

The Path to Womanhood: An Analytical and Historical Study on Feminism and Feminist Art History

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Abstract

Throughout history, the negligence towards women and prohibition of practicing their basic rights have cast a shadow on their achievements and triumphs. The lack of female-oriented narrative and acknowledgment of their presence in pivotal events in history misrepresented them as the inferior of the sexes. With their lives dictated to them by the ruling powers, and the opportunity to be considered as part of their respective societies gone astray, women were not permitted to develop a sense of identity and individuality for centuries. However, the mid-nineteenth century marked a revolutionary period in women's history through a movement that would later establish substantial changes in their lives, known as the Feminist movement. To have their voices heard and messages spread, feminist artists became the main advocates of feminism and through their artistic innovations and transparency towards womanhood, they shed light on matters history failed to correspond to until the 1970s. To be able to understand the chronological context of these pivotal changes, this paper aims to give a historical overview and response to the following questions: 1- what is feminism? 2- how did Feminist art come to be?, and 3- how did feminism and Feminist art change the conception of art in the art world? To answer the former questions, the author aims to use the qualitative historical-analytical research method through the study of historical and theoretical literary works in English of the said period collected from libraries in Hungary and other open resources.

Keywords: Women; History; Liberation, Art history; Women's Rights

1. Introduction

Through a brief overview of art history, one acknowledges the unmasked absence of the female presence until the late 20th century, and if encountered one, the female artist's accomplishments are not as highly regarded as her male counterpart's. A number of renowned female artists in art history were either of prestigious backgrounds or had connections with prominent male figures of higher status. The late 1960s marked a revolutionary era for women and female artists as they publicly began expressing their ire

and disapproval of the unprecedented erroneous misrepresentation of the female sex. By creating art through their perspective, female artists displayed their fervor to depict womanhood and femininity through their respective lens. By establishing institutions, organizing events, and holding exhibitions, female artists raised awareness for women and gave birth to a revolutionary art movement, known as the Feminist Art.

Despite its rapid international growth, interest, and acknowledgment, many critics expressed their condemnation and found faults in a movement that aimed to raise awareness for women's liberation and rights globally. Some of these criticisms were issued by women of minority who believed the Western conception of feminism and feminist art lacked inclusion of all women. According to them, Western feminism displayed favoritism towards white women and failed to understand the needs of those who were not part of the mentioned category. Due to this, remeasurements and alternations were required for this movement to be approved and practiced universally.

2. The Alliance of Women: Brief History of the Feminist Movements

Feminism refers to a set of sociopolitical and philosophical ideologies and movements that aspired to corroborate and promote gender equality on all political, economic, individual, and social platforms. The social and political imbalances halted women from practicing their basic rights and despite their continuous efforts, the route of achieving their goal has come to a standstill by the pressures forced upon them (Pollock, 1999). The eventful July of 1848 gave birth to the first-wave of the Feminist movement, and with the occurred changes afterwards, societies became witness of two additional Feminist movements that welcomed noteworthy benefits and deviations to women's lives.

Throughout history, many scholars studied the lives of many early inspiring female figures and attempted to find the roots and origins of the feminist phenomenon. Marguerite Johnson, professor of Classics at the University of Newcastle, claims Sappho, the Archaic poet of ancient Greece, to be the first acknowledged feminist figure in world history. Johnson states that the "Suffragettes, and feminists living in the diaspora of Paris' Left Bank championed Sappho," and that she became their inspiration to use literature and poetry as their tool for protest (Johnson, 2022). To support her statement, Ellen Greene, professor of Classics at the University of Oklahoma, believes the Greek poet depicted a unique, yet controversial image of femininity and the female experience through her works, and shed light on taboo topics related to womanhood that were both explicit and condemned to be openly discussed in the public sphere. She states: "Sappho constructs erotic experience outside male assumptions about dominance and submission (Greene, 1999)."

