



Cutting Realities: Gender Strategies in Art

by Kimberly Lamm

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Cutting Realities: Gender Strategies in Art is displayed on the first few floors of the Austrian Cultural Forum; a sleek, modernist building composed of glass and steel. *Cutting Realities* features work by artists from Central and Eastern Europe who confront, with a wide range of mediums and materials, how often representations of the body reflect prevailing gender hierarchies. While the work itself is visceral, challenging, and unsettling, the show as a whole feels arid and without a clear purpose. It isn't just the building's cold, silvery interior that seems to undermine the work's subversive potential. *Cutting Realities* is culled from the Kontakt collection of the Erste Bank Group, Vienna, and the work's provenance seems to halt the possibility of creating a show that articulates why feminist art matters and what historical realities this work can define now. Of course art from a bank's collection could attest to feminism's importance and vitality; however, like capitalism itself, this particular exhibition erases history and dulls the work's sharpest arguments.



Natalia LL, "Consumer Art," 1974, Collage of 6 photographs. Courtesy: Kontakt. The Art Collection of Erste Bank Group

The idea for *Cutting Realities* is grounded in the 1970s, when feminist art became a discernible movement that garnered enough collective momentum to cut into the screen of stale perceptions impeding gender equality. Sexism still thrives in insidious forms, and the show would have been enriched by a statement addressing the question of how younger feminist artists draw from the work of their predecessors. Nor did I read anything on the walls or in the catalogue that made it clear how the work on display reflects or emerges from the histories of Eastern and Central Europe. By reproducing the misogynist graffiti Dutch soldiers wrote on army barracks in Srebrenica on a set of posters that feature her image, Šejla Kamerić's "Bosnian Girl" (2003) engages directly with the recent war in Yugoslavia. "Bosnian Girl" dramatically demonstrates how gender informs the construction of ethnic identities and asks us to think about

how the history of gender-biased violence impacts the present. But how does the rest of the work featured in *Cutting Realities* reflect this issue, which has been so crucial to the political history of the region?

What saves *Cutting Realities* is the fact that many of the artists deploy their considerable skills for disquieting ends. A series of ink drawings by Ulrike Lienbacher (born 1963) is a compelling rendition of the desires and fears that inspire us to fetishize the female body in fragments. In one drawing, Lienbacher has depicted the bottom half of a young woman's face in pinkish-red ink. Her chin rests on her stiffly posed hands, which contrast sharply with the blood beginning to drip from one nostril and the diffuse pink color that circles her lips like a rash. In another drawing, Lienbacher has rendered the bottom half of a girl's body in a simple black line depicting her feet, legs, and the tiny curve of her buttocks from behind. Blood streams down the insides of her splayed legs to form a soft, powdery pool. The white paper around these eerily austere designs pulses with estrangement. I was left wondering how this work develops and departs from earlier feminists' work depicting the violence of fetishization. Of course these questions might be left to viewers, but I didn't see traces of a curatorial logic that could explain why work from different decades was displayed without regard to chronology.

The work of the Austrian artist VALIE EXPORT exemplifies the combination of anger and intelligence motivating the best feminist work of the 1970s. "Body Sign Action" is a photograph of EXPORT's leg tattooed with an image of a garter belt's hook. Stark but incisive, I found this icon of feminist art, with its critique of the hyper-sexualization of women's bodies, refreshing. Natalie Lach-Lachowicz's (known as Natalie LL) 16mm film "Consumer Art" (1972-75) and her collage of six color photographs of the same name are also bold and direct. With blonde curls and a big smile, the Polish artist resembles Goldie Hawn and Brigitte Bardot. She looks straight into the camera and, by playing with bananas, milk, and popsicles, mocks the hyperbolic femininity, erotic submissiveness, and pornographic tropes of advertising. Both "Body Sign Action" and "Consumer Art" prove that the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray was on to something with her formulation of *mimesis* in visual art: because patriarchal thinking is so pervasive, women must self-consciously represent the ideas they are expected to embody.

If feminist artists from the 1970s highlighted the ridiculousness of ideas about the sexual availability of women's bodies, artists working in the present inhabit the daily habits, practices, and norms that produce our concepts of gender, and attempt to undo them from the inside. In her video "Jock" (2001), Dorit Margreiter trains herself to hit a baseball in a batting cage. She repeatedly waits for the ball and hits it with a steel bat. We don't see the ball bouncing against the chain link fence, but the metallic rattle is audible. "Jock" verges on banal, and Margreiter does not shy away from this. Her laconic depiction underscores how much meticulous work goes into producing the signs of gender, revealing how difficult they are to undo.

The work of the Croatian artist Sanja Ivekovic' is the highlight of *Cutting Realities*. It is both formally and politically provocative, and does not seem dated. In "The Black File" (1976), Ivekovic' sets newspaper announcements about missing daughters next to soft-porn images of young girls. "The Black File" raises interesting questions about the eroticization of vulnerability. Perhaps patriarchal culture's need to see girls as helpless dovetails with the insistent desire to see their beauty as their primary value: a combination leading young girls into dangerous voids. In the video "Personal Cuts" (1982), Ivekovic' strings together footage from military parades and rallies, scenes of factory production (set to disco music), soccer games, building demolitions, displays of consumer goods, and a party in which girls and young women flock lovingly around Joseph Brosz Tito (the post-World War II President of Yugoslavia). After each video clip, Ivekovic' cuts a hole into a black veil covering her face. As the video moves between spectacle culture and images of a woman exposing herself to the gaze of the world, Ivekovic' suggests that Yugoslavia's movement into capitalism was demoralizing and liberating at the same time. I wish *Cutting Realities* had a similar strategy for presenting how feminist art engages with and is a part of history. Without a strong and subtle historical framework, an exhibition like this leaves feminist art at the margins of what matters.
