



Truism, a 1982 Times Square Spectracolor board by Jenny Holzer.

HOW WIDE IS THE GENDER GAP?

A decade of progress toward parity was followed by years of low visibility. Now women artists are asserting a renewed militancy in the struggle for equal representation

IN OCTOBER 1980, IN THE PAGES OF THIS MAGAZINE, KAY Larson offered a happy assessment of the progress of women's art during the previous decade: "For the first time in Western art, women are leading, not following," she wrote. "And far from displacing men, female leadership has opened up new freedom for everyone." From the vantage point of 1987, this statement seems sadly dated. With hindsight it is possible to pinpoint 1980 as the year before the tide began to turn

B Y E L E A N O R H E A R T N E Y



ABOVE Artist Susan Rothenberg in the studio: "Why wasn't I weeded out? It was just that painting was very important to me." **BELOW** A place-setting from Judy Chicago's 1979 installation *The Dinner Party*. Suddenly nothing seemed more passé than vaginal imagery.



COURTESY ACA GALLERY

against the wave of pluralism that carried so many women artists into public view. The '80s, it quickly became clear, were about the reinstatement of painting as a dominant mode of expression and, with it, the tradition of the heroic male artist.

At the museums, the new fascination with emotional, expressive painting also resulted in a focus on men. The most notorious example of this—and the first exhibition since the '70s to spark an organized protest by the Women's Caucus for Art—was the Museum of Modern Art's 1984 "International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture," in which a scant 14 women were included among the 165 artists represented.

Meanwhile, those few women who did reach superstar status in the early '80s—artists like Susan Rothenberg and Jennifer Bartlett—did so with art in which gender was not an issue. As Rothenberg remarked in an interview, "When I'm in the studio, I'm just a painter." Suddenly nothing seemed more passé than pattern and decoration, vaginal imagery, body art, ritual and all the other forms pioneered by women in response to their particular experience.

But today there are signs of a new restiveness among women artists and an unwillingness to let the advances of the '70s disappear into history. The most obvious evidence of a returning militancy is the emergence of the Guerrilla Girls, a group of anonymous women artists whose feisty posters point out evidence of sexual discrimination by art-world individuals and institutions.

Another sign of change: as the romance with Neo-Expressionism cools, avant-garde women artists are making a strong showing in art that borrows and manipulates media imagery. Two of these women, in fact—Barbara Kruger and Sherrie Levine—have made it into Mary Boone's previously all-male stable. Boone says she "took these artists on not to stress statistics, but because they are good artists." Kruger, however, remarks, "My decision to enter that gallery is a symbolic leap."

But how are women artists in general faring in today's art world? What was the legacy of '70s activism and how have women artists responded to the new conditions of the '80s?

The abrupt shift in the status of women artists during the early '80s did not occur in a vacuum: the Reagan Revolution marked a setback for the entire women's movement. The rise of the Moral Majority, the increasing bitterness of the abortion-rights debate and the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment all demonstrated a growing distance between the goals and assumptions of '70s-style feminists and those of the country as a whole. Even within the women's movement, controversy raged about the consequences of the drive for gender-blind laws, economic equality and the elimination of preferential treatment in cases of divorce, custody

