



Laura Castagnini
Why aren't more men curated
into contemporary feminist
art exhibitions?

In recent years there has been a resurgence of 'women only' contemporary feminist art exhibitions worldwide. In Switzerland, *It's Time for Action (There's No Option) About Feminism* (Migros Museum, 2006) exhibited nine women including Patty Chang hacking off her 'melon' breasts, while in the United States, *Global Feminisms* (Brooklyn Museum, 2007) presented work by over eighty female artists including Emily Jacir's shaky footage of her daily border crossings between Palestine and Israel. Locally, *A Time Like This* (VCA Margaret Lawrence Gallery, 2008) showed eight female artists including Lorraine Connelly-Northey who presented a pair of high heels made from steel and barbed wire. Even the exhibition this essay accompanies, *The View From Here: 19 Perspectives on Feminism* (West Space, 2010), includes nineteen female perspectives without a single male voice to be heard.

This essay argues that the curatorial decision to exhibit *female* artists in order to present contemporary feminist art ignores the wider aesthetic contribution that feminism made to twentieth century art history. By excluding male artists, the 'women only' model creates a feminist art history based solely on gender politics, rather than aesthetics. Such exhibitions often interrogate the political and historical implications of feminism, sparking furious debate about whether feminism is still relevant. They illustrate early feminist politics, questioning the continued under-representation of women artists within art institutions, highlighting gender inequality within the workplace, and looping art and politics into a delicious, tangled mess. Yet we must remember that early feminist art did more than illustrate politics; it introduced previously ignored subject matter, such as abjection, motherhood, female desire and gender inequality, into mainstream art.

'Para-feminism' is a way of thinking which, as defined by Amelia Jones, "polemically...argue[s] for the explicit rejection of the tendency within dominant strands of second wave feminism to assume a normative gendered subject."¹ The discourse of 'para-feminism' follows a particular strand of early feminism that worked to dismantle reductive gender binaries because it considered the structure of gender itself to be unstable. To quote Jones, "para-feminism understands gender as a question rather than answer."² Although Jones discusses the work of female artists, in particular Pipiloti Rist, her framework opens up new possibilities to consider the work of contemporary male artists whose work also blurs the boundaries of the masculine and feminine.

Images and characters from Matthew Barney's *The Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002), for instance, are imbued with aesthetics and content closely associated with para-feminism to such an extent that he is often referred to as 'the poster boy' of feminist-inspired male artists.³ Consider 'Her Giant', from *Cremaster 5*, a mythical hermaphrodite creature with legs that resemble a horse. The body is hairless except for an elaborately curled moustache, and protruding from the crotch is not a penis but a long strand of interwoven satin ribbons. As described by Jennifer Blessing, "these beings are not male, not female; elements of dress or makeup may suggest masculinity or femininity, but, finally, these figures are so elaborately constructed that the most extreme indicators of 'absolute' gender are nullified."⁴ The elaborate makeup and prosthetics used to construct these characters place them within a mythical or futuristic framework, creating a fantastical speculation about the future possibilities of gender. These beings exist separately from gender; they go beyond the confines of male and female identity.

¹ Amelia Jones, *SelfImage : Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject*, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 113

² Ibid.

³ For example see Nancy Princenthal, "Feminism Unbound," *Art in America*, 95.6 (June - July 2007), p. 145

⁴ Jennifer Blessing, *Rose is a Rose is a Rose; Gender Performance in Photography*, New York : Guggenheim Museum, 1997, p. 90

An un-gendered subject functions within the discourse of later feminist theory, in particular Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985). Haraway takes pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and presents a utopian vision of a world in which gender no longer exists. The 'cyborg' is heralded as an un-gendered being, through which heteronormativity will be dispersed:

The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seduction to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity. In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense.⁵

The construction of cyborg characters in *The Cremaster Cycle* is illustrative of a practise that runs parallel to early feminist concerns; it references feminism's dismantling of binary gender, but furthers it by creating a space in which gender is completely nullified.

Contemporary artists' fascination with the abject and grotesque body, often visualised through the use of visceral, non-art materials, was also introduced into the mainstream by feminist artists of the 1970s. The idea of the 'abject' body was later theorised by Julia Kristeva in her essay *Powers of Horror; an Essay on Abjection* (1980). The abject is described as neither subject nor object, but that which the subject repels:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.⁶

The recurring use of abject, non-traditional materials such as Vaseline within *The Cremaster Cycle* can be traced back to such early feminist practises. Slipping between references to the inside and outside, abject and object, Barney's materials exist in a liminal space 'in-between' these states and identifications.

It is impossible to deny the inherent 'maleness' present within the action sequences, sports stadiums and scantily clad women of *The Cremaster Cycle*. Yet this masculine imagery intersects with aspects permeated by an aesthetic that was introduced by early feminist artists. Although created by a male artist, these feminist-imbued aspects illustrate the wider aesthetic influence of feminism upon contemporary art.

The far reach of this influence needs to be recognised by feminist art exhibitions. Furthermore, we need to question separatist structures that place feminism in the exclusive domain of the female. Feminism is meant to dismantle reductive categories of gender—not reiterate them.

⁵ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York and London: Routledge, 1991, p. 149

⁶ Julia Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," *Powers of Horror; An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1982. p. 1