

# Making It Impossible Not To: Reclaiming the Domestic, the Body, And the Craft in Feminist Art, 1960s– 1980s

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## Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of feminist art and visual protest from the 1960s through the 1980s, with an emphasis on how female artists utilized a variety of media to challenge systemic oppression. Working across performance, video, and textile, artists like Martha Rosler, Betye Saar, Ana Mendieta, and the Guerrilla Girls transformed their own bodies and domestic materials into instruments of resistance. What had long been treated as passive—the female form, the quilt, the kitchen—became confrontational. This paper traces that transformation, arguing that these women did not simply enter the art world. The artists examined in this study rebuilt the contemporary art world, forcing a reckoning with reproductive rights, racial justice, and bodily autonomy that the canon could no longer ignore.

## Introduction

By the mid-20th century, the same galleries that hung the female nude on their walls as spectacle were quietly, systematically shutting out the women behind the work. The hypocrisy was not subtle; it was structural.

Fueled by the Civil Rights and Feminist movements, female artists sought to develop new visual languages and strategies to confront sexism and racism. This era of visual protest was not

confined to a single medium. It lived in performance art that pushed the body to its limits, and in video works that parodied the rituals of domestic life. By adopting “guerrilla tactics, reclaiming crafts that had long been dismissed as “women’s work,” and using their own bodies as sites of raw, political meaning, these artists dismantled the wall between high art and lived experience. This paper argues that, from anonymous poster campaigns to earth-body rituals, these women did not merely join a

conversation—they forced the entire art world to begin a new one.

### **Feminist Art & Civil Rights–Era Visual Protest (1960s–80s)**

In 1985, the Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous feminist art collective, was founded in the heart of New York City. All around the walls of SoHo and the East Village, where artists gathered, sassy posters that sharply criticized sexism, racism, and discrimination within the art world began to appear. Despite the Guerrilla Girls' identification of their work as "public service messages," the public in the 1980s considered them a "women artists' terrorist organization." Therefore, it was necessary for the Guerrilla Girls to adopt a form never before seen in the art world: guerrilla tactics. These tactics—including anonymous membership, undisclosed numbers, and surprise interventions—prompted the Guerrilla Girls to become highly visible not only in New York City but also throughout the national art press.

One of the most famous works by the Guerrilla Girls is *Female by Birth* (2001). The composition of this piece shows a left-to-right progression of female figures, beginning with a crawling baby and ending with an adult woman holding a protest sign. This visual timeline suggests that female identity develops socially and politically, not biologically. Positioned directly above the imagery, the text reads, "Female by birth / Feminist by choice," essentially separating biological sex from political ideology. This statement effectively asserts that feminism is not something women are naturally born with; rather, it is a conscious decision and a learned response to sociopolitical inequality.

Another notable work by the Guerrilla Girls critiques the art world's internal biases. In 1989, the group visited The Metropolitan Museum of Art to calculate the ratio of female artists represented in the modern art sections versus the number of naked female bodies on display. This research led to their famous poster featuring the provocative question: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?" Although the Public Art Fund rejected the design for billboard use, it eventually found its audience in New York City buses, successfully broadcasting its message to the masses. The poster has since achieved iconic status for its bold design, which features the reclining nude from Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Grande Odalisque* (1814) wearing a signature gorilla mask. By juxtaposing classical art with modern statistics, the piece serves as a stinging critique of the art world's hypocrisy.

### **Martha Rosler**

Martha Rosler stands as one of the most influential figures in conceptual and political art. Working across photography, video, and installation throughout the 1960s and 70s, Rosler built a body of work that refuses comfort. With sharp irony as her primary tool, she dismantled the image of the American home not by rejecting it, but by holding it up so close that its contradictions became impossible to ignore. Behind the gleaming countertops and the well-set tables, she found something that had been carefully hidden: the labor, the resentment, and the women who had been expected to perform contentment for decades.

*Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) is a staple of

contemporary art history, frequently cited for its biting critique of traditional gender roles. In the video, Martha Rosler adopts the persona of a frustrated housewife within a sterile, domestic kitchen set. Through a series of exaggerated and increasingly violent gestures, she parodies the “perfect” housewives. As she demonstrates various kitchen tools in alphabetical order, her aggressive movements, such as the stabbing motions with a knife, serve as a powerful expression of the veiled frustration and resentment simmering beneath the surface of domestic life.

### **Betye Saar**

Betye Saar’s work stands as a profound intersection of feminism and Black Civil Rights activism, where the personal acts as a catalyst for political resistance. Often utilizing mixed media as a vessel for her social critique, Saar weaves together themes of family heritage and historical memory—a framework that has defined her artistic language since her earliest days. After pursuing postgraduate studies in printmaking, she shifted her focus to the assembly of “found objects,” repurposing items like vintage photographs and placing them within window frames to recontextualize the Black experience.



