Tomorrow's Voices

Ellen Cantor's 1993 *Coming To Power* exhibition offered an impactful intergenerational dialogue amongst artists, feminists, and social activists in the fields of visual art, performance, and video. The exhibition was accompanied by a collection of essays that were Xeroxed, stapled together, and hand-distributed, yet never published.

As a tribute, to bear witness, and to formalize Cantor's invitation to respected writers of her era, Tolentino and Hertling envisioned this publication. Taking a nod from Cantor, they enlisted a younger generation of multi-faceted practitioners who work as curators, writers, historians, and artists to contribute to this archive: Ashton Cooper, Amalle Dublon, Constantina Zavitsanos, Vivian Crockett and Clara López Menéndez.

In this section, we, the readers, are privy to their reflections on explicitness, gender, the body, and language through encounters with Cantor's work, the 2016 and 1993 exhibitions, and the movement and politics of performance and art-making.

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The Year of the Woman

Ashton Cooper

Between January and September of 2016, I spent many of my working hours at Maccarone tracking down a diaphragm for the recreation of a 1966 Yoko Ono sculpture, or searching for the actual scroll that Carolee Schneemann pulled out from between her legs in 1975 (now tastefully encased in plexiglass), or making what felt like a hundred excel spreadsheets detailing the whereabouts of the other fifty-three artworks that would come to hang in Pati Hertling and Julie Tolentino's restaging of *Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-Plicit Art by Women*.

When artist Ellen Cantor organized *Coming to Power* in 1993, it was the first show she'd ever curated. And while I was handling the Benglis double-sided dildos that Cantor had included in her show, I was also doing studio visits and making obsessive revisions to the exhibition text for my own all-women show, *Mal Maison*, which incidentally happened to be the first show I'd ever curated.

It was while working on these two projects simultaneously—these two all-women shows made twenty three years apart—that other all-women shows shifted into sharp focus. Announcements for all-women exhibitions countrywide seemed like they were arriving in my inbox at a breakneck pace. They were everywhere and in the unlikeliest of places, from the most azure of blue chip galleries to the bro-iest of artist-run spaces.

In just 2016, across the country, we saw Hauser Wirth & Schimmel's inaugural LA show, *Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947–2016*, the Rubell Foundation's *No Man's Land*, the Denver Art Museum's *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, and a series of DKNY-sponsored all-women exhibitions at the New Museum. One of the more troubling manifestations was a multitude of all-women group shows that exploited some kind of retrograde understanding of feminism and expected to be lauded for doing so (I'm looking at you *The Female Gaze: Women Look at Men*).[1] Near the end of the year, I received a press release for an all-woman art fair booth. It's clear that "feminism" has become an effective marketing tool in the art world.

2016 also saw not one but two painfully un-nuanced, dehistoricized *New York Times* articles about the recent "trend of the all-women art show" as well as a start-of-the-season piece headlined "In Art This Fall, Women Win in a Landslide."[2] This blithe, celebratory heralding of the fad and the unexamined pervasiveness of the genre began to feel somehow insidious.

Moreover, feminism has not just been used to sell artwork, but toys and Beyoncé albums. When a new Star Wars film was released at the end of 2015, a Wal-Mart commercial used feminist polemic to sell action figures to women, scripting a little girl to say that Princess Leia doesn't need anyone to rescue her because "she's a modern empowered woman unfettered by the antiquated gender roles of a bygone era."[3] A certain strain of feminism has become so unthreatening, that even Wal-Mart is exploiting it to sell things.

And so exhaustion sets in. Mainstream acceptance hardly seems like a fair exchange for a watered-down feminism that assimilates into white supremacist capitalist patriarchy rather than undermining it. I refuse to be placated by this corporatized feminism, for stale, uncritical all-women shows, for a feminist art history being written by blue chip dealers and underwritten by multi-billionaires. It's not good enough.

So we have to find new ways. If our radical forms (all-woman shows being just one example) are going to be co-opted, we must continue to find new models, new sites, new forms. One possibility for resistance is to know our history, and to be aware that the commodification of feminism comes in cycles.

The past five or so years of mainstream "feminist" frenzy started to feel a lot clearer when I recognized the cyclical nature of these "Year of the Woman" moments, which seem to make their way into mainstream consciousness every twenty years or so. In its original iteration, *Coming to Power* was staged just one year after a record number of women being elected to the Senate prompted the media to dub 1992 the "Year of the Woman."[4] Two decades earlier, Sandra Hochman had released her eponymous 1973 women's rights documentary, not coincidentally the same year Roe v. Wade was decided.[5] And it was just five short years ago, in 2012, that headlines were once again touting the same moniker due to congressional, Olympian, and big business wins for women.[6] It isn't a coincidence that in each of these three moments of mass interest around feminism, the art world has followed suit. It is because of this general mainstream interest that we are oversaturated with a surfeit of all-women exhibitions curated with an unthreatening and diluted take on Feminism.

