

***The 1978 “A Lesbian Show” Exhibition:
The Politics of Queer Organizing around the Arts and
the Fight for Visibility in American Cultural Memory***

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By Anna J. Weick

Introduction

“The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”.¹
-Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

Our history is our lifeblood. We look to the past to create ourselves, affirm our beliefs, and to legitimize our dreams and ambitions. With a historical erasure of real human identities, individuals in society struggle against the constant onslaught of bigotry with no stories of past success or positive expression. Gay history has been systematically ignored, repressed, and forgotten by American society.

In particular, a historical memory of GLBTQ arts remains non-existent. Art by women, especially by queer women, has been deemed unimportant, self-involved, child-like, without skill, over-emotional, silly, trivial, ugly, passé, but it has never been truly legitimized by society or by our historical memory.

A hostility towards the memory of GLBTQ art history and support for lesbian and gay art undermines aims of queer liberation. Queer Americans deserve, as do women, people of color and all those oppressed by the military-industrial complexes controlling the resources and people of the world, the dignity of accurate historical representation and a legitimization of their identities.

The acknowledgement of Queer history is integral to and intimately connected to social equality.

When people blindly believe that the historical record is a collection of apolitical facts, dangerous assumptions are upheld, and movements towards a forward-thinking, diverse and accepting, peace-seeking society are threatened.

These truths must not be overlooked –
I say this earnestly and with urgency.²

¹ Kundera, Milan. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

² My personal reflections on the process of writing this paper.

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Feminist, Queer, and Art Historical Context

From January 21 – February 11, 1978, lesbian visual artist Harmony Hammond curated an art exhibition at 112 Greene Street in NYC with the name “A Lesbian Show.” In statements about the show before and after its duration, Hammond characterizes this exhibit as a cornerstone in the development of a distinctive lesbian presence in the art world of New York City. Although “A Lesbian Show” remains absent from many survey textbooks on art and GLBTQ³ history, I assert in this piece that this void comes from a place of ignorance rather than from a lack of historical, social, or political importance.

I will use “A Lesbian Show,” the first lesbian-identified art exhibition in America, as a case-study of queer organizing and expression in the face of intense heteronormative hostility. The details of the exhibition space, the techniques employed by the artists and the appearance of the art itself, and the methods of organizing and publicizing the show give us an image of the show at its genesis. The critical response, reviews, and the immediate art and feminist responses will help us to understand the dynamics specific to “A Lesbian Show” and how the exhibition was able to function despite sexism and heterosexism rampant in that historical context. “A Lesbian Show” was marked by a D.I.Y. aesthetic existing outside of mainstream art norms, a collaborative, woman-centered ethos, and efforts at establishing a woman-focused network in the art world.⁴ All of these factors helped lesbians artists, many of whom who also identified

³ A note on my usage of terms in this paper:

I use “Gay Liberation” synonymously with “gay” when discussing Gay Rights politics post-Stonewall.

I use “lesbian” more specifically when talking about lesbian-identified queer people, especially in the context of ‘70s lesbianism and lesbian-identified art.

I use “queer” when talking about queer people presently and the process of history in silencing queer experience. I use “GLBTQ” (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) when discussing the legacies of GLBTQ history in a larger context.

⁴ “D.I.Y.” (Do-it-yourself) was first used as a term to describe independently-produced art, music, etc. in the ‘70s, in the context of the growing punk music subculture: Triggs, Teal. “Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic” *Journal of Design History* Vol. 19, Issue 1. 69-83. Oxford Journals Database.

themselves as feminists, to help combat the invisibility they believe they encountered as lesbians in the art world. At the same time, I will frame the show in its larger political and art historical contexts, with social trends such as gay liberation, radical feminism, and postmodern queer theories influencing the show itself and its legacies. In the art world, the deconstruction of minimalism as a formal art technique also contributed to the show's relative successes and failures. Through an analysis of "A Lesbian Show," a deeper understanding of the suppression of queer experience, specifically that of lesbian art, can be realized as a dangerous process within the art world and beyond.

Although there is a limited amount of historical information about the show, the participating artists, its immediate influence for both queer studies and art history, its legacy in raising consciousness about lesbian existence and art remains clear. This paper seeks to understand how the 1978 exhibition succeeded and what factors aided as well as hindered its success, especially in relation to the growing success of feminist art and art-related projects of the 1970s. Feminist art in the 1970s was able, although in limited numbers and specific conditions, to enter the canon of establishment art, funded by influential institutions and featured in prominent art textbooks. Why was it much more difficult for lesbian artists to enter the canon, and what factors would have helped them to? Contemporary research and archives on feminist art abound across the country, particularly in New York City, whereas research and archival material on lesbian art remains essentially invisible.⁵ Queer experience and history, specifically centered around accomplishments in the arts, will never be restored to a larger understanding of American history without a deliberate effort to insert the history back into memory.

⁵ Some examples of Feminist Art Archives in the US: The Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art; The Feminist Art Project from Rutgers; the !Women Art Revolution digital archives for Stanford University, among many others.

The political context at the time of “A Lesbian Show” represented a moment of relative stability for the feminist movement, a force growing and increasing in membership since the counter-culture movements of the 1960s. Within the feminist movement, however, the lesbian movement was still seen by mainstream feminists, other activists, and the general public as the most radical sect of women’s liberation; mainstream feminist organizations focused on the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and a heightened consciousness of domesticity and women’s rights at self-determination. Following the 1969 Stonewall riots, certain sectors of the gay rights movement, fueled by anger and infused with energy of protest, moved into the streets, demanding political and social equality for gay Americans. Aside from equality, the Gay Liberation movement during the 1970s sought a safe space – outside of potentially dangerous, criminal bar spaces – to express their identities and create, restore, and renew their cultural history. Even with the strides made in the feminist movement during the 1970s, mainstream feminists still viewed lesbianism and the fight for gay rights as a fringe cause. According to Cheshire Calhoun in “Separating Lesbian Theory from Feminist Theory” Lesbians who identified more with gay liberation than with feminism were viewed as highly radicalized during this time⁶. Karla Jay discusses the conflict between lesbians and mainstream feminism in her book Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation. Betty Friedan, the president of NOW (the National Organization for Women), Jay reports, criticized the presence of lesbians within feminism as the “lavender menace,” further alienating lesbians from mainstream feminist activism.⁷ Thus, with rejection even from mainstream feminists, lesbians then more than ever needed a space of their own.

