Introduction:

The feminist art movement that began in the 1960’s culminated as a result of numerous factors. First, women have always been used as subjects of art produced by male artists. Historically, these women have been displayed as ideal feminine figures and sexualized objects of desire. Titian’s painting, *Venus of Urbino* (1538), shows a woman passively reclining, staring seductively at her audience. She has no identity beyond that of an object to be gawked at by an intended male audience. In the twentieth century, this idea is perpetuated. Sexualized images of women circulated via mass media. Those in the form of pin ups were usually well known personalities, but like earlier depictions of women they were presented as sexual objects, their sole purpose to flaunt their sexuality for men. Tired of being misrepresented as subjects and overlooked as serious artists, women artists revolted during this feminist movement with a kind of art that had an undeniable presence that was too shocking to be ignored. Although some previous works strayed from the traditional representation of women, such as Manet’s assertive *Olympia*, this period beginning in the late 60’s saw an influx of bold feminist works. This newly found freedom led women artists, from Judy Chicago to Hannah Wilke, to rebel against the constraints of tradition, creating a new paradigm for the female subject in the art world. Feminist artists appropriated familiar images of women and used them as a means
to propel their agenda. When depicted by women, the female body became a powerful weapon against the social constructs of gender.

The feminist art movement was not just about challenging the way women were viewed as artists and subjects in works of art, but it was about women confronting their subordinate roles in society. Art was just one platform used by feminists to rebel and promote their ideas. In the decades leading up to the movement, many political and social changes were taking place. More women joined the workforce and demanded pay equal to men. The civil rights act to end discrimination, which was initially intended to protect African Americans, was extended to include women. The 1960’s welcomed the introduction of the birth control pill and by 1965 there were no states prohibiting a woman’s right to oral contraceptives. In 1973, the controversial decision of Roe vs. Wade made abortion legal. Women were enjoying more freedom than ever. They were rising up against the restrictions that held them back for so long and it was inevitable that this would extend to and be reflected in the art they produced.

Feminist art is a difficult subject since there has been some trouble defining exactly what it is. Some categorize feminist art simply as art created by women, while others regard it as art created with a visible anti-male sentiment. For the sake of this paper I am establishing it as art that stood to question tradition, created by artists who refused to continue to deny that their gender did not influence the art they created.

Just as women gained headway in achieving reproductive rights and advanced in the workforce, they also made inroads in the art world. Historically, nude figures were a favored subject of artists. Mastering painted and sculpted nudes was said to be the highest art one could create. In order to produce a realistic likeness, it was imperative
that artists had access to nude models. Men had both male and female models available to them, while traditionally women were allowed neither. The inaccessibility of nude models, along with their almost complete exclusion from formal learning academies and exhibitions kept the focus on men’s art. The art that circulated was art that was created by men for men. It was nearly impossible for women to achieve the respect and recognition awarded to male artists since they were not given equal opportunities. Given only certain subjects that were deemed appropriate for women to paint, female artists were relegated to producing what would be regarded as inferior art. Females were rarely seen as significant artists; rather their art was considered a hobby. But in the time leading up to the feminist art movement, more women were learning in formal art academies with their male counterparts. They were no longer interested in or limited to creating “decorative” art; instead they wanted their art to confront important issues and challenge how women were presented. Many of these artworks stirred controversy since they completely strayed from tradition and in some cases overtly mocked artworks that were historically considered some of the greatest. Sylvia Sleigh’s Philip Golub Reclining (1971) (figure 1) bears an undeniable resemblance to Diego Velasquez’s Rokeby Venus (1947-51) (figure 2). Sleigh plays on the traditional roles of men as painter, woman as subject. Sleigh uses the traditional reclining nude as her subject, but this time that nude is male. In the reflection of the mirror, we see not only this man’s face, but also a female figure looking on as she paints him.

Photography played a critical role in the feminist art movement, since it was a medium that was exploited by feminist artists. Whereas men had a so-called “head-start” with painting and sculpture, photography was pioneered by and equally associated with both
genders. For all intents and purposes, photography captured *real* women, and this objectivity was used to the feminist’s advantage. In many cases these works were not just illustrated biographies, but they were meant to embody issues of every woman.

