



Wild Effervescences: A Retrospective Look at Feminist Art

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“Is it possible that the wild effervescence of the artworld in the past seven or eight decades has been a terminal fermentation of something the historical chemistry of which remains to be understood?”

This provocative question from critic and philosopher Arthur Danto comes from an essay in which he explores his famously controversial thesis about the end of art¹. He has in mind the radical changes that have taken place in the visual arts beginning with Dada and continuing through conceptualism, Pop, and performance art. These movements have upended traditional aesthetic and artistic values to a degree that leads him to posit that art now requires a new narrative to replace older notions about the nature of creative progress. This is the scene in which feminist art has made its mark.

The label ‘feminist art’ denotes a diverse body of work, some of which enters into traditional art worlds rather comfortably, but much of which certainly seems to demand a new narrative, or at least a sweeping revision of the old one. It is by no means clear yet what that revision would look like, and I take Danto’s own question to be somewhat rhetorical, implying that a confident answer is not forthcoming any time soon. Hence the thoughts that follow are offered only tentatively and with caution.

Two recent art world interventions caught my attention for their parallels with events from earlier times. In January, 2018, Sonia Boyce had a popular work by Pre-Raphaelite painter John Waterhouse of *Hylas and the Nymphs* removed from a Manchester Art Gallery. The painting had hung in a section of the gallery that bears the title ‘In Pursuit of Beauty’. Boyce staged a performance designed to raise awareness about the portrayal of nude girls as seductive² destroyers, as well as about official choices of what is considered beautiful and worthy of display (Boyce 2018). She invited members of the public to post comments about her action, both by taping

¹ Danto, Arthur, (1986). The end of art. In *The philosophical disenfranchisement of art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 85; see also David (2018) State of the culture IV: Why the ‘art world’ as we know it is ending. *Artnet News* https://news.artnet.com/opinion/state-of-the-culture-iv-context-collapse-is-reformatting-the-art-world-1214525?utm_content=from_&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=US%20newsletter%20for%202%2F2%2F18&utm_term=New%20US%20Newsletter%20List

² Boyce, Sonia (2018). Our removal of Waterhouse’s naked nymphs painting was art in action. *The Guardian* 6 February, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/06/takedown-waterhouse-naked-nymphs-art-action-manchester-art-gallery-sonia-boyce?utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=GU+Today+main+NEW+H+categories&utm_term=263170&subid=2035308&CMP=EMC-NEWEML661912.02.19.2018.

written notes in the space where the painting had hung and by means of social media. These comments—which ranged from distressed outrage to amused approval—themselves became part of the extended performance.

Several months earlier the Louvre witnessed another event that received an even more scandalized reception when Deborah de Robertis exposed her pubic area in the room housing the *Mona Lisa*. Her stated goal was to dramatize the fact that women in the world's most distinguished museums are mainly present only as images hanging on the walls, where they are often nude. She was arrested and charged with sexual exhibitionism, although a French court soon dismissed the case³. Both works are instances of contemporary performance art, a movement in which women have been prominent. One takes action against painted bodies and the sexual content of the depiction, the other draws attention to real female bodies by exposing a feature of female anatomy that is usually not painted directly but is often alluded to with provocative coyness. In their very different ways, both call attention to the depiction of women's sexualized bodies in the history of western art, as well as to the absence of women contributors to that history—issues that virtually defined the concerns that launched feminist art history nearly half a century ago.

If one takes a long view of feminist thinking about the arts, the last few years can sometimes feel like *déjà vu*. After several decades when feminism was declared dead, and 'postfeminism' was regarded as a sign that the goals of the so-called second wave movement had either been met or had receded in importance, we now see a resurgence of protests against women's exclusion from important art venues, as well as renewed objections to the ways that women are often depicted. Performances that enact such protests simultaneously offer critiques of traditional art and aesthetic norms, and also transform the catalogue of what counts as art today, thereby contributing to the 'wildly effervescent fermentation' that Danto so colorfully described over thirty years ago. Depiction of the female body in art is a topic that is already well-covered by feminist art history, as well as by popular examinations of the media, entertainment, and advertising, so one might think there is little more to say. What is more, theories of gender have expanded to query sexual binaries and include queer and transgender identities, so the initial 'male artist' vs. 'female body' approach might seem *passé*. However, I believe the subject deserves another look, for it lies at the heart of an irony, perhaps even a paradox, about the inroads women artists have made in the current and ever-changing art world.

