

# make/shift

A globe is positioned on the right side of the cover, resting on a dark, reflective surface. The background is a deep red with a textured, slightly mottled appearance. A black power cord lies on the surface in the foreground, looping around the base of the globe. The globe itself shows a map of the world with various colors for continents and countries.

feminisms in motion

**Make/Media**

**Feminist Art Is Everywhere**

**INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence**

**La Lucha for Environmental Justice**

issue no. 2  
fall/winter 2007-2008

\$5.95



74470 22743



# Look for It Everywhere!

An E-Symposium on Feminist Art (and Other Things)

WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution, a major international retrospective of feminist art from 1965 to 1980, opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in March. Throughout the spring, feminist-art shows, discussions, and related events proliferated in L.A. (some of them formally affiliated with WACK!, some not). On the East Coast, Global Feminisms, an exhibition of feminist art from 1990 to the present, inaugurated the new Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. The market, or the established art world, or something, had put feminist art in the spotlight.

Major newspapers, big-city alt-weeklies, blogs, and small-town papers alike covered the big museum shows, displaying rare interest in creative work by feminists. Yet almost none of their articles were written by feminist artists or critics. While gentleman staff writers at commercial papers wondered whether feminism really was the most influential movement in late-twentieth-century art, people personally, immediately, creatively/politically/socially involved with feminist art were engaged in scattershot, sprawling conversations at and about events every day of the week for weeks on end in Los Angeles. At parties and in lecture halls, in galleries and at dinner tables, feminists were talking inspired, talking shit, talking tired old tropes, talking other possibilities, talking resistance, talking, talking, talking.

These are the conversations *make/shift* wanted to document. They were dynamic, critical, hopeful, contentious, visionary, and

growing in many directions. How to represent that in print? I invited Cara Baldwin and Emily Roysdon, two then-local feminist artists/curators/editors/organizers (both have since relocated), to collaborate on a discussion for *make/shift*. Busy schedules all around quickly rerouted the conversation to e-mail, where we posed a series of questions to one another. Immediately, others pressed in: how would we shape this thing? Why were we limiting the conversation to so few voices—maybe each of us could reach out to some others to each answer a question or two? (Not unlike how, during the crowded opening of *Shared Women*—the group show of young queer feminist artists that Emily cocurated with Eve Fowler and A. L. Steiner at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions—I talked with Cara about one thing until someone I wanted her to meet passed by, introductions were made, my friend picked up on the last thing Cara'd mentioned, and the three of us trotted off in a new direction.) And why, Cara wondered, were we limiting the conversation to a couple of art shows (*Shared Women* and WACK!, on which Cara had worked)? She wanted to talk about radical feminist strategies for social change—and more!

Of course there's no way we could replicate the layered, many-voiced conversation that took place (and is still taking place) around feminist art past, present, and future, in Los Angeles and beyond. Yet we wanted to share some kind of slice of it, and so we made this.—Jessica Hoffmann



Cara Baldwin, Irma Contreras, and Jessica Hoffmann outside *Shared Women* at LACE, March 2007. Photo by Christopher Bazin.



**Cara Baldwin** is an independent curator, editor, artist, and writer. She is a cofounder of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, and she worked on WACK! as a curatorial and research assistant.

**Jennifer Flores Sternad** is a researcher, writer, and student whose work focuses on activist art practice. She is currently writing about collectives in Argentina, Brazil, and Bolivia.

**Emma Hedditch** is an artist and writer living in London.

**Jessica Hoffmann** is a member of the editorial and publishing collective behind *make/shift*.

**Sandra de la Loza** is a multimedia artist and educator. Much of her work is interventionist and focused on Latin American and Chicano art and culture.

**Malyar Nili** is a founding member of *fem-in-art*, a feminist-art group at UCLA. In April 2007, she organized the symposium "Beyond The Waves: Art Informed by Feminisms" at the Hammer Museum.

**Emily Roysdon** is an interdisciplinary artist. She is a cofounder of LTTR, a feminist artist collective.

ER: Institutionalization—pros and cons?

