

WOMEN, ART AND WAR

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Introduction

The waging of war has been the primary dominion of men. Women, however, have been engaged as soldiers for thousands of years, albeit limited in their capacity to serve. What this means for society is a powerful issue that has only been explored since the second wave feminist movement began in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As a political issue in the art world, women's participation in the theatre of war has been inadequately addressed and rarely displayed to the public in its institutions, if at all. What does it really mean for our community if we depict the female, perceived as the beautiful and nurturing sex, as militant, powerful, and "man-like"? What does it mean for society if we give a woman a gun?

The pursuit of this issue in my own artwork began on a group excursion to Israel, where I was struck by the vision of females in uniform. They were young, often shy, almost-normal teenagers who are faced with an untenable fact of life—that they must be warriors. The political situation in this part of the world mandates that they learn to shoulder weapons and train to be combat-ready instead of leading the lives of young females in countries that do not conscript their women. My daughter, living the posh, sheltered life of a woman who will never serve in the armed forces, is the polar opposite of the Israeli girl, yet she shares much of the same hopes and dreams for the future, maintains friendships and seeks social situations that are endemic to youth. What would her life be like if she had to put on a uniform and serve her country? And, more importantly, how would her life change? Living under hierarchies that are little understood by civilians may lead to changes in behavior that may not conform to societal norms. In other words, would the power a woman wields as a soldier enable her to assume a more equal lifestyle in

modern society? Contemporary female artists have a rare opportunity to inform the viewing public about these questions and how they may be addressed today. Unfortunately, for a number of political reasons, there is little evidence that depicting women in war is acceptable in the art world.

With these weighty issues in mind, I began my artistic endeavors. My personal vision is to connect with the viewer, who will contemplate issues addressed in my work. Subsequently, the viewer would leave with personal decisions to be made, that is, is there an answer to my question of women, society and guns?

Women in the Military

My images of female soldiers and jeeps (jeeps used as surrogates for the women in particular situations) are intended to portray the generic woman in military garb, with no particular country or political affiliation in mind. I desire to limit the conversation to the challenges that women face in the military, as opposed to offering political opinions about a particular country's conflict. I do, however, use many images of soldiers in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) due to the availability of reference material which I deem as integral to my work. In more recent studies, I have attempted to portray the female soldier of other countries, attempting to explore the differences in how war is waged by women around the world. Subject to the patriarchal institution, women have an unusual place in the military; it is often uncomfortable for me to explore this in my own art. As I mentioned earlier, I am a mother and, as such, bring certain viewpoints in my depictions of these women. I have been a nurturer, and I have accepted this role in my life without question. I believe that much of the treatment I give to my work is a result being a mother. However, I am

consistently grappling with the concept of portrayal and how to reconcile the nurturer and feminist within. In this thesis, I attempt to provide an historical basis for many of the decisions I contemplate prior to beginning a new body of work.

As women's participation in conflict increases in modern-day militias, I attempt to understand how their gender requires special consideration. Traditional theorists claim that war is a man's domain, while women are seen as peacemakers (Eliatamby 37). Many second wave feminists suggest that the manner war is waged can be a theoretical basis for explaining their vision. Masculine dominance is the driving force in female subjugation and the destructive military imperialism that dominates world politics. A recent example of this perversion of power can be seen today as the U.S. military grapples with an unacceptable increase in sexual assaults of female soldiers at the hands of men.

The writer Virginia Woolf was among the first to address the dichotomy between women and war. In her book, *Three Guineas*, 1938, she asserts that women must use their own sensibilities to prevent war. "Women have never made war...scarcely any human being in the course of history has fallen to a women's rifle," she notes. The role of women as outsiders has enabled us to ask fundamental questions about the institutions of power. In addition, the trappings of power (i.e., military dress) contributes to the psychology of the heroic male ego that is at the heart of militarism and fascism. Woolf's conclusion is that women must band together to introduce an entirely new social order that is faithful to a feminine value system (Donavan 195-197). Although much has changed in modern society since *Three Guineas* was published, especially the inclusion of women as military combatants, it is interesting to note how Woolf's vision of war continues to persist. The military remains a fascist, imperialistic and patriarchal institution. The film, *The Invisible*

War, (Dick) a documentary produced in 2012, is an example of how women fare against the military hierarchy. U.S. women, while serving, are subject to rape and other abuse by their male peers at rates higher than that of the general population: an estimated 25% of women will be victims, yet few are reported. This is due to the lack of prosecution of those who commit the crime, compounded by the unwillingness of superiors to investigate.

