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Feminism Uncovered

RICHARD MEYER ON THE "WACK!" CATALOGUE

A **TECHNICOLOR SEA** of bare-breasted women spills across the cover for the catalogue to "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution," an international survey of women's art from 1965 to 1980 on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles through July 16. Designed by Lorraine Wild, the dust jacket reproduces a large detail from a Vietnam-era photcollage by Martha Rosler titled *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain: Hot House, or Harem*, 1966–72. More than any single work in the exhibition, more perhaps than the exhibition itself, the *WACK!* cover has become a site of interpretive conflict and controversy.

In an otherwise largely positive review of the show, Holland Cotter in the *New York Times* commented that the catalogue jacket "needs rethinking," noting that Martha Rosler's sardonic collage of *Playboy* centerfolds loses its point out of context and turns into just another sex-sells pitch." In *Artnet* magazine, Hunter Drohojowska-Philip quipped "When composed by Martha Rosler, it was a critique of representation. Today, it looks like an advertisement for *The L Word*." Both critics contrast the original context of Rosler's collage with the (allegedly) commercial aims of its reappearance on the jacket of an exhibition catalogue. What was once a critique of pornographic display has become, in their eyes, yet another slick commodification of the radical past. (An unacknowledged irony: The *Artnet* review, titled "Pussy Power," is surrounded by ads for auction houses, commercial galleries, and designs by Diane von Furstenberg.)



Martha Rosler, *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain: Hot House, or Harem*, 1966–72, collage on paper, 20 x 48 1/2".

One feminist art historian told me that the cover sends the wrong message to her students, many of whom already equate female sexual freedom with pole-dancing parties and *Girls Gone Wild* self-abandon. According to MoCA, several of the 119 artists in the show have voiced concerns—and in one case, incredulity—over the cover design.

On WACKsite, an online community forum hosted by the museum, far more comments have been posted about the cover than about any other topic. They range from expressions of dismay ("The women are all young and thin . . . thus reiterating a very narrow notion of beauty") to declarations of empowerment ("I am woman hear me roar! RRRRRRRRRRRRRRR"), from frankly perplexed responses ("I must say I was a bit confused when I first saw the cover") to open-ended, even ethical, questions ("If this image 'seduces' someone into learning more about feminist art, is that a bad thing?"). Both Lorraine Wild and MoCA director of publications Lisa Gabrielle Mark contributed postings on the subject; the latter notes "After looking at over thirty possible covers, we opted for something we expected would provoke discussion on issues fundamental to feminism, and clearly this cover has."

Now, I have a belated confession to make. I am a contributor to the "WACK!" catalogue and an admirer of its jacket design. I like that it cannot be parsed into either a familiar critique of female objectification or a simple reflection of male sexual privilege. Like a peep-show device spinning out of control, *Hot House* exposes too many naked women, too many scenes of seduction and subjection. Its appearance on the cover of *WACK!* recalls the difficulty, but also the pleasures, of explicitly sexual imagery within feminist art of the 1970s. In conjunction with the catalogue's exclamatory title and its smaller print subtitle ("Art and the Feminist Revolution"), Rosler's overflow of female nudes variously suggests a sudden slap or confrontation ("whack"), an act of sexual self-gratification ("whacking off"), and a kind of craziness or sensory overload ("wack job"). The cover challenges our expectations that feminist art will make itself clearly identifiable as such, that it will renounce heterosexual pornography and all other forms of what *Playboy* would call "Entertainment for Men."

As the catalogue cover for an exhibition devoted to "Art and the Feminist Revolution," *Hot House* reminds us that men have no monopoly on desiring women's bodies and that female artists of the

'70s took up a wide range of strategies to confront issues of erotic desire and inequity. Feminist art, in other words, often got a lot hotter than the Emily Dickinson plate in Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*. The sexually forthright works displayed in "WACK!" extend from Joan Semmel's oversize paintings of copulating couples to Cosey Fanni Tutti's illustrated career in British porn, from Tee Corinne's *Cunt Coloring Book* of 1975 to Lynda Benglis's dildo ad in the November 1974 issue of *Artforum*, from Carolee Schneemann's silent sex film *Fuses*, 1964–67, to Barbara Hammer's 16-mm *Multiple Orgasm*, 1976. "WACK!" does not celebrate female sexuality as a space of untrammelled plenitude and power. But it does demonstrate the boldness with which various women artists, both lesbian and straight, claimed explicitly sexual imagery as a viable possibility for feminism.

