SEEING THROUGH THE SEVENTIES

ESSAYS ON FEMINISM AND ART

Laura Cottingham

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Acknowledgments

The nine essays collected here were written over a relatively short period of time, roughly five years, between 1992 and 1997. Together they reflect and are informed by an interest in the feminist art movement of the 1970s. Before 1992, my critical engagement with art was exclusively in the field of contemporary art, where I had been active as a viewer and a critic since coming to New York in the early eighties.

As my decade of participation with contemporary art in New York began to expand into greater involvement with the European community in the early nineties, I felt it was impossible for me to continue to work with feminist ideas and contemporary art unless I was willing to examine more carefully the initial emergence of feminist art during the seventies. To continue my practice without this necessary, even if temporary detour, would have been fraudulent; it seemed to me that the feminist art of the seventies was being lost and obscured—even as it was having a completely unacknowledged revival in the work of younger artists in the

nineties. My increased contact with Europe, especially the six months I spent in France in 1992 at the Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, can be credited for this change in perspective. It provided necessary distance from my immersion in the New York situation and gave me more insight into the significant role conservation and preservation play in establishing and maintaining cultural values, a perspective implicit to European cultures and less intrinsic to American assumptions.

Since then, the seventies have functioned as an important cultural location for me, providing the inspiration for two major museum shows. For the *NowHere* exhibition presented at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebaek, Denmark, in 1996, I curated a survey of artists from Europe, Japan, and the United States that featured works by women from the seventies alongside those of the nineties. In a subsequent curatorial project for Le Magasin Centre National d'Art Contemporain de Grenoble, France, in the 1997 exhibition *Vraiment Féminisme et art*, French and American artists were featured according to a similar cross-decade juxtaposition. I am grateful to both museum directors, Lars Nittve of the Louisiana Museum of Art, and Yves Aupetitallot of Le Magasin Centre National d'Art Contemporain de Grenoble, for providing me with these significant opportunities to expand both my own and their respective public's awareness of feminist culture.

Similarly, all but one of the essays collected here are the result of invitations. Except for "How many 'bad' feminists does it take to change a lightbulb?" (1994), which I wrote and self-published, none of the following essays would exist if they hadn't been directly requested. "Shifting Ground: On the Critical Practice of Lucy R. Lippard" (1997), is the result of American critic Saul Ostrow's inspiration; it was originally intended to complement a book of Lippard's essays that was never published. For "The Masculine Imperative: High Modern, Postmodern" (1994), I am thankful to Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer and Arlene Raven, who invited me to participate in their second anthology of feminist criticism and encouraged me to

develop the ideas of masculinity and fine art that I had only tentatively outlined in earlier writings. British curators Kate Bush, Emma Dexter, and Nicola White invited me to write "What's So 'Bad' About 'Em?" (1994), for their *Bad Girls* catalog; and "Are You Experienced? Feminism, Art, and the Body Politic" (1996), was written for the exhibition *L'Art au corps,* curated by Philippe Vergne at the MAC Galeries Contemporaines des Musées de Marseille, France. "Eating from the *Dinner Party* plates and other myths, metaphors, and moments of lesbian enunciation in feminism and its art movement" (1996), was commissioned by UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum Art and Cultural Center and Amelia Jones for their exhibition *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's* Dinner Party *in Feminist Art History*; and "L.A. Womyn: The Feminist Art Movement in Southern California, 1970-1979," was produced for the 1997 *Sunshine & Noir* show curated by Lars Nittve at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark. "Notes on *lesbian*" (1996) is the product of encouragement from art historians Flavia Rando and Jonathan Weinberg, who requested a text for an issue of the *College Art Journal* they coedited on lesbian and gay representation in the visual arts. I am especially grateful to Dirk Snauwaert, director of the Kunstverein München, who invited me to write an essay for his Claude Cahun exhibition, even though I had not, at that time, published anything on the artist. "Considering Claude Cahun" (1997) is the result.

