ANITA STECKEL

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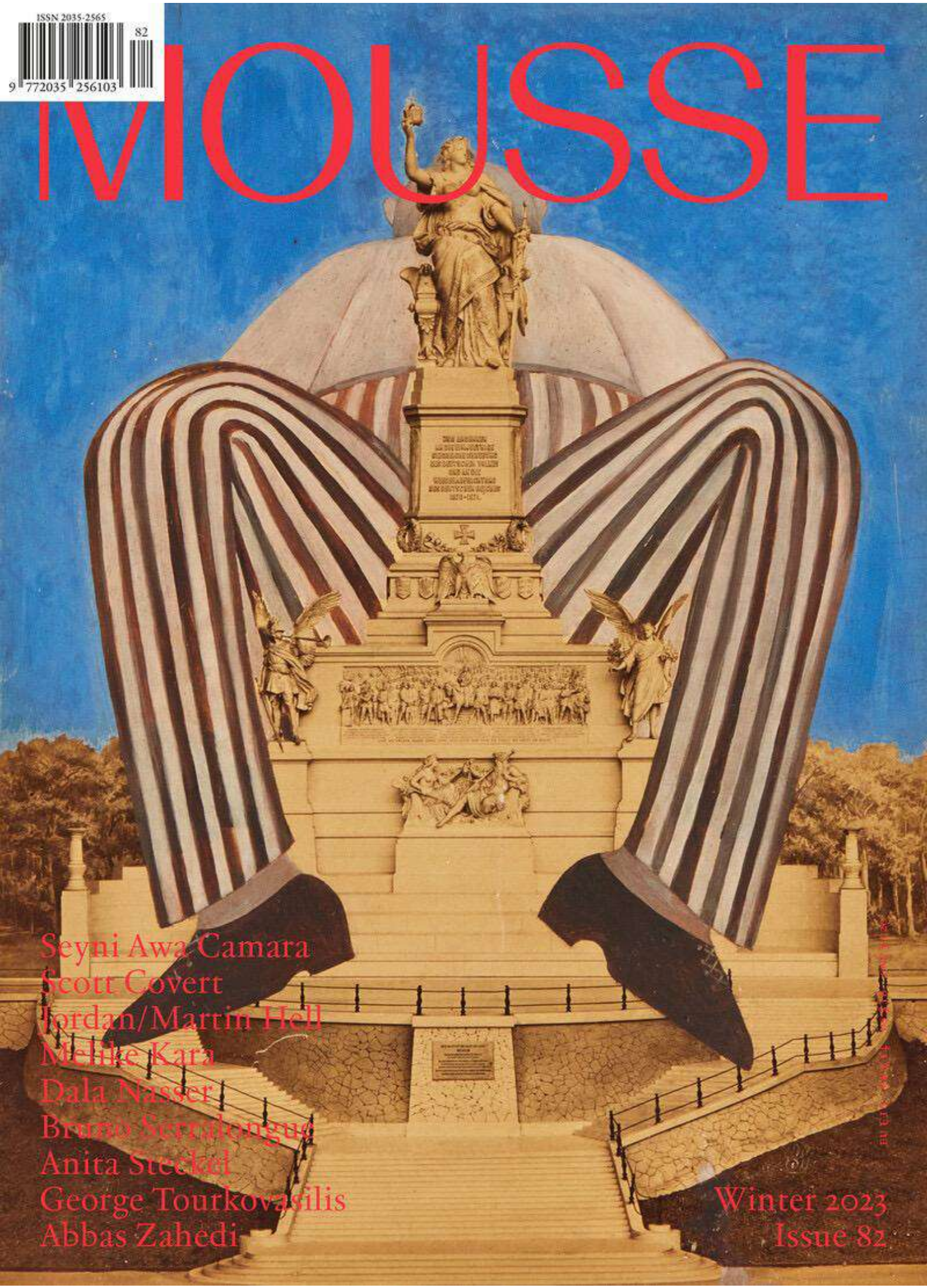

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(A)
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(B)
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IN CONVERSATION

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Subway (Giant Women on New York), 1973. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salveson

(A)

Reconsidering Anita Steckel in the Age of Heteropessimism

by Wendy Vogel

To tell the story of Anita Steckel's art, most writers start in one of two places. The first strategy focuses on a censorious attack in 1972 against Steckel's erotically charged work and her subsequent efforts to rally fellow sex-positive feminist artists against censorship. The other tactic is biographical, involving cherry-picking fabulous details from Steckel's life—her relationship with a young Marlon Brando, her gigs on a cargo ship and as a Latin dance instructor—as context for her work dealing with sexual content. Both the historical and the artist-centric approaches are necessary for understanding Steckel's complex body of work. Her practice, in bringing to light what was repressed, exemplified a fascinating chapter of the movement toward sexual liberation. The changing attitudes then and since about her work, however, reflect the contradictions inherent in the second-wave feminist movement. Following her participation in the Fight Censorship group in the 1970s, Steckel continued to work as a semi-underground artist for decades, then received reappraisal in the 2000s, shortly before her death at eighty-two in 2012. In the wake of the #MeToo movement and an invigorated debate about feminist representation, what might Steckel's work tell us about the stakes of erotic art now?

Anita Steckel experimented with a variety of approaches—both celebratory and unnerving—addressing the sexual underbelly of culture. Her early work melded figuration with Rorschach-like blobs, revealing her penchant for hidden psychological content. In the 1960s she developed a proto-feminist Pop art strategy of collage and montage, adding her own illustrations to vintage photographs or reproductions of art in order to critique racism, sexism, and war. Her two best-known series of the 1970s extended her practice of collage, as she embellished photographic depictions of the New York skyline with figures. To make *Giant Women on New York* (ca. 1969–74), she drew and painted female nudes of Amazonian proportions—many with her own face—over pictures of the Big Apple. The *New York Skyline* series (1970–80) likewise features fantastical landscapes combining imagery of the city horizon with Steckel's sketches of erect penises standing atop the skyscrapers. Sometimes accompanied by nubile nudes, the drawn phalluses obviously symbolize how male domination is echoed in vertical modern architecture.

Steckel's work expresses both politicized critique and an exploration of desire. The artist drew emotive figures, occasionally performing sex acts, over clinical photographs from a sex manual, for a group of works called *Untitled (Erotic Drawing Series)* (ca. 1977). For a related, undated series, she Xeroxed her own face and drew images of penises on top of the resulting print. In one of her final bodies of work, *Anita of New York Meets Tom of Finland* (2004–5), she added her own stylized image on top of reproductions of works by Tom of Finland.

* * *

Born in Brooklyn in 1930, Steckel was educated at the High School of Music and Art, the Cooper Union, and the Art Students League. Clearly influenced by the legacies of Dada and Surrealism, she made her first big impression with the 1963 solo exhibition *Mom Art* at Hacker Gallery, New York. The show included collages on antique photographs mounted over patterned endpapers. (Her then-husband, artist Jordan Steckel, criticized the decorative endpapers as too feminine.)[1] She explained her cheeky title as a pithy dig at patriarchy and prevailing tastes of the time: she "did not want to be called a Pop."[2] Highlights from this show included *The Imposter* (1963), a photo of a priest that Steckel adorned with sunglasses, curvaceous bare legs, and a pair of high heels, and *The Librarian* (1963), in which she painted a fringed bra and bare torso over an image of a stern-faced, bespectacled woman. The artist described her use of photography as integral for the delivery of her suggestive messages: "No matter how upsetting is the subject matter of a painting, we feel relatively safe. We know it isn't real. But paint an image into a photograph, which we are conditioned to believe is an unquestioned reality—then there sets up an uneasiness of another sort."[3]

Nearly a decade later, Steckel was launched into the general public's eye with her 1972 exhibition at Rockland Community College, *The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics*. The administration invited her to present a solo show at the school, located about an hour north of New York City, as part of an "audition" for a teaching position. As the artist tells it, a faculty member advised her by telephone not to include any work with sexual content, as it could negatively affect her chances of being hired. She was incensed by this advice to self-censor. In response, she decided to present everything in her studio with sexual content as part of a strategic feminist framework.

Steckel's exhibition included prints, paintings, sculptures, and collages. She handed out *Legal Gender* (1971), a multiple with a penis drawn over a reproduction of a one-dollar bill, explaining that it "had to do with women getting so much less money for the same jobs as men."[4] She displayed selections from her *Giant Women of New York* and *New York Skyline* series as well as whimsical paintings like *Busby Berkeley Circle (Flower)* (1970), featuring a penis sprouting leaves, its head surrounded by "petals" of dancing nude chorus girls. The New York works depicted both triumphant images of female empowerment—like a nude woman riding the Empire State Building—and prints such as *Pierced* (1970), where a woman appears to be impaled on the Chrysler Building. In *N.Y. Canvas Series #2* (ca. 1971), erect, cannon-like penises and buxom nudes are spangled with touches of red, white, and blue. It was interpreted equally as a criticism of the ongoing Vietnam War.

The Rockland show ignited a firestorm of controversy. On its second day, a county legislator condemned it, deeming any imagery with a phallus pornographic. A school trustee recommended that the exhibition be moved to the art department's restroom. Critics and curators, meanwhile, conveyed support by sending telegrams regarding the caliber of Steckel's practice—among them writer Lawrence Alloway, Whitney Museum director John I. H. Baur, and Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Henry Geldzahler. The event piqued the media's interest, and a television segment reported visitors "having their consciousness raised."[5]

Given the college's threats to shutter her exhibition, Steckel soon decided to form the Fight Censorship (FC) group. On March 8, 1973, she gathered a group of women artists in her live-work studio at the Westbeth Artists Housing complex in New York's far West Village. Members included Judith Bernstein, Louise Bourgeois, Martha Edelheit, Joan Glueckman, Eunice Golden, Juanita McNeely, Barbara Nessim, Anne Sharp, Joan Semmel, and Hannah Wilke. In a statement, Steckel identified "sexual subject matter" by these artists as "many things: political statements, humor, erotica, sociological and psychological statements—as well as purely sensual or esthetic 'art' concerns."[6] For that first meeting, she penned a handwritten manifesto on a page adorned with a drawing of the Statue of Liberty holding the woman symbol. The text urged women artists to represent all types of erotic content, especially male nudes. It concluded: "If the erect penis is not wholesome enough to go into museums—it should not be considered wholesome enough to go into women. And if the erect penis is wholesome enough to go into women then it is more than wholesome enough to go into the greatest art museums."[7]

The reception of FC, and the fate of Steckel's work, exemplified the contradictions of the 1970s. On the one hand, the era has been heralded as a time of sexual liberation; on the other, the culture was still plagued by old ideas about how sexuality can be pictured, and by whom. The same year that Steckel mounted her exhibition at Rockland Community College, the sex comedy *Deep Throat* debuted in general-audience theaters, revolutionizing the pornography industry. In October 1973, FC participated in the event "The New Female Sexuality in Art" at the New School for Social Research as part of a pornography class taught by Michael C. Luckman. Several members of the group presented their work live on stage—memorably, Bourgeois cradled her phallic sculpture *Fillette* (1968) in her arms.[8] Soon after the group coalesced, FC courted media attention across genre divides. In the course of a year, they were featured in a *New York* magazine issue about erotic art made by women, in the radical feminist periodical *Off Our Backs*, and in *Viva* magazine, a short-lived adult women's publication backed by *Penthouse* publisher Bob Guccione.

If the goals of FC were admirable—to allow women to broadly create art about sexual experience—the group didn't measure up to twenty-first-century metrics of diversity. The members were all white, cis women who engaged in heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, they excluded certain artists based on internecine criteria. Betty Tompkins was not invited to join, for instance, because she appropriated pornographic photography for her large-scale *Fuck Paintings* (1969–74), and several members were opposed to utilizing porn in one's work. From today's perspective, the notion of censorship might also seem dated in light of the discourse over cancel culture. "Cancellation," in terms of online moral outrage, often only solidifies problematic public figures' standing in the world.

