



***WOMEN'S IMAGES RE-EDITED: THE CRITICAL REMIX
WITHIN FEMINIST CONTEXT***

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Abstract

One contemporary feminist critical remix practice is to subvert a male/female dichotomy. In this essay, I discuss current aspects of remix and re-editing criteria within feminist video works by women artists contextualized within feminist movements. I begin with a media critique of subverted women's media images by remixing them from commodified constructs into a disclosure of gendered ideals. My analysis deconstructs sexism and racism in a male and female dichotomous social system that still exists as a tradition of White and Black image constructions within a post-colonial discourse.

Keywords: video art, feminism, feminist film analysis, women artists, feminist remix

**Women's Images Re-Edited:
The Critical Remix Within Feminist Context**

To view "Women's Images Re-Edited" in a feminist perspective, it is important to contextualize in a historical frame of what are conceived of as three waves of feminism. While other feminists problematize the metaphor of waves, I use feminist wave theory as a historical introduction to de- and re-construction of images by women artists to offer a historical narrative of feminist remix aesthetics. I begin this essay with discussion of feminist created collage work in the early 20th century, in what is considered first-wave feminism with photography as a medium. I posit that the collages are precursors to feminist subversions of media images in video art during second-wave feminism (in the late 1960s to 1990s). With access to digital production, third wave feminists' video art utilizes Internet searches of amassed images from the Internet to counter 21st century feminist backlash by patriarchal practices occurring on the Internet and in popular culture of video games, films, advertisements, and Internet sites. "Remix" is therefore not a new invention. The male construction of female objects of desire and commodified women's bodies, and the male created gaze, proceeded from Renaissance painting to later photography, film, and video. Important in this lineage, is also the rise of gendered sexualised advertisements, first as printed image and later as moving image on the screen. The rise of new media facilitated this process, primarily through the construction and production of male visions of females, and later with the feminist de-construction of women's images within digital remix practices.

Women's Images "Remix" Within the First Feminist Wave

Collage and photomontage emerged as an art form at the beginning of the 20th century and during the 1920s, in conjunction with modernism where a range of experimental photographic techniques arose and were developed. The technique of the photomontage can be seen as a conceptual method to collect, subvert, and reassemble image contents; thus leading away from a mere photographic representation when depicting social and political critique.

The visual depiction of women was already very present before the invention of photography and later cinematography, and blossomed around the turn of the 19th century with these newly available media. A textual and reading-based society has changed to a visual image-based society, where a visual regime has been self-empowered and where images are no longer recognized as representations. Krolokke and Sorensen (2006) describe the visual depiction as an ideological construction of an absolute category of “woman.” This order of representation naturalized women as a beautiful image to look at, even defined by her ‘look’ through putting on the mask of beauty. “Woman” became a matter of commodified visual representation, representing modernist and industrial thinking.

A critical engagement in re-constructing media images to de-construct the content on an iconologic level involves a disclosure of the male gaze and an analysis of the construction process. The process can be seen as a political montage of media images, where gender becomes a political issue. John Heartfield’s political photomontages and also Hannah Höch’s works provide counter images of the same time, as both were members of the Berlin Dada art movement.

In 1930, Hannah Höch created the photomontage *Mother: From an Ethnographic Museum* (*Mutter: Aus einem ethnographischen Museum*) (<http://humanities.uchicago.edu/classes/readcult/figure7.html>), which actually used the same corpus of the woman photographed by Heartfield for one of his photomontages, but used by Höch without a pregnant womb. The face of the woman is replaced with collaged photographic elements associating historic and modern times. The entire series *From an Ethnographic Museum* critiques and reflects the role of a woman in a modern, technocratic, and mediatised society. The changes at this time to a new women’s image is set between the old structures of an ethno mask and social emancipation within new forms of commodification of women. Another work by Hannah Höch, entitled *The Gymnastics Teacher* (*Die Gymnastiklehrerin*) (<http://www.artvalue.com/auctionresult-hoch-hannah-1889-1979-germany-die-gymnastiklehrerin-1657433.htm>) depicts ideal female beauty from the media in relation to the image of a corpulent woman of everyday life posing in a housework dress. Höch adopted an early feminist art perspective, where cut outs of photographic