The period during which these essays were written coincides with and was directly informed by the primary project that has occupied me since 1992, the ninety-minute video essay *Not For Sale: Feminism and Art in the U.S.A. during the 1970s* (Hawkeye Productions, New York, 1998), which presents a selection of the visual basis from which many of the assumptions, references, and observations contained in my recent writings have been drawn. I am forever indebted to the dozens of seventies practitioners, including artists, critics, and historians, who shared their archives, time, and memories with me, including Emma Amos, Eleanor Antin, Nancy Buchanan, Judy Chicago, Tee Corrine,

Judith Dancoff, Mary Beth Edelson, Hermine Freed, Ann Gauldin, Cheri Gaulke, Harmony Hammond, Jill Johnston, Joan Jonas, Joyce Kozloff, Barbara Kruger, Leslie Labowitz, Suzanne Lacy, Sue Maberry, Barbara McCullough, Senga Nengudi, Howardena Pindell, Adrian Piper, Flavia Rando, B. Ruby Rich, Martha Rosler, Rachel Rosenthal, Betye Saar, Miriam Schapiro, Carolee Schneemann, Mira Schor, Joan Semmel, Sharon Shore, Barbara Smith, Michelle Stuart, Ruth Wiseberg, Faith Wilding, Martha Wilson, and Terry Wolverton, among others.

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Shifting Ground

ON THE CRITICAL PRACTICE OF LUCY R. LIPPARD

Art criticism is a suspicious practice, and writing about contemporary art, the art of the moment, is especially suspect. Not a creative activity, not a commercial enterprise, not an academic discipline; art criticism is hardly even a recognized profession. Although the production and assessment of visual art has a distinct ontology within the West's self-conscious sense of its own historicity, art criticism occupies an extremely vague cultural field where neither professional parameters nor standards of value have ever been clearly delineated. Consequently, while at its highest moments criticism of art functions to elucidate important truths—or at least significant facts—that might otherwise be lost to not only immediate and concerned art viewers but to history itself, more often criticism devoted to the contemporary visual arts functions within the crudest realm of rhetorical practices, somewhere between erudite cheerleading and vulgar advertising.

After all, art criticism is a young discipline—if it can be considered or called a discipline at all. Although writing devoted to the contemporary arts emerged as a demonstrative practice within the gallery and museum matrix that developed in Paris during the nineteenth century, it remains at the close of the twentieth century pretty much what it was at the end of the last: an amateur pursuit first and foremost. Bounded by newspaper and art magazine journalism on the one hand and academic writing and publishing on the other, twentieth-century art criticism as it exists in Europe and the United States occupies a kind of shadow land between public relations and the academy. Owing to the nonprofessional status of the vocation, contemporary art critics also teach, lecture, curate, edit, publish novels or poetry, hustle journalism, advise collectors, assist art dealers, and otherwise engage with institutional networks and cultural practices where cultural validity and money flow a little more easily than they do for art criticism.

Additionally, most of what has been and continues to be labeled "art criticism" is not and never has been truly critical at all, but could be more accurately categorized as "writing about art" or even "fine art promotion." The entire history of Western art has seldom witnessed the appearance of an actual *critic*. Art criticism, so-called, more often functions as a form of interpreting—of negotiating a price to be placed on a work of art; or, of fulfilling an obligation to commend or otherwise flatter the visual art in question. From Denis Diderot's reviews of the Paris *Salons* to twentieth century accounts of the Whitney Biennials, the Venice Bienniales, the Documentas, or the 1990s emergence of new galleries in the Chelsea area of Manhattan, few words have been published on art which aren't first and foremost words of description, interpretation—even advertisement—rather than criticism per se. Even the most celebrated of visual art's nineteenth-century scriblings, such as Charles Baudelaire's writings on Eugene Delacroix or Emile Zola's early championship of Paul Cezanne and Édouard Manet, are little more than homages composed in subjective ecstacy. Indeed, it