Betye Saar - The Liberation of Aunt Jemima  
(1972)

One of her most famous 1972 works, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, remains a definitive statement on gender and racial agency. Created in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination while Saar was a young mother in Los Angeles, the piece served as her protest when she could not physically attend rallies. In one of her interviews, she said the piece serves as a “transformation of the derogatory image of Aunt Jemima into a female warrior figure, fighting for Black liberation and women’s rights.” This subversion effectively challenged the dual oppression of racism and sexism, as the figure of Aunt Jemima symbolizes both Black liberation and women’s rights.

### **Performance Art & the Female Body as Protest**

#### **Ana Mendieta**

Ana Mendieta was a prolific Cuban-American multidisciplinary artist whose work spanned performance, sculpture, and film. She redefined

the relationship between the female form and the natural world. Central to her practice was her Earth-Body philosophy, in which she utilized raw elemental materials such as water, fire, and flora to explore themes of identity and belonging. Her artistic language was deeply informed by her persona; as a teenager, she was sent from Cuba to the United States after Fidel Castro came to power. This early experience of exile and rootlessness became the driving force behind her desire to reconnect her physical body with the land.

Mendieta's most iconic body of work, the *Siluetas* series, serves as a visceral intersection of gender and environmental art. In these pieces, she staged performances where she would lie directly in natural landscapes or shroud herself in organic materials, leaving behind a documented imprint or silhouette. By carving her shape into the mud, burning it into the grass, or tracing it in flowers, she asserted her presence in a world that often rendered women of color invisible.

As Mendieta famously noted, "As non-white women, our struggles are two-fold," highlighting the intersectional burden of both racism and sexism. Through her artistic explorations, her body became a literal bridge between her Cuban heritage and her American reality: a silent but powerful protest against the erasure of the female identity.

### **Carolee Schneemann**

Carolee Schneemann (1939–2019) was an artist whose work dismantled the traditional borders between painting, performance, and multimedia installation. Deeply influenced by the structural

abstractions of Paul Cézanne, Schneemann eventually transcended the limitations of the two-dimensional canvas. She transitioned from abstract painting to a more visceral exploration of human anatomy, utilizing various media to center the body within her art.

*Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions* serves as a landmark example of her radical approach. Set within her cluttered studio, the work features a nude Schneemann herself interacting with her ongoing assemblages. By applying paint directly to her skin, she effectively dissolved the boundary between the artist and the artwork, physically merging with the environment she created. For her, the nude was not merely an object for the male gaze, but a "primal, archaic force" capable of unifying visual energy and personal agency.

Schneemann further pushed these boundaries in her renowned group performance, *Meat Joy*. Performed in major cultural hubs like Paris, London, and New York, this piece was a chaotic explosion. The performance famously incorporated what Schneemann described as "erotic rite," the raw materials. By utilizing fish, chickens, sausages, and wet paint, she created an indulgent celebration of the body, further cementing her legacy as a pioneer of performance art. Her influence has been recognized globally, with major exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Whitney Museum, and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.

### **Yoko Ono**

Yoko Ono was a versatile figure in the global art scene, spanning the disciplines of music, filmmaking, and visual arts. While she is widely

recognized for her marriage to John Lennon of the Beatles, her independent creative legacy is defined by a radical, interactive, and avant-garde sensibility. Her early 1960s work often sought to dismantle the barrier between the artist and the viewer. For example, *Painting to Be Stepped On* (1960) transformed the traditional canvas into a floor piece designed to be physically tread upon by the public. Many of her “Instruction Paintings” from this period existed as written prompts, inviting the audience to either perform a task or contemplate a specific idea.



Scenes from Yoko Ono – *Cut Piece* (1964)

One of her most significant contributions to the feminist canon is the 1964 performance, *Cut Piece*. First performed in Kyoto and later in Carnegie Hall, the staging of *Cut Piece* was deceptively simple: a thirty-one-year-old Ono sat motionless in a black suit on an empty stage. With

a pair of scissors placed before her, she invited the audience to step forward and cut away fragments of her clothing to keep for themselves. The power of the piece lay in the unpredictable human element. While some participants approached with modest, almost apologetic hesitations, others acted with an unsettling bravado—such as the young man who aggressively cut away the chest of her shirt. By placing her body in a position of passive vulnerability, Ono created a visceral commentary on sexual violence and the objectification of women. She famously remarked that through this experimental performance piece, she sought to test the boundaries of human nature “to see what they would take.” Since then, *Cut Piece* has been hailed as a cornerstone of feminist performance art.

