

Bad girls or babes

Barbara Pollack on postfeminist art

Babe Power

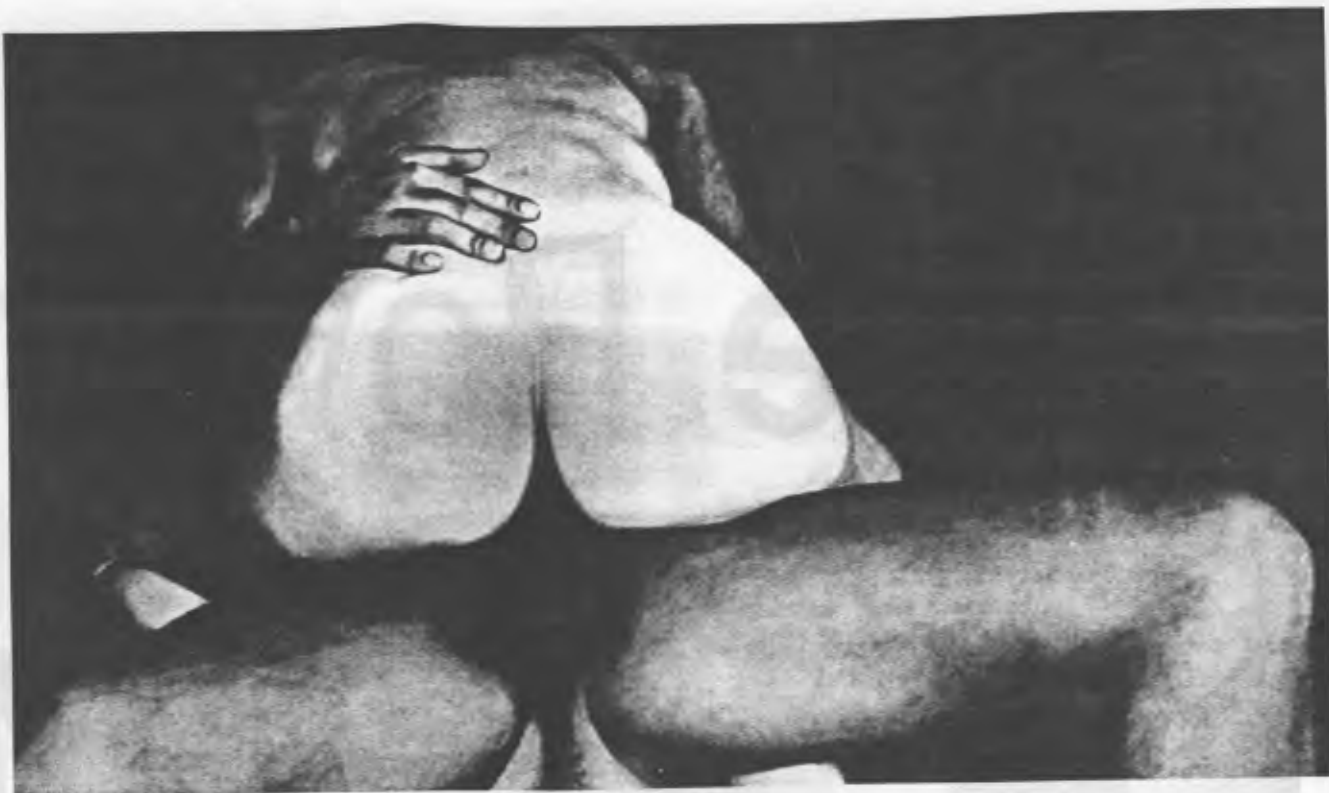


Q: How many Bad Girls does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: One, and she really wants to get screwed!

Karen Finley
Hallwalls 1982

In 1974, artist Lynda Benglis ran an advertisement in *Artforum*. In the ad, she posed as a *Playboy* centerfold wielding a gigantic double dildo. 'Extreme vulgarity' cried five *Artforum* editors, who published a joint letter in protest, condemning the photo as 'a mockery of the aims of feminism'.



Joan Semmel
Purple 1973

But feminist critic Lucy Lippard defended the image. To her, Benglis made clear what every woman artist knew intuitively – that all you needed to make it in the art world is a seductive stance and a big fat prick.