has long been standard for critics to write and publish lengthy accounts of art they advocate, while restricting (and so too being restricted by editors and publishers) negative commentary to verbal equivalents of a simple "thumbs down." Demonstrably critical writings on visual culture during the twentieth century have been inspired by and within coterminous political challenges: the debates on realism and bourgeois culture sustained by the Russian and Soviet avant-garde during the 1920s; the calls for communism within the surrealist movements; and, from the reactionary front, the Nazi critiques of abstract and 'degenerative' art promulgated during the Hitler period. In the postwar United States, critically positioned evaluations of fine art have arrived in response to and support of political critiques of the society at large. The women's liberation movement of the 1970s ushered in critiques of male supremacist ideology in visual culture as developed by critical historians such as Carol Duncan, Linda Nochlin, Arlene Raven, and Moira Roth. Similarly, the challenges to Eurocentrism introduced into American culture during the 1960s by the civil rights and black power movments theoretically motivated and formed the foundation of critiques subsequently introduced into art criticism by Howardena Pindell, Thomas McEvilley, Maurice Berger, Michelle Wallace and others.

Still, the most common maneuver for the critic who wishes to make a critical gesture that goes against the grain of prevailing tastes and attitudes is to enthuse over an artist or group of artists about whom no one has yet been enthusiastic. Although a gesture of this type may be rightly interpreted as serving a critical purpose, it is nonetheless still an adulatory rather than a critical practice in and of itself.[1]

The restrictions on criticism (which comes from the Greek verb *krinein* meaning "to discern and to judge" and "to separate, to cut into") emanate from fine art's limited mode of address and conventions of distribution. The French Revolution ushered in bourgeois expansionism, opened the doors of the Louvre to the public, and ushered in the belief that art should be

shared by —or at least occasionally "on view" to— the public. Since then, private collectors and museums have replaced the king and his court as Western art's patrons, tastemakers, and guardians. No critic can easily escape from the nefarious network of money and capital that circulate, navigate, and pollute the public discussion and display of art. In the American twentieth century—even as the typography of fine art has been permanently altered through the admission of modes of expression drawn from popular culture such as fashion, design, advertising, pop music, and television—the leverage for dictating art's direction remains fixed in the material hands of collectors, commercial dealers and museums. This infrastructural matrix hasn't shifted: financial transactions remain the most obvious determinant of what is currently, and what will be considered in the future, the art of the period. Or to quote Barbara Kruger's 1980s dictum: "You make history when you do business." In the Euro-American visual art economy of this century, art that does not find a place for itself in the commercial apparatus of today is unlikely to find a place for itself in the future.

In such a system, the critic typically functions as a kind of intellectual auctioneer who assumes that art's viewers are its literal purchasers (which they frequently are). Critics have been, and are forced to become, fine art's most devoted fans, its fawning appreciators, erudite articulators, and enthusiastic adulators. In the dominant twentieth-century American narrative, one can envision Alfred Barr wielding a gavel over a proverbial lot of European modernist efforts he hopes to introduce (to sell, metaphorically and actually) to New York, or imagine Clement Greenberg seeking takers for abstract expressionism from a proverbial audience of paddle-wielding connoisseurs. Although the writings of Barr and Greenberg, two of the most influential arbiters of fine art in twentieth-century America, exceed the rudimentary rhetoric of salesmanship at nearly every turn, the structural mechanisms that inflect and infect fine art's commodification nonetheless stipulate that writing about contemporary art is first and foremost an art of persuasion that very

closely approximates salesmanship. As long as the commercial system remains the primary determinant of which artworks and artist are allowed to come into and maintain public visibility, art criticism is coaxed into highlighting, pointing to, or otherwise demonstrably indicating the current and future value of particular artworks and artists.

After more than a decade of publishing in the venues available for art criticism in New York, Lucy R. Lippard confided to an interviewer in 1974 that she "started out with the idea that criticism was going to be a provocation, another kind of provocation than art. . . . But people don't look, don't think when they look . . . So we find ourselves either writing pap to be fed to the 'art public' or P.R. for the market, or incestuous annotation for the inner art scene—which isn't much of a contribution to anybody."[2] The question of audience—the audience for art as well as for art criticism—was an originary concern of Lippard's that has consistently informed her practice. Lippard's changing relationship to her own sense of an audience for her writing has, more than any other motivating factor, dictated the shifts and starts that form the outline of her focus across the thirty year period within which she has functioned as one of the most prolific and episodic art critics in postwar America.

