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She Demon Spawn from Hell is an introduction to the M/E/A/N/I/N/G Online republication of my essay "[The *ism* that dare not speak its name](#)," originally published in Documents No. 15, Spring/Summer 1999. It is occasioned by performance artist Tamy Ben-Tor's anti-feminist performance on the Saturday January 7, 2006 panel " 'Feminisms' in Four Generations," moderated by Roberta Smith, with panelists Ben - Tor, Collier Schorr, Barbara Kruger, and Joan Snyder, held at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City as part of the 5 th Annual New York Times Arts and Leisure Weekend.

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January 13, 2005

She Demon Spawn from Hell

At times the debates over feminism and feminist art take on the characteristics of daytime soap opera, complete with contested inheritances, angry aging divas, and beautiful young women suffering from the convenient onset of amnesia.

Panels on feminism and feminist art abound, or recur, I'm not sure which is the more accurate word here – a whole day of panels dedicated to the subject will take place at the CAA Annual Conference in New York in February 2007 (I will moderate a panel for this event, "Life of the Mind, Life of the Market:" A Re-evaluation of the Contribution of Theory to Feminist Art from 1980 to 2006") – and on these panels there are a number of familiar patterns of behavior and strategic positioning that emerge, one of which is the considerable reluctance to downright hostility on the part of young women at any association with the word Feminism, "the F-Word." "Various protestations, from 'Yes, I'm a feminist *but*,' to 'I'm a woman, so of course I am working from that experience, but I'm not a feminist,' or 'above all I'm an artist,' crystallized for me that there was no point in insisting that they must be feminists just because they used feminist-inspired

forms and tropes. If they say they're not, they're not. It bugs my generation to know that this generic feminist style's permissions came from, generally speaking, our efforts, just as it drives some young women crazy to have to acknowledge any legacy." I wrote those words in my contribution to "Contemporary Feminism: Art Practice, Theory, and Activism – An Intergenerational Perspective," a forum I organized in *Art Journal*, Winter 1999.

In the same piece I noted the irony that I too was affected by the same impulse, since I was planning a second book, one that I am just completing this winter, in which I didn't want the word "feminism" to appear, because of the tiresome nature of the polemical battles it has engaged me in and because I felt that my writing about painting was marginalized because of my association with feminism. Of course it has proved impossible to eradicate feminism from my manuscript, practically speaking because I often get asked to write about feminist-related issues thereby creating a body of text on the subject. And anyway, like Al Pacino in *Godfather III* trying to escape his identity as a Mafia Don but being "pulled back in," the word "feminism" cannot be erased because of my own history with it and my commitment to the recognition of female subjectivity and agency.

That same year, in "The *ism* that dare not speak its name," (that appears in full below, with an updated ending), I wrote:

"There is no doubt that public identification as a feminist does carry risk. Young women are often afraid of the word, even when they are drawn to the concepts. They want to be at the center. Who wouldn't? And, largely because of feminist activism and feminism's analysis of societal hierarchies, this has become an achievable goal. But feminism is seen as by definition speaking from the margin, for the margin. Thus, by extension, the center is not feminist, will not reward overt demonstrations of feminism. Unfortunately, this analysis of the risk of feminism is probably accurate, but surely a devil's bargain that only reinforces the continued necessity for strong feminist identification and action. And, further, embracing the non-feminist center also carries risk for the woman artist: that the new post-gendered universal of the center turns out to be the (male) universal of the past in which only feminist specificity can spare a woman artist from being subsumed by a male-oriented art history.

One could argue that the young women artists on these panels about the feminist legacy who distance themselves from feminism have been set up to play the role of the bad seed. It could further be argued that their attitude toward feminism is certainly not their fault since feminist accomplishments are often not preserved and

not taught. Rather, women who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s have been bathed in and have internalized a two decade-long, culture-wide backlash against feminism. Also, this backlash increasingly operates in a covert manner that is hard to guard against because it seems to take feminism into account yet is manifested either as a culture of victimization, as seen in repressed-memory narratives or other afternoon talk show excesses, or in the simulation of feminism enacted in the "bad girl."

On the other hand, why is it that young women who are not feminists are the ones so often selected to publicly represent their generation in these contexts? The young women who are feminists are not selected as frequently. Perhaps that is because they are less successful or "hot," in art market terms. But, again, it is likely that one condition for art market viability is precisely to abjure feminism. That also may not be "their fault." But the tools are there for any young woman to deconstruct the hierarchies that seek to determine her moral and political choices and those choices are hers to make."

So isn't it interesting that this year's new young woman art star, Tamy Ben-Tor turns out to be even more venomously anti-feminist and male-identified than Vanessa Beecroft, whose performance on a similarly organized four generations of women artists panel in December 1998 Ben-Tor was unknowingly re-performing, with a vengeance?

For those who could not attend this latest panel, a report may be of interest.

Roberta Smith introduced the panel with some interesting opening remarks. First she noted that at the time she entered the New York art world, women artists were just beginning to assert themselves through important feminist collectives, notably A.I.R. Gallery and the feminist art publication collective, *Heresies*. She herself was not a feminist but a "bystander," yet she was affected by it. Secondly -- after pointing to some deplorable statistics on the representation of women in the art world (60% of art students are women, 15% show up in galleries -- I myself thought the picture was much better than that in that department! -- and 4% of the work currently up at MoMA is by women) so that things won't be won again -- in a quite amazing assertion (and one I agree with thus was happy to hear her say it), she considered feminism one of the most important discourses of the past 150 years, along with Darwinism, Marxism, and the advent of psychoanalysis.