images have been reassembled to communicate the image representation of a woman in an (early) mediatised society. In the cut outs of women from media, depictions of the legs, faces, and eyes are central to describe the “new woman.” This “new woman” is deconstructed as a gendered media construct. In her other work, Höch created photomontages that forefronted the fetishistic character of women’s images and the male gaze on female fetishized objects such as legs, which is also viewed later in feminist film analysis based on psychoanalytical reading of images. In another photomontage, the woman is depicted as a construction of an industrialised mechanical object as a reference to modern times. In *The Eternal Female* (*Das ewig Weibliche*) (<http://www.art1900.de/Exp2Sub.html>) Höch arranged beauty elements as female stereotypes, which also becomes important decades later for the critique on the commodified woman in media images within second-wave feminism.

Women’s Images “Remix” Within the Second Feminist Wave

During the 1970s the theoretical basis of radical second-wave feminism was a combination of neo-Marxism and psychoanalysis, leading to a discourse of investigating the role of women as victims of a patriarchal, commercialised, oppressive beauty culture. The feminist revolution also had deep impact on the art world, in particular for the production and consumption of women’s art. Viewers can see various manifestations of subversions and re-arrangements of photographic media images in works by Martha Rosler and Barbara Kruger. (See <http://www.martharosler.net> and <http://www.barbarakruger.com>.) The feminist revolution collision with the sexual revolution not only liberated women, but also targeted women in another new boost of commodification and sexualisation of the women’s body. Many women artists’ works center around the woman’s body and the male gaze, offering a critique on media images and its male construction within the commodification of women. Martha Rosler created a series of photomontages during the years 1966-1972, entitled *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows no Pain* (<http://www.artlies.org/article.php?id=1487&issue=54&s=0>), where the female body becomes visible as a targeted object in a sexualised media society. In the photocollage *Hot House, or Harem* (<http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/>

arthistory/feminist/images/MarthaRosler-Hothouse-Harem-1972.jpg)

from this series, Rosler collects images of naked women's bodies, which are rearranged in masses and in a form that connotes a paradise for sexualised male fantasies from the porn industry.

Artist Barbara Kruger primarily criticised constructions of women in media through her photographic montages with text elements, such as *You are not yourself* (1982) (http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2009/04/24/arts/20090424-pict-ss_2.html?_r=0), *We are not what we seem* (1988) (<http://videoguerrillas.tumblr.com/post/671279551/we-are-not-we-what-we-seem-barbara-kruger-no>), and *Your body is a battleground* (1989) (<http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/feminist/Barbara-Kruger.html>). These photographs and text-based images depict a postmodern context of women functioning as a social figure where imbalanced power relations between the gendered sexes are foregrounded.

Pollock (2003) argues that during the 1970s, sexuality became a cultural construct in which the meaning of sexuality within a male gendered society opposed a feminist essentialist perspective based on a natural or *biological* truth. Pollock's thesis opposes a dyadic discourse and offers possibilities for change of conventional categories from the continuous production of sexual difference, which is stabilised through media images.

The cues for Pollock's 21st century challenge can be seen in the famous 1930s debate between Bertolt Brecht and George Lukacs on the political merits of realism versus modernism, in defence of contemporary artists working within a radical or political modernism (Pollock, 2003). The strategies of radical modernist artists were Brecht's notions of "distanciation," "defamiliarization," and "dis-identificatory" practices, where the viewer has to be liberated from being passively captured by illusions of art. For Brecht, radical art is not united, it is multi-faceted and inspired new art forms, such as performance and time-based work, installations, videos, scripto-visual multiple projects; art forms which are influenced by society, media, and political discourses. From a third wave feminist perspective of feminist art in the 1970s, art is interpreted as a specific intervention, interrogation, lesson, and action to question (Pollock, 2003). "Reality is to be grasped not in the mirror of vision but in the distance of analysis, the displacement of the ideology that vision reflects and con-

firms" (Pollock, 2003, pp. 226-227).