The military in modern times may be faced with changes in its traditional hegemony as the nature of recruitment evolves. Maneska Eliatamby, author of *Women Waging War and Peace*, states that there are a number of reasons for joining the military today. Conscription or forced recruitment (as in Israel) is often imposed by country leaders. A deep commitment with the goals of the military is cited as another reason for joining; patriotism, religious fervor, or ideology are motivating factors. There is a lack of educational opportunities for those who cannot afford them, and the military offers an alternative. Finally, the most frequently reason given for joining in the United States among both men and women is economic necessity (38). Many of these young men and women would be forced to live in poverty with low paying jobs if they had chosen another path.

Case studies were conducted in third world countries that have allowed women in the military, including Eritrea, Sri Lanka and Nepal. These studies found that women join the fighting forces hoping that their actions will change their social status within their community and that they will no longer be subject to oppression in both military and civilian life. Unfortunately, when women return to the domestic arena post-conflict, this is rarely the case (38). Unless women's groups are established to deal with such issues,

women return to prewar social norms and never achieve emancipation. There are few exceptions.

The IDF is the only nation-state militia that conscripts women for service. Orthodox Jews of both sexes are currently exempt; however, there is a movement within the government to reverse this law. Women who are married may also receive exemption, as well as those who are already mothers. Israeli women must participate for one overwhelming reason: the IDF needs numbers to engage in conflicts they consider ever-present. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the primary struggle between those living within the borders. While both sides appear to have legitimate concerns as to their claim to the land, the dispute has evolved and taken more directions than can be considered within the scope of this paper.

Women in service in Israel have fewer privileges than men do. They are assigned to less important jobs—security, clerical positions, and the like. As of this moment, women are excluded from combat and reserve duty, seriously limiting their opportunities for advancement: in of the mid-1990s only thirteen percent of officers were women. Their secondary careers, too, are hampered by their exclusion from the “old-boy” network so valuable to promotion. In their book, *Women in Israel*, authors Yael Azmon and Dafna Izaeli report that here has been research that women in the military have a more positive self-esteem and are more achievement-oriented after service. One conclusion is that the macho culture of the military “fosters and disseminates the myth of male superiority and female dependence. The daily interactions between men and women frequently reproduce the gender division of labor, status and power in society. In this sense, women’s military service also contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequality” (13). One study

conducted shortly after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, by Rivka Bar-Yosef and Dorit Padan-Esinstark, appears to support this conclusion (309-318). During this crisis, men were called upon in their roles as soldiers while women maintained traditional sex roles. This led to dissonance within the female population and a move toward new opportunities for participation in the paradigm of crisis-solution.

In many countries female soldiers are viewed by officers as inferior. Units are segregated; and women are paid less and relegated to duties that tend to be traditionally feminine, such as patrol, clerical, social and secretarial work. Prior to the lifting of the United States' ban on women in combat in January of 2013, women were trained in the operation of weapons, yet were rarely deployed (Mitchell 187).

In the United States military statistics reflect an inherent problem in our modern society: that there is still a disparity in economic class structures for women and minorities. In order to advance their personal goals, civilian women need to seek alternatives that may appear unacceptable to many, such as military service (Eisenstein 30). Although there is no official data on the extent to which the poor and minorities are disproportionately selected into the military, a study conducted by Amy Lutz at Syracuse University in 2008 concluded that significant disparities exist only by socioeconomic status, finding "the all-volunteer force continues to see overrepresentation of the working and middle classes, with fewer incentives for upper class participation" (Wyant). In 2011, a study done by the Pew Research Center found that black women enlisted at far higher rates than white or Hispanic women, representing nearly a third of all women in the armed forces. While serving, U.S. women are faced with a number of obstacles to achieving equality with men. Distrust of their abilities, both physical and emotional is prevalent.

Critics of women in the military believe that sensitivity toward women's issues such as sexual harassment and rape are making the military too "soft". Brian Mitchell, author of the book *Women in the Military: Flirting with Disaster*, 1998, voices his concern as follows: "Many men [who] are attracted to the military by its intensely masculine and deeply romantic character...are all now threatened by the military's eagerness to present a female-friendly face. These things which have inspired many men to greatness are looked upon today as embarrassingly puerile" (169). In opposition to most feminist viewpoints, Mitchell theorizes that women are not interested in achieving physical prowess, are not competitive by nature, are not intrigued by danger and are not compelled to hide their weaknesses, be they psychological or physical. And women tend to complain more about illness in injury because "the role of the patient is more compatible with the woman's passive, dependent role in society" (170). Feminists and artists alike must collectively work against such denigration and deep-rooted cultural beliefs.

