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## Guest Post: More Joy, Less Shame The Heretics by Kate Dailey

by [Melissa Silverstein](#) on June 9, 2010

in [Documentary, Lesbian, Women Directors](#)

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*Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* — the independent art and political magazine published from 1977 to 1992 — was a work born of conflict. It was war on paper, crashing an establishment hostile to women artists; featuring images so provocative the publisher refused to print them; exposing the injustices of indigenous art produced by women in slave-like conditions; pissing off both the industry and its own staff members in its quest to be truthful, equitable, and bold.

*The Heretics* — a documentary about the history of the group created by Joan Braderman, a former member — is a work born of joy. Those decades old struggles are now tinged with laughter: they laugh at Mark Rothko telling one woman she pains like a man. They laugh about the fights they had over the magazine's name (one hated "Pink" so much she threatened to quit the group), they laugh about the battles they had with publishers and critics and gallery owners, about getting older, getting married, finding success and going online. *Heresies* is probably one of the most uplifting and warm-hearted films about inequity and political strife, and it makes one want start a women's consciousness raising group while learning to crochet.

The product of a feminist art collective, created by women frustrated with their lack of access and authority in the art world, *Heresies* included early works from writers like Barbara Ehrenreich and B. Ruby Rich, artwork from greats like [Ida Applebroog](#) and [Janet Froelich](#), former creative director for the *New York Times*, now at *Real Simple*. While a core group of women made up the early years, each issue had a different group of editors and a different theme, style, and tone: The Lesbian issue, the Great Goddess issue, the Class issue, the Film issue...

The magazine's issue on decorative arts — work traditionally done by women and, to that point seriously undervalued, helped usher in a critical appreciation of that medium, while exposing some of the unfair working conditions that sometimes accompanied them. Most importantly, *Heresies* gave women confidence and experience and awareness; it helped them shape their careers and find their voices. (Froelich, who came up with the iconic image of the Twin Towers as [two beams of light](#), says that designing *Heresies* helped her overcome the prejudices held by herself and others about commercial art).

Braderman is both a documentarian and a video artist, and her movie is filled with over 40 different types of techniques and film effects, the result being a rambling, ebullient, pastiche. The most impressive shots, however, are the simplest: warm, convivial interviews with the women who started *Heresies* and worked on it over the years. It's almost a transgressive act to film a woman of a certain age with the tight shots Braderman uses on her friends, and one can't help but notice how lovely these women look, aglow with their passion, pride, and memories. Considering this is a film about the politics of aesthetics, however, one also questions the impulse to dwell on that detail.

But *The Heretics* is a boomer movie as much as it's a feminist movie, and it draws dangerously close to the "kids these days" moralizing that's so divisive in any phenomenon, political movement or philosophy that's existed for more than a single generation. The titular heretics wistfully say that women these days don't understand, that no one wants to call herself a feminist anymore, that women were more committed back when they were in charge — forgetting, perhaps, that many of their own

discovered to feminism literally by accident, so rarely did women identify as such, and that while the women of *Heresies* may have been deeply committed, that commitment was forged in reaction to an unforgiving and apathetic culture where neither men nor women cared much for the politics of inclusion.

Braderman's film recovers from this [common fallacy](#) by interviewing some of the young women behind [L.T.T.R.](#), a modern feminist genderqueer art collective, and filling the screen with the URLs for blogs like [Feministing](#) and [The Angry Black Woman](#) – in other words, highlighting the works of young women who innovate, create, debate and argue, who speak out against privilege, who make something big and bold with very little resources, women much like the original Heretics profiled in the film. (Braderman's phenomenal, [comprehensive website for the film](#), which includes a PDF of every single issue of *Heresies*, displays less equanimity. There, Braderman tut-tuts that, "Young women imagine that "choice" means not just choice on the market but freedom to choose how to live – that combining full-time work and having children is effortless; that women have gained equality in the public sphere and that only merit determines one's progress". It's too bad that the site doesn't have the same links to current feminist websites included in the film, links which would direct the reader to a plethora of smart spaces where no one thinks that having it all is easy and which demonstrate just some of diversity of young women's imagination).

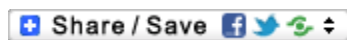
But after watching *Heretics*, it's easy to see why Braderman and her compatriots might feel discouraged: they set out to change the world. Their success was impressive – many critics believe that the feminist movement was the twentieth century's most influential force in modern American art – but for these women, it was never just about art. Their unbridled enthusiasm, their adamant belief that they would revolutionize politics, culture, society, sex, gender, race, and class, the thrill that came with creating something new and different propels every frame of this movie. After all those years, all that strife, and all that joy, it must be hard to understand why the world continues to be a hostile place for women; why they created something big and bold and wonderful, but the war still rages on. Film was seen at a screening @92YTribeca. *DVDs of The Heretics are on sale at [Women Make Movies](#). It's screening at [Newfest](#), New York City's LGBT film festival, on June 10th.*

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