Female American artists and the Vietnam War.

'We are here on the simplest basis – because we are choking with shame and anger, because we are afraid for ourselves and for our children, and because we are profoundly discouraged.'[1]

The 1960's saw the evolution of an anti-establishment counter-cultural phenomenon that spread across America into many parts of the western world. With burgeoning levels of mass media dissemination and following in the wake of Cold War McCarthyism, the Korean War, the Cuban Missile Crisis and American military occupation in the Dominican Republic, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution paved the way for an escalation in the Vietnam conflict in 1963/4 which came at a time when the American view of its own identity was under intense internal scrutiny. As the decade unfolded, the war in Vietnam became a metaphor for much dissatisfaction within American society and 'protest' became the conduit for its expression. International and domestic issues such as sexual liberation, race and gender equality, nuclear and environmental concerns, civil rights, freedom of speech, and foreign military policy led to an escalation of internal dissent that expanded in direct correlation to the level of involvement in Vietnam. Protest became the language of socio-political engagement and the 'communism versus democracy' war being waged by proxy in Vietnam became an emotively charged focal point for the expression of anger with broader facets of the American ideal. The Vietnam conflict seemed to serve as an increasingly reflective mirror into which the nation gazed as it struggled to come to terms with a seismic shift in the post-war evolution of the US identity and the moral constitution of the American Dream.

The artistic community was also in a state of flux. The advent of a 'New Left' movement, which included curators, writers, intellectuals and artists such as Seth Siegelaub, Joseph Kosuth and Lucy Lippard, created a dematerialised, democratised and collective-minded artistic culture that challenged commoditised formats of display and value creation. Minimalism then conceptualism emerged as the new avant-garde, which rejected the authorship/ownership and dealer/gallery/institutional models of the previous decades. The desire to effect change bonded the 'agitational' minority groups representing this wave of activism, such as the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC), Artists and Writers Protest (AWP), Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG), Women Artists in Revolution (WAR), and the Ad Hoc Women Artists Committee (AHWAC). They devised initiatives to give exposure to their concerns via events such as Angry Arts Week (1967) which included the Collage of

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[1] **Sontag, Susan. Cited in Frascina, Francis *Art, Politics and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* Manchester University Press. 1999 p. 75**

Indignation (Figure 1) and the Peace Tower (Figure 2) in Los Angeles in 1966, which contained 400 works of artistic opposition to the war.

'I believe the women's liberation movement today is, perhaps the most important and potentially the most radical political movement that we have.'[2]

This quote from Herbert Marcuse alludes to the high incidence of female activism in the period. Because of their parallel struggle with women's rights, gender equality and sexual liberation, which was channelled into their artistic output in opposition to the war, they had greater ground to gain. I will thus compare the works of a number of female artist/activists in order to analyse variations of the same emotive response, as expressed in my opening quote from Susan Sontag, in her speech at the opening of the Peace Tower. Anger was the currency they invested, in their endeavours to effect change.

Figure 1

Figure 2

There was much to be angry about. By 1965 there were over 200,000 American soldiers in Vietnam. 58,000 US soldiers were killed. 20 million Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotians were killed, wounded or rendered refugees. 18 million gallons of poison were deployed by the USA. The cost of the war to the US economy is estimated at 6-800 billion dollars.[3]

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[2] **Kellner, Douglas (Ed).** ***The New Left and the 1960's: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse (Vol 3).*** **Routledge 2005 p. 165**

[3] **http://www.mrfa.org/vnstats.htm**

With the rise of the feminist movement coinciding with the US escalation of involvement in Vietnam, many female artists gained prominence in the period through their response to the war. May Stevens produced a series of acrylics on canvas entitled *Big Daddy* (1968). Prompted by her anger at realising that her own father, an ordinary working-class man, was a pro-war, pro-establishment, anti-Semitic racist, who typified vast swathes of a silent working majority of the American population, Stevens targeted this sector of society to vent her anger. Combining large and predominantly red, white and blue images influenced by pop, colour field, hard edge and animation, she created a homogenised, phallic, ignorant, male persona that acted as visual metaphor for all that she felt was hypocritical and unjust in the patriarchal power dynamics of family life (Figure 3 - *Big Daddy, Paper Doll* 1968 & Figure 4 - *Big Daddy Draped* 1971).