These changes need to be taken into account in any assessment of the presence or absence of women on the art scene, but they also complicate the task considerably because that scene has altered. I suspect that even the most successful artists today have entered a world that is filled with paradox and self-immolating ends. One goal of this essay is to investigate the grounds for this suspicion. I begin with a brief review of some familiar revisions of art history that helped to launch feminist artistic production, and that in the process also contributed to the challenges to traditional concepts and values that are still underway in the art world.

³ Rea, Naomi (2017). French court sides with artist who exhibited her vagina at the louvre, deeming it non-sexual, *Artnet News* October 20, 2017. https://news.artnet.com/art-world/nude-performance-artist-acquitted-french-court-1121558?utm_content=from_&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=US%20newsletter%20for%2010/20/17&utm_term=New%20US%20Newsletter%20List.02.19.2018.

1. Correcting the historical record

In 2017, Wikipedia added entries for over 6,500 women artists to its reference site. This expansion resulted from a coordinated effort on the part of hundreds of researchers engaged in what they termed the Art+Feminism Wikipedia Edit-a-Thon⁴. Their goal was to locate and record women painters, sculptors, and performers whose work has been overlooked or overshadowed by their more famous male colleagues. In so doing, they added a chapter to the last half-century of feminist endeavors to redress the neglect of women artists: to uncover lost women painters, sculptors, architects, composers; to account for the absence of women in the history of the arts; to analyze the criteria that govern the world of fine art; and to examine the contributions of women to the development of contemporary art forms.

Adding to the lists of women artists is important if only to correct the historical record. And indeed that record continues to require attention: recent studies indicate that only about five percent of works in the permanent collections of major museums—at least in the United States—are by women, and contemporary solo exhibits feature women artists relatively infrequently⁵. However, this represents only one approach to redressing the gender imbalance that marks the history of culture. (I speak of Euroamerican culture here, but I suspect this generalization pertains more widely, perhaps even globally.) Equally important is to probe more deeply into the conceptual frameworks that have either precluded the entry of women into various fields of art or have blinded us to their presence. We are, after all, considering the circumstances surrounding the emergence and maintenance of the very concept of art in the modern period, specifically of the fine arts—beaux arts—and the accompanying values attached to fine art: beauty, aesthetic value, genius, and the artist ‘himself’. All carry mutually reinforcing assumptions about the roles that gender fosters among participants in the art world. Unpacking their significance is not an easy task, however, for they also represent moving targets, having all been under fire in the last century.

That women have not figured prominently among the great artists that history has remembered is well-known, but just why this is the case is complicated, and explanations have been debated for decades. The question was launched early in the second-wave feminist movement by Linda Nochlin’s now-famous essay that queried: “Why have there been no great women artists?”⁶. The question was only partly rhetorical, for Nochlin herself offered reasons that stressed the conditions of learning that prevailed during the years when European painting grew to what we now recognize as greatness: the Renaissance and thereafter. She noted that the few women who did create usually learned their craft under the tutelage of artist-fathers, for studio education was barred to girls, and they failed to receive the kind of training that all artists require. In the course of this study, Nochlin also cast doubt on many cherished ideas about artistic creativity, including the myth of artistic ‘genius’, for no talent flourishes without training, and opportunities to learn have never been equal. Nochlin’s answer to her own question acknowledged that while accomplished wom-

⁴ Cascone, Sarah (2017b). Narrowing gender gap, Wikipedia Edit-a-Thon writes 6,500 more women into art history. *Artnet News*, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/2017-artfeminism-edit-thons-927797#.WSGnEPzi7RI>.

⁵ La Force, Thessaly (2018). Women’s work. *T: The New York Times style magazine*, February 18, 2018., 206-208.

⁶ Nochlin, Linda (1971). Why have there been no great women artists? In *Women in sexist society: Studies in power and powerlessness*. Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran, Eds., New York: Basic Books. (Widely reprinted.)

en painters of the past have often been forgotten, there weren't very many of them to begin with.

