

Review: Art, Activism, and Feminisms: Sites of Confrontation and Change

Reviewed Work(s): Art and Feminism by Peggy Phelan and Helena Reckitt; Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001 by Martha Rosler; Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968-2000 by Hilary Robinson; The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life by Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette

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Art, Activism, and Feminisms: Sites of Confrontation and Change

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Art and Feminism by Peggy Phelan and Helena Reckitt. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2001, 304 pp., \$75.00 hardcover.

Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001 by Martha Rosler. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004, 390 pp., \$34.95 hardcover, \$19.95 cloth.

Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968–2000 by Hilary Robinson. London: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2001, 706 pp., \$100.95 hardcover, \$44.95 cloth.

The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life by Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette. North Adams, MA: MASS MoCA Publications, 2004, 154 pp., \$30.00 hardcover.

Much has been written over the last four decades on feminism, art, and the critical relationship between the two. Art as political activism also has been the subject of many scholarly writings, and political artwork frequently intersects or explicitly engages scholarly writing. Much has been written, but much also has been left out, and readers seeking information regarding art informed by feminist concerns *and* intended as an intervention might be frustrated by current offerings. Texts that are simultaneously engaging, informative, and critically self-conscious of their place in a hotly contested, ideologically loaded—and potentially revolutionary—field, are rare. While content should be the primary focus when evaluating a book, an *appealing* book can be an important tool or ally, particularly in a course devoted to exploring how art can create, change, or jam culture; aesthetics become content within books on feminism, art, and activism. Even issues of cost, a perennial concern for college students, take on new significance in this context, for accessibility, the power to reach as large and varied an audience as possible, is an important component of art concerned with social and economic justice. Grounded in these thoughts, I began to look at each of the following four books for useful and inspiring discussions of feminists, who make art in order to intervene in, act upon, or change existing modes of culture.

I turned first to *Art and Feminism* by Peggy Phelan and Helena Reckitt. Published in 2001, the book is out of print but still readily available. With the majority of its pages devoted to images of work by dozens of feminist artists (all women), the book's structure is designed to support the claim

Reckitt makes in her "Preface," that "*Art and Feminism* suggests a relationship between the demands of feminist politics, the debates of feminist theory and the explorations of artists informed by these concerns" while "identify[ing] struggles and differences between feminist artists of different generations" (11). Given this focus on difference, it is not surprising that the editors' analysis is rooted in psychoanalytic theory, a point I will return to.

Phelan's "Survey" is a chronological exploration of the relationship between the terms "art" and "feminism," and the art produced by women interested in the rich space between theory and practice where culture is confronted, commented upon, and hopefully changed for the better. In the section "Works," which is subdivided into the categories including "Personalizing the Political," "Differences," and "Corporeality," the authors forge thematic relationships between works spanning the last four decades and between art and the critical and cultural frameworks it emerged from and against. This look at forces outside the usual cultural and critical frameworks is augmented in the section on "Documents," which includes a collection of artists' statements and other theoretical and critical documents, grouped under the same headings as the artwork. Both the headings and the essays that frame the groups of work situate the art within a specifically activist context, pointing out the pre-existing conditions in need of redress, the various strategies adopted by feminist artists to dismantle a patriarchal culture harmful to women, and celebrating the positive changes wrought by artists working from a set of feminist ideals. As readers learn on the very first page of the book,

[s]ome of feminism's most important political achievements have been indebted to artists, who have inspired new ways to think about the public and the private, the art object and the art subject . . . assumptions about gender . . . the implications of the marks of race, age, class, and sexuality on art production and reception. Both critical of the art world and central to it, feminist artists have revised the possibilities of art as a political and aesthetic practice. (frontispiece)

Although the variety of works illustrated reminds one that feminist art, like feminism itself, is not homogenous, and didactic paragraphs accompanying each image draw connections between formal elements in each piece and the over-arching theme of each section, the book's layout prevents drawing visual connections between more than a few works at a time, and the short captions often seem theoretically superficial.¹ The abundance of photographs (many in color) and large, colorful, multi-textured pages are indeed attractive, even seductive, as the cover image of a woman's parted lips (a detail of Geneviève Cadieux's *Hear Me with Your Eyes*) is certainly intended to be, but it is precisely this emphasis on seduction and desire that creates a potentially unresolvable tension between the authors' feminism and their analysis of effectively activist-feminist

art. Phelan defines “feminism” as “the conviction that gender has been, and continues to be, a fundamental category for the organization of culture [that] usually favours men over women,” (18) but in describing the relationship between art and feminism as “[a]lluringly open, deceptively simple . . . seductive” (16) she casts her subject squarely within the role many women and artists have been fighting to free themselves from for decades—the object of physical, sexual desire. This tendency is problematic in a work exploring the power of feminist art to intervene in, and potentially alter, prevailing notions about the roles of women and art in a patriarchal culture.