Several historians indicate Hildegard of Bingen and Christine of Pisan of the medieval era to be the first feminists to declare women's rights. Abigail Favale, professor at the University of Notre Dame (Church of Life), states that Hildegard of Bingen was one of the few nuns who advocated gender equality, and her "...theology, following sacred scripture,

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emphatically affirms that both woman and man carry the imago Dei, which endows each sex with equal dignity before God (Favale, 2018).” Regarding Christine of Pisan, Bonnie A. Birk conducted a study on her life and advocacy for women’s rights and states: “It has been noticed by many commentators that a number of the female literary figures Christine created had an unmistakably deified aura about them (Birk, 2005)”, and due to her creations, she created public awareness on the female presence in society.

Despite the renowned history and undeniable efforts of the formerly mentioned figures, contemporary history has introduced a set of additional noteworthy figures such as Olympe de Gouge, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Jane Austen as the frontiers of the Feminist movement (Rampton, 2015). The mentioned figures challenged their male counterpart by questioning their moralistic standpoint on women as entities and fought for their rights and needs that were verboten to attain. However, during the course of history, treatment towards women rarely altered and they only began witnessing conspicuous changes in their rights during the late nineteenth century.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the first-wave of feminism transpired in the United States. The participants of this movement declared to be treated equally as their male counterparts and aimed to expand the circle of opportunities for women, with an emphasis on suffrage (Caughie, 2010). The movement was officially introduced during the 1848 Seneca Falls Conference; an event with the attendance of three hundred men and women, united in support of women’s independence and egalitarianism. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the leading figure of the Feminist movement, wrote the *Declaration of Seneca Falls* and defined the philosophic and strategic ideologies that resulted in the triumph of the movement, hence resulting in attaining voting rights for women (Wellman, 2004).

The earlier stages of the feminist movement were accompanied by a number of uninvited obstacles and controversies. The first issue was its concurrent emergence with two other significant movements: the temperance movement and the abolitionist movement (Knight, 1976). A substantial number of people argued the other two held more importance in comparison to the feminist movement. They claimed the latter solely focuses on women, but the temperance movement and the abolitionist movement had the possibility of establishing an ameliorating future for the majority of people, hence the need to be prioritized.

Their rights being regarded as less of importance encouraged feminists to soar their advocacy and their despondency and dissatisfaction with the public perception of the more deserving of rights, became their motivation to continue fighting for their rights. Among the many who spoke up for their rights was the African-American Sojourner Truth. Through her impactful speech, entitled *Ain’t I Woman?*, she shared the struggles she had to endure in an environment disregarding her both as a woman and human. Due to their religious background, men believed in the inferiority of women with the sole reason that their lord, Jesus Christ, was a man. In part of her speech, Truth questions men’s intellect and morality, by stating:

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“Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as many rights as men, ‘cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him (Truth, 2016).”

However, despite their empowering words, people marginalized the needs of women and the protesting community was harshly criticized for their unladylike mannerisms and lack of public awareness.

There were many perceptual conflicts regarding women’s participation in the political hemisphere, for instance voting and candidacy. These divergences resulted in a challenge of intellectual differences between men and women as they battled through their respective views to prove the inaccuracy of the other party. Many feminist advocates claimed women were spiritually superior to men and their participation in the social arena could strengthen social conduct and the democratic system of their country; Their ideologic belief was criticized by the opposing party.

The feminists’ continuous efforts to attain their rights brought forth the second and third-waves of the earlier feminist movement. The 1960s gave mass recognition to the feminist movement, due to its simultaneous occurrence with the anti-war and civil rights protests and the rising self-consciousness of a number of marginalized communities around the world. “The New Left was rising and the voice of the second-wave was increasingly radical (Rampton, 2015).” Sexual identity and individual rights were the dominant concerning issues of the second-wave, and the participants of this movement devoted their time and determination on passing the *Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution*, assuring social and gender balance and equality regardless of sex (National Archives, 2022).

