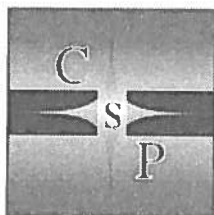


Blaze:
Discourse on Art, Women and Feminism

Edited by

Karen Frostig and Kathy A. Halamka



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PERMA-WAVE: BRIDGING FEMINISM'S GENERATION GAP

MARIA ELENA BUSZEK

For the young feminist artists, critics, and writers who joined their professional colleagues in the annual tradition of flooding the respective, back-to-back conferences of the National Women's Caucus for Art (WCA) and College Art Association (CAA), 2006 was something of a banner year. Not only did each conference dedicate panels to the subject of "third-wave" feminism in contemporary art—in which emerging feminists in their respective field represented themselves in presentations about the generation gap that plagues the Feminist Movement as a whole—each panel was marked by lively intergenerational dialogues and praise that followed. At the WCA panel, efforts to effectively name and further movement-wide the goodwill that these discussions brought about led to panelist and artist S.A. Bachman declaring, to the delight of all, that perhaps we have finally reached the era of "Perma-wave," where feminists of different generations might finally work together to further the cause of women's rights even as they acknowledge and debate one another's differences.

To those at the WCA's panel at the CAA annual conference just four years earlier, the possibility of this kind of intergenerational love-in seemed a far-distant, if not impossible prospect. At this New York conference, the National WCA had assembled speakers to pay well-deserved tribute to the New York Feminist Art Institute (NYFAI). The fruit of the dynamic "women's liberation" movement begun in the late 1960s, NYFAI's successes in giving women a voice for their self-expression, using art as a vehicle for consciousness-raising and activism, and encouraging women to take all these tools into broader gallery and academic systems reflect the larger successes of this generation of activists. However, discussion of the institute's closing in 1990 led to inevitable questions of feminism's future in the panel's subsequent question-and-answer session, as one audience member after another each essentially rephrased a single question: "Where are the young feminists?"

As a young feminist in attendance, my first instinct was to slink down in my seat and look around me with the same question on my mind. However, a cursory glance at the rows to my left and right revealed something: I was hardly the only younger woman in attendance. Indeed, with each rephrasing of the question, my neck craned around a few more degrees to gradually take in the entire crowd. Easily a third of the audience appeared to be comprised of women under the age of 40. By the time the woman seated directly to my right stood up to angrily ask the question once again—"Where *are* the young feminists?"—I raised my hand in frustration: "We are right here. *Right next to you.*"

The situation, as I pointed out then, felt familiar as well as symbolic of a much larger problem of the women's movement—ironically, perhaps best summarized here with a football metaphor. A group of feminists who came of age during the second-wave stand in a huddle over the movement's game-plan, exhausted and battered at half-time and—looking searchingly at one another—ask themselves, "who do we put on the field?" Meantime, there sits a group of sprightly rookies warming the bench, waving frantically at the all-star huddle, but who—programmed by the unspoken hierarchies that always emerge even in the most team-oriented of activities—have been made to feel too outranked, too insignificant to dare break the concentration of the huddled captains with so much as a shout or a tap on the shoulder. So, there they sit: ready, willing. . . unnoticed. The applause that my comments at drew from the audience made it appear as if the open recognition of this situation bought about a sense of relief to *all* the women in attendance. The focus of questions from that point shifted from the panel to the audience; beginning a contentious but thrillingly necessary dialogue about this unfortunate reality of contemporary feminism's intergenerational tension—although *tension* would perhaps be an inappropriate word for it. Intergenerational *blindness* might be a better way of stating our present situation, because it really is a matter of not seeing, and of subsequently not understanding.