### **Textile Arts Reclaimed as Feminist Fine Art**

#### **Judy Chicago**

Widely regarded as the mother of the feminist art movement, Judy Chicago broke away from the male-dominated “fine art” world to build a space specifically for women. Her practice was incredibly expansive, breathing new life into mediums that were often dismissed as craft, such as needlepoint, ceramics, and stained glass. Her influence extended beyond the studio into the classroom; recognizing the necessity for a feminist pedagogy, she established the first Feminist Art Program at California State University. Chicago defined feminist art as a medium that “reaches out and affirms women,” seeking to validate a collective history that had long been ignored.

Her most monumental contribution to the canon is *The Dinner Party*, a massive installation that

serves as a symbolic history of women in Western civilization. The work features a triangular table with 39 elaborate plate settings, each dedicated to a significant historical or mythical female figure, sitting atop a “Heritage Floor.” On this floor are the names of 999 additional women, literally creating a foundation of female legacy. Ultimately, *The Dinner Party* stands as a powerful testament to the reality that the world we inhabit today is built upon a vast, interconnected history of women.

Chicago’s personal life was just as much of a statement as her studio work. In the late 1960s, Chicago undertook a radical act of personal liberation by formally shedding her father’s and husband’s surnames in favor of “Chicago,” the city of her birth. This was a direct protest against patriarchal naming traditions that pass identity exclusively through male lineage. By reclaiming her identity on her own terms, Chicago effectively transformed her own personal story into a medium of protest.

### **Faith Ringgold**

Faith Ringgold was essentially a rebel who chose the path of most resistance. Her work did not just look at the Black female experience; it lived inside it. Growing up in the heart of Harlem during the Civil Rights movement, her early style was intensely realistic. Rather than walking away from American society, Ringgold attempted to force it to evolve so that America would become a more honest place for herself and the people who would follow her.

Ringgold eventually shifted her “thangka” paintings into a much larger, more intimate

format: the quilt. Her first major quilt piece, *Echoes of Harlem* (1980), was pieced together by her mother just before she passed away. By 1983, Ringgold began layering handwritten stories directly onto the fabric, creating deeply personal “story quilts.” By choosing quilting, a medium long dismissed as mere “women’s craft,” Ringgold sought to dismantle the barrier between high art and domestic craft. Her work proved that the collaboration of family history and artistic medium creates a powerful, political identity.

Ringgold’s practice moved beyond the studio and into the realm of systemic advocacy. She became a fixture at feminist art conferences, where she campaigned tirelessly for the racial integration of the New York art scene. Her activism was not merely theoretical; she spearheaded a landmark protest against the Whitney Museum of American Art. This direct action forced a shift in the institution’s gatekeeping, leading to the inclusion of visionary artists Betye Saar and Barbara Chase-Riboud. Ringgold further dismantled the “white-wall” monopoly by successfully lobbying for the representation of Black artists within the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition schedule.

### **Sheila Hicks**

Sheila Hicks has long argued that textiles are a universal language, meaning they are a fundamental component of every culture on Earth. Her practice is defined by a global perspective, rooted in the belief that weaving is an essential, rather than a decorative, human act. Her intellectual trajectory began at Yale University, where she initially studied painting. However, her focus shifted toward the structural possibilities of fiber through the influence of art

historian George Kubler.

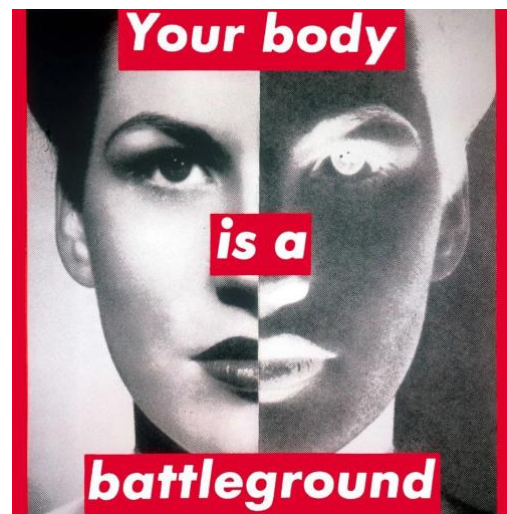
Hicks became captivated by the complex weavings of pre-Incaic Andean cultures. She began teaching herself to weave not as a hobby, but as a way to understand how these ancient societies structured thought through lines and threads. To Hicks, these ancient textiles were extremely sophisticated, as they represented a physical manifestation of human logic and communication. This fascination eventually placed her at the center of the burgeoning Fiber Art Movement, where she redefined the tapestry as a three-dimensional, sculptural form.

One of Hicks' most iconic works, *The Evolving Tapestry: He/She* (1967–1968), perfectly illustrates her departure from traditional flat weaving. The installation consists of hundreds of individual “ponytail” units, which are bundles of fiber that are bound and stacked in a repetitive, organic sequence. The work invites a sensory response that traditional painting cannot achieve. By naming the piece *He/She*, Hicks imposes a human, gendered dimension into the abstract material, suggesting that the thread is not a mere tool for making cloth, but a way of representing the interconnected nature of human identity.

