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Miriam Schapiro: Collaging Feminist Expression

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Abstract

In the competitive art world of the 1960s in Western society, women struggled to make a name for themselves as the predominantly male audience refused to take their art seriously. The second wave of feminism and the feminist art movement helped women fight for rights and opportunities to express their thoughts and experiences. Many feminist artists reveal themes of social construction of gender and non-essentialism in their art as they explore women's identity and roles in a complex society shaped by social norms. This paper evaluates Miriam Schapiro's career and artistic development chronologically, examining how her use of materials and symbols historically considered feminine, such as fabric and embroidery, pushes the boundaries of the traditional definitions of high art. Her later invention of the art form "femmage" and her involvement in collaborative works further demonstrate her feminist ideals and commitment to exposing gender inequalities. Through analyzing Schapiro's artworks and the perspectives of critics of her work, it is clear that Schapiro's work reveals the social construction of gender and non-essentialist ideas in many ways.

Keywords

Miriam Schapiro, Feminist Art Movement, Feminism, Feminist Art History, Social Construction of Gender, Essentialism, Collaboration

1. Introduction

The second wave of feminism in the 1960s gave rise to the feminist art movement. In the highly competitive art world of the time, women artists struggled to make a name for themselves as the predominantly male audience refused to take their art seriously. This movement created opportunities for women to express their thoughts and share their experiences like never before. Women artists of this time

created art that is often united with the theme of identity and the purpose of broadening women's voices and fighting for equality. They spoke out against the incorrect and lack of representation women faced in the media and also challenged men's depiction of women's roles in the home and society. Challenging traditional male-norms of high art, many women artists took on non-traditional and unprecedented forms of art such as femmage, gender performance, video art, and more. One of these artists was Miriam Schapiro.

Schapiro was a Canadian American artist known for her prominent influence in the feminist art movement (Broude & Garrard, 2015, p. 132). American art critic and curator Edward Leffingwell regards her as a pioneer of her craft through her invention of "femmage" (an expression which combines feminine and collage (Auther et al., 2018, para 1)), pivotal contributions to the feminist art movement, and also her status as a founding member of the Pattern and Decoration movement of the mid 1970s. In many of her artworks, Schapiro uses materials and visuals related to femininity such as fabrics, embroidery, dolls, dancers, and more (Leffingwell, 2006, p. 130). By using these materials, Schapiro reveals the social construction of gender and non-essentialist ideas in many ways. Through elevating these feminine forms, Schapiro exposes how femininity itself is shaped by what roles society assigns to women. These materials invite her audience to see how gender roles are socially constructed and ask questions such as why these materials are considered feminine in the first place and if these materials suggest something natural that distinguishes women from men. Not only does Schapiro reveal the social construction of gender through her art, she solidifies her role as a feminist artist by highlighting the value of collaboration and its ties to feminist art. By analyzing various works from her career, this paper aims to examine how Schapiro's art challenges essentialist ideas that constrain feminist art while exposing the social construction of femininity.

2. Schapiro and the Social Construction of Gender

2.1. The Concept of Social Construction and Essentialism

The concepts of masculinity and femininity have long existed in a dichotomy, where gender was seen as a concept that was natural to one's sex. This is described in the essentialist viewpoint where it is believed a man is expected to act in a masculine manner and a woman in a feminine one simply because of their biology, following the logic of biological determinism. However, this viewpoint was proven to be incorrect in many ways. For example, the color blue and its connections to each sex over time has been shown to change in different periods. According to the book *Gender and Media* by Tonny Krijnen and Sofie Van Bauwel, "pink…was seen as a masculine colour, while blue, with connotations of the Virgin Mary of Christianity, was associated with femininity (5)". This proves the essentialist viewpoint to be erroneous because of western society's color coding of gender today where little girls are expected to like pink toys, clothes, etc, while the boys blue (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021, p. 5). Such gender theories were not widely dis-

cussed or debated until the 1960s, when many civil rights movements emerged in America. The feminist movement was one of these movements. Women came together and spoke out against toxic cultural norms that kept women inferior to men while exposing how deeply these norms were actually embedded into society. They pushed for women's rights and fought for equality in a deeply discriminating society where women were seen as objects.

