High Times Hard Times

New York Painting 1967–1975

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Outlaws: Women, Abstraction, and Painting in New York, 1967–1975

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Around twelve years old I knew a few names of "great artists." I was afraid to ask if any of these names belonged to women—what if my worst suspicions were confirmed! . . . I decided a painter named 'Cézanne' would be my mascot; I would assume Céz-anne was unquestionably a woman . . . If Cézanne could do it, I could do it.

—Carolee Schneemann[1]

For a generation of women who came of age in the 1960s, it took a measure of denial and some slyness to imagine that they might have any future as artists. Studio art and art history were taught almost universally by and about men. "'You're terrific kid . . . but don't set your heart on art, you're only a girl,'" Schneemann was cautioned while at college. "Did all this have any connection with my English teacher insisting I not do a thesis on Virginia Woolf—'trivial and obscure' . . . but Proust would do instead?" she asks, "Or my philosophy teacher objecting when I wanted to do a paper on [Simone] de Beauvoir, advising me that [Jean-Paul] Sartre was where my attention should be instead?"[2] For her part, Louise Fishman recalled: "I had no women painting teachers. When I saw a picture by Joan Mitchell, I just clung to it."[3]

The history of art did harbor some isolated female exceptions, of course. In 1955, Yayoi Kusama decided to come to the United States: "She went to the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo traveling for six hours to look up Georgia O'Keeffe's address. She sent O'Keeffe a letter . . . and fourteen watercolors. O'Keeffe was the only well-known woman painter Kusama knew."[4] O'Keeffe had gained admission to the New York art world through her ties to photographer and gallery owner Alfred Stieglitz, and most subsequent exceptions were able to claim their (however compromised) status in comparable ways, such as Helen Frankenthaler through her liaison with critic Clement Greenberg. "For women, the economic class system is largely determined by their relationship to men. The higher up the man she relates to, the more she benefits from the system," Harmony Hammond pointed out; it followed that "the lesbian . . . has no privilege unless she is independently wealthy."[5]

When Fishman came to New York in 1965, "there was no art community of women at all. Most women artists were completely invisible."[6] Those women who made inroads in the art world in the 1960s—such as Schneemann, Agnes Martin, Yoko Ono, and

Howardena Pindell, *Untitled*, 1968–70 (detail)

Left: Louise Fishman (right) with writer and activist Bertha Harris (1937–2005) at a lesbian feminist protest in New York, ca. 1974

Right: A.I.R members, 1974 *(from left to right)* bottom row: Howardena Pindell, Daria Dorosh, Maude Boltz, Rosemary Mayer; second row: Mary Grigoriadis, Agnes Denes, Louise Kramer, Loretta Dunkelman; third row: Barbara Zucker, Patsy Norvell, Sari Dienes, Judith Bernstein; top row: Laurace James, Nancy Spero, Pat Lasch, Anne Healy, Dottie Attie

Yvonne Rainer—experienced extreme adversity, at times to a point where personal collapse ensued.[7] The realm where experimental dance intersected with Performance art proved relatively more hospitable to female participants, given women's historical importance in modern dance (and a general receptivity to the exposure of nubile bodies). Yet, as Schneemann wrote in 1974 to Allan Kaprow:

> at the time when our gang was getting recognition and help in the 60's I received recognition and proportionately no help whatsoever. . . . None of the other men ever asked me what I was doing, thinking, or spoke about my work. It went in one direction: I asked them about their processes, events. . . . Now we women reach to each other.[8]

Consciousness-raising groups provided new and crucial resources for many in the late 1960s and '70s, including Fishman, Hammond, Elizabeth Murray, Ree Morton, Joan Snyder, Jane Kaufman, and Howardena Pindell—although Pindell has faulted her white cohort for discounting the impact of racism. These groups broadly addressed all facets of the conditions of women's personal and working lives, though with a view ultimately to securing their right to be recognized as artists, rather than "women artists" or exceptions. The advent of programmatically feminist art initiatives in the 1970s, alongside women-only publishing and

exhibition opportunities, generally held limited appeal for those women specifically committed to abstract modalities. Moreover, these abstract artists had to rebuff those feminists who derided abstraction as failing to advance women's interests, or even as endemically masculinist, due to its purportedly distancing and elitist character. "For a lot of feminists, formalism represented the patriarchy—male authority, male ideas, and male rule," Lucy Lippard recalled.[9]

For most women, demanding the freedom to become an artist meant demanding the freedom to work as they pleased. For many, abstraction stood as the epitome of aesthetic liberty. "Painting gave me the same feeling of tremendous freedom I had experienced playing ball," recalled former tomboy Fishman:

> it was abstraction as much as painting that thrilled me. I had seen all those issues of *Art News* that my mother had, with articles like "Joan Mitchell Paints a Picture" . . . I saw all those painters as rogues, outside the normal course of things . . . I felt that Abstract Expressionist work was an appropriate language for me as a queer. It was a hidden language, on the radical fringe, a language appropriate to being separate.[10]