⁶ Calhoun, Cheshire. “Separating Lesbian Theory from Feminist Theory”. *Ethics* Vol. 104, No. 3. (Apr. 1994) 561. *University of Chicago Press*. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2381979>> Accessed November 1, 2010.

⁷ Jay, Karla. Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation. *Basic Books*, New York: 2000. 137

Even though not all lesbian feminists had radical conceptions of the politics inherent in their sexuality, radical feminist lesbians did exist and frequently published literature on the subject. In 1977, a lesbian art consciousness began to form itself more strongly in the public eye, with the creation of the Lesbian Art Project and the publications *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics* and *Chrysalis*.⁸ Art scholar and queer studies educator Laurel Lampela discusses Harmony Hammond, curator of “A Lesbian Show,” and her contributions to lesbian consciousness-raising in the ‘70s before the show in “Moving from the Inside Out: Hammond’s *Radiant Affection*.”⁹ Lampela reports that Hammond co-edited the “groundbreaking first issue” of *Heresies*, entitled “Lesbian Art and Artists.”¹⁰ The group Radicalesbians, like the short-lived collective “The Furies,” published the piece “Woman-Identified Woman,” discussing the political nature of a lesbian identity and its urgency in a society that rejected any form of lesbian sexuality.¹¹ By 1978, despite the growing number of publications and projects devoted to the politics of a lesbian life, lesbianism was still considered the most radical sect of the women’s liberation movement, hindering lesbians’ efforts at garnering financial support and a public space for expression.

Hammond organized “A Lesbian Show” during a time when feminist art established itself as a force with the social momentum to change popular conceptions and images of women in America. With the growth of the Women’s Liberation movement in the 1970s, feminists sought not only equal protection and rights under the law, changed consciousness surrounding women’s potential, and respect for a woman’s life choices, but also a demand for a space as well as

⁸ Hammond, Harmony. From In a Different Light

⁹ Lampela, Laurel. “Moving from the Inside Out: Hammond’s *Radiant Affection*”. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*. Vol 4(2), 2007. Haworth Press, 2007. <<http://jgled.haworthpress.com>>

¹⁰ Lampela, Laurel. “Moving from the Inside Out: Hammond’s *Radiant Affection*”.

¹¹ Radicalesbians. “The Woman-Identified Woman”. 1970. *Women’s Liberation Movement: An On-Line Archival Collection*, Duke University. <<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/wlm/womid/>>

recognition for women's cultural expressions. Such expressions allowed women to "heal" themselves from the discrimination and violence that abounded in their lives of their sisters, mothers, and daughters and simultaneously assert their existence and varied emotions as legitimate and deserving of time and money. Judy Chicago's organized the large-scale exhibitions "Womanhouse" (1972) and the "Dinner Party" (1974-9) as statements of feminist art encapsulating some of the main aims of the movement within their methods and enactment¹². "Womanhouse" and the "Dinner Party" were collaborative efforts by a variety of feminists coming together to make the art possible; in addition, both projects were consciously rejecting the methods of fame achievement inherent in typical, male-dominated art institutions. Despite the grassroots approach of the two projects, both, particularly the "Dinner Party", achieved a level of fame almost rivaling mainstream male art of the 1970s. Examining the methods of feminist art projects in the 1970s, one sees that many efforts at legitimizing lesbian art projects in mainstream American consciousness mimicked the conditions and aims of feminist art pioneers such as Judy Chicago.

Throughout the 1970s, feminist art proliferated across the United States, establishing a female presence and starting a tradition of deconstruction and personal narrative within the art world. The earlier acceptance of feminist art would ultimately pave the way for the emergence of lesbian art in 1978. Even though much of the feminist art in the 1970s started off as collaborative and independent from mainstream media sources, a few notable feminist artists and collectives broke into the canon of "remembered" art. In the 1970s, feminist groups and feminist art in particular attempted to support women's issues, build a historical memory of women's accomplishments, and heal the damages women experience at the hand of the patriarchy. Judy

¹² Bois, Yve-Alain, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, and Rosalind Krauss. Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism (Vol. 2) Thames and Hudson: 2005.

Chicago's 1972 work "Womanhouse" is a seminal example of this method of art-making. Chicago collaborated with a large group of women to produce "Womanhouse", a project concerned with deconstructing mainstream portrayals of women's sexuality, the objectification of women's bodies, and the uneasy, often unhealthy relationship of women to domestic spaces.¹³ This project shared many of the same characteristics as "A Lesbian Show" – a collaborative art effort, etc. – but rose to a level of fame unknown to any lesbian artists of the time. Historian Carla Williams claims that despite lesbian artist participation in "Womanhouse" and "Dinner Party," the project showcased the developing and strengthening relationship between lesbian politics and the feminist art world.¹⁴

The conditions in the New York art world in 1978 generally favored the narrative-devoid work of minimalist artists, a hostile environment for narrative-based art. From its genesis in the 1960s through the 1970s, the art world sanctioned minimalism and minimalist artists as the dominant genre supported by institutions and art critics. Minimalism rejected the wildly successful Abstract Expressionist movement of the 1950s-1960s, a movement which emphasized the importance of intimate personal expression¹⁵. Minimalism made no space for the expression of marginalized identities because it suppressed the expression of all identities. The Minimalist movement, comprised of artists such as Donald Judd, Richard Serra, Carl Andre, Ad Reinhardt, Dan Flavin, and Frank Stella, hinged on the "purification" of form, devoid of any mark of the artist's hand, in order to best communicate the universal truths of humanity. In many of its foundational texts (including those of Carl Andre and Ad Reinhardt) that inspired the hyper-masculine minimalist artists dominating the avant-garde American cannon by the 1970s, there is

¹³ Bois, Yve-Alain, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, and Rosalind Krauss. Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism

