

No Man's Land – A Comfort Zone: Notes about a Title

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Published in **NO MAN'S LAND, Rubell Family Collection, December 2015**

Choosing a title for an exhibition is an important milestone in any curatorial process. It is a distinct moment in which the artworks chosen to be displayed together are placed in a unifying context, so that each of them seems suddenly imbued with an additional meaning that impacts their reading. In the case of the current exhibition, the title "No Man's Land" was finalized at a relatively late stage in the work process. In what follows, I will explore several possibilities of reading the ironic affinity between this title and some of the central concepts underlying feminist discourse.

The expression "no man's land" is inextricably related to the notion of a specific terrain or territory: a clearly defined area whose control has been abandoned during, or in the aftermath of, an armed conflict between enemy countries. The etymological origin of this expression dates to the fourteenth century: "Nonemanneselond, an unowned waste ground outside the north wall of London, site for executions." In the United Kingdom, several places referred to as "no man's land" denote "extra-parochial spaces that were beyond the rule of the church, beyond the rule of different fiefdoms that were handed out by the king [...] ribbons of land between these different regimes of power."¹ During the First World War, the term "no man's land" was popularized to describe the terrain between the front lines of two entrenched armies – an exposed and dangerous area that soldiers were prohibited from entering. This term may also refer to the terrain separating the border checkpoints of two countries. Significantly, underlying all of these different designations is the concept of an area that is not owned, controlled, or ruled by any sovereign power, a territory that belongs to no one.

The irony inherent in the exhibition title thus stems from the connection forged between a term associated with wars and the violence inflicted by men and a selection of works by women artists. This irony is further enhanced by the clichéd identification of land – of the earth itself – with "femininity." Hills and valleys, caves and crevices, are likened in many world mythologies to the curves of the female body. Caves represent female genitalia, while women in labor were compared to the earth bearing its fruit. These associations, which have persisted over hundreds and even thousands of years, conflated woman with the earthly, natural realm, while man was identified with the realm of the spirit and of culture. One of the most sweeping arguments made by radical feminism was that this inherently hierarchical division between women and men relied on a universal distinction between Nature and Culture. Indeed, as the anthropologist Sherry Ortner has argued, the human enterprise shaping all societies may be summed up as a series of attempts to

¹ <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=no-man%27s-land>

control matter, or nature, by means of spirit, or culture. In other words, all societies attempt to shape and purify the material/natural/organic realm through acts of acculturation and discipline.²

The term "no man's land" is based on the idea of a border, and on related acts of circumscription and exclusion. Significantly, the etymological origin of the term "gender" is similarly related to acts of partitioning, classifying, and categorizing – and thus, by extension, of creating limits and obstacles. The word "gender" comes from the ancient French *gendre*, or *genre*, meaning "kind, sort, class, species, character."³ This intersection between the notions of gender, boundaries, and classification led the artists associated with the first wave of radical feminism to establish a new form of speech that transgressed gender-based boundaries and deconstructed structures of language and culture, while questioning the concepts of fixed limits and definitions. In the 1990s, this discourse was further developed by philosopher Judith Butler's writing on fluid identities, which further promoted a redefinition of familiar gender limits.⁴

One of the defining principles of postmodernism, which builds in many ways on feminist thought, is the transgression of boundaries between different domains and the cancellation of hierarchies between high and low. In this context, the meaning of the term "no man's land" is inverted, so that it no longer defines a circumscribed, off-limits area but rather represents an open, liberated twilight zone. Recast as an ambivalent, liminal sphere or limbo that contains both this *and* that, NO MAN'S LAND reflects critical thinking that undermines culturally determined boundaries, classifications, and distinctions. As such, it becomes an elastic sphere in which there is no separation between public and private, the personal and the political, or exterior and interior. It is associated with the constant subversion of any agenda that classifies, defines, orders and institutionalizes the plethora of unclassifiable possibilities. This is a sphere that allows for the existence of everything that is unordered and that does not conform to norms – all that is distorted, unusual, irrational, or perceived to threaten the established order. It serves as an arena that preserves the possibility of subversion, the insistence on open-ended definitions, the freedom to wander among countless existential options – one in which the public order is defiantly unraveled.

