

American Feminist Art

Presentation Description

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Feminist art seeks to question the dominance of men in art and society, gain recognition and equality for women artists, and to question assumptions about womanhood. Beginning in the 1960s, feminist art used painting, performance art and "traditionally female" crafts like sowing and weaving to spread its message. The latter forms of expression were used because they, unlike painting and sculpture, did not have a male-dominated history associated with them.

This type of art was not just meant to be aesthetic, but also to incite and bring about change, for example by creating alternate venues for female artists to exhibit in. Recently, feminist art has also included statements about race, class, forms of privilege, and gender identity and it is continuously evolving ([2], [12]).

Feminist art is connected to conceptual art which prized ideas in art over the formal execution of the artwork and was often political in its messages. For some artists, articulating an idea was enough and they did not produce physical artworks. The view that the message of an artwork was the most important thing about it persisted [11]

Mary Beth Edelson

Born in 1933, Edelson organized a support group for people who experienced trauma when she was 13. At the same time, she began taking art lessons at the Art Institute of Chicago. Edelson is regarded as a first generation feminist artist, having focused on how women are portrayed in art since the 1970s. She worked to increase the number of exhibited female artists and for civil rights ([3], [16]).

Some Living American Women Artists / Last Supper (1972)

Edelson's *Last Supper* (from [4]) in Figure 1 is a poster mock-up that references the famous painting *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci. Edelson pasted over the faces and heads of Jesus and his disciples with pictures of women artists who she placed randomly. All of



Figure 1: Some Living American Women Artists

them are said to be idols and or artists that she admires. The only deliberate placement was Georgia O’Keeffe as Jesus, which shows Edelson’s admiration for her. All in all, Edelson put the photos of 82 women artists on this poster [16]. With this collage she wanted to present the faces of female artists that were seldomly seen in 1972 and expose the male exclusivity of the art world [4].

Barbara Kruger

Barbara Kruger is a designer, graphic artist, and photographer born in 1945 in New Jersey. She is best known for silkscreen prints that have concise captions and use found photographs as backgrounds. She started covering economics and politics satirically in the 80s and continues to critique social, cultural, and political tidings to this day. The short captions of her works of art make her communication with the viewer very direct. She uses a palette of red, white, and black in her artworks to get the viewers attention and to get her message across [9].

Untitled (I shop therefore I am) (1987)

The print in Figure 2 (from [6]) is a conceptual work of art in the sense that it is more focused on conveying a message than necessarily being aesthetically pleasing. Still, the

striking red and gray color scheme with white font pops out at the viewer and catches their attention. The slogan *I shop therefore I am* is a spin on the famous quote of Rene Descartes *I think therefore I am*. The modification makes a comment on materialistic items replacing the self-worth of consumers. This is an obvious critique of consumerism where shopping can somewhat define one's existence and the focus is on having rather than being. From a feminist point of view the artwork can be interpreted as a male-looking hand holding the message which is meant for women. It tells them that they are defined through their appearance in a rather typical sexist manner [6].

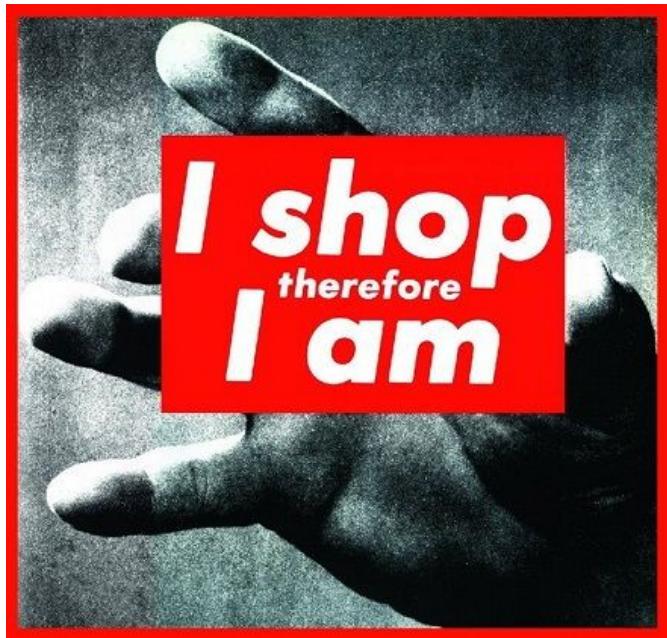


Figure 2: Untitled (I shop, therefore I am)

Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground) (1989)

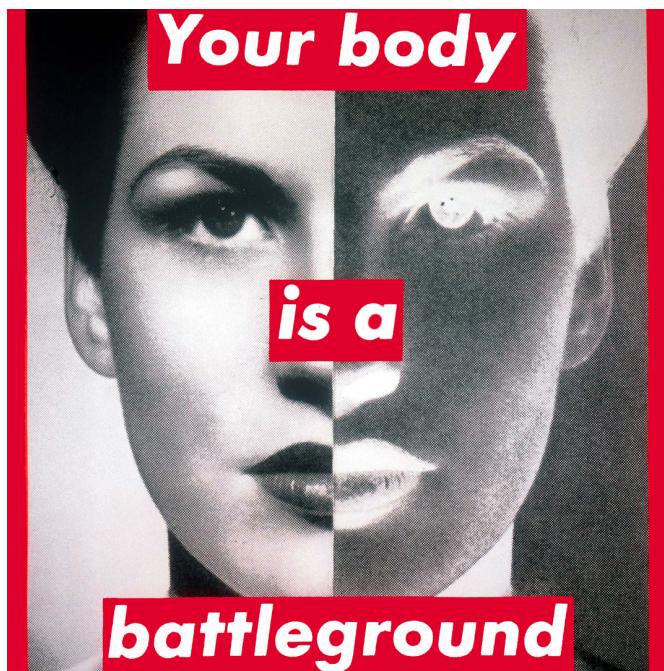
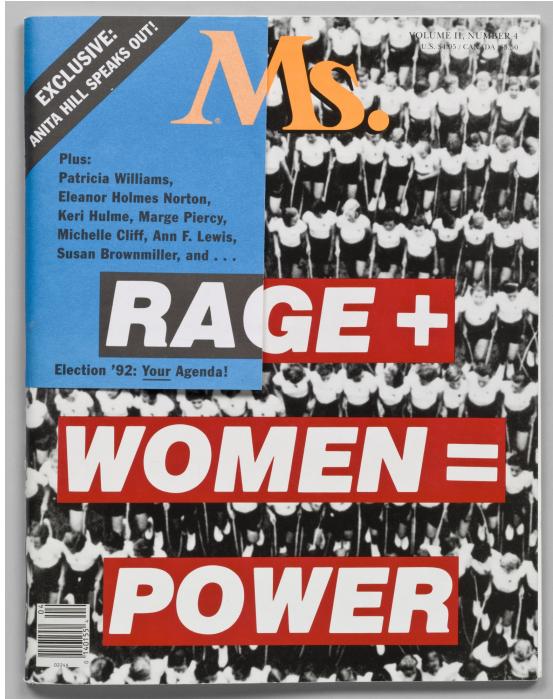


Figure 3: Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground) (1989)

The second work of art by Barbara Kruger in Figure 3 (from [14]) was made in 1989 in connection with protests against laws that attempted to restrict the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court ruling *Roe vs. Wade* that legalized abortions in the U.S. Made for the *March for Women's Lives* in Washington D.C. the artwork shows the same features as Figure 2. The message is very direct, now even with a face staring at the viewer telling them *Your body is a battleground* in reference to the battle over reproductive rights. The split face could signify the ongoing struggle ([10], [14]).



(a) Cover of *Ms.* magazine



(b) Cover of *W* magazine

Figure 4: Magazine covers

Magazine Covers

Figure 4 presents two magazine covers that Kruger designed. Section (a) shows the cover of *Ms.* magazine from 1992 (from [1]) and (b) shows the cover of *W* magazine from 2010 ([15], [13]). Both covers again demonstrate Kruger’s signature style in black, white, and red. The slogans are short and direct and leave some room for interpretation. In (b) it is purposefully not clear if Kim Kardashian is saying the slogan or if it is a comment on her. These two covers represent a return to her roots for Kruger as she started her career as a graphic designer at multiple New York City magazines [9].

Guerilla Girls

The Guerilla Girls are a group of anonymous female artists that was formed in 1984 in New York when a survey of the Museum of Modern Art showed that of 169 exhibited artists less than 10% were women. Since then they have worked to expose sexual and racial discrimination in the art world. The Guerilla Girls wear gorilla masks in public to protect their identities and use pseudonyms inspired by significant historical female figures. Calling themselves the *conscience of the art world*, they appropriate the visual language of advertising to make their point [8].

