

## No More Nice Girls: Feminist Art as Revision

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Nothing says “the sixties” like the word *revision*. Barely anything survives in the academy that was not upended or blue-penciled in the wake of the battles of Berkeley and the Sorbonne. Revisionism, the muse of the moment, seeped into the arts like corrosive salt through a fresco.

Moving with the times was easiest in the arts, where avant garde postures stand bail for serious attention to the *nature* of the times. Repudiation of inherited models of aesthetic worth was mistaken for redemption from the necessity of them. The fledgling feminist art movement dismissed hard-won mastery as “mere skill” and snubbed the canon of Western art as evidence of male dominion over the criteria for legitimacy and achievement.

The movement rallied women whose resentments welcomed an assault on taste. Ideology gilded mediocrity—and ritual grouching—as celebrations of “women’s way of knowing.” Its boiler-plate idiom of class struggle set adrift concepts of (male) greatness. Timely academic *kriegspiel*, dedicated to promoting party spirit among women, validated—however inadvertently—the 1963 assertion of Leonid Ilychev, Khrushchev’s spokesman for the arts: “Art belongs to the sphere of ideology.” Identity politics was *In* and here to stay. Much of today’s art and culture mimics the intellectual fray of the 1960s, itself an imitation of contests begun in the 1910s and 1920s. From the 1909 *Futurist Manifesto* to the 1963 Fluxus promise to purge the world of

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“dead art,” heady *pronunciamentos* on the reconstruction of everything were—and still are—a recurrent feature of modernism.

The feminist art movement’s luxurious cant and mélange of no-styles took root in the *Kampfzeit* rhetoric of the sixties. No more nice girls. No more counterrevolutionary submission to male definitions of culture. No appropriate “language of form” existed for women, so it was time to get bawdy, stop catering to the depraved tastes of the bourgeoisie, and throw out the spiritual weapons of a dying class.

Valerie Solanas’s *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* (Society for Cutting Up Men) was a minor but wholly characteristic offering.<sup>1</sup> It stumbled into art history in the axial year 1968—the year Solanas shot Andy Warhol. The tenor of the text is consistent with the title of her first play, *Up Your Ass*, greeted by Norman Mailer as “the magnetic north of the feminist movement.”<sup>2</sup> Solanas strides forward to slay Great Art, a swindle produced and validated by men:

The male, having a very limited range of feelings and, consequently, very limited perceptions, insights and judgments...cannot be an artist. How can he who is not capable of life tell us what life is all about? A “male artist” is a contradiction in terms. A degenerate can only produce degenerate “art.”...[T]hey *have* to see beauty in turds because, so far as they can see, turds are all they’ll ever have.<sup>3</sup>

Shulamith Firestone pocketed a fine art degree from the Art Institute of Chicago and followed up with polemical justification for repealing existing notions of excellence. It is impossible to know how much her antagonism to traditional scales of merit owes to her own possible failures as an artist. The only thing on record is her 1970 *Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*,<sup>4</sup> which channeled sexual hostility through a filter of bush-league Marxism and loose bits from Christopher Caudwell, a British communist writing in the 1930s who championed advanced society’s ultimate freedom from biological necessity.

Caudwell’s fantasy appealed to the dogmatic utopian and co-founder of the Redstockings. Firestone insisted that the oppression of women as a class

<sup>1</sup>Valerie Solanas, *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* (Society for Cutting Up Men), <http://www.womynkind.org/scum.htm>.

<sup>2</sup>See Norman Mailer, *The Prisoner of Sex* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).

<sup>3</sup>Solanas, *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*.

<sup>4</sup>Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (William Morrow, 1970; New York: Farrar Strauss, Giroux, 2003).

“goes back beyond recorded history to the animal kingdom itself.”<sup>5</sup> Feminists have to question, not just all of Western culture, but “the organization of culture itself, and further, even the very organization of nature.”<sup>6</sup> What we are conditioned to call art is an artificial category promoted by the bipolar gender trap from which technology can liberate us. Guys and dolls, unisex at the millennium!