¹⁴ Williams, Carla. "American Art: Lesbian, Post-Stonewall" *GLBTQ Encyclopedia*, 2009. <www.glbtc.com>

¹⁵ Bois, Yve-Alain, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, and Rosalind Krauss. Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism (Vol. 2) Thames and Hudson: 2005.

an emphasis on, in Carl Andre's words, "the exclusion of the unnecessary."¹⁶ A stripping down of everything deemed "unnecessary" to the purity of form in a canvas inherently favored privileged white, male, heterosexual artists. For a lesbian artist with no art history to identify with, inserting a narrative into artwork was not only a goal, but a necessity for working through an oppressive, heteronormative society, as I will discuss more at length later in this piece. Art historian Anna Chave dissects the power dynamics inherent in the largely male minimalist movement of the 1970s in her article "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," critiquing minimalism's enormously-sized gestures, phallic references, and use of industrial products as materials.¹⁷ Minimalist works, inherently large in scale, dwarfed both individual bodies as well as narrative-driven works. Chave comments that minimalist sculpture in particular "distance[s] and isolate[s] the viewer" – physically and emotionally barring woman to woman collaboration and organization.¹⁸

Formally, minimalism employed either traditional materials and techniques (oil painting) or those that emphasized a specific gender-based power hierarchy. For example, minimalist sculptor Richard Serra, one of the primary artists Anna Chave critiques in her article, experimented with lead, a poisonous and dangerous substance, as an artistic material.¹⁹ Serra used these experiments with hyper-masculinized materials as preparation for his later works, known to many art critics as the most compelling modern sculptures – enormous, imposing, steel ellipses, created by industrial battle-ship production plants from World War II.²⁰ Feminist art, on the other hand, made use of new and previously unused materials, techniques, and mediums for

¹⁶ Andre, Carl. "Preface to Stripe Painting". Harrison, Charles and Paul Wood. Art in Theory Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA: 2008. 820

¹⁷ Chave, Anna C. "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power." *Arts Magazine* (January 1990): pp. 44-63.

¹⁸ Chave, Anna C. "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power." *Arts Magazine* (January 1990): pp. 44-63

¹⁹ Bois, Yve-Alain, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, and Rosalind Krauss. Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism

²⁰ Bois, Yve-Alain, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, and Rosalind Krauss. Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism

their intimate expressions in their art; narrative-based art worked with photography, collage, decollage, video/electronic media, pamphlets and fliers, installation/gallery space art, and performance/conceptual art.²¹ These new techniques allowed feminist and lesbian artists to exist and work outside of the dominant power structures that oppressed them; as queer author Audre Lorde articulated, “The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.”²² These new forms of media and a backlash against pure formalism gave women the opportunity to express desires, hopes, and fears which had never previously been given a legitimate space to be voiced in society. Feminist art of the 1970s acted as the bridge connecting late and anti-modernist works with the postmodern art practices prevalent in the 1980s.

Postmodern art practices typically focused on a deconstruction of representations in society and their connections to dominant power structures, rather than the minimalist focus on the purity of form. Postmodern art encapsulated the increasing knowledge that society was being shaped by and represented by these repeated representations. Likewise, this was an inherently important idea to Second Wave feminists, who saw society's representations of gender and women as central to the treatment of women within a culture.²³ Deconstructivist art of the mid-to-late 1970s focused on deconstructing the patriarchy and its modes of subjugating women. Deconstructivist art principles were also employed in the representation of women's bodies in an attempt to fully subvert the male gaze.²⁴ Deconstructivist art often employed institutional critiques, such as the interventions done by feminist performance artist Adrian Piper in

²¹ Bois, Yve-Alain, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, and Rosalind Krauss. Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism (Vol. 2) Thames and Hudson: 2005.

²² Lorde, Audre. Zami: A New Spelling of My Name. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1982.

²³ Bois, Yve-Alain, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, and Rosalind Krauss. Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism

²⁴ Bois, Yve-Alain, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, and Rosalind Krauss. Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism

“Catalysis III” (1972) and “The Mythic Being” (1975).²⁵ German artist Hans Haacke is one of the first widely-recognized artists who engaged in the process of institutional critique in America. His “MoMa Poll” from 1970 asked viewers to connect their politics to the funding of the institutions they frequented, namely, the Museum of Modern Art in NYC: “*Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?*”²⁶ More recently, performance artist Andrea Fraser gave fake gallery talks criticizing common conceptions of museums in her 1989 piece “Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk.”²⁷ Thus, feminists, especially lesbian feminists, helped to dismantle the power structures inherent in the majority of minimalist art theory and practice, subverting the genre by incorporating individual narratives of oppressed women into their art, helping to build a notion of postmodernism and postmodern art.

Yet, as feminism and the women’s movement progressed throughout the seventies, and as artistic boundaries were tested, lesbian arts were continually ignored or repressed. Harmony Hammond, the exhibition organizer of “A Lesbian Show,” characterizes the ‘70s as a time when “art by lesbians was not considered chic and galleries did not encourage ‘lesbian or queer readings’ of work like they do today”.²⁸ Lesbianism, it appears, was not in vogue or acceptable in any context – within feminism, within the art world, or within politics.

Details and Organization of the Exhibition

²⁵ Huang, Karen. “Mythic Being Threatens Stereotypes” Art Institute of Chicago Gallery Review. <http://www.fnewsmagazine.com/2006-nov/mythic-being-threatens-stereotypes.php>

²⁶ “Hans Haacke MoMa Poll” http://www.arts.ucsb.edu/faculty/budgett/algorithmic_art/haacke.html

²⁷ UCLA Art Department Page on Andrea Fraser. <http://www.art.ucla.edu/faculty/fraser.html>

²⁸ Blake, Nayland, Lawrence Rinder, and Amy Scholder, eds. In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1995.