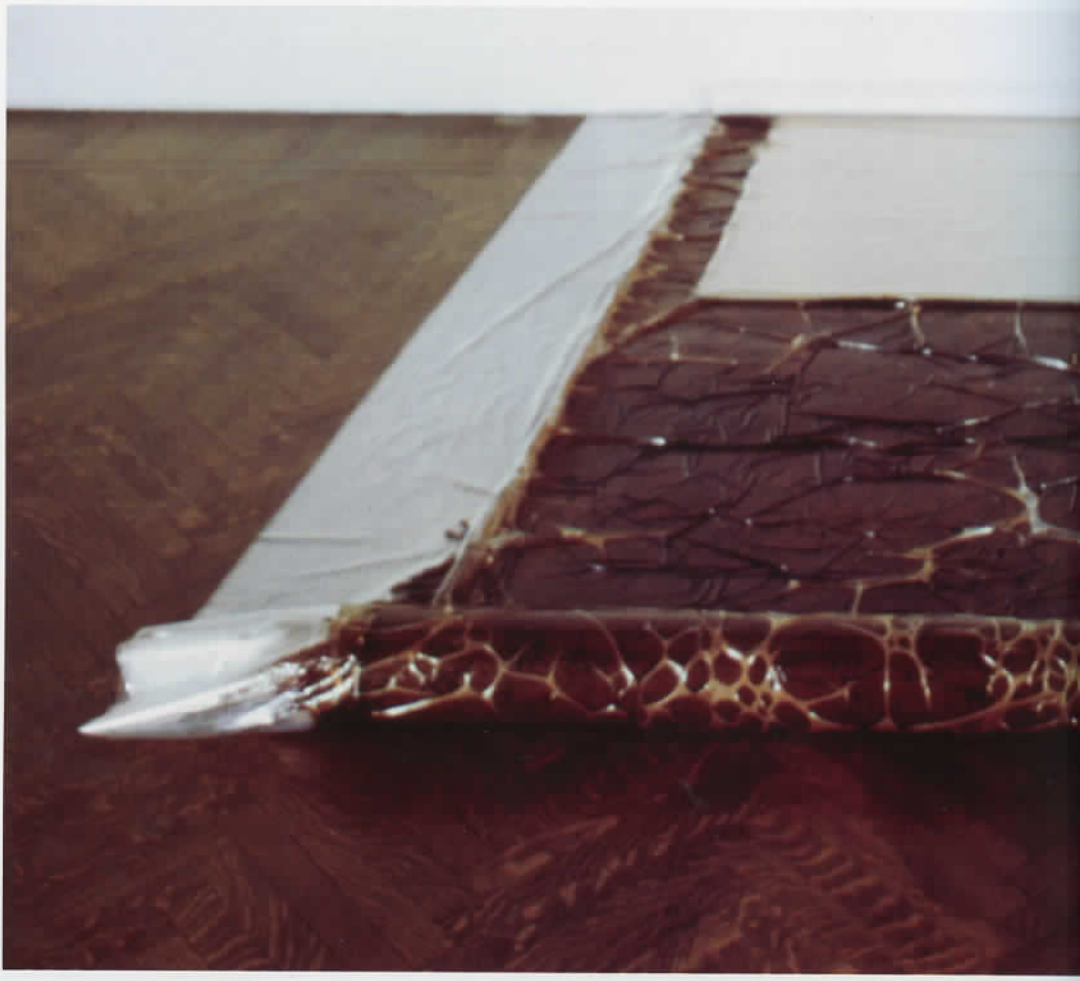
Others viewed this more broadly, such as Morton, who declared in 1975: "The responsibility of the artist . . . [is] to be free, and while in that freedom, to look, and to see while looking, and to feel, and to respond while feeling, and to be romantic, and to love the romance."[11]

In 1974, Morton agreed to participate in a token show of women faculty members at the Philadelphia College of Art (although previously she had declined to join A.I.R., the first women's cooperative gallery in New York). Her contribution to the exhibition comprised a pointed extravaganza of femininenes, including "paper doilies . . . contact paper, glitter, and candy gumdrop-like 'jujubes,'" and a wall adorned with a "pink swag and scattered with three-dimensional pastel bows fabricated from Celastic."[12] Women well knew that their art was liable to be depreciated as ornamental, no matter how it looked, and therefore many steered as wide a berth as possible around "the only art sin," as Eva Hesse dubbed the decorative in 1969.[13] Others, however, including Morton, Pindell, Kaufman, Snyder, and Mary Corse, set about reclaiming the decorative for their own purposes, whether burlesquing, reimagining, or celebrating it. Besides seizing the maligned territory of the decorative, some went further and foregrounded craft in their practice, rehabilitating another fraught area for women, who historically were restricted to domestic handicraft as a creative outlet. For example, Hammond's homely *Floorpiece V* (1973), a partially painted, hooked rag rug, insinuated a craft modality into a high art

