

# Arts & Leisure

## Women Artists Engage the 'Enemy'

By ROBERTA SMITH

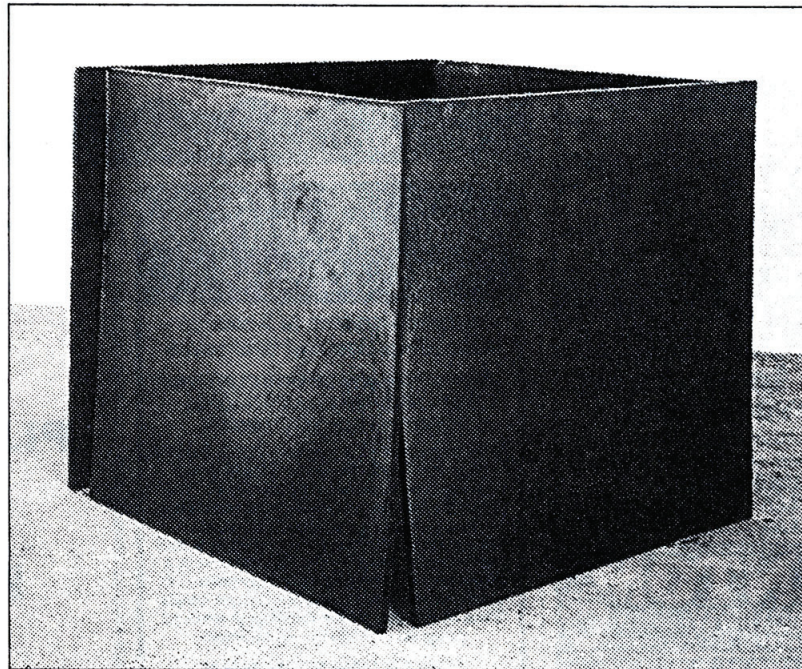
**R**ICHARD SERRA'S "HOUSE OF Cards" is a Post-Minimalist landmark of the late 1960's made of four thick sheets of solid lead propped casually against one another to form a somewhat threatening four-foot open cube. Rachel Lachowitz's sculpture is identical — except that its slabs are bright red and made of lipstick. In case anybody misses the point, Lachowitz has named her piece "Sarah."

This season, the art world has seen a trend toward more confrontational art by women — ranging from Kiki Smith's life-size wax sculptures of battered women, seen at the Fawbush gallery in SoHo, to Marlene McCarty's Neo-Conceptual word installation that lined the walls with profanities at Metro Pictures.

Lachowitz's "Sarah," also shown at Fawbush, belongs to a kind of subgenus of this larger trend — a new strain of funny, angry, feminist art that marches straight into enemy territory. Lachowitz and other women are taking imagery identified with and created by men, some of it sexist, and turning it on its head. Although their efforts are rarely up to the level of the art they parody, they are reshaping the 80's device of appropriation — the use of existing images or artworks — into a new kind of esthetic backtalk.

Sometimes the turnabout is achieved by translating a male artist's work into materials or objects that flaunt their femininity, like lipstick or chocolate, sometimes by adding images that create new layers of meaning or expose hidden ones.

The borrowing can be explicit, as when artists like Sue



"Sarah" (1992) by Rachel Lachowicz—Lampoon in lipstick.

Fawbush

Williams, Deborah Kass and Catherine Howe parody specific paintings by Richard Prince, David Salle, Andy Warhol or Willem de Kooning. Or it can be more oblique, as with the in-your-face photographs of skewed mannequins that Cindy Sherman exhibited at Metro Pictures. Fraught with mismatched body parts and sexual organs, as well as mocking rage, these images were widely seen as the

**Armed with anger and everyday materials, feminists are poking fun at their male colleagues' works.**

perfect comeback to Jeff Koons's pornographic photo-paintings of himself and his wife having sex, shown at the Sonnabend Gallery.