Figure 1 Sylvia Sleigh, *Philip Golub Reclining* (1971).
By using photography, women artists of the 60’s and 70’s were able to represent themselves in a more effective way than in other media. Although photography had been used for decades preceding the feminist art movement, this medium attracted feminist artists. Described as a voyeuristic medium, photography was a powerful tool in deconstructing the male gaze and bringing private moments into the public domain. The medium of photography itself was a stray from tradition, so much so that the word “artist” had previously been synonymous with “painter”. With photography, artists could be subjects, but in new ways. In earlier paintings, bodies were represented based on a system of perfect proportions, an unnatural ideal; but there was a truth to photography. The camera captured things as they were, often defying what was considered ideal. The changes in society correlated with the changes in imagery. In 1979, artist Judith Black
created a photographic self-portrait, which shows her less-than-perfect body. Her aging body and tired eyes capture the essence of a working woman and a mother. 1 Presenting these women how they actually were, flaws and all, was one aim of the feminists. With photography, there was no denying that these were live, flesh-and-blood women. Photography was able to capture private moments in women’s lives that would otherwise be ignored. They served as documents and gave insight into the private lives of women that had been hidden for so long. The women’s movement would not have had the success and controversy had it not been for the use of photography and videography.

Many of the artists working during and after the feminist art movement used familiar images as a way to bring attention to women’s portrayal in society. Whether it was pin-ups, movies shots, or advertisements, sexualized images of women were found everywhere, but were questioned by few. They had been prevalent for so long that they were accepted as normal. Many feminist artists imitated images found in popular culture and refashioned them in an attempt to appropriate power. 2 Since these images were so recognizable, their audience was widened to include more than just art connoisseurs.

Unfortunately, with progress came backlash. Feminist artists and their artworks were deemed a threat against tradition. Men, and even some women attacked art that challenged the old ways of depicting women. In the second half of the twentieth century, artists such as Hannah Wilke, Cindy Sherman, and Lynda Benglis used themselves as subjects to attack social issues of gender and identity, and established themselves as serious artists. Their works unapologetically confronted stereotypes and double

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2 Marvin Heiferman, “In Front of the Camera, Behind the Scene: Cindy Sherman’s “Untitled Film Stills””, *MoMA* 25(Summer 1997): 18.
standards associated with gender. They, along with other female artists, gained significant attention, because of the number of works produced during this period that were so different and in many cases so shocking for the time. By looking at works of many artists working during this period, and focusing attention on the artworks of Hannah Wilke, Lynda Benglis, and Cindy Sherman, I will answer the question, how did female artists use their art to promote their feminist agendas.

Analysis:

Hannah Wilke was an artist heavily associated with the feminist art movement. She began her career creating sculptural forms. Made out of terra cotta, Wilke sculpted small vaginas, which were what first gained her recognition; she is credited with being one of the first artists to use vaginal imagery. This in itself was a huge stride for the feminists. In her series of photographs entitled *S.O.S - Starification Object Series* (1974) (Figure 3), Wilke took this concept one step further. Using her mostly nude body as a backdrop, Wilke photographed herself with these vulvas randomly stuck to her body. Rather than sculpting with clay, Wilke chose chewing gum as her sculptural medium; of this she said, “I chose gum because it’s the perfect metaphor for the American woman, chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece”. Her awareness of society’s attitude that women were insignificant is apparent with every “scar” left on her body. *S.O.S.* not only attacks the physical representation of women, but also their actual treatment in society. In this series of photographs, Wilke parodies popular images of women. While her glamorous and sexy poses mimic those of advertisements and pin-

