

BOOK REVIEWS

WITNESSING FOR WOMEN BY ABIGAIL SOLOMON-GODEAU

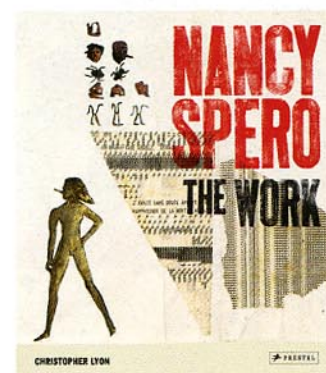
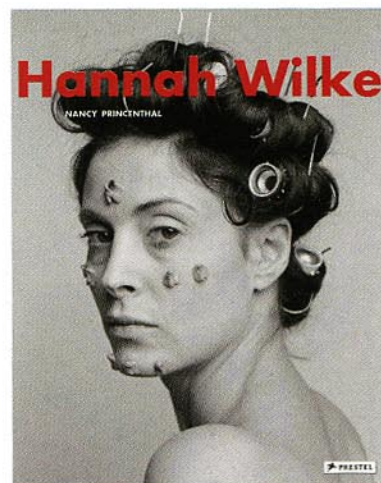
If there is one central conclusion to be drawn from the recent array of books and catalogues on contemporary women artists, it is that there exists no such thing as women's art, or even feminist art. Indeed, as many feminist scholars, critics and artists have long argued, possession of a uterus, or identification with feminism, in no way determines, much less defines, the nature of women's artistic production. Despite the existence of an extensive bibliography seeking to codify feminine esthetics in visual art, the more women artists become critically visible, the less they reveal any overarching features that might be said to reveal their sex. This is not to deny that anatomy, sexuality, psychology and feminist politics may be factors in both the conception and meaning of an artist's work, but this is far from constituting the artistic equivalent of sexual determinism.

Of the books on offer here, *The Deconstructive Impulse* covers a wide array of practices, while the volumes devoted to Nancy Spero, Hannah Wilke, Lynda Benglis and Suzanne Lacy collectively testify to great artistic diversity as well, even though these women, who clearly identify themselves as feminists, are all American, white, professionally educated and, excepting Spero (b. 1929), born within 10 years of one another. And just as these recent publications attest to artistic differ-

ence, so too do they attest to different models of art-book publishing.

In order of size, opulence and what could be called "production values," Christopher Lyon's *Nancy Spero: The Work* takes pride of place. Unlike most coffee-table books, this is an elegantly written, inclusive and ambitious monograph, handsomely designed and copiously illustrated. Given the very high quality (as well as size) of Spero's bibliography, Lyon's book makes an impressive addition. Incorporating previous scholarship, supplemented with his own sensitive and nuanced readings of Spero's oeuvre, Lyon—a professional editor and longtime friend of the artist—places due emphasis on Spero's formal and iconographic inventions, while providing the necessary biographical and contextual framework with which to better understand it.

Spero, who died last year, was the only artist in this group who worked consistently in two dimensions. Her art, however, was as unconventional as that of artists who embraced new mediums



Nancy Spero: The Work, by Christopher Lyon, New York, Prestel Publishing, 2010; 340 pages, \$85.

Hannah Wilke, by Nancy Princenthal, New York, Prestel Publishing, 2010; 176 pages, \$49.95.

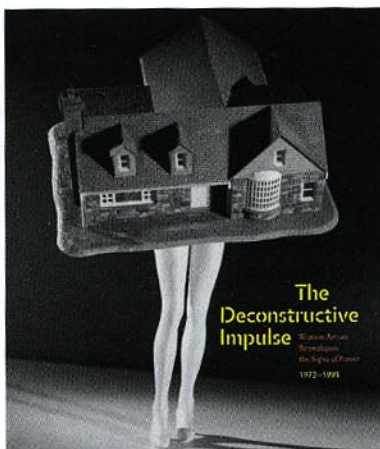
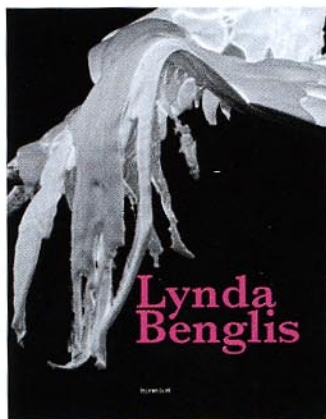
Lynda Benglis, edited by Franck Gautherot, Caroline Hancock and Seungduk Kim, Dijon, Les presses du réel, 2009; 455 pages; \$55.