With an understanding of the political, social, and aesthetic contexts operating before and during “A Lesbian Show,” the specific details of the exhibition can be explored. Hammond’s show functioned simultaneously as an acknowledgement of the history of lesbian artists (“we found ourselves not only short of information and documentation on the work and lives of lesbian artists of the past”) in addition to an exploration of the movement’s contemporary status (“but also on contemporary artists working within the context of the feminist art movement”²⁹). Hammond speaks in her explanation of “A Lesbian Show” of her experiences as curator of what we can now recognize as the first major lesbian art exhibition, detailing the “frustrat[ing]” process leading up to the show, the curatorial decision-making (including the reasoning for the space, chosen artists, and style), reactions to the show, and its primary legacies in her eyes.³⁰ Hammond describes the goals of the exhibition as focused on exposing the work of contemporary lesbian artists in Manhattan to support lesbian arts organizing³¹. As Bonnie Zimmerman and George Haggerty outline in their *Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures, Vol I*, “A Lesbian Show” created space for a lesbian consciousness in the art world in addition to maintaining the relevance of art and art-making to lesbian and feminist causes, movements, and sentiments.³² The primary commentaries on “A Lesbian Show” came from art critics and GLBTQ or feminist scholars; mainstream publications largely ignored the show.

The history of the exhibition space itself, located at 112 Greene Street in New York City, is immediately relevant to the meaning of the show within queer and art history. In the book 112 Greene Street: History, Artists, and Artworks, Robyn Brentano and Mark Savitt details the

²⁹ Hammond, Harmony. “A Lesbian Show” *In a Different Light* 45

³⁰ Hammond, Harmony. *Lesbian Art in America*. New York: Rizzoli International, 2000.

³¹ Hammond, Harmony. *Lesbian Art in America*. New York: Rizzoli International, 2000.

³² Zimmerman, Bonnie and George Haggerty. *Encyclopedia of lesbian and gay histories and cultures*, Vol I., 64

exhibitions and artist projects hosted in the space throughout the seventies. One hundred and twelve Greene Street was known for being a host of alternative, cutting-edge art, including performance art, gallery interventions, food art, puppetry, experimental music and composition, and conceptual art.³³ This alternative space fit with Hammond's aims of the show, which included efforts to create a space for what was then considered a radical political and social identity. Brentano and Savitt maintain the individualized, anti-establishment nature of the space in their introduction to the history: "Lacking a voice in the museum/gallery system, artists created alternative spaces".³⁴ Throughout the 1970s, the gallery space featured the work of collaborative performance artists, musical performances, and alternative sculpture exhibitions. The space also hosted many feminist and outspoken female artists, including Ana Mendieta and Louise Bourgeois (1974), demonstrating the openness of the space and its affiliates to new and progressive art and art ideas.

The artists and women involved in the show remained committed to the political nature of "A Lesbian Show," even though the artistic productions were varied from artist to artist; the collaborative nature of the project was stressed regardless of individual art practices. There were initially eighteen artists exhibiting in the show, including: Lula Mae Blocton, Tee A Corinne, Betsy Damon, Louise Fishman, Nancy Fried, Gloria Klein, Dona Nelson, Mary Ann King, Amy Sillman, Ellen Turner, Flavia Rando, Sandra de Sando, Janey Washburn, Debbie Jones, Lil Lakich, Gloria Longval, Kate Millett, and Harmony Hammond, with guests for extra programs in the space in addition. Tee Corrine, one outspoken lesbian artist involved in the show, was the author of the Cunt Coloring Book, published in the early 1970s. Hammond reports that the

³³ Brentano, Robyn and Mark Savitt, eds. 112 Workshop/ 112 Greene Street: History, Artists, and Artwork. New York: New York University Press, 1981.

³⁴ Brentano, Robyn and Mark Savitt, eds. 112 Workshop/ 112 Greene Street: History, Artists, and Artwork. New York: New York University Press, 1981.

collaborative woman-focused nature of the show was carried out even in efforts to publicize the event. An art student from Skidmore College, Tina Murch, documented and publicized the show for class credit; in addition, Hammond procured grant money from *A Lesbian Lifespace Project* for the publicity materials.³⁵ The art produced was varied, from sculptures and paintings in the exhibition itself to video, film, performances, and readings ongoing for the duration of the show, organized by Betsy Damon. One interesting dynamic of the art in the show was the lack of erotic depictions of lesbians and lesbian relationships; at a time when lesbianism was viewed as so radical even by the feminist movement, neglecting to show lesbian sex was safe rather than conservative.

Another dimension of the artists involved in the show centered around the fear of being ‘outed’ by participating in the show, demonstrating the political nature of the exhibition by its very existence. Hammond describes her anxiety about the show and the “realit[ies]” the artists “were forced to confront: – Fear of coming out of the closet, fear that work would not be taken seriously – trying to ‘convince’ lesbian artists that they had a space where their art would not be criticized based on their sexuality”. Fears extended past anxieties over the perception of ones work into the realm of one’s future employment opportunities; participation in “A Lesbian Show” was a strong and potentially dangerous political statement. Hammond recalls:

As one’s personal life was made public, artists risked everything from family and community disapproval to job discrimination or artistic stereotyping. One invited artist was threatened by her gay male downtown dealer that if she exhibited “as a lesbian” she could say goodbye to the gallery’s exhibition and representation of her work. (She didn’t show)³⁶

The immediate reception of the show indicates how revolutionary it was to many in the art and gay worlds. Aside from the reviews, the exhibition organizer, Hammond, writes that “A Lesbian Show” “was successful in creating a lesbian presence and stimulating dialogue in the

