

## THE NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART AS A PLACE OF COMMUNICATION FOR THE. “SECOND WAVE” FEMINIST ART WORLD

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**Abstract:** *This abstract underlines the relationship between exhibitions held at Tucker's New Museum of Contemporary Art during the 1980's and the "Second Wave" Feminist Art World. Within the museum ambit, Tucker was a pioneer in dealing with themes such as diversity and how sexual sensitivity can affect artistic representation. Tucker's interest lay in tackling concepts which, for various reasons, such as market, political and sexual discrimination, were not necessarily visible. The museum was conceived as a laboratory of ideas connected to issues of everyday life. The Tucker exhibitions which handled the relationship between sexuality and its varied forms of expression were: "Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art," 1982; "Difference: On Representation and Sexuality", 1984; "Let the Record Show", 1987. These exhibitions were the first to reflect systematically on how art was a means to bring together differing points of view regarding sexuality: the European approach and North American approach. Presently, the debate inherent to art and feminist criticism is flourishing, and there is a proliferation of literature regarding "Second Wave" art practice and criticism between the 1970's and 1980's (Kate Mondloch 2012). According to some currents of thought, the 1980's were characterized by "theoretical feminism": a model of psychoanalytical and poststructuralist criticism, wholly dedicated to language, representation and the psyche. According to both Kelly and Kolbowski, there is no general concept of feminism but a concept born and developed in differing ways and at different times. This underlines the problem of a general periodization of the various forms of Feminist Art.*

**Keywords:** art; cultural approach; exhibition; feminism; periodization

### 1. FOREWORD

The advent of the French May Student Revolution spread quickly throughout both the Old World and the New World<sup>1</sup>. Among the themes present in this contestation was debate inherent to ethics and Art Institutions (Guidi, 1982). In 1969, Harald Sezeeman organized the “*When Attitudes Become Form*” exhibition:

The major characteristic of today's art is no longer the articulation of space but of human activity; the activity of the artist has become the dominant theme and content. It is in this way that the title of the present exhibition should be understood (it is a sentence rather than a slogan). Never before has the inner bearing of an artist been turned so directly

into a work of art. (Sezeeman, 1969, no page number).

A further hallmark of these years of contestation was the strong attention paid to the democratization of art; it was believed that the Art World should not be the sole domain of the social elite but one which was accessible to all.

From this, one can also understand another aspect regarding the democratization of Art, that is, how artistic and museum spaces also had an educational role to play in respect to the public (Brook, 1968).

During the 1970's, following McLuhan's “*the medium is the message*” concept, many artists experimented with themes inherent to *Art and Reality*, and these artists paid attention to medium as a means of both social analysis and the communication of varied artistic forms.

Naturally, the concept of “*medium*” regards photography, film, video and television. It entails a complete turn-around of the concept (...) The

<sup>1</sup> Some authors retain that the *Second Wave* feminist movement began with the 1968 Student Revolution (see: Baumgardner J. and Walker R., (2000), *Manifesta: Young Woman, Feminism and the Future*, Straus and Giroux and Drake J. (1997), *Third Wave Feminism, Feminist Studies*, 23 (1), pp (97-108).

difference between painting, drawing and sculpture should be neither levelled nor eliminated. The term “medium” makes clear that alongside “new media”, classical painting, graphics and sculpture must also be regarded as a means of communication. (Romain, 1977:21)

During the first few months of the Student Revolution, women began to perceive that:

Many young women had their first political experiences within the student movement and in left-wing organizations, in particular the New Left parties. They acquired skills in political analysis and in organization. But they found themselves so frustrated by the subordinate position they occupied in relation to men. There was a pervasive indifference to their particular interests and needs as women. They were “angels of the mimeograph machine” (angeli del ciclostile) doing behind the scenes support work for those (mostly men) who had a public presence as leaders, speakers, and writers. (Barkan, 1985:31)

In this period, various feminist collectives were set up in which women examined:

(...) the sources of oppression and sources of strength in both their personal lives and society in general. Often this examination leads to considerable growth in the lives of the participants each of whom begins to work in her own way to change the system of sexist oppression (...) (NYRF, 1975:1).

Marcia Tucker became acquainted with New York feminist collectives in 1968:

Talking honestly with a group of women with whom you know you are completely safe opened up a new way of being for me. I found out that many other women shared my experience, which was extremely illuminating.

The personal became political for us; shared personal experiences have moved us into the dimension of action. For instance, our group participated in marches against the conditions in women’s prisons, facilitated new consciousness raising groups in the arts, and did all kinds of organizational work to support women both inside and outside the arts. (Tucker, in Pachmanovà, 2006:118).

