

KNOW

INTERVIEWS

I Have Never Heard Any Good Reason for Censorship

Magdalena Kröner Interviews Judith Bernstein for Kunstforum

This spring, Magdalena Kröner of KUNSTFORUM interviewed New York-based artist Judith Bernstein about her work, feminism, war, censorship and the importance of "emotional punch." Bernstein's work was recently exhibited in Los Angeles in *Fuck Vietnam* at The Box.



Interview from KUNSTFORUM:

Artist Judith Bernstein, born in Newark 1942, lives and works in New York. In 1974, her drawing *Horizontal*, a monumental depiction of a phallic presence, part of the group exhibition *FOCUS: Women's Work – American Art 1974*, caused a scandal: *Horizontal* was removed from the exhibition for being too sensationalist. The censorship of her work yielded turn intensified the controversy already surrounding her work. After this scandal, Bernstein's career was virtually over before it had actually begun. Her provocative works were barely exhibited or sold. However, the artist is presently experiencing an extensive rediscovery. In summer of 2010, MoMA PS1 showed *Five Panel Vertical*, as part of the group exhibition *Greater New York*, and in October, The New Museum exhibited early political collages such as *Are You Running with Me Jesus?* as part of the exhibition *The Last Newspaper Show*. In November of 2010, The Alex Zachary Gallery, located on New York's Upper East Side, exhibited a new reconfiguration of Bernstein's monumental *Signature Piece*, and in 2009, Mara McCarthy's gallery *The Box* in Los Angeles installed a retrospective of the artist, spanning four decades.



Judith Bernstein, *Superclock*, 1966, Charcoal and Mixed Media on Paper 22 x 30 inches, Collection Paul McCarthy

Magdalena Kröner: What was your most important exhibition and what memories do you have of it?

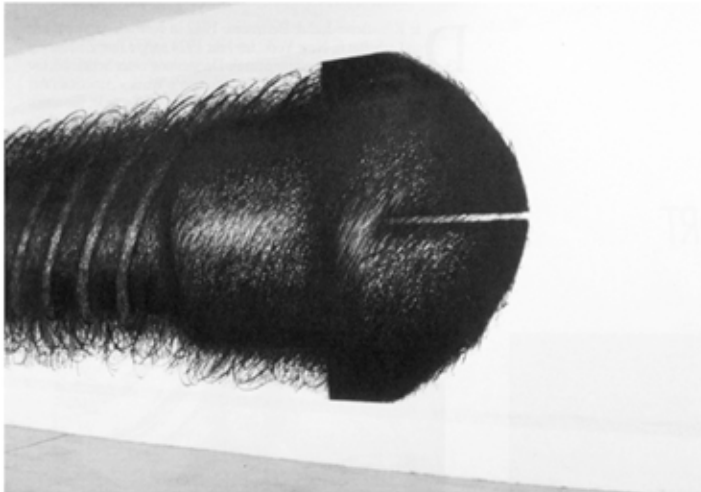
Judith Bernstein: I had my first exhibition at A.I.R. (Artist in Residence) Gallery in 1973; it was my first individual exhibition. A.I.R. was the first gallery dedicated to promoting and presenting art produced by women on a professional level. Back then critic Lucy Lippard had a file of artwork of women artists. This file served as a resource in choosing women for A.I.R. It was an exciting time; we all were very idealistic, and very young.

MK: What was special about A.I.R., which still exists today?

JB: As a women's cooperative in New York with a conceptual sensibility, A.I.R. was founded in 1972 to facilitate the entry of women into the art market. Ideally the purpose of A.I.R. was to secure a spot for women in a system dominated by men. Many women artists did not want to associate with a gallery promoting women and not men. They had reservations about leaving the male establishment. Nancy Spero and Ana Mendieta were among the early members. That A.I.R. continues to exist today demonstrates the need for professional artistic representation for women.

MK: Which works were exhibited at A.I.R. as a young artist, and how were the reactions?

JB: October 1, 1973, I had the first solo show where I exhibited *Horizontal*, *Big Horizontal* and *Five Panel Vertical* – three pieces of work that right from the beginning were met with volatile reactions. Interestingly *Horizontal* would be censored in 1974.



Judith Bernstein, *Big Horizontal*, 1973, Charcoal on Paper 9 x 26 feet

MK: I would like to know more about that. In your opinion, what was it that made those works controversial?
 –Could you explain the context for censorship?