### **Art Addressing Reproductive Rights, Sexual Violence & Bodily Autonomy**

Barbara Kruger is a defining figure in postmodern art, recognized for her sharp, visual interrogations of power. Her signature aesthetic—high-contrast black and white photography overlaid with aggressive Futura Bold Italic text in red boxes—draws a direct line to the politically charged graphic design of the Russian Constructivist

Alexander Rodchenko. While her career spans over four decades, her critique of consumerism and gender remains strikingly relevant because the power structures she attacks have not disappeared; they have gone digital. By utilizing the language of advertising and pop-culture imagery, Kruger makes her work immediately accessible to the public.



Barbara Kruger – *Your body is a battleground* (1989)

Kruger's most enduring work, *Your Body is a Battleground* (1989), was originally designed as a protest poster for the 1989 Women's March on Washington. The piece features a photographic silkscreen of a woman's face, vertically divided into positive and negative exposures. This grotesque split further alludes to the objectification of women, where the female form is no longer a person, but a literal site of sociopolitical conflict. The visual “split” mirrors the deep polarization of political language. The use of the possessive pronoun “Your” in the bold caption is a direct, even confrontational address to the viewer. It transforms a private concern into a public crisis, asserting that reproductive

freedom and bodily autonomy are universal issues.

### **Nancy Spero**

Nancy Spero was a radical force in American feminist art, known for her figurative interpretation of the pressing sociopolitical and cultural crises of her time. Her work was a relentless interrogation of racism, sexism, and systemic violence, utilizing a diverse range of media. While her practice was firmly rooted in the modernist tradition, she frequently reached back into antiquity, drawing inspiration from ancient Egyptian sarcophagi and classical scrolls. This fusion of the ancient and the contemporary allowed her to frame modern suffering within a long, historical arc of human struggle.

Spero viewed her creative output as a form of direct action. “I guess maybe my art can be said to be a protest,” she famously told Art21. For her, the privilege of being an artist lay in the ability to reshape reality, projecting a message of resistance to a global audience. Her creative life was also defined by a deep, intellectual partnership with her husband, the artist Leon Golub. Together, they functioned as a formidable duo, using their distinct styles to confront the pressing cultural issues of their time.

In her 1991 work, *The Bride*, Spero moved the protest directly onto the female form. The piece features a nude woman’s body, surrounded by visceral red marks that bleed across the canvas. As curator Manuel J. Borja-Villel observed, Spero’s work presents an “inscribed body”—one that is bruised, sexed, and heavily laden with symbols. By borrowing the heroic gesture typically associated

with male performance art, Spero reclaimed the female body from a site of victimhood and transformed it into a site of historical power.

### **Lynda Benglis**

Since the 1960s, Lynda Benglis has been a disruptive force in the art world, celebrated for creating ecstatic forms that are as playful as they are abstract. Her early reputation was built on her innovative wax paintings, works created by meticulously brushing skin-like layers of pigmented beeswax and damar resin. As she manipulated these materials into marbled surfaces with a blowtorch, her works felt more like moving tissue than static art. This tactile approach was her first step in challenging rigid gender roles, as she began to explore the intersection of the female body, organic sensuality, and industrial materials.

Benglis is perhaps most famous, and infamous, for her 1974 *Artforum* advertisement, a work that remains a cornerstone of feminist institutional critique. For this provocative intervention, she presented a photo of herself on a glossy black magazine page. In the image, she is entirely nude, sporting white sunglasses and holding a comically large dildo between her thighs. This was not merely an exercise in shock value; it was a calculated act of “sexual mockery.” The 1974 *Artforum* advertisement became the definitive example of her *Mockeries* series, a category of work where she utilized her own image to destabilize traditional ideas of sex and gender. She later reflected on the work, stating that she wanted to create an image that could “never be one thing”—defying a singular gender, form of sexuality, or restricted desire.

## Conclusion

The feminist artists of the 1960s through the 1980s did not have to be taken seriously. They made it impossible not to. The works explored in this paper, such as Ana Mendieta pressing her body into the earth, or Betye Saar dismantling the Aunt Jemima image from the inside out, are not mere historical artifacts. These women understood that if the world would not hand them visibility, they would carve it out themselves. They insist that power can be named, that labor can be honored, that the body is not a passive thing to be looked at but a living site of meaning. These artists did not just bridge the gap between past and present. They proved that the distance between ancient ritual and modern protest was never as wide as we assumed.

Their legacy endures because the conditions that produced it have not disappeared. As long as there are structures that render women invisible, there will be artists who refuse that invisibility—who pick up whatever is at hand, fabric or film or their own skin, and make something that cannot be ignored.

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