Female U.S. soldiers who have been engaged in recent conflicts assert that they are the same as their male counterparts, but must perform without drawing attention to themselves to avoid criticism. Mission-driven and focused, they bring many female qualities to their service such as alternative (and possibly intuitive) perspectives to problem solving, and sensitivity to those who are wounded. Although this experiment in the U.S. military is in its infancy, many feel that allowing females in combat will eventually lead to a greater sense of equality within the current structure: more officers, more advancement among women and a greater respect for those who have served in post-military careers. Gunnery Sergeant Mayo of the Marines, in relating her story in the book *Band of Sisters: American Women at War in Iraq*, 2007, states that one of the long-term

effects of her being in combat is that her daughter Sydney has seen how strong her mother is and can therefore stand up to anyone and do what she wants to do. “If she wants to fly a fighter jet, she can” (314). It has yet to be seen if this viewpoint is the exception or the norm; however, it offers hope and empowerment for those who follow in Sergeant Mayo’s footsteps.

Art and War: Females Speak

Second-wave feminist activists of the 1960s and 1970s¹ had a view of the current world order as a product of American and other such capitalist countries’ imperialistic pursuits. They claimed that the U.S. preserved its profits and advanced its own causes by waging war and manipulating economic policy. These post-colonial practices, along with the rhetoric of male superiority and white supremacy serve to marginalize those who are outside—people of color and women, among others. The subjugation of oppressed groups often leads to violent acts against them; in the case of women, rape continues to be a tool used around the world to assert power and control (Riley et. al 3). This is a somewhat radical approach toward explaining why rape occurs in many cases, yet it is easy to see why many feminist artists chose to identify with such a viewpoint. Their efforts to attack the current hegemony, criticize the ideological processes that create gender inequality, and protest the erosion of democratic rights were essential to their art (Davis 25).

I admire many of the women who created art during this period. Judy Chicago, Hannah Wilke, Martha Rosler, Miriam Schapiro, Lucy Lippard and Nancy Spero contributed

¹ The “Second Wave” of feminism refers to the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The First Wave is commonly known as the period of suffragette, when women were concerned with their own issues of equality and oppression. During the second wave, feminists were not only interested in their own status, but were particularly concerned with the oppressed in all facets of society, including gays and blacks.

much to contemporary art and reshaping visions of the world order. Current artists Mary Kelly, Jenny Holzer and Coco Fusco are among the few who have carried on the mission of their predecessors, integrating their powerful work with opportunities to create conversations that could potentially initiate change. As an artist of this epoch, I hope to convey much of what these women have already proffered, depicting women as powerful and able to perform many of the same duties as their male counterparts. However, there is a greater question that some of these women have touched upon in their work. That is, how do we eliminate war so that *both* males and females no longer make the decision to fight them?

Nancy Spero's *The War Series 1966-1970*" (at the Galerie Lelong, New York, 2003) is perhaps the most significant work to address the issues surrounding war: that is, issues of power, resting with men and masculine violence. She recalls, "For five years from 1966 to 1970, I painted (gouache and ink on paper) *The War Series: Bombs and Helicopters*. These works were intended as manifestos against our [the US] incursion into Vietnam, a personal attempt at exorcism. The bombs are phallic and nasty, exaggerated sexual representations of the penis: heads with tongues sticking out, violent depictions of the human (mostly male) body. The clouds of bombs are filled with screaming heads vomiting poison onto the victims below, etc. I imagined that Vietnamese peasants saw it as a giant monster. I viewed the helicopter as the symbol of this war—the omnipresent image of the chopper hovering, transporting soldiers, napalming villages, gunning fleeing peasants or picking up wounded and dead US soldiers" (Brandon 78). Often the works in this series contain references to the Holocaust. As a Jewish woman, Spero identifies with the victims of World War II as well. Her understanding is that terrorism and genocide in the guise of conventional warfare

is hardly a thing of the past. Vietnam only proved that to be true and it will continue to be true for wars in the future. In writing the introduction to the catalog of the exhibition, the critic Robert Storr states, “The crux of the matter is not one of establishing an arbitrary congruence between two incommensurable systems, (Hitler’s Reich and the Kennedy/Johnson/Nixon Republic) but rather of the potential or actual eruption of the fascist impulse in any society that regards its adversaries, and even its allies of convenience, as innately alien” (12). Spero’s ability to define the symbols of war as she did is a testament to her enduring role in contemporary art. She seems to see beyond her own era and into the wars of today, that by giving her own names to the things that power “sought to obscure through its euphemisms of triumphant efficiency and inscrutable otherness,” she achieves a level of urgency that those who have come before her have not (13).