Women in the art world, like women in politics, seem to have made a new connection between anger and power, experiencing the first and claiming the second — without asking permission. This year witnessed the birth of the Women's Action Coalition, or WAC. Started in January at a meeting of about 15 women and now over 1,500 strong, the coalition includes women from a wide range of professions and has tackled a variety of issues. It has monitored rape trials, defended abortion clinics and stopped traffic at Grand Central Station with a demonstration that called attention to the \$30 billion in child support owed American mothers.

Along with the Guerrilla Girls, the small anonymous group of art-world activists whose poster campaigns did so much to raise consciousness in the 1980's, the coalition organized a protest at the Guggenheim Museum's new downtown branch in June because only one of the six artists in the inaugural show was a woman.

This new appropriation is the latest phase in a many-  
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# The New Appropriationists: Engaging the 'Enemy'

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faceted feminist art that has been under way for nearly 20 years, most noisily during the early 80's, when a generation of photographers like Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Sarah Charlesworth and Sherrie Levine turned the camera into a consciousness-raising tool. Except for Levine, who rephotographed works by Edward Weston, these women tended to look beyond the art world and leave male artists alone. They preferred photography because it was not as male dominated as painting and sculpture. They appropriated from pop-culture sources — advertising, fashion, television and the movies — and addressed issues like society's objectification of women, its obsession with material goods and its commercialization of exotic cultures.

In the late 1980's, women working in non-photographic media manifested a cruder form of anger in their art. Examples include Kathe Burkhart's tabloid paintings of movie stars, Rona Pondick's oddly seething sculptures of mutated shoes, multiple mouths and piled breastlike forms, and Ilona Granet's scolding imitations of traffic signs, which warn men against making catcalls to women.

Now these two kinds of 80's feminist art are coming together. Women are using the conceptual rigor of appropriation to create rawer, more robust artworks that question the meaning and power of art by men. They're transforming the relatively intellectual social critique of the early 80's into a hybrid form of social-esthetic satire. And they have no qualms about using appropriation to confront male painters and sculptors on their home turf. An added twist is that several of the artists being borrowed from — Prince, Koons, Salle and Warhol — are appropriationists themselves.

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Sometimes the women tack onto existing images clever addenda that coax out new meanings. One of the strongest paintings in "Painting Culture," a group show last November at the Fiction/Non-Fiction Gallery, was Deborah Kass's "Before and Happily Ever After." The work pairs "Before and After," a well-known early Warhol based on a magazine advertisement for plastic surgery, with a detail of the penultimate scene from Walt Disney's "Cinderella." Beneath Warhol's double image of a woman with a hooked nose and her ideal, postsurgery profile is a second image, of the moment when Cinderella slips her ideally proportioned foot into the glass slipper, proving herself worthy of her prince. Thus Kass reminds us that the Warhol is more than an innocent, slightly nostalgic Pop icon: it also sends a subliminal message to women about their looks.

Kass also makes simple substitutions and reversals. Her one-liner "Jewish Jackie" series replaces Warhol's repeating images of Jacqueline Kennedy with profiles of Barbra Streisand, focusing again on the way art reinforces female stereotypes. (Exhibited in June at Simon Watson's intermittent gallery on Lispenard Street in TriBeCa, they'll be shown again at Fiction/Non-Fiction this fall.) Kass's imitation Salle paintings feature grisaille images of male torsos and crotches instead of female ones.

In other cases, exaggeration is the key. Sue

Williams's one-woman show at 303 Gallery in May — generally, an indictment of the male sex — included a parody of one of Richard Prince's joke paintings. In Williams's version, Prince's veiled misogyny, which is part of the general malaise of his art, was stripped of its ambiguity by her use of degrading Playboy cartoons.

The art of Sylvie Fleury and Janine Antoni flaunts its femininity through materials, objects and activities linked to women. Like Cindy Sherman's latest photographs, their work does not appropriate so much as respond, smartly and ironically, to certain es-

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thetic styles. At Postmasters Gallery this spring, Fleury, who is Swiss, exhibited chic groupings of shopping bags from expensive department stores and boutiques.