In Steckel's case, though, the era's uneasiness about sexual art produced by women had a profound effect on her work. After the initial buzz of FC wore off, the group members went their separate ways. Feminist art turned away from explicit erotic content, particularly involving heterosexual subject matter. As the 1980s dawned, Steckel's work received little mainstream press for decades. In recent years, her recognition increased through the concentrated efforts of art historians Richard Meyer and Rachel Middleman. Meyer wrote about Steckel and other members of FC in his 2007 essay "Hard Targets: Male Bodies, Feminist Art, and the Force of Censorship in the 1970s" for the catalogue of the important touring survey exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*.[9] Several artists mentioned in the essay, including Steckel, were absent from the *WACK!* show, but still, Meyer's scholarship proved a moment of rediscovery that led to further exhibitions and interest in this fruitful period. In 2016, Alison Gingeras curated Steckel's work into the well-reviewed exhibition *Black Sheep Feminism* at Dallas Contemporary about a group of censored sex-positive feminists.[10]

* * *

To write about practices like Steckel's requires taking the sensual temperature of the world. In a review from 1989, Eleanor Heartney positioned Steckel's work against a wave of rising US conservatism and the AIDS crisis: "In two short decades, we have passed from the exuberant affirmation 'Make Love, Not War' to the pinched admonition 'Just Say No.'" She wrote that Steckel's "old-fashioned project is to give visual expression to sexual pleasure and desire." Among the works on view, she was less convinced by Steckel's depictions of heterosexual couplings than photomontages of Hitler and his associates over which she had drawn giant erections. "It may say something about current times . . . that the most convincing works here . . . represented instead the unholy alliance of sex and death."[11]

Today, the abiding attitude of the post-#MeToo era may be heteropessimism. Writer Asa Seresin defines the term as "performative disaffiliations with heterosexuality, usually expressed in the form of regret, embarrassment, or hopelessness about straight experience."[12] While heteropessimism is associated with exasperation voiced by women online for the failures of men, the flip side of this discourse resides in the rabid, dangerous subcultures of men's-rights activists and incels.

Looking at Steckel's work now, in a world clogged with dick pics and innumerable venues for porn, we derive

little shock value from her gonzo, cartoonish depictions of penises atop skyscrapers. Still, the truth of the phallic symbol persists. Female bodies are policed via laws—in the United States and elsewhere—that stem from a combination of patriarchal culture and religious repression. (Steckel tackled this issue with gusto in *Murder by Church Sanctioned Illegal Abortion* [ca. 1973], a photomontage showing the artist crucified over an ejaculating penis in a cathedral, an image that continues to zing in 2022.) The safety of the LGBTQIA+ community is also threatened by legislation and hate crimes. In this climate, it seems only reasonable to roll one's eyes at het culture writ large. In Seresin's view of heteropessimism, however, she notes that this attitude relinquishes accountability: "If 'heterosexuality' becomes shorthand for misogyny, the proper object of critique falls from view. To be permanently, preemptively disappointed in heterosexuality is to refuse the possibility of changing straight culture for the better."[13] Steckel, in her erotic work, refused to pit a love of men against her feminist convictions. For this reason, her work—and the gaps in its understanding—demand closer attention.

Art historian Rachel Middleman has detailed the trajectory of Steckel's work, from her participation in erotic art exhibitions in the 1960s to her emergence as a feminist figure in the 1970s, in particular the Rockland show of 1972: "Through this episode [of censorship], the positioning and reception of her work became politicized and its eroticism harder to speak about."[14] She argues that the two readings have been incompatible, even to this day: "It is significant to note that despite Steckel's struggle to have 'the erect penis . . . no longer be prevented from being part of art,' her most reproduced works focus on female sexual imagery."[15]

Meyer, for his part, points out the challenge inherent in figurative practices like Steckel's that picture heterosexual desire from a female point of view. Citing art historian Linda Nochlin in the 1970s, he notes the depiction of men as erotic objects was often seen as parodic rather than a true reversal of power dynamics. Furthermore, for feminists of this era, their portrayals of men could be written off for their formal similarity to male homosexual art—equated with a patriarchal point of view.[16] Curiously, in many subcircles of the second-wave feminist era, desire was written out of the equation—straight, gay, or lesbian—even among the practitioners of "cunt art" who sought to picture the power of the female sex organs. Steckel and the FC group remained outliers in regard to their work that addressed their heterosexuality. Meyer, who did not meet Steckel until the 2000s, was even more surprised by her late mixed-media collage series *Anita of New York Meets Tom of Finland*, begun in her seventies. In these works, Steckel draws her oversize likeness on top of prints by Tom of Finland illustrating hypermasculine gay sex scenes. "Anita's nudes do not generally engage in sexual activity with Tom's men," Meyer writes, noting their proximity. "But they do inhabit a shared space of creative and erotic fantasy, the space, that is, of Steckel's art."[17]

Steckel embraced both the satirical aspects and the deeper ambivalence of her art practice. "Women, rip off your 'white-gloves'—rip off the fig leaf—and then perhaps we'll all have a chance to get together and tell some jokes," she wrote in a statement from 1972.[18] Perhaps more salient than Steckel's desire to depict full-frontal nudity, however, is her consistent use of collage and montage, which writer Ashton Cooper calls "superimposition"—the artist's "insisting on the interrelatedness of supposedly incompatible things." For Cooper, this formal strategy was related to the intricacy of Steckel's personal relationships with men: "Like her feminist contemporaries, Steckel was faced with the complex dilemma of making her private pleasures line up with her public politics."[19]

To understand Steckel's deepest motivations, we must turn to her works including her own face. "When I merged my face with [the figures in the paintings] it was like an understanding that we are each all of these women, sometimes victorious and sometimes victim," she told an interviewer in 1979.[20] She alighted on this strategy during the *Giant Women of New York* period, depicting herself through photomontage as embracing the skyscrapers or, in *Subway* (ca. 1973), as masturbating between two men on the subway. The latter image confronts and reverses a fear of flashers from her childhood, as she details in a humorous limerick.[21] Her Xerox works, too, reside in the place between active and passive, or receiver and penetrator—her face pressed forcefully to the glass screen, her hand drawing the graffiti-like penises that surround the print of her face. Now, Steckel's work provokes not because of pornographic imagery, but because it touches on all that remains unresolved in culture. When it comes to desire, consent, and radical rethinking of heterosexual relationships, there's still a long way to go.

1 Rachel Middleman, "Gender Play: Anita Steckel," in *Radical Eroticism: Women, Art, and Sex in the 1960s* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 151.
2 Anita Steckel, interview with Richard Meyer, July 8, 2005, published in Richard Meyer, "Irrepressible," in *Anita Steckel: The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Art Gallery, 2022), 44.
3 "Mom Art," *Esquire*, October 1963, 134–35.
4 Anita Steckel, video interview with Richard Meyer, Westbeth Housing, New York, 2006, received by this author from Hannah Hoffman Gallery.
5 Channel 13 PBS Broadcast about Anita Steckel's *Feminist Art of Sexual Politics*, February 1972, video, Anita Steckel Papers, Archives of Women Artists, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Library Resource Center, received by this author from Hannah Hoffman Gallery.
6 Anita Steckel, "Statement on Censorship by Anita Steckel (Woman Artist)," distributed to other women artists on March 8, 1973, in New York. Also published in the *Village Voice*'s "Press of Freedom" section, March 29, 1973.
7 Steckel, "Statement on Censorship by Anita Steckel (Woman Artist)."
8 See Alison Gingeras, "Anita Steckel and the Fight Censorship Group: 'The Golden Age of Porn' Meets Feminist Art," in *Anita Steckel: The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics*, 19–27.
9 Richard Meyer, "Hard Targets: Male Bodies, Feminist Art, and the Force of Censorship in the 1970s," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Cornelia Butler and Lisa Gabrielle Mack (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 363–83.
10 See Andy Campbell, "Black Sheep Feminism: The Art of Sexual Politics, Dallas Contemporary," *CAA Reviews*, November 10, 2016, http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/3096.
11 Eleanor Heartney, "Anita Steckel at Underground," *Art in America*, January 1989, 156.
12 Asa Seresin, "On Heteropessimism," *New Inquiry*, October 9, 2019, https://the-newinquiry.com/on-heteropessimism/.
13 Seresin, "On Heteropessimism."
14 Middleman, "Gender Play," 150.
15 Middleman, "Gender Play," 172.
16 Meyer, "Hard Targets," 370.
17 Meyer, "Hard Targets," 383.
18 Anita Steckel, "Statement of the Artist's Views on Censorship," February 1972, in *PAD/D Archive*, quoted in Middleman, "Gender Play," 149.
19 Ashton Cooper, "Anita Steckel," *Artforum*, December 2021, https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/202110/anita-steckel-87259.
20 "Sex, Power, and Art: Amanda Sebestyen Talks to a Controversial American Artist," *Spare Rib*, August 1979, 43.
21 "Riding subways to school wearing socks / I developed a knowledge of cocks / Every week I'd see four / Sometime five, sometime more / Sometimes one every two or three blocks / Those sexual shocks every day / Turned me into a difficult lay / For there it remained / That thing from the train / Stood before me the very same way." "Sex, Power, and Art"; and Richard Meyer, "Passages: Anita Steckel," *Artforum*, Summer 2012, https://www.artforum.com/print/201206/anita-steckel-31080.

Anita Steckel's studio, ca. 1970 © Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel

An artist, feminist, satirist, and unapologetic New Yorker, ANITA STECKEL (1930–2012) experimented liberally across various formats and media—from pencil and paint to collage, silkscreen, photocopying, and assemblage—to develop an ongoing critique of the sexism in Western art history and the prudishness of postwar US society. Her best-known works address taboo notions of female pleasure and eroticism, reflecting on women's experience of public space and modernity in the urban capital of the twentieth century. Outcries over Steckel's work spurred support from critics, curators, and fellow artists, who argued that the shock value of her images in no way deterred from their artistic merit and intellectual power. In response to calls demanding the cancellation of her 1972 solo exhibition *The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics* at Rockland Community College on the grounds of obscenity, Steckel rallied her fellow female colleagues—including Louise Bourgeois, Judith Bernstein, Juanita McNeely, Joan Semmel, and Hannah Wilke—to create the Fight Censorship group in protest of institutional double standards. Steckel studied at Cooper Union and Alfred University as well as the Art Students League of New York, where she taught from 1984 until her death. Starting in 1970 she lived at Westbeth Artists Housing in the West Village. Recent solo exhibitions include *Anita Steckel: My Town*, Ortuzar Projects, New York (2022); *Anita Steckel: The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics*, Stanford Art Gallery, California (2022); *Anita Steckel*, Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles (2021); *Legal Gender: The Irreverent Art of Anita Steckel*, Jacki Headley Art Gallery, California State University, Chico, and Verge Center for the Arts, Sacramento (2018); *Anita of New York*, Suzanne Geiss Company, New York (2013); *Anita Steckel and Friends*, Westbeth Gallery, New York (2012); and *Mom Art: 1963–1965*, Mitchell Algus Gallery, New York (2009). Her work featured in the institutional survey exhibitions *Maskulinitäten*, Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, Germany (2019); *Cock, Paper, Scissors*, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles (2016); *Black Sheep Feminism: The Art of Sexual Politics*, Dallas Contemporary (2016); and *Identity Crisis: Authenticity, Attribution and Appropriation*, Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington, New York (2011). She was the recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant (2005), a National Endowment for the Arts grant (1983), and a MacDowell Fellowship (1966). Her work is in the permanent collections of the Brooklyn Museum, New York; Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania; the Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Kansas; Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts; and Verbund Collection, Vienna.

WENDY VOGEL is a writer, critic, and independent curator living in New York. She regularly contributes to *Artforum*, *Art in America*, and *art-agenda*, among other publications. Vogel teaches in the Photography department at Parsons School of Design. She is a 2018 recipient of the Creative Capital | Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant.

