Mlle Bourgeoise Noire and Feminism 2 (notes for MOCA gallery talk)*

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As part of her gallery talk for *WACK!* Art and the Feminist Revolution at MOCA, LA, O'Grady read this statement inspired by Marsha Meskimmon's important catalogue essay, in which the theoretical underpinning for the show's historic statement of including 50% non-U.S. artists had been laid out.

Now that I have a captive audience. . . .

First, I want to thank Connie Butler, for her ability to SEE, to see that there was, and has always been more to art and to the feminist revolution than could be contained in the now canonical but limited Anglo-American-centric version of feminist history.

I also want to thank Marsha Meskimmon for her WACK! catalogue article, "Chronology through Cartography: Mapping 1970s Feminist Art Globally," which opens the article section and provides the subsequent theoretical spine of the show. Personally, I think everyone should memorize this article so we can just move on. It's a brilliant piece, and one from which I've gained many fresh insights into the historic fate of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire.

In my Walkthrough comments I'd complained that work like mine and Senga Nengudi's had suffered from being misperceived through the imposition of a white feminist vocabulary that did not know it's own name, a feminism which considered itself normative. . . equally valid for all women. . . and which did not recognize that it was in fact "white middle-class feminism" and that that was its name. A feminism that privileged gender over class and race and for which "revolution" often seemed to mean primarily "sexual liberation."

But Marsha Meskimmon's article has helped me understand more deeply what was really going on. Meskimmon quotes Doreen Massey as arguing:

"Most evidently, the standard version of the story of modernity— as a narrative of progress emanating from Europe—represents a discursive victory of time over space. That is to say that differences which are truly spatial are interpreted as bein differences in temporal development—differences in the stage of progress reached. Spatial differences are reconvened as temporal sequence."

Meskimmon adds: "The histories of feminist art practice are dogged by a similar, if more subtly tuned, dependency on temporal models masquerading as spatial awareness."

She describes the chronological version of 1970s feminist art as implying "a cartography focused upon the United States and emanating outward from it—first toward the United Kingdom, as an 'Anglo-American axis,' then through Europe (white America's cultural 'home') and [finally] touching upon the wider context of the Americas, Africa, and Asia.... [in] an implicit assumption that the 'feminist revolution' will come to us all, eventually."

In this way, Meskimmon says, the chronological "timeline invitably justifies mainstream interpretations of feminist art by reading differences in terms of progress narratives. Where works differ significantly from the norm, they do not call the definitions of the center into question, but instead are cast as less advanced and 'derivative' or marginalized into invisibility as inexplicable unrelated phenomena—perhaps just not 'feminist' or not 'art.'"

When I read that last sentence, I went "Yeessss! THAT must have been what happened!"

There was this photo of a woman screaming, reproduced so often it had become an empty signifier. Almost noone got what she was doing. Why is she so agitated? She's obviously performing... she's wearing a costume... but what is that banner about? A body performance... but not about sex... who cares? Still, most people probably didn't even ask those questions. They just turned the page and moved on. Even feminist critics... as well as both white and black intellectuals trained and conditioned in mainstream feminist theories... were remarkably un-curious about work such as mine and Nengudi's. I'm sure the same is true for many other artists in the show who have been "off the map" while old patriarchal "temporal models" masqueraded as new feminist "spatial paradigms."

But a new generation of curators like Butler, and critics like Meskimmon, give us guarded hope that things can change, that canons can be broken and... fingers crossed... not be re-made.

^{*} Statement read during O'Grady's gallery talk for WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, March 22, 2007. Later published in Artlies 54, Summer 2007.