest in women's crafts such as quilt making, crochet and needlework characterises the bearers of this brand of feminism. The heroinisation of the role of housewife and mother is also characteristic of this group; the job is recognised as extremely constrictive, exhausting and thankless, and the women who worked and still work in this role are given the recognition normally denied them by the dominant culture. In so doing, the wish is that these nameless women be included in the record of our cultural heritage as just as creative, just as necessary, as the men who were freed to think, invent and create.

## 3. The Popular Culture Feminist

Most often the wish for a more community-based art production is at the heart of this feminist position. The area stressed by this group is that of mass media portrayal of women in advertising, on television and in the press. This mass media exploitation of women is seen as the most insidious form of sexism extant in our society today.

Analysis is often based on the semiotic work of Barthes, Eco et al. According to this viewpoint, women's position will only improve when stereotypical characterisations of women in popular culture are done away with. With this in mind many feminists seek to subvert mass media by direct intervention, mimicry and parody.

#### 4. The Ungendered Feminist

A branch of feminism exists which considers the problem of systematic injustice on the basis of gender thus: Where gender is recognised, women have experienced injustice on its basis. Therefore let us do away with gender altogether and have an egalitarian androgynous world, where everyone is considered a person firstly and a man or woman secondly if at all.

This group of feminists see no advantage in women organising together against their own oppression since this merely serves to reinforce gender identity as the primary identity. Women-only consciousness raising groups are also considered to define more strongly the gender gap. The solution, according to this stance, is to integrate completely with the other gender and to ignore gender distinctions except in specifically sexual situations. This, it is concluded, will finally destroy the myth that men and women have inherently different skills and attributes and lead to the end of injustice on the basis of gender.

#### 5. The Deconstructionist Feminist

Feminists who have taken up the theory of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray reason thus: The culture in which we live is a patriarchal culture in which a binary system of subject-object relation is considered the norm or 'natural' relation to the world. We see meaning (verbal and visual) as fixed and immutable. However, there are other ways of seeing the world, other epistemological viewpoints.



Deconstruction suggests that we call our culture's binary system a *masculine* relation since it is founded in a patriarchal power structure. It suggests that a *feminine* relation is that which is found outside of the masculine. The feminine relation is one in which meaning is not fixed, but rather that at the moment of seeing/hearing, meanings are set 'in play'. The homogeneity of this fixed masculine relation becomes replaced by the heterogeneity of a multiplicity of interpretations, each of which is equally 'correct'.

The difference between masculine language and symbols and feminine language and symbols is seen to reside in the formal construction of a meaning or meanings; a sentence/text/image either sets itself up with a fixed, logocentric relation to the hearer or viewer, or with a fluid, open relation.

I would call *feminine* the moment of rupture and negativity that conditions the newness of any practice.<sup>4</sup>

This feminine relation however is not seen as the response of every woman in the culture to the images and texts she encounters. Women are seen as identifying with the patriarchal view (indeed as having to identify with it in order to make sense of the world as it is presented to them every day), assuming a masculine relation in order to decode cultural meanings.



### 3. FEMINIST ART PRACTICE

How does the means of signification in a given art practice function? What is signified and with what political consequences?<sup>1</sup>

The philosophies outlined above represent five distinct trends within contemporary feminism. Each trend has been adopted by various artists as a basis for feminist art production. The object of this essay is to assess the political consequences for art practice of the adoption of any one of these feminist stances. The question asked of each art practice must be, as a feminist art practice, is this work the communication through the medium of culture of a subjective view of gender-based injustice?

In order to discuss the application of these trends to art practice, it is necessary to cite certain artists as examples of one trend or another. Inevitably there will be areas of indistinction where artists seem to belong to more than one trend, or not to any at all.

However hazy the perimeters, these trends do have certain distinctive features. It is with these features in mind that the artists have had ascribed to them one philosophy or another, and it is these features, as evidenced in the artist's work, that come under criticism, thereby providing examples of the particular form of art practice.

#### 1. The Essentialist Feminist

The most well known artists working from this philosophy are Monica Sjoo and Mary Beth Edelson, among others.

Monica Sjoo is a Swedish woman who now lives in Wales as a painter. Her first major contact with the British art public was when the police visited a joint exhibition she staged with four other women in 1973. Among other work exhibited appeared what has come to be her classic piece, *God Giving Birth* (see fig. 1). This was among those pieces considered worthy of police attention as constituting a breach of the Obscene Publications Act.

The piece expresses quite succinctly many of the ideas central to Sjöo's work. Her philosophy is a matriarchal one; she envisions a Utopia run by women - as she says herself:

Those who create life should also make the decisions about that life, and should be responsible for the organisation of communities. ... Women created ancient cultures. There is no way anyone else should make decisions about ... life.<sup>2</sup>

Sjöo seeks for a 'return' to prehistoric matriarchal culture, a culture she sees reflected in ancient sites such as New Grange and Stonehenge (fig. 2). These ideas have been set out by her in a book based on her research into prehistoric European culture entitled *The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother of All*.

Her image of women corresponds quite closely to that mentioned earlier as a feature of this trend within feminism, in that she accepts the concept that men and women have different inherent skills and attributes. Sjöo sees a strong connection between women and the earth, for instance, and uses many traditional symbols of witchcraft and female mystery in her paintings.

It is absolutely vital ... to connect with the Earth, but also through imagery we are re-establishing that Earth is sacred and offering a holistic view of life civilised in the image of the Goddess.<sup>3</sup>

Also typical of this philosophy is her reversal of the value judgements by which we perceive men to be superior to women. She delights in the mysterious specifically feminine aura surrounding snakes, the moon, cats and other such images. She applauds the emotive and passionate to the detriment of the logical and calculating. Her philosophy is Jungian in origin. She feels her paintings awaken in their viewers a deep recognition of this ancient matriarchy, especially among women.

An awful lot of women have felt a strong sense of coming home, a recognition from somewhere deep within [on encountering the work].<sup>4</sup>

Monica Sjoo is a fitting representative of the genre which has been titled essentialist. There is no doubt that she and many other people consider her to be a radical feminist artist. But for the purposes of this essay, does her work constitute what has been defined as feminist art? Is the work of Monica Sjoo the cultural representation of the subjective experience of women's systematic injustice on the basis of gender?

Let us address the first part of the question to begin with. Monica Sjoos cultural representations are quite specific. She uses instantly recognisable images - sickle moons, the female form, ancient sites, snakes, horns and many other symbols associated with the occult or the mysterious in our culture. Her style, moreover, enhances the mysterious effect with much use of flowing, swirling line, shapes often melt into each other in an indistinct fashion. This combination of traditional female mystic imagery with fluid lines and shapes leads to a very specific match-up with a particular dominant cultural female stereotype. There exists within Western culture the stereotyped image of woman as 'mystic', to quote D.H. Lawrence on the subject

Women grow downward, like the root, toward the centre and darkness and origin ... men grow upwards, like the stalk, towards discovery and light and utterance.<sup>4</sup>

This tradition of woman as dark, earthy, tied to her physicality is a strong one. Many great writers and philosophers have mentioned it specifically. The idea that woman is the 'dark continent', an inexplicable creature outside of men's understanding, has long been used as an effective excuse in support of gender discrimination. The concept of an illogical, irrational aeroplane pilot, for instance, is often cited as a frightening example of what the consequences of gender equality in the workplace would be. Similarly women drivers are often described as erratic and clumsy; unable to come to terms with the logic of a machine.



Images, as stated earlier, either support or undermine cultural codings. They can never be ambivalent. The question then is whether Sjöo's adoption of a pervasive vocabulary of images for her own purposes succeeds, or whether, instead, her purpose is drowned by the power of the culturally coded images.

Before answering this, the second part of the above definition of feminist art must be applied to Sjöo's work. The second part of the definition states that the cultural representation should be of the subjective experience of gender-based injustice.

Certainly Sjöo's work is highly gender-conscious. She feels that it is to women that her work speaks strongest.

