

In the art museum, on the subway, online, and in fashion magazines, we are constantly confronted with images of the female body accompanied by a range of understandings and discussions about feminism, women's rights, and the perception and reception of the female body in modern culture. Although this is not too different from past eras, fighting for women's rights has been a constant, especially since the inception of Second Wave feminism in the 60s and 70s along with the introduction of, and later failure to ratify, the Equal Rights amendment from 1972-1982.

Recently, a discussion of a new generation of feminism has arisen, adding to a part of feminist discourse referred to as the "internet age" of feminism, activism, and art. In our new information age of technology and life, information is easily accessible to most, making online discussions of politics and philosophy more prevalent than ever. With these new platforms for discussion, online activism has drastically increased. From early examples, like infamous hacker group *Anonymous*, to more accessible websites like [change.org](http://change.org). Platforms for feminist discourse have also sprung up on websites like *Feministing*, *Bitch Media*, and *Rookie Mag*, a website for teen girls that encourages young feminist discourse and celebrates teen hood and identity through art, music, and articles.

With the introduction of an essentially popular, mainstream, version of feminism in magazines like *Rookie*, the understandings of what constitutes feminism is changing. Now, what seems to be most prevalent in the cultures of high school and young women, in fashionable media, leading to the summation of feminism being assimilated into more palatable mainstream ideals, is a new concept deemed "neo-feminism". But before we get too ahead of ourselves with feminist discourse and analysis, a working definition of feminism, beyond just the basic equality of men and women, must be put into place.

In Helen Molesworth's essay *How to Install Art as a Feminist*, she chooses Marxist historian Eli Zaretsky's definition to aptly describe feminism as it pertains to art. "Feminism aspires to 'revolutionize the deepest and most universal aspects of life—those of personal relations, love, egotism, sexuality, and our inner emotional lives.' I like this definition; it helps me remember that part of what I'm after, as a feminist, is the fundamental reorganization of the institutions that govern us, as well as those that we, in turn, govern."<sup>1</sup> What Molesworth and Zaretsky mean by this is that feminism isn't only the basic equality of men and women, but a radical way to approach life. It is a way to view life and humanity through a revolutionary lens of equality, and to work in our daily lives to try to improve equality for everyone. Using Zaretsky's and Molesworth understanding of feminism as our modern working definition is important, because it reminds us of the core values of second wave feminist theory and art, and the failed alignment of some current feminist art and theory within those past understandings.

Throughout the eras of feminist art corresponding with second wave feminism, two dominant movements defined our understanding of how we perceive women in society. One was about reclaiming the female body and utilizing women's sexuality as iconography in subjective and objective ways, and the other about power and liberation through motherhood and maintenance (celebrating womanhood through domestic work, art, and lifestyles). In the 21st century, we have come to a point where what is commonly perceived as neo-feminist art work has failed to celebrate female sexuality. Instead of reinforcing positive representations of women's bodies, neo-feminism reinforces the objectification of young women, sexualizing and

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<sup>1</sup> Molesworth, Helen. "How to Install Art as a Feminist." *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art*. New York City: Museum of Modern Art, 2010. 499-513. Print.

perpetuating unhealthy standards of thin and predominantly white teen beauty. In the case of neo-feminist art, how are the young women behind this movement, in fact, dismantling feminism? And how did we get to this point in not only art history, but also women's history itself? I believe that we can track the progression of feminist art from the movements corresponding to second wave feminism, to neo-feminism, and ultimately locate where the young women pioneering the movement of neo-feminist art went so wrong with their practice and theory.

Starting in the late fifties, coming to prominence with second wave feminism in the late 60s, and still resonating in contemporary art today, the founding of the most remarkable era of feminist artwork stemmed from a time where women's liberation was seen as getting out of the house to celebrate female sexuality in a powerful movement driven by women. The leaders of this movement were frustrated with the exclusive and objectifying representation of women as subjects in art instead of as artists themselves. Accordingly, they set out to challenge the overtly sexist structure and practices common in the art world, and did so in an evocative manner.