***Blanket Paintings* and *Presences* in Harmony Hammond's Bowery loft studio, 1972**

and she "began to get angry, especially after I was left out of such shows as Kynaston McShine's *Primary Structures* (1966) [at the Jewish Museum, New York]," a movement and career-making exhibition. After failing to engage Judd, Robert Morris, and others privately in discussions on painting's status, Baer composed a heated letter to the editor of *Artforum* magazine in September 1967, attacking her peers' high-handed dismissals of painting's viability and building a reasoned defense of the medium. She instantly found herself shunned within art world precincts that formerly had admitted her. "Mel Bochner came over to my place and returned books and magazines he had borrowed saying, 'I can't speak with you anymore,'" Baer marveled. Worse yet, Dan Graham's proposal to write about her work for *Artforum* reportedly prompted editor Phil Leider to proclaim: "'She's not going to be in this magazine. No more. Not reviewed. Nothing.'"[16]

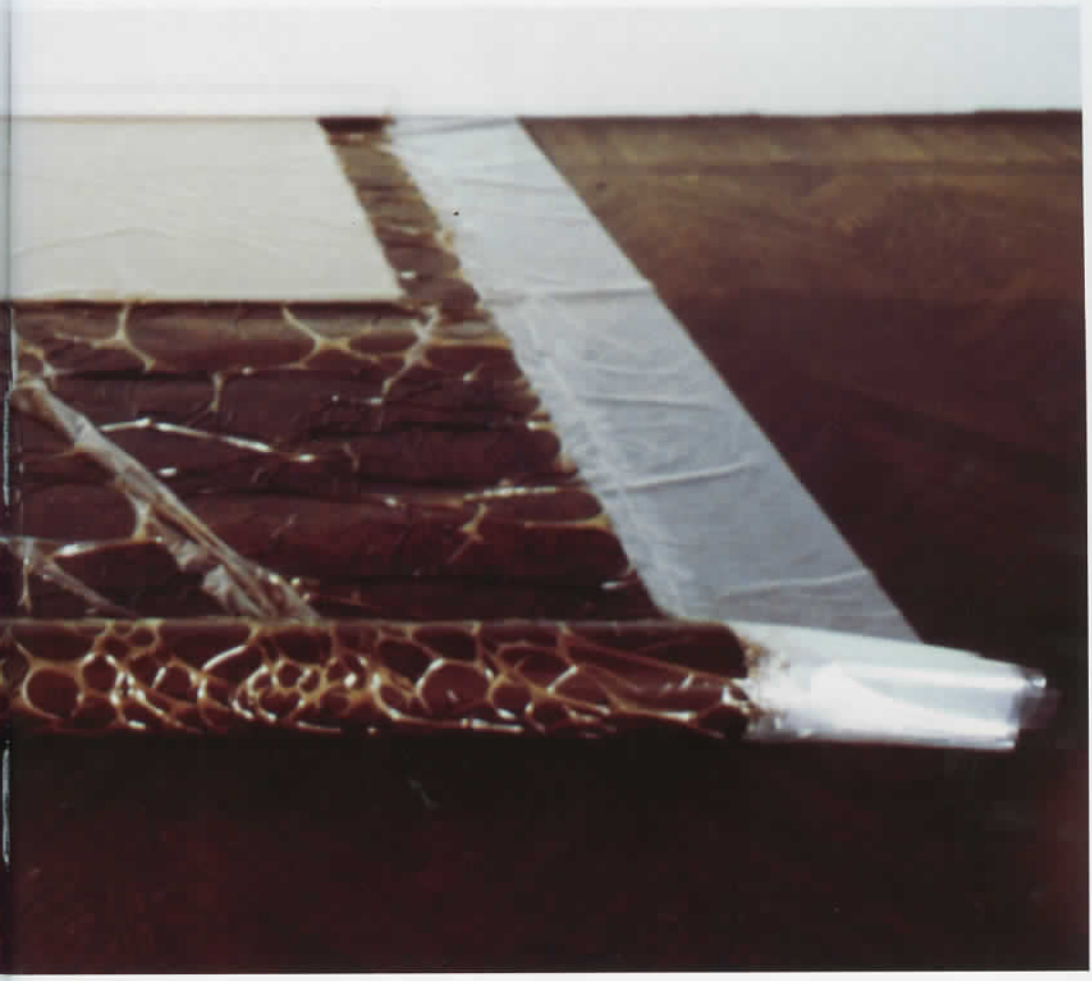
That Baer enjoyed, however briefly, a meaningful degree of access within the inner circles of the art world testifies to the erstwhile kinship of her aesthetic views with those of an emergent cohort of male artists, and to her fluency in certain discourses then current within a given studio ambit. Baer could argue about philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein



Dorothea Rockburne, *Intersection*, 1971. Mixed media installation, 15 × 99 × 92 in. (38 × 251 × 234 cm). Collection of the artist; courtesy Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, New York

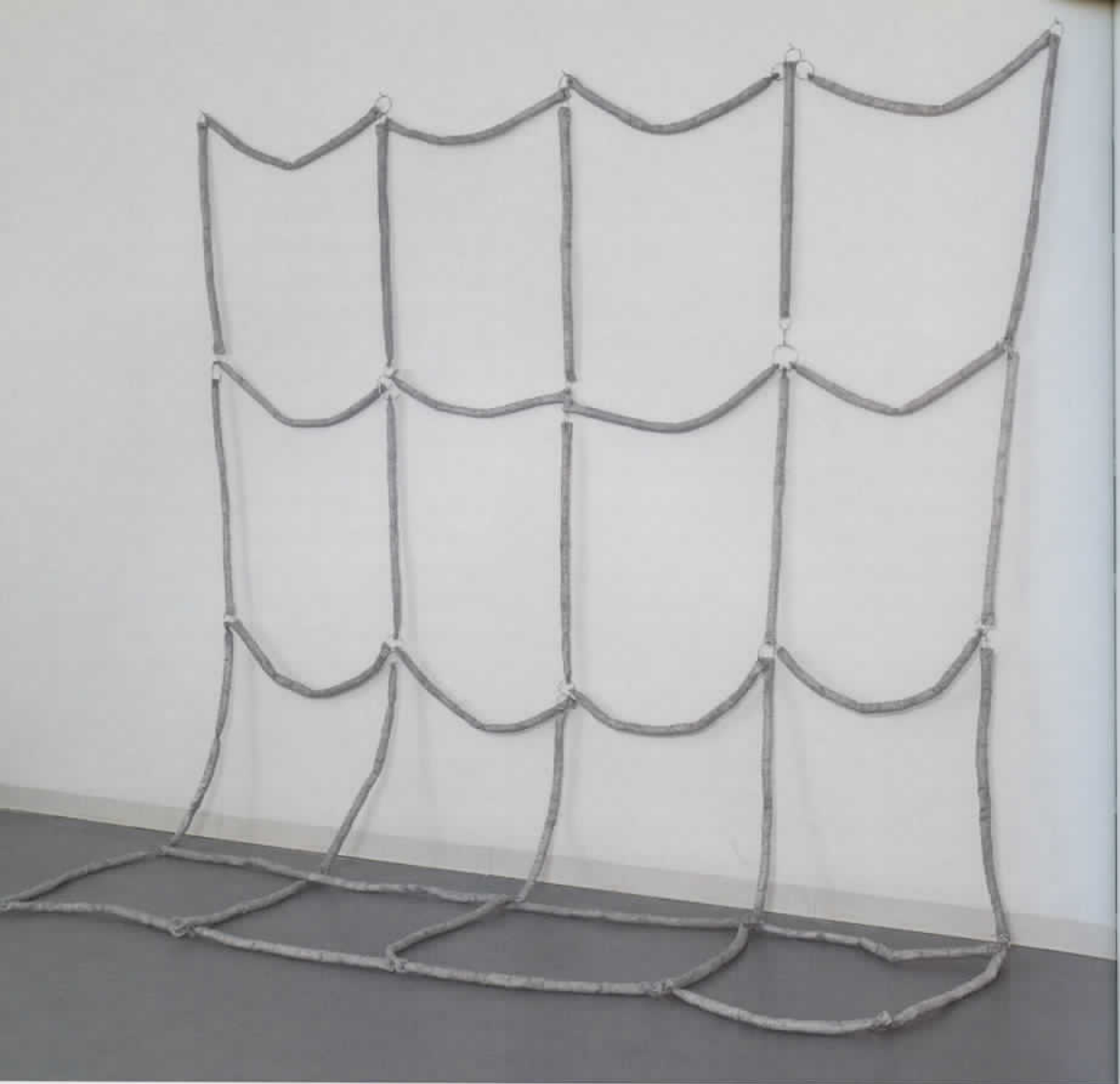
with comer Richard Serra, for instance, and she had done graduate work in science. Likewise, Lozano's intellectual interests encompassed the male-coded and male-dominated realms of science and math; her respected *Wave* paintings (1967–70) entailed "a science idea transferred to an art idea. What . . . excites me the most: astronomy, physics, cosmology. I've always enjoyed math."[17]

Even more so, mathematics would drive the art practice of Dorothea Rockburne, for whom math represented "straight, simple thinking and it never enclosed . . . I was excited by this and bored by art school instruction."[18] By 1966, Rockburne was friendly with Bochner, Sol LeWitt, and others who shared her preoccupations with "how ideas infiltrate practice," as Bochner put it. She is said to have separated herself from her male peers, however, "in terms of the overt physicality and sensuality her



art would explore"—sensuality being an attribute often ascribed to women's art.[19] Rockburne elected to 'risk' the sensual, just as she risked representing her intellectually founded practice in intently personal terms—another stereotype of women's creative practices being their undue personalism and emotionality. "I'm interested in the ways in which I can experience myself, and my work is really about making myself," Rockburne averred.[20]

