

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.

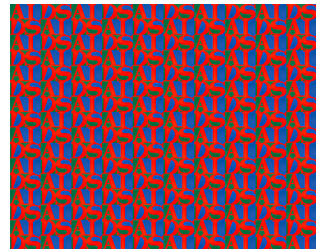
Ryan

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 graffiti font

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

You wanted an approach to the exhibition that was conscious of what was resonating today?

Helen Molesworth

Yes, or what was missing, compared to what was happening then. For instance, much of that work had a sense of urgency that I don't feel is really present in a lot of work today. I wanted people to see that there may have been things that have been lost along the way. Curator Ann Goldstein says of the '80s that it was the "last movement." I think she's right, even though the movement doesn't have a name, but the '90s and the first decade of the 2000s don't feel like they can be narrated as concisely as the '80s. I think that's because of a lot of social conditions, not the least of which is the Internet and what has come to be the fully global character of the art world and of information in general. There's still a lot of time delay in the '80s. Even though the fax machine felt revolutionary, it had nothing on the Internet [laughs]. It might as well have been teletype.

Also, with the coming election, the show feels more and more germane to me in ways that I didn't see coming. For instance, it didn't occur to me that the right wing would organize itself in such a repressive way around women's reproductive rights, but it has, and of course it's shades of the culture wars from the 1980s. And I think Occupy Wall Street is strongly indebted to Act Up [AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, an activist group that in the late 1980s began using civil disobedience to raise awareness around the AIDS crisis]. It shows in their strategies and their discourse and in the number of artists who are involved in Occupy movements across the country, just as they were with national Act Up chapters. So the show felt timely when I first started organizing it, and it continued to feel timely as the process developed. When it finally opened, even I was a little surprised.

Ryan

Could you talk about why New York is such a dominant center for a lot of the artwork within the exhibition?

Molesworth

After *Magiciens de la Terre* [a controversial exhibition of global contemporary art in Paris in 1989] and the subsequent rise of a star curator, there was a move to make a certain scale of exhibition "global" as a kind of mandate. Fairly early on, I decided that I would not do such a show. I didn't have the expertise, and the story I wanted to tell about the decade is that it actually was the last moment before that mandate, before a certain discourse around globalism took hold, to the extent that now I feel it's almost a received idea. I really wanted to make a show about this moment when New York is beginning to feel the pressure from other places but has yet to cede its vision of itself as the center of the art world.

Ryan

Do you think that, in a way, a facet of this exhibition has a memorial quality? The audience is experiencing, for instance, many artworks by people who died of AIDS-related illnesses.

Molesworth

That's definitely part of it. To see the work of a lot of the artists who died of AIDS interwoven into a larger context makes one very aware of how many people didn't make it and how many careers are frozen in time. You become aware of how much time has passed. I also think the emotional quality of the exhibition, which was apparent at the opening at the MCA

Art in the 1980s: A Decade of Crisis
 Consider the impact of the AIDS crisis, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the rise of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, and the emergence of the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Curated by Ann Goldstein and Helen Molesworth. 2000. Jeff Koons, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles. <http://www.jeffkoons.com>

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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