Filled with purchases that couldn't be seen because of their tissue wrappings, these shop-till-you-drop displays emitted their own kind of feminine mystique and effectively lampooned 80's commodities artists like Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach. In particular, they evoked Koons's early obsession with what he called "The New," exemplified by his vacuum cleaners encased in Plexiglas. (They also bring to mind that well-known quote from the young Frank Stella, who said of his early, straightforward stripe paintings that he "wanted to keep the paint as good on the canvas as it was in the can.")

Antoni's work, shown at the Sandra Gering Gallery, brings a feminine perspective to Minimal art, endurance-test performance art (like Chris Burden's or Matthew Barney's) and commodity art all rolled into one. She exhibited two big cubes — one made of chocolate, one of lard — alongside tubes of lipstick and heart-shaped candy boxes made of solid chocolate. In an almost chilling process of self-degradation, Antoni fabricated some of these last objects herself during the exhibition. After gallery hours, she gnawed off bits of chocolate and lard, which she took home and converted into chocolate candy boxes and lipstick to add to the display. The contrast between the raw and the fabricated and the unseen activity that connected them was charged: eating disorders and other female obsessions were evoked and converted into a form of artistic suffering.

At least since Pop Art, artists on the margins have targeted their established colleagues. Robert Colescott has added African-American characters to old chestnuts like Emanuel Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware"; a Canadian collaborative, General Idea, has reworded Robert Indiana's "LOVE" image into an AIDS symbol; the Australian artist Imants Tillers has reprised paintings by Georg Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer. And much of the new feminist appro-

priation follows the lead of Sherrie Levine's early 80's images of modernist masterpieces copied from art books, which feminized works by Mondrian, Matisse and Miró by rendering them in diminutive scale and in the more feminine medium of watercolor.

The artist closest in spirit to such ironic backward glances this season is Faith Ringgold, who exhibited a series of quilt paintings that, among other things, insinuated black models into Picasso's "Desmoiselles d'Avignon." Also related is Zoe Leonard's series of close-up photographs of women's genitals — almost identical to a painting by Courbet — in this summer's "Documenta IX" in Kassel, Germany.

Painters from somewhat earlier eras are the quarry of Catherine Howe, who will have her second solo show at the Stephanie Theodore Gallery this fall. Pitting two swashbuckling, bravura styles against each other, Howe paints passages from famous Abstract Expressionist masterpieces as backdrops for images of waiflike children borrowed from turn-of-century portraits by Robert Henri and John Singer Sargent.

Howe's children are sometimes color-coordinated to their backdrops — thus Willem de Kooning's "Rosy-Fingered Dawn" features a pink-cheeked, blue-eyed blond originally derived from Sargent. Elsewhere she emphasizes stark contrasts, as when Philip Guston's mostly white "Painter's City" becomes the setting for an endearing black street urchin by Henri. In Howe's work both styles are made to look a bit outmoded and sentimental, while the children become stand-ins for various groups — women, blacks, working-class people — generally excluded from art's upper echelons.

The new feminist appropriationists under-



Fiction/Nonfiction

Deborah Kass's "Before and Happily Ever After"—Subverting an icon.

stand two old maxims. The first is that the most effective criticism of art is often other art. This work echoes points made by feminist theoretical criticism over the past decade; it just does so quickly and visually, and is a lot more fun.

The second is that imitation is the highest form of flattery. Except for Sue Williams and Janine Antoni, these women have not yet

achieved the originality of the feminist photographers of the early 80's, or of the male artists they parody. Kass's work wouldn't be nearly as engaging if it didn't incorporate the visual inventiveness of Salle or Warhol. But to some extent, originality is not the point. By subverting male artistic authority in its own language, these women are finding a new voice. □



Postmaster Gallery

Sylvie Fleury's "Poison"—Emitting a feminine mystique of its own, and satirizing 80's commodities artists like Jeff Koons.