Exhibitions that focus upon artworks created in previous decades are, by their nature, retrospective. But retrospectives can have different modes: some are biographical, for example, while some, like "The Deconstructive Impulse," are revisionist. As Helaine Posner argues in the introductory essay of the exhibition’s catalog, the so-called deconstructive art created by North American female artists in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s should not be considered—as it often has been in the past—part of a move toward theory-heavy yet gender-neutral (or even post-gender) postmodernist art making. Rather, it should be considered skillfully investigative of the way gender power imbalances were expressed in the media, the museum, and the domestic sphere.

Building upon Posner’s assertions, Nancy Princenthal’s essay provides an overview of the themes to which the artists applied their deconstructive approach, such as the external construction of the self and the visual conventions employed across the news and fashion media. Tom McDonough focuses upon two artists, Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman, in order to explore what he considers an especially effective deconstructive stance: a subversive acceptance of, rather than resistance to, reification. Kristine Stiles describes the various ways in which numerous female artists, in adopting the domestic sphere as a locus of inquiry, drew attention to its jointly oppressive and empowering potentials. And, finally, Griselda Pollock discusses how artists, including Mary Kelly, Silvia Kolbowski, and Dara Birnbaum, activated the particularly potent relationship that exists among psychoanalysis, feminism, and aesthetics.

What is most compelling about these essays is their attempt (successful, in this reviewer’s opinion) to provide a new, separate space for a group of artists within an already well documented historical moment. The authors reference earlier feminist artwork but are focused upon giving this slightly later body of work a discrete, refreshed consideration. In revisiting the writings of contemporary critics and theorists such as Craig Owens, Jacqueline Rose, and Rosalind Krauss, the authors, themselves accomplished critics and theorists, return to the source, rereading and highlighting the critical context within which the artists worked and to which they actively contributed.

The catalog is not a particularly easy read, despite its clean and appealing design and clear organization—and the artworks included in the exhibition (some of which are illustrated in the high-quality plates included at the rear of the volume) are for the most part already included in other catalogs and monographs—but the critical context in which the artworks are considered is original. It is a necessary purchase for an academic or research library environment.

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