

PAGE TURNERS

Sara Marcus on *Heresies*



Amy Sillman and Deep Six's *A Pink Strip*, 1977. From *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics* 1 (January 1977).

ASK A CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST when the backlash to the second wave began, and they'll likely talk about the early 1980s, Reagan's election, and the final defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982. But the forces of reaction started ramping up a bit earlier, in

1977. In that year, the Supreme Court allowed new restrictions on abortion for the first time since the 1973 victory in *Roe v. Wade*. In that year, Anita Bryant stoked antigay mania, spurring the repeal of a nondiscrimination law in Dade County, Florida, and emboldening a ballot initiative in California that would have barred gays and lesbians from teaching school. And although only hindsight would reveal this as a harbinger of failure, on January 18, 1977, Indiana became the thirty-fifth and final state to ratify the ERA, leaving the amendment permanently three states short.

Feminism's triumphs of the '70s were proving at once entirely inadequate and deeply vulnerable. The insurgent right wing was getting stronger every day, and feminists had been divided for years: The Marxists mocked the goddess worshippers, the career radicals distrusted the academics, and lesbians wanted to create their own worlds without men or straight women. Even more fundamentally, the predominantly white parts of the movement, which is to say most of it, fumbled repeatedly when it came to addressing racialized difference. The Combahee River Collective of black feminists produced its famous statement in 1977, but most white feminists did not then comprehend how necessary women of color's political theory and practice was.

For feminism to survive on the cusp of the Reagan era, the movement would need to encompass its multitudes without splitting apart. And to keep growing, it would need to develop new concepts, new institutions, and new aesthetics. In January 1977, a group of art-world feminists in New York launched a new journal, titled *Heresies*, that would, in both its singular process and its stunning product, endeavor to imagine ways of doing all of this.

The debut issue of *Heresies*—a respectable 114 pages long, of which only two were occupied by ads—listed a twenty-member collective that included critic Lucy R. Lippard as well as artists Harmony Hammond, Joyce Kozloff, Miriam Schapiro, Joan Snyder, and May Stevens. Many of these women had been meeting since 1975 at an array of downtown lofts, talking endlessly to hash out the publication's structure, contents, and title. (Lippard pushed hard to call the journal *Pink* until Mary Miss brought up a quote popularized by Susan Sontag: "New truths begin as heresies.")



Cover of *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics* 12 (Fall 1981).

From the beginning, the journal carried a visionary selection of essays, poems, and artworks. Louise Bourgeois published art in early issues. So did Laurie Anderson, Ana Mendieta, Howardena Pindell, Martha Rosler, and a very young Amy Sillman. All this alongside writing by Lippard, Barbara Ehrenreich, Teresa de Lauretis, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Ntozake Shange, and on and on. To look through these publications some forty years later is to reinhabit that explosive moment when a critical mass of brilliant thinkers were asking how the feminist revolution that had so thoroughly reshaped their lives might change the look and feel and function of art. Hammond wrote about abstraction and gender, Lippard about kitsch and class; Ida Applebroog assembled a portfolio of comic feminist artworks and wrote an essay on women and humor. Documentary strategies, community-based practices, and traditional craft were all explored and reexplored in the pages of the journal, which promised a quarterly

publication schedule at first, though it soon lapsed into a slower pace. (One-year subscribers were guaranteed four issues, even if it took four years for all of them to arrive.)

