



## Meaning: An Anthology of Artists' Writings, Theory, and Criticism

Edited by Susan Bee and Mira Schor

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Anyone around the New York art world in the late '80s/early '90s would have been aware of the magazine, *Meaning*, whose very name came about in response to the lack of "meaning" in most art publications and art discussions of the time. [The slashes separating the letters were a device adopted from the Language Poets, with whom the editors shared an aesthetic kinship.] The over-heated, riotously materialistic art world of the late '80s produced the last generation of super-stars—Salle, Fischl, and Schnabel—and young painters and sculptors considered commercial success their due. *Meaning*, founded by Mira Schor and Susan Bee, friends, feminists, and artists, cut through this hysteria and created a space where intelligent discussion could take place, keeping hype at bay with thoughtful artists reflecting on the reality of life in the art world. Where else could one find a serious discussion on art and motherhood, on aging and women artists, on the resemblance of a baseball diamond to the landscape of the female body?

*Meaning* was not the only voice reacting to the '80s commodification of art and the marginalizing of work by women and people of color. The Guerrilla Girls were active on the streets of New York plastering city walls with posters, pointing fingers and naming names of galleries, critics, museums that did not show or review women artists or artists of color. The feminist magazine *Heresies* was still active. While the kind of revelatory statistics the Guerrilla Girls published have since become part of mainstream discourse, the impact of those initial posters is no longer with us, and the times are not ripe with the feminist fervor that produced a magazine such as *Heresies*. With the present anthology we return to the texture of the thoughts, ideas, and concerns of that period; more, we are given a fresh framework to consider issues relevant today.

Have the times changed since the years during which *Meaning* was published? Once again we have a Bush for president. Again there is enormous wealth while millions suffer in poverty. Again there is a plunge into reactionary attacks on abortion,

activism may and must prosper. As rights are removed, people of the left, civil rights activists, gay activists, and feminists are challenged to act. These essays teach us how we can use those strategies to counter today's repression.

The anthology is divided into five sections, each focusing on a general topic: Feminism and Art; The Politics of Meaning and Representation; Artists' Musings; Artists in Perspective; and selections from a number of forums, ranging from Authenticity and Meaning in Art to Motherhood. In each section we hear an intriguing assortment of artist's voices. The best way to enter the book is through browsing. Reading this way, with some essays taken out of their original context, both refreshes, and helps make connections that might not have happened so readily.

As a new mother and an artist, I went directly to the forum entitled, On Motherhood, Art, and Apple Pie. There I found my own experiences nurtured and confirmed, noting, for instance, how being a mother introduced Ellen Lanyon to the world of flora and fauna, rapidly focussing her work, just as my experience with my daughter has brought new influences into my painting. It is disheartening to read of the number of women/artist/mothers who experienced discrimination as mothers at the hands of dealers and collectors, hiding their children during studio visits, not taking them to openings. I wonder if this practice will continue in our post-feminist era—to be a thorn to yet another generation of artist/mothers or whether it has become a part of history? This informal forum is particularly accessible, simmering with the flavor and resonance of old-fashioned consciousness raising—"Oh, you felt that way, too!"

A wonderful, oddball essence permeates the section called Musings, salted as it is with such delicious tidbits as Susan Bee's litany of odious (and real) comments from studio visitors and Vanalyne Green's ode to "Mother Baseball" in which she compares the baseball field to the female body (a man with a club faces a man with a rock and the batter is born when he steps up to home plate, a white surface in the shape of a house). Tom Knechtel compares artists' finding their bearing in the art world to bats' orienting themselves by bouncing their shrieks off walls, and Ann McCoy links the death of her "moon goddess" rabbit to the antics of a dismissive, animal-phobic art critic. Most luminous was David Reed's essay, "Media Baptisms," in which he describes how his experience of "the uncanny" in the desert seeped into his own work ("The desert seemed internally familiar from the dreams of surrealism").

More theoretical essays abound in the sections, Feminism and Art and The Politics of Meaning and Representation. Mira Schor's "Appropriated Sexuality," a critique of the work of David Salle, was written in 1986 when Salle's star glittered brightly in the New York art world. Schor could not find a publisher for her provocative piece. This led ultimately to the first issue of *Meaning* where the daring article would find a home. Schor writes of the complicity of critics who recognized but forgave



readings. Schor complains of critics openly "succumb[ing] to the cult of the artist as magical misogynist" as Salle capitalized on work that savaged women. Schor links Salle's humiliation of women to the impotent sadism inherent in work, such as Salle's, that withholds meaning.