The imagery, as mentioned above, is also what might be termed exclusively female. But it seems to tend toward celebration of traditional female themes rather than the communication of a gender-based injustice, concentrating as it does on the formulaic representations of woman's perceived 'essence'.

One could suggest that the mere fact of woman celebratory painting in the context of a patriarchal culture is sufficient to highlight the gender-bias within the culture. By drawing attention to the fact that so little work has traditionally celebrated women as anything but sexual objects, Sjöo's work is certainly innovative, especially the choice of subjects for celebration which include taboo areas like menstruation and childbirth.

But this argument is acceptable only so long as the form of the work is clearly celebrating the feminist, non-culturally prescribed image of woman, and not the constrictive role models offered by patriarchy. The image must celebrate woman as the active subject in the culture, and not as an object which functions as the bearer of a cultural concept, mystique, sexuality or anything else.

This is where Sjöo's work seems to come close to succeeding, but her form and choice of image betray her ideals. In choosing instantly recognisable, strongly coded symbols, Sjöo trades her claim to celebration of a genuine womanhood for celebration of the patriarchally constructed Mother Earth version of the female role model.



The only audience to whom the intended message is clear is that group of feminists who already, like Sjoo, have turned the dominant value system on its head. For any other viewer the work finds a cosy niche within the dominant ideology: a depiction of dark, mysterious, irrational womanhood.

For this reason Sjoo's work cannot be deemed what this essay conceives of as feminist art. It is too easily co-opted into support of the system of gender injustice, by depicting women in a fashion consistent with the apologists of gender injustice.

Mary Beth Edelson is an American artist whose sculpture and performance work are built on her deep commitment to a matriarchal aesthetic. Her philosophy is perhaps best outlined by herself, quoted from a press release in 1974:

The ascending archetypal symbols of the feminine unfold today in the psyche of Everywoman. They encompass the multiple forms of the Great Goddess. Reaching across the centuries we take the hands of our Ancient Sisters. The Great Goddess, alive and well, is rising to announce to the patriarchs that their 5,000 years are up - Hallelujah! Here we come.<sup>6</sup>

As is obvious, she shares much of her ideology with Monica Sjoo. Her concept is of a woman-centred society where the current system is overturned; the One True God becomes the One True Goddess. She, like Sjoo, harks back to an ancient pre-patriarchal culture where women were the powerful ones.

Jungian theory is also present in the concept of an ascension of archetypes through which we all travel. The assumption is there that we all have some basic knowledge of this ancient matriarchy which has only to be awakened in us to provide, as Sjoo put it, a 'sense of coming home'.

Perhaps Edelson's most famous piece is *Woman Rising*, a performance or 'Ritual' performed on a beach in North Carolina, and documented in photographs which are enhanced with drawing (fig. 3).

The photographs show a progression of positions as Edelson moves from kneeling on the sand with her hand supporting her breasts to standing up straight with both hands in the air. She has painted concentric circles of alternating black and white around her nipples and over her belly, drawing attention to her specifically female attributes.

In the photographs, the figures are enhanced by 'energy lines' drawn as emanating from Edelson's body, and which, in the final photograph, appear as two strong shafts coming from the sky to meet above the head of the standing figure.

The idea behind these images is the rising of 'female power'; a mystic concept involving the Jungian theory of the collective unconscious, the traditional Western myth of woman as magical, and the belief in a prehistoric matriarchal society.

In the *Sexual Rites* [of which *Woman Rising* is one] the female body is no naked Circe, but powerful and wild, full of self-creative energy. I have described the whole self-absorbed, positive, erotic, spiritual woman during the process of her transformation, how she holds her memory, her body, her spirit in the balance. My body is just as much a metaphor for the Goddess in this Ritual as a metaphor for Everywoman.<sup>7</sup>

The roots of Edelson's Goddess image are firmly based in prehistoric artefacts. As Gottner-Abendroth mentions when speaking of the first photograph in the series:

She kneels in the sand, completely naked, with her hands she holds her breasts in the same gesture as hundreds of prehistoric little goddess idols do.<sup>8</sup>

Gottner-Abendroth likens Edelson's body paint to the markings found on fertility idols ... although she neglects to mention from what geographical or historical sources she concludes this similarity to exist.

These prehistoric artefacts may be said to be genuinely mysterious in that we do not know their origin or original use.

Suppositions by Edelson, Sjöo and others are merely that. There is no definitive proof to support the existence of rituals and cults such as those assumed by these feminists to have once existed. Given this situation, reference to them instantly conjurs in our minds ideas of the occult, the inexplicable, the foreign, because of their cultural and temporal distance.

Given the cultural response, is this use of prehistoric referents effective? After all, according to Edelson's philosophy, she is using these images for their original purpose once more. There is one element of the philosophy under discussion which occurs also in the practice of those who believe in an art 'for art's sake'. That is, that images and symbols can be plucked from one geo-historical situation and placed in another without their meaning being significantly altered.

As was noted in an earlier section, it is not possible to transfer an artwork from one society to another without the artwork changing its meaning in some way, as it is interpreted through a new culturally coded system. Therefore, even if Edelson's theory of an ancient matriarchal culture were correct in every detail, it still does not mean that her adoption of these poses and rituals, however pure her motives, can be read in the same way today as they were in this ancient matriarchy. The cultural codings on these sorts of images - lines of energy, pre-classical poses, fertility symbols- are defined by their 'familiar unfamiliarity'. We are used to categorising these forms and postures as part of an alien culture, something mysterious and foreign. At first glance, many of Edelson's photographs look like reconstructions of tribal dance, something one might find in a 1950s British movie in their almost caricature-like use of body paint and posture. The implication to the Western viewer then becomes the occult and mysterious nature of this woman, and the concept of paganism adds also a taint of the evil or unclean to the images.

Edelson, therefore, like Sjöo, endangers the clarity of her message by relying on forms which are familiar to Western culture as representations of the female mystique: potentially threatening, always alien.



The argument that Monica Sjoo's work celebrates traditional symbols of womanhood as distinct from re-defining those symbols, is one that may also be applied to Edelson. In using these 'matriarchal' images, Edelson presupposes the inversion of the dominant value system. Only when this inversion is completed, is her work seen as depicting her definition of the empowerment of women. Without this inversion, her work becomes traditionalist decorative depictions of women's mystery- this mystery rooted specifically in women's gender - as emphasised by the body paint in the photographs.

We can therefore conclude that Edelson's position is similar to Sjoo's with regard to the specific definition of feminist art defined earlier in this essay.

Her choice of image reference predisposes her to a misreading due to the cultural codes present in the images chosen. For her celebration of the empowerment of women to be readable, a prerequisite inversion of cultural values is demanded, but this inversion of values is nowhere mentioned in the images.

Edelson's work is a celebration of gender specificity. Where no comment on the dissatisfaction of women with current gender role assignation is visible, as in her work, the work can be construed as celebrating the gender injustices that exist today.

