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### How many 'bad' feminists does it take to change a lightbulb?

The following essay is abbreviated from a pamphlet that was independently published in New York in June 1994. The 36-page pamphlet includes the original, extended essay, along with images of art by 36 American women artists. Copies are still available for DM 10 from Sixty Percent Solution, Tompkins Square Station, P.O. Box 20461, New York, NY 10009, USA.

I'm concerned with the organizing principles that constructed and framed the recent art exhibitions called „Bad Girls.“<sup>1</sup> How did these shows function as sites of cultural meaning? Why were the exhibitions applauded by mainstream art and entertainment writers and decried by most women artists? What do these exhibitions say about the issues women, and art, currently confront? I want to look at the kind of meta-narrative that was invoked, and the particular ways the curators situated the art, and the artists, beginning with their choice of „Bad Girls“ as the ruling moniker.

The kinds of meanings implied by the phrase „Bad Girls“ circulate around the fundamental dyad imposed on women according to the prerequisites of Judeo-Christian patriarchy, the two Marys of the New Testament: the virgin-mother versus the whore.<sup>2</sup> In the rhetorical deployment of the phrase as a museum title to describe artistic practices, „Bad Girls“ accepts this post-Biblical assignation of women into an either/or category based on a male sexual and reproductive use of women: „Good Girls“ deliver their sexuality to men for the purpose of producing male children: „Bad Girls“ deliver their sexuality to men for other reasons. Although, the exhibition rhetoric often pretended to divorce the „good“ from the „bad“, as if to suggest that the „Bad Girls“ the curators wanted to describe, document and fabricate are some kind of new independent breed (a special kind of '90s phenomena?) the shows couldn't help but directly invoke the „good“ half of the patriarchally-split female subject because it is already historically situated and therefore automatically called forth.

If the curators had really wanted to escape the good/bad dichotomization, they wouldn't have used it to begin with. And often, they courted it. Wall posters at the New Museum shows in New York, for instance, challenged viewers to position themselves as either „bad girls“ or „not“ through identifying with inane oppositions regarding one's relationship to bridal bouquets, farts, Valentine's Day and the color navy.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, at „Bad Girls West“, held at the UCLA-Wight art gallery in Los Angeles, a show deliberately titled „Good Girls: Virgins, Mothers and Martyrs,“ was on view next door, at the same time.

The invocation of „Bad Girls“ as a ruling nomenclature utilized by museum institutions in 1993-1994 references attitudes and assumptions much more immediate than the historicized mother/whore assignation it invokes. As old as the good/bad patriarchal division of women is – that is, as old as recorded civilization itself – the chosen phrase „bad girl“ has a particular place within 20th-century life in the United States. It is, first and foremost, a white, middleclass, heterosexual concept that belongs to the conservative cultural ideology of 1950s America. New Museum Director and „Bad Girls“ curator Marcia Tucker acknowledged this historical location in an essay published in her exhibition's „zine“ where she wrote: „My mother's words, perfectly representative of the 1950s style of rearing girls, had a lasting effect on my character; whatever she said, I vowed never to do. This is the 'personal' genesis of this exhibition.“

Tucker presents her mother's words as: „'Never wear more than three colors at once'... 'It is just as easy to fall in love with a rich man as a poor one'... 'You don't need to let boys know that you are smart'... and 'Don't ever go out of the house without a girdle.'“ Each of these admonishments, while obviously directed toward a girl/daughter listener and situated within the terms of 1950s-style sexism, are also implicated in social and economic class distinctions. Color restraint is a middle class (Anglo-derivative) code of fashion taste. Only the (heterosexual, or posing as) daughters of middle-class or wealthier fathers are socially enabled to meet, or marry, rich men. The only girls who are able to get smart are those for whom education is a given. And the girdle was *de regueur*, not for all American women who lived during the 1950s, but for those in whom upper-middle class values, or an assimilation into those values, was either assumed or encouraged. But despite Tucker's admission of the show's origin in her own 1950s (Brooklyn, Jewish, daughter-of-a-lawyer) experience the American „Bad Girls“ exhibition catalogue attempts to argue that its title is based on a

friendly interpretation of „bad“ and „girl“ as they are used in African American English. „Bad (meaning good),“ as Linda Goode Bryant notes in her New Museum catalogue essay, has its roots in African-American English; and Tucker observes that „when African-American women call each other ‘girl’ it is a term of affection and familiarity.”<sup>4</sup> But if „bad“ and „girl“, as separate words, are allowed positive usage in either subcultural or dominant cultural locations, the same cannot be said for „Bad Girl“ as a single descriptive unit. The difficulty, or actual impossibility, of locating „Bad Girl“ within women-affirmative connotations required Bryant and Tucker to commit a gross error of etymological method by splitting the phrase into two different words.