This fluid space of collapsed systems and unraveled boundaries may be related to French theorist Julia Kristeva's concept of "abjection" – a key term in feminist theory, whose resonance is felt in numerous ways throughout this exhibition. First elaborated in 1980 as part of her discussion of maternity, Kristeva's "abject" brings together mind and body, culture and nature, psyche and soma, matter and representation.⁵ Underlying this concept is the presence of the body as a metaphor of both interior and exterior, as a symbolic system ordered by a regime of prohibitions that enact a hierarchical order of binary divisions: clean and dirty, normative and despised, legitimized and rejected, accepted and excluded. Bodily fluids, excretions, and dirt are perceived as threatening this

² Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in *Woman, Culture and Society*, edited by M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974, pp. 67–87.

³ <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=gender>

⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.

order and dissolving the comforting boundary between the tremulous flesh and the skin that covers it. This process of ordering, excluding, and compartmentalizing, of disciplining and of preserving existing categories, is what we refer to as "culture." Seen through this prism, NO MAN'S LAND may be read as a utopian site that absorbs all that is rejected, despised, excluded, or pornographic; as a comfort zone that allows for, contains, and even intentionally raises "contaminated" political materials, taboo themes, and various perversions.

The British anthropologist Mary Douglas similarly defined dirt as a symbol of disorder, a disruption of existing categories and norms, and offered an alternate way of probing the terms "clean" and "unclean" and their manifestations in Jewish and Christian literature. In her writings, Douglas investigated the symbolic dimension of the language of purity, revealing that what is generally perceived as "dirt" encodes the concepts "polluted," "unclean" or "taboo." These binary terms underlie an entire system of classifications that people use in order to organize their world. "Reflections on dirt," she argued, "involve reflection on the relations of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death."⁶ Her oft-quoted sentence, "what is unclear is unclean," aptly represents the twilight zone of NO MAN'S LAND and could well have served as the exhibition's motto.⁷

Significant to a semantic analysis of the exhibition title is the perspective of the French theorist Luce Irigaray, who – like other feminist thinkers – questioned the linear, binary logic inherent in male-dominated language and the persistence of hierarchies based on binary oppositions. Irigaray's main contribution to feminist discourse stems from her analysis of linguistic constructions, which builds on both psychoanalysis and linguistics. Irigaray argued that language, which enables us to distinguish between different things in the world, also fixes the social roles of its male and female speakers, traditionally limiting women to the roles of lover, wife, and mother. The privileging of male linguistic forms, as Irigaray argued, further cemented the idea of an essential difference in the realms of thought, society, and culture.⁸ In this context, the expression "no man's land" reveals how the reference to a universal absence of ownership over a terrain is represented by the term "man," to which the term "woman" is implicitly subordinated. Like other feminist theorists, Irigaray offered new, subversive and challenging linguistic forms that undermine the objectification of woman in relation to a male subject, and give rise to a new discourse centered on the body and emotions.

This new discourse was given variegated forms of expression in visual art. Most prominent among them was the use of the female body – the most immediate and intimate territory – as an arena of struggle for the representation of female identity. Beginning in the late 1960s, women artists turned to express themselves through mediums that had yet to become dominated by men, such as body art, video, and performance art, as well as through non-canonical materials such as fat, meat, or chocolate. In this process, they used their own bodies as a tool for defining their sexuality and

⁶ Mary T. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, p. 5.

⁷ <https://www3.nd.edu/~jneyrey1/purity.html>

⁸ Luce Irigaray (1977), *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985.

identity and for examining a range of sensations and emotions, building on the assertion that the "personal is political." This trend underscored the engagement with the subjective, personal, private, and bodily experiences of every woman as the basis for a new political agenda. The title "No Man's Land" can thus also be interpreted as a metaphor for the female body itself as a site of knowledge and a physical means of defining human existence. The militant association of this title, moreover, is compatible with political activism and with the idea of the body as the last frontier, the battleground of an ideological struggle concerning its representation in protest against centuries of oppression and discrimination. And while this revolution is already behind us, and its arguments have since undergone various reincarnations, the current exhibition still underscores the sweeping use of the body as both platform and subject, even among young contemporary artists.