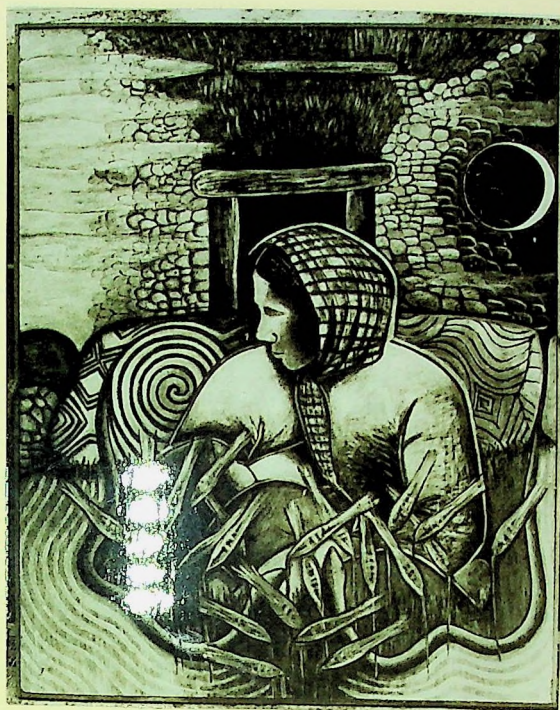
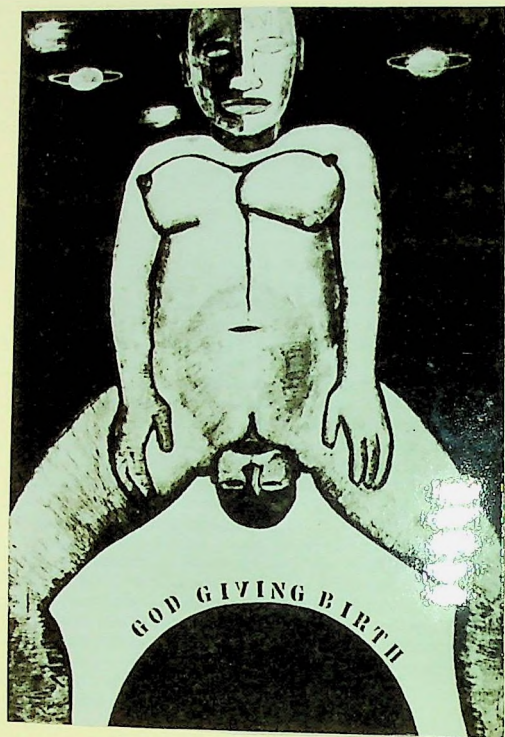
On this basis we must conclude that Mary Beth Edelson's style of feminist art is unacceptable to the definition of feminist art here operating.

The oeuvres of these two artists bear the distinguishing features of the trend under discussion, although the two women work in different media and on different continents. With two such divergent representatives of the same trend, the attributes of the trend may be assessed with some degree of clarity for their suitability for the definitions of this essay.

As was shown, both artists fall prey to the use of what is conventionally seen as 'feminine' imagery. This imagery serves to undermine their radical stance by transmitting a message that supports the gender injustice of our society.

The element which appears to facilitate this misreading is the concept of the inversion of cultural values. Where this concept is not specifically explained, the normative cultural values remain in place, facilitating a meaning construction which is confluent with the culture, although not what the artists intended.





1. Monica Sjoos God Giving Birth
2. Monica Sjoos Corn Mother  
At Newgrange
3. Mary Beth Edelson Woman Rising



## 2. The History Orientated Feminist

It is not a question of reproposing lace doilies but of recalling them as examples of the atrophied expression of a culture which remains authentic although smothered.<sup>9</sup>

As examples of this area of feminist thought, Kate Walker and the combination of Tricia Davis and Phil Goodall are the most appropriate artists, as they have all worked, and indeed continue to work, from this philosophy.

These women were all involved in the innovative *Feministo* project, which took place over a period of years and included a wide variety of artists throughout Great Britain. The project entailed a system of chain letters written between isolated British feminist artists, whereby artworks in the form of drawing, painting or small sculpture were exchanged through the post as a visual dialogue. The network expanded over a great number of women, and concentrated on the use of visual imagery to comment on the experience of sex roles, work in the home and related issues.

Kate Walker lives and works in London, from where she has been active in the feminist art movement since the sixties. Her work engages with the concept of the woman's role as housewife and mother in combination with the chosen role of artist. She aims to find a balance between cataloguing what she recognises as the debilitating and cramping stereotype of the good housewife to which so many women aspire, and the genuine courage, hard work and stamina of the women who take on the job of housewife and mother.

Among her projects was a collaborative refurbishment of a terraced house in London.<sup>10</sup> Walker took over a room in this house in which to create an environment. Her environment consisted of a kitchen knee deep in rubbish, half finished cups of coffee, milk that had gone off, cigarette ends and grubby plastic cartons. An endless circle of footsteps traced the path from the fridge to the cooker to the sink. Strewn on the floor were plastic dolls and the story of Cinderella, written out in coloured crayons. On the wall hung a ceramic plate inscribed:

Bless my little kitchen, Lord,  
I love its every nook,  
And bless me as I do my work  
Wash pots and pans and cook.''

The cupboards in the kitchen were filled with packets of food neatly piled on top of each other as well as towels precisely folded and neatly stacked away.

Walker expressed her dissatisfaction with this environment because it was static, whereas she wanted to imply the chaos and fluidity of a home situation in contrast with the sharp, hopeless order imposed by the woman trying to keep it all under control.

A later project entitled *Fenix Arising*(fig. 4) seemed to solve this problem of presentation by having the artists (again, this was a collaborative project) continuing their work during the show. Walker's children wandered about the exhibition, drawing and playing as she worked. The audience was specifically encouraged to participate in the evolution of the show by drawing and making in the gallery. The exhibition began with just a black shed-size cubicle in the centre of the gallery space. From this cubicle a projector shone views of family situations onto a screen made of white clothes, situated on one of the gallery walls. Women's legs made in soft sculpture emanated from the cubicle. With this sparse beginning the show opened, and the artists began to work on further pieces during the exhibition, which toured Britain.

The result of this strategy was a clear depiction of the pressures and responsibilities of the women - as represented in the artwork, and as part of the reality of the show.

Kate Walker's vocabulary of images is radically different from that of the feminists described under category one. As was mentioned earlier, among this second group of feminists the interest is focused on the traditional expectations of women's role in the home. Walker's vocabulary is drawn mainly from household and family artefacts. Old clothes, rubber gloves, blankets and buckets all make appearances in her work.

Walker's encouragement of the women viewing the exhibition to participate in its development operates as a further endorsement of 'ordinary' women's creativity and imagination, and facilitates the recognition of how much energy, both emotional and physical, is involved in housework and mothering.

This depiction of women's day-to-day existence, where any woman is invited to participate, also facilitates a group respect and co-operation which serves to negate traditional theories of women as inherently competitive with each other.

In one way it is possible to draw an analogy between her choice of image and that of Edelson and Sjöo. Both groupings do look at very traditional woman-associated images. The difference is that in Walker's work, the objects used have a cultural significance which is concurrent with the thrust of her argument. Two rubber gloves holding a bucket may imply a woman's work, but it also very explicitly implies drudgery and unpleasantness - both ideas are highly relevant for Walker's message. The strategy of using objects culturally coded as both 'drudgery work' and 'woman's work' succeeds in depicting the latter as undesirable by anybody, and seems to make the appropriate step of asking why it is that women are the ones with whom we associate this drudgery.

We can conclude that Kate Walker's strategy of utilizing 'feminized' objects and images succeeds where those in category one did not. Her work is the representation of women's role through the medium of the tools and paraphernalia of that role. It is simple, direct and sufficiently close to the values of the culture to have its message of gender injustice clear and easily comprehensible.

Phil Goodall and Tricia Davis were involved in the *Feminista* postal project, the experience of which led them to put together an exhibition entitled *Mother's Pride: Mother's Ruin*. This work seeks to investigate some of the ways in which women's experience is structured through education, employment and domesticity, looking also for possible responses to those structures.<sup>12</sup>

The visual vocabulary of the work is taken from the reality of many women's lives; images of pregnancy, typists, ironing boards, cots and household paraphernalia.



Goodall and Davis, like Kate Walker, have chosen to retain the cultural value system in a fairly intact state, and to merely show up women's systematic injustice through the culture's own values.

They do not leave the objects to speak for themselves as Walker did, but rather make alterations in the object to bring out a new or different side to its nature than that normally seen. The object comes to have a very specific double meaning: as the reality of a mundane household object, but, due to some addition or alteration by the artists, also a symbol or communication of women's oppression.

This communication is achieved by the use of familiar objects, as in Walker's work, but this time in a different fashion.