My Town (Giant Women on New York), 1973. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salveson

(B)
Anita Being Anita

Betty Tompkins, Dodie Bellamy, and Rachel Middleman
IN CONVERSATION

Anita Steckel (1930–2012) was not keen on compromise. A pivotal figure in the feminist discourse that fed the flames of the early 1970s New York art scene, Steckel was a cofounder of the Fight Censorship group in 1973, a collective of women artists who engaged in forms of sexually explicit art ("political, humorous, erotic, psychological").[1] The unapologetic artist and activist developed a practice out of testing the limits of bourgeois etiquette by adopting openly erotic imagery as subject matter of her work; to this day, hers is an unrivaled testimony of commitment to artistic freedom, feminist visibility, and an assault against restrictions.

In the ensuing conversation, moderated by Rachel Middleman, writer Dodie Bellamy and artist Betty Tompkins take Steckel's instance as a starting point to open up about their experience of censorship; female power and taking up too much space; humor and dirty limericks; the use of photographs and appropriation; and the autobiographical voice.

RACHEL MIDDLEMAN
I met Anita in 2006—I was a graduate student and my Ph.D. advisor, Richard Meyer, did a public conversation with her at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. I visited her studio in New York many times to conduct research and interviews, and worked with her over the years. She asked me if I would be the executor of her estate. Since she passed away in 2012, I've been responsible for fulfilling her wish of having her work placed in collections where it can be seen and preserved.
BETTY TOMPKINS
I knew Anita because she and I showed with Mitchell Algus Gallery in New York at the same time, around 2002. The first year I showed with the gallery, all the exhibitions were of women artists—one unbelievable show after another. In those days, Anita was always there for the openings with some incredibly good-looking young guy who I assumed was making sure that she got there and got home okay. We had lunch a couple times, and she came to my studio, and that's how I got to know her.
It's time for her to get a reconsideration from the art world, which is very efficient at forgetting people after they die, even if they have top-notch galleries. I see it all the time, and I'm always sorry because it's like nobody is fighting for you. I have three galleries, and I'm really dependent on them to do the fighting for me. I'm seventy-seven and I'm not going to be here forever. I remember one of Anita's shows: it was these really big pieces of a giant nude woman stamping, walking over buildings, and that was a terrific show. I'm sorry I don't have anything from it, even though I do own a piece of hers. My husband, Bill Mutter, got it for me as a present a number of years ago and it hangs in the living room. I love it. It's President George W. Bush giving a hand job to the king of Saudi Arabia.
DODIE BELLAMY
I was in Los Angeles in the fall of 2021 and I just happened to go to Steckel's show at Hannah Hoffman Gallery; the exhibition was big, and no one was there but me and my friend. This allowed us a very intimate engagement with the show. I didn't know anything about her at the time. I loved how there was no singular easy position for me to take in terms of the sexuality in her work, like the work kept shifting from empowerment to violation, and all these angles between those extremes.
Reading about Steckel has revealed new layers and refined my appreciation, but at the same time I feel that you don't need to do all this research to get what she's doing. The work engages in a conversation with the viewer—I feel constantly challenged by Steckel's appropriation of pornographic imagery: the naked woman on the subway, the Xerox print with her open mouth circled by cocks. Her face is literally smashed into the glass, like a protozoa under a magnifying glass. But her eyes point upward like she's having a vision. I cannot look at this work on a purely cerebral level. It hits me in the gut.
RACHEL
I was thinking about your work and some of the themes that we could discuss in terms of Steckel's practice and legacy that also overlap with your interests: sexual content and its censorship; the use of photographs and appropriation; and the autobiographical voice.
Let's discuss censorship first. Betty, do you remember Steckel from the 1970s when she was working with the Fight Censorship group?
BETTY
I don't remember Anita then, and I knew very little about her because there was no internet. If you didn't get in an art magazine and if you hadn't been to the show, whichever show it was, you didn't know about it because all our experience was in-person experience. I knew the work of hers that I saw at Mitchell Algus Gallery, and I was very taken by it.
RACHEL
You were also working on sexual imagery. How was the environment? What was your reception like?
BETTY
It was very anti-women, that is what the environment was like. My joke used to be that the male dealers were interested in the male artists, and the female dealers were interested in the male artists, and nobody was interested in us girls. When I was first doing the *Fuck Paintings* [1969–74], I was trying to do the only thing I thought pertained to the art world, which is that there was—and is—a certain amount of sociability attached to it, and that you got to know people. When I went to galleries, I would introduce myself, stuff like that. I was at one gallery owned by a woman and I said, "I don't have enough to show you yet, but I'm working on a series that when I do have enough, I'd like you to see it. Would it be okay if I came in with slides?" And she said to me, "Don't come back for ten years until you found your voice." I was very young. Then she looked me up and down again and said, "Actually, don't bother coming back then. We don't show women. We have no market for women, and we have no intention to build one." To me, that was very liberating. Nobody gave a shit. Nobody cared what I did. Nobody was going to care, and I did know that I had found my own voice. To me, it was either you're crushed or you're free. I was free, and that's how it was for me.
RACHEL
Anita once expressed a similar feeling when I asked her, "How did you have the guts to make sexual work at the time?" She said something like, "Well, our work was largely being ignored anyway, so we didn't have anything to lose."
DODIE
I've often thought that the radical experimentalism that comes out of the San Francisco Bay Area, where I live, is a direct result of its marginality. There's no mainstream to reward you if you behave yourself, so there's an incredible freedom existing in the margin. I haven't experienced the overt censorship that Steckel and Betty went through. I came of age as a writer in a close-knit queer community where writing about sex was seen as a political imperative. I had a long interest in that sort of subject matter, but I couldn't have really pushed things without a supportive community. When I would step outside that community, I often found my work treated as a joke or dismissed completely. Things are obviously better for me now, but it's been a long, rough journey. I imagine that Steckel's involvement in a pro-sex feminist community was essential to her development as an artist.
BETTY
Well, I could do whatever I wanted. I did know for a while before I did it that I was going to do these *Fuck Paintings*. I didn't want the grief and I also didn't want any of them taking credit for me, so I waited until I was out of school and had moved to New York. When I would go around to the galleries, I was generally very bored because the shows were, for one thing, almost always by men. I saw just enough shows by women like Marisol, Louise Nevelson, and Louise Bourgeois to make me think that it was possible. It's not like I saw no women. It was just enough to keep you hanging in, but I would go to these shows and I was never engaged with their work, so I would leave very quickly. The conversation I was having with myself was *What kind of art do you want to see? What would engage you?* And it's a good question; I ask it of myself even today. I wanted to be looking at something that had some charge to it, that the engagement with the painting was because of its subject matter.
That's how one day I took out the porn photos that my first husband had sent me. The story of these photos, which I used for the *Fuck Paintings*, is quite interesting, as those were the old days and you could not easily access pornography. My first husband was twelve years older than I was, and he lived in Everett, Washington. He rented a PO box in Vancouver, BC, which was a few hours away. He sent off his checks to get hold of these photos and gave the sender the PO box number. He waited what he thought was the adequate amount of time, and then drove over the border and picked up the mail from that PO box, hiding the packets of photos. They were really little photos like two by three inches. He drove across the border hoping he looked like the all-American boy; his car was not searched, and he made it across. Eventually, he moved to the East Coast, which is where I met him at Syracuse University. And that's how I came to the original group of photos for the *Fuck Paintings*. One day, I took the photographs out and I started to crop them with my fingers to see what I got.
When I got rid of all the extraneous things—the hands, the feet or legs, faces, necks—yup, that's it: that's an image that has charge. I would look at this for hours.
When I was in Ellensburg doing my master's thesis, I had started off by making a list of all the things in painting that I loved and that I could do well. The goal for me, with each successful painting, was to *not* do something that was on this list. And I didn't know if I was going to annihilate art for me or come up with something new. I was hoping that this elimination method would force me to rethink everything and come up with a new approach to it. It turned out to be one of the better ideas I ever had. One of the things that I loved was the bounce of the brush against the canvas. So one day, I said to myself, *I don't know what I'm going to do, but I got to take you off the list. I can't do this anymore*. Because I physically and emotionally loved it; it personified what painting was to me. I started working with spray guns, the kind of spray gun you paint a house with, a big one. When we moved to New York, so that my first husband could go for his EdD at Teachers College, Columbia University, we lived in their student housing, which was a small two-room flat, a very, very tiny space to work in. I knew right away when I decided to do these paintings that I wanted them to be big—the biggest I could fit in our vehicle at the time, which was a Ford Econoline, five by seven feet. I could fit two in at a time on an angle, so that was the size I was going to do. That was how I started these paintings.
RACHEL
In the series *Giant Women on New York* [ca. 1969–74], Steckel drew, collaged, and painted on photographs of the city and then blew the images up to three by four feet. Not only did she enlarge those collages, but what stands out is that the nude women in those pieces are also much larger than the city itself.
DODIE
The giant women looming over New York City's skyline are glorious. On one hand we're given an exuberant goddess figure performing acrobatics across the skyline. And then there's *Pierced* [1973], where a woman is arched over a spire that's about to impale her soft belly. Of course, I thought of the 1958 horror classic *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman*, which is so much about the shamefulness of female power, of taking up too much space, of excess, no matter how glorious you are. Steckel is brave to grapple with the tension between empowerment and abjection. It's an embarrassing position.