Interestingly enough, her question has not receded into the annals of art history but still endures as a feminist slogan in wider venues. For example, in 2017, designer and creative director of the Dior Fashion House, Maria Grazia Chiuri, clad runway models in T-shirts sporting the title question "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"⁷. This is one of several examples where art, art history, and the wider world of design converge, testimony to the fact that feminist scholarship has not remained in academia's ivory tower. (That tower represents another myth, but pursuing that topic would digress).

But to return to the question: what explanations best account for the absence of women from the history of art? It could be that women were there all along—painting, sculpting, designing buildings (not to mention singing, performing, writing, acting, and dancing); and that prevailing attitudes caused their accomplishments simply to be overlooked. In a pre-Wikipedia effort, feminist art historians scoured the holdings of museums, and they indeed discovered numerous women in their collections, some of their works in storage and seldom if ever displayed, some on display but misattributed to men. (Several works by the Dutch painter Judith Leyster, for example, had been credited to Franz Hals.) Thanks to those efforts, some of those early artists have now become well-known. Perhaps the most famous is Artemisia Gentileschi, hardly noticed before Mary Garrard's scholarship brought her work into the light, and now commonly compared with Caravaggio⁸. In a large, best-selling book, Germaine Greer reviewed the accomplishments of a host of painters from the Renaissance into the Twentieth Century whose work was rarely recognized but who have become more well-known, thanks to the investigative efforts of feminist historians⁹.

2. Conceptual constraints

Discovering lost women artists begins with accepting a standard concept of art and then searching for female contributors to that category. Another approach seeks not to find women among the artists of the past but rather accepts the possibility that there might not be very many to find, especially if we focus on Hegel's recognized fine arts (architecture, painting, sculpture, music, and poetry). Therefore, perhaps we should ask instead: If women weren't painting, were they doing anything else that should count as artistic creativity?

This approach was taken by two more art historians, Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker, in their influential book *Old Mistresses* (1981). In addition to noting the difficulty that women traditionally have faced in obtaining technical training, such as proficiency in linear perspective or paint chemistry, they observe that women in fact did excel in one kind of painting, but it was considered a minor genre: flower and fruit still-life. Although sometimes distinguished, their renown fell short of those

⁷ La Force, Thessaly (2018). Women's work. *T: The New York Times style magazine*, February 18, 2018, 209.

⁸ Garrard, Mary (1989). *Artemisia Gentileschi: the image of the female hero in Italian Baroque art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Y también: Broude, Norma and Mary Garrard (2018). *Introducing feminist art history*. Independently published.

⁹ Greer, Germaine (1979). *The obstacle race: The fortunes of women painters and their work*. New York: Ferrar, Straus, Giroux; also Chadwick, Whitney (1990). *Women, Art, and Society*. London: Thames and Hudson.

artists who produced the more highly-regarded history painting. The reason for the lower acclaim had to do with reigning judgments about the relative lack of significance of their domestic subjects: dining rooms, nurseries, kitchens, gardens. The content of these works seemed to suit the supposedly more limited range of their abilities; women, even painters of talent, were thought to have a ‘natural’ placement in the home.

In the actual household—as opposed to the painted one—we find women engaged in artistic activities of several sorts. In well-to-do homes, girls were expected to play a musical instrument for the entertainment of family and guests, or to be able to draw and paint pleasant pictures to hang in their homes; but these amateur efforts rarely were recognized as major contributions to art¹⁰. However, in just about every home, rich or poor, there were women making things that now sit only on the margins of art: domestic products such as needlework, embroidery, and useful items such as quilts. Often these artifacts wore out from use and have not remained to be collected and preserved, though a few have now made their way into museums. But they represent an important clue about the conceptual framework that governs the notion of art, because it was only with the rise of the notion of *fine* art that the kind of work produced in domestic settings gradually receded into the lesser category of ‘craft’¹¹.

