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Making ourselves visible

Jen Kennedy
Binghamton University

Liz Linden
University of Wollongong

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Making ourselves visible

Abstract

Recently, we have been told by a number of prominent feminists from various generations that feminism is dead. We are troubled that this is their perception when we see so much life in it still. In an effort to resuscitate feminist discourse, we want to explore publicly the question: what does feminism look like today?

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Jen Kennedy and Liz Linden

Making Ourselves Visible

Recently, we have been told by a number of prominent feminists from various generations that feminism is dead. We are troubled that this is their perception when we see so much life in it still. In an effort to resuscitate feminist discourse, we want to explore publicly the question: *what does feminism look like today?*

But this question is immediately complicated by a semantic stumbling block. It seems to us that the predominant understanding of “feminism” is coded by a body of works, actions, and texts produced in the 1960s and '70s, such that it has become nearly impossible to talk about contemporary feminism in a way that doesn't tie it to an historical moment. The tendency to treat these decades as a feminist ground zero centralizes the

Authors' Note

This text is part of an ongoing project exploring contemporary feminist practices by creating public platforms for negotiating the problematics of feminism today. It is an excerpt from a longer, in-progress inquiry into blind spots within the feminist movement to contradictions between its politics and their implementation.

discourse and limits its meaningful articulation to a handful of strategies and practices exemplified by so-called “feet in the streets” activism. In other words, the feminist practices and attitudes cultivated in the '60s and '70s have become the gauge by which all subsequent actions have been judged. This produces a hierarchy within feminism that fails to consider its multifaceted relationship to the ground on which it is enacted. In other words, the unidirectional relationship between the past as precedent and the present as its protégé obscures the myriad pressures that led to the dispersal of feminism and, as such, the situation we are confronting today.

A common narrative of second-wave feminism goes something

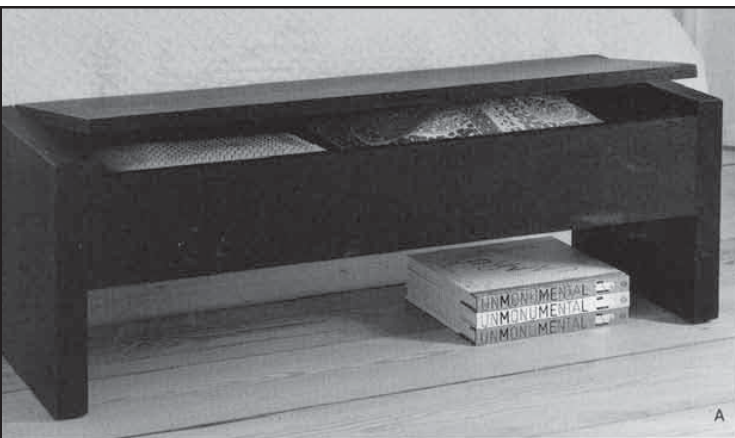
like this: born from the radical movements of the '60s, feminism espoused a transformative political project that deepened and extended our understanding of oppression and subjection by suggesting these things are not always self-evident or even visible, but tightly woven into the fabric of capitalist culture. Bifurcating the New Left's focus on the political economy and class-based oppression, feminism highlighted a multitude of social injustices that had previously been tolerated, overlooked, or naturalized. The wide-reaching and interrelated nature of oppressive structures targeted by feminism led to the development of the movement's “intersectionist” approach. With this, feminism's focus shifted from gender-based oppression located in male persons to patriarchal positions and structures that bare unevenly along lines of not only gender, but also race, class, sexuality, nationality, and so on.

In short, the crux of second-wave feminism was a critique that integrated the economic and political concerns of the New Left with a cultural account of the systemic character of subordination in capitalist culture. In the '60s and '70s feminists secured the movement by identifying and challenging the many oppressive structures in capitalism, an inherently patriarchal system. Paradoxically then, the continued dominance of the '60s and '70s narrative actually works against at least one of the principal goals of second wave feminism, which was to rethink oppression and injustice as a multi-dimensional matrix, by instead turning it into a monastic symbol. As Roslyn Deutsche has pointed out,¹ the unifying impulse of left melancholia is at odds here

with feminism's goals of interrogating unified subjectivities and heroic modes of being.

One can clearly see this at work in statements made at “The Feminist Future,” a sold-out two-day symposium organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York in January of 2007. While the ostensible subject matter of “The Feminist Future” was the state of the movement going forward, an odd foreclosure of that exact topic recurred throughout the event. Statements such as these abounded: “A contemporary understanding of the feminist in art must necessarily look to the late 1960s and 1970s” (Connie Butler),² “I thought I would talk about the way that I saw that women were presented in the visual field...and I'm going to go quite far back in time, to the '60s and '70s, to talk about this” (Martha Rosler),³ or “This paper places the feminist future in dialogue with particular episodes from the feminist past” (Richard Meyer).⁴ We have the disconcerting feeling, in witnessing such approaches, that we are invisible to them.

