

HYPERALLERGIC

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The Feminist Avant-Garde, Now More than Ever

Their only solution was to make their revolution their own way, without help and without precedent.



Thomas Micchelli May 20, 2017



Installation view of “WOMAN. FEMINIST AVANT-GARDE of the 1970s” (2017) from the Sammlung Verbund Collection, Mumok, Vienna (photo by Lisa Rasti, © Mumok)

VIENNA — With its array of more than 300 works by 48 artists, the scrupulously researched *WOMAN. FEMINIST AVANT-GARDE of the 1970s* is a timely and provocative exhibition that argues its points with care, precision, and a magical sense of simultaneity.

Curated by Gabriele Schor, the director of Sammlung Verbund, with Eva Badura-Triska, a curator at the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (Mumok), where the show opened on May 5th, *WOMAN* is less a celebration of the varieties of Feminist art than an examination of shared ideas and motivations.

In contrast to *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, presented at MoMA PS1 in 2008 — an exhibition that, as I wrote at the time, elucidated “a mutually supportive network that offered both a sense of purpose and a protected emotional space for experiment and play” — *WOMAN* emphasizes the position of the individual artist as an actor within a range of international movements, both aesthetic and political.

The presentation at Mumok is the seventh stop of a ten-city European tour, from Rome to Brno (unfortunately, there are no plans to bring the show to the US). Its current iteration, however, can be considered a homecoming, given that it is drawn entirely from the corporate collection of the Vienna-based Verbund AG, the largest electric company in Austria.

Schor, as Verbund’s in-house curator, initiated the collection’s focus on 1970s Feminist art. The stereotypical conception of a risk-free corporate collection, however, is immediately exploded by such graphic and aggressive works as Judy Chicago’s photolithograph “Red Flag” (1971), a crotch shot of a hand yanking a glistening, red, phallic tampon from a shadow-cloaked vagina, and Gina Pane’s “The Hot Milk” (1972), a vertical, double-column grid of mostly color photographs documenting a performance in which the artist slices her own back and face with a double-edged razor blade.

In her essay for the exhibition catalogue, Schor writes that Feminist art is “strikingly [...] not usually identified as an ‘avant-garde’” despite its political, social, and aesthetic correspondences to previous movements that were historically based on “the discursive paradigm of male artistic genius”:

The inability to perceive the links between ‘feminism’ and ‘avant-garde’ is thus a conspicuous blind spot in both art history and art criticism. [...] Yet the feminist art movement’s historic and pioneering achievements in the art of the past four decades is not in dispute. The protagonists of the feminist avant-garde wrote manifestos and pamphlets, established numerous women artists’ associations and journals, articulated a critique of art institutions, organized their own exhibitions, created groundbreaking work in terms of form as well as content, and sought to fuse art with life.



Renate Bertlmann, “Tender Pantomime” (1976), black and white photograph, from a six-part series (© Renate Bertlmann; Sammlung Verbund, Vienna)

The Feminist focus on photography, performance, film, and video was both a formal choice — a turn toward art forms that decisively “fuse art with life” — and a conscious break with the traditional medium-based hierarchies of Western art.

It was also a practical decision, one that obviated the need for a studio, which had become one of the hoariest clichés of “the discursive paradigm of male artistic genius.” Instead, art-making took to the streets, often via inflammatory encounters with an unsuspecting public, recorded on grainy black-and-white photos, Portapak tape, and Super-8 film.

WOMAN makes no attempt to gin up its frequently spartan schema with colorful graphics or digital displays. Instead, it turns the era’s simple, white-walled asceticism to its advantage through abrupt shifts in scale and visual rhythms; a lively interchange of floor sculptures, table vitrines, and pylons of CRT monitors; and framed photos mounted in rows, columns, clusters, and grids, some slightly asymmetrical to deliver a syncopated kick.

The result is a grisaille purism that feels authentic to the period without pretending to take you back in time: the display is resolutely museological throughout, redolent with parallels and correlations as subtle as they are illuminating.

