

Pictures of Theories: Abstraction and Radical Feminism in the USA, 1968-1974

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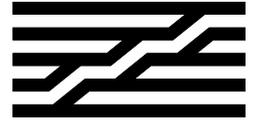


Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Fractional Module*, 1947-1951, 49,5 x 59 cm, Courtesy Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

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The front cover of Ti-Grace Atkinson's 1974 book *Amazon Odyssey: The First Collection of Writings by the Political Pioneer of the Women's Movement*¹ defies visual conventions of promotional enticement. The author name and title, though boldly claiming her primacy as a movement leader, are printed in relatively small type at the top and bottom edges of the book, ceding most of the territory at the center to an amorphous abstract shape with elements suggesting horns, teeth, sutures, eyes, and other organic forms. This so-called "beautiful monster," painted in watercolor and ink by artist Barbara Nessim,² serves as an assertive prompt for the communicative powers of abstract art to mediate the emotional dissonance contained within the book's chronological structure. Together Atkinson and Nessim transformed five years of diverse lectures, press releases, open letters, and polemics into a singular 18-cm square "art object" crowned by a cover she deemed "so beautiful and perfect; I got chills when I saw it."³ Inspired by their partnership, Atkinson appended the book with a lengthy Afterword that documented their collaborative process.⁴

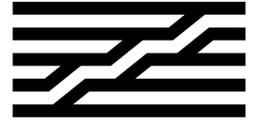
Amazon Odyssey is a salient example of abstraction as both a source for, and product of, feminist theory and action. "Radical politics – like aesthetics – is, at its best, a process of both critiquing a problem in its most fundamental form and trying to envision a better way for human beings to organize themselves in relation to one another," Atkinson wrote decades later.⁵ The centering of an abstract biomorphic image distinguishes *Amazon Odyssey* from the visual presentation of theoretical texts by two other leading feminist theorists also sourced in modern and contemporary art. The stark white infographic cover of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (New York, Doubleday, 1970) chimes with her earlier conceptual art deconstructing language and space, such as the Fluxus installation *Trap: An Environment* (1967). Meanwhile the cover of Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York, Morrow, 1970) reproduces Edgar Degas's oil painting *Portrait de jeune femme* (1867, Musée d'Orsay) in full bleed, signaling both her earlier training in figural painting and her concerns with the function of beauty in the social



control of the female body. Like Millet and Firestone, Atkinson came to feminist politics and activism from the aesthetic practices and discourses of painting and sculpture. The following essay, part of a larger research project into the development of radical feminism from the failed promises of modern art, focuses on Atkinson's work with Nessim on *Amazon Odyssey* in the invention of a feminist narrative abstraction.

Some biography first is needed to illuminate Atkinson's initial aesthetic principles as a critic and curator. She was born in Louisiana in 1938, graduated from high school in California in 1956, and married and moved to Philadelphia. Around 1959 she began a BFA painting program, jointly offered by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the University of Pennsylvania. Constrained by marriage, she divorced and gravitated to the New York art scene, splitting her time between the two cities. Associations with critics Harold Rosenberg and Tom Hess opened the door to her career as a public intellectual. *ARTnews* hired her as an editorial associate in 1962 and in a brief 16-month stint as a regular critic, she published about 150 short reviews, primarily documenting the debuts of young artists, most of them now forgotten but a few whose work resonated with her passion for Abstract Expressionism. In stylized, hipster prose she praised gestural abstract paintings by Vivian Springford ("paints beat from Brave New World, shoots for the moon with hearts and flowers"⁶) and John Stephan ("the works become so increasingly real, the viewer so much involved that he and the landscape are soon an eery one"⁷). She remained suspicious of figural and symbolic images, wary of their tendency to distort or manipulate. Though she appreciated Pop art's ability to stimulate public excitement, in unpublished texts she stated her preference for abstract art, reasoning that it transmits the essence of an idea while representational art only delineates a specific instance of an idea.