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ups, the viewer is distracted by these unsightly scars stuck on Wilke’s body. These glamorous poses also address and question what is perceived as feminine in society since these are poses borrowed by models found in mass media. By representing these scars as female genitalia, Wilke reminds her audience of the stigmas attached to being a woman. She poses as an object of men’s desire, while simultaneously and intentionally looking slightly ridiculous. The title itself, *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*, also acknowledges this dual reaction of sex appeal and absurdity. *S.O.S.* was meant as an outright attack on the popular images of women.
Although she denies a feminist agenda, Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Series* (1977-80), nevertheless brought to light the way women were exhibited in society. Much like Wilke’s *S.O.S. Starification*, Sherman also used familiar images as the foundation of her photographs. Appearing as if they were taken directly from a movie, Sherman’s photographs do not initially appear as mocking as Wilke’s *S.O.S. Starification series*; in fact they look as if they are actual snapshots taken during a film shoot. In this series of 69 black and white photographs, Sherman plays the role of many different women, each representing a different stereotype. She dresses up in wigs and make-up, looking like a completely different woman in each image. Not self-portraits in the traditional sense, these photographs beg the question, “Who is Cindy Sherman?” We certainly cannot ascertain who she is from her portraits since she does not maintain a fixed identity. In one, Sherman portrays a young blonde lying as an object of sexual desire on a bed wearing a bra. She stares blankly up at the ceiling emitting an air of vulnerability (Figure 4); in another, she is dressed in a professional suit in the midst of towering skyscrapers (Figure 5). But these photographs are not a glimpse into the life of Sherman, rather they are meant to question the identity of women in general and how these familiar images lead us to define identity by what we see. By using herself in each of these roles, we see one woman convincingly appearing as 69 very different personas. Sherman’s multiple identities illustrate how easily it is to obscure a woman’s true identity behind a social construct of clichés. Although her film stills appear as actual reenactments of earlier films from the 1950’s, her characters do have more substance. Where actual movie stills
capture a moment of high intensity in motion pictures, Sherman’s photographs appear to catch her characters alone in moments of quiet reflection. *Untitled Film Still* (Figure 6), shows Sherman draped in a bath towel with her back to the viewer. She poses in front of a mirror and stares at her reflection. Her seeming unawareness of the camera gives us a sense of her being alone, as though we have caught her in a very private and honest moment. These characters Sherman creates become more than just clichés as she transforms them into thinking beings. By mimicking popular images and identities, Sherman reminds us things are not always as they appear as she adds an introspective element to these characters. The viewer’s instantaneous recognition of these fictitious characters is a reminder of how these socially constructed identities are so ingrained in our subconscious.
Figure 4 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #6*, (1977)
Figure 5 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #21* (1978)

Figure 6 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still* (1977).
Lynda Benglis, who is recognized as a sculptor, did not receive criticism for her early sculptural works. Her sculptures, unlike Wilke’s overtly feminist vagina sculptures, are so abstract that they are more of a representation of sexuality rather than an obvious likeness. It was not until a group of Lynda Benglis’s photographs of herself were published in *Artforum* magazine that she came under fire. In 1974, Benglis took out pages in *Artforum* to promote an upcoming exhibit. In photographs reminiscent of and inspired by the popular pin-up of Betty Grable, she defies the stereotypical idea of femininity. Unlike Grable’s provocative pin-up, which was intended to seduce male audiences, Benglis dressed butch, appearing quite masculine while she stood in confrontational poses. In the most controversial photograph, Benglis is completely nude, sporting only a pair of sunglasses and a dildo, which she mockingly holds in front of her as if she was male (Figure 7). Her hair is short and slicked back and her pose is aggressive. She appears to be asking if she were a man could she and her work be taken seriously. Her advertisements were not just about female depictions, but were about acknowledging women as artists. Although Benglis’s initial motivation behind the advertisements was to bring a little humor into the feminist art movement, many people were not amused and were actually enraged by the images. Benglis said she did it because she thought “an artist who is a woman could place herself on a pedestal type situation, and make a kind of icon of herself, and mock herself”. Editors of *Artforum* condemned this particular work, among them respected art critic Rosalind Krauss, who openly criticized Benglis’s photo, referring to it as “vulgar”. Unlike her sculptures, with Benglis’s advertisement there was no avoiding or mistaking this clear image, “she forced

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4 Lynda Benglis, Lecture held at The Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, Skowhegan, Maine, 30 July 1999.
5 Ibid.
There have always been certain standards that women were expected to yield to; Benglis fought against these ideals and her photographic works were viewed as a threat to femininity. This series of advertisements addressed the inequality of the sexes in art, but also forced viewers to acknowledge the sexual messages in her abstract sculptural pieces as well.

