

AN INQUIRY INTO FEMINIST ART

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the

Department of Art

by

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c 1979. Jane Zednik

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation and thanks to Professors Oliver Bevan, Mina Forsyth and Ron Marken for their patience and tireless efforts in the editing of my paper.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Professors Warren Petersen and Charles Ringness for their assistance in various matters.

Acknowledgement is also made to the College of Graduate Studies and Research and the Saskatchewan Arts Board for providing the financial assistance which made possible these investigations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	I
2. PART ONE Attitudes Towards the Female Artist in the Last Two-Hundred Years.....	7
2.1 The Nineteenth Century.....	8
2.2 The Twentieth Century.....	13
3. PART TWO Feminist Definitions of their Imagery.....	20
4. PART THREE Problems With the Feminist Definition of Feminist Art.....	32
5. CONCLUSION.....	37
REFERENCES.....	iv
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	ix
PERIODICALS.....	xi

I. INTRODUCTION

Everything which is usual appears natural. The subjection of women to men being a universal custom, any departure from it quite naturally appears unnatural.

- John Stuart Mill

The 'bibles' of art history by Gardner, Gombrich, and Janson, textbooks which are used in almost every educational institution in North America which offers a general survey course in art history, do not mention one female artist.

We know of several women artists in the past, however, who did achieve notable recognition for their work in their lifetime. Artists such as Marietta Robusti, Lavinia Fontana, Artemesia Gentileschi, Elizabeth Chéron, Mme. Vigée-Lebrun, and Angelica Kauffman created paintings that earned them not only financial success, but in some cases, national and international fame.

Certain paintings executed by women have been confused with and certified as the work of approved masters. The Portrait of Mlle. Charlotte du Val d'Ognes, bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum in 1917, was unanimously accepted by a consensus of experts as one of the great masterpieces of Jacques Louis David, until

about ten years ago, when Professor Charles Sterling proved that the portrait was in fact by Constance Marie Charpentier - one of David's pupils.¹ The Jolly Toper in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, for years was a favourite, world-famous Frans Hals, until modern cleaning revealed the characteristic "J" which identified it as a painting by Judith Leyster (done when she was nineteen years old!).² And as a third example, it was discovered that Tintoretto's Portrait of Marco dei Vescovi, a praised masterwork in the Vienna museum, was in fact done by his daughter, Marietta Robusti.³

It can be argued, however, that none of the artists cited were innovators and that they stayed close to the tradition and style of the era. They did not implement or encourage radical changes in the approach to painting, and perhaps, in that context, their work is not as significant as that done by their male peers. What is important, is that all the artists mentioned were the progeny of practising artists. This fact seems to indicate that the past social climate did not invite women in general to participate in various forms of visual expression.

I agree that the presence of a few female artists in the past is very much a social condition, not an aesthetic one. That the social condition can indeed change - that it will change because the desire of female

artists to exhibit their work is a necessity; simply because there are more females choosing to do art.⁴

As the sculptor Lynda Benglis has pointed out, more and more women in this century are participating fully and actively in all areas of the visual arts. This increase can be attributed mainly to the popularization of the Women's Liberation Movement. Its goals of ending discrimination and stereotyping of the female sex have received increasing attention from the public since the movement's stirrings in the early 1960's.

As a consequence of growing public awareness of this movement, more women decided to enter into an art world that had been previously dominated by men. When it came to the presentation of their efforts, however, they found that the galleries and museums were less than enthusiastic. The Museum of Modern Art in New York City for example, has had, of the one thousand shows of the past forty-three years, only five one-artist shows by women.⁵ Of one hundred and twenty-nine one-artist shows in ten years, the Whitney Museum has had only eight female representatives. The Guggenheim has not had, to this date, a single exhibition by a woman.⁶ Furthermore, when the ten leading New York galleries were surveyed, it was discovered that 96.4 percent of the artists represented were males.⁷

In 1969, politically active artists in New York City organized the Art Workers Coalition to protest the museums' and galleries' discriminatory practices against women artists. This group was also actively involved in other significant issues such as the Vietnam war and federal politics. Women Artists for Revolution (W.A.R.) began as a caucus in the Coalition but became an autonomous group a few months later because they felt their rights were not being sufficiently emphasized.³

Their first and most highly publicized confrontation was with the Whitney Museum in 1970. W.A.R. demanded that fifty percent of the work in its annual show be done by women, since this exhibition purported to be a yearly survey of the entire contemporary art scene.

