***Being Seen: The Politics of Visibility in Feminist Art***

**Introduction to *The Art of Feminism*, published by Chronicle Books, San Francisco, and Tate Publishing, London, 2018**

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This is the first book to present feminist interventions in art and visual culture from the nineteenth century to the current era. By no means an exhaustive history, and focusing primarily on the Western tradition, it nonetheless shows how women moved from the art world’s margins to its center. While claiming the visibility and space that had long been denied them, female artists demanded the transformation of the terms under which they had been excluded.

We see women assert their right to become subjects, and not just objects, of the gaze. The portraits created by female modernists have an almost performative ambition, as if by depicting confident, dynamic female subjects they might help bring about this longed-for liberation. Returning the gaze with a vengeance, women imbued images of themselves and one other with curiosity and desire. They experimented with masquerade and self-fashioning. “Masculine? Feminine? But it depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that always suits me,” wrote Claude Cahun of her and Marcel Moore’s staged photographs. “I will never finish removing all these masks.”

Suffragettes understood the contagious power of spectacle. Their dramatic processions incorporated embroidered banners depicting allegorical figures of female heroism and grace. Suffrage agitators were urged to dress elegantly, to wear white dresses, accessorized in the suffrage color schemes: purple, white, and green in the United Kingdom; purple, white, and gold in the United States. Designed to win hearts and minds, and to counter stereotypes of feminist dowdiness and unattractiveness, their campaigns were reproduced widely in newspapers. Half a century later, women’s liberation activists also used mass media to disseminate their message. The 1970 anti-Miss World protest in London, during which Angry Brigade members pelted flour bombs at the contest, was broadcast live, reaching almost twenty-four million viewers. Feminists drew sustenance from seeing, and being seen, together. When asked why she attended a women’s liberation demonstration in 1971, one participant replied, “we wanted to come together and look at each other.”

Throughout the periods surveyed here artists have critiqued the degrading, stereotyped, and fetishistic depictions of women that appear in art and popular culture. Combining image and text in their work, they have experimented with strategies of estrangement to highlight the constructed nature of gender. Some artists refuse to represent women altogether. Hélène Cixous’s argument that women must write from the self and the body resonated within feminist art circles. Evoking bodily experience, they made artworks that disrupt deep-seated patriarchal divisions between reason and passion, mind and matter. Filmmaker Laura Mulvey urged feminists to create “a new language of desire,” a call that artists from Mary Kelly to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha have taken up. The psychoanalytic concept of jouissance, an experimental practice that ruptures the male symbolic order, has been generative for feminist art. That jouissance relates to the culturally feminine, rather than biologically female, chimes with current understandings of gender fluidity. Contemporary artist Heather Phillipson devises haptic installations that celebrate various bodily functions, creating a state of heightened excitement. Operating almost synaesthetically, tropes echo and rhyme across screens, objects, and soundscapes. Like Joan Jonas and Carolee Schneemann before her, Phillipson’s art frequently explores relationships and hierarchies between human and nonhuman animals, and is alert to the agency of objects and matter.

Feminists have given symbolic value to denigrated realms of female creativity and experience, from eroticism and sex work to friendship, conversation, childbirth, and housework. By staging acts associated with domestic and parental labor in the museum, artists including Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Lea Lublin and Lenka Clayton highlight society’s reliance on this under-seen, under-valued work. Yet feminists have contested the idea that women are inherently more nurturing, domestically inclined, or peaceful than men. They recognise that naturalizing feminine activities, and suggesting that they are performed as labors of love, only perpetuates feminized subjects’ exploitation and their work’s devaluation.

Where some feminist artists invent fictional and mythic characters with whom to identify, others scour the past for evidence of creative women and female relationships. Intergenerational calls-and-responses play out across artworks. Mary Cassatt’s 1893 mural for The Women’s Building imagines female exchanges over the eras. Decades later, Miriam Schapiro includes a reproduction of one of Cassatt’s portraits in *Mary Cassatt and Me*, 1975. Maud Sulter pays homage to nine black female muses, including novelist Alice Walker and Ysaye Maria Barnwell from Sweet Honey in the Rock, in her 1989 *Zabat* series, its title referencing female dance and ritual.

The use of female subjects and bodies has taken on new contours in online contexts. While feminist artists were amongst those to criticize the internet’s military/industrial origins, many, including SubRosa, VNS Matrix, Sandy Stone, and Lucy Kimbell, were amongst key particpants in the Netart movement of the 1990s in which art was circulated, and often made, online. They responded to the internet’s potential for initiating more expansive forms of communication and collaboration, intimacy, and identity. Recently, however, Net optimism has given way to Net cynicism. Feminists have critiqued the internet’s commodification of all aspects of life and subjectivity, highlighting its increasingly predictive and preemptive operations. Hito Steyerl is among artists who explore how to withdraw from the internet’s regime of surveillance, as well as how to inhabit it critically and disruptively. Meanwhile, artists including E.Jane and Sondra Perry play with fictional personae and avatars to both play with and disrupt assumptions about gendered and racialized identities.