The work ranges in form from straight drawing to photomontage to installations of household appliances and objects. Most of these objects bear a cultural code relevant to some particular area of the stereotype of femininity, and this is interestingly exploited in the juxtaposition of paradoxical pairs of images, both of which form part of the stereotype. For instance, a silhouette of a typist with her typewriter is formed from images of a mother and baby (fig. 5). Many of the concepts use humour as a device, for example, the punning of a sticking plaster on which the words *I need you* are printed, which is entitled *Emotional Elastoplast* (fig. 6).<sup>13</sup>

Thus a cot, when painted black and with an adult inside it (fig. 7), comes to represent not only itself, a cot and symbol of children, but also a prison for adult women due to the lack of alternative child care facilities.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly the *Emotional Elastoplast* represents itself, a plaster for cuts and bruises sustained by children, but also the emotional binding that prevents a woman from attempting to break out of her circumstances. The final image of the *Badges Woman*, a silhouette of a woman covered in badges with feminist slogans printed on them, represents the future or response to women's predicament. Instead of an a-historical celebration of female power such as Edelson and Sjöo propound, Davis and Goodall have depicted a woman challenging, trying to change her surroundings in a very specific environment.

Davis and Goodall, through cleverly exploiting the meanings of household objects, have made a clear message that manages to be theoretically founded, but not obscurant. The double entendre is readily readable, and adds an extra edge to the criticisms being made.

Because their objects' meanings are coincident with the culturally sanctioned meanings, it is difficult to escape the message of the show. To see a doll's face matched with an anatomical drawing of a woman's reproductive system is to be clearly set a challenge about two paradoxical views of women.

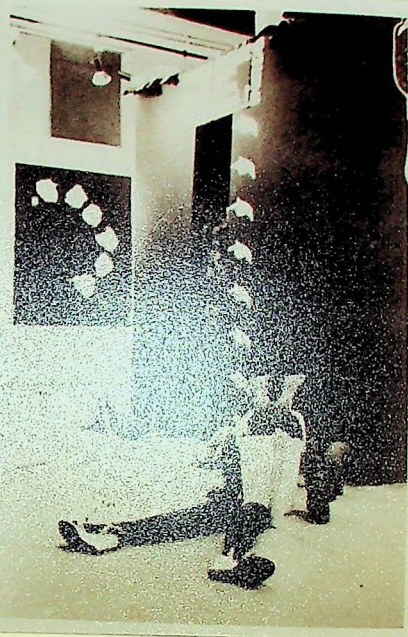
Despite its unambiguity the show never falls into sheer propaganda. It challenges and questions assumptions rather than stating dogmatically. This was something for which the women were specifically aiming. In an essay on the show they explicitly state:

As feminist artists, ... we wanted ... to raise the possibility of a political art in which the art is not grafted onto the politics, serving the cause, nor the politics, as content, poured into the art.

By drawing attention to women's social role in all its paradoxical impossibilities, the implicit message is consistently one of the gender injustice perpetrated against women. The *Badges Woman* prevents this message from becoming one of woman as the helpless victim of this injustice, which would in itself conform to an element of the cultural norm of woman as victim.

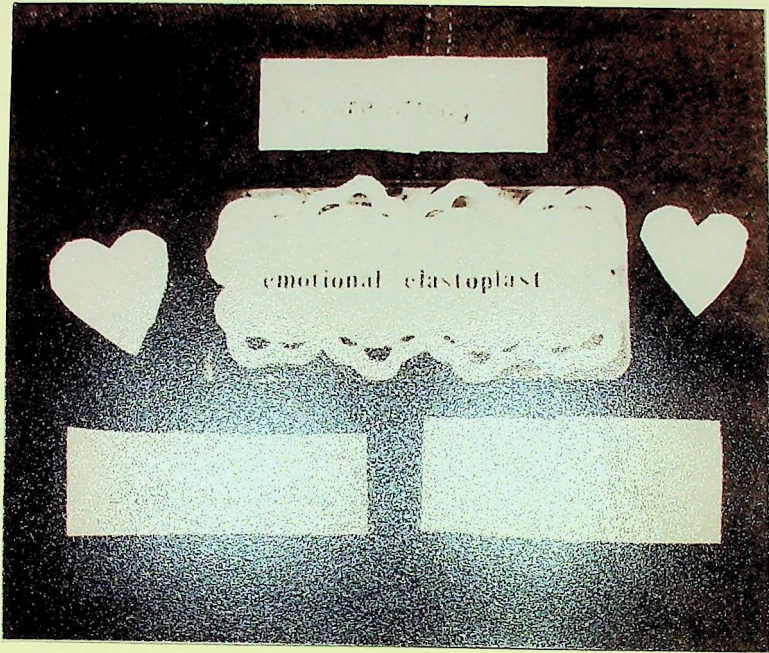
Since this strategy conforms to the prerequisite set by this essay of a cultural communication of the subjective experience of gender injustice, the work of this second category, whose primary features are exemplified in the work of Walker, Davis and Goodall, can be accepted as falling within this definition of feminist art.





4. Kate Walker, detail,  
*Fenix Arising*
5. Goodall & Davis, detail,  
*Mother's Pride:*  
*Mother's Ruin*





6 & 7. Goodall & Davis, details, *Mother's Pride: Mother's Ruin*

### 3. The Popular Culture Feminist

We live in an age when a flood of ready-made images are to the eye what prejudices are to the mind.<sup>15</sup>

Feminists involved in the critique and hi-jacking of the mechanisms of popular culture are perhaps more divergent a group than those analysed up to now.

Areas of work range from pornography to advertising, however there seem to be only two major methods of intervention by feminist artists: these are refacing and parody.

Refacing is the practice of interfering with a piece of popular culture after it has been produced, for instance the masking out of text on a billboard and its replacement by a text which uses similar imagery and typefaces. Refacing can also mean the hi-jacking of a popular culture event for another purpose - for instance an advertising slogan or image may be usurped and its meaning altered for presentation in a new way. Examples of refacing work include the work collated by English feminist Jill Posener, a group of Dublin students, and a group of women calling themselves *Bloody Women*, also working in Dublin.

Billboards have long been a prime target for anti-popular culture feeling, and billboard refacing has many supporters.

Some of the slogans used by refacers can be obscure from the point of view of the passer-by, since they occasionally make the mistake of linking too directly with semiotic theory, and not directly enough with audience awareness (for an example of this, see fig. 8).

The use of the original typeface of the advertisement can be seen as a joke on the advertisers- having words put into their mouths, so to speak- which although retaining the passivity and powerlessness of the viewer, is often a stronger statement than the alternative of straight graffiti.

One of the strategies advocated by Jill Posener is the refacing of billboards such that the billboard looks as though it is untouched. A short, pithy slogan, sometimes only one word, is formulated in the same typeface as the text of the original advertisement, and then the new message is placed over the original.



The result is an effective visual, where the new message has the same importance and authority as the original, and seems genuinely to be a revelation on the part of the advertisers as to what their intentions or assumptions really are. The strategy generally attracts much attention from members of the public, certainly reaching a wider audience than gallery-orientated art.

Posener's messages use the given images and standards to reveal paradoxes within popular culture, much the way the previous group revealed paradoxes within the ideology of femininity. This time the representation of the dominant ideology through advertising constitutes the base material.

A piece photographed by Posener on a *Kayser* tights advertisement (fig. 9) is a simple but highly effective comment on the ease with which the objectification of women can become violence against women: the replacement of *Kayser* with *Rapist* merely reveals more about what exists already in the image rather than introducing any new image or material. The message of the refacing is clear without falling into the propagandist. The viewer is left to draw his/her own conclusions about what the image has become.

