

Interview with Jenni Sorkin

Before I ever met Jenni Sorkin, I encountered her work from afar. After reading her essay on the legacy of the radical, Marxist feminist Shulamith Firestone for a 2015 issue *Frieze* magazine, I wrote her a cold email about the ways that her writing had moved me. She wrote back right away, and we have been in touch—in person and over email—ever since. As I came to know Jenni better, I also discovered more of her work, reading essays she's written on re-performance, stained cloth, and most recently, her 2016 book *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, and Community*, a project that focuses on the lives and practices of three American, female ceramicists working in the 20th century. Through each of her projects, I've become more sensitive to the inter-connectivity of gender, embodied performance, alternative pedagogy, and craft work as community engagement. Here, we discuss that recent book, as well as Sorkin's role in the seminal L.A. exhibitions *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at MOCA Geffen (2007), *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933–1957* at the Hammer Museum (2016), and *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947–2016* at Hauser & Wirth (2016).

Carmen Winant: As a place to start, will you talk a little bit about your background as an artist? As an undergraduate student you were focused in the material and fiber department at SAIC.

Jenni Sorkin: I started in the photo department and quickly moved on to fiber. The department was full of women. That education introduced me to an alternative canon and an alternative modernism. I only realized that was the case when I arrived at Yale as an art history doctorate student, actually.

But there was a very strong Americanist program at Yale, and wonderful collections and decorative arts and crafts objects. Because I had a foothold already, I could bring along the hands-on knowledge with me, and use it to bracket the canonical modernism to which I was being introduced.

At SAIC I had a handful of amazing faculty mentors—all women, such as the art historian Kelly Dennis, and the artists Anne Wilson, Joan Livingstone, and Barbara DeGenevieve. Still, this was a BFA program in the late '90s—there was no dedicated “critical” focus. It was haphazard; I graduated from that program never having written a paper.

CW: Did you come to miss art making as you shifted focus from it?

JS: I actually found it arduous, and tedious, even as I was doing it. I never liked being in a studio by myself. I tried social practice work; I tried lots of things. But what I really liked doing was talking about other people's work. You can imagine: people hated me in critiques! I was always hyper-articulate and hyper-critical of other people's work. I felt out of sorts in art school.

CW: You moved from there into curating, not directly into art history.

JS: From SAIC, I got an MA at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. That education exposed me to a different history and politics. There were many international students and curators who passed through that program, in particular,

Carmen Winant is an artist and writer based in Columbus, OH. She is currently at work on an experimental book about the nature of practice.

many Latin Americans. After that I accepted a position at MOCA, Los Angeles, working with Connie Butler on *WACK!*. I had no friends in L.A. at the time; I knew no one. Instead, I spent a lot of time doing studio visits with artists in that show, listening to them talk about their own histories.

CW: What a unique experience, meeting with those women. How many curators have access to so many of their living subjects?

JS: Nobody cared about them at the time. This was directly after 9/11 [2001]; people did not give a shit about feminism. Barbara T. Smith, for instance, had no gallery; she hadn't had encounters with curators for 10 or 15 years. There was very little knowledge about the history of the Woman's Building, or the Feminist Art Program at CalArts. The history of feminist activity was mostly overlooked and ignored. Pacific Standard Time, which helped shine a light, had not yet happened. It was a serious process to bring it all together—the show opened in 2007, and I started working on it in 2001.

CW: At UC Santa Barbara, you have an appointment in art history and are affiliated with both feminist studies and the art department. Do you find that these disciplines—and their coursework—compete with one another, or inform each other's projects?

It's all a part of the same project. As a contemporary art historian, my work always takes on a bifurcated role: both *forward* and backward-looking. I am what I consider a first responder to artwork—the first person to write on work as it's first being shown, the first person to publish on an emerging artist, etc.—and a responder to

the past, writing archivally-driven histories like (my book project) *Live Form* that are very much bound up in the longer 20th century.

Art historians and artists have different purviews in the work. Artists are always driving forward in their work; they get bored or anxious if they are asked to spend too much time looking back. It is one of the amazing features of being artists. They are over the series they did one year ago, ten years ago.

CW: *Revolution in the Making*, a show that you co-curated with Paul Schimmel at Hauser & Wirth, veered toward the latter: it was a more historic project. The exhibition has had a major impact, and continues to echo in conversations I have with friends and artists. Can you describe the process of putting it together?

JS: It was the inaugural show of Hauser & Wirth [then Hauser, Wirth & Schimmel]. Paul [Schimmel] approached me, and invited me into that space to work together; we knew each other from my time at MOCA, and he was aware of my commitment to feminist art, and art made by women. It was a wonderful invitation, and one that totally overtook my life for two years.

The experience of working with a commercial gallery budget was totally transformative, I have to admit. Museum budgets are often quite pinched—things move a lot slower to keep up with fundraising efforts. We got to do in two and half years what would have taken six or seven years

Jenni Sorkin is an associate professor of Art History at UC Santa Barbara. She writes on the intersection between gender, material culture, and contemporary art. Sorkin's new book, *Live Form: Women, Ceramics and Community* was published in July of 2016.

at a major museum. The show wasn't as historically minded as *WACK!*, though they were, of course, related. I was able to work less within a tightly constructed framework and more toward an aesthetic preoccupation with abstraction.

