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Feminism and the Art Machine

Resistance and change often begin in art.

—Ursula K. Le Guin¹

Upon reading the article *Contemporary Feminism: Art Practice, Theory, and Activism—An Intergenerational Perspective*, I was initially struck by how much has still *not* changed since its original publication in *Art Journal*'s winter 1999 volume. As stated in the introduction to the article, the occasion for the compilation of this group of essays by twelve distinguished “women artists and art historians from three generations of feminism” was the thirty year anniversary of the “inception of the Women’s Liberation Movement and the Feminist Art Movement.”² (Schor 8) At the time, a swirl of attention around this cultural moment had left some lingering questions about how feminism had changed the art world, what was learned from it, and whether these lessons had been absorbed into the institutional “curricula, politics, and individual working methods” of these women of the arts and the academic and professional institutions that they were now associated with. (Schor 8) Indeed, as I read through these diverse, vibrant and, at times, very personal narratives, one ongoing thought seemed to be continually looping through my brain, and it went something like this: *Wait! It is now 2019. Twenty more years have elapsed*

¹ From a speech that the author Ursula K. Le Guin gave in November 2014 upon receiving her second National Book Award. The speech was later included in the collection of her work entitled, *Words Are My Matter: Writings About Life and Books, 2000—2016, with a Journal of a Writer’s Week*.

² The authors of the collection of essays referenced in this paper are: Mira Schor (introduction), Emma Amos, Susan Bee, Johanna Drucker, María Fernández, Amelia Jones, Shirley Kaneda, Helen Molesworth, Howardena Pindell, Mira Schor, Collier Schorr and Faith Wilding. “Contemporary Feminism: Art Practice, Theory, and Activism—An Intergenerational Perspective,” *Art Journal*, winter 1999, 58:4, pp. 8-29.

since the publication of this article. Thirty plus twenty equals fifty. (I pause here to double check with a calculator, after all, I'm an artist and math has never been my wheelhouse.) Yes! Fifty years have elapsed since the inception of these movements, and women artists' work still only represent around 12% (Topaz 8) of the art we consume today in many major museums and other cultural institutions.³ Why hasn't more changed for us? It has been fifty years already! My whole lifetime. How long is this going to take? (I pause again to weep silently with my head resting on my desk.)

Once I recovered from the mini-breakdown that I mention above, I started to think more critically again around the issues at hand, and upon re-reading Emma Amos's essay I was struck by, and have empathy for, her frustration with the first wave Feminist Movement of the 1970s and her feelings of exclusion as a black woman. She felt that there was no voice involved that represented her experience as a woman artist of color, therefore she wasn't interested in participating in some of the feminist groups to which she had been invited in. (10) But I wonder, if that was the case, why then didn't she feel it was even more important to lend *her* voice and unique perspective to those very conversations going on? How can we ever affect cultural change, if we are not willing to work together to educate one another about our differing experiences and perspectives? Although, on the other hand, as Susan Bee states in part of her contribution to the discussion, "the decision to follow a feminist path in art has never been easy.

³ From the most recent study on diversity of artists in major museums, "The U.S. art museum sector is grappling with diversity. While previous work has investigated the demographic diversity of museum staffs and visitors, the diversity of artists in their collections has remained unreported. We conduct the first large-scale study of artist diversity in museums. By scraping the public online catalogs of 18 major U.S. museums, deploying a sample of 10,000 artist records comprising over 9,000 unique artists to crowdsourcing, and analyzing 45,000 responses, we infer artist genders, ethnicities, geographic origins, and birth decades ... estimates of gender and ethnic diversity at each museum, and overall, we find that 85% of artists are white and 87% are men." Topaz, Chad M. et al. "Diversity of Artists in Major U.S. Museums." *PLOS Submission*, 2018, p. 1.

Being political and announcing your difference is not the most unproblematic way to proceed in the art world.” (12) Maybe it just felt like too much of an undertaking for Amos at the time?

Howardena Pindell, another black women artist coming of age in the 1970s, had similar complaints about the first wave Feminist Movement. She felt disappointed by the fact that many of the “artist/art related consciousness-raising groups” that she was involved with didn’t want to address the racial issues of inequality because it was too “political” and that this distracted from the more important “issues of feminism.” (22) At the time, her way of dealing with this reality was to explore issues of race in her work and to start her own groups for black women artists.

Of course, since then many minority and black women artists and feminist theorists, such as bell hooks, have lent their voices to the conversation, one that is still on going.⁴ Indeed, María Fernández paraphrases hooks in her essay—and echoes my sentiment above about Emma Amos’s experience—when she writes:

How can we produce change if we continue to be trapped within boundaries that promote alienation? Most of us abhor prejudice and domination but have not yet learned to recognize the ways in which we support the very structures we wish to eradicate. (16)

It seems then, that only through continuing education and open, thoughtful discussion that we will be able to come to an understanding on this. The question is whether the Feminist Movement of the 21st Century can expand to accommodate the views of more than just the generic “female” perspective.

