



ArtSeen

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## *Role Play: Feminist Art Revisited 1960-1980*

by Thomas Micchelli

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"I embody everything you most hate and fear." This provocation floats in a comic strip-style dialogue balloon in Adrian Piper's oil crayon drawing, "I Embody Everything" (1975), but it could have been scrawled under every work in *Role Play: Feminist Art Revisited 1960-1980*, a subtle, timely, and moving exhibition at Galerie Lelong.

Every piece, in one way or another, is an act of aesthetic subversion, an assertion of the feminine as an alternative to the intrinsic oppression of the social order, a wad of phlegm in the eye of the male gaze. Some of the works need nothing more than their titles to make their point: Helena Almeida's "Hear Me" (1979); Hannah Wilke's "So Help Me Hannah" (1978); Shigeo Kubota's "Vagina Painting" (1965); Lorraine O'Grady's "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Shouts Out Her Poem" (1981); Valie Export's "Action Pants: Genital Panic" (1969/2001).

From a 21st century perspective, the notion of role-play in pioneering feminist art evokes a welter of shifting contexts and coupled paradoxes. It turns on the ancient strategy of speaking truth to power in the guise of a sibyl, prophet or fool. In each case, truth must be cloaked in riddles and misdirection so that, if it is too uncomfortable, it can be dismissed as the ravings of a lunatic. Nearly every work in this exhibition is a self-portrait. However disguised, these artists speak to the viewer from inside themselves at a time when the dominant, i.e., male, aesthetic practice was dedicated to cool, distanced objects and surfaces that deftly avoided messy emotions or any sensual pleasure beyond the visual.

That was then, as they say, but it is also now. The specific aesthetic and political exigencies that motivated these works are no longer in the forefront of our minds, yet the sense of urgency, even direness, that many of them convey remains undiminished over the span of two generations. Ana Mendieta's thirteen-part suite "Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints – Face)" (1972), perhaps the most powerful work in the show, presents the artist's face pressed against a pane of glass in an array of jarring distortions, alternately clownlike, pathetic, painful, insolent and grotesque. These mute images tell us nothing of the artist's life or beliefs; their immediacy is directly related to the degree to which they tap into their creator's emotional core.

Ironically, what many regarded as an ephemeral and frankly dubious politicizing of art has only deepened in significance and emotional resonance with the passage of time. The artists' use of their own faces and bodies as their primary medium, even when masked by theatrical personae, lends these

works a heavily autobiographical aspect that leads us to contemplate what has happened to those faces and bodies in the intervening years. The tragically shortened lives of Ana Mendieta, Hannah Wilke and Francesca Woodman, to name the most well-known, inevitably informs their work. It's difficult to look at Mendieta's face painfully crushed against a sheet of glass and not think about her fall from a high-rise apartment window. Similarly, Hannah Wilke in "So Help Me Hannah," an iconic image of the time, no longer feels like an avenging sexual angel glorying in her naked desirability. Instead of focusing on fantasy elements like Wilke's silver pistol and white pumps, we become more aware of the bruises and blemishes on her skin. This is not the idealized form we once took it to be, but the nakedness of a real body that will age, sicken, and wither away. Nine years after these photos were taken, Wilke was diagnosed with the cancer that would kill her in 1993. And Francesca Woodman, who committed suicide at the age of twenty-two, haunts her psychologically charged, richly allusive and sumptuously toned black-and-white photographs like a wraith: hidden behind a ruined fireplace; curled inside a curiosity cabinet; cowering shadowy and naked in a museum vitrine; crawling around the corner of a rough stucco wall to encounter herself in a discarded mirror. What might have seemed like the adventures of a latter-day Alice now feels like rehearsals in self-annihilation.

Unlike their male counterparts, with their pristine boxes, striped paintings and hands-off renderings of celebrities and images culled from ads and cartoons, the artists in this exhibition dirtied their hands in the stuff of life. It's this sense of earthiness that distinguishes their most trenchant works. Anna Maria Maiolino's "Entrevidas / Between Life" (1981), a photographic triptych of a woman's bare feet striding across a pavement dotted with luminous white eggs, is so densely tactile that you can feel the papery skin of her soles and the grit of the brick paving. Lynda Benglis' video, *Female Sensibility* (1972)—twelve minutes of Benglis and fellow artist Marilyn Lenkowsky kissing each other—is infectiously sensual; the two women seem to be drowning in the delirium of their touch, taste and smell. And Yoko Ono's notorious 25-minute film, *Fly* (1970), which follows a fly crawling in extreme close-up across a sleeping woman's naked body, feels even more visceral. The soundtrack, filled with Ono's vocalized drones, chirps and gutturals, reflects the creepy, tickly sensation of a bug moving slowly across your skin, a feeling that becomes almost unbearable when the fly sets about exploring the woman's eyes, nostrils and lips. Again, death—in this instance, the murder of John Lennon, credited as co-director—seeps into our experience of the film, which ends with as many as seven flies crawling across the body, splayed on a mattress like a corpse on a bier.

To play a role is to embody a character. These artists embodied their art, many quite literally. Four decades old yet astonishingly fresh, the work they made was a rejoinder to the overly intellectualized and impersonal art of their time, and of ours. The artists in *Role Play* equated art with the body, and that simple act affirmed art as a living, breathing thing, impure and imperfect, steeped in personal histories, emotions, and experiences, bristling with contradictions and no stranger to death.

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