

Exquisite Acts and Everyday Rebellions: Notes from the Trenches

by Elana Mann

(Note from the author: This essay was first published in 2007 on the Exquisite Acts and Everyday Rebellions website)

"There is no doubt that public identification as a feminist does carry risk. Young women are often afraid of the word, even when they are drawn to the concepts. They want to be at the center. Who wouldn't? And, largely because of feminist activism and feminism's analysis of social hierarchies, this has become an achievable goal." --Mira Schor [\[1\]](#)

"Exquisite Acts and Everyday Rebellions: 2007 CalArts Feminist Art Symposium and Exhibition" is organized by a group of students dedicated to activating and interrogating contemporary Feminist practice through collaboration, connection and exchange. While we recognize and pay homage to the legacy of Feminist art practice, we challenge our own community to revitalize Feminism discourse for the current generation of students and artists at CalArts and beyond.

Much attention has been paid lately to the contemporary state of Feminism, due in part to the highly anticipated Feminist art survey, "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution; 1965-1980" opening March 2007 at MoCA. Recent and upcoming activities in New York and Los Angeles are responding to and representing Feminist art with exhibitions such as "Multiple Vantage Points: Southern California Women Artists" at Barnsdall Park, "Shared Women" at LACE and "The Feminist Future," a symposium held at MoMA in January, 2007. However, the penetration of women artists into the gallery and museum system is still shallow at best. In an article entitled "Where the girls aren't," Jerry Saltz (an art writer for the *Village Voice*) outlines the statistics of solo shows by women artists in 2006, which were at a bleak 23 percent. The statistics for solo shows by woman artists in museums is even lower, at 14 percent. Saltz writes, imploringly, "We all have to feel threatened by the bias. We must see it as a moral emergency. Having mainly men show means that more than half the story is going untold." [\[2\]](#) A more poignant title for Saltz's article would have been "Where the Feminists aren't" for, after all, Feminism speaks to under-represented minorities of all kinds, not just "girls." More importantly, how will this recent outpouring of Feminist ideas in large art institutions affect the patriarchal and capitalist systems of the art world? And how will Feminist artists respond?

As the dialogue brews over the "crisis of Feminism" established Feminist voices, such as Mira Schor, and Coco Fusco seem frustrated and fiery, especially with the "younger generation." Schor and Fusco fiercely criticize the neglect of Feminist principles in art education and reprimand younger artists who publicly revoke and rebuke Feminism. On a recent list-serve, Coco Fusco writes about the path many young women artists are taking today,

"Talk to those so-called radical knitter grrrls in a few years, when they are deciding

whether or not to go to grad school and what sort of career they want to carve out. If they choose 'hot' MFA programs they will be routinely visited by famous female artists who will tell them in private in their studios that feminism is a bad word and it means bad work. They will be visited by critics who will yawn and stare at the floor if they talk about feminism or identity. They will be counseled by "sensitive" men to be "post-identitarian" and "anti-essentialist." They will sit through painful group crits in which everyone will avoid discussing feminism - over and over, until they are disciplined through peer pressure into rejecting any feminist identification. I've seen it happen over and over - even to seemingly tough and radical dyke students who start grad school asking about Judith Butler and finish "complaining" that queer politics on campus is coercive and boring." [3]

Many other Feminist artists from the 70's, such as Faith Wilding, are not as critical of the younger generation of woman artists, but still admit to a feeling of disappointment and pity. Wilding writes of a CR ([Consciousness Raising](#)) session she lead in 1998:

"As they spoke it became clear to me how differently the challenges and risks of being feminists were experienced by these women compared to my experience. I was moved by the complexity of their positions and choices. These women had grown up enjoying many of the "benefits" feminists had struggled for in the past. And yet they often found themselves groping for ways to individually confront the real issues of sexism still operating in their school, home and work environments. They were sensitive to the privileged positions they occupied as educated (mostly white) middle-class women, yet they felt alone-perhaps aware of the precariousness of this privilege-bereft both of a feminist support network and of viable new strategies to organize group action." [4]

In both of the writings above, Wilding and Fusco stress the need for a reinvestigation into Feminist history; they expose the patriarchal and economic systems that continue to maintain gender, race and class inequality and oppression. However, they seem to question the ability of the younger generation to take on these important issues.