Feminist artists in the 1970s not only used photographic images for creating montages, but also moving images that they altered and re-imagined. The expansion of artistic media through the invention of video art emerged around the 1970s and was appealing especially for women artists since it was not esconced in male art history. It became possible to act out in a performative context by having control over the media and the image, while using the media video to explore female gender issues. Beneath experimental video works, body experiments and *facing the self* has been put in a context of *The Personal is Political*. Women artists, especially in Europe and North America beginning in the 1970s, criticized media images from TV and print; read them as political text and viewed them as political images of a male media discourse.

The video work *New Reel* (1977) by Hermine Freed is one early remix example of television footage where the disclosure of the images' cultural representation is foregrounded. In a videotape that stands out as one of the earliest examples of the use of appropriated television footage, Freed assembles a collage of images representing USA media icons, from Mickey Mouse and Richard Nixon, to *The Wizard of Oz* and the Rolling Stones. Placing cartoon images next to images of the war in Vietnam, Freed creates a surreal vision of United States culture, and begs the question whether an anthropologist of the future would be able to decipher the truth of the age from such a confused mix of representations. Continuing a theme brought up in several of her earlier videos, Freed asks, "if history is made of memories, whose memories is it made of?" (Video Data Bank, 2011).

An early example of a popular feminist strategy of appropriating and subverting mass media images to critique representation of women's bodies and lives is the video piece *Beaver Valley* (1980) created by Janice Tanaka. Troy (2011) argues that:

By the end of the decade, as television as furniture was entrenched in nearly every American home, many feminist artists were recognizing media images as a political text with tremendous social influence. Here, television commercials in which women appear as one-dimensional sexy sirens (in one a woman's rear

end in tight jeans is shown with a yellow racing car speeding toward her crotch) are balanced with original black and white scenes exploring conflicting emotions related to sexuality and motherhood. (p. 3)

Beaver Valley is a classic early feminist video about the commodification of the female body and how media are constructing women's identities as well as shaping them as objects of desire. Popular mass media constructions of women entrenched stereotypes about women. Feminist remixes critique what constructs women as media objects from outside, while this *outside* is described as a male gendered media structure, re-modelling women as objects of desire within the acceptable roles of a woman in a patriarchal society.

Hermine Freed's video piece *Art Herstory* (1974) critiques the male canon in art history during the 1970s feminist struggle in society and within the male art system. In *Art Herstory*, Freed remixes images from art history with images of herself. In this way, she figuratively *inserts* herself and her artwork in art history.

Women's Images "Remix" Within Third-Wave Feminism

Viewing the field of art in the new era of digital technology, global communication, and the new media Internet, the demands of women artists from the 1970s and aspects of modernity can be included, when demanding equal positions for women as subject and not as object of art, addressing the exclusion of women artists through a male gendered society. The deconstruction of women's images within media contexts as an ongoing tradition from the 1970s continues. It is stunning that the current generation of women artists are articulating nearly the same issues, but within their own contemporary style and frame of creation, while using images from new media as a generation influenced by pop culture and clip aesthetics. When addressing the male gaze within media images, its construction and consumption, the regalia of power still shape binary and male structures, although *gender fluidity* became an ethos of third-wave feminism. "The sexual politics of looking function around a regime which divides into binary positions, activity/passivity, looking/being

seen, voyeur/exhibitionist, subject/object" (Pollock, 2003, pp. 123-124).

For formulating spaces of femininity, it has to be considered that gendered binary structures of modernity are still within media and their images. "Modernity is still with us, ... and ... it is relevant then to develop feminist analyses of the founding moments of modernity and modernism, to discern its sexualised structures, to discover past resistances and differences, to examine how women producers developed alternative models for negotiating modernity and the spaces of femininity" (Pollock, 2003, p. 127).