For all the controversy over *WACK!*'s dust jacket, the historical specificity of *Hot House* has been largely overlooked. Critics allude to the original context of the collage without telling us what that context was. As a result, a key question posed by one of the WACKsite commentators ("Emily") has remained largely unanswered. "What," she asks, "are the differences . . . between how this artwork by Martha Rosler was seen when it was created and now?" In the remainder of this piece, I will try to respond to Emily's question.

Each of the nudes in Rosler's collage originally appeared in *Playboy* magazine issues of the mid- to late '60s and early '70s. They were not centerfold spreads (which would be rather larger in scale) but rather photographs snipped from other pages in the magazine. Rosler told me that she "never bought a single issue" of *Playboy* but instead retrieved copies from the communal trash area in her New York apartment building and, following her move to San Diego in 1968, from local city dumps. Rosler was interested in what she calls the "just past" status of the found magazines. The female nudes she reclaimed had already been discarded by someone else, presumably a man, in favor of those on offer in a more current issue. In its wild proliferation of Playmates, *Hot House* mimics both the mass production of mainstream porn and its built-in disposability as Miss August inevitably gives way to Miss September and, eventually, to the garbage bin or garage sale. (In 1973 Rosler organized an installation/performance/rummage sale at the University of California, San Diego, titled *Monumental Garage Sale*. Among the items available for purchase from the artist were *Playboy* centerfolds.)

The color printing of *Playboy* in the '60s varied so widely that some of the figures in *Hot House* appear to be tinted green or yellow or orange. This "off-color" effect is heightened by the juxtaposition of the women's bared flesh with blue sheets, orange cushions, and pink blankets as well as with the groovy green and orange throw pillows that a couple of the models employ—with strategic inadequacy—to cover themselves.

By the standards of today's hardcore porn—or, for that matter, of John Currin's most recent paintings—*Hot House* appears rather tame. Even as the collage conveys sexual titillation, it does so through the (Vaselined) lens of nostalgia. Notice, for example, the seemingly endless variety of ways in which the models manage to bare their breasts, legs, and buttocks while keeping their genitals hidden, whether through a well-placed bend of the knee, a handy blanket or ruffled bedspread, or, in one case, a head of fabulously long hair. No such gestures of deflection would be necessary after 1971, when *Playboy* started to publish full-frontal photo spreads. The retro modesty of Rosler's nudes, along with their period hairdos, bikini lines, and silicone-free breasts, returns us to an earlier moment in American popular culture.

In contrast to the majority of works in "WACK!," *Hot House* was not exhibited or published at the time of its making. The collage hung for several years above a couch in the artist's San Diego studio and surfaced in reproduction in some of her slide lectures of the '70s. In those lectures, Rosler presented *Hot House* alongside her other photomontages, many of which likewise responded to the status of the female body as sexual commodity. In *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain: Kitchen I or Hot Meat*, 1966–72 (also included in the current exhibition), the artist slapped a photographic fragment of a naked female torso (likely lifted from *Playboy*) against the door of an oven. The resulting image both literalizes and ridicules the alignment of women's bodies with "meat" to be prepared for male pleasure. In related collages, cutouts of breasts and vaginas are pasted incongruously over advertising images of women in wedding gowns, bathing suits, or bras and panties. Through these cut-and-paste interventions, Rosler recharges the original slogans and advertising copy ("Isn't It Nice to Feel Feminine Again?") with a feminist irony verging on rage. Were *Kitchen I* to have appeared on the cover of *WACK!*, the feminist politics of the gesture would have been unmistakable. *Hot House* sends a far less determinate message.

While creating works such as *Hot House* and *Kitchen I*, Rosler also produced a series of collages protesting the Vietnam War, several of which were published in the feminist press or distributed as flyers at antiwar rallies. In these now well-known works (not exhibited in "WACK!"), Rosler introduced the visual traces of guerrilla warfare, napalm attacks, bombings, and military massacres into the mod interiors of fashionable American homes. In doing so, she forced domestic comfort and political cruelty into simultaneous visibility.