Even twenty years later, Johanna Drucker’s words and her personal and professional experiences particularly resonate with me. Somehow, she is able to illuminate all of the touch

⁴ bell hooks. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. South End Press, 1989, p. 113.

points involved with this complicated and nuanced educational, social, cultural, and political maelstrom. One in which the ripple effects are still being felt today. As Drucker states at the beginning of her essay:

In the early 1970s, I was terrified by the idea of becoming a feminist, certain that it meant becoming aggressively plain, alienating men, and giving up on romance and humor. In addition, my critical faculties were offended by images of solidarity and sisterhood with a community of only women who appeared to suspend judgment to support each other's work. Misconceptions all, but nonetheless these ideas held potent sway in my mind in my early adulthood. And I think many of those same negative stereotypes persist today. (13)

She goes on to write, "the work I associated with early 1970s feminism made me queasy: the vaginas and labia and flowers, quilts, weaving, and body art seemed so obvious. I longed for transcendence out of gendered identity through my work, not identification with it." (13) But then, she goes on to admit that her ambivalent feelings at the time were the result of ignorance around the issues and a lack of life experience. Indeed, it was really only a matter of time before she was able to "sort out the difference between the concept of being a woman artist (in which gender had a determining role) and feminist art practice (in which gendered identity becomes a political position within patriarchal structures of power)." (13)

Over time, as Drucker's feelings about feminism were eventually resolved—like my own now—around the idea that "the real triumph of feminism is the moment when women can work without a sense of obligation to overt feminist concerns. To achieve a position maximizing freedom of aesthetic expression has always seemed far preferable to having one's aesthetics at the service of an agenda." (14) Although, one flaw with this line of thinking, is the idea of

“historical amnesia.” This phenomenon can be accessed for positive benefit when applied to gendered, ethnic, and LGBTQ+ perspectives that were “once marginalized identities” and now are commonly accepted. (14) But when applied to the political ideologies behind feminism and its equal rights ethos, then it starts to break down. Because once history is forgotten, it is all too easy for it to be repeated, or as I am starting to realize, that maybe the real inequities were never fully resolved in the first place. Or, as Mira Schor writes in her essay, “for feminism, the problems of institutional memory and of storage of cultural work remain.”⁵ (23)⁶

I can also see now that what was needed two decades ago, and what is needed still today—because we cannot afford for the historical lessons of feminism to ever be forgotten—is a generation of women (and men) artists who as Johanna Drucker aptly states “will need to be able to think beyond their individual identities and into a collective insight into the way they are positioned by those very forces to which they think themselves immune by virtue of their talents, energies, and abilities.”(15) In this way, maybe some of the past misconceptions and negative associations with feminism can be wiped clean and a new, shinier form of inclusive feminism can emerge.

Another important issue that María Fernández touches on in her contribution to the debate, is the economic realities of “women’s exploitation and oppression in the global capitalist system of production” and how electronic media theorist’s “utopian” predictions of liberation

⁵ Something else that Mira Schor goes on to state that powerfully resonates with me now, as I am part of the generation of women that was impacted by what she was speaking of when she wrote, “in less than thirty years, large chunks of the accomplishments of the feminist art movement in the United States had fallen out of history and very nearly out of existence. It is not surprising that during the 1980s the term *postfeminism* was popular, encouraged by a culture-wide backlash against feminism.” (24) I have already written about this in much more detail in another MFA paper (<https://www.annebarnesdesign.com/post/intersections>), but as a young girl growing up in the 1970s, college educated in the late 1980s, and coming of age in the 1990s, I too felt this push towards *postfeminism* and its idealistic promises of equality in both career and homelife.

⁶ I just wanted to note that the only essay that I do not quote from at all in this paper, is the one written by Shirley Kaneda. This is not because I do not think that what she has to say is important, but because much of what she touches on, I have already explored in the paper that I wrote and that is referenced above in footnote 5.

through an “electronic revolution” never came to pass. (15) When it comes to technology, I would say that a whole lifetime of advancement has happened since then. To start, this was written before social media became the driving factor in many business models, and I would argue that for a certain segment of the artist population, it has given them control over their art careers in a way that they never had before. In a small way, it has *democratized* the art market. By building up a following on various social media platforms, artists can now sell their work directly to a devoted audience of people whom they know are interested in what they are doing and who want to buy what they are creating. They are also able to derive income from teaching classes directly to a community of online learners, as well as license their work for use on consumer goods. This has been especially empowering for women artists, most of whom have been ignored by the traditional hegemonic arts institutions. It is now possible to have a rather lucrative art career without ever being represented by a gallery or collected by museums. Of course, if you want to be an artist whose work is noticed by the critics, then maybe this is not the way you want to go. But it is a powerful option for those who want to support themselves with their art, and that is no small matter for any artist.