One of the first works you’ll encounter in “Female Sexuality” — one of the exhibition’s four sections (the other three are “The Beautiful Body,” “Role-Plays,” and “Mother, Housewife, Wife”) — is Hannah Wilke’s “Super-T-Art” (1974), a large grid of 20 black-and-white photographs whose title plays on the words “Super Tart,” which she derived from the rock musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970). The series of photographs begins with the artist dressed in a Roman-style toga, which she gradually sheds and rewraps into a billowy loincloth,

vamping coquettishly, until she ends with her arms raised in mimicry of the Crucifixion.

Uncannily, the French artist ORLAN, in 1974-75, did a similar photo grid, “Occasional Striptease with Trousseau Sheets,” consisting of 18 self-portraits, at first costumed like Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s Saint Teresa, madonna-like, suckling a swaddled bundle of fabric, but by the fifteenth shot she’s not dressed at all, à la Botticelli’s Venus, with the final image simply the pile of sheets on the floor, as if she had ascended into heaven or melted into the earth.

Both works are intended as comments on Marcel Duchamp’s “The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even” (1915-23), one of the most noteworthy of art history’s countless embodiments of the male gaze. (The show also features Wilke’s notorious 1976 video, “Through the Large Glass,” in which she performs another striptease, this time at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, minimally obscured behind the cracked pane of Duchamp’s masterwork.)

Despite the surface resemblance of these two works, Schor and Badura-Triska afford you enough room to draw your own connections. They could have installed the two photo grids side-by-side, but that would have skewed our impression of the artists’ actions, emphasizing the striptease’s sensationalism rather than its ramifications as a social construct. Instead, the grids face each other from opposite sides of the gallery.

ORLAN’s striptease shoots an arrow from the sacred to the profane, a full unmasking of Bernini’s barely disguised eroticism, while Wilke’s performance is more ambiguous: her transformation from a Roman goddess to a transgendered Christ is too pointed to be unadulterated fun and too joyful for calculated blasphemy; either way, the apparent transition from paganism to Christianity occurs without the artist placing a value judgment on either.

This relatively small corner of the exhibition is a microcosm of its thematic richness, with images and ideas ricocheting around the installation, some intentionally and others through inference. In a photograph from her “S.O.S. Scarification Object Series” of 1975, Wilke portrays herself in a cowboy hat and round sunglasses, her bare torso covered in wads of chewing gum, 13 of which are mounted on nine sheets of paper (to a surprisingly sensuous, jewel-like effect) in a neighboring frame.

But she is also wielding two toy pistols that, in the free-associative interplay encouraged by the installation, link up with VALIE EXPORT’s armed and dangerous self-portrait, “Action Paints: Genital Panic” (1969), on the other side of the room. In the photo, EXPORT slumps on a bench while gripping an allegedly real machine gun and exposing herself via her jeans’ cut-out crotch. This in turn relates to Penny Slinger’s photo series of self-portraits as a bride dressed in a mock-wedding cake, which is similarly cut away to reveal the artist’s vagina.



Penny Slinger, "Wedding Invitation -2 (Art is just a piece of Cake)" (1973),

black and white photograph (© Penny Slinger. Courtesy Gallery Broadway 1602, New York; Sammlung Verbund, Vienna)

Slinger's bridal imagery then returns your thoughts to the Wilke/ORLAN riffs on Duchamp, a perspective that broadens your reception of the motif when it reappears in scabrous videos by Ewa Partum and Renate Bertlmann. The bride represents not only a connection to a key work of phallogentric Modernism, but also a flash point in society's idealization and subjugation of women — a balling-up of the warring strains of purity, desire, bondage, and freedom that animate the entire exhibition.

It's telling that Slinger's self-portraits greet you at the entrance to the exhibition's second half (*WOMAN* covers the third and fourth floors of the museum), and that the image described above, "Wedding Invitation — 2 [Art is Just a Piece of Cake]" (1973), is the second full-page reproduction to appear in the exhibition catalogue, after the Portuguese artist Helena Almeida's haunting photograph of a hand emerging from a darkened interior and resting on a partly opened casement window.

Almeida's photo is from "Study for Two Spaces," a series of hands draped over gates, bars, and grates that she made in 1977, a few years after the fall of Portugal's four-decade-long authoritarian dictatorship. The hands are neither bound nor free, but rest literally on a threshold between the two.