Tension, however, certainly does come into the picture, particularly when it comes to the day-to-day realities of feminist activism, because few young women are content to warm the bench for long. Indeed, it seems as if the cultural blindness to a third-wave of feminism in the United States has resulted not in the mass rejection of feminism that many—including older feminists—assume has happened since the 1980's, but instead in either a storming of the field or, rather, a change of venue altogether as young women create their own work and conduct their own research in a parallel feminist universe that the women who *would* be coaching them are either unaware is happening or, worse, have little interest in either

supporting or acknowledging. (To underscore this problem, it bears noting that at this same conference where young women's alleged rejection of feminist bonds and ideals was so casually discussed as fact, there were nine panels specifically dedicated to women's art and feminist art history, in which easily half, if not the majority of participants were early-career artists and scholars; and the White Columns exhibition *Regarding Gloria*, dedicated to young feminists whose work paid homage to that of their predecessors, had just closed after a much-publicized and successful run.¹) My intention, however, is not to scold established, older feminists for hogging the ball—especially not when their example and nurturance led younger feminists such as myself to the women's movement in the first place. Instead, I am interested in exploring the utility of acknowledging feminism's evolution based on the experiences and interactions of each different generation that affects it.

My interest in identifying a "third-wave" of feminism stems not just from my age—born in 1971, by all accounts I grew up smack-dab in the middle of the splintering postmodern feminist world that arguably led to the emergence of a third-wave of the women's movement—but also from my research, which focuses upon the ways in which the evolution of feminist thought has affected visual culture since the nineteenth century. Most recently and extensively I explored this evolution in my book *Pin-up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, and Popular Culture*, where I use the pin-up as a "case study" toward a broader investigation of feminism's complicated relationship to both women's sexual expression and its representation in pop culture. Because of my interest in focusing on this historical sweep rather than zeroing in on a single period or movement, I also inevitably explain the evolution of feminist activism and theory alongside feminist imagery—an evolution I have followed historians of the modern women's movement in addressing as three "waves" of feminist expression and organizing that have emerged since the late eighteenth century.

The first-wave of feminism is by far the most nebulous, in large part because for nearly 150 years its myriad participants were almost uniformly involved in the one battle that tended to connect them: enfranchisement in democratic societies. As such, feminism's first-wave encompasses individuals and movements as separated by time and approach as Mary Wollstonecraft—whose 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published in the wake of the American and French revolutions to contrast women's universal powerlessness against the self-congratulatory, democratic zeal of revolutionary philosophers—and Simone de

Beauvoir—whose groundbreaking 1949 book *The Second Sex* was begun shortly after French women first gained the vote in 1945.

However, the first-wave period between roughly 1920 and 1960 is marked by feminist activity ebbing as women in Europe and North America sorted out the limits of enfranchisement that they had won and applied throughout these years. In this period, feminism was also actively fought within these same cultures, a backlash against both women's gains to date and the world-upside-down that they threatened to many: a period that Shulamith Firestone would in 1970 call history's "first counteroffensive" against the women's movement.² Firestone, however, would be among the firebrands of feminism's second-wave, born largely of the labor and civil rights movements of the post-WWII era, which in the 1960s sought to take inventory of and fight against ongoing sexism that voting rights alone had been clearly incapable of undoing. Generally referred to, then as now, as the women's liberation movement, feminism's second-wave used strategies of the progressive movements from which its leaders sprung, similarly initiating and passing equal-rights legislation—concerning everything from reproductive rights to gender-specific classified ads—as well as producing feminist memoirs, theory, and collectives that raised consciousness concerning more insidious examples of sexism ingrained and normalized in everyday life. While this era is often discussed as not just popularizing but institutionalizing feminism—both *as* an "institution" with certain common goals and practices, and *within* institutions ranging from national governments to organized religion—the fact is that the second-wave was far more diverse and contentious than it is (or was) generally acknowledged to be, leading to visible fissures from the start of this era's feminist resurgence. Feminists of color and working-class women called attention to the middle-to-upper-class eurocentrism of second-wave leaders, straight and lesbian feminists debated the "proper" sexual positioning of the movement's members, and sex-radical and anti-censorship feminists declared their right to sexual self-expression in the midst of anti-pornography activism.

