

Sex, Art, and Misogyny

Coco Fusco
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Against Our Will: Sexual Trauma in American Art Since 1970

by Vivien Green Fryd

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In 1974 the performance artist Marina Abramovic stood naked and immobile in a Naples gallery. Next to her was a table with seventy-two objects, including a loaded gun. Beside the objects was a document absolving the audience of responsibility for whatever they might choose to do to her with those objects. Freeing the audience from accountability turned the performance into an exposé of their ethics: they became actors in a scenario as well as witnesses of one another's behavior. Some of them made violent gestures toward Abramovic—they were not exclusively sexual, but many were. She endured cuts to her skin as well as what one critic described as intimate caresses and minor sexual assaults before the audience erupted into a fight when a participant put the gun to her head. Interestingly, as soon as Abramovic ceased to be immobile and began to walk toward the people around her, they fled the gallery rather than reckoning with what they had done.



Suzanne Lacy

Suzanne Lacy: Three Weeks in May, Los Angeles, 1977

The performance in Naples, entitled *Rhythm 0*, put sexual aggression toward a female body on display, but Abramovic has never identified herself as a feminist. She is not known for using her art to advocate for political causes—but in this case agit-prop wasn't needed to make a point. Her performance compelled participants to examine their own and others' violent impulses toward a woman. Abramovic created an in-between space, distinct from the activities of "real life" but existing in real time. In a sense she created a trap: by feigning feminine passivity she elicited actions among her audience members that

dramatized an essential human struggle between our attraction to aggression and our desire to adhere to a social contract.

In the 1970s, as the second-wave feminist movement flourished, numerous women artists made their bodies, their sexual desires, and the social conventions that oppressed them the focus of their creative endeavors. The degree to which they saw their art as serving a feminist agenda varied: it wasn't unusual then—nor is it now—for artists to fear that framing their work in political terms would limit how it would be perceived. And even among those identified as feminists, there was no consensus as to what feminist liberation in art was supposed to look like, or what art that sought to achieve women's liberation needed to do.

Satirical tactics in activist performance have often proved to be more politically effective than purely aesthetic expressions of outrage. In 1970 feminist activist and scholar Karla Jay organized “Ogle-Ins,” in which female participants would catcall men walking to work on Wall Street to raise awareness of sexual harassment. The catalyst for these irreverent spectacles was the actual torment suffered by a busty, twenty-one-year-old Wall Street bank employee named Francine Gottfried, whose daily confrontations with thousands of leering guys on her way to work were reported in *New York* magazine—along with her measurements. The comic inversion of a sexist social dynamic captured the attention of reporters, and radio stations gave airtime to the leader of the protest. Women around the country with comparable experiences responded with similar actions, thus launching the first public debate about sexual harassment—the term “street harassment” wasn't coined until 1981—that would eventually lead to US court rulings that recognized quid pro quo sexual harassment at work as discrimination, as well as the establishment of EEOC guidelines for sexual harassment in the workplace, affirmed by the Supreme Court in 1986.

The bawdy humor that characterized the Ogle-Ins was not only used by feminists to force men to confront their mistreatment of women; it also served as an assertion of women's erotic agency. Alta Gerrey, the founder of Shameless Hussy Press and the organizer of a commune for women escaping abuse in the Bay Area, lampooned heterosexual marriage at a Beat poetry reading (she later wrote a volume of lesbian love poems). In the archival footage that shows her reciting before a huge crowd, it's unclear whether she speaks from personal experience, but she delivers her verse with a sly smile:

*I never saw a man in a negligee.
Two times I wore special fucky gowns.
You know the type—
one look and he turns off the football game.
But they never do.
And I was so busy being dainty and smelling fresh*

*I couldn't hump, couldn't wiggle,
couldn't sweat, couldn't scream.
You know damn well I couldn't come.*

Although some feminists have argued that the hypersexualization of women in visual culture is central to their subjugation, many women artists in the 1970s considered their celebrations of sensuality and explorations of sexual desire to be expressions of power. Carolee Schneemann paved the way for this approach in the 1960s with works like *Meat Joy*, in which a group of scantily dressed performers engaged in sensual play while covered in raw meat and paint. Barbara Hammer's film *Dyketactics* (1974) combined sequences of a group of nude women dancing, bathing, and touching with scenes featuring Hammer herself engaged in lesbian sex. The Bay Area author Pat (now Patrick) Califia cofounded Samois, the first lesbian BDSM group, in 1978, published the first book on lesbian butch-femme sexuality in 1980, and contributed to a burgeoning world of female-centered erotic literature.