³⁵ Hammond from [In a Different Light](#) 45

³⁶ Hammond from [In a Different Light](#) 45

mainstream and feminist art worlds, and in generating an art consciousness in many lesbian communities”.³⁷ However, to accurately judge the immediate reception of the show, an analysis of the local reviews is crucial. The show was not reviewed by any papers besides New York-based art critiques, alternative news sources, and gay periodicals; the lack of coverage of the show by the mainstream press, while not surprising, is still significant. There are only six reviews of “A Lesbian Show” that are currently accessible, and even then they are not readily found without archival help. Kay Larson’s forward-thinking review, “The Colonized Self,” printed in the *Village Voice*, went the furthest in declaring the sexual-politics inherent in the exhibition, describing concepts such as marginalization.³⁸ Larson ends her review with a declaration of the challenges of women’s history with a look towards the future: “There are so many private histories at 112 Greene. It makes you bitter-such isolation women feel!- but hopeful, too, because a step to end that isolation is being taken.”³⁹ *SoHo Weekly News* reviewer John Perreault addressed the need to understand the politics of art-making, proclaiming that “these aspects of experience can no longer be repressed or censored or assumed to be implicitly expressed.”⁴⁰ Also in the *SoHo Weekly News*, reviewer Cynthia Carr stressed that the actual content of the art was secondary in importance to the participation in the first place by the artists in the show.⁴¹ J.M. Saslow reported on the connection between the materiality and gay politics of the exhibition in GayWeek’s “‘A Lesbian Show’ Catalogues Current Art Trends”: “An important theme continues to be the use of art as a tool for self-exploration, a confessional mode in which the process of making art promotes, records, and shares the artist’s own experiences

³⁷ Hammond from *In a Different Light* 47

³⁸ Larson, Kay. “Lesbian Art: The Colonized Self”. *Village Voice*. (March 1978)

³⁹ Larson, Kay. “Lesbian Art: The Colonized Self”. *Village Voice*. (March 1978)

⁴⁰ Perreault, John. “Lesbian Art” *The Soho Weekly News*. (1978)

⁴¹ Carr, Cynthia. “Another View”. *The Soho Weekly News*. (1978)

and growth.”⁴² Myra Carter reviewed a video screening in the “AGITCRIT” column of the *Majority Report*, characterizing the project as a “process of integrity”.⁴³ Taken together, these more alternative reviews generally favored the aims and goals of Hammond’s exhibition, demonstrating the sore need for lesbian arts organizing by 1978.

In addition, the responses to the show by Third-World lesbians and lesbians of color figure in to the show’s short-term legacy. Hammond reports that Salsa Soul Sisters, a Third World Gay Women’s Organization, and Jemima Writers Collective organized a separate event one evening to celebrate art that they believed was excluded from “A Lesbian Show”.⁴⁴ Three artists added visual pieces to the gallery after that celebratory night. The pushback and criticism of “A Lesbian Show” and its white, American focus forced the organizers, artists, and others watching the show to confront the complexities inherent in asserting their lesbianism in a world of intersecting identities.⁴⁵

As to the long term legacies of “A Lesbian Show,” one can examine the exhibition history including and centered on lesbian women after 1978. In 1980, the GALAS (Gay and Lesbian Art Show) was organized in Los Angeles and in 1982, the Extended Sensibilities show was held.⁴⁶ After the Extended Sensibilities exhibition in 1982, no lesbian or even queer-centered art show was organized for eight years until the “All But the Obvious” exhibition in

⁴² Saslow, J.M. Review in *Gay Week* (1978)

⁴³ Carter, Myra. “AGITCRIT” *Majority Report* (1978)

⁴⁴ Hammond from *In a Different Light* 45

⁴⁵ Race is a ubiquitous influence and pressure on women’s identities, especially for lesbians and also particularly for women within the art world. Besides the Third World Feminist response to “A Lesbian Show,” I have not and unfortunately will not address the dynamics of negotiating a lesbian identity within a particular racial or ethnic group. The limited resources about “A Lesbian Show” focused on the white artists involved, and the reviews of the show that I found neglected to discuss race in the context of lesbian sexuality, and with my limited amount of time to conduct my research, I was unable to dig deep enough to have a command of the intersections between queer art-making and racial discrimination in the United States. I hope that future historians, art critics, lesbian feminists, and women’s studies students and professors will expand on this sorely-neglected area of research.

⁴⁶ Hammond from *In a Different Light* 45

1990.⁴⁷ From a strictly exhibition-history perspective, “A Lesbian Show” was revolutionary in its presence. An eight-year gap of lesbian-art-centered exhibitions clearly reflects the hostile environment for queer people from the late ‘70s throughout the ‘80s.

In examining the legacy of the show, one encounters an almost complete lack of a cultural/historical memory of the show itself as well as the lesbian artists exhibited in “A Lesbian Show.” This lack of a historical memory surrounding the show and the involved artists is particularly relevant considering the development during this time of a memory of earlier feminist artists and feminist artists emerging in the 1980s. Artists such as Judy Chicago were memorialized already by the ‘80s and ‘90s; in the ‘80s, postmodern feminist artists like Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, and Cindy Sherman achieved incredible levels of fame.⁴⁸ Why then, given that “A Lesbian Show” was organized and executed in a manner similar to that of many feminist art and exhibitions through the ‘70s-’80, was the exhibition forgotten in American cultural memory? In the next section of this paper, I will examine some theories as to why woman-produced, feminist, and/or lesbian art has been systematically silenced in art history as well as the ramifications of this silence on individuals and society.

Mechanisms of Silence, Consequences of Silence, & the Future of Historical Memory

“A Lesbian Show”: lesbians uniting to build community within a subculture of artists otherwise lacking support from a heteronormative American memory of the arts, is an inherently political act. Feminist, lesbian, and lesbian-feminist theorists from a range of artistic and historical disciplines have written over the years about this process of historical memory and

⁴⁷ Hammond from *In a Different Light* 45

⁴⁸ Bois, Yve-Alain, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, and Rosalind Krauss. *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (Vol. 2) Thames and Hudson: 2005.

oppression within the arts: the mechanisms of oppression, this process of deconstructing that oppression, and the hopes for the future. Through these theories, we can look further into the quality of funding, available research material, the process of uncovering silenced historical material, and the greater implications for ending this invisibility in the arts, past and present.

