

***Backing Forwards: The 1976 All-American Glamour Kitty
(runner-up) Finally Meets the High Heel Sisters.***

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Act Out: Performative Video by Nordic Women Artists, a conference held at University of Evora, Evora, Portugal, November 23 -28, 2008

...Third wave feminists, lesbians and cyber feminists may have only experienced the feminist art of the 1970's second-hand, making work that responds to it's legacy---implicitly, explicitly, and /or with parody.

(Toronto-based critic Helena Reckitt, CAA Bulletin, pg. 7, New York, March 2006)

What influence has The Women's Art Movement of the 1970's in the U.S. had on contemporary feminist video, in particular, contemporary Nordic women's performative video? With this question in mind, I have been asked to discuss my own work, which began as performance and video in the early 1970's.

In becoming acquainted with contemporary Nordic performative video, I've been impressed by the transnational nature of these works. The videos being discussed at this conference deal with what curators Maura Rielly and Linda Nochlin label, in their recent exhibition of the same name at The Brooklyn Museum in New York, *Global Feminism*. The works deal with identity, gender, lesbianism, race and socio-economic class. The key word here is *feminisms*. In contemporary arts, according to Reilly and Nochlin, there seems not to be just one definition of feminism, but many. This plurality exists in part because of the differing circumstances and contexts in which women around the world live and create art. For those of you who are students the contemporary reaction against one solidly defined term, feminism, versus feminisms as a plurality of meanings may seem odd without some background on the The Women's Art Movement of the 1970's.

In early 1970's I was a graduate student with Ana Mendieta, Jayne Hileman and a few other actively feminist students at The University of Iowa in Iowa City. Though this university is in the middle of the country in what some consider the middle of nowhere, their Art Department was already well known among the avant guard as a center of innovation. Philip Guston and Jackson Pollack. And in the late 60's and early 70's Hans Breder, a German intermedia artist started the first graduate program in multi-media (performance, video, installation etc.) outside a major coastal city. Through a major grant he collaborated with other departments and faculty to create the CNPA, Center for New Performing Arts. Artists, not yet, but soon to be art household names arrived on a regular basis to interact with a small group of faculty and students. I recall Stephen Foster's courses on Dada and Fluxus when we met many of the main players from the

Fluxus groups in Europe, Japan and New York. Nam Jun Paik discussed how video would change the art world and other visitors saw Iowa as a last bastion for shocking an audience.

With the efforts of Chicago, Shapiro, and Lippard (all of whom visited our campus early on) a grass roots women's art movement began to develop. The movement questioned the content, form, and theory that had supported the avant-garde of modernism. Many of us who felt marginalized by both gender and geography suddenly felt like contributors to this cultural dialog. Though criticized as exclusionary later, there was a democratic inclusionary method in these early activities with no juries or judges. Everyone was encouraged to participate.

Critic Lucy Lippard was a frequent visitor. In the early 70's she began a project encouraging women from all over the country to share their work by sending her slides. From her slides lectures we were able to see what women artists were doing in response to the debates begun by Lippard and artists like Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro. As the Women's Movement in 1960's and early 70's culture was developing, Chicago and Shapiro set up the first graduate program for women art students and soon after organized the Woman House Project in Los Angeles. They raised questions: *Are women's life experiences different than men's? How does culture construct our notion of gender? If women's experiences are different than men's, is their art, or should their art be different?* Artists such as Mary Beth Edelson, Linda Montano, and Lynn Hirschman, Martha Wilson from Franklin Furnace in New York, and the grandmother of feminist performance, Carolee Schneeman, all made multiple visits to campus to give performances and installations and to collaborate and critique graduate student work. (see images of 70's women artists)

Even at that time we disagreed about feminism as a term and became aware of what seemed to be the white, middleclass, suburban, and Western bias of the movement early on. Criticism from outside and within the ranks challenged so called goddess imagery like that of my friend and colleague Ana Mendieta as essentialist, affirming the cultural bias that associates women with nature and men with culture. (See images by Ana Mendieta, Mary Beth Edelson and myself using the iconography of the ancient Minoan Snake goddess as a Feminist political gesture of defiance.) Though criticized as exclusionary now. The movement was much more democratic and inclusive than the existing avant-garde and these were healthy debates that bring up many of the issues dealt with in the Post-Modern 80's and 90's. The women artists, historians and critics of 1970's movement can be credited with helping open this kettle of worms by questioning the Western white male hierarchy in the avant-garde culture of the art world.

In 1975, I noticed an unusual form on the back of my bag of kitty litter. It was for the Eleventh Annual All-American Glamour Kitty Pageant Contest. For the past year I had been making clothes for my cat, Ms. Kitty Glitter, as part of a feminist conceptual artwork. (See images of All-American Glamour Kitty Pageant, 1976) I took several photos of Ms. Kitty wearing her outfits (housewife, go-go girl, Indian maiden, cheerleader, bride, etc.) and entered them in the national competition. Over a period of

several months, she was graduated from one of 250 regional winners, to one of eighteen semi-finalists, to one of the nine finalists out of 20,000 entries nationally. Waverly Mineral Products, the company that produced the All-American Glamour Kitty brand kitty litter, sponsored the contest. This contest provided their main publicity for the product for a dozen years.