Around the same time on the East Coast, Joan Semmel was painting naked heterosexual couples during and after lovemaking. Judith Bernstein had started creating in 1969 her giant-sized biomorphic screw drawings that symbolized excessive patriarchal power, and one of those pieces was censored as pornographic from a Focus show in Philadelphia entitled "Women's Work: American Art 1974." These women's full-frontal treatment of sex met with opprobrium then and to this day remains unsettling for most art institutions, as well as for those feminists who see it as a distraction from oppressive realities. Feminists remain divided as to whether feminist art should shine a light on gendered oppression or whether it can envision sexuality as a domain that upends such constraints.

Two recent social movements, Black Lives Matter and Me Too, have focused on the persistence of systemic violence in American society and the culture of impunity that protects perpetrators who kill unarmed black men as well as those who sexually abuse women. These movements have drawn attention to men whose power usually shields them from scrutiny—the most notable among the accused come from law enforcement, politics, and the culture industry. The movements have also generated a good deal of soul-searching on the part of those who have turned a blind eye to wrongdoing or shielded colleagues and superiors for fear of reprisal. Many of the high-profile Me Too cases have involved well-known art world figures, which has catalyzed multiple demands for retribution from feminist arts professionals, institutional commitments to exhibit more women artists, and renewed attention from art critics and journalists to the placement and pricing of women's art. Me Too has also contributed to a reconsideration of the anti-porn feminist Andrea Dworkin, who is infamous for calling heterosexual sex itself an expression of male contempt for women. It's not Dworkin's ill-fated efforts to ban pornography but her

articulate rage about women's sexual subjection that suits the current moment of feminist indignation.

Vivien Green Fryd's new book, *Against Our Will: Sexual Trauma in American Art Since 1970*, arrives at this historical moment to offer an overview of American feminist artists' treatment of rape. Fryd takes the first part of her title from Susan Brownmiller's best-selling *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975), which called for a redefinition of rape as a political crime against women. Although some readers criticized the book for its comparisons of rape with lynching, Brownmiller's argument that rape was an instrument of oppression against all women and that Freudian psychoanalysis had unjustly discredited women's accounts of rape (by presuming them to be fantasies) helped to change laws relating to sex crimes. Rape shield laws were adopted in the late 1970s to prohibit the admission of evidence of or the questioning of rape complainants about their past sexual behavior.

Similarly, Fryd concentrates on feminist art that foregrounds the pervasiveness of rape, proposing that such art should be valued for its capacity to empower survivors and enhance public awareness. She focuses on how the experience of the survivor rather than the action of the perpetrator is represented in art and how it affects viewers. Her study is partly sociological, looking at the relationship between feminist art projects and feminist political activism, and charting their impact on public debates and legislation on sexual harassment and abuse.

What is most unusual for an art historical study, however, is that Fryd applies "trauma theory" both to discussions of audience engagement and to her analysis of feminist artworks themselves. Whereas trauma is medically defined as a psychological or emotional response to deeply disturbing experiences for individuals, cultural theorists since at least the 1990s have expanded trauma theory to embrace collective responses to large-scale catastrophic events such as war and slavery, the ethics of witnessing, and the symbolic representations of trauma in literature and film. Those theorists have explored the ways that literature and film represent the psychic disjunctures of trauma as well as its impact on readers and viewers, who are enlisted as ethical witnesses of unspeakable acts. Fryd's approach differs slightly from this tradition because she concentrates on the curative power of feminist art for survivors. She wants us to look at art as a practice that enables survivors to "work through" and thereby resolve the kind of suffering that the feminist movement named and politicized. Of the artists in her study, she claims:

Their shared outrage over the topic of sexual violence against women heretofore has not been recognized. I use trauma theory to shed light on what motivated them to speak the unspeakable and to make public the crimes of rape, incest, and domestic violence.

Fryd notes at the outset that the feminist artworks she considers have never been analyzed from this perspective. Her use of trauma theory leads her to concentrate on four basic themes: feminist art's reliance on personal testimony, the imperative of many feminist artists to replace disinterested viewing with ethical witnessing, parallels between psychic manifestations of trauma and the formal structures of artworks, and finally the therapeutic value to participants as a measure of the worth of feminist art. Fryd emphatically privileges ethical over aesthetic questions:

I contend that artworks, installations, and exhibitions establish repetitive traumatic sites, representations, and stories that surround, involve, and challenge the viewer to witness, acknowledge, and remember sexual trauma. Rather than aestheticize and neutralize this violent subject matter, these artists instead expose it as a traumatizing experience. Their sustained and strategic preoccupation with and critique of sexual violence against the body—mostly female but sometimes also male—indicates a radical turn from earlier European and American works in which rape and representation collide.