CW: It was a big show, in multiple senses of the word.

JS: Well, the work had to be large in scale, in some obvious sense, to hold the enormity of the space. But more importantly, women often work on a small scale out of necessity, not out of desire. Their practices are often not supported economically through galleries and museums. We found so much work by women sculptors responding to this in a long-term way: for instance, responding to the scale of their male counterparts, like Richard Serra, responding to minimalism. It was a fascinating pattern.

CW: *WACK!* and *Revolution in the Making* were women-only projects, as is your book, *Live Form*, which examines the lives and work of three ceramic artists working in the 1950s: M.C. Richards, Marguerite Wildenhain, and Susan Peterson. Are you...

JS: A happy separatist? Yes! [Laughs.] I do write about men. But I feel compelled to write about women; I am not apologetic about that.

CW: All-women exhibitions have drawn criticism lately for perpetuating some ghettoization of the already marginalized in the art world.

JS: Why don't we understand them instead as bringing much needed attention? Why does the language need to be continually framed in such

a negative way? We still have the problem of the default to address. When you say the term "artist"—and this is a notion that Griselda Pollock, the feminist art historian, first wrote about—it is additive to have to put "woman" in front of that. That adjective—the African-American artist, the Asian-American artist, the gay artist, the trans artist—becomes the means of making everyone non-white or male into a secondary addition. We cannot fully unseat the white male artist, which is why these projects are so necessary.

Projects like *Live Form* work to force a different viewpoint. Making people aware of alternatives is a deliberate revisionist art historical or curatorial strategy. Listen, there is no such thing as feminist curating. There is only curating by feminists.

CW: How did you elect to focus on these three particular artists—M.C. Richards, Susan Peterson, and Marguerite Wildenhain—for *Live Form*?

JS: All three of these women left their most important work in print. Each consistently published, each left an impressive written archive. Their words, devalued in their own lifetime, contained germs of wisdom that I thought could be really applicable today. Also, each of these artists worked to pioneer some sense of alternative spaces and alternative pedagogy. They offer an alternative model for an artist working outside of the boundaries of the art world. This is compelling to the present moment; there are so many people at that margin now. My job as a historian is to go back to the record and see what lessons can be taken from these women, all of whom lived in a far more sexist and repressive social era.

CW: And, of course, each worked in ceramics.

JS: Ceramics has been completely undervalued and overlooked. My work tries, always, to consider it in a more constructive and theoretical way. I aim to reclaim it as a performative—and non-utilitarian—medium, in which the maker is not only performing skill and mastery, but also the making of the self.

CW: You describe your subjects several times as proto-feminists. What exactly does that mean in this context? Would they have referred to themselves that way?

JS: These ceramists would have vehemently rejected the term “feminist.” Frankly, they could not have been asked to accept that term in the time they came of age. Each of these women supported their male colleagues more than they supported their female colleagues. This has to do, I think, with self-identifying with a masculine way of being in the world which still persists. Only one of the three women in this book (Susan Peterson) had children. All three of them married and divorced multiple times; in that historical moment, such a practice was quite uncommon. For a woman to be self-supporting during the 1950s, to lead a hand-to-mouth existence, was very rare. It meant giving up the more comfortable, social privileges of being married, having a man in your life, owning property, being settled in some way. This offers a real lesson for artists in trying to figure out new ways of living now.

Andrea Zittel, for instance, forging new designs for living in Joshua Tree is really no different than Marguerite Wildenhain establishing Pond Farm. Forging new, outsider

models is not new; part of my work is demonstrating that such a legacy exists. And, this is important, it is a *legacy of craft*. Craft is really where it's at when thinking about a history of social practice work, non-object based work, performance work, and alternative world-making.

CW: Speaking of new models of teaching and living as an artist, you contributed several shorter essays to the Black Mountain College show catalog. Maybe we could end on this note; can you speak a little about notions of “alternative world-making” in relationship to schools?

JS: Right. The history of art schools, like CalArts and so many others, is one of community building. Of learning, in some real sense, how to live and be an engaged citizen of the world, rather than learning how to make artwork. Helen Molesworth's Black Mountain show is very much engaged in this project—this interest in cultivating utopian values, in collectivity. Los Angeles, and its legacy of art schools, is the city most devoted to this practice. It really differs from a city like Chicago in that way: there is one major art school in that city, which provides a less sustainable context. Here, people move, attend, graduate, and stay. There is a network to enter and build from. And it feels endless.



1
*WACK! Art and the Feminist
Revolution* (installation view)
(2007). Image courtesy of
MOCA, Los Angeles.



2
*WACK! Art and the Feminist
Revolution* (installation view)
(2007). Image courtesy of
MOCA, Los Angeles.



3
The Feminist Studio Workshop,
lead by Faith Wilding.
Photo: E.K. Waller



4

*Revolution in the Making:
Abstract Sculpture by Women,
1947 – 2016 (Installation view)
(2016). Image courtesy of the
artists and Hauser & Wirth.
Louise Bourgeois: Art © The
Easton Foundation/Licensed
by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo:
Brian Forrest.*

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*Revolution in the Making:
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(2016). Image courtesy of the
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Photo: Brian Forrest.*