

The power of feminism and feminist art in the contemporary moment

“Although it is true that women aren’t oppressed solely because of their sex or gender, and that many women also suffer from other forms of oppression and exploitation, for a feminist it remains necessary to analyse women’s specific experiences, in all their complexity.”¹

In this essay, I will argue that feminism and feminist art are paradoxes: they are both powerful and powerless to act as vehicles to incite positive change for women. The reasons for this paradoxical nature are many and will be discussed one by one. I will also respectfully borrow from Terry Smith the idea of the ‘bind’ and will explore how feminism’s power or powerlessness is impacted by existing cultural circumstances.

Today, the term ‘feminist art’ means different things to different people. For many intersectional feminists, it is an open term that refers to any art made by a woman, transwoman, genderqueer, non-binary or other person about their lived experiences.² For others, it is issue-based and a site for struggle.³ Numerous contemporary women artists choose to reject the label of ‘feminist’ for their work, and others claim to be incorrectly categorised as feminist artists.⁴ Feminism as a movement can feel somewhat anachronistic or unhelpful in our current non-gender-specific, inclusive landscape, where ideas of difference and diversity are preferred to those of sameness and gender specificity.⁵ We may fairly question what exactly feminist art *is* in the contemporary moment: how can we distinguish it from non-feminist art? And despite ambivalence and lack of clarity around the

¹ Toril Moi, “Thinking Through Examples: What Ordinary Language Philosophy Can Do for Feminist Theory,” *New Literary History* 46, no.2 (Spring 2015): 192.

² Annika Kristensen, “Thank you,” in *Unfinished Business: Perspectives on art and feminism*, ed. Paola Balla et al. (Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2017), 31.

³ Julie Ewington, “Unfinished Feminism, Unceasing Activism: Australian Art over Five Decades,” in *Unfinished Business: Perspectives on art and feminism*, ed. Paola Balla et al. (Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2017), 22.

⁴ Jacqueline Millner, Catriona Moore, and Georgina Cole, “Art and Feminism: Twenty-First Century Perspectives,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 15, no.2 (2015): 144, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14434318.2015.1089816>.

⁵ Millner, Moore, and Cole, “Art and Feminism,” 143.

term, which artists are choosing to continue to work in a feminist vein?⁶ To answer these questions, I will first look at feminism itself.

Feminism, as one of the key themes of contemporary art, seems the most slippery, contested and open to scrutiny, which may be due to it never having explicitly defined itself.⁷ Even those who choose to align themselves with feminism have differing and often contradictory understandings of the term.⁸ The criticisms levelled at feminism in the past around lack of inclusion have spawned the idea of 'feminisms', in the plural.⁹ The idea of having multiple feminisms to accommodate the expression of a diversity of people across generations, continents and cultures aligns with the contemporary preference for multiplicity over singular or binary views.¹⁰ However, it could be argued that the criticism feminism bore previously for being narrow and exclusionary could more fairly have been due to the slow awakening in society generally of the catastrophic impacts of colonialism and damaging thought binaries such as west/east, colonised/uncolonised and centre/periphery.¹¹

Is it possible to define feminism? Toril Moi arrives at, "both the critique of the oppression and exploitation of women and a vision of freedom, justice, and equality for women".¹² This sits quite well with the Oxford Dictionary of Gender Studies' definition, being the view that, "women and men should be treated equally and the advocacy of women's rights".¹³ Julie Ewington explains that, "the

⁶ Susan Best, "Anger and Repair: The Art and Politics of Judy Watson's 'the holes in the land' (2015)," *Third Text* 32, no.1 (2018): 84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2018.1442191>.

⁷ Aruna D'Souza, "'Float the Boat!': Finding a Place for Feminism in the Museum," in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 66.

⁸ D'Souza, "'Float the Boat!'" 66.

⁹ Laura Mulvey, and Anna Backman Rogers, eds., *Feminisms: Diversity, Difference and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 11, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁰ Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1.

