

Maria Elena Buszek

“Waving Not Drowning:

Thinking about Third Wave Feminism in the U.S.”

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From moment to moment we perform subtle psychological and social negotiations about just how gendered we choose to be. This tension—between needing to act as women and needing an identity not overdetermined by our gender—is as old as Western feminism In every case, the specialness of women has this double face, though often, in the heat of new confrontations, feminists suffer a harmful amnesia; we forget about this paradox we live with.

*Ann Snitow*¹

In Ann Snitow’s 1989 *Dissent* article “Pages From a Gender Diary,” the author returns to journals and memories from her days as a young academic in the burgeoning and yet-unnamed second wave of the women’s movement. Acknowledging the ways in which paradoxical beliefs, experiences, and peer models informed her life’s “gender diary,” the article was a call for feminists of her generation—many bitterly divided over differing doctrines within the movement—to similarly re-examine and embrace the same qualities in their own feminist identities. Written on the verge of a new decade, the urgency one senses in Snitow’s prose throughout the essay stemmed from her understanding that, regardless of the gender/less freedoms that feminism promised, women’s sexed being still remained a culturally and politically necessary area of intellectual inquiry. This urgency also seems reflective of the fact that it was written at a moment when the women’s movement seemed at the threshold of change: soon to be either rejected or rejuvenated by a new generation of women, depending on the legacy of its predecessors.

During the ‘80s, much had been made in the American popular media of the professional gains of women and their re-evaluation of the ability to “have it all,” much less their need for an organized movement to attain this elusive “it.” By the early ‘90s, as if women had somehow

moved beyond or rejected the contemporary existence of feminism (an attitude perhaps best communicated in the work of Katie Roiphe and Rene Denfield), the term “postfeminism” was bandied about to describe this new manner of (not) thinking about the female condition.² However, it was also in this atmosphere that a new generation of American feminists simultaneously emerged to embrace the “f-word” that many female youths and professionals had eschewed. Loosely-knit activist groups like Riot Grrrl and theories like (Sonic Youth’s) Kim Gordon’s “foxcore” bubbled up in popular culture of the late-80s to reclaim the spirit and title of feminism, with a determined, reflective individualism that resembled the grab-bag of a movement Snitow experienced in the ‘70s. Growing up as a punk Hispana in the lower-to-middle class, box-house suburbs of the Midwestern U.S., my own view of feminism's promise wasn't much different in the mid-80s than it had been for Snitow in her youth a little over a decade earlier. However, my female peers and I had never lived in a world without feminism—and, frankly, those of us young enough didn't really know what feminism was “supposed” to mean in the first place. We simply admired the movement as something that had not only inspired women to be paradoxical creatures, but to piece together and dole out their contradictory identity in any way they damn well pleased.

By the mid-‘90s, this generation of American feminists would be dubbed the “third wave,” and comprised of women from the ranks of both the second wave and those born in the midst of its formation (generally Gen-X’ers, now 25-40 years old). Unlike conservative postfeminists, third wave feminists asserted the continued relevance of both the movement’s history and gender itself in their lives and work; facts acknowledged in the movement’s given/chosen name, linking it to generations before them. To briefly define the first two waves of the feminist movement is to be outrageously reductive to the complexities of (not to mention

significant national differences within) each. For brevity's sake, however, I would like to at least draw a fuzzy chronological outline around these two fluid moments in order to explore the one at hand. The popular women's movement of the 1960's and '70s arguably emerged as women acted on the idea that a revival and re-tuning of the work of female suffragists and early women's rights activists, or "first wave" of the women's movement, was long overdue. This second wave of feminist activists took it upon themselves to herd up and scrutinize the many and varied goals of their hundred odd years' worth of foremothers in an effort to settle upon a common agenda for contemporary women activists to build upon and work toward. A noble effort, except of course for the fact that—particularly as it shifted from a primarily activist to academic movement—much of this agenda was based on a decidedly white, Protestant, middle-to-upper class perspective. As such, for all its affinities with earlier “waves,” the successive aspect of the third wave tag seems in large part to have been the result of a desire to question the second wave's well-intended but restraining dogmatism, as well as the “harmful amnesia” about the movement's pluralities that it produced—both so well articulated by Snitow.

Third wave thinkers have been comfortable with redefining feminism to include any woman who believes that inequality between women and men exists and affects their lives, and acts toward balancing the scales. A pointedly individualistic and anti-elitist approach to feminism, it looks as much to pop culture as politics for influences and strategies. Role models celebrated by this generation include women as visible on MTV as in the *Bluestockings Bookstore*—from bell hooks to Pat Califia to Courtney Love—in an effort to locate the relevance of gender in even the most unexpected or superficial aspects of everyday lives. Very few academics have attempted analyses of or publications about the third wave—there presently exist only about a half-dozen anthologies of third-wave discourse.³ Of these, most sources come from

outside of the academic or “fine art” worlds, and include the work of authors and artists involved in the locally- and cheaply-produced ‘zines that characterize the broadly focused voices and issues of the third wave. Because of such sprawling, grass-roots sources, voices represented often come from racial and economic classes beyond those typically present in (still overwhelmingly white and upper-class) American academic, consciousness-raising and gallery circles. The work available in these volumes riffs on diverse, even contentious, personal feminisms in hopes of touching on larger, common issues in other women’s lives. In fact, as one anthology editor, Jennifer Drake asserts, perhaps the one thing that “unites the Third Wave is our negotiation of contradiction, our rejection of dogma, our need to say ‘both/and’ [instead of ‘either/or’].”⁴

Plurality, of course, has its price in this movement; it is difficult to instigate focused and effective group activism based on a philosophy of subjectivity. Representative of critical second wave voices is journalist Ginia Bellafante who, in her now-infamous *Time* cover story on third wave culture, wrote: “[I]f feminism of the ‘60s and ‘70s was steeped in research and obsessed with social change, feminism today is wed to the culture of celebrity and self-obsession.”⁵ Bellafante’s questionable defense of this position aside (never explained are how, for example, she deems the vaginal imagery of Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* “honorable” but Glenn Close’s performance—for a domestic violence shelter’s benefit—from Eve Ensler’s Obie-winning *Vagina Monologues* “obscene”), her criticism of the lack of tangible and unified third wave political activism is valid.

However, what Bellafante did not take into account when considering the third wave was both the extent to which “mere” sex still rallies women, and the solidarity that her sweeping criticism of feminism’s evolution would engender. Following issues of *Time* had to publish

special sections to properly represent the volume of letters challenging Bellafante's claims—many from “model” second wave American feminists like Gloria Steinem, who noted the same magazine's critiques leveled against *them* in their youth. (As Debbie Stoller, co-editor of third-wave 'zine *Bust*, succinctly put it: “Obviously, there's just no pleasing *Time*: as far as they're concerned, we girls are either too feminist or not feminist enough.”⁶) While some have criticized the lack of cohesion (i.e. "sisterhood") in third wave culture—pointing to the brevity of organizational attempts such as Riot Grrrl as third wave failures—perhaps it is precisely this element that will sustain us. The multi-generational and -dimensional feminist outrage over *Time*'s declaration of feminism's demise-by-diaspora bears this out. Moreover, the third wave's perceived lack of conventional activism is less a testament to the apathy of its members so much as its grounding in discursive modes of critique—a sort of cultural activism rooted in a familiarity with both academic thought and popular media, and the methods/successes of each in influencing culture at large.

But what does the emergence of third wave feminism mean for artists and art historians? For all the analyses of these “waves” in gender studies, feminist art production and art historical inquiry have never subscribed to any party line—in the States, the rubric of “feminist art” has accommodated both the Guerilla Girls and Annie Sprinkle, as that of “feminist art history” has both Linda Nochlin and Amelia Jones. (And, if cultural analysts ranging from Laura Mulvey to Lorraine Gamman, Griselda Pollock to Katy Deepwell, and the debates over controversial female artists like Tracey Emin and Della Grace are any indication, Great Britain is at least aware of, even comfortable with such feminist pluralism and paradox in art and criticism.) We are familiar with the philosophy of the third wave regardless of our familiarity with the term. If anything, while the term is currently used toward defining a group of young feminists, perhaps third wave

should instead be viewed as the phenomenon of the contemporary women's movement embracing (or giving in to?) the always already present paradoxes of feminism in Western culture. Most importantly, the rise of a third wave speaks to the continued belief in the existence/oppression of gender inequality and, more optimistically, the faith that new generations of women continue to place in the history and power of feminist critiques against it. Regardless of whether we identify with, puzzle over or repudiate the notion/relevance of a third wave for the women's movement, it is crucial that—as students, educators, critics and creators of art engaged with feminism—we understand that the expression of gendered knowledge, however different or contradictory from one's own, continues to matter and inspire. It is our responsibility to teach, learn, speak and live with this very much in mind.

¹ “Pages from a Gender Diary: Basic Divisions in Feminism,” *Dissent* 36, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 205-6.

² See Amelia Jones’ “Feminism, Incorporated: Reading “Postfeminism” in an Anti-Feminist Age,” *Afterimage* (December 1992): 10-15, for an excellent analysis of both postfeminist thinking as well as the diverse cultural sources that encouraged its dismissal of feminism’s history and pluralism.

³ See, for example, Jennifer Drake and Leslie Heywood (eds.), *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Barbara Findlen (ed.), *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1995); Karen Green and Tristan Taormino (eds.), *A Girl’s Guide to Taking Over the World: Writings from the Girl Zine Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin: 1997); and Rebecca Walker (ed.), *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995).

⁴ “Third Wave Feminisms,” *Feminist Studies* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 97-107.

⁵ “Who Put the ‘Me’ in Feminism?,” *Time Magazine* 151, no. 25 (June 29 1998).

⁶ Letter incorporated into Stoller’s essay, “Media Whores,” in *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order* (New York: Penguin):271.