The Deconstructive Impulse: Women Artists Reconfigure the Signs of Power, 1973-1991, by Nancy Princenthal, Tom McDonough et al., New York, Prestel Publishing, 2011; 176 pages, \$49.95.

Leaving Art: Writings on Performance, Politics, and Publics, 1972-2007, by Suzanne Lacy, Durham, N.C., and London, Duke University Press, 2010; 377 pages, \$99.95 hardcover, \$27.95 paperback.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"The Deconstructive Impulse" at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, N.Y., through Apr. 3, and traveling to the Nasher Museum of Art, Durham, N.C., Aug. 25-Dec. 5. "Lynda Benglis" at the New Museum, New York, through June 19.



COMPARED TO THE WIDELY RESPECTED SPERO, WILKE, WHO DIED OF CANCER IN 1993, IS A FAR MORE DIFFICULT SUBJECT, OFTEN ACCUSED OF NARCISSISM AND EXHIBITIONISM.



Above, Nancy Spero: *Artaud Painting—Then there will be the terrible explosion*, 1969, cut and pasted painted paper, gouache and ink on paper, 25 by 21 inches. © The Estate of Nancy Spero. Photo © David Reynolds.

Right, Hannah Wilke: #4 from the series "Intra-Venus," July 26 and February 19, 1992. Two chromogenic supergloss prints, 71½ by 47½ inches each. Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.



such as video and performance, or new materials such as polyurethane foam. From 1963 on, Spero often juxtaposed images with words and texts, integrated within various forms of collage on scroll-like grounds, some as long as 25 feet. Drawing on an image repertoire that extends from ancient Babylonian reliefs to contemporary porn, Spero distilled from the archive of world culture a signature iconography, dominated by the imagery of femininity—running or dancing women, female heads with jutting tongues, fertility goddesses, etc. Spero was preoccupied with acts of violence, especially as they affect women, and presented these referential horrors with great formal beauty. Lyon's monograph, which is highly attentive to Spero's complex negotiations between political actuality and mythic modes of expression, as well as her rich formal inventiveness, critically elevates the status of the deluxe art book. For while many of these publications are splendid objects, few become, as Lyon's study surely will, an indispensable resource for understanding an artist's formal and thematic legacy.

Not nearly as sumptuous but considerably less expensive and more portable, Nancy Princenthal's monograph on Hannah Wilke is, like

the last decades of her life, widely acknowledged as a major artist), Wilke not only led an abbreviated life but also alienated other women artists as readily as she did critics and her male peers. Her graphic ripostes to those who accused her of narcissism and exhibitionism, in works marked by an emphasis on female anatomy (the chewing gum genitalia, her nude performances), made her vulnerable to charges of essentialism, while, needless to say, she remained a lightning rod for art-world misogyny.

Stunningly beautiful in her youth, Wilke freely deployed her face and body in photography, performance and video. By playing the role of erotic icon, she intentionally blurred the boundaries of image and self. But, as Princenthal—an independent critic and former *A.i.A.* senior editor—persuasively argues, this ploy should be understood as strategic, deconstructive and legitimately underpinned by Wilke's feminism. Moreover, the artist's last multipart work, "Intra-Venus," based on her unflinching chronicle of her own terminal illness, is so lacerating as to make critical analysis seem a violation. Confronting all these difficulties, Princenthal is a model of tact and judiciousness, acknowledging the problematic aspects of Wilke's position in the art world while convincingly arguing for the iconoclasm, courage and historical importance of her art.

