

Cite this article: Lesley Shipley, review of *Against Our Will: Sexual Trauma in American Art Since 1970*, by Vivien Green Fryd, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2020), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.10003>.

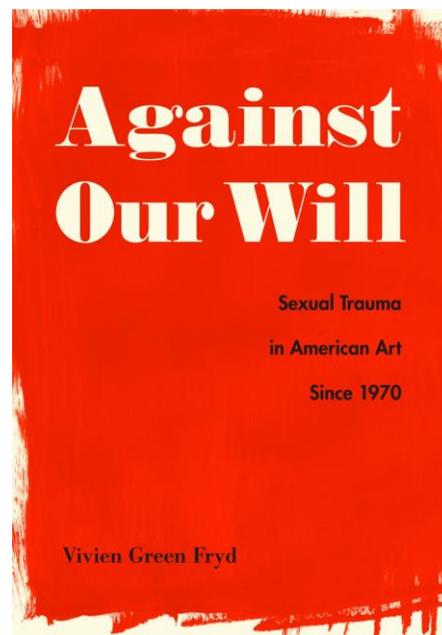
Against Our Will: Sexual Trauma in American Art Since 1970

Vivien Green Fryd

University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press,
2019; 368 pp.; 29 color illus.; 65 b/w illus.; Hardcover:
\$49.95 (ISBN: 9780271082066)

Reviewed by: Lesley Shipley, Assistant Professor of Art
History, Randolph College

Included in the introduction to Vivien Green Fryd's new book, *Against Our Will: Sexual Trauma in American Art Since 1970*, is a reply the author received in response to a query she posted on an academic listserv, one that in my view reflects both the necessity of her project and its originality as a work of scholarship. While in the early stage of research into the topic of sexual violence in art, Fryd asked members of the listserv for suggestions of artists who have addressed rape or sexual trauma in their work. One person responded with what reads as dismay: "What has art history come to that you would want to write about a topic like this?" (8). While such a comment may seem myopic in the current climate of #MeToo, Fryd makes clear that this reply was not an isolated incident. She writes, "Although some agree that the project is long overdue, a number of my interlocutors, whether art historians, scholars in other fields, or non-academics, have expressed surprise and sometimes distress over what they perceive to be an unusual and disturbing scholarly endeavor" (8). The fact that Fryd started working on this book nearly sixteen years ago, and that it was published within just months of Nancy Princenthal's book, *Unspeakable Acts: Women, Art, and Sexual Violence in the 1970s* (Thames & Hudson, 2019), reveals the urgency of the subject of art and sexual violence, as well as its demands (both scholarly and emotional) on those who confront it. Instead of asking, "What has art history come to?" we might look to Fryd and the artists at the center of her book to help us re-envision the role that art can play in the current #MeToo movement and other efforts to raise awareness of the pervasiveness of rape and incest within American culture. Indeed, anyone committed to social justice as an artistic and scholarly endeavor will find much to learn from Fryd's methodology and, perhaps most importantly, from her voice as a scholar and a survivor of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although she does not mention socially engaged art history as it has emerged within the last decade or so, I would argue that Fryd's book is instructive for art historians interested in using scholarship as a form of activism.¹ In her detailed historical analysis of feminist art that addresses sexual violence, Fryd urges us to



take seriously the impact of all forms of sexual violence on our society, while encouraging us to consider how art might serve as a source for constructive public dialogue and even a catalyst for change.

In addition to sharing her own goals for this project, Fryd begins her book with a brief overview of the scholarship on the subject of rape in art and culture.² She situates her analysis of art and sexual violence within a feminist art historical framework, beginning with feminist art historians' critique of so-called heroic rape imagery. Heroic rape imagery, Fryd writes, "elided the reality of the physical violation of women in order to produce spectacles of pleasure that also involve pain and forbidden desire" (4). In contrast to this artistic expression of patriarchal violence, the women in Fryd's account (men do contribute to this history, but the majority of the artists in *Against Our Will* are women) challenged, and continue to challenge, idealized representations of rape so familiar to students of Western European art history, such as Nicolas Poussin's *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (c. 1637–38; Louvre) or Titian's *The Rape of Europa* (1560–62; Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum). In contrast to these historical images of submissive white female nudes, feminist artists beginning in the 1970s created work centered on first-person testimony, empowerment, and healing through art. Fryd writes:

[S]uch works of art confront, represent, reenact, and negotiate trauma, an emotionally stressful and catastrophic experience that wounds the body and brain. I contend that artworks, installations, and exhibitions establish repetitive traumatic sites, representations, and stories that surround, involve, and challenge the viewer to witness, acknowledge, and remember sexual trauma. Rather than aestheticize and neutralize this violent subject matter, these artists instead expose it as a traumatizing experience (18).