A problematic aspect concerning the *Second Wave* feminist movement, prevalently made up of middle-class white women, regarded the relationship between social class and ethnicity. This peculiarity gave rise to Afro-American and Latin-American feminist groups which had on their

political agenda not only respect for the civil rights of women, but also for the rights of the ethnic group to which they belonged. For instance, the *Black Panther*, who organized feminine self-awareness groups, followed the dictums of Marxist class-warfare ideology and wished to create their own state.

A further typology was the NAACP, which also had feminist collectives within its organization. However, the NAACP aimed to improve the conditions of the ethnic group it represented by peaceful means.

## 2. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Tucker opened her New Museum of Contemporary Art in a small space within the *Fine Art Building* (FAB) at 105, Hudson Street in the TriBeCa area of New York on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1977. Tucker’s first collaborators were: Susan Logan, Alan Schwartzmaniz and Michiko Miyu.

A particularity of the Museum was that it was not equipped with a display area but had only offices from which to coordinate exhibitions and manage contact with artists and the Press.

The first three exhibitions which Tucker organized were held at venues external to the FAB<sup>2</sup>.

Due to the sale of the FAB, Tucker moved her museum to *The New School for Social Research* at 65 Fifth Avenue on 14<sup>th</sup> July, 1977 with the help of Vera List (Tucker, 1978). This new location had both offices and a display area and the first exhibition which she held there was *Early Work by Five Contemporary Artists*. This exhibition ran from 11<sup>th</sup> November to 30<sup>rd</sup> December, 1977.

Tucker’s idea to open an exhibition space originated from the previous decade when she was working at the Whitney Museum. Owing to her position here as curator, she had the opportunity to work with both emergent and established artists, both male and female. The position also allowed

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<sup>2</sup> The first exhibition, which was entitled “*Memory*” and held on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1977, took place at C Space, at 81 Leonard Street, New York. The second exhibition, “*Four Artists: Drawings*” was held in Tokyo at the Contemporary Museum from 20<sup>th</sup> August to 20<sup>th</sup> September, 1977. The third exhibition took place in Woodstock at The Gallery of July and August between 23<sup>rd</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> July, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> At a later juncture, the museum moved first to the Astor Building at 583 Broadway in SoHo, and then to 235 Bowery, between Stanton Street and Rivington Street.

her to compare and contrast herself with the various concepts and currents existing in America in that period<sup>4</sup>.

In 1976, Tucker wrote to Brian O'Doherty regarding her intention to introduce a new style of museum management:

a workable, serious contemporary art center that would bridge the gap between alternative spaces like The Clocktower and Artists Space and the top-heavy bureaucratic structures.

At the end of the 1970's, great weight was given to *Art Museum Collections* as a means of distinguishing one museum, gallery and alternative space from another. This created a hierarchy of importance among the various structures exhibiting artworks. This did not favour contemporary art given that the artists were neither as well-known nor as highly sought-after and so their works were less likely to be purchased for inclusion in Institutional Collections.

(...) museums focused increasingly on their collections, on acquiring works and showing them, and on looking for collectors to donate or to will their collections to the museum, they became increasingly out of touch with what was actually happening today. (Tucker, in Pachmanová, 2006:111)

Given the then limited number of contemporary artworks present in museum collections, Tucker wished to emphasize the relationship between works of art and the world at large; without this connection, contemporary art in a social vision, could not assume dialectical importance within the art world. This was on account of the fact that only such a vision could highlight this relationship, and the same was true for neglected groups of artists tackling social and political issues, for example AIDS, Feminism and Ethnicity, through their works.

Through the exhibitions and debates she organized around exhibition themes, Tucker succeeded in presenting this connection between the world at large and the Art World.

In the 1980's, when Tucker's museum was in a position to hire a larger number of collaborators, she published the first book in the series entitled "Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art".

In the same period, the museum undertook its High School Art Program (HSAP), which was an initiative geared towards having problematic adolescents involved in educational programs at the museum. These programs, which were the first of their kind in the United States, were characterized by their interdisciplinary and intercultural methods which were employed so that youngsters could gain awareness of the socio-cultural questions surrounding them in their daily lives.

The Tucker exhibitions which handled the relationship between sexuality and its varied forms of expression were:

"Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art", 1982.

"Difference: On Representation and Sexuality", 1984.

"Let the Record Show", 1987.