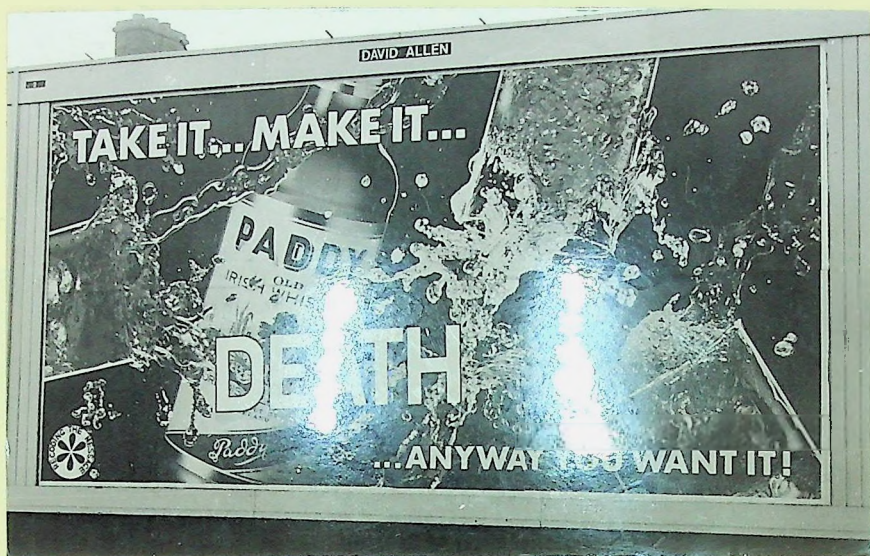
From the point of view of the current working definition of feminist art, Posener's work certainly qualifies as a clear representation through the medium of popular culture of how she perceives gender injustice.

Another similar strategy of billboard refacing was employed by Dublin students Adam May and Mary Fitzsimon, from the National College of Art & Design, and Ian Conroy from Dun Laoghaire School of Art & Design.

In this case messages were replaced, as with the technique described above, but occasionally text was also added in other areas of the board. This made it more obvious that intervention had taken place, but the style of typeface remained highly polished and professional.

Like Posener, the group drew attention to information presented in the original advertisement, rather than adding new information. Work like the refaced *Ibiza* billboard (fig. 10) reveals the ambiguity of the photograph used, pointing out in a clear and effective manner that the image can also be read as one of violence and rape, not just as an objective view of a beautiful nude.





8 & 10. Dublin students' billboard work





9. Billboard photographed by Jill Posener



A poster has been successful when it has triggered a fundamental discussion about critical conditions and possibilities for improvement. In spite of the difficulties, there have always been opportunities to familiarise many people with uncomfortable ideas.<sup>16</sup>

These two examples of billboard refacing use the morals of popular culture to reveal in a clear and succinct way the proximity of the two images of woman: as desirable and as victim. They point out existing paradoxes in our value system, thus undermining it, without needing recourse to specific feminist images or theory. For this reason the work is unambiguous and highly readable in the context of mainstream culture, constituting a clear message about gender injustice within the moral system under which these billboards operate.

The second form of refacing, picking up on an event in popular culture, is less common, but did occur recently in Dublin when a group of women, also from the N.C.A.D., produced a T-shirt. The event was a magazine advertising campaign launched by the company Smith & Nephew for one of their products, *Lil-lets* tampons.

The campaign focused on the embarrassment caused a young woman by her menstrual cycle. *Lil-lets* were offered as discreet and invisible so that no-one need know the woman was menstruating - not even the woman herself, curiously enough.

As an illustration for the campaign, the company photographed a young model wearing a T-shirt on which the words *Hi, I've got my period* were printed (fig. 11). Much of the accompanying text pointed out how horrific such a T-shirt would be, since everyone would then know the model was menstruating. The group of women from the N.C.A.D. then took the idea, redesigned the T-shirt so as to include a number of euphemisms for menstruation, and printed up a large number for sale (fig. 12). The idea behind this reprint was that the T-shirt become a badge of pride and enjoyment of the menstrual cycle, and not the embarrassing stigma portrayed in the magazine advertisement. This flouting of convention was intended to reveal the social stigma associated with the functions of the female body, and to pose the question as to why this stigma exists. As Lisa Tickner put it:



- I'm the curse; I'm the affliction my friend; Eve's curse;  
that time; I see you riding on my moon down; I'm  
in my flower; I'm on your moon; the red king; on  
the rays; bloody; I'm the dance; I am going to  
see my relative at Waterloo; telling off the roof;  
riding the red flag; I'm here; I'm on the  
drape; on the ground; I'm leaking; flying the  
red flag; I'm on my dear mother; the member;  
I'm coming home; having my sick time; after the  
manner of our father; it's my time of the  
month; I'm not the woman's friend;  
I'm really; I'm in the ice-box;  
covering the water-front; and my blood and seed;  
the hammock; I'm riding the cotton  
picycle; on the road; the cherry's in the cherry;  
I'm flying the red flag; sister is here; my  
country cousin; visiting; the tailor is here; Aunt  
Jane is here; I'm on my red-head  
at the end of the General's bedstead;  
and painted Circle; the red sword; lit will  
Reggie; Criminal Christ; friend; I've read in  
a book; I'm in the fish; of the old  
road; in the woman; I'm on my wheel;  
my package; I'm on the road; the Ring;  
I'm having my dress; on the night; on the  
moon-change; the contest; I'm directed; in the  
ketching; with my little friends; I'm at the dark of  
the moon; got the moon-sickness...

Since women are not expected to be disgusting, the violation of certain established taboos, like that on public reference to menstruation, symbolises a disrespect for the social order, and a rejection of the normal patterns of domination and submission enshrined within it.<sup>17</sup>

This hi-jacking of a concept for re-use with another value assignation is reminiscent of the first category of feminist theory investigated. In order to understand the meaning behind the reprinting of the slogan, a reversal of attitude to menstruation is necessary.

Only those people whose attitudes are already in sympathy with feminism will understand the meaning. For those who have not reversed their attitude toward menstruation from shame or disgust (the culturally dominant attitude) to pride and enjoyment (the feminist attitude), the T-shirt retains the meaning given it by the advertisement, the dominant culture meaning. This meaning does, of course, change slightly in that the context of the T-shirt is no longer the same, but nevertheless remains within the same philosophy.

The dominant cultural associations with menstruation such as clumsiness, bad temper and irrationality become perceived as being excused by the wearer of the T-shirt. In other words, the message is not, as was intended: *Hi, I've got my period and I'm not embarrassed to tell you because I'm proud of it*, but rather *Hi, I've got my period which means I'm in lousy humour so be sympathetic*.

Again we see that messages whose values are too distant from those of the mainstream culture are likely to be misread by viewers who ascribe to mainstream values. The messages become misconstrued by the application of the dominant ideology to them.

Parody as a strategy of intervention in popular culture by feminist artists is a hotly debated issue. Examples of feminists who have used parody in their work are Lynda Benglis and Jo Spence.

Lynda Benglis is a West Coast American artist based in Los Angeles, whose work consists of sensual poured-foam sculpture as well as performance and video pieces.



In 1974 she ran a series of advertisements in *Artforum* magazine to advertise an exhibition of her work. The fourth and last advertisement in the series consisted of a full-page colour photograph of Benglis in an aggressively sexual pose, her nude body greased, with only sunglasses and an enormous latex dildo as accessories (fig. 13).

She is quoted at the time as describing the work in terms of 'a media statement ... to end all statements, the ultimate mockery of the pin-up and the macho.'<sup>18</sup>

The piece created a great stir when published, and is often cited in arguments both for and against parody of pornography.

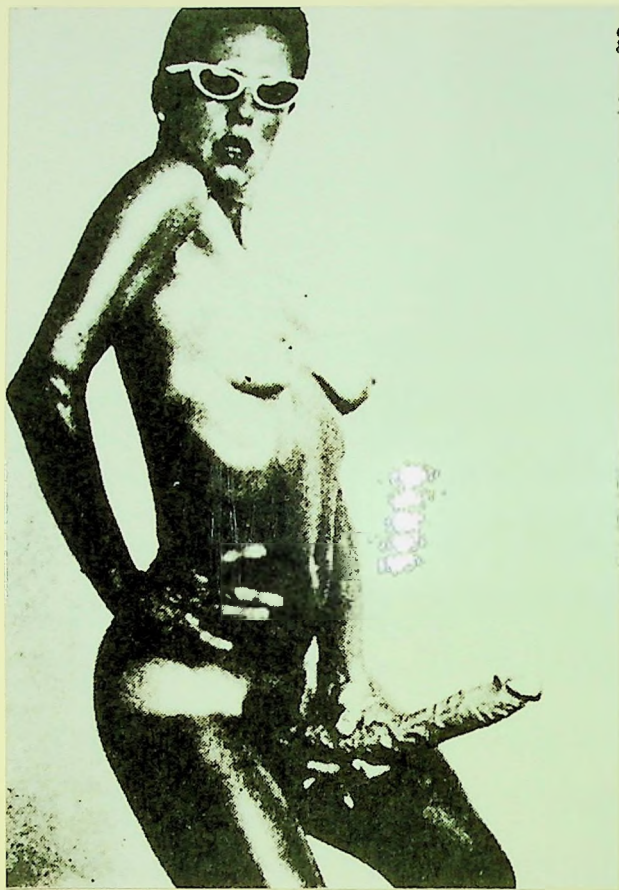
In order to produce successful parody, the idea or object parodied must be in some way exaggerated to an unrealistic degree. Some elements of the idea must remain constant so that the subject of the parody is recognisable.