In debunking the myth of the Great (male) Artist, the women’s movement hatched myths of its own. Art was hailed as one of those things that women do naturally, like lactating or menstruating. *Instinct is art; we are the earth.* Along came the archetype of the Great Goddess, gynergenic aesthetics and the litany of self-worshipping conceits trumpeted by a generation of women artists. Solanas again: “The true artist is every self-confident, healthy female, and in a female society the only Art, the only Culture, will be conceited, kooky, funky females grooving on each other and on everything else in the universe.”<sup>7</sup>

The nonpareil of groovy, full-frontal feminism remains Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*. Her mammoth cunnilingus-as-communion table was recently installed in perpetuity in the Brooklyn Museum’s new Center for Feminist Art, the world’s first cathedralette to feminism as an aesthetic category.<sup>8</sup> A huge triangular buffet is laid with thirty-nine place settings representing the stylized pudenda of specific women, real and imaginary. Vaguely suggestive of an open flower, each serving platter-sized vulva is prettily decorated with emblems of the woman’s attributes (e.g., composer Ethel Smyth’s vaginal opening is formed by the curve of—guess!—a baby grand). This is Ms. Chicago’s “butterfly-vagina” imagery for women hungry for affirmative symbols. The incongruity of the imagery and its solemn feminist purpose is lost on bien pensant curators.

Labial display, a recurring feature of feminist art, found its mirror image in the striptease culture of gay males who put themselves on show as fruits of the old guard’s cultural decline. It was a short walk from the transvestite flamboyance of Candy Darling, a Warhol superstar, to the coy contrivances of Cary Leibowitz, a.k.a. Candyass, and the multiple self-portraits of Yasumasa Morimura in drag, hands crossed over the family jewels. Robert

<sup>5</sup>Firestone, *Dialectic of Sex*, 4.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Solanas, *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*.

<sup>8</sup>See [http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner\\_party/](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party/).

Mapplethorpe's S&M photographs come readily to mind here, but the full roster of artist provocateurs is too long to recap. What matters is that the history of art was indicted as the history of Male Art—and until the late twentieth century, largely *heterosexual* male art.

Womanart's peculiar accomplishments coincided with the assault on public taste by camp sensibility, the gay male wrecking ball. What art historian Linda Nochlin derided as “the white male Western viewpoint” stood in the dock with heterosexuality itself as an agent of sexist domination. *Hey, hey, ho, ho, hetero-normativity has got to go*. And while you are at it, take what Marcia Tucker, former director of The New Museum, called “Western male ‘rationality’” with you, too.

Female artists aligned with gay men against the coercive power of norms, whether aesthetic or sexual. Mutually reinforcing, feminist art theory and queer aesthetics egged each other on in sorties against transmitted understanding of artistic achievement. Together they gave us what academia might call *the poetics of transgression*. Both were—still are—vulgar initiatives that traded on the susceptibilities of their audience.

As Firestone had grasped, class analysis is a beautiful piece of work, but it fails at the taffy pull on nature that gender feminism required. That kind of heavy lifting needed help from men happy to take their own swing at the dominant culture. Among radical feminists, male sexuality—phallic power—was acceptable so long as it was directed toward other men. A straight man is the class enemy; a gay man is, well, probably a size 14 or larger.

Camp's puckish vulgarity complemented Womanart's sentimental and styleless vulgarity. Both were sententious, narcissistic, and stagy. Feminism's Great Mother was as much a high camp artifice as anything that played on the drag belt. Exaggerated grievances sought right of entry into the arts for identity politics in all its uncombed militancy. Operating in tandem, the goddess and the drag queen created a platform for more than Womanart's aggressive amateurism. They also spearheaded the mainstreaming of homosexuality. When all remnants of regressive concepts of obscenity had been swept away, the gay “lifestyle” would not only be tolerated. It would be validated and embraced.

By now, we are sodden with orthodoxies of self-expression that accommodate porno-chic, AIDS art, body art, shock art, theologically illiterate mockeries of Christianity, or any display of ideological kitsch that accords with one or another fashionable academic plank. Writing last year in

*First Things*, Roger Kimball was blunt: “The list of atrocities is long, familiar and laughable. In the end, though, the effect has been anything but amusing; it has been a cultural disaster.”<sup>9</sup>

The effect of *Womanart* and its brood, valorizing the lewd along with the maladroit, has spread well beyond the specialized precincts of gallery and museum culture. By holding a funhouse mirror to serious matters and ridiculing objections to the distortion, it succeeded in belittling the complexities of our common life. At the same time, it helped ramrod unexamined agendas past open discussion in a campaign to dictate premature, irresponsible consensus.

When the arts take it upon themselves to manipulate not only arenas of taste but, more significant, attitudes toward sexual mores—cleansed of all reference to societal repercussions—we have paddled backwards to a duplicitous idealism. Imitations of the ideological contests of the 1910s and 1920s, even played unwittingly as farce, orphan everyone of grace of mind and impoverish the shared culture that underwrites our common good. A candid stocktaking of the feminist art movement and its revisionist catechism would be useful.

Meantime, the sixties—still breathing—have a playground in the arts.

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<sup>9</sup>Roger Kimball, “The End of Art,” *First Things*, June/July 2008, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/05/002-the-end-of-art-2>.