BETTY
These women were giants. Bigger than the skyscrapers. When I first saw them, they made me laugh. I thought it was hilariously funny and very powerful—you looked at them and what you saw first, second, and last were the giant women; then you saw the buildings. What first made an impression were the giant powerful women. Also, at the time that Anita was doing them and that I was doing what I was doing, if you wanted to be taken seriously as a painter, you worked large. It was a given. You could make small pieces, but you had to make large, major paintings.
RACHEL
It's great that you brought up the humor. Anita was so witty, and there's a lot of humor in her work. She also wrote dirty limericks that she would recite; often they would have connection to some work that she was doing as well. But I think the use of humor is so important as a form of critique.
BETTY
Oh yes, because nobody can take that away from you. Gallerists could not show you and they could not write about you, but if you had wit and said something surprisingly funny, they couldn't ignore you.
DODIE
Steckel's humor is refreshing, reminding us that political art doesn't need to be stodgy or dour. I feel the current attack on humor from the radical left is dangerous. Societies need the pressure release that humor provides, need the expulsion of laughter. I love how Steckel called her show *Mom Art* as a reaction to Pop Art; it's such a juvenile joke. Even the goofiness of the excessive floral framing of some of the images creates an almost subliminal tension, again undercutting a purely cerebral engagement with the work. I keep looking at the *Anita of New York Meets Tom of Finland* series [2004–5]. Adding the "of New York" to parallel the "of Finland" is wonderfully silly. Converting Finland's harsh black-and-white images to psychedelic colors and inserting naked women into private gay sex rituals is so *What the fuck is happening here?* I particularly relate to this work because I was taught to write about sex by gay men, and they would sometimes forget I was not one of them. I'd have to keep insisting: "Me doing this is a very different ball game. No matter what I do or want, I'll never have the sexual freedom you guys operate in." This was right before the AIDS epidemic blew up our world.
RACHEL
I think that way of employing humor also goes back to the piece from the *Bush* series [2004–8] that you, Betty, have: *Presidential Handshake* [2005].
BETTY
Yeah. It's hilarious.
RACHEL
One of the things I always found really important about Steckel's work is how she uses nudity and sexual imagery in many different ways, that it can be funny sometimes, violent, but sexual and erotic as well. Anita's experience with censorship—or attempted censorship—of her show *The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics* at Rockland Community College in 1972 led her to make her work more autobiographical. She was given the chance for a show, which she knew had the potential to lead to a teaching position. But before she went, someone there warned her not to bring any of her sexual art if she wanted to be considered for a position. For her, it was a real dilemma. Of course, she really needed the job, she needed the money, but she was also afraid that it would basically amount to self-censorship. If she started censoring herself in order to forward her career, then she was concerned that she would start doing that in the studio as well.
BETTY
That's a valid concern. And that's incredibly perceptive of her to be aware of the fact that once you do it in one circumstance, there is nothing to stop you from doing it in all circumstances.
RACHEL
Anita decided to bring all the sexual art that she had and title the show *The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics*. She knew it was going to be an issue, so she made it into a political issue. There were calls to close the show because of the sexual imagery; in particular, it was the male nude and phallic imagery that was problematic. This controversy got a lot of press. The public news station did a piece on the show. They interviewed the local legislator who was trying to close down the show and people who were at the exhibition, faculty and students, defending Steckel's right as an artist to say what she wants to say. She got a lot of support—there were telegrams from art critics and curators backing her work and her artistic expression. One of the things that I discovered when I was working with her and researching the exhibition was that after that experience not only did she found the Fight Censorship group [1973], but she also reworked the *Giant Women* series and put her own face on the nudes. There was actually an earlier version of that series in which they were anonymous drawings of nudes in the city. Afterward, in 1973, in a show titled *New York Woman* at Westbeth Gallery, New York, she unveiled the new version with the self-portrait. She moved into Westbeth Artists Housing in 1970 and lived there for the rest of her life.
BETTY
That was a great idea. It adds such a dimension to her work once she put herself in it. I've been asked tons of times if any of the women in my paintings are me, and I never answer. I've never done things with heads, faces in it. If I did, I would not use my own.
DODIE
Rachel, thanks for going into the rationale for Steckel inserting her own image into the work. What I've read about it presents it as a historical fact, with no explanation, which left me wondering, *Why did she do it?* I love how the work then becomes about her but evades simple autobiography, like no one assumes that the giant woman looming over the skyline is an episode from Steckel's life. It's about not distancing herself from the larger concerns her work is addressing. It adds a layer of risk and amps up the viewer's discomfort a notch. When I was a young writer, my female model for writing about the self was Kathy Acker, who basically uses herself as a trope for social, psychological, political, literary concerns to flow through. Though my style is very different from hers, I'm always conscious that the singularity of my "self" works as a representative of larger concerns. I'm not interested in vomiting out my personal shit for no particular reason.
RACHEL
Betty, it's interesting that you describe the *Fuck Paintings* with an autobiographical story about how you got the photographs. We know that it's not you in the source photographs, but the personal story of how you found them is important context for understanding where you got the imagery from, what its original intention was, and how you transformed it into your own statement.
BETTY
When I was an undergraduate, I had been trained as an abstract expressionist. All my teachers were abstract painters, and they were wildly enthusiastic about it. So I was very well trained. To this day, when I look at something I'm going to paint or something I have painted, I see two things at the same time. One is all its abstract elements: *How is this hanging as a painting? What's it doing?* The other is: *What is the subject matter, and what is it doing with the painting?* But that's why. When I look at anything, I look at it two ways.
RACHEL
I see that, and I think the parallel with Steckel's practice is her use of collage: she's got that content piece, but she's also thinking about how those different elements are working formally and visually together in the whole composition.
BETTY
Absolutely. She does it in a different way. Interestingly, I have been having dreams about doing collages, which I have not done since my very early twenties. But yes, she used collage extremely well. And it's a great springboard for grabbing onto ideas and dragging them out of something else.
RACHEL
The other thing that I think has come out of the exhibitions of Anita's work in the past two years is more of a sense of her drawing practice. You really have to see her work in person to perceive how complex the drawing aspect of it is. Because the imagery is so bold, you see the subject matter first.
BETTY
That's true. It's my belief that's what she wanted you to see first, because you have to work at it to see the rest of it. The imagery's incredibly out there.
RACHEL
Anita formed the Fight Censorship group in 1973 with a group of women who were all making sexual art of different types. It wasn't just male nudity or images of sexual activity, and they made the work for different reasons too. But then years later, she talked about feeling the pressure of censorship coming from other feminists, and maybe there was some of that the whole time.
BETTY
Oh yes. Of course. It was there. It was there from the beginning.
RACHEL
Tell me about it.
BETTY
Some artists were critical of my use of pornography as source material because people had been paid to have sex with each other so somebody could take photographs of them. And of course I didn't agree with this opinion because what difference does it make if it's a commercial source or not? One of the things that I say most often when I'm asked to define what I do in my practice is "I take something that exists in the real world, and I do something to it that's unique to me, and then I give it back." I think that pretty much describes everything that I've done since I was in graduate school. If you had to distill it down to one sentence, that's it, whether it's language, words, phrases, stories, whatever. If it's imagery, if it's an ad source, whatever it is, whether it's porn, it existed outside of me. But when I'm done with it, it's mine. Does that make sense?
RACHEL
It does, and I've been very captivated by the way that Steckel used appropriation and collage in her work and the ways she dealt with censorship, which was something she was interested in her whole life. She kept clippings of articles about cases of art censorship, even when it didn't have to do with her own work. It was something she followed closely, especially the NEA controversies in the late 1980s and early 1990s.
DODIE
Another way to look at it is that one's culture is as much a part of one's biography as life events and therefore fair game. This position is very unpopular these days, where there's an obsession with who owns what experience. I tend to engage artifacts that nobody really cares about, like the Stephen King film adaptation *Christine* [1983], so I'm fine.
BETTY
I'm reading a book right now, *If I Make You a Star*, by Theresa Brown. She and I were in the same high school class, and we've seen each other once every twentysomething years since we graduated. She talks quite a lot about this, but it's also my direct experience, that back then we didn't have the words, a common language, which now we do because of the #MeToo movement. Language isn't obscure words, or obscure thoughts. They had just never been put together like that before, so we didn't have that language. We all had terrible experiences growing up in the art world at that time. But we didn't have the words to say, "This is what you're doing," "This is how I feel about it," "This is what I am experiencing."
RACHEL
Anita was so well read. She wrote poetry, limericks, and memoirs herself. There's just so much untapped. Even if you haven't read through all her archives, you can see it in the work. In some of her pieces she's pulling images of Lenny Bruce, Billie Holiday, Van Gogh, and all sorts of different figures and people who had an influence on her. Sometimes it's almost like a puzzle trying to put together all the references that she's making.
BETTY
Absolutely. Where my work is single-sourced, hers is very multi-sourced. It makes a huge difference.
DODIE
In any given piece, Steckel is never doing just one thing. The way she simultaneously operates on multiple registers—high, low, humor, horror, politics, eroticism, art critique—creates an incredible amount of energy. I don't need to get all the references for the work to make me reel, like all my chakras get activated and spin like crazy.

1 Fight Censorship Group, "Women Artists Join to Fight to Put Sex into Museums and Get Sexism and Puritanism Out," 1973.

BETTY TOMPKINS (b. 1945, Washington, DC; lives and works in New York) has had recent solo exhibitions including *Betty Tompkins: Raw Material*, MO.CO Montpellier Contemporain, Montpellier (2021); *Women Words*, rodolphe janssen, Brussels (2021); *Will She Ever Shut Up?*, P·P·O·W, New York (2018); *Betty Tompkins*, Kunstraum Innsbruck (2017); *WOMEN Words, Phrases, and Stories*, the FLAG Art Foundation, New York (2016); among many others. Her works have been shown in numerous institutional exhibitions including Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg; Museum of Contemporary Art Vojvodina, Novi Sad; Virginia MOCA, Virginia Beach; MO.CO Montpellier Contemporain, Montpellier; Kunstraum Innsbruck; the FLAG Art Foundation, New York; Muzeum Susch, Zernez; the Hall Art Foundation | Schloss Derneburg Museum, Derneburg; the Brooklyn Museum, New York; Museu de arte de São Paulo (MASP), São Paulo; Institute for Contemporary Art, Richmond; Stavanger Art Museum; Fortnight Institute, New York; Künstlerhaus Bremen; Dallas Contemporary; Houston Museum of Modern Art; Stamford Museum & Nature Center, Stamford; MoMA PS1, New York; Juniata College Museum of Art, Huntingdon; and Centre Pompidou, Paris.
In 2003 she participated in the Biennale de Lyon. Her works are included in important collections such as the Brooklyn Museum, New York; Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin; Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris; Fondation d'entreprise Francès, Senlis; Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem; Islip Art Museum, East Islip; Museum of the City of New York; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, New York; Stamford Museum, Stamford; 21c Museum Hotel, Louisville; and Zimmereli Art Museum, New Brunswick.

DODIE BELLAMY's writing focuses on sexuality, politics, and narrative experimentation, challenging the distinctions between fiction, essay, and poetry. In 2018–19 she was the subject of "On Our Mind," a yearlong series of public events, commissioned essays, and reading-group meetings organized by the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco.
In 2021, Semiotext(e) published *Bee Reaved*, an essay/memoir collection circling around grief, loss, and abandonment, and a new edition of her 1998 PoMo vampire novel *The Letters of Mina Harker*. With Kevin Killian, she coedited *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative 1977–1997* (Nightboat Books, 2017).

RACHEL MIDDLEMAN is an associate professor of art history at California State University, Chico. She is the author of *Radical Eroticism: Women, Art, and Sex in the 1960s* (University of California Press, 2018). She has published articles in *Art Journal*, *Les cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, *Konsthistorisk tidskrift*, and *Woman's Art Journal* and contributed to edited volumes and exhibition catalogs, including Academics, Artists, and Museums: *21st-Century Partnerships* (2018); *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, the Arts and the American West* (2019); *In the Cut: The Male Body in Feminist Art* (2019); *Women, Aging, and Art: A Cross-cultural Anthology* (2021); *Joan Semmel: Skin in the Game* (2021); *and Supernatural America: The Paranormal in American Art* (2021).
She recently curated Anita Steckel: The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics (2022) with Richard Meyer at the Stanford Art Gallery, Stanford University.

Preparatory collage for *Valentine to Brando (Giant Women on New York)*, ca. 1969–73. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Dario Lasagni

1–2 *Anita Steckel* installation views at Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles, 2021. Artworks © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel and Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles

3–4 *Anita Steckel: My Town* installation views at Ortuzar Projects, New York, 2022. Artworks © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel and Ortuzar Projects, New York. Photo: Timothy Doyon

5 *Solo (Giant Women on New York)*, 1973. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Savleson

6 *Anita Steckel: The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics* installation view at Stanford Art Gallery, Stanford University, 2022. Artworks © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel and Stanford Art Gallery, Stanford Department of Art & Art History, Stanford University

7 *Coney Island (Giant Women on New York)*, 1973. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. 29 Photo: Paul Savleson

8 Preparatory collage for *Empire State (Giant Women on New York)*, ca. 1969–73. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Savleson

9 Preparatory collage for *Embarrassment (Giant Women on New York)* (detail), ca. 1969–73. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Savleson

10 Preparatory collage for *Just Waiting for the Bus (Giant Women on New York)*, ca. 1969–73. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Savleson

11 *And They Needlepoint, too...*, n.d. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Dario Lasagni

12 *Murder by Church Sanctioned Illegal Abortion (Giant Women on New York)*, ca. 1973. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Savleson

13 *Untitled*, n.d. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles

14–15 *Untitled* (details), n.d. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles

16 *Work and Leisure* installation view at Sala Impasti, Milan, 2022. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel and Sala Impasti, Milan. Photo: Roberto Marossi

17–21 *Untitled (Erotica Drawing Series)*, ca. 1977. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles

22 *Statement on Censorship*, 1973. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Dario Lasagni

23 *Untitled* (collage with *New York Skyline* and Diane Arbus photograph), n.d. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel

24 *Legal Gender*, 1971. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Dario Lasagni

25 Exhibition flier for *Westbeth Women Art Exhibition*, Westbeth Gallery, New York, May 4-28, 1973. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Dario Lasagni

26 *Feminist Party* poster, 1971. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Dario Lasagni

27 Exhibition poster for *Steckel / Collage*, Hansen Gallery, New York, New York, 1977. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Savleson

28 *Hiding in the Bush isn't Always Easy*, 2008. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Savleson

29 Business card featuring *New Mona Takes the Brush*, n.d. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Dario Lasagni

30 *Untitled (Anita of New York Meets Tom of Finland)*, 2004. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Tim Doyon

