Title
The World Above the Water Line: From the 1960s to New York City’s A.I.R. Gallery

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This presentation examines the feminist historical happenings of the 1960s and how they led to the creation of New York City’s A.I.R. Gallery. Founded in 1972 by multi-media artist Susan Williams and sculptor Barbara Zucker, A.I.R. is the first artist-run, not-for-profit gallery for women artists in the United States. [SLIDE] Enlivened by the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 60s, members of the art world began publicly protesting the paucity of work by women artists in museum exhibitions and permanent collections; however, women were still being denied access to the commercial gallery system. This absence from the gallery world perpetuated the fictive (and gender biased) belief that somehow work by women was of lesser quality than work by men. A.I.R. Gallery was conceptualized out of this frustration.

[SLIDE] In 1971, Williams and Zucker decided to proactively build their own women’s cooperative. The artists met during the summer of 1963 and soon became close friends and art colleagues. Most significant to this discussion of feminism, they both were involved in consciousness-raising groups together. Zucker explains that A.I.R. was a natural extension of this feminist engagement. [SLIDE] Toward the end of 1971, they broadened their fledgling co-op to include artists Dotty Attie, Maude Boltz, Mary Grigoriadis and Nancy Spero. The original two founders came across these additional four women through personal connections and
suggestions from Marcia Tucker and Lucy Lippard. After the first six women were decided upon, the remaining 14 were found through studio visits and the Women’s Slide Registry.

[SLIDE] Before investigating how and why these early women artists joined A.I.R., it is critical to consider the climate for women artists in the 60s. A.I.R. was conceptualized in the early 70s in New York at and because of a particular historical moment. In order to fully understand the gallery’s significance to the art world and to feminism, we must first acclimate ourselves to the 1960s in order to understand why A.I.R. was founded at the exact moment that it was.

In 1953, 10 years before the historically significant publication of Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, Hugh Hefner released his first issue of *Playboy Magazine*. The magazine disseminated, and continues to disseminate, images of female perfection and passivity to a community primarily comprised of desirous men. If we regard images from *Playboy* as mirroring the stereotype of the ideal woman-of-the-day, then the illustrations Alberto Vargas made for the magazine during the 60s can be seen as typifying societal expectations for women during the decade.

[SLIDE] In Vargas’ *Peace Sign*, for example, a woman is shown nude, with an enticingly voluptuous figure, lying on her back. Her legs are splayed open and a caption to the left of her body reads: “you make your peace sign, I’ll make mine.” A blatant reference to the Vietnam War, this image presents viewers with a woman who is neither politically engaged nor socially conscious, but, rather, passively displayed and sexually available. That she references a peace sign at all suggests she is not ignorant of the Vietnam War. Rather, her distinction between “your” peace sign—the male peace sign—and “mine”—the female peace sign—implies a conscious choice to equate political activism with a masculine agenda and political apathy and unabashed sexuality with a female.

Published in *Playboy*, Vargas’ illustrations of women were primarily seen by a male audience. Therefore, the messages they communicate about the “ideal” woman can be regarded as masculinized fantasies
separate from female reality. However, advertisements in Good Housekeeping Magazine, primarily read by women, do not present the sex in any less stereotypical a light. [SLIDE] For example, in an advertisement for Hotpoint refrigerators published in Good Housekeeping in 1960, an elegantly dressed housewife is shown removing food from a refrigerator fully-stocked with nutritious foods and juices. Her face is demurely down-turned; she wears a green dress with green pumps and is standing in her kitchen in front of green cabinets. That her dress is the same color as the kitchen cabinets creates a visual connector between her gendered body and the domestic commodification of the kitchen and its accoutrements. Eerily reminiscent of the protagonist in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s The Yellow Wallpaper, the woman in this advertisement seems to emerge from the green cabinets behind her, seems to be a physical extension of her domestic environment. [SLIDE] Seen together, these advertisements released in the late 50s and 60s—targeted for both men and women—position women as submissive, inextricably tied to the domestic space and primarily concerned with the needs, sexual and otherwise, of their husbands.

In 1969, while Vargas was still perpetuating his destructive images of women in Playboy, the Whitney Museum included a shockingly scant number of women in its Biennial Exhibition. In the nine Biennials, 1960-1968, before this exhibition, an average 10% of the artists shown were women. Out of 143 artists shown in the 1969 biennial, however, only seven of them—5%—were women. With women artists being passed over for museum exhibitions, like the Whitney Biennial, and with the dissemination of stereotypical, unrealistic images of their subservience to men, like those by Vargas, how would women ever recover?