The conquest of the canonical art world by male modernism, which constrained women to carve out an unaffiliated *terrain vague* in which they could operate, is also related to the choice of handicrafts and labor-intensive practices as a tool of liberation from the modernist hegemony, which devalued such creative forms due to their association with the territory of "women's work." NO MAN'S LAND now comfortably contains these forms, which are no longer accompanied by barricades or war banners.

Numerous feminist thinkers have considered the concept of exclusion from the perspective of subjects marginalized by a culture that treated them as perverse or different. So, for instance, the book *The Newly Born Woman* (1975), jointly written by the French feminist theorists Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, attends to the spectacle of the "witch hunt," which targeted women later defined as "hysterical," and to the ways in which such phenomena were treated by the patriarchal hegemony as represented by the Christian religion and, subsequently, by Freudian psychoanalysis. As they argue, the forms of treatment to which these women were subjected were expressive of male anxieties and fantasies concerning sexuality and the female body.⁹

The issue of exclusion is of course inseparable from the question of representation and the status of women in the history of art. To a large extent, the art field was, for many centuries, a site that women were prohibited from entering, a "no woman's land." Feminism challenged the hierarchy of the male artistic canon and undermined the aesthetic and ideological criteria that served to "guard the threshold" throughout history. This strategy fundamentally changed our modes of observing art, the sphere of art criticism, and our understanding of art's conditions of production; in many ways, it was also one of the pioneering heralds of postmodernism. The critical terminology of feminist theory has become an integral part of our cultural infrastructure, and its impact is evident today not only in the field of feminist art, but in the art world at large – so that it is difficult to conceive of a contemporary male artist operating today outside the framework of feminist discourse.

⁹ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément (1975), *The Newly Born Woman*, translated by Betsy Wing, University of Minnesota Press (Theory and History of Literature #24), 1986.

In this context, the decision to exclude male artists from this exhibition may thus raise certain question marks, and perhaps even objections; today's feminism is no longer combative, and such a decision, which is in itself exclusionary, may thus be described as more compatible with earlier waves of radical, militant feminism. Yet the very fact that such an exhibition is taking place now, in late 2015, as a form of gender-based affirmative action, attests to the fact that even today, after more than five decades of struggle, women are excluded from most art institutions, and the statistics favoring male artists are still both relevant and disturbing. NO MAN'S LAND offers an open-ended, transgressive sphere aimed at righting this situation, and in this sense subverts the etymology of its own name.

Especially significant in this exhibition is the observation that women's art has no unifying style. The well-known statement made by the activist art historian Lucy Lippard – that feminist art or women's art is neither a style nor a movement, and that a stylistic or formalist contribution to art would have been a failure,¹⁰ resonates as one wanders throughout the exhibition. Various expressions of the concern with the body, sexuality, and pornography, alongside an engagement with consumerism and appropriations from art history, new interpretations of handicrafts, decoration and ornamentation, images of nature and works centered on religious and political themes – are all attended to in countless styles and expressive forms, which reflect almost fifty years of feminist thought. The members of the first generation indeed managed to shake the art world and question accepted values, yet the postmodernist discourse on the politics of identity continues to evolve and acquire new forms, which are relevant for the changing times.

This exhibition does not encompass the entire range of women artists included in the Rubell Family Collection, yet the wide selection of artworks on display, which were collected over the course of five decades, serves as a representative historical sample of a range of concerns and themes: from protests against discrimination and the struggle for equality to expressions of gender fluidity, queer theory, black feminism, ecofeminism, postcolonialism, de-construction, and multiculturalism. From the perspective of the present, one can observe a new, complex, and richly varied picture that is both significant and influential in its ongoing exploration of the physical, political, and psychological position of the feminine.

Essay translated by Talya Halkin

¹⁰ Lucy R. Lippard, "Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s," *Art Journal*, Fall / Winter 1980, p. 362.