Anita Steckel was one of the first women artists to actively portray women in powerful sexually dominant roles, breaking out onto the art scene also as a woman who challenged the world's perspectives on women artists and how women were portrayed in galleries and museums. Steckel, with a group of other women artists who made explicit art celebrating female sexuality, founded Fight Censorship (FC) in the 1970s to "combat the censorship of sexually explicit art made by women."<sup>2</sup> Fight Censorship believed that it was inherently wrong that men were allowed to paint women in hyper-sexualized ways, but when women did it of themselves or of men it was prohibited from being put up in galleries and museums. Fight Censorship was not only fighting hyper sexualized portraits and imagery of women portrayed as "art" without questioning, but was also combating sexist double standards art museums subjected women to when they portrayed men in the same way. Women's artworks were commonly censored and removed from museums and art galleries for explicitly portraying male and female bodies, while men with very similar work (usually only portraying women) were given shows without a second thought. In Steckel's own words, "females are shown in a seductive, sexual, and nude manner [in the] very same museums that refuse to show the sexual male nude."<sup>3</sup> Steckel found it deeply disturbing that objectifying women was considered a socially appropriate thing to do, but when it came to presenting male bodies in similar ways, it was perceived to be incredibly offensive.

Steckel questioned the male dominated art world in many ways, fighting for women's sexual liberation by portraying progressive, powerful, sexual women in her art,



Figure 1: Anita Steckel and the Skyline Painting (1974)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Meyer, Richard. "Hard Targets: Male Bodies, Feminist Art, and the Force of Censorship in the 1970s." *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2007. 364-83. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Meyer, Richard. "Hard Targets: Male Bodies, Feminist Art, and the Force of Censorship in the 1970s." *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2007. 364-83. Print.

and by fighting so that men and women's sexualized bodies could be all given equal chances to be considered art. She wanted to challenge the double standard held to men and women's art of objectified bodies and she knew that if she started utilizing and objectifying men's bodies in her art, (treating them the same way that women's bodies had been treated for so long), someone would be against the hyper sexualized imagery of men. Steckel understood that once someone became offended by these portrayals of men's bodies, she would be highlighting the problematic objectification of all bodies and calling out the double standard held to men and women in the art world. The Fight Censorship movement questioned "how they could represent the human body and sexual experience in a non-objectifying manner"<sup>4</sup> by trying to liberate both men and women's bodies from the oppressive objectification prominent in the art world.

Not dissimilar from Fight Censorship's initiative to celebrate sexuality without objectifying the body, Tracey Emin, an artist who grew to fame in the 1990s followed in very similar footsteps. In her piece, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*, which brought her to artistic prominence, Emin made a tent appliquéd with over 100 names of people she had slept with. Although this piece was frequently dismissed by critics as a shallow remembrance of her sexual escapades, the phrase "slept with" was *no* euphemism for the sexual encounters Emin had had throughout her life. Emin's artwork detailed everyone she had slept with or been intimate with in her life, people she had slept next to and shared a closeness with, not just random strangers who had "shagged her against a wall."<sup>5</sup> The piece includes the name of her grandmother who she used to fall asleep with while listening to the radio, two unborn fetuses representing the mother she could never be, and the name of Billy Childish, a long time boyfriend and artist. Emin's art fought against the idea that overtly expressing female sexuality was inappropriate for the art, also challenging the misogynistic tendencies the art world has writing off women for celebrating their sexuality. Emin thought that women's art was all too frequently dismissed as being unprofessionally sexual, while in reality the art was usually trying to express something sexual in a non-objectifying and non-pornographic way.

Emin was very familiar with critiques like these, especially after critics were as brash as to review *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*, in childish manners and phrases like "she's slept with everyone.... even the curator."<sup>6</sup> Many critics missed the point of the piece entirely, making up the contingent of viewers who saw her work as too sexual and those who failed to see the intense personal narrative behind the artwork. On the floor



<sup>4</sup> Middleman, Rachel. "Anita Steckel." *The National Museum of Women in the Arts Blog*. The National Museum of Women in the Arts. 16 Nov. 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Nardi, Sarah. "Everyone Tracey Slept With." *The National Museum of Women in the Arts Blog*. The National Museum of Women in the Arts. 16 Nov. 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Graves, Jen. "A Controversy Over Tracey Emin's 'Everyone I Have Ever Slept With'." *The National Museum of Women in the Arts Blog*. The National Museum of Women in the Arts. 16 Nov. 2014.