Writing for *ARTnews* bolstered her status at Penn and provided a platform to arouse the city to contemporary art. She tirelessly worked as an unpaid volunteer in the Graduate School of Fine Arts to expand their vague concept of a faculty-run exhibition space into the ambitious Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) with an all-star advisory committee of Rosenberg, Hess, Clement Greenberg, and others. Named acting director at age 25, Atkinson opened the museum in October 1963 with a bang: an important retrospective of Abstract Expressionist painter Clyfford Still. The famously irascible artist admired her principled disregard for authority and refusal to accede to red tape or ordinary executive procedure. *ARTnews* reprinted Atkinson's catalogue essay with the title "Freedom... absolute and infinitely exhilarating," underlining her faith in the liberatory potential of abstract art⁸. Her commitment to the pioneering generation of abstract artists continued in the next exhibition of David Smith's welded steel totemic sculptures. Smith, like Still, espoused the existentialist ethic of creative autonomy. His uncompromising attitude inspired another future radical feminist, Andrea Dworkin, who cherished the advice he gave her when she was a first-year student at Bennington College: "never whore."⁹ For her third and final act at ICA, Atkinson expanded her purview to Pop, minimalism, and assemblage in the stylistically inclusive fourteen artist *The Atmosphere of '64*, with Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella, and others, to condense the most memorable art of the year in one Philadelphia extravaganza. With the

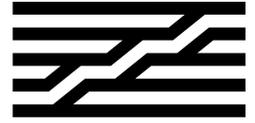


ICA Atkinson created a temporary autonomous zone to effectuate the public educational good of aesthetic independence, lasting only about a year before the authorities regained control.

Despite her immediate impact, Atkinson as an attractive young woman – “fiery, unforgettable”¹⁰ – was not taken seriously by either the Penn administration or the local media. A photo in the *Philadelphia Daily News* of Atkinson and an all-female installation team ran with the caption: “Art with a Feminine Touch.”¹¹ The administrators overseeing the ICA shared this sexist attitude, diminished her contributions, and named a man as the permanent director and demoted her to his assistant. After a drawn-out fight, she quit, explaining in a letter to Greenberg: “I pushed the situation to its absolute absurdity so that positions would have some clarity – they did.”¹² Was this the moment she became a feminist, that she first clearly perceived the intractability of patriarchal culture and politics? The conjunction of her personal crisis and the resurgent conservative politics of the Republican presidential candidate sparked Atkinson to privately declare that she was renouncing womanhood and Barry Goldwater.

Scholarship on Atkinson points to the ICA’s rejection as the proverbial last straw that forced an inchoate feminist position into public feminist action.¹³ She had already read *The Second Sex* and written a number of unpublished *ARTnews* reviews that lambasted the objectification of women’s bodies by Balthus and other artists. These textual fragments can be woven together into a larger fabric of her then unarticulated conjunction of abstraction and women’s liberation. In her brief time at the ICA, Atkinson seems to have neither condemned male supremacy nor supported female artists. Marisol was the only woman in *The Atmosphere of ‘64*, though Atkinson did commission an evening dance program, produced by her *ARTnews* colleague Jill Johnston, with pieces by Yvonne Rainer and Lucinda Child among others. Perhaps, had she remained in the art world, Atkinson would have evolved into an influential feminist critic and curator, in the vein of Lucy Lippard. But she had other goals. Atkinson quit the art world and moved to New York to enroll in Columbia University’s graduate school to study philosophy. Her intellectual interests expanded from pure aesthetics to the patriarchal structure of oppression. A correspondence with Simone de Beauvoir led her to Betty Friedan, author of transformative book *The Feminine Mystique*. In 1966 Friedan co-founded the National Organization for Women, a mainstream legal and advocacy group, and nominated Atkinson to be president of the New York chapter. She quickly became one of the most visible and outspoken leaders of the nascent women’s liberation movement in the United States.