The museum did not comply with their wishes, but this spot-lighting of prejudice against women artists in New York caught the attention of other women across the country. By 1971, groups similar to W.A.R. had sprung up in Chicago, Minneapolis, Kansas City, Atlanta, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Iowa City, Toronto, and Montreal. These groups introduced alternative means of showing women's art by forming co-ops and slide registries, and by mounting exhibitions outside the gallery and museum mainstream.

Instead of operating as temporary outlets for women until the discriminatory attitudes of the established locales became more impartial, these organizations became introspective and secular. Out of this isolation grew claims that the art world's partiality to men was owing not only to social precepts but also to its refusal to accept the possibility that women make different art from men.

Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago, responsible for Womanhouse (1972) in Los Angeles where the first feminist consciousness - raising sessions were held, became the first artists to propagate this new perception. They came to the conclusion that women make a distinctly different art from men. They claimed that women's concerns and imagery were not evident in any piece of work done by a man. This difference formed the basis for what came to be called "feminist" art and it was readily agreed upon and lauded nationally by other women.

This paper will deal essentially with one question: Is there a feminist art? Its existence or non-existence is important because, in either case, the results will be significant not only to women but to the future of art as well.

In order to answer this question, one must ask another one:

What is feminist imagery? If, as an increasing number of female artists claim, feminist art does exist, it must have an imagery or ideology and a use of colour and/or subject matter that identify it as a singular means of expression. If, however, the feminist precepts are found to be inaccurate or unclear, perhaps feminist art, instead of being a definitive art form, is a superficial result of a group maintaining a defensive attitude towards prejudicial surroundings.

Before these issues can be fully dealt with, it is necessary to look at the factors in our culture that have been instrumental in determining the groundwork for this counter-movement by women artists. The prejudicial discrimination by art schools, sociologists, scientists, male peers and critics will provide the surroundings that seem to be responsible for isolating women artists and for the conception of the feminist art movement.

2. PART ONE

Attitudes Towards the Female Artist in the Last Two-Hundred Years.

The woman who is an artist is
merely ridiculous.

- Renoir in a letter to Catalle Mendes

This chapter will examine the dispositions of men in the past and present toward the female artist. One must note that, almost without exception, most prejudicial remarks cited in the following sections pertain to preconceptions about the nature of women rather than to their work. The art historian, Mary Garrard, points out that the negativism of men towards the woman artist is compounded by the fact that

... since art has often been
stigmatized as a womanly pursuit, men
in the field have taken great care
to preserve appropriately virile
images for the roles of the artist
... and to ensure that the more
prestigious work is done by males,
lest the profession become female-
dominated and hence weaker in image.^I

The prejudicial stance by men that will be illustrated in the following sections will perhaps make clear the dilemma that faces the woman artist of today.

2.I THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Young women of the last century were encouraged to be artistic, but they were not encouraged to be artists. A girl's decision to study art was met with approval by the family. The broadening of handicraft skills and an education in refinement was thought to make her a desirable companion and a more stimulating wife. For her education to be in the arts was natural, for, as James Jarves points out in The Art Idea Journal of 1871,

...few women are yet predisposed to intellectual pursuits - naturally they turn to those fields of Art which may seem to yield the quickest return for the least expenditure of mental capital.²

Instead of art, women were encouraged to do stencil cutting and imitative drawings; in other words, work that was considered suitable to their talents.

Where shall we find, except among women, the patience and carefulness required in the colouring of botanical plates and every description of illustrative art? Man is not made for sedentary life; woman, on the other hand, conforms to it without inconvenience.³

This remark, made in The Crayon in 1860, exemplifies the

kind of outlook men had towards women. It was felt that women's assets were patience, diligence and obedience. That they possessed any intelligence or creative ability at all was refuted by authorities like the sociologist, Havelock Ellis:

women dislike the essentially
intellectual process of analysis
...women dislike rigid rules, and
principles and abstract propositions.⁴

Lacking mental agility, women obviously could never be creators or innovators. But some women chose to pursue art and found, to their consternation, no available nude models in the art institutions. As late as 1893, "lady" students were not admitted to life-drawing at the Royal Academy in London, and even when they were, after that date, the model had to be partially draped.⁵ Across the channel, similar problems faced the female art student. The Salon in France firmly declared that "women were not accepted as professional painters".⁶

This discrimination against the female art student by the academies was fuelled by writings of sociologists, philosophers and scientists. They insisted that the artistic potential of the woman was negligible, or non-existent, because of her physical and mental ineptitude.