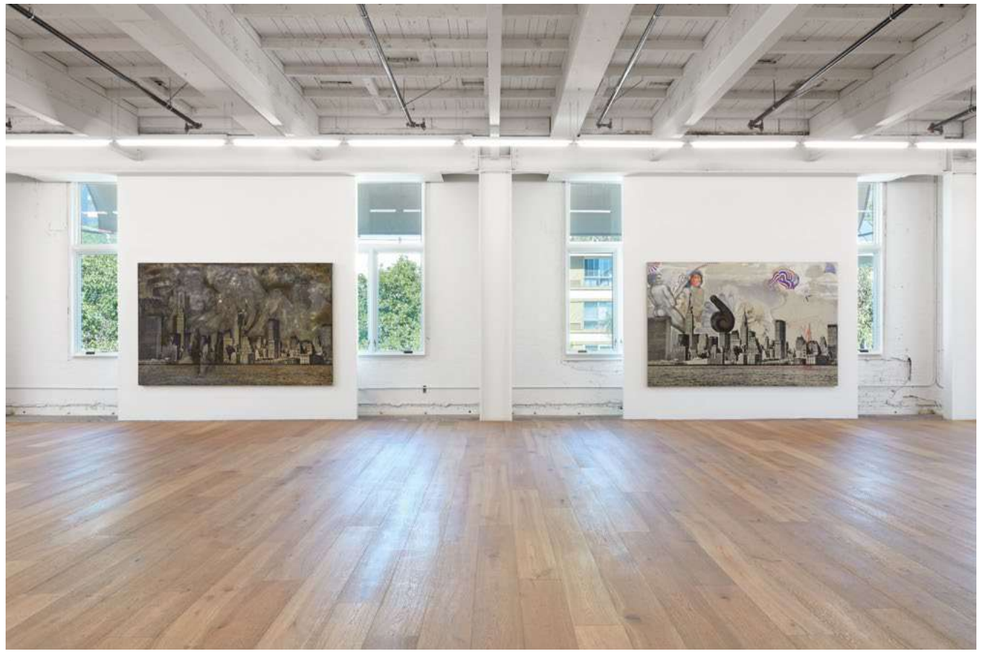
31 *Untitled*, n.d. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles

32 *Über Alles (Mom Art)*, 1963. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Tim Doyon

33 Ray Johnson, *Ray Johnson Piece for Anita Steckel*, n.d. © Ray Johnson Estate. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Dario Lasagni

A. Steckel

NY Skyline on Canvas #2 ((Red White and Blue) Black Cock Cannon), ca. 1971. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salveson



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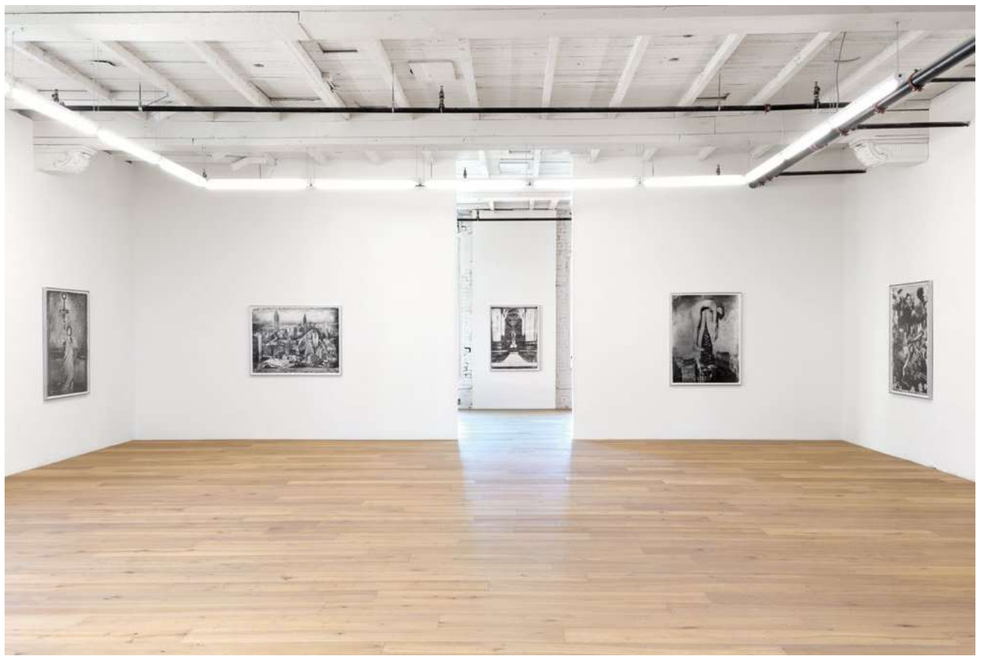

A. Steckel

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W. Vogel, B. Tompkins, D. Bellamy, and R. Middleman

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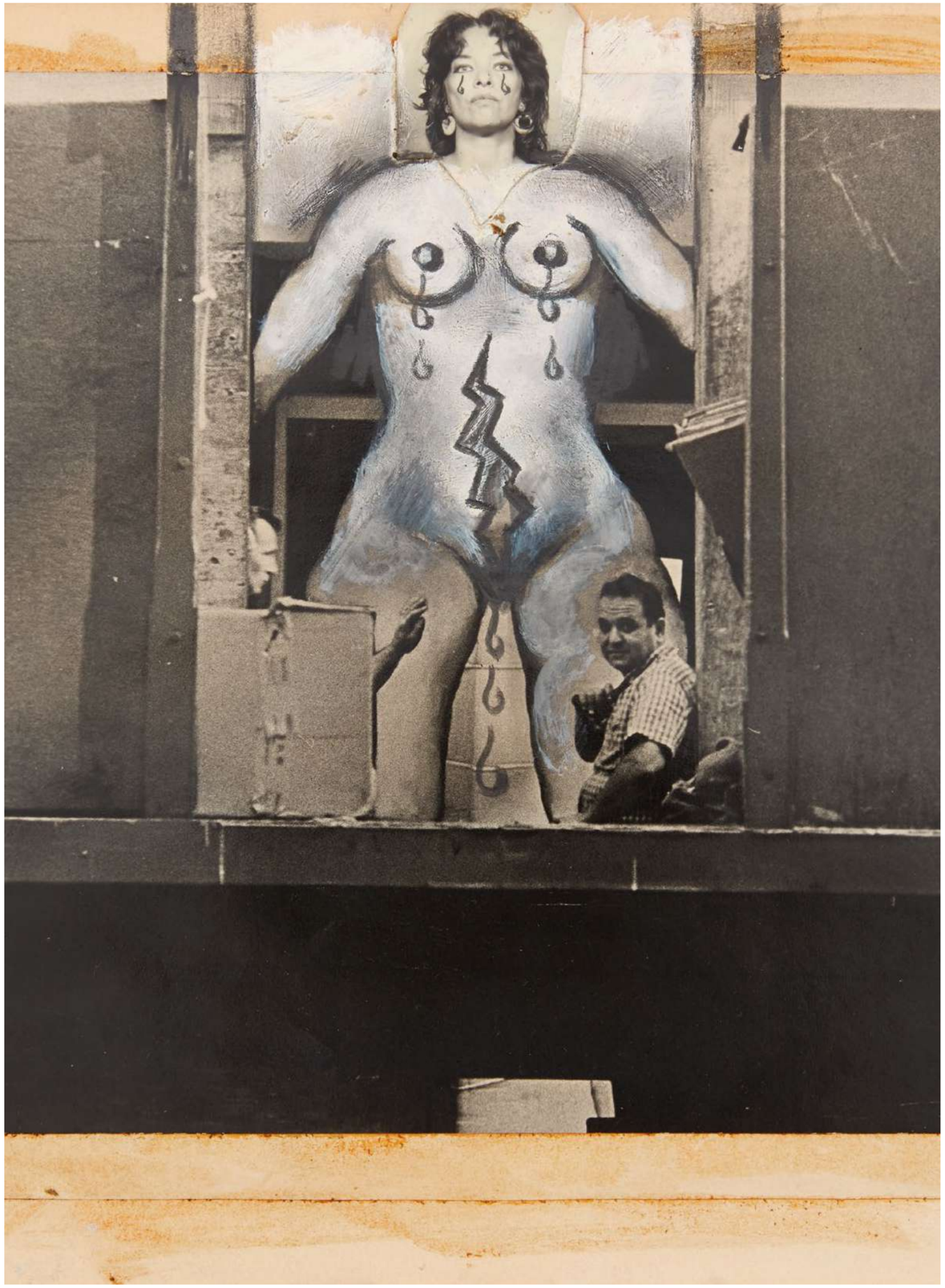
A. Steckel



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W. Vogel, B. Tompkins, D. Bellamy, and R. Middleman

NY Skyline on Canvas #5 (Eat Your Power Honey, Before It Grows Cold), ca. 1970–72. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salveson

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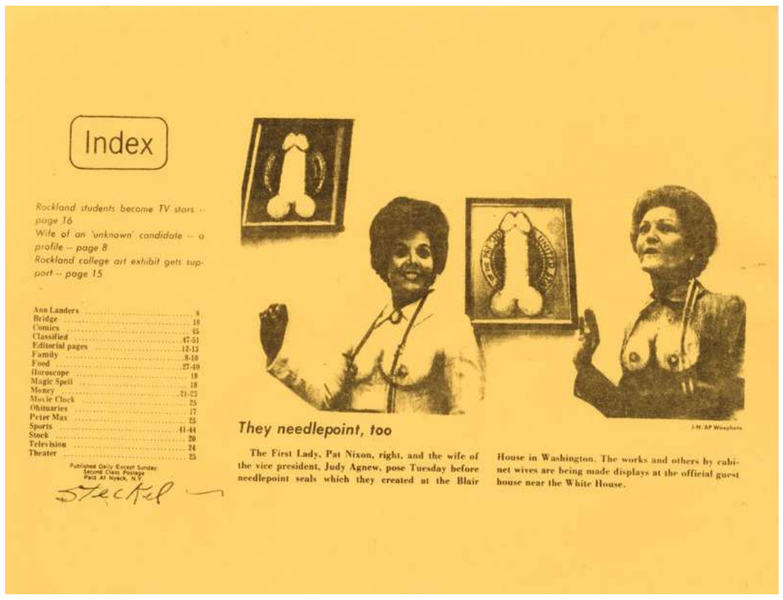
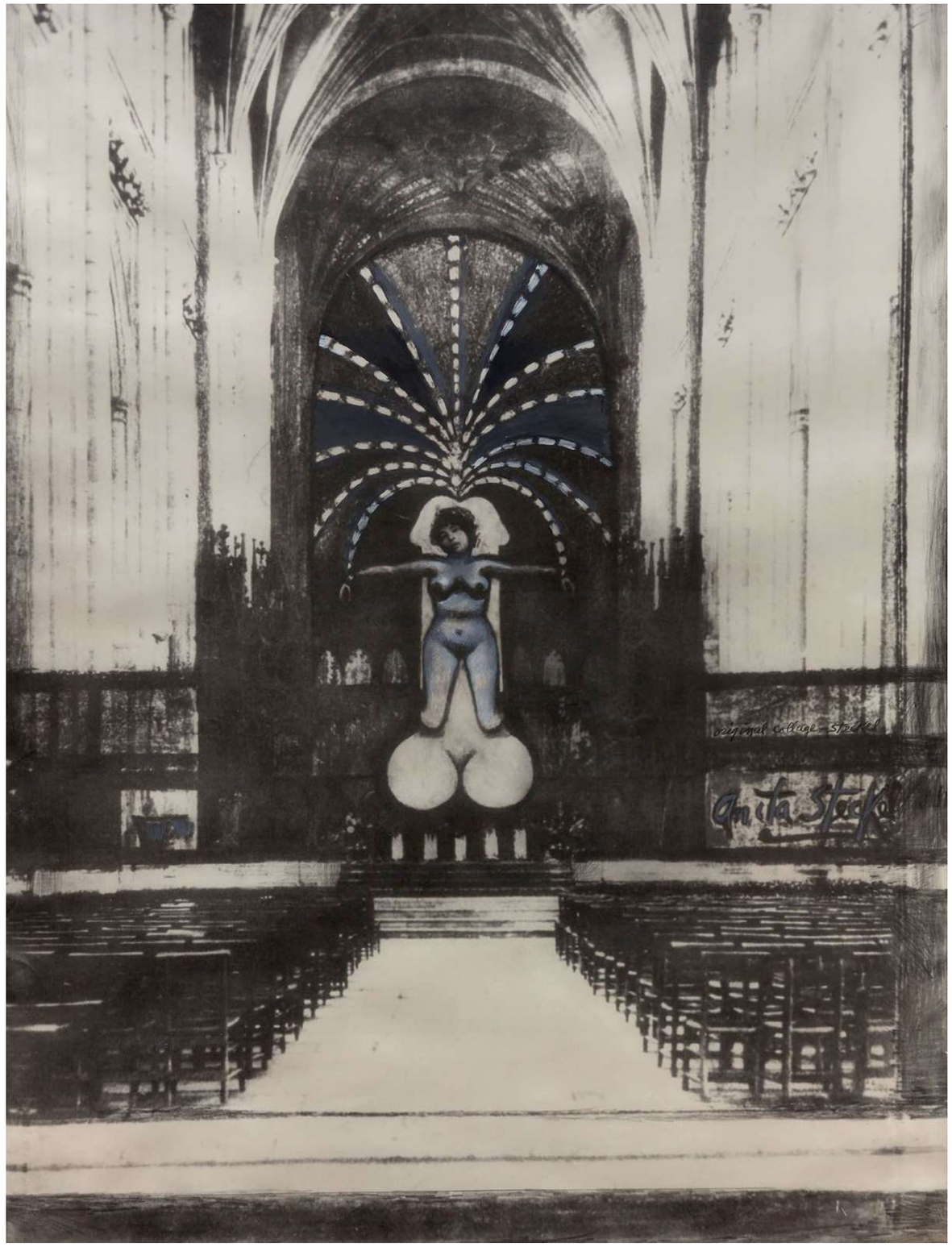