While to Rockburne the geometric forms she explored were associated with "an extraordinary range of feeling,"[21] more typically the geometric vocabulary identified with Minimalist practices was considered anti-expressive. In the 1960s and '70s, numerous women ventured to explore the geometric schema of the grid, revisiting this modernist, Minimalist emblem with a vengeance. Through her consciousness-raising group, Fishman determined that her paintings "had come from a completely male



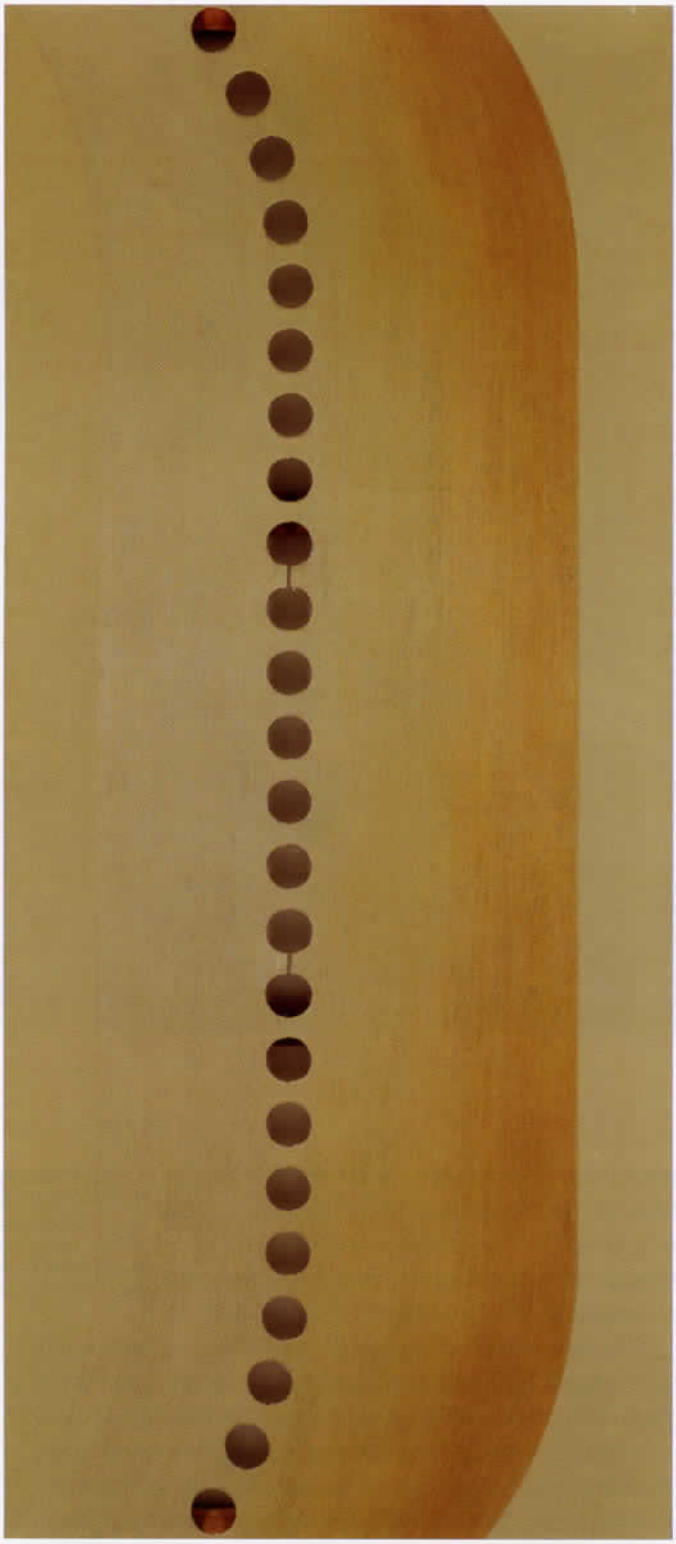
Howardena Pindell, *Untitled*, 1968–70. Canvas, enamel, grommets, and foam, 144 × 144 in. (365.8 × 365.8 cm). Collection of the artist; courtesy Sragow Gallery, New York

source. The first thing I did was cut up the grid paintings and stitch them together, trying to come up with a language that was my own."[22] Pindell also worked with grids, as well as extensively with circles (which in some quarters came to be coded as feminine), and imported sewing into her practice: "I took some thread . . . and made a grid, longitude and latitude."[23] In 1969, Corse formed a grid of shimmering crystals lodged in acrylic on an expansive canvas. And Snyder often used grids to underpin paintings contradictorily lavished with expressive marks, along with sewn and collaged elements.

