

Robin Mitchell Mira Schor Faith Wilding Nancy Youdelman **f**eminist directions 1970/1996

Amelia Jones

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

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.

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;