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Lorraine O'Grady addresses the audience at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles' "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution," Mar. 4, 2007

Brainstormers' 2005 performance at P.S.1

WHITE WALLS, GLASS CEILING

by Ben Davis

It's March 2007 and feminism is again hot in the art world, with important historical exhibitions of feminist art opening in Los Angeles ("WACK!" at LA MOCA) and New York ("Global Feminisms" at the Brooklyn Museum), plus many important smaller shows on view at galleries and alternative spaces. This flurry of interest is, one hopes, an occasion for the art world to get to the heart of its own problem with women.

Let's refresh, once more, on the numbers: Women make up more than half of students in art schools -- at the School of Visual Arts, 71 men enrolled in graduate studies last fall, to 134 women -- yet less than *one third* of solo shows in Chelsea spotlight women artists.

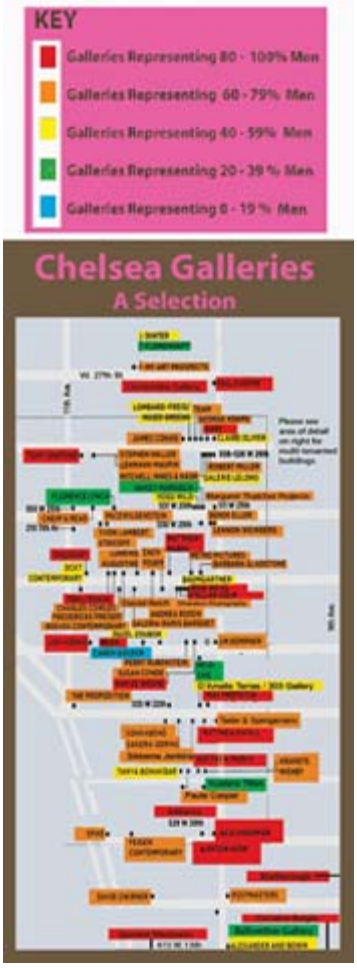
This disparity can't just be chalked up to inertia, either (the fact that, say, most Minimalists or Ab Ex painters were men). At galleries devoted to emerging art, the totals are grim -- Clementine, John Connelly Presents, Leo Koenig, Inc. and Rare galleries, for example, all show 80 percent or more male artists, according to the activist art group the Brainstormers, which crunched the numbers for 2006.

What is striking about critical writing on the topic to date, however, is the lack of curiosity about *why* this is. It's depicted as a freakish anomaly, with very little curiosity voiced as to the material basis for sexism in the visual arts, or the mechanisms by which it functions. Connected to this is the fact that the problem is addressed as a matter of internal politics, as if the art world were literally a world floating off in space separate from Earth.

This inward-directed perspective is part of the problem. It is a symptom of the low level of actual -- as opposed to rhetorical or theoretical -- political activity in the art world, and a mindset focused on individual enlightenment rather than the structural realities that frame and produce ideas. In fact, art's general self-perception as a liberal field might well be an obstacle to getting at the root of the problem. But make no mistake -- you can't explain this phenomenon without getting at factors larger than just art.

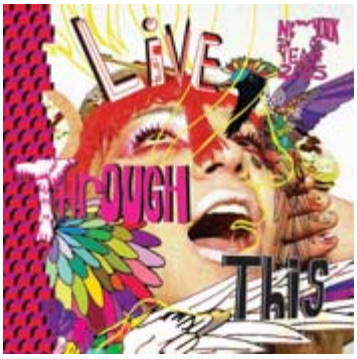
One of the ways you can see that the question is institutional is that, while women are deplorably underrepresented as art-producers, as curators and scholars, they make up a clear majority of the field (the Association of Art Museum Curators informally estimates their membership at about 50/50, though they have no hard data; looking over the names of curators of major shows, the total of women would seem to be much higher). At P.S.1's 2005 "Greater New York" show -- the very event which prompted the Brainstormers to stage their first activist art intervention, standing in costumes and pointing at the building to call attention to the disparity -- less than a third of the artists were women. Yet some three-fourths of the curators listed as having been part of the review process were female.

In his review of that exhibition, Jerry Saltz noted two important facts. One was the low number of women artists involved. The other was



Graph from the Brainstormers' 2006 "Gallery Guide"

Brainstormers' edited screen capture of Clementine gallery's website



that, despite its rhetoric about being based on an "open call," "Greater New York" looked very much like a feeder for product from mainstream New York galleries. You have to combine the two observations to get to the origins of the inequality.

To understand the physics of the art world, one has to be clear that its primary motivations are not moral, theoretical or even esthetic, but commercial. Rather than an ivory tower, as some claim, it is a golden pyramid, and its broad, unshakable base is constructed of art dealers, who are first, last and always businesspeople. Concretely, this means that what is deemed "hot" new art must factor in what piques the interest of playboy European heirs, Japanese capitalists, newly rich Russian robber barons, American i-bankers and the like -- all of whom are predominantly male, and arguably less prone to buy overtly "feminine," let alone feminist, work, or take women seriously (in the current issue of *ARTnews*, both Ed Winkleman and Zach Feuer admit that "feminism" is simply not a "selling point," which at least proves that their clients prefer women who do not assert themselves.)

Of such raw material is taste created. As Lucy Lippard long ago noted, art institutions are "discriminatory, usually under the guise of being discriminating."