'Pin up' photographs and illustrations are illusionist in the first instance; they involve the exaggeration of certain attributes as part of their attraction. Slender young women, greased flesh, extraordinarily large sexual organs or sex toys are all part of the normal visual vocabulary of such images. A parody which picks on these exaggerated elements is in danger of becoming confused with a serious attempt at a 'pin-up' photograph. As Lisa Tickner says:

The depiction of women by women ... in this quasi - sexist manner as a political statement grows potentially more powerful as it approaches actual exploitation but then, within an ace of it, collapses into ambiguity and confusion.'<sup>19</sup>

Benglis, by conforming too closely to the stereotype, and by exaggerating only those elements normally exaggerated in such photographs, does not differentiate herself sufficiently from serious genre images. She fails to make any clear statement on the feminist view of sexual exploitation. The opposite occurs, in that such an ambiguous image, authored by a woman, could conceivably feed the notion that women enjoy being exploited, dominated and objectified through pornography. Indeed, this seems to have been the understanding from which a group of editors made the following judgement of the piece:





13. Lynda Benglis, from an advertisement in *Artforum*
14. Jo Spence, from *the Picture of Health?*

An object of extreme vulgarity ... brutalising ourselves and our readers.<sup>20</sup>

As such, its ambiguity renders it unacceptable as a communication of gender injustice.

In contrast, a similar parody by Jo Spence reveals the possibilities of the strategy when carefully applied.

Spence is a British artist who has been active in political photography for some years. She had a part of her breast removed in 1982 when she was in her forties. She subsequently made a striking photograph in which she is depicted from the waist up wearing nothing but a motorcycle helmet, her arms raised above her head (fig. 14).

The pose is a typical one of the genre Benglis was parodying, the girly pin-up, but this time the areas of emphasis are very different.

Spence's breast is badly scarred by the operation, her skin is old, her eyes are free of make-up and have heavy bags beneath them.

The parody relies on the idea of an average woman in this pose as distinct from a beautiful young slim woman. The pose appears as ludicrous and disrespectful.

This emphasis of the pose as ludicrous reveals how little respect women in the culture receive, even those who are deemed by the culture to be the most valuable: the young and beautiful.

The image of an older woman in this sort of pose communicates the lack of value attributed to women who are no longer youthful looking; a function of the way in which women are forced to trade on their bodies for respect. The photograph is unambiguous and powerful in its denouncement of the value-system operating; again by remaining within the value system. Spence's body is sufficiently at variance with the norm to make it obvious that this is not the 'real thing'. There is no danger of her photograph being taken as a serious element of the genre being parodied. The pose is seen as 'disrespectful' because of her age and her scarred breast. The parody is a success in that the whole image appears as sordid and objectifying.

We may conclude that, in parody, it is necessary to be sure that the exaggerated or changed attributes are not those normally exaggerated or changed by the genre parodied.

Our conclusion from this section must be that, in order to intervene successfully in the monologue of popular culture as purveyed by the mass media, it is necessary to remain under the operant value system as far as is possible, thus minimising the chance of misreading.

#### 4. The Ungendered Feminist

This analysis is addressed specifically toward those artists who consider themselves feminists, and who see androgyny (the conscious decision to see as not relevant the gender identity of the artist) as an appropriate strategy towards the elimination of gender-based injustice. The art practice of feminists who subscribe to this philosophy is not identifiable as a particular school, since the nature of their argument is that no art practice specifically recognised as women-made ought to exist. As Elaine de Kooning put it:

We're artists who happen to be women or men, among other things we happen to be - tall, short, blonde, dark, ectomorph, mesomorph, Black, Spanish, German, Irish, hot-tempered, easy going - that are in no way relevant to our being artists.<sup>21</sup>

There are, no doubt, areas of experience common to both men and women where gender difference is not relevant. In terms of feminist art practice, it is important to recognise that women have been largely absent from art history, and that the traditions of that art history must bear more of a relation to the men who have been producing it than to the women who have not.

The real crux of chauvinism in art ... is that we as women have learned to see the world through men's eyes and learned to identify with men's struggles, whereas men don't have the vaguest notion of identifying with ours.<sup>22</sup>

There exists, as we have noted, the assumption that art is a value-free phenomenon, gender-free, culture-free. It is hoped that this assumption has by now been revealed as fatuous, and that art carries with it the morality and concerns of the culture which produces it, and reflects the morality and concerns of the culture context in which it is read.



Since the culture which produced the Western tradition of art practice is a culture in which men have been considered the primary, normative gender, and since to all intents and purposes this system is still operative today, it follows that the art produced and consumed reflects this ideology.

Western culture believes itself to be ungendered; the use of the generic *he*, of words like *cavemen* does not register with a good many of the members of the culture as representative of a bias. The assumption by the exponents of the dominant culture, as was noted in Chapter One, is that anything which does not conflict with the dominant ideology is in sympathy with it. As we have seen, anything which conflicts too radically with it is also quite readily co-opted into sympathy with it.

As long as this myth of a *general* art, literature etc. persists in the way it has done up to now, feminist aesthetic theory must insist that all investigations into art be thoroughly genderised.<sup>23</sup>

An artist in this case may be convinced of the reality of gender injustice in the culture, and may, like de Kooning, believe that the most appropriate response to this situation is an assumed ambivalence to gender specificity in production. Nevertheless, the dominant ideology causes this stance to be interpreted as confluent with the morality of the culture, since the art practice does nothing to challenge the normative assumptions.

A stance such as that taken by de Kooning, although valid in the abstract, when applied in the reality of a gender-biased culture, renders effectively invisible its rejection of that injustice.

##### 5. The Deconstructionist Feminist

For this section only one example is presented, since this artist has become the representative of deconstructionist artists working in feminism.

In Britain and Ireland, the great champion of deconstructionist feminism as art practice is undoubtedly Mary Kelly. Kelly is an American artist who came to live in London in the early 1970s and has had a high profile in the feminist art world since that time.

Her piece, *Post Partum Document*, (see figures 14 and 15) is almost always cited as one of the most highly successful pieces using this theory by those who advocate the strategy of deconstruction.