It is also important to note that in this same issue of *Artforum* that published Lynda Benglis’s photographs, artist and collaborator of Benglis, Robert Morris published a picture of himself similar in nature. In this photograph, Morris is shown overtly sexual, shirtless, and adorned in S&M gear (figure 8). Morris’s photograph seems to be addressing issues of gender as well, as he appears almost excessively, and ridiculously, masculine. Although Morris’s photograph received criticism, it was minute compared with the negative attention given to Benglis. One interesting point is that Rosalind Krauss, mentioned earlier for her disgust with Benglis’s photo, is actually the one who took this photograph of Morris. In her essay, art historian Lucy Lippard gave numerous examples of male artists who have done equally shocking performance art that avoided uproar. She cited works of Vito Acconci, Scott Burton, and William Wegman and stated that the controversy caused by Benglis’s photo proved that “there are still things women may not do”.

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Figure 7 Lynda Benglis, Ref.: Artforum, Nov. 1974.
Similar to Benglis’s *Artforum* photos, many of Wilke’s photographs suggest advertisements, as in *S.O.S.* where she poses like celebrities. By using these recognizable forms, Wilke effectively attacked clichés. Anyone and everyone could look at these images and relate to them since they mocked images in mass media. Sexualized images of women were everywhere and were accepted into mainstream society. It is only when women started creating art that took control of the female form and that established women’s bodies as places of power that controversy was evoked.
Many critics accused Benglis and Wilke of being narcissistic for using themselves as subjects, yet men who did self-portraits were not called narcissistic. Also, men have always been able to use women as models, whether these women were deemed attractive or not, but when a woman used herself as her subject she was viewed as self-indulgent especially if she happened to be beautiful. Many thought that Benglis’s photographs from *Artforum* were a cheap ploy to attract attention to her exhibit. Although these photos did bring attention to Benglis, her intent was to bring attention to and challenge the gendered imbalance in the male-dominated art world. The fact that there was unequal reaction between her photographs and Morris’s showed that there were different expectations of male and female artists, their work, and their behavior.

Wilke was viewed as narcissistic, not only because she used her own body in her works, but also because she was considered beautiful. As Lippard pointed out, men are able to use beautiful women as neutral subjects, but when a woman uses her own beautiful body, she is a narcissist.\(^8\) Wilke’s beauty was one reason that she was not taken seriously as a feminist artist. It was hard for people to accept Wilke as a feminist, since her beauty was likened to the ideal representations that the feminists fought against. If a woman was good looking, she was assumed to be putting her body on display because she knew she was attractive; a man, on the other hand, could use his body with little, if any, comment, evidenced by the performance arts of Vito Acconci, Scott Burton, and William Wegman, as well as Robert Morris’s photo. The woman would be considered a narcissist, while the man was considered an artist.\(^9\) Wilke used her body to deal with

\(^8\) Ibid., 125.
\(^9\) Ibid., 125.
issues of femininity and feminism. She did not do this to indulge herself, but instead as she stated, “I felt it would interest me to create an iconography about a woman by a woman. I could be representative of every woman”.\textsuperscript{10}

Unlike earlier works of art with a female subject, Wilke’s \textit{S.O.S. Starification Object Series} does not satisfy the male gaze; instead, much of Wilke’s work is created for an assumed female audience. Her later works show the effects of breast cancer as she photographed her mother’s battle with the disease (figure 9). In this case, photographs serve as documentation. The importance of beauty is questioned as Wilke positions photographs of her mother’s sick and aging body next to her youthful and healthy body. Later still, Wilke documented her own battle with lymphoma, photographing the degradation of her own body (figure 10). These latest photographs show a much different Wilke than her earlier shots. She is no longer a thin, beautiful woman; her body is swollen and her hair thin. These series take very private and personal images and bring them into the public realm.

\textsuperscript{10} Slatkin, 263.
Figure 9 Hannah Wilke, *So Help Me Hannah: Portrait of the Artist with Her Mother* (1978-81).

Figure 10 Hannah Wilke, *Intra-Venus Series #1*, June 15 and January 30, 1992 (1992-93).
Although some have argued that Cindy Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills did not make a feminist statement, and instead perpetuated female stereotypes, her later series of photographs made a bolder statement. In 1981, *Artforum* magazine commissioned Sherman to create a series of twelve self-portraits, which she aptly entitled *Centerfolds.* Playing off of men’s magazines, Sherman is photographed in each of the shots, lying or sitting down with the camera hovering above. Unlike men’s magazine photos though, Sherman calls into question the male gaze. This series features emotionally charged photographs. The figures are shot extremely close-up, described by one critic as “embarrassingly intimate.”