From the mid-1960s through the 1990s, Lippard's critical practice has remained committed to an extremely descriptive discourse that relies heavily on the self-stated intentionalities of artists, writing not so much *against,* as much as *for* or *on behalf of* artistic practices, aesthetic developments and artists the commercial system has neglected, left unencouraged and unrewarded. In the sixties Lippard was among the first to publish on minimalism, conceptualism and pop. In the seventies her attention switched to feminism as she became the most widely published and visible chronicler of the feminist art movement in the United States. During the eighties, the art and issues of the Native American community in the United States and the wide range of art and activism associated with multiculturalism and progressive agitprop took hold of Lippard's attentions.

Across the past three decades her writing plods along a path that always runs outside of academia, sometimes veers through mainstream journalism, and stays ever just parallel and somewhat antagonistic to the dominant art press. Situating herself as what she has called "a moving target," Lippard has steadily fluctuated the focus of her critical eye to accommodate her perceptions of the visible shifts in American popular, academic, and activist discourses. In this sense, her entire critical ouevre could be seen to illustrate the rupture that occurred between the stodgy, literary-based and formalist criticism of the forties and fifties and the pluralistic expansion of fine art culture ushered in by the political mobilizations and divisive breaks with traditional European visual practices that occurred in the United States during the 1960s. Lippard's collected works to date, which include fifteen books on art, a novel, and hundreds of uncollected essays as well as journalistic pieces, chart and reflect the increasing consciousness of the politics of culture as it has been played out in postwar America. They also illustrate a more generalized crisis regarding the aims and means of art criticism. For Lippard is a recalcitrant art critic, continually in search of an understanding of what criticism is or could be, and how it can or could function productively and independently of commercial determination.

Although her earliest writings from the 1960s fairly approximate the traditional demands for formalist analysis and historical documentation that then circumscribed art-critical-cum-historical practice within the Euro-American academic model, her writings after 1970 break with the form, focus, and distribution networks within which her criticism had previously functioned. After 1970, Lippard's style of writing began to veer more radically away from academic rhetoric and formalist arguments, her focus took her farther away from art and artists aligned with the commercial gallery apparatus, and she began to publish more regularly in non-art publications such as the mainstream feminist monthly, *Ms.*, and in Manhattan news and entertainment weeklies such as *Seven Days* and *The Village Voice*.

In the midst of the political upheavals across the United States circa 1968, the American popular consciousness was forced to confront its sense of self more directly than ever before. In addition to the political and social transformations ushered in by the events of circa 1968, the American psyche became self-conscious for the first time since its formulation as a nation in the eighteenth century. White, middle-class Americans—facing themselves in the mirror held up by the war in VietNam, Angela Davis on the lam, the Detroit and Watts riots, flower power, the mobilization of the women's movement, bloodshed at the Democratic National Convention, and the killing of students at Jackson and Kent State Universities—were confronted with a troubling image that had little to do with the "justice and liberty for all" of American mythology. In the visual art and cultural life of New York and other urban American centers, the social movement of the sixties and seventies forced many writers and artists to rethink their practices and their allegiances. Like other members of the Manhattan visual art community, including Hans Haacke, Adrian Piper, Jon Hendricks, Faith Ringgold, and others, Lippard was forced to confront the narrowness of fine art's concerns and audience. Consequently, she modified her critical practice in order to situate criticism within a different construction of its sense of competence, direction, and audience. In this sense, Lippard's influence on contemporary art and culture in the United States is related to the breakdown in the modernist assumption of universality—and in the preconception that the value of art is somehow related to or inchoate in the idea of its potential universality—that the political activism of the sixties and seventies ushered into American cultural life. One might even suggest that Lippard is more a cultural activist than an art critic—a designatory distinction she would, and has, claimed for herself for the past twenty years.