Ms. Kitty began to receive local and national media attention, as well as numerous prizes including a year's supply of kitty litter, jeweled cat collars, engraved silver platters, and a TV set. As one of the nine finalists, Ms. Glitter and I were flown to Miami Beach for a week of "competitions" at the luxurious Hotel Fontainebleau. Two other events were being held at the Fontainebleau while we were there, an international conference on psychics (including academics and psychics like Sybil Leet) and the annual conference for The National Organization of Little People.

Included in the week's events was the Mouse mobile Motorcade through downtown Miami, (nine Volkswagen Bugs painted like big mice from the local exterminating company) The Kitty Fashion Show, The Kitty Olympics, and the Coronation (emceed by former Miss Universe Pageant announcer Chuck Zinc). Sister Mary Louise from Pennsylvania won the fashion show competition. She dressed up like Pocahontas and dressed Harry, her cat, like Davy Crocket. The Grand Prize winner would get their cat's picture on the front of the All-American Glamour Kitty brand cat litter for one year and a trip to Philadelphia for a week's vacation at the hotel where the first outbreak of Legionnaires Disease had occurred the week before our competition! No one really wanted to win after the Legionnaire outbreak

Later that year I did a series of installations, and performance/events based on this bizarre experience. In the following years I developed a series of tableaux and performance pieces based on a cat-masked, toga-clad alter ego attempting to deconstruct everything from Classical Greek Mythology to Mary Kay Cosmetics. I often use animal-human hybrids to parody gender related roles. These performance tableaux involved elements of satire and melodrama to question the myths being constructed within the image.

So what, then, did the Women's Art Movement of the 1970's contribute to contemporary feminist inquiry in the arts? Many essays such as those found in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970's*, History and Impact, ed. Broude and Gerrard, Abrams, 1995 discuss this topic. I'd like to give an overview of seven contributions I feel are most important to this discussion.

1. **The Women's Art Movement introduces a renewed interest in content:** There was a recognition that content in art is related to the experiences of the artist in culture. Lucy Lippard said that a woman's social, biological, and political experiences differ from those of men in our culture. Art is born of one's experiences and must be true to them to have integrity. (Paraphrased from notes taken at a Lippard lecture at

- The University of Iowa in October 1975.) Autobiographical content became acceptable again following modernism emphasis on form alone.
2. **The WAM was interested in the notion that culture constructs the meaning of gender, race, ethnicity, social class.** By re-appropriating images previously lost to negative discourse many artists attempted to *deconstruct such images' meanings. This manifest itself more pervasively in the criticism of the 1980's Post Modern era.*
 3. **The WAM transformed methods of artistic production.** Art was generated in collective, cooperative, and collaborative environments through such venues as Woman House and The Women's Building in Los Angeles.
 4. **The WAM adopted new forms to better articulate the new content.** These were pluralistic approaches that included, installation, performance, video, ritual, tableau, and intermedia. Forms like traditional painting and sculpture came with a litany of *rules*. It was easier to say something new with a new medium where history did not impose an existing aesthetic.
 5. **The WAM used art as a vehicle for encouraging social change and making political comment.** Works by many women artists, in particular those created by Suzanne Lacy (*Whisper, Wind, The Waves*, 1979), unabashedly took a political point of view and attempted to influence opinion.
 6. **The WAM was responsible for the rediscovery of elements of traditional women's culture and crafts, of folk arts, naïve and primitive art.** This resulted in a partial reconciliation of the so-called *Minor Arts* (such as weaving, embroidery, other textile processes as well as ceramics) and *High Art*.
 7. **The WAM instituted a critical rereading of history in general and art history, in particular.** Lost art by women from past decades and centuries was rediscovered. There was a re-evaluation of *Woman* as subject. Issues of origin were raised and the *Great Goddess* archetype became a symbol for the female principle as a strong creative force.

It seems to me that there is a pattern in the artistic development of my own work and that of many other early feminist artists. As years went by we seemed to go through several *stages*.

1. Self-awareness was the first stage. Through consciousness raising and reading contemporary feminist theory, among other things, we became aware of our unique cultural and biological situation as related to gender. This led to use of more autobiographical content and with that came more narrative content. Gradually we began to better understand how culture helps construct our definitions of gender as well as how personal experience influences perception of the self. (The work done at Woman House, organized by Judy Chicago and

Miriam Shapiro, and later the work of Ana Mendieta, Mary Beth Edelson and Lynda Montano come to mind). In my own work there seems to be an early emphasis on autobiographical content that quickly becomes a cultural critique. This is exemplified by the All-American Glamour Kitty Pageant project of 1976

2. Next many women artists began working in collaborative and cooperative environments using new forms as a means of cultural critique in an effort to bring about change for women. There was an activist and group collaboration element to this stage. The work of Suzanne Lacy and Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* project are good examples of this. My 70's and 80's performances, tableaux and videos of cat-masked Isadora Duncan's in the ruins of Greece and with her *modern woman* sidekick Erma, in the bowling alleys and Laundromats of Iowa seem to fit this stage.