Collier Schorr reiterated the same kind of respectful approach to

feminism that she had in the *Art Journal* Intergenerational Forum. She was raised by a feminist mother; she graciously mentioned that when she was a student she had admired and felt empowered by Barbara Kruger's work. She spoke of walking a fine line between doing work that was perhaps not feminist by someone who is a feminist but looks for "equilibrium."

Joan Snyder described what it was like to be a young woman artist in the late 60s, realizing that there were no female role models, then what it was like to become such a role model for the young women art students she encountered in her visiting artist's gigs across the country in the early 70s. As she put it, lights were going on, epiphanies were experienced by women as they began to unmask the patriarchal underpinnings of the male universal of formalist art. "*Now where are we?*" she asked, noting the existence of not just a high-up-in-the-sky glass ceiling that people sometimes speak of, but of a fake ceiling way below that that women hit before they know it.

Then along came Tamy. My notes of Ben-Tor's comments, as verbatim as my hand can write, are as follows: "I don't see my work as feminist. I don't think about feminism at all. It is problematic to associate myself with any ideology. It's fine if it serves the **weak** [*I put that word in bold face because from that point on you could hear a kind of subliminal hissing emanating from the audience, composed largely of women over 40, as usual at such events*] but I don't feel affiliated with it. My interests are more my personal interests. I don't portray women because I am a feminist ..." Here, she seemed to stumble for a moment, noting that in fact she didn't portray too many men. "This is an awkward situation, I don't feel part of it." She said that she didn't read feminist writings in her theater arts education in Israel, she was inspired by people like – she named a number of male luminaries of the theater and film world – "mostly men, by coincidence," she affiliated herself with her male faculty although there were women there. Smith asked, did she think her army service had affected her in this direction. "No, it's personal. Just because there is a group called women doesn't mean that they have anything in common."

OK, fair enough. Again, if she isn't feminist, you can't make her be one and obviously individual women don't necessarily have much in common with individual other women. On the other hand, she, with Kruger chiming in, trotted out Margaret Thatcher and Condi Rice as examples of how women are exactly as corrupted by power as men when they finally get it a shopworn statement, since clearly these are exemplars of male-identified women (a good old term from women's Liberation days that has fallen out of favor in

our post-gender world, although its practical applicability has not been materially affected by post-gender theory: perhaps one can change it to power-identified and then see how things shake down in terms of gender and gender analysis). A more complex analysis of the issue of women and power (which women get power, how they do it, and who gives them power) is necessary to reveal the perverse superficiality of that canard.

So when Schorr leaned towards her and said, “You can’t say it’s a coincidence when you’re influenced by those who hold power,” the audience applauded, so then Schorr quickly added that she wasn’t criticizing Ben-Tor. And Kruger followed with a number of disappointingly unclear statements: she came across as somehow slippery, more evasive about feminism than she appears in her visual work, which is most often much more overtly feminist than her comments indicated. It seemed above all that she wanted to preserve her viability as a model for hot young women artists who, like Ben-Tor, did not want to be limited by the label of feminism.

No one suggested to Ben-Tor that her vehement antifeminist position is also *ideological*, that it is also political speech, and, further, that such a position strategically insures a certain access to power. It is like stating, in certain situations where it might serve you to do so, that you are not Jewish when you are.

Not a far-fetched analogy because, indeed, the subject of the Holocaust came up, on the heels of Schorr suggesting that perhaps Ben-Tor’s “Israeliness” gave her permission to demystify mourning whereas for New York Jews it might be harder to shake off the Holocaust. Thus, just as the question arises, is it OK for Jews to forget about the Holocaust? Is it OK for women to forget about feminism, as we move forward?

Ben-Tor said, “the Holocaust is an issue for humanity, not just for Jews.” She continued, “if you do work as a woman, it hides the truth.”

All this was all the more disturbing first of all because I really loved Ben-Tor’s video *Women Talking about Adolf Hitler* when I discovered it in a back upstairs hallway of P.S. 1 at the “Greater New York” show in 2005. The piece had the liberating hilarity of Mel Brooks’ “Springtime for Hitler,” and Ben-Tor was utterly convincing inhabiting various stereotypical and not so stereotypical but immediately familiar personae. And disturbing also because of the nature of Ben-Tor’s physical appearance on the panel as seen from the audience, her beauty -- tall, cascading blonde hair, pale complexion, and light blue eyes -- and the contempt and anger she telegraphed in her bearing. In the light of her comments, I could

not help but begin to see her as the Jew who could have passed as a gentile during the Holocaust, or who could have been, or who at least could be cast in a movie as, a non-Jewish Ukrainian milkmaid turned concentration camp guard during the same era.

Oh, dear me, that's not nice. It is not considered good form for older feminist artists to appear anything but utterly supportive of younger women artists but, really, why be nice? I should add that I have written admiringly of her work in an upcoming piece in *The Brooklyn Rail*. She is a very interesting young artist, for the moment maybe even a brilliant one. However, her attitude towards feminism as expressed on the panel is not one that flows necessarily from her work. In fact it is not even something you would expect upon seeing her work, which seems to build on the work of women who would I think embrace a relation to feminism – I'm thinking of performers like Lily Tomlin, Tracy Ullman, or Sarah Jones, although she might not recognize these performers. Looking at all the words that connote violence and anger in "Hell Bent," [Jerry Saltz's recent review of her current show](#), "[Exploration in the Domain of Idiocy](#)," -- "ferociously," "predatory glee," "assassin's ear," "lethal levels," "toxicity," "bloodthirsty fury" – there is a rage there that recalls Karen Finley's early performances. *[The recurrence of the word "Hell" in the titles of Saltz's review and of my report is an amusing coincidence. Before I read his review, "Tamy Ben-Tor is this year's demon spawn from hell, the beautiful male-identified woman who makes sure to distance herself from feminism as a passport to art world success" were the first words I wrote when I left the building after the panel].* The rage against feminism thus emerges from some other sources than any suggested by her work, these may include specific personal histories that we cannot know, and perhaps she has been taught that this is a socially acceptable and advantageous position, and thus it is part of a phenomenon that must be addressed.