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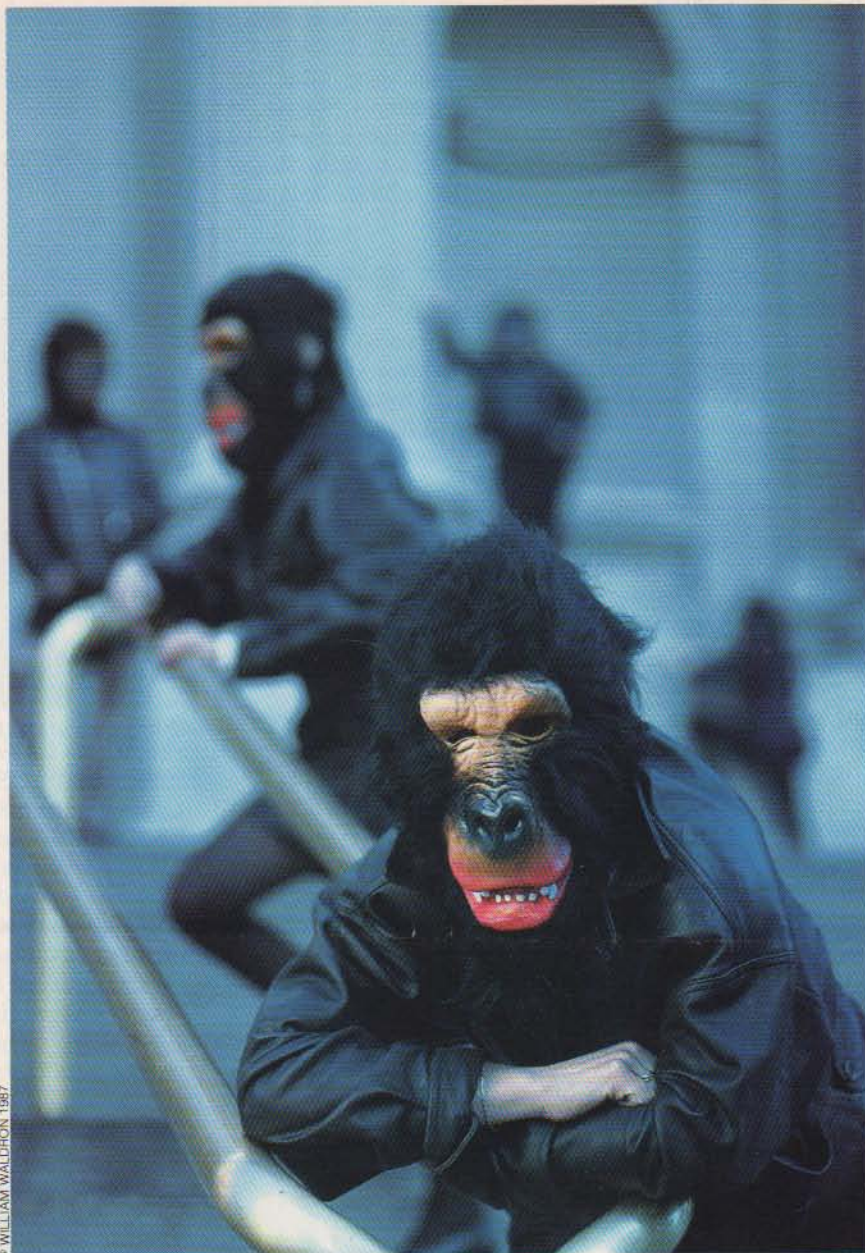
and maternity leave. Between 1980 and 1986, membership in the National Organization for Women dropped by one-third.

Within the art world, economic realities were undermining women's hard-won visibility. First, the explosion of the art market, fueled in part by a return to painting after a decade of experimental, often deliberately noncommercial art, was centered on art that was decisively unfeminine. Dealer Ronald Feldman maintains that the de-emphasis of women's art during the heyday of Neo-Expressionism was not a matter of deliberate prejudice. "A particular movement came along that was heavily male. It was the first viable movement with an international flavor that came on the market after a very dry period, and collectors and curators just went for it."

At the same time, public funding for the sort of organizations that nurtured the women's art movement was reduced. Ariel Daugherty, National Project Director for the National Data Base on Women Artists, has made a study of National Endowment for the Arts funding statistics. "Although in fact the NEA budget has increased," she says, "between 1982 and 1985 the share of the NEA budget going to women artists' organizations dropped by 35 percent."

