Friday, March 9, ***The New York Times***

'Wack!'
The Art of Feminism as It First Took Shape

By HOLLAND COTTER. 2007

Opening of the first-ever museum show of feminist art at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Holland Cotter's feature-length review was illustrated by four works, including *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*.

LOS ANGELES, March 4 — If you've held your breath for 40 years waiting for something to happen, your feelings can't help being mixed when it finally does: "At last!" but also "Not enough." That's bound to be one reaction to "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution" at the Museum of Contemporary Art here, the first major museum show of early feminist work.

Let me be clear: The show is a thrill, rich and sustained. Just by existing, it makes history. But like any history, once written, it is also an artifact, a frozen and partial monument to an art movement that was never a movement, or rather was many movements, or impulses, vibrant and vexingly contradictory.

One thing is certain: Feminist art, which emerged in the 1960s with the women's movement, is the formative art of the last four decades. Scan the most innovative work, by both men and women, done during that time, and you'll find feminism's activist, expansionist, pluralistic trace. Without it identity-based art, crafts-derived art, performance art and much political art would not exist in the form it does, if it existed at all. Much of what we call postmodern art has feminist art at its source.

Yet that source has been perversely hard to see. Big museums have treated art by women, whether expressly feminist or not, as box-office poison. On the market, feminism is a label to be avoided. When the painter Elizabeth Murray tried to

assemble a show of art by women from the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in 1995, she couldn't find enough to fill a small gallery. MoMA has more work by women now, and she could do her show from in-house stock. But she still couldn't write a history.

The Los Angeles exhibition, which has been in the works for at least a decade, does write a history, calling upon an international roster of 119 artists, most represented by work from the early 1970s. But because that history is endlessly complicated and comprehensive accounts of it few, this show is still a rough draft and its organizer, Cornelia Butler, chief curator of drawing at MoMA, will doubtless be fielding suggestions and complaints for months to come.

Doubters will ask whether the one- curator model is out of date for a globalist project of this kind. Others will question the mid-'60s-through-'70s time frame — why not longer, or shorter? — as well as why certain artists, including the many male artists informed by feminist thinking, are absent, and self-declared nonfeminists like Marina Abramovic are present.

The questions are sound, and we all have our please-add wish lists (Lenore Tawney and Rachel Rosenthal are on mine, along with many non-Western artists). Still, I hope Ms. Butler will accept thanks for pulling off the impossible with aplomb, and let the fallout be what it is: fodder for future drafts.

For me the "Wack!" of the title is a problem. It's meant to echo the acronyms of various feminist groups — WAC (Women's Art Coalition) and so on — that came and went over the years. But it plays too readily into an antic, bad-girl take on feminist art that diminishes it and makes it a joke.

On the other hand "art and the feminist revolution" is fine. Feminism was revolutionary. "Why have there been no great women artists?" asked the art historian Linda Nochlin in 1971. Because of a hierarchical social structure, built on privileged distinctions of gender, class and race that gave men, and only certain men, the time, education and material resources required to make "great" art, to become "geniuses."

How to remedy this situation? Upend the structure, and invent a new kind of art based on a different definition of "great." And that's what feminists tried to do, though ingrained social values were hard to change. The most visible early feminist artists were white, straight, middle class. Working-class women and women of color belonged to some other world, as did lesbians, Betty Friedan's "lavender menace."

Gradually but always incompletely, boundaries loosened up. In the early '70s, with the Vietnam War in progress, women could see their oppression as part of a larger oppression. At the same time, in different forms, with different priorities, feminism, often assumed to be a Western phenomenon, was developing in truly radical ways in Africa, Asia, South America. There never was a Feminism; there were only feminisms.

How does any show lay out this multitrack panorama? One way to start is by abandoning linear chronology, which is what "Wack!" does, though this doesn't mean it escapes accepted models of history. The presence of figures like Eleanor Antin, Louise Bourgeois, Mary Beth Edelson, Eva Hesse, Mary Kelly, Adrian Piper, Miriam Schapiro, Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke adds up to a pantheon of textbook heroes — a market-ready canon of exactly the kind early feminism tried to disrupt. And certain foundational events are acknowledged. Faith Wilding is represented by a re-creation of the crocheted environment she originally created for the landmark Womanhouse in Los Angeles in 1972. Two of the artists who were with her there, Judy Chicago and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, are also in the show, with Ms. Chicago's mandalalike paintings representing a genitally centered, "essentialist" brand of feminism that many other artists rejected [see photo].