No writings on art can easily escape their positions as art's advertising verbiage; that is, as the words used to wrap around objects whose values are ultimately more determined by their

resale value within a collector coterie than by a consensus of either an aesthetically informed few or a disinterested many. Given that a commercial apparatus circumscribes and dictates what is exhibited as art and what is published and circulated as art criticism, what are the actual possibilities for the critic of contemporary art? Even academic art historians, who generally consider that their acknowledged position within the academy and the additional advantage of historical hindsight places them above the commercial roar that echoes in every contemporary critic's ear are easily and readily co-opted by the art market—which initially directs most historians to their subjects anyway. At the same time, some critics *are* more critical than others and some critical gestures matter more than others, at least to the extent that they produce results—either by assisting in a transformation of the mental landscape of the time or by contributing to the successful marketing of certain art works and artists. Lippard's influence has not, like other widely published writers on art from her generation and those before, been coordinated within the powerful energies of the gallery market. Nor has she worked within the institutional structure and coextensive discourse of the academy. By publishing on the work of under-recognized and unknown artists and resituating her critical gaze outside of New York's hegemonic gallery structure, Lippard has provided both the present and the future with information, suggestions, and contradictions that the commercially empowered networks of distribution have often deliberately eclipsed.

Consequently, to evaluate Lippard's position within the context of art criticism, one must first accept the possibility that it was historically necessary for her—for someone?—to reconfigure the communicative context of criticism within an understanding of its overloaded and overdetermined limitation as the chorus for fine art's rarified drama. Additionally, one must be prepared to consider that some cultural gestures—such as Lippard's practice as a critic after 1970—must be evaluated according to the kinds of subsequent and future practices, both institutional and artistic, they opened up.

In this sense, timing must be accepted as one measure of the contemporary critic's worth. The position for a critic of contemporary art is always charged with precipitancy. However differently practiced, contemporary art criticism is always speculative. Criticism's more debased practitioners literally gamble on the monetary value of their speculations, while criticism's more exalted players are forever wagering their cultural capital on nothing less than the future of the future. If accepted as a form of gambling, criticism's evaluation must somehow be considered relative to what is or was at stake. And what was or wasn't lost. For while the art historian enters a discourse that is already written (even if perpetually open to revision), the critic of contemporary art must engage in a conversation that is happening as she speaks. As Lippard observed early in her career, in 1967: "Contemporary criticism is no place for someone who hopes to be right all or most of the time."[3]

To appreciate the contributions of Lucy Lippard it's important to consider not only how her influence has been felt, but also how and where it hasn't been—for reasons that both do and don't have to do with however Lippard has been producing and navigating within the imprecise and speculative practice of art criticism.

I

Lucy Lippard emerged out of and within the American post–World War II generation, a generation that came into a fine art scene catapulted into existence by the altered political, economic, and cultural circumstances of the United States—and its art—after 1945. The confluence of postwar circumstances that permitted, and even encouraged, a viable visual art community in New York City during the 1960s were largely the result of situations that had begun or been realized during the forties and fifties. These included the influx of art dealers, collectors, and artists who fled Europe and the Nazis; the international success (or rather like the Allies, "triumph") of American abstract expressionism; the production of new schools and

programs for visual art training that began and continued during the two decades that followed the end of the war; the successful cultural expansions of New York museums devoted to modern and contemporary art, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, all of which were founded in the decades just before World War II and blossomed subsequently; and the coterminous emergence of an American collector class dedicated to buying and supporting art made in the United States.

After taking an undergraduate degree in art history from Smith College, Lippard came to New York City in 1958 to become a fiction writer. She took a job as a page in the library at the Museum of Modern Art, where she met other young newcomers to the visual art scene, including Sol Le Witt, who worked the night desk, Dan Flavin, who worked as a guard, and Robert Ryman, who also worked as a guard (and whom Lippard would marry and divorce). She has referred to this period of her life as her time as "one of the Bowery Boys," when she, Ryman, LeWitt, Robert Mangold, Frank Lincoln Viner, Tom Doyle, Ray Donarski, Eva Hesse, and Sylvia Mangold all lived on or near the Bowery in the early sixties. Lippard enrolled in the graduate program at the Fine Art Institute of New York University (where she received an M.A. for a thesis on Max Ernst) to continue her formal education as an art historian. Her first piece of criticism, on Jean Dubuffet and Ernst, appeared in the *College Art Journal* in 1962. By 1964 she was writing reviews on contemporary art for the then fledgling *Artforum* and the more established *Art International* (now defunct).