How does this critique hold up now in 2001? Has the bad boy grown up? Salle's star has dimmed significantly since the '80s, his work no longer on the minds of younger artists. His recent Gagosian show lacked female nudes to mistreat. Instead we are treated to a series of large canvases, "Pastorals," each depicting a bucolic scene of a young Rococo couple sitting by a riverbank. The male of the couple hoists a freshly caught fish into the air as the young maiden shyly recoils. Insets into the large canvas are smaller canvases of lemons, artichokes, napkins, roses, and a basket. Salle reprises his familiar layering technique stenciling fish and a guitar onto the larger canvas. What does it all mean? The lemons are painted as small yellow "tits"; the lady seems to recoil from the fish, her own "smell." The paintings still refuse to yield meaning, but the smartness and brashness of the early Salle is gone. The paintings are bland. Salle's misogyny is now revealed in the blank stare of the clothed maiden rather than in grotesque posturing. The bad boy has not grown up; he's just grown older. Schor's critique continues to give us an entry and context with which to see his work.

Other pieces in the Feminism and Art section help us to think hard about the feminism of then and its conditions for today. Laura Cottingham's disturbing 1993 essay, "Just a Sketch," paints a bleak picture of feminism's future. Defining feminism as "any activity, thought, or deed, which assumes both that male supremacy exists and that it must be dismantled," Cottingham asks the question, "How does feminism advance within a society defined by its belief in and maintenance of women's subordination?" Tracing the progressive shift from "feminist" to "women" to "gender" studies in the university as a movement away from women as the real focus of feminism, Cottingham sees a similar phenomenon in the art world where white middle-class "feminists" ignore or pay only lip service to the work of the true pioneering feminist artists.

Joanna Drucker sounds this theme in her essay, "Visual Pleasure," as she writes about early feminist artists who do not receive the legitimacy they deserve because they are left out of the theoretical discourse. For Drucker, the only women artists who succeed in the mainstream are those farthest from engagement with tactile material. These artists appropriate, use text, and photography, divorcing themselves from the art of tactile and "visual pleasure" which remains the sole domain of male artists.

Essays by Maureen Connor, Lucio Pozzi, and Faith Wilding are more hopeful, revealing strategies to get out of the box of appropriation. Connor argues that while "appropriation is valued as a challenge to convention, it actually further erodes our freedom to explore" and values experimentation

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essay, "12 Questions of Art," encourages play in art, the search for the ineffable, and warns against becoming entrapped by intentions. He deplores the "Academy of Transgression," agenda art, which, once embraced by "consumer orthodoxy," becomes fashionable. Pozzi does not favor the hand-made over the machine-made in art; it is the spirit in which the art is made which is vital. Wilding sounds a similar theme in her piece "Monstrous Domesticity," her review of the Bronx Museum show, "Division of Labor: 'Women's Work' in Contemporary Art." In her lengthy essay, Wilding writes of early feminists' "domestic art," made from quilting and sewing and ironing, and the later appropriation of these strategies by male artists, who fetishized and sentimentalized them in the process. Wilding argues for finding a way to combine "the handmade and the machine made" as a way forward.

Deborah Kass reminds us of the constant need for representations of other's experience in "A Conversation on Lesbian Subjectivity and Painting" and Joanna Frueh in "Aesthetic and Postmenopausal Pleasures" insists that "the postmenopausal body deserves cultural resurrection as a site of love and pleasure" instead of being seen as "the tomb of man's desire." These ideas have not lost their timeliness, in fact seem strangely radical in W's era. And that I believe is the ultimate importance of this anthology, to remind us of our history and to inform the young of where we are and where we need to be. The essential questions are raised: how art is practiced, by whom, for whom. The central and ongoing issues of "relations of gender and power, criticism and practice, individual artist and social practice" (from Joanna Drucker's excellent introduction) are addressed.

This book should be required reading in MFA programs across the country for both men and women. It is a book that sustains artists, its ideas reaching to the core of how people become artists, why they keep going, and who they are. It is not about strategies for success, but it is about strategies for staying alive, open, and resourceful as an artist. To see one's own thinking reflected in the thoughts of others, or to be provoked into new ways of seeing, is what we hope for when we read. This meaningful anthology brings us fresh ways of looking at the tough, persistent, and perplexing problems inherent in artistic production and theory.

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