**2.1 *Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art, 1982.*** In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, the curator, Daniel Cameron, expressed his personal vision and three forms of "Homosexual Content":

**Homosexual Subject Matter:** the manufacturers of mass-produced goods targeted the heterosexual market while undertaking to endow products with features which would attract other typologies of consumer. For what concerned the Art World, the gender of exhibition visitors and those who bought works of art was of no relevance. Due to that fact that the sexual identity of art exhibition visitors and those purchasing artworks was of no importance to the artist, Cameron believed that mass producers should not take the gender of consumers into consideration, either.

**Ghetto Content:** the focus of this categorization was once again the consumer, yet with a difference; both the producer/artist and the consumer/public were homosexual. "Ghetto Content" suggests mass-produced goods and fine art works aimed at social minorities. "Ghetto Content" can be observed in art, the Media and in items produced by homosexuals for Gay and Lesbian consumers.

**Sensibility Content:** this third category was conceived as the sum of the previous two approaches. "Sensibility Content" was characterized by its having no specific public and by its being born from personal sensibility and academic study, from the experiences of an artist inherent to the idea of homosexuality seen as a concept.

Knowledge of the concept did not imply sexual orientation; without being explicit, artists

<sup>4</sup> As examples: Ree Morton, Gladys Nilsson, Nancy Graves, Jane Kaufman, Lee Krasner and Joan Mitchell. For a complete vision see <https://www.whitney.org/artists>.

manipulated images and material to create a concrete representation of the concept of gender using homosexual overtones.

**2.2 “Difference: on Representation and Sexuality”, 1984.** This exhibition was managed by the guest curator Kate Linker and by two co-curators who were responsible for the choice of films projected at the film forum which ran alongside the exhibition. With regards to the “*Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*”, Marcia Tucker stated:

The point of view of this exhibition is specific, since gender itself is not the subject of the show; it is instead an intellectual as well as visual exploration of how gender distorts "reality," as seen through the work of thirty-one artists, both male and female. (Marcia Tucker, in Lincker, 1984:4).

This reality is the result of artistic thinking and so it is a subjective way of interpreting a determined reality. The aim of this exhibition was to underline how each artist reads reality through bias, what Tucker defined as “a visual exploration of how gender distorts reality”. Tucker believed that what an artist experienced helped form his sensibility towards certain thematics and points of view and these biases or cognitive distortions were to represent the basis of this exhibition.

Making reference to Freud and Lacan<sup>5</sup>, the modalities used in the analysis of these biases were mainly psychoanalytical.

**2.3 “Let the Record Show”, 1987.** The curator of this exhibition was Olander. He contacted Coalition to Unleash Power ACT UP activists to produce an installation intrinsic to the AIDS issue. Throughout the 1980’s, New York City bore witness to the deaths of approximately 75,000 people due to this disease, accounting for something in the region of 20% of those Americans dying from AIDS (New York Times, 2001). The installation was entitled “SILENCE=DEATH”.

The installation was a provocation towards State and Federal Healthcare Institutions and individuals who, according to ACT UP, in an attempt to achieve their own political ends, were those responsible for the institutional reserve and

maneuvering which barred the spreading of information regarding AIDS.

### 3. CONCEPT OF FEMINISM BUT A CONCEPT BORN AND DEVELOPED IN DEFFERING WAYS AND AT DIFFERENT TIMES

In the introduction to her book “*Mobilities Fidelities*”, Martina Pachmanová wonders:

How can women (and other marginalized groups) speak so that they would be really listened to? In other words, how to make visible (and readable) what has been forgotten, and what was subdued by various systems of power? (Pachmanová, 2006:7).

In reply to Pachmanová, Marcia Tucker said:

We wanted to emphasize the relationship between works of art and the world at large, because without that connection art – and contemporary art especially – becomes valued by only a few people within a very small, closed system. Moreover, only through making this relationship clear could various neglected groups, including women, finally emerge from obscurity, and the reasons for their historical and cultural dislocations be properly examined. (Tucker, in Pachmanová 2006:115).

The concept of relating works of art<sup>6</sup> to the world at large with the aim of having art become a means of social criticism, according to *Second Wave* Feminists, allowed for a restructuring of the concept:

“[...] system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history. (Moscovici, 1973:ix–xiv).

The organization of exhibitions and the relative debates inherent to a given theme was a means through which the community could elaborate

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<sup>5</sup> See: Nancy Fraser (2013), “Against Symbolism: the Use and Abuse of Lacanianism for Feminist Politics” in “Fortune of Feminism. From State Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis.”

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that in the three aforementioned exhibitions the participating artists were not only female but also male. As there was a tendency to stereotype males negatively, this was a choice which “*Second Wave*” Feminists did not wholly approve of. (see: Ruspini, E., 2003, “Le Identità di Genere”, Carocci, Roma). Tucker’s capacity to include male artists in these exhibitions had a positive effect on the reconstruction of social representations.

certain issues and begin to question the Social Representation Theory<sup>7</sup> of these issues.

