

Out of the shadows

In the 1970s feminists claimed their place in the male-dominated art world through media such as video and photography. By Rachel Spence

Today, most young female artists would be mystified if asked whether they feel marginalised by their gender. Yet just four decades ago, few argued with Linda Nochlin's legendary 1969 essay "Why are there no great women artists?" in which she declared that the art world was "stultifying, oppressive and discouraging" to artists who were not "white, preferably middle class and, above all, male".

Nochlin had the statistics on her side. In 1971, for example, the Los Angeles Council of Women Artists pointed out that of 713 artists in group shows at Los Angeles County Museum only 29 had been women. Out of 53 one-person shows, only one was female.

Buoyed by the climate of social revolution, and inspired by the radical vision of a handful of different practitioners, female artists fought back. Many embraced the new mediums of photography, video, performance and body art as alternatives to painting and sculpture, which were indelibly associated with patriarchy.

Both as autonomous art and as a chronicle of performances, photography accounts for much of *Woman: The Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s*, an exhibition of 16 women artists that forms part of the corporate collection of Verbund, Austria's largest energy company.

Verbund is expanding its European interests – they already own 45 per cent of Italian energy company Sorgenia – and the show is clearly a useful profile-raising exercise. Nevertheless, one can only admire the free rein given to Verbund's in-house curator, Gabriele Schor. An Austrian art historian and critic, she has

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created a collection that includes not only the first-wave feminists but also a host of cerebral, reflective artists such as Louise Lawler and Gordon Matta-Clark. Following on from *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, a similar but much bigger show that toured the US recently, *Woman's* presence in Rome suggests a new appreciation for this neglected generation.

Given the deep-rooted sexism they were confronting, it is little wonder that the first feminist artists often kept it simple. "These are the models society holds out to me: the Goddess, the Housewife, Working Girl, Professional, Earth-Mother, Lesbian," writes Martha Wilson as an introduction to her "Portfolio of Models," a sequence of photographs showing her modelling in various guises – silk pyjamas for the goddess, turn-up jeans and bomber jacket for the lesbian.

Determined to reclaim their own image after centuries of manipulation, female artists use masquerade as a leitmotif. In a performance entitled "The People Were Enchanted" (1974-75) Eleanor Antin struts around a Californian suburb dressed as a king in cavalier's cloak, wide-brimmed hat and false beard. In her 20-photograph sequence, "Super-t-Art" (1974), Hannah Wilke morphs from Mary Magdalene to Jesus Christ by way of an artfully draped sheet. The Austrian artist Renate Bertlmann dons stockings and boots, accessorised with a condom-sprouting swimhat and mask on her crotch. Her compatriot Birgit Jürgenssen photographs herself with her hands and face pressed against glass, wearing a white-frilled, cameo-clasped



Identity? Helena Almeida's 'Work-32 (Entrada I)', 1977

shirt, the words "I want out of here!" painted across the pane in raw capitals.

The doyenne of self-transformation is Cindy Sherman. This exhibition is a precious opportunity to see some of her earliest works, such as the series entitled "Bus Riders". Shot in 1976, when she was just 22 years old, these photographs show that even then her vision possessed a nuance that put her in a class of her own. Rather than boiling her characters down to essentials, she builds them up from minute details: the wrinkled stockings of a stooped old lady, the awkward way a woman clasps her shopping bag.

Certain works have a wince-making immediacy. In the video "Touch Cinema" (1968), Valie Export puts on an open-sided box over her naked torso and invites male passers-by to knead her breasts. Charged with embarrassment, shame and desire, the work is a forerunner to the more famous, self-flagellating performances of Vito Acconci and Marina Abramovic in the 1970s.

Not all the work is so anguished but the exploration of boundaries is a characteristic of feminist art. In the film "Burial Pyramid, Yagul, Mexico, 1974", the US-based Cuban exile Ana Mendieta buries herself under a pile of boulders in a rocky, verdant landscape then slowly emerges like a sub-

terranean earth goddess. Valie Export, in "Body Configuration" (1976), moulds her body to the contours of buildings and traffic kerbs. The era's greatest visual poet, Francesca Woodman, shoots herself within derelict interiors. Illuminated by shafts of late-afternoon sun, she dissolves like ectoplasm in front of a dusty mirror, infiltrates a fireplace, wraps herself in shredded wallpaper. A genius at both lighting and crop, Woodman creates images that not only disturb but also express a lost psychic and architectural harmony.

Tragically, Woodman committed suicide at the age of 22. Had she lived she would, like Sherman, have been hailed as one of the great art photographers of the age. For many of the other artists here, the medium is a vehicle for messages of resistance that could not be expressed any other way. That today's great women painters, such as Jenny Saville and Marlene Dumas, are now free to return to the medium of the Old Masters is partly thanks to the battles of these trailblazers. It is a pleasure to see them honoured.

Woman: The Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s from the Sammlung Verbund of Vienna, National Modern Art Gallery (GNAM), Rome until May 16. www.gnam.beniculturali.it