Here, to the show's credit, they all mingle on equal footing with dozens of less familiar artists, some of them unknown even to seasoned museumgoers. Among then are the Indian-born Nasreen Mohamedi (1937-90) and Zarina Hashmi; Sanja Ivekovic, a conceptual photographer based in Croatia; the social activist Mónica Mayer from Mexico City; the British performance artist Rose English; and the German filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger,

whose cinematic spectacles are like proto-Matthew Barney. The overall installation, which twists through the hangarlike Geffen Center, has an arresting start in Magdalena Abakanowicz's 1969 "Abakan Red" [see photo]. A suspended fiber sculpture dyed a rich vermilion, it suggests a monumental vagina. On a wall behind it, Nancy Spero's "Torture of Women" (1976), a set of five horizontal scrolls filled with graffitilike drawings, reads like a hallucinated record of human pain. So, right away, two intertwined themes, the body and politics, are in play.

They turn up in figure painting, of which there's a fair amount: from Judith F. Baca's surging mural of migrant workers, to Margaret Harrison's superhero shemales, to Joan Semmel's elephantine copulating nudes. An animated film self-portrait by the Austrian artist Maria Lassnig is of particular interest: she dehumanizes and rehumanizes herself repeatedly before our eyes. So are six feverishly executed "Angry Paintings" produced by Louise Fishman in 1973, partly in response to her conflicted feeling about feminism as a movement.

With the first names of specific women — Marilyn Monroe, the artist Yvonne Rainer, the dealer Paula Cooper — scrawled in large, slashing strokes on paper, the paintings have a distressed look well suited to their expressive content. Much of the show's sculpture — Senga Nengudi's nylon stockings weighted with sand, Harmony Hammond's ladder-shaped grids wrapped in bandagelike strips of cloth — is similarly unconventional.

Some of the most radical work of all, though, is in video and in the related medium of performance. And no combination of the two is more mesmerizing than "Mitchell's Death" (1978) by Linda M. Montano, in which the artist, her face bristling with acupuncture needles, delivers an account of her husband's violent end in the rhythms of Gregorian chant [see photo].

Another video is hard to shake in a different way. In the 1975 "Free, White and 21," Howardena Pindell plays the roles of a black woman talking about art-world racism and a white woman accusing her of paranoia. A glance at the show suggests how on the money Ms Pindell's polemic was. Along with Ms. Nengudi, Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, the filmmaker Camille

Billops and the wonderful conceptualist Lorraine O'Grady are the only African-American artists who have work in the show, with the collective called "Where We At" Black Women Artists present only in photographs.

The collective, which stayed together from 1971 to 1997, had a fascinating history, though you learn nothing about that in an exhibition that is frustratingly bare of wall labels. (A cellphone tour offered by the museum covers only certain entries, and is short on hard information.)

The fastidious art-speaks-for-itself approach is O.K. for a Brice Marden retrospective, but in a content-intensive historical show with a hefty amount of unfamiliar material it does a disservice to art and audience alike. Without some context, there is simply no way to understand the extraordinary career of Suzanne Lacy, one of the few artists — Ms. O'Grady is another — who deals directly and pointedly with issues of women and class [see photo of Ms. O'Grady's *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*]. Nor it is possible to make sense of what's going on in a 1977 performance by the Lesbian Art Project, presented as a silent and unannotated slide show.

Fortunately, work by other lesbian artists is far more accessible and, in the case of short films by Barbara Hammer, sexually explicit, loaded with attitude and hilarious. The show's lesbian artists — among them Ms. Fishman, Ms. Hammond, Tee Corinne (1943-2006) and Nancy Grossman — represent a version of feminism that has particular pertinence today.

With their insistence on experiencing gender — along, one must hope, with race and class — as an unfixed category, but one they control, and their interest in playing with various versions of "great," they are exercising freedoms of choice that feminism always offered: freedom to challenge received truths, to exchange passivity for activism, to find solidarity in diversity, to adopt ambiguity and ambivalence as social and aesthetic strategies. And by doing so, they are acknowledging that the art they are making, whatever form it takes, is political by default.

This sense of the self in the world seems to be second nature to a new generation of lesbian feminist artists, like the 20 who are participating in the brash, action-packed group show called "Shared Women," organized by LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions) to coincide with "Wack!" and on view through April 9. And I expect to find it again in the many young artists from around the world who will make up "Global Feminisms," which opens at the Brooklyn Museum this month.

But this attention, finally here, is not enough. "Wack!" needs all kinds of adjustments. In addition to wall labels, there should be many more historical documents — books, journals, posters — than the meager assortment on view. Maybe they'll show up at P.S. 1. The show's otherwise excellent catalog is crippled by the lack of an index, and its cover needs rethinking. Martha Rosler's sardonic collage of Playboy centerfold nudes loses its point out of context and turns into just another sex-sells pitch.

Beyond all that, feminist art of the 1980s and '90s still awaits a large-scale museum survey, and given the ground it would cover, it could be the most exciting one of all. But maybe this is just me wanting more. As I walked through the Geffen Center repeatedly over two days — the show takes at least that long to digest — I saw a gold mine of art-historical study present and future, and a revolution still, in ways to be determined, in progress.

"Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution" remains at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 South Grand Avenue, Los Angeles, through July 16. It travels to P.S. 1 in Long Island City, Queens, next year.