As a young artist organizing a Feminist art exhibition and symposium, I am in solidarity with many of the arguments put forth by Schor, Wilding and Fusco. However, I find it both easy and difficult to place myself in all of their discussions, as is always the case with broad generalizations and sweeping statements regarding "my generation." While I am grateful to have these artists as role models, what really connects me to a Feminist discourse are some events that took place in the early 90's, when I was twelve and thirteen. The first event was my Bat-Mitzvah, which is a traditional Jewish coming of age ceremony. My mother, who acted as my dutiful and brilliant tutor, finally held her Bat-Mitzvah at the age of 40, while I was able to lead an entire service by myself at the traditional age of twelve. A year later, John Salvi walked into an abortion clinic in Brookline, MA (fifteen minutes from where I lived) murdered two women and wounded five clinic workers. In response to the shootings, I attended a demonstration where I marched with a giant bloody coat hanger made of paper maché, a symbol whose meaning I barely understood. Meanwhile, the Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill hearings were going on around the time I started menstruating; this was part of my introduction to ideas

about "womanhood." The slogan of 1970s feminism, "the personal is political" connects me with second wave feminism, yet the events that took place during the early 90's shaped my personal landscape of what it means to be a woman and a Feminist. [\[5\]](#)

Certainly, I benefited from changes in society that the second wave feminists fought for. These changes have positively affected my religious upbringing and my ability to have more choices in terms of sex, my body, my education, my career, etc. However, after learning at a young age about the tenuousness of a woman's position in the United States, I do not believe that I ever took my situation for granted (although older Feminists may prove me wrong). Still, I encounter many women and men who are afraid of Feminism, fearful of calling themselves Feminist and ignorant about Feminist issues. I often feel similarly overwhelmed and confused about what Feminism means today, what my place is as a woman in a male-dominated world and how to empower myself in an art context.

Fortunately, I met other women and men who were asking themselves similar questions and we decided to embark on this quest together. Here are some goals we have collectively outlined for ourselves:

1. We are asking our own questions about Feminism, about being a woman, a "white" person, a "non-white" person, a man, an immigrant, a queer, a young artist.
2. We intend to learn from Feminist history and to claim it as our own, as part of our legacy.
3. We are empowering ourselves in our local and global communities to make our voices heard and to help other marginalized communities speak up and speak out.
4. We are experiencing collective and collaborative action and also supporting each other in our individual work.
5. We are fighting against sexism, racism, capitalism, ageism, geocentrism and all other societal forces that disempower and marginalize groups of people.
6. We are imploding the stereotypes of Feminists and Feminism and defining for ourselves what Feminism means to us (not to you or to them).
7. We are inclusive of all genders, races, nationalities and ages in our cause.

I feel grateful for the support of CalArts faculty, students and alumni who are involved in "Exquisite Acts and Everyday Rebellions." I am doubly blessed to have such strong female role models who have helped inspire and encourage this project, as our group marches on, frightened and brash, impetuous, thoughtful, rebellious and exquisite.

Footnotes: [\[back to top\]](#)

1. Schor, Mira, "The ism that dare not speak its name" *Documents*, No. 15, Spring/Summer 1999

2. Saltz, Jerry, "Where the girls aren't; Art and apartheid: the prime real-estate is still a men's club," *The Village Voice*, September 21st, 2006.

3. Fusco, Coco, writing on the "Faces" blister, December 3rd, 2006.
4. Wilding, Faith, "Don't Tell Anyone We Did It!" *Documents*, No. 15, Spring/Summer 1999.
5. See "Women's Liberation: Notes from the Second Year," *Journal of the Radical Feminists*, New York, 1970, for historical articles on consciousness-raising and the concept of "the personal is political."