Scientific and unscientific advocates of male superiority based their argument on the fact that man's brain has a greatly superior absolute weight and it was emphasized by brain anatomists that the frontal lobes - believed to be the seat of logical thought and of all higher intellectual processes - were distinctly more developed in men than women.⁷

Although it is true that the brain of a woman is, on the average, 150 cubic centimeters smaller than a man's, "there is no clear evidence of overall differences in intelligence between the sexes".⁸ At the turn of the century, however, a difference in brain size was thought to be sufficient evidence that women were intellectually deficient and therefore inferior to men.

To further their argument, the men of medicine and science turned to another biological factor that they felt was connected to human levels of creative energy. Woman was sufficiently disadvantaged by her menstrual cycle to cut down on her continuity of energy, that energy might even be diverted thereby into destructive channels. A "scientific" example of this pernicious conversion of energy was cited in the British Medical Journal of 1878: "it is an undoubted fact that meat spoils when touched by menstruating women".¹⁰

As if it were not enough for women to be considered physically

II.

and intellectually inferior, sociologists and philosophers attacked the feminine character as flawed. Authorities did not admit that women's morals had evolved in response to their roles in a patriarchal society.

Women themselves have no standards of their own; they are a-moral (not immoral). Having to comply constantly with foreign standards accounts for the typical ailment of hysteria. It also produces hypocrisy and mendacity, tendencies to which women are organically inclined.¹¹

One can now say that this observation by sociologist, Otto Weininger is absolute, unsubstantiated nonsense, but such statements in his time were considered to be scientific, accurate and conclusive. Sigmund Freud deduced that women's dilemma stemmed "from the repressed desire to have a penis and her discovery of her own castration".¹² He felt that this led to traits of passivity, emotionality, lack of abstract interests, greater intensity of personal relationships, and an instinctive tenderness for babies.¹³ Similarly, Freud is considered to be a gifted and insightful man, respected as the father of psychoanalysis, but it is hard to believe that the reason for women's problems with self-identity lies solely in penis-envy.

Instead, these male experts should have looked to society

and its theories about the status of the woman for an answer. Why women did not or rather could not participate fully in the visual arts can be clarified by the following restrictions.

First, the cultural, scientific, and religious tradition of patriarchy disallowed the possibility of a female intellect. Second, methods of birth control were virtually non-existent. As a consequence, women had numerous children and the position of wife and mother was a full-time responsibility. It was also imperative that a woman marry and bear many offspring lest she be considered a social misfit. The proportion of men to women in the art world was large, so that the odds of any notable achievement were against the women. In hand with that, discrimination by the art institutions against female students severely impaired any progress they made and suppressed any hopes they had.

The major dilemma, however, can be found in the societal expectations and psychological barriers that confronted the woman artist. She feared success in a society that was unable to reconcile personal ambition, accomplishment, and success with femininity.

2.2 THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The fault lies not in our stars, our
hormones, our menstrual cycles, but
in our institutions and our education.¹⁴

- Linda Nochlin

After the great advances and cultural alterations of the last seventy years, especially in the new cultures of Canada and the United States, one would not expect century-old conditions to be applied to women artists of today. Despite decades of emancipation, women are still not encouraged to take their work seriously.

It is obvious that getting started as an artist is difficult enough for men. But the burdens inherent fall with particularly destructive weight on women.... When young male artists are granted the benefit of the doubt, though their work may be underdeveloped, women artists frequently have to persist in a unique kind of isolation.¹⁵

Despite growing acceptance of alternative modes of living and different moralities, universal acceptance of women as artists has not yet materialized.

True, women today can readily enroll in art schools. They are allowed to draw from the nude model to their heart's content. In fact, most art classes have a higher ratio of women to men. On an

average, sixty-four percent of students enrolled in art schools are women.¹⁶ Yet, as demonstrated in the following interview excerpts, the majority of women who go to undergraduate and graduate school suffer subtle intellectual coercion:

Barbara Hepworth: I was in terrible trouble because the committee of men said they would never again give a scholarship to a woman.¹⁷

Julie Lamoe: When I graduated from art school in 1965, men instructors were still asking women students why they were painting and not getting pregnant.¹⁸

It would be logical to assume that because there are a greater number of women in the art schools, there would be a proportionately large number of qualified women teaching. However,

the professional art schools, as well as those in universities, while they do not officially exclude women faculty members, give decisive preference to men. Most of the 55% plus female art students now in the schools - find their job at the high school level or below.¹⁹

According to a survey on the status of women in the United States, at one hundred and sixty-four art departments, only 30.2% of the instructors are female.²⁰

Though progress has been made since the turn of the century with regard to the social status of the woman, little progress

seems to be being made in the area of fine arts. A woman's physical and mental capabilities are no longer strictly classified as inferior, but social and male persistence still try to press her into a submissive role.

