

Gendered:  
Art and Feminist Theory



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By

Tal Dekel

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

Gendered: Art and Feminist Theory,  
by Tal Dekel

This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-4219-2, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4219-8

To my mother, Eva Oster



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	ix
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Part I: First-Generation Feminist Art</b>	
Chapter One.....	10
An Historical View: The Birth of Feminist Art	
Chapter Two.....	21
A Kaleidoscopic View: The Proliferation of Feminist Art Streams	
Chapter Three.....	86
Attitudes Towards 1970s' Feminist Art	
<b>Part II: Test Case</b>	
Chapter One.....	98
The <i>Post-Partum Document</i> : The Exception that Proves the Rule	
Chapter Two.....	122
Motherhood and the Feminist Discourse: An On-Going Debate	
Chapter Three.....	129
The Absence of Maternal Representation in First-Generation Feminist Art	
<b>Part III: A Re-Reading</b>	
Chapter One.....	136
American Versus European Feminist Art: Does a Dichotomy Really Exist?	

Chapter Two .....	141
Postmodernism: Early Streams	
Chapter Three .....	148
The “Death of the Author”—Vive la Femme Auteur	
<b>Afterword</b>	
Feminism and Women’s Art in Israel: Influences and Correlation with American Feminist Art .....	153
Notes .....	181
Bibliography .....	185
Index of Names .....	203

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research developed out of my doctoral dissertation, as I began lecturing in the Women and Gender Studies program at Tel Aviv University. Numerous people have accompanied me through these years to whom I am indebted. Firstly, I would like to thank Prof. Nurit Kenaan-Kedar for the trust and deep interest she demonstrated in the work from its conception to its birth and growth. My gratitude also goes to Dr. Ktsia Alon for reading the manuscript and making constructive and insightful suggestions for its improvement; to Dr. Hadara Schefflan-Katzav for her willingness to share her deep and extensive knowledge with respect to motherhood and feminism; and to Dr. Dalit Baum, for her sharpening and refining of processes and principles within the feminist discourse in Israel.

I would like to thank Geora Rosen, editor-in-chief of the Red Line series of the Kibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, for his confidence in the importance of publishing the original Hebrew version of this volume. My deep gratitude also goes to Liat Keren for her meticulous and intelligent editing of the English version of the book, and to Shlomit Lola Nehama, editor of the Hebrew version. Special thanks to Liat Daudi for her unwavering support over the course of these years, and to my children, Ran and Paz, for their patience throughout the long hours I devoted to research and writing.

Finally, I want to express my deep and enduring appreciation to my parents, Eva and Ariel Oster, for granting me the privilege of experiencing an interpersonal dynamic from which I have learnt and integrated into my own life the importance of feminist ideology and the principles it seeks to inculcate—for me personally and for us as a society.



# INTRODUCTION

## 1. The Scandal: Is This Feminist Art?



FIGURE 1-1: Lynda Benglis, *Untitled* (ad in the November 1974 *Artforum* Magazine), 1974. Colour photograph©Lynda Benglis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

In the specific context of this journal, it [the photo, T.D.] exists as an object of extreme vulgarity. Although we realize that it is by no means the first instance of vulgarity to appear in the magazine, it represents a qualitative leap in that genre, brutalizing ourselves and, we think, our readers. *Artforum* has, over the past few years, made conscious efforts to support the movement for women's liberation, and it is therefore doubly shocking to encounter in its pages this gesture that reads as a shabby mockery of the aims of that movement. (Alloway, Kozloff, Krauss, Masheck, and Michelson 1974: 9)

This was the reaction of the editors of the prestigious American journal *Artforum* to Lynda Benglis' photograph (FIG. 1), published in the November 1974 issue. The photograph presents an image of a naked woman standing defiantly and holding a double dildo to her pubis. The image is of the artist herself, the photograph forming part of a series entitled *Sexual Mockeries*. Benglis originally intended the image to serve as an artistic statement accompanying a feature article on her work written

by Robert Pincus for *Artforum*. Although she hoped that the image would be pulled out like a centrefold, the editorial board refused to publish it in such a form. Ultimately, Benglis found a way around the problem by presenting it as a commercial advertisement spread over two-pages (Richmond 2005: 25).

The piece provoked a wave of response—enthusiastic and condemnatory alike—some readers of the journal even cancelling their subscription to the journal in objection to its inclusion. Although the editorial letter—published by leading figures in the art world of the time in the following issue—was one of the fiercest reactions (Richmond 2005: 26), similar views were expressed by numerous critics, some of them associated with feminist criticism. The latter included Cindy Nemser, editor of the *Feminist Art Journal*, who, in a highly critical op-ed article, described Benglis as an artist uncertain of her artistic and feminist path and prepared to exploit the platform afforded her by the pages of an established journal in order to draw attention to herself in a way which debased the female body (Nemser 1974).

