

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cottingham, Laura. "The Feminine De-Mystique." *Flash Art*. 1989. P. 91-95.

THE FEMININE DE-MYSTIQUE

GENDER, POWER, IRONY, AND
AESTHETICIZED FEMINISM IN '80S ART.

LAURA COTTINGHAM

"Because I'm convinced that there are whole areas of me made by the kind of experience women haven't had before. . . ."
—"Anna" in *The Golden Notebook*, Doris Lessing, 1962.

"Women want to please . . . women make pleasing art."
—Lynda Benglis, "Unskirting the Issue," *Artforum*, Spring 1984.

"For me and my position as a woman, it is difficult, as women have, historically, always been left out."
—Rosemarie Trockel, Interview, *Flash Art*, May 1987.

In the mid to late seventies, the conscious incorporation of a feminist understanding into art characterized a movement within the United States and Western Europe. Artists such as Joan Snyder, Marisol, Ree Morton, Miriam Schapiro, Suzanne Lacy, Joan Mitchell, Nancy Graves, Eva Hesse, Ana Mendieta, Yvonne Rainer, May Stevens, Lynda Benglis, and Judy Chicago attempted to artistically work-through the political dialogue that was taking place in student unions, marriages, and public demonstrations. Like so much "political art," the work frequently suffered from didacticism, none more so than the most grandiose signature piece of the period, Chicago's *Dinner Party*.¹ Although this brief era of recent art history is frequently mocked or overlooked,² today's women artists are significantly indebted to the intellectual contributions and social transformation brought about by new wave feminism (1968-74). Political organizing by seventies feminists, some of whom were artists, created significant changes in law, customs and attitudes, and established a climate more favorable to all forms of self-development in women.³ Most 20th-century women's fiction documents the specificities of female alienation. But women were accepted as novelists seventy-five years before their admission to art academies and artist careers, and a strong feminist voice in the plastic arts is still emerging. Today's women artists share a historical legacy extremely dependent on the recent past—and uniquely distinct from their male counterparts. This feminist per-



JENNY HOLZER, FROM "THE SURVIVAL SERIES," 1987.
INSTALLATION AT CANDLESTICK PARK SPONSORED BY ART SPACE, SAN FRANCISCO

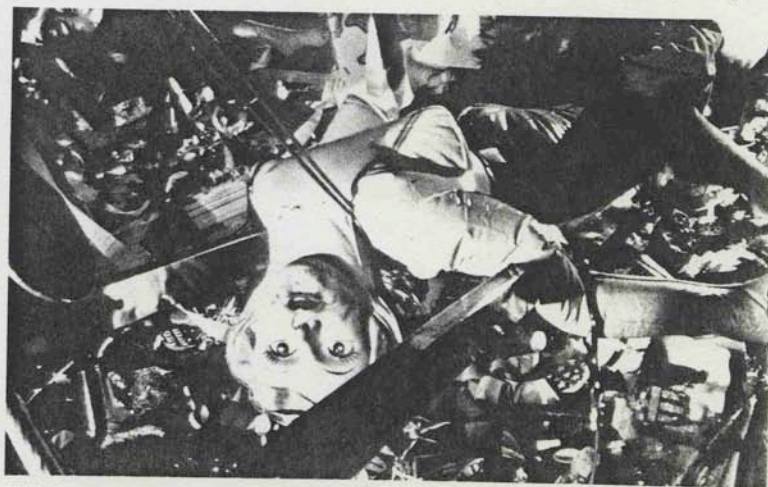
spective runs through much of eighties art, and especially late eighties avant-garde work by New York and West German woman artists.

The fundamental premise of the '68-'74 Woman's Liberation Movements, that "the personal is political," disclosed a belief in the political ramifications that surround every action that occurs in daily living. Built on the late 19th-century contributions of the suffragists, second wave feminism incorporated theoretical understandings gleaned from Marxism and the Frankfurt School, and points of political praxis taken from the civil rights and Viet Nam struggles in the U.S., and the contemporaneous student rebellions in Europe. Second wave Ameri-

can feminism recognized the implicit force of ideology, that there is no power as strong as that which we cannot see, as that which we obey because we think we want to, as that which is mystified. Feminism's second generation of artists are more likely to address power, ideology, and mystification in their work, because they are women and, unlike men, not obvious heirs to dominant traditions.