JH: When I walked through WACK! for the first time, I kind of flipped out—part of that was about being overwhelmed by seeing so much art that had affected me emotionally, that felt somehow intimate, all together in a public space, among a crowd. And part of it was about knowing that some of the work in the show was originally street art, radical art, so there was something especially disarming, confusing about seeing it in a museum. I felt at once thrilled and scared, inspired and deflated (like I was seeing the artifacts of a failed revolution). Then, at "Exquisite Acts and Everyday Rebellions" [a symposium on feminist art at CalArts, March 2007], I wondered many times, am I the only person here who's not a current or former student or teacher in an art school? What do I/we make of that? And another thing: In this month-ish of feminist-art events in L.A., I don't know of any street or even outdoor projects, or projects that are really reaching beyond gallery/museum/school spaces and the people who are already connected to them. Do you?

ER: To start with the street—the lack of a critical public sphere is a more pervasive problem than just an issue for feminism. There are, of course, obvious and powerful scenes of protest that have happened in the recent past, but I speak of a sustainable public intellectual and political culture. In the current environment of white-washing (literally) difference, and a powerful conservative Right collapsing polarities and margins into centralized politics based on morality, people who are still making claims on rights and demanding that antagonisms be acknowledged are not finding space in public life.

That in turn makes "institutions" a refuge, a remaining platform for dissidence. This arrangement is full of compromises, but is valuable and malleable, and certainly not uniform. As well as our contemporary political times influencing the site of these conversations, it is also a certain "tell" of success for once-marginalized people to be in positions of power and to be hiring and exhibiting feminists. A huge part of my practice is invested in independent collaborative projects, so this is not a treatise on how to work with and become a part of an institution. I am just not the kind of person that hates something because of where I find it.

And as for education and insider-ness, I think it is hard times

when so many fields are hyperprofessionalized. I can speak for myself and say that I went to graduate school to seize the opportunity of mentorship from a powerful conceptual feminist artist, an opportunity not really available before my generation. Some people choose the institution for a challenge, some for safety; it is not so easy anymore to judge the superstructure—not this many years into capitalism when substantial numbers of people have decided to infiltrate...

EH: Could we break down the question of institutionalization? I think it's interesting to question the experience of viewing or hearing something that you may have quite an intimate relation to, in terms of it being something that affected your consciousness, or that you understand as coming from a specific historical and political moment and situation. It seems obvious that one would experience a sense of ownership over that feeling or fact, and therefore find it hard to see or hear that same thing out of that situation. I am really interested in this reaction that I have—is it a question of property? If so, how can we maintain this relation without foreclosing the possibility that others might experience this relation? My understanding of one of the ideas of feminist politics is that it informed culture by questioning how and who has access to it and who is making it and how it is being recorded. I think it's important that as artists we continually engage in these questions and consider the placement of our work, but I also think as viewers we have power to re-absorb our relation to works despite where they are placed. This is not to say that it doesn't matter where a work is placed, but that each institution has its own questions, which should or could be articulated in the experience of viewing if we want to or can gain access.

In terms of working outside of the museum, my understanding is that there are so many things going on that are critical and imperative but are less visible, which for many people is equal to nonexistent. This invisibility [is] largely due to an emphasis on discretion, and working with small groups slowly over time.

CB: What would happen if institutional critique refused circumscription? I welcome a relatively boundless institutional critique—one that impacts bodies. For example, what if feminist critique was made to register at every level, from somatic, spiritual, interpersonal, local, social, and symbolic exchanges to the military industrial complex, neoliberalism/conservatism, and global capitalism?

Maybe people don't make art in the streets, or at home, so institutions are where you learn about it. Or, maybe we don't recognize what we do and experience as art. Art is supposed to be something different and there for everybody and that's one of the best things about it.

Like music, feminism, film, art can be a slippery and open thing. That openness and expansion challenges the singularity of other things, other projects. This is what draws me to it. A conservative response is definition, or an acceptance of the need for boundaries. (To name a few: the permitted protest, barricade, blockade, discipline, media, race, gender, sexual orientation, border, nation, state, family.) So, in part I think there is a failure of imagination involved when accepting a view of the world in which art is only perceived when it appears as a commodity exchanged in a very narrow context, which is both the cause and effect of oppression that is expansive and itself a product of global capitalism. Again, I'm not saying art can't exist there—it's everywhere so save your hair. Stroll through the city blocking off the bridges to sew up a river, throw an apple through a storefront window and knock my socks off. Art is art in the dark.