The historicized usage of „Bad Girl“ is distinctly derogatory: it functioned, and functions, to regulate the behavior of women toward self-sacrifice, sexual repression, and assimilation into the heterosexual contract of marriage and family, toward the very „Good Girl“ model against which the New Museum curator claims to have reacted. An appropriation of the good/bad model, from any woman’s perspective, even if consciously attempted as subversive, is still nothing more than a parroting of a male supremacist construct. That the catalogue assists locate the term, however speciously and haphazardly, within African-American culture is particularly slippery, given that the „Bad Girl“ epithet relies on racism, along with classism and heterosexism, to structure its embrace of sexism. The „Good Girl“ of Marcia Tucker’s memory of the 1950s was drawn as a middle class, white, heterosexual girl: poor women, non-white women, and lesbians were/are automatically designated as „bad”.<sup>5</sup>

„Bad Girls“ video curator Cheryl Dunye raises the problematic issues of race and bad girlism in her catalogue essay when she comments on the lack of submissions received from women of color. „I began wondering“, she writes, „if there is something about ‘bad girlism’ that excludes discussions of race, because most of the women-of-color video artists tend to make work about their community, class and spirituality.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the works, video and not, by lesbians seemed to function within a framework that accepts the idea, or existence, of lesbians as ‘bad’ by definition – so ‘bad’ in fact, that the heterosexual curators were often incapable of even naming the works as lesbian.

The general suggestion of the exhibitions, that the self-appellation „Bad Girl“ is a kind of antidote or emancipatory reaction to the „Good Girl“ model, is ludicrous. The exhibition rhetoric relies on a false, pseudo-Hegelian premise that thesis („good girl“) and anti-thesis („bad girl“) will provide synthesis (emancipation) – ignoring how obviously this dialectic willingly writes the terms of women’s emancipation according to the very terms of patriarchy. It’s impossible that freedom for women can develop out of the very ideological and structural basis of women’s oppression; or, to cite again the most often quoted line of Audre Lorde: „The master’s tools can never dismantle the master’s house.” This false good girl/bad girl dialectic acts as an obfuscating substitution for the real oppositional/dialectical struggle of feminism: to eliminate the categories „man“ and „woman“. That „Bad Girl“ terminology has recently erupted in fashion magazine cover lines and Hollywood film titles is further evidence of how conveniently it functions to define and contain female experience within nonthreatening terms. If being a „bad girl“ – with its implications of (usually-hetero) sexual activity and a refusal to conform to the repression of self involved idealizations of motherhood and chaste womanliness – is preferable to the „Good

Girl“ model, it still doesn’t take us where we want to go. What we want is the freedom to be individuals – to construct our lives and our sexualities for ourselves – not the non-choices forced on us by the very terms of our oppression.

To a writer for *Art News*, Tucker explained that a „bad girl“ is „honest, outrageous, contentious, wanton, self-indulgent, and even vulgar.”<sup>7</sup> If this is what Tucker appreciates, and the label she claims to attach to herself, it is an interesting contrast with her own actual social and legal status as a married woman who is also a mother. How do we explain that Tucker, who writes of how her determination to be a „bad girl“ inspired the exhibitions of the same name, ended up living such a „good girl“ life? Is Tucker’s appreciation for „Badness“ really anything more than a form of cultural slumming: is her very position as a legal and social „good girl“ what allows her to romanticize and advocate the „bad girl“? After all, those of us who are really bad – we who are unmarried, unmothering, unheterosexual, unwhite, uneducated, unmiddle-classed, unapologetic – are in quite a different position. And while we may consider ourselves „honest, outrageous and contentious,” who ever willingly describes herself as „wanton, self-indulgent, vulgar“? That Tucker puts the „Bad Girls“ in the same pejorative terms commonly used against women who do what we want – „wanton, self-indulgent and vulgar“ – offers another instance where her voice and her judgement don’t subvert, but directly mimic, the patriarchal voice of woman hating. Much of the rhetoric associated with these exhibitions reeks of such unexamined self-hatred and self-contempt.