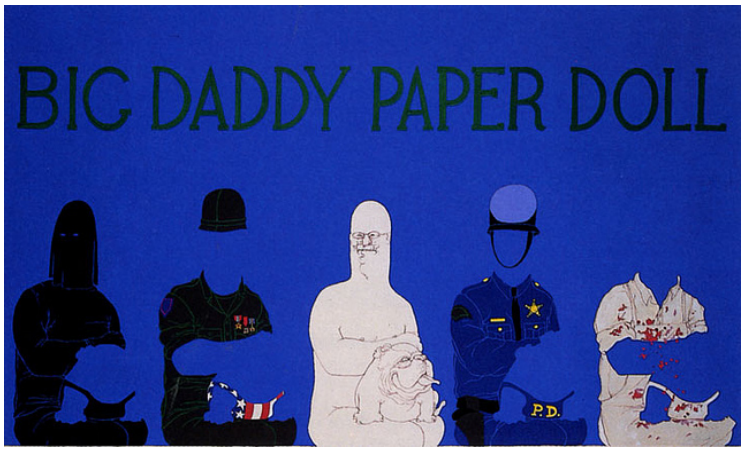

Figure 3

Figure 4

Emanating from this source and masquerading as patriotism, Stevens showed her metaphoric 'Big Daddy' in many guises, infiltrating the social, domestic, and governmental infrastructure such as the judicial, military, and educational systems, and more broadly supporting an imperialist attitude abroad. Her work held a questioning mirror up to many Americans and what she considered to be their unconsidered positions on racial and sexually equality and foreign policy (Figure 5 - *Big Daddy, Big Three* 1975).

Figure 5

Nancy Spero was another female activist/artist whose visually vitriolic anti-war images produced between 1966 and 1970, entitled *War Series: Bombs and Helicopters*, show graphic images charged with military and sexual iconography. Her use of abhorrent phallic, nuclear and predatorial imagery is as immediate as the insensitive masculinity of the 'search and destroy' missions they depict.

'I started to think about how to address the war. I would do it in a way as to show the collusion of sex and power. I wanted it to be obscene, because the war was obscene.'[4]

Challenging the authorities on issues such as social, racial and gender inequality and the institutional failure to support minority groups in the face of a male-dominated oppression and patriarchal imperialism, Spero and Stevens typified what Matthew Israel identified as women who produced 'figurative, topical, ephemeral works in a spirit of anger, not just against the war, but also against the New York art world.'[5] For Spero, the helicopter became the true symbol of the War (Figure 6 - *Peace* 1968 & Figure 7 - *Helicopter and Victims* 1968) which, along with the bomb (Figure 8 - *Manly Bomb* 1966), she anthropomorphised into evil,

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[4] Spero, Nancy. Interviewed by Lois Tarlow in Thomas, David. C. *As Seen By Both Sides. American and Vietnamese Artists Look At The War.* UOM Press 1991 p. 112

[5] Israel, Matthew. *Kill for Peace: American Artists against the Vietnam War.* UOT Press. 2013 p.67

destructive vessels of death, precipitating catastrophic and emotively charged visions of human carnage.

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

In this respect Spero's work, as with another female artist/activist Martha Rosler, reference the daily encapsulation, through the television and other media, of the perceived reality of the war in the American imagination. Vietnam earned the epithet of 'the living room war' with television footage beamed into millions of American homes daily.

'Vietnam was America's first true televised war. It was also the country's most divisive and least successful foreign war. Many believed there was some connection between the two facts.'[6]

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[6] **Hallin, Daniel. *The Uncensored war: The Media and Vietnam* cited in Brothers, Caroline *War and Photography: A Cultural History.* Routledge New York 1997. P. 202**

The insensitivity of the vehicles of destruction within Spero's work as well as the male perpetrators are touched upon by David Kunzle who points out that US soldiers are desensitised through a military policy that alienates its soldiers by separating them from civilian society via military bases located outside the towns. As a result he contends that US soldiers relish their role as feared, alien and obtrusive protagonists, abiding by a different moral code, both within their own society and abroad. It is this perception of them as 'monster-mercenaries' that Spero, and her husband Leon Golub (Figure 9 – *Mercenaries 1* 1976*)*, so effectively portrayed.[7]