2.2. Schapiro's Early Career

Early in her career, Miriam Schapiro did not openly identify as a feminist artist. She struggled with finding her identity and realizing her own value. In a competitive time period where representation of women was scarce, Schapiro felt conflicted and uncertain about her identity between her public and private lives. This uncertainty was reflected in her art. In the late 1950s, her works of abstract expressionism, such as *Beast Land and Plenty* and *Fanfare*, showed her "lack of focus at this time" (Duncan, 1986, para 9 - 11). According to Thalia Gouma-Peterson, a professor of art history and curator, Schapiro was "presumably reflecting her own confusion about her role as a woman and an artist (Duncan, 1986, para 12)". At the time, many critics such as Sidney Tillim noted the inconsistencies in her style and were confused by her shifts from abstraction to "stylized geometry". Criticism such as Tillim's reflects the social value at the time where it was believed women's role should be in the home rather than working on a career, believing women were incapable of making serious art (Duncan, 1986, para 11).

Schapiro chose to have a child during this part of her career. After the birth of her son in 1955, she was torn between mothering and pursuing her artistic career (Duncan, 1986, para 13). Writer and producer Diane Tucker pointed out that Schapiro became further at odds with the amount of time she spent with her "outside work" as an artist and "inside work" as a mother and wife (Tucker, 2024, para 2). 1960 and 1961served as a transitional period when Schapiro was "reborn" and emerged "out of the jungle of abstract expressionism" (Duncan, 1986, para 15). She gave herself freedom to explore and create images authentic to herself. Her works began to include various recurring designs, such as "a red rectangle, a vertical tower, and visual symbols for the female body" (Tucker, 2024, para 8). Then came the *Shrine* paintings around 1962. According to Gouma-Peterson, these paintings are Schapiro's attempts to "connect herself as a woman artist with the history of art, though still unclear about her relationship to it". In these paintings, the visual of an un-cracked egg represents Schapiro as a woman and artist; it suggested the "infinite possibilities yet unborn but in the making" (Duncan, 1986, para 19 - 20).

2.3. Analyzing *Shrine for the Egg*

Shrine for the Egg was one of four pieces in Schapiro's *Shrine* series of the 1960s. In the center, an egg is placed on the top of a pyramid pieced together in a checkered pattern. Surrounding the egg is a floral background enclosed in an arched

mosaic border. The egg is a recurring symbol in Schapiro's works, often symbolizing birth or potential (Duncan, 1986, para 19 - 20). Here, the egg shows that Schapiro is recognizing the value of the potential of women. The enclosure the egg is in, if not understood as a shrine, represents the oppression women face when they attempt to pursue their own interests. The thick walls surrounding the egg limit its abilities to extend itself, shown through the flowers climbing up the background but never extending beyond the border. By placing the egg at the center, the work critiques the contradiction between valuing women for aesthetics while simultaneously denying their freedom of expression and autonomy. Therefore, the egg may represent the diverse possibilities women can achieve if not imprisoned in the role society has assigned them.

It could be argued that Schapiro is elevating femininity by putting motherhood on a pedestal. She connects the biology of women to something worthy of worship. The prominent purple color in the work further associates the piece with femininity, while giving the work an overall hyper-feminine look that challenges traditional male definitions of serious art. However, this viewpoint may face criticism in that it risks essentializing women by implying fertility is women's destiny. In feminist art, essentialism is a controversial topic as any symbolism of biology or maternity may reinforce restrictive stereotypes. But, making such connotations is not entirely unfavorable as it can also be seen as a strategic way of reclaiming femininity. Schapiro's celebration of motherhood can be understood as transforming the traits that were once used to limit women into a source of empowerment.

2.4. Analyzing *Big Ox* #1

In 1967, her creation of *Big Ox* #1 marked the beginning of her feminist journey in the art world. Through the combination of the "O" and "X" and opposing colors of orange and pink, Schapiro affirmed that this artwork is a reflection of herself as a woman (Duncan, 1986, para 24 - 27). Unlike the shrine paintings, the subject is no longer contained within a compartment. The outstretched "X" communicates many of Schapiro's early understanding of how to balance the conflicting ideas of masculinity and femininity. Big Ox served as a statement that a woman could have "strong, male-assertive, logical, measured and reasonable thoughts in a female body" (Gouma-Peterson, 1997, pp. 19-20).

Big Ox is a work made of computer imaging in a geometric style (Broude & Garrard, 2015, pp. 132-133). The piece shows one orange structure pieced together with a hexagonal "O" and an "X" cutting across it. With the "O" representing a vaginal structure, the form symbolizes a maternal body extending outwards in the shape of "X" (Gouma-Peterson, 1997, pp. 19-20). In the journal American Art, Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (2015) described the piece as "a newly invented, body-based, archetypal emblem for female power and identity, realized in brilliant red-orange, silver, and 'tender shades of pink'" (132). Although this is a tempting and powerful interpretation, the work's feminist meaning could be

blurred due to its abstract and minimalist presentation, opening up the piece to varied interpretations. Still, Schapiro's use of abstraction and engaging with the male-dominated history of minimalist art is a feminist act in itself: she reshapes the boundaries of this artform by adding feminine perspective through its form and colors.