This expanding discourse—and the heated debates that it inspired—resulted not only in a diverse but an increasingly individualistic feminism that, as the evolving movement both shaped and responded to postmodern theory, would by the 1980s give way to what many have begun to both recognize and theorize as a third-wave of feminism in our present day. As reflected in the feminist practices of Generations X and Y—who, for better or for worse, are generally the most reported-upon and self-identifying members of our contemporary third-wave—our era is currently defined less by a single-minded focus on organization and activism

(which, it is frequently argued, excluded as much as served women who did not meet certain leaders' "standards" for the same) than on the study of identity-formation, leading women to theorize and practice an individual feminist politics expressed more subtly in everyday-life actions.

I appreciate the feminist "wave" model because, as literary scholar Judith Roof puts it, it allows one to address feminism's evolution without resorting to the tempting mother/daughter framework in which age-based generations are pitted against one another. This inevitably privileges "a kind of family history that organizes generations where they don't exist, ignores intragenerational differences and intergenerational commonalities, and thrives on a paradigm of oppositional change."³ As such, literary scholar Astrid Henry argues in her book *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism*, "the metaphor of the wave seems to offer an alternative model for describing feminist generations."⁴ The wave structure also allows for feminist scholarship to "flow," as it were, toward individuals, movements, and practices that may not in their own day have been recognized by—indeed, may even have been fought by—the period's dominant feminist culture, and recuperate them as preexisting models for subsequent generations.

However, like Henry, I also recognize a crucial problem in applying this seemingly fluid structure in our present moment of feminist history in that the

emergence of feminism's third wave seems to profoundly alter our use of the metaphor of the wave. Given the early mapping of 'mother' and 'daughter' onto 'second wave' and third wave,' the wave metaphor and the mother-daughter relationship increasingly have become synonymous within feminist discourse. While initially offering a generational model located outside the family, then, the wave metaphor has [since] come to resemble the familial structure with its understanding of generations based on the human life cycle.⁵

As such, this binary construction of recent feminist history often lends itself to the polarization of women who identify by age or experience with one "wave" (read: side) or another. Moreover, it forces women who came to the movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s to choose either one side or the other in this illusory divide—or worse: "As they can be understood as neither 'mothers' nor 'daughters' within feminism's imagined family structure, such feminists [find themselves] frequently absent from recent discourse on feminism's (seemingly two) generations."⁶ In other words, as literary scholar Diane Elam has put it: while most debates on the issue posit "senior," second-wave feminists

against their “juniors” in the third-wave, in reality “most feminists find themselves to be both a senior and a junior at the same time.”⁷

However, I remain among those advocates of “naming and claiming” a wave structure for feminist history because I maintain that, in addition to presenting one with the most straightforward chronology of dominant issues and ideas in the long history of the movement, a discussion of feminism’s various waves provides one with the best available metaphor for precisely the paradoxes that have sustained the movement itself. Addressing feminist history as evolving in waves respects the fluidity and resiliency of the women’s movement, but also respects the significance of difference and even conflict therein—which I believe many feminists who reject the wave metaphor wish to sweep under the rug in favor of a unity not only as illusory as a generation-based feminism but, ultimately, one that threatens to prove fatal. Sociologist Nancy Whittier has compellingly argued that “the presence and strength of conflicts over what it means to be a feminist and over appropriate feminist behavior and goals signify the continued vitality of the movement. A movement remains alive as long as there is struggle over its collective identity, or as long as calling oneself or one’s organization ‘feminist’ means something.”⁸ This struggle has historically forced the question succinctly articulated by Elam: “Is feminism a *tradition* handed down by powerful ancestors, or is it a *progress* in which the latecomers, however dwarf-like, are always standing on the shoulders of those who came before, seeing farther, knowing more?”⁹ And while efforts to pose this question have perhaps inevitably resulted in polarization within the movement, nuanced efforts to answer it have resulted in a productive paradox: the reality of feminism, of course, is that both answers are correct—a fact that instigates tension but also understanding across generations as a balance is necessarily struck between tradition and progress.