Unusually, Snyder did not shy from incorporating explicitly feminist content, including "vaginal slits," in her abstract paintings—flagrantly

Louise Fishman, *Untitled*, 1971. Acrylic, chalk, and string on canvas. Two parts, 34½ × 7 in. (87.6 × 17.8 cm) each. Courtesy of the artist and Cheim & Read, New York

violating Greenberg's law as to the unimpeachable flatness of the picture plane, which had to be totally rid of holes or the illusion of them. Lozano also perforated her canvas in *Punch, Peek, Feel* of 1967–70, and around 1966 Lynda Benglis drilled through the center of the support in a painting with a teasingly pink, monochrome, encaustic skin. The conceit of the canvas as surrogate for the female body, and of the act of painting as phallic, was long endemic to art discourse ("the canvas . . . stands there like a pure chaste virgin . . . And then comes the willful brush which first here, then there, gradually conquers it with all the energy peculiar to it," suggested Wassily Kandinsky in 1913).[24] For women, merely to "attempt the brush"



Lynda Benglis, *Blatt*, 1969. Poured pigment and latex, 128 × 103 in. (325.1 × 261.6 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Cheim & Read, New York

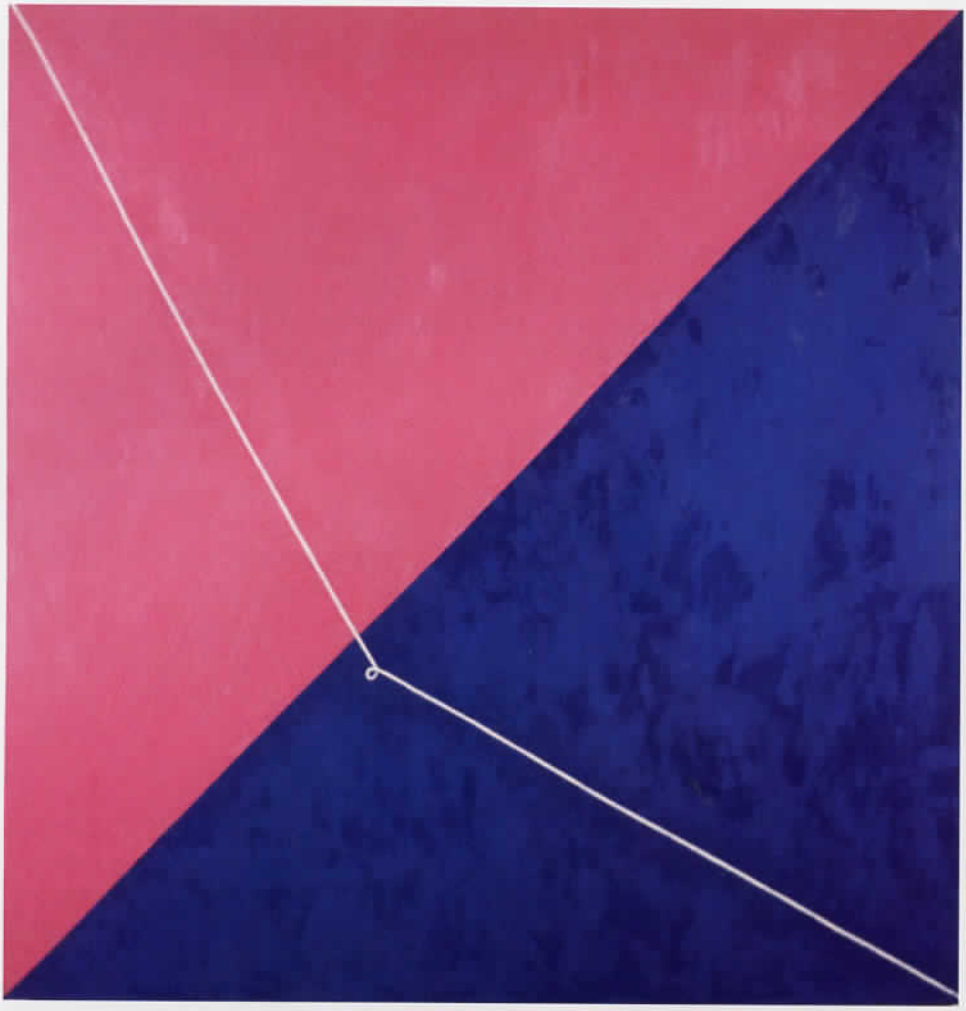
Opposite: Lee Lozano, *Punch, Peek, Feel*, 1967–70. Oil on canvas with perforations, 96 × 42 in. (243.8 × 106.7 cm). Courtesy Hauser & Wirth, Zürich

Installation view of Lynda Benglis's exhibition at The Clocktower in New York, December 1973

was to invade a phallic preserve. Some elected to enunciate that trespass expressly, as in Shigeko Kubota's *Vagina Painting* performed in New York in 1965, with a brush attached to her crotch making marks as she squatted, in an apparent riposte to the tacitly ejaculatory heroics of Jackson Pollock.