A. Steckel



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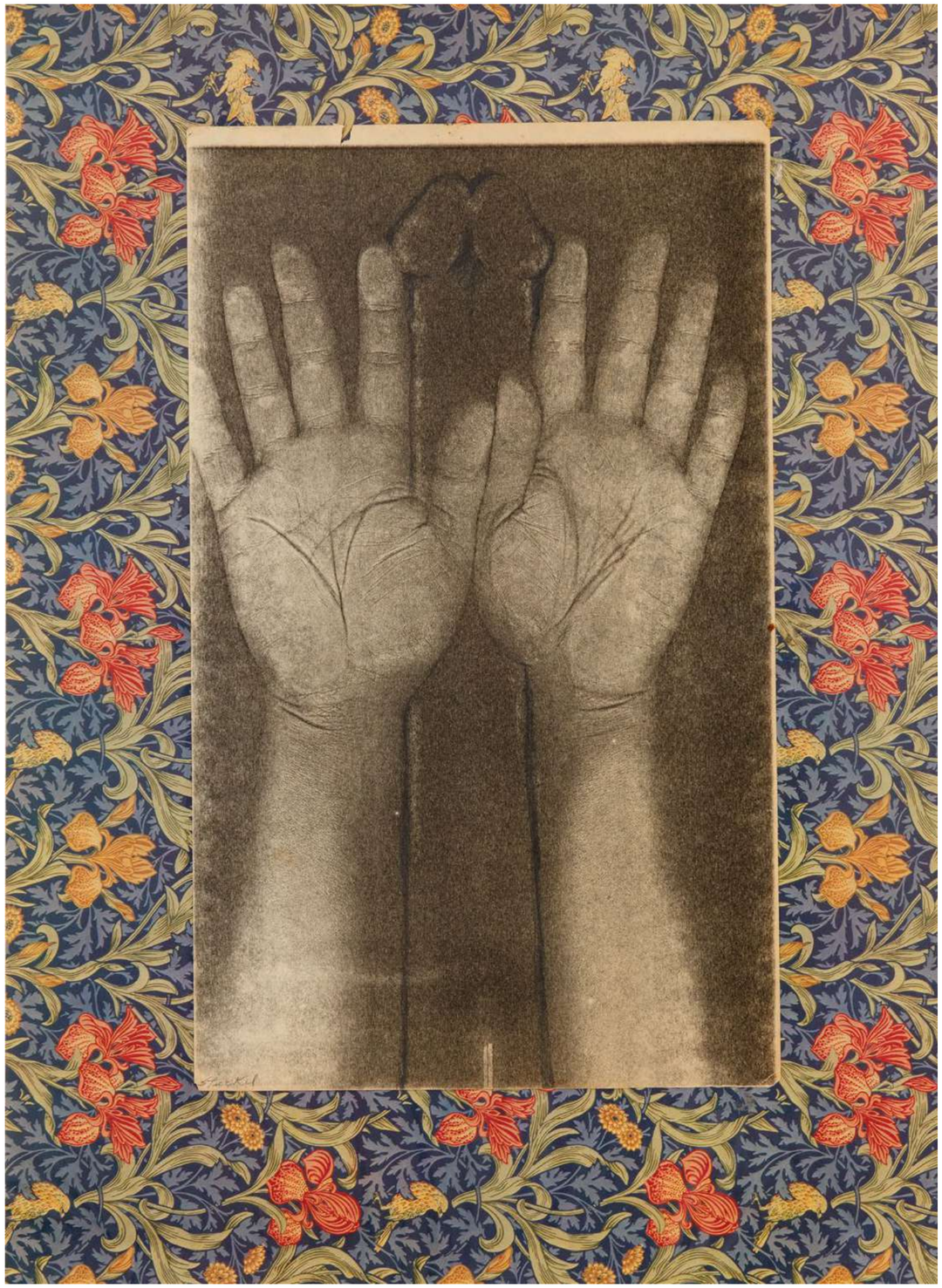
W. Vogel, B. Tompkins, D. Bellamy, and R. Middleman



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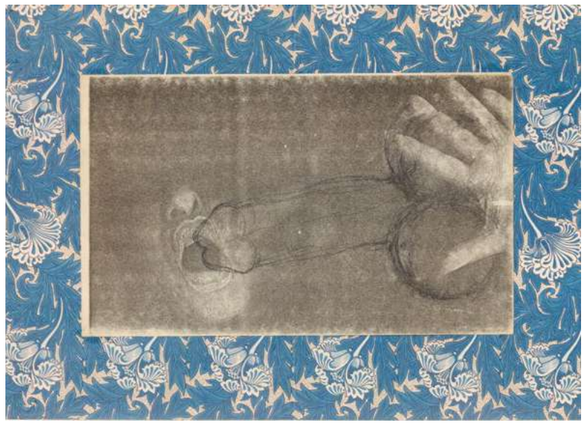

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A. Steckel

W. Vogel, B. Tompkins, D. Bellamy, and R. Middleman

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A. Steckel

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W. Vogel, B. Tompkins, D. Bellamy, and R. Middleman

Preparatory collage for *Pierced (Giant Women on New York)*, ca. 1969–73. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salveson

Dr. Anita Steckel's Eye Chart

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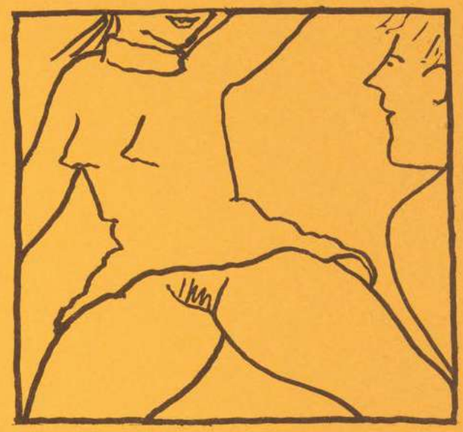

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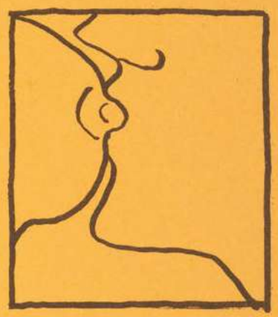

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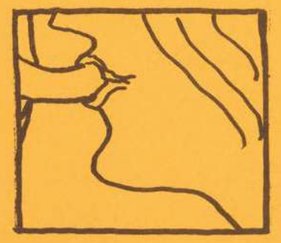

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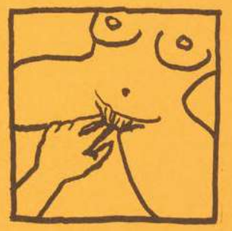

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Dr. Anita Steckel's Eye Chart, n.d. © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Dario Lasagni

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WOMEN ARTISTS JOIN TO FIGHT TO PUT SEX INTO MUSEUMS

AND GET SEXISM AND PURITANISM OUT

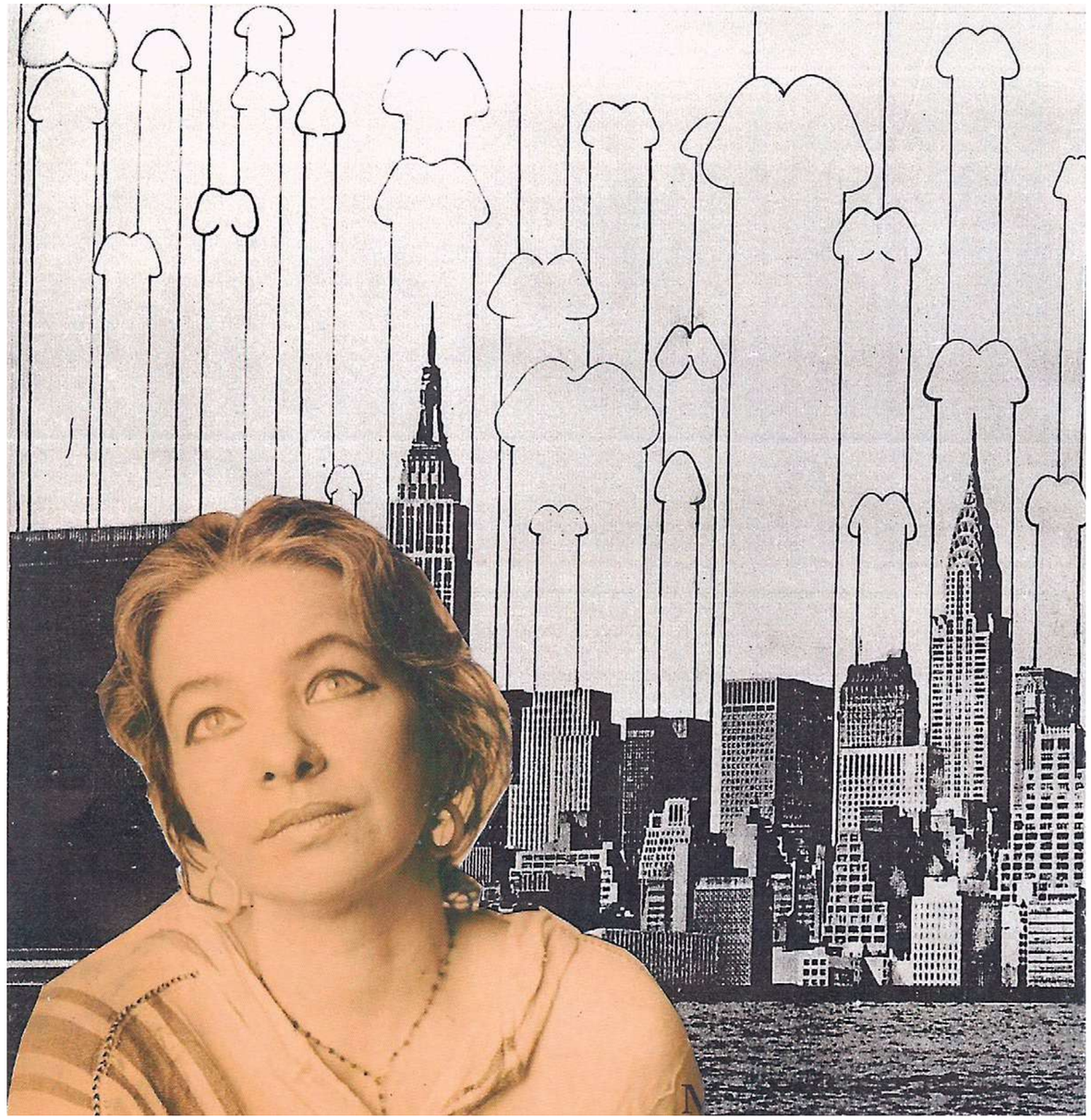
NY ARTIST ANITA STECKEL CALLED A MEETING, AT HER STUDIO, OF WOMEN ARTISTS WHO HAVE DONE, WILL DO , OR DO_ SOME FORM OF SEXUALLY EXPLICIT ART, ie., POLITICAL, HUMOUROUS, EROTIC, PSYCHOLOGICAL, ETC IN ORDER TO - 1. READ A PAPER SHE HAD WRITTEN ON SEXUAL AND SEXIST CENSORSHIP IN MUSEUMS_ AND 2. TO ASK OTHER WOMEN ARTISTS TO JOIN WITH HER TO FIGHT THIS PURITANICAL OPPRESSION . AMONG THOSE ARTISTS PRESENT AND WISHING TO JOIN THE FIGHT WERE, THIS EXCEPTIONALLY HIGH STANDARD GROUP; JUDITH BERNSTEIN, LOUISE BOURGEOIS, BARBARA NESSIM, MARTHA EDELHEIT, JOAN GLUCKMAN, EUNICE GOLDEN, JUANITA MCNEELY, JOAN SEMMEL, AND ANNE SHARP.