A necessary question, then, in thinking through this restaging of *Coming to Power* is: Why do this show again/now? What is the value of re-staging it, transplanting it from one "Year of the Woman" to another? How can we understand *Coming to Power* both as undermining the aforementioned forces of commodification and inevitably also as a tool of marketing?

In its linking of these three "Year of the Woman" moments, this *Coming to Power* restaging itself makes us aware of these cycles, how they function, how feminism is commodified and used for the purposes of people in power. *Coming to Power* allows us to grapple with the all-women show through time, enter into a conversation with history, and try to understand what is useful and why. As an inherently cyclic format, the restage adds a historical multidimensionality, gives an elasticity to meanings and values, and suggests a meta-conversation about the problems and possibilities embedded in feminism-as-trend. In its direct engagement with history, I believe that this restage can be a way for feminism to try to resist its own commodification.

In 1993, *Coming to Power* was already placing itself within a feminist history. The subtitle—*25 Years of Sexually X-Plicit Art by Women*—locates 1968 as the point of origination. That year, amongst many other social upheavals, the Women's Liberation Movement crystallized in the national consciousness. The original show was curated to bridge second and third-wave artists.

In 1993, most of these works were not part of "an official, monumental history," as Liz Kotz described it in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle,"

one of the three essays written to accompany the 1993 show (the other two written by Jan Avigkos and Lorraine O'Grady).[7] But in 2016 we've seen a great portion of this work before, much of it not just in major museums, but also in art history textbooks. Seeing this show now, one must unavoidably face how the market has shaped feminist art history of the last 50 years—and the fact that so many of these women have indeed come to power.

I don't want to lament the successes of artists informed by feminism who do find market support, but I think we need to pay closer attention to the fact that not everyone lauded in these moments of mass interest receive perennial support or the same level of financial stability. There are several second-wave artists in the show who, in the past few years, have been included in an exhausting media storm around the idea of "rediscovered women artists." Joan Semmel and Judith Bernstein, for example, have both received an enormous amount of well-deserved attention recently, but it is a lie that they are being rediscovered. They were noticed in '73, '93, and now we are noticing them again. The troubling reality is that these puffs of media attention don't always correlate with a sustained interest in the work. While the trend articles move on to other topics, these artists have had to find ways to support themselves and keep working.

Jan Avigkos's *Coming to Power* essay "Ten Sentences, in Two Parts, on Sexually Explicit Art by Women," which makes five arguments in support of the show and five against, discusses this very issue. She writes, "Exhibitions like this one … create a framework whereby diversity comes into focus." Later she writes, "Or, should we be wary that the popularity of sexual politics as a thematic in contemporary art motivates a fleeting interest in 'sexually explicit art by women,' but is deficient in terms of any real investment or long-term commitment to the practice of art by women."[8]

This restaging brings all of these issues to the fore and in doing so refuses a stagnant, simplistic understanding of how the market actually impacts these women's lived existences. These cycles can launch careers, but they can also prevent artists from receiving any steady commitment. All of that is on view.

In this context, it is easy to become skeptical of any kind of institutionalization or recognition in a market context. Later in her essay, Kotz writes: "And as so many once radical or disruptive tendencies get re-contained within institutions, even relatively progressives ones, I find myself quite pessimistic about our prospects for more challenging versions of feminism in the art world, since most of what circulates right now seems either repressive, reductive, or simply regressive."

I still feel Kotz's fatigue, but I'm also hopeful. I still believe we can make "more challenging versions of feminism in the art world," but that they must be born out of an insistence on creating new models and new languages. I don't think all-women shows should be our go-to model for provocation, but I also don't think they should be dismissed outright. Avigkos' essay points out that all-women shows aren't always a ghetto and they aren't always a liberatory space.

An important lesson in working on this show has been experiencing the ways in which those operating outside dominant culture (whether they are women making sexually explicit art or otherwise) find ways to support each other. In 1993, Ellen Cantor found a space to support these artists—and in 2016, people across seven art spaces came together to support her. Perhaps the most important way we can continue to find new ways of feminist exhibition-making is creating opportunities for each other in spite of and even within a system that, despite appearances to the contrary, is set against us.

1
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8
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