Crafts can require enormous skill, but they do not measure up to the defining features of fine art: Crafts tend to follow a plan, a formula, such that their makers produce the same kind of thing that has been done in the past with only small variations. Stitching a coverlet, throwing a pot, turning a chair leg—these activities remain constrained by the uses to which the item will be put. In contrast, fine art supposedly brings something new into being that is independent of practical use. It is *original*, and the highest examples of fine art are the works of geniuses. Although it requires training to develop to its full potential, according to Kant, it is the art of genius that gives guidance to lesser lights, who merely follow. The concept of genius marks a strongly gendered category, for it attaches the notion of original creativity to male artists, despite the fact that the terms that describe his creativity are often cast in terms of labor and birth—just not actual physical labor and birth of the animal and reproductive sort¹².

What is more, craft works typically are made for some practical purpose: to keep warm, to cover a wall, to set a table. Their value is at least partly instrumental, and if they are visually pleasing, that is a bonus. However, theories of fine art strip away the importance of practical values, leaving *aesthetic* value at its core. Quilts and clothing may be pretty, but they are also items of practical use and are evaluated as such. Works of fine art such as painting, music, and poetry, demand a more contemplative regard. The rise of the concept of autonomous art—fine art—goes hand in hand with an increased emphasis on contemplative, distanced aesthetic appreciation.

The modern concept of the aesthetic refers to an experience of beauty (or other high aesthetic value) for its own sake. According to the analysis that prevailed in the influential philosophies of the eighteenth century, beauty signals a particular kind of pleasure, one that had to be carefully distinguished from the physical, sensuous pleasures furnished by touch, taste, or smell. Listening to music or looking at paint-

¹⁰ Korsmeyer, Carolyn (2004). *Gender and aesthetics: an introduction*. London: Routledge, ch. 3.

¹¹ Shiner, Larry (2001). *The invention of art: a cultural history*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹² Battersby, Christine (1989). *Gender and genius: Towards a feminist aesthetics*. London: The Woman’s Press.

ings or sculptures can be enjoyed entirely apart from sensuous pleasure or practical use. By extension, craft objects such as utensils, quilts, clothing, cushions or even meals are not going to meet these criteria because they are also assessed for their practical uses and the physical comfort they sustain. Women's domestic artistry receded from view just as the vaunted notions of the aesthetic, fine art, and genius rose in the cultural imagination. Thus both philosophical concepts and historical circumstances overdetermined the relative absence of women from among the artists represented in museums whose mission is to gather together the greatest works of an age.

3. Bodies on and off the canvas

Theorists who laid the conceptual foundations for the modern notion of the aesthetic also offered catalogues for the kinds of things that 'naturally' occasion the pleasures of the beautiful. These include bounties of nature such as flowers, items with forms that display compositional harmony such as architectural design, fine sculpture, music, and poetry—and also the (young, pretty) female face and figure¹³. This assessment bestows a philosophical imprimatur onto culturally gendered norms of a certain place and era. It also opens the subject of the portrayal of 'beautiful' human bodies in art¹⁴.

The most esteemed form of painting was for a long time considered to be history painting that portrays scenes from the Bible or from myth and legend. Obviously, both men and women are depicted in such scenes; and especially in those that portray classical mythology, they might be nude. But the nude—especially the female nude—also became a subject for painting on its own. Indeed, it became such a central motif in visual art that one historian has argued that the female nude—young, attractive, and often though not always white—is a virtually defining feature of European art¹⁵. These painted women are not only unclothed, they are often posed in alluring positions, either willingly (an exotic odalisque—assuming one can posit willingness to a member of a harem) or reluctantly (Susanna and the Elders). Although aesthetic pleasure taken in beautiful objects is supposed to be disinterested and non-sensuous, the female form of the most stereotypically alluring sort is listed among the items of 'natural' beauty.

The claim that contemplation of a seductively positioned nude figure prompts disinterested aesthetic attention demanded scrutiny. The traditional notion of aesthetic disinterestedness became a subject for feminist challenge, although by no means do all discount its importance¹⁶. This issue prompted a feminist theory of audience reception that was popular for some years, especially in film theory, although it quickly was adopted by historians of painting. Namely, the notion that visual art is especially targeted to the (heterosexual) 'male gaze'¹⁷. The male gaze was both a

¹³ e.g. Burke, Edmund (1757/1958). *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*, J.T. Boulton, Ed., London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

¹⁴ Brand, Peg Zeglin (ed.), (2000,2013) *Beauty matters*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

¹⁵ Nead, Lynda (1992). *The female nude: art, obscenity and sexuality*. London: Routledge.