If her work is bold, she is likely to be compared to a man. If it is not powerful, but tender and expressive, the work is stereotyped as feminine. If she competes too aggressively, she runs the risk of isolation from both sexes. If she is insistent, she is considered to be hard and masculine. If she is single and insistent, she is considered to be fearful of the roles of wife and mother and is a possible lesbian. If married, she is made to feel guilty about her need for artistic identity.²¹

Louise Nevelson, the sculptor, found it impossible to be both married and an artist: "I wanted art and I felt rich enough to pay the price".²² Career conflicts are not infrequent. Marriage and work are not mutually exclusive for men, but women seem to have to make a choice.

The showing of a woman's work presents another obstacle. As indicated in the introductory section of this paper, the representation of female artists by the galleries and museums is minimal. Artist Lil Picard, for example, has "had the experience twice of being refused as an artist by galleries. I was told

bluntly: 'We don't take on women'."²³ Dorothy Dehner "has been told by collectors never to buy the works of a woman."²⁴

If the woman artist is insistent, or fortunate enough to obtain a showing of her work, she runs the risk of gathering prejudicial reviews about her efforts. A male critic reviewed Louise Nevelson's sculpture, Clown in the Center of the World, in Cue Magazine, October 4, 1941:

We learned the artist is a woman in time to check our enthusiasm. Had it been otherwise, we might have hailed these sculptural expressions by surely a great figure among moderns.²⁵

She buried the piece.

One would expect that the greatest support for women's efforts would come from their male peers. In fact, the opposite occurs. The following quotations reveal some of the different types of prejudicial reasoning against women by various male artists. The artists, all apparently well-known, were not cited by name in the reference material. Perhaps they feared remonstrance.

Let's just say that I can't think of any woman artist that I would be interested in, either as a person or a woman. I think they're all too cranky and unreasonable. Or, if they're reasonable, they're so damn reasonable that I can't

stand them. Why are they that way? They're that way because they are that way. They just can't be different, I guess.²⁶

This male painter's analysis of a woman artist is unclear at best, but his bias is evident. The next remark is by an older, "most-celebrated" male artist:

I think it's practically hopeless for a woman to be an artist. After all, men can't have babies. If male artists could have babies, I'm sure most wouldn't go through the trouble of being painters. Why should they? And I think a woman who's trying to be an artist is sort of dividing herself. My feeling is that they should create a home.²⁷

The next two statements, both by "celebrated" male artists, tend to envision the woman as a bitch or castrator. This categorization of the female artist who is insistent or single-minded perpetuates the long-held belief that a woman, in order to be female, must be domestic and docile.

The fact that most artists are men affects the woman. One of the dangers they run is wearing their balls around their necks to prove they aren't women. You know, overpainting and being too masculine in their painting just to prove they're not women. This affects their painting because they seem to be leaning over backwards to be unfeminine.²⁸

They have to pay a high price for femininity. They become more aggressive. Successful women artists are castrators. I would say so definitely.²⁹

Male artists are reluctant to accept women's encroachment into an art world once controlled by men alone. Though the opportunities for a woman to become an artist have increased, prejudice still prevents her from realizing herself artistically.

Women are not under the same kind of pressure, as in the past, to marry, and modern birth control methods make the bearing of children optional. Yet these advantages do not guarantee absolute freedom for the woman to become an artist.

Women contend that impositions are made on the aspiring woman artist by the total disregard for her creative potential or the stripping of self-confidence that occurs in the art schools. Married women or mothers are not seen as serious contenders because it is still thought unlikely that women can be both creative and have husbands or families. This attitude prevails even though a woman might work hard and produce fine work. If the woman chooses not to marry or have children because she wishes to devote as much time to her work as possible, she is considered to be either dangerously aggressive or possibly lesbian.

Art historian, Lucy Lippard, points to another form of prejudice that has developed. Art gallery dealers often treat women artists as sex objects.³⁰ Her experience shows that there is a "bed to get ahead" policy. Whether this is as predominant as suggested is debatable, but it is clear that the obstacles that faced women artists of the past, though perhaps not as overt as before, are still evident.

From the evidence in Part One, I conclude that there are obstructions, although they have become less general and more specific. Women artists do have valid complaints.

3. PART TWO

Feminist Definitions of their Imagery.