This liminality — balancing between the political and the poetic — stands out as an encapsulation of the work made by these women, who were as ready to turn the world upside down as their mostly male avant-garde predecessors, but were halted at the gate by the social status of their sex. Their only solution was to make their revolution their own way, without help and without precedent. As the Detroit-born artist Suzy Lake said in a symposium sponsored by the museum the day after the opening, "We didn't know who we were, but who we were not."



Annegret Soltau, “Selbst” (1975), black and white photograph on barit paper, from a 14-part series (© Annegret Soltau; Sammlung Verbund, Vienna)

The artists’ collective sense of having nothing to lose led them to explore areas that had less to do with personal branding and more to do with personal experience — actions that, in the aggregate, became individual entries in the ledger book of universal experience, expressed through the common themes and nested meanings running throughout the show.

In this regard, Schor and Badura-Triska’s light curatorial touch succeeds in bringing viewer and artwork together in active engagement. Although the show overall is grouped into four categories, its recurring images and subsets of meanings, such as those associated with the Wilke/ORLAN striptease, are woven through the exhibition with an almost Pynchonian sense of parallelism and coincidence (an impression underscored by the installation’s open-plan design, in which one section subtly informs the next). Objects and actions from both sides of the Atlantic may have been created independently of one another, but come together here as intuited agents of rebellion and resistance.

Suzy Lake’s phrase, “who we were not,” is provocatively reified in the exhibition’s two most powerfully phallogocentric artworks, paired by the

curators on the same wall: Judith Bernstein's "One Panel Vertical" (1978) — an example of the artist's lush Screw Drawings — in pitch-black charcoal on thick watercolor paper, and Lynda Benglis's infamous Artforum ad (which is actually from a portfolio of nine pigment prints called "SELF," 1970-1976/2012), depicting the artist brandishing a lifelike, extra-long dildo.

Those lampoons of male aggression are the center of a genitalia cul-de-sac, with the adjacent walls filled with fantasias on the vagina, with Judy Chicago's above-mentioned "Red Flag" and VALIE EXPORT's "Action Paints: Genital Panic" on the left-hand wall, and on the right, tenderly abstracted photographs by Friederike Pezold and sculpturally explicit ones by Suzanne Santoro.



Valie Export, "Tap and Touch Cinema" (1968), video, black and white,

sound (© Valie Export/ Bildrecht Wien 2016. Courtesy Galerie Charim, Vienna; Sammlung Verbund, Vienna)

These images lead you away from the overt aggression of the male organ to the covert power of female sexuality. Posters from ORLAN's performance, "The Artist's Kiss" (1976), in which she sold French kisses during the FIAC art fair outside the Grand Palais in Paris, an action that got her sacked from a job teaching art in a girls' school, hang near a monitor playing VALIE EXPORT's "Tap and Touch Cinema" (1968), a video of her encounter with a leering, hostile crowd as she invites people off the street to fondle her breasts (enclosed inside a box she wears like a halter top) while she times them with a stopwatch.

Less explicit but equally intimate is Sanja Iveković's "Opening at Tommaseo" (1977/2012), a photo series in which the artist, her mouth taped, silently greets visitors to her gallery opening by exchanging touches to their face and hands. A hidden microphone on Iveković's body records her heartbeat, and the resulting audio was played the following day in the exhibition space. As uncomfortably close as these performances may seem, a mental comparison with the lunatic antics of the Viennese Actionists, the all-male band of provocateurs who staged pageants of blood, gore, sex, and death at this same time, attests to their warmth, humor, and relative subtlety.

The struggle between the burgeoning power of women and society's efforts to repress it — the overarching theme of the show — is expressed mainly through staged photography and films. The artists bind their faces in tape (Renate Eisenegger); fabric (Lydia Schouten, in her savage video, "Sexobject," 1979/2016); and thread, with its echoes of domesticity (Annegret Soltau); or mash them against panes of glass, as in works by Katalin Ladik, Birgit Jürgenssen, and Ana Mendieta. It continues to be terribly unnerving to see these photographs of Mendieta's distorted face with the knowledge of her fall from the 34th-story window of her apartment in New York City's Greenwich Village, a death for which her husband, Carl Andre, was charged and acquitted.



