

Moderators: Jonathan P. Eburne and Judith Roof

EDITORS' FORUM:

ANGRY WOMEN AT 25

*T*wenty-five years ago, in the midst of the Culture Wars, the San Francisco-based punk magazine series RE/SEARCH published ANGRY WOMEN, an anthology of interviews with fifteen contemporary performance artists, writers, musicians, and activists. The anthology marked something of a turning point in the history of feminism, its expression of renewed anger marking a tentative break with identity politics and a recognition of the need for “a renaissance of hope which anger can bring—stuck as we are in the midst of an existential, angst ridden culture of cynicism which has helped implant a widespread attitude of passivity and submissive acceptance,” as its editors remarked.¹ In 2016 we continue to live in times of active cultural as well as geopolitical warfare; how much have the conditions of cynicism and repression changed since 1991? There is, after all, still a whole lot to get angry about. Beyond its political claims, we consider the anthology to play no less significant a role in changing the genealogy and discourse of experimental artistic practice, particularly in the United States, where the work of collecting and circulating experimental art by women remains deeply necessary. In light of the twenty-fifth anniversary of ANGRY WOMEN we asked a number of scholars and artists, including some of the artists originally featured in the issue, to reflect on the relevance—as well as the inevitable shortcomings and frustrations—of the anthology today. What are we to make of the anthology’s framing concerns:

its frank, aggressive sexuality, its unapologetic recourse to myth, and its claim that “we need an electric revitalization of our life force; a reconnection to the world; a heightened conviction that we can change life”?² Into what kinds of contemporary genealogies of experimentalism do we—or should we—place the likes of KATHY ACKER, SUSIE BRIGHT, WANDA COLEMAN, VALIE EXPORT, KAREN FINLEY, DIAMANDA GALÁS, BELL HOOKS, HOLLY HUGHES, LYDIA LUNCH, SUZY KERR AND DIANNE MALLEY, LINDA MONTANO, AVITAL RONELL, SAPPHIRE, CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN, and ANNIE SPRINKLE? And what are the continued stakes of anger in the arts of the present?



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¹ Andrea Juno and V. Vale, introduction to *Angry Women* (San Francisco: Re/Search, 1991), 5.

² *Ibid.*

Figure 1.
Angry Women, edited by Andrea Juno and V. Vale.

STRONG FEMALE CHARACTER

ASHTON COOPER

The mythical Gorgon Medusa retains a strong hold on the modern imaginary, from Sigmund Freud's contention that her tale was the ultimate illustration of castration anxiety, to Hélène Cixous's poststructuralist positioning of her threat to phallogocentrism, and to Medusa's Revenge, a short-lived second-wave lesbian theater company.¹

When Perseus cuts off Medusa's petrifying head, he effectively transforms her into an image he can then use as a weapon for his own ends. He therefore doubly removes the power of the monster, bringing about not just her death

but also the postmortem control and manipulation of her image. The myth thus becomes a striking metaphor for how powerful and instrumental images of women can be in the very oppression of women.

And so there is the premortem Medusa meeting our eyes on the cover of Re/Search's 1991 early Riot Grrrl compendium *Angry Women*, a volume that gathers together sixteen interviews with women who, at the very least, have taken charge of their own representations. Here, Medusa is still vibrant, still

commanding her own powerfully deadly image, a potent symbol for the women the collection presents. If Cixous urged women to write their own stories, then these artists and writers have devoted themselves to creating unflinching images of the female body on their own terms.

Carolee Schneemann's interview in *Angry Women* outlines a corporeal methodology for depicting the female body, which Schneemann herself began using in the early 1960s and which remains useful up to the present. In

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her artwork and writing, Schneemann images herself and the female form with an emphasis on physicality and the specificity of a body's lived experience. She uses blood, bodily fluids, and yonic interior spaces to stress really *feeling* the body at the same time that she creates representations of it. She conflates paint and blood—the material that makes images with the material that makes bodies. “I am both image maker and image,” Schneemann says.²

Apart from her artwork, a key facet of Schneemann's practice is her refashioning

of our understanding of ancient art, something she does often in interviews and in her writing. Schneemann goes beyond the Second-Wave turn to herstory, which uncovers and glorifies female historical figures; she instead rewrites history so that our foremothers become women depicting themselves. “I assume those ancient ‘goddess’ figurines were made by women,” she says in *Angry Women*.³ Another historical revision is her contention that those smeary red hands pressed on cave walls are actually made with menstrual blood. “Complex electronic measurements have confirmed that the patterns of handprints in Paleolithic caves were made by women (probably using menstrual blood),” she wrote last year.⁴ Complex electronic measurements aside, her reclaiming and rewriting of history recontextualizes reified concepts—“fertility” figures and the first art made by “man”—as images made of and by women. How can this change our conception of history? How can this change our conception of our origins and ourselves?

Schneemann’s most transformative work for me is “Interior Scroll.” In *Angry Women*, she describes it: “In one performance, ‘Interior Scroll,’ [1975] I stood naked in front of the audience, extracted a paper scroll from my vagina and read a text on ‘Vulvic Space’—about the abstraction of the female body and its loss of meanings.”⁵ The abstraction she refers to is precisely why it is so important to reclaim “fertility goddesses,” even metaphorically. In emphasizing the specificity of the body, Schneemann asks us to think about *who*

is making the art and, beyond that, the socio-political context in which they existed.