Figure 9

Spero's works challenges the military as well as sections of the community parodied by Stevens, that, as James Aulich puts it, 'represent a moral inversion within male codes of sacrifice, ordeal, glory and moral rightness, whereby violent omnipotence hovers over the splayed female victims…..and where rape is a form of revenge within the natural order.'[8]

Lucy Lippard describes Spero's works as 'some of the angriest art ever made' as she depicts images of 'defecation of death and mutilation' being randomly bestowed on innocent and usually female victims.[9] In contrast to the collaged works of Martha Rosler, and the bold large-scale flat colour-filled canvases of Stevens' paintings, Spero imbued her work with a disorienting effect via her choice of a soft palette, executed in a gouache wash on rice paper.

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[7] **Kunzle, David. *Two Different Wars* in Thomas, David. C. *As Seen By Both Sides.* p.26**

[8] **Aulich, James. *Vietnam, Fine Art and Culture Industry* in *Vietnam Images: War and Representation* Macmillan Press 1989 p. 76**

[9] **Lippard, Lucy. *A Different War: Vietnam in Art* Real Comet Press, Seattle 1989 p.42**

Her works are small and draw the viewer in, only to elicit a repulsive shock. They lend a childlike innocence and fragility to the work that is entirely incongruous given the anger and revulsion emanating from the images (Figure 10 - *Female Bomb* 1966).

Figure 10

Martha Rosler had also been a participant in anti-nuclear, and civil rights campaigns and yet it was her engagement with feminist and anti-war issues that led to her politicising her art. Martha Meskimmon identifies a tendency in the period to try to view women's anti-war involvement as 'political' whilst 'relegating their involvement with civil rights and feminism to the realm of social, moral or ethical.'[10] It was a sentiment that the leading feminist activists fought hard to dispel. As May Stevens affirmed: 'I was involved in civil rights and anti-war movements. It was really very consuming. My social life, my political life, and my studio life were the same.'[11]

Rosler produced twenty photomontages between 1967 and 1972, titling her series *Bringing the war Home: House Beautiful.* These works drew the viewer in to confront both what Meskimmon refers to as a 'Brechtian' response of reflective detachment, as the mini, yet epic

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[10] **Meskimmon, Marsha. *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics* Routledge 2003 p.55**
[11] **Stevens, May. Interviewed by Lois Tarlow in Thomas, David. C. *As Seen By Both Sides.* p. 64**

dramas play out in each of the images. (Figure 11 - *Balloons;* Figure 12 - *Beauty Rest;* Figure 13 - *Roadside Ambush;* Figure 14 - *Vacation Getaway*)[12]

Figure 11

Figure 12

In a secluded vacation spot, privacy isn't a problem, so you go all out with glass, for view, light, and visual spaciousness. Simple or no-pattern coverings, soft colors, and small-scale furnishings add to illusion of size. Blue of the ceiling and brown of the beams extend through the glass walls to the eaves from living room to the outdoors

Figure 13

[12] **ibid p. 56**

Figure 14

Lifting emotively-charged war pictures from the popular press and transposing them into images of idealised and sanitised domestic settings taken from leading style and design magazines, Rosler was able to bridge the gap between first world 'us' and third world 'them'. 'What I wanted wasn't the *physical* presence but an imaginary space in which different tales collided.'[13]

Through this process of appropriation and recontextualisation, the onlooker was forced to face his or her own reticence to engage with the reality of, and the policies relating to, Vietnam.

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[13] **Rosler, Martha. *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings 1975-2001.* The MIT Press 2004 p. 353**

'Encouraging instead a participant citizenship, Rosler's series troubled her viewers' own status as knowing subjects by examining the conventions through which familiar images constructed the fictions of stable gender, national and cultural identities.'[14]

Using a variety of formats, mediums, and visual tactics, Rosler aimed firmly at the consumer-oriented middle and upper classes, Spero fired straight at the consciences of the military, whilst Stevens targeted the lower white and blue-collar sectors of American society.