So while I support her work and agree with the praise she has received for it, I claim the right to what may seem like an *ad feminem* attack. First, as a performance artist who uses the malleability of her appearance and her talent for mimicry to powerful effect for social critique, her appearance is one of her artistic tools, and, also, a speaker's appearance and body are part of the semiotics of her comments. And, second, *she* certainly wasn't hampered by any such imperative to be even remotely respectful. These women had no importance for her, they were not important because they were women artists. Apparently she had told Smith the day before that she wondered why there weren't going to be any men on the panel – Smith put the most positive

spin on this, that there were indeed many male artists whose relationship with feminism or feminist-inspired art would make them eligible. But I'm sure that Ben-Tor had meant no such thing. She wanted to be on a panel with some big boys, Matthew Barney maybe, not Joan Snyder or Barbara Kruger. And of course, why not? Wasn't that what feminism was all about, getting women to be accepted at the big table, live in the big house? Snyder, who must have felt blind-sided (literally even, since she was seated right next to Ben-Tor) and who said she was rendered "speechless" by the shock of Ben-Tor's comments, tried to be warm and understanding of Ben-Tor's unwillingness to be limited by any ideology, ended up saying that she knew that feminism was considered a dirty word, women didn't want to be called feminists, that even she hated always being identified that way. But that is the whole point of feminism, the Catch-22 that so long as being considered a feminist is a disadvantage and feminism a dirty word, there is clearly a need for feminist analysis and critique of culture.

Most likely she has no idea what feminism means, especially if she thinks it is only for the weak. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright (the *not-Condi*, who just last week was the only person in a room full of former secretaries of state, all men, who had the guts to speak up against President Bush to his face) has often noted that a culture thrives in direct relation to the degree of legal rights, decent health care, and economic opportunities afforded the women in it. Feminism is for the strong in that it works for the full recognition of the deeply moving strength of women in the face of laws and customs that degrade them no matter where they live and what they offer their society. Feminism is also a lot of fun: there is nothing so exciting as sharing a common awareness and disrespect for unjustly held and deployed power.

This is all "esprit de l'escalier." In the spirit of the moment I too would have been speechless because it is hard to fully take in villainy when it confronts you so boldly and to productively say what you think when steam is coming out of your ears.

In fact, there is no reason to speak to her. As she said, "many women in the world are oppressed, that's where feminism has to struggle, it doesn't have to struggle for me." This speech is for everyone else who might need to hear it.

"*Humanity*" ah yes that familiar universal to which women were so long subsumed and subjected. That was the final red flag and I am grateful to writer Lynne Tillman for ending the event with a statement from the audience that I have placed as a new ending for "The ism..."

The text which follows is updated very slightly from the original publication, and the notes appear at the end of the text but are not hyperlinked.

[January 2006]

The *ism* that dare not speak its name

"My mother was communist, feminist, vegetarian, and everything," said Vanessa Beecroft, speaking at "The Body Politic: Whatever Happened to the Women Artist's Movement?," held at the New Museum in December 1998. In a sense, she provided at least one answer to the question posed in the title of the panel. *She* had happened to it. It is of course the third term of her description that is key and that epitomizes one way in which feminism is perceived by a new generation of women artists, in this case quite literally the daughters' generation. In the mysterious way in which a good joke works, it is the word "vegetarian" that reduces the two other terms, which represent major political and social movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to the kind of self-indulgent crackpot movements which now reductively sum up the sixties and seventies. Although it may be a healthful practice, here "vegetarian" is the coded caricature that trivializes communism and feminism.

Speaking last, as the youngest of the four panelists — including Nancy Spero, Mary Kelly, and Renée Cox — Beecroft, who disconcertingly matched the affectless pose of the women in her videos, which ran continuously during her talk as well as during the discussion period that followed, opined that she was against work that "screamed." According to her, such work may have been necessary early on in the feminist art movement but she herself had encountered no problems in her four year career. In response to comments on the continued deplorable statistics for women exhibiting their work — Spero mentioned that the initial gains achieved in the mid-seventies through demands and protest, from about 4% to 25% of women in group exhibitions,(note.1) had never been exceeded to this day — Beecroft stated that she never counted. However, she admitted in a quick aside, she was often shown with other women: she did not elaborate further on why this might be the case. She also traced her interest in the female nude to her grounding, as an Italian, in Italian Renaissance art, with no acknowledgement of years of iconographic analysis of this history of representation by feminist art historians. As disaffected Barbie-doll-figured half-naked women milled around the atrium of the Guggenheim Museum in the video of her performance there last

year, she said she was "always impressed by beauty in women, the ability to be objectified, and to objectify themselves." As for the question of power, she expressed some nostalgia for art done under repressive totalitarian regimes when subversion had to be done through covert, non-"screaming" codes!: "I don't mind even the condition of non-power. I think it's more stimulating. Let's say, in old dictatorships, all the intellectuals, they were in this condition. If it's this level, I like, I don't like when it's against, so obvious."
(2)

The other panelists and the audience, largely composed of women in their forties and fifties (and about ten hardy men) did not seriously question Beecroft on the political content of her work and her statements. No one noted that if we've learned anything from thirty years of feminist and postmodern critiques of representation, it is indeed that every representation serves an ideology, not just those that "scream." None of the other artists on the panel remarked on the dangers of flirting so closely with traditionally exploitative figurations. Each of the other panelists had been very effectively articulate in her own presentation. Nancy Spero was particularly luminous that evening, but even her brilliance was not enough to undo the fact that Beecroft's slap in the face to feminism was the dominant act of the event, as bad boy and bad girl activities so often are. Good manners and perhaps also keen political strategizing intervened. Don't be mean and don't give her any additional importance by taking the bait. Perhaps they felt that it would have been like shooting fish in a barrel. However I suspect that many in the room that evening were appalled by Beecroft's complacency, her sense of entitlement, and her apparent contempt for the work that had enabled her sense of privilege.