The silence of lesbians and queer people and the silence of women are interconnected, but they are still distinct. The historical silence of women's artistic expression has been articulated by a number of feminist theorists from the beginning of the Women's Liberation movement up until the present day. Linda Nochlin published a cornerstone text in the study of women's banishment from mainstream arts in 1988, entitled "Why Have there Been No Great Women Artists?" She proposes the false notion in society that what is usual is normal, and she challenges the art world to think more critically about its exclusion of women, especially in relation to the lack of opportunities for female artists:

But in actuality, as we all know, things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class and, above all, male. The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education-education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals. The miracle is, in fact, that given the overwhelming odds against women, or blacks, that so many of both have managed to achieve so much sheer excellence, in those bailiwicks of white masculine prerogative like science, politics, or the arts.⁴⁹

Nochlin establishes that success in society, especially in the subjective field of art, is not correlated to ability but to privilege, in an attempt to finally dispel the belief that art by women is inherently inferior to art by men. Nochlin's piece is crucial in understanding the silence of queer people in the arts, the invisibility of women in history and art history, and general lack of awareness about the politicization of historical records. Nochlin also stresses the need to celebrate the accomplishments of queer people (and people of color,

⁴⁹ *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*, Westview Press, 1988 by Linda Nochlin, pp.147-158

people of socio-economic status, etc.) in spite of the societal pressures working against them, their art, and their success.

Outside of art history, other academic disciplines addressed modes of media information and women's sexuality relevant to the context of "A Lesbian Show" in their feminist theories from the 1970s to the present. Cinema theorist Laura Mulvey, in her piece "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," claims that all film is a product of and perpetuates the patriarchy inherently through its medium and scopophilic visuality. In her piece, she calls for a closer examination and consciousness of the methods of media production "There is no way in which we can produce an alternative out of the blue, but we can begin to make a break by examining patriarchy with the tools it provides."⁵⁰ Especially in the feminist examination of film as a medium, theorists like Mulvey have demanded an open consciousness to deconstructing the heterosexual media models available to Americans. This deconstruction-based philosophy can be observed in feminist literary criticism of the 1980s, especially the ideas of Bonnie Zimmerman. Zimmerman characterized the process of establishing queer-focused literary criticism in the 1970s as "beginning with nothing."⁵¹ By the mid-to-late '70s, Zimmerman claims lesbian criticism existed, but remained unrecognized, existing only in "underground" publications and accessible primarily to people within a queer subculture. Feminist lesbian criticism has existed within a variety of academic disciplines from the beginnings lesbian and woman-centered consciousness, supporting the efforts and ideas of feminist lesbian art theorists.

Adrienne Rich continued in this feminist lesbian critical, theoretical, and creative tradition in her book of poetry, Dream of a Common Language, and in her article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". In *Twenty-One Love Poems* and many of her other

⁵⁰ Harrison, Charles and Paul Wood. *Art in Theory* Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA: 2008. 820

⁵¹ Zimmerman, Bonnie. "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism". *Feminist Studies* Vol. 7 No. 3 (Autumn, 1981). 451-475. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3177760>>

publications, she establishes the heartbreak of lesbian invisibility and lack of queer history: we are “women who could not, speak/to our life-this still unexcavated hole/called civilization, this act of translation, this half-world.”⁵² Existing and producing art (or literature, or film) helped these women fashion an identity, but the deep void of queer history and cultural memory relegate lesbians to what Rich describes as a “half-world,” a morphed version of a hidden reality. Queer theorist Gloria Anzaldua explores the struggles of lesbian women of color in creating their own history in her autoethnography, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*:

the brown woman...puts history through a sieve, winnows out the lies, looks at the forces that we as a race, as women have been a part of...This step is a conscious rupture with all traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths.⁵³

Queer theorists such as Rich and Anzaldua interpreted the lack of representation of lesbians in history through their personal, poetic works, attempting to heighten public consciousness regarding the lesbian experience.

Artist Tee Corrine, one artist exhibited in “A Lesbian Show,” discusses the struggles involved in funding lesbian art in “How Lesbians Artists Support Their Art.” Corrine explores the risks involved in creating lesbian art – “the mainstream art world will overlook one’s production or relegate it to a subcategory of ‘genre’ art” – and the immense difficulties for lesbian artists to receive even enough funding to create their art without taking on other occupations and odd jobs.⁵⁴ For Corrine, however, the lack of money to support lesbian art illustrates to her not only the rejection by mainstream funding sources for lesbian art but also the immensely personal and passionate reasons to create such art. With information from hundreds of interviews with lesbian artists, Corrine elaborates on the “rewards” of creating lesbian art and

⁵² Rich, Adrienne. *Dream of a Common Language* W. W. Norton and Company, NY: 1978.

⁵³ Anzaldua, Glora. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

⁵⁴ Corinne, Tee A. "How Lesbian Artists Support Their Art." *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 5.3 (2001): 43-52. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 5 Dec. 2010.

the lengths many lesbian artists have gone and will go to continue creating their art.⁵⁵ Corrine also discusses the healing qualities of art production for many lesbians going through hardship; as they created their art, they both supported their communities and supported themselves through the creative outlet. At the conclusion of her article, Corrine calls for an increased respect and visibility for lesbian art in the hopes for garnering more funding.

Artists and lesbian feminist theorists also recognize not only a heterosexism within the art world, but a world with intersections between homophobia and misogyny. Lesbian artist Deborah Kass elaborates on the sexism within representations of gay art:

The art world isn't homophobic, it's lesbophobic. It's riddled with fags. They support, buy and show one another. Art is traditionally where fags go to make a living. It's very culturally, historically sanctioned, from Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, on. This is where we expect 'feygeles' to be. No one expects lesbians. We're expected to be in literature or libraries, not visual art. There is no culturally sanctioned place that has any fame, money or glory attached to it, where lesbians are supposed to go. Unless it's the tennis circuit and even that's controversial.⁵⁶

Thus, Kass confirms the intersectionality of a lesbian identity, with unique pressures of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism. Understanding the factors acting upon lesbians working in the art world helps us to contextualize the silence that such artists face, and the reasons for their erasure from art historical record.

Much of the material involved in early lesbian arts activism is ephemeral in both its nature and in the lack of recognition of its importance. Leaflets, posters, sketches, exhibition booklets, and advertisements for the "A Lesbian Show" have generally not been saved by public archives; although some feminist material from the 1970s has been archived recently, there still exists a serious lack of material from lesbian arts organizing during this time. Only two textbooks on the subject of lesbian art in American have been written: one, by the exhibition

⁵⁵ Corinne, Tee A. "How Lesbian Artists Support Their Art." *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 5.3 (2001): 43-52. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 5 Dec. 2010.