Like Wilke, Lynda Benglis (b. 1941) attained instant notoriety as a consequence of her own bodily exposure. Having purchased two full pages in the November 1974 issue of *Artforum*, she used the spread to display a photo of herself, nude and defiant, wielding a large double-headed dildo. Part of the fallout was an indignant letter published in the next issue by five *Artforum* editors, two of whom (Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson) resigned and went on to found the journal *October*. Serving as the catalogue for a traveling retrospective, *Lynda Benglis* grants this art-world scandal its own chapter, reproducing not only the ad but the myriad articles and letters it provoked. Benglis's confrontational image, apparently retaining its shock value even today, constantly resurfaces as an "issue" throughout the contributors' essays.

Integral to Benglis's gesture was the fact that the advertisement was a response to an earlier poster by

Lyon's book, handsomely designed, abundantly illustrated, pleasurable to read—and a necessary supplement to the existing literature. Compared to Spero, however, Wilke (b. 1940), who died of cancer in 1993, is a far more difficult subject for a monograph. Whereas Spero was universally respected in feminist circles (and in

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Top, Lynda Benglis: *Untitled (VW)*, 1970, pigmented polyurethane foam, 48 by 69¼ by 41¼ inches. Courtesy Galerie Michael Janssen, Berlin.

Above, Carrie Mae Weems: *Untitled (Woman and daughter with makeup)* from “Untitled (Kitchen Table Series),” 1990, silver print, 27¼ inches square. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Robert Morris—an exaggeratedly macho self-presentation as bare-chested biker, sporting a Nazi helmet, chains and sunglasses. Morris was a close friend and periodic collaborator, notably in their remarkable videos of the early '70s. Benglis's ad was therefore part of an artistic dialogue, a kind of checkmate to Morris's provocation.

The catalogue illustrates a great many works made from 1966 to 2009, including ephemeral pieces that no longer exist. Lavish in its use of color—absolutely necessary for an artist like Benglis—it also reprints important critical writing on her work, notably then *Artforum* associate editor Robert Pincus-Witten's “The Frozen Gesture” from the same issue that contained the controversial ad. In addition to the six essays by the exhibition's curators, there is an

exceptionally thoughtful one by Paris-based critic Elisabeth Lebovici—an intelligent, provocative and theoretically informed discussion that interprets Benglis's oeuvre in unexpected ways, in stark contrast to the faux-populist musings of American commentator Dave Hickey, who wrote the foreword.

Benglis is unusual among women artists for having achieved professional and critical recognition at a relatively young age, albeit in what was then a far smaller art world. Even more unusual was her respected position in a milieu composed of mostly male sculptors—Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Richard Serra and, of course, Morris. Although there was a period when feminist critics interpreted Benglis's work in terms of feminine esthetics (highlighting the decorative and ornamental elements of her sculpture), retrospective viewing does not really support such a reading. Benglis acknowledged influences such as Pollock's drip painting, the flung lead work of Serra and the use of the floor in Minimalist sculpture, but far more evident in her work is an exploration of diverse formal possibilities—color as it operates with various materials; strange juxtapositions of organic form and industrially fabricat-

ed material, from foam to glass, from Mylar to polyurethane—together constituting a career-long investigation of what “sculpture” can be.

The Deconstructive Impulse: Women Artists Reconfigure the Signs of Power, 1973-1991 is also based on an exhibition, in this case a traveling 21-person show. With the exception of Wilke and a few others (e.g., Lynn Hershman, Susan Hiller, Elaine Sturtevant), the selected artists, born in the late 1940s and 1950s, are often labeled as “second generation.” Although it is arguable whether they are deconstructivists, as art historian Griselda Pollock avers in her essay, they do represent a coherent grouping. What links Judith Barry, Dara Birnbaum, Sarah Charlesworth, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Sherry Levine, Laurie Simmons, Cindy Sherman et al. has less to do with Derrida than with their reworking, for critical purposes, the established icons, signs and conventions of mass media and consumer culture. Moreover, rejecting traditional mediums, all these artists developed their work in photography, video, photo/text and, in the case of Holzer's early pieces, text alone. Equally “second wave” is the adoption of psychoanalytic theory—by artists like Barbara Bloom, Silvia Kolbowski and Mary Kelly—as an artistic strategy to expose the psychic as well as social mechanisms of sexism, fetishism and militarism.

