

## **Cunt: A Revolutionary Act of Feminist Art**

The art installation, "Cunt," and its conception reflect my perception of the world within the context of feminism. The process of creating it was both an expression of my ideas informed by this perception, and an act of political and artistic rebellion. My goals in creating "Cunt" are to share my point of view with others in hope that it will inspire social change within their own lives, families and communities.

Our ideas are shaped by our perception of the world around us. I am a woman who does not fit into the assigned gender roles of my culture. I see everything in terms of gender, power, sexism, feminism, and women's sphere. One of my earliest memories is of Thanksgiving dinner at my maternal grandparent's house. After dinner, the women and girls cleared the dirty dishes and carried them off to the kitchen. The men huddled around the television for the football game, shouting their orders for beers into the busy kitchen. The boys followed accordingly and placed their orders for soda and milk. I was dragged into the kitchen and given a dishtowel. The room started spinning and something inside me snapped. I loved football. I sure didn't want to have to stand drying dishes and listening to my cousins croon over pukey boys. My brother didn't have to endure such torture. He got to watch the game and drink soda; he didn't even like football. So I protested loudly. I said something like, "I am being oppressed. I will not wash the dishes unless the boys also have to. I want to drink soda and watch the Vikings. This is sexist and unfair." I don't think I even had a clear idea of what oppression or sexism was, but I knew something was seriously wrong with the situation. My mother

gave me the look, and pulled me aside, “This is the way things are. You don’t have to like it, but you will accept it. You are ruining Thanksgiving. Besides, your brother is too young to do dishes.” She was right. I did ruin Thanksgiving, but my brother was not too young to help clean up and neither were my father, grandfather, uncles or male cousins. So I made it my mission thereafter to repeat this scene at every family gathering until justice prevailed. Sadly, my first attempts at challenging the patriarchy ended in disappointment. Nothing changed, except that they stopped asking me to help with the dishes.

This same paradigm has followed me throughout my life. The scene, the characters and the lines change slightly, but the story is the same. So accordingly, it seemed this project had to deal with women’s issues. I wanted to work on something I really cared about, women and the feminist movement. Deciding the topic was automatic, but finding my focus was extremely difficult. I originally wanted to comment on feminism from the second wave of my mother’s generation to the present using art and performance art. However, I took a well-learned lesson from The Beach Boy’s Brian Wilson, who lost his mind trying to encompass the entire world on his “Smile” album.<sup>1</sup>

Instead of trying to comment on all of feminism from 1960 to the present, I decided to look for the source of the oppression I perceive in society today, and make that my focus. This is no easy task. History is filtered through historians who have personal agendas and who perceive things differently than I do.<sup>2</sup> However, I was confident there had been a time in history when women were beautifully empowered, and that something

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson, Brian, Wouldn’t It Be Nice: My Own Story, New York: Harper Collins, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Compare Howard Zinn’s “A People’s History of the United States” with standard high school and college U.S. History textbooks.

had changed that. I started searching for an answer. I found two books of paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe that made me think about women, beauty, and cunts.<sup>3</sup> It was a powerful feeling, and I wondered if there was so much power in admiring her work and the beauty of women, if there was also a great deal of power that can come from devaluing these same things. I started thinking about the reasons why people subjugate others, and about the power that comes from claiming authority and taking back what has always been ours. That is why I like O'Keefe. That, is the kind of art I wanted to create.

Around this same time, I read the book Cunt: A Declaration of Independence, by Inga Muscio.<sup>4</sup> I began to see cunts as animate beings in their own right. I learned that Cunts and the Catholic Church had a long and painful history of fear, hatred, misunderstanding and violence. The term cunt, according to Muscio, comes from many ancient words, which were titles of esteem given to spiritually empowered women. The Church feared these women, and actively participated in the execution of many Cunts and similarly esteemed Whores and Witches. It often benefited financially from the persecution of these women. Their elimination, especially during the Inquisition, solidified the church's authority, wealth and power.<sup>5</sup> I imagined the stories of all those women. What would it mean to acknowledge how they lived, and why they died? I wanted to create a cathedral to honor them. I wanted to take back the word cunt. This was the beginning of the idea for the installation.

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<sup>3</sup> Arrowsmith, Alexandra, and Thomas West, eds, Two Lives: Georgia O'Keeffe & Alfred Stieglitz; A Conversation in Painting and Photographs, New York: Callaway Editions, 1992.  
Castro, Jan Garden, The Art and Life of Georgia O'Keeffe, New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Muscio, Inga. Cunt: A Declaration of Independence. New York: Seal Press, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Muscio.

