



Curating as Feminist Activism: Exhibitions on Women Artists and Feminist Art in the US, 1977-2007

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In this project, I aim to explore the potential of curating as feminist activism by examining four major exhibitions that are about women artists and feminist art in the US over the last three decades. They are: “Global Feminisms” (2007), “Women Artists: 1550-1950” (1977), “Bad Girls” (1994), and “WACK! Art and Feminist Revolution” (2007). I aim to analyze, compare and contrast these exhibitions, address the significance and necessity of exhibitions that are about women artists and feminist art, and try to find out what would characterize an exhibition as activism. Curating is usually thought as an institutional and scholarly practice; however, exhibitions can function as curatorial correctives to the exclusion of women from the master narratives of art history and from the contemporary art scene. I studied how these exhibitions have functioned or could lead towards activism by examining the new arguments and questions each exhibition contributed to the discourse of women artists, feminist art and art history; the way in which each exhibition repositioned and/or re-integrated women artists into history; the perception of each exhibition by the press, artists, scholars and the public; the differences and similarities among these exhibitions in terms of social and historical contexts, goals, focuses, methodologies, and artists selection criteria. I concluded the project by identifying the effective methodologies of presenting women artists and feminist art, and pointing out the ways in which curatorial practice can function as activism.

During the research process, I had the opportunity to study primary sources and archival materials in museums and libraries for the first time. The richness of information and the historical traces left in between the pages kept surprising me and significantly opened my eyes: I encountered a handwritten note from feminist art historian Linda Nochlin, newsletters published by the Women’s Caucus for Art in the 1970s, piles of artwork loan agreements and much more. Another important part of my project was to conduct interviews with artists and art professionals to gain first-hand information on their views of the exhibitions studied. After multiple practices, I learned how to ask, phrase and clarify the right question and maintain the flow of conversation, getting questions answered while staying open to spontaneity. Having read through many exhibition catalogues and articles, I further honed my skills in extracting and synthesizing information as well as developing my own point of view out of existing findings and arguments by scholars.

Participating in this research project has greatly contributed to my education in art history and gender studies. Different than the more common art historical research paper I have written for class, this project is more like a hands-on field work as well as a comparative study of exhibitions, an area that I have always been interested in but did not have the chance to explore further until now. This project combines my academic interests and utilizes my knowledge in both art history and feminist theory, and will continue to inspire my future study in these areas.