2.5. Analyzing *Dollhouse*

Ox opened up new opportunities for Schapiro, such as her collaborations with Judy Chicago, which "solidified her feminist convictions (Duncan, 1986, para 28)". When Chicago and Schapiro created the feminist art program in California in 1971, their aim was to question the values of the male dominated art world and to encourage women to make art from their personal experiences (Schapiro, 1972: p. 268). Katherine M. Duncan, (1986) author of the article "The Early Work of Miriam Schapiro: The Beginnings of Reconciliation between the Artist and the Woman", claims that Schapiro's struggles in her early career strengthened and shaped her for her future, allowing her to eventually pursue more authentic expression in her road to self-discovery in the art world (para 29).

The work *Dollhouse* was created as a part of the 1972 installation *Womanhouse*. The work contains bits of lace, handkerchiefs, miniature furniture, and personal mementos that Schapiro and her collaborative partner Sherry Brody collected from women all around the United States (Graf, 2022, sec 7). This collaborative method challenges traditional ideas of individualism, and highlights the value of shared creativity and contribution of many women. Made using old liquor crates, the house exhibits six rooms: a parlor, a kitchen, a Hollywood star's bedroom, a harem room, a nursery, and an art studio (West by Midwest, 2018). This dollhouse can be most straightforwardly connected to how women are expected to take care of the home and the children. This is represented through the parlor, kitchen, and the nursery, depicting the expected role for a white, middle-class woman during this time. The kitchen displays a paper counter and shelf, a fabric oven and fridge, a window framed by floral curtains, and a wall decorated with a clock and a blue dish. The room is tied together with orange floral wallpaper and a green tiled floor, with tiny cups and plates scattered on the counters. On the ground, a siamese cat drinking from a plate is being watched by four mice. These domestic details present the kitchen as a feminine space, evoking a sense of warmth and hospitality. It reinforces the binary that associates women with a private and domestic lifestyle and men with a public one. This idea is emphasized with the detail of an image of several men in line staring into the kitchen from outside the window, physically putting the men outside the home.

This piece also represents the conflict many women felt about their identities as artist, wife, and mother, such as the confusion Schapiro herself felt in the beginnings of her career. The addition of the art studio especially highlights this as it demonstrates the tension between women's ambitions towards creating art and the expectations of homekeeping.

However, the presence of the traditionally male art studio along with a sculpture of the male nude rather than a female one subverts these expectations by suggesting a woman can also be an artist. It challenges the idea that the domestic duties and lives of women prevent them from creating serious art, suggesting that women don't have to choose between being a mother or an artist; they can be both. This is an act of subversion as Schapiro attacks traditional gender norms from within by combining scenes of the studio and domesticity.

The lack of dolls in the house represents the idea of how anyone can occupy these rooms. It challenges gender norms by implying that caregiving and domesticity are not inherent to women or femininity. Schapiro subtly invites the audience to occupy the rooms with their imaginations. For example, while one woman may envision herself in the rooms, another may envision a husband, children, or another occupant. The imagined occupants break the expectations that only a mother or wife belong to these rooms.

Upon a closer look at the house, various details make the scene feel odd, disturbing the serenity of the home—the folk-art head of a demon in the baby's bassinet, a spider on the top half of an egg while a baby is placed in the other, an image of a grizzly bear through the window of the nursery, a rattle snake wrapped around a tree stump in the parlor, an image of ten men staring into the kitchen, etc. (Power, 2016, para 3). According to the article "Womanhouse: An Iconic Feminist Installation by Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago", "Schapiro stated that the work combines the supposed safety and comfort of the home with the terrors existing within its walls" (Graf, 2022, sec 7). These details could mean that even in a home that seems perfect, secrets and conflicts still exist within. It explores the complexities that exist in a household and suggests that nothing is what it may seem. This also follows the idea of subversion as many of these details are "hidden" within a lovely home, exposing the layers of domesticity that are often overlooked. Some viewers, such as writer Kim Power from the journal Brooklyn Rail, argue that although the contents of *Dollhouse* are intriguing on their own, its deeper concept of elevating feminine forms "is lost in the ambiguousness of the presentation" (Power, 2016, para 3). However, I argue that these additional details and hidden meanings add another layer to the overall complexity of the piece. This allows the central message of challenging social norms to become more nuanced and to reach more audiences through its multiple layers.

