

CONTEMPORARY FEMINISMS

by Amish Morrell

It is with great excitement that I introduce this issue, which could not be timelier for many reasons. In recent years, there has been what seems like countless exhibitions dealing with feminist practices in contemporary art, including but not limited to the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art's touring show *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (plus responses by local galleries to *WACK!* when it was mounted in Vancouver, such as Artspeak's *Persistence: An Archive of Feminist Practices* and vivo Media Art's, *THE AFTER PARTY*); the Brooklyn Museum's *Global Feminisms*; *Shared Women* at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions; *The F-Word* at Vancouver's Western Front; *Martha Wilson: Staging the Self* at the Dalhousie Art Gallery in Halifax; and Allyson Mitchell's *Ladies Sasquatch*, exhibited most recently at the Art Gallery of Lethbridge. While all of these exhibitions either explicitly or implicitly suggest a need to pause and consider the current state of feminism and feminist art practice, it may be a daunting task to authoritatively describe and represent such a diverse set of movements. With this difficulty in mind, this issue of *C Magazine* instead attempts to further expand the parameters of how we might talk about and understand contemporary feminisms.

Two of the feature essays in this issue engage art and cultural practices that are inflected by both feminist and queer politics. In Jen Hutton's "God and the Gaze," about Lady Gaga and feminist camp performance, the writer references Gaga's televised dedication of her MTV Video Music Awards trophy to "god and the gays." While Hutton describes an important parallel between Lady Gaga's fluid gender identity and exaggerated femininity, and the camp femininity of gay male performers, by no means does she suggest that this signals a return to oppressive gender norms. As hyper-feminine, Gaga inhabits this position in such a way that, as Hutton argues, she is not just an object of sexual desire, but is a desiring subject. Paradoxically,

through her performance of what might normally be understood as a straight identity, Lady Gaga invokes a spirit that is distinctly queer.

Similarly, Emily Roysdon's image-text project *Ecstatic Resistance* is deeply engaged with both feminist and queer politics. However, she attempts to move beyond existing theoretical models of identity and of the political that limit what can be understood and achieved. In her theses on ecstatic resistance, Roysdon outlines "a positionality of the impossible" through which to rethink sexual difference, and articulate new relationships between the imagination and the body. Concerned with a larger reorganization of the cultural imaginary, she argues for the invocation of what is unspeakable, unthinkable and unimaginable, as a strategy by which to undermine a phallogentric and Eurocentric way of organizing the world.

Roysdon, and Helena Reckitt in her essay "Who Was that Woman?," further propose an engagement with history and temporality that is carefully attuned to gender and sexual identity. Among other images, Roysdon includes a film still from Ulrike Ottinger's 1981 movie *Freak Orlando*, which presents a mythological history of the world based, in part, on Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. Reckitt, similarly, examines some of the ways contemporary feminist artists have engaged with women artists of previous generations, as a way of destabilizing hegemonic narratives of history and excavating unrealized possibilities from the past. This examination functions as a form of what Elizabeth Freeman calls "temporal crossing": identification across generations, or even epochs, akin to gender crossing.¹

The cover of this issue depicts a public art project by Jeanine Oleson called *The Greater New York Smudge Cleanse* (2008), where a ten-foot long sage smudge stick was used to ritually cleanse areas of New York City including Greenpoint and Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn, and the West Village in Manhat-

tan. The performance shown on the cover, a response to the anxiety that followed the stock market crash in the fall of 2008, and the growing condemnation of US economic imperialism, was held at Wall Street's Federal Hall, the site of George Washington's presidential inauguration, the day before the 2008 American presidential election. By invoking the past as a symbolic reference point, while simultaneously engaging the present, this project works as a form of imaginary crossing, an act of ecstatic resistance that aims to cleanse Wall Street and George Washington. These ideas of real and symbolic transformation are further extended with an artist project by Onya Hogan-Finlay, who inserts a queer presence into the rural landscape through her drawing practice. Her work, however, contrasts 60s and 70s feminisms, which attempted to describe a universal experience of women through the alignment of their bodies with nature, primarily through reproduction. Onya Hogan-Finlay's centrefold is irreverently and ecstatically engaged with back-to-nature feminist imagery and recognizable Canadian icons.

In conjunction with this print edition, our website, www.cmagazine.com, will be featuring additional material, for those seeking further information, as well as for students in specialized art programs who are using *C Magazine* in their studies. These resources include study guides for Jen Hutton's "God and the 'Gaze': A Visual Reading of Lady Gaga," and Emily Roysdon's "Ecstatic Resistance," and a list of readings and exhibitions related to this issue's theme.

As we are about to go to press, we are aware of the magnitude of what there is to say and write about this topic. There was much that we simply could not fit into this issue of the magazine. However, feminism isn't simply an isolated concern. As this issue reveals, it informs many other movements, practices, and discourses, and importantly, it does not speak to or include only one gender. Contemporary feminism is relevant to every issue of *C Magazine*, and as a subject for critical writing and practice, it doesn't end here. ♦

¹ Elizabeth Freeman, "Packing History. Counter(ing) Generations." *New Literary History* vol. 31, no. 4, (Autumn 2000), 727-744.