And yet, isn't that what the early feminist artists' movement had worked for, the day when young women artists would feel only entitlement and possibility? After all, in the Bible, God made the Jews wander in the desert until all those who remembered slavery had died out so that only a fresh, amnesiac but free generation would enter the promised land of milk and honey. The difference here is that only thirty years have passed since the beginning of the Women Artist's Movement and many of those who first worked in feminism are still alive and not even that old, and are only now doing mature work that synthesizes a broad experience encompassing feminism as well as later discourses. But, they haven't forgotten how it was. More importantly, they still see and experience the underlying discriminatory practices of patriarchal systems because they were trained to look for them in the world *and in themselves*.

The ideological schism made evident at this event has been revisited and reenacted at several panels organized in the past three years or so on feminism "then and now," including: a panel moderated by Faith Wilding held in conjunction with "Between the Acts," an exhibition of works by young women artists at Art in General, curated by Juana Valdes; a series of panels held at A.I.R. Gallery in 1997–98 to celebrate its 25th anniversary,(3) as well "The F–Word: Contemporary Feminisms and the Legacy of the Los Angeles Feminist Art Movement," a symposium organized by the Feminist Art Workshop (FAWS), a group of CalArts students, alumni, and faculty in October 1998, at which I was a participant. Towards the end of "The F–Word," the question was asked, "Where is feminism going?" While predictive comments are probably futile, one can attempt to point to where it has come to. A graph of the progression of events at "The F–Word" provides a few impressions of what is admittedly a complex subject of inquiry.

"The F–Word" included an evening of "Videos from the Woman's Building," presented by Annette Hunt and Nancy Buchanan who had both been involved in the Woman's Building in Los Angeles in the mid–1970s. The fervor and sincerity of a new political movement was expressed in works by Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, Nancy Buchanan, and Nancy Angelo, interviews with Arlene Raven and Sheila de Bretteville, as well as in archival footage of the construction of the Woman's Building.

In *Memory and Rage*, a 1978 video documentation of Lacy and Labowitz's performance piece in front of LA City Hall to protest a series of killings of women, women clad in dowdy dresses, sensible shoes and masked by long black veils each recited damning statistics of violence towards women, backed by a chorus of all the participants yelling out, "We fight back!" The video recorded every detail in real time, no matter how silly or boring, so that a local black male councilman is seen to be both supportive and opportunistic, and local female TV reporters earning their stripes on the street (and reporting back to the, inevitably male, anchors) seemed to understand their own stake in the issues raised by the event. At the end a young Holly Near sang "Something About the Women." One young woman in the audience said, "this [violence against women] is all still happening but there seems to be more silence." The power of group action, the power of anger informed by facts, and the total sincerity of the participants burned through any cynicism that the contemporary media–savvy audience might have brought to a retrospective viewing of its traces.

Another powerful work was a fictional video from 1977, *On Joining the Order* by Nancy Angelo. A woman's voice tells a story

of a young girl who can't understand why puberty has caused a loss of intimacy with her father: One night, when her mother is away, she gets into her parents' bed, waits for her father to stumble home in a drunken haze, and lets him have sex with her, thinking it's his wife, her mother. When he awakens and realizes what he has done, he turns his face away and weeps. The mother returns, they all have breakfast, and nothing is said. The narrative is told so that it seems like a true story yet with the strange pace and eerie plotting of a folktale. Although the topic of incest is incendiary, the story here is undidactic and morally ambiguous: it isn't clear who is more culpable, the girl who slipped into her father's bed, or the father who had distanced himself from her precisely because of his fear of incestuous intimacies.

While the quality of the black and white video now seems primitive, the aural narrative was juxtaposed with astonishingly effective metaphoric rather than illustrative imagery. No people were pictured; during much of the tale, fingers of what looked like a woman's hand stroke a rose suspended in clear gel. The slow manipulation of the rose in this primal goo as visual accompaniment to a narrative of incest seems like a perfect example of what early feminist art in the United States sought: visual art that would depict and embody sexuality as experienced by the woman as subject. In this case one intuited, as it turns out correctly, a lesbian erotics.

At the end of this evening it seemed that "**The seventies ROCK!**" Yet two themes shadowed the presentation: both Hunt and Buchanan expressed gratitude that anyone was interested in what they had been involved with so many years ago. More tragically, from a historical point of view, the material we were watching had almost just been lost: Hunt, after safeguarding these hours of tape for nearly twenty years, recently had literally put the stuff out on the curb for garbage collection. Only a providential call inviting her to place the tapes in the Long Beach Museum of Art's archives saved this historically valuable material. The fragility of feminism's legacy was baldly evident.