Like the "Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain" collages, 1966–72, the antiwar works (later known as "Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful" and "Bringing the War Home: In Vietnam," both 1967–72) were never displayed or sold as art objects in the late '60s or early '70s. According to the artist, "I did not think 'series' when working on these, nor did they actually have titles." The collages functioned as agitprop, whether directed against the subjection of women or the war in Southeast Asia. In one collage, *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful (Playboy: On View)*, 1967–72, Rosler combined the two forms of protest by insinuating a naked *Playboy* model into a group of Vietnamese civilians confronted by American GIs with rifles. By forcing a Playmate into news photographs from Vietnam, the collage draws out the connections between male domination at home and at war,

between private pleasure and public violence. In a related if rather more oblique gesture, Rosler positioned several Asian Playmates in the foreground of *Hot House*, thereby suggesting a link between sexual and military colonization, between an orientalist fantasy of exotic submission and the brute reality of the war in Southeast Asia.

It would take some twenty years for works such as *Hot House* to enter the art market. When they did so, it was in the form of editioned photographs (which is to say, commodities) rather than rough-and-tumble pasteups or agitprop flyers. The feminist and antiwar collages have, in Rosler's words, "migrated from the street to the gallery. . . . They have become art, and in becoming art they no longer 'are' the works I made but rather representations of them."

How, then, are we to understand the representation twice removed that is the cover of the "WACK!" catalogue? What does it mean that a work produced with "no thought of permanence, let alone sales" (in the words of its creator) should resurface thirty-five years later as the dust jacket of a massive, \$59.95 exhibition catalogue? Is the cover a brazen marketing ploy or a brilliant pornotopia? An affront to the legacy of the '70s feminist art or a genuine unraveling of patriarchal pleasure?

As you'll already have guessed, I do not believe that the *WACK!* cover affords any clear resolution to these questions. In attempting to locate the original context for Rosler's collage, I have found instead a work that continually eludes my historicizing grasp, a work whose individual title, series name, exhibition history, circulation, and reemergence as an editioned photograph cannot be securely dated or conceptually stabilized.

In the absence of more concrete information on *Hot House*, it occurred to me that I might consult the magazine that furnished Rosler with her source images. Drawing upon a favorite archival resource (eBay), I sought to match images from back issues of *Playboy* with the women on the cover of *WACK!* Eventually, I found several of the nudes in *Hot House*—including the fully recumbent redhead with an orange pillow in the right midground—in a photo-essay called "The Girls of Rio," published in the February 1966 issue. Part of *Playboy's* ongoing paean to sexual tourism ("The Girls of Tahiti" would follow later that year), the pictorial presents a "cosmopolitan potpourri of infinitely varied . . . emphatically eligible *senhoritas*" against the "lush tropical verdure" of Rio's landscape. Although some of the women appear fully clothed, some topless, and some in the altogether, they never appear with one another. The twenty-eight "Girls of Rio" are set, one by one by one, within the frame of twenty-eight different images. The assignment of each woman to a specific locale—the beach, the mountains, the rain forest, the hotel pool, the botanical gardens—helps promote the fantasy that each is individually and exclusively available to the *Playboy* reader.

Rosler flouts *Playboy's* enforced separation of women. She explodes the visual frames and flimsy narratives that would otherwise divide and organize these female nudes for the male gaze. Stripped of their original contexts (whether Rio beach or Tahitian village, Ivy League campus or English country estate), the women now recline upon, fit up against, and snugly overlay one another. Their seemingly boundless proliferation, their refusal to stay within the prearranged space of male fantasy, creates a new visual and narrative context, a context that is *Hot House*. Rosler's Playmates have been asked to provide "Entertainment for Men" one too many times. In response, they overproduce female submission to the point where it becomes something like its opposite—a wave of naked defiance.

Among the list of donors acknowledged in the "WACK!" catalogue for their "generous support" of the exhibition is the Hugh M. Hefner Foundation. Like Rosler's recycling of *Playboy*, Hefner's patronage of "WACK!" disarms our expectations of feminist art and exhibition. It reminds us that sexuality, politics, and commerce interact unevenly and to unpredictable effect. Like *WACK!'s* cover image, the dialogue between art and the feminist revolution remains an open question, an ongoing struggle, and a site of wild contradiction.

Richard Meyer is Sachs visiting professor, department of history of art, University of Pennsylvania.