Two generations later, Lynda Benglis' revolutionary pose has turned into the sure-fire career path for younger women artists. Under the banner of Bad Girls, artists such as Lisa Yuskavage, Vanessa Beecroft, Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas, Pipilotti Rist, Anna Gaskell, Justine Kurland and Cecily Brown (to name a few) are showing off in museums, top galleries and international biennials. The work itself – and the pervasive use of nudity – is no longer shocking. What is shocking are the venues. Halls of art history that until recently ignored women artists have opened their doors and welcomed these power babes. But any artist without Alzheimer's disease knows that this is not the first time women artists have been celebrated for selling the female nude.

And many worry that this latest work is merely a replication, rather than redefinition, of the uncritical commodification of women in popular culture.

When the New Museum in New York held the 'Bad Girls' show in 1994 (shown also at the ICA London), many championed the term as well as the new wave of feminist art filled with humour and irony. 'I never took offense for one minute', states performance artist Martha Wilson, 'it was clearly being used to subvert the idea that only boys were permitted to be bad'. According to Deb Kass, one of the artists included in the 1994 show, the term at the time seemed mildly amusing, 'it had an advertising kind of quality, not without humor'. But the repeated use of the term in the year 2000 troubles Kass as 'being ahistorical'. As she says, 'The term is used again and again and again, because nobody knows their feminist history, so feminism gets invented again and again and again'.

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'One so-called solution to being labeled a feminist has always been this ironic position which permits the misogynist and the artist to live side-by-side in the same work.' Pointing out that irony is ultimately apolitical and undivisive, Semmel insists on its advantages for marketing contemporary art by women. In other words, irony proved a boom to art dealers who can now peddle works by women artists to sexist and politically-correct collectors alike.

If this position seems cynical, can it be any more cynical than Vanessa Beecroft's performance *Show* held at the Guggenheim Museum in 1998? *Show* stationed 20 models in the rotunda of the museum, either nude or semi-nude. (The shoes and panties were supplied by Tom Ford of Gucci.) According to Beecroft, the work is her exploration of the way women skilfully 'internalize aesthetics'. Or as Pipilotti Rist stated in a recent television interview, 'It doesn't matter if the girl is naked or not. All that matters is whether she looks self-confident or happy without her clothes on.' (A savvy pornographer couldn't state it more succinctly.) And as recent articles in the *New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue* and *Mademoiselle* prove, Bad Girls are best when they themselves look like fashion models – no blacks, dykes, or 40-plus year-olds need apply. 'Today, the word Bad means good, usually good photo-op', confirms Wilson, 'It does not mean addressing life-altering or deeply disturbing issues.'

Of course, no one wants to return to the bad old days of 'Fem vs Feminist' on the issue of sexual imagery. Almost everyone is tired and exhausted by the censorship tactics of the likes of Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. 'Being a post-sex feminist in 1989, before Madonna, was almost a crime', states Marilyn Minter, whose appropriation of pornographic images was roundly excoriated in the

early 1990s. 'I was treated like a traitor to feminism because I wasn't saying that all sexual imagery was bad.' Minter – and a wide range of women from Hannah Wilke to Karen Finley – suffered through this period being accused of narcissism, self-promotion, and worse yet, collusion with the male gaze. No one really wants Emin or Lucas or Sam Taylor-Wood to suffer a similar fate. But many wish they would give a nod to Mary Kelly or Sylvia Sleigh or Faith Wilding or Adrian Piper – all of whom created remarkably similar works 25 years ago. Instead, more often than not, they distance themselves from identification with feminists, assisted by the term Bad Girls.

Why do women continue to embrace this label? 'Because this is a maladaptive way of our dealing with our desperation', says Cottingham. 'It indicates that women still feel that they have no right to refuse institutional support.' Schneemann offers a more long-range point of view: 'Sometimes, the culture can accept what it rejected initially, but with that acceptance comes vitiation.' As she points out, in a society that worships Madonna and Courtney Love, the body is no longer the difficult issue nor does it challenge political hierarchies. 'Political issues are kept completely at bay because of the luscious promise of rewards and success if you can be a Bad Girl.'

The risks, however, are patently clear. Sure, you get fame and fortune in the short run but, as anyone scanning the XXX section in the video store can tell you, the title Bad Girls rests on the belief that women have a sado-masochistic desire for punishment. Bad girls are sexually active girls in need of discipline. Bad girls are little girls in need of a spanking. So, for now, crawl up in the lap of Larry Gagosian and Charles Saatchi. But don't forget – the inevitable whack on the butt is on its way! ■

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