Figure 2: *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*<sup>7</sup>

of her piece Emin appliquéd “with myself, always myself, never forgetting,” reminding the viewer that her piece was not solely about the people she had “slept with,” but the intimate act of existing in another person’s presence and how it had affected her as a being. The piece reminded Emin’s viewers that it was not so much about sex as it was about the different states of love and intimacy that are so crucial to the human condition. Emin managed to highlight the overt misogyny in the art world by having multitudes of critics write her off as a sexually promiscuous artist (shaming her for her openness about her sexuality) while still creating art that liberated female sexuality in a very personal and subjective matter. Emin’s work is powerful in the sense that it makes the viewer think intently about everyone they have figuratively and literally slept with, and with the power of making people think, Emin truly challenged the misogyny in the art world.

Conversely to Emin’s text based approach to celebrating female sexuality, Sanja Iveković chose to express her sexuality in a very visual, abrasive fashion. In her piece *Triangle* (1979), Iveković photographically documented her “simulating masturbation on the balcony of her home as President Josip Broz Tito’s motorcade passed by.” Although Iveković knew that she was under direct police surveillance, she utilized her expression of female sexuality as a way to challenge and critique the state of politics and art in Yugoslavia. In order to challenge the State, Iveković simply moved her intimate activity “from the domestic interior [of her home] to the balcony, signifying a transgression of the border between safely contained (unseen and unspoken) female desire and its dangerous counterpart, visible female sexual agency.”<sup>7</sup> By making her sexuality out and open to the public, Iveković used her body to visibly express the problematic censorship of female sexuality from politics and culture, all the while traveling the fine line between objectifying women’s bodies and the power implied with female sexual actions.



Figure 3: Sanja Iveković: Trokut (Triangle) 1979<sup>7</sup>

Iveković’s work was met with intense censorship and critique by the Yugoslavian government, and the art world in general. *Triangle* was a blatant expression of female sexuality being censored, because although Iveković was using her body as a tool for political critique, it was in actuality a version of her own personal expression and experience of being censored by the media and the government. Iveković was using her body as an extension of her own anti-establishment and anti-censorship mentality, not objectifying her body as a

<sup>7</sup> Meskimmon, M. "Chronology through Cartography: Map- Ping 1970s Feminist Art Globally." *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2007. 331-33. Print

way to provoke attention. She translated the powerful nature of her thoughts and beliefs into a performance piece in which she utilized her sexuality in a manner subjective to her own opinions. Iveković combatted the objectification and censorship in the art world and politics in the seventies by not only subjectively using her body and sexuality as a way to protest the state, but as a way to draw attention to when a woman seemingly objectifies herself it becomes much more problematic than if a male artist had created the same objectification.

In perhaps the most succinct commentary on female bodies in the art world, Andrea Fraser employed her presence as a well known female artist to critique women's roles in the art world. Fraser posited that women's art is inseparable from their bodies and identities, resulting in women's bodies being more commodified than the art they make. In her piece *Untitled* (2003), in which "the artist is seen having sex in what some have characterized coyly as "every imaginable position," with an unidentified American collector who paid close to \$20,000 to participate in this curious 60-minute work of art."<sup>8</sup> This piece forces the viewer to question what we truly want from art, not in only financial terms, but in personal and psychological ways as well. In the end, Fraser's piece really boils down to the ultimate question of when everything is laid out before us, is all society really wants from revered women artists their bodies?

Historically, feminism has struggled with the dichotomy of wanting innate equality for men and women, while still wanting to celebrate the separate identities of women and womanhood. This manifests itself in art history quite frequently with the push to incorporate more women artists in art museums. The difficulty with this situation is that although there is a desperate need to diversify the typically male dominated presence of art in museums and galleries, many feminists still want women's art to be viewed for the nature of the art in itself, not the fact that the person who made the art happen to be a woman. Helen Molesworth discusses this dilemma when describing her ideal museum show, "It's important to me that these artists are women (important even in the midst of wanting it to not be important: feminism's double bind, its inescapable contradiction)."<sup>9</sup> Fraser, similarly to Molesworth, addresses this issue in her art by agreeing with and accentuating the fact that art by women is all too commonly viewed as just *art by women*.

The nature of the inseparably bound perception that women's art can only be viewed as women's art, is contrived from traditions in the art world of using women's bodies in artwork as objects, instead of portraying women in a subjective and non-objectifying manner. The tendency of art museums to have images of women created by men, instead of artwork created by women, is all too common and reinforces the idea that the art world would rather have various depictions of women's bodies instead of celebrating the artwork women make. Fraser proclaimed herself in her 2001 video piece *Official Welcome* that she was "not a person today, I am an object in an artwork,"<sup>10</sup> highlighting the fact that women artists have to come to terms with the misogyny so present in the art world and should actively take a stand against it. Fraser thought that the best way to counter the objectification of women in art was by reclaiming women's bodies and

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<sup>8</sup> Trebay, Guy. "Sex, Art, and Videotape." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 13 June 2004. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Molesworth, Helen. "How to Install Art as a Feminist." *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art*. New York City: Museum of Modern Art, 2010. 499-513. Print.