“I mistrust intensely whatever you might call your ‘own life’ because whatever it is, it might already be colonized by principles and aesthetic ideals that society offers you,” she says in *Angry Women*. “So my work has to do with cutting through the idealized (mostly male) mythology of the ‘abstracted self’ or the ‘invented self.’”⁶ Her insistence on difficult, unwieldy, messy, body fluid-covered images of women and all their cavities is an effort to render that abstracted female self material. In the current moment, when we are confronted again and again with sanitized Images of Women packaged as “feminism,” these images retain every bit of their intensity and function as important historical touchstones.

Hollywood has hosted the rise of the Strong Female Character⁷ who, in all her weapon-slinging glory, is packaged as the heir apparent to the insubordinate, angry, and riot-prone facets of the Second- and Third-Wave fight. A closer look, however, reveals that these characters are stripped of their radicality by being inserted into masculinist monomythic frameworks.

The *Hunger Games* saga, for example, centers on protagonist and Strong Female Character du jour Katniss Everdeen. The trilogy ends with a return to a rural, warmly lit, and softly focused scene in which the heroine is married, wearing a sundress, and holding a baby in her arms. Safe and sanitized hetero-motherhood is

deemed the appropriate ending for a woman previously presented as the badass leader of a political rebellion. The market success of the series has no doubt been responsible for the proliferation of female protagonists in a number of new action films. The most notable perhaps is Rey, the successor to Luke Skywalker in J.J. Abrams's new *Star Wars* sequel. Following the logic and the plot of the inaugural *Star Wars* film, however, this new episode merely inserts a female character into a familiar patriarchal story line.

The *Star Wars* films are born out of Joseph Campbell's hero theory, which posits that much timeworn mythology follows a similar narrative: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."⁸ Campbell's theory (and by extension the big screen depictions of female action heroines we are seeing) is a dead ringer for Schneemann's description of "the idealized (Mostly male) mythology of the 'abstracted self' or the 'invented self.'" These abstracted women are not radical. There is no liberation in simply assimilating a woman into a system that has long oppressed her. Medusa loses her seditious power when she is stripped of the control of her own image and it is co-opted for the purposes of Perseus-as-patriarchy.

Beyond the films themselves, feminist polemic has become a marketing technique to

sell action figures to mothers and daughters, as made evident in a recent Wal-Mart commercial in which a little girl says that Princess Leia doesn't need anyone to rescue her because "she's a modern empowered woman unfettered by the antiquated gender roles of a bygone era."⁹ Here she is again: what I'd term the Strong Feminist Character, making us forget that "old" problems (reproductive rights, objectification, equal pay) are far from solved.

And this is not a new issue—for decades, feminists have taken issue with the supposed radicality of a multitude of action heroines (Princess Leia, Wonder Woman, *Alien's* Ellen Ripley, etc.). "We live in a culture of oblivion that perpetrates a kind of self-induced denial in which the meaning of the recent past is continually lost or distorted . . . much like feminist history was always lost or distorted," Schneemann says in *Angry Women*.¹⁰ It is precisely because these characters and narratives are perpetuated—and therefore these critiques must be made again and again—that *Angry Women* and the Medusa myth are so important as references for young generations looking to educate themselves on feminist history and find methodologies for creating their own representations.

"I am experiencing retroactive cautions given the degree of glamour, economic reward, and current cultural embrace of many things feminist which lack rigor, radicalization, and resistance," Schneemann writes this past year in the *ARTnews* "Women in the Art World" issue.¹¹

The great menace is that a new generation of young women will be placated into thinking that these abstracted women can serve as role models—will be pacified into not creating new narratives, new systems, new methods of thinking. Through these Strong Feminist Characters, women are being taught to assimilate into heteropatriarchal structures, instructed in oppressive dictates of how they should look and behave, and compelled to see themselves in stories written by men. “Angry Women” is a potent reminder that twenty-five years later there is still plenty to get mad about.

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¹ Sigmund Freud, “Medusa’s Head,” in *The Medusa Reader*, ed. Marjorie B. Garber and Nancy J. Vickers (New York: Routledge, 2003), 84–86; Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875–93, accessed December 15, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>; Kate Davy, *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers: Staging the Unimaginable at the WOW Café Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 39.

² Carolee Schneemann, “Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions 1963,” Artist website, accessed December 15, 2015, <http://www.carolee-schneemann.com/eyebody.html>

³ Andrea Juno and V. Vale, *Angry Women*, ed. Andrea Juno and V. Vale (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 1991), 76.

⁴ Carolee Schneemann, “Carolee Schneemann Responds,” *ARTnews*, May 26, 2015, accessed December 15, 2015, <http://www.artnews.com/2015/05/26/carolee-schneemann-responds/>

⁵ Juno and Vale, *ibid.*, 72.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁷ Sophia McDougall, “I hate Strong Female Characters,” *New Statesman*, August 15, 2013, accessed December 15, 2015, <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/08/i-hate-strong-female-characters>

⁸ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 30.

⁹ Jeff Green and Christopher Palmeri, “Star Wars’ Toys Aren’t Just For Boys Anymore as Rey Takes Over,” *Bloomberg Business*, November 30, 2015, accessed December 15, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-11-30/-star-wars-toys-aren-t-just-for-boys-anymore-as-rey-takes-over>

¹⁰ Juno and Vale, *ibid.*, 69.

¹¹ Schneemann, “Carolee Schneemann Responds.”

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