It goes without saying that most of these artists are now very widely recognized. Indeed, Sherman may well be the best-known woman artist in the world. Sturtevant (b. 1930), less acknowledged, is thus both the oldest participant and the sole wild card. Since the 1960s, her art has consisted of exactly copying the work of now-canonic figures: Duchamp, Warhol, Johns and so forth. Whether this makes her kin of Sherrie Levine is an open question.

The welcome inclusion of three women of color—Adrian Piper, Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems—raises questions about the ways in which feminism, deconstruction, simulation, appropriation, psychoanalysis and postmodernism do business with one another. How does (or should) one reconcile art intended for the public sphere (Holzer's “Truisms”) with the practices of institutional critique (Lawler's arrangements or Levine's

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Suzanne Lacy performing *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, 1976. Photo Raul Vega.

appropriations)? How does work directly addressing historical reality (Martha Rosler's Vietnam War collages) relate to postmodernist practice? Do terms like "identity," "identity politics" and "gender identity," typically refused (or subverted) by white artists, have other valences for artists of color, who, obviously, are "raced" in a far more concrete and oppressive fashion? Are sex, gender and race of equivalent weight in the politics of representation? Does the fact that Weems's "Tabletop" series stages specific predicaments of black women as family members, lovers and friends, or that Piper and Simpson invoke the history of slavery and disenfranchisement, sit uneasily with, say, the witty dollhouse interiors of Simmons or the dazzling fetish images that comprise Charlesworth's "Objects of Desire"?

Such questions are worth pursuing, making one wish for some discussion of race and its representations. The essays written by the exhibition's organizers, Nancy Princenthal and Helaine Posner, chief curator of the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, N.Y.—along with other texts by art historian Tom McDonough on fetishism, Griselda Pollock on psychoanalysis, and Duke University professor Kristine Stiles on the feminist critique of domesticity—discuss many of the themes and procedures manifest in this quintessentially postmodernist ensemble. But the neglected topic of race is the fault line that leads inexorably to the issue of "the political" in contemporary art, to the limits and possibilities of art-in-the-gallery as an agent of social or political change. Which is to say that the foundational insight of the women's movement, the now clichéd motto "the personal is political," operates in two directions, nowhere more inescapably than on subordinated or marginalized populations.

This concern is directly addressed in Suzanne Lacy's book, a compilation of her writings on her own practice over a 30-year period. In contrast to the other offerings, *Leaving Art: Writings on Performance, Politics, and Publics* is a far more modest

production, in keeping with its university press imprint and its less visual substance. Lacy's title, however, immediately poses serious questions about activism and art. Given the author's long career performing individually and collaboratively, and later orchestrating large numbers of participants in public performances, we might well ask if social engagement is tantamount to "leaving" art.

Considering the full scope of Lacy's work, as this anthology encourages, requires a few contextual observations. Lacy (b. 1945), like many California artists, was inspired by Allan Kaprow as a teacher, thinker and producer of Happenings. Furthermore, the Woman's Building in L.A., the numerous West Coast feminist groups, Womanhouse at CalArts, etc., all contributed to an activist—and populist—orientation that stresses merging art with life in the service of social change. Lacy's working-class origins have made her very attentive to issues of class and race, which, with feminist politics, are fundamental to her work.

In contrast, however, to the *Deconstructive Impulse* artists, who reflect many varieties of feminist thought, Lacy remains close in spirit to the feminism that emerged in the late '60s. Many of her most significant performances directly addressed women's issues, especially rape, prostitution, pornography and physical aging. With a canny understanding of mass communications, Lacy calibrated her staged actions to garner media attention, and to be readily comprehensible to those outside the art world. One of the most consistent elements of her activity is its emphasis on forming multiracial alliances under the banner of "Women."

As an activist who directly engages the public in her artwork, Lacy has touched hundreds of women's lives, although she acknowledges the impossibility of measuring long-term effects, or determining her work's efficacy in sparking social change. And while it is undoubtedly a positive development that museums and publishers are now producing so many women-artist shows and monographs, the institutional and esthetic fissures between art, theory and political praxis remain, as always, a perpetual challenge to feminists—and, indeed, to artists of whatever gender. ○

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