¹⁶ Eaton, Anne (2008). "Feminist philosophy of art." *Philosophy Compass*, 3(4).

¹⁷ Mulvey, Laura (1975), Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen* 16: 3, 6-18; also Devereaux, Mary (1990). Oppressive texts, resisting readers, and the gendered spectator. In *Feminism and tradition in aesthetics*, Peggy Zeglin Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer, Eds., University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 121-141.

powerful tool of analysis and a target of feminist critiques, which noted that neither women nor men occupy the same, stable social positions. Complexities occasioned by racial differences regarding the presumed agent of the gaze were the subject of bell hooks' notion of the 'oppositional' gaze¹⁸. More recently Amelia Jones has examined queer and trans identities in relation to images from art history¹⁹. While the notion of the gaze was debated and critiqued among feminists, critical race theorists, art historians, philosophers, and film scholars and eventually faded from use, the prominence of the female nude in art remained an enduring issue for examination and challenge. This subject, old and over-analyzed as it may be, appears to be gaining a revival today.

The two performances that opened this discussion testify to this revival. Both represent continued revolt against the painted images that remain at the heart of the great tradition of European painting. They call attention—yet again—to the dominance of certain visions of femininity that remain powerful, including the temptations and dangers presented by a feminine body. Although this style of depiction is no longer practiced, the fund of images that surround us is virtually inescapable and retains a power over the cultural imagination. In fact, if one were to remove all paintings of seductive images of women from museum walls, there would be an expanse of empty gaps—and this perhaps is the point.

4. Feminist appropriations

The effort to discover women artists from the past raised an inevitable question: once we find their works, will we also find shared artistic and aesthetic features that reflect or enact the gender of their creators? Does art by women have a 'feminine' stamp? Domestic subjects and settings are to be expected simply because of women's shared history of household activities. But women are not all the same, and feminism has always had to grapple with the temptation to find sameness where difference reigns. (This issue surfaced in theories of the gaze mentioned above.) Theories of the gaze critiqued cultural icons for their heterosexual normativity, but similar biases exist within feminist communities as well. Not all women are either objects or subjects of heterosexual desire, nor do they all share a similar relationship to historical ideals of the 'feminine'. But they do (apparently) share one thing: common body morphology²⁰.

Despite the persistent feminist critique that women were depicted chiefly as sexualized bodies, it is those bodies that remain central in feminist art works. But *feminist* art developed in resistance to models of the *feminine* because beauty in its traditional form constitutes an oppressive category. In the hands and the brush of feminist artists, female bodies are no longer pictured as passive objects of desire but become

¹⁸ hooks, bell (1995). The oppositional gaze: black female spectators. In *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, Peggy Zeglin Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer, Eds. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 142-59.

¹⁹ Jones, Amelia, Ed. (2012). *Seeing differently: A history and theory of identification and the visual arts*. New York: Routledge.

²⁰ However, clear binary sexuality, formerly taken for granted, is also under challenge. In art, this enterprise is especially dramatic in the work of transgender artists such as Leon Mostovoy's *Transfigure project*: <http://transfigureproject.com/>.

confrontational images, both depicted and performed. The results are sometimes shocking, but they are also witty and provocative in their deployment of parodies, puns, and references to art history.

Archaic though the image may be, the odalisque has a presence on the feminist art scene. For some years, a New York group called The Guerilla Girls chastised galleries and museums for failing to include women in their exhibits with a series of witty posters. One of the most famous featured David's *Grande Odalisque* on which the figure of the seductive woman wore their signature gorilla mask beneath a banner headline: *Does a woman need to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* **(1)** (The image marks a pun in English–guerilla-gorilla.) This campaign was intended to draw attention to the absence of women artists who are displayed in major museums such as New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. But the choice of David's famous figure also directed one's gaze to the tempting view of female flesh, now made humorously hideous with the graft of a gorilla head onto the body. In the museum the painting hung in a place of honor, but the poster was surreptitiously plastered on the walls of subways and city buses. The transit authority judged the image obscene and removed it—prompting the question of why an acclaimed image in art should be obscene when displayed in a non-museum setting, thereby also raising the issue of the distinction between art and pornography²¹.