„Bad Girls“ acted to infantilize, as well as pseudo-eroticize, the art and the artists it claimed to champion. This Lolita-ization was underscored by the inclusion, in the New York shows, of drawings by the curator’s 10-year old daughter and her friends – that is, *real* girls. In Part II of the New York venture, written comments by the curator’s daughter even appeared alongside some of the artworks.<sup>8</sup> The inclusion of works by children, like the slangish, ironic spin of the title, helped move the art away from any serious consideration and relegated it to a marginal place. Imagine an exhibition of works by Richard Serra, Carl Andre and Donald Judd under the title „Heavy Metal“, or a survey of Richard Prince, Jeff Koons and Mike Kelly called „Stupid Idiots.“ Obviously, no matter how much metal is actually involved in their works, or how happily they play the role of idiot, white male artists would never be grouped under museum titles that suggest such a flipant relationship to their investigations, just as white men who „do what they want“ are unlikely to be discussed as „wanton, vulgar and self-indulgent“ because these damning words are more often reserved for women and non-white (especially black) men.

No matter how stupid, how nothing, art by white men is – and I could give a list of big-nothings with long resumes and big bank accounts, if we had 100 pages to waste here – it is accepted as serious, conscientious and generative. But women; well, anything we do is likely to be labeled as either of little consequence or just a joke. In terms of general exhibition practices, the „Bad Girls“ extravaganza evidenced extreme curatorial arrogance and contempt for both the art and the artists.

Even as the supposedly autobiographical premise of Tucker’s ruling nomenclature collapses in its attempts to generalize her own life, it invoked particularly perverse distortions when pushed to accommodate the rest of us. In foisting the Good/Bad dichotomy upon a new generation of women (most of whom came of age in the ‘60s or ‘70s or ‘80s when the social mores of the ‘50s were under attack), the „Bad Girls“ shows

reanimated anti-women prejudices and assumptions that '70s feminism had subverted and that many of us had hoped were buried. Rather than documenting the aesthetic advances in feminist art making, the shows set up a framework that participated in an anti-feminist backlash.

Face it: the museums chose the term „Bad Girls“ because of its potential as a marketing device, because it commodifies art, and women, as insubstantial and sexualized objects. The poster for the UK shows featured Catherine Deneuve in a white wedding cum debutante gown which focused on Deneuve's cleavage – another instance of virgin/whore indexing. The pristine image of Deneuve's Caucasian female propriety and axiomatic desirability hovered over a background of a romantically-clouded sky, suggesting that white womanhood is both heavenly and eternal – and eventually violable. In snarled script lettering (a typographical constant in this cross-Atlantic exhibition extravaganza), the title is blared across the top of the poster and coupled with a sexual double-entendre, politely delivered in a parenthetical to read: „Bad Girls (are coming!)“ The American exhibitions included the same euphemism for orgasm on their invitation cards, employing the pithy expression „Do Come!“ with an exclamation point as a subtle hint as to the intended pun. The logo for the American shows, although not as movie-star sexy as that of their British sisters, featured a pair of red, arched lips: an announcement of the female servitude of the smile and the sexually-willing availability of those (women) who are lipsticked. The New Museum's institutional announcement quarterly, *Views*, featured a more explicit image to announce the show: a photograph of a sculpture of a plaster face, eyes closed, whose outlined lips suck an egg-like thing. Both images utilized by the American shows were of femal orifices, mouths that might also be read as lips of another sort: one is smiling, the other silenced through penetration. From the UK posters, which appeared in London tube stations, and the American exhibition graphics, which were not as popularly distributed, the message was clear: these are sex(y) exhibitions and girl/woman is a synonym for sex.