While taking a tongue in cheek look at the way contemporary society associates animal images with gender characteristics, Gilmore challenges the viewer into recognition of these stereotypes, and a subsequent questioning of their validity....
(From exhibition essay by Paul Brenner, Real Art Ways, Hartford, Ct 1982)

3. Many feminists then went out into community to affect changes that go beyond issues of gender to issues of class, race, and ethnicity. This initiated the many art in the public interest projects of the 1980's (and continuing to this day) by artists like Mierle Ukeles. In my own work I began a series of community-based projects in homeless shelters and hospitals.

After living on the Lower East Side of New York in the mid 80's, my work began to deal with issues of homelessness and loss of identity. One component of my work was a series of community-based collaborations with disenfranchised individuals living in shelters and state hospitals. In large rooms or smaller walk-in structures, walls and floors are covered with metal notes juxtaposed with found objects, metal books, video and elements such as steam, water, and light.

In these community-based projects we concerned ourselves with those experiences where object, place and identity intersect. In workshops and journaling, we found the *bed*, in both its domestic and institutional settings, became a source for memories of sounds, words, and images.

The *Homeless Drawing Home*, *Windows '95* and *Wisdom Pass* projects (late 80's through mid-90's) were collaborations with homeless shelter residents, hospitalized children, and adult cancer patients and their caregivers. During workshops we created drawings and writings on metal foil, based on journal entries. My intention in these public projects was to give seriously ill individuals and their families access to nontraditional art forms and to encourage use of the imagination as a survival tool. It was my earlier experience working with groups of women and with collaborative processes during the 1970's Women's Art Movement that led to this point in my artistic practice.

My more recent work (2005-present) presents room-sized installations of wearable structures activated with robotics and embedded with video. Extending from previous work in my *Containers for the Self* series, these situations further explore those psychologically and culturally based entanglements of image, language and space through which we try to locate our own identity.

In the installation Blind one enters the gallery and is confronted by a seven-foot high cave-like structure tracing its roots to a wheelchair accessible, camouflage hunting blind. Shining through a slit and projected on a nearby column is a video loop of my hand endlessly unzipping a zipper. Around this larger phallus-filled igloo several smaller motorized versions of the hunting blind circulate, helpfully dispensing Kleenex, vacuuming up and responding to remote control demands from viewers.

*...We cannot help but be swept away by the slapstick spirit, checked by a note of dread and caution supplied by the hand in its endless Sisyphean pursuit of the completed zip. Everything, and everyone (including, crucially, the artist herself) is caught in a permanent vicious cycle, a perverse closed loop of good will, bloodlust, vanity and pure brilliant stupidity. (Matt Freedman, *Blind* catalogue essay).*

Earlier wearable structures, *The Architecture of Migration* and *The Architecture of Fatigue* explore the dualities of presence vs. absence and border issues relating to public/private, rural/urban, poverty/privilege, and life/death.

For the past thirty years, then, my practice has been concerned with social issues, found situations, and psychological narrative. From *The 1976 All-American Glamour Kitty Pageant*, to my 70's and 80's photo tableaux of cat-masked Isadora Duncan's in the ruins of Greece and the bowling alleys and Laundromats of Iowa, to my twenty years of community-based public work in shelters and hospitals--my search is for some unspoken connection in these random collisions of objects, images, and voices. For me the work is both an intuitive response to personal experience and a cultural critique.

To bring you to my contemporary work I will show a brief excerpt from my 2005 film, *Blind*. My own work has most recently focused on creating a critique of American politics. This video shown recently at the Anthology Film Archives in New York is just 6 minutes long and was created here in Portugal and Evora while I was a Fulbright Scholar here in 2003-04.

Blind, the film, follows a six foot high, wheelchair accessible hunting blind on its journey through Portugal (2003 and 2005), a country whose government supported the American government's war in Iraq, but whose people did not. The *blind* is a phallic-shaped portable tent made in China from camouflage-patterned fabric and compressible into a backpack for easy transport. The hunting tent is outfitted so a wheelchair bound hunter can set up in the woods and maim other species. Ironically the *Blind* is similar in form and surface to the Neolithic dolmen and stone circles found in the Alentejo area of southern Portugal. Using the blind as my "container", I move through the 5000 year-old

Cromeleque dos Almendres (stone circle), the Anta Grande do Zambujeiro (dolmen), up the stairwells of a 16th century abandoned Renaissance convent, and through an abandoned pasta factory.

I hope I've successfully backed you forwards to the present state of *Global Feminisms* and prepared us historically for a discussion of the Nordic performative videos we are seeing at this conference. In many instances these works also use irony, humor autobiographical content, collaborative methods and new media and technologies to critique the cultural construction of gender, identity, race, socio-economic status and issues of power. Perhaps the embracing, and sometimes the simultaneous rejection, of popular culture and mass media forms marks one of the several major differences between the video work of the Women's Art Movement of the 1970's and the contemporary Nordic work we discussing here .

I think a further discussion of these historical referents with the Nordic artists themselves and you, the audience, will reveal much more than my analysis, however. At this point, then, I will leave you with this image and open my presentation up to audience questions and discussion.