Martha Rosler’s essay collection *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Essays, 1975–2001* records the artist’s observations on the purposes (ideal and actual) and potential power of art, artists’ ethical obligations to audiences, and society’s obligations to art. For students of art, art history, and activism, it offers insight into a working artist’s struggles to make culturally relevant art and to give her beliefs visual and verbal form. Rosler, known for her work in photography, performance, and video, spent the last three decades exploring the nature of truth in photographic imagery, the power of pictures to bring about social change, the role of technology in art, and the changing relationship between patrons, artists, and viewers. Some of her essays, such as “The Figure of the Artist, The Figure of the Woman,” reveal explicitly feminist or gender-based views, while others, including “Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, and Makers: Thoughts on Audience,” offer analyses of power in a more general sense. All raise important questions about what art for social change should look like and offer strategies for producing such work.

Many of the thirteen essays in Rosler’s book were written during the 1980s, at a time when conservative politics changed the economic and cultural climates of the world’s strongest nations, and the fervor surrounding the feminist movement and its artistic manifestations waned. As the so-called “culture wars” escalated, conservative forces marshaled against controversial art, cutting funding and other support for artists, thereby limiting the types of art that could be produced. At the same time, as Rosler explains in “Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations,” advances in image-making technology transformed media and journalism, allowing those in power to manipulate information and its dissemination in ways previously unheard of, that were likely unethical. For Rosler, however, her faith in the ability of artists and citizens to communicate through art and imagery remained, as did her belief in its necessity:

These are the contexts for the manipulation of [photographic information]. Concerns about manipulation center on political, ethical, judicial, and other legal issues, . . . as well as the broader ideological ramifications of how a culture deploys “evidence” it has invested with the ability to bear (“objective”) witness

irrespective of the vicissitudes of history and personality. Complications posed by questions of reception, such as those raised by post-structuralist critics and philosophers, have themselves fueled a pessimism about the ability to communicate meaning (let alone "truth"). Nevertheless, . . . it seems unreasonable to conclude that meaning cannot be communicated. (296)

Reading Rosler in 2006, many of the examples discussed seem dated, even when the issues at stake (power, censorship, and gender, to name a few) are timeless. But given the circumstances surrounding her production, her urgent call for artistic strategies designed to counter developing trends was necessary and prescient. We have seen where these trends have taken us, and many of Rosler's premonitions about politics, art, and culture, sadly, have proved accurate. While she had no way of predicting precisely how artists today would react to the scenarios she foresaw, it is interesting to see how the interventions being created by contemporary artists relate to and reflect the predictions she made and the call for action she raised.

Published by Mass MoCA to accompany the 2004–2005 exhibition, *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* catalogs work by some contemporary artists who have answered the call for politically engaged art. Designed "to offer the reader a modest intervention that was similar in spirit to the work it was charged to represent" (Thompson and Sholette 2004, 6), it functions as a handbook or toolkit of tactics that can be used by anyone searching for an artistic strategy for combatting social and economic injustice. Chapters on "Nomads," "Reclaim the Streets," "Ready to Wear," and "The Experimental University" describe work by Western artists who:

produce work that encourages individual mobility and freedom, . . . actions that occur within the public, . . . tools and clothing to augment the wearer's sense of personal autonomy, and deploy aesthetic strategies in other discourses including anthropology, biotechnology, and urban geography." (n.p.)

As each of the books reviewed here makes clear, feminist thought has played a large role in shaping artistic interventions. However, as Rosler points out, postmodern identity politics have recently supplanted more singular movements surrounding issues of race, gender, and sexuality as sources of inspiration, and the artists of *The Interventionists* usually address specific social ills like homelessness, and the capitalist takeover of public spaces for private gain (Rosler 2004, 367). Significantly, many artists function as part of a group, using collaborative techniques pioneered by feminist artists in the 1970s, but only a handful produce art that could be called intentionally feminist (although a case could be made, depending on one's definition of "feminism," for including many environmentalists and social-justice crusaders under a broadly feminist program). Artists

who have been inspired by or engage feminist concerns but produce work in more traditional media or for more traditional spaces rather than for public, non-art spaces (I am thinking here of Jenny Saville, for example) are largely absent from the survey.