And yet all of the shows claimed to be about other things as well. Even if we were to allow the „Bad Girl“ title to stand within the terms suggested by the curators – as an umbrella for transgressive art by (mostly) women – the reduction of female transgression to sexual behavior, as indicated by the types of work excluded from the exhibitions and the context within which the selected works were framed, contradicts the American curators' supposed otherwise-motivated intentions. If sexualized behavior by women is in itself transgressive, could it ever be argued that it is the *only* female transgressive behavior? (Especially, when women's sexuality is presented, as it was in the „Bad Girls“ exhibitions, as by, about and for men?) Significantly absent from all the exhibitions were images of women confronting the law or government or fathers or religious institutions or husbands or any other symbols of male-invested authority. According to the visual terrain of the American shows, female transgressive behavior spans a spectrum, or perhaps a speculum, from the color pink to mechanized dildos.

The equation of woman, in this instance „woman artists“, with sex worked as a marketing device for the museum, just as it works for mainstream consumer advertising. Both the British and the American exhibitions claimed record audiences; the New Museum's two-part „Bad Girls“ broke all prior attendance records for that institution. Still, we must assume that the record-breaking audience for the shows was

not exclusively made up of viewers who wanted to experience an art brothel, that many of the people, especially the women who attended these exhibitions, did so out of a sincere desire to see art made by and about women. The clear majority of museum exhibitions on view in New York during the 1993-94 season were devoted to solo exhibitions by white men, including those of Richard Avedon, Frank Lloyd Wright, Joan Miro, Mike Kelley and Robert Ryman. „Bad Girls“ was the *only* major exhibition of the year which featured mostly women.

For those of us who care about art and feminism, the „Bad Girls“ shows indicate a crisis of institutional assimilation that could not have been anticipated by '70s feminism. All of the „Bad Girls“ exhibitions were curated by women; suggesting, once again, that female bodies in 'positions of power' are not enough. We need consciousness.

- 1 In 1993 and 1994, five exhibitions organized by art museums in London, Glasgow, New York and Los Angeles were presented under the title „Bad Girls“. Six women artists were featured at the Institute for Contemporary Arts, London and the Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow. In New York, over fifty artists from the U.S., mostly women, were exhibited in a twopart show at The New Museum, and dozens of other artists working in video, film and performance were presented in various satellite venues. Another forty artists were shown at a sister exhibition held at the UCLA Wight Art Gallery, Los Angeles. The New York and Los Angeles shows shared a catalogue, some of the same artists, and a curatorial concept based on laughter. Although less extravagant in size and more serious in tone, the U.K. show also shared artists, along with a title, with its American counterparts.
- 2 The division of women into mothers and whores actually predates Judeo-Christianity and is located at the so-called beginning of Western Civilization, in Athens of 500 b.c.d., where the separation of Greek women was drawn between mother-wives and courtesans; laws, prohibitions and customs were set accordingly. For a discussion of the coercion of contemporary American women into „good girl“ lives, see Andrea Dworkin, *Right-Wing Women* (New York: Perigee Books, 1983).
- 3 Such as the quiz in the „zine“ written by Sybil Sage which is broken into two columns headed with: „You're more apt to be a bad girl if:“, and „You're less apt to be a bad girl if:“.
- 4 Linda Goode Bryant, „All That She Wants;“ and Marcia Tucker, „Attack of the Giant Ninja Mutant Barbies,“ in: *Bad Girls*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994).
- 5 In the American „Bad Girls“ shows, lesbians appear to retain this automatic classification as „bad“. In the video portion, which was curated by a (Black) lesbian and includes the most lesbian artists, it is as if being a lesbian is in itself „bad“ enough. To underscore this assignment, „Gag: An Evening of X-Tra Bad Girls Video,“ held at the New Museum on February 3, 1994 was also mostly lesbian. X-Tra Bas was revealed to refer to sexually explicit.
- 6 Cheryl Dunye, „Possessed“, in: *Bad Girls*, exhibition catalogue, p. 112.
- 7 Mary Haus, „Funny, Really Funny“, in: *Art News*, April 1994, p. 27.
- 8 The artists were not informed that their work would be annotated by a child, or by anyone. At least one artist, Janine Antoni, protested and the child's text was removed.