The feminist subject matters Benglis sought to raise by means of the photograph—and the profoundly political criticism it represented—escaped the understanding of many (Cottingham 2000: 103). Thus, for example, her assertive posture—as if preparing to perform an act of penetration—was intended to demonstrate an “unnatural” form of behaviour. While appearing as though she was forcing her way into prohibited places and roles, her intention was to draw attention to women’s lack of access to cultural and artistic power. Likewise, the choice to include her own body in the photo symbolised the reclamation of her feminine potency by exercising her human right to act both as a subject and as a woman—a choice exercised by many of her contemporary male artists, at times via extremely provocative images. Her body posture and facial expression similarly imitated degrading advertising and the use of the female body within the pornography industry in order to reveal the ways in which women are exploited and oppressed—physically, psychologically, economically, and socially.<sup>1</sup>

As reactions to the photograph echoed throughout the art world and feminist and public discourses, it became evident that Benglis had struck a nerve amongst her contemporaries with respect to ethical, aesthetic, and political issues alike. This sensitivity was directly associated with contemporary cultural attitudes towards the body, sexuality, and the status of women. While she published the photograph with the deliberate goal of stimulating a broad political discussion of salient social issues, however,

she appears not to have anticipated that it would become an iconic symbol for an entire generation—namely, the feminist artists of the 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

Women artists whose work was informed by a feminist awareness emerged as a distinct artistic movement for the first time in Western history in the 1970s in the United States and Europe, acquiring the label “feminist art”. This was an historic moment, constituting the first encounter between the fields of art, social activism, and intellectual and political thinking under the ideational influence of the feminist movement. The conjunction led to the emergence of an art and theory whose ramifications left their clear stamp on the lives of women throughout the world.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1970s, American women artists imbued with the spirit of radical feminism used their work to demonstrate the conceptual influence of feminism in its many and varied forms. Engaging with numerous issues relating to the status and rights of women, they established a clear link between their art and their lives as women. Frequently, they depicted the quotidian lives of women—small, seemingly unimportant moments. From their perspective, every subject—including those which, prior to that point, had been deemed trivial, minor, and (thus) “feminine”—were worthy of discussion and museum exhibition: issues related to housekeeping and child raising, the difficulties of making a living, over-friendly bosses with a habit of patting their behinds, or body-image issues manifested in the worried looks they gave to their expanding waistline in the mirror.

Art played a significant role in the social process which gave impetus to the American radical feminist movement. Through their artistic activity, this group of artists not only expressed feminist ideas but also helped realize them by questioning traditional conventions. When Lynda Benglis exposed her naked body provocatively attached to a dildo, her message was unequivocally political. Other artists similarly employed their personalities and corporality in the most direct and sensual of manners in order to express political ideas and principles. Innovative and revolutionary in both form and content, this art was regarded as representing one of the peaks of the second wave of feminism.

As Kathleen Wentrack points out, feminist artists in Europe were also addressing the status of women in society during this period—although the circumstances on the continent were very different from those in the United States:

By the mid-1970s the prevalence of the feminist art movement in the United States contrasted with the less visible movement in many European countries ... In the United States the women’s movement extended readily to the arts, but in Europe politics and art had a more complicated

relationship. For many feminists in several European countries art was regarded as a privileged activity and not a place for agitation. (Wentrack 2012: 77-78)

Despite these disparities, European women created important feminist art during this decade. Western historiography contends that three central waves can be discerned in the development of feminism and the feminist discourse: the first, which emerged in the nineteenth century, the second, which arose in the mid-1960s, and the third, which developed in the late 1980s. The first wave was both European and American, women on both sides of the Atlantic beginning to organise themselves collectively with a clear-cut political agenda, protest against the existing patriarchal order, and promote female equality and social status. Like the suffragettes who fought for the right to vote—liberal feminist activists struggled to achieve equality for women in education and the business sector, to help women suffering from poverty or rescue those trapped in prostitution, and to increase awareness of freedom of choice in matters of reproduction, etc.

The second wave of feminism—the artistic consequences of which are the subject of this book—also manifested itself in both Europe and the United States, being directly linked to the birth of the Women’s Liberation Movement. The third wave—which is sometimes regarded as extending into the early 1990s—remains prominent today, reflecting clear affinities with postmodernism, undermining traditional disciplines and questions and deconstructing meta-narratives and the notion of a single objective, absolute, transcendent Truth by positing multiple “truth(s)”. Contemporary feminist discourse belonging to the postmodernist third wave, it thus reflects different—and sometimes even contradictory—emphases embodying a complex and heterogeneous reality.