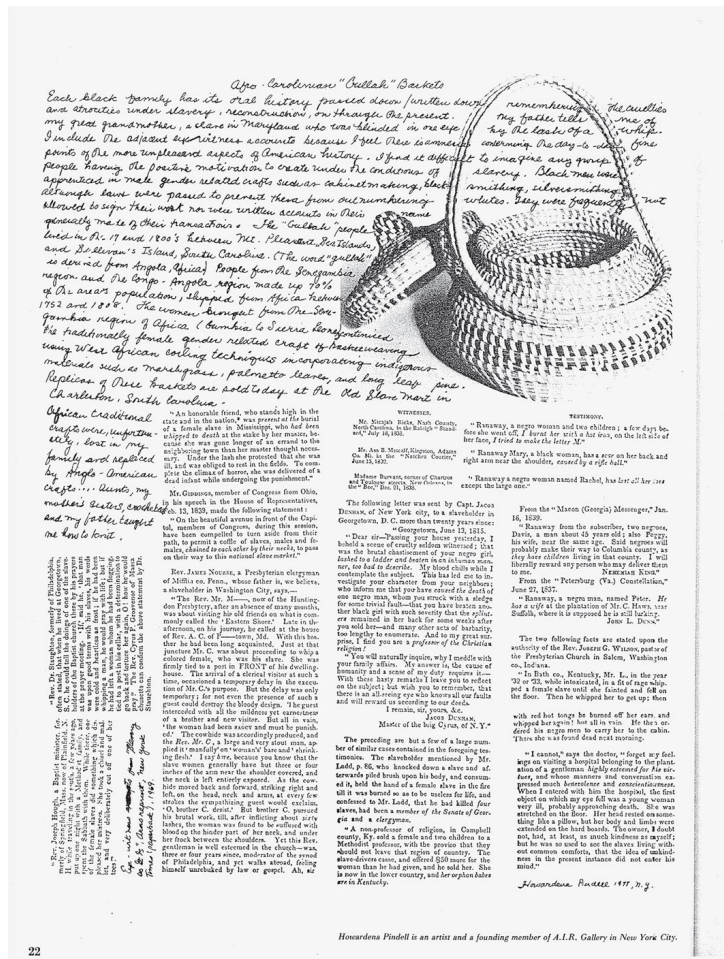
The journal's entire run is now freely available online, thanks to the archival efforts of Joan Braderman, who helped found *Heresies* and who made a 2009 documentary about the journal's early days. Scanned in grainy black-and-white, the artworks that survive most successfully are those that involve line drawing or a lot of text, such as Rosler's *Tijuana Maid*, 1975, a transcription of a bilingual "postcard novel" she'd written based on testimonies from domestic workers at the border, and Pindell's photographs of women in Senegal, framed by lines of neat cursive diary entries from her voyage there.

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Organized to accommodate many viewpoints, *Heresies* from the beginning took a multipronged approach to feminism. The debut included a piece on the Wages for Housework campaign, another on socialist feminism (by none other than Ehrenreich), and poems by women in prison. Subsequent issues focused on ecology, racism, class politics, and aging. Their 1985 survey of peace activism covered not just the era's high-profile women's antinuclear encampments but anti-apartheid and anti-police brutality activism as well.

Many of the feminist magazines and small presses founded in the mid-'70s sputtered out after a few years, but *Heresies* kept publishing until 1993. (Along the way, the collective contributed a satirical art-world board game to the February 1980 *Artforum*, the first edited by Ingrid Sischy.) The organization's innovative structure is surely to thank for this longevity: A core group of volunteers, eventually known as the Mother Collective, was in charge of choosing themes, sending out open calls for writing and artwork, and raising money through benefit exhibitions and donations. Meanwhile, the on-the-ground work for each issue—selecting contributions, doing layout and paste-up, getting the pages to the printer—was done by a group that formed solely to produce that issue, was open to all,

and usually included only a few members of the Mother Collective. People who left the Mother Collective—and most did cycle off, though Lippard's name remained on the masthead till the end—became *Heresies* “Associates” and often stayed active in an advisory role, keeping institutional memory accessible while minimizing burnout and making room for new members to join.



Howardena Pindell's Afro-Carolinian “Gullah” Baskets, 1977. From *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics* 4 (Winter 1977–78).