The Miss America Pageant held in 1968 and 1969 in the Atlantic City, was heavily criticized by the feminists due to its commercial use of women and misrepresentation of their sex and gender. The feminists argued that women were not tools for entertainment and should not be depicted as the inferior latter of the gender spectrum. “The 1968 uprising was conceived by a radical feminist named Carol Hanisch, who popularized the phrase ‘personal is political’. Disrupting the beauty contest, she thought, in the summer of that year, just might be the way to bring the fledgling Women’s Liberation Movement into the public arena (Gay, 2018).” To ridicule the event, a number of feminists based in New York, notably known as the Redstockings, “staged a counter pageant in which they crowned a sheep as Miss America and threw repressive artifacts related to women such as bras, high-heels, makeup cosmetics, and whatever that was forced on women to use to look presentable into the trashcan (Magee, 2021).” This event would later mark the earlier stages of Performance art; a significant art style mainly practiced by feminist artists.

Due to monotonous sexist mindset of the society, the first-wave was not as abundant as the latter ones to come. The significant change in people’s perception on political and societal affairs was the main key to success for the second movement to be considered by the

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society. However, akin to the first-wave, the second-wave occurred simultaneously with two other eminent public protests; the Black Power movement, and the efforts to end the Vietnam War (Jenkins, 2021). Considering the importance of the latter protests, feminists were unable to attain the desired outcome, and needed to strategize further to be able to accomplish their aim.

The unequal treatment resulted in the formation of female-based organizations, Consciousness-Raising groups, and publications, solely focused on women empowerment and debatable topics on womanhood and their rights as social citizens (Blakemore, 2021). In comparison to the former wave, the second and third waves of feminism were gradually more hypothetical and were based on the synthesis of neo-Marxism and psychoanalytical ideologies. Feminists “began to associate the subjugation of women with broader critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and the woman’s role as wife and mother. Sex and gender were differentiated—the former being biological, and the latter a social construct that varies culture-to-culture and over time (Rampton, 2015).”

The third-wave of feminism occurred during the early 1990s, and it exceeded to the 2010s. Intersectionality, reproductive rights, individual empowerment, violence against women, and sexual liberation were some of the crucial topics of discussions that feminist activists took the initiative to resolve during the current wave. Women from different ethnic and religious backgrounds found their voice owing to this wave, and through their involvement and inclusivity, a diverse range of narratives on the topic of female struggle in a male-dominated world were shared with their respective societies (Baumgardner, et al, 2000).

While the first-wave was driven and authorized by a limited population of women, the latter waves welcomed the inclusion and involvement of various backgrounds, beliefs, and colors. Through the spread of empowering and promising messages to women, including those in developing countries, the latter waves demanded equal opportunities for all women and sought sisterhood and unity within all communities. The feminists stated that when it comes to gender equality, race, class, and faith are all correlated with each other and equality should set no limits for those advocating for change (Veenstra, 2011).

Despite the notable changes introduced to the public through the latter waves, R. Claire Snyder, assistant professor, and scholar, believes that the third-wave was more significant, because of “... three important tactical moves that respond to a series of theoretical problems within the second-wave. First, in response to the collapse of the category of ‘women,’ the third-wave foregrounds personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multi-perspectival version of feminism (Snyder, 2008).” The second matter in which she explains, revolves around the postmodernist phenomenon, that “embrace[s] multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification (Snyder, 2008).” To conclude her statement, she believes the third-wave is more open and dynamic as it “emphasizes an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of the feminist political (Snyder, 2008).”

3. Feminist Art: Visual Representation of Women

Inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's declaration in her renowned book, *The Second Sex*, the second-wave feminists aimed to advocate further for their rights through creating groups and campaigns. In her book, de Beauvoir (2011) states that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman", implying the pressure implemented on women to follow a strict guideline to become socially accepted. To remonstrate against the political system that undervalued women as the correspondent half of the society, women were awakened from the prolonged patriarchal slumber and had the fervent drive to change the social structure for the benefit of their sex and gender. As previously mentioned, due to the simultaneous occurrence of other protests, feminists continuously strategized their route to triumph, however, one approach inclined them closer to their aim: involvement of artists, hence giving birth to the feminist art.

De Beauvoir's study influenced many artists' mindset regarding women's inclusion in the social sphere. If women's lives were not the product of any inflexible natural law, then they could be remade, updated, changed, strengthened, and improved (de Beauvoir, 2011). These transitions require ingenuity, dedication, and willpower; behavioral patterns that most artists recognize to this day (Meagher, 2019). "As feminist artists took up the tenets of women's liberation, they found in it a rationale and inspiration for a new art practice (Artspace Editions, 2017)." In contrary to the use of art by the civil rights and anti-war activists to promote their political stance and arguments, feminist artists used art as their arena for interrogation into both the political and personal amendment; Art became both exceptionally receptive to political clarification and productive of it.