Do Women Have to be Naked to Get Into the Met. Museum? (1989)

This artwork in Figure 5 stems from a portfolio of 30 images titled *Guerilla Girls Talk Back* and shows text and a reclining nude woman wearing the typical gorilla mask. This poster is based on *La Grande Odalisque* by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and has the title seen above. In smaller font it says "Less than 5% of artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of nudes are female". This poster critiques the apparent hypocrisy of the Met. Museum that has no problem exhibiting nudes of women but somehow has a very small number of women artists. When the Guerilla Girls tried to get this poster displayed on advertisement boards they were repeatedly rejected based on the nudity of the poster [7].

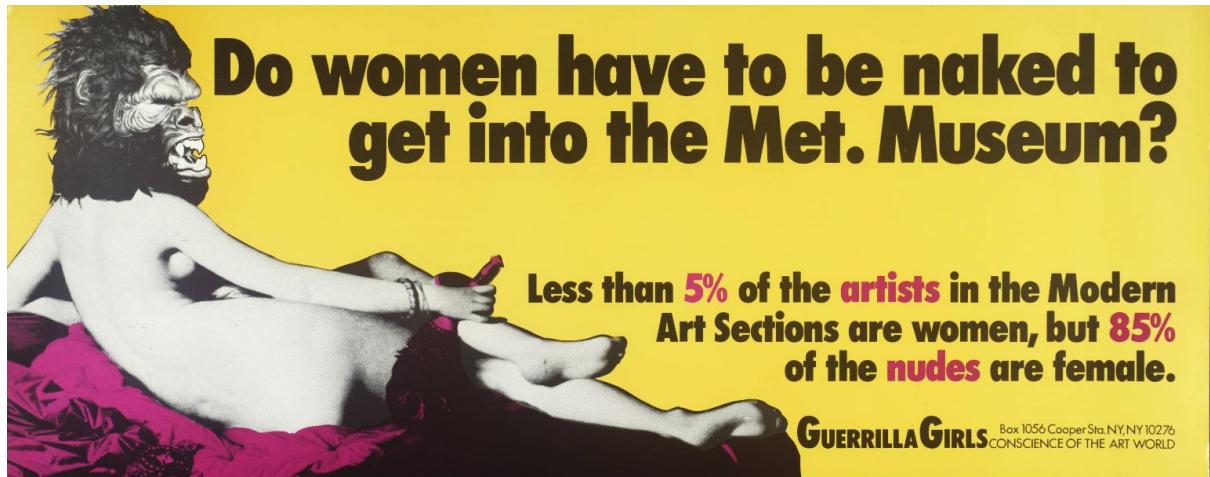


Figure 5: Do Women Have to be Naked to Get Into the Met. Museum?

The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist (1988)

This poster stems from the same portfolio as the one in Figure 6 and lists 13 very ironic points or "advantages" of being a woman artist listed beneath the titular headline. Some of the "advantages" are "Working without the pressure of success" and "Not being stuck in a tenured teaching position". Obviously these are highly ironic and supposed to highlight the irony of the situation woman artists find themselves in [8].

THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING A WOMAN ARTIST:

Working without the pressure of success.
Not having to be in shows with men.
Having an escape from the art world in your 4 free-lance jobs.
Knowing your career might pick up after you're eighty.
Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be labeled feminine.
Not being stuck in a tenured teaching position.
Seeing your ideas live on in the work of others.
Having the opportunity to choose between career and motherhood.
Not having to choke on those big cigars or paint in Italian suits.
Having more time to work after your mate dumps you for someone younger.
Being included in revised versions of art history.
Not having to undergo the embarrassment of being called a genius.
Getting your picture in the art magazines wearing a gorilla suit.

Please send \$ and comments to:
Box 1056 Cooper Sta. NY, NY 10276

GUERRILLA GIRLS

CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD

Figure 6: The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist

Ridykeulous

Ridykeulous is a curatorial initiative formed by Nicole Eisenman and A.L. Steiner in 2005 that aims to increase the exhibition of feminist and queer art and also produces art that uses humor as a critique of the art world and culture in general [5].