It is perhaps inevitable that the future should be so far out of reach, given that “The Feminist Future” symposium was following on the heels of a spate of popular feminist retrospectives. “Documenting a Feminist Past” at MoMA, “Part Object, Part Sculpture” at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, and “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution” organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and presented at P.S.1 in New York all focused on feminist art practices from the 1960s on. The opening of “Global Feminisms” (though not a retrospective in and of itself) marked the inaugural exhibition of the Sackler Center



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G | FLORAL TILE WALL ART visit page 64

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NATURAL SLEEP

for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, which was built explicitly as a permanent home for Judy Chicago's 1974-79 installation, *The Dinner Party*. The Sackler Center opened just after "The Feminist Future" and was similarly a touchstone for the symposium's participants. Given that these exhibitions were almost exclusively retrospectives, it is perhaps unsurprising that, despite its name, "The Feminist Future" seemed so hell-bent on addressing the past.

Also problematic at "The Feminist Future" conference was the fact that many speakers pointed to the existence of "The Feminist Future" itself as evidence that feminism was alive and well. A number of the speakers, from Ute Meta Bauer to Linda Nochlin to Catherine de Zegher, used this event to bolster their claims that the future of feminism was flourishing, a logical fallacy that seems best summed up by a bastardization of Descartes: *I am, therefore I will be*. By treating this rather suspect evidence as proof, the future is endlessly foreclosed by these always-prioritized preliminaries and self-congratulating modes.

There is, therefore, no mystery in why so many of our peers describe themselves as post-feminist, or not feminist at all when the dominant use of "feminism" is explicitly defined by the past-tense. At "Reconsidering Feminism," another MoMA symposium that took place in November 2007, Sharon Hayes explained her ambivalence towards the persistence of the word "feminism" despite her continued use of it, "I feel like what a movement does is catalyzes energy and grabs it and

holds it and allows it to run somewhere and I don't feel that is happening now under the name 'feminist movement.'"⁵ It is ironic that today we find ourselves hampered by the richness of our language at hand, which has not been divorced from its historical roots and imperatives. It is a strange paradox that this richness has become our present poverty, keeping us from moving forward, empowered by our presence in our moment. When does that retrospective moment justly end and, more importantly, how are we to recognize ourselves, our practices, in a movement that valorizes the backward glance?

Recognizing the logical paradoxes created by these critical frameworks prioritizing past over present, we began to try to create our own frameworks, which specifically and artificially limited feminist discourse to the present in an effort to sidestep the problems of the retrospective gaze. Our first effort was a project called "Back to the Future: an Experiment in Contemporary Feminist Practice," which was a town-hall meeting held at the Whitney Museum on the evening of February 21, 2009. We framed our event as a public experiment in the suspension of disbelief, a language-game, with the goal of using a provisional, substitutive vocabulary to rehabilitate some of the more inflexible elements of the feminist phrasebook. However one thing that became immediately clear by limiting our discourse to the present was how many equally problematic and patriarchal effects are at work in our artificially contemporary feminism as well. One participant at "Back to the Future" pointed to issues of female-

on-female aggression, while another mentioned studies showing that female bosses consistently promote their male employees over their female ones. "Back to the Future" made it clear that the barriers to new feminist practice we perceived are not only a result of the dominance of the 1960s and '70s in feminism, but that they are also a byproduct of the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism. As a result, we have continued to develop our project across platforms addressing the continued and problematic influence of neoliberalism's priorities in a feminist frame as well.

Despite the growing currency of terms like "post-feminism," which suggest that this movement is over or no longer necessary, it is evident that feminism's successes are thus far largely ideological. That is, while feminist critiques of pay equity, reproductive rights, and poverty to name a few, are widely accepted, few institutions have actually made material changes to reflect this shift in cultural mentality. As one participant at "Back to the Future" explained, "What I'm kind of worried about...is that there is sort of a 'life-styling' of feminism and that the rhetoric parallels the recycling sort of rhetoric, like showing somebody that you brought your own bag [and you get credit for being green]."⁶ The problematics of "life-styling" imply that we need to put pressure on institutions to synchronize concretely with changing attitudes and realize feminist demands. But that alone is not enough. Once again, many of the injustices and oppressive structures we face have become invisible, including the patriarchal pressures within feminism

itself. Indeed, among other things, many of the gains made by identity politics have now been recuperated to bolster the individualistic agenda of neoliberalism and increasing gender equality in the workforce obfuscates wage repression and actual pay inequity. Moreover, the signification of the very term "feminism" has been reassigned. No longer connected to a living politics, feminism now represents a vague notion of "the good" that is associated with combating gender inequality. In the absence of visible—which is to say recognized-as-such—feminist activity, our movement has become moribund.