Because of prejudicial reasoning by art schools, galleries, museums, and male artists, taking refuge in feminism would seem a rational thing for women artists to do, considering the barriers that still face them. Instead of battering away at the walls that prevent them from expanding their potential as innovators or creators, they have retreated into a fortress called feminist art, armed with the ammunition of feminist imagery. Though it is conceivable that there is a woman's art simply because women's experiences are different from men's, it is also possible that feminism is a 'fight fire with fire' attitude. This suggests that because men have an art and an image, that women too, can have their own art and image. If this is true, would it not suggest that the feminist art movement is as hypocritical and fallacious as the illusion of male superiority? This specific question will be discussed in Part Three of this paper.

Before any kind of evaluation or summation of the feminist art movement can be made, it is necessary to examine the type of imagery that the movement claims to be of a distinct, feminine sensibility. According to the artist Joan Snyder, this sensibility does exist, though she, herself, admits to being unable to offer a precise definition:

I know what it isn't. But I can't pinpoint what it is, though I've boasted I can walk into the Whitney Annual and pick out the women's work.¹

Other feminists claim that because female sensibility has only been recently realized and that "it is still in the process of being structured"², an agreed definition has yet to evolve. Perhaps, because the feminist art movement is new, feminist artists have difficulty explaining just how their imagery differs from men's. The other possibility is that, despite what they claim, imagery and forms of expression do not differ between the art of men and women. This suggests that the difference that the feminists claim is not so much in the imagery, but rather in their political stand and defensive outlook towards the existing art world. This possibility, however, will be explained in a following section.

I find from the literature that there is little conclusive agreement among the feminist artists and their supporters as to what does constitute a feminist image. Some artists, like Joy Poe in response to the question: "What is feminist imagery?", seem to cover the whole spectrum of possible imagery in the art experience:

It is transparencies, re-arrangeable forms, layering, openings, bags, protrusions, grids, repetition of elements, fascination with textures, sensuality and attention to detail.³

This statement indicates that there is no one particular image that is peculiar to the woman artist. Yet, for the feminist art movement to exist as a separate group, it ought to have special concerns and an imagery that supports these concerns. Simply being a woman and an artist does not merit the label "feminist". The problem in establishing an imagery seems to stem from the fact that the feminist artist has chosen diverse issues to call her own.

Some feminists have chosen a fundamentally sexual or erotic channel. Others have opted for a realist or conceptual celebration of the female experience in which birth, motherhood, rape, household imagery, windows, menstruation, autobiography, family background, portraits of friends, figure prominently. Others feel that the only feminist art has a "right on" political posterlike content. Others are involved in materials and colours formerly denigrated as 'feminine' or in a more symbolic or abstract way parallel to their experiences.⁴

These themes have been used by artists in the past and present, regardless of sex, colour, creed or age. They are not singular

or peculiar to a woman artist.

There does seem, however, to be an association made, linking sexuality and femininity, by the feminists. They state that much of their imagery uses biological and sexual sources as references.

There's a lot of sexual imagery in women's art - circles, domes, spheres, boxes, biomorphic shapes, maybe a certain striation or layering.⁵

Those forms listed above are ubiquitous in large groups of women - far more so than in any body of work by men.⁶

Could sexual symbolism then be equated with feminist imagery?

Some feminist artists, like Faith Wilding and Ellen Rosenberg, say this is correct. The use of vaginal iconography constitutes one of the basic differences between the images employed by men and women. They state:

We are interested in a level of sensation and sensitivity directly related to cunt sensation. I'm not talking about sex or orgasm as much as I am about the experience of cunt as a living, pulsating organism.⁷

To me, female imagery is lives and bodies of females. My response is genital and sympathetic.⁸

It is ironic that, while the feminists disapprovingly call men's work "cliché, aggressive, all angles and phallic"⁹ and have chosen to disentangle themselves from the machismo of the art world and its stereotyping of female artists, they have chosen to cast themselves in that very same male stereotype. By adopting the cliché, that soft-curved forms are feminine, they are accepting a male viewpoint of those images. By using those colours and forms that have been considered by men to be feminine, they are agreeing with a male evaluation of what women's capabilities tend towards. Would it not then follow, that these women are also in agreement with men's connotations that feminine things are weak, pale, fragile and inconsequential? The feminists may think that this imagery is strong because it is presenting a profound meaning not hitherto discovered but nowhere in the reading material has this been made clear. The most prominent proponent of feminist art, Judy Chicago, offers equally obscure and weak definitions of feminist imagery:

Feminist imagery often has a central image, repeated forms, concern with a state of emotional reality and a focus on the nature of female identity.¹⁰

