

Female troubles: females troubling the public sphere

Once upon a time, the women busily inventing feminism (the recent version, of 30 years ago) spent little effort on the questions of physical space. They were more focused on creating a new space, a spatiotemporal imaginary with real “rooms of one’s own,” collective and separate, than in engaging with the dominant architectural and urban planning orthodoxies. The discourse of “space” as a shared discursive realm was no doubt borrowed from psychologists of the time and allowed for the group activity of consciousness raising to occur. But to do this—at least before the age of the internet—you need new interior spaces, even if they are simply the olds ones repurposed and envisioned. Yet women in the 60s and 70s were both taking to the streets and demanding safe streets; eventually some discovered the researches by other women on collective housing, collective kitchens, and other services, and in fact more and more women were studying architecture. The great work of critique of city planning, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, was written by a Manhattan “housewife,” Jane Jacobs in 1961, not in response to the women’s movement but perhaps representing the same pressure from “below” of women to intervene in public debates about the conduct of urban life with respect to the built environment. Jacobs’s book argues for the small-scale essentially face-to-face neighborhood space, with its multiple businesses and population mixtures and flows (which we might recognize as the space of the housewife), as that which gives a city vibrant life.

Artists, particularly in Europe, have focused on questions of the city for much of the 20th century, but this preoccupation did not seem to gain much purchase in the US art worlds. Instead, conceptual art helped bring on “earth art,” in which men carved out large chunks of real estate in emphatically urban areas (the exceptions being Gordon Matta-Clark, who cut holes out of decrepit urban structures, and Dan Graham, who focused primarily on suburbia, then under construction: a postwar phenomenon). The (Paris-based) Situationist critique of the city was far less influential (in the art world than their critique on the media and their central position in the “society of the spectacle.” My own interest in domestic spaces (primarily interiors) was spurred by the way in which they were

represented in the media, as naturalized environments. Like most feminist artists, I regarded an engagement with architecture per se as excessively, inescapably, masculinist, since feminists centered their interest on the social processes occurring within those male-built, male-imaged, and male-developed environments. If anything, the feminists I knew were more concerned with far-away real-estate and territorial struggles— that is, the war in Vietnam—which had to be brought to a halt, than with rethinking architecture, though there were efforts at collective living arrangements of various sorts. I remark with a note of irony, my own artistic practice in this regard: I was intent on situating images of the war “over there” within the confines of our domestic households and other spaces— both through their depiction in the media. More on this later.

Simultaneously, I was considering the kitchen as the site of production, primarily the labor of women (often unpaid) and other “others,” including children and domestic servants. The kitchen, like the coffee shop, became a stage set (built for television or for literary production) on which to act out the differential roles and expectations of women in US culture. Women were forced to come onto the stage of home-based production and entertainment when, in the postwar suburban, “open plan,” kitchens lost their walls that had shielded them from the living room, or lounge, just as the middle-class housewife had definitively lost her servants, including the cook. Now women were made schizophrenic, having to be both producers and consumers of culinary largesse, at one and the same moment, often in the company of dinner guests. This interested me enormously and led me to do several works considering the various roles played by women of different classes and races in relation to food production and service.

Despite my interest in territoriality (including works like the Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems), questions of housing as a broad social, and urban, issue did not engage me as an artist at that time; I was confident I would never turn to a consideration of housing in my work. My self-prophecy was soon rendered incorrect. In the 1980s I became increasingly interested in the new processes of gentrification and the death and life of decrepit urban neighborhoods in the US and elsewhere. Even more worrisome was the fate of the poor, who had “held” these territories during the better part of the 19th and 20th centuries, and even more so during the great suburban migration out of the cities into the new suburbs in the postwar period—an internal exodus facilitated by national

highway construction intended to serve military mobilization, and by low-cost loans to war veterans. These new American suburbs were advertised as fulfilling the American dream for the children and grandchildren of immigrants, offering youngsters a clean play to play and thrive in healthy air and away from the physical and racial and class contamination of the cities. I soon also became interested in those spaces of transportation, including roads and airports, and the decidedly local, proletarian, urban mode of transportation, namely, urban undergrounds/subways/metros. These places of public appearance and transit function extraordinarily differently from each other in terms of social mixing and hierarchies, gender inclusion, architectural address, and so on.