Obviously it is distressing to find evidence of patriarchal priorities working in the most activist ends of the feminist spectrum, and yet it is utterly important that if this is so, we confront this issue directly. In order to reactivate the promise of feminism we must be aware of our implication in these structures, and our investment in behaviors that actually work against us, be they from earlier feminist moments or the neoliberal playbook. We must also be realistic and recognize that the values operating in feminism today once served an ideological purpose in uniting a disparate movement, at a moment when order was the priority. We would not have had the insights of the revisionist critiques of the 1980s without the protests of the '60s to inform them, so while we seem problematically placed in this moment, given the apparent invisibility of our current gestures and activisms to the Feminist Movement at large, we must also be frank enough to question if would we be worse off without the past (over)shadowing us.

And of course the seamless narrative of feminist history is partly the product of memory itself, and the very human urge to encapsulate experience in an ever more nostalgic way. This being the case, we must find positive, progressive ways to use our imperfect but inevitable impulse to abridge memory. As Friedrich Jameson explains, “there is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude, cannot furnish as adequate a revolutionary stimulus as any other.”⁷ In addition, we must recognize and support the courageous feminists who participated in the groundswell of the '60s and '70s who have gone out of their way to acknowledge that those moments felt messy and chaotic at the time, not like a “movement” at all. It is to these feminists that we owe a great debt, for their reinvestment of the first wave with some of the critical detail removed by distance.

And that is the imperative that our invisibility brings; we must find ways to transmit our movement forward by using all our existing advantages while creating new ones for ourselves as well. We must develop techniques to incorporate a more diverse set of voices and methodologies to help bear the weight of our movement in its forward vector. We must describe and preserve our movement in a way that does not retroactively erase difference, but instead makes it visible for all to see. We have been told that feminism cannot afford this diversity, that differences dilute our message and make us weaker. We have been told that we must move forward in a singu-

lar direction, in a unified manner, for our movement to be seen. These voices tell us, again, that the path to equality is finite, narrow, and fixed. These voices sound eerily familiar; let's not let them be our own.

¹ Rosalyn Duetsche, *Not-Forgetting: Mary Kelly's Love Songs*, Grey Room 24 (2006): 27-37.

² Connie Butler, invited speaker, “The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in Visual Arts,” 34 min., 32 sec., sound recording; from Museum of Modern Art MultiMedia, MP3, <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/76/157> (accessed on May 25, 2009).

³ Martha Rosler, invited speaker, “The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in Visual Arts,” 35 min., 27 sec., sound recording; from Museum of Modern Art MultiMedia, MP3, <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/76/157> (accessed on May 25, 2009).

⁴ Richard Meyer, invited speaker, “The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in Visual Arts,” 28 in., 10 sec., sound recording; from Museum of Modern Art MultiMedia, MP3, <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/76/157> (accessed on May 25, 2009).

⁵ Sharon Hayes, invited panelist, “Reconsidering Feminism: A Year in Review,” 2 hours, 2 min., 4 sec., sound recording; from MoMA Think Lectures, MP3, [feed://www.moma.org/visit/podcasts/feed_thinkmodern.xml](http://www.moma.org/visit/podcasts/feed_thinkmodern.xml) (accessed on May 10, 2009).

⁶ Anonymous participant, “Back to the Future: An Experimental Conversation on Contemporary Feminism,” Whitney Museum of American Art, February 21, 2009; transcript from www.contemporaryfeminism.com (accessed on August 28, 2009).

⁷ Friedrich Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947): 82.

Pages 18-21: Liz Linden, *Unmonumental* (for Alphabet Prime), 2009

Ginny Kollak

True Lies, Tired Hedonists

Don't coop yourself up all day in the library. It is a perfectly lovely afternoon. The air is exquisite. There is a mist upon the woods, like the purple bloom upon a plum. Let us go and lie on the grass and smoke cigarettes and enjoy Nature.

The first lines of Oscar Wilde's *The Decay of Lying* break my heart. It's all Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby's fault, and though it is indeed a perfectly lovely afternoon, the purple bloom upon the plum I had with breakfast will have to do for now.

Goldin+Senneby, as the two Stockholm-based artists call themselves, have found a way to rope me into their web of production. True, I may have entangled myself, telling them that I had been reading some Wilde and saw a few connecting threads between his text and *Headless*, their own ongoing project. And I did say that I thought I might write something about it. However it started, I'm now in the library, commissioned to write an article at the behest of the artists, who were invited to contribute to a new journal of contemporary art.

Let's start with the most superficial of similar circumstances: Oscar Wilde's Vivian has been writing an article, too. *The Decay of Lying*, from 1891, takes the form of a dialogue between two invented characters: the rather flamboyant writer Vivian and the more malleable Cyril, who is alternately scandalized and amused by his friend's acrobatic criticism. Vivian presents his splashy theory to Cyril and the reader in the draft of an article, also called “The Decay of Lying,” written for the charmingly named *Retrospective Review*, journalistic arm of the society of Tired Hedonists (of which Vivian is a proud member). Under this guise, Wilde develops his own ideas about the status of art and aesthetics in the Victorian era. Vivian's article—ostensibly a protest against the stifling trend of realism in art and literature—begins