Fryd devotes most of her attention to well-known female artists, most of whom have been considered in the vanguard of feminist art since the 1970s. She provides detailed accounts of the media interventions and street performances that Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz carried out in Los Angeles highlighting a culture of impunity around sex crimes and the media's sensationalizing of rapists, as well as the more intimate art events they organized that incorporated survivor testimony. In 1977 Lacy embarked on *Three Weeks in May*, a multifaceted performance-driven project that included ritualized public mourning on the steps of LA's City Hall, marks on sidewalks revealing them as sex crime sites, and maps in city offices and malls that displayed the pervasive presence of unsolved rape crimes in the city. These activities in public spaces coincided with a gallery show in which participants were invited to share their own experiences of sexual violation and read the testimonies of others. Fryd's treatment of Lacy and Labowitz is the most thorough investigation I've read into how these artists fused personal histories and political activism in their work.

She also offers the most extensive interpretation I've come across of Faith Ringgold's *Slave Rape* quilt series, as a reckoning with histories of collective trauma that distinguish black women's experiences of subjection during slavery and beyond. Beginning in the 1970s, Ringgold adapted quilting techniques developed by slaves to create her own narrative tableaux, combining image and text, that depict black women with weapons in hand, prepared to defend themselves against white men who sought to capture and/or violate them. Her series also includes stories of young black women who were raped by black men and forced to remain silent, bear their children, and even marry their rapists.

Fryd also considers less famous projects, such as a 1985 group exhibition about rape at Ohio State University, and others facilitated more recently by Judy Chicago, whose pioneering pedagogy gave rise to the legendary Feminist Studio Workshop in 1973. Not surprisingly, to support her assertion that sexual trauma is a persistent undercurrent in feminist art, Fryd ends by discussing the young artist and activist Emma Sulkowicz, who in the fall of 2014 renewed a public debate about rape on campus by carrying a mattress—symbolizing the burden that rape survivors must live with—around Columbia University throughout her senior year.

Fryd also devotes an entire chapter to Kara Walker, which feels like an odd choice. Walker’s artworks depict eroticized aggression, but she is not known to identify as a feminist or to conceive of her practice as a form of redress. On the contrary, Walker has built a career by defying the political mandates of the black art movements of the 1970s, which sought to uplift the race with positive images of African-Americans and condemnations of racism. In one of her most frequently quoted statements, she says that her work “makes people queasy. And I like that queasy feeling.” It’s at this point that Fryd’s critical method hits an impasse, for Walker’s blend of sadomasochistic fantasy, silhouetted evocations of antebellum history, and postmodern irony resists Fryd’s quest to champion art that resolves sexual trauma. Fryd refers to Walker’s work as “troubling” for its ambiguity and locked in “hopeless and helpless repetition of trauma among individuals and generations.” There doesn’t seem to be room in her interpretation to acknowledge that Walker’s sardonic approach to historical tragedy has catalyzed discussions about collective memory and our lingering attraction to scenes of subjection.

Among the other notable artists discussed are Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneemann, and Yoko Ono, but Fryd’s focus leads to interpretations of their works that feel strained. Known for her iconoclastic celebration of erotic energy—her hand-painted experimental film *Fuses* (1965) features the artist having sex with her partner—Schneemann seems somewhat out of place in a study devoted to art about sexual subjugation. Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1964)—in which she instructed audience members to cut her clothes off while she remained immobile in a kneeling position—has been read as an indirect reference to the Vietnam War and the bombing of Hiroshima, an experiment in participatory performance



Faith Ringgold/ACA Galleries, New York/© 2019 Faith Ringgold/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York

Faith Ringgold: Slave Rape Series #13: Fight to Save Your Life (detail), 1973

that challenged the neutrality of the viewer, and an exploration of female vulnerability. In Fryd's book it becomes a performance about "victim and assailant, sadism and masochism," one that she deems "disturbing." She wants us to understand Ono's impassivity during the performance as an enactment of traumatic disassociation, even though performance artists since the 1960s have rendered their bodies inert in order to emphasize their status as objects and to allude to the history of the nude in classical art. Wilke's *S.O.S.-Starification Object Series* (1974–1982)—photographic self-portraits replete with references to the ways that female bodies are objectified—"may covertly allude to sexual violence." At several points, Fryd's study suffers from an inclination to reduce artistic intent to autobiography and to subsume ambiguous visual metaphors into a single anti-rape story line.