Offering a feminist counter cinema and an example of rearranging traditional film, Abigail Child series *Is This What You Were Born For?* from the 1980s, constructs and subverts a wide range of film source materials as conceptions located within a cinematographic context. Her original montage pushes the envelope of sound-image relations with sensitivity, smarts and passion; and explores gender while focusing on strategies for rewriting narrative (Child, 2011). McElhatten (2011) explains:

Child decomposes the materials and gestures that would compose us. ... Each image and sound cuts deep and works over time containing hidden and unhidden detonations working against the manufactured ambush that images have in store. ... Viewer passivity is unsafe and active viewing is a necessary pleasure. (p. 1)

Furthermore, the film collaboration between Tracey Moffatt and Gary Hillberg, entitled *Love* (2003), depicts the cinematic structure of a classic love story re-editing into an unhappy ending, not for the female protagonist, but for the male main actor. Tracey Moffatt reverses gender roles beginning with love and admiration, which evolves to male rage, and later to female bursts of anger. White (2011) describes the piece as

A wealth of clips, from chaste black-and-white Hollywood classics to more full-flooded fare from the 1960s and 1970s, show women's love, lust, longing and revenge. Without commentary or condescension, the film remakes the age-old story of a boy and girl in love with exhilaration and irony. (p. 1)

The difference to the classic narratives in film history is the rearrangement of the footage in an empowering form where the female actress succeeds over the male suppression of the protagonist, reviving the found footage film as a feminist genre and remixing the former genres anew.

Proceeding Third-wave Feminist Video Pieces

The following discussed and analyzed video works state a media critique in form of a subversion of media images themselves and remix women's images of commodified constructs into a disclosure of gendered ideals. The videos visualize constructions of sexism and racism not only in a male and female dichotomy, but also within the gender imbalance in a post-colonial discourse.

Within this frame, the video work *Distaff [Ain't I Redux]* (2008) by artist Sian Amoy remixes images of Black women made by Disney with contemporary sports images. This re-mix is a disclosure of Disney's images not only as an example for controversial stereotyped images of Black women, but also in another context, of restricting a Black cinema to racial segregation in the U.S. until the 1950s.

When analysing the split screen video work *Distaff [Ain't I Redux]*, on the left side of the screen images show Mammy caricatures from animated cartoon films made by segregated Hollywood and Disney film companies, while on the right screen current footage from a tennis match shows an exaggerated strong animal like metabolic enhanced woman. But the sportswoman on the right is depicted in her thinker poses and as to be preparing for the *fight*, preparing herself for the strike back, when finally smashing the ball back, literally into the image of the Mammy caricature on the left. A close-up of a single eye follows, which can be assumed to be the artist's eye, and later the tennis game of two players is to see, followed again by the close-up of the single eye, and finally the success of the player is captured, while on the left screen still the caricatures of a Black *mammy* are visible throughout the entire video. I interpret *Distaff [Ain't I Redux]* as a symbol for a form of empowered disclosure of stereotypes within the Black female gaze on media images (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Sian Amoy, *Distaff [Ain't I Redux]*, 2008, Video Still. Courtesy

Moreover, both, the Mammy caricature and the mediated sports star can be associated with the *Hottentot Venus Sarah (Saartjie) Baartman*, drawn by Georges Cuvier in 1815, whose anatomy and physiology became a strong stereotype for the image of African women in a colonial and post-colonial context. While this former image of the Hottentot Venus became bodily associated with the Mammy caricature, it has been overtly sexualised in a pornographic context as the Jezebel stereotype in the 1970s. The perpetuation of stereotypes of Black women demonstrates that gendered racist stereotypes and the colonization of a Black women's body became prevalent in media and proceeds until today. Further, *Distaff [Ain't I Redux]* shows how the tradition of mother and whore dualism continues unfettered. The video work *Distaff [Ain't I Redux]* visualises a dual image not only in its representation of the split screen itself, but through this giving references to stereotypes of mother and whore, also as a mediated woman's image, which still contains echoes of stereotypes on both screens, since sports reports tend to depict sexualised images of women, notably in tennis reports. But the split in the screen also represents the contemporary Afro-American woman, who is an empowered subject with a female gaze, thus offering a disclosure on the Black woman's media image.