Yet war and its destruction of people, environments, and cultural spaces have continued to occupy my attention, not out of choice but because of the press of events.

In 1993, I was invited by a museum in Graz to participate in an exhibition that addressed war during Steirische Herbst, the yearly fall art festival. The organizers' theme was driven by their physical proximity to the former Yugoslavia, with its schismatic wars then underway. My work, called *It Lingers*, addresses some major European and American wars, presenting descriptions and representations of war in 20th century Europe: the Second World War; the (first) war against Iraq (1991, called the Gulf War); and the Yugoslavian conflicts, especially the war in Bosnia and the siege of Sarajevo (with a look back at Yugoslavia in 1914). Images were arrayed in a tableau of descending size, culminating in small newspaper maps of the many conflicts raging at the time of the work's making. Of the four large pictures capping the photographic array, one was of Bosnian women demonstrating in Geneva, holding up a huge photo of a murdered young woman, her face streaked with blood.

In the past couple of years I have felt impelled to produce a series of photomontages of the present war in Iraq, with a mix of motives, from activism to rage and despair and more activism. These works revisit the images of beautified domestic Western spaces, primarily kitchens and living rooms, contaminated by the war-injured, the captured, the exhausted, and the desperate, along with US military figures, and this time including icons of the humiliated, tortured and maltreated body we came to know as the images of Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

Your question about gendered media is interesting. Craft production and other socially productive activity—say, rug or cloth weaving or farming or gardening—may be assigned to one gender or another in a given society, an assignment surely rationalized by essentializing the work under consideration as either masculine or feminine. There are also matters of social status at play, depending on whether the work in question can be associated with artistry and thus can generate products that command high prices, and perhaps also high wages or rewards. These crafts are generally those ancillary to power and wealth, and the arts are a prime example. Media are a bit problematic because their artisanal status is always under suspicion, since they are associated with technological and processes that have been both industrialized and domesticated. Women have been involved in the production of photographic and media images since their inception, but women are commonly written out of the histories, or they are written into its essential nature in order to exclude these media from consideration as art. One curator of a major European art exhibition in the early 1980s (a pivotal moment in the direction of the art world) explained that photo and video were female forms and that thus he would not be including any of that in his show. In *documenta 7* of 1982, there was no video, and few women artists. (I participated, but as a performance artist because of the exclusion of video.)

Spectacle culture is now deeply integrated into the globalization of conflict and competition. I do not identify very much as “an American,” but rather as a New Yorker—a resident of an island off the coast of the American continent—looking with dismay and surprise at the culture of America as depicted in the media. It was a big shock for me to move first to Illinois, in the heartland, and then to California. I had to come to terms with being a foreigner, seen as much like those loud women depicted in strange dramas about New York. The images of “typical Eastern European women” (who are not, I confess, much visible or noted) are of unwilling, miserably oppressed prostitutes, often “sold” to the Middle East or Turkey; the occasional office cleaner or nanny; and fabulously strange-looking skinny, blonde clothing models, mostly Russian). For a look at more interesting Eastern European and Central European women, I would say look at nettime

and cyberfeminism, at an array of women authors, and even feminists... I don't want to get into particulars here.

American cultural hegemony includes of the export of images and other cultural products, which themselves are announced and advertised through branded images. American imagery is naturalized into the landscape of everyday life and shapes the "life worlds" of people as it travels over the airwaves and television cables and on product packaging, arriving like pernicious viruses on airplanes (It is mid-December as I write, and a recent Iberia flight from Berlin to Madrid serenaded passengers with *Jingle Bells*, an American Christmas ditty, and related pop favorites; one can hardly help noticing the global creep of the US's Santa Claus and Halloween through commodified ephemera.) Artists too travel like viruses on planes, for the second most valuable circulating commodity in the art world, after the big-tag products, the art works, are artists (but perhaps those of a less exalted class), who land—lightly or with a thud—on the local landscapes of artistic production. How this affects local production and reception, including the reception of women's' work-at this particular moment , all too easily ignored in search of the authentic exotic utterance— remains to be seen.