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Feminist Forum (2007)

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It was the enthusiasm of my teachers in college and graduate school who intentionally (and occasionally unintentionally) drew me to understanding my feminism. Raised in a contented Philadelphia suburb, I couldn’t put a name, face, or description to my feelings of discontent about life, about my ever-changing body, about my boredom and malaise. Feminism was a revelation to me, as was feminist art. The ideas of connection to other women, to women’s experience, to women’s history were all revelatory to me. Concepts of feminism and feminist art relieved me enormously. The ideas and imagery helped me feel emancipated and empowered. As I evolved from adolescence into adulthood, I found myself increasingly delighted and joyful as I developed a greater understanding of feminism and feminist ideas. These encounters gave definition to my intellectual life, my professional practice, and my personal development.

I went to The University of the South, a renowned liberal arts college, though not known for its feminism. I had a professor, Pamela Royston Macfie, who was a feminist scholar of literature and criticism. She had us read Ibsen’s *The Doll House*, as well as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, highlighting the accomplishments of the women and frequently offering feminist revisionist readings. Most significantly, I wrote a paper for her on Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and compared the disgust of the protagonist’s suicide and Flaubert’s description of the disgust of leaving a brothel. I remember the comments my professor gave included, “Have I been a feminist Pygmalion?”

Feminist thought was a place of refuge for me from the world of cultural production created, sustained, and promoted by men. I remember discussing *French Feminist Theory* with her. I also had an elderly male professor, Scott Bates, an authority on Apollinaire, who gave me much of the language for understanding feminist thought. I see now how subversive he was, actively recruiting me for the local chapter of NOW.

I came of age in the late 80s and early 90s as an art historian and critic. As a graduate student, first at Vanderbilt University, then at Case Western Reserve University, I learned more about women artists and the role of feminism and I read a great deal of critical theory. Often, I would be struck by particular passages, which transformed me intellectually, even helped me organize my world practically (at least in the case of some of the French deconstructionists).
I remember feeling implicitly the draw of feminist art when I first encountered it. The importance of these ideas and images made a deep impression on me, though they weren’t subjects or artists discussed in my art history classes, by my friends and colleagues, or by anyone I knew. In college, I became aware of feminist performance art, and Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party*. The idea of a collaborative project, involving many women, that reclaimed the history of women in the realms of art and ideas, really intrigued me, but I didn’t consciously realize it, until I was writing my master’s examination. One of the questions asked about the decline of portraiture in the contemporary period. I began my answer with how I saw portraiture changing because of the influence of Surrealism; that is, the newfound focus and interest in the mutating body, as if the medieval interest in the shape-shifter had become a major presence in modern art. I then talked about the role of abstraction as an indicator of radicalism in modernism and how the interest in absence, alienation, and angst informed the shift away from portraiture. I remember articulating how Chicago’s iconic “butterfly/vagina” forms and place settings had become dismembered portraits of the historical figures. I also spoke about the role of the body and the prominence of the self in performance art in the 1970s. I remember many red check marks and stars from my committee and I also have a strong sense about how important such ideas were to me.

Of central importance to me in my writing was the work of Arlene Raven. I felt her writing gave me keys to understanding how to think about gender as an issue in cultural production. Also, the prominence of women in her writing was compelling and intrigued me. When I met her in the early 1990s, while I was researching Nancy Grossman’s art, I knew I was in the presence of greatness. We became friends and she became a mentor to me. She advised me on all aspects of my personal and intellectual life.

In terms of artists, I have had the experience of stopping when an image speaks to me, either on the wall of a gallery or museum, or in a reproduction. I experienced that sense when I first saw a leather-covered head by Grossman. When I had the opportunity to see an exhibition of her works, I thought I was looking at a constructed vision of a self. The work felt visceral to me, raw and exciting in a way I couldn’t articulate at the first encounter; dangerous and secret also. Paintings by Sylvia Sleigh and Joan Semmel intrigued me with their original approaches to realism and woman-centered perspective. Then, I was enthralled by the sensuality, the eroticism of Louise Bourgeois’s line in her drawings which I encountered before her sculptures. I read about Lucy Lippard’s 1966 exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction* and was instantly drawn to Eva Hesse’s sculptures for similar reasons. The use of enclosure and entanglement in Bourgeois and Hesse’s work became the subject of my dissertation. A feminist perspective informed my reading of the artists’ works and resulted in much confrontation about the final version of my dissertation and my reliance on feminist critical theory.

Since graduate school, I have been interested in artists who use text, like Ann Hamilton, Leslie Dill, and Lorna Simpson. In my teaching, I found the students are drawn to the art of Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer. Through the process of developing a course on Women in Art, I became more interested in the art of the Pattern and Decoration movement. Here was a moment in the artworld when women artists participated equally alongside the men artists in crafting a major moment in the avant-garde. The artists experienced an intense backlash, particularly for their inclusionist approaches to art and history especially for their use
of art from other cultures and reliance on women’s work as source material. Now I am interested in clarity of conception in feminist art. I am fascinated by younger artists, in particular, like Sungmi Lee and Mickalene Thomas. But, I still am learning from a wide range of women artists, including Kara Walker and Yong Soon Min.

Much of my professional activity centers on my efforts to memorialize Arlene Raven and her radical approaches to art criticism and feminist art history. Arlene and I co-coordinated a day of panels and two exhibition receptions for the 2007 annual conference of the College Art Association. Since her death in August 2006, I have continued planning these events. They have become much more significant as part of my friendship and professional involvement with Arlene, as my contribution to some of her legacy. I am co-editing a volume of essays on Arlene’s life and legacy with Johanna Burton for *Critical Matrix: The Princeton Journal of Women, Gender, and Culture*. I am working with a group of artists who have met for a decade in a writing group, stemming from their experiences with Arlene. I write on women artists for publications like *NY Arts* and have recently written articles on Nancy Grossman and on Mimi Gross. I am working on a long-term project about African-American artists and the word with Sarah Turner at the University of Vermont.

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