While historically the feminist movement was accompanied by a broad set of profound societal changes—whose consequences have improved the lives of many women—issues stemming from the very fact of being a woman in contemporary society still exist. Women today still frequently find themselves dealing with chauvinism and sexism as though the century-old feminist movement had never arisen. Although some opine that the feminist movement is *passé* because the fight for equality has been fulfilled, every woman being free today to choose her own path—whether as housewife, career-oriented, or other—the vast majority of women still face daunting challenges. Now, rather than having to cope with straightforward choices—such as being a mother or pursuing a career—most must deal with the multiple aspects and facets characteristic of postmodern life.

Many women feel frustration and disappointment with the achievements of the feminist movement and the general status of women in society. The repression of women overtly persists, at times taking crudely open forms, on other occasions being latent, below the surface, or embodied in inscrutable shapes. Much work evidently still remains before women can act as/for themselves in order to win the battle against repression and the accepted social hierarchy. Feminism continuing to bear a social stigma at times, the mere word “feminist” puts many people off. Even a brief conversation with women who declare that they are not feminists, however, reveals that many of them support and identify with feminist concepts. As feminist psychologist Ariella Friedman notes, “An identification with the material exists alongside an objection to the identity” (Friedman 1999: 20-22).

Despite addressing an aesthetic and artistic field, this book seeks to advance the feminist mission of bridging the gap between form and content, substance and identity. In this way, it reflects—and hopefully contributes to—the establishment of feminism both as a way of life and as an academic discipline. The latter trend, manifest in recent years, is closely associated with the growth of Gender Studies programs. The term “sex”—which traditionally signified the “natural”, biological differences between men and women—has now been replaced by the word “gender”, the new terminology reflecting the dismantling of accepted meanings and a probing of the distinction between the two sexes that calls for a (re-)examination of the social-conditioning system and socio-cultural conventions which shape it. The academic feminist discourse practiced in Women’s Studies programs and other branches within the social sciences employs the term “gender” as the essential foundation for analysis and criticism. As critic Hannah Naveh defines the field of gender studies, it constitutes “a base and method of sceptical, challenging thinking, neither dogmatic nor Establishment” (Naveh 2006: 35).

## **2. The Structure of the Book**

The current volume seeks to compare the world of the feminist art of the 1970s in the United States with that in Europe with the aim of introducing the feminist spirit and demonstrating its relevance to the contemporary reader. Although its focus lies on the second wave of feminism, it also addresses some aspects of the third wave and the current state of the movement, particularly with respect to the Israeli art scene.

The methodology employed herein combines the fields of art history and art criticism with intellectual thought regarding social and political

processes. While art reflects and attests to a social reality, intellectual/political thinking and critical analysis deeply influence artistic activity—which in turn impacts reality, initiating debate and promoting cultural change. The intimate link between theory and artistic practice—and their common ability to draw a full and rich picture of reality—makes this a very fruitful fusion.

PART I reviews the historical background and social processes which led to the emergence of the second wave of feminism, highlighting radical feminism and the feminist art movement. In this section, I examine the various streams, techniques, and approaches developed by the first generation of feminist artists in the United States. This section also explores the feminist ideology which guided these artists, together with the creative principles characteristic of each stream, the extent of the change the artists sought to bring about, and the critical discourse revolving around their work in the 1970s and beyond. The latter was marked by a split in the 1970s, some supporting the use of representations of the female body in art and regarding it as a source of strength and power, others arguing that it enhanced neither the creative woman artist nor the viewer; buttressing the traditional representation of the woman as an object exposed to the male gaze, it thereby perpetuated it as a source of male visual pleasure. In the years following this decade, these views changed, the passage of time giving rise to interpretations which facilitated a new perspective.

PART II focuses upon an extraordinary case that proves the norm—the work of artist Mary Kelly. Born in the United States in 1941, Kelly moved to England in the mid-1960s, where she won broad recognition. She subsequently returned to the U.S.A., where she is currently one of the most prominent figures in the art and academic worlds alike. During the 1970s, Kelly chose to scrutinise feminist principles via the prism of motherhood—a subject which, up to that point, feminist artists had largely eschewed.<sup>4</sup> Abstaining from any representation or image of the female body in her work, she thereby set herself apart from the central stream of the contemporary radical feminist art prevalent in the U.S.A. Herein, I examine one of her most well-known works, the *Post-Partum Document*, created between 1974 and 1979 in the wake of one of the most personal of experiences—childbirth. This piece is analysed in relation to the influence of feminist and psychoanalytical theoretical sources on Kelly—supplemented by an exploration of the subject of motherhood in relation to the cultural status of mothers in art and artist-mothers within the art world and general culture from the viewpoint of the feminist discourse.