Rosler also targeted the ignorance inherent in a consumer, media-driven society but ascribed to it a non-specific, asexual identity. The ignorance that Stevens targeted was within a predominantly male faction of society at home, whereas Spero's target was the masculine militarist ignorance founded in the sort of rhetoric typified by Michael Herr's description of American helicopters whilst he served in the army, as 'endlessly responsive female sex toys, available to move with him wherever he desired and receive whatever his aggression and desire to destroy had to give.'[15]

Rosler's setting of distressing images of fear, torture and mutilation involving women and children, into chic domestic interiors, effectively diminished the boundaries separating 'subject' and 'object' and 'insider' and 'outsider'. She forced her viewers into an active engagement with their personal philosophy, cultural and political integrity, citizenship, and humanitarian and foreign policy beliefs. Looking at the Vietnam War through the ubiquitous, censored media reports had somehow afforded the American public a comfortable detachment: the images became over-familiar, which subconsciously 'allowed' the atrocities of the war to become 'normalised'. However, as Matthew Israel points out: 'Rosler's works reacted to what she has called the dangerous, dualistic separation between "the here and the elsewhere", by trying to bring the war home to the American public.'[16]

Rosler undermined the American consumer by implication of being 'blinded' and 'trapped' (Figure 15 - *Make Up/Hands Up* & Figure 16 - *Booby Trap*). By juxtaposing war images, which offered a parallel definition of the 'victims over there' with 'victims over here', she pulled the rug from under the self-absorbed lifestyle of many Americans and forced a contemplation of their country's foreign policy.

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[14] Wallis, Brian. *Aperture* vol. 112 (1998) p. 60 cited in Meskimmon, Marsha. *Women Making Art* p.56

[15] Israel, Matthew. *Kill for Peace.* p.67

[16] Israel, Matthew. *Kill for Peace* citing Rosler, Martha *"Here and Elsewhere"* in *Artforum* Vol. 60. No. 3 (2007)

In this respect Rosler's work resembles another contemporary anti-war artist/activist: Violet Ray (Figure 17 - *Channel* 1967 and Figure 18 - *Polaroid*), although it is interesting that he used a female pseudonym. When linked together, feminism, activism and art seemed to embody the transformations, as outlined, being fought for on the broader scale.

'Feminism clarified the direct links between everyday life, anti-war work, and struggles for civil rights and political and social transformation.'[17]

Figure 15

Figure 16

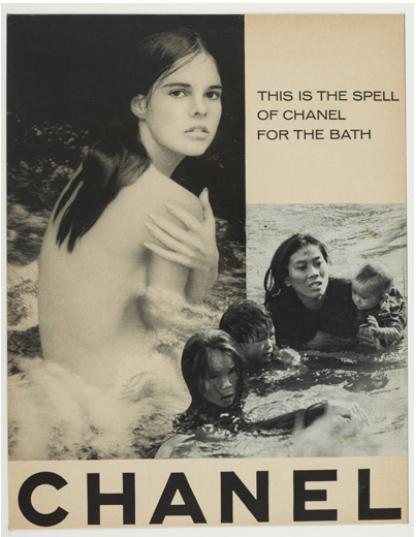

Figure 17

Figure 18

[17] **Alberro, Alexander. *The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of Decoy* cited in Meskimmon, Marsha *Women Making Art* p.55**

The effectiveness of Rosler's series, which she returned to the media for popular dissemination via underground anti-war and activist publications, was that she left the viewer trapped. Forced to face the potential superficiality inherent in their own position as human being, consumer and citizen of an imperialist nation, Rosler brought the war, and the strands of debate it precipitated, directly into the homes and minds of Americans, leaving them with nowhere to hide. In this respect, her works were as effective as Spero's albeit the means by which the end was achieved were more cerebral than Spero's visceral approach. Although very different in content, size, medium and with each artist targeting a different section of the American community, the work of these three women, especially with Leon Golub within the ranks by marital association, have produced some of the most effective, compelling and relevant art from the Vietnam era. Some of their images have been reworked and represented, gaining a new resonance because of wars in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan in the intervening years, affording Spero, Rosler, Golub and Stevens their place in the institutions of 'high' art. Somewhat dispiritingly, with forty years of hindsight and the conflicts ongoing today, the resurgent popularity of their works are testament to the fact that human nature continues to learn from the lessons of history only to make the same mistakes again.

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