From this idea came new perception of the world. I started seeing not only how women are oppressed, but also how cunts are oppressed. I came to the conclusion that the source of many problems faced by women in western culture can be found in an institutionalized hatred and misunderstanding of their bodies.<sup>6</sup> No one ever told my girlfriends and me how great our cunts are. I bled, threw up every month and had violent cramps that kept me benched from too many important basketball games. I was told that this was my curse for being evil and for Eve eating that damn apple. I was told a lot of things about my cunt by doctors and teachers who insisted on calling my cunt a vagina or worse, a bottom. The word vagina, incidentally, comes from a term meaning a scabbard or sheath for a sword.<sup>7</sup> I believed it all, all of it that is, except for the part about shaving. I was smart enough to know there was something fascist and wrong with putting a razor anywhere near my cunt. However, many women I know happily buy into that. There is a whole hygiene industry devoted to making cunts smell less like cunts and more like Lysol, selling chemically treated cotton that causes increased hemorrhaging and increased need to purchase more chemically treated cotton, and a wide variety of other Inquisition-style cunt torture methods. Suddenly everywhere I looked I saw them, companies telling me I'm dirty and that they can make me clean. If their advertisers were honest, the slogans would read, "Baptize your cunt in chemicals to keep that handsome man coming." I wasn't buying what they were selling. To make matters worse, not only are women

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<sup>6</sup> Many feminists argue that the media, and mainstream society create unhealthy standards for the physical appearance of women. There is a lot of discussion related to this topic, and nearly all of the books in the bibliography touch on this topic. During the creation of this project, I came to the conclusion that this hatred is not only an extremely important issue, but it is at the center of the sexism and oppression that women currently face.

<sup>7</sup> From a forward by Betty Dodson to Muscio's book, "Cunt: A Declaration of Independence."

completely alienated from their own cunts, but there is also a lot of misconception about the purpose of cunts.

My artist statement for “Cunt,” is “I have no vagina.” That roughly translates as, “I have no sheath for a sword.” Cunts, especially in the eyes of the Catholic Church, are often seen only as a means for reproduction, and for male pleasure. Most people would not agree with this statement, but to varying degrees, they actively uphold the belief that cunts are for men and babies, and not just for cunt’s sake. Interestingly, the word vagina comes from a term that describes only the birthing canal and does not include the clitoris.<sup>8</sup> Under the same kind of church mandated morality, sex education in my high school completely omitted the clitoris. “Cunt” tries to remedy this omission to illustrate that while functionally cunts are the entrance into this world for every human being, there is no obligation on the part of the cunt to serve as that entrance. More importantly, the installation serves to remind people that the clitoris is a very important part of the cunt, and should not be omitted.

It is important to note that not only is misunderstanding and fear of cunts unhealthy for both women and men, but these feelings are intimately connected to the power struggle between men and women. Feminists argue that there must be equality between the sexes if we are ever to have loving, healthy communities, but complete equality can never be achieved as long as women are solely responsible for giving birth to children. There cannot be complete equality because we are anatomically different. Women have cunts. Some cunts have babies. It is important to note that not all women are born with cunts and not all men are born with penises, and that this installation warmly embraces members of the transsexual and transgender community. Regardless,

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<sup>8</sup> Also from Dodson’s forward to Muscio’s book.

all people enter this world through cunts and only women possess this incredible power, and wherever there is power, there is the possibility for conflict. Women carry civilization in their bodies. Men do not. Without cunts, we ultimately cease to exist. This is not to say that women are superior or inferior to men, or that this is a burden or an honor. That is up to the individual woman to decide. The important part is that it is undeniable that only women give birth. Had Freud been able to perceive the world through my eyes he would have called this “Womb Envy.” To create social change, and to actively pursue feminist goals, we must begin at the source. We must begin to see cunts differently. That is how “Cunt” was conceived.

The more I thought about the feminist movement, and how it had influenced my life, the more I realized how much my ideas had changed over the years. I used to think that feminism meant eschewing anything feminine. No dishes. No makeup. No Barbie. No sewing. No baking. No pink frilly anything. I grew up with a hatred of anything girly. I saw feminine as weak. Instead of learning the finer points of eyeliner, I played football in dirty jeans. I was aggressive. I was assertive. And I was smart, smart enough finally come to the realization that I had a conflict of interests.

I was a girl. I was born with a cunt. Still, I hated everything girly. I desperately wanted to be a boy, not because I felt like a boy. There was no gender confusion for me. There was only confusion over the roles I was supposed to fulfill. I saw masculine as powerful, intelligent and superior. I actively made masculinity the standard that I strove for, but that is not a realistic or healthy model of feminism. Making men the standard is part of the problem, not the solution. I no longer love football. I do have a new fondness for the color pink after this project. Like the color pink, many other things in our culture

are feminized. In a simple mathematical equation, feminine things are usually given less value than masculine things. These feminized objects are stripped of their intrinsic value and reassigned values based on socially constructed ideas of gender and worth. How many girls equal one boy? A large part of this installation is about reclaiming things that are devalued as feminine and weak by our society.

Sewing has long been viewed as feminine, as a women's activity. As with most women artists and their work, sewing is highly undervalued. It is disrespected as a method of production, and often marginalized within the art community along with other traditionally feminized art forms. The Industrial Revolution and the ability to mass produce clothing and other sewn items further decreased their value. The right to sew as a form of self-expression and political protest became a central part of creating "Cunt."