For all its openness, the journal was not immune to some of the exclusions and errors of the larger movement. Perhaps most strikingly, when women of color got together to produce the eighth issue, 1979's “Third World Women,” there were no Mother Collective members involved: The journal's central team was at that point all-white and had been from the beginning. “We were all for having women of color in the thing, but we did not do it right,” Lippard acknowledges. “We didn't start out with women of color, which we

should have—[rather than just] inviting people in after we had formed.” In her 2016 memoir of the feminist-art scene, *Openings*, Sabra Moore writes that somebody proposed inviting all the editors of “Third World Women” to join the Mother Collective—a move that might have helped *Heresies* become an art-world microcosm of the multiracial movement feminists across the country were failing to build. Nothing ever came of the idea.

If “Third World Women,” though, suggests something about the original group’s limitations and the way those limitations reproduced themselves down the line, it also testifies to the flexibility and openness the multicollective structure made possible. As the poet Patricia Spears Jones, who worked as *Heresies*’ office manager for several years in the early 1980s, recalled, the core group “really owned up to what they didn’t know, which was fairly rare, as in almost nonexistent. They worked very hard to expand the main collective, but they also gave the different publication collectives a great deal of autonomy.” The editors of “Third World Women” produced one of *Heresies*’ strongest issues, featuring work by Lorde, Mendieta, and Pindell as well as Michelle Cliff, Jayne Cortez, Joy Harjo, Adrian Piper, and Betye Saar.

The idea for “Third World Women” came out of one of the public “evaluation meetings” that were held after each issue appeared. In those pre-internet days, criticism of published work was most commonly conducted face-to-face, building a real-life community that could survive critique and incorporate it. And *Heresies* welcomed critique not just from readers but from collective members themselves. Many meetings ended with a session of criticism/self-criticism: a go-round in which everybody said how they felt the meeting had gone. Moore recalls, “You couldn’t respond to anything. So it wasn’t a debate; it was a final airing. While it was painful and unpleasant, it was also a way people got to leave the room having said what they needed to say.” “Some of us tended to talk more and try to lead [during meetings]—I was one of them,” Lippard says, and crit/self-crit “gave people who weren’t talking all the time a chance to say exactly what they thought about how it was going. I remember always being surprised.”

Not every conflict was amenable to resolution through feminist processing. In the late ’80s, in the midst of a dispiriting legal battle involving a staff member who’d taken some twelve

thousand dollars from the journal's bank account after being laid off, Joyce Kozloff, who had been in the collective at the beginning, wrote to Moore, "I think you should just publish Issues #24 and 25 and then *fold*. I really feel that *Heresies* no longer makes sense—it comes out once a year, many people believe it ceased to exist years ago, the issues are uneven, but mostly, it just feels very seventies and tired to me now." Moore retorted, "I am curious what factors you see as 'seventies'—the desire to act collectively?"

Far from being dated, *Heresies* suggests one approach to navigating our own challenging times. "Even though some of those meetings could go on forever," Jones says, "I'm incredibly grateful for the time spent with such deep-thinking women who wanted literally to change the world. We were young enough and had enough energy to think that maybe we could—and I think, in some ways, that actually happened. A lot of the work that was done in the '70s, we're seeing the fruition of now."

Heresies' feminism was not the bland female empowerment of *Working Girl* or the Wing's pinkened coworkers of today; each issue hums with the assumption that a feminist outlook could fuel a push for transformation not just of individual lives but of structures, patterns, and institutions, including those of the art world. "As women, we are aware that historically the connections between our lives, our arts and our ideas have been suppressed," the *Heresies* collective wrote in its initial statement of purpose, which appeared at the outset of every issue. "Once these connections are clarified they can function as a means to dissolve the alienation between artist and audience, and to understand the relationship between art and politics, work and workers. . . . Our view of feminism is one of process and change, and we feel that in the process of this dialogue we can foster a change in the meaning of art."

Sara Marcus, the author of *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution* (Harper Collins, 2010), is writing a book about political disappointment in twentieth-century American culture. In 2019–20 she will be a fellow at the University of Southern California's Society of Fellows in the humanities.