From protest at the dearth of presence and inclusion of female artists in galleries and museums to restoration of the degraded languages of decorative and craft-based arts, the first segment of Feminist art became a liberal and vehement art practice, and was specifically concerned with altering art history and techniques to include female artists in the artistic and historical narrative (Gouma-Peterson, 1987). Judy Chicago, one of the earlier feminist artists and the pioneer of Feminist art, known for her unorthodox artistry, designed an institution for the Feminist Art Program at Fresno, California, in 1970, and then, with the collaboration of Miriam Schapiro, they established another institution at CalArts in Valencia, California, in 1971.

The first installation dedicated to art through the feminist perspective was a well-publicized exhibition entitled *Womanhouse*, which was unveiled to the public in 1972. Organized by Faith Wilding, Miriam Schapiro, and Judy Chicago, along with Feminists Art Program students, such as painter and theorist, Mira Schor, twenty-four women refurbished a dwelling in Los Angeles (Musteata, 2015). *Womanhouse* celebrated what had been viewed as trivial and provocative, even taboo to some extent at the time: cosmetics, tampons, linens, bathing caps, and underwear grew to grow to be the material for excessive art (Musteata, 2015). As the most impactful feminist installation,

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Womanhouse not only shed light on the important aspects of womanhood, but on the united and influential delivery of female artistry, a matter highly disregarded by the art scene. Chicago and Schapiro's acknowledgment of the absence of women in art history and efforts to alter the course of it, invited many young artists to become the change they wanted to witness.

Many feminist students, such as Gabriele Schor and Faith Wilding from the exhibition and the Feminist Art Program, discovered their path to having vital and significant careers as artists and educators on feminist art. Schapiro and Chicago remained key figures of the Feminist art movement in the United States throughout the 1970s and much of the 1980s and continued the path of exposing the public to the female-oriented art and experience. In fact, in 1973, the development of *The Women's Building* in Los Angeles continued to strengthen and expand the research that Schapiro and Chicago had begun (Gerhard, 2011).

The establishment of *A.I.R.* (Artists-In-Residence) in New York, in 1972, offered an exhibition venue for feminist artists and their works in the turbulent art scene of the region (Meyer, 2019). One of the pivotal efforts of *A.I.R.* was conducting a multitude of vital talks in addition to showing work, which helped to create a framework for Feminist art that represented the power of the academy, industry, and the studio. Altogether, these institutional efforts helped create a new space for the development of feminism and art (Douglas, 2017). Being recognized by the academia as an art form and movement was an advantageous opportunity for the women's rights advocates to get their message of equality across.

Although, a noticeable number of the art created during the US feminist movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, appeared to concentrate on the female anatomy and sexuality, the art that preceded it, specifically those created in the United Kingdom, appeared to be grounded in discussions on psychoanalysis and Marxism (Munro, 1960). *The Post-Partum Document* by artist and thinker, Mary Kelly, bids to transform female art-making into an overt discussion of Lacanian (and thus inevitably Freudian) ideologies of sexual distinction. Kelly's installation created a space for a radical and intellectually arduous interpretation of motherhood, using her son's diapers as visual traces of the continuity and discontinuity between mother/creator and child/object (McCloskey, 2013).

In her 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey states that she uses psychoanalysis as her political weapon. Akin to Kelly, Mulvey's art is both hypothetical and pragmatic (Mulvey, 1975). Joining forces with Peter Wollen, film-theorist and filmmaker, Mulvey created a series of movies through avant-garde filmmaking techniques that intersected with the strong and interesting work of other feminist filmmakers in Europe, Britain, and the United States. Experimenting with camera rotation, narrative deconstruction, and the fetishized allure of the female screen star, the artist managed to represent the misrepresentation of women in the media and establish a unique set of characteristics to her work aesthetic.