I answered in abstraction: a doughnut form stood for my vagina, the repetition of that form for

my multi-orgasmic nature, the
dissolution of that form for
orgasm.¹¹

The display of female genitalia and the use of sexual
imagery, according to art historian and critic, Barbara Rose:

is profoundly radical in that
it attacks the basis of male
supremacy from the point of
view of depth psychology.¹²

What this depth psychology is, Barbara Rose does not venture to explain. It could refer to the popular and Freudian viewpoint that the structure and development of the human race revolves around the penis. In other words; anatomy is destiny. If this is what is meant by depth psychology, the display of female sex organs would offer a threat to this concept. The feminists are then claiming that the human race is centered around the vagina and not the penis. Instead of trying to destroy one myth, vaginal iconographists seem to be trying to replace it with another one. Proliferation of sexual imagery by women can be interpreted also as an attack on the basis of male supremacy in the sense that it breaks the restriction that only man, as the aggressor, holds sole rights to an open sexual appetite. The depiction of the female as an object of desire, of lust, has been rendered in countless ways by male artists and this has been accepted as

natural. It was inconceivable that a woman could harbour such primitive urges. The fact that many feminist artists not only expose private parts visually, but that some have chosen to depict the man as sex object, turns the table on the concepts of male and female sexuality.

Though feminists are assaulting long-held and erroneous social concepts on male and female sexuality, they are not calling this political confrontation to call attention to the plight of the female artist, but rather are proclaiming it as the manifestation of womanhood.

I am not adverse to someone pinning vaginas on a wall, but I do not believe that sexuality constitutes the beginning and end of a woman's experience. The feminists would claim that the attitude I present is the result of a fear of accepting my female identity.

Because of the dangers of exposure, sexual imagery in women's art has been externalized so unconsciously that it remains personally threatening for many artists to confront their own content.¹³

This statement is based on pure speculation. This assumption about women's repressed sexual imagery is indicative of the defensive attitude taken by the feminists.

I also do not agree with the art historian and psychologist,
Laurie Adams that

given the inevitable sexual
aspects of artistic creativity,
there is an equally inevitable,
and gender-related difference
in the works of art made by
men and women.¹⁴

Laurie Adams also goes on to say in her article that because
men are convex and women are concave, women can never be great
artists. This conclusion is based on what she calls a 'classic'
work by Marie Bonaparte who stated that women are born with less
libido than men.¹⁵

Feminist artists also believe that because of their different
type of sexuality, they are "more open, more autobiographical
in their work than men"¹⁶. As the artist Hannah Wilke points out:

Helen Frankenthaler has an
emphatic response to nature. Her
body is out there, spread out in
the landscape - her legs, her thighs,
her torso, her breasts, her neck,
her head, her arms.¹⁸

The association of the feminists with all things curved,
soft and organic, demonstrates their acceptance of all that has
been socially relegated as being feminine in nature. The irony
again, is that the feminists see society's views as being the
result of male dominance.

Instead of trying to educate a biased art world that women artists possess an equal potential for creativity and powerful expression, the feminists seem to be trying to establish an opposing camp. What makes this confusing, is that the feminists want two contradictory things. They want first, to establish the fact that women's art is different from men's. Then second, to be free in their choice of subject and means of expression so that their work is not stigmatized by the art world as being feminine. These two desires are not mutually compatible. This paradox could well account for the lack of any singular definition of feminist imagery. The concept of a woman's art is also inconsistent with the feminine desire that the existing art institutions end the stereotyping of women's art. They are then stereotyping the art of their male peers as well.

Feminist artists and their supporters may claim that their art is more inward-looking, more delicate and nuanced than a man's but

...which is more inward-looking than Redon, more subtle and nuanced than Corot? Is Fragonard more or less feminine than Mme. Vigée-Lebrun? Certainly, though, if daintiness, delicacy and preciousness are to be counted as earmarks of a feminine style, there is nothing fragile

about Rosa Bonheur's Horse Fair.
 If women have turned to scenes of
 domestic life, or of children, so
 did Jan Steen, Chardin and the
 Impressionists - Renoir and
 Monet as well as Morisot and
 Cassatt.¹⁹

Apart from the sexual imagery, organic forms and
 autobiographical content, feminist artists also believe themselves
 to be identifiable by their constant use of fragmentation,
 grids and striation. Those components manifest themselves in their
 work because "women are forced to play so many roles, while
 most men play one or two in their lifetime".²⁰

It has to do with a kind of
 softness, layering, a certain
 colour sensibility, a more
 expressive work than any man is
 going to do right now, and a
 repetitiousness, a use of grids,
 obsessive in a way.²¹

Perhaps by coincidence, perhaps
 not, many of the artists who
 have drawn a particularly unique
 interpretation from the grid's
 precise strains are women.²²

The claim that the grid is an earmark of feminist imagery
 is inconsistent with the claim that feminist art is endomorphic.
 A grid is a network of crossing parallel lines that is precise
 and angular. Organic forms that were stated earlier as being
 an important part of feminist imagery are neither straight,

angular, or precise in configuration.