In a sense, however, those women who claimed entitlement to the once-preeminent medium of the Western visual regime would find it newly available to them at this moment, precisely owing to its recoding as a weaker, more feminine enterprise than sculpture, in tandem with the increasing bias that held painting to be defunct. When Murray arrived in New York in 1967, she recalls, "the word being spread was, 'Haven't you heard? Painting is dead!' I thought, 'Oh, really? Well, to hell with *that*. I'm painting.'"[25] Such bravura was common among the women who persisted in painting at a time when the medium languished under a cloud of critical opprobrium.

Even among those women most single-mindedly devoted to the medium, however, not many confined themselves to strictly traditional



Elizabeth Murray, *Flamingo*, 1974. Oil on canvas, 76½ × 73½ in. (194.3 × 186.7 cm). Collection of Paula Cooper

Opposite: Ree Morton, *Untitled (Stretcher Piece)*, ca. 1971–73. Mixed media, 21 × 21½ × 66 in. (53.3 × 54.6 × 167.6 cm). Estate of Ree Morton; courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York

painting technique, or at least not for long. Others (such as Eva Hesse) would come to find painting constraining, and would elect, like numerous of their male peers, to explore a range of media—promiscuously opening painting out onto the fields of sculpture, installation, conceptual practices, video, and performance (against Greenberg's edicts as to the necessary "'purity'" of the medium), and actively deconstructing painting's premises. "I HATE: / . . . Painters—phony/ Paintings—rectangle . . .," Morton exclaimed; "Paintings are too flat."[26] Rockburne's supports were often folded, layered, or adhered flatly to the wall rather than stretched, and she worked with materials such as metal and crude oil, as well as vellum, linen, and gesso. "Often my work is misread as painting," she protested,[27] explaining, "I was thinking of working in some undefined area between painting and sculpture."[28] (Women venturing into sculpture faced other obstacles, however, for sculpture was then defended as a profoundly manly enterprise, more demanding of the body than painting and requiring a greater battery of and mastery of tools—equipment off-limits to generations of girls who were consigned to home economics courses in high school while the boys took "shop.")

Among those who aggressively sought to unfix, dissolve, or expand the given terms of painting by the mid-1960s, Schneemann used

Ree Morton in her studio, in front of her *Beaux Paintings*, 1975

her own nude body as the armature for her *Eye Body* (1963) and *Body Collage* (1967); Kusama, buoyed by the Happening wave, transposed motifs from her magisterial *Infinity Net* paintings (1959) into real time and space, painting polka dots on nude and clothed bodies, on dogs and a horse, over fields and in a pond, often in carnival-like settings. Benglis's pigmented latex "fallen" paintings—such as *Odalisque (Hey, Hey Frankenthaler!)* and *Blatt*, both of 1969—took Pollock's and Frankenthaler's gambits to new extremes: unlike Frankenthaler's lyrically aesthetic flows of paint over canvas, Benglis was willfully gaudy, using fluorescent, Day-Glo, and other harsh colors, and emphasizing the fact of the spill by leaving her puddled, congealed, rubbery mats of paint on the floor. The works suggested a high-spirited riposte to Carl Andre's sober "plains" of metal plates—as, too, did Hammond's gaily colored rug pieces.

"When I started to paint, it was like speaking for the first time," Snyder recalled.[29] And a motley chorus of differently pitched voices—by turns ethereal or rapturous, comic or visceral, analytic or corrosive—would newly, insistently swell from the late 1960s onward. For these women to raise their voices—to make their marks—took radical feats of imagination, tenacity, and an outlaw mentality, or chutzpah. Rule-breaking is, of course,

Elizabeth Murray in her studio at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, 1975

rife within avant-gardes, above all in the '60s, but these incorrigible women had the temerity to break a founding rule of the avant-garde itself, namely, that of its own homosocial homogeneity. When an interviewer said to Baer, "speaking of being rude . . .," regarding her impolitic letter to *Artforum,* she countered: "It's the only way to be, if you're female. You don't get anywhere otherwise."[30] Murray says of the satisfactions of her studio: "When I do something I get a kick out of, it's kind of 'Hah.' 'There you go.' 'Up your ass' [to] . . . everybody who ever told me, 'You've got to be a lady; you've got to be nice; don't raise your voice; don't laugh too loud.'"[31] Or, "you can't paint," she might have added.