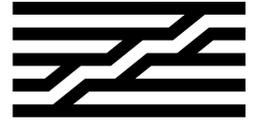
By late 1967, however, the American second wave feminist movement began to split between the mainstream and the radical left, between those who endeavored to usher women into power and those who fought to destroy power entirely. Radical feminist groups like Redstockings were already in formation, but Atkinson remained aligned with NOW until Valerie Solanas shot Andy Warhol in June 1968. Friedan denounced the violent act, but Atkinson refused to abandon the author of the separatist “SCUM Manifesto” which she admired for its blatant hostility toward male supremacy, and visited Solanas in jail along with Florynce Kennedy, Solanas’s lawyer and Atkinson’s mentor in direct action. She resigned from NOW and founded the October 17th Movement, later called The Feminists, deploying flamboyant methods of



incitement, earlier utilized in art criticism and graduate department meetings, to the wide-open adversarial arena of women's rights, picketing *The New York Times* to protest sex-segregated help wanted ads, occupying the New York City marriage license office, and later opposing police while demonstrating against the Vietnam War. Over the next few years, the scope of her provocative vision expanded to ending all oppression, of which the subjugation of women was at the core. Atkinson became a lightning rod for her promotion of women's separatism and frank discussion of violent revolution, exposing herself to criticism by allying with the mafioso-turned-civil rights activist Joseph Colombo. By the end of 1972, feeling wounded and betrayed, she largely left the movement, focusing on her graduate studies and teaching career.

That brings us to *Amazon Odyssey*. Long at work on her unpublished magnum opus *Women and Oppression*, Atkinson, with the encouragement of Jill Johnston, decided to first assemble an anthology of miscellaneous old texts in 1973, relying on visual art to craft a new holistic volume with an updated narrative arc. The first three illustrators invited by Links Books art director Uli Boege failed to conjure her vision for the cover. Then he showed Atkinson one of Barbara Nessim's drawings from her *Womangirls* series, images of lithe partially nude female dancers without pubic hair standing *en pointe*, which to Nessim represented the impossible expectations heaped upon women. Atkinson immediately rejected the image, however, likening it to a burlesque stripper. Undaunted, Nessim invited Atkinson to her studio to work together on a new image. With Atkinson standing behind her describing her fraught journey through the women's movement, Nessim reached for gray watercolor and painted the biomorphic abstraction which became the cover image. "The designer thought it repulsive," Atkinson recalled. "Now I *knew* we were home free."¹⁴

Nessim was uniquely suited for the role of Atkinson's visual interpreter. Born in the Bronx in 1939, she had studied at Pratt Institute and worked as an artist and freelance illustrator for over a decade, contributing to *Harper's Bazaar*, *Esquire*, and other periodicals. She navigated the masculine realm of New York publishing as an independent woman, much like her one-time roommate Gloria Steinem. From 1962 to 1968 they shared a one-room apartment, with a writing desk and a drafting table on opposite walls. Their concern for the exploitation of women rampant in the early '60s was realized in creative projects like Steinem's undercover exposé of the Playboy Club in *Show* magazine and Nessim's Pop art parodies of stereotypes of women as domestic sex objects. Fortunately for Atkinson, Nessim also appreciated the capacity of abstraction to correlate ideas and emotional states. In the late 1960s and early '70s Nessim created a series of abstract works on paper using watercolor, ink, and marker. *Two Universes* (1968), consists of concentric circles made from a ruled pen and recalls the musical rhythms of Sonia Delaunay and the mystic spirals of Hilma af Klint. This personal body of work, separate from her commissioned assignments, emerged from a meditative process that "came directly out of myself" Nessim said.¹⁵ Other drawings evoke semi-abstract landscapes with graceful shapes suggestive of bodies, profiles of faces, ribbons, and household objects. Two twisted upright planes she envisioned as monumental minimalist sculptures. A consistent element to all her abstract work is the presence of a horizon line, which establishes space and endows forms with gravity. Nessim, previously unknown to Atkinson, possessed a polished abstract aesthetic, narrative

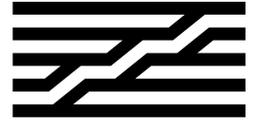


techniques, and feminist subjectivity, not to mention the requisite patience and can-do spirit, to bridge the gap from mind to brush.