¹¹ Maura Reilly, "Introduction: Toward Transnational Feminisms," in *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, ed. Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2007), 16.

¹² Moi, "Thinking Through Examples," 192.

¹³ Gabriele Griffin, "Feminism," in *Dictionary of Gender Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780191834837.001.0001>.

point always was, still is, the urgent necessity for change".¹⁴ Yet these definitions of feminism as a movement and philosophy do not necessarily align with current feminist artistic practices that can tend towards self-expression of the individual rather than essentialist statements around women's gender sameness. If it is assumed that feminist art is an expression of the feminist movement and philosophy, then does it not follow that feminist art is *bound* to express generalist statements that refer to women as a group? It could be argued that much contemporary art that is considered to be feminist could more accurately be categorised as art made by women about women's experiences.

The contemporary tendency to reduce or expand art made by women about women's experiences to the category of 'feminist art' weakens any power that feminism, or feminist art, might have as a vehicle to incite positive change for women as a group. We arrive at the idea of feminism as being 'everywhere and nowhere'.¹⁵ This, together with the many other problems associated with the unfortunate 'F-word' as mentioned in my introduction, render feminism hostage to what could be termed the 'feminism bind'.¹⁶ The possible existence of a feminism bind is of course problematic as the original aims of radical feminism of the early nineteen-seventies, to achieve gender equality for all women, have not yet been achieved.¹⁷

Unravelling further, is it possible that the two terms 'feminist' and 'women' have become conflated somewhere along the way? When critiqued through a patriarchal lens, this seems possible: art made by men (or non-women) is labelled simply as 'art', whereas art made by women about women must be labelled as 'feminist' for it to be understood and consumed.¹⁸ In other words, have women in their efforts to separate themselves from non-women and to fight for their own autonomy, inadvertently arrived back at a definition of themselves that is located in a limiting patriarchal framework? Do women in fact require themselves as a group to be 'decolonised' from the

¹⁴ Ewington, "Unfinished Feminism, Unceasing Activism," 22.

¹⁵ Moi, "Thinking Through Examples," 193.

¹⁶ Here I am borrowing Terry Smith's idea of the bind. Terry Smith, "The Provincialism Problem," *Artforum* 13, no.1 (September 1974): 135.

¹⁷ "The Global Gender Gap Report (2018)," World Economic Forum, accessed April 29, 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2018>.

¹⁸ Max Delany, "Unfinished Business," in *Unfinished Business: Perspectives on art and feminism*, ed. Paola Balla et al. (Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2017), 13.

patriarchal system and repositioned as a group in their own right in another system, such as egalitarianism?¹⁹ This problem can be understood as the 'patriarchy bind'.

Given the possible existence of these binds and the conflicted and controversial nature of feminism as a movement or movements and of what constitutes feminist art, it begs to ask which contemporary women artists do continue to label their work as 'feminist', and who of those advocates for equality for women and women's rights. I argue that contemporary artists who experience racial or ethnic intersectionality are more likely to feel comfortable working in a feminist framework than others as they are not grappling with the legacy of postcolonial 'guilt'.

Correspondingly, non-intersectional women are more likely to find that their agency in feminist expression is limited or tainted by their 'whiteness'.²⁰ To complicate things even further, not all non-western women are comfortable working in a feminist framework either, as for these women the oppression of racial and ethnic inequality can be a greater burden than that of their gender oppression: these women would rather fight alongside their male counterparts for racial and ethnic equality than stand divided in a battle for gender equality alone.²¹ This could be described as the 'postcolonial intersectionality bind'.

It is worth highlighting that contemporary western women's lack of agency through feminism is problematic because, as mentioned previously, gender equality for all women has not been achieved. Here we see the paradox of the 'privileged white' or 'privileged centre', a persistent and damaging manifestation of thought binaries. How does this play out in practice for western women in Australia? In manifold ways. The gender pay gap has been widening since the year 2000.²²

¹⁹ T. J. Demos, *Decolonising Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 10.