The theme of gratitude and loss continued at The F-Word's official opening reception. The FAWS collective and the symposium grew from FAWS member Karina Combs' discovery, in the CalArts archives, of evidence of a Feminist Art Program, which she had never heard of! Documents, in some cases already in the dumpster, led to the rediscovery of material and events jettisoned from institutional memory, even though it might be argued that the existence of the Feminist Art Program at CalArts from 1971 to 1975 was one of its principle and most innovative contributions to

contemporary art history. Those involved in the Program and the LA Woman's Building certainly had not forgotten and now we were told that we were honored guests. Liz Barrett, a current faculty member and part of FAWS said, "What was really important to us was to meet you all, to meet the people who had been part of the Feminist Art Program. We wanted to create an occasion for you to come and reflect with us on your experiences with those programs and your stories, your personal stories and your art practices."

So we did tell our stories. That night there were vivid and funny testimonies from the women who had been in Judy Chicago's original Feminist Art Program at Fresno State, as well as participants in the Womanhouse Project and the Woman's Building. The next day the symposium began with a panel including Faith Wilding, Cheri Gaulke, Sue Maberry, and me. Each of us spoke in about our early experiences but also about our current work, in our art, jobs, and teaching, where feminism operates in a more complex field of interests. Wilding spoke of her involvement with cyberfeminism, for example, Gaulke spoke of collaborative projects in the public art field and in teaching, Sue Maberry about a recent grant from the Getty that allowed her to transfer slides of early feminist art works to digital form (*but she had to choose only 1500 out of 10,000 images*). I spoke about the dilemma I experience between feeling the responsibility to continue to represent feminism in my work, for pedagogic purposes, and moving towards other intellectual and formal concerns, for my own growth. We seemed to have an engaged but also a balanced and reflective view of the past and, at the same time, we existed very much in a developing present of contemporary artistic and pedagogic practice.

In informally circulated "Journal Notes from F-Word Symposium Week at CalArts," FAWS noted that the final discussion "got bogged down in some of the usual dichotomies between 70s and 90s feminisms which once again enforced a simplistic and somewhat false division between essentialist and constructivist views of the body." This was surely not the intention of FAWS whose "Working Papers for Themes and Topics," prepared just before the symposium, put forth well-informed and wide ranging questions and strategies. But indeed, by the end of the symposium, the still considerable living power of "seventies feminism's" legacy had been overshadowed by a curious reenactment of the way in which it was condemned to the essentialist scrap heap of history by certain aspects of postmodernist discourse predominant in the 80s.

This was largely effectuated through interwoven presentations by

Simon Leung and Juli Carson who both paid particular homage to the work of Mary Kelly. While the intellectual rigor of Kelly's critique of traditional representation of woman becomes ever more significant in the face of a less theoretically inclined moment, it is important to remember the extent to which, in the 1980s, the discourses of which Mary Kelly is considered the exemplar represented not only a necessary corrective to some work from the 70s, but also a new prescriptive and divisive hierarchy within feminist art. Those involved in a critique of totalizing systems and essences seemed to display totalizing impulses of their own: to replace Woman with the concept of Human Vehicle for constructed gender signifiers continues to leave out the more complex lived experience of interwoven biological and social construction. As I have discussed in other contexts (4), the critique of essence also favored certain visual strategies, doubling the prescriptive effect of the new hierarchy. Thus, the evocation of Mary Kelly by Carson and Leung — in the context of a symposium dedicated to the reconsideration of the 70s feminist legacy, felt like a reenactment of the repressive aspects of the discourse and set into motion the familiar miasmic atmosphere described in the FAWS report.

Certainly more fluid movement along previously frozen vectors of masculine/feminine, male/female has opened up a wider range of identities. But when Leung said, "I don't know what a body is," he did not allow for the very real social, legal, and economical consequences that still devolve from living in a biologically sexed body. The pitfalls of the rhetoric of a post-sexed body were illustrated by the question one student posed: "I think it's still problematic, as a visual artist, as a woman, as a black woman, where do I put my body? ... I just want to hear the body talked about... Do we address the body and therefore play into notions of essential[sic], of fetish, or do we not address the body and try to make a theoretical model of the body, but where's the body? ... In my studio this is kind of daunting."

Indeed, how do you deal with conflicting theoretical positions, when in the studio? "The language" doesn't help beyond a certain point in the struggle to visually represent experience of the lived body, especially if the concept "woman" has been so successfully problematized that a woman doesn't trust her own experience. If Woman with a capital "W" was an essentializing concept that silenced differences among women, nevertheless the confusion and doubt evident in some of the students' questions and faces made clear that if you can't say that actual women exist, embodied and enculturated, then women are silenced yet again.

It is just at this point that the graph I've traced of "The F Word" leads back to what seemed so infuriating about Beecroft at the "Body Politic" panel and again more recently about Tamy Ben-Tor at the "Feminisms in Four Generations" panel. For, just beyond the ivory walls of sophisticated gender theory, the postfeminist sense of complacency about the success of feminism is belied by a proliferation of facts available daily in the mass media that point to how much women in our culture are still enslaved to, and sometimes endangered by, the demands of an ideological and commercial system committed to their objectification.

In the art world, the situation is certainly complex — women have done and inspired some of the most significant work of the past two decades in large part under the influence of ground-breaking investigations of gender and sexuality by early feminist artists, who often used non-traditional media (including video, performance, installation, and text as image); women exhibit more now and are reviewed more frequently. Young women artists enter the art world with a sense of opportunity and at least an illusion of equality with their male cohort. Despite the fact that, at the glass ceiling of major institutions, museums, galleries, journals, and academic centers, women are still usually only accorded token representation, one can stipulate that things are certainly measurably better than they were thirty years ago. But what about life outside the art world? Of the many articles on issues relevant to women that I habitually clip from *The New York Times*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Time* and *Newsweek*, among other publications, here are some headlines and quotes, from 1998 alone (the date of the original publication of this essay, it surely could be updated without any problem):

"An Old Scourge of War Becomes Its Latest Crime" ("Week In Review," *New York Times*, Sunday, June 14, 1998, p.1 & 6):

"More to the point, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the new style of warfare is often aimed specifically at women and is defined by a view of premeditated, organized sexual assault as a tactic in terrorizing and humiliating a civilian population.... achieving forced pregnancy and thus poisoning the womb of the enemy.... Largely because of the systematic use of sexual assault in ethnic wars in the Balkans and Rwanda, the [international criminal] court is expected to rank rape as an internationally recognized war crime for the first time in history."