Considering the art practice and criticism of “Second Wave” feminists between the 1970’s and 1980’s (Kate Mondloch, 2012) through the theory of social representation, it may be hypothesized that a classification of feminism linked to a specific period can become difficult in that a Manichaeian distinction would imply that social and political history had evolved simultaneously and in the same way.

At the end of the 1960’s, the feminist movement in the United States was divided according to the objectives which were considered as having priority.

As their main objective, the radical feminist movement belonging to Black Panther had the development of the Afro-American liberation movement and used a Marxist class warfare approach. (Davis, 2016).

Radical feminist groups, such as the New York Radical Feminists, largely made up of upper-middle class white women, gave priority to male oppression:

As radical feminists we recognize that we are engaged in a power struggle with men, and that the agent of our oppression [...]. We do not believe that capitalism, or any other economic system, is the cause of female oppression, nor do we believe that female oppression will disappear as a result of a purely economic revolution. (NYRF., 1975:1).

As can be seen from this extract, the Afro-American struggle for liberation goes unmentioned and one can understand a Socio-democratic rather than a Marxist vision<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> “The Social Representation Theory belongs to the realm of social psychology, and claims that social psychological phenomena can only be properly understood if they are seen as being embedded in historical, cultural and macro-social conditions. The concept of Social Representation, that is, the collective processing: “[...] of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating” (Moscovici, 1963, pp. 231-260)“ (Rega, 2010:3).

<sup>8</sup> A further aspect of European and American feminist groups made up prevalently of white members was: “an emphasis that has been picked up and extended in the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, our sexual identities as male or female, our confidence in language as true or false, and our security in the image we judge as perfect or flawed, are fantasies”. (Rose, 1985:32).

These are just two examples to underline how the feminist vision in a single western nation had different priorities during the same historical period.

This diversity of sensibility inherent to feminism was reflected within the contemporary art world. Recently, these differences have also been expressed by Mary Kelly and Silvia Kolbowski, two artists who took part in the *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* exhibition.

In the 1995 article *A Conversation on Recent Feminist Art Practices* Kelly sustained that: “Sometimes we fall into periodization [...] different historical and political contexts produced very different forms of feminist intervention in art” (1995:64). Kelly was working in Europe and when she went to the United States, she understood that concepts born and developed in Europe, for instance *Psychoanalysis*, were perceived differently there.

In the same article, Kolbowski argued the importance of noting that when Kelly produced *Post-partum* in Britain, Judy Chicago was producing works in America. There were clear differences between Kelly and Chicago concerning: “what was going on in each country in terms of feminist art practice and feminism in general”. (Kolbowski, in Kelly, 1995:52).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

During her life, Marcia Tucker had close contact with the main artistic and social movements existent at her times. In addition, her position as curator at the Whitney Museum allowed her to acquaint herself with both emergent and well-established artists.

These two areas of experience gave Tucker the opportunity to elaborate her critical sense; having the possibility to frequent not only mainstream artists, she was able to make comparisons between both well-established and up-and-coming artists to ascertain whether the former were able to bring anything new to the artistic world.

During the months which Tucker spent in TriBeCa working at the *Fine Art Building*, she opened the headquarters of her museum and, at the same time, got to know individuals, such as Stephen Eins who then founded *Fashion Moda* and Alanna Heiss who went on to establish *P.S.I.*, people who were to change the whole concept of museums and galleries. In the same period, Tucker acquainted herself with feminist collectives and female artists.

In those years, TriBeCa was the fulcrum of experimental art in general. The area was home to hitherto unknown American and foreign artists who were to become well-established in the coming years.

The singularity of Tucker's New Museum of Contemporary Art was its creation of an exhibition space in which contemporary artists could display their works.

The 1970's witnessed large-scale social contestation towards the establishment, a phenomenon which also permeated into the artistic world and thus, art became a means of social protest. Through her exhibitions Tucker demonstrated great sensitivity towards social issues, so much so that some of her exhibitions have achieved iconic status in the history of contemporary art. A further example of Tucker's sensitivity is represented by the fact that she incorporated the works of male artists into exhibitions handling the various forms of sexuality, something which as-of-then had prevalently been the domain of feminist artists.

The current proliferation of literature on "Second Wave" feminists has presented a problem regarding the periodization of the feminist movement (Merck, 1987, Gever and Summer 1986) Given that events concerning history, politics and art around the world have evolved neither in the same way nor at the same time, a new school of thought is now developing, one which does not divide the feminist movement into precise historical periods, such as "First Wave" and "Second Wave".

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