PART III examines the disparities and correspondences between Kelly's art—as a representative of continental feminist art—and that of the first-generation American artists. Herein, I outline the general characteristics of the artworks of that period, adducing the hegemonic thinking of the period and the postmodern concept of the “death of the author” in order to ground the discussion. The latter notion highlights the difficulties encountered by feminist artists of the period, aiding in the identification of the challenges and objections they faced and the reasons behind the failure of the feminist art movement to gain legitimacy and broad public recognition.

Although the feminist art of the 1970s sowed important seeds for future development, the relatively large number of studies of it up to the 1990s have generally been tendentious and/or inadequate, a whole generation of women artists consequently suffering an historical injustice at the hands of scholars and critics. The decades which have now passed warrant a re-assessment of their work from a fresh perspective—as indeed has begun to occur since the end of the twentieth century.

\* \* \*

This volume is based on my doctoral dissertation, written in the Department of Art History at Tel Aviv University. The intensive weeks of writing the initial research proposal were also the final weeks of my first pregnancy. As a young woman in pursuit of my PhD, I was thus “conceiving” two worlds simultaneously. My first child would, I was aware, wonderfully and irreversibly shake up my entire life as I knew it. Following the birth, I pressed on to complete my dissertation. Amongst the feminist artworks I perused during this period, Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1974-1979)—a monumental, complex, conceptual piece that employs objects representing the early years of Kelly's own son, brought together into a gut-wrenching, heart-breakingly authentic and poignant depiction of the life of a young mother—was especially significant and symbolic to me at that time.

The work, which at first glance appears to be minimalist—cold, precise, and imbued with a subtle intellectualism—struck me, despite a distance of twenty years and thousands of kilometres, with full force, Kelly succeeding in plucking the strings tautly stretched inside me: stress and exhaustion, anxiety and contentment, excitement and expectation, disappointment and love. My intimate world blended with the universe outside, thoughts and beliefs about femininity, feminism, and motherhood merging with the artworks I was analysing, the baby who had grown

inside me and then emerged into the world, and the text unfolding on paper.

Ten years have passed since then, and the dissertation has matured and developed into a book. In this form, it examines the definitions, boundaries, and genders which shape the world—on the public and individual level alike—through art and theoretical analyses. In my personal life, my academic work, writing, and university teaching have intertwined with motherhood and the rearing of children. As the two areas have interlaced, they have provided me with balance, complemented by new perspectives—including the capacity to address difficult issues and embrace new discoveries related to the female and maternal experience.

Like my son, the textual infant also grew, developed, and matured. During its composition, this volume has undergone numerous revisions, the original text being expanded to provide a deeper discussion. At the same time, I can also identify the old-new me in its text. While the feminist art of the 1970s in the United States and Europe appeared to have become a distant, disconnected, academic subject, its value purely aesthetic and therefore irrelevant to our daily lives, today I am able to recognise the strong ties between my own experience and that of many other women—both in the here and now and from the 1970s. I believe this subject to be more intriguing and pertinent now than ever. Despite the lengthy interval of time between conception and birth, I hope that in the pages of this book something remains of the sense and meaning which accompanied its genesis: a deeply personal experience which can never be surpassed.

**PART I**

**FIRST-GENERATION FEMINIST**  
**ART**

# CHAPTER ONE

## AN HISTORICAL VIEW: THE BIRTH OF FEMINIST ART

The second wave of feminism emerged in Europe and the United States in the mid-1960s, its development generally being linked to the birth of the Women's Liberation Movement. Despite the achievement of many of the latter's aims, the first half of the twentieth century witnessed not only a substantial decline in feminist activity but also a regression in the status of women in society. Notwithstanding these difficult years, women and feminist organisations continued to be active, even gaining a measure of political success. Many critics now believe that the reluctant activism of feminist women between 1920s and 1950s was a strong contributing factor to the fierce eruption of the 1960s feminist revolution (Rosin 2000: 190-194).