JB: The exhibition *FOCUS: Women's Work – American Art 1974* was shown at the Philadelphia Civic Center Museum. It included 170 works by 86 women artists. Notably, five influential women curated the exhibition, among them Marcia Tucker, at the time a curator at The Whitney Museum, Cindy Nemser, writer and publisher of *The Feminist Art Journal*, Adelyn Breeskin of the National Collection of Fine Arts, Anne D'Harnoncourt of The Philadelphia Museum of Art, and sculptor Lila Katzen. The managing director and curator of The Philadelphia Civic Center Museum, John Pierron and Marian Aguilera implemented the censorship. Furthermore, Frank Rizzo, the then conservative mayor of Philadelphia had a say in it. Irresponsibly they rated my work as dangerous to women and children; consequently denying it of any societal relevance. They used a phraseology frequently applied to pornography, that it was of "no redeeming social value." The good thing was that I received a great deal of support. At the opening, artists and supporters wore buttons saying "Where is Bernstein?" There was also a petition signed by fellow artists, exhibitors and critics that included Dore Ashton, Louise Bourgeois, Clement Greenberg, Lucy Lippard, Alice Neel, Marcia Tucker, and Angela Westwater.

MK: How did you feel about being censored?

JB: It was 1974 and I had just begun following my own path in the art world. I never wanted the exhibition to be closed. I felt it was a shame that *Horizontal* wasn't included in the *FOCUS* exhibition, but in a way I was still part of it. Many publications including *The New York Times* and *Artforum* framed their critiques in response to the omission of *Horizontal*. Overall, it was incredibly important for women artists to be shown, to be noticed, and to receive reviews.

MK: In your opinion, why did this censorship happen?

JB: I believe it has to do with the subconscious content of my work. When viewing *Horizontal*, *Big Horizontal* and *Five Panel Vertical*, an observer probably will likely internalize these huge phallic presences as no different than a giant cock.

MK: Why does the subject matter of your work continue to be controversial?

JB: The connection between screw and phallus, present in much of my work, touches upon many sensitive aspects that exist in the subconscious. Men especially can feel intimidated by the scale of a work such as *Five Panel Vertical* (15 x 35 feet), a monumental presence which last summer in 2010 was shown for the first time in New York since 1973 as part of that year's *Greater New York* show at PS1 – something that made me ecstatic. *Five Panel Vertical* was previously exhibited in *Sexual Politics Exhibition* at UCLA Armand Hammer Museum, 1976 and in the *American Feminist Originators* in Katzen Art Museum, American University, Washington D.C., 2007-2008. Additionally, women and men may disapprove of how I chose to politicize female genitalia as angry and aggressive as in the series *Active Cunt*.

MK: Compared to artist Lee Lozano, whose approach is similar to yours in many aspects, people always emphasize the humor in your work. According to those statements, Lee Lozano's work is "terrifyingly dark," whereas yours shows a "scathing cheerfulness," as *Artforum* once put it. What role does humor play in your work?

JB: I LOVE humor. For me, aggression and humor are strongly connected. You see this in *Fun Gun*, where the penis has a gun-like trigger, and *Supercrack*, a comic figure with huge genitals who flies whilst ejaculating through the world.



Judith Bernstein, *The Dance (After Matisse)*, 1993, Graphite on Canvas 9 x 22 feet

MK: You belong to a generation of female artists, among them Lee Lozano, Mary Heilmann and Marilyn Minter, who have been doing art for decades, and who have gained more presence in the scene recently. How do you explain this, and what does your rediscovery mean to you, also on an institutional level?

JB: I think people are hungry for distinctive voices. I'm thrilled about the recognition of my work.

MK: In what way does the distinctiveness you mentioned apply to your own work?

JB: My work references the subconscious and is a culmination of ideas about scatological graffiti, anti-war movement, sexuality and feminism. It strikes a nerve. For one thing, the U.S. "War on Terrorism" has produced military conflicts with no foreseeable end. This is the elephant in the room. My work about Vietnam becomes very contemporary because the anxieties about the current wars have not been sufficiently addressed. There is also interest in the artwork of the seventies and this is where my roots of the phallic presences reside. I'd say the present interest in my work is remarkable. There is a current generation that really supports of the directness of my work.

MK: Why?

JB: In 1966, when I was still studying at Yale, my work had been censored from an outdoor group show curated by Robert Doty. I was even censored by Kodak! – That same year they wrote me, "We don't duplicate this kind of art."



Judith Bernstein, *L.B.J.*, 1967, Mixed Media on Paper, 26 x 39 inches, Purchase Committee of The Whitney Museum

MK: Has scandal been an obstacle or advantage for you?