<sup>10</sup> Trebay, Guy. "Sex, Art, and Videotape." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 13 June 2004. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.



fighting against all objectifying representations of them; because, after all, women's bodies should never be valued above women themselves.

Reclaiming female sexuality was a crucial part to the art movements which corresponded to second wave feminism, although there was another movement which also actively helped define womanhood as we know it in the arts and in society. Not in opposition to reclaiming female sexuality, but taking a different approach to women's liberation, this movement started in the late fifties working to redefine domestic work and life as a powerful part of womanhood. Understanding the key elements of womanhood, like the possibilities and actuality of motherhood, while also coming to acknowledge the power of women's domestic labor typically written off as *women's work*, were elements seemingly missing from women's liberation art. So a new group of artists set out to reclaim these realities of womanhood. And, in doing so, the liberation of motherhood and the recognition of household labor as real work removed the concepts that motherhood and "women's work" were not things for professional women to do, helping to reinforce the notion that motherhood was a serious job which women could do, while simultaneously being an artist or pursuing any other professional career.

Throughout her career, Mary Kelley documented the invisible experience of women working with daily domestic and household labor. In a time where expression of body and reclaiming sexuality were very prominent, Mary Kelley felt that it was her role as a prominent female artist, wife, and upcoming mother to make art about a contingent of the female population too frequently forgotten about in the feminist art world. Although Kelley acknowledged the prominence of the Madonna-child relationship throughout art history, she noted that there was rarely a true expression of the real mother-child relationship. Kelley felt that motherhood was all too often glossed over and written off as a beautiful process filled with ease and grace, whereas the reality of it was hardly ever brought to light in the art world. So, Kelley set out to document her experience as an upcoming mother in her *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79), hoping to shine a light on this reality.

Mary Kelley's *Post-Partum Document*, "consists of six sections of documentation that follow the development of Kelly's son, Kelly Barrie, from birth until the age of five. Kelly intricately charts her relationship with her son, and her changing role as a mother by writing on artifacts associated with child care: baby clothes, his drawings, items he collects, and his first efforts at writing. In addition, there are detailed analytical texts that exist in parallel to the objects."<sup>11</sup> Kelley took note in painful detail of her child's development and her development as a mother to emphasize the erasure of the difficulties of motherhood from the art world. Her art being easiest to understand in a feminist context, Kelley took a pointed approach



**Figure 4: Post-Partum Document: Documentation II, Analyzed Utterances and Related Speech Events 1975<sup>11</sup>**

in her targeting or limiting her audience to "The Women's Movement, other women artists, and people generally interested in the issues of patriarchy."<sup>12</sup> In doing this, Kelley actively chose to make her work appeal to the women most frequently affected

<sup>11</sup> Khan Acadmey, 2014. Web. 12 Nov.

<sup>12</sup> 1999. Print.

by the dismissal of motherhood and domestic labor as work. Kelley wanted to unite women around the deep psychological process that motherhood was and to draw attention to the desperately tiring work that so many women took upon themselves to do.

Capturing the conceptual elements and realities of motherhood, instead of adding onto the presupposed ideas that motherhood is a simple joyful process, Kelley worked to portray an image of motherhood and domestic labor as an intense job. She captured the psychological effects motherhood had on herself and her child for six years in order to truly portray the gravity that motherhood was incredibly different than the “angelic baby with a goddess like mother” typically ported in art. Kelley redefined womanhood by showing the intensity of a woman’s life at home, showing how motherhood was an actual job and that “women’s work” was hard labor. She fought against the representation of the ideal, unrealistic portrayal of a mother without any work to do, by showing a real life version of motherhood the art world desperately needed to have.