"Hard Times for Strong-Minded Women" (Arts & Leisure, *New York Times*, Sunday, September 27, 1998, p.37): "If transmissions of the new fall television shows were intercepted by a galaxy far, far away, here is the chillingly clear picture that extraterrestrials

would get of the human female at the dawn of the new millennium. She is young, perennially confused, perpetually underemployed and adorably confounded by men."

"Why the Women Are Fading Away" (Gail Collins, *The New York Times Magazine*, October 25, 1998, p.54–55): "One reason that women are having trouble winning the top political offices is that those are the jobs men want to keep.... The number of women in Congress keeps inching up, but there is no House woman within a mile of a real leadership role."

"Capitol Hill: Shoe Show" (Periscope, *Newsweek*, October 26, 1998, p.8): "Impeaching a President on charges of lying about sex with an office underling? Surely it's time to listen to female voices. But when Republican congresswomen held a press conference after the House's historic impeachment vote, the Capitol Hill newspaper Roll Call's only coverage was a photo documenting the legislators' almost identical footwear."

"Designer Vaginas" (Susannah Breslin, *Harper's Bazaar*, p.130): "The way Dr. David L. Matlock sees it, he's the Picasso of vaginas. But this gynecologist is just one of many doctors practicing the latest cosmetic–surgery technique: female genital reconstruction. From remodelling the appearance of the labia minora and labia majora (the inner and outer vaginal lips, respectively) to reducing the diameter of the vaginal canal ... gynecologists and plastic surgeons are altering private parts at the request of women willing to shell out thousands of dollars for these procedures.... Matlock is so busy he hasn't even had time to finish putting together the photo album of before and after pictures."

If you can't bring a feminist analysis to these and many other examples of women's place in society, you are dangerously disabled and this disabling is all the more pernicious because it is occurring *after* Women's Lib, consciousness–raising, and feminist theory seem to have preempted the need for continued critical vigilance, when people think these discussions have been resolved. (5) Vaginal cosmetic surgery is taking place years after the rarely seen *Near The Big Chakra*, a 1972 film by Ann Severson entirely composed of close–ups of an astonishing variety of palpitating and bubbling labia, like mollusks from the deep, small ones, big loose ones, ones masked by black pubic hair, and ones sparsely haloed by gray hairs, all making the case for the female sexual organ as a varied and fascinating species of living organism. While early feminist movements and practices dreamed of new generations of empowered women, those involved could not have imagined women losing the ability, will, and courage to look at societal structures critically or women losing solidarity with other women.

Terms such as "male-identified" float back into one's mind, but no consciousness-raising sessions now exist to examine what that might mean. Women accept advances owed to an activism whose premise and engagement they now mock — *and often know very little about*, because this history is not widely taught. They take as a birthright rights and opportunities that are not foundational but that were granted due to the courageous efforts of "screamers."

By foundational, I don't mean to speak of hard-wired, biologically based essence, but, rather, of hierarchies that may be soft-wired yet are deeply entrenched throughout recorded history. Perhaps here one can usefully look to the example of the African-American experience: slavery was ended by the Emancipation Proclamation and blacks have benefited from laws rectifying previous injustices, but, in America, while equality may be legislated, racism is foundational. Recent roll-backs, also by law, of affirmative action before equal opportunity has been achieved indicate the fragility of what is not foundational. Similarly, while women have undoubtedly achieved substantial legal, economic, and political rights in the twentieth century, agency and subjectivity are not considered women's birthright in the way that they are, albeit in a very relative fashion, for men: rights granted by law are contingent, sexism is foundational. After all, in just one example, the right to abortion granted in *Roe v. Wade* has already been seriously constrained and has been just a couple of Supreme Court justices away from being revoked completely several times in the past fifteen years. Complacency, combined with contempt for the people who got you there, makes it even easier for the forces you thought were defeated to take these rights away from you again.(6)

At the beginning of the movement, women also often began by denying that there was a problem. It was painful and risky to take off those rose-colored glasses, to criticize Daddy and rethink Mommy. But it was a time when one generally tended to think politically and to believe that activism could bring change. It is well-known that the feminist art movement emerged from the civil rights, anti-war, and women's lib movements. Although the CalArts Feminist Art Program and other early separatist feminist programs were as tortuous and psychologically wrenching for many of the participants as they were challenging and empowering, they did provide basic and enduring models of women supporting women.