Ana Mendieta, “Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)” (1972/1997), C-print, from a six-part series (© The Estate Ana Mendieta. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York; Sammlung Verbund, Vienna)

For a number of artists — notably Lynda Benglis, Lorraine O’Grady, Eleanor Antin, Marcella Campagnano, Karin Mack, Martha Rosler, Alexis Hunter, Martha Wilson, Suzy Lake, and Cindy Sherman — one way to control their own narrative was to purposefully dissemble, to retain the power of a secret identity while inhabiting the persona of another, in effect playing the Fool to male authority’s senile Lear. These roles are often defined by men’s expectations, such as Martha Wilson’s impersonations of six character types, from the satin-draped ideal of the Hollywood goddess to the more mundane realms of the housewife, the working girl, the professional, the earth-mother, and the lesbian, while a character like Lorraine O’Grady’s “Mlle Bourgeoise Noir” operates on her own racial and sexual plane.

Cindy Sherman has all but owned costumed self-abnegation for decades, but Wilson and Campagnano were doing it while she was still studying at Buffalo State College, where Lake was a direct influence. The works by Sherman in the exhibition date from those student years, when she was dressing up as various campy characters, male and female, white and black, sometimes cutting the photographic images from their blank backdrops and pasting them into comic vignettes against a white sheet of paper. Also on hand is the crude but imaginative 16mm stop-motion animation, *Doll Clothes* (1975), in which she depicts herself as an underwear-clad cutout in dozens of poses, trying on and taking off a series of outfits.

Sherman’s self-portraits, aside from the gender politics implied by the roles she plays, are among the most apolitical work on display, which could also be said of the otherworldly self-portraits and interiors of Francesca Woodman, whose photographs have often been scoured for signals of her early death by suicide at the age of 22. The relatively large selection of prints here, however, underscores not the presence of a death wish but the meticulousness, variety, and imagination of her

artistry. The work of these artists does not so much depart from the core idea of a Feminist avant-garde, as serve as a complement to the more expressly political statements, a decidedly female focus pulled into reverse angle.

The irony plaguing this show, of course, is the degree of its relevance. While there have been incremental gains since the 1970s in the institutional recognition of women artists — that is, if you take zero as a baseline — the issues of freedom, equal rights, economic parity, social justice, and personal respect are, if anything, in retreat. The president of the United States, a man whose sexual and racial attitudes were retrograde when they were formed in the '70s, and who remains mentally and emotionally arrested there, seems hellbent on recreating the decade's rolling scandals, escalating wars, FBI investigations, special counsels, protest marches, and violence in the streets.

In 1972, Richard M. Nixon's reelection campaign slogan was "President Nixon. Now more than ever." That same year, Renate Bertlmann made "The Indiscreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie," named after the title of Luis Buñuel's satirical film (also 1972), a work adorned with metal filaments sprouting from the intersection of two linear shapes, a junction implying a hairy rectum.

It's one of many affronts devised by Bertlmann in a breathtaking array of media: drawing, photography, sculpture, film, installation, and wearable art, including a set of finger gloves made from pacifiers pierced with X-Acto blades — a horrifying concept on every level — transforming her fingers into talons and her hands into lethal weapons (as documented in the 1981 photograph "Knife-Pacifier-Hands").

Such works were not merely conduits of outrage in the face of repression, injustice, incompetence, and corruption; they were correctives to an aesthetic that referred only to itself, a refocusing of art on the body, and a realignment of concerns from the formal to the social and political. Disdainful of the market, convention, and

boundaries, the only goal that really mattered to these insurgent, untamable, experiential artists was to be able to see without filters; everything else followed from there.

WOMAN. FEMINIST AVANT-GARDE of the 1970s *continues at Mumok (Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Museumsplatz 1, Vienna) through September 3.*

Travel to Vienna and hotel accommodations were provided by Mumok in connection to the opening of the exhibition and its related symposium.