Kelley was not the only artist and mother to feel a void in the art world when it came to motherhood and women’s domestic labor. Mierle Ukeles, a performance artist, felt especially torn when becoming a mother seemingly became contradictory to the life she led as an artist. In her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, she declared her different identities as a woman and as an artist that seemed to be counter-intuitive to her feeling as a whole being. “I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (Random order) I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc.”<sup>13</sup> Ukeles wanted to make a piece of art which combined all of her identities into one fluid performance in opposition to the separation of identities she felt forced to live with, birthing her *Maintenance Art* exhibit.

Throughout her *Maintenance Art* performance, Ukeles bridged the world of art and the worlds of domestic labor and motherhood by turning her daily tasks as a mother into performance art. Specifically, in her piece *Care*, Ukeles transposed her life into a museum gallery space, living with her husband and child in the museum. In this space, Ukeles performed her daily domestic routines in a more fleshed out conceptual sense and presented them as performance art. Ukeles proposed that “avant-garde art, which claims utter development, is infected by strains of maintenance ideas, maintenance activities, and maintenance materials.”<sup>14</sup> Ukeles believed that most avant-garde art was integrated with various forms of maintenance and repetitive labor she found also happening in her life at home raising a child. So, instead of trying to create a visual depiction of the labor she was doing in her every day life, Ukeles thought it made most sense to draw from those avant-garde understandings of conceptual art and turn her life into a performance piece.

What was particularly notable about Ukeles doing this was the fact that she was drawing previously unmade connections between conceptual forms of art, and the realities of motherhood that so many women face. Ukeles was not only highlighting how hard and maintenance driven motherhood could be, but was equating motherhood with an artistic practice not done before. Previously, being a mother and an artist seemed counterintuitive and oppressive to Ukeles’ art practices, but now, her daily maintenance work and care as a mother could be linked with her art;

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<sup>13</sup> Ukeles, Mierle Laderman. *MANIFESTO FOR MAINTENANCE ART 1969!* New York City: Self Published, 1969. Print.

<sup>14</sup> Ukeles, Mierle Laderman. *MANIFESTO FOR MAINTENANCE ART 1969!* New York City: Self Published, 1969. Print.

it was her art demonstrating a major shift not only in her art, but in the art world and feminism in general.

Ruth Asawa was another woman artist and mother who fought for “domestic” art to be taken as a serious form of art throughout her life. While artists like Kelley and Ukeles focused on working in art forms that translated easily into intellectual and gallery settings, Asawa chose to work in a form of art that traditionally was viewed one dimensionally as women’s domestic labor. Known for creating giant wire sculptures, the process of weaving she utilized to create her work caused it to be perceived as “domestic’ sculptures [made] in a feminine, handiwork mode.”<sup>15</sup> Though in the time her art was initially reviewed (the 1950s), woman’s work was constantly perceived to be more simplistic and less serious than men’s, but Asawa was not deterred. Critiques like this were missing the subversive nature of Asawa’s work, which was in fact an intense critique of how women’s work was commonly perceived.

In one of her most controversial artworks, Asawa built a statue of two mermaids in Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco. This piece was received with incredibly mixed reviews; her followers loved the piece and rallied behind it. The architect in charge of redesigning the square, hired Asawa to make the sculpture, wanting to replace it with a “modernist abstraction.”<sup>16</sup> When the piece was described to look like a “suburban lawn ornament,”<sup>17</sup> in a dismissal of Asawa’s art, a larger discussion of feminism and aesthetics in modern art erupted. Though Asawa was prominently displayed as a wife and mother of six throughout this controversy, critics attempting to portray her as somehow a less serious artist for taking on both of those roles, she accepted the critiques with grace. Being a mother of six was a key part of Asawa’s personal identity and one that she never wanted to remove from her identity as an artist. Asawa believed that being a mother and an artist were two key parts of her being. She lived her life so that art was incorporated in her family, and family was incorporated in her art.

Asawa recognized the importance of not sacrificing one’s identity in order to be perceived as a serious artist by critics, and instead celebrated her identity as a mother of six by making domestic art with an enlightened air of not caring. Asawa believed that her artwork should be solely her own, and that she should not bow to harsh critics of her art being “too domestic” or “too womanly”. By holding a harsh stance against critics perceptions of her art being too womanly, Asawa helped to usher in an era of art celebrating home life and domestics, instead of assimilating to the form of the woman artist critics were trying to push her to be. Asawa reminded artists of her



**Figure 5: Imogen Cunningham - Ruth Asawa, Sculptor, and Her Children 1958**

<sup>15</sup> Sullivan, Robert. "Ruth Asawa, the Subversively 'Domestic' Artist." *The New York Times Magazine*. The New York Times, 21 Dec. 2013. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Sullivan, Robert. "Ruth Asawa, the Subversively 'Domestic' Artist." *The New York Times Magazine*. The New York Times, 21 Dec. 2013. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Martin, Douglas. "Ruth Asawa, an Artist Who Wove Wire, Dies at 87." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 17 Aug. 2013. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.



generation that they should never sacrifice their own personhood or identities to their art as a result of societal or critical pressures. Artists work should always be truly their own.