The odalisque is also a point of parodic inspiration for Faith Ringgold, who merges issues of sexual availability, race, and domestic craft material in her works. *Jo Baker's Birthday* (1993) is a canvas with a quilted fabric border in which Matisse's famous *Red Room* sits in the background beside the artist's version of one of his equally famous odalisque paintings. The work playfully critiques standard art mediums, famous images from artists of the past, and European norms of female beauty²². **(2)**

Of course, many artists have been using mediums other than paint and pencil for quite some time, so one may wonder why this particular work should be singled out for its use of fabric, which is now far from unusual. This question has important variations that ask how one distinguishes feminist art by women from art by male artists who also participate in deconstructive movements such as conceptualism or performance. In the case in question: what is the difference between a work made by a male artist who uses fabric or other craft material, and that of a female African American artist who quilts around an odalisque and names her after an expatriate jazz singer? This question can only be answered by reference to the artist and the context of her gesture. A woman, and a member of a racial group that historically has been doubly excluded from mainstream culture, has a different relationship to what the image represents than does a male artist of the culture that produced the original theme. Ringgold appropriates and plays with the image, altering it into a witty political comment. The meaning of a picture does not emerge from its appearance alone²³.

In traditional modes of depicting the nude such as odalisque pictures, women's sexual organs are partially hidden. (Courbet's now famous *Origine du monde*, hid-

²¹ Eaton, Anne (2008). "Feminist philosophy of art." *Philosophy Compass*, 3(4).

²² Chicago, Judy and Edward Lucie-Smith (1999). *Women and art: Contested territory*, New York: Watson-Guptill, 102-103.

²³ The narrative within this picture is more complex than I have summarized above. See the commentary provided by the St. Louis Museum of Art: <http://emuseum.slam.org:8080/emuseum/view/objects/asitem/items@:26768>.

den for years from the public eye, is a striking exception.) Breasts are bare but pubic region discreetly recedes into shadow, or it is covered by a wisp of fabric, a casually placed hand, or a turned thigh. The amount of feminist art that lays this region bare is striking, though the subjects usually move from sexual invitation to childbirth, menstruation, exploitation, rape. Confrontational, ugly, disgusting—sometimes intended to be beautiful. And perennially controversial.

Perhaps the most well-known work of feminist art is Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1979)—a massive mixed-media piece that is an open triangle measuring 48 feet on a side, with place settings for 39 women from history. An additional 999 names of women from the past are inscribed on the porcelain tile floor. It is a monumental work for which Chicago enlisted the assistance of hundreds of volunteer artists to create the 'craft' table settings: the mats and runners, the ceramic plates, the tableware.

Presented in the form of a triple Eucharist, which singled out 39 famous women who had altered the course of human history—but also found space to mention numerous others—the work made a point of using skills that have been thought of as specifically female, such as stitchery and china painting, as an integral part of the installation (Chicago and Lucie-Smith 1999, 43).

At the time of its first exhibit, *The Dinner Party* was both lauded and excoriated. Chicago's stated aim was to create a symbolic history of women, but the choice of symbols proved highly controversial, for each place setting featured a plate with a vaginal motif (3b). Highly stylized and abstract but unmistakable as to what they denote, these motifs were a particular target of criticism—from feminists as well as from mainstream critics. The latter found them embarrassing or even obscene. The former found the idea that women of note could be represented by variations on vulvar images to be reductionist, sexist, and unprogressive. Despite its popularity when first displayed, for a variety of reasons this work was taken apart and put into storage for decades. But it was not forgotten, and after considerable effort on the part of the artist and her supporters²⁴, it has been re-installed on permanent display at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Indeed, it is now acclaimed as the 'most famous feminist artwork of all time'²⁵.