In summation, feminist artists claim that there is a feminine sensibility that is unique and different from a man's. The feminists do not have at this time any manifesto that defines this sensibility or clarifies their philosophical viewpoint. Consequently, there is confusion about feminist art. The assumptive and perplexing statements of the artists and their supporters compounds the confusion.

Feminists have a somewhat flexible choice of subject matter, but many of the artists have chosen to be represented by sexual imagery. To the feminists, vaginal iconography represents a definite feminine concern and at the same time, it challenges the whole notion of male supremacy.

Feminists such as Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago, and Joan Snyder state that sexual imagery is a very real symbol of the woman. Their announcement, however, that sexual imagery is synonymous with female identity is pure conjecture on their part. Not all of the feminist imagery depicts overt images of female sex organs; other women artists have softened their sexual imagery by using organic forms.

Little mention of colour was made in the reference material,

except that the feminists felt that a woman's choice of colour was of a different sensibility. Without any factual documentation, this is little more than an hypothesis. Fragmentation and multi-layering in feminist work is explained as being a manifestation of the various roles a woman must act out in her life.

All the ingredients that the feminists claim to be indicative of feminist art, such as sexual imagery, organic forms, fragmentation, multi-layering and grids, are also devices that have been employed by men artists as well. Nowhere in the reference material have any of the spokesmen for feminist art pinpointed the real difference between a man's and a woman's art. Likewise, they have not presented a clear definition of feminist imagery. Their comments are subjective, contradictory at times, and totally unsubstantiated either by example or fact. The types of hypothetical statements about feminine sensibility and feminist imagery that have been presented by the artists and their supporters in this part of the paper can only leave one wondering whether feminist art is an illusion.

4. PART THREE

Problems With the Feminist Definition of Feminist Art.

It is apparent from the varied statements presented by the feminists in Part Two that there is a lack of a strong argument for feminist art. The feminists claim that this vagueness can be attributed to the newness of the movement and that they are not well enough organized as yet to produce a manifesto. This raises the question: Is the feminist art movement to be seen in the same light as other art movements such as Fauvism, Cubism, and Surrealism? I think not. The word 'movement' in the case of the feminists is a word for lack of a better one to define a group. The feminist artists concerns lie not only with a female imagery but also with social complexities. As stated earlier, the need for both feminist imagery and also total artistic freedom makes it very difficult to understand the precise aims of these women.

What started as political confrontation to gather the maximum amount of attention for the plight of women artists became something different. It evolved into a group of women who came to the conclusion that no one had realized before that there was a feminist art. Instead of tearing down misconceptions, they added their own. Just as it is impossible to define what

makes up a man's art, so it should be equally impossible to define a woman's. As Robert Stoller, the psychologist, points out in his book, Sex and Gender:

Gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations.¹

The real problem is that society has made up guidelines that define the perimeters of masculinity and femininity. The feminists should be more concerned with the tearing down of these cultural restrictions. Instead, they are strengthening these limitations with their insistence that women make a different art from men.

Understandably, women have justified fears about their art work because of the social equation of "bad" with "feminine". But for feminists such as Miriam Schapiro to say that women's art "is the only goddam energy around"², claiming that they make unique and better art than men is not going to alleviate the situation. The problem also lies with their misconception, shared with the public at large, of what art is.

Basic to the question are many naïve, distorted, uncritical assumptions about the making of art in general. These assumptions, conscious or unconscious, link together such unlikely superstars as Michelangelo and Van Gogh; Raphael and Jackson Pollock.³

In a society that has confusing ideas about standards of quality, feminists want to make good art. One way of doing this would be to form a separate group that is supportive of its members. With the right public relations, it could establish itself as a valid art movement. This development would seem, however, to be contradictory to the feminist argument that it was grouping in the first place that placed women in the inferior position. Another problem is that the feminist art movement is very defensive. Instead of trying to fight the discrimination that is responsible for their suppression, they have started up their own little art world that is as fallacious as the illusion of male supremacy.