The Advantages of Being a Lesbian Woman Artist (2006)

This artwork in Figure 7 is a comment on the Guerilla Girls poster from Figure 6. Ridykeulous's artwork crossed things out of the Guerilla Girls poster and re-wrote them with a black marker. The result is that the items are ridiculous and vulgar [5]. For example, the title was changed from "The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist" to "The Advantages of Being a Lesbian Artist". Another point got changed from "Working without the pressure of success" to "Working without the pressure of sucking dick". These changes take the already ironic poster up a notch and making it, as their name suggests, ridykeulous. And while the poster is very ridiculous, it does extend the critique that was originally leveled against the art establishment's treatment of women to the treatment of artists who are not heterosexual.

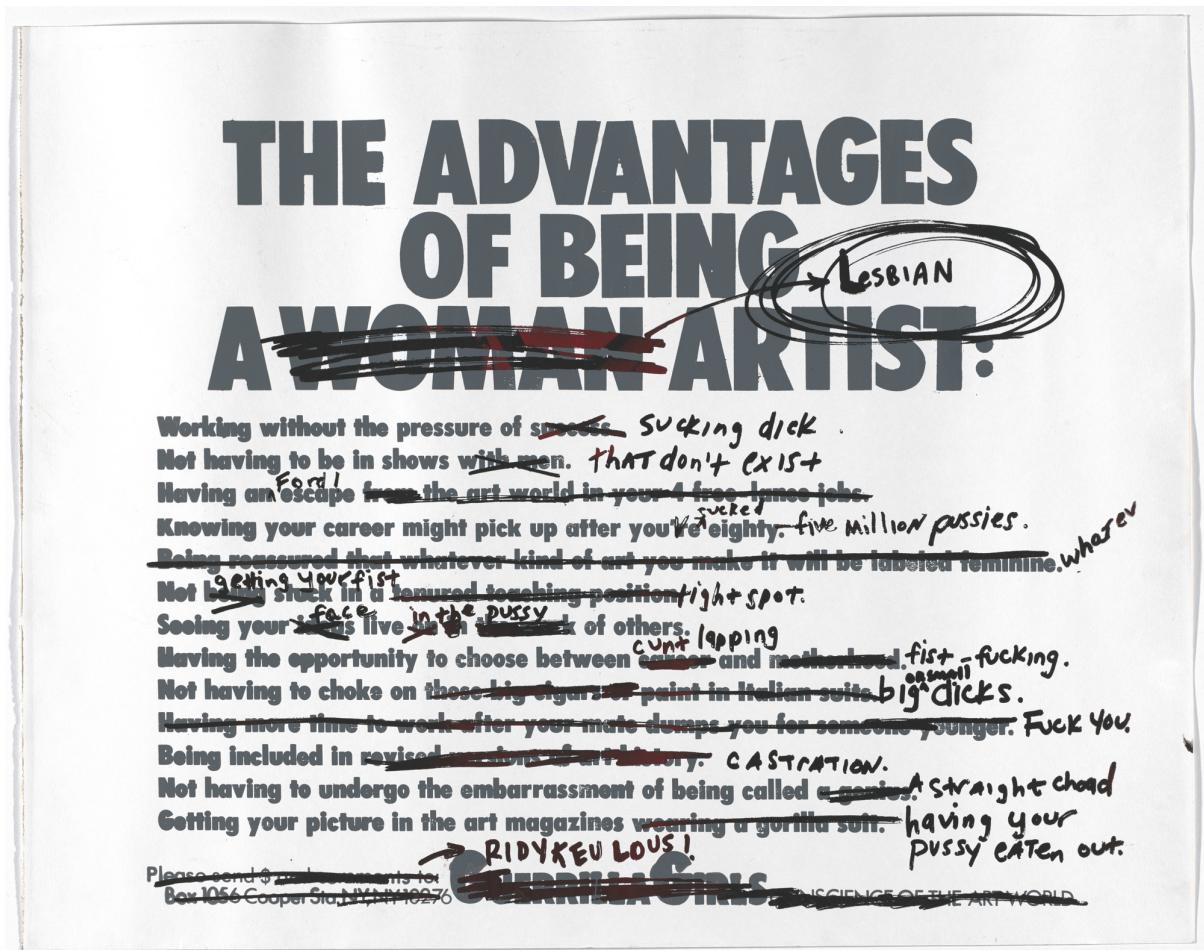


Figure 7: Advantages of being a woman artist

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