Two self-consciously feminist coalitions represented are The Biotic Baking Brigade, whose pie-throwing membership includes “seasoned activists in ecology, social justice, feminist, and animal rights movements” (Thompson and Sholette 2004, 69), and whose tactics, based in the traditionally female sphere of the kitchen, transform cooking from a nurturing act into one of disruptive socio-economic commentary and the cyberfeminist collective subRosa. Comprised of five women artists, subRosa honors famous female activists of the past with its moniker and perpetuates the legacy of earlier feminist artists like Martha Rosler through performances and videos “center[ed] on the uses and implications of biotechnology as it applies to sexual difference, race, and trans-national labor conditions” (Thompson and Sholette 2004, 121).

The Interventionists also presents the work of William Pope.L, whose video *Member* (a.k.a. “Schlong Journey”) is described by the artist as “about trying to own whiteness, male whiteness, through the phallus” (Thompson and Sholette 2004, 93). While *Art and Feminism* defines feminism as being about the power operations of gender (not just about women), and *Decoys and Disruptions* features essays about male and female artists, *The Interventionists* illustrates the possibility that artists of any gender can contribute to the creation of art about gender and power relationships. Like the colorful artist biographies and vividly illustrated project descriptions of the catalog, this notion will hopefully serve to inspire additional research into the ongoing manifestations of feminist thought in contemporary, activist-oriented art.

Although it is sadly devoid of illustrations and lacking in visual appeal, especially in comparison to Phelan and Reckitt’s lushly illustrated volume and the splashy, graphic aesthetic of *The Interventionists*, Hilary Robinson’s anthology *Feminism-Art-Theory* is an otherwise stunning collection of writings dated 1968–2000. Given the availability of images online and in other books, including *Art and Feminism*, which features many of the artists and works covered in this anthology, the lack of illustrations is frustrating but not unforgivable, especially in such a thorough book of documents.

Like Phelan’s “and” in *Art and Feminism*, the hyphens in Robinson’s title allude to the existence and allow for the development of complex relationships between the terms *feminism*, *art*, and *theory*, defined respectively as “a set of politics, . . . a set of cultural practices, . . . and a set of ideas and knowledge that can be used in analysis” (Robinson 2001, 1). The 99 texts by artists, critics, and theorists are meant “to disrupt the orthodoxy of a canon of feminist writings [and to demonstrate] the eclectic,

polyphonic publishing that feminism has developed or in which it has intervened" (1). In this way, and in the implied corollary goal of revealing the various ways in which feminist artists and authors have used their work as tools of political and cultural change, the diverse (though still Western) anthology, framed by Valerie Solanas's *Scum Manifesto* and bell hooks's comments on "Women Artists: The Creative Process," is remarkably successful.

Organized around nine thematic sections, each fronted by an introductory essay and list of essential reading, the book allows for focused study on topics such as "Activism and Institutions" and "Politics in Practice: Material Strategies," as well as analysis across and between the frequently overlapping categories. Robinson's own contributions, including her summaries of included texts, are clear and insightful and raise important issues surrounding the term "feminism," its constituent (and sometimes problematically monolithic or binary) "identities," and its changing role within academia, the art world, and Western society as a whole. As Robinson writes in the section on "Activism and Institutions":

[t]he relationship between activism and theory has always been a vital one for feminism. Without the space for reflection, analysis and development of strategy, activism would be random and counter-productive; without active intervention in patriarchal social and cultural structures, feminist thought would remain an academic, apolitical endeavour. (49)

The statement sums up the relationship between feminist thought and activist art explored, in various ways and to differing degrees, in each of the books discussed above. It also crystallizes the calls to awareness and action articulated by each of the authors, who all recognize the importance of exploiting feminist art's ability to interrogate and alter the patriarchal, capitalist world we inhabit. Finally, Robinson's book, along with the others, best serves students of contemporary activist-feminist art as a tool to raise awareness and encourage production of interventionist culture.

Julie Cole has taught Art History and Women's Studies courses at Colorado College and the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. She currently serves as Executive Director of the Smokebrush Foundation for the Arts, a non-profit organization dedicated to bringing innovative exhibitions, public art, and arts programming to the Pikes Peak Region.

Note

1. Although, as Reckitt explains, "[t]he focus of this volume is primarily on artworks and texts that have made a critical impact in Britain and the U.S." (2001, 14).