

THE DINNER PARTY

FROM CREATION TO PRESERVATION

By Judy Chicago, photography by Donald Woodman

Merrell Publishers 2007 £ 29.95 \$49.95

308 pages, 180 color 50 bw ills

ISBN 13:978-1-8589-4370-1 (hard)

ISBN 10:8589- 4370-1 (paper)

GLOBAL FEMINISMS NEW DIRECTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Edited by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin

Essays by Maura Reilly, Linda Nochlin, N’Goné Fall, Geeta Kapur, Michiko Kasahara, Joan Kee, Virginia Pérez- Raton, Elizabeth Lebovici, Charlotta Kotik

304 pages, 270 Color

Merrell Publishers 2007

ISBN 13-978-1-8589-4390-9 (hard)

ISBN 10:978 -0-87273-157-8 (paper)

WACK!

ART AND THE FEMINIST REVOLUTION

Essays by Cornelia Butler, Judith Russi Kirshner, Catherine Lord, Marsha Meskimmon, Richard Meyer, Helen Molesworth, Peggy Phelen, Nelly Richard, Valerie Smith, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Jenni Sorkin

512 pages 475color, 255 mono

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

MIT Press, 2007

ISBN-13:978-0-914357-99-5 (hard)

ISBN-10:0914357-99-9 (paper)

Women can be so bad, so activist, so willing to break all the rules. These three major books document that fact profusely. The stunningly illustrated new book on the monumental *Dinner Party*, an icon of one aspect of feminist art from the late 1970s, serves as a counterpoint for *Wack*, which focuses on feminism from 1965 to 1980 and *Global Feminisms* which includes artists born since the 1960, meaning that most of the work dates from the 1990s to the present. The 1980s are omitted from this trio of invaluable historical overviews, although a selected chronology of all-women exhibitions in *Wack* extends from 1943 to 1983. Since the 1980s is when many artists of color emerged into the mainstream, excluding those years means that the history of feminist art is still dominated by middle class white women. *Global Feminisms* ambitiously declares that “an understanding of co-implicated histories, cultures and identities is crucial to a rethinking of feminism . . .” and takes on the world. It proposes to be a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to feminist art. The degree of its success is discussed below.

The *Dinner Party* with its new essays by Judy Chicago about the history of the installation, both positive and negative, as well as its conservation is a valuable contribution to the literature on that famous work of feminist art. By acknowledging 1038 important women, 39 of whom are given place settings at a table shaped like an isosceles triangle, it rewrote Western Civilization. By foregrounding traditional female arts of needlework and china painting it altered entrenched perceptions of media. Finally, the use of explicit vaginal imagery locates the piece in the years when so many women used their bodies to define feminism.

The body is also prominent in *WACK*. Curator Cornelia Butler briefly acknowledges the crucial fact that “feminism often coexisted with political engagement on other fronts such as race, class and sexual orientation,” but the obsessive emphasis is female self representation for its own sake, whether in performance, sculpture, painting, video or photography. The catalog includes a crucial essay by Chilean critic Nelly Richard, which discusses the resistance art of women artists during the Pinochet dictatorship; Judith Russi Kirshner writes of the Italian Feminists and Valerie Smith of Black Women Artists (who are represented only by a few mainstream choices in the exhibition). Most of the catalog focuses on now famous painters, photographers, performance, and video artists. The real theme is suspiciously modernist, that “feminism fundamentally changed contemporary art practice.” That closet modernism is underscored by the inclusion of a themes like Abstraction, Silence and Noise, Autophotography and Taped and Measured. In other words the radical ways in which women used media is the heart of the revolution, and the use of media is all too often detached from social content and used for its own sake. It is certainly true that women broke into a stultified world of late abstract expressionism and minimalism with their full physical presence, but the whole enterprise seems mainly narcissistic and self indulgent. When actions are linked directly to the political or social sphere, as with the artists in Chile, or the work of Suzanne Lacy, Judy Baca, or Faith Ringgold, they are far more resonant. The women’s movement has another story to tell that is not represented here that would include a full range of Chicanas, Native Americans, Asian Pacific Americans, Marxists, Civil Rights Activists, Anti War Art, and much more.

*Global Feminisms*, also a beautifully produced catalog, includes the work of artists from about sixty countries, half of whom have left their original countries, for European capitals or New York City. Significantly, none of the few artists from the US have relocated outside of this country. The catalog also includes essays that try to circle the globe, all of Africa is covered by N’Gone Fall, Geeta Kapur writes on India, Michiko Kashara on Japan, and Joan Kee on Asian Women in general, Virigina Perez-Ratton on Central American Women artists and finally Charlotta Kotik on Eastern and Central Europe and Elixabeth Lebovici on Western European Women. Of course the two curators Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin each have an essay. What strangely dominates the catalog is a strong emphasis on transgender performance, a direct continuation of the themes of the *WACK* exhibition. Transgender/transnational, makes a tidy connection and a tight reference to current gender constructs in the United States. But only sporadically

visible in *Global Feminisms* are the real feminist issues facing women globally, such as trafficking, prostitution, maquilladoras, war, terrorism, poverty, and much more. Some women decoratively reference major tragedies, such as Lida Abdul's house painting performance in war ravaged Kabul. Many artists, as selected for this exhibition, are still preoccupied with their own bodies. Major exceptions are artists from Central America like Isabel Ruiz, Regina Jose Gallino, Patricia Belli, and Priscilla Monge who engage with the realities of living under oppressive dictatorships and war.

So how is feminism redefined by *Global Feminisms*? Maura Reilly drops current names in the introduction, but visually *Global Feminisms* still seems obsessed with women as performative objects, not as initiators of proposed solutions to the widespread problems facing women today in the global war on terror, labor exploitation, urban migration, child prostitution and much more. Women who address these concerns, such as Ursula Biemann, are not included here. *Global Feminisms* is still circumscribed by the elite, but claustrophobic, perspective of the Northeast of the United States, by the depoliticized modernist art traditions of the United States, and the definition of feminism as embedded in the female body in and of itself

Feminism is much more than middle class women asserting their right to change genders or spill milk. It is a world wide political action for the rights of women. Entirely omitted from *Global Feminisms* are any artists from the Middle East or even a single reference to the ongoing devastating Iraq war that stands at the center of our daily consciousness. An artist like Hana Mal Allah, who has just left Baghdad, paints its destruction. She is a strong woman who is asserting her right to bear witness to the war and to art as a civilizing force and means of communication.

Breaking the rules is a good start, but if those broken rules don't move onto transforming our world's obsession with war, terror and the oppression of women, what is the point. In the end it is simply mannerism.