The Second World War both prompted and encouraged women—many for the first time in their lives—to leave their homes and seek wage-paying jobs.<sup>5</sup> Across Europe and throughout the United States, women became an integral component of the home front—in agricultural, industry, and the munitions industry—as the men were called up to fight. At the end of the war, the men returning from the front and expecting to resume their jobs, it was assumed that these women would similarly “return”—to their “natural” place in the home. In the U.S.A., the craving for normalcy in the 1950s being based—at least in part—on restoring the old order, the status of women waned, women again being expected to find their full contentment in being mothers and housewives. Thus, for example, the budgets previously designed to establish crèches and kindergartens for working mothers during the war were reallocated, seriously hindering women from finding work outside the home.

The post-war economic prosperity experienced by North America further reinforced the image of the bourgeois housewife surrounded by electric appliances. For the first time in a number of years, the age at which women married dropped, the birth rate concomitantly rising. The “baby boom” similarly accentuated the model of the happy nuclear family:

Father as breadwinner and Mother as housewife living happily with their children in a nice house in the suburbs.

The publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 was the opening shot in a campaign destined to initiate an uprising and demand for change. In this provocative book, Friedan attempted to articulate what up until that point had remained virtually unspoken, giving voice to the feelings of young women of the 1950s and '60s who, while financially comfortable, felt repressed. In the opening chapter, famously entitled "The Problem That Has No Name", Friedan articulated the solitary, silent agony in which middle-class housewives lived in the American suburbs:

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—"Is this all?" (Friedan 1963: 57)

The book was an immediate best-seller, quickly becoming one of the most significant influences on the shaping of the worldview of many women—including women artists—across the United States. A perfect depiction of the "golden cage" in which women were trapped, it described how they had become victims of a false system of values which demanded that they find identity and meaning in their lives solely on the basis of their family.<sup>6</sup>

The Women's Liberation Movement formed an integral part of the social protests and revolutions America witnessed in the 1960s: the protest against the Vietnam War, the permissive sexual revolution and emergence of the "flower children", and the civil rights movements on behalf of African-Americans, American-Indians, and the LGBT community. The protest movement against the repression of women in the preceding decades—in particular their grave situation during the 1950s—also served as a direct source of inspiration to generate change.

The second wave of feminism was characterised by a growing body of theory, politics, and activism, its declared aims being the exposure of the repression of women by the medical, governmental, and educational Establishment. Devoting immense activity to raising individual and public awareness regarding the social and political status of women, the feminist discourse began to diversify and multiply, coming to be marked by distinct schools of thought and expression—Marxist feminism, psychoanalytical

feminism, radical feminism, black feminism, etc. While many of these groups were complementary, some came into conflict with one another.

### **A. Radical Feminism in the United States**

While the first wave of feminism laboured to increase the awareness of the right of women to education, health and welfare services, fair wages, etc. in the spirit of liberal feminism, the second, continuing these efforts, also sought to understand and expose the social structure behind the repression of women and develop new ways to combat it. The latter trend was particularly prevalent amongst radical feminists in the United States.

Radical feminism set about changing the definition and place of women in culture, addressing the ways in which the female sex had been assigned a specific gender role. The members of the movement devoted themselves to renewing awareness of sexuality, motherhood, and women's rights over their own body—contraception, sterilisation, abortion, artificial insemination, etc.—while the feminist discourse discussed pornography, prostitution, sexual harassment, rape, violence, and women's lives in general. In contrast to other feminist streams—such as psychoanalytical feminism—these theorists endeavoured to make their work accessible and intelligible, their writings being intended to contribute to effecting an immediate, real transformation in the lives of women suffering from diverse forms of repression. Regarding its task as playing a direct role in the daily lives of women rather than engaging in a theoretical analysis of the repressive aspects of visual art, literature, medicine, or economics, the discourse disdained the complex formulations characteristic of the Marxist feminism prevalent in Europe during the same period, for example, in favour of creating a direct link between the female experience—women's distresses and secret desires, from the powerful to the prosaic moments in their lives—and political activism, art, and feminist expression.

One of the principal forms of female political activism in the public sphere in the United States was that of group consciousness-raising, women banding together in order to enable their (exclusively female) members to reveal the personal and intimate elements of their lives. Awareness was stimulated by taking an informed look at their lives, particularly those experiences which reflected their status in the eyes of society—their childhood and adolescence in a patriarchal world, their assumption of motherhood and housewifery, and their sense of the inferiority imposed on the female body both within and without the home. They also sought to analyse and understand how female social identity had been created and shaped by social conventions.