FURTHER MEETINGS AND DISCUSSIONS WILL BE HELD AND ACTIONS DISCUSSED AND DECIDED, BUT THE "FIGHT CENSORSHIP" GROUP HAS BEGUN_AND WILL GO ON FROM HERE, WITH OTHER ARTISTS CONTRIBUTING TO AND HELPING WITH THEIR IDEAS AND FORMING THEIR ACTIONS_ AND GROUPS, ENLISTING THE AID, IT IS HOPED, OF ALL CONCERNED WRITERS AND TEACHERS, AND A GENERAL , ALERTED CITIZENRY.

THE STATEMENT BY MS STECKEL MADE 2 BASIC POINTS:
THAT SEXUALLY EXPLICIT SUBJECT MATTER IS KEPT OUT OF MUSEUMS, DELEGATED TO "SMUT" MAGAZINES AND FILMS ETC., WHICH EDITORIALIZES SOCIETIES ATTITUDES IN THE MOST TERRIFYINGLY PURITANICAL, ie. UNWHOLESOME, UNHEALTHY WAY. AND SECOND, THAT WHILE FEMALES ARE SHOWN IN A SEDUCTIVE, SEXUAL , AND NUDE MANNER_THESE VERY SAME MUSEUMS REFUSE TO SHOW THE SEXUAL MALE NUDE, ie. UNCOVERED BY FIG LEAVES AND WITH ERECT PENIS, A TABOO.

Quote., Ms Steckel's statement;
" This is blatent sexist discrimination- and we women demand equal sexual exposure of men in art in museu
If the erect penis is not "wholesome" enough to go into museums- it should not be considered "wholesome" enough to go into women. And if the erect penis is "wholesome" enough to go into women then it is more than "wholesome" enough to go into the greatest museums."
Anita Steckel © (complete statement enclosed)

22



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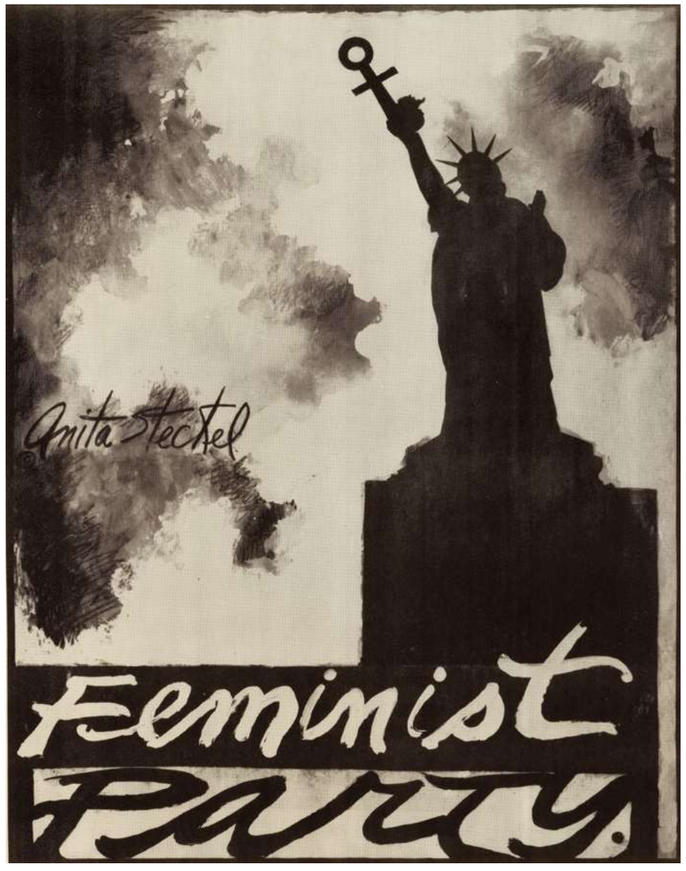

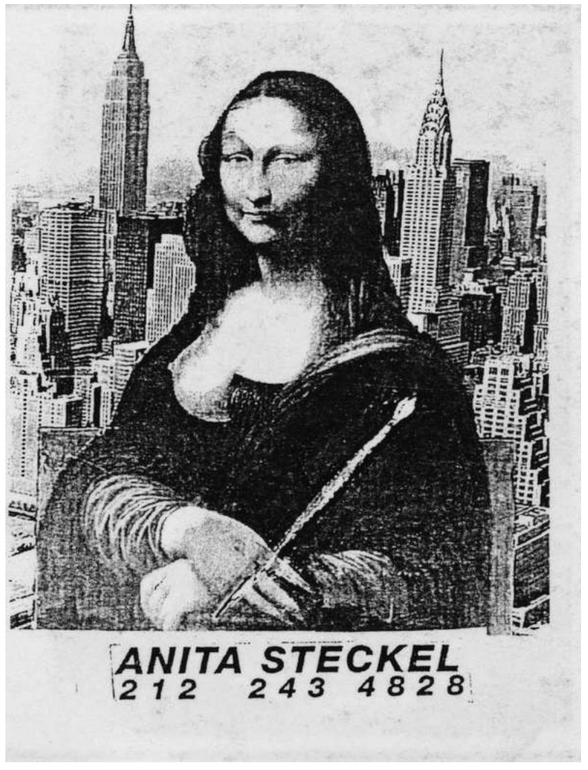

A. Steckel

W. Vogel, B. Tompkins, D. Bellamy, and R. Middleman

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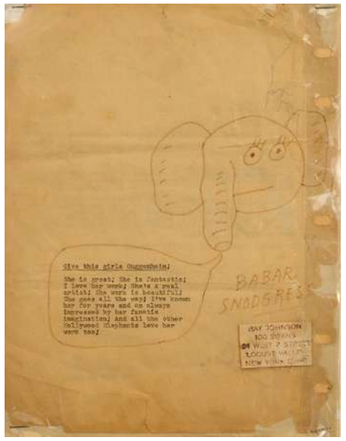
A. Steckel

32

W. Vogel, B. Tompkins, D. Bellamy, and R. Middleman

2023	* *Bohemia: History of an Idea*	Kunsthalle Praha, Prague
2022	*Anita Steckel: My Town*	Ortuzar Projects, New York
2022	*Anita Steckel: The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics*	Stanford Art Gallery, Stanford
2022	* *Work and Leisure*	Sala Impasti, Milan
2022	* *Interior*	Michael Werner, London
2021	*Anita Steckel*	Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles
2019	* *Maskulinitäten*	Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn



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2019	* *The Pleasure Principle*	Maccarone Gallery, Los Angeles
2018	*Legal Gender: The Irreverent Art of Anita Steckel*	Jacki Headley Art Gallery, California State University; Verge Center for the Arts, Sacramento
2018	* *Art Cash: Money in Print*	Hoehn Family Galleries, University of San Diego
2016	* *Cock, Paper, Scissors*	ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles
2016	* *Black Sheep Feminism: The Art of Sexual Politics*	Dallas Contemporary
2013	*Anita of New York*	The Suzanne Geiss Company, New York
2013	* *Fire in Her Belly*	Maloney Fine Art, Los Angeles
2012	*Anita Steckel and Friends (Memorial Exhibition)*	Westbeth Gallery, New York
2011	* *Identity Crisis: Authenticity, Attribution and Appropriation*	The Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington, New York
2010	* *Looking Out, Looking In*	Kingsborough Community College, New York
2009	*Mom Art: 1963-1965*	Mitchell Algus Gallery, New York
2009	* *Human Rights Art Exhibition*	South Texas College Art Gallery, McAllen, Texas
2008	*The Grosz-est Bush: Goodbye and Good Riddance*	Mitchell Algus Gallery, New York
2008	* *Art From Anxious Times*	Phyllis Harriman Mason Gallery, The Art Students League of New York
2008	* *Bun*	Kumukumu, New York
2008	* *Contextual Texture*	Kingsborough Community College, New York
2007	* *Women's Work: Homage to Feminist Art*	Tabla Rasa Gallery, New York
2007	* *What F Word?*	Cynthia Broan Gallery, New York
2007	* *Women's Work: Homage to Feminist Art*	Tabla Rasa Gallery, New York
2006	*Anita Steckel*	Mitchell Algus Gallery, New York
2006	* *Potentially Harmful: The Art of American Censorship*	Georgia State University, Atlanta
2006	* *Exquisite Corpse – Cadavre Exquis*	Mitchell Algus Gallery, New York
2006	* *Why the Nude? Contemporary Approaches*	Phyllis Harriman Mason Gallery, The Art Students League of New York
2005	*Anita Steckel*	Mitchell Algus Gallery, New York
2005	* *Contemporary Erotic Drawing*	The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut
2005	* *The Annual Instructors' Exhibition*	The Art Students League of New York, New York
2004	* *The F Word: Sex & Feminism*	Mitchell Algus Gallery, New York
2003	* *Salute to Feminist Artists*	National Arts Club, New York
2003	* *The Annual Instructors' Exhibition*	The Art Students League of New York, New York
2001	*Self-Images & Montage*	Mitchell Algus Gallery, New York
2001	* *21st Suffragettes*	Sideshow Gallery, New York
2000	* *Dream Worlds: Neo-Surrealism in the Millennium*	Attleboro Museum, Attleboro, Massachusetts
1999	* *Plan for Peace: Education, Negotiation, Peace*	Times Square Lobby Gallery, New York
1999	* *The Annual Instructors' Exhibition*	The Art Students League of New York, New York
1998	* *"And I Quote..."*	Mary Delahoyd Gallery, New York
1997	* *Westbeth Women Photographers*	Audart Gallery, New York
1997	* *Women's Vision: A Photography Show*	Westbeth Gallery, New York
1996	* *The L Word*	Eighth Floor Gallery, New York
1995	* *Get It? Humor in Art, Art to Laugh At*	Westbeth Gallery, New York
1995	* *A Sense of Community*	Times Square Lobby Gallery, New York
1994	* *The Animal Show: Inter-Generational, Inter-Arts, Inter-Species*	Westbeth Artist's Gallery, New York
1994	* *Examining Room (Women's Health Show)*	Ceres Gallery, New York
1994	* *Works by Women Artists*	Bryn Mawr College, Philadelphia
1994	* *The Women's Room*	Parsons School of Design, New York
1994	* *Truth Be Told: It's All About Love*	Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., New York
1994	* *Women's Art Show: Reclaiming the Past... Rewriting the Future*	Kingsborough Community College Art Gallery, New York
1994	* *Herstory 4*	P.D.G. Art Galleries, New York
1993	* *Over 100 Artists Works Under $100*	Gallery Onetwentyeight, New York
1993	* *Gifted Artists*	P.D.G. Art Gallery, New York

