THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

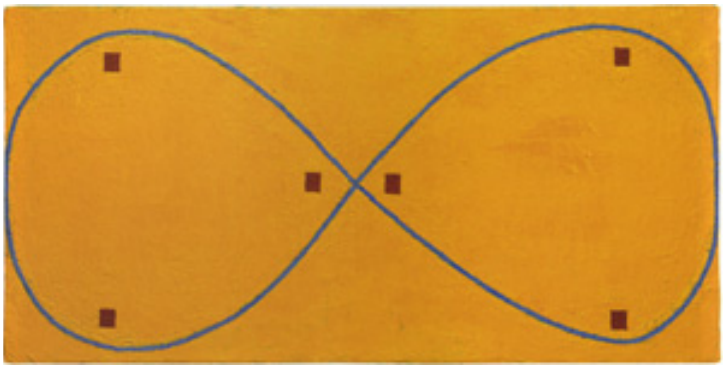
THE SEVENTIES

by Deborah Kass

Everybody has their own 1970s and this is the story of mine:

The years I attended high school from 1967 to 1970 were some of the most intellectually, politically and aesthetically charged in post-war history. The rapid change in social consciousness was not lost on a teenager with an interest in the world outside her provincial suburb. It would be difficult to overestimate the power of the social changes occurring everywhere on a young and voracious mind desperate to get out of Long Island and into the real world of New York City, that exotic land of gritty streets, Columbia University radicals, chain smoking intellectuals, poets, painters, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Mimi and Richard Farina, Laura Nyro and Eva Hesse, all of whom would soon be my best friends.

During high school I attended the Art Students League on Saturdays, with the disapproval of my parents and money I'd earned babysitting. I learned how to draw from the model and learned anatomy. But my real education happened after my morning classes. Nearly every Saturday afternoon I went to the Museum of Modern Art and contemplated the masters, Cezanne through Pollock to Pop Art. I had my favorites. But I couldn't help but wonder: What in god's name did any of this have to do with me?



Elizabeth Murray, Möbius Band (1974). Oil on canvas 14×28". Collection Ellen Phelan and Joel Shapiro.

Weirdly, it was the Frank Stella show in 1970 at MoMA, which I saw my senior year of high school, that blew me away. Even though I always wanted to be an artist, I wasn't sure what that meant. Seeing Stella, and being able to follow his logic through each series to the next, meant to me that I could do this with my life. My diary from that day, written on the spot, is remarkably lucid about the importance of what I was looking at.

In September 1970 Carnegie Mellon was not a cool art school. But when I arrived a new dean had hired a group of youngish hippie cowboys, all male of course, like the rest of the faculty. On our first Christmas break 12 of us, including two of the professors, got into two vans and drove across country to visit Allan Kaprow at the very new and hip Cal Arts—a place where I had wanted to apply but my parents nixed because it was too far away from New York. I don't know what the point of visiting Cal Arts and Kaprow was, although a bunch of the people who were on the trip transferred there. But since we were stoned the entire trip, one might say, in the parlance of the day, the journey was the point.

My boyfriend at the time and I started visiting his pals in Soho in 1971, where at night they kept the windows dark and took the trash out when no one was around. The closest place to eat was Remingtons on Waverly, soon to be Mickey Ruskin's Lo Cal. Spring Street Bar, Food and Broome Street were yet to be. We often stayed with John Torreano, his pal from grad school at Ohio State, home of the very influential professor Hoyt Sherman. We visited his other friends in their vast, rough but beautiful lofts. It was in Gary Bower's huge kitchen I had my first design epiphany: a Chemex coffee pot—simply the chicest object I had ever seen. To me it symbolized the life I wanted to live. I was 19.

The Whitney Program was at 29 Reade Street in the basement of an abandoned bank building, before the neighborhood was named Tribeca. I went there in the fall of 1972 and met the soon-to-be very famous Julian Schnabel along with the mostly soon-not-to-be famous others. A list of words as yet invented, so never uttered at the ISP: diversity, feminism, identity, deconstruction theory, or post-modernism, or post anything. Ron Clark, the director of the Program was simply a Marxist. The artists associated with the Program were nearly all male: David Diao, Allen Shields, Gary Bower, Barry LeVa, Robert Smithson and various other guys showed up for

visits. The only woman: the severe and fabulous Yvonne Rainer.

Jack Burnham had announced the end of art. Clement Greenberg held sway, Michael Fried, Judd, and Smithson were waging intellectual turf battles in the much poured over pages of Artforum, all of it bad for painting. It was part of the conventional wisdom of the time that it was impossible to do anything new in painting. To me it seemed as if painters in New York in the early 70s were splitting formal hairs, dancing on the head of pins, or trying to psyche out whatever tiny spot might be left somewhere between Pollock and Stella. Or Pollock and anyone.