Fryd acknowledges that some of the artists she discusses were more self-consciously invested than others in using their art to heal and raise awareness, and she also makes room in her argument for the experiences of male children and adults. But she seems to value artworks only insofar as they confirm the ubiquity of sexual trauma and does not consider the other ways women artists dealt with sexuality that have been at least equally important to feminist cultural practice since the 1970s. There is nothing inherently wrong with focusing on only one approach to a subject in an art historical study, but the political critique of rape and pornography was part of broader feminist concerns about women's health and women's sexuality, and for many feminist artists the exploration of erotic agency was as important as the attention they gave to their sexual subordination.

The strongest element of *Against Our Will* is its detailed account of the public discussions of rape and pornography that feminists launched in the 1970s. Fryd marshals historical data quite effectively to show how feminists forced the rest of society to see that widespread sexual aggression was being concealed by patriarchal views of women masquerading as absolute truths. She demonstrates that feminist activism and the art that was part of it helped to liberate women by creating a space and a vocabulary for them to express themselves, while also contributing to seismic shifts in the field of psychology and in popular culture. Without those efforts, it's doubtful that today we would pay as much attention as we do to domestic violence, child abuse, incest, sexual violence in prisons, or sexual predators in the Catholic Church. It's also unlikely that the Supreme Court would have interpreted the Title IX anti-discrimination law as forcing colleges to respond effectively to claims of sexual harassment. And it would not be possible for women to sue and secure substantial settlements for sexual harassment in the workplace.

Having myself been an impulsive teenager during the 1970s, one who was more interested in sexual liberation than my personal safety, I find it sobering to recall the misogyny that second-wave feminists faced. Anyone who doesn't know where the Me Too slogan "Believe women!" comes from should be reminded that until recently, health

professionals and law enforcement systematically mistrusted women's accounts of sexual violation and refused to consider that incest might be widespread among the middle and upper classes. As I read Fryd's book, I also found it disturbing to realize that while I studied both feminism and Freud's psychoanalytic theories in college in the late 1970s and 1980s, I can't recall learning that the father of psychoanalysis had retracted his original assertion that female hysteria was the result of actual sexual trauma because his colleagues deemed that hypothesis socially unacceptable. But I don't think that Freud's suppression of his original views about incest and hysteria should become grounds for dismissing his investigations of fantasy, and Fryd's argument suggests that her readers do so. Many feminist artists have been inspired by Freud's understanding of the symbolism of dreams and the workings of the psyche, even though others have recognized that he succumbed to political pressures and censored truths about women's sexual oppression.

I would also argue that there is a highly relevant issue regarding rape, women, and truthfulness that Fryd does not touch upon. While she discusses black women artists' efforts to foreground the sexual violation of black women during slavery, she says nothing about the also tragic history of false accusations by white women that they were raped by black men during slavery and segregation. White women's complicity with these falsehoods may have been coerced at times, but not always, and even today the ghosts of that past return in numerous deceptive claims against black men. While this history does not invalidate the feminist demands that we "believe women," it does reveal how American society has exploited a patriarchal obsession with racial and female sexual purity by casting interracial sex between black men and white women as a violation. An excellent arena in which to consider these tensions is erotica and pornography, which have delved deeply into our culture's secret obsession with interracial sex even when mainstream art and culture avoided it. But Fryd's strictly anti-porn views leave this important subject out of bounds.

Art that considers our capacity to commit acts of violence presents a special set of challenges for those who create art as well as for those who view and interpret it. The distinction between ethics and aesthetics, which many believe should be clearly defined, becomes more difficult to delineate. To be uninterested in a style of painting, for example, may reveal a cultural bias, but it might also be an educated assessment of craft. To be indifferent to artistic depictions of horrific acts, or evidence of grave injustices, may speak of a moral failure to appreciate the suffering of others. We should be able to recognize the difference between the fact that a terrible thing happened and its rendering in art, but in moments of political urgency it can be tempting to let that distinction collapse. Fryd strives to give a particular kind of feminist art its due, which in itself is not a bad thing, but that singularity of purpose leads to questionable conclusions.