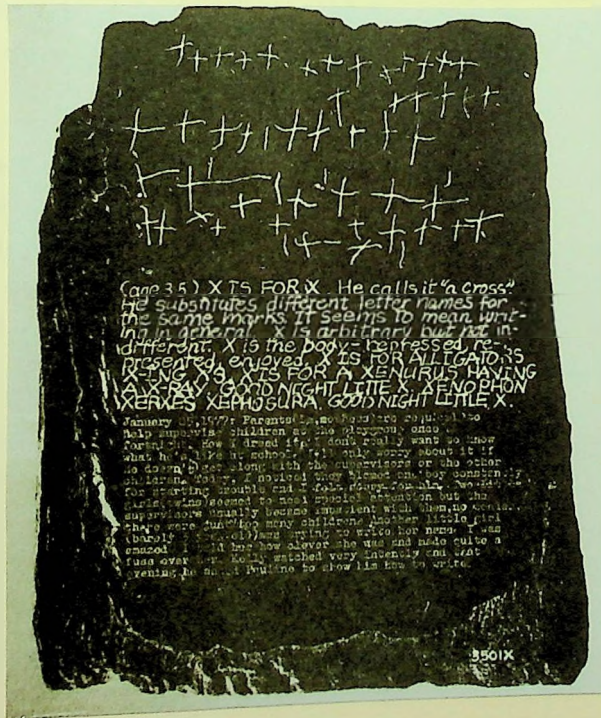
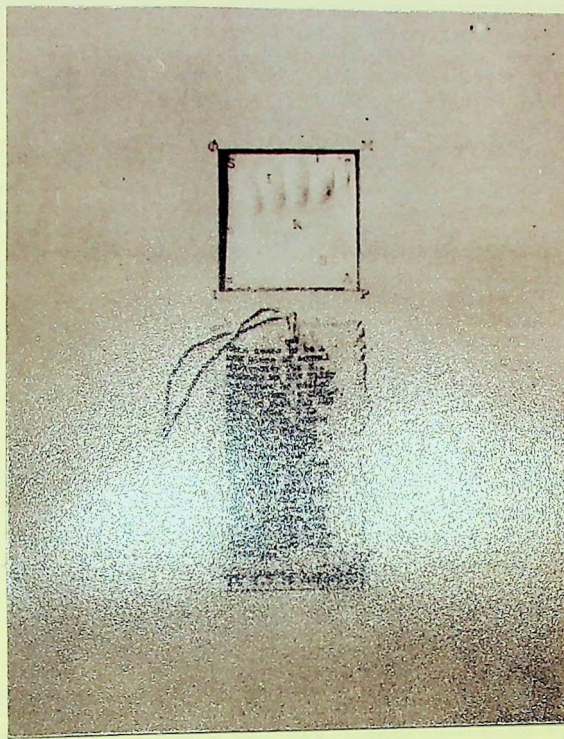
*Post Partum Document* is an attempt to document Kelly's own experience of motherhood by placing it within the terms of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, thus providing an opportunity to deconstruct the cultural ideology around motherhood and femininity. Lacan is the primary influence on the theory of both Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. His re-reading of Freud is an important element of the French theory of deconstruction.

The work exists on three levels. The first is her son's artefacts: framed soiled nappies, comforters, his first attempts at writing and other such memorabilia. The second level concerns his mother's responses and worries: timetables and feeding charts, diary entries revealing her own self doubt and confusion, memories of conversations with him, or comments by him. The third level constitutes a Lacanian psychoanalysis of motherhood and femininity under patriarchy. These three elements are combined with each other in various ways. Sometimes one piece is superimposed over another (figure 15), sometimes all three levels are depicted one below the other mimicking the Rosetta Stone (fig.16), sometimes one level appears alone, as with the framed nappy.

Kelly uses much specific theory and specialised language in her exhibition which led her to produce a brief companion leaflet in an effort to clarify the theory of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The entire work has now also been produced in book form. She described her work in the following way:

I am using the 'art object' explicitly as a fetish object in order to suggest the operations of the unconscious that underly it. The stains, markings and word imprints have a minimum sign value in themselves, but a maximum affective value in relation to my lived experience. In psychoanalytic terms, they are visual representations of cathected memory traces. These traces, in combination with the diaries, time-tables and feeding charts, constitute what I would





15 & 16. Mary Kelly, detail, *Post Partum Document*



call a discourse which 'represents' my lived experience as a mother but they are consciously set up in an antagonistic relationship with the diagrams, algorithms and footnotes, thereby constituting another discourse which 'represents' my analysis, as a feminist, of this lived experience.<sup>24</sup>

By its very nature Kelly's piece runs the danger of obscurantism for two reasons. Firstly her decision to use personal memorabilia which are the bearers of 'cathected memory traces' means that their importance in the work is only fully understood by Kelly herself. To the viewer the objects are nothing but average items used in childcare and normally then thrown away. Their use here becomes a form of trophyism where they bear, for the viewer, only an imaginary significance to the trauma of separation (as the child grows up and gains independence from her) of which Kelly speaks.

Secondly the direct use of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is undoubtedly alienating for those viewers who are unfamiliar with its terminology and specific vocabulary. Kelly makes no attempt to give an account of the theory on which the work is based, other than the brief leaflet circulated. The leaflet assumes a level of familiarity with the subject that is unlikely to be met by very many viewers, a situation which led to an article in *Spare Rib* commenting that the theory was 'inadequately represented'.<sup>25</sup>

The piece is set up as readable in a variety of ways, in accordance with the theory of 'feminine' art practice as propounded by Kristeva. It is a set of potential communications rather than any one in particular. Nevertheless Kelly did have specific concepts in mind which she wished to represent; that motherhood and femininity as conceived of in our culture are social constructions that limit women's psyche and relegate it to a secondary position.

This idea is clearly in accordance with the definition of feminist art as presented here, where systematic gender injustice is communicated in some way. But is Mary Kelly succeeding in communicating through the culture?

Specific vocabulary has a tendency to inhibit and alienate the viewer, which is not conducive to good communication. Kelly has said that she wishes the visual elements to draw people into the work to such a degree that they are willing to study the theoretical side and come to some understanding of the communication in the piece. It seems equally likely however, that having enjoyed the 'visuals' in the way one normally enjoys or views aesthetic objects in a gallery, the viewer is ill-ready to approach the rest of the work in a completely different manner, and is much more likely to lose attention and move on to the work of another artist which may be enjoyed or viewed on the normative 'aesthetic' level, thus leaving Kelly's work to appear meaningless.

[Deconstructionist art] ... exploits the technologies of mass produced and reproducible imagery (photography, typography, montage) in order to make unique examples of gallery art which are easily as elitist and inaccessible as any painting.<sup>26</sup>

While not wishing to advocate artwork that appeals exclusively to the 'three minute culture', to an attention span that cannot last further than three minutes, it does seem that Kelly's piece is more than a little opaque, since the majority of its viewers are unlikely to be familiar with Jacques Lacans re-reading of Freudian theory. For this reason, it is unlikely that her work constitutes a communication that is meaningful to any but a few elite. Here we have the concept of an artwork whose meaning is open only to those who bring to it its own theoretical analysis and value system. Anyone who has no experience of Lacanian analysis will be no wiser after viewing Kelly's piece, since she makes no attempt to explain the philosophical premises from which she works. Only viewers with a previous knowledge of deconstruction will comprehend the message or potential messages. This problem of communication where a shared pre-set feminist value system is required (as was seen with the goddess-orientated group and in areas of popular culture work) occurs again here and implies that Kelly's work has the potential to be misread - or worse still to remain unread - by those who do not share her value system.

Certainly Freudian terminology is ambiguous as to whether the primacy of the phallus is natural or cultural. It is conceivable that those whose sympathies lie with a system propogating gender injustice might use this form of art practice to support a teleological claim for women's primacy as nurturers under the current system.

Kelly's work, when viewed by an audience ignorant of or not in sympathy with her philosophy, can be misread by means of the dominant ideology as a meaningless sentimental piece on motherhood, or as a support for the cultural meaning of motherhood. This problem precludes Kelly, as the prime example of deconstructionist feminist art practice, from the definition of feminist art practice functioning in this essay.



## CONCLUSION

During the course of the essay, various approaches to feminist art practice have been examined for their efficacy as strategies of intervention into the dominant culture.

As was mentioned in the Introduction, feminist art practice is here assumed to be art which bears the message of feminism to a public which is largely anti-feminist. Two mutually dependent findings in relation to this aim have resulted from this study.

The first is the recognition that the more divergent a value or image system on which an artwork is based from the value system of the dominant culture, the less likely the artwork is to be 'read' in the way the author intended. If an artwork is made using a system of imagery which differs significantly from that of the mainstream culture, then that the artwork will be reinterpreted through the dominant culture codings and 'read' as something which is in sympathy with the dominant cultural values.

