



## Sense of a woman

By Kate Lowenstein  
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*Contemporary art's founding mothers star in this survey of feminist art.*



Carolee Schneemann, Portrait Partials Photograph: Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art, New York

For some, the expression feminist art calls to mind bizarre performance pieces and cringe-inducing vagina references. Others understand it as a critical influence behind much current contemporary work. Nobody, though, has ever seen a major survey of seminal feminist art. Why? Because incredibly, it's never been assembled—until now. “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution,” which opens at P.S.1 Sunday 17, is part of a recent spate of interest in gender-focused art (including last year's exhibitions “Global Feminisms” at the Brooklyn Museum and “Shared Women” at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, both of which featured work made in the last two decades only), but it is the very first attempt at a comprehensive, international roundup of the pioneering decades of feminist work.

The show—which opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles last March before traveling to the National Museum for Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C.—is curator Connie Butler's gift, eight years in the making, to anyone who knows this important work only from reproductions. “A lot of the artists who emerged in the early 1990s—Janine Antoni, Matthew Barney, Andrea Zittel—were acknowledging feminist impulses,” she explains, “yet a lot of people, myself included, had never actually seen the pieces in person.”

Now's the chance: P.S.1's galleries will burst with this dynamic art, churned out with gusto—and often vitriol—during the sexual revolution. Works on view will include video (an enraged Martha Rosler redefining household duties in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, from 1975), painting (Miriam Schapiro's 1965 anatomically suggestive *BigOX No.2*), performance artifacts (like the titular prop from Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*, which she read while pulling it out of her—yes—vagina in 1974) and photographs (like those documenting Lorraine O'Grady's culture-critiquing

routine as *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* in 1980). Says Rosler herself: “A walk through ‘WACK!’ reminds me that movements in their first flush need no justification—they justify themselves.”

Butler, chief curator of drawings at MoMA, limited the scope of the exhibition to work made between 1965 and 1980 (after which, in the U.S. at least, the lines began to blur with other identity-based work), selecting 120 artists and collectives from around the world. “My criterion was art that sought to undermine and intervene in cultural hierarchies of all kinds,” she notes. Of course, shows like “WACK!” run the risk of establishing cultural hierarchies of their own, and with that in mind, Butler has included artists from the time who worked outside the prescribed lexicon of feminism. The abstract canvases of Mary Heilman, for example, make no obvious reference to women’s issues, but Butler sought her out anyway. “She’s talked about a gendered vocabulary of domestic architecture and using a certain palette to interpret those things,” the curator says. “It wasn’t her primary concern, but she’s completely in agreement with [a feminist] reading of her early work.”

Butler decided against a chronological arrangement of the works, choosing instead to group them thematically: The pieces are divided into categories such as “Body as Medium,” “Abstraction” and “Autophotography,” allowing for connections to be drawn across decades and continents. With respect to the latter, “WACK!” also features names relatively unknown in the U.S., like Brazilian video artist Sonia Andrade, Swiss-born sculptor Mira Schendel and German filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger. The title itself “is not a specific acronym,” according to Butler, “but it is meant to hearken back to those of activist groups from the late ’60s: Artists Against War, Women Artists and the Revolution, etc.” Sexual and other connotations are also intentional, she allows, while the exclamation mark is meant to capture the movement’s emphatic tone.

“Feminism survives,” insists Rosler. “It’s a rational response to the gap that remains between social ideals and reality.” The art world’s recent attention to the subject may serve to gauge just how far society has come in the way of gender equality, and it’s also a reminder of how significant the movement was for the development of contemporary art. As Stanford scholar Peggy Phalen puts it in her catalog essay, “Feminist critical and creative work has been responsible for the most far-reaching transformations in both art-making and art writing over the past four decades.” Guess a few vagina references can go a long way, baby.

