

Feminist Art Finally Takes Center Stage

By HOLLAND COTTER
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"Well, this is quite a turnout for an 'ism,'" said the art historian and critic Lucy Lippard on Friday morning as she looked out at the people filling the Roy and Niuta Titus Theater at the Museum of Modern Art and spilling into the aisles. "Especially in a museum not notorious for its historical support of women."

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Ruby Washington/The New York Times
The artist Coco Fusco, in combat fatigues, addressing the symposium.

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Ruby Washington/The New York Times
The critic Lucy Lippard, left, spoke with members of the audience.

Ms. Lippard, now in her 70s, was a keynote speaker for a two-day symposium organized by the museum that was titled "The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts." The event itself was an unofficial curtain-raiser for what is shaping up as a watershed year for the exhibition — and institutionalization, skeptics say — of feminist art.

For the first time in its history this art will be given full-dress museum survey treatment, and not in just one major show but in two. On March 4 "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution" opens at the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in Los Angeles, followed on March 23 by "Global Feminisms" at the [Brooklyn Museum](#). (On the same day the Brooklyn Museum will officially open its new Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art and a permanent gallery for "The Dinner Party," Judy Chicago's seminal proto-feminist work.)

Such long-withheld recognition has been awaited with a mixture of resignation and impatient resentment. Everyone knows that our big museums are our most conservative cultural institutions. And feminism, routinely mocked by the public media for 35 years as indissolubly linked with radicalism and bad art, has been a hard sell.

But curators and critics have increasingly come to see that feminism has generated the most influential art impulses of the late 20th and early 21st century. There is almost no new work that has not in some way been shaped by it. When you look at [Matthew Barney](#), you're basically seeing pilfered elements of feminist art, unacknowledged as such.

The [MoMA](#) symposium was sold out weeks in advance. Ms. Lippard and the art historian Linda Nochlin appeared, like tutelary deities, at the beginning and end respectively; in between came panels with about 20 speakers. The audience was made up almost entirely of women, among them many veterans of the women's art movement of the 1970s and a healthy sprinkling of younger students, artists and scholars. It was clear that people were hungry to hear about and think about feminist art, whatever that once was, is now or might be.

What it once was was relatively easy to grasp. Ms. Lippard spun out an impressionistic account of its complex history, as projected images of art by women streamed across the screen behind her, telling an amazing story of their own. She concluded by saying that the big contribution of feminist art "was to *not* make a contribution to Modernism." It rejected Modernism's exclusionary values and authoritarian certainties for an art of openness, ambiguity, reciprocity and what another speaker, Griselda Pollock, called "ethical hospitality," features now identified with Postmodernism.

But feminism was never as embracing and accessible as it wanted to be. Early on, some feminists had a problem with the "lavender menace" of lesbianism. The racial divide within feminism has never been resolved and still isn't, even as feminism casts itself more and more on a globalist model.

The MoMA audience was almost entirely white. Only one panelist, the young Kenyan-born artist Wangechi Mutu, was black. And the renowned critic Geeta Kapur from Delhi had to represent, by

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default, all of Asia. "I feel like I'm gate-crashing a reunion," Ms. Mutu joked as she began to speak, and she wasn't wrong.

At the same time one of feminism's great strengths has been a capacity for self-criticism and self-correction. Yet atmospherically the symposium was a very MoMA event, polished, well executed, well mannered, even cozy. A good half of the talks came across as more soothing than agitating, suitable for any occasion rather than tailored to one onto which, I sensed, intense personal, political and historical hopes had been pinned.

Still, there was some agitation, and it came with the first panel, "Activism/Race/Geopolitics," in a performance by the New York artist Coco Fusco. Ms. Fusco strode to the podium in combat fatigues and, like a major instructing her troops, began lecturing on the creative ways in which women could use sex as a torture tactic on terrorist suspects, specifically on Islamic prisoners.

The performance was scarily funny as a send-up of feminism's much-maligned sexual "essentialism." But its obvious references to Abu Ghraib, where women were victimizers, was telling.

In the context of a mild-mannered symposium and proposed visions of a "feminist future" that saw collegial tolerance and generosity as solutions to a harsh world, Ms. Fusco made the point that, at least in the present, women are every bit as responsible for that harshness — for what goes on in Iraq for example — as anyone.

Ms. Kapur's talk was also topical, but within the framework of India. It is often said that the activist art found in early Western feminism and now adopted by artists in India, Africa and elsewhere has lost its pertinence in its place of origin. Yet in presenting work by two Indian artists, Rummana Hussain (1952-1999) and Navjot Altaf (born in 1949), Ms. Kapur made it clear that they have at least as much to teach to the so-called West as the other way around.

Ms. Hussain, a religious secularist, used images from her Muslim background as a critical response to sectarian violence; Ms. Altaf (known as Navjot), though based in Mumbai, produces art collaboratively with tribal women who live difficult lives in rural India.

Collaborative or collective work of the kind Navjot does has grown in popularity in the United States and Europe in the past few years. And several of the symposium's panelists — Ms. Lippard, the Guerrilla Girls, Carrie Lambert-Beatty, Catherine de Zegher — referred to it as a potential way for feminist art to avoid being devoured and devitalized by an omnivorous art market.

It was Ms. Fusco again who brought utopian dreams to earth. While sympathetic to the idea of collective work as an alternative to the salable lone-genius model, she suggested that the merchandising of art is at present so encompassing, and the art industry so fundamentally corrupted by it, that even collectives tend to end up adhering to a corporate model.

The power of the market, which pushes a few careers and throws the rest out — the very story of feminist art's neglect — was the invisible subtext to the entire symposium. It was barely addressed, however, nor was the reality that the canonization of feminist art by museums would probably suppress everything that had made the art radical. Certainly no solutions for either problem was advanced, except one, incidentally, by Connie Butler, MoMa's drawings curator, who is also the curator of the Los Angeles show.

In her panel talk she said that when she was agonizing over what choices of work to make for the "Wack!" exhibition, the art historian Moira Roth suggested, brilliantly, that she just eliminate objects altogether. Instead, Ms. Roth said, why not invite all the artists who made them to come the museum for a group-consciousness-raising session, film the session, and then make the film the show?

Somewhat unexpectedly, signs of a raised consciousness were evident among young people in the MoMA audience, the kind of people we are told either have no knowledge of feminism or outright reject it. In the question-and-answer sessions after each panel, the most passionate, probing and agitating questions and statements came from young women who identified themselves as students or artists.



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When they spoke; when Richard Meyer, a gay art historian, spoke about queer feminism; and when Ms. Mutu ended her presentation by simply reading aloud a long list of curators, scholars and artists — all of them women, all of them black — who, could and should have been at the MoMA symposium, I had a sense that a feminist future was, if not secure, at least under vigilant consideration.

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