The title of Fryd's book connects her project directly with the legacy of anti-rape activism, namely the influential 1975 book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* by Susan Brownmiller. A fitting homage to Brownmiller's revolutionary work, Fryd's title links her writing with this early moment in the feminist movement, when feminist activists, including artists, sought to transform the dialogue (or lack thereof) about sexual trauma. A self-disclosed survivor of trauma, Fryd brings both personal and professional experience to bear on her subject. Framing her own project as "strategic agency through scholarship," Fryd takes an interdisciplinary perspective when interpreting this history (27). Like the artists and activists she includes in her account, Fryd seeks to give "voice to the voiceless and make sexual trauma known and knowable" (xv). She writes, "[A]s you read this book, you, too, become a witness, just as I performed the role of a witness in the writing of this book" (27). By weaving together trauma theory, sociological data, and art-historical scholarship, Fryd presents a comprehensive account of the ways in which feminist artists sought to change people's attitudes and beliefs about sexual violence in American society (8).

To account for feminist artists' continued activism centered on sexual violence, Fryd identifies what she calls an "anti-rape and anti-incest cycle" that develops beginning in the 1970s. Fryd defines the anti-rape and anti-incest cycle as a "counternarrative [that] starts and restarts from a beginning without a simple progression or decline, but instead with an 'increased circulation and popularization'"(1).³ According to Fryd, the central aim of the "anti-rape and anti-incest cycle" is to provoke the viewer and facilitate social change, thereby ending the stigma, silence, and pain resulting from sexual trauma. Fryd contends that the "anti-rape and anti-incest cycle" "must be assessed and reassessed so that

politicians, members of the military and church, and the general public may more fully understand the history of the rape crisis movement and the necessity of its application today” (16).⁴ In this way, she aims to show that there was a repeated and intentional effort on the part of feminist artists to help survivors of sexual violence share their stories and end the silence that had rendered rape and incest taboo subjects within public and private discourse.

Feminist artists of the so-called second wave believed in art’s ability to move viewers emotionally, ethically, and politically. They engaged with materials and techniques, such as performance and video, that could provoke the viewer into feelings of empathy and outrage. In Fryd’s account, the “anti-rape and anti-incest cycle” began with early work on sexual violence by Ana Mendieta and Yoko Ono. In particular, Fryd points to Mendieta’s *Rape Scene* (1973) and Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1964; Museum of Modern Art, New York) as initiating a feminist perspective on sexual violence that incorporated the dual elements of witnessing and testimony (to a lesser degree in Ono’s piece) that would become central to feminist art activism that addressed rape and incest. On the West coast, Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, and Leslie Labowitz introduced new forms of feminist activism on sexual violence that today we would call socially engaged art. In projects such as *Three Weeks in May* (1977) and *In Mourning and In Rage* (1977), Lacy and Labowitz employ art for its ability to heal and therefore end the silence that isolates survivors of sexual violence. Their performances, community projects, and protests stand out as some of the first community-engaged projects intended to facilitate public awareness and dialogue on sexual violence.

In chapter two, “Performing the Anti-incest Cycle in the Los Angeles Woman’s Building, 1977–1985,” Fryd introduces readers to the innovative ways in which feminists in Los Angeles used video to raise awareness of the devastating effects of and misconceptions about incest. Between 1979 and 1981, the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles, founded in 1973 by Arlene Raven, Judy Chicago, and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, organized the *Incest Awareness Project*, which included Nancy Angelo’s deeply affecting multi-channel video installation entitled *Equal Time in Equal Space* (November 13, 1980). Using the circular format of a feminist consciousness-raising session, *Equal Time in Equal Space* included six video monitors arranged so that viewers could sit and watch as survivors shared their stories. After watching the videos, viewers could then participate in journal writing and discussions run by counselors trained in the treatment of incest trauma. Fryd provides a powerful analysis of this project, as well as Angelo’s innovative use of the early video format. As she notes, video quickly became one of the most effective ways for artists to deploy survivor testimony and secondary witnessing as a means for social change. Recording survivor’s stories in video served two purposes: first, it enabled a therapeutic process for survivors to end their silence and stigma while fostering community support; and second, it enabled the public to experience first-person testimony within a structured framework that provided support for the general audience, as well, in the form of referrals to support organizations and therapists and the presence of organizers who made themselves visible and available to any audience member needing emotional support (97).