The near invisibility of women in the art world at this moment made many feel discouraged, even dispensable. [SLIDE] Zucker, for one, personally struggled with these insecurities. During the late 60s Zucker showed in group exhibitions at commercial galleries but never received a solo show. The artist worked for curator Eugene Goosen, artists Helen Frankenthaler and Robert Motherwell and critic Clement Greenberg; she was incredibly well connected to the pulse of the contemporary art world. However, the sculptor’s high-profile
contacts did not amount to much since, as she explains, “I didn’t know how to put myself forward as an artist, only as an object. Pathetic.” Zucker elaborates on this fragile emotional state, saying she was “too shy too scared too repressed too ashamed” to attempt to improve her professional situation. Furthermore, the male artists she did associate with had more unsavory intentions than those a professional mentor should. Frankly stated, Zucker explains that these artists “wanted to get into my pants but rarely into my mind.”

Reflecting on her emotional and professional situation during the late 60s, Zucker blames herself for not knowing how to ask for help. Although the artist would learn in the early 70s how to channel her anger into a “useful tool” through consciousness-raising groups and through A.I.R., she, to this day, has not been able to shake the fear of being lesser, of being culpable for her gender “failures”, entirely.

[SLIDE] Early member Maude Boltz experienced a similar sense of feeling lesser and unworthy during the 60s. In the late 60s, Boltz lived in Pennsylvania with her then husband, also an artist. He would meet with fellow artist friends, including Robert Mangold, to talk about popular artistic trends. Boltz was never invited to participate in these gatherings, in this “secret club” as she calls it. Although her husband had several artist contacts, Boltz was more interested in advancing her partner’s work over her own. In fact, Paula Cooper offered Boltz a solo-show at her gallery but the artist turned it down for fear of overshadowing her husband. Unfortunately, Boltz’s husband shared this desire to champion his career over hers and asked Boltz for a divorce the day critic Kasper Koenig complemented her work before even noticing his.

After the separation Boltz moved to New York and began teaching at Parsons and Cooper Union. Although Boltz did participate in group-shows abroad at this time, she was still unsatisfied with the essential invisibility of her work, of work by women in general, in the art world. As a proactive gesture against this invisibility Boltz submitted slides of her metal sculptures to the registry. Lippard was so impressed with these images that she scheduled an appointment to meet with Boltz at her studio. However, when the critic arrived at the artist’s loft, Boltz had no work to show and was so overwhelmed that she could not even get out of her
chair. Unfortunately, Boltz had internalized all of those years of being negated by her husband since, when faced with an opportunity to show work to the premier women’s art critic, the artist could not bring herself to speak. Boltz recalls Lippard’s confusion that there was no work to review and no vocal artist to speak with, so she soon left the loft. Recounting the story, she remembers being “embarrassed and devastated.” Before joining A.I.R. in ‘72, Boltz was left demoralized, under-confident and self-deprecating by her personal experiences in the 60s.

[SLIDE] Early member Dotty Attie similarly experienced professional disappointment in the 60s. After graduating from art school in 1961, Attie remembers being dissatisfied with the lack of gallery representation for women. Although she showed in one group and one solo exhibition in ‘65, Attie decided to reroute her attention from her career to her family. The artist soon had two sons and decided to put her career on hold for the remainder of the 60s. In the early 70s, however, Attie joined consciousness-raising groups that reactivated her feminist engagement. This engagement soon transitioned to Attie’s desire to focus once again on her career and start exhibiting her work.

A family friend knew that Zucker and Williams were establishing an all-female co-op and suggested Attie contact them to join the project. Zucker soon visited Attie’s studio to review her work. Although Zucker critiqued it favorably, Attie recalls her having reservations that the work was representational. This anecdote is interesting to consider since so much of the feminist art aesthetic during the 1970s was dedicated to a reclamation of the body. Feminist artists celebrated didactic, representational work since it often functioned as an expression of their gendered identities. Zucker’s fear that Attie’s work was figural, therefore overtly gendered, is a product of the 60s sentiment that women’s art aesthetic should be abstract in order to make their sex invisible.