The feminist influence on current art practice is most visible in art termed post-modernist, where the deconstructivist mode—situated as a pluralist critique—accepts the use of social theory when it is aestheticized according to the signifiers of fine art practice. The new feminist art, like its seventies predecessors and its postmodernist contemporaries, is less likely to be a painting and more likely to be executed in media such as photography, installation, or other parameters of visual expression specifically located in the 20th century.

The painting, like the naked woman it frequently images, is one of the most highly prized commodities of our time: wealthy men collect both. On the art market, the medium continues to demand the highest prices overall; the three record prices for a single artwork all belong to painting—specifically, two works by Van Gogh, and one by Picasso. And painting, like patri-



CINDY SHERMAN, UNTITLED, 1989.
COLOR PHOTO, EDITION OF 6, 45 1/4" x 67". COURTESY METRO PICTURES, NY.

Flash Art 91

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archy, remains dominant. Although women artists in the U.S. and Europe are indeed coming of age—even into some positions of privileged visibility across the gender barrier, such as the U.S. Pavilion at the 1992 Venice Biennale and the Mary Boone Gallery—painting still belongs to the boys. During this decade, where quite a few women artists achieved visible careers as painters (Susan Rothenberg, Jennifer Bartlett, Elizabeth Murray), none achieved the high critical or market status of, in New York for example, Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Eric Fischl, Ross Bleckner, or Leon Golub.

The exclusion of women from painting's most privileged sphere is accompanied by the challenge to painting implicit in so much postmodernist work. Or is it simply "the choice" of so many women artists to work in alternative media, especially in photography and installation. The challenge to traditional definitions of fine art—especially the primacy of painting—influenced early feminist art, when earth works, body-based art, performance, conceptualism, quilts, and pottery dominated much of sixties and seventies art. Though still resisting painting and the assumptions of originality and commodification that surround it, a different aesthetic distance is evident in today's art that reflects feminist concerns.

The art is simply more aestheticized, rendering it, at one level, more readable to an art literate audience and, on another level, less antagonistic to (the same) patriarchally-informed audience. Seventies feminist art was rough, nature-based, funky and, in its most explicit forms, didactic, pointed, and overtly "political." Eighties feminist art is more elegant, streamlined, and less politically directed.⁴ Irony and the subordination of feminist ideology to technical concerns are the most common tools of this aestheticization.

The work of Rebecca Horn, Jenny Holzer, Rosemarie Trockel, Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Louise Lawler, Annette Lemieux, Katharina Fritsch and numerous others⁵ follows within this continuum. Some of the art manifests feminism directly, through a confrontation with gender; other expressions subsume gender within a confrontation with power. For all of these artists, a feminist reading is not the only possible reading, but a reading too frequently eclipsed within the dominant discourse, which favors the so-called sublime, or a form of gender-blind (frequently Baudrillardian) postmodernism, or simply isn't interested in feminism.⁶

The knowledge of patriarchy's lies and injustices without the possibility of living free of them can only create in women a schizophrenic relationship to a culture where "man" is assumed a universal for human but women have a lived experience that announces our difference. Statements directed toward recognizing women's dis-



SHERRIE LEVINE, UNTITLED (AFTER EGON SCHIELE), 1985. PENCIL, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 14" x 11". COURTESY MARY BOONE GALLERY, NY.

cordant place in a male-defined world are put forth in Barbara Kruger's *Untitled (I Shop Therefore I Am)*, 1987, a photograph of a woman's hand holding a credit card reading "I Shop . . .", and Rosemarie Trockel's *Cogito, Ergo Sum*, 1987, a machine-knit canvas with "Cogito . . ." scrawled in shaky cursive penmanship across the center. Both works challenge the universality of the most oft-quoted line in continental philosophy, René Descartes' "I think therefore I am," and question the authority of modern philosophy, of which Descartes is considered the founder. Kruger's sly comment on metaphysics empathetically confronts the position of bourgeois women whose career it is to shop; at the same time, she's critiquing that lifetime spent in department stores. Trockel mock's the confidence inherent in Descartes' proclamation when she reproduces it in schizophrenic script; using the original Latin construction serves to heighten the distance between the words and their speaker. The subtle gibes and ambiguous insertion of a female presence in these two works are indicative of the subversive voice that resounds through contemporary art by women.