The women who participated in these groups freely expressed their private thoughts, sharing their reservations, experiences, and secrets with other women on the basis of female solidarity. Being fully persuaded that every woman who gains awareness also acquires strength and influence within the phallogocentric world, these groups turned consciousness-raising into a form of political activity. The principle that group consciousness-raising was essential was affirmed time and again towards the end of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s in radical feminist manifestos—as, for example, that composed by the radical feminist activist Kathie Sarachild. Published in New York in November 1968, this stated (in part):

In our groups, let's share our feelings and pool them. Let's let ourselves go and see where our feelings lead us. Our feelings will lead us to ideas and then to actions ... This is a consciousness-raising program for those of us who are feeling more and more that women are about the most exciting people around ... It is a program planned on the assumption that a mass liberation movement will develop as more and more women began to perceive their situation correctly. (Sarachild 2000: 273-74)

The idea that women's personal lives should be understood in relation to phenomena occurring in the public sphere found expression in the slogan "The personal is political"—coined by Carol Hanisch, a "Redstockings" New York group activist, who used it as part of the title of an article on feminist groups working for raised awareness published in March 1969. Herein, Hanisch asserted that women's daily-life experiences should be regarded as social and political issues rather than as problems to be dealt with in therapy or kept private and personal. This belief encapsulated the essence of the feminist quest to dissolve the impenetrable divide between the private and public spheres. In Hanisch's view, there is nothing "natural" in defining female existence as "personal". The social perception from the nineteenth century onwards that had identified femininity with motherhood, relationships, and love, was on the contrary overtly social and political—the latter referring to the broad realm of power relations. In contrast to given, natural facts, political circumstances are amenable to change. In calling for political power for women—and maintaining that they possess the capacity to alter their lives and reality—this slogan became one of the cornerstones of the radical feminist movement.

## B. Representations of the Female Body and the Male Gaze

One of the central subjects addressed by the radical feminist discourse in the 1970s was the attitude to the female body—also a primary concern within feminist art. Many radical feminist thinkers sought to expose the ways in which men exploit the female body against women, others choosing to emphasise the uniqueness of the female body, celebrating and nurturing its singularity and invoking it as a means of expression and a tool with which to enhance a positive sense of femininity.

Inspired by these writers, feminist artists also began to look for alternative ways to represent women. Here, too, the female body served as a central element. Viewing their use of it as a direct reflection of the radical feminist perception, these artists attempted to create a counter-response to the traditional representation of the female body in Western art—a negative stereotypical gender bias which had tendentiously and voyeuristically exploited the female body under the male gaze.

One of the first to analyse the history of Western art from this perspective was the American scholar John Berger. Examining female and male representations in art in a volume entitled *Ways of Seeing*, Berger revealed what he regarded as the hidden mechanism behind the phenomenon: “*Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at*” (Berger 1972: 47 [original italics]). As Berger indicates, the man wields visual power over the woman—whose passive-object status derives from their acceptance of the male “view” and thereby effectively accepting an identity determined by the male Other. This attitude not only governed the way women view themselves but also the majority of male-female relationship issues.

Female nudity continues to hold a significant place in art even today. In a catalogue for an exhibition entitled *Female Nudes* she curated in 2009, researcher Ktsia Alon provides a contemporary description of the way in which the female body is represented via a gendered inversion: “Female nudity is often also an inverted ‘self-portrait’ of the male painter, a method whereby the reality of the clothed male is exposed via the naked women standing in front of him. This is an exemplary representation of vulnerability, employed by gender inversion in order to reinforce itself” (Alon 2009: 3).

Up until the 1970s, the expression given to power relations between the sexes by Western art had been principally male itself. From antiquity through the Renaissance and up to the modern period, art had unanimously followed this trend, the female nude lying—literally and iconically—at the

heart of Western art (Nead 1992). Herein, nudity embodies that narcissistic gaze which permits the Western male observer to perceive himself as enlightened and cultured—the male painter likewise experiencing the pleasure of domesticating and converting to high culture what he considers to be a symbol of raw, passionate, bestial nature.

One such example is Giorgione's *Venus of Dresden* (1509), which portrays a naked woman lying outstretched, sunk in deep sleep and unconscious of the penetrating gazes of the spectators scrutinising her body. One hand rests on her pudenda in a gesture possibly suggesting masturbation, her other arm being raised to accentuate her breasts. Another typical example is Fragonard's painting *The Bathers* (1765), in which a large group of voluptuously naked women are depicted performing their ablutions in a variety of revealing and unnatural poses designed to exploit the angles of their bodies: stretched on their backs, splaying their legs, turning their buttocks to the spectators, and embracing one another (FIG. 2).



FIGURE 1-2. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Bathers*, 1765. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

The feminist discourse arguing that female nudity serves as one of the most prominent visual means of male dominance—a symbolic act of sexual violation engaged in by artist and spectator alike (Alon 2010: 6)—feminist artists in the 1970s took it upon themselves to shatter this image.