Reflecting how business profits from human data trails, and mimicking venture capitalist practices, in 2014 Jennifer Lyn Monroe incorporated herself as JLM Inc. She evaluated and issued shares in her material and intangible assets and raised capital based on her potential success. Similarly, Erica Scourti attempts to repurpose platforms of networked capitalism. Her “live twitter bot with feelings,” *Empathy Deck*, responds to its followers’ tweets by sending them one-of-a-kind empathy cards that combine images and inspirational text. For her 2014 book *The Outage*, Scourti gave a writer access to her online passwords and accounts, on which he then drew to ghostwrite her memoir.

Scourti’s stance of maximum compliance is adopted by other artists, including Andrea Fraser and Tanja Ostojić. Scourti likens her approach to Paul B. Preciado’s account of self-administering testosterone as a form of overidentifying with “pharmacopornographic capital.” Preciado’s understanding of bodies as a locus of chemical, hormonal, and cosmetic modification finds resonance in Candice Lin and Patrick Staff’s *Hormonal Fog,* 2016, in which testosterone-reducing, plant-based tinctures are pumped into the gallery foyer. Transgender politics are nonetheless a lightning rod for contemporary feminist debate. Faultlines have emerged between feminists who insist that only people born as women can lay claim to that gender, and those who see claiming trans or nonbinary gender identity as a central tenet of the feminist struggle for self-determination.

For the 2016 online curatorial project “URL IRL” members of the black female collective sorryyoufeeluncomfortable collaborated with curator Francesca Altamura to ask where the internet ends and the real world begins. Discussing the program, artist and co-curator Deborah Findalter highlighted the unequal ways that black female bodies circulate online. Where content generated by black women often goes viral, those women rarely receive recognition or pay for their meme-ified images and words. In Zarina Muhammad’s ‘Digjihad,’ 2015, a work included in the program, leotard-clad women dance over videos of military and terrorist actions—stitched together from a compilation including iPhone footage, CCTV, computer games, and state and terrorist propaganda. Mischievously jamming viral tropes, including GIFs, emojis, and bhangra dance moves, Muhammad calls out the contagious nature of macho glamorizations of violence.

While hyper-sexualized representations of black female bodies circulate as commodities online and off, the perspectives of women of color are often sidelined. “White feminism has failed the true test of feminist solidarity,” Myriam François-Cerrah wrote in 2014, treating non-Western critiques as “quaint contributions permitted to confirm the eternal truth of Western supremacy.” Meanwhile, the goal of female liberation is used to justify imperialist wars and occupations, with women from the Arab world stereotyped as passive victims and grateful recipients of Western aid.

Some artists have developed strategies that aim to challenge white supremacy. Trinh T. Minh-ha makes experimental films in proximity to, rather than on behalf of, subaltern individuals and groups. Rebecca Belmore’s performances and videos give witness to the lives of murdered indigenous sex workers in British Columbia. Using the hyper-visibility of Hollywood, in *Love Story* (2016), Candice Breitz cast celebrity actors to narrate the accounts of people who had fled their homes due to sexual and gender prejudice and violence. On an institutional level, resonating with Flavia Dzodan’s mantra, “My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit,” arts organizations have initiated activities that foreground global feminist struggles. The Showroom has developed its artist commission program in collaboration with community groups in London, including a woman’s shelter and Justice for Domestic Workers. In 2017, basis voor actuele kunst (BAK) in Utrecht, launched Propositions for Non-Fascist Living, a research itinerary designed to contest the normalization and internalization of fascisms, and to institute new realities.

The sustainability of an art world that relies on feminised labor—care, passion, flexibility, communication—while making it hard for many workers in the sector to support themselves, is of increasing feminist concern. While continuing to pressurize institutions into giving fairer representation to artists from diverse backgrounds, feminists also question the logic of participating in a system that undermines their ability to care for themselves and others. Céline Condorelli, Park McArthur, Raju Rage, and A.L. Steiner are among artists who highlight the networks of kinship and mutual aid that enable cultural and social survival. It is not enough to exhibit feminist art and program feminist content if the host institution’s values contradict the feminist politics on show, curators and organizational directors are realizing. Binna Choi, Director of Utrecht’s CASCO, argues that the “back” of purportedly radical institutions needs to more accurately reflect their public “front.” For Site for Unlearning (Art Organisation) (2014–ongoing), Choi and her coworkers collaborated with artist Annette Krauss to interrogate ingrained institutional behaviors. They concluded that their preoccupation with being busy and productive had created exploitative conditions for themselves and those they worked with that emphasized productivity over collective care. Through “unlearning exercises” they sought to make the maintenance activities that supported the organization more visible, valued, and equitably distributed.

Feminism can mean different things to different groups and people, representing mainstream neoliberal efforts to get more women in the boardroom as much as fights for sexual autonomy and global justice. To rediscover feminism’s radicalism and relevance, artists today revisit feminist art, thinking, and activism history. Sharon Hayes describes her artworks, which often restage events from queer feminist history, as “placeholders” that try to keep earlier moments of political promise alive. Alex Martinis Roe, whose art establishes feminist genealogies and forges intergenerational feminist networks, works in a spirit of “dutifully undutiful” feminism. “Fans of feminism” is art historian Catherine Grant’s term for the combined reverence, playfulness and critique with which artists revisit feminism’s past. By creating feminist cultures and awakening feminist subjectivities they help us to understand and imagine the world differently.