Although seldom explicitly, women artists have created something of an independent ontology. On the most visible level, the new ontology expresses itself in gender-specific symbols and words: Rosemarie Trockel's kitchen appliances and fabrics; Rebecca Horn's eggs; Katharina Fritsch's Madonnas; Cindy Sherman's housewives and starlets; Sherrie Levine's "male artist" appropriations; Annette Lemieux's "Mother"; Barbara Kruger's and Jenny Holzer's

gender-based conundrums. Less obviously textual, but equally emphatic, is the particular language of this new ontology: for these women artists, the dialogue is usually conducted on the level of irony.

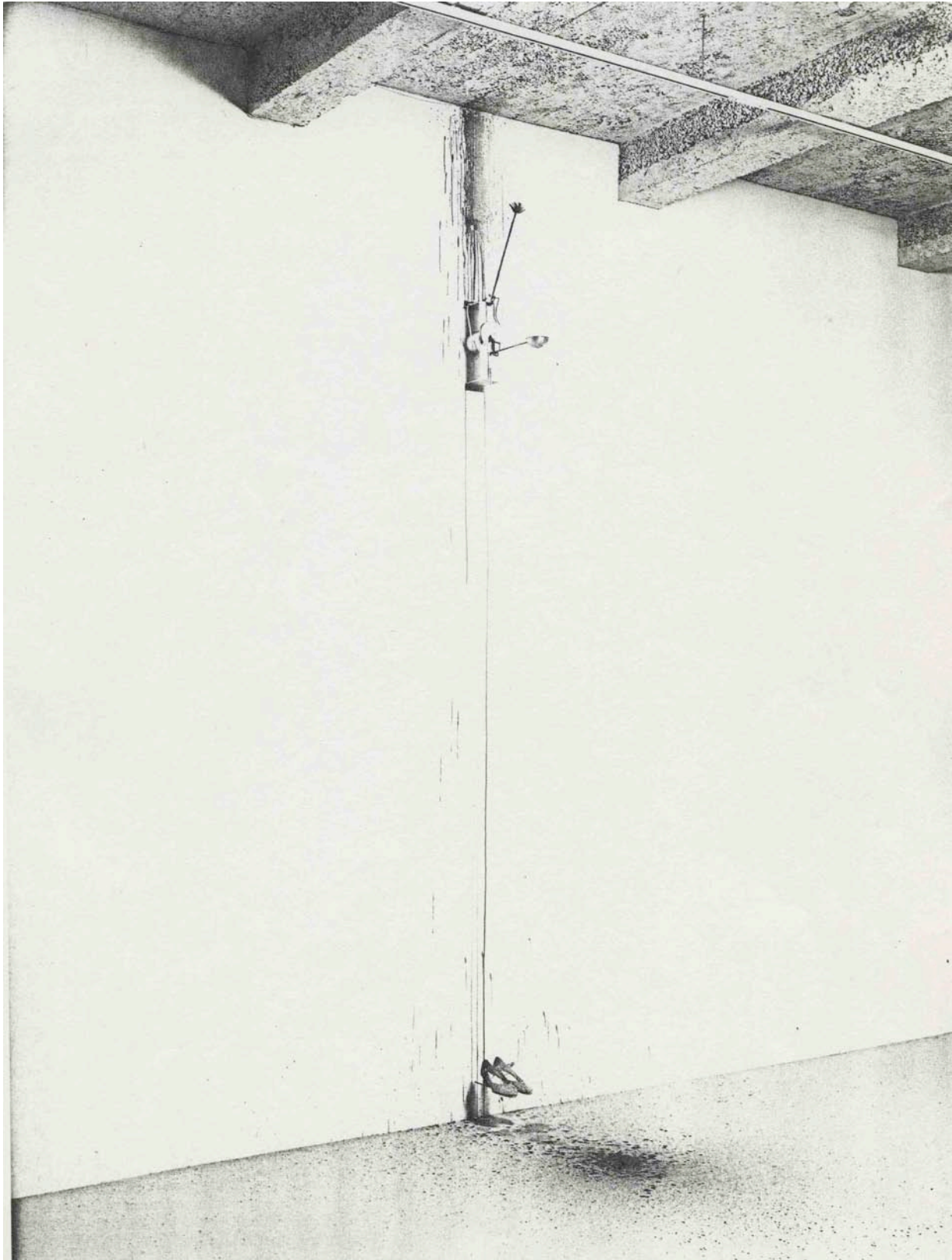
Irony is all-pervasive in eighties American culture, from television to advertising to fine art. A glib smile seems to have descended upon viewers and artworks everywhere, a climate created by advertising's need to debase any beliefs that don't worship the dollar, and a corresponding depoliticization by some post-structuralist theorists, such as Derrida, for whom all value systems (and thus, all politics) are insistently reduced to relativism. When all perspectives are granted equal weight, only irony can tip the balance in the subject's (either narrator/artist or viewer) favor. In eighties art, especially that coming out of New York, an ironic posture is struck, even ordained, by the irony-laden legacies of Duchamp and Warhol, the influence of deconstructivist theory, and the celebration (through reproduction) of advertising imagery and techniques. Jeff Koons' most recent exhibition of over-sized knick-knacks in porcelain, wood, and glass demonstrates the logical outcome of the ironic disposition: consumer fetishism masquerading as camp. Whereas irony once expressed the sly stance of the marginal, the indirect disagreement of the critical,⁷ it has become, with its mass popularity in the late 20th century, the reactionary acquiescence of a majority.