Psychologist Frank Barron published some interesting findings about feminine attitudes in his tests done at the San Francisco Art Institute. Though he could not discern any great differences between men and women students in personality tests, he did find different results in the way men and women students evaluated themselves and their work. In response to the question, 'Do you think of yourself as an artist?', sixty-six percent of the male students asked, answered "yes", while sixty-seven percent of the women art students answered "no"⁴. Either the female students are just passing time and are not interested in their art, or, more likely, they have

adopted a negative attitude and are not willing to accept themselves as artists. With an outlook such as this, how can they expect to produce quality work? By way of analogy, if an athlete entered in a marathon race tells himself repeatedly or accepts the conclusion that he will never reach the final destination, the chances are great that he will not finish. Worse, he will not even try to test his potential strength but would rather throw in the towel at the first signs of muscle strain.

Frank Barron also found that women art students did not think as highly of their products as did their male peers. He asked the senior art classes in the visual arts if, 'In comparison to the work of others at the Institute, is your work particularly unique or good?'. Forty percent of the men asked answered "yes", while only seventeen percent of the women felt that their work was of merit.⁵ The most perturbing thing that Frank Barron discovered was that, in the whole Institute, fewer than forty percent of the women students considered their work important, while seventy percent of the men did.⁶

If women artists continue to believe that their efforts are of little value, that attitude will be reflected in their work, and the work will not merit recognition. Furthermore, by being self-deprecating, women artists greatly diminish the chances

of changing an erroneous social concept and going on to produce major works of art.

Feminists are not helping to alleviate these problems because they themselves are adding more confusing elements. The feminists are trying to convince the world that stereotyping should not exist; yet, at the same time, they state that women make their own unique art. Their ideas on the ingredients of feminist art are at best confusing. If women hope to change the existing prejudice, they themselves need to nurture a more positive self-image. To belong to a segregated group that lacks conviction, will justify the prejudice in the minds of the discriminators. Only by personal drive and conviction can a woman hope to counter and change existing opinions and put an end to discrimination.

If women artists continue to cultivate a poor self-image (as seen in the testing by Frank Barron), their work will tend to be weak and shallow. Unless the feminists rid themselves of their defensiveness and get straight their intentions and goals, their 'movement' will always be vulnerable to criticism. It would be of greater importance if they would realize that art is androgynous, and that

...there is little conclusive evidence on the nature, extent and mechanism of sex hormone effects on the development of productivity in man.⁷

5. CONCLUSION

The first part of the paper made it clear that women artists do have valid complaints. Discrimination and stereotyping by the art schools, institutions, galleries, critics, and male peers do pose serious problems for the aspiring female artist. The feminist art movement came into being as a reaction to the discriminatory measures practised against them. The feminists established women's co-operatives, slide registries, and "women-only" galleries. The feminists changed from their political stance and began to claim that because a woman possesses a different sensibility from a man, the woman artist produces work that is unique.

Upon further investigation, however, the existence of feminist art, as preached by the feminists, became suspect. The arguments about feminist art were confusing and ill-documented by any factual information. These unclear and at times contradictory definitions of feminist art pose the possibility that it exists only in the minds of the artists.

That women art students have a very low estimation of themselves and their work is pointed out in the tests conducted by Frank Barron at the San Francisco Art Institute. Only by changing their attitude towards themselves can women artists hope to make positive steps toward educating an unwilling public. As the famous sculptor Louise Nevelson says:

Single-mindedness, concentration and absorption in one's work comes through the unfolding of the individual's self-development and should not have anything to do with "masculine" and "feminine" labels.¹

If the feminist art movement does become stronger, if more "women-only" art galleries open, and more co-operatives are established, there are potential dangers to be considered. First, isolating themselves from the rest of the art world will strengthen public opinion that women artists are somehow different. It is conceivable that, in the future, art galleries could be divided into narrow, specialized categories. There could well be women's galleries, men's galleries, black galleries, and so on. The woman who does not wish to participate or be associated with the feminist art movement may well have to conform to it, whether she wishes to or not. If she does not join the movement, she will be branded by the feminists as selling out her feminine identity, and she will be discriminated against by the male-dominated art world. If she wishes her work to be recognized, she may well have to bend her art and personality to fit the feminist image.

I can only agree with the famous Op Artist, Bridget Riley, when

she said:

Women's Liberation, when applied to artists, seems to be a naïve concept. It raises issues which in this context are quite absurd. At this point in time, artists who happen to be women, need this particular form of hysteria like they need a hole in the head.²

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