²⁰ Francesca Berry, "Linda Nochlin," in *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers*, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Jonathan Vickery (Oxford: Berg, 2007): 89.

²¹ Alan Petersen, "The body in question: an introduction," in *The Body in Question: A Socio-Cultural Approach* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 7.

²² "Face the Facts: Gender Equality 2018," Australian Human Rights Commission, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/education/fact-facts/face-facts/gender-equality-2018>.

Women are much more likely than men to live below the poverty line in retirement.²³ And, alarmingly, gendered violence towards women is on the rise.²⁴

There is one final problem that Anne Marsh highlights for women, feminists and feminist artists:

Several events converge in the twenty-first century to focus attention on these [difference] debates and they play out in the academy with the shift from women's studies (established in the 1970s) to gender studies and then to queer studies over a period of three decades. As these changes occurred, woman as the subject of critical thinking gradually moved further away from core intellectual business, and in some cases simply disappeared as the subject of investigation in the academy.²⁵

In other words, the subject of 'woman' has been unfashionable in the art institution for some time. It is important to note, however, that due to the impact of the postcolonial intersectionality bind, this problem mostly effects western women as contemporary art's difference and postcolonial debates have positioned the transnational or non-western woman as one of the most fashionable or important subjects of investigation. Maura Reilly makes this position clear when describing the drive behind the major global feminist exhibition of 2007: "*Global Feminisms* is a curatorial project that takes transnational feminisms as its main subject."²⁶

Contemporary women artists from non-western countries and cultures who adopt a feminist framework often produce powerful and exciting work, for two reasons.²⁷ Firstly, there exists the urgent need to address lingering issues of alterity and post-colonialism, and secondly, there exists the persistent need to address issues around the gendered bodies of women.²⁸ This intersectionality

²³ "Older Women's Risk of Homelessness: Background Paper," Australian Human Rights Commission, accessed April 29, 2019, <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/age-discrimination/publications/older-women-s-risk-homelessness-background-paper>.

²⁴ "Not Now, Not Ever: Putting an End to Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland," Queensland Government, Department of Communities, (February 28, 2015), <https://www/csyw.qld.gov.au/campaign/end-domestic-family-violence/about/not-now-not-ever-report>.

²⁵ Anne Marsh, "Art and feminism: Generations and practice," *Artlink* 37, no.4 (December 2017): 12.

²⁶ Reilly, "Introduction: Toward Transnational Feminisms," 16.

²⁷ Linda Nochlin, "Women Artists Then and Now: Painting, Sculpture, and the Image of the Self," in *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, ed. Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2007), 47.

²⁸ Reilly, "Introduction: Toward Transnational Feminisms," 18.

of race or ethnicity with gender is very powerful in a feminist art context and contributes to the 'rewriting of histories' that the contemporary moment champions.²⁹

In this essay I have revealed the paradoxical nature of feminism and feminist art as vehicles to argue for improved conditions for women. For a number of reasons, feminism and feminist art are inconsistently both powerful and powerless to incite positive change for women. Barriers to success include unclear and contradictory definitions of the terms as well as anachronistic or unhelpful associations. Furthermore, talking about women as a group is problematic in today's cultural landscape where ideas of difference and diversity are preferred to those of sameness and gender specificity. In the contemporary moment, the feminism movement finds itself caught in several binds which either weaken or strengthen the agency of its practitioners. The art institution plays a part in influencing the potential power and powerlessness of feminism and feminist art. Despite these problems and challenges, feminism and feminist art remain important modes of expression for those who wish to continue to fight for gender equality for women, transwomen, genderqueer, non-binary and other people. A possible solution to these extensive problems is for society to consider restructuring to an egalitarian framework that champions equality and respect for all people regardless of sex, gender, cultural background, age or ability.

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²⁹ Hans Belting, "From World Art to Global Art: View on a New Panorama," in *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, edited by Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Wiebel (Cambridge, MA: ZKM/MIT Press, 2013): 184.

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