Among those organizations were many of the women's co-ops and galleries designed to foster a nonjudgmental environment. In retrospect it appears that this nurturing attitude may have left members ill equipped for the businesslike mentality that pervades the '80s art world. Painter Joan Semmel, in her 50s, remarks, "We used to think we could beat the system, and we did for a short time. But when the whole Salle-Schnabel thing came out we weren't ready. There was a whole machine, involving critics, dealers and collectors, and having to do with the strategy and planning that come together behind them. Women haven't wanted to deal with that. I personally can't stand it." Although it appears that younger artists of both sexes are increasingly comfortable with the demands of the market, many artists of Semmel's generation shared her stance toward the commercial world. Often it was less a matter of choice or discrimination than the innocence that existed in a much smaller, more intimate art world. "It didn't occur to me at the beginning that one could make a living as an artist," Mary Frank says, "so I wasn't disappointed when I didn't."

Painter Grace Hartigan believes there is an inverse relation between market strength and female visibility. She recalls, "When I was in New York in the late '40s, there were almost no galleries showing avant-garde art. Everyone was poverty-stricken—there was no fame, no money, no



Dressed for success: A cadre of Guerrilla Girls makes an early-morning assault on the Metropolitan Museum.

galleries, no collectors. That's when you have equality. Men have no objection to women as creators. It's only when they're all scrambling for recognition that the trouble begins." Hartigan admits that artists like Jennifer Bartlett and Susan Rothenberg are widely accepted, but explains, "If you're an extraordinarily gifted woman, the door is open. What women are fighting for is the right to be as mediocre as men."

Thus women's disappearance from the front line seems less a matter of conscious design or deliberate sexism than a convergence of unfavorable trends. A woman *could* negotiate her way to the top in the early '80s, and when she did it was never really clear why the factors inhibiting other women had not hindered her. Susan Rothenberg asks, "Where are the women I went to art school with? Why wasn't I weeded out? I was married. I had a kid. It wasn't careerist drive. It was just that painting was very important to me."

However, unlike the feminist artists of the '70s, Roth-

it is his New York artists who press for the inclusion of women in group shows and that it was the New York critics who made an issue of the number of women in the recent "Spiritual in Art" show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Other groups are joining in the lobbying efforts to raise institutional consciousness. In New York last fall the Women's Caucus for Art sponsored a march on the Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art to dramatize their findings on the low proportion of female representation in museum exhibitions and permanent collections. They met with curators there and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and MoMA to discuss the problem and possible solutions. One of these discussions involved Lowery Sims, associate curator of 20th-century art at the Metropolitan. Sims herself has been actively using her position at the Met to push for greater representation of women and minorities. But as she gives the statistics for the opening show in the new 20th-century wing—of 144 artists there are five blacks, 15 women, three Latin Americans and one Asian—she says sadly, "It's the best we could do."

Sims offers several reasons for this state of affairs. "There's a lack of awareness on the outside," she says. "We don't have a concerned upper class involved in the arts that is actively pressuring for change. Right now the inclusion of women and minorities depends on the goodwill of the curator. And since most of our acquisitions are based on donations from collectors, to really up the numbers the museum needs to have them show some interest. Our first line of acquaintance tends to be those artists brought to our attention by collectors." Thus one line of attack she suggests is to focus on the women who collect art, either singly or as part of a collecting team. "That would be a place to raise some consciousness about the problem," she says.

Among dealers there is disagreement about the degree to which collectors are reluctant to purchase art by women. Paula Cooper maintains that "collectors with mainstream collections don't care about gender—they're interested in quality." However, John Cheim, director of the Robert Miller Gallery, admits, "I do find resistance among collectors to buying art by women. I'm quite shocked by it. I find that there are collectors in their 40s and 50s who have no interest in art by women. They may not say it, but it's understood." He adds, "I think things are better for younger artists. Younger people are buying younger artists—each generation gets better." Ronald Feldman agrees that the situation is changing. On collectors' resistance to women's art, he says, "That was absolutely true until five years ago. Now it's rapidly changing. Women are more visible as artists; the quality is equal to what men are doing; they're getting more coverage. It's almost an equal market."