Controversial though it may still be, Chicago's *Dinner Party* is tame compared to her earlier *Red Flag* (1971) or the installation and performance space titled *Womanhouse* (1972) in which she contributed *Menstruation Bathroom* featuring real blood and discarded tampons. The deployment of real bodies and their products describes the often disturbing performance art in which feminist artists display their own bodies in ways that defy standard alluring poses. These works achieve a spectrum of meanings, from quotidian (this is the way female bodies are in daily life) to mythic (invoking ancient themes of birth and the cycles of life). Carolee Schneemann pur-

²⁴ The piece was acquired by the Elizabeth Sackler Foundation and eventually donated to the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

²⁵ Cascone, Sarah (2017a). How—and why—'The Dinner Party' became the most famous feminist artwork of all time, *Artnet News*, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/the-brooklyn-museum-judy-chicago-dinner-party-1131506>.

sued the latter connotations in works such as *Interior Scroll* (1975), where the artist herself slowly extracted a long ribbon of paper from her vagina and read from it. One might have thought that this kind of performance would have to be a unique event, but in yet another reprise, a variation was recently repeated by another performer²⁶. Other of her works similarly feature her own body, sometimes posed with snakes and alluding to ancient goddess imagery and invoking the sacred associations of birth and death (e.g. *Minoan Snake Goddess*, 1963). Although many found this early nude work lewd, one could find beauty there. Other performers, however, rejected the idea of positive aesthetic features altogether and deliberately made themselves disgusting. Karen Finley's events, in which she smeared her body with substances that resembled blood and excrement, caught the outraged attention of members of the US Congress and were used as a reason to curb funding for 'obscene works' from the National Endowment for the Arts. (In 1998 the Supreme Court ruled against Finley's First Amendment defense.)

This was the sort of scene that Danto, himself highly appreciative of much feminist art, singled out as major interventions in cultural tradition.

The performance artist, when a feminist, vests herself with attributes opposed to commonplace notions of femininity: her art is funky, aggressive, confrontational, flagrant, daring, extreme and meant to be sensed as dangerous: she uses frontal nudity, blood, menstrual fluids and the like almost magically... And it can be pretty scary. But it also makes clear why traditional aesthetic categories will not apply to it. It is not meant to be beautiful, symmetrical, composed, tasteful, let alone pretty or elegant or perfect (1990, 300-301)²⁷.

Though vaginal images or displays share a certain shock value, the artistic uses of the female body by no means signal the same meanings. Chicago's plates celebrate female identity. But many performances are defiant in-your-face challenges to classic erotic images in which women are compliant and passive. The deliberate cultivation of that which is not pretty but is grossly material is the occasion not only for presenting formerly taboo aspects of bodies but also of highlighting the ways that those bodies have been misused and abused. Because the forms are easily recognizable, female reproductive organs represent an available motif for targeted protest, as with Zoe Buckman's recent *Champ* (2018), a huge neon installation in Hollywood of a glowing uterus and ovaries wearing boxing gloves, a clear protest against recent sexual abuse scandals in the entertainment industry²⁸.

²⁶ Corbett, Rachel (2018). A performance artist reprised Carolee Schneemann's famous 'Interior Scroll'—Using Hillary Clinton's Benghazi testimony, *Artnet News* https://news.artnet.com/art-world/adrienne-truscott-interior-scroll-1200854?utm_content=from_&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=US%20newsletter%20for%201/18/18&utm_term=New%20US%20Newsletter%20List.

²⁷ For an appreciation of the feminism of Arthur Danto's art critical writings, see Peg Brand Weiser, 'Feminist reflections on Arthur C. Danto, in Lydia Goehr and Jonathan Gilmore, Eds. *A Companion to Arthur C. Danto* (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming).

²⁸ Cascone (2018). Zoe Buckman sends post-Harvey Hollywood a message with her public sculpture of a boxing uterus, *Artnet News*, https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/art-production-fund-champ-zoe-buckman-955151?utm_content=from_&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=US%20newsletter%20for%203%2F1%2F18&utm_term=New%20US%20Newsletter%20List

Kara Walker's *Subtlety* (2014), a work as monumental as *The Dinner Party*, foregrounds the exploitation of women's bodies in the specific circumstances of slavery. *Subtlety* has a subtitle that renders the intended meaning of the work unmistakable: *or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant*. This enormous Sphinx-like figure, with the head of an African American woman and bulging, exaggerated buttocks and sexual organs, makes use of the unusual medium of sugar, a substance that is both perishable and traditionally outlawed from art. Because of this feature, the work also assails traditional artistic norms of the object of art, even as the medium provides much depth of meaning. Like so many works that demand critical reflection on the way that women's bodies are displayed in art—in this case bodies with a history of servitude—sympathetic interpretation of this work can be elusive and it is easily misunderstood²⁹. It is a complex work that both commands appreciation as a sculpture and participates in the movements within the art world to 'de-artify'—to challenge, defy, and reject the very traditions that have been under investigation by art historians and commentators.