We saw this effect in the work of Monica Sjoo and Mary Beth Edelson, for instance. The essentialist stance seems particularly prone to this reinterpretation because of the acceptance by this trend of dominant concepts of male and female attributes. This makes differentiation sometimes difficult between work that represents essentialist feminist ideology and work that represents a mystic version of normative culture. Both use similar imagery, but have coded the images differently. However, essentialism is not the only area in which this misreading can occur. As was noted, it can occur also in interventions in popular culture, as well as with deconstructionist based work.

Therefore we may conclude that any art practice whose coding of imagery differs significantly from the dominant culture, but which neglects adequately to represent this new coding, is assumed to be coded in the value system of the dominant culture, and thus fails to undermine its values.

It is a necessary element of the art practice, therefore, that it facilitate meaning construction which is in sympathy with feminist

ideology, but which is accessible to those unfamiliar with feminist theory.

This brings us on to the second conclusion from this enquiry. The point may be illustrated by the work of Walker, Goodall and Davis, those artists chosen to exemplify what was defined as the History-orientated Feminist.

The strategy employed by these artists is one which, although formed by feminist awareness, does not require a feminist value system on the part of the viewer in order to be interpreted the way the authors intended. The strategy employed by these women is to use the culture codings of the dominant culture to describe its own value system. The ideology of femininity incorporated into this value systems is then revealed as a series of paradoxical stereotypes. This undermines the value system of the culture in a way which facilitates the construction of feminist meanings without recourse to the alternative image-codings employed by some of the other artists.

It is therefore an effective feminist strategy to juxtapose the dominant image-codings of the culture in order to undermine the biases which formed them.

This conclusion places no restriction on the aesthetic form and style of feminist art practice. Although feminist art does constitute a new movement in the art world, its definitions must be in regard to the political theory and aims of its members, rather than any formal trend. As previously stated, if feminist art is to retain its vitality it must avoid categorisation as an 'Art Movement'.

Feminist art practice has ... to define a problematic in relation to an understanding of the ways in which it can be effective - not by expressing some ... personal set of ideas, ... but by calculated intervention (utilising or addressing explicitly womens experience ignored or obliterated in our culture).'<sup>1</sup>

## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION

1. KUHN, Annette 'Introduction' *Feminist Aesthetics* Ed. Parker & Pollock
2. MCCARTHY, Sarah quoted in 'Feminism and Modernism' Griselda Pollock *Framing Feminism* Ed. Parker & Pollock
3. *ibid.*
4. LIPPARD, Lucy *From The Centre: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*
5. From an interview I conducted with Pauline Cummins on January 30th, '89.
6. MALLOON, Terence 'Mary Kelly Interviewed' *Visibly Female* Ed. Hilary Robinson

### CHAPTER ONE

1. RADCLIFFE-RICHARDS, Janet *The Sceptical Feminist*
2. PARTINGTON, Angela 'Feminist Art and Avant-Gardism' *Visibly Female* Ed. Hilary Robinson
3. TICKNER, Lisa 'The Body Politic' *Framing Feminism* Ed. Parker & Pollock
4. STEPHENS, May 'Taking Art to the Revolution' *Visibly Female* Ed. Hilary Robinson
5. LIPPARD, Lucy *From the Centre: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*
6. BARRETT, Michelle 'Feminism, and the Definition of Cultural Politics' *Feminism, Culture and Politics* Ed. Brunt & Rowan
7. *ibid.*
8. STEPHENS, May 'Taking Art to the Revolution' *Visibly Female* Ed. Hilary Robinson
9. PARTINGTON, Angela 'Feminist Art and Avant-Gardism' *Visibly Female* Ed. Hilary Robinson
10. ALTHUSSER, Louis 'State Ideology and the Apparatus of State Ideology' *New Left Review*
11. GIBNEY, Margaret 'Romanticism'
12. MALLOON, Terence 'Mary Kelly Interviewed' *Visibly Female* Ed. Hilary Robinson
13. SAUZEAU-BOETTI, Anne-Marie 'Negative Capability as Practice in Women's Art' *Framing Feminism* Ed. Parker & Pollock



## CHAPTER TWO

1. POLLOCK, Griselda 'Feminism and Modernism' *Framing Feminism* Ed. Parker & Pollock
2. The concept of breaking feminist art practice into five parts is based on the essay 'On Sexual Politics And Art' by Mary Kelly in *Framing Feminism*, where feminist art practice is broken down into four parts based on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. This division is reproduced by Flitterman and Barry in 'Textual Strategies: The Politics of Artmaking' in the same anthology. Although I do not support the theory by which feminist art was thus divided, I did make use of the essays in formulating my own set of divisions.
3. PARTINGTON, Angela 'Feminist Art and Avant-Gardism' *Visibly Female* Ed. Hilary Robinson
4. KRISTEVA, Julia 'The System And The Speaking Subject' *The Kristeva Reader* Ed. Toril Moi

## CHAPTER THREE

1. DAVIS, Tricia & GOODALL, Phil 'Personally and Politically: Feminist Art Practice' *Framing Feminism* Ed. Parker & Pollock
2. VINCENTELLI, Moira 'Monica Sjoo Interviewed' *Visibly Female* Ed. Hilary Robinson
3. *ibid.*
4. GRIFFIN, Susan *Pornography and Silence*
5. VINCENTELLI, Moira 'Monica Sjoo Interviewed' *Visibly Female* Ed. Hilary Robinson
6. LIPPARD, Lucy 'Freelancing The Dragon' *From the Centre: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*
7. GOETTNER-ABENDROTH, Heide *Die Tanzende Goettin*. Original quote reads: In den *Sexualriten* ist der weibliche Koerper keine nackte Circe, sondern machtvoll und wild, voller eigenschoepferischer Energie. Ich habe die ganzheitliche, auf sich konzentrierte, bejahende, erotische, spirituelle Frau mitten im Prozess des Werdens dargestellt, wie sie ihr Gedaechnis, ihren Koerper, ihren Geist in der Balance haellt. Mein Koerper ist in diesen Ritualen ebenso Abbild fuer die Goettin wie Abbild fuer Jedefrau.
8. *ibid.* The original reads:  
Sie kniet im Sand, voellig nackt, mit den Haenden haelt sie ihre Brueste in derselben Geste, in der is hunderte uralter kleiner Idol-Goetinnen tun.
9. SAUZEAU-BOETTI, Anne-Marie 'Negative Capability as Practice in Womens Art' *Framing Feminism* Ed. Parker & Pollock

10. This house is actually the South London Women's Centre, 14 Radnor Tce. Lambeth.
11. PARKER, Roszika 'Housework' *Framing Feminism* Ed. Parker & Pollock
12. These are the aims as defined by Goodall & Davis in the essay 'Personally and Politically: Feminist Art Practice' *Framing Feminism* Ed. Parker & Pollock
13. *ibid.*
14. *ibid.*
15. MATISSE, Henri quoted in *Monuments and Maidens: Allegory and the Female Form* Marina Warner
16. STAEK, Klaes *Cultures In Contention* Ed. Kahn & Neumaier
17. TICKNER, Lisa 'The Body Politic' *Framing Feminism* Ed. Parker & Pollock
18. *ibid.*
19. *ibid.*
20. *ibid.*
21. BARRY, Judith & FLITTERMAN, Sandy 'Textual Strategies: The Politics of Artmaking' *Framing Feminism* Ed. Parker & Pollock
22. CHICAGO, Judy, 'Judy Chicago Talking to Lucy Lippard' *From The Centre* Lucy Lippard
23. ECKER, Gisela 'Introduction' *Feminist Aesthetics*
24. KELLY, Mary quoted in 'Feminism & Modernism' Griselda Pollock *Framing Feminism*
25. WADDELL, Mgt. & WANDOR, Micheline 'Mystifying Theory' *Spare Rib* no.55 Reprinted *Framing Feminism* Ed. Parker & Pollock
26. PARTINGTON, Angela 'Feminist Art and Avant-Gardism' *Visibly Female* Ed. Hilary Robinson

## CONCLUSION

1. KELLY, Mary quoted by Griselda Pollock in 'Feminism And Modernism'  
*Framing Feminism* Ed. Parker & Pollock



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