⁵⁶ Hammond, Harmony. *Lesbian Art in America*. New York: Rizzoli International, 2000.

organizer, Harmony Hammond (Lesbian Art in America), which chronicles lesbian art from the '70s-'90s; and another, (Damn Fine Art), which focuses on lesbian art during and preceding the 1990s. Research materials and archives on queer history, women's studies, and art history are strangely absent and unhelpful in painting an accurate picture of lesbian art organizing around 1978. Research about the subject, aside from Hammond's personal statements about the intentions of the exhibition, must be done tangentially – the political contexts for the show, about the exhibition space, about the artists' activities after the show. Even the six reviews of the show were difficult to find without an elite college's archival powers and research librarians' efforts. And here we see the paradox of researching queer history: the process is at once untapped, ready for research, and undocumented, unsaved, and difficult. It is a process both encouraging in a trailblazing sense, and discouraging in the absence of history; every roadblock to my research was a personal affront to my identity as a lesbian, and every missing document was a homophobe who refused to legitimize my history and the history of the brave women before me.

This loaded quality of GLBTQ historical research appeared common to the academics whose work I read. GLBTQ historical research was and is always more than the mere procuring and rearrangement of facts; like "A Lesbian Show," the process of restoring lesbian and gay history to American memory is a fight for dignity and respect, a call for community, and a statement of activism and politics. Gay Historian John D'Emilio describes his experiences working in the Gay Academic Union: "Faculty and graduate students from a variety of disciplines were daily giving meaning to the concept of a community of scholars as we eagerly shared every new bit of information we found".⁵⁷ Working in such a new discipline was empowering for D'Emilio, but it was also a process marked by anxiety and fear: "I began to

⁵⁷ D'Emilio, John. "Not a Simple Matter: Gay History and Gay Historians". *The Journal of American History* Vol. 76, No. 2 (Sep., 1989), pp. 435-442 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1907977>> 437

sweat. For one, I was choosing an area of research for which there was no context, no literature, no definition of issues, and no sources that had ever been tapped”.⁵⁸ Working within the field of GLBTQ history is at once personal and political, an act of activism and an urgent archival need, a story richly uncovered yet devoid of any legacies or previous content. D’Emilio characterizes his first-line research in gay history as personal, emotionally exhausting, and difficult without institutional support: “I feel compelled to weigh what I do with care, all the time. But it is also at times exhausting, and something I wish I could discard the habit and simply act on impulse. The habit, however, runs deep.”⁵⁹ To those involved in the fight to restore and legitimize this history, the process is more than compelling; it is a matter of individual happiness and freedom.

Art and history are two disciplines superficially separate from the worlds of politics and gay rights. With a closer examination of how politics shape art production and reception, how the arts influence political movements, and how politics play into the American historical record, one begins to see the mechanisms working behind the scenes of art galleries and exhibitions. “A Lesbian Show” illustrates the deeply political meanings behind participation in an exhibition, the materials used in artistic production, the identities of artists, the spaces of exhibitions, and the historical record and memory of art, artists, and artistic events. Art Historian Linda Nochlin describes art at its highly politicized core:

The question "Why have there been no great women artists?" has led us to the conclusion, so far, that art is not a free, autonomous activity of a super-endowed individual, "Influenced" by previous artists, and, more vaguely and superficially, by "social forces," but rather, that the total situation of art making, both in terms of the development of the art maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself, occur in a social situation, are integral elements of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions, be they art academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator, artist as he-man or social outcast.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ D’Emilio 437

⁵⁹ D’Emilio 437

⁶⁰ *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*, Westview Press, 1988 by Linda Nochlin, pp.147-158

Feminist conceptual artist Adrian Piper powerfully describes the inherent politics in artistic production and creation, especially in combating “visual pathologies” such as racism and sexism:

Political artists are often reproached with arrogance for trying to ‘change the world’ – as if any single individual could – and then ridiculed when immediate revolution fails to occur. But no one is obliged to try to change the world, and it is unlikely that any artist tries to. All *anyone* needs to aspire to politically is to do what he can, and to do his best. To change an opinion, or an attitude, or to modify a knee-jerk response, or to catalyze an ongoing process of personal transformation, would be plenty. Undertaken collectively, it would be all we needed.⁶¹

Today, we have the Lesbian Herstory Archives.⁶² There are textbooks on GLBTQ history in America.⁶³ Third Wave feminists like the Riot Grrrls frequently discuss the importance of women’s artistic freedom in connection to historical representations of our work: “BECAUSE viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we are gonna figure out how what we are doing impacts, reflects, perpetuates, or DISRUPTS the status quo.”⁶⁴ But the research, as seen through this research project about “A Lesbian Show,” is more than lacking, and our consciousness as Americans and as global feminists and queer people will be damaged without immediate legitimization of this history. Progression forward requires the liberation of our pasts. The truth of our selves rises from the truth of our histories.

⁶¹ Adrian Piper, “Goodbye to Easy Listening,” in Adrian Piper: PRETEND (New York, N.Y.: John Weber Gallery, 1990)

⁶² www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org

⁶³ Examples of accessible GLBTQ history textbooks from www.amazon.com: *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present* by Neil Miller; *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* by Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vinicus, and George Chauncey (1990); *Queers in History: The Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals* by Keith Stern and Ian McKellen (2009)

⁶⁴ “Riot Grrrl Manifesto” Bikini Kill Zine 2. 1991. <www.historyisaweapon.com> Accessed December 1, 2010.

