



WMC Exclusive by Marcia G. Yerman

The Activism and Art Connection

February 12

With Nancy Pelosi the new House speaker and Hillary Clinton throwing her hat into the presidential ring, feminist art also looks to the future in 2007, while still debating its past. A group of female curators at the Museum of Modern Art, having come up through the ranks to speak today with a formidable voice, turned on the spotlight at a two-day event hosted by MoMA, an institution that has been slow in the past to acknowledge the work of women artists.

The symposium, “The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts,” January 26 to 27, proclaimed a new era while dealing with many of the concerns debated among women in other fields. How do you engage different generations in dialogue? Is the term “feminist” obsolete? Amid advances, why do so many feel overlooked?

Writer and activist Lucy R. Lippard, the keynote speaker, emphasized “art made as part of a larger social movement,” a theme she has explored for 30 years. Performance artist [Coco Fusco](#) echoed the theme in a presentation that captured how visceral dynamic art can be. Dressed in camouflage fatigues and as serious as she was ironic, Fusco presented herself as a United States military figure conducting a briefing. She raised such disparate issues as the parallels between structures in the military and the art worlds and women identifying with conservative forms of power.

Specifically addressing the role of women in the Abu Ghraib torture and interrogation setting, Fusco spotlighted how some women have co-opted the position of “victimizer.” During ample question and discussion periods, audience members embraced the dialogue. A graduate student from Iran challenged the North American point of view that portrayed women of other cultures as “victims,” and expressed her frustration with the “disconnect” of such perceptions. Others confronted the lack of diversity at a symposium where women of color were barely visible.

Carrie Lambert-Beatty took up the theme of the interplay between activism and art when she described the [Women on Waves project](#), in which the Dutch organization operates an abortion clinic on board its ship, the *Borndiep*. Traveling to ports in countries that ban abortion—Ireland and Poland, but they were blocked in Portugal—the ship’s crew transported women 12 miles out to international waters to legally perform the procedure. Through installation and documentation of such projects, Lambert-Beatty argued, a new political art is being formulated.

In a conversation about the need to restructure cultural hierarchies while defying the market place, two of the founding Guerilla Girls—the “feminist masked avengers” who picketed MoMA in 1965—found themselves fielding the query, “What do you do when the system that you have criticized embraces you?” Often during discussion periods, women instrumental in contributing to the discourse of the 70s and 80s expressed concern with a lack of documentation and appreciation for their contributions. Favoring statement over query, they focused the groups’ attention on exhibits, projects, and agendas that fall by the wayside.

In her closing response, art historian Linda Nochlin addressed these concerns, asking, “How do we bring our voices into the cultural mainstream?” Nochlin—who wrote the iconic 1971 article, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”—has co-curated an exhibition, *Global Feminisms*, that will debut at the new [Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum](#). Opening in March 2007, one of the galleries will be the new permanent home of Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*.

That, in itself, is progress.

Marcia G. Yerman is a writer/curator/artist who focuses on cultural issues at the Women’s Media Center.

The [Feminist Art Project website](#) features a state-by-state calendar of exhibitions and activities.

[Home](#) [WMC Exclusives](#) [WMC News Update](#)