Add to this background the network of backroom elbow-rubbing that forms the social unconscious of dealers' artist selections, and you have a cascade effect -- an initial disposition that male artists and their concerns are more marketable turns into a disposition towards their friends and their concerns, which then replicates itself, as there are fewer examples of commercially acceptable female artists. In 2005, Deitch Projects curator Kathy Grayson put together *Live Through This*, a book that attempted, with some prescience, to round -up the hottest artists of the contemporary scene. The 27 entries mention exactly three individual women: Bec Stupak, Misaki Kawai and Julie Atlas Muz (the woman-dominated acts Tracy and the Plastics, Le Tigre and Avenue D are also mentioned). In her essay, Grayson is quite clear about how this scene gelled:

"The most interesting part of the organization of this group of people is the insane degree of complexity with which everyone is interconnected. Brian Belott and the Huron Street people, who came from various Providence beginnings, put the Dearraindrop people up when they're in town, who in turn used to affiliate with the Paper Rad people, who have gone on tour with Cory [Arcangel], who also curated a show featuring a bunch of the artists in this book including Justin [Samson], who collaborated with A[assume] V[ivid] A[stro] F [ocus] in Miami and lives with me and Ry [Fyan], who in turn showed with Dash [Snow] and Dan [Colen] at Rivington Arms a while ago, Dash having used Brendan [Fowler], Dan, Ryan [McGinley], Ry, Keegan [McHargue] -- I mean, the majority of these people -- as his subjects, Dash's awesome-looking living room wall being the subject of Dan's next painting, who seems to be in all of Ryan's early photographs -- Ryan who is close friends with Brendan and Phiiliip and Terrance [Koh], who are all in the next *K48* issue Eli [Sudbrack]'s friend Scott is doing, which also includes Jules [de Balincourt], Matt Leines, Devendra [Banhart] -- and on and on, ad infinitum."

In short, this new scene sounds a lot like the old boys' club.

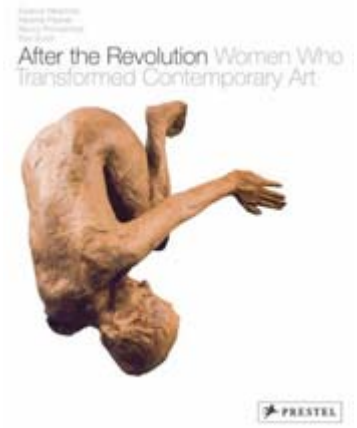
All this is not a timeless, unchallengeable condition, however. In fact, what is striking about today's situation is that, in many ways, we are several steps behind where we were 10 years ago. Speaking on a panel at the Women's Media Center, curator Helaine Posner cited statistics from the upcoming book *After the Revolution*: In the 1970s, 11.6 percent of gallery shows were by female artists; in the `80s,

Cover of Kathy Grayson's *Live Through This: New York in the Year 2005* (June 2005)

Ryan McGinley, Dash Snow and Dan Colen at Deitch Projects in 2006
Photo by Hikari Yokoyama

Tristan Tzara, Jean Arp and Max Ernst in 1921

"Countering Erasure: Women's Leadership in the Visual Arts" at the Woman's Media Center, Mar. 7, 2007



14.8; and in the '90s, 23.9. But the average total for the new century, according to Posner, is 21.5 percent -- a decrease.

At the same time, in December 2006, a *New York Times* article reported that the pay gap between men and women in general, closing throughout the '80s and '90s (though it's still worth noting, that meant that the average woman made only 75 cents to a man's dollar) had gone into reverse in the '00s: "The gap between their pay and the pay of male college graduates has actually widened slightly since the mid-'90s," the article states, with wider disparities the higher up the pay-scale you look.

Is doesn't take a brain scientist (or a heroic Brainstormer) to hypothesize that the two stats -- the status accorded to women as artists, and the status of women in general in the economy -- are interwoven.

The ultimate point is that simply focusing narrowly on changing attitudes in the art world is a case of tilting ideological windmills. In the '60s and '70s, there was a combative Women's Liberation movement, which scared the powers-that-were into according more respect to women's points of view in almost every field, made reproductive rights a central axis of politics and left in its wake numerous women's organizations and advocacy groups. Reading pioneers like Judy Chicago, or Valie Export, or Yoko Ono, it is clear that this broader context was the condition of possibility for the flourishing of their practices.

There followed a 30-year backlash. Mainstream women's organizations, dominated by middle-class politics, became more focused on lobbying largely perfidious politicians than mobilizing large numbers to protest. In art, "feminism" turned permanently inwards towards the mumbo-jumbo of postmodern identity politics, away from even a symbolic connection to popular protest -- logical, perhaps, given the receding tide of struggle. This set the stage for the post-feminist quagmire that we find ourselves in today, inside and outside the art world, with women's specific gains being eroded as part of a generally rising tide of inequality.

We can expose the hypocrisy of curators, critics and dealers, and show how they tail this backward slide of consciousness in general. Yet I am not optimistic about turning around trends in a billion-dollar industry through individual guilt-tripping.

Still, I believe there is cause for hope. The statistics in the visual arts are just shocking, just glaring enough that they might serve as spark for something. It is possible that they might stand as symbol for a much broader movement -- the kind of movement that, realistically, we all need if we want to win the battle for a more just, less profit-driven, more transparent and, above all, more representative artistic future.

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Cover of Eleanor Heartney, Helaine Posner, Nancy Princenthal and Sue Scott's *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art* (May 2007)

Valie Export's performance *Actionpant: Genital Panic* (1969)

Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1965)

Still from Berwick Street Film Collective's *Nightcleaners* (1970-1975), on view as part of "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles Courtesy of LUX