

Robin Mitchell Mira Schor Faith Wilding Nancy Youdelman  feminist directions 1970/1996



Amelia Jones

**New Directions, Old Debts:  
Feminism 1970/1996**

All contemporary artists and historians of contemporary art owe an enormous debt to those who struggled to articulate a feminist art theory and practice at the beginning of the feminist art movement around 1970. This is a debt that, unfortunately, has hardly begun to be reckoned, much less paid;

*Feminist Directions*—which exhibits recent work by Robin Mitchell, Mira Schor, Faith Wilding, and Nancy Youdelman—offers a small installment to initiate the payment.

The idea for this exhibition developed out of a series of conversations I had with Wilding regarding the historical understanding of the contributions of the early 1970s feminist art movement in the U.S., the continuities and differences characterizing feminist theory and practice across the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, as well as the continuing activity of most of the feminist artists associated with “1970s feminism.” These conversations arose in relation to two different exhibition projects. First, the show that Laura Meyer and I were beginning to formulate on the history of the epochal Feminist Art Program (founded in 1970 at California State University, Fresno by Judy Chicago and a group of students, including Wilding and Youdelman, and moved to the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia in 1971, where the original group was joined by Miriam Schapiro as co-director and new students, including Mitchell and Schor). And second, *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, the exhibition I have organized for the UCLA/Armand Hammer Museum of Art which highlights the “sexual politics” within feminist debates about the visual arts for the last 30 years, pivoting around the reception of Chicago’s monumental feminist project. In our conversations, Wilding expressed understandable frustration over the fact that she, and the other women artists who founded the Feminist Art Program, have become identified with the work that they completed there while their ongoing practice has been ignored.

At Wilding’s suggestion, then, and with Meyer’s agreement I decided that, rather than mounting a historical show about the Feminist Art Program, it would be more valuable to organize a tandem exhibition highlighting recent work by several former Program members: hence, *Feminist Directions 1970/1996*, which attempts to re-activate the public’s appreciation for the Program as an important pedagogical and artistic experiment but also to present publicly the work of four artists who have either been placed within a larger artworld context void of any appreciation of the history of feminism or have been inexorably linked to their early years working with Chicago and Schapiro.

It is my hope that, along with *Sexual Politics* and its catalogue, this exhibition will expand the current renewed interest in the vital discursive history and diverse artistic practice of the U.S. feminist art movement from 1970 to the present. While feminism has changed its emphases across these decades, many threads do interconnect the various methods, materials, and goals that have been articulated by feminist artists and theorists since 1970. The works in this exhibition—the incisiveness of their feminism and the complexity of their aesthetics—testify to the continuing relevance of feminism to art practice and to the importance of challenging, broadening, and otherwise rethinking the parameters of feminist art practice and theory.

Several people have been invaluable in helping Laura Meyer and me see this exhibition to fruition. *Feminist Directions* would not have taken place in this form without Wilding’s initial input nor without Katherine Warren’s strong support in bringing it to the Sweeney Art Gallery at the University of California, Riverside. Meryl Pollen’s elegant catalogue design ensures that the exhibition will be remembered well. Most importantly, I want to extend my deepest gratitude to the artists represented in this show. Their strength, intellectual brilliance, wisdom, and passion in sustaining the vital concerns of an aesthetically and conceptually rigorous feminist visual practice have enabled subsequent generations of feminists to persevere and forge ahead productively as artists and as art historians, theorists, and critics.

Laura Meyer

**Re-imagining the Body:  
A Feminist Continuum**

Robin Mitchell, Mira Schor, Faith Wilding and Nancy Youdelman have charted feminist directions in art since they helped found the pioneering Feminist Art Programs at California State University, Fresno and the California Institute of the Arts in the early days of the feminist art movement. Wilding and Youdelman were among fifteen Fresno State students who joined instructor Judy Chicago in the fall of 1970 to develop an all-female off-campus art program where the women could "evaluate themselves and their experiences without defensiveness or male interference." Utilizing group consciousness-raising activities as a means of determining subject matter, the women experimented with non-traditional art media such as fabric, performance, installation, and film to explore their experiences and expectations as women in a male-dominated society. The following year the Feminist Art Program relocated to the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Valencia and joined forces with instructor Miriam Schapiro and a new group of students, including Mitchell and Schor. That winter Program members collaborated on the historic *Womanhouse*, transforming an abandoned Hollywood home into a fantasy environment that explored the post-World War II middle-class ideals of "feminine" domesticity and sexuality with equal parts anger, nostalgia, and humor.<sup>2</sup>

Having developed to artistic maturity in the same intensive educational program, the artists featured in *Feminist Directions* share many concerns in their artwork, yet they approach these problems with divergent representational strategies and styles. The participants in the Feminist Art Program struggled to define a new kind of art—one that would value the contributions and experiences of women as much as those of men. Yet these struggles were not limited to assaults on the exclusionary values of the traditional art establishment. Since the early 1970s women artists and art theorists have also struggled amongst themselves to define appropriate and empowering strategies for "feminist art."