When Lippard arrived in downtown Manhattan, an American visual art scene that mirrored the production and distribution for visual culture that had been established in Paris during the nineteenth century had been newly, and nearly completely, constructed in New York. By the mid-1960s, New York was host to a functioning network of commercial galleries, museums, artists, publications, critics, rivalries, and collectors devoted to contemporary art. "In the sixties," as Lippard has written,

"New York was resting in a self-imposed and self-satisfied isolation, having taken the title of world art capital from Paris in the late '50s."[4] Lippard's awareness of the limitations that attended New York's consolidation of cultural and economic forces was expressed as early as 1970 in a catalog essay for the Museum of Modern Art's *Information* exhibition, where she asserted, "In New York, the present gallery-money-power structure is so strong that it's going to be very difficult to find a viable alternative to it."[5]

When she began to publish criticism regularly, Lippard entered an artistic dialogue that had just recently moved beyond what had constituted the first real wave of a consciously understood American contribution to European visual practice. Abstract expressionism had newly ceded some commercial and critical ground to pop art, even though the dominant standards of New York visual culture were still being dictated according to the formalist aesthetics consolidated in the later writings of the New York School's most established critic, Clement Greenberg. One of the first reviewing positions Lippard sought was from *Arts* magazine, where Hilton Kramer was editor. He rejected her reviews.[6] When she found her first steady platform, as the New York reviewer for *Arts International*, Lippard emerged within the aesthetics of what would eventually be known as minimalism and, its subsidiary and more critical analogue, conceptualism. Her writings from the late sixties, which were greatly influenced by her direct participation in a social milieu dominated by the visual artists she wrote about, are among the most informed documents on what was then considered the new art in New York. Her most influential essay from this period, "The Dematerialization of Art," (1968), cowritten with John Chandler, remains a classic introduction to the artistic motivations and historical origins of conceptual art practices.

Lippard's initial understanding of what constitutes value in visual art had been influenced according to European, especially French, art making of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her earliest essays and reviews refer often to surrealism, Dada and cubism. Indeed, she edited two anthologies, *Surrealists on*

Art and *Dadas on Art*, both published in 1970. Like other American critics and artists who aligned themselves with an idea of the avant-garde during the sixties, Lippard favored Marcel Duchamp over Pablo Picasso as the kingpin of early-20th-century European art; many of her essays before 1970 identify Duchamp as the logical precursor to the then new art, a situation she has subsequently qualified sarcastically: "As responsible critics we had to mention Duchamp as a precedent . . . "[7] Lippard has also, somewhat more idiosyncratically, maintained an early and ongoing penchant for the art and ideas of the American abstract painter Ad Reinhardt (on whom she published a monograph in 1966). Additionally, her originary aesthetics were infected by the strident formalism of Clement Greenberg, as were nearly everybody's at the time, though Lippard was quickly anti-Greenbergian in her immediate championship of pop art (she published her survey *Pop Art* in 1966) and of minimalism, movements publicly denounced by Greenberg when they began to gain ground. While other New York critics, most notably Rosalind E. Krauss and Michael Fried, towed a Greenbergian line even as they insisted on their critical differentiation from same, Lippard consistently sought out other artistic strategies and artists to write about, and even refused to publish in *Artforum* from 1967 to 1971 as a protest against the magazine's continued dedication to Greenbergian formalism at the expense of other artistic directions.[8]

Lippard entered New York's artistic and critical community during a period when art criticism, and all cultural criticism, was undergoing a process of tentative reexamination. Criticism was announced as auxiliary, if not antithetical, to cultural products themselves—novels, films, poems, paintings, and sculptures. The most obvious gesture of the anticriticism position was Susan Sontag's influential essay "Against Interpretation," first published in *The Evergreen Review* in 1964 and subsequently released to a wider audience when it appeared in an eponymous essay collection of 1966. Sontag's essayistic castigation of the interpretive mode included sweeping statements against the search for meaning (and "content") in art, such as: "Interpretation, based on