The pressure tactics of groups like the Guerrilla Girls and the Women's Caucus for Art are based on an implicit acceptance of the values and mechanisms of the art world. Artist Silvia Kolbowski argues that the battle for a bigger piece of the pie obscures the question of whether the pie itself has been properly baked. Speaking of the Guerrilla Girls, she says, "They're not questioning the marketplace. They are accepting the validity of the institutions and structures and seeing how women are measuring up. What's missing is a critique of those institutions." In her own work Kolbowski attempts just such a critique. Borrowing images from advertising, fashion layouts and department-store displays, then recombining and juxtaposing these with bits of

text, she explores the implicit messages they convey about femininity, capitalism and the Third World.

Artist Aimée Rankin raises similar questions. "The art world is a focal point for patriarchal fantasies," she says. "The ideal of the heroic genius is by definition male." In her work Rankin uses deliberately kitschy objects—plastic baubles and toys, reproductions of Symbolist paintings, strings of beads and gold-painted leaves—arranged in boxes. Humorous exaggerations of extreme definitions of femininity, Rankin's boxes are nonetheless oddly compelling and seductive. This, she maintains, is also true of clichés about womanliness.

Rankin agrees with Kolbowski that it is important for artists to expose and undermine institutions that perpetuate debilitating notions about gender roles, but she also believes that the Guerrilla Girls' emphasis on numbers is not entirely misplaced. "My decision to work within the system in a more aggressive way comes out of my realization that moving outside the system didn't really change much. Our targets weren't even aware they were being boycotted."



Curator Lowery Sims at the Metropolitan: "There's a lack of awareness on the outside. We don't have a concerned upper class in the arts actively pressuring for change."

KOLBOWSKI AND RANKIN ARE JUST TWO OF A striking number of women artists who are appropriating and "deconstructing" media and popular imagery, making art that offers a curious contrast to the sort of feminist art most visible in the '70s. The early days of the feminist-art movement were dominated by art that attempted to explore what was uniquely female in women's experiences. Artists working in this mode included Nancy Spero, Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Mary Beth Edelson and Carolee Schneeman. Today artists like Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Jenny Holzer, Silvia Kolbowski and Cindy Sherman seem more interested in examining femininity as a social or psychological construct. They explore the way gender roles are conditioned by external forces, and they challenge a white male social order in which women, like inhabitants of Third World nations, are regarded as "other."

Barbara Kruger, for example, announces in a photocollage, "We won't play nature to your culture"—a defiant



ABOVE Artist Silvia Kolbowski faults the Guerrilla Girls for "accepting the validity of the institutions and seeing how women are measuring up. What's missing is a critique of those institutions." **BELOW** A Guerrilla Girls sticker.

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receding Neo-Expressionist movement. In an interview published in the catalogue of her traveling show, Jenny Holzer suggests that the work of these artists "tends to be about 'real world' subject matter more than a lot of male artists' work. I think this is a funny reversal, because now a lot of men's work, like Clemente's for instance, is about fantasy and mysticism, and it's very personal. It's the women who are doing the hard-headed, subject-oriented things."

She sees this change as a response to the fuller possibilities open to second- and third-generation feminists. "My guess is that the first generation of feminist artists was feeling its way along, trying to find an appropriate means of expression. I also think they were very self-con-

scious about what they were doing because it was new. Being self-conscious, they would take things close at hand, like their bodies or traditional women's work—repetition, domesticity, boredom—all the things that were women's lot. Now, since the women's movement has been somewhat successful in the United States—there isn't always economic freedom but there is mental freedom—you have the permission and the confidence to go ahead and do what you want. World politics are a lot more interesting than patterns and repetition and boredom."

Art-world acceptance of women working in this mode may be rooted in the fact that this is unexplored territory, without a tradition of male dominance. The work's success may also be related to these artists' tendency to infiltrate from within, adopting a traditionally male tone and language in order to expose its contradictions, rejecting the earlier generation's tendency toward separatism. Thus Barbara Kruger explains that her aim in joining the Mary Boone gallery is not what it may appear. "The question is how I can be more effective in generating change. I'm not interested in repeating the notion of the great artist, of being the Queen of the Hop. I want to let go of that competitiveness."

