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MOCA TAKES A WACK! AT FEMINISM and ART

by John Hindman

Spring this year brings what promises to be a glorious mess of an exhibition that reopens The Museum of Contemporary Art's Geffen Contemporary space. With both artists and media from all over the map—and a subject the basic terms of which undoubtedly few participants could agree on—it's the perfect MOCA show. *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* is the first large-scale museum exhibition devoted to the parallel evolutions of art and feminism in the late 1960s and the 1970s, and brings together more than 120 artists, from Abakanowicz to Zarina.

With that onomatopoeic wakeup call of a title, and the juxtaposition of works by artists normally unlikely to spend more than five minutes together in the same room, *WACK!* proffers socio-aesthetic tinder that will clearly produce both heat and light. A sizable part of the Geffen's capacious exhibition space will be taken up with works in a dizzying array of media—painting, drawing, printmaking, and sculpture; photography, film, and video; and performance art, music, and theatre—produced between 1965 and 1980. In addition, documentation of consciousness-raising, activism, and publishing strategies widens even further the project's scope.

While the Second Wave feminist movement is generally identified with the decade of the 1970s, the late 1960s saw a fundamental shift in women's perceptions of their own social roles. Soon, ripples of this cultural upheaval reached the art world—which in turn engendered a reevaluation of basic assumptions concerning women and the arts. The term "feminism" has meant many different things to many different people over the decades, but *WACK!* proceeds from historian Peggy Phelan's definition: "Feminism is the conviction that gender has been, and continues to be, a fundamental category for the organization of culture. Moreover, that the pattern of that organization favors men over women." This idea suggests that a

full understanding of feminism in art—and of contemporary art overall—must necessarily look to women’s work of this crucial period.

WACK! and its accompanying catalogue acknowledge—even embrace—the fact that “feminism” can and does have differing meanings for each artist included. What has distinguished second-wave feminism from other social movements is the simple but profound equation “the personal is political,” making for a wonderfully complex and fertile alternative to the often-rigid analysis of other “isms.”

WACK! brings together important pieces by such iconic artists as Chantal Ackerman, Eleanor Antin, Judy Chicago, Ana Mendieta, and Nancy Spero, as well as works by lesser-known figures like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Kirsten Dufour, and Ulrike Rosenbach. Artists of color are represented—Judith Baca, Howardena Pindell, Betye Saar, and the African American collective Where We At / Black Women Artists among them—highlighting their political differences with white feminists. Moreover, women of other geographies (e.g., the UK, Western and Central Europe, Australia, India, Japan, and Central and South America) and different social, political, and theoretical alliances also move the checklist beyond the customary feminist “canon.” Influential proto-feminist art produced in the years immediately prior to the florescence of the ‘70s will be featured—Yayoi Kusama and Yvonne Rainer, for example—as will early work by younger artists such as Cindy Sherman and Lorraine O’Grady.

WACK! offers fascinating new insights to consider and argue over, reminding one of the great feminist critic Jill Johnston’s discussion of personal/political/cultural histories: “Telling it like it is means telling it like it was and how it is now that it isn’t what it was to the is now people.”

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***WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* is on view at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA March 4–July 16, 2007. More at www.moca.org**

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