5. Summing up

When feminists exploit the female body in their works, they are taking a bold risk that has not diminished over time. One of the philosophically deepest meanings of the body is precisely that it is the *body* as opposed to the *mind*. And it is the female body that is especially associated with material being—that which brings forth life in its animal form, but also that which is *not* associated with the creative development of science and culture. Foregrounding the female body in art defies this venerable association, though it also risks perpetuating the connotations that historically have undercut women's participation in high culture. In 1976 art critic Lucy Lippard succinctly noted that 'It is a subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of women to expose that insult'³⁰). That abyss still remains to be bridged.

Feminist artists are not the only ones who explore interiority and materiality in art, but because of the traditional linkage of gross matter with the 'feminine', their work necessarily calls to mind venerable conceptual frameworks. The results remain discomfiting, but more important is the outcome that this work has helped to foster in the art world: namely a deconstruction of the values and concepts that have traditionally held that world together—autonomous fine art, positive aesthetic value, genius, aesthetic distance, and so forth. Critiques of the limiting concepts that underlie the absence of women from the history of art converge with similar aims that have transpired in the art world at large; and feminist artists perpetuate and advance those movements. At the same time, it would underestimate the significance of feminist interventions to see them as merely joining the stream of de-artifying works from

²⁹ Davidson, Maria del Guadalupe (2016). Black silhouettes on white walls: Kara Walker's magic lantern. In Sherri Irvin, Ed., *Body aesthetics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 15-36.

³⁰ quoted in Chicago, Judy and Edward Lucie-Smith (1999). *Women and art: Contested territory*, New York: Watson-Guptill, 144.

conceptualists and those who followed them. In Norma Broude and Mary Garrard assessment, ‘the feminist movement, and the art that accompanied it, ... brought a deep sea change to the art of the 20th century, more revolutionary than the mere styles that had made up a changing avant-garde’³¹.

In a hundred years, will historians look back to our time and note that indeed, now there are great women artists well-represented in museums and galleries? If one is merely counting numbers, then the statistics will probably improve. (Although the binary implied by the term ‘woman artist’ might have become outdated if transgender movements continue apace.) However, if one anticipates that women will have gained a place within the history of fine art, this judgment falters because the very notion of fine art is so deteriorated. From Dada, conceptualism, and all of the de-artififying movements of the last century, the very concepts that art historians targeted as the conceptual barriers to women’s entry into art have been rejected by some of the most powerful voices in the art world today. To put it another way, the art world now is hardly recognizable as the one from which women were historically missing. It was the good fortune of feminist artists that they entered an art world that was changing rapidly and that admitted—even sometimes welcomed—the uses of nontraditional mediums and images and the development of confrontational forms, including radically challenging installations and performance art. It is ironic that the norms of art institutions were changing so radically that those efforts would land in a place quite different from the scene that originally was a site of exclusion.

The effort to understand the absence of women from the walls of museums and galleries is matched by the effort to be sure that they are there in the future. But the places where art will now appear hardly resemble the world of art in which they were absent. After all, it is hard to establish greatness when the very concepts lying behind the notion of ‘great’ are deconstructed and rejected. Feminists themselves are major contributors to the contemporary movements that describe today’s creative visual culture. It would not be accurate to say that the success has destroyed the goal; the accomplishments of feminist-minded art are too important for that pessimistic judgment. Still, there is an irony here. Women are more secure in art, but art is less secure in the cultural position where it used to reign³².

³¹ Broude, Norma and Mary Garrard, Eds. (1982). *Feminism and art history: Questioning the litany*. Westview, 6. This book presents a detailed study of the changing perspectives that characterize thirty years of feminist art history.

³² For helpful comments on this essay, I thank Peg Brand Weiser, Carrie Tirado Breman, and Ann Colley.