The success of these media critics may be due in part to the corrective they supply to the romantic excesses of a now

But is it possible to subvert the system without being changed by it? Miriam Schapiro has her doubts. She points out, "As Marshall McLuhan said, 'The medium is the mes-



**WOMEN IN AMERICA EARN ONLY 2/3 OF WHAT MEN DO.
WOMEN ARTISTS EARN ONLY 1/3 OF WHAT MEN ARTISTS DO.**

A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE FROM **GUERRILLA GIRLS** CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD

Artist Miriam Schapiro has doubts about the agenda of a younger generation of feminists: "If you destroy the myth of women in art, you destroy your ancestry—deny your grandmothers. It throws the baby out with the bathwater."

sage. I'm afraid the artists who think they can subvert from within may be kidding themselves."

As a veteran of the women's movement, Schapiro is also troubled by other aspects of the younger generation's agenda, particularly their tendency, as they sweep away the myths of gender, to sweep away any positive connotations of femininity as well. "What feminist criticism has provided for the world is a paradigm from which you can extend to larger issues," she says. "My fear is that as this develops there begins to be angst about early feminism. But if you destroy the myth of women in traditional art, you destroy your ancestry—deny your grandmothers. That's a short-sighted view. It throws the baby out with the bathwater." She adds, "There is a predictable historical rule of thesis/antithesis. What I'm arguing for is the middle ground."

The relative success of the female media critics should not obscure the fact that women artists in general have a long way to go to achieve parity with men. While U.S. census data reveal that 38 percent of artists are women, men continue to make up the bulk of visible, practicing artists. And a report by the NEA notes that women artists make a yearly average of only \$5,700 from their artwork, as opposed to an average of \$13,000 for men. (These statistics include artists in all the artistic disciplines.)

For feminist artists, curators and critics who are veterans of the '60s and '70s, the apparent stagnation of the move for equality has been discouraging. "It's disappointing that the interest in race and feminism hasn't been sustained," says Lowery Sims. "You think that everyone should know what we went through in the '70s, and then you realize—poof—it's gone. I find it appalling that the movement hasn't filtered down to young blacks, minorities and women."

Despite the statistics, however, there have been some permanent gains. As Joan Semmel points out, "The justification for not showing women artists has changed. Dealers used to say that women artists weren't as good as men. Now they say that collectors won't buy the work. That's progress—of a sort."

The question for women artists in the '80s seems to be: How does one build on gains and avoid the trap of trying to start all over again from square one? Just as many leaders of the larger feminist movement have realized that equality cannot be achieved in isolation from other social and personal goals, so art-world feminists are having to redefine their tactics in order to reach a younger generation for whom feminism is a problematic matter. "I'm reluctant to pigeonhole myself as a feminist," says Carol Hodson, a graduate student of sculpture at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. "I'm wary of the way movements become more important than individual action. It seems to me that any group that's organized becomes generalized."

On the other hand, young women are not unaware of their debt to the activists of the '70s. Hodson's fellow student Virginia Tyler remarks, "I don't think I would be able to step out into the real world if it hadn't been for the '70s. I caught the tail end of the feminist movement—I was the last member of a women's co-op gallery. When I look back,

Artist Joan Semmel: "The justification for not showing women artists has changed. Dealers used to say women weren't as good as men. Now they say collectors won't buy the work. That's progress—of a sort."



SUZANNE OPTON

I realize I made a lot of bad pink stuff, but if I hadn't done that I probably wouldn't be doing anything now at all."

In the final analysis, it seems clear that in the art world, as in the "real" world, women have made irreversible strides toward greater equality. It is also clear that these advances are the product of constant, dogged efforts by women themselves to chip away at the barriers surrounding them. "We have received orders not to move," one Kruger text reads, parodying the passive role to which women historically have been relegated. In the art world, it appears that these orders are being regularly ignored. ■