JB: Let's say, there are artists for whom the scandals in which they were involved in paid off big time – like Robert Mapplethorpe or Andres Serrano. But that was art by men, and it evolved in a later time. Perhaps, my work was just too uncomfortable. Critic Jerry Saltz once asked me what sort of people appreciate my art the most: gay men, heterosexual women, lesbian woman... I think everyone likes it for different reasons and those reasons do not necessarily reflect commercial interests. Perhaps, my – let's say "difficult" – position in the art market also has something to do with the fact that my work is not so easy to categorize. My work was classified as being feminist, but my work does not only address feminist topics; it operates on a much broader realm – it encompasses politics, sexuality, violence, and power. It combines many different psychological aspects which can make it all the more difficult to grasp.

MK: Could this be the reason that your work was not included in Connie Butler's *Whack – Art and The Feminist Revolution*; a comprehensive feminist exhibition featured at The Museum of Contemporary Art in 2007, and at P.S. 1 in 2008, which included more than 120 female artists from the US and Europe?

JB: I think so. I had a long conversation with Butler and we agreed that feminism probably was the most important artistic movement of the past century. To me, it was important to be part of the feminist movement, however, it was also important to see my work as feminist and dealing with broader issues. However, I'm observing and critiquing men and that view has not always been embraced. *Bathroom Graffiti* supports that critique as well as *Sally You Old Fuckhead*, and *Vietnam Garden*.



Judith Bernstein, *Sally You Old Fuck Head*, 1967, Mixed Media on Paper, 22 x 30 inches

MK: How did you come up with that critique?

JB: Early on, I was inspired by the graffiti I found in the bathrooms at Yale. I looked at the graffiti and realized I could use this idea. This material was a door to the subconscious in men and it was a dialogue for men that women were not privy to. There was no editing of thoughts when men used the bathroom; they let go physically and psychologically with graffiti. The material was more profound than the obvious.

MK: Through all those years, how did you exist at the periphery of the art world?

JB: In 2008, I had my first solo exhibition after 24 years at Mitchell Algu gallery. I was always working and had amassed a large cache. Had I been commercially successful as an artist, I could have had a different life and a different career. Although part-time I was fortunate to be able to teach. The academic world provided a place for me. While my work did not sell very well, academia facilitated the discussion of my work and its contextualization of feminism, political art and censorship. I'd say that it was the contact and exchanges with other artists and intellectuals that helped me the most.

MK: Currently, the censorship of a piece by artist David Wojnarowicz, who died in 1992, has raised international attention. His video *A Fire in My Belly*, which he produced in 1987 after learning of his HIV positive status, contains a 10-second sequence showing a crucifix teeming with ants. After protests by republicans and the influential Catholic League, his work was removed from the group exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* at The Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

JB: This reminds me once more that I have never heard a good reason for any sort of censorship. There are just poor arguments and lame excuses motivated by fear. Censorship contradicts the First Amendment of our Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech. It's important to hear the voices of artists in addition to the voices of others. Censorship has consequences: many artists wanted to remove their works from *Hide/Seek*. The Andy Warhol Foundation decided not to financially support any further projects at The Smithsonian. The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation also protested the censorship by refusing honor its financial promise until the video's reinstatement.

Last December, the Calder Foundation removed Wojnarowicz's work from the National Portrait Gallery and in that same month, The Metropolitan Museum of Art organized a film screening and a panel discussion about the work. The Metropolitan's response was meaningful because it addressed more complex and relevant issues greater than ants crawling over a cross. Censorship happens and interestingly one of Jeffrey Deitch's first actions as new director of MOCA LA was to paint over a mural the museum commissioned by Italian Graffiti artist Blu on an outside wall of the museum. Deitch later expressed that he feared the mural depicting a row of coffins draped in dollar bills might offend the feelings of war veterans. To recreate the Blu mural outside or within MOCA would be terrific!



Judith Bernstein, Charcoal Signature at the Gallery of Alex Zachary on Upper East Side, Exhibition November 12, 2010 – January 15, 2011

MK: What is your opinion on that?

JB: I think it's important that voices of power hear voices of dissent – and this is exactly what Blu's work had done. It is unfortunate that his mural was painted over. Currently I have a mural on Bowery gate across from New Museum that says "Fuck War," a part of the Art Production Fund and New Museum. In the last ten years, I have continually produced work protesting various wars – and this also includes the culture's war against women's equality, and it is a war. If anything, censorship confirms that art is still able to cause an enormous emotional punch.