Still, the power of irony hasn't been absolutely co-opted; situated within a self-conscious context, it can still effectively expose the false, undermine the expected. To avoid impotence, any use of irony within today's pan-ironic temperament must necessarily be mindful of its direction and avoid the easy seduction of total disillusionment. A glib, sardonic stance placed Warhol against the self-importance of abstract expressionists, but in today's climate it simply sets up artists like Jeff Koons, rendering their work seamless within Madison Avenue's telegenic frame. If, however, an ironic stance is reinforced by the specificity of its direction and the clarity of its aim, it escapes collapsing into an ineffectual smirk.

Louise Lawler and Sherrie Levine position themselves against the power of art history and the control of that particular history by collectors and institutions. Levine's comment on the (art) historical entrenchment of the present holds a gender-conscious spin: her reproductions of prior artworks are all works originally conceived by male artists. With *Untitled (After Egon Schiele)*, 1984, and others, Levine fulfilled the art world's demand for "images of male desire" but, as she says, "because I'm a woman, those images became a woman's work."⁸ Her more recent work, from 1984-87, of checkerboard patterns, gold paint on virgin wood, and bold stripes challenges

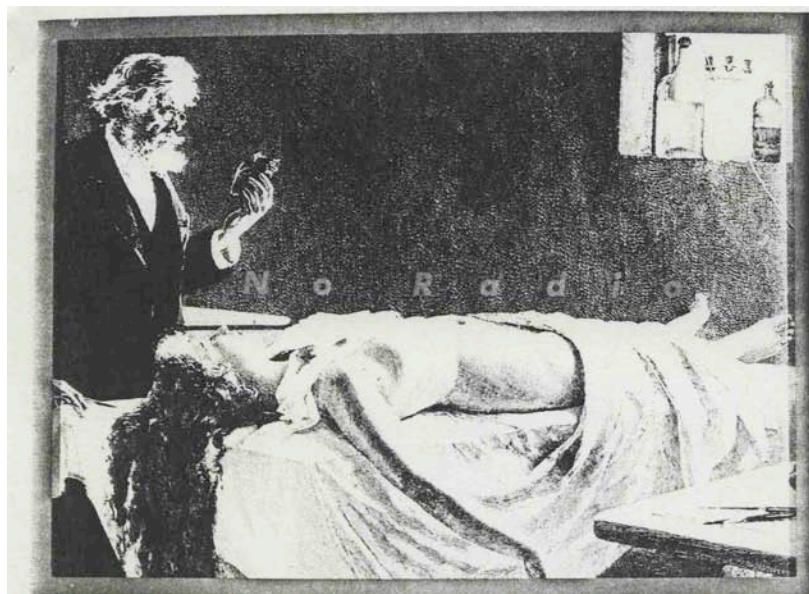
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BARBARA KRUGER, UNTITLED (NO RADIO), 1988.
PHOTOGRAPHY, 51 1/2" x 68 1/2". COURTESY MARY BOONE GALLERY, NY.

again, the mystified notion of originality and painting's worship of the grand male gesture.