The track of women reclaiming womanhood, motherhood and sexuality through their artwork has gone hand in hand with combating the lack of female representation and the constant objectification of women in the art world. In 2014, issues of representation and oppressive views of women are still as prominent as ever, and though there are still women combating those issues in similar ways to previous feminist movements, a particularly new movement deemed to be “neo-feminist” has taken a different approach altogether. Although, reclaiming and celebrating sexuality and the nature of domesticity are still key parts of reclaiming womanhood, with neo-feminism, the necessary understandings of the separation between celebrating sexuality (now exclusively) and objectification seems to have been misunderstood or lost all together. The neo-feminist art movement has seemingly created a gap between current feminist beliefs about reclaiming womanhood, motherhood/reproductive rights and fighting against rape culture, and their own beliefs, leading to misguided (or even perhaps accidental) objectification of young women’s bodies in neo-feminist art. So although the young women who are the pioneers of neo-feminist art are trying to follow in the footsteps of the movements of reclaiming female sexuality, they fail to do so in a subjective manner.

Slightly dissimilar from previous feminist ideals, neo-feminism sets out to redefine specifically the standards we hold for teenage girls’ appearance and sexuality. Petra Collins, a photographer whose art could be considered the template which much other neo-feminist art follows after, decided at a young age that as an artist she “wanted to create images that represented [her] own sexuality.”<sup>18</sup> Although she began identifying as a feminist at 18, her work supposedly celebrated sexuality much before that. Perhaps it is because she has only identified as a feminist for four years (she is now 21), and has not had adequate time to fully form her knowledge on feminism, or perhaps it is because of her attraction and easy assimilation into fashion photography, Collins somehow seems to fail in executing her work in a way that subverts traditional beauty standards and expressions of women’s sexuality.



Figure 6: The Teenage Gaze, Photo Number Nine<sup>18</sup>

Although allegedly trying to combat the oppressive view of the male gaze and media perception of female bodies, Collins makes a fatal error in her work: failing to acknowledge her own internalized misogyny. With the intention of reclaiming female sexuality, Petra frequently takes pictures of her friends and models scantily clad in periodically provocative positions. Though there is definitely nothing wrong with teen girls visibly displaying their sexuality, the

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<sup>18</sup> Sciortino, Karley. "Petra Collins vs Karley Sciortino." *Dazed*. Dazed Digital, Feb. 2014. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.

*American Apparel Ad: Denni in the Disco Short, and Pearl Disco short detail shot*<sup>19</sup>

manner that Collin's chooses to present teenage sexuality is deeply problematic. In Collins' photography, she seems to be doing a much better job selling the young woman's bodies in her images to current trendy aesthetics and fashions, instead of subverting the ideas of what teenage sexuality is. In her photograph, number 9 from her *Teenage Gaze series*, Petra shows an image of a young woman's butt in a pair of very short shorts leaning on a bathroom sink edge in a position generally equated with putting on makeup. There is nothing else to the image other than it is in Collin's noteworthy style of grainy film photography that is especially popular in fashion magazines like *Dazed* and *i-D* currently.

This picture does not feel empowering, it does not show a young woman actively taking hold of her sexuality and challenging societal standards and understandings about what young women's sexualities are presented as. Instead, this photo seems much more similar to an advertisement for a shorts brand, like the American Apparel ad shown previously, using a highly sexualized image of a woman wearing short shorts from behind in an attempt to equate "sexiness" with the shorts. *Photo Number Nine* is, in essence, a deeply offensive shorts commercial which uses a woman's body to sell clothing. What is notable about Collins' work being so eerily similar to an American Apparel ad is that her work is perceived as "feminist," whereas American Apparel is known for its offensive and objectifying imagery and politics.

