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Mark, Lisa Gabrielle., and Cornelia H. Butler. *Wack!: art and the feminist revolution*. Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007.

Chapter: Hard Targets, Male Bodies, Feminist Art and the Force of Censorship in the 1970s

WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution serves as the exhibition catalog for the international survey of feminist art of the 1960s - 1980s, curated by Cornelia Butler for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. *WACK!* documents and illustrates the impact of the feminist revolution on contemporary art practice, and features works by both notable and unfamiliar artists such as: Carolee Schneeman, Louise Fishman, Louise Bourgeois, and Yoko Ono. The art examined in *WACK!* includes work by over 120 artists working in all media and is accompanied by written entries by leading critics, art historians, and scholars. The catalog offers new perspectives on the beginnings of the feminist art practices in the West.

The section, *Hard Targets: Male Bodies, Feminist Art and the Force of Censorship in the 1970s*, written by Richard Meyer, explores an obscure strand of feminist art that departs from the typical focus of the female experience and embodiment, and instead focuses on the visual imagery and eroticized revisioning of the male body (Meyer, 363). The artists that Meyer includes in this chapter were not showcased in the original exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, however they serve as a memento to the power of curation and omission inherent in the feminist art field. Meyer calls attention to this chapter within feminist art practices specifically to showcase the diversity of the experiences and to explore the forms of censorship that the artists endured.

Artists within this genre of feminist art sought to recontextualize the male body in order to flip the gender roles and fundamentally retool the nude male form to anti-sexist ends (Meyer, 363). This group placed heterosexual pleasure at the forefront and viewed the visual representation of desire for the male body as a right. Artist Anita Steckel embraced these themes and utilized phallic imagery to explore gender power dynamics and heterosexual sexuality. Steckel's exhibition, *The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics*, opened at Rockland Community College in February 1972, to an uproar and several attempts to censor her art. The exhibition held several pieces from her *Giant Women* series, photomontages in which a monumental female nude moves through public spaces of New York City, including a series where the city skyline literally becomes a phallic landscape. After the installation of Steckel's show, Rockland County Legislator John Komar called up the college to close the exhibition, or failing that, to

relocate it to “a more appropriate venue on campus such as...the men’s or women’s restroom.” This type of attempt at censorship did not stop there, and in fact the local district attorney opened an investigation as to whether Steckel could be prosecuted, (in the end she was not, and could not be prosecuted for her art) (Adams, 365).

In 1973 Steckel founded the Fight Censorship (FC) group. This group was a collective of “women artists who have done, will do, or do some form of sexually explicit art, i.e., political, humorous, erotic or psychological.” Steckel crafted a manifesto that demanded that sexual subject matter not be prevented from being art (Steckel, 366). Artists at the time were interested in calling attention to, and pointing out, the double standard within art of the depiction of nude bodies. Female nudes were appropriate subject matter and well positioned in art museums, however the male nude was considered an inappropriate subject matter and barred from museums and institutions. Ultimately the FC issued a press release, which called for museums to open themselves to phallic imagery by female artists and more broadly to the sexual expression of women.

Censorship played a large role in the push for the freedom of sexual expression in the 1960s and 1970s. Many women artists explored phallic imagery as a means both to critique male supremacy and to claim the male body as a site for female fantasy and desire. This approach to feminism is a counterpoint to the vaginal and gynocentric imagery to which feminist art of the day is most associated with (Meyer, 368). Within radical gynocentric feminism in the 1970s, an insistence on female sexual agency and pleasure existed alongside a critique of sexual penetration as inherently oppressive of women (Echols, 369). Within the American feminist movement, porn was positioned as violent and aggressive towards women, coining the phrase, “*pornography the theory, rape the practice*” (Morgan, 375).

Artist Joan Semmel sought to craft an alternative erotic language of images for heterosexual intimate exchanges that fought against the prevailing idea of penis penetration as aggressive towards women. Photographing real couples before, during, and after intercourse, Semmel used these images as inspiration for her paintings. Her work fought to find images that did not change gender roles, or romanticize the exchange, but instead presented it as normal and integral to the heterosexual experience. To achieve this she used high-contrast colors, unexpected angles, croppings, and sequential events to defamiliarize the sense of heterosexuality (Meyer, 376). Her partially abstracted approach to rendering the scene allowed the viewer to connect and understand the scenario and yet distance themselves from the reality of it;

furthering her hope of creating imagery that displayed a heterosexual exchange as non-violent.

The participants in the FC group and other various feminist artists of the early 1970s challenged the suppression of erotic art by women, especially that which featured or focused on the male body. The artists discussed in this chapter portrayed the male body as an object of female humor, fantasy, critique and important to the female heterosexual experience. Women artists who made a sexual statement with their art were subject to multiple forms of censorship, prohibition, and constraint. To combat this censorship they crafted tools and strategies (manifestos, press releases, protest petitions, and the founding of advocacy groups) to combat and confront those exclusions and constraints within the public sphere (Meyer, 382).

These artists true contribution to feminist art lay in their artistic practice which did not conform to heterosexual convention nor to mainstream feminist thought at the time. Leaving us with a window into the diverse and individualized perspective of feminism, sexuality, and politics as complex and interrelated ideologies.

Works Cited

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