Storr also evokes Goya’s *Disasters of War* in describing Spero’s work. “The feeling of betrayal that informs Goya’s series is an indispensable element of its meaning. His anger and his sorrow are directed not only at ‘crimes against humanity,’ the inevitable cruelty of war, and perhaps the inherent sadism of humankind, but also at the perversion of a social and political ideal. To an even greater extent than Goya’s, Spero’s war cycle is predicated on an essentialized notion of human nature, and a gendered one at that” (11).

Lucy Lippard is yet another artist/art critic instrumental in advocating for political art whose objective was to change the current structure of power. Instrumental in helping to form the Artists Workers Coalition, Lippard worked tirelessly to integrate art and politics in her work and advocated changing what was the current limited system of museum spaces into a “new and more flexible system that can adapt itself to the changes

taking place today in the art itself" (Bryan-Wilson 160). Through the process of writing her novel, *I See/You Mean* (1979), Lippard discovered how her life was shaped by class and gender and sought to join the feminist cause. Changing the focus of her criticism, she now wrote to further the reevaluation of how women's art was perceived and accepted within the institutions of art. She called for active feminist artists to channel social and personal rage, to think about values and to inject art with "didacticism". As she writes in her essay, "Trojan Horses: Activist Power and Power",

Artists alone can't change the world. Neither can anyone else, *alone*. But we can choose to be part of the world that is changing. There is no reason why visual art should not be able to reflect the social concerns of our day as naturally as novels, plays and music...The more sophisticated artists become, the more they are able to make art that works on several levels. They can make specific artworks for specific audiences and situations, or they can try to have their cake and eat it too, with one work affecting art audiences one way and general audiences another. Art that is not confined to a single context under the control of market and ruling-class taste is much harder to neutralize. And it is often quite effective when seen within the very citadels of power it criticizes. (185)

Since the end of the Vietnam War, depictions in the media have become part of our everyday experience. Laura Brandon, art historian, writes in her book *Art and War*, that there are those who have looked at a particular conflict and have chosen to frame it as spectacle. From this, two distinct bodies of work have resulted. The first pays homage to war art's troubling references to war as pornography, emphasizing its brutality and presenting it as performance. The other attempts to elicit moral outrage that such things are allowed to occur. Both approaches are countered by reflective and elegiac works that are grounded in grief and mourning. The range of materials reflects many of the post-modern and contemporary trends such as painting, installation and photomontage (90).

I feel that my work reflects the second of the two approaches to depicting conflict. Using collage as my primary medium, I offer repetitive visuals of cut-out female military figures mounted to board or panel. Jeeps, used as surrogates for the women, are occasionally added. Both the women and the jeeps are painted in bright colors, my intention here is to make these generic; by representing them in unusual colors such as pink and purple, they appear to be “non-soldiers,” donning garb in opposition to traditional camouflage. Some of the cut outs are offered in sexually alluring poses. My intention here is to explore my own encounter with these women as explained in the introduction to my thesis. My maternal instincts play a part in these particular images--that I am troubled by these young women, exuding power on one hand (with guns), but attempting to portray themselves as beautiful and sexy on the other. Painted scenes are often part of the work, although they are used to establish context and ground for the figures. I have also experimented with texture, adding a tactile quality to the piece. Inviting the sense of touch can enhance the viewer’s experience and create another method for engagement. Some of the materials I have found work well to create space and a ground for the figures are wood ash mixed with acrylic paint and sand.

Recent works have been more exciting, in that the exploration of additional materials have enabled me to integrate my vision of women and war with the way many second wave feminist artists approached their work. Yarn woven through nails hammered into board is a technique I have discovered to be unique, yet suitable for the work I wish to create. The yarn is used to highlight portions of collaged images which I glue to the wood board. These images are photographic references from a variety of sources, including the Internet. The yarn, like the color in the cut outs mentioned above, transforms the

photograph into the generic soldier, no longer with distinct features. It also serves another function; unintended, yet certainly welcome. Feminist artists often utilized craft in their work to enhance their images, commenting on the status of “women’s work” and what had been thought of as acceptable pursuits for women in society. My own commentary that women soldiers must deal with a duality of self-image is reflected in the material of the yarn and its traditional connotation.

