

Yet Another 'Feminist' Perspective on Art History?

Jacqueline Sim

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Jacqueline.Sim@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

The Art of Feminism: Images that Shaped the Fight for Equality provides a chronological, thematically well-structured overview of feminist history and the different roles artists and artworks played and play in it. The volume illustrates art history from a female perspective and addresses questions of race, class and sexuality in different historical contexts. It coherently and consistently provides a platform for marginalized artists, creating intersectional awareness of the inequalities characteristic (not only) of the art scene.

Schon wieder ein ‚feministischer‘ Blick auf die Kunstgeschichte?

German Abstract:

The Art of Feminism: Images that Shaped the Fight for Equality gibt nicht nur einen chronologischen, sondern auch einen thematisch gut strukturierten Überblick über die Geschichte des Feminismus. Dabei werden verschiedenen Rollen diverser Künstlerinnen und Werke anhand von zahlreichen Darstellungen illustriert, wobei stets auch Fragen nach Herkunft, Klasse und Sexualität kontextualisiert und diskutiert werden. Der von Helena Reckitt herausgegebene Band ist somit eine konsistente Plattform für immer noch marginalisierte Künstlerinnen.

How to cite:

Sim, Jacqueline: "Yet Another 'Feminist' Perspective on Art History? [Review of: Reckitt, Helena: *Art of Feminism: Images That Shaped the Fight for Equality*. London: Tate Publishing, 2019.]." In: KULT_online 63 (2021).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2021.1188>



Yet Another 'Feminist' Perspective on Art History?

Jacqueline Sim

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Reckitt, Helena. *Art of Feminism. Images That Shaped the Fight for Equality*. London: Tate Publishing, 2019. 272 pages, 30,00 GBP. ISBN: 978-1-84976-649-4.

The increasing acceptance of feminism in Western culture has not only led to significant improvements for women in the past decades. It has also turned feminism into something that can be marketed in almost every area of culture. Art is one such area, and a consequence of this development is that the label 'feminism' is sometimes only that, when it comes to exhibitions and publications – the content does not always match the label. Tate Publishing's *The Art of Feminism: Images that Shaped the Fight for Equality* is very clear when it comes to the label. But does the content keep the title's promise?

The Art of Feminism is a collaborative project. Edited by Helena Reckitt, who is not only a Reader in Curating at the Goldsmiths College but also one of the leading global experts in visual arts, it consists of three parts written by Lucinda Gosling, Hilary Robinson, and Amy Tobin. A preface by Maria Balshaw, Director of the Tate, and a foreword by Xabier Arakistain, a feminist curator in Spain, complete the volume. The three parts are ordered chronologically, describing developments from 1857 to today. Remarkably, *The Art of Feminism* is not merely a collection and discussion of artworks. It is also a history of feminism. The central aim of the volume, as Balshaw puts it in her preface, is to "[set] out [...] the, as yet, incomplete story of feminist emancipation" (p. 6).

This story begins with the first part, "Suffrage and Beyond," covering the period from 1857 until 1949. Lucinda Gosling, its author, is specialized not only in visual art, but also in the role of women in the world wars. She starts with a brief analysis of how art turned from a "[...] simpl[e] part of an arsenal of feminine accomplishments women were expected to learn [...]" (p. 16) into an accepted career path. Gosling then discusses the suffragist movement. In this context, she gives insight into the movement's color identity: "Purple as everyone knows is the royal colour, it stands for the royal blood that flows in the veins of every suffragette, their

instinct of freedom and dignity ... white stands for purity in private and public life ... green is the colour of hope and the emblem of spring” (p. 41). This is illustrated with a great selection of visual examples from flyers and posters. After describing the different roles women had in World War I, Gosling dedicates the final chapter to the new kind of woman emerging in the early 20th century, a woman who is “pushing [b]oundaries” and “celebrating [d]ifference” (p. 75) by adapting stereotypical masculine looks and confident behavior. As a role model for that, Gosling sees Polish artist Tamara de Lempicka: “[s]exually confident, defiantly provocative, and financially self-sufficient, [...] the new woman of the 1920s made flesh” (p. 84).

In the second part, “Defining Feminism,” Amy Tobin, curator and lecturer at the Department of History of Art at the University of Cambridge, examines the timespan between 1960 and 1988 with a focus on socio-political topics. She develops a colorful and diverse history of women’s rights history. By focusing on powerful dynamics leading to productive activism and not on the oppression women were facing, she gives women an active instead of a passive role and empowers them as subjects of historical developments. She also makes clear that the activism she describes already shows intersectional awareness – art collectives like the See Red Women’s Workshop raised consciousness not only of women, but also LGBTQIA+ and POC issues. This collective, like many others, had the goal to teach and share artistic skills and also “provided service printing for women’s, LGBTQ[IA+], black, and community groups” (p. 119). In contrast to the other parts of the volume, some subchapters are written by other authors, like Flora Duster. She describes the so called “Sex Wars” of the 1980s and shows in her selection of works how artists have succeeded in breaking binary stereotypes in a new and inspirational way without falling into patriarchal patterns. While these subchapters are illuminating, they interrupt the reading flow. It seems like Tobin’s part is conceptualized as a continuous narrative, and the different voices with their different tones and writing styles break up this narrative.

Hilary Robinson, Professor of Feminism, Art, and Theory at Loughborough University closes the volume with the final Part, “Redefining Feminism,” addressing the years from 1989 until the present. In this part, the intersectional issues already touched on receive more attention. Robinson is also more focused on particular artists than Gosling and Tobin, resulting in a change of tone. She contrasts four types of feminist: public, personal, citizen, and activist.

Each of these types is again categorized into two to three models, and each model is represented by an individual artist. One such artist is pop icon Beyoncé, a “Public Feminist” who “brings the message to the Masses” (see p. 192). While there might be better examples of “Public Feminists,” Robinson argues convincingly enough that elements of her performances, such as the use of an audio section from a TEDx talk of Nigerian feminist and author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, make Beyoncé an appropriate example at least.

An increasing number of books is being published about Feminist Art, but *The Art of Feminism* is much more than just a catalogue collecting the works typically linked to feminism, and the feminism in the title is not just a label for marketing purposes. With over 300 images on 272 pages in high quality and aesthetically pleasing format, it is a successful and intersectionally aware attempt at making female artists and their work visible in their historical context. What makes *The Art of Feminism* stand out among other feminist books is that it is both: a book about feminist art and a history of feminism. It can be looked at selectively for the art depicted in it, it can be read in its entirety for the historical overview of feminism it contains, and everything in between. Because of the independence of the chapters, it can be read in chronological order as well as in individual parts.

As feminism can be a very personal subject and mean different things for different people, reading *The Art of Feminism* can be an invitation to get inspired by certain perspectives from different centuries, to engage with them and come to one’s own, maybe different, definition of feminism. More or less independent of this process, the book invites its readers to be carried and blown away by the works of art accompanying feminist movements through the years. Either way, *The Art of Feminism* can be read by anyone who wants to know more about feminism, history, or the history of art – with or without preexisting knowledge. Even those well acquainted with the topic can find interesting new artists and expand their knowledge.