2.6. Analyzing She Flies *through the Air with the Greatest of Ease*

Another artwork of Schapiro's that demonstrates the idea of the socially constructed nature of gender is the painting *She Flies through the Air with the Greatest of Ease.* Painted in 1994, this painting is associated with the expressionist movement during the early 20th century (Miriam Schapiro). On the left, there is a smiling woman emerging from a seemingly magical yellow background. Flying, she holds a bouquet of flowers and wears a shirt with a bright red star and the letter "S". On the right, a man is seated rigidly. Dressed in bright red and blue, his

expression is serious while he stares blankly into the distance. The dark pattern behind the man is being replaced by the vibrant and colorful hues brought by the woman as she seems to fly towards him. A sense of movement is created with the brushstrokes of white and splatters of dots in blue, red, and green.

There is a juxtaposition of the positive energy in the vibrance and dynamic gesture of the woman and the somber ambiance created by the grounded structure of the man. This contrast can be interpreted to say that Schapiro believes men are more rigid in their thoughts, usually unwilling to step out of the traditional norms of society, while women are more free-spirited and open-minded to newer concepts and ideas, willing to experiment and make changes. The playful expression of the woman is almost mocking the man for his stiffness, as if suggesting his resistance to change is causing him to be disconnected from the evolving and colorful world around him. In contrast, the woman's flight and joy symbolizes liberation. This painting departs from the tactic of subversion in Schapiro's earlier works by outright challenging the socially constructed differences of women and men. Rather than subtly undermining gender norms from within with images of domesticity, she created a sharp and direct visual contrast that shows femininity to be something creative and powerful.

The letter "S" on the woman's white shirt may represent several words: superhero, she, or even Schapiro. Each points to the idea that women have a superhero-like quality. Schapiro celebrates the power and energy of femininity while also suggesting that these qualities can break through outdated social values. Through this painting, Schapiro is able to elevate female imagination and freedom.

3. Schapiro and the Importance of Collaboration

3.1. Collaboration in Feminist Art

Collaboration plays a prominent role in feminist art, or activist art in general. Critics such as Donald Kuspit have often dismissed feminist art as propagandistic in the way it enforces common experience and crowd mentality (Mullin, 2003, p. 194). This illustrates the social construction of gender as feminine traits, such as emotional expression and community, are devalued in a society that favors traditional ideals of individualism. This idea of individualism is also known as the golden nugget theory of genius. In art historian Linda Nochlin's (1971) essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", the golden-nugget theory of genius describes genius as something innate and mysterious found in certain male individuals (para 26). Nochlin (1971) critiques this idea by explaining that genius is a "dynamic activity rather than a static essence" and should be understood in a situation (para 30). In other words, genius is not an inborn trait but one that emerges under specific conditions of environment, opportunity, and resources. Nochlin (1971) points out that the absence of female artistic achievement is not due to a lack of genius but rather because the expectations and demands put on women simply make "total devotion to professional art production" impossible (para 29). Reframing genius in this way reveals the concept of artistic greatness to be a social

construct.

Feminist philosopher Amy Mullin makes a similar argument in the journal *Feminist Art and the Political Imagination*. In her essay, Mullin (2003) quotes the critique of Robert Brustein regarding individuality and collaboration in art. Brustein opposes collaboration, diminishing it to "mindless group-think", and holds the belief that only artists who express their individuality are capable of making good art (193). Mullin (2003) disagrees with Brustein as she argues that collaborative works enriches artistic imagination rather than threatens it. She believes the idea of the "lone wolf" model of artistic genius is flawed as talent, in fact, does not require the "individual artist to subordinate his or her self and imaginative powers to the group cause (193)". This can be seen in various examples of collaborative feminist artworks such as Suzanne Lacy and Carol Kumata's Underground (1993), etc. (Mullin, 2003, p. 195). These artworks reveal the importance of engaging with not only collaborative partners but also communities of audiences.

Mullin (2003) also highlights that good activist art should evoke emotion, "initiate dialogue, or to imaginatively explore political alternatives", rather than delivering a clear message or slogan (195). She stresses the component of initiating dialogue by engaging the audience through an artwork, prompting them to participate in the process of creating meaning in a work (200 - 201). In this way, activist art becomes an active exchange of dialogue between the artist and the viewer, countering the criticism that reduces activist art to passive and propagandistic group-think. This is different from the "lone wolf" model of artistic genius which places the artist high above their audience, implying the superiority of the artist and thus preventing establishment of meaningful dialogue.