The British artist Mary Kelly is well known for her large scale narrative installations that address questions of sexuality, identity and historical memory. She cites her work, *Gloria Patri* (1992) as being inspired by the first Gulf War. *Gloria Patri* consists of five text-laden shields made of highly polished aluminum. They are dramatically lit, beside trophies and discs hung at various heights in order to make use of the viewer’s peripheral vision. Descriptions of battles as reported by various media are etched into the surface of the shields. The metallic shine has been selected by the artist to parody the way masculinity is defined and displayed. As part of the artist’s ongoing interrogation of gender politics, *Gloria Patri* contemplates the consequences, for women, of adopting the masculine ideal, for example, demanding to be allowed to engage in combat (Artist Biography). Her goals are much like I have set forth in my own work, allowing the viewer to form opinions about the efficacy of women at war in modern society.

The brutality of war informs the work of American artist Jenny Holzer, often using language to send messages of authority to the public in an anonymous voice. The powerful work, *Lustmord*, 1993-1994 is a large, mixed media installation that addresses the horrors perpetrated against the Muslim women of Bosnia by Serbian soldiers in the former Yugoslavia. The piece is a commentary on the rape of women in wartime from three

different perspectives (Observer, Perpetrator and Victim). So as to adequately convey the experience, Holzer use violent and graphic language, spoken by invisible characters. She hopes that readers will react to the piece from all three perspectives. One particular element of the installation is a series of photographs of text written on human skin. These appeared in the magazine of the German newspaper *Suddeutsche Zeitung*—the ink used on the cover contained human blood. Holzer saw this as a statement of complicity: that rape, symbolized by the blood of the victim, is an act, not only committed by a human against another human but also watched by other humans (as in the case of the reader of the magazine). Brandon asserts that such art, involving the observer, may question whether depictions of the human body at war may contribute to its waging (98). In her biography of Holzer, Diane Waldman notes, “Chillingly, the series underscores the way the world often sits by, watching, while women fall prey to abuse and death”(Drozdek). Her goal is to break down the psychological walls that seem to prevent us from our awareness and knowledge of brutality. As participant in the moment of understanding horror and death, the viewer becomes complicit in acts of physical cruelty. “If we can bear to look at evil, then we are evil” (Brandon 98).

Many modern-day feminists call upon women to take action against the traditional male-dominated hierarchies of power to end war and eliminate the necessity for women to serve (Davis 26). Speaking to the new world order, the work of Coco Fusco embodies much of what I attempt to convey in my own artistic practice; that is, it seems to answer questions, particularly, how women are changed by their military role and whether this is good or bad. Her video, *Operation Atropos*, 2006 and accompanying photographic series illustrates the potential political ramifications and social injustices surrounding

interrogation practices in light of what occurred in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. The performance is orchestrated by Fusco, who filmed herself in the role of “guard” wearing fatigues and carrying a bullhorn. Accompanying her is a group of “prisoners” in orange jumpsuits, who are “forced” to clean the street in front of a compound (which happened to be the United States consulate in Rio de Janeiro) with toothbrushes. The images are disturbing, as we see women on their hands and knees, with an authority figure issuing cruel orders. One of her focuses, obviously, is how female sexuality is used for interrogation by the U.S. military.

Fusco considers other issues, such as what it means for a female who wears a uniform and its connotations and symbolic meaning. In her manual *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators*, 2008, she attempts to elaborate on her performances as they often failed to examine the tradition of sexual manipulation as women’s primary vehicle to power (Brown). The book is a treatise on women’s role in the interrogation process, written as a letter to Virginia Woolf. She often refers to Woolf’s anti-war stance, citing that women, however marginal their economic or political status might be, would have to actively resist by refusing to provide support for it. War was not just about political domination through physical violence, but about the exploitation of the human spirit for financial gain, sexual power, and the censure of our capacity to engage in abstract thought. As such, women would best serve the war efforts by serving as peacemakers (16). What Woolf did not see was that in modern times, due to high unemployment and the demand for troops, American women are now integrated into the making of war. Fusco, then, makes her most powerful assumption: that the military has manipulated and exploited the presence of women in their ranks strategically and tactically. “The more access American