The theme of the body and its socio-historical meanings is central to the art of Mitchell, Schor, Wilding, and Youdelman. Mitchell's recent paintings engage and subvert the motif of vaginal "central core imagery" espoused as a symbol of female power by instructors Chicago and Schapiro in the Feminist Art Program.<sup>3</sup> Her organic abstractions are organized around the "central core" of a spinal column—a corporeal yet non-gendered synecdoche of the human subject—and one that links cerebral and sexual functioning. Nancy Youdelman's sculptures explore the physical forms, emotional relationships, and behavioral directives embodied in and shaped by women's and girls' clothing. Fashioned from buttons, pins, and fabrics, as well as organic materials, glass, and metal, they evoke a disappearing tradition of women's stitchery that for generations served as a model of feminine creative production. Wilding and Schor's collages and paintings highlight the power struggles that circulate around and through the body. Combining tender watercolor evocations of the flesh with images of military artillery and armor, Wilding's War Subjects and Recombinants suggest subconscious negotiations of states of vulnerability, self-protection, and aggression. Schor's War Frieze and Joy series critique the philosophical abstraction of the body from the mind, highlighting the materiality of language itself and pointing to the terrible cost in human aggression that results from the abstraction of human life.

As the culturally-defined site of sexual identity, as well as the medium through which the world is perceived and transformed, the body has been the subject of shifting feminist debates over the past 30 years. In the early 1970s many feminist artists visually celebrated the strength and sexuality of the female body in an effort to critique body-based gender stereotypes. Feminist artists inspired by poststructuralist theory, by contrast, frequently eschewed representations of the body altogether in the 1980s, out of concern that such representations tend to reinforce the objectification of women in patriarchal society. In the 1990s we have witnessed a resurgence of interest in representing the body among feminist artists. The artwork in this exhibition reaches across these shifts in dominant feminist art theory and practice to re-imagine the body. Its diverse figurative, abstract, and conceptual approaches to the body and its relation to feminism point toward future feminist directions.

<sup>1</sup> Faith Wilding, *By Our Own Hands: The Women Artists Movement, Southern California, 1970-1976* (Santa Monica, California: Double X, 1977), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> See the exhibition catalogue for *Womanhouse*, with an introduction by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro (Valencia, California: California Institute of the Arts, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> Chicago and Schapiro later formulated their theory of "central core" imagery in "Female Imagery," published in *Womanspace Journal*, n.3 (Summer 1973), pp. 11-14.



## Mira Schor

My agenda for my work was established by the time I received my MFA from CalArts in 1973, having spent one year in the Feminist Art Program: I wanted to bring my experience of living inside a female body—with a mind—into high art in as intact a form as possible. The word agenda was not part of my

vocabulary in the early seventies, that kind of strategic language was learned later, in the linguistically-oriented eighties, but my goals, my ambitions, and my desires for my work were established. I continue to work on the edge of the two domains I sought to reconcile in my art—the private space of the body, the public space of the art world and art history—juggling two terms that have sometimes seemed mutually exclusive: feminism and formalism. I am unwilling to drop either ball. The whole point for me was that there could be “great women artists,” and I wanted to be one, a “woman artist” in the sense of working consciously from a feminist analysis of culture.

The strategies with which I have resolved my understanding of these terms and positions have changed several times in the intervening years. At CalArts I embraced the slogan of Women’s Lib, “the personal is the political,” because it buttressed my need to make autobiographical art. My first pictorial understanding was that I myself had to be in the picture. I did a series of “story paintings” in which my self-portrait protagonist explored her sexuality within an eroticized California landscape. A couple of years later I had left the picture, leaving in place the image of an empty dress as a vehicle for femininity. Applying a formal analysis to my work, I abstracted the dress shape into a wasp-waisted double V shape, made of delicate, translucent rice paper covered by my handwriting. I was present as a person-sized shape and as personal text: autobiographical “story” was now in orthographic traces on a *Book of Pages* and *Dress Books* (1976-78).

In the mid-eighties, after an excursion into the landscape for sources of some of my “feminine” forms, I returned to more polemical feminist work and to representations of language. I reeducated myself in psychoanalytic and postmodernist theories. These seemed inimical to my early feminist education and to painting, yet they enabled me to better express my ideas through writing, and my enhanced awareness of social constructions of femininity and masculinity enriched my visual image bank. In a sense, “Theory” liberated me from only depicting my own body and its trials and tribulations so that I could focus on the body politic, including the male body, the body of language, the bodily matter of paint itself.

*Stealth* and *Area of Denial-egg* are part of *War Frieze* (1991-1994), an approximately 300 running feet long and one foot wide painting done in discrete sections. In this work the transmission of power in society is represented by the flow of language as body fluid from sexual body part to body part—language embedded in the body of oil paint. The language is no longer that of the secret diary or the obsessional love letter, as in my seventies works. It is public, sometimes “pub(l)ic,” appropriated from the news. *Stealth* is a vein coursing backward, against the grain of habitual reading, from right to left, from breast to penis and beyond. In *Area of Denial-egg*, the yolk of female fertility is wasted as uterine matter flows through a phallic area of denial down into a blood-filled toilet (in the previously empty art historical stall abutting Duchamp’s *Fountain*).

In my recent works the only body left on the painting surface is paint itself, with language as the vestigial but necessary (political) “subject.” I feel perhaps closest to what I always wanted to do: engage with the history of painting on my own terms—expressing my Joy in painting.



*Joy—Thick Flesh*