Helen Molesworth’s essay was particularly interesting and poignant, especially when considering the artist talk that she gave during the June 2019 residency at Lesley Art & Design, and in light of her recent professional setbacks that were much covered in the news media.⁷ Her thoughts from twenty years ago about the “contemporary moment of feminism” were somewhat prophetic when she wrote:

⁷Halpern, Julia. *Clashing Visions, Simmering Tensions: How a Confluence of Forces Led to MOCA’s Firing of Helen Molesworth: Many were shocked that MOCA LA fired its prominent chief curator Helen Molesworth.* news.artnet.com, 16 March 2018.

I am the privileged beneficiary of political and theoretical struggles that have preceded me. I entered adulthood with an understanding that my sexuality was mine to explore, that my desire was a lush and intricate thing. So, too, I was driven intellectually by theories that posited identity (gender, race, class, sexuality) as a complicated construction—theories that allowed me productive and liberatory moments of disengagement from, and manipulation of, my biologically and culturally marked body. As you might imagine, a lot of this happened in graduate school. The workplace is a different matter altogether. There, sexism remains. (21)

Molesworth goes on to write:

Sexism is woven into the institutional fabric, the language, the everyday logic of places like law firms, the academy, and the corner grocery store. Telecommuting, working mothers (as if mothering wasn't work), home officing, the rise of the adjunct, the decline of union membership ... It occurred to me that while there is a lot of talk about feminism, there is remarkably little about sexism ... sexism may be less blatant, less hostile—but it's still there. (21)

And indeed, it seems, that not a whole lot has changed since she wrote those words two decades ago, as it is hard to ignore the rumors of sexist discrimination playing a role in her recent firing from her post as chief curator at MOCA LA. (Halpern)

Moving on, Collier Schorr's experiences with the feminism of the 1980s were well informed, but as she points out, "each generation has a different relationship and claim to and with the term." (25) But one of the glaring difficulties of the Feminist Movement—pointed out in one way or another by most of the women in their essays—is the reality that there is no such

thing as a *universal* female experience. Therefore, the dictums and structures of feminism could never adequately address everyone involved. María Fernández referred to it as the challenge of the “utopia of an alliance among the world’s women.” (16) And Amelia Jones as her naïve and “idealistic view of feminism as a collective, supportive environment in which women could negotiate and exchange ideas.” (17) And I have already discussed how it failed to support the black and, therefore by default, other minority perspectives. In other words, just because we are women, it does not mean that we all agree about everything, have the same lived experiences, or that we support each other unconditionally (something that became painfully obvious to many of us after the 2016 election). Maybe Faith Wilding stated this the most eloquently when she wrote:

I don't think feminists generally have worked out yet in practice how to live in a house of difference. We still lack the lived experience of affirmative work in groups and on projects with people from diverse backgrounds, ages, races, and classes, without resort to quotas, tokenism, political correctness, or “special” considerations. It is crucial for the development of contemporary global feminisms that we acquire this experience. (27)

Maybe we have gotten a little closer to this idea of a “global feminism” in the past few decades, at the very least we are now having the important discussions around race and gender equality in the art world. And with the advent of the recent #MeToo Movement, sexual discrimination and harassment are issues that are finally, it seems, being taken seriously. But as Faith Wilding also wrote, “we’ve still got a long way to go, baby!” (29)

Now that I am almost finished contemplating this, upon reflection, maybe more has changed than I originally thought. And this gives me *some* hope. The hard conversations about race, discrimination, and inequality are going on and through them, there is a greater cultural

understanding and acceptance of differing perspectives and life experiences. Women have more power over their art careers and how their work is consumed. And feminism as a whole, is back on the forefront of the cultural debate in a way that both educates and empowers women *and* men. But I have come to think of these changes as “tiny revolutions” won, more so than substantial cultural shifts. This is because I fear that the patriarchal structures of power are still firmly in place, just better hidden. When you look at the actual statistics not much has truly changed in over fifty years.⁸

Finally, except for the fact that I am a woman, an artist, and a feminist, I am not exactly sure yet what this all has to do with my own art practice; and whether I want to use it as a platform for “resistance and change” (as the author Ursula K. Le Guin so succinctly put it). I guess I am still trying to figure that out, and I fear it will take another lifetime for me to do just that. Let us just hope that it does not take as long for the “art machine” to become more fully equitable.

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⁸ “With respect to gender, our overall pool of individual, identifiable artists across all museums consists of 12.6% women. With respect to ethnicity, the pool is 85.4% white, 9.0% Asian, 2.8% Hispanic/Latinx, 1.2% Black/African American, and 1.5% other ethnicities. The four largest groups represented across all 18 museums in terms of gender and ethnicity are white men (75.7%), white women (10.8%), Asian men (7.5%), and Hispanic/Latinx men (2.6%). All other groups are represented in proportions less than 1%.” (Topaz 15)

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