Like Levine, Lawler wants to make us conscious of art's historicization and the institution's so-called "personal" and political that determine that history. In her 1983 *Patriarchal Role Call*, she recorded a series of male artists' proper names, deliberately contorting the sounds into an almost unrecognizable "bird" call, calling into question the subjective resonance and power a recognizable (male) name carries in the history and market for art. The six photographs shown as part of Lawler's *Metro Pictures* show in 1987 forefronted the function of art as a commodity exchange and status conveyor. In *Bought in Paris, New York, Switzerland or Tokyo*, 1986, the complicated provenance of a Frank Stella painting is followed through five captions under five identical reproductions of a photograph of the Stella hung in a posh interior. If such universally acknowledged "great" art is so easily possessed, so readily adaptable to Bloomingdale's bedsheets, then wherein lies its power?

For the artists who work directly with words, such as Kruger and Holzer, the irony is Socratic; interrogation, guised within a pretense of ignorance, attempts to identify and illuminate falsehoods. Although presented and punctuated as statements, Kruger's verbal manipulations of clichés and Holzer's authoritarian-like truisms, are actually questions. Both artists appropriate discourse, selecting from various voices and sources, and then presenting their chosen phrasologies in a direct, seemingly unmitigated way. The apparent monotone of the voice, expressed visually in

uniform lettering and simple sentence construction, is the basis for an ironic interpretation.

In Kruger's *Untitled (What big muscles you have)*, 1986, "What Big Muscles you have!" foregrounds a list of first-person possessive, male encoded titles: "My chairman... My Rambo... My sugar daddy... My pope... My ayatollah..." Although the statement "What big..." is presented as an exclamation, it functions as a question challenging the social and political power men hold. Through the allusion to biceps, Kruger provides the viewer with a humorous entrance to her text, an entrance that brings all her words into a challenging focus. In *Untitled (We Don't Need Another Hero)*, 1987, Kruger's words (taken from Tina Turner's pop hit of the previous year) challenge how men are determined saviors, rescuers, the necessary actors in times of need; it's impossible to imagine Kruger substituting "Heroine" for "Hero."

Holzer's "Truisms" (1977-79), a list of statements, clichéd and other, establish a questioning context because the phrases call out from so many different perspectives. Presented as a simple list, with each comment set in uniform, all-cap, sans serif, bold-face lettering, the seemingly homogeneous enumeration falls into disharmony and contradiction as soon as the statements are read. The lead line, "Abuse Of Power Comes As No Surprise," is followed with statements such as "Humanism Is Obsolete," "Morals Are For Little People," and "Romantic Love Was Invented to Manipulate Women." Together, Holzer's "Truisms" form an attack on the various, and frequently divergent idioms that people

employ in the commonplace of conversation or the conscious manipulations of social policy.

A mild, sometimes arch, melancholia runs through much of Annette Lemieux's work, but a feminist gloss coats many of the potentially nostalgic renderings. In *Father Knows Best*, 1987, a polka dot fabric covers the cushion of a Christian kneeler, the bright dots mocking the authority of both "fathers"—the ecumenical and the familial; the title referring to a popular fifties, father-central, family TV show. In *Mon Amour*, 1987, the juxtaposition of two black and white fifties-style photos—one, of dead war victims, the other, of bathing-suited women on the beach—points to the parallel objectifications involved in the designations of "enemy" and "women."

In Cindy Sherman's photographs, female objectification becomes both the subject and the object. The early film stills (1977-81) call attention to the narcissism implicit in femininity. The more recent work, from 1987, of grotesque still lifes and exaggerated body parts, frequently points to specifically female compulsions, such as anorexia, bulimia, cosmetics, and birth control devices.

The most salient feature of Rebecca Horn's most recent work is its austerity; the dominant object utilized is a machine. But the technocentric nature of the pieces emphasizes the discretion with which Horn chooses her (few) symbols. In one of Horn's signature works, *Lola*, 1987, a stylized metal box holds a brush that flings red paint against the gallery wall, forcing the red to smatter a pair of red tap shoes on the floor. Because of the title, the female-recognizable shoes, and the color "red," the piece suggests a form of violence specific to women.