One of the most controversial photographs of the series, *Untitled* #93 (Figure 11), depicts a blonde Sherman lying presumably naked in bed, as she firmly grasps the bed sheets up over her chest. Her hair is disheveled and her eye make-up is smeared. She stares off into the light with a blank expression. Many interpreted this photo as the aftermath of a rape, although Sherman denies it. Sherman purposefully leaves out anything that could give way to a narrative, leaving the sole interpretation up to the viewer, much like she leaves her works untitled, adding to her works ambiguity. In all of these photographs, the women appear vulnerable and perhaps as victims of various crimes. Any way one interprets these images, these centerfolds make the viewer uncomfortable. We get a sense that we are looking at something we should not be. In the end *Artforum* decided not to publish the series citing that they reinforced female

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sterotypes. In responding to criticism, Sherman said, “Well, I was definitely trying to provoke, but it was more about provoking men into assessing their assumptions when they look at a picture of a woman”.

Figure 11 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #93* (1981).
Many of the Sherman’s photographs we have looked at challenge the depictions of women in modern society. In another series of photographs, *History Portraits* (1989-90), Sherman refers back to historic paintings. In this series of 35 photographs, Sherman portrays some of the most well known figures of art history. From Caravaggio’s *Bacchus* (1595) to the Virgin Mary, Sherman draws on traditional European painting to create these photographs. While some portraits refer to specific paintings, others point generally towards works popular in earlier years. Although these are recognized as typical or specific paintings, Sherman’s intent is not to duplicate works of old masters. By mimicking these portraits it is unclear whether Sherman is attacking old styles of depicting women, and in the case of Caravaggio a homosexual man, or if she is perhaps suggesting and illustrating how art has and is continuing to change. The later seems more likely if we take into account Sherman’s alleged dissociation from the feminist revolution.

Sherman’s *Untitled #216* was clearly influenced by Jean Fouquet’s *Madonna of Melun* (c. 1450) (Figure 12). Fouquet’s painting shows a seated Madonna with an infant perched on one knee. Her breast is exposed as we assume she is about to feed her infant. In her *Untitled* photograph, Sherman dresses up as Fouquet’s Madonna of Melun. Her dress is similar, she wears a crown upon her head, she holds her baby with one hand and looks downward toward the child while she grasps a draping with her other hand. The top buttons of her dress are undone, so that her top opens to reveal a prosthetic breast. The unnatural shape of the breast corresponds to that painted by Fouquet. Much like her *Film Stills*, Sherman uses photography in a unique way. Although she uses photography as her medium, there is an element of painting to her work. In these cases, Sherman
herself becomes the canvas. In her Film Stills, she played with wigs and makeup. In her history portraits this is even more apparent. She created these photos to look like paintings by painting herself with makeup, adorning prosthetics and dressing up. Unlike early paintings though, Sherman’s photographs are easily reproduced and could be seen by anyone at anytime.

Figure 12

Conclusion:

The subject of feminist art is a difficult one, because of the problems defining it. Before feminist movements, women who wanted to be taken seriously as artists had to leave their gender out of their art.\textsuperscript{12} Most female representations by male artists contrast with contemporary self-representations by women artists. Photography enabled female artists to represent women outside of the context they were traditionally represented. Although it may be too early to know the long-term results of the second wave of feminism, it has broken boundaries for many current artists. Continuing in the path of earlier feminist photographers, today’s artists are continuing to test limits. One such artist is feminist photographer Catherine Opie. Opie’s \textit{Self-Portrait Nursing} (figure 13) continues to oppose conventions of beauty and femininity. Her aged, heavy, tattooed body is not representative of normative femininity, but as she poses as a reinvented image of a Madonna with her child, she forces us to rethink our preconceived ideas of feminineness.

\textsuperscript{12} Semmel, 2.
The goals of the feminist artists were to reclaim the female form as a symbol of power and present it as opposed to the conventional ideal. Society has constructed ideas and ideals of how a woman should look and what her roles should be. Many women artists who were working during the time of the feminist art movement may not have considered themselves to be feminists, but their works had a considerable impact on women’s role in art. By challenging tradition, women artists, whether or not they had feminist agendas,
played an important role in reshaping contemporary women’s art by transforming how women were represented as subjects as well as how they would be recognized as artists.
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