Norman O. Brown, Carlos Casteneda, Zap Comix, Pop Art and drugs promised some other kinds of insights. I learned the history of 20th century sculpture staring at David Smith's Cubi at the Carnegie Museum, tripping my ass off. Dropping acid and going to museums was one of my favorite pastimes. I will never forget tripping at the Met and being certain that Titian's "Venus and The Lute Player" was painted on material that was flocked in a flor de lis pattern. It wasn't.

Throughout college I made regular trips to galleries. Two shows blew my mind during college as much as the Stella show had when I was in high school: Guston at David McKee at the Barbizon Hotel's mezzanine, and Elizabeth Murray at Paul Cooper's first space in SoHo.

When I saw Elizabeth's show at Paula Cooper the earth moved, because a seismic change was occurring in my life as I stood there looking. I had been oblivious to feminism, I was entirely and erotically male identified. But looking at her paintings, I realized that for the first time the subject, which I previously and unconsciously assumed to be male, had changed. I recognized what was traditional in her painting—traditional as I had come to understand it through my sojourns to MoMA and at college, a New York School, Cezanne-through-Stella thinking. This painting was clearly coming from there, but with a different point of view and speaking in a different voice about something else altogether. The subject was female. And I mean subject as we defined it in the 80s and 90s. The speaking subject, the specific subject. The subject with agency.

I was seeing abstraction, turned upside down, inside out, deployed in a completely new way. Maybe it was that I was living with a minimalist sculptor, but what Elizabeth had done was something very different, using formalism, a deeply impersonal language that was so familiar to me, taking this impersonal language and making it personal.

I felt that I was the intended audience for the first time looking at a work of art. This object had something to do with my experience of the world. It was the first time since I was a kid looking at paintings at MoMA that I saw my own reflection. In every sense of the word this was new and wasn't new what everyone was looking for?

When I served burgers at the Broome Street Bar and lived in a loft on West Broadway next to Towers Cafeteria, soon to be The Odeon, there were several women artists along with Elizabeth whose practice was located in my new favorite neighborhood downtown. It was there, at the intersection of the New York School, painting and feminism, that I was in exactly the place I wanted to be.

I was a lucky young woman painter, due to my arrival in New York at the height of Second Wave Feminism. I didn't imagine that being a woman painter would ever be the problem that it was to become for my generation of women painters in the 80s. In the 70s my heroes were doing great! Along with Elizabeth there was Pat Steir, Joan Snyder, and Mary Heilman, whose work I would see upon arrival with regularity in Soho and at the Whitney, courtesy of the late great Marcia Tucker. Lousie Fishman, Susan Rothenberg, Lois Lane, Denise Green, Harriet Korman, Harmony Hammond and Dona Nelson showed regularly. I will never forget Mary's show at Holly Solomon's in 1976. There was a small red, yellow and blue diptych that was so kooky and vivid I never forgot it. In the 90s I saw it in her loft, exactly as I remembered it from 20 years before. Joan's virtuoso emotional intensity led to a lifetime of formal invention. Pat's gorgeous deconstruction of picture making simply made the work of Ross Bleckner and Jonathan Lasker possible. "New image" and "Bad Painting," along with feminism, inspired the men and women of my generation.

The influence of these painters on us was enormous, but has never been historically acknowledged. And rarely by the male painters my age. While I was a student at CMU, Pat and Elizabeth taught at Cal Arts, where their influence was clearly felt. Content was eventually de riguer in the paintings of their male students. While the more radical women involved themselves in the Feminist Art Program, consciousness raising and collective efforts, those men my age followed quite a different model.

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Civil rights, equality, social justice and progress—the 1960s be damned, the guys of my generation saw their paths very differently: art was business and business demanded a kind of ruthlessness I don't think any woman, younger or older, could even imagine. Their vision presaged what the art world was to become and what their auction prices would reflect. It was also a harbinger of the retrogressive social Darwinism both in the art world and real world, that has lead to the political despair and powerlessness so many of us feel right now.

Women painters my age? We simply didn't have a prayer.

The 70's was the only decade in which women painters got their due and functioned in the tiny art market of the time, relatively on par with their male colleagues. It hasn't happened since; the 80s and its art stars put an end to that.

The importance of the 70s New York women painters' achievement is reflected in the fact that many of their careers have been long and successful, and—although not for enough of them—their retrospectives are finally in place. This is an area of feminist or any art history that has yet to be touched by curators or scholarship and certainly deserves to be.

To paraphrase Griselda Pollock, these painters made feminist interventions into the histories of abstract painting. They changed the language of painting and made it speak for themselves for the first time.

Because of the enormous historical importance of the women's movement of the 70s (Second Wave Feminism) these works were produced in a receptive cultural climate, in a critical mass, and were big and visible enough to change painting history. This to me this is THE contribution of New York painting in the 1970s.