1993	* *Political Art Documentation & Distribution: The PADD Archives*	The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York
1993	* *Herstory III*	P.D.G. Art Gallery, New York
1992	* *Herstory II*	P.D.G. Art Gallery, New York
1991	* Ann Tanksley, Anita Steckel, Tony Gleaton, and Sumayyah Samaha	Kenkeleba Gallery, New York
1991	* *Using the Photo as Springboard*	P.D.G. Art Gallery, New York
1989	* *The First Amendment Freedom Show*	Ashawagh Hall, East Hampton
1989	* *CHINA-June 4, 1989*	Blum Helman Warehouse, New York
1988	*Sexual Imagery–A Female Perspective*	Underground Gallery, New York
1987	* *The Dematerialization of Art*	Randolph Sommerville Theater, New York University, New York
1987	* *Concrete Crisis: Urban Images of the '80s*	PADD and Exit Art, New York
1987	* *A Tribute to Black History Month*	Westbeth Gallery, New York
1986	*Anita Steckel*	The Sea Wolf, East Hampton, New York
1986	* *The Transforming Landscape: Women's Views of Nature*	Louis Abrons Arts for Living Center, New York
1986	* *Eve: An Art Opera*	C.U.A.N.D.O. Arts Center, New York
1986	* *Self Portrait*	Kenkeleba Gallery, New York
1985	*Women Artists Series*	Mabel Smith Douglass Library, Douglas College, Rutgers University, New Jersey
1985	* *Self-Portraits by Women Artists*	Gallery at the Plaza, New York
1985	* *Dimensions in Dissent*	Kenkeleba Gallery, New York
1984	* *Carnival Knowledge*	Franklin Furnace, New York
1984	* *Affirmations of Life*	Kenkeleba Gallery, New York
1984	* *The Great Animal Show*	Park Avenue Atrium, New York
1984	* *Art in General*	The Human Arts Association, New York
1983	*Anita Steckel*	The Sea Wolf, East Hampton, New York
1983	* *South Bronx Art Projects*	Fashion Moda, New York
1982	* *Women Artists: Self Images (Views by Women Artists sponsored by WCA)*	Judy Caden Gallery, New York
1982	* *Documenta 7*	Kassel, Germany
1982	* *A Selection of Prints by Hampton Artists*	Alex Rosenberg Gallery, New York
1981	* *Bienal de Arte Medellín*	Medellín, Columbia
1981	* *Voices Expressing What Is, Action Against Racism in the Arts*	Westbeth Gallery, New York
1980	* *Into the 80s Collection: Original Graphics by Major Artists of Tomorrow*	Alex Rosenberg Gallery, New York
1980	* *Transworld Art Retrospective*	Alex Rosenberg Gallery, New York
1979	*Collage: Giant Animals on N.Y. Series*	Razor Gallery, New York
1979	* *Works on Paper*	Westbeth Gallery, New York
1979	* *Women Artists*	The Brooklyn Museum, New York
1979	* *We Heart NY*	Alex Rosenberg Gallery, New York
1978	* *Women: From Nostalgia to Now*	Alex Rosenberg Gallery, New York
1978	* *New Collage*	Alex Rosenberg Gallery, New York
1978	* *The Animal Show*	Organization of Independent Artists, World Trade Center, New York
1977	*Steckel/Collage*	Hansen Galleries, New York
1977	* *Contemporary Women: Consciousness and Content*	The Brooklyn Museum Art School, New York
1977	* *Points in Time*	Women in the Arts Gallery, New York
1977	* *Private I: An Inside Look at Art*	The Floating Gallery, New York
1976	*The Paintings of Michela Griffo and Anita Steckel*	Soho Center for the Arts, New York
1976	* *118 Artists*	Landmark Gallery, New York
1976	* *Floating Gallery at Rutgers University*	Rutgers University, Newark
1976	* *The Year of the Woman: Reprise*	The Bronx Museum, New York
1975	* *40 Years of American Collage*	St. Peter's College Art Gallery, Jersey City
1975	* *Exhibition Games*	Women's Interart Center, New York
1975	* *The Westbeth Graphics Workshop*	Guild Hall, East Hampton
1974	* *Westbeth Graphics Workshop*	Westbeth, New York
1974	* *Picnic on Green St.: Land Benefit: Works and Performances by Gate Hill Co-op Artists and Friends*	The New Music Palace at The Open Mind, New York
1974	* *Interpretations of Sexuality*	Albin-Zeglen Gallery, New York
1974	* *Contemporary Reflections 1973-1974*	Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield
1974	* *Erotic Art by Women*	The Erotic Art Gallery, New York
1974	* *Point of View: 19 Women Artists*	Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine
1974	* *The Eye of Woman*	Houghton House Gallery, Hobart & William Smith Colleges, Geneva, New York
1973	*New York Woman*	Westbeth Gallery, New York
1973	* *Visual Witticisms*	The Erotic Art Gallery, New York
1973	* *Fantasies*	The Erotic Art Gallery, New York
1973	* *Women Experiment in the Living Arts*	Sarah Lawrence College, New York
1973	* *In the Beginning: Women and Religion*	Women's Interart Center, New York
1973	* *Westbeth Women Artists*	Westbeth Gallery, New York
1972	*Male Nudes Plain and Fancy*	10th Street Gallery, New York
1972	*The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics*	Rockland Community College Art Gallery, Suffrin, New York
1972	* *Obra Grafica del Taller Westbeth de Neuva York*	Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Mexico City
1971	*Manicalaughter: Ten One Man Shows*	Westbeth Gallery, New York
1970	* *An Inaugural Exhibition: Introducing the Visual Artists of Westbeth*	Westbeth, New York
1970	* *40°44'N x 73°59'W: An Evening of New York Scenes*	Westbeth, New York
1969	*Anita Steckel*	Kozmopolitan Gallery, New York
1969	* *Human Concern/ Personal Torment*	The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
1969	* *Inaugural Exhibition*	The Erotic Art Gallery, New York
1968	* *The First International Exhibition of Erotic Art*	Lunds Kunsthall, Lund
1965	* *Contemporary Erotica*	Van Bovenkamp Gallerie, New York
1965	* *65 Self Portraits*	School of Visual Arts, New York
1963	*Mom Art*	Hacker Gallery, New York
1961	*Anita Steckel*	Hacker Gallery, New York

* Selected group exhibitions

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ANITA STECKEL
Ramona Heinlein, “Anita Steckel atWonnerth Dejaco”
Spike Art Magazine, October 11, 2023

By **Ramona Heinlein**
11 October 2023
curated by, Wonnerth Dejaco, Vienna

Anita Steckel at Wonnerth Dejaco

Anita Steckel, *Legal Gender*, 1971, photolithograph, 7.5 cm x 16 cm. All images: © The Estate of Anita Steckel. Courtesy: The Estate of Anita Steckel; Ortuzar Projects, New York; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Dario Lasagni

In Vienna, a presentation of erectile drawings and out-of-scale collages benchmarks the transformation of sexual politics between her heyday and 2023.

These days, Wonnerth Dejaco is full of cock. A fat rooster struts above the New York skyline, penis graffiti adorns one-dollar notes, and female figures rub, suck, and ride on a hand's phallic fingers. "LUST," the solo exhibition of activist, artist, and satirist Anita Steckel (1930–2012), is exactly what oozes from the mixed-media collages, archival material, and drawings on view at the gallery: for sex, for provocation, for tongue-in-cheek – or tongue-on-dick – imagery. Especially memorable are male genitalia drawn on xerox copies of the artist's face, her lips gleefully pursed on an acorn, her wide-open mouth welcoming jizz from four hard, neatly arranged penises. Looking at the raw images, I almost feel the cold glass of the copier and my damp breath on it. The prints are mounted on "well-behaved," crafty wallpaper with flowery ornament, standing in downright silly contrast to the copies' dirty contents and sketchy quality. The message is clear: I don't want flowers, but dick – also exposed in grand museums.

For several years, curator Juliette Desorgues has been working on Steckel's first exhibition in Europe – part of Vienna gallery festival curated by. The artist was integral to the downtown scene in 1960s and 70s New York and, alongside Judith Bernstein, Louise Bourgeois, Joan Semmel, and Hannah Wilke, a member of the "Fight Censorship Group," which resisted the oppression of female sex-positive work. (Steckel co-founded the group following the attempted censorship of her 1972 exhibition "The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics" at Rockland Community College on the grounds of obscenity.) Her work was largely underrepresented in her lifetime, her CV lacking any major solo exhibitions, though attention has recently been revived by shows at Stanford Art Gallery and Hannah Hoffman Gallery, both in Los Angeles.

Steckel's works are joyfully brute, fast, and empowering: Her business card shows the Mona Lisa holding a paint brush, one boob hanging out in front of Manhattan. Female potency's takeover of city space is likewise the main theme of "Giant Women on New York" (c. 1969–74), a major series of drawn-on, collaged, and painted-over photographs. *Empire State* (1974), for instance, depicts a glorious female nude scissoring the phallic building, though "LUST" only shows its preparatory sketch, while unfortunately leaving out altogether the series' more ambivalent and vulnerable works.

The artist examined the phallus not only as an object of pleasure, but also as a patriarchal apparatus. The print *Bring it on* (c. 2004–08), a depicts George W. Bush with a cross over his crotch and is subtitled "macho christianity." The dick-pic'd dollar bills, which were distributed at the opening of "The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics," are overwritten with "Legal Gender," hinting at the pay gap. Steckel's work remains pressingly vital in its questioning of embodied gender's contradictions: What does it mean to desire

the oppressor's body? And how should straight women deal with the contradictions between empowerment and pain? At the same time, and despite Steckel's pioneering historical role, the liberational force and provocative potential of the erect penis seem both worn out and somewhat blind to marginalized positions in sexual politics today. (It should be noted that "Fight Censorship Group" was entirely white, cis-gendered, and heterosexual.)

More interesting perhaps is Desorgues's invitation of two contemporary writers to converse with the show. The air was tense to bursting during Constance Debré's reading from her auto-fiction *Love me Tender* (2021), a powerful self-examination of lesbian desire and motherhood. The novel's protagonist leaves her family and law career, shaves her head, and tattoos "son of a bitch" across her belly, becoming a butch artist who spends her "lonesome cowboy" time writing, swimming, and craving sex. The dissolution of the bourgeois family – the protagonist loses custody for her son on the grounds of "obscenity" – and the evolvement of queerness as a rejection of societal conformity and material security is told without no bra, deodorant, or ornament. Whereas Debré shares Steckel's crude, slap-in-the-face language, artist and political dominatrix Reba Maybury's writing reaches for play to deal with sexuality and challenge the museal space with perversion and desire. Reading from the opening chapter of a forthcoming book, Maybury asks a man in the audience to play a submissive that Mistress Rebecca meets in a bar, charging the gallery event with improvisatory surprise. Her writing is hilarious, but also ironically and sharply critical in its observations, using her practice as a sex worker to infuse art with questions of power relations, labor, and female strength.

The radicality of Debré and Maybury's approaches lies in the relentless dissection of their own experience; like Steckel, they dare to address their political and artistic concerns with "I." Besides founding the "Fight Censorship Group," the puritanical shitstorm caused by her 1972 exhibition prompted the author of "Giant Women" to rework the series, collaging her own face onto the originally anonymous figures. Because what might take more guts than exposing the erect penis? Exposing the living self.

—

"LUST"
Wonnerth Dejaco, Vienna
8 Sep – 14 Oct 2023

RAMONA HEINLEIN is an art historian, editor and writer living in Vienna.