At the Munster Sculpture Project in 1987, Katharina Fritsch exhibited, in an outdoor public square, a larger-than-life yellow madonna with prayer-positioned hands and a dangling rosary. This unmitigated Catholic/kitsch appropriation calls forth so many possible meanings (the Pope's recent edict claiming motherhood or virginity as woman's only vocation; the pervasiveness of the madonna/whore diad in popular consciousness; the pan-national Christian legacy; the naïveté of religion), that Fritsch seems to be challenging the very idea of iconography. In the 1988 Carnegie International, Pittsburgh, Fritsch exhibited *Ghost and Pool of Blood*, a six-foot madonna-like form, strategically placed a few feet behind a pool of red plastic—more than a few viewers commented on "this menstrual blood." But Fritsch's work tends to allude specific readings. At Basel's Kunsthalle, she exhibited *Tischengesellschaft (Table Party)*, 1988, a life-size installation of 32 identical dark-haired men in black shirts seated at a long, pattern-topped table. Were these plaster figures to suggest prisoners meeting across an invisible barrier, men passively

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awaiting female-prepared food, or members of Mussolini's party making plans? These are a few among any number of possible interpretations.

For Trockel, the reproduction of female-coded symbols and objects is often a challenge to conventions of taste and value. With the perfume bottles she exhibited at the 1985 Cologne Art Fair and later (1986) photographed atop a corresponding piece of fabric, Trockel makes an ironic comment on the determination of (art and consumer) objects as valuable. Some of Trockel's best-known art—of wool fabrics, pieces of clothing, kitchen equipment—could be said to "rescue" women's work. Her large, machine-knitted wool panels of hammer and sickles, corporate logos, swastikas, and Playboy bunnies assert the woman's tradition of weaving and craft. Although tending toward subtlety, Trockel can frequently be emphatic, as in *Frau ohne Unterleib* (*Woman Without an Abdomen*), 1988, an assault on female representation in painting. The installation utilizes a negative of Georges de la Tour's *Cheater with the Ace of Diamonds* and a wax cast of a female form from the waist down.

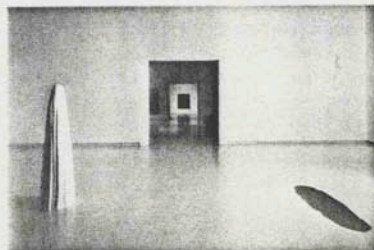
For all of these artists, a critique of art's traditions and a challenge to the notion of "originality," modernist conventions, and commodification is implicit. But within this postmodernist discourse, their language is marked by the idiom of patriarchally-defined femaleness. Whatever the political gains or academic inroads made by new wave feminism, the effects of the cultural Zeitgeist on contemporary women's consciousness is lasting. Women born between 1940 and 1955, who came of age during the peak of feminist consciousness in the U.S. and Europe, and are now coming of age as artists, were affected most by the dramatic reorientation self feminism suggests. With or without an active acceptance of feminism, a woman's art frequently admits gender "because if you're a woman, your experience is entirely different, no matter how much the same as a man's you want it to be."⁹ Critiques of male power and female powerlessness call out from a large body of eighties art.