In the process of making the installation, I felt it was important that the media and production methods I chose reflect my goals. Sewing is an activity that I scorned as a young feminist. I wrote it off as a weak, feminized activity that involved little skill or mental activity, busywork that was used to keep women entertained and out of the way. I had never sewn before creating this installation, so it was a difficult task to undertake. I was most terrified by the thought that I was somehow betraying my feminist ideals. After working on this project, I came to the conclusion that I do love to sew, but not because I have to. Feminism should never have been a list of dos and don'ts in my life. It is limiting, ridiculous, and destructive to assign genders to colors, toys, activities, sports or anything else. Being a feminist simply means that I can do whatever I chose to do.

Another important thing I learned in this process, is that sewing is not easy, and I had been greatly underestimating its value. It is very comparable to carpentry. There is a

lot of math and three-dimensional imaging involved. My grandfather built houses for a living, and my grandmother sewed the family's clothing. He made money at his trade, but she worked for free. Before I started this project I would have had a hard time arguing that her work was as valuable as his, but I know now that sewing takes a great deal of skill, patience, creativity, and intelligence. It is only seen as less valuable because it is also seen as "women's work." It was important to use sewing as the main means of production for "Cunt," to give value to the things we devalue, namely women's work, sewing, cunts, and all things labeled "pink."

None of the fabric used for the installation was purchased new. All of it is second hand, and most of it was donated. I chose not to use new fabric, because it was very important to me that none of the materials used in "Cunt" came from sweatshop labor. Sweatshop labor has always been primarily provided by women and children in impoverished, and developing countries. Their labor is not given the value it should be given, and I did not want to support that kind of business. Used fabric also decreased my dependence on corporations and our system of capitalism, which for the most part, does not always have women's issues in mind as was discussed earlier. Yet another reason for working with primarily used and free materials was to show that while the feminist movement is largely seen as a middle-class movement, you don't need a lot of money to create revolutionary art. Finally, re-used fabric was important for environmental reasons. I did not want to support further destruction of the earth, which is feminized and often treated accordingly. It is also interesting to point out that while some of it the fabric comes from women's and men's clothing, most of it is from left over from people's



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sewing projects. It is a patchwork cunt that represents the work of a very large community of artists whose work that goes largely unnoticed.

Another part of the process was using different fabrics to represent diversity among women. I used many different combinations of colors and textures. I felt this was important, because feminism is often accused of being highly elitist, predominately middle-class and white. Feminists are frequently charged with barring entrance to poor and minority women, and of striving for policies that benefit and affect only middle-class, white women. Additionally, I wanted to create this diversity of colors and fabrics in the installation because the images of women that we see in the media every day are very homogenous. The colors and textures are representative of the idea that no two women are the same, i.e. no two cunts are the same.

The design of “Cunt” is strongly influenced by my goal of symbolically reclaiming cunt power from the Church. It is intended to be a cathedral to honor Cunts, The ceiling is designed to recreate the look of stained glass. It is also made to be at a height that makes it impossible to stand up in the cunt. You have to kneel down and crawl to go inside. The act of bowing is a common way of showing respect and reverence in our culture, especially in churches. The design was also influenced by my desire to have the viewer participate in the process. They are invited to come inside the art, and are a very vital part of the installation. Hopefully, they will emerge with many new ideas and questions about cunts. It is a symbolic rebirth into a whole new way of thinking.

The process of making this installation also reflected the process of creating healthy, cunt-loving environments. Sewing was a solitary endeavor, many of the ideas



presented in this paper came out of long hours crouched over the hum of my mother's sewing machine. It was a very meditative process. I had lots of time for reflection and meditation. However, it could not have been created entirely on my own. The first sewing machine I used belongs to my mother. It broke midway through the project and the repairman proved to be of little help. So, I had to borrow another machine from a friend. This same friend offered me the gallery space to hang the installation. She assured me that painting an entire gallery pink was a good idea, and helped by painting the spaces that I could not reach. She also provided a few extra hands to help install the show.

My primary goal for this project was to create an environment that encourages thought about women, feminism, and cunts. I wanted to make people see the word cunt and its anatomical equivalent differently. The idea of simply writing a paper lacked a dimension and creativity; it did not interest me. I wanted something people could touch. It is very important to me that people can participate, be active and take part in the process. "Cunt" is designed so that people can experience the art on many different levels. They can look at it, touch it, wrap up inside of it and hopefully they will come away with a feeling of empowerment.

"Cunt" is an act of rebellion, and it is also a rebirth. Following the example of my childhood protest over dishes, I wanted the project to be activist in nature. However, I wanted it to diverge from that first act of anti-climatic rebellion and create some kind of change in the community. Through talking with people during the process of creating this installation, the word cunt is already being used to empower both men and women in the communities of Bemidji, Duluth and Minneapolis. It has spread four

or more generations from me out into the world, and that is just from talking with people about the project. I hope the installation can create more waves. There is so much power in reclaiming a word that has been in the wrong hands for too many centuries. “Cunt” is an example of the kinds of spaces we can create simply by opening our mouths and saying, shouting, yelling, screeching, bellowing, singing, chanting the word cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt. That is a revolutionary act of gender redefinition.

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I have no vagina.

VAGINA

CUNT