Through their months-long collaboration on *Amazon Odyssey* they developed a visual language of tonal shifts, expansive landscapes, and symbolic geometry. Atkinson conjured a stimulating but also somewhat melancholy mood in Nessim's studio by reading poetry by Southern writer Donald Davidson and playing recordings of Ravel's haunting, airy piano compositions especially the movement "Le Gibet". In addition to the strategically grotesque cover, the 260-page book is distinguished from other theoretical texts by its interior graphic design. A 50-page section is laid out with sequenced abstract illustrations, all in grayscale, of watercolor realms and symbolic narratives articulated through varying configurations of triangles. Within this section, the 18-page set "Radical Feminism," which consists of two 1969 essays, "Declaration of War" and "Metaphysical Cannibalism", is laid out on pages with black text superimposed on watercolor backgrounds divided into horizontal stripes of varied light gray tones. Black blots along the three dividing lines evoke distant explosions of bombs or symbolic ideas. The thickness and tone of the stripes varies over the two-page spreads, modulating the layout like an arid version of Klee's Tunisian watercolors, or musical passages related to Ravel's mood of death suspended in vast landscapes. Another 30-page set in *Amazon Odyssey*, "Juniata II" (titled after Atkinson's four lectures at the eponymous college in Pennsylvania) utilizes triangles to convey a symbolic narrative. The oppressor is represented by an upright triangle, and the oppressed by an inverted triangle precariously balanced on one point. In an abstract symbolic narrative that recalls the Suprematist books of El Lissitzky, Nessim drew sequential configurations of these two triangles to depict different relationships between the classes, corresponding to Atkinson's systematic analysis of many women's reluctance to name men, and male-dominated institutions such as the Catholic Church, as their oppressors.

The third corpus of interior illustrations consists of 35 tactical charts based on Atkinson's rough sketches visualizing her theories of social groups interacting with and against feminist revolution. The vertical diagrams illustrate the upward movement of radical feminism and the forces of allies and passive and active resistance they encounter along the way toward achieving specific strategic goals. Nessim created different repeating patterns such as waves, circles, and arcs to signify various classes such as oppressors, lesbians, feminists, neutral nonfeminists, and anti-feminists. These expressive patterns, serving as fill within rectangular areas, are distinctly hand drawn and irregular not mechanical-looking. Nessim's cursive signature at the bottom of each chart has the effect of elevating its status from illustration to collaboratively produced independent work of art that investigates systems of meaning, comparable to a Jasper Johns numeral lithograph, according to Atkinson.¹⁶

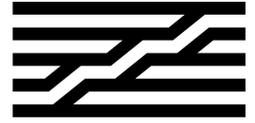
Comparison of the layouts of two texts in *Amazon Odyssey* with their original 1970 publication in New York Radical Women's newsprint journal *Notes from the Second Year: Major Writings of the Radical Feminists* (edited by Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt) evidences Atkinson's evolution from a visual culture of



direct activism to one of tonal abstraction. "Declaration of War," considered an early pronouncement of radical feminist theory, first appeared in *Notes* in a plain text layout without illustrations. Elsewhere in the journal another Atkinson text, "The Institution of Sexual Intercourse," was incongruously illustrated with a black and white reproduction of Magritte's Surrealist painting *The Lovers* (1928, MoMA), slightly cropped. This image is absent in *Amazon Odyssey*. The anthology moved beyond the rudimentary graphic design of radical feminism, mostly eschewing representational imagery while retaining the two-column text format of *Notes* enhanced with lush redolent watercolors. Though to be clear, a few photographs appear throughout the book and on the back cover depicting Atkinson's various affiliations and activities, including the moment when she is attacked on stage during a 1971 speech at Catholic University, adding dramatic tension to the abstractions. Also punctuating *Amazon Odyssey* are a half-dozen marginalia depicting endearing yet ominous orbs in various phases of activity strung on horizon lines, an ink-drawn leitmotif that comments on rather than illustrates the texts.

Analysis of the abstract illustrations in *Amazon Odyssey* also surfaces some of the aesthetic discourses embedded in Atkinson's feminist polemics. Art offered a useful set of metaphors as the focus of her thinking evolved from contemporary curating to feminist activism. The oldest text collected in *Amazon Odyssey*, "Abortion," from 1967, shifts the terms of the debate from reproduction, in which women are vessels, to creation, in which women are sovereign over their bodies. She declared "the woman is the artist," arguing that women, like sculptors, possess the moral and Constitutional right, established by the 14th Amendment, to control their life, liberty, and property.¹⁷ She extends the metaphor of art as life in "Metaphysical Cannibalism or Self-Creativity," a lecture from 1970, asking, "What if one's life were like a work of art, created by a dialogue with one's surroundings, whether animate or inanimate."¹⁸ True freedom, she argues, is attainable when living life becomes like creating art, internally motivated and self-justifying, free from the external definitions and judgements at the root of asymmetrical power. *Amazon Odyssey* exists as a venture in the fulfillment of this vision, a coherent choreographed art object in which Atkinson, in close dialogue with Nessim, aspired to actualize her ideas and experiences through an intersubjective abstract language.