Recently, Murray has joined the exceedingly short list of female artists awarded career retrospectives by the canon-making Museum of Modern Art in New York. Kusama is now a prominent fixture and subject of study on the international scene—although for nearly two decades oblivion seemed the fate of the impresario of *Self-Obliteration* (1967). Baer, too, has experienced a burst of limelight lately, although she promises: "I'll disappear again—being female, especially—but I'll come back every fifteen years, because my work lasts."[32] By contrast Corse, never widely known, has now all but vanished from view. Altogether, not many women

artists have enjoyed major institutional, critical, or marketplace legitimation, and that which arrives can prove transient.

Recognizing the daunting odds against them, in the late 1960s and '70s numerous women took a turn toward an art more didactic in its strategies. Adrian Piper, for one, has termed her own early abstract art "the work I did in the Garden of Eden, before I found out I was a black woman."[33] But others would cling to a sense of the possibility—even the political possibility—within abstract modalities. "OBLITERATE WALL STREET MEN WITH POLKA DOTS," exhorted Kusama, for instance, at a protest-performance in 1968; "Our earth is like a little polka dot . . .," reads her *Open Letter to Richard Nixon*, "one orb full of hatred and strife amid the peaceful, silent spheres. Let's, you and I, change all that . . . ."[34] Hammond has cited French philosopher Simone Weil's observation that "revolution presupposes not simply an economic and political transformation but also a technical and cultural one."[35]

Geopolitically, revolutions of various kinds were afoot by the late 1960s, and that awareness helped stoke a generation of women raised without reasonable expectations of serious careers. In 1969, Lozano could dare to dream big: "For me there can be no art revolution that is separate from a science revolution, a political revolution, an education revolution, a drug revolution, a sex revolution or a personal revolution . . . I will participate only in a total revolution simultaneously personal and public."[36] Although she quit early, by now it is clear that Lozano did help to foment a major cultural change, if not quite a revolution. Those once formidably masculine bastions of modern art are now incalculably different—and differenced. Against the fading regime of Greenberg, against the critical dicta of the day, against patriarchy, against elements of feminist ideology, this outlaw work got done.

Notes

1. Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 145.
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4. Kojima Yayoi and Uchida Mayumi, *Kusama Yayoi: Kusamatrix*, exh. cat. (Tokyo: Mori Art Museum, 2004), p. 98.
5. Harmony Hammond, "Class Notes," *Heresies* 1, no. 3 (1977), p. 35.
6. Cotter, "Art After Stonewall," p. 60.
7. See Anna C. Chave, "'Normal Ills': On Embodiment, Victimization, and the Origins of Feminist Art," in Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg, eds., *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2006).
8. McPherson, *More Than Meat Joy*, pp. 195–97.
9. Susan L. Stoops, "From Eccentric to Sensuous Abstraction: An Interview with Lucy Lippard," in Stoops, ed., *More Than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70s*, exh. cat. (Waltham, Mass.: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 1996), p. 29.
10. Cotter, "Art After Stonewall," pp. 59–60.
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12. Allan Schwartzman and Kathleen Thomas, eds., *Ree Morton: Retrospective, 1971–1977*, exh. cat. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1980), pp. 40–41, 85.
13. Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), p. 217.
14. "Making Waves: Katy Siegel Talks with David Reed About the Legacy of Lee Lozano," *Artforum* 40, no. 2 (October 2001), p. 126.
15. "Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Frank Stella: New Nihilism or New Art," interview with Bruce Glaser, 1964, repr. in James Meyer, *Minimalism* (London: Phaidon, 2000), p. 199.
16. Judith E. Stein, "The Adventures of Jo Baer," *Art in America* 5 (May 2003), p. 111.
17. Maurice Poirier and Jane Necol, "The '60s in Abstract: 13 Statements and an Essay," *Art in America* 71, no. 9 (October 1983), p. 135.
18. Jennifer Licht, "Work and Method," *Art and Artists* 6 (March 1972), p. 34.
19. Stoops, *More Than Minimal*, p. 72.
20. Licht, "Work and Method," p. 33.
21. Marcia Tucker, *Early Work by Five Contemporary Artists*, exh. cat. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1977), n.p.
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23. Lynn F. Miller and Sally S. Swenson, *Lives and Works: Talks with Women Artists* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1981), p. 143.
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25. Paul Gardner, "Elizabeth Murray Shapes Up," *Art News* 83, no. 7 (September 1984), p. 51.
26. Schwartzman and Thomas, eds., *Ree Morton: Retrospective*, pp. 8, 9.
27. Licht, "Work and Method," p. 34.
28. Tucker, *Early Work*, n.p.
29. Gerrit Henry, "Joan Snyder: True Grit," *Art in America* 74, no. 2 (February 1986), p. 100.
30. Stein, "The Adventures of Jo Baer," p. 111.
31. Robert Storr, *Elizabeth Murray*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), p. 187.
32. Stein, "The Adventures of Jo Baer," p. 106.
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34. Kojima and Uchida, *Kusamatrix*, pp. 105–06.
35. Hammond, "Class Notes," p. 36.
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