women have to the exercise of political power and the use of deadly force in war, the more apparent it becomes that we aren't using it very differently from men. Furthermore, our status as minorities in public office and as relative newcomers in government and military duty, and the persistence of prejudice and sexual harassment to which we are subject, don't seem to deter us from advocating and partaking in violence against the enemy" (18). The photographs released to the media about the abuse occurring at the Abu Ghraib prison in 2006 ignited disgust among many and sparked many protests and calls to put a stop to such practices. The women that were depicted in a number of the snapshots were seen sexually humiliating their prisoners. The presence of these women was used by the military to enact a new way of extracting information. Sporting lipstick and wearing sexy lingerie, among other methods, figured prominently in both detainee and eyewitness accounts of the sexualized interrogations. Fusco saw the use of women as sexual aggressors as the impetus for her performances. The character she created, as in *Operation Atropos*, as an implacable female interrogator who could speak about issues and events. She is the kind of person who sees her own internalization of the military's worldview and her success within its structure as feminist gains, although Fusco believes just the opposite (27). What, then, does she hope to achieve from her art? She asserts that women must not frame their experience exclusively in terms of powerlessness. If they persist in viewing female aggression as stemming from their victimization, there is no way to "address serious and real ethical and political questions emerging from women's involvement in systems and structures of dominance. If we refuse to address the ways that women embrace power then we deny ourselves the means of understanding how conservative

forces exploit identity politics” (81). In performing, Fusco hopes to convey these views to her audience in hopes that those who internalize them seek societal change.

Finally, Fusco comments on how the art world approaches the subject of war. Until recently, many have tackled the subject and have treated it, for the most part, as a tragedy. Now, few artists have taken up the chorus to rise against our current conflicts. She claims that there is a general reluctance on the part of the public to express anything more than tepid ambivalence about the war and the torture depicted in the media. In fact, torture seems to be seen as seductive given the nature of programming on prime time television; crime dramas sexualize the relationship between law enforcement and terrorism. Additionally, she asks if escaping into erotic sadomasochism fantasies erode our capacity for ethical concern for the effects of sexual torture? Are we desensitized to war because of sensory overload, privilege of political indifference or, “because violence severed from actual effects is so commonplace in movies and video games?” (25).

Art and War: The Political

As an artist with a distinct political message, my concern is that my own endeavors will be marginalized and dismissed by the viewing public. This is in reaction to my perception that, in recent years, contemporary artists have avoided images of war. Possibly, these images have been excluded from public view. Since the Vietnam War, many artists, including female artists, have chosen to downplay the presence of politics in their work. Even if they do speak to the political, they are often censored by institutions. In 2006, the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA, New York City) exhibition *Without Boundary: 17 Ways of Seeing* was particularly striking in its timidity and avoidance of current issues,

according to critic Tyler Green, writing for the *New York Observer*. Female Islamic artists Shirin Nashat and Emily Jacir, both included in the show, spoke out against the exhibition for its timidity--a bold move given MOMA's power and political clout. Nashat declares, "My immediate reaction was, how could anyone today discuss art made by a contemporary Muslim artist and not speak about the role of subjects of religion and contemporary politics play in the artists' minds? For some of us, our art is interconnected to the development of our personal lives, which have been controlled and defined by politics and governments" (Green). Jacir concurred, stating, "Given the conservative nature of the United States and the restrictive policies in American institutions, there is not the freedom to directly address certain sociopolitical situations like Iraq and Afghanistan." In addition, Jacir, a Palestinian-American artist, makes works that directly challenges political arrangements and spotlights the current Palestinian-Israeli conflict. "Historically, any Palestinian narrative is regularly censored in this country," she said, "This makes it extremely challenging to show work here. So now with the fact that we are living under the Bush administration, with its policy of occupation, torture and detention, and are battling for civil liberties, freedom of expression and political activism, it is clear why contextualizing the political situation some of us in the show are coming from would be whitewashed" (Green).