Perhaps the most important political act I perform is to identify myself publicly as a feminist. I use the word, the F Word. But, nearly thirty years after the beginnings of the most recent major

feminist movement, like the love that dare not speak its name, feminism is the *ism* that dare not speak its name. Students in the early feminist programs such as the CalArts Feminist Art Program were taught to say the word cunt until it lost its derogatory nature and female sexuality was revalued, and yet here we were, at a symposium organized to honor their legacy, yet its organizers were so tentative that they were unable to even spell out the word that defined the movement. It was an apt title and also quite cute and funny, but if women can't spell out "FEMINISM," then feminism is in big trouble, or is it women who are in big trouble? At the very end of the symposium, Faith Wilding got up and did the Fresno "Cunt Cheer." *Give me aC...* The audience's embarrassment, discomfort, but perhaps also *awe* could scarcely have been more palpable if she'd peed on the floor!(7)

My own basic definition of feminism is perhaps a nineteenth-century one: that women are still, despite major changes, not seen as intrinsically having equal agency and subjectivity, but, rather, are most valued for their sexuality as a commodity. Culture, both in the capitalist first world and in the recesses of dusty villages of the third world, is still intent on the objectification of women. Paradoxically, because it is such a silenced area, the story of women's experiences of their own lives and bodies is a rich one, largely untapped in the larger scope of the history of civilization.(8) "The Body Politic" and the "F- Word" symposia revealed disturbing examples of how easily and quickly even recent, self-consciously historical, contributions of women are lost.

There is no doubt that public identification as a feminist does carry risk. Young women are often afraid of the word, even when they are drawn to the concepts. They want to be at the center. Who wouldn't? And, largely because of feminist activism and feminism's analysis of societal hierarchies, this has become an achievable goal. But feminism is seen as by definition speaking from the margin, for the margin. Thus, by extension, the center is not feminist, will not reward overt demonstrations of feminism. Unfortunately, this analysis of the risk of feminism is probably accurate, but surely a devil's bargain that only reinforces the continued necessity for strong feminist identification and action. And, further, embracing the non-feminist center also carries risk for the woman artist: that the new post-gendered universal of the center turns out to be the (male) universal of the past in which only feminist specificity can spare a woman artist from being subsumed by a male-oriented art history.

One could argue that the young women artists on these panels

about the feminist legacy who distance themselves from feminism have been set up to play the role of the bad seed. It could further be argued that their attitude toward feminism is certainly not their fault since feminist accomplishments are often not preserved and not taught. Rather, women who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s have been bathed in and have internalized a two decade-long, culture-wide backlash against feminism. Also, this backlash increasingly operates in a covert manner that is hard to guard against because it seems to take feminism into account yet is manifested either as a culture of victimization, as seen in repressed-memory narratives or other afternoon talk show excesses, or in the simulation of feminism enacted in the "bad girl."

On the other hand, why is it that young women who are not feminists are the ones so often selected to publicly represent their generation in these contexts? The young women who are feminists are not selected as frequently. Perhaps that is because they are less successful or "hot," in art market terms. But, again, it is likely that one condition for art market viability is precisely to abjure feminism. In my extemporaneous remarks at the opening reception of the "F-Word symposium, I asked a blunt and overdetermined question: "Young woman, if given the choice of identifying yourself as a feminist or having a show at Deitch Projects in New York, what would you do?" So I was interested by the first sentence of Inka Essenhigh's artist's statement for her first show at Deitch Projects (January 7-February 13, 1999): "My paintings present an apolitical world." This seemed unnecessary, not to say egregious. To say the work is apolitical is in itself a political statement since it calls up the discourse of the political: if the work is truly apolitical, why bring up the term? Additionally, the statement was at cross-purposes to the work: the paintings depicted little dick-headed homunculi engaged in samurai-like behavior disposed along dynamic vectors on strongly colored enameled flat backgrounds. Given the undercurrent of violence in the work, it would seem that the artist's statement was intended as a passport into Deitch Projects — "let me in, I'm not political." That also may not be "their fault." But the tools are there for any young woman to deconstruct the hierarchies that seek to determine her moral and political choices and those choices are hers to make.

My comments in this essay may at times appear to speak with a tinge of bitterness to discord between generations of women artists, but in fact the generational schism is a red herring of the backlash. I've referred to my time in the Feminist Art Program as "boot camp for feminists" and no one in their right mind longs to go back to boot camp. But change should be something positive

and progressive. Certainly education would help such development. If artists, in the course of a standard art education, were as well-versed in the rich legacy of feminist art as in Italian Renaissance art and other major movements in art history, they could not fail to be inspired.

I recently showed a class of mostly women art students the *Womanhouse* film by Johanna Demetrakas (1972) and *Reclaiming the Body: Feminist Art in America*, a video documentary by Michael Blackwood done at the time of the *Bad Girl* exhibition at the New Museum (1994). During even the most primitive agit-prop performances of *Womanhouse*, such as the Punch and Judy-like "Cock and Cunt Play," their faces were agape, riveted to the screen. A few said that those two hours provided the most concerted information about women artists they'd ever been exposed to (they were seniors in art school). And at least one immediately put the inspiration to good use, sitting in the front row of a critique with a fake penis conspicuously strapped under a very short skirt and shocking her good-natured but slightly antediluvian male sculpture teacher!

Not only is my students' interest heartening, but also, at every panel discussion I've been to where the generations seem pitted against each other and a Vanessa Beecroft is in evidence, there is always another young woman who speaks up for feminism. When Beecroft described her mother, the audience laughed: in particular, a young German woman in the front row burst into hysterical laughter. Clearly, Beecroft's description had rung a bell! However, when she spoke, her comments were quite different than her laughter would have indicated. She told the audience that she was never actively in a women artists group but "I say I'm a feminist and I'm very glad that women fight before I came." Addressing herself to Nancy Spero, she said "I'm not as full of hope that you are, Nancy.... I feel there is a kind of backlash. A lot of women I talk to in school, they don't want to hear the word feminism, and they say no we don't want to deal with it and for them it's something very closed up. There is some bad part about feminism, where the women fighters weren't aware of, they have one way to look and that's why I like that you said there are a lot of different ways of feminism."