Although her style of photography is hidden behind a shroud of alleged feminism and reclaiming the female body, Collins seems to fail in understanding the difference between celebrating sexuality and female bodies, and objectifying them. In cases like Sanja Iveković's who was critiqued for objectifying her own body, Iveković's uses her body to actively challenge the Yugoslavian government's censorship of her art and her body. She used her body as a tool to combat the oppressive norms of the society around her, simultaneously reclaiming her body and sexuality. This is dissimilar from Collins' photography because in Iveković's work, the power of her artwork is controlled by her utilizing her body in a way to critique the government instead of objectifying her body in a way that sells her sex appeal to established art movements and fashion magazines.



Figure 7: American Apparel Ad: Denni in the Disco Short, and Pearl Disco Short detail shot<sup>19</sup>

Though Collins is no Iveković in the sense of challenging politics with her work, Collins recently caused an uproar when she posted a bikini picture of her pubic area in an unshaven state, leading to the deletion on her Instagram. Upon this happening, it led to a much larger discussion on censorship of female bodies and body hair, causing Collins to write her own essay and interpretation on the nature of body censorship

<sup>19</sup> The Disco Short, American Apparel. *American Apparel*. N.p., n.d. Web. 1 Dec. 2014.

in the 21st century. In her essay Collins addressed key issues on how women's bodies are mandated to be "perfected and aspects [of real women's bodies are] concealed in the media (i.e. in hair removal ads for women hair is NEVER shown),"<sup>20</sup> although she failed to address the manner in which she portrays body hair in her own imagery. Instead of utilizing body hair in her photography as a perfectly natural part of humanity, she sexualizes body hair in order for it to fit her very fashionable aesthetic.

In a interview from *Dazed Magazine*, Collins states that she thinks "it [is] so funny how shocking armpit hair on a girl is to people--they spot it and they just like can't look away! But I love it now, it's such a cool accessory. I love the combination of armpit hair and a slutty dress."<sup>21</sup> Despite the fact that there is nothing wrong with body hair being sexy, sexualizing a natural part of the body in attempt to make it more commonly accepted is ultimately problematic and objectifying. Artists should not have to objectify and sexualize something in order to make it accessible, though it seems Collins has a tendency to do so, making her art appeal to the mass market of fashion and art. Unfortunately, since Collins has yet to grow to a place in her work where she has discovered how to celebrate sexuality in non-objectifying way, her work fails to subvert the standards of beauty and sexuality that women's bodies are constantly subjected to.

Although Collins is definitely the artist considered to be the figurehead of the neo-feminist art movement, there is an ever growing collection of women artists falling in line behind her. Collins curates a woman's artist collective called *The Arduous*, in which she "sets out to embrace her own vision of what is beautiful, young and female. Conveniently, she is thin and (un)conventionally beautiful."<sup>22</sup> The artists chosen to be in *The Arduous* reflect Collins' narrow understanding of feminism, shining a light on how similar aesthetics seem to be a bigger attraction to her than young women making actual political art. Collins' collective is unfortunately poorly diversified in every sense on the word, with her collective being a majority of thin, white, cis gendered women who work with photography very similar to hers. Collins portrays a very narrow view and aesthetic of female beauty alternative to what is generally considered beautiful by only supporting a very narrow type of artist in her collective. The nature of *The Arduous* is incredibly troubling because as it becomes the popularized version of current feminist art associated with online magazines like *Rookie*, which are specifically targeted to a wide audience of teen girls. It alienates a huge proportion of their audience and exposes them to a problematic version of feminism, (the audience being young girls just discovering feminism and feminist art for the first time).

One of the most prominent artists to come from *The Arduous* is Swedish photographer Arivida Byström who is known for her artwork combatting gender norms. In spite of the fact that her photography is subversive in the sense that it switches up gender roles and presentation, Byström still manages to stay in step with the all too familiar trend of majority white, thin, and "beautiful" people in her work. After initial critiques of the subjects in her work being exclusively white and thin, she still struggles with the dire need for intersectionality and representing people of all colors and sizes in her work. In an interview in *i-D Magazine*, when asked about the biggest adversity she faced as an artist she answered, "I think the biggest struggle I have is with myself... There is [a] load of crap critique when it comes to

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<sup>20</sup> Collins, Petra. "Censorship and The Female Body." *Petra Collins*. Petra Collins, 2013. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Sciortino, Karley. "Petra Collins vs Karley Sciortino." *Dazed*. Dazed Digital, Feb. 2014. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Fairlie, Ariane. "Petra Collins' Neon Signs And Neo-Feminist Photography." *BeautifulDecay Artist Design*. BeautifulDecay, 16 July 2014. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.

intersectionality [in my work]... [but] there [are] loads of people that [have] been giving me eye-opening critique [too].”<sup>23</sup> Though this was a trivially answered question, I think it broaches how important the need for intersectionality is in neo-feminism. Historically, a fair amount of feminism has failed to address issues pertaining to women of color, so movements like “womanism” were founded to incorporate the intrinsically tied oppression of women and people of color. So, even though we are in a new generation of feminism, it is still important as ever to address issues of race, weightism, and class as well as gender, since the basis of all feminist theory is true equality for all.