To conclude, Atkinson and Nessim's work offers a model of feminist abstraction as collective activity. The formal interests in seriality and repetition, as well as geometry and materiality, of the interior layouts of *Amazon Odyssey* relate to other contemporary works of abstract art by Louise Fishman, Harmony Hammond, Howardena Pindell, and Jenny Snider that stemmed from their participation in New York feminist consciousness-raising groups. In a larger art historical frame, *Amazon Odyssey* harkens back to the women's culture of af Klint's spiritualist group "The Five" and anticipates the work of a younger generation of female artists like Mai Thu Perret attracted to the idealism of the lost cause of radical feminism. The communicative power of abstraction expresses at its core, for Atkinson, the hope for a better tomorrow. "Oppression, as a subject, is a downer," Atkinson admitted in her Afterword. But in partnering with Nessim: "Together we transformed a 'collection' into a book, and my work with her gave me great joy."¹⁹



Notes

1. This description applies only to the book's second printing, which Atkinson revised because the abstract image appeared too small on the cover of the first edition.
2. Barbara Nessim, interview with author, July 10, 2020. Thanks to Nessim for answering my many questions. For access to the Ti-Grace Atkinson papers I am grateful to Rachel Greenhaus, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, and for access to the ICA institutional records, I thank Eric Dillalogue, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania.
3. Ti-Grace Atkinson, "Afterword" in *Amazon Odyssey: The First Collection of Writings by the Political Pioneer of the Women's Movement*, second printing (New York: Links Books, 1974), cclix.
4. Ibid.
5. Ti-Grace Atkinson, "Art and Logic," *Artforum* 46 no. 9 (May 2008), 111, 404.
6. T.A.S [Ti-Grace Atkinson Sharpless], "Vivian Springford," *ARTnews* 62 no. 3 (April 1963), 55.
7. T.A.S. [Ti-Grace Atkinson Sharpless], "John Stephan," *ARTnews* 61 no. 9 (January 1963), 18.
8. Ti-Grace Atkinson Sharpless, "Freedom... absolute and infinitely exhilarating", *ARTnews*, vol.62, n°9 (January 1963), 36-39
9. Andrea Dworkin, *Heartbreak: The Political Memoir of a Feminist Militant* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 61–62.
10. Victoria Donohoe, "Penn's ICA Reverts to Rocking the Boat," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (July 16, 1967).
11. "Art with the Feminine Touch," *Philadelphia Daily News*, April 11, 1964.
12. Ti-Grace Atkinson to Clement Greenberg, letter (July 26, 1964), Clement Greenberg Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
13. Jenni Sorkin, "The Feminist Nomad: The All-Women Group Show," in *Wack!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 469. See also Breanne Fahs, "Ti-Grace Atkinson and the Legacy of Radical Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 37 no. 3 (Fall 2011), 561–590.
14. Ti-Grace Atkinson, "Afterword", op. cit., ccxlvi.
15. Barbara Nessim, interview with author. For a comprehensive study see *Barbara Nessim: An Artful Life* (New York: Abrams, 2013).
16. Atkinson, "Afterword" in *Amazon Odyssey*, ccxvi, n. 7. For a detailed study of these charts see Sam McBean, "Feminist Diagrams," *Feminist Theory* 22 no. 2 (2021): 206–225.
17. Atkinson, "Abortion" in *Amazon Odyssey*, op. cit., 2.
18. Atkinson, "Metaphysical Cannibalism or Self-Creativity" in *Amazon Odyssey*, op. cit., 80.
19. Atkinson, "Afterword" in *Amazon Odyssey*, op. cit., ccxxx.