

Video

Not for Sale

Gilda Williams

It is already hard to believe that in the 1950s nearly all advertising in ladies' magazines endorsed cleaning products. By 1980 these sunny ads of sparkling housewives delighting over spotless kitchen tiles – 'so shiny I can see myself!' – had mysteriously vanished. The majority of such ads has now been transformed, and today most by far promote cosmetics, clothes and all genres of beautifying assistance. Evidently women have inexplicably grown more interested in what they see reflected in those tiles than in floor hygiene.

In mainstream culture and contemporary art alike, the female body (instead of, for example, the family or the home) has become the site where femininity is experienced and performed. Between 1950 and 1980 history slammed head-on into one of the most essential -isms of the 20th century: Feminism, which exploded with fury and chaos in the late 1960s and 70s. From the start, taking charge of the body is how feminist activists, theorists and artists could assert themselves, ever since their very first outing at the 'No More Miss America' demonstration in 1968. Since that landmark event – the Stonewall of the feminist movement – in which women ritualistically tossed brassieres, girdles and other body-confining and defining garments into a rubbish bin in front of the beauty pageant, the foremost task for the feminist is to reclaim and self-define her body. (Whether this has resulted in a new oppressor, the body beautiful, has become the core argument of some recent *fin-de-siècle* theorists.)

Laura Cottingham's impressively researched 90-minute video essay, *Not for Sale: Feminism and Art in the USA during the 1970s*, 1998, (screened at Milch and the Tate Gallery in December) reveals how so much feminist art is directed upon the body: whether in the work of now-famous artists like Adrian Piper (*The Mythic Being*, 1974, which sees the conceptualist-turned-Activist artist publicly in drag); Joan Jonas (spoon-hammering the sliding video frame that traps her in *Vertical Role*, 1972); Hannah Wilke (with her attention-grabbing striptease, upstaging the nearby *Large Glass* in *Hommage à Marcel Duchamp*, 1976), or in the revelatory barrage of terrific unknowns (like Mimi Smith's *Steel Wool Peignoir*, 1966, a see-through negligee of scrubbing pads; or Rachel Rosenthal's eerie, grinning self-analysis in *The Arousing*, 1978). Body Art, combined with the need to give the movement public exposure, resulted in a hybrid art form that crossed political

Mierle Laderman
Ukeles

*Transfer: The
Maintenance of the Art
Object* 1974

video still from
Laura Cottingham
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demonstration with performance. Explorations of re-constituted sexuality combined shock tactics with autobiography. Art historical and mass media uses of the female image were contaminated with unprecedented guerrilla-like icons of unassailable and liberated women. It is not until the close of the decade, particularly with Jenny Holzer, that the body is relieved of its task as the single most revolutionizing source-image for feminist painting, performance, installation and sculpture.

In the first half of the Century Freud had famously asked what women want, only to arrive at the stunningly arrogant conclusion that she wanted (what else?) a penis. It is no surprise that women have spent the second half systematically yelling back, 'You can f!*\$ing keep it!' – but how to say it best? There was by no means a unanimous reply. The demand of inventing a feminist art was complicated: no one could agree on the definition of art – much less of Feminism, a brand-new term. *Not for Sale* documents well the giant, internal conflicts and theoretical uncertainties encountered in articulating the newborn Women's Liberation Movement. Should feminists hate men, or negotiate? Exclude men, or dominate them? Can a man be a feminist? Can a woman be a feminist and still marry, or raise children, or wear lipstick? Please choose one of the following solutions for finally getting women into the Museum of Modern Art: a) force officials to exhibit women; b) picket and petition to raise public awareness; c) forget MoMA; found an all-women institution; d) infiltrate City Hall with a radical-lesbian speech; e) kill all men. Answer: all of the above, each possibility supported by at least one of the movement's separate voices.

Men almost never appear in the whole video (only two: David Ross, interviewing Barbara Smith and Nancy Buchanan at the Women's Building, Los Angeles, 1974 and one unnamed pro-feminist young man working with Judy Chicago). Instead the video focuses far more on the courageous struggles among women than those with their male oppressors: Nancy Spero, at a meeting

of the recently formed, all-women AIR Gallery in New York, refusing with unshakable determination to allow men to exhibit with them; Judy Chicago, emotional and fabulously angry that women in her *Dinner Party* research group resist reading political theory, urging them to gain an empowering, intellectual grasp on the task at hand; activist Ti-Grace Atkinson, frustrated and resentful of opportunists who join the revolution in order to get an abortion and drop out soon thereafter. All, however, are aware that history has somehow handed their generation the thankless job of sorting out a few millennia's worth of theoretical and practical injustices, at least in time for the imminent year 2000 and to ensure that the revolution will be well underway by then – and it is.

Recently I visited the Hallen für Neue Kunst in Schaffhausen, Switzerland, an exceptional collection of American and European artists emerging in the 1960s. While part of my heart sang to see the magnificent LeWitt wall drawings or the unforgettable Flavins, another part kept asking, where are the women? (There are none in this warehouse-size collection.) Where are the non-white artists? (None.) The work on view, sensational as it is, stopped looking like the bold new beginning it claimed to be, and seemed the very opposite: the final chapter in the obsolete, centuries-long domination of Western-male art. That was the very last – and very recent! – moment when men could claim art as their own domain (at least without vociferous protest, as occurred in the 1980s) and it is up to history to keep it that way.

Not for Sale, obligatory viewing for all, succeeds in the tradition of feminist efforts as a call to arms, a reminder of the gruelling work that was done in so short a time, for the benefit of so many, and whose achievements can never be taken for granted. ■

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