Chapter three, “Faith Ringgold: Quilting the Anti-rape and Anti-incest Cycle, 1972–1986,” shifts the reader’s attention away from collaborative projects to the work of a

single artist, Faith Ringgold, whose story quilts are among the most powerful examples of anti-rape representation. Fryd closely analyzes imagery from Ringgold's twenty-one quilt series called [The Slave Rape Series](#) (1972–1985), arguing that Ringgold presents a compelling counter-narrative to the predatory white, masculine gaze. Combining the format of Tibetan thangkas with painted quilts, a technique for which Ringgold would later become renowned, the series is comprised of paintings that depict a nude black woman in the landscape, running, hiding, or appearing to stand guard while in a position of active looking. Fryd reads Ringgold's anti-rape cycle in relation to what Kaplan calls the "transgenerational trauma" of slavery, noting that Ringgold rejects a white, Western, European art-historical framework that idealized the white female body while hypersexualizing or dehumanizing the black female body (106).

Chapter four, "Recirculating the Anti-rape and Anti-incest Cycle in Exhibitions, 1980–1993," reexamines the criticism that arose in the 1980s concerning what art historian and critic Moira Roth perceived to be feminist artists' retreat from sexual violence as a focus of their activism. Contrary to this criticism, however, Fryd identifies three exhibitions in the 1980s and early 1990s that "circulated and recirculated the anti-rape and anti-incest cycle within their contemporary political contexts" (150). These include *A Decade of Women's Performance Art* at the Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans (1980); *Rape*, the traveling exhibition curated by Susan Brownmiller, Jenny Holzer, and Barbara Kruger for Ohio State University Gallery of Fine Art (1985); and *The Subject of Rape*, organized by participants of the Independent Study Program for the Whitney Museum of American Art (1993). Each of these exhibitions evinced an "activist curatorial practice" that ensured the continuation of the anti-rape and anti-incest cycle within feminist art activism, demonstrating that a so-called retreat never occurred (152).

Chapter five, "Judy Chicago and Donald Woodman: The Anti-rape and Anti-incest Cycle, 2001–2006," focuses on the continuation of the anti-rape and anti-incest cycle into the early 2000s via two projects organized by Judy Chicago and Donald Woodman at Western Kentucky University from 2001 to 2006, and at Vanderbilt University in 2006. The first project, entitled *At Home: A Kentucky Project with Judy Chicago and Donald Woodman*, reenvisioned Chicago's earlier installation, *Womanhouse*, which she co-organized with Miriam Schapiro in 1971 and 1972 during their tenure at the California Institute for the Arts. The 2006 project at Vanderbilt University, on which Fryd collaborated with Chicago and Woodman, was entitled *Evoke/Invoke/Provoke: A Multimedia Project of Discovery* and included work meant to "exorcise" participants' personal experiences with rape and sexual assault (211).

In chapter six, "Kara Walker: Creating a Third-Wave Anti-rape and Anti-incest Cycle in Silhouettes, Videos, and Sculpture Since 1994," Fryd's central argument about the healing effects of the "anti-rape and anti-incest cycle" seems to unravel as she situates Kara Walker's work within this history. Walker's cut-paper silhouettes of sexual violence, deviancy, and racial stereotyping within the context of the antebellum South subverts and calls into question the redemptive aims of some of the earlier feminist artists addressed in the book, artists Fryd claims "deliberately tried to provoke viewers to respond to their visceral images and take action" (27). There is no doubt Walker's work provokes viewers, but their responses to the silhouettes of sadomasochistic antebellum scenarios will be significantly

different from those viewers who experience Suzanne Lacy's socially engaged projects or Faith Ringgold's empowered women in her *Slave Rape* series. In her analysis of Walker's cut-paper silhouettes and her more recent public sculpture, [A Subtlety](#) (2014), Fryd accounts for the difference between Walker's work and that of earlier feminist artists by considering how the concepts of transgenerational trauma and Toni Morrison's term "rememory" (224) may help to elucidate the work's effects. Fryd's analysis of Walker's place within this history of art and sexual violence is worth quoting at length:

Since Walker declines to visualize alternative behaviors and, conversely, repeatedly visualizes the trauma of slavery in her "bits and pieces" of reconstructed and imagined memory, this relenting repetition of horrors as a postmemory is stuck in a closed loop. This implies that no resolution exists. The very continuous looping of her videos establishes the repetition compulsion characteristic of PTSD. Rather than suggesting that testimony can assist in healing trauma (as some West Coast feminists, Ringgold, Clarissa T. Sligh, Lynn Hershman, JoEl Logiudice, and Kate McSpadden imply or explicitly state), Walker instead embodies the hopeless, helpless, terrorizing repetition of trauma that becomes transgenerational because of its continuity in the present (264).