At the end of the January 2006 panel "Feminisms' in Four Generations," in response to Tamy Ben - Tor's comment that she was interested in human beings not women, just like the Holocaust was issue for humanity not just the Jews, writer Lynne Tillman made a statement from the audience. She said that feminism is not just about specific bodies. Yes, she said, Condi Rice is a woman,

but a male-identified one. Feminism is a critique of power. Ben - Tor spoke of "humanity" but feminism was part of the discursive process that had put into question what is "humanity"? w Who is allowed to be called "human"?

I was grateful to Tillman for the content and the clarity of her statement because the word "humanity" had rung an alert bell because of a particular, personal association it has for me , in relation to the word "feminism." A little man who taught art had once told me, when I was 20 years old, that I would never be an artist. A few years after that, when I was still quite young but had in fact become an artist in the world, I called him on this as something outrageous to say to a young person. He thought about it and a few weeks later said that he had never said that I would never be an *artist*, he'd said that I would never be a *painter*! Many years passed and I ran into him again. "How are you?" he asked. "Still fighting the good fight?" I puzzled over that cryptic question. Later that same summer, I found myself near this man again at a beachside memorial party for a recently deceased, much loved artist. "Still fighting the good fight?" he asked again. "The Feminist fight?" Ah, the truth was revealed. A short man with an Hercule Poirot mustache, he waved at the ocean and announced, "*I'm* interested in humanity." "I am too," I began to say, after having for a minute stared out at the water as if to see all the humanity floating about in it, "but I feel I have to start with a group that I am part of most closely..." but I stopped trying to engage him in a real conversation when I realized that he wasn't listening to me.

Singular or plural, feminism nonetheless, the word spelled out in full. The legacy must be preserved, political analyses of women's societal positions continued, and that may take some continued "screaming," but it is not a matter of one generation's bitterness, but of everybody's business.

Notes:

1. In an interview in the mid-1990s, Lucy Lippard spoke about the Ad Hoc Women Artists Committee, started in New York in 1970 "primarily in order to protest the paucity of women in the *Whitney Annuals*." She says, "We started the Women's Registry [in 1970] so when institutions told us, as they constantly did, 'there are no women who ... (make sculpture, do conceptual art, work with technology, etc. etc.)', we could throw a huge batch of images of them and say, 'Oh yeah? Take a look at this.'" "From Eccentric to Sensuous Abstraction: An Interview with Lucy Lippard," *MoreThan Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70s*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Susan L. Stoops (Waltham, MA: Rose Art

Museum, Brandeis University, 1996) 27. In 1989, two posters by the Guerrilla Girls, "WHEN RACISM & SEXISM ARE NO LONGER FASHIONABLE, WHAT WILL YOUR ART COLLECTION BE WORTH?" and "GUERRILLA GIRLS' IDENTITIES EXPOSED!" listed hundreds of women artists in response to similar "there are no women who" statements from major figures in the art world, proving that not much had changed in two decades, despite everything that seemed to have changed: cf. Mira Schor, "Just the Facts, Ma'am," *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 87–97.

2. The quotations of Beecroft's comments as well as other quotes are transcribed from my audiotapes of the panels discussed in this essay and I have chosen to faithfully record the words of people for whom English is a second language. In addition, in some cases I include verbatim quotes from people whose names I was not able to learn.

3. These included "Women and Abstraction," moderated by Elke Solomon, "Realities of Feminism &/or Activist Practice," moderated by me, with comments by Johanna Drucker, Elizabeth Hess, and Peggy Phelan, "Committing *Heresies*: Ideas and Battles Behind a Unique women's magazine," and also a roundtable on WAC (Women's Action Coalition).

4. Cf. "Medusa Redux: Ida Applebroog and the Spaces of Postmodernity," in Mira Schor, *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 67–81, and "Backlash and Appropriation," in *The Power of Feminist Art*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 248–63. 5. More recently it was notable that in cases such as that of Teri Schiavo, there was no public feminist analysis in the major media although it was called for on many levels. This is perhaps more a problem of the media but it is reflective of the lack of pressure from society for such analysis to be heard.

6. A January 22, 1999 National Public Radio "Morning Edition" report on abortion rights (on the 26th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*) noted the high median age (around 55) of women actively involved in fighting for the maintenance of abortion rights against substantially successful efforts to restrain access by anti-abortion forces. A recent poster aimed at young women was described as representing a young woman, covered with tattoos and adorned with nose-rings. The caption addressed both the complacency of younger women and their transposition of feminist values into "bad girl" or "bad grrl" rebellion: "You think you can do anything you

want with your body. Well, think again."

7. To be fair to the people in the room at the time, Fresno and CalArts Feminist Program member Chris Rush regaled the opening night audience with the story of Judy Chicago dragging the "Cunt Cheerleaders" to the Fresno airport in 1971 to greet T–Grace Atkinson, who, according to Rush, was not amused by this display! On the other hand, in a *Rashomon*–like manner, Faith Wilding "remembers that Ti–Grace thought they had a lot of balls" while in *Through the Flower*, Judy Chicago recounts the same story but says that the "Cuntleaders" did this "much to my chagrin. Although I loved it, I also felt embarrassed at such overt expression of womanly pride." (Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My struggle as a Woman Artist* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975) 107.

8. This has been said better before me. I return often in my mind to this quote from *A Room of One's Own*: "One goes into the room — but the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room. The rooms differ so completely; they are calm or thunderous; open on to the sea, or, on the contrary, give on to a prison yard; are hung with washing; or alive with opals and silks; are hard as horsehair or soft as feathers — one has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one's face. How could it be otherwise? For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated with their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics." Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1957) 91.

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