What comes together in the two split screen images, is not only the stereotyped shape of the Hottentot Venus, but the seemingly *natu-*

realisation of the woman's body through sports images in general on one side and the "mother" caricature of a woman on the other side. In both screens the woman's body is centred and naturalized; making sex differences visible. While the woman's body is associated with nature because of its ability to reproduce, in sports the body is foregrounded and carrier of ideology for symbolising cultural ideology on sex differences, where the male body symbolises culture as the *master of nature*. Artist Sian Amoy describes the tennis star of the video as manly, but the depiction of manly and lacking all femininity is common for women in sports. Klein (1988) argues that the body changes visibly physiological through sports training and develops similarly to male body forms. This impact on body alteration has been criticised since the beginning of women's sports. Her deviation from the female *norm* affirms the effectiveness of the male aesthetic norm as social control over the female body in masculinising women through sport (Klein, 1988). "Should a sportswomen's achievement have reached or excelled what is accepted as normal for males, admiration was expressed, but also often amazement if not embarrassment" (Klein, 1988, p. 143).

Artist Sian Amoy writes about her video work:

Distaff is Old World lexicon for women's work or things that are known to be traditionally female-related. This film takes images from a recent US Open tennis match between tennis stars Venus and Serena Williams and harshly contrasts that with stereotypical images of women of African descent taken from cartoons from the early part of the [20th] century. Much is often made of Venus's and Serena's physical abilities and their ability to 'overpower' their opponents as opposed to their strategic acumen during games. This contrasted against the exaggerated physical features of the illustrated women. Often, as with the [Williams] sisters, their physical features are exaggerated, specifically their legs, behind, and facial features, often depicting them as manly and lacking all femininity. (Amoy, 2011)

The following two videos view women's images in media in relation to gendered sexualised images in the public realm of advertisement

and new media. While the video *Endless Game* (2006) by Vesna Bukovec uses images from advertisements to create an endless stream of over-idealized women's faces from television commercials, Evelin Stermitz's work *Women in War* (2010,) shows an aggregation of sexualised gendered images of commodified women from the public online video platform YouTube® mixed with the underlaid sound of reports on violence against women. Both videos articulate the commodification of women in a postmodern media context while still facing aspects of modernity. Artist Vesna Bukovec states about her video *Endless Game* (Figure 2):



Figure 2. Vesna Bukovec, *Endless Game*, 2006, Video Still. Courtesy of the artist.

Contemporary advertising no longer directly sells products, it sells emotions, desires and fantasies. Advertisers teach us how we have to look and behave to be competitive in today's world. Most of the advertising uses eroticism as the primary force of attraction. Who is the target audience, male or female? Even if the product is made for women, the imagery addresses both sexes. A woman has to buy the product that will transform her in such a way that she can enter a man's fantasy. ... The endless

game of seduction is present everywhere. In case we forget, the first advertisement will remind us. (Bukovec, 2011, p. 1)

Pollock argues that the discourse of advertising and its production and consumption constructs the consuming subject, which is possessive, desiring, and competitive, when rendering the woman as an object (Pollock, 2003, p. 238). This performance in advertisements shape the ideal women for the male beholder, which constitutes the split self of a woman. Bronfen states that,

If, in the way she imagines and carries herself, woman is always accompanied by an image performed for the masculine gaze, this entails an uncanny doubling of the self. Oscillating between the gaze directed at her and her own engagement with this gaze, her self-perception thrives off a productive tension between her “true” self and the image she is meant to resemble. ... However, if a woman’s appearance depends on the masculine gaze, her power consists in manipulating the manner in which she is surveyed. (Bronfen, 2002, p. 13)

The method of appropriation has been applied by various artists since the 1970s to work against the mediated images of women. Whereby Ross (2000) describes “Appropriation” as: “... the critical act of appropriating mass media representations to disclose the social contradictions they otherwise tend to naturalize” (p. 1). A similar approach and a form of subversion of media images through video art to disclose male constructed fantasies on women’s images is viewed in Evelin Stermitz’s video work *Women in War* (Figure 3) and emerged from a new media context. The video work was created during a research on the tag “women” on YouTube and through this finding stereotyped videos with women’s images entitled as “Most Beautiful Women,” “Famous Sexy Women,” and so forth. By re-editing the found videos and underlaying the material with sounds from reports on women in war and violence against women, the final video became a strange subversion of women’s media images and the woman as a commodified object becomes obvious. The video is split between women’s images in media and the sound of the

real, to break with a world of male illusions and enter the field of male transgression. *Women in War* is a metaphor for women’s images in the media war and real war. Since YouTube can be viewed as a source and database for current media images through its popularity and free upload of user content, it mirrors the emphasis on viewing females as objects of desire when repeating ancient dyadic sexualised objects and through this stabilising the binary tradition, while also referencing societal structures and hierarchies.