4. Feminist Art: A Multi-Disciplinary Movement

One of the key factors that issued Feminist art to communicate prudently with the audience is its dynamism. In comparison to the other art movements, Feminist art was not conservative on practicing a particular form, design, or style to create art. The dynamic nature of the movement allowed feminist artists to explore and incorporate elements from a diverse range of art movements into their art to represent their visual mindset. Conceptual art, Body art, and Performance art were some of the rejuvenated styles that were commonly used by the feminist artists to narrate the nature of women and the desire to end gender discrimination.

From the 1970s, Performance art began being associated with and recognized as the principal art style to represent feminist art and artists. Performing in public or private spaces became a clear venue for female artists to convey tangible and emotional messages to the public to uncover the female-experience (Forte, 1988). Due to its direct encounter and interaction with the audience, Performance art preserved the task at a deeply intimate point, as there was little distinction between the performers and the art itself. The audience became part of the art, and had the opportunity to candidly experience the artist's biosphere. Body painting was another art practice that became a favored instrument for the feminist artists due to its ability to create a communicative path with the audience that was unambiguously linked to the performer's personal sphere. In Feminist art, the body and performance art frequently interrelated, as both blur the lines between the performer and the observer, the art and the creator (Forte, 1988).

Performance art and body painting were not the only art practices to find meaning within the scope of Feminist art. Video art, another style commonly practiced by feminist artists, appeared only a few years before experimental art and offered a platform that had no previous background developed by male artists, unlike painting or sculpture, that were previously dominated by the prominent artistic male figures of the industry (Douglas, 2017). The video was perceived as a stimulation capable of putting television production resources into public's hands, which would benefit the Feminist art movement with immense opportunities for attracting a more diverse and larger audience. Due to its publicized nature, video art provided female artists to attract direct attention to the topic of social injustice and discrimination experienced by women. The *Woman's Building* supported the *Los Angeles Women's Video Center (LAWVC)* which offered unparalleled accessibility for women artists to the costly modern equipment needed to create video art (Douglas, 2017).

5. Conclusion

In the late 1960s, the Feminist art movement began in the midst of a broader social revolution against prevailing norms. The purpose of such initiative was to produce art that reflected the lives and experiences of women. It also sought to give women more visibility and recognition within art history and the art community.

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Some of the renowned pioneers of the Feminist movement are the Performance artist, Yoko Ono, Vivienne Binns with her female genitalia depictions, and the pivotal figure, Judy Chicago, who made many declarations through her installation arts (Forte, 1988). The Feminist art movement was synonymous with the acceptance of alternative art forms, as artists sought to challenge the prevailing perception of the conception of art. Through the adoption and adaptations of new forms, such as fashion, performance, film, and sculpture, female artists have broadened the concept of art beyond the male-dominated mainstream media (Gouma-Peterson, 1987). One could argue that academic art practices, such as painting and sculpting, were deliberately unheeded by female artists. The works of feminist artists created a revolution in the art world that became one of the most vital impacts on current art styles such as Decorative, Conceptual, and Performance arts.

Feminist art aims to make the viewer question society's societal and political standards and expectations in hopes of initializing changes in attitudes towards women, thereby ending sexism and promoting gender equality. The main reasons why Feminist art was created in the first place remains unchanged. What has changed and evolved over the decades is one's perception of understanding and communicating the matter with their audience.

In her 2003 essay, *Looking Back to the Future: Essays on Art, Life and Death*, Rosemary Betterton argues that the traditional feminine ideology in literature needs to respond to modern forms of communication since our society has evolved comprehensively since the late 20th century (Betterton, 2003). The emergence of social media has contributed to major shifts in connectivity, hence providing an effortless access to feminist education and art works. The next generation of female and feminist artists will perceive matters in accordance with their time and would have more diversity in terms of tools and equipment to convey their messages to the public.

The next generation, similarly to the formers, could benefit from infusing the old art practices with the modern instead of dismissing them, just to start the chapter from scratch. As far as art creation is concerned, exploring new territories and merging traditional mediums with new methods or present mediums with classical narratives, could provide one with better opportunities to spread the words of gender equality and end sexism altogether.

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