

Magazine

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The Last Movement

Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s

BY HELEN MOLESWORTH & BARTHOLOMEW RYAN

Covering the years 1979 through 1992, the exhibition *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s* presents works made by a diverse group of more than 90 artists. Many came of age in an era that saw the assimilation of two powerful and converging forces—mass-media saturation and movements for social justice. The show is broken into four sections: Democracy, Gender Trouble, Desire and Longing, and The End Is Near, each addressing themes of concern to artists of the time.

Helen Molesworth, chief curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston and guest curator for the originating institution, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Chicago, talks with Walker assistant curator Bartholomew Ryan about the impetus for *This Will Have Been* and what she hopes will resonate with viewers.

Bartholomew Ryan

How did the exhibition come together originally? Was it something you had been thinking about for a while?

Helen Molesworth

I think it first started to form in my mind around 2007/2008, before the troop surge in Afghanistan, and then the economic crisis happened. The return of an intensely militarized foreign policy and increasingly inequitable economic policies certainly put one in mind of the '80s. I was surrounded by a lot of people who felt confused about what had happened and how it happened, and I thought, "Well, the chicken has come home to roost. If you dismantle Keynesian economics in the early '80s, this is what's going to happen." I first got interested in the period for that reason.

Global Feminisms and *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* opened in 2007—two important exhibitions in which the decade of the '80s was just left out, and that's when I began to feel that we can historicize the '60s and '70s endlessly but can't get anywhere with the '80s.

Ryan

Given the monumental reputation of the '80s as this tumultuous mix of aesthetic, political, and social registers—were there potential pitfalls you were trying to avoid? How did you come to a decision about where you would concentrate your attention?

Helen Molesworth

There were tons of pitfalls. The first path I took was to organize the show based on the kind of critical nomenclature of the period. I did Neo-Geo and Neo-Expressionism and Appropriation and it looked, to my eye, really terrible, really stale. I realized I needed an organizing structure that remained true to what was important in the work in that period, but also offered a way to think about what is important for now. Instead of looking at the material in the way it was discussed at the time, I tried to reimagine what was still vital about it for our present. The exhibition covers the period from 1979 through 1992, which is a way of talking about how the '80s is not so much simply a decade as it is a historical period that encompasses the Reagan/Thatcher era but that also begins with punk and ends with the election of Clinton.

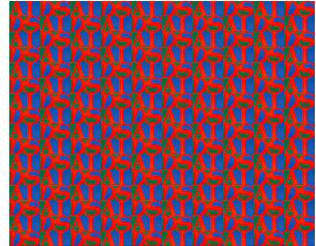
Ryan

This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s is on view June 30, 2012—September 30, 2012.

DATE June 22, 2012

TYPE Articles

GENRE Visual Arts



General Idea, *Imagevirus*, 1987

Courtesy AA Bronson

THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING A WOMAN ARTIST:

Working without the pressure of success
 Not having to be in shows with men
 Having an escape from the art world in your 4 two-hour jobs
 Knowing your career might pick up after you're eighty
 Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be labeled feminist
 Not being stuck in a neutral teaching position
 Seeing your ideas live on in the work of others
 Having the opportunity to discuss between career and motherhood
 Not having to choose between big cigars or paint in Italian suits
 Having more time to work while your name drops you for someone younger
 Being included in revised versions of art history
 Not having to undergo the embarrassment of being called a genius
 Getting your address in the art magazines printed in quarterly list

A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE FROM GUERRILLA GIRLS CHALLENGED BY THE ART WORLD

Guerrilla Girls, *The Advantages of Being A Woman Artist*, 1988

© Guerrilla Girls, courtesy www.guerrilla-girls.com



Installation view of the exhibition
This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s, 2012

Photo: Gene Pittman, Walker Art Center

last winter, also comes from, again, the sense of urgency that the work still has. It's prickly and unresolved, and very little of it is designed to be comfortable in a domestic interior.

You know, I feel like in the '90s and the 2000s we've all gotten ... not complacent, but very, very good at accommodating power. And there was a period when we were a lot more vocal about not wanting to be so accommodating. I think people kind of miss that.

Ryan

Obviously, history is always changing, and what seemed important 10 years ago seems much less important today. It's interesting to consider artists in the show such as Lorraine O'Grady or Peter Hujar—I'm sure there are other examples—who were making very relevant work, but only time has allowed the mainstream of the art world to see that. What's your take on our shifting notions of what seems pertinent now compared to 30 years ago?

Molesworth

I've come to feel that at any given moment there are more artists working than can be adequately shown or received in their time. There is the possibility, and we know this, that they might get picked up later in life or after they're gone. How is it we come to cycle through artists in this way? The only answer I've come up with is that we get the art we need and that's both for the shallow and the deep. Sometimes you need the shallow art of the moment because something about it helps prick an awareness or consciousness of our current condition.

Ryan

Is there anything about coming to Minneapolis after its premiere in Chicago that interests you specifically? Are you anticipating a different kind of reception here?

Molesworth

I am curious about how it's going to feel at the Walker, because in the 1980s, even though New York didn't understand the global character of the art world, I feel that the Walker did. The Walker has such an interesting relationship with the avant-garde—it's always had an awareness of the European avant-garde and its pull in the United States—and with acquisitions, as evidenced by its in-depth collecting of Sherrie Levine and Robert Gober, for instance. The MCA Chicago, I think, has a much more classic American '80s collection. And both cities had great music scenes, which were such an important part of what happened during this time. Both the Twin Cities and Chicago are also filled with young progressives—so yes, I'm curious to see how the show will read politically in Minneapolis.

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