Subverting the patriarchal and gender-biased artistic perception, they set out to establish a new feminist artistic language and construct an authentic visual representation of the female body to replace the traditional phallogocentric depiction of women. Understanding the exploitative dimension of the gaze upon women's body, many feminist artists restricted themselves to depicting their own body, while other feminist artists insisted on creating representations of other women's body, claiming that women's gaze upon each other is fundamentally different from that of men looking at women, as it is not exploitative but rather empathic and bonding.

For the first time in Western history, a feminist art movement thus contrived to create an artistic stream informed by a clear political agenda—one which would present their version of the female body and properly define the female essence. The artistic addressing of the female body was therefore strongly political in nature, imbued with a strong desire to effect social change. This choice of subject—for better or for worse—was what largely defined feminist artists in the United States during the 1970s.

The label “first generation” was attributed to feminist art of the 1970s by feminist artists and art critics at the beginning of the 1980s—who defined themselves as the “second generation”. The research literature makes a clear distinction between the first-generation feminist artists—active between 1970 and 1980—and the second generation working in the 1980s and onwards (Gouma-Peterson and Mathews 1987). The intense occupation with the female body exhibited by the first-generation female artists led their successors to regard them as fundamentalists or “essentialists”, the latter term being employed in a derogatory sense. Essentialism indicating a concern for the heart of things and what unites them, its expression amongst the first-generation female artists took the form of direct and explicit engagement with the physical female body and its uniqueness, including its organs—breasts, ovaries, and the womb. Important branches of this art—painting, sculpture, video, and installation art—sought to evince the fundamental essence of women *qua* women and faithfully represent their world. Seeking to intimate their experiences as women—as distinct from the male experience—in their work, the principal tool of these feminist artists lay in their own bodies, which they depicted in various and diverse circumstances as active creators—rather than in positions (again, both literal and symbolic) imposed on them by the male (gaze).

Retrospectively, second-generation women artists and critics pronounced the art produced by the first generation to be “overly essentialist”, their exclusive preoccupation with the physical female body being mundane, simplistic, lowbrow, and anti-intellectual. Seeking the broadest common denominator, its exposure of the female body remained trapped under the voyeuristic and exploitative male gaze. In reaction, the second generation tended to proscribe literal and intimate depictions of the female body altogether—not to speak of refraining from placing it at the centre of their works.

The majority of studies of first-generation art carried out up until the 1990s contend that the feminist artists of the 1970s in the United States were in fact important political pioneers and fervent activists. By stressing the fact that they were not all intellectuals, however, these scholars once again raised the spectre of essentialism, insinuating that the first-generation artists were not sophisticated—and were in fact inferior to the subsequent generation of feminist artists in the U.S.A. (Jones 1996: 20-37). This charge was also made by contemporary feminist artists and critics working in Europe in the 1970s who identified primarily with Marxist and psychoanalytical feminism—these being perceived by the majority as more sophisticated and progressive than their American counterparts. One of the principal grounds for this distinction lay in the fact that the majority of European women artists strictly distanced themselves from depictions of the physical female body, focusing instead on philosophical or social and financial perceptions and developing theoretical positions. The ideological discussion concerning essentialism continued to develop, the contemporary perspective clearly indicating that the issues involved are neither absolute nor clear-cut in favour of one orientation or another.<sup>7</sup>

### **C. Power Play in the Art Field—Alternative Routes**

The feminist artists who aspired to implement changes in the structure and modes of operation in the field of art—to use the terms of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu—sought to find ways to reveal the power play prevalent within it. Raising awareness of the imperative for change in critical and commercial art institutions, they drew attention to the urgent need to overthrow the supremacy of a small and largely biased white male elite. In endeavouring to reformulate modes of action, exhibition, and creativity, they also initiated projects such as the establishment of alternative publishing houses and art magazines and the holding of art conferences and festivals—thereby developing new forms of art

production and consumption—while simultaneously promoting a unique and influential linkage between theoretical studies and their creative work. Significantly, while the new suggestions proposed by feminist critical thought were initially intended to advocate women's art within the hegemonic, primarily masculine, art field, time has demonstrated that this approach expanded to include other minority phenomena—such as indigenous art—which subsequently won increased visibility within the artistic and cultural fields.

The feminism which emerged during the 1970s raised awareness amongst many women artists. Up until to this period, few women creators had received recognition by the Establishment or exposure in exhibitions, the art world being almost exclusively controlled by businessmen and male artists or curators. Activist feminism introduced past and present women artists into the artistic canon—without whose presence the latter would have fallen into oblivion. It likewise raised the issue of why so many art works had been deliberately forgotten or considered insignificant simply because they were created by women. A prominent example of this criticism is the art historian Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking article "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (Nochlin 1971).