Figure 3. Evelin Stermitz, *Women in War*, 2010, Video Still. Courtesy of the artist.

The video *Sew Akira* by Michelle Handelman (2008) describes explosion like images in which the face of a woman is sewed in. *Sew Akira* can be seen as a metaphor for a woman’s image interwoven with mediated image constructions, losing identity and space for own images (Figure 4). Handelman’s statement about her video can be viewed with irony, when associated with the position of a woman in media images as a repeatable copy function for constructions of womanhood in a postmodern hyper-mediated society where the overall sexualisation of

a woman's body in media is obvious. Artist Michelle Handelman writes about her video remix:



Figure 4. Michelle Handelman, *Sew Akira*, 2008, Video Still. Courtesy of the artist.

Why Sample: because it inspires me. Because I can take that which is perfect and repeat it ad *infinitum*, because the more I repeat it the more it hypnotizes me, because then I can hypnotize the viewer, because it represents a moment of pure visual and physical ecstasy for me and if I take that moment, just that one moment, I can have that ecstasy forever! Because it's there and I can take it. Why Akira: because it has the best animated smoke, because it screeches, because it's the first popular anime and my performance character is based on anime, because I want to live inside that movie, because it's flat and beautiful, because the color is so intense, because motorcycles are cool, because sometimes I want to be a cartoon. What does it become: a new rhythm, a new vision, a reflection of my outer world with my inner voice, a relationship between my outer world with my inner voice, a melding of influence and action, a dream of sex and fury and

messy fluids. (Handelman, personal communication, January 23, 2011)

The remix video art discussed in this section proceed third-wave feminist video pieces as a counter cinema to male structures in art and the media society. The rearrangement of cut outs from found footage in digitised artefacts such as videos echo a tradition of early feminist critical political photomontage occurring at the beginning of the 20th century in the Dadaist style.

While feminist art *officially* emerges in the 1970s, it has roots in the early 20th century. Many contemporary women artists work within a postmodern context and poststructuralist style proceeding and altering the practice of women artists from the first-wave feminist period. They work with found footage retrieved from both classic and new media in a global context. In these practices, not only female image constructions of male media are analysed, subverted, and criticized, but also reconfigured in a feminist context where female spectatorship and the subversion of the male gaze becomes a central focus for the re-edited images in a critical artistic approach.

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Author's Bio

Evelin Stermitz, M.A., M.Phil., studied Media and New Media Art at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, and holds the degree in Philosophy from Media Studies. Her works in the field of media and new media art focus on post-structuralist feminist art practices. In 2008 she founded ArtFem.TV – Art and Feminism ITV (<http://www.artfem.tv>) and received a Special Mention for the project at the IX Festival Internacional de la Imagen, VI Muestra Monográfica de Media Art, University of Caldas, Manizales, Colombia, in 2010.

Her works have been exhibited and screened at various venues such as the MMoMA Moscow Museum of Modern Art, Russia / Vetlanda Museum, Sweden / Centro Nacional de las Artes, Mexico City / Museum of Modern Art, Buenos Aires, Argentina / PAN Palazzo delle Arti Napoli / CAM Casoria Contemporary Art Museum, Naples, Italy / Museum of Contemporary Art of Vojvodina, Novi Sad, Serbia / Fundació Joan Miró and CCCB Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, Spain / Museum of Fine Arts, Florida State University, USA / MAC/VAL Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne, France / Chelsea Art Museum, New York, USA / International Museum of Women, San Francisco, USA.

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