

VISUAL ART

Feminism Essay

The Feminist art movement began in the 1960's catalysed by women's conceived inferiority to the dominant man. In 1971, an essay was written by Linda Nochlin "Why have there been no Great women artists?" This gave tremendous momentum to women concerning their role and status in the art world. Photography was centrally used in the feminist art movement. It captured 'real' women, presenting them as they 'actually' were, flaws and all which was the central aim of feminist artists.

The importance of this issue is that the art world has been transformed by feminists; it has redefined the very terms of late 20th Century art: "exposing cultural assumptions about gender" and stressing the specificity of bodies marked by gender, race, age and class." (Art and Feminism).

Judy Chicago is an artist, author, feminist, educator, and intellectual born July 20th 1939 in Chicago. Chicago's conceptual practice focused on female subject matter predominately, creating works that recognised achievements of major female historical figures, also celebrating the unique experiences that women have. She uses untraditional methods of art collaboration and use of women's craft, her highly provocative use of vaginal imagery, and her desire to expand the dialogue of art to make it more accessible to viewers. She would work with art forms such as needlework, ceramic decoration, and glass, often included alongside traditional high art media like painting, which was traditionally considered an art form used by men.

'The Dinner Party' is an installation art created by Judy Chicago between 1974 and 1979 during the Feminist Art movement. The material used to make this installation comprise of wood, ceramic, fabric, needlework, metal, and paint. Over 100 women collaborated on this monumental project. 39 place settings, each commemorating a female historical or mythological figure, are placed around an equilateral triangle formed from 3 tables. On the base tiles are inscribed a further 999 names.

The chronological sequence of the names along the table traces the social origins and decline of matriarchy, highlighting the replacement by patriarchy in society over the ages. This gives a place for women in history which is of significant nature as it highlights their importance. The equilateral shaped tables symbolise equality which was one of the central aims of feminist artists during the 1970's.

The artwork itself represents the way in which feminists began to explore through art. It helped to validate the importance of craft-based art forms and break down the boundaries separating them from their "high" art counterparts, also celebrating the art of females throughout history.

Aspects of Chicago's work are of postmodern nature; Chicago scandalises and intimidates audiences with her frank use of vaginal imagery. The confronting nature is disturbing, however, without this shock-value; the work would not accomplish what it set out to achieve. She developed and expressed the subject matter traditionally, on a heroic scale (implied by the size) – in media that were considered beneath the standard of fine art, working openly with many studio participants and acknowledging their role in the production of art – in all these ways Judy Chicago defied tradition, and challenged the usual boundaries of the contemporary art world-dominated by men.

Cindy Sherman was born January 19, 1954 in Glen Ridge, New Jersey. In her conceptual practice, she explores a number of issues current in the modern world specifically the role of women in society. Her artwork consists of stereotypes; the prostitute, the housewife, the woman in distress, the woman in tears, the dancer, the actress. Sherman utilizes the camera and the various tools of everyday cinema such as stage scenery and makeup to recreate common illusions or stereotypes.

In her structural frame: *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) that consist of 69 black-and-white photographs of the artist posing in different stereotypical female roles. In one of these photographs, she is being portrayed as a fearful, suspicious woman, framed between large city buildings.

The extreme closeness of the image was described by one of her critics as “embarrassingly intimate” which is the perspective that Sherman wants us to see, impacting on the audience in a way they feel shameful at looking. The positioning of buildings in the background of the photo storm over Sherman as if she is inferior to them, a mere object in society-also revealing the role of woman with growing technology overtaking the function of woman in society. In the cultural frame, Sherman through her artwork depicts the way women were exhibited in society; where there have been pre-conceived views of their role. Sherman explores her personal concerns of how mass media and the nature of the creation of art impacts on the role and portrayal of women in society. Importantly, her work encourages self-reflection in the spectator. As Sherman argues, “I’m trying to make other people recognize something of themselves rather than me.”

She is able to make a comment on the impact that technology has had on society and more importantly women. This comes across as effective as audiences of her context can relate to the issue as they had a subconscious understanding of such an impact.

In the postmodern frame, Sherman appropriates, referring back to historic paintings; portraying some of the most well-known figures of art history i.e. the Virgin Mary. A central postmodern characteristic of her work is its confronting nature, exploiting the female ‘private parts’ making it an ‘ordinary’ depiction as it is used so frankly. The audience is contraposed to the issues imminent in her works- Through technology, Sherman appropriates and re-contextualizes the meaning of beauty to confront the audience and reveal a deeper meaning of humanity. Sherman utilises the camera and the various tools of everyday cinema such as stage scenery and makeup to recreate common illusions or stereotypes.

Women have a voice through their art forms that can convey and illuminate their ideas to the audience, which could potentially have the power to change inexorable minds and consequently change the world as we know it so maybe one day, there will be no division between male and female, and equality will be brought about.