Women gradually began to establish themselves in alternative frameworks, the majority of which were exclusively-female ventures (Fields 2012b: 2; Moravec 2012; Gardner-Huggett 2012). These included exhibition sites and galleries, events, workshops and collective work spaces, and the publication of journals and books. By calling into question the aesthetic and ideological criteria which had guided art criticism, feminism challenged the official Establishment art hierarchy governed by the dominant male culture. One of the central issues feminist artists addressed was the question of who determines what and how art is defined—including the implications of this for the structure(s) and ideology of Western art history.

The re-examination of these values and the models which they reflect transformed the way in which art, art criticism, and the creation of art was viewed. In retrospect, the feminist avant-garde art of the 1970s introduced a completely new perception and practice, sowing the early seeds of postmodernism in art.<sup>8</sup> Various manifestations of feminisms and feminist art also emerged concurrently during the same decade—not only in the United States but also in many other parts of the world (Meskimmon 2007).

As remarked above, a further feature unique to the first-generation artists lay in the close link they developed between theory and practice. Drawing increasing inspiration from textual sources, many of them

returned to study and academia, immersing themselves in the humanities and social sciences. Some groups of women artists met and studied together, others enrolling in the Women's and Gender Studies programs established for the first time in the United States in the 1970s—a step which profoundly influenced their interests and art works. The principal subjects they examined were—as already noted—the status of women through history, the social construction of the female image, and the institutionalised idealisation of the female body within Western culture. They also endeavoured to analyse the female image in the modern world as portrayed in their own close environment—especially in the fields of advertising and the mass media—with the aim of revealing the hidden motivation behind the ruling male hegemony and the roots of the Establishment idealisation of the female body. These images, they contended, reflected the desires and passions of male-dominated Western culture regarding female beauty and sexuality, demonstrating and determining the inferior social place and status of women within the patriarchal world.

Feminist art of the 1970s in the United States also frequently addressed subjects viewed at the time as scandalous or taboo—rape and sexual assault, menstruation, abortion, motherhood, and domesticity. These themes were drawn from actual-life material which arose in the groups established to raise awareness, as well as from the increasing number of theoretical texts published during those years inspired by the “female experience”—which, for the first time, they began to candidly and openly express.

One of the most central and significant texts which influenced the political perceptions of feminist artists during the 1970s, gradually permeating their visual artworks, was Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Published in 1949 in France—followed by an American edition in 1953—this formed the theoretical basis for the development of much contemporary feminist thinking. By 1968, ten editions of this seminal book had been printed in the United States. Another significant contribution was Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), considered by many to be the match that kindled the feminist flames in the U.S.A.

Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) was also an influential feminist publication. A daring and pioneering book, herein Greer alleged that women had been separated from their libido and repressed into a sexual passivity resembling castration. While this “position” had been forced upon them, they had also unconsciously acquiesced and accepted it. Calling for immediate political action whose influence would also be felt

in the private sphere—the home—Greer urged women to free themselves from the burden of the nuclear family, leave their husbands (either temporarily or permanently), and ignore all representatives of the Establishment. To assist women in rehabilitating their self-image and ability to enjoy their body, Greer offered women rather extreme suggestions—such as tasting their menstrual blood, exercising sexual abstinence, and abandoning monogamy. Her book aroused a wave of interest and endorsement, alongside angry protest from both women and men throughout the U.S.A. and abroad. A landmark in the history of the women's movement, it has been translated into more than twelve languages and reprinted numerous times.

Another figure who influenced the radical feminist assertion that the roots of female repression lay deep within patriarchal system was Kate Millett. In her celebrated book *Sexual Politics* (1970), Millett claimed that sex is political primarily because male/female relations constitute the paradigm of all human relationships:

... the situation between the sexes now, and throughout history, is a case of that phenomenon Max Weber defined as *herrschaft*, a relationship of dominance and subordination. What goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged (yet is institutionalized nonetheless) in our social order, is the birthright priority whereby males rule females. (Millett 1970: 24-25).

Claiming that the social class system promotes racial, political, and economical inequality, Millett argued that if men—and women—do not abandon the notion of male superiority as a birthright, these systems of oppression will continue to exist simply due to the logical and emotional mandate inherent in basic human existence. In other words, Millett believed that men and women must eliminate the sexual roles and behaviour constructed by patriarchal culture.

Other influential books included Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) and Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976). I shall discuss further examples below.