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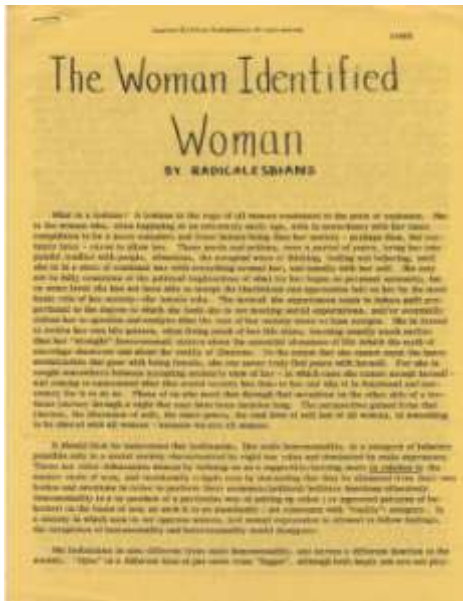
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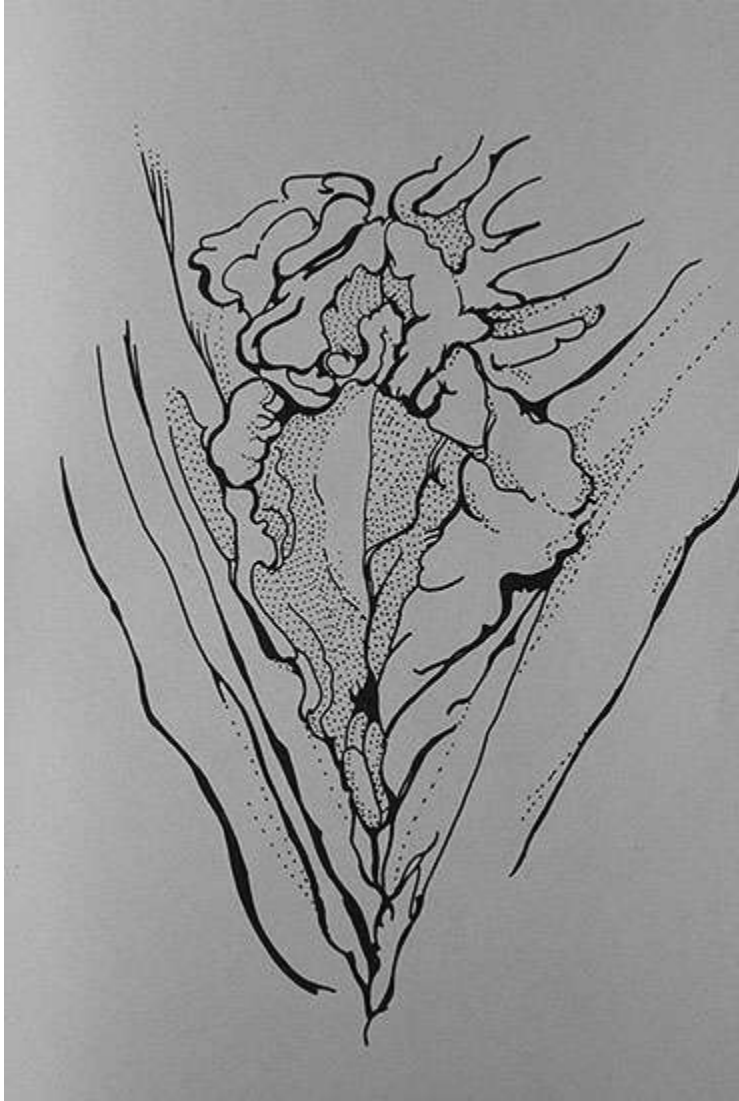
Image Appendix



www.brooklynmuseum.org
Judy Chicago and co.: *Dinner Party*



<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/wlm/womid/>
Radicalesbians "Woman Identified Woman"

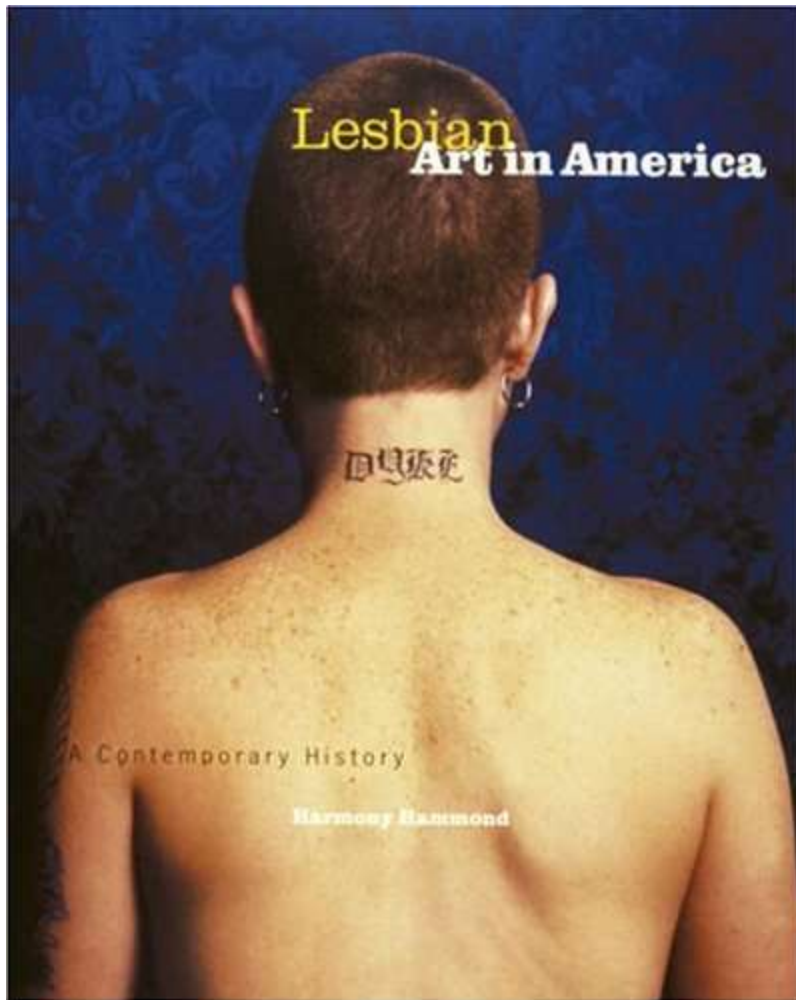


Tee Corinne's *Cunt Coloring Book*
www.queer-arts.org



<http://www.andrew.cmu.edu/course/48-305A/sketch.html>

Richard Serra's minimalist ellipse sculptures



www.amazon.com

Harmony Hammond's textbook