While Fryd's inclusion of Walker's work provides a compelling disruption or complication to the anti-rape and anti-incest cycle, I agree with Coco Fusco's assessment of Fryd's interpretation. Fusco writes, "There doesn't seem to be room in [Fryd's] interpretation to acknowledge that Walker's sardonic approach to historical tragedy has catalyzed discussions about collective memory and our lingering attraction to scenes of subjection."⁵

In the final chapter, "Mapping and Chronicling the Anti-rape and Anti-incest Cycle into the Twenty-First Century," Fryd concludes her historical analysis of the anti-rape and anti-incest cycle in feminist art activism with an assessment of the cycle's enduring legacy in the present. Most notably, Fryd considers Emma Sulkowicz's [Mattress Performance: Carry That Weight](#) (2014–15), an endurance performance in which Sulkowicz carried a twin mattress each day to class in protest against the university's handling of her rape accusation during her sophomore year, for which the man was found not guilty. Fryd examines the circulation and recirculation of Sulkowicz's performance in the form of "collective carries," such as the rally at Columbia University in September 2014 (282). In the context of the feminist art activism presented in her book, Fryd identifies Sulkowicz's project as "a return to the earlier second-wave feminist goal of instigating change." (285).

As one of the most comprehensive histories of feminist art activism, *Against Our Will* should inspire scholars and activists to continue Fryd's investigation into art's potential as a tool for social change. Fryd's application of trauma studies to this material will appeal to an interdisciplinary audience of scholars and students, not only in the field of art history but also in the fields of trauma studies, sociology, and gender studies. Scholars and students alike will find the illustrations helpful. Particularly noteworthy is the chapter on Faith Ringgold's *Slave Rape* series. *Against Our Will* stands out as one of only a few publications that I am aware of in which a reader can see the entire series of these rarely reproduced paintings, as well as *The Slave Rape Story Quilt* (1984–85; Collection of the artist) and *The Purple Quilt* (1986; Private collection). Readers will find full-page color illustrations, as well as color details and black-and-white reproductions of the *Slave Rape* series.

As I write this review, a jury consisting of seven men and five women has found Harvey Weinstein guilty on two charges of sexual abuse and rape. Although this trial addresses a mere fraction of the allegations against him (more than eighty women have bravely come forward), in the words of one of the survivors, this verdict marks a “reckoning and an awakening.”⁶ Like many feminists and supporters of the #MeToo movement, I have been following the Weinstein trial, have listened to the harrowing testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, and continue to hope that their incredibly brave testimonies would not be for naught. Undoubtedly, the cross-examination of Weinstein’s victims was excruciating. Already having undergone physical and emotional violation, the women who stood up to speak their truth in public were forced to relive their trauma in an atmosphere of skepticism and outright attack on their credibility. Like the jury verdict against Weinstein, Fryd’s book sends the message to survivors of sexual violence: We hear you and we believe you.

Notes

¹ Over the past decade, socially engaged art history and art criticism have taken a more visible stance in academia and the public realm. Some of the most prominent include *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism*; the SECAC 2015 panel “Socially Engaged Art History,” and the related #ArtHistoryEngaged; Amy Hamlin and Karen Leader’s project [Art History That](#); and the conversation published in the journal *Panorama* in fall 2019 that centered on the question “Isn’t It Time for Art History to Go Public?” (see Laura M. Holzman, “Isn’t It Time for Art History to Go Public?,” introduction to *Bully Pulpit, Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 5, no. 2 [Fall 2019], <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.2271>).

² Fryd includes numerous references to the history of rape in European art and culture. These include (but are not limited to): Diane Wolfthal, *Images of Rape: The “Heroic” Tradition and Its Alternatives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Norman Bryson, “Two Narratives of Rape in the Visual Arts: Lucretia and the Sabine Women,” in *Rape*, eds. Sylvana Tomaselli and Roy Porter (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 152–73; Johann Heinrich Schönfeld, “*The Rape of the Sabines*,” *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 74 (January 1987): 358–71; and Mieke Bal, “The Rape of Narrative and Narrative of Rape: Speech Acts and Body Language in Judges,” in *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons*, ed. Elaine Scarry (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 1–32.

³ Here, Fryd quotes Jacinda Read’s *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape-Revenge Cycle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 29–31.

⁴ Throughout her book, Fryd provides historical and contemporary data to contextualize the urgency of this issue. One example she gives is that “one in every six American women has been a survivor of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime” and “one in thirty-three men (3 percent) has experienced an attempted or completed rape in his lifetime.” Fryd, *Against Our Will*, 15, 16.

⁵ Coco Fusco, “Sex, Art, and Misogyny,” *New York Review of Books*, May 9, 2019, 36.

⁶ Spencer Bokak-Lindell, “Is Harvey Weinstein’s Conviction a #MeToo Victory?,” *New York Times*, February 25, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/25/opinion/weinstein-me-too.html>. According to The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), only five out of every one thousand sexual assaults lead to felony convictions. See: Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network website, “The Criminal Justice System: Statistics,” <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system>.