

**CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE**

This Sept. 22 Style review incorrectly said that the exhibition of feminist art at the National Museum of Women in the Arts originated at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles created the show.

**Art**

## Free Radicals

By Barbara Pollack

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Nothing in the exhibition "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution," which opened yesterday at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, would let you know that Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta flew out of a window in 1985 and fell to her death (her husband, sculptor Carl Andre, was acquitted of murder). Nor would you know that Lynda Benglis's appearance in *Artforum*, naked and sporting a sex toy in an ad for her 1974 solo exhibition at New York's Paula Cooper Gallery, led editors at the magazine to protest the "extreme vulgarity" of the image. Feminist art was like any other movement in art history -- full of gossip, rivalries, back-stabbing and camaraderie -- only more so.

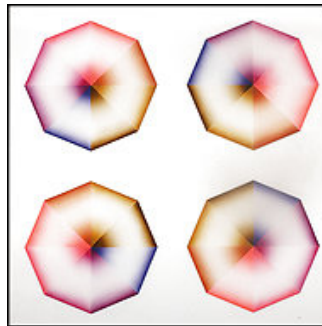
This exhibition, a landmark in many ways, cannot begin to capture the lives of the women who built this movement, or the reaction of audiences in the 1960s and '70s who were changed forever by seeing these works for the first time.

But that is the only shortcoming of a show that is surely a testament to curatorial courage. Connie Butler, who organized it for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where it opened in March, faced the daunting task of establishing criteria for feminist art that would accurately reflect the various strains within the movement, though she certainly could not include every artist who considered herself a feminist.

She also had to take into account several histories on the subject, such as "The Power of Feminist Art," by Washington scholars Norma Broude and Mary Garrard. Rather than cater to one faction or another, Butler amassed more than 300 works by 118 artists that convey the breadth of feminist art, not only in the United States but throughout the world. Susan Fisher Sterling, the women's museum's chief curator and acting director, should also be applauded for bringing the show -- filled with edgy, transgressive material not necessarily suitable for family viewing -- to Washington.

Expect to spend a long time at the exhibition to get even a cursory understanding of the artworks on view.

Unlike in Los Angeles, here there are copious wall labels that put the works in historical context, even though the show does not follow a strict timeline. In some rooms, the artworks speak for themselves. Realist painters Alice Neel and Sylvia Sleigh effectively convey the power of a female point of view, while the photomontages of Mary Beth Edelson draw attention to the existence of talented female artists in our midst. More-abstract works need some advance knowledge of the



Judy Chicago's "Pasadena Lifesaver Red #5," one of more than 300 feminist artworks at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. (National Museum Of Women In The Arts)

absolute maleness of the art world of the period, a time when minimalists, virtually an all-boys club, were enamored of the masculinity of industrial materials. In contrast, the use of soft fabrics by Harmony Hammond, perforations by Lee Lozano and color spills by Lynda Benglis were considered radical, even unartistic, at the time.

Feminist art psychoanalyzed art history, uncovering male biases embedded in ideas about art. Judy Chicago insisted on making works inspired by the vagina, Faith Wilding crocheted a spidery web that took over an entire room and Joyce Kozloff took patterns denigrated as "craft" and turned them into art.

Feminist art of the '60s and '70s also psychoanalyzed psychoanalysis, countering Freud's assertion that women, as baby-producers, were incapable of creative production. So, Joan Semmel went out to paint pictures of sexual intimacy from the female point of view, and Carolee Schneemann stood naked on a pedestal and pulled from her "interior" a scroll bearing a feminist text, which she read aloud. Most important, feminist art asked how we came up with our idea of what is "feminine," then looked at advertising, television, coloring books and pornography for an answer. Martha Rosler collaged snippets of women from makeup ads and soft-porn magazines in her extensive series "Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain." Betye Saar revisited the woman on the box of pancake mix in "The Liberation of Aunt Jemima." And a lesser-known artist with the pseudonym Cosey Fanni Tutti went so far as to become an X-rated performer, turning out self-portraits that appeared in adult entertainment venues as well as in art galleries.

These works clearly influenced Cindy Sherman and many other artists in the 1980s, who looked at identity as pure fabrication and freely stole imagery from popular culture to prove the point. For those who think that an exhibition of feminist art could only be a form of "affirmative action," this show is packed with works that can be considered (only for want of a better word) masterpieces. It is thrilling to see Louise Bourgeois's "Unconscious Landscape," a pile of breast-like forms cast in bronze. Or Elaine Sturtevant's film "Duchamp Nu Descendant un Escalier," her take on Duchamp's famous painting, "Nude Descending a Staircase." Take time to watch all of Yoko Ono's early videos, especially "Rape," a 1969 film in which a camera crew tracks and harasses a young German woman. And don't miss Yvonne Rainer's "Film About a Woman Who . . .," a 1974 work that was a landmark in the field of feminist film criticism.

In fact, this show has lots of works that are often reproduced in art history textbooks but are too rarely seen in museums. In one room, there are several haunting photographs by Mendieta -- silhouettes of her body outlined against the fallen snow or filled with charcoal and burning against the earth -- made all the more poignant by her tragic death.

Across the room, a monitor plays "Thriller," a 1979 video by Sally Potter that explores the causes of Mimi's death in the tragic opera "La Bohème."

The works of the two artists blend brilliantly, as only live art in a museum can do.

By bringing together all of these artworks for the first time, "Wack!" does much more than make history. It gives another generation a chance to see art that was not made for a marketplace or even with the hope of having an audience, but with a determination and belief that art can change the way we live. That kind of optimism seems awfully old-fashioned, given the current cynicism in the art market. But who knows? Maybe this time around, feminist art will exert its free-wheeling influence once again.

*Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, at the National Museum of Women in the Arts through Dec. 16. The museum, at 1250 New York Ave. NW, is open Monday-Saturday 10-5, Sunday noon-5. Admission: \$10 for adults.