

## WOMANHOUSE, feminism and separatist spaces – Rose Gibbs

“History is fragile. It clings to the most obvious evidence that remains” says Lynn Hershman Leeson in her documentary film !WOMEN ART REVOLUTION.

We should know, although we do not always remember, that our knowledge of history is partial – what we are able to grasp of our past is only that which has been deemed important enough to record. According to Voltaire “the only objects worthy of historical study are the peaks, not the valleys of mankind”<sup>1</sup>. Without comparing their incommensurable situations it is worth noting that women and certainly slaves would not agree that Athens was the [birthplace of what we call democracy](#), yet somehow this fiction remains the dominant narrative that poses as the truth. It is the powerful who decide which are the peaks, and which are the valleys of our collective past, leaving the lives of the subordinated in darkness.

Much of the woman’s movement of the 60s and 70s set about illuminating women’s pasts. In the cultural field art historians such as Linda Nochlin in the US and Ann Harris Sutherland, Griselda Pollock and Rozika Parker in the UK researched and wrote about the history of women artists. Between 1974 and 1979, 400 women came together with Judy Chicago to make [The Dinner Party](#), an art installation that celebrated the lives of mythical and historically famous women. In London in 1979, Pauline Barrie and Felicity Allen began feverishly gathering slides for what is now [The Women’s Art Library](#). In a move that eradicated barriers to entry and circumnavigated the inevitable prejudice of institutional recognition they put out calls for contributions from anyone who identified as a woman artist.

Feminists worked not just to fit women into the patriarchal canon – to raise forgotten genius into the light - but also to interrogate the logic of its hierarchies. Providing a feminist alternative to the atomising individualism of so much art production, artists formed women’s collectives. Much of this was born out of the anti-establishment spirit of the day: the fight for civil rights in America and the anti-Vietnam war protests called for solidarity and strength in numbers. Challenges to the status quo questioned not just the large political authorities but also personal lives: the nuclear family with its patriarchal head was dismantled in favour of horizontal communal constellations.

Women artists sought to find their own means of self-expression. In 1970/71 Judy Chicago set up the Feminist Art Program at State University California, Fresno and in 1972 she and Miriam Shapiro started [WOMANHOUSE](#). Set apart from male dominated spaces these events provided the opportunity for women students and artists to explore concerns pertaining to their gender –thoroughly embracing subjects eschewed by the purity of minimalist art that distanced itself from political turmoil and mucky lives.

These were endeavours that recognised the value of separatist spaces. Linda Nochlin writes of her own experience in a women’s college:

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<sup>1</sup> Berlin, Isaiah, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity, Chapters in the History of Ideas – Giambattista Vico and Cultural History*, first published in 1990, Second edition published by Pimlico 2013 page 54. ISBN 9781845952082

“Women had a chance to do everything...I participated in theatre, where women did lighting, carpentry and, of course, acting and direction...We were not pushed to the margins because there were no gendered margins, so to speak; we were all there was”<sup>2</sup>.

It is widely assumed that there is no longer a need for such strategies in the avant-garde world of contemporary art, but a tally of almost any commercial gallery or museum in London will quickly show otherwise. While there might be outliers such as Tracey Emin or Louise Bourgeois, women artists remain massively under represented while at the same time making up the preponderance of art students. In art colleges machismo pervades in spite of growing numbers of women tutors. In such an atmosphere artists must conform to the norm, adopting the prevalent codes of conduct and visual languages, to achieve successful integration into the system. This is not a question of women being understood, assimilated to enrich our cultural field but rather a process of adaptation rather than resistance to the situation.

With laws that are ill equipped to deal with globalisation, sites under which to gather and protect individuals against exploitation are becoming impotent. Women continue to be discriminated against, and bear the brunt of austerity measures in a society that routinely pays them less than men, the art market not least. It is urgent that the feminist agenda should not be about infiltration of an exploitative system; the [outsourcing](#) of feminised labour to the most economically vulnerable for example, but the circumvention of such systems. This calls for solidarity.

Feminism finds itself up against an interesting problem. It is an ideology that is at war with itself: it seeks both to bring people together to recognise gendered group treatment while at the same time questioning the very nature of that grouping in an attempt to find a route to autonomy and liberation from such categorisation. Separatist spaces confront these seemingly contradictory goals and can be seen as a short-term project to achieve long-term systemic change. In coming together under the banner of ‘woman’<sup>3</sup>, we can more fully investigate our differences, where these are not reduced to a binary difference between genders, but differences within a gender.

The super rich dominate both London and the art world. Both have become the place of speculative investment. It is against this backdrop that I along side other feminist practitioners seek to find a space, a [contemporary WOMANHOUSE](#), for women to come together and make work. This will be a project that recognises art’s value to community rather than of commodity. It will be a cross generational art work with collaboration at its core – a collectively made space that destabilises the notion of authorship, suggesting something that may be closer to the way that we live: an acknowledgement that we are shaped by those around us, that we do learn from others, and while we may be different there are many things that we share.

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<sup>2</sup> Nochlin, Linda Edited by Reilly, Maura, Women Artists The Linda Nochlin Reader – First published 2015 page 11. ISBN 9780500239292

<sup>3</sup> Woman is a gender category, rather than a biologically determined sex category.