SDL: How does institutionalization privilege cultural production in terms of class? [Also, I keep thinking about] the institutionalization of this dialogue—the politeness, ease of these conversations. Where is



the fire, the wildness, the risk, the energy, the trust to struggle with each other even if it hurts a little so that we can grow?

ER: Do you think there is a feminist aesthetic? A feminist ideology? I think there is a feminist ethic, more akin to an ideology than an aesthetic, but mostly a strategy, which is applicable in aesthetics and politics. I think it would be misleading and disappointing to ascribe a "look" to such a complex field as feminism. Doing so is a crawl toward essentialism, which serves no one and limits the realm of influence that feminism is then capable of effecting. Feminism as an ideology is a tool, a life, a pleasure.

CB: I think collaborative social practices and hybrid forms; resistance to closure and cultural boundaries; conflation of object/subject positions; a reflective approach to representation that includes culture, bodies, and social and material conditions are some of the feminist strategies that compose a feminist aesthetic and reflect its ideology—while it's resistance to singularity that makes it so vital. Like Connie Samaras wrote me recently, "Talk about binaries, the division between material and cultural politics seems one of the most naturalized." I add—one that has to do with the relationship between cultural currency and class. I believe in the power of cultural politics.

Meanwhile, long-contested radical histories and present and future possibilities have entered into a period of escalated and profound erasure. I'd like to use this conversation to address that in a broader political sphere that includes feminist art and practices' relationships to radical transformation.

What would happen if feminists embraced a global radical agenda that included class, race, land use, and social-justice needs? What if cultural and radical feminisms embraced? What if a fraction of an oppressed global population comprising more than half of its labor production and products found shared language and action for demanding social justice, liberation, and parity? I keep asking this question (this is the third forum in which I've posed it), and people seem not to be able to hear it as other than rhetorical.

My girlfriend Toast says it would be like Tiananmen Square: "They would find a voice, they would gather, say what they had to say, and no one would listen." She reminds me it also depends on where this happens and what you call finding a voice: "If you start blowing shit up like Bernardine Dohrn, you'll be in trouble. But if you send e-mails and participate in permitted protests, they'll leave you alone."

Yes. I close my eyes and strain to imagine what other things might be true. Perhaps social change is possible on this scale now more than ever, and what she's saying, while it's apparently true, forecloses that possibility. What does total revolution look/feel like?

JH: What are you offering of feminism today? How does feminism inform/inspire/provoke your work?

ER: I identify as a feminist artist to distinguish myself as an active

critical queer with a memory. And I use it to demand a context in which bodies and histories take precedence over capital power/material patriarchy power. As an artist/writer/organizer I broadcast a genderqueer feminism that walks away from biological determinism and assumptions of people's identity and desires. This is a crucial tenet of feminism being the bridge and site of alliance in struggle. In this we are fashioning a desired present and future. Apart from a pure resistance movement it is one that speaks to the moment and the possibilities currently present to shape our engagements and actions.

MN: I'm facilitating a class on art and feminisms and am attempting to bring intersectional feminisms, and ideas of related privileges and oppressions, into the classroom. My biggest challenges seem to be keeping a balance of bringing in information, mostly via readings, and discussing them as a group, rather than in a hierarchical manner, each student having the opportunity to connect with their own experiences in relation to feminism and identity politics, and make artwork that reflects these issues. Some of the students are already versed and involved with feminist thinking and art making, and some are thinking about feminism specifically and making art for the first time.



JH: Do you work in collectives/groups? Can you talk about how that relates to feminism for you, if it does?

CB: I talk about feminism and apply it in my life, including editorial discussions working with editors/authors/artists/activists conditioned to see queer and feminist practice and theory as "cultural studies" rather than tools for actively and creatively expressing themselves and connecting meaningfully with one another.



On the left, patriarchy and chauvinism often go unchecked, and feminism is as often thought of, as it is in academic settings, as a subcategory, one of many liberation movements or postmodern, post-structuralist approaches to engage with—or not. Some old-left guys will talk about how identity politics splintered “the movement.” I operate on and share the belief that the strategies and tactical engagement of the Black Panther Party and radical queer and feminist cultural production irrepressibly appear and reappear as the most vital forms of resistance locally and globally—providing essential tactics and language employed by the recent Zapatista and anti-globalization movements.