Furthermore, it becomes clear why collaboration is a distinctly feminist practice. A main component of feminist art is its ability to bring women together from diverse backgrounds to speak out about their experiences. Through sharing, it can be recognized that their experiences are not the result of individual failure, such as struggling to pursue careers or manage societal expectations, but rather the socially constructed patriarchal structure that allows men to normalize marginalizing women. Collaboration not only serves as something that enriches the imagination, it is also a tool for challenging social norms that value individuality over community.

3.2. Collaboration in Schapiro's Career

Collaboration played an important role in Schapiro's career, especially from the 1970s onwards, when she became ever more involved in feminist art. Schapiro was involved in various "collaborative" works. For example, in her *Collaboration* series (1975-76), she paid homage to great women artists before her, such as Frida Kahlo and Mary Cassatt; and later, in her *Presentation* series, she worked together with other women and/or women artists to create pieces such as *Anatomy of a Kimono* and *Anonymous was a Woman* (Gouma-Peterson, 1997, pp. 28-34). Many of these works utilized the technique "femmage". This term was coined by Schapiro

as she created works that combined acrylic paint, fabric, embroidery, and other techniques to form a new type of collage that holds a specific meaning for and about women. Some iconic images of her femmages are the cabinet, the apron, the kimono, the heart, and fan. They are all "metaphors for women and for Schapiro herself" (Gouma-Peterson, 1997, p. 22). Tucker (2024) writes: "Femmage holds a significant place in American feminist art because it pushes back against the dominance of men in art history. Previously, women had to downplay any indication of gender in their work in order to be taken seriously" (para 12).

Analyzing Anatomy of a Kimono

Anatomy of a Kimono is a large installation of ten panels that spans over 52 feet when put together. Created in 1976, it is a femmage that includes both abstract images and recognizable patterns of Japanese kimonos, fans, and robes (Broude & Garrard, 2015, p. 134). While simultaneously using feminine materials and high art techniques, Schapiro takes her representation of women to a higher level as she utilized donated handkerchiefs and dresses collected from women all around the country (Broude & Garrard, 2015, p. 135). By incorporating fabrics that were part of women's daily lives, items as ordinary and intimate as handkerchiefs used to wipe hands or faces and dresses worn day to day, she transforms these personal items into elements of high art. In addition, she establishes a dialogue between herself and her audience, emphasizing the work as a collaborative effort that empowers women from diverse backgrounds. It also reflects the feminist critique of artistic individualism by underscoring the value of community, demonstrating that art can be made collectively rather than relying on a single "genius" artist.

Not only does it challenge traditional art hierarchies by elevating domestic materials, it also honors women's creativity and shared experiences. Schapiro's integration of Japanese patterns with Western feminist art highlights this idea of women's experiences being shared across cultures. Schapiro reclaims both everyday items and cultural symbols as artistically significant, while also showing its importance in representing women. The monumental size of the piece further emphasizes this message by enlarging typically small domestic fabrics into a powerful and remarkable statement that breaks through the socially constructed norms that consistently dismiss and overlook women. *Anatomy of a Kimono* invites viewers to reevaluate the boundaries of high art and to recognize women's roles in both creative and cultural practices.

Despite facing criticism, Schapiro continued to bring awareness to the "devaluation of women's experiences". Sometimes, male critics dismissed her work as sentimental. Schapiro rejected this criticism by saying: "sentimentality is a powerful idea, and it helps women artists move away from the traditional male forms". Schapiro's works are not only about women trying to "figure out their lives" in a world that underappreciates and undermines women, they also draw attention to the women who were marginalized in art history. As Nochlin said: "Schapiro made a place for women in her art. And she made it in a way that is modern and splendidly seductive in its sensuous pictorial fabric" (Tucker, 2024, para 24).

4. Conclusion

Miriam Schapiro was a pioneer who reshaped the art world. By inventing femmage, she blurred the distinctions between art and craft, elevating traditionally feminine materials into the realm of high art while celebrating the labor of women. By working collaboratively, she defied critics and empowered women to embrace their creativity and to pursue their own interests. Her artworks reveal that the various social standards and values that shape society and the beliefs that are used to marginalize women are socially constructed. Through advancing the feminist art movement, she demonstrates that art can be a powerful tool for social change, creating a foundation for future artists who continue to challenge inequality. Her art remains relevant today as her innovative use of fabric and collage continues to be studied and celebrated. Reflecting on the women's movement, Schapiro remarked: "It was the first time in my life that I saw what it meant to be connected to other people, and as time went on, I realized how much I had to give (Shypula, 2024)".

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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