

THE ART OF FEMINISM

Images that Shaped the Fight
for Equality, 1857-2017



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Top: Penny Slinger, *On Her Lips, You Kiss Your Own*, from *An Exorcism*, 1970–77, still

Penny Slinger developed the series titled *An Exorcism* over seven years, a period that coincided with the raising of her political consciousness. The series started life as a film, made in collaboration with her partner, the filmmaker Peter Whitehead, at a near-derelect stately home in Northamptonshire. After pausing to return to London and work with a women's theater group, Slinger renewed the project, this time working through, or exorcizing, gendered social conventions. Slinger acted out the scenes herself, working with her girlfriend Suzanka Fraey.

Bottom: Carla Accardi, *Triplíce Tenda*, 1969

Carla Accardi studied painting in Florence, but lived and worked in Rome. In the early 1960s she gave up painting on canvas and began using the transparent *sicofail* (plastic wrap). By the mid-1960s Accardi had developed a sculptural practice. *Triplíce Tenda* (*Triple Tent*) is an important example of this practice, which seems to combine object and environment, place and space. In 1970, Accardi formed the feminist group *Rivolta Femminile* (Feminine Revolt), with Carla Lonzi and Elvira Banotti.

Many artists and artist groups reflected on the home as a site of entrapment. Works such as Bobby Baker's *Edible Family in a Mobile Home* (1977), the Kanonklubben's *Damebilleder* (1970), and *Womanhouse* (1971) by the students and teachers of the California Institute of Art's Feminist Art Program used the space of the artwork to create immersive environments that recreated the suburban home as a nightmare. Baker's mother figure had a teapot for a head, from which tea was served for the span of the work's short duration. The performance length was itself determined by the availability of the cake that made up the bodies of the father, son, and baby, which Baker served with the tea. *Womanhouse* featured mannequins quartered by linen closet shelves and buried in bathtubs of sand. In the Danish *Damebilleder*, members of the all-woman art group Kanonklubben set up tableaux exploring washing up, beauty, and sex. These living images moved from oppressive situations to empowering ones and included a self-defense class, a celebration, and a camp during which members of the group lived together and talked to visitors.

If many artists explored either the limits or the creative potential of the home, others reflected on the uneven access many women had to stable and secure places in which to live or work. These works show the diversity and critical acuity of defining feminism during this period, and include Faith Ringgold's painting *For The Woman's House* (1971), made for the women's prison at Rikers Island, New York. Ringgold's oil painting in eight segments shows women doing things in the world—from directing traffic to playing basketball to giving a political address. The painting gave the women inmates a window on a world that hadn't yet come into fruition. Nil Yalter, Judy Blum, and Nicole Croiset's *La Roquette Prison de Femmes* (1974) depicts a different view of prison life. The installation pictures an often invisible constituency of women, even in the context of feminist activism, and shows the vulnerability they face both inside and outside the cell, as well as the solidarity and community formed in the woman-only space. In this context, confinement takes on a very different meaning.

The works of Carrie Mae Weems and Sonia Boyce also describe a more complex idea of home and belonging. Weems's *Family Pictures and Stories* (1978–84) is a photographic series documenting the artist's family. The series depicts family members in detail and with realism, showing middle-class African-American family life in

contrast to the negative conclusions of the Moynihan Report (1965), which controversially argued that single-mother families hindered racial equality. The black British artist Sonia Boyce's painting *Lay back, keep quiet and think of what made Britain so great* (1986) considers the experience of migration and diaspora. The work's four panels combine the Victorian wallpaper prints of William Morris—a famous exponent of domestic socialism—with scenes of imperialist print culture framed by missionary crucifixes—two signifiers of British colonial power. The artist's self-portrait in the fourth panel looks out to the viewer from a background of gentility bound with struggle. Boyce's work powerfully communicates the violent foundations that supported colonial homemaking, and that remained embedded in silence.

Other themes that arose during this period include the politicization of the home as a site of consumption. This is clear in the exploration of products, in the reproduction of the home, and in the maintenance of the housewife herself. Such issues are evident in a number of works made beyond the context of the women's liberation movement—before the first protests in the United States, Great Britain, and Europe—but also in a global context. Sometimes associated with pop art, the works of Maria Pinińska-Beres, Isabel Oliver, Eulàlia Grau, and many others show the home as a consumer battleground.

A number of artists sought to reenvision the home as a site for new kinds of life and different kinds of relationships. Italian artist Carla Accardi's *Triplíce Tenda* (*Triple Tent*, 1969) is a painted plastic tent, described by the art historian Teresa Kittler as a reflection of Accardi's interest in a utopian mode of flexible living, resistant to the closed spaces of Catholic family life. Meanwhile *Berlin* (1976), by Rose English and Sally Potter, recast a grand family home in London, along with a local ice rink and swimming pool, as the site for a somber performance. With a chorus of suited dancers on the fireplace, the home and its fixtures were transformed into a place of uncanny familiarity. Likewise Penny Slinger's photo-collage series *An Exorcism* (1970–71) used a near-derelect stately home in Northamptonshire, United Kingdom, as a backdrop to a melodrama of self-discovery, including sequences of erotic acts between two women. This work, like Louise Nevelson's *Black Wall* (1959), imagines the traditional home broken down and rearranged, able to hold what we might now call a queer feminist domesticity.