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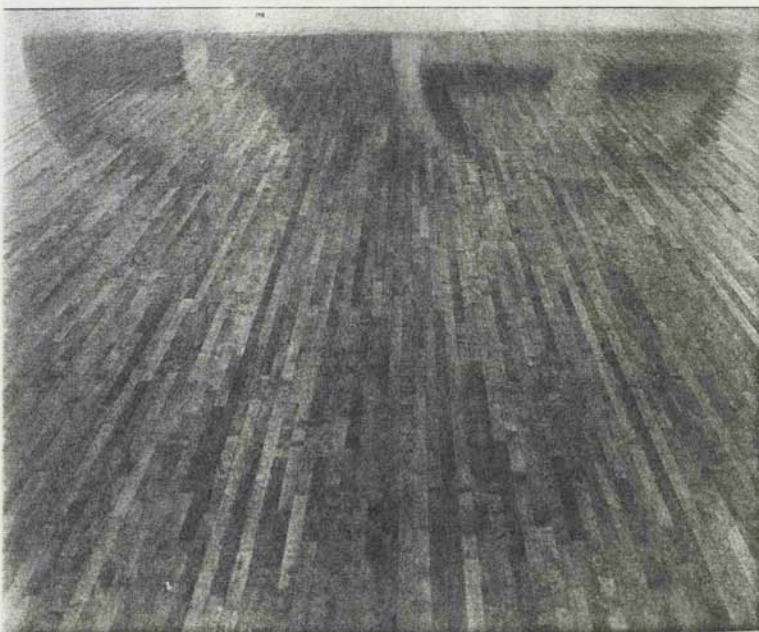
1. *The Dinner Party*, 1977-78, Judy Chicago's monumental table with plates installation that pays homage to Sappho, Pope Joan, Queen Elizabeth, George Sand, Virginia Woolf, and other celebrated women of history. American museums routinely refused to show the piece (claiming its size was prohibitive), and critics repeatedly mocked it (especially the vaginal forms of the dinner plates). But *The Dinner Party* is probably the single most important artwork produced in the U.S. in the 1970s because of its nearly-complete synthesis of the reigning radical opinions of the period.
2. For example, Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro and other feminists created The Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts in the early '70s. Although the program received national attention at the time, it is seldom referred to in written or spoken discussions of Cal Arts today. In 1981, the Cal Arts Ten Year Alumni Show excluded all the work of former Feminist Program Students.



ROSEMARIE TROCKEL, UNTITLED, 1988.
MIXED MEDIA, 74 3/4" x 19 5/8" x 11 3/4".
COURTESY BARBARA GLADSTONE GALLERY, NY.



KATHARINA FRITSCH, GHOST AND POOL OF BLOOD, 1988. POLYESTER, 200 x 60 CM. AND 5 x 200 CM.
COURTESY GALERIE JOHNEN & SCHÖTTLE, COLOGNE.



LOUISE LAWLER, HOW MANY PICTURES, 1989.
CIBACHROME, EDITION OF 5, 48 1/16" x 61 7/8". COURTESY METRO PICTURES, NY.

3. Recent feminism's most significant contribution to popular consciousness is its insistence on the specifically ideological construction of the "female," a social position previously understood as fundamentally "biological" or "natural," thus given, Simone de Beauvoir's observation, that "a woman is made, not born" was the beginning of a new theoretical model within which individual women could situate themselves.

4. One of the quintessential pieces of the '70s feminist dialogue happened in 1974, when sculptor Lynda Benglis bought a full page color ad from *Artforum*. Intended as "the ultimate mockery of the pin up and the macho," Benglis' ad was a nude photograph of herself holding a giant dildo. In the corporate climate of late '80s art, such a direct attack on the hegemony of the phallus is nonexistent. Today, the most pointed gender critique of the New York artworld is made by the Guerrilla Girls, a direct action group who distribute posters that announce specific instances of sex discrimination at museums, galleries, and magazines, always attended by humor and irony. Unlike Benglis, the Guerrilla Girls keep their identities secret.

5. Also including Mary Kelly, Vicky Alexander, Nancy Dwyer, Sarah Charlesworth, Erika Rothenberg, Sylvia Kolbowski, Gretchen Bender, Nancy Barton, Lorna Simpson, Laurie Simmons, Martha Rosler, etc.

6. The oppression of women is a much less championed social evil in contemporary art writing than, say, homosexuality, the class struggle, or the Holocaust—political themes in contemporary art that critics seldom sneer at. Feminism, however, is frequently criticized proforma, e.g., Lawrence Chua's review of Jenny Holzer: "Although it has its weak points (just as William Burroughs is sometimes clouded by misogynist tendencies, so Holzer's is with feminist rhetoric)," in *Flash Art*, October 1988, p. 113.

7. Irony originated with Greek tragedy: the *eirōn* was a character who did not and could not speak directly, as opposed to the *alazōn*, a character who pretends to more knowledge than he has.

8. Levine in an interview with Paul Taylor, *Flash Art*, Summer 1987, p. 55.

9. Yvonne Rainer, in an interview with Lucy Lippard, originally published in *The Feminist Art Journal*, 4, No. 2 (Summer 1975), reprinted in Lippard's *From the Center*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976, p. 268.

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