Once the six core A.I.R. members—Zucker, Williams, Spero, Grigoriadis, Attie and Boltz—were decided upon, they searched the Women’s Slide Registry for additional artists tobolter their ambitious project.
The committee considered the 200 artists in the registry and of those 200, made 60 studio visits. Selection was not based on any particular curatorial agenda—in fact the committee was not even looking for work that necessarily subscribed to an overtly feminist interpretation. Artists were selected based, simply, on the exceptional quality of their work. Not surprisingly, several women who were invited to join A.I.R. declined out of the anxiety that, if represented by a female co-op, that their work would be ghettoized as exclusively gender-themed. [Slide] Helen Frankenthaler, who never explicitly aligned herself with the feminist movement, was one such woman. Interestingly, Louise Bourgeois was denied invitation by A.I.R. since members were concerned that her age might prevent her from executing necessary gallery maintenance and Carolee Schneemann always hoped to join but could never seem to afford the $21-monthly membership dues.

[SLIDE] The first gallery meeting was held at Williams’ apartment. Each artist brought slides of her work and Williams and Zucker coordinated a presentation of everyone’s slides so the collective could see the work of their new colleagues. Boltz remembers nearly fainting after seeing the slide show out of a mixture of pride, excitement and relief. In a 1997 panel on A.I.R.’s early years, Zucker described her reaction to the presentation: “it was so moving to see that work, to realize how many of us there were—like the first time I’d snorkeled, thinking the world existed above the water line. Then I looked under the sea and saw that world was at least as big as the one on top.”

The next task was renovating the SoHo space on Wooster Street that was formerly a machine shop. [SLIDE] Although the husbands of Grigoriadis and Agnes Denes helped with some of the heavy lifting, the rest of the renovations were performed by the A.I.R. women themselves. And these renovations were certainly plentiful. The space had peeling plaster and warped floors, rusting pipes and defunct radiators. Luckily, members Patsy Norvell and Laurace James knew carpentry and taught the others to build walls and do electrical wiring. Denes spent the summer refinishing the floor that she laid herself. In the 1997 panel, one member recalls a male friend announcing sarcastically: “I can’t wait for the gallery to open, to come and see
how you girls made your walls.” But make them they did. Of all of the early A.I.R. accomplishments, Grigoriadis sites the space renovation as the most significant among them.

By April of that year, the only task left was finding the perfect name to call the gallery. [SLIDE] Grigoriadis diligently recorded all of the A.I.R. meeting minutes—including the gallery name suggestions—and has preserved the original journal in which she recorded them. It is amusing to note some of the particularly unsuccessful suggestions offered by members, including: Yes!, Poetry and Spring, Quality and Bearded Lady. Perhaps foreshadowing the cunt artists’ re-appropriation of the body, member Judith Bernstein suggested the gallery be called T.W.A.T. (Twenty Women Artists Together). This suggestion was quickly rejected.

A.I.R., decided upon unanimously, is an acronym for “Artists in Residence” and was initially suggested by member Howardena Pindell in part as homage to Jane Eyre. Pindell thought the association between the gallery and Charlotte Bronte was an appropriate one since both the writer and the cooperative of artists endured significant creative setbacks as a result of their shared “undesirable” sex.

[Slide] A.I.R. was conceptualized out of the climate of the 1960s where women were fiercely objectified and professionally overlooked. The experiences of early members Zucker, Boltz and Attie all function as testimonials to both the stifling conditions for women artists at this time and the desperate need for a gendered safe space like A.I.R. The gallery came into fruition at the precise moment that it did in reaction to 1960s phenomena, like the Vargas girls and the 5% women included in the ‘69 Whitney Biennial.

Using the Whitney as a microcosm for the New York art world, A.I.R.’s inception quickly changed women’s professional visibility in other galleries and museums. In the Whitney Biennial of 1972, the same year of A.I.R.’s opening, 135 artists were exhibited. Of these artists, 35 were women—three of whom were A.I.R. members. This 27% women shown is markedly improved from the 5% in ’69. Furthermore, in the ‘73 Biennial, 61 of the 228 artists shown were women, two of whom, including Grigoriadis, were from A.I.R. As
Grigoriadis reflects, the early 70s became “an auspicious moment” to challenge women’s roles, take consciousness-raising groups to an even more productive place and claim a professional position for women in the art world. Luckily the art world was ready.

Thank you.