The roots of this anti-political bias by the American public can be traced to a conservative reaction against the Vietnam War protest movement, to civil rights, and, most importantly, to the art world—again a nod to the second wave feminist movement. It was exhilarating to find the review of the traveling exhibition, *WACK!* [Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., New York and Vancouver, B.C.], by Holland Cotter of the *New York Times* (2007). He stated, "One thing is certain: Feminist art, which emerged in the 1960s with the women's

movement, is the formative art of the last four decades. Scan the most innovative work by both men and women done during that time, and you'll find feminism's activist, expansionist, pluralistic trace. Without it, identity-based art, crafts-derived art, performance art and much political art would not exist in the form it does, if it existed at all. Much of what we call postmodern art has feminist art at its source" (Cotter). Could contemporary art have evolved without Judy Chicago, Hannah Wilke, Ana Mendiata, Martha Rosler, Faith Wilding, Miriam Schapiro and Suzanne Lacy (all represented in *WACK!*)? Holland Cotter, an influential, established and powerful critic doesn't think so. Artist Coco Fusco wrote a review of *WACK!* and its sister exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, "Global Feminisms" that seems pertinent to the discussion of how political and feminist art is still outside the current hegemony. She states that the "current view of the state of feminist art seems out of sync with reality. First, the art world continues to be hostile to all practices that politicize aesthetic values and ruling tastes. Second, the institutions that mounted the exhibitions were not committed to acquire feminist artworks, which would have constituted a much stronger form of recognition of feminism's 'value'" (93).

Lucy Lippard addresses the evolution of politics and feminism in art post-Vietnam war era in her essay "Hot Potatoes, 1980". She ponders that even though artists had been engaged in socially concerned art, it became chic and mainstreamed in the post-Vietnam era. Within the feminist movement, groups were polarized to how to proceed as radical and cultural feminists grappled with a vision of the future. And, within the art world, established feminist artists were slow to sense and respond to social currents while younger artists were more concerned with social issues in often peculiar and ambivalent ways (108). In the 1970s, the avant-garde adopted an individualistic, American male

stance that did not respect cultural activities. It looked toward revitalizing contemporary art by forcing artists to think less narrowly and accept ideological responsibility for what they produce. In the 1980s, when the political environment moved to the right and there was a backlash against the radical feminism movement, the question remained, "How do we arrive at an art that makes sense and is available to more and varied people yet maintains its aesthetic integrity and regains the power that art must have to provoke, please and mean something?" (111). Attempts to answer that question have produced forms that were less than exceptional.

Lippard notes that the most meaningful work of the 1980s is what she calls a "collage aesthetic". Not a collage as a technical term, but a juxtaposition of unlike realities to create new reality. In other work, collage is dialectic where words and images expose the cultural structure of society. It is art that turns against itself and the public. Martha Rosler, another feminist artist making her mark during this period, used what she termed "decoys" in her work that mimic some well-known cultural form in order to strip it of its mask of innocence. Rosler, in her work *Gladiators*, 2004 manipulates images of war and domestic tranquility to produce a work of which, according to Lippard, calls to question its underlying values and meaning. Goals of a future art form would serve to create a new kind of art community within, not apart from, the rest of the world. This would restore the collective responsibility of the artist. She foresaw dangers of this type of art production as potentially creating factionalism that had already divided the politicized minority within the art world. Significantly, art which may be viewed as containing overtly social content still poses a threat to the status quo. A new kind of art practice would take place, at least partially, outside the art world. Lippard concludes, "We continue to talk about 'new forms'

because the new has been the fertilizing fetish of the avant-garde since it detached itself from the infantry. But it may be that these new forms are only to be found buried in social energies not yet recognized as art” (118).

In the twenty-first century, the political pulse of the country has again swayed toward the conservative, which can be hostile territory for artists who wish to offer their work that is political, biased, or tending toward beliefs that are not the norm. For example, David Wojanarowicz’s video depicting Christ with ants crawling over him was removed from an exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery in November 2010 when the Catholic League and a spokesperson for Rep. John Boehner (R-Ohio) called the piece “hate speech” and deemed it a misuse of taxpayer money (Trescott).

Many gallery spaces and juried exhibitions have often chosen not to display art of a political nature. In the April 26, 2013 issue of the *New York Times* “Art in Review” section, of the five exhibitions reviewed, only one, “Engines of War” at the *Gasser Grunert Gallery* in Chelsea (an exhibition of photographs taken during the current US military actions) had any political content (Art in Review).

Current War Exhibitions

Peace and Quiet, 2012 was a project created in Times Square by the Times Square Arts, a division of Times Square Alliance. It consisted of a small structure in which veterans were stationed within, hoping to engage the civilian public (and veteran passers-by) in a dialog. The goal was education, as there seemed to be a great deal of disconnect between the two groups. One of the female participants, Sergeant Lyndsey Anderson, had an intriguing observation about the event. She points out the fact that in the military, she is

only one among many with values of duty and unselfishness. The artist, on the other hand, tends to be a non-conformist and views the military with suspicion. The soldier in contemporary art has not been considered as an individual, but as part of an entire military-industrial complex (Cembalest 87). Hopefully, a dialog can seek to alter this vision. This particular art piece, as a form of social engagement may anticipate the future of political art in its successful engagement with the audience in order to create a better understanding.