Another problematic element in Byström's art very similar to Collin's is the sexualization of something, in her case acne, as a way to make it more appealing to mainstream media and art. In a series of portraits Byström shot for *Nero Magazine*, she photographed portraits of two thin white men and two thin white women with acne on their face and necks; photoshopped around the acne were small images of roses, supposedly attempting to equate having acne with having flowers on one's face.<sup>24</sup> Though not overtly sexualizing acne, she repackages acne in a way which transposes it into a trendy, beautiful aesthetic. The packaging method of Byström's choice? One of thin, white, beauty. So although Byström is trying to redefine acne on bodies as beautiful, (which in essence is a desperately needed representation in media and art), she fails to do so in a way which makes it accessible to anyone who is not thin, white, or gender conforming. So, in spite of the fact that Byström's art does fall under the category of “neo-feminist,” it seems that since it manages to alienate so many people, it is quite anti-feminist.

Although feminism and bigotry aren't mutually exclusive, it is of the utmost importance for new generations of feminists to combat the previous iterations of their predecessors' racist, classist, and transphobic tendencies, instead of failing to address and reinforce them. In a very well known example, second wave feminism was frequently criticized for being non-inclusive to black women, failing to discuss the intersections between racism and gender discrimination black women face and never attempting to address it. As a result, *womanism* was created to shine a light on the major inequalities that all women of color face, while still working to fight major inequalities in society overall. Feminism, at its core should work to fight for the equality of all people, no matter what race, class, or size they may happen to be, and should create spaces to discuss and address the intersections between all these key elements of human identity. So, when feminist movements arise that exclusively support privileged members of society (thin, white, cisgendered), they



Figure 8: Photography for *Nero Magazine*<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Kinsella, Felicity. "Arvida Byström Is Hot Hot Hot Pink!" *I-D Magazine*. I-D Magazine, 7 Mar. 2014. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Byström, Arvida. *Photography for Nero Magazine*. 2014. Arvida Byström Portfolio, London. *Arvida Byström*. Web. 17 Nov. 2014.

are in fact more anti-feminist than not. While it is unclear what the main goal of neo-feminism is (since they fail to address the intersections between race, class, size, and gender), they do come from a place of trying to liberate female equality and feminine identity in some form. So perhaps the biggest question we must ask is of what the new generation of young feminists and artists can do to resolve neo-feminism's poor interpretation and practices of feminism?

Though there are many ways to approach the issues with neo-feminism, the most basic way to remedy many of these issues would be for everyone to take a moment to research what feminism means, in order to find a definition that resonates within themselves. Many of the issues surrounding neo-feminism stem from a lack of basic education of the core elements of feminism, ultimately perpetuating a narrow and exclusive understanding of feminism. So, if the current neo-feminist art movement does not take time to step back and reevaluate their misconceptions about feminism, their movement will remain more anti-feminist than feminist. For neo-feminism to take a step towards perpetuating a renewed more intersectional version of feminism and feminist art, it is important to encourage other young artists to combat the widespread objectification of women's bodies in the media, art world, and, as previously discussed, some modern "feminist" art. The battle of objectification is an arduous one, and one that is still yet to be won, so there is a constant need for new perspectives and ammunition to fight against the objectification of women's bodies. While fighting against objectification, it is also of the utmost importance to present a wide and inclusive display of working feminist, female artists. Inclusivity and intersectionality are essential for the new generation of feminist art, since a diversity of voices have been so lacking from neo-feminism and are desperately needed to foment a feminist revolution in art and the world in general. Though neo-feminism is deeply problematic, there are many proactive steps a new young generation of feminists and artists can take to resurrect a newfound, better rounded understanding of feminism today, which will work to create a subversive and intersectional version of "neo-feminist" art. So what's stopping us?



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