Thankfully, many contemporary feminist thinkers see in this problem a challenge that has led to their own attempts to represent the very contradiction of feminist evolution in their work and writing. Indeed, the paradoxical nature of the issue has forced feminist thinkers to approach feminism itself as a political paradox: not as a singular *feminism* but as multiple *feminisms*, which are simultaneously individual and (like the “communities” they produce), inevitably somehow common. As theorized by Donna Haraway, this organizational strategy for feminism does not deify movement-killing individualism above women’s mobilization. Indeed, art historian Katy Deepwell has appropriated Haraway’s use of the parasite *mixotricha paradoxa* as a creative metaphor for feminism’s *growth* through diversity.¹⁰ Deepwell argues, via Haraway’s research, that

this creature, like feminism itself, “has paradoxical and unexpected habits of survival and reproduction. . . . [I]t survives by attracting others to live on it [and] it reproduces by division.”¹¹ In other words, each of these contemporary scholars promotes the logic to be found in both paradox and division in ways that feminist thinkers have been exploring, if perhaps not acknowledging, since its first wave.

Art historian Amelia Jones—in her contribution to the nine views on contemporary art and feminism recently published in the October 2003 issue of *Artforum*—weighed in on the relevance of recognizing how this balancing act applies not only to feminism’s future, but feminism’s past when she argued that “we are in danger of getting very confused about the complexity of past decades’ feminist debates.”¹² Contributing to this same *Artforum* discussion, Linda Nochlin voiced her own frustrations over this very “confusion” when she reminded her readers that, although second-wave activists were all “for justice, equity, and a fair shake for women artists, critics, and academics, our views were extremely varied, and we were often at odds with one another,” and like Jones lamented the tendency for recent histories to pin down a unified trajectory for the second-wave in such a way that a culture “that seemed open and dynamic [is] now pinned down and displayed like butterflies in a case.”¹³ By way of conclusion to these *Artforum* perspectives, art historian Peggy Phelan spoke to both the openness of which Nochlin wrote and its legacy for subsequent generations of feminists. Her piece articulates the ways in which our contemporary art world was shaped not only by second-wave challenges to patriarchal, heterosexist accounts of history, but also by the anxiety of documenting its own history as postmodern artists and art historians simultaneously came to acknowledge the limits of doing just that. Phelan reiterates the degree to which the resulting ambivalence—as she puts it, “in the fullest sense of that term”—was the product of the increasingly self-critical, multicultural, and relativist postmodern culture ushered in by second-wave inquiry. Indeed, as Phelan asserts, the ambivalence that marks feminism’s third-wave is not just a logical progression of second-wave thought, but today a necessary worldview: “In these days of hideous fundamentalism, the capacity to acknowledge ambivalence is revolutionary.”¹⁴

Yet, while all these scholars fight for the recognition of emerging feminist voices by their more established elders as a strategy for unity within the movement, it is important to remember that the lack of recognition that plagues feminism works both ways. Faith Wilding—a creative pioneer at the start of feminism’s second-wave whose recent work on “cyber-feminism” finds her continuously contributing new theory in

our contemporary third-wave—rightfully criticizes the ways in which young women's "repudiation of historical feminism is problematic" because it tends to throw out "the baby with the bathwater and aligns itself uneasily with popular fears, stereotypes, and misconceptions about feminism."¹⁵ One cannot forget that many younger women's embrace of the term "third-wave" is rooted not in a drive toward feminist continuity, but an antagonism born of the desire to build their own feminist identity far from the institution constructed by their mothers. (As put in an exasperated tone by the painter Cecily Brown: "My generation was born feminists. We don't have to keep proving it."¹⁶) And this stance is itself another consistent one in feminist history. As no less an iconic second-wave figure as Gloria Steinem recently said of her own feminist beginnings to young interviewer (and leader of feminist punk bands Bikini Kill and Le Tigre) Kathleen Hanna in the glossy feminist magazine *Bust*:

I knew less about the suffragists than you know about the second wave, [and] I did the same thing of positioning myself in opposition to them, because I had heard that they were these puritanical, sexless bluestocking folks. . . . I'm sure I made feminists older than I feel uneasy as I wandered around in the '70s in miniskirts and boots with a button that said "Cunt Power."¹⁷

With this in mind, I would like to return to Katy Deepwell's appropriation of Donna Haraway's pesky *mixotricha paradoxa* parasite as a hopeful model for feminism's future. When first approaching the subject of the various "waves" of feminist art history in my own work, I felt certain that the contemporary artists whose work led me to the topic would in turn lead me toward the theme of rebellion in the Feminist Movement, and that their art would provide me with a useful icon symbolic of the third-wave's difference from previous eras in the women's movement. I found instead that the truth of feminism's history is far more complex, as this drive to survive and reproduce has consistently led the movement to evolve according to each moment in which it has found itself, with participants striking a necessary balance between tradition and progress. But, I also feel that the influence and lived familiarity of postmodern philosophy presents early twenty-first-century feminism with a unique opportunity in relation to this fact. Postmodernism's idealization of plurality has provided the contemporary Women's movement with a manner of embracing its own multifaceted history without abandoning its activist nature—provided, however, that feminists are willing to both refute the popular stereotypes of generations not their own, and engage

respectfully with these generations' ideas so that feminism's "reproduction by division" does not simply prove divisive.

As beautifully put by emerging feminist historian Ednie Kaeh Garrison, we must come to accept that "the simultaneous confidence and uncertainty about what constitutes feminism doesn't have to be conceptualized as a 'problem.' Rather, it is a consequence of the proliferation of feminisms."¹⁸ Were this approach to the movement and each other to happen more frequently, I believe that we might begin to not only recognize one another, but also perhaps finally reach a place where we might reevaluate the utility of identifying each other in terms of feminist "waves" at all. Though it may be helpful for us to identify ourselves according to the shared experiences of the generation in which we were born, I believe that it is equally instructive for us to understand that we live through certain waves together, and waves are, literally, fluid. Beside their nebulous beginning and end, they also flow into one another. No matter one's date of birth, as I write we are all living through and defining the third-wave—an evolving *present*, not just a generational *label*—and, as such, are all invested in contributing to and vigilantly looking out for what is made of it as the tide continues to roll.

¹ See *College Art Association, 91st Annual Conference Program* (February 19–22, 2003); and Catherine Morris and Ingrid Schaffner (eds.), *Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art of the 1970s* (New York: White Columns, 2002).

² Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 24.

³ Judith Roof, "Generational Difficulties; or, The Fear of a Barren History," in *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*, ed. Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan (Minneapolis and London: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997), 72.

⁴ Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Diane Elam, "Sisters Are Doing It for Themselves," in *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*, 63.

⁸ Nancy Whittier, *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of the Radical Women's Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 18.

⁹ Diane Elam, "Sisters Are Doing It For Themselves," 56.

¹⁰ See Donna Haraway, "Otherworldly Conversations; Terran Topics; Local Terms." *Science As Culture* 3, no. 1: 64–98.

¹¹ Katy Deepwell, editorial statement, *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*.

¹² Amelia Jones, "Feminism and Art: Nine Views," *Artforum* 42, no.2 (October 2003), 143.

¹³ Linda Nochlin, "Feminism and Art: Nine Views," 141.

¹⁴ Peggy Phelan, "Feminism and Art: Nine Views," 148–49.

¹⁵ Faith Wilding, "Where is the Feminism in Cyberfeminism?" in *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Hilary Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 397. Originally published in *n.paradoxa* 2 (1998).

¹⁶ Quoted in Elizabeth Hayt, "The Artist is a Glamour Puss," *New York Times* April 19, 1999, B7.

¹⁷ Quoted in Celina Hex, "Fierce, Funny, Feminists," *Bust Magazine* (Winter 2000): 56.

¹⁸ Ednie Kaeh Garrison, "U.S. Feminism—Grrr! Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave," *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 149.

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