*The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest's* current issue tries to take all this on. We're in mediation, and this issue is on the valences of the question, *how do we say we?* I've had an expanding group of people around me over the last six years with whom I regularly work through what we think is happening. Only recently I realized that even though working in this way is often a near-total pain in the ass, I hadn't been worn down or made afraid with all of the shit that's been going down since 9/11 because I never felt alone in working all that out. A good argument is a conversation.

JH: Cara mentioned that she's had a few “jaw-dropping moments” at feminist-art events over the last few weeks. Have you? What were they?

MN: One thing that was left to the sidelines for the most part throughout the events was the voice of artists of color on panels, and to an alarming degree. Shouldn't this be old news?

My work is most informed by feminisms dealing with issues of race and gender, from a bicultural Iranian American perspective. I question my level of surprise as some of the most articulate scholars, seemingly with good intention, sometimes with some unconsciousness, and sometimes with complete ignorance, continue to talk in disempowering ways about and for Middle Eastern women, I could, unfortunately, share too many examples.

SdL: A panelist at MOCA stating that we shouldn't focus on the omissions, the people left out [of WACK!], because those questions are divisive and distract us from the larger questions. These were the same arguments used by men to silence women-of-color feminists who were challenging race-based movements during the 1970s—as if there aren't differences in power that manifest themselves in the curation of shows, the selection of panelists, etcetera. Are these questions really “old”? How are they still relevant today, especially in a city like Los Angeles?

I am very disappointed by the exclusion/lack of space given to a history that has been really vital—the work of Chicana visual artists, writers, and activists that not only created a space/discourse/transformational practice for other working-class Chicanas but also challenged feminism in a multitude of ways and transformed feminist discourse and practice in the 1980s. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga's seminal anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* [1983], challenged racism within feminism and sexism and homophobia in nationalist movements. They began to break down essentialist paradigms and were a driving force in discussing oppression in its complexity by arguing for the need to discuss the intersection of multiple oppressions. In the Bay Area, a vibrant scene of women-of-color feminist artists, scholars, and activists organized conferences, poetry readings, film festivals, art exhibits. The cultural production served to politicize a generation of younger artists and activists who demanded that the canons in ethnic studies and women's studies be opened up, began organizing their own events, and also did community-based organizing centered around

issues relevant to working-class women of color such as work with women in prison, health issues, education, etcetera.

JH: What do you see artists (feminist-identified or otherwise) asking of feminism today?

CB: We want a dance party, we want cupcakes. We want better music—that's what we're getting. We want better design, better jobs—don't know, but my heart is swinging in the balance.

ER: What do *you* want from feminism today?

CB: I want revolution, get down. I want a dance party, I want cupcakes. I want good music. I want better design, better jobs—equality.

JFS: Yes, equality—and I want a feminism that seriously asks what we mean by equality and will be specific about naming it. Cara mentioned a global feminist agenda that included race and class and land use and social justice. Yes, I don't know how feminism would want to think equality or act in its name otherwise. The kind of feminism I want starts there. I don't think it works to try to think feminism—as an epistemology or as political action—without thinking of racism, class, colonialism, as if these were take-them-or-leave-them kinds of issues, other kinds of difference or the things that other feminisms or other feminists will talk about and care about. That makes it too easy to talk about and even fight for something that can mean “equality” in one context but naturalizes and actively perpetuates oppression in another. Mujeres Creando, an autonomist feminist group in La Paz, put it really well; they say that when women in a position of economic privilege demand equality, they don't want to be equal to the farmworkers or laborers or the pariahs of their society; they want to have the same rights to exploit that their husbands and male colleagues have.

ER: I want feminism to be a vanguard of radical inclusion oriented around struggles for justice and equality, nothing less. Feminism is and should be a site of coalition and alliance that commits itself to perpetual change and porous boundaries. And thus practitioners of feminist art are all people who ask the questions that reveal oppression and set the scenes for positive and complex identifications. Feminist art looks like everything—look for it everywhere.