

WHAT TOOK SO LONG? Diasporic Identity and Artistic Agency

Karen Frostig

Associate Professor, Lesley University

Visiting Scholar, Women's Studies Research Center, Brandeis University

While theorists name a variety of starting points for postmodernism, most agree that the Holocaust represented the failure of the modernist enterprise with its problematic tie to ideas about progress.¹ Within the art world, a different trajectory emerges. Many feminist artists and art historians assert that second-wave feminist artists of the 1970's were largely responsible for the beginnings of the postmodernist art movement.² Several feminist artists such as Eva Hesse, Judy Chicago, Eleanor Antin, Mierle Ukeles, Martha Rosler, Hannah Wilke, Joyce Kozloff, Miriam Schapiro, Joan Snyder, Linda Nochlin and Nancy Spero emerged as leaders within the second wave feminist art movement. Although these artists were identified as secular artists,³ upon closer examination, many bore either a direct connection to or cultural affiliation with the legacies of the Holocaust.⁴ From this context, I argue that ideas about rupture, which define postmodernism may, in fact, be wedded to ideas about continuity, expressed by a generation whose very identity is predicated on familial memories of rupture and dislocation. Thus, ideas about rupture are likely to conceal a more nuanced set of attachments to notions of continuity, which is then expressed as a persistent preoccupation with concerns about rupture that define Jewish identity in the 20st century. The essay draws an analogy between the presence of rupture and continuity as an organizing force in second-wave and third-wave feminisms,⁵ with its presence in my own precarious development as an artist and later as a third-wave feminist artist.

Graduating from an east coast art school in the early 1970's, I was trained as a modernist abstract expressionist painter, steeped in the prevailing ideology that art should be a self-referential, autonomous practice, that has little connection to real world events, living essentially "above" the social realm.⁶ My early performance work was highly interactive and only incidentally transgressive, taking the form of street art and lacking the criticality that soon informed the practices of second wave feminists.

Although, I was largely oblivious to the development of the feminist art movement, I followed Jewish feminist activist voices opposing the war in Viet Nam, joined feminist "consciousness raising" groups, and began to position myself in relation to the feminist movement. These different affiliations produced an entirely new concept of Jewish secular feminism, whereby Jewish identity was constructed largely as a cultural phenomenon and often in the form of protest.

The complete essay tracks my professional development over a forty-year period as an artist, art therapist, educator, author, and social critic. I identify significant ruptures followed by career detours that culminate in a long-awaited arrival of sorts, where artistic inquiry, criticism, reflective thinking and social engagement,

intersect. The essay concludes with ideas about rupture interfacing with notions of continuity and collaboration, forming the basis for a new era of hope and possibility.

References

- "The Feminist Art Project." <http://feministartproject.rutgers.edu/>.
- Bloom, Lisa E. *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Brook, Vincent, ed. *You Should See Yourself*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006.
- Hills, Patricia. "Reflections of the Early Years of the Women's Caucus for Art in Boston." In *Blaze: Discourse on Art, Women and Feminism*, edited by Karen Frostig and Kathy A. Halamka, 2–20. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007.
- Lacy, Suzanne, ed. *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995.
- Muller, Dena. "The Burden of Inclusivity: Second-Wave Feminism and the Third-Wave Era." In *Blaze: Discourse on Art, Women and Feminism*, edited by Karen Frostig and Kathy A. Halamka, 103–12. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007.
- Sayre, Henry. *The Object of Performance*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Notes

¹ Vincent Brook explains in his introduction to *You Should See Yourself*, that "most critics view the postmodern era as emerging from the seismic socioeconomic and cultural shifts of the post-world War II era." Vincent Brook, (Ed.). *You Should See Yourself*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 7.

² The Feminist Art Project <http://feministartproject.rutgers.edu/> While postmodernism emerges from the counter-cultural movements, identity politics and poststructuralist movements of the 1960's and 1970's (Brook, 7), the second-wave feminist art movement is aligned with the civil rights and women's liberation movements of the 1950's and 1960's, Patricia Hills, Reflections of the Early Years of the Women's Caucus for Art in Boston. In K. Frostig & K. A. Halamka (Eds.), *Blaze: Discourse on Art, Women and Feminism*. (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 3. Suzi Gablik discusses how feminism shapes artistic content: "Modernist aesthetics, concerned with itself as the chief source of value, did not inspire creative participation; rather, it encouraged distancing and depreciation of the Other. Its nonrelational, noninteractive, nonparticipatory orientation did not easily accommodate the more feminine values of care and compassion, of seeing and responding to need" Suzi Gablik. In Lacy, S. (Ed.). *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 80.

³ The term "secular" generally refers to the nonobservant Jew (Brook, 6). Bloom describes secular artists as projecting "a certain unacknowledged Jewishness" and asserts that "Jewish feminist artists and art historians had to erase their Jewish identity to be at the center of a movement in which gender overrode all other kinds of identities." Lisa Bloom, *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of ethnicity*. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 6.

⁴ Bloom, 7.

⁵Dena Muller incorporates Buszek's description of third-wave feminists as linked to an era, not a group: anyone interested in feminist inquiry today, is a third-wave feminist. Muller continues "while many of the concerns included in third-wave feminism were first raised in second-wave feminism, they are more fully realized and are inclusive of broader social justice concerns. Third-wave feminism supports inquiries into transnationalism, including issues of globalization, immigration, and postcolonialism. Third-wave feminism supports inquiries into gender justice, including transgender identity and queer culture. Third-wave feminism supports inquiries into race and class by considering how they interrelate to create socio-economic injustices. Third-wave feminism supports inquiries into sexuality defined by consensual,

subject-driven use of the body and open to a discussion of eroticism and pleasure. Dena Muller, *The Burden of Inclusivity: Second-Wave Feminism and the Third-Wave Era*. In K. Frostig & K. A. Halamka (Eds.), *Blaze: Discourse on Art, Women and Feminism* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 106.

⁶ The superficial coherence of formalism is derived from its emphasis on form over content. It is perceived as a self-reflexive process with personal and social content deemed extraneous to a self-contained concept of truth. Henry Sayre, *The Object of Performance*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 41.

Correspondence with Author

Karen Frostig, Ph.D. Associate Professor at Lesley University and Visiting Scholar in the Scholars Program at the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University.
karen.frostig@gmail.com