



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

Edited by Susan Bee and Mira Schor

Duke University Press

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