Yigal Ozeri's *Territory* at the Mike Weiss Gallery, 2012, was an exhibition that addressed the "feminine" side of the female soldier. An Israeli male artist, Ozeri seeks to merge the concept of the warrior goddess with the "universal soldier." The paintings are lovely, photorealistic depictions of the sensuous female—part of the earth, nature and the unpleasant reality that all nature faces, the need for self-defense. Hence, there is the need for the military heroine who is embodied by the young, beautiful Israeli girl. She is presented as an Olympian, standing tall on a hillside strewn with rocks, the ideal symbol of the mother country (Hrbacek). Given the difficulties that women in the Israeli Defense Forces have to endure, it is quite interesting to contemplate this unique view of them. In my personal experience, I saw the female soldier as a young woman torn between her need to defend and be a part of the military complex and her femininity. She is not, however, the warrior goddess, simply a modern young woman who is questioning where she fits in the world and can she level the playing field with her male counterparts in society? (Hrbacek)

Where do I fit in?

Exploration of the subject matter that I have chosen has obviously been extremely personal and meaningful. These young women appear to me as my own daughter, with all the naiveté and immaturity of young adulthood. When I first approached this subject, I began with materials that felt comfortable, such as oil paint on canvas. Representational images, taken from reference photos, depicted the women in their environment—patrolling, training and casually interacting with their peers. To distinguish them as I wished, I added alluring poses and revealed them less modestly, showing bits of skin. Looking back on this formative period, I am certain that although the images were beautiful and rich with color, they lacked the power to evoke the message I wished to convey. Moving into collage and installation, my work became more in line with those I wished to emulate; that is, many of the second wave feminist artists referred to throughout this thesis. Their aesthetic, which combined elements of collage and craft, suited my needs and were more visually stimulating. The yarn drawings, the method to which this refers is the combination of collage and yarn woven onto nails attached to board, are particularly exciting and has been well received by my teachers and peers.

Future work may include continued forays into sculptural elements. I believe that my installations have been thoroughly explored; these include life-sized cut-outs, similar in structural form to the collages, mounted to Styrofoam insulation board and attached to wood stands. These figures have an in-your-face quality, and can appear overwhelming to the viewer, which was not my original intent. Subsequently to the construction of these figures, I constructed smaller pieces that told a particular story. The title of this work, *The Shooting Range* (2013) integrates the structural elements with the painting that I loved, but

could not achieve a positive result. The success of this work is that it resolves the problems I faced earlier; that by telling a complete story with multiple mediums in one installation, I can engage the viewer and create interesting dialog. Other experiments in form include mold-making using female soldier cookie cutters. A number of molds have been created and I am attempting to synthesize them into viable artworks. These trials have enabled me to maintain a connection to my subject matter and, at the same time, allow me to explore new materials and mediums.

What's next?

The question remains, what is in store for the female soldier when she becomes a civilian? What roles can she play in modern society that will enable her to attain a level of equality to her male counterparts? It is likely that most women will return to their families and become the nurturers, mothers and care-givers. Working women may bring some of their military skills and training to the civilian world, but it remains to be seen whether or not this elevates them to pay levels equivalent to men performing the same tasks. What does serving actually mean for the mental health of these women? Can integration in society be seamless, or are we faced with additional strain on governmental resources to provide for them? Few current working artists have attempted to create a dialog with their audience to elicit responses to such questions.

Although arguments against the Vietnam War initiated wonderful art pieces by feminist artists, there later seemed to be a move away from socially-concerned art. Whether artists bowed to conservative forces of the 1980s as current institutions displaying art did, or was there a general apathy toward such images, the public becoming

jaded and numb toward what was previously thought of as “powerful” artwork? And yet another observation of societal change is the current mood of the public toward gun violence. Displaying my own work in the United States would likely evoke negative responses from the public, but in Israel, the depictions would be seen as every day and natural. Artists, however, do have a moral responsibility to present the issue in politically charged form, whether or not it provokes negative feedback. It is because of this that I intend to continue to present the female soldier as a warrior, with a feminine quality, as young women may assume in today’s society. In this way, I can reconcile my own